

The Society of Misfit Stories Presents...

Raising Mary (Frankenstein)
A Sylva Slasher Story

By

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Sylva Slasher has a unique job for a high school senior: she raises the dead for criminal investigations...and parties. Her latest client is a seven year old dying from Leukemia who has requested that she raise Mary Shelley. Sylva wants to make sure the event goes perfect for her special client, which, of course, means things go horribly wrong.

Raising Mary (Frankenstein)

“The heart will break, but broken live on.” -Lord Byron

For more than nineteen hours, I inhaled death. Darkness crawled around my soul and ripped jagged holes in my sagging heart. The death I inhaled spilled out of my lungs, oozing acidic poison so damaging to my spirit, it was scarred for life. I pressed play one last time before getting off of the plane which had just traveled from Bournemouth to Hawaii. A warm hand came down gently on my shoulder.

Her voice eased out a gentle tone. “Are you ready to go, ‘Sylva?’”

My best friend, Emily. She knew not to utter another sound, for I had no voice in which to answer. The moving image began again, and almost for an instant, I smiled. But seeing that sweet little girl in the video again—those tiny dimples, that heart-warming smile, and hearing her cheerfully sing, dancing like a ballerina on that small airplane monitor only reminded me that I would never, ever see her again.

As I watched, my thoughts drifted ominously like black clouds floating into the stormy memories of the past downpour of chaos, the last forty-eight hours. I knew for certain that I wouldn't study for my AP necromancy exam for Monday, tomorrow. Mom would chew me out because I'd miss yet another day, or two, of senior high school. I wouldn't eat. I wouldn't sleep much either. I'd spend that dreary time obsessing about how, for a seven-year-old girl named Dresette Swansea, raising Mary Shelley from the grave sealed her walking papers in an envelope marked death.

* * *

We walked toward a replica grave for Mary Shelley. Dresy ran up to me and tugged my pinky finger, breaking me from a spell of enchantment. Our footfalls echoed in the damp musty underground tunnel; her filthy ballet shoes, and my weather-beaten Converse.

“Come,” she said, in the cutest, most bewitching voice. “Holograve.”

It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. This seven-year-old poor little rich girl had turned an abandoned underground crypt on old estate grounds at the outskirts of Bournemouth, England into a fantasyland for the dead for no other reason except she loved zombies. Holograms of the living dead dressed like farmers walked the tunnels, moaning and stumbling past us; some of them stopped for a quick munching on holographic wriggling victims too weak to scream.

Mustard-colored fluorescent light bulbs shone through angry-looking ceramic wolf eyes spread out in pairs along the wall, and illuminated cave-like paintings depicting the story of Frankenstein in stop-action cinematic sequences. Inside the tunnel walls were alcoves displaying robotic children dressed in colorful costumes from different cultures around the world. Strangely, they were all gruesomely undead or made with faces full of terror. Throughout the whole tunnel, if you can believe this, was the song *It's a Small World* playing softly. The song faded as we turned another corner in the vast tunnel.

To my feet, the floors felt like cobblestone but were actually broken skull heads. Holographic vampire bats fluttered their wings, hanging upside-down from above. Magically, the wind from their wings tickled the nape of my neck. It gave me goosebumps. This little girl had a more disturbing imagination than I did. Totally rad. We left that section of the tunnel and continued. Zombies were everywhere. I was in awe, and wondered how a seven-year-old could be so cool.

We followed behind J.Q., a seventeen-year-old toothpick of a boy who knew the tunnels well. He told us his father used to be the caretaker of the vast underground crypt and now that his father had died, he proudly

took over the job. His turban made him look like a terrifying shadow creature dancing against the walls. Like me, he wore Converse on his feet, but *everything* on him was brown; his leather jacket, shirt, jeans, shoes, and turban, which was actually more of a khaki color.

“This way,” he said, guiding us through the winding tunnel. His Hindi accent was thick but his voice cracked often, as if he was going through puberty and his voice started changing.

I gasped. Farther down the corridor, just before the bend, I could see bright twinkling sparkles of lights as if faeries were down there sprinkling pixie dust to guide our path.

Looking directly at Dresy so she could read my lips, I pointed. “What is that, Dresy?”

“They’re fireflies,” she said, using sign language as she spoke in her British tongue.

“Fireflies,” I said. “Down here?”

Dresy nodded. “Uh-huh.”

Dresy Swansea wasn’t deaf—she’d get upset if you called her that. She was hard-of-hearing. Her curly black hair bounced on her shoulders. She wore a pink tutu, and a different wig each day of the week. On that night it was black because she loved to depict Annette Funicello in cosplay.

Dresy often mimicked the Mickey Mouse Club video when Annette danced a ballet to the tune of a song dedicated to her by Jimmie Dodd. I had never even heard of Annette, or Mr. Dodd until the original Mickey Mouse died, just a while ago. Dresy had watched the MMC digital videos, old and new, over and over again. She totally loved the ones when Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake were a part of the MMC but could recite *all* of Annette Funicello’s parts on the Disney DVD word-for-word.

Dresy wrapped her warm little fingers around my hand, and started singing the song from the Funicello video while we walked through the breathtaking holograms of fireflies flashing soft blips of light around our heads. Instead of singing Annette, on that part of the song, she substituted her full name, Dresette. The sound of her voice was so joyful, so pretty, it made me hum along. I adored her cute little dimples when she grinned and thought how Dresy was such a sweetie, it hurt my heart so much to know she was gravely sick.

Besides being nearly deaf, Dresy also had Leukemia. She was a fighter because she didn’t act or appear to be sick but, none of the treatment she went through was effective because of her weak immune system. Over the past year, I’d done quite a few free raisings for the Live-Your-Dream Foundation, and that’s how Shadow came across my name when searching for ways to make her last birthday wish come true. One of Dresy’s requests was to raise her iconic ancestor, Mary Shelly from the grave. I wanted to do all I could to make her happy. Being that my eighteenth birthday had just passed and she would never live past eight, I was committed to giving every ounce of myself to bring her joy.

We were humming and singing with such glee, I completely forgot that Shadow was with us, and the hotshot twenty-year-old attorney gave me a start when he spoke.

“So, you and your necrotic entrepreneur friends are high school seniors that service the Hawaiian community with your family-owned funerary business?”

I put my hand over my heart. “Forgot you were even here, Shadow.”

Dresy stopped singing, and skipped down the hall the second she heard his voice, giggling.

“Well, I wanted to give you two a chance to get to know each other,” he said.

Shadow was such a handsome guy, you couldn’t call him hot or a stud, only beautiful. His hair was black and slicked back like a Hollywood actor in those old black and white films. He stood about five inches taller than me at five-foot-nine, and had a muscular build. His almond-shaped eyes were dark brown, which went well with his expensive brown suit and two-toned brown and beige shoes.

I noticed Shadow was hiding something behind his back, but didn’t spill the beans, thinking it was a surprise for Dresy.

Shadow followed my eyes, peering around his back, and he put a finger up to his lips. “Shh.”

We followed behind Dresy and J.Q., walking side-by-side.

Shadow’s dress shoes clicked loudly on the broken skulls. “You didn’t answer my question, did you?”

“Um, no,” I said. “Our business is called the Silver Kisses Aerial Ash Scattering Company.”

“Silver as in your eyes, or your name?”

“Silver as in the lips of the dead, and their families kissing their loved ones one last goodbye.”

“We don't have anything like that in the U.K. There were a couple of Catholic priests that tried that for a spell, saying if they did exorcisms, they should be able to resurrect the dead but the Pope scorned them and it led to a big scandal and the banning of necromancy by any member of the church.”

“Isn't the death penalty banned here, too?”

“Well, yes, which reminds me I have to brief for a case on Monday regarding a new type of capital punishment called zombie row.”

“Zombie row?”

“Yes, but never mind that, so in America, you raised the dead for local and federal homicide investigations, did you?”

“Yup, but mostly, like I said, for mourners to say their last aloha to their family members.”

“That's right, you flew here from Hawaii.”

“Sure did. And not to sound sarcastic but I'm looking forward to the nineteen-hour flight back.”

Shadow chuckled. “Bollocks. You taking a piss at me?”

“What?”

“Joking—as in pulling my leg.”

“Oh.”

“I've flown to Los Angeles once, and that was too much. I couldn't even imagine going to Hawaii.”

“No, honestly. Flip kicked my butt in the Oneechanbara video game, and I look forward to revenge. We played it almost the whole flight.”

“Is that so? Well, I assure you, Dresy is most grateful you made the trip, and took the liberty of not only paying you double your funerary fess but also putting a college fund together for you and your friends. Speaking of them, what do they do exactly in your company? Beckham Watanabe and Emily Hayashi? Your contract didn't specify.”

“Um, oh, my friend's job descriptions? Well, Emily assists me, and Flip—he likes to be called Flip instead of Beckham, pilots the helicopter after we cremate the deadhead, and scatter its ashes over the pacific.”

“Deadhead? Is that what you call the walking dead?”

“Yeah, kind of morbid, but hella-cool, right?”

“Uh, yes, but honestly, it reminds me of the Grateful Dead.”

My hair spilled over my shoulders like brown silk, and I brushed a strand from my eyes. “The who?”

Shadow chuckled. “Nevermind.”

I shook my head, not seeing where he saw humor in what I said. “Can I ask a somewhat personal question? And it's okay if you say it's a client-attorney privilege.”

“Well go on, what is it?”

“Um, well, how did Dresy get so—so wealthy?”

“Oh, that it? I can answer that. She got it from an inheritance.”

“Inheritance? I thought she didn't have any family.”

“And for the most part, you're right. Her mother gave her up for adoption when Dresy was very young, so she never knew of any family to speak of when I found her in foster care. Lady Abigail Swansea hired me to find her—said she was her great-aunt, and had no other heirs to bestow her wealth, and when she became ill, made it her duty to find one of her relatives. I did a little research, and investigation, and found Dresy. Lady Abigail is the person that also gave me the little rustic cowhide journal with Lord Byron's story secretly dedicated to Mary Shelley in it—the one Dresy wants to read a bit from to Mary after you raise her.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. “Now I get it. Hmph.” I absorbed what he told me a few seconds while we continue to follow J.Q., and Dresy around the twists and turns in the labyrinth of tunnels.

“Well, anyway,” I said, finally. “Thanks for finding us. My parents totally appreciate what Dresy and her Girls Rising College Fund is doing for us. Em wants to go to med school. I'm not sure what I want to major in, yet.”

Dresy stomped toward us, pouting her bottom lip. J.Q. squatted, just a few feet ahead of us; his back leaning against the wall. He slipped a harmonica out of his jacket and started playing a melody softly. It sounded like a song from his native land of India; pretty but in a way, kind of eerie.

Dresy stopped in front of Shadow with her hands on her hips. “Uncle Shadow, you interrupted my song,” she said, in a whiny voice.

“I’m sorry, darling,” he said, and kneeled.

Omigod. I saw what he had behind his back and let out a soft whimper of adoration.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said.

Dresy’s eyes widened, and she clasped her hands in front of her, grinning. “You do!”

“Yes,” Shadow said, and showed her the wolfdog pup, brown with white fur on his belly.

Mesmerized by his cuteness, I sat on the skull ground—my butt resting on my heels—and felt a sharp painful tweak from a muscle in my shoulder reminding me of the aggressive workout I had with my martial artists sensei, yesterday after school. Master Li always kicked my butt when we sparred, but yesterday I received an extra butt-kicking because I was late to class.

The pup yawned, and he opened up his precious blue eyes, squirming just a little in Shadow’s hand. Dresy gasped. J.Q., stopping playing his harmonica, and stood up, smiling at the puppy.

Dresy shook her hands excitedly, as if shaking them dry of water. “Can I hold him? Can I hold, Uncle Shadow, please—please—please!”

Shadow handed the pup to her. “Of course. He’s a rescue, and needs plenty of love.”

I scratched behind his ears, while Dresy hugged him. J.Q. came over to us, chuckling.

“So,” I said. “What are you going to name him?”

“Squiggy,” she said, laughing. “Because he wiggles when I squeeze him.”

Squiggy let out a little bark, and licked Dresy in the face.

“Yech,” she said, and scrunched her nose up.

She tried to push Squiggy away, but he barked in little quick yips, making her flinch, and licked her again. Shadow, J.Q., and I laughed. Dresy looked up at us and laughed too, this time letting Squiggy lick her cheeks.

* * *

Emily had just gotten back from preparing the gravesite of the ceremony with J.Q., when Bega served us breakfast. Bega, eighteen, was a Hindu priestess and Dresy’s nanny. J.Q. received a phone call and disappeared somewhere to talk in private. Emily joined Flip and me at the round oak breakfast table in the brick red sit-in kitchen of a massive treehouse manse, or tree manse.

Flip was six-foot-four and had feet the size of skateboards and kept annoyingly kicking my feet. His short black hair was slightly faded on the sides. He had creamy brown skin that stretched around big walnut-shaped eyes that always seemed to seek for approval.

“Whoa—whoa—whoa—whoa,” he said, spreading an amazingly large amount of butter on his waffles. “Runticle, run that by me again. Lord Byron actually did write a horror story just like Mary Shelley did with *Frankenstein*?”

“And as John Polidori did with *The Vampyre*?” Emily said, jumping in the conversation as if she were there the whole time.

Emily sat down to join us. She had a round face and small brown eyes with long eyelashes. Em scratched her short slightly turned-up nose with the chipped blue-polished nail of her index finger, and then took a sip of her orange juice. “Lord Byron wrote a story, too?”

“Yeah, he did, Em,” I said, taking a bite of French toast, “You didn’t miss much, though. I just started telling Flip what Shadow just spoke to me about in the library. So where was I? Oh, yeah, the story. It was called *Leichgate*. And wait-a-minute...Flip, I’ve told you a million times to *stop calling me runticle!*”

Flip dismissed my comment with his fork. “Yeah—yeah—yeah, I hear you. Dude, that’s just too trippy about Lord Byron. Shadow told you all this?”

I sighed. *Dude* was just as bad as *runticle*. “Uh-huh. But get this—at first, Mr. Polidori thought he would be paying a delightfully chilling homage to his dear friend, Mary, but the night he finished it—the day before they all planned to meet to speak of each other’s story, an angel came to him in a dream and said that if he tells Mary about this story she will become gravely ill and die to become a liche.”

Flip shrugged. "A liche?"

I sucked my teeth. "Come on, you know, an undead sorceress. The angel said that Mary would travel eternally seeking the seven heavens and seven hells searching everywhere for him, not even knowing that the Earth was no longer a memory in her consciousness. It was a dimension she would no longer gain access to."

Emily took a bite of her English muffin. "So Lord Byron never showed it to either of them—John, nor Mary?"

I poured more maple syrup on my French toast. "Nope."

"So what's this super-secret story about?" Flip asked, and he took a big swig of his milk, leaving a milk mustache.

Emily wiped Flip's lips with her thumb, affectionately. I looked around the tree manse to make sure that Bega wasn't around. Dresy hadn't hired servants, for some reason. I caught my blurry reflection in the shiny steel refrigerator across the kitchen. My honey blossom hair was a mess, and I still had on my black babydoll tee shirt that read *Got Zombies?* in white letters, jeans and rainbow colored toe socks.

"Hello?" Flip said, impatiently.

I gave him the stink eye and lowered my voice. "In Lord Byron's travels to fight against the Ottoman Empire," I said, "in the Greek War of Independence, he came across the many legends of a rebellious nun named Sister Mary."

Emily tilted her head. "Wait. Sister Mary? So the story is actually about a different Mary?"

"Okay, now you're losing me," Flip said.

I shook my head. "It's not that confusing, just listen."

Flip waved his fork at me dismissively. "Well, go ahead then, Slasher."

I slapped his fork with mine. "I told you not to call me that, either."

"Will you stop it, Flip," Emily said. "What? Are you two going to fence with syrupy forks and make a mess? We're already in the doghouse with Bega for being so messy when we got in early this morning."

"Guys, just listen," I said. "Sister Mary joined the Catholic Church but had always felt restless about the limitation of being exposed to only one viewpoint of God. She eventually left the church and traveled the world with the intentions of passing through many gates and cultures to taste their various fruits of enlightenment."

"You know, I read Don Juan in eleventh grade," Flip said. "Lord Byron had a *lot of ladies*."

"Telling a story here," I said, annoyed.

"I'm following you," Flip said. "I was just saying."

"Anyway," I said, sighing, "Lord Byron was inspired to write about Sister Mary fictitiously. In *his story*, Sister Mary's life was full of adventure and she actually became a fearless warrior fighting battles for the meek and poor, but one day while living in Munich, Germany she got in a bitter argument with a gypsy lady about the realism of there being seven heavens and seven hells.

The gypsy supposedly put a curse on her and that night, Sister Mary was later stricken with a fatal sickness. She died the next morning, and awoke in a spiritual form. Filled with hatred for feeling betrayed by her faith, Sister Mary traveled through many gateways in search of bringing her wrath on the gypsy woman—through seven levels of heaven and seven levels of the underworld, but never found her way back to Earth."

"That's a pretty scary story," Bega said, making us all jump. She wore a bindi, or red dot between her eyebrows, a tiny sparkling ring in her pinched nose and had no hair at all on her smooth oval head. I'd say that Bega was prettier bald than most girls I'd seen with hair.

"Dresy would love hearing that as a bedtime story," she said; her British accent, confusing with her appearance seemingly putting her ancestors from India.

"Bega," I said. "We didn't hear you come back in the kitchen from giving Dresy a bath."

She had reddish-brown skin and slightly dark wells beneath her eyes. "And where is this book—this literary artifact that holds such an interesting story?"

"Uh, I don't know," I said, shrugging. "I think Shadow said it has to be present during our mock raising. It's something he came across with by one of Dresy's last remaining family members before she died."

Bega wore a saffron sari which was wrapped around her waist with the loose end draped over her left

shoulder. Beneath the sari she wore a matching choli that bared her midriff, a petticoat, or underskirt, and leather sandals completed her outfit. She placed a hand (with dragonfly Henna tattoos) against her chest, holding the sari in place as she leaned over and poured orange juice out of a rose-colored pitcher into Emily's half-empty glass.

She stood up straight. "Do you think Shadow will protest if I ask to observe the ceremony?"

Flip shrugged, and spoke with a mouth full of food. "Can't hurt to ask."

"By the way," I said. "I've been meaning to ask."

"Go ahead," Bega said.

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I think living in a tree house is hella-cool, but you call this place a manse. Now, Father John, my religious studies teacher, last year in eleventh grade, told us that a manse is a place where a priest lives. Why would a priest live in a tree house, or is manse short for mansion because it's so huge?"

Bega placed the pitcher of juice on the red marble counter island in the kitchen. "The story that I've heard from the old locals down at the market was that the owner of this castle had very bad nightmares and dreamed of an apocalypse with men rising from their graves."

Flip snickered. "Gnarly."

Bega gave Flip an expressionless gaze. "And that he kept a Black Friar, or what you would call a priest, on grounds. The former owner built a treehouse, this tree manse, for the day that the dead walked his land. That way, he could find safe shelter out of the reach of the living dead and in the presence of one of God's helpers."

"Uh-huh," I said, pushing away from the table. "Well, good thing we won't be facing an apocalypse anytime soon or flesh-eating zombies like in the movies to worry about, anyway. The zombies I've raised are as harmless as a six-year-old. Okay guys, story time over. It's time to get ready. Thanks for the breakfast, Bega."

"None of you finished your plates," she said, collecting them.

"Where did you get that pedicure?" Emily asked. "I want to get a mani-pedi before I get back."

"Don't listen to her," I said, tugging Emily by her elbow. "We're not going to have time to do anything, Em. We have to get back home. School's Monday, remember? Nineteen-hour flight? It's already Saturday. You have an AP science paper to work on and I have an AP necromancy exam."

We headed toward guest rooms of a tree manse that sat twenty feet above the ground in a forest of colossal English Oak trees. Trees, mind you, that were the largest in size, height and girth of any other I'd ever heard of or seen. The trunks all had to have been at least thirteen feet across with girths up to about twenty feet. Shadow said that some of the trees were probably wider than the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. Dresy, of course, fell in love with the place, the moment she saw it. I mean, what kid hasn't had a dream of living in a tree house? I glanced back and caught Bega watching us with cold eyes before she carried our dishes into the kitchen.

I didn't know what it was, but something didn't sit well with me about that priestess chick. I tried to shake off the suspicious feeling when I slipped out of my jeans and shirt. Nope. The funky feeling was still there. I took off my bra and panties. Still there. When I hopped into the steaming hot shower, I began to ask myself why a priestess would want to be a nanny. It didn't make any sense to me. But then again, she was only eighteen, and the job was kind of like being a full-time babysitter, so I shrugged it off.

I heard a knock on my door.

"Yeah," I said, yelling over the jetison spray of the shower.

"It's Em, just want to say hurry up, Shadow wants us to meet him at the entrance of the grave's tunnel in fifteen minutes!"

"Okay! You—you showered already?"

"About to," she said. "Flip's already showered and throwing on his clothes. He said he'll wait on us in the kitchen while he grabs another quick snack."

"Be right there."

I looked forward to the raising ceremony of Mary Shelley. Even though we didn't have permission to

raise the real Mary Shelley, (raising public figures from the dead was outlawed in America and the U.K. after the fiasco of some chick raising Marilyn Monroe from the dead ruined an entire political family and tainted them eternally with scandal and shame), I knew that just *playing pretend* for Dresy's birthday meant the world to her. We would carry on the entire ceremony as if it was Mary Shelley, and Shadow brought Lord Byron's story in its original small leather-bound journal for Dresy to read to Mary.

How cute. Dresy was such a beautiful soul. I would do all that I could for her, her last days on this earth. It was a miracle our parents agreed we could fly abroad on a Friday evening when we had school the following Monday—AND I had a ridiculous tough AP necromancy exam to study for—knowing a Sunday night cram session was inevitable. I blew out a bubbled sigh, water from the shower spraying the crimson-colored shower tiles in front of me. It sucked that Dresy had leukemia and the doctors only gave her a few more months to live.

Why her? Why so young? I grabbed the golden bar of soap from the shower's chrome holder, made my wash rag sudsy, and spun so that the hot spray of the shower rained on my back. It was hot, and felt good, soothing my sore shoulder. Closing my eyes, I went over in my head how the raising ceremony would play out, and like always, butterflies fluttered crazily in my stomach. Like an actress gets stage fright before a performance, I always got grave fright before raising the dead. This time I was more nervous than ever.

A cold chill pricked me at the nape of my neck and rippled down my back as if death itself suddenly came in the shower with me. I snapped my eyes open, and gasped. I exhaled an embarrassed sigh of relief, stepped out of the shower, and hurried to get ready for the ceremony. I put on my winter ceremonial garb for the raising: navy blue leather jacket, matching turtleneck, jeans and leather ankle boots—both blue, too. In necromancy, blue was the color for mourning. At least, in Hawaii, it was.

After I was fully dressed, I stared in the mirror, spreading lip gloss on my lips and making sure the little bit of makeup I did put on was cool. I slipped the lip gloss tube and my iPhone in my back pocket, picked up and slipped my backpack full of necromancy stuff around my shoulders. In it I kept a jar of chicken ashes, priest-anointed skin balm, pig iron, crushed datura, graveyard mold, along with herbs and spices to disguise the corpse's smell. Seriously though, I didn't need most of the stuff since all I was really doing was going through the motions to raise a hologram. Shadow said he'd control the image via remote control so all I had to do was go through the motions. He'd studied a YouTube video of a few of my raisings and had my timing memorized.

As I headed to meet Emily and Flip, butterflies were swarming in my stomach like crazy and my flesh crawled with goosebumps. This was ridiculous. It wasn't even a real raising. Yet, something just didn't feel right.

* * *

"Brr," I said, blowing warmth into my hands. "I thought we were supposed to go left, J.Q."

"No, it's this way," he said.

J.Q. had reddish-brown skin plagued with acne. His head was a giant cantaloupe on a stick body. He had a neatly-shaven mustache and a goatee that gave him a somewhat handsome face.

"What's up with pimple-puss?" Flip said, asking Emily about J.Q. "And why's he walking so fast?"

"Shh," Emily said, smacking Flip on his arm.

"Hey," Flip said. "Dude is all the way up there. He can't hear me."

"Your deep voice travels far, Flippy," she said.

"Flippy? I'm Hawaii's three-time extreme skateboard champ. My name deserves better respect than that."

"Uh, right, Flip is better." I said. "I skate better than you—besides, you called me runticle. That's respect?"

"The day you skate better than me, Syl, I'll paint your toenails. Anyway, that's cause *you are a runticle*, but Flippy—that just sounds like a little kid's name."

I pushed him hard in the shoulder. "And you're nothing but a big kid in oversized clothing."

Emily chuckled. Flip mused his hand in the side of my face and I smacked it away.

“Anyway,” I said. “Shadow says we could get lost in these tunnels. J. Q. knows every nook and cranny of these underground tunnels so it's best we keep up.”

We were back in the underground ossuary, or graveyard, built by a royal family that lived here centuries ago. Shadow told me that the family was so stricken with shame and scandal that they were forced to build a burial place called the *Chapel of Bones* for their loved ones to avoid vandalism.

I turned to face Shadow, Dresy and Bega, behind us. “You guys okay?”

“Just brilliant,” Dresy said, grinning, showing her two buck teeth.

Bega said nothing but just gave me a cold stare, her legs moving awkwardly swift for her usual graceful self.

“J.Q., slow down a bit,” Shadow said, calling out. His voice echoing through the empty tunnels.

This time, there were no deadhead holograms or sounds of the undead feasting on their victims, and the Disney song *It's a Small World*, took a back seat to creepy church organ music which drove an ominous mood throughout the tunnels. When I turned back around, my little friend giggled, and ran to catch up with me.

“I took a nap so I could stay up late for the raising ceremony,” she said.

Because she was hard-of-hearing, Dresy's words were a little muffled when she spoke, but I could understand her completely. She looked back at Bega, who was now holding Squiggy the way a cartoon character would hold on to a bomb that was about to explode. Bega let the pup down, and he ran toward Dresy.

“Yes, you most certainly did take a nap, Dresstte,” Bega said, using sign language and speaking. “But you will have to get some more sleep when we get back. Promise?”

“I promise,” Dresy said, signing back.

I tugged my iPhone out of my back pocket to see the time. It was seven minutes after midnight. “Happy Birthday, Dresy,” I said, making sure she could read my lips while pushing my phone back in my pocket.

“Happy Birthday,” both Emily and Flip said in chorus.

Emily gasped, sucking in air dramatically. “It's my birthday? Yay! Cake and ice cream later today!”

“Oh, Sylva,” she said, reaching for my pinky, “promise me that you, Flip and Emily will have some with me before flying back to Hawaii.”

Her eyes radiated warmth and were bright like the rising sun, melting my heart.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” I said, making the promissory gesture.

“We all will,” Flip said, and picked up Dresy.

She laughed and Emily tickled her. Squiggy started barking.

Emily tickled Dresy some more.

“Stop it, Emily,” Dresy said, laughing. “Stop it!”

Emily stopped tickling her. Dresy's face was so cute; one of surprise, and anxiousness. There was a beat of silence as both Dresy and Emily froze.

“Do it again, Emily,” Dresy said.

Emily did as requested filling the hollow tunnels with the joy of laughter.

“Dude, slow down,” Flip called out to J.Q. “We're having a little fun with the birthday girl.”

“If you want to start by twelve-thirty,” J.Q. said. “We must keep moving!”

“How is this whole raising the dead with a hologram thing going to work, anyway?” Flip asked.

“Supposedly, the stone lid of the sepulcher will open mechanically,” I said.

“And project an image of Mary Shelley climbing slothfully out of it.” Emily added.

Dresy joined in cheerfully. “As if she were the real thing!”

We walked down a corridor where the back of skull heads provided a necrotic decor in the walls; literally a museum of death. Shadow and Bega caught up. Squiggy tried to keep up with us, but seeing that he couldn't, Flip picked him up. He growled until Flip rubbed behind his ears and then Squiggy lovingly licked his hand. Dresy reached up and rubbed Squiggy as we continued behind J.Q. like a group of tourists. We came to another fork underground and followed J.Q. to the right. I could've sworn it was the other way.

Shadow cleared his throat and called out to J.Q. “We're going the proper way, mate?”

“You hired me as the guide,” J.Q. said, sourly. “Either let me guide, or find the way yourself.”

“Oh, well you don't have to be nippy about it, J.Q.,” Shadow said. “Just making sure.”

I tried to clear the awkward air. “Tonight we're raising Mary Shelley from the grave!”

Flip chuckled. “The Rise of Shelleystein.”

That made us all laugh. Squiggy started barking as if he got the joke, too.

“The company that produced our Mary Shelley hologram,” Shadow said, “is already in the works with holograms of deceased horror actors Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney to appear in Halloween Balls.”

Flip chuckled. “Gnarly.” He gave Squiggy back to Dresy to hold. “Say hello to my little friend,” he said, emulating Al Pacino in the film *Scarface*.

I shook my head. “Speaking of holograms, I'd pay anything to see Vincent Price do the Thriller Dance with Michael Jackson.”

J.Q. disappeared around another corner. Emily, Flip and I started laughing while we emulated a part of the Thriller dance, and shuffled around the corner, right into, not one, but two rifles pointing at our heads.

“In the name of Kāli, if you do any more of those ridiculous dance moves,” a girl said, “I will shoot you!”

* * *

We all put up our hands. Two blond chicks smiled when J.Q. approached them.

“Dude, really?” Flip said. “I'm getting mugged in a tomb?”

“I knew something was wrong,” I said. “J.Q. set us up!”

“Shut up,” J.Q. said.

Like J.Q., the two girls, were seventeen, and wore outfits that were coordinated in brown: leather jackets, tight jeans, and Converse. They both wore light brown cummerbunds around their jeans as belts. Their hair were in a ponytails and both had one foot on the ground and the other on a killer-looking fifteen-inch wide KickGlider, which were like hovering snowboards without the hardware. They had some hella-cool yellow shades on and Henna tattoos on the hands.

Squiggy barked and the natural blond tapped her KickGlider with her foot so that it flipped, and as soon as it was back to being right-side up, glided over to Squiggy, ripped her cummerbund from her waist and tied a muzzle around Squiggy's snout.

“Don't,” Dresy said, and tried to unwrap the cummerbund but couldn't.

The natural blond slipped up her jeans pant leg and unsheathed a small knife that was strapped to her ankles. She ripped a piece of Dresy's tutu and tied it around her mouth. “That should shut the brat up,” she said, and pushed her down to the ground roughly. “Now sit there and don't move, or one of your friends here will get hurt.”

Dresy's eyes were full of disappointment and she started crying. It hurt my heart to see her sad. One of the blond girls was a bit taller than the other. She was the one who had her gun sticking so deep into my forehead I knew I'd be bruised for days. Her nose was hooked like a witch, her skin, golden.

The other, the bleach-blond one, planted her rifle between Flip's eyes. She tossed J.Q. a gun. “Here's your .38,” she said. Her eyebrows were thick, dark brown, and her skin was reddish-brown.

He caught the gun, and slipped out a pair of yellow shades from the inside of his jacket and put them on. “Where's Hadji?”

“At the tunnel's entrance which leads into town, looking out,” the bleach-blond said.

“Check them for weapons, Ronnie,” J.Q. said. “They're necromancers, so I supposed they may just be carrying sacrificial knives just out of habit.”

Ronnie smacked open Flip's long coat, and immediately confiscated the machete knives he had inside a specially-made leather sheath in the lining of his jackets. She tossed them to the ground, maybe two feet to my right.

“What is the meaning of this?” Shadow said.

J.Q. smacked himself in the head with the heel of his palm several times, and blurted out inaudible angry sounds. “I swear! By the goddess of the universe, if you don't—don't, ooh, Betty, shut,” he said, studding,

“Shut that greedy two-faced ambulance chaser up before I shoot him in the face and disgrace myself!”

Betty, the natural blond, took her weapon away from my head. Her KickGlider hovered patiently four inches above the ground purring softly. She smacked Shadow with the butt of the rifle so hard, he spun to the ground in a cry of painful agony. Dust from the skull floor shot up in a small cloud around his head.

“You're kind of cute when you're on your knees,” Betty said. “Anyone have a flogger?”

J.Q. barked that annoying childish laugh. “There's no need to act innocent, Mr. Stefanson. “Your friends should know you were the one to set this up.”

I shot a look at Shadow. If looks could kill, he would've been blown to bits. Ronnie patted down Emily, and emptied out the contents of her backpacks to the ground. She proceeded to check Bega.

“Nevermind her,” J.Q. said, it is forbidden for a Hindu priestess to carry a weapon of violence.

Ronnie reluctantly walked away from Bega and reached for my backpack. I swatted her hand away. She tried again and I grabbed her thumb and twisted it, making her drop to the ground. Something jarred me in the head and as pain jolted through my head and neck, I kissed the ground. Stars danced before my eyes in a cloud of dust. The ground was cold and hard. I felt someone, probably Ronnie, check my body for weapons, before snatching me back up to my feet. The world spun and my vision swam in a pool of dizziness.

“The rest of them are clean,” Betty said.

“Good,” J.Q. said. “Well, Sylva...Slasher, you will find that we do not have time for heroics.”

The glimmer of Flips machetes reminded me that they were only feet away from me, but my eyes did not betray my thoughts. I kept them trained on the skull floor. “And who the heck are you?”

“None of your concern,” J.Q. said. “But if you must know we are simply...business people.”

Ronnie grabbed me by the collar of my jacket and jerked it. “Get up,” she said.

I smacked her hand away and she stuck the nozzle of her rifle up my nose. “Go ahead, death-bitch. Let's see if you can raise yourself back from the dead!”

“Ronnie,” J.Q. warned. “I'm not a killer like my father and his peers of thugees, we're entrepreneurs.”

She pulled the rifle out of my nostril reluctantly. A corner of my lip rose in a nasty snarl.

“I'm your death—bitch, alright,” I said, and wiped the smell of metallic from my nose, defiantly.

“Ooh,” Betty said, laughing, “looks like we'll have to douse you both with corn oil and have a bra and panty fight in the crypts, later on.”

She walked over to J.Q. and he kissed her roughly. Betty shoved him in his chest, and he stumbled back with that annoying boyish laugh. J.Q. motioned for Ronnie to go to Shadow.

She did, and yanked him up, ripping his expensive suit jacket, searching for Lord Byron's journal.

“Do you know how much this suit costs,” Shadow said, angrily.

Ronnie smacked Shadow in the face with the butt of her gun, and he staggered backwards in pain.

“Got it,” she said, and held the journal before handing it over to J.Q.

He skimmed through the contents, seemed pleased, and slid the journal into his jacket.

“They call themselves the Paanch,” Shadow said, steadying himself against the skull walls, “which is Hindi for The Five. Just a bunch of thugs who think they're the teenage Indian-punk version of Indiana Jones.”

J.Q. laughed. “Oh, but you're wrong, Mr. Stefanson. We are the suppliers of all the major acquisitions that every sniffing begging British museum comes to when they can't get their cowardly hands on the most precious relics and artifacts. Now, if you would be so kind, I have a meeting in the morning with a very anxious society of antiquaries, and want to be fully refreshed when I sell them this fine literary relic. You know, they'll pay anything to boast to the other museums of having the secret story written by Lord Byron for Mary Shelley.”

“What about Jemadar?” Ronnie asked. “I thought she wanted you to bring the journal to her first.”

J.Q. pounded his head again with the heel of his palm, and pointed at Ronnie. “Foolish bitch,” he said, “there is no—no—no Jemadar! Have you ever seen her, or heard of anyone that has?”

Ronnie traded a fearful look with Betty, and they both shook their heads slowly.

J.Q. nodded maniacally. “That's...that's because she doesn't exist!” Spit splattered from his mouth, and dribbled a little on his chin. “I suspect,” he said, wiping the saliva from his chin, and seemingly regaining

composure, “one of the treacherous curators has had their fun manipulating us long enough.” He grabbed Betty's chin roughly and squeezed her lips like she was a fish. “Tomorrow, my darling, I take matter's into my own hands, and will become the *new* leader of the Paanch.”

Betty tried to smile, but was obviously in pain. When J.Q. let go off her mouth, which was now reddened and bruised, she rubbed it.

“One,” J.Q. shouted, and shook his fist, making a part of his turban loosen, “who does not hide behind mysteries and smoking mirrors!” His voice lowered. “And Lord Byron's Journal is our ticket.”

J.Q.'s expression became blank for an instant, and then he smiled slowly, as if he had just had an epiphany. “Come on, kitten, time to purr.”

Betty went back to her KickGlider, which hummed softly and hovered by our machetes, shimmering on the ground from the tunnel's lights. I had been easing closer and closer to the machetes on the ground and was now just inches from them.

“Come on, babe,” Betty said, “I'm hungry. Let's go get find an all-night burger joint.”

J.Q. stepped on the KickGlider, and wrapped his arms around Betty's waist. “Ronnie, take care of them.”

Shadow rubbed the back of his head and saw that his hand was bloody. “What about me? My money?”

“Money? Oh, that's right, I did agree to pay you handsomely.” J.Q. reached inside his jacket.

He pulled out his harmonica and tossed it in Shadow's feet. It clanked to the ground of skulls.

“Better pick it up,” J.Q. said, grinning, “Maybe you can get that tear in your pretty suit jacket fixed. My harmonica will at least pay for that.”

He laughed, and then smacked Betty on her buns. “Let's glide out, baby.”

Betty pushed her glider with a couple of kicks, and it sped off down the tunnel; tiny pink lights illuminating from the rear of it. J.Q. laughed boyishly, his small voice echoing through the corridors. Ronnie turned and without hesitation, shot Shadow in the heart. He crumpled to the ground, hitting his head against the wall on the way down. Emily screamed. Bega just watched, as if she's seen a hundred men shot in cold blood before. You could hear Dresy's screams even with her mouth gagged, and it was the most terrifying sound I'd ever heard in my life.

“I though he said you weren't killers,” Flip said, his yell echoing in throughout the tunnel.

“He said he wasn't a killer,” Ronnie replied, and smirked. “Can't say the same for me. Now to shut this annoying brat up.”

Ronnie pointed her rifle at Dresy, but before she could shoot, I dropped to the ground and slung a machete at her. It sliced her leg, and she screamed, falling backwards. Ronnie hit her head on the skull ground and her cranium cracked. Blood exploded from her head and she was dead. Dresy screamed louder, tears flooding down her sweet cheeks. I snatched the rifle from the ground and tossed it to Emily.

“Emily, find something to tie Shadow up,” I said. “Call the police, and Bega take Dresy to safety.”

“Okay,” Emily said, teary-eyed.

Dresy was turned toward the wall in a fetal position. I thought she was hiding her face from seeing Ronnie's corpse.

“Go,” Bega said. “They must pay for this.”

I nodded. She nodded back, and I went to the KickGlider.

“Alright, Flip, let's ride or die. Show me your skills, brudder.”

He flashed me the shaka sign. “Surf's up, and they're going down,” Flip said, and placed a foot on Ronnie's KickGlider.

I got on to the wide hovering board, behind him, and grabbed on to his waist.

Emily came over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Be careful, babe.”

“Always,” he said, and tapped Em's nose softly with his thumb, making her smile.

Flip was so powerful, all he needed was one push and we were whizzing down the tunnel. Obviously, Betty and J.Q. was so sure they they were in control, they were taking their sweet time leaving; maybe giving time for Ronnie to catch up. At any rate, we caught up to them quickly. They saw us, and started speeding up.

The KickGlider was kind of like a motor scooter, except you had to kick-push it every so often to maintain speed, which could go up to thirty miles-per-hour. However, misjudging the rate of speed you were

going could spell a nasty painful spill.

When we got to about fifty feet behind them, J.Q. started shooting at us. Flip was a lot better glider than I took him for. His maneuverability was a beauty in motion. We avoided every bullet.

“Hold on, tight,” Flip said, as he dodged, dipped and cut corners in the maze of tunnels.

Moonlight from outside started spilling into the tunnel and I knew that we reached the farthest end. Based on J.Q.'s earlier comments, this opening led to the town. There were a row of cement steps ahead of us, and a rusty iron gate, which was open. J.Q. and Betty jumped off the KickGlider and ran up the stairs. J.Q. shot one more time and the bullet just missed my head, clipping off strands of my hair.

“Hurry,” I said, gasping, “We're losing them!”

“Hold on,” Flip said. “We don't have time for you to get off.”

“Wait—what?”

“I said, hold on!”

Flip glided close to one side of the wall, pushed off hard so that we went to the other side, kicked his leg out and stepped on one of the skull heads in the wall to give us a big push off the ground and we whizzed up the steps.

Flip bent his knees and balanced himself. “Bend your knees!”

I thought for sure I was going to fall off and slide painfully back down the steps. I yelled and held on his waist for dear life. We made it all the way to the top! Seriously, it had to have ascended about twenty feet.

We shot through the entrance and met an explosion of smoke, blinding us totally. Flip and I rammed into a parked car, our bodies colliding hard. The thick smoke disoriented me.

“Good job, Hadji,” I heard J.Q. hollar. “Nothing like a little smoke bomb to save the day. Hurry!”

Hadji? J.Q.? Betty? Ronnie? Cartoon characters?

I rolled to my feet, and blindly searched for the KickGlider, finding it a few feet away from us on the sidewalk. Flip was knocked out cold, and his head was bruised. I shivered. The air was colder than it was in the labyrinth of tunnels. I slipped, and almost lost my footing. The ground was damp from rainfall. A horn honked, and a few cars ran up and down the streets, lazily.

Where did they go?

I wasn't really sure, but thought I heard J.Q.'s voice coming from my right. So with a couple of pushes, I kicked the glider back into motion, and sped across the crosswalk. The traffic light turned green and an eighteen-wheeler truck cranked into motion. I grabbed on to the back of the truck. There were only a few people out and about, dress warmly for the chilly air; a young couple holding hands, an old lady walking her poodle, and a priest locking up the doors to a church.

I passed by policemen sitting in their parked car, but pulled myself to the side of the truck, and was sure they didn't see me. For a few seconds, my stomach twisted in knots, waiting to hear sirens or a whistle for me to halt, but that didn't happen. In no time, I spotted Betty, Hadji, and J.Q., or Jonny Quest, or whatever his real name was, pushing their gliders on the sidewalk. J.Q. spotted me, and they sped down a dark alley.

Was it a trap? What should I do? Turn around? Not a chance.

I push-kicked the glider as fast as I could and coasted toward the alley with a little plan of my own. Right before I went into the dark alleyway, I leapt in the air and when I came down, smacked the tip of my toe hard on the KickGlider. It went flipping forward into the alley. Shots were fired at the wide snowboard-like contraption and I saw the direction from where the muzzle flashes were; directly on my right.

I landed like a cat on all fours, and crouched low, snapping into a clockwise leg sweep. J.Q. fell backwards and hit his head against the wall. His .38 went flying in the air. More shots were fired from the back of the alley by a door lit by a lamp post. It was Betty.

I dove to my stomach and caught the J.Q.'s gun. I rolled and fired twice at Betty with both hands on the gun. Bullets ricocheted of the ground all around me and chunks of asphalt sprayed into my line of sight. I spotted a garbage bin, and ran for cover. I ducked out, and a bullet hit the can, right near my face. My heart pounded by it being such a close call. The vibration of the can shuddered so hard, I felt in in my face, and jerked my head back behind the bin. After a beat, I poked my head out cautiously and pulled the trigger, and got a freaking *click...click*.

Dammit. The gun was empty. All they had to do now was come right on out and I was a dead girl. Fight or flight. I could either fight, and risk losing it all, including my life, or run, and have to live with myself forever knowing that I gave up, when there could've been a chance to win. I exhaled, and wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. Is it possible to be pissed, and scared at the same time? Talk about conflict of interest.

J.Q. moaned and started waking up. I stood up, and slowly released the anger and hatred I had for him and his stupid organization, that ruined Dresy's birthday, to the universe.

Master Li said strength has no use for hate or anger.

I lifted my knee high, paused for three seconds to collect a concerted amount of chi, and thrust my foot into J.Q.'s head, knocking him out. I went over to collect the KickGlider to see if it was still any good, but it was shot, literally. An older woman, thirties, matronly, walked past the alley and saw me holding the gun. She glanced down J.Q.'s bleeding body, let out a little cry of fear, and hurried off.

Freak me. She's going to go call for help, and I'll be left holding the... I tossed the empty gun into the wall and dashed, somewhat cautiously, for the door at the end of the alley that I'd seen Betty go through. I berated myself for not wiping my prints off the gun first, and walked through the door, distracted, catching a small fist in my stomach. I bent over, another blow hit me in the back of my head. I let out a guttural scream and kissed the ground for the second time, that night. *Get up—get up—get up!*

I rolled over on my back just in time to catch someone's foot about to slam down into my face. With both hands, I twisted the foot, and rolled to my side, and snapped the ankle. The person screamed in agony. It was a young girl with a red ponytail. I sprung to my feet, and realized that I was in a warehouse of some sort. Rows and rows of boxes sitting on crates filled the area. Dark figures surrounded me and the only light came from the moonlight slipping into the door from outside, and a lightbulb in a wire frame at the far end of the warehouse.

Just in time, my eyes adapted to the darkness. There were seven teenagers surrounding me; five girls and two guys.

This is not fair at all—for them, that is.

One girl advanced. She held a lead pipe in her hand. She had red hair, too, and wore a dark pea coat, slacks. The chick swung at my head. I ducked, spun, and hit her in the stomach with a back fist. When she stumbled back, I snatched the pipe out of her hand, cracked her in the knees, and she went down holding her knee, crying.

The two guys came at me; a short muscular bald dude with a red ponytail cascading out the back of his head, came from the left, and a skinny boy in slacks and a silk shirt, also sporting a red ponytail, was behind me. I side kicked the one in front of me in his jaw, planted that foot in the ground, and backspun hitting the one behind me in the ear with the pipe, only seeing him from my peripheral view—a no-look blow. He held his ear and yelled, staggering backwards. I ran up to him and swung the lead pipe with both hands, knocking him under his chin. His jaw cracked, and he plopped to the floor, bloodied and unconscious. The other guy had gained his composure and kicked me hard in the back, making me drop the pipe. My back exploded in spasms of burning pain. I clutched for my back, stumbling forward. Letting my momentum help me build speed, I ran up a wall of boxes and did a backflip over his head.

I kicked him in the back of his head and he fell into the boxes. I took another moment to grasp at the excruciating ache in my back, and gasped for air. *Mind over body—mind over body.*

He turned and came at me with a wild vengeance. He swung, I blocked, and countered with an uppercut to his chin. It didn't hurt him at all, but my fist felt like I just slammed it into a brick wall. I shook my fist and held it in my hand.

Muscle man smiled and hit me in the chest. It felt like a sledge hammer. What do you do when you need time to recover? Run. He released a deep warpath yell and followed. The other two girls let out war cries and followed. Although, I was running for my life, I couldn't help but notice how comical they sounded. I sprinted down an aisle that was wet and slippery. Yep. Great day to wear boots, and not my usual comfy Converses.

Stacks of boxes fifteen-feet high were on both sides of me. Stupidly, I ran for the light at the end of the

warehouse. When I got to the end, guess who was waiting for me with a rifle pointed at my head? Betty.

However, I was running so fast, and the floor was so slippery, I couldn't stop. So, I did what came naturally. I took the gun away from her as I slid past her, crashed into the wall and shot her in the stomach when the gun went off by mistake. *Oops.*

She clutched her stomach, and blood leaked out of the hole in her leather jacket, and crimson spilled over her brown Henna tattoos, splattering to the floor.

Betty fell to her knees. "Guess, I won't need a flogger, after all," she said, falling face-first into the concrete.

Totally distracted, again, I turned to see what the others were doing and that's when the lead pipe I'd dropped earlier, flung into my head and nearly knocked me out. White stars and red stripes exploded in my head like it was the Fourth of July. *Great.* I swear a five-inch tall clone of Master Li tugged on the loave of my ear and said, "Focus, Sylva, focus. Always be aware of all around you, and all around you will honor your presence of awareness."

That's when the warehouse lights came on, and the police told everyone to halt, and stay where they were. All I remember from that point was Flip helping me up, and later me breaking down in a violent fit of crying when Emily told me at the police station that Ronnie shot Dresy when I threw the machete at her leg. The police let one slip through their hands, however. Don't ask me how, but J.Q. got away mysteriously, and Betty didn't croak. She survived the gunshot wound. Since, Dresy died, I guess Bega had no reason to stick around, and she disappeared without a forwarding address, after answering a few questions at New Scotland Yard.

Lord Byron's journal was as elusive as Tolkien's ring, but nevertheless news of its existence, caused an uproar. Every television station in the airport reported on how museums around the world were on a desperate quest for the precious artifact. The police commissioner told me that they had been in pursuit of *The Five* for years. Finally, with our help, they had arrested some members, which would give their investigation some legs.

From what I gathered, *The Five* inherited a tradition of crime from their forefathers who once terrorized India as an organized gang of assassins. The leader of these thugs, Jemadar, was as mysterious as Keyser Söze. No one knew for sure if the person was male or female, but the commissioner told me that every museum curator they interviewed, shuddered and became disoriented with hysterical fear when they were asked about the leader of the teenaged criminal acquisition gang. Anyway, that was their problem, and their headache.

Me? I'd been sitting in the plane for nearly nineteen hours and thirty minutes with a bandage on my head, bruises on my hands, and a hole in my heart. Squiggy looked up at me with his sleepy eyes and licked my hand before he yawned, and proceeded to nestle his furry little head in a comfortable spot on my lap. With Emily standing beside me, I smiled slightly, and pressed play one more time to watch the joyful three-minute video of my precious friend who died on February 19th, thirty-three minutes after her eighth birthday began.

I remember the quote at the beginning of Lord Byron's story *Leichgate* he wrote in lieu of Mary Shelley and John Polidori's challenge, and it comforted me: *The heart will break, but broken live on.*

About the Author

Ace Antonio Hall is the author of the horror novel, *Confessions of Sylva Slasher* (Montag Press, April 2013). His short stories *They*, *Raising Mary: Frankenstein*, and *Bated Breath* have been awarded Honorable Mention for the Writers of the Future Awards 2013, 2014 and 2016. He published his short story *Dead Chick Walking* in *Calliope Magazine* Fall 2013 #141 and *The Eldáling* in their Spring 2016 issue.

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Hall received a BFA from Long Island University and taught English for more than a decade. He is a native New Yorker who now resides in Los Angeles, CA.

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Also by the Author

Confessions of Sylva Slasher

SYLVA lives on a parallel version of Earth, where “deadheads” (zombies) are non-threatening, and have gentle simple minds. Because deadheads can speak and never lie, officers of the law hire Sylva for police investigations, or mourners want their loved ones raised to simply say their last goodbyes.

A ship hires Sylva, her best friend, EMILY and Emily’s boyfriend, FLIP, who all work for a necrotic company, to raise a corpse, kicking off a zombie-themed journey during spring break. The raising ceremony ends in a disastrous fashion.

For Sylva, performing a botched ceremony deepens her melancholy mood since the day marks the two-year anniversary of her boyfriend, BRANDON’s death. What happens next takes her on a strange adventure when passengers on the ship mysteriously die and reanimate into the living dead. Dark secrets are revealed and the only way to survive is to discover the truth about herself.

Will Sylva be able to save her friends or will she die with them on a ship full of a thousand corpses?