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A Noise Downstairs

by Mari Syrad Grieves

Callie held her breath. As she so often did so as to be both alive and dead at the same time. She sucked in a lungful of air and held it, pushing her chest out from within as her cheeks turned scarlet. She felt like she was going to burst. Driving the breath against her closed mouth, she waited for the cloudiness in her vision, for the tingling in her arms and face, and the rush in her ears that let her know she had reached the tipping point and calm would resume. This was how she prepared.

Callie was flushed, but David, too engrossed in his phone, hadn't noticed the absence of rapid breaths, as she had been trying to exist between this world and no world.

"Hot?" he asked. She exhaled. He but his phone down, kissed her furious red cheek, and rolled over away from her. Callie lay there, eyes wide in the dark, sucking in the dregs of light from the blinking router and the distant street lamps. The room was quiet apart from David's low, rhythmic breathing, the bass line to Callie's thin staccato gasps.

She turned her head to look at the clock. 23.49. Blinking, she looked again. 1.34, then 2.16, then 3.30... Callie wasn't alarmed. This is how it always started after David had closed his eyes and left her alone to play a game with the night. It started with the sequence of numbers, blinking red lines on the clock's smirking, digital face. Then the night's quiet would be infiltrated by the noise from downstairs. It used to frighten Callie. She would squeeze her eyes shut and curl into David, gripping on, as though he could somehow protect her in his apathetic slumber. She come to learn though, that when the night game began, he could not hear her, he could not feel her, he would remain in a state of pre-death until the winner was announced.

Callie got out of bed and descended the stairs. She opened the back door in the kitchen and stepped out into the cold garden. A light came on, sensing her, and illuminated the solitary figure on the lawn. Covered by a dark shroud, long, straight, black hair peeking out from beneath the hood, the noise got louder. The sound: inhumanly deep, a rocking, ticking, terrifying sound which cracked into the air, whipping Callie to the ground.

She stood back up, her ice blue feet and pale nightgown, creating an ethereal image against the beast this night had offered up. She would not be defeated. She stepped deliberately towards the iniquitous figure, her arms crossed in front of her face as though fighting a relentless wind. The low clicking had ascended to a horrifying guttural shriek, tearing at her eardrums, Callie fought on, step by laboured step.

Callie had accepted death into her heart before she'd even left the bedroom. Nothing could scare her now. Nothing could beat her, or tame her, or deafen her. She could not lose. She stood face to face with the succubus whose victory would result in her perdition, opened her mouth, and screamed. Screamed until there was nothing left of the figure but dust, until there would never be silence again. She had won the game. For tonight.