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THE
TOKEN


A JUST INK PRESS MOVIE



A Just Ink Press novella

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The Token

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When Patience receives an unwanted token from a stranger, she doesn't expect the life-altering events that follow, but after her few days of good luck turn sour, she's more than willing to rid herself of the thing and the shadows that come with it.

Chapter One

Patience Madison walked briskly down the cobblestone walk. Her ankle attempted to take an angle it wasn't designed for and she quickly straightened it, continuing her journey. Cobblestones and heels were just not meant to work together cooperatively. She cursed herself for wearing them when she knew she'd be taking the horrendous walk down Fifth Avenue. At that point, coffee became necessary to her appointment's survival. She'd text saying she'd be a little late, keeping her blood thirsty tendencies to herself.

Once at the coffee shop, she stood in line, thankful it was so short for once. *People have to have their lattes and iced mocha with whip.* She was no different in that respect and ordered the latter because it sounded good. Besides, the mocha would boost her energy along with the caffeine. Her appointment texted back with a 'no worries' and she ordered something for them as well.

The décor of the coffee shop was warm and soothing in creams and chocolates with big comfy chairs, tables, and Wi-Fi for the geek squad who could be found all hours the shop was open. About the norm for coffee shop atmosphere, she supposed.

The barista yelled out her name; she grabbed her drinks and headed for the door. When she pushed out, she damn near ran over an elderly homeless-looking woman.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Excuse me," said Patience.

The woman's grey eyes studied the cups in her hands before finally settling on her face. "Patience. Such a pretty name."

Patience gave the woman a tight smile because she so did not fit her name. "Thank you, but I rarely have any. If you'll excuse me." She tried to step around the woman, but the woman blocked her path . . . to her appointment, to freedom, to the world. "I'm sorry, but I really am in a hurry."

"Here." The woman had something like a silver coin in her hand. "A token . . . of appreciation."

Patience raised both cups. "My hands are kind of full, sorry." She attempted to move around her again to no avail. *Oh my God, woman, move!*

"Perhaps you should slow down," the woman said. "You look like you could use a good rest."

Patience blinked. Did she hear her correctly? "I'm late for an appointment. Now, if you don't mind . . ."

"I'll put it in your pocket for you," the woman said, and she touched her arm.

Patience tried not to look displeased or shudder visibly, but if the woman was homeless . . . she shook the thought from her mind. It was wrong to think like that. She didn't know if the woman was homeless or not.

"Don't forget to pass it along." And she let go of Patience's arm and walked away.

Patience noticed the time on the large clock above the bank. "Crap. Bo is going to kill me."

As Patience walked the opposite direction, the woman turned and yelled something else back to her, but she couldn't hear the words over the sounds of the city.

* * * * *

Patience finally made it to Bo's new office building and walked through the maze of cubicleland to her intended section. Bo's secretary, Nadine, didn't stop her, but jumped up to open the door with its new sign stating "Isabo Cartwright" clearly on the varnished wood.

"Thanks," Patience said with a smile and stepped inside. "I've brought a caffeine fix." She set the cup on Bo's desk and took a quick look around. Stark white greeted her everywhere. And then flat brown – not like you'd find in an IKEA, but rather a thrift store. "Good God, I'm glad you called me."

"I told you it was bad." Bo reached for the coffee. "You are a godsend, woman!"

"Right," she replied, her eyes taking in the white walls, gray floor, and god-awful brown furniture. "So what did you have in mind for in here?"

Bo looked up, her vibrant blue eyes sparkling with a smile. "I was thinking blue. You know, to match my eyes."

Patience raised a brow. "Sapphire blue, huh?"

Bo nodded. "Think you're up for the challenge?"

"When am I not?" Patience pulled out a notepad from her tote and started jotting ideas down. "Any other color or aspects you'd like implemented?"

Bo laughed. "This is why I hire you. You're so thorough."

"I love what I do," Patience replied, though her friend knew this. Her mind had already started designing Bo's new office.

"Too much, I think," Bo said.

Patience looked up from her notes. "What's that mean?"

Bo leaned forward. "When was the last time you went on a date?"

"Oh, please, don't start with that," Patience said with a smirk, knowing her friend only had her best interests at heart. "I don't have time for the games of romance."

"You're going to turn into the crazy old cat lady one of these days," Bo replied and sat back, her brow pinched in concentration. "How about some silver and white, but not white-white. I hate that. It blinds me."

Patience laughed. "And maybe some lighter blues and a touch of green."

Bo jolted in her chair. "Green? You're kidding, right?"

"I never kid," she replied, shaking her head. "A light shade of green to compliment the blue. Trust me, Bo. You hired me for a reason. Remember what I did to your bedroom? That color green."

"Oh, fine," Bo said with a wave of her hand and sat back in the creaky black office chair. "Add a beautiful new chair that doesn't sound like it's dying to that list."

Patience laughed. "You got it."

She wrapped her appointment with Bo, declining a match-making move by the woman, and set off to a job in progress. Along the way to and from the next project, she found a twenty on the sidewalk, somehow got a free lunch, and received flowers as she passed the street florist on the way home.

Once she arrived home, she immediately sat down at her drawing table and started working on Bo's office project. The ideas flew across the paper in a flurry as she

sketched out the office from photos and memory. Color blended into the white and black. Not long after, she had the design finished, to her astonishment. No project ever flowed so easily from her mind to paper, and she was pleased as hell with the outcome. She knew Bo would love it.

Chapter Two

After three days filled with incredible luck, such as getting *the* socialite of the city to hire her, every dream she'd had in the past few days turned sour. Her dreams, which had been filled with everything she ever wanted from childhood to adulthood, slowly darkened, filling with shadows falling across desires, making them vanish in silence.

A man appeared with fire-orange hair and eyes to match, dressed entirely in black with pale skin. He stood about twenty yards from her, at the edge of the beach. Her children ran around, playing at the water's edge, the third building a sand castle in solitude as Patience and the faceless man of her dreams sat back on the blanket and watched. Something about the man standing at the end of the beach set Patience on edge. He didn't belong in her dreams, didn't belong in that world. He raised his hand slowly and pointed at the child with the sand castle.

"Pass it along," he said.

Patience frowned at him. "I don't understand. Pass what along?"

"Pass it along." The tentacles of his shadow stretched outward, slithering along the sand toward the oblivious child sitting alone.

Patience stood, fear coursing through her veins for reasons she couldn't explain. "What do you mean? The child?"

The insidious shadow continued to creep across the sand, leaving nothingness in its wake, with the dream of being on the beach dissipating before her eyes. She looked down at her "husband," who sat clueless. A circular tattoo with a triangle surrounding the sun on his right forearm blazed brightly before Patience turned back to the child with the sand castle. Once the darkness smothered the child, he vanished beneath its blanket. Patience screamed. The husband put a hand on her leg, as though calming her, but that was his only reaction.

"Pass it along," the man with the fire-orange hair said again, and it echoed around her in a buzz of insect's sound that had her jump damn near out of her skin.

Patience bolted upright, sweat covering her body, making her shiver in the cool evening air. She looked at the time – after midnight. "Fucking hell." She threw the covers back and crawled out of bed. Bits of sand skittered across the hardwood floor. "What the – ?" She hadn't been anywhere near a beach that day. As she walked to the kitchen, something caught her attention from the corner of her eye, but when she turned her head, there was nothing. She thought she'd seen movement, but she was the only one in the apartment and contrary to Bo's earlier statement, Patience did not have any pets. "I'm losing my fucking mind."

She poured a glass of water and took a large gulp. Hushed voices swept around her, a distant buzz or words, and she turned abruptly. "Who's there?" Patience didn't realize how frightened she was until she noticed the jostling water in her glass. Tremble was an understatement for her body's current condition. "Christ." She took another gulp and set the glass on the counter, heading back to bed and figuring she was still in the nightmare. Or perhaps a whole new one.

A glimmer caught her eye as she headed back to her bedroom. She walked over to the sofa table and picked up the silver, round object. "Token of Appreciation," she whispered of the item stuffed into her jacket pocket by the homeless woman three days

prior. There was a hand cut out of its center, allowing her to see through, with the words stamped into the metal around the hand.

Patience flipped it over and gasped. The words “pass it along” engraved twice appeared on the back. “Could this be the reason—?” She shook the thought. Magic didn’t exist in the really real world, much like luck—good or bad—didn’t exist. The words must have embedded in her mind during the split second she saw them, and created the idea in her dreams.

But nothing bad had happened over the past few days since she’d received the token. Why now? Was the dream an omen? She mentally shook the thoughts again. Omens were nothing, just like magic.

Patience knew if she thought about it too much she’d scare herself silly. She sighed, placed the token back on the sofa table, and went back to bed, ignoring the shadows that moved. The movement was just her eyes playing tricks on her. *Has to be*. She was tired. That was all.

An hour later, she sat in her bed, up against the headboard, staring at the corner of the room. She’d seen something move there, but it hadn’t in the past hour. Like pins pricking her skin and that familiar tug drawing one to a specific spot, she could feel someone watching her. Now and then, shadows would move in her peripheral vision, but she refused to remove her gaze from the corner of the room. It felt like *him*, the man on the beach, the one who had destroyed her lovely dream.

“Pass it along.” The faint whisper of the dream echoed in her mind.

“Stop it!” She slid back down into bed and pulled the covers over her head, resorting to the age-old childhood safety nets. She could only hope that it worked better than it did in *The Grudge*.

* * * * *

Five hours later, her alarm went off, shrieking to the heavens. Patience slammed her hand down on the defenseless clock and lay in a haze of sleep. Apprehension slapped her wide awake, and she sat up in bed and stared straight into that corner of her room.

Nothing.

There was nothing at all there.

Thank God.

It must have all been a nightmare. She couldn’t recall any other dream.

She climbed out of bed to get ready for her appointment with Bo, stepping on a few grains of sand as she walked to the bathroom. “I don’t even want to know,” she said and ignored the sand on the floor. After a shower and getting dressed, she headed into the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. The half-filled glass of water on the counter right where she’d left it the night before in what was supposed to be a dream stopped her in her tracks.

“Oh God,” she whispered. *Please don’t let any of this be real.*

A shadow passed through the living room, grabbing her attention. The moment she turned her head, the glass on the counter flew off and shattered at her feet. Patience jumped, screamed, grabbed her tote, and ran out. She didn’t care if she’d be an hour

early for her appointment with Bo. Her fucking apartment was haunted and the ghosts could apparently move shit. Who'd want to stick around for that?

Patience took her time getting to Bo's office, and along the way, stopped by the coffee shop. It wasn't so much that she needed the caffeine fix, but that she was looking for the old woman who'd given her the token. She grabbed her latte and headed out the door, looking up and down the street for her. *Nothing.*

The air lay still. Not a single breath of wind. Even the traffic silenced around her for a heartbeat. *Nothing.*

"Shit," she muttered, and began her trek to Bo's office. If the glass hadn't taken a dive off the counter all by itself, she'd swear up and down it was all a dream and that her eyes – and now ears – were playing tricks on her during her waking hours. So now what? She was at least three feet from that glass when it went suicidal. Did she have a poltergeist issue? Or was it straight up demons? Because the latter would suck and she'd never enter that goddamned apartment again.

She walked through the double doors at Bo's office, stopped for a deep breath, and made her way through cubicleland to Bo's office door.

"Hi, Nadine," she said to Bo's secretary. "I'm a bit early. Is she in a meeting?"

Nadine smiled, but something in her eyes – concern maybe? – startled Patience, like the secretary thought Patience had been in a car wreck or something. The smile strained around her mouth, but never reached her eyes. "No, she's alone in there. Go on in."

"Thanks," Patience said, too tired to question the look, and returned the smile before opening the door.

Bo glanced up from the papers on her desk. "Someone's early." Her head jerked back up. "Where the hell is mine?"

"Shit, sorry." She slapped her forehead as she came to a halt halfway across the office. "I'm a bit distracted today." She stomped one foot in frustration.

Bo eyed her carefully as if watching a ticking bomb and pointed to the chair. "Sit and talk while I finish this shit."

"It's nothing, really." Patience set her bag on the floor next to the chair.

"Bullshit," Bo replied. "You look totally frazzled, like scared out of your wits. What the hell happened? Did someone mug you?"

"No." Patience let out a sigh. That explained Nadine's look. "It started last night. I was having this beautiful dream, and then this man appeared out of nowhere, and when he stretched out his hand, shadows started sweeping across the beach and taking the dream away."

Bo looked up and quirked a brow. "Interesting."

"And then there are these shadows I keep seeing out of the corner of my eye," Patience continued. "You know how sometimes when you're really tired you see shit like that, but when you look, there's nothing there?"

"Like ghosts," Bo replied.

"Something like that, except I don't think they're ghosts. Today, after thinking they'd be gone with daylight, I saw one, and when I looked, the glass I'd left on the counter last night flew off and shattered at my feet."

"Maybe you knocked it over when you turned."

"No, because I stood at least a yard away." Patience rubbed her temples. "That's when I left the house. I didn't want to be there anymore."

"This all started last night?"

"Yes. Maybe they *are* ghosts. I don't know. Whatever's going on, I think it maybe has something to do with the token that old woman gave me."

"What old woman?"

"The one I ran into at the coffee shop the day I brought us coffee," Patience said. "It's a Token of Appreciation, and on the back it says to pass it along."

Pass it along, echoed through her mind and she forced herself to not cringe, though from the look on Bo's face, she wasn't sure she'd succeeded.

"Then maybe you should pass it along," Bo replied. "I mean, what if it's bad luck to keep it for so long? Did she say anything to you?"

"Yes," Patience replied. "Aside from passing it along, she said something else as I rushed away, but I didn't catch it."

"And this was four days ago?"

Patience nodded, anxiety building just talking about it.

Bo set her pen on the desk. "Do you have it with you?"

Patience picked up her tote and started rummaging through it, but then remembered where it was. "No, it's on my sofa table. Shit."

The corner of Bo's mouth turned up. "Kinda hard to pass it along if you're not carrying it with you, dumbass."

"Shut up." She set the tote back on the floor.

"My suggestion is to put it in your bag or pocket, and when you're out and about tomorrow, give it to someone else. Maybe that'll lift the curse."

Patience frowned. "You know I don't believe in that shit."

"Doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Bo said with a grin. "So, change of subject to get your mind off this . . . I heard through the grapevine that you bagged *the* Mrs. Pearl Harrington. Is it true?"

Patience smiled. "Yes. She called me the day after our meeting. Said someone had given her my name and number."

"That's great! You do a good job for her – which I know you will – and she'll recommend you to *everyone*."

"I know," Patience said. "I'm scared shitless."

"Nah, you'll do just fine," Bo replied. "I know your work, sweetie. You're one of the best interior designers around."

"Thanks." Patience lowered her head a little. Compliments were something she could never get used to.

"Okay, so, drinks tonight at eight," Bo said.

"No."

"Seriously? You got a job for Harrington and you're not going to celebrate?"

Patience studied her friend/client. "No match-making and I'll meet you for drinks."

Bo frowned, her brow pinching together, and she tapped the tip of the pen against the desk. "You take the fun out of everything."

"Promise," Patience said firmly.

Bo sighed. "Fine, I promise I won't try to fix you up with anyone."

"Good." Patience grabbed her bag and stood. "I'm going to go do some shopping for your office. I'll meet you at the pub at eight."

Bo waved her off. "Don't spend all my money."

Patience laughed and left the office. As she made her way out of cubicleland, she couldn't fathom anyone being happy sitting in one of those, day in and day out. It'd drive her mad, though she wasn't feeling too far from that at the moment.

Chapter Three

Three hours of wandering through stores proved fruitless – and nerve-wracking. Everywhere she turned, something spooked her. Dresser drawers on display came open, yet no one was around, antique pianos played low, dissonant music, but when she looked, no keys moved, no salesperson stood by. When she searched for specifics for Bo's office, it was like the colors she needed didn't exist in the color wheel, which was total bullshit because she'd seen a few things the day before. She admonished herself for not picking up the items then because God knew if she'd be able to find them again. And of course, she couldn't find them once she traveled back to those stores.

At the last stop of attempting to find previously seen items, the glass objects dotted around the store seemed to creep toward her and threatened to fly off the shelves. With a last glance at a tall black vase – she would have sworn it had been sapphire blue yesterday – that seemed to shimmer every time she walked by, she gave up and hurriedly left.

Deciding to take a short lunch break, she headed across the street to the deli. Probably not the best idea in the world. The meat was fetid, the chips stale, and she had to switch out her flat soda for water, which also didn't taste all that great. So much for eating and drinking anything. Maybe she was coming down with something. She checked her forehead. Normal.

"What the hell?" Patience grabbed the spoiled food, stood, and threw it all in the trash, not even bothering with trying to get a refund. More shopping was needed. She *had* to pick up at least *one* item for Bo's office today. She headed over to Third Avenue, where the more upscale antique shops were. Perhaps they'd hold something spectacular for Bo.

She hit a few stores, and still, nothing other than creepy-looking pieces that had her wondering just who in the hell would design something like it. The blues, silvers, and greens she needed vanished . . . like her dream. As she passed an old shop, the symbols in the window caught her attention, looking similar to runes or the like. She looked up to see the sign – Trinkets & Talismans. *Seriously?* Patience wondered if they'd know anything about the token in the metaphysical store, so she opened the door and stepped inside. The scent of patchouli invaded her nose, but she continued on and looked around, until a woman stepped out of the back and froze upon seeing her.

"Um, hi," Patience said.

The woman cleared her throat and took a tentative step forward. "May I help you, young lady?" Her hands twisted around one another, as though wringing out something bad.

"I was wondering if you've ever heard of a Token of Appreciation," she said. "It's about the size of a quarter and is silver with a hand cut –"

The woman held up her hand. "I don't deal in such things. Leave."

"But, someone gave one to me and –"

The woman leaned forward and whispered, "Death, he follows you."

Patience took a startled step back. "What?"

“Death follows you wherever you go” – she pointed out the window – “and he will not stop until he has what he came for.”

Patience followed her pointing finger, but saw nothing outside the shop. Then, as she turned her attention back to the woman, a glimpse of fire-orange hair appeared across the street. She gasped and looked back, but he was gone. “Oh my God! That was him, the man in my dreams!”

“If you are seeing him, the curse has already begun,” the woman said.

“But, what does he want?”

The woman leaned on the counter, studied Patience carefully with a tilt of her head, and finally smiled. “That which he might not get, Strength and Patience.”

Patience stumbled backward. “How’d you know my name?”

“If you can survive long enough to pass it along, you may live, but your sanity will be in question. Now leave my shop before you bring bad luck upon it and me!”

Patience rushed out the door and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, trying to catch her breath. She had to calm herself down before a panic attack took over, and then where would she be? Freaking the fuck out in the middle of the street with the whole world watching her. She slowed her breathing and gathered herself together before looking around the street for any sign of *him*. If he was there to collect her, she’d have to be extremely careful. Right? The woman wasn’t exactly clear on what he’d want from her, but she figured Death collected souls, so that had to be it.

From that point forward, her trek around the city to other shops was full of surprises of the killing variety, or at least the maiming variety. At one point, a taxi damn near ran her over. If she hadn’t been so cautious after what the woman said, she’d be dead. She thought briefly about going home before drinks with Bo, but didn’t want to enter her apartment.

Walking around the city all day was not a choice she wanted to make, but the idea of going home where the shadows lived terrified her. Perhaps a quick stop at her apartment would be safe for a bit, to grab dinner, if she could even eat anything, before meeting Bo. She walked slowly, cautiously home, taking as long as possible to avoid the inevitable confrontation. Realistically, it gave her time to come up with a plan of attack, if one could attack shadows.

Standing in front of her apartment door, Patience slipped the key into the keyhole and turned it. She took in a deep breath, turned the knob, and flung the door open.

Quiet nothingness greeted her.

She braved a step inside, carefully checking for shadows from the corner of her eye, praying they were gone or at least dormant for the time being.

Nothing.

Letting out a small sigh of relief without dropping her guard too much, she quietly closed the door and headed for the kitchen because her stomach wouldn’t shut the hell up about what it wanted. The token’s glimmer beckoned her, and she snatched it off the sofa table and slipped it into her pocket in case she had to leave in a hurry.

She threw together a quick, bland as hell meal, and wolfed it down without tasting much so her stomach wouldn’t abort the mission. It didn’t matter. Ten minutes later,

she was puking. The sight of maggots amongst the remains of her meal made her vomit again.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell is going on?"

A shadow moved along her peripheral vision. Patience pretended like she hadn't seen it, rinsed her mouth, and walked back to the kitchen. She nonchalantly grabbed her tote and keys, and locked up the apartment. How in the hell was she going to sleep there?

* * * * *

Around eight o'clock, she met Bo for drinks at Hannigan's near Bo's office.

"Nice to see you're dressed to kill," Bo said after a once-over. "You couldn't even change clothes?"

"I wasn't home long enough," Patience replied, and took a sip of the vodka martini Bo had placed in front of her. She wrinkled her nose. Nothing tasted good anymore. She would wither away into nothingness. *God, how depressing.*

"Any luck shopping today?"

Of course. The *one* topic she really didn't want to discuss. "Not a damn thing. I don't know why I can't find anything. I saw three things the yesterday in windows passing by."

"Maybe you're looking too hard. You know that happens. It took you a month to find that painting in my living room, remember? It just *had* to be perfect."

Patience flipped her hand toward Bo. "Whatever. The job always has to be perfect or I don't get recommendations. My business relies heavily on word of mouth. You know that."

"What about slowing down? Can you slow down a bit?"

Patience shook her head. "There is no slowing down. It's either freight train or stopped. One means no personal life, and the other means unemployment."

"Girl, you picked the wrong career." Bo sipped her martini. "So, see any more shadows or the like?"

"Why do you think I left my apartment before changing?"

"You're not sleeping there tonight, are you?"

Patience fluttered eyelashes at her friend. "I was hoping you'd let me stay with you."

Bo laughed. "At least buy me a drink."

"With your own money, sure thing." She flagged down the bartender and ordered another round. "Hope you weren't planning on a one night stand."

"Our relationship is standing," Bo replied with a smirk.

"You know what I meant."

Bo laughed. "A friend in need supersedes the need for a man."

Patience snorted. "Good for the friend; sucks for the man."

"Indeed."

For a second, after Bo spoke, she disappeared from Patience's vision, along with all sounds. Startled, she jerked her head one way and then another, nothing, no one, just

empty darkness. Then, as if someone flipped a switch, all sound and lights appeared. People laughed and flirted, glasses clinked. With a quick flick of the wrist she downed her drink and studiously ignored the moment of nothing.

After a few hours and too many martinis on an empty stomach, Patience stumbled outside with Bo half holding her upright. They precariously walked between and around people, and Bo hailed a cab. By the time they reached Bo's condo, Patience was falling over as they made their way up the little flagstone sidewalk. Bo propped her against the wall so she could unlock the door.

"I've never seen you this drunk, Patience. What the hell?" Her friend swung the door open and dragged her drunk ass inside.

"No food," Patience mumbled.

"You've got to be kidding me. You can't drink like that on an empty stomach." She sat Patience on the sofa. "Don't puke!"

Patience fell to the side and giggled. "Tasted like shit the last time."

Bo returned to her after locking the door. "What did?"

"Puke."

"You've already puked today?"

Patience nodded overzealously. "Yep. There were maggots."

"Oh my God," Bo said and sat next to her. "You ate bad food?"

"No, food was good. Coming back up was bad. Maggots."

"Where'd they come from?"

Patience shrugged. "Don't know." She pulled up her shirt and ran a hand across her stomach. "In here, I guess. Can't eat anything. It all tastes like shit. Martinis too."

"Jesus," Bo replied.

"Jesus ain't got nuthin' to do with it." She pointed toward where she thought her apartment might be. "But that motherfucker . . . that thing inside my head that's real now, *he* fuckin' did this to me."

Bo took her hand. "Patience, what are you talking about?"

"The man who stole my dreams." She turned to Bo, tears in her eyes. "I can't dream anymore. He takes them . . . everything in them, gone" — she snapped her fingers — "like that."

"You're talking nonsense," Bo said. "You need to sleep this shit off."

Patience panicked and gripped her friend's hands tightly. "No! Can't sleep. Can't dream."

"But you just said your dreams are gone, so what's there to be frightened of?"

Patience reached into her pocket and withdrew the token. "This."

"You remembered it," Bo said. "Let me see." She took the token from her and turned it over in her fingers, reading the inscription on both sides. "Everything that's happening is because of this little piece of metal."

Patience nodded. "The lady in the shop said so. Said Death was stalking me. Said I need to get rid of it." Her eyes brightened. "Do you want it?"

"Hell no," Bo replied, and instantly jumped. "Ouch! What the fuck? It burned me."

Patience took the token back, and turned it around and around. "Really? That's weird. Never did that to me."

Bo sighed. "Well, I need to sleep. You should eat something. A sandwich, perhaps?"

Patience shook her head. "The bread'll taste moldy."

Bo placed a hand on Patience's leg. "You are really scaring me."

"I'll be fine," she replied, her words not quite as slurred. "I just have to get rid of this fucking thing."

Bo stood. "Here, I'll help you to bed."

"Sounds like a plan," she replied, attempting to get up without help, but failing miserably.

"Oh, come on." Bo reached down and pulled her up by her arm, and then pointed. "That way."

A shadow moved across the wall right before the lights went out, but more to the point, she thought she heard Bo ask if she'd seen it before passing out.

Chapter Four

There wasn't much left of the beach anymore. Just a rocky alcove, part of the ocean, and some sand near the surf. The children were all gone. She'd been able to drag her "husband" away from the blanket now in oblivion, and the two stood on the edge of a cliff looking out. He was still unaware of the man who now stood in the center of a void.

"Pass it along," he said.

"Okay, I get it now," she screamed.

The tentacles of darkness slashed and hacked away more of her dream, and she broke down, dropping to her knees on the grass. The husband consoled her, though he likely didn't understand the reason for her tears.

Her name suddenly screeched across the sky, "Paaa-tieence!" She looked down the disappearing beach to find the tentacles wrapping around Bo's legs. Patience stared with a pinched brow, not understanding the struggle. The children hadn't resisted. The man next to her likely wouldn't fight back when his time came. Why was Bo screaming?

Realization struck and she tried to wake up, but the man in the void prevented it.

"Bo," she yelled, a blood-curdling scream following close behind as her best friend faded away into the void

Patience awoke abruptly, a silent scream stuck in her throat, sweat drenching her body as she bolted upright. There'd been a dream . . . and the man with the fire-orange hair had been there erasing it. And Bo.

She gasped and her eyes widened before she threw the covers off and darted down the hall to Bo's room. She knocked on the door and waited impatiently, foot tapping, for all of three seconds before knocking again.

"Bo!" No answer came. *Oh God, oh God, oh God.* She did *not* want to open that door, so she knocked again. Nothing. "Shit." She grabbed the doorknob, held onto it for ten seconds before finding the strength to turn it, and opened it to a mere crack. "Bo, are you in there?" No sound, but a very specific scent traveled to her nose. Bittersweet metallic. "Motherfucker." She opened the door to find the once-sea-foam-green bedroom splattered with blood. More importantly, it was Bo's blood. How Patience could even think the blood would belong to someone else, she didn't know. Perhaps a defense mechanism of a sort.

Bo's body lay across the bed, face down, shredded everywhere, as though from claws or lots of large, very sharp teeth. Patience leaned in and looked around, trying not to gag at the sight and smell. Three words painted on the far wall in Bo's blood screamed at her

Pass It Along

"Oh God, no!" She dropped to her knees. "How could you? You were supposed to come after *me*, goddamn it!" A sob escaped her. "Please, let this not be real. Please, God."

"Oh, it's real."

She spun around, landing on her ass in the process, placing her back against the wall. The man who stole her dreams stood twenty feet away, grinning like the sadistic bastard he was.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Of course, we haven't been properly introduced," he said. "My name is Daemon."

"Are you a demon? Did you do that to my friend? Why are you here?"

He waved a finger at her. "One question at a time." He clasped his hands together and took a step forward. "Yes, a demon of sorts. No, I did not do that in there, but my pets did. And I'm here because you have yet to pass along the token of luck."

"That thing is *not* lucky!"

"There is good luck and bad luck. You had three days of good luck, at which point you should have rid yourself of it. Now, the coin has flipped."

"But I didn't know I only had three days," said Patience, who was desperately attempting to hold on to any patience at all and trying to not freak out because she was talking to a demon.

"Nonetheless, the coin has flipped," he said. "It must be passed along."

"I forgot it at home yesterday and had no way to pass it along. If I get rid of it, will you stop? Will Bo come back?"

"The luck shall cease and no, your friend will not return . . . unless you want to start the zombie apocalypse." Daemon's grin broadened, showing off his whiter-than-white teeth.

"That's not funny," she replied.

"Yes, it is." He clapped loudly, making Patience jump. "Now, I'll do something I *never* do and give you a bit more time to rid of the token, given you didn't hear that part, which is, of course, very important. Do what you need to do here and get moving."

"But—"

He put a finger to his lips. "Patience, take care of your friend." With a snap of his fingers, he vanished.

"Fuck you! You take care of my friend!" She let out a scream and peered through the bedroom door. All that blood. One wouldn't think the human body held so much. She slapped her forehead. "Stop being a logical cunt. Your friend was just murdered by a demon."

Patience slowly got to her feet and stepped inside the room, until the carpet beneath her foot on the third step squished. Blood welled up around the edge of her foot. "Crap." She knew what it would look like if she proceeded any further, so she rubbed her foot along the carpet just enough to erase the print, carefully lifted her foot, and wiped one hand along her sole to clear off the excess blood so it wouldn't drip. She hopped out of the room, down the hall, and into the bathroom, where she stuck her foot

directly into the sink. After washing it off and making sure there was no blood in the sink or on her foot, she ran out to the kitchen to call the police.

Something held her back from dialing. What if she just left now and called Bo's phone before calling the police? No one had seen her come home with Bo.

"God, that's an awful thing to do to your friend." She looked back to the bedroom and frowned. "I'm sorry, Bo. If I stay here, they'll think I did it, interrogate me for days, and I'll never be able to get rid of the token." She placed the receiver back on the charger and went to the spare room to change, admonishing herself the entire time. But there was nothing she could do for Bo. She certainly couldn't save her life. If only.

* * * * *

Patience wandered the streets for hours, pretending to shop for the job with Bo. Her heart ached and it was all she could do to hold herself together. If she broke down without attempting to call Bo, her office, or anyone else, the police would know she'd been there . . . once they discovered her friend's body. She made a call here and there to Bo's cell, and after a few hours had passed, she called the office and left a message with Nadine. An hour or so later, Nadine called back and told her the news. She'd finally been able to let out some of the emotion she'd withheld all morning.

Getting rid of the token completely slipped her mind. When she finally remembered that Daemon had given her more time, she attempted to "pass it along" as told, but was either rejected or caught trying to drop it in someone's bag.

After her billionth attempt as dusk neared, she grew frustrated and slumped against a wall. "What if I just toss it into the street?"

"Doesn't work that way," Daemon said, suddenly popping into existence.

She jumped away from the wall. "Jesus. Don't do that!" *The bastard.*

"I'm certainly not that flake," he replied, and pushed away from the wall, stepping out of the alley. "You *have* to give it to someone and they *have* to know you gave it to them. Otherwise, it won't lift the curse from you." He circled her like prey, coming to a sudden stop in front of her. "Oh, and you *have* to tell them about the three days thing. Don't care how or when. Just as long as it gets done."

"You're crazy," she said. "I've been trying for hours. I can't get rid of it."

His brow pinched in concentration. "Interesting. I suppose it happens differently for everyone. You'll figure it out." He motioned to snap his fingers —

"Wait!"

"Yes?"

"What happens if I can't get rid of it?"

The corners of his mouth twisted up. "Then you'll not get rid of me, Patience. And I think that is something you very much would like to do."

She stared at him. "Are you Death?"

He chuckled. "No."

She gave him a quick nod and turned on her heel to walk away from him before he could vanish first. His laughter followed her. Was he amused by what she'd done? She certainly felt more in control.

"Control is an illusion," his voice whispered around her.

Her step faltered, but she kept moving, pushing forward, and continued to attempt to give away the gods-be-damned token. She wouldn't allow Daemon to take her life. No way in hell.

Chapter Five

Patience stood staring up the steps to the police station. An idea flitted around her mind, one that would possibly free her of the token's curse . . . but she had to choose wisely. She wasn't going to give the token to just anyone. While there were good people who deserved the good luck, what if, like her, they forgot to pass it on or didn't hear the goddamned old woman say she had three fucking days? She drew in a deep breath to calm herself. Those people wouldn't deserve the curse she currently lived, and she would not be a party to their losses or any more murders by shadows slinking in the night.

Nope. She wouldn't do it.

Control may be an illusion, but Patience knew she could have *some* control over the token, and that was to whom she would give the damn thing.

She wavered a little, the lack of food and dehydration taking its toll. This had to end soon so she could at least drink a glass of water without gagging. Otherwise, she'd die in a few days.

Grabbing the handrail, she pulled herself up the steps toward the police station, stumbling on a few. Her vision blurred a little and she had to grip the handrail tighter to keep from tumbling down the stairs. When her vision darkened around the edges, she gasped.

"Oh God, no!" She grabbed the railing with her other hand and tried to hold herself up, but her body had other plans.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" The male voice came from her left, and she tried to reach out to him.

"Help . . . me." Her voice was weak, distant.

Go to sleep, Patience. Daemon's voice wrapped around her like a cloak, and the world turned black.

* * * * *

Her eyes fluttered open, and she slowly took in her surroundings. Was she in a hospital? She tried to sit up, groggy as hell, and settled for the controller to the bed. Then she pressed the call button for the nurse.

One finally stepped into the room with a smile. "Oh, you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"Why am I here?"

"You passed out in front of the police station," the nurse – Sandy, according to her nametag – said. "A policeman called it in, said he'd witnessed you going down and tried to talk to you." She smiled. "He said he'd stop by again later –"

"Again?"

Sandy giggled while writing down her BP and heart rate. "Yes, he's stopped by twice a day since you were brought in."

Horror swept through Patience. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days," Sandy replied.

"What?" Patience pushed the covers down. "Oh my God."

Sandy pulled the covers back up. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I have to leave. I have to leave *now*!" Patience struggled with her. "You don't understand."

"Ms. Madison, you were severely dehydrated, had no food in your stomach, and you just slept for three days without a sedative." Sandy held her down by her arms. "You are in *no* condition to walk out of this hospital." She jerked her head toward the door. "A little help in here!"

Two more nurses ran in as Patience struggled to get off the bed and out, out, out of the hospital. She already saw one shadow slink along the wall of her room. "No!" They held her to the bed while another nurse injected her with something that she prayed wouldn't put her to sleep. She didn't want to go back into the void. It'd seemed like forever when she was just there last. Why had Daemon put her to sleep?

"I can't . . . stay . . . here." Patience strained to get the words out. "Danger" Another person walked into the room as her vision blurred, but she recognized his outline from the last time she saw him, the last time the world went black. "Help."

"We gave her a sedative," Nurse Sandy said to him. "She was fighting us."

He nodded to the nurse, stepped up next to Patience, and took her hand. "It's okay. I'll be here when you wake."

And the lights went out again as she fell into the void.

* * * * *

Nothingness surrounded her. No landscape, no sound, she couldn't even hear herself breathe. All was black. Was this what her dreams had become? A giant, blank slate of never?

"If you prefer to look at it that way," Daemon said, appearing at her side.

"This is where you live, isn't it?"

"Yes and no." He stepped around her, circling her again. "It is where I send those who don't pass it along." He swung an arm outward. "They're all there, in the black, co-existing without ever running into one another. Some call it Hell. Some, Purgatory. Others call it Gehenna."

"So this is to be my fate," she said.

"Is it?" He looked back at her and smiled. "I don't know about you, Patience. You have certain skills."

She raised a brow at him.

He laughed. "What I mean is you're smart. Your friend's death, regardless of how paranormal it looked, should have framed you for murder, kept you from passing along the token of luck, but you didn't respond as most would. You didn't venture all the way into the room to check her body, thereby not leaving a trail of your presence. You walked away. Even when you stepped in the blood-soaked carpet, you found a way to show you weren't there."

"Don't talk about her," she snapped. "You have no right."

He leaned into her. "I have *every* right. You brought me to her."

"So it's *my* fault she's dead?" She took a step back. "I'm sorry, but fuck you."

Daemon laughed, and the sound of it sent chills up her spine. He then looked up and to his right, as though someone was there, but she couldn't see anything. Whatever it was, he wasn't comfortable with it because his whole body stiffened. Finally, he turned back to her.

"You still need to pass it along because regardless of what you do in the waking world to escape me, this will be your reality every time you close your eyes." He touched her forehead and everything vanished.

Chapter Six

Patience opened her eyes to find a man sitting in the nearby chair. She eyed the clock—after midnight. She wondered what day it was, if she'd lost another three days when they knocked her out.

She carefully shifted in the bed, trying not to make too much noise.

"I really hope you're not trying to escape again," the man from the chair said. "I'd actually like to talk to you for once."

Patience had frozen and looked up at him when he spoke. He had one eye cracked open, and the sight made her want to laugh . . . except that there really was no reason to laugh anymore. Death followed her. Death trapped her. What was the point of anything anymore? Except that she knew if she killed herself, that void would be exactly where she'd end up.

The man sat up and took her hand, and it wasn't until he'd reached up with his other hand to wipe away a tear that she realized she'd started to cry.

"What is it, Patience Madison?" His voice, soft, caring, wrapped around her like a warm blanket. "Talk to me. Maybe I can help."

She lowered her gaze to his hand holding hers, and her eyes fixed on the tattoo on his forearm—a circle with a triangle surrounding the sun. No way in hell would she allow anything to happen to this man who, according to her dream, would be her husband. "No one can help. Everyone just needs to stay away from me. Please. Don't sit here with me anymore. They'll kill you."

"Who'll kill me?"

"The shadows," she whispered, and saw one slither along the wall. She gripped his hand tight, but wouldn't look him in the eye. "Please, you have to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, his words and tone strong.

She finally met his eyes and regretted it instantly, falling into the deep forest of emerald. "Why are you here?"

He smiled. "I'm intrigued by the woman who fell at my feet."

"Don't date much, do you?"

He laughed. "Cracking jokes like that aren't going to make me go away anytime soon." He tightened his grip on her hand. "Now tell me why I have to leave."

"Who are you?"

He sat back. "Right, forgot about that. I'm Fionn Whelan."

"And you're a police officer?"

"Yes."

She fidgeted, pulling at a string on the blanket covering her lap. "Have you seen anything out of the corner of your eye?"

"You mean like that guy over there?" He pointed to his right.

Patience nodded.

"Don't worry about him," he said. "He and I have an understanding."

She pulled back just a little. "How?"

"Don't worry about how. Just know that I am the one human on this planet they can't kill." He grinned. "Tell me why this is happening, Patience. What do you have?"

She told him the entire story, including what happened to Bo, even though it scared the ever-living hell out of her to do so since he was a cop.

Fionn sat in the chair, listening, asking a question here and there, and holding her hand. The shadow stayed in one spot along the wall, as though it was afraid to move.

Fionn caught her staring at it. "Do you want to see what it actually looks like?"

"I don't know," she said.

"It'll be okay," he said, and snapped his fingers. The shadow slid off the wall and along the floor toward him. "The demon you've encountered, Daemon, is an old being. As old as time itself. These are his creations." He grabbed the shadow around the neck and it magically materialized, looking like an abstract wolf of some sort: silvery scaled skin, black eyes, a snout that bared sharp teeth with the four largest being canines. It almost looked like a creature made of metal for the shine of its coat. It writhed in his grip, apparently not liking the fact that he'd exposed it. "The thing is, Patience, he created something I can control."

"White Wolf has no control," the creature hissed.

"Really?" Fionn shook it by the neck and it screeched. "Go back to your Master." He let go and the creature vanished.

Patience closed her gaping mouth. "Did it go back to him?"

Fionn nodded. "And that one can't come back until the next person."

"Why'd it call you White Wolf?"

"That's the literal translation of my name." He sat forward again and took her hand. "We're going to have a small problem with your story, Patience. Do you understand that?"

She raised a brow at him. "C'mon, the demon didn't even condescend to me."

He laughed. "Sorry, I should have known, since you've survived this long, but do you truly understand what has to happen here?"

"I have to give the token away," she replied. "Where is it anyway? Where are my things?"

"It's in that bag over there," he said with a nod toward it. "No one is going to believe this story, and you have to not only rid yourself of the token, but Daemon as well. I think you've already lost some of your sanity, am I right?"

"Probably," she said. "Are you saying I have to completely lose it?"

"If you're crazy, Patience, he can't harm you." He squeezed her hand. "The mental hospital would be the safest place for you."

She sighed. "I'm not sure about it, but if you think it's best—"

"Who are you talking to?" Nurse Sandy walked into the room and the shadow growled.

Patience sat frozen. Fionn wasn't there in the chair next to her bed, but the shadow still existed. Was it a different one, or had Fionn even existed himself? The shadow crept toward the nurse. Patience lurched forward and screamed at the nurse to get out

or the shadow would kill her. Papers went into the air as Nurse Sandy first let out a yell, and then wrestled Patience to the ground.

The alarm sounded and a team arrived, attempting to subdue her.

"Where's Fionn?" she screamed.

"There is no one here by that name, Ms. Madison," the nurse replied as they struggled with her to hold her down.

"The police officer who visited me," she shrieked.

"What police officer?"

Oh God, he was imaginary? At that point, she gave up fighting, knowing that Daemon had won, that the woman in the shop was right. Her sanity was gone. There was no Fionn Whelan. No White Wolf. No one who could control the shadows.

And she still had the token.

She'd end up in the void . . . forever.

They carried Patience away, her arms and legs strapped down to the gurney, light after light passing overhead as whatever drug they'd shot her up with took effect and streamed the lights into one big solid line of bright.

Chapter Seven

Patience sat cross-legged on the floor, her hands and arms wrapped around her torso with sleeves locked firmly in place by buckles on her back and sides. She rocked forward and back, softly chanting, "Pass it along."

"What's wrong with her," said the man on the right at the open doorway. He was tall, lean, with a dark head of short-cropped hair. Couldn't work in this place if you had long hair. The Sick tended to grasp at it and pull. The tattoo on his right forearm caught her attention and it reminded her of something, but she didn't understand what or why.

"Flipped her lid 'bout a week ago," said Stan, the night nurse. He was shorter but stocky. Also had short hair. Blond. Patience had seen it up close. Closer than she ever wanted to be to him. He smelled funny. Mean. Dirty.

She continued to rock. "Pass it along. Pass it along. Pass it along."

"What happened?" His eyes widened a little as she chanted over and again.

"Nobody knows, man."

"Pass it along," Patience continued, a mere whisper. "Pass it along."

"She keeps saying that. It's kinda creepy."

"Yeah," Stan replied. "I think it has something to do with this." He flipped the coin he'd been tossing over to the young man.

He caught it and looked down at the silver in his hand. "Token of Appreciation."

Stan grinned and gave him a short nod. "Turn it over."

He did, and his eyes widened again. "Pass it along." He looked at Stan. "What the hell?"

Stan shrugged, then slapped a hand on his shoulder. "You're appreciated, Eric."

Eric tossed the coin back at Stan. "I don't want it. Belongs to her anyway."

"Like she's gonna know it's gone," Stan said and turned the coin over his knuckles. He finally noticed the silence and that Patience had stopped rocking. Took him long enough. "Oh, you want this?"

She stared at the coin passing over his fingers, closed her eyes briefly, and rocked again. She didn't chant, but kept her eyes on the hand holding the coin that'd brought her so much grief. "You may keep it. You're appreciated." The shock on his face made her smile, though saying those last two words made her feel like vomiting after the way he'd treated her. "Three days, pass it along," she said, a mere whisper passing her lips.

Stan pocketed the coin and turned his attention to Eric quickly, like she'd scared him, which twisted the smile on her face. "C'mon. We've got others to check on. I just wanted to show you the freak-show first, since she's so damn unique in her condition." They stepped out and Stan closed the door, fear in his eyes for the first time since she'd met him in this hell-hole.

Patience stopped rocking. "It's been passed along."

Daemon stepped out from the shadows in the corner of her room. "Well played, Patience. I think you've finally earned your name."

"Patience is an illusion," she replied.

He nodded. "You've learned something, after all."

"Just like the White Wolf is an illusion."

"You think so? Perhaps you should look again," Daemon replied.

She looked up at the window in the door to her small, padded room, and Fionn's face filled it. He smiled and winked.

"I don't understand," she said. Fionn was that Eric guy? That was why the tattoo caught her attention.

"The White Wolf, Patience," Daemon replied. "While he and I are enemies, we both recognized something in you, and that was your will to take on the burden of the curse in order to protect humanity." He looked at the door. "With exception to Stan, there."

"He's a prick," Patience said.

Daemon laughed. "Enjoy your life, Patience. You've certainly brought joy to mine. And while your life won't be restored, it will be renewed. That is the prize for surviving." He leaned forward and whispered, "Which so few do." Daemon bowed to her and vanished from the room, most likely to follow Stan the Man Who Was Too Mean to Live. A part of her hoped he didn't figure it out.

The End



Dedication

To You, who scares the living daylights out of me. I finally gave you life. Happy?

Acknowledgements

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