

Mitchell climbed into bed after midnight and tried to force himself asleep. A jumble of red numbers paraded before him on the bedside clock: 12:51, 1:35, 2:43, 3:06. It was no use; he was wide awake. His body clock was still in Los Angeles where it was late afternoon.

Tree branches rustled in the winter gales drumming a tap-tap rhythm on his window. It reminded him of the tap-taps that would pierce the silence of his father's study while he graded papers. Mitchell had never been given the chance to submit one of those assignments; Dad had rejected his application to the course with a two-word explanation. "Course full." They'd never talked about it, but then again, they never talked about anything. No, Dad was more of a silent guide to the maze of Mitchell's life, speaking up only when telling Mitchell what *not* to do.

Exhaustion overpowered Mitchell and he fell asleep for a spell. He dreamt of the Vardø tunnel, a detailed return journey through the winding cavern. On his final twisting ascent, the roof crumbled, the weight of the sea too much for it to bear. Concrete chunks slammed down in front of him. His chest muscles tightened. A deafening low-frequency rumble thundered in his stomach.

He sat upright in bed, his heart thumping. The bottom-heavy roar from his dream had been from the dream, right?

He threw the sheets aside, rose from the bed, and strode to the window, chilling his feet on the cold floorboards. The wind outside swirled shade, snow, and shadow. He surveyed the pallid landscape for a clue to the sound's source, then opened the window and stuck his head out. It was a stillness as quiet as death. Had a snowplow driven by? He strained his eyes looking for evidence, but nothing matched that powerful, deep sound perched on the border of dream and reality.

He exhaled. Perhaps it was a bassist checking levels for the show as he got ready to rock the arctic. Mitchell unplugged the clock to disable its taunting red lights, returned to bed, propped his head on a stack of three pillows, and settled on the dream as the sound's origin. Sometime later, he went to sleep.

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The lobby and adjacent dining room were barren at eight-thirty a.m. His mind hazy from a lack of rest, Mitchell had walked out in a Napalm Death long-sleeve, slippers, and pajama pants; it didn't matter. Where was Dag? Where was anyone?

He found the all-purpose coffee-espresso maker, a staple of European travel. The tap of a porcelain cup against the metal drip tray seemed much louder in the silence.

Mitchell selected espresso as his beverage, and the machine obliged with a series of beeps, whirs, and gargles. While his mug filled drop-by-drop, he estimated how much he'd slept. Three hours, give or take, and now he was stuck between time zones more undead than awake. He'd drink this, then another, then listen to music to get his energy up.

He became aware of a presence—a feeling he was being watched. He turned toward the doorway and saw a female figure with unkempt long hair in silhouette. Mitchell's arm jerked, splashing coffee. A hot drop landed on his toe, but the pain was only moderate.

"Du," the woman, a silvering sixty-something who looked like she'd gone days without sleep, said. She took two steps toward him, her finger extended. The expression on her face matched the fishermen from yesterday's mural – vacant. Her name tag announced her as "Ingr_d," the "i" worn off over years of servitude. "No one comes here when it is dark," she said.

Mitchell suppressed his unease. "Do you work here?"

"Are you here...help?"

Sensing the woman's struggles with English, Mitchell switched to Norwegian. "*Jeg skriver en historie*," he said. "*Om hekser*." More of a podcast on witches than a story, but Ingrid didn't look like the podcast type.

Ingrid's eyes flared. "*Heks*," she said, and paused. "So you know the witches are taking us."

Mitchell's neck tingled. "What do you mean, taking you?"

Ingrid kept her eyes on Mitchell as her expression changed. It was calm yet devastated. Resigned to the horrible thing lingering in her thoughts.

Mitchell did not move for a moment, immobilized by the odd words. In the blink of an eye, she was gone. The hotel's front door bounced shut, and he raced out of the dining room, through the lobby, and into the frosty morning after her.

A car engine turned over and he raced toward the street then slipped on the snow, keeping his balance only with a cartoonish, arm-flailing effort to stay upright. A Ford sedan bolted away. He waved his arms hoping to catch Ingrid's eye in the rearview mirror, but the car continued down the street, then turned left in the distance.

Mitchell held his position on the road as the wind stuck icy daggers in his neck. *The witches are taking us*. He'd read of sightings of a phantom like Gan Finn, not witches. Not disappearances.