

1 – The Portrait

At the front of the hall hung a portrait painted in oils: a woman in a gown and corset, with dark lips and darker hair. Its eyes didn't follow the viewer so much as pierce through them. Though its mouth curled down into the slightest scowl, the light and shadow across its cheeks made it seem, if you caught it in the corner of your eyes, as though it was smiling.

Paintings lined the hall, but it was the portrait that Jason's flashlight lingered on. He stuffed a fist into the pocket of his puffy jacket and hunched his shoulders to fend off a shiver. Did it count as creepy? It was working on *him*, but he'd have to convince the rest of his friends if he wanted to win their contest. Setting his flashlight down on a nearby table, he dragged his phone out of his jeans pocket.

While he framed the portrait in his phone's camera, his fingers grew cold. He clenched his hand into a fist, then blew on his knuckles, then patted his cheeks, but they remained cold and oddly pale. Hurry up and get the shot, he told himself.

With a ruby-nailed finger, he tapped the screen, then lowered it to peer at the finished picture. The zipper on the front of his jacket twitched before sliding downward, slowly baring the front of his shirt.

No good. The picture had come out blurry. Jason took a few steps forward. His sleeves thinned out while he rubbed his hands together to warm them up—slender fingers, slim wrists, goose-bumps along his soft skin. He swept a lock of darkening hair behind his ear, out of the way of a red teardrop earring.

The portrait's hands, folded in its lap, now looked large and plain in comparison, and its ears were conspicuously unadorned.

Lifting his phone again, he held it as still as possible. His pursed lips were overtaken by red lipstick. The collar of his shirt stretched lower across his chest and his copper-red hair tickled his slender shoulders. He tipped his head back, held his breath, and snapped another picture. This time, the shot was clearer, but the photo itself seemed wrong. Instead of eerie scornful beauty, there was a confused, almost shocked look in the portrait's eyes.

He lowered the phone. The same was true of the painting itself. Its mouth was half-open, its chin and brow more masculine, and its hands no longer folded but raised above its lap, as if moving to stand.

Nylon shrunk into velvet as the sleeves of his jacket became long fingerless gloves. A chill brushed along his arms and his phone slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. "Shit," he whispered. He dropped to his knees, patting around his feet. His pout thickened, his cheeks lifted, and his eyebrows arched. The portrait, still illuminated by the flashlight, now less resembled a woman and more a young man.

Still kneeling, Jason groped for the flashlight on top of the table. As he clutched it in his fingers, his jacket clenched tight about his waist. Soft down and nylon became silk and whalebone. Tighter and tighter the corset cinched around his midsection, sculpting his figure with a firm hand. From underneath its grip, floral lace spread along the front of his shirt—though now it was more a blouse. With each heaving breath, his pale, waxy skin rose and fell against the deep neckline, and his breasts stretched outward to fill his top.

Jason searched the floor for his phone with his flashlight held above his head. The portrait on the wall now bore his own short, blonde hair; his was thick and dark, crimson red, spilling loosely down his back. The portrait's corset and gloves had become a down jacket, while its expression was one of shock and mounting panic.

The chill settling over his body matched his cool, soft sigh: "Ah, there you are." He picked up his phone and stood, dusting off his knees and sweeping his hair back behind his shoulders. A silver chain wound around his neck, with a small red pendant carved in the shape of a flower dangling against his chest. His eyes were painted with kohl and his cheeks touched with rouge. His face had grown still and pale, settling into an expression of gentle disdain.

With a wave of one delicate hand, his pants unfurled into a skirt and stockings and garter, and his shoes retreated into a pair of velvet slippers. Much more comfortable. And now, for the photo. He couldn't keep a hint of a grin off his lips. He raised his phone and took a picture of the portrait as it now was.

The flashlight in his hand sprouted and bloomed into a candelabra, filling the hall with dancing shadows. A chill in the air followed Jason as he turned, raised the candles, and strode slowly down the hall.

Just wait until he showed his friends what he'd found.

Behind him hung a portrait painted in oils: a young man in a down jacket, its fists raised as if pounding against the canvas itself. Its brow was furrowed in anger and its mouth was agape. If you caught it out of the corner of your eye, you might almost think it was trying to cry out.

2 – The Trophy

Warm fireplace light fluttered through the hole in the wall. It lit up the closet so well that Allie didn't even need a flashlight. Trying to peer through the hole from the floor, she could only catch glimpses of rich, dark wallpaper and mahogany trim. Which room was on the other side? Had one of her friends lit a fire, or was there someone in the mansion with them? Her curiosity burned brighter and brighter until she gave in, climbed up on top of an old chest, and warily stuck her head through the hole.

A drawing room greeted her on the other side: thick leather armchairs huddled next to the crackling fireplace, bottles of brandy and crystal tumblers, a smoking jacket hanging from a coat

rack, a pair of hunting rifles crossed above the mantel. On either side of her were trophies, mounted heads—bull and boar, antelope and lion, unicorn and dragon, orc...and Allie.

This was too weird for her. She pulled her head back only to bonk it against the trophy plaque wrapped around her neck. *That* hadn't been there before. She planted her hands against the other side of the wall, dug in her heels, pushed as hard as she could, wrenched her shoulders from side to side, and when none of that worked, started banging her fists hard enough to make the trophies bounce and clatter against the wall.

A deep voice coming from the lion's head made her freeze. "Cut it out!"

The dragon rolled its eyes and let out a snort of smoke.

"Who's da new guy?" the orc asked, twisting its neck around to try and see.

"Shh!" the unicorn said. "*His lordship's* coming."

The doorknob turned. The talking heads stiffened and exchanged nervous glances. As for Allie, panic was setting in, and she was back to pounding on the wall with her fists and knees. The bull, who was closest to her, nodded his snout in her direction and whispered, "Be quiet!"

The door swung open. Into the firelight strode a fox wearing a red hunting jacket and black boots; close behind him followed a gray wolfhound with bushy whiskers. They crossed the room, the fox turning to warm his tail by the fire while the hound tipped back into one of the armchairs and poured himself a glass of whiskey. The sight was so absurdly *cartoonish* that Allie had fallen silent, her mouth open and lip curled in disbelief.

The hound tipped his head in the direction of the trophy wall, then looked over at the fox with a genial smile. "I say. You've bagged yourself another one, haven't you?"

"Quite. A fine trophy—"

That was enough to snap Allie back to reality, whichever one she'd poked her head into. "Hey!" she said, slapping her hands against the wall. "I'm not a *trophy*! Let me down from here, you half-baked Disney rejects!"

The orc winced and shook his head, muttering under his breath, "Shouldn'ta said dat."

The fox lifted his snout, narrowed his eyes, and shot Allie a small but withering glare before giving his friend a smile. "Why, that's right! I haven't told you how I brought down that one. The Beast of Carzacas, they called it. Two weeks spent deep in the jungle, and I'd found neither hide nor hair of it. Until one morning, by the banks of the Actlan, I caught a glimpse of blue fur..."

A shudder washed over Allie and the hair on her neck stood on end. Fuzzy warmth flooded across her cheeks. The peach fuzz on her face fluffed out into a deep blue pelt, with magenta along her

neck and chin. Her hair shrunk down to a rough mane running along her spine. Her eyes widened and her new mane bristled in surprise.

The hound nodded along as the fox continued his story: "Rifle in hand, I crept closer and closer. Then its antennae twitched. It raised its head—in an instant, its powerful nose had caught my scent, and the chase was on!"

Allie's nose wrinkled and wriggled, then bloomed out wide and round and bulging and yanked the whole front of her face forward into a big enough snout to match. Eyes crossed and muzzle hanging open, she stared down at her bulbous feline nose. Her whiskers twitched. Almost as an afterthought, a pair of purple pom-pom antennae popped out of her forehead and bobbed briefly above her head.

"Huhh-hey!" she cried out. "Stop it! Let me go! I'm sorry I yelled at you!"

The bull curled back the corner of her lips and hissed, "Shh!"

"The thunder of its hooves filled the forest, then—*crack!*—a tree came toppling down, and I, with only moments to escape from underneath. It had felled that mighty trunk with one strike of its horns..."

Two fat bulges swelled up like bubbles on either side of Allie's head, throbbing against her skull until her horns sprung free. They corkscrewed out to either side, wrapping around themselves like ram's horns. Each was nearly six inches thick at the base and heavier than steel, so unwieldy that Allie's head toppled forward and bumped her chin against the plaque.

"...at last, I had it cornered. A huge beast it was, grown to a monstrous size in those untamed wilds—tusks as tall as my hand!"

The hound chimed in, "Good god, man!"

Muscle bristled and rumbled beneath Allie's fur, then her neck surged outward and the plaque creaked as it grew to keep pace with her size. Her head bobbed back up, no longer struggling under the weight of her horns. The surge of savage strength thickened her cheeks and her brow, while the sprouting tusks pried her lips open. Her canines curled back as they inched taller and taller, until their tips framed her nose on either side. In between, smaller fangs peeked from behind her lip.

Allie slammed her hooved hands against the wall, jostling all of the other trophies. The boar teetered dangerously on its nail. Over a chorus of worried protests from the other heads, she roared out, "Thish isn't fairrr! Lemme grr-oh!"

The fox didn't so much as twitch his tail. "...it nearly had me finished. But the behemoth was, thankfully, still a simple-minded beast. A distraction might draw its attention. I had but seconds..."

His words struck like a mallet to the forehead. Her jaw slumped open from the weight of her tusks. Drool drizzled over her fat black lip. She tried to focus her eyes on the fox, but they slipped and went crossed instead. Her hooves slid down along the wall as her shoulders slackened.

Now it was her thoughts, not her horns, that were too heavy for her head.

"Whut...happen...me?" she said in a deep rumble.

The antelope shook its head and murmured, "Shame."

"Now yer speakin' my language!" the orc snorted, shooting her a flirty leer.

The other heads fell silent as the fox stepped toward the wall. "...not until I was safely aboard the boat back to port did I confirm my suspicion that the Beast was, indeed, male."

The Beast flinched and a deep grunt squeezed its way out of his throat.

"A fine specimen! I say, it's a shame you couldn't take him alive," the hound said, having risen from the chair and come to stand by the fox's shoulder. "He makes for an exquisite trophy all the same. Almost life-like!" He reached out and ran a paw along the side of the Beast's snout.

Trophy. Aggression ripped through the Beast's thick brain. His pupils narrowed to pinpricks, his mane bristled, and his purple antennae quivered furiously. With a roar he twisted his head and snapped his jaws, quite nearly taking the hound's entire hand off.

"Me...no...tro-pee!"

The Beast pulled back and the whole wall around him bowed outward. Wood splintered and cracked and all the other heads began shouting at once, cheering him on. With tremendous force, he tore himself free, staggering back on his hooves, then tumbling down to all fours before picking himself up again. The plaque, and a chunk of the wall with it, was still stuck around his neck like a collar.

From back in the drawing room, the beagle barked, "Quick, man! After him!"

The Beast barreled out into the hallway, ramming clean through the doorframe with his horns, hooves scrabbling across the floor. Seconds later, to a peal of hunting horns, the fox and his companion charged into the hallway, rifles in hand.

"Tally-ho!" the fox cried. The chase was on once more.

3 – The Conservatory

Vines had crawled beneath the corners of the double doors. Thin green runners clung to the floorboards, studded with small, oblong leaves and reddish-purple blossoms like plump-petaled roses. Small drops of nectar glistened underneath each flower.

The sound of flowing water, the smell of growing plants, and the dark of the night sky greeted Kyle as he opened the doors and stepped into the conservatory. Beneath the thick greenhouse roof, the vines had been free to grow: climbing the walls, wrapping around the beams, sending creepers across the cobblestone path. On either side of the path, fresh water trickled along a small trough that fed the flowerbeds.

Some of the vines were wire-thin, some as thick as rope. They all bloomed with the same densely-petalled flowers, ranging in shade between pink and purple. The soles of Kyle's shoes stuck to the cobblestones where droplets of nectar had fallen.

He followed the path through the conservatory to a fountain, surrounded by several wrought-iron benches. Vines that were particularly thick and bulbous had grown across the floor, and in a few places, they came together in forms that resembled bodies. One with arms outstretched along the bench, another splayed out on the ground, yet another sitting by the side of the fountain. Where a head would be on a human, instead each had a large green bulb, blooming with thick petals that seeped nectar between them.

"Jesus," Kyle said, letting out the breath that had caught in his throat. "Just plants." At least he'd found what he was going to show the others.

He just needed a good spot for a picture, an angle where the illusion would still work. After trying a couple of places around the fountain, he climbed up into one of the flowerbeds. While he pulled out his phone, small creepers slithered over his sneakers, curled around his ankles, and sunk into his skin.

Kyle checked the picture on his phone and rolled his tongue over his lips. They were dry and his mouth felt sticky. Too bad he hadn't brought a bottle of water with him, but he was pretty sure Jamie had some in her bag back in the foyer.

The vines crawling over his feet felt his thirst. They stretched out, groping blindly until they found the running water and dipped their roots in. Their stems bulged thicker and greener as they climbed his legs, exerting a gentle downward force on him.

The cool rush of water swept over him as he was slipping his phone back into his pocket. A sigh fell from his mouth as his shoulders relaxed. His lips were more plump and plush when he licked them again, but his saliva still clung thick and syrupy to the corners of his mouth.

Maybe he wouldn't head back just yet. The air was pleasant, the sound of water was relaxing, and he could just stay here and enjoy the view and drink. And drink.

Sweet water flowed through the roots and through the vines and into his body. Sweet, cold, and heavy. His eyelids drooped and a lazy grin squeezed across his plump, purplish lips. He bent at the knees and leaned forward, rubbing his hands along his thighs.

A thin fibrous membrane rolled up along his legs, thinner than silk, slipping underneath his clothes. It crinkled like waxy leaves as it wrapped higher and higher, until it clung between his fingers like

webbing and emerged from beneath the collar of his shirt. It had a faint green tinge, so delicate as to be translucent, and its edges were a reddish-purple, almost like the color of his swollen lips. The membrane enveloped his head, but came just short of closing around his mouth. Instead, its rim sat against the edge of his lips, like a second pair.

"H-hah...so thirsty," Kyle said. His eyelids fluttered, but couldn't open more than a crack. Even then, it was like he was looking through some gauzy filter. That wasn't important, though. Drinking was more important.

His vines wriggled slowly. A few budded off new creepers to reach further along the trough and draw in more water. The membrane exerted a gentle pressure on his head, squeezing his forehead down while stretching his mouth longer and longer. His second "lips" filled out, growing as large and plush as the first, which were squished tighter between them. A few drops of thick, yellowish drool oozed from the middle of his mouth and dripped onto the ground in front of him.

Kyle's feet sunk into the dirt and began to take root, but that wasn't so bad. The conservatory was a lovely place to drink and grow and grow and drink.

His vines twined together with others, joining their capillary systems and expanding his reach. Another membrane furled around his body. Its tight grip crammed more water up through him, out into his arms and up to his head. Moving his fingers was difficult; his hands had grown into round, clumsy bulbs.

The membrane squashed his head down further and drew out his mouth until his lips felt as though they were flapping together. Three sets piled up against one another, the outermost pair a rich red and even rounder and fatter than the last. His long narrow tongue slurped between them, dribbling with sticky-sweet saliva.

Kyle tried to open his eyes. He didn't have any. Had he ever? If he hadn't, would he be wondering if he did? It was so soothing to grow and drink, but an itch in his animal brain kept telling him something was wrong every time his mind slipped out into his root network or visited other flowers.

A fourth layer of stem fiber curled up over his body, compressing his head down into a bulb and adding another set of lips. As full and distended as they had grown, they resembled lush petals, all squeezed together around his tongue.

The itch was too strong to ignore. In a dull panic, he reached for his lips, or maybe his petals, but what bumped against them wasn't his hands, or even leaves, but something thick and fleshy and soft with a dripping wet tongue in the middle. From the bulbs that had been his hands, he had grown two new petal-mouths.

Something deep in his gut told him to pull away, but he didn't *want* to. One of his new tongues slipped between his lips and a rustle of delight ran through his vines. He leaned into the intruding lips, kissing and suckling, while fat strings and pearls of nectar dripped onto the ground.

A new consciousness spread throughout the conservatory. Vines and runners stirred, leaves stretched, flowers unfurled their lips, and roots drank greedily. With the doors lying open, the garden stretched its creepers out into the mansion, crawling along the floors and walls, driven by a fresh, powerful urge to grow.

Finally free of its animal urges, the three-headed flower relaxed its arms, spread its petals, and let streams of golden nectar drizzle down over its lips and onto the soft, rich soil.

4 – The Stables

The sound of each footstep drove Jamie deeper into the corner of the stall, huddled up, hand clamped over her mouth.

Clop, clop. Iron horseshoes striking against bare dirt. Leather straps and steel clasps clinking against each other. This wasn't real. There was no way this was possibly real. In the space between the stall door and the ground, she saw a pair of spiked horseshoes stepped into view. Thick, cracked hooves. Shaggy dark fur. An unnatural green glow falling across the floor. The breath squeezed itself out of her throat. Don't make a sound. Maybe he won't find you.

The stable door slammed open. "WHERE'S MY HEAD?" boomed out of a jack-o-lantern's frozen grin from its perch atop the shoulders of a looming, burly, black-furred horse-man.

You could say he was a sort of *headless* horseman.

The horseman's chest heaved. Green flame flickered inside his head. His biceps were tightly knotted, one hand clenched into a fist, the other gripping an axe whose blade caught a sliver of moonlight. The ground trembled as he strode forward, or maybe Jamie was the one trembling.

"I'm sorry!" she squeaked. "I don't know where your head is or who or what or why or—"

"GIVE ME BACK MY HEAD."

The horseman whipped his arm back, axe held high, then swung his whole body in one motion. Jamie's eyes started to widen and she breathed in to scream. Before she could make a sound, she was cut off by a *chop*.

Jamie blinked. She was...fine? Her head tipped forward, then toppled down into her lap and tumbled over her thigh. Her brow furrowed and she mouthed the word 'what?' but she couldn't quite speak without lungs. While having no body was unsettling and disorienting, and while she kept trying to squirm with the shoulders and arms that she no longer had, she hadn't felt so much as a sting.

The horseman stuffed the grinning pumpkin under his arm, then grabbed Jamie by the hair and shoved her down onto his shoulders—facing backwards. For a moment, she felt supremely dizzy, until he wrenched her head around straight again with a wet *crack*. Breath flowed through her mouth again, and she could feel all the sensations of having a body beneath her, though it was a far

bigger and bulkier body than she was used to. While she was still baffled and in shock, the horseman stooped down and set the jack-o-lantern head on top of Jamie's body.

"Oh my god," she whispered. She could speak again, though her voice was deeper and rumbled in her chest. "Oh my god," she added, watching her body quiver, then sit up and spin the pumpkin head around to face front. She took a step back, misjudged her own balance, and stumbled into the side of the stall.

The horseman's chest rose and fell steadily, but his whole body was so much larger that Jamie felt as if she was practically gasping for air. With each deep inhale, her nostrils flared larger and stretched wider, and with each exhale, fog snorted out in front of her face. Clutching her head with big, hoof-tipped fingers, she tried to yank herself back off, but it was no use. The seam between her head and the horseman's body had grown over with black fur and her neck was thickening with burly muscle.

Jamie's human body pushed itself onto its feet, swayed from side to side, then began to move toward her, its grinning jack-o-lantern head staring her straight in the eyes. After a few steps, it paused and adjusted its head with a sound like digging a spoon into a pumpkin's guts. A shrill cackle rattled off the wooden walls and its green flame flickered with glee.

"Get back!" Jamie shouted. She tried to squirm away, bumping her shoulders and elbows against the wall, struggling against the big, unwieldy body she was stuck with. So much power was packed into those bristling muscles but she had no idea how to use it.

But then a surge of unnatural confidence shot through her veins and her heart began to thump. She let out a sharp breath between her lips and stomped a hoof against the floor. Pops and cracks accompanied the slow stretching of her snout. She narrowed her eyes at the thing coming toward her and shouted, "Give me back my body, you freak!"

Her body came to a halt. It raised its arms and turned them over curiously. Then with another sharp cackle glowing green embers flickered to life and began to crawl across her clothes, crumbling them away into ash.

It was *taunting* her.

Jamie's snout wrinkled as it shot out further. Black fur curled around her cheeks and stretched down her long muzzle toward her chin. Beneath her creased brow, her eyes glowed an unearthly green. There was more stallion than human to her face. Her hands balled into fists. "I'll crush that pumpkin head into pulp!" she snorted, taking a step forward with a heavy, satisfying *clop*.

Jamie's body clutched its jack-o-lantern head and staggered back. "*Eee-hee-hee-hee!*" The ghostly embers eating away its clothes revealed a pale-green coat of fur spreading across its skin, and riding tack stretched across firm, rippling muscle. Its shoes burst into flame, burning away to reveal hooves.

This *thing* was turning her own body into that of some headless mare—but as Jamie stared at it, the sight tickled some forgotten memory in her mind, so old it couldn't have possibly been her own. Yet so familiar...no, no, that was *her* body, her *own*, and it was trying to *take* that from her.

Fury filled Jamie's chest and pounded against her temples. Her glowing eyes fixed on the axe, still sunken into the wood where it had struck her. She tore it from the wall, wrapped both hands tight around the haft, and turned to face her human body. A bridle flung itself around her snout and a bit clacked into place between her teeth. "*GIVE IT BACK*," she bellowed, rattling the stable doors with the same booming voice that had terrified her before.

Just as she reared back with the axe, just as she was about to swing and splatter the pumpkin to pieces, the headless mare reached out, grabbed her reins, and pulled her head down. Jamie's eyes gazed into the jack-o-lantern's unblinking eyes, and were filled with blazing green fire.

Her shoulders slumped. Her hand let the axe slip from its fingers and wrapped around the mare's back instead. For a moment, they stood together in an embrace, both crackling softly with the same ghostly flame. Then the mare tugged on Jamie's reins. With a nicker and a toss of her mane, she reached down and picked up the axe, then followed close at her hooves.

That forgotten memory now filled her with a sense of duty: to find a new head for the headless mare.

And with that, the mansion had done its duty
—for this year, at least.

Happy Halloween!