

Night Shift

Night shift. God, how I hate it. Eight hours fighting against my natural urge to fall asleep while checking the cells every thirty minutes in between another boring game of cards. I'd swear Eddie Jones is looking at my cards when I have to make my rounds, but fair is fair – I've done that to him as well.

I glance at the clock on the wall. The corridor is quiet enough that I can *hear* it tick-tocking eight feet away – either that, or it's a bloody noisy thing. Eleven-twenty-nine p.m....time to check on the prisoners – oh, I'm sorry, the *patients*. Prisoners, patients – they're all *orcs*. Fomorians. The mutated. Whatever you want to call them.

I sigh, letting Eddie know it's that time again, pick up the keys and stand up. He grunts, angling his neck to the ceiling, wishing for a cigarette. Fortunately, it isn't far to the cellblock entrance; less than five yards. Just five minutes checking the cells, and we can get back to the game.

I stop outside cell 1. The chalkboard mounted outside announces that this little monster, #5-A, is Seamus, and a note underneath it to watch the lights. Just below it, a square box on the wall holds a trimmed-down version of one of those thick files somewhere in administration; the full one covers his eyesight problems in nauseating detail...you'd think they could just say he's an albino and be done with it, like the summary! And just mention that he's an orc, without the tedious "thin yet well-muscled" line about his muscles, or the "stochastic moss-green fungus" that tattoos his face and limbs. I get it. He's an orc!

I peek inside. The cells aren't much to speak of – a bed bolted to the floor along one wall, and a table bolted to the opposite wall. There's a sink built into the wall, in the corner next to the door, just about visible from the door. Two books, a magnifying lens, and his glasses lie on the table.

He's curled up on the bed, soundly asleep. Not that I can say that; not accurate enough, apparently. Instead, I have to note that he *appears* to be asleep. Not that he's really much of a problem; he knows his place, knows how lucky he is that *we* caught him. And not the dwarves.

Cell 2 couldn't be any more different. Thomas Grady (#6-A) is one of those brats from the Fomorian Brotherhood. Little bastard stirs up a lot of trouble out of some kind of deranged belief that he's a "superior lifeform" to us. Rules are to keep him under lock and key – gladly! – though apparently we can't just throw the damn key away...so we have to settle for watching him, and not letting him have anything he can turn into a weapon.

I peek inside. It's definitely him – heavy build, short brown hair. He's asleep – sorry, he *appears to be asleep* – no doubt dreaming of the havoc he'll wreck in the name of the Brotherhood, or even just from exploding because it's Wednesday, or some other reason.

First girl in cell 3 is #7A. Maebh, the *slavers' daughter*. Yeah, her parents are bloody slavers. And the worst part is that I can't even properly dislike her for it; a little bird told me that her parents only did it to keep her fed, and neither is at all proud of it! Imagine that...Fomorians with morals! Or so they claim.

I glance inside. Surprise, surprise, she's still awake, but she's *not* touching her drawing pad or tools. She's lying upside down on the bed with her head dangling off with her hands behind it, wiggling her feet in the air. She obviously sees me, because she glances at the door, sticks her tongue out, and sits back up with far more speed than a heavy girl like her should be capable of. I take note of the fact that she's still awake; the doctors are worried about this, even if she looks fine to *me*.

Cells 4 and 5 hold the twins, #8-A and #9-A, or Aoife and Ciaran if you *really* want to give them their full names. Both of them are rail-thin gingers and, surprisingly enough, their parents are part

of that damned Brotherhood. Or at least they were – apparently they deserted. Either way, they’re not very cooperative – you have to shout at them about as much as with 6-A to get them to do anything – though I’ll admit, they’re not as hostile as *him*.

Both are awake, and both give me the same apathetic looks. The resemblance ends there; 8-A lies on her stomach facing the door, and 9-A lies on his back with his hands underneath his head, waving his left foot aimlessly. Each of them has a single book on their table; apparently, they’re also trying to learn how to read. Don’t know why they bother, really.

I hesitantly stop outside cell 6. The chalkboard announces that this little freak, #10-A, is *Diarmuid*. He’s one of the two new ones brought in today; a fisherman’s son from Galway, they say. From what I saw earlier, he’s also got eyesight problems, wearing sunglasses at all times. The summary file hasn’t arrived yet, so nothing yet about any issues or even a description beyond short black hair, the glasses, and no existing signs of exposure. But people talk. Word is that his eyes are red.

As if to prove that, he suddenly stops tossing and turning. His head starts upright, staring at the wall opposite him. I start recording this, and he whips his head around to stare at me. I’m glad he’s on the other side of the door; his eyes are *blood red*. Those eyes are *evil*. Like those of a ghost, or some kind of snake. Probably a snake; at least they can’t walk through walls!

I’m kind of glad to move onto the next cell. That has the *other* new one: #11-A, or Siobhán. A five-foot-high dwarven girl. Don’t ask me how that makes sense...some legal nonsense about being born to them, or in one of their tunnels, or something like that. Word so far is she’s a fugitive – not just in the usual sense of “no place for me in society”, but a genuine runner. That would explain why she’s bald on one side – apparently the dwarves do that to prisoners – but not how she ended up here.

She’s standing at the sink, scrubbing frantically at her right arm. I take a note of this. Good thing there isn’t a mirror in the cells – the doctors are worried she’ll hurt herself. Actually, that applies to *all* of them, but her in particular for some reason. Regardless of why, I do not want to go through all that paperwork again. I go to leave, but something catches my eye on her arm...a tattoo of some kind? I can’t quite make out the details, but it looks like letters in some kind of oval or rectangle.

As soon as she realises that I’m watching, she flinches and pulls her sleeve down, turning her arm away. She backs away from the door, not taking her eyes off it – off me – even as she reaches the far wall next to the bed. I note this as well; something’s definitely not right here. In fact, it reminds me of some of the older prisoners in the main block, trying to remove their skin fungus.

“So?” Jones breaks the silence as I sit back down and light a cig.

“So, what?”

“The new kids. What d’ya think of them?”

I shrug. “The albino? Creepy little brat.”

“He’s not an albino. Didn’t you hear the doctors?”

“Fuck off, his eyes are red, and he wears sunglasses. You tellin’ me he ain’t one?”

“I don’t understand it neither. But I’m with ya on the creepy part.” He pauses, and shrugs. “I guess he gets that a lot.”

“So what?” I finally draw on the cig.

“So what? Fuckin’ hell, Tommy, ya don’t think he *wanted* to be turned into an orc?”

I pause. I’ve never thought about that before. Most of the freaks seem pretty happy with it, but they were mostly *born* that way. The new ones definitely weren’t.

“Now you mention it, the girl’s scrubbing at her hands like there’s blood on ‘em. She a dwarf?”

“Yeah, she is. From what I hear, she was born in one o’ their surface villages. Any ideas how she ended up here?”

“No...though there *is* that tattoo on her forearm. Looked kinda familiar.”

“How?” he asks as he picks up my lighter for his own cigarette. I shrug, *just* as my eyes fall on

the symbol on the side. Three letters inside a rounded rectangle. C-T-C. A very well-known logo, that: *Comhlacht Tradála Chonnacta*, the Connacht Trading Company. The dwarves' monopoly on trading with the outside world. I saw that logo less than five minutes ago, as a tattoo.

"What?" he prompts. He must have seen my face.

"Uh...Eddie, why would a girl have CTC's logo on her arm?"

"What?" he looks down at the lighter, turns it around to see the logo, and sharply looks back at me. "Where?"

"The new girl. She kept scrubbing at her right forearm. I *think* I saw that logo there."

His eyebrows shoot north towards his hairline. He doesn't appear to have noticed that I'm not entirely sure. "Really? It didn't look like a...like a cattle brand?" Of course a dairy farmer would think that. Now that he mentions it...it looked more like *that* than a tattoo.

I shrug again. "Not really *our* problem, is it? Unless she tries cutting her arm off."

"Or," he adds sourly, "if CTC come and claim their *property*."

"Their *property*? What are you talking about?"

He rolls his eyes. "Come on, Tommy! Ya don't think she put that brand on her arm of her own free will? CTC stamp that logo on *everything* they own – even the bloody bog roll!"

I'm still not getting it. "Everything they own? What, you mean they own *her*?"

"Like a slave, I bet," he nods grimly. I am actually at a loss for words, so I start shuffling the cards again for the next game. As I do, I glance up at the clock again. Eleven minutes to twelve.

"You know what? I *hate* this job."