

## Gary's Lament, Part 2

By Snow McNally

The ringing of the gunshot still echoed in my ears. I looked around, feeling disoriented and nauseous. Images of torment began to fade from my mind, but the pain didn't.

I tried to stand, only to realise I was already on my feet. My surroundings were unfamiliar; some kind of rocky outcrop with trees behind me, overlooking what appeared to be a small settlement.

Stumbling closer to the edge, I looked down at the town. From a distance, it looked strange; the style was old, very old, but it all looked newly constructed. Some kind of movie set, maybe?

The street lamps were all gas-powered. The roads were dirt, and littered with horse manure. Strange.

"Where am I?" I muttered, to no-one in particular.

"Italy," a voice said behind me. I whirled around, barely keeping my balance. "Right in the heyday of the witch hunts," they added.

It was a woman, shorter than me, with long platinum blonde hair and shining blue eyes. I knew who she was immediately; I'd seen her countless times before.

She just wasn't a *she* the way I remembered her. Here, it seemed to be an established fact that she was female. Just like in a dream.

"Alex?"

"Hi, Gary," she said. She was dressed in an expensive-looking blue dress, her slender arms folded delicately in front of her. The faintest trace of a smile played on her lips.

"I don't..." I began, but I didn't really have an end to that sentence. My head still ached, though I couldn't remember why. "Italy?"

"Well, not exactly," she said. "It's a reconstruction. A memory."

I looked around again. It all *seemed* very real, but something about it *did* feel off. Then again, maybe that was just me feeling off.

"Whose memory?" I asked, knowing the answer before the question got all the way out.

"Who else? Rebecca, of course."

Rebecca's memory. Why would she have a memory of medieval Europe?

"Why- Oh, I remember. She trapped me here as some kind of sadistic punishment," I said, more to myself than to Alex.

It was beginning to come back to me. She wasn't human, or she wanted me to believe that she wasn't. Drugs, hallucinogens, magic tricks. I didn't really know.

"Not punishment," Alex said. "Education."

"What could she possibly want to teach me?" I asked, aggravated.

"Who she is," Alex explained. "Who I am. Why... why letting you back into my life isn't as simple as you think."

She looked genuinely disappointed. I wished I understood why.

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm not really real, you know," she said. "Just a figment of her imagination."

For just one moment, I got swept up in that statement. I thought back on every interaction with Alex I'd ever had, trying to work out if it had ever really been real.

"You mean-"

"Not the real me," she hastily corrected. "Just the one you're talking to now."

"Right." I looked at her again, and couldn't hold back the question any longer. "Okay, so why are you a woman then?"

She looked surprised, as if she hadn't expected the question. How could she not have, though? People don't just up and change genders. Do they?

"This is how Rebecca sees me," she said. "Everything you're experiencing was created by her."

"She sees you as a woman?"

"She sees me as I want to be seen," Alex said tersely. "As I wish I was always seen."

I didn't understand. The Alex I knew had never wanted to be a woman. We'd known each other for years. There was no way. None.

"Wait... you wish you were a woman?"

"No, I *am* a woman," she corrected. "What I want is to be seen as one."

"Seriously?" I was trying to understand, but it just didn't make any sense to me. I was starting to realise just how little I actually knew about her.

"Is there some reason why I wouldn't be serious about that?"

I just looked at her, appraising the person in front of me. It was Alex, no doubt about it. Everything she said sounded genuine.

On the other hand, none of this was real. I had to keep reminding myself of that; it was far too easy to forget.

"I guess not," I said.

Down in the village, people had started to make noise. When I looked back down, there were people milling about in the streets. All of them seemed to be congregating to the town centre.

"It's starting," Alex said. "We should get going."

"Going? Going where?"

"To the execution," she said.

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"Wait," I said, running after her as she began to walk away. "Execution?"

"Yes," she said, not breaking stride. "It's very important that you see."

As we walked, the trees rushed past us considerably faster than our walking pace. It was as if we were being accelerated by something, though I had no idea where we were going.

"Who's execution?" I asked, assuming it was probably important. I still didn't know *why* Rebecca brought me all the way back here to watch someone die, but it did seem like something she would do.

"Why do you think we're here?" Alex asked, walking straight through a tree. "Why *now*?"

"I have no idea," I said.

Alex stopped suddenly, turning around to face me. The terrain stopped moving, and I felt suddenly dizzy.

"This is when Rebecca was born," she said. "This is where she lived. Now you need to see how she died."

She said it so seriously, so gravely, I didn't really even know how to respond. Rebecca died in the dark ages? The same Rebecca that had tormented me in the twenty-first century?

"What?"

"Just watch," Alex said.

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We took one last step through the trees, and found ourselves right in the middle of the

crowd, in the town centre. Surprised, I looked behind me. There were no trees anywhere near us.

Nobody seemed to notice us. They were too busy milling about, talking amongst themselves and generally making a big deal about the growing piles of wood we were all surrounding.

A couple of young women walked past, whispering to one another about the imminent arrival of someone called Giovanni. It took me a few seconds to even realise I'd understood what they'd said.

"Alex," I said, getting her attention. "These people. Why are they speaking English?"

"They're not," she replied. "They're speaking Italian. Because you don't speak Italian, you're hearing it in English."

I pondered that for a moment. In the real world, that wouldn't make sense, but I wasn't in the real world. Surprising how easy that was to forget, considering how strange my environment was.

"Right. Dream."

We stood in silence as the crowd grew larger, swelling outwards from the masses of wood in the centre. Everyone seemed to be reacting differently; some sombre, others excited. A few wept, others smirked.

A hush fell over the crowd, and Alex touched my arm. Everyone was focussed on a building across the street.

"They're being brought out," she said.

"Who are?"

"The witches," she explained gravely.

I looked at her, confused. None of this was making sense to me.

"Rebecca was a witch?"

"Very few of the women burned for heresy were actually practitioners of witchcraft," Alex said.

"You didn't answer my question."

Alex ignored me, turning back to the building that was the focus of everyone's attention. Several women were being led out, bound with rope. They were rudely shoved if they didn't walk fast enough. None of them looked older than teenagers.

"There she is," Alex said softly.

I recognised her even before Alex had spoken. She didn't look the same, not exactly, but it was undeniably her. Her skin was darker, her eyes more natural, her hair was brown and wavy.

"Wow," I said. "She looks so different. And yet..."

It was the way she moved, the expression on her face. Pure defiance, as if she were above the world and the way it worked.

"She isn't afraid?" I asked Alex.

"Why should she be afraid?" Alex replied. "She's exactly where she wants to be."

I looked at Alex, then back at Rebecca. She certainly did look confident, almost triumphant. I just couldn't understand why.

"She wants this? Why?"

"Love," Alex said simply.

I tried to imagine Rebecca in love. I couldn't even picture her infatuated, let alone so lovestruck it would lead to... whatever this was.

"A broken heart?" I asked.

"Not exactly."

The women were led to the piles of wood, forced up them, tied to posts standing vertically in the centre of them. Rebecca shared a post with another woman, one who struggled considerably more than she did.

We were close enough that I could hear them talking, but to my surprise, I couldn't understand what they were saying. They were speaking in rapid, frenzied Italian.

"They're speaking Italian," I said to Alex. "I'm hearing Italian. Why?"

Alex observed them talking for a few seconds, then looked me in the eye. Her expression was strained, and she was starting to look a little pale.

"That conversation is... private," she said. "She's reassuring the girl that everything will be okay."

Something in her tone of voice told me not to ask, but I couldn't help myself. I had to know.

"Will it?"

"No," she said, as the torches were lowered onto the wood.

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As the screaming died down, the world began to fade out, dissolving around us. For a moment or two, it was just Alex and I, alone in the darkness.

I felt sick. Learning about the witch hunts in school was one thing. Watching several young woman burn to death in front of you, as the crowd yells and cheers, is quite another, and something I would remember for the rest of my life.

All of them screamed, and cried, and begged and pleaded. All of them except one. Even at the end, she didn't scream.

The lights turned on, like several candles being lit at once. We found ourselves indoors, in what appeared to be a medieval Italian home.

Rebecca was asleep in her bed, oblivious to the world. Beside the bed stood a man, tall, thin and dark, with golden eyes and long black fingernails. He watched her sleep with careful amusement.

It didn't take her long to rouse, blinking as she looked about the room. She stared right through the man, as though she couldn't see him. The same applied to us.

"So this is Hell," she muttered. "Looks about right."

"I must admit," the man began, surprising her, "I hadn't expected to see you again quite so soon."

She immediately focussed on him, and for a brief moment, looked happier than I'd ever seen her. Then her expression turned sheepish.

"I, uh, accelerated the process," she confessed. "And made sure that this is where I ended up."

The man's expression was unreadable. His body language was, if anything, even more impenetrable.

"And how, might I ask, did you accomplish that?"

"Witchcraft," she said. "The High Inquisitor himself had me burned at the stake."

I shuddered to remember it. How she managed to pass through apparently not even traumatised was a mystery to me.

"You remember the details of your death?" he asked.

"In vivid detail," she replied.

"Curious," he said. "And amusing, if pointless."

Rebecca looked crestfallen. Another surprising look for her; it didn't suit her.

"Pointless?"

"All dead find their way to me," the man said. "Not just the sinners."

"What about Heaven?" Rebecca asked, sounding confused. The man looked away, breaking eye contact for the first time. Rebecca didn't push it. "So this is..."

"Hell," the man answered. "But not as you understand it."

"You look different," she said, ignoring his comment.

"I get that a lot."

The two of them just looked at one another, silently appraising. I was completely lost, no idea what was going on. Alex just looked pensive.

"This looks like where I grew up," Rebecca said.

The man didn't even seem to hear her. He was too busy staring intently, his golden eyes practically glowing.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded.

"For you," she said, taken by surprise. "When I figured out who you were, I-"

"Who do you think I am?" he interrupted her.

"You- you're Lucifer," she said. "The Morningstar. Prince of-"

"Yes," he said, interrupting her again. "And no. I am that, and so much more."

I looked over at Alex for confirmation. She was actually talking to the devil? Alex nodded slightly, not taking her eyes off of the conversation happening in front of us.

"More?"

"The world is so much bigger than you know," he said. "So when you answer me again, and tell me *why* you came here, think very, *very* carefully."

She looked him in the eye, but her hands, clenching the side of the bed, were shaking.

"I..."

"Yes?" he asked, almost tauntingly.

"I came for you," she said. "I wanted to see you again."

For a moment, Lucifer was silent. He seemed almost upset, disturbed. Then he looked angry.

"You're a fool," he snapped.

"But I-"

"You thought, knowing who and *what* I am, that I would have the slightest interest in seeing you again? That I cared- that I'm even *capable* of caring about you? About any mortal?" He shook his head. "Naïve, just like the rest of them."

For the longest time, Rebecca said nothing. She just sat there, staring at him, or staring through him. I couldn't tell. Beside me, I could see Alex biting her lip and digging her hand into her folded arms.

So that was it, then? She killed herself because she fell in love with the devil, only to be rejected when she got to Hell? Well, it explained why she was such a bitch, but not how she got back to the real world, and hundreds of years later.

I looked at Alex, wondering if we should do anything. She just shook her head, understanding what I was thinking.

"I never said that," Rebecca said softly.

"No?" Lucifer asked, still taunting her.

"I said I wanted to see you again. Not that I gave a damn whether or not you wanted to see me, or if you cared about me."

Now that was more like the Rebecca I knew.

"Intriguing."

"You think I care what your opinion of me is?" she snapped, standing up suddenly. "For all I know, you don't even *have* emotions. In any case, I'm not that insecure."

Lucifer folded his arms, appraising her in a new light.

"So you took your own life for the *chance* to-"

"To look you in the eye and tell you that I love you," she said.

"You don't even know me."

"No," she agreed. "But now I have an eternity to change that."

"And if I banish you from my sight forever?"

"I don't care," she said, shaking her head. "I'm bored of mortality, bored of humans. If I have to spend my eternity writhing in pain, so be it. Just let me do it among the demons."

For a moment, Lucifer was silent, staring at her. Then, without warning, he burst out laughing.

“So glad I amuse you,” Rebecca said dryly.

“Indeed,” he said. “I must admit, I’ve never had someone seek me out purely on the basis of boredom before.”

“And love,” she insisted.

“We’ll see,” he said.

“Will we?”

Lucifer smiled, revealing rows of fanged teeth. Suddenly, he didn’t look quite so human anymore.

“Welcome to Hell, Rebecca.”

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I woke up gasping, covered in sweat and aching from head to toe. Harsh light assaulted my eyes, and it took a few seconds to work out that I was in a hospital bed, hooked up to a variety of machines. It took a few more to realise I wasn’t alone.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Rebecca said, leaning seductively against the side of my bed. I shuddered.

“Is this... real?”

She smirked, her red eyes glistening under the hospital lighting.

“As real as you’ve ever known,” she said.

“I feel terrible.”

“Well, you haven’t moved in nearly two months,” she said pleasantly, as if that were supposed to help me feel better.

I looked around. It was a private room, and there were no staff to be seen. If I’d been in a coma for two months, that made sense.

“Everything I saw... about you, and Alex...”

“All true,” she said.

“Why?” I asked. “Why show me?” I didn’t bother asking why she chose such an unpleasant *way* of showing me.

“If you want to be a part of our life, a part of *her* life, you need to know,” she told me.

“I... Yeah. I guess I would.”

I tried to imagine knowing them and *not* knowing any of that. The lies they’d have to tell me just to keep me in the dark. How I’d feel if I one day learned the truth, known they were lying to me that whole time.

“Would you have believed any other way?” she asked.

“Probably,” I said roughly. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Well, I’ll give you some time to think about it,” she said with a smile. “Process it all, think about-”

“No,” I interrupted.

“No?”

“I don’t want to think about it,” I said. “I don’t want... I don’t want to know.”

“It’s a lot to take in, I know,” she started. I didn’t let her finish.

“No, that’s not it. You... you live in a different world, a fantasy world. One that I don’t want to be a part of.” I swallowed. It was difficult to talk. “I *like* reality. I like understanding the world I live in. I don’t want to lose that.”

Rebecca looked serious, even thoughtful.

“Yeah,” she said after a pause. “That happens.”

“I never asked for this,” I said. “For any of it.”

“It’s not really the sort of thing you can ask for,” she pointed out. “But I see your point.”

"I don't care," I said. "I don't want to know."

"Trust me, there's a lot you don't know."

"I want to forget," I said.

"What?"

"Take it back," I told her. "Take it away."

She shook her head, biting her lip and closing her eyes briefly.

"I can't," she said. "Not if you want to stay in Alex's life."

"Then I won't stay," I said. "I can't, not at that price."

Her eyes flashed, then looked down, and she shook her head again. Her fingers gripped the rails on the side of the bed.

"That's... disappointing," she said.

"Oh, like you care."

"Not personally," she said. "But for her sake, it's disappointing."

Somehow, I doubted that. Alex cast me out, decided I wasn't necessary. I wouldn't be missed, and Rebecca wasn't going to say anything on my behalf.

"Well, that's what she's got you for, I suppose," I said bitterly.

"You're really sure about this?" she asked, sounding genuinely upset. Somehow, I still didn't care.

"It's too much," I said. "Please."

"Fine," she said. "Go back to sleep. When you wake up, it'll all be gone."

I breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment, I wasn't sure she would actually help me.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't."

I blinked, and she was gone. A second later, I was suffering the most intense migraine I'd ever felt. Nurses and doctors raced in as my machines started beeping like crazy, but I was already passing out, slipping back into the comforting blackness of sleep.

For a brief moment, just before I lost consciousness, I could have sworn I saw Alex, standing in the doorway, looking at me with disappointment.

Probably just a hallucination from the pain, I told myself.

**THE END**