

Gretyl: A Novella

by Dani Hoots

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Middle of the forest, Germany, 1942

“**Y**ou can’t be serious; we’re lost again, Christoph?”

I exclaimed as the sun began to lower itself below the tree line. It was going to get dark soon and if we didn’t hurry, we would be stuck in the middle of nowhere without any light, supplies, or food for that matter.

“Stop worrying about it, Ren, we will make it out of here by the time the sun sets,” Christoph answered, a little irritated that I had asked again. He jammed his fists into the pockets of his beige pants. He blew a piece of his dark brown hair out of his face, angry at the world. It wasn’t my fault he had gotten us lost. I told him not to listen to the jerk that was Thomas but, nein, he had to take on the dare to go to the top of the hill in the forest and check out the plane that crashed a few weeks back during the last bombing mission by the Allies. We were told not to go out

there by the military officials, who were trying to keep people away from the area. We never heard if anyone survived the crash and Thomas dared my brother to go find out. Boys were stupid, daring each other to do things like this, right in the middle of a war. Our parents would be worried if we didn't get back before nighttime, not to mention we would be in deep trouble for going into the forest. And it was all thanks to my brother Christoph.

“How about you two stop arguing and figure out where we are. I swear I've seen that patch of moss before. Are you sure we aren't going in circles?” our friend Kate asked as she flicked a piece of her blonde hair out of her freckled face. She wore a light blue blouse and black skirt. These past few weeks I swore she was wearing her best clothing. I wondered if it was because Christoph was leaving and she wanted him to look at her for once. I thought about asking but I never got a chance.

She and her sister Ann had come with us on our little “primetrip', along with Ann's boyfriend Wilhelm. They were as frustrated as I was with my older brother. He was almost sixteen now and he still was as immature as our little brother Carl. Good thing he wasn't out here with us, he would be crying a river from Christoph getting us lost.

“This is a German forest, there is moss everywhere, sis,” Ann sighed as she picked the burs off her red grey dress. Her blonde hair was cut short and pinned back. I always thought she was more beautiful than her sister, but I

never confessed that. “But I do remember that stump over there.”

Kate smacked Christoph in the back of the head. “See, we are going around in circles. What stunt are you trying to pull? Are you just trying to get out of going to the front?”

Ann and I chuckled as Kate had hit my brother. The two of them had been close since I could remember, but never officially started dating. Now that he was leaving for the war next week, I doubted they would ever be together. Neither of them had said anything or acted sad, but Ann and I could tell the tension was there.

He waved her hand away. “This isn’t any stunt, I’m trying to find us a way out of here.”

“The city lights should be coming on soon,” Wilhelm added as he ran his fingers through his light blonde hair. His blue eyes sparkled in the light as he smiled to the rest of us. “That will help us find which way to head as well.”

“We will be out before nightfall, I will guarantee you that,” Christoph shot him a look. Wilhelm didn’t say anything but just kept following my brother, even though I was pretty sure he could figure out how to get out of here faster. It wouldn’t matter though, Christoph wouldn’t listen to him, he hated how much smarter and determined Wilhelm was than him. It was his ego that got him in this mess and it was his ego that would get us all stuck here.

I rolled my eyes. “You better get us out of here, it was your stupid dare that brought us out here in the first place, and you didn’t even find what you were supposed to, did you?”

His face began to turn red. “Shut it, Ren! Maybe then you shouldn’t have come with me.”

“I wasn’t going to let you come out here by yourself; are you crazy? This area is off limits to citizens, and is supposed to be haunted. What if something happened to you? I’d feel horrible for not coming along.”

Christoph glanced at the other three. “Then why did they come?”

“We couldn’t pass up an adventure like this, could we? Besides, we were bored,” Kate explained.

“Glad I could help you not be bored,” Christoph mumbled.

“These are also our last days together,” Ann said. “We might as well stay together.”

We all became quiet as we realized this could be our last adventure together. Although my brother could be annoying, I knew I would miss him. I didn’t think about the fact I could lose him, so many men had lost their lives in this war. So I followed him, in fear that this could be my last moments with him, and we found ourselves stuck in the middle of a forest. Not only would we be in trouble for not getting home on time, but also for trespassing. We

never did find the plane, but just other trees and even more trees. It wasn't worth the dare and now we were lost.

Crash.

A flash of lightning cast shadows every which way. I jumped about five feet in the air, not expecting the storm.

“Was ist das?” I exclaimed.

Christoph looked up at the sky, or at least as much as you could see of the sky through the dense overhang. “I don't know, I thought the sky was clear when we entered the forest.”

“Well it was lightning, that's for sure,” Wilhelm added. “A storm must have rolled in.”

“In the middle of the summer?” Ann questioned.

A cool wind swept through the trees. I rubbed my arms with my hands. “Not to mention this cold breeze. We need to get home.”

That's when I felt it, a drop of cold water hit my head. I looked up to find more and more drops of water begin to fall out of the sky.

“Oh great,” Kate sighed as she held out her hand, letting the water droplets hit it. “Rain. Could this day get any worse?”

She shouldn't have said that.

Rain came pouring down in sheets, filling the forest with mud. Lightning flashed about us and thunder shook the ground. I hadn't seen a storm this bad in a long time.

We started running, Christoph taking the lead. Even after getting lost, we still for some reason considered him the leader. Maybe it was just because he was the oldest.

My dress was soaked and my skin cold with the wind whipping through the trees. My dark hair was drenched and tangled. I was wearing sandals, unfortunately, making it hard to run. Mud stuck to the bottom of my soles and I nearly lost a sandal in a puddle. I wanted to cry. It was miserable and I had no idea how close we were to the town. For all we knew, we could have been moving further into the forest.

That's when we found it, a little cottage in the middle of the woods.

I had never heard of anyone living out here, I had always thought it was all wilderness. It appeared ancient, though, the wooden frame beginning to rot away, the mortar crumbling away, and pieces of the roof were missing. The storm clouds had made the area darker than it should have been for this time of day. It felt strange, almost spooky, as the grey light fell upon this broken home. Ferns and ivy had overgrown the walls, covering any siding that hadn't broken away. It was still standing, though, and it looked habitable enough. I had seen homes in worse condition after some of the bombings back home.

We ran straight for it, the stone pathway rather slippery but thankfully I didn't fall even as I thought I might. Moss had grown over most of it, which made it even more

treacherous. Ivy and mushrooms had taken over what was once a beautiful yard, roses and carnations still poking out in places but unkept and most areas choked out by ferns and weeds. As we approached the entrance, hoping someone there could help us, all five of us pounded our fists on the door.

“Is anyone home?!” I yelled. “Bitte, we are stranded and cold!”

There was no answer. Wilhelm looked into the cottage through the cracked stained—glass window. “There’s no one in there, doesn’t look like anyone has been around in years.”

“We need to get out of this rain,” Kate rubbed her arms. “It’s getting colder by the second.”

Christoph turned the knob to find the door was unlocked. Before he could step in, I pulled him back.

“You can’t just go in there, that’s trespassing.”

“No one lives here, besides we are just going to stay here until the rain ends. No harm in that.”

Ann sneezed. “I agree, Ren, we’re soaked and cold. There is no point of running around in circles through all of this. We should try and get warm.”

“Not to mention we still don’t know which way the city is. If we run father in the wrong direction, we will find ourselves in the middle of the forest when it’s dark and we won’t have any shelter,” Kate agreed.

I glanced at Wilhelm. He shrugged. "If there's no one in there, there should be no harm in going in."

I had a bad feeling about it, something in the back of my mind was telling me it was not a good idea. But all of them were right, we had to get out of the rain. There was something else there, too, in the back of my mind. Something familiar about this place. I shrugged it off and opened the door.

The cottage was even eerier in the inside than it was outside.

Contrary to the exterior, the interior seemed to be in much better condition. The walls weren't crumbling, the furniture was still intact, and if it weren't for the dust everywhere, I would say someone was here recently. But the dust said otherwise every step we took disturbed it. It made Ann sneeze and my nose also started to tickle.

It was dark inside, barely any light broke in from the outside from the lightning flashing outside. A stained glass window cast blue and red hues through the living room area. Wilhelm thankfully brought some matches, as he was almost old enough to be drafted into the war. He always seemed to be prepared, at least compared to my brother who was supposed to enlist in just a few days. He just had to do something stupid like this before he left. Wilhelm got one of the matches to light, and we found a usable candle on a small table.

Now that we could see, we found ourselves in the

living room area. In the corner was a fireplace and two couches. A giant rug laid on the floor, stains in the form of dark drops were splattered across it. The dim light made it hard to tell what caused them. A door led to a small kitchen on the left and on the right stairs led up to a second story. A few glass cabinets were spaced out through the living room, full of fine china and silver. I was surprised that the place hadn't been robbed, especially since the door had been unlocked.

“Who do you think lived here?” Ann questioned as she placed the lit candle on the table between the chairs and the fireplace.

“Probably some Hexe was exiled here,” Kate wiggled her fingers spookily. “And whoever comes here will be cursed for an eternity, as her ghost eats your soul.”

Ann frowned. “That’s not funny.”

“But it is strange, that this cottage is here,” I peered around. “And why none of us have ever heard about it.”

“Probably was abandoned long ago and everyone in town just forgot about it. This area has been blocked off since before the first world war,” Christoph explained as he sat down on the couch.

Wilhelm glanced around. “I wonder who did own it, though. I always love a good story.”

We all pondered on that thought as the storm persisted outside. The thunder shook the windows and I was

surprised they didn't shatter. Oddly enough, they didn't seem as broken as they did outside. On the contrary, they appeared in perfect condition. Rain still came pouring down.

I wandered around the living room, looking at all the china and silver the mystery person so many years ago collected. They were beautiful, something you would only see in a museum. Different types of flowers were painted on their edges and, surprisingly, the colors were still as bright as it probably was the day it was made.

The silver was also spectacular. Each piece was carefully engraved with flowers or animals on them. I remembered my parents having some silver like this before the war started. They sold the pieces to help with money issues we were dealing with.

Ann and Wilhelm stayed on the couch, watching the windows as the storm persisted outside. Kate and Christoph were both wandering around the first floor, which mostly consisted of this room and the kitchen. I watched as they went in the kitchen as Kate gently placed her hand in Christoph's.

I glanced over to Ann who was also smiling at this. I sat down next to her.

"About time," I said. "They haven't really talked and he leaves in just a couple of days."

She nodded. "I've been bugging her about it but she

just ignores me.”

“She deserves better than to have her heart broken,” Wilhelm mumbled.

Ann hit him. “That’s rude and you know it.”

He shrugged. “It’s the truth. He should have acted on his feelings a long time ago if he really cared for her. If he does it now he’s only going to bring her pain.”

Wilhelm was right, but I couldn’t help but feel bad for my brother. I knew he liked Kate, he had for a long while. He was just always afraid to hurt her. I sighed and leaned back in the couch. This wasn’t the time or the place. We needed to get home.

Christoph and Kate came out of the kitchen, smiling and laughing. Kate had her fingers intertwined with Christoph’s. They took a seat on the other couch.

“Anything interesting in the kitchen?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nein, not really. Just looked like an old kitchen.”

“Anything to eat?” Wilhelm added.

“Nein.”

We sat there and watched the rain hit the colored glass. There wasn’t any break in the rain and it didn’t seem to be letting up. The sun began to set and we were surrounded by total darkness.

“Well, we will probably be stuck here for the night,” Christoph stood up. “Wilhelm, do you want to help me

build a fire?”

“You’re going to make a fire in an abandoned cottage?” Kate questioned. “How are you going to even find dry wood?”

Christoph pointed towards a barrel. Inside were at least ten pieces of wood. “That should hold us up through the night, hopefully. Luckily Wilhelm has some matches and we should be able to find some paper around here. How about you three look for paper while the two of us start getting the wood ready?”

I glanced at Ann and Kate and they shrugged. I had no idea where to look for paper, but figured searching the drawers would be our best bet. I opened a few drawers to find nothing but dust and some utensils. There were some old tools and coins, but I didn’t see anything that could be used to make a fire.

Giving up on the living room, I decided to check the kitchen for any type of book. Opening up cupboards, I found more dishes and utensils. Whoever lived her must have loved to cook. In one cabinet, a large dusty book laid waiting. I grabbed it

“I found a cookbook, will that work?” I held the book up as I went back into the living room.

“Ja, bring it here,” Christoph motioned over.

As I walked over, I flipped through the book. There weren’t any pictures or drawings, this book was old. I

opened it up to a page. It was a recipe for a roast, but what kind of roast, I wasn't sure. Before I could read any of the ingredients, Christoph ripped the page out.

"Hey, I was reading that!" I yelled.

"It's a cookbook, we have plenty at home." He threw the paper into the fireplace. Wilhelm used his matches and started up the fire.

It wasn't long before we had a roaring fire going and we were all sitting next to the fireplace, trying to stay warm. Ann, Kate, and I tried to dry our hair a bit, not wanting to catch a cold. Mine had definitely started tangling. It hurt as I ran my fingers through, trying to straighten it out. I probably looked like a mess, but at least I was with my friends who wouldn't care. They didn't look too great at the moment either.

"Who thinks we should tell some scary stories?" Christoph grinned. "I know of a few."

"Nein!" both Ann and I shouted.

"We don't need to make this situation worse by scaring ourselves even more," Wilhelm added.

"I don't know," Kate smiled. "This could be our only chance for telling stories in an actual scary situation. It could be a lot of fun."

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

My heart felt as if it had stopped as we all stared up at the ceiling.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

That wasn't our imagination, there was something upstairs. It sounded large, almost human—like. It reminded me of the sounds my little brother made when he was running back and forth on the second floor of our house. I gulped, the feeling of dread spreading through my veins. “You all heard that, oder?”

“Probably just a rat. This place is old after all,” Christoph whispered.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp

“A rat doesn't wear shoes. Those were definitely the footsteps of someone wearing shoes,” Wilhelm said. “There is someone upstairs.”

The clomping stopped and we heard a loud creak that made me shiver. There was no evidence of anyone living here and we had been there for at least an hour, it couldn't have been a person. They would have already noticed us here.

“We should probably check it out, make sure it isn't some kind of bear or something,” Wilhelm stood up and pulled out his flashlight.

“If it's a bear we shouldn't go up there,” I exclaimed.

“Ja, we should leave it up there and stay safe down here,” Kate said. “Besides, I don't think it's a bear; bears don't sound like that when they walk. Those were definitely footsteps.”

“Either way, we should check it out. If it’s a person that needs help, we should do something, shouldn’t we? Who’s coming?” Wilhelm asked.

We all nodded, none of us wanting to be the only person staying by themselves by the fire. If Wilhelm was right, it could be someone who needed help. They could be trapped upstairs and luckily we came when we did.

We crept up the stairs, the wood creaking under our feet. My heart was pounding in my chest and I could hardly breath. I wondered what could be making that thumping noise, and whether or not it was a threat to us.

We got to the top of the stairs. Wilhelm used his flashlight to look around. The only thing at the top of the stairs was one door. I looked around at the dust on the ground. There weren’t any signs of footprints. We decided to check the room. Slowly, Christoph opened it.

The room was similar to the downstairs. In perfect condition if it weren’t for all the dust. Two small beds had their headboards against the wall and small nightstands stood next to them. There were some stuffed animals, a bear, rabbit, and mouse, on one of the beds. The other bed was plain. There was a closet to one side. the door open revealing clothes for a boy and girl.

“That’s weird, this looks like a children’s bedroom,” I said as I touched the wood frame of one of the beds.

“Why is that so strange?” Kate asked as she sat down.

“Because why wouldn’t whoever was living here take their stuff with them? If I moved as a child, I would have taken my stuffed animals with me,” I explained as I picked up the bear. It stared back at me with its black threaded eyes.

“That is true. Maybe they left in a hurry,” In an instant, she jumped back up. “Was ist das?!”

A rat scurried out from underneath the blanket, squeaking, and ran off to a hole in the corner of the room.

“It’s just a rat. That was probably what was making that noise,” Christoph said.

“Ja, because we already established mice wear shoes and walk around,” I added. “And as I was saying, this room is also strange because where is the parent’s room? This accounts for all the rooms in the cottage and I didn’t see any master bedrooms.”

We stood there silent, pondering on the thought. I knew I was right, that it was odd for a cottage to have a bedroom for children but not for the parents. The room was also large, larger than a bedroom usually was for children. It could have been easily cut in half into two rooms, one for the children and the other for the parents. I found it completely strange.

“Well, I guess the sound was just our imagination,” Wilhelm shrugged. “It’s stopped either way.”

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

Dust came crumbling off of the ceiling. We stared up at it, silent. There was an attic. What could get worse than a strange noise coming from an attic, I didn't know. All I knew is that I didn't want to go up there and whatever it was could stay there.

"I don't think that was our imagination, Wilhelm," Kate whispered.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

"I think we should go home now, I don't care if it's dark, we have a flashlight," I said.

Christoph shook his head. "It's still storming. It's too dangerous."

I pointed at the ceiling. "And that's not?"

He shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

"You can't be serious," Ann said before I could. "What if that thing attacks us?"

"Or what if it needs help?" Christoph asked. "We should check it out, I think I saw the entrance to the attic in the hallway."

"Christoph, that isn't a good idea," Wilhelm said.

Christoph eyed him. "But you are the one who said we should look up here in the first place."

"Yes, when I thought whatever it was was in here. The attic is a different story. The attic is a lot more dangerous."

“What,” he stepped up to Wilhelm. “Are you afraid?”

“Nein, I just don’t want any of us to get hurt.”

“But what if it is a person that needs help, could you forgive yourself if they got hurt?”

Wilhelm let out a deep breath. “Fine, but the two of us go up first to make sure it is fine for the girls. I don’t want them to get hurt up there.”

Christoph nodded. As we turned back to the hallway, I noticed something strange on the door. Indentations marked up the corner of the wood. “Are those ... Are those scratch marks on the frame of the door?”

Wilhelm shined the flashlight on them closer. “It appears so.”

I just stared at them, trying to figure out what could have made them. It looked almost like an animal, but the markings were too fat. They almost appeared to be made from human nails. Why would someone do that? What was in here that made a person scratch at the door.

“What could have made those?” Ann whispered.

Kate shook her head. “I don’t know, maybe a wild animal got in here?”

I wrapped my arms around myself. “I really don’t want to be here anymore, this place is giving me the chills.”

“Right. So we should go check out the attic,” Christoph started into the hallway. The others followed and I reluctantly did as well. He was right, if a person was

trapped up there, it was our duty to help them.

Christoph pulled down the attic door. The ladder came sliding down at us. Ann and I let out a little scream as we jumped back out of the way before it hit us. Each of us poked our head to look up at the dark, dank room.

“Anyone up there?” Christoph called. There was no answer.

“Maybe whatever it was went away,” I whispered.

Christoph shook his head. “Nein, we have to see what’s up there,” Christoph started up the ladder. “You chickens coming?”

I shot him a look, as did Wilhelm. He followed my brother up the ladder and after a few moments, they signaled to us that it was okay. The three of us followed them up the ladder into the attic.

There wasn’t much there, just a few books and a couple of boxes. Nothing could have made the noise.

“Wow, look at all this stuff,” Christoph started rummaging through the things. “Some of this could get a pretty penny back home.”

“It’s not our stuff, Christoph. Put it back,” I growled as I peered around the attic. I couldn’t believe we had come up here, it was creepy.

He waved me off. “I wasn’t going to take it, I was just commenting. Oh, look at this one,” he picked up an item that appeared to be a doll house. Ann and Kate started

searching through some of the boxes as well. I rubbed my forehead.

“Didn’t know this would be a cleaning party. Here I thought we were searching for that weird noise,” I said.

“We are stuck here, might as well check these things out. There are some pretty nice things. Look at this doll, I haven’t seen anything like it,” Ann held up the doll. It looked like one of the old handmade rag dolls children had before the turn of the century, it’s dress faded with time and her face needing to be repainted.

“That’s ...Creepy. We should really be getting back downstairs, I don’t like being up here,” I glanced around. Most of the things in the boxes appeared to be for children and I didn’t want to know why. There were tea sets, building blocks, all sorts of dolls and stuffed animals. It was a children’s haven here, if it weren’t for how scary it was.

Wilhelm nodded. “Ren’s right, we should be getting back to the fire. There doesn’t appear to be anyone up here.”

As we begun to turn back, Christoph started for the one box that stood out from the rest. A little blue box, about one foot by one foot by one foot. A perfect little cube. It was clean, untouched by all the dust that covered everything else in the room. It almost appeared to glow.

Christoph started to reach down for it.

“Don’t touch that, that isn’t yours,” I said.

“There’s no one here, I want to know what’s in it. Aren’t you curious what’s in the only thing here that isn’t covered in dust?”

I didn’t say anything, I knew he was right. I was curious. As he reached for it, a dark image appeared behind him.

The four of us gasped as we watched the image become clearer. It was a small little girl, coming up to about Christoph’s waist. She had a little dress on, it was blue, aged, and torn. Her hair was blond, matted, and tangled beyond repair. She looked like a doll that hadn’t been cared for in decades, thrown around in a closet never to be seen again. Her face was scratched, dirty, pieces of flesh seeming to be missing on her skin. Her eyes were blacker than the night that surrounded us.

And Christoph didn’t notice her standing there.

“Ch ...Ch ...Ch...” I tried to say something but fear left me frozen.

He turned to us. “Was?”

We all pointed at the girl behind him. He turned around and jumped back when he saw her. Christoph scrambled to where the rest of us were and stared at her.

Her head twitched sideways as she moved. As she opened her mouth, it appeared as if her jaw was disjointed from her skull. Like only a string of flesh was keeping it

connected.

“Don’t touch my box!” she screeched, her childish—sounding voice chastised us with whatever evil possessed her. She let out a terrifying high—pitch shriek as her body dissolved into a black mist which scattered in all directions and vanished.

We screamed. We screamed bloody murder as each of us hurried down the ladder, down the stairs, and towards the front door. Forget the storm, we didn’t care anymore. Whatever was in this cottage wasn’t worth the shelter from the rain.

As we got to the door, Wilhelm tried to open it only to find it was locked. He tried to ram it open but it wouldn’t budge. It resisted all the force that he put on it.

“It’s stuck!” he yelled as he kept pushing. Christoph pushed him out of the way and tried for himself. It didn’t work, nothing worked.

“There has to be another way out of here, another door,” I explained as I started for the other rooms on the first floor. There were none.

“What about a window?” Kate asked.

Wilhelm and Christoph nodded and grabbed one of the wooden chairs and threw it at the window in living room. It smacked into the window and bounced off, shattering the wood into splinters. The window was completely unharmed.

We all stared at the window, not able to comprehend what had just happened.

“How is that possible?” Ann whispered. “There is no way that is possible.”

“We’re trapped,” I covered my mouth, tears beginning to form in my eyes. I had never been so terrified in my entire life. This was something out of a ghost story. Nothing like this actually happened in real life, at least not that I knew of.

Wilhelm hugged Ann as she began to start crying as well. Christoph placed his hand on Kate’s shoulder and squeezed it. “We will find a way, don’t you worry. Everything will be fine.”

“How...” Kate began as she pointed at the table. “How did that get down here?”

We all turned to find the blue box from the attic on the table.

“Christoph, why did you bring that awful thing down?” I exclaimed, pissed that he would even think about the box when that girl was chasing us.

He held up his hands in defense. “I didn’t bring it down, I swear.”

“Then how did...” I began, but I didn’t want to know the answer. I didn’t even want to think about it. I rubbed my head, wishing that I had never listened to him in the first place. We were all going to die and it was his fault.

Christoph started towards the table.

“What are you doing?” the rest of us exclaimed.

“Was? I want to know what’s in it. What’s the harm of looking?”

“You mean like when you said what is the harm in looking in the attic? Then that creature came out of nowhere and attacked us?” Kate asked.

“We are all fine aren’t we?”

“Other than we are locked in this cottage,” I yelled, pointing at the door.

“Then we might as well see what’s in this box,” he sharply replied.

I cringed as he started to open the box, half expecting the ghost to reappear, the other half thinking we were just all going to die. He opened it.

“It’s cookies,” he stated. The four of us rushed over and looked inside. Sure enough there were at least a dozen ginger cookies inside. Christoph reached inside.

I smacked his hand. “What are you? Crazy? You don’t know where those came from or whether or not they are good.”

He glanced back down at them, like he was transfixed on them. “We haven’t eaten in hours, I’m so hungry.”

“So you are willing to eat from a box that appeared in the middle of the forest in an attic with a little girl ghost?” Wilhelm said. “Think these things through, Christoph, I can

‘t keep watching your back.’”

“What do you mean by that?” Christoph retorted, his face turning a bit red.

“This isn’t the first time you have let your ego get in the way of making a good decision and last time I had to get you out of it as well. Now here we are, trapped in a cottage in the middle of the forest with some type of demon ghost child screaming at us. You don’t deserve to fight for this country. You should just back down and be the coward that you truly are.”

Christoph shoved Wilhelm. “You take that back.”

Wilhelm shoved him back. “Make me.”

Christoph threw a punch at Wilhelm, but he dodged it. They started hitting each other when the three of us girls pulled them back.

“Stop it, now!” I yelled. “We are in a bad situation, you two don’t need to make it worse. If any of us got hurt, we would have no way of getting help. We are locked in here. Alles klar? Trapped until who knows when. So stop it!”

The two of them stared at each other for a moment longer, then shrugged us off.

“Fine, we will pick this up later,” Christoph said. Wilhelm just shook his head.

A crash of thunder shook the cottage, making each of us jump a few feet. I groaned. The storm wasn’t letting up,

not that it mattered. We couldn't get out of this cottage, or at least not yet. I hoped something would happen so we could leave, a tree crashing down, breaking the door down or a window. Anything, really.

"We should keep looking for a way out of here. The sooner we can leave, the better," Wilhelm said.

"Weren't there some windows upstairs? Maybe we should try those," Ann proposed.

I shuddered at the thought of going back upstairs. "But that's where that thing was. We can't risk going back up there, oder?"

"If it means leaving this place, I think we should try," Wilhelm switched his flashlight back on. "If we stay together, everything will be fine."

So we went back up the stairs. I really didn't want to, but, as Wilhelm said, there was safety in numbers and I wasn't going to stay by myself downstairs.

It was quiet. Eerily quiet, unlike before. We climbed the stairs. The wood didn't creak as it did before, the sounds from the attic were gone and I swore I couldn't even hear a rain drop hit the roof. The only sound I could hear was the sound of us breathing and my heart pounding in my chest.

Once we reached the top of the stairs, we opened the bedroom once again. It was the same as it was, eerie and silent. The beaded eyes of the stuffed animals stared up at

me as we walked towards the window. Christoph and Wilhelm picked up one of the small tables and tossed it at the window. It did the same as the window downstairs and didn't budge. Wilhelm punched it. Nothing.

"Damn it! Why can't we get out of here?" Wilhelm pounded his fist on the window again.

Suddenly there was crunching noises coming from behind us. There stood Christoph munching on a cookie. We all stared at him.

"Was?" he said, crumbs falling out of his mouth.

"You ate the cookie? What were you thinking?" I exclaimed. "You are the biggest idiot that I know."

"I'm hungry and I can't think when I'm hungry."

"You can't think ever apparently!" I yelled at him and rubbed my forehead.

He frowned, dusting off the crumbs on his shirt. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I felt my anger begin to boil inside. "It was you who got us lost, it was you who took on that stupid boy's bet, and it was you who said we would be fine in this cottage. For all of them, I told you not to. Why can't you ever listen to me?"

A cool breeze swept through the room, chilling me to the bone. It didn't feel just like cool air, but something not of this world. I turned to find the little girl next to the bed.

Her movements were jerky as she clawed at her own

skin, blood running down her arms. Her head twitched back and forth, her jaw appearing disconnected. I could see part of her skull as flesh appeared to be missing, rotted away with time. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't in fear of what she might do.

“Can't get out, can never get out. Can't get out, she will never let us out,” she repeated as she grabbed her head and pulled at her hair. Pieces of it came out and fell to the ground.

We signaled to each other with our eyes and started inching towards the door, making sure she wasn't following. She didn't move but kept scratching at her arms and pulling at her hair.

“Never leave, can never leave. Forever will go by and we will never leave,” suddenly her head jerked up. “Just one more sweet, that's all I wanted. Just one more bite.”

“Run!” I screamed as we all scrambled through the door. First Christoph, then Ann, then Kate, then me ... The door slammed shut behind me.

“Wilhelm!” I screamed through the door. I pounded on it. “Wilhelm!”

Christoph pushed me out of the way and tried to open the door. It had locked. We could hear Wilhelm pounding his fist against the door. Christoph kept trying to push it open but it wouldn't budge.

“Someone help! Let me out of here! Open the door!”

he called.

“Do something!” Ann cried out.

“We are trying!” Christoph responded. “Stop touching the doorknob.”

“There is no doorknob on this side!” he yelled back. “Kick it down! Please, get me out of here!”

Christoph kept trying but the door wouldn't budge. I heard scratching noises. I covered my mouth, now understanding what the indentations were from. This isn't the first time this has happened in this cottage, we weren't the first victims.

“No, get away! Please don't!” With that, Wilhelm screamed.

“Wilhelm! Wilhelm!” Christoph called. All was silent. Suddenly the door gave and creaked open to reveal nothing but the room. Nothing seemed to be disturbed.

“Where did he go?” Ann gasped. “What are we going to do?”

I shook my head. “I don't know, I don't see any trace of him here.”

“What are we going to do? We have to find him,” Ann began tearing up. “We can't just leave him wherever he is.”

I grabbed her by the arms. “It's okay, we will figure this out. Don't worry about it. We will find him.”

Kate pulled her close and rubbed her back. “He's

okay, it will be okay.”

Ann started sobbing. I peered around but I saw no trace as to where Wilhelm went. There was no evidence of him even being there. Everything was back to normal, even the table that they threw at the window.

“Christoph, the table,” I pointed at it. “It’s back to normal. It doesn’t even look damaged. Didn’t one of the legs break off when you threw it at the window?”

He examined it without saying a word. He had to have been thinking the same thing, wondering how it was all possible.

We kept searching around for any clues as to where Wilhelm had gone. My arms shook as I pulled back the blankets on each bed. There was nothing there. I checked the large toy chests but there was still nothing. Christoph opened the closet door, then quickly shut it again. “I think we should head back down stairs.”

“Why, what’s in there?” I asked.

“Let’s just ...go.”

Ann pushed out of Kate’s grasp and opened the door. Christoph thought about stopping her, but he knew she would have stopped at nothing to see.

She put her hand over her mouth. “Nein ...nein!”

There Wilhelm was, hanging on a piece of rope, knives piercing through his flesh, red liquid dripping down the handles. His blonde hair was darkened by the

blood from the incisions on his scalp. His eyes were open, lifeless.

It was the most horrific thing I had ever seen.

I pulled Ann back away from the closet and closed the door. We needed to get out of the room before the girl came back and did the same thing to the rest of us. Her body was trembling as I forced her to walk. Hurrying back down the stairs, we got away from the room and the closet where Wilhelm hung.

Christoph went straight for the front door, but it still wouldn't budge. I tried myself a few times but there was no way out. It felt like it was made of steel. Christoph pounded his fist on it again and again as Ann kept crying. There was no use, both of us knew. After a while, he gave up trying. He grabbed another cookie and came to sit next to Ann, Kate, and I. I thought about telling him to stop eating the cookies, but I knew it wouldn't have mattered. He would just ignore me, just like he had been the entire night.

He crunched down on the cookie, the sound echoing through the room. The storm was still going strong outside, thundering shaking the cottage and lightning creating shadows throughout. We stared at the fire as it crackled and popped. I watched as the blaze of fire burn bright, the red color reminding me of the horrific scene upstairs. The red was the same color as the blood running down his face. I rubbed my eyes, trying to un—see what I had seen

but it was no use. The image would forever be imprinted in my mind. I had seen a lot of horrific things through the past few years because of the war, but nothing as bad as what I had seen just now.

I couldn't believe what happened, I didn't even understand what happened. Ghosts weren't real, they were just part of stories told to little kids to keep them from misbehaving and going into the woods alone. There was no way any of it could be real. We should have listened to the stories and never have taken that dare. We should have never broken the rules. All of us wanted to be out of here. We all wanted to go home.

I couldn't sit still any longer. Standing up, I started to pace around. I was shaking, everything was happening so fast, I couldn't comprehend it all. Part of the cookbook that Christoph didn't rip out still laid next to the fireplace. I started to flip through the pages. There were recipes for stews, broth, potpie, the list went on. It looked normal enough, but something seemed off. The ingredients didn't make sense, I didn't see anything about beef or chicken. Instead I swore it said something about children. Did it mean lamb? I closed it and rubbed my head. I couldn't think straight anymore, I needed to stop reading before I started to make more things up. There's no way the cookbook had said children as an ingredient.

Coming back to where the others sat, I wrapped my arm around Ann. Her tears were dry now but she seemed

hollow, as if no one was there. Her pale skin was cold to the touch and I wondered if anything could warm her up again. She and Wilhelm were close, and if it weren't for the war, I think they would have gotten married right out of school. But being all for the military, Wilhelm would have joined the moment he could have, just like Christoph. But unlike Christoph, Wilhelm had better judgement and probably would have survived and made it back to Ann in the long run. They would have been together eventually, but now that would never happen. My eyes began to tear up at the thought. She deserved better than this, all of us did. Even Christoph.

If we stayed here, I knew, we would be fine. The girl probably stayed upstairs and if we waited it out until daylight, someone would come for us. I just hoped daylight would come soon, I had no idea what time it was even. Hopefully only a couple more hours and someone would find us.

Scratch. Thump. Scratch.

It was coming from underneath the stairwell. There must have been a basement that none of us knew about. My heart beat quickly in my chest. It couldn't be possible, there couldn't be another thing in this cursed home. I didn't know what was worse, this or the sound that had been in the attic.

Scraatch.

Basement, most definitely. I didn't want to think that,

though. I didn't want to find something worse than upstairs.

"Was ist das?" Kate whispered.

"Probably just some kind of machinery that is down there, like a boiler," Christoph answered.

"That's no boiler and you know that," I shot back. He munched on his newly acquired cookie.

"There could be another way out down there, a secret passage," Christoph said.

Ann shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself. "I'm not going down there. I just want to go home."

Scratch. Thump. Scratch.

"You woke her up, now you pay the price," a young voice said.

We jumped off the couch and turned to find a young boy standing by the door to the outside. He came to my shoulder, probably only twelve or thirteen. He wore dark shorts and a plain white shirt covered in dark splotches. It was half tucked in and he had missed buttoning a button by the collar. One sleeve was rolled up on his right arm, revealing deep incisions along his arm. It looked as if someone had cut out parts of his flesh, leaving the bone exposed. The same was found on his thin legs. He didn't wear shoes, his feet splintered and cut as if he had been running through a forest. His hair appeared to be lighter but matted with blood that ran down his face. His eyes

were a light blue, wide open, and I didn't see him blink once as we stood there.

“She's awake and now you must pay the price,” he raised up a knife crusted in blood.

We screamed and scrambled towards the closest exit, which was the door to the basement. The boy had blocked us from all of the other exits and we knew we couldn't stay up there with him. Our best bet was to lock him out of the basement, even though the sound had been coming from down there. One problem at a time.

Christoph quickly shut the door between us and the boy. We heard as the boy stabbed at the door, trying to get to us. Christoph pushed on the door, making sure he couldn't come through. After a few moments the boy stopped and no noise came from the other side. We didn't dare open it, in fear that he could still be there. Pulling out the flashlight, Christoph shined it down the stairs.

It was damp down here, the rain from outside leaking inside and flooding the basement. It smelt like mold and I could hardly breath. It was different from the rest of the cottage, as if it had aged faster. It was as if this was its true self. The stench made me want to gag, I could taste death down here. It wasn't just the mold, there was something else in here.

We stood there, staring down the stairs with the flashlight. Although it brought light, it still looked like a dark abyss down there. None of us wanted to go down

there but neither did we want to face that boy.

“What do you think is down there?” Kate asked.

“Whatever it is, I bet it’s horrific,” I whispered.

“Couldn’t be worse than that boy or girl,” she said.

“I wouldn’t speak so soon,” I mumbled.

Kate took a step down. I grabbed her arm before she could go any lower. “You can’t be serious, we should stay here.”

“There’s a boy with a knife out there. I’m not going back. As for the basement, there could be a way out. There is only one way to find out,” she started back down the stairs.

We followed her and stepped down the stairwell. As we grew closer, I noticed strange bumps in the ground.

“Wait,” I said. “What’s on the floor?”

Christoph steadied the light onto them. They appeared to be bodies. I covered my mouth. “Oh my God.”

None of us could look away from the horror we were staring at. I could make out at least five bodies at the bottom of the stairwell. Their flesh had been ripped off their bones, only chunks of it left. The bones were yellow, covered in flies and maggots as they fed on the rest of the meat. I realized that was what the stench was. I covered my mouth to keep from screaming again. I was sick of this place, I was tired with all the death we were finding. I wanted to go home, I wanted to forget all of it.

Something below us started moving. I froze as Christoph shined the light on it. It appeared to be human—like, dark wavy hair and black cloth draped across her body. She moved on all fours, creeping around like a spider. Her hair hung in front of her face. My heart beat faster as she tilted her head up at us.

Her eyes were black, yet glowing. She bared her fangs, growling. Red liquid began to drip down the teeth, as if she had just been feeding. I gulped, hoping we weren't next on the menu. Slowly I started to step back up the stairs. Christoph, Kate, and Ann did the same. Suddenly the creature bolted up the stairs at us.

We screamed and hurried back to the first floor. The creature was too fast though, and grabbed Kate by the ankle. It dragged her down the stairs.

“Kate! Nein!” Christoph shrieked and tried to go after her but I pulled him through the door and closed it.

Christoph just stared at the closed door in horror as we could hear Kate's screams “What did you do that for? I could have saved her!”

“Nein, you would both be dead. I had to save someone,” I said. “It was too fast, she was gone the moment it grabbed her.”

We tried to ignore the thumping that came as her body was drug down the stairs. The creature growled and we could hear its gargles as it feasted on Kate. Ann went to

the corner of the room and threw up. I felt as if I were going to do the same. I tried the front door again but no luck. It was still solid as a rock.

The boy was nowhere to be found. I didn't even find evidence that he was there, but I knew he couldn't have been a figment of our imagination. We had all seen him, we all heard what he had said.

She's awake and now you must pay the price.

What did he mean by that, I wondered. I pondered on this thought, trying to keep my mind occupied and not think about the two friends I had already lost. I had to keep Ann and Christoph safe and the only way to do that was to keep a clear head.

Christoph went back over to the box and grabbed another cookie.

I glared at him. "How can you be eating at a time like this? How can you eat those stupid cookies?!"

"I'm hungry, Ren! And stressed! And when I'm stressed, I get hungry."

I shook my head. "I swear, you are getting fatter by the minute as you eat those. You look chubby already."

He stuck his tongue out at me.

"She's right," Ann added as she had finally stopped throwing up. "You look heavier. I don't know how, but you do."

Christoph shrugged. "Probably just the lighting.

I glanced around. the lighting hadn't appeared any different than earlier. We huddled around the fire, praying nothing else would attack us. Christoph kept munching on cookies and I was surprised he hadn't run out. I didn't know how, but the box still appeared to be full.

"What are we going to do?" I asked as I paced back and forth in front of the fire.

"We wait until morning," Christoph sighed.

"How will morning fix anything? Will it change us being stuck here and what happened..." I covered my mouth, holding back the tears. Kate and Wilhelm were dead. For all we knew, none of us would make it out alive.

"In the morning, people will come looking for us and can help us get out of here. We just have to stay in this spot until then," Christoph explained.

I shook my head. "But they might come to us. The boy did!"

"But he's not here anymore is he? We just will have to deal with it if it happens. There is no point of worrying about it," Christoph took another bite of a cookie.

"We need to find a way out of here, we have got to find a way out of here," the anxiousness apparent in my voice as I started for the windows again.

"Und was? Go out in the storm?"

"Well it's safer out there than it is in here!" I shouted back. Ann started crying again.

He munched on the cookie and said nothing. I swore he was getting bigger but shook it off as me hallucinating with everything that was going on.

I rubbed my forehead, thinking of a way to get out of here. There was no way out. I smelt something warm, delicious.

Like ...broth.

“Do you smell that?” I asked.

Christoph nodded. “Ja, I do.”

Ann also shook her head yes. Slowly I crept into the kitchen. There, a large cauldron was being heated up by another fireplace.

Christoph stuck his finger in it and licked it. I looked at him disgusted.

“Beef broth...” he licked his finger again. “At least that’s what I think it is. It’s brown like beef broth.”

It smelt off though, a little different than beef broth. “Who did this though? It wasn’t here before.”

Christoph shrugged. “Beats me, but at least we have something else to eat.”

I rolled my eyes as I glanced around. There on the kitchen table was the cookbook. I thought it was still in the living room. Looking at the page it was opened to, I gasped.

“Was ist es?” Ann asked.

I pointed at the book. “The recipe ...It’s...”

“Tick, tock, tick, tock, the blood begins to boil,” two voices said in unison behind us. We spun around to find the boy and little girl standing there, holding up knives. “You woke her up, now you must feed the Hexe.”

We screamed, but there was no way out, they blocked the exit into the living room. Christoph pulled out his own knife and pointed it at the two children.

“What’s going on, tell us why you are doing this!” he yelled at them.

“You woke the Hexe up, now you must die,” the little girl twitched her head. “Or else we will all suffer.”

“What Hexe? What are you talking about!”

The boy’s head also twitched back and forth. “The Hexe that won’t burn. The Hexe who lives in this little cottage.”

My eyes widened. Everything made sense, everything about this place finally made sense. “Oh my God, I know who these kids are.”

Christoph looked at me as if I had gone insane. “Ren, what are you talking about?”

“Hanzel and Gretyl. This is the cottage where the Hexe would eat children.” Ann glanced around, also putting the pieces together.

Christoph shook his head. “That’s a fairytale, don’t be ridiculous.”

“We are going to be killed by two little kids that look like something out of a ghost story! I’m not being ridiculous!” I yelled back.

Hanzel and Gretyl started coming closer and we began to back up towards the pot. It was a stupid thing to do because the fire was burning hot. I felt my skin burn with every inch that I got closer to it.

“Christoph, what are we going to do?”

He looked back and forth at us and the two children. Without warning, he charged at them with his knife. Stabbing the knife at them, his hand went through their bodies, as if they weren’t of this world, yet their knives were real. They stabbed Christoph and pushed him into the boiling pot.

“Nein!” I screamed. The cauldron began to boil increasingly harder and harder. The bubbles covered his body as it heated up. Christoph’s body floated to the top, blood spilling out of his wounds. I covered my mouth, tasting the bile that was coming up into my mouth.

Ann grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the kitchen and towards the door. I didn’t know what the use would be, but we had to try once more. We turned the knob.

It opened.

We ran into the forest, the storm still persisting. We didn’t care which way we were running, we just wanted out of there. We just wanted away from that little cottage

in the middle of the forest.

That's when it hit, the massive bright light and echoing sound, sending us flying through the air and into the dirt.

"Ren, Ren! Are you okay," I heard a voice call me out of the darkness. My eyes flickered open to find my mother's face in front of me.

"Mother!" I wrapped my arms around her.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so happy you are okay," I could hear her begin to cry.

"I'm so sorry we went into the forest, we didn't mean to get lost. And there was the storm and the cottage..." I began.

She shook her head. "What are you talking about? There was no storm last night."

I stared at her, confused. I remembered a storm, there was no way it could have been my imagination. "Yes there was, it was raining last night."

"Nein, it was clear. We were bombed last night and a couple hit out here. When we found out that you and the others had been out here, we came looking for you."

I glanced over to find Ann with her parents. She looked as confused as I did. Was it all a dream? I looked around and found no trace of the cottage in the woods, just trash from the bomb that hit.

As I kicked through the rubble, I noticed a small little

blue box. I bent down and opened it up.

Cookies. The box was full of cookies.

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