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blood play:

a queer gothic approach to game design

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Digital Arts and New Media

by

dani wright

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content warning

This thesis deals with homophobia, transphobia, religious trauma, violence, other forms of bigotry, and discussions of blood. There is adult language, including homophobic slurs. The language is intended to be precise but its presence may be upsetting and/or triggering. I also intentionally use less professional language, including words such as *fuck*. This is because I am modeling my approach to theory on previous queer theorists' work, such as Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, and Jose Esteban Muñoz.

My research was driven by a hyper-fixation on vampires as tragic queer figures. Much of the vampire media portrays vampires as white; their preternatural abilities and pale skin make vampire media a haunt for white supremacists specifically because of the draw of a white power fantasy. There is no space for white supremacists in the queer vampire space I work with. White supremacy is not welcome in queer gothicism and must always be condemned by any artists working within the space.

Some vampire games, such as *Vampire: The Masquerade (5e)*[1] and *Thousand Year-Old Vampire*[2] include explicit condemnations of the far-right and fascism. This is a start.

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[1] "*Vampire: The Masquerade* is not a fascist-friendly game. If you are a neo-Nazi, 'alt-righter', or whatever you're calling yourself nowadays, we urge you to put this book down and call someone who you trust to talk about where you went so wrong in your life." (*Vampire: The Masquerade* 419)

[2] "If you are a supporter of the near or far right I am going to ask that you not buy my games."

abstract

blood play: a queer gothic approach to game design by dani wright

By locating queerness in gothic media and monstrosity I have created a set of queer gothic design principles—which I call queer gothic poetics—to guide the creation of games that are structurally queer gothic: this is the name I propose for the new genre of media that I am identifying. Games can be aesthetically gothic—*Bloodborne*, with its Gothic architecture and narrative of corruption; *Darkest Dungeon*, with its focus on legacy, ruin, and evil; and *Gloom*, with its despair, family ruin, and titular gloom, are proof enough of that—but are there existing games that have a gothic structure? In answering this question, I turn to a couple branches of theory: queer, gothic, and monster. Additionally, I look at academic writing and research in queer game studies as well as queer games themselves. How do queer game designers approach the production of queer games? What can I learn from them and how can I apply their insight and wisdom to the creation of queer gothic games?

I begin by drawing upon the work of Tanya Krzywinska and Matthew RF Balousek. Krzywinska identifies five "gothic coordinates"—which can be used to locate gothicism in video games—in her 2015 paper "The Gamification of Gothic Coordinates in Videogames": story/character, *mise-en-scène*, affect, style, and function. Balousek's 2017 MFA thesis *Opening the Horse* proposes a set of design principles using queer formalism as a structure.

After creating my queer gothic design principles, I used them to guide the creation of queer gothic game fragments: *Grey University v0.1.0. Grey University*

v0.1.0 is a set of Twine games, interactive fiction, about gay vampires struggling with their monstrous nature, religious trauma, and falling in love. It is only one part of a larger project, and is tied to a piece of ongoing fanfiction titled *Grey University I*, published on the fanfiction site archiveofourown.org, commonly known as AO3.

The last portion of this thesis paper is a postmortem of both *Grey University v0.1.0* and the thesis paper itself. I identify my successes and failures with the creation of the game and the design principles and answer the questions: What is a queer gothic piece of media and how does one create one?

dedication

to Will.

i wish i'd talked to you more about the books

you were reading. come haunt me some time.

</3

acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis committee—Elizabeth Swensen, Matthew RF Balousek, and Michael Chemers, who gave me the insight and guidance I needed. Thank you to my professors—AM Darke, micha cárdenas, Nathan Altice, Michael Mateas, who helped me focus my research and find my path through the program. Thank you, Colleen Jennings and Bennett Williamson—DANM could not function without you two. Thank you Marcelo Díaz Viana Neto for encouraging me to apply to the program. And finally, thank you to the DANM 2021, 2022, and 2023 cohorts; you all have been so inspiring to me.

1 – introduction

"No matter the motive, the gothic is already queer, since its monsters, ghosts, and transgressive desires expose a world outside of normative structures."

Laura Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*

The queer gothic[1] genre I identify in this paper has existed for a long time, almost as long as the gothic genre itself. This is because the gothic—with its focus on the supernatural, the sublime, the liminal, ruin, and trauma—is ready to be queer. The gothic technology of the monster is queer. The gothic settings of dilapidated ruins haunted by the trauma and legacies of past generations is queer. The gothic structure—in architecture as well as literature and art—with its ornamental kitsch and ingrained politics of Otherness is queer. Not all gothic texts embrace this queerness; they become monsters as they fight to support and return to a status quo at odds with their nature. But when gothic media engages with its latent queerness, it becomes a part of the queer gothic. It transforms itself into something preternatural.

blood play consists of an explication of queer gothic poetics—which can be used to guide the creation of games that are structurally queer and gothic; a video game—*Grey University v0.1.0*, a collection of fragments of interactive fiction about

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[1] It is important to note that the queer gothic genre that I identify is different from Laura Westengard's gothic queer genre; I outline how gothic queer media can be but is not always queer gothic, often because of a return to the status quo at the end of the text. (*Text* here refers to the content of the media regardless of if it is written down or not.)

gay vampires—whose design was guided by the queer gothic poetics; and a postmortem that turns a critical lens on my work and evaluates both how successful the design principles were and how successful *Grey University v0.1.0* was.

The poetics I outline in this paper should be useful for queer game designers interested in making games that fit in the queer gothic genre that I identify. These poetics are descriptive and not prescriptive; they should serve as jumping off points for designers.

1.1 – what the fuck are poetics?

Poetics are a hard thing to pin down and that's mostly the fault of Aristotle who, in roughly 350 BCE, wrote[2] a treatise called *Poetics*. In it, he explains what a poem is, what types of poetry exist, and how poets create poetry[3]. All types of poetry are, to Aristotle, "imitations. They can be differentiated from each other in three respects: in respect of their different *media* of imitation, or different *objects*, or a different *mode*…" (*Poetics* 3). Here, he is straightforward: poetry refers to art where "the medium of imitation is rhythm, language, and melody…employed either separately or in combination" (*Poetics* 3–4). He goes on to note that "the art which uses language unaccompanied, either in prose or in verse…, remains without a name…" (*Poetics* 4). So, poetry refers to art that uses language and can be heard, performed, or read. This is

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[2] *Wrote* is, perhaps, too strong a word. Aristotle's writing does not survive; we have notes on his lectures that make up his "writings" today.
[3] Aristotle does spend most of his time discussing the poetic form of the tragedy, but the discussion serves as a model for identifying and describing other poetic genres.

incredibly vague and unhelpful; I find it difficult to identify a piece of art that does not fit into this definition of "poetry," but maybe that's the point—maybe *anything* can be poetry.

Poetics is, however, a whole separate monster. In her 2020 book, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media*, micha cárdenas provides a definition that has been essential to my understanding of what poetics are: "Poetics should be understood here as the meeting of intention and expression; all the ways that matter is used to communicate, where matter includes concepts expressed as words, sound, or gesture" (29). This is an incredibly helpful starting point for a discussion of poetics— it establishes that they are the intentional use of forms of expression, with the unstated goal of expressing *something*. To expand upon this, I turn to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which states that "*poetics* may be used as a label for any formal or informal survey of the structures, devices, and norms that enable a discourse, genre, or cultural system to produce particular effects" (1059). In other words, poetics describe the tools and strategies that poets[4] use to elicit some effect, or emotional response, from an audience. I approach this from the perspective of an artist; this is my understanding of what is meant when authors, critics, and theorists write about *a poetics of [x]*: there is little explanation of what the fuck *a poetics* is and, frankly, too much explication of that the hell *[x]* is. Critics—especially poetic critics—

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[4] Here, *poet* can refer to anyone creating media that might be considered poetry, whether or not it is verse-poetry.

approach this from the opposite direction; they use poetics to identify what genre or subcategory art fits into. If a piece of media appears to engage with a *poetics of [x]*, then *[x]* is a useful lens to analyze and critique the art through—the media fits into the *genre of [x]* and can be treated and evaluated as such. But to me, this understanding of poetics feels too nebulous, too hard to pin down.

Fortunately, my understanding of poetics—aided by both cárdenas and *The Princeton Encyclopedia* and hampered by Aristotle—fits into an existing framework I am familiar with—the MDA framework for game design. In their 2004 paper, Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubeck identify elements that make up a game's played experience: the mechanics—a game's rules and parts, the dynamics—a game's systems and emergent behaviors, and the aesthetics—the player experience. Hunicke et al. also describe two perspectives on the game:

> From the designer's perspective, the mechanics give rise to dynamic system behavior, which in turn leads to particular aesthetic experiences. From the player's perspective, aesthetics set the tone, which is born out in observable dynamics and eventually, operable mechanics.
>
> ("MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research" 2)

This describes how a game designer—a game poet, if you will—can design the systems of a game in order to evoke an emotional response from the player. Games are poems, their designers are poets, and these poets use many types of poetics, but especially a poetics of play, to make their audience feel something.

So when people talk about a *poetics of [x]*, what they mean is that by using *[x]* as a design guide, they can create media that elicits a specific emotional and aesthetic

response—one that is in line with the emotional and aesthetic values associated with *[x]* as a genre. When I discuss what I identify as a poetics of the queer gothic, I am going to be talking about emotional and aesthetic effects that the queer gothic genre is interested in evoking and some of the tools that poets can use to achieve these effects.

1.2 – the queer gothic

My work and research have been inspired by both Laura Westengard's *Gothic Queer Culture* (2019) and George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* (2006). Both of these scholars identify queerness in gothicism and gothicism in queerness—the two concepts are intrinsically linked. It is important to distinguish my work from Westengard's and Haggerty's research because while we all discuss gothicism and queerness, our approaches are slightly different. Westengard names gothic queer culture and defines it as "queer cultural production in which gothicism is used as a strategy for expressing ongoing, accumulated traumatic experiences" (*Gothic Queer Culture* 3). I do not argue against Westengard—gothic queer culture and art is an important genre and Westengard's research and writing have been essential to aiding my understanding of how queerness and gothicism fit together. Haggerty points out that both queer theory and gothic media are "transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to dominant ideology" (*Queer Gothic* 2). Dominant ideology means normative beliefs and values; queer theory and gothic media oppose structures like monarchism, conservatism, and

heteronormativity (and homonormativity[5]). This is a little bit closer to my understanding of queer gothicism, but it is still not *quite* how I define the genre/mode of cultural production. Instead, I assert that queer gothicism is a genre that uses radical gothic structural and formal elements to disrupt the status quo. I identify the queer gothic genre and claim that it has been around since the inception of the gothic genre. This is not a hot take in the slightest; Oscar Wilde's inflammatory gothic novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was published in 1890–1[6] around the height of the gothic genre's popularity, and its reception was in part a response to both Wilde's queerness and the queerness in the text.[7] But even before that, the gothic was queer. For example, Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872) explicitly features a sapphic romance. Jack Voller, in his 1994 book *The Supernatural Sublime*, identifies what he calls the radical supernatural sublime and presents Matthew Lewis' 1785 gothic novel *The Monk* as an example of this mode. Voller goes on to explain the radical supernatural sublime:

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[5] Homonormativity is essentially the neoliberal gay agenda: it is the replication of the structures of homonormativity within homosexual lives. Homonormativity is not queer because it is not disruptive—the goal of homonormativity is assimilation into a heteronormative society rather than the restructuring of society and an investment in a better future.

[6] *The Picture of Dorian Grey* was originally published in a magazine in 1890 and then as a novel in 1891.

[7] I will go into further detail on the queerness of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in future work, but for now I will note that four years after the novel was published, Wilde was tried and arrested for gross indecency—the English legal term for homosexuality at the time. The novel played a role in his trial; Wilde's legal opponents "sought to extract 'the relations, intimacies and passion of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits, tastes and practices' not just through Wilde's social contacts but also in his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" ("The blackmailer and the sodomite: Oscar Wilde on trial" 43).

[T]he radical supernatural sublime finds in the space of suspension the key to its subversive power. The conventional sublime creates, out of the failure that occurs in this moment of arrest and expansion, a sense of transcendent achievement and metaphysical plenitude. *The project of the radical supernatural sublime is to seize that moment, foreground it, and by close scrutiny reveal it to be a moment of absence*, a revelation enabled by the supernatural sublime's inversion of the traditional understanding of infinity as evidence of an omnipotent divine presence. *In its radical mode, Gothic fiction unmasks the dissimulation, the necessary trope of irony, inherent in previous literary figurations of transcendence, and that gesture of unmasking, that recognition of helplessness and unfulfillment as such, is the revelation of the decaying corpse in the place of God.*

(29–30, emphasis my own)

Voller's book is essential for my exploration of the sublime later on, but for now I want to associate the radical supernatural sublime with queerness as a radical mode of resistance. Lee Edelman says of queerness: it "can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (*No Future* 17). The project of queerness is not assimilation into heteronormative society; its agenda is not conservative or neoliberal—it is radical. José Esteban Muñoz says that "queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (*Cruising Utopia* 1). There is a better world and queerness will locate it. queerness will, like the radical supernatural sublime, reveal the emptiness of present world, the emptiness of heteronormative life. This puts the goals of the radical gothic and queerness in alignment; this is the basis of the queer gothic. In other words, gothic media cannot be considered queer gothic unless it is radical, unless it engages with the latent queerness of gothic media and embodies the radical mode of gothicism, unless it is both *queer and gothic.*

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Gothicism is not just about the sublime: there are other elements of the gothic that are queer. The gothic technology of the monster is a prime example of this. Jack Halberstam claims that "[t]he monster is the product of and the symbol for the transformation of identity into sexual identity through the mechanism of failed repression" (*Skin Shows* 9). There is something both fundamentally queer and fundamentally gothic about the monster. I begin my thesis by exploring and defining the queer gothic genre; I do this by identifying four elements—or poetics—of the queer gothic: a poetics of haunting, a poetics of monstrosity, a poetics of ruin, a poetics of the sublime. A poetics of monstrosity is overloaded with meaning, therefore, I expand its definition to include a poetics of the grotesque, a poetics of liminality, a poetics of multiplicity, and a poetics of the uncanny. These will be expanded upon later in this paper.

1.3 – why the hell does any of this even matter?

I use these poetics to guide the creation of a set of games—*Grey University v0.1.0*, which fit into what Bo Ruberg identifies as the queer games avant-garde. It is a project that queers the form of the video game—using the definition proposed by Matthew RF Balousek:

> I suggest the term *dismantle::queer* (v.)[8]: the disruption, questioning, or opposition of normative structures, especially in regards to gender

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[8] Balousek uses the namespace operator format *y::x* to mean "x as in y" in his 2017 thesis: *Opening the Horse*.

and orientation, and especially with the aid of or an emphasis on relationality (*Opening the Horse* 11).

Grey University v0.1.0 does more than oppose normative structures in games as a whole. It disrupts the conservative gothic genre by synthesizing elements of the queer gothic; it questions the normative assumptions of gender and sexuality through the form of the vampire and the vampire's desire; and it disrupts tropes of heterosexual romance in vampire narratives.

The poetics of queer gothic media I describe will help more artists interested in working within this genre get started with creating media that is structurally queer and gothic. These poetics are, again, not prescriptive: they describe the queer gothic genre as it exists and proposes modes of thinking that will facilitate the production of more work in the genre. I do not expect the reach of this project to be large at first, but hopefully as more (queer) artists make more queer gothic work, this paper—and my following papers, (hopefully) including a PhD dissertation—will be formative to an emerging field of writing about queerness and gothicism.

2 – theory

> "…we can think of *low theory* as a mode of accessibility, but we might also think of it as a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory."
>
> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

In order to describe my proposed queer gothic poetics, I need to build upon a foundation of monster, gothic, and queer theory. I will also dip into queer game studies and gothic game studies as part of my research into making queer gothic video games. I will do my best to explain why I chose vampires as the focus of this project, instead of any of the other gothic monsters that exist—most, if not all, of gothic monsters can be read as overtly queer, though to do so would be beyond the scope of this MFA thesis paper.

Theory can often be dense; it is notorious for being inaccessible to a nonacademic audience. I will do my best to break down the technical jargon and make the paper understandable, following Jack Halberstam's definition of "low theory." He explains that low theory is "theoretical knowledge that works at many levels at once, as precisely one of these modes of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns though knowing and confusion and that seeks not to explain but to involve" (*The Queer Art of Failure* 15). In other words, low theory is a disruptive mode of theory that asks us to engage with it. Definitions can be helpful, but when a text becomes inflated

with academic language, it fails to help us interact with the ideas it attempts to explain. If theory remains inaccessible then it will continue to fail at leaving the academic spheres, rooting itself in institutions and forsaking the opportunity to be truly radical and disruptive.

2.1 – monster theory

The monster is a gothic technology[1] that often serves as a site for cultural anxieties and fears to be mapped onto. In an essay that has been influential in modern monster theory, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen states that "the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" (4). In other words, the monster is never just a monster; it is always a placeholder for something else, something Other. It is beneficial to look closer at Cohen's seven theses, which are: "The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body," "The Monster Always Escapes," "The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis," "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference," "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible," "Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire," and "The Monster Stands at the Threshold…of Becoming" ("Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" 4, 6, 7, 12, 16, 20). There is a through-line to these theses: the monster is a cultural technology that exists on the boundaries, it threatens systems of categorization and always escapes

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[1] This is different from the poetics of monstrosity, which focus on how artists can use the technology of monstrosity to evoke a feeling of grotesqueness, liminality, multiplicity, and uncanniness in their audience.

attempts to reduce it, and the fears projected onto the surface of the monster are often forbidden desires—taboo desires for the Other—because the monster can serve as a fetishizing lens of Othering.

One of the monster's purposes is to represent cultural anxieties or Othered identities and act as a threat to the continuation of dominant cultural values. Its meaning is not set in stone by the author; the monster can be interpreted and reinterpreted by the audience. Halberstam explains that the "monster's body indeed, is a machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative" (*Skin Shows* 21). So, the gothic monster is a surface for anxieties, fears, and (as we will see) taboo desires, to be projected onto. It is important to note that even though the monster can represent whatever is projected onto its surface, the monstrous body cannot be reduced to a single metaphor. "Monsters are meaning machines. They can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body. And even within these divisions of identity, the monster can still be broken down" (*Skin Shows* 21–2). The monster is a technology that can constantly be reinterpreted because it refuses to be read as a single metaphor. It is a constructed body—stitched together like Frankenstein's wretched creature—and the marks of its construction, its stitches and seams, are always visible. Cohen says that this "refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" ("Monster Culture (Seven Theses)"

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6). Cohen identifies that the threat of the monster comes from its resistance to systems of categorization; the monstrous body refuses to fit into normative structures and that makes it a threat to the structures and the systems that they are parts of. In other words, the monster is radically disruptive.

In her monstrous essay[2], "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village in Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," Susan Stryker presents a transsexual manifesto:

> The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.

(245)

Here, Stryker attempts to reclaim transphobic arguments that suggest that to be trans is unnatural and monstrous. She asserts that yes, our trans bodies are monstrous; they are unnatural; they are constructed and medicalized. And as frustrating and dehumanizing as that can be, there is power in embracing it. The construction of the trans body destabilizes the concept of gender because it highlights the stitches that hold the gender

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[2] Really, it's part essay, part manifesto, part poetry, part diary entry, part performance, part theory; this is one reason why I call it monstrous. The other reason is because the piece is explicitly about the monstrous body.

binary together, pointing out the unnaturalness of the gender binary. But Stryker has not thought large enough—trans bodies are not the only monstrous ones. Halberstam says that "[the] monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities" (*Skin Shows* 27). This echoes Muñoz's assertion that queerness disrupts identities and emphasizes the need to celebrate our monstrous natures. I would like to paraphrase Stryker: I am queer, and therefore I am a monster.

2.2 – gothic theory

What makes something gothic? This question is predicated on an understanding of what *gothic* means. But what kind of gothic?[3] Is it "gothic" or "Gothic," and what's the difference?

Firstly, there's the "Gothic" architectural style, defined by its lancet windows, pointed arches, flying buttresses, ribbed vaults, and ornamentalism. In *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*, Nick Groom highlights the four periods of English Gothic architecture identified by Thomas Rickman: the Norman Gothic—1066–*c.* 1180, the Early English Gothic—*c.* 1180–1275, the Decorated Gothic—1275–1375/80, and the Perpendicular Gothic—1375/80–1520/30+ (*The Gothic* 14). This style evolved over

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[3] For my purposes, I will focus primarily on cultural production (art, literature, architecture, etc.) that has been given the label or genre "Gothic;" scholarly writing and research on the cultures of the Goths—Ostrogoths, Visigoths, etc.—are beyond the scope of my study. These cultures are not less worthy of my attention, I have simply focused my attention on Gothic art and literature.

three centuries and was used primarily for religious buildings—specifically for Catholic buildings, since the Reformation had not yet happened. And then, well…the Reformation happened, and it was *violent*. England dissolved the monasteries with legislation, and then with force. "The built environment of abbeys and their social structures…were entirely dismantled and England turned its back on the past…The dissolution of the monasteries…had huge and irrevocable social effects, but also created an aesthetic of ruin…The attempts to break with history also revealed the inescapability of the past and the extent to which it haunted the present" (*The Gothic* 27–8). The trauma caused by the Reformation and religious wars that ensued could not be repressed, no matter how hard England—and the rest of Europe—tried. This aesthetic of ruin that Groom identified helped inspire a new genre of literature and art that emerged in the mid- to late-1700s: the Gothic movement.

Gothic art and literature deals with trauma, supernaturalism, and the sublime. There are plenty of Gothic tropes; Andrew Smith identifies that early works in the genre were "reliant on particular settings, such as castles, monasteries, and ruins, and with characters, such as aristocrats, monks, and nuns" and a "representation of 'evil'" that "makes visible the covert politics of the text" (*Gothic Literature* 3). These elements help contribute to the *mise-en-scène* of Gothic literary works and come together to form what Laura Westengard, in their book *Gothic Queer Culture*, identifies as the "currency of the Gothic…sexualized power dynamics, supernatural elements, and terrorized and vulnerable women" (*Gothic Queer Culture* 1–2). These elements were central to

Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*—traditionally seen as the first Gothic text.

Walpole explicitly tied Gothicism to Whiggish political stances: namely opposition to absolutism, Catholicism, classicism, and royalism. "'Gothic' was the term used by Parliament to defend its prerogative against the absolutist tendencies of the monarch," Groom explains. "The characteristic 'Gothick Constitution'...appealed strongly to Whigs and Nonconformists" (*The Gothic* 47, 55). Gothicism was a political genre, and its techniques and technologies continue to have radical applications.

gothic refers to the literary devices, artistic formal elements, and aesthetic motifs that were established in Gothic works but have grown to exist outside of the original context of the Gothic literary movement. Westengard uses "the uncapitalized *gothic* to refer to gothic aesthetics and rhetoric (shifting symbols, themes, and metaphors) that find their root in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and U.S. Gothic literature but that are dislocated form any specific historical period" (*Gothic Queer Culture* 6). I will follow suit, and most of my paper will discuss the gothic. The queer gothic poetics I identify are explicitly *not* queer Gothic poetics.

<center>2.3 – queer theory</center>

What the hell even *is* queer theory?[4] In brief, queer theory is essentially a branch of critical theory and philosophy that focuses on queerness: how queerness fits into the

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[4] I know that I'm asking what the hell things are a lot in this thesis, but I think that it's an important question to ask, especially about fields of theory that are notoriously dense.

world, how the world reacts to queerness, and how to resist and disrupt the anti-queer systems and structures that we face. Queer theory as an academic field evolved from Gay and Lesbian Studies. I will do my best to summarize the theory that I read while researching for this thesis, tracing lines of thought through multiple theorists' works. It is also important to note that the term *queer* is overloaded with meaning. *Queer*, for me, takes two forms: one—queer as a verb, following Balousek's definition of *disrupt::queer* presented earlier in this thesis and two—queer as a noun, referring to LGBTQ+ individuals who a) identify as queer and b) exist in a way that disrupts, questions, and opposes normative structures. In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Bo Ruberg says that "queerness is simultaneously a term for the lived experiences of LGBTQ subjects and a term for reimagining, resisting, and remaking the world" (7). In other words, to queer is to disrupt and to be queer is to both be disruptive and be LGBTQ+.

I started with Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (published in French in 1976, translated to English in 1978). Foucault is known for being obtuse and hard to parse; one often must read and reread his writing to make sense of what he is trying to say.[5] In this text, Foucault analyzes the medicalization and policing of sexuality. "In the eighteenth century, sex became a 'police' matter" (24). His line of inquiry asks: Why is sexuality policed? Foucault

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[5] Part of this can be attributed to the nature of translating philosophical texts— important shit gets lost in translation all the time. But part of this is Foucault's fault; in my opinion writing was not his specialty—lectures were.

asserts that "[o]ne of the greatest innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of 'population' as an economic and political problem" (25). He links the concept of population to the perceived wealth and power of a society. This tied a nation's continued existence "not only to the number and uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage rules and family organization, but to the manner in which each individual made use of his sex" (26). Foucault goes on: "It was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizens' sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable of controlling the use he made of it. Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it" (26). In other words, sexuality became something public, something policed, because sexuality was a tool that society used to invest itself in future generations. Foucault summarizes: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). In other words, homosexuality became a marker of identity rather than a behavior. Sexuality was medicalized—that is, turned into something that could (and indeed must) be identified, analyzed, and diagnosed—and because homosexuality, aberrant sexuality, was a threat to the continuation of society, "one had to try and detect it…in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, among all the signs of behavior" (44). Foucault's conclusion to *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* outlines the shift from a "society of blood…where power spoke *through* blood" to a "society of 'sex,' or rather a society 'with a sexuality'"; he notes that "at the juncture of the 'body' and the 'population,' sex became a crucial target of a power

organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death" (147). Instead of focusing on who gets to live and die, our society has turned to regulating the body and the population through the technology of sexuality.

In her 1985 book *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, "That the blossoming—or at least, the broadcast pollination—of a lambent and abstractable consciousness of 'sexuality' itself, was also concommitant [sic] with the ideological sublation of the family, is one of the points of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*" (82). Sedgwick understands Foucault's argument to be: A growing understanding of "sexuality" as a concept, a thing to be studied, was part of the creation of the family as an ideology.

This point echoes Lee Edelman's 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, which asserts that "[f]or politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child" (2–3). Politics are, for Edelman, conservative efforts to prolong a generation's values, resources, and power through the idea of its future generations—its Children. The Child is the notion of future generations, and reproductive futurism invests in the Child because it is invested in generational logic, in the family-by-blood unit. Reproductive futurism claims that an investment in the future of a family's well being necessitates the investment in the continuation of their society by the process of child-rearing. In

essence, *your family will be successful if you contribute to the continued success of your society by adding to its population*.

Jack Halberstam expands on Edelman's definition of reproductive futurism and offers a new name, "reproductive temporality," in his 2005 book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. For Halberstam, the "time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples… Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life… that accompanies the practice of child rearing… The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next" (5). Straight time revolves around the family unit. Everything, from daily schedules to life plans, are designed to support and enforce the Parent-Child relationship.

Where does queerness fit into this view of (straight) success? The short answer is: It doesn't. The longer answer is: Not only does queerness have no place in a society that focuses so heavily on reproductive futurity, the lack of investment in reproduction makes queerness a threat to a society that places so much value on the continued growth of its population. The response of a society to the threat of queerness is the medicalization and policing of sexuality. As Sedgwick points out, our "society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged" (*Between Men* 4).

Us queers, with our resistance to generational time, to straight time, live in opposition to this relationship[6] and, therefore, in opposition to the structure of straight time. Sara Ahmed expands upon this in her 2006 book, *Queer Phenomenology*: "For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return" (21). By failing to participate in family time, to follow the cult of the Child, queer lives are devalued within a heteronormative society because their very existence threatens the totalizing existence of the generational family, of the Child. Halberstam's 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure* takes this notion and forms a sort of manifesto. "The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, for being" (88). But queer failure should strive to be louder; the work of queerness is to disrupt reproductive futurism—straight time—by dismantling the institution of the generational family. Queerness is not invested in heterosexual reproduction, in the nuclear family, in generations and legacy; it is invested in radical resistance, community building, and according to José Esteban Muñoz, "future and hope…queerness is always in the horizon" (*Cruising Utopia* 11). Queer failure is gothic because it enacts ruin upon the institution of the generational

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[6] This is not to say that queer people cannot raise children. Many do. But queerness as a project stands in opposition to—or perhaps complication of—a life ruled by the Child and the Generation.

family, though it is important to explain that this is not in the sense of conservative fearmongering, where queerness seeks to destroy the family out of spite or malicious intent. Rather, queerness proposes alternative forms of family that radically change how our relationships are structured, it provides a better model for connections between each other and restructures our society in a way that is not built on the oppression or exploitation of Others.

2.4 – queer game studies

Bo Ruberg is one of the most prominent scholars working in queer game studies; they have written and edited now three major works on queer game studies (they co-edited *Queer Game Studies* with Adrienne Shaw in 2017 and wrote *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* in 2019 and *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* in 2020), they were the lead organizer for the Queer Games Conference (QGCon) from 2013-2017, and they have otherwise been heavily involved in academic conversations about both queerness in games and queer games. Their research and writing is typically considered foundational for queer game studies and, while I am typically more resistant to the notion of canonical texts, I feel that Ruberg does a good job at highlighting other voices in conversations about queer game studies and queer game design and find it necessary to talk about their research.

In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Ruberg outlines queer game studies and then performs queer close readings of games alongside queer texts. In the introduction, Ruberg highlights how one can find queerness in games, even when queerness was not part of the intentional design: "The queerness in a video game may

lie in the opportunity to resist structures of power, or partake in alternative forms of pleasure, or inhabit embodied and affective experiences of difference. Queerness can be found in how video games construct or disrupt notions of desire, temporality, success, meaning, life, and death" (15). This gets to the crux of my understanding of queer game design: while queerness can be read in any game, queer game design intentionally interacts with structures of power and disrupt normative ideologies. Ruberg's conclusion looks at a movement in the indie games scene which they call the "queer games avant-garde." They say that "[m]any of these works are…innovative in their forms, interweaving queer themes with queer design in order to challenge the normative logics that traditionally have dictated how games are played and how they communicate meaning" (210–1). Again, Ruberg highlights the key to queer game design: disruption of normative ideologies through the design of a game.

In *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, Ruberg identifies members of the queer games avant-garde.[7] In the introduction, they outline a few characteristics of this movement and the games produced within it:

> "*The queer games avant-garde explores queerness beyond representation…The queer games avant-garde makes identity messy…The queer games avant-garde is interested in how games feel…The queer games avant-garde questions empathy and looks for its alternatives…The work of the queer games avant-garde is political…The queer games avant-garde is fundamentally intersectional.*" (19–22)

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[7] Shocking, I know. I'm going to say "queer games avant-garde" a lot and I'm sorry that it gets repetitive.

The majority of this book is made up of interviews between Ruberg and queer game designers whose work Ruberg has identified as part of the queer games avant-garde. I agree with the approach to this book, it strives to be descriptive of an artistic movement by spotlighting the voices of the artists creating queer and avant-garde games. Since the form of this text is a little avant-garde itself[8], I will do my best to explain my approach to my analysis of this text. I pull quotes from the interviewees that I feel are relevant to the analysis of queer games as an academic field. These quotes reflect the beliefs of the interviewees, not Ruberg. They are also candid—or presented as candid— responses to Ruberg's questions, which makes them less formal than quotes from other media studies or theory texts.

Dietrich Squinkifer says that it is "really queer to respond to tragedy with silly, proud, and ostentatious work," calling this type of art production "joyful resistance" (37). Joyful resistance is queer because it plays with the systems that it disrupts, locating pleasure in the act of resisting, disrupting, and being queer.

Aevee Bee says "[r]ather than give an outsider ownership of whatever queer story I'm telling, I feel like I'm giving other queer people the ability to reclaim and control their own stories and their pasts" (55). This touches on an important part of the production of queer games: The audience can be other queer people. We don't have to make games about queerness for straight people. This echoes Ruberg's point about

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[8] Not in terms of being interviews, but rather by presenting these interviews as the text/theory itself and only offering a foreword and afterword of Ruberg's own theory and analysis.

moving "beyond representation." Queer game designers can and should make games for queer audiences.

For Naomi Clark, "it's important to think about the theoretical aspects of queerness because it allows us to get beyond representation—to explore the other levels at which queerness can erupt in games" (110). Representation plays into neoliberal and homonormative narratives of acceptance. We deserve better. Clark also asserts that "Queer people are the avant-garde because we're willing to do things other people aren't. We have a legacy of being outsiders. We take the work of disrupting systems farther than other people can" (112). Queer people can disrupt systems more than non-queer people because our very existence is in opposition to normative systems. We are queer because we are *not straight*, *not cisgender*.

To Avery Alder, "queerness means an otherness from dominant narratives and from dominant modes of exchanging power—an otherness that relates to desire, the body, and gender. Queerness is a feeling where you move between anger about and celebration of marginality. Queerness aspires to break down boundaries" (191). Alder also says that games "are made queer when they have structural queerness. Structural queerness is fundamentally about challenging the frameworks for how stories get told. It's about subverting systems through queer mechanics and creating new ways of seeing desire" (191). I take this notion of structural queerness into consideration when I make my own queer games.

2.5 – gothic game studies

Tanya Krzywinska identifies five of what she calls "gothic coordinates," which she uses to identify if games are gothic. She notes that games do not need to use all five of her coordinates to be considered gothic, but acknowledges that many games she considers gothic utilize a couple of these coordinates. Krzywinska's five "gothic coordinates"—which can be used to locate gothicism in video games—are story/character, *mise-en-scène*, affect, style, and function.

Why did Krzywinska come up with these coordinates? She wanted to establish some sort of framework for identifying gothicism in games. There are a lot of games that use the gothic mode (to varying levels of effectiveness), but there is relatively little research into gothicism in games. Krzywinska set out to rectify that. gothic game studies is underdeveloped and I hope to change that with my future research.

For now, I will simply assert that Krzywinska's taxonomy is incomplete, but that feels like it is by design. She argues that the gothic is a mode, not a genre. I do not fully agree. There is a clear gothic genre that uses conventions and structures, but the gothic genre can be emulated in media that is not precisely gothic. To me, gothicism is both a mode and a genre; both a way of making media and a type of media with its own conventions and tropes. gothicism is overdetermined, like the monsters found lurking in the shadows of the mode/genre.

2.6 – vampires; queer gothic monsters

Now that I've introduced the various lines of academic inquiry, I suppose it's time to pose the question: Why the focus on vampires? It's an important question to

ask—one that I've spent the past two years working on finding the answer for. The short story is that I read the *Twilight* books for the first time before starting my MFA, found myself hyperfixating on gay vampires as tragic gothic figures, and was so on my bullshit that I just made a whole graduate degree out of my obsession. The longer story is that after reading *Twilight*, I plunged into a research pit of queer theory, gothic theory, monster theory, gothic novels and tales, and the intersections of all of them. I found the figure of the vampire to be a particularly resonant distillation of the overlap between all of these disparate threads of interest.

I found that vampires are queer gothic figures that exist outside of the bounds of heterosexual space and time. They haunt the present and threaten the future while never quite stepping outside of the past. They often remain stuck in their ways, which helps Other them by identifying themselves as part of an Elsewhere in time and space: the vampire is never from Here and Now. They prey on humans, especially those with a chance of reproducing. Vampires don't hunt the elderly or the married nearly as often as they hunt the virginal, the not-quite-married. They threaten the bloodlines of their prey. They seduce the beautiful and drain life indiscriminately, always extinguishing legacies, families, and their futures.

Vampires are sexy but infertile[9], incapable of continuing their bloodline. But vampires still create their offspring by siring new vampires. They build their own

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[9] Save a few exceptions, notably Edward Cullen and the rest of the (male) vampires in the *Twilight Saga*, who can impregnate a human woman.

family units—covens—by creating their own children, siblings, and lovers and let their mortal bloodlines end. They do not subscribe to straight time; they do not care for the Child. In fact, the thought of turning a child into a vampire is horrifying. *The Twilight Saga*'s immortal children and *Interview with the Vampire*'s Claudia are two examples of vampires trapped in bodies unsuited for their nature. In *Twilight*, the immortal children are unable to develop a mature mind and creating one is a capital offense punishable by death; the Volturi, the vampiric government, execute any vampires associated with an immortal child. In *Interview with the Vampire*, Claudia finds herself wanting the life of an adult while she is stuck as a child for decades; this is part of the horror in the novel and Claudia is seen as aberrant and grotesque by the other vampires in the narrative. Armand says "[Claudia is] a child who can never grow, never be self-sufficient. I would not make a vampire of that boy there now if his life, which is so precious to me, were in serious danger, because he is too young, his limbs not strong enough, his mortal cup barely tasted: yet you bring with you this child" (*Interview with the Vampire* 250). The Child is incompatible with vampirism. Vampires are incapable of following the cult of the Child because they do not care; sex is not how they reproduce. For vampires, sex is for pleasure. Turning someone into a vampire is its own form of pleasure, but it comes without the baggage of inheritance. Vampires don't follow family time; in fact, their schedules are completely opposed to it. There is no

daywalking for (most) vampires[10]. They wake in the night and sleep at dawn. Their temporality is a queer one, and this is one reason why they are monstrous. "…[Whatever] refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order, but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends." (*No Future* 11). Vampires are inherently opposed to reproductive futurism because of their nature. They exist in opposition to the idea that the duty of rearing the Child is our purpose. Vampires couldn't give a shit about the Child, unless its blood smells good. *Fuck the Child, fuck the social order, fuck futurism*, says the vampire. *Give me blood instead, for blood is life and I am thirsty*. The vampire is much like the queer because both come "to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form" (*No Future* 4). The vampire, as a queer gothic figure, is a monster that radically opposes conservative cultural values, including reproductive futurism and straight time. So opposed, in fact, that to be outside during the straight day is (typically) enough to burn the vampire, if not reveal its condition as Other.

When I started this project, I was so focused on vampires that it felt as though I couldn't talk about anything else. But, as I did more reading and writing, I found that I could connect vampires to a larger framework to help facilitate the creation of queer

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[10] Again, the Cullen family of vampires from *Twilight* are exceptions—they are not hurt by the sunlight and merely sparkle, giving away their inhuman, preternatural nature.

gothic games—vampires are not the only queer gothic figures. Earlier, I argued that most gothicism is ready to be queer, therefore almost all gothic figures have the potential to be queer gothic. As I meandered my way through theory (and wished that I had minored in Literature during undergrad, like I originally wanted to), I found myself drawn to the field of poetics. I was constantly bumping into the concept and eventually, I found that by outlining a poetics of queer gothicism, I could stitch together my disparate threads of theory into something…bigger. Something, dare I say, monstrous.[11]

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[11] A bit dramatic, I know, but I was almost a theater kid so cut me some slack.

3 – queer gothic poetics

The queer gothic is informed by a poetics of haunting, monstrosity, ruin, and sublimity. As a poetic form, the technology of the monster is grotesque, liminal, multiple, and uncanny. These aspects of a queer gothic poetics are descriptive; I do not intend to create a prescriptive system for the creation of queer gothic media because to do so opposes the very notion of queerness as a radical act—a radical existence. Instead, I present these aspects as suggestions, starting points, for queer gothic artists to launch their own interrogations of the genre.

I touched briefly on what the fuck a *poetics of [x]* is earlier in the introduction but, since the concept has proved resistant to my early attempts to understand it, I will reiterate it here. When one is talking about a *poetics of [x]* what they mean is that a text[1] is designed to evoke a sense of *[x]* and the specific techniques that are used to elicit that vibe make up the *poetics*. In her 2018 book *On Video Games*, Soraya Murray defines poetics—with a focus on poetics in games—as "the perceptible elements of a gamic text – and how they converge to bring about particular aesthetic and expressive effects for the player" (66). In other words, the strategies and tools that an artist/poet uses to create a particular aesthetic experience of *[x]* are sometimes called *a poetics of*

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[1] Not literally *words::text*, but *piece of media::text*.

[x]. I identify queer gothic poetics to aid artist/poets specifically in the creation of queer gothic games.

The identification and explication of these aspects of a queer gothic poetics is the first part of my thesis project; they were used to guide the creation of my first queer gothic game[2], *Grey University*—the second part of my thesis project. The final part of my project is the post mortem I wrote following the release of *Grey University* (v1.0.0), where I turn a critical lens on my own work and evaluate the success of the game as well as the design principles—these queer gothic poetics—I followed while making it. Before elaborating on these aspects it is important to present my working definitions of gothic media, queer media, and monstrosity.

gothic media is media that engages with gothic themes beyond the surface level. Something can look gothic, but I would not classify it as such unless the gothic aesthetic[3] serves a greater purpose than set dressing. There is value in set dressing: it can help establish expectations about what will be presented in a piece of media. By associating a piece of media with an aesthetic of horror, the audience expects there to be elements that are unsettling and terrifying. They would be confused if, for example,

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[2] Game fragments, really. The piece of *Grey University* I present here is a selection of scenes from a larger forthcoming experience; I chose these scenes because they allow for an exploration of some of the themes that drew me to the Gothic—specifically vampires: tragic figures terrorized by the ghosts of their religious trauma as they come to terms with their monstrous nature.

[3] Here, *aesthetic* does carry its Romantic definition—*the appreciation of beauty in art*—instead it means *a set of cohesive visual and/or sensory elements that contribute to a holistic style, feeling, vibe, etc.*

a film that has a campy horror aesthetic ended up being a lighthearted romantic comedy. ~~Artists~~ Poets can play with audience expectations to create playful dissonance between audience expectation and the actual content of a piece of work. But for my purposes, I want to identify *gothic media* as media that is truly gothic: media with layered narratives; a black and white morality draped over morally gray characters; ruin, legacy, and corruption/degeneration as major themes; critiques of Christianity—specifically Catholicism[4]; psychoanalysis; discussions of sexual power dynamics; and, of course, some classic gothic tropes: live burial, chases through ruined castles, supernaturalism, haunting, dual natures, false heroes, etc. *gothic media* engages with these themes and tropes at a structural level: there is something, some trauma, repressed in the center of the media; it resurfaces as the audience engages with the ~~work~~ poem; it refuses to be exorcized.

    Queer media is media that engages with queerness as a radical mode of existence. Having queer characters in not enough: representation is important, but it is also important to ask *representation for whom? For what purpose? For whose*

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[4] British Gothic literature was tied to Whiggish criticisms of Catholicism and monarchism. "'Gothic' was the term used by Parliament to defend its prerogative against the absolutist tendencies of the monarch," Groom explains. "The characteristic 'Gothick Constitution'...appealed strongly to Whigs and Nonconformists" (*The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* 47, 55). In Britain, Gothic literature was tied to Protestantism and a Parliamentarism resistance to the centralized and unquestioned authority of the monarch.

purpose? Rainbow capitalism[5] is an insidious mode of capitalism that plays off neoliberal ideologies and markets queer identities as products. Sometimes, a queer character is not actually queer—they are not radically resisting heteronormative society and its values—they are just gay. I will again point to Edelman's assertion that queerness disturbs an identity.

Monstrosity refers to the condition of being a monster. But what is a monster? Traditionally, a monster is in some way aberrant—physically or morally degenerate. Victor Frankenstein's monster is an amalgamation of death, sewn together parts of corpses. In a word, the creature is wretched. But monsters are also sites for a culture to project its fears and anxieties. Monsters become Others in some way, be it because of their sexuality, gender, race, religion, morals, body, or mind.

Before I dive into the various poetics, I want to provide a disclaimer: these are works in progress. Some poetics are more developed than others and the expansion of these sections, while beyond the scope of this MFA paper, are the immediate next steps in my research and writing. Just because some sections might feel underdeveloped doesn't mean that this section is weak—the weakest parts of my paper are still very

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[5] The first reference to the phrase "rainbow capitalism" I've found comes from Horacio N. Roque Ramírez's 2011 paper "Gay Latino Cultural Citizenship: Predicaments of Identity and Visibility in San Francisco in the 1990s," where Roque Ramírez equates "rainbow capitalism" to the "sale of queer diversity" and "its oversimplified claims for inclusion" ("Gay Latino Cultural Citizenship" 192). This is homonormativity; this is neoliberal ideology; this is the selling of "queer" as nothing more than a product, a rainbow flag.

strong and I don't say that to sound self-congratulatory; I am proud of this work and want to recognize its merit.

3.1 – a poetics of haunting

A poetics of haunting refers to the trauma—especially religious trauma—that is felt by members of the queer community. I encourage artists working with the queer gothic to interrogate the Church's power and criticize its preaching.

Trauma is, unfortunately, a part of our lives as queers living in a system that opposes our very existence. The gothic genre resonates with queerness because it is full of trauma: both for the characters in the narrative who must face horrifying circumstances (such as being chased by their almost-father-in-law through the hallways of his castle, as in *The Castle of Otranto*) and for the readers who experience this trauma second-hand—though for some of us, the horrors are a little too familiar to be second-hand experiences as much as they are reliving our own. Laura Westengard claims that "there is something about Gothicism that resonates with the experience of queer precarity in a system built to maintain normativity, a connection between existing in a world built to deny and devalue queer expression and the creation of Gothic content…if something is both queer and Gothic, look under the surface to disinter the insidious trauma buried there" (*Gothic Queer Culture* 2). This has guided my approach to reading gothic literature; there is always some trauma at the center of gothic narratives, there is always an echo of the trauma queer folks are subjected to, there is always the potentiality for gothic artists, authors, and poets to engage with the queerness lying just under the surface of the genre.

In my thesis, I make explicit references to religious trauma for two reasons. First, many queer folks, I included, grew up in the shadow of Christianity's homophobic agenda. It was—and continues to be—traumatizing to see and hear angry and violent attacks against queer and trans bodies justified by Christian beliefs. Secondly, the gothic grew out of a religious context: it primarily focuses on either a Protestant critique of Catholicism or an atheist critique of Christianity—a common gothic trope or motif is the revelation of the clergy and the Church as either inept or insidiously evil. There is gothic media that doesn't fit into these two categories, but the works that I am looking at in this study as well as my focus on vampires (who are damaged or repelled by symbols of Christianity) direct me towards these interpretations specifically.

The "Church" refers to the religious and political institution of the organized Christian denominations. It is not a singular entity, but rather multiple organizations, beliefs, values, and practices that come together, like Frankenstein's wretched monster, in a horrifying whole. This is not to say that all Christians are homophobic. Rather, the Church as an institution is politically invested in the project of homophobia as much as it is invested in the project of the patriarchal family or the conversion of non-Christians.[6] This positions the Church—again, not all Christians—in opposition to the

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[6] "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28: 19–20 NIV

continued existence of queer lives. For queer folks raised within the Church, this fundamental element of the religion can be—and indeed often is—traumatizing. There is a sort of dissonance between Bible quotes about loving everyone, no matter what and the verses that make queerness explicitly a sin. No amount of "loving the sinner" can change the fact that "hating the sin" means loathing a fundamental element of queer folks' identities and desires. The message of the Church to queer folks is that their desires for queer intimacy are unnatural and having them—not even acting upon them—is a sin (one often depicted as an aberrant, monstrous, unforgivable one). This is the source of queer religious trauma; it is not the only a trauma many queer folks are subjected to, but it is *the* trauma that resonates most closely with the queer gothic figure of the vampire.

Haunting is the return of the repressed: the manifestation of trauma that has refused to be processed. This trauma does not have to come from major traumatic events, thought it certainly can. Westengard suggests that an alternative approach to interpreting gothic media and the trauma contained within examines "the accumulated daily assaults arising from systemic refusals and invalidations" (3). These smaller traumatic incidents—microaggressions—build up over time in ways that Westengard highlights as gothic because of their interaction with the gothic tropes of paranoia and accretion. "Paranoia and accretion are particularly suited to reflecting microaggression, since microaggressions often leave recipients feeling as if their responses are paranoid or overreactive…Accretion…mirrors the way repeated microaggressions accumulate to create insidious trauma" (31).

The Church, with its repeated messaging that homosexuality is deviant and damning, and a culture based on conservative Christian values—at least in America and other Christianity-based nations—are locations where queer people are constantly reminded that they are unwelcome. When there are large, traumatic, homophobic events, like the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting or the ongoing legislative attempts[7] to restrict and repress queerness, the LGBTQ+ community suffers collective trauma because of the painful reminder that we are not safe in our own countries and communities. But the small traumas, the repeated microaggressions, are just as dangerous. There is a low-level awareness amongst queer people that outside of explicitly queer spaces, we are always intruders. Unwelcome. Potential targets for a hate crime. The violence directed at us is not always physical but it is always felt.

Westengard continues their conversation about accumulated trauma: "Haunting manifests in the swirling, fractured, intersecting temporality of ongoing low-level trauma, not just a singular traumatic event popping though into the present but a disorienting and overwhelming storm of traumatic intrusion" (32). This is an important

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[7] The currently proposed 2022 Florida Senate Bill S1834 states that "A school district may not encourage classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels" (*Florida State Legislature* 3). This excerpt shows that the bill, if passed, would restrict conversations about queerness in classrooms. By making queerness taboo, it suggests that being queer is shameful and should be kept secret. This stigmatization of identity forces queer youth into the closet and signals to them that it is unsafe for them to be outside of the closet because of the secretive nature of their identity. This approach to conversations about queerness is traumatizing in the insidious way identified by Westengard. It sets up repeated daily microaggressions as the official policy for discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation and reinforces heterosexuality as the assumed default.

perspective on trauma and haunting because the dominant narrative is that a major traumatic incident causes a haunting. A murder will leave a vengeful ghost. A false heir will be crushed by a statue's helmet. Abuse will leave angry child spirits. But what about the ongoing small traumas? What ghosts do they leave behind? They certainly leave traces; people struggle with the impact that microaggressions have on their mental health.

Westengard asserts that "gothic queer cultural production pulls together queerness, trauma, and gothicism as a way of acknowledging and communicating the insidious, structural traumas related to living queerly in the United States" (30). So how does one tie all these elements together? More specifically, how does one use gothicism to represent the trauma of being queer in the United States, or for that matter, any other conservative Christian area? This is where the poetics of haunting comes into play. Because haunting can often serve as a metaphor for repressed traumas returning, we as poets can take the notion of haunting and ghosts and queer them.

3.2 – a poetics of monstrosity

Queer gothic media is both aware and proud of its monstrosity. Like the technology of the monster, the queer gothic poetics of monstrosity is multiple: it has many aspects that have been sutured together. I want to highlight this aspect of the monstrous form and call attention to the constructed nature of the monster's body by describing the poetics of monstrosity as a multivalent poetics: it is not *just* grotesque, *just* liminal, *just* multiple, or *just* uncanny—it is all of them at the same time, and it

refuses to be reduced to just one aspect. Like Frankenstein's monster, a queer gothic poetics is composite.

A poetics of monstrosity refers to the queerness of the monster. Embracing our monstrosity is essential to the project of queerness. This is not a new idea in queer spaces—Susan Stryker said "I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster…[Words] like 'creature,' 'monster,' and 'unnatural' need to be reclaimed by the transgendered" ("My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix" 246) back in 1994.

3.2.1 – grotesque

The grotesque refers to the distorted portrayal of queerness as aberrant, repulsive, and horrifying. I locate pleasure and power for queer artists in embracing this.

gothic media—and horror media in general—can sometimes have a sort of obsession with the grotesque, often manifested in a fixation on body horror. Sometimes, body horror describes or visualizes (in explicit detail) the physical trauma enacted upon a body. Other times, there is a fixation on aberrant bodies—bodies that are in some way deformed or physically Othered. There are two main modes of body horror and other images of the grotesque: which I will call the Wrong Way and the Right Way.[8] Despite

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[8] Not to get too prescriptive, but in my trans opinion cisgender—and able-bodied— ~~artists~~ poets don't really understand the history of the grotesque and often replicate harmful ideologies by presenting the grotesque as monstrous (derogatory).

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the massive scope of the Wrong Way, there is still a Right Way to depict the grotesque, but it is essential that there is an understanding of the history of the grotesque before you attempt to utilize it.

The Wrong Way to utilize the grotesque is to present it as aberrant and monstrous and, therefore, a reflection of the moral failings of the person-reduced-to-*thing* whose body is twisted and grotesque. This was a common belief, especially in Europe and America[9], where there is a well-documented culture of spectacle around grotesque bodies and the moral panic that they create. In Allison Pingree's chapter of *Monster Theory*, "America's 'United Siamese Brothers': Chang and Eng and Nineteenth-Century Ideologies of Democracy and Domesticity," Pingree argues that the conjoined twins Chang and Eng were seen as "monstrous and perverse" (107) because of their grotesque body and its implications on their (heterosexual) romantic lives—both twins were always physically present. This is a neat distillation of the idea that moral failings lead to grotesqueness. Or that grotesqueness leads to moral degeneracy. The logic is circular because it stems from the need to label the non-normative as aberrant.

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[9] Or "the West," but fuck the totalizing view of "the West" because it refers to locations of whiteness as capable of being viewed holistically, and that's far too close to echoing white supremacists desires for white ethno-states to make me comfortable with the construction of "the West" and the not-West. I mean what really is the opposite of "the West?" There's "the East," "the global south," and other groupings, but really, they just mean "non-white," don't they? Isn't this just "the Occident" and "the Orient" all over again? Read some fucking Edward Said.

There is a subset of the Wrong Way which expresses a voyeuristic interest in the deformed body, which is emblematic of a desire to see an Other, categorize them, and pathologize their Otherness. It is most explicitly visible in the culture surrounding circus attractions like the derogatorily named "freak show," where abnormal physiques were presented as visual attractions of the Other. The desire to pathologize physical deformity—and its associated moral aberrance—is the basis of phrenology: the racist pseudoscience used to justify, among other horrors, the violence of slavery, which is a major theme investigated in American Gothic media.

The Right Way to depict body horror is the queer way. In order for the grotesque to be handled well, any suggestions of moral degeneracy present must be the internalized result of trauma from a harmful system—cisnormativity, fatphobia, ableism, heteronormativity, Christianity, etc.—and it must be revealed to be a false assumption; the grotesque can be unsettling, visceral, and gory but it cannot be utilized uncritically in the Right Way; it must be challenged, and its base assumptions must be revealed to be false. Otherwise, its evocation merely upholds the harmful systems that it should be critiquing.

So, what is the queer way of representing the grotesque? To answer that I pose another question: what is a queer experience of the grotesque?

For trans people, there's a term for the internal feeling of deformity, monstrosity, and Otherness caused by one's body—its shape, its size, its features—and its perception by oneself and by others: gender dysphoria. There is a type of body horror

to the trans experience[10], a feeling of being stuck in a body that is wrong. This horror is internalized; it can be the result of trauma (personally speaking, at least). There is nothing wrong about the trans body, no matter what bigots say. Trans people aren't predators or perverts, and neither they or their bodies are aberrations or unnatural.

For queer people, the grotesque echoes the narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Our desires are called perverse and Christian doctrine suggests that we must be aberrant, monstrous beings and our very souls must be ugly, deformed by the stirrings of queer desire—much like Dorian Gray's portrait, twisted and corrupted by his sins. When Basil begs, "Pray, Dorian, pray," Dorian says that "[i]t is too late" (178–9). Dorian accepts that he is fated to have this twisted portrait, that he is beyond salvation. He beats himself up over it, but refuses to change his ways; it is simply not an option. This smacks of internalized homophobia. Can Dorian not find beauty in his portrait? Must he only see the negative? The portrait is just an image, one that changes magically in response to his actions. The tragedy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that he lets this portrait consume him, corrupt him. Instead of emulating Gray's fall, I imagine a better ending, a queerer ending: Dorian finds beauty in his magical portrait and revels in his queer nature. He finds pleasure in his supernatural existence and locates power in the magical pause to his aging. While the rest of his social circle is bitter and aging, Gray can celebrate his life and revel in his aberrance.

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[10] Not every trans experience, but gender dysphoria is common for trans people.

3.2.2 – liminal

A poetics of liminality refers to the in-between nature of queerness in today's world. The performance of gender—especially for trans and non-binary people—is similarly radically in-between; to quote Muñoz, "[t]o perform such a hybrid gender is not only to be queer but to defy troubling gender logics within gay spaces" (*Cruising Utopia* 76).

3.2.3 – multiple

A poetics of multiplicity refers to the layered nature of the gothic text, the monster's body, and to queerness. These all refuse to be simplified into a single essence; they demand to remain sutured—the evidence of their construction plain on their surfaces.

Monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" ("Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" 6); this is true of the queer gothic as a genre—it is multiple meanings/ideas/horrors/identities sutured together and the marks of this, the stitches, are evident on its surface. The queer gothic is like Frankenstein's monster: wretched, aware of its wretchedness, and eternally mad at its "cursed, cursed creators" (*Frankenstein* 138). Halberstam says of gothic novels: "[They] are technologies that produce the monster as a remarkable mobile, permeable, and infinitely interpretable body. The monster's body, indeed, is a machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative" (*Skin Shows* 21). The queer gothic creates these wretched monsters and allows the

audience to project multiple meanings onto them; monsters can represent any anxiety. "Monsters are meaning machines. They can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body" (*Skin Shows* 21–2). So, the monster is the concept of transness, of queerness. It is, to the early English Gothic novelists, the new aristocratic class that has come into money without the legacy of a family name and the dandyism associated with these aristocrats. The queerness they represent. It is a predator: both financial and sexual. It is the creature that preys on innocent (read: virginal) women. It is the foreigner, the person from the exoticized and mysticized East. "The monster…refuses categorization…the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" ("Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" 6).

Our queer gothic work, too, is multiple. Its meanings are inscribed in layers, its surface refuses to be simplified into one reading or another, it is inherently intersectional and any attempt to resist that intersectionality will cause the work to fail and collapse in on itself. Queer gothicism is a monstrous form of media, of art. It is avant-garde by its very nature of multiplicity.

<div align="center">3.2.4 – uncanny</div>

A poetics of the uncanny refers to the unsettling nature of queerness in a straight world. It is uncomfortable for us queers to hide and to pass; this pressure serves as a violent reminder that we are not safe in this world. But when we are visibly and loudly queer, there is a discomfort for those used to the status quo of the straight world we reject. There is something *off* about us that makes the straights whisper, "they're almost

<div align="center">45</div>

like people, but they're too '*strange::queer*', too '*faggot::queer*'." And they're right: there is something not quite straight, not quite cis about us. It's what we celebrate.

3.3 – a poetics of ruin

A poetics of ruin refers not just to the gothic aesthetic of ruin but also to the ruin that queerness enacts upon the institution of the heterosexual family. Queerness refuses to continue the bloodline; it rejects generational logic and straight time altogether. This does not mean that queerness threatens existing heterosexual families, rather the existence of queer lives questions the importance of generational logic and that is the threat to heteronormative law and order.

3.4 – a poetics of sublimity

Finally, a poetics of sublimity was already briefly discussed, but I will further explain it here: the sublime is the moment when, in the face of some phenomenon—natural or supernatural—one experiences a moment of ecstasy and awe. The gothic sublime, in the radical mode as outlined by Voller, queers this awe. It reveals the constructed nature of the phenomenon and exposes, for my purposes, the emptiness of the Church's promise of God. There is no Heaven or Hell for us to go to, there is only the present we are stuck in, the past that haunts us, and the radical future we are able—and encouraged—to build.

3.5 – how the hell do you use queer gothic poetics to make shit?

Now that I've outlined my queer gothic poetics, I would like to explain how to use them to guide the creation of queer gothic media. In order for media to be queer gothic, it does not need to check all these boxes. In fact, the only requirements for queer

gothic media is, as I said before, that it is both queer and gothic. But these poetics should be useful design principles for artists interested in working within the genre.

If a piece of media engages with a poetics of haunting, it is essential that it is critical of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and homonormativity; this can come up in the form of trauma—repressed or not—that characters/players must deal with, but it does not have to be trauma related to big events. In fact, the accrued trauma of microaggressions are more common to the queer experience because we feel the traces of bigotry in the everyday systems that we must navigate.

For a piece of media to engage with a poetics of monstrosity, it must be overdetermined, overladen with meaning. It must revel in its monstrous nature, reject normative narratives about the aberrance of trans and queer desire, exist between accepted identities, and disrupt systems of power.

Ruinous queer gothic media takes a queer approach to time and resists heteronormative logics. Like the vampire, ruinous queer gothic media says, *To Hell with the Child*.

Sublimity can be evoked in moments of revelation—specifically the revelation of the emptiness of heteronormative and cisnormative narratives and expectations. There is no happy ending for homonormativity; assimilation is not liberation. By moving beyond representation and engaging critically with queerness, media can embrace queer gothicism.

4 – Grey University v0.1.0

Grey University v0.1.0 is a piece of interactive fiction—really four scattered fragments from a larger piece of interactive fiction—displayed as part of the Digital Arts and New Media (DANM) exhibition, *unforgetting*, which ran from 22–30 April 2022 at the Digital Arts Research Center (DARC) on University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) campus.

In *Grey University*, players interact with the narrative by making decisions about how the main character speaks and acts, either fighting the main character's monstrous nature or filling in the role of the gothic heroines. The game fragments were made in Twine, an accessible, "open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories" (*Twine*). Each fragment focuses on a different queer gothic theme: *turning* highlights the self-flagellation that is common among vampires with religious trauma, *feeding* focuses on the moment where a vampire fights to resist their monstrous nature, *descent* pairs religious trauma with repressed queer (sexual) desires, and *chased* plays with the trope of the gothic chase and queer desire. Each Twine fragment was presented with a poster and some wall text—a QR code to the game and a content warning. Something unique about these Twine games is that I intentionally disabled the ability for players to undo or replay the narrative fragment; I did this both in order to play with the expectations of the Twine format among creators familiar with the tool and to evoke in players a sense of regret for missed opportunities.

Figure 4.1 Grey University v0.1.0 posters hanging in the DARC

The posters and QR codes were hung in the second floor corridor of the DARC at the UCSC against a long, red wall (Figure 4.1). Across from the posters, I placed a couch in order to encourage visitors of the exhibition to sit down and play the games. This is not the presentation I had in mind for my exhibition: I was expecting the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to prevent an in-person installation altogether and planned accordingly; the game fragments are all available for free on itch.io, a storefront for indie game developers (Figure 4.2).
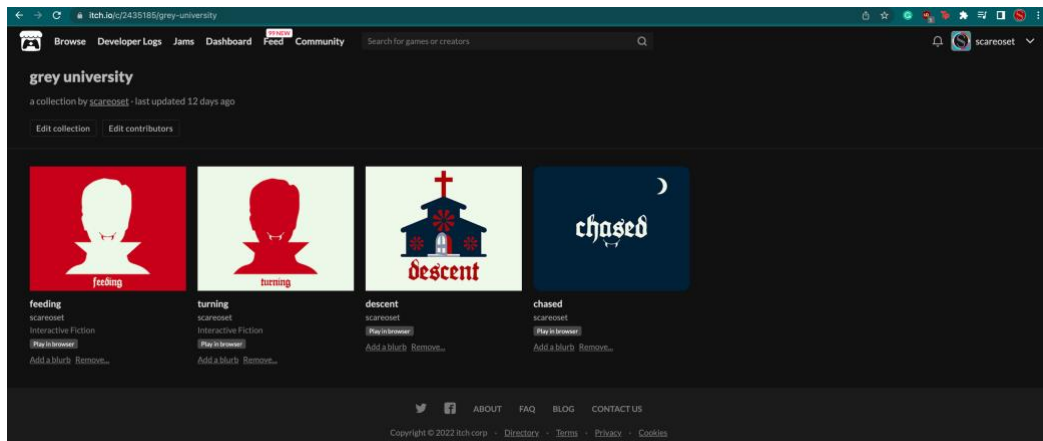
4.1—*feeding*

Each Twine game fragment looks different. *feeding* is a game with an off-white text against a red background, matching its cover image and poster (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 feeding *poster*

Ideally, this game (in fact, this is true of all the game fragments in *Grey University v0.1*.0) is displayed in the Fondamento font, but since I ended up changing the target platform from computers to smartphones, the text will typically show up in Times New

Roman (or whatever the default serif font is on your phone/browser). This game plays with Twine's[1] (text-style) macro, creating kinetic text on the webpage. The first page (or passage, in Twine parlance) simply reads: "His heart is beating, beating, beating." But unlike in a printed narrative, the words "beating, beating, beating" are vibrating. Since this is the only text, the player will likely assume that they should click on the vibrating words.[2] In the next passage, players are presented with options denoted by a plus sign (Figure 4.4). This is the way that options will be presented in the rest of this game.
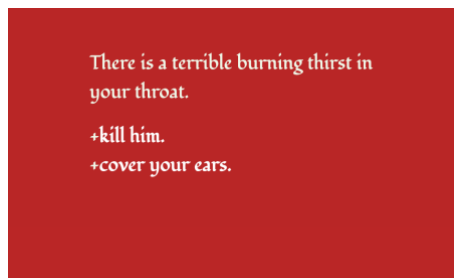
Figure 4.4 options in feeding

As the game progresses, the player is presented with an increasingly overwhelming amount of options to kill the human that they've encountered. Options like "kill him," "eat him," and "taste him" are repeated in a long list, with the peaceful option "help him" nestled in between the repeating patterns of options. If the player tries to help

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[1] Technically Harlowe's (text-style) macro; Harlowe is one of the languages Twine games are written in.
[2] Some players did not assume this at first and needed to be prompted. This is a shortcoming on my end as the designer and is something that I would fix if I were to do the project again.

him, they must choose between staying still or tasting the air. If they choose to taste the air, they find themselves with their teeth against the human's throat. They are told in glowing text, "This is your nature." The only options are "feed," and they are all vibrating. There is a single option, the ninth "feed" in the list, that is vibrating up and down instead of left to right. This is the only option that saves their prey. If they choose to kill the man, they see "He dies in your arms." The game ends. Otherwise, they get a bleak ending where the man lives, but they must hunt an animal if they want to survive. Their inner monologue says that "[s]taying alive is not the same thing as living." The game ends.

feeding focuses primarily on the poetics of haunting and monstrosity, though it dabbles in a poetics of ruin. In *feeding*, the player is haunted by the implications of their monstrous nature. They must contend with the trauma of this violence and are always either fighting against the systems of the game in an attempt to resist the violence or giving in and killing—feeding. They are multiple, both human and monster in the same body, existing between states of fully one or the other. And this scene is grotesque, their interactions with the man they try to save/spare are uncomfortable, their bloodlust is always just beneath the surface waiting to taste blood.

4.2—*turning*

turning is presented as the opposite of *feeding*; it has an inverted color palette and focuses on a human being turned into a vampire—a being they believe is monstrous—rather than a vampire feeling like a monster. The background of the whole Twine game is an off-white (the same off-white used for the text in *feeding*), and the

font is colored blood red. Similar to *feeding*, this fragment plays with Twine's (`text-style`) macro. The game starts with the player being bitten by a vampire and experiencing the process of turning. Instead of using plus signs or vibrating text to denote a "continue" link, this game fragment turns to early interactive webcomics and uses ">>>" to denote continue links. As the player clicks through, they arrive at a passage that reads "How long must you burn?" Their only option is to respond with "forever." Slowly, this text fades; they keep answering "forever." The question, still blurry, changes to "How long is forever?" Slowly the text fades back into focus. Eventually they are told that there is a voice. The only visible option that they have is to listen, but if they scroll down the page, they can find the option to run. If they listen, they meet Someone, presumably the Christian mythological figure of God. The run option is still present (and will be the rest of the time they are in this liminal heaven/hell area). They can either take this Someone's hand or resist.

If they resist taking the Someone's hand, the Someone comments on what a shame it is that they made this decision.

If they take its hand, they feel pain. After some time, the pain lessens, and they can ask to leave or they can thank Someone. Regardless, they will learn that the Someone does not intend to forgive them, they must suffer for eternity. They can either accept their fate, stating that they deserve it, or they can reject their sentence.

The player is presented with the options to "FIGHT GOD" or "GIVE IN." If they fight God, they can either "KILL GOD" or "STOP." If they kill God, they drink His blood and return to the scene with their sire, who asks "What have you done?"

They kill their sire and the game ends. If they stop, they accept their fate of damnation and burn forever. The game ends. If the player runs at any point, they meet their sire and drink his blood. He degrades them. The game ends.

Figure 4.5 turning *poster*

turning revels in the monstrous nature of the player in every poetic sense. They are given the option to "KILL GOD" and drink His blood in a grotesque display of power (and radical::sublime revelation that God is not omnipotent and immortal, that he can bleed—and, yes, even die—like the rest of us). They spend most of the game in a liminal space between life and the afterlife, suspended in a sort of purgatory where they are given the option to submit to damnation. They are overdetermined as a monstrous figure, both repentant and boastful; they think both "This must be it: proof that you were wrong. Hell must exist because you are suffering there right now. And you will continue to suffer here forever," and "God is not dead. You are God. You are

full of him." This multiplicity is part of their monstrous nature; they are both arrogant and humbled. There is an uncomfortable—dare I say, uncanny—moment in each of the endings: either the player kills God and their sire in a brutal and inhuman display of power completely at odds with their earlier belief that their lack of faith justified their damnation; they flee from God and come back and come back to experience the following passage: "He tips a cup back and you feel the warm blood splash on your face. You lap it up like a good bitch. It is life. Blood is life. You are so parched."; or they stay with God and accept their damnation, experiencing the following passage: "The searing pain returns and it never goes away." None of these are "good" endings, there is always fundamental about the player that is lost—their humility, their humanity, or their soul.

<div align="center">4.3—descent</div>

descent pairs religious trauma with forbidden queer desire. In this game, the player finds themselves wandering the campus of Grey University. They can either enter a chapel, which looms ominously over them, or they can walk, and eventually run, from it towards their room. If they end up in their room, they awaken outside of the chapel, having sleepwalked—a common trope in gothic fiction[3]. When they enter the chapel (the only option they are presented with), they find themselves remembering a traumatic incident from their childhood. Here I literally stitched together the past and the present (Figure 4.6), having the temporally dislocated passages cross over and

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under each other. They descend into the bowels of the chapel and recall witnessing a scene of homophobic child abuse—an attempted exorcism to "straighten" a young boy. In the present, they meet the girl they've been crushing on in school, who turns out to be a vampire dom[4].

Figure 4.6 descent *in the Twine editor*

While *feeding* and *turning* are presented as opposites of each other—their color palettes and posters are inverted versions of the other—*descent* is presented as a standalone piece. It is the only fragment to use an (edited) emoji (the church/chapel emoji: 🏫) in its title card/poster (Figure 4.7). *descent* also differs in form from *feeding* and *turning* narratively: it is much more linear. The player does not fill the role of a vampire, they are mortal, the prey. They have less agency, which serves to make the

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[4] "Dom" in the BDSM sense; a dominant partner.

narrative feel more tense, more claustrophobic, which is in line with Tanya Krzywinska's description of gothic games.

Figure 4.7 descent *poster*

descent is all about haunting; the player is haunted by the chapel on campus and by the traumatic experience of being queer in a homophobic church and witnessing homophobic child abuse. It also embraces the sublime, but in a different sense than how *turning* does. In *descent*, the erotic encounter with the vampire dom is full of sensual and submissive sublimity.

<center>4.4—chased</center>

chased is the final game fragment I worked on for this thesis. It was also the most delicate one. *chased* deals with the terror of being pursued by a (sexual) predator, and I worked hard to make sure it was not in poor taste. In this fragment, the player

finds themselves leaving the school library after dark. Their phone is too low on battery to call a friend, so they must either wait for someone to walk them home or brave the dark and make the journey alone. Whichever option they choose, they notice that they are being watched. They try to flee but are overtaken by the person watching them, their love interest. Similar to *descent*, the game ends with them either being turned into a vampire or being made into dinner.

The title card and poster (Figure 4.8) are the most visually unique of the set of title cards/posters; they use the dark blue from the *Grey University* color palette as a background instead of the blood red or the off white.

Figure 4.8 chased *poster*

chased most directly uses a poetics of haunting and monstrosity—in its uncanny mode. This game speaks in the language of haunting: fear permeates every layer of the character's internal monologue, they start to spiral and panic when thinking about how they could be attacked by a sexual predator. They are haunted by the violence enacted

upon other students at Grey University: if the player chooses to wait for their friend, they read, "you camp out front of the library. it looks so...*creepy* when it's closed. it's a little uncomfortable, especially with the recent news about the missing student. she disappeared on her way home from work last month. you try to not think about her, about the predators on campus that make girls like you and her feel like victims-in-waiting, like prey." Here there is a collective trauma felt by members of the student body; the missing girl represents an unchecked threat of violence against the community as a whole. This was an intentional choice, gothic fiction often deals with sexual violence and sexualized power dynamics. I wanted to (tastefully) include a reference to the accrued trauma of being at risk of potential sexual violence and then subvert that trope of gothic sexual violence by revealing that the supposed predator was really the person—well, vampire—that the player had a crush on. Even though the vampire can either kill or turn the player, the violence is not sexualized—yes, there is a suggestion of erotic interaction between the player and the vampire, but the violence is not sexual and only takes place outside of the context of the erotic interplay.

The juxtaposition of the threat of (sexual) violence with the relative safety of erotic desire was part of my exploration of the uncanny. Because their love interest scares them—actually chases them—at first, the tone of the player's interaction with her is marked by a sense of unease. The anxiety that comes with interacting with their crush isn't quite the feeling that the player should experience, there's a threat of something dangerous lying underneath the surface.

4.5—*bitr*

bitr (née *bloodryv*) was an early concept of this project, and some of the ads I made for it were part of the installation in the DARC. *bitr* was pitched as a combination between a period tracker, UberEATS™, an instant messaging service, and a daylight reminder. In exploring this project, I defined a style guide for the app (Figure 4.9), which included a color palette that was carried through to the final posters.

Figure 4.9 bitr *style guide*

bitr consisted of app mockups, a website mockup, and ads as well as prototypes in JavaScript and Swift that were quickly scrapped because of the time commitment to making them; I preferred instead to create the posters and mockups before moving onto Twine.

Because *bitr* was part of the ideation of the thesis project, it doesn't really interact with any of the queer gothic poetics I outline. However, *bitr* does play with a secondary reading of vampires as class parasites. The visual aesthetic I developed for

bitr—and later for *Grey University v0.1.0*—is something I call *vampiric corporate minimalism*. *Vampiric corporate minimalism* plays off of the recent design trend among (largely digital) corporate media—advertisements, website assets, etc.—called Corporate Memphis, which is inspired by the designs of Ettore Sottsass and his collaborators in the Memphis Group. Corporate minimalism uses simple (read: minimalist) geometric and abstract designs (Figure 4.10).
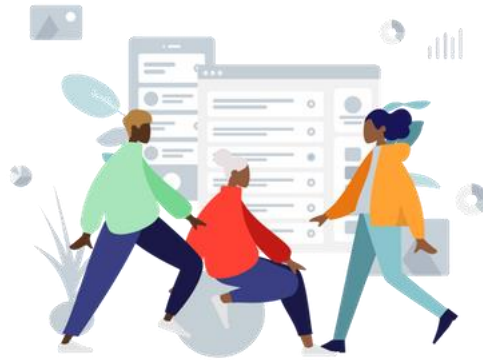
Figure 4.10 "Humaaans - 3 Character.png" from Pablo Stanley's Humaaans *collection (accessed via https://blush.design/collections/humaaans/humaaans)*

I mirrored this by using a flat vector art style, silhouettes, and a limited color palette. I also opted for a sans-serif font—Montserrat—to mimic current design trends, especially among tech companies (like Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Apple, and Google) in their media (advertisements, website content, social media content, etc.). In the *bitr* ads I made mock-ups of for, I played with corporate language, mimicking the "Got Milk?" marketing campaign with "Got blood?" (Figure 4.11) and Subway's "Eat Fresh." with "Drink fresh." (Figure 4.12).

Figure 4.11 bitr *"Got blood?" ad mock-up*

Figure 4.12 bitr *"Drink fresh." ad mock-up*

For me, *vampiric corporate minimalism* is more than a play on a visual style, it

builds off of a reading of vampires as class parasites—nobles feeding off of the life

force of the proletariat. By tying vampires to this fictional advertisement campaign and mobile app inspired by multiple real-world technologies with their fair share of ethical violations (see Facebook's 2016 presidential election scandal, Uber's backing of the 2020 California Proposition 22, or the fact that giant tech companies avoid taxes [Taylor]), I stitched fictional parasites to the visual language of the real life monsters we often find living under the domination of.

4.6—*Grey University I*

I wrote fanfiction about this thesis project[5], which sounds embarrassing (and maybe it is), but a discussion of my work would be incomplete without mentioning this in-progress piece of fiction. *Grey University I*, published on AO3, follows college freshmen Luke and Seth as they investigate paranormal occurrences on their college campus. The work is currently unfinished, but there are 8 chapters published as of 01 May 2022.

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[5] Fanfiction is fiction written by fans of a piece of media. It is non-canonical to the original work. The fanfiction I wrote about *Grey University* is also non-canonical to the work I presented at *unforgetting*, but it was both inspired by and inspiration for the Twine games I showed. I call this episodic narrative "fanfiction" because it was written as part of the ideation process of *Grey University v0.1.0* but was more of an exploration of the vampire romance young adult genre and the setting of Grey University, which was inspired by the internet fashion/art trend of dark academia, which feels gothic in nature.

5 – conclusion

I wanted to do more with this MFA thesis. Originally, I was planning on creating a visual novel in Ren'Py, a Python-based tool; a set of zines that compiled original epistolary queer gothic fiction and queer gothic theory; a designed installation that included various vampiric paraphernalia, such as blood bags; and some posters. Pretty much the entire project changed by the MFA exhibition. I ended up with four Twine game fragments and six posters presented across from a couch to sit on. Ultimately, I feel as though I accomplished what I could with the time and resources that I had, but I would have liked to do much more—and may try to make a PhD dissertation out of the work I feel I have left.

5.1—a post-mortem of *blood play* and *Grey University v0.1.0*

I feel finished with the Twine fragments, but that does not mean I am finished with *Grey University*; this is, after all, only version 0.1.0. In the future, I would like to actually make the visual novel I originally imagined. Since the game is only a portion of the work I am presenting in this thesis I also want to expand upon the writing and theory, since I feel like it is a major component of the project. I would return to my discussion of the queer gothic poetics and further refine them. I would also expand upon the theory sections and do a better job of ~~tying~~ stitching together the different threads of thought—I feel that my exploration of the theory I read was incomplete and I want to add more texts to the discussion.

In general, though, I feel satisfied with the work that I created. Not happy— there is always improvement that I can make—but satisfied. When people played the

games they commented on how effective the text effects I used were, which told me that I made the right choice in using Twine; I don't think I could have created the same effect in Ren'Py or another tool for creating interactive narrative games. I found it funny that people told me whether or not they survived the game fragments; neither living nor dying was the point of the stories. But in the context of games, death is usually interpreted as the "bad ending."

I wanted to spend more time in this paper defining queer gothic poetics, outlining queer gothic approaches to game design, and defining the genre through literary analysis—though *literary* is a loaded term and I was going to look at a vast array of media including novels, video games, web series, movies, and comics. Earlier drafts of this paper included an entire chapter on this genre analysis/(too) close reading of gothic texts, but I have cut it because I a) ran out of time, and b) didn't want to have an MFA thesis that rivaled the length of dissertations and academic books. I can just do that work in an actual dissertation or academic book.

I feel as though the games that I made accomplished what they attempted to, but were not perfect. Formally, I am very satisfied with the work that I produced; I think I used Twine's `(text-effect)` macro to great effect. I chose color palettes that fit with the tone of the project as a whole. If I were to start this project over, I would spend more time focusing on playtesting the narrative experience; I didn't get nearly enough feedback while I was developing the games, but that was in part due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the isolating effect it had on me—I was less

connected to my friends and didn't have a large list of people I could ask to play my games.

In general, I find myself wishing that I did more work. That is a silly thing to say—I worked my ass off on this project. But I still want to have done more. Maybe that's because what I really want is to do a dissertation. Part of me is screaming, *Why the fuck do I want to do that? I'm so burnt out!* But the other part of me is just sitting there smugly thinking about how much more I could do if I gave myself a few more years to perfect my argument. In other words: yes, I'm a grad student; yes, I'm an idiot; we exist.

I need to be explicit here: I wrote a damn good paper. I made aesthetically compelling and technically interesting games. I am proud of this work—and I should be. It is good work. I have, in this reflection of my work, attempted to highlight areas of improvement because I will improve this work. As I type the final revisions to this paper, I am already planning the next iteration of both my writing about queer gothic games (and media) and the next version of *Grey University*, which leads me to the discussion of the future.

5.2—*blood play* and future scholarship

In the future, I plan to continue my research into the queer gothic with a PhD dissertation. I will continue to make queer gothic games and write about the queer gothic genre, this time with a focus on the haunted house as a site of queer trauma. While researching for this thesis, I read a sentence in Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*: "Now in living a queer life, the act of going home, or going back to

66

the place I was brought up, has a certain disorienting effect…'the family home' feels so full of traces of heterosexual intimacy that it is hard to take up my place without feeling those traces as points of pressure" (11–2). This made me think about the trauma of queer people that lingers at their family homes. The next stage of *blood play* is a refinement of my argument—potentially as an academic book—about vampires as tragic, queer, gothic figures; the next stage of my research into the queer gothic is looking like it will shape up to be a dissertation about the family home as a haunted house. Additionally, I would like to focus more directly with Westengard and Haggerty's works (*Gothic Queer Culture* and *Queer Gothic*, respectively). I know that my work is situated between these two scholars' and I want to engage with their writing more explicitly.

This project explores an underdeveloped area of study, which proved to make research a little difficult—I had to stitch together various threads of theory to create the ground my project can stand on, but it also makes this research very exciting! My paper is one of the first published pieces about queer gothic games! I hope that I have explained my queer gothic poetics well enough for queer game makes to use them as jumping off points. There is at least one success story: myself. But it would be lovely to see more queer gothic game makers and scholars.

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<title>feeding
</title>
<meta charset="utf-8">
<style>
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        margin: 2em;
}

h1
{
        font-size: 14pt;
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        margin-bottom: 2em;
}

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}

tw-passagedata
{
        display: block !important;
        line-height: 200%;
        margin-bottom: 2em;
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}

tw-passagedata:before
{
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        font-weight: bold;
}
</style>
</head>
```

```
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role="stylesheet" id="twine-user-stylesheet" type="text/twine-css">tw-story
{
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  color: #edf8e8;
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}

tw-link {
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}

.visited {
  color: white;
}

tw-sidebar {
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  max-height: 100%;
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  padding: 0 0.5em 0.5em 0.5em;
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  background-color: transparent;
}
tw-icon {
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  padding-right: 0.75em;
}</style><script role="script" id="twine-user-script" type="text/twine-
javascript"></script><tw-passagedata pid="1" name="00_feeding" tags=""
position="100,100" size="100,100">His heart is (text-style:
&quot;shudder&quot;)[[[beating, beating, beating-&gt;01-feeding]]].</tw-
passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="2" name="01-feeding" tags=""
position="300,100" size="100,100">There is a terrible burning thirst in
your throat.

+[[kill him.-&gt;00-eating]]
+[[cover your ears.-&gt;02-feeding]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata
pid="3" name="00-eating" tags="" position="200,300" size="100,100">No! You
mustn&#39;t feed on him!
```

+[[kill him->01-fighting]]
+[[eat him->01-fighting]]
+[[taste him->01-fighting]]
+[[kill him->01-fighting]]
+[[eat him->01-fighting]]
+[[taste him->01-fighting]]
+[[help him->01a-eating]]
+[[eat him->01-fighting]]
+[[taste him->01-fighting]]
+[[kill him->01-fighting]]
+[[eat him->01-fighting]]
+[[taste him->01-fighting]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="4"
name="02-feeding" tags="" position="500,100" size="100,100">You can still
hear the (text-style: "shudder")[beat] of his heart, but it's
muffled.

+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[take a deep breath.->03-feeding]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="5"
name="03-feeding" tags="" position="700,100" size="100,100">This is worse!
The scent of him — his fear. His sweat. His (text-style:
"smear")[blood].

+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]

+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[save him->01a-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]
+[[kill him->00-eating]]
+[[eat him->00-eating]]
+[[taste him->00-eating]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="6" name="01a-eating" tags="" position="400,500" size="100,100">"RUN! RUN YOU FOOL!" He is terrified, unable to move his feet. You shove him, hard, and he is sent flying backwards. He tries to catch himself but only skins his hands in the process.

+[[taste the air->01-fighting]]
+[[stay still->00-fighting]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="7" name="01-fighting" tags="" position="800,500" size="100,100">He tries to scream, but your teeth are against his throat before the sound comes out. (text-style: "smear")[This is your nature.] You are so much faster than he could ever hope to be. His blood smells exquisite. All you have to do is:

(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[(text-style: "rumble")[+[[feed->end-alt]]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
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(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]
(text-style: "shudder")[+[[feed->end]]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="8" name="00-fighting" tags="" position="600,500" size="100,100">(text-style: "blur")[You fight your nature.] (text-style: "smear")[It's an impossible fight.] (text-style:

"blurrier")[You will not drain him.] (text-style: "shadow")[(text-style: "smear")[You are so thirsty.]]

</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="9" name="end" tags="" position="1000,500" size="100,100">He dies in your arms.

the end.</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="10" name="end-alt" tags="" position="1000,700" size="100,100">You release him and take a step back before your legs lock you in place, unable to move. He gathers himself and runs. You could easily catch him.

Instead, you wait for hours, unmoving. When you feel in control you stalk the woods around campus. There are animals with enough to keep you alive. What a stupid phrase. Staying alive is not the same thing as living.

the end.</tw-passagedata></tw-storydata>

</body>
</html>

```
<!DOCTYPE html>
<html>
<head>
<title>turning
</title>
<meta charset="utf-8">
<style>
body
{
      font: 10pt Cousine, monospace;
      margin: 2em;
}

h1
{
      font-size: 14pt;
      text-align: center;
      margin-bottom: 2em;
}

tw-storydata
{
      display: block !important;
}

tw-passagedata
{
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      line-height: 200%;
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{
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tw-passagedata:before
{
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73

```
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version="2.3.16" ifid="6692B124-482A-406B-86AF-1F269AF67C15" zoom="1"
format="Harlowe" format-version="3.2.3" options="" hidden><style
role="stylesheet" id="twine-user-stylesheet" type="text/twine-css">tw-story
{
  background-color: #edf8e8;
  color: #ca001a;
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}

tw-link {
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.visited {
  color: #ca001a;
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tw-sidebar {
  display: none;
  position: fixed;
  top: 0;
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  width: 20%; /* padding-right of the tw-story element. */
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  padding: 0 0.5em 0.5em 0.5em;
  text-align: right;
  background-color: transparent;
}
tw-icon {
  text-align: right;
  padding-right: 0.75em;
}</style><script role="script" id="twine-user-script" type="text/twine-
javascript"></script><tw-passagedata pid="1" name="start_00" tags=""
position="100,200" size="100,100">He bites you and *fuck*. Your blood
starts to burn. You can feel it, racing through your veins. Through your
(text-style: &quot;shudder&quot;)[heart]. Your vision is (text-style:
&quot;blurrier&quot;)[blurring].

[[&gt;&gt;&gt;|turning_01]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="2"
name="turning_01" tags="" position="300,200" size="100,100">Is he still
here? Has he left? You cannot tell. It doesn&#39;t matter either way. Your
whole body feels like it&#39;s burning. This must be it: proof that you
were wrong. Hell must exist because you are suffering there right now. And
you will continue to suffer here forever.
```

[[>>>|turning_02]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="3" name="turning_02" tags="" position="500,200" size="100,100">How long must you (text-style: "smear")[burn]?

[[forever|turning_03]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="4" name="turning_03" tags="" position="700,200" size="100,100">(text-style: "blur")[How long must you burn?]

[[forever|turning_04]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="5" name="turning_04" tags="" position="900,200" size="100,100">(text-style: "blurrier")[How long must you burn?]

[[forever|turning_05]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="6" name="turning_05" tags="" position="100,400" size="100,100">(text-style: "blurrier")[How long is forever?]

[[forever|turning_06]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="7" name="turning_06" tags="" position="300,400" size="100,100">(text-style: "blurrier")[But there's a light. The burning is not gone, but there is a light.]

[[>>>|turning_07]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="8" name="turning_07" tags="" position="500,400" size="100,100">It's brighter now. The searing pain in your veins is not going away. Is it getting more unbearable? How is that possible? You can only bite your tongue and try not to scream.

[[>>>|turning_08]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="9" name="turning_08" tags="" position="700,400" size="100,100">There's a warmth. How can anything feel warm while you burn? It doesn't make sense.

There is a voice.

[[listen|turning_09]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="10" name="setup" tags="setup" position="0,0" size="100,100">(set: $giveIn to false)</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="11" name="turning_09" tags="" position="900,400" size="100,100">"You do not have to become a monster, my Child."
What the fuck does that mean?
"Take my hand and be healed."
(text-style: "strike")[Someone] something is holding out their hand to you.

[[take its hand|dying_00]]
[[don't|turning_10]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="12" name="dying_00" tags="" position="100,600" size="100,100">You reach out to touch its hand. *FUCK!* You thought you were burning before.
"It's okay, my Child. I am healing you."
It hurts so much, *so fucking much*. Your vision has gone from all black to all white. You are blinded by this power.

[[>>>|dying_01]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="13" name="turning_10" tags="" position="100,800" size="100,100">(set: $giveIn to true)"That *is* a shame. You could have spared yourself some pain."
The burning is more intense.

[[FIGHT GOD|turning_11]]
[[GIVE IN|dying_04]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="14" name="dying_01" tags="" position="300,600" size="100,100">"You may rest now." The burning has stopped. You sit there, recovering for minutes, hours, days, eons.

[["thank you"|dying_02]]
[["may I go?""|dying_03]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="15" name="dying_02"
tags="" position="500,600" size="100,100">"For what, my Child?"

[[>>>|dying_03]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="16" name="dying_03"
tags="" position="700,600" size="100,100">"You must pay for your
sins."
What the hell?
"Did you mistake my Grace for forgiveness?"

[[No...|turning_11]]
[[It is what I deserve|dying_04]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="17" name="turning_11" tags="" position="300,800" size="100,100">You lunge at Him, despite your pain.
"Foolish, ungrateful Child, you are not mine! I reject you!"
He is weak. You are thirsty. Your teeth are aching, aching. Aching to bite, to rip, to tear.

[[KILL GOD|turning_12]]
[[STOP|dying_04]]

[[run|run_00]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="18" name="turning_12" tags="" position="500,800" size="100,100">He is not strong enough to fight you off. You sink your teeth into his neck and pull from him.
He has stopped moving. He is empty.
His blood is powerful and you are full of Him.
You feel a pull, through the darkness.

[[follow|turning_13]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="19" name="dying_04" tags="" position="900,600" size="100,100">He smiles at you.
(if: $giveIn is true)["You are making the right choice. I am sorry it had to be this way, my Child."] (else:)["I am sorry it had to be this way, my Child."]
He almost fools you.

The searing pain returns
        and it never goes away.

[[...|end]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="20" name="run_00" tags="" position="100,1000" size="100,100">You gather your strength. You run. Run as far away from the light as you can.
It's getting darker.
        Even darker.
                You can't see anything at all.
                And then,
                You can.
It's red.
Everything is red.
And you are thirsty.
"My child, you have been reborn."
Who the fuck is this?
"I have made you in my image. You are perfect. Now, drink."
He tips a cup back and you feel the warm blood splash on your face.
You lap it up like a good bitch.
It is life.
Blood is life.
You are so parched.

[[...|end]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="21" name="turning_13" tags="" position="700,800" size="100,100">It's getting darker.
        Even darker.

> You can't see anything at all.
> And then,
> You can.

It's red.
Everything is red.
And you are thirsty.
"My child, what have you done? What have you done to Him?"
You were thirsty and he was weak.
"You cannot have killed Him. How?"
It was easy.
"What have you done?"
Why is he so horrified.
"You have killed God. It shouldn't be possible."
God is not dead. You are God. You are full of him.
"You have no idea what consequences you will face for this, my child."
How can you ever face consequences? You are the arbiter of justice, are you not?
It does not matter. Is he strong?
"Please, my child. Don't do this."
He is not. He tastes vile. But this body, on the floor. It is warm and sweet.
You drink.
It is ecstacy.

[[...|end]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="22" name="end" tags="" position="900,800" size="100,100">the end.</tw-passagedata></tw-storydata>

</body>
</html>

```html
<!DOCTYPE html>
<html>
<head>
<title>descent
</title>
<meta charset="utf-8">
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}

h1
{
      font-size: 14pt;
      text-align: center;
      margin-bottom: 2em;
}

tw-storydata
{
      display: block !important;
}

tw-passagedata
{
      display: block !important;
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tw-passagedata + tw-passagedata
{
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}

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{
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</style>
</head>
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tw-link {
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tw-sidebar {
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  padding: 0 0.5em 0.5em 0.5em;
  text-align: right;
  background-color: transparent;
}
tw-icon {
  text-align: right;
  padding-right: 0.75em;
}</style><script role="script" id="twine-user-script" type="text/twine-
javascript"></script><tw-passagedata pid="1" name="start" tags=""
position="100,100" size="100,100">(set: $creepedOut to false)it&#39;s
saturday evening and most people have gone home for the short break; you
are stuck here because you chose to go to a school on the east coast
because it was the farthest you could get away from the reach of your
parents and still afford college. &quot;afford.&quot; you&#39;ve got more
debt that you knew was possible, but someone allowed you to take out all of
those loans. maybe the world will finish this ending, this slow burn
flirtation with death, and you won&#39;t have to keep sending a chunk of
your meager paycheck to someone who makes money off of the lie that this
```

helps you get a job in the future. your sister and her friends are all still unemployed, and they graduated years ago.

>>> [[wander to the chapel|chapel entrance]]
>>> [[wander around the courtyard|courtyard]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="2" name="courtyard" tags="" position="300,100" size="100,100">(set: $creepedOut to true)there's something about the layout of the campus that makes you feel a little bit uncomfortable. it's hard to put a finger on it. you wish that any other east coast school had accepted you, but grey university was the only one that you got in to. surely other campuses don't feel so...what's the word. archaic? no, you like the idea of a campus that looks ancient. maybe it's the whole religious vibe. yeah, that's it. the chapel exists at the center of everything else. it reminds you of a european take on the spanish missions that litter the countryside of california. isn't it weird how back home they didn't talk about the genocide that the missions and el camino real represent? but the chapel calls to you. it towers over the courtyard; its shadow creeping towards your feet.

>>> [[go to the chapel|chapel entrance]]
>>> [[walk away from the chapel|the green]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="3" name="chapel entrance" tags="" position="100,300" size="100,100">every time you roam campus, you find yourself coming back to here. in that disney movie you watched as a kid—the one you were obsessed with, *the hunchback of notre dame*—the mother fell onto the steps and cried "sanctuary!" hoping for someone to help her. it's ironic, that the villain was a clergyman. and that murdered her on the steps of the chapel that was supposed to offer her protection.

>>> [[enter|chapel entryway]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="4" name="chapel entryway" tags="" position="300,300" size="100,100">you hate this building. it creeps you out in a way that is too visceral to be superstition. (if: $creepedOut is true)[the whole "feeling called to this place" thing doesn't really do the building any favors.] there's also something...buried here. buried in you? what is it?

>>> [[remember|memory start]]
>>> [[look around|chapel description]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="5" name="the green" tags="" position="500,100" size="100,100">you hurry in the opposite direction of the building. something about it sets you on edge. your heart is beating faster even though you're barely speed-walking. your throat feels tight, like someone is grabbing it. squeezing it. over your shoulder, the chapel looms. you never noticed that it sits atop a tiny hill, just big enough to make the building seem taller than it should. it beckons.

>>> [[return to the chapel|chapel entrance]]
>>> [[run from the chapel|the dorms]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="6" name="the dorms" tags="" position="700,100" size="100,100">you run, run like your life depends on it. and maybe it does, the way your heart is punching your ribs. you catch your breath on a

bench and look around to get your bearings. this part of campus is intimately familiar: its the dormitories. your room is the only one with its light on. did you leve your light on? it's eerie when the buildings are empty; it feels like a ghost town.
the tip of the steeple is visible from here. and you feel it: *something wants you in that building.* no, that can't be right. it's just a building. and yet. you can feel it tug at your blood, your bones.
*something ****needs**** you in that building.*

>>> [[go to the chapel|chapel entrance]]
>>> [[go to your room|dorm room]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="7" name="dorm room" tags="" position="900,100" size="100,100">you run up the stairs two at a time. if this place were more modern, there would be an elevator. but it isn't, so you have to climb your way to the seventh floor. you're panting and sweating by the time you get to your door. you unlock it, stumble inside, close the door as quickly as possible, and lean your back against the door.
that was *weird.* what the hell was that feeling? you don't think you've never gotten such a malicious vibe from a building before—especially a building on campus. and you should know, you've wandered campus at night for pretty much the entire time you've been here.
shrugging it off, you shower and get ready for bed. by the time you're brushing your teeth, your heart has slowed down. when you get under the blankets and make yourself cozy, you notice that you can see the courtyard from your window. of course you can, you're so high up. and just beyond the courtyard is the chapel. you hate that building in this moment. groaning, you roll over and pull the cover over your head.

>>> [[go to sleep|sleepwalking]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="8" name="sleepwalking" tags="" position="1100,100" size="100,100">the cold wakes you. you can't quite remember your dream...someone was calling you. maybe it was the pretty girl from your ge class—cam. you were pretty sure that she was flirting with you the whole semester, but you're too much of a coward to make the first move. the ball's in cam's court now.
your teeth start to chatter and you shake thoughts of cam...her perfect lips, that devious smirk, her smoldering gaze when she shares a private joke with you...from your mind and you try to assess where the hell you are.
oh.
of *fucking* course.
it's the chapel.
somehow you sleepwalked down seven flights of stairs, across the green and the courtyard, and made your way to the front doors of the chapel. which are cracked open, by the way.
and, to top it off (as if things couldn't get any worse than they are right now), you've left your keys—*shit,* and your phone—inside your room. so you're locked out. you'll have to go to the housing office and you don't know if anyone is going to be in there right now.
someone has to be, right? but the chapel is calling.

>>> [[enter the chapel|chapel entryway]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="9" name="memory start" tags="" position="100,700" size="100,100">(set: $stairs to false)the priest was talking about prop 8 and marriage. they'd already read a verse that talked about how it was a sin to sleep with a man the way one slept with a woman. you didn't know what that meant. but the priest was talking about "homosexuality" and he said it like it was a dirty word. most of the congregation was listening with rapt attention.

>>> [[you listened|memory homily]]
>>> [[you looked around|memory decription]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="10" name="chapel description" tags="" position="100,500" size="100,100">it's just a religious building. catholic, probably. or one of those store-brand catholic denominations. you thank the gods that your parents at least had the decency to pick a catholic church; you've heard horror stories about the evangelical churches some of your friends were raised in: concrete buildings, folding chairs, literal nazis in the congregation. at least you got traumatized in a place that didn't look like a motel or a strip mall. it's nice to not get instant bad vibes from any generic building in the crumbling hellscape that is american suburbia.

>>> [[remember|memory start]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="11" name="memory homily" tags="" position="300,700" size="100,100">"we cannot let the homosexuals threaten our great nation like this! when god created the institution of marriage, it was a *holy* thing. this concept of 'homosexual marraige' is a direct attack on our religion. the homosexuals seek to strip our holy words and ceremonies of their meanings, to bastardize them and desecrate them. they would force us to perform these unholy, degenerate 'marriages' in our very chapels. this is monstrous and a direct threat to our religious freedom. god does not mince words and, as we read earlier, he has declared it an abomination!"
something about this homily made you uncomfortable. you couldn't quite place it. you knew vaguely that prop 8 was about letting gay people marry each other. like two husbands or two wives. that didn't sound all that bad. you supposed that "homosexual" was a mean word for "gay, but people already used "gay" as a mean word. you felt deeply uncomfortable. and a little mad.

>>> [[you looked around|memory decription]]
>>> [[you spaced out|memory later]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="12" name="memory decription" tags="" position="100,900" size="100,100">the chapel felt like a generic religious building. very catholic, but that was kind of a given, considering you were sitting in mass right then. the pews were uncomfortable and you thought that they were designed that way. even the slightest shift made a creaking sound that set the eyes of half a dozen members of the congregation on you; they were filled with judgement.

>>> [[you spaced out|memory later]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="13" name="memory later" tags="" position="500,700"

size="100,100">your parents always liked to go to evening mass. back when grandma was still around, you'd go with her. but since she passed, the family still attended the evening service. you came to your senses as the congregation was shuffling out of the pews. honestly, you spent most of your time in that church spacing out. it was always full of things that made you deeply uncomfortable for unnameable reasons.
your parents went off to talk to some family friends—their friends, really. you weren't friends with the older people and they didn't have any kids your age you could talk to. so you wandered around the chapel, exploring the nooks and crannies. that was when you noticed it: a door was left partially open. you slunk over, careful not to draw the unwanted attention of any adults in the area who might lecture you for snooping and trespassing.

>>> [[you slipped behind the door|memory stairs]]
>>> [[you returned to your parents|memory parents]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="14" name="memory stairs" tags="" position="700,700" size="100,100">(set: $stairs to true)the doorway opened to a staircase that led down into the bowels of the chapel. it felt eerie. uncomfortable. like something was off. you couldn't help but inch your way further and further into the darkness below. there were muffled voices coming from a room at the end of the hallway the stairs dropped you into; they did not sound happy.

>>> [[you listened|memory exorcism]]
>>> [[chapel stairs]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="15" name="memory parents" tags="" position="1100,700" size="100,100">(if: $stairs is false)[they were deep in conversation still. you couldn't get your mom to give you the car keys. you could only return to the open doorway.](else:)["honey you look worried sick." your mom pulled you into a hug. it wasn't comforting. "come on, let's get you to the car so we can go home."]

>>> (if: $stairs is false)[[[you slipped behind the door|memory stairs]]](else:)[[[continue deeper|deeper-00]]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="16" name="memory end" tags="" position="1300,700" size="100,100">you asked your parents to stop taking you to church after that.

>>> [[continue deeper|deeper-01]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="17" name="memory exorcism" tags="" position="900,700" size="100,100">you wished that you could have made any other choice, but it felt like none were afforded to you.
as you crawled your way into earshot, you began to make out the voices.
"...homosexuality, i command you in the name of god! leave this boy! come out of him!"
there was a violent sound; someone had been hit. there was a scream of terror.
"hold him down!"
more noise in the scuffle. more slaps and punches. the screams gave way to cries. the whole time, someone was yelling about demons and homosexuality. you couldn't make sense of it, nor did you want to.

this place made you feel sick and you wanted nothing more than to get out of there. slowly you began to make your way up the steps, terrified that you would make a noise and bring the violence out of the room and onto yourself. as you were reaching the top of the stairs, the boy managed to escape. he ran into the hallway and tried to reach the stairs. but a priest got to him first. he slammed the boy against the wall and roared, "demon! in the name of god! i command you to come out of this boy!" he slapped the boys face.

>>> [[go through the doorway|descent]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="18" name="chapel stairs" tags="" position="800,500" size="100,100">how strange that you're exploring this chapel and remembering this. or, you guess, it makes sense. similar architecture and all that. but this memory is so specific, the one about the stairs. you thought you'd pushed that so far down in your mind that it would never resurface.

there is a doorway and you know, *know* that it will open to a staircase that leads down, down, down into the chapel's underside. into its belly. something is screaming in your head not to go through the doorway.

>>> [[remember that you listened|memory exorcism]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="19" name="descent" tags="" position="1000,500" size="100,100">you wish that you could have made any other choice, but you find yourself slinking down the stairs. remembering. you don't want to.

>>> [[remember that you ran|memory parents]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="20" name="deeper-00" tags="" position="1200,500" size="100,100">you make your way down the steps one at a time, each one making your stomach drop a little lower. there is dread building now. your heart is beating faster, threatening to take off at a gallop. *why are you doing this? why are you walking down these stairs?*

>>> [[remember that you followed your parents|memory end]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="21" name="deeper-01" tags="" position="1400,500" size="100,100">

>>> [[continue deeper|deeper-02]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="22" name="deeper-02" tags="" position="1500,700" size="100,100">

>>> [[continue deeper|deeper-03]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="23" name="deeper-03" tags="" position="1200,900" size="100,100">

>>> [[continue deeper|deeper-04]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="24" name="deeper-04" tags="" position="900,1100" size="100,100">"hey."

>>> [[scream]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="25" name="scream" tags="" position="100,1400" size="100,100">you scream and it feels like this place eats up the noise. there is no echo.

"sorry, didn't mean to scare you." she smirks as her hand comes to rest upon your shoulder. it's cam(if: $creepedOut is false)[, the girl from your ge class].

>>> [[stare at her|stare]]
>>> [[say something smart|dumb]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="26" name="stare" tags="" position="400,1600" size="100,100">*fuck.* she is so pretty you don't know what to say. in fact, you're glad you didn't try to say anything. it would have been an impossible task. she hasn't moved her hand from your shoulder and the touch is electrifying. so you take her in, appreciating her beauty. in this moment, you understand how artists feel when inspiration strikes them. if art has a singular purpose, it is to represent her.

>>> [[blush]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="27" name="dumb" tags="" position="300,1400" size="100,100">hi.
(click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace:

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"hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.](click-replace: "hi.")[you're pretty.](click-replace: "you're pretty.")[come here often?](click-replace: "come here often?")[sorry for screaming.](click-replace: "sorry for screaming.")[...](click-replace: "...")[are we about to kiss right now?](click-replace: "are we about to kiss right now?")[hi.]

>>> [[say something|stumble]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="28" name="stumble" tags="" position="500,1400" size="100,100">her smirk gets even more insufferable and you fall even more for her.

>>> [[blush]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="29" name="blush" tags="" position="700,1400" size="100,100">"i didn't think you'd still be here on campus." *she remembers who you are!* "and i'm truly sorry for frightening you." her hand is still touching your bare skin. it seems silly for you to have been out this late in a tank top, but you're suddenly glad that you dressed for this; for contact like this. "it's just that i thought everyone had gone home." there's a hunger in her eyes and you hope, hell, you even *pray* that she wants the same thing that you want. "i'm sorry for calling you here. i wish it had been anyone else." *no, no, no,* you want to say. *i want to be here. with you. please. please want me here too.* an emotion flickers across her face, moving too fast for you to parse before the hunger returns. she leans closer to you and suddenly your back is against the wall and she's right there, her breath on your neck.

>>> [[play it cool|freak the fuck out]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="30" name="freak the fuck out" tags="" position="900,1400" size="100,100">"may i?"

>>> [["yes."|yes]]
>>> [["please."|beg]]
>>> [["no."|no]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="31" name="yes" tags="" position="1100,1200" size="100,100">"good girl," she purrs in your ear. you feel her lips against your bare skin, working their way down your neck with kisses, love bites. you feel euphoric. you moan. your legs are weak. you press yourself into her. you lose yourself in her. she is everything. (text-style: "blurrier")[you are nothing.]

the end</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="32" name="beg" tags="" position="1100,1400" size="100,100">"good girl," she purrs in

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your ear. you feel her lips against your bare skin, working their way down
your neck with kisses, love bites. you feel euphoric. you moan. your legs
are weak. you press yourself into her. you lose yourself in her. she is
everything. (text-style: "blurrier")[you are nothing.]

>>> [["please?"|turning]]</tw-passagedata><tw-
passagedata pid="33" name="no" tags="" position="1100,1600"
size="100,100">her expression hardens and there's a flash of something—
anger?—behind her eyes. she is devastatingly beautiful, and her sudden
change hurts you. why is she mad at you? you try to apologize, to beg for
forgiveness, but she doesn't listen. or if she does, she simply does
not care. she paces the hallway. you are cold—underdressed for a midnight
excursion to the basement of the chapel. slowly, her face settles into a
stony mask. completely cold and unfeeling. "bummer, i was hoping that
we could have fun." and *oh*, how you want to. *need* to. but it's
too late. you've already denied her. "oh well." and she moves
fast. faster than you thought possible. one second, she's pacing the
hall in front of you, the next, she's behind you with her hands around
your head. "food is food and blood is blood." you'd like to
know what that means, but before you can ask you hear a horrible sound,
like a branch cracking. and then, nothing.

the end</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="34" name="turning" tags=""
position="1300,1400" size="100,100">"oh?" her interest is piqued.
she moves away from your neck. pulls back. too far. "are you
sure?"

>>> [["please."|turn]]
>>> [["wait..."|no]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata
pid="35" name="turn" tags="" position="1500,1400" size="100,100">she smiles
hungrily at you before returning to your neck. you lose yourself in the
moment. and then, she's pulling away. *no! come back!* "you're
cute when you're needy" she murmurs in your ear. it feels like
shes so far from you and yet her voice is right there. "here. drink
this." she presses something to your mouth and it is warm. suddenly
you are thirsty, so thirsty, and the only thing that can sate you is
whatever she's giving you. you drink greedily until she pulls away.
"good girl," she says again and again you feel a thrill run
through you. you are hers. you are *her* good girl. she holds you now,
wrapping her arms around you. "i've got you, darling." and
she does. and you are her darling. and that's all that matters.

the end</tw-passagedata></tw-storydata>

</body>
</html>

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```
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<head>
<title>chased
</title>
<meta charset="utf-8">
<style>
body
{
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      margin: 2em;
}

h1
{
      font-size: 14pt;
      text-align: center;
      margin-bottom: 2em;
}

tw-storydata
{
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}

tw-passagedata
{
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      margin-bottom: 2em;
      white-space: pre-wrap;
}

tw-passagedata + tw-passagedata
{
      border-top: 1pt dashed black;
      padding-top: 2em;
}

tw-passagedata:before
{
      content: attr(name);
      display: block;
      font-weight: bold;
}
</style>
```

```
</head>

<body>

<h1>chased
</h1>
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version="2.3.16" ifid="B8C846CC-EE79-45C2-9233-68CC189A07CF" zoom="1"
format="Harlowe" format-version="3.2.3" options="" hidden><style
role="stylesheet" id="twine-user-stylesheet" type="text/twine-css">tw-story
{
  background-color: #edf8e8;
  color: #ca001a;
  font-family: Fondamento, serif;
}

tw-link {
  color: #ca001a;
}

.visited {
  color: #ca001a;
}

tw-sidebar {
  display: none;
  position: fixed;
  top: 0;
  left: 0;
  width: 20%; /* padding-right of the tw-story element. */
  max-height: 100%;
  margin-top: 5%; /* padding-top of the tw-story element. */
  padding: 0 0.5em 0.5em 0.5em;
  text-align: right;
  background-color: transparent;
}
tw-icon {
  text-align: right;
  padding-right: 0.75em;
}</style><script role="script" id="twine-user-script" type="text/twine-
javascript"></script><tw-passagedata pid="1" name="start" tags=""
position="100,100" size="100,100">it was already getting dark when you left
the library.
(click-replace: &quot;library.&quot;)[library.

you&#39;d lost track of time as you juggled studying for midterms and
looking for the pretty, brooding girl.]
(click-replace: &quot;girl.&quot;)[girl.

you swear she&#39;s been following you around and you hope, //hope//, that
she is going to work up the courage to ask you out.
```

of course, you are going to say yes when she does.]

[[//shit.//->shit]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="2" name="shit" tags="" position="300,100" size="100,100">> //shit.//

you hated walking on campus after dark. there was something unsettling about the way that the familiar buildings and paths felt...twisted. warped. unfamiliar.

your phone buzzed as a message arrived.

[[*check it*->check]]
[[*ignore it*->ignore]]
</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="3" name="check" tags="" position="500,300" size="100,100">> //check the message.//

it was your housemate group chat.

elle: hey! are you coming home soon?

[[*respond to it*->respond]]
[[*ignore it*->ignore_2]]
</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="4" name="ignore" tags="" position="500,100" size="100,100">> //ignore the message.//

you didn't like to look at your phone when you were walking on campus at night. it felt like you were too distracted to notice if someone came up to you.

[[*walk home->walk]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="5" name="respond" tags="" position="700,300" size="100,100">> //respond to the message.//

you tried to type out a response quickly. it was cold and you were starting to feel scared.

[[*give an update->update]]
[[*ask for elle to meet you->meetup]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="6" name="ignore_2" tags="" position="700,500" size="100,100">> //leave elle on read.//

you'd be home soon but you didn't want to look down at your phone; it would make you feel too vulnerable.

[[*walk home->walk]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="7" name="update" tags="" position="900,300" size="100,100">(set: $update to true)> //give an update.//

you: sorry!! got lost in my work. heading home now!!

[[*walk home->walk]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="8" name="meetup" tags="" position="900,500" size="100,100">(set: $meetup to true)> //ask for elle to meet you.//

you: sorry!! got lost in my work. could you actually meet me @ the lib? its rly dark and id prefer to walk with a friend.

elle: sure thing girl! ill run over rn. <3

[[*wait for elle->wait]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="9" name="walk" tags="" position="700,100" size="100,100">> //walk home.//

you started on your way home, feeling uncomfortably aware of every small sound. at least you lived on campus; you didn't know what you would do if you had to walk all the way off campus. or if you had a car, you'd still have to walk to the parking lot, which felt a lot sketchier than the campus pathways to the dorms.
(click-append: "parking lot")[—where someone could be hiding under a car or behind a row of vehicles waiting to grab you]
(click-append: "dorms")[—where the easiest place for someone to hide was behind a bush or tree, which was equally scary but felt less likely]
(click-append: "less likely.")[*oh gods i'm spiraling*, you thought to yourself. *get a grip*.

[[*pick up the pace->powerwalk]]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="10" name="wait" tags="" position="700,700" size="100,100">> //wait for elle.//

you camp out front of the library. it looks so...//creepy// when it's closed. it's a little uncomfortable, especially with the recent news about the missing student. she disappeared on her way home from work last month. you try to not think about her, about the predators on campus that make girls like you and her feel like victims-in-waiting, like prey.

wait, what was that?

you listen, straining your ears. (text-style: "fade-in-out")[you hear footsteps.]

[[*run->run]]
[[*listen->pause]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="11" name="startup variables" tags="startup" position="100,300" size="100,100">{
(set: $update to false)
(set: $meetup to false)
}</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="12" name="runTest" tags="" position="300,300" size="100,100">you try to run.

(mouseover-replace: "run.")[
         run.]
(mouseover-replace: "run.")[
         run.]

```
(mouseover-replace: &quot;run.&quot;)[
            run.]
(mouseover-replace: &quot;run.&quot;)[
            run.]
(mouseover-replace: &quot;run.&quot;)[
            run.]
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            run.]
</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="13" name="powerwalk" tags=""
position="900,100" size="100,100">&gt; //pick up the pace.//

you start to walk with purpose. that&#39;s what you like to call it, at
least. struggling to not break into a run even though you&#39;re scared for
your life feels almost humiliating. this is your school and you deserve to
feel safe here, damnit.

but you need to focus. listen. stay alert. what&#39;s that behind you?
(text-style: &quot;fade-in-out&quot;)[you hear footsteps.]

[[*faster-&gt;run]]
[[*stop and listen-&gt;pause]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="14"
name="run" tags="" position="1100,100" size="100,100">&gt; //faster.//

you try to run.

(live: 10s)[you&#39;re not fast enough.

[[*it overtakes you.|caught]]]

(click-replace: &quot;run.&quot;)[
            run.]
(click-replace: &quot;run.&quot;)[
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              run.]
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              run.]
(click-replace: &quot;run.&quot;)[
              run.]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="15" name="pause"
tags="" position="1100,300" size="100,100">&gt; //you listen.//
```

something is definitely approaching you.

(text-style: "fade-in-out")[it's getting closer.]

//fuckfuckfuck//.

you're frozen in place. terrified.

(text-style: "fade-in-out")[it's getting closer.]

//am i going to be the next missing girl?//

your body is ready to flee, but your legs feel bolted to the ground.

(text-style: "fade-in-out")[it keeps approaching at the same
deliberate pace.]

//shitshitshit//.

(text-style: "fade-in-out")[it's almost on you.]

//is this how i die?//

(text-style: "shudder")[they stop.]

"hey, i was hoping i'd run into you." it's her voice. your heart is pounding against your ribs; you thought you were being chased—hunted. but it's okay now, it's just her. (click-replace: "her.")[her.

the brooding girl from the library. she quirks a smile in your direction. "my, you look delicious."

there's a tingle of desire deep inside you, fighting against the adrenaline your flight instinct is pumping into your blood.]

[[*say hi to her->hey]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="16" name="caught" tags="" position="1300,100" size="100,100">> //it overtakes you.//

[[*say hi to her->hey]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="17" name="hey" tags="" position="1500,100" size="100,100">> //say hi to her.//

"hey," you manage. "were you...chasing me?"

she looks you up and down. there's a glint of something in her look—is it thirst? desire? you're still waiting for her to explain herself and eventually she raises her eyes to meet yours. she shrugs. "i wanted to say hi and you bolted."

you laugh nervously. "hi."

she flashes a sharp smile. "hi back."

there's a pause and your body goes from terrified to excited. //this is her!! she's right here and she's talking to you! and she looks...hungry.//

"do you want to get out of here? come home with me?" she raises an eyebrow suggestively. "i'd love to...taste you." she licks her lips and your legs get weak.

(if: $meetup is true)["uh, my uh...friend is going to meet me in a few minutes."

she chuckles darkly. "and?"]

[[*"please"->accept]]
[[*"i've really got to get home"->reject]]</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="18" name="accept" tags="" position="1700,100" size="100,100">> //"please."//

it's almost a moan at the word leaves your lips. she looks satisfied. smug, even.

"perfect," she purrs. her hand reaches out slowly and traces a line down your arm, her sharp nails scratching you just a little. "follow me."

you cannot imagine declining.

//the end.//</tw-passagedata><tw-passagedata pid="19" name="reject" tags="" position="1700,300" size="100,100">> //"i've really got to get home."//

"that's a bummer, i was really hoping that we could have some fun." she's smiling, but something is wrong. it's too sharp. she moves closer to you and you're scared again. terrified, even.

"um, what are you doing?"

"im having dinner" she lunges at you and her teeth sink into your throat before you can scream.

//the end.//</tw-passagedata></tw-storydata>

</body>
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I – Arrivals

Grey University is a small school nestled up against a large, dark forest. The campus is a converted church, purchased around the end of the nineteenth century by Edmund Grey and managed by his estate after his death. When I say that it is small, I really mean that. There are less than three thousand students across all of its programs. I was enrolled there for my undergraduate degree. It had been my second choice and only ranked that high because of its remote location (which discouraged my family from dropping in to say hello), its beautiful campus (all high arches and lovely spires), and the stories of hauntings (which terrified and excited me endlessly). It was a little while after the end of the twentieth century, but the exterior of the buildings had been maintained. Inside, there were plenty of modern accommodations: fluorescent lights, electrical outlets, wireless networks, and insulation. Thank the gods for the insulation. Winters would have been unbearable without it, as the fireplaces did little to fight off the chill and frost at night.

I had been admitted as a Literature major, which gave me a lot of writing and discussion classes in Bleck Hall – one of the "most haunted" places on campus. Maybe I had applied as a Literature major hoping to have my own supernatural experience late one night. Gods know I couldn't have been in my right mind to get a Bachelor's degree in the Literature Arts. I probably could have done better for myself staying at my local library poring through their catalog. But instead I decided to take out student loans and

pay tens of thousands of dollars to be assigned readings. I was deeply interested in the readings we discussed as well as the discussions that my professors moderated. I suppose the whole experience wasn't a total bust. And I did bite off more than I could chew with the supernatural side of Grey University. But I'll get to that.

Since the campus was so remote, housing was provided for all four years. The rooms were largely suites of four single bedrooms, a single bathroom, and a common area. There were options for singles without suites, but I was desperate for new friends in this isolated location. My suitemates were very nice, which makes me lucky I suppose. Some of my friends had horror stories about attempted murder by nut allergy, violation of boundaries, a violent lack of hygeine, and an incident with boiling water and the campus police. The worst of my suitemates was Paul, who was just weird and awkward. He dropped out after the first semester and we converted his room to a game/party room.

I didn't let my parents drop me off at campus or help me move in. I woke up late on my last morning at home, squinting my eyes against the harsh ten o' clock sunlight and stumbling through my morning routine on muscle memory alone. I brushed my teeth, roughly applied deodorant, and ran a brush through my hair before shoving the last of my toiletries in a ditty bag. I fried a single egg while a slice of bread toasted for a few minutes too long. I wolfed down my breakfast and washed the burnt taste from my mouth with cheap coffee. My mother was in tears saying goodbye to her baby and my father grunted a goodbye from behind his newspaper. I said something like, "Bye Mom, bye Dad. I'll see you this winter." before closing the screen door

behind me, throwing my backpack into the passenger seat, shoving my ditty bag into a suitcase in the back seat, and driving off to college on my own.

The car ride there was long, maybe three hours including the winding mountain road. I sang along to the songs on my iPod and drummed on the wheel. I smoked a cigarette and rolled down my window. I stuck my hand out and yelled that I was free. Damn my mother for being so clingy and damn my father for being so detached. Ninety minutes in, I took a break and pulled into the shoulder so that I could stretch and relieve myself. I was well into the mountains and figured this was as good a place to stop as any. I hiked a minute or so into the woods so that nobody could see me from the road. I threw my cigarette against a tree and pissed on it to put it out. As I emerged from the woods, I saw an officer leaning against my car. "Shit," I muttered under my breath. He had a smug look on his face that told me I was going to get a ticket for something.

He saw me, smirked with the side of his mouth, and tipped his head in a greeting.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and stopped a couple dozen feet from him. "Is there a problem?"

"Nossir, just making sure you came back to your car." His vowels were stretched out and his consonants were clipped. I couldn't quite place his accent but it felt incredibly rural. He smiled with his mouth. It made me uneasy.

"Do people tend to leave their packed cars on the side of the road?" It was obvious that I was a student heading to the University.

"Sometimes," he chuckled darkly to himself.

I felt uneasy and my eyes flickered to his belt, looking for a gun. "Well, I'm back from my bathroom break and I'd very much like to get on my way. Are you going to keep me?"

He squinted his eyes, sizing me up. "Naw." He shook his head. "But be careful in the woods, especially by yourself. There's predators in there that ain't afraid of humans." I nodded and stared as I waited for him to get back in his car and drive away. "Have a nice afternoon." The officer tipped his hat and pushed himself off of my car. He smiled again, but it didn't make it to his eyes.

When his car disappeared around the bend I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. There was something *weird* about him that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I shook my head and made my way to the driver side door when I noticed a slip of paper on the windshield. A ticket. I'd apparently sped past his speed trap a curve or two ago. "Fuck you." I snarled, balled up the ticket, and threw it into the passenger seat with my backpack. I angrily rubbed hand sanitizer in and wrenched the car keys in the ignition. For the rest of the drive I smoked another cigarette in silence, gripping the wheel with white knuckles and sneering at the forest that passed me.

When I saw the campus come into view I forgot my brooding. Flicking my cigarette butt out of the window, I pulled into the parking lot and made my way to the check in booth for freshmen. The process felt like controlled chaos and I shambled my way from table to table, picking up my room keys, paperwork to fill out, student ID card, orientation pamphlets, and a small pile of useless fliers. I found my dorm building on the map, drove my car to the closest lot, and began to move in. My suitemates were

in various states of unpacked and we all said brusque hellos and tried to settle into our rooms. Some parents were there, watching their sons set up their college lives and chatting with each other about how proud they were to have such responsible kids. I even heard someone say they were so happy to have their dear Seth follow in his father's, grandfather's, and great-grandfather's footsteps by attending Grey University. *Great*, I thought, *a Legacy*.

They all gave me disapproving looks that I didn't blame them for. I smelled like a bad influence and looked like a slob. Hell, I gave myself a disapproving look in the bathroom mirror when they were gone. I wasn't dressed cool and I don't think I carried myself with the swagger of someone who thought highly of themself. If I'm being honest, I was a shithead back then. But at least I knew I was a shithead and I knew my place.

I finished moving in, left my car in the student lot, and freshened up. The four of us sat down in our rooms, doors wide open, waiting for each other to say something. Eventually, Seth edged his way towards the center of the common area, nervously checked a shiny watch on his wrist, and cleared his throat. "I think the cafeteria is serving dinner now, and I am starving after moving in. If you guys would like to come with me, feel free to. I will be heading out in a minute." He said this like it was an announcement, with the tone of someone in charge. And who were we to deny that? Us three, we followed Seth to dinner because he told us to without saying it and I was grateful that he had asked us in his own way. Dinner wasn't too bad; there were flaky

biscuits, a tasty gravy, some crispy fried chicken, and a rich chocolate cake for dessert. We talked to each other and got to know who we were living with.

"Yeah, pretty much everyone on my father's side has gone here since it was founded. I think my great grand-father was in the first graduating class or something. Honestly, my parents would not have let me apply anywhere else. And with our history I think I would have been accepted if I had failed all of my high school classes."

"You aren't mad at your parents for that?" I asked. "For taking away your agency?"

"Are you kidding? I am so happy that I did not have to choose a college. After this I will get hired by my father's office and I will not need to worry about making any big decisions for a very long time." He grinned broadly, flashing his perfect white teeth.

"Lucky!" Paul looked at Seth with a mixture of awe and jealousy. "I wish I could not make any big decisions."

Trevor talked around a bite of cake. "I dunno man, I'm glad I don't have to live with a family name hanging over me." Seth shrugged nonchalantly as if it didn't bother him because nothing did, and I loved him for it.

II – Cigarettes and Earl Grey

We stayed up that night talking about the school and ourselves. It was orientation week so there were no classes to worry about and we had the campus to ourselves.

"I'm here for History on a scholarship." Trevor leaned back in one of the chairs in our common area. "And if all goes well, I'll be here through graduate school and eventually I'll be a tenured professor sitting in a comfortable office being paid to write a book about the Renaissance every decade or so."

"Is there something special about Grey's History department?" I wasn't aware of any nationally recognized Grey University programs or professors.

"Nah, I just like the forest. And it's not too competitive since it's so far out of the way."

Seth smirked.

"What about you?" Trevor nudged Paul with his shoe.

"Art." Paul didn't look up from his sketchbook, which he was scratching in with a charcoal stick.

"Could we see some of your work?"

"No."

Trevor, Seth, and I shrugged at each other. "Seth?"

"I am a Literature major." He laughed softly. "I do not need a useful degree because my father will get me a job when I graduate, so I am here to enjoy myself. If you want to know any of the secrets of Grey University, I am certain I can surprise you." I arched an eyebrow and Seth locked eyes with me. "Do you want to know, Luke?"

It took me a second to find my voice. "Yeah, I would love that. Are there any secret rooms?"

"Of course there are, do you want to see one?" Seth smiled his brilliant smile and it was all I could do to say yes. Secrets and adventure on my first night at Grey University? "Great, let me grab my coat. Who else is coming?"

All four of us ended up setting off together. I slipped a sweatshirt over my head and grabbed a pack of cigarettes and my lighter. Paul stayed in his black hoodie, but he switched out his sketchbook for a smaller drawing pad. Trevor stayed in his tee shirt. Seth came out of his room in a coat that looked expensive. "Shall we?" He held the door and ushered us out.

I started smoking as we walked around campus and held out my pack. "Anybody want one?"

"No," said Paul, monosyllabic as always.

"Sure," said Trevor.

Seth hesitated. "Are you going to tempt me into giving up a year of my life at a time?" I almost stammered some sort of denial but he put a hand on my shoulder and said softly, "I am teasing you." He pulled a cigarette out of the pack slowly and put it in his mouth, leaning his head forward for me to light it for him. I fumbled with my lighter and he smirked.

I put the pack and my lighter in my pocket while Seth choked on what I'm sure was his first drag off a cigarette ever. I laughed and clapped him on the back. "You'll get used to it, but it will cost a few more years." He laughed dryly and I knew I would do anything to hear that again.

We marched forward into Bleck Hall, Seth holding the heavy oak door for us. Trevor hesitated. "Don't they lock these at night?"

"Never." Seth grinned devilishly. "The buildings are open all day, every day. Even on holidays. Some people love to work and never take time off and the University will accommodate them." This was evidently enough for Trevor and we let Seth lead us deep into the bowel of Bleck. We descended so many staircases I knew we must be well underground. The air was colder and I stuck my hands into my armpits to keep them warm. Trevor shivered, his teeth chattering and breath clouding in front of him. Paul was enchanted, eyes wide as he greedily lapped up the detailed architecture of the building. "There are a lot of storage rooms, extra offices, and private libraries down here," Seth explained. "And because some of these rooms belonged to professors who have long been dead, there are plenty of unexplored rooms with weird passages and hidden compartments."

"What about ghosts." Paul said this without intonation and I was startled by the intensity in his voice.

"There are, of course, stories…" Seth winked and gave a knowing smile, but refused to elaborate when pressed. "Now, let us explore this office." He gave a door with frosted glass a light push and it slowly creaked open, complaining about its rusted hinges and warped wood. The room was dark and dusty. Seth pulled a string, lighting up a warm bulb hanging from the ceiling. It hummed and swayed slightly, flickering loudly occasionally. The walls were covered in bookshelves overflowing with thick volumes of yellowed pages. I picked up one and started thumbing through it. The pages

were rough against my fingers and the dust felt almost sticky on my hands. It was full of old poetry and dedicated the bottom half of the pages of the notes needed to understand it. I rubbed my hands against my sweatshirt when I was done.

I saw Paul had cornered Seth and was speaking quick and low. "Which areas are the most active? I need to know. Bleck is haunted – the *most* haunted place on campus! Has anyone in your family seen anything...*supernatural*?"

Seth was smirking – he did this a lot whenever Paul pressed him for answers. "Maybe I will show you another night. This is our first and I would hate to have been the person responsible for scaring you off." He looked past Paul's shoulder and I caught his gaze. I raised my eyebrow and he winked at me. I looked away quickly, blushing slightly and thanking the gods for the poor lighting, which hid my embarrassment.

Trevor gave a yelp of surprise and the three of us snapped our heads to look at him. He was standing by a shelf that was angled slightly away from the wall. "There's a room behind this!" We rushed to him and tried to peer behind the shelf. "Quick guys, let's push this open more!"

"How did you find this, Trevor?" I asked as we widened the opening.

"I saw the shelf and thought about those hidden bookshelf doors and started tipping the books looking for a trigger!"

"Which book was the right one? What do you think this room is for?"

"Oh, none of the books worked but I did see a button on the underside of one of the shelves." He pointed to a small, barely perceptible bump that made a clicking sound when I pressed on it.

"Whoah, *cool*."

"If you pay close attention to the classrooms and offices, you will be able to find doors like this all over. Some of these hideaways are known by the faculty, but most of them have been abandoned for decades." Seth vanished into the hidden chamber.

Beyond the shelf, the room was dark. Paul dug his phone out of his pocket, turned on its flashlight, and slunk forward silently. Trevor and I looked at each other, shrugged, and pulled out our own phone flashlights. We followed Seth and Paul into the dark.

The walls were mostly bare save for a single bookshelf at the end of the long dusty chamber, a ratty tapestry hanging on one side, and an empty hearth on the opposite. There was a decaying chair behind a wide desk covered in papers and open journals. Paul was hunched over the desk, scribbling furiously in his sketchbook and muttering under his breath. I slowly approached Paul and the documents. "Hey Paul...what are you doing?"

He didn't even look at me as he responded. "Taking notes."

"Yeah…" I tried to get help from Trevor but he shrugged and shook his head. "Why are you taking notes?"

"Runes."

"Well, that explains that." Seth smirked. "Luke, come here and look at these notebooks."

I warily walked around Paul, who had returned to muttering, and met Seth in the back corner. He handed me a notebook with yellowed, crinkled pages. "Do you suppose this is someone's research? Or perhaps a personal diary?" He flipped through another volume casually and flashed a brilliant, mischievous smile at me.

I gawked stupidly for a second, blushed furiously, and tried to bury my face in the notebook. The dusty notebook. I sneezed loudly. And *something* in the room moved. It was a small sound, just a rustle. But in the hidden office, every noise was amplified. All three of us looked at Seth, expecting some sort of answer. He was still, eyes wide and mouth pressed into a thin white line. After a moment, he gave a curt nod and said to all of us, "I believe it is time to leave. Quickly." Trevor and I hurried out of the hidden room but Paul stayed at the desk. "Paul. We are leaving. Now." Paul didn't respond and the sound of his pencil scratching at the paper made me cringe with fear. "Paul. Leave the desk." Seth's voice was hard now. Angry, even.

Paul looked up with a cold fury in his eyes. "Not yet." He went back to his sketchbook. Seth slowly approached the desk and put a hand on the papers Paul was copying from. He leaned in closely and whispered something right in Paul's ear. Paul put the pencil down and nodded. As Seth returned to the bookshelf door, Paul slipped a piece of paper into his sketchbook. He hurried after the rest of us and Seth pushed the shelf back into place.

Trevor rubbed his arms for warmth. "Hey Seth, what was that back there?"

"Probably nothing, but I do not want to take chances in a hidden room in the basement of Bleck Hall." Seth started up the stairs and I followed two steps at a time.

We returned to our rooms without incident and Paul locked himself away instantly. Trevor mumbled something about taking a warm shower to get the cold out of his system. Which left Seth and me in the common room.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Seth shrugged off his coat and turned on an electric kettle. "Would you like tea? It's Earl Grey"

"Uh sure, tea would be great." I sat down in one of the wooden chairs with stiff cushions. "I had a blast, actually. Thanks. Do you know all of the secrets here?"

Seth chuckled softly. "No, not nearly half of them. But that is still a lot of secrets to know." He disappeared into his room with his coat and came out with two mugs. "Cream and sugar?"

"Fancy," I teased him. "But yes. Please." Seth returned from his room again, this time with some expensive-looking teaware. The kettle finished and he started to steep the tea, humming as he worked. I didn't recognize the tune. "Do you know what Paul meant by 'runes?'"

"I am sure they were just symbols or letters in some foreign script. Something makes me think that Paul is more excited about the secrets he believes are hidden at Grey University than the classes or professors. I hope he is not too disheartened by reality."

"Is this place not really haunted?" I tried to hide my own disappointment.

"I cannot speak of the supernatural as I do not believe such stories. In my opinion the campus is full of spooky buildings and naive students who want to believe

in something." He brought me a cup of tea very carefully and sat down in a chair opposite me with his own. "Did you come here hoping for an encounter?"

"No, I'm here more because it will discourage my parents from visiting." I shrugged. "Are you close with your family?"

A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth but Seth hid it with his tea quickly. "My parents and I have a more...business relationship. I felt much closer to my classmates than my family growing up."

"Weren't they here this morning talking about how happy they were for you to be going here?"

"Hah!" he laughed bitterly. "They were not my parents; they were the housekeepers who helped me move in. My parents were unable to make it today because of their work. I hardly see them out of their offices before supper, if they show up at all." I was baffled by his strange life, with distant wealthy parents, doting housekeepers, and the weird way he dressed and spoke. Unsure of how to respond, I sipped my tea. "I take it you are not close with your parents?"

"No, my dad barely notices I'm around and my mom is like, weirdly attached to me. Like she calls me her baby but I don't think she knows a thing about me besides the fact that she birthed me. And I guess that I'm now in college." I shrugged awkwardly and tried to push the conversation away from my parents. "Where's your family from? Are they local since they have such strong ties to Grey?"

"Yes, actually. Their estate is near the village."

"There's a village?" My jaw dropped.

"Of course there is! I would call it a town but it is far too small for that. There is a quaint little shopping district. I will have to take you there some time."

"What work do your parents do?"

"I am not privy to all of the details, but to my knowledge they deal with international trade. Importing a lot of expensive inventory from Europe. That sort of thing." He waved the thought away with his hand. "But enough about my parents' work, I will have enough of that when I have graduated. What do your parents do?"

"My mom and dad both work in offices but I'm not really sure what they do. My dad does like, data entry or something? And my mom calls a lot of people but I'm not sure if it's a sales position or something else." I shrugged and slid a little lower in my seat, shifting to get comfortable. The two of us sat in silence for a while, sipping our tea every now and then and listening to the shower run and Trevor sing a pop song poorly.

"I am going to retire to my room for the night," Seth announced suddenly. "May I take your cup?" He held out his hand and collected the dishes. "Thank you for chatting." He gave me a curt bow of his head and left me alone.

Trevor emerged from the bathroom in his boxers with a towel thrown over his shoulder. I cleared my throat and he yelped, jumping in the air. "Dude! Don't look! I thought you'd all gone to sleep oh my god." He fumbled with the towel as he hastily attempted to cover himself a little more.

"Trevor, man," I tried to speak through my laughter. "Dude, you need bigger boxers."

"Shut up! Oh my god." He hissed, his face flushed. "You didn't see anything and if you speak of this to anyone I will kill you." Trevor ran into his room and slammed the door. When I had recovered from my fit of laughter, I stood up and got ready for bed.

I had trouble falling asleep. I couldn't stop thinking about Seth, with his fancy clothes and stiff way of speaking. Part of me hated him. He was a Legacy! How could I not? But he was pleasant to talk to and didn't come off as mean-spirited or snobby. I didn't trust him or respect his position. "Blood money for sure," I mumbled to myself. I fell asleep thinking about how pleasant his laughter was to hear and how much I resented him for his parents' estate. His stupid coat and his brilliant smile. And tea. Of course he offered me tea. It was sweet and warm. And so goddamn pretentious.

III – Exploring Bleck Hall

It was well past ten in the morning when I could no longer ignore the harsh sunlight against my eyelids. I sat up, stretching and yawning and scratching myself. My stomach grumbled a little, so I splashed water on my face, brushed my teeth, and applied deodorant. I went to the bathroom quickly and pulled on some warm sweats and a cozy hoodie. When I opened the door, I found Paul sitting in the hallway with a backpack on his lap. He looked up and then scrambled to his feet. "Locked out," he offered as an explanation. He swung the backpack onto his shoulder with a grunt.

"How long have you been out here?"

"Nine." He pushed past me and disappeared into his room. I triple checked my pockets for my keys and wallet; I doubted Paul would have let me back in and the others seemed to still be asleep. I lit a cigarette and headed to the dining hall.

The breakfast felt far too fancy for a college cafeteria, but I assumed that they were making an effort for orientation week. I loaded my plate with eggs Benedict, French toast, an orange, a cranberry muffin, and a cheese danish. The coffee tasted expensive and I doctored it with a splash of cream and a spoonful of sugar. It would be a waste of luxury to take it black. I ate and lounged at a table in the corner of the massive room. I suppose that its size made sense since, being the only dining hall, it needed to accommodate the whole campus. There were booths and tables and counters, and even a patio.

When I had finished breakfast, I decided to take a walk around the campus to try and locate my classes. I thought about returning to the suite and asking Seth for a tour since I was certain that as a Legacy, he would know the place well. But I hadn't seen him and didn't want to be a bother. Consulting my phone for my schedule, I wandered the floors of Bleck Hall and planned the quickest route for each day of classes. The building was beautiful – intricate metalwork on the windows glimmered in the sunlight, which fell onto the warm, dark wood that covered the walls. The lounges were full of cozy-looking armchairs and expensive leather couches. Occasionally I found myself gazing out over the campus from tall, pointed windows with marvelous detailing. I felt truly lost in a fantastical castle, and the electrical outlets didn't even register when I scanned the rooms; they were perfectly subtle. The whole place felt like

some medieval European setting grafted into twenty-first century America. If I hadn't been so enchanted, I'm sure it would have been slightly uncomfortable, living with the two dissonant experiences. But as I said, I was completely enchanted.

On the third floor, I found a small library. Well, small compared to the actual campus library. It took up half of the floor and had shelves that stretched up to the ceilings and a ladder on a track to reach the upper layers. I made myself comfortable at a long table with green Tiffany banker's lamps (though I didn't recognize them as Tiffany's at the time). It was nice being by myself; I felt at ease. Noticing an ashtray in front of me, I lit another cigarette. *Danm*, I thought, *I'm running low. I should ask Seth to come with me to the village and see if I can pick up some more.* I added that to my mental to-do list. Thinking of Seth reminded me of the secret room at the bottom of Bleck Hall with runes and dusty research. I wondered if I could find it by myself during the day, and if I'd be able to figure out what was hidden there. *After lunch*, I promised myself.

Before I went to the cafeteria, I texted the suite group chat.

L: im gonna go get lunch any1 wanna come w/?

S: No, thank you. I am going to grab a bite later. Have fun.

T: Sure!

T: Lemme get dressed real quick

T: R u at the dorm rn?

L: almost

L: c u soon

I changed into jeans and a t-shirt and met up with Trevor in the common area. "Paul doesn't want to come?"

"I guess not," he shrugged. "Haven't heard from him at all today."

I shrugged back and we headed out. The walk was a few minutes, but Trevor and I didn't fill the time with any conversation. Both of us scrolled through various feeds on our phones, swiped our ID cards to enter the cafeteria, collected a fresh panini from the sandwich counter and a cup of water, and sat down opposite each other at a small table. Trevor wolfed his food down so quickly I barely noticed he'd had any to begin with. As I swallowed my last bite, he cleared his throat. "Does Paul kind of...freak you out at all?" He leaned forward conspiratorially and lowered his voice.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean last night with the muttering and scribbling!" he practically hissed.

"Yeah, that was a little weird," I conceded. "But I had him pegged as one of those like, emo quiet kids." He raised an eyebrow. "If that makes sense."

"Kinda? I dunno, he kinda creeps me out." Trevor shuddered. "You and Seth are lucky to be on the other side of the suite from his room. I heard him drawing late last night. I didn't even know you could draw loudly!" He snorted a laugh. "What about Seth?"

I felt my cheeks flush. "What about him?"

"He talks so stiffly! I feel kind of weird living with him, like he'll think I'm a peasant compared to him."

"Oh, yeah. Totally." I grinned. "I feel like I'm living next to a prince. But we'll corrupt his lordship with our commoner ways."

He raised his cup of water. "Cheers, bro. I'll drink to that." We clinked our glasses together and each took a swig. We took our dishes to the dish return and exited the dining hall. "Are you headed back to the dorm?"

"Nah, I'm gonna go look for my classes at Bleck some more. You?"

"I'm gonna take a nap while I still have time." Trevor laughed. "Peace, bro." He raised a hand in a wave and left me.

I made my way to Bleck Hall and stared up at the windows on the facade. From the ground, I could see the tops of the library shelves. I opened the doors and took the stairs down. It was cold under the building, but I guess that made sense. I found the room we'd explored after a bit of searching and pushed the frosted glass door open. I closed it softly behind me for some reason, I suppose I didn't want anyone to walk in and discover the secret room. That was just for me. And the other three, I guess. I pushed the button and slipped past the bookshelf-door. My jaw dropped. The papers that covered the desk – all the runes Paul had been looking at – were missing. The research was still there on the shelf. But the loose papers were gone.

Paul probably took them, I rationalized to myself. *I mean, what the hell was he doing outside in the morning? Having breakfast? A poor excuse.* I tried to remember if he had been carrying anything. *Whatever, it's not like there's some monster on campus.* Pushing the thought aside, I went to the shelf, picked a notebook at random, and started to page through it. It was filled with a rough script and hastily drawn and labeled

diagrams. I struggled to read it, but the illustrations suggested that it was about some medical condition. There were dental illustrations, maps of veins and arteries, and a cross section of an eye. I should have asked myself what it was doing in a hidden chamber underneath the Literature Department, but the thought never crossed my mind. I put the notebook back and plucked another one at random. This one was written in a neat and small handwriting, entirely uppercase letters. It was also written in French, which I didn't understand. I pulled volume after volume, looking for more in English. There were quite a few in that French handwriting, one that I thought was empty until I recognized Hebrew characters later – or earlier, I suppose – in the book, a chunk of journals in Korean, two fragile journals in Baybayin, and a single tattered volume penned in Romanian Cyrillic. I had no luck finding more English volumes and eventually gave up my search. *I'll have to ask Seth what he makes of all this when I see him again. Or maybe I should wait until he mentions the secret room. I don't want to come off as obsessive like Paul.*

My stomach growled and I startled myself. "Shit," I mumbled as I pulled out my phone to check the time. It was well past six. I had completely lost track of time. I started to return the books to the shelf in the order that I pulled them, or at least as best I could. *It's not like anyone's going to check this shelf. The dust here is so thick I'd be willing to bet money that it hasn't been touched in at least five years.* I finished up and wiped my brow with the back of my wrist. I was sweating a lot and breathing heavily. I choked on some dust and coughed until tears filled my eyes.

"Are you dying?" Seth sauntered in with one of my sweat shirts over his arm. "Because it sure sounds like you are dying."

"Jesus Christ, you scared me man," I gasped. He offered me my shirt and a tiny plastic water bottle. "Thank you," I rasped. "What are you doing here?" I pulled the sweatshirt over my head.

"Trevor mentioned that you had gone to Bleck and you were not answering my texts. I assumed you had gone to the sub-basement where the service is spotty." He smirked as he gave me a once over. "I assumed correctly."

I was lucky my face was red from choking. "You texted?"

"Yes. We were going to get dinner. I told them to go ahead while I collected you. Are you coming?" He gestured for me to leave.

"Yes. Yeah. Sorry." I stammered my way through a rough apology and hurried up the stairs. "How long have they been in the dining hall?"

"No more than ten minutes, I went to fetch you right away." He smiled. "You will not be late. Well...perhaps a little but I promise it will not be a big deal." He led me the rest of the way to the cafeteria.

Trevor eagerly waved me to the table and Seth took a seat next to me and across from Trevor. "Where were you? Were your classes really that hard to find?"

"No, no. I just went exploring Bleck Hall and lost track of time. There's a really cool library on the third floor!" Seth raised an eyebrow in my peripheral but I ignored it. "It's got those fancy desk lamps and really cozy chairs and there are fireplaces all over the building."

"Lucky," Trevor groaned. "I hope the History Department has a cool building too."

"Did you look for your classes Paul?" I secretly hoped that he'd explain what he'd been up to this morning.

"No." Great.

"How are the runes?"

Paul's mouth thinned. "Fine." He narrowed his eyes and gave me a cold glare.

"Cool. Seth?" I turned and looked away from Paul.

"I do not need to look for my classes; I am very familiar with the area."

"Oh! That reminds me! Would you show me around the village? I need to grab some supplies and don't really like the idea of driving through the woods tonight."

Seth blinked in surprise. "Oh...uhm...yes. I would love to show you the village." I tried to flash him with my best smile. I'm sure it came off as a grimace.

"Trevor? Paul?" I turned to them.

"Nah, I don't want to go out tonight." Trevor patted his stomach. "Too full."

"I am certain you would love to taste the night life New Chester has to offer." Seth grinned devilishly.

"Maybe another day, fellas."

"Suit yourself." I shrugged.

"I'll come." I almost didn't hear Paul.

"Brilliant. We should leave soon. The businesses will start to close in a couple hours." Seth pushed himself to his feet.

I pulled out my keys and jangled them. "We can go from here, unless anyone's got stuff at the dorm they wanted to take?"

Seth and Paul shook their heads and we left Trevor outside the dining hall. "Have fun!" he yelled after us. "Don't stay out too late!" His laughter faded.

We piled in the car; Seth took the passenger seat and offered to navigate for me and Paul seemed content to stretch out in the back. I would have snapped at him if I cared about my car. Or if he could hear me; music leaked from his headphones and I almost worried about his hearing before I remembered I didn't care. "Tell me where to go, local boy." Seth playfully swatted my arm and started directing me.

IV – New Chester

It was a fifteen minute drive to the village. The road was dark and I wouldn't have caught the sign that read "New Chester Exit Here" if Seth hadn't pointed it out. The shopping district was really just a block of businesses. "Is there a market or liquor store?"

"Yes, the Hardy General Store probably has whatever you want."

"You coming with us Paul?"

"Nope." He raised his phone to show us that he had a map and disappeared.

"Looks like it's just you and me." I nudged Seth with my elbow. "Did you need anything down here?"

"No. I just wanted to show you one of my favorite places to stop after you finish your errand."

"You spoil me." I couldn't help smiling. I walked in the store and turned around to find Seth stopped at the door, looking up at the sign. "Seth, come in! I promise I'll be quick."

Hardy's was not the kind of store I was used to. There was a long counter between us and the merchandise, which was sorted into cubicles that were labeled with hanging tags. Everything was wooden and the lights seemed to be real lanterns. It was pleasantly rustic and felt completely out of its time. An older woman stood behind the counter and welcomed us in with a kindly voice. "Ah, young Master Bleck! I see you have brought a friend. It is lovely to meet you, Mister…" she held out her hand and waited for me to introduce myself.

"Luke. Just Luke." I tried to shake her hand but I ended up just sort of limply squeezing it.

Seth nodded in a slight bow. "Good evening Madame Hardy. How has your family been?"

"They are doing well, thanks to your parents. Please pass on my gratitude when you see them next. Now Mister Luke, what are you looking for?"

"Uh, do you have any cigarettes?"

"Of course, my dear. How many packs would you like?" She grabbed a step ladder and reached for a cubby just above her head level.

"Uh, two please?"

"Such manners your friend has, Master Bleck!" She returned to the counter with two packs of an obscure brand. "Your total is fourteen dollars." She smiled, revealing yellowed teeth.

I pulled out my card but Seth stopped my hand. "Cash only, Luke." He pointed to a sign on the counter. "I will pay for them." He opened his wallet and pulled out a fresh twenty dollar bill without a single crease. "Keep the change Madame Hardy. I hope I will see you soon." He smiled and gave another nod-bow before he left.

"Yeah, thank you!" I called over my shoulder as I followed him out to the street. "Dude, you didn't have to pay for me! How can I make it up to you?"

"It is perfectly okay, Luke. Do not worry about it at all. If you want to pay me back, come with me. I would very much like to show you something." He set off up the street.

"Seth, what are you showing me? We're already past the shopping district!" I pleaded.

"Have faith, Luke. This is going to be good. I promise." My heart jumped every time he said my name and I almost pestered him again to hear "Luke" against his lips again. Seth led me deeper into New Chester and finally stopped at a small one-story building. "We have arrived," he whispered in a voice that promised adventure. "Come in." There was a click and he opened the door. I entered.

The building was just a reception area and a small office, really. It was fancy, though. Way more classy than Hardy's. This place had a marble receptionist desk, sleek computers, an electronic lock on the office door, and sterile lights. LEDs, I assumed.

The floor was marble too and my shoes clicked against it in a satisfying manner. "Wow, Seth. I don't know what the fuck this place is, but I think it looks very nice."

He smiled warmly. "I am glad you find it agreeable. Now, come into my office." He swiped a card and opened the next door.

"Why the hell do you have an office?" I gaped as I took in the room. "I mean, what the fuck do you need one for? You're like eighteen and have a dorm and an estate."

"Sometimes I want to get away from my parents' world. The campus, the shopping area in the village, the estate – they have their fingerprints everywhere. I took a small amount of money and purchased myself this space. Cash only so there is no paper trail, of course. This," Seth spread his arms, "this is my space. Welcome."

I was going to make a joke about how he bought himself an office, probably before he was a legal adult. Or about how formal he had been. But I figured I was the first person he had shown this to. "Do you have a receptionist?" I gestured back to the desk.

"No, I just wanted to leave the computer outside." He smirked and shared a private joke with himself. "This room is more of a studio space for me." He inhaled sharply. "Which reminds me, I wanted to show you this." He went over to a big wooden desk and opened a drawer. "Remember how I said I knew the secrets of Grey University? Have a look." He withdrew a leather folio and opened it on the desk. I walked up to look at the papers he was spreading. "My family has an extensive archive

with documents about the history and use of Bleck Hall, as well as some other buildings."

"Wait. Shit. You're Seth Bleck. As in Bleck Hall Bleck." Seth nodded hesitantly, looking confused. "Fuck. And Madame Hardy said that. Shit. I am a moron, how did I not put that together!?"

"Luke, are you all right?" Concern – genuine concern, bless this boy – crept into his voice.

"Yeah. I'm just a dumbass. Go on about your secrets and archives."

"Er...If you say so...Well, I was curious about the room we explored last night, so I did some research. I believe that the office we were in was originally used for a professor of Folklore and Literature. School records indicate that the sub-basement of Bleck Hall has been changed to extra storage within the past twenty years, but the professor of Folklore position had been vacant for some time before then. The last professor disappeared thirty or forty years ago. He had been losing his mind, according to these papers, but he vanished before the University worked out a package for his dismissal. He had been working on a book about blood rituals before he left and I think that Paul was scribbling down the symbols that this professor had been collecting for whatever spellwork he thought was needed in his research." He gave me a cautious smile and waited.

"Seth...wow! How did you do this so quickly? And why? I mean I think this is incredible, but...just...wow." I shook my head in awe. "This is incredible." He beamed and I knew I would do anything to make him beam like that again.

"I just wanted to prove to you that I am not all talk. I know most of the secrets of Grey University and I love a good mystery, so I will know the rest of them soon enough." He said this so surely, it felt like he was declaring his mission statement to me. I couldn't help smiling. I mean, this was just so *cute*.

"I'm serious, Seth. This is impressive. Like, I'm blown away right now. You did this all today?"

"Last night, I was having trouble sleeping." He shrugged nonchalantly.

"Oh, wow man are you good now? We can go back if you're tired?"

"I will be all right, but I appreciate your concern. It is endearing." He smiled at me and I knew he saw me flush; there was a satisfied glint in his eyes. "We should go, though. I believe Paul is almost ready to head back to the campus."

I looked at the night sky as Seth locked up behind us. There wasn't much light pollution out here, so I could see the backbone of the night sky. Opposite that, the full moon gleamed. It was crisp and perfect. I wanted to take my time walking ` so that I could soak up the rural magic I felt. I could hear a soft breeze rustling the leaves in the forest, an owl's hoot, and a wolf's howl. The air felt completely wild and I was enchanted. I felt my phone vibrate and Seth spoke. "We should hurry to the car now." He sped down the street and I jogged to keep up.

Paul was leaning against my car, looking bored. "You find everything you needed?" He nodded, though how he heard me, I don't know. The music he was listening to made we feel like I needed to raise my voice to talk to Seth. We got back

in the car and started off towards campus. Seth navigated for me and was patient, even when I missed a turn. Paul sighed loudly from the backseat.

About five minutes from campus, he sat up so quickly it startled me. I slammed my foot on the brakes and the car came squealing to a stop. "Jesus, man! Paul! What the fuck was that about?"

Paul looked pale—paler than normal—and stammered, "N...nothing. I...there...it...I thought I saw...saw something. Never...nevermind. Keep going. Sorry."

Seth and I shared a concerned look, but we shrugged since there was nothing we could do. When I parked the car, Paul bolted towards the dorms. Seth waited for me as I locked the car. "Thank you, Luke, for inviting me. And for coming to my office. I really appreciate it." He smiled and looked up at me.

"Of course, Seth. Thank you for showing me your office. And for navigating. And for paying for my cigarettes. Do you want one? Why am I offering, you bought them. Would you like one of your cigarettes?" I laughed nervously.

"Why don't we share one?"

"Shit, I am a bad influence on you."

Seth cocked his head. Of course he cocked his head. "Why do you say that?"

"Dude, I think you just said your first contraction. And you're smoking with me. Two bad habits. These are going to cost a lot of years." I nudged him with my elbow and hopped on the hood of my car. "Come on, let's look at the stars while we smoke." Cautiously, he joined me. We leaned back, our heads against the windshield,

and watched the stars as we passed the cigarette back and forth. Seth didn't choke this time.

"Smoking with you is worth the years it will cost me, I think. I am not sold on contractions, though. Saying it felt dirty." He turned to make sure I was laughing at his joke. I smiled wider so he could see I loved it. We stayed there after the cigarette was finished, but we didn't light another one.

V – Flu Season

I didn't love Seth then, not yet. But I was overcome with an intense fondness for him that grew unnaturally quickly. If I'm speaking honestly, it frightened me a little. This was the second evening I had known him and I was already blushing whenever he shared a joke with me. I was not subtle about my crush and that was embarrassing. Hells, it still is. When we returned to the dorm Trevor was showering. Paul's room was closed. Seth and I each went to our rooms and waved silently. I smiled at him and closed the door to my room.

The rest of orientation week passed without incident; Seth and I made our way back to New Chester to pick up more cigarettes since we had spent a lot of time walking and smoking together. Seth didn't cough nearly as much now. I took out some cash and bought them this time, which seemed to disappoint Seth slightly. He didn't speak up because of course he didn't.

Since Seth and I were both Literature majors, we ended up sharing a lot of classes. I didn't mind at all, and we would discuss our readings and assignments in

between our lectures and sections. When there were group assignments, he and I would partner up. Seth was a better writer than I was so I delegated editing to myself and we brainstormed together. For solo papers, we would often review each other's work before the due date. It often felt like I was taking a private class with him.

We had one discussion class that took me back to the only course in high school that I ever cared for. We'd read chapters of books on our own and then have intense and engaging conversations and debates about interpretations of the text and the nature of humanity. It was all very pretentious, but I felt like I was being taken seriously by my professor and my peers and that meant the world to me.

One day, I was walking with Seth to Bleck Hall and I said, "I think that I'm finally happy." He smiled and caught my gaze. "I completely understand how you feel and agree wholeheartedly."

The class that I enjoyed least was focused on reading analytically and then writing about them. The term "lateral reading" grated me and I found myself intensely disinterested in reading dry articles and academic papers. These were the exact opposite of what I wanted to discuss. It was supposed to fulfill some basic writing requirement for our GEs, so I grit my teeth and took it Pass/No Pass. The professor was kind enough for my strong disliking of the course to leave a bad taste in my mouth; if he were having us read literally anything else, I would be fine with the work. Enthusiastic, even. His name was Professor Leighton, but he insisted that we called him Noah.

Noah was a local. He actually lived in New Chester rather than on campus in the faculty housing. Our final project was supposed to be an analysis and presentation

on something we found from the local newspaper that interested us. Even though it was early November, Seth and I planned out what we would be researching to try and knock it out early. Bless Noah for having all of the assignments on the syllabus.

Maybe I was talking to Seth about an assignment due in five weeks because I was looking for excuses to talk to him. Or maybe I was a really diligent student.

"Luke?" Seth nudged me and I looked up. Noah was sitting on the desk in front of me. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. "If you're too tired to come to class, I'd rather you get enough rest and send me an email." I nodded and grabbed for my bag. "Hey." Noah's voice was soft and he rested his hand on my shoulder. I looked up and tried to focus my eyes on him. "If you're struggling, you should talk to the Health Center. At the very least, they can look into insomnia or anxiety or something." I shrugged and yawned through my nose to avoid being rude. "Okay Luke?" He wasn't letting me go just yet, so I nodded as enthusiastically as I could. Noah's arm relaxed. "Seth, can you make sure he actually goes to the Health Center?"

"Yes, sir." Seth helped pull me out of my desk and into the hall. "Have you been staying up all night?"

I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut. "No. I don't think so. I just feel so drained."

"Do you want to grab some lunch?" My stomach started to growl. "I will take that as a 'yes.'" I did my best to match his pace as we marched towards the dining hall. I felt cranky and had a migraine by the time we were seated. "I think you should have some soup. I will grab you a bowl and some tea. Stay here." I mumbled a thank you

that I don't think he heard and rested my head in my arms. Seth nudged me awake again and pushed some chicken soup and a cup of herbal tea in front of me. "I added some honey for your throat." I was about to ask what was wrong with my throat, but I interrupted myself with a hacking cough. Seth raised an eyebrow and I gave up any attempt at resistance and grunted a weak acknowledgement. The tea was pleasant and the honey was soothing. It didn't relieve my headache, so I started slurping the soup.

"I think I should lie down." I had finished the soup and could feel it sloshing around in my stomach. I probably ate too much.

"That would probably be for the best, but might I recommend you retire to your room rather than lounge out here?" Jesus Christ, he really spoke like that. Before I could argue with him, Seth helped me up and we walked out of the dining hall. I was leaning heavily against him and he supported me with an arm around me. At some point I must have started to droop because I remember his shoulder was under my arm when we arrived at the suite.

"Is Luke sick?" Trevor's voice called from his room. I stumbled towards my room, but changed course to the bathroom at the last moment.

"I think he is, I will take him to the Health Center to see what's wrong–" I threw up into the toilet. "Yes, I would say that he is sick. I'll just grab some medicine for him later." Trevor must have stayed in his room or left the dorm because I don't remember him being there for the rest of the day. Paul didn't show up, but that was normal at this point. Seth sat with me, though. He rubbed my back and got me cold water. When I stopped throwing up, he helped me clean my face with a washcloth. If I hadn't just

vomited an entire bowl of chicken soup in front of him, I might have found the care that he took when dabbing flecks off of my face somewhat endearing. Romantic even. He led me back to my room and aided me as I got into bed. "I am going to be right back with some medicine for you," he whispered in my ear.

I might have fallen asleep, or maybe I just didn't process time. It seemed like he was back in an instant with an armful of medicines, immune boosters, and cough drops. "I think you have caught the flu. Did you get your shot this year?"

"Not yet, I thought the flu started around January." It took a lot of effort to get those words out.

"It starts earlier than that, it just peaks in the winter." He fiddled with plastic and sat down on my bedside. "I need you to sit up and take this medicine. Can you do that for me?"

I nodded, but he slipped his hand around my back and helped me pull myself up into a position that vaguely resembled sitting. "Here," he said softly and brought the medicine cup to my lips. "Drink." I did. The medicine was a bitter syrup and I coughed. He brought a glass of cool water to my mouth. His hand was still pressed in between my shoulder blades. It felt ice cold, but I was almost certainly running a high fever. I felt my sweat through my shirt against his hand. This poor boy was putting up with a lot to take care of me.

"Thank you." My voice was hoarse. "Aren't you worried I'll get you sick?"

"Not at all. I never get sick." He smiled at me and I felt like everything might be okay. "Would you like me to leave you?" He started to get up.

"No, wait." *What was I doing?* "Please. Stay." I weakly patted the blanket.

"If you insist," he grinned. "Move your legs so I can lay back." I obliged. "Would you want to watch a movie?" I shrugged. "Is your laptop good? I can get mine if you would prefer." I gestured to my bag, which he'd leaned against my desk. He pulled it out and handed it to me for the password. When I'd unlocked it, he took it back. "What are you in the mood for?" I shrugged. "So you are saying that I can choose the film?" I nodded. It was all I could do. "Perfect. I hope that you know exactly what you have signed up for. How does horror sound to you? Fantasy? Romance?" He was just saying words. "Excellent!" I fell asleep before he had pressed play.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep. I woke up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat and he was laying across my legs, which I had kicked out. "Sorry," I whispered as I reached for the glass of water that he'd left on the bedside table.

"It is okay," he mumbled sleepily. This dork didn't even use contractions in his sleep! "Do you need to pee?"

"Yeah, can I get up?" The medicine was working and I was able to get up on my own. I stood over the toilet and relieved myself. After I flushed and washed my hands, I slipped back into my room. "Is it okay if I grab some fresh air?"

"Sure, sure." He smiled sleepily. I slid on some sandals and grabbed my cigarettes and lighter from my coat. Outside it was chilly, but I needed the cold air against my face. I smoked a cigarette and looked at the stars from a bench.

"Do you have another one?" I jumped. Seth had walked up behind me.

"Jesus! Yeah, here." I offered him the last one and lit it for him.

He sat down beside me and looked at the stars with me. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, for now." I leaned against him.

"I think you are not supposed to smoke when you are sick." I shrugged and sucked on the cigarette. "For that matter, I do not think I should be smoking either." I shrugged and heard his cigarette crackle softly. I nestled into his shoulder. "I think these are going to be the death of you." He sat with me until my arms got goosebumps. I closed my eyes and smelled him. Cigarette smoke and sandalwood. "We should get you back inside."

"Thank you for taking care of me." My throat was feeling rough after smoking. I coughed.

He handed me a lozenge. "Of course, Luke. Do you want me to stay with you for the rest of the night?" I nodded as I sucked on the honey lemon cough drop.

"Can I change into a less sweaty shirt?"

"Sure, I need to change too. Should I grab a blanket and pillow for the floor while I'm in my room?" I shook my head. He left quietly. As I was pulling my shirt over my head, I saw someone outside my window, coming back from the direction of Bleck Hall. I squinted my eyes and recognized Paul in his band hoodie. He was holding a large sketchbook and some pages dropped. He snatched them up as fast as he could and started running towards the dorms. I pulled my shirt over my head and Seth returned.

I got in bed and tried to get comfortable. He tucked me in, despite my halfhearted protests, and lay across my legs again. "Good night, Luke. If you need anything just ask. I am a light sleeper."

Seth insisted on taking care of me while I recovered. He picked up food for me, made me tea, ensured that I was drinking enough water, and helped me when I threw up. True to his word, he didn't end up sick as well, and I was feeling much better after a week. I was so grateful that Seth had nursed me back to health. He insisted that it wasn't as dramatic as I made it sound, but it really meant the world to me. And maybe the fever overrode some of my impulse control, but I loved being close to him. It was comforting.

VI – Dropout

Paul seemed to be struggling with adjusting to life at Grey University, or maybe he was spending too much time in the study rooms at Bleck Hall. I saw him running back late at night fairly often and he seemed to be overworked and underslept. I felt like I should have been more worried about him, but he was so distant that it was at times hard to care about his well being. Sometimes I feel that if I had been a little bit more compassionate, he would have stuck around. I don't know where he went, or where he is now. And neither do his parents, for that matter. Wherever he is, I hope that he's brooding and scratching away in sketchbooks with his charcoal pencils. That seemed to be his favorite thing to do. But he didn't leave until the end of the quarter,

just before finals week. If you're going to drop out, I guess you wouldn't bother to do finals. But I left off before the end of our first semester, so I'll get to Paul later.

Seth nursed me back to health and I loved him for it. He slept next to me through the worst of my illness, only leaving me at night when my fever started to come down and I managed to keep my meals inside of me. Trevor raised an eyebrow when he saw Seth come out of my room one morning, but I didn't mind that he thought we were together. And he didn't seem to mind that we'd slept in the same room, which was a relief. I didn't have the energy to deal with a bigot at home. Paul didn't register that I had been sick, much less that Seth had spent a week sleeping in my bed. Seth was oddly casual about the whole thing, like he would have taken care of anyone and the physical intimacy I felt with him was blasé. That stung me a little bit, but I was embarrassed to feel so sensitive about something so small between friends and never brought it up.

Paul never joined us on our trips to New Chester and I found myself looking forward to going out, just Seth and me. Sometimes, Trevor came along if he wanted to pick up some supplies or grab a bite off campus. But I think he knew that I longed for time alone with Seth and he left us to it most of the time. Seth didn't seem to notice that I was obviously falling for him and I think that his naivety or obliviousness made me love him more. There was something so detached from the present about him, like his mind was always stuck in the past (without the prejudices that come with).

Just because Trevor left us alone for our trips to New Chester doesn't mean he wasn't there the rest of the time, which I was grateful for. We ate at the dining halls together and talked about our classes. Trevor was focusing on the 1800s, which lined

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up with our readings. We talked about art and literature movements, formative figures like Mary Shelley, and the consequences of imperialism and industrialization. I felt like a proper college student and I loved it. We were enlightened philosophers and the dining hall was our salon. At least, that was what it was like for us. I'm sure that we were pontificating to each other, oblivious of the ways in which reality differed from our perceptions and – I'm certain – the disdain of our professors and peers who couldn't care less about our "deep revelations about the human condition" or whatever pretentious phrase we had come up with. For all these sins, I repent. At least I can say that I was never a Philosophy major and for that I am grateful.

When Seth and I were studying by ourselves, we had long and engaging conversations about a wide range of topics. I often lost track of time and we walked back from the study rooms at Bleck Hall well past midnight.

"I think *Carmilla* is an interesting example of gay vampire literature, especially since it was written in the 1870s." We had been reading Le Fanu for class and I'd been enjoying its prose and concept. "It touches on themes that I wish other vampire stories talked about more often. Like, where's the queerness in *Dracula*? Stoker's book feels...I don't know...oddly conservative? Like when Mina says something like 'Men are more tolerant.' It just felt mean spirited to make fun of the 'New Women' for being independent. Maybe I'm reading it wrong, but Mina and Lucy kind of just make me think of, like, aggressively straight girls that are also hyper conservative. Like hello? You'd rather not have rights?"

Seth chewed on his bottom lip in thought. "Yes. I am also not a fan of Lucy's death. It is brutal how she loses herself and becomes this monster that Van Helsing and the rest of them need to put down. It seems needlessly cruel to her character." He shook his head. "Although, I guess that *is* the horror of it. But aside from Johnathan Harker's torture, the only real ill that befalls any of the main men in the story is Arthur's loss of his fiancé and Quincey's death at the hand of Dracula's hired help. As for *Carmilla*, I did not like that Laura was dead at the start of the story, but I suppose that it serves to show how the trauma she deals with follows her to the end of her life."

"Oh, yeah. I didn't appreciate the g-slur at all in *Dracula*. I know it was 1890 or whatever, but I hate it when Mark Twain throws slurs around in his books too."

"Maybe I was in awe of actual lesbians in a book written by a man from the nineteenth century, but I found *Carmilla* to be just a more enjoyable story!"

"Yeah, me too! It was also like, fairly erotic in a way I wasn't expecting? I know that there was actually a large countercultural movement away from Puritan ideologies, but I was still caught off guard by the fairly explicit orgasm scene. And the part right after that, too: 'Her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, 'You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever.'' Like that is such an overtly homoerotic scene and a dramatic confession of love. Gods, I love Carmilla so much."

Seth sighed. "Yeah, I wish I could find someone who loved me the way Carmilla loved Laura." I tried desperately to avoid making eye contact or blushing. I am almost certain that I failed but Seth never mentioned it.

"Maybe we should get back." I cleared my throat and checked my watch. "It's almost two in the morning." Seth smirked and helped me pack up my mess of notes and papers. I wanted to stay longer with him next to me, but we did have classes to get to tomorrow.

As we were leaving through the front doors of Bleck Hall, Paul darted up the stairway from the basement levels. "Good evening, Paul." Seth raised his hand in a wave but paused when he saw the look on Paul's face. His eyes had narrowed into a cruel glare and his jaw was set. He moved his sketchbook protectively behind him. Seth opened his mouth to say something, but I pulled him by the arm out of the building.

"I don't think he wants to talk to us so it's probably best if we give him some space." Seth looked crestfallen, but he nodded his head and we made our way back to the dorm. Paul didn't follow us.

"The lower levels of Bleck are for storage and offices, not library rooms or study spaces. I wonder what he was doing down there."

I sighed. "I don't know what he was doing, but he clearly doesn't want us to know so we should just drop it." I shook my head and opened the door to my bedroom. Seth followed me into my room. "Oh." My voice caught in my throat a little bit.

"If Paul is going to explore the secret rooms, he should have someone going with him. What if he gets stuck down there?" He was suddenly serious and intense. I didn't like this shift.

"If Paul wants a buddy, he'll ask for one. I think he's just poking around. That's harmless." Seth's eyes narrowed. "Right?"

"Do you want to…I don't know, confront him?" I silently cursed Paul; I had been having such a nice time with Seth and now the atmosphere between us felt like it was crackling. Gone was the excitement and anticipation I felt around him. Right now, he and I were opposed and I hated how it felt.

"I think we should. As soon as possible, maybe tonight even." Seth relaxed a little bit.

I shook my head, but assented. "Okay, sure. We can wait for him to come back." I sat down on my bed aggressively. I know it was dramatic, but I was a little hurt that we were…well this wasn't exactly a fight per se, but it was a disagreement. Seth walked towards me slowly, stopping directly in front of me. He held his hands out — not a lot, just enough for me to notice them — and motioned for me to hold them. Hesitantly, I accepted. I shot him a look to let him know I was suspicious of his intentions. He snorted a quick laugh and pulled me to my feet. I was standing face to face with him now — well, face to neck. He was a little bit taller than me. His arms wrapped around me and pulled me against him, his chin resting on my head. *Oh.*

"Luke, I am sorry. I am worried about Paul's safety, but I do not want to argue with you or hurt your feelings. I respect your insight and your opinion." I slowly brought my arms around him to reciprocate the hug. "Are you okay? Are we?" I nodded into his chest. "Good." I could hear the smile on his face.

He started to drop his arms, but I held tighter. "Just a little more." He nodded and hugged me again. "Thank you." I don't know why I was crying, but I just felt so *safe*, so *secure* for the first time in years. I wanted to stay like this forever.

"I think I hear Paul at the door," Seth whispered into my ear. I nodded and we released each other. "I will do the talking, unless you want to say something to him?"

I shook my head. "But I'll come with you." We entered the common room and found Paul closing the door, his sketchbook under his arm. He scowled when he saw us but he didn't move to abscond, which was a relief. I wouldn't have put that past him.

"What." Not even a question, he said it as an accusation.

"Paul, where were you tonight?" Seth tried to sound like he was innocently asking, but all of us knew that there was an ulterior motive.

"Bleck Hall. You saw me."

"Were you exploring the secret rooms?"

"Yes. It's none of your business."

"It is dangerous to go down there by yourself."

"I don't care."

"Will you at least bring me with you when you go down?" Seth was almost pleading, which confused me because we were not close to Paul at all. "It is not safe to be alone down there."

Paul paused and considered it. I gave Seth a confused look; why would Paul even agree to that proposition? "Will you show me a new room?"

Seth nodded. "Yes, I will show you more of the rooms I am aware of. The only stipulation is that you do not explore Bleck Hall without someone accompanying you. If I learn that you have been lying to me, I will revoke my offer."

Paul and Seth were staring each other down; I felt as though I wasn't even in the room. "Deal. We'll start next semester." Seth nodded in response and led me back to my room. Paul slammed his door shut.

"Hey, Seth? What the hell was that about?" I sat down on the bed again, this time it was a resigned sit. He sat down next to me. Calmly.

"It is not safe for him to be exploring down there alone, and I do not think that he would agree to leaving Bleck Hall alone." He shrugged. "If he cannot stay away from the rooms beneath Bleck, I will at least make sure that he is not exploring them alone."

"Seth, I'm going to be honest with you right now. I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about and I'm going to need you to be straight with me."

"I am worried." He paused. "I think that it is not safe to be down there, exploring the hidden rooms. Especially at night. By yourself. And Paul does that seemingly every night."

"Seth are you talking about, like, monsters and ghosts?"

He sighed. "Yeah. I do not know. Maybe. It is not important."

I was confused, but I honestly didn't want to talk about Paul, the bowels of Bleck Hall, or whatever Seth thought was down there. Instead I wanted to just sit next to him. I leaned my head against his arm and he wrapped me in a side hug.

The next evening Paul stayed in. Seth was surprised but I expected Paul to leap at any opportunity for learning more secrets hidden under Grey University and taking two weeks off of exploring before winter break didn't seem like too bad a tradeoff. I

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had to study for my finals anyways, so I assumed Paul was in the same boat. Maybe less studying and more working, since his classes were — at least I assumed — studio classes.

Paul did manage to avoid us while he stayed in at night, which was probably an ordeal for him. Seth, Trevor, and I kept catching him in the common area for brief moments before he darted either back into his room or out to gods know where. Just not Bleck Hall. Seth seemed certain of that much.

Paul didn't look okay. His eyes were sunken, he seemed a little pallid. Maybe he wasn't getting enough sleep. Or maybe he was dealing with the same bug that I'd had a few weeks earlier. I tried to ask him about it, but he brushed me off.

The Friday before finals, Paul dropped out. I didn't learn until Sunday. Seth seemed concerned, but it felt on par for how he had been acting. Leaving without speaking was a thing he had done for pretty much the whole semester. Plus, we never heard about anything bad. The campus police didn't ask us about him or anything. Seth was far more concerned about Paul than I was, but we'll get to that later. I was more focused on my finals and my plans for the break. I didn't want to go back home to my family. I felt so free at Grey and I didn't want to lose all of my autonomy and agency. I was looking into just about any alternative, but couldn't find one that was free. I had considered asking Seth if I could stay with him, but the thought made me nervous. We weren't dating. He was just nice and affectionate. And what would his parents think? Come to think of it, I wasn't even sure if he was gay. Maybe next year I would work up the courage to ask. Instead I resigned myself to texting.

"You'd better respond to me." I teased. "If you give me radio silence until January I don't think I'll ever forgive you." I stared at him to make sure he knew that I was only half kidding. He laughed and hugged me goodbye.

"I hope that your break is lovely. I am so excited to see you again. You are moving back on campus early, right?" I nodded. "Good." His face split into the beaming smile I loved so much. "Then I will drive over as soon as you are unpacked." I nodded some more. I must have looked like a bobblehead toy. "Drive safe!" He stepped back as I started my car and drove through the woods to my parents' house.

It was going to be a long break without him.

VII – Bleck Place

Seth did keep in contact, for which I was grateful. And, true to his word, as soon as I was back on campus and unpacked, I texted him and he showed up within half an hour with his stuff. We hadn't heard back from the university about filling Paul's room, so we left it as it was until Trevor came back so we could figure out what to do with the space together. For now, though, Seth and I had the dorm to ourselves. I'd wanted to move back early; spending any more time with my parents than I was required to sounded like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from. And Seth felt similarly about his parents it seemed. I didn't want to talk to him about family because I wasn't too keen on sharing about mine and from what I could tell, he felt similarly.

Winter break ended a few weeks into January but the campus buildings (and therefore the dorms) were open a few days after New Year's. I practically fled my

parents' house and moved back the first chance I got. Seth drove out to meet me as soon as I was unpacked. He had a big grin on his face as we hugged and greeted each other. "What're you smiling about, silly?"

"I have a suggestion, Luke, if you will allow me." His stupid grin caught me off guard.

"Y-yeah. What's up?"

"How would you like to stay at Bleck Place until the semester starts up?"

I was caught off guard. "Uh…what about your parents? Wouldn't they mind?"

"They are rarely at home; they have business stuff to take care of back in Europe, I think." He shrugged. "If you do not want to stay with me there you do not have to. I just figured that it would be nicer than staying in the dorms." He was so bad at playing casual and I could see that he was going to be devastated if I turned him down.

"Seth, I would love nothing more than to stay with you!" I grinned as I watched his perfect face light up.

"Excellent! I am certain you will find me to be a gracious host."

Of course he was.

Bleck Place was massive. It reminded me of Grey University's buildings——especially Bleck Hall. "Actually, our house was designed by the same architect that Grey University used for Bleck Hall. Or rather, Bleck Hall was designed by the same person who did Bleck Place; our house was built first."

"Holy shit, that's so cool! But Seth," a lopsided grin pulled at my lips. "Don't you know how *pretentious* it is to have a house with a name? My house is just called 'home'——the same as most people."

He rolled his eyes and pushed my shoulder lightly. "You are an idiot, Luke. Besides, it was not my idea to give Bleck Place its name. That was my great great grandparents' idea." I opened my mouth, but he cut me off, "And before you say something witty, I will point out that my parents are the ones who continued to call it by its name, I simply learned from them."

"It's still pretentious." I smiled at him and he returned his own brilliant grin.

"It is really quite pretentious."

"You know," I mused as I held a cigarette with my lips and went to light it, "it always seems like the houses with names are the haunted ones."

He reached to pull the cigarette away from my lighter, shaking his head. "We should try to avoid smoking inside the house. The scent will soak into everything and my parents will notice and complain." He led me outside to a balcony and returned the cigarette. "You are right, of course. All houses with names are haunted."

"Please tell me you're joking. I don't think I can sleep in a haunted house." I was only partially kidding.

"You attend Grey University, Luke. You are going to have to get used to the occasional ghost." I felt my mouth open in protest. He took my distraction as an opportunity to snag the cigarette out of my hand and take a drag himself. I knew that the next semester would start too soon and we would have to give up this perfect

arrangement: Seth and me in his parents' haunted house with nothing but free time. I just wanted to enjoy this easy existence for as long as I was allowed to.

For the most part we lounged around, reading our books, watching television shows and movies together, and making day trips to New Chester. Seth insisted on showing me a cafe in New Chester and ordered a London Fog—which I learned was an Earl Grey latte. I made a mental note to learn how to make a good one for him later. *I'm such a sap.* Of course he loved an Earl Grey latte, it was so quaint, so pretentious, and so perfectly *Seth*.

We got really invested in stupid shows about monster hunters——Seth seemed to love shows about that kind of thing. Poorly-written dramas with a touch of the supernatural. I started looking up book series that fit the monster of the week format that we could read together. I was very obviously falling for him, and I hoped that I wasn't reading too much into his interactions with me; I couldn't bear it if he ended up not feeling the same way about me.

Seth had set me up in a guest room down the hall from his bedroom, but I found myself drifting to sleep leaning against him in his room while we watched our terrible monster hunter drama shows. He didn't seem to mind me lounging across his lap. I wanted to touch him all of the time and tried to make it seem as casual as possible: clapping his shoulder when we were joking in public, patting his thigh when I was laughing at his jokes, holding his hand when it was a scary scene in the show, draping myself across him when I was feeling particularly tired——or dramatic, nudging him to

get his attention, and so on. He never seemed to mind, and sometimes he would reciprocate. I hoped that he felt the same way that I did.

I hadn't really noticed the difference between Bleck Place and the university buildings. It had the same creepy factor at nighttime, but I stayed in my room or Seth's——talking, reading, or sleeping. (Or pining like an idiot. Seth wasn't my *type* per se, but that didn't matter. Now, my type was just *Seth*.) One night, Seth and I were heading back from the balcony when suddenly I remembered his weird office in New Chester. I don't even know what reminded me of it. I guess it was the hallway looked like Bleck Hall's and that reminded me of the unused office and that reminded me of Seth's conspiracy board and yarn operation.

"Hey, Seth? What's up with that missing professor investigation thing you have going on in your office? Aw man, it's a bummer Paul left. He was drawing those runes or whatever, right?"

Seth stopped and stared at me, surprised that I'd brought it up at all. I hadn't mentioned the office since he'd shown it to me. "Oh. Um. I am not really sure. I never got around to figuring out what exactly he had been researching. And Paul was…less than helpful." I watched the idea form in his head before he asked. "Did you want to go looking for more information in Bleck Hall?"

"I thought you were against the idea of anyone going down there? Isn't that what you chewed Paul out about?"

"I told him not to go down there *alone*; it is not a problem if you are with someone." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Besides, that was Paul. I am fairly certain you

and I can handle ourselves better than he would have been able to. We have seen far too much of that show to not know how to handle ourselves should we come across a specter of some sort."

I snorted at that. "Okay, okay. You've convinced me. Let's go dig for clues and hunt some ghosts." I skipped down the stairs we were on and darted to the foyer, where my jacket was.

"What, right now?"

I shrugged into my jacket and pulled my car keys out of the pocket. "I don't see why not. What, are you *scared*, Seth?"

He grimaced for a second and I considered taking it back. "No." He shook his head. "Let us kick some ghost arse."

I burst out laughing. "Did you really just say *arse* with a straight face?"

He slipped into his coat. "It is much more dignified than *ass*, I will have you know."

"Pre-ten-tious," I teased in a sing-song voice.

He rolled his eyes and followed me to the car.

VIII – Below

Bleck Hall towered over us and I was struck with how similar the building was to Bleck Place. The same façade, doors, windows, and the same inside. It barely felt like a different place. "Seth, how do you manage to live and study here when it feels exactly like your home?"

"It actually is much different here. Campus is more lively, for one. There are *people* here—living, breathing people! Bleck Place is stuffy and feels more like a mortuary than a home some days, especially when my parents are around." He shrugged and started towards the entrance lazily.

What could I do but follow?

We skipped down the steps, giddy at the idea of our trespassing on school grounds. Was it really trespassing, though? Seth's family practically owned this part of campus and we were students, so we had every right to be here. But it still felt forbidden in some way, sneaking down into the forgotten parts of the building to look over the contents of a hidden office where a missing professor's belongings were still located. It was thrilling.

We found ourselves in the room I hadn't been to since the first night at Grey University. It had changed drastically; whatever Paul had been up to, he had turned this room into his own workspace. There were sketches and notes all over the place. He must have forgotten about them in his rush to move out.

"Do you remember what Paul had been so excited about? I just remember that he cared that something *supernatural* was afoot at Grey University." I laughed dryly.

"I believe that Paul was interested in the prospect of ghosts haunting the campus," Seth said. "I do not think he found any of them, but I do know that this professor of Folklore and Literature had been interested in blood rituals. Perhaps Paul was hoping to find information about how to summon a ghost with blood magic?"

I snorted. "Yeah, okay. Blood magic. I mean, it seems like the kind of thing Paul would be into, with his whole emo thing and the vampire look to him."

"Vampire? I thought He was interested in ghosts?"

"Oh, I just meant that he was out so late and never got any sun," I explained. "So, vampire." Seth gave me a wide grin and a little chuckle. It started in the back of his throat and *gods* I wanted to say something. But I didn't.

I really should have.

We pored over the papers and journals, looking for any information about ghosts that Paul or this mystery professor might have uncovered. It was tedious work and I started to feel the late hour tugging at my eyelids. I was in the middle of yawning when Seth exclaimed, "Luke! I think I have found something!"

I was alert again. "What is it?"

"Here!" he said triumphantly, slapping a journal down in front of me. I read it:

"*...In my studies, I have found that it is very difficult to summon Them, but one ingredient is required:* blood. *And it must be fresh blood, from a living being, preferably a human. It is unclear if there are dangers with using your own blood. I have heard of successful summonings using the following runes...After making these runes with the blood, you must call its True Name three times. If you are lucky (unlucky? It is hard to tell based off of the notes I am working from) then He will visit you. I dare not write his name out of fear he will notice...*"

I reread it. "Seth, what the fuck does this mean?"

"It is the passage Paul must have found. He cared about the runes and wanted to see a ghost, right?"

"I suppose, but I don't think I'm really understanding how this helps us. Are we going to summon a ghost?"

Seth shrugged.

"Do *you* want to summon a ghost, Seth?"

"I mean, I kind of do. Just to see who or what shows up. Plus, I have been curious about this for a while. Ever since I put together my little conspiracy board at the office in New Chester."

"Okay." I breathed through my nose, filling my lungs. Exhale. Count. Inhale. Better. "So. How do we start?"

Seth and I kept looking for clues. Now that we knew we were looking for runes and a name, things went a little bit faster. The professor had, at some point, actually written the name of the ghost he wanted to summon: Magnus. It was, honestly, a silly name. Not really ghostly, but also not really normal. It felt like a name as dusty and unused as the books we were sifting through. I had the brilliant idea, at some point, to prick my finger and collect some blood in a small vial that was lying around. Seth looked away with distaste. But I wanted to be into this. So into this that Seth might be able to love me for taking it so seriously.

We found a thing to chant as we called Mangus's name, something in Latin or some other ancient language. Seth found it and told me what to say and I followed his instructions. About halfway through, he realized that he hadn't remembered to light the

candles that the missing professor said that we needed so we started over. And then it was done. We had performed our ritual and now we waited for something to show up.

Nothing did.

After an hour or two, I broke the silence. "Seth?"

He flinched. "Hm?"

"Seth, I'm feeling kind of tired, and we've been here for a while and nothing has shown up. Can we call it a night today and try again tomorrow? Or some other time?" I yawned.

He sighed. "Yeah, I suppose. Sorry to have kept you up so late."

"No, it's okay. I'm just—" Another yawn. "So sleepy."

"Let's go home, Luke." He helped me to my feet and led me up and out of the basement and its hidden office. I trudged up the familiar stairs behind him to the entryway of Bleck Hall. Now that I had spent time at Bleck Place, something clicked inside my head. "Seth?" I asked tentatively. "Bleck Hall is arranged almost exactly like one of the wings of your house, right?"

"Yes, the South Wing. Exactly! What makes you ask?"

"If we are in an office in the basement in Bleck Hall, and Bleck Hall is exactly like Bleck Place, then what is hidden in the basement of the South Wing at Bleck Place?"

Seth looked at me with a dawning sense of realization. "Oh! Oh! Brilliant, Luke!" He hugged me so quickly and tightly that I was fully caught by surprise; my breath was knocked out of me. "We should go find out!"

IX – Legacy

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X – Waiting

[…]

XI – Turning

I wasn't expecting dying to hurt so much, but it really should haven't caught me by surprise, considering I was damning myself by choosing this. Choosing. Did I really have a choice? I'd found myself in the only situation in which turning into a vampire was preferable: I hadn't told Seth I loved him. And as much as I hated the idea of being a monster, I would hate even more to leave this unsaid. Maybe I'd step into the morning sunlight once I'd confessed. Or maybe, just maybe, we'd figure something out. Only Seth would be able to come up with a solution. I was sure of that. But first I had to survive the transformation. And *fuck*, did it hurt. My whole body felt like it was burning; like I was enduring the eternal suffering of damnation. The lakes of hellfire couldn't hold a flame to the blaze that was scorching my veins. I might have screamed. I couldn't tell you. I know that my vision went black, and then white. I felt fire licking the inside of my skin and was reminded of those trees that get struck by lightning and burn up from the inside out. *Fuck*. This was more pain than I could endure, and yet…I was enduring it. I didn't feel my soul leave my body though maybe this pain was it dying. I knew that at the end of this, I would no longer be human. I'd be something

else, something more. That seemed like such a small thing when I weighed it against not telling Seth. And hell, did I *love* him. I was willing to do this for him. How embarrassing. I was writhing on the ground now; sensation was coming back to me— no, flooding back—and I knew that it was almost done. A thought struck me suddenly: *would Seth hate me for this?* Shit. I hoped not. But it was far too late for me to change my mind. I twisted and screamed for what felt like hours. It might have been. And then it was done. Goodbye humanity, hello undeath. I was a monster now, there was no doubting that. My throat was itching, burning. I needed to drink. My teeth ached for violence, for blood. But my heart ached too. Not in the burning way—though it did still burn—it ached for Seth. I longed to see him. To tell him how I felt. How I loved him. And how I hoped he would forgive me for what I'd become to tell him that. *Please, Seth. Don't hate me. Please love me back. I would give anything—I did give everything,* everything.

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