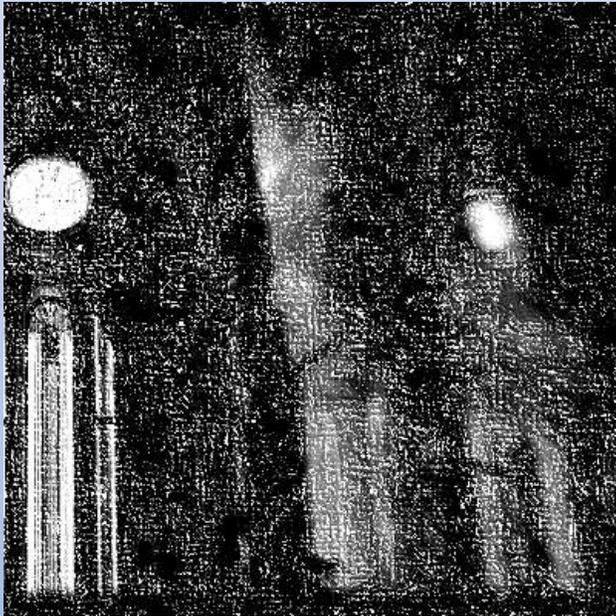


Alice put down her pencil. He might have taken notes, but she couldn't calm her hands down enough to write coherently on the pad. "So, what is it you do here?"



The Temple of Ultimate Evil

A Tale of Terror

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The building itself stood as a tower, stacked upon dark tower, constantly unfolding, forever changing. In the main entryway, polished braziers were enclosed inside hollowed out pitch-black columns. Their red fiery light illuminated most of the hall and engulfed the cavernous area in a brilliant, flickering glimmer. Illustrations of hideous demons doing battle with mortals danced on the curved ceiling in the glowing light while inky-black marble icons gazed down upon the stone floor.

Red and black have always been the colors of fire and destruction. The very harbingers of ill tidings. Dictators, madmen, and sociopaths have always found the color combination appealing. In the background, Alice McKibben thought she could hear faint screaming and the whimpering of those in extreme torment. The room smelled of brimstone and sulfur. The heat level was such, even a tropical plant would have withered and died almost instantly.

Alice found the whole place unnerving. As a news reporter, she was comfortable at plane crash sites littered with bodies, tornado disaster sites strewn with bits of broken limbs, bloody battlefields, and even Chinese prison interrogation cells. She'd visited all these places to get a story. But this place – this place – made her blood run cold. Her most horrific nightmares appeared more inviting, more friendly. Still a story was a story. And in these days of internet news and streaming live broadcasts, you had to go where you could get the story before anyone else.

The man, if you could call him a man, who crossed the floor to greet her was even more horrific than his surroundings. The flesh on his legs and arms were stripped of their skin, down to the sinews. He wore the tatters of a robe, a dark crimson shade. How it remained on his bones was a mystery. Still, his most disturbing aspect was the giant scorpion's tail rising from his back, the stinger floating lazily over his head. It seemed perpetually ready to strike.

"Good morning, Ms. McKibben," he announced in an unearthly, gravelly voice. "My name is Mr. Winterly. Welcome to the Temple of Ultimate Evil." He held out a hand. Well, you might call it a hand. It had six boney fingers which ended in sharp, dagger-like claws. Alice froze. Mr. Winterly waited and then put his hand down. "Yes," he muttered, "of course."

"Thank you so much for seeing me," Alice's voice was shaky.

"No trouble at all," Mr. Winterly grinned unnervingly, "We've always had an excellent relationship with the press. Has anyone showed you around yet?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I only recently arrived."

"Oh well, in that case, let me conduct you on a tour of the facilities myself. I think you'll find the experience fascinating."

"Mr. Winterly, is it?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind if I asked you a few questions before we begin?"

"Of course, my dear."

Alice's hands shook as she took out a pad and pencil. She didn't do this often, as it was rather old fashioned. But she noticed both her iPad and phone died the minute she entered the building. She was

also curious to see if the paper would burst into flames. As it turned out, it didn't. "What exactly do you do at the Temple of Ultimate Evil? Come up with world-conquering strategies? Undermine governments? Plot the temptation of holy men? Come up with new and ingenious ways to corrupt souls?"

"My, my, we do have quite the imagination, don't we?" Mr. Winterly's sharpened teeth flashed in the unpleasant red-lit room. It was the kind of effect a Hollywood producer would pay millions for in a horror epic. His yellow eyes turned bright as if backlit by flames. "No, no, nothing of the kind. Nothing so dramatic. And to set the record straight, Lehman Brothers was just a subsidiary."

Alice put down her pencil. she might have taken notes, but she couldn't calm her hands down enough to write coherently on the pad. "So, what is it you do here?"

Mr. Winterly snickered, "Why it's quite simple Ms. McKibben. Oh yes, it's all quite simple ... here at the Temple of Ultimate Evil, we train MBAs."