

HALLOWMERE™

Volume One

In the Serpent's Coils

TIFFANY TRENT



PROLOGUE

[Trans. note: Only surviving letter of 1285 series]

Spring 1285

To Frater Josephus, Kirk of St. Columba, from Pater
Iamblicus, Kirk of St. Fillan, greetings.

My dearest brother:

I am grateful for your patience of late. By now, I hope you will have received the charm that will allow you to read this letter. I have asked you to wait before taking any action, as our dear Friend has counseled, but I believe he feels the time has come.

At Midsummer, you must enter the fallen realms of our enemy. It grieves me to place you in such great danger, who already have suffered so much at the hands of the Unhallowed. Only you can achieve this errand. You must bring the stone back to the Kirk of St. Fillan before the Midsummer-tide is done. I suppose it is needless to remind you of your duty, to beware of falling again under the spell of the witch. You of all people know her terrible fondness for revenge.

Yours in Faith,
Iamblicus

August 27, 1865

CORRINE TRIED TO SIT, BUT WEAKNESS WASHED OVER HER. She considered lighting a lamp to locate the source of the noise that had awakened her. Then she realized that she had no idea where the lamp was, or where she was, for that matter.

The wall behind her head squeaked. Mice. She had heard them in the walls of the rooming house where she and her mother had stayed since coming to Washington. But this room didn't harbor the sweet stink of the sewage canal outside, and there was quiet here, a deep quiet far removed from city streets.

"Mother?" she whispered to the stillness. But there was no sound of breathing aside from her own. Her mother didn't answer her call. She put her hand to her throat, but the locket she sought for reassurance was gone, the locket that her parents had given to her when she was five.

Voices sifted through the bedroom door. She tried to calm herself enough to stand. After two tries she managed. She walked unsteadily toward the line of light coming from under the door, nearly smashing into a nightstand. She ran her hand along rippling wallpaper, finding the doorknob before deeper panic boiled. Her fingers shook so hard that she could barely

turn it. She crept toward the voices and crouched near the banisters. She clung to the posts, trying to recover her shattered breathing.

Downstairs, lamplight flickered across dark blue wallpaper and the white woven flowers of a Persian carpet. A black woman, dressed in a maid's dark dress with a starched apron and cap, held the door open for two men as they carried something large and heavy into the foyer. Corrine's fingers tightened on the balusters. She knew this paneled trunk. It had stood next to her mother's bureau back at the farm in Maryland. Corrine had often slipped into her parents' room to slide her hands across the trunk lid, feeling the contrast between the wooden side panels and the middle section of fern-embossed tin. It was kept locked; her mother wore the key on her charm bracelet.

Corrine had only seen inside it once, when she was four. She remembered entering her parents' bedroom and finding the trunk lid open, beckoning her like a wide mouth. The smell of every holiday combined—the spice of Christmas, the lilies of Easter—drew her to the trunk's edge. A woman looked out at her from the dome top. Her golden hair was clasped in a pearl-studded chignon at her nape; her face shone like an angel's. But there was something decidedly wicked about the feline tilt of her eyes.

The lady in the portrait smiled at her. Corrine gasped. And then, the trunk lid slammed shut. Corrine's mother stood over her with a look on her face that Corrine had never seen before or since.

"This is not for you," her mother said, touching her head as though it ached.

"But the pretty lady, she smiled at me," Corrine said.

"Nonsense!" her mother snapped. "I will not have such fancies from you, Corrine!"

Corrine cried then. She had never seen her mother angry.

And then, her mother had enfolded her in the warm silk of her embrace. “Really darling, don’t trouble yourself. Just don’t look in there again.”

After that, the trunk had remained locked. But Corrine had never forgotten the lovely spice drifting out from under the lid, the lady’s mysterious, feline smile. Corrine would almost have said that the woman was not quite human.

And now the trunk was below. But the trunk hadn’t been with them at the rooming house; it would never have fit in their tiny room.

A man entered, carrying a pair of gloves and a riding crop. As he entered the circle of light, Corrine hunkered down closer to the banister, hoping he wouldn’t see her. His deep-set eyes looked hollow, and his wavy hair drooped around his cheekbones with the heat. Corrine’s eyes widened. She only recognized this man because her mother had once showed her his portrait—her uncle William.

Since Corrine could remember, her mother’s brother, a powerful lawyer, had shunned his sister and her family. Even when her mother came to Washington after Corrine’s father had disappeared in the Battle of Petersburg, Uncle William had not once offered to shelter or succor them in any way.

“You can put the trunk over there in my study for the moment,” Uncle William said to the two men.

Corrine watched as the men disappeared into the study. The maid came and took Uncle William’s gloves and crop from him.

“A good journey from Maryland, Mister McPhee?” the maid asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I think the Council will be pleased.” He looked up, as though he sensed Corrine’s presence, and frowned. Corrine shrank from the banister, until she could see little more than his head.

“My sister’s farm is in terrible disrepair,” he said. “I doubt that worthless husband of hers ever worked a day on it before he went into the army. It will have to be sold.”

Corrine smothered a cry of shock. Instead of staying to hear the rest of the conversation, Corrine crept back into her room and pulled herself into her bed, trying to quiet her wheezing gasps.

Sell the farm? She thought of the beautiful long fields, the Elk River that wound around them. She had begged her mother not to leave, not to dismiss Nora and Willy, former slaves who had escaped through the Underground Railroad. But her mother had been adamant. There was work to do in Washington, she had said. More nurses were needed every day to care for those still recuperating from their wounds. But her mother would never allow her estranged brother to sell the farm—would she?

The tears streamed until she was forced to smother her sobs in her pillow. The loss of the farm hurt terribly, but what her uncle had said about her father . . . She pulled the pillow from her face and stared into the darkness.

Where was her mother?

August 28, 1865

Clinking silverware rattled Corrine awake. The thin maid she’d seen the night before set a pewter tray of food on a folding table at her bedside. The room’s wallpaper leaped out at her with its cigar-brown and tulip-leaf-green patterns, threatening to sicken her as she pushed herself upright.

A man entered, a white-bearded doctor who opened his black bag at the edge of her bed. He held her shoulders still as he inspected her breathing and glared into her eyes and mouth.

“Has your eye always been this way?” he asked, peering at her expanded left pupil.

He held her head so tightly she couldn't nod. "Yes," Corrine said. "My mother called it my 'fairy eye.'"

The doctor grunted and released her. Taking a bottle from his bag, he filled a tiny lead cup and gave it to her. "This should be your last dose," he said.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Quinine," he said. "You very nearly died of the ague."

"The ague?" she asked. "Swamp fever?"

"It's rare, but it can happen," the doctor said. "Your uncle tells me your rooming house was near the canal. Not a good place for children."

Corrine didn't remember when she had first felt the signs of fever, much less when she had taken her first dose of the medicine. She swallowed the quinine. Bitterness clawed at her throat until she gagged.

"Your mother was a nurse, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"She should have known better then," he said.

Was? Should have? Why did he speak of her mother that way? She held the cup out to him. He packed it away and left the room with one last glance. She heard him in the hallway, talking, she supposed, to Uncle William.

"... danger mostly past. Perhaps in a day or two..." the doctor said.

More baritone murmurs.

The maid entered with a pitcher of water and a glass. Corrine tried to sit up again, but the dizziness capsized her into the bed.

"Where is my mother?" she asked.

"She in the grave, child," the woman said. Her accent was so thick that Corrine was not sure she understood.

The woman continued. "She die more than a week ago, and they bury her in the nurses' cemetery in Alexandria."

“Dead?” Corrine’s voice cracked.

“She refuse to quit working ’til the very last. Probably what killed her, Lord bless her. They try to give her the medicine, but too late. She already too weak. And you come down with it, and they worry more over you than her. She go in a hurry, child, and that’s the truth.”

Corrine’s mouth softened with nausea, even as she struggled against the maid’s words. Her mother—dead? Despite the afternoon heat, she clutched at the covers, willing her eyes to follow the patterns in the wallpaper so she wouldn’t cry.

The maid picked up the night pot at the foot of the bed. Corrine saw sympathy in her eyes, but also a very obvious frustration. *What are we going to do with you now?* the woman seemed to be thinking.

“What’s your name?” Corrine asked. She tried to distract herself with something, anything, from the knowledge sinking into her stomach.

“Betsy,” the maid said.

Corrine clutched at her throat and thought again of the locket. “Do you know what happened to my locket?” she asked.

“Your locket, child?”

“A gold locket on a gold chain. Shaped like a little book. My mother and father . . .” She was too shocked to say more.

Betsy shook her head. “Didn’t see one.” Covering the pot with a cloth, the maid glanced again at Corrine and left the room.

Corrine slid back into the bed, stiff with unshed tears. She had cried about the farm, but death was too devastating for tears. Everything was gone—her father, the farm, the locket, and now her mother.

If only the Southern states hadn’t seceded. Then the rebellion wouldn’t have happened. Her father would have never

gone to war, her mother wouldn't have left the farm to nurse wounded soldiers. As Corrine's mind raced with what-ifs, she fell into an exhausted sleep.

She sat with her mother in a dark bower by the Elk River; night-blooming vines shed light from pearly bells. In the flower-glow, her mother's face was young and vulnerable. The iron cross she had always worn was a dark bar at her throat. Her mother removed the cross and put it over Corrine's head. You have greater need of this now than I, her mother said.

Eyes gleamed from the forest shade. Things flitted through her peripheral vision—nacreous wingtips, twiggly limbs, tufts of milkweed hair. Fairies. Her mother had told her many stories of them. She wanted desperately to look at them, but her mother said, Don't look at them. Look only at me.

So she kept her gaze on her mother's eyes, watching as the pale face aged, as the skin sagged and dissolved into bone. Only her eyes remained intact, watching Corrine lovingly from their sockets while her mother's finger joints clicked toward her cheek.

She screamed herself awake, fairy laughter echoing in her ears. The dream confirmed what Betsy had said. Her mother was dead. Corrine promised herself in that moment that no one—human, fairy, or otherwise—would ever see her cry again.

No one came to her, and she drifted in and out of the fever-lands.

August 29, 1865

It was afternoon again. Uncle William was looking down at her, the same concern and consternation on his face as Betsy's had held. His bushy eyebrows winged outward like moth antennae, and below them his eyes were dark like her mother's. Now that she saw him more closely, Corrine realized there was gray

at his temples. The only other family resemblance was the soft jaw, quite becoming on her mother but decidedly odd-looking on her uncle.

"I suppose you have heard about your mother," he said.

"Yes." She was proud that her voice didn't break this time.

"Most unfortunate," he said. Corrine wasn't sure if he meant for her or himself.

"Yes," she said. "How did I get here?"

"You were brought here from the hospital when the danger was past. As your father has not returned from the War, you are now my ward."

Corrine nodded. His disdainful tone when he mentioned her father was only slightly less than when he had spoken of him that night in the foyer.

"I must tell you now that I dislike children and am not accustomed to having them underfoot. You may stay here so long as you abide by my rules. These rules are simple." He held up an index finger. "First, do not interfere in my affairs. Second, act decorously and with discretion. Lastly, at all times, do as you are bid."

Uncle William paced as he lectured. "Do these things and you may stay. Do otherwise and I will send you elsewhere. Your life here will be very different from your transcendentalist upbringing. I have no tolerance for such romantic notions. You will be expected when you are of age to either make your own way in a respectable profession or, more preferably, to find a match whom I deem appropriate. Until that time, I will find a tutor to train you in a vocation."

He paused and looked at her. "Have you an idea whether you wish to be a nurse or a teacher?"

Corrine shook her head. She had never been spoken to in this way. Her parents had always believed in learning through experience, in self-cultivation through kindness and compassion.

This was so different, she didn't know how to respond.

Uncle William's brows knit. "Very well then," he said, looking around the room as if he had something more important to do. "Have you need of anything else?"

"Mourning clothes," she said in a small voice. "And . . . perhaps some books?"

"There is a library in my study on the ground floor. Betsy will show it to you when you are able. You are only to look at the books. Do not disturb my desk or personal effects. When you use the library, it would be best if you were finished before the afternoon, as I return from my office then."

He stared at her throat as he spoke, and she touched the collar of her nightgown uncomfortably.

"Corrine," he said. "Did your mother . . . give you anything before she died?"

"Only my locket a long time ago," she said. "Do you know where it is?"

"A locket?" he asked. "Are you certain it wasn't an iron cross?"

Corrine shook her head.

"You are certain?" he asked again.

"Yes," she answered, wondering why this could be so important to him.

"The cross was a family heirloom passed from mother to daughter. Did you ever see it?"

Corrine recalled her dream and shut her eyes before answering. "Yes," she said. "Mother said it was very old. She only let me touch it once."

"You don't know what happened to it?" Uncle William asked, agitated.

"No, Uncle," she said. "I don't. Mother always wore it."

There was a silence in which she gathered that he was trying to find something appropriate to say.

“May I see the trunk?” she asked.

He looked at her with fleeting surprise before his face darkened. “How do you know about that?”

“I saw you bring it in the other night,” she said. “I want to see it. It was hers.” She fidgeted with the bedsheets, inwardly appalled at her own impertinence.

“Do you know where the key is?” Uncle William asked.

“Mother always wore it on her charm bracelet,” Corrine said.

The muscles around her uncle’s right eye twitched. He swore softly.

“I would like to—” Corrine began.

But her uncle interrupted. “Until I decide otherwise, the trunk remains mine. You may enter my library for books, but you are not to go near that trunk. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Uncle,” Corrine said, wishing she had the strength to stand up to him.

“Very well,” he said. His thoughts were obviously elsewhere, and she didn’t know him well enough to read him. “I shall send Betsy to find suitable clothes for you and anything else within reason that you might require.”

He left then, mumbling under his breath.

“My locket . . .” she said softly. But it, like everything else, was gone.

Corrine leaned back in the bed, puzzled. Uncle William was more distraught over the loss of his sister’s jewelry than her death. And Corrine couldn’t understand his attachment to that trunk, the only thing she had left of her mother. *If only I had the key*, she thought. But she knew where it was—six feet under the soil of Alexandria, circling her mother’s rotting wrist.