

Dying Hereafter

They came at night, of course. Caroline wouldn't have known anything about it, except that she had woken with a desperate biological need and was passing a window when she saw movement in the garden. She had always thought that she would be good in situations like this. She was generally good in a crisis, generally good at knowing what to do. But the sight of the dark shapes, humanoid but somehow inhuman, barely visible in the moonlight, ghosting across the frosted lawn, left her unable to move. "Gary," she croaked, the word barely getting past her lips.

She didn't hear them break through the French doors, didn't hear them climb the stairs. She only knew that they were gone from the garden, and she had managed to turn around when one of them was in front of her. She caught a glimpse of long black hair in a high ponytail, of stone eyes that pinned her back against the wall with a glare. Then it was gone, and she slid down, till she was sitting, aware of only the urge to vomit and the dislocated sound of her gasping.

She didn't know how long she'd sat there, before she had convinced herself that it was nothing more than one of those hypnagogic dreams. Or maybe hypnopompic – she was never sure which was what – and it was this with this delirious line of thought in her head that she found her husband of two years dead on their bed, his blood staining every square inch of their 1000 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets.

The police didn't seem to believe even the watered down version she gave them, in those unreal hours that followed. Caroline wasn't sure that she even believed it herself, except that the sight of Gary, the smell of the blood, seemed to pervade her, flashing back into her consciousness every time she did anything other than focus on whatever was going on at that exact moment. She thought the police might regard her as a suspect, watch her for signs of guilt, ask her just one more question, but they seemed focussed on an intruder, inspecting the doors and windows, dusting for fingerprints and taking endless photos.

"There are no right reactions," her friend Julia, widowed for the past five years to the rather more explainable cancer. "I thought the most horrible thoughts. Anger at him for leaving me alone. Relief that it was finally over."

They were sitting in Julia's living room, Caroline having been temporarily kicked out of what the police were calling "the crime scene" but she preferred to think of as "her house".

"It's different, though," Caroline said. "You had months to prepare." She watched the surface of her tea shimmer; little waves caused by her trembling hand criss-crossing it.

"All that preparation is rot. You never really believe it's going to happen, and it's always a shock when it actually does. The world will never be the same again."

Caroline smiled, but even she could feel the sadness in it. Her world had changed, and not just because Gary was dead. Because now she knew there were things that could come into your house, wreck your life, and leave no traces of their presence.

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"Did you know he had a lockup?"

It had been a week since Gary's funeral, a mundane affair, muted and uninspired, filled with formulaic clichés. Such a good turn-out. We all miss him. If there's anything I can do, just ask. He'd want you to be happy. The police were still 'making enquiries', which Caroline was interpreting as 'have no idea who did it'.

She had finally decided to go through his belongings, giving away the best of his clothes to charity, the rest to recycling. Julia was with her, mostly to stop her holding each item to her chest, lost in recollections of the last time he had worn it, communing with the particles of him that each one held. They had, eventually, moved on from the bedroom to the office. Julia was holding up an invoice from a garage-letting company, a quizzical look on her face.

"He didn't," Caroline said.

"According to this, he had paid through to next June. Maybe ..."

Caroline glared at her friend. "Julia Cornwall, stop thinking that."

"What?"

"You're thinking that maybe he was cooking crystal meth in that garage, and that's why he was ... why he died." The guilty reaction on Julia's face would have been amusing in any other circumstance. Caroline sighed. "'Breaking Bad' is not a manual for actual life."

"That's the first time you've sounded like yourself since he died," Julia said. She looked at the garage invoice. "Do you think we should go and look, at least? In case there's anything there."

"I think we should finish going through the office," Caroline said, "and then the DVD and CD collections. We'll get to the garage eventually." She was more than curious to find out what was in it, why he had kept it secret from her, whether it had any significance in his death, but, as much of a rock as Julia had been for her, she wanted to go alone. There are some things that you don't want even your best friend to see before you've had a chance to deal with them.

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The lock-up was on a South London council estate that came from the can't-be-bothered end of the brutalist architectural school. Caroline's five-year-old Ford Focus seemed too posh to be parked there, in front of a garage door whose once-red paint had faded to an unimpressive variegated pink. She held Gary's key ring in her hand, weighing it thoughtfully. Would it be better to know or not know? Should she have brought Julia after all? Or told the police?

It was primarily the thought of having to re-negotiate the Elephant and Castle roundabout that kept her from just driving off again; driving off and keeping going until she was far away from places he had kept secret, places he had walked, places he had sat ... places he had died. But she had come, and she was going to face whatever it was. She opened the door and climbed out of the car, her attention fixed on the garage door.

A large padlock, just the one, with scratches around the lock that suggested it hadn't always been used with the most care. She went through the likely keys on the ring, trying each of them in turn. It was, of course, the last one she tried. Was it inappropriate to be amused by that joke, as she faced her husband's secrets? She wasn't sure, and thinking about it got her through any further indecision over whether she should open the door.

Whatever it was that she was expecting to be inside, it wasn't a sparsely appointed room with an armchair that she faintly remembered from the flat Gary had before they were married, what looked like a working shower cubicle, and a wardrobe-and-chest combination that had clearly been rescued from a lifetime of abuse. There was a worn and bare rug on the floor, and a filter coffee machine plugged into a worryingly frayed extension cable. She thought that maybe it was a secret love-nest, only to realise that would require some kind of bed. She stalked around the room, talking to thin air.

"What is this, Gary? Why would you have this stuff here? And what were you keeping in ... oh." She opened the doors of the wardrobe to find a single outfit, hanging neatly. It looked like it was made of black leather. Maybe this was his secret. But didn't people with kinky wardrobes usually have lots of clothes? And Gary had never shown any signs of that kind of thing. Not that she would have objected if he had, probably. She reached out a hand to bring it out, only to snatch it back. Somehow, the thing was hot to the touch. Cautiously, she placed the back of her hand against it, ready to jump away again. No, no heat this time, or rather just the merest remnant of warmth. She unhooked the hanger from the pole and brought it out. Trousers and a sleeveless black top, with some kind of design grooved into it. Something about it looked familiar, but she couldn't immediately place it. The strangest thing of all was that it didn't look anywhere near big enough to fit Gary. In fact, she could have sworn it was actually *her* size. She shook her head and set it down on the armchair, and investigated the chest.

"Well, I suppose that was to be expected," Caroline said, peering inside. "A sword, Gary? How ... were you hiding a pendant for re-enactment from me?" She brought it out of the chest. It was shorter than she was expecting, maybe only a couple of feet long, and in a black leather scabbard that hung from a matching belt. The same device that was engraved on the clothes was on the scabbard, still scratching away at a memory. From this angle, it looked a bit like an hourglass, or a very stylized number "8", with sketchy wings from what she presumed was the top, at least once she'd turned the sword around. She set it on the armchair, leaning it up against the back cushion.

"Anything else?" she asked the chest. The only remaining things were two vaguely cylindrical bits of the same material, once more with that design etched onto them. She held them up, turning them this way and that. "Oh. They go on your wrists." On a whim, she tried one on, and was surprised to find that it fitted well.

A faint glow from the back wall caught her eye. She walked over to it, curious. Partially obscured behind an empty shelving rack was a roughly door-shaped outline, slightly fuzzy, like a rectangle of felt tacked to the wall, but a rectangle of felt that was glowing dark blue.

"Weird," Caroline said, because the silence had started to become oppressive. She reached out to touch it, and felt her fingers sink into it, before meeting resistance. She yanked her hand back and inspected it. The correct number of digits were still present, and there was no burn or other damage. She looked at the glowing rectangle again. Sure, she wasn't the most observant person ever, and the thing was kind of hidden, but she felt certain that she would have noticed a large glowing rectangle had there been one when she opened the garage.

She walked back to the armchair and, shifting the sword to one side, perched on the edge of the seat cushion to think. "Option one, Caroline is losing her grip," she said. "In favour: talking to herself, seeing magic glowing rectangles. Against: I don't feel like I'm hallucinating, and the glowing rectangle door thing is still there. Option two, Gary was into weird stuff. In favour: strange black outfit hidden in secret lockup garage, what happened the night ..."

She pushed the thought away, and went back to concentrating on the insistently glowing special effect. What had changed between her coming into the garage and her seeing it? She blinked. "Idiot," she muttered, and she unlaced the bracelet wrist-thing and pulled it off. She was rewarded with the glow fading away, leaving the merest outline on the wall.

"So, putting bits on makes it glow. I wonder what happens if I put on the whole thing?" She looked at the outfit critically. "Other than I feel really silly. I'm so glad Julia isn't here."

She was right: she did feel silly. And the way that she also felt kind of sexy and powerful only added to the silliness. She finished buckling the belt around her hips, rather enjoying the way the sword felt, and turned to face the back wall. "Well?" she asked it. It glowed back, both inviting and intimidating. She had sworn to herself that she would find out what this was all about, and if she had to do it dressed like an extra from 'The Lord Of The Rings', so be it. She shoved the shelving rack out of the way, took a deep breath, and stepped into the doorway.

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"Hi there!"

The fog slowly cleared from Caroline's vision, from the outside in, so the first thing she was aware of was the desks and terminals that make up an open-plan office, and it was significantly later that she was able to focus on the perky young man, dressed not dissimilarly to her, smiling at her.

"New recruit?" he said.

"Uh ... how ...?"

"The staggering and the caught-in-the headlights look is unmistakable. Don't worry, we've all been there. Orientation is just over the other side of the office." He indicated a door. "They'll explain."

She managed an automatic "Thanks", while staggering in the indicated direction, concentrating primarily on staying upright.

The Orientation room had comfortable seats, and a rather more friendly air about it. The woman behind the desk looked up as Caroline entered. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "A new recruit."

"I think there's been some sort of mistake. My husband ..." It was the woman's ponytail, pulled up high on her head, that did it. Where Caroline had seen an outfit like the one she was wearing. Where she had seen the design with the stylised winged number eight. Inhuman figures moving across the lawn. The glare of the woman in the hall. She felt her knees weaken, but an anger she hadn't anticipated flowed through her, providing strength. "I'd like to know why you killed my husband."

"Ah." The woman tapped on the keyboard in front of her. "Hmm. It's very difficult to know. What time do you think it is?"

"What? It's like ..." Caroline blinked. She had a pretty good internal clock, but it seemed to be malfunctioning. "I have no idea. I think it was early afternoon before, but I don't know now."

The woman nodded. "This place is outside of time, in a sense." She paused. "I'm sorry about your husband, but maybe if I can explain what we do here, what we've recruited you for, then perhaps you'll understand."

"It doesn't seem very likely," Caroline said.

"Just give me a chance. My name's Laura, by the way."

"Caroline. Caroline Lawson." She grabbed one of the comfortable chairs and pulled it right up to the desk. She might be willing to hear what Laura had to say, but she was damned if she was going to sit like she was here for a job interview, regardless of what they said about recruiting.

"I know. We get quite a lot of information from the suit. Anyway, pleased to meet you, Caroline. We're the Time Angels."

"Time Angels?"

"Stupid name, I know, but someone came up with it sometime and it stuck. Or it will stick. Essentially what we do is fix when things go wrong in the timeline."

"By killing people's husbands?" Still, the idea of time travel seemed less strange than magic suits and glowing doors.

"Sometimes. Usually it's less drastic. We spot when the timeline has gone wrong, and we do what it takes to fix it."

"But ... how do you know what 'wrong' is?"

"Well, mostly it involves the whole planet getting turned into radioactive glass. That's an indication. Or mass death, of one sort or another. We don't care about which political party is in power, or who wins a talent competition, or even who triumphs in a war, usually. There's enough big stuff to keep us busy." Laura paused. "Or at least, we believe there is. Once it's fixed, though, the only people who remember what the problem was are the people who fixed it, and even they tend to be fuzzy on the details. It turns out that time travel is quite confusing, and only a few people can cope with it."

"Gary was killed because if he hadn't been, the world would have ended?" That didn't seem very reasonable.

"Possibly. I really can't tell you. It might not even have happened yet, or it happened so long ago that nobody remembers."

Caroline sat still for what felt like a long time. From the moment the figures, the Time Angels, it seemed, had appeared in her garden her life felt like a weird dream that she couldn't wake up from.

"Why do you say I've been recruited?" she asked, eventually.

"The suits recognise people who have the ability to handle time travel. We're not certain how they do it, but we know they're never wrong." Laura smiled in a way that was clearly meant to be reassuring.

"I don't think I have any relevant skills." Unless they needed some snappy slogans and a well-thought-out social media campaign. Which was possible, given that "Time Angels" was the best name they'd come up with.

"You'll surprise yourself." Did nothing penetrate the smug confidence of this woman?

"What about my home? My friends?" Caroline was stalling for time, trying to get some space to think.

“We encourage everyone to maintain a home life. There are some rules, though. You’re not allowed to go back and interfere in your own time line. Once you start time travelling, you can’t directly affect anything that happened to you before – that’s locked.”

“So, no going back and telling myself the lottery numbers?”

“Exactly. Our experience says that nothing messes up a timeline faster than people attempting to fix their own lives. It’s like an instant paradox.”

“If I’d won the lottery, why would I need to go back and tell myself the numbers? I see.” Caroline was tempted, for lots of reasons, most of which boiled down to the fact that this was the coolest thing that had happened to her, let alone anyone she knew. But what about Gary? Could she forgive them for killing him? If she joined up, if she became a part of the organisation that had killed him, she might find out why, or who. She’d need to be subtle, asking questions only when it was safe. And she’d need to ignore the stench of self-justification and guilt that the whole idea had about it.

“Do you need some time to think?” Laura said.

“No, I’m ready. I’m in. Do I have to sign something?”

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Caroline hung upside down from the rafters of the drafty barn, waiting. She wasn’t quite sure if this was her fifth or sixth mission, but it was the first time she was going to have to kill someone. Fifth or sixth? First one simply involved sending an anonymous letter to an MP, resulting in a question being asked in the house and a minister resigning. The second was the one where she’d had to cut the cable of a nuclear missile launch console. Third, erase a voicemail message. Fourth, dig up the road to prevent a convoy from arriving in time. That one had left her muddy and smelly, and she’d been very glad of the garage shower. So this must be her fifth. She found her memory wasn’t quite as good as it once was. They’d warned her that would happen; Shifting time-zones, moving in and out of history, plays havoc with your memory.

She had a team with her, had backup in case she couldn’t do it. She could just make out Janna’s outline, hidden in the shadow cast by the old John Deere tractor, and took reassurance from it. But she was sure she would manage. The man was planning to blow up most of South Dakota, inadvertently starting the second U.S. Civil War, only this time it would escalate to nuclear weaponry. She unsheathed her knife, and continued to hang and wait, listening for his footsteps on the old wooden boards below. She knew he would come, and she knew he wouldn’t leave.

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“Are you sure about this?” Julia’s hands rustled in the plastic gloves.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m tired of looking at my mousy brown hair.” Admittedly, when Caroline had come up with this idea, she’d intended to do it herself, but an abortive attempt had left the bathroom resembling the aftermath of an explosion at the dye factory and herself looking like a demon badger. Hence the frantic call to Julia, hence the emergency re-dyeing that was going on.

“I’m all for individuality,” Julia said, “but all black? Are you going to start wearing lots of white makeup and pretending it’s the ‘80s again?”

That wasn't so far from the truth, really. Caroline had caught a Duran Duran video on television the other day and wondered if they had actually had some contact with the Time Angels. "I just want to make a change," she said. She didn't fancy explaining that she thought it would go better with her Angel uniform.

"I do worry about you, you know." Julia started to rinse the dye out, the water just a trifle too hot for Caroline's comfort. "You've lost a lot of weight since Gary died. I think you're working out too much. People do that, you know."

Apparently something about the very act of working with someone's hair transformed your conversation into 'hairstylist'. Any second now and Julia would ask about her holidays. Caroline wondered how she'd react to being told that she was planning a jaunty murder spree in Eighteenth Century France. "I'm happier now than I've ever been," she said. It was true, she realised with vague surprise. She was happy. Even if she hadn't discovered why Gary had been killed, she'd found the commitment of the other Angels, their camaraderie, to be fulfilling in a way that working in advertising just wasn't. "I mean, I miss Gary, but ... you have to move on." The cliché came easily to her, an easy camouflage.

"Well, that's good, I suppose," Julia said. "All done. Arise from your throne, Goth Princess Caroline."

Caroline looked at herself in the mirror, and felt a rising sickness in her stomach. She gathered her fresh-dyed hair up in a hand, holding it in a high ponytail. She had seen this person before. She had thought the scene was seared into her memory, but she realised now that she hadn't seen properly. It wasn't just the Time Angels who had killed Gary. It was her.

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"This is the grimmest task we ever have to do," Kev, section leader, was saying as Caroline walked into the briefing room. "One of our own has gone rogue."

"Gary Lawson," Caroline said, aware of the hollowness in her own voice.

"Caroline. We thought it best not to involve you." Kev moved, as if he was going to steer her out of the room.

"You can't, Kev. You can't leave me out. I'm going with you, and I'll be the one to kill him." Caroline glared at him with all the certainty she could muster. "It's set. If I don't go, I don't end up here at all."

"You shouldn't be messing with your own timeline like that."

"It's too late. It's part of my timeline before I joined. For me, it already happened. Just tell me what he did, so I can at least know why I'm doing it, and not rely on some crappy self-fulfilling prophecy."

Kev looked at her for a moment that dragged on forever. "Take a seat," he said, eventually, not bothering to hide his disgust, though Caroline thought it was mostly just that he hated losing arguments. "Angel Gary Lawson travelled into his own timeline and staged a road accident, delaying his wife's return to their house, preventing her finding him with another woman."

Caroline gripped the arms of her chair tightly, willing her face into a professionally impassionate expression. She might have let out a slightly pained moan, but at least she looked like it didn't affect her.

Kev glanced at her, just for a moment, and then continued. "We're going to insert ourselves before the infidelity began, and remove the problem."

A euphemism. Great. Caroline wanted to protest, to claim that it wasn't fair that they should kill him before he'd committed the offence, but somehow that got buried in a burning fury.

"The target point in his timeline is after he became an Angel, but after what we believe to be his last mission, so there should be only limited impact. Any questions?"

There weren't any questions, just an air of sombre determination. No-one liked it when they had to police their own. The meeting broke up, Angels moving to prepare their kit, have one last coffee before the off. Kev approached her.

"You don't have to go. Your timeline isn't critical, as far as anyone can tell."

Caroline shook her head. "I'm going," she said. "I couldn't stay here, even if I didn't know that I was there."

They moved swiftly across the lawn, away from their insertion point behind Gary's shed. The lawn was crisp with frost, crackling beneath their feet even as they ghosted across it. Caroline felt, rather than saw, her team-mates around her, and was buoyed by their unspoken support. She didn't look up at the upstairs window as they approached. They stopped at the French doors, waiting for a heartbeat while Caroline pulled out her keys. No need for breaking and entering when you're the house-owner.

In the upstairs hallway, she paused, and looked to where she knew her former self would be standing. It wasn't a surprise that she'd failed to recognise herself, back then. She barely did this time. How could she not know what kind of man he was? What he would do? Caroline glared at her, angry at herself for her ignorance, for her complacency, for her weakness. No wonder the police had never seriously considered her as a suspect. She watched as the other her slid down the wall, then turned and walked into the bedroom, drawing her sword and setting resolution onto her face. He didn't wake.

They extracted directly from the bedroom, and there was none of the usual celebration and back-slapping, just the calm recognition of the completion of an unpleasant job. Kev came over to her, wearing a concerned frown. "Ok?" he asked.

"Yeah," Caroline said. She smiled, wryly. "I think I've finally put my husband's death behind me."