

As the young man sat in the darkness, the sounds echoed around him. The shimmering of the moonlight, the warmth of her red lips, the slow churning of her tears. The footsteps beyond the door and the sound of a trigger hammer cocked. The taste of lead and the glimmer of blood in a pool of silvery glow.

She reached out and he took her hand. His heart a hollow of grief and nothingness, removed as a man watching the pictures unfold from a far off land. He lent over her, tears falling down onto her own as he kissed her forehead. He took her part of key, the third, from the chain around her neck and added it to his own, then he took up the gun by her side, heavier now than ever, burdened by loss and sorrow.

The rain poured hard, cold and stinging. The streetlamps shone with a halo of regret, the tracks of his tears washed away by the downpour. The killer entered his car and turned on the lights as the young man lifted the gun. And within the moment, a thunderous clap, a shatter of windscreen, the terrible gargle of the blood overflowing from the man's now torn throat, creeping down his neck, over the chain, covering the fourth part of the key. The spluttering as he coughed for air. The young man continued forward, pulling the trigger again and again until the mighty ricochets became nothing more than the dead click of metal on metal.

And then, from the darkness of the trees around him, the faint echoes of sickening laughter. Those evil cackles surrounded him, bore into his brain like the sinister slivering of a snake. They were here, what had he done? Had this been what they wanted all along? As he turned to look back, the lights of the car grew in intensity until all around him was a stark contrast of white light and deep black shadow, and the sickening pale yellow of the laughing eyes.

He fell to his knees, there was no where he could turn, no way to run, to escape. In a filthy puddle of rain and dirt he had given himself up. The young man held the two keys in his hand " the third and the fifth. The jackal before him stepped forward. And then again. And then, with a laughter so evil it tore his soul and broke his heart, they attacked.

The sky was a wash of black as the old man sprinted over the gravel. His heart hammering in a panic of dread. Then he wretched, his knees gave way and he crashed to the ground. The vomit hit the dirt beneath him in a single splutter leaving a foul, acidic taste. There was no time to waste, to rest or to recover. He lifted himself to his feet and started to run, his robes hindering his movement as they waved around him, the chain around his neck, the one that held the first part of the key, digging into his flesh with the weight of every sin he had ever committed.

He could hear the scraping chase of the jackal behind him. The beast with the yellow eyes and mind-splitting laughter coming for him. The old man ran faster now. He must be the last of them, the sanctuary floor slick with blood, the crimson stains vandalised the walls like some gruesome form of expression. And the beast was gaining on him. He slipped into the forest and pressed himself backwards against a large, twisted oak.

As he breathed the air before him glowed a pale blue in the scattered moonlight. Frantically he searched the ground. A twig, no, something larger, a heavy stone. The laughter growing louder now, as twisted as the oak, sending a shiver through every inch of him. He could not stop the

wretch, and spat the vile liquid from his mouth.

The jackal was here. The fast clatter of its paws against the gravel now a slow stalking for its prey. It was right behind him. He picked up the heavy stone, a strain on his back, and as the beast left forward, cracked the stone against its head. The dark figure scrambled away a couple of feet before falling to one knee. It jolted backward, laughing and growling, white teeth glimmering in the faint night. The man stumbled toward it, bearing the weight of the stone, dropping it onto the jackal's head. It buckled under the weight, and the man knelt on the black figure. He lifted the stone again, and struck down on the beast's head. And again, the skull cracking and caving inward under the violent blows, blood and brain and fractures of bone flew up and onto the man's cloak, onto his face, into his mouth.

He collapsed to the side, panting for breath, spitting out the archaic concoction from his mouth. He examined the dark figure with the caved in head and with a cry of despair he found recognition; the keeper of the fifth key. His chain gone, but his body fully in human form. Those bastards. Those sick, twisted bastards. He convulsed forward, and emptied what was left in his stomach upon the cold grassy ground.

Deep within the forest came the mocking snigger of the jackal.

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The blood dripped from the stone tablet, a sound as chilling as the silent night's air. The old man, robed in black and filled with sorrow took the key from her cold, naked body. The four other Keepers stood watching in horror, but clutching to an uncertain hope. A hope that was ancient and weary in their minds, a faith held together by the insubstantial thread of time and mythos.

'Here, to me.' the old man held out his hand, 'quickly now, or her loss will count for nothing'

In the dim light of the five candles " the sixth had burnt out – the four each in turn took hold of their keys; the cold metal that hung on chains around their necks, a constant reminder of the price which had to be paid. The Keeper of the Fourth was the first to remove his chain. For ten long years he had carried it, holding tight to the hope that one day it will be used. And now, surrounded by the strangers who held the other four, that day had come. Finally the burden would no longer be his.

As he lifted the chain from his dark skin and over the tightly curled black hair he felt a pang of doubt from deep within. Still he held out the chain in his right hand, and the old man reached for it. He wondered if releasing the key will lift the burden, or maybe it will deepen. He had been told what the key would unlock when he took it up, he had heard what he needed to hear, it was his way out or a past of pain and suffering. But from what he had seen tonight, from finally meeting the other four, and seeing the blood of the sixth, a doubt jarred any hope of freedom. And just as the old man took hold of the precious item, the sound of laughter echoed from far away.

'They are here. Run,' spoke the old man as he dropped the key to the ground. 'RUN!'

In a chaotic panic the others dispersed as the large man stooped low to retrieve his fallen key. It lay in the pool of the lady's blood behind the stone. As he crouched he heard the splintered crack of

the wooden door as it tore open. Then the scream of the fidgeting Keeper of the Second mingled with the blood curdling screech of the laughing Jackals. Why the hell did he not run!?

He threw his back against the stone, sitting in the blood, and pulled the gun from the waist band of the jeans. He cocked the hammer. He had been warned about certain dangers, advised to carry protection. He never thought he'd have to use it. The piece felt cold and dead as a headstone in his large hands, he had never fired it, nor any gun. The thought of the unknown power of the thing made him apprehensive to do so.

The screeching and screaming stopped suddenly.

'Hey!'

He waited. No response.

'Hey, Second, you ok man?'

Nothing.

He lent to his left to get a view from behind the stone. Second was ok, he stood looking over something. Had the nervous guy killed it? Cautiously he rose to his feet, clutching the gun as though his life still depended on it. 'Second, you hurt man?' he gave a quick look around the room. Signs of a struggle and splashes of blood that weren't there before. 'Second, answer me!'

Then second turned. As he brought his face around Fourth knew something was wrong, and when he turned fully, he could see a gaping hole where his jaw had been torn off. His blood still spilled from the jugular in spurts, lending a visceral, congealing glisten to his black robe.

Then he saw the dagger in Second's hand. The old man's dagger, dripping crimson in the poor candle light. 'What the...? Are you ok? Man, we need to get you to a doctor!' he spoke in disbelief. Hearing the words back he realised how stupid they sounded. Of course he was not ok! The man was missing half a face!

In shock, Fourth's knees buckled beneath him, he couldn't even imagine the pain the other must be feeling, but they were safe, the beast was dead. Wasn't it? He hadn't seen the body, but...

Then he looked up, Second stood, now by his side, and rose the dagger. It came down and buried itself deep in Fourth's left shoulder, he unleashed three rounds until Second's head was riddled with holes, and the lifeless body dropped to the ground.

The pain of the dagger then stuck home. He couldn't move his left arm and it hurt to breathe. The cold blade, struck deep, burned like hell, his blood creeping down the chest under his robe. He panted for breath, tears now coursing down his cheeks from eyes squeezed shut. He couldn't bear to see what he had done to the small guy.

And then came the sound of that laughter – that screeching, mocking laughter. The laughter that spoke into his mind like a drill, planting words like twisted seeds. The Keeper of the Third is upstairs. Get her.

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“My dear brothers and sisters, I thank you all for your hard work and dedication to the cause. I want you to know that this cause rises far beyond these mortal bodies of ours; names, race and creed are nothing in the light of the mysteries we shall awaken tonight. My friends, we have stood back for centuries, hiding in the shadows as the demons take what is rightfully ours. Mankind has known torment and fear under the tyranny of their black hearts and now it is time to release the Master and reclaim our thrown.

“Each one of you here has been entrusted with a segment of a key; segments that form a key of lies – propaganda for the jackal masters and his demon hordes! They say that the Master was imprisoned for the good of mankind, that his release would bring about the destruction of the world! These lies have kept those weak of spirit blinded from the truth, the truth that the world the Master fought for was far greater than the one in which we now live.

“And now we gather to unlock the prison in which he writhes. We shall overthrow the Jackal. We shall be the victors.

“Master, take this offering that you may show mercy on us, your servants.

“Thank you for your sacrifice, Keeper of the Sixth.”

She struggled, gagged and bound, tears of terror pouring down her face, pleading for release, pleading on behalf of Mankind that the beast not be awakened. But her cries had no effect. The Keeper of the First plunged his dagger deep into the naked girl’s chest.