

A woman with dark hair and red lipstick is seated on a wooden bench in a dimly lit, rustic tavern. She is wearing a black strapless corset over a black lace dress. The tavern has stone walls, wooden barrels, and is lit by several candles. The title text is overlaid on the upper part of the image.

Edge of the World
Part One: The Tavern

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Roses Are Red... and Then They Are Dead

The air was heavy with the smell of old wood and damp stone. I found myself sitting in a dimly lit cave that resembled a medieval tavern. The shadows were long, and the atmosphere felt thick, dark, and undeniably eerie. I had no idea how I ended up there; the last thing I remembered was going to bed in my home. *This must be a dream*, I thought. *It has to be.*

Suddenly, I realized I wasn't alone. In the far corner sat a woman dressed like a cabaret lady from yore. Her clothes were black and red; she was wearing a satin corset and a full lace skirt. Her dark brown ringlets framed her pale face, her red lips set in an upward smile directed at me. She looked human; a doppelgänger of one of my best friends. Her physique and facial features were indistinguishable from Angie's, and yet there was an unmistakable supernatural weight to her presence. I knew immediately she was an entity, something far older and more profound than a mere figment of my imagination. I was sure now that this was neither reality nor a dream; I had been brought here in spirit, and I was going to find out why.

The Angie lookalike waved toward me, gesturing for me to join her at the corner table. I had no other option but to do as I was told if I wanted to know what was going on. I sat down and could feel her eyes on me, staring into my very soul. There was a brief period of silence that I felt I had to break.

“So, you look like my friend Angie, but for reasons I do not understand, I know that you are not her. I also know that I am not dreaming. Can you tell me what, hmm sorry, who you are?”

The woman maintained her stare as I sat on the edge of my dingy chair. Just as I was gathering the courage to speak again, my thoughts were interrupted by shrill laughter. The woman doubled over, her head rocking back and forth as the sound of her laughing filled the room, scaring the life out of me. She shook her head teasingly at my apparent nervousness and finally spoke.

"Listen to me, *hija*¹," she said, her voice steady and brooking no argument. "I'm going to tell you something, and I don't want you to fight me on it. We both know how people are: their mannerisms, their expressions; it's all just a mask for something else. You know I am not your friend. Most people would be scared. But you? You'll be alright, ²*chérie*."

I was still lost because, although she spoke, she made no effort to answer my questions. She sounded like Angie, too, though she had an accent, maybe Spanish? She spoke to me and I understood her, even when she used French words here and there. I wished I could remember more of my high school foreign language classes. I

¹ daughter, in Spanish

² dear, in French

was yanked from my thoughts when she spoke again; I guess my face was as confused as my mind, because this time she offered a little more context and fewer speaking in riddles.

“You know who I am; we’ve met before. I look like your friend Angie because this is a form that is familiar to you. You can be open to all of this. I may come from a dark place, but I have light to give you in return,” she said, gesturing to the tavern. “You are right; I am not human. I was once a woman, many moons ago, when I came from Granada to France to work in a *cabaret*, and now I am this spirit that protects your friend. ¿*Vale*?³ My name is Carmen. *Enchantée*⁴, Isabella!”

Soon after, she came to my side of the table and hugged me, precisely three times. I had no idea why, but I hugged her back. I felt a sense of *déjà vu*, as if this had happened before. I wasn't afraid of her at all for reasons I couldn't explain; I just wanted to know what she knew. Once more, she read me like a cheap paperback in a dusty library and shook me out of my reverie.

“That’s not important now, Isabella. We should go straight to the point; let us focus on what you came here for.” She sounded stern and imposing, never breaking her straight posture on her chair. This was clearly not a brunch with friends over mimosas.

She then gestured to the table, where a selection of items had been placed: a red rose bouquet, an *littala*⁵ candle holder (very similar to the ones I had in my Helsinki

³ ok, in Spanish

⁴ pleased to meet you, in French

⁵ a well known Finnish glass design brand

apartment), a champagne flute, and, very out of place, a can of *guaraná*⁶. It was my favorite soda growing up in Brazil and I had no clue how she got a can here. Carmen served me some *guaraná*, began drinking her champagne, and then gestured for me to drink from my own glass. Upon closer inspection, I noticed it was not a glass but a larger candle holder instead. I scrunched my nose as I saw a piece of candle wax floating atop the sweet, sparkly drink. As I reached for the piece of candle and flicked it away, Carmen spoke again.

“Just drink it; it is good for you. It will bring you the luck and clarity that you need. You came here looking for those, right, *hija*?” Then she laughed in that high pitch again, making my ears ring. She continued drinking, pausing only to speak here and there.

“*Mira*⁷, *hija*, as my drink is almost over, I’ll soon overstay my time here. That’s why we both need to drink; we share our energies and help each other to be stronger. Neither of us should stay here for long.”

“I feel I’ve stayed here far too long already, to be honest. And yes, who doesn’t want clarity and luck? I need this to make more sense; why are you helping me, Carmen?”

“You are a good friend to my *hija*, Angie. This is my way of saying thanks for your friendship. You both share the sight of the Edge of the World. In different ways. ¿*Lo entiendes*⁸?”

⁶ a popular Brazilian soft drink made from the guaraná plant

⁷ to look, in Spanish

⁸ do you understand, in Spanish

I was confused, but I thought about all the times throughout my life that I had sensed things others didn't. Angie and I spoke sometimes about those supernatural experiences, but we were never so specific about traveling to other dimensions or having familiar spirits. I simply agreed that I understood, since Carmen said our time was limited.

"Yeah, I think I do understand on some level. What else do you want to tell me before you leave? I see your drink is down to its last sips, and so is mine." As I finished my question, Carmen pointed to the table and stood up. I looked down to find a set of written instructions.

"Don't worry, Isabella. They will make sense when the time is right. Now we must go; it's too dangerous for your body if your essence stays here too long. *C'est terminé*⁹. *Au revoir*¹⁰, *mi hijita*¹¹."

She turned her back and disappeared into a dark corner of the tavern. The candle burned down to its wick, the red roses were dead, and my glass of guaraná was empty. I grabbed the paper with the instructions I could not read. Everything looked blurry and scrambled. They made no sense at the moment, but the urgency was clear: I had to leave soon. The discomfort I felt in that place increased tenfold, and just when I thought I how was I supposed to find a way out, a weird creature approached the table.

⁹ I am done, in French

¹⁰ goodbye, in French

¹¹ my little daughter, in Spanish

The Long “Road” Back

As if this sort of lucid dream world sensed my awakening consciousness and urge to leave, the tavern dissolved. Suddenly, a monster appeared. It was a hulking, as tall as a tree, half-human creature with melted skin that looked wet and heavily scarred, almost falling off the muscle in places. Although the creature looked hideously ugly, I knew it meant me no harm. Why? Just a strong feeling. Its widely set brown eyes reminded me of a grazing cow before being taken to slaughter. It had some unspoken innocence that cancelled out its disturbing other physical features. While I stared at its monstrosity, it stared back at me and then began moving away, disappearing into the smoky, shadowy void left behind by the tavern. I scrambled to follow, calling out in a hurried, worried voice.

“Hey, where are you going? Should I follow you? Can you hear me?” The creature moved forward without looking back or answering. It felt like I was watching a live-action version of a *Dungeons & Dragons*¹² cartoon, full of cryptic, senseless characters that only fostered confusion almost to the very end of the story. I had no choice but to abide by the only message I actually understood: *leave*. As the creature moved ahead, it shoved me through a labyrinth of cold corridors and heavy doors. I was breathless, trying to keep up with my guide. After what felt like a half-marathon, we suddenly

¹² animated tv cartoon series that originally ran on American CBS from 1983 to 1985

stopped short; so short that I almost bumped into my companion. It couldn't talk, but it growled in clear discomfort at my proximity. I gave it a small, apologetic smile, which seemed to mean nothing to appease the situation; the creature simply turned its back again and gestured for me to look at where we were.

We were trapped at the end of the path. It was a round room, as dark as the tavern. There were huge wooden doors, each fastened with iron hinges and a sturdy copper doorknob. By the time I looked back, my guide was already gone. I was alone, but I knew the only way out: I had to choose a door.

I had no idea which one to choose. No one had told me anything. *Was I supposed to choose based on a vibe? What if I chose wrong?* Those were the thoughts that I kept ruminating non-stop. My time was running out and I had to act on it. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and reached out to feel the cold touch of the doorknob in front of me. I burst through the threshold, feeling like my whole body disintegrated and was put back again in a split second. Before I could make sense of what happened to my body, I found myself in my hometown across the Atlantic Ocean.

My whereabouts came quickly to me because I recognized the familiarity of the statues, the trees, and the smell of fruits and vegetables from the farmers' market in the central park. That place used to be one of my old hangouts in what felt like a past life. My friends Marcie and Lala were there, sitting on a red-and-white checkered picnic blanket, eating caramel popcorn and drinking *mate* tea. Their faces felt warm and familiar. I could hear their joy when they saw me, but I knew this wasn't where I should be. It was a projection of nostalgia; the love I have for them and our friendship. I couldn't stay

because I didn't belong there anymore. This was only a slice of my past life, frozen in time. There was no time for me to say anything, so we hugged and I waved them goodbye. As I stepped away, leaving them covered in sunshine and taking my *saudade*¹³, the scenery shifted. I was back in the passageway from before. The door I had opened vanished in a puff of smoke; once chosen and left, a door could not be opened again.

I had to keep moving, catching glimpses of my life like snapshots. I opened a door to Stockholm in Sweden, thinking that maybe I was at least back on the right continent. Walking the narrow, cobbled streets of Gamla Stan¹⁴ made me happy. I saw a garden near the King's Castle full of yellow daffodils, the smell of spring in the air. I remembered posing here for a picture the first time I visited Stockholm with Kristoff when we were just dating. We had shared a scarf on a bench because although it was already April, the weather was much colder than in Spain where I was living at the time and I forgot to dress warmer. I remember his sweet embrace and that I could stay here in this memory so much longer. But though I wanted to stay, the ruminating thoughts returned: I did not belong in this vision either. Back I went to the maze of doors.

It was a strange feeling; knowing you are dreaming and not dreaming at the same time. I had a magical awareness that these were the doors of my perception, leading to places that meant something to me. I realized that if I could bend space and time in this "Edge of the World," I could travel faster. So, with a plan in mind, I tried something else.

¹³ The feeling of longing for someone in Portuguese

¹⁴ Old Town in Stockholm, Sweden

The next door brought me to Tallinn in Estonia. I stepped through with my eyes closed; and when I opened them, I saw the Medieval Wall and the Nun's Tower. I felt so much lighter, so light that I realized a murder of jet-black crows was flying beside me... because I was also flying! I felt elated not only for flying, but because I also loved crows all my life, a secret dream to flying and befriend them was always in my mind since childhood. This city was beautiful and the birds flying next to me gave me a feeling of joy beyond the one I felt in real life when visiting for poppy seed *pullas*¹⁵ and frothy cappuccinos in October rust misty afternoons in the Old Town. This was amazing but it wasn't my *home*. I sadly left my feathery friends there and tried coming back for another door. I wonder why crows came to me. I always loved them, they are my favorite birds and it has always been a dream to befriend one of them. Maybe another wishful thinking making into something that looks real in this strange place.

I began taking shortcuts, flying over forests to bridge the distance. I saw the stone castle in Hämeenlinna and the colorful houses of Porvoo. I was getting closer and closer to my actual destination because I was in Finland now. My crow friends returned, and their presence reassured me like familiars to a witch. Maybe they are more than wishful thinking. Maybe my thoughts of parting ways with them making me sad brought them back. My reasoning was interrupted when my dark colored friends started cawing louder to call my attention. From high above, I finally saw it: my apartment in Helsinki. I entered through the open living room window, knowing I had to get to my bed to wake up.

¹⁵ A sweet kind of buttery bread

But something was wrong. This was *almost* my place. It had my dachshund trinkets and our Lego flowers, but this place was twice as big as it should be, and my family was there waiting for me. It was a vision of the future, not the present. They weren't the anchor I needed to return. I dodged their questions about the touristy itineraries of the day and if I wanted more coffee in the kitchen because there was a loud noise piercing through the conversation. I then noticed a large black and grey crow pecking furiously at the windowpane for my attention. That was the sign for my way out. I took one last look at the joy of that future and stepped through the window to the outside. Instead of flying into the wide blue sky along my smaller guides, I was back in the dingy hallway. Three doors remained.

I had to focus harder. I imagined the warmth of my real bed, the amber light from the lamps, the smell of lavender fabric spray on my duvet, and the prayers I learned from my grandmother and recited without fail every night. I pictured Kristoff covering me with a blanket and whispering, "*rakastan sinua*¹⁶." I held that thought deep in my heart and opened the door.

¹⁶ I love you, in Finnish

The Awakening: Figuratively and Literally

The transition has to be nearly complete because I have this feeling of urgency that keeps gnawing at me. I hoped I had just arrived at my final stop. I was now in my kitchen; not the vision kitchen from moments ago,, but the exact one I live in. As I came closer, I felt the need to sit at the table. I saw a setup for a real brunch this time: slightly burned toast, a mug of coffee and milk filled to the brim, and a slice of dry chocolate cake. I had an urge to take a bite of the cake when I heard a familiar voice.

“I’m still making your eggs; shouldn’t you start with them first?”

It was my Kristoff. I looked at him and, with a smile and a wink, I grabbed a piece of the cake anyway. He shook his head, jokingly disapproving of my bad breakfast antics.

“A bit dry, but good cake, Kris. You’re getting there,” I said after a mouthful, followed by a gulp of the coffee he had made.

“I’m done with the eggs. Sorry they look a bit rubbery...” he said in that soft baritone voice of his. “...I just wanted to give you some rest. You needed sleep and I needed cooking practice. Maybe an 'A' for effort?”

I laughed at the eggs that looked like tiny pieces of yellow rubber on my plate. “It’s okay, *amor*¹⁷. Thank you for taking care of me...” and I started eating the eggs. Once Kristoff turned his back, I felt like I was floating; not flying as before, but easing off the dream

¹⁷ my love, in Portuguese

hazy state I was in. My husband was anchoring me back to everyday life. Soon my eyes blurred, the kitchen turned to thick fog, and I heard his voice again.

*“Huomenta”*¹⁸, sleepyhead. Glad to see you are joining me back in the world of the living.”

I rubbed my eyes, the sensation of my own bed finally returning to my limbs. As the tavern and the monstrous guide and my feathery friends faded into memory, I held onto the message Carmen had left me. It was a message of positive energy and strength, with the promise that everything was going to make sense... when the time is right.

¹⁸ good morning, in Finnish