

THE INVASION: A CHRISTMAS STORY

By Chloe Hawker

Violet tried not to be nervous as she sat in the lobby outside Zaniah's office. She hadn't done anything wrong, she reasoned. Well, nothing wrong enough for Zaniah to get involved. Had to be a routine meeting. Of course, Violet knew well that there were no routine meetings with Zaniah.

Zaniah's secretary, a little demon with a pinched face named Yildun, nodded sharply, and Violet swung open the huge, heavy doors.

This office probably hadn't changed in several hundred years, Violet thought. It was rustic and gothic at the same time, like a crypt with a fireplace. Violet wouldn't be surprised if the office had first come together in a crypt, actually.

The Higher One was sitting in a tall-backed velvet chair, her pale skin glowing in the firelight. Violet's strategy was to look intentionally unimposing, choosing a small frame and a short sharp shock of purple hair. Zaniah's strategy was the opposite; she chose to embody all her well-earned intimidation in her physical form. Even for Violet, a demon with more than a little power in her own right, the sight was unsettling.

"I take it your meeting with Sebastian went well," Zaniah said.

"Yes, ma'am," Violet said, dipping her head. "I told him everything you told me to. About how we fight together every thousand years, and what you told me about his son."

"Yes. His son. The little boy with the iron heart. Good. And you took payment for it."

"Of course."

"I would have expected nothing less." Zaniah's eyes looked at something far away before they returned to focus on Violet. "How old are you?"

Violet was caught off guard. "Seven hundred and fifty-three or so," she said, forgetting. It was hard to keep track.

"And no one has ever told you what all of this means? What happens every thousand years?"

"N-no, ma'am. I thought that was why you picked me for the job."

"It is," Zaniah mused, absentmindedly dragging a hand through her long, black hair. "I just find it curious. Violet, I think you could do a lot for me in this war. With the recompense you got out of our dear Sebastian and the trouble you caused there, I'd be very interested in promoting you down the line, if you continue to work the way you have."

Violet swallowed. This was a surprise. She never had a Higher One pay attention to her before. At least, not in a good way. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you. But—” Violet didn’t know if she was going too far. “Could you tell me? Why it happens? What’s happening now?”

To her surprise, Zaniah smiled. “Yes, I suppose you should know. You know that we inhabit more dimensions than humans do, that our beings touch more of this universe than theirs do. You know that there is limited effect we can have on them or their four-dimensional world. We can cast illusions and deceptions, but we can change very little, because our dimensions are too spread apart from the lower dimensions. Well, that distance is not constant; it is constantly changing, in a cycle that last approximately a thousand years, as man measures.”

Violet’s eyes widened. “What happens when the dimensions come together?”

Zaniah’s eyes went dark with hunger. “When the dimensions come together, the overlap is cataclysmic. Suddenly, all our deceptions and illusions become, in those dimensions as well as our own, real. The material and the immaterial, as man would see them, begin to behave in the same way. So in these times, we not only have to persuade or deceive, we can do the work for ourselves.”

Violet felt a jolt of electricity run through her. “So that knife I drew on Sebastian—”

“Was just as real to him as it was to you.”

Violet remembered the ribbon of blood that had dripped beneath the blade. She hadn’t conjured that. “The battles we must have won this way...”

“They’ve been many, and glorious. And they will number many more before this war is over. And you, Violet, will have the chance to fight in some of them.” The depth in Zaniah’s eyes suddenly vanished. “But to fight these battles, you need to know the story of the one—the only one of this kind—that we lost.”

“Lost? How could we possibly lose a battle this way?”

“Don’t be a fool. Ours are not the only higher dimensions interested in the dimensions of men.”

Violet frowned. “But theirs are even farther away than ours.”

“Exactly. So there has been only one time in our history that theirs have overlapped with the humans’ the same way ours are doing now.” Anger, fury that Violet knew would vaporize her if she sat in its focus, began to trickle into the Higher One’s eyes. “It was not so long ago. About two thousand years by the humans’ count, two cycles past. Then, we did not know it was possible. We made our preparations as the days grew closer, outfitted our strongest guards and prepared our assassins and commanding officers. But our calculations were off; we didn’t take into account the effect of the higher dimensions, crashing into our own. It began before we were ready to invade.”

Zaniah’s eyes were looking at something far away in spacetime. Violet felt as though she no longer sat in this crypt of an office but somewhere on the edge between the dimensions. “We

discovered the overlap had already begun, and we rushed to borders to begin the invasion. But the Shining Ones had beaten us there and created a great blockade around the edges of the dimensions. It was a battle like we had not seen in many millennia.” Zaniah’s voice was bitter. “When a few of us finally broke through, we discovered what it was they had been guarding. *Their* invasion had already come.”

Seething, Zaniah picked up a piece of paper from her desk and handed it across to Violet. “Have you seen this before?”

It was a painting of an animal house in the night, a brilliant star shining above it. A man and woman were inside with an infant. A few sheep herders gathered around them. “Not this one,” she said, “but I’ve seen others like it. ‘Christmas,’ isn’t that what the humans call it?”

Zaniah inclined her head. “This bright place, this thing the silly men called a ‘star,’ this was the edge of the dimensions, the blockade of angels. The dimensional overlap in those days was in a land called Judea, and it began here, in a city called Bethlehem,” she said, pointing the picture. “And this—this *infant*—is what that blockade was protecting.”

“But you broke the blockade.”

“A few of us did, yes. But you misunderstand. This was not an ordinary invasion, an influx of Shining Ones in the same way that we invade now. This child *was* the invasion. This single child. We laughed when we saw him, thought that, if this was all the Light could muster, then this war would be over before morning. But when we landed, when we tried to work our craft in that little town called Bethlehem, it didn’t work.”

“What do you mean?”

“This child, this infant that we laughed at…” Zaniah’s nostrils were flaring, and Violet felt the temperature in the office go up. She’d seen it raise a few degrees before when other demons were upset, but this was an increase of twenty or thirty degrees. “This was the Speaker Himself, become a human.”

The temperature in the room didn’t change, but Violet went cold.

“The very ground burned our feet,” Zaniah spat. “Water was like acid, darkness like the light of a thousand suns. We attacked everyone in the city, in the country, but they disappeared like smoke beneath our fingers. At night the very stars sang like the Shining Ones, so that even then, we had no peace.” She breathed deeply. “We were not at a complete loss—we could still tempt and deceive—but it was a brutal labor at every step. We would take a life or turn a soul, and suddenly, the Speaker-child would be there, turning our work to dust. And that hedge of angels didn’t stop, either. That overlap lasted for thirty-three years. They were thirty-three of the most brutal years in our history. We lost many, and gained few. It was a costly defeat.”

Violet’s ears were ringing. “So—the story they tell about Christmas—it’s true?”

“True enough. The humans twist and poke at it, of course, but it’s been annoyingly persistent. But even those who still believe it’s true have no idea of the scope of what happened then. The

natural order of things was totally destroyed. By binding Himself with those wretched creatures, the Speaker left something of Himself behind... Our researchers still don't understand it completely. But ever since then, too much of their dimension somehow exists alongside the humans'. And we cannot do the same."

But then Zaniah smiled. "A happy accident for us, though, that this overlap begins at 'Christmas time.' There will be no hedge of angels now, and in their season of light, the humans will find darkness they have not known in centuries. Now, our reign is free, and we will more than make up for our ancient losses. The overlap is wide and our hunger is deep."

Violet nodded. *But if so much damage was done before, what happens when they come down again?* "Why did we never learn of this?"

"Diabolical history is long and complex. This incident is unavoidable for those who serve on the front lines during times like these. But we avoid saying too much about it otherwise. To even say the Speaker's name is to give Him power, and we don't want anyone to think that our ghastly defeat in those days dooms us now. We have learned, and He has not. It is that simple. And that, in the end, is why we will win."

Zaniah straightened some papers on her desk in a dismissive gesture. "You'll receive your new assignment from one of my lieutenants in the next few days. Until then, have a little fun. Enjoy the greedy, bitter, angry trappings of the season." She flashed a black smile. "Merry Christmas."