**The Vigil Guard**

C.S. Vance

“There are seven dead soldiers in the wall.”

“Excuse me?”

Lily lifted her gray eyes to Heather and repeated, “There are seven dead soldiers in the wall.”

Heather raised an eyebrow, then bent down to bring her gaze level with Lily’s. “That’s an unusual story,” she said. “How did they get there?”

“My dad said that my great-great-grandfather put them there, and that’s where they have to stay.”

“I see,” said Heather, narrowing her eyes in a conspiratorial smile, “and do their ghosts roam the halls at night?"

Lily turned back to the paisley wallpaper and sighed, “That’s what Sarah asked, too. But then she understood.”

Heather followed Lily’s gaze to the wallpaper, then froze. A dark, rusty liquid swelled in boils beneath the swirling pattern. As she watched, the boils burst through the paper and the liquid ran in clotted rivulets down to the baseboards. Heather opened her mouth to scream, but only air escaped.

“I said, do you like it?”

Heather started at the sound of Lily’s tinkling voice. She blinked, and the liquid vanished.

“Sarah liked it. My great-grandmother picked it out. It’s silk.”

“Oh,” Heather heard the thin rasp of her voice and cleared her throat. Her hands trembled. “It’s beautiful,” she said, examining the delicate paisley scroll that repeated down the length of the hall. She drew a tremulous breath, then turned to Lily with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, “Will you show me the playroom? We can play a game before dinner.”

Lily looked up at the window, curtains drawn against the shaded courtyard. “I want to play outside,” she said.

“You know you can’t go outside. Your sun allergy will put you in the hospital. Come on,” Heather held out her hand.

Lily turned from the window and stared at Heather’s open palm. Lines of fortune creased the surface and pale blue veins ran beneath the thin skin at the wrist. She looked up at Heather’s face with a china-doll smile and placed her porcelain hand in hers.

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Heather sat at the desk in her room on the third floor, examining her latest paycheck. *Pay to the order of—Heather Lee’s Au Pair Service*, she read, *Two thousand dollars*. Heather opened the center drawer and placed the check on top of the stack of paystubs—each identical to the last, each dated one week apart.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Heather stiffened and glanced at the clock—11:45pm. The same time every night. She shrank into her chair, switched off the desk lamp, and waited.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The sound moved down the hall, the steady tread of boots in formation. The footsteps grew louder, then stopped just outside her bedroom door.

Heather’s heart pounded. She closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths. *Two thousand dollars a week.*

As if on cue, the scratching started—a tentative etching at first, then louder and more vigorous as the sound traveled up the stairs and down the hall. Heather envisioned claws scraping the floorboards, ripping through the wallpaper, and shredding the door across the hall. She pressed her hands to her ears… *Two thousand dollars a week.*

A minute later, the hall fell silent.

Heather waited until the clock read 12:01am, then crawled into bed, pulled the blanket over her head, and counted sheep until dawn.

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When Heather opened the bedroom door in the morning, she squinted against a sunbeam that penetrated a crack in the curtains at the end of the hall. Her eyes followed the light as it stretched across the floorboards. The door across the hall stood intact, the wallpaper unscathed. She caught a glint of metal on the floor and leaned over to inspect the object. A button shimmered through the dust motes, engraved with a military insignia and the motto *Vigilamus pro te.* Heather picked it up, turned it between her fingers, then tucked it in her jeans pocket.

Lily greeted Heather at the breakfast table with a cherubic smile, “Morning Heather, what are we doing today?”

“First, we have your math lesson.”

Lily frowned.

“But afterward … coloring?”

Lily clapped.

Heather laughed and poured a cup of coffee. She yawned, retrieved the button, and held it out to Lily, “I found this outside my room, do you know what it is?”

Lily glanced at the button and shrugged, “Sarah used to find those, too. Can we go outside today?”

“Lily,” Heather sighed, tucking the button back in her pocket, “you know we can’t play outside.”

“I know,” Lily stared into her cereal, poking at the sodden flakes with her spoon.

“Do you want to bake cookies?”

Lily brightened and smiled.

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Heather peered out her bedroom window and saw a shadow move across the dark courtyard below. She looked closer and recognized the shape of a girl in a long nightgown—Lily.

Heather tore down the stairs and out into the twilight. The sun had just dipped below the horizon and purple gloaming lingered over the mountains. “Lily!” she cried, running across the cobblestones. “Come back inside!”

Heather stopped short. Lily stood rigid, eyes glued to the horizon. She made a slow turn to face her. “Sarah worried, too,” she said, “but the sun is gone now.”

“It still isn’t safe,” Heather reached for Lily’s arm, but the girl jerked it away.

“Sarah’s gone now, too,” said Lily. As twilight faded to night, the girl closed her eyes. When she opened them, the gray irises glowed like twin moons.

Heather gasped.

“It isn’t safe,” Lily mimicked in a twisted caricature of her tinkling voice. Her face grew stony, “The soldiers can’t protect you now.”

Heather gaped as Lily’s blonde hair shriveled to wisps of gray and her fingernails morphed into pointed talons. Pustules formed on her lips, and she opened her mouth in a hoarse intake of breath, revealing rows of dagger-like teeth.

*Vigilamus pro te*, Heather realized. *We stand guard for you*.

Lily fixed her glowing eyes on Heather and lunged.