

MARK MURKOVICH

Holiday in Scaresylvania

(Excerpt of the draft translation)

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— Chapter 1 —

The Bat-Borne Message

Twilight crept over the old town of Carpathville, sliding silently toward the gates of the cemetery. Shadows pooled thick and inky across the cobblestone streets, draping the town in a cloak of darkness that seeped into every nook and cranny. The October wind, sharp and wild, raced through the narrow lanes, howling eerily against the windows and doors of weathered houses. It snatched amber leaves from gnarled trees, sending them tumbling across graves and crooked tombstones.

From the heart of the cemetery came the faint, mournful sound of a harmonica. Slow and melancholy, like pale mist curling between the headstones, it was played by Victor, the ever-bored gravedigger. He sprawled atop a slab crowned with a weeping angel, eyes fixed on the mansion across the street, humming his own quiet tune.

Steam puffed from his mouth in thick clouds, but Victor hardly noticed the damp chill. His tall, wiry frame seemed fragile at first glance, yet he moved with a careful steadiness. His dark shirt, faded trousers, and stretched suspenders were well-worn, yet neat. Even the black stubble along his jaw was trimmed with care, framing his face sharply, and his scuffed boots gleamed almost as if polished.

Victor's gaze remained locked on the house across the road. The tall, gloomy mansion stood directly opposite the cemetery gates, on Lament Lane. Its number—thirteen—was hardly lucky, yet

it suited its peculiar inhabitants: the Murkovich family. Just their name was enough to make townsfolk shiver, and the wild rumors surrounding them only added to the chill.

Most of Lament Lane's residents were considered odd by the rest of Carpathville. The difference was simple: they lived across from the cemetery because it was cheap, with a grim view to match. The Murkovichs, however, had lived in Carpathville long before the town had grown even modestly, and they had no intention of leaving. Tombstones, graves, and all.

A sweet, familiar aroma drifted on the wind. Nasturtia Murkovich had baked her grandson Mark's favorite pie again, bursting with Wolfsbane Berries. Victor would have been more than happy to take a slice. Mark would likely have been pleased to see him too—but after a pause, Victor decided against interrupting. Mark Murkovich had something important on his mind.

With one final wistful note from the harmonica, Victor tucked it into his shirt pocket and pulled out a Choco-Joker bar. Mark had recently given him a whole box, packed to the brim. Victor bit into it, letting the rich, chocolaty taste mingle with the spicy-sweet scent of the pie drifting from below. Leaning back against the angel statue, his eyes never left the second-floor window of the mansion.

That was Mark's room. On his "spiderweb" bed, he refreshed an app on his phone again and again. The headboard, shaped like a web with long-legged spiders perched on the posts, could have sent most children running. But Mark wasn't most children. Bats, scorpions, snakes, and other "creepy" creatures—or trinkets like skulls and gravestones—were as ordinary to him as breakfast cereal. They adorned his wallpaper, paintings, or sometimes appeared in person whenever his grandmother brewed potions or his grandfather tinkered with strange inventions.

"C'mon, Karloff, this is driving me mad," muttered Mark to the raven perched on his headboard. "They could've at least told us the time the results would drop."

"Caw," replied Karloff, shifting as though he understood perfectly.

Mark tapped the app once more, but the screen stubbornly remained the same. His pale grey eyes were wide and focused, the tiny stone earrings in his pierced ears glinting nervously.

His room was littered with Choco-Joker wrappers, boxes stacked precariously on every surface. His usual teenage messiness was evident, yet this chaos had a serious purpose. Mark's lifelong dream of visiting Scaresylvania hovered almost within reach. But it was far too early to celebrate; dreams had a nasty habit of collapsing at the last minute. Patience, stretched thin, was all he had.

The Choco-Joker company had launched the "Joker's Surprise Sweepstakes." The grand prize: a trip to Scaresylvania, an ancient village famed for mystical sights and residents with peculiar talents. Most outsiders dismissed it as nonsense, yet the villagers didn't mind. For tourists, the place promised all manner of spooky delights—fortune-tellers, psychics, and shelves upon shelves of magical curiosities.

The rules were simple: buy a bar, enter the code into the app, and keep your fingers crossed. Mark had spent every penny he possessed, buying almost every Choco-Joker in Carpathville. Wrappers littered his room, each one a reminder of the wait that now seemed endless.

The sweet, spicy scent of pie wafted up from below. Normally, Nasturtia Murkovich would have delivered a slice straight to him. But today was a Big Day, and everyone in Mark's small household knew better than to disturb him before the contest results were announced.

Mark tugged lightly at the faint stubble on his chin and glanced out of the window. He looked just old enough to pass for a teenager, yet his faint stubble, thick sideburns, hooked nose, and lean frame made him stand out. Around his neck, he wore a black leather choker with metal studs; on his wrist, a worn band; and, hanging from a chain, his old medallion—his lucky charm.

Clutching the medallion in his hand, he closed his eyes and pictured himself in Scaresylvania. Luck had rarely been his ally, but that was what charms were for—to nudge the scales. He believed in miracles with all his heart.

Suddenly, a translucent figure of a man in old-fashioned clothing appeared halfway out of the wall above Mark. His round, inquisitive face, with tufts of grey hair and a bushy moustache, scanned the room. Karloff gave him a calm look. The ghost raised an eyebrow, silently asking how things were. Karloff shook his head, and the spirit slipped back into the wall without a sound.

Mark opened his eyes just as a rustling at the open window caught his attention. A boy clambered onto the sill, perching as though he belonged there.

“Hey,” he said. “How’s it going?”

The boy’s sturdy frame and thick chestnut hair moved with the ease of someone who had done this a hundred times.

“Great! Glad you came,” said Mark. “Maybe you can help me stop overthinking this. Want a Choco-Joker?”

“Nah,” the boy replied with a smirk. “Still got two boxes left from the last haul.”

This was Darin, Mark’s best friend. They had been inseparable since forever, despite their families’ constant squabbles. The boys kept their friendship out of grown-ups’ nonsense.

“These candy bars seem a bit sketchy,” Darin said, nudging a wrapper with his sneaker. “Never heard of them before you mentioned them.”

“They’re just candy,” Mark said. “Pretty good, actually. According to the booklet, they’ve been popular for generations. The contest is just a bit of extra hype.”

“Lucky you,” Darin said.

Mark handed over the phone. “Let me know as soon as the results pop up. I swear, this is the longest night ever.”

“Your folks laying low?” Darin asked.

“Seems so. Probably plotting how to cheer me up... if needed.”

Darin settled in, and Mark stroked Karloff’s glossy black feathers.

“So why’s Scaresylvania got you so hooked?” Darin asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark admitted. “It just... pulls me. I can’t explain it.”

Since childhood, Mark had been obsessed with the misty mountain village. Encyclopedias, travel guides, TV specials... even the odd social media post—he had pieced together every scrap of information. Yet there was little to find, and the longing remained.

Darin straightened on the windowsill, suddenly tense. Mark noticed instantly, as did Karloff.

“There’s a bat... with a scroll,” Darin said, tapping the phone. “The results are in—stay calm.”

“What? Did I lose?” Mark asked, voice tight.

His heart raced—hot and then cold. A tremble ran through him.

“Don’t drag it out,” he whispered.

“Caw,” Karloff encouraged.

Darin turned the phone toward him, eyes wide. “Mark... you won.”

Mark held his breath. Could it really be true?

Confetti streamed across the screen. A black bat hovered in the center, clutching an unrolled scroll. Sharp letters spelled it out clearly:

Winner — Mark Murkovich, Carpathville.

— *Chapter 2* — **Auntie’s Prediction**

“Three unforgettable days and three magical nights awaited in the heart of the country’s most mysterious village! And at the end—a rare chance to witness the famous Paranormal Parade on All Souls’ Day and meet the creator of the delicious Choco-Joker bars—the Chocolate Joker himself!” Mark read the advert in a single, breathless rush.

He could have recited it by heart—he had pored over the colorful booklet for hours. The moment he spotted it in the shop, he’d snatched it up without hesitation. The images of Scaresylvania felt strangely familiar, tugging at something inside him more strongly with every glance.

“Oh, Mark,” his grandmother sighed softly from her high-backed chair by the fireplace, where Karloff perched in comfortable silence.

Grandfather Felix Murkovich sat on the sofa, twisting his fingers together. His fluffy white moustache twitched from side to side—as much as a ghost’s moustache could twitch, given that he was slightly see-through.

“You know the rules about your father,” Nasturtia began. “Until you turn sixteen, you can’t leave Carpathville without an adult.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mark muttered, rolling his eyes and folding his arms. “I’ve heard it a million times. Because my dad’s some kind of secret super-agent, and evil masterminds might swoop in and kidnap me, I’m stuck here by the cemetery for the best years of my life.”

“That’s for your own good,” Nasturtia replied evenly, though a sharp edge crept into her voice.

“Maybe I’m not even Mark Murkovich,” he shot back. “Maybe it’s just a fake name so no one can find me.”

Mark was seriously grumpy. He had spent his entire life in Carpathville, never once venturing beyond its borders. Not that he was desperate to escape—but sometimes he wondered what lay elsewhere. He knew every street, every corner by heart. The town itself wasn’t bad at all: ancient, green, nestled near the mountains. But even the cemetery, the park, and the little main street—with its town hall and fountain—had begun to feel the same, day after day.

He had four whole years to wait — it felt like forever.

His father feared that his secret work put Mark in danger, so he had sent him to live with his grandparents until things were safer. *No place is safer than Carpathville*, he had said, *especially with your grandparents*. But whatever that secret work was, it dictated the rules of Mark’s life. And so he stayed—never leaving the town.

That was why he had seen his father only a handful of times as a small child. There were gifts and cards on birthdays and holidays, the occasional phone call—but it was never enough. And with each passing year, it seemed to be less and less.

“This is my chance!” Mark burst out. “I’ve been dreaming about this trip for ages, and now it’s finally here—like magic.”

He wisely chose not to mention that he had spent all his pocket money on endless boxes of Choco-Jokers.

“Forget it, Mark,” Darin said, clapping him on the shoulder. “We’ll grow up, I’ll earn some money, and I’ll take you to Scaresylvania myself.”

“Thanks, man,” Mark said. “But by the time we save enough for a proper trip and see everything, I’ll probably be grey-haired and hobbling around with a cane. I might not even care about landmarks anymore.”

“I’d still find it interesting,” grandfather Felix piped up.

Nasturtia shot him a sharp look.

“It’s getting stuffy,” Felix muttered. “I’ll open a window.”

“You can’t feel stuffy—you’re a ghost,” Nasturtia snapped.

“Even so, the room feels tense,” he grumbled.

Mark opened the booklet again. *Until you’re sixteen, you can’t leave Carpathville without an adult...*

The words echoed in his mind.

Without an adult.

A sudden idea sparked.

“Hang on,” Mark said, his eyes lighting up. “I can’t leave Carpathville without an adult until I’m sixteen, right?”

“That’s right,” Nasturtia nodded cautiously.

“So I *can* leave... if an adult comes with us!”

Nasturtia froze, staring at him. Even Felix paused halfway to the window and slowly turned.

“Er...” Felix murmured.

No one had expected that. Silence settled over the room.

Then the phone in the hallway rang—sharp and sudden.

“It’s not that simple,” Nasturtia said, ignoring it. “I can’t go with you. And it’s not just because I promised Lucretia I’d help with the Autumn Festival. I can barely manage around the house, let alone travel.”

“I’ll go with the boys!” Felix blurted, flinging the window open.

Cool air rushed in, carrying the scent of fallen leaves. From somewhere outside drifted a faint, mournful harmonica tune.

“Fool!” Nasturtia snapped. “You’re a ghost, not a living person. Stay home and don’t cause trouble!”

“Stop reminding me I’m a ghost,” Felix huffed. “I’m well aware!”

“You’ll ruin their trip with your muttering,” she said.

“You’re the one muttering,” he shot back.

“I’m worried about Mark,” Nasturtia said, shaking her head. “And who keeps ringing that infernal phone?”

Mark walked into the hallway to answer it.

The quirky old telephone—shaped like a narrow tower with a bat perched on top and tiny stained-glass windows—rattled loudly. Its windows flared with light at every ring, dimming in between.

“Murkovich residence,” Mark said. “Who’s speaking?”

“Mark, I’ve been waiting forever!” came a hoarse female voice. “What’s going on?”

It was Auntie Cobrelia—his father’s cousin. A tall woman with wild white hair and a long nose, she adored bright makeup, chunky jewelry, and sharply tailored clothes.

She had the gift of foresight—though ‘gift’ was a mild word for it. To her business partners, she seemed brilliant and calculating—a top player in her field. In truth, she simply knew the outcome in advance and moved through deals with effortless confidence.

With all her quirks, Cobrelia fit perfectly into the Murkovich family. They were all a little unusual—but always ready to help one another.

She had called because she sensed something was troubling her favorite nephew. She often did that during Mark’s difficult moments, and he had grown used to it—just as he had learned to trust her predictions.

“Hello, Auntie,” Mark said gloomily. “Sorry. We were just... talking.”

“I know,” Cobrelia replied. “I’ve felt something off all evening. You’re discussing something important—trying to make sense of it.”

“Yeah,” Mark muttered. “Trying... but not getting anywhere.”

“I have good news,” she said brightly. “It will work out in your favor. Something unexpected—I promise.”

Her words lifted his spirits, though the worry didn’t disappear entirely. Nothing was certain yet. Still, Cobrelia was rarely wrong, and he tried to hold on to that.

“What’s happened?” she asked. “I laid out my Tarot cards and saw a long-awaited gift—and a journey. Then the Hermit appeared: a tall, dark-haired man, with a shadowy aura and a troubled past connected to the dead. Nothing too dangerous, though. My instincts say these worries are exaggerated. They’ll pass.”

“Doesn’t sound very cheerful,” Mark admitted.

Darin moved closer, setting Karloff on the stand near the phone.

“I won a trip,” Mark went on, “but grandma won’t let me go. She promised Dad I’d stay in Carpathville until I’m sixteen—unless there’s an adult with me. And I want to go so badly.”

Nasturtia and Felix listened, following every word.

“Dear, it’s only a few years,” Cobrelia said gently. “Wait a little, and I’ll take you anywhere. Money’s no issue, you know.”

For her, paying for a trip for the whole Murkovich family—even including Darin—would have meant nothing. *Mark knew that. She could afford it easily. But he could never bring himself to ask for something like that.* Accepting a gift was one thing. Asking for it was another.

“I know,” Mark said. “But... could you come with us? Just three tickets. Me and Darin—we just need an adult. The trip’s already paid for.”

“Oh, dear...” she hesitated. “Where exactly are you going?”

“Scaresylvania,” Mark said, picturing the booklet again. His heart dipped slightly.

A pause followed.

“Ah...” Cobrelia faltered. “I’m terribly busy right now. I can’t get away. But don’t worry—I still see a good outcome. Trust me. There’s no need to fret. We Murkoviches always find a way.”

“You’re probably right,” Mark said quietly.

He glanced at Darin, who gave a hesitant nod. Nasturtia approached, and Mark only shrugged.

“Let me speak to her, dear,” she said. “Hello, Cobrelia... yes... my heart’s quite unsettled.”

Mark picked up Karloff and returned to the sitting room.

“What now, Darin?” he asked under his breath. “Auntie says there’s a solution, but I don’t see one. Could your dad take us? Or your mum?”

“No chance,” Darin said, rubbing the back of his neck—a nervous habit Mark knew well.

Mark absentmindedly stroked Karloff’s glossy black feathers.

“What’s that sound?” Felix asked suddenly, wrinkling his nose. “The phone again?”

Mark and Darin listened.

A simple, cheerful tune drifted in from outside.

“Oh,” Mark said. “That’s Victor. His harmonica. Haven’t seen him in a while.”

Mark had once given the gravedigger a box of Choco-Jokers, not knowing where else to keep them. The tall, dark-haired young man, who had a weakness for sweets, had probably eaten most of them by now.

“Wait,” Mark suddenly exclaimed. “Victor!”

“Yeah, that’s definitely him,” Darin said. “Always playing that tune.”

“No—I mean something else!” Mark broke into a grin. “Victor can take us to Scaresylvania!”

Felix gulped audibly.

“Come on!” Mark shouted, already racing toward the cemetery across the road. Darin dashed after him, with Karloff flapping behind.

“Oh, Cobrelia, I don’t know,” Nasturtia’s voice drifted after them. “Wait—Mark! Darin! Where are you going?”

“Just across the road, grandma!” Mark called without turning. “To the cemetery—to Victor!”

They bounded down the porch steps and ran into the yard.

“Auntie Cobrelia was right,” Mark explained between breaths. “Her Tarot showed the Hermit—a tall, dark-haired man with a shadowy aura and a past tied to the dead. That’s Victor! He’s tall—way taller than you—dark-haired, and lives like a hermit in a shack in the cemetery. And the dead? It’s a cemetery! Graves everywhere! As for his past—no one with an easy life ends up living there.”

Excitement surged through him. His heart pounded—not just from the running. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

“Makes sense,” Darin agreed as they reached the cemetery. Karloff cawed approvingly. “Still, it’s amazing how she predicts all this.”

“No surprise,” Mark said. “It’s Auntie Cobrelia. Her predictions always come true—just not always the way you expect.”

“Exactly! Remember when she said I’d never place in the hundred-metre? She was right! I’ve already won the grand prix twice!”

Darin, who loved sports, was clearly proud of this. He sprinted easily between the gravestones, while Mark struggled to keep up.

Tombstones and trees blurred past.

At last, they reached the stone slab with the weeping angel—Victor’s favorite spot.

The gravedigger hadn’t expected visitors so late. He froze mid-note, harmonica still raised.

“You boys all right?” he asked, eyeing them. “It’s night. And you’re playing tag... in a cemetery.”

“Don’t start,” Darin snapped. “You literally live here.”

“Caw-caw,” Karloff echoed mockingly, settling on a nearby tombstone.

“Victor, please,” Mark said. “We need your help. You’re the only one who can.”

“Bit early to be measuring you for coffins,” Victor smirked. “Not my line of work.”

“I’m serious!” Mark said sharply.

Victor looked at him more closely. For a brief moment, something in Mark’s eyes flickered—something dark, almost eerie—but it vanished so quickly Victor blamed it on the moonlight.

“I won a trip to Scaresylvania,” Mark continued, “but I can’t go without an adult. Grandma and grandpa can’t manage—you know that. There’s no one else... except you.”

“I’m not family,” Victor said.

“That doesn’t matter,” Mark replied. “You’re an adult. That’s enough.”

Victor sighed.

“Don’t tell me you’re too busy,” Mark pressed. “You’re not building coffins or digging graves all day. A week away won’t hurt. It’s not like all of Carpathville’s VIPs are going to die at once.”

He had a point. The ancient cemetery—reserved for the town’s most honored residents—was nearly full. Only those who had achieved something truly great were buried there, and such people didn’t pass away often.

“I don’t have a car,” Victor said. “And I can’t drive—you know that.”

“No car needed,” Mark said quickly. “We’re going by train. It says so in the booklet. Please, Victor... you have no idea how much this means to me.”

Victor rose slowly, hands in his pockets, and looked up at the pale moon. His unkempt hair stirred in the wind, leaves skittering across the ground.

“Fine,” he said at last, glancing back at the graves. He didn’t want to go—but he couldn’t refuse a boy who had always treated him like a friend. “I’ll take you.”

Mark sank down onto the stone slab, relief washing over him. His heart was still racing.

“Scaresylvania...” Victor murmured.

Somewhere far away, a lone wolf howled.

“I haven’t been there in a long time...”

— *Chapter 3* — **Postcards in a Cage**

Mark closed the creaky wardrobe doors behind him and looked around the attic. Faint shafts of sunlight filtered through the branches beyond the wide-open window, scattering across the dusty, cluttered room.

The attic seemed to stretch on forever.

Along the walls, all the way up to the ceiling, stood tall cupboards, their shelves crammed and overflowing with boxes. Carved chests, crates, trunks, and old wicker baskets were piled haphazardly, one atop another. Furniture lay shrouded beneath dust sheets; yellowed newspapers and magazines rose in teetering stacks; heaps of old clothes spilled into forgotten corners.

Among the clutter were objects that stirred the imagination: an old gramophone with scratched records, a mantel clock that had long since stopped keeping time, a rocking chair buried beneath a thick blanket of dust. The attic was full of odds and ends that were almost certainly useless now, and yet no one had ever quite found the heart to throw them away.

The one thing Mark could not find was the birdcage he needed. He could picture it perfectly—he knew he had seen it—but where exactly? The memory had slipped away entirely. The only certainty was that it was somewhere in this vast attic.

He walked to the window, drew a deep breath of crisp, fresh air, and glanced at the narrow chest of drawers nearby. On its worn surface lay a small stack of postcards. Mark picked one up, perched on the edge of the windowsill, and opened it.

A few conventional lines of good wishes were scribbled in a sharp, careless hand, and at the bottom, a modest signature: Dad.

Mark had seen this card countless times and read it just as often. Whenever his father sent a postcard—for a birthday, Christmas, or some other occasion—Mark kept it in his room at first, rereading every line as though he didn't already know it by heart. Eventually, he had decided it was better to hide them somewhere far away, so they wouldn't keep pricking at his heart whenever he came across them. And what better hiding place than this vast attic—or perhaps the cellar, with its own peculiar curiosities?

Mark sighed and set the postcard back on the pile. Again.

He received cards from almost everyone from time to time—even from Victor, though only rarely. The one person who had never sent him anything was his mother—a mother Mark had never seen.

It was almost impossible to believe: he didn't even know what she looked like. Only vague descriptions, passed down through his grandmother's memories, gave him the faintest impression.

The painful truth was that Mark's mother had died giving birth to him. No photographs, no portraits remained; she had never liked having her picture taken and had never considered herself particularly beautiful. He had her high cheekbones and dark hair. He even suspected his warm olive skin came from her side.

A few spoken descriptions, and the name Katarina—that was all Mark had. Not nearly enough.

He hoped that when his father finally returned, he would be able to ask questions, learn the details, perhaps even hear stories about his parents together. After all, there was no one else to ask; his mother had been an orphan. But his father had not appeared for many years, and that thought stirred a quiet anger in him. He was their only child—surely a few days each year could be spared? Apparently not. His father seemed to have far more important matters than his own son.

Anger rose in his chest. Mark banged his fist on the dresser. Pain flared through his knuckles instantly. But it was nothing compared to the ache that had lived inside him for years, flaring at the most unexpected and unwelcome moments.

"Hey, Murkovich!" a shout rang out from the street.

Mark recognized the voice at once. He spun around and saw Arthur Zingerei—the local celebrity—standing in the middle of the road on a brand-new skateboard, grinning. His mop of wavy red hair gleamed in the sunlight.

The Zingerei family—especially old Jacob, Arthur’s grandfather—were immensely proud of having lived in Carpathville since the town’s founding. Mark had never understood why this mattered; his own relatives on his grandmother’s side had lived there just as long. But to Arthur’s grandfather, it meant everything. He wore his Honorary Citizen of Carpathville pin with pride and carried himself with exaggerated aristocratic airs—a playful parody of nobility, if anything. At the very least, Mark thought, the finest plot in the town cemetery had already been reserved for him, thanks to his countless services to the community.

Arthur had inherited more than just his grandfather’s looks—his finely chiseled profile, his striking features—but also, most importantly, his arrogance. And he made no effort to hide it. On the contrary, he flaunted it at every opportunity.

That was why Mark could not stand him—or his grandfather, for that matter. While many longed to be part of Arthur’s circle, Mark had never even considered it. Arthur never missed a chance to sneer at Mark’s modest circumstances or make cutting remarks about his appearance—but only when Darin wasn’t around. Once, when Darin had caught him bullying Mark, he had given Arthur such a thorough beating that Arthur never forgot it. Since then, he avoided his sharpest taunts whenever Darin was present, saving them for when Mark was alone.

“They say you won that trip to Scaresylvania,” Arthur called, baring his teeth in a smirk. “I hope you never come back! One less lunatic in town.”

How Mark longed to throw something heavy at him. And he would have, had anything suitable been within reach.

“Don’t worry,” Mark replied, leaning out of the window. “If I don’t come back, I’ll make sure to haunt your nightmares instead. Forever.”

Arthur’s grin vanished at once. He spun around, shouted a few parting insults, and rolled away on his glaring neon-green skateboard. That skateboard alone probably cost more than Mark’s entire trip to Scaresylvania.

The rumble of wheels had scarcely faded when the attic door burst open with a creak and slammed against the wall.

“All right?” Darin exclaimed, ducking under the low lintel as he stepped inside. “Who were you talking to?”

“Oh, no one,” Mark shrugged. “Just talking to myself.”

He moved away from the window and opened another cupboard in search of the cage, relieved that Darin hadn’t overheard—otherwise Arthur would have been in serious trouble.

“I came through the door today like a proper civilized person,” Darin said proudly, glancing around.

“Of course you did,” Mark snorted. “You saw I wasn’t in my room, so you used the front entrance for once.”

“You can’t hide anything from me. What are you looking for, anyway?”

“The cage for Karloff. Otherwise I won’t be allowed to take him—rules, you know. Where is he, by the way? With gran?”

“Yep,” Darin mumbled, brushing dust off the rocking chair. “Sleeping, I think.”

“Good. If he were here he’d get upset...”

Mark knew his raven well. Just mentioning the cage could sour Karloff’s mood for hours. He would have to break the news gently—especially since he had no intention of leaving on a long journey without his winged companion.

Darin twisted around, surveying the attic, and the rocking chair creaked beneath him.

“Huh,” he said. “Who’d have thought your feathered friend had already been to Scaresylvania?”

“He’s no more my dude than he is yours,” Mark called from behind the cupboard door.

“I dunno. He comes to yours for tea and cake, not mine... so you work it out. Have you asked him about it yet? What he saw, all that?”

“Not yet.”

“You’re hopeless! Make sure you do, or you’ll miss your chance...”

Mark closed the cupboard and scanned the attic again.

“All right, let’s look together,” Darin said, pushing himself up. “Or you’ll be stuck here till midnight. It’s painful to watch already.”

They tried to imagine where a cage that large might reasonably be kept. But in this vast jumble, nothing followed any logic; everything had simply been shoved wherever it would fit. After a moment, they decided to search from opposite ends, moving toward each other. They lifted dusty sheets, opened cupboard doors, peered into boxes.

“I’m amazed you don’t have colonies of bats up here,” Darin remarked, shifting something heavy.

“They fly in sometimes,” Mark said, closing a chest filled with jars of dried snakes—his grandmother’s potion supplies. “I hear them leaving—the flap of their wings.”

“Hm... interesting.”

“Not really. Sounds just like opening an umbrella.”

“No, I mean the door,” Darin said thoughtfully.

Mark followed his gaze. Behind a tall standing mirror, slightly askew, stood a door framed with carved wooden architraves. Above it were four arched panels of black, mirror-like glass.

“I wonder where it leads,” Mark said, stepping closer. “There aren’t any rooms up here.”

“Maybe there used to be?” Darin suggested. “I remember old photographs... nothing like this existed.”

Mark reached out to trace the carved reliefs. A faint hiss and crackle made him jerk his hand back.

“Ow! Electric shock! Must be one of Grandfather’s inventions. You know how he loves his gadgets.”

Darin knew that well. He used Grandfather Felix’s folding exercise machine every day.

Footsteps sounded below, crockery clinked, then the door creaked open. Grandfather Felix appeared, carrying a tray. Being a ghost, he could float—but with steaming tea and sandwiches, he preferred to walk.

“Still hunting for the cage?” he asked.

“Yes, no luck so far,” Mark admitted. “Grandfather, what’s that door?”

Felix peered at the architraves. “Ah... tried woodcarving once. Gave it up. Terribly dull. Fiddly work. Just a leftover, really. Come along, tea’s hot—elderflower, and piranha sandwiches. Better drink it while it’s hot.”

“Mmm, piranha,” Darin said with relish. “My favorite.”

Grandfather Felix smiled and vanished through the wall.

“Strange,” Mark murmured. “If it was just a hobby... why a whole door?”

“This is Grandfather Felix! Have you forgotten where you live?”

“In the Murkovich house!”

A moment later, Grandfather reappeared, drifting back through the wall.

“By the way... your grandmother has arranged for you to stay with Aunt Eleanor.”

“Aunt Eleanor?” Mark said, surprised. “In Scaresylvania?”

“Yes,” Felix shrugged. “She used to send postcards. Now you’ll meet her. Your grandmother will be at ease.”

“All right,” Mark said. Felix vanished again.

Mark turned to Darin. “They never mentioned relatives in Scaresylvania—even though they knew how much I liked the place.”

“And what difference would it have made?” Darin asked. “More sweets? More postcards?”

“Exactly. Now I’ll see everything myself. That’s much better.”

“Yes. Gran worries... but your wish is stronger than I thought. You have to go.”

“Don’t fret,” Darin said, clapping him on the shoulder. “You’ve never been anywhere. Now you’ll be gone for days—far away, too.”

Darin munched on a sandwich, glancing briefly at the postcards, but said nothing.

“It was hard keeping them in my room,” Mark admitted.

“I can imagine... that sort of thing means a lot.”

Mark pulled a chair closer. As he tugged at the dust sheet, the very cage they had been searching for toppled out with a loud clatter—large and black, with an arched door and a heavy base.

“Things turn up when you least expect them,” Mark said, repeating one of his grandmother’s favorite sayings.

“True,” Darin chuckled, lifting the heavy cage. “You can hide it all you like... it’ll still be there. Always with you.”

Mark opened the cage and drew out the colorful bundle.

“You’re right. But it’s hard to see them now—just postcards, not him...”

“I understand,” Darin said with a sigh. “Not completely. I’ve got a father—sort of. He’s always at work. We hardly talk. Almost like he isn’t there.”

Mark glanced at the postcards once more, then tucked them into the top drawer. He didn’t want them catching his eye—at least not for a while.

— Chapter 4 — **Hangdog Hollow**

“Karloff, are you going to sulk for the entire trip?” Mark asked, setting the cage firmly on the seat. “Eat something. Here—strawberry, your favorite.”

He sprinkled a handful of cornflakes into the cage. They clattered against the bottom. Most ravens wouldn’t touch such a thing, but Karloff was no ordinary bird. He loved the crunch, especially strawberry or banana—but now he ignored it, turning his back to everyone. He tucked his head under his right wing and remained silent for half the journey, clearly sulking about being caged.

“I brought you so you could come with us,” Mark said, brushing his hands together with a few nervous claps. “Train rules say animals have to be caged. It’s this or staying home. And if I let you out, the conductor might show up—and then we’d be in trouble.”

Karloff didn’t move, though he understood every word. No doubt about it.

Mark shook his head in disbelief and turned to watch the view outside. Tall spruce trees whipped past like a green fence. Heavy grey clouds raced overhead, driven by the wind, and enormous raindrops lashed the window, leaving jagged streaks like cracks across the glass.

“Relax,” Darin said. “He just needs time. Once he’s free, he’ll be flapping and cawing like nothing happened. You know him.”

“Yeah,” Mark admitted, glancing nervously at Karloff. “I’m more worried about Grandma. She’s been so anxious.”

Nasturtia Murkovich couldn’t stop fussing, giving last-minute advice and checking that nothing had been forgotten. Two coffin-shaped suitcases and a trunk were stuffed to bursting, as if they were going away for three weeks rather than three days.

“Listen to Victor. Look after Karloff. Don’t wander off to strange places. Keep your medallion on...” Grandma had even taken the medallion down to the basement, worked a little magic on it, and returned it, insisting it was his main talisman for the trip. There were so many instructions that Mark could barely remember them all.

He had tried to reassure her that everything would be fine. Victor and Darin had promised too—how could it go wrong? Yet until the taxi disappeared from view, Nasturtia kept her eyes glued to him, nervously fidgeting with her bat-shaped brooch that pinned her shawl.

Grandpa worried too, though he hid it better. Before they left, he pulled Mark aside. “You can never have too much money,” he said, pressing a leather pouch brimming with Scaresylvania coins into Mark’s hand. There was no time to ask where the coins had come from.

The dreary scenery flashed past in a dull, endless blur when a cough interrupted Mark’s thoughts.

He glanced at Darin, arms crossed and lips pressed into a thin line, who nodded subtly toward Victor. The gesture spoke volumes—time to ask the gravedigger about Scaresylvania.

“Er...” Mark started, then froze. His courage had vanished. Why did it feel so difficult to speak?

Victor didn’t seem to notice—or perhaps he chose not to. He sat with his left ankle resting on his right knee, engrossed in a thick book. Its worn cover bore faded gold letters:

Bartholomew Morgensteinmayson: Vivacious Vampires

Perfect reading for Scaresylvania, a place full of creatures.

The train suddenly slowed, chugging unevenly. The engine’s hum faded, and the wind and rain seemed louder. A long, shrill whistle cut through the storm.

“Victor, Mark’s got a question,” Darin said, nudging him.

Mark’s reluctance flared, but his eyes drifted back to the window. A rotten wooden sign floated past in the fog, its name barely legible.

“Hangdog Hollow,” Mark whispered.

“Yeah,” Victor said quietly. “Not exactly a cozy spot.”

“You’ve been here?” Mark asked, seizing his chance.

“A few times. My dad’s from here. Lived here as a kid before moving to Scaresylvania. Wonder how many old-timers are left? The only things worth seeing were a grim factory and an old mine. Doubt much has changed.”

“Why didn’t you ever say you’re from Scaresylvania?” Mark asked bluntly. “You knew I wanted to go there, and you never mentioned it.”

“Maybe because I didn’t want to,” Victor replied, closing his book. His tone warned him off. “When I grew up, I moved to Carpathville. That’s my home now. Scaresylvania’s just... childhood and dull memories. Moving on is normal. Runs in the family, at least.”

“Nice one,” Darin snorted. “Not a family—a dynasty of wanderers!”

Just then, the train jolted and stopped. Darin and Victor lurched forward, then slammed back into their seats. Karloff’s cage nearly slid off, but Mark grabbed it just in time. Thuds and shouts echoed from nearby compartments where suitcases had fallen. Karloff cawed in confusion.

“Easy, don’t worry,” Mark said, holding the cage tight. “Just a sudden stop. Nothing serious... probably.”

The lamps flickered, then went out. Darkness swallowed the carriage.

“Odd,” Victor muttered, peering out the window. Clammy fog clung to the glass. Men’s voices echoed from the platform, yellow lights flickered, and figures ran past with large iron lanterns.

“What’s odd?” Mark asked. “The lights?”

“Odd that we stopped at all. Trains usually skip Hangdog Hollow.”

A loud voice boomed down the corridor. Darin jumped up, slid open the compartment door, and peeked out. Dark silhouettes holding glowing phone screens crowded the aisle.

A short, stocky conductor in uniform trudged past, holding a swaying lantern that barely lit the floor ahead.

“Stay calm. Remain in your seats,” he droned, repeating the same instructions. “The train will resume shortly.”

Victor stood, tossed his book onto the seat, and headed for the door.

“Darin, sit down,” he ordered. “I don’t like this.”

Darin sat, grumbling and crossing his arms. Victor leaned out just as the conductor reached them.

“What’s the problem?” Victor asked sharply. “Why did we stop?”

“A tree,” said the conductor, unfazed. “Fell right on the tracks. Bad weather’s common—snow, rain, you name it. Lucky it didn’t hit the engine, or we’d be in serious trouble. Just a minor inconvenience.”

The conductor shone his lantern into the compartment, spotting Mark and Karloff. He smiled at the raven, then frowned when the light hit Darin’s scowl.

“Stop shining that in my face!” Darin snapped.

The conductor muttered, adjusted his cap, and shuffled off. “Stay calm. Remain in your seats...”

Victor paused, grabbed his jacket from the hook.

“I’m going to check what’s happening,” he said. “They might need help, or we could be stuck here for ages. You two stay put. Understand?”

Mark and Darin said nothing.

“I’m serious,” Victor insisted. “Stay in the compartment.”

“Quit nagging!” Darin huffed. “We get it.”

“Good. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Victor stepped out and slid the door shut.

“Smooth way to dodge the question,” Darin muttered.

Victor’s footsteps faded into the rain’s patter. Lightning flashed; thunder roared.

“What?” Mark asked, still hugging Karloff’s cage. The raven pressed close, grateful to be safe.

“Exactly. Didn’t answer your questions and used this to escape,” Darin said.

“He’s just helping,” Mark said.

“Yeah, right! Slipped away with a convenient excuse. There’s a crowd out there—they’ll manage without him. He’s a passenger, not crew. Just showing off, maybe.”

The compartment felt cold. Maybe the lights going out stole the warmth, or the stalled engine chilled the air. Mark’s fingers were icy.

“Dunno why you’ve got it in for Victor,” Mark said. “We’ve known him forever, we chat loads. But you won’t let it go.”

“He’s shifty, that’s all,” Darin said, sprawling on the seat. He grabbed the book, flipped through it noisily, and tossed it aside. “The more I learn, the sketchier he seems.”

“Stop exaggerating,” Mark said.

“And you stop defending him,” Darin shot back.

“I’m not!”

“Then keep your eyes open. Who knows what dark secrets he’s hiding?”

Mark had no reply. He remembered Auntie Cobrelia’s Tarot reading: “A man with a dark aura, a troubled past, and the dead trailing him.”

Why a dark aura? Why the dead? What troubled past? Sure, Victor worked at a cemetery. But could it be more complicated?

A new voice echoed from the corridor.

“What’s going on?” Mark asked, sliding Karloff’s cage into a corner and peeking out.

An old man hunched over a rickety cart, piled high with goods, pushed it down the empty carriage.

“Souvenirs, sweets, guidebooks!” he called, his cart wheels squeaking for oil.

He knocked on each door, but most passengers ignored him. A few asked, then closed their doors without buying. The old man, draped in a long black cloak with a hood, revealed a silver-white beard flowing to his waist. Yet he pressed on, his pace steady.

“What’s that?” Darin asked, still lounging.

“Just souvenirs and sweets,” Mark replied. He suddenly realized they hadn’t eaten during the trip. Grandma had packed big sandwiches, but the jolt and Victor’s exit had made him forget.

Mark started to close the door, but the old man was too close. It’d be rude to ignore him. Fine, he’d buy a few treats.

“I’ll take a couple of sweets,” Mark said.

“Got anything to drink?” Darin asked.

“Yeah, that’d be good,” Mark agreed. “I’m starving.”

“Me too,” Darin added.

The old man stopped nearby. Though darkness cloaked the carriage, the fog’s glow allowed Mark to see a long, hooked nose and dark, round glasses that glinted faintly.

“Anything you fancy, lad?” the trader rasped. “Souvenirs, sweets, guidebooks.”

“Er... sweets,” Mark said, fishing for coins. “Do you take local money?”

Mark knew that closer to Scaresylvania, local currency was important. Zlotys, silvers, and bronzaks circulated alongside regular cash. He wasn’t perfect with the denominations, but he had a rough idea of the costs.

“Whatever works,” the old man said kindly. “Got sweets, lollies... Choco-Joker bars. Want some?”

“No, no, and no,” Darin groaned. “Those bars haunt my nightmares.”

“They got us this trip,” Mark reminded him.

“What’s that?” the trader asked, curious.

“You’re the lad who won?” Mark said shyly. His cheeks burned in the dark, thankfully hidden.

“Of course! Everyone in Scaresylvania knows. Lucky winners get treated special.” He rummaged through his brochures. His thin fingers, nails neat and skin smooth, looked almost too young for such an old beard. A slim, pale metal bracelet gleamed beneath his sleeve.

“Here,” he said, handing over a thick booklet. “The best I’ve got.”

Mark felt a sudden warmth in his chest as he took it. He touched his medallion—it was strangely hot. Not burning, but uncomfortable.

The glossy cover read:

Secret Scaresylvania: The Complete Guide to Unfamiliar, Unique, and Unexplored Places

Before Mark could read further, Karloff let out a loud caw, startling him—and Darin too.

“Karloff, give a warning!” Darin exclaimed. “Nearly fell off my seat!”

“Hush, Karloff, I’m coming,” Mark said, watching the raven pace nervously.

“Fine medallion,” the trader commented. “Very pretty.”

Mark touched it again. Now it was cold.

“Yeah, my talisman,” he said. “Never take it off.”

“Remarkable,” the trader smiled. “May I?”

Without waiting for permission, he reached for the medallion. The heat returned, growing sharper.

Karloff cawed, flapping wildly, striking the bars. The cage toppled onto the seat. Darin leapt to steady the raven.

“Mark, what’s wrong with him?” Darin asked, alarmed.

Mark couldn’t move. A searing pain gripped his chest, freezing him in place.

The trader’s hand recoiled as if burned. A low, inhuman wail echoed through the carriage, deafening and roaring, drowning out all other sounds.

The old man's silver beard and fake nose fell away. His hunched posture straightened; the tattered cloak transformed. A towering figure stood before them, glossy dark skin gleaming, muscles rippling, veins bulging. His grimace revealed sharp, saber-like fangs. Beneath the dark glasses, a toxic green glow flared in his eyes.

Lightning flashed through the fog, illuminating a sharp black goatee on his face. The cloak now hung in rags.

Mark froze, speechless with fear. Where was everyone else? Why did no one else see him?

"Easy, Karloff, what's wrong?" Darin's voice came through the chaos of flapping wings and caws.

The lamps flickered again, alternating light and dark. The giant leaned close, hot breath on Mark's face. Mark caught his reflection in the black lenses, which cracked as green light seeped through.

Then the lights blazed back on. Mark collapsed, drained. Karloff quieted, snuggling against him. Darin rushed to his side.

The figure was gone, leaving only the silver beard, broken nose, and scraps of cloak littering the floor.

"No more adventures, please," Darin muttered, voice shaking. "Mark, are you okay? I promised your grandma we'd be fine!"

He scooped Mark up, sitting him by Karloff, freeing the raven.

"Medallion," Mark whispered. "It's burning... I can't..."

Darin felt his forehead. "Medallion's fine. You're burning up, though. Sick? Need a drink?"

"Yeah, lemonade," Mark managed.

Darin stepped to the cart. "Where's the trader?" he asked. The corridor was empty.

Mark shook his head. Exhaustion hit him hard.

"Some trip," Darin muttered. "Fine, we'll pay later." He grabbed a bottle of cherry soda.

"You hear that?" Mark asked. "The roar..."

"Yeah, train whistles spook me too," Darin said, calm as ever.

"Whistles?" Mark frowned. Darin hadn't seemed affected by the terrifying transformation.

"Oh, Karloff," Darin said. "Dunno why he freaked. Started, then stopped. Probably the whistle. Here, drink. You'll feel better."

Mark didn't ask more. He sipped the cool soda while Victor burst back into the compartment.

"What happened?" Victor asked, panting.

“Well...” Darin searched for words. “Mark’s feeling rough.”

Mark sipped in silence, still clutching Karloff and the guidebook the strange trader had given him, hidden behind his back.

*For detailed information about the **Mark Murkovich** adventure series, please contact us at:*

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