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The first time Bastion witnessed a murder, he was staring at a crack in his ceiling. Which, looking back, was probably appropriate for where else do such things occur but in the cracks of humanity?

He had just dropped into bed. Tired, sore and not a little grumpy. Typical twentieth birthday. No cake, candles, party. His head was woozy too, a few cans of his favoured amber beverage having not worked its magic tonight. Not the floating just-dropped-a-few-bottles-of-beer woozy, but one where that machinery in his head was gunked with grease and the synapses were struggling to fire.

With sore head on a lumpy pillow, he sniffed sornily for himself and rubbed at his nose, trying to get the stench of the Golden Lucky Takeaways out of his nose, the oily tang of sweet and sour pork rising through the floor boards and vents.

He sighed, stared at his favourite crack in the ceiling, and wondered, not for the first time, what the hell this life was all about. The crack didn't answer. Well, not yet at least.

She had looked particularly insane today.

Lank hair hanging down over her face, a limp testament to her ageing, the auburn brown largely faded to a dull tinge of grey. She gnawed at that thumb the entire time. It was all Bastion could do to not reach over the table and yank it out of her mouth. But, no touching allowed of course.

Seb, the big guard with the big teeth and the even bigger gaps between the teeth had given him a nod as he stepped through the metal detector.

"Lively visit today then?" Seb's face was placid. The tone was not.

Bastion ignored him and walked out.

At least Mason had remembered his birthday, had even shouted him to McDonald's. But, it hadn't ended the greatest when Bastion curtly told him to mind his own business.

"Chill man, just asking."

"Yeah, well maybe I don't want you asking."

"Well stuff-you very much." Pause. "Even shouted you to Maccas prick."

"Didn't ask you to."

It wasn't deserved, but Bastion's back was up and sometimes his mouth came out fighting.

Mason had walked off, after another 'stuff you'.

And so, instead of maybe hanging out with Mason and Stace and Roddy, he was climbing into bed, half drunk with a woozy, cotton-wool head, trying to forget the vacant look in his mother's eyes.

Which was when the tremors started.

They began in his feet, an uncontrollable shaking that had his toes curled over and his calves thrumming against the blanket. It was at that moment, as his legs began to drum an electric beat on the bedsheets, that Bastion realised that the alcohol-infused headache had suddenly receded and his mind suddenly felt remarkably clear. The tremor had ascended to his chest and arms now, and his hands had joined in the spastic cadence, adding a counter-point to his feet. Despite his body being all kinds of crazy, his mind had found a whole new operating frequency, every detail in the room becoming clear.

All Bastion could think was that this was a pretty shitty time for his head to kick into gear, just so he could watch his body dance the electric boogaloo across the bed.

Of course, thoughts of death passed through his mind. He hadn't been very good to his body over the years, and he wondered if it was now gonna wave goodbye and kick him on to the next phase.

He could just hear its snide voice as it packed up shop: *"Sorry Bastion, times up buddy. I can't take no more of your crappy breakfasts and your sedentary lifestyle and a liver that you've shot to hell. Those hot cakes this morning were a pound of fat too far. But, before you go, I think I'll put on a show and dance my way out. Oh, and just to show you I'm not a bad sport, I'll let you watch it all in perfect 1080 HD."*

So, he just lay there shaking, possessed by a bad case of the spastic jitterbug while his mind logged it all in perfect, observant detail.

Strangely enough, he didn't feel an ounce of fear.

Bastion had heard of such things. People recounting their brushes

with death and how time slowed down and brought with it a remarkable clarity. Of course, it was difficult to say it slowed down with his feet drumming an epileptic beat on the bed, but he was definitely taking in more detail. Every detail in the room was brought into crystal focus. He noticed the cobwebs in the corner, the same ones he'd been looking at for a few weeks, nay months now. He saw Mr. Spider nestled comfortably amongst his silken strands, glassy eyes watching the crazy human as he danced. He noticed how grimy the ceiling was and thought that he really should do something about that. He smelt the mustiness of unwashed clothes lying beneath the bed, the smell of a twenty year old that was spending too much time on his own. He saw it all, and was almost overcome with a desire to clean it *all* up, his life included.

Unfortunately, at this moment of clarity he was also mid super fit, so he couldn't do much but lay there, limbs twerking and crumping, and observe the sad state of his bedroom, a blunt metaphor for the sad state of his life.

Bastion stared up at the ceiling, not sure what else to do but wait it out. Either he was gonna shake himself into the next life, or he would exhaust himself and things would end in one hell of a headache.

He found his favourite crack in the ceiling and fixed his gaze on it.

Then came the shadows, creeping in from the edges of the room.

Great, he thought. There goes my vision. I'm not even gonna be able to watch the end of the show. He could practically hear his body laughing at the joke. *Gotcha!*

Sadly, all the worse for him, it was the exact opposite. He didn't lose his vision. And, it most certainly wasn't the end.

At first, Bastion thought he was losing his vision completely. The shadows expanding and reaching for the centre of the room. Then his body gave an almighty shudder, a last shaking loose of the gears, before lying blessedly still.

Then he saw that his crack, the one that looked like a demented Superman 'S' was moving. Well, not moving exactly, but *growing*. The ends extending from where they ended towards the edges of the room and into the shadows.

Bastion thought his mind was definitely gone by this point, which couldn't be right because he still enjoyed crisp mental clarity. But, he thought of his mother's vacant stare and wondered if she too saw things that weren't there with crystal clarity. The thought disturbed

him more than anything else.

The ceiling shook, and Superman's 'S' began to open wider, a dark maw appearing immediately above Bastion's prone body. The maw grew wider and the ceiling began to peel away and upwards, like the skin of some demented giant orange. He would have jumped up and run but, while the spasms had stopped, his body had apparently not recovered the ability to move so he just lay there, captive to the view that was quite literally unfolding before him.

Unlike what you would expect when one's ceiling is unexpectedly peeled open, Bastion did not find himself staring up into the night sky. Instead, he found himself looking down into another room where a hunched figure moved slowly across his vision, attending to what he could only think of as a cauldron in the centre of the room. Whether he was on top of them, or they were on top of him, he couldn't tell, nor did it seem to matter in the gravity-defying situation. Bastion did not have time to ponder upon such things because his gaze was immediately distracted by the boy atop a small wooden table to the side of the room. What looked like a large bone had been jammed and secured in his mouth. Pale blue eyes were wide in terror as he watched the crouched figure draw closer, something glinting dully in hand. Bastion guessed the boy to be about nine years old.

What happened next is what would forever curse Bastion with recurring nightmares that would pull him sweating from uneasy sleep.

There was cutting. And blood. And terror that made Bastion's guts clench in a way the tremors hadn't. And there was a blade that once glinted with a metal sheen now glinted red.

And there was the book, an awful, terrible book that burned with forbidden knowledge.

It lasted a long time. Bastion was forced to watch, unable to blink or turn away until it was done, some unknown power ensuring he witnessed this darkness, that someone watched the boy's passing, a small comfort to this horrific end.

When it was done, and the boy had been gone for some time, the vision closed and Bastion passed out.