

## The White Pass

Jeremy Leclerc, Knight Templar, ducked behind a pillar to get away from the cold drizzle blowing into Charlotte's SouthPark Mall's parking deck. He shivered under his black leather duster, but could not close it for fear of slowing the draw of his bloodsword. Nor did he want to stand in the shadows with a thirty-inch blade drawn. Security at the mall wasn't good, but the weapon reflected any glimmer of light.

"Swords, yet another way in which we have failed to enter the twenty-first century," he whispered, brushing dark-brown hair out of his eyes.

From the large, gold-encircled crystal that hung under his shirt, a sprightly female voice issued. "Complaining again? Some hardy warrior. It's just water."

"Cold water," he said. "Keep your voice down."

"Son of Adam," she said, "only you can hear me unless I will it."

"Right and I'm the one who doesn't need to be hearing you. I'm watching for a hideous human-eating beast from the underworld. Quit distracting me."

"Distracting? More like keeping your sorry self alive. Not all monsters are ugly bunches of muscles. This one might be gorgeous. And we don't know that this one eats the women. They just disappear. We know nothing about we're up against."

"My guardian angel," he muttered, "is a know-it-all pain in the ass."

"I sense something," she said, "a hint of pain and terror in the wind. I fear we are too late."

"Damn it. Which way?"

"North, by the cell phone tower."

Jeremy ran down the ramp, avoiding the video cameras that he'd earlier noted. Then he was out in the December mist, his feet splashing through shallow puddles as he raced out past the high-end restaurants, ducking behind SUVs and monstrous pickups to avoid the eyes of the miserable valets by McCormick and Schmick's. The rain and mist grew worse, curtaining him off from the mall and late holiday shoppers.

"So much for America's sunny South," he muttered, putting his right hand on the bloodsword's grip.

The darkness next to him wavered and Shadowheart appeared. As her blonde hair and blue shift did not cling, she'd only manifested as an image. Incarnation was difficult for her in the earthly realm.

"This is no natural storm," she said. "Look, there, where the streetlights have failed."

Jeremy moved out, staring into a darkness that was more than the absence of light. Then he saw it.

It drifted forward, one with the mist, towering over the nearby cars. The creature was a pale image of a woman, with colorless hair draped down its back, wearing a flowing dress. The rags of its dress and hair tossed in the wind. A grief-ravaged face of haunting beauty seemed to focus on the horizon. It was as if the rain and mist had taken their own mournful form.

In one hand it held what looked like a bunch of blood-soaked rags. In the other, hanging loose-limbed as only the dead can, was the body of woman, well-dressed, a handbag dangling from her shoulder. Her wide, staring eyes and open mouth were stretched in horror.

"A Bain Sidhe," Jeremy snarled.

A sound reached him. A high painful sound that might have been the wind sighing but wasn't. The Bain Sidhe sang its awful song. It raised the hand holding the corpse over its head, easily fifteen feet in the air. The long bony hand opened and the corpse flew up into the sky and vanished.

Jeremy's sword slid from its sheath as if eager. Its silver shone bravely in the low light. Jeremy rushed forward weapon held high.

"Jeremy, you fool. No!" Shadowheart called.

The Bain Sidhe's mournful face lowered to regard him. Its eyes were huge dark pools that drew him in.

Despair shattered Jeremy. A howl of grief and pain burst from him as he stumbled to the ground, sword falling from nerveless fingers. Every loss he had ever experienced welled up fresh and painful as a new cut. The rain felt colder than the pit of Hell and his body shivered with ague.

He managed to look up at the looming Bain-Sidhe with its soulless eyes and ravaged beauty. Its wind-like song filled his ears:

*"Fall to the cold ground*

*Never rise again; there is no point, no hope*

*Fall to the cold ground.*

*Rot and be food for worms,"*

Jeremy could only barely draw a breath.

"Back, Hellspawn," a voice cracked.

Suddenly Shadowheart stood between him and the Bain Sidhe, but she was not the slender blonde teen. This Shadowheart towered over Jeremy in her black armor. Her green eyes, set in a face of heartless beauty, framed with midnight hair, blazed down at him. She turned to face the Bain-Sidhe, her great black and red wings spread between him and the apparition.

"Back," Shadowheart shouted. "You will not have him!"

Energy surged between angel and Bain Sidhe, causing a flickering, roiling disturbance of the soul and the very air. They extended hands toward each other and the space between them shimmered.

But across the link that bound him to Shadowheart, Jeremy instantly knew his guardian was overmatched and losing. While her wings shielded him from the worst of the Bain Sidhe's influence he struggled to his feet, dragging the sword up with him, its point scratching the asphalt. He staggered away, somehow managing to keep his feet under him.

'Shadowheart,' he sent, 'run.'

Jeremy's strength returned with every yard he gained away from the creature. He paused between two cars and looked back. The Bain Sidhe was nearly invisible through its protective mist of fog and rain. It passed a streetlight, which dimmed and went out, then the creature was gone.

Jeremy heard the sound of wings over his head and Shadowheart dropped from the sky to crouch alongside him. By the time she landed, the wings and black hair were gone and she was her smaller blonde self. This time she wore a fur-trimmed leather jacket and the usual paraphernalia of a Charlotte mall rat. But when she stood, it was slowly and her speech was halting. "Jeremy. Are you hurt?"

"No." Free from the Bain Sidhe's baleful presence, only his knees and hands, scraped from falling to the pavement, troubled him. "Are you all right?"

“No,” she said as rain dripped off her jacket. “I am badly damaged. Jeremy, let us go into the mall and rest.”

“You don’t look hurt,” he said, suddenly frightened.

“I had to fully manifest in this universe to fight the Bain Sidhe in this plane and I do not feel pain as you mean it,” she said, starting forward. “But I have taken injury from the beast. It is ancient and powerful.”

Jeremy followed her, sliding his sword into a hidden sheath in his coat. “It will not pursue us?”

“No,” she said. “Your life-energy does not interest it. This one consumes only the female.”

“It doesn’t want you?” he said.

She gave him a slight smile and brushed rain off her face. “My animus is female but I am not of the race of Eve. My energy is hostile to the creature.”

He walked alongside her, concerned by the unsteady gait. After a few more steps she leaned on him. She did not feel human. Her body was light and generated no warmth, but at least no one would walk through her.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought...well, I guess I didn’t think.”

“Something new about that?” she snapped.

They reached the side door to the mall. Passersby likely took them for a couple on a date. The light of the doorway was welcome but the tinkling Christmas music made Jeremy want to scream. Scream warnings to those walking out into the night. Shouts of his failure and his defeat.

“I am too hard on you,” Shadowheart said, her voice gone gentle. “Too hard because I am afraid and hurt and because you’re young and reckless. You flung yourself at a monster that even I dread, and I rebuked you. Forgive me. It’s only my wounds speaking.

“What can I do?” he whispered. “How can I help?”

She pointed to an alcove in the food court. “A quiet spot, some hot chocolate from the Caribou would be nice too. It’s outrageous what they charge but what can you do?”

Jeremy left her in an alcove and hurried to buy two hot chocolates. His frantic looks back at Shadowheart seemed to charm the staff. As he grabbed the cups and headed off he heard one girl say. “Lucky bee-yotch, I want a guy who is so eager to look after me. And he has such a cute French accent.”

Shadowheart leaned back in her seat, eyes half-closed. But the sight of the chocolate made her sit up. “Ah. You know, God gave us chocolate.”

Jeremy strove for lightness. “Benjamin Franklin said he gave us beer.”

She rolled her eyes and lifted the chocolate. Before Jeremy could warn her of the heat, she took a healthy swig. Shadowheart quickly finished hers and gave a sigh of contentment. At her casual glance at his untouched cup, he quickly pushed it across to her. She sipped the second cup more slowly.

“Better?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Even talking with you is restorative. I am, after all, your guardian angel. But I am going to need to retreat to my crystal soon and for an extended period.”

“My guardian angel,” he repeated.

Shadowheart sighed. “This again? You have your own angel and still you do not believe. Doubting Thomas has nothing on you.”

“You say you’re an angel. Clearly you’re supernatural but beyond that, who knows? It’s not like you’ll answer my questions about the God and the universe.”

She sipped her chocolate. “I keep telling you that it’s forbidden.”

“And I keep telling you that makes no sense. What are we, God’s ant farm? Is there nothing good on TV in heaven? Why do we suffer? Why is there evil? What use am I supposed to have for a God who makes ridiculous rules?”

“I’ll be sure to tell him you said so.”

“Please do.”

She frowned. “What is it with you and rules? Who ever heard of a Taoist Templar? Not to mention to what you did with the oath of chastity.”

“I had my fingers crossed on that one, obviously so did my father.”

“Do you forget how we met and were sealed to each other?”

“No,” he said. “It was very impressive. The Templar master took me to a door in the deepest part of Roslyn Castle one morning. Yet it opened to a field under stars. What did you call it?”

“The place between the worlds.”

“So how does an angel lose to a Bain-Sidhe? Your power comes from beyond space-time.”

“I am not here to fight your battles for you Jeremy. If you do not have free will then you are merely a puppet. No, in the Realm of Earth I am severely limited by design. I am allowed to intervene only when there is a breach of order of the universe. The Bain-Sidhe is of the space time that man was meant to inhabit. My interference by directly confronting it made me vulnerable as I was the one in violation.”

He looked at her calm, gentle face. “Thank you. I’m grateful you don’t always follow the rules.”

“You must be rubbing off on me. I, for one, would be grateful if you could follow at least some of the rules.” Suddenly she swayed and looked faint.

Jeremy grabbed her by the shoulders. “You’re not going to...going to die? Are you?”

Shadowheart steadied, then looked out over the throngs of holiday shoppers with their noise and packages, the running children busily ignoring the hapless adults trying to negotiate with them about their behavior.

“I am not alive, Jeremy, and cannot die. But in this earthly realm I can dissipate to where we are parted and I am no longer me. I would pass to the hollow place where I have no purpose, no function, and no reason for being. When I am not a guardian angel, I am nothing.”

Jeremy struggled to comprehend as he tore at his shirt, trying to pull out the crystal. “Then go now.”

She put a calming hand on his arm, a light touch, like a bird settling. “Soon. But you must promise me not to fight the Bain Sidhe until I return.”

Jeremy pressed his lips together. “That was the third woman murdered in two weeks. When will it strike again?”

Shadowheart shrugged. “It’s not a natural creature. It doesn’t need to eat every day. It might not kill again for a thousand years or it might kill a thousand times tonight.”

“Is there something we could give it?” he asked. “Could we bargain with it?”

“No, Jeremy. It is not a personality. It has no intelligence, no self-awareness. A Bain Sidhe is more like an animated wish to kill. It’s a fragment of matter from the beginning of time

that has taken on this form. It exists on the borderline between life and unlife. Perhaps that is why it seems to hate and destroy the living.”

“Am I to leave that horror to kill God knows how many while you recover?”

She frowned. “The Bain Sidhe is an enemy beyond us. You cannot get close enough to strike with the bloodsword. I cannot stand against it again.”

He slammed a fist to the table. A group of teens at another table turned around. They met his glare and returned to their phones.

“What harms the thing?” he demanded.

“Iron,” she said, her voice gone dull. “All things of ancient Faerie fear iron and steel.” Her head nodded and then snapped up. “Jeremy, I must go. Do nothing until I return.”

Suddenly he was alone in the food court.

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Jeremy spent the day recovering at his apartment. Shadowheart could be felt only by her complete absence. Worry about her “health” conflicted with a relief at being free of her badgering and not having to explain about who he was about to turn to for help.

*Hell, he thought, if she was mad about my breaking the rules before...*

He drew the bloodsword from its scabbard and knelt on the rag rug in his living room. He pressed the cold gemstone to his forehead and concentrated. After a few minutes of strain an image resolved: a bright red mouth, sex, sharp teeth piercing flesh, blood flowing.

Near midnight Jeremy left for Charlotte’s north side in his Mini Cooper, heading for the Montezuma apartments. He drove into the rundown complex of 1980’s era slapped-up apartments. No one was out in the shadows of the aged buildings. Jeremy parked the small red car and waited.

She exited from a second-story apartment, presumably her latest victim’s, and walked toward the outside staircase. Piled masses of dyed blonde hair caught the streetlights. She wore a denim jacket over a sweater that looked like it might explode under the pressure of her bustline. Rhinestone-studded jeans and cowboy boots completed the picture.

Jeremy got out of the car and walked over to face her at the bottom of the stairs. She paused briefly on seeing him, then sauntered on, the heels of her cowboy boots tapping on the stairs.

He placed a hand on the haft of the bloodsword and looked up at her. Her pale face and luminous blue eyes regarded him over generous, bright red lips.

“Why, Jeremy Leclerc,” she said in a high, country twang. “I haven’t seen you since I tied you to my four-poster and had my way with you two or three times.”

“Three,” he said.

She smiled. “It was a good night.”

“How’s your latest victim, Debbie?”

“Oh, he’s fine, Honey. Got his feet propped up, lots of blankets. I made him drink a pint of Gatorade with some vitamins then left him on what remains of his bed with a smile on his face. I told you before. I don’t have time to bury hundreds of corpses a year. I sip ’em and leave ’em happy.

“That’s what I’ll find if I check?”

“Knock yourself out, Sweets, but I did give you my word. Speaking of which, is our truce still holding? You at least owe a girl a fair fight.”

Jeremy grimaced. He'd gone hunting Debbie alone, just after arriving in Charlotte and after a major tiff with Shadowheart. He'd ambushed Debbie in her lair only to hesitate to strike the petite vampire. But Debbie hadn't hesitated and with a strength that he hadn't anticipated in the small body, she'd wrenched the weapon from his hand and flung him on her bed. What started out as a desperate fight turned into foreplay as she played his body like she owned it. Hundreds of years had given her knowledge of anatomy that could make anyone into her bed toy.

"I promised that so long as you did not kill or turn humans, that you were safe from me," he said.

"Yep, 'course I was sitting on your chest and threatening to drink you dry if you didn't."

He shrugged. "A Templar may not claim duress. His word is inviolable."

She smiled and came down the remaining stairs to take his arm. "What brings you out looking for me? If it's a party you want, it will have to be another night, I'm beat."

Jeremy couldn't help but smile at the buxom vampire. "No party. I need your help. There's a—"

"Is this a long story?" she said. "I mean, I love listening to that European accent of yours and all but..."

"Kind of."

"Good. There's an all-night diner on Central. I love their food and the chocolate shakes."

"Didn't you just eat?"

"I nourished my vampiric essence," she protested. "It hasn't done anything for my tight little tummy. And being the undead, I can eat any damn thing I want and not gain an ounce."

Jeremy drove them to the Landmark Diner on Central. To his surprise the old Indian gentleman on the door knew Debbie and gave her a wink. He took them to a quiet corner booth. Debbie slid in and rested her formidable breasts on the tabletop. "Oh," she sighed. "Try carrying these things around for a couple of hundred years."

"Uh, yeah," he said, trying to keep his eyes on hers.

The waitress, a slim, pretty girl with a ponytail, walked up. "Do y'all know what you want?"

"You betcha," Debbie smiled, "a big thick steak, with a pile of onion rings and a chocolate shake."

"How do you want that steak?" the waitress laughed.

"Rare," Debbie said, rolling the R's.

"Now how can you eat like that and have such a tiny waist?" the waitress asked.

Debbie batted her big blue eyes at her. "I'm on a liquid diet most of the time. But better watch out, cutey, I may take a bite out of you."

The waitress giggled and blushed.

"Coffee and a Danish," Jeremy grumbled.

The waitress walked off, with Debbie giving her a speculative look.

"Do you mind?" Jeremy said.

"Come on, Jeremy," Debbie smiled. "A girl always has to be thinking about where her next meal is coming from. I sensed her interest."

He started to speak but she raised a hand. "No business till after dinner."

The meal came out quick and good. Jeremy watched in astonishment as Debbie ate enough dinner for two men, washing it down with chocolate shakes. Meanwhile she chatted amiably. Debbie was a good small-talker, a necessary skill to lure victims.

"So," she said with a sweet smile, "now that you've given a girl her propers, what can I do for you?"

"You've heard about those women disappearing from the malls?"

"Now, Jeremy, I had nothing to do—"

"I know, I know," he interrupted. "It was a Bain Sidhe."

"A what?" she raised an eyebrow along with her shake.

"Bain Sidhe," he repeated.

She sipped and shrugged.

"An ancient spirit of death and doom that appears as the ghostly image of a woman holding bloody rags. This one was over twelve feet tall."

"You're funnin me."

"What kind of vampire are you?" he threw up his hands.

"You think we get some sort of handbook for the undead when we turn, *'Evil for Dummies?'*"

"An Irish spirit of doom," he grated. "It kills women for their life force, using despair as a weapon. It almost killed me last night. My guardian angel saved me but she was badly hurt in the process and is recovering in the overworld."

"Good," Debbie shuddered, tossing her blond hair. "Angels scare the crap out of me. Wait a minute, how does an angel lose against anything?"

"Shadowheart can only intervene with her true power if some rule, which only she seems to know, is broken. When she saved me she broke the rules and became vulnerable. She was nearly destroyed."

"Too bad, so sad," Debbie said.

"Be serious for a minute," Jeremy leaned forward. "I need someone to act as bait for me while I find a way to kill it. You're the only powerful supernatural creature around here not likely to try and kill me. So I've come to you."

"And I do this why?" she said, resting her chin in her hands.

"Money?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Because it's the right thing to do?"

It took a full minute for her to stop laughing. "Jeremy, you kill me, Sweetie. Oh, that was a good one."

"What do you want, Debbie?"

"I've got truce with you," she said. "I figured it would be useful to have a good guy who owed me a favor. But I can't screw every Templar or other good guy into submission... well I could, but it would take a lot of time and I might get unlucky and run into a gay one."

"There are no gay Templars," he said.

"Yeah, right. Don't ask, don't tell. Sure. Anyway what I want is the same deal with all the forces of light. I don't kill or turn humans and no one hunts me."

"A *White Pass*," Jeremy murmured. "There have only been three of those given in the last five-hundred years."

"Start a trend," she said.

Jeremy considered. Having spared Debbie, or truth be told, been spared by her, he'd studied all he could find on her. There was no record of Debbie killing anyone besides a serial rapist in the 1960s, since the Civil War.

"There are dead that you slew after you first turned," he said slowly.

She nodded. "I had a few bad years with that bastard, Ben Carrier, after he turned me. Don't expect you to understand, or forgive, but I was dying of yellow fever in a Charleston whorehouse when Ben took me. I wanted revenge on the world for a while. Realized after a bit, that all I was doing was making more of the same misery. I stopped."

"What happened to Carrier?"

"I cut off his head and shat down his neck."

"I thought the expression was, 'ripped off his head.'"

"He was strong," for a second Debbie's facade of youth and good humor cracked. Jeremy was looking at something older and more dangerous. It was his turn to shudder.

*Perhaps, he thought, Debbie was as much sinned against as sinning.* She was nothing like the vampires he'd trained to fight, being a creature more of dark sex than of death. His choice was to insist on retribution for ancient past sins or prevent present and future deaths.

Debbie got coffee and had the waitress drop the bill on him while he thought. She looked out the window as traffic whipped by on Central Avenue. A horn sang in the distance.

"Very well," he said. "As a Templar, I can speak for the Master. He speaks for all forces of light. Do you understand Latin?"

"My only foreign languages are Spanish and Yankee."

"I'll translate the ritual. We'll have to go to a church."

"Save your ritual, Jeremy, and I can't set foot in a church. Do we have a deal?"

"I so bind the order and all forces of light," he said, "on pain of death and excommunication. I extend the White Pass to Debbie Middleton on behalf of the Knights Templar. The pass will be recorded in every database, in the stone tablets of Joseph and you will receive the traditional sheepskin and the ring of peace. The ring's aura will warn any soldier of light that you are protected."

"Great," she said, twinkling her fingers. "I love bling."

"Right," he said. "Here's the plan. We'll meet at eleven tonight by the symphony bandshell. The mall is open late again..."

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Jeremy and Debbie sat in a truck cabin in the outskirts of Southpark mall where the bloodsword had told him to expect the Bain Sidhe.

"You didn't mention anything about a stolen truck," she said.

"You didn't steal it, I did." He shifted in discomfort. Mindful of what Shadowheart had said about the Bain Sidhe fearing iron, he wore a chain mail coat under his Kevlar.

"And a leaf-sucking truck at that? What are we going to do, clean up Myers Park lawns?"

"Shut up and duck," he said, grabbing her and pressing her down in the seat. A CMPD cruiser went by, its searchlight playing briefly over their truck as it scanned the distant reaches of the parking lots.

Debbie turned from where her head lay in his lap. "Did you want me to do something as long as I'm down here?"



Jeremy sighed. "The bloodsword has never been wrong before."

"It's been hours, Jeremy."

The windshield began to glisten with mist, then a fine rain started.

"Good sign," he said, starting the truck's motor.

"Says you," Debbie peered out the side window.

"Time for you to get out there."

Debbie opened the door and climbed down, then looked back at him. "Now ,Jeremy, Honey, you are going to back me up? Right?"

"Jesus Fucking Christ," he said. "How many oaths do I have to make to you?"

She grimaced. "Vampire whores have trust issues. And don't swear."

"I will be there. My word to God."

"Didn't I hear something about you being a Taoist?"

"Debbie!"

"All right. Keep your shorts on." She strode off into the gloom and mist, which thickened by the second. He could barely see the glimmer of her blonde hair.

Jeremy got out the other side, drawing his bloodsword and adjusting the controls on the side of the vacuum truck. Then he slid under the huge metal drum of the dieseling truck as far back as he could and tried to be invisible. He couldn't see Debbie anymore but comforted himself with the knowledge that she had better night vision than he did.

A shriek split the air. Debbie came flying out of the darkness, her cowboy boots clacking like mad on the asphalt. For a busty woman she was really making speed.

"Jeremmmmmeeee!!!!!"

On her heels came the Bain Sidhe. It wailed its wordless song of misery and death. But Debbie wasn't listening. She plunged past Jeremy, still screaming. Behind her, the Bain Sidhe, perhaps puzzled by Debbie's failure to succumb to its song, reached out a long bony hand.

As it strode past Jeremy, he plunged out from under the truck, striking a backhand cut. The enchanted sword cut through the Bain Sidhe's mist-like body without resistance but its effect was immediate. The Bain Sidhe howled in pain and bent double. Before Jeremy could cut again, its ghostly claws struck him. His Kevlar split under the Bain Sidhe's attack but its hands rebounded from the chain mail beneath. Still its mad eyes bore into him chilling his soul, emptying his mind of purpose and his body of warmth. With his last fading rags of energy and will, he stabbed with the bloodsword in his right hand and thrust the nozzle of the leaf-sucker with his left, pulling its pistol grip trigger. He heard the roar of the engine, then fell into darkness...

The world came back slowly, first with the sense of water falling on him and penetrating his clothes, then the sound of the truck and its roaring vacuum. He opened his eyes to look up into Debbie's luminous ones. He lay in her arms, his head pillowed on her large, very soft breasts.

*Right, he thought muzzily, they're real.*

"Did I get it?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "It disappeared up the nozzle and into the truck but I don't think it's dead. I can still hear it." She shivered.

He painfully craned his head around to look at the truck. The huge steel drum had evidently contained enough of the property of iron to keep the Bain Sidhe contained.

Jeremy groaned as she helped him to his feet. He felt a little woozy and reached up to his neck finding some waterproof Band-Aids. He glared at her. "Debbie!"

“Oh come on,” she pouted. “It was just a nip and a sip. You lose more when you cut yourself shaving.”

“Take my car,” he said, handing her the keys. “Follow me.”

They pulled out of Southpark and headed up Sharon Rd to Independence Boulevard then East on Highway 74. A half-hour and a country side road took them behind Bubba’s Auto Salvage yard. Jeremy cut the chain on the fence and they both drove in, heading for the auto crusher.

As he pulled up and got out of the truck, Debbie parked next to them. Jeremy hopped out and looked up at the huge machine. *Impact Five*, it said on the side. It was an orange metal box with enormous pistons, used to flatten cars.

Growls sounded behind him. Jeremy spun, his hand reaching for the sword. Three huge Rottweilers and a Doberman faced him. As they started to rush, Debbie jumped in front of Jeremy and drew herself up to her full five-foot three-inches and hissed. The dogs stopped so fast that one somersaulted. Then all four fled yelping into the darkness.

Debbie gave him a smug look. “Dogs are terrified of the undead. It’s in *‘Evil for Dummies’* chapter four. You oughta get yourself a copy.”

Jeremy hopped back into the truck and maneuvered it into the massive crusher. The whole machine wouldn’t fit so he backed the metal cylinder in.

“Debbie, start her up.”

“Oh hell,” she said. “Now he thinks I’m a damn mechanic. Let me throw some switches.”

As Jeremy turned off the truck, a gray mist emerged from the dashboard vents, manifesting as ghostly claws. Somehow the Bain Sidhe had found at least a partial outlet.

“Debbie,” he shouted, as the claws struck. There wasn’t enough room to pull his sword but even half drawn it cut the ghostly hands reaching for his throat.

“No use yelling at me,” she shouted back. “I’m going as fast as I can.”

“Now!” he yelled again. The claws struck and his arm went numb. He switched hands and whipped the sword around in its sheath. One claw dissipated. The other struck and his left leg went numb.

With a sound like an old Star Trek phaser, the *Impact 5* came to life. Massive jaws pinched down on the back of the truck drawing it in and crushing it. The Bain Sidhe gave a dreadful howl from its imprisoning cylinder as metal was driven into it. Its final shriek of agony and despair almost made Jeremy pity it. The machine cycled dragging more of the truck into it, with Jeremy still in the cab. The roof over his head started to buckle. Jeremy struggled but his half-frozen body betrayed him. The door hung in its bent casing, holding him in.

“Debbie,” he screamed. He let the sword slip back into its sheath and threw his shoulder at the door.

Debbie leapt to the truck’s runner, wrenching the door off the frame with inhuman strength. Grabbing his arm in a way that made him glad it was numb, she yanked him out of the cab. They thumped onto the oil-soaked ground. Diesel fuel spilled out of the ruptured tanks and the truck burst into flames. Debbie threw him up on her shoulders and they sprinted for his Mini.

By the time they reached the car, Jeremy’s body again responded to his demands, though his arm felt like it had been pulled from its socket. They jumped into the Mini and roared out of Bubba’s.

An hour later, Jeremy let Debbie out by her pink VW Bug.

She smiled. “You sure know how to show a girl a good time.”

“Thanks,” he managed.

“Just let me know when my White Pass is ready. I’m looking forward to getting my new ring.”

“I’ll call the Grandmaster and have it Fedexed.” Jeremy drew a breath. “I owe you.”

She looked at him, her smile fading. “Jeremy, honey, I like you, so I’ll tell you a couple of things. Don’t get too fond of me. I ain’t good for you or anyone living. You are a little too trusting and way too naïve. Try not to get killed.”

“Deal. Sunrise soon. Better get underground.”

She shook her head and sashayed off toward her car.

Jeremy drove home, staggering up the thirty-six steps to his top floor apartment. He gratefully made it to his bedroom, collapsing across the bedspread, fully dressed, too hurt and miserable to draw the curtains. He stared at the rising sun.

Suddenly Shadowheart stood in the room. Sunshine streamed through her simple blue shift and her golden hair made banners on the wall. She vibrated with health and energy.

“I’m back,” she sang, spreading her arms, “restored and returned.” She danced her little joyous dance to greet the sunrise, smiling beatifically at all God’s creation. Then she turned to Jeremy, who lay unmoving on the bed, glaring at her from one open eye and stinking of oil and smoke.

“You look like crap,” she said.

The End

Audio version available: [68\) Episode 143: The Templar by Edward McKeown - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xk44NrLMtWw)

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