Antler Guy Saga- Original Format
by erinnightwalker

Summary

Its hard, living in suburbia. Its harder when your neighbor is an eldritch abomination.

This is the original raw text of my Tumblr posts about Antler Guy and Neighbor Steve. Enjoy.
I have the feeling that the families get along great except for Steve. Like, the wives are baking (questionable) brownies together, the kids are playing together, Antler Guy occasionally takes Son and Timmy to school (no car, just carries them in huge swinging strides through a nexus of ungodly sights in a swirling netherworld shortcut. Sometimes they stop for McDonalds). Hell-wife gave them a potted Audrey Jr., Steve’s wife (who I now christen Sharon) gave them a begonia.

One time Steve tries throwing holy water but all Antler Guy does is thank him, saying that no, Antler Guy isn’t Catholic but it’s the thought that counts, he is so kind to water his creeping deathshade vines regardless.

For Christmas Antler Guy gives Steve a case of ammunition. To be funny/sarcastically mean Steve gets Antler Guy the world’s most hideous Christmas sweater, singing light-up reindeer included. He immediately regrets it because not only does Antler Guy love it and wears it for several months, it will never need batteries because Antler Guy powers it with his own eldritch aura.

When they come back from a holiday to Hawaii, Steve is horrified to find out Sharon bought them matching Hawaiian shirts. He is even more horrified that his wife means it that if he doesn’t wear it he will forever sleep on the couch.
Chapter 2

What drives Steve up the wall and down the other side is how... normal... everyone treats the Abominations. (Yes, that is their last name. No, it is not a joke. Son was asked his last name for the standardized testing at school, had a quick conference with Timmy, and decided that Son Abomination sounded good, “Since my dad calls your dad the Abomination anyway and we can paint it on your mailbox just like the Henderson’s did theirs!”. Antler Guy agreed and did a lovely rendition of it for the mailbox, with only a few glyphs of soul-rending terror added to keep up to snuff.)

The Great Plant Exchange went beautifully, though the Audrey Jr. (named Aubergine for the lovely shade of purple poison that drips from her fangs) is on a diet at the moment. She was in cahoots with the cat and the dog to get into the good people food and ate two frozen turkeys all herself. Now she’s restricted to the hallway table to answer the phone and the door. (Steve actually likes her, and keeps slipping her hotdogs when Sharon isn’t looking. Their door-to-door salesman rates have dropped dramatically since she changed abodes.) Hell-wife has almost gotten the begonia to bloom and say it’s first words.

The homeowner’s association just loves the Abominations. All paperwork stamped and dotted, in on time and in triplicate. Antler Guy likes filing, says it reminds him of his old job. There is a resident who spent 20 years as a lawyer and they have long, animated conversations about all sorts of things that make Steve swear to never need legal counsel.

Hell-wife joined the PTA and spearheaded a committee to fundraise in the fall with a haunted house. It was a county-wide hit, though the claims that a particularly rowdy group had been deliberately lost in a timeslip to the Outer Doors Of Chaos was firmly rebuffed. Most young people nowadays, it was agreed, just couldn’t appreciate flute music.

Antler Guy really does try to connect with Steve. The surprise birthday party was perhaps a bit much, given that most participants do not have the ability to suddenly materialize in front of the guest of honor to give them a hug. Sharon assured them that Steve normally screams on his birthday, and the remains of the cake were heartily enjoyed by all. (A plate was saved for Steve once he came down from the treehouse.)

After the Hawaii trip (which was a present for his birthday) and the Matching Shirt Ultimatum (which was Sharon’s attempt at patching things up with Antler Guy, he really was sad about the birthday screaming), Steve finally grabs his courage in both hands (plus the shotgun, which let’s face it is about as useful as a teddybear at the moment but it does comfort him) and confronts Antler Guy, about why such a group of……Abominations could possibly come to his quiet slice of suburban bliss.

“……BUT NEIGHBOR STEVE, WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE.”

“No no no, I read it in a book! Don’t you have to be invited or something?!?”

“WELL YES, TO THE HUMAN WORLD. BUT THIS IS NOT THE HUMAN WORLD AS YOUR THREE-DIMENSIONAL BRAIN PERCEIVES IT.”

“What the hell does that mean?!!”

“DID YOU NOT KNOW, NEIGHBOR STEVE? LEGALLY SPEAKING, ALL OF THE VASTNESS OF HUMAN SUBURBIA IS, IN FACT, A PART OF HELL.”
“…….”

“The flamingoes are the boundary markers. It was decided that the flaming skulls were too kitschy for modern times.”
Antler Guy, as one may have noticed, is a calm sort of fellow. In the face of human atrocities he displays a curious Zen sort of state of mind. Timmy asks Son if he’d ever seen his dad angry, and Son hasn’t. (When asked, Timmy says that yeah his dad gets mad, but it’s like the Fitz-Simmon’s chihuahua down the street- mostly high-pitched noise and occasionally TV remote chewing. Sharon replaces the poor thing every 3 months or so.) When pressed (gently, at the monthly book club, and with many cups of tea and at least one daiquiri), Hellwife admits that this comes from serving many years at his old job.

After the revelation of the nature of his neighborhood, Steve has not been overtly mean to Antler Guy. Not yet in the realm of friends, but vastly better than before. No more holy water, no more shotgun blasts. (Still the occasional jumpscare, but Antler Guy really can’t help that part.) They even occasionally share news over the fence as Antler Guy trains the creeping deathshade vines in proper oral hygiene, and Steve waters his lawn (and occasionally slips a goldfish cracker to a deathshade vine that looks particularly adorable. Aubergine has trained him well.)

Which is how Antler Guy learns about the peeping tom that’s been plaguing the adjacent streets. Apparently the pervert has been getting bolder, and rattling doors. He almost broke into one apartment, whose occupants were a single mother and her daughter, Mildred. Millie, a shy girl who is a great horror fan and firm friends with Timmy and Son, had missed school because of it.

Steve knew because Sharon had told him, on her way to deliver a tuna casserole and a double batch of brownies to the pair. (Sharon has been dubbed the unofficial mob boss of the Mother’s Mafia. She is quite pleased with this title.) He tells her to wait, confers briefly with Aubergine, and sends her along with, “Only as a loan, you know, but Auby wants to stretch her roots and she’d probably like getting all ribboned and curled anyway. Little girls still do that, right?” She has strict orders to bite anyone that makes Millie or her mother cry. (Steve is dubbed the official neighborhood marshmallow for this. The bookclub buys him a jar of marshmallow fluff in commemoration.)

He turns to look at Antler Guy, and freezes, much as a chihuahua will when faced with a hungry hellhound.

“You….you alright there buddy?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess not. Did you, uh, know you’re kinda fuzzing at the edges, there?”

“Right. Um. Well.”

Steven makes a very ungraceful exit when space starts bending around Antler Guy’s still, unmoving form.
When Steve sees a shadowy form in his back yard when he gets up to pee that night, there’s no hesitation. He grabs the shotgun from the cabinet and peeks out the back door window.

Just in time to see a nebulous form of soul-wrenching terror engulf the man reaching for the door handle. A sliver of moonlight reveals a very familiar eyesocket. After a moment (and a sincere prayer of thanks that he had already peed, cause otherwise he’d have done it then and there) Steve opens the door. The nebulous form freezes, reality bending around the edges.

“Nice night for it, huh?”

“…..Y E S.”

“Guy won’t scare anymore little girls, will he?”

“P E R F E C T L Y.”

“Good. G’night then. Oh, and if Hellwife has an extra Audrey Jr. that needs a home, let me know. Millie likes Aubergine a lot but Augy’s just too big for the apartment. Dunno if they come in miniatures though.”

“Anytime.”

There are no more peeping reports. Millie brings back Aubergine and spends an entire afternoon teaching Steve the particulars of Augy’s new “hairstyle” (a gravity-defying mass of teased tendrils, ribbons, and barrettes) in between games of tag and hide-and-seek with Timmy and Son.

When Antler Guy and Hellwife present her and her mother Beatrice with a tiny Audrey Jr. (”pOOr ThinG Is a ruNT And wOn”T geT MorE Than A FooT taLL, BEa, aNd NeeDS a New FRiEnD”, assures Hellwife), both mother and child burst out crying. Millie names it Bella, after Bella Lugosi, and shows it to the excited group of boys (Steve and Augy included).
Life in a subdivision partly populated with eldritch and possibly magical (officially classified as “extra-dimensional”, for even when faced with the physics-defying nature of their new co-habitating citizens the government cannot bring itself to acknowledge them as “magic wielding hell-beasts”, as some high-ranking staff members initially suggested) goes on fairly normally.

Sure, there are a few hiccoughs. The creeping deathshade vines get a stern talking to about appropriate afternoon snacks (“NOT the Fitz-Simmon’s chihuahua, I don’t care how much he has it coming or what he excreted where, now spit it out!”), Aubergine sheds all her leaves at once and snowballs the house (but does helps sweep up afterwards), and moonrise is a good time to watch the night-gaunts fly by (but on moondark it’s best to stay inside, no matter how prettily they glow. They’re somewhat similar to fireflies, and don’t always check to see if their partner glows as well. It wouldn’t be as much of a problem if they didn’t dive mid-coitus and drop just above the ground.)

While the neighborhood in general is accepting of the Abominations, when things get to be a bit much they tend to come to Steve. Since meeting Beatrice and Millie (and the formation of the Terrifying Triad known as Millie, Son, and Timmy) Steve is the adult human male most comfortable dealing with Antler Guy on the whole street. (Sharon as U.M.B. is widely held to have, well, steel-whatever-the-hell-she-wants, and Timmy is known to run over to Antler Guy and ask for rides through “that wobbly grey place, you know, the one with the REALLY BIG alligators?” Still, the courtesies must be observed.)

So when a writhing sparking ball of snarling terror and teeth takes up residence in the Manzo’s toolshed, and when Animal Control refuses to come (the street is banned due to a run-in with the deathshade vines), Steve is called. Having heard the description, Steve brings Antler Guy.

When they get there, Mr. Manzo is forcibly holding the door shut. Unholy yowling is coming from inside. At a gesture from Antler Guy, Mr. Manzo leaps away, and the doors blast open.

A 150 pound ball of whimpering, flaming something hits Steve and knocks him on his ass. The whimpering, flaming something proceeds to slobber all over Steve, his shirt, his pants, and a decent portion of grass in between distressed yelps.

“GACK!”

“NEIGHBOR STEVE, ARE YOU IN DISTRESS?”

“GAAAACKLEARGHSPLUH- DOWN boy, HEEL, that’s a good- Antler Guy, what is this?!”

“I BELIEVE IT IS A HELLHOUND, NEIGHBOR STEVE.”

“Good grief, I didn’t know they came this big and…..and….. Guy?”

“YES NEIGHBOR STEVE?”

“Is he supposed to be…..skinless?”

“YES NEIGHBOR STEVE. THIS VARIETY WAS BRED TO BE LAP DOGS. THEIR FLAME IS MOSTLY WITHOUT HEAT, AND THEY HAVE NO SKIN FOR THOSE WHO ARE ALLERGIC.”

“…….lapDOG?!”
“YES NEIGHBOR STEVE.” Antler Guy lays a hand on the hellhound, who tries to burrow further into Steve with little success. “HE APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN RECENTLY WEANED. IT WILL TAKE TIME FOR HIM TO GROW TO HIS FULL SIZE.”

“……”

“THE SMALL BREEDS GROW MORE SLOWLY.”

A vile hissing emanates from the shed. (Mr. Manzo has long since fled for the safety of his kitchen.) As Steve attempts to calm the frantic hell-puppy, Antler Guy investigates. He reaches one long hand in behind the riding lawnmower and….. winces.

“NEIGHBOR STEVE?”

“Yeah- I’m right here, uh, doggie, not going anywhere- Guy?”

“I APPEAR TO HAVE AN…. ATTACHMENT.”

Steve is awed at the tiny ball of white fluff attached to one long, thin finger. He didn’t know that Antler Guy’s fingers COULD be bitten, much less by a tiny kitten.

Which is how Steve and Sharon got Clifford (”Aww c’mon Sharon, how could I pass that one up?”), and Antler Guy and Hellwife get Fluffy (”NEIGHBOR STEVE ASSURES ME IT IS A TRADITIONAL TITLE.”)
Chapter 5

Time passes, as time does (which for Earth is generally somewhat faster than The Dimension That Smells Of Shrimp, and slower That One Wibbly Place With Murderous Flying Potato Crisps—Timmy was allowed to select human-dialect names, and Antler Guy refuses to change them. He says they are far more pleasant than the terms he used to use.)

Fluffy remains on the small side. This in no way impedes her rule of the neighborhood. In order of preference, her resting places include the top of Antler Guy’s head, Hellwife’s ample lap, and wherever else she damn well pleases. (The deathshade vines have a healthy respect for her, all of Clifford’s six-foot-plus frame is terrified of her, and she actively conspires with Aubergine. The prior pets of Steve and Sharon, Mr. Paws— a mild mannered neutered tom of advanced years— and Puggles— his nearly as elderly pug cohort— are ignored with royal disdain. Which suits them fine, they’d much rather be made much of by Aubergine, and relax in the gentle, soothing warmth of Clifford’s flames.)

Within short order, her routine is established. The neighborhood, and neighbors, know better than to mess with the White Puffball of Doom (one of Timmy’s better efforts) on her daily patrols. In return, her rule is moderately benevolent.

So when she goes missing, literally no one has any idea where she has gone.

It starts with Antler Guy striding through the neighborhood, making a peculiar call somewhat akin to a humpback whale with a headcold. When that produces no results, he starts asking. Very earnestly. Very. Earnestly. He even folds himself up enough to take tea with Mrs. Giotto, the resident cat lady. He emerges with a delightful recipe for snickerdoodles, but no information.

Steve knows something is wrong when he starts getting texts at work. By the end of shift, he’s inundated with calls, texts, voicemails, and a singing telegram sent by one particularly frazzled neighbor, whose message was only “HELP.” His boss is not pleased.

He almost expects it when Antler Guy materializes as soon as he shuts his car door. He still almost craps himself.

“Hi Guy, what’s up-”

“FLUFFY. FLUFFY IS MISSING.”

“Really? Have you tried looking in Mr. Manz-”

“YES. TWICE.”

“Oh, ok, well, let’s try-”

“Neighbor SteVE!”

“Hellwife?”

“FLuffY Is MissINg!”

“Well yes, Guy just told me-”

“STEVE!”
“Sharon?!”

They decide to move the confabulation into Sharon’s kitchen. (A quick phone call to Beatrice assures that a) the sleepover of the Triad is going smoothly, b) the news of Fluffy’s disappearance hasn’t made it there yet, and c) it won’t until further news is secured.) Sharon has called on her information network to no avail, Hellwife has questioned every plant in a five block radius, and Antler Guy is distraught. Apparently he cannot feel Fluffy, which means she is either dead or out of his range. (“AND SHE WOULD NOT BE SO UNCARING AS TO NOT RETURN HOME IF DEAD, SHE IS A VERY LOVING MAMMAL.”)

Steve is quiet. Steve is thinking. Steve….has an idea.

“Guy?”

“YES?”

“Exactly what constitutes your range?”

“ALL OF THE ENVIRON OF HELL, NEIGHBOR STEVE.”

“So……when we run out of flamingos, right?”

Clifford is supplied with a squeaky sorta-looks-like-a-mouse-don’t-ask-so-many-questions toy belonging to Fluffy. The direction he doesn’t want to go is the way they head. They decide that cramming Antler Guy into Steve’s Prius would be unhelpful, sunroof or not, so up on Antler Guy’s shoulders Steve goes. (Steve has always wanted to try it, in his heart of hearts. Its everything Timmy described and more.)

They set out, following the cringing hellhound. Even cringing and following the scent of the Feared Fluffy Thing, Clifford has some speed. (It helps that both Steve and Sharon explained the situation, via Aubergine.) In the space of perhaps an hour and a half, they hit the end of Antler Guy’s range. Literally. If Steve hadn’t had a deathgrip on Antler Guy’s horn’s he’d have gone flying.

“NEIGHBOR STEVE, I CAN GO NO FARTHER.”

“Ugh, kinda got that Guy….”

Steve slithers off and looks at Antler Guy. He’s pushing at the air like there’s a forcefield. (There isn’t. Steve checks, just to be safe.) So, after a short conversation with Clifford, Antler Guy waits next to the last flamingo as Steve rides his big, red, skinless flaming dog onwards. (Steve had wanted to try this since he first read the Clifford books.) (Well, something close to it anyway.)

It is a measure of the surrealness of his day to day life that he isn’t surprised by the gate guarded by gun-toting gentlemen. Nor by the flurry of activity he and his dog raise by jumping it. A short, balding fellow in a Very Important Labcoat comes out of the concrete building and gives shrill orders to “apprehend that vile extra-planar sympathizer and his hideous creature”. As Clifford starts drooling green flames as he snarls, no one seems particularly interested in following his orders.

Luckily, a man riding a walking nightmare and then a hellhound garners attention. Specifically, a shitton to social media attention (and no few memes). And the government, unsurprisingly, monitors the areas inhabited by its extra-planar citizens very closely. So before the standoff gets beyond the tense stage and into the itchy trigger finger stage, a swarm of black SUV’s hit the scene.

Steve sits serene upon his noble steed as the wave of black suits descend. In record time the labcoat
is escorted away, the guards are pacified, and an ominously growling cat carrier is presented to Steve. Clifford lets out a tremulous “BOOF?”, to which the carrier “Mrowls?”. Steve opens the carrier (the guards, as one, flinch- some of their compatriots are still in medical from trying to get the damn thing IN the carrier), and Fluffy walks out, dignified as the queen she is. She kneads Clifford’s head (without claws, for once), and settles in.

They make a strange parade returning, the dog and the biggest, shiniest, and most ominous of the SUV’s. (Strangely, all pictures taken of the cavalcade go mysteriously missing.) Antler Guy doesn’t care- as soon as he’s in range, Fluffy jumps to his head and purrs ferociously.

When the suits try to talk to him, he brushes them off, preferring to murmur in hair-raising tongues to his cat, who is still purring fit to split and is trying to groom his antlers. Steve sighs.

“What do you guys need? They’ll be busy for a while.”

“Well Mr. Anderson, we would like to offer our condolences at this unfortunate occurrence, and tender our assurances that it will never happen again.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We would also like to ascertain Mr……?”

“Antler Guy Abomination.”

“……Beg pardon?”

“Antler Guy Abomination. That’s what my son named him.”

“……”

“Technically he named him Antler Guy when he first saw him.”

“…………”

“Abomination came later, when Son needed a name for that standardized testing stuff.”

“…..your son attends school with his offspring?”

“Yep. They’re at a sleepover right now. Sharon’s probably baking brownies with Hellwife. They’re both stress bakers.”

The suits have a whispered conference. Two short phone calls later, the suit with the shiniest pair of sunglasses has an offer for Steve.

Steve’s official title is Extra-Planar Liaison. Sharon calls it Neighbor Herding. Steve doesn’t care about the title. He gets twice his previous salary plus full benefits to ensure the smoothness of Antler Guy’s “integration in the fabric of human society”, which means all the things he was doing, plus field trips into other planes of reality. (Fluffy is fond of the gigantic mother cat; Clifford tries to eat the homunculi’s acid snot and regrets it immediately).
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It started, innocently enough, with Timmy’s birthday party.

Steve, armed with the wealth garnered by his new job, not only rented a bouncy house beloved by the Terrifying Triad, Auberguine, and Steve himself, he finally upgraded the family phones. (His and Sharon’s anyway. Timmy’s phone was lost to a scintillating puddle of mud and bones. Steve shrugged, taught the acidic glop how to play Bejeweled, and cut the service when they got home. The glop got better reception on it’s own.)

Upon gentle (i.e. at the monthly review meeting there were pointed questions and a very well put together powerpoint given by a pair of sunglasses that owned a luxurious handlebar mustache) prompting from his new employers, Steve’s next task was to “show our new extraplanar neighbors in a positive light to the greater population.”

Steve decided this was an excellent time to make an Instagram account.

His first post, of Antler Guy delicately cutting his slice of cake with his fingertips, nearly broke the notifications on Steve’s phone. His second one, a short video of the Triad sneaking up on Antler Guy to smear bright purple frosting on his face, did break the notifications. (Steve restarted and adjusted his settings. Thank god he’d put the thing on silent.)

Antler Guy took the new development in stride, indulging Steve in his posing and carrying the “selfie stick” Steve insisted they bring on their excursions. His favorite part was scrolling through the notifications (well, watching Steve scroll since his fingertips a) couldn’t control the touchscreen and b) made the screen itself shimmer with rainbow colors), seeing those who “followed” him.

“NEIGHBOR STEVE, I HAVE NOT HAD SO MANY FOLLOW MY LEAD SINCE I CAME TO THE UPPER WORLD. THIS INSTANT-GRAM IS QUITE AMUSING.”

“Yeah, it is fun. Even the trolls are kinda funny.”

“TROLLS? I DID NOT KNOW THE TROLLS HAD MIGRATED TO THE INTERNET AS WELL.”

“…..as well as….? You know what, nevermind, I don’t wanna know.”

Antler Guy even made friends over the social platform, including one particularly nice lady in Pennsylvania, an artist by the name of LK. He told Steve that some of her work reminded him of home, especially the photo album and her husband’s sculptures. He purchased one through Steve, “TO SEND TO COUSIN %@&&^*@^@, ZIR BOY LOOKS JUST LIKE IT.”

“Just like that? But that looks human. Well, minus the horns and the snarling.”

“YES. AMADEUS HAS MUCH OF HIS PREVIOUS LIFE.”

“…..you lost me there, buddy. Previous life?”

“BEFORE HE WAS….. ADOPTED.”
“Wait, adopted? You guys adopt, what, human kids?”

“……IN A SENSE.”

“Still lost here, buddy.”

“….I BELIEVE I HEAR MY HELLWIFE CALLING.”

“What, I don’t hear-”

“GOODNIGHT, NEIGHBOR STEVE.”

Never before had Steve seen Antler Guy run from him. (Usually it was the other way around.) Sharon didn’t believe him, until hours turned into days without a sign of Antler Guy. Hellwife wouldn’t say anything no matter the daiquiris, she just looked at Steve and sighed sadly. Son didn’t know anything either. He played quietly with Timmy and Augy, sniffling occasionally. Even Millie practicing her zombie makeup on Steve didn’t help. Finally, he murmured the reason to the Triad, who took it to Steve with wide-eyed solemnity.

His father wouldn’t look at him.

“Guy, open the door.”

“Guy, I’m sorry I asked, please open the door.”

“……”

“Dammit, you can be mad at me but please, don’t let my mistake mess it up with Son. He’s a great kid and he doesn’t understand that it’s my fault not his, he needs his dad-”

“I AM NOT HIS FATHER.”

“You are in every way that cou-”

“I DO NOT DESERVE TO BE HIS FATHER.”

“What-?”

“HIS PATERNAL BEING MURDERED HIM AS AN INFANT AND WAS IN TURN MURDERED.”

“…..holy….fu-”

“THEY CAME TO MY JURISDICTION. THE…..FATHER…..STILL HELD ONTO THE SOUL OF THE CHILD HE HAD KILLED. I REMOVED HIS TOUCH FROM HIM.”

“Good. Bastard deserved the worst you could throw at him-”

“I KEPT HIM.”

“What?”

“I KEPT THE CHILD.”

“….So? He’s a cute kid, you guys are great parents-”

“I SHOULD NOT HAVE KEPT HIM.”
“What the hell Guy?! That’s your Son!”

“He was pure.”

“…..and you lost me again…..”

“He was pure. A pure soul. He did not belong there. Not…. There. But I was weak, and I wanted……”

“…..come on Guy, you can do it, I’ve got you.”

“…..I… I wanted…..A…..child. A-and we cannot….B-breed one so I….I changed h-him and k-kept h-h-him from…..”

“Come on Guy, I’m here for you.”

“…..I kept him f-from heaven.”

Nightmare eldritch abominations can cry. Its rare, so they don’t keep Kleenex. (Steve never cared much for that shirt anyway.)

“Now you listen here. You are a damn fine father. Hellwife is a damn fine mother. And Son is a damn fine kid. I doubt Heaven would be as good for him as you two are.”

“…..but-”

“No buts, buddy. I listen to Sharon, and she listens to everything. You didn’t come here just for the green lawns and the flocking plastic flamingos, did you?”

“…..no.”

“Why’d you come here?”

“…..neighbor steve-”


“…..because he deserves better.”

“better than?”

“Better than….There. He…. deserves the chances he….. should have had. To be….human.”

“And you’re giving that to him. He goes to school, he has friends, he takes spelling tests for pity’s sake! Yeah, he’s a little different, but he has that chance. You’re giving him that chance. And you shouldn’t beat yourself up for giving it to him.”

“…..”

“He loves you, Antler Guy. And he needs to know why his father won’t look at him.”

“…..please, would you….send them over?”

“Sure thing buddy.”

Sharon bakes no less than 5 separate types of custard and Steve spends an extra hour reading to
Timmy that night. The next morning, Hellwife hugs Steve so hard he squeaks. Twice. Son calls an emergency meeting of the Triad, and absconds with two of the custards. They emerge later (Hellwife, Bea, and Sharon having drunk several cups of coffee and polished off two more of the custards and a tray of Hellwife’s cheesecake brownies) and immediately begin a game of tag.

Antler Guy also hugs Steve. They both sniffle a little.

Chapter End Notes

This was written as the prize in a contest/giveaway thing. The winner wanted to be written into the story, so there she is.
Chapter 7

For one who quite literally oversaw Hell, and lived there, Antler Guy has a hard time lying. (There is little point in it, really, the truth hurts far more.) When asked why he closets himself with the Terrifying Triad, Fluffy, and Steve’s home computer, he almost gains enough facial expression to be shifty.

Almost.

Steve doesn’t press too hard. The origins of Son are still new and a tender area, one that he’s unwilling to accidentally tramp on, and he figures that Guy will spill when the time is right. Patience. Patience is key. And trust. And patience.

He lasts almost a week before he caves and checks the browsing history on Timmy’s account.

His eyebrows start climbing at “HOW TO ASSIST SMALL HUMANS”, and don’t stop until they hit hairline with “animals to help at hospitals”. It’s not something he’s ever considered before, but the more he thinks about it, the more he likes it. And it would be good PR for Antler Guy.

(The suits would like more progress than an Instagram account.)

(......the suits will not like this.)

(..........)

(Steve starts making calls that same day. Sharon gets an excited text from him, and makes much more effective calls.)

~

“NEIGHBOR STEVE, I AM UNSURE.”

“C’mon Guy, we talked about this. We got Fluffy and Clifford registered and Hellwife made them matching vests and everything!”

“I DO NOT FEAR FOR FLUFFY. SHE IS A FINE MAMMALIAN AMBASSADOR. I HAVE NOTICED THAT HUMAN YOUNG OFTEN FIND ME ..........INTIMIDATING.”

“I think you’ll be surprised, Guy.” is all Steve will say on the subject.

And he is. Due to height concerns, the first part of the visit to the Shriner’s hospital near their area of suburbia is held outside. Clifford is a big hit- he lays down still as can be as the kids (and nurses, because they can) climb all over him. Those steady enough enjoy a ride get their fill as he lopes along the strip of grass, his passengers held perfectly steady and whooping all the way. Sharon stays with Clifford and shows a rapt audience how a gigantic dog (past 8 feet tall and creeping on 9) will beg for treats. Drool is involved. A lot of drool.

Steve and Antler Guy push on. The first stop is the children’s cancer ward. Antler Guy is hesitant, but the greeting stops him in his tracks. Every child there is smiling at him- and every Monster Under The Bed is smiling too. (Those of them that have faces, anyway. The mass of tetrahedrons glitters in a friendly fashion.)

The hospital’s Director of Extra-planar Concerns smiles too. She adjusts her clipboard, and scratches
Fluffy’s head when she wraps around her ankles.

“At this hospital, we believe in helping our patients to the best of our ability. And our Monster Helper program allows beings who no longer fit in their old jobs to have gainful employment. All of our monsters here are certified Eaters of Bad Dreams, and have been known to form close bonds with their assigned child. Some even leave with the patient once their illness has been cured.” She patted Antler Guy’s arm and pointed towards a large chair suitable for his frame. “Why not get acquainted?”

Antler Guy immediately descends into chittering conversation with the assembled monsters, gravely introducing himself to each and every child, listening to their stories and boasts about how their Monster is a lot more scary than him, but with time he can learn to be scarier. A tiny girl with a terrifying amount of IV lines and no hair pats his long hands gently, under the careful eye of her ever-watchful Monster (being mostly a mass of eyes with a long, long, long purple tongue).

Fluffy is the center of her own social whirl, purring magnificently despite the occasional hair-pulling so children who hadn’t seen their own pets in far too long could hold something soft, and warm, and good. (Fluffy Monsters are something of a rarity, and sometimes are too busy for communal pettings.)

Steve, having no special power going for him and only the standard human kit, plays round after round of Go Fish with a shy young boy missing an arm. His Monster, a tentacled starfish thing, assists him while playing it’s own hand and holding cards for the tetrahedron, who’s human child is too tired to participate, but looks on none-the-less and calls out the tetrahedron’s choices in a whispy voice.

It becomes a regular stop. They set up a family day, where each family gets to meet the Abominations and see what their children were so excited about. Antler Guy and Hellwife are the epitome of grace and kindness. Timmy and Millie lead a massive game of tag with Auberguine as It, and Son gets to cut the cake. (The donations that come from the Instagram posts made that day are staggering- three months operating costs in the first hour. The Director of Extra-planar Concerns can be seen weeping in the embrace of a dew-clawed lizard, also weeping.)

Two months (and many moments spent at the hospital, both bitter and sweet) later, the smoking letter arrives on Antler Guy’s doorstep.

It really was too good to last.
Chapter 8

The whole street knows something is wrong the day It arrives.

A glowing ball of impossible light floats down the street. To look directly at It is impossible; a glance out of the corner of the eye is almost manageable, but still useless. A melody just beyond the edge of hearing follows It, but no one tries to get closer. Some residual memory hiding deep in the hindbrain warns that to approach is to burn, lit up within by the purity of one’s soul trying to rejoin the source before it’s time.

The eldritch of the street do not sense It until It is there, an implacable, unstoppable force. Most hide. Miss Cravandish- the gorgon that teaches Physical Education at the middle school, currently on maternal leave until her eggs hatch- drops a pot full of her prized daffodil bulbs. Peabody scoops up his Pomeranian in all sixteen arms and runs, flat out, for home. He ignores the pain when his shoes slide off his tentacles and the asphalt burns his squishy skin.

No one dares warn the Abominations, or Steve and Sharon. It is only due to great good luck that both families were out that day- the kids at school, Sharon coordinating a bake sale to fundraise for more inclusive programming at the After School program, Hellwife shopping, and Steve and Antler Guy checking on a recent addition to the Shriner’s Ward- a tiny baby girl riddled with tumors. Her Monster was a living floofy rug that hummed gently. It had good news for them- her vitals were improving, the tumors seemed to be shrinking. The ride home was joyful; Antler Guy grinned the whole way, waving at passing cars from the sunroof of the Prius, Fluffy in the back seat. (Clifford had stayed home. He was currently cowering behind Mr. Manzo’s shed with Mr. Manzo as It passed.)

His joy ended the moment they turned onto the street and saw the unearthly light in front of his home.

“NEIGHBOR STEVE. STOP THE CAR.”

“What the fuck is tha-”

“STOP. THE. CAR.”

What happened next was hard to see, and hear. Steve, when trying to explain to Sharon later that night, mostly remembers a liquid feeling in his ears and a tightness in his eyes. He was pretty sure Antler Guy approached It, but he couldn’t be certain. Neighbors said Steve screamed and Antler Guy shouted something, and It left. But It left behind Steve, passed out in the concerned embrace of the deathshade vines, and Antler Guy, holding a gently smoking envelope, laid out flat on his own doorstep.

Sharon comes home to this moments after It leaves. Later, most folk agree that it was best this way. Her concern is surpassed only by her rage when she learns what happened. Almost immediately she grasps the situation from neighbors coming to check. 911 is deemed useless, as are the Suits. Sharon makes only two calls- one to Beatrice, to warn her and ask that she pick up the children and bring the boys home (Beatrice agrees, and wishes her good hunting), and one to Hellwife.

Moments after the second call is made, reality warps and Hellwife appears, kicking aside a pile of Wal-mart bags that appeared with her. Where Sharon is fiery rage tightly held, Hellwife is icy calculation spilled everywhere- the whole street shivers when she delicately picks the envelope out of her unconscious husband’s long fingers. On a balmy summer day, the decorative thermometer on
Mrs. Giotto’s porch drops 30 degrees as she reads it carefully. Twice. And folds it neatly.

“ThEY. HavE. NO. RIGHT.”

Clifford, who was nosing his master and gently licking him to rouse him, immediately starts howling. Fluffy pauses her grooming of Antler Guy’s brow ridges to yowl with him.

~~~

The menfolk eventually rouse. No lasting harm is done, but a family meeting is called. Beatrice and Millie are included at Hellwife’s insistence (“You aRE Kin Of My Son, AnD sO mY kIN. yOu ArE famILy. PlEase, StAY.” They do.)

To put it simply, and without the complicated and unutterable by human tongue language involved, the letter delivered by It is two things- a cease-and-desist order for Antler Guy to stop interfering with the business of Heaven, and a summons for one human soul, male, to be returned to Heaven.

Antler Guy had been doing a bit more than just visiting at the hospital. He had been strengthening the children and the ill, a breath at a time, and some had lived who should have died and gone to the Heavens. He had also deliberately misfiled the paperwork of Son’s mortal life, and it had taken this long to solve the mix-up.

The Heavens wanted Son, and they wanted punishment for Antler Guy’s crimes.

Hellwife has other plans.
There is a hierarchy to Hell, and to Heaven. Hell is, very simply, Not Heaven. There are some very pleasant places that would not swear to Heaven, and so are regarded as Hell. Earth was left as a neutral area, one where both sides could leverage influence to see who, finally, Wins. No direct action can be taken by either side.

Officially, that’s all there is. Heaven, Earth, and Hell.

Unofficially…

~~~

“Do you know your lines, neighbor Steve?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“NEIGHBOR STEVE, BEATRICE, SHARON, YOU DO NOT HAVE TO-”

“HUSH husband. They are sure, as are we all.”

“But I do not deserve-”

“Enough.” Everyone—Triad, associated parents, Antler Guy, even the plants and the pets—shivered in the parking lot. Hellwife normally was… nondescript. Not nearly as terrifying at first glance as Antler Guy could be. But the last week, she had started to gather an invisible force to herself (not a literal force, Steve had quietly asked one day.) An air of regal power surrounded her now. A very large and insistent air of regal power. “I am your wife, husband, and I will decide what you deserve.”

She tenderly scritched around the base of his horns as he sat in the middle of the circle of friends and family (and some vines carefully grown and shed under Hellwife’s specific instruction. Aubergine and Bella refused to be left behind.) Antler Guy quieted under his wife’s gentle claws. The moon shone pale on his polished skull as the hour inched closer to 2 AM.

“Are you ready, my son? Timmy? Millie?”

“Yes mama.”

“Yes Miss Hellwife.”

“Yes Missus Hellwife.”

The bright parking lot lights grew strangely dim.

“Then let us begin.”

~~~

Unofficially, there’s Denny’s.

~~~

Hellwife held out the envelope outside of their circle, and began to speak. (For the sake of human
brains, she had carefully applied her own sort of runes on all participating non-eldritch creatures, including Fluffy. Even cats have their limits.) It glowed, burning itself up into strangely-scented smoke that drifted out into a pool, one that glowed in the same way that It had glowed.

It did not appear, for that was not It’s function. But two other Things drew themselves out of the mist. Things that triggered pain, and fear, and the agonizing knowledge that you deserved this, you deserved whatever They did to you because you are impure, imperfect, not worthy of such Light-

“Enough.”

They…flinched.

“I did not Call for such lackeys. Either send a proper representative, or I will consider the matter closed.”

They roiled uncertainly.

“Do not try my patience.”

They converged on the pool. Steve could feel that liquid sensation in his ears again, only the squiggles Hellwife had carefully drawn kept it from being painful. He had a mighty desire for a Q-tip, though.

Something Else flowed out of the pool. It was not an It, nor a They. This one radiated something else. This one had Power, the kind that would squish a lesser being with no regard, Power that pressed at the mind to be obeyed.

This… was a Boss.

Again, the liquid feeling, only mixed with…derision? If water could hold a snort, that’s what the Boss would radiate. Steve decided a baseball bat would be a better choice.

“Better. A proper Witness.”

Quizzical waterslosh?

“Steve, if you’ll get started?”

“Oh, I, uh, I do so swear…”

Sharon grabbed his right hand, Beatrice his left. In the small circle they made were Antler Guy, the Triad in his lap. Fluffy rode Clifford’s head as he lit the vine circle that surrounded them all, Aubergine and Bella forming a living one within it.

“-of my own free will-”

Hellwife stood between them and the Boss at the edge of the circle, staring at the Boss and it’s increasing distressed They.

“-pledge my son-”

The Boss quivered.

“-as I pledge my son-”

“-as I pledge my daughter-”
The Boss billowed menacingly. Hellwife narrowed her eyes.

“-AS I PLEDGE MY SON-”

The Boss screamed. Hellwife smiled. And stage-whispered.

“-aS I PleDGe My Son-”

The Boss screamed again, and They threw themselves at the barrier of hellfire, fed on wood freely given, reinforced by living flesh. Hellwife smiled.

“-as we pledge to eachother-”

And spoke.

“As witnessed by Heaven, Hell, and Earth, our children are pledged Betrothed. Their souls belong to each other, and none other.”

They were looking worse for the wear, Their light dulled and curls of smoke flickering over Them. The Boss was pissed, and the tickle of water in the ears became a torrent, one so angry that words were almost visible.

HE WHO FELL IS MINE.

The force behind the words was direct, and nigh unavoidable for one who had touched Heaven, much less one who fell from it. Antler Guy shook, and tried to stand. The kids, the adults, the plants-even Clifford held him down. Fluffy stood on his head, hissing softly.

Hellwife bared her teeth in a grin that had nothing at all of goodwill in it. She delicately stepped outside of the circle and spread her arms. The aura of regal power bloomed.

The Boss yelped.

“I Invoke my right as Wife to Fight for my Husband. The winner may keep Him.”

The Boss tried it’s best to rally the troops, even call for help- a wave of her delicate claws and the misty gate dimmed in brightness. No help would come from there.

“And since I never Fell…” She stepped forward. The forces of Heaven cringed.

“…you will fight me Fair.”

The mortals kept their heads down, as she had warned them to. A shield of leaves from Aubergine hid the sight and some of the sound as Bella sang her best rendition of Bohemian Rhapsody. Sharon joined for some of the duets.

“Who’s First?”

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The victory feast in the diner was somewhat confusing for the servers, but justly deserved for the family. (A side door was opened for Clifford and Auberguine, who just couldn’t fit in the restaurant.)

(Hellwife occasionally hiccups slightly glowing mist. Beatrice folds her a birthday crown, and Bella waves the indigestible bits of holiness out the side door. Sharon hugs her, Steve orders her favorite birthday cake-flavored shake. The kids are smiling, and her husband’s claws entwine with her own.)
Chapter 10

There are consequences to all things.

Happily, most of them are benign. Sure, the Spirit of Dennys asks for a barrel of maple syrup— the really real squeezed-from-actual-woodflesh kind. (Hellwife has a cousin in Vermont.) (Well, a cousin who IS Vermont, but still.)

The hiccups last a few days, but any lingering odor is neatly covered by the thoughtful gift of a Febreeze spritzer, courtesy of Beatrice. It turned them a lovely shade of puce.

The Trio are, if anything, even more inseparable. Antler Guy assures all parties that any true telepathy would not develop until consummation of the Betrothal. (A consummation that would never necessarily have to happen— the Betrothal could not be broken, true, but Son would be perfectly happy living in sin, and modern human conventions were much different from what they used to be.) (This was carefully explained to the two pre-teens and the equivalent-in-eldritch-years-no-really-he’s-in-his 30’s???. Timmy made a face, Millie nodded solemnly, and Son blushed all the way down to his feeder roots.)

However, emotional bleed-over was to be expected. When Timmy lost his homework, the others were anxious. When Son broke a major branch during P.E., Timmy and Millie both felt phantom pain. When Bella finally learned how to use Timmy’s old skateboard to move freely about the apartment, using tendrils to pull herself along and singing the Spiderman theme song, the boys couldn’t stop smiling (especially when they saw Millie’s recording of it).

The Suits have an honest to goodness conniption fit when the next scheduled meeting rolls around. Sunglasses were snapped, mustaches ruffled, and pants pleats uncaringly wrinkled in the uproar. When asked why he had not reported it earlier, Steve tells them “it was a family thing, no need to involve anyone, it was handled.” When asked how, he tells them nothing more than “lady stood by her rights, trust me, if I knew more I probably wouldn’t be here. She’s scary when she’s pissed.” Hellwife’s file gets several new pages from this, mostly filled with question marks.

There are no reprisals from Heaven. (“Of coURse nOt, NeighBOr sTeVE, iT Was HandLEd iN A leGal MannER. I fOllOwEd tHeIr Rules To tHe LettEr, anD Not An inCh mOre.”) The street breathes easier, and the Mother’s Mafia authorizes a Congratulations themed series of covert food deliveries. (They aren’t sure what they’re congratulating, but it certainly requires baked goods and casseroles at We-Won-Homecoming-levels.) The eldritch neighbors show their solidarity as well. Miss Cravandish offers Sharon to be brood-Godmother. She accepts, much to Steve’s eternal delight (“make them an offer they can’t refuse do you get it honey-”). The lovely gargoyle couple make a tiny statue of Antler Guy, complete with a teensy Fluffy for his head. Peabody dedicates his next cycle to Hellwife, and excretes a stunning pearl necklace one globule at a time. (She knits him a silk sweater for himself and a matching one for his Pomeranian, Brutus.)

Hellwife’s role is downplayed, at her insistence. “i hAvE lIvEd in The pUbLic Eye, anD I preFEr mY maRRIed Life. I Am Happy. TrulY.” Some of it can’t be hidden, but she hides in plain sight again, in the shadow of her husband’s open manner. The rhythm of their lives calm somewhat, and the outside world forgets.

Mostly.
Antler Guy refuses to stop his hospital visits, and the trend of tiny miracles continues. Not enough to be noticeable to the world at large (for he is not the only eldritch being in a new life, and others with fewer….restraints have been making huge strides in human medicine), but enough that he feels…. good. The neighborhood settles into itself- a little odd around the edges, but not unwelcoming.

And then, into the vacant house behind Steve and Sharon, comes a middle-management systems analyst named Ri’Lethiel.

Ri’Lethiel is not his legal name. His parents named him Robert, but several teenage rebellions later he alighted upon the occult scene, and took the name Ri’Lethiel. He never really left the occult scene; when the eldritch came into mainstream life he watched, waited, and traded information.

Antler Guy and his family are very high profile- even the Suits can only creatively edit their presence so far. And the Suits cannot edit what they cannot find. The Dark Web is darker than one may suspect and some corners are under strange patronage indeed. The particular website that Ri’Lethiel frequents, updates, and is a long-standing moderator of is dedicated to the tracking and research of powerful eldritch. Some members treat it as an odd form of bird-watching or celebrity tracking. Others have different reasons to follow them.

There is nothing out of the ordinary about him. Antler Guy senses no ill-will, Hellwife does not feel unease. Sharon’s network trips no alarms and Steve… is Steve. While Ri’Lethiel is not incredibly outgoing he is not the surliest neighbor in the area by any means. He blends in to neighborhood life for several months, almost a half a year.

He is…..average. Forgettable.

He does not wish to be so for much longer.

~~~

The day the children go missing is the day that Beatrice graduates.

(Steve, in a moment of inspiration all his own, cites the expanded family ties created by the Betrothal as an excellent reason to bring Beatrice in on the government payroll. The look on her face when he told her her new salary and the sort of benefits it entailed should she accept is forever one of the best moments of Steve’s life. She chose to quit her previous job and finish the degrees she had paused when Millie was born, via online courses at a local junior college.)

She does not walk, nor attends the ceremony. Sharon, in an uncharacteristic moment of weakness, has a horrible case of the stomach flu. Hellwife, being immune to human diseases, is tending her at the Abomination’s house so as not to infect the rest of the family. Steve, fretting over his wife, is
forced to attend the monthly Suit meeting with a glorious set of nerves and no little anger. (The Suits
did not feel as though a mere sick wife was good reason to postpone. Sharon is already planning her
rebuttal once food stays mostly in place.) Antler Guy, who presented Beatrice with a truly glorious
bouquet of mostly-native-to-this-plane-of-existence flowers as a mass apology and congratulations,
has his own meetings to go to.

This leaves Beatrice in care of the Triad. It is also their last day of school, and a grand party was
planned for. The Mother’s Mafia catered the event and a sea of casseroles and other homemade
goodies covered the tables. (All known allergies are accounted for, and tables are clearly marked by
contagion.) (There will be no repeat of little Spg’lck’s unfortunate inflation-via-cumin-powder. The
janitors have politely requested greater vigilance, for his slime is very difficult to remove from the
ceiling.)

The party (planned long in advance by the sub-commanders of the MM) is a grand success. Three
tired, happy children climb into the middle seat of Sharon’s minivan (on loan from said worthy,
while Beatrice’s sedan is in the shop), while Beatrice helps a pregnant Mafia member load her car
with food and toddlers.

The squeal of tires and the terrified screams of her children turn heads. Her own wordless cry incites
panic.

Her purse is found two blocks down the road, with her phone and wallet inside, tossed from the car
at speed. The police are called; Hellwife and Sharon are called immediately, but cannot leave the sick
room. Antler Guy is unreachable and a bored voice (later a jobless voice, once his superiors get a
hold of his sunglasses) tells the frantic Beatrice that Steve “will be notified of her call once his
meeting is over.”

Hours later her car is found. Locked inside is Millie, badly bruised and chloroformed in a hot, airless
car. Timmy and Son are nowhere to be found, but a pale patch of sap is splattered against a window,
and Timmy’s sneaker is left on the floor.

Steve joins her in the hospital, pale and shaking, and they wait for Millie to wake up.
Hospitals are their own sort of crossroads. Loaded with the struggle for one more breath, the despair of those too late, and the calm acceptance of people who have good reason to court the Reaper, the potential for exploitation by those of ill intent is high in the Days After reunification. There are guardians in place and wards kept running smooth- not all divine, and certainly not all of Heaven. A peace is kept by sheer force of will of those who work there.

This peace was preserved in the face of Suits (repelled by gimlet-eyed nurses and a few of the upper ward gargoyles recruited as muscle), media frenzy (a cordon of security guards, including Siegfried the auroch minotaur), and the vanguard of the Mother's Mafia (a quick conference call to Sharon and they scatter, some to organize who was a possible witness, some to canvas the neighborhood, some to coordinate logistics and supplies.) (Though the general is weakened she is not without strength, and this is what she can do well. This is what she tells herself as she crumbles in private call to Steve, wrapped in Hellwife's arms as she fights not to vomit again. She isn't sure who is shaking worse, herself, Hellwife, or Steve's hands as he holds the phone.)

In the face of Beatrice's grief, the peace is uneasy. It lightens a little when Steve arrives, because he is a past master of acting as ambassador to those beyond, whether beyond human understanding or beyond the depths of grief. His hope, too, lies in Millie's tiny limp hands, and this is something that he can do, for her, for Beatrice, for Timmy, for Son. He can sort through pleasantries and accept a dinner tray. He can gently encourage Beatrice to eat a little, and listen to the doctors while watching the nurses. And he can hold back the terrible gnawing fear because this, this is something that he can do. He can do this. He can.

Beatrice is not lost. This is not her first time, watching the rise and fall of her daughter's chest, willing it to continue. Millie's father nearly killed her, beating Beatrice into early labor. The first month of Millie's life was spent in an incubator with her mother watching, watching. They were all alone, her and Millie, until an awkward, goofy man brought a huge house-trained cabbage just to keep her daughter safe, until the leader of the neighborhood stay-at-home spouses absorbed her into their web, until a family of Halloween decoration rejects that her mother would have run screaming from were the kindest beings she ever met. (Steve told her what Antler Guy had done to the peeping tom. She admits to herself that she considered asking him to visit Millie's father in a similar way.)

Even now she watched how these people- her new family- drew together, holding each other up through their own overwhelming pain to help hold her too. She spared a moment to be grateful that at least Millie was here, not lost and possibly hurt, before returning to her thoughts. She had given a thorough report to the police, of course, and combed through every bit that she could remember with obsessive detail. She simply could not remember. This is suspicious, in itself. Beatrice does not forget small detail. Her life has taught her that the tiniest change can be incredibly significant: Millie's untimely birth started with a dangerous silence she reacted to too late. So she knows when the children have a secret, often before Sharon. She knew the day before Miss Cravandish's eggs hatched, just from the way the peeping changed tone. She watches, and she hides in plain sight. An unwed black mother is not always seen and she uses this to her advantage, another weapon in an unkind world.

As Steve sleeps under a thin blanket with exhaustion etched in deep under his eyes, Beatrice thinks. She thinks about all the snippets she has picked up from Hellwife, the frantic research into eldritch
protections that she did when Millie first became friends with Son, the feeling in the air when she walks through a ward-line. She thinks about her daughter, the way she smiles, how happy the boys make her, how their lives have changed so much.

She thinks about how she has never seen a birthmark on her daughter's bicep before.

~~~

Steve makes a call to the Suits when Millie wakes up. Not to ask for help but merely to inform them that yes, she is awake and no, she will not answer any questions from Suits or police. The hospital administration tries half-heartedly to keep Millie for observation, but other than a reluctance to talk she is in perfect health. Her mother insists on going home, for recuperation in a friendly environment. No one sees the fist in her pocket, or the wad of Kleenex wrapped with precision around a dark-brown smear.

The car ride is uneventful- Steve drives while mother and daughter cuddle in the back, and whisper. They turn onto a ghost-street- no one is out, not even at midmorning. There are signs of life, though, and care- the pets have been fed and watered, Auberguine's leaves are neatly bundled for the composting pickup. Bella's skateboard is propped against the Abomination's porch, next to a fresh delivery of soup and casserole. (Bella herself is currently curled up deep in the depths of Auberguine, having cried herself to sleep. Mr. Paws and Puggles keep her company.) Fluffy and Clifford are asleep in the front yard, having spent most of the night searching for scents with the help of Mr. Manzo, Peabody, and Brutus.

Hellwife welcomes them home with open arms and ushers them into her home. An oilslick bubble keeps Sharon's sickness from spreading to the human contingent. In a nest of blankets and a sad-looking bucket rests Sharon, looking worse than the projectile vomiting episode that triggered her quarantine. Hellwife settles in next to her, taking comfort as much as she gives it. Steve starts for his wife, and is stopped by Beatrice.

"Wait Steve. We need to talk."

The smear on the tissue, carefully tasted by Hellwife, is some sort of suppressant. At her request, Hellwife checks both mother and child for magical interference. Hellwife's brow-twigs furrow.

"tHERe Is SomeThIng, BuT iT hiDEs. SliThery WretChed thinG-"

"But there is something, right? Something that is designed to make you not look?" Beatrice's eyes gleam.

"YeS....BuT I CannoT caTch it. mY HusbaND is BeTTer at SucH TWisTy casTiNg." Hellwife sighs, and she droops. "i worRy thAT i CannOt rEacH Him, noR fEEl Son. ThIS tasTes Of ConSPiRaCy."

No one looks surprised. Steve looks almost as sickly as his wife, who has regained some color from sheer rage. Beatrice holds Millie in her lap, eyes faraway and thinking. Millie tugs on her mother's shirt, and whispers in her ear. Beatrice nods.

"Millie can find them."

~~~

The neighborhood is quiet, but eyes are watching.

The bond between the children allows Millie to zero in on the boys' position with relative ease. (It
does not help the feeling of conspiracy to find them so close to home.) Information flies through phones warded against wire-tapping and via Hellwife's Interhouse Begonia Mail system- who lives there, what do we know about him, recent movements- reports are sparse. No one in the neighborhood offers to call the police, not even the retired cop Mr. B. Clive on the corner. Police couldn't help.

But these, these are the people in the neighborhood. These are the Manzos, the Hendersons, the Fitz-Simmons, Mrs. Giotto, Mr. Clive, and all the other humans that have accepted and welcomed the Abominations (even if somewhat reluctantly, at first), that paved the way for other eldritch to come and have a home, a community. And that community, made of grumpy ex-cops and the gorgon hatchlings that he baby-sits, of timid gardeners and tentacle-kin, will not tolerate what was done to three innocent children, what may still be happening to two of them.

As the sun sets, they gather. A solid line of beings surrounds the house. Fences are bridged with hands and arms, but no one touches the fence or grounds of Robert's lot. Dead center in the front, in an arc that goes into the street, is Hellwife, and Beatrice, and Steve. (Millie is in the Anderson home, behind layers of Auberguine and the very protective pets. Sharon is still in her bubble, but her subcommanders keep her supplied with information and warm soup.) An old man steps up, and unfolds a very long letter. This is Mr. Krupnik, the elderly lawyer friend of Antler Guy, and the current elected representative of the Home Owners Association of the area.

Midway through the reading of grievances, the house begins to creak. A few paragraphs more and it sways alarmingly. With the words "lien for non-payment of fines" it shrieks like a dying thing, and spits out three beings in a flood of house furnishings and occult paraphernalia. The two small shapes are plucked from the flood by their parents.

The third watches in pants-shitting terror as the father of one of the boys, no longer held in check by the possible murder of his child and in no mood for the blackmail "Ri'Lethiel" had attempted, materializes in front of him. Mr. Krupnik clears his throat, hands Antler Guy the letter gravely, and lets his fellow member of the HOA finish the eviction in his own special way.

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By unanimous consent the empty house is sold to Beatrice, who pays in full (for the Suits kept their word, and her savings account is plump) and remodels extensively. The fences separating the three properties are removed- it is less three families in three houses, and more one family with extensive yardage. The grounds are, by neighborhood agreement, an unofficial playground supervised by Auberguine and deathshade vines. (Auberguine at her adult size cannot be contained in a house, but monitoring a playground of screaming children keeps her occupied and happy. The deathshade vines like eating the shed goldfish crackers, and stealing the occasional pacifier.) The Abomination's home is invite-only for safety concerns, as it obeys mortal physics only loosely. The Anderson's home is wide-open, a community hub of interaction and information. Beatrice's home is the quiet place, the still pool in an often-turbulent extended family. But it is their family, one that they have made. And whether quiet or raucous, together or far-flung, it remains their family, their neighborhood, their community.

And they embrace it, and defend it, and hold it open for others seeking home.

Chapter End Notes
Fear not, this is not the end. This is what I've been calling the shortform version—written in a style similar to how it was started, and compressed for time and ease of reading. Thing is, there is a longform version in the works, that may very well turn into a novel if I don't turn into some form of poultry and/or suffocate under a mound of college homework. Longform will have much more detail, and cover a longer span of time.

Those interested in the longform version are welcome to head over to my Tumblr account. Search for "antler guy" and you'll get the latest news. I tag pretty much everything with that that pertains to the story.

And, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Thank you for every kind word and smile that this story provoked. Every shining drop of nasal-expelled beverage is a glittering jewel. Every wheeze is a symphony. And I hope that the nail-biting bits were not unbearable.
Addendum and Other Things

No, this isn’t a fake out. I figured the easiest way for everyone to see this would be to add it in a final chapter.

So, for those who want regular updates as to Antler Guy and the longform version, I have a twitter at http://www.twitter.com/erinnightwalker. Burning questions are welcome there as well, I revived it to make such things easier. There is also a tumblr, of course, under the same username. If you are interested in original work of a non-Antler Guy nature, inquire at the twitter so I don't violate the TOS here.

FAQ time!

WHERE IS MORE I NEED IT- I am a college student at the moment, and time is precious (and part of the reason the original update schedule on tumblr was incredibly wacky). There is, indeed more- I have it plotted until the Triad is out and about on their own shenanigans. The short version is, like, one arc. I got prequels, sequels, and in-between-quels.

Ok.... WHEN IS MORE I NEED IT- It is being written, painfully slow. Those interested are welcome to contact at twitter, or send a message here.

I WISH TO THROW MONEY AT YOU TO MAKE THE STORY COME OUT FASTER- Due to the TOS of AO3, I cannot answer that question here. Ask somewhere else. Hint. Hint.

DO YOU PLAN TO POST IT HERE- I do, actually. While I may publish for money as well, I know the joy of being able to read something without having the money to keep it. And it wouldn't be what it is without y'all. Also, I know I can and do buy books that I have free access to as well.

I WISH TO MAKE AN ART/DO A CROSSOVER/FANFIC OF THE THING- Cool! I ask that if you do, you do it not for profit. If you are honestly interested in making a webcomic based solely off the story I have written, then we need some careful negotiation. If you are drawing/writing for fun, I ask as a courtesy that you link or mention where you got the idea from. And shoot me a link if you want, because I like seeing how people headcanon various characters.

WHY ISN'T THIS A COMIC/MOVIE/NETFLIX THING YET- because I have no idea how to do most of that, and my own drawing skills aren't up to snuff to solo a comic. If anyone knows how to Do The Thing, let me know?

This will update occasionally with interesting tidbits.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!