

## Episode 46: The Grove

### Ambrose

Any man of style would have objected to the quantity of birds that adorned this patch of woods.

Sure, The Middle Reaches were noisy, and birds' cawing and screeching formed part of the cacophony all the way from the Outer Layers to The Cavern of The Mouth, but a concentration of oversized, black-feathered, sharp-taloned beasts lurked in the branches of the Grove, and though they had great utility for terrifying visitors, visitors at this distance from the creek were rare.

The rest of the time the birds were simply annoying. Then again, Ambrose couldn't blame them for sticking around. He supposed that if he were a bird, he might hang out in a place where he and his pals occasionally got to share a worm bigger than he was, too.

Big worms. Big snakes. Ambrose had come to appreciate The Middle Reaches' sense of humor. He looked at his tree, his exploded mouth rendered in bark. The Grove was a circle of grey trees, or a circle within a circle within circles, and the trees had people, victims, inside. Victims of the entities who powered this place's malevolent engine.

"It's funny," Ambrose said.

Celia approached him from behind and wrapped an arm around his bare shoulders. They were both naked, naked and whole, without a mark from

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their gruesome demises. As ghosts, they could step out of the trees and socialize. If one could ignore the birds, along with the tedious scents of rot and honeysuckle, the Grove could actually be pleasant. “What’s funny?” Celia asked.

“How ridiculous I looked,” Ambrose said, pointing at his tree. “You’d think the expression on what was left of my face would be terror, desperation, something like that. But no. I look positively goofy, like, ‘Oh gee, this giant snake just tunneled from my ass to my mouth and killed me!’ Most of our tree-form associates look pretty goofy.”

“I refuse to acknowledge anything goofy about maggots,” Celia said. She turned Ambrose away from his tree. He kissed her, and putting their mouths together felt as warm, wet, and passionate as it would have felt if they were alive. In death, they had coupled. They were closer than they had ever been.

“No, nothing goofy about maggots,” Ambrose said. “Nothing goofy about that kid, either, the one who had so much skin cut off. Never mind all the other mutilated bodies covered in bark.”

“Chris,” Celia said. “The kid is Chris Ledbetter.” She looked at Chris’s tree. Rubbing a finger over one of Celia’s nipples, Ambrose hoped the kid wouldn’t join them.

“I still don’t get why Chris is here and Pedro isn’t,” Ambrose said.

“Gordon Marks killed Chris, and Gordon Marks was with Avin,” Celia said. “He was also connected to that other ghost boy, Bobby Lightfoot, who came through here... whenever that was.”

“I know,” Ambrose said. The pudgy pubescent spirit, who was supposed to be important, had come through with Sheldon. Seeing Sheldon had been a shock. “But Pedro died in The Middle Reaches. That has to be Avin, Lyanetha, and Hastur’s fault, too.”

Grove gossip. God of the Citadel, God of the Lake, God of the Palace—Nick had known about them—they were responsible for the malevolence. And the deaths. The engine that turned The Middle Reaches into a ghost-making machine.

“Pedro is somewhere,” Celia said. “Maybe we’ll see him when we join the others.”

“This... ‘gathering,’ you mean.” Ambrose said the word with disgust. Fraternity aside, he’d never been a joiner.

“Yeah. Unless you think we can skip it.” Celia wasn’t a joiner, either.

“Did you ever wonder where the plan came from? Vengeance, brutalizing gods through the sheer force of numbers. It’s not a *clever* plan,” Ambrose said. “It maximizes violence and minimizes... survival? Can ghosts claim to survive?”

“I don’t know,” Celia said, shaking her head. Her hair danced around her neck. “Kiss me again.”

He kissed her, and she pulled him with her, down toward the ground. He was hard before she lay in front of him, chest heaving, legs parting. He slid slowly inside, and she closed her eyes, moaning.

Others stepped out of the trees, men, women, some old, some young, all naked. They clustered around Ambrose and Celia. Lips met lips; thighs met thighs. Ambrose and Celia opened themselves to newcomers. Ambrose didn’t know what he kissed—maybe once he would have cared about gender and age, but that time was gone—he simply offered, accepted, and touched with abandon.

The Grove filled with the romance of the dead, flesh enjoying flesh where there was no flesh.

## Si-woo

The claustrophobia of live burial had always, in Si-woo’s horror-movie mind, stemmed from the paralysis of being trapped in a tight wooden coffin under the weight of impassable dirt. He hadn’t, until recently, thought about a live burial in a crypt, the closest analog to this yellow room with smooth, solid stone walls and no windows or doors. He and Becky were discarded here, no way out, no way in.

Buried alive.

Uncountable minutes, hours, days, weeks, months. They didn’t get hungry or thirsty but never had in The Middle Reaches or Carcosa, either, so...

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So, they wouldn't dehydrate or starve. The room seemed sealed, but he didn't think they'd suffocate, either. Si-woo detected no light sources, but the room had a comfortable glow. If the room could have light with no source, it could have air with no source. Why? Because it wanted them to see their entrapment, but it didn't want them to dehydrate, starve, suffocate, or have any of the other usual escapes from live burial.

No death. This was forever.

Except not necessarily. He and Becky had only what they'd been wearing or holding when he'd rushed up the stairs chasing Heather and Angelica, which meant he still didn't have a shirt, but he did have—they had—a sword. After the first long while passed, and conversations circled, they started taking long looks at the sword. If the alternative was this room forever, was the sword the right choice? The only choice?

Even when they could fuck like bunnies on the hard stone floor, which they did, life in a small, empty room, time passing endlessly with no interruption from sleep, could feel like a drill boring into their skulls but never quite breaking through for a release.

They loved each other. They told each other again and again, and Si-woo meant it, and he felt confident Becky did, too. They loved each other, but love wasn't as powerful as the drill.

Passion drained from the act of penetration before long. Stroking, rubbing, licking, nuzzling—they kept at it, but it became automatic, more like mere friction.

They stared at the sword, lying in a corner they avoided.

"Life ended when I stood beside my dead family," Becky said. "Life ended when we lost our daughters."

They'd had this conversation a thousand times. Si-woo had a few choices for responses, which would take them toward a few familiar variations. He liked the "George was no great loss" option, but instead, he chose, "We lost our daughters long before that... wedding."

"I never told you," Becky said.

Something new? "What? What didn't you tell me?"

"How Charlotte Charlotte and I ended up in The Middle Reaches."

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“I...” He hadn’t given it much thought because he didn’t know how he’d ended up there himself. “You were running from George.”

“Yes, but I could have gone anywhere. I was... drawn... to The Middle Reaches.” Becky looked at the sword.

“Drawn how?” Si-woo was curious but only slightly afraid of her answer, and the slight fear only arose because she sounded so guilty.

“I had dreams,” she said. “An attractive man in a red shirt told me to come to The Middle Reaches because Charlotte Charlotte and I would be safe there. I trusted him. I wanted him, I think, and I felt... flattered... because he wanted me.” She wiped away a tear. “I knew they weren’t normal dreams. And I knew something wasn’t right.”

“That place... reels people in. Devours them. You’ve got nothing to feel bad about,” Si-woo said. He wanted to hold her but sensed she didn’t want to be held.

“He tricked me. I know it,” Becky said. “He tricked me like Angelica tricked us about having a choice about our daughters. He never wanted me. He wanted me to bring Charlotte Charlotte to The Middle Reaches so they could take her and turn her into... whatever she was at the end and use her to try to kill Heather and Bobby and who knows what else if... my God, George... and Bobby...”

“You don’t know that,” Si-woo said.

Becky didn’t answer. During a long silence, she looked at the sword.

She looked up at him, and her eyes asked, *Should we kill ourselves?*

Si-woo felt his eyes answer, *Yes.*

But they hadn’t had another conversation, one he knew they’d both considered but never dared to breach. They had one sword. One of them would have to kill the other, or at least one of them would have to fall on it first. Killing or watching the other die seemed unthinkable, so they waited, saying nothing.

## Gordon

At first, Gordon felt rotten about Adam sending him away, almost angry, but when he found himself under the purple sky, looking up at black stars, for a second, his upper body felt weightless, and he was glad not to be in the Tower of Two Suns, glad to be far away from three-sided tables, glad not to be listening to adults yammer about alliances, glad to be here—

with the monsters—

and not with Adam and the freaky water woman. No Adam. It was a strange thought worth thinking.

He'd expected The Middle Reaches to be more crowded. Sure, a group of blue spiky things that reminded him of alligators splashed in the creek nearby, and giant squirrels with bat wings darted back and forth among the trees overhead, but the real Flood, which he and Adam had watched as if on a big-screen TV, seemed to have moved further down in the creek's new direction, toward home.

Toward what had used to be home. Were The Middle Reaches home now?

"G-gordon?"

Staring at the sky had kept him from being aware of what stood in front of him. He snapped to attention, not sure who had said his name. For a moment, every muscle tensed—he didn't have friends—but he relaxed again when he saw Steven.

Steven did *not* relax. He held his hatchet close to his chest and looked from the spiky alligators to the squirrel-bats as if at any moment they'd swarm on him. As he came closer, he looked over his shoulders, like someone might tackle him from behind. "What's got you spooked?" Gordon asked.

His brother looked confused. "We're... here again," he said.

Gordon took a deep breath, tingling with the fair and foul mix of odors. "Yes."

Steven came close enough for Gordon to set a hand on top of the hatchet and push it downward, which made the younger boy's arms release some of their tension. Finally, Steven got the message and let the hatchet hang at his side. "Are we... safe?"

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“I think we are,” Gordon said. “The creatures...” He stopped and thought, *Lyanetha’s children*, but he didn’t want to explain Lyanetha to Steven. “They don’t attack each other for the same reason they won’t attack us.”

“Why?”

Gordon looked up and watched a squirrel-bat fly from a branch on one side of the creek to a branch on the other. “It’s like kids used to say on the playground. It takes one to know one.”

“I don’t know how I got here,” Steven said.

Gordon laughed. “We should be used to that by now.”

Shockingly, Steven cracked a smile. “I guess we should.”

“Get any action with the hatchet lately?”

Steven’s smile widened. “Certainly tried. You wouldn’t believe where I’ve been.”

“I could say the same thing.”

“Did you like it?”

“Like what?”

“The place where you were.”

Gordon thought, but not very long. “Not really.”

“Gordon?”

“What?”

“Do you... I mean...”

“What?”

“Do you mind if I stay with you?” Steven’s face turned red.

Gordon understood why Steven asked but decided to play dumb. “Why the fuck would I mind if you stayed with me?”

“The other options... don’t...” Steven stood up a little straighter. Maybe he had gotten taller. “They don’t suit me.”

“We’re brothers,” Gordon said.

Steven chopped the air as he talked. “And I don’t want to take orders from Adam anymore, either.”

“Fuck Adam,” Gordon said. “From now on, we only take orders from ourselves.”

## Bobby

Bobby stepped into the circle of smaller grey trees within the dense woods beside the creek. “A Grove of Ghosts,” Sheldon had called it, right at the time when Bobby was figuring out that he, himself, was a ghost. On the off chance that he might be among friends, he lowered the rapier, from which blood—of many colors—did more than drip. It poured.

After the first attempts at fighting, attempts that were mostly blind slashes in mad arcs, he noticed that pieces of the creatures he hacked apart kept moving. They wiggled, and strands crept from legs to trunks as if they would reconnect, pull together, reunite, reform. The creatures would reassemble, live again, but something stopped them. Bobby slashed, and he watched the dismemberment try and fail to reverse. Movement that should never have been gradually wasn't. Dead things, truly dead, piled.

Bobby reached a conclusion. His sword, in some hands, could tear holes in reality. In his hands, it could kill things that would otherwise refuse to die. Bobby became less afraid and saw fear in *them*.

Some, but not all, of the creatures of The Flood fled from him. By the time he decided to return to the Grove of Ghosts, he hardly had to fight, which was good because he felt exhausted.

As the blood of his kills poured into the ground within the circle of trees, he realized he had no reason to be here, but he had wanted to come. Maybe that was reason enough.

“You,” a masculine voice said. If it came from a tree, Bobby couldn't tell which one.

“Me,” Bobby said. He took a deep breath. He wasn't wheezing. “And?”

“He looks different, doesn't he?” a feminine voice said.

“But what's he *doing* here?” This voice was a whisper, hard to tell anything about it.

“You can address me directly,” Bobby said. His voice sounded strange in his ears. He tried to lean on the rapier but found it a less useful cane than before.

“Okay,” a different, deep voice said. “What are you doing here?”

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“I guess I’m here to talk to you.” Bobby surveyed the area. Birds... of a kind... lurked in the branches, but other than the gruesome figures in the trees, the place seemed relatively peaceful. The usual screeches and shrieks accompanied the birds’ caws, but they played background. The Grove seemed like a lovely place for a nap for the types of people who slept.

As a circle of trees in a supernatural place, it also seemed like an oracle, but its voices sounded too conversational for mythical status.

“What would you want from *us*?” a woman asked.

Her tone inspired Bobby’s response: “Do you mean *you* might want something from *me*?”

“Whose side are you on?!” This woman’s voice was sharp.

And her question was incisive. He hadn’t had an opportunity to articulate the problem to himself, but he decided there’d be no harm in thinking out loud. “The truth is, I don’t know. There was... a villain... and I was on the side fighting against him. And then I was defending someone, so I thought I was on her side, but I ended up bringing her somewhere, to someone... and maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“You serve Hastur,” a man said. “You traveled with Avin, but you *serve* Hastur. We are everywhere. We *see*. You are not one of us.”

“If you mean a tree, no, I am not one of you.” Bobby smirked. “And I *don’t* serve Hastur. I might have... accidentally... but I don’t. Not anymore.” Bobby considered. “Whose side are you... Grove ghosts... on?”

The man who had accused him of serving Hastur laughed. Another voice joined him, and another, and another. High-pitched laughs, low-pitched laughs, everything in between, syncopated, maniacal.

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!

Bobby was really fucking sick of maniacal laughter.

## Karla

Karla Zeitmeister, Mansworth Futures and Securities Freelance Agent Number 1387010, did not enjoy working in Carcosa. Her colleague, Agent 2598396, specialized in anomalies situated within Carcosa, which didn't operate along infinite timelines like other realms anyway, so Karla rarely had reason to think of Carcosa, more rarely a cause to go there. However, her current responsibility was expansive.

Her responsibility spanned realms, including the home of the three Carcosan "gods."

The current mission involved mercy to a lesser extent, apology to a greater, and long-term planning to the greatest. She stood in front of a yellow wall made of stone, gathering her wits for interaction with people. Agent 24, "Young Torrents," was more of a people-pleaser. Most of MFS never interacted with humans, especially not the living variety.

Rebecca Charles and Si-woo Park were, however, alive, and they needed to stay that way, so Karla walked through the yellow wall.

Ms. Charles and Mr. Park, both naked, sat on the opposite side of the small room, looking not at her but near her, toward a corner where a longsword lay. Karla cleared her throat. "Ms. Charles? Mr. Park?"

They looked at her and breathed. She inferred that they didn't believe she was actually there, an inference supported by their continuing failure to acknowledge her. "I am not a hallucination. You both see me."

They looked at each other and looked back at her. Animation slowly filled their bodies, and they stood, backs sliding up against the yellow wall behind them. Karla knew they were absorbing her bright red hair, her opalescent complexion, and her tailored periwinkle suit.

"You might want to get dressed. We're leaving," Karla said.

"Wha—" Rebecca said.

"I'll explain after I've released you," Karla said.

Ms. Charles and Mr. Park were highly accommodating. They said nothing as they put on what clothes they had. Karla introduced herself by name and as an associate of MFS, then led them through the wall, after which they stepped

into a cubicle on the 24th floor of the Atlanta tower, where a desk with two chairs on one side and one on the other waited.

The only item on the desk's surface was a packaged white dress shirt for Mr. Park, which Karla offered and he accepted. He was still buttoning up when Karla began. "Someone more familiar will join us shortly," Karla said. "Meanwhile, I have a duty to express MFS's deep distress about having been misled, as you were misled, by our legal representation."

"Angelica," Rebecca said. Si-woo finished buttoning and sat.

"Correct, Beaufort and Associates." Why couldn't this wait for Agent 24? "We allied ourselves with Beaufort because we believed we had a common purpose. We believed we all sought to maintain a balance between realms, a balance long prized by MFS and our predecessors, but current indicators suggest Beaufort's leadership has sought to undermine this balance."

"Angelica lied to us and took my daughter," Mr. Park said.

"Yes, we were all misled by Ms. Beaufort with tragic results, and for our part in your tragedy, on behalf of Mansworth Futures and Securities, I must sincerely..." Karla inhaled deeply, "apologize."

Mr. Park and Ms. Charles gawked at her. Karla watched for Agent 24.

"You're sorry," Ms. Charles said. "What are you going to do about it?"

The question felt like a blindside, but it shouldn't have. "Quite a lot, Ms. Charles," Karla said. "Quite a lot."

## Augustus

Conjuring the ghost of his dead grandson was ridiculously easy. As soon as the boy appeared, Augustus sent him away to change into one of the suits he'd bought, black with orange pinstripes, much better than the choice of boxers only or cheap polo and jeans that the boy had been doomed to.

"Let me have a look at you, my boy," the grandfather said. Acknowledging his grandson made him feel like a grandfather, which meant feeling old, a feeling he didn't like, but he wasn't nearly as old as he should have been, which brought some comfort.

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Sheldon turned in a circle, modeling the suit, which fit his teenaged body perfectly. He was an attractive lad. They had the same eyes. His father had been useless, a disappointment, so Augustus had decided to ignore his offspring. Seeing the young man now, and considering the reports he'd heard, he was willing to consider the possibility that the decision had been one of his rare mistakes.

"Tell me, Sheldon," Augustus said. "Vere, Sheldon Vere. You do know me?"

"Yes, Grandfather," Sheldon said.

"Do you know why I've summoned you?"

"No," Sheldon said. "Mom said that after Dad left, you wanted nothing to do with us."

"Quite right," Augustus said. "But you still have my name, and all that's different now. Now, you work for me. You know... things I know... things few know... The Middle Reaches... Carcosa... the gods."

"Yes, Grandfather."

"What you may not know is that I now own the land where The Middle Reaches sit, and the unimpeded right to develop it."

"I know you had money when Mom and I were poor," Sheldon said.

"Don't get snarky," Augustus said, frowning. "You're going to help me and help yourself in the process. As I think you know, there's an upheaval underway, and The Middle Reaches are at the... middle... of it all. I say, let the old gods fall. Let them kill each other. I have the land, and I have the power. I'll take their place."

"Umm... yes, Grandfather."