

The Con

The crowd erupted into cheering applause, pierced through with enthusiastic whistles. Dylan didn't take the whistles personally, though – the same ones had sounded for every one of the five team members already on stage. Even Paolo had gotten a few.

Can't you just enjoy your first convention? Take a breath and get out there. She pasted a smile on her face and stepped onto the open stage, into a barrage of camera flashes.

She managed a wave, then made her way behind the long table, high-fiving Rachel, Jasmine and Ben almost absently, focussed on getting to Troy and his microphone.

“Go, Dylan!” someone yelled from the crowd.

She waved again as she reached Troy. He gave her a quick, fatherly hug and whispered in her ear, “You’ll be great. Relax.” Keeping an arm around her shoulder, he turned back to the audience. The noise tapered off as he spoke into the mic. “It’s okay for me to hug her – I’ve known her since she was in pigtails.”

The audience’s chuckle was peppered with charmed “aww”s.

“To be honest,” Troy went on, “I’m just glad no one can accuse me of favouritism, because I had nothing to do with this: it was you folks, and almost eighty thousand more like you, voting from around the world, who decided she should join our team permanently. And we’re really thrilled you did.” As the applause started up again, his arm tightened

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around her shoulders in a half-hug. “We had some great experiences with all our trainees, and they all did amazing work in what were – well, you saw them – sometimes challenging environments.” He made a wry face, and laughter rippled through the room again.

“Who the *fuck* touched my hair?” Paolo murmured in a mocking falsetto, just loud enough for Dylan and Troy to hear.

Dylan’s smile froze. In her peripheral vision Paolo lifted his phone and, when she turned slightly to frown at him, she heard its camera shutter sound. He shrugged, pointing at his phone and mouthing, “Web page.”

Troy was still speaking. “Dylan’s a quick learner with great instincts, and a darn bold investigator. She’s definitely got what it takes to be a full, active member of the *Operation: Haunting* team, so Dylan,” he turned slightly to speak directly to her, “welcome aboard. I’m glad to have you along, no matter how dark and difficult the job.” He turned back to the audience and shouted, “Ladies and gentlemen, we’re here at your fantastic con to officially introduce our newest operative: Dylan Powell!”

During yet more applause – *surely their hands are getting sore?* – he handed her the microphone. *Breathe.* She blinked in another round of camera flashes as Troy stepped away.

“Wow.” She cleared her throat and raised the mic again. “So... apparently I can walk into an abandoned mental hospital full of paranormal activity, but talking to a crowd this big might be more than I can take.”

A sympathetic laugh this time, and strangely, that made her feel better. “Okay, let’s try that again. What I should’ve said first was: thank you. Thank you for being such amazing fans and for voting for me.” She held her grin in place until the applause died down. “This has already been the most incredible experience I’ve ever had. Like Troy said, I’ve known him for years, but even if he weren’t there, if *Operation: Haunting* didn’t exist at all, I’d still want to do this. And I get to work with this amazing team.” She swept her hand toward the tableful of people beside her. “I just can’t frickin’ wait!”

Everyone laughed at that, and from the far end of the table, Rachel’s overly-dramatic blown kisses sent Dylan into relieved laughter, too. She

turned back to the audience. “I promise I’m not going to waste that opportunity. Thank you so much.”

She handed the microphone to Troy before she sat down, and he spoke over the fading applause. “All right, folks, we’ve got the whole team here – new, old, and me, who counts as ancient – and I know you didn’t come here to listen to speeches, so let’s get the Q & A started. We’ve got microphones set up at both of the far aisles, so come on down.”

He switched off the microphone as the excited noise and movement began. Turning his back on the audience, he looked up and down the table of team members. “Okay, show time,” he said quietly. “Tell the funny stories when you can. Try not to hog the mic. Give Jas time to interpret for us. No spoilers, but Rache and Paolo are going to preview next season like we talked about. Remember there are kids here, so watch your language and behave yourselves.” He looked right at Paolo as he said it, but then nodded at the other end of the table. “Ben, Jas, how’s the tablet working?”

Ben murmured “Should be fine” as Jasmine scribbled “test” with her stylus, and they all half-turned to see the word appear on the big screen behind them.

“Good.” He took the last chair, to Dylan’s left. “Wheels up, people.” He turned back to the audience just as Rachel murmured her usual response: “Sir, I never got a wheel.”

“We all set?” Troy was asking the audience. “Let’s start over here. Yes, ma’am: what’s your question?”

“Oh, my gosh,” the woman said breathlessly. “Hi, I’m Michelle. And, well, first I want to say thank you all so much for being here! It’s a huge thrill. Really. I’m such a fan.”

“Well, thanks for having us,” Troy said, as the rest of the team smiled and answered with variations on “hi” and “thanks”. Jasmine gave her thank you in American Sign Language, then scribbled OUR FANS ROCK on the tablet. The crowd burst into cheers, further flustering the woman at the microphone.

“So, my question is for Troy. How do you think your Navy career prepared you for what you do now?”

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To Dylan's right, Paolo grunted. "Every goddamn time," he breathed through his teeth. His crooked half-smile looked pained.

Meanwhile, Troy had laughed a little. "I get that question a lot," he said, without a trace of boredom or accusation. "I sometimes wonder, if I had a list of all my answers, whether they'd actually make any sense." He let the laughter surge and ebb before going on. "It's harder to pin down than you'd think. But I think leadership would play the biggest part. Maybe along with that, an awareness that teamwork is key, and that having a team you can trust is essential." He looked down the table at the team and waited a moment for Jasmine to catch up with her signing. "Am I right?"

Nodding heads and murmurs of agreement answered him.

"Plus he makes us keep the van really tidy," Rachel added. "Like, OCD-tidy. Shipshape, sir-yes-sir tidy."

Laughter rolled over the audience again.

"Makes it easy to find things, though," Ben put in. "That's useful."

"Maybe, but the little sailor caps are just cruel," Rachel said, to more laughter.

To Dylan's left, Troy was shaking his head, smiling. To her right, Paolo was typing on his phone, out of sight below the table. His half-smile looked pasted on.

Dylan settled back in her chair as the session went on.

Ben was asked whether the team would use any new technology next season, and his answer was typical of him: nervous at first, then gaining speed and enthusiasm as he talked about his latest gadgetry. Dylan tried to follow his explanations but was starting to lose interest when Rachel jumped in: "And do you sleep with all of them under your pillow, or do you have some sort of schedule?" Ben blushed a little but answered without a pause, "Believe me, next time we do an overnight shoot in some drafty ruined hotel, you'll want one under your pillow, too." Rachel laughed along with the audience.

Next question: "Can you give us any idea of some of the locations we'll see next season?" Making a show of looking to Troy for permission,

Rachel leaned into the microphone and said with perfect seriousness, “Disneyland, The Eiffel Tower – we’ll need climbing ropes for that, Ben – and my grandma’s basement. Which is maybe the scariest place we’ll ever be.” She managed to keep a straight face for a few moments of audience laughter, then relented. “No, but actually, pack your bags, because we’re going to be doing some travelling: Chicago, Halifax, Santa Fe, Ottawa, Vermont... and those are only the ones we’ve confirmed. We’re still waiting for the okay on a few other amazing sites.”

While Rachel was speaking, Jasmine scribbled each city name followed by an exclamation mark. She added a quick, loopy sketch that had people puzzling at the big screen until she labelled it with an arrow: FINGERS CROSSED!! Rachel nodded at it. “Big time. Add some horse-shoes or something.”

Troy waited until the excited applause and chatter died down before saying, “Paolo, maybe you could preview some of the reports of activity in those locations.”

Probably only Dylan heard Paolo stifle a sigh before he began. “Well,” he said. “I don’t have my notes, but from what I remember, we’ve got mostly the usual reports of footsteps, disembodied voices, moving furniture, quite a few regular apparitions, full-body or otherwise. You know. The usual stuff people love.” More excited applause.

A woman and a teenaged boy stepped up to the audience microphone together. The boy waved at the stage, then launched into rapid sign language as the woman next to him said, “Uh, this is my son Paul. I’m just here to interpret. He has a question for Jasmine.”

“Clearly,” Paolo muttered. Jasmine had already leaned forward to see more closely, grinning and nodding.

“Um, first he just wanted to say thank you all for being here. He never thought you’d come to our little convention. He figured he’d have to get himself to San Diego Comic-Con if he wanted to see you.” She smiled a little. “And... he wants to thank Jasmine for showing that using sign language doesn’t mean he can’t have a cool job, or be part of a team. Maybe even be famous.”

Jasmine’s proud grin softened as the boy continued to sign.

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“But his real question,” Paul’s mother said, her eyes fixed on her son’s gestures, “is whether she ever gets scared on the job, but just doesn’t show it. Because of her reputation.” Paul straightened his shoulders and pulled his t-shirt out in front of him, so everyone could see *Jasmine aka Fearless* spelled out in cartoon ASL gestures above the *Operation: Haunting* logo. The audience shifted and craned to see it.

“Oh my God, I want that shirt!” Rachel squealed.

Jasmine, blushing herself now, waited for the activity to die down a little before beginning to sign her answer. Troy interpreted. “Miss Fearless is saying that it’s only our fantastic editing team that makes her look so... calm and collected. She says it’s all...” He frowned as Paul started grinning. “I didn’t catch that last part.”

Grinning, Jasmine printed POST-PRODUCTION EFFECTS on her tablet. MIRACLES, she added. She winked at Paul and touched her hand lightly to her heart.

As the laughter died down, Ben startled them all by leaning into his microphone. “Don’t believe her. She really is fearless.” He signed the last word, a little clumsily.

Jasmine, shaking her head, circled POST-PRODUCTION and added MAGIC and a happy face.

I am part of this now, Dylan thought in amazement. These are my co-workers and we’re at a fan convention. People want to hear about how we look for ghosts. How weird is this? She sat back, grinned at the audience, and soaked it all in.

Half an hour in, a fan asked what their favourite location had been. The team looked at each other for a moment, then said “Kingston,” in a simultaneous chorus. They laughed as the audience broke into whistles and enthusiastic applause.

“That was an amazing experience,” Rachel said as the noise died. “A crapload of work, but so worth it. I still get goosebumps thinking about it.”

“It took ages to set up, but that was some of the best evidence I’ve ever seen,” Ben agreed, his usually solemn face almost reverent.

Jasmine and Troy were nodding in agreement, but the audience member was speaking into the microphone again. “Paolo, how about you? Kingston as well?”

The team looked over in surprise. Paolo leaned slowly forward on the table, arms crossed. “No, I don’t think so,” he said into the new silence. “I’d probably go with the Yorkside Jail.”

Dylan stiffened in her chair. Troy turned, warning in his eyes, to watch Paolo.

“Oh, yeah?” the fan asked, over a little ripple of uneasy whispers in the audience. “Why?”

“Are you kidding? It had a pretty spectacular energy,” Paolo said. “Lots of bad things, horrible things, happened there for more than a century. From a historical point of view, it’s an amazing place, and we were lucky to get access at all before it was demolished. Plus of course it was a landmark case for Dylan.”

The audience stirred again.

Paolo looked over at her, his eyes widened innocently. “It was your birthday, right?”

Not trusting him or herself, she forced a smile. “You bet,” she managed. “Not exactly the martini bar I might’ve preferred, but definitely memorable.” The laughter from the audience had a thread of relief in it.

“Oooh, martini bar!” Rachel jumped in with enthusiasm. “On it! Note to self.” She reached over and wrote on Jasmine’s tablet: FIND SPOOKY BAR.

“Wrong kind of spirits,” Troy said, and everyone groaned happily. “Who’s next?”

As the next fan giggled into the microphone, Dylan reached up to scratch the bridge of her nose, turning slightly away from the audience and toward Paolo. From behind her hand, she muttered, “You asshole.”

His eyebrows lifted momentarily in response, but he kept his gaze on his phone, below the table. His faint, sardonic smile hitched upward as the Q&A went on.

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“Damn, I hate these things,” Paolo exhaled as he pulled the van door shut behind him.

“I thought it was great,” Dylan said defiantly, still running on adrenaline.

“It was,” Rachel said. “And he knows it.”

“It went really well,” Troy said from the driver’s seat. “Good crowd, and everyone stepped up. Thanks, guys: couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Aww,” Ben said, which was so unlike him that everyone burst out laughing. Even Paolo snickered.

“So what now?” Rachel asked.

Jas held up her tablet and tapped her finger on FIND SPOOKY BAR. Everyone except Paolo chuckled again.

“No bar-hopping,” Troy said, even though he couldn’t have seen the tablet from where he was. Jas rolled her eyes, but Dylan saw Troy smile in the rearview mirror.

“Not even one little haunted martini?” Rachel asked coaxingly. “Not one little dry hauntini?”

“What would be in that, I wonder?” Ben mused.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t go celebrate,” Troy said. “Just no bar-hopping extravaganza, please. We have an early start tomorrow. I’d suggest you stay near the hotel.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Rachel murmured. “Okay: a place near the hotel. On it.”

The discussion got a little loud, and lasted until Troy pulled the van into the hotel’s wide sweep of a driveway. They all piled out, blinking in the bright lights overhead, as the valet took the keys.

“Right,” Rachel announced in her best Troy impression. “Go do what you have to, and meet in the lobby. Wheels up in twenty minutes.” She ducked his good-natured swat, stuck out her tongue at him, then turned

to Dylan. “Come on, newbie, let’s go get ready. It’s time to welcome you in true *OpHaunt* style.”

“Actually,” Troy said, “Dylan has some paperwork to sign first, then she and Paolo are going to have a little chat.”

“So you’re saying I can’t go either,” Paolo said, unsurprised.

“Yeah, but you never do anything fun anyway, sunshine,” Rachel said, punching him lightly on the shoulder.

Dylan was still blinking at Troy. “Paperwork? What’s this about?”

“You can catch up with them later, I promise. But this has to be done. It’s standard stuff, now that you’re officially onboard. And Paolo has to give you some more background.”

“Oh,” Rachel said in surprise. She and the others turned to look at Dylan. “You haven’t done that yet?”

“Apparently not,” Dylan frowned, trying to read their expressions.

Jasmine signed something too quickly for Dylan to catch, and Rachel murmured, “Don’t scare her.”

“Well, then,” Ben said, after a moment of awkward silence. “Guess we’ll see you on the other side.”

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“Troy, what the hell?” Dylan said as they stepped off the elevator, Paolo lagging a few steps behind. “Seriously? Paperwork?”

“Sorry, hon, but yeah. Come on. We can use my room.”

“I’ll get the laptop,” Paolo muttered and headed down the hall.

Dylan sighed as Troy swiped his card key in the reader. Behind her confusion, she felt almost childishly annoyed. This was her reward for a good day? This is what she got, after everything she’d worked for?

She let herself drop onto the couch, and after pulling a sheaf of paper from the safe, Troy joined her. He put the papers on the coffee table in front of them.

“That’s the contract,” Dylan said, frowning at the top page. “I signed that already.”

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“I know, and I appreciate your keeping it quiet until we made it official today. But if you remember, there’s a mention of a non-disclosure agreement and additional training to be conducted later. This is it.” He put it on the top of the pile and left his hand on it as he turned to face her.

“What you need to understand before you sign this,” he said, his face more serious than she’d ever seen it, “is that it’s a legally-binding document, and it has more severe consequences than probably anything you’ve signed before. The work contract can be broken by either party, no harm, no foul. But this document means you keep quiet about parts of our work, and that’s much harder to do.”

“I can keep quiet,” Dylan said. “How many times did I have to bite my tongue during that Q&A today?”

“About spoilers and personality conflicts,” Troy said. “Those are only a tiny part of it.”

“Troy, you’ve known me for years. I can keep my mouth shut.”

“It’s more than that.” Troy sighed. “It’s... we’re sort of famous, as you probably realized today. We work on camera, watched around the world. We do interviews, have huge online forums, a hundred thousand Twitter followers last time I checked. We all get recognized on the street. Most of our work is public knowledge, out there for anyone to find. But we need to be sure you can keep the rest of it just between us, as a team. Even if you decide to leave.”

“I’ve wanted to be here ever since you guys started!” Dylan said, bewildered. “I’m not going anywhere, and I know how to keep work confidential.”

He stared hard at her a moment longer, then nodded. “Read it first,” he said. “Carefully.”

Humouring him, she did. It wasn’t even a full page, and was meticulous in naming the ways she couldn’t share details of upcoming training or “other work-related incidents and/or experiences, to be determined as required by designated authorities of *Operation: Haunting* and its stakeholders.”

She paused, frowning, and looked up at Troy. “Designated authorities... that’s you, right? And the studio?”

“Mostly.”

They were both startled by a knock at the door. Dylan stared at the page some more while Troy let Paolo in.

“She sign yet?” Paolo murmured.

“She’s looking it over.”

“Good call.” The door shut. “Hey, um, Dylan?”

She looked up to find Paolo, laptop in hand, smiling at her – a genuinely understanding little smile that startled her all over again.

“I know it’s a big decision,” he said. “But we’ve all signed it, and we all think you can handle it. Plus, even though we signed, we all manage to live normal lives. Well, as normal as we can get, hanging around with this guy.” He tilted his head at Troy.

Troy grinned. “Don’t put that all on me. Pretty sure the spooks get some of the blame. Hey: you did well today.”

“Thanks,” Paolo winced. “Didn’t love it.”

“I know.” He clapped Paolo on the shoulder, then moved back to Dylan’s side. “Well? What do you think?”

She tore her eyes away from Paolo, who had moved to connect the laptop to the room’s television. “I’m not sure what to think. But I’m signing.” She scribbled her name on the blank.

“Okay, then,” Troy said. “Witness.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” Paolo came over and scrawled his signature beneath Dylan’s.

Troy added the date and his own initials. “That’s it, kid,” he said. “You’re ours now.” He leaned back against the sofa and rubbed his eyes.

“Welcome aboard,” Paolo said, smiling again, and to Dylan’s shock, he stuck out his hand. “Paolo DeSanto... though online I go by OH_Boy.”

Dylan froze. “You what?”

“Yeah, it works better onscreen. You know, *Operation: Haunting* – O.H. OH_Boy.”

“But... he’s everywhere online. He’s –”

“Sweet?” Troy suggested. “Enthusiastic? Our biggest fanboy ever?”

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Paolo scowled. “Shut up.”

“No,” Dylan stammered. “No way. OH_Boy is always so... happy. He’s – but you’re –”

“An asshole?” Paolo said.

“Yeah, let’s go with that.” She blinked, remembering how often the team had laughed at OH_Boy’s comments and sent him smiling emojis in return. He was the most avid follower on all the online feeds.

Paolo’s sardonic smile returned, resignation in every line. “Why else would you bring an archivist into the field? Think about it. Paolo plays better for the cameras.”

“He’s especially grumpy when we aren’t finding much evidence,” Troy pointed out.

“Cynical time fill: that’s me.” Paolo shrugged. “At least online as OH_Boy, I can say what I’m thinking. And keep the troll activity on the forums to a minimum while I’m at it.”

Dylan blinked at him again, considering a variety of responses. “Huh.”

“Okay,” Troy said, sounding tired. “I’ll leave you to it. I’m going to check in at home before it gets too late to call. If you need me, I’m just in there.” He nodded toward the bedroom off the sitting area.

“What’s this now?” Dylan asked, suddenly wary.

“This is the other training the contract mentioned,” Troy soothed. “It’s just – well, Paolo will walk you through it. If you need to, though, you can come talk to me afterwards, okay?”

“That’s ominous,” Dylan told him, trying a laugh. “What is all this?”

“The reason for the confidentiality clause,” Paolo said.

“That doesn’t help,” Dylan said.

The door shut behind Troy. Paolo leaned over and switched off the table lamp. The laptop and television screens washed the room in silver-blue.

“Oh good, mood lighting,” Dylan muttered, moving carefully to one end of the couch. Paolo didn’t seem to notice, cuing up a video clip. He let a few seconds play before pausing it.

“Do you recognize that?” he asked, nodding at the television screen. “It was one of our cases in season two.”

It took a moment for memory to shoulder past the oddness of the situation. “Isn’t that the West Point Lighthouse?”

“I knew you were a superfan,” he said with satisfaction. “You used to come to these cons in costume, didn’t you? Admit it.” He pressed play. “This is Ben, going solo with that y-spectrum camera we tried for a while.”

Onscreen, an oddly-shaped room swept past in a hundred smoky shades, empty except for a staircase climbing up a far wall as if it were penciled in. Ben’s calm voice echoed as he noted the time, location and equipment for his clip-on voice recorder.

“I remember this,” Dylan said. “That y-spectrum made everything look really weird, but there should be... there it is.” She pointed at a wisp of black shadow, blurring past the corner of the stairs as if rushing up the spiral. Paolo paused the playback again, and she couldn’t help but grin. “I remember this episode. Ben was pretty shocked when he did the evidence review.”

“Some of his best acting that season,” Paolo said, with a return of the personality she was used to. “The review segment isn’t on here – this is the raw footage. Keep watching.”

“Time note, 1:12 a.m.,” Ben’s whisper came through the speakers. “Pretty sure I just saw something go up those stairs. Hello?” He called out as he moved closer to the stairway, tilting the camera up and adjusting the focus. “Is there anyone here with me?” Onscreen, the greyscale blurred, resolved and blurred again as he adjusted the camera settings while climbing the first few steps. His boots clanged to a halt on the metal stairs as he lifted the camera’s view upward.

A tall, slender silhouette in charcoal stood about four steps above, looking down at him. The camera whirred and blurred again, trying in vain to bring its subject into focus. The silhouette’s smudgy head tilted as if curious.

“Oh,” Ben said. “Hello. Can you see me?”

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The silhouette straightened its head and took a noiseless step down. Ben inhaled, but his voice stayed calm. "I'm not here to hurt you," he said.

A thin sound, faint but persistent, whispered through the speakers.

"I'm here with others," Ben said. "If you have a message, we can listen. My instruments will record you if you speak to me." As he spoke, the other sound grew in strength like a rising river.

Again Dylan's memory checked in. "This noise," she said slowly. "Wasn't it Jasmine's evidence for this episode? On the playback it seemed almost like words..."

"It wasn't Jasmine's originally." Paolo adjusted the sound levels and suddenly she heard, as clearly as if it had been spoken in her ear: ...*you here? You can't be here. It isn't safe. Why are you here? You can't be here. It isn't safe. Why are you here? You can't be here. It isn't safe. Why are you here? You can't be here...*

"Do you have a message for anyone?" Now Ben's voice was overloud, oblivious to the rush of whispers his equipment was recording.

Onscreen, the storm clouds churning within the figure became agitated as the voice rose in distress. *You can't be here! It isn't safe!*

It rushed the camera, turning the screen abruptly black.

Dylan jerked back in her seat as Ben cried out in alarm. The screen returned to confused life over a chaotic clatter of echoing metal, followed by a heavy impact and a pained curse. The camera hit the floor, bounced once and slid to rest with its lens facing the quiet, breezy night outside the lighthouse's front door.

"Fell backwards down six steps," Paolo said as he stopped the playback. "Bunch of wicked bruises and a badly sprained ankle. He spent a lot of that trip in the van. It took some creative editing to make it seem as if he went out a few times."

Dylan stared at Paolo as he called up another file. "Okay." Her voice sounded a little unsure. She tried again. "Okay. So – creative editing. That happens in reality television, right? Creative editing?"

“Not really the point of that clip,” Paolo said dryly. He sat back, squinting at her in the low light. “That’s your reaction, though, isn’t it? You aren’t surprised at all by the apparition itself?”

“Well, sure – I mean, he actually captured something on tape, and it’s pretty damn amazing. I’m sorry he got hurt, but why didn’t we broadcast that piece? That’s huge evidence.”

“Evidence,” he repeated, still studying her. Then he shook his head once. “It would’ve freaked out our client for sure, and at least half the audience.”

“But it’s incredible: sound, image, everything!”

“You do realize most of our viewers aren’t fully convinced that ghosts even exist.”

That made her pause. “No. That can’t be right. Why would they watch, if they didn’t believe?”

“To see us fail. To watch us debunk the claims. To explain away what we can’t. To love Rachel and hate me. They’re more interested in us than the paranormal.”

“Well,” she frowned, “something like this would open their eyes.”

“And what a pleasant awakening it would be.”

“Come on. I don’t think it meant to hurt him. If he’d been able to hear the voice, he could’ve prepared. He might not have fallen.”

Paolo snorted and turned back to the computer. “That’s pretty much what Ben said himself, afterwards. Doesn’t matter. He was overruled.”

“By the studio? Or by Troy?”

He kept scrolling through the file list. “We’re going to jump ahead, since the existence of actual spirits seems to be something you accept so easily.”

“Doesn’t everyone on the team?”

“Not at first,” he said absently. “So we’ll skip Rachel playing hide and seek with what seems like a little girl around an open grave in Chicago. Although that kid’s laugh is the creepiest thing I’ve ever heard, before or since.”

“So this is the training? Dusting off the archive footage to show me what the audience never sees?”

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In the flickering light from the screens, Paolo gave her a sideways glance. “Don’t make my job sound so lame.” He hesitated over a file, cued it up and nodded at the television again. “Recognize it?”

“Show me more than one frame and I’ll see what I can do.” She sat back, torn between amusement and anticipation.

The picture shifted into motion as the camera panned across a comfortable family room with a long sofa against one wall, facing an oversized fireplace. A pair of rocking chairs waited at either ends of a pale area rug, and a low coffee table was centered within reach of everything. Rachel’s voice from behind the camera was soft, but brimming with its usual cheer: “Rachel and Jasmine, Mortimer house, 2:43 am. We’re going to hang out in the living room and see what happens. Voice recorders are running, Jas has the EMF, and we’ve set up the threshold laser just outside the room in case anything decides to join us.”

“Mortimer house,” Dylan echoed, shaking her head.

“Yeah, trick question. This was never broadcast. No one’s seen it but us.”

Onscreen, Rachel’s camera was still sweeping the room. “Jas, anything yet?”

Jasmine appeared in frame, holding the electromagnetic field sensor out in front of her and frowning at its display. “Just the usual,” she said, her voice as soft as Rachel’s but richer, with the vaguest hint of an accent. “A few spikes near the TV and stereo, but nothing unexpected.”

“Oh my God,” Dylan breathed. “This... this is before she got sick. They never show these episodes anymore. Sometimes the Europe ones, but not the others.”

“She had a nice voice.” With a few clicks on the keyboard, Paolo moved the video ahead. “They decide to split up. Rachel leaves a camera on the mantel, and takes another with her to the second-floor hallway. Jas stays here with the EMF. I’ll show you their footage simultaneously.”

Rachel was sitting cross-legged with her camera set a few feet away, the hallway walls serving as a natural frame. “My name’s Rachel,” she said. “Can anyone hear me?”

The living room shot was a little off-center, but it clearly showed Jasmine making herself comfortable on the couch, looking around the room. “Is there anyone here with me?” she asked. “I’d like to hear your story. The family who lives here is concerned.” She looked down at the EMF sensor on the table in front of her. “Do you know this isn’t your house anymore?”

“The kids in this house say they see a little boy,” Rachel was saying. “Is that you?”

“I’m not here to hurt you,” Jasmine said.

“Can you come play with me?” Rachel asked. A high giggle, suddenly cut off, made her look around with a smile. “Hello? Was that you laughing?”

Jasmine glanced off-screen as the threshold sensor squealed, and then she noticed the EMF lights, flickering in rapid sequence. “Whoa,” she murmured. “Something’s here, anyway.”

Rachel’s voice turned coaxing. “Why don’t you come play with me? I have some toys here...” The giggle sounded again.

With a gasp, Jasmine sat up on the couch, rigid. Her hands clawed up to her throat, her mouth opening and closing without a sound. In the next instant, she was thrust back against the sofa cushions, her legs pushing feebly at the table in front of her. There was the merest scrape as the table moved, and her clothes rasped against the upholstery, but otherwise her struggle made no sound. Her mouth gaped wider, her eyes flaring open, then squeezing shut.

“It sounds like you’re having fun,” Rachel said to the hallway, pouting. “Can’t I play, too?”

Downstairs, Jasmine’s hands were scrabbling at her throat as if trying to latch onto whatever had hold of her. Her body bowed suddenly up and outwards in a taut arc, throwing her head over the back of the sofa and pushing her toes into the carpet. Her muffled gasps came faster, more frantically. The sensor on the table was flickering and bouncing, spinning across the slick surface.

“I might have some candy in my pocket,” Rachel said, rustling a wrapper.

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A wet, crackling crunch broke the silence in the living room. At the same instant, Jasmine was yanked up off the sofa to dangle limply in midair for a moment before being thrown out of frame. She landed in a boneless tumble that set a rocking chair into motion.

Rachel frowned, looking offscreen. “Jas? Did you hear that?”

Jasmine’s pained wheezing filled the living room audio. The EMF sensor lifted off the table and streaked toward the camera, striking the wall above with a sharp crack and a shower of electronic pieces.

Rachel scrambled up in alarm as heavy, running footsteps overlaid Jasmine’s feeble noises downstairs. “Jasmine!” a stricken voice cried as the threshold sensor beeped. Someone raced past the camera, slowing at the edge of frame. “Oh my God... Jasmine?”

“Who... is that?” Dylan managed, her throat dry.

“Ben, of course,” Paolo said as Rachel darted down the upstairs hall, the camera left behind. He closed her video, and the living room filled the screen.

Nothing was moving within the camera’s view, but Ben’s urgent off-screen whispering came through. “Hold on... Oh God, Jas, can you breathe? Breathe for me, come on...”

More running footsteps neared, and the threshold sensor went off again as Troy’s voice filled the channel and his bulk crossed in front of the camera. “What happened? Is she all right?”

“No,” Ben’s voice cracked. “It’s bad. We have to –”

“Troy!” Rachel shouted in the distance as one of the rocking chairs flew across the screen. Troy threw up an arm to block it, but it crashed into him hard enough to stagger him backwards into Ben and Jasmine.

“Stop it!” Rachel yelled, still offscreen but closer now. “You have no right to be here!”

A lamp somersaulted off the end table with a contemptuous crash.

“Tantrums now?” Rachel said, her voice tight with anger. “I don’t think so. Stop it and get out. You aren’t welcome here.”

Troy rose into view, wiping blood off his forehead. “Damn straight you aren’t welcome here,” he said grimly. “Get out or we get you out.”

The sofa cushions shuddered and split open, fabric ripping like a cursed response. Stuffing flew.

“Wow, a poltergeist pillow fight?” Rachel sneered. “Now I’m scared.”

The second rocking chair raced toward her as the coffee table started jittering, two legs lifting off the floor.

“Stop *provoking it!*” Ben screamed.

“We’re on it,” Troy said, sharp but calm. “Get Jasmine out.”

Dylan hardly knew where to look or listen as all the furniture shook violently and a gale wind spun through the room, howling past the camera’s microphone. The room itself seemed to shudder as the camera rocked. Both Troy and Rachel started shouting, and it took Dylan a moment to realize it wasn’t English. *Is that Latin?* She hardly had time to wonder before Ben’s voice caught her attention.

“Come on, Jas,” Ben whispered hoarsely. “Come on, baby, let’s get you out. Hang on to me, okay?” They appeared in the corner of the screen, his arms cradling Jasmine’s body as if she weighed nothing, her head lolling against his chest. He darted through the camera’s view as Troy and Rachel called into the chaos around them.

Paolo stopped the playback, and the sudden silence in the room seemed to echo. “It crushed her throat so severely they were considering tracheotomy. She was lucky, but the doctors couldn’t repair her voice-box,” he said when Dylan didn’t immediately speak.

“Wh-what happened? What was that?”

His eyes were pained, even in the low light of the screens. “Exactly what it looked like. More demon than spirit, we figure. Had to exorcise the damn thing.”

Exorcise? She tried to fit that in her head. “But... how?”

“Troy was a Navy chaplain, and I guess you could say he’s kept up with it. Spooky stuff runs in Rachel’s family, and her degree is in comparative religions, so she’s useful in a pinch. Ben... he’s usually calmer in a crisis. Don’t judge him by this.”

Still processing, she remembered the anguish on Ben’s face as he crossed the room. “Ben and Jasmine?”

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Paolo sighed. “They’d kept it quiet, but when he wouldn’t leave her hospital room we all pretty much clued in.”

“Is it still going on?”

“Guess so. They’ve been engaged for about six months. The studio won’t let them say anything publicly, for some useless corporate reason.”

She blinked at him, the revelation looking for somewhere to settle after what she’d just seen.

He smirked a little and shrugged. “Archivist. It’s amazing what I know.” He went back to the laptop files as she tried to pull herself together.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay. So the jobs aren’t always fun. These things are real and they can be dangerous. I get it.”

“And that’s what you’re going to go with? That’s the moral of the story?”

“What else am I supposed to get out of it?”

“You could notice how we worked as a team there. If Ben hadn’t been watching the monitors in the van, if he and Troy and Rachel hadn’t been there to step in...”

“Right, true. And where were you during all that?”

“Or you could ask if you should pick up some Latin along with the ASL, so you can be a useful addition to our team.”

“Should I? Do I have to?”

“Or,” he said, “you could watch this.”

Her irritated response stuck in her throat when she saw the screen. “That’s... that’s the Yorkside Jail.”

“I know. Your birthday and your... what was it, fifth time out with us?”

“You should know,” she said through her teeth, “archivist.” Her heart seemed to catch as she watched familiar figures race around in fast-forward, setting up equipment. “Hey look, there’s you being an ass. Oh, there it is again.”

“Funny. But now you know I had to keep that up for the camera.”

“So you say.”

“And I couldn’t show favouritism for any one trainee while the voting was still happening, no matter who I wanted to win.”

She shot him a glance while he spooled through the footage. A click stopped the mad rush, and the screen filled with an odd rainbow of colours. Two figures, outlined in crimson and splotted all over with white, orange and gold, stood alone in a space made of blues and violets.

“This is from the thermal camera,” she said.

“Well done.”

She stared some more. “That’s me. With Troy.”

He nodded. “In the cafeteria, around 3am. We’d already set up the night vision camera at the end of the room. That’s what gave us the footage we put together for the broadcast.”

“Wait, but... that’s you filming, with the thermal. You were with us.” He nodded, eyes still on the screen, and irritation rolled through her again. “You told us the thermal wasn’t working that night. I watched you film a segment about how its power levels had drained because the place was so active.”

“Sometimes I have to lie. Sometimes we all do.” His eyes met hers, but only for an instant, and in the low light of the screens she couldn’t tell whether he was annoyed or ashamed. “Jasmine was never sick, the thermal worked perfectly, Troy and the team know the truth, trainees and audience don’t. Have you not figured that out yet?”

She bit back a retort, her heart thumping now. “So you’re going to show me something that happened that night. Beyond what I know happened that night.”

He pressed play, and the rainbow figures onscreen came to life.



Dylan let herself into her hotel room, tossed her card key on the table, and headed for the window, using the glowing lights of the city below to navigate between the furniture. She stopped at the glass, crossing her arms over her stomach and leaning her forehead against the cool

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pane. She exhaled, and her breath condensed on the window a moment before fading away. Breathing in and out again, she watched the evidence appear and disappear.

“That,” she murmured, “was a very odd day.”

She tried to think back, to recapture the excitement of the fan Q & A session, but found it as distant and unreal as yesterday’s dream. Shaking her head against the window, she reached again for detail, aware of the silent darkness of the room around her and a chill across her shoulders.

Remember Paul, she thought. With that came a sudden flash of clarity: a black t-shirt with cartoon hands, the sound of Rachel’s enthusiastic squeal. A remembered sense of happiness rose, warming her, making her smile.

“Remember that,” she told herself aloud, “not –” A vision of Jasmine, suspended gasping above a coffee table, punctured her mood. Shuddering, she shoved it away again. “Not that.”

Who the fuck touched my hair? Paolo’s mocking whisper from the Q & A darted through her mind. Her scalp prickled at the memory of fiery figures on a television screen.

“Stop,” she murmured.

Relentless, the memory played on: the thermal versions of her and Troy sitting in the vast, frozen-indigo dining hall of the Yorkside Jail, talking to the air.

“Is there anyone here who’d like to speak with us?” Troy asked, his heat signature rippling as he moved in his seat. “We aren’t here to hurt you.”

“My name’s Dylan,” her own voice said, sounding strange and hollow from the television speakers. “We’re here to listen to your story.”

Dylan? came a soft whisper, and, nearer the microphone, Paolo drew in a startled breath. *I knew a Dylan once. Long ago. But... you’re not like him.*

Two shining faces turned toward the camera, orange and gold swirling over their features. “Paolo? You hear something?” Troy asked.

“Maybe a whisper,” Paolo murmured. “I think it was responding to her.” The camera jerked toward Dylan, whose heat signature flared briefly.

“Me?” she squeaked, then recovered. “Hello?” she called. “If you’re here with us, I’d like to meet you.”

Troy held a glowing arm in the air, a box of shadows in his fist. “We have a device here that will tell us if you come closer. And Dylan has a voice recorder, so we can hear you.”

A spot of steel-blue behind Dylan’s chair swirled and grew, drifting up to the level of her head and hovering there as if uncertain, while Troy said “If you’re here, come closer” and Paolo, hardly breathing, said nothing.

Both Troy and Dylan leaned forward to watch the K2 in his hand – and it had stayed unlit and lifeless, Dylan remembered. The sensor hadn’t registered anything, and her own recorder had captured only the familiar voices of the team. She remembered the depths of the shadows, the feeling of cavernous space around them, the lingering scents of old cooking grease and body odour, the flaking paint and twisted remnants of furniture in the corners, but the sensors hadn’t responded at all.

In the thermal view, the cool spot behind Dylan swirled again, elongating until it nearly touched the floor. Then it curled slowly up and toward her head and shoulders.

“Paolo?” Troy called quietly. “Anything new?”

“No,” Paolo answered, after a barely noticeable hesitation. “I think... something’s off with this thermal.”

Sometimes I have to lie, sometimes we all do. Was she imagining a note of regret as she remembered Paolo saying that?

Onscreen in the Yorkside Jail, Troy was looking toward the camera. “Off? Like a malfunction?”

The frond of purple cold was still unfurling behind Dylan. *What are you doing here?* the voice murmured from the speakers. *This place isn’t for you.* Hesitantly, the wisp of colour reached out and stroked the crown of her head.

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Dylan stood up so quickly her chair fell over backwards with a clatter that echoed through the dining hall. “Someone just touched me. Touched my hair.” Her heat signature flared wildly as she spun around. The room was so dark, she remembered, she couldn’t see three feet past the filming area. Her voice climbed embarrassingly high, cracking. “I know I felt something. Who the *fuck* touched my hair?”

The bruise-coloured form pulled itself once more into a hovering ball. *I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I would never hurt you.*

Troy was trying to calm her down, still asking questions to the vast dark around them. Paolo was silent, watching in the thermal spectrum as the whispering shadow rippled, swirled and flattened, finally haloing Dylan’s head and shoulders without touching her. *Hush girl, don’t be angry, but this place isn’t for you. This place is full, too full of emptiness. It will drown you. Dylan. Dylan, you can’t stay, they’re coming...*

In the corners of the room, new dark clouds were coalescing, spinning and growing, drawing closer as if in curiosity. Spots of blood red and black bloomed within them.

Dylan remembered her panic rising, stronger than she’d ever felt, and how the room seemed to constrict around her. “Something’s wrong. We have to leave.” Her voice had been thin and brittle through the speakers, not sounding like her at all.

“Dylan, it’s okay –” That was Troy.

“No! No!” She’d fought for breath, fought for control. “Something’s wrong. We aren’t alone here. We have to get out!”

In the playback, Paolo swallowed hard, the sound lost behind Troy’s soothing noises. The smear of colour cowed around her faded into almost nothing as the bloody dark suns in the corners bobbed and grew. “Maybe we should get her out,” Paolo finally suggested.

Dylan’s breath heaved in and out as she looked around wildly. “I want to go back to the van. We can’t stay here anymore.”

“Okay, okay. We’re going.” Troy put an arm over her shoulders, turning for a moment toward Paolo. “What’s the situation with the thermal?”

“Nothing,” Paolo answered tightly. “Not a damned thing.”

“Liar,” Dylan whispered, blinking in her silent hotel room. Sometime during her trip down memory lane – a confusing landscape of real life and video evidence – she’d sat on the edge of the nearest bed, facing the city below.

Hush, girl, don’t be angry...

“I’m not,” she said, taking a deep breath. “Well, okay, I’m angry at Paolo. He’s such an ass.”

Except then she remembered his face just minutes ago, drawn and worried in the light of the screens as he stopped the playback and looked at her. “You have to be careful, Dylan,” he’d said. “It seemed drawn to you, drawn to your energy.” Hesitantly, he’d reached over and touched her hand. His fingers made the merest contact before he pulled away, turned back to the laptop, and started closing down files and programs at lightning speed. “Just be careful.”

A sudden chill across her neck made her shiver. *Wasn’t he just doing his job? Everyone has a role. Troy is the leader, Rachel is the comic relief, Ben is the engineer...*

“And Jasmine?” She suppressed a different type of shudder. “Guess she was the sacrificial lamb.”

But she survived and is thriving. She is the courage.

She sighed. “Guess that leaves me as either Toto or a flying monkey.”

A faint laugh drifted past her ear, and a lightly frosted feather seemed to brush her hand. *Never.*

“You’re right. I was definitely the Cowardly Lion for that episode.” She looked up into the darkness of the room. “So... the night we met, in the Yorkside Jail. You were seen.”

So it seems. Amusement and irritation slid into regret. *I truly didn’t mean to scare you, only warn you.*

“I know. Though now I know what you look like, at least.”

That isn’t what I look like. Amusement melted into uncertainty. *Is it? I don’t think so...*

“Doesn’t matter,” Dylan said soothingly. “But we’ll have to be more careful when the thermal’s on.” She felt the sense of rueful agreement in the air. “More importantly, you got me out of there. Thank you for that.

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And now I know something about what might have happened if you hadn't."

I will keep you safe, Dylan.

"You have so far." She dredged up a smile as more of the convention Q & A surfaced in her memory. "Did you hear Troy tell everyone I have good instincts?"

The laugh sounded again, rippling goosebumps across her skin. Yes.

"You know that's probably the only credit you're ever going to get," she said.

I can live with that. Something tugged playfully at the ends of her hair.

So to speak.