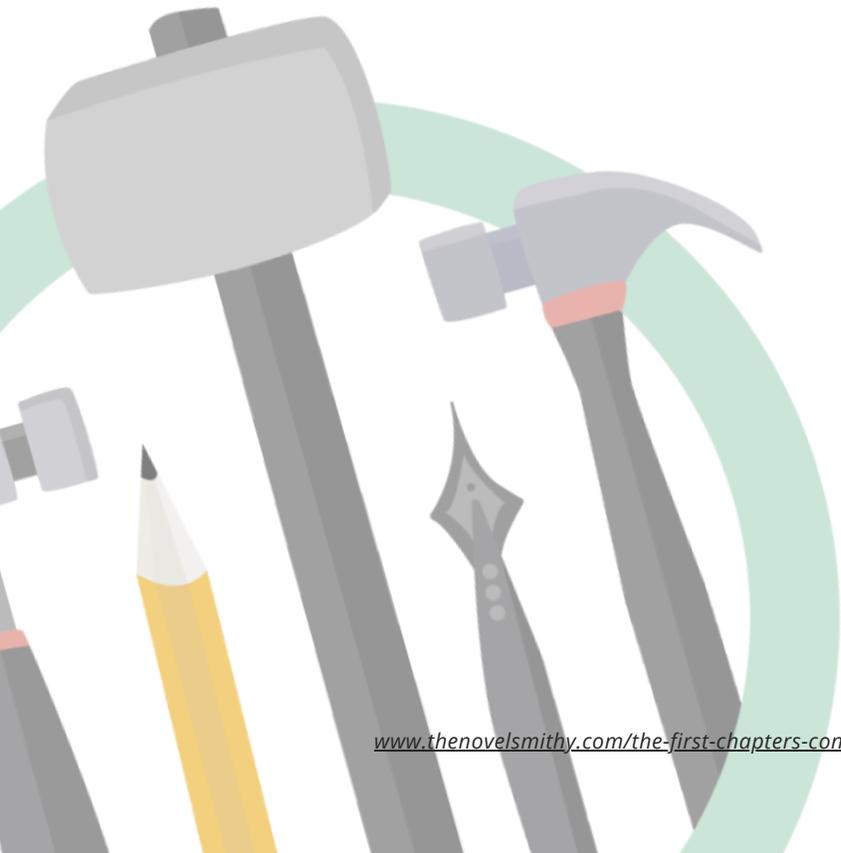


The First Chapters Writing Contest

Gloaming by Holly Ostara

(Winning Entry from 2019)



Gloaming - Holly Ostara

A superstitious woman with a PhD in physics takes a leap into the unknowable when she gives up Life to save her beloved grandmother's soul from an eternity in nothingness.

Chapter One

There have been many stories about the whippoorwill. Its call incites terror in some; some it sends to madness. The call of the hermit thrush rises and falls on integer multiples—octaves. The whippoorwill's call doesn't do anything quite so mathematically grand, but Harbingers understand patterns, too. Maybe it's the patterns that scare humans; repetition has a way of reminding people of things they'd rather forget. For Theogony, it wasn't the repetition; it was that she'd heard them before, and she didn't like to remember. It isn't that the Genus Antrostromus is unlucky—it's that the Antrostomus is there.

"Are you staying long this time?" Gran asked.

"A few days," Theogony said. "I just...needed a minute to breathe."

"Your father used to say the same thing," Gran said, absently. Theogony looked up, and Gran seemed to realize what she'd said a moment too late. Her smile became forced as she reached over to pat Theogony's hand, her fingers dry and rough against her granddaughter's skin. It was freezing and Gran's wool-gloved fingers scraped over Theogony's bare skin like sandpaper. Things always hurt worse in the cold.

"Never mind me, love. He's just on my mind a lot this time of year."

"Because of my birthday." Theogony's voice had come out softer than she'd meant it.

Gran gave a wry smile. "He would've been so pleased to see you born. Your grandfather certainly was, when your father was born." She sighed, shook her head as if to clear it. "So very like a Mulrennan, the both of them."

Theogony started to ask another question, but Gran beat her to it, and Theogony cut herself off again, disappointed. There was so much she didn't know—so much she wanted to know but had never been able to ask. But Gran always looked so sad whenever her family was mentioned that Theogony couldn't bring herself to ask. Not anymore.

Gran passed her the bag of bird seed and Theogony reached in, her fingers sliding into the seeds in a satisfying way. She curled her fist, pulled out a handful of seed, scattered some of it for the birds near their feet. There was a sense of peace unique to this part of the day, a respite from the eeriness that otherwise enveloped their land. She'd forgotten how relaxing it could be to sit and watch birds eat.

"You work too much. There's more to life than figuring out how it runs. You should take more breaks before you burn yourself out." Gran punctuated this with another toss of seed. The birds hopped around the corpse road and the graves beyond to get it, their little beaks snatching it up with pinpoint precision. Theogony liked precision.

Theogony frowned in thought. "I just...I feel like I can't rest until I know."

Gran muttered something under her breath, which Theogony would've sworn sounded like 'just like your grandfather,' but she couldn't be sure, and the second little tidbit of information, in as many minutes, left her stunned speechless too long to confirm it. Gran kept throwing seed, and Theogony followed suit, her heart still pounding, wondering what that had meant.

The gravestones in this part of the cemetery were old—probably why Gran sat here on Saturdays. She'd never loved anyone in these graves...not like the ones by the stream. Or maybe Gran got the same skin-crawling sensation over her whole body that Theogony did whenever she was by her parents' graves.

Gran made a valiant effort to change the subject. "I think I might spot a whippoorwill today."

A bird chirped moodily. Gran passed the bag back to Theogony again, her hands hard and calloused as they brushed against Theogony's own. She hoped Gran's arthritis wasn't acting up again. Since her stroke last year, everything seemed to be acting up. Theogony moved a little closer on the bench until their arms brushed and she could feel Gran's warmth against her.

"You still haven't seen one?"

Theogony remembered lying awake in bed as a child, hearing the creepy callings of a group of whippoorwills—like ghost birds, always chorusing their eerie 'whip-poor-will!' but never seen. They hadn't been seen here in decades.

"Today's the day," said Gran, smiling. "I've got a feeling."

Their voices were quieter than usual, in deference to the silence of sunrise. A robin fluttered into the mix at their feet and began eating. Gran hummed, picked up her bird diary from the bench and made a note by its entry.

It gave Gran something to do. There was that. Theogony could not imagine the loneliness of living out here alone. It had been lonely enough with the two of them, before she left for college. Would Gran come live near her in Boston?

She tossed more seed. The sun was rising higher in the sky, and the nuthatches and the robin had been joined by a pair of cardinals. Theogony pushed her hands into her pockets to warm them, letting Gran continue on as she relaxed into the warmth of the shoulder pressed against Theogony's own. She breathed in the crisp air.

"There used to be so many of them." Gran's voice scratched a bit—the cold air, probably. Theogony rested her head against Gran's shoulder, her eyes fixed on their collection of birds. "Devilish birds were everywhere when we moved here. I could barely sleep at night with all of them singing. Nothing like home, when all you had to worry about were fairies; at least they were quiet. I suppose the weather's a bit cold for them now, but I did hear one..."

"What?" Theogony looked up, startled by Gran's pause.

"Nothing." Gran looked over the cemetery with squinted eyes. "I just thought I saw someone."

"Who?"

Gran shook her head. "No one. Someone long since dead."

Well, it was a cemetery, after all. If one were going to hallucinate the dead, it was as good a place as any. Still, it was worrying. Gran wasn't going to have another stroke, was she? They could go into town Monday for a check, just in case.

"Maybe we're just looking in the wrong place."

Gran considered that. "Faye Johnson said she saw three in her backyard just last week."

Theogony neglected to mention that Mrs. Johnson was on the decline, and she lived five miles away besides. She had always taken anything Mrs. Johnson said with a grain of salt, if she took it at all, and suspected Gran felt the same, even if she never said so.

Gran patted Theogony's thigh, smiling fondly at her. "Listen, I found a box when I was cleaning out the attic last week. It has some things in it from your grandfather I thought you might want to read."

“Granddad? Really? I want to see it.”

“I put it next to the—”

Gran’s hand stilled abruptly, half a handful of seed still cradled in her palm. Gran’s eyes locked in front of them, past the birds and tombstones and faded silk flowers.

“Well.” Gran swallowed. “There’s that damned whippoorwill.”

There was a sudden, harsh winter breeze, or maybe it was just Theogony. She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling unraveled, and followed Gran’s gaze. She’d seen plenty of birds before, but the small brown one, black-eyed and speckled, was the first to make her uneasy. It blended into the lichen and grave moss growing over Elizabeth Smith’s (1670–1724) tombstone, only noticeable when it shook itself.

It stared right at them—right at Gran.

No, Theogony was imagining that.

Gran picked up her bird diary, making a checkmark next to whippoorwill. It was such a final checkmark, such a decisive closure to an era of bird watching. Theogony stared at the whippoorwill, unable to look away, that familiar feeling of dread she always got at home rising up in her like bile.

Then the whippoorwill began to sing.

Gran didn’t react, though Theogony felt her own pulse triple in time. It was so eerie, so creepy. She’d heard these birds singing her whole life, but never seen one—never watched one singing while staring right at her.

Gran tossed the last of her seed and stood, gathering her things.

“We could stay a while longer, if you wanted.” Theogony didn’t recognize the tense note in her own voice. “I don’t mind. And you’ve been waiting for this bird for years.” Gran laughed. “Theo, my love, I’ve seen my whippoorwill. There’s no reason to keep working once a job’s done, is there? And anyway, I’ve got to start us some breakfast. Eggs and sausage?”

Theogony nodded automatically. Gran tucked her diary beneath her arm and started for the house. Theogony tried not to notice the little limp from the arthritis in her knees. Gran disappeared past the yew hedge that gave their house some privacy. Theogony turned back to the bird, a single whippoorwill. The others had flown off. It continued singing, continued staring.

It didn’t stop until the kitchen door closed behind Gran.