

*Stephanie Rubright*

### **The Last Visitor**

A black mass fills the hallway, its tattered cloak brushing against walls to leave a fresh, familiar stench in its wake. The heavy rotting odor saturates the space, the smell routine to the staff. It passes by a woman, scrubs stained with blood. Her seasoned eyes have seen its work, but the artist goes unnoticed. As it drifts down corridors, the bundle of shadows do not touch the ground, though its large instrument drags behind. Moving, its dark tendrils reach across the hall until it pauses in an open doorway. Inside, a steady sound of beeping cuts through the silence, the message clear and cruel. A child lies on a bed, more bone than flesh. Reduced to melted eyes and blistered limbs, It looks more human than she. The fluctuating figure hovers into the room, consuming heat and replacing it with a bitter chill. A bony hand materializes from the umbral cloud, reaching out until it grips scorched flesh; not with malice, but with pity. It fills the lone chair by the bed, accompanying the tangle of raw skin and burnt hair. Its touch engulfs her, jarring like a plunge into wintry water. She exhales a noise, a dim grunt, and it hears elation. The periodical beeping shifts into one prolonged tone. The skeletal grasp frees her from the fire, and she relishes in the relieving embrace of Death.