

The Legend Of Grigne-Dints

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Prologue:

On this day, August 24th, 1572, upon the lands of France, a terrible genocide was ordered with an iron hand by a powerful monarch calling for the annihilation of all who opposed his religious doctrine. He ruled under the well-known name of Charles IX.

At the dawn of this accursed day, I, Nicola Berteaux, a youth, became the captive target of malevolent aristocrats who envied my father, Henri Berteaux, for his professional and familial success, while the men of the Church despised above all his healing magic. The uncertain times offered them the opportunity to settle their grievances.

Under the sway of a Christendom gone mad, the moment proved favorable to the conspirators. They sent their henchmen, acting under the authority of Philip II, King of Spain, a fervent Catholic ruling over the Spanish Netherlands and accomplice to the King of France, to honour a contract that had taken a deadly form with one single purpose: to wipe out my family and myself.

Yet they never imagined for a moment that through their vile act, my destiny would be altered forever.

On this day of Saint Bartholomew, forever engraved in the history of France, it was within the enchanted abysses of the County of Hainaut that my second birth rose from hell, taking the form of the diabolical Grigne-Dints. He tore away, walled in and imprisoned my innocent soul for eternity, left waiting in purgatory.

In the depths of those lands, they became the most accursed place, a ground no being tainted by evil should ever tread, under penalty of being captured and forever bound as a prisoner of my formidable power. Thus, these tortured and wicked souls would wait patiently for the fateful day when I would lead my deadly crusade against human corruption.

CHAPTER 1 – The Devil’s Beets

Nowadays, in autumn, somewhere on the lands of Tournai in Belgium. The late afternoon stretched its shadows across a valley still filled with the scents of humus and fallen leaves. A blue 4x4 drove at a measured pace, its tires humming lightly over the damp asphalt. The vehicle sank into the rolling landscape, bordered by trees whose foliage had turned yellow and brown with the season. The bare branches reached their fingers toward the gray sky like silhouettes wearied by the coming winter.

Farther ahead, vast beet fields spread as far as the eye could see. And, around a bend, an old farm appeared: a white building with flaking walls, its roof seeming to bear the weight of centuries. It stood solitary and imposing, an unwavering witness to times long past.

Inside the 4x4 sat an American family.

At the wheel, James Berteaux, a sturdy man in his forties, wore a small hat that gave him the look of a hunter. His broad frame nearly filled the driver’s seat. Wrapped in a thick coat, he seemed to savor every moment of this unexpected trip. His round cheeks showed a quiet serenity, and his eyes, full of admiration, lingered on a tractor in a nearby field spreading manure in heavy curls over the plowed earth.

To his right sat Kelly, his wife, close in age but with a completely different expression. Her medium-length brown hair framed a severe gaze filled with both irritation and resignation. Thinner in build, she wore a thick wool cardigan that emphasized her strict demeanor, as if she wished to remind everyone that she was here to keep things under control, no matter what.

In the back seat sat two children: Stan, thirteen, and Antoinette, eleven.

Stan had slumped into the left corner of the seat. His preadolescent body, dressed in fashionable clothes, already looked tired of the journey. Withdrawn into himself, pale-faced, his light-colored eyes stared blankly at the screen of his tablet, which he held like an invisible shield. His brown hair, still unruly, fell over his forehead.

Opposite him sat Antoinette. Her frail silhouette was lost in oversized clothes chosen in a deliberately boyish style. Her short, dark chestnut hair accentuated the tomboy air that set her apart from her brother. But her dark eyes burned with indomitable energy. Annoyed, she flared her nostrils repeatedly, as if each breath expressed an internal protest.

Unable to contain herself any longer, she suddenly leaned toward the window, pressed her nose to the glass, and exclaimed in English, in a theatrical, mocking tone:

“Houston, we have a problem!”

Stan, surprised, lifted his head from the screen. His nose twitched, and he answered in the same language, a teasing smile tugging at his lips:

“Strange... really strange!”

Antoinette was not about to be outdone. Her face twisted into an exaggerated grimace, and with her left hand she produced a bright pink sock with big round eyes made of white fabric. She raised it to her face and, using a strange ventriloquist voice, declared solemnly:

“Mister Sock says... it stinks!”

Stan burst into nervous laughter, pinched his nose dramatically, and dropped his tablet in an exaggerated gesture meant to mimic nausea.

“Quick! Turn off the ventilation, Uncle James!” he cried in French, almost panicking.

James watched the scene in the rearview mirror. His amused eyes met the children’s. In a calm voice tinged with an American accent that still clung to his French, he intervened gently:

“Come on, Stan, nothing serious. It’s just the farmer, probably the owner of the big white farm where we’re going. He’s spreading manure, it’s the season...”

Antoinette widened her eyes and brandished Mister Sock at James again as if to challenge him. In a high-pitched voice, mixing disgust and provocation, she shouted:

“The manure!”

Stan, entertained by his sister’s reaction, immediately regained some color. His smile returned to brighten his pale face. He settled more comfortably against the seat, retrieved his smartphone, and began tapping on it with a pretend casualness. His voice, deliberately pedantic, sliced through the air:

“The cows’ droppings, little sister.”

Antoinette pursed her lips, pouted, and turned toward Kelly, hoping for an ally. But her complaint took on a dramatic, almost theatrical tone:

“Gosh... I really don’t like this. Kelly! We’re going to have to breathe this and live with it for three days! Three days!”

Kelly, whose patience had already been strained since the beginning of the trip, let out a sigh. Her lips tightened, and her face, marked by growing frustration, hardened. She spun around toward the back, her eyes sharp.

“That’s enough!” she said in a firm, authoritative tone. “And this trip will be a good chance to learn to live together again... just the two of you.”

Antoinette’s expression dimmed. Crestfallen, she made Mister Sock move mockingly, and in a whiny little voice she made him speak:

“Some chance...”

Kelly frowned even more and leaned slightly toward the girl, as if her presence alone could crush her.

“I heard you, Antoinette. Grow up a little. And get rid of that ridiculous sock.”

The remark fell like a guillotine. Antoinette instantly curled up in her seat, clutching her improvised comfort toy tightly against her face with an almost feverish intensity. She inhaled loudly, her nostrils expanding in a nervous twitch. With her free hand, she brushed a strand of hair back sharply, a gesture of pride contrasting with her wounded expression.

Beside her, Stan let out a long breath and rolled his eyes. His gaze drifted toward the landscape passing behind the window: trees twisted by the wind, waterlogged fields, the farm growing larger on the horizon. A veil of boredom crossed his face. Then, struck by a sudden worry, he straightened up, leaned slightly toward the driver’s seat, and asked in a hesitant voice:

“Uncle James... why did we come to this place?”

Antoinette seized the opportunity to speak again, her voice loaded with exaggerated despair:

“That’s right! It’s serious, really. This morning we were in Paris... and Disneyland wasn’t far! And now... look where we are!”

She waved her arms in the air to emphasize her point.

Kelly, at the end of her patience, raised her hand in a sharp gesture. Her index finger pressed against her lips, demanding silence.

“Enough, Antoinette,” she said with cutting coldness.

The girl sank deeper into her seat, defeated but not resigned. She clutched Mister Sock against her like a shield, her dark gaze now avoiding her stepmother’s entirely.

CHAPTER 2 – The White Farm

At that very moment, James, who had remained strangely calm, kept his indulgent smile. His eyes lifted toward the rearview mirror. His gaze met that of the children, softened by a benevolence that bordered on amused mockery.

“I understand you, kids,” he finally said in a deep, steady voice. “But after that professional conference on global demographic impact in Paris, we had to make a detour. It was the perfect opportunity to come to this farm... on the lands of my ancestors.”

James paused, his fingers tightening around the steering wheel as if the simple touch connected him to his origins. His words had taken on an unusual gravity.

His voice then grew deeper, more solemn.

“And from now on, French will be our common language until the end of this stay.”

Arms crossed against her chest, Antoinette turned sharply toward the window. Her dark eyes scanned the landscape, but her sulking expression fooled no one. She muttered in a dragging tone, in clumsy French:

“Mort de rire...”

James, startled, widened his eyes. His gaze hardened as it locked onto his niece’s through the mirror. His voice grew firmer, though still tinged with a strange kindness:

“*Mords de rire*, Antoinette! You don’t say ‘mort,’ but ‘mords.’ And what do you mean, *mords de rire*? ”

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, as if his memories seeped into the worn leather. Pride filled his tone as he continued:

“Long ago, before the Berteaux family left for the United States, our family lived here, on these lands of the County of Hainaut. First French, then occupied by the Netherlands, they later became the Kingdom of Belgium that we know today. This is where our roots lie.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes and let out a grimace of protest. Her voice rose, mocking and provocative:

“What a load of nonsense! Belgium! What kind of country is that, seriously?”

She waved Mister Sock in front of her, and in a high-pitched voice she lent him, the sock added:

“Yeah! Now I get why they gave me this name... and why I had to spend hours learning that stupid language...”

Stan calmly set his tablet down beside him. His tone became measured, almost gentle, in stark contrast with his sister's frustration.

"...the language of Molière," he clarified with a faint smile. "It's not the end of the world, you know."

Then, with a mischievous glint, he added:

"And your French name is actually pretty cute, you know."

Antoinette turned slowly toward him. Her narrowed eyes and slightly furrowed brow betrayed deep irritation. She exhaled dramatically:

"I already miss Westchester County..."

James, unshaken, did not allow their bad mood to sway him. He shrugged and continued, eyes fixed on the road:

"I promise to take you to visit the city of Tournai. They call it the city of five bell towers. There, you can hear a magnificent carillon, unique in the world. And don't worry: soon enough, it will be time to go back home, to Tarrytown, in our beautiful country, the United States of America."

Stan sighed and slumped into his seat. His murmur, barely audible, still carried through the car, weighted with a thinly veiled reproach:

"Some grand arrival... Let's just hope this trip goes by fast and without trouble."

A heavy silence fell inside the car, broken only by the purr of the engine and the distant chiming of a carillon that, already, they seemed to hear in their imagination.

CHAPTER 3 – The Dining Room

In the dining room of the old farmhouse, the atmosphere was heavy. The large room, lit by lamps with old-fashioned fittings and supports, was steeped in an icy mood. Around the long solid wooden table, James, Kelly and Stan were eating their meal in silence.

The plates were full, but the food had lost all flavor, so palpable was the tension. The clinking of forks against the porcelain echoed with cold regularity. Their faces, marked by fine scratches, betrayed a recent struggle that no one seemed willing to mention.

One chair remained empty: Antoinette's. Her absence weighed heavily on the atmosphere, like a shadow crouched in the back of the room. No one spoke her name. The oppressive silence said more than a thousand accusations could.

CHAPTER 4 – The Bedroom

Night had settled over the white farm. The faded wallpaper on the yellowed walls was peeling in places, as if the house itself were growing tired of its own secrets. In the room prepared for them, Stan stretched long and hard, his arms casting elongated shadows under the trembling glow of the old bedside lamp.

“Haaa...” He yawned loudly before slipping beneath the rough sheets, the wooden boards creaking under his weight. With an almost obsessive precision, he pulled the covers tightly over his body, as if trying to barricade himself against the coldness of the place.

Across from him, Antoinette lay on her back, eyes open, her features frozen in annoyance. She finally turned her head sharply toward him, her face illuminated by an unsteady halo. In her hand, she held a flashlight she raised proudly, as if it were a treasure she had stolen from the house.

Stan frowned, puzzled.

“Where did you find that flashlight?”

Antoinette, mischievous, made a few grimaces and shone the beam directly onto her face, emphasizing her tragic clown expression.

“The owner left several of them hanging on the wall, right in front of the big window.” She suddenly pointed the light at her brother. “You want one?”

Stan lifted his left hand to shield his eyes, wincing.

“No! And turn that off right now. You’re annoying me.”

She exhaled dramatically but complied. The flashlight disappeared under her pillow. For a moment, the room sank once more into a dimness broken only by the dull glow of the bedside lamp.

A plaintive sigh cut through the silence.

“This sucks... Kelly doesn’t like me, I’m sure of it.” Antoinette exhaled sharply, her nostrils twitching. “I mean, she even took my tablet. How am I supposed to play or talk to my friends now?”

Stan sat up slightly, irritated by the remark. His eyebrows furrowed at once.

“I told you! You’re always messing around everywhere you go. And because of you, Kelly confiscated my smartphone too!”

He raised his hands scratched and covered with small marks toward the ceiling, as if appealing to an invisible judge.

“Why did you kick that ball so hard, huh? And right against the chicken coop door, on top of that! You totally smashed it...”

Antoinette inhaled loudly, her nostrils flaring in frustration, then pulled Monsieur Chaussette’s head from under her blankets.

The pink sock with big round eyes seemed to protest in a plaintive voice she immediately gave it:

“I just wanted to play football a little before dinner... that’s all!”

Stan’s face fell in disbelief. He let out a long sigh. His eyes dropped to his forearms, still marked with fine scratches.

“Stop it. Because of you, the chickens flew everywhere... and that rooster, a real beast, attacked us like some demon. Look at the state I’m in! And James, and Kelly too, they’ve still got scratches!”

Antoinette raised her eyebrows and, with a breath filled with resentment, muttered:

“If I were a real boy, I’m sure Kelly would’ve forgiven me right away...”

Stan rolled his eyes and pulled his blanket up to his chin.

“Oh, enough with your identity crises.” His voice grew tired, worn from the same recurring arguments. “I don’t feel like talking to you anymore.”

But Antoinette wasn’t discouraged. She waved Monsieur Chaussette again, who leaned toward Stan as if scolding him:

“Yeah... Well, I hope tomorrow’s lunch will be better than in that hotel in Paris, you know, the one of the five winds...”

Stan let out one last sigh. Then, with a sharp, decisive gesture, he switched off the bedside lamp. Darkness fell over the room like a heavy veil, swallowing every reply.

Yet Antoinette still whispered into the dark, taunting:

“You’re right, stay in your little corner.”

Her words dissolved into the sacred silence that followed.

CHAPTER 5 – The Night

Night had wrapped the farm in its cloak. In the children's bedroom, only the steady rhythm of their breathing disturbed the silence.

Facing the large French window, the old curtains embroidered with medieval scenes knights, ladies and fantastic beasts moved under the push of the wind. Behind the fabric appeared the immense shadow of a solitary tree, its twisted branches swaying slowly.

Suddenly, a sharp crack tore through the stillness: one of the thick branches, weakened by time, gave way under its own weight. The noise jolted Antoinette awake. Her eyes flew open, widened by a surge of brutal anxiety.

Instinctively, she pulled her covers up to her chin, her gaze fixed on the shifting shadows dancing across the ceiling. The branches swung, drawing distorted shapes that seemed to pulse like living silhouettes.

Then the roof itself began to protest. The beams, pressured by the wind, started to creak with a relentless rhythm. And through the gaps of the old French window, the wind rushed in, whistling for long moments like a murmur spoken in a forgotten tongue.

Antoinette felt her stomach tighten. Unable to watch the unsettling play of shadows any longer, she buried her head beneath her pillow, tossing nervously from one side to the other. Her breathing grew shallow, quick, uneven.

But curiosity mixed with fear eventually won. Slowly, she raised her head again, pressing Monsieur Sock against her cheek as though the sock were her protector. Her nostrils twitched, and her eyes, wide open, scanned the shifting darkness once more.

Still tense beneath her blankets, Antoinette nervously ran a hand through her short messy hair, pushing it aside as if the gesture could restore her composure. Her dark eyes flashed with worry. Then, in a sudden surge of determination, she threw her covers aside, jumped out of bed and grabbed her flashlight hidden beneath her pillow.

A sharp click cut through the room. The beam burst out instantly, slicing the dimness with its harsh white light. Without hesitation, she aimed the flashlight at her brother's bed.

Deep in heavy sleep, Stan groaned and barely stirred. The brutal light bit at his eyelids. He suddenly opened his eyes and, blinded, raised an arm to shield his face. His strained features showed overwhelming fatigue.

"What... what is going on?" he growled in a hoarse voice.

Antoinette didn't answer immediately. Staring at him, her eyebrows furrowed, her nostrils flaring, she stepped toward him with determination. The flashlight trembled slightly in her hand, but her voice was firm, almost dramatic.

“Do you hear that, Stan? Do you hear how everything is cracking in this stupid house?”

She gestured with her chin toward the groaning ceiling, the sighing walls and the ancient curtains whose shifting shadows moved like silhouettes.

Monsieur Sock suddenly popped up between her fingers, brandished at eye level like a silent accomplice that had become oddly talkative. She turned the sock toward the French window, then brought it back toward Stan as if ready to attack him. Her ventriloquist voice, shrill and mocking, rang out:

“Do you want me to reveal a secret, Stan?”

Stan let out a long sigh, rubbed his eyes with his fingertips, and finally pushed himself halfway up in bed. His brown hair was disheveled, and his hunched shoulders betrayed the depth of his exhaustion.

“Another one of your stupid ideas...” he muttered. “You really can’t stay calm, can you?”

But Antoinette pushed on. She leaned even closer to him, so close the flashlight’s beam exaggerated the shadows on her determined face. Her voice dropped, lower, more urgent, almost solemn:

“This time, it’s serious.”

Stan rolled his eyes and yawned so wide his jaw seemed ready to unhinge.

“Fine... I’m listening. But make it quick.”

Without waiting, Antoinette leaned toward his ear, dragging Monsieur Sock with her. Together, like a strange creature with two mouths, they whispered rapidly and breathlessly.

Stan, at first unmoved, suddenly widened his eyes. He whipped his head toward her, stunned.

“What?! You’re completely crazy! Are you feeling okay? Got nighttime cravings or what?”

Antoinette straightened, offended. Her eyebrows arched, and a pout twisted her mouth. She stomped her foot and stepped back from the bed, releasing a cry of frustration:

“I’ve had enough!”

Stan froze, surprised by his sister’s explosion. He sat up fully, the covers sliding down to his knees. Instinctively, he raised his hands, palms open, as though trying to defuse a bomb.

“Shh!” he hissed sharply. “Not so loud, the parents could hear us.”

His tone lowered but sharpened. His words, measured yet harsh, struck Antoinette with painful precision:

“Why this constant identity crisis? Why do you always rebel against authority? Why do you keep taking insane risks... and with that ridiculous sock, too!”

Antoinette felt her throat tighten. Her eyes glistened with wounded anger. She brandished Monsieur Sock in a sharp movement, like an improvised sword. The sock rose, threatening, in front of Stan's tired face.

The tension between them thickened. The silence of the house already unsettling seemed to grow heavier, as if the beams, the walls, the shadows themselves were holding their breath, waiting for the outburst to come.

Antoinette, trembling, squeezed Monsieur Sock so hard her fingers turned white. She thrust him violently toward Stan, her dark eyes blazing. Her voice burst forth, broken by emotion but filled with unwavering force:

“Because I became his confidante!”

She jerked the sock’s head in a stiff nod. Her throat vibrated with restrained anger.

“Why, Stan? Why did our parents die so unfairly?!”

Monsieur Sock nodded again, approving her suffering. Antoinette stepped closer, her breath short, her nostrils flaring.

“And you... why did you choose to be so cold with me since that day? Why did you shut yourself away, like I don’t even exist?”

Stan froze. His face, first closed off, slowly softened, cracked by an old pain. He straightened, hesitated, then gently placed his right hand on his sister’s frail shoulder. His gaze clouded with tears he refused to let fall.

“I’m sorry, Antoinette...” His voice shook. “I’m angry at the whole world too. I’m angry at the day when... those men cowardly killed mom and dad.”

His breath trembled, his lips quivered.

“I miss them terribly... every second. But Uncle James, the police... they keep saying it was just bad luck. That they were... in the wrong place at the wrong time. That day, in that supermarket...”

His voice faded into a rough sigh.

Antoinette turned her head away sharply, unable to face the memory. Her eyes flared with a reddish glow, a reflection of her anger and repressed tears. She stared at the French window, as if the darkness beyond were calling her. Then her lips twisted into a nervous smile.

“Then I’m leaving, Stan.” Her voice trembled with icy resolve. “I’m going to walk beyond that field, along that stupid country path. I’ll walk until dawn. And nobody not even you will stop me.”

Stan jolted, his heartbeat racing. He shook his head violently.

“No! No, Antoinette, that’s insane...”

Then, as if convincing himself, he fell back onto his pillow, folding his arms around his body. His voice dwindled into a weary breath:

“Sorry... but I don’t approve.”

Antoinette shot him a murderous look.

“You’re scared, aren’t you? Terrified of going outside?”

Stan clenched his jaw and replied sharply:

“Think of the consequences for once! You can’t just act impulsively like that!”

But Monsieur Sock, manipulated by Antoinette’s hand, leapt toward him and squealed in a shrill, mocking voice:

“Coward! Chicken!”

Stan turned his eyes away, wounded in his pride, but withdrew into silence.

Antoinette, meanwhile, wasted no time. In a flurry of hurried movements, she leapt out of bed, threw on her clothes, and slipped into her shoes. Her trembling hand fastened her flashlight to her belt. Her breath filled the room in quick, uneven bursts.

Then she walked toward the French window. Her left hand landed firmly on the handle. She turned it with a sharp twist.

The doors opened with a piercing creak, and the wind surged inside at once, sending the embroidered curtains flying like specters rushing into the night.

Stan, who had believed it was only bravado, slowly sat up. An ironic smile spread across his lips as he curled back under his covers.

“She won’t do it...” he whispered mockingly.

But Antoinette’s silhouette appeared in the doorway. Head high, proud, her face shone with a strange brightness a mix of defiance and exhilaration. She rubbed her arms quickly as if awakening her strength, clutching Monsieur Sock tightly. The wind lifted her short hair, scattering it around her face.

Without hesitation, she stepped out.

The night swallowed her instantly.

Stan froze, mouth open, his smile gone. A cold shiver crawled up his neck.

“Oh, that little brat!” he shouted, springing out of bed.

He ripped off his covers in a single movement, his heart pounding wildly. His hands shook as he shoved his feet into his shoes. His movements were jerky, frantic. He grabbed his coat

from the chair, threw it on hastily, and charged toward the French window still swinging under the force of the night wind.

He stopped short. On the wall, several old flashlights hung from hooks. For a moment, he hesitated: should he really follow that reckless sister into the darkness? His expression hardened. With a swift move, he tore one from its hook. The flashlight felt heavy in his hand, as if it carried the weight of an irreversible decision.

“Antoinette... you’re going to pay for this,” he muttered through clenched teeth.

Then he crossed the threshold. The freezing breath of the night wrapped around him at once. The door slammed shut behind him, and his steps sank into the damp earth, swallowed by the deep silence of the countryside.

CHAPTER 6 – The Wind of Escape

A few minutes later, the two silhouettes were moving side by side under the milky glow of the full moon. They made their way with difficulty through the beet fields. The broad leaves, soaked with dew, slapped against their legs at every step, leaving long wet trails on their trousers.

Triumphant, Antoinette was the first to break the silence. She raised her voice in an amused, almost provocative tone.

“So, big brother, why did you finally decide to follow me?”

Stan lifted his flashlight toward the sky before lowering it back to the ground, as if the gesture could make him look more confident. His face was closed, his features tense.

“I’m not following you!” he snapped. “I’m only here because I feel responsible. Uncle James agreed to take us in, him and Kelly... so I don’t have the right to betray them.”

Antoinette shrugged and quickened her pace, splashing mud under her shoes.

“Responsible, responsible... I’d say you’re just too serious. I’ve got nothing against them, but let’s admit it, they’re seriously annoying.”

Stan sighed, raising his voice to cover the rustling of the wind in the trees.

“They’re not annoying. Not difficult, not unbearable. They’re just... too caring. Maybe clumsy, but they’re trying to do the right thing.”

Antoinette turned her head toward him, her eyes sparkling with a mischievous glint.

“There you go again! You always defend everyone. That’s so typical! The adults’ little knight in shining armor.”

Stan bit his lip, his face flushing with irritation. He tried to walk faster to catch up with her, but the sticky mud slowed him down. His breath grew short, and soon he cried out, panting:

“Could you... slow down a bit?!”

But Antoinette burst out laughing, her eyes shining beneath the moon. She rubbed her hands together with a playful air.

“How about we sing a song, huh? You know, the ones we used to sing with Mom and Dad to learn French...”

For a second, her voice softened, brushed by a happy memory, before she slipped back into a teasing tone.

“Come on, Stan, don’t make that face. It’ll be fun!”

Stan rolled his eyes.

“Antoinette... you’re impossible.”

But she insisted, delighted to get on his nerves.

“I could sing the one where I mess up everything with my horrible accent...” she said, rolling her r’s in an exaggerated way, pulling faces like an actress on stage. “Remember? My tongue still twists just thinking about it.”

She burst into a crystalline laugh that rang out in the night, almost unreal. Then she added, with a mischievous wink:

“And since I know it’s not your favorite... that’s exactly the one I’m going to sing.”

Her arms swung cheerfully at her sides, her steps quickened even more, carried by pure provocation.

Out of breath, Stan tightened his fist around his flashlight, caught between irritation and a dull anxiety he refused to admit. The field stretched as far as the eye could see, bathed in the moon’s pale light. And despite their bickering, a strange feeling lingered in the air the unsettling sense of being watched by invisible eyes, hidden in the shadow of the beets.

“No! I’m begging you, don’t do that,” Stan groaned, his eyes wide with panic.

But Antoinette, straight as a queen, thrust out her chest proudly. She took a deep breath, her gaze gleaming with childish mischief. Her nostrils flared, and her lips curled into a victorious smile. Then, in a clear and defiant voice, she began the rhyme:

“Une souris verte,
qui courait dans l’herbe...”

Stan squeezed his eyes shut, as if every syllable were tearing into his eardrums.

“Je l’attrape par la queue,
je la montre à ces messieurs...”

“Stop, please!” Stan choked, covering his ears with his hands, his face twisted with disgust.

But Antoinette went on relentlessly, her little voice echoing in the night like a mockery:

“Ces messieurs me disent :
trempez-la dans l’huile,
trempez-la dans l’eau,
ça fera un escargot tout chaud !”

She snapped her fingers at every rhyme, underlining her provocation.

Stan, pale, slowed his pace, dragging his feet like a condemned man.

“Je la mets dans un tiroir,
elle me dit qu’il fait trop noir...
je la mets dans mon chapeau,
elle me dit qu’il fait trop chaud...”

Antoinette’s laughter burst out between lines, unbearable to her brother.

“Je la mets dans un tiroir,
elle me fait trois petites crottes !”

She burst out laughing and lifted her fist like a pop star holding a microphone.

“This is awful! Aaaah!” Stan shouted, bending his knees, crushed by the sonic torture. His breath came in ragged bursts. He placed a hand on his chest, trying to calm his burning lungs.

He staggered on for a few more steps and raised his eyes to his sister, who was already standing on the country path. His shoes, weighed down by clumps of earth, felt glued to the ground.

Antoinette, meanwhile, stood tall, chin lifted, her eyes wide as she stared at the dark entrance to the woods. She drew a deep breath, then declared in a brisk, determined tone:

“All we have to do now is cross it.”

Stan finally caught up with her, dragging his legs like shackles. His face was red, his lips trembling. He bent forward slightly, hands on his knees, then straightened with difficulty. He sniffed loudly and muttered in a miserable tone:

“We’re going to catch a nice cold... That’ll be great. And anyway... you said the country path, not this crazy forest idea.”

Antoinette shrugged casually, her nostrils twitching nervously. With a gesture, she swept her hair to the side like a self-assured actress. Then, between her fingers, the pink silhouette of Monsieur Sock appeared.

The puppet turned toward Stan, its big white eyes seeming to challenge him. In a nasal, mocking voice, it said:

“Jeez! You’ll get over it.”

Stan jumped, stunned. His eyes darted from the sock to his sister, incredulous.

“Hey! Easy, little sis! Do you even realize how stupid what you’re about to do is?”

Antoinette tightened her grip around her puppet and answered sharply:

“I already told you, Stan. I want to get away. I want to breathe far from this family that’s suffocating me.”

Her eyes gleamed with anger, but behind that fire was a very childlike distress.

Stan raised his hands and clapped slowly, heavily, each slap of his palms echoing like a slap in the face in the night.

“Fine, bravo! Well, I’m done with this ridiculous show and I’m going back to bed.”

He turned on his heel, his voice shaking with anger. But before he could take a step, Antoinette raised Monsieur Sock to the level of his face. She gave the puppet a mocking voice, deeper, almost authoritarian:

“Coward. Go crawl back to your little corner. At least there you won’t risk getting lost.”

Stan froze, his eyes darkened by anger. His sister’s frail silhouette stood out against the shadow of the woods, her hair lifted by a freezing breeze. And in the distance, in the rustling of the fields, something seemed to be watching them.

Stubborn and upset, Antoinette and Stan turned their backs on one another. Without exchanging another word, they split apart: she toward the darkness of the woods, he toward the reassuring safety of the farm.

Stan dragged his feet, his face lined with anger and exhaustion. His arms hung by his sides, heavy as lead. Suddenly, a sharp crack of dead leaves shattered the nocturnal silence.

He stopped dead. His eyes widened. The sound was not the wind it was the sound of footsteps. Fast, precise, purposeful.

“Who... who’s there?” he stammered in a barely audible breath.

His ears rang. A cold shiver ran down his spine. Instinctively, he turned toward the source of the sound. The country path leading back to the farm seemed swallowed by darkness. His lips trembled. Terrified, Stan suddenly spun around and started running, his soles slapping against the damp ground.

A few moments later, he collided violently with Antoinette, who was quietly humming to herself as she walked toward the forest.

“Hey! Are you insane?!” she cried, startled, stepping back. She stared at her brother, who looked ashen. “What’s going on? And why do you have that face?”

Stan, unable to speak, his mouth slightly open, pointed with a trembling finger toward the path behind them. His eyes reflected a raw, animal fear.

Antoinette followed his gesture. Then, under the caress of a soft, discreet wind, a silhouette emerged. A human figure, tall and broad, slowly took shape in the distance. Its stride was purposeful, its pace steady. As it drew nearer, the pale moonlight revealed the metallic gleam of a rifle.

Stan, paradoxically, seemed to relax. His tense features loosened, and a relieved sigh escaped his lips.

“Phew... it’s just the farmer. The owner of the guesthouse.”

Arms crossed, eyes dark, Antoinette snorted.

“Figures. I’m never lucky. And just so you know, his name is Germain.”

CHAPTER 7 – The Poachers

The silhouette approached until its boots struck the ground with a heavy thud. It was indeed Germain, the farmer. He wore a thick canvas cap, his fleshy, wrinkled face marked by time. His calloused hands gripped the wooden stock of his weapon tightly. He fixed his gaze on them, rolling his r's in a gravelly voice:

“Well now... the Americans! What are you doing here at this hour?”

Stan, trying to win over the giant, forced a syrupy smile and pressed his hands together as if begging.

“Please, Mister Germain... don’t tell Uncle James. It would be a real disaster for me and my sister.”

The farmer narrowed his eyes, the corner of his mouth twisting from a smirk into a more severe expression.

“I’m not in the habit of lying.”

His words fell like stones. He paused, studying the boy and then his sister, before adding firmly:

“Follow me. You shouldn’t be wandering around here. It’s too dangerous.”

He gripped his rifle with both hands and turned his head toward the woods. His deep voice darkened further:

“Poachers are out. The night belongs to them, and they don’t hesitate at anything. Even the police avoid confronting them now. And this time of year... they especially like hunting wild boar.”

A heavy silence settled. The breath of the wind made the surrounding beets shiver. Antoinette frowned and clutched Monsieur Sock tightly, while Stan swallowed hard, his gaze locked on the threatening shadows of the woods.

Antoinette, pretending a sweetness she didn’t feel, took two steps toward Germain. A forced smile tightened her lips. She raised Monsieur Sock toward the farmer’s face, the sock trembling like an overexcited puppet.

“M–maybe we could make an arrangement...” she stammered, speaking in a falsely supplicating ventriloquist voice.

Germain froze, eyes wide. His face, hardened by years working the fields, suddenly showed utter bewilderment. He stepped back and burst out:

“What the hell is that thing?!”

Stan, red with shame, raised both hands in denial. His face twisted in a pained grimace.

“It’s... it’s her comfort toy,” he explained with a dragging, embarrassed voice.

The farmer frowned, staring insistently at Antoinette as if trying to read her soul. Then, to the children’s surprise, a mocking grin split his lips.

“Well! The little ventriloquist... girl, you don’t have all your fries in your cone, that’s for sure. Might be time to grow up!”

Stan nodded vigorously, crossing his arms like an exhausted adult tired of repeating himself.

“I keep telling her...” he sighed.

Antoinette, stung to the core, shot her brother a series of whining grimaces, trying to defend herself silently. But before she could speak, Germain whipped his head to the side. Something had reached his ears. His boots scraped the ground as he took a step toward the woods.

A sharp hiss cut through the air. Then two electrodes shot from the shadows and stabbed violently into his chest.

The shock was immediate. Germain convulsed, his massive body trembling like a broken puppet. His weapon fell heavily into the grass. His eyes rolled back, and he collapsed under his own weight, motionless, his cheek pressed against the dirt.

Stan and Antoinette stood frozen, horror carved into their faces. The silence shattered with a brutal crack as dry branches snapped under heavy footsteps.

They both turned at the same moment, breath short.

Two figures emerged from the darkness of the woods. Tall, imposing, their heavy steps beat the ground rhythmically. They wore long, dull coats flapping against their legs. Their leather caps gave them the look of old-time soldiers, but their faces hard, insolent had nothing military about them. They were predators.

The shorter one raised an arm. In his hand gleamed an electric stun pistol. His voice cracked like a whip:

“God damn it, God damn it! Louis, I told you this would end badly!”

The other, larger, chuckled, calming his companion with a gesture.

“Relax, Jo! The boss won’t be long. Just a setback. We clean this up quick, then we take the game once it’s gutted.”

The words froze the children’s blood. Antoinette tightened her grip on Monsieur Sock as if he could shield her. Stan turned deathly pale, his lips trembling.

“I... I feel sick,” he stammered, his legs wobbling. “I think I’m going to faint.”

Antoinette turned toward him with a fierce glare. Her voice cracked like a verdict:

“They’re bloodthirsty killers, Stan. Open your eyes!”

Stan whimpered, his chest rising and falling too fast.

“Please... let this be a nightmare...”

Antoinette grabbed her brother’s arm with a sudden, brutal grip. Her hand, surprisingly strong for her age, yanked him toward her. This time her voice came out as a pure scream of survival:

“RUN! Let’s get the hell out of here!” Antoinette shrieked, her voice hoarse with panic.

CHAPTER 8 – The Escape

Without waiting another second, she pulled Stan behind her. The two children dashed across the beet field, their legs pounding the heavy soil, their ragged breaths echoing through the night. The moon cast a pale glow over them, and each wet leaf slapped against their knees, splattering their clothes with icy dew.

Their panting soon turned into gasps. Antoinette, a nervous smile glued to her face despite the terror, glanced toward her brother.

“What if I try to talk with them, huh? You think they’d listen?”

Stan, his face flushed and slick with sweat, replied between breaths:

“Don’t try to be smart not now!”

Behind them, the poachers had begun an unrelenting chase. Their massive silhouettes cut across the horizon, their coats flapping like dark wings. The pounding of their boots on the torn earth grew closer, unstoppable.

Louis, breathless, finally winced in pain. He stopped, bent double with his hands on his knees. His tense face lifted, bloodshot eyes shining in the night.

“Shoot them, Jo!” he growled. “They’re too fast for us!”

Jo, relentless, didn’t slow down. His harsh breathing echoed behind the children. Only a few meters away, he halted, inhaled slowly and deeply. His cold eyes narrowed. With a precise gesture, he raised his weapon, aligning his target.

“Don’t worry, Louis. I’ve got them in my grip now,” he said in an icy voice.

A cruel smile stretched across his lips. He took in a long breath, held it. Then, in a blinding flash, the electric pistol spat its charge.

Stan barely had time to scream. His body arched violently before collapsing heavily to the ground, arms spread out like a puppet whose strings had just been cut. One electrode had struck his neck, the other grazing his skin. His pale face twisted in a grimace of agony.

“Stan!” Antoinette screamed, the cry tearing her throat apart.

She dove to the ground, sliding on the wet leaves, throwing herself flat beside him. Her face scraped against the beets, but she didn’t even notice. Her vision blurred by panic, she reached toward her brother, her heart hammering wildly in her chest.

Stan groaned faintly, his eyelids fluttering.

Jo resumed his march slow, calculated. His pistol reloaded, he advanced like an executioner confident in his kill.

Louis, still gasping, pointed a trembling finger at Antoinette.

“God almighty! One of ‘em is still moving!”

Jo smirked. His voice, glacial, betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

“Calm down, Louis. I’ll knock her out too. Then we gag them and bring them back with the farmer.”

Antoinette, face smeared with dirt and sweat, crawled desperately toward her brother, her fingers clenched around the sleeve of Stan’s coat. Her dark eyes burned with powerless rage.

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At the same time, far away, the white farmhouse lay in peaceful silence.

In the master bedroom, James was snoring heavily. Suddenly, his body jerked. His eyes opened, as if alerted by an invisible echo. He sat up in bed, scanning the darkness, breath held. Then he turned his head toward Kelly, sleeping beside him. His face softened.

Reassured, he lay back down and wrapped himself against her, ignoring the distant call still resonating somewhere deep inside him.

CHAPTER 9 – The Creak

Outside, in the field, the nightmare was unleashed.

A sound rose first faint, almost imperceptible: a sharp, piercing creak, like enormous teeth grinding against each other. It tore through the night.

Antoinette froze. Her hands instinctively left Stan to cover her ears. Her face twisted in pain, her eyes desperately searching for the source of this inhuman noise.

The creaking intensified, echoing across the beet field, filling the air with a sickening vibration. Even the poachers stopped in their tracks, their gaze shifting toward the darkness of the woods.

Something was approaching.

“Where... is that creaking coming from?” Antoinette whispered, her eyes wide.

Her flashlight trembled in her hand, sending shaky beams across the leaves. She scanned the area, short of breath until her eyes met Jo’s. And in that instant, her blood turned to ice.

The poacher’s eyes had widened so far they looked ready to burst. His entire body was trapped, wrapped tight by tentacled roots that had burst from the ground roots thick as a man’s arm. Thousands of hooked claws jutted from their dark bark, sinking into his flesh with a wet, nauseating sound.

Jo screamed. His cry tore through the night like an animal in agony. The claws tightened, driving through muscle and bone. Then, with a crack of breaking ribs, the poacher’s body was hoisted upward, tossed into the air like a rag doll. His head lolled, his limp arms swayed uselessly.

Then, suddenly, the roots released him. Jo crashed to the ground with a dull thud, his body twitching in grotesque spasms, his glassy eyes fixed on the sky. His breathing was reduced to the faintest rasp. Sated, the claws retracted in one fluid motion and vanished back into the earth, swallowed by the darkness.

The creak returned louder, closer.

Louis, gasping, bolted toward his companion. His boots tore at the soft soil, each heavy step betraying his panic. Reaching Jo, he knelt, breathless, his face draining of color at the sight of the lifeless body.

“But... what... what the hell is that?” he stammered, his throat dry.

Fear oozed from his voice. With a jerky motion, he yanked the weapon from Jo's limp hands. His wild eyes scanned the night. Standing again, he raised his pistol, spinning on himself, searching for an invisible attacker.

Another creak echoed, freezing the children's blood. Louis, sweat dripping down his forehead, turned in circles, his frantic gestures revealing his terror. His lips trembled; he bit his lower lip convulsively. Then suddenly, his gaze stopped.

A few meters away, the thick beet leaves began to move. As if something crawled beneath them. Slowly at first, then faster. A wide furrow split the earth, snaking forward, heading straight for him. The ground vibrated under his boots.

And then everything stopped. Silence. No breath, no movement. As if the night itself held its breath.

Louis panted, his weapon trembling in his damp hands.

“What is this goddamn thing?!” he screamed, voice cracking.

Meanwhile, Antoinette had crawled back to Stan. She shook him frantically, her small hands clamped around his arm. Monsieur Sock wobbled in front of the boy's face, as if trying to pull him back from the void.

“Stan! Wake up! Hurry!”

Stan groaned weakly, his lips trembling as a broken breath escaped them. His eyelids slowly lifted, revealing a foggy, disoriented gaze. His head flopped to the side, and a deep, painful groan seeped from his throat.

Antoinette burst into a trembling smile almost hysterical tears pooling in her eyes.

“Finally! You're tougher than I thought!”

Louis, still standing, scanned the horizon. His weapon pointed in all directions, he squeezed the stock so hard his knuckles turned white.

“I'll get you, whatever you are!” he shouted.

Stan, disoriented, staggered as he got up, supported by his sister. His trembling fingers tore the electrode from his neck. Pain made him wince, but fear forced him to stay upright.

Then the creak sounded again. Louder. Closer.

Louis paled. His weapon slipped from his sweaty hands and dropped into the earth with a dull thud.

“What... no... no...”

CHAPTER 10 – The Roots of Evil

His eyes widened in horror. His legs locked. He was no longer anything but a puppet on invisible strings.

Dozens of roots burst upward more numerous than before erupting from the ground like a rising tide. They wrapped around him, coiling, twisting at inhuman speed. Claws sprouted by the thousands, glistening with dark sap, and pierced through his flesh.

Louis screamed. A guttural, tearing scream that echoed across the entire valley. Then the shrill creaking rose another pitch, drowning out his voice, swallowing it whole.

The claws, now fully unleashed, plunged brutally into Louis's body. Flesh gave way with a wet, muffled sound.

“W—what... what's happening?!” Stan stammered, his face horrified, his eyes stretched wide with terror.

Antoinette held her brother up, struggling to keep him standing. Her fingers trembled, but her gaze stayed locked on Louis. Beside her, Monsieur Sock raised its limp little head, its fabric eyes glinting in the night, and said in a flat tone:

“That's strange... really, really strange.”

Louis, his body pierced from every angle, mouth hanging open in a ragged breath, crumpled to the ground. His chest still rose and fell, irregular and harsh. Then, to the children's shock, the claws retracted as if satisfied, and the roots loosened, unwinding from his body before slipping back across the field, disappearing into the earth.

Stan and Antoinette stood motionless, petrified, their faces drained of all color. They didn't dare move. They didn't dare speak.

And then a new horror struck them.

Before their disbelieving eyes, Louis's limp body began sinking into the soil. Slowly. Inexorably. As if dragged down by an invisible force. His flesh, his clothes, his boots everything slid into the soft earth without disturbing the surface. Only one clenched hand twitched for a fraction of a second before disappearing completely.

“L—look!” Stan choked, voice strangled. “It's... it's demonic! He's being swallowed!”

A few meters away, Jo, the second poacher, still lay curled on the ground, his glassy eyes staring up at the sky. But already, the same supernatural force was dragging him under. His body began to vibrate, then pulled from below he too slowly sank, swallowed by the black soil.

Antoinette, fascinated despite herself, narrowed her eyes.

“This country is completely insane...” she muttered.

A cold shiver shot through Stan’s spine. Panic surged back through him. He grabbed his sister’s hand violently, his fingers crushing hers like a vise.

“Run! Let’s get out of here!” he shouted, his voice cracked by fear.

The two children bolted again, panting, stumbling through the furrows of the field. Their footsteps thudded dully, their lungs burned, their hearts hammered wildly. Hand in hand, they raced downhill, beet leaves slapping against their legs, until they reached the edge of the field.

Breathless, bent double, they finally stopped. Sweat dripped down their foreheads; their trembling chests rose and fell in ragged bursts. With fearful eyes, they looked back at the field they had fled. The upper slope, bathed in the moon’s pale light, now looked calm. But the air still vibrated with a lingering, menacing echo.

Stan, throat dry, spat his words like a groan:

“What were those... those tentacles?! Those claws out of nowhere?! And that creaking! I can still feel it in my teeth... and my hair is still standing on end. What is happening, damn it?!”

Still gasping for breath, Antoinette nodded slowly. She brought Monsieur Sock in front of her face. The little fabric puppet raised its round eyes toward her, then turned toward Stan.

“In the end...” it said in a calm voice, “I’m starting to like Belgium.”

Stan, exasperated, grabbed her shoulders and shook her with desperate energy.

“Stop acting smart!” he cried, nearly in tears. “None of this is normal! We need to go back now right now to the farm. And Uncle James... he must not know anything. Do you hear me? Nothing! Otherwise... otherwise they’ll put us in foster care, and we’ll be separated. It’s over for us.”

Antoinette lifted her chin proudly, her mouth twisting into a stubborn pout. She ran a nervous hand through her hair, pushing it aside with theatrical flair. Then, without another word, she accepted the truth and walked beside her brother toward the farm.

Silence seemed to settle again. Only the wind rustled softly through the trees of the dark woods. Stan began to regain hope, when suddenly

Without warning, a shadow rose before them.

A tall man emerged from the darkness and seized them in a single movement. His powerful arms closed around them like clamps, and before they could scream, his massive hands covered their mouths.

Antoinette let out a muffled cry, Stan struggled in vain. But the stranger held them with an unbreakable strength.

In the night, his features appeared: a face marked by deep wrinkles, weathered by age, his eyes shining with a disturbing hardness.

“What’s going on here?! Where are my men, Jo and Germain?!” roared the stranger, his voice booming like thunder.

Stan, lips trembling, raised his eyes toward him.

“W–who… who are you?” he stammered, breathless.

The man frowned. His face hardened even more, and his dark eyes flashed dangerously.

“I’m Marcel. Their boss. And you two… you’ve got a funny accent, kids. You’re coming with me, and you’re going to explain what’s happening here.”

His knotted fingers tightened around the adolescents. He dragged them roughly toward the beet field, his heavy steps pounding the soil. Stan and Antoinette stumbled, tossed around like rag dolls.

But before they could even protest, the earth opened before their eyes.

Black roots burst from the field massive, lightning fast. In a single blink, they wrapped around Marcel, lifting him off the ground. His mouth opened to scream, but a gag of roots was already strangling him. His bulging eyes reflected absolute terror.

Hundreds of claws shot out of the tentacles and sank into his flesh. The sickening sound of tearing meat mixed with his muffled screams. Then, in one final spasm, he was thrown to the ground, his body curled on itself like an empty shell. His fingers twitched, leaving one last mark in the soil.

And soon his body too was seized slowly drawn into the loose earth. He vanished, swallowed whole, as if he had never existed.

CHAPTER 11 – Grigne-Dints

Thrown backward by the force of the attack, Stan and Antoinette were hurled violently to the ground. They rolled in the dirt, breath knocked out of them. Struggling upright, they stared, mouths agape, at the spot where Marcel had vanished.

Antoinette cried out in pain. She clutched her right arm: a gash ran across it, cut open by the monstrous claws. Blood dripped, warm and vivid, soaking her sleeve.

A new shrill creaking rose from the field like the scraping of enormous jaws. The sound vibrated inside their skulls, as though grinding their teeth from within.

Stan, horror-stricken, pointed a trembling finger toward the beet field.

“L—look!”

Then it appeared.

From the heart of the field, a monstrous silhouette erupted. The plants bent aside as if struck by a hurricane. Tentacled roots rose into the air, still smeared with blood.

Grigne-Dints.

Its abominable effigy revealed itself under the moon’s pale light. Its left cheek bore the indelible mark of an inverted cross, carved like a blasphemous scar. Its misshapen eyes blazed red-hot, and from its gaping mouth poured tongues of crackling fire.

Slowly, it drew its tentacles back toward itself. Their claws retracted one by one with a metallic click except for one. One remained extended, dripping with Antoinette’s blood.

In a hideous gesture, Grigne-Dints brought the claw toward its twisted face. Its tongue nothing but a whip of flame coiled around the claw and licked the blood with a sickening hiss.

Then its blazing eyes fixed on Antoinette.

A horrific creaking exploded in the air, louder than ever. And with the voice of a child heavy, commanding, echoing as if spoken by a thousand mouths it declared:

“Who are you, loathsome and pitiful creature?”

The tentacles hissed through the air, slicing the atmosphere. Grigne-Dints advanced, its colossal mass crushing the plants beneath it. Its voice rumbled again, thick with ancient mystery:

“This is strange indeed, for the depths of my being... call for you. At the risk of awakening... and unleashing my forbidden self.”

Stan and Antoinette, petrified, clamped their hands over their ears. The creaking split their eardrums, twisting their faces in agony. Slowly, they lowered their hands and stared at the monster.

Then Antoinette's eyes lit with a sudden spark of intuition. She pointed at the creature and screamed:

"Jack O'Lantern! It's him! It's Jack!"

Stan shook his head frantically, his trembling lips struggling for words.

"Impossible!" he stammered. "A—and we're not even in America, Antoinette..."

But his sister, her face hardened, frowned and stepped forward, as if pulled by an invisible force.

"Then... what is it?" she whispered, her throat tight.

Suddenly, one of Grigne-Dints's tentacles shot out faster than lightning. It wrapped around Antoinette's ankle and yanked her with brutal force toward the field.

"ANT... OINETTE!!!" Stan screamed, arms outstretched toward his sister. "No!"

His cry tore through the night, raw with anguish.

His sister, shrieking with despair, struggled like prey caught in a monstrous web. The tentacles dragged her relentlessly, ripping her away from solid ground. Her fragile body scraped against the thick beet leaves, her face contorted in absolute terror.

A long tentacle suddenly rose before her mouth and thrust itself inside, gagging her with a plug of roots. Her wide, terrified black eyes searched desperately for her brother.

Grigne-Dints, towering and imperial, raised its blazing face toward her. Its fiery sockets burned brighter, as if the fire within had finally found the prey it had awaited for centuries.

Its voice both childlike and abyssal rolled through the freezing air:

"Know this, pitiful one: for hundreds of years I have ruled these cursed lands with absolute power... I am Grigne-Dints!"

It tightened its grip. Several roots wrapped around Antoinette's small body, cocooning her like a damned chrysalis. Her chest heaved under the crushing pressure, but her strength was already fading.

"From now on, you belong to me!" it roared, grinding its teeth in a deafening metallic shriek. "Locked within my underground kingdom, you will never again see the light of day. You will die alone... forgotten by all!"

Then the monster began to spin.

Its tentacles lashed the air with supernatural fury, whipping up a spiraling wind that bent the surrounding plants sideways. Its enormous mass whirled faster and faster, until it was nothing but a vortex of flames and shadows.

Then, with a deep rumble, it plunged into the earth.
The ground split beneath it, forming a gaping chasm.
In a single instant, Grigne-Dints and his captive vanished swallowed by the entrails of the world.

Only a black, open pit remained, from which rose a faint breath of heat.

CHAPTER 12 – The Call of the Void

Stan remained frozen, mouth slightly open, paralyzed with horror. His short breath barely made it past his lips. His legs trembled.

“A—Antoinette!” he finally screamed, shattered. “Why... why did that creature take my little sister?!”

Seized by sudden rage, he ran toward the chasm. His steps whipped the ground disordered, frantic. Once at the edge, he paced back and forth, turning in circles like a wild animal locked in a cage. His hands clutched at his hair, his eyes desperately searching for a solution.

“That’s what happens... when she keeps challenging danger... running headfirst into everything...” he muttered, almost delirious.

Before his eyes, the gaping hole was already beginning to close, slowly, relentlessly, as if the earth were reclaiming itself.

Stan froze. His fists tightened, his lips trembled with nervous bites. Then his gaze fell to the ground.

Right there. At his feet.

Antoinette’s comfort toy. Monsieur Sock.

He grabbed it with almost sacred urgency and clutched the puppet to his chest.

“Monsieur Sock...” he whispered, voice strangled. “I have to find her. I have to bring her home.”

Tears blurred his vision, but he swallowed them down, shaking his head.

“Dad... Mom... I know I spoke too soon, trying to act strong. But please, I’m begging you give me strength. Because I’m scared. Scared I won’t make it.”

He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs as if drawing a final reserve of courage. Then he slapped his own cheeks sharply twice, chasing the fear away. His chest lifted, his eyes narrowed with determination.

He cast one last look toward the farm the small white shape lost in the distant darkness. Then toward the hole, now nothing more than a narrow slit, ready to seal shut.

“I’m coming, Antoinette,” he whispered. “Wait for me.”

And without another thought, Stan closed his eyes and leaped.

His entire body plunged into the darkness.

CHAPTER 13 – Nicola, the Imprisoned Soul

Deep underground, in a forgotten world carved by time and cursed fate, Grigne-Dints moved swiftly through a vast tunnel, dragging Antoinette captive in the grip of his tentacles. His misshapen silhouette slid like a living shadow, his roots pulsing, occasionally scraping the damp earthen walls with an unbearable screech.

The tunnel stretched as far as the eye could see, vaulted and winding like a serpent. Along one side ran a trench carved directly into the ground: it carried a viscous, luminous liquid, its color shifting between sulfurous yellow and phosphorescent green. It flowed slowly, leaving behind a sinister shimmer. Bathed in this morbid glow, the place seemed to breathe its very walls pulsing with an unhealthy, living light.

Suddenly, Grigne-Dints stopped.

With a brutal motion, he released Antoinette. She crashed heavily onto the ground, breath knocked from her lungs. She winced, her body aching from the fall, and lifted terrified eyes toward the creature.

The monster stood frozen, as if struggling against itself. His tentacles slumped onto the floor in a strange torpor. His jaw scraped in a discordant grind, and a guttural roar shook the tunnel.

“NO!... This cannot... NO!”

The howl rang out like a funeral bell. Clods of earth rained down from the ceiling, and the echo rolled along the tunnel until it vanished into its depths.

Trembling, Antoinette managed to sit upright, her muscles sore. Her wide, dark eyes remained locked on the demonic effigy. Fear consumed her, yet her voice burst out despite herself fragile, breathless:

“Wh–where... where am I?”

Grigne-Dints convulsed violently, twisting in a way that was almost human. His tentacles whipped the air like lashes. His blazing eye-sockets red as burning coals began to shift in color. The infernal red slowly faded into an immaculate, pure, unreal white.

The mask seemed to loosen. The creature itself straightened, as though soothed. When it spoke again, its voice was no longer that of the monster. It was softer, touched by a deep melancholy that echoed strangely in the foul air.

“Fear not, fair maiden. I shall do thee no harm.”

Antoinette, stunned, pointed a trembling finger at the creature that was no longer entirely a creature. Her pale lips barely formed the words:

“What... but... who are you? And that... thing?”

A heavy silence settled. The air in the tunnel grew oppressive, broken only by the faint, viscous bubbling of the glowing fluid along the ground.

Grigne-Dints slowly raised a tentacle almost gently and placed its clawed tip on the earth as though trying to appear less threatening. His whitening eye-sockets fixed on Antoinette with a tragic, tender intensity. The demon or what remained of him seemed inhabited by another presence.

“I am Nicola,” he whispered at last, like a confession. “And this body... this mask... is not mine.”

CHAPTER 14 – The Tunnel

Higher up in the tunnel, several dozen meters away, a dull thud echoed.

Stan had landed heavily on the earthy ground. His knees buckled under the impact, his palms scraped against gravel. Winded, he coughed, his face smeared with dust.

He quickly regained his senses and reached into his back pocket. He pulled out his flashlight and switched it on with a frantic gesture.

A beam burst forth, slicing through the darkness. The light revealed the bare walls, the raw vaulted ceiling shaped by centuries, and that same strange liquid slithering along the trench.

The silence was broken only by the pounding of his own heart. Stan, tense, swept the flashlight in all directions, the trembling beam betraying his shaking hands.

He rose slowly, his legs still unsteady. His clear eyes probed the depths of the tunnel. The glowing liquid cast shifting reflections, painting the walls with unnatural halos.

Stan bent down, intrigued, and aimed the beam directly at the trench. The undulating substance appeared to vibrate almost alive.

“It looks like... molten lava,” he whispered, his voice shaking. “But... where could it come from?”

The tunnel answered him with silence.

A silence that wasn’t quite silence for as Stan strained his ears, he thought he perceived a distant murmur, a faint rumbling that seemed to resonate under his feet.

His breath quickened. But he tightened his grip on the flashlight, held it out before him like a pathetic little weapon, and took a cautious step deeper into Grigne-Dints’s kingdom.

Stan suddenly froze.

A low thump like the beating of a gigantic heart made the ground vibrate behind him. He raised his flashlight instinctively and saw, horrified, the opening through which he had fallen slowly closing. The earth flowed like living matter, sealing the exit until only a solid, silent wall remained.

“This is getting worse...” he murmured, his throat dry. “Looks like I’m trapped... But where are you, Antoinette?”

He inhaled deeply, tightening his grip on the flashlight as if it could push back the darkness. Sweat beaded on his forehead, sliding down his temples. The quivering beam swept the tunnel

walls until it caught an opening to his right an emerging gallery, narrow and gaping like a mouth calling him.

Stan froze, fascinated and uneasy.

“What... is that?”

His breath echoed against the walls, amplified by the cavernous acoustics. Hesitating, he took one step, then another, his soles scraping on the damp earth. Finally, he turned and entered the emerging gallery, disappearing into its suffocating narrowness.

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Farther down in the main tunnel, Antoinette confronted the inconceivable.

She backed up slightly, but her dark eyes stayed locked on the demonic effigy before her. Her legs trembled, yet curiosity outweighed fear.

“Your... your inner fire!” she stammered, her voice shaking. “Why isn’t it the same anymore?”

The monstrous mask of Grigne-Dints stirred. His eye sockets blazed with a new clarity not the infernal red of a furnace, but a white glow, bright, ardent and pure. The light bathed the underground vault, pushing back the shadows as though hell itself had shifted into a strange form of redemption.

The voice that rose was not that of the monster. It was calm, fragile almost human.

“Do not fear me. I am Nicola Berteaux, son of Henri and Angèle Berteaux.”

Antoinette’s eyes widened in astonishment. Her breath quickened. The name echoed like something from another era.

Grigne-Dints, inhabited now by Nicola, lowered his gaze toward his own body. His tentacles swayed slowly, hesitantly, as if discovering for the first time the horror of his condition.

“Who am I... if not a spirit trapped in this monstrous form?” he groaned with a trembling voice.

His root-like claws folded and fell limply onto the ground with a dull thud. The mask lifted again, its whitened sockets turning toward emptiness.

“Heavens... I remember. Yes... I remember the night of my death... that cursed 24th of August, 1572.”

A tremor rippled through the vault. The earth itself seemed to react to the mention of that date.

Nicola sighed, and the breath that escaped the flaming maw of Grigne-Dints held the innocence of a lost child.

“And I see now through the black thoughts of this infernal host that I have been a prisoner since that day, bound inside this Grigne-Dints, forged by the vengeful will of Henri, my own father.”

Shaken, Antoinette lowered her gaze to herself. Her hands fumbled over her coat, her pockets, her clothes. Suddenly, her face darkened.

“No... Monsieur Sock! I lost him!”

She searched again, panicking, her fingers rushing across her body as if trying to conjure the missing puppet. Her eyes then turned to the creature bewildered, almost pleading.

Grigne-Dints /Nicola through him moved forward in a slow, cautious motion. His tentacles, instead of whipping the air violently, bent gently toward the girl. One of them rose, hesitant, then extended softly in her direction.

There was no trace left of the monster’s past savagery. Only the clumsy gesture of an ancient soul trapped in a body that wasn’t his, trying to reach out to the living.

“Who are you,” the deep voice asked from the flaming mask of Grigne-Dints, “you who speak this familiar babble?”

CHAPTER 15 – The Gallery

Meanwhile, Stan crept forward in the emerging gallery. His trembling flashlight cast distorted, monstrous shadows across the steep walls, shadows that seemed to move in rhythm with his hesitant steps. The air grew heavier here, saturated with a fetid humidity.

Suddenly, he froze. His breath caught in his throat, and his chest tightened at the sight before him.

On either side of the narrow passage, multiple openings gaped like open mouths. Their inner vaults, dark and glistening, held strange translucent cocoons dangling from the ceiling. Each one, tapered to a point, descended to just a few centimeters above the ground, swaying softly like living stalactites.

Stan paled, his lips parting.

“What... what are all these... these stalactites?”

He approached, knees shaking, and knelt before one of the cavities. His flashlight carved out the silhouette of a cocoon shimmering with a sickly gleam. At its tip, a drop of viscous liquid formed, swelled, then fell into a small hollow carved into the rock.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

Each drop echoed like the ticking of an infernal clock.

Stan grimaced and wrinkled his nose.

“Gross!”

His hand clenched the flashlight as if it were his last link to reality. He took a deep breath, then against all reason slid on all fours into the appendage. The space was tight, suffocating; the walls oozed a slimy liquid that stained his shirt and stuck to his skin.

“Antoinette...” he murmured, throat tight. “Knowing my little sister, she’d be capable of hiding in a place as twisted as this...”

Crawling cautiously, he approached the cocoon. The light revealed an organic, almost translucent texture, with blurry shapes shifting inside. Heart pounding, Stan pressed his ear to the surface.

A tremor.

Then a muffled swarming, as if something trapped inside was writhing beneath the membrane.

“What the...?”

Stan jerked back, gasping, eyes fixed on the quivering cocoon. His flashlight slipped toward the tip of the stalactite. The viscous liquid dropped, one bead at a time, into the hollow, then slowly trickled outwards like a cursed sap.

He squinted. A movement caught his eye deeper in the cavity. He aimed the beam and nearly dropped the flashlight.

There were dozens of them.

Huge, greasy worms at least twenty centimeters long, their dull skin looking as though coated in dirty oil. They advanced in perfect formation, aligned as if performing a ritual. At the tip of each slick head protruded a chitinous hook, sharp as a blade.

The creatures crawled toward the cocoons. One of them, leading the line, lifted its hook and pierced the membrane effortlessly. The cocoon vibrated, the liquid spurted slightly, and the worm burrowed inside like a parasite fulfilling its purpose.

Stan stifled a cry.

“Ew! That’s... that’s disgusting!”

Instinct battled against morbid curiosity. His hands trembled, but he couldn’t stop himself from reaching a finger toward one of the monsters crawling near him.

He touched the oily skin.

In a split second, the worm reared and thrashed violently, its hook snapping toward him.

“Aaaah!”

Stan leapt back, nearly dropping his flashlight. He scrambled out of the appendage, crawling as fast as he could, his hands frantically wiping his pants as if to erase the horror of the contact. His ragged breathing echoed in the gallery, and his heart hammered in his chest.

He leaned against the wall for a moment, sweat beading across his forehead, eyes wide.

“It was... alive...”

*

Meanwhile, in the main tunnel, Nicola’s voice still resonated through the demonic mask, heavy with centuries of sorrow. Antoinette finally managed to calm her racing heartbeat. Her breathing steadied as she observed the towering demonic silhouette, its tentacles lazily undulating in the pale glow flowing along the luminous trench.

To her own surprise, she felt her fear recede. Her legs stopped shaking; a strange force pushed her to step forward.

She took one step, then another, and declared in a clear though slightly trembling voice:

“I... my name is Antoinette Berteaux. I’m an orphan. My parents are dead... murdered. I’m not from this country. I come from Tarrytown, Westchester County, New York State.”

The name vibrated strangely through the air, as if the earthen vault itself held onto each syllable.

The creature its inner fire now white and flickering tilted its head. Then the voice, carried by Nicola, answered, heavy with weariness:

“Alas... 1572. The night when my mother was betrayed, executed, murdered in cold blood...”

Antoinette froze, brows knitting.

“You... you said 1572?”

A shiver crawled along her spine. That date belonged in history books, in tales of massacres not in a real conversation deep beneath the earth.

Grigne-Dints, still possessed by Nicola’s soul, slowly shook his massive head. He stepped back, then knelt with a resonant thud, like a collapsing tree.

Countless tentacles veiled the flaming mask. His voice came out pained, broken by an ancient sob:

“How I miss you... my sweet, tender Angèle...”

Antoinette felt her throat tighten. She stepped closer, guided by sudden empathy. Her own grief resurfaced.

“Your mother...” she whispered.

A heavy silence fell, broken only by the distant echoes of the glowing liquid flowing in the trench. Then she murmured, her voice trembling:

“It seems... we unfortunately have something in common. Like I just said... I lost my parents too.”

Her eyes shimmered with moisture. The memory of the bloodstained supermarket, the screams, the terror flooded back.

But the calm did not last.

Grigne-Dints suddenly rose to his full, colossal height. His tentacles slammed against the ground, then whipped into the air, slashing through the darkness. The mask erupted in crimson fire. The oppressive voice boomed through the tunnel:

“You may have managed to awaken my forbidden self from its slumber, human! But know this: neither you nor that coward Nicola Berteaux will divert me from my coming crusade. I will tear the corrupted souls of this land and consume them all every last one!”

Antoinette pressed a finger to her lips, shaken by the sonic blast. Her eyes widened as a detail in the tirade struck her “Wait... Berteaux? You said your name was Berteaux?”

A heavy silence stretched.

She shook her head, nervous, her short hair falling before her eyes.

“Like... that’s... that’s my last name too. But... it must be a coincidence... obviously...”

Her legs wobbled. Some unseen, disturbing connection had just taken shape.

Then suddenly, her face contracted in shock. She lifted her head and cried out, her voice echoing through the tunnel:

“You said: COWARD?!”

The word rang out absurd, grotesque, and terrifying all at once.

Grigne-Dints, shaken by an internal convulsion, spewed a burst of red-hot flame from his mask. His tentacles cracked violently against the tunnel walls, the sound echoing like thunder in the bowels of the earth.

Antoinette stumbled back, heart pounding. Her legs knocked together as her nostrils flared in panicked breathing. She instantly understood that the fragile moment where Nicola still existed within the creature had just shattered.

“Oh... no! Not you! she cried, her voice breaking.”

Panicked, she spun on her heels and bolted into the shadowed tunnel, her footsteps clattering like falling stones. Her flashlight bounced against her belt, casting erratic flashes across the walls. Her scream was swallowed by the abyss, echoing like an endless lament.

CHAPTER 16 – The Scarecrow

Further down the descending tunnel, Stan crept forward in tiny steps, tense as a bowstring ready to snap. The flickering beam of his flashlight slid across the oozing walls, revealing viscous streaks and shapeless forms. His fingers, smeared with a glistening fluid, clung unpleasantly to his skin. He stared at them for a second, disgusted.

“This is revolting!” he muttered, wrinkling his nose. “But what on earth are those creatures doing inside their cocoons?”

He hurriedly wiped his hands on his pants, but the slimy substance stretched like a web, refusing to disappear.

He tried to think of something else. His footsteps echoed heavily in the tunnel when suddenly he halted.

A few meters ahead, the ground began to bubble like diseased earth. A dark mass slowly emerged, molded from black, glistening mud. At first shapeless, it rose, stretching abnormally long arms that thrashed the air with aggressive motions. The thing wore a battered, twisted straw hat but its face... it didn’t have one. No eyes, no mouth, nothing but a disturbing void beneath the hat’s wide brim.

Stan stepped back, terror freezing him in place.

“What... what IS that?!” he screamed, voice cracking.

The scarecrow moved. Its arms snapped like whips, spraying curls of black dust around it. Its steps heavy, dragging made the ground tremble. It advanced. Slowly. Inexorably.

Desperate for an escape, Stan glanced to his right. There, a narrow opening gaped a stretched gallery like a mouth ready to swallow him. Without hesitation, he darted inside.

The steep slope seized him instantly. His feet slid out from under him, his hands scraped against the walls, but nothing helped he was tumbling, carried by an irresistible pull. His screams ricocheted through the tight passage as he rolled, his whole body striking the sides.

Then suddenly, the ground vanished beneath him.

He fell through empty space. His scream dissolved into the void before he crashed violently onto a hard surface. A dull thud echoed. His back slammed against cold, rugged limestone.

He lay there for a few seconds, dazed, his ears ringing. Then, in a survival-driven jolt, he felt around his pockets and found his flashlight. Trembling, he switched it on. The beam burst forth, carving a fragile halo through the darkness.

Before him opened a gigantic cavity, a natural dome whose ceiling vanished into unseen heights. The ground, covered in pale stones, seemed to float in a vast stretch of black water. Sickly reflections danced on the surface, shifting, as if invisible creatures stirred beneath the waves.

Stan pushed himself upright with difficulty, his face twisted in pain. His legs still shook from the fall. His eyes swept the expanse.

“Where... where did I fall into?” he whispered, breath shallow.

He slowly turned, the flashlight beam sweeping arcs of light across the damp walls. The water stretched in every direction, encircling the little limestone island where he had landed.

“No... no... no! This can’t be happening... I’m trapped!”

His voice cracked, swallowed by the echo. His fingers tightened around the flashlight until they whitened.

He kept turning, lighting now the dripping rock wall, now the shifting shadows on the water. A biting cold rose from the surface, seeping into his clothes.

“No way I’m swimming... No way!” he muttered. “If that’s water... it’s freezing. And who knows what’s living underneath...”

His imagination, unleashed, conjured visions of knotted arms grabbing him under the surface, of gaping maws dragging him down. He shut his eyes, inhaled deeply, and felt a tear sting his eyelids. Alone. Trapped.

And somewhere above him, in the tangled maze of tunnels, the screech of Grigne-Dints still echoed.

Stan, still shaken from his fall, remained frozen for a moment, his bruised knees pressed against the limestone. His flashlight slipped from his hands, rolling away until it came to rest a few meters farther. The trembling beam crawled up the damp walls before latching onto the ceiling.

Stan’s breath caught.

The dome’s entire vault shimmered faintly, studded with hundreds of knife-like stalactites stretching downward like the teeth of a slumbering beast. Their eerie symmetry gave the cavern an unreal appearance, as though shaped by a conscious will.

A fleeting smile cracked across his dust-covered face.

“This time... luck’s on my side,” he whispered in a trembling breath.

Gathering his strength, he rose and stumbled toward the flashlight. His trembling hand closed around it like a lifeline. He lifted it and pointed it toward the far end of the cavern.

His heart leapt: a small opening, half hidden behind mossy rocks, pierced the wall. A narrow, slanted passage tunneled upward like a promise of escape.

“Great!” he said, eyes gleaming with hope. “But I’m gonna have to be careful... really careful.”

The stagnant black water around the island released a soft ripple, like a submerged breath. Stan clenched his jaw, decided to ignore it, and stepped toward the lifesaving opening.

CHAPTER 17 – The Union

In the twisted maze of the main tunnel, Antoinette panted. Her chest rose in ragged bursts, each scorching breath tearing at her throat. She had taken refuge in a narrow curve, her back pressed against a damp wall.

She closed her eyes for a moment, but the echo of a monstrous voice made her flinch.

“You cannot escape me, insolent creature... Master me or fear me, for I rule this world as absolute sovereign!”

Grigne-Dints’ screech rippled through the bowels of the earth, ricocheting from wall to wall. The tunnel vibrated like a funeral organ. Antoinette clamped her hands over her ears, her pupils blown wide with panic.

She slid down to her knees, her fingers trembling against the packed earth. Her voice strangled, cracked escaped her despite herself:

“Who... who are you? Who exactly are you?”

A leaden silence fell. Then the creature answered, its voice rumbling like a blazing forge:

“I am my father’s creation... Henri Berteaux. It is he who forged me, through the grace of the black ring.”

The name struck her like a slap. Berteaux. Again. Her own name.

Antoinette whipped her head around, her gaze darting from one wall to another as though she might find a crack, an exit. Her dry throat tightened as she cried out:

“Your father... was a sorcerer?!”

A guttural snarl rolled inside the monster’s chest.

“A sorcerer? No. A physician. But he was weak... weakened by the tender love of Angèle and their only son, Nicola.”

Grigne-Dints growled, grinding its teeth, then resumed with venomous cruelty:

“Not long after their deaths, he had no reason left to live. So he ended his pitiful life... miserably!”

A mocking laugh shook the vault, chilling Antoinette’s blood. She frowned, her lips trembling with indignation.

“And Nicola? You... you and he are one, aren’t you? Who is he to you exactly?”

The mask's red glow intensified. The tentacles snapped against the ground in anger. The demon's voice thundered, merciless:

"Nicola?! A puny thing! A coward! A weakling... A wretch who must remain ignored by all!"

Each word vibrated like a hammer striking stone, pushing Antoinette deeper into terror.

Still shaken by the creature's fury, Antoinette felt a nervous courage swell in her chest. She dared to reply, her voice tinged with deliberate irony:

"So that's him your forbidden side! Nicola... You seem to admire him, yet you coexist."

A terrible rumble answered her words. The tunnel walls shuddered as if struck by an earthquake.

"NO!" roared Grigne-Dints. "Nicola's soul is imprisoned within my entity and will remain so forever! He has no power, no will. Beware, miserable girl... for I alone am Grigne-Dints!"

The echo rolled from wall to wall, repeating the monster's name like a cursed incantation.

Shaken by the explosive blast of sound, Antoinette pushed herself up. Her knees trembled, but her eyes blazed with defiance. Silently, she began edging backward, her feet sliding over the loose earth. Her eyes searched desperately for a passage, a path upward.

But suddenly, the ground itself seemed to awaken.

With a monstrous crack, roots bristling with hooks burst from the earth and coiled around her ankles. Antoinette screamed, her face frozen in terror. In a heartbeat, she was yanked from the ground and dragged violently backward. Her body scraped the dust as the roots hauled her like prey into the darkness.

"Let go of me!" she screamed, thrashing wildly.

Her arms flailed, but the vegetal grip tightened. In a desperate surge, she snatched her flashlight and, with a sharp swing, slammed it into the tentacles holding her.

A dull crack echoed. The creature growled, shaken by pain. Antoinette, teeth clenched, struck again. And again. Her blows rang through the tunnel like funeral bells of survival.

Finally, the roots released her, retracting in a spasmodic convulsion. Freed, panting, Antoinette rolled to the side and launched herself to her feet. Without looking back, she bolted into a frantic sprint, her ragged breath tearing through the air. Her footsteps rang like a fragile melody against the distant rumble of the monster.

CHAPTER 18 – The Dome

In the dome drowned in shadow, Stan made his way toward the summit of the limestone islet. The beam of his flashlight cast unsettling shapes across the walls, but his gaze remained fixed upward. There, hanging like a fang of stone, was the stalactite he had chosen as his starting point.

He drew in a deep breath.

“When you’ve got to go... you’ve got to go,” he whispered, his trembling voice betraying his fear.

He wedged the flashlight between his teeth, the trembling beam projecting erratic flashes along the stone. Then he leapt. His fingers clamped down on the rough surface of the stalactite. For a moment he nearly lost his grip, but he tightened his hold, his knuckles whitening with effort.

“Climb, Stan... climb!” he muttered between clenched teeth.

His arms stretched to the point of tearing, and a cold sweat gathered across his back. Slowly painfully he gained height. Every movement cost him a burning stab through his muscles. His shoes slid on the damp rock, forcing him to rely solely on the strength of his arms.

Halfway up, he allowed himself a glance downward. A mistake.

The islet where he had stood moments earlier looked tiny lost in a sea of black water. His stomach twisted, and a wave of vertigo crashed over him.

“The faster I reach... the passage... the sooner I can save Antoinette...” he repeated to steady his courage.

He then sprang toward a neighboring stalactite. His fingers slipped. His heart lurched. He caught himself at the last second, his nails scraping the rock with a shrill sound. His gaze plunged involuntarily into the abyss below. A cold shiver crept down his spine.

“That was... way too close...”

Panting, Stan clenched his jaw and resumed his ascent.

From stalactite to stalactite, he advanced like a tightrope walker suspended between life and death. His muscles screamed, his arms trembled, but his mind fueled by his love for his sister refused to yield.

At last, his fingers found the edge of a narrow passage. He hauled himself upward, his paralyzed arms pulling with every ounce of remaining strength. His torso crossed the threshold, then his legs.

Collapsing for a moment inside the tight crawlspace, he let out a shaky laugh, his lungs burning.

“Mom and Dad... would be proud of me right now...”

CHAPTER 19 – The Duel

Antoinette ran for her life, her footsteps echoing through the tunnel like a frantic hammer striking stone. Her ragged breath burned her throat, her legs trembled, yet she refused to slow down. She had to get away from this nightmare had to outrun it, somehow.

Then, abruptly, everything stopped.

Her ankles were seized by an invisible force. Roots burst from the ground, coiling around her feet and tightening like iron chains. The pull was so violent that she lost her balance and fell forward with full force. Her palms scraped the rough earth, and her cry shattered against the walls.

A heartbeat later, the roots yanked her upward. Her frail body slammed against the vault with a dull, sickening thud. Her flashlight slipped from her hands and rolled into the darkness. Then she crashed back down onto the ground, breathless.

She tried to rise, but the monster's shadow was already filling the passage.

Grigne-Dints emerged his colossal silhouette advancing with terrifying assurance. Every step echoed like a verdict. His tentacles lashed the air, and the red glow within him intensified, flooding the tunnel with a bloodlike light.

Suddenly, more roots erupted and wrapped around Antoinette's ankles, pinning her completely.

The creature chuckled, grinding its teeth in a shrill metallic sound.

“I will abandon you in one of my bottomless galleries...
There, no one will ever find your body again.”

Antoinette's face was streaked with dust and sweat, but she forced herself to lift her head. Her breathing was harsh painful. Summoning the remains of her strength, she muttered in a broken yet still defiant voice:

“You only get away with this... because I'm not a boy!”

The fiery mask of the monster blazed brighter. Grigne-Dints ground his teeth even harder, and in a fit of rage hurled the girl against the ceiling. Her body struck the rock before crashing back onto the ground.

A faint groan escaped her lips.

“I... I'm hurt... Please...”

But the creature felt no pity.

Its roots unfurled again, slithering around it like an obedient army. It stepped closer, and its voice cracked like a whip:

“I sense now that you are no longer so bold... nor so reckless.
Your end is near know this!”

His tentacles seized her effortlessly, lifting her into the air as if she weighed nothing at all. Then, with a sharp motion, he flung her across the tunnel. She tumbled for several meters, her body striking the ground at every bounce.

Groaning, her head spinning, she forced her blurred gaze open. It landed on a lateral opening. A small gallery. An appendage.
A chance.

Crawling her trembling arms dragging her wounded body she pulled herself toward the entrance. She slipped on all fours into the narrow passage, panting, her sweat-soaked hair clinging to her face.

Then she saw it.

A massive cocoon, hanging from the ceiling like an oversized stalactite, gleamed in the shadows. Its viscous surface pulsed gently, as if breathing. From its pointed tip, a glowing droplet fell at regular intervals, splattering the ground.

Antoinette's eyes widened.

“What... what is that...?”

She attempted to skirt around the organic mass, but suddenly a tentacle whipped behind her and struck the cocoon. The impact burst the membrane in a revolting, wet explosion.

From the ruptured sac spilled a decomposed body along with a downpour of creatures.
Dozens of them.

Wormlike horrors, slick and oily, as long as snakes, crashed onto the girl in swarming waves. Their hooked mandibles scraped her skin, their cold, viscous bodies coiled around her arms and legs.

“NO—NO! GET THEM OFF ME!” she screamed, her voice tearing through the air.

She kicked, flailed, her hands striking wildly at the slimy monsters. Her breath came fast and broken. Her face twisted in panic. Finally, in a burst of rage and terror, she managed to rip herself halfway free and crawl with desperate strength toward the exit.

In a last frantic surge, she burst out of the appendage and collapsed back onto the main tunnel floor. Her body shook uncontrollably, her breathing ragged. But she was alive.

Behind her, the gallery still echoed with the wet, frenzied sounds of the enraged worms.

Grigne-Dints stood motionless in the corridor.
The red-lit mask turned slowly toward the upper end of the tunnel. His tentacles slammed the ground with a dull rhythm.

Then the monster bared his teeth in a shrill, grinding snarl a sound so piercing it shook the very earth.

The cavernous voice of Grigne-Dints boomed through the underground passage each word making the walls thrum, as if the earth itself recoiled.

“Who are you, miserable adolescent, and how dare you infiltrate my kingdom?”

His tentacles whipped the air with such violence that clods of earth exploded across the floor. The echo multiplied endlessly, a threat rippling through the tunnel.

“Do not even THINK of joining that unfortunate girl!”

A violent strike cracked the wall, sending dust raining down.

“Prepare yourself... you will die as well!”

His shrieking, metallic teeth-grinding tore through the space a sound so unbearable it stabbed Antoinette’s ears like red-hot needles.

She instinctively clamped her hands over them, her heart pounding so fast she feared it would burst.

CHAPTER 20 – The Escape

Meanwhile, farther down the main tunnel, Stan advanced with slow, cautious steps, the trembling beam of his flashlight quivering in his hand. His face, strangely calm, almost gave the impression that he had found a brief moment of respite. His footsteps echoed through the oppressive silence.

Then suddenly, the ground split open beneath him.

From the black, glistening soil rose a grotesque form.

A scarecrow.

But not the harmless kind meant to guard a field this one was fused with stone and dust, its oversized arms composed of dead roots and snapped branches, its crooked fingers screeching against the walls. Its head, hidden under a wide, warped hat, twisted upward to reveal a gaping, lipless mouth from which erupted a guttural shriek.

Stan froze, mouth agape, paralyzed with terror.

“No... not him again...”

The scarecrow roared a feral, animalistic cry and lunged forward. Its heavy steps shook the ground, each movement sending clouds of dust spiraling upward. Its arms swung like massive scythes, ready to cut the boy down where he stood.

Stan’s breath caught a spark of survival igniting within him.

He spun around and bolted toward the upper tunnel, his screams bouncing between the walls:

“HELP! HELP ME!”

His legs pounded the earth, his throat burned from the effort. The flashlight in his hand flickered wildly, casting frantic, fleeting shapes along the damp walls.

He abruptly veered right into a narrow gallery, hoping to escape. But the place resembled a trap more than a refuge. Thick roots hung from the ceiling like a forest of dead vines, forcing him to push through, struggling and gasping.

A cry of despair tore from him as he felt the creature’s icy grip lock around his leg. The scarecrow’s misshapen fingers rough as burned branches yanked him backward with brutal strength.

Stan’s face twisted with horror as he frantically clutched at the solid roots anchored in the wall.

The scarecrow leaned close, its hollow eye sockets glowing with a reddish flame. Its mouth stretched wide, unleashing a bestial howl that shook the gallery to its foundations.

The earth trembled. Chunks of the walls crumbled away. And then, suddenly, the ground gave way.

Stan let out one final scream of terror as his body pitched forward into empty space. He disappeared through the gaping opening, swallowed by darkness and the roaring void.

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Far back in the main tunnel, Grigne-Dints, his tentacles fully unfurled, advanced inexorably toward Antoinette. His silhouette filled the passage an immense, monstrous shape driven by centuries of hatred.

His grinding teeth shrieked with such force that even the walls seemed to suffer. Each vibration pulsed through the belly of the earth.

Finally, he roared, the flames inside him blazing through his mask:

“You are going to die!”

His cry surged like a tidal wave, crushing Antoinette beneath its weight. She staggered, her legs ready to collapse, yet her gaze remained locked on the monster caught somewhere between terror and defiance.

Grigne-Dints walked with the assuredness of a king in his kingdom when suddenly, his tentacles recoiled against his will.

A violent spasm rippled through his monstrous carcass.

His titanic body faltered.

He stumbled, then crashed to the ground, his blazing mask slamming into the dust with a thunderous impact.

His tentacles writhed, twisting like wounded serpents. His claws gouged the earth in furious chaos.

The creature gasped choking, suffocating unable to draw breath.

His screams echoed through the tunnel, furious and agonized:

“You will not succeed, runt! YOU WILL NEVER SUCCEED!”

The echo rolled along the walls like a sinister storm.

Antoinette, frozen, trembled uncontrollably. Her chest rose and fell in frantic, uneven breaths. Her wide eyes flickered between fear and a strange fascination.

She watched this supposedly invincible monster suddenly weakened, tormented by some unseen force.

Was it Nicola, fighting from within?

Her breath hitched.

She dared not move, terrified that the slightest motion might rekindle the entity's wrath.

CHAPTER 21 – The Depths

In another forgotten corner of the underworld, Stan was slowly regaining consciousness. He sat hunched forward, his back throbbing, his hands scraped raw. The damp, earthy ground clung to his skin like a second layer of filth.

Breathing hard, he grabbed his flashlight the only weapon he had left. His fingers trembled as he swept its beam in every direction. The shaky halo of light revealed shifting walls, pulsing shapes that seemed to breathe.

“Wh... where am I now?”

His breath quickened as a root burst from the soil.
At first thin and brittle, it began to swell gorging itself on some unseen, sinister energy.

“What... what is that...?”

More roots followed. They erupted, thickened, twisted, soon covered in a bark so coarse it resembled plated armor. Within seconds, their surfaces bristled with thousands of gleaming thorns—sharp as daggers.

They drew together in a grinding, sinister creak.
Gradually, they shaped themselves into something recognizable.
A face.
A hideous mask made of roots, gnarled and crooked, bristling with thorny fangs. A rictus of pure hatred.

In a silent howl, the root-face lunged toward Stan.

The boy froze for a heartbeat but instinct saved him.
He swung his flashlight with all the strength he had left.
Each blow cracked like wood splitting apart.

The thorn-fangs snapped close to his cheek.
The air reeked of sap and mold.

With a final desperate strike, Stan smashed the creature against the wall. The mask exploded into splinters and fibrous debris. He recoiled with a gasp of disgust and frantically wiped his flashlight against his shirt.

“Gross!”

But his relief lasted only an instant.

The scarecrow.

It appeared suddenly above him its hulking silhouette carving itself into the darkness. Its enormous arms came crashing down, and its warped hand clenched violently around Stan's hair.

Agony tore through his scalp as he was yanked upward like a rag doll.

The monster's distorted face leaned close. Made of roots and earth, it twisted with feral rage. Its eyes two fiery sockets burned with an infernal glow.

Stan, his legs kicking helplessly in the air, screamed out his last scrap of determination. He smashed the creature's hand with his flashlight again and again.

Then, suddenly
A crack.

The flashlight shattered.
Its beam died.
But the sacred earth hidden within like forgotten dust puffed into the air and drifted softly to the ground.

A shiver travelled through the gallery, as though the underworld itself had held its breath.

Stan dropped, crashing heavily onto his backside. His chest rose and fell in painful spasms.

“What... what kind of nightmare is this...?”

The scarecrow shrieked a roar that shook the very earth.
In a frenzy of fury, it hurled its entire body into the pit, throwing itself upon the boy. Its claws slashed for him, its warped face lunged to bite.

Stan fought like someone possessed. His feet kicked wildly, his hands pushed blindly.
But the monstrous grip found him.
A huge hand clamped around his throat.

The pressure increased.
His breath locked.
His vision darkened.
He was suffocating.

His wide eyes darted desperately, searching for escape any escape.

And then, from the wall, a different kind of root emerged.

A Devoted one.

It slid from the earth inch by inch, glowing faintly with some strange inner energy.

Stan's tear-blurred eyes fixed on the apparition.
Was it another enemy...
or an unexpected savior?

The scarecrow's grip tightened. Stan choked, his fingers flailing helplessly in the air.

In a final, instinct-driven burst of survival, he seized the hideous mask of the Devoted this snarling mesh of roots and thorn-fangs.

His hands trembled, but he somehow found the strength to crush it against the scarecrow's monstrous face.

A sickening crack rang out.

"Mom... Dad... I love you," he gasped in what he believed was his final breath.

The living mask bit into the scarecrow.

A guttural, monstrous scream erupted through the gallery.

The scarecrow wild with pain and rage lifted its other hand, the gnarled stump clenched tight, ready to smash down on the boy's skull.

Stan closed his eyes.

Convinced everything was about to end.

CHAPTER 22 – Saved

But then, the impossible happened.

A colossal tentacle burst out of the darkness and intercepted the blow mid-air.

The impact was so tremendous the entire gallery trembled, raining dust and earth in a gritty cascade.

Another tentacle whipped forward and wrapped itself firmly around the scarecrow's head.

The creature howled, its voice echoing like a cry torn from beyond the grave.

And with a sharp, merciless twist, the tentacle tore the scarecrow's head clean off.

The decapitation erupted in a violent crack of roots and shattered soil. A spray of sacred dust burst outward, falling in a glittering shower over Stan and cloaking him in a shimmering, fleeting mantle.

The monster's body convulsed, then collapsed into a slow, lifeless spasm crumbling into a heap of fibers and earth that scattered into nothingness.

“STAN! STAN!”

Antoinette's voice cut through the darkness.

Stan, still dazed, lifted his eyes. His face first frozen by shock softened. A nervous, almost childlike smile pulled at his lips.

He scrambled upward awkwardly, using the disintegrating corpse like a grotesque staircase. His aching hands gripped the edge of the opening, his muscles screaming in protest.

“I... I'm here!” he gasped, his voice ragged but strong.

Antoinette appeared immediately, her face lit by raw emotion.

Her eyes glistened. Her lips trembled.

She bent down, stretching both arms toward him.

“You have no idea how happy I am to see you!”

Stan tried to protest but his fingers wrapped tightly around hers. In one combined effort, he was hauled out of the pit. He rolled onto the gallery floor, panting, drenched in sweat and dust.

Antoinette didn't wait even a heartbeat. She threw herself at him, hugging him with all her strength.

For an instant, the entire underworld vanished leaving nothing but that fierce, trembling embrace.

Stan, startled, closed his eyes and returned her grip.
But soon he pulled back, slipping again into his role of exasperated older brother.

“You should’ve stayed in the bedroom! You were supposed to listen to me!”

His scolding sounded more worried than angry.

He reached slowly into his shirt like revealing a hidden treasure.
Between his fingers appeared a small, familiar body of fabric: Mr. Sock.

Antoinette’s eyes widened.
Her breath caught.
She took the plush toy with trembling hands, as though reclaiming a lost piece of her soul.

“I thought you were gone...” she whispered, voice breaking. “I missed you so much...”

Stan met her gaze stern but full of unspoken relief.

“I had to fight like crazy down here. With all those bogeymen... those carnivorous plants... those disgusting worms...”

Antoinette lowered her eyes, hugging Mr. Sock to her chest. A faint smile tugged at her lips.

“We’ll talk about it later... if you want. I mean... you really had to fight for it.”

Stan inhaled slowly. His features softened.
A perplexed but sincere smile spread across his face.

He stepped toward her. For the first time in a long while, he no longer looked distant.

His fingers still trembling brushed against her pale cheek.

“Your face... look, you’re hurt.”

His voice had grown gentle without meaning to almost pleading.
But Antoinette stiffened and swiftly pushed his hand away.
Her eyes darkened, and she clutched Mr. Sock so tightly her knuckles turned white.

“It’s nothing!” she snapped, as if that single refusal could erase every sign of vulnerability.

Stan exhaled sharply, raising both hands in surrender.

“There it is... again. Your blasted pride. Always pretending nothing hurts.”

He turned away for a moment, sweeping the tunnel with his flickering flashlight.
The walls oozed with streaks of that viscous, luminous liquid. Shadows danced across the earth like mocking ghosts.

“Listen,” he said with renewed firmness, “we have to find a way out of this crazy world.
Before that... demon... comes back.”

But Antoinette shook her head violently.
Her face tightened, twisting into a stubborn grimace.

“Impossible!”

And then, as suddenly as her fury had risen, her expression changed.
Her eyes grew intense almost feverish.
She lifted Mr. Sock and thrust him in front of Stan like a grotesque yet solemn banner.

“This is insane... Come follow me.”

Stan stood frozen, baffled.
The pink puppet with its big round eyes stared back at him, as though it had gained new authority. His heart sped up; he couldn’t tell anymore if his sister was delirious or if she had discovered something he hadn’t.

“What... what’s going on?” he asked, voice tight.

Without giving him time to resist, Antoinette grabbed his hand.
Her grip was firm, urgent burning with determination.
She yanked him forward as if tearing him away from every doubt.

“Please, Stan trust me!”

Her eyes shone with a mixture of fear and certainty.
The moment felt solemn like the dark world around them demanded their full alliance at last.

Stan swallowed hard.
His instincts screamed caution, but her urgency and her fragility cracked his resistance.
He nodded weakly.

Behind them, far away, a low moan drifted through the tunnels.
A scraping, relentless resonance that vibrated in the very walls.

Grigne-Dints.

The creature hunched in the shadows of the main tunnel, coiled tightly on itself. Its masked face bowed toward the ground, its tentacles curled inward in an almost fetal posture.
Yet from its throat seeped a continuous, grinding rasp the sound of teeth endlessly scraping one another.

A muted threat, ready to explode again.

CHAPTER 23 – The Encounter with Nicola

Stan and Antoinette moved forward through the narrow gallery, their footsteps echoing on the damp ground. The air grew thicker, heavy with an almost suffocating smell.

Suddenly, Stan yanked his sister sharply backward. The beam of his flashlight wavered, lighting up his tense face.

“Wait!” he blurted out, his voice rushed.

He forced her to face him, his ragged breathing brushing against her cheeks. Fear, worry, and anger all mingled in his clear eyes.

“How did you get here?” he asked, his voice shaking with desperation. “And... and where is that monster?”

The silence of the gallery seemed to close in around them. Drops of glowing liquid kept falling in a steady rhythm, like a cruel hourglass ticking away.

Antoinette lowered her eyes for a moment, torn between confession and silence. But behind her, the low grinding of Grigne-Dints drew nearer.

Antoinette suddenly lifted her hand, blocking the beam of the flashlight with a sharp gesture. Her gaze, calm yet filled with a strange intensity, locked onto Stan. She gently took the torch from his clenched fingers, as though that simple object carried the weight of their lives. Then, without a word, she pulled him forward. Together, they left the narrow gallery and stepped back into the suffocating stillness of the main tunnel.

With a deliberate movement, Antoinette switched off the flashlight.

Darkness wrapped around them at once, broken only by the pale reflections of the luminous liquid running along the floor. She stood still a moment, staring down the tunnel’s slope with a serenity that sent a chill through Stan.

“He won’t hurt us,” she said in a steady voice. “Actually, he’s the one who destroyed the bogeyman you’re so afraid of.”

Stan spun toward her, incredulous. His face tensed in the shifting half-light.

“What are you talking about?”

Instead of answering, Antoinette raised her arm the one still wearing Mr. Sock. She turned the grotesque puppet toward Stan as if it had something crucial to say. Her voice grew deeper, vibrating with a new conviction.

“Like... he needs us.”

Stan's breath caught in his throat. His gaze locked, almost hypnotized, on the two white stitched eyes of the sock.

"But... he's evil, Antoinette! He kidnapped you! He wanted to bury you in his darkness!"

His sister pivoted sharply, her eyes widened by the ghostly glow of the phosphorescent liquid. She flicked the flashlight back on and lifted it under her own chin. Her face twisted into a disturbing mask half child, half ghost.

"We have to help him!"

The harsh beam deepened every line of her features, hollowed her cheeks, and made her pupils glitter. Caught off guard, Stan hesitated. He snatched the flashlight almost violently from her hands, held it under his chin, and gave himself in turn the look of an angry specter.

"Help him?" he repeated, his voice cracking under the strain of fear and incomprehension.

Unfazed, Antoinette took the torch back and repeated the gesture. The pale halo carved strange shadows across her face.

"He is, without even knowing it... and in the eyes of the people of this country... a terrifying legend, condemned to wander through time."

Stan shook his head, rattled by the weight of those words. With a nervous movement, he grabbed the flashlight again, pointed it at his own face, and let his voice explode.

"WHAT?"

His shout echoed through the gallery, amplified by the underground acoustics, as if hundreds of voices laughed at him from the darkness.

Antoinette didn't flinch. She took the flashlight one last time, angled the beam beneath her chin. Her voice trembled not from fear, but from the weight of what she was finally admitting.

"Totally," she repeated. "I tried to run away again and again. But his terrifying double... his forbidden self... every time, he caught me. Every time, he threw me back at his feet."

Stan's heart hammered. He moved to yank the flashlight out of her hands but his gesture hung in midair, as if something held him back.

His eyes rested on his sister's cheek. In the dim light, he could make out the scratches, the marks left by the creature. His throat tightened.

"Now I get it..." he murmured, shattered. "Those marks... on your face."

A heavy silence fell.

The tunnel itself seemed to listen, breathing with them.

And somewhere behind them, very far away, a faint grinding shuddered through the earth, a reminder that Grigne-Dints was never truly gone.

Stan suddenly grabbed the flashlight again, held it under his chin, and, his face lit from below, stared intensely at his sister.

“You said... HIS DOUBLE!”

The beam accentuated his dark circles and carved hollow shadows along his cheeks, giving him the look of a terrified specter.

Antoinette, still composed, took the torch once more and mimicked the same pose. The light drew theatrical shadows over her features. Her tone remained calm, but every word carried a new, heavy gravity.

“Follow me. I’ll explain everything.”

Stan exhaled loudly, as though the weight of the truth were already settling on his shoulders. He nodded, resigned, and clenched his fist around Mr. Sock, which his sister had practically forced him to hold. Then, together, they set off again through the tunnel, their steps paced by the luminous trickle flowing along the floor.

“It’s crazy...” Antoinette began, her voice burdened. “His story started on August 24, 1572.”

She continued in a measured rhythm, as if reciting a litany learned in the dark.

A bit further on, the glowing channel lit their faces more clearly, underlining each expression.

“Yes. Henri, his father, wasn’t just a physician... He also practiced sorcery,” she said, stressing the word as if merely pronouncing it burned her lips.

She drew a long breath, her dark eyes fixed on the tunnel’s lower descent.

“And when Angèle, his wife, was betrayed and massacred, Henri couldn’t bear the loss. Mad with love and despair, he took his own life. But not before sealing a curse, through a black ring, into the flesh of his own son.”

Stan stopped dead. His wide eyes trembled in the shifting light.

“So... Nicola... he was an only child. And after his parents’ death... he became a prisoner of that monster?”

Antoinette looked straight at him, brows furrowed, her voice slightly hoarse.

“Yes. Grigne-Dints was born from that cursed ring. It fed on Henri’s grudges on all his darkness and Nicola... he ended up trapped, crushed by his own father’s thirst for revenge.”

She fell silent, her breath a little shorter. Then, stepping forward, she placed a hand on Stan’s shoulder, forcing him to look straight ahead. Her voice suddenly shifted strangely.

“And you see... that’s not normal. Not normal at all.”

Stan shivered at the coldness in her words. Antoinette stopped abruptly and, with a firm hand, blocked him from taking another step.

“What is it?” he asked, uneasy.

Antoinette raised Mr. Sock, as if the puppet suddenly held authority over them both, and pointed his stitched face toward the lower end of the tunnel. Her gaze hardened.

“Like... we’re gonna have to run. Really fast.”

Stan’s breath caught in his throat.

At the far end of the tunnel, a massive shape appeared—dark and titanic. Grigne-Dints.

From the back, his twisted body already filled the entire passage. His tentacles, first lashing the air like whips, suddenly shot outward with brutal violence.

With a sinister crack, they drove into the walls, embedding themselves on either side like monstrous stakes. The earth shook; dust rained down in a fine veil. The passage was now blocked—sealed off by his own power.

Then, slowly, Grigne-Dints turned his masked head.

The red glow of his gaze flared in the gloom like twin infernal flames. In an impossible motion, his skull twisted a full one hundred eighty degrees, almost dislocating, until his burning eyes met the petrified stares of the two adolescents.

His voice both cavernous and shrill rang through the tunnel like a death knell:

“You unsettle me... to my very core.”

The silence that followed carried a threat more chilling than his words.

Stan and Antoinette stood frozen, unable to move forward or backward. Their eyes darted left and right, frantically searching for an escape that didn’t exist. The air in the tunnel felt thicker heavy with the acrid scent of scorched earth.

“This is bad...” Antoinette whispered, her trembling voice echoing through the underground void. “No escape in sight...”

Stan swallowed hard, his forehead slick with cold sweat. His gaze locked onto his sister’s, his jaw quivering.

“You promised... he was harmless!”

A tremor shook the ground.

Grigne-Dints, gigantic and relentless, advanced toward them. With each step, his tentacles buried themselves into the walls with a dry crack, tearing out chunks of earth and sending

clouds of dust raining down. The red blaze of his mask lit the surrounding stone like a walking furnace.

“I shall exterminate you... once and for all, vermin!” he roared, his voice booming down the tunnel.

Antoinette instinctively staggered backward, nearly falling. Her lips trembled.

“He’s freaking out...” she muttered in a desperate tone.

Stan, mouth half open, struggled to form words, his breathing short and sharp.

“There... there’s always a way out,” he finally said, more to convince himself than to reassure his sister. “At least... I hope so.”

As if their doubt summoned fresh horrors, the ground shook again.

Before them, at the upper end of the tunnel, two silhouettes rose out of the black earth.

The scarecrows.

Their enormous bodies straightened with a sinister crack, their arms swinging like cursed branches. With a guttural roar, they lurched forward, their towering limbs reaching toward the two children.

“THERE’S TWO OF THEM NOW!” Stan cried, his voice breaking under the weight of fear.

Their escape ended abruptly.

Tentacles shot out behind them, coiling around their ankles like iron serpents. In an instant, Stan and Antoinette were violently dragged backward, their fingernails clawing helplessly at the floor. Their screams mingled in the dusty air.

“Your wretched fate is upon you!” roared Grigne-Dints, the blazing light of his mask washing the walls in a hellish glow.

The frail bodies of the adolescents were hurled with brutal force against the compacted earth. The wall shuddered, knocking a groan out of them both. Antoinette, winded, crashed face-first into the ground. Her cheek scraped against the rough soil, leaving a streak of dirt on her skin. In a superhuman effort, she pushed herself up onto her knees, her eyes burning with tears.

“NICOLA!” she screamed in a sob of rage, her hands clawed into the damp earth.

*

Higher up, in the depths of the crypt of the Well of Malevolent Torments, a new glow was awakening.

The immense well, encircled by channels that all flowed into it, was almost filled to the brim with a thick, luminous essence. Its surface usually still as a cursed mirror suddenly shivered. Concentric waves formed, casting a bright, almost holy light across the walls.

The channels feeding the excavation began to throb in turn, as if a heart were beating through the entire earth.

The essence vibrated ready to answer an invisible call.

CHAPTER 24 – The Sacred Union

In the tunnel, Stan and Antoinette, bruised and battered, struggled shakily back to their feet. Their limbs trembled, their faces bore the marks of the encounter, but they moved closer to one another, staggering, supporting each other.

They managed only a few steps toward the upper end of the tunnel. There, the two scarecrows loomed grotesque silhouettes of flesh and wood, living barricades swinging their endless arms in a monstrous din. Their guttural howls filled the gallery like a storm.

The teenagers stopped, breathless, and exchanged a look heavy with despair.

“It’s over...” Stan whispered, his eyes reflecting the red glow burning behind them.

Antoinette, pale-faced, clutched Mr. Sock tightly to her chest.

“We’re doomed...”

Her tone was a lament, yet in her eyes flickered a tiny spark the stubborn glint of a child who, even faced with the inevitable, refused to bow.

Gasping for air, Stan walked backward, dragging Antoinette with him, his hands clamped on her shoulders. Their panicked eyes scanned the tunnel where the earth itself suddenly seemed to breathe. The walls began to vibrate. Countless Devoted Ones burst out of the stone, erupting like wooden serpents. They grew at a furious pace in just a few heartbeats they stretched, swelled, twisting around one another. Hideous faces carved themselves into their surfaces, lined with sharp fangs dripping with black sap.

“I should’ve stayed in bed!” Stan screamed, his strangled voice breaking as his bulging eyes fixed on the horror creeping toward them.

The monstrous vegetal mouths snapped hungrily, lunging forward to bite the air. At the same time, the two scarecrows ahead swung their gigantic arms, ready to crash down on the teenagers like infernal clubs. The entire tunnel shook with their guttural roar.

But the fury shifted sides.

Tentacles burst forth with blinding speed.

Their claws, spread wide and razor-sharp, slashed down upon the bogeymen. With a single, savage swipe, the scarecrows’ heads were torn off in a geyser of sacred earth that splashed across the walls. The monstrous bodies collapsed heavily, their limp trunks scraping the ground in a cavernous crash.

The Devoted Ones were not spared either.

A storm of barbed roots rained down on them, slashing, impaling, tearing their hideous faces to shreds. Thorns exploded in sprays of viscous sap, and the stench of rot mixed with the

swirling dust. The ground was littered with fragments of smoking sacred earth, smoldering like smothered embers.

Amid the chaos, a clear, commanding voice rang out:

“Time is running short! We must reach the crypt!”

Stan and Antoinette, still on their knees, stunned and wide-eyed, turned in unison toward the colossal figure.

“NICOLA!” they cried together.

The fire burning inside the monster was no longer red but an intense white, flickering like an exhausted flame. Grigne-Dints inhabited by Nicola staggered forward, leaning heavily on his tentacles, which sank into the ground to hold him upright.

“He... he is very strong!” Nicola groaned, his voice echoing like something carried from far away. “I don’t know how long... I’ll be able to hold him back...”

The children sprang up to meet him, their steps unsteady but resolute. Instinctively, Antoinette held out her hands, as though she might soothe the creature.

“I’d like to understand!” Stan shouted, his voice torn between fear and demand.

“It’s Nicola!” Antoinette insisted fervently, her eyes shining with desperate conviction. “It really is him!”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly straightened his monstrous frame. His ragged breathing became a painful grinding of teeth. Two of his tentacles, claws retracted, rose and pointed toward the lower end of the tunnel, as if to show the way.

He turned his pale, glowing face toward Stan.

“I am pleased... to finally meet you, dear Stan,” Nicola said, his tone unsteady but warm. “Your sister has spoken highly of you... and of your courage.”

Stan frowned, taken aback, and shot a dubious look at Antoinette.

“Really?!”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola swayed, his massive body bending under an invisible weight. His tentacles scraped against the walls. Then he went on, his voice rumbling with urgency:

“Time is short!”

Stan took a step toward him, his gaze blazing with confusion and defiance.

“Why?!” he cried, his voice echoing down the gallery.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly lowered his tentacles, folding his claws against his own body, and fixed Stan with his burning gaze. His voice thrummed through the tunnel, deep and labored:

“We must reach the crypt at all costs... There lies the Well of Malevolent Torments. If I plunge into its basin, I may finally free myself from this monster... and perhaps reclaim a fragment of my humanity.”

Stan’s brows knitted, his features hardened. He pointed a trembling finger at Nicola, then turned it back toward Antoinette and himself.

“And us? What do we get out of it?”

The creature moved closer, his roots dragging heavily along the floor like chains. His voice softened a little:

“I am in great need of you both. Alone, I cannot do it. I am too weak against my own formidable ego against that other half that devours me from within. But you... you can assist me on the way.”

He took another step, then another, each word seeming to cost him more effort.

“A rising gallery, carved at Grigne-Dints’ command, leads directly out of the crypt. It reaches the surface. You could escape through it... and see the light again. And, in so doing, you would save this country from the curse that has plagued it for centuries.”

Despite the fear gripping his gut, Stan let out a nervous smile. He glanced at Antoinette, who watched him intently, then turned his attention back to the monstrous colossus.

“What... what proof do we have that you’re telling the truth? What guarantee do we have that you won’t betray us?”

Antoinette, exaspérée, jabbed him sharply in the ribs with her elbow.

“Oh, just shut up, Stan! Don’t you get it? This might be our only chance! We have to trust him—otherwise we’ll never get home.”

Stan doubled over in pain, his lips twisting into a grimace. He shot his sister a dark look, but didn’t argue.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly inclined his head toward them. His tentacles trembled faintly, as if wracked by a dull, constant ache.

“If you wish to free yourselves from this cursed realm, then we must join forces. The danger is not fading. Every step we take awakens these bewitched places.”

The trio started walking again. The monster advanced with difficulty, his roots dragging behind him with a wet, dragging sound. The teenagers quickened their pace to stay beside him, breathing hard.

Stan, brows furrowed, edged closer to the colossus and called to him, his voice tinged with both curiosity and dread:

“So... can you explain to me? Those things we saw... those huge oily worms, hideous, with hooks. Those carnivorous plants that kept hunting us. And especially... those bogeymen with gigantic arms. What were they?”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola kept moving, but slowly turned his pale, glowing face toward the boy.

“The worms you saw are the Loyaux my oldest creatures. As for the plants, they are the Devoted Ones. They are the very essence of Grigne-Dints... his guardians, his sentinels. They watch over this realm and protect its power.”

He exhaled loudly, his inner fire flickering. “Fortunately for us, I still manage barely to restrain the monster. Otherwise, they would have torn you to pieces already, without mercy.”

Stan swallowed with difficulty, his throat tight. His lips trembled as he whispered:

“So I was... very, very close to being done for...”

He clenched his fists and briefly lifted his eyes to the dark vault above them, as though silently thanking some unseen force for sparing him.

Antoinette, her gaze fixed on Mr. Sock, saw the sock twitch nervously, as if shaken by a sudden urgency. Its stitched mouth twisted into a grotesque expression as she gave it a sharp, high, insistent voice:

“I’ve got it now! As long as Nicola stays in control, none of Grigne-Dints’ minions can get near us!”

At those words, Grigne-Dints/Nicola abruptly straightened his colossal form and quickened his pace. His tentacles slapped the ground, carving furrows into the soft earth. The teenagers, caught off guard, hurried to keep up with him, panting, their hearts pounding. The monster turned his pale mask toward Stan, and his voice rang out, deep and solemn:

“The bogeymen... or rather the Scarecrows, as they call themselves, are not mere creatures. They are hunters of forbiddens hunters of interdits. They were shaped from the sacred earth that covered my body when I was first born into this realm. Their existence is tied to my own damnation.”

He then turned toward Antoinette, his bleached eyes shimmering with an intensity that was almost human:

“And those oily, hideous worms... they are the Loyaux. Grigne-Dints’ most fervent, most ruthless servants. Their loyalty never wavers.”

He slowly extended one of his tentacles. Its tip rested near a narrow channel carved into the ground. The luminous liquid flowing there shimmered with an unhealthy, almost hypnotic glow. His voice grew heavier, laden with pain:

“The Loyaux are charged with maintaining this infernal realm. They build without cease, extend the galleries, and above all... they extract the very essence of its power.”

Stan and Antoinette stared, mouths open, before shouting in unison:

“WHAT!?”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola suddenly stopped. His inner fire flickered for a moment. Then, with terrifying speed, he unfurled two tentacles and slapped them firmly against the children’s foreheads.

They froze in place, eyes wide, unable to move.

A searing heat flooded their skulls, while Nicola’s voice echoed directly inside their minds:

“See... See how the monster arranges his misdeeds, aided by his minions. You must understand what I have been fighting... for centuries.”

CHAPTER 25 – The Screeches of the Past

Flashback

A battlefield, gutted by shells, screaming under flames.

The First World War.

Mud clung to boots, the sky choked by smoke. Six Prussian soldiers advanced with brutal steps, their faces twisted by hatred. Their rifles rattled, mowing down civilians who tried to flee, screaming. Mothers clutched their children to their chests, old men stumbled in earth soaked with blood.

Suddenly, the ground trembled.

A gaping fissure opened, spitting dust and stones.

With a deafening rumble, Grigne-Dints burst from the bowels of the earth monstrous, immense, incandescent. The soldiers, stunned for a heartbeat, recovered and opened fire. Bullets ricocheted off his vegetal armor, useless.

Grigne-Dints, implacable, unfurled his tentacles.

In a flash, the claws came down. Weapons were torn from hands, bodies thrown to the ground like simple rag dolls. The soldiers screamed, struggled, but were quickly subdued, bound, paralyzed. Terror flooded their eyes.

Then, the true horror began.

The earth gave way beneath them.

Slowly, inexorably, their bodies were sucked into the depths. Their cries faded as they disappeared.

In the entrails of the subterranean world, the Loyaux writhed in fevered agitation.

They seized the condemned and spun thick, fibrous cocoons around them, their bodies imprisoned in a living shell. These cocoons were fixed like stalactites inside dark appendices, lined up in sinister rows.

Then the worms shiny, oily, armed with hooks went to work. One after another, they pierced the prisoners' flesh through the translucent membrane. The soldiers convulsed, their bodies wracked with spasms, but they could not scream.

The viscous, luminous liquid began to seep, drop by drop, from the tip of each cocoon. It trickled in a thin stream into a narrow channel, joined other trickles, and fed the underground river.

The essence of life ripped away, transformed, stolen.

End of flashback

Stan and Antoinette gasped, frozen in place, eyes wide. Their faces were bathed in sweat. The tentacles slowly withdrew from their foreheads. A heavy, oppressive silence fell around them.

The tentacles stuck to the teenagers' foreheads peeled away with a wet sound, like suction cups being torn from flesh. They snapped back in a sharp movement, returning to the monster's body. Stan and Antoinette blinked, still trembling, their faces slick with cold sweat.

Antoinette, arms raised, hands open in a gesture of refusal, shook her head violently.

"Like!... Just like the three poachers," she murmured, her voice tight.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola nodded slowly, his mask turning toward her.

"Yes," he said in a resonant voice. "Like them. Their souls, corrupted and stained by evil, will be transformed... reduced into that cursed, luminous liquid."

He turned his pale mask toward the little channel snaking at their feet. The gleaming fluid ran along, hypnotic, like a river of stolen light.

"That essence then flows into the Well of Malevolent Torments," he added, his voice rumbling with painful echo.

Stan blanched. His lips quivered. He bit nervously at his lower lip, then breathed, almost in a whisper:

"So... they're still... alive?"

The monster pivoted toward him, his tentacles twitching as if irritated.

"Grigne-Dints requires living subjects," he replied curtly. "Living, so he can better feed on their essence and enslave their souls."

Antoinette stepped forward, clutching Mr. Sock to her like a pitiful talisman. She lifted her arm and brandished the sock toward the colossus.

"What a grim fate!" she cried, her throat tight.

Stan, jaw slack, suddenly raised his head. His eyes shone with desperate incomprehension.

"And time... will erase their remains, won't it? There'll be nothing left of them!"

He turned to his sister, his features marked by crushing disbelief.

"A sad end indeed..." he breathed.

Antoinette slowly lowered her arms, her fingers trembling along her sides. She took a deep breath, as if to clear the horror from her lungs, but her voice still shook:

"But... what's the point of all that luminous liquid?"

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, silent for a moment, began to turn away. His roots scraped against the wall with a grinding sound, then he pivoted back, his mask fixed on the girl. His blazing eyes locked into hers.

“To raise his army of the damned.”

Stan took a step back, his hands clenched. His breath caught in his chest.

“An... an army of the damned?!” he cried, his voice jumping an octave. “But... but what for?!”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly straightened his immense mass, his vibrating voice filling the tunnel.

“To destroy this country... to wipe away every trace of corrupted humanity, every soul infested by depravity and the evil one.”

Silence fell again heavy, broken only by the sinister trickling of the luminous liquid.

Antoinette frowned, her features hardening. Then, with a near-theatrical gesture, she lifted her head proudly. Her dark eyes gleamed with defiance.

Her breath ragged, she stopped dead in the middle of the tunnel. She raised Mr. Sock sharply, shaking him like a flimsy barricade. Grigne-Dints/Nicola, surprised by the gesture, froze. Stan also stopped short, staring at his little sister in disbelief.

“Wh—what is it now?” he asked, his voice strangled.

Antoinette locked her dark gaze into the pale glow of the colossus’ eyes. She stepped forward, chin high, brandishing the pink puppet like a symbolic weapon.

“I would like to know,” she said, her voice firm, almost solemn. “Angèle your mother... did she know what awaited her on that cursed day, August 24, 1572?”

The silence thickened in the tunnel. The earth-packed walls oozed, the viscous liquid kept flowing, yet everything seemed suspended on that question.

Antoinette suddenly let Mr. Sock fall. The puppet hit the ground with a soft thud, its button eyes turned toward the vault above. Her fists clenched.

“Mom and Dad... they didn’t know either,” she went on, her trembling voice rising higher and higher. “They had no idea death was waiting for them that day, when they were just out shopping like everyone else! When those thieves lost control and started firing... everywhere... without even looking!”

Her voice broke. Tears filled her eyes, but she clenched her jaw, refusing to collapse completely.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola stepped forward, his heavy tread echoing like a tolling bell. Slowly, with an almost infinite delicacy, he extended one tentacle. It came to rest on the girl’s left shoulder in a touch surprisingly gentle. Then a second root brushed her other shoulder.

“Mercy...” he breathed. “Nothing and no one could have warned Angèle of her tragic end. She was betrayed victim of a vile act defenseless. Just like your parents, torn from life by blind violence.”

The pale fire in his mask softened, pulsing like a fragile flame.

“I am deeply moved, believe me. Your pain is mine. Be assured of my most charitable sympathy.”

He inclined his head slightly, as though in a gesture of respect or mourning.

Antoinette stared at him for a long moment, her fists still clenched, her shoulders trembling. She drew a deep breath and, for the first time, her face no longer reflected pure defiance. Behind the creature, she could finally glimpse the soul of a son, wounded as deeply as she was by the loss of a mother.

Stan, his face shadowed with grief, moved gently closer to his sister. His light eyes glimmered in the faint glow of the liquid running along the tunnel floor.

“We miss them so much...” he whispered, almost under his breath.

Antoinette straightened abruptly, as if driven by a new resolve. Her dark gaze fixed on the monster.

“Then tell me!” she said, her voice trembling with intensity.

With a firm motion, she grabbed the two nearest tentacles and gripped them in her slender but stubborn hands. Her hold was meant to be firm, as if she could wrench the truth out of him.

“I need to know. Not tomorrow. Not later. Now!”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly lowered his head. His monstrous shoulders sagged, his roots shivered, and he crouched down, folding in on himself as if crushed beneath the weight of memory. The blaze in his eyes dimmed, turning again into that pale, whitish light fragile as recollection.

He lifted his mask toward them, and his voice deep, but heavy with pain resounded through the tunnel.

“And so... at the dawn of that cursed day, I, Nicola Berteaux, barely seven years old, was torn from innocence.”

Antoinette’s breath hitched. Stan furrowed his brow, caught between fear and fascination.

“My father, Henri Berteaux, a respected physician in Tournai, was summoned in great haste,” Nicola went on. “A young midwife had begged him to come. A woman in her village writhed in agony, about to bring forth a child.”

His voice cracked for just a second.

“I can still see him... my father, hurrying out at dawn, his satchel full of ointments, herbs, and vials. My mother Angèle hugged me tightly, worried, though she hid her fear. She knew... oh yes, she knew those days were riddled with traps. Neighbors spoke in hushed tones, and the smell of hatred and jealousy hung in the air.”

He closed his eyes briefly.

“Yet he went. Because it was his duty. Because he believed that healing meant defying death itself.”

The silence grew heavier still. The sound of luminous drops running down the walls became the only music.

Antoinette, shaken, tightened her grip around the monster’s tentacles. Her eyes shone, no longer with rebellion, but with a strange compassion.

“Your father...” she murmured. “He was like Dad. Always ready to help, even when it wasn’t convenient.”

Stan nodded quietly, his heart pounding.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola remained motionless for a moment, as if frozen in pain, before resuming his tale.

Chapter 26: Secrets Revealed

Flashback

The Year of Our Lord 1572.

In Henri Berteaux's ground-floor apartment, everything seemed frozen in a muted unease. Henri, in his thirties, a robust, well-built man, stood before the heavy wooden door. His face, marked by long nights and medical emergencies, bore that evening an expression of alarm.

He set his tricorne hat on his head with a sharp gesture. His calloused left hand came down on the latch, revealing in the trembling candlelight a massive ring: a gold setting holding a large black stone, raw and mysteriously carved. The stone seemed to swallow the light rather than reflect it.

A rustle of footsteps sounded on the staircase. Nicola appeared, a frail silhouette at the very top. His large, pale eyes shone in the dimness, framed by chestnut curls that fell across his forehead. For all his pallor, the little boy stood proudly, braced against the banister, his gaze fixed on the door.

Henri turned his head and, despite the tension, a bright smile lit up his features.

"I won't be long, dear Nicola. Take good care of your mother in my absence. I shall be back very soon, you may be sure of that."

He didn't give his son time to answer. Already, he opened the door with a sharp movement and disappeared, the heavy panel slamming shut behind him like a warning.

Nicola stayed still for a few seconds, unsettled by the sudden emptiness. Then, slowly, he walked toward the large window. The boy began to whistle, a clumsy tune to give himself courage. Outside, the street teemed with activity: the cries of peddlers, the ceaseless clatter of horses' hooves, the grinding of wagon axles. An almost normal bustle, but too dense, too nervous, as if the entire town were holding its breath.

"Do not be so impatient; your legs might start to tremble," said a gentle voice behind him.

He turned at once.

Angèle, in her twenties, was sitting in a carved chair with a heavy book open in her hands. Her long dress of fine wool followed the delicate lines of her slender figure. Her chestnut hair, soft and curly, fell over her shoulders, lighting up her angelic face a pale face in which there still vibrated a quiet strength.

Nicola hurried to her with a wide smile and slipped into the chair beside hers, nestling against her. His child's eyes sparkled with impatience.

“Would you like me to tell you an enchanting story?” she asked, lifting her eyes from the book.

He nodded eagerly.

Angèle slowly turned the first page, her fingertips gliding over the parchment as if it were a treasure.

“Once upon a time,” she began in a singsong voice, “in the wicked entrails of the deep cellars of a very old castle...”

The tale filled the room with warmth. For a time, Nicola forgot the heaviness of the air outside.

As the day waned, the dining room was bathed in the wavering light of a majestic candelabrum. The meal, simple but generous, had satisfied the child. Nicola carefully set down his cutlery, then dabbed his lips with a seriousness that amused his mother. They shared a tender, light smile of complicity.

Suddenly, an uproar rose from the street. Shouts. Screams. Angèle and Nicola sprang to their feet, worry twisting their features. Together, they stepped up to the large window.

Below, the street was no longer the same. Among the scattered crowd appeared men in arms. The sharp metallic sound of cuirasses, heavy footsteps on the cobblestones, torches flaring like tongues of anger. Soldiers everywhere.

Angèle’s gaze hardened. She laid a protective hand on her son’s shoulder.

“My God...” she whispered.

Startled, she parted her lips slightly and dared one last look outside. Her heart turned to ice. The street had become a whirlwind of flames and iron. Soldiers were barking orders, neighbors were being dragged forcibly from their homes. Slowly, in a gesture bordering on despair, she pulled Nicola back against her, holding him with a fiercely protective grip, as if she could hide him from the world. The child, white as a sheet, buried his face in his mother’s bodice, breathing in her reassuring scent despite the chaos rising from the street.

Outside, in front of Henri’s building, an officer appeared. Short of stature yet broad-shouldered, his stubbled, weathered face radiated harshness. In his hands he held a long list, which he slowly unrolled. His steel-grey eyes scanned the names one by one before he lifted his head and gave a curt order:

“Inside! Search everything! Not a rat is to escape.”

His voice cracked through the air like a whip. Immediately, soldiers armed with pikes and torches stormed into the houses. Others hastily piled up wood to build pyres that were already crackling to life. The acrid smell of resin and tar filled every breath, mingled with the darker stench of human fear.

The officer, like a carrion bird, advanced slowly down the middle of the street, his boots striking the blood-spattered cobblestones. All at once, his gaze froze. His sly eyes fixed on Henri's building. A wicked, almost ravenous smile stretched across his lips.

In the dining room, Angèle and Nicola recoiled from the window as if the intensity of that gaze had pierced the walls. Nicola, his voice trembling, lifted his eyes to his mother.

“Wh-what is happening, Mother?”

Angèle tightened her grip on her son. Her face, grown even paler with dread, turned toward the vestibule, as if she were already expecting the worst.

The front door suddenly exploded inward. The officer appeared in the doorway, a black silhouette haloed by the reddish light of the fires outside. Standing there, fists planted on his hips, he exuded a chilling presence. A hellish racket of screams, boots and clashing steel poured into the apartment, shattering forever the peace of that home.

The officer stepped forward, his heavy tread echoing on the flagstones. The point of his sword dragged along the floor, scraping with a grating shriek that pierced the skin. Each step was a threat.

He stopped at last beside the great candelabrum whose trembling flames lit the room. His eyes gleamed with a sickly light. A dry, cruel chuckle escaped his throat, punctuated by a mocking nod.

His face, now fully illuminated, revealed a gaze haunted by a strange terror but a terror turned outward, that of a man who found in hatred his only reason to act.

Four soldiers appeared behind him, armed with spears and halberds. They took their places in silence at his back, like war dogs waiting for the order to bite.

The officer raised his hand in a cold, dismissive gesture. His fingers pointed at Angèle and Nicola, huddled together in the middle of the room.

“Seize them.”

Outside, the street shook with apocalyptic turmoil. Women screamed, men were beaten with rifle butts, children were dragged by their hair. In that monstrous confusion, four soldiers surrounded Angèle and Nicola. They hauled them toward the door, knocking everything out of their way, shoving the poor townsfolk who ran and cried under the blaze of the torches.

The soldiers drove their prisoners through the raging street. Everywhere, fire devoured the stacked faggots; the flames climbed high, blackening façades, casting twisted shadows across the stone. The screams of the tortured mingled with whispered prayers and the cries of children torn from their mothers. The air reeked of burning timber, sweat, and blood.

Facing the pyres already raised, Angèle hugged Nicola even tighter, her trembling arms wrapped around him like a last, desperate shield. Her face, bathed in tears, softened. She leaned toward him, her lips close to his ear.

“Do not be afraid,” she murmured in a frail but steady voice. “Henri, your father, will be here any moment now...”

Nicola, eyes wet and widened by fear, looked up at her.

“But... where are we going, Mother?”

Angèle did not answer. She simply held him closer, crushed by despair. In a protective gesture, she placed her hand on his head and covered his eyes with her palm. The boy felt the warmth of her hand and clung to it, his little heart pounding fit to burst.

But the embrace was brutally torn apart. Two soldiers, without the slightest regard, wrenched them away from each other with a sharp jerk. Nicola screamed, reaching out to his mother, but already two other men had seized him firmly, dragging him back.

“What... what are you doing?!” Angèle cried, her voice breaking.

Her protest was smothered by a gag they clamped over her mouth with brutal force. Her eyes, wide with horror, never stopped searching for Nicola, who was struggling a few steps away.

Angèle, screaming behind her gag, was dragged to a blazing pyre. Her hands were tied behind her back with rough rope that bit into her skin. The fire was already crackling at her feet, its suffocating heat burning her face. Her frantic gaze combed the crowd, desperate for a miracle, a familiar figure, some possible escape.

Meanwhile, Nicola was led aside. Two soldiers brought him to a soldier of imposing build, his face hidden in the shadow of a broad helmet. The man showed neither anger nor pity only the impassive coldness of an executioner obeying orders.

“MOTHER!” Nicola screamed with all his might.

His cry was swallowed by the chaos. The officer, without a word, seized the child by the shoulders. He clamped a gag over his mouth, then yanked a coarse hood down over his head. Nicola, smothered by the rough cloth, felt his arms pulled behind him and bound tight. His resistance crumbled; his body went limp, broken by brutality and terror.

With a sharp motion, the man hoisted him up and tossed him into the back of a cart. Nicola rolled across the hard planks, his hands tied, unable to stand.

The soldier climbed to the front, took up the reins, and with a violent snap sent the cart forward. The horse neighed and lunged. Wooden wheels screeched over cobblestones, then over packed earth, carrying the cart out of the city.

Through the cloth of the hood, Nicola could still make out muffled cries, the roar of flames, and somewhere, his mother’s torn voice calling him despite the gag.

His last memory of that cursed night was the endless jolting of the cart that carried him away from everything he had ever loved.

End of flashback

Downstream in the tunnel, Antoinette, mouth half-open, staggered two steps before stopping, her gaze fixed on Grigne-Dints/Nicola.

“It’s... horrible,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

Stan, overwhelmed, slowly bent his knees. He sank heavily onto the cold ground, his shoulders sagging.

“It’s... it’s cruel,” he stammered, his eyes clouded with tears.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola straightened his towering, tentacled silhouette, making the air vibrate with his authority.

“Time is short! We must reach the well at once.”

But Stan, frowning, lifted his face toward the creature.

“Berteaux...” he murmured. “That means that...”

The monster stopped dead. His tentacles smacked against the wall, raising a sinister echo. With a sharp movement, he pivoted toward the boy.

“Indeed! We are undeniably of the same bloodline,” he thundered. “The monster tasted it in Antoinette’s blood. You understand now why he is determined to see you both dead.”

He exhaled heavily, a hoarse groan echoing through the tunnel.

“And it was only made possible because of my father Henri’s brother... The one who, coward or visionary, turned his back on the insurrection and fled to the New World.”

A heavy silence fell, broken only by the soft, sinister gliding of the luminous liquid along the channel.

Chapter 27 – The Birth of the Myth

Later, as they advanced at a slower pace through the tunnel, Antoinette unable to restrain her temperament wrinkled her nose and frowned.

“Like... I was wondering: that weird name, ‘Grigne-Dints,’ where does it come from?”

The monster slowed. His many tentacles stirred gently in the air, like snakes hesitating before a strike.

“My dear young lady,” he replied, “you are decidedly as talkative as ever.”

Mister Sock, perched in Antoinette’s hand, opened his stitched mouth into a grotesque grin, squirming nervously.

“And honestly,” added the sock in a nasal voice, “your name... is ridiculous.”

Time itself seemed to freeze.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola halted abruptly. His inner fire flared violently. Then, in a lightning-fast motion, he hurled a tentacle around Mister Sock. The toy was lifted, strangled, shaken in the air like a pathetic prey.

“No!” Antoinette screamed, her face collapsing in panic.

She reached out, but another root cracked in front of her, blocking her path.

Stan, breathless, sprang to his feet.

“Stop! He’s just a toy you don’t understand!”

But Grigne-Dints tightened his grip, the sock twisting grotesquely, its fabric creaking under the pressure.

The monster’s blazing mask lowered toward Antoinette.

“This toy... or perhaps this talisman, is nothing but a hindrance to your courage, Antoinette,” he growled. “And I, Grigne-Dints, destroy weaknesses.”

Antoinette, fury burning in her eyes, stepped forward despite the threatening root.

“If you destroy Mister Sock, then you destroy me!” she screamed, her voice raw.

A heavy silence fell, suspended in midair. The creature stared at the girl with his blazing fire, probing the very depths of her soul.

“RIDICULOUS!” the monster roared, flames surging through his mask.

Then his voice cracked softened, almost plaintive:

“Know... that certain mercenaries, speaking the patois of the surrounding regions, once called me that. For in the long agony preceding my death... I ground my teeth.”

Antoinette, stunned, stepped back. Her breath shuddered. Slowly, almost tenderly, the tentacle released Mister Sock, who fell limply into the girl’s hand.

“You’re nuts or something!” she snapped, masking the emotion rising in her throat with sarcasm.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola froze, petrified. His tentacles retracted slowly, as if ashamed.

“They enjoyed it so much...” he murmured. “Or so they said.”

He abruptly turned away from Antoinette, walked a few heavy, solemn steps, then stopped. The flames inside him flickered, as if consumed by a memory too painful.

“I still hear... their spiteful laughter echoing through my insides. They claimed once death had taken me that I was their finest creation.”

His voice deepened, weighed down with a sorrow that seemed to seep into the tunnel itself.

“Edagard, their leader... he snickered wickedly. Said I entered hell... in the grandest manner.”

Antoinette, eyes moist despite herself, pressed Mister Sock against her cheek. Her voice cracked in a whisper:

“I... I’m sorry.”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly turned back. His inner flames paled, becoming briefly white. His warped eyes fixed on the girl.

“Edagard,” he continued, voice trembling, “known as ‘the Bloodied,’ was the most terrible of all. But the effigies... through their deadly dance... they were far more diabolical still.”

The tunnel walls seemed to echo that cursed name. A murmur of footsteps, metal, and invisible drums filled the air as if echoes of the past invaded the present.

The monster lowered his head suddenly, his tentacles sinking heavily to the ground like an unbearable weight.

“I shall tell you what happened next...” he whispered, sepulchral.

Then, raising his blazing mask toward Stan and Antoinette:

“And reveal... how Grigne-Dints was born.”

*

Beginning of the flashback

Year of Our Lord 1572.

Under the heavy, suffocating night in the County of Hainaut, on the Tournai borders of the Spanish Netherlands, a rickety cart jolted along a rough country road. Its wheels groaned, battered by deep ruts, and each violent jolt rattled the air like a death rattle.

Seated casually at the front, a fat, foul-smelling Dutch soldier tugged harshly at the reins. His bloated, sweat-glistening face appeared in flashes under lightning tearing through rainless clouds. Each thunderclap split the valley like an omen of death.

The soldier halted the cart with a metallic crash. Heavy and clumsy, he climbed down, cursing, then stomped to the back. His hands violently dragged a child out of the darkness. With a brutal gesture, he ripped the hood off the boy's head.

A face emerged: that of a seven-year-old boy, Nicola Berteaux. His large clear eyes, wide with growing terror, shone beneath chestnut curls stuck to his temples. Well-dressed, almost noble, he had the complexion of a prisoner round, pale, hollowed by fear. The gag stuffed in his mouth smothered his muffled cries.

The soldier shoved Nicola onto a rotten stump at the forest's edge. Wood-eating insects crawled across the decaying fibers, and the child shivered at their touch. His bound hands pulled painfully behind his back.

Then a silhouette rose in the gloom.

With a confident step, Edagard the Spanish mercenary advanced. His tall, gaunt figure was haloed by the torch in his right hand. His scarred face, framed by filthy long black hair and a thick beard, looked chiseled by cruelty. Wearing an extravagant feathered hat, dark armor, and heavy boots, he radiated a brutal, commanding presence.

He cast a cold glance at the Dutch soldier, who stiffened as if struck by lightning, then backed away toward the cart like a frightened beast.

Edagard sneered, his predatory eyes fixed on Nicola. He turned slightly, contemplating the shadowed walls of Tournai below, as if the city itself were to witness his ritual.

Around him gathered some thirty mercenaries of various origins: pikemen brandishing long shafts, axe-wielders, knife-men, swordsmen, and musketeers. Their faces bore the scars of violence, their coarse laughter poisoning the air.

Nicola swallowed hard, glancing toward them. His small chest heaved convulsively under his gag.

Suddenly, seven mercenaries more frenzied than the others stepped forward. Their eyes glistened with near-ritualistic madness. Forming a circle, they surrounded the child, chanting rough, guttural songs.

Each brandished at the tip of his sword a strange effigy carved from fodder beets. Their sickly yellow flesh, crudely shaped, formed hideous faces with hollow eye sockets and wide gaping mouths. Inside, flames burned fiercely, throwing red and orange glimmers through the carved openings.

The effigies twirled and danced above the boy, spectral and grotesque. Trails of smoke snaked up like damned souls.

Nicola, sweat beading on his forehead, widened his eyes. His jaw clenched uncontrollably. His teeth ground in desperate terror. The fragile sound drowned beneath the mercenaries' cacophony.

The flames cast warped reflections across their distorted faces, turning the scene into a macabre dance. Around the child, the infernal round swirled faster a liturgy of evil, a fiery farandole of death.

Edagard, in whose eyes terror gleamed alongside jubilation, smiled wickedly. Leaning toward Nicola, he watched greedily as the boy's fear intensified. Nicola, despite himself, ground his teeth louder and louder. His innocent face twisted with unbearable dread. He searched the surroundings helplessly, hoping for an escape, a savior, a miracle but the infernal circle closed around him.

His clear eyes filled with tears. His chest rose and fell in savage panic.

Suddenly, his entire body convulsed violently. His small bound arms trembled, his legs stiffened, and his gagged mouth emitted a stifled groan. Nicola writhed, seized by an inner fire devouring him from within. His teeth clattered, grinding so fiercely that a shiver ran through the assembly.

Then, with a sharp jolt, the spasm ceased.

Nicola collapsed, stiff, his wide-open eyes frozen in the terror of his final vision.

A brutal silence weighed over the clearing for one suspended second before a vile laugh sliced it open.

Edagard, startled yet delighted, straightened. With languid fingers, he stroked his beard, savoring the moment like a personal triumph. His brows lowered; his gaze darkened then, with theatrical morbidity, he removed his feathered hat. Bending slightly, he bowed to the child's corpse as though honoring a defeated opponent.

A guttural, sinister chuckle escaped him.

Then he straightened, surveying the area meticulously, as if inscribing this moment into eternity.

His eyes settled on an ancient oak tree, standing proudly amidst the land, its deeply-crevassed bark bearing centuries of suffering and secrets.

*

At the foot of the ancient oak, one of the seven mercenaries an Irishman with a pustule-ridden face and jaundiced eyes stepped forward. With a brutal jerk, he tore the smoldering effigy from his sword. Its carved demonic face, branded with an inverted crucifix, still oozed acrid smoke.

The Irishman sneered, his grotesque smile revealing rotting teeth. Without hesitation, he hurled the effigy to the ground and split it with a swift stroke. A foul stench filled the clearing.

In a frenzy, he seized the half bearing the face. Ignoring the searing heat, he pressed the grotesque mask onto Nicola's innocent features, as though sealing his fate forever.

The contrast between the child's purity and the effigy's monstrosity drew sardonic laughter from the mercenaries.

The six accomplices, holding their own effigies high, exchanged a gleeful glance. Without a word, they grabbed Nicola's body. Carelessly, they tossed him into a shallow pit freshly dug at the oak's foot. Loosely packed soil thudded over him.

Then, as though nothing mattered, the seven mercenaries returned to Edagard and their companions, brandishing their weapons swords, halberds, muskets ready to unleash carnage upon the innocent citizens of Tournai.

*

At dawn the next morning, under a still-grey sky, the land lay scarred. The air hung heavy with thick, black smoke remnants of savage slaughter.

Along a blood-stained rural path walked a man: Henri Berteaux. Broad-shouldered, his face carved by exhaustion and dread, he wore the dark garments of a religious order, his hood drawn over his brow. His boots struck the damp earth rhythmically, his gaze burning with frantic worry.

Henri searched everything the trees, the ground as though sensing catastrophe.

Then he stopped. His eyes froze.

At the foot of the ancient oak.

A dread seized him. He quickened his pace.

And there he saw it.

The small, lifeless body. Carelessly buried. Abandoned.

Henri stumbled.

His breath collapsed inside him.

He dropped to his knees at the edge of the pit. Trembling fingers brushed the horrible effigy still clinging to Nicola's face.

With shaking resolve, Henri lifted it: half a beet, charred, bearing a burnt inverted cross. Its stench ash and death assailed him.

His heart shattered.

A raw, primal scream tore from his chest, echoing over the valley:

“NICO-LAAAAAA!”

His cries pain and rage woven into one devastating lament split the morning air like a curse.

He collapsed forward, arms limp, choking out broken moans and guttural prayers. Tears streamed down beneath his hood.

Then, in a frenzy of despair, Henri raised his head to the sky. His bloodshot eyes transfixed the heavy clouds. Strange words spilled from his trembling lips an ancient, forbidden tongue. His arms jerked into a trembling cross. His left hand lifted slightly, revealing a massive ring gold setting, a large rough black stone carved with ominous patterns.

Suddenly, the ancient oak shuddered.

Though the air was still, its thousands of leaves rustled wildly. They tore free in swarms, wilting before hitting the ground. Guided by an invisible force, they settled on Nicola's body one by one, forming a makeshift shroud.

Henri hunched again, sobbing. His shoulders shook violently. His joined hands pressed so harshly that his nails pierced his skin. Burning tears splashed onto the black stone.

The stone pulsed bright red like a malevolent heart awakening.

A thick, oily liquid seeped from it, sliding along the ring, dropping onto the soil. The earth drank it greedily. Ordinary earthworms convulsed violently. Their slender bodies swelled, lengthened, warped. They grew monstrous twenty-centimetre abominations armed with jagged hooks before burrowing feverishly into the ground.

Henri chanted desperately in the ancient tongue, his words trembling with grief and rage. His shoulders writhed as if possessed.

By sunset, drained, he finally rose. He brushed the dead leaves covering his son his last goodbye. His hands quivered.

Slowly, he stood. He leaned forward, pushed back his hood.

His face emerged: aged, hollow, ravaged.

He turned away, staggering through the fields, leaving behind the body of the child he loved unseen.

Night spread its cloak. Wind rose in violent gusts. The shroud of leaves scattered wildly. Dust swirled.

And then

Nicola's body stirred.

Slowly, inexorably, it sank into the earth pulled by some unseen force. The soil closed over him, swallowing his innocence forever.

The sun's final rays fell upon the now-empty hollow. Heavy air pressed upon the land.

Then from the depths

A root burst forth.

Tentacular.

Enormous.

Covered in countless claws.

It rose from the earth. Then another. Then hundreds writhing with terrifying strength.

In the midst of the chaos, a monstrous mask tore from the darkness. A hideous head emerged, lit from within by a fiery burn. An inverted cross scorched one cheek. The body followed roots and tentacles mimicking the twisted form of a deformed child.

The countryside's silence shattered beneath a low, rumbling growl.

The monster ground its teeth long, shrill, agonizing ripping the air apart.

Then, lifting its infernal head toward the heavens, it screamed a demon's curse:

“GRI-I-I-GNE... DINNNNNTS!”

“I am Grigne-Dints... and from this day forth my vengeance shall never cease!” the creature roared, its guttural voice echoing like an omen of doom.

“The end of mankind's corruption is at hand!”

Its roots thrashed the earth with thunderous force. Every impact shook the ground like an earthquake. Its tentacle-claws unfurled in a metallic shriek. The glowing mask, marked with the inverted cross, radiated an inner fire so fierce it lit the night like a hellish beacon.

The monster growled again, teeth grinding with endless fury. Nearby crows burst into flight, shrieking. Forest creatures fled deep into their burrows. Even the sky seemed to reply splitting with spectral flashes behind the black clouds.

Then, in a brutal, savage motion, the creature plunged its roots into the soft soil. The ground split, swallowing its tentacled body like a hungry maw. With inhuman speed, it burrowed into the depths. The grinding of its teeth faded but lingered in the air like an eternal threat.

The gaping hole sealed shut behind it, leaving only ravaged soil and drifting leaves under an oppressive silence.

The calm that returned was not peace.

It was dread.

For that night, in the Year of Our Lord 1572, a cursed name was born one that would pierce centuries like an open wound:

Grigne-Dints.

And from that moment on, his reign of vengeance began

tireless, irrevocable,

consumed by a hatred burning against corrupted humanity.

Then he vanished... forever.

Chapter 28 – The Return of the Monster

Stan, his face grave and trembling with emotion, cried out in a vibrant voice. He suddenly stepped between Antoinette and the monster.

“Now we keep moving... and no more questions until we reach the well!”

Grigne-Dints, his head lowered toward the ground as though reflecting on this command, straightened slowly. His tentacles scraped heavily against the floor and then, first clumsily, then with more confidence, he began to move toward the lower end of the tunnel. Antoinette and Stan, their faces determined but tense, set off behind him, their eyes fixed on the dragging roots.

The monster’s cavernous voice rose suddenly, chilling the air.

“Fear... takes on many forms, Antoinette.”

Grigne-Dints’ solemn tone echoed through the bowels of the tunnel, his words rolling like muted thunder. Stan, nervous, grimaced and abruptly quickened his pace. He caught up with the monster in a hurried stride, then raised his hand in a forbidding gesture.

“I said: no more questions! Or we’ll never get there.”

Grigne-Dints turned his monstrous head slightly toward him and replied in a firm voice, vibrating like a sentence:

“That was not a question, Stan.”

The words rang like a death knell.

Struck dumb, Stan stopped dead, frozen like a statue. His eyes widened in terror. Grigne-Dints turned fully, slowly, his tentacles cracking heavily against the floor. The reddish glow deep inside his mask intensified, setting his monstrous effigy ablaze like a coal stirred by the wind.

Terrified, Stan suddenly flung his right arm out in front of his sister and shouted in a trembling voice:

“NO!”

Antoinette, halted mid-step, watched as her brother’s arm then dropped suddenly, as if all strength had left him. Stan spun around and, in a panic, broke into a desperate run toward the lower end of the tunnel. His ragged breathing was swallowed by the echo. He veered toward a small side passage and vanished into the gloom.

Antoinette, her face disoriented, chose the opposite way. She darted into an adjacent tunnel, her footsteps slapping nervously against the soft earth. Grigne-Dints, enraged, unfurled a swarm of tentacles. They whipped through the air with sharp cracks, and his voice boomed, reverberating off every wall:

“You will die... slowly, I swear it!”

With a venomous surge, the monster hurled himself forward and swung his entire mass toward Antoinette’s tunnel. The girl, panting, reached the end of the gallery and slammed against the back wall. Short of breath, she kicked frantically at the floor, searching in vain for an exit. Tears brimming in her eyes, she spun around, desperate, toward the entrance.

Her trembling hands held Mister Sock out in front of her like a shield.

“You want a fight? Then you’ll get a fight!” she cried in a broken voice.

Meanwhile, Stan, paralyzed with fear, had wedged himself into a narrow side passage. Curled up, his arms pressed tightly against his body, he gasped for air. His lips trembled as he whispered into the dark:

“Th-this... this can’t be happening... we’ll never make it...”

In the gallery, Antoinette flared her nostrils nervously and, in a reflex, swept her hair back with a sharp flick of her hand. Above her, the ceiling groaned. Tentacled roots burst from the vault—coiling, menacing, ready to swoop down upon her. The girl, suffocating with dread, still kept Mister Sock raised in front of her face like a last line of defense.

“I’m gonna pee my pants!” she blurted in a strangled voice.

Suddenly, a whitish light flickered inside the monster’s mask. Grigne-Dints staggered. Nicola, the captive soul, rose to the surface. The effigy’s red flames faded, replaced by a pure, gentle glow.

The colossal silhouette froze. Antoinette, stunned, let out a long sigh of relief and dropped to her knees, her arms limp. She exhaled deeply, releasing all the terror she’d been holding in. Mister Sock slipped from her grip and flopped heavily to the ground, dangling between her slack fingers.

In front of her, it was no longer the demon standing there... but Nicola, the imprisoned child, fighting to exist through the cursed shell.

“You... you managed to take back control of the monster,” Antoinette breathed, her voice still trembling.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola gave a faint nod. His towering shape swayed, but he moved toward the girl with timid, unsteady steps.

“We must reach your brother Stan as quickly as possible... and reassure him.”

Antoinette, relieved, broke into a radiant smile. She sprang to her feet and, teasing despite the fear still clinging to her, walked toward the monster with a light step.

“Him, reassured? Please! He’s probably better off alone, far away from the two of us.”

*

A short while later, they were walking together again.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola led the way, his tentacles scraping against the tunnel walls in a sinister procession. Stan followed at a distance, his face rigid, still shaken by the terror he had just escaped. Antoinette brought up the rear, exhausted. Her steps dragged. She pouted, sighed loudly, then ran her hand through her hair in an irritated, nervous gesture, sweeping it to one side.

“Like!... is that stupid well still far?”

No answer.

Stan and Grigne-Dints/Nicola kept walking, intent, as if they hadn’t even heard her. Antoinette, offended, picked up her pace and moved closer, trying to get a reaction.

“Nicola! Hey! Can you hear me?”

Silence.

The monster didn’t even turn his head.

So, with an almost childish movement, Antoinette reached out and tried to brush her fingers against his root-covered flank.

But suddenly, a voice resounded... inside her head.

“I heard you, Antoinette.”

The girl stopped dead, petrified. Her eyes grew huge. Her hand remained suspended in midair, motionless, as if paralyzed. Yet she kept walking, slower now, at the monster’s side, her lips parted.

“Grigne-Dints... But... you... you’re talking in my head?”

“I’m going to help you, Antoinette. Together, we will bring justice... upon the murderers. Those who vilely and prematurely tore your mother and father from you.”

The words cracked in her skull like a poisonous promise. Antoinette stood there, speechless. Slowly, her gaze darkened. Her features hardened.

“You... you’re right. They didn’t even hesitate for a second to kill my parents...”

A heavy silence settled.

Then, abruptly, the girl shook her head, as if to chase away a dark thought, and resumed her normal stride.

“Like! But why did you suddenly become so... understanding, huh? And especially... so nice?”

The monster did not answer out loud. His deep voice reverberated again in her mind:

“Join me, Antoinette. Together, we’ll be stronger. And we will make them pay... dearly... all those accursed beings for everything they have done.”

Antoinette, dazed, stared at the glowing mask. Her breath caught.

“You... you want me to take revenge?”

“You have the right... yes, the right! Without restraint, without pity, without remorse... to rise up against this injustice.”

Temptation seeped into her like poison. Her fingers tightened convulsively around Mister Sock, pressed against her chest. Her eyes drifted off for a moment into the void, torn between grief, anger... and the promise of revenge.

Antoinette burst out, conviction ringing in her voice, her eyes shining with a strange light.

“You’re right! After all... you only go after the bad guys... well... almost!”

The monster’s mask dipped slightly. His voice coiled around her thoughts like a sweet, seductive venom:

“Leave the group as soon as you can, Antoinette... come to me. But first, you must strike... strike hard and knock out that coward Nicola so I can free myself from his hold.”

The girl’s drawn features tightened as she froze. Her legs trembled slightly. She remained there, breath short, before finally muttering in a hollow voice:

“But... who am I to deliver justice with my own hands?”

Her trembling fingers clutched Mister Sock against her chest. Then, suddenly, she raised her head and stared intensely at the blazing mask. She nodded firmly.

“I see what you’re trying to do... You really think I’m going to fall into your trap?”

The monster ground his teeth, his red fire flickering like a coal being stoked. His voice turned harsh, scathing:

“I see you too are nothing but a failure. A coward, just like that runt!”

Antoinette, stung to the quick, sprang to her feet.

“No! You’re dead wrong!”

Her eyes flashed with defiance. Grigne-Dints/Nicola suddenly turned his gaze away from her. His whitish fire pulsed, and his massive body drifted slowly away from the girl to move closer to Stan, walking at his right.

The monster adjusted his stride, pressing subtly closer to the boy. His hot, heavy breath mingled with Stan's. At first distracted, the teenager kept his eyes fixed ahead, but tension began to etch itself into his features.

“They don’t understand your pain... But I do.”

Stan flinched, stunned. He whipped his head toward the oppressive silhouette.

“What?”

The voice grew louder in his mind, deep and resonant, as if rising from some bottomless pit.

“I know what it is to be misunderstood... and unjustly abandoned.”

The words struck Stan like a blow to the heart. His steps slowed. His breath turned uneven. He averted his gaze from Antoinette for a moment, pensive, troubled.

“That’s... that’s impossible... You... you’re in my head!”

He jabbed his finger toward the creature, accusatory.

“How... how is that possible?”

The mask turned slowly toward him, its reddish light seeming to feed on the boy’s fear. Gently, almost tenderly, Grigne-Dints/Nicola drew closer. One tentacled root slid away from his massive body, sinuous as a serpent. It glided quietly through the air, then wrapped around Stan’s torso, squeezing at first softly, like a caress.

Stan froze, his heart pounding wildly.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

The root continued to coil, encircling his body in a treacherous embrace. Grigne-Dints/Nicola tightened his grip slowly, his voice rumbling in the boy’s mind:

“You are lost... in the face of your own injustice. But I... I can offer you a way.”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola sent three more winding roots toward the boy’s body, snapping them slyly through the air before looping them around him like living rings.

“You’ve become so silent... so shut away inside yourself.”

His tentacles suddenly tensed, compressing Stan’s chest. The creature’s voice rang in his mind, powerful, hypnotic:

“I am with you, Stan. Together... we can finally make the murderers of your parents pay for their horrific crime.”

At first, Stan kept his eyes fixed ahead, as if hypnotized. Then, suddenly, they widened. His fists clenched with newfound strength. His face lit with a troubled gleam half-hateful, half-awestruck.

“Yes... They all have to pay!”

The tentacles tightened further, deepening the hold, as if sealing a dark pact.

“Join me, Stan. And together, we will wipe out all these impure beings. You’ll be able to rule the world that has despised you so much. But first... you must strike. Strike hard, and silence that weakling Nicola. Let me reclaim full control of my body.”

Stan suddenly raised his eyes, dizzy at the sight of the blazing face looming over him. The whitish fire pulsed, burning at the edge of his mind. His gaze dropped to the roots coiled around him like hungry serpents. Astonishment, anger, and fear clashed within him.

“No! I... I’m not your thing!”

In a desperate effort, he shook his whole body, wrenching himself free of the embrace. The tentacles snapped back against the wall with a violent crack. Stan leapt aside, his features drawn tight, then started walking again, forcing an air of indifference, as if nothing had happened.

The heavy silence was broken only by the sound of their hurried steps.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, Stan, and Antoinette strode on through the tunnel at a brisk pace, the air thick with tension.

Chapter 29 – The Devoted Ones

All at once, the steep walls began to stir as if under the breath of some invisible force. Tiny buds burst out in clusters, swelling, splitting open, until they became Devoted Ones bristling with glittering thorns. By the thousands they bumped into one another, crossing, stretching, and spreading in waves over the entire tunnel wall like a vast living network.

Antoinette, fascinated in spite of herself, froze. She leaned forward, narrowing her eyes to better make out the strange movements of this vegetal army.

“Like! What is even...?”

Stan, alerted at once, jumped and rushed toward her. He grabbed her by the shoulder and yanked her back.

“Be careful! They’re the Devoted Ones... Remember what happened to me in the pit!”

Antoinette, dumbfounded, stared hard at the heaving plants, like wild beasts on the prowl.

“But why are they all rushing off like that, in every direction?”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola stepped forward with a heavy stride, his blazing mask casting sinister reflections over the thorn-covered walls. He watched the coordinated retreat of the Devoted Ones.

“They are announcing our arrival...”

A heavy silence fell. Antoinette grimaced, her brow furrowed with a mix of fear and curiosity. She drew right up to the wall, stretched out her hand, then stopped mid-gesture with a shudder. She stood facing the Devoted Ones, eyes wide, as if daring their frantic motion.

Antoinette’s face twisted, caught somewhere between disgust and curiosity. She moved even closer to the crawling wall, her gaze fixed on the chaotic frenzy of the Devoted Ones. Every motion seemed calculated, almost intelligent, as if they formed a living army. Her breath caught when she dared thrust Mister Sock out in front of her. The worn fabric of her comfort toy trembled in her hand, ridiculous in the face of these vegetal monsters.

With a hesitant move, she gently touched the very tip of one of the plants. The reaction was immediate, brutal: the stalk reared up, snapped sharply through the air, then wrapped itself around the poor toy like a viper.

“You... you’re going to let him go!”

Antoinette’s voice rang through the tunnel, vibrant with panic. She pulled with all her strength, squirmed, shaking Mister Sock frantically as he was swallowed up, smothered in the greenish grip. Her fingers turned white from clutching the fabric so hard. Finally, in a

desperate surge, she tore her treasure from the vegetal claws. The plant, apparently offended, snapped back and vanished into the seething mass.

“Filthy weed!”

Her face flushed red with anger as it hardened. She hugged her comfort toy to her chest, her breathing ragged. Her gaze then drifted toward the lower end of the tunnel, where a strange radiance pulsed in the distance. The light swelled in waves, flooding the gallery with supernatural flashes. Antoinette squinted.

“But... what’s down there?”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, who had been leading the way, stopped short. Slowly, he turned his blazing mask toward the depths of the tunnel. The uncanny whiteness of his inner fire reflected in the growing glow.

“It is the well... the Well of Maleficent Torments.”

Antoinette felt her heart pick up speed. She hurried to join Stan, who was waiting a few steps ahead. He gave her a faint, relieved smile when their eyes met.

“We’ve finally made it!”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, impatient, lashed the air with his tentacles. His entire body quivered, as though the ground itself were calling him. Then, without another word, he started off again, quickening the pace.

“We must hurry... before the Devoted Ones seal the passage for good.”

Behind them, the tunnel was visibly growing darker: the Devoted Ones were writhing more furiously than ever, gradually closing off the space like a chasm of thorns.

Antoinette, looking troubled, suddenly grabbed her brother’s arm to hold him back. Her face went pale as she whispered:

“Tell me, Stan... did you also hear the monster... in your head, earlier?”

Stan froze. His eyes widened, a shiver running down his spine. He nodded slowly, almost ashamed.

“Yes... He tried to recruit me. To win me over... so I’d choose his side.”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, hearing these words, halted on the spot. His tentacles stiffened, suspended in midair. His whitish fire pulsed like a deep breath. Slowly, he turned toward them, his words falling like a sentence:

“I told you. He is still powerful... terribly powerful, despite his isolation.”

The teenagers traded a worried look. Then, almost reluctantly, they started forward again behind him.

At last, they reached the very end of the tunnel. A blinding light poured in, washing over their tense faces. Without a word, Grigne-Dints/Nicola veered off and entered the final gallery. The two children followed him, short of breath, their footsteps echoing along the ground.

Chapter 30 – The Crypt of Maleficent Torments

Before them stretched the crypt: an enormous circular pit carved directly into the rock, opening flush with the ground. The vast, yawning excavation was nearly filled to the brim. A luminous essence churned inside, radiating a blinding, unbearable brilliance. The light danced, vibrated, pulsed like the beating of a monstrous heart. Thick swirls of pale smoke rose in spirals, drifted up to the rocky vault, then fell heavily back down, viscous and clinging, as though the air itself were turning to liquid.

Antoinette, mouth half-open, hugged her stuffed toy against her chest. Stan stepped closer, fascinated and terrified all at once. His voice trembled, though he tried to sound bold:

“Holy... It looks like a gigantic cauldron of molten ectoplasm.”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola observed the well in a long, solemn silence. His tentacles slid across the ground with an ominous rustle, but the pale fire glowing within him reflected a new gravity. Around the pit, several massive trenches converged, each silently pouring its viscous, luminous flow inside. The essence fell in thick cascades, each drop vibrating with a malignant force. The well seethed, on the verge of overflowing.

His voice rumbled, deep and prophetic:

“When this flow reaches its peak, the damned of Hell will arise. They will sweep across the lands of men by the thousands... and no one will withstand them.”

Antoinette, frozen to the bone but trying for a bit of humor, smiled nervously. She pressed Mister Sock to her chest as if for courage.

“Well... good thing that’s not happening tomorrow.”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly turned his mask toward her. The pale fire flared stronger.

“You are mistaken, fair maiden... it is imminent.”

Antoinette’s breath caught. Her smile vanished. Beside her, Stan’s jaw dropped open, words deserting him. Finally, he managed to choke out:

“What? You mean... monsters are going to come out of that?”

The creature snapped his gaze toward him. His tentacles cracked sharply against the rock, as if to emphasize the urgency.

“If you do not wish to see this nightmare reach the surface, then go at once to the crypt of Grigne-Dints. There, you will find the vein... the secret passage that leads directly to the outside world.”

A suffocating silence settled, broken only by the roiling of the well.

Then Antoinette stepped forward, determined. She lifted Mister Sock toward the monster, as though speaking through him:

“And you... you’re going to free yourself, right? Free yourself at last from this cursed fate... and from that infernal entity. You’ll be able to rejoin your family...”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola watched her. His pale fire flickered for a moment, like a beating heart. He stepped closer, imposing, then bent slightly to face the young girl.

“Like me, you must grieve. And once you reach the surface, remain united forever. Never let the memories of your parents fade... for those memories will be what save you.”

Stan hesitated, his body taut, his hands trembling. Then, in a sudden impulse, he stepped toward the monster. His heart thudded violently in his chest. Slowly, awkwardly, he raised his arms and wrapped them around the creature. The tentacles tensed, then softened.

“I... I’m glad we met you... you, our distant ancestor.”

The monster’s mask lowered slightly, as if in gratitude. Grigne-Dints/Nicola inclined his head, and his voice, filled with emotion, resonated throughout the crypt:

“With all my soul, I thank you. You helped me fight my darkness... and free myself from the legend that chained me.”

He extended a long root toward a narrow entrance concealed behind the well. The gallery looked tiny, but a faint light pulsed inside a promise of escape.

“This is the vein. Your salvation. Once I plunge into the basin, don’t waste a second... go. Leave this world.”

Stan and Antoinette exchanged a look. Without a word, they saluted the monster. Then, skirting the massive excavation, they headed toward the cramped opening. Their steps echoed faintly, swallowed by the well’s deep rumbling.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola watched them go. His tentacles folded back. His pale fire intensified. Proudly, he climbed onto the glowing rim of the pit. His roots snapped like war drums. His mask dipped toward the children one last time.

“Be free... and carry my legacy.”

Then, resolute, unwavering, he opened his tentacled arms above the seething light.

“For this underground, devil-born world will vanish forever.”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola breathed deeply, each exhale making the tunnel walls vibrate. His pale mask cracked with conflicting emotions. In front of him, the Well of Maleficent Torments blazed brighter and brighter, its intensity growing, its smoke thickening until it coated the rocky ceiling. The luminous essence roared like a furious sea.

Stan and Antoinette, already inside the crypt, froze. They turned one last time, watching the monster with a mix of respect and dread. His face seemed peaceful now, almost human in its resignation. Only then did the two teens illuminate each other with their flashlights and squeeze through the narrow entrance.

Inside, the crypt stretched like a dark cage. Their beams swept over slick walls coated in black, shimmering rock. The air was heavy, choked with suffocating humidity.

“Like! This place is just as creepy as the rest,” Antoinette muttered, clutching Mister Sock tight.

Stan scanned every corner nervously, his flashlight trembling like his hand.

“I don’t see the vein! He must have dug it somewhere!”

Antoinette moved frantically, slicing through the darkness with her jittery beam. Her pupils widened as panic built in her chest.

“We have to hurry, Stan! Nicola is going to jump into the well any second!”

At that exact moment, Grigne-Dints/Nicola, still outside, rose to his full height. His roots unfurled like a forest expanding at once. His pale fire pulsed violently. His voice quivered with fervor:

“Father... Mother... we will finally be reunited. I cannot wait to feel your love again...”

With a solemn breath, he leaned his tentacled body toward the pit. The well shuddered, churned, then released strange bubbling swells at its surface as though it recognized its host. Then, without hesitation, Grigne-Dints/Nicola hurled himself forward. His roots cracked one last time through the air. His entire body plunged into the luminous essence and vanished.

Stan and Antoinette, panting, searched the crypt desperately. Their lights whipped over the walls, revealing nothing. Stan froze. He cast his light under his chin, his face twisted with dread.

“There... there is no vein!”

Antoinette, pale, approached the entrance again. She stared at the well with rising terror. Mister Sock trembled between her fingers.

“Uh... uh-oh...”

With a jerky motion, she lifted a trembling finger toward the pit. Her eyes widened in horror.

“Like... something’s not right

Chapter 31 – The Failure

The well, now in full-blown turmoil, seethed like never before. Bursts of blinding light erupted from its depths, flooding the crypt with a scorching brilliance. Hundreds of Loyals swarmed from the adjacent tunnels, crawling at high speed. They flung themselves into the basin with a sickening splatter, as though feeding the storm.

Suddenly, the surface split apart. And there, rising from the whirling essence, emerged the monstrous head of Grigne-Dints twisted by agony and fury.

“WHYYYY?” he roared, his voice shaking the entire crypt.

Stan, seized by terror, rushed to the entranceway of the crypt. He leaned heavily against the wall, breath short and wheezing. His eyes widened toward the tunnel outside, which trembled violently.

“But... but what’s happening?”

Antoinette, her face tight with worry, stared insistently at the churning pit.

“Strange... Nicola reappeared out of nowhere...”

Stan exclaimed, tense, his gaze glued to the excavation.

“I don’t like this! Not one bit!”

The two teenagers sprinted toward the monster. Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly emerged from the basin, his head weary, his pale fire flickering weakly. He staggered, his tentacles thudding feebly against the ground.

“He... he is very strong! (He gasps loudly.) I can feel him still... still there, fighting savagely to reclaim my soul...”

He collapsed heavily, crushed under the weight of the internal struggle. Stan and Antoinette, hesitant but resolute, stepped closer despite the fear gripping them. The creature weakly lifted his head toward them, then turned it toward the well.

There, an appalling spectacle unfolded: the Loyals poured in by the dozens, hurling themselves one after another into the boiling excavation. The roiling surface swallowed them whole then spat out distorted silhouettes. One of them, swollen with light, crawled out onto the ground. Its body tore open and exploded, revealing a hideous damned soul, clad in ancient rags faded by centuries. Empty eyes radiated terror, and from one of its arms ending in a metal hook shot jagged bolts of electricity that cracked through the air.

Antoinette, petrified, pointed a trembling finger toward the pit.

“Look... look, Stan!”

Before their horrified eyes, more Loyals erupted from the surface. Each one split open to birth even more damned souls: men, women, soldiers, warriors from every era, dragged from humanity’s bloodiest conflicts. Each bore the same cursed hook, each unleashing infernal lightning.

“THE DAMNED!” Antoinette screamed, her voice cracking with fear.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola lowered his massive head, his pale eyes fading.

“I am... sorry...”

Stan stepped forward, nervous, his fists clenched tight.

“WHAT?”

The creature gazed desperately at him.

“It did not work... the liberation failed... and I do not understand why...”

Antoinette turned sharply, thrusting Mister Sock toward Stan and the monster like an accusing scepter.

“I don’t want to be a killjoy, but this... this is totally out of control!”

She swallowed hard, her eyes drawn helplessly to the pit.

“And they’re coming out... more and more!”

All three turned again. The excavation boiled more violently than ever. This time, eight Loyals plunged in at once. The basin exploded with blinding radiance. And from its depths burst forth... Edagard and his seven mercenaries.

Their silhouettes rose, terrifying, wreathed in spectral flames. Their electrified hooks spat destructive arcs of lightning, illuminating the crypt with blinding flashes. Their hatred howled through their war cries as they advanced confidently toward the teenagers.

Stan nearly collapsed, his legs buckling beneath him.

“No... Edagard... and the seven mercenaries!”

His voice broke in a desperate cry.

“They’re going to raise an army of damned... and slaughter us!”

Stan, eyes wide with terror, swallowed dryly. His frantic gaze whipped toward the monster.

“Nicola! What can we do?”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly shook his head, his pale fire fading.

“Nothing...”

Stan bit his fingers in panic, his gaze locked on Edagard’s towering shape.

“So... I’m going to die?”

Antoinette, furious, seized him sharply by the collar. Her eyes bore into his with fierce determination.

“You’re seriously a pain, Stan!”

She spun toward the monster.

“You must confront Edagard and his mercenaries. It’s the only way to honor your will.”

Then she turned back to her brother, voice firm and blazing.

“And you stop shutting down! Stop hiding inside yourself!”

Her gaze darted between Stan and the monster, her breath fast but resolute.

“We must rise above our doubts, break our fears, and move forward... together.”

A heavy silence followed. Antoinette frowned, lowered her eyes for a brief moment toward Mister Sock...

Then, with a brutal gesture, she tore him from her grip. Under Stan’s stunned stare, she hurled her stuffed toy straight toward the pit. The little cloth body struck the boiling essence then sank instantly into the depths.

“Mister Sock!” Stan cried, his voice raw with anguish.

Chapter 32 – The Children’s Pact

Antoinette’s face tightened in pain. A single tear slid down her cheek. But suddenly she straightened, proud, her features hardening. Her gaze burned with determination.

“It’s over... We have to grow up and stand together. It’s the only way to fight those damned creatures... and finally win our freedom!”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola abruptly lifted his massive tentacled form, his inner fire vibrating with renewed force.

“You are right, Antoinette! (He raised his voice.) Fate cannot torment us again! These damned souls... and Grigne-Dints himself... must be annihilated. Otherwise the entire land will fall into darkness.”

Antoinette clenched her fists, her eyes fixed on the monster, ready for the decisive battle.

“We must find what will allow you to rejoin your family... but for now, destroy your tormentors once and for all!” she cried, voice trembling with intensity.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly turned his blazing mask toward Edagard and his mercenaries. His flickering inner fire flared into a fierce blaze.

“I shall face them... and obliterate them!”

He rose to his full monstrous height, his clawed tentacles snapping through the air like whips. His blazing eyes fell upon Stan and Antoinette.

“But you two... take shelter in the main tunnel. Beware the Devoted they are waiting for the slightest moment of weakness to seize you.”

Stan, nervous, took several steps toward him, waving his hands as though fending off invisible fear.

“And if the damned get to us? What do we do? Throw dirt in their eyes, is that it?”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola shook his massive head slowly. His voice echoed deep, steady, reassuring.

“No, Stan. Fear not. Run, hold on... I shall join you as soon as I can.”

At these words, Stan grabbed his sister’s hand and both of them dashed away. Their footsteps hammered the damp ground while the burning breath of the impending battle already filled the crypt behind them.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola planted himself before Edagard and his seven mercenaries. His roots surged outward in a shifting wall bristling with fangs and claws. His voice roared like thunder:

“Come forth, sons of perversion... Today marks the end of your reign of blood!”

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Stan and Antoinette, breathless, ran full speed until they reached a fissure in the tunnel. There, their lungs on fire, they stopped, bent double, grasping for air. Stan leaned against the dripping wall, his chest rising in frantic bursts.

“We... we’ll stay here, Antoinette. Not a sound. Not a single move. We wait...”

Antoinette, her features strained, swept a trembling hand across her sweaty forehead. She nodded gravely.

“All right... But I’ve got a really bad feeling.”

The silence did not last.

Suddenly, guttural shrieks raw and blood-chilling echoed through the rock. The walls trembled. The two children jolted violently, their eyes widening in terror. Slowly, they turned their heads toward the lower end of the tunnel.

There, a horde of damned souls was rushing forward at terrifying speed. Their jaws snapped like steel traps, their hooked arms spat long streaks of crackling blue lightning that lit the vault with sinister flashes. Their advance, punctuated by inhuman cries, resembled a tidal wave dark, relentless, unstoppable.

Stan and Antoinette froze, mouths open, breath caught in their throats.

“I feel like... like I’m in the dentist’s waiting room,” Antoinette whispered, her voice taut with nervous irony, eyes fixed on the horror approaching. “And trust me... I’m not expecting good news.”

Around them, the walls suddenly bloomed with thousands of tiny buds. They burst open in a shiver of thorns, swelling before their eyes. The Devoted came alive. Packed tightly together, they intertwined, feeding on the fear saturating the air. Soon they shaped themselves into hideous, grotesque faces vivid, twisted snarls bristling with razor-sharp teeth ready to bite. The entire wall became a nightmare fresco bending toward the two fugitives.

Chapter 33 – The Battle of Souls

Meanwhile, Grigne-Dints/Nicola launched his first attacks. His tentacles sliced through the air, cracked against the ground and the rock, sending shards and sparks flying. Edagard, agile despite his damned body, dodged the blows with beastlike rage, his crackling hooks tracing showers of electricity through the air. His feral howls mingled with the crash of battle.

“Vile creature!” roared Edagard, his eyes bloodshot with hatred.

But Grigne-Dints/Nicola straightened to his full height and bellowed in turn, a blazing fire erupting in his mask.

“You are the executioner! You’re the one who shattered my soul... Today, I demand justice!”

Edagard, his face twisted by visceral hatred, abruptly recovered his stance. With a brutal gesture he swung his arm, brandishing his incandescent hook. The weapon hissed through the air and hurled a rain of electrical sparks that slammed into the walls of the crypt. The crash rang out like thunder, lighting the fight for an instant in sinister flashes.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, fierce, sprang forward. His massive tentacles anchored themselves to the rocky vault, allowing him to stride across the ceiling like some monstrous beast. His claws scraped the stone, carving deep glowing furrows behind him. At their tips, he slowly unfurled a full crown of slashing hooks, each one vibrating with murderous force.

“You have not yet witnessed... the full scope of my new power!” he growled, his voice rolling like a hellish echo.

He lunged with blinding speed. His hooks tore through the air and crashed down on Edagard with relentless precision. The mercenary tried to dodge, raising his electric hook as a shield, but the force of the assaults was overwhelming. The impacts resounded in the crypt like hammer blows of thunder, each strike unleashing showers of sparks and splinters of rock.

Driven back against the wall, Edagard was struck from all sides. Grigne-Dints/Nicola’s hooks shredded his cursed flesh, ripping apart his muscular frame until there was nothing left but a dislocated body, reduced to bloody rags. With one last guttural howl, he collapsed heavily, his lifeless corpse void of all strength.

Still clinging to the vault, Grigne-Dints/Nicola let himself slide down fluidly to the ground. His blazing sockets fixed on the remains. A wave of relief but also of pent-up fury vibrated through his mask.

Beneath the filthy tatters of the fallen enemy, a dull Loyal suddenly emerged. Crawling at an unnerving speed, it squeezed between the rocks and sped toward the Well of Tormented Evil. Nicola, tense, watched the scene in horror.

“At last you are truly dead, Edagard the Bloody...” he breathed, his voice heavy, though his inner fire flickered with worry.

Suddenly, the seven remaining mercenaries, possessed by a rage grown tenfold, screamed as one. Their crackling hooks hurled monstrous arcs of electricity. They charged as a pack toward the monster, their bodies warped by the curse.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola did not hesitate. His tentacles cracked and whirled through the air like a murderous storm. He struck without respite blocking, slashing, crushing. The clash was brief but brutal. The mercenaries, crushed by the violence of his blows, ended up torn to pieces. Their mutilated carcasses crashed to the ground one after another, strewn like bloody rags across the stone.

“Fie...” he murmured as he gazed down at the corpses. “I’m starting to adapt rather quickly to their deadly abilities.”

His blazing fire turned intensely white. He lifted his mask toward the darkness of the tunnel.

“I must rejoin my descendants. They must be growing impatient.”

With a powerful leap, he climbed back onto the vault and launched himself forward, vanishing into the main tunnel, his tentacles scraping the stone with demonic speed.

But already, behind him, the mercenaries’ shredded bodies began to twitch. One by one, seven dull Loyals emerged from among the rotting fabrics, their oily bodies gleaming with a sickly sheen. They slithered like a swarming mass toward the Well. With a revolting squelch, they plunged together into the boiling essence.

The liquid roiled, crackled, and flared with unbearable light. Then, one by one, the damned took shape again. Edagard, his maw twisted with hatred, emerged first, followed by his seven henchmen reborn from the flames. All of them, draped in their old, time-faded rags now soaked in light, brandished their electric hooks with renewed ferocity.

Edagard raised his head, his enraged eyes locking onto the main tunnel.

“Not yet, Nicola... This time, you’re the one who will fall!”

*

At the same moment, the Devoted began to proliferate along the walls. They interlaced their twisted faces into a seething mass, their sharp teeth clacking frantically. Their expressions of terror reflected like a thousand living masks, slowly covering the entire vault. And they were moving, inexorably, toward the Well of Tormented Evil, as though drawn by some ancestral force.

Dozens of damned burst into the tunnel, roaring in their inhuman voices. Their hooks clashed, unleashing violent electric arcs that lit the darkness with blinding flashes. The ground vibrated beneath their steps.

Stan and Antoinette, huddled against each other, trembled from head to toe.

“Hurry, Nicola! Hurry!” cried Stan, his voice cracking with anguish.

Antoinette, however, stayed very still, her gaze locked on her brother.

“Not this time,” she said, her voice low, almost a whisper, but with a gravity that sent a chill through Stan.

He turned to her, his face pale.

“What? What do you mean?”

Stan, his features drawn tight with fear, suddenly straightened. His eyes darted frantically over the ground, searching for the slightest weapon, the faintest shred of hope. All at once, his fingers closed around a dead root thick and twisted. He seized it in a burst of rage, raised it before him like a fragile trophy, then hugged it fiercely against his chest.

“We have to defend ourselves... at any cost!” he said, his voice trembling but resolute.

Antoinette, who until then had remained frozen, flashed a reckless smile. She rushed toward another dead root, thinner but just as solid. Her eyes gleamed with defiance as she lifted it like an improvised weapon.

“For once, I actually agree with you, big brother!” she exclaimed with a spark of enthusiasm.

Before them, the damned marched on inexorably. Their gaunt silhouettes advanced heavily, their electric hooks buzzing with rage. They raised and swung them through the air, sending crackling arcs that slammed against the tunnel walls. Their guttural roars filled the crypt with an infernal din, as if all of hell itself were demanding vengeance.

Stan and Antoinette froze for a heartbeat, stubborn looks on their faces despite their dry throats. They swallowed hard, their grip on the dead roots so tight it turned their knuckles white.

Then suddenly, the ceiling erupted in sound.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola burst forth in a shattering leap, his tentacles whistling through the air like a demonic whip. His colossal silhouette flooded the space with an aura of terror and hope combined. He dove upon the damned with ferocious brutality. His roots cracked and lashed, smashing into the damned one after another. The creatures shrieked, tore apart, and fell in ragged pieces that hit the floor with dull thuds.

Stan, breathing hard, let out a long sigh of relief. His wide eyes lit up with a flicker of life.

“Saved...” he whispered, his face turned toward the monster.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola landed firmly on the ground. His tentacles anchored themselves into the stone while his inner fire, a blazing white, burst from his eye sockets and from his gaping maw. His scorching breath echoed like a call to war.

“We will have to reach the Well of Tormented Evil as quickly as possible,” he said in a deep, resonant voice.

He rose proudly, his monstrous form looming, and fixed the children with a gaze that held both gravity and hope.

“I also managed to kill Edagard... and his seven mercenaries,” he added firmly.

Moved, Antoinette dashed toward him and grabbed one of his tentacles with almost childlike energy. She squeezed it warmly, like one congratulates a brother-in-arms.

“Compliments!” she said with a sincere smile.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola then lowered two of his tentacles. In a fraternal and solemn gesture, he placed one on Stan’s shoulder, the other on Antoinette’s. His voice rang out like a grave warning.

“We must hurry. Soon the damned, the Devoted, the scarecrows and the Loyals... will occupy the entire kingdom.”

Stan, troubled, stepped closer to him. His gaze betrayed a deep, gnawing fear, but also a painful curiosity.

“What are they... what are they going to do to us if they catch us?” he asked.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola slowly turned his head away, his blazing sockets shimmering with a weary light.

“As for me... they would only imprison my soul even more,” he answered, his voice tired, laden with an infinite weight.

Antoinette, her face suddenly anxious, swung her root nervously through the air as if to ward off an invisible enemy. Her voice shook with dread.

“And... and for us!?”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola stopped dead. His fire flickered for a moment. He lowered his head slightly and, in a regretful tone, murmured:

“For you... it would be much worse.”

“As I’ve surely already told you... a most tragic end.”

Stan and Antoinette, their arms hanging slack, remained motionless, heads bowed, crushed by that prospect. The heavy silence of the tunnel echoed with their ragged breaths. Then, slowly, Grigne-Dints/Nicola raised his head again. His burning sockets settled calmly on the two children. His voice, firm and deep, cut through the air.

“But for now, let us have faith... and seek that which so terrifies my ego!”

Stan straightened suddenly, his face hardening. In a furious gesture, he brandished his dead root like a sacred weapon. His eyes shone with reckless fire.

“Let them come!” he cried defiantly.

At that very instant, the ground trembled. The damned surged by the dozens, filling the entire tunnel with their grotesque silhouettes. Their howls rose like an infernal clamour. They advanced at speed, their arms bristling with electric hooks flailing wildly, raining long showers of sparks through the air.

Antoinette, her throat tight, instinctively turned toward the upper end of the tunnel. Her eyes widened. She saw the Loyals those hideous worms advancing quickly. They flooded the passage, crawling, swelling, tearing themselves apart. Suddenly, from their disgusting flesh, countless hideous faces burst forth, their expressions twisted with terror. Their gaping maws gulped the air, sucking in everything around them.

“Like! We... we have to move!” she shouted, her eyes bulging.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola rose to his full height, implacable. His tentacles quivered, his slashing claws sprang free of their sheath. His tone cracked like a military command.

“Follow me! We charge through the damned together and, without stopping, we head straight for the Well!”

Stan and Antoinette nodded vigorously, galvanized despite the fear clutching their chests.

Then Grigne-Dints/Nicola leapt and raced along the ceiling at full speed. His tentacles whipped the air with a deafening roar, smashing and tearing through the damned with inhuman violence. Each blow exploded spectral flesh into tatters that rained down onto the ground. The monster pushed forward, unstoppable, like a storm of claws and flames.

The children, for their part, fought with desperate bravery. Stan brought his dead root crashing down on the damned who tried to encircle him. Antoinette narrowly dodged the deadly electric discharges streaking through the air, her hair flying in all directions. Together they forced their way through, striking, dodging, yelling, but always moving toward the crypt.

Soon, the entrance to the crypt yawned before them, wide open, lit by the fumes rising from the Well of Tormented Evil. But at that very moment, the ground rumbled. Four monstrous silhouettes suddenly erupted from the earth: gigantic scarecrows, their hideous faces frozen in eternal terror. Their overlong arms rose in a slow, mechanical, oppressive motion. They began to march, blocking the passage, advancing slowly but inexorably toward the entrance to the crypt.

Chapter 34 – Edagard’s Return

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, Stan and Antoinette stopped dead, panting, their hearts pounding wildly. Their bewildered gazes turned toward the well. There, standing before the blazing excavation, Edagard, his face steeped in venom, loomed like a master returned from the dead. At his side, his seven mercenaries, more hateful than ever, flanked him like vengeful specters. And behind them, dozens of other damned stood in ranks, forming a seething army that blocked every way out.

“How is this even possible?!” cried Stan, his voice broken by terror.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, his inner fire roaring, did not falter. His face hardened, his whole body went taut. With a low rumble, he hurled his tentacles forward, unleashing a flurry of lightning-fast attacks. His slashing claws crashed down on Edagard with all the force of his pent-up rage.

Edagard, however, dodged with a sly agility. His electric hooks crackled, flooding the crypt with bluish flashes. With a bestial scream, he counterattacked, hurling his lethal arcs against the monster. The impact made the whole gallery quake.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola roared back:

“The solution is surely here! Otherwise, why would they defend this place at the cost of their lives?!”

Edagard, driven back against the wall, took a rain of devastating blows. Each impact rang out through the crypt like the knell of an inevitable sentence. The bloodthirsty leader screamed his rage, but his cries shattered beneath the murderous power of Grigne-Dints/Nicola. At last, his lacerated body came apart. He collapsed in tatters on the ground, his monstrous silhouette reduced to a pitiful carcass.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, his sockets blazing, stared at the still-smoking remains. But already, a new threat appeared: a dull, viscous Loyal burst from Edagard’s soiled garments. Crawling greedily, it sped toward the Well of Tormented Evil, as though to offer its fallen master an immoral resurrection.

“Now I understand... why they regenerate!” roared Grigne-Dints/Nicola, his inner fire blazing with fury.

With a lightning-quick motion, he brought one of his clawed tentacles crashing down. The impact was so violent that the Loyal exploded in a revolting spray, splattering its viscous humours across the black rock.

“It’s over once and for all for you, Edagard!” he growled, his voice ringing out like an oath.

Without pause, he then threw himself at the remaining mercenaries. His tentacles whipped through the air with infernal speed. Every strike slashed their damned flesh; every rake of his claws blew their bodies apart into glowing cinders. He raced along the vault like a frenzied spider, striking from above, impossible to pin down. Then, amid the carnage, his burning gaze turned suddenly toward Stan and Antoinette.

“Take care of the damned around the well! We must find whatever will put an end to this nightmare for good!” he ordered, with solemn urgency.

Stan and Antoinette, breathing hard, immediately hurled themselves into the fray. Armed with their dead roots, they struck with desperate resolve. Each blow was a cry of survival. They managed to knock several damned out of commission, their spectral flesh dissolving in fading bursts of light. Around them, Loyals that tried to slither up to the well were intercepted and smashed to pulp under furious strikes.

“Careful! More and more of them are coming!” shouted Stan, his voice strangled by the effort.

Two damned, their gaping maws screaming insatiable rage, suddenly burst forward and lunged at Antoinette. Their hooks came down in unison and electrocuted her. The girl convulsed, her face frozen with pain. She crashed heavily to the ground, limp, her body shuddering with spasms.

“ANTOINETTE!” screamed Stan.

Seized by a fury suddenly multiplied, he brought his root down on the two damned with savage force. Their disjointed bodies exploded into a formless mass. Trembling, Stan rushed to his sister and gently helped her up. His breath caught when he saw her eyelids flutter open.

“H-how are we supposed to know what will put a definitive end to all this...?” she murmured, her voice shattered by suffering.

But already, another damned burst out of the infernal horde. With lightning speed, he raised his incandescent hook and brought it down toward Antoinette. The blow slashed across her cheek, and blood bright, vivid red sprayed out. The droplets flew through the air and splashed into the Well of Tormented Evil. The scarlet liquid mingled at once with the luminous essence.

Stan, mad with rage, threw himself at the damned. With a bestial scream, he struck with all his strength. His root smashed down and pulverized the creature in a rain of sparks. But his attention snapped back instantly to his sister.

“That was way too close!” he breathed, his eyes brimming.

Then suddenly, his gaze snagged on the well. A small detail chilled him at first... and then lit him up from within.

The blood... Antoinette’s blood was quickly mixing with the very essence of the well. The brilliant color darkened. A strange reaction began: bubbles surged up, a dull humming vibrated through the whole crypt. The coils of smoke scattered in a chaotic dance. Stan, his

mouth hanging open, understood. His heart raced, and an incredulous smile spread across his face.

“I... I think I’ve found the answer!” he exclaimed, his voice trembling with revelation.

Haggard, Antoinette lifted her eyes toward the well. In the essence, the blood swirled, thinned out, faded away. Suddenly the turmoil stopped. The cursed liquid seemed to calm, as if soothed by this unexpected sacrifice.

“You’re right, Stan... but we’ll have to pour much more of our blood into that essence,” Antoinette said, her voice firm, her gaze determined.

Stan nodded, his eyes shining with desperate courage. Together, the two teens cut deep into the palms of their hands. The pain was sharp, but they ignored it completely. Blood flowed freely, warm and red, coating their trembling fingers.

“Let’s do it,” Stan whispered.

In one solemn gesture, they plunged their bloodied hands into the well. The scarlet liquid mixed instantly with the luminous essence. A violent reaction followed: the surface of the well quivered, boiled, then began to whirl with tremendous force. A deep humming filled the crypt, as though the stone itself were vibrating under the power of the ritual.

Despite their fear, Stan and Antoinette wore smiles of hope. They leaned in closer, their faces lit by the blazing glow of the well. But suddenly, the essence settled again. The whirlpool calmed, the sounds faded out, and the luminous liquid returned to its original aspect calm, unruffled.

“No! No! NO!” screamed Stan, pounding his fist against the ground, his eyes bulging with despair.

Antoinette stepped back, her mouth open, unable to believe what she was seeing.

“This can’t be happening...” she whispered, her hands still trembling above the well.

Stan bit his fingers frantically, tears in his eyes.

“This is it... I can’t... I can’t take it anymore!” he sobbed, his voice shattered by despair.

At that instant, four monstrous scarecrows erupted into view, howling their rage at the entrance to the crypt. Their grotesque faces, carved out of horror itself, twisted into cruel rictuses. Their overlong arms swung down like massive clubs, grabbing and shredding everything in their path. They advanced, ready to flood the crypt and crush the children’s last hopes.

Chapter 35 – The Alliance of Fire and Blood

At that very moment, Grigne-Dints/Nicola fought fiercely against the damned, his tentacles slicing through the air with demonic violence. But suddenly, his once-white sacred fire, symbol of his long struggle, shifted violently in color. His glowing orbits burst into a deep, furious red, darker and more threatening.

A sharp, unbearable screech tore through the air. Then, in a monstrous crash, he collapsed heavily to the ground, lifeless, his tentacles crushed beneath him.

A cavernous voice rose from within the malevolent entity.
“You miserable weakling... You will pay dearly for this!”

The damned instantly hurled themselves onto the weakened monster. They severed his tentacles one by one, ripping them away like dead limbs. Dark, corrupted bursts of energy splattered across the stone walls with each brutal tear.

“Nicola!” cried Antoinette, tears filling her eyes.

In a final act of courage, Stan and Antoinette leapt forward together. Armed with their roots, they struck with all their strength. Every blow was guided by desperation. One after another, the damned were torn apart, their spectral bodies dissolving into fading sparks.

Breathless, face pale, Stan turned toward his sister, his voice trembling.

“He has to take control of the entity again... if he doesn’t, everything is over.”

Then, as if answered by the impossible, a miracle occurred. Grigne-Dints/Nicola, weakened and mutilated, let a faint whitish flame reappear. It flickered timidly, but it was alive. Summoning a final surge of strength, he lifted himself, wavering, and faced the children.

“As long as I still control even a fragment of my ego... you must unite with me, bind your intention to mine,” he said, his voice torn but determined.

Stan, confused, shook his head.

“What? But soaking our blood didn’t do anything!”

Antoinette opened her hands in a helpless gesture.

“At best... it made a few little bubbles!”

Grigne-Dints/Nicola staggered, but drew closer, his eyes glowing with a desperate determination. He fixed his flaming gaze on Antoinette, as if searching her very soul.

“You still do not understand...”

Stan suddenly shouted, struck by an intuition.

“The equation! The solution must be union, union through the blood... Otherwise why would he have wanted to lose you in the depths after tasting you?”

Antoinette nodded forcefully. She looked at her brother, then at the monster. All three of them now understood.

The key was union.

Not one sacrifice.

Not a mere drop of blood.

But the fusion of their forces, their intention, their pain, their lineage, their fire, and their blood.

It was the only way.

Chapter 36 – The Sacrifice

Stan, Antoinette, and Grigne-Dints/Nicola fought their way toward the well, carving a path through chaos with every step. The damned burst out from every shadow, brandishing their crackling hooked weapons, roaring like savage beasts. Their lightning arcs whipped through the air, slashing the walls and sending showers of sparks across the stone.

The two teenagers, breathless and pale, dodged strike after strike by a hair's breadth, their dead roots swinging wildly with desperate yet unwavering resolve.

Behind them, the Loyales emerged by the hundreds, sliding out from the cracks of the crypt. Their oily flesh stretched and writhed across the ground, twisting in grotesque spirals. Then, in an unspeakable display of terror, their bodies split open. From the glistening slits burst twisted, nightmarish faces, jaws snapping blindly at anything that moved.

The crypt seemed to breathe, to writhe, to awaken... as if the underground kingdom itself had become a living nightmare.

“Hurry!” cried Antoinette, grimacing, her eyes burning with a violent, painful determination.

She and Stan reopened their palms, but this time deeper, without hesitation. Blood spilled in heavy, hot streams down their trembling fingers. Together, they plunged their hands into the blazing essence of the well of malevolent torments.

“And this time... this time we end this cursed crusade once and for all!” shouted Antoinette, her voice ringing with fierce courage.

Grigne-Dints/Nicola, shaking violently, lifted himself before the sulfurous pit. His blazing orbits burst into a frenzied light. Suddenly, the white fire swirling inside his mask spun violently, then shifted to a blood-red inferno.

A piercing shriek tore through the crypt, a sound so sharp and unbearable that the stone itself seemed to tremble in pain.

A voice rose from within the entity's depths, echoing from some ancient abyss.

“You traitor! I granted you so much power, and this is how you repay me!”

The spinning red fire flickered, then flashed white again. Nicola's true voice burst forth from the creature.

“You stole my freedom! My soul! And ever since that day, I have wandered through the ages like a monster, chained to your curse!”

The mask flared again, crimson and maddened.

“Ungrateful wretch! I gave you new life through the cruel effigy that bore your name. I gave you the strength to punish the impure!”

Nicola clenched his teeth, every remaining tentacle trembling with rage.

“Life? You call that life? I would rather have joined my family... in the kingdom of God!”

The mask erupted in red fury.

“The kingdom of God? Look at how He abandoned you! How He cast you aside without a shred of mercy!”

In a final, desperate act, Grigne-Dints/Nicola lifted his monstrous head. He wrapped two tentacles around his own mask, gripping it as if to tear it off, crush it, extinguish it forever. The fire inside flickered violently, flicking from red to white in a final battle between two ancient wills.

“Your reign ends now!” cried Nicola, his voice human, trembling but free.

In a sacrificial act, he sliced through two of his own tentacles with a violent sweep of his claws. The blood burst forth in thick, dark streams.

Without hesitation, Nicola hurled his entire body into the well.

The impact was brutal. His massive form vanished instantly beneath the glowing essence.

The well of malevolent torments reacted at once.

A deep, monstrous rumbling filled the crypt, vibrating through the stone as if a thousand drums were beating at once.

Stan and Antoinette’s blood, mixed with Nicola’s, spread through the essence like ink in water, saturating it completely.

The light darkened, turning into a black, glowing red like a burning night.

Then came the explosion.

A colossal shockwave ripped through the underground kingdom.

The floor split open.

The walls cracked.

Stalactites shattered.

The crypt shook like a world on the verge of collapse.

A massive vortex erupted from the well, shaking every stone. The walls oozed, the ceiling crumbled, and boulders crashed down in a deafening roar.

Stan and Antoinette stumbled backward, breath caught in their throats, terrified eyes fixed on the damned and the scarecrows still advancing.

Their hostile faces twisted into one final grimace of agony.

Then as if struck by some invisible force they dropped dead to the ground.

Their hooks extinguished in a last sputter of sparks, then fell into complete silence.

“They... they’ve all gone mad!” cried Stan, his voice shaking.

The Loyales, still crawling from the ruptured earth, writhed with their monstrous faces and chattering teeth. They lurched toward the children but froze suddenly, stiff as statues, before

collapsing in heaps.

Their oily flesh melted, bubbling into a foul, dark sludge that seeped into the stone.

Then, from the heart of the well, a silhouette slowly rose.

It was Nicola.

The child floated upward, his face calm, bathed in a soft, peaceful glow. His once-troubled eyes now shone with serenity. He turned toward Stan and Antoinette with a gentle, grateful smile, then opened his arms.

Two other figures materialized beside him Angèle and Henri.

Their faces radiated warmth and love.

Nicola rushed into their arms, and the family embraced fiercely, finally reunited. The three of them rose slowly toward the vault of the crypt, ascending into a benevolent light until they disappeared entirely.

A breath of peace swept through the ruins.

Stan and Antoinette, tears streaming down their cheeks, looked upward with trembling smiles.

“He’s finally free,” whispered Stan.

“And forever,” added Antoinette softly, but with certainty.

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand while Stan sniffed loudly, trying clumsily to hide his sobs.

But reality returned swiftly. The well still vibrated like a dying beast, collapsing in on itself. The ground split again. Stones rained from above.

“We have to reach Grigne-Dints’s crypt and find the vein! Now!” shouted Stan, gripping his sister’s hand tightly.

They dashed through the chaos, leaping over the twitching bodies of the last dying damned as they crumbled into ash.

They plunged back into the crypt of Grigne-Dints, breathless, eyes darting wildly across the fractured chamber.

Suddenly, Stan froze.

“I found it! The vein it’s here!”

Antoinette rushed to him, her heart pounding. She tore out her flashlight and aimed the trembling beam at a wide fissure.

A narrow opening stretched inside, like a living vein beating faintly with dark energy.

“Hurry!” she said, her voice breaking with urgency.

Stan managed a tense smile.

“Believe me, I’m not planning on staying here any longer!”

He grabbed her arm and pushed her ahead. Antoinette dove into the opening, her hair brushing the slick walls as she crawled, breath ragged, fingers scraping the stone. Stan followed close behind, sealing their escape.

Chapter 37 – The Vein

Antoinette, her face taut with strain, crawled forward through the suffocating passage. The air was thick, almost unbreathable. Every movement felt endless. Behind her, Stan, panting heavily, pushed gently but firmly against her back.

The walls trembled around them, tightening and loosening, as though the vein itself were trying to trap them alive.

“Hurry... HURRY!” cried Stan, desperation cracking his voice.

Their hands slipped along the damp rock, yet they pushed on, driven by a single thought: reach the surface and freedom with it.

Stan, sweat streaming down his forehead, pushed harder against his little sister in the narrow passage. His muscles burned, his fingers scraped raw against the stone, but he would not stop. Antoinette, gasping for breath, crawled with every ounce of strength she had left, her fingernails scratching the wet walls. Their breathing echoed through the vein like a drum pounding urgency into the rock.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion ripped through the underground world. A violent tremor surged through the stone, shaking them to their core. The vein contracted sharply then, as if expelling an unwanted burden, released a massive shockwave that blasted through its length.

A cry, half terror and half relief, burst from their throats as the force hurled them forward, propelling them out of the suffocating tunnel like cannonballs shot into the unknown.

Chapter 38 – Return to the Surface

Outside, in the beet field drowned in the night, a burst of soil and stones exploded among the furrows. Stan and Antoinette shot out of the gaping wound in the earth, screaming despite themselves from the impact, before crashing violently onto the hard ground. Their bodies rolled through the dust before coming to a stop, faces twisted in pain, lungs burning.

For a long moment, they lay there, stunned, staring up at the sky above them. The cool night air lashed their skin, still marked by the darkness of the underground. The contrast was overwhelming: after the hell below, the stars glittered like an ocean of diamonds, and the full moon shone overhead with regal brilliance.

Stan, still trembling, pushed himself up onto one elbow. His voice was hoarse, thick with emotion.

“We... we’re finally home!”

Antoinette, her hair in wild disarray and her eyes glistening, joined him with a trembling breath.

“We did it!”

Their eyes met exhausted, yet filled with a deep, unspoken bond. Without another word, they threw their arms around each other, holding on tightly, as if to confirm they were real, alive, and that the nightmare was finally behind them. Their hearts beat in unison in that silent embrace.

Slowly, Stan loosened his grip and narrowed his eyes toward the horizon. Something had caught his attention.

“Look... over there! On the path, right at the edge of the woods...”

Antoinette followed the direction of his gaze. Her face froze, startled. There, under the pale wash of moonlight, a motionless figure lay sprawled on the ground.

“The farmer,” she whispered, her throat tightening.

Stan winced slightly, torn between worry and uneasy humor.

“I hope he’s forgotten we ran away...”

Antoinette shook her head, managing a tired half-smile.

“We can always hope.”

Exhausted but resolute, Stan and Antoinette pushed themselves to their feet. They moved quickly through the beet rows, their steps clumsy, their clothes caked with dirt and dust. Above them, the vast sky stretched wide open, a flawless canopy of stars. The full moon, bright and imposing, bathed their path in silver light like a promise of freedom reclaimed.

Chapter 39 – The Morning

In the teenagers' bedroom, at the break of dawn, daylight slipped quietly through the half-open curtains. Stan, peaceful-looking, slept deeply, curled in the softness of his bed. His face, marked the day before by fear and exhaustion, now breathed serenity. The silence of the house was disturbed only by the discreet chirping of birds.

But suddenly, a sharp noise shattered the calm. Someone knocked vigorously on the door.

“Up! Breakfast is ready!” Kelly called out firmly.

Reality had already caught up with them, sweeping away like a dream the thin boundary between the horror they had lived and the normality they had regained.

Stan grimaced and slowly pushed himself upright. His heavy eyelids opened with difficulty, revealing eyes reddened by fatigue. With a long yawn, he stretched his stiff body, his fingers disappearing into his tangled hair that he rubbed vigorously, as if trying to chase away the last remnants of the nightmare.

“We’re coming right away, Aunt Kelly,” he mumbled in a sleepy voice.

He glanced to the right side of his bed. Seeing the empty space, he sighed and lazily lifted his arms toward the ceiling.

“Antoinette!” he called, dragging out the last syllables.

“Here! I’m in the bathroom!” replied his sister instantly, her voice bright and alert.

Stan breathed out in relief. His arms dropped heavily onto the mattress, a tired smile rising to his lips.

“You’re up early...”

“I wanted to be ready for this very special first day,” Antoinette answered, barely able to contain her excitement.

Stan, still dazed, stood up on unsteady legs and moved toward his suitcase resting on the floor. His movements were slow, methodical, as if each one required effort. He rummaged through the clothes, pulling out a clean pair of pants and a sweater.

“We... we have to keep all this secret,” he said with a deep exhale. “Uncle James and Aunt Kelly would never believe us anyway.”

Antoinette’s dreamy voice drifted from the bathroom.

“You’re right. But what an adventure... If I had known I’d ever live something like that...”

Stan nodded silently, his face still shadowed by the night. As he pulled on his pants, he muttered under his breath:

“Unthinkable... almost impossible.”

Antoinette, absent-minded, added softly:

“He’s free now.”

Stan, slipping into his sweater, froze for a moment. Then a calm breath escaped him.

“And together, we saved this country from that monstrous legend.”

He felt lighter, as if saying the words had closed the weightiest chapter of their lives. Without wasting time, he shook his hair back into place and walked toward the bathroom.

But as he reached the doorway, he stopped dead.

The mirror caught his eye first. Antoinette stood before it, carefully brushing her medium-length hair. She slowly turned toward him, revealing something new. Dressed in a feminine outfit, both simple and elegant, she radiated an assurance he had never seen in her.

Stan’s jaw dropped. His eyes scanned her from head to toe, stunned and strangely proud.

“Wow,” he breathed, unable to find anything else to say.

Antoinette flashed a mischievous smile but remained silent. She passed beside him with a grace that struck him as entirely new. Her steps echoed lightly on the wooden floor as she crossed the room, walking with a newfound feminine poise, leaving behind her a faint scent of maturity.

•

Downstairs, in the dining room, James and Kelly were eating quietly. The discreet clink of cutlery punctuated the morning. But suddenly, their movements froze. Their eyes, surprised and doubtful at once, locked onto the entrance to the room.

Antoinette appeared, walking with assurance, her hair shining as it fell lightly over her shoulders. Her demeanor and her clothes transformed her in their eyes. James and Kelly exchanged an astonished look, almost incredulous.

With a light step and her hair loose, Antoinette entered the dining room. She seemed transformed by the ordeal she had lived. Stan followed closely behind her, quieter but serene, almost relieved to step back into an ordinary atmosphere. Together they approached the family table. They sat side by side, moving with a quiet coordination born from everything they had endured. They served themselves calmly and began to eat, savoring the rare moment of peace.

Kelly froze, nearly forgetting to breathe. Her gaze studied them intensely. She examined every detail: Antoinette’s newfound certainty, Stan’s contained seriousness, and the strange

aura of premature maturity resting on both of them. At last, she said in a tone halfway between surprise and admiration:

“Well... Belgian air does wonders.”

Across from her, James burst into a joyful laugh. He slapped his palm on the table and declared:

“And it’s only the first day!”

But the cheer vanished immediately. James’s phone suddenly RANG, vibrating insistently. He jumped, grabbed it, and stood up abruptly. His hurried footsteps echoed as he stepped out of the room and vanished into the vestibule, looking concentrated and troubled.

A silence settled. Kelly slowly lowered her fork. She frowned at the teenagers, her eyes searching for the truth behind their strangely calm demeanor.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked, her voice softened by concern.

Stan and Antoinette nodded with their mouths full, polite but evasive. Stan hesitated, then lifted his face toward Kelly, his gaze wavering between confession and fear of disbelief.

“There’s... something we need to talk about,” he said haltingly. “A little problem... nothing too serious... that happened last night.”

Before Kelly could respond, James reappeared, his expression tense. He hurriedly slipped his phone into his inner jacket pocket. Taking his seat again, he grabbed his coffee cup, drained it in one gulp, and slammed it down.

“I have bad news,” he announced gravely.

Kelly turned to him at once, alarm tightening her features. Stan and Antoinette exchanged a sharp glance, their eyes wide, united in sudden apprehension. Stan straightened, courage flashing across his face.

“Actually... we also wanted to tell you”

But James raised his hand to silence him. His gaze darkened.

“No time,” he cut dryly. “We have to leave immediately. The institute is sending us on an urgent mission.”

He pushed back his chair with a harsh scrape, stood abruptly, and left the table with long, hurried strides, leaving behind him a cold tension.

Kelly stared after him, then turned back toward the adolescents. Her voice, firm but still warm, called:

“Your little problem... will have to wait. Quickly now. Go get your bags. We’re heading back to Tarrytown.”

Stan and Antoinette froze for a heartbeat, stunned. But then their eyes met. On their faces bloomed a small, shared smile one of quiet relief.

“At last... we’re going home,” they whispered together.

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In the farmhouse courtyard, James dragged a large suitcase behind him. His stride was heavy, nervous, almost rushed. He walked toward the back of the dusty black SUV. The engine was already running, the vehicle ready to flee the countryside. He opened the trunk and lifted the suitcase inside, helped at once by Stan.

“I’m glad to see you cooperating without fuss,” James said, casting a quick, approving glance at his nephew.

Stan, composed and confident, met his eyes steadily.

“Anyone can change, Uncle.”

A genuine smile brightened James’s face. He nodded, surprised and impressed, then walked around the vehicle toward the driver’s side.

“You’re right,” he said before opening the door.

Kelly approached in brisk strides, dragging a heavy suitcase that she heaved into the trunk. The latch clicked loudly.

Then came Antoinette determined, almost radiant. Her hair swayed with each step, and she pulled a small black suitcase covered in colorful stickers: football players, motorcycle racers, IndyCar machines. She stared straight at James as she neared the SUV.

“And the farmer? Are you telling him about our sudden departure?”

Kelly paused, hand on the door handle. She turned toward Antoinette, her voice both serious and tender.

“James left him money for the stay, and an apology note on the kitchen table.”

Silence settled again, broken only by the rumbling engine.

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Across the fields, at that same moment, the farmer sat at the edge of the path near the woods. His silhouette was stark against the pale dawn. He shook his head repeatedly, as if waking from a nightmare. His trembling hands rubbed his face, failing to wipe away his dazed expression. Slowly, painfully, he pushed himself upright, swayed on his tired legs, and began walking toward the farmhouse, his shadow stretching long behind him fragile, uncertain.

Chapter 40 – Renaissance

One year later. Tarrytown, Westchester County, U.S.A.

In the family living room, an autumn afternoon filled the room with golden light. Antoinette, transformed, her long silky hair flowing over her shoulders, wore a colorful folk costume. She smiled, amused, as she looked out through the large picture window. Outside, the whole town was alive: Pumpkin Fest was in full swing. Music, laughter, and joyous shouts rose all the way to the house, mingling with the wind, heavy with the smell of spiced pumpkins.

Antoinette raised her voice, her eyes sparkling with impatience.
“Stan! Hurry up, our friends will be here any minute!”

Stan finally burst from the hallway, face glowing, dressed in bright colors as well, his face painted to match the spirit of the celebration. His smile lit up his features, but he froze abruptly as he passed the half-open door of his father’s study. His eyes were drawn at once to the darkness inside. His smile faded, his steps slowed.

Intrigued, almost pulled in by an invisible force, he stopped dead. His heart beat faster. Then, driven by a sudden intuition, he gently pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

The study was silent, slightly messy. The smell of polished wood mingled with the stale scent of old papers left closed for too long. Stan moved forward hesitantly, almost feverishly, his eyes scanning every corner. At last he approached the wide oak desk, his gaze fixed on something he did not yet understand.

Antoinette’s voice rang out behind him, anxious.
“Hey! What are you doing?”

Stan, startled, turned toward his little sister, his index finger pressed to his lips.
“Shhh! We’ve never been allowed into Dad’s study.”

His eyes gleamed with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. He moved slowly, carefully, as if afraid to awaken some invisible presence. Around him, old folders were stacked, yellowed, spilling over with bundles of papers tied together with worn string. On the walls and shelves, framed family photos: their smiling parents, himself and Antoinette as small children, holiday memories, fragments of a simple life... a brutal contrast with the secrets buried here.

Stan walked around the wide oak desk. His eyes suddenly caught on a detail: three perfectly aligned drawers, almost intimidating. His breathing quickened, his hands trembled slightly as he grabbed the handle of the bottom drawer. With a quick yet hesitant motion, he pulled. The wood groaned, and a puff of dust rose, wrapping him in a harsh smell of old paper and long-sealed secrets.

Antoinette, who had stayed back, folded her arms. Her face showed a mix of weariness and fear.

“We have to go! We’re not supposed to be in here,” she whispered.

Stan looked up at her, his pupils shining with insistence.

“Just a second, Antoinette. It’s so rare that we’re allowed in here at all...”

His fingers searched carefully through the drawer. Then suddenly, he froze. At the very back, laid there as though it had been placed with solemn respect, rested a small black box. Its matte surface, slightly cracked with age, was marked with silvery writing in an old-fashioned, almost esoteric style.

Stan picked it up slowly, holding it as though it might shatter at the slightest wrong move. He swallowed, his heart pounding in his chest. With a trembling breath, he opened the box.

“But... what is it?”

Antoinette, suddenly drawn in despite herself, stepped closer, her eyes fixed on the interior. A strange glint reflected in her gaze. There, nestled in the worn velvet, lay a ring. The gold of the setting was dulled, as though it absorbed the light instead of reflecting it, and at the center sat a large black stone, roughly carved. A heavy silence fell over the room.

Antoinette’s eyes widened. Her voice broke in a cry of terror.

“Isn’t that the black ring of...?”

Stan, speechless, clutched the box as though afraid it might slip from his hands.

“It’s Henri’s ring... Nicola’s father’s ring.”

Their eyes met, frozen. Antoinette, pupils dilated, reached out a trembling finger and barely brushed the surface of the black stone. At the touch, she shuddered, as if an icy chill had rushed through her.

“I know the story of this stone,” she murmured gravely.

Stan recoiled slightly, shaken.

“What!?”

Antoinette closed her eyes for a moment, summoning her memories. Then, very slowly, she turned away, horrified. When she opened her eyes again, she fixed them once more on the ring, as if hypnotized.

“Nicola... during our first meeting, told me that he often saw, in his tormented mind, a supreme angel... named Lucifer. Long before his fall into hell, he supposedly shed tears of sorrow and betrayal from the sky. Those tears, as big as stones, tore open the heavens and, like lightning, crashed down and ended up scattered deep in the earth.”

Stan trembled, his hands gripping the box so tightly his knuckles turned white. He stared at his sister.

“You mean that...”

Antoinette slowly, deeply met his gaze. Her voice was barely a breath.
“That one of those stones... gave birth to the legend. To the monster. To the demonic effigy.”

The silence grew heavier. In the closed room, it almost felt like the walls were breathing.

“To Grigne-Dints!” said Stan and Antoinette together, their voices blending into one, both grave and full of dread.

Stan, terrified, snapped the box shut at once, as if it held evil itself. With shaking hands, he shoved the case back into the deepest part of the drawer. Then, in a sharp motion, he slammed the drawer closed. The sound echoed through the study like an irrevocable sentence.

A heavy silence followed. The two teenagers remained frozen for a moment, shaken, unable to look away from one another. Their eyes, clouded with unspoken worry, searched and understood each other without the need for words. Finally, they nodded slowly, as if sealing a silent pact.

“Let’s not think about it anymore,” Stan breathed, his voice low, almost pleading. “We have to move on.”

Antoinette took a deep breath, her trembling lips stretching into a faint, forced smile.
“You’re right. Let’s go join our friends... and have fun at the Halloween festival,” she said, trying to inject a lightness she did not truly feel.

Their complicity, fragile but real, began to resurface. The tension in their features softened, their shoulders loosened, as if they had silently agreed to bury for good what they had just discovered. Slowly, they moved toward the door. Together, they crossed the threshold and left the study, closing the door firmly behind them.

The bang echoed through the now-empty room, and an oppressive, almost supernatural stillness settled. Then, a shiver ran across the windowpanes. Through the glass, something strange began to happen.

First, a faint rustling rose, like a sigh from outside. Then that murmur swelled into a sinister racket: thousands of withered oak leaves, dull and autumn-colored, appeared as if conjured from nowhere. They whirled madly, colliding and spinning in a macabre dance. Though there was no wind, they churned and swarmed, as if driven by a will of their own.

The leaves slammed against the window in a dry, rhythmic, obsessive patter. CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! They slowly covered the glass, darkening the light filtering into the room.

Then, in the midst of that chaos, something took shape. The outline of a face gradually emerged, at first blurry, then more and more distinct. Hollow eye sockets, an oversized jaw, sharp teeth... The nightmarish visage of Grigne-Dints was reborn, sculpted by the interlaced dead leaves.

For a heartbeat, silence fell again, smothering even the sound of their rustling. And then, in a hideous crackling, the face began to grind its teeth, a long, metallic, unbearable GRIND. As if the monster’s jaws, beyond time and death, still refused to fall silent.

Grigne-Dints, immortal, was grinding his teeth once more...

THE END

Postface: A Bit of History

The hideous, grimacing effigy of the Grigne-Dints is to Belgium what Dracula is to the Carpathians: a local embodiment of the monster myth, rooted in rural legends and ancestral fears.

Several centuries ago, the Walloon countryside suffered a dire shortage of seasonal labor for the autumn harvest of sugar and fodder beets. It was the Irish, numerous and hard-working, who answered this call in great numbers. Once the harvest was complete, these workers gave birth to a rustic, folkloric tradition: hollowing out the yellow-collared fodder beets softer than the sugar beets to craft grotesque, frightening lanterns. Thus were born the first demonic effigies, lit from within and accompanied by strange, fantastical tales.

Later, with the arrival of agricultural mechanization, the need for human labor diminished. The Irish, seeking new horizons, migrated in vast numbers to the United States, then in full expansion. There, the beet was replaced by the pumpkin, more abundant and more symbolic, but the spirit of the stories endured. Halloween was born, balanced between fear and wonder.

Thus, the bond between the United States and the rural Belgian roots of the Grigne-Dints is anything but accidental. The circle closes: what began in the dark, misty fields of Wallonia crossed the Atlantic, transformed yet never forgotten. The link between the carved beets of yesterday and the glowing pumpkins of today stands as a testament to this cultural transmission. Grigne-Dints becomes the missing link, the bridge-creature between two continents, two eras, and two forms of storytelling steeped in fear.

Thank you for reading. – Pascal