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3rd Place Winner

The Phantom of Thorngrove Castle

Dusk was nigh, a thin, vapourish chill mantling the drowsy hamlets clustered around the great ruins of Thorngrove. She could see the night rolling in, as if drawn by coal-black horses, mercilessly enveloping everything in its path. Her stale breath clouded the paned glass as she fastened the clasp of her cloak. The last of the sun's quivering rays was swallowed by the roiling clouds, leaving only the village's swaying lanterns as dimly glistening orbs to penetrate the festering darkness. Not a soul was in sight. Perfect.

She cautiously pried open the window, glad for once that she was small for her nine years, and slipped out into the thickening mist. The window slid shut with a muffled bang. She flinched. Hopefully, the noise wouldn't waken her baby sister, asleep in the trundle bed beside the window. The squalling would give her away immediately, and then how would she prove her brother wrong? He was lying, the little beast. She would show him. She would see for herself!

She started forward, confidence in her stride, but some inner quaver caused her to halt, glancing hesitantly from the cottage to the summit of Thorngrove. She doubted her endeavour for a moment for suddenly, the ruins seemed a long, long way off. With unprecedented difficulty, she managed to swallow and then pushed onward.

The wind was soft as she crept through the village to the bottom of the tor, but gradually the gale worsened as she left the cover of the hamlet's comforting streets. The storm clouds brewed dark above her, and the mist thickened into suffocating smog. She licked her dry lips. She must continue. She stood tall, trying to ignore the wind as it whipped her hair into shapeless strands, tore at her dress, and lashed at her cloak. She took a few steps, blown into a stagger by a

sudden gust. She spat hair from her mouth and crouched, deciding that crawling was perhaps the best option.

The rough, uneven ground was steep, even for crawling, and brittle. It slanted incessantly upward, exposing her to the brutality of the elements. Something sharp sliced into her palm. She cried out and clutched at it frantically, a trickle of blood spotting her dress. A thorn. Of course there would be thorns. What else would have caused the tor to receive its ominous name? 'Twas not a grove of ancient oaks or apple trees. Nothing grew for miles but crippled, cadaverous briars. The moon's ghostly grey rays shredded through the storm's murky mantle, casting an enormous shadow over her, before vanishing once more into the gale. She quivered, her eyes fixed on her destination, looming far above her -- Thorngrove Castle.

Stones rose up from the ground, massive stones which had long since fallen from the castle's outer wall. She stood as she approached, padding softly around the obstructions, trying not to think how they looked remarkably like gravestones. She could hear her heart pulsing. What if her brother were right? What if there was.... But no, phantoms didn't exist. They were the product of lore and folktales. No, her brother was just being knavish and spiteful and beastly, simply beastly. She shook her head to clear the thought. The boulders were the result of flawed stonework, not the markers of lost souls. A cold rain began, light droplets that hung in the air as if frozen in time. Her teeth chattered as she dodged around the last of the fallen masonry and dashed into the courtyard.

Gnarled vines of ancient ivy clung bitterly to the tumbled stone of the castle wall, shivering lifelessly in response to the icy gusts that accompanied the castle's new guest. Leafless trees clawed helplessly at the fog, sprouting through the cobblestones as if straight from the dungeons beneath. The spires of the castle itself were gaping with weathered cracks and mouse

holes gone awry. She burrowed beneath her cloak hood, attempting to slink inconspicuously across the courtyard. With a furtive backward glance, she pushed open the half-rotten door to the castle keep.

Up the stairs she went, her brother's words dancing vindictively through her head. "Don't believe me, do you? Thorngrove Castle isn't inhabited because of the phantom. She was a scullery maid, you see, and nobody payed her a bit of mind. Nobody even noticed when a knight brushed by her on the stairwell to the keep and knocked her down the stairs. She broke her neck, and her body lay at the base of the stairs for a hundred years. But even in death, nobody saw her. So she shadows anyone who enters the keep, mocking everything they say. For since she was not seen, she demands that she be heard..."

Blood pounded in her ears as she pressed to the curving wall of the staircase. She bit her lip savagely, her breath coming in cold gasps, her eyes darting frantically. She took another step and froze. A footfall sounded behind her. Her face whitened. There was someone there, someone following her, just as her brother had said! She jerked her head around, searching for the intruder, expecting to catch sight of a fleeting apron or perhaps a coif. Nothing but darkness met her eyes. Of course she would see nothing; 'twas the nature of phantoms to be invisible! Heart pounding, she took another step forward. Yet again, another footstep sounded behind her. She quickened her pace, scrambling up the uneven stone as fast as her legs could carry her. The footsteps only quickened also.

"I hear you!" she cried.

The phantom was without mercy. "*I hear you!*"

"I didn't do it!" she shrieked, clenching her eyes shut. "Leave me alone!"

But the phantom only mocked her, "*Leave me alone!*"

She reached the end of the staircase, only to find the entrance to the lookout blocked by a large oak door, too intact to move. She yanked on the door ring, heaving with all her might. Far from opening, it disconnected from the door and fell to the stair with a clash. The footsteps behind her ceased and an eerie clang of metal followed. A sword! The phantom was so vengeful that she had taken the knight's sword!

Diplomacy was no longer an option. She couldn't convince it to leave her be. She glanced frantically from the stairwell to the hopelessly heavy door. Run. She would have to run past it. She was small, young - she could do it. At least, she hoped she could. She plunged down the stairwell, screaming all the way. As she burst into the courtyard, she could hear the phantom screaming in anger behind her.

She had evaded it! She raced around the groping tree prisoners, out of the courtyard and into the stinging open air of the tor. Thorns tore at her cloak and boots and her small arms as she bolted toward the swaying lights of the village.

Gasping, she darted down the hill, the dying earth crunching rapidly with each step, the tor seeming to heave and roll beneath her. Her brother had been right after all! The phantom of the scullery maid *did* haunt the keep of Thorngrove Castle! It *did* follow anyone who entered, mocking anything said in horrible, spectral tones! And who knew what else it could do!

She covered her head with her arms, running...running...running...leaving the castle far behind, hoping beyond all hopes that Echo, the phantom of Thorngrove Castle, wouldn't follow her home...