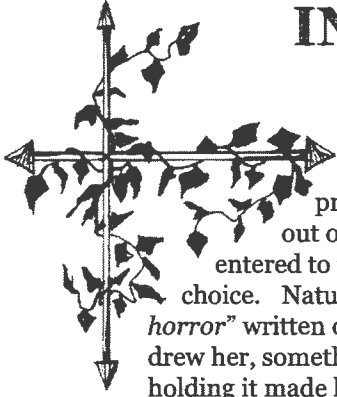


IN BONDAGE

Shelby Spears



The library sent out an email about their latest promo—they called it blind date with a book. Check out one of the books on display in the front and get entered to win a fifty-dollar gift card to the bookstore of your choice. Naturally, she went. She picked out a book with “*gothic horror*” written on its brown paper wrappings. Something about it drew her, something she couldn’t really put her finger on. Just holding it made her feel good—strange, but good. Even though she hadn’t read anything creepier than *Goosebumps* in the past fifteen years, she checked it out, and walked home with a skip in her step.

When she got back to her place, she opened it, per the instructions, but instead of the gothic horror the label promised, she found a strange, ancient grimoire, something you might find in a haunted house. The title was in Latin. She understood the word for “book”, but that was all. Underneath the title was a drawing of a dark-eyed skull, wonderful yet peculiar. It had a dreamy quality, like those strange shadows that move if you get too close, and disappear if you ever try to look at them. It was one of those things that exist on the peripherals of your vision, but never seem to go away. And, frankly, it was all in poor taste.

She thought it must have been some sort of joke. She swore, cursing her bad luck, and plopped down on the couch next to her cat. Now that reading was no longer an option, she decided to take the book back the next day and enjoy a quiet evening with kitty, a bowl of ice cream, and her Netflix account instead.

She stayed up late that night, watching stand-up comedy routines, and slept through her alarm. In her rush to get ready, she didn’t notice that the strange, mysterious book had moved from its perch on her coffee table. It wasn’t until she was at work and checked her texts that she found it waiting inside her purse. She pulled it out and stared at it blankly. She couldn’t remember putting it in there, nor the eyes of the skull being so large and menacing. They stared back at her, calling out her name enticingly, saying...*open me, open me...*She opened it to a random page and read from the spidery hand-written text. She sounded out a couple of words, and then a sentence, and a paragraph. She tried to stop but the more she thought about it the fuzzier the idea of stopping became in her mind. She was barely conscious when Ellen, her boss, barged in.



"Where are those papers I asked for an hour ago?" Ellen looked from her to the book and back again. "Oh...I see. Reading on the job, are we? Have better things to do than keeping our job?"

"No, ma'am, I—"

"Then put that book down and get me my papers!" Ellen shouted, her face purple.

She put the book back in her purse, resolved not to look into it again, and started to search for the papers.

After work, she headed back to the library, only to find that it was closed for the remainder of the week. Yet the lights were all on, and shapes were moving about inside, but the doors were locked and no one responded to her banging on the windows. Eventually she gave up. As she was leaving, a strange desire impelled her to take the scenic route home, which involved going through downtown.

Strolling past the grey stone buildings, she saw a familiar site: Hobs's Used Bookstore. Hobs, the owner, an old man with snow white hair and the oddest sense of fashion she'd ever seen, was locking up the front door as she went past.

"Ah, well, here's a sight for my sore eyes," he said, tipping his ancient bowler hat. "Too bad I'm locking up—someone brought in a crate of Nora Roberts today, and I figured you might want to take a gander at it."

"Oh, I'd love to. I might come by tomorrow." She remembered the weight of the strange tome in her bag. "Speaking of books..."

A long explanation and three cups of coffee in Hobs's kitchen later, she finally let him speak, his hands shaking.

"I've never seen anything like this before. Heard stories, yeah, about guys who would get books in, books with skulls or whatever..."

stories that never ended well. But I've never—where do you even find something like this? What type of horrible person lets this circulate in a public library?"

She became afraid. "Will something happen to me?" she asked.

"I can't promise you anything," he said. "But, I can give you this." He got up and started rifling through a drawer. He pulled out a bottle of holy water. "I don't how well it works, or if it works at all, but it's something, right?"

"Right," she murmured, taking it from him.



EXEMPOATOR UNUS



Hobs convinced her to spend the night in his guest bedroom. "It's too dangerous out there," he told her. "At least until we can figure out exactly what's going on."

She called her friend Monica, told her to take care of her kitty. Left it at that. * She also dug around in the shop until she found some old Bibles that Hobs didn't even know he had. Partially out of fear, partially out of having nothing else to do, she tore out pages and pasted them onto the door of her bedroom.

In the other room, Hobs was going through the book with rubber gloves and a crucifix around his neck. Combined with his orange-rimmed glasses, he was a bizarre sight. If the circumstances were different, she would have laughed. But as it was she was worried—about the book, her cat, her own life, and why Hobs, a book dealer she knew next to nothing about, would help her. Nothing made sense. Her head swam with so many questions she could not organize into coherent thoughts. She asked the first one that seemed tangible.

"What exactly are you looking for?"

"How to kill it."

Another thing she might have laughed at. But it wasn't really that funny to think about. A story could be alive, so why not a book? And the follow up question: So why *this* book? This strange, terrible book. And why her? In a world of six billion, how was she special enough to deserve this profound hatred?

Hobs dispelled her reverie.

"I can't find a goddamn thing," he said, his face twitching. He slammed the book closed. Later, she would swear that the skull smiled. "It's late, and I can't think. Probably time to turn in. I'll show you the guest bedroom—but for the love of God don't try to look at the book in the night. It's too dangerous."

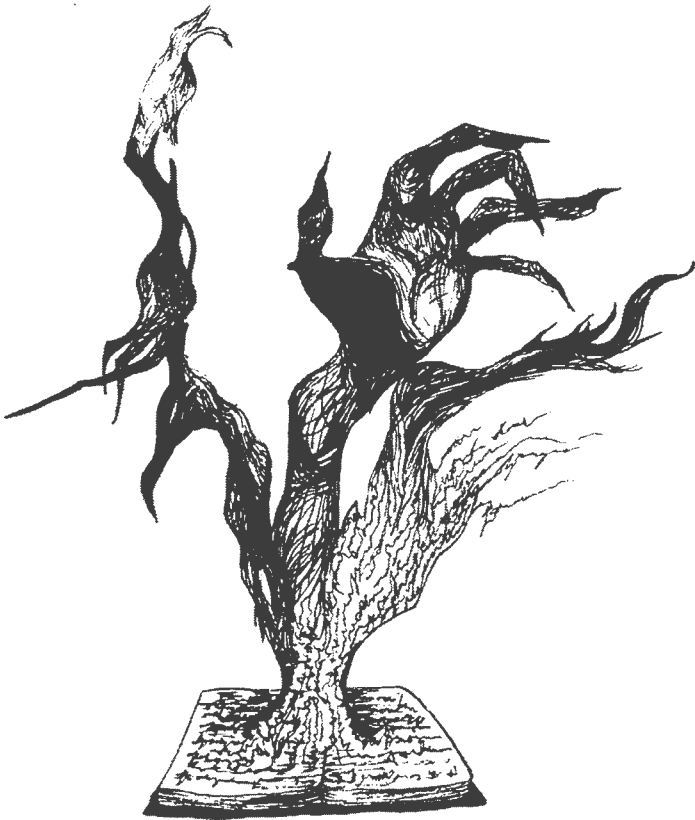
It was good he told her that, because she spent half the night tossing and turning, her bones aching with the temptation to leave her room, go down the hall in silence lest she wake Hobs, enter the room and incant those strange, forbidden words, to let their power wash over her. She was so lost in this vision that she did not hear the floorboards creak, did not hear Hobs stub his toe in the hall in his haste, did not hear as he fell prey to the same madness that tormented her.

In the morning she went down for breakfast, but couldn't find Hobs anywhere. It was only later, when she went unto his study and found him lying on the ground, bloody and cold, the book nowhere to be found, that she realized the meaning of the skull's strange, cruel smile. She returned to the guest bedroom and has not left since. She hears shrieks and moans every night, and once, when she cracked the door to see if anyone



had found the body, she was assaulted by the unmistakable smell of death, the unmistakable sight of the devil himself, that strange and fearful beast that lives in all our nightmares, roaming the halls, searching for us endlessly.

Soon she will die of malnourishment and starvation—she has been living off the drywall and rats that come to the room in fear of the beast. They grow fewer and fewer. Every day the sunlight grows shorter and the nights impossibly long. Soon there will be no days at all. The rats will come again, and she won't have the power to fight back. It will be their turn then. She won't even have the power to scream.



EXEMPOATOR DUOS

