

House Call

Barney's ancient Chevy rumbled along the cracked asphalt, jolting slightly as it ran over the occasional pothole. He bobbed his head and tapped the steering wheel to the beat. The radio was playing "Highway to Hell", some old AC/DC song. Barney lived for classic rock, and he loved to go on and on about how lucky he was to catch so many famous shows live when he was young. Owen couldn't relate, he wasn't much of a music person, it all sounded like noise to him. He preferred driving with the radio switched off, but Barney said only psychopaths did that and declared that while they worked together, he would expose Owen to "real" music. It had been a month since the two were paired together and Owen still hadn't changed his mind.

For what must've been the thousandth time, Owen wondered why they'd been made partners. He had just graduated from the academy, full of excitement and brimming with purpose when he received news of who he'd be assigned to work under. Barney Mossman. Owen hadn't known much about him other than that he was a venerated officer with decades of experience in the field. He wasn't expecting a washed-up alcoholic, reeking of gin and cigarettes. Barney generally showed up to work late and hungover, if he bothered to show up at all. How he was still employed was beyond Owen's understanding. Whenever he made an appearance, he'd spend the workday waltzing around the office chatting with his buddies, stopping only to drop more paperwork onto Owen's desk. That was how the new recruit had spent his first month of service, up to his eyeballs in reports. Which was why Owen was overjoyed when Barney randomly decided to respond to a house call.

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“Would you get a look at this sunset!” Barney whistled, turning down the radio a notch. “I swear it looks better on this side of the city.”

Owen glanced out the car window as they rolled down the interstate, heading towards the Santo Domingo exit. He watched as the rays of the setting sun drowned everything in a sea of reds and oranges, like the city was on fire.

“You pay it no heed though, it’s just a coincidence that we’re seeing one on the way there,” Barney said.

“What do you mean?” Owen asked, confused at what that had to do with anything.

Barney glanced at him in surprise, removing one of his hands from the steering wheel to scratch at his white stubble for a couple seconds before answering. “Well, you know, there’s an old wives’ tale that’s been around since before I started that says seeing a sunset on the way to your first job is a bad omen.”

Owen’s heartbeat quickened, until he thought about what Barney had just said. “But... they happen every day, the odds of seeing a sunset on any given day are like 10 to 1, what does it matter that it’s during my first assignment?” he asked.

Barney shrugged, “I didn’t say it was true, just a superstition,” with that, he turned the music back up.

What the f- Owen felt a flash of irritation, what was that even supposed to mean? What was the point to Barney telling him that? *He’s just trying to psyche me out*, he reasoned. It wouldn’t work though, Owen had been waiting for this day, throughout the years he’d spent training at the academy. This was his chance to prove himself and be one step closer to the first of many promotions.

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They pulled up to the house in the next 15 minutes. It sat at the end of the cul-de-sac, a two-story brick stone, painted in a drab grey. Barney parked on the curb next to a mailbox, with ANDERSON printed on the side and shut off the car. The call had come from a nosy neighbor who hadn't seen any of the Andersons leave the residence in weeks. They'd also reported hearing strange noises and seeing pulsing lights the last time the family was home. Owen stepped out into the street, the lawn was unkempt and chock full of weeds. He flipped open the mailbox and saw that it was overflowing. Barney popped the trunk and handed Owen his gladius. The younger man accepted the sword in its scabbard and clipped it to the belt of his pants. Owen straightened his tie, smoothed the wrinkles out of his suit jacket, and took a deep breath. Barney slammed the trunk shut, plucked a hip flask from the folds of his ratty leather jacket, and took a sip while staring at the house.

"You want a swig, before we start?" Barney swiped at the corner of his mouth and wagged the flask in Owen's direction. "It's good for nerves," he said.

"We're not supposed to drink when we're on the clock and you know I hate alcohol," Owen said and walked off.

"Suit yourself," Barney screwed the cap back on.

Filled with anticipation, Owen strode purposefully around the lawn to the front porch and tried the doorknob. "It's locked," he said.

"Most doors are," Barney replied, walking through the grass towards him.

Ignoring that, Owen looked around, trying to guess where the Andersons hid the spare key. When he'd started to consider smashing a window, Owen saw a flash of silver over his shoulder and heard a small *Shunk*. Barney carried two doubled sided axes and had just used one of them to slice through the doorknob. He nudged the door open with his boot and gestured to

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Owen, "After you." Owen blinked and opened his mouth to say something, before deciding to close it instead and march inside.

The smell hit him first, the second he crossed the threshold. Reading hundreds of reports and going through simulations hadn't been enough to prepare him for the stench of death. It was as if someone had left a hundred pounds of hamburger meat to rot in the sun. What he saw after stepping through that door, however, was far worse than the smell.

There was a small dining room to the right of the front door with a thick oak table in the center. There were 4 chairs arranged around the table, with small sequined cushions on the seats of each. Fancy looking plates, napkins, and cutlery lay shattered about the room. Owen noticed something strewn across the table, surrounded by dark stains and lying in shadow. At first, he thought it was some kind of animal, the family pet maybe, but when he squinted, he saw it was a young woman. She looked to be in her twenties, her body was covered in slashes and chunks of flesh were missing. He could also see that she'd been severed at the waist, with just her top half sprawled across the table, her arms hanging limp over the side.

Owen reeled, hands on his knees, trying desperately not to puke at the sight in front of him. Barney stepped in and surveyed the grisly scene, twin axes dangling at his sides. His breathing stayed even, and he looked around with an impassive expression.

"If you feel like you're gonna puke, do it outside, you wouldn't want to risk slipping in it," Barney said.

Owen glanced at the other man sharply, *He barely looks fazed! Just how many times has he seen stuff like this?* he thought. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, swallowing bile. "I'm fine," he said stiffly and straightened, drawing his gladius. Barney nodded and walked further into the room. Owen followed him and spotted another corpse lying beside a doorway

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leading to the kitchen. It was an older woman, and she was in a similar condition to the other person, but with all of her limbs ripped off and her face torn to ribbons. He shook his head and told himself to stay focused, he'd become an officer in the first place to stop scenes like this one from happening. They continued on into the kitchen and found it in a similar condition to the dining room.

Chairs were smashed, the island ripped to pieces, and the cabinets pulled from the walls. Glass crunched under their feet from an oven that looked like it had been busted into.

“Ya see that?” Barney jabbed one his axes in the direction of the fridge, which lay open and on its side in the middle of the room. “The fridge was cleaned out, along with the pantry and the cabinets,” he said. “There were bites taken out of those bodies too, I’d say we’re dealing with one hungry motherfucker.”

He stepped around the fridge and walked in the direction of the den, before freezing in his tracks. “Kid you’re gonna *love* this, come here. *Quietly.*” Owen crept around his partner and peered through the doorway. It was a large den, with art hanging on the walls and lavish furniture filling the space. The only light came from a small chandelier hanging from the tall ceiling, bathing the room in warm hues. The room might’ve been used for fancy dinner parties once upon a time. It lay in ruins now, the artwork slashed, the chandelier dangling from a thread, and a demon sleeping in the middle of the room.

“That’s a *Ravager* demon, it’s been a couple of years since I’ve seen one, they’re pretty rare,” Barney said with a grin, “They’re tough bastards too, talk about one helluva fight for your first job, ay kid?”

Owen’s stomach dropped and his palms started sweating. Imagine a lobster and a scorpion get together and have a baby, and the resulting hell spawn grew to be bigger than a

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horse. That's a ravager. Ravagers were covered in thickly plated armor, sported two massive claws, and a tail ending in a stinger as long as Owen's forearm.

"Shiiiiiiit," Owen thought with rising panic and his palms started to sweat.

"There's a pentagram on other the side of the room and a body that I'm betting was our summoner laying right next to it," Barney said.

The corpse belonged to a man, dressed in fine clothes, with a shiny amulet and multiple rings on his fingers. There was some sort of tome lying next to him, its edges worn and several symbols carved into the cover. The man had been disemboweled, the soft pink flesh of his intestines spilled out onto the floor, with him curled up next to them. His body was otherwise untouched, with no bites or gashes marring it. The pentagram had been drawn in white chalk but looked wrong, the lines sloppy and the circle much too small for a demon of this size.

"Looks like a classic demon summoning gone wrong, the ravager probably broke the circle immediately, killed the caster for summoning it, and ate the others." Barney shook his head, "What I don't understand is why anyone would want to conjure a ravager of all things, a djinn to grant you wishes maybe, or a group of succubi, I could understand, but this?"

Owen's thoughts raced. Many species of demon could use magic to complete requests when summoned. Provided the caster could successfully restrain one, any number of deals could be made for the appropriate price. If you wanted immortality, you could sacrifice a child, for endless wealth the demon would take half of your lifespan, to kill an enemy simply give up pieces of your own body. Ravagers weren't capable of using magic though and were just mindless brutes. He could only assume that the Andersons had been trying to conjure something

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much more manageable and failed. Their summoning circle wouldn't have been enough to handle such a large and volatile demon.

“R-Ravagers are classified as a B tier demon species, and incredibly difficult to kill, the officer handbook doesn't advise taking one on with a standard two-man team,” Owen said nervously, “We should call for backup.” The ranking system went from E to A, with demon species in the latter tier able to threaten cities.

Barney whipped out his hip flask and drained it in a couple gulps before answering, “Nonsense, we're all we need for this one.”

Before Owen could offer a retort, Barney hurled his empty flask at the sleeping demon. It pinged harmlessly off the ravager's hide and hit the ground with a loud clang. Three sets of black eyes clicked open as the creature shifted and turned towards them. It stared at the two of them for a second, before letting loose an ear-splitting screech and charging.

“Sink or swim, kid!” Barney shouted and dove in. He took a swipe at one of its legs before dipping around to the demon's flank. The ravager spun around and did an about face in seconds, striking at him with a claw. Its pincers only clicked on air though as Barney dodged to the side with the speed of greased lightning. He whacked at the claw with an axe and took a chunk from the carapace.

Owen watched as the 53-year-old man went toe-to-toe with a ravager, hacking and slashing with reckless abandon, brackish puddles of demon blood already littering the floor. Barney ducked and dived the ravager's quick strikes, laughing all the while.

How can he move like that? Owen wondered. It was if he was untouchable, for all the luck the demon seemed to be having in hitting him. Their uniforms and weapons were enchanted to protect and strengthen them when killing demons. In order for them to use guns, each bullet

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would need to be enchanted separately. The city had decided it was more cost efficient in the long run to supply their officers with melee weapons, like swords and axes instead. But the runes could only take so much punishment. A couple good strikes from such a powerful demon would be enough to seriously maim one of them, or worse. And yet he'd run in without any hesitation.

Fear filled every cell of his being, but Owen knew he couldn't give up here. He needed to succeed and move up in the department. He drew his sword with shaking hands and ran in.

Barney looked at him and grinned and the two began coordinating attacks.

"Keep your eyes on me, you fat fuck!" Barney yelled drawing the ravager's attention by leaping up and taking a swipe at its face. When it turned to him, Owen slashed at its flank, his blade cutting deep. The demon whipped around and swung its tail at him, he ducked, barely evading in time, feeling the demon's flesh lightly graze his hair.

"Attaboy!" Barney shouted and struck one of the demon's legs at the joint, slicing clean through and severing the limb. The two of them kept on like this, with Barney using his speed to execute brazen attacks against the demon and keep it focused on him, leaving it open to Owen's blows. They were managing to slowly wear the beast down and it looked like they were close to killing it.

Owen raced forward to slice through one of the ravager's damaged claws, hoping to sever the appendage, when he slipped in a puddle of its blood. The world turned sideways as his feet went out from under him and he fell to the floor. Not wasting a second, the demon went to smash his head in with one of its thick claws. Time slowed; Owen knew he wasn't fast enough to get to his feet in time. He looked into the ravager's black eyes and saw nothing there, no hatred or wicked glee, just the cold indifference of an insect. Owen saw a flash of movement even faster than the demon, and all of a sudden Barney was there, standing in front of him.

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The demon struck him full on from the side and turned into the blow, catapulting Barney through the air. He soared across the room and crashed into a door, before smashing through it and falling into darkness. Owen heard several thumps followed by silence. It sounded like Barney had been thrown down the basement stairs.

“No!” Owen cried and stood. “Barney, are you alright?” He couldn’t hear anything over the demon’s chittering as it dove at him.

The ravager tried to pinch him between one of its claws, but he deflected the sharp pincer with the flat of his gladius. All he had to do was somehow keep pace with this thing and edge towards the basement door to check on Barney. He raised his blade for an overhead strike and felt a sudden burning pain in his side. Owen screamed in agony and glanced down to see the ravager’s stinger embedded in the flesh. He’d forgotten about its tail! It was as if he’d been stabbed, and he could already feel a tingling numbness as the venom spread through his body.

Ravager venom acted as a neurotoxin, quickly filling the victim’s veins, and paralyzing the body, before eventually stopping the heart. The latter effect was rarely the cause of death though, as ravagers typically tore their prey apart as soon as they stopped moving. Owen’s legs crumpled and his fingers turned leaden, the sword slipping from his grasp. The demon’s claws snapped shut on his midsection. His suit’s runes prevented him from getting chopped in half, but the sheer pressure from the ravager’s claw still broke some of his ribs. The pain was excruciating, and a garbled scream fell from his numb lips. The demon’s mandibles opened wide, and it lifted him towards its mouth. And then its head exploded.

Owen was soaked in demon blood and gore as the ravager released him and sagged forward, dead. The quivering handle of one of Barney’s axes lay embedded deeply in the creature’s brain. The sheer relief Owen felt as the old man stepped into view was palpable.

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Barney was covered in bruises and one of his arms hung at an awkward angle, but he was beaming at Owen.

“I told ya it would be one helluva a first job, didn’t I?” he laughed. “I called for backup a couple minutes ago so the paramedics should be here soon.” He grabbed Owen under the armpit with his good hand and began to drag him to the exit. “And if you survive, drinks are on me!” It was the last thing he heard before falling unconscious.