Schism
by grayorca15, YearwalktheWorld

Summary

1 Corinthians 12:26, "That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another."

Tentative hiatus.

Notes

New fic by me and grayorca15!

This fic is basically RP style, with no set update schedule and no set chapter length. Different POV's are written accordingly:

The Kid - YearwalktheWorld
Dennis Zalewski / Others - grayorca

But each given part has also been beta read by each other. We hope you enjoy!

Leave a comment if you please. Or join us on the Amino app @ Official Castle Rock group. We love to geek out over CR, however AU we go with it here. :3

Faceclaims for OCs are heavily hinted/described throughout. Should we reach the conclusion, a special bonus chapter featuring Easter egg reveals, cast choices,
recommended OSTs, and more will be posted. Have fun searching!
September 9th, 2018

Dear diary.

So. Day eleven. Here I sit. And, to start off, yeah, it was looking a lot like the previous ten if anyone was expecting a happy ending to this fuckup of a manhunt. ...Yeah, that's right. Fuck - up - of a manhunt. It'd been almost two weeks since our dear Dale Lacy went and flew the coop.

Of his own volition, or at someone else's hands, the theories out there once ranged from the mundane to the fantastical (yes, fantastical - thanks for telling me that's an actual word, Em).

By the end of the day, though, I can assure you, as the one to discover what became of our late warden, things have taken an all-expenses-paid vacation to Weirdsville.

Also known as Castle Rock, Maine.

"Oh, that's nice. When can we expect our return to normalcy?"

...Not any time soon.

That's all I can know for sure.

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Cell Block F.

Closed since the Christmas fire in '87.

...Nobody goes down there anymore...

Using a pair of bolt cutters to sever the heavy, padlock-bearing chains wound through the door handles, this was all Dennis Zalewski cared to think about, as he and Officer Chris Boyd prepared to set foot in the long-since-disused wing. he opted not to consider how it was his impulsive blurting-out which had landed them this uneviable task. Warden Porter, Lacy's hastily-chosen replacement, had more than a few irons to handle from the fire at the moment, never minding the mysterious aspects of her predecessor's disappearance.

One of her first self-appointed jobs was to somehow relieve the overcrowding of the facility on the whole.

Zalewski, only a shy two years on the payroll, already had more clout with the higher ups than most of his colleagues. It wasn't that he aspired to be a know-it-all to garner this kind of reputation to further his own ends. But in his short tenure at Shawshank, he had picked up his fair share of work, and then some. More hours meant more dollars on the weekly stipend. Every penny counted when one was on the cusp of fatherhood. And to do his job well, he was familiar with all the prison's inner workings on at least a casual basis.

Said inner workings included knowing the layout to a tee.

"Pft. Nice goin', Junior Ace," Boyd was already grousing as they stripped the chains in a noisy series of clanks. Together, they put their shoulders against the metal doors and pushed. The rusty hinges screeched in protest, but gave at being shoved. "Did you- have to go and mention this
particular tidbit to the new bigwigs so soon? Y'know she has that bug up her ass, to get things done that Dale would'a normally let lie. With Lacy outta the picture - "

"I get it, Chris. She wants to shake everything down, see what falls out, to know what she's dealing with," Dennis retorted. "And you know it was only a matter of time before she asked somebody about the decommissioned parts of the building."

Doors parted, they paused to wrap the handkerchiefs - improvised respiration masks - about their faces, before clicking on their flashlights. A screen of floating dust revealed itself in the dual beams.

Boyd wasn't done ranting. "Yeah, only a matter of time. So why bring it up now? Then you and I would'a had at least a chance of avoidin'- Christ. Look at this mess."

Entering the wing, they stood a few floors above ground level. The high rows of broken windows had long since been boarded over from outside, leaving a bare minimum of light inside. Old, scorched metal had given way to rust and decay in the three decades since the blaze ensued. The catwalk railing was at least intact, the cell doors left facing it askew, some sticking out at odd angles like broken blades of grass.

All around, a hollow sort of silence pressed in, making their presence here seem at once outlandish and intrusive.

Dennis wrinkled his nose, not only at the smells of aged soot and old concrete. This block was the equivalent of Shawshank's appendix - dark, no electricity or working plumbing, not of any real use to anybody, but nevertheless there. Any visitors from outside would feel instantly displaced, picking their way along the twisted landings.

Inching his way closer toward the edge, Boyd peered down into the depths of the corridors below. He squinted over the cover of his mask. "There. That's where they stacked the bodies. Fuckin' jailbird barbecue..."

Lovely. Sniffing, Dennis declined to look for himself. He turned to inspecting the cells nearest to them instead. Some boasted (former) bunk beds, others single cots, each with the standard toilet-and-sink setup in its opposite corner, pitted and blackened by a once-raging inferno. He panned his flashlight across the walls, the ceilings, the floors -

Wait.

The floor.

"Hey."

Taking a few steps forward, Dennis squinted, half-kneeling to take a closer look at the tracks - noticeably darker than the ashen dust piled up all around. Fresh drag marks, a footprint or three, scuffed their way through the detritus.

Leading onward.

He straightened up. "Someone's been here."

"And?" True to form, Boyd took his first chance to slack off, and ran with it. Behind him, Dennis heard the scuffle of shoes, then a thump, followed by the creak of old mattress springs. "So what? 'hat's night-nights for me, pal."
Brows furrowed, Dennis glanced over his shoulder. "Really?"

Stretched out on a cot, Boyd folded his hands behind his head, giving a contented sigh. He was safe in the knowledge his less-experienced colleague would do the real heavy lifting. "Oh, fuck yeah."

"...Great. You do that." Resigned to the idea of pressing on, alone, knowing there would be no convincing the older corrections officer to do anything different (and that this was far from the first time he had caught the short end of such a stick), Dennis turned back, half-following the prints in the filth. The tentative allure of figuring out what had created them was momentarily trumped by the need to do as he had been instructed.

Someone had to count the beds.

Solitary had become a joke, nothing actually individual about the cells in that wing. The general population corridors were looking more like hallways stuffed to the brim with uniformed refugees, three or more to a given cell. And they kept bussing more and more bodies in by the week, from every last podunk corner of the northeast and beyond.

Shawshank's walls wouldn't give.

But the people trying to make sure she operated to the best of her ability might soon enough.

The records for Block F were long since gone. The overcrowding had to be addressed.

Dennis held on to the barest glimmer of hope that, once F was fitted for it, things would get that much easier for everybody once there was room to breathe.

Dale Lacy had run a tight ship.

But perhaps now, more than ever, was the time to loosen things up.

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If he had a son, he would name him Wendell.

He thought about it often - about the one missed day and Marren's exasperation when he had asked her to take a pregnancy test, about the cells that could have been dividing and clumping together to create his son.

He thought about it, because it was preferable to think about, versus the twenty-seven years he had been in this fucking cage. About how, maybe, if he ever got out and found a way to his own dimension again

(*Because he didn't care about the other Henry Deaver by now, didn’t care about the other place with the hordes of birds that had wormed its way inside of him, making him into a veritable puppet*)

he would come home to a grown up son, still hurt about a father who vanished before he was even born, who supposedly abandoned his mother for some town where he had been raised, where his own father had disappeared and hurt him in a different sort of way.

He wanted to scream about it when those thoughts crossed his brain unbidden: a grown son with narrowed, accusing eyes and crossed arms, refusing to listen because he can't begin to explain just where he had been-
(Not to mention the fact that the last twenty-seven years hadn’t aged him, face still remaining so smooth and unblemished, if he ever found his way back to Marren and Wendell would they even believe he was who he said he was?)

And sometimes he let himself imagine a darker possibility, one where he had been totally wrong and Marren hadn’t been pregnant at all. Where there was no Wendell and she had moved on from him, because who would truly wait twenty-seven years for him?

As much the thought pained him, to wish her nothing but happiness even if he himself wasn’t necessarily a part of that equation, it hurt worse to think it had come to pass.

To think he had been so excited for nothing, all along. If the one thing that had gotten him through this farce of an imprisonment didn’t exist he might just -

The tank opened.

He stiffened, but didn’t attempt to move, beyond an anxious, exhaling shudder of his now-prolific ribcage. The starvation he had undergone for what felt like forever, when it was closer to a month or so, had drained him of his already-lacking energy long ago.

Even now, he didn’t know what had prompted Lacy to stop bringing the trays with bread and water down weeks ago. All he knew was the way the deprivation shriveled his stomach and dried his tongue, to the point where the only times he could speak or move was when the Bad took over.

(For some reason the Bad wasn’t bound by petty humanity the way he was, it could force his shaky legs up and form words through his mouth but it was never his own words or his own voice)

He watched as Lacy descended, eyes boring into him until he could make out the older man’s whole form, lantern in hand, and - and - no... no, the man had no tray.

He let his eyes slink off of him until they hit the floor.

Why did I expect any different?

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” He knew this quote well. Isaiah 14:12, one that he became intimately familiar with, a saying he associated with shaking bars and righteous fury. In the beginning of his imprisonment he had tried to explain who he was, where he was from, how he could not be the Devil but it only served to infuriate Lacy more.

(The Dale Lacy in his dimension was nothing like this man: he was proud and stern but not unlikable, the kind of fellow who would know everyone’s names in town, the one who had told him that he was strong and not to let his father steamroll him, but of course mere words were nothing against Matthew)

Breathing slow, he rested his brow against the bars, eyelids drooping. He was too thirsty to really make much use of his mouth, the few words he had attempted before sounding like nothing more than gargled, incoherent syllables, words run through a garbage disposal only to come out in shredded wisps.

Besides, he had stopped explaining long ago. He knew the futility of that argument. Now he only begged for the torture to stop or to be given something, anything. Only The Bad really talked anymore.

“Today is the day,” Lacy said, and something about his tone made his prisoner’s knobby spine stiffen. He set the lantern down in its usual place, beside the chair. “Today is the day that I prove
who you really are.”

Lids lifting, his eyes trailed back over to Lacy, mildly alarmed at the words he was saying. He could see nothing unusual about him, nothing that would indicate a test of any kind.

(His mind wandered back to sixth grade, when they learned about the Salem Witch Trials, where the townsfolk would poke the supposed witches with pins to see if they could feel it and when they couldn't it meant they were a witch, but in reality they had usually just gone into shock or something, it was so far in the past he couldn't really remember - )

until he looked down at the man's hands.

He took a sharp breath.

They weren't gloved like usual, instead showing bare skin the prisoner hadn't seen hardly ever before.

A test, he had said, and now with Lacy approaching the bars he understood just what sort of test his captor was proposing.

“W-waiih - ” he tried to warn him, tried to say wait and get the man to listen but his tongue wasn't moving to let him form the word. Instead it laid limply in his mouth, useless, slurring his words.

“There is no more waiting,” Lacy said, seeming to understand what he was trying to say. “Today is the day. You will either prove me wrong or I will prevail over the Devil.”

He shook his head at the words, belatedly trying to shrink back from the man, to get somewhere out of reach as Lacy crouched down in front of him but couldn't find the strength to do so.

He's going to kill himself, The Bad said in his head. It actually sounded stunned, as if it hadn't foreseen this turn of events. Perhaps it hadn't. Perhaps it had lived through something like this before

(He thought back to the other Henry, alive and well fed, nothing like how he knew he looked at the moment and something like resentment stirred in his stomach)

but had never imagined this. Perhaps it had, but disregarded it as possible.

He is. He's going to touch you and kill himself, it continued, almost as if it were talking to itself. Because we can't help it, can't turn it off- he's threatening us and we have to defend ourselves, but-

I'm going to starve to death down here, he thought for himself as one ungloved hand rose up toward him. I'm going to live out the rest of my days - hours, even - in this godforsaken cage and never know if I have a little boy named Wendell.

The mere thought of his would-be/might-be child gave him the courage to lift his head back up and stare at Lacy, to try and convey just how wrong his decision was.

Lacy stared back down at him, hand momentarily frozen, and he allowed himself to feel a surge of hope that whatever he was showing was working, having some effect on the other's resolve.

The hope crumbled when Lacy scoffed and continued to reach closer.

(His thoughts devolved into a panic rarely felt during his imprisonment but he couldn't show it outside, physically he just couldn't force his face to show his emotions so he just continued to lean
He was going to kill Warden Lacy by simply allowing him to touch his skin, and then he would soon follow, or else he would become a husk of a person, whose only thoughts were on unobtainable food and water. He didn't know what would happen to The Bad, but the way it's own emotions seemed to be adding to his own were any indication it wouldn't be happy.

Let me speak, let me SPEAK! The Bad screamed in his head, a type of panic he had never heard before so he gave control over immediately.

“Da… Dale, Dale, listen, listen to him,” he said and it wasn't his own voice. It was younger, wavering and slightly reedy. “Don't touch him, don't do it, don't *touch* us- ”

The ungloved hand stopped, held midair. The man seemed shocked into a form of silence, before sputtering and finding his voice once more.

“Terry?” Lacy asked, and he felt his hands grip the bars, eyes widening and head nodding earnestly without him meaning for it to.

“Yes, yes, it's me, Dale, *listen* to me, don't touch him- ” The words that weren't his own were cut off by Lacy slamming a fist onto the bars, shaking the whole cage and scaring the words back down his throat.

“Shut up! No! It can't be you, you killed yourself that night, jumped off the school’s roof!” Lacy shouted but didn't move closer so The Bad regained its hold, to continue its protest.

The voice tried again: “I-I did, I did! But it really is me, I'm using his body and if you touch him you'll die, what you need to do is let him out. Let him go back. Please, *please*, Dale, it's me, Terrence -”

“NO YOU'RE NOT!” He roared and shook the cage again, startling him enough to lift his head, out of harm's way, before it dropped back down onto the bars, like the string holding it up had been severed. As quickly as it appeared, The Bad had left, perhaps realizing that it wasn't getting anywhere good with its attempt. The strength it had been able to use to manipulate his skeletal frame had vanished, leaving him to rely on himself.

“He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him!” And here was another quote that had been burned into his brain, about Satan and his lies. “When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of LIES!”

He couldn't speak. He didn't have the baseless strength that The Bad could force into his system, all he had was the insatiable hunger and dehydration and fear. Nothing that he could use to open his mouth and force something out that would stop this man.

Lacy was crouched then, eyes burning with a fire so bright that he wanted to move back, for fear of getting burned by that gaze, but his body felt too heavy, too cumbersome to try.

A hand moved forward, towards his cheek. He let out a thin cry from his lips, no actual words to be discerned, just one last guttural warning for Lacy to not.

“You are a master of *lies,*” he said, hissing the words at him as his hand threaded its way between the bars, now close enough that he had to cross his eyes to look at it. “And- ”

Lacy stopped.
His fingers made their way to his cheek, a sort of awful pressure on it as they settled onto the paper-thin flesh. They fell limp after a single moment of touch and the older man gave out a groan of his own.

Lacy hunched over, one hand now clutching at the bars and the other pawing feebly at his chest. He could do nothing but watch as his kidnapper gave out another plaintive gasp, this one more strained. The hand holding the bars for support slipped off of them.

He slumped down, now wheezing out labored breaths that he was sure would be the man's last. He had warned him. He had warned him. But now, to watch the way that a simple touch was killing Lacy, it felt as if it were killing him, too. Their eyes connected as the man slid down even further, now almost entirely sprawled upon the floor-

(I knew it, they screamed at him, you are The Devil and I have proved it, even if it killed me I proved it and now you have no choice but to face it-)

With that final glance, he lay face down on the dirty floor of the chamber, took one last shuddering breath and then-

Then Warden Dale Lacy was no more.

Silence flooded the tank.

It was much less melodramatic than he had expected the death to be. Something in him had imagined the man bleeding from his eyes and mouth, had expected disease to suddenly riddle him head to toe, but instead it had been almost... quiet. A few tortured gasps for air, a hand clutching at his heart, and then it was over.

Alas, it was over for him, too. Because even if he had survived far longer than any normal human being could without food and water his form had still deteriorated, still shriveled until there was practically no strength in him, leaving an impenetrable haze behind in his head. The Bad simply wasn't allowing him to die for reasons he wished he didn't know.

But he did.

Let me take over.

And there it was, in his head not even five minutes after the death of Lacy with its insistent voice. That was what it wanted, he knew, all along. A host it could manipulate and use for purposes he didn't know what for, but also knew couldn't be anything good.

He knew what its first step would most likely be if he gave himself up. He was no use to The Bad if he was as weak as he was now, with no food or water. His eyes flickered over to the body.

Let me take over, it begged again and he cried out at the offer, a soft, pitiful whine, heaving himself away from the fresh body. He stumbled over his own bare feet, half collapsing against the opposite side of the cage - as far away as he could get. He knew what would happen if he gave in and to his horror, it was actually tempting.

“Nn… nouhh,” he moaned, weak and feeble, and still it felt like his tongue was nothing more than a clunky piece of chalk in his mouth. “Nnouh!”

You're dying, it said again and now The Bad wasn't using the upset voice, it was using the deeper, angry one that terrified him and sent sharp pains running all throughout his body. Even we can't save you if you continue on your own.
He shook his head at the words, refusing to count them as true, right to the bitter end, turning his head to glare sideways at Lacy’s lifeless form. No. He had warned him not to touch him. The Bad had even warned him, so Lacy should have known it was serious. They were serious.

Now because of that blunder, that misstep, they would both rot down here.

(A part of him wondered if Lacy had believed he would die but was just really looking for a way out, had used him to fulfill some impromptu suicide mission to prove his captive was evil and in some last cruel twist sealed him in here to starve for eternity or until The Bad decided he wasn’t worth its time any longer)

He didn’t want to die, but he knew what would happen if he gave into The Bad - could almost taste the flesh between his teeth and feel the blood running down his chin. His stomach grumbled. The simple thought, of consumption itself, of satiating the need, made his mouth water in anticipation.

My boy.

He froze at the words in his head, the new dreadfully-familiar tone. He knew that voice as intimately as his own, had felt the way it changed something inside him from love to fear, his blood running cold instead of hot like it should have.

My little boy, it continued, droning, so placid and assured. He couldn't shrink back from it, from a voice that was only in his head but he tried anyways, hunching over and placing his hands flat over his ears.

The last time he had heard this voice was on a tape, after he had killed himself.

You do not want to die this way, Matthew coaxed. He curled up further, finding one last reserve of strength to shuffle into the farthest corner of the small cage. God will not bring back those who do not help themselves.

“Gu... goh away,” he moaned, growing dizzy, willing the voice out of his head. It wasn't real, it wasn't, The Bad was just using another disguise to try and fool him. It had done so before, using children's voices, making him panicked and upset until he relinquished control-

God helps those who help themselves, Matthew continued, unmoved, despite his command. And I will help you, Henry.

He didn't respond, unsure - for several minutes - of just what to feel. No one except himself had called him Henry in a long time, a long enough time that the name now felt foreign and wrong.

That name did not belong to him in this world.

Who are you to deny me, Henry? Matthew asked, and still his voice was that same booming, falsely-patient calm it always was. It had struck fear into him throughout his childhood, had frozen him into young adulthood every time he heard someone with the same tone because all he would be able to imagine was

(An autumn picnic with his parents and his father pulls out a gun, his mother with her wavering voice telling him to put it away, his own face aghast and afraid at the way Matthew held it up to his own ear)

his father, standing behind him. Now, to have it in his head it was as if every nook and cranny inside the tank was filled to the brim with the man’s presence.

Who are you to refuse? Your mother is not here to steal you away, Henry, not this time. No one is
Eyes shuttering, he let out a choked noise and lowered his head. His hands slid from his ears. He buried his face in his arms, trying in vain to ease the spinning.

He hadn't known it was possible to cry without tears before his starvation began but he knew now, the way that your shoulders shook and your body trembled of their own accord, the way your eyes burned but no liquid came out.

He sobbed without tears in the cage - at the offer, at his own broken form and The Bad that had called forth a specter of Matthew to torment him into agreeing.

He could never say no and hope to stick to his decision with his father. He had learned long ago that the easiest way to live with the man was to agree as soon as possible, simply give in and allow him every part of his soul.

As much as he didn't want to say yes, he wanted to not die even more.

He nodded.

The spinning stopped. The trembling eased.

His eyes reopened.

*Good choice,* Matthew crooned, and he remembered suddenly a different night when his father had bent him to his will.

*(His mother smiled sadly and said to lie so when his father stared at him and asked in that monotone voice if he heard it he covered over and said yes because his feet were cold, he hadn't dressed for this freezing winter night)*

and then time, over and over again, until he had fled with his mother. It seemed even in a different dimension, with Matthew Deaver dead in both, he could still break him just as easily.

“Good... choice,” he repeated and now it didn't have the parched slur of thirst because it wasn't him, it was The Bad, Matthew, the Forest, but whatever he wanted to call it didn't matter. All that mattered was the way it forced his body to obey an invisible master, using it and leaving him to deal with the pain.

Slowly, he rose, moving without real struggle for the first time in weeks. He stood, stooping, and turned around, with none of the hesitation or exhaustion that had marked his movements moments before. Then, without so much of a second thought his hand reached through the bars, all skin and bones, and grabbed ahold of Lacy’s body.

“Would you like to go away?” The Bad asked him, through himself, even as his mouth opened, as he dragged the body closer to him, as his head lowered. His eyes roved back and forth, deciding where to begin.

He pulled out an arm, using long, thin, claw-like fingers to shove the sleeve back.

*Yes, yes, please, I-I don't want to see,* he begged to the voice, the force in control of own body. Seconds after, he felt his teeth sink into something soft and still slightly warm, something that was tough to get a good grip on with his mouth.

The hunger spiked.
He bit deeper.

And then, like a fuse had blown, he was gone.
Rekindle

September 10th, 2018

Dear diary...

(Yeah, I know - however derivative it is to keep starting these entries in such a manner, like some giddy, tittering eight-year-old girl, at three weeks of it and counting, it’s become my routine. And, as work has come to be anything but routine now, I gotta get my familiarity fix somewhere. ...You can appreciate where I’m coming from, Em. You always do. Journaling is an inexpensive hobby, yeah, and I’d sooner you read these than any court-appointed shrink.)

So. Should I just start with how Boyd was almost right?

For a change?

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Before he turned the corner, Dennis decided to see - while he was at a safe distance - if a bit of boldness would prove rewarding. Now was as good a time as any to find out, with no one else around. Squaring his feet, he drew to a stop, glanced over his shoulder once more, and barked: "Chris!"

It echoed once along the corridor, and hadn’t quite faded by the time Boyd hollered back:

“What?”

Get your smug, lazy ass outta that cot and help me!

...is what Dennis would’ve liked to have said.

But he didn’t.

Golden-boy-wannabe reputation aside, with professionalism put before petty personal hiccups, Zalewski liked to think of himself as easy-going. He wasn’t a demander. Holding up his share of the work, he didn’t expect much out of those he worked with, besides the simple, written-in condition that they would meet him halfway. True, private corrections work didn’t foster the same brotherly feelings of camaraderie than law enforcement, but it wasn’t far off from that, or many others, in which its efficiency was defined by how well its workforce got along with each other.

From day one, Dennis had known he wouldn’t like Chris Boyd. The guy’s pedigree, in keeping with his tendency to cut corners and to duck work at every turn, could boast the header of “Shawshank’s Biggest Complainer” and anyone reading it wouldn’t find reason to disagree. Granted, he was far from the only person here with grievances on his mind, from either side of the bars, but how was it that, shift after shift, Dennis’ tendency to internalize his disgruntlement somehow meant he was to be stuck with Boyd for a wingman?

Odd couple chemistry, my johnson.

“I got somethin’!”

“Yeah? Unless you want to send her my way after you’re done, you’re cuttin’ in on my snooze time!”
Dennis scoffed behind his mask, fingers tightening around his flashlight.

So much for baiting him.

Whatever. Was worth a shot.

“At least keep your radio handy, then. We don’t know what kind of signal interference there may be down here.”

A hissing burst of static, white noise, erupted from his own set, as Boyd (as begrudgingly as always) answered him with a cursory press of the receiver.

Thanks, pal. That’s reassuring.

Making a mental note to ply the mic with every set of stairs he descended, Dennis went on. His mental recollect of the wing’s outdated floor plan would have to guide him, as would the series of opened doors left in his wake.

Further in, the smell of charred metal faded, giving way to the heady musk of copper and slowly-tarnishing steel. With his light panning across the disused cells, throwing up spidery shadows every which way he turned, this foray made him think less of how Block F used to be a working arm of Shawshank and more of the amateur camping he had done, maybe a shy fifteen years ago, in the forests around Castle Rock.

He wasn’t the biggest outdoorsman there ever was, but the lifestyle got its hooks into his two younger siblings at an early age. Every spring since they were born, the two youngest Zalewskis would be the first of the family to bolt out the door, splashing around in puddles made from melting snow banks, breaking out their bikes while there were still patches of ice on the street.

And as the eldest of these three brothers, it was a natural duty for Dennis to oversee Joseph and Trevor on their eventual romps through the woods, exploring all around the foot of Black Mountain. Alternatively this meant doing the heavy lifting of carrying camp provisions, clearing a site, and seeing to their hurts when one (or inevitably both) found a way to scrape or bruise themselves.

Sometimes, they hiked out to a would-be site at just before sundown, an impulsive act done only to escape the inevitable bores of home. With dinner behind them, and the weekend to look forward to, one look and it was time to pack.

Yes. More than once, they managed to get themselves lost.

And on those occasions, Dennis had learned how to pitch a tent in near-total darkness, while Joey and Trevor took turns arguing over who would hold the flashlight (the trees ceased to look so majestic in its glow, the thinned-out ends of their branches turning spindly and armlike, reaching out every which way around the clearing, as if beckoning them closer: “come, come visit the woods, boys, we’re nothing if not inviting, especially at night”), and whoever didn’t wield the light would be the one to stand lookout, to somehow keep the beasts - that Trev was always so convinced followed them about, unseen, on every venture - at bay.

Because Mom and Dad had such unspoken confidence in him (or so he liked to think), Dennis had never questioned the danger, or saw it as a real deterrent. Bears were a rare enough occurrence in Maine, and he knew enough from books that they would sooner turn and amble away from a strange sight than wander in to investigate.

But Joey had always been a tease. He liked nothing better than to poke fun at Trev’s fear of, well,
anything and everything. They were closer together in age than Dennis was to Joey, and he
supposed this separation factor quipped him with a relative wisdom and natural authority, to
mediate their squabbles. He could put an end to the childish bickering as effortlessly as if Paul had
dropped his newspaper to favor them with The Eye.

All it usually took was a stern “ah- hem” and that was that.

Dennis may not have had the will to follow through on the whupping it warned of, but he didn’t
need to. Memories sufficed there: Dad had only raised a hand to each them once, and on those three
occasions, both brothers were not spared as witnesses. (Paul Zalewski, a retired DNR official, was
as mild as homemade apple pie, besides. He liked to fish and collect stones in his spare time.)

Alas, this inborn familial authority granted him did not immediately translate itself into Dennis’
professional life. Now people like Chris Boyd were his camping partners, so to speak. And over
them he held no sway.

Instead of continuing on side by side, Dennis was left to hike solo today.

It was unnerving as it was weirdly liberating, to be picking his way through Block F, with no one
watching his back. No one to snap at to “keep up”. And no one else to blame if he became lost
beyond the point of no return.

Perks of having a radio strapped to one’s chest - therein lay his only current assurance in being able
to find his way back now.

With little else to do besides keep going, eyes open, ready for any obstacles, Dennis thought of the
article he had read, and the story other guards had relayed him soon after. The cause of the fire had
never been determined, officially. Some think a stove in the commissary sprung a gas leak. Some
thought it arson, a very convenient burn down that meant construction on the newest block would
be a sure thing, come springtime. Leaving several dead, most of them convicts, it was as though the
proverbial book had been closed just as quickly the doors had been chained shut.

1987.

Curious.

That would mean it happened on Lacy’s watch. He was made warden in 1985.

Was there any correlation?

Of course there were those who would always suspect - some casually, some fervently. Dennis
could safely say he fell somewhere in between: he knew Dale Lacy as devout and hard nosed, but
the junior corrections officer didn’t think their missing superintendent shady enough to commit so
dramatic a scam, especially if it put people’s lives in danger.

Maybe aspiring-lifers like Boyd knew better, and had their years of experience to judge the man
by, but for what it was worth Dennis was one who believed in due process. Innocent until proven
guilty - that cornerstone of American law put everything else into perspective.

And had there been any evidence collected at the time which pointed the undeniable finger at
Lacy, he was sure that story would have become common knowledge, pretty damn fast. No
rumors, no whispers, Shawshank would have instituted a new warden faster than you could say
“boo”.

Holding said position meant one was effectively the mayor of a penitentiary versus a town. The
prison sat some twenty miles away from ‘downtown’ Castle Rock. A few homes had cropped up just outside her walls, but Dennis could no more imagine his family living in his workplace’s shadow any more than he could see the dark side of the moon. A shorter commute was just not worth that trouble.

Dale Lacy lived even further away, and regardless of that distance, he kept a snug schedule. For all his commitments, Dale was reputed to be as devoted to Martha as he was the church and the state. Maintaining those three pillars, one would think there was nothing that could ever turn him off of a lifetime filled with faithful community service.

Two days after the search had been put together, Chris Boyd’s first guess could only be the product of a truly slothful mind:

“Please. Anyone else here think Boca or Malibu wasn’t looking better to him by now? I mean, a lifetime of work without so much as a three-day weekend off, ever, would crack any man’s sanity by the time his nesteggs are due to hatch. Ol’ Lacy got itchy feet and went out for a scratch, then decided to keep goin’, end of story.”

Overhearing the hypothesis, unseen around a corner, Dennis Zalewski rolled his eyes then, and he did so once more now, picking his way through a rusty, decrepit cellblock.

So what if the buyout was right around the corner? If it just so happened to coincide with Warden Lacy’s disappearance, one didn’t necessarily (and automatically) relate to the other.

A severance package in the six figures from Northeast Correctional, on top of his pension. Doesn’t matter how much of a workaholic you are, aren’t, were, weren’t. Most would take that and live like royalty for the rest of their days. Lacy’s pushing sixty-two. He wouldn’t leave town without Martha, much less the money coming their way.

Squarer than square. Sterner than stern.

It’s not like he had time to lead a double-life or anything.

-----

“Boyd, come in.”

The footprints in the dust, he had long since lost track of. In his sweep of the vacant cellblock, he knew following them, satiating his own curiosity, wasn’t why they were here. But it was certainly more tertiary to his task than Boyd’s prerogative to catch up on lost beauty sleep.

Now, though, looking at where he had ended up, Dennis wasn’t about to go plunging ahead without someone watching his six. The knowledge of them had already taken on a haunting status, given he thought he had found just what the now-invisible prints had led up to.

This door wasn’t like the other ones.

Not only was it wider, bigger, thicker, with a heavy-duty latch made to be pulled outward…

It was already open.

And the room it looked in on was nothing Zalewski had expected to see.

His almost-piqued gasps echoed in the reverberating space. Bare, blue-gray steel walls, no clutter strewn about whatsoever (climate controlled, compared to the rest of the vacant block).
The only exception was a domed hatch cover situated in the center of the room.

It, too, was already open, hinged to one side, revealing a yawning, circular shaft below.

A ladder down to who-knew-where.

_Someone’s been here all right._

_And I’ll be damned if I remember seeing this mentioned anywhere in the layout map in Porter’s office. For a wing that isn’t supposed to have any sublevels-

He keyed his mic again. “Chris?”

Static crackled, cleared, then crackled again. Faintly, the guard thought he heard a response: “..wski?”

Standing at the threshold, not daring to move closer just yet, he pulled his handkerchief from around his face. Thing was damp and smelly already from the breathing he had done through it. Balancing his flashlight in the crook of his shoulder, he used it to wipe his now-sweating hands.

To the mic, he said, “Boyd, if you got this, hurry on down to the ground floor. There should be two clear staircases. Try me again once you reach my level.”

Perhaps two minutes later, Boyd made good on following these instructions: “- the hell are you, Ace?”

“Ground floor, as far west as you can go along that corridor.” Flashlight pointed into the chamber, Dennis glanced over his shoulder. Distantly, he thought he could hear the stomping shuffle of boots, hurrying forward. “Watch yourself as you go. There’s a lot of tossed mattresses and shit to get around.”

“Consider me- ouch- warned.”

Dennis looked again at the opened hatch, ajar and utterly out of place. Naturally, his first niggling question was where could it possibly lead? And just as naturally, his innate sense of caution warned against climbing down inside, to promptly discover the answer to said first question.

He wasn’t about to do so alone, though.

No way, no how.

Twelve-year-old Joey Zalewski did that once, stuck his head shoulder-deep down a apparently-abandoned burrow tunneled into the steep side of a rocky riverbank. Maybe it was the work of a fox, or a very-motivated bear. Whichever it was, he wanted to see for himself.

Then and there.

Seventeen at the time, Dennis remembered standing ankle-deep in chilly water, with ten-year-old Trev lingering just behind him, both of them equally flabbergasted at the flagrantly-dumb bravado their middle sibling was demonstrating. Yes, he was the clown of the family, but until then, they hadn’t thought him so dense as to do something so senselessly stupid.

“Ello? Anyone hooome?” Joey had cried.

Or might have cried. The dirt muffled his high voice to a very-insulted drone.
Dennis took a moment to blink and shake his head before finding his voice again. “Joe, that’s not a good-”

“Idea?” Withdrawing from the hole, the worst to happen was the shower of pebbles jarred free from the ground just above the burrow. With a yelp that was more startled than afraid, Joey stumbled back and darted out of harm’s reach, splashing his way to safety between them as the burrow entrance promptly collapsed inward on itself with a belching plume of dust. Whatever loose ground Joey disturbed, or whatever he might have thought he would found inside, he took the experience to heart as a cautionary one.

To date, Dennis was thankful nothing worse had actually happened. They had legged it some eight miles away from town, with only the packs on their backs for supplies. Had Joey hurt himself, beyond what could be patched up with a rudimentary first aid kit-

Snap, snap.

“’Ey, greenhorn. You daydreamin’ again?”

Zalewski flinched at the fingers flicking beside his ear, blinking his way back to the present. When had Boyd learned to move that fast?

Belatedly, he thought to fire back: “So w-what if I was?”

You offered, before.

Mask pulled off, Boyd only scoffed through his nose, shining his flashlight ahead, merging its beam with Dennis’. The bolt cutters hung from his other hand. His expression screwed up in neither amusement nor disappointment, but some ugly offspring of the two. “This is what all the fuss is about? ...Someone left a toilet lid up?”

Dennis frowned. “What? Y-you don’t think it looks odd?”

“The whole block looks odd, Junior. It’s been abandoned for over three decades. Unless your ghost came this way, I don’t see this as being anything-”

Clank.

Boyd didn’t look particularly surprised at being cut off. But as they both regarded the hatch with raised eyebrows, Dennis couldn’t help asking, “...You hear that?”

Chris blinked, and the he-cares-not frown was back. “What?”

Inching closer (despite his inner sense of don’t, don’t go there), Dennis strained to hear it again. “That.”

(“I thought I heard something in there, Denny.”)

Boyd scoffed, unknowingly smothering the distant memory of Joey Zalewski in the process. “Christ, man, don’t tell me you’re doin’ the whole horror-movie thing where-”

Clang.

A second, deeper ring rattled up the shaft.

Chris Boyd promptly clammed up.
Vindicated, but feeling no less grim, Dennis glanced back. “Call for backup.”

Boyd squinted and grimaced, hooking one hand over his belted hip. “Why, for the spooky, inexplicable noise you think we’re hearing?”

_A paragon of denial, this guy._

“Can you cap the sarcasm for once and just do as I ask, please? Neither of us knows what this is, admit it.”

“You sayin’ you wanna wait? Not like whatever’s down there is goin’ anywhere.”

*It’d be good to rule out as something dangerous, regardless.*

Dennis frowned. Wherever the ladder went, it ran both ways. He could go down a few rungs, look about, climb back up, and that would be that.

“Call ‘em.”

-----

_Easier said than fuckin’ done!

Boyd was showing admirable restraint. He didn’t verbalize as much, but somewhere above him, Dennis thought he could hear the muttered swears as Chris fiddled with his radio, trying various channels in the hopes of contacting someone closer than those in the administration building.

Best of luck to him.

Meanwhile, Dennis pulled a Joey.

He made sure to shake out and reaffix his handkerchief mask before climbing down. And it proved to be the right decision. Descending feet first, flashlight tucked under his armpit, his progress was slow to start.

Four rungs down, his ears popped, the air temperature doubled, and the smell hit him. So thick and ripe and pungent, he had to stop, breathe in, and hold it, to resist clapping a hand to his nose.

Awful. Like rotten eggs left outside in a bucket after a week of heavy rainfall - instant gag reflex.

Pausing, he turned in place, manipulating the flashlight into his one freed hand, as he swiveled around and scanned the pitch-black chamber.

The first thing his illumination found was the craggy corner of a squarish structure. Panning further, Dennis’ mouth dropped open behind his mask. Shadows not unlike those of the cells overhead played about the walls.

_A cage?_

What on Earth was a cage doing-

He angled the light down.

And remembered to breathe out. “Oh, _fuck_…”

-----
His first thought when he came back to the world wasn't his own.

Joey. Joey stuck his head down in the hole -

He blinked once, sluggishly, so slowly he swore he could feel the thin skin pulling across his very eyeballs, but he didn't dare attempt to move otherwise. He felt disoriented, as if he couldn't recall anything, as though he had no idea who he was, when he was, or where he was, why it was so oppressively dark and why it smelled so rotten.

A second thought followed soon after, and this one was undoubtedly his own. It was wordless, instead just a crash course of panic and revulsion and fear as he remembered everything. He remembered the cage, and The Bad in his head, speaking to him as Matthew, how it spoke through him as Terrence Lacy, remembered the relentless drill of hunger and Lacy -

(He remembered just what became of Lacy and gagged once, insides coiling, but of course nothing came up because he had his meal long ago, didn't he? Just how long ago though, that was the real question, just how long it had been since he willingly gave over control of his body, since he begged to be shoved away from himself- )

And then it was as if he couldn't breathe, the thick smell hanging stagnant in the air, far too strong for him to be able to inhale. He didn't know what it was and yet he did, he knew it in his mind and his heart and most importantly his stomach.

He licked his cracked, dried-out lips once, in an effort to soothe the stinging pain beginning to emanate from them, and tasted blood.

Lying there, on his side, he curled his fingers, barely feeling how they remained coated in a dried, flaky substance - more blood -

Joey -

The name entered his mind once more, one he had never heard of before

(He thought so at least but there was something in the back of his mind that was struggling, protesting as if it could remember but just couldn't articulate it for him to look at)

and the strangeness of why was enough for him to blink once more and try to engage in his surroundings. It was too dark, with the rank scent of death

(The body in front of him must have been torn to shreds, shreds he stuffed in his mouth and ate - he had to will his mind away from the thoughts then, for fear his stomach would convulse and bring those shreds back up, if they were still in it at all)

still in the air and someone was climbing down the ladder.

Wait.

Wait.

Blinking again, he let out a choked moan, quiet enough whoever was approaching couldn’t have heard it. They were climbing down the ladder because when he looked up and squinted he could see that the hatch was still thrown open and, what looked like, someone else's shoes were barely visible at the rim of it.

Someone was climbing down the ladder, and soon their feet would hit the floor of the tank.
Listening to them descend, his mind felt strangely blank even though he knew he should be panicking, that he should be screaming for help or rattling his cage or doing something to draw attention to himself, but instead he couldn't stop thinking about the blood on his lips and what it had tasted like.

Still tasted like.

He didn’t consider trying to speak. He couldn't stop thinking that if the person took a few more steps forward their feet would run into the decomposing, mangled body of the late Warden Lacy. That they would then notice the strips of flesh undoubtedly missing from it.

He licked his chapped lips again, almost as an afterthought, and still tasted the blood.

*Joey, he stuck his head down that burrow and we stood back, just watching in utter shock at his stupidity* -

*(He knew who this “Joey” was, he could feel the information in his head and yet it was locked away from him which wasn't fair because these were his own memories and knowledge then weren’t they?)*

He shook his head as if to get rid of the intruding thoughts. He had bigger concerns at the moment, mostly the way that this person would soon stumble into the body, as sure as soon as they started walking, and how he had evidence of his (at least) desecration of the cadaver all over him, stippled across his face, all over his hands, and sitting in his stomach, or even the way that The Bad was silent.

It had never been like that before

*(That was a lie actually, he realized belatedly because in his own time, his own dimension he had never heard another voice whisper in his mind, never even had the option of giving up control, but it had been so long ago that he ceased to ever think about it)*

always at least a presence in the back of his head, as if it had a gentle grip on his skull.

*(And then he thought of his father again, a firm but not harsh grasp on the back of his neck, leading him out of the church, his eyes connected with Molly’s and she looked concerned, almost as if she had seen the car pull out of the driveway last night at midnight, just him and Matthew-)*

But now - now it was silent, with no pressure. Just him to pilot himself. It made him nervous in a way, which in turn led to budding frustration and anger. He didn't want to feel nervous when The Bad left - he should feel joyous and celebratory, just not *fucking* nervous -

A light clicked on.

He would have startled away from it if he had more energy, but it had been drained from him long ago. Now, he felt more exhausted than even the night Lacy had died. He wondered if his tiredness had to do with the sudden disappearance of The Bad.

His eyes tracked the light. It panned over the bars, slowly at first and stopping as if the person wielding it was trying to understand what they were looking at. He held his breath, but finally looked up, so when the light hit him he would be able to see who the person was.

His first time seeing someone other than Dale Lacy in twenty-seven years. He would have thought he’d be more excited, but instead all he felt was a baseless dread pooling in stomach.
(It probably had to do with the decomposing corpse in front of him and the way he had eaten it, didn't it?)

Then the light angled down, wavering once and he heard a sharp breath puff out of the person as they saw him, and the body.

“Oh, fuck…”

He squinted at the stranger - what little of them he could see behind the glare, even if it was partly obscured by some type of rag tied around the bottom half of the young man's face.

No.

Not a stranger.

The face. It looked familiar. He looked familiar. Something about the wide eyes and orange - yes, orange - hair that could be barely discerned in the gloom, it stirred something in his memory, something that didn't exactly have pleasant connotations -

(He obeyed the command to get on his knees while also trying to calm the young man down - they had gone to school together, been in same grade, years ago - and he knew the way he could get high-strung, could see it in the shakiness of his hands and the wild light in his eyes - he needed to stay calm, for Molly's and the little boy's sake)

And then he remembered, remembered how he knew Joey -

Where he knew Joey from -

(They weren't really friends but he saw the other boy around town and they were in the same grade so he always waved, especially when his younger brothers had tagged along because it was funny - how excited they got, another big kid waving just at them! For them!)

and he remembered other things, too - a shoddy, homemade cage that he had found in the basement and a - a - yes, and a nod in the police station, and a -

(“Did your, uh, your dad ever touch you?” “What? No. My-my dad, he was fucked up, but not like that.”)

warning gunshot, fired into the air, that had somehow hit Molly Strand, but how had it possibly done that? A warning gunshot that he blamed, in a way, for setting this whole thing off, a (“fuckin’”) warning shot that was practically the cause of his imprisonment then -

(If he had a son, he would name him Wendell, but he didn't know if said son even existed - because of this fucking man)

His eyes slid shut at the not-so-distant memories, burning fiercely with tears he knew he couldn't produce.

The man in front of him -

It was Dennis.
September 10th, 2018 (con’t)

Remember.

Almost. I said he was ‘almost’ right.

Dale Lacy didn’t go any such place Boyd said was most likely, if the man really did ‘snap’ (according to what little we know; a ‘snap’ in Lacy’s case isn’t the same snap, say, I would have, bear that in mind).

But our late warden certainly broke from the norm anyone, not knowing better, would have expected of him. (I wasn’t far off with my supposition that he was leading a double-life. ...More like he had a living skeleton in the closet. Eureka?) Granted, there are plenty of people far closer to the center of the investigation than me. But let’s just say, work isn’t routine for me anymore because I’m enjoying a uniquely... exclusive point of view on the matter.

Being the guy to find... him lends me such a privilege, I suppose. (I’m being as careful as I can be, Em, under the circumstances. Like always. I know, I worry too much sometimes - “a lot of the time”, I can hear you saying it now - but in this case I think you would agree with me that any and all worry regarding the matter is more than justified.)

And, yes, at first, I couldn’t believe the things he tried to tell me.

...Because what sane, logical person would?

-----

For one terrifying, suspended instant, Dennis Zalewski took in what he was seeing.

Then he promptly decided to set procedure aside (for there was no page of the training manual which could possibly apply to the situation) and move the rest of the way down the ladder.

Because, against all his better judgment, he knew there was no backpedaling from a sight so gruesome and unexpected, and simply write it off as a byproduct of sleep deprivation. He was nowhere near tired enough to warrant so vivid a hallucination.

And even if he was, the scant glimpse of eyeshine (an ordinary thing, he mused later, one might see in a poorly-lit photograph) his flashlight revealed, from inside the bars of the cage, almost lost in the shadows, and the frighteningly-thin face to go with it-

“CHRIS!”

Up above, he heard a metallic clatter, accompanying startled footsteps. Pulling his mask off, he craned his head back, looking up the shaft in time to see Boyd’s puzzled visage lean into view.

“What is it, Zalewski?”

“Bolt cutters, now! There’s someone down here!”

...Two someones, if I’m being completely honest.

Were he in that moment, though, Dennis was positive there would be no summoning the older
guard to his side.

Message delivered, he clapped the rag back over his nose and mouth, and stepped closer.

Between the cage and the ladder lay a body, layers of clothes torn through, missing altogether along the arms and legs, innards strewn about like hideous, dried-up party streamers. How it was he had only noticed the overpowering stench of it upon descending into the chamber, Dennis didn’t know. Something to do with air pressure, maybe.

But looking at it now, bloated and eviscerated and distorted beyond immediate recognition, once twisted by rigor mortis and in a clearly-advanced state of decay-

Boyd noticed it right away. His very voice seemed to recoil in disgust: “Ohh! The hell is- the fuck is that smell, Ace?”

To his credit, he didn’t halt his descent.

Averting his eyes, ignoring the mangled corpse as best he was able, Dennis didn’t wait to be offered the long-handled cutters. He reached out to take them. “Later. Give me those.” He paused, gulping a deep breath, trying to not let his panic and newfound-nausea overwhelm him. “There’s- one still alive.”

“One still ali- oh, Jesus ehh- ugh. Oh, God. Are you- you kidding me with this shit?” Stepping off the ladder, Boyd turned, cringing visibly. Before his flashlight found the cage, it panned across the humanoid husk Dennis stood beside. The older guard leaned back, sharply enough his back clanged against the ladder. “There’s a goddamn BODY down here?”

“Besides that, look.”

Mindful to set his flashlight at an angle, lest he accidentally blind the man, Dennis knelt beside the cage. Besides the odor of the corpse, there was another muskier smell underneath that, one he recognized as similar to the guards’ locker rooms and showers. He knew it: the smell of long-lived-in clothes, soaking in slightly-sour sweat. Closer up, it was more than obvious.

Just as plain to see was the apparent-prisoner’s vastly-depleted state of health. The clothes probably fit his frame at one time, but now they looked loose and baggy, around the shoulders, across the middle, and the folds of the legs. Curled up as he was were, with all four limbs pulled into the fetal position, he scarcely resembled any more human a shape than the body he shared the room with.

For the moment, there was no trace of the eyes Dennis had spied, either. The man’s off-white face, all harsh angles and sunken-in cheeks, was hidden behind his bony, folded wrists. His matted, tangled strings of dark hair were raked forward, obscuring his profile in full. In shock or unresponsive, Dennis might have thought him dead and frozen if it weren’t for the staggered in-out, in-out rhythm of his ribs.

Dennis squinted and listened, straining to hear for any other signs of life. The faint wheezing the man emitted was barely audible.

It was all but lost in Boyd’s following tirade:

“‘Well, if that isn’t somethin’ else? You don’t think he doesn’t have- something to do with the oh-so-lovely sight before us, man? Leave him.”

So focused ahead, Dennis barely registered the absurd suggestion. He scant knew where to start addressing this problem, but in the bare second he had glimpsed the captive, looking up at him
(beseechingly or in terror, who could say), one glimpse had already been enough to haunt him into the next life.

He couldn’t just leave.

“H-hey,” he couldn’t help a stammer, willing his voice to go soft and (hopefully) comforting. Somewhere behind him, he heard Boyd grousing to nobody, pacing restlessly about what little floor space was left, and the crackle of radio static. But he paid it precious little attention. He thought he spotted movement, very slight, and just the barest glimpse of an eye, looking back at him. “Psst, hey. Hey, pal, you- are you- ”

*Christ above, what do you say to a guy you find like this?*

Already at a loss for what else to try, he blinked and swallowed, uneasy, and reached, hesitantly, between the cold, flat bars.

“Buddy- ”

——

Dennis. Dennis Zalewski

( *He was eight-years-old and strolling out of church with him one afternoon, talking excitedly about show and tell tomorrow and what they were going to bring in, Dennis was bringing a book about the Rocky Mountains his dad had bought him and secretly he thought that it wasn’t a great item, that his was way better, but Matthew was watching him so he didn’t say it aloud-* )

stood in front of him, eyes wide in what he thought could only be abject horror and revulsion, but not at him - for him.

( *He didn't care what exactly Dennis felt for him because all he felt for the man was a bone-deep rage that almost gave him enough strength to scream at him, but he didn't, decided to conserve it for a better situation, better use* )

He wasn’t in tan-toned law enforcement garb, either - no, this Dennis was wearing a blue uniform he could (only guess) belonged to the guards of Shawshank State Prison. He turned his head away, slowly, to conserve any amount of energy he could so he didn’t have to look at the man any longer.

If this Dennis wasn’t *the* Dennis who had fired a warning shot that had

( *given him dragged through the snow, struggling desperately to break free and pleading with Warden Lacy, not understanding at first why the man didn't recognise him, but then understanding far too well, too late-* )

gotten him into this situation, then - realistically - he couldn't be angry with him.

But he *could*. He wanted to, didn't want to have to face the truth that this man, this Dennis, was not the same one who had set off this hell of an existence he had been living because then there would be no one to blame except -

*Do you want him gone?*

The words felt like someone had suddenly gripped his head, digging their fingers in hard enough to leave bruises. He was sure anyone else would’ve slammed their forehead into the bars in front of them, taken by surprise, but all he could muster in response was a faint shake of it.
The Bad was back from its mystery trip, waltzing in unannounced and plugging right into his thoughts, like the audio jack to a pair of headphones. If he hadn't been so used to it

(He’d had twenty-seven years to adjust to someone else responding to once-private thoughts in his head so it wasn’t entirely shocking anymore, in fact it was more unsettling when The Bad didn’t answer back)

he might have gasped, flinching visibly at the intrusion.

He didn’t.

“CHRIS!” Dennis shouted, and that was enough to startle him into flinching. He wasn’t lost on the irony of that, either - so used to The Bad in his head, yet unused to another human's voice.

(And it was that human’s fault, too, their fault how his body reflexively twitched and jerked at the sort of noise he should be well adjusted to)

Do you want him gone? The Bad asked again, now sounding excited and anticipatory and - and - hungry. His stomach turned and flopped at the implications he just now understood.

No! No, I… I don't want to- eat him.

His unspoken reply was met with moody silence so he turned his attention back to Dennis, watching as his eyes trailed over to the body beside him, and then as he twisted away from it to yell at the someone waiting above the tank.

“-tters, now! There's someone down here!”

...Two someones, if I'm being completely-

He forced Dennis’s stray thought out of his head, biting his lip at it. He didn't want to know what he was thinking, didn't want to know that Dennis was thinking about the remains strewn on the floor between them because then he might feel guilty.

He didn't want to.

He was so tired of feeling guilty.

You need your strength, though, if we're going to survive. You need to eat, The Bad rationalized to him, and it was sick the way the words made such simplistic sense. He knew there was no chance he could even walk without support at the moment - and how had he gotten strength before?

(He didn’t know actually, if he had been given energy or not because he had begged to be taken someplace else and his request had been approved so yeah, he actually had no clue)

There's another one, though, he argued back, swallowing harshly at his own thought. It... doesn’t have to be Dennis.

“- a goddamn BODY down here?” And now the other man was down in the tank, too, and this one wasn’t recognisable to him the way Dennis was. But something in the voice rankled him immediately, put his teeth on edge.

(It reminded him of Matthew, he realised, the self-centered nature of it as if he were the only one who mattered in the grand scheme of things, as if God had specifically chosen him for some mission that only he was allowed to know about, and only he could undertake)
Dennis was knelt down by the cage then, close enough that either of them could reach out and touch the other.

He knew exactly what would happen if the man did, yet he did nothing to discourage Dennis.

See, you want him dead, The Bad said, tone now veering slowly toward the angry one that made his body begin to ache from unknown pains. You want him dead, so why not feast?

Because. If he's stupid enough to touch me that's his fault, he thought back, cracking his eyes open to look up to the other man and then Dennis. They were talking, perhaps to each other or separately, but either way he didn't particularly care. He had his own conversation to attend to.

But if he's not - I deserve some answers.

The Bad was quiet for a moment, the phantom grip on the back of his neck and head easing momentarily before returning, much stronger than before. He bowed his head just a touch more, blinking rapidly as he tried to adjust to it.

You won't get any answers from him, it said, not sounding as angry anymore. More impartial than anything. But as long as we get to eat one of them, it doesn't matter.

(He knew that he probably wouldn't get answers from Dennis, or at least this version of Dennis, but he wanted to be able to look him dead in the eyes and ask him why he thought it was a good idea to shoot even a warning shot, if he knew the sheer agony that one impulsive moment had caused him, twenty-seven years of it)

“H-hey,” Dennis said then, the words directed at him. He turned, as little as he could, so he could angle himself to look the man in the face, eyes opened to bare slits.

“Psst, hey. Hey, pal, you- are you-”

(He suddenly remembered a very different day when Dennis had used that tone - the same no-pressure, soft tone that you would use to calm a very young child - his younger brother, the middle one, Joey, he had skinned his knee playing outside, on the sidewalk, and Henry had watched from across the street, unnoticed by either of them, as Dennis soothed Joey and helped bandage the cut)

Then the words cut out, as if Dennis wasn't sure how to continue.

He watched, unblinking, as the guard paused, uncertain, then lifted his hand. Disappointing, a bit, that the man would die this way, but he didn't particularly care.

(He cared, but not in the way he should have, he cared only in the sense this death would be too peaceful, too final for Dennis because it wasn't goddamn fair, one single moment of panic before rest compared to his twenty-seven miserable years of imprisonment?)

The hand approached, closer and closer to him.

Still, he didn't attempt to stop it.

(“You won't get any answers from him,” The Bad had said and again it was disappointing, this whole ordeal of being found had turned out to be nothing more than another way to drain him of energy he needed, another way to spike his emotions before deadening them again)

“Buddy- ”
“Zalewski!”

Sheepishly, Dennis stopped short.

“Get the chains off first. Then we’ll figure out what we gotta do to get him to move.”

The younger guard glanced up, frowning. Odd. That was actually a rather astute observation, coming from Boyd.

“...You have a plan, then, I’m guessing?” Straightening up, he turned to study the chains in question - two sets of them, wound tight around the enclosure’s door, barely noticeable in the gloom.

Boyd stepped over, sparing the captive only a cursory glance before lowering his voice. “Skinny as he looks, I don’t think we got much to worry about once the door’s open. But you best not go petting a dog before you know if it’s friendly or not anyway, right?”

_Wow. Another sound bit of advice in less than a minute's time. To what do I owe the honor?_

For some strange little reason, it made Dennis smile - a nervous half smirk passing for a smile. Maybe it was the sheer insanity of the situation. But it was preferable to wallowing in confusion. “When did you start making sense?”

Scowling, Boyd hiked a thumb over his shoulder. “Soon as I heard they’ve got a mob squad headed our way from central. Orders are get this guy out, and leave the body how we found it. We’ve stomped all over the evidence enough.”

As it happened, Chris Boyd wasn’t without a plan there. Out of character as it abruptly seemed, maybe it was the dread over what reception their discovery would receive that was compelling him to actually do his job for a change.

Either way, Dennis mused, affixing the bolt cutters to the chains and bringing the handles together with a _snap_, it was a welcome surprise in a scenario so out of the ordinary.

Boyd climbed back up the ladder as his younger colleague stripped the chains off, setting them aside. Then he gave the door an experimental tug. Finding it wouldn’t budge, he grabbed on with both hands and pulled.

The rusty, protesting _screech_ heralding its opening elicited no response whatsoever from the prone, silent prisoner.

Caught waiting on Boyd’s solution, however many minutes it would take, Dennis paused to wipe the sweat from his face (how stuffy and warm was it down here all of a sudden) and prop the bolt cutters against the door. Task accomplished, he couldn’t help another anxious glance at the chamber’s most-unsavory occupant.

Taking another, more studied look around the corpse, Dennis also noticed a folding chair, knocked over, resting against the wall. Shoved to the corner where the cage met the wall were two containers. One, its lid missing, was overflowing with cigarette butts. The second, lidded, was - presumably - water, given the small metal tankard sitting beside it.

Inside the cage, there was nothing - except the listless, bedraggled prisoner and another lidded kitchen pot which was apparently a makeshift latrine.
No sign of food. He doubted there had been much use for it as of late.

A pretty pitiful-looking setup, overall.

Whatever this all was… whoever had died here… whoever this barely-alive stranger might prove to be…

“Gettin’ ahead of myself,” Dennis muttered, under his breath. “Again.” Regarding the man lying on the floor, appreciating his sorry, depleted form for what it was once again, he couldn’t help a sympathetic frown.

Slowly, he knelt down, leaned in, and listened.

There it was, another soft wheeze of air slowly being drawn in.

“Hey. ‘T’s gonna be okay, pal…” Dennis spoke gently, hoping it somehow compensated for all the loud ruckus which had ensued in the last ten minutes. A bit of comfort for a room sorely lacking in pleasant amenities. With no one to stop him, he reached over to pat the man’s hunched shoulder, trying not to balk at how thin the bicep felt under the fabric. “We’ll get ya out of here.”

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Boyd glanced down the shaft, appreciating his handiwork one final time before taking hold of the improvised rope. “Like reelin’ in a fish, Ace. Just make sure he doesn’t sway too much on us.”

Crouched at the base of the ladder, Dennis spared their ‘catch’ a worried look.

It wasn’t returned. The starved man was still out like a light. He sat at the foot of the ladder, long legs stretched out, back positioned against the rungs, with chin to chest and eyes closed.

Affixed around his torso from behind, running below his arms, were the twisted up bed sheets Boyd had procured from an old storage closet. Wound up and tied off in several places, Dennis’ working knowledge of knots proved useful in chaining the pieces of linen together, like improvised rope.

_How was work today, dear?_

_I learned how to fashion a parachute harness out of old towels._

He managed a halfhearted chuckle. Looking at the man, repositioned in full view, Zalewski felt his stomach fold and clench. True, this unfortunate soul was not the picture of health, but the flaky evidence adorning his front, hands, and face was - in a word - was as unsurprising as it was bizarre.

_(Climbing back down, Boyd had stepped into the cage, taken one look as they hauled the man out, and scoffed. “Pretty sure that ain’t dried spaghetti sauce.”)_

Dennis shook his head to banish the unsavory thought.

_Innocent until proven guilty._

They didn’t know the facts yet.

Instead, he keyed his radio so he wouldn’t have to shout over their charge’s head. “Y’sure this’ll work?”

“I’ve got at least sixty pounds on him. This ought to be a cinch.”
Tempting as it was to indulge in some sarcastic contradiction, Dennis shook his head again, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. This was worth a try. It wasn’t as if he had any better ideas.

“Okay, well… up slow.”

“Roger.”
September 10th, 2018 (con’t)

So, when all was said and done, I was left alone with him - the skeleton from the underground closet.

He let me do most of the talking to begin with. He looked... frail, spent, but somehow... not without his wits, edgy. His eyes were sharp. As you might imagine, he probably wasn’t in the mood to say much, without being talked to (or at) first.

Then he did ask some very choice questions (but not before ‘politely informing’ me I needn’t speak like he was “the village idiot.”)

What came after was... frenetic, to say the least.

And to say the most... well, I already told you what he told me, didn’t I, Em?

At first brush, we covered a lot.

———

His feet were cold.

A numb feeling would envelop them soon, he was sure, the same way it had all the other times. Then he could shuffle through the snow with his sneakers on, ill prepared and unequipped for the midnight expedition that his father had taken him on, but at least his feet wouldn't be red and stinging.

He knew he should expect the trips, have some semblance of a plan ready for when his father creaked open his bedroom door at night

(“Get up,” his father said the first time but he had remained frozen, fists gripping his sheets and all he could think about was the gun, that gun Matthew had pulled out of the picnic basket, and the way his mom had smiled at him afterward, watery and panicked but trying not to show it)

and commanded him to get up, but he never did. Perhaps something in him still expected the trips to die out, to finally have a good night's sleep, and to wake up without the first thing he did was counting the hours of rest he had actually gotten the night before.

(“Four,” he whispered to himself, one eye cracked to look at the ceiling, but he wasn't upset, it had been a good night for sleep, compared to a night with no sleep whatsoever)

They never had stopped, the trips. He wasn't sure they ever would, especially with the way his dad was getting, worse and worse, he could tell even though his mother

(pushed the hair out of his fever-warm face and he sneezed again, head pounding with a force he had never felt before as it grew steadily in tempo, his father watching from the bedroom door with impassive eyes, as though admiring his handiwork)

tried to shield him from the truth.

“Do you hear it?”
He stopped, eyes searching the dark forest around him as his father spoke. It wasn't often that Matthew asked, as if he was sure his son heard whatever it was

("The voice of God," Matthew explained and he rolled his eyes, shifting from side to side in the forest before his father's voice lashed out - “Watch yourself, boy, for He is always looking!” and then he flinched and nodded, too scared to rebel back)

that had spoken to him in the woods.

He had never heard it, not once.

“Yes,” he said, shoulders tense from the lie. Sometimes Matthew was able to see past it, but other times he seemed genuinely fooled. The trips were never better either way, though, so it didn't particularly matter.

There was a beat of silence, as if his father was contemplating what to say or do.

“False prophet,” Matthew said finally, but his voice wasn't angry. Just… monotone. Somehow, it was worse. A chill forced its way through his body at it, but he didn't let himself shudder.

“Do not lie to me again, Henry,” he said and he remained frozen, not willing to incur anymore wrath from Matthew. “Start walking. Open your ears, listen harder. You will hear it, and it will be glorious.”

He nodded instead of responding, shoulders coming up and down with his head. Matthew paused for a moment longer before trailing on ahead of him, his long black coat lifting with the wind.

He took off after the man, slowly, but made sure he was steadily catching up, not taking care to scan the snow-covered forest floor for obstacles. And then, as soon as it seemed like he was about to be step to step with Matthew, it happened.

He stepped on a hidden twig, stumbled at the next step, and went down hard. His pants only protected him from so much and his knee burned, no doubt skinned and possibly bleeding. He bit his lip, determined not to cry in front of his father.

("I'm so cold," he sobbed and held his trembling hands together, gazing up at his father through watery eyes, praying for some miracle where Matthew would turn into someone loving and understanding and take him back home to his bed but instead the man's face twisted with disappointment and rage- )

Matthew didn't like it when he cried.

He didn't get up. Instead he let his hands sink into the snow, stinging them and making him grimace at the feeling. He didn't want to get up -

No. He couldn't.

His vision swam, hands sinking further into the snow. How much sleep had he gotten last night? Actual sleep? Or the night before that or the night before that or

(class, where he had been unable to keep his eyes open and even less able to answer even with the teacher repeatedly calling his name, for some reason his mouth couldn't respond, it was as if it was too slow to hook up with his brain)

any night in awhile, lately. The lack of sleep had been sapping his energy for awhile and now, now
“Dad,” he choked out, breath steaming in the frigid air. His hands were freezing, but he couldn't remove them from the snow, only grip tighter.

No response. All he heard was the crunch of footsteps as they approached him.

“Dad!” he cried out then, worried that Matthew would simply take one look at him and leave, leave him to pass out in the snow and then find his own way out of the forest.

“Get up, Henry,” he heard his father say. He turned his head to look at him, watching as the man stood there and watched his own son, in turn, exhausting himself to the point of collapse.

“I can't,” he said, aware of the whine in his voice and hating it. Hating himself, at the weakness.

(He felt anger then for thinking of himself as weak, at his father for instilling the thought in him that it was whiny to not be able to stand by yourself)

“Dad, please. I can't.”

After a moment Matthew strolled forward and grabbed the back of his jacket, pulling on it so hard he stumbled, then yanked him up until until he was on his feet.

“There. Now, continue.” Matthew turned, placing his hands in the pockets of his coat and taking a few steps.

He remained frozen, knees shaking as he attempted to stop the world from spinning by blinking. There was no way he could walk, not around in the forest. He thought he could probably manage to climb the stairs at home, make it all the way into his bed and then collapse into a dreamless sleep for three hours before his alarm would set off and he would awaken once more.

But not the forest.

(He wished for once his father was the type who would listen to him when he asked to stop, who helped him unzip his coat and untie his shoes, who tucked him in and smoothed his hair to one side, but the most kindness he had seen so far this night was getting help standing up, served rough)

“Please, I want to go home,” he called after him, still not attempting to move. His lip trembled, but he forced himself not to cry. Not yet. “Please, I'm so tired.”

“Walk, now.” Matthew called back to him, expecting him to follow obediently, like a quaint little lamb. But he couldn't, couldn't force one foot to lift up without fear of falling over again. In fact, he wasn't sure he would be able to remain standing much longer with the way he was shaking.

“Dad,” he called out again and this time Matthew did turn around, evidently surprised that he still hadn't moved. “Dad, I can't. I can't, I'm so t-tired, please, Dad-”

And now tears were running unchecked down his cheeks, just like they had nights before when he had cried about being cold or hungry or just scared and they were always the worst nights, the nights where Matthew went from being indifferent in his treatment of him to cruel and mean.

“You can't? You can't?” Matthew asked, walking closer to him. Something about the tone made the tears slide down his face even faster, but he nodded anyway, trembling still.
“Or perhaps you simply… won't?” And now he was right in front of him, so fast that he had to blink to clear his vision and try to comprehend what was going to happen because Matthew didn't like it when he cried.

“Perhaps, you're simply not dedicated enough? Perhaps you don't want to hear God?”

“No- ” he gasped out, a complete lie but he would say anything to just be taken back to the warm car and be able to close his eyes for just an hour, just one blessed hour, please -

“Liar! I told you not to lie to me, Henry!” Matthew grabbed his shoulders and shook him once, hard enough that he kept shaking afterward, faster than he had previously.

“You're worthless if you can't hear Him,” Matthew hissed and for one clear moment, he saw things for how they were. He saw the crazed look in his father’s eyes and felt the harshness of the fingers, digging into his shoulders, saw the way his father simply wanted to make him hurt. The way his father was not worthy of being a father, yet here they were, his son caught in his grasp.

It made him angry. Angry enough that what seemed like a random thought flitted across his mind, something he had thought before, but had not dared to say aloud, ever, until this moment -

“You can't hear Him, either!”

There was only a sharp breath of air from Matthew before he was suddenly stumbling, flying it seemed, and he thought that somehow he had fallen but no, no looking ahead he saw the open palms of his father and knew what had happened.

(It wasn't the first time he had been pushed but it was the most violent, not the other times where he had been steered a certain way, this push was full of unbased anger -)

He fell. His back slammed into something, some solid mass of what felt like ice and snow packed together (later he would realize it was a snowbank) and at the moment all he felt was blinding pain and then - and then -

And then -

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Eyes snapping open, he gasped, one explosive breath, and attempted to lift himself from his agonizing position.

Somehow, he had been laid out flat, his spine - for twenty-seven years it had always remained curved, damn cage was too short - was now suddenly forced straight.

(Perhaps that's why he remembered that night, he thought, why he had felt such pain in his back that he screamed, howled loudly enough for Matthew to realize his mistake and take him home, so maybe if he howled loud enough now the same would happen -)

This time though he couldn't lift himself up, instead barely only being able to raise what seemed like an inch before slamming back down, and that was when he noticed, harsh lights blinding him the way nothing had in nearly three decades.

His vision washed out to white, then slowly cleared. Foreign smells clogged his nose. His ears rang.

He wasn't in the cage, or the tank. He was in some other room, with bright lights and more people
than what seemed possible crammed in all around him - some with glasses, all with surgeons masks. They were bustling about and yelling at each other, some seeming to notice he had woken up and others not.

Belatedly, he remembered, barely awake for any of it - Dennis and the other guard, talking to The Bad about needing to eat, and then the way they had lifted him out of the tank - ingenious method, really, but then…

Then it went black. He had an idea, fleetingly, of what might had happened in the time since The Bad took over because he could feel something - blood, fresher than Lacy’s - coating his lips -

He swallowed, nervously almost, then coughed at the coppery aftertaste wafting back up his throat.

One of the masked faces turned and looked right at him. The set of eyes above it went wide. Forgetting his pain in the same second, he stared back.

“Oh, shit, he's awake, everyone - ”

Voices swarmed.

“Keep the I.V. in!”

“Tighten that buckle!”

“Shhhh, shh, settle down, kiddo, you're- you’re okay- ”

The cacophony was an instant headache. He took another gasp and attempted to lift himself off the table again, to bend out of this torturous stretch, anything to ease or stop the terrible burning along his spine.

Then, finally realizing he must have been strapped down he looked and saw that yes, yes (no!), there were leather bindings around his willowy wrists, his narrow waist, and more he could feel farther down and what was happening, what was going on -

(He was too panicked to even try to guess how he had ended up in this room or where The Bad was, he was more focused on the agony of his position and the crowd of people closing in around him, too many, too close -)

Hands found his shoulders and forced him down.

“...should’ve sedated him to start, he's going wild, man, and you- heard what he did to that guard - ”

Help! HELP ME! he screamed out in his mind because his actual mouth didn't seem to be working for anything other than to groan and gasp for air like a beached fish. He felt someone grab his arm, and another on the other elbow, to keep him from moving again. A third mask walked into view, holding a small bottle in one hand.

“Not right now, lemme just get the eyedrops done, okay? Then you can stick him up.” And then there was a hand on his cheek, another pressing on his brow, a third grabbed his chin, and he tried to flinch back, twist away, but their collective grip was strong, stronger than him without The Bad to help -

Help!
“Jesus, someone help me hold him still, won't you? I can't do this if he keeps fucking moving!”

HELP! he screamed again, utterly panicked. The hand at his cheek was replaced by two more, on either side of his face, holding him still and forcing him to look straight ahead. Compared to his back, he barely noticed the throbbing pain of his skull, pressed against the unyielding table.

One plastic-gloved hand moved to his eye and then was holding it open against his will, fingertips against the eyelids, he tried to blink it away, but it wasn't letting up -

“Get a needle ready, you'll want him out for the rest of this.”

Needle?! His breathing sped up instantly. The bottle came back now, uncapped and he focused on it, realized what it was, made one last attempt to struggle - eyedrops for him, but knowing that didn't make it any less scary -

You're on your own, The Bad said, suddenly back and he flinched, but wasn't allowed to move further what with all the hands holding him. The dropper turned toward his eye and steadily approached. Nothing we can do at the moment.

No! Wait, wait - just don't leave, please, don't leave me, please! he begged in his head, heart racing as the liquid was released into one eye, instantly making half of his vision blurry and teary.

“One down, one to go.”

We can't help you, The Bad insisted, sounding almost uncomfortable at his request. We can't.

(It was pathetic, he knew, to whine and beg the voice in his head to stay, but right now he had no one else, no one to hold his hand through doctor visits like his mother had done when he was younger and just as afraid -)

He didn't say anything back then, too ashamed to explain himself to The Bad so instead he stilled, gasping again as his other eye was pried open and the eyedrop administered.

“Okay, that's a wrap for me. Go ahead now, boys.”

The hands holding his face were removed and immediately he shook it, blinking and hissing at the blurry, too-bright new world around him.

Someone - he couldn’t see their face, only hear them - tried for a comforting remark: “Easy does it, fella, easy… Feelin’ better already, aren’t ya?”

He didn’t feel better. His head was still pounding. His very eyeballs felt chilled, slightly less itchy, but worst, his back -

Distracted, something took its chance - pricked him in the arm, sharp and stinging (the needle, he assumed), and it was pushed deeper even as he yelped and tried to yank his arm away.

Someone grabbed on, held it still. Gasping, he turned his head to look at everything around him. His eyes were still fuzzy.

Then the needle was pulled out, having pumped something into his body and at first he wasn't sure it would work, wasn't sure if The Bad would allow it to do so, but he felt the effects almost immediately: a drowsy feeling, spreading rapidly through his veins, growing steadily stronger. His frantic panting slowed.
“There, done.”

Slower...

“Jumpy bastard, isn't he?”

The aching in his head and back faded, numbed. He rolled his eyes up, craning his neck as far as it would go. Something behind (what he assumed was) the door caught his attention. He couldn't make out exactly what it was, tears and eye drops mixing to create bleary, mosaic swirls of colors - blues and grays and greens and yellows - and his eyelids sagged, threatening to close at any moment -

Then, he recognised it. The shock momentarily jarred his eyes open.

He would recognise that shade of orange anywhere.

Dennis had been watching from the door’s window.

The world pitched over. His eyelids fell shut upon realization, and he drifted off into darkness.

---

Standing outside the bustling examination room, alone, Dennis Zalewski did his best to stay calm, cool, collected. He heard the rising din, muffled as it was by glass and concrete, and remembered to breathe out, schooling his expression into neutral.

Don’t. Don’t give them reason to knock you out, too. Hired-on quacks would like nothing better.

There had been more than enough panic in the last few hours, from all walks of the staff. Word had already begun to spread, from custodians (tasked with cleaning up the blood) to other guards (three of them bearing a loaded stretcher out of Block F, while no less than a dozen others worked to clear a path along the congested corridor) to the likes of Deputy Warden Reeves (who had taken one look at their gastyly discovery and promptly threw up).

While the storm spun up around him, Dennis did his best impression of the eye of a hurricane. Calm wasn’t his strong suit, but already worked through his share of anxiety. He kept his arms crossed, idly thumbing at the embroidered patch on the shoulder of his uniform.

He picked exactly the wrong time to risk a glance through the window.

Because one glance was all it took to bring it rushing back.

Unconsciously he rubbed at his mouth and backed up a step, averting his gaze.

Fuck. It wasn’t my imagination.

In the near-dark it was one thing. He hadn’t thought what he saw was real, and if there was still wiggle room to categorize it as mad, he wanted to continue to believe so. Things were crazy, yes, but…

This crazy?

Coincidence, fate, or just bad timing, Dennis had looked in on the exam. He had been the first to try and wrangle this problem, it was only dutiful to stay involved, however much his gut protested, said to back off, don’t go down there -
The kid from the cage stared directly at him.

And before he passed out, before any of the doctors saw it, Zalewski saw it again: a glassy red shine crossing the man’s irises, planing sideways from one eye to the next.

It was no trick of the light.

Unsettled all over again, Dennis lifted a hand, about to bite his knuckle, then thought twice if it. He had washed up since the incident - several times - but when one took into consideration the knowledge the average human touches their own face once every five minutes -

He lowered his hand, tucking it into the opposite elbow.

That was enough panic and biting for one day.

——

Up slow.

At the time, Dennis was prepared for the worst, relative to the situation (couldn’t do anything much about the long-dead body at his feet, so it was left to rest in the interim). He had a bit of niggling doubt as to whether his knots would hold, or the linens Boyd found wouldn’t fray, unwrap, and snap at being subjected to such force. He had visions of standing underneath the ladder, arms half raised, ready to catch... whatever needed catching.

(So what if it meant there was a chance their freed prisoner ended up in his arms, bridal-style? If it worked, it worked. And with how dreadfully underweight he appeared to be, Zalewski was approximately eighty-percent sure he wouldn’t fold up under the impact.)

Keep him from swaying.

Progress was slow at first. Standing a pace away, Dennis watched as the improvised line tightened, and the rig pulled taut. He didn’t doubt Boyd could handle the work from above, pulling up segment by segment, knot by knot. The older man had an untapped reservoir of upper body strength, apparently, and leverage besides. He could make himself into a capstan, spinning the pulled-up lengths of sheet around him as he went.

What Dennis doubted was how narrow the shaft became, once one reached the top of the tank. He stood up as the last of the slack was taken from the rope, and their seated subject was gradually brought to a standing position. The harness held true around his chest, arms and legs dangling lifelessly, just like a puppet’s. His head sagged forward, hair obscuring his face.

Taking one last glimpse at progress from above, Dennis put a hand on the man’s arm, steadying him as his bare feet lifted from the tank floor.

Here we go.

He kept his commentary to a minimum (that is, none at all) while they worked. Echoing down the metal tube were the grunts and gasps of exertion, as Boyd did the heavy lifting. Dennis followed as close as he could manage to, with what free margin of space the ladder could spare. He moved slowly, cautiously, up the round rungs, his shoulder parallel with their subject’s knee. To get this close was the only way to keep him from veering off course, steering and guiding from below, if you will.

How long the operation took was no one’s concern at the time.
But it must have taken a very tense five minutes, at a minimum.

Because it was a proven fact Boyd could never keep his mouth shut for more than six, at most: “Last full-measure, boys. We doin’ okay down there, Ace?”

Hanging from the ladder, just below the shaft’s bottom edge, Dennis only paused to dab sweat from his brow with his sleeve. The muggy stench of death was still thick in the air, what with no openings left to really ventilate the confined space. This uniform, he would make a point to dispose of it, once he changed out at the end of his shift.

(The prisoner’s soiled vestments were in worse shape, soaked in who-knew-what filth and fluids.)

“Less talking, more hauling.”

And there was probably the one and only time in recorded history when Chris Boyd did as Dennis Zalewski asked of him.

Without comment.

Several tugs later, Boyd managed to lean down and hook a hand under the prisoner’s shoulder. He kept hold of the rope, and with one last heave, pulled him up and out of the hole.

Dennis swiftly followed, closing the gap from below, mindful to keep their patient’s feet from catching on the metal lip. Last thing he needed was some twisted ankles to wake up to.

He emerged to grunts of exertion, not far away. “Gotta, kid! Friggin’ bag-of-bones that you are.” In his best imitation of gentle, Boyd pulled the freed man aside, propping him up against the room’s cracked, concrete wall, as they had done in the tank.

Getting to his feet, Dennis heard a dazed moan (intentional reply or not, who could say) and felt his heart clench.

Shit. Could those guys from central be any slower about getting here?

He clicked on his flashlight, instantly regretting it as he moved in for a closer look. The murky illumination above ground made it all the more clear. The starved man was just that, starved - every line and angle of his face stood out in painfully-sharp relief, eyes and cheeks sunken in far further than anyone living’s should ever be.

For a fleeting moment, looking at that miserable mask, Dennis felt helpless to do anything for him. Truthfully, at the time, there wasn’t much else on hand to fix the situation any more than they had.

But at least they had gotten him out, alive, and the horror show down below was out of sight. And the smell. It permeated the air the same way Dennis was sure it would haunt his nose for days to come.

Hair tousled, Boyd was panting and sweating, but still marginally cleaner than his two companions. He hadn’t spent as much time scuffling and kneeling about in the mess. Freeing a spare piece of cloth from the linen-rope, the older guard wiped at his shining face. “I guess now it’s, what- hurry up and wait?”

You want me to get on the radio? Tell ‘em to move faster?

“Take five to get our wits back, at least,” Dennis remarked, without glancing away. Carefully, he picked up one of the man’s withered hands (the fingers were still curled into the palm, like the
limbs of some dead spider), and gently felt for a pulse. The vein he found beat weakly, but steadily under the pad of his thumb. “Christ. How long you think he was down there?”

“Long enough to, ugh… y’know.” Boyd took another look at the prisoner’s dirtied face and clothes. Darkened red stains adorned the once-white undershirt. “I can’t begin to guess what that shit’s about.”

*Not having a choice, most likely.* Dennis thought, just for a moment, to a most-unsavory history lesson, and in turn, it made him think of Emilia. Among other things his wife was, she was an insatiable bookworm. One of her first big accomplishments in American literature was *Moby-Dick.*

(“There is a dash in the title, Dennis. Most who cite it elsewhere simply choose to ignore it.”)

And among other elements the novel incorporated, borrowing from real life, none were so prominent as the fact that - after the whale rammed and sunk the *Essex* - the survivors, while adrift for the next few weeks, were forced to draw lots, to see who among them would be shot for consumption…

*Reality check, man? This isn’t four-hundred miles off the coast of South America, though. Those guys weren’t held captive by anything but desperation. Yet…*

“It doesn’t… add up, though.”

Boyd blinked, scowling in thought. “What d’you mean?”

“If he’s been down there, starving to death, for weeks…” Dennis mused, rubbing the back of his hand against a raspy-feeling chin. “Why doesn’t he… have any facial hair?”

His colleague seemed to pause and consider this. He moved closer, squinting. The scowl deepened.

Watching for his reaction, Dennis later figured out then was exactly the wrong time to talk over their discovery.

“…Dunno. Maybe… that’s what happens when your metabolism is all outta wha-aahck!”

The words devolved into a strangled, choked-off shout. A half second behind the rest of the world, Dennis belatedly thought to reach out and intercede, before he caught up with what was actually happening. He moved fast, a burst of adrenaline he was not totally unfamiliar with (breaking up scuffles in the mess hall usually required the same snappy reaction times), but against all rational explanation, the Kid moved faster.

And what was more baffling, he didn’t attack with his hands.

Boyd collapsed in a backwards sprawl, as if a cougar had pounced upon him. Scrambling aside, Dennis dropped his flashlight, deftly clipping his baton. It hit the concrete with a bounce, the high beam it emitted momentarily whiting out his vision.

He didn’t stop to think. All he saw was a *blur* of blue and black, saw the other man fall, giving a pained, gasping cry as he went. Grasping the handle, Dennis drew his arm back in a tennis-serving swing and threw the next blow. He felt it land, glancing off something sharp and rigid, and a shudder ran back up his arm..

The sound their attacker made - a guttural growl too loud and too deep for any normal man to produce - only gave him so much pause. Gasping, Dennis backpedalled, baton raised again, as the man, slight of frame and weak though he appeared, surged to his feet and rounded on him with a
feral snarl.

He saw the red in the man’s eyes before anything else. It wasn’t so much a glow as a sharp gleam, scarlet red, standing out most vividly against the dark sockets, set in that deathly pale face. The lines in said face thickened and deepened, lending it an angular, almost demonic quality.

The skin, taut but clear, rippled like the color-changing hide of a cuttlefish. It seemed to darken, the beginnings of darker, lateral stripes emerging around the jawline.

Next he noticed - in that awful split second of horror - was the blood, fresh and shining, and then the lips peeled back, the jaw unhinged at the corners, revealing a jagged set of teeth -

*Sharp teeth? Since when does any man -*

Dennis puzzled on it later. Somewhere on his peripheral he heard Chris give a wet, wordless gasp of alarm. Whatever he tried to say, Dennis struck again, before the starving man could draw himself to full height, putting every last ounce of frantic energy he could into the strike.

Frightening as the sight before him was, the baton held true. It landed with a solid crack upside the skull. The red light winked out. The man’s face crumpled, a short unearthly wail escaping him as he staggered sideways, folded up, and fell in an ungainly heap against the wall. The sound bounced once around the empty cellblock.

As quickly as the attack began, it was over.

Eyes closed, struggling to breathe between spluttering gasps, Boyd was still on the floor, blood-slicked hands clutching his throat, as Dennis unfurled his handkerchief to press it there. The other guard groped blindly for it, fingers slipping, to take the rag under his own grip. Within seconds, it was soaked through.

Moments afterward, the flashlights of their very-late running backup shone down on them from the landing above.

And just like that, their two-man rescue operation metamorphosed into the first big crime scene of Dennis Zalewski’s career.
Vexation

September 11th, 2018

(with all due deference to the date I find myself writing this on)

I thought about being a cop once.

And, to be fair, what little boy hasn’t at some point? It can be a very romantic profession, to protect society against those who would cause disorder and mayhem, especially when you don’t know any better. But, like most aspirations one has between the ages of, say, five to ten, they are subject to change, once you find out no, being a policeman?

It’s not at all how it looks on TV.

So while I find myself working a branch of the criminal justice system I may not have foreseen going in to even five years ago, I do my job to the best of my ability.

Not to mention it was this or continue on as a Mellow Tiger busboy, setting pins and wiping up peanut shells and cleaning shot glasses, eventually being promoted to full time bartender for the rest of my young adult years. My aspirations weren’t anything original, but I’ve always fancied the idea of saving up enough to leave Castle Rock. Joey and Trev beat me to it (thanks in part to Dad’s prerequisite suggestions on how to best get in to the park service; they took the easy route, or “smarter, not harder” as Trev would say), but before I could follow suit, maybe migrate to Portland or Boston to take the necessary courses…

I don’t know if you’d like me better as a policeman, Em.

But as of late, I’m quickly learning - via crash course - what it means to be a detective.

——-

The next time he woke up in an unfamiliar place, his first concern surprisingly wasn't where he was.

(Of course that was still in the back of his mind, wondering just where exactly this place was in relation to his old cage, but for once there was a more immediate concern)

He huffed out once, blinking precariously as the harsh lighting stung his eyes, as it had done so mercilessly the first time, and felt his breath heat up around him. The closed-in smell of his own breath filled his nose.

What?

After a beat of contemplation he shook his face, feeling something digging into the sides of his cheeks, some sharp plastic material that seemed to be covering the lower half of it.

Covering his mouth.

He went cross-eyed looking down, trying to tell just what exactly the strange plastic material was, but it only succeeded in making his vision blurry, unwanted tears welling up from the glare. The smell of the muzzle was very artificial, worsened by the wet exhalations he emitted. It didn’t impede his breathing, much, but that it was there at all …
This was new, whatever it was. For all the evils he had been accused of, Lacy had never put something over his face, some sort of guard to cover his mouth

(He didn't need any help figuring out why he had the plastic sheet over it as well, he had tasted the reason why quite well, even if he himself hadn't actually been present for it, not like The Bad knew what it was to brush one's teeth)

or any other part of him. The cage had always been sufficient.

(Until it hadn't been because the man had still been able to reach through the bars and put a hand on him, hadn't been when the man had keeled over from the touch, hadn't been when The Bad had eaten him)

He reached up to study it with his hands and -

And he couldn't.

——-

I know that expression, all too familiar... as much as you're not.

Dennis knew not what the man’s circumstances were, prior to entering the room. He had simply looked in through the door's window, waited on the buzzer, and stepped inside. There had been a terse preliminary briefing with the doctors and Warden Porter, regarding what was expected of him, what they aimed to find out in the course of this encounter.

Seeing what a ridiculous getup they had stuffed the once-sedated man into, it made Zalewski’s fingers curl. He kept them from closing into fists, hooking his thumbs into his belt.

Shawshank didn’t have the latest and greatest in corrections technology or gear or personnel. But what it had left to spare were a few storage rooms: concrete walls, barred, fog-glassed windows, and metal, keypad access doors. This one had been cleaned out on short notice- makeshift holding area. In the corner of the ceiling was one lonely camera, poised on a short metal arm, red recording light aglow.

Big Brother was watching.

Dennis spared it a brief glance before stepping closer - cautiously.

It had been roughly three days since discovering the tank, the putrid, gored-out body inside, and the cage with its barely-alive enigma. Initial excitements aside, the course of action being taken since was decisively clear one.

The stranger - get him healthy, get him talking. Stat.

Not necessarily in this order.

The former would take longer, undoubtedly. Despite his current appearance and how it had improved (washed, hair combed, inspected for further injury, clothed in a fresh uniform), the long term damage was not so quickly undone. Dennis couldn’t help another quiet wince - the man looked just as thin as a nail as he remembered. Seated on the floor, masked and jacketed and cuffed at the sneakered ankles, he was propped up against a wall.

And by this account he looked precisely like a mental patient about to be left in a padded cell, to waste away from the rest of his days, no one around to hear his screams - once he realized
protesting was what he was meant to be doing.

It was almost pitiful.

Then Dennis remembered the red shine, eyes angry and alight in the dark -

He leaned down, trying his best imitation of a wry smile.

“Well, look who’s finally awake.”

-----

He jerked again, trying one more time to move his hands. They didn't budge from their positions, forearms folded across his torso, hands strapped down to his sides in fabric stitched so tight there was no possible way he could use them.

The ends of the overextended sleeves were tied off behind his back. He could barely raise his shoulders. His back, forced straight, didn’t ache as badly as when he had been stretched out upon the table. But in trade for that small comfort, his arms were immobilized.

Evidently, the staff of Shawshank had found it necessary to not only cover his mouth, but put him into a straitjacket.

(He didn't know why he was surprised, he would have been more surprised if he had woken up and had been left alone, unrestrained, but the way the mask cut into his cheeks and the uncomfortable way his arms had been bent still sent a shock through him)

Clink.

He let his eyes wander down to his feet and saw a pair of steel cuffs encircling both ankles, light flashing from them and causing him to shut his eyes tight for a moment. He drew his legs up, moving his feet away from the glare of fluorescent light. The short chain between the binds pulled tight.

They really weren't taking any chances with him.

(He knew it was smart that they weren't because had they decided to just put the straitjacket and cuffs on, the next guard who walked into the room would have been dead, jugular ripped open and flayed for the world to peer inside)

A glimpse of color drew his attention to the window of the door, a flash of orange that he still knew all too well, the recognizable shade that made him grind his teeth from behind the plastic mask. His head was already aching. The straps were fastened too tight.

(Dennis was lucky he was so chained up as he was, because his anger had only risen with the examination-by-ambush and then the unwanted sleep he had been forced into at the prick of a needle, he wasn't exactly sure what caution of his own he would be able to exercise so the straitjacket and mask saved the young man)

A buzzer sounded outside of his door, making his shoulders hunch as he remembered a different sound

(The tank always squeaked and thudded whenever it was opened, loud enough that it was impossible to miss, loud enough to warn him and get him to take a sitting position before the man ever reached the last rung on the climb down)
but he let some of the tension relax out of his back once the door simply opened and Dennis walked inside.

He glanced up, heart speeding up once his eyes had found their way to the guard’s face. His mouth opened, almost as if he were about to bare his teeth.

(Which is exactly what he was about to do, to snarl or growl at Dennis like some sort of cornered wild animal, intent on hurting anything that got in its way)

Or, he thought, I could say something.

He wouldn’t, though. He wouldn’t growl, much less speak. Dennis didn't deserve his words or any explanations of what had happened. Didn't deserve anything more than questions he was certain this version of Zalewski could not answer.

Their eyes met, a brief flash where he saw Dennis swallow once, a small, but noticeable tic. At him, in fear, or something else, he didn't know. Or perhaps a combination of all three.

Then, the young man's mouth twisted itself upward, into some caricature of a small grin that seemed more mocking than anything else. He bent forward slightly, a gesture that surely would have made him flinch before, but instead he simply sat there, watching, waiting… and maybe dreading.

If Dennis was going to hurt him, there was no way he could defend himself.

Which one of them should be more worried?

“Well, look who's finally awake.”

-----

The man said nothing.

And, for the moment, neither did Dennis.

Which was fine. Until further notice, they had nothing but time to burn.

(“Stop watching me, Denny. It makes me nervous.”)

Odd though it was to think of his youngest brother in that moment, Dennis couldn’t help a short-lived comparison. Trev had always been on the shy side, the most self-conscious brother, always unconsciously intent on figuring his place out, to figure how he stacked up against Dennis and Joseph. Joey had always assured him there was no such thing to worry about, but Trevor simply had those big, over-expressive eyes - the only one of Julia’s three sons to inherit them.

Found out, guilty or innocent, he would always stop and stare until he was told there was nothing to fear.

The same vulnerable glint had surfaced in the man’s eyes now. His expression only revealed so much - eyebrows level, mouth pressed in a line, breathing short, controlled breaths. His body language was taut, closed in as much as it could be while bound in such a fashion.

But the eyes gave him away.

Dennis tried for another smile - one that was less condescending. “That makes two of us, pal. Between you and me, I don’t know why they’d think your seeing my face first would lead to
anything… productive.”

Rather than stand back up, he settled down into a balanced crouch. Neither man broke eye contact.

*That is… I think this is a man. …I want to believe he is. ‘Cause that shit I saw, down there… that’s the stuff of… of…*

“Okay, I’ll keep this simple. The basics.” Dennis let his elbows rest on his knees, hands clasped together before him. Not the most comfortable pose, but it was no more less comfortable than being tied up. At the same time, the compulsive need to introduce oneself came over him. “My name is Dennis, Dennis Zalewski. We’re… I’m a corrections officer here at Shawshank State Prison. I was one of the people to find you. Are… can you… tell me who you are?”

Again, the man said nothing.

His eyes, wide and round and staring straight at him, neither emoted, nor blinked. He didn’t struggle or try to get away, only stayed where he was, sitting on his hip, against the wall. His breathing, if anything, grew slower and steadier.

Letting a few minutes anxiously tick by, Dennis frowned. Maybe that had been too much information at once. He tried rewording his query into something simpler: “Who… are you?”

His radio crackled with sideband chatter. Belatedly, he turned the volume down.

The man’s gaze flicked toward the speaker, just for a second, before refocusing.

*Now who needs to stop staring, Dennis?*

Blinking, Zalewski’s frown faded, and he swallowed a new lump in his throat. He tried not to fidget, visibly. “Do you even… understand me? Speak English?”

*…as much time as you need, that’s what they said…*

At that, the man did blink. As a means of response or simply imitating his interrogator’s expression, his trancelike focus didn’t stray.

Dennis didn’t peg it as a yes or a no. He wasn’t about to get his hopes up - either of their hopes up.

In part, this was his fault. While omitting the more fantastical details of the story, the consensus among the prison’s chief circle of staff was that this all fell outside routine procedure. It was why he was here now, in lieu of a licensed psychiatrist. It was same why the physicians had ever given Theresa Porter the okay to proceed.

Normally someone found in this condition would face weeks of closely-monitored care in a higher-end hospital. There, their health could be gauged accordingly, their dietary needs seen to, their weakened immune system shored up by all kinds of medicine. That would have been the right thing to do.

Dennis hadn’t mentioned the teeth or the eyes in his debrief. At the time, *that* had felt like the right thing to do. Not because he had an ax to grind, thinking Chris Boyd somehow deserved what had happened to him (hell, that guy was to thank for making the first leg of the rescue possible), but what Zalewski had seen first - the meek, hapless captive in the cage - he couldn’t just pretend he hadn’t seen that.

It was easier to keep the insanity secret, weirdly enough.
Castle Rock, and therefore Shawshank, was nothing if not weird.

“How long were you down there?”

Not really expecting an answer, at a loss for what else to try, Dennis started to think out loud: “Isn’t it obvious?” you might say. Well, no, buddy, I’d have to disagree with you there. Nothing obvious about a man, kept in a cage underneath a prison, starved nearly to death, forced to consume the body of the first person to initially discover him. Which brings me to my next question…”

The man didn’t say anything. He blinked a slow blink, but otherwise didn’t move.

Dennis frowned, ticking off the second point on his fingers: “Did you kill the man who found you? Answer: no. The autopsy didn’t bear that out. If I remember right, they said the cause of death was cardiac arrest. Not uncommon in a man of his age, weight, and naturally it didn’t help he was a lifelong smoker…”

The can of butts by the cage. Any connection?

Declining the urge to ask, Zalewski went for the most popular tidbit of the story, as had quickly become common knowledge around the prison: “You can attest to that, right? His chest was torn open before they had to break out the bone cutters. Ribs were cracked like popsicle sticks. The tissue around the organs was gnawed at, but you didn’t touch the heart or the lungs.”

Amazing what a difference a few short days could make in understanding something so outlandish. His impression of the state of the body, besides gruesome, was less than thorough. There was no sense in denying what he had seen, the evidence of arms and legs stripped of muscle, and the doctors later confirmed these initial impressions without a doubt.

So here he delved into the biggest issue of all: “Whatever the reason, it helps me start to piece this together already: you were down there for a while, as was whoever smoked all those cigarettes. The person who found you, he’s already been IDed: Dale Eustace Lacy, age sixty-two, missing for almost two weeks. And the part everyone else involved with this case seems to be overlooking is, yes, Lacy was the one to smoke all those Marlboros. But here’s the kicker - no normal man could possibly smoke that many cigarettes in the course of fourteen days. Ergo, if Lacy was the one who found you - ”

Listening to Dennis speak about these issues he knew nothing about, as if he were a goddamn qualified expert, wasn't merely irritating. It was aggravating and enraging and (It made him want to sob with relief with the way the younger man had already pieced it together, the way he was correct Jesus Christ Dennis you hit the nail right on the head those detective skills really are coming in handy huh?)

it made him want to tear his way out of the straitjacket, rip the mask off and jump at Dennis. Questions be damned, answers could go hang themselves, listening to him drone on and on was far more than he wanted to deal with at the moment.

With every ounce of self control he still possessed, he held back.

“ - the tissue around the organs was gnawed at, but you didn't touch the - ”

(Shut up shut up shut up no he didn't want to hear about what he had done what The Bad had done
Calm down, The Bad cautioned him, pressure increasing throughout his head. He didn't jolt at the sudden internal sound, merely blinked and continued to stare up at the young correctional officer with an apathetic expression.

(He was calm see, see his face he's being SO perfectly calm, listening to the bullshit that wasn't actually that, that was so close to the truth that he was almost certain Zalewski had connected dots that no one else had or yet wanted to, after all he was just the mystery man who ate their precious warden wasn't he?)

I am calm.

“You were down there for a while, as was whoever smoked all those cigarettes - ”

He kept his face straight, eyes upturned and unblinking as Dennis continued, edging his way far closer to the truth than he seemed to really know. The straitjacket seemed impossibly tighter all of a sudden, like his blood flow was being slowly siphoned off from being in such an uncomfortable position. His arms felt numb and tingly, falling asleep due to the lack of circulation.

His breathing slowed down, though, not allowing himself to show any discomfort from the straitjacket. That would invite questions and then Dennis might come close, close enough so that if he wasn't bound and muzzled he could reach up and -

I said calm down, The Bad said again, this time louder than before and with more urgency. It understood their peril, he realized, that if it allowed him to go on with his anger there would be consequences of the type that even it couldn't escape.

I said I am - I am calm.

“- age sixty-two, missing for almost two weeks.”

No, you're not -

“And the part that everyone else involved in this case seems to be overlooking - ”

The mask was too tight now as well, pressing unbearingingly snug on his face, the straps cinched too short. It felt shoddy, as if it were unmade for long term use and yet he was certain it had been affixed to him for at least a couple of hours. Once

(If)

it was finally removed, the damage was already done. The edges would leave deep, red grooves in his skin that would sting every time he reached up to trace them - under his eyes, along both sides of his jaw. The realization made him want to hiss and scream, to beg to have it taken off because, please, he wasn't some wild animal -

(Except he was because people don't just rip out other people's throats with their teeth, that's a great big no-NO against being human, a rule you can't break except he did so now he wasn't human was he)

“- no normal man could possibly smoke that many cigarettes in the course of fourteen days - ”

Shut up shut up shut -
“Ergo, if Lacy was - ”

Calm down!

“The one who - ”

I AM CALM!

“ *Found* you - ”

“SHUT UP!” He didn't so much scream the words as force them out of his whole body, a near yell, letting out energy that he hadn't shown in his movements. They drained him but only in the slightest.

Who cared what strength it took? He still had words to say.

Dennis fell silent immediately, eyes widening and mouth dropping open. His position didn’t change, still crouched close by - too close. It made him feel as if he were the scared, cornered animal being coaxed out of its hiding place by a human.

( *He was scared yes, and perhaps closer to being an animal than a man but he wasn't about to coaxed out by Dennis fucking Zalewski, now if the man came too close he would bite one way or another because that's what cornered animals do, right?*)

“Shut - up. You don't need to speak to me like I'm some village idiot,” he continued, seething, aware that his voice was slightly muffled by the mask. “I can understand English *perfectly* fine.”

“You-”

“No,” he cut Dennis off, struggling into a more upright position. The chains and straitjacket made it hard, but he managed to prop himself higher up against the wall, leaning heavily on it. “No. You've talked *enough*, let me speak now, okay?”

Dumbfounded, Dennis stared at him a moment longer before nodding, mouth slowly closing. He looked

( *Frightened and shaky, one hand trembling as it went to unclip the gun at his side and he put his hands up to beg, plead with Dennis to let Molly and the little boy go, we grew up together come on Dennis this is me, Henry Deaver, put the gun down!* )

curious. He would have been more surprised had he not considered the career choice this Dennis had chosen. This Zalewski probably dealt with much much worse than his words on a daily basis.

( *But the worst he had ever dealt with, was it the almost ripped out throat of his colleague and the fear of himself being next?*)

“I hate listening to you,” he began, inching further up the wall, chains rattling together as he did so. “Talking like- like you *know* what happened to me.”

“B-but I don’t - ”

“*Shut up*! You don't- listen at all!” He squeezed his eyes tight at the sudden tug of his arm in the straitjacket trying to hold it snugger, pulling it farther than what was comfortable. “Let me speak, and we can- get this over with, easier. You know, I loathe even being in the same *room* as you, after what you did.”
“Did? Do you mean-”

“I know you don’t know, okay?” And the stark realization that he did know this, that he knew this Dennis couldn't be the one to blame, hit him hard, hard enough that he let a groan out and curled in on himself, shoulders hunched forward as much as they could go.

“Hey, t-take it easy, you-”

“Quiet. Let me- just let me ask you something now, all right?” he switched gears, trying to avoid the truth that had just swung around and hit him square in the jaw through the mask.

Dennis nodded, apparently not willing to speak again just yet. Not trusting himself to not say anything more inciting, probably.

“Where are we?”

“Castle Rock. Uh, Shawshank… State Prison, like I said before.”

“Okay, so we're… above, now?” He knew it was a dumb question to ask, that of course they weren’t subterranean anymore, but the fear forced the words out of his mouth. The mask pulled and cut into his face again, making him wince at the sensation.

“Above… the tank, yes. Above ground. They kept you in the infirmary for a while, cleaned you up, but… what- what do you mean when you say I don’t -”

“Why am I tied up?” he cut Dennis off, looking down at his bound ankles and then at the way his arms were strapped together.

Next he looked up Dennis’ eyes were still darting, looking at the restraints in question, uneasy. “As a… For… for your own protection.”

“My own protection, from what? What happened?” he asked, even though he already had a good (terrible) idea about the answer. The Bad had wanted to eat, and it had. Just what exactly happened - that was the real mystery to him.

“You… don’t remember?”

“No, I'm asking because I remember it perfectly,” he deadpanned, glaring daggers. “I don’t remember. The last thing I can think of before - before the doctors - was the other guard putting me up against the wall.”

“You were barely conscious, two shades away from death. But… what happened next, it was…” Dennis trailed off. A torn, near haunted look flickered across his face before he schooled it back under control. “It shouldn’t have been able to happen. But it did. Just trust me when I say the muzzle isn’t totally unwarranted.”

“Hah! Trust you? Christ. It's hard enough to even have to look at you, to know you just so happened to be the one to rescue me, and that you have absolutely no clue what you've done.” He leaned his head against the wall, eyes half closed from the sheer amount of energy it had taken him to sit up. “You ruined my life. Jesus, I was going be a dad.”

Maybe he didn’t mean to reveal that so soon, but there was no sense in holding the revelation off for long, either. Dennis’s face twisted at the despondent words, with horror and pity and… some sort of strange kinship all mixing together and playing out for him to see.
His stomach sank.

(This man, he was also gonna be a dad wasn't he, soon now from the looks of it, soon enough that the thought of his being a dad shook Dennis in some way- no no no this was too unfair, some trick of something, the universe couldn't have taken that from him and given it to Dennis, could they? Could they?)

“You're- you're gonna be a dad?” he choked the question out, shaking his head at the mere idea.

Eventually, blinking, Zalewski stammered a reply:

“Sir, I-I- you- your- do you hear what you’re saying? Until a-a few days ago I- I’ve never laid eyes on you. We’ve never met prior to that, to now. How can you know - ”

(Wendell, if he had a son he would name him Wendell)

Chains clinking, he leaned forward. “You didn't answer the question! Are you going to be a father? Did you take that from me, too?” He didn't care about the alarm and confusion on Dennis’s face or the utter nonsense he knew his words sounded like. He had to know now, had to know if one of the only things that had ever gotten him through his twenty-seven years in the cage, a baby he wasn't even sure existed, had been gifted to Zalewski like some prize -

“Fine- yes! Okay, I’m damned if I-I know how I took anything from you in the first place, but if it somehow makes you feel better - ”

(“Feelin’ better already, aren’t ya…”)

He felt the furthest thing from it. He couldn't help the way his face crumpled at the words, or how he bit his lip hard enough to draw blood which caught at the bottom of the mask, no doubt staining his chin light red.

(This wasn't fair, wasn't fair at all it should be him at home with Marren with a young adult Wendell coming home for a holiday but instead he was panting from the energy it took to get himself talking, trying not to cry at the thought that there was no Wendell for him but Dennis somehow still gets his own)

“That's not- not fair,” he said, knowing it came out wavering, choked up, and not at all righteous like he wanted it to sound. “After everything I went through- have been through, I- I was supposed to be a dad and then you - you - ”

“Sir, stop, settle down- Focus. …okay. If I am who you say I am, how is it I… I don’t know what you’re talking about, or remember any of this?”

(His insides felt like they went white with scalding-hot anger at being told to focus, being told to focus by this about-to-be father while he was a whole dimension away from his own potential son - even though it was actually good advice in the here and now because his head was spinning, making him dizzy and his breath was coming out in furious, short bursts)

“Don't tell me to focus!” He stopped to take a breath, as best he could manage through the fouled mask, curling further once his shoulders began to ache. No one had ever told him, nor had he ever learned firsthand, just how painful wearing a straitjacket could be - maybe one simply had to be crazy enough to not acknowledge the discomfort. “You don't remember because - because… it's not you.”

(his own explanation made him want to cry again but he resisted the urge because he had been
Thankfully, Dennis gave him a moment’s rest before asking, almost gently, “How is it not me?”

“It’s… it’s you, but… but not this version of you. So it is you, but also not.” He shrugged (tried, that is) when he saw Dennis’s incredulous expression, already beginning to feel the effects of all of his efforts of the day weighing on him. “You don't believe me, do you?”

“No. And would you honestly expect me to? It’s all- a bit much, more than I was expecting to be told.”

“I’m sure it is,” he said, feeling a trifle bitter at the perfectly reasonable reaction. “You know… it was also a bit much to be locked in a cage for as long as I was, because of you.”

Dennis frowned.

“...How did that happen, then? What did I… do?”

At least he wasn’t rambling on unchecked, anymore.

“Killed Molly Strand, for one,” he said, almost flat. Receiving nothing but stunned silence in response, he begrudgingly went on: “You - the other you - was a police officer. I had- come home to Castle Rock because… because my father died. And I found a kid in his basement - down in a cage, just like me - you were one of the cops that showed up.” He closed his eyes again, feeling drained from the relatively short amount of talking he had done in just one day.

Who could blame him? For twenty-seven years he had mostly been having conversations exclusively in his mind.

Dennis paused again, clearly thinking this over, despite looking very incredulous in the same breath. He bit his lip, worrying it, before going still again.

“Fine, let him puzzle.”

“A kid… in a cage… like you?”

He breathed out. His spine was starting to ache. Fatigue may have started to get the upper hand, but not before he said his piece. “Not the same exact… cage or place or even captor, but yes. Kid in a cage, rescued by me, prior to being caged myself. That was just the start. He said - he heard things, in the woods? Not… normal things. Bad sounds. And even though he only looked around eleven or twelve, he… my dad, he- had these little tapes and - and he said he had kept this kid in his basement for years. Decades, even.”

“Why? Because the boy heard these- sounds in the woods?”

“No- I mean, maybe? Partially? It was because my dad… he was - not good, when I was a kid. Abusive, I guess you could say. My mother and I got away from him when I was eleven and apparently this kid… he said he was me. Me, but- but not, like you! My dad, he was really religious, used to be the town pastor. He thought the boy was a temptation, sent to his door by the Devil, to somehow replace… me. So… he caged him.”

He glanced up. Dennis had gone very still and quiet. Meeting his prisoner’s eye, the guard reluctantly went ahead in stringing together the story: “And for years, he just… kept him there? Then- your father died, and you found the cage. What happened after that? How was Molly Strand involved?”
“Molly… was my friend, when I was a kid. My only friend, to be honest. We hadn’t seen each other in years. By then she was a council woman, so she had some authority to work with. The kid, they sent him to Juniper and… the other patient he was put with, he set his mattress on fire. The hospital went up in flames. Molly spoke with the cops, got us in to talk to him. He started to… I don’t know, have some kind of fit? Molly grabbed his arm and she saw- something through him, I saw it, too, later on - but that was after…”

(He remembered the girl with her bloodied knife and shaking hands and the prisoners, the dogs and the horror in that hazy part of the world, or beyond worlds where the dead of Castle Rock suffered together)

“After? …After what?”

“We were supposed to just go home, have him only for one night, to let everything calm down, but - but Molly, she knew we had to get to the woods. You were following us, supposed to watch the house that night, but we went across the train tracks when the train was coming, got you stuck behind it and that’s where we went - into the woods.”

(his face twisted at what came next, at the shouting and the gun firing, at Molly somehow getting hit, running to her side, and then fazing into the hazy part, the one he somehow found himself in, Molly disappearing, the people he saw, then the leaves were gone, there was a foot of snow on the ground- )

“And… that’s where… why did he shoot her?”

“You shot her,” he spat. “You shot into the air, a warning shot after catching up because Molly and the kid had ran ahead, but you didn't need to do that, why did you shoot? We knew you had a gun, you pointed it at me, they saw it- why, why did you have to do it?”

Again, Zalewski went silent, pondering. His brow furrowed visibly. He sat back on his heels, hands clasped before him. After another feels-like-forever beat he spoke again, voice low with conviction:

“Most people, they stop and look when they hear gunfire. It’s an unusual sound. They stop and look to be sure that it is what they heard. That was… had to be the intention, I guess. To surprise them, to get Molly and the kid to stop. But it doesn’t follow: how could a warning shot, fired into the air, even hit her?”

“I… I don't know. It was the hazy place, somehow… sending the bullet in a different direction - straight at her. But it happened, that's what matters, and it was you who fired the gun. It was you who killed her and then - then she died, Zalewski. Because of you, on the ground like some - some animal you shot for sport.”

“You realize how crazy this all sounds, right? Say I believe you now. What would that change?”

“Nothing!” he cried out, but the words didn’t change the way he felt, the anger that wanted to choke him or the fact that he had spent twenty-seven years in a cage. The tears sprang up of their own accord, unwelcome and unwanted - just like the rest of his last few decades of torment. “It changes nothing because she’s still dead and I was still caged and it's all - your - FAULT!”

By the end, his voice veered into a scream, the collective screech of a thousand livid ravens, somehow contained in one word.

The silence to follow - wrought with frosty tension - was the longest of all.
Stoic, Dennis stared at him. He didn’t break eye contact or scoot away.

By the skin of his teeth, no doubt, he managed not to flinch.

“When did all of this happen? What year?”

“When I got here, this world - it was 1991,” he said, squeezing his eyes to try and force the tears away. It only served to let a few trickle out, along the edges of the mask. “So, twenty-seven years in the cage. Yeah, I would say it was a bit much.”

“Who caged you?”

“You haven't guessed?” he said, suddenly tired and unsure that he could keep himself upright, even supported by the wall. The explosive anger was just that - only good for so long. “Lacy. Warden Lacy caged me.”

“And you told him all of what you just told me?”

“Yes.” He shut his eyes again, sorrow finding its way into the places his anger had once filled, making his shoulders bow forward even more, tilting his head aside and making his mouth turn down (not that Dennis could see it). “But - it was just like what happened to the kid and my dad. Lacy thought… I was the Devil, the curse on Castle Rock. He thought he- he was… doing the right thing, keeping me locked up.”

(He left the “maybe he was” unspoken because he was sure Dennis was thinking it himself, no need to confirm it for himself to agonise over later)

“He never… saw things differently? All that time, he never bought your story as true?”

“No.” He turned his head to rest against the wall, fighting off the new tidal wave of exhaustion threatening to overwhelm him, and rapidly losing. His grip on lucidity slid away with it. “He was… a dedicated man, La… Lacy…”

“How did he die? …Uh, sir? Sir? Kid, you still with me?”

The last question turned out rhetorical.

He certainly wasn’t. By the way the man’s eyes unfocused, his voice petered out to a listless whisper, and he started to slump, to tip sideways, it was clear: the tank had run empty.

Before he could think to stop himself, Dennis shuffled forward, reaching over to catch the man by the shoulders. For all the different ways their highly questionable encounter had veered, this moment couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than a loss of consciousness.

How he kept at that for so long before passing out… must’ve wanted to say it for a while. And if Lacy caged him, never listened to him, all that time…

Caught up in the moment, constantly thinking “questions, questions, stick to the questions,” Dennis thought he did a passable job at listening where Dale Lacy (evidently) hadn’t. He certainly hadn’t stepped into the room prepared to be accused of inter-dimensional murder. But who could say there was a way to steel yourself for that?

Just like there probably wasn’t a way to prepare for being unexpectedly rescued by said murderer.
With certain undisclosed supernatural inconsistencies kept out of the equation…

No wonder the guy was cross.

Blinking, Dennis glanced up at the camera lens, passively watching over them all the while. He thought briefly of the people, the suits, on the other side of the lens. What they thought of all this revelation would come to next, he hoped this had been somehow illuminating.

Wordlessly, he keyed his radio mic- the nonverbal signal to the waiting team, waiting just outside the room with the gurney, to come collect their patient. In the midst of the interrogation, Dennis didn’t miss the drops of blood collecting at the bottom edge of the mask. Hopefully the guy didn’t hurt himself too badly in his struggle to talk.

His chin had dropped against his collar - just as it had outside the tank.

And once again, Dennis could only marvel at how sorry it made the man - or kid, a young man, by the way the pitch of his voice kept fluttering - look. Hesitantly he pushed the overgrown bangs out of his eyes, parting and smoothing them to one side. The pale skin felt hot and somehow clammy - two conditions that should not be in concert together.

Red lines where the plastic had bit into that sensitive skin…

*Just like the eyes and teeth…*

The kid was breathing calmly enough, but it sounded raspy and wrong, stuck in a rattle behind the plastic cover. Feeling actually sympathetic once again, Dennis reached over to loosen the nearest strap on the crude mask, above the ear.

Just a bit.

“What’re we gonna do with you, buddy?”
Disparate

September 12th, 2018 (13th and 14th)

You were with me, Em. All three days. Do I really need to rehash it here?

Because, in hindsight, I should have been there - watching him - that weekend.

We might have understood each other faster if I had.

——-

Most days, Dennis didn’t care to bring work home with him - no more than he could consciously avoid, that is.

In tonight’s case, the higher-ups had insisted. He needed a break. And no, he hadn’t signed any documents saying he would keep the information to himself. But he liked to think Emilia was discreet enough to not go spreading gossip about the latest urban myth added to Shawshank’s already-impressive proverbial library. Part of what had made her such an effective research assistant at the TV studio was her ability to not blab, to check and double check her sources, to avoid jumbling materials together, to not pander to popular opinion in pursuit of the truth, not just overhyped, mutated facts.

“Just because it’s popular doesn’t mean it’s right.”

And by the grim, downward cant of her expression when she had said it, Dennis already knew he had broken some kind of rule in that arena.

Besides worrying her sick in the first place. The news coming out of Shawshank was nothing positive. What little story had made it onto basic cable and a few select internet outlets - the best of it was neutral and no better.

Yes, it has been confirmed: Dale Lacy - the search is officially off. His body has been recovered, found in a decommissioned wing of the same prison he has presided over these past thirty years. The cause of death has not yet been released. In an apparently-unrelated incident Christopher Boyd, a corrections officer from Shawshank, has been hospitalized after a violent encounter with an as-yet-unnamed convict. An official investigation is said to be underway -

“Are you scripting again?”

Hunched over the kitchen table, head bowed into his folded arms, Dennis smirked and stifled a chuckle. “How’d you know?”

She played into it with a verbal shrug: “Oh, I just do.”

“Yeah, from all the way over there?”

Over there was a stretch. Their place wasn’t exactly spacious. From the outside one might look at it and think the single-story dwelling wasn’t all that rustic or charming. It wasn’t square, by any definition.

And from the inside they would be proven right. From a small entryway the front door led straight into the kitchen, which in turn led a cozy, quaint living room. Besides two bedrooms (one now a
makeshift nursery), a single bath, a closet, and a fifth, final space known between them as the den, there wasn’t much square footage available to escape one another’s company.

Emilia was perceptive. Following a routine hug she hadn’t immediately pried into what it was that had her husband so visibly distraught. There was no reward to doing so. She also knew breaking into hysterics was not the way to start off asking about how his day had gone.

Hug given, she glided back into the kitchen, the coattails of a bathrobe following at her heels. Hanging his coat on a hook adjacent to the front door, Dennis tried to momentarily forget the sheer craziness he had experienced and pretend this was any other ordinary night.

Doing so, he heard the fridge door give a clank as it was opened.

Then it closed. There were footsteps padding away, followed by the creak of weight settling in the well-broken-in couch of their living room. Poking his head around the corner, he spotted the offering Em had laid out.

An opened, chilled bottle of beer awaited him on the table.

Classic.

Grateful for a few moments to just let his mind go blank, to decompress, Dennis took a seat, a generous swig, and then a few minutes to rest his eyes.

But it wasn’t long before his restless mind began churning again. Emilia may not have meant to hover just at the edge of his hearing, but she didn’t have to. Living together under the same roof for so long, even if they were only a shy three years married, she could just tell.

Some may have called what he was doing brooding. Being in the television business, Em called it scripting.

Because she was cute like that - cute and bookish and going on matronly. Her wit had grown quicker as if to compensate for the increasing ungainliness of her body, the physical slowing down which had to occur. She knew better than to feel discouraged. For her to be more than whip smart, Dennis had once thought that impossible, but so were a great many other things he was now calling into question.

“Dear?” A good-humored drawl invited him to share more. “If you’re expecting an answer to that you best park yourself somewhere I can see your face. And put your feet up while you’re at it.”

Yes, ma’am. Gathering his thoughts, along with the beer, he coasted into the living room. It was a narrow, rectangular space, hardly different from a hallway. There was an old recliner stuffed into the corner across from the couch. Bottle in hand, Dennis sank down into it with a grateful sigh.

Had he been this sore all day and not even realized?

Emilia spared him another minute’s peace before tutting. “Mm-mm, footrest, up, now.”

Belatedly, Dennis groped for the wooden lever positioned on the side. Copy… that . The footrest in question swung out and lifted his socks from the carpet. He gave the bottle one more pull before setting it down. “Better?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Stretched out on the couch, reclining lengthwise from arm to arm, book in hand, Emilia managed to occupy both seats. There was a throw pillow behind her shoulders. Ordinarily a very
lithe, petite thing, she could almost have appeared dainty, were it not for her distended midsection. Having just passed the eighth month mark, Dennis was quietly impressed that she was continuing to go about most days at home as if nothing were all that different.

But in tonight’s case he was also silently dreading the inevitable. His wife had a knack for taking their conversations and methodically picking them apart to get to their heart in no time at all. If she was insisting he made himself comfortable it wasn’t a suggestion being made out of compassion alone.

Just like he had felt earlier, so intent on unraveling a mystery no one else seemed keen to, Emilia now had a plethora of questions requiring answers.

She was already proving to be far kinder in her interrogation method, at least.

*Bad cop, meet good cop. You’re gonna get along great.*

Playing along, Dennis pretended to watch her read until a page turn happened. “So, I suppose you already know as much as the rest of Castle County?”

“You suppose correctly,” Emilia responded, as nonchalantly cool and prim as he anticipated. She wasn’t one to wring her hands and fret. But Dennis knew genuine from veneer when it came to a placid expression on her comely face. “And I would think now would be the time for you to disillusion me.”

“That depends, honey. You want everything? The whole truth is… a lot more than you think.”

“Is it?” Her blue-green eyes quirked his way, following the raise of a shapely eyebrow. She had left her hair down tonight, features framed by wavy brunette locks. “You know I’m not one to shy away from the facts as they are.”

*Do I ever?* Dennis sighed again, this one deeper and more heartfelt than those previous. His sweater, some three days old after repeated siestas in his work locker, felt twice as itchy. “I’m still trying to get all of them straight in my head as it is, Em. Maybe after we’ve had a night to sleep on it…”

Led in to her rebuttal, Emilia still had the decency to be gentle in contradicting that plan. “We both know you getting any sleep at all will be a long shot. And you’ll keep me up wondering about it.” He favored her with another prolonged glance, long enough she eventually closed her paperback and set it on the floor, same as the bottle.

There, even playing field.

Dismissing the impulse that said *“grab another beer”*, Dennis crossed his ankles and tried to appear relaxed.

To be fair, he had kept the greater bulk of the story from her for a few days. The cage had been found on a Sunday, the follow-up meeting came around on Thursday. And here he was in the wee hours of Friday morning, with an open weekend staring him in the face.

*A paid* open weekend, no less.

Emilia was patient, yes, but an issue of this nature - she was just as likely to think her husband had lost his marbles as much as he had watched too many *Twilight Zone* reruns in his teenage years, and the two were now somehow twining together.
However she took the story, there was no getting around having to tell it.

...I was gonna be a dad...

Unsettling as it was, to have the man look him dead in the eye and *predict* such a thing on the spot, Dennis decided to leave that part for last, provided Emilia bought the rest.

There was a lot to cover.

“First thing he did was tell me to shut up, and he wasn’t wrong for saying so…”

——-

Later, he woke up.

Left alone in the concrete room, again, still shackled, jacketed and masked, he discovered just how angry he had made The Bad.

*You were calm? You call that calm?*

His head pounded at the words, a steady throb that hadn’t grown naturally, but instead had suddenly entered like a railroad spike, piercing his mind unannounced, manufactured and driven in as a punishment for his words with Dennis.

Too many words, it seemed.

_**No, no, I wasn’t calm, pl-please, stop,**_ he begged in his mind, but his pleas only made the pain worsen (the next day it left him feeling like his skull had been caved in by a baseball bat). His vision swam, forcing his eyes shut tight.

*Oh, you weren’t calm? That’s funny, I distinctly remember you telling me you were!* The Bad shouted and even though it was only in his mind the noise seemed to turn the pain up to eleven, enough so that he let out an audible groan.

He had been punished before by The Bad with headaches, acoustic-induced, a dull sort of ringing agony that always seemed to rest squarely in the front of his cranium, but this time was different. It was as if the headaches had been at 10% before, and now this one was at least 80%.

( _He would hate to feel one at 100% because even now it felt like his whole head was splitting in two, like someone was taking their hands, fingertips dug in between the lobes of his very brain, pulling the two halves apart, surely a headache set at 100% would mean death, it had to_)

“Stop…” he whispered, slowly moving his head side to side as if it could relieve himself of some of the pain and pressure. It only succeeded in making him feel like he was going to vomit, forcing his mouth open to gag before closing it again. The roots of his teeth complained accordingly. “S-stop, please.”

*Why? Why should I stop?* The Bad thundered in his mind, cranking the pain dial up another few notches, which hadn’t seemed possible even a minute before.

“I’m sorry, I-I shouldn’t ha-have talked, j-just *stop!*”

_No, The Bad said, sounding all at once calm, but not any less angry for having to impart this torture. He wanted to bring his knees up and rest his head on them, but even the thought of dropping his head enough to touch them made his heart beat faster. *No, I don’t think you’ve learned*_
Droplets of sweat broke out across his face. Snagged by gravity, they ran down, following the sharp contours of his mask. The stinging as they flowed over the raw, red lines it’s edges cut-

He whimpered again and braced his head against the wall. He hardly felt the outward pressure, gritting his teeth, trying to ride it out.

If he hadn't learned yet, he would soon enough.

-----

Where once there was a look of reigned-in curiosity on her face, Dennis could tell by the end of his first summation that Emilia was actually angry. A disapproving frown creased her mouth within the first minute, and stayed plastered there until he finally thought to stop and ask something in return.

“You think… it was a bad call?”

All because I had to know what the damn sound was, just like Joey. And I always liked to think I was smarter than his impulsivity.

“More than that, Dennis, it was a stupid call.” Emilia, oblivious to these ruminations, sank back against her pillow, fingertips drumming against the couch cushions in thought. “For a multitude of reasons.”

“Well, I’m not goin’ anywhere - fire away.”

“It’s tantamount to cruelty, above and beyond what normally goes on there,” Emilia minced her way into the rant, but kept her furious eyes pointed upward. The ceiling had no stake in this argument, therefore it was safe to rail at. “Are they even considering bringing charges against Warden Lacy?”

Dennis frowned. “It’s a little redundant when he’s already dead, hon.”

“His estate, then, his dependents? I mean, I doubt Martha had even the slightest inkling, but for something of that magnitude to be going on, right under their noses, and nothing be done- ”

“But they are doing something, Em. The investigation- ”

“Is internal, bound to be rigged to the gills, and you know it.” Emilia took a sideways glance him. “Involving you in ways no C.O. normally ever would be, it’s veering off course already.”

And she could care less about patching the holes, addressing the lack of integrity. It’s you being in the center of it that bothers her.

“Has my name come up, officially, in any press releases?”

“No, but it didn’t have to. Those phone calls you made, it sort of tipped me off.”

So I did - shot myself in the foot. Dennis rubbed his eyes. He could feel the dark circles underneath taking shape. “You haven’t seen what this man has done, Emilia. You’d understand what they’re dealing with… falls far outside the norm as we know it.”

“Except that it’s not a what, it’s a who,” she retorted. “All I know is he hospitalized another guard. He can’t be the first convict in history to ever do so.”
Except I don’t think this man is a convict. His story didn’t mention anything about a trial. Lacy snared him on a self-delusional vigilante pretext - like one man could possibly be THE cause of all Castle Rock’s problems.

“No. But we were only trying to help - like you would anyone who was found locked up underground, virtually starved to death. I would’ve snapped pictures, but the phone was back in my locker.”

The sarcasm wasn’t unwarranted. Emilia looked to the ceiling again. Her cross expression lessened at the reminder of just what he had been through. It was a fortunate thing he was sitting here at home with her free to ruminate on anything at all. There was also a wet glimmer in her eye that said he needn’t remind her out loud.

Biting his lip Dennis skirted around the issue - for the time being. “Has there... been any more word on Boyd?”

“They haven’t kept you up to date,” she muttered, almost to herself. She stirred with discomfort, bracing her feet at the end of the couch in a half hearted attempt at an inverted stretch. “Another-ugh, glaring inconsistency.”

“Em.”

“They’ve been pretty sparse on the details.”

“I mean, last I heard he was in an ICU, but stable.”

Another sideways look, Emilia shrugged and tried for some grim humor. “If one can ever be called stable after having his throat torn out. Even if he lives he’ll be a mute for the rest of his days. …I know there’s a great many people who might be relieved to know, but…”

There was some covert relief in the way she said it, and while he was grateful for her concern and her restraint, for not fretting and fawning over him, Dennis didn’t think he was getting away unscathed any more than Chris hadn’t. As of now he had learned too much and knew there were too many loose ends awaiting him back at work to think he had been anywhere in the right.

About any of it.

Funny. For the crowd of people that soon flooded into the decrepit cellblock, tending to Boyd and the erstwhile prisoner, all he could remember was dazedly trailing along in their wake. “Is this really happening?”

Turned out it was.

After hearing from a peculiarly green-faced Reeves, Theresa Porter virtually yanked him up the stairs to her office. She railed for at least an hour, half in a rage over the dither Shawshank’s newly-overseeing corporate board was now pitching, half over his borderline gross incompetence, as if he had deliberately acted with reckless disregard. If he had been ankle deep in trouble before, the muck had crept up to his knee by the time he was sent down to the infirmary.

“Take another long look at him before you start saying anything to me about bogeymen and monsters under the bed, Officer.”

Not Porter’s exact words, but not far off, either.

So, following a change of uniform at his locker, Dennis went and had his look. It had taken a
couple levels of waiting for word of his ‘specialized’ security clearance to be passed along.

But by the time he found the man again, only so much had changed: the Kid was strapped down to a table, still in his old, soiled clothes (they hadn’t even bothered to wipe the blood off his face, like it was evidence or something, a sight for the cameras to grab grainy stills of), surrounded by a phalanx of people in masks, plastic gloves and scrubs.

Looking at him like that, Dennis had almost forgotten his own glimpse of the inhuman eyes. He could’ve fooled himself into believing it wasn’t what he had seen.

Then, coincidentally as you like, the man woke up. The hired help took one look at him and panicked. He panicked back. A ruckus ensued.

Watching, utterly unnoticed, Dennis remembered thinking “needle is such a buzzword, you shouldn’t say it, call it a syringe” and sure enough, the man had to be duped into sedation. Up until that point, he hadn’t seen anything besides a painfully-underweight, terrified person trying to fight off all the strangeness he had suddenly been thrust into.

The strong red gleam in his stark, frightened eyes before he passed out -

Then all of his talk concerning parallel dimensions, mirror opposites, not even knowing why they thought restraining him was such a necessary measure.

The man was very clear on who he was.

Did he really not know what he was?

——-

Like a knife edge scraping along a blackboard, the pain dimmed right as it crescendoed, when he was sure he wouldn't be able to stand it anymore, at the moment he was ready to give up everything and anything, where if his pleas weren't answered he wasn't sure he would ever come back the same.

Then it stopped.

(He realized he could take twenty-seven years in a small cage underground, eating nothing but bread, and still hold on to who he was, but the sheer torment that had just been bestowed on him almost crushed his mind in one fell swoop)

There was time enough for several deep breaths. Then he let out a whimper and finally, tentatively, pulled his knees up, resting his head on them, trying to quiet his gasps. The pain was still there, but so minimal he could only tell because of the dull droning sound it seemed to make. His eardrums sang with it.

There. I think you've learned, The Bad said, sounding so calm that it was as if just a moment before it hadn't put him in the worst agony of his life. Do you want me to tell you what you've learned?

He let out another whimper in response, nodding his head shakily. He had learned all right, and what he learned he was sure would be burned into his memory forever.

The same way falling between worlds had been.

You learned that the only person you will talk to from now on is Dennis.
“What-” Sitting up, he began to protest but a sharp burst of pain resonated in the back of his head so he stopped, shutting his mouth with an audible click. The pulse subsided after a brief moment. He understood what The Bad was trying to convey - the conversation would be thoughts-only.

What… do you mean? he tried again. I don’t - don’t like him.

Irrelevant. You made the choice when you told him your story, The Bad said, then sighed as if it thought he was slow. Everyone else - whatever they ask, whatever you desire to know - you won’t speak to them. Ever.

He nodded against his kneecaps, the tension fading from his shoulders as more pain seemed to melt away. The terms were hardly fair, but what else could they be? He just needed to agree, agree with whatever The Bad wanted and then he would be left alone - still in a straitjacket and mask, but without the accursed headache.

You dug us into this hole, but luckily we can still climb out. Any further down, though, and you're of no more use to me.

He didn't know if The Bad was bluffing or not, but he knew what would happen if he had no more use. His body wasn't strong enough in any sense of the word to be able to exist on its own. Ordinarily someone in his condition wouldn’t survive outside a hospital.

Whatever The Bad truly was, it was keeping him alive.

No more use - no more life.

That hole would become a grave.

(He wondered just if he even wanted to live any further for a moment, but then the memory came back to him - walking down the streets of Boston with Marren, eagerly asking if she had missed her period yet and she couldn’t give him an actual answer yet there was something in her tolerant smile that told him he was right, that Wendell was closer rather than farther-)

He heard a scurrying sound just then and blearily looked up, the corners of his vision fuzzy from exhaustion, and saw a tiny mouse, making its way over to him. Or, not specifically to him but into the room, squeezing through a gap beside the door smaller than one of his fingers.

You also learned… The Bad drawled, and then it was as if someone was squeezing the nape of his neck, not painful but definitely uncomfortable. To let me take control when I say so.

He paused, unsure whether it was worth it to agree to something so extreme, but the pain cranked up, just enough to let him truly feel it so he nodded, nodded as hard as he could to try and dislodge it somehow.

Good. So, hand it over.

He didn't pause that time, instead allowing the feeling of being pushed out of his own body overwhelm him, a strange cold numbness (so in keeping with those countless nights in The Forest), until he wasn't in control anymore, until he was the one merely watching instead of feeling.

He looked down, watching as one arm began to move in the straitjacket and then the other, back and forth until it became apparent what The Bad was trying to do. It was trying to break them out of the bindings.

What are you doing?
The Bad ignored him, instead straining harder against the straitjacket until a hard-won *rrrip* seemed to manifest, small enough that it wasn't entirely noticeable but large enough for it to expand.

He heard the mouse squeak again, right outside of his peripheral vision, but sounding close enough that it was now inside of the room. They strained again and the rip became a tear.

*What are you doing? The guards will notice-*

*Stop talking. I know what I'm doing.*

With one more strain against the straitjacket the tear widened, spreading far enough he could slip his arms out of their holdings, first the right and then the left before the ruined sleeve material sagged off of his shoulders and hung by his waist.

(At the moment he couldn't feel it but he was sure that his arms would be aching by tomorrow, aching and sore enough that it hurt to even lift one, although he was also certain that his arms would be forced into a new straitjacket soon enough)

The Bad brought his hands up, seeming to study them for a moment before raising them higher and ripping the mask off in one clean motion, the once-sturdy straps snapping like dried-out twine, letting it clatter to the side. The air suddenly smelled fresher and lighter than before, since the mask seemed as if it had trapped his breath and forced it in and out of him in a cycle. This air - it hadn't been forced anywhere.

He sucked in a breath, wheezing it out with appreciation when his skin didn't start to feel wet or clammy. The Bad twisted his body around then, so fast he almost felt dizzy, so that they were facing the other way, down on all fours.

His eyes caught the mouse again, now mere feet from him. It froze as it saw him looking back, ears pricked and tail standing out stiff behind it, whiskers trembling.

His hand flicked out like a jagged bolt of lightning, far too fast to be humanly possible, and snagged it.

*Wait - wait, what are you doing*? he asked, staring down at the squirming mouse with apprehension. The Bad seemed to tighten its grip on the little creature, stilling its frantic motions although it continued to squeak.

The rodent fought valiantly, neck twisting back and forth, nipping at his knuckles with sharp teeth. Distantly, he felt the sting of skin being torn.

*We need to eat,* The Bad retorted, starting to raise the mouse. *And you need to watch.*

*Wait - w-wait, no, NO! Don't do that, please, don't! I don't want to watch-* he begged but he was given no response, just felt his mouth open and widen, more than what felt possible, watched as the mouse was lifted higher, higher and then *

*WAIT -*

The Bad dropped the mouse into his mouth, teeth clamping down, incredibly sharp - sharper than they should have been - sharp enough to pierce its body and kill it straight away.

If he was in control he was sure he would have heaved it up, the dead mouse and other contents of his stomach shoring up and spilling onto the floor and dirtying his new clothing.
But, since he wasn't in control, instead his teeth retreated and came down again, chewing a few times

( enough so that he could feel the fur matting into clumps, individual hairs sticking in his saliva, the way the organs popped like jelly-filled candies, the tiny bones crunching, so vivid that he would remember it for what felt like the rest of his life, always coming back every time he saw a rodent scurry past that first sickening crunch filling his head)

before swallowing the remains with one deep, unbothered gulp.

The worst of it was, a second after it was over, how normal it all seemed. His head cleared. The ever-present ache in his stomach eased, caring not what it had been fed, only that it was. His freed arms rested at his sides, loose and finally beginning to warm up as blood flowed back into them, but suddenly he wished that he was still in the straitjacket, that the mask was still on his face. It was preferable to what had happened.

He couldn’t say anything.

Just remember, The Bad said, sounding all too pleased with itself. Who exactly is in charge. His knees came back up, and the entity made itself comfortable, content, using his arms to hook underneath and rest their head on them.

He would remember.

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There were still three bottles of beer in the fridge, apparently. Dennis thought nothing of them, rinsing his empty one in the sink before returning to the living room.

Emilia had taken time to sit up, to free one half of the couch, but Dennis paused before taking her offer. “Honey, if you want, just come out and say it.”

“Ask you to drop the matter? I won’t, I know you don’t have pull enough for them to listen.” She patted the empty cushion and he sat, threading an arm over her shoulders in a cursory half hug. She scooted close, rested her cheek against his collarbone. “But I know you’ll be careful. So what else would you have me say?”

“Well ‘I love you’ like always will do us fine, I think.” Dennis smiled at hearing the sharp puff of air she blew, smothering a laugh. “Really - whatever passes for normal, as much of that you can manage for me, Em. No stressing, no freak outs. I’ll be in your debt.”

And I’ll act on facts, not fears. Like you’re always saying. “Facts can be scary, but it’s worse when you don’t have them.”

Smirking, eyebrow raised once more, Emilia paid him a very sardonic glance. She read the spaces between his words as effortlessly as one would a haiku.

“Consider it added to your debt tab, sir.” Without waiting for an invitation she grabbed his free hand, pressing it to her swollen middle, and Dennis was only all too happy to feel the same little flutter of movement beneath the cotton robe. To know it was still there, as content and unaffected as ever, was perhaps the best news he had gotten all day.

But then a shadow of guilt must have crept across his face. Emilia, despite not knowing the real reason for it, spared him a kiss on the chin and nuzzled in close.
“Honestly, though, between you and this one, if you don’t drive me to white hair before forty, I’ll be amazed.”
Odd how sometimes even the basics escape you when everything else ceases to be so complicated.

Waking up that morning after our long weekend, it came to me, the one fundamental thing you always do upon meeting a stranger.

“What’s your name?”

Dennis Zalewski hadn’t asked, and the Kid hadn’t told.

So it proved to be no surprise at all, that following Monday, he clocked in per usual and was handed a small stack of folders. With this plethora of observational notes he normally was by no means meant to hold, much less read, he made his way toward the first barred set of checkpoints.

Where he was supposed to go, right?

Lieutenant Frank Chesterton, graying and increasingly stocky, but still burly enough to be intimidating under the right circumstances, grabbed his shoulder before Dennis could reach the buttoned doorjamb.

“Before you do, could I have a minute, son?”

Dennis stopped, eyes darting. “Yessir?”

The older man circled around to his side. While not one of those most involved in the case, he was still technically Zalewski’s superior officer. “Now don’t look so jumpy all of the sudden. He’s not goin’ anywhere, but… don’t you have some- predetermined meetin’ with the warden before you go rilin’ him up?”

‘Rile up’ would be counterproductive. So, no.

Keeping this smart remark carefully unspoken, Dennis cleared his throat. “Sir, it was my understanding Warden Porter is intending to instate a small, select brace of personnel to watch this… particular prisoner. She called to tell me as much on Friday, said I was to be among them.”

“I’m aware.” Chesterton hiked an eyebrow. “And you don’t think she’d like to brief you on the latest? Standard procedure- I don’t care how much of a special case he is. You’ll want to hear what he was up to while the both of ya took the weekend to recoup.”

It wasn’t a question of thinking, Dennis realized. In his haste, he had almost jumped the gun. Fortunately not everyone had helplessly thrown their hands up in the overwhelming spirit of “let’s just wing this.”

He would talk to Porter first.

Then they were standing outside a different room. Dennis didn’t recognize it as the same barren space once cleared out for the man’s convenience. This one was smaller, with the same concrete-
block walls, with high, rectangular windows along the top of one wall. The cloudy, impenetrable-looking glass looked out onto the yard below.

Stepping through the door, folders tucked under his arm, Zalewski cleared his throat.

The Kid stood facing one of those windows - jacketed, masked, still cuffed at the ankles.

…it’s his second jacket… there won’t be a third…

Porter’s parting words were as foretelling as they were threatening.

Amazing. The guy can cannibalize the former warden and hardly anyone around here flinches. But some random mouse falls prey and… shit, it’s not about the mouse at all, Zal. Get a grip.

The door buzzed shut behind him.

Opting for the simplest alternative, Dennis cleared his throat again. “Good morning.”

The man didn't turn, the only indication that he had even heard being a loud huff of breath and his droll reply:

“Have a nice… relaxing weekend?”

Instant snark. No eye contact.

As much as I could - with you being on my mind every other minute of it.

Dennis rolled his eyes, unseen as the motion was, before crossing his arms, feet braced apart in a loose, waiting stance. He wasn’t going to be pulled into another bicker-fest right from the beginning.

But that reaction at least confirmed he was still secure in his place at the top of the Kid’s hate list.

“Look. How ‘bout we just start over? …Hi, I’m Dennis, and I’m sorry that I ruined your life. …I did do that, didn’t I? I mean, it’s my fault you ever… had reason to touch Molly, after she touched the boy. Had I not… shot, the first domino would’ve stayed standing, and we wouldn’t be here now.”

Talking crazy as I may be, that’s the language you evidently speak. Why make any more translation issues out of it than there already are bound to be?

“…Yeah, I spent a good portion of that ‘relaxing’ weekend thinking on all that you crammed into my head. Everything I said prior to that, I did pull a lot of it out of my ass, talented guy that I am. And - wouldn’t you know it - a few things you mentioned stuck. But before I dissect any more I figured we might as well start fresh, clean page on the therapist pad, with a whole new week to chew up, if you will? …C’mon. You never did tell me your name.”

The masked man turned during the small speech, a man uncertain half turn, eyebrows furrowed and bottom lip worried between his teeth.

Dennis expected him to look irate. Again.

Rather than that, he looked… surprised, mostly.

“My name…” He began and hesitated before beginning again, as though he were admitting some taboo knowledge. “My name is Henry… Henry Deaver.”
Dennis blinked. Repeating the name, quietly mouthing the consonants and vowels to himself, his frown metamorphosed into a bemused grimace.

Four simple-sounding syllables - adding up to a name that, in his version of this town, had an infamous backstory that was altogether different.

“...You sure about that?”

The anger quickly resurfaced.

“No, I came up with it on the spot .” He rolled his eyes at Dennis before returning to the glare. “Yes, I’m sure that’s my name. Why?”

“Why… the same kind of ‘why’ that has me owning up to a crime my… other self pulled. In front of a camera and everything. That name - on this side of things - ” Dennis stopped, swallowing an urge to sigh (of the many he dreaded would surface), to remember to dig for facts and not debate unnecessarily. He shook his head, reorienting his focus. “Henry Matthew Deaver?”

That got a response: the prisoner cringed at the full name, face crumbling for a moment before it rebuilt itself, burying the emotions below a calmer, cooler front.

“Yes, that's… my middle name,” he said, tersely. “But don't- don't say it again. I don't like my middle name.”

“Sorry, but I had to be sure, to eliminate the possibility.” Dennis refolded his arms, folders secured against his chest. They didn’t contain the information he was now in the know of, as the story was one which predated him by a few years, but Emilia knew as much as anyone who married into a Castle Rock household these days. It had refreshed his memory to relay it to her.

Henry Deaver.

“Is that why you haven’t… spoken to anyone since last we talked?”

“No,” the man said, then took another moment as if he were collecting his thoughts. “I just - I couldn’t talk.”

Couldn’t talk, and I think I know why - but he had no problem raking me over the coals, standing on my back long enough for some third-degree burns to set in.

Dennis shook his head. In less than a minute’s time, he had done it once more. Again, like the misdirecting mouse, the bigger issue was being glossed over. Practically ignored.

Not on his watch.

Name. The name is why.

“I can see why - I mean, otherwise they’d find some way to charge you with manslaughter, statute of limitations or not. But who would’ve bothered at the time? I mean, you were, what… twelve when it happened?”

Thankfully, Deaver went along with the ruse. “No, I wasn’t twelve. I was as old as I am now, but - but twenty-seven years ago.” He frowned at his own words - or his eyes seemed to, above the mask. “I haven't- aged a day since getting here. Just like the kid in my own world -”

“This kid - what was his name?”
“His name… his name was the same as mine. Henry - ” The man swallowed hard, as if preparing to say the rest: “Henry Matthew Deaver.”

“The boy your father found at his back door, the one who caused a fire at the hospital, the same kid who was there when I shot Molly…” Steeling himself, Dennis stepped one, then two paces closer. Not like there was a way for someone shorter to intimidate a taller person via such a move, but closing the gap a bit felt justified. “They say he pushed his father off the bluff at Castle Lake. You’re not him, and he’s not you.”

Duped into discussing an obviously-sore subject, he saw a flash of resentment cross the half-covered face.

Then the glare came back in full force. “I didn't know about him pushing da - his father off of the bluff, but if he did… he had good reason to. We're the sons of the same people, but not the same ourselves.” He raised an eyebrow at Dennis, as if daring him to challenge the words. “We're both Henry Deaver, just from… different worlds. Like you and the other Zalewski.”

And nothing you say is gonna change my mind on it.

Dennis didn’t back off. He glanced away, quickly piecing together another short explanation-slash-rant, then let it fly:

“Well. You and I have something more in common than I thought: both of our… alternative selves have allegedly killed before. Each for his own reason. Both could have been deliberate acts, or accidental, or hell, we may never know the truth, because the only other parties to those occasions are either dead, or stuck on the wrong side of the looking glass. So how about we dispense with the nonsense, stop chasing our tails, and start making things right?”

The man scoffed and balked. “Make things right? How could you- I don't think that could ever happen, Dennis. How would you even begin to do that?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m here to figure out.”

Another scoff. “Some figuring you’ve done so far.”

At least I’m trying, man. Name me one other person who is.

“You want history to repeat itself, is that what you’re saying? If it did, you’d probably end up in a situation even more tremendously messed up than this one.”

The man’s mismatched eyes narrowed to slits.

Dennis shook his head and stepped back. Closing the gap any further would only lead to more tension. “C’mon, I doubt there’s anyone else on this side who would listen to you even half as dedicatedly as I have. And if they did, their next move would probably be prescribing you some heavy antipsychotic medication, stand back after you’ve been turned out on a world you’re not from, and watching what happens. I’m trying to do better than that at least.”

You can talk about alternative dimensions all you want.

Between here and outside the barbed wire is just as much of a world of difference.

Deaver wasn’t moved by his argument.

“You don't know everything at play!” he hissed, but he looked distraught behind the mask, torn
between fear and anger. “We- you- can't just- fix things somehow. Your listening and believing me, it means- it changes nothing. I can't- I can’t go back to the way things were.”

“No more than I can. And if we can’t go back, where do we go?”

“Don't talk to me like I'm a child,” he said, but the fear had won out on his face. His voice pitched a few octaves higher. “You don't understand, Zalewski, I can't even talk to anyone. We can't move forward, or back, so we stay stuck. That's the only option, as much as I hate it.”

“Because you’re not… it’s not up to you?”

“No. It never is,” he said, his voice losing some of its sharp desperation. He sounded softer now, no more vehemence, and sadder than anything else. “At one point I - I thought I was in charge, but… I'm not.”

Now we’re getting somewhere.

Dennis paused, wondering if he should even mention the biggest tell so directly. But he didn’t have reason to wonder if his deductions and insinuating remarks weren’t rubbing salt into this man’s less-obvious wounds.

“Then… the jacket and the- the mouse, that wasn’t… you, either?”

“Well, I don't really look like I could break out of a straitjacket on my own now, do I?” the man asked, looking himself up and down - nothing but long limbs and no substance under all the safeguards. “And I would never… kill a mouse the way I had to.”

Something in the way he said it bore repeating, however unsettling it was. “You had to?”

Just like how you had to try and kill Boyd?

The man closed his eyes, paused very deliberately, then reopened them. “I'm not in control, sometimes, of my body. When that happens… I don't get to decide what we do, Zalewski. I'm just… along for the ride.”

Dennis frowned again, thinking of the notes he held, and the grainy security footage Porter had shown him in her office. He thought much more of the latter than the former. “And that might explain the- the personality switch. But you- are you aware, when it happens? Do you- remember us getting you out of the tank?”

“Sometimes I am,” he shifted uncomfortably, glancing down at his bound arms. His shoulders tensed, hunching as far as the jacket would let them go. “I ask, if I can… go away, and sometimes it… lets me. Yes, I remember getting lifted out of the tank, but once the other guard set me down… it goes black. I only remember the mouse because it was a lesson.”

Like a dog whipped into heeling. That’s the look on his face right now.

“What about… Lacy? Was he another kind of lesson?”

Deaver’s eyes narrowed in contemplation. “No, at least… I don't think so. That was just - survival. If it was a lesson, it was a lesson that we had to eat, even if I didn't want to. I told you I don't get to decide a whole lot, anymore…” he mumbled the last sentence, looking away from Dennis as if he didn't want to see his reaction.

Like he was ashamed. By these things he did not do.
As with the eyeroll before, Dennis felt a semi sour taste flood his mouth, but his thoughtful expression went unseen.

This man, who claimed to be Henry Deaver and somehow was and wasn’t in the same breath, he may have started his life and lived it like any other person up to a given point.

But past that point, something had changed.

And this change was not the internal snap everyone was presuming it to be, the end result of years of confinement and conditioning, but an external intrusion. This Henry wasn’t meant to be here any more than Zalewski’s other self was supposed to shoot an innocent woman in the line of duty.

It wasn’t them. Something else had apparently decided these things needed to happen, a faceless, nameless power that somehow rectified such events as necessary.

Maybe it was the same thing, hiding behind the masked man standing in front of him now.

Hiding because it had nowhere else to go… until it acted out again.

Just like a stickup artist, some hoodlum with the barrel of their gun crammed into a hostage’s face.

How do you shake something like that?

Certainly not by yourself.

“You can decide something right now, and if you choose different I’ll understand, but… do you want my help or not?”

*If I’m your only option… wouldn’t you rather have a slim chance than none at all?*

The prisoner hesitated for a moment, but didn't outright reject the offer. Instead of sad or enraged, he now looked fearful, as if whatever had latched onto him and took control wouldn't exactly *like* any help Dennis could offer.

“God… helps those who help themselves,” Henry said finally, before adding with a huff: “Good advice from a… not-so-good man.”

“Then… if you’ll hear one more tidbit from another not-so-reputable man… I’d go so far as to say God isn’t holding up His side of things right now, bud. What sort of God would put you through what you have been? By what I’ve seen… you look like you need someone besides Him on your side.”

“Maybe I just haven't helped myself enough,” Deaver muttered, but all fight had long since left his voice and face. “Or maybe… you're right. Maybe I could… use some other help.”

Dennis managed a small ironic smirk. “Even if it is me?”

“Especially if it's from you. You're probably… the only one who can by now?” he said, staring straight at him.

*By now, yes.*

“Hey, I’m preferable to anyone else the powers here might bring in. Not like you… can talk to anyone else. Or so a certain someone might have you believe.”

“Trust me, I'm not- *not* talking to anyone else.” A pained expression made its way across his face,
before quickly disappearing. “What… what happens now?”

The smirk whisked into nothingness. Dennis reminded himself to not frown, remembering what he had seen in the footage, before the moment everyone else found so repugnant, what they were just pretending hadn’t happened -

*What happens now?*

Besides the flicker of discomfort, Dennis now saw something else surface - something that had become all too familiar.

But, for the moment, he chose to overlook it, to test where that line was. His baton was still clipped into its holster. He might know in a few seconds if it still held any real stopping power.

He stepped closer.

“Well, a few things, but… how’s the mask feeling today? A little tight?”

With the wall at his back, the man didn’t try to evade him. His eyes narrowed again, tracking the guard’s movement, but otherwise he did not stir.

“More than a little,” he admitted, then looked embarrassed at the mention. “They - they did the straps tighter this time, somehow.”

*Last time it was snug enough to cut skin. And now it’s worse?*

Dennis lifted his hand, considered his options one last time, looked again at the man’s face, and drew back.

*As I thought.*

Time to ask - point blank.

“Is it okay with Redeye if I give you a readjustment?”

“Redeye?” Deaver asked, sounding like he had no clue what he was getting at, or felt what was happening. “Who… are you talking about?”

“What I saw, last week, on more than one occasion,” Dennis explained, bluntly. Maybe it was the lighting of the room, some strange prism effect on the man’s corneas, but he had to know who he was dealing with.

Both of them.

“The one who attacked Boyd. The cause of your blackouts. It might not have been you… Deaver, but whatever it was, it’s obviously the same thing that has you under its thumb. Doesn’t it have anything to say for itself, or is it such a cowardly opportunist it doesn’t need words?”

For a single moment Deaver looked panicked, eyes wide and eyebrows arched up before something - behind those shining irises - took over and everything went slack, not just his face but his whole body as well.

“*I wasn’t planning to speak,*” he said, voice almost veered into a monotone drawl, without the little inflections that signal to a real person. “*But we can talk, if you insist.*”

*Well, I found your calling card.*
But at least Dennis had the proof Porter wanted - this room wasn’t without its own A/V surveillance. The affected change on the voice would not go unnoticed.

Not like the visual cues had.

“Thanks for obliging me, and him for that matter. Suffice it to say, there’s nothing we can easily cover in just a few sentences. But I also know there’s nothing we’ve said here that’s gone unnoticed by you. With that in mind, you can keep whatever secrets you’re aiming to keep. I just want to help the guy you’re shadowing. …You gonna play nice if I make wearing that dog muzzle a little less unbearable for him?”

“I don’t think so,” the entity said, sounding unbothered by the way he had put it - unbearable. “You saw what happened to Boyd, Officer. Wouldn’t want that happening to anyone else. Best to keep us muzzled for now, no matter how it feels for him.”

“Why? Are you really that impulsive?” Dennis asked, flat as a board. “Is that how it happened with Lacy, too?”

“I wouldn’t say I was… impulsive, only that… I took the chance I was given. I can't say whether I'll take the next chance I see as well, so it's safer to keep it on, nice and snug, for you as much him, and everyone else. Besides, it's not hurting me any.”

“Clearly.” Dennis paused. The eyeshine, flared up, complimented the red, irritated areas around the edges of the mask. “Compared to you … I must not seem so bad anymore, do I, Henry?”

Like a light being switched back on, the emotions came flooding back into his face and tension reappeared in his shoulders and back. He remained stooped over, like an improbable scarecrow.

“No,” he said, sounding defeated since it was obvious the mask was not being loosened. Not today. “Nothing is worse than it.”

Dennis smiled again - half in pity, half in finally reaching the place they should have started off on.

“I think we’re on the same page, then, the three of us. I’ll do what I can to help, you just gotta give me the chance. And we can always hope we end up better for it, not worse. I’m not here to try and outdo a demon in the ‘evil’ department, and part of that involves giving you the benefit of the doubt, Henry. What else can we do but stay positive?”

“Easier for you to say, not in this mask,” he said, but not without a thread of hope at the words. Tiny, yes, but others could be woven around it, into something much bigger and stronger. “But I… I trust you'll try to help.”

“Just like I trust you’ll do everything you can to make sure I don’t get hurt. All we can do is go from there. I’ve got a few ideas, and among them… I’m thinking there needs to be another little adjustment, something to get you thinking in terms of the here and now.”

“Such as…?”

“How do you feel about an alias?

Deaver’s brow furrowed. “Might… be nice. It is kind of hard to get a nickname out of Henry, though.”

“Not quite.” Dennis tapped the corner of his unconsulted folders against the jacket, dutifully ignoring the annoyed glance it earned him. “I have something else in mind.”
Prior to stepping into that room, Dennis had thought of just the two words to sum up the problem: Special case.

Who wasn’t their own, in the grand scheme of things? In the exact opposite way, he was just as notorious. A kind of honorary condemnation had been handed his way. Look, there’s the guy that got Boyd mauled. The one they called (and still were calling) names like Golden Boy and Junior Ace. How’s this all for by-the-book, greenhorn? Oh, don’t look at us, bucko, like we were supposed to know to cover these kinds of unorthodox scenarios-

Just as he wouldn’t a short time later, Dennis didn’t bother with the notes. He followed Lieutenant Chesterton, feet moving on autopilot, lost in a mental fog until the man stopped, rapping his knuckles on the warden’s window.

“Enter.”

Chesterton opened the door. “Officer Zalewski to see you, ma’am.”

“Send him in.”

Dennis didn’t wait for an affirmative, turning sideways to thread his way past the stockier man. He tried not to think about the irritated stare that was aimed at the back of his head.

Standing adjacent to the door, an open ledger held in both hands, Joshua Reeves spared them a wry smirk (like he wasn’t the same Reeves who lost his lunch at the sight of Lacy), but was mercifully quiet.

Fine. By all means, stay that way, man.

Dennis could do with avoiding every other walking, talking reminder of Chris Boyd. But here, with the various heads of department, it was kind of a hopeless cause.

So he kept his eyes on Theresa Porter. “Ma’am.”

She gestured to the set of chairs before her desk. Beside said desk sat a television on a rolling stand. “Officer. Have a seat. That’ll be all for now, Frank. Tell the relief to expect him within the hour.”

Chesterton bowed out with a scowl and closed the door.

Taking a seat as directed, Zalewski watched him depart out of the corner of his eye. Within the hour, is it?

Besides having the rest of Shawshank to oversee, Porter set her current round of paperwork aside. Outwardly, she looked no less harried than last he had seen her: black dress suit, both it and her face no longer wrinkled with fatigue, and the standard gold chain link necklace glinted almost innocently.

But Zalewski recognized the forced pleasantries when next she spoke: “Dennis, good morning. I trust you had a pleasant weekend.”

“Where’s our ‘thank you’ for taking the time while we deal with the shitstorm your foolishness got us into?”
Without frowning, he managed to hold her eye and nod.

“It was, ma’am, thank you.”

“Sure the missus appreciated it. The most she’s seen of you in a while?” Reeves spoke up, in a tone that was anything besides offhand and casual.

Dennis pretended to busy himself settling the file in his lap. “It was, sir.”

Porter smiled - a small, redundant curve of the lips. “We appreciate you taking the time, too, Officer. Things were… are complicated. It was good if you to step aside for a beat while everyone got their bearings.”

“Including our honored guest,” Reeves drawled. There was a light\textit{fwap-ssshunk} as he closed and shelved the ledger. Dennis paid the deputy warden a sideways look as he mosied over to, seemingly without permission, perch himself on the edge of Porter’s desk. “A little birdie told us you were on your way to see him, soon as you punched in?”

“Yes, sir. By the… documents I was provided, and the nature of our conversation on the phone, Warden Porter, I… understand you wanted to appoint me to some kind of… specialized detail?”

Porter nodded. The smile stayed the same. “Temporarily, yes.”

“Might I ask why?” Dennis paused, then rephrased: “I mean, is there not a conflict of interest?”

Reeves said nothing, spare raising an eyebrow.

Porter’s smile faded. She set her elbows on the desk, pointing to the file before her with one manicured nail. “Among other sources, I’ve been over and over this transcript of your conversation with the man, Officer. As yet, it’s the most he has spoken to anyone, before or since. We’d feel… as though having you on board is- crucial in figuring this problem out.”

\textit{Crucial. Meaning you can’t find more than a few people willing to get involved at all?}

Dennis glanced between them, giving the words time to sink in. “You’re serious? Even considering how furious I obviously made him?”

\textit{And probably still do.}

“That was only the first date.” Reeves shrugged, oblivious to the quiet chastising look Porter shot him. “Regardless, it’s quite the wild story he came up with, Zalewski. One that you clearly have bought into, from the sound of things.”

“I… went along on the assumption you wanted him to talk, sir. What about… no one was very clear on.”

“Granted, but in the time since, he’s had virtually nothing to add,” Porter mentioned. She took a remote from beside the stack of papers, aimed, and pressed the button. The screen snapped on, revealing a fuzzy, low res image of the storage room, and it sole occupant. “But based on this, I was thinking there may be some truth to your… version of events after all.”

Noting the timecode in the corner, Dennis watched. Porter pressed another button, then a third. The playback speed whirred up. The word MUTE appeared in the top right corner of the screen.

The occupant of the room, seated against the wall, needed no introduction. Dennis instantly
recognized the attire - the off-white jacket stood out a mile.

The second person to enter the room was the blue uniformed figure of himself, three days ago according to time of the recording. The tape raced ahead, running some forty minutes before slowing down as four more figures intruded on the room. Dennis watched as his past self stepped out of frame and the scrubs-wearing orderlies pulled Deaver’s passed out form onto a stretcher.

Porter hit fast forward, then play. The footage, clearly already edited down to length, cut from the high angle of one room to another. The timecode changed accordingly - a few hours into Friday morning.

The new warden set the remote aside. “After he was moved to another area for examination and then observation, this happened.”

The remainder of the footage was played at normal speed, sound still muted. Dennis watched, frown ever more apparent, as the bound man was situated in the room, restraints checked (one orderly cinched up the mask strap Zalewski distinctly remembered loosening), and then left to his own company. The brief exam felt cursory at best.

Ten minutes later, the patient stirred. Leaned against the wall, his head lifted, before sharply canting back down. His shoulders trembled visibly. Dennis swallowed uneasily, watching him fold up, obviously in some kind of distress.

“This went on for roughly fifteen minutes,” Reeves drawled, with the same kind of disconnected interest expected of a corporate suit. “But the real reveal… was that.”

The timecode jumped again.

The man stopped shuddering.

At first, it wasn’t clear what was happening. He started to struggle again, but in short, deliberate jerks.

Dennis barely managed not to jump, seeing one, then both arms of the straitjacket simply split, from shoulder to wrist, as though a pocket knife were slicing apart the seams.

While he had seen worse already, more than Porter and Reeves put together, it was still jarring to behold.

“How the hell did- ”

Reeves smirked, held up a finger. “No, wait for it.”

Hands folded atop her desk, Porter looked on and didn’t so much as blink.

The man tore the mask off in short order, ripping the straps up and over his head. The shredded sleeves hung in tatters, like the leftovers of a second, decaying skin, but he made no move to strip them away. His attention went to the only actual witness of the impossible feat.

The only other occupant of the room.

Dennis watched the man turn, impossibly quick, then his arm unfurled and struck like a lunging snake. The long, clawing fingers - the fleeting, narrow shadows they cast on the floor - didn’t exactly evoke any pleasant memories.
Looking then at the prisoner’s face, barely canted toward the camera’s eye, he saw only a minute
ticker of red on the monitor. The image quality was too low, the spectrum of colors too muted, for
it to be anything natural.

So focused on that detail, Dennis couldn’t help jumping at watching the mouse meet its end.

Without so much as a pause of uncertainty, the man dropped the rodent into his mouth.

Dennis flinched backwards before remembering there was nowhere to go. “The fuck? Did he ju-

He stopped himself, gripping the armrests of his seat.

*He did. Get over the shock. You’ve seen it before - this behavior, this… side.*

Belatedly, he also remembered he wasn’t alone in watching the footage.

Porter spared him another glance with her cool blue eyes, let the tape run a few moments longer,
then hit pause again.

Reeves scoffed out loud at the ending image - the prisoner didn’t play to any imaginary audience,
only refolded and sat back against the wall, apparently content with the outcome of his kill.

And the latest shellacking of mystery it heaped upon the already over decorated dossier.

“Yeah. Like the Hulk move as performed by Jack Skellington wasn’t strange enough,” the deputy
warden remarked, sounding equal parts amused and snide. “He one-upped that less than a minute
later.”

Porter set the remote aside. “And the next he was checked on, he made no move to attack.”

Dennis blinked. “W-what?”

“Quite the unpredictable little scrapper, he is,” Reeves went on. “I mean, he waited long enough to
get hauled out of the cage, then takes no time to introducing himself - not with words, but-

“Joshua, give it a rest,” Porter sighed, visibly weary of her subordinate’s witticisms. Having put up
with them all weekend long, one glimpse behind her professional mask was enough to temporarily
allay Dennis’ confusion.

He wasn’t the only one for whom this didn’t make sense, not by a long shot.

Reeves frowned, but sulkily fell quiet all the same.

“The next guard to find him.” Porter went on. “He didn’t protest at being restrained again. The
orderlies to fit him in another jacket had no trouble. He let them put the mask back on.”

Dennis swallowed, uneasy, despite the calm delivery of the story. “You were… did you see them
do this, ma’am?”

“Secondhand, yes. And the tape corroborates their reports. It’s all in the file- notes, photo stills.”

She nodded toward the folder, still resting in his lap. “Regardless, you needed to see this before
going anywhere near him again.”

“Ma’am, with all due… respect, why is he even still here? I know, he’s harmed one of our own, but
you don’t think… a psychiatric facility with medical support wouldn’t be a better fit?”

Porter’s expression darkened a shade. “From this, we can’t know what is the better fit. Here, our
personnel are at least somewhat better equipped to deal with the violence. That baton you carried ended up being a lifesaver.”

Dennis frowned. “Might I suggest… more routine check-ins, then? Had someone- noticed what was going on, before he tore the jacket off-”

Porter didn’t interrupt, nor did Reeves.

New movement out of the corner of his eye stopped him mid-question.

The frozen image on the television screen flickered. Dennis blinked, saw the pause icon still displayed in the corner.

“Officer?”

“Do… do you see that?”

Plainly bewildered, Porter looked at the screen. “What?”

Dennis didn’t think to explain, too caught up in what he was looking at. The man sat there, the only living, mobile thing in the room, huddled up against the wall, arms hugging folded knees. The staticky edges of the frame continued to jump and flicker.

“…That.”

“Officer, the… tape is still paused.”

_It is. And I’m not… imagining more, am I? …No, I can’t be. Not out here in broad daylight._

“You see somethin’ we’re not, Zalewski?”

In an uncanny parallel of Chris Boyd, Joshua Reeves managed to blindly hit the nail on the head.

_Something they’re not…_

Apparently unable to tell for herself, Porter shook her head. “It’s his second jacket, Officer. There won’t be a third. If he has anything to say, he hasn’t deigned to share it with anyone since speaking with you. For better or worse, we need more to work with before… deciding what to do with him. You’re our best shot at obtaining that information, by any means necessary.”

“And if he… doesn’t want to talk?”

“His choice.” Reeves’ voice was a shrug. He stood up from perching in the desk. “We’ll see what it takes to loosen his tongue… not like we have a lot of options to pick from there, though. And even fewer of them that result in a happy ending. You might want to advise him of that.”

_Advise. As if they can do worse than forced starvation and borderline-possession…_

Dennis didn’t offer any more articulate an affirmative than a curt nod. His eyes never left the screen.

Or the once-blank face, now grinning back at him from behind the glass. Or the flat, monotone voice forming words no more heard by them than the change in expression was seen.

_Sure you still want to know what that noise was, Joey?_
Like visiting the pound to look at a supposedly-rabid dog already on the list for euthanasia.

That’s what that day felt like.

Then again… it was my idea, originally.

——

The phone went off just as Dennis turned the Chevette’s puttering old engine off. He paid the ringing no mind until he had gotten out of the car. The tone wasn’t his default. Circling around, he opened the passenger door, and saw the damage was underway.

With the flip phone held to her ear, Emilia glanced sideways at him, raising an index finger in a wait gesture.

One hand resting on the roof of the car, Dennis glanced up at the ancient concrete building before them. Today the outside looked suspiciously like nothing but stone and barbed wire. He spotted lookouts in the two watchtowers gazing down on the lot. Self-consciously he pushed the sunglasses further back against his eyes.

Alternating between pauses and curt replies, Emilia spared his fidgeting no attention. Her focus was elsewhere, listening raptly to whoever was chattering away. Dennis thought he heard a tinny, high-pitched voice emitting from the speaker. He declined the urge to ask who it was.

He already had some idea.

Emilia confirmed it before the call ended: “How about this, Valerie, just give us- thirty minutes or so and I’ll call you back? We’ve a prior engagement to attend to, I’m sorry, one that can’t be rescheduled. …Yes, all right… yes, talk to you then. Thank you. Until later.”

Dennis watched as she spared the phone’s screen a worried glance before flipping it shut. His stomach promptly sunk. “Valerie Boyd?”

Shaking her head, Emilia stowed the phone and unlocked her seatbelt. “Again, the poor thing.”

Still camped out in Chris’ hospital room, then. Dennis tried, unsuccessfully, to shake the dismal thought, offering his own wife a hand in standing up. Just what he needed was a reminder of last week’s grisly attack.

“You still thinking about patching the roof?”

Dennis shook his head. The flip side to that coin: the last thing he was worried about now was fixing the leak in the entryway of their front door.

“We can still walk away, Em.” At her disbelieving glance he bit his lip, unsure of where that had come from, except a place of great concern. He did have a tendency to blurt these things out. “I mean, it’s not like you’re… under any obligation to meet him.”

Much less come within a mile of this place, in your condition. I know it bothers him as much as it does me.
Emilia knew better than both of them, what her nerves could or couldn’t take. But Dennis also knew how she resented that kind of thinking, being handled “overly delicately” as she once called it, around five months along. So he wisely kept quiet and pretended to adjust his shades again.

*Last chance to bail out.*

Emilia rolled her eyes, hiking her purse onto her shoulder. “My argument hasn’t changed, Dennis.”

“I didn’t think it had.”

“Yes or no questions only, right?”

“Those would be… best.”

*You’re far more gung ho about this than I was counting on.*

Her attention shifted to the right, then back to his face. Dennis followed her eyeline to his raised arm - unintentionally keeping her trapped between him and the door. “Why are you stalling? …It’ll be fine, Dennis. You could be right. Who knows if a friendly, new face isn’t just what he needs to see?”

“Maybe, although he won’t- Em, he can’t even speak to you.”

“So you keep reminding me.” Dennis froze as she reached up to pull the sunglasses halfway down his nose, so their eyes could meet. “There’s no harm in just looking, then, is there?”

An alias.

Dennis gave Deaver a night to think it over.

And to start figuring how to address the man’s needs.

“No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

“Ehn-oh. That spells- ow! What are you- doing?”

“Hold still.”

It was their third meeting. Initially, Dennis hadn’t meant to back the man into a corner. But as he stepped foot in the room, he couldn’t help noticing that was close to where Deaver stood. The windows at one wall had proved too tempting for him to not take a look through.

Deciding to table the talk of pseudonyms for a moment, in spite of the negative response, the guard turned his attention to making their latest conversation a tad more comfortable. He wasn’t about to stand back and watch the man continue to suffer.

*That thing cuts any deeper, he’ll be wearing those lines for life.*

“Before we talk about anything- else, hey.” Dennis paused in fiddling with the buckled strap at the back of Henry’s head. It wasn’t unlike the bridle of a horse, the leather straps almost a match with
the dark brown hair. Deaver, ducked against the wall with nothing to hide behind, shot him a
dark smoldering look over one shoulder. “Relax. I thought you’d like to get out of this Hannibal Lecter
getup?”

“Well, yes, but- some warning next time? Don’t just start- grabbing me!” Even with the accusing
tone the taller man relaxed some, now that he knew what was happening.

*Like you would’ve consented, had I asked.*

“Sorry…” Dennis muttered, almost halfheartedly. He refocused on pulling the tab through the
latch. The strap was already flush. Yanking on it just enough to free up some slack wasn’t going to
be pleasant. “Keep still. This’ll hurt a bit.”

“Not like I haven't dealt with- Jesus!” The word turned into a wincing yelp. He kept still, though,
only his shoulders tensing up as the strap was grabbed.

“Sorry.” Working out more than his fair share of tangled knots on camping trips, Dennis was
grateful for having nimble fingers. This one was painfully simple in comparison. Sliding the tab
free he pulled the metal pin loose from its notch. “Got it.”

The held-back tension did the rest, letting the plastic apparatus fall free. Deftly, Dennis unwound it
from across Henry’s face, trying not to wince at the ugly, red furrows left behind - laterally under
the eyes, trailing off diagonally along his near-nonexistent cheeks - the end product of nearly a
week’s worth of continuous wear.

*Shit, those have to sting.*

He stepped back to a healthy distance. “There, that’s gotta feel better, right?”

*No one ever said what I can’t do to make it easier on him.*

Deaver paused, shook his head like a horse tossing its mane, then winced, working out the stiffness
in his jaw. “Yeah, it- definitely is…” He hesitated, settling, biting his lip before mumbling, “Thank
you, Dennis.”

*Least we don’t have to mince words there.*

“You’re welcome.” Holding the strap between two fingers, Dennis spared the dangling mask a
revolted glance before tossing it aside. It smelled of dried blood, old sweat and sour breath. “They
won’t let me bring any- ointments or the like in, but fresh air alone ought to do you some
wonders.” He paused once more, taking another studious look at the wounds. *Still no stubble, either.*

“As for the rest of it, one thing at a time. Haven’t they… have you eaten yet? I mean, since… I
found you?”

*Don’t mention the mouse. We both know by now. No need to dredge it up.*

“No… I don’t- think anyone was raring to take the mask off after- ” Deaver hesitated, eyes averted.
“After what happened.”

“Have they even asked if you wanted anything?”

He shook his head no. “Not that I could actually tell them, anyways.”
**Beside my point, man, but there’s another mark against how clumsily they’re handling your situation. On purpose and not.**

Dennis scoffed, paying the camera overseeing them a very overt glare. “Well, that at least tells me they’re sort of buying the story about you’re not a totally… conventional pris- person.”

**Normal person. The words you’re wanting to use are ‘normal - person’**.

Deaver didn’t seem to take offense at the adjective. “I guess so. But I’m not gonna lie, I would rather not… starve again.” He said the words as if they didn't bother him, but his eyes were too wide for him to look entirely casual about the sentiment.

**So strange - one green eye, one brown.**

Dennis shook his head - to get his focus back on track more than anything. “Didn’t say I’d let that happen, pal, but…” He trailed off, eying the jacket dubiously. “It’ll take a lot to convince them it’s ever gonna be safe enough to take that off you.”

Deaver frowned, eyebrows creasing at the words. “So… until that happens, I don't eat?”

**Think, Zalewski, think.**

The urge to start pacing came and went. Frowning, pondering out loud, Dennis scratched at his chin. “What if I brought you something?”

“And then… you'll undo the jacket? Or you're gonna, what, feed me like a baby? Because something tells me the people watching…” Henry stared at the camera for a moment before returning his attention to Dennis. “they wouldn't be too thrilled with your idea.”

“The alternative doesn’t help anybody: you go hungry, and they look- flagrantly neglectful. If they were so concerned, they ought to have at least tried to offer you something.” Dennis stopped short, knowing full well what he was saying was being recorded. But again the three words Porter had used kept echoing over and over:

**Any means necessary...**

Nothing he said ought to be used against him.

He was here, dealing directly where no one else would.

“I’m not so dense I don’t see the- the risks, man. It’s just… someone has to make the first move.”

As much as Deaver might not have liked the idea of moving forward or backward, to stay in place would mean his starving again - something he desperately did not want. So his hand was inevitably forced.

“Okay,” he said simply. “If you want to… risk it, I'm not going to object. But I don't think there’s anyone for them to look- flagrantly neglectful to.”

**You don’t know how right you are. But I have to start somewhere.**

“So, what’ll it be? …Don’t worry, I won’t sneak any poison or pills in with it. That’d be too uninventive.” Awkward as the joke felt to crack, Dennis didn’t think a little levity would hurt anybody.

Evidently unsure whether the guard was being serious or not, Deaver blinked an almost-bemused
“Bread, just - just bread. No... poison or pills would be nice.”

Odd choice and not, all things considered. But for the moment, Dennis was just happy to have an answer. “I think I can manage that.”

Why did you agree to this again?

He didn't answer the angry voice. Why should he? It already knew why, it just liked to punish him. Humiliate him, incessantly mock him, in his own mind.

Oh, you're going to ignore me? The Bad said, waited one heartbeat, and a sharp spike of pain implanted itself dead center in his head, fast enough that he let out a cry of shock at the intrusion.

No, no - I won't ignore you - just stop! He grit his teeth as he thought and sighed once the pain ebbed back into the constant hum in the back of his skull. It was hard to disobey The Bad’s word when it held such power over him.

Still didn’t stop him from trying, from reminding himself to still fight.

That impulse was on life support - same as the rest of him.

Tell - me: why did you agree to this again?

Because...

He wasn't actually sure why he had agreed to meet Dennis’s wife. It made him uncomfortable in a way, to know the heavily pregnant woman would be escorted through Shawshank to him.

(He knew he wouldn't want Marren, pregnant or not, to ever come to this place so he wondered just what the hell Dennis thought when he first mentioned it, if he was in any way hesitant of his own idea)

Then came the half-baked explanation.

Because? The Bad asked him, impatient. He tensed for a moment, expecting more pain, but was relieved when none came. He felt like a trained dog, conditioned to respond to its owner through the use of a shock collar.

Because Dennis wanted me to, and I - I trust him.

Trust him. How can you be sure it was Dennis that wanted you to meet her?

...What? he frowned at The Bad’s reasoning, initially not able to make sense of it.

You know, Henry, don't play stupid. You see the cameras, always watching us. You truly think Dennis is here to help? Nothing else? Don’t you ever wonder if his kindness is just a means for them to get information out of you?

He shook his head at the words. Dennis - even after the rescue, the near miss, the guard believed him about the other worlds, believed him even when he shouted and got angry, took the mask off and got him something to eat.
He did all those things because they're telling him to, you stupid boy, not because he wants to help. Don't tell me you believe him. This is just another ploy, to get more information they can’t otherwise obtain.

Stop. It’s not anything like that. I can’t- his eyes closed at his thought, and he bit the inside of his cheek. I can’t even really talk to her.

That's right. The Bad cranked the pain, just the tiniest amount, as if it were a warning. And you won’t even try, if you’ve actually understood my lessons so far.

He had.

But understanding and abiding by - they're two very different ideas.

-----

“Well, it isn’t anything fancy. But I think that was… kind of the idea, yeah?”

Just as he had removed the mask without warning, on the fourth visit, Dennis dared fate once again. Eying the knots keeping the jacket’s oversized sleeves fastened together behind the prisoner’s back, he spied just what he hoped to find: a tail.

Pull that and the knots would let themselves out.

So, while Deaver took a vaguely-studious gander at the peace offering - three plain slices of Wonder Bread sitting on a steel tray - Zalewski reached behind and pulled the knot’s tail out.

Is this how lion tamers feel, working with cats they’re not familiar with for the first time?

“Hey - I said warn me!” he yelped, swinging around to confront Dennis. His freed arms fell to his sides as he visibly winced - they must have been incredibly sore after being bound.

Dennis glared right back. By now he knew the difference between actual anger and momentary discomfort. It had been the same with removing the mask.

Still, he took a measured step back, one hand at his belt, a thumb’s twitch away from unsheathing the baton. “And give you time to say ‘no’ three different ways? If you were gonna try and hurt me it would’ve happened as I walked in. Your face is looking better… by the way.”

“It doesn't feel better,” Deaver seethed, raising a thin hand to self-consciously rub at the furrowed lines. A day’s time hadn’t taken the raw-edged look off. “Feels sore. Which my arms will now feel like, as well, thanks to you.”

Dennis noted how his hands still trembled as he rolled the overly-long sleeves back. “I didn’t put the jacket on you to begin with, Nick.”

Deaver bristled, fists clenching. “Don't call me that! I said no. My name is Henry, not Nick, and warn me when you're gonna touch me.”

At least I got his mind off of hurting.

“Fine, Henry. So, we’ll leave the ankle bracelets on. And I’ll stand all the way over here…”

Dennis stepped back even further, away from the table that had been provided for the ‘meal’ to come. “No more touching, period.”

“Why can't you respect that I'm saying no?” Henry glared back, but still took a half step toward the
"I'm sorry, were you expecting me to hand feed you?"

Dennis refrained from bringing that back up. He only glared in mute affront, letting the man ponder his look - read his own answer into it.

Deaver scowled. “You want to just ignore what I want, like everyone else?”

Watching him poke and prod at the tray, slowly spinning it in place, Dennis didn’t think himself entirely guilty of that observation. “How is making you more comfortable not giving you what you want? …Honestly, I’m surprised you can still use your arms at all, considering how the blood flow was pinched off for so long.”

“Well, as you’ve pointed out, I’m not a ‘conventional’ person. You think I’d be alive right now if I wasn’t?”

At this Dennis sighed, but if it sounded like anything, it was self-deprecative at best. “No, if you were normal, I’d be talking to a very unconvincing corpse… or maybe I have been all along, and you’re just very good at playing alive.”

“Maybe I am,” Deaver shrugged, then thought twice, gingerly stretching one arm, then the other. “Or maybe I’m supposed to be- dead, but- something’s got too much invested in me to let that happen.”

Something.

“Right, your… your copilot, let’s say. Keeping you on life support.” Leaning against the wall, below the camera’s vantage point, Dennis crossed his arms. “And you took a baton to the face and it didn’t break your jaw. That should’ve been my first hint.”

Didn’t even leave that bad a bruise.

Pushing the tray a few inches back, Deaver scoffed. At least the look of aggravation made him appear considerably less bug-eyed. “It's gonna take more than that to break anything in me, Zalewski. You know how long it took me to get in this state? Spoiler - way longer than it should have.”

“So, more than thirty days?”

He grew quiet for a moment, before saying: “Probably. At a certain point you just stop caring. It's not worth it when you're counting down to your death, not your next meal.”

Dennis frowned, raising an eyebrow at the abrupt change in tone. “So, way more than thirty days. And it wasn’t unprompted: Lacy turned some kinda corner about how he was dealing with you.”

“He always said I was the Devil, but at that point it just… changed. He was - proving a point, to both of us. If I didn't die, I was the Devil and if I did… I don't know what would have happened, then.”

“Why did he just up and have a heart attack in front of you? Coincidence?”

“I…” Deaver paused, looking up at the camera before simply watching Dennis for a moment. “Depends on what the truth is gonna do to me, doesn't it?”
“Man, at this point, the forensics don’t lie. He died, then- well, he died, but nothing that can be proven says you caused it. If anything he looks more guilty than you - you didn’t build yourself the cage after the Christmas fire torched that block.”

“He touched my face, then died. He proved to himself that I’m the Devil,” Deaver said, recounting the series of events. “He died thinking… he was right to cage me.”

“He caged you without ever giving you a chance to defend yourself,” Dennis retorted, not unkindly. “Granted, it was a long time ago, but… if Dale Lacy was half the man of the law everyone says he was, he should have heard you out.”

Denver’s frown didn’t vanish. “He wouldn’t have believed me, just like…” He trailed off, bit his lip again, but not hard enough to split the skin. “What if… Is there a… a sheriff here, by the way? Is he - around?”

“Current or former?” Dennis paused, considering, then answered his own oh-so-obvious question. Only one man held the office in 1991. “You mean Alan Pangborn?”

The man’s expression lit up with actual excitement.

“Yes, yes - is he in Castle Rock? How is he?” he asked eagerly.

“Retired, last I checked. There’s supposed to be a bridge in town being dedicated to him fairly soon. Why?”

“No reason, just… wondering if he’s… similar over here.” Deaver’s eyes flicked to the side, tense at his own explanation.

At first brush, Dennis neither sounded or looked convinced. Time to prod the tiger again. “No reason, my ass. What does he have to do with any of this?”

Shoulders tensing, Deaver glanced back at him. “Nothing. He has nothing to do with this. He was… important to me, in my own time. That’s it.”

“Important, how? Why would it matter if he was sheriff at the time you- fazed over?” Dennis stepped closer. “That’s what you’re getting at, right? You say Lacy wouldn’t have believed you, then the next subject you just so happen to go for concerns another man of law?”

This time Deaver didn’t hold off the urge to glare. “Stop,” he hissed, not taking any steps of his own. “Alan is a good man, Zalewski. Don’t ask any more about him.”

Said in the same low tone that brokered no further argument - don’t touch me, don’t talk about Pangborn - Dennis scowled at facing such a roadblock, but nodded.

How’s that for respecting when you say ‘no’?

Deaver stared at him for a moment longer before relaxing when it became apparent Dennis really wasn’t going to force the matter any further.

“Thank you… for the bread. You’re pushy, though,” he grumbled.

“I’m nothing if not that.” Dennis glanced away, gears ground to a halt. He looked up at the camera, directly above his head, once more, and scratched idly at his ear. “The other me… he probably made a better cop, didn’t he?”
“He was,” Deaver said before huffing. He reached for the tray. “Although for a cop, he asked some pretty personal questions for what he probably assumed about me.”

“He presumed to know, you mean. Difference is in that line of work necessitates asking things people usually didn’t want to talk about. He had to rule out true from false. It’s not what we’re especially known for here in the corrections system, where those we deal with usually already are guilty of something, but we’re doing what we can with what we have.”

_I’m doing what I can, in other words._

Fingertips on the bread, Deaver went still. He stared at Dennis for a second. “This dimension really messed everyone up, didn't it? You, working here… you _should_ be a cop.”

“Like it would help you now if I was?” Dennis grumbled, almost dismissively. “Sorry I don’t meet your expectations there. …I didn’t on the admittance exam, either.”

_Few years ago at this point. Haven’t thought much of it since._

At a glance, Deaver looked a mite sympathetic for his interrogator. “That- sucks for you,” he shrugged, wincing slightly at the leftover pain it caused. “But you're right, it's good for me. I’m… glad you were the one who found me, though, Zalewski.”

“Glad? Even if I’ve been nothing but a pain in the…” Dennis trailed off again, eyes darting, as if unsure of where to end that thought.

_Glad - after I shot your best friend and practically landed you here? …Unintentionally took Lacy’s place?_

“Even if you've been a pain,” Deaver grinned at him, perhaps the first somewhat happy expression anyone had yet seen on his face. “I know I have.”

“But I could at least be less of a pain… and I haven’t been. You actually have cause.” While Zalewski didn’t appear to share in the sentiment of the statement, at least it helped him better put things in perspective.

“You do, too. You're working here as a C.O. when you should be a cop, on babysitting duty for who knows how long… we’ve both have some reasons to be pains. And we both could be less. Who cares? You treat me like an actual person.”

“When… Lacy didn’t ever bother to see you that way,” Dennis muttered.

_Another check on the improvement list - supposedly._

“Not just him,” Henry said. “You're the only one who really does in this dimension. Definitely a step above the rest.”

_Of my own volition, yes. And to their convenience. But is it actually the help you need?_

“Well, I appreciate the… vote of confidence, sir. Not many of those being handed around right now.” Dennis took a glance at the untouched slices. “Anything else I can get you?”

Deaver’s expression fell again.

“No. Nothing… simple like bread, no,” he sighed, shuffling over to grab the waiting chair. “The bread will do.”
“Good. I’ve pried enough for one day. I ought to- at least let you eat in peace,” Dennis explained. He sounded neither discouraged or appeased, only thoughtful - thoughtful of the bigger picture only he was privy to. “Among other things…”

The last wasn’t said quietly enough to go unheard.

Deaver blinked, tilting his head. He stopped short of sitting down. “What… other things?”

“Complicated… things, Henry. Don’t- just- enjoy your meal.” Without much more in the way of an adieu, Dennis reached for the door, slipping through before it fully opened, letting it clank shut behind him, the drone of one buzzer running into the next.

——-

Given another day to stew, Zalewski came up with more of a plan.

…and, for the record, it was not a great one.

But one was preferable to none.

He didn’t think on it too long, alone, either. He wasn’t that impulsive. He wasn’t.

He couldn’t afford to be.

——-

Standing before the bathroom sink, Emilia actually paused mid-brush. Around the corner, Dennis saw the reflection of her face frown, considering what inanity he had just proposed: “One blink for ‘yes’… two blinks for ‘no’?”

He stood in the hallway, leaning on the archway separating the living room from the den. “You got it.”

“…Star Trek methodology?”

“Em.”

“You’re not serious.” She must have wanted to shake her head. Instead, she resumed brushing. “I’m just- trying to wrap my head around it, Dennis. You say he might be open to a visit… but he can’t speak?”

“I asked him about it today, hon, after we had discussed a few… ideas. He… he looked reluctant, but we agreed that it’s worth a try.”

“A try? A try, how?”

“That he meet someone who doesn’t look at him like a prisoner, or a guilty man, or anything like that. An… unbiased encounter, if you like. I already ran it by Warden Porter.”

He heard Emilia set the brush down, apparently satisfied with the work done, ready to begin braiding. “Dennis, after everything you’ve told me, I’m hardly unbiased.”

“But you- ” He stopped short, running a hand over his face. Yes, maybe this was borderline nuts to consider, but so were all the clues he was seeing - that no one else could. “What you’ve heard is my version of events, Em. If you saw him for yourself, I might… I don’t know, give you some perspective.”
“And that perspective goes both ways: it helps you, help him.” Dennis waited, letting her puzzle over the ramifications as best she could. “You might be onto something. It’s not like they’ve… given you a partner to work with.”

*Officially, no. Just as they haven’t officially told me not to share the story with you. …It’s a surprising amount of leeway, considering.*

Considering yet again, Dennis moved from the archway to the bathroom door. Emilia had paused again, hands holding two half-spun locks of hair. She looked at him via the mirror’s surface.

He elaborated:

“I’m not asking you to be his next best friend, Emilia. I just don’t… know what he needs. Really needs. But what he has been lacking is a little… sensitivity, some gentle words. Someone needs to look at him, who he doesn’t have any… preconceived notions about, and who isn’t there to do any harm. And the visitor in question, they don’t know where he was found, what he’s been through, or what he’s… done. Just… one person meeting another. He hasn’t had that simple pleasure in years.”

“It’s only a visit?”

He stepped onto the tiled floor. “Only a visit.”

Emilia frowned, but resumed braiding as he stepped up behind her. “Well, I… do admit I’m more than a bit curious. I just- need some time to consider for myself. Ourselves. A day or so, if you please.”

Grateful for her open minded attitude, Dennis kissed the unbraided side of her head. “Yeah. For now, it’s only an idea.”

*So was my thinking in ever mentioning Block F, to free up space for the overcrowding.*

*Good intentions, get paving.*

——-

He posed the question next they saw each other..

Deaver stopped short of taking a bite from the bread and managed to unknowingly echo Emilia. “You’re serious?”

Standing in his newly-usual place, on the far side of the room, Dennis rolled his eyes. “Says the man from the cage.”

“I wasn’t being- rhetorical. You want me… to meet your wife?”

Time to explain in no uncertain terms: “I want you to meet Emilia Grantley, yes. That she just happens to be Emilia Zalewski according to some piece of paper is an… unavoidable side note.”

“What - *why*, though? You know I can't even speak to her, right? Or do you think I'm lying?” He put the bread down then to focus his full attention on Dennis.

Put in the spot, the guard glanced away. Mind made up within a few minutes, he looked back. “It’s not that. I’ve… seen enough to know it isn’t some kind of bluff. But… you don’t have to talk to her. I said meet, not talk, and I told her the difference, too, made it very clear.”
Deaver blinked. “Can I just know why, then? I mean… what are you hoping to achieve?” He didn't look wary of the idea though, just confused by it being suggested in the first place.

“I need someone to bounce ideas off of. Em is a research assistant at a television station. Not the over sensationalizing kind, either. She can help me separate facts from… emotion. And she can do that easier if she knows… what you look like. I mean, they say I can’t take pictures home, to keep leaks from springing, but it’s not like they’ve really hurried to get you any legal representation, either, have they?”

For the umpteenth time, the unlisted prisoner didn’t look convinced.

“So, you're… trying to tell if I'm telling the truth or not? Or if I'm innocent? I'm not understanding you, Zalewski.” He frowned at Dennis, but not with any malice.

_No more than I am you these days. And that’s the problem._

“We need a mitigator. You know what that is?”

Deaver’s frown deepened. The furrows left by the mask flexed accordingly. “My vocabulary is pretty rusty after those twenty-seven years, so you'll have to remind me.”

_Well, you seemed to know ‘rhetorical’ just fine._

Just managing not to sigh, Dennis crossed his arms. “In legal terms, it’s a third party brought in to impartiality help two parties - at odds - reach a compromise. In layman’s terms… it’s like a referee. …I need someone to judge me, more than judge you.”

Contrary to the delight he expected, Deaver only looked all the more thoughtful. “Okay… so, you need someone to judge how you're… dealing with me?” He blinked, abruptly, an unconscious affirmative by the one-to-two blink system Dennis had joked about. “Why? I think you're doing… okay, in my opinion.”

“And while I would like that to be the only one that counts, forgive me, but your interpretation of fair treatment might just be a little… skewed after so long. Are you honestly the same man you were when Lacy locked you up?” Dennis paused, eyes roving. “You're at least a hell of a lot thinner.”

_Your state of mind didn’t go unaffected, not for that length of time._

Deaver scowled. “I want to say yes, but…” He shrugged. “It took a long time for me to realize that the way I was treated as a kid, by my father, was wrong. And then, it… it all came back when Lacy locked me up. But you're not Matthew, Dennis, and you're not Lacy.” His expression went darker with the mention of the two men, as if their mere names were enough to dredge up the unpleasant memories.

“And that’s just it: I don’t want to become your next Lacy or Matthew. I need someone to reign me in, keep me from that same zealously. However long they drag this investigation out… you can smell the bad vibes rolling off of this place a mile away.”

Deaver’s scowl eased. “If you say so, but something tells me you'll never be on their level. So… when do you want her to come?” he asked, almost casually. He picked the bread up again, as if to continue eating.

“A few days, time enough for either of you to ax your consent before I run it by Porter. …Wait. Was that a yes?”
Deaver rolled his eyes and placed the bread back down before saying; “Yes, I'll meet your wife if you're that worried about becoming Lacy or my father. You think she'll say yes, though? I'm not sure I would.”

Dennis scoffed, but not without half a smile. “Why? You think she’ll be afraid of your dirty looks?”

“I know I would be.” Sheepishly, he gave Dennis his own version of a smile, even if it proved short lived. “But… isn't she pregnant?”

“Yes. You wouldn’t think she knows that, the way she can’t sit still unless there’s a book in her hands.” At the raised eyebrow his joke received Zalewski shook his head. “Bad timing, another thing I’m infamous for, right? The other me?”

“Very bad timing,” Deaver said dryly, then glanced around the mostly-barren room, as if appraising it. “I'm just saying… I wouldn’t want Marren here, pregnant or not.” He ended the sentence staring straight down.

She’s not my first choice, either… but Em is better than nothing. And by now she’s eager for just a look at you, I know it. Curse of an inquisitive mind.

Dennis opted for a slight subject change. “What’s she like, Marren? You haven’t… said much about her.”

“Marren was - is,” he corrected himself, cringing at his own slip up. “She's… smart, and loud and dragged me way out of my comfort zone the very first time we met. We were gonna get married, soon, have a kid… the last time we talked she - she told me had missed, by a day.”

“A day,” Dennis repeated, testing the word for himself, and all the weight it carried. “Shit. ‘Kept you hanging’ is an understatement.”

He nodded, before saying softly: “If we had a boy, his name was going to be Wendell, and his middle name…” He shrugged once more and let himself trail off.

“What? What did you… have in mind?”

He shrugged again. “Nothing. Let's not… talk about it anymore, Zalewski. It's not… a fun subject.” He gave Dennis a solemn look, this time not demanding it to be dropped but asking. Pleading, in a way.

Break out another joke, Officer.

Dennis shrugged in acquiescence. “One of the only other things you can talk about besides all the different ways there is to eat bread, right?”

The food in question was picked up. “You'd be surprised to learn how many there are. Trust me, when it's the only thing to interact with, you’ll start looking for entertainment anywhere.”

“...But I bet you know how to make some pretty impressive shadow puppets, huh?”

At this Deaver only spared the tiresome guard an eye roll, wordlessly stuffing a generously-sized piece of bread into his mouth.

Laugh it up, not-Lacy, laugh it up.
September 16th, 2018 (con’t)

It was my idea, closest thing I could fathom to... a plan. Both of them were good enough to humor me, despite their misgivings. Maybe... in spite of their misgivings. I don’t know which is more true.

Because it wasn’t until later I realized exactly what Deaver meant when he said it “wasn’t up to him.”

It wasn’t hyperbole.

Funny. You think the eyes and teeth (and the selective biteyness, literal and not) would’ve clued me in sooner.

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Shawshank wasn’t a supermax like Attica or ADX Florence. But it wasn’t the drunk tank at the Castle County jail, either. Some effects, they were asked to leave in temporary storage after signing in. Emilia gave up her purse with minimal protest, having already prepared by taking the important items out at home. No cash or cards. The cellphones were their cheap spares. The sunglasses were left, folded up, next to them in the box.

Dennis thought ahead. He wouldn’t put it past some of his less-esteemed coworkers to swipe visitor’s belongings now and again.

Best to carry no money, no cards…

Their wedding bands were the exception.

While inwardly restless, Dennis declined the urge to pace. They wouldn’t be kept waiting long. Standing idle, having given up the booth’s seat to Emilia, he fidgeted quietly, spinning the ring about his finger. A visitor’s badge had been clipped to the lapel of his jacket.

Next he looked up, his wife was looking at him over her shoulder. Her eyebrows worked once, but she didn’t frown. True to form, she spared him a little half smile.

“You all right, Dennis?”

You make this look almost natural, never having been here before.

He refrained from mentioning it. To do so would only invite more unnecessary chatter he knew she would immediately tire of. “Yeah, just... scripting again, you know.”

Emilia’s smile only disappeared as she spared the door, on the opposite side of the divider, a belated look. The turn of her head hid it from view.

Glancing down, looking at her folded hands, Dennis couldn’t help noting how her fingers were intertwined with themselves. Specifically, he noted where her right thumb and index finger were.

At a much slower pace, she had been spinning her ring, too.

She knows. She’s doing the same.
Go get ‘er, tiger. Make a good first impression.

Shut up. Just - please, let me at least see her. He grit his teeth, disliking the fact that he had to ask The Bad to let him interact with Emilia at all. I won’t talk, but don’t… distract me, or show her anything.

Oh? Why is that?

He didn’t want to say, didn’t want to give The Bad the satisfaction of knowing just why he wanted to be on

( their)

his best behavior. Admitting would just be showing a weakness, and he knew what The Bad did with weaknesses.

Weaknesses were its bread and butter.

( He knew this all too well, like the voice of Matthew Deaver cutting into him and bending him to his will the way the man had done when he was a child, a weakness he had tried to bury but was dug back up, unable to be at rest)

Because… because she’s pregnant.

There was a moment of silence that would have felt thoughtful if the conversation he was having had been with anyone else, but with The Bad, it felt anxiety-ridden and tense. His shoulders hunched almost automatically at sensing it.

Because she’s going to remind you of Marren, you mean? it finally said, fake sympathy in its voice. Meant to coerce him into spilling his story, make him vulnerable and easier to demolish. It left a sick feeling in his mouth, coating the top of it.

Fine, yes. She’s going to remind me of Marren, and I don’t want to scare her. Please, I - haven’t asked you for hardly anything else.

There was a sound like a chuckle in his head then, one that made him curl up further into himself. It was a - a bad sound, for lack of a better term. Laughing at him for a mistake he had just made, that’s what it felt like.

Remember you asked a favor of me, Henry , it said once the laughter died down. Remember this when I ask one of you.

He would.

The moment the buzzer went off Dennis stepped forward, preemptively setting a hand on Emilia’s shoulder. In his peripheral vision he thought he saw her shoot him a glance. Then there was new movement, beyond the divider window.

Almost unceremoniously, the pair of guards - Harper and Johannsen, he later pegged them as - muscled the bedraggled, staggering prisoner through the door, then closed it behind him with a sharp thunk .
Dennis winced at the sight.

*Christ, Porter. Couldn’t you’ve cleaned him up more than that?*

Emilia’s first words weren’t a far echo of this thought:

“Good Lord, Dennis, he’s- what- this is- is… what happened to him?”

She normally wasn’t one prone to theatrics - gasping, hands held to the mouth, those sorts of tics - but without looking aside Dennis felt her hand reach back and grip the top of his own.

Besides looking as emaciated and haggard as ever, Henry Deaver didn’t appear to have bathed, or not very thoroughly if he had at all, in the past three days. Even if it was an improvement over the state he was originally found in, it was still striking. The standard issue blue inmate uniform appeared fresh, sneakers clean, and a white undershirt devoid of spots. His oily hair lay almost flat, unkempt and half clumped into greasy strands. And his wan skin bore almost a grimy shine.

The furrows from the mask were still raw, crusted with dried blood. A faint tinge of red inflammation lined both tracks.

*Small wonder if they’re not infected by now.*

Deaver seemed to hesitate upon spotting them, as if he suddenly didn’t remember the meeting was expected at all, that he wasn’t due to be paraded like this. His eyes went wide and anxious, mouth pressed into a taut line, and he moved to step back before suddenly freezing in place, like a deer caught in the headlights.

Later, Dennis supposed he had been.

Those eyes had frozen him at the Mellow Tiger not that many years ago.

While her husband wasn’t watching, Emilia stood halfway up from her seat, and - through the glass - was actually trying to beckon the man to come closer.

“For now, don’t be like that. …C’mon. Aren’t we here to say hello?”

-----

The whole ‘meeting-Zalewski’s-wife’ plan hadn't really clicked in his head until two guards - men he had not seen before, didn’t know what to expect of them, these strangers - were on either side of him, dragging him along a new hallway into an unfamiliar room to meet her.

(He felt a twinge of pain as one of them roughly pulled him forward, enough so that he felt The Bad seem to tense itself, ready to defend him - them? - at a moment's notice)

He didn't look good. He didn't mean that in a vain way, either, just that he wasn't a pleasant sight. He could tell without the use of any mirror - nothing but skin and bones. The latest set of clothes he had been shunted into felt baggy. His hair remained sullied, his face gaunt and red lined from the mask. He didn't want

(Marren)

Emilia to be - scared (of?) for him their first meeting and he wanted to say so, wanted to backtrack in time and say no to Dennis but then the door in front of them opened, a buzzer going off and -
He stumbled into the room, guards still flanking his sides before letting him go abruptly, forcing him take a few clumsy, hasty steps in order to not fall.

He took one quick breath before swinging his head over, to get his first look at Emilia Zalewski from behind the glass divider.

*Je-sus, Dennis knows how to pick them*, The Bad commented, for no reason other than it could, but he ignored it.

She was a beautiful, fair-skinned brunette, nigh exotic compared to most he had seen, and, yes, heavily pregnant, a mix that left him reeling, for one moment mistaking her for another beautiful brunette woman, who may or may not have been pregnant, and it wasn't even their similar looks that drew the connection in his mind: it was - the sheer and utter concern on Emilia’s face.

So similar to Marren's after he told her of Matthew's death.

He took a step back, mostly in apprehensive confusion, eyes wide and alarmed at his own thoughts before she stood up from behind the divider and she was so short -

(Marren hadn't been that short he reminded himself but his stomach twisted because really he didn't know, couldn't really remember just where she had been height-wise and it hurt to realize this loss of information-)

“Now, now, don't be like that. ...C'mon. Aren't we here to say hello?”

-----

“You know he can’t hear you without the phone, right?”

Dennis cracked the obvious joke for his own comfort as much as Emilia’s. She sounded a mite uncertain. He even managed a wry smile at the irritated look she spared him.

Anything to keep the tension at bay.

“Yes. After telling me all about how he can’t speak during this meet,” Emilia muttered, not entirely incorrect for reminding them of the fact. Her expression gentled, looking at Denver’s mildly petrified face again, the way his mismatched, questioning eyes darted to one side and back. He was still standing in the same place, hunched over, on the far side of the yellow-walled room.

After some seconds of waiting, Dennis tapped the glass divider, then motioned back toward himself with one index finger, nodding sideways for effect. Emilia spared him another dubious glance, but sat down accordingly, wordlessly picking up the booth’s phone as she did.

*Come on. You know it's just a few questions. Yes or no only.*

-----

He glanced at Dennis and bit his lips, eyes flickering from the empty chair across from Emilia, back to the closed door. A silent question that they both understood -

*Should I just leave?*

Dennis shook his head at him before tilting it at Emilia, who had sat on her own side of the divider. There she was - waiting for him, eyes turned up expectantly, seemingly over the initial horror of
how he looked, and almost… hopeful.

(Marren could be expecting him, he thought, and there would never be a way to get back to her… but he could give Emilia and by extension Dennis what they wanted, couldn't he?)

Scared? I thought you wanted this so badly, Henry! The Bad mocked him, and the condescending tone alone was enough to make him shake his own head and start forward, pulling the chair out and sitting down without further hesitance.

There were worse things to be afraid of than the Zalewskis.

He stared at Emilia for a moment, her right back at him, with those peculiar blue-green irises. Then his eyes went to the woman’s hand, holding the phone, her shiny silver wedding band, and his ever-wayward thoughts trailed back to his old life

(He would never wear his own, either, never rub it between his fingers, never have an indent that it left behind just the scars of the mask)

before he stopped them.

Slowly, gingerly, he picked up the phone hanging in its cradle.

-----

If Emilia still harbored any reservations about this encounter, they were a thing of the past. Dennis could tell by the glint in her gaze. She was smiling again, the same ever-encouraging one she always seemed to don without trying.

He remembered the first time it snared him. All she had had to do was sit down beside him at the bar and ask, “Rough day?” A waspy retort declaring his desire to drink alone died on his tongue the moment he looked up.

For a second, he hadn’t thought Emilia Grantley was real. But she didn’t wait to let him ponder the unbelievability of his luck. More gorgeous than her looks was her compassionate nature, her easy-going attitude. There were a fair number of sad saps drinking away their woes that night, who would’ve undoubtedly loved to buy her drinks, and before it was over, they had swapped life stories over a record (minimum) two beers.

They hadn’t traded numbers, just a promise to rendezvous there the following night.

She was at the door, waiting like the timely angel he hadn’t thought he would ever meet, an hour after he was able to get away from the job. Her only words were “there he is, fashionably late”, followed by a salient kiss on the cheek.

He was sold.

Hopefully that same unworldly kindness would be enough to keep things on a positive note now.

“There, not so bad, is it?”

Blinking his way back to the present, Dennis almost couldn’t peg that one as rhetorical or literal. Was it meant more for him, or for Deaver? It was most likely both, but he thought to add his two cents anyway:
“Sure. What’s there to hate? Not every day you get to meet… Nick Cage.”

“Dennis.”

The sheer unimpressed flatness in her voice prompted another smile. He almost leaned away from her scathing look. “Sorry, sorry… He gets the joke, hon. I’m just- you’ve heard how rough things’ve been for him. All work, no play. I try to keep it light.”

To that Emilia only made a short eyeroll of suffrage before looking back to their guest, holding the receiver to her chin. “Then may I say I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with him as your… only friend, Henry. You’ll have to excuse the over abundance of- atrocious material. It’s been building up for years.”

-----

He couldn’t help it. He gave his own tiny smile at listening to her. The accent was so novel. She was - nice, kind enough to apologize for Dennis’s terrible humor

(Not terrible because he found it insulting, just terrible because the jokes weren’t funny, he had groaned to himself about it before)

and understanding enough that he forgot and the word slipped out:

“He-”

The agony was immediate, claws skewering his brain, digging deeper and deeper. Any words that followed died immediately, replaced by a short keening sound as he let the phone drop, not caring where it went.

He didn't care about anything, what Emilia was thinking or even what Dennis was now doing, only about the way it felt as if someone was stabbing into his skull, then pulling the blade out only to plunge right back in, fast enough that the pain never even really subsided -

He dropped his head quick, arms already up to cover it, onto the counter as the pain intensified and if it didn't plateau soon he wasn't sure he could take it.

Are you going to talk, Henry?

The pain let off, if only a tiny amount. Barely enough to let him answer.

NO no NO stop I'm sorry!

More faded away, enough that he let out a breath he hadn't known he had been holding. Shivers in his arms began to subside along with it.

Are you sure? You aren't going to say more?

No, no, I'm not, I'm not - no more- talkingjustplease, s-stop -

The pain cut off abruptly, making him gasp in shock and relief when all that was left was the sea that always resided in the back of his mind, sinking back to low tide.

Continue, then. The Bad said, not sounding particularly bothered over what it had done to him. I’m curious now.
He kept his head buried in his arms, taking another moment to catch his lost breath. To wait and see if The Bad had anything else to say.

It didn't.

He raised his head then, cautiously, letting one shaking arm lift up to grab the phone - his brittle muscles felt weak and rubbery, pulled to their breaking point before blessed release - and pressed it to one ear, eyes slowly tracking back up to see Emilia and Dennis.

He didn’t think to calm his deep, recuperative breaths.

Now he knew, at least.

The Bad wasn't bluffing.

-----

Amplified by the phone’s speaker, the noise of Deaver’s voice veering off into a brief, tormented screech made both Zalewskis jump.

It sounded anything except human.

Rightfully startled, Emilia jolted backward in her seat. Dennis felt the back of her head collide with his midriff as he heard a muffled clatter. Deaver lost his grip on the phone, practically collapsing against the glass, burying his face behind the cover of his arms. His fingers jerked spastically, curling into clawed half fists.

“Dennis, what’s-”

Shit. There it was. Just like on monitor. The red you saw - you alone. The same- thing that spoke when you asked to remove the mask. This is what it does.

Reminding himself, Dennis swallowed his nerves and gripped Emilia’s arm. “Shh, ju-just wait.”

Wait.

Because he couldn’t think of anything else to say. Waiting was the only thing he could do at the time Porter played the tape. Waiting was all they could do now. Wait helplessly and wonder just how long it would be before -

...went on for fifteen minutes...

It wasn’t a repeat episode. As quickly as it set in, the attack subsided. The shudders tapered off. Staring, barely considering the world around them, Dennis watched as Deaver seemingly pulled it back together in short order. Gasping, the man actually reached for the dropped phone, putting it to his ear as if nothing had happened.

Nothing at all.

Rigid against him, Emilia’s face was near blank with uncomprehending shock. She blinked several times, calming her own twanged nerves, before hazarding speaking again.

She messed up in that she spoke into the phone, like any worried person would:
“Henry, are you- are you all right?”

“You okay in there, folks?” Dennis heard the forewarning buzz almost too late. Half turning, he waved away the supervising guard who cracked the door open. Thankfully, they took the gesture for what it was and closed it again.

Meanwhile, Emilia didn’t sound convinced by the lack of response.

Dennis looked back to see she had her hand out, fingers splayed on the glass.

“Henry...?”

Well, if that didn’t scare her off…

Looking at her hand, raised to the glass, made his own twitch. He wanted to raise it as well and see just how tiny her’s was, compared to his own, but instead he fought the urge and kept it down.

That would only be pushing his luck.

She had looked shell-shocked for a moment before the concern came rushing back, twofold, asking him if he was all right through the phone - a question he would never tell her the truth of.

( No, he wasn’t all right his head had just been cleaved in two it felt like, but he couldn’t very well tell her that so he sat there, motionless, almost frozen by her gaze)

Then a door had opened and a guard called something out before Dennis dismissed the man with a raised hand.

He wondered just what Dennis thought of his episode.

“Henry?”

His name drew him back to the present, forcing him to focus again on Emilia and her raised hand.

( He couldn’t tell her the truth he knew that, even if she and Dennis both knew it was a lie)

He nodded his head yes.

Dennis let out a sigh he didn’t know he was holding. Christ alive.

Emilia wasn’t half as subtle in her reaction. The small nod from Deaver seemed to satisfy her as much as it didn’t. Abruptly, she turned the phone over, pressing the mouthpiece to her collar. Her hand slid from the window.

“How was that?”

“The reason he can’t talk, Em. That’s… what happens.”

“...Every time?”

“Every time.”
He had heard the proof. Prior to that moment, he thought hadn’t needed an explanation from the horse’s mouth. He had seen enough on camera, and in little moments simply talking with the man, to guess what the true nature of his affliction was.

Then he found the card, had spoken to it, face to... not-face.

The facts had to add up.

Migraines from hell if he tries speaking to anyone else. Looking like a bag of bones, while somehow still able to walk and talk. Sparse, but intense cravings for raw meat, whatever kind he can get his mitts on.

Claiming he can’t remember those times he asks to “go away”... unless he’s told “no, stay and watch...”

“What is it, though? That’s not- and- how he looks -” Assembling her own conclusion, Emilia stammered to a halt. She glanced back through the window.

Brows low, Deaver was still gazing at her, stoic, breathing calm, unfettered breaths. It wasn’t a menacing look, no more than it was a truly calm, placid state.

But it certainly wasn’t normal.

...a normal person... a ‘conventional’ person -

Dennis sighed again, briefly pinching the bridge of his nose before the big explanation: “Looks aren’t everything with him, Emilia. That’s what I’ve tried to tell you. And it’s hard to really-understand what I mean, the way I mean it, without seeing him. There are... is only so much anyone can see. It’s part of why I asked you here. And I... just now... you didn’t see the red, either?”

“Red?” Emilia repeated, eyebrows creasing.

-----

“Red?”

His own brows creased at the question posed by Dennis as well. What red where there to see? What was he missing - no, what were Emilia and him missing, apparently?

And then, the nickname that Dennis had used for The Bad, it came back in full force, a name he hadn't thought deep on, save perhaps it was a pop culture reference he didn't understand -

Redeye, is it okay with Redeye, the one I saw, the one who attacked Boyd -

How did Dennis see The Bad, that was what he should have asked himself, but instead he had gotten caught up in the thrill of having someone to talk to at all.

His free hand drifted up to his eyes, feeling around the near-hollow sockets, and placing a cautious finger on the lid of one before pulling it away, as if it would come back changed.

Redeye -

What are you doing? he asked The Bad, almost afraid of what he could get as a response. What - what are you doing to me? What is... Dennis seeing?
He's seeing me, Henry. I just so happen to show through as red eyes, mostly. And I won't lie, I'm a bit disappointed by his lack of creativity.

His stomach dropped at the realization, a pit forming so quick he hunched over slightly, one hand raised to the counter to grip its edge, the other still holding the phone to his ear. Even though Emilia had turned her phone away, he could hear enough to fill in the blanks.

And then, another thing - she hadn’t seen it, hadn’t seen the red eyes that Dennis apparently did. In any other circumstance he might just be able to fool himself into thinking that either Dennis was mistaken and The Bad was just trying to freak him out, or that Emilia simply hadn't gotten the chance to truly see the red eyes.

Both stories would be lies to himself. The Bad - it was showing itself to Dennis, for some sort of reason.

Why? he asked, as Dennis and Emilia continued to speak. Why show yourself to him? Why not - anyone else?

A beat of silence, broken only by the muffled words behind the glass divider. And then The Bad spoke, parroting two words that made his teeth grit almost automatically:

Why not?

-----

“You didn’t see it, then.”

Emilia’s frown didn’t fade. “No.” Belatedly she looked back to the window. Deaver was watching both of them very intently, albeit with a new nervous edge to his gaze, unblinking. “Henry, do you know what he’s talking about?”

“Em, he knows. Try something a little less- ”

Without putting the phone aside she intercepted him: “Do you remember what I said about not coaching me, Dennis?”

He did. It had come up the night before, a last minute review in how they would have to appear. Emilia had no shortage of her own ideas on what to ask, and he had to respect that.

What else did he bring her here for, then?

“Ask what you will, hon. I’ll keep the time.”

Just to sell the idea, Dennis glanced at his watch.

Five minutes. Is that really all that’s gone by yet?

He heard Emilia sigh through her nose before she ventured onward. “He says this was his idea, me meeting you. And that you were reluctant, because I… remind you of that which you’d rather not talk about. So I may as well make sure there’s no confusion, going ahead: would you rather I just… stay out of the matter altogether?”

-----
He blinked at the question, tilting his head slightly to one side, still holding her gaze. Stay out of it? Just because she

( was pregnant, something he would never get to know if Marren had been and the knowledge left some type of gap in him he was sure would never be filled)

reminded him of Marren?

*How thoughtful. Shake your head - like a good little dog, Henry.*

He tensed, just slightly at the mocking voice of The Bad. He had asked to not be distracted, and it had *seemed* like it had agreed, but now - now it disregarded their deal. Perhaps because he had disregarded its lesson.

Fair punishment.

He shook his head no to Emilia’s question.

-----

Standing idle, arms folded, Dennis raised an eyebrow. *Oh-kay.*

Emilia didn’t exactly look elated, but the severe consideration didn’t drop from her face. Deaver looked tense, even if the negative was an affirmative for her to keep asking.

After a pause, she did: “Well, then I should say it’s nice to meet you, Henry. I’m Emilia, and I’ve heard quite a bit about… just that, I’ve heard a lot. I don’t know how much you may have heard about *me*, but… just know there’s not much I don’t know about your- situation. But you don’t need to worry on my part. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think I could help you, somehow. Dennis is your only real confidant, as yet, so… sorry, I’m rambling by now. There’s just so much I’m still wondering about.”

“Nothing simple, Em? He doesn’t need a therapist. He needs a friend.”

At that Emilia scoffed and smiled. “What d’you say to that, Henry? Could you use more friends, you think?”

-----

*Earth to Henry - she asked a question.*

He shook himself out of the semi-trance he was in, simply listening to the gentle lull of her lilting voice, before Dennis cut in with something more direct.

*You need another friend? Is that what you need, Henry?*

He could definitely use all the friends he could get - although, he was only hesitant as to whatever adverse effects a friendship would have for Emilia.

( *He didn't want The Bad getting another target, not someone gentle and compassionate like her and not someone like Dennis either, giving into the idea of a friend only for The Bad to ruin it for everyone)*

Even with that thought in mind, he nodded at her through the glass.
Though it took a moment, Emilia nodded back at the silent affirmative. “We’re off to a good start, then. I mean, not that I think it’s every day they’ll arrange these meetings at our leisure. But I’m happy to know you think there’s some potential.”

You’re reading a vastly different book than me, hon.

Stepping close, Dennis tapped her shoulder.

Sparing him a curious look, Emilia rotated the phone’s mouthpiece up. He spoke into it:

“You know what that means, right? A whole bunch of things, some of them not so… good. Not saying she- we won’t think less of the idea, but- are you positive?”

Let’s see if you can’t answer me in front of someone else.

-----

He didn’t try at first, didn’t dare to because the spike of pain that slammed into him before was still fresh in his mind.

The Bad was eerily silent, no quips or warnings to be heard.

The moment dragged on and Dennis raised a cautious eyebrow at him, nodding once as if to tell him it was okay so - he cleared his throat once, half from nerves and half from anticipation before attempting.

“I - ” He cut himself off with a nervous breath, eyes screwed shut immediately as he waited for the pain to come. For just a moment it seemed to rise, stirring from the depths and ready to swallow him whole when it just… receded.

He kept still a moment longer, but let one eye peek open to glance around. The pain didn't rise again, instead keeping to the low thrum it always was.

He opened the other eye and looked around fully then, as if he would see The Bad in human form, waving a finger at him for thinking it was that easy. But instead all he saw were the two anxious looking Zalewskis in front of him through the glass.

...Nothing? he asked, but received no answer.

“I - I understand,” he started again, stuttering on the words in some fear that he was once again wrong, that the pain would come back in full force. “I want you both to be my… friends.”

He let himself smile at them then, cautious but excited enough about the wonderful lack of pain and the inexplicable quietness of The Bad.

“Even if you can be annoying, Dennis.”

-----

At this Dennis smirked - a wholly casual, untroubled smirk. How refreshing after expecting another migraine seizure to set in. “You say that like it’s new news to me.”
Emilia scoffed again, but it was half a giggle. She must have been duly charmed and confounded by the evident loophole they had just unearthed. “Is this how it works, then? He can speak proper sentences to you, but not me?”

The smirk dropped. “That’s his problem, Em, and it’s not just you. It’s everyone else. …Are you gonna hold it against him?”

“Oh, when he looks like that? Hardly.” Emilia’s smile grew a mite more somber, taking another appraising look at Deaver’s withered profile. Even with a ghost of a smile, it was too incongruous to seem real.

And yet…

“Then, as a friend, Henry, I can’t help but worry for you, already. Haven’t you been eating since—since you were found? Don’t you think you ought to be in a hospital?”

-----

His own smile cut out at the question, mind filling himself in on just what had been past his lips since getting replaced, most of it not bread.

*Oh, we've been eating, all right,* The Bad said, the words making him hunch forward at the slightly humorous tone to its voice. *You wanna tell her what that’s been, Henry?*

He didn't, didn't want her to know about Boyd or Lacy

(Although he was sure she already did, the way she stumbled over the words about his release told him as much)

or about the mouse, but he didn't want to lie to her, either. Friends tell other friends the truth - a lesson that stuck with him from his own childhood, more than thirty years ago, a lesson he learned with Molly.

(He told her - whispered secrets about Matthew, too ashamed to let anyone else know just what his father thought of him, but Molly never judged, she just listened and understood him)

He glanced up at Dennis, trying to convey just what was conflicting him, but the young man simply motioned to his wife, not unkindly. Just reminding him to shake his head yes or no.

Should he be in a hospital?

Probably. But just what would happen if he was, what The Bad would do… it made him want to shake his head no. But that would require more explanation, more than he could tell to Emilia without words.

*She needs an answer, kid. You got one?*

He shook his head and shrugged, knowing he looked helpless, yet again, but not sure of what else to do.

-----

Dennis took a beat to try and translate that mixed response. But the clearly-puzzled gaze Deaver leveled at them, soon mirrored by Emilia, it was only evident the prisoner did not know what was
best for him.

His own admission. Another ‘no’ to respect.

Emilia seemed to know this without being told. “At least see if the medics here will doctor those cuts on your face, please. You’re halfway to a full-on Glasgow smile.”

“Smiley- that ought to be your nickname.” Dennis smirked again at the mock offense that graced his wife’s visage, the sideways glance saying he best not chance any more ribbing. A distant buzz, muffled by concrete walks, seemed to counterpoint her disdain. “Yeah?”

“Again, I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with him. I suppose you don’t care for that, being called anything except your own name?”

-----

He thought on it a moment. At first, when Dennis had brought up the byname business (“Nick… like Nick Cage, get it?” he had said, making him roll his eyes at the joke but also at the nickname in general - his name was Henry, he didn’t want to let go of it so soon after clinging on for twenty-seven years) it wasn’t even a question to him - no nicknames if they weren’t for Henry. Nothing wild or inherently bizarre. But another part of him, one that grew steadily more reasonable the more he thought about it, really thought about (“Your father gave you that name,” it would say, making him cringe at the truth because Matthew had named him Henry, a tie to the past he so disliked, “And now you refuse a chance to start again? Without him plaguing you?”)

Nick as a moniker. It wasn't awful - save for the crack Dennis made about the actual Nicolas Cage (“He’s a person where you come from, right?”) - and if he was being honest, it felt like a fit for him. A natural fit, without any tangible connections to Matthew this time.

His father never had liked movies that he didn’t film himself.

He shook his head no, trying to convey that it was all right. A nickname would fit - something to tie him into his future.

Even if it did spring from a terrible reference.

-----

“Yes, no? Or… no, no?”

Dennis snorted, repressing a laugh. “‘No, that’s okay’ is what he means, Em.”

“No to Smiley, I hope,” Emilia retorted, with a wry glance at her spouse. “Painfully unoriginal, that.”

With a shrug Dennis took a moment to peg the distinction: “So he’s Henry Deaver to… everyone else, but Nick to his friends. The two sides are- very exclusive.”

“Are they?” Emilia asked, with a suspicious frown to match. Doing the math in short order, she
looked back through the window. “Do you… expect to get out of here soon, Nick?”

-----

There was no thinking required to answer her question, only a small pit that formed in his stomach, a dread he couldn't place.

(Why did it bother him? He had spent twenty-seven years in an underground cage, he could handle some time in a prison, but still the thought of the mask and the straitjacket made the pit bigger)

He shook his head no without hesitation.

-----

“Oh.” Sensing she had twinged a nerve, Emilia backpedaled. “I’m sorry, that was… insensitive of me. How could I ask when… Dennis, you said they don’t even know what to do about him?”

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

Gently, Dennis angled the phone upward to speak into again. “Because, for starters, the only name he has happens to be someone else’s. But it’s not like you’re the first person in history to have that happen to, right, Nick? How many John Smiths do you think there’ve been throughout the years?”

-----

It was still a bit of a shock, to hear the name Nick and know it’s usage was addressed to him. Some part of him still clung to Henry, still insisting that that was his name.

(But it wasn’t in this dimension, it belonged to the kid he had rescued from a cage as well and surprisingly no bitter feelings emerged from the revelation, just a sense of calm that at least someone else had it, even if the name was handed down from Matthew because it was still the name Ruth called for, still the name Alan said)

“Too many… to count,” he replied back, after some delay, shrugging as he did so. “Nick is… nice. It fits. I'm not getting out soon, but we can at least - think about the future, if I ever get out.”

A new name, to go with a new life in a way. Because he wasn't fooling himself into imagining a future where he was reunited with Marren in his own dimension, where his life went back to normal.

He couldn't ever go back to Henry Deaver, but he could at least try to move forward, as Nick. He would try.

-----

Compared to the run-in-place mode they had started off on, Dennis decided to count that as marked progress.

Nick it is, then. Rest of the C.O.s can go on saying that, not knowing it doesn’t bother him half as much anymore.
“If still means there’s a chance, pal. When and where it comes around, well…”

He wanted to say “we’ll be there”. It felt like a pleasant, optimistic note to touch on. But a little thing like reality kept chittering away somewhere in the back of his head.

It wouldn’t shut up, like a hyperactive parakeet. The same reality that was so subject to change, the thing that kept reminding him of Emilia’s fast approaching due date, the unpredictable elements that were Porter and the board of directors operating the puppet strings.

“We’ll play it by ear,” Dennis settled on. “But I think that settles it - you’re stuck with me for the immediate future... appeals notwithstanding.”

-----

“Stuck with you? Huh. Of course I get the short end of the stick.”

He smiled when he said it though, meant to be a gentle poke at Dennis and was glad to see him grin back at him. It felt so genial, so genuine. He opened his mouth to speak again -

Why?

before another most unwelcome voice beat him to it, one that he hadn't heard since the day Lacy died, one he thought about often but never seemed to ponder.

Why are you rejecting the name I gave you, Henry?

Matthew's voice dug into him almost immediately, making his face go rigid with fear, mouth dropping open in some silent plea before it closed again, unable and unwilling to speak out against his father.

Do you reject me as so? Rejecting your own father, Henry? Is that was this is?

The phone dropped onto the counter again. The words sunk deep into him, making his spine curl and his hands to come up, to shield his face as if he were a child afraid of the dark corner of his room and you bet he was afraid -

(Afraid because that voice, all it took was hearing it and he was ready to comply with whatever it said, he was a child again scared of disobeying Matthew as if he was alive and breathing in front of him, cursing under his breath as Henry continued to wail about his back because dad - you pushed me -)

It was as if the hurt from the night ending in the staggering push came back as well, a dull throbbing sensation in his back that seemed to last weeks after it supposedly healed, fierce enough to make him walk bent everywhere.

Do you think you can do that, boy? Are you selfish enough, willfully ignorant enough to turn from me?

“No,” he whimpered out and no pain came with it, only that already present in his mind and back remaining. “No, no -”

And yet you answer to ‘Nick’? What am I to make of this, Henry, other than a rejection? Defiance, from you!

He couldn't answer the question with words, instead choosing to lace the fingers covering his eyes
together, realizing belatedly he was rocking in his chair, a back and forth motion he had used in the cage when he felt especially frightened or upset.

Someone else might have said something then, a muffled sound that might have been a voice on the other side of the glass, but he paid it no attention, instead trying to focus on what Matthew would say next, how he could prepare for it.

If he missed responding to it there would be hell to pay.

_Do you reject me, Henry? Is that what you're trying to say?_

“No,” he cried out, not even stopping to think of the words he was saying. “No, I'm not!”

He couldn't - couldn't ever get away from Matthew, even if he was just a voice in his head, not even physically there to intimidate and bully him but the voice, it was enough to do both. He pressed his fingers tighter over his eyes and tried to prepare for whatever Matthew would say next, but there was never any real preparation he could do for the man.

All he could do was -

-----

Dennis backed away as Emilia hastily hung up the phone.

On the opposite side of the glass, the door buzzed open. It failed to smother the panicked cries as Deaver’s mood took an abrupt nosedive. Within seconds and without prompt, he had gone from coherent and alert to a whimpering, cowering mess.

Officers Cecil Harper and Earl Johannsen - neither of them were known for their delicate touch.

“ _No! No, please!_ I didn’t- ”

Emilia stood, backing up against Dennis, who instinctively draped an arm around her at watching Harper seize their newly-designated friend by the shoulder, wrenching him out of the seat as Johannsen kicked it aside.

“It doesn't mean- no, it's n-not what you think!”

Neither guard actually had any height on the prisoner. But at being hauled to his feet, he didn’t bother to unfold from his hunkered-down stance. The shuddering was back. His eyes were squeezed shut, hands raised to his face, as he struggled and railed against a foe invisible to everyone else in the room.

“It’s _not_ , I- ”

“You’re _done_ is what you are, fella.” Dennis frowned as he heard Harper effectively stomp on the whining cries, as carelessly as one might smash a bug - several bugs - on a sidewalk. “Get goin’. _Move_ , I said!”

A worse sound followed - the terse _shhhick_ of a collapsible baton deploying.

Dennis swallowed harshly. He knew from experience what such a noise heralded.

_Shit. No, no, don’t- not in front of-_
“Dennis, what are they-”

“Don’t!” Acting on impulse, Dennis lunged forward, thumping the reinforced glass with the flat of his hand. He only hoped he could be heard clearly through the webbed pane. “Nick! Don’t listen to it!”

It wasn’t so much meant for Deaver to heed as it was his coworkers.

Baton raised, Johannsen froze. His face turned back to the booth, screwed up in confusion at the contextless command. Looking similarly bewildered, Harper paused, both hands affixed around the prisoner’s bicep.

The cries stopped.

-----

Hair hanging in his face, he wasn't sure what was going on in reality and what was happening just in his head because Matthew’s voice was so loud but the hands gripping his shoulders were so tight -

You haven't learned anything, have you, Henry? Tell me! Did you mean to reject me or was it your utter carelessness that allowed this?

“No! No, please! I didn't mean to - ” he cried out but Matthew cut him off, voice getting louder every time he spoke -

Didn't mean to? You didn't mean to? You willfully discard your given name, take up ‘Nick’ and you tell me that you didn’t MEAN to reject ME?

He heard what sounded like a chair getting kicked, but his eyes were shut, trying desperately to fight against something but not knowing what it was, not knowing if he was actually being grabbed or if Matthew's voice was real, too much was happening and it was frightening -

“It doesn't mean- no! It’s n-not what you think!” His words were coming out too fast, disjointed and desperate in his attempts to soothe Matthew but he couldn’t, nothing he did seemed to work, everything he said just making the voice angrier.

The hands gripping him moved lower, onto his biceps but he barely noticed them, more focused on his father’s voice.

You disgust me, the way you plead when you know you've done something wrong, Henry. Or do you think what you have done is okay?

“It's not, I - ” He was cut off by another sound, one that could have been a voice but it was so drowned out by the screaming in his mind and the blood rushing in his ears.

“-goin’, move, I - ” He barely registered the command before wailing again as Matthew spoke up, drowning out everything else, even what he would later realise was the sound of a baton unfurling -

How can I ever trust you again, Henry? How can I trust you to follow me, the same way I trusted your mother and she betrayed me, have you betrayed me in the same way?

“Don’t!”
A new, fourth voice cut through the storming sea of noise, jerking him out of his trance and at least partially back into the present day because he knew *that* voice and it wasn't unkind, wasn't cruel, just panicked -

“Nick! Don't listen to it!”

*(Don't listen to it don't listen to it don't listen to that one, the one with the red eyes, do you see it can I take the mask off?)*

...Dennis?

His cry cut off in his throat, instead coming out as a wheeze of hot air. His eyes opened suddenly, blinking rapidly in the fluorescent light as he dazedly glanced around, feeling the rough hands on his biceps.

Eventually he noticed the raised baton, held above his head.

They were going to hit him, weren't they, if Dennis didn’t say something, if Matthew had made him even a bit more panicked, if they were a bit less confused they would have *beat* him with a baton, right in front of Dennis and Emilia, wouldn't they?

His eyes connected with Dennis’s, blue eyes wide with fright and realization, even as the baton lowered back down to the flabbergasted guard’s side, even as they began to march him forward without allowing him to say goodbye.

Dennis - had helped him. *Actually* helped. Even when he didn't need to, with no one expecting him to, even when he could have been considered past the point of comprehension -

Dennis was his friend.

That much - he could comprehend just fine.
Beleaguer

September 16th, 2018 (con’t)

After a long weekend away - I must have seemed like a quick study to him, at the time, compared to all of those who didn’t take his case so seriously (those that wrote him off as a cannibalistic crackbrain from the start - I think we know whom I’m referring to).

Then again, his idea of ‘quick’ compared to the average man, that’s less than the proverbial blink of time our species has inhabited this planet… far less.

But by the time both of us were ‘sat down’ in the same room and (finally) subjected to some kind of official inquest - it was practically laughable.

Just how long were we given for our memories to degrade, fade, warp, get twisted around by stress and emotion?

Compared to how little time it was, after that botched visit (which was just me, trying to get back to being objective after the fact), we were allowed to set our facts straight...

I’m rambling by now, aren’t I, Em? With no one to listen, only to read and wonder, “What the hell is he getting at? Is there a point to be made, some key piece of evidence that helps the rest of this clusterfuck seem a little more cohesive?”

I refer you to my entry dated September 8th.


(P.S. you know how terrible I am at naming things, Em.)

——-

It didn’t matter how financially shaky you were. One didn’t need the likes of satellite radio installed in their car to occasionally be beamed over the head with an especially apropos song. Even knowing there was a chance for it to happen, Dennis didn’t protest once Emilia wrapped up her conversation and - without a word to him - leaned over to turn the dial. He paid scant attention to the hodgepodge of sounds as she tuned the needle one way, then the next.

“...how romantic, but I knew we were done... was it something I said, or something I did, it must be over my head...”

“You mind?”

One hand at the top of the steering wheel, Dennis made a disinterested wave with the other. His eyes stayed on the road. The folded sunglasses hung from the neck of his sweater.

The clench of his jaw went unheeded.

By all means. Lord knows I must need Jason Mraz to tell me just how colossally wrong I’ve gone about handling today - right here, right now.

Nevertheless, the strum of guitars was preferable to remembering the heartless slam of an iron
gate, or the buzz of electronically-locked doors, or the incomprehensible chatter of the P.A. system.

He needed to get as far away from the sounds of Shawshank as they could manage.

“I am sorry for the way you must feel about yourself every day, maybe you needed me to make it so you could keep on runnin’ away…”

The drive home was a welcome near quiet, compared to the terse dismissal they had faced. The day wasn’t that late, but the overcast weather diluted the direct sunlight they had enjoyed that morning. The sun itself had been reduced to a cotton-covered white orb behind the clouds.

Again, from bright sun to a gloomy afternoon haze - how apropos.

But it couldn’t be more gloomy than the inside of Shawshank, and how it must have now felt to their hapless friend.

Because they had agreed, right, the three of them? That was the descriptor to refer to him as by this point. Not a kid, not a monster, not just some other inmate, a honorary ‘convict’ whose original ‘crime’ was lost somewhere in the early days of 1991.

They had called him their friend.

And he theirs.

“...I didn’t quite understand, but now it’s out of my hands, it’s out of my hands…”

The voice of ‘Matthew’ fell silent, no longer speaking, much less hounding him, as the two guards hustled him out of the visiting room, back down a series of hallways, and into the concrete box he now called home.

Why? Why would you do that? he asked The Bad, now understanding just who exactly had actually been talking to him.

(He was almost injured, he wanted to scream at it, almost had gotten beaten with the baton in front of Dennis and Emilia because of it, because of Matthew, why would you let that happen why? why!?)

He received no reply, just a dull, muffled ringing filling his ears as the maddening silence stretched on.

The two guards, though, kept talking as they roughly jerked him to a halt. For half a second he tensed, expecting a baton to lash out and smack him, but nothing came, just the hands on his biceps tightening.

“Fuckin’ psycho, flippin’ out like that…” one of them muttered as if they weren't right behind him, as if their hands weren't holding him still. As if he couldn't hear them.

As if he couldn’t potentially strike out and kill them in the blink of an eye.

(He could, but then what would be the point, where would he go from there, every other metal-grated, bar-covered door you came across in this building was locked)

“Who, him or Ace?” the other scoffed. “One minute they’re gettin’ on like a house on fire, and the next…”
The hands left him, retreating back for a moment. He stretched his arms out, half knowing what they were about to do, but dreading it anyways.

His face burned. Almost as an afterthought he reached up to feel the furrows below his eyes. Thinking twice of it, he deliberately curled his fingers and lowered his hand. Every touch, every wince, every frown made them complain.

("At least see if the medics here will doctor those cuts on your face, please - ")

They always put the mask on too tight.

“C’mon, they’re both kooky at this point. What dumbass brings his fucking wife to a prison? Shoulda seen the look on her face, though - thought she was gonna cry.”

“Shoulda? I was there, Earl. I saw it. Shit, any more stress and she mighta popped that baby out on the spot.”

(His hands balled into fists at the guards talking about Dennis and Emilia, defensive words about leaving them alone on the tip of his tongue but he swallowed them, knowing it would only invite more trouble)

Evidently, him clenching his fists didn’t go unnoticed.

At that, he was promptly shoved through a door - back to the same empty little room.

Well, not totally empty.

Three familiar (and most unwelcome) articles awaited them on the table.

“And this dude would’ve just kept on screaming, wouldn’t he? Best to get him in the jacket and mask quick now, don’t want any parts of us missing, eh? You hear how much he took outta Boyd?”

“No, but I get the feeling it was a lot, otherwise it’d be, what, just a very impressive hickey?”

It wasn’t worth the energy to glare at them.

They weren’t guards, they were goons posing as guards, adult-aged bullies. Having a laugh at his expense.

Not like he hadn’t been there before.

He kept his head down, expression utterly blank. Fabric was draped over his shoulders, an open jacket. Hands grabbed him again, one arm forced out at an angle and the other forced down. He bit his tongue harder, making himself stop from asking for a warning the way he did with Dennis.

These guards, they were definitely not Dennis.

“Hell of a lot more than that, I’ve heard. Someone said he might not even be able to talk anymore, but I dunno.” The guard stuffed the outstretched arm into one sleeve of the straitjacket they had grabbed before pinning it behind his back, cinching the bindings to close the cuff, letting the other guard do the same to his other arm. “Poor bastard. Can’t say I’ll miss hearing from him.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get your hopes up. Soon as they figure out who this punk is, the sooner they can charge him. Enough of this wishy-washy he is or he isn’t nonsense.”

“Didn’t you hear?” The stouter guard - Johannsen, according to his shirt, the one who almost struck
him - snorted as they crossed his arms, making sure they were as tight as they could go before strapping them in place. “Dude is Henry - Deaver. Sure looks different, I’d say!”

“The pastor’s boy? Ha! Like hell he is. No amount of time underground would make him go that pale.”

(He thought back to finding the other Henry, down in the basement of his old home, the sheer confusion and fright he had felt at the sight, the dark-skinned boy gripping the chain link cage in front of him, eyes dead and mouth hanging open)

“Could ask him, couldn’t we? See if he really will only speak to Zalewski.”

With those words a hand grabbed his face, rough, calloused fingers digging into the ragged furrows lining it, hard enough his mouth fell open, a faint cry rising from his throat.

(Fingernails raking across them, splitting the scabbed-over skin open, stinging fiercely enough he wanted to jerk back but he couldn't, arms folded and immobilized, one guard behind him and the other in front, glaring at him as the nails pushed further into his flesh)

“You’re Henry Deaver, boy?” the guard asked, grinning at him as if it were a joke. “Whose leg you tryin’ to pull with that one?”

_Hmph. No one’s leg except his own - that’s what I’d tell ‘em._

…if The Bad saw fit to comment about this at all.

Thus far, it hadn’t.

“C’mon, kid. It ain’t a tough question. Yes or no?”

He didn't want to nod because if he did it would only split the skin even further, blood trickling down and potentially causing the infection to worsen, more than it was as is. The already-smarting cuts would only get worse and worse, as they were ripped open again and again, and by then - even if they were treated - they would turn into scars, wouldn't they?

In his state, scarring wouldn’t be easy to avoid.

But the grip on his face tightened, the guard’s eyes darkening at his lack of response, reminding him of what they almost done in the visiting room, baton raised and ready to hit him.

He nodded, letting out a hiss as the guard’s fingers dug further into his cheek.

“That so? Why you bother answerin’ to ‘Nick’ then?”

He didn't have any way to answer the question without hurting himself, even more than a baton would, so he stayed silent, simply staring straight back at the guard in front of him. Blood seeped from the pulled cuts.

“He ain't gonna talk, Cecil… let's just put the mask on and get outta here. We got places to be. You have it?” The grip loosened just enough for the pain to fade, letting him take a deeper breath in preparation.

The crude mask was definitely the worst part of the getup, much worse than the straitjacket or ankle chains. At least those didn’t maim him with every wear. The concave plastic bit into his cheekbones relentlessly, splitting the skin and then slipping in even further, to the point he felt as if
it was his skin sometimes.

Because it was always rigged too tight.

“Okay, fella, chin up. Let’s get it over with.”

He cringed back as the mask was raised up, buckles clinking against each other. He only stopped when the guard grabbed his arms tight, from behind, and held him still.

“Don't even think about movin’, buddy,” the other warned, voice low, placing the plastic front over his mouth, the jagged, unfinished edges already scraping the cuts. “Won’t end well for you, I'm telling you that much.”

He forced himself still, remembering the baton once more.

*(coming up and then lowering slowly, so much threat in that swing raised high, sharp pain in his back that he had felt before from a push, falling unchecked into an ice-laden snowbank)*

The strap in the back was grabbed, suddenly enough he let out a short moan, gasping as it was went tight, as tight as it could possibly go, but again, it was yanked and he remembered when Dennis had had to do that, pull so the tension would come out, but they weren't letting it go slack now.

They were fixing it taut, so it wouldn’t come undone.

The thought still stung enough to make his eyes water

Involuntarily.

“There. No chance he can get it off now, huh?” the guard before him muttered, making sure the mask was secure. He paid their captive’s near-tears look no mind. Even the tiny movements of his fingers feeling the sides of the muzzle caused more discomfort.

“If he was gonna try, moment’s come and gone.” The other guard - Harper - grabbed for the waiting ankle cuffs. The chain clattered on the metal table as it paid out.

*(It wouldn't have been him would would try anything it would have been The Bad but it had been oddly silent since the Matthew incident)*

The cuffs were locked around his ankles, chain small enough so that he would have to shuffle when walking with it on - but that minor inconvenience was nothing compared to the mask.

Nothing could ever seem to compare to it.

*(Except for Matthew, those two were probably tied, he thought)*

“Good. He’s suited up, door’s prepped, let's get outta here. Never did like this room,” one guard said, taking a moment to look around the bare concrete walls. The little windows were set high enough so that even he could only barely peek outside.

He half expected a parting shove from one of them, to make him topple over and then get a show out of watching him fight to turn upright again. But the two showed some small mercy in leaving without indulging in any further harassment. The door thunked shut.

Then it was just him, with the table and chair for company.

And the damn camera, with its beady red light.
He shuffled to his usual corner of the room, below a window, put a shoulder against the wall, and slumped down it till he was seated on the floor, shifting uncomfortably until his back was flat against it. Already the jacket felt warm and stifling, and the straps of the mask pinned strands of his disheveled hair to his scalp.

He looked up at the camera, once, wondering who might be watching on the other side, before looking back down at his chained feet, feeling the mask grate against - and through - what scabs that had been forming. He tried not to tense, to relax, to breathe easier, while the wetness in his eyes dried up. Tensing his facial muscles only made things tighter.

It would be a long night.

Alone.

Not like he hadn’t endured a lot of those, either.

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The sky was one solid, formless expanse of gray by the time they turned back into the driveway. The trees around the yard - oaks and maples of varying states and sizes - stood motionless.

No wind. Means no rain on the way.

The Chevette bounced once, settling into the worn-in ruts in the dirt. Emilia braced a hand against the window, buffering herself from getting tossed against the door. She sighed quietly as the hatchback coasted to a stop, taking care to switch off the radio.

Dennis switched off the engine.

For a moment, they sat there in mute contemplation, seatbelts on. The old engine ticked several times before falling quiet, sounding as tired as the day already felt. Neither made a move to exit the car.

Emilia went for her purse first, opening the flip phone inside.

She kept quiet as she read, so Dennis went for a nudge. “Any… answer?”

Doubt Valerie would understand much if she told her what happened.

“A text- ‘Talk tomorrow, if you want.’” Emilia relayed, finally sparing him a vague, unreadable glance. Then she put both thumbs to the number pad and began typing. “Unsurprising. We were there for over an hour.”

Compared to the thirty minutes you thought it would originally be.

“You hungry, in other words?” As the diversion failed to get her attention, Dennis leaned back in his seat, paused, then unclipped the belt. “They could’ve kept us longer, and didn’t. I’m sorry, Porter tries to keep things short… most of the time, but this was… I didn’t know that would happen, Em.”

Liar. It could have, and it did.

His wife made no direct refute, only asked another passive-aggressive question:

“Can you be more specific than ‘that’?”
“The panic attack, he-” Zalewski stopped again, trying not to get carried away explaining too much. “I told you: It’s not just the physical problems with him, hon. It’s the mental- baggage. He’s got a problem, one neither… the- the justice system can address or… or modern… clinical psychology.”

“Oh, you’ve been taking courses in what spare time you don’t have?” Emilia griped, rightfully a little disenchanted with the whole business. However understanding anyone could claim to be, they had their limits, including her. Besides that, she probably was hungry and in need of a lie down. “Dennis, I came along because I thought this would help you help him.”

*She didn’t come along to see the horror show in full - the horror that is Shawshank itself. And it was a hair’s breadth from turning that way by the end. Is it really worth it, foisting the aggravation on her?*

He bit his lip. “And I appreciate it more than you know. It’s just- I want to help, but to do that, I have to know what needs helping. I don’t know what’s wrong with him, really wrong. He barely eats, he won’t sleep unless they drug him, he hasn’t showered, hasn’t had a shave in at least three weeks-”

“What?” Emilia blinked, taken aback. Instantly, the irritation was gone, replaced by abject puzzlement. Finishing her text, she stowed her phone. “What does… does something like shaving have to do with his- condition?”

Dennis frowned, glancing once at their silent, empty house, at the ladder still standing by the low overhang above the front door (*a patch job at best, like this case*), before looking back. “That’s just it, Em- it was one of the first things that seemed… off. A man, even one who’s spent weeks starving to death, ought to have at least some fuzz after a few days. That doesn’t change, even as your body eats itself to stay alive.”

*...talking to a very unconvincing corpse...*

Resting her elbow against the window, Emilia took another moment to ponder. She put her knuckles against her chin, as she always tended to while deep in thought.

“And everyone else’s… overlooking this?”

“They seem to be. Although I was the one find him,” Dennis explained, carefully. It felt wrong, to withhold the whole truth, but if that were told, he didn’t think his confidant would remain so objective. “No one else was in the position to see it, except… Chris.”

*I asked him. He thought it might be a metabolic issue. And the time since has shown it’s not. ...It’s worse.*

“He did? Just before… the attack?”

“I couldn’t help pointing it out, crazy as everything else was,” Dennis admitted. “Besides all that’s happened, it’s the one detail I…”

*The voice. The eyes. The bare-bones. Why am I the only one to notice? Fuckin’ Redeye - whatever that is, whatever I spoke to - it’s got to do with it. It has to.*

“It’s the only detail to note doesn’t make me sound instantly delusional. I probably already sound it, I’m sure, talking in all these- non… fuckin’ nonspecific words. I just don’t know how it can’t make any sense-”
He stopped instantly, feeling the palm of her hand alight on the back of his own. He looked over, expecting to see something like pity or fury in her face.

Strangely enough, Emilia’s expression was still settled, neutral.

And next she spoke, she didn’t immediately accuse her husband of what a fruitcake he was rapidly turning into.

“Whatever’s wrong with him, Dennis, I saw it. There’s no confusion about that - he’s suffering. He won’t speak to anyone, but you or himself. He’s a mess, inside and out. He knows who he is, but at the same time he looks like… he doesn’t want to be. He looked as though he wanted to take up that name, to try and think of us three as friends, but something- something won’t let him. I want to think it’s something mental, but… it can’t be that simple. The evidence doesn’t add up. It’s like… that same something is making sure he doesn’t… get anywhere.”

She was rambling again.

But thankfully it was not far off of what Henry Deaver said prior, about being stuck in place.

...we stay stuck... only option... I hate it...

We. It.

“It’s not him saying that,” Dennis murmured, with yet another bout of appreciation. “The same… thing he was shouting at, by the end, that wasn’t him.”

"Don't listen to it!” I said. How long has it been since anyone told him those words? No one was around to say it, to keep a slide from starting.

Something soft stroked his knuckles- the pad of Emilia’s thumb. “We’ve all argued with ourselves, Dennis, over what we think we should or shouldn’t do, but… what I saw was taking that to a new level. Confined like he was, for that long… is it any wonder why he’d develop a few spare… voices? Personalities, even? To cope with the loneliness?”

Except… it’s not just a voice or a personality. Who has cause to be that scared of a voice in their head? To have to ask to “go away” when the other persona takes over? Voices are noise. Noise isn’t supposed to have that much power. Personalities aren’t entities separate of your own awareness… But how else can I explain the jacket or the mouse?

Dennis shook his head, finally thinking to open the door. “Except… I don’t think this one gave him much choice, Em.”

He told me as much. And I’ve seen too much to think it’s anything else. You, on the other hand...

“Speaking of not having choices,” Emilia remarked, gathering her belongings before opening her own door. “Guess who else called while Warden Porter had your ear?”

“No.” He circled around the hood of the car. “I don’t need to guess any more today. Joey again?”

How fitting this should all happen right before he sees fit to turn up in my life - in person.

Emilia smiled at taking his hand. “Trevor, actually.”

“Oh.” Dennis stopped short, his bad mood deflating instantly. Just how like his youngest brother was that, so unassuming and undisruptive? Whenever Trev did pipe up, it was actually startling. He
never wasted a word. “And what’d he… have to say?”

“Nothing you need worry about, first of all. I didn’t tell him where we were,” she pointed out, then stood, letting him close the door before they started toward the porch, side by side. Fallen leaves crunched under their feet. “And I don’t plan to.”

“What did he want, Em? He never calls without a reason.”

Gracefully, she overlooked the demanding nature of his words while they climbed the steps. “You haven’t called him back? He’s left three messages the past week?”

Yes. I haven’t trusted myself to not spill anything to him. You can barely keep up with my wild speculation. Why would he, hundreds of miles away?

Dennis spared his wife only a brief glance of you’re-serious before opening the screen door. “No, I haven’t returned his calls. And you can probably figure out the why for yourself.”

Emilia unlocked the door and they stepped inside. She waited until they had shed their jackets and boots before replying.

“I can, but you don’t think sharing it all with me can do any harm. Why not Trevor? He’s certainly more discreet than Joey.”

“By leaps and bounds,” Dennis agreed, hanging both coats on hooks by the door. “Doesn’t mean he can resist Tweeting it to all of his stand-in buddies. And those include Joey.”

Downside of his semi-antisocial tendencies: Trev blabs far too much to faceless names on the Internet.

“Or Allison. You know what a gossipmonger she can be.”

“I only know you’ve told me that many a time,” Emilia countered. She set her purse on the kitchen table, sat down, and began dutifully removing its contents for inspection - making sure nothing was absent. “I’ve never actually- met the woman.”

He didn’t miss the thinly-veiled irony in her tone. “Consider yourself lucky. Joey called it right, the first time we got together for dinner at their place: ‘I thought Trev was the smart one. What’s he doing with this praying mantis?’”

Smirking, Emilia scoffed at the comparison. “And you know how he exaggerates, Joey. I doubt Allison is anything that bad.”

“Again, though, you haven’t met her.” Pulling out his wallet, Dennis took a moment to rifle through the few cards left inside. Driver’s license, a few one-dollar bills, and the old, dog eared snapshot of his departed parents - all present, same as it had started out with. “Were my mother still with us, she’d sooner snatch Trev away to hide in her closet than let Allison take him to Nevada.”

“Why? Because he was the baby of you three?” Emilia scoffed again, with less amusement. “And he happened to marry first, move the furthest away? Most would think happier thoughts of such an accomplishment.”

Well, if only everyone had Louis and Charlotte like you did, dear. Their only daughter, and they didn’t care if you married up, only if you were happy- the exact opposite out of whatever trope I might have expected. How did I luck out?
“The last shall be first…” Dennis muttered, outwardly no less aggravated than before, satisfied knowing nothing was missing from his wallet. True, he might not have flown very far from the nest, but the muted, irrefutable sadness in Julia Zalewski’s face the day he had up and relocated, only to the other side of town, he remembered that most out of all her solemn moods.

Joey had taken one look and promptly followed. They grabbed a drink at the Mellow Tiger that same night.

_We’re just a family of sad sacks, Denny, going back three generations. And I, for one, am not about to stick around. This place has a “zero” kind of mood going for it. There are better ways to spend your time than wait for the bog to suck you in past the point of no escape._

“This place” meaning Castle Rock as a whole. True to his word, Joey was the first to up and leave town, landing some ski lift maintenance gig out in Montana. He had been gone all of seven years, eventually trading hats from recreational tourism to ecological sightseeing. Compared to the flats he grew up in, life in the mountains was just the exhilarating escape he had always craved.

He only returned once to date - to attend a pair of untimely funerals.

And rather than let his brothers wallow in newfound depression, the middle son tried to lift their spirits with story after story, tease after tease.

He was marginally successful.

"And now… you want to get a helicopter pilot’s license, do your own tours? Sounds nice and dangerous. Flying one of those things is just a controlled crash the entire time, you know."

“Can’t be more dangerous than handling all the poisonous critters you do, Trev. Spiders? Snakes? Horny toads? Seriously, I think you’ve gone sick in the sun, it’s baked your brain to the point you think Ally’s someone worth-

“Horny toads aren’t venomous, Joey.”

“Nah, just the one you’re trying to pass off as a girlfriend.”

“...nnis? What’s so funny?”

However unlike him it was to crack up at thin air, Zalewski couldn’t help another grin at Emilia’s plainly stumped face. The last thing he seemed to be referring to was a half-delivered Bible verse.

Then here he was, giggling like a stoned hyena, when less than ten minutes ago, he had been trying to make a strong case as to how crazy he wasn’t being.

This aside was not helping.

Admittedly, though, Emilia was downright precious when she sounded baffled.

“Dennis? Are you…?”

“No, it’s okay,” he assured her, without quashing the smile. Now he had cause for it - some actually optimistic hope. “I think I just figured it out, what I need to do. It was staring at me all along.”

She hiked an eyebrow. “And that is?”
To not overthink it. I’m driving myself mad enough, let alone the people around me, with speculation. The best thing to do would be to drop that mode and go for another one. Even if it’s the last thing I think will get us any answers, it’s preferable to fretting and sniping and slogging through moral quicksand.

Just have to remember what to bring tomorrow…

“And just what do you think you were doing out there with him? At that hour?”

His feet weren’t cold anymore. He was back in bed, socks pulled on, safely tucked under a thick, plushy blanket. He lay face down, folds held to his face, as his mother fawned and murmured over him, fretfully pushing his hair out of his eyes. It was still damp with melted frost.

Alternatively she turned away only to screech at his father.

But at least he was warm again.

“You’re lucky he didn’t break his neck!”

“He wouldn’t’ve broken his neck, Ruth, stop exaggerating. He's fine.”

Just the voice of his father was enough to make him tense, to draw further under his blanket and snuggle closer to his mother and the protection she granted.

His back twinged with that minor movement. He swallowed a yelp at the jagged spikes radiating out from his spine, shooting along his shoulder blades and ribs.

It had been some minutes before he thought to roll over, to begin struggling to stand. The same pains had driven him to his knees, weeping and whimpering, as he tried in vain to find his feet. Matthew had had to carry him home, practically over one shoulder.

Every rough step his father took made the agony flare.

“You haul him back, he’s half frozen, wailing like a banshee, and you call that fine?”

“He’s being a kid, Ruth, playing up how hurt he is. It's not that bad, calm down! He's going to be fine, just a bruise, a bruise that’ll fade.”

“He’s going to the clinic first thing in the morning, end of story.”

“He will not be going anywhere, all he needs is some time in bed,” Matthew leaned closer, a move that made him close his eyes in dread, one hand reaching out to grasp for Ruth. “Stop making a big deal out of nothing.”

“You call this ‘nothing’? It’s no wonder half the town thinks you’re crazy.”

“Oh, is this what you’re on about? Henry gets one bruise, and suddenly you believe I’m crazy? You're just coddling him now, Ruth, stop trying to turn him against me.”

“Hmph. You’re doing a fine job of that on your own.”

“What did you say?” Matthew said the words calmly, but he knew the weight behind them, what the man would take them as, a - a rejection of him, from Henry. “Henry is my son, Ruth. He will not go to a clinic tomorrow, and you will not stop me from taking him outside, when I see fit.
"That's the end of the story."

“You’ll see- he can barely stand up straight, Matthew. He won’t be following you anywhere if you don’t let him heal.”

“It's his own fault, let him deal with his consequences. Leave him alone now, Ruth, he doesn't need you holding his hand.”

It wasn’t his fault, but there was no sense in arguing that now. At least if he was here, lying in bed, hurt, it would mean a short respite from his father’s treatment.

His eyes were still closed as he felt the weight sitting beside him shift. His mother didn’t say anything else, but he could hear the quiet snifflies she held back, leaning down to kiss his forehead.

“Ruth. Let him rest.”

With how his back ached so terribly, that proved hard to do.

----

Last he had woken up following a memory of Matthew Deaver, back aching and heart speeding, he had done so immediately, eyes snapping open.

This time, though, it was much more gradual. He shifted, letting a quiet, unintelligible murmur out as he did so.

(Ruth murmured to him in his hair, petting it even as it dampened her hand, the other stroking his cheek and he wanted to ask her to stay, to enjoy the affection, but Matthew was there, watching them from the doorway with cold eyes)

His eyes blinked slowly, then more rapidly as he began to feel the mask again, cutting so deep he was almost afraid to even attempt to move his face, in fear of the pain he would feel.

He blinked again, shifting more upright from the slumped position his body had fallen into before the memory…

Or memory-dream?

He really did fall asleep, didn’t he?

For anyone else it wouldn't be any cause for concern, but he couldn't recall the last time he had actually slept, unbothered. Even in the cage his days were spent awake, every hour awake. He had begged for sleep, the only escape he had from inside the bars was into one’s own mind (this is before he had realized even that small pleasure had been taken away), but now that he had gotten it…

It disturbed him.

He sighed to himself, breath trapped behind the mask, and looked blearily around at the same four concrete walls from before, at the same high and thin windows and the same table where someone sat -

Wait -

His back hit the wall when he jerked away, instinctively trying to find distance between him and the man, panicked eyes roving the room for signs of anyone else, but when he found none they
centered on the man again, and his hair - the coppery red hair.

Oh. He relaxed then, shoulders that were up defensively making their way back down, heart hammering from the mini scare, but it would slow soon.

It was Dennis… who must have watched him sleep.

…For how long?

“He… Hello?” he questioned, unsure of why Zalewski was here, their last frantic encounter still fresh in his mind. His voice was scratchy, a quality he hadn’t heard in so long, the residual thickness of waking up before he was ready to do. He frowned then, talking quickly to get his words in before Dennis could respond. “Dennis, w-why… are you here?”

Zalewski didn’t snap at him to be silent. He only smirked, a weak imitation of the smiles he had seen yesterday. There was a plastic box on the table beside his hand. “Why not? It’s not like I’m needed anywhere else just yet.”

(Why not)

Well, that answers just about… nothing.

“Oh. Okay…” The almost-extinct urge to yawn came over him and he did so, voice muffled from behind the mask. He stopped as the motion pulled on his wounds, smothering a whimper in the process. He felt light-headed, disoriented, half still in his foggy memory and half-coherently here, having a conversation with Dennis.

He heard a thump and a jingle of keys, presumably as the guard hopped down from the table. “Seriously, though, man, you might wanna get with it. We’re going to have some more company today, and not the good kind, either.”

Unsurprising. Emilia is gonna be tough to beat in the ‘good’ department.

He blinked, squinting up from underneath disheveled bangs. “Who?” he asked, sitting up a little straighter. The mental fog started to thin. “I have it together, just a little… sleepy.”

Dennis frowned. “Given how much you haven’t eaten lately, that’s not surprising.”

At least the shorter man didn’t say it with snark, but some clear concern.

(“Could you use another friend?” she asked and he nodded he could use all the friends he could get because now he had two, Emilia and Dennis)

He shrugged, still mildly unsettled by the fact he had actually shut down and slept. He might as well confess to that effect. “I haven’t- slept in a long time, Dennis, I don’t think it’s… that. But… tell me, who’s coming to see me? Is that why you're here?”

“Yeah. The new warden, Porter. She’s finally- decided it’s worth trying to talk to you.” Taking a studious look at his masked face, Dennis frowned, pausing only to turn back and grab the plastic box, still sitting on the table. There was a bright red plus sign on one side. “After the damage is already been done, go figure.”

“Wha - what does she even want to talk about?” he stuttered, heart catching in his throat at the idea. “I-I've told you everything, and I know they're watching.”
His eyes caught the box for a moment and he stared at it, but only with a touch of suspicion. This was Dennis, not some other guard - this man wouldn’t hurt him.

Annoy him, maybe. Strip things off without warning.

(Bash his face in whenever The Bad grew a little too feisty - okay, not that harsh - like whacking a dog on the snout)

But never hurt, hurt.

“You got me there, man. They may’ve been watching and listening all this time, but a face-to-face meeting might just show them what fun they’ve really been missing out on.”

Setting the box down, Dennis crouched beside him. He unclipped the tabs and hinged the top half open. Inside were several rolls of bandages, a box of disposable gloves, cotton swabs, bottles of antiseptic wash, medicinal tape, tubes of antibacterial ointment -

“Speaking of faces, your’s needs some attention.”

“For me?” he asked, even though he already knew the answer. He leaned forward eagerly to look at the contents of the box again before grinning up at Dennis, regardless of how it pulled on the cuts. This was a more welcome sight than a tray full of food. “Thank you, seriously.”

Grinning as best he could with the mask practically grown into his skin.

Zalewski appeared to appreciate the sentiment, even if his smile wasn’t that radiant. It looked almost nervous, caught off guard by the sudden enthusiasm. “You’ll probably be rethinking that gratitude in a few seconds later, once I start cleaning the blood off.”

“I…” His smile tapered off at the thought of the pain to come - as if he hadn’t possibly endured enough already. “I probably will. But after - I'll say thank you, again.” He eyed the various materials in the box again, this time far more apprehensively.

“...One thanks is enough, pal, don’t gotta keep saying it.” Dennis’ gaze shifted sideways, and his smile crumbled completely. It was no big mystery to either of them what he was looking at. He edged his way closer. “Shit. They cinched it up tighter than a clam’s ass, didn't they?”

The slack, Dennis was going to have to get some slack to even take the mask off, but with the way it was already biting into his skin, his eyes watered prematurely, already anticipating what was to come. Before, when it had been removed, the pain was awful, burning and festering for days afterward even with the mask still off.

He knew this time, somehow, it would be worse.

He nodded stiffly, any joy in his expression completely wiped off. “Tight as they could get it, I think.”

At that Dennis scowled, then dug through the kit with renewed determination.

Seconds later, the guard found it, beneath the box of gloves. The long metal blades of a sizable pair of scissors gleamed at being pulled out of hiding.

He couldn’t help a nervous swallow. The guy may as well have brandished a scalpel. “They'll… let you do that?” Anxiously, his eyes zeroed in on the scissors before returning to Dennis’s face. “Za… Dennis, I don't think - you're supposed to cut the mask.”
“There’s a lot of things they aren’t supposed to do, either, but no one stops them.” Gently, Dennis ran a finger along one strap, to a point just behind his subject’s ear. “That thing’s coming off. If they want to put it back on so badly, they can replace the binds with a softer grade of leather.”

“Oh, just, um, warn me when you're gonna cut so I don't flinch -”

“Hold still.”

He followed the curt order, going as still as he could, even holding his breath as he felt one of the blades slip behind the strap, without poking his skin, and begin to close -

He came back, did he?

He flinched at the noise, letting out a gasp as he did so. The closing blades jerked, nicking him right behind the ear as it did so. Dennis cursed under his breath, and the scissors halted their advance.

Knock, knock. Who’s there?

You, he thought bitterly, beginning to feel sweat burning the cuts on his face. Why are you here, now? Just - let Dennis help me this one time.

“This one time”? Last time it was me who did the favor for you. Now it's my turn, isn’t it?

“Nick? Something wrong?”

“I - it's talking to me,” he admitted, hesitantly, without moving. “Just trying to… trip me up. Sorry, I'll stay still now.”

Not right now, please - just let this mask come off. that's all I need just stop talking.

Either actually heeding his word or falling quiet for its own reasons, it did.

Carefully, Dennis breathed out and resumed cutting.

The leather was perhaps a quarter-inch thick, taking several bites from the blades before it frayed and parted. Once again, the held back tension let it fall free. The plastic cover peeled away like an artificial scab.

He hissed from the sensation of the freedom before sighing, letting out a shaky breath he forgot he was holding. The cuts smarted, worse than before now that they were exposed to fresh air, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

“Thanks,” he breathed out. “Thank… you, thank you.”

“You're welcome, and good riddance to this thing.” With some relish, Dennis tossed the maimed apparatus aside. “It did more damage than keep anybody safe.”

“You think…” he trailed off, brows furrowing at the thought. It hadn’t crossed his mind too often prior to now, never been a concern for him, but with it off he was finally considering the reality of what the mask might have done to him. “You think I'll… have scars?”

Dennis frowned again, but instead of looking closer he turned to the kit, yanking one, then two gloves from the paper box. With some fumbling, he managed to thread them on. “It’s gonna leave some marks… how bad, or for how long, I couldn’t say. I’m not a doctor.”
But here he is, about to try and play one.

“What’re you doing now?” he switched the subject, already keen to take his mind off of scarring - and The Bad’s mockery. “Why do you need gloves on?”

Um, hello, Doctor Deaver, was it?

Yeah, once upon a time.

Dennis wrinkled his nose, adjusting one of said gloves with a few tugs. “Bacteria. You may not be worried about it, but I gotta, and frankly, man, you’re in real bad need of a bath. You wouldn’t smell so- ripe if you were one-hundred percent healthy.”

Oh, doesn’t the occasional dash of water in the face count?

…and as some of the guards had seen fit to tease them with.

(It happened a few times over that weekend they spent apart - not long after the second jacket went on - “How’s this for a spritz?” Given no time to answer, the cup of water was splashed in his eyes, leaving him to cringe and seethe, unable to wipe it away with his hands bound)

“Not like anyone's offered me one in… awhile, you know,” he muttered. “But - I would take it if I could, Dennis. Properly.”

“One thing at a time, then, buddy.” Unrolling a length of gauze, Dennis tore it off before applying a small dash of antiseptic. The smell of alcohol made his nerves twinge again. Looking again at his patient’s furrowed face, the guard bit his lip, uncertain. “And this next step isn’t gonna be much fun at all.”

“Ju- ” he stumbled over the word, mouth trembling at the thought of the alcohol seeping into his face. It wouldn't feel nice, that was for sure. But if he could get through it, he could get the cuts treated, wrapped, and at least on their way to healing. The alternative was more gruesome to consider. “Just do it fast, please.”

Dennis folded the wetted gauze in two, into a smaller, more manageable square. “Fast won’t be as thorough, though. You can’t see what I see from here. There’s a lot of dried stuff to get through before it can start doing any good.”

“Right, fine,” he snapped, not at Dennis, but more at - the frustrating situation they found themselves in. It wasn’t a suggestion being made to prolong his torture, but to start trying to undo it. “Fine, be thorough, please. As fast as- thorough can be.”

Apparently deciding to just dive in, the guard reached over, snaring his jaw in one hand, firmly turning his face up at an angle to tilt the damage up, into the light. His fingers were trembling, but felt solid where they held against his mandible.

Not a surgeon’s hands, but perhaps not far off those of a field medic’s.

“Just remember- you agreed with Em on this.”

He scowled, again, despite how it pulled at the cuts. “Way to instill confidence in your patient, Doctor.”

Dennis tried for a peacemaker’s smile. “You can have all the bread you want afterward?”
“...Just do it.”

And to both their immense relief, knowing and not, The Bad had nothing to say throughout the ordeal.
Petition

September 17th, 2018

...Yeah, about that official inquest?

Turns out, like the visit, it was the only one we were going to get. Considering what came of it, I shouldn’t be surprised.

But I am.

-----

One look at that cold, concrete edifice posing as his superintendent, and he made his mind up.

The door was already open. Still, stealing a glance at the vacant secretary’s desk, Dennis stopped short, as a precaution. Then he raised his hand to knock on the frame. Normally he wouldn’t dare interrupt unannounced, but by the sound of the flatscreen TV (a new addition since last he was here; the blocky old screen on a cart was gone), the warden didn’t sound all that preoccupied.

It turned out she was a trifle busy.

He had to knock twice.

“Ma’am?”

Belatedly, he caught what the newscaster was saying:

“-permitted such latitude, it’ll be some time before this problem is mended. Back to you, Richard.”

Sparing him a glance, Warden Porter was quick to hit MUTE on the remote. The usual litter of papers adorned her desk, with the Apple laptop looming over them all. She appeared to be working alone, as out of the ordinary though it looked. Dressed for business, her black-blue suit only made the gold plated necklace gleam even more vividly.

Dennis wondered briefly just what press story he had missed before assuming his position.

That is, gently swinging the door shut before marching over to plant himself squarely before said desk.

The posh, floral-patterned chairs he stood between were new, too. The sight of them and the TV and the general improvements made to the once-slipshod office made his blood burn a few degrees hotter.

Took the time to redecorate, I see.

Despite the unannounced nature of his appearance, Porter spared him another of her infamous, tolerant smiles. “Officer Zalewski.”

Yes, that’s my name. Tired of wearing it out yet?

Evidently not, and the rest of him was feeling strained, at best. He refrained from crossing his arms or clenching his fists - barely.
His mute, expectant gaze seemed to be reply enough for her. Rather than lean onto the desk, she sat back - the mint office chair looked comfortably padded, too. A throne befitting her station, seemingly. “Would you like to sit down?”

He made no move, save for scratching his palm with his thumb. The nail caught on his wedding band. “You’re not going to help him.”

“I’m sorry?”

_Honestly? She’s gonna pretend like she doesn’t know?_

“Deaver, ma’am. The… special case? The same one you authorized a visit to?”

_That I was there for, the same one you berated me for not keeping ahold of, all eighteen hours ago?_

At that her gaze grew sharp, borderline lambasting. A second later, she shot back: “The same one to which you’ve been appointed to as liaison. Yes, Officer, I know who you’re talking about. But if you’re going to burst into my office to ambush us with your grievances concerning him, you can be more a little more goddamn specific.”

_Concerning him? What doesn’t concern me about him at this point?_

Dennis couldn’t help a glance at the television, trying to play off the sheepishness he felt as distracting. The sound may have been taken out, but the news program gave way to a commercial break. Something rural and tourism related, probably, going by the aerial shots of a forest scrolling by.

Atypical New England fare.

_Em’s probably looking out at those same woods right now, sitting on the back porch, stack of books next to her lawn chair. Supposed to be warm enough for it, these next few days._

_Or… no. She mentioned Valerie again, having her stop over for lunch, take a break from her vigil at County Hospital. A nice gesture, and it’s just well I’m not there, to vent all of this at exactly the wrong pers-_

“Officer.”

He snapped back to attention.

_Crap, worst place to daydream ever, Zal._

Therein lay the consequences of pondering too much and sleeping too little.

Carefully, sifting through his options, he picked an alternative line of conversation, one not so harshly worded. But it still had to be in keeping with what he wanted to say. The queen might be without her servants right now, but it didn’t mean he was free to sling excess attitude at her and think he was safe, off the record, immunized.

He wasn’t.

...any means necessary... a little more specific...
Sighing, Dennis squared his shoulders. “My apologies, ma’am, I didn’t mean to impose. Only to say that—well, I know it’s only been a few days, and while I don’t think I haven’t been of any help, I don’t believe Deaver’s situation isn’t being… fully taken into consideration. We’ve tried our best, but—without making a few… missteps.”

Porter raised her eyebrows, folding her hands in her lap. “That’s putting it lightly. I like to think we haven’t disregarded your advice, Officer, especially given the results of your attempts to talk to him have been… so mixed.”

“When of course they are, the guy has spent almost three decades underground,” Zalewski retorted, with a frustrated flatness that only someone in his place could have demonstrated. “Anything we might’ve asked him would’ve been muddled, to say the least. I’m not a professional in that field. And as far as I can tell, none of the doctors who’ve examined him even tried.”

*On your orders, or lack thereof.*

Porter’s tone grew icier. The eyebrows lowered. “Your transcript copies confirm that? Or did he?”

“Both. He’s—ma’am, you must have seen the tape of our visit by now. The—head pains he experiences? That’s why he can’t speak to anyone.”

Her expression epitomized unconvinced. “Besides yourself, apparently.”

“There isn’t any ‘apparently’. The visit bears it out. The footage of the straitjacket being torn? You can’t honestly say we’re dealing with the average man here.”

“He *attacked* one of our employees, Officer. Which doesn’t make him all that different from the rest of our inmates.”

*Convicted criminals. He’s a league apart from them.*

Dennis grit his teeth. Again, there was so much he had seen that no one else cared to entertain.

“Yes, he was scared, ma’am, of course he attacked. New transfers don’t ever get a bit jumpy?” he clarified, but as the warden’s stoneface persisted, he backtracked. “Are you ignoring *how* he attacked Chr—Officer Boyd?”

She shrugged. “Deaver had no weapons on him at the time. Isn’t it just like someone to kick and claw during a struggle?”

*Struggle—just like he did once he was fastened onto that table. Isn’t that just what we do to people with no papers, or meat on their bones?*

“It is, but…” Dennis shook his head. Caught betwixt procedure and moral discrepancies, it was already evident what side of this given line he was on, versus his superior. “I just… the restraints aren’t unadvisable. But you’ve seen the tapes there, too. Once I took them off, Deaver was perfectly willing to talk.”

“And he started by accusing you of interdimensional manslaughter,” Porter deadpanned, eyebrow raised. “Only to follow it up by asserting that he is Henry Matthew Deaver—a name already tarnished by a rather sordid history in this town.”

“And you expect me to take anything else he says seriously?”
She needn’t verbalize the third thought, Dennis could already tell how it made everything sound. Loony, in a word.

This would be an uphill battle for him, no two ways about it.

“Ma’am, we’re steering without a rudder. Is it any wonder why things are just going in circles?” He hesitated, then went on: “How he spoke to Emilia and I during the visit, that all seemed - normal enough, right? Until… He doesn’t- want to hurt anyone, he just wants…”

You don’t know what he wants, because he doesn’t know what he wants, because that thing - Redeye, until I know what else I should call it, besides “bad news” - has got him so scrambled he barely knows up from down, forward from back.

Conceding the argument as futile, Dennis stepped back. “Would you consider talking with him, then? Perhaps there’s something I’ve missed that you won’t.” At that Porter blinked, sparing her open laptop a glance.

Checking the time? Your availability?

Shaking his head again, Dennis scratched at his ear. “There must be something I missed. I’m too close to see what’s right under my nose - ” He paused, thinking again of just what might make the meet a bit more bearable. “Give me some time to… prep, and then see what he has to say?”

Porter gauged him with one last stare before sitting forward, fingers poised over the keyboard. She nodded. “One hour from now, Officer. I’ll see if anything gets lost in translation.”

For the moment, that was the best Dennis could have hoped for. He kept his eyes forward, despite passing Reeves on the way out. A few floors down, he detoured long enough to borrow a first aid kit from the infirmary. Those were always fully supplied.

Once again the duty of actually showing some care fell to him.

-----

This is what I get for being pushy.

By the time they were through, Dennis was sweating, but not half as troubled now as he had felt starting out. The collar of his shirt felt damp, the neck of his undershirt soaked through. His nerves felt like trembling, overcranked guitar strings. Among other things he accomplished, he figured out - without any doubts whatsoever - he was not cut out for practicing medicine.

Fuck, man. Feels like running Hacksaw Ridge, my first day of boot camp.

Finally, he was about to sit back and take stock of what he had (supposedly) fixed. His plastic gloves bore the brunt of the damage. Delicately, he managed to peel one off, mindful to turn it outside in, then he repeated the process on the second. The plastic bag he had tucked into the kit proved handy for disposing them in.

Clean the wounds - check. Apply the ointments - check. Dress the wounds… that has to wait. Butterfly bandages, surgical tape, that’s gonna look terrible, but if it works…
Giving themselves a few minutes’ time to recoup, Dennis glanced up, frowning, and shook Deaver’s nearest shoulder.

The man hadn’t moved, barely stifling his cries to muffled whimpers. His head was angled down, resting with his back pressed flat against the wall.

“Hey. You still with me, man?”

After a pause, Deaver turned his head up the barest bit.

“Yes,” he mumbled, hooded eyes slowly rolling up to look at Dennis, but they had a glassy, unfocused sheen to them, as if there was a new vacancy behind his face. “I’m… here.”

But no red gleams in sight.

Barely. I know I’d want to tap out seconds into that torture.

“Good, wouldn’t want you to- ” Dennis stopped short, thinking twice of his need to ramble. Talking wasn’t all that easy for Deaver - Nick - at the moment. To do so meant moving one’s cheeks.

He sighed, donning a fresh pair of gloves and plucking some spare tissue from the kit. Carefully, he started to dab the tears and blood away. “Sorry… again, pal. I didn’t think we’d- it-it’s for the better. I’m sorry it had to hurt.”

Sorry I didn’t dare to help this sooner, too. Suppose that means I have officially joined the ranks of those who have hurt you in the past. Good intentions, failing again.

Nick nodded slowly, still looking effectively dazed from the arduous cleaning. It didn’t take much deep digging to core out the dried blood, but where it was concentrated, the hurt couldn’t be avoided. Fresh blood had flowed, dripping spots all over the lap of his jacket. They had had to staunch and wait for it to stop flowing before Zalewski gingerly applied the antibacterial cream.

One furrow, then the other.

Deaver didn’t protest once. At some point, so much pain had become its own anesthetic.

“It’s okay… ‘s over now,” he spoke slowly, nearly slurring, using fewer words than Zalewski knew the man was capable of, simply to keep from moving his face too much.

Coincidence or fate having a go at them for the umpteenth time, Dennis glanced up at hearing a muted buzz. There were at least two checkpoints between this room and the main wheel. He started to dab and wipe faster.

Company was on the way.

Okay. And here we are, about to be visited by Frau Kommandant herself.

Another weak attempt at humor, Dennis forced a laugh and squeezed his patient’s shoulder, a gentle rib against what they had just assumed. “Well, now that you went and said something, jinxer, you hear that?”

“What?” Nick tilted his head up more, taking a look around the room. “The buzzin- ” He cut himself off, letting out a sharp breath from the way the word pulled at his raw, torn face.
Dennis frowned, squeezed his jacket-covered shoulder again. “Stop. You only had to nod, remember?”

Wincing, Nick spared him another wet-eyed glance. He nodded, at both the original question and the follow-up.

The kicked-puppy face, in full force.

“Okay. I’ll keep them talking, much as I can. I mean, they’re the ones who okayed this fuckup at all. I shoulda known better than to think they’d give us time to finish.” He stopped to stow items back in the kit. “You, don’t talk unless I specifically ask something. Reeves might try to needle you, but don’t give him the satisfaction. Sit there and… look sad, makes him seem more like a douche in front of the warden, got it?”

He nodded again. He must have looked appropriately pitiful and vulnerable, with the inflamed furrows framing his cheeks, like ghastly haunted house makeup, and a listless expression to match.

“Perfect.”

Another buzz sounded, followed by the thud of a door.

Dennis closed the kit, then retrieved the discarded mask from the floor. Setting it beside the plastic bag, atop the table, he removed the new gloves, policing up the garbage as the final door clunked open.

Two pairs of feet.

One set of shoes, one set of clicking heels.

“Officer Zalewski, fancy meeting you here.”

-----

**Yikes. Almost feels like you're in worse shape than before, huh?**

He didn't bother responding to The Bad, just continued to focus on the far off corner, the spot where the floor and the wall met. Focusing hard enough on it meant he could fade away from the stinging of his face, meant he didn't have to think about what just happened.

He really did a number on you.

At that he almost wanted to frown, but he forced his mouth to remain in the same sloping line it was. Moving any part of his ravaged face hurt. But Dennis - he didn't do a number on him. The mask did, damned piece of jagged-edged plastic slicing deeper and deeper into his skin every time it went on.

Dennis helped. Although the process hurt, it wasn't the guard’s fault. He had even apologized for hurting him, an idea so ludicrous he almost went to laugh. But he didn't, of course.

Does this make up for Molly? The Bad asked suddenly and then the words did cause a frown to appear on his face, before he quickly wiped it off, hissing at the sensation. The conversation that was happening around him lapsed for a moment as if waiting to see if he had anything to add.

(He thought for just a moment of asking the question aloud to Dennis, seeing if Zalewski was
making penance for a man he would never know and something akin to shame arose deep in him, 
knowing the ways he accused him, the ways he forced that guilt unto Dennis)

He didn't, of course - to do so would hurt the situation they were presently in.

Besides, Dennis said to only reply when he asked him something, an order he was more than happy 
to follow, because although he couldn't see Warden Porter’s face or her underling, Reeves, he 
could take an educated guess as to what they looked at him with.

( Fear, disgust, anger, bewilderment, apathy, any of those bad emotions that wiggled inside of you 
and played out on your face when viewing something or someone you couldn't even begin to 
understand, something you only knew you were right to be fearful of)

That wasn't Dennis , he answered back in his head as the conversation seemed to continue. At least, 
not this one.

No? What happened to your rage, Henry? It sounded surprised in its own right, as if it genuinely 
couldn't understand why he was no longer angry with this version of Zalewski. Why completely 
change your mind, so quickly?

The stalwart concern. Because Dennis listened to him rant and still came back, offering an apology 
he didn't need to, helping him out of the straitjacket and mask, making sure he was fed, giving him 
contact with another friendly person,

(Nearly two, he thought for a moment, remembering just how pregnant Emilia was)

protecting him from a beating, cleaning his wounds…

Dennis was his friend, that was why. He didn't deserve anger from him, didn't deserve the 
accusations and pain of knowing.

You think he's your friend, The Bad said quietly, as if it was whispering inside his head. But you 
wait, wait and see. You think this all matters, in the grand scheme of things? You think he'll go 
against Shawshank for you?

The words were meaningless, laughable even in the face of what was happening all around him. 
Because while The Bad might not be able to see it, he could, in the way the guard cut the mask off, 
and was speaking to Reeves and Porter for him while he silently stared at the wall.

Dennis already was.

-----

I hear one more quip out of this sleazeball-

“Well, let’s see what we- there he is.” Practically strutting, Joshua Reeves rounded the corner of 
the table, craning his head for a good (first) look at their hapless, malnourished subject. “Not Henry 
Deaver, but our very own, life-sized… Achmed, the Dead Terrorist.”

Really?

Dennis felt his ears burn again. With the sternest glare in his arsenal he stared back, holding the 
deputy warden’s eye once Reeves glanced up.
“Uh oh. Theresa, I think I made ‘im mad.”

Mercifully Porter paid her subordinate’s wit no attention. She followed his lead, edging along the wall to take her own very-delayed gander.

Breathing slow, even breaths, Deaver stared in the exact opposite direction.

That was fine. She didn’t deserve the strength it would take him to lift his head.

Dennis broke the quiet by cinching the garbage bag up in one terse tug. “Besides the jacket and chains, this is about the same as he looked when I found him.”

Reeves wrinkled his nose. He did not step closer. “Needs that bath we never arranged for him, too.”

“Among other things,” Dennis sniped. “Trust me, if his prints had shown up and proved he’s somebody, there’s no way he’d still be suffering like this, over a week after being found.”

“You said yourself he’s not the average man, Officer,” Porter remarked, arms folding loosely over her chest. “And I can’t just set aside the fact he injured one of the staff.”

“And no one since.” The decommissioned mask, pulled across the table, clattered noisily as Dennis held it up, practically brandishing the cut strap. “This thing was uncalled for.”

Hiking a brow, Reeves stooped for a closer look.

At just the wrong time, Deaver’s visage shifted. His upper lip curled in a brief, airy hiss.

Quickly, Reeves took a stumbling half step away.

Unmoved, Dennis dropped the mask on the table. “But I’d still keep your distance, sir. You know well as I what his shifts in mood can bring out.”

Please, behave, Redeye. Please. Not like you can just up and skedaddle, either. If you could’ve jumped ‘into’ another host, you would’ve by now.

Porter, in the other hand, didn’t look keen to entertain the notion of a demon in their midst. Her expression curdled with a mix of repugnance and strained patience. “Yet he’s let you treat his injuries without issue, take his restraints off, at your own risk, and not physically harmed you.”

Physically. There’s a distinction, is there?

The inner part of his mind that sounded eerily similar to Emilia pointed this out almost instantly.

“Ma’am, the issue isn’t hard to grasp. He needs help, not ridicule and hindrance. The sooner we get that to him, the sooner we might solve his problem.”

“His problem?” Reeves parroted.

“What else would you call it, sir?”

“A case. And he’s small change, besides. We’re staring down enough of a lawsuit as it is, for reckless endangerment.”

....orders are get this guy out...
Boyd’s words felt like they were spoken in another lifetime. But the key word among them, *orders*, stuck in Zalewski’s mind like a stubborn thumbtack.

Orders.

Orders the likes of Porter gave.

Before anyone knew just what they were dealing with…

Dennis shook his head, running his fingers through his hair. “And you think it’s even worth offloading the weight onto him? Think it’ll make a difference to anybody? He’s as much a victim as Chris is - a victim of some- some circumstantial lunacy our former warden bought into, hook, line, and sinker.”

Reeves scowled. The debate was quickly gaining steam, tension thickening the air between them. “Allegedly, Zalewski. I saw the tape of that meet. This is supposed to be ‘the Devil’ himself, Henry Deaver? Who in their right mind is gonna buy such bullshit, besides you?”

Dennis matched the frown, clenching his fists. “With all due respect, sir, I was only told to keep him talking. You never forbade me from thinking his story might be true.”

“True, while he can’t bear to repeat it to anybody else? Likely fib, I say.”

“…What do you say to that, Nick? You the liar he says you are?”

-----

He looked up and over then, eyes angled up to catch Dennis’s before trailing over to Reeves and Porter.

The Bad remained quiet, but he could feel it, stirring in the back of his mind, gathering up strength, sapping it from him like a leech against an artery. A charge was building. It left him feeling…
tired, as if his energy was abruptly being siphoned away from him.

(He thought of Lacy randomly, a name that had been almost non-existent to him for quite some time so to have it pop in was disturbing, making him wonder just what caused it)

The warden and deputy warden stared back at him, looking incredulous, so he spoke.

“No,” he said, barely above a whisper, voice still half-slurred from pain and an odd, increasing sense of drowsiness that crept up on him. “Not a liar.”

The tide rose. The thought of Lacy grew.

-----

Leaning in to listen, Reeves’ pinched face did not slack off. “He doesn’t have a more elaborate argument than that?”

The urge he felt to throttle the man came back around. Dennis sidestepped it with a tense shrug. “That’s the best he can do. If it isn’t enough to satisfy you, sir, I suggest moving him to the infirmary, get him that shower and bed rest, *then* we’ll try again.”

“On the prison’s dime? He’d be better off at Juniper Hill.”
“Where he can potentially tear another person’s throat out?”

Hands practically on his hips, Reeves didn’t look swayed. “Well, right now he doesn’t look like he could tear a sheet of paper in half.”

“Who’s fault is that?”

“Reeves,” Porter spoke up, after a lengthy pause of deliberation. “If you would please not get carried away arguing what shouldn’t be done, the quicker we might figure out what compromise would work best, for everyone?”

Dennis ground his teeth. Was he hearing this correctly? Why were they so reluctant to do the right thing? What was so difficult about looking at Deaver as someone who needed help?

The guy was punishment personified already.

“Ma’am, if I may, the bigger picture isn’t the issue.”

Porter’s arms were still folded. “And what if I said it was?”

He bristled. “Sure. How ‘bout we start with the idea Lacy didn’t think it was worth charging him? Due process, that old system? We figure out who he is, then consider the case on its own terms. Innocent until proven guilty, past tense.”

“Terms?” Before Porter could yank his leash, Reeves rounded on him. “You have a law degree you never told us about, Zalewski? Unless you do, don’t go lecturing your bosses on what we should do or how we should do it - not if you value your place in this institution.”

-----

They threatened him.

Well, no - Reeves, the deputy warden, threatened Dennis and when he did that he set off a chain reaction - he threatened Emilia and the baby, and he threatened him, didn't he?

I could scare them off of him.

The words entered his head suddenly, causing him to jolt, a tiny movement that all at once hurt and drained him of even more energy.

(He wondered looking back if The Bad had started conserving as soon as it realized just how in dire straits he/they was/were or if it was an incubating sickness itself robbing him of it)

They weren't entirely unwelcome though.

...You could? With just words?

He didn't want to harm anyone again, didn't want another mess for Dennis to clean up and a tighter collar around his neck, deal with the consequences of any physical violence, but just words?

That was doable now, wasn't it?

Just words, it promised. And for once, he believed it was telling the truth. The Bad understood the situation at hand by then, understood what an attack on Reeves would mean for them. Just words, but they'll back off.
(Dale Eustace Lacy, the name reverberated in his head and he didn't know why just wanted to stop thinking of the man)

He thought on it for just a moment longer, before nodding. He would use The Bad this one time, in defense of Dennis.

(And Em and the baby and himself, protecting them all by using something bad for a good reason but just this once)

The walls of his throat closed. For a few seconds, his breath stalled out. His mouth opened on its own it seemed, a sensation he felt was almost foreign to him

(Even though he had handed control over just a few days ago, when The Bad taught him such a repulsive lesson and forced the mouse down his throat, the cold numbness didn’t remove all sensation from his awareness)

and a voice - husky and far raspier than his own, one he hadn't heard

(And suddenly the thoughts of Lacy made sense, they weren’t his own, but instead The Bad’s weren’t they, thinking about what it was already going to do, leaking into his own mind, strands twining around one another)

in a long time - rang out:

“Is that any way to treat valued employees, Deputy Warden?”

-----

The voice caught him more off guard than it did Porter or Reeves, apparently. The latter promptly shut his mouth, eyebrows arching up almost to his regressing hairline. The whites of his eyes went round with disbelief.

Attention elsewhere, Dennis didn’t spare a second to think it funny.

Well... way to stop him dead, Red.

It wasn’t the same neutral, Doppler-affected voice he remembered being spoken to in with a few days prior.

On the contrary, this was a very recognizable, smoky tenor anyone working at this prison in the past three decades would recognize.

Still leaning against the wall, Deaver didn’t look away from their incredulous stares. His visage creased into a scowl, seemingly inured to whatever discomfort it caused.

The look was so intense and severe, contrary to his weakened state, it couldn’t be a joke.

Dennis didn’t want to feel as vindicated as he should have in that moment, but he did.

Just to sell the idea, to hammer in that it wasn’t simply him mishearing another take on a veritable voice, he chanced calling it as such:

“Warden Lacy?”
“The fuck are you talking about, Zalewski?” Reeves gasped. He hastily stepped away. “This- that’s not- that can’t be- ”

“Yes?” Nick cut in smoothly, but it wasn't him anymore, was it? “It can be, Deputy, and it is.”

“Now you see it’s not just me hearing things, right?” Dennis interjected. “You heard it, too.”

_It as opposed to them. They’re not the same. They’re not. Like no one ever accuses twins of being one and the same person and then asks them to prove it._

Not that he would ever expect the jailer and his captive to think they were so interlinked.

Grasping for an explanation Reeves spluttered, “Heard it? Hear, what? That- so, the guy knows how to impersonate better than most guest stars on SNL. Shocker! There’s something we weren’t expecting, sure, but just where does he get the idea he knows Lacy better than any of us?”

“I assume I would know myself better than you do.” With that said Nick cocked his head to turn his festering glare solely onto Reeves. “But if you believe you know more, go ahead, Joshua, by all means. _Explain._”

The red gleam was back.

By the lack of surprise on his superiors’ faces, Dennis supposed that was, again, an element only he could see.

As the two of them glanced his way, he only went for another shrug. “You tell me, but it sure _sounds_ like Warden Lacy.”

Porter stood well away, arms still folded. One could have mistaken her startled expression for a slip of control before she frowned, ever stern, like the stubborn disciplinarian she always seemed to resemble. “That’s… not him, though.”

“And even if it was, would you be any less culpable than him, ma’am, in how you’ve mistreated this man? At least Lacy blundered ever on with that in the name of good intentions, no matter how in the wrong it seems to us now. He never shunted that duty off on someone else because he couldn’t bear to be _bothered._”

_“You_ two, running Shawshank…” Nick trailed off, shaking his head at the mere thought. The affected voice and unbothered manner persisted. “It's disgraceful. The good I've done, erased in mere days, and yet you still look so dumbfounded.”

“What good?” Reeves echoed, denial still running high. “You’re not Dale Lacy. You’re- the guy who tore a man’s throat out.”

“That was Henry who attacked Christopher Boyd,” he said, but even then it was still a lie. Nick and Redeye - they were separate identities, so while Redeye had control… could Nick really be held accountable? “Not me. Don't speak of that you don't know, Deputy. You only sound all the more ignorant to everyone listening.”

“It wasn’t Henry, either,” Dennis clarified, as monotone. “This isn’t Henry you’re speaking to. He’d be seizing up like a short circuiting weedwacker if it were.”

_Exclusive access has its shortcomings, doesn’t it, Red?_
The eyes swung around to glare at him then, smoldering crimson trying to burn holes into his face. “Zalewski is right, on this not being Henry. If he tried… well, he summed it up adequately enough. And I don't suppose anyone, least of all Henry, would enjoy going through that again?”

“If you’re not Dale Lacy and you’re not Henry Deaver, then who are you?” Inane as the question was to ask, Porter managed to keep a level tone in demanding it, and a blankened face to match.

Something like a vile smile spread over Nick's face then, causing some of the gashes on his face to pull, gaping slightly like the flared gills of a fish, a step back from the cleaning that had just taken place at his expense.

Once more, the voice puppeting his face didn’t sound very discomforted.

“Wouldn't you like to know that, Theresa?”

“Fucker’s just pulling our leg, Porter, both of them are,” Reeves declared, not sparing Dennis a side eye dose of suspicion. “This one, he’s crazy enough to think he’s someone else, at least twice over, putting on voices like I put on different pairs of shoes. Textbook D-I-D. You want him turned over to Juniper, just gotta say the word. They can figure out who he is and get back to us.”

“And if any of their staff or residents are hurt?” Dennis cut in. “You’ll have five or six Boyds on your hands before you knew it.”

“At the same time, you’d rather us keep him here to coddle and amuse? Help screw his head on straight, to our own peril? Whatever freakish hyper-strength it took him to break out of that straitjacket, who knows? It may have been a one-time stunt.”

“And if it’s not? What wasn’t a stunt became an even bigger mistake? You want that kind of bad news to come out of Shawshank?”

*Place is on tenterhooks as it is, no matter how many convicts they keep sending us, more garbage for the pit to reek of.*

“You’re saying it would be the last straw?”

“Deputy Reeves,” ‘Lacy’ said suddenly, brows slightly creased and mouth upturned, a sly insufferable smirk. His smoky tenor didn’t abate. “Which tooth would you say was the last straw for that prisoner? Was it his molars, when you fed them to him?”

“...What?”

“When you wanted his name, I mean,” he continued, smirk slowly transforming into a grin. “Out in the sandbox, eight whole months, remember? Height of July was the worst. Low provisions, pressure from Washington, dates looming, a proficiency grade to maintain? Or else you might have missed out on that renewal. How desperate were you for answers that you thought any measure was acceptable, to keep your profits up, as long as he gave - you - the names?”

On that front, Dennis was not so knowledgeable. Such elements of Reeves’ pedigree certainly wouldn’t be common knowledge. He felt a new rush of horror at thinking wherever the man had come from, to torture and neglect somebody as part of your business model was apparently morally acceptable.

But at the same time, with light shed on such a story, was it any wonder why Reeves was that complacent, so blâché in their neglectful mishandling Deaver’s case?
He had been there before.

Here he was, again.

If Porter knew anything to this effect, her face didn’t show it.

Until ‘Lacy’ made her the next target: “While you, on the other hand, have what to show for a few days of command, Theresa Porter? Sure cleaned up the office good, all nice and neat and modernized. A shame the rest of our institution is set to crumble, overburdened by too large a population, you’ll watch over it all from a place of relative royalty.”

Reeves’ slowly veered from aggravated disbelief to quiet, bewildered shock. Lord knew he certainly hadn’t shared his backstory with their guest, face to face.

How else could Deaver know if he wasn’t what he appeared to be?

Or the condition of the warden’s quarters, a place he had never seen nor been told about?

“Theresa,” Reeves finally managed a squeak, before clearing his throat. “Ahem, if you… if you think we’ve heard enough- ”

Looking for an easy out, as much as her jumpy colleague clearly was, Porter finally deigned to step forward. Her arms unfolded, hands moving up to perch on her hips. For a moment, she looked like a haughty crane, poised to spear a crawfish on its beak.

The smirk stayed stretched across the prisoner’s gaunt face.

“We’ll talk later, Mr. Deaver. For now, you just… rest up.”

Standing by the table, reluctant to move less he upset the situation further, Dennis kept still and silent until they had filed back out the door. Reeves went with at least one stumbling step. Head held high, Porter didn’t spare a backwards look.

It was another few minutes of thick, low-lying fugue before Zalewski dared to look back.

Rather than let the persisting gleam intimidate him, he threw a sardonic comment it’s way:

“So, Red. Did you keep track of all the ways I fucked that up? Because I lost count somewhere after ten.”

“I did not, Zalewski,” it said, now back to Nick's voice but with the same monotone approach it had adopted before. “Although I would say you're over exaggerating your estimate. …Talk to Henry now, I'm sure he has much he wants to say.”

The flat expression on his face faded, along with the red flare in his eyes, making way for a grimace to form on his face and a choked whimper to fall out of his mouth. The cuts must be burning from the motions Redeye moved his (their?) face with when it was in control.

Hearing, besides seeing, the change happen, Dennis quickly opened the kit back up. Forgoing the gloves, he went for the tissue. “Shit. Hold still, you're bleeding again.”

Logic said he might not want to put his fingers anywhere near that mouth, so soon after a switch occurred. A new rivulet of blood trickled free to pool at the corner of his mouth. Throwing caution to the wind, same as his presumably-terminal job, he knelt down and held the folded tissue against
Nick’s cheek.

The skin still felt warm, irritated. He waited a spell for it to stop before hazarding a remark: “That could’ve gone better, you think? I botched it from the start.”

*Yes or no, remember?*

Instead, Nick opened his mouth as if to speak before shutting it again and nodding at Dennis, his eyes examining his face from so close up. There was another weighty beat of silence before his mouth opened again, this time with less hesitation.

“How blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, Dennis,” he said quietly, one eye squinting against the pressure held against it. “For theirs is the kingdom of heav- ”

Zalewski frowned. Gently, he repositioned the padded tissue, stilling the ailing man’s words mid-sentence.

“Hmph. Shush, you.”

*As Em would say.*

Nick didn’t smile nor frown at that, save for an uncertain glance away, eyes falling halfway shut.

Despite the somber tone, Dennis couldn’t help a semi-affectionate scoff. Even if the asides to the Bible were few and far between, and of some relief for Deaver to refer back to, it wouldn’t prove to easy to recite with an unstitched face.

Best he didn’t.

“But thanks for the thought.”
September 18th, 2018

I might as well’ve pinned a note to his collar - “If found, return to Dennis Zalewski.”

Because how else could it have happened?

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He knew it wouldn't last, but the amount of time Matthew allowed him to rest with his injury felt like nothing substantial at all.

Daylight rose and fell outside his window. He wasn't sure exactly how long it had been since the freezing night his father pushed him. Not more than a couple of days, though, the way his bruised back still throbbed with every tiny movement he made, coming alive with a fiery passion at every simple shift of his weight.

His stomach was the safest to sleep

(Not that he was actually sleeping, more fading in and out of consciousness, coming to when Ruth entered his room, pressing a hand to his sweaty forehead and asking how he felt in a trembling voice before he could doze back off into an uneasy rest)

on he discovered, causing the least amount of pain to his back when he did so, much more comfortable than when he first tried sleeping on his side.

His eyes were closed when his door creaked open, breathing slow and steady until he heard that noise because -

(There was no one else it could be but Matthew, at this time of the day his mother was still at the high school teaching her classes and Alan would never dare stop by to check on him, would rather catch him on the streets and who else would care about him enough to try and get inside?)

because it was Matthew, coming to wake him up that's why. He could tell by the footsteps alone, the heaviness and assuredness that rested in them. His mother tiptoed inside, leery of waking him up, but wanting to see how he was.

Matthew didn't care to consider those things.

“Henry,” he heard the man call out so he opened his eyes, turning his head slightly to stare up at Matthew. He looked back down at him with no expression.

(His back seemed to dial the pain a notch just looking at him, remembering him shouting the words because he was upset and exhausted and frightened of the way his body couldn't move on its own, the way his father's hands had pushed him and the first sharp stab as he slammed into the icy bank, the wordless shrieks he had let out)

“Get up. No more pretending you're hurt.” With those words, Matthew glared at him, some anger showing itself on his face. Anger at him, for

(For screaming and crying and needing to be carried home, for clinging onto Ruth and sobbing
for being in bed with a ‘fake’ injury. He wished he was lying when he told Ruth how bad it hurt, if only so he could effectively take the words back, not having to look at her broken expression as he explained.

“Come. We have to make up for lost time.”

“W-what?” he croaked, slowly pulling himself into a sitting position on his bed, before thinking twice of the attempt, flopping back against his pillows. His back seemed to throb with every move, no matter how miniscule. Hunching over lessened the ache, if only slightly. “What do you... mean?”

“I meant what I mean, Henry, don't ask questions you know the answers to!” Matthew was by the foot of his bed then, voice raised as he continued to watch him struggle to maintain his position. “We need to go to the forest, now. Get out of bed, and wear some better shoes this time.”

He winced at the thought of entering the forest so soon again, eyes foggy with exhaustion and back begging him to lie back down with every step, a monotonous torture that would repeat itself for a few hours at least.

“But, Dad- ” he started to protest, but stopped when Matthew changed position, stepping closer, close enough the man could now reach over and yank him up, away from his pillows.

( He had done it before, hand reaching and grabbing hard enough to leave fingerprints on the nape of his neck, dragging him like a cat would do to its baby, making him feel almost suffocated behind the warm palm)

He had a feeling that was what he intended to do.

“Wait, Dad!” His cry was cut off when Matthew placed a firm hand on the back of his neck, fingers curling around it and trapping stray baby hairs in between them. “Dad, stop!”

“Get up, then, Henry,” his voice sounded calmer than before, as if having the upper hand helped the man feel more in control. The fingers tightened on his neck, beginning to pull him up. “Get up, and put some shoes on. Do not disobey me.”

“No, no, I'm not kidding, Dad, I swear my back - ” He struggled to get out of the grip, turning his head to the side. His back protested, the tugging from Matthew's hand causing it to light up. “I can't, I can't get up, please, m-my back hurts too bad, Dad - ”

“And whose fault is that?” The hand became more insistent, managing to win the fight and forcing him to stumble up, still half on the bed. “Need I remind you?”

( Not his it wasn't his fault, not your fault baby his mother whispered, arms folded on his bed as she watched him drift away, not your fault you didn't do anything wrong my little boy, I'm so sorry this happened Henry)

She was right.

It wasn’t his fault.

“Let go!” he wailed, wrenching himself free from his father's grasp, but that might have been the
wrong decision. He stumbled even more far forward, feet twisting as his momentum brought him up and around, eyes connecting with Matthew's in a moment of icy panic

(They looked surprised, as if he hadn't expected him to show so much willpower, as if he expected a broken Henry who cried but obeyed, not one who tore himself free of his grasp)

as they both realized that he was about to fall.

His back. No. He was going to land on his back, wasn't he, oh God and he began to fall, knees buckling and feet crashing down first and then

(He thought about his mother for a sheer, precious moment, thought about her cradling him that first night he came back after being pushed, the way it made his back feel better for a moment when she held him)

his back collided with the floor as he let out a premature scream -

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A slam jolted him back to the present.

Gasping, he awoke with the echoing scream of his younger self still ringing in his ears, eyes hazy with confusion at the words he heard. His whole body felt hot and sweaty, his face seeming to be the worst.

(He remembered another time he felt this sort of heat, at the beginning of winter and he was walking to school, intent to power through the day but a car rolled up beside him, honking once, followed by a blip of siren, and he groaned once he saw the driver)

He let out an unintelligible mumble, blinking slowly as the black of his sweltering vision finally began to edge out, colors and fuzzy shapes coming into focus. Voices murmured over and around him. He was definitely not in the concrete room, the last place he recalled being.

As a matter of fact, he wasn't in Shawshank anymore, was he?

…Had he slept again?

His eyes adjusted more until he could look all around, taking in the two seats in front and the curved pane of glass. It was dark outside, beyond a few glimpses of yellow sodium lights, a webbed shadow that might have been a glimpse of fence.

“Look who’s up.”

His eyes snapped over at the voice right next to him.

Reeves was sitting there with one raised eyebrow and a slight smirk on his face.

There were seatbelts hanging on the row of connected seats beside him, too, and when he turned his head in the opposite direction there it was - another sheet of glass.

He was in a car, for some reason.

(His last car ride was in the trunk of Lacy's Lincoln so even just being in the backseat felt like a brand new experience)
“Wha… what’s goin’ on?” he mumbled, words slurring in his parched mouth. It felt like cotton, as if all the moisture had been sucked out of it and left a desert behind. It made no sense, as to why he would be in a car with Reeves and two other guards, in the driver’s seat and shotgun -

(The same guards who were going to beat him in front of Dennis and Em, the same ones who insulted the couple behind their backs, the same ones who grabbed his face and forced him back into the straitjacket and mask, those guards)

“Oh, plenty, plenty’s going on.” The smarmy knowing in Reeves’ tone made his blood curdle. It may have been only their second meeting, but he had seen enough to peg the man with one word - despicable. “You, on the other hand, are going for a little ride.”

(But where and why? What was happening and where was Dennis? Why did his face feel so goddamn hot and his head feel like it was swimming?)

“Wh… what?” he repeated, hoarsely, becoming more aware, but at the same time, semi delirious. He wished he could ask anyone else the questions in his mind, but with the two guards chattering amongst themselves and Reeves being right next to him, the corporate man was the only one who could answer. “But… where? A-and why? What's ha-happening?”

Something touched his shoulder. A hand?

“You just take it easy ‘til we get there, huh? Wouldn’t want to spoil the- surprise.”

“I… I feel funny,” he muttered, eyes rolling back over to look at Reeves. It must not have been a pretty sight, as Reeves’ expression wrinkled with disgust and he leaned away.

As if that wasn’t sign enough, the man confirmed as much: “Yeah, pft. Don’t look none too hot, either.”

“Too hot, I’m too hot,” he said, feeling his face flush even more. It felt wet, weeping some third kind of moisture that was not tears or sweat.

After much delay, he figured it out.

(“This is the actual hard part.” Dennis had joked, using the scissors to snip dozens of bits of surgical tape to length, makeshift sutures that would hold the sides of each furrow closed, methodically applying them down one line, then the other. “I got another one for you - Rugby.” To which he rolled his eyes and stifled a smile, not once would he ever have thought it genuinely funny to be compared to a football)

The tape job was gone.

Why? Why would they undo what he tried to fix?

He let out a startled whimper when the vehicle started up, engine grumbling like some discordant beast, and peeled out fast, not giving him any time to adjust or fasten his seatbelt.

(Not that he could put the device on with his arms still bound as they were but at least a new mask hadn't been placed on him, a miracle he was extremely thankful for, especially with the cleaning he had gotten a bit ago… how long ago was it really, though)

“Surprise?” he asked then, pressing his back into the cushioned seat behind him, trying to make sure he wouldn't slam forward. “What - su-surprise? Am I sick?”
The hand was back on his shoulder, only this time it slid past, settling somewhere between his shoulders.

Belatedly, he realized Reeves’ intent as the man gave him one hard shove over.

He wasn’t allowed to keep this seat, apparently.

“Oh, just stretch out and wait. Sick is the least of what you are.”

He let out another meek whimper, stuck at an awkward angle between the wall and the edge of the seat, legs folded underneath him on the metal floor.

( What was happening? How was he supposed to relax and wait when he was in a car for the first time in twenty-seven years with what felt like a fever, confused and unsure of what was going on? How could he even stretch out with the straitjacket on?)

He was able to keep himself quiet for another moment before a sharp turn left him sprawling, inched further onto the floor, shoulder slipping from where it was wedged on the seat.

“Where's Dennis?” he asked Reeves, watching as the man's annoyance seemed to grow by the second. But he had to know, or at least ask, whether or not the man would answer his questions about what was happening. “Is he he at Shawshank?”

Words arose from the front of the van.

“Hmph. So much for only talkin’ to Zalewski, period.”

( He realized with a jolt that the man was right, without even thinking he had asked questions and The Bad didn't knock him over flat, in fact The Bad was... nowhere to be found or felt, a sensation that frightened the hell out of him)

“Need us to quiet him down, sir?”

Grimacing, Reeves took the diversion in stride. Leaning forward, evading his captive’s gaze, he held out a hand between the two front seats.

“Hand me that, I’ll do it myself.”

“What? Wait, what's happening?” He couldn't shift himself to see just what the man was grabbing, but whatever it was, he knew it couldn't be pleasant. He let out a cough and tried again futilely to see what Reeves had.

Shhh-ick.

“Spare the rod, my ass.”

Spying what it was - his blood ran cooler for a few blessed seconds, chilled by newfound fear.

A baton.

Hefting the weapon, Reeves rounded on him. The blunted tip of the baton jabbed into the crook of his throat, pressing hard enough black spots began reappearing in his vision. A sound somewhere between a gasp and a choke escaped him.
He didn't attempt to say anything, just stared up at the man with wide eyes, the awful noise continuing to escape as the pressure didn't let up. The black spots grew larger.

( Was this some sort of punishment he wondered for what The Bad had revealed the other day, some sort of payback for that little secret being set loose or did Reeves really not care that much about what he was doing to him? )

“Listen to me,” Reeves began, letting off the pressure just the slightest. He sucked in the quietest breath he could, swallowing the leftover lump in his throat. “You're not going to speak. Not giving you a choice anymore, got that?”

The baton lifted off of his throat then but he watched it raise higher in horror, letting out a soft moan as it did, high enough to swing down and hit him.

( Guess Dennis couldn't save him all the time could he, because now it wasn't The Bad about to get him beaten it was himself and his own mouth, asking questions he should have known weren't going to be answered, and with The Bad mysteriously gone, not even returning to punish his rule-breaking, it couldn't help out either could it? )

“Would've been so much easier- if you'd just been quiet ,” Reeves rolled his eyes, as if the act of beating him with a baton wasn't a serious matter, as if it was as casual as the sort of punishment a parent would impart.

( Ruth never really punished him though, even when he knew he deserved a talking to at least but she must have been scared to discipline him, after the type of abuse Matthew liked to dish out )

“But you had to go and fuck it up.”

He didn't know before just how loud a baton was when it cut through the air, making a screaming sound itself from how fast and hard Reeves brought it around, like the swing of a baseball bat.

Just as he had when he was a child he shrieked before the punishment ensued, eyes closed, arms aching to raise and protect himself, but they were stuck in the straitjacket -

( Lying there in the snow, staring up at Matthew unbelievably through tears because he pushed him, shoved him into the snow bank and he couldn't breathe, air knocked right out of his lungs )

His head slammed back against the wall of the car with the strike, stunning him for a moment as he dazedly watched the baton raise again.

His ears rang, drowning out every other sound that might have been made. The Bad stirred somewhere, awakening just as the baton made its way back down for a second strike.

What's going-

Thwack!

It's voice cut out when he was hit again, feeling as if Reeves somehow put more strength and vicious intent behind the swing. His vision went askew, blackening for just a moment before he came around, blinking rapidly as he zeroed in on the baton's next move.

What's going on? Why is he hitting you- us? The Bad sounded bewildered, with more than a bit of fright in its voice.
It swung up and down in a matter of seconds, too fast for him to even let out a cry or close his eyes, heavy wood and rubber smashing back down into the same spot on his head.

I - I don't know, you need to help me, I don't know what's happening -

“You'll be quiet now I bet, huh?”

He nodded at the words, dumbly, not sure if Reeves was actually asking him a question or just talking aloud. Best to stay safe and answer - as well as he could while his head felt like it weighed a ton of two.

Hands were on him then, the baton discarded to the side. Instead of his back they aimed for the bottom of the straitjacket, where the ties that held the sleeves taut were.

“Now to get you outta this - don't want you taking prison property with you.” Reeves muttered, one hand pushed on his chest to hold him back while the other around the first tie, fingers fumbling.

Why is he taking me out of it? he asked The Bad, desperate for any answer it could give him.

What's going on? Am I sick? Why do I feel so hot?

I don't know what's happening just - stay calm for now, stay calm -

Reeves pulled on the tie, hard enough that his arms came loose immediately, an aching pain that would have concerned him more if he wasn't already frightened for

( His back, what if he could never walk straight again, what if it didn't heal? What if everyone would whisper about Henry and his curved back, one shoulder held lower than the other, you know it was his fault right, made his father mad enough to push him, made Reeves mad enough to beat him)

the state of his head.

The hands unbuckled the front of the jacket, tearing it open, pulling up and off of his shoulders - in a matter of seconds the straitjacket was gone, tossed aside, along with the baton.

He felt cold without it, but also hot, undershirt sticking to his skin, arms chilled, but his face remained sweaty. Every last joint throbbed, badly enough that he didn’t dare move. A mix that reminded him of that first night of bedrest, years ago, unable to get comfortable.

Jesus, you're sick, The Bad said, as if it could examine just what was going on with his body, down to a molecular level. Perhaps it could, and it didn’t sound happy with what it found. Sicker than I thought.

What's wrong with me? How- how sick am I?

Henry, you're pretty goddamn si-

It was cut off by the car screeching to a halt, making him slam the back of his head against the the
metal interior, vision going spotty again.

“We're here?”

“Close as we’re gonna get, sir.”

“Get the door, then!”

Where are we?

I don't know, Henry, you think I wouldn't tell you if I did?

The pounding in his head eased off. He listened as car doors opened up, but didn't hear any of them shut again. Reeves reached down to seize the collar of his shirt, hauling him up onto his knees

(the molars, the molars were all the man had left)

before dragging him forward.

You have to know- know something I don’t.

Cold gushed inside, rushing in as the van’s back doors swung open. The bite of it stung his raw face. Besides the crisp air, he smelled musky exhaust smoke. The red glow of taillights highlighted the silhouettes of Harper and Johannsen. Their faces were lost in shadow.

He wanted to recoil, fight his way free.

Looking at them through his eyes, The Bad tried to do the same, coiling like a snake under an outcropping of stone. A hiss built in his ears. The tide in the back of his mind shifted and sat there, like the slack tank of an overloaded boat.

What was worse, it started to ramble. The needle began to skip and scratch across several records at once.

Know something- know something you don’t-

(time enough to get back, not much traffic this late, but if anyone sees- )

-have to- do something-

( -idea has to work, this time next year, folk won’t even care what happened to Lacy’s killer- )

-don’t know- what to do- something, anything-

( -better be seeing a nice extra set of zeroes on that next paycheck)

Two sets of hands grabbed his arms, dragged him back to the present, the rest of the way out of the van. Reeves’ voice crowed after him: “All yours’, boys!”

Know something - know something - KNOW

(“He’s dangerous, Theresa, you saw the shit he did in there!” “Yes, I did.” “And if he hurts anyone else? We can’t be seen as culpable.” “But what d’you propose we do about it?” “I’m not proposing anything, it’s just... if they found a body in the river they couldn't identify, you think the police would go to too much trouble?” “You do this, I knew noth- ”)
He let out a gasp, coughing harshly as if the memory needed to be repelled out of his brain and out of his body.

He stumbled out, over the bumper, nearly faceplanting onto the road, were it not for the arms grabbing him up. Dizziness overtook him. His breath began steaming, turned misty by the autumn night air.

River? Were they going to kill him and dump his body in the river? Would The Bad stop them?

( More so could it, in their weakened state?)

The skipping stopped. The Bad coiled tighter in his mind, some of its panic flowing into him and Jesus that scared the shit out of him, feeling that abject panic from it, this being that hurt and manipulated him into being panicked for so many years.

It was supposed to be in control, wasn’t it?

“ - seems dead already, eh? Thought he’d put up more of a fight.”

( Not that I’m complaining, this would be a hell of a lot harder if he wasn’t so damn out of it)

His eyes snapped over to the guard who spoke, Harper, he thought, but with the darkness of the world around it was hard to tell, plus the confusion that was running through his head was hard to separate and ignore.

“Guy’s face is hamburger, Cecil. What’s the fun in tenderizin’ someone already beat?”

They were dragging him then, heels scraping along the pavement, touching it for the first time in twenty-seven years, but he couldn't focus on the joy he wanted to feel because he could hear something behind him, where they were dragging him, the roar of currents getting closer -

( Good thing he’s skinny as he is or we might’ve had some trouble getting him over the railing)

He couldn’t fight. He could barely hold his head up.

“It’s Reeves, man. He probably wanted to beat his face in as soon as he got outta that cage and started causing problems.”

“His idea of a solution- can’t say I disagree with it.”

They stopped dragging him right as the roar became loudest. The air seemed to grow several degrees more frigid, cutting through the muggy haze of heat beneath his skin. His breath caught in his throat.

The river, rushing on by in the dark, was maybe twenty feet below them.

Wait waitwait, you need to - do something! Quickly!

“Lift his legs up first? Then just- toss him over… might be easiest.”

I can’t! I can’t DO anything!

They’re gonna throw us in!

“On three, before he gets too wiggly. Against the railin’. Take his shoulder, I’ll get his leg.”
You think I don't know that? Just - stay calm!

A hand grabbed his shoulder, the other sliding down to grip at his leg, hooking behind his knee. He let out a panicked cry and tried to break free, but his movements were sluggish, weak and out of sync.

“One - ”

You need to HELP ME!

Their grips tightened.

“Two - ”

Stay calm! CALM!

“Three!”

He was lifted up suddenly, shoved against, then over the concrete railing. Like falling backwards off of a bed, there was an awful moment of suspended weightlessness. He tumbled, looked up, thought he saw stars, actual stars for the first time in -

Then gravity grabbed ahold.

He might have been screaming, but there was no way to tell with the rush of air around him so strong, stealing his breath away, limbs flailing as he freefell from the bridge, eyes wide, but then squeezed shut as he hit the water's surface -

(He had continued to scream after hitting the floor, begging Matthew to help him up please, just help him stop hurting he didn't want to hurt anymore but his father didn't care, just watched him for a moment with those cruel blue eyes, then stepped over him, toward the door)

His eyes opened again at the impact, a terse splash muffled by the water closing over his head. What little light there was to see by vanished. Liquid flooded his ears, blotting out the chaos of the air above.

Underwater wasn’t much of an improvement.

Aimlessly he twisted to move his arms up and down, flailing for a handhold, tried to pump his legs, but he felt so weak and confused and panicked, so panicked because he was sinking, would sink further if he couldn't find any strength in him to continue on.

(He laid on the wooden floor for what felt like an eternity, watching the world grow darker outside of his window before finally forcing himself to sit up, but he didn't have the luxury of time now, he had to move and fast)

Give me control, give it NOW and I'll get us out!

The current grabbed him, sweeping downstream at a fair clip. There was a dull, dead impact as he felt himself glance off a scummy stone piling. Tendrils of cold aquatic vegetation swirled about, teasing like ticklish boneless fingers.

Water flooded his windpipe-

NOW, HENRY!
He didn’t ask to be sent away. He handed it over as fast as he could, fleeing from control of his own body that he couldn't operate, from the choking invasion of his lungs as the water continued to flood inside of him.

His arms only twitched for a second and his panic gave way to a calmness he didn't know he possessed, where he was accepting his fate of drowning at the bottom of the river. But then The Bad forced it up and down in one powerful movement, doing the same to his other arm and kicking his feet up.

He broke the surface fully, letting out a sputter and a desperate gasp for air, foaming water leaving his lips. His arm came up and then down, fighting against the current and losing, but at least there was no more water in his mouth, no more calm acceptance of death.

There was a strange feeling of being lifted and carried along by the water, like an obscene piece of driftwood. He couldn’t see - there were only layers of shadows, passing by above his head.

Striking out parallel to the flow, he made to try and get ashore.

(He almost made it back onto the bed when Ruth came home and shrieked when she saw him, rushing over as he clung to the bedpost, trying to feebly swing his leg on and she gently lifted it onto the mattress before doing the same with the other, saving him from even more torture)

It wasn't long before the river took a bend, and he washed onto a shallow bank, dark and gritty and littered with sharp rocks. With shaking hands he - The Bad - somehow managed to drag himself up the incline. He lifted his head and coughed once, then twice, hacking up river water, detached from the sensation.

(He wondered if The Bad was feeling the cough, if it felt the simultaneous clamminess and heat of his skin, if it felt his aching head, it claimed the mask had never hurt, but all these problems combined-)

Eventually he stopped coughing, managing to raise up on his elbows. His once-flooded chest burned as fiercely as his bleeding, weeping face, a sharp contrast to his shivering, waterlogged body. He coughed one final time, spit a combination of phlegm and bile, breathed in a wheezy breath and managed to open his eyes.

The brackish forest loomed all around, foreboding trees trying to encircle him, trying to cage and draw him in once more with their very image.

Staring up at them, he realized what he had seen weren’t stars.

Light. Dozens of tiny points of it.

Glinting off of eyes, beaks, gossamer feathers.

Perching along limbs of all of them - there were crows lining every available branch at the edge of the forest, each one deadly silent except for a stray caw. More were rapidly approaching, black as the night sky, glimpses of flapping wings visible in the distance.

But not so black he, who had spent so much time trapped in the dark, couldn’t see them.

He continued to stare up at them, as they stared right back, heads cocking this way and that, wings flush to their sides.
A giant murder of crows, just waiting to welcome him back to the land of living.

(Or to see if he was going to make it out alive because at the rate he was going he wasn't sure he would)

This time, he didn't have to beg to leave.

The darkness took over before he could even think to.

-----

Dennis Zalewski typically never locked his car.

Because what was the point?

None, usually.

It (she, Emilia once tried to sail the idea by him of feminizing the old hatchback, as if that made it more appealing; “does she have a name?”) was no prized commodity. The odometer was well past the twenty-hundred thousand mile mark. If his luck held, the Chevette’s creaky transmission would last them another winter before snapping the following spring.

It was like the leaky entryway ceiling, or the yard that would begin filling with leaves before long, or the still-locked ramshackle tool shed at the northeast corner of their backyard. All were easy enough to live with, but would eventually need addressing. The leaking would become a hole for a draft, the leaves would be even more of a chore to rake up next year, and the tool shed… well, it could probably go unopened for the time being, yeah?

It wasn’t as though Dennis could top what he had found under Block F.

Lately, the unassuming Chevette spent most days sitting idle in the parking lot of Shawshank. The door locks, while they still worked, were often a forgone conclusion. Typically nothing of value was kept inside.

That night, Dennis locked the doors once he got home, standing in his own driveway, as a precaution.

Not that anyone looking in through the window would see the brown-paper envelope in the glovebox.

He knew it was there - reason enough to be semi-paranoid.

Never minding the fact he didn’t accept it. The thing had practically been shoved into his hands. Following the confrontation with the warden, Dennis had finished the patch job, taping up the cuts as best he could.

He opened his locker for a change of clothes, only to find it stashed in his jacket’s inner pocket.

One apprehensive peek inside confirmed his worst fears.

The next day, Deaver was gone.

The day after, Zalewski spent all of its daylight hours trying to fathom an explanation. After his shift (up before sunrise, back after dark), he detoured to pick up a short list of groceries. It wasn’t
until after he thought some of the choices were rather peculiar.

His mind was still abuzz as he parked and opened the trunk:

*Blackmail by extortion. ...The reverse? Or... no, nothing was extorted. I agreed to this, one way or another, from the start. But it- became extortion as time went on-

“Dennis!”

He barely managed to get two plastic bags hooked onto his fingers before Emilia interrupted the task. Startled, he glanced up, around the car’s rusting quarter panel.

It wasn’t unlike his wife to greet him at the door, no matter the hour. But now she was already there, standing on the threshold, holding her bathrobe closed with one hand, the screen door with the other. The outside light crackled yellow above her head.

Frowning, he set the bags back down. “What is it, Em?”

“You might want to leave those for a moment.”

*Seriously? There's milk and eggs in here.*

Sticking a pin in the sardonic thought, Dennis closed the trunk lid. The implicated command in Emilia’s voice couldn’t be ignored.

He started toward the door. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re not going to believe this.”

Baiting him with that cryptic statement, Emilia waited until he reached the door before leading him inside. Her eyes were a touch too wide to be called calm, but her hand found his and gave it a squeeze. There was only a slight tremor in the gesture.

“Don’t make a fuss, please. Just- don’t.”

“Em, what’re you talking abou…”

Stepping into the kitchen, Dennis balked. The scent of dried muck hit his nostrils.

On the whole, nothing looked out of place. There were a few books on the table, one paperback held open by an empty drink coaster. An empty glass snack bowl sat beside it. An arrangement of fake flowers presided over the center. Three of the four chairs were pushed in. The kettle was on the stove, burner set low. The countertops were empty, boxes lined up against the wall, spice rack tidy.

Practically lounging under the table, trussed up in an old threadbare comforter, was an ungainly, hunched over body, arms and face buried in the bunched-up folds.

A body wearing an inmate’s garments.

Emilia’s square throw pillow was tucked beside his head.

Then the incongruous smell of mud and river water clicked in his head. Dennis was suddenly very glad he didn’t have any groceries in hand. And the brown envelope was relegated to the least most
urgent matter on his mind.

Silhouetted against the legs of the chairs, his mind instinctively drew the comparison. It started to reel. The light of the kitchen vanished. The linoleum morphed into riveted metal. The backdrop of chair legs turned flat, sharp, *metallic* -

“Oh, my God.”

Emilia squeezed his hand again, regrounding him in the present. “I-I managed to get him in from the doorway, but he hasn’t- ”

Dennis unintentionally cut her off. The words broke into awkward silence, watching him vault across the kitchen, dropping to his knees at the (hopefully just unconscious) man’s side. It wasn’t without a strong sense of *déjà vu* he grabbed the blanket-clad shoulder, whispering breathlessly, trying to rouse him.

Once again, the man’s face was hidden from view.

“Henry, *hey* . Buddy… Henry, c’mon, Henr- Nick, wake up.”

Dennis heard slippered footsteps pad over to stand beside them. Daintily, Emilia set a hand on his back.

“How’s he?”

I can see that, but…

Why was he shaking so badly all of a sudden?

Or rather-

“Is he sick?” Dennis stole a glance over his shoulder, then took another more careful look, gingerly pulling the blanket away from Deaver’s face. Even without touching his skin there were noticeable beads of sweat forming along the man’s brow, a faint wheezing sound emitted with every exhale. His curved-over back rose and fell steadily.

*Just like you found him- plus a few facial wounds and a nasty bacterial infection.*

Mindful not to stand too close, Emilia hovered at their peripheral. “At a guess, yes. And with the head trauma, the bruising… I was going to call the hospital, but then I remembered- who he is.”

*Shawshank’s most unwanted, clearly.*

“How long’s he been here?”

“Only a few hours, that’s why I called- asked you to pick up those things.”

“You’re kidding?” Dennis couldn’t help blurt ing it out. All the while he had been nosing around a late-night convenience store, grabbing some normal commodities like milk and eggs, his wife had been playing de facto, perfectly-calm nanny to their unexpected guest?

Were fluctuating hormones simply not a factor in her pregnancy?

In such a state, she couldn’t kneel down to join them on the floor, much less drag an unconscious
man who (even as underweight as this) had to outweigh her by a hundred pounds.

Somehow she had figured out a way.

Eyebrow raised, Emilia folded her arms. “Call the hospital if you think we ought to, Dennis. In any case, it’ll only land us in deeper trouble. You don’t wonder how he ended up here at all?”

“I don’t need to guess,” Dennis sighed. Now wasn’t the time to repeat himself, or mention the money. “After the last- talk we had, I shouldn’t be surprised this is what they… tried to do.”

“What d’you mean?”

“They tried to get rid of him, Em, the only way they could - by wiping their hands of him.”

The frown sounded through her words. “But… what part of that involves leaving him on our doorstep?”

_They didn’t. Why else would he smell like the inside of a lobster trap?_

Sparing her an almost-exasperated look, Dennis fished for the keys in his jacket. “Can you- go get those bags? I’ll stay with him, figure out what- we should do next.”

_Now I know why flour was such a needed thing._

Plucking the key from his hand, Emilia spared them a tolerant smile before gliding out the front door.

Knowing he had bought himself a minute, minimum, Dennis set his hand on Deaver’s shoulder again. Even with a blanket draped across it he could feel the sharp pins of bones. Firmly, he gave the man a rough shake.

“Nick, wake up .”

Limp as a rag, Deaver’s head tipped sideways against the pillow. His eyelids fluttered, whites visible for a brief second, irises rolled up into his skull, but overall he remained unresponsive.

Dennis frowned. The lack of a reaction probably was for the better.

The same tracks he had spent so long cleaning were filthy, dark bits of earth ground into the raw, red flesh. The tape was gone. The inflammation had spread, covering both cheeks, reaching back almost to his ears. His lips were blue and chapped, split and bleeding in two places. Thin coats of sweat rolled down his skin in veritable waves.

And that was only his face. Dennis shuddered to think what other damage there might be across his body.

...unconvincing, unconventional...

“Just had to go and make a scene again, didn’t you?”

_Not that I expect an answer, but… you wouldn’t have had anything to say to Em anyway, right? Something’s keeping you ticking, and if it suddenly decides to up and not…_

“Hey, hear this, whoever’s listening.” Despite the lunacy that was Henry Deaver, Dennis reached
over to grab his earlobe. “Die on my kitchen floor, and I’m going to be very pissed, got that?”

Again, not expecting a response, he wrote off the incoherent mumble Nick managed as coincidental, at best.

Were he conscious, Dennis could already imagine the comeback:

“Oh, how indecent of me. Next time I botch my part in an off-the-books execution I’ll go somewhere else for critique.”

Because - dimensional wrongdoings aside - it wasn’t a bad way to pass the time, trading witticisms with Nick.

Straightening up, Dennis pulled the blanket aside, managing to get a grip beneath the man’s armpits.

“C’mon. Let’s upgrade you to the couch, at least.”
The next night went no differently. His back felt no better, his mind no more rested, and Matthew was no more understanding. He took the soup Ruth made for dinner on a tray, but neither parent came to collect the bowl once it was empty. He set the tray on his bed stand, turned over, burrowed underneath his covers, and tried to get some rest.

Then he heard footsteps in the hallway, all too soon.

*Not again…*

There was a knock on the doorframe. “Henry?”

He didn't answer the voice. He was sure the silence wouldn't deter Matthew, though, because it never had before. Pretending to be asleep typically only ended with his father roughly shaking him awake. There had never been any circumstance where the man decided he would simply leave him alone.

*(There was one time, actually, but it was only because he was sure the man took Ruth's threats of visiting a clinic seriously, so he spent that first night mired in his own agony without Matthew's interference)*

The door creaked open, a single moment where he held his breath, wondering if this one night, just *one* night, Matthew would merely peer in, see he was resting, and turn to walk away.

Of course though, that's not what happened.

His luck was never that good.

His father stepped inside.

“Feeling better, son?”

He blinked his eyes open.

Hearing Matthew call him son felt a bit surreal. That adjective, the man reserved for parent-teacher conferences, visits by relatives, and church appearances, because it was just that - for maintaining an illusion. Behind closed doors it was always just Henry, with the same warning tone no matter what he did.

Good or bad.

“No,” he answered back anyways, forgoing with the silence. Matthew would get an answer out of him either way, it was better to let it be what he actually felt. “I feel bad.”

“Hm. No better than last night?”
“I f-fell, Dad,” he reminded him, voice getting jammed in his throat by the trickle of fear beginning to percolate. “I'm still hurt from it.”

“Did you say your prayers yet?”

“Yes, I always do them, before trying to sleep.” His voice was reduced to a bit above a whisper, always getting quieter and quieter the more Matthew asked him, afraid of telling an overt lie or answering a question in a way he didn't like.

This wasn't a lie. He had said them.

In his head. Why verbalize them if God could read your mind as easily as anything else?

Thankfully, Matthew didn't seem in the mood to push the issue.

But he did take a few steps closer, looming over the bed. His shadow fell across the bed stand with its empty tray.

“Ten minutes, I want you downstairs, in your jacket and boots. We have work to do. Sleeping can wait.”

It couldn't wait, not with the meager amount he got every single night for so long, two hours there, four if he was lucky. And how did Matthew expect him to even be able to get up without crying? His back wasn't healed, wouldn't heal for quite some time. Walking downstairs alone would exhaust him and strain the injury, much less spending a few hours wandering around the forest.

“No, Dad,” he said, without thinking. The words terrified him to say, but once they were out he didn't want to take them back. “I'm not- getting out of bed. I'm hurt.”

“You're sore, not hurt. There's a difference. You're only as hurt as you believe you are. Once you get up and go, you'll be surprised how much better you actually feel.”

“I'm not getting up,” he repeated, craning his neck around, training his eyes on Matthew to watch what he was going to do at the words, because he meant them. He was not leaving his bed this night willingly - if his father wanted him out, he would have to drag him, kicking and fighting the whole way. “I'm not just sore, I'm hurt. Y-you hurt me.”

There was frost on the glass of his bedroom window. He had spent his day watching it crackle and spread.

Somehow, Matthew's voice turned cooler and more bitter. “Is that what you think I did?”

“Yes! Because it's true, you hurt me, Dad.” His voice grew louder, loud enough that he forced himself to lower it. His mother was still asleep, hopefully. He needn't wake her up.

“Without reason?”

“You didn't have a reason! You pushed me into a snowbank, and you don't care. I'm not going out tonight.” He burrowed deeper under his blanket, pulling it up so that only his eyes and forehead remained exposed. “You can't make me.”

Such outright defiance, he expected worse than another tongue lashing to happen. Matthew’s expression darkened into a thundercloud. His arms tensed.

“So long as you live under this roof, I am never without a reason.”
“You didn't have a reason to push me, Dad,” he continued to protest, even with the dreadful way Matthew was beginning to glare at him. “You just did it to hurt me. I'm not gonna go out there and let you hurt me again.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you, Henry.”

“Then why did you do it?” he asked, because the response genuinely baffled him. Could Matthew truly believe his own words? “W-what other reason did you have?”

What was stranger, the glare built, then softened away, vanishing from Matthew’s face as quickly as it set in. His eyes almost looked gentle by comparison to where they were, seconds earlier. He leaned closer, taking a knee beside the bed. “It was for your own good.”

He wished he would balk at the gentleness, that he could power through the rare emotion on his father's face, but he felt his own resolve slip at seeing it.

There was a time when Matthew must have looked at him this way much more often, and a part of him was desperate to do anything to go back to those times, even if it meant agreeing with the man that getting pushed into a snowbank was for his own good.

Somehow.

“How was it for my own good, though?”

If he was owed an answer, Matthew apparently didn’t see fit to offer it just yet.

Instead, the pastor turned and shouted into the hallway:

“Ruth! …Ruth, are you there?”

He let out a noise of bewilderment, wriggling out a tiny bit from under his blanket to see what was happening. For a moment he didn’t think about the lingering pain in his back. His father never called for his mother in situations where they were fighting - Ruth would always take her son’s side. It was just asking for a defeat.

So why would the man call for her now, while they were arguing about his injuries?

“M-mom?” he called out for himself, mostly in confusion.

From somewhere on the other side of the house, a voice answered:

“What is it, Dennis?”

_Dennis?_

There was only one other person he knew by that name.

Why would his mother be calling for Dennis, in answer to her husband’s voice? Ruth never met the boy. They weren't good enough friends for him to introduce the oldest Zalewski to her, just good enough for her to recognize him in public.

(He thought for a split second about an older Dennis, working in a prison, but why would he think that?)

Something was wrong.
“M… Mom?” he called out again, head angling over to watch his bedroom door. His face flushed with newfound nervousness.

“He’s awake.” Head turned away, Matthew’s eyes never left the hallway. “Bring another washrag.”

“Is everything all right in there?”

He couldn’t stifle a flinch of shock.

The voice changed.

Whoever that was, with their British accent and vernacular, it definitely wasn’t his mother.

He changed tactics, looking back around at Matthew for guidance. What was happening? Who was this new woman? Where was his mom?

“Dad? Dad? What’s happening?”

Matthew turned back around.

He flinched again.

His hair wasn’t black anymore, but a coppery red. His face wasn’t his own, either - rounder, not as square and stern. Nor was his voice, even as it grew higher and began to stammer.

The stranger held up his hands, pacifying, almost. “Take it-it easy, Henry. You’re s-safe now.”

He felt frightened for a moment, letting out a weak, shallow gasp at the change. There was another, stronger feeling of familiarity to the face, though, one he couldn't immediately name, but whoever the man was, he felt… safe.

( Dennis?)

“De…? Wh-where's- Dad?” he asked, but something in him was slowly realizing that Matthew was not here, nor was Ruth. Was he even in his own room, in his own bed? The mattress didn't feel like his own. And his throat suddenly felt drier, swollen shut with more than such a jarring change of mood. “Where... are we?”

“Just relax, pal. You’re not- c’mon, just stay calm.”

Calm.

That word was important, wasn’t it?


His face felt incredibly hot, burning inside and out, head abruptly filling with a pain that hadn't been there before, but most surprisingly - his back hurt nowhere near as bad as it was supposed to. There were more pressing pains than it, for certain.

He couldn’t hide an apprehensive sniffle.

“Just- just lay back down. You’re safe, man. You don’t have to worry.”
Wasn’t he already lying down? Belatedly, he noticed the shadow loitering above his eyes, the rough texture of wetted fabric resting on his brow. It didn’t feel much cooler compared to the rest of him, but it was better than nothing.

“Shhh. We’ll get you another cold rag, just- don’t talk.”

“Okay,” he whispered, wincing after he spoke, a new wave of burning pain lighting up his face. He lowered his head back down from its lifted position, trusting that the new man would do what he said. He said he was safe, and he believed him.

Even if the name temporarily escaped him…

Apparently noticing the searching quality of his eyes, the caretaker, still kneeling beside him, hastily cleared that mystery up with a few choice words:

“Hey… It’s Dennis, Nick. Remember?”

His eyes widened at the names, recalling one after the next - and other things as well - because a woman with a British accent, he met one in prison, in Shawshank, her name wasn't Ruth, though, it was Em… Emilia, right? She was the same one… Dennis asked him to meet.

Yes, he remembered. They were the same couple that had (effectively) helped him decide on a new name.

He opened his mouth to say so before recounting

(“You don’t have to speak, just nod”)

what Dennis said, and simply nodded. He did need to tell him something, though, somehow try and explain just what happened, even if he couldn't remember how he ever got to a house he had never been to before.

“Bri… bridge,” he wheezed, practically gasping, turning his head to the side to try and catch Dennis's eyes. “Over… b-bridge.”

As if to illustrate the idea, he heard a hiss - somewhere in the background a tap was running, water echoing in a sink.

For one blessed second, Detective Zalewski donned his proverbial fedora, regardless of the new horror emerging in his expression. Just like how he had pieced together the story on Dale Lacy, he found an answer. He took the one word, fit it into a preexisting theory, and viola - one arm of the case, solved.

...you should be a cop…

“A bridge? …Fuck. They… they toss you off a bridge?”

He nodded, one tiny nod, eager to try and share more of the story, try to explain anything he could, even in his fevered state.

“My- head?” he asked, trying to get Dennis to notice it, motioning with his eyes. He wondered if he had been right, about any underlying injuries caused by the beating. “Hit m-my head… b-baton.”

At that Dennis’ face only wilted in sympathy. He stayed where he was, crouched beside the bed (couch?), and reached over to adjust something beneath his chin.
A pillow?
When was the last time he had the pleasure?

“That’s why you gotta keep still, Nick. You’re safe, even if… no, we won’t take you to the hospital unless there’s no other choice. But- we’re doing what we can with washrags and rest and Neosporin. If there’s any- internal damage… well, you would’ve passed on by now if it was going to kill you, right?”

…unconvincing… maybe I am…

“Right,” he agreed, softly, letting his eyes pan past Dennis’ face and to the corner of his vision.

This wasn’t his old bedroom.

He could see, what he assumed was, the Zalewski's living room, with him occupying the couch (curled in on himself) - besides a chair in one corner next to the couch, a coffee table behind Dennis, another couch against the wall across from that. There was vertically-paneled trim, low lighting from an adjacent corner lamp, end tables lining a wall down the one hallway he could see, a ceiling fan spinning lazily overhead.

Normal, domestic surroundings.

Just how on earth had he managed to get there?

The realization set in. He felt a wave of exhaustion hit him while he looked about, blinking rapidly to even keep his eyes open. He let his focus languidly crawl back over to the man beside him, letting out a long puff of breath.

“Can I… I sleep now, Dennis?”

*That was a long night of… is it really only the next day?*

Mindful of his undoubtedly-sore appearance, Zalewski grinned, however nervously, reaching over to gently pat his shoulder.

“Sleep all you need, buddy. We’ll take care of you.”

…*How nice of him.*

*Oh.*

He blinked slowly. The voice in his head didn't shock him as much as the transformation of Matthew into Dennis did, or hearing Emilia's voice answer to the name Ruth. Because this one wasn't nearly as new as the Zalewskis’ were.

He had had twenty-seven years to get used to it.

A normal person might have cursed.

*You're still here?*

He felt it now. The proverbial snake was still hiding out under its rock. But now that he knew it was there, like always, there was no ignoring it. He could almost hear rasp of sand against its scales.
Prissy, sulky little thing.

_Hmph. Rude. ‘Still here’ - how’s that for a ‘thank you’?_

Oh.

So that was how he went from crawling out of a river to taking up every last inch of this couch.

_Was just asking_ , he thought wearily, not in any real mood to fight anyone else. Even if it was only a memory, actual or imagined, arguing with Matthew drained him. _Thank you, for... getting me here?_

The airy sound it made in response might have passed for a sigh. It sounded as exhausted as he felt.

_Close enough._

“Nick?”

“Hmm?” he mumbled, turning his head in the direction of the voice. Somewhere in his conversation with The Bad his eyes fell shut, and he wasn't feeling keen on reopening them just yet.

“Don’t move. This might be a little- chilly.”

He let out another unintelligible mutter in reply, following the direction to remain still. Chilly was just what he wanted, with how hot his face felt.

_Thanks for the warning._

For as many other times there ever had been to disagree with The Bad, at least in this one instance he didn’t have to.

——-

The washrag was wet and cold to the touch, but this latest one came with a new feature.

“An ice pack?” Dennis half unrolled the piece of cloth to find a blue, blocky rectangle inside. Writing the question off as rhetoric, he rewrapped the rag.

“It’ll keep longer.” Mindful not to crowd them, Emilia waited at the opposite side of the table. Besides the cloth, she had a book tucked under one folded arm. Nowhere in the house was she without one to grab. “Put it under his throat.”

Dennis blinked. “What?”

She motioned at her own neck. “Left side, the arteries circulating up to the brain will conduct that cold feeling to his head. Might make the burning a little less intense.”

_We’re not about to force feed him a bunch of Ibuprofen, in other words._

Dennis frowned, but did as instructed, mindful to place the wrapped pack where it wouldn’t impede their patient’s breathing.

His anxieties piqued again, regarding the hideous state of Deaver’s face, which was even more gruesome up close. There was a hand towel draped across the pillow his head rested on, and that was already spotted with sweat stains and blotches of blood. Scabs were forming along both
furrows, the body’s natural substitute for bandages, but in terms of avoiding making the infection worse...

(“Hospital - he needs a hospital, Denny.”)

There it was again - a niggling comparison from his past that wouldn’t pipe down. Never would he have foreseen it coming back around in this fashion, but he couldn’t unsee eleven-year-old Trevor Zalewski. He was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, brown eyes big and soft behind his wire-framed glasses, with a hapless robin cradled in his hands. The red-breasted bird lay limp in his palms, wings hanging splayed.

From where he was, foamed up with razor in hand, eighteen-year-old Dennis could already see it was dead - blunt force trauma, if he were filling in the box on the death certificate. The beak was unhinged, eyes rolled shut, clawed feet curled in on themselves. The panicked urgency in Trev’s eyes went out upon being told, but he waited until his older brother finished shaving before they dug a grave in the garden.

Not that Trevor needed help operating a hand trowel, but there was a story to go with the robin.

By the youngest Zalewski’s account, it had bounced off the living room window. Whatever scare it gave him was soon overcome by a benign sadness. Dennis explained the bird couldn’t tell the difference between waxed glass and the open sky. This kind of incident was fairly common, and therefore nothing to feel too badly about.

Then Trev turned the lesson on its ear:

“What if he lived? Would we take him to the doctor?”

“Dennis?”

Startled, he blinked out of the memory. “What?”

Emilia tapped her bare wrist. “You’re going to run late.”

_Shit. As if I could forget... I almost ought to._ Forcing a sigh, trying to allay his doubts for at least the hour it would take to drive to Shawshank, Dennis stole another look at Deaver.

He was still lying there in an uneasy doze, but at least the incoherent muttering had stopped. The twitching of his eyelids had smoothed out. His once-agitated breathing had steadied.

“You’re sure about this, Em?”

The eyebrow raised his way could mean any number of potential responses.

Confident Deaver was effectively conked out, Dennis muttered, “He still smells like the underside of a buoy.”

Emilia scoffed, despite the smile that creased her face. “Speaking from experience, dear? Some story you never told me?”

*It was Joey’s idea, for the record. I don’t think that day messing around with discarded fishing tackle wouldn’t have been so memorable, otherwise.*

Unable to stifle a quiet chuckle, Dennis pulled the disheveled blanket forward, making sure to recover their guest’s upper body. “It was just the one time.”
At that his wife laughed outright. She held a hand to her forehead, feigning distress. “Then, please, spare me. I don’t want to think this is the same man I married.”

The same one who talked you into thinking harboring this not-fugitive was doable, yes, it is. … Because Joey’s moronic-decisions gene isn’t exclusive to him, apparently.

Dennis stood, retrieving his coat from where it had haphazardly been tossed into the recliner. “I’m preemptively sorry for the trouble he’ll cause you today, then.”

To borrow one of your more cagey phrases.

“So long as he doesn’t expire…” Emilia let the thought hang, smiling reassuringly only as the silence stretched on a few seconds too long. “You know what I mean. And I turned the wax warmer on in the bedroom. I think we’ll live.”

If only that were all it takes. If only I didn’t have to work. If only-

“Dennis, please.”

Spacing out as he did, the worry must have shown on his face. It always did.

Therefore he didn’t flinch when Emilia pulled him into a one-armed hug. Her other arm still held the book. He noticed some gold filigreed lettering on the spine. “It’ll be fine. You just need to- go on about your day, like it never happened.”

“Look the other way?”

She shrugged against him. “I know, it’s not your way. But think of the alternative- what sorts of questions they’d have if you didn’t show for a few days.”

I still don’t like it. Even with that envelope in the glovebox… I didn’t have to cover this shift, and yet-

Reading the indecision that followed, Dennis found his coat yanked away. Grabbing one hand and the sleeve to match, Emilia began pulling it on for him.

He couldn’t help another wry smile. “That desperate to get rid of me?”

What irony - Shawshank couldn’t wait to kick Nick to the curb, either.

“Wrist,” she instructed, prim as a rose. He lifted his other hand, and only once the coat was on and zipped up did she spare an answer, “The sooner you get going, the sooner you’ll be back. That commute isn’t getting any shorter.”

“Em, we didn’t really talk any- contingency plans.”

“I’ve got one if I need it, Dennis. Don’t worry.” She patted the pocket of her robe. “Phone and a locked door. That’s all we ought to need, right?”

I want to think so. I damn hope so.

Letting her guide him to the door, collecting his thermos and packed lunch from the kitchen counter, Dennis didn’t voice as much. If Emilia wanted, she would’ve called the authorities a long time ago. For better or worse, she decided she wanted in on the situation.

He had to worry, though. It was a basic prerequisite of caring.
“Anything happens, call.”

“Yes, I will, I promise.” Indulging him one last (goodbye?) kiss, Dennis fumbled for the doorknob on the way out. The waving motion of his wife’s hand instantly reminded him of the same gesture Charlotte Grantley dismissed him with four years prior.

Not a rejection of his asking permission to marry her daughter.

But because Charlotte wholeheartedly endorsed her husband, Louis’, means of demonstrating acceptance.

“Come on, then, lad. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

Charlotte waved them out the door, while Emilia looked on, giggling behind her hands - his mother-in-law’s idea of blessing the proposal, he later thought. “Go easy on him, Lou. First timers and all that.”

To date, Dennis hadn’t remembered to ask what she meant by “first timer”. Sure, several things were meant, surely.

Maybe it was better he didn’t know. By the third pub on the tour Louis was over the moon (and “well in his cups”) with the idea. What followed was almost lost in a haze of good humor, raucous songs (that Dennis had positively no clue what the lyrics to were, besides the drunken yodeling he contributed), and overly-strong fermented alcohol.

If only going to work now felt so encouraging, as opposed to anxiously dreadful.

Hissing, Emilia waved her hands again, shooing him down from the porch. “Off with you, Mr. Gander. The farm’s just fine without anyone hovering.”

I do have a tendency for that.

Smirking, he waved back. “Get to your post. I expect a full report tonight.”

And a text detailing more medicine cabinet requests, please. It’s not like we… don’t have the cash.

As yet oblivious to this black market luxury, Emilia spared him one last nod, her smile plain to see even at a distance. He waited until the door was shut before shifting the thermos to his left hand, fishing for his keys.

He hadn’t forgotten - the safe-on-wheels was still locked.

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He didn’t know how long he was out, but when he came to he felt much better.

The baking heat in his head had somehow been dampened. He still felt too hot, aching almost everywhere, head feeling like it was smashed in, but not nearly as bad as last time he woke up.

This time, he also remembered exactly where he was.

Still on the same worn couch, with knees folded to the side to fit him fully on it, arms pulled up against his chest, a blanket snugly tucked up around him

( Someone had pulled it up for him, tucking him in the way Ruth sometimes did, giving him a one armed hug after and smiling down at him in a way Matthew never would and never did)
and a pillow still beneath his head. Luxuries that were taken from him twenty-seven years ago.

There was something under his chin as well. A cold block, wrapped in what he assumed was the
washrag Dennis mentioned, had been carefully placed against the underside of his jaw. It felt
pleasant, not intruding like one might guess. The numbing cold it emitted was soothing.

His eyes weren't open just yet, but he could sense light from behind the lids, not the harsh
fluorescents that lined the ceilings of Shawshank, but a much softer, yellow light. Like from a
lamp, or a window with the sun coming in at the exact right angle.

It wouldn't hurt his eyes if he opened them, so he decided to, only a bit.

He blinked slowly, trying not to shift and make the cold underneath his chin slip. His vision flitted
all around the space, taking in every last object that filled it -

Including the pregnant woman reading a book on the couch across the room from his.

Completely unbothered, like he was as natural a fixture as a rug.

( Emilia Zalewski, that's who she was, a woman he had agreed to be friends with, the same one
who came to a prison just to see him, that Emilia that's who she was)

Finally glancing up over the pages, her eyes connected with his own, but he couldn't detect any fear
or apprehension in them when she realized he was looking back, just genuine surprise.

“Well, look who’s awake.”

( “-like I would’ve expected you to walk back in here on your own two feet, Dennis. Dad got you
good and smashe-”)

He closed his eyes again. The needle jumped off the record. Even a little unintended glimpse into
her mindscape was too disorienting.

Was The Bad feeling as rough as him?

He heard the gentle thump of a book closing. “Nick?”

He opened his mouth to try and say something back, but hesitated, unsure of whether The Bad was
apt to continue to punish him after forgetting to do so once.

He waited for a moment longer, trying to determine if the snake would rise again, and hiss out
another warning.

It didn't.

“H-hi… Emilia?” he posed the words like a question, one eye reopened to peer at her and the other
shut tight, braced for the worst in case he was wrong, in case The Bad struck him unawares.

To his surprise, it remained sleeping in the back of his mind, weighed down with the same
exhaustion he felt.

Emilia, by contrast, didn’t look troubled. The surprise was gone from her face, replaced by the first
inklings of open concern. She had seen, close up, what happened the last time he spoke out of turn.

Nevertheless, she made no move to get closer.
Which was fine. He looked a terrible enough sight, even if she had brought him into her home (was that what happened?). If she wanted to keep her distance now, he couldn’t fault the reluctance.

They were equally guilty of it on some count.

“Hello,” she eventually responded. The only noise besides were the wheezy, anxious breaths he took. “Nick, right? We… we agreed that was what you wanted to be called?”

“Yes, please.” Even in the grips of illness and exhaustion, he found he couldn’t help but be polite to Emilia. The woman took him into her home, taking care of him despite (in spite of) not knowing even who he really was. The least he could do was say please. “I would… prefer Nick.”

At that she gave a sympathetic smile - the same kind he had seen in the visiting room.

It was a welcome sight, even though - if he was being realistic - he knew she wasn’t entirely without nervousness.

(He wasn’t that daft, the startled look on her face upon opening the door - no two ways about it, he had given her a fright, showing up near-dead on her doorstep, somehow still on his feet, having the presence of mind to knock)

He couldn’t just pretend that hadn’t happened.

But what had transpired in the time since was… encouraging.

“Nick it is, then. Are you feeling any better? Can I- get you something?”

“I feel… a lot better,” he said, taking a mental checklist of how every part of his body felt like. His head still ached, inside and out, eyes still strained, lungs still burned, but not even half as bad as before. He wondered if his fever had broken yet, or if there was still more to get through.

Judging by how hot his infected face still felt, he wasn't confident, either way.

Scarring was a guarantee by this point.

“No, I don't think I- need anything right now.” He looked around, having an idea of where Dennis could be, but wanting to ask anyways. Asking was the only way to know for sure - that his overactive mind wasn’t just supplying its own answers. “Is Dennis… here?”

Emilia’s reply was equal parts exasperation and fondness: “Not for a few hours. He’s at work. I practically had to chase him away with a broom.” A bit of hesitation later, she added: “Fortunate thing he was around for that near-episode. You’re- lucid compared to where you were a few nights ago, but I don’t think…”

The thought went unfinished.

He glanced back over in time to see her set the paperback down atop an already-impressive tower. The couch she was on creaked as she rose to her feet, using the armrest for leverage. “There’s a thermometer in the bath. Be right back.”

The Bad, evidently keeping an ear open all that time, gave a derisive mutter once their latest host was out of sight.

_Hmph. A few nights. How sweet is that?_
It is sweet, he thought back, making sure he remained calm. There was no reason to let The Bad see it had any sort of effect on him. It didn’t, he didn’t need to let it. She’s my friend. Did you have anything to say?

He didn’t want to get - bullied anymore, by anyone. Matthew had done enough of that for his (near) whole lifetime, had done enough of that to Henry.

But he wasn’t just Henry anymore, was he?

The proverbial serpent stirred in its hiding place, one slit-pupil eye staring out from between folds of scaly coils. It sensed something new in that line of thought, something it did not care for.

You… you’re not serious. After all that, what we went through? You’re still going to- to cling to the delusion she’s in any way interested?

I am. She wouldn’t have been waiting for me to wake up if she wasn't interested. She's about to check my temperature. If she wasn't concerned, none of this would be happening. He frowned at The Bad, one eyebrow raised. The only one who’s delusional here is you.

After- you- The voice cut out like a badly-tuned radio station.

He almost thought it gone for the time being before it came raging back, hissing and spitting. The pressure at the back of his head and neck doubled, the invisible scruff-grab he was so accustomed to.

You dare speak to me like that, Henry? Need I remind you what I can do? You live or die at- at my mercy. Were it not for me, you would’ve perished in that cage years ago, much less survived being tossed in the river! You endanger whomever you're around, because of me! You’re mine, no one else’s!

He grit his teeth through the pressure, letting out a faint whimper, but nothing else. Nothing more for The Bad and its - its tantrum. Because that's what it was, a petty tantrum from the voice in his head because if it wanted to incapacitate him it would’ve - would have crippled him with a migraine seizure.

But it couldn't, for reasons he wasn't going to question.

My name - is not - Henry, he thought back, an idea of - of not just a new name, but a completely new person gripping him. Why couldn’t he take on the idea of a new identity in full? My name is Nick. If you want to keep Henry to yourself, fine. He's yours. But I'm not Henry, I'm Nick.

You insolent little-

“Nick? You there?”

Something tapped his nose - twice in quick succession. Blinking, uttering a flustered breath, he shrank against the pillow, glancing up. The fuzziness at the edges of his vision cleared.

Emilia had snuck up on him in the short time it took to address The Bad. She wasn’t across the room anymore. Seated on the coffee table’s edge, less than an arm’s reach away, her blue-green eyes smiled at drawing his attention.

He almost flinched.

(masks, a room full of masks and scrubs, the attire of choice for medical personnel everywhere)
Besides the mask, Mrs. Zalewski had come prepared. She was wearing a green paper apron (even if it barely covered half her midsection) and black elbow-length rubber gloves besides. The digital thermometer was held ready between two digits.

The Bad, derailed from its argument, took one belated glance her way and scoffed. *Is it Halloween already?*

*Will you leave me alone?* With that as his final thought, he imagined shutting a door on The Bad, turning the knob and locking it to keep the entity out of his thoughts, if only for a moment.

Put it in its own cage for a change.

Silence rang in his ears soon after, and he took advantage of it to answer Emilia's question.

“I'm here, sorry. Just…” he trailed off, unsure of whether Emilia was privy to all the knowledge about him, or if Dennis would even want her to know. “Just in thought.”

“Hm. If you say so, Mr. Deaver. You’re entitled to some privacy.” The smile didn’t ease from her eyes. Whether or not she read between the lines wasn’t important at the moment. “Now I did this once about twelve hours ago, while you were out cold. It may feel funny, but using an ear thermometer doesn’t hurt. Just keep still, all right?”

“Oh, I can do that.” He held still, as directed, biting his lip at the memory of what The Bad had done to him a different time when Dennis told him to hold still - making him jolt, causing the scissors to cut him.

It remained silent, though, shifting restlessly behind the door in his mind.

Emilia was right on one front: it did feel strange. Not that he didn’t think worse had happened in the blank space after he had been sedated for the first time. But the process now involved a blunt, non-invasive probe, instead of a needle jab, sliding a few centimeters into his ear canal. He couldn’t quite keep a straight face.

Within a second, the instrument beeped.

“One-oh-two point nothing,” Emilia reported, eyebrows creasing as she relayed the readout. “That’s a bit of an improvement. The first time you read one-oh-four.”

“Improvement,” he echoed, nodding to the words she said. 102° wasn't great, but it was much better than what it had been. The fever may not be broken, but it would be soon enough. “I'll be… better soon?”

“One step at a time, yes, you ought to be. But don’t go getting any ideas about running ‘round the house,” Emilia didn’t need to wag a finger to be taken seriously. “You’ve got at least a few days of rest coming. …And I'll tie you to that couch if you dare think of disobeying that advice.”

Her eyes weren’t smiling, but there was a teasing glint to them.

“Few more days of rest sounds nice.” He smiled at her, not sure if it reached his own eyes, but wanting to reassure her that he would be fine. “No need to tie me down just yet.”

Then her eyes did smile. “Good. On that note, can I get you anything before you nod off again? You must be thirsty, sweating so much.”

*Not to mention what it must be doing to the couch.*
As if she harbored some small amount of mind reading ability, Emilia scoffed a moment later. “No, I’m not worried about that old thing you’re laying on. Dennis will have fun burning it in a few weeks’ time.”

The smile fell. “Sorry, still, didn't mean to…” he trailed off, wincing at his own thought. The feeling of good humor deflated. He didn't mean to bother the Zalewskis and disrupt their lives the way he had done, didn't mean to mistake Dennis for his father, didn't mean to get a fever and sweat all over their couch.

There was a lot he didn't mean to do.

“C-can I get some water?” he asked instead, not keen on completing his sentence.

Emilia didn’t seem to take his hesitation the wrong way.

“Be right back, then. I’ll go clean this while I’m at it.”

Partially shamed, he averted his eyes as she left. He probably should have said “thank you”, but the impulse came along on an afterthought.

As if cottoning onto his doubts, the snake stuck its nose under the closed door. The black forked tongue flicked out to take a sample.

_Doin’ okay over there, Nicky boy?_

He closed his eyes again.

_How almost-Boyd was that impression?_

_Doing just - fine. Much better, in fact._ He grimaced at its reappearance, but didn't allow himself to show any more emotion while it spoke. Steeling his mood seemed like the best way to put it off.

_Want do you want?_

_Want? What do you think? Win one battle, you’ve got the war in a bag? Pft! Spoiler - I ain’t going anywhere anytime soon._

He heard running water the next room over. Emilia would be in the kitchen at least a minute or two. He wasn’t about to let her walk in on another inward conversation.

_There is no war. I'm not the one you get to bully. Go play with Henry now, I don't have time to talk with you._ With that in mind he imagined shoving The

_(Snake)_

Bad back behind the door, straining against it to keep it in place and then deadbolting it as quickly as he could, pressing all his energy on to its frame for a moment as it banged to be let out.

But with Emilia around, it had very little chance of him lowering his guard enough again to let the door come unlocked.

He opened his eyes and waited. He didn’t hear much else from The Bad by the time the running water shut off. Emilia padded back into the living room with a plastic cup in hand. Protruding from it was a bent-necked straw.

She didn’t catch him by surprise.
She retook her seat on the table before offering it to him. “You don’t have to take it all at once.”

“Thank you.” He took the cup from her, before looking back up after a moment of hesitation and adding: “For everything.”

He placed the straw between his lips then, worrying it for a moment before sipping some water, mouth immediately feeling cooler from the first bit of liquid that filled his mouth. Somehow, the water only made him realize just how dry his mouth and throat actually were.

The reaction must have read on his face. Emilia tilted her head. “Is it- too cold?”

He shook his head no, forcing himself to stop from taking another gulp.

“No. Just- didn’t realize how dry my throat is.” He offered her a weak smile before returning to the cup, intent on drinking it all if he could.

“Hmm. Cough drops probably wouldn’t be a good play. I’ve almost inhaled a few, they don’t dissolve fast enough.” Thinking out loud more than to him, Emilia tapped a finger against the table while he drank. The mask made it tricky to read her expression beyond what her eyes conveyed. “Dennis says… you only seem to eat bread, is that right?”

“It's the only thing I've eaten in a really long time,” he mumbled, wanting to at least try and explain himself to her. She deserved to know this much at least, right? He wasn't sure if she should know about The Bad, but why he only could keep bread down… that wasn't private. “Only thing he gave me until - until he stopped bringing- ”

The words got caught in his throat, seeming to force it shut around them with emotions he didn't know he felt about the situation. But thinking back on the grueling starvation made him feel - frightened, as if it could happen again at a moment’s notice, even though he knew it was absolutely foolish to think such a thing.

(Stop thinking of it, you don’t wanna scare Emilia, do you? She doesn't need to get worried for you any more than she already is, shut your mouth and speak of it no more)

“Sorry… just, that's what I- I… feel comfortable with for now.”

Emilia nodded. “And I’m sorry if I’m prying too much. I meant what I said, you being entitled to some privacy. But I think… that word, it ceased to mean anything to you a long time ago, didn’t it? You- they took everything from you, including that.”

Jeez - just as insightful as her old man. …Dennis, that is.

He slammed a proverbial fist on the door and the words disintegrated.

The Bad had no room to speak on who either Zalewski measured up to.

“I haven’t had privacy in a long time.” He nodded, two fingers gripping the straw between them. His throat felt even drier, but he found himself unable to take another sip right away. “I appreciate you giving me some, but… you can ask what you want. I owe you that much at least.”

I'm not sure I'll be able to answer every question though - the words remained unspoken, yet he was sure that both of them understood that they were there.

Emilia drummed her fingers again. Her padded fingertips thumped gently on the table. “Dennis’ already told me a lot - not the whole story, but at least a good two-thirds. You don’t have to answer
if you don’t want. Let’s just make that clear: if I ask anything you don’t want to speak of, just don’t say anything. Like- how our visit went, the yes-no system? You don’t have to deny, just be quiet. Deal?”

*How conditionally unconditional.*

“How about… you said you- knew Dennis in a- well, before. What d’you mean by that? Were you friends?”

“I…” he trailed off, already unsure about what Emilia had been told and what Dennis wished to keep between the two of them. It was his to decide, here and now, wasn't it? He wouldn't lie to her though, that was for sure. He wouldn't lie to the woman who could have called the police, gotten him right back where he started, but instead brought him inside, because she was his friend.

“I did know him from before… in another - time. Another place. We weren't exactly friends, I would say - as kids, everyone knew who I was so it was hard to truly make friends, and then I moved. As an adult, he… it's hard to explain, I'm sorry.”

She nodded once again. “That’s quite all right. I only wondered. For having lived here all his life, how few people there are here who he’s any kind of connection with… you might be the last person I imagined he would take up being friends with.”

Thinking again of that sentiment, her eyes turned up. “Oh, how you didn’t make it easy on each other, though. It's a smart thing he did step back and ask me to play back up peacekeeper. We probably wouldn’t be here if he didn’t.”

He frowned. Where would he be, if Dennis hadn't asked Emilia to meet him? He still might have shown up at their house, but he doubted that she would have taken him inside the way she did. He would be sick with a debilitating fever, concussed and waterlogged, but in a hospital instead, subjected to a whole retinue of new problems. And that would be a hospital Shawshank would undoubtedly check with, to see if he was there, because they didn't toss him over a bridge and expect him to live.

Next time, they would have made sure there was no chance he would live.

“Probably not. I was… awful when he first rescued me,” he admitted, shrugging. “I wanted someone to blame for what happened to me, but with Lacy already dead… there was no one left. So I… took it out on him. I shouldn't have done that, though - we probably would have gotten along sooner if I didn’t.”

“Yes, but hindsight is always twenty-twenty, as they say. He never lost sight of the first thought he had: to help you. Never mind that you snapped at him to start, Joey and Trevor have done their fair share of that, too. Dennis knows most of it’s just bluster. That’s always been his nature, one not enough firstborns in the world embrace - to understand and protect.”

Emilia paused to spare the emptied cup an appreciative look - it had only started off half full. “I know, I sound like I’m idealizing him. But anyone with a smidge of decency who works at Shawshank stands out like a firefly on a moonless night.” At that, she halted again. A bit of red flushed at the corners of her visible cheeks. “Sorry. There I am, waxing poetic. Too much time on my hands.”
“It’s okay.” He smiled at her, because she was more right than she seemed to really know. “He’s- he’s a great person, especially for working at Shawshank. If anyone else had found me, I don’t think I would’ve survived. I never had siblings, never got the chance to… be a brother. Guess he’s my first experience with that kind of- relationship.”

“Again, I’m sorry in advance. You know his humor may be God awful, but that’s only because there are very few who can outdo Joseph. And Trevor goes the smarter route - he rarely ever tries.” Emilia paused, rolling her shoulders in a brief stretch. The coffee table probably wasn’t the most comfortable place to sit in her condition. “You’ll figure out where you stand on that front soon enough. But don’t worry. We don’t expect them to be visiting for another week, at least.”

The smile crumbled. He barely stifled a flinch.

How could she voice such information so casually, as if it were of no consequence or complication?

How much of a fool was he for not cottoning on sooner?

“Th-they’re… they’re visiting?” he asked, biting his lip at the idea. It wasn’t enough he had almost died - twice - in as many weeks. Two new people, who would have no idea who he was, or why Dennis even let him in the house? How would they react? “And you want me to… stay? To meet them?”

(Idiot, of course her two brothers-in-law wouldn’t miss their nephew’s birth, why does that come as such a shock?)

After the fact, Emilia seemed to realize what she let slip. Her own eyes turned puzzled, then contrite, not without some new reservations that maybe she hadn’t fully appreciated upon opening the door. “Not - not if you don’t want to, Nick. There’re always alternatives. We could simply - ”

The sound of her voice faded, even as his eyes watched her continue to speak, drowned out by the overly loud creaking of the door, and the vile snickering that followed.

Whoop. Didn’t think of that one, did we, Henry?

He may as well have drunk sand, the way his mouth went dry all over again.

He hadn’t thought of that. Hadn’t even imagined the thought of Dennis and Emilia’s family, their whole family, of just how much he was intruding into their lives.

The name that The Bad called him didn't slip his mind, but he didn’t feel… right correcting it. The strong version of himself, it would have been able to, to smile at Emilia and joke with her about brothers, to slam the door shut in his mind and continue on as if nothing were wrong.

That was Nick - the articulate, sassy one who could defend themselves.

…Themself?

He wasn't feeling very strong all of a sudden.

…you’re not him, he’s not you…

The door remained swung open, snake hissing as he remained paralyzed by the side of it, unable to move. He remained quiet, completely tuned out of whatever Emilia was saying.
She had given him permission to do that if he was uncomfortable, right?

Her words trailed off. Her eyes darted, betraying some innate unease. He didn't want that. He
didn't want her to be worried around him. True, that was a fairly unrealistic goal, one he couldn’t
ever fully achieve. Because that was what he did, what Warden Lacy always claimed, why there
would never not be a reason to cage him.

Why he was not totally safe to be around.

*That’s right. So why don’t you give her some space, you halfwit? Why don’t you both think - long
and hard - on why this cannot work?*

“...Nick?”

At that he did flinch, averting his eyes, drawing back against the couch cushions. There was
nowhere else to go. The wrapped ice pack tucked against his neck, he made a point to wedge it
back in place before pulling up the covers around himself. The shakes from the once-repressed
fever seemed to redouble. The burning intensified, increasing slowly like he had been resealed to
bake in an oven.

He closed his eyes and shivered.

That wasn’t his name.

He didn’t want to think, not in these fragmented terms.

But what choice did he have?
He clocked out at a little past eleven. Between going on another covert run for more supplies and the trip home, Dennis arrived there closer to twelve-thirty.

The exterior light was left on. Emilia was waiting on the porch, arms folded atop her middle, bundled up in her coat, gloves, boots, and not-Eskimo hat.

(She was quick to correct him the first time he dubbed it such, however politically incorrect: “Inuit, not Eskimo.”)

Without turning the car off, Dennis practically vaulted out the door. “Em?”

Frowning, she raised a finger to his mouth. “Shush, I only wanted to help with the bags.”

He couldn’t help feeling a little miffed, not to mention foolish, trekking back to turn the key. 

Sheesh. After giving me a slight heart attack, why do I doubt that?

Opening the trunk, the inquisitive expression he leveled at her was question enough. “He’s asleep, don’t worry. Just- the fewer door slams, the better.”

“Think it’s a concussion?”

“On top of everything else, yes.” Emilia went for the lighter items - two bags of plain, folded sweatshirts with pants and accessories to match. Dennis grabbed the heavier bag full of canned soups. “He was awake for a short while, earlier.”

...And?

“Em, if something’s wrong, we can still call-”

“We don’t need to call anyone, Dennis. We need to talk.”

He kept his eyes closed, turned slightly into the pillow, blanket pulled up to his chin. His breathing had mellowed to an easy in-out rhythm, not on its own, but from him forcing it do so.

There was no need to freak anyone else out more than he already was, did, had.

(And no need to freak Henry out anymore, either, because there was some sort of gap now, wasn’t there, a gap between who he was and who Henry was)

He heard the front door creak open, face scrunching at the sound before he made himself relax again. Nothing to worry about. Dennis was home - he could deduce that much from the clunky-sounding car he heard idling into the driveway and the way Emilia rushed to meet who it was.

He kept his eyes shut, though, breathing evened out and face neutral. Feigning sleep, as best as he
could. The incident from before when he

(Henry?)

panicked - it still left him confused and agitated. He wasn't ready to talk and explain himself to
either of the Zalewskis.

That was fine. Neither of them would force him to, if he wasn’t ready.

And if they tried, well…

They could just leave Henry alone.

Intent on stowing the new clothes in the bathroom cabinet, Emilia walked through the living room
without a backwards glance.

Dennis hesitated in the archway. Outwardly, the room looked no different than last he had seen it.
Same assorted stacks of books. Same toned-down lighting.

Same compromised smell.

Deaver was still dozing on the couch, resembling a curled-up hunch beneath the fleece throw
blanket. He seemed as though he hadn’t stirred all day, with his face buried in the towel-covered
pillow. The wrapped ice pack was still nestled under his chin like a formless stuffed animal.

The wax warmer was running full tilt, going by the potpourri of scents wafting about.

Without a word, Emilia strode by on her way into the kitchen. There was a light clatter as she
began opening the cabinets to stow the cans of soup.

Drumming his fingers on the wall, Dennis considered seeing if their guest would wake up upon
being asked. He didn’t seem to be shaking as profusely as yesterday morning, his breaths deeper
and on more of an evened cadence.

Nah, why go there? If he was actually getting some rest, best not interrupt.

He had years’ worth of it to catch up on.

“No.” Emilia mentioned as much while Dennis remembered to hang his coat up. “He hasn’t woken
up since.”

“No more fever nightmares, either?”

He heard her shelve the last can and close the cabinet door. “Thankfully not. I don’t know what I
could’ve done in that situation… other than wait it out.”

Kicking off his shoes, taking care to set them in a pair beside her discarded boots, Dennis went
back into the kitchen. The fridge door was open, as she rifled through a few containers of leftovers.
The checklist of possibilities wasn’t so enticing: shrimp stir fry, Hamburger Helper stroganoff, tuna
salad -

“Hon, if you want to talk, I don’t gotta eat dinner that bad.”

Stomach, keep quiet. You don’t know serious hunger from not.
Emilia spared him a grateful glance before closing the door. “He hasn’t eaten anything, for that matter.”

Dennis pulled a chair away from the table, taking a seat, and she followed his example, folding her hands over a placemat. “Probably for the best.”

“I asked him about it, the bread,” Emilia went on. Her fingers fidgeted, indulging in a brief spin of the wedding ring, betraying again some inner trepidation. “He… said it’s all they’ve given him, for years.”

“He spoke to you?”

“Full sentences,” she affirmed, a funny mixed tone of awe and bewilderment. “Turns out, whatever he suffers from, he isn’t as… exclusive in who he talks with as we thought.”

Frowning, Dennis shot the empty archway a dubious glance before lowering his voice. “This is… Henry Deaver we’re talking about, right?”

One and the same? Or…

“He said he answers to Nick.”

He said he answers to Nick.

The words made him burrow deeper under the blanket, pushing it up to cover his face so only his eyes peeked out. The old couch made a creak of protest, and he froze.

The noise went unnoticed by the Zalewskis.

He wasn’t Henry, was he? Because he knew where the actual Henry Deaver was at the moment

( Cowering in the room of his mind, hands up to his face as he tried to breathe slowly, facing away from the now silent door but still terrified of what lurked behind it)

and it wasn’t in control. Henry needed to be defended, protected from the dangers that lay in wait for him, inside or outside of the Zalewskis’ house.

( And in his - their? - mind, protected from the hushed whisper that had him convinced he was nothing but trouble)

He knew the words Emilia spoke weren’t saying every thing, but he was fairly sure they all knew what they meant.

He answers to Nick, because he's not Henry.

He wasn't.

“And? We all agreed that’s what he wanted to be called in close company.”

“Yes, but… don’t you think he may have… misinterpreted that? He’s not of sound physical health, or… mental.”

“It was a joke, Em. A- pop culture reference.”
“A joke to us, yes, but how else is it he could talk to me, alone, without seizing up like he did in the visiting room?”

(Poor Henry with his migraine seizures, so vicious he practically forgot to breathe, The Bad’s leash around his neck tightening until he was lightheaded and gasping for air, good thing he was here to loosen it enough to breathe in deep)

He shifted as slowly as he could, so that he was angled in the exact right direction to keep listening to their conversation, one eye opened just enough to see the hazy outline of the room around him.

He wished Emilia would just say it aloud, the thoughts they were all having, even him.

(Even Henry, watching along with him, with bated, slow breathing)

Because he wasn’t just a nickname anymore, that was for sure. But he never had been, had he? Henry needed someone to protect him as soon as Lacy dropped, probably sooner - it was just the name that Dennis gave him that helped solidify

(“Textbook DID - ”)

whatever he was.

By the time he shook that thought long enough to listen again, Dennis was getting the idea, realizing just what his wife was inferring.

He didn’t exactly sound elated.

“And my big mouth. Jesus H, I meant it for laughs, not- I didn’t think he’d take it so seriously.”

“You saved him from a wasting death. Whatever came next, whatever was said, it was no joke to him. Nothing about it was.”

“But how- that fast? Did it happen that quick? I mean, he was down there for years. I thought I was keeping it light, not making more- complications.”

“Are you so sure you want to call it that, dear?”

“You want to know what Reeves called it? …D-I-D. The douche might have nailed it right on the head and not even known.”

He wasn’t a complication, at least not to - themselves. He was the one keeping them stable, keeping Henry stable and calm, quiet in his mind instead of panicked like he

(was)

would be if there was no one to protect him.

That didn't mean he wasn't a complication for anyone else though, especially with the brothers on the way. Dennis and Emilia, when they rescued him, helping nurse him back to

(almost health, he wasn't quite there just yet but soon he was sure, physically he would be much better but mentally? That wasn't even debatable was it, with him even being brought into existence)

health, they thought they were saving Henry Deaver.
And they were, in a way. But they were saving him, too, which they hadn't expected.

There was a pause as Emilia consulted with her phone, presumably to not misinterpret the acronym with another likely longhand. The awe left her voice completely.

“Dissociative Identity Disorder? As in… Sybil?”

“God, I haven’t watched that one in years. Might have to make time-”

“I meant the book, Dennis.”

“Hm, I thought you did. …You don’t think he already believes it? That he’s… not Henry?”

“He’s well on his way, I think. As a means of survival, I don’t think- Henry is capable of managing by himself at this point.”

“He won’t be by himself, Em. He has us.”

“But you know it won’t stay that way for long. Your brothers, the baby- there’s a lot of change hurtling our way in only a few weeks.”

He stiffened at the words, letting out a slight wheeze before forcing his breathing back into steadiness, slow and deep.

(He reeled at the words and took a short breath, not to the point of panic but right on his way, no no don’t do that, don’t panic don’t panic, you’re fine we’re fine just - I’m gonna sort this out don’t panic Henry)

He knew he couldn't stay with the Zalewskis forever, that it was their kindness and friendship that tethered him to the couch with an ice pack under his chin and a blanket pulled around him but -

He had to be pragmatic. They couldn't afford to take care of another human being, not when they had a baby on the way. He would have to figure something else out because if he couldn't,

(I'm just thinking Henry, don't take the words seriously okay, don't panic you're fine, we're fine, I'm in control)

he wasn't sure what he would be able to do. It's not like Ruth or Alan would know who he was in this dimension, would they?

Or… Alan would have an idea. But not a good one.

(And it would break Henry to see the suspicion in the man's eyes, shatter him into even tinier pieces than he already was)

Time to think of something new.

While he thought, he lent an ear to what Dennis was asking, “Does he know?”

“About what?”

“Joey and Trev, did you tell him we’re expecting company?”

“I did. It seemed like something he ought to know, and then he just... shut down. Hasn’t woken up since.”
“You didn’t change the pack?”

“I… didn’t want to disturb him. …Don’t look at me like that, you know what I meant.”

His breathing sped up again, before he wrested control back and set it to calm forcefully, the face
he was making become smoothed out and peaceful, as if he was asleep.

( You can’t panic every time one little thing happens Henry, we need to listen to what they’re
saying, don’t panic okay?)

Joseph and Trevor, he remembered them in his own timeline, the younger Zalewski brothers. They
were impossible to mistake. Joey with his crazy, flamboyant antics (didn’t he once prank town
hall? Somehow, over the course of one night, a rubber duck or three found their way onto every
last ground level windowsill, and a note taped to the front door- “what a bunch of quacks!” ) and
Trevor with his unflagging willingness to follow along, if Dennis was doing the same (usually this
meant using his given vote to veto whatever bonkers plan Joey was trying to hatch next; but rumor
had it some of his allowance went into the ‘duckbomb’ prank).

Matthew hadn’t liked the middle Zalewski boy, though (“a needlessly-foolish, menacing nuisance
on two legs if there ever was one”) , so he never really got the chance to interact with them save for
a few times - even when he was finally

( ripped away, screaming and kicking and begging for his father to let him go, let him go stop stop
it’s over it’s over let me go!)

taken away from the man, not unwillingly, he never interacted with the Zalewski boys. Never
wrote or called or reconnected. They were far away from Castle Rock by that point, and the sour
memories a mention brought with it.

( But not without nightmares)

He knew enough about them, though, enough about family to understand that they would not
welcome him so readily the way Dennis and Emilia did. They would be instantly suspicious of the
strange man their brother and his pregnant wife brought in.

He knew he would be.

How could they not?

Awkward silence prevailed for some time before Emilia banished it with a formidable sigh. “Well.
In for a penny, as they say. Whatever’s troubling him, we agreed to be there where no one else
would. We can’t just go back on that promise.”

“You’re not having second thoughts?”

“Oh, plenty. But don’t think it means I’ve changed my mind about it, Dennis. As long as things
are… stable enough, he’s welcome to stay, as long as he needs to.”

“And your brothers-in-law? How are we supposed to convince them it’s a good idea?”

“Same way you convinced yourself, dear- you saw what he was before someone else told you what
he wasn’t. If they hear it from us, then see for themselves, how bad could it really be?”

How bad could it really be, wasn’t that the question he wanted answered as well? Just what was
wrong with
him, and how bad it needed to be fixed, or even if it needed to be fixed. Because being stable enough, he wasn't sure it would last.

Just because the snake was silent behind the door didn't mean it was gone, right? He knew that, Henry knew that, and Dennis knew that.

Being as stable as he was at the moment, he was sure it wouldn't last. Because at some point, Henry would come back out, wouldn't he? And he was anything but stable.

Emilia kept pressing: “You said yourself I don’t have to be his next best friend. I’m making up my mind as I go, let Joseph and Trevor do it for themselves.”

“Then… should I mention it, next time one calls?”

“Just say we had- an old friend turn up out of the blue. They won’t know any different.”

“When they ask who that is, it’s gonna get tricky, fast.”

“You dealt with worse. Shawshank did worse to him, and I know your brothers won’t challenge you too much as long as you stand firm. You’re the firstborn: what you say, goes.”

“Spoken like a true only child, hon.”

“Hmph. They’re our guests, besides. We will host whom we want. Who’re they to say different? They left Castle Rock, you stayed. I’d say you’re allowed to live that life as you please.”

“And that’s fine. But I can’t exactly hold them to a vow of secrecy once they know. It would be all over the newspaper faster than the time Joey spontaneously went freediving in the canal- while pulling Trev in with him. …’The afternoon wasn’t cool enough,’ he said.”

“...So you know what crazy looks like.”

“We’re acquainted, yeah. And it slowly has me thinking the three of us might not be as far from the definition of it as we believe.”

He wasn't sure if he was crazy or not.

(If Henry was crazy, he corrected himself because he wasn't the first one here, was he? How odd was that to think, that even though he felt as if he were his own complete person, that he was manufactured to defend the broken man so scared he couldn't get out of his own mind?)

Was it crazy, what Henry did? Creating a defense mechanism to keep himself as sane as he could?

Perhaps. But he also felt as if he - they - would just be crazier if he wasn't a part of Henry. The man would be completely shattered, unable to speak to anyone but Dennis, and even then it would he broken sentences, cut off with fear.

He protected Henry, and if that was crazy… then he probably was as well.

(As crazy as a split personality can be, huh?)

Dennis slept no easier, even with having talked with Emilia about their doubts and revelations
concerning Deaver. He had another fourteen hour shift to attend to the next day, no shortage of curious looks paid to him by other guards, no fewer unruly inmates to corral from place to place.

No absence of jaded higher-ups watching his every move, listening with pricked ears for any whispered mention of their absent, unlisted not-convict.

Exhausted by her day-long vigil, Emilia fell asleep and stayed asleep, slumbering hard as a rock. No amount of twisting and kicking by the baby made her stir.

Nestled against her back beneath the covers, Dennis kept a hand draped across her rounded midriff. Every soft flinch beneath his fingers he tried to buff away with gentle strokes.

*I know… I know, little guy. Everyone’s a critic, everyone’s a hypocrite.*

He didn’t sleep so much as lay there for a shy five hours with his eyes shut, drifting in and out of darkness. That was what passed for meaningful rest these days, just getting off his feet. For as much as Lieutenant Chesterton bragged about being able to sleep standing up, Dennis had not once yet felt the overwhelming need to try.

It wasn’t advisable. Typically, all hazy-eyed, he was sharing the same immediate breathing space with untold numbers of murderers and bank robbers and -

Another flinch against his palm.

Okay, hint taken, I’ll stop.

Emilia pulled in a sharp breath, her side rising and falling with the deep inhalation, before quieting again.

Dennis opened his eyes, blinked the stagnant fog of sleep away for several minutes, before mere curiosity drove him to slide away, resettling the covers once he stood up from the bed. The red digital clock beside the bed read 4:27 A.M.

*I’ll go hover for a few minutes. …Just a few. What could that hurt?*

He tried to stall, stopping by the bathroom. The glowing wax warmer inserted in a wall socket above the counter continued to give off an aroma. Going by the blue color, Dennis supposed it was called something grossly presumptuous like Blueberry Rain or Glacial Flora.

But it took the worst off the prevailing funk in the air. He couldn’t fault it there.

Business done, he dried his hands and took his bathrobe down from the hook. Padding barefoot into the living room, he stopped short. The lamp in the corner was still turned down low.

Still huddled up on the couch, eyes half open, Deaver was muttering to himself again. His back shuddered, shoulders shaking, as the words grew more clear, less slurred.

But, as Dennis listened, it didn’t seem to be another father-son disagreement from decades ago.

“- calm down, Henry, you're fine… nothing bad is gonna happe… no… n-no, I won't let it, jus’ gotta- calm down…” His voice faltered for a moment, paused, and then changed, into the same flat monotone from before. “Shut *up*, both of you. Sleep, *now*.”

The twitching stopped.

For all of five seconds.
Dennis thought about interrupting. The first instance of Deaver feverishly waking up, it had been an experimental, deliberate act. If Emilia intended to watch him all day, Dennis wanted to know if there were any immediate dangers to watch out for.

It didn’t seem so, even if he had been initially mistaken for Matthew. And the subsequent encounter, Deaver apparently hadn’t done anything wrong.

Other than break off mid conversation to evade Emilia’s inquiries and go back to sleep.

Did their situation really call for a second test?

Mind made up, Dennis took a seat on the adjacent couch - plenty of safe distance if something went awry. He paused to clear his throat, waited until the rambling ceased, then tried for it:

“Nick? …Nick, you awake?”

Blinking rapidly Deaver flinched, head raising in reflexive surprise before dropping back onto the pillow underneath him. His eyes went wide for just a moment before setting into a half awake, half asleep look.

“I am,” he said, sounding more confident in talking to him instead of the half-delirious mumbling. “What… do you - need me? For something?”

Stifling a need to frown, Dennis sat forward at the edge of his couch. “Sorry. You weren’t awake when I came home. I just- wanted to see how you’re feeling.”

“I feel okay.” He smiled at him, albeit weaker than ones he had seen prior. “Better than before.”

Face still looks like sliced leather.

Dennis declined to say so. “Yeah? Things not feeling so sore anymore?”

“Yeah. My head feels a lot better than… yesterday? Not aching as much.”

So soon? Wonder why that is.

Dennis cracked a small smile. “Not even with all the bruising? You should see how you look.”

Deaver let out a short huff of laughter at the words. “I'm sure it's not pretty. But, to be fair, I'm sure I didn't look too good before, either.”

“No, but at least it was uniform. Now it’s like Two Face went ten rounds with Rocky, and lost. No dizziness or double-vision?”

Deaver squinted. “I feel a little dizzy… and you look a little blurry, but it's not awful, not like-earlier. Much better than the first time I woke up, I promise.”

Ease off. Don’t want to sound like you’re trying to get him to convince you.

“I’m glad to hear it. Em said you… didn’t stay awake for very long. Had some water and that was it.”

Deaver seemed to cower at the words, as if he thought he had done something wrong, only accepting so much hospitality. “I - I was tired,” he stuttered, but his head shook at his own words, a
little twitch that seemed to give away how inwardly conflicted he felt. “Didn't mean to be rude, sorry. I'm- more awake now.”

Dennis shook his head. “I didn’t say it was rude, buddy. After what you’ve been through, hell, it’s more than understandable. I’d probably want to sleep for a week.”

Deaver squinted again, looking a mite more thoughtful. “That would be nice. I'm sure you could-use a week of sleep too, with the way you work.” He shrugged, sitting up a little straighter to look him fully in the face. “I'll be more awake when your brothers are here.”

*I would hope so. Gotta sleep with one eye open around Joey, always.*

With a sheepish laugh, Dennis scratched at his ear. “Yeah, about that… I’m sorry we sprung it on you that way, but maybe Em figured the fewer surprises in store, the better off you’d be. I should’ve… said something sooner, the time I’m gonna have to take off from work and all.”

“That would be nice. I'm sure you could-use a week of sleep too, with the way you work.” He shrugged, sitting up a little straighter to look him fully in the face. “I'll be more awake when your brothers are here.”

*I would hope so. Gotta sleep with one eye open around Joey, always.*

At that the off-duty guard frowned again, taking note of the last second deviation, but deciding to not point it out just yet. “How’d you even make it here? I mean, beaten over the head and dumped in the river, you weren’t in great shape to begin with.” He stopped to let the answer simmer before hazarding a guess: “Red did you another favor?”

“I wouldn't… call it a favor. It's just selfish - wants to live as much as I do,” Deaver muttered, shrugging helplessly. “But yes, I'm assuming Red is how I got here. I don't remember much of anything before passing out on your doorstep.”

**Besides the beatdown and the botched execution.**

“Well, for all it's evils, it’s got some tricks it hasn’t shown you if it can find our address no problem. And it knows we won’t turn you away, so long as you’re breathing.” Leaning forward, elbows on his knees, Dennis watched for any sign of the entity was eavesdropping. He knew that monotone drawl from Deaver's own semi-easygoing tenor. “The only good news besides is it must feel how you look.”

“Crows - I think it… I think the crows showed us the way,” Deaver mumbled, almost with a wistful, distant air, before starting, looking back up at Dennis after a moment. His eyes were rather sharp for being half bedridden with borderline pneumonia. “Oh, it definitely does, trust me. It's not as all-powerful as it would like me to believe.”

**Powerful enough to keep you goin’. And that’s all?**

“Is it?” Dennis frowned again, switching topic gears for one beat. The oddness that was the crow factor could wait. “You sure… you’re all right? Why’re you so- jumpy all of a sudden?”

“W-what do you mean?” Deaver took in a gulp of air, bony fingers curling into the blanket hard enough to turn them red and shaking. “I'm all right. Just… sick, right now.”

“Specifically, I mean,” Dennis elaborated, firmly, but no without concern. He stood up, took a few steps closer. “I still look fuzzy? Do you still feel dizzy?”

**Since when are you such a barely-contained spaz?**

“I mean… yes, but not as bad as before. My eyes are probably still… adjusting to light after
twenty-seven years, and I-I got tossed off a bridge. I'll be okay… like you said, if I was going to
die I already would have.”

Did he?

Frown still in place, Dennis leaned over the coffee table, one arm poised for balance.

Ludicrous as the thought sounded, it might just be partly true.

“We never did check your pupil dilation,” he mused out loud. “That’s the number one most telling
symptom of a concussion - slow contraction of the iris. But I’m not gonna push. If you say you’re
okay, I believe you, only… Nick, I’m gonna have to ask something else of you.”

Deaver bit his lip, clenched fingers straining even harder against the blanket before loosening in an
instant, some newfound calmness coming over his face.

“Okay. Don't worry, just ask.”

I have to worry, or else there’d be no reason to ask.

“You ever need help, you won’t hide it from us. You’ll ask when it ever becomes too much. I
know that doesn’t jive with how you’ve- lived these last few decades, but if you’re gonna stay
here, you’ll stay as a guest, not a prisoner. You need anything , you say so. Got it?”

He stared ahead for a moment, completely still, before letting a soft breath of air out, nodding his
head once slowly.

“Okay, I-I will. But… you have a baby on the way, Dennis. I might have been in a cage for twenty-
seven years, but I know how expensive they are. I'm not gonna help with that situation, if you keep
me here. I can figure other- arrangements out if I need to. I can help myself. But thank you, it
means a lot.”

Somewhat mollified, Dennis managed another smile. “We won’t keep you if here isn’t where you
want to be. And don’t go thinking you gotta move out tomorrow. Em isn’t due for another two
weeks, minimum, and it might even happen later than that. Do you know what she had me pick up
for you yesterday?”

Just in case you were in for an extended stay?

Their guest tilted his head to the side, letting his own timid smile crawl across his face. “No, what?”

Smirking, Dennis plucked at his own robe’s sleeve. “Sweats. Shirts, pants, boxers, socks. Soon as
you’re ready, you’ll be getting an all-day makeover by her. Lucky guy - I can’t remember the last
time I was so pampered.”

“This includes the bath she threatened?” Deaver joked, but his smile looked all the more genuine,
being reminded by the promise of what was to come. “Will be nice to get out of this- prison get-up
though, pretty sure I've been wearing it nonstop for a week.”

So he’s at least receptive to the idea of improving his appearance. That’s a start.

“I’m sure you smelled worse before your stint in the river- I had to work with you all those days
prior, didn’t I?” Dennis couldn’t hide a short lived snicker, inane as the idea to hit him was. “One
whiff, I bet Reeves’ eyes were just dripping .”
“They probably were. Hey, maybe that’s why he chose a river! It makes sense now, he was just trying to help. ” Deaver let out his own huff of laughter. “Guess I should actually be thanking him, huh?”

Dennis scoffed, still smiling - however dark their humor’s logic was. “In part, yeah, but that’s where the thanks should end, man. You were just a loose end he couldn’t afford to let dangle. And Porter… I don’t know what her deal was. Or wasn’t. I’m just glad you’re out of there, period.”

“I am too, although I wish the departure had been a little less… bumpy.” He hesitated for a moment before adding, “Thank you for helping me so much, though. You don’t have to.”

“If I didn’t, who would? You’re almost lucky that attorney, Henry Deaver, wasn’t notified. I thought to, but… well, do you think it would’ve really helped anything?”

“…No. I doubt he remembers me, or what our connection is. Best not to even chance something like that.” Deaver shook his head, smile disappearing from his face. “He’s not in town then? Left, same as I did?”

Slightly abashed, Dennis straightened up, folded his arms, rubbed at his mouth. “Yeah, but then, so do most folks when they come of age around here. How old were you when you did?”

“Eleven. It was - it was really bad with Matthew, to the point that we... probably would’ve died if we stayed.” He shrugged at his own words, probably trying to seem dismissive, but a slight shake had resurfaced in his hands. “There was- a bad fight, but we made it out, since we had someone to protect us.”

“You mean Sheriff Pangborn?” Bluntly said as it was, Dennis couldn’t think of another nearly-as-important name Deaver had yet mentioned. “Was that why you were asking about him, before?”

There was a pause before he nodded again, a slight flush filling in on his face - darker than the fever-red it already bore. “I just wanted to know if he was okay, over here. He was my father, Dennis, my actual father. I just want to know how he is.”

“You’re- pft, you’re serious?” Dennis belatedly got a handle on his knee jerk reaction. “How did- I mean, I know how, but- what about his wife? His two boys? They all died in a car crash. But this- if you’re the age I think you are, that would mean he…”

Deaver blinked. “He had a wife and kids, over here? N-not my dad, not in my- time. He just had me and my mother, after we left. And yes, my mother cheated on Matthew with Alan, that's how it's even possible. But he would still be my dad, even if he wasn't biologically.”

“Point taken, pal. I don't mean to impugn your story. Just… the two versions don’t quite line up, like they don’t with me, right? Was the other me even married?”

“I... don't know.” He shook his head, eyes going distant for another half second, before looking back. “I left when I was eleven, and never bothered getting back in touch with anyone. And then when I did come back, and we met again… we didn't talk about marriages, or anything like that.”

Dennis took his turn to shrug. “It was only an example. I mean, our Pangborn, he lives with Ruth Deaver over on North Prospect. Everyone knows it, and if they were an item before Pastor Deaver fell off the cliff, no one really says they were in the wrong anyway. That guy was all kinds of scatterbrained.”

“He wasn't just scatterbrained, he was abusive and ruthless and he- ” Before he could raise his voice too far, Deaver cut himself off with a sharp breath and a shake of his head. Emilia was still
asleep after all. “He’s dead. It- doesn't matter anymore. So Alan, he’s with - Ruth, still? That's good. I hope they're happy together, the way they were with me.”

On that Dennis couldn’t confirm too much. What he knew was rumor, not because he was on a first name basis. Even if Deaver wanted some affirmation, better to say nothing than give him the wrong idea. “They must be. He’s been there at least a few years. And Henry - this side’s Henry - he hasn’t been back for over ten years. He’s too busy trying to keep needles out of clients in Texas, last I heard. Or read.”

“Oh.” Deaver frowned at that. “Very different from me, then, I visited my parents all the time… and I was never trying to keep needles out of clients. Is he some sort of lawyer, then? For death row?”

Dennis nodded. “A defense attorney. He argues for the people no one else wants to. And why would they? Those cases are born losers, most times. The death penalty may not be the best solution in every case, but it’s got to have some meaning. What’s there to put the fear of punishment in someone, to keep them from breaking the law, without something of that magnitude?”

Deaver raised an eyebrow. “Some people though, they don’t deserve it… he must argue for those cases, right? If he was raised by Ruth like I was, no way he would argue for anyone deserving of a shot. And Alan, too… although, you talking about them, it sounds like he wasn't a father figure to this Henry.”

“I don’t think Henry’s even aware. Not like he visits much- the town thinks he got away with murder. They’d just as soon lynch him as let him walk freely downtown.”

“If he pushed Matthew, he - he did the right thing, for a good reason. It was that or have someone else die, I'm sure.” Deaver's eyes went slightly hazy with recalled memory. “But of course no one really knows about that, do they? They always thought the pastor was such an upstanding person… no one even questioned what he was like behind closed doors, only Alan.”

“Given Matthew’s line of work, most wouldn’t. Someone in that position you wouldn’t think could be so evil to his own… family.”

Just like they wouldn’t think Dale Lacy did what he did to you.

Dennis kept that much unspoken. Deaver could draw the parallel for himself.

“The new reverend isn’t held in that high esteem, but he’s getting there. Once and a while Em and I stop there on a Sunday to hear him tell it.”

“Almost any reverend is better than Matthew. If you don't mind, I would rather not… go with you, if I'm still around when you do. I know it's not my Matthew’s church, but I'm sure it looks the same. I haven't stepped a foot inside in so long, I would rather not start again with his church.”

“Fair enough. To be honest, the last time we went will probably be the last for a few months. Until we… find our feet, in working out where the baby fits into everything.”

One way or another, it always comes back to that. One big sore subject.

Dennis scoffed softly. “Or maybe I can talk Em into taking an extended trip back home with her folks. Then it would be just you, me, and the bros.”

“Oh, what, and have the voice of reason leave?” Deaver managed to return a small smile to his
face. “I might have left when I was eleven, but I remember Joey just fine. Something tells me it’s best to have Emilia around if he’s coming.”

“You’re not wrong. If anyone has a hope of taming that tornado, it’s her. I learned pretty quick it’s not worth trying. Almost broke a few bones, trying to show why rollerblades are not meant for five-year-olds - especially when Joey’s feet were too small for them.”

“He was always a hell raiser. Did he ever try to climb the fire station, or was that just my Joey?” He chuckled at the memory the words brought. “It's a miracle he's alive in this dimension, isn't it?”

Fire station? Facepalming, Dennis affected a mocking stare of horror from between his fingers. “Don’t give him any ideas, I beg you.”

“I'll try not to, though with him that's not hard. Trevor, though, at least he- isn't the same? He was so little last time I saw him, I don't know if Joey ever got to him.”

“Sort of. The line of work he’s in, you could say Trev likes to live dangerously, too - he and his wife run an anti venom farm out in Nevada.” Dennis paused, letting that information sink in. “Who woulda guessed, right?”

Because there’s no shortage of drunk people poking poisonous critters out west.

“Anti… venom farm?” Deaver’s eyebrows shot up at the idea before settling back down. “Definitely wouldn't have been my first guess, yeah. Although working with animals, I could at least see that coming.”

Dennis grinned. “I made him promise to keep the tarantulas at home, don’t worry. Joey would about have a stroke if he saw one.”

“Aw, not even a little one? Could make a good first pet for the baby… who doesn't have a name, I'm assuming?” Deaver jokingly rolled his eyes at him. “And yet you came up with one for me.”

The grin crumbled. The truth of it was a very poignant smack to the face. Not that Emilia was pressuring him either way, but once they had found out they were having a son, she had effectively left the matter completely in his hands. “I... What do you want me to say? The idea just occurred to me.”

“Don't look upset, you'll come up with something. Though I'm not sure it'll be able to top Nick Cage, huh?”

Much as Dennis appreciated the vote of confidence, he wasn’t so sure he could make lightning strike the same place twice. “Sure, and I name my firstborn after some celebrity’s stage name, my in-laws would disown us faster than you can say ‘cheers’.”

“Yeah, that's probably not the best idea. You'll come up with something, even if it doesn't hit you until you see the baby. Long as they're named, right?”

“You don’t get far in this world without a good name,” Dennis repeated - a saying unintentionally passed on from Paul Zalewski some decades prior.

That afternoon Joey went diving in the canal, taking an unwilling Trev along with him, it had been the big closing note their father ended the debacle on. Joey had never looked so small and intimidated as he had that day. No amount of questioning by police and EMTs on the scene had made him realize the error of his spontaneity.
While Trev sat on the tailgate of the ambulance, shaking under a towel while they fit an oxygen mask over his mouth, Dennis remembered seeing Joey yanked away from the police by a rightfully-livid Paul. What followed, he did his best to not pay an ear to, but the closing verse had always stuck in his head:

“You want to act the fool and sully your name, you do it alone. Don’t endanger those around you. You’d see where it doesn’t get you when all you have is your reputation to go by. Don’t become a menace just because your family’s lifestyle is not exciting enough to suit your own.”

Joey took some of the advice to mind.

From that day on, he didn’t rope either brother into his antics when there was a chance they would get hurt. And Trev never went along unless Dennis signed off the idea to begin with.

“That’s why Henry doesn’t come back to Castle Rock, or why I did, either, for awhile. Best to move on. You don’t have any ideas, though, at all?” Deaver sat up a bit straighter, presumably to listen to what Dennis would say.

If he wasn’t already reading between pages just by looking him dead in the eye.

Dennis winced. “Some. I… you said I’ll know when I see them. I’m gonna lean on that argument for now.” Pause. “Where’d you get ‘Wendell’ from anyway?”

“I… I’m not sure. It just - sounded right, and good with his middle name - Alan. Matthew may’ve forced his name on me, but my son deserves to have a good man's name.”

_Noble sentiment- if only that’s what it took for him to go back._

“You think time… it stood still, over there? The same way it did for Henry while he was locked in the basement?”

“I hope it did, sometimes.” Deaver said softly. “But I don't want to get my hopes up. I mean… who even knows if Marren was pregnant? Best not to - dwell on it.”

What else did you have to live for without that?

Dennis swallowed the urge to ask, scratched at his chin. “Again, fair enough. I don’t mean to dredge it all up again, but… if you’re here for- for now, you ought to- come up with a cover story.”

“For your brothers? Sounds like a good idea, but…” Blinking owlishly, he frowned at the suggestion, glancing down at his emaciated hands. “How will I explain the - state I’m in?”

“I’m sure there’s a name for it, some- genetic low weight disorder, rare, but not unheard of. Em can help you do the research. That’s her job - finding stories. You’ll need one for whomever you might meet, not just Joey and Trev.”

“Sounds good to me,” Deaver nodded along to the explanation. “Although I’m not sure I should interact with other- citizens just yet, Dennis. Who knows how many have family members working at Shawshank? And who knows what they would do if they heard… they messed up?”

“I think I have some ideas, none of them… promising,” Dennis muttered. There was still the untouched wad of green bills in the glovebox, not yet mentioned. “Practically everyone in town knows someone who works there. Those dickheads who tossed you off the bridge, do you know who they were?”
Not like I can go around asking.

Troubled as he abruptly looked, Deaver managed an answer: “The same ones who dragged me out, when Red was using Matthew’s voice to scare me - when Emilia came to visit?”

*Ceil Harper, Earl Johannsen.*

Dennis nodded. “I know who they are. They make Chris Boyd look like a…” He trailed off. There was another awkward reminder best left untouched. “They’re not all that popular in town, either, but so long as you avoid the bars, you should be safe.”

*No pub-crawls for you, mister.*

Deaver scoffed at the words - an almost exact match of his host’s ventings of disbelief. “Trust me, the only times I've ever willingly gone to a bar was with Marren. You don't have to worry about me sneaking out to go drinking.”

“Shake on it?” Unfolding his arms, Dennis held out his right hand, across the coffee table.

*Another once-normal gesture of greeting that got lost in all the hubbub.*

It might have been offered in jest, but it was also riddled with dozens of unspoken messages.

Trust, understanding, confidance.

“Sure.” He took his offered hand without hesitation, taking it in with a firm grip, firmer than what should have been possible with such a bony, brittle hand.

“Good.” Nodding, Dennis took care to squeeze only gently back, and let go first. “Good. Can I get you anything now? We’ll be up in a few more hours, but if there’s something you want…”

At that Deaver seemed to recoil, taking time to pull the blanket back up to his shoulders. “No, I'm good. You have to go to work soon, though? …You should try and sleep at least a bit more. Marren used to get so annoyed with me when I wouldn't get back to bed before work, always wanted me to rest.” He smiled at Dennis then, not bitterly but with a bit of sadness. “Is Emilia the same way, when she's not exhausted herself?”

“She crashes only when she has no choice. Before the baby, she was like a hummingbird - never could sit still more than a few seconds.”

“Your kid will be the same way then, I bet. Bedtime and waking will be a battle and a half with him. But no, I don't need anything else, go back to bed.”

*’Him’? I don’t remember mentioning they were a boy.*

“While I still can, right?” Strange as it felt to bid someone good night at five A.M., Zalewski did so anyway. “Rest up. See you in a few, then.”

He didn’t stop in walking back down the hallway, waiting for the telltale creak of the couch. He only paused before climbing back into bed. Undoing the robe, he stripped the fabric belt from the loops, then spread it over the comforter.

Another layer against the newest chill he felt, snuggling back into the sheets.
Garish

September 20th, 2018

From that point forward, things weren’t just a matter of “do as I’m told, or else”.

Not for me, and not for him.

I know, these entries are getting more and more meta, Em. But you knew, better than me by that point, just what we were dealing with. I knew what I knew, just as you formed your own impression of him.

...Or should I say ‘them’?

——-

The troubled feeling didn’t last long. Two hours of solid sleep more than made up for the six half-decent ones he had racked up. Dennis woke up to an empty bed, glanced over at the clock (7:43 A.M.), then the math added up.

“You’re up early.”

Attention, Captain Obvious on deck.

Or so Joey’s greeting would have gone upon watching his older brother’s sorry self shuffle into the kitchen.

“No more earlier than you were.” Emilia spared him a smiling glance over one shoulder, then nodded toward the coffee pot. The decanter was simmering, still full. “First one’s yours, dear.”

It always is, how you detest the stuff.

He stopped to rub the sleep from his eyes with the heels of his hands. “What’re you doing?”

After the fact, he noticed the ceramic bowl in her hands, plus a wooden mixing spoon. “Getting a head start on my plan. Don’t tell him.”

Dennis scoffed. “Hon, he’s only in the next room. I think the jig is up.”

She practically hissed in rebuttal, but didn’t stop stirring. The batter inside looked appropriately thick, ready for kneading. “Only if you say what I’m doing. Hush.”

“Fine, got it.” It was usually his custom to shower once rolling out of bed. Dennis went for the coffee instead, taking a seat at the table. Emilia may be intent on her newest project (it didn’t appear she had brushed her hair yet), but that didn’t mean she was too preoccupied to talk. “So how much of our heart-to-heart did you hear?”

——-

Dad is different over here, huh, Henry-

Leave him alone.

It hadn’t taken long for The Bad to rise up again after his conversation with Dennis, stirring at the
sense of distress it must have gotten off of Henry.

Talking about his real father, and his wife caused the

(\textit{Man? Personality? Aspect? He wasn't sure what to define Henry as, even with his being the original})

man some amount of discomfort. The kind that The Bad liked to latch onto, to create even more stress and draw him back under its influence.

He couldn't allow that to happen again, though. Just the thoughts of Henry being in control, too scared to speak or move without permission made him feel enraged.

Which was what culminated in the tension-filled talk session between the three of them - him and Henry on one side of the door, The Bad whispering from the other.

(\textit{It went on for hours it felt like, him trying to reassure Henry but every step he took forward just seemed to cause them to take another two back})

He hadn't rested. Because of The Bad he was still awake when Dennis walked by, still embroiled in the half-fight, half-banishment of The Bad, arms caging Henry away from the door in their mind, too aware of the temptation he felt to open it.

\textit{Dad hurt me, Nick, he doesn't care, he helped Lacy hurt me}, Henry wailed, making him grit his teeth outside of the mental battle going on. Even if it was in his head, the voices were loud. \textit{He saw me, and still shut the trunk on me, Nick, why doesn't he care}-

“ -start on my plan. Don't tell him.” He heard Emilia respond to something Dennis must have said. The different conversations were already giving him

(\textit{Them? Could Henry feel the pain?})

a headache, mind racing back and forth between reality and the room in his head it felt like.

Unsure of which to pay more attention to.

“Calm down,” he whispered aloud to Henry, making sure his voice was quiet enough so that he wouldn't be heard by the Zalewskis. “It's just trying to rile you up, and you're letting it.”

\textit{Rile you up? That's not what I'm doing at all, Henry. There's just a lot to think about, huh? Alan, Joey and Trevor, not to mention Marren} -

\textit{You better sto-} Emilia's voice drew him back out again, fast enough he felt some sort of mental whiplash at the change in focus.

“ -say what I'm doing. Hush.”

Hush - that's what he wished The Bad would do.

\textit{And who knows if she was ever actually pregnant?}

Henry let out another anguished wail in the room, making him bite his lip harder. There had to be an end to this, and soon - The Bad was tormenting him too much.

One imaginary hand raised, striking on the frame of the door, the other curled around Henry's shoulders.
Shouted down, the voice fell silent. Henry continued to sob, but slower then, finally winding down to gentle hiccups, from the once-overwhelming panic The Bad caused him.

He sighed after the shaky moment of relative quiet, breath having been held in anticipation of a reply from the entity. When none came he relaxed further into the couch, not realizing how much tension he had been holding in his body during the

( Hours long it seemed)

confrontation. He could still hear Emilia and Dennis in the kitchen, talking quietly between themselves.

If only the talk within his head was proving so genial.

“So how much of our heart-to-heart did you hear?”

-----

“Not a peep.” Emilia finished stirring to her satisfaction. “But I can guess you made some progress, or else you’d stay up talking until one of you agreed to a deal.”

Dennis paused for a sip of his coffee before forcing a sigh, pretending to massage one temple. “No court terms yet, please, Em. It’s too early.”

She nodded, spreading a length of wax paper across a baking tray. “But you did get somewhere, talking to him?”

“I did….”

Question is, which one of… shit, are we really diagnosing him DID from this point onward?

Belatedly, Dennis spared the empty archway a sideways look. He had legitimately forgotten to take a closer look at Deaver while trekking through said space. “Why don’t we bring him in here and talk, the three of us?”

Emilia stopped, a rolled ball of batter poised between the palms of her hands. “But that’d ruin this surprise.”

“Surprises in general aren’t a good idea with him, hon, even if you mean well. And given what we talked about… he needs rest more than he thinks, get his head on straight.”

In more ways than one.

Sighing quietly, Emilia sat the first ball on the tray, reaching into the bowl for more. “I suppose you’re right. His fever might yet prove too stubborn for him to eat, anyway.”

“You think?”

“I’ll take another reading today if he wakes up.” For a moment, almost-comfortable silence prevailed. Then she stopped rolling batter dots to ask, “There are no short term fixes with him, are there?”

Dennis shook his head, rubbing at his eyes again. “If I think of one, you’ll be the first to know.”
There was no short term fix with Henry, that was for certain.

He was the long term fix, if anything. A personality dredged up from the hard edges and spitfire the man used to possess, nothing soft or gentle about him.

_(He wasn't mad about it, wasn't mad that Henry needed someone to protect himself, just tired of the constant nature of it that's how he felt, tired)_

But it would be nice, if there was any way he could leave Henry alone long enough to take a break. A rest of his own, in some ways.

Of course though, that led to other problems. The Zalewskis would undoubtedly notice the change in personality from him to Henry, and they would be able to connect the dots if they hadn't already.

How would they react, to knowing he wasn't actually Henry? That he had been… someone else, this entire time? Well, not the whole time, but a good chunk of it. Would they feel lied to? Betrayed?

_(He banished the thoughts from his - their head immediately because as nice as that break would be it wasn't coming anytime soon and he had just calmed Henry down, he didn't want to deal with it again so soon)_

Dennis mentioning a talk between the three of them… is that what it would be about? About him?

_(And what would they think of that, when he told them the truth, no need to hide anymore?)_

Even though he had been hoping to rest even a tiny bit after the confrontation with The Bad, the questions that plagued his mind kept him wide awake.

Listening to the conversation in the kitchen nearby.

-----

For the next forty minutes, they saw to their morning rituals. Emilia finished her tray of mini biscuits, placing them in the oven, then set to work packing a lunch. Dennis was tempted to linger and see, in advance, what would find its way into the Tupperware.

He stopped short halfway through the living room, sparing a look at their guest.

Still sequestered under the blanket, Deaver had changed position. Instead of facing out, the man had turned over, face hidden against the cushions.

Tempting as it was to step over and check on him, Dennis went for the shower first.

He knew a “do not disturb” sign when he saw one.

Putting it out of his mind for the time being, he gathered his day clothes and showered without any interruptions.

By the time he stepped back into the living room, dressed and toweling his hair dry, Emilia was seated on the other couch. Rather than stretched out with a book, she was sitting on the edge, as though waiting.

Dennis couldn’t help a silent look of Really?
She returned it with an arched eyebrow. *Will it hurt to try?*

Quashing a need to sigh, he stepped closer. “Nick, you awake?”

He turned over easily, face flushed and hair tousled from being buried in the cushions of the couch. His gaze flickered from him to Emilia with some apprehension before responding. “Yes… what’s going on?”

“Oh, sorry if we woke you,” Emilia started, leaning forward as much as she was able, hands folded together. “Are you feeling all right enough to talk? Just for a minute?”

She may not peg the look on Deaver’s face as one of outright nervousness, or the timid words as more than an abrupt bout of bashfulness.

Dennis did. When the frail man’s eyes shifted back to him, he shrugged. *Your call - yes or no.*

The division was clear: only Henry was so laconic and hesitant.

Quite unlike his alter ego.

“Y-yes. I’m fine with that, we can talk,” Henry stuttered out, hands twisting together and then apart, nervously. It wasn’t as though he could fully hide from their inquiries beneath the blanket.

Sighing softly, Dennis willed his voice to be a few degrees more gentle. “You sure? We’re not gonna rile anyone up?” Out of the corner of his eye he saw Emilia shoot a noted glance. The wordage was very much deliberate: speaking to Deaver as though he were more than one person. And not just because of the malevolent spirit fused with every other molecule of his being. “Last thing I want is you getting hurt again because I pried too far, pal.”

“No, no, you… you won’t, I promise.” He fell silent for a moment, seeming to be listening to something (completely unheard to anyone else) before nodding. “You can't hurt me, don't worry.”

Can't, instead of won't. As if something, *someone* wouldn't allow Henry to be hurt. Three guesses as to who that could be.

“Good. Because you probably already figured this out, but I can’t stay - again - today, and not for a few more, either. I just… wanted you to know. Em’s gonna be here to take care of you. I know, the no-talking clause means you two probably won’t be doing much-conversing, but so long as that’s the arrangement, I wanted to ask: you’re not just… you anymore, right? There’s someone besides Red in the picture now?”

“I- ” Deaver took a short breath, seeming to be almost on the brink of panic before calm washed over his face. “No, you’re- right, and you deserve to know. It's not just me and Red anymore. You- you named him, remember? Nick? He… protects me.”

*There it is - he's officially referring to part of himself as though it is someone else.*

Anxiety piqued, Dennis couldn’t help biting his lip. “He… and that’s who I spoke to, earlier? Not… you?”

“You speak to him a lot,” Henry admitted, giving a tiny shrug, probably trying to make this revelation not seem so daunting. If he was calm about it, they could be, too. “I haven’t… spoken very much, to anyone really. He's better with reassurance, making sure we'll be okay. But before, today on the couch - that was him, yes.”
“Whereas… you’re the one who isn’t allowed to speak, except to me?”

Henry hesitated, before cautiously nodding after a moment. “I think so, at least. Nick says it’s better to be safe, and talk only to you… better to not risk it.”

_Or so either of them think. He - Nick - also said Red isn’t as all-powerful as it professes to be. Just that it has Henry under its thumb, and can apparently keep the three of them from certain death. But does even that have its limits?_

Emilia must have already felt left out, watching him ponder and grimace. She didn’t appear upset or scared, exactly, but her expression wasn’t entirely untroubled. “So… that means no talking to me, whatsoever.”

Dennis almost went for reassurance before realizing she wasn’t asking. “You’re still okay with that, Em?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She shrugged. “At least it’s no big unexplainable mystery in a regard. This… condition has a name.”

_and naming things makes them inherently easier to understand._

“It does.” Dennis scratched his chin again. “You’re aware of that, Henry? What all of this sounds like to us?”

_It’s not the C word, don’t use the C word. Weren’t you a doctor at one time? You have to at least know of the disorder._

Henry’s confidence seemed to wither like a grass blade held to a fire. “Not good, I'm sure… but he helps, I promise. I'm not… crazy, I promise.”

“Neither of us are saying that, Henry,” Emilia cut in. “You’re just a little… dissociative.”

“Translation: you’re not you anymore,” Dennis deadpanned, but not harshly. It was what it was. “Not just you, and that may sound crazy to normal folk, but can it really be crazier than what Warden Lacy put you through?”

Deaver paled at the mention of Lacy, a slight tremor settling into his hands before they suddenly went still. “That's true. It's certainly less crazy than what he- he did. We- we work together, to help each other, if that makes sense? Nick more so, for certain.”

“I’m sure he hates my guts, too, forcing the job on him like I did,” Dennis blurted out, wishing a second later he could recapture the words. “Don’t feel too responsible, Henry. You’re just trying to keep your sanity together.”

_With string and popsicle sticks to bridge the gap between the two halves._

“I - he doesn't hate you, he likes you and Emilia. He's just tired, of having to protect me all that time.” Henry winced, focus drawing inwards and then relaxing again. “But he says it’s okay. He says it helps, being here now instead of Shawshank.”

_Not to mention not being crammed into that sorry excuse for a clown suit._

Looking again at the inflamed furrows, Dennis refrained again from a mention of it. He nodded, hoping it looked encouraging. “It can only get better, too. Forget for a minute all the change coming up. Where you are now is a hell of an improvement from two weeks ago.”
“Thank you, for that. And… and say thank you, to Emilia, too? I don't want to test anything but… we're both grateful, for both of you. Nick's happy he can take a break now, for a minute.”

The small smile Emilia gave said he needn’t relay the message. “Well, he can get used to it, at least for today. We won’t press the matter, but if you're feeling up to it… you might wanna let her draw you a bath at some point.”

“That…” Henry trailed off for a moment, head cocked to the side as if, once again, he were listening to someone else - which he undoubtedly was. “That sounds fine. Nick trusts Emilia, and says - we need a bath, desperately. His words, not mine.”

“He’s saying what we’re all thinking, in other words.” Emilia nodded, smiling wider. “But if worse comes to worst, I have plenty of wax melts to pick from.”

Grimacing again, Dennis pretended to wave a hand before his nose. “One that’s less fruity next time, please?”

“It’s not that bad, Den.”

“It is if Henry says it is,” Zalewski declared, with enough mocking grandeur even Joey could applaud - some lightheartedness in parting. “What do you think, Deaver?”

“Oh, do I count as two votes now?” he teased back, a brightness to his tone that would have seemed impossible even a week ago. “I would much prefer a bath to the wax melts, please. Dealing with the smell of sweat and that, at the same time? No, thanks.”

“Now to mention the- ow, okay, okay, I get it.” Smirking, Dennis sidestepped out of swatting range. Emilia’s nun-like glare was both amused and dismayed. “Not mentioning it.”

_Not like he won’t smell the oven’s contents soon enough._

She leveled an accusing finger at Deaver to boot. “Three to one, then, you’re taking that bath this afternoon. Understood?”

He nodded, a pretend frightened expression on his face before it melted into a grin at her and Dennis, perhaps the first one from Henry they had seen.

_Thank the Lord. No offense, man, but some of the inmates I work with smell better._

“Oh, and don’t you look so smug, Officer. You’re not the one who gets to play lifeguard.”

Both the grin and the smirk simultaneously dropped.

Dennis blinked. “Excuse me?”

A light rain had begun by the time Dennis found himself shooed out the door. He stood on the porch staring at the closed front door, thermos and lunch bag in hand, for perhaps thirty seconds. All the time he had spent stalling, saying he was drying off, ruined. Yes, he could always crank the hatchback’s heater up to full blast on the way, but…

_Lifeguard?

_Bad mental images, ahoy._
The wax warmer was off. The tub was a bit too small to fit comfortably in, so he kept his knees up, arms wrapped around them in an awkward half-sit, half lean-back. At a little over half filled, there was space enough to bathe without sloshing water on the floor.

**Well, at least we're getting clean. Relax a bit, Henry, there's a screen. It's fine. You won't be flashing Emilia.**

He huffed at the words, but complied, letting himself lean back to the edge of the tub fully, eyes trained on the shadow he could see on the other side of the screen.

***(It reminded him of Matthew for a moment, sitting across from him in a confessional, stumbling over something he had supposedly done)***

Don't think about that. Just relax, okay? I'm serious - you're safe now. They know, and they're okay with us. Nick chided him in their shared headspace, but not without the gentle nature he adopted for him.

That had probably been the biggest surprise, one Nick pretended hadn't been so surprising, but let out his own sigh of relief just the same - the Zalewskis were perfectly fine with both him and Nick being… alive?

But it was not unwelcome. Being accepted the way they had, it lifted some of the stress Nick had been under recently, trying to keep him protected from any situation that could hurt them.

**Could I... say something, Henry? To Emilia?**

He nodded, causing the water to splash up, gentle waves swirling in the tub. How could he refuse that of Nick, after all he'd done for him?

His mouth opened, hesitant at first. Nick didn't take control the violent way that 'Red' did, instead making sure he was okay with it every step of the way, taking baby steps before he did what he wanted.

“Eh- Emilia?” his voice came out wavering, but still noticeably stronger than when he spoke before. “Thank you for... for understanding. ...This is Nick, by the way.”

**Just in case she can't already tell?**

Right, Henry.

He glanced over as the shadow behind the screen shifted. He could tell by the change of silhouette, she was looking their way.

“I was wondering when I’d hear from you. You’re welcome. Everything okay over there?”

“Everything is fine, thank you. Henry is okay... right, Henry?” He nodded at the words coming out of his own mouth, something that had felt odd before, but after having so many conversations with Nick, it was natural - their idea of natural. “Yes, he's okay.”

It was mostly true. The water was warm enough to enjoy, keep the feverish shivers at bay. Even if his face stung at the feel of steam, cleansing what he could of it felt leagues better, as did scrubbing the matted tangles from his unkempt hair.
He only silently dreaded the tortuous brushing that would follow.

“Good. Did you find a soap you like? I’m sorry there isn’t much selection. Dennis meant to stop by a Walmart, but they’re so far out of the way…”

She sounded contrite enough, he could imagine the apologetic look on her face.

The steel-barred accessory shelf hanging off the tub’s open side only had four bottles of body wash to choose from.

“Oh, we… we’ve just been relaxing, but I’m sure it’s fine. Don’t worry about it, we’ll use whatever you have.” His hand reached out, then stopped for a second, as if asking for permission. He nodded again, and his hand went back out, grabbing at the first body wash on the rack.

It was a generic store brand of men's body wash - Dennis's then.

Normal to them, and yet not.

“You're… from England, right? How’d you end up in Maine?” Nick asked as he opened the bottle, squeezing some of it onto his hand. “No offense to Castle Rock, but… I’m assuming that wasn't the goal, at first.”

He found the washrag draped over a bar bolted to the wall beside his shoulder. “You’d be right. I guess I was looking to get lost and didn’t even know it. It was only supposed to be a three hour tour.” Pause. “Gilligan’s Island, y’know?”

He didn’t, exactly. Television was another privilege he had gone years without.

“What made you stay? ...Was it Dennis?” He paused for only a moment before continuing his stream of thought. Of course that was why she stayed. “How’d you two meet, then?”

Emilia seemed to dwell for only a minute before carrying on with a shrug: “Really just happenstance. Like something out of the 40s, he looked like the most long faced fellow at the bar that night, like he was about to ship out and didn’t expect to come back. He wasn’t talking to anyone, no phone in hand or anything. I thought, ‘Small town like this, they all must know each other, and he’s drinking alone. Wonder why that is.’ I expected him to pretend he didn’t hear me, pull out the mobile like someone just texted him.”

“But he didn't. That's not Dennis's style, is it?” He began to wash himself, head cocked to continue listening to the story. “What happened, then?”

“I asked him ‘Rough day?’ and he just about choked on his beer.” This was said with the kind of fond relish only the happy-to-have-it-happen-to could manage. Emilia must have set the book down. Clearly she was more in favor of telling a story versus reading one. “Maybe I exaggerate, but by the time he was done coughing his face was as red as a beet.”

He let out a laugh at the words, taking a pause from washing to listen more intently. “What happened after that? Did he chat you up the rest of the night?”

“Didn't seem to want to at first, as though he thought I had somewhere to be. It was sort of true, the bus was taking off at nine the next day. There was engine trouble, everyone thought we wouldn’t get on the move until after lunch. I didn’t feel all too tired, and the Mellow Tiger had an out-of-towner’s special I thought to try. When all was said and done, I never ordered it - we were too busy gabbing.”
“That's very sweet,” he responded, because it was very true. Hearing about how Dennis had been before Emilia made it that much sweeter to see how happy he was nowadays, with her. “You two are sweet together. You'll be great parents to your little boy.”

“Boy?” Emilia repeated, not unkindly, but clearly out of bafflement. She didn’t sound shocked to discover the gender - he knew she already knew. “Did he- tell you what we were having?”

Oh. Oh, Nick - why did you say that? Henry cried out, his own panic starting to flow into their mind before it was forced out by a rush of calm. Artificial calm - he could tell the difference by now from Nick, when he was actually calm and when it was a front to keep him from plunging headlong into terror.

“I didn't do it on purpose, stop - be calm, Henry.” Nick whispered his plea, one hand reaching out to grip the tub. Only once the rush of nerves was tamped back under did he raise his voice again. “He- no, Dennis didn't tell us, Emilia. We just… know. It's something that we can do - we know little things like that, without being told.”

Far from sound terrified or put off by the notion, his current caretaker’s question sounded just like that: a question. No inferences or mocking attached.

“How? You think, and you… know things?”

“Sometimes. It's… someone's eyes, or face usually… it lets us see or hear what you're thinking.”

He sighed, taking another moment to calm them both down. “Or sometimes we can just listen after the fact. Like when Dennis first found us - he was thinking about Joey.”

“Joey… about some undoubtedly-foolish venture such a discovery harkened to, right? I’ve heard many of them.”

Only a bookworm would use such words. Most would abbreviate it as “that time J. Zalewski did something dumb.” …Which time was that?

“Sticking his head down a burrow. Must've reminded Dennis - the way he couldn't see anything, the foolishness of it. We don't - mean to look, really. It's like a radio, but we don't know what turns it on or off. It just… happens.”

“I… see.” He heard a light pattering sound - fingertips drumming on a book cover. “You wash behind your ears yet?”

“No,” he muttered, reaching up to do so. It would be best to spend their time in the bath wisely, instead of just talking to Emilia. “Doing it right now.”

“Good.” Glancing sidelong at the screen, he saw the shadow stir again, but Emilia set her book back down within a minute. She sat back in her chair, muttering under her breath, but it was audible against the gentle splashing of water. “Oh, stop. I don’t need to hear it from you, too.” A quiet sigh later, she explained, with an almost-tired exasperation, “One more kick to the pancreas and I swear, he’s no longer welcome.”

“At least you don't have much longer?” he said, almost trying to reassure her. It had been one of the concerns he had for Marren, too - such a light sleeper, a baby kicking inside her would surely lead to restless nights, especially in the last trimester. “Only three, four weeks now?”

“Two,” Emilia clarified. She held one hand to her forehead, head tilted back. She may not typically admit to the strain, but it was there nevertheless. “Or more if he doesn’t feel like sticking to the schedule. Dennis says most of his immediate family were all born late.”
“I would expect him to be late, then. And Joey and Trevor are coming, to help out and see their nephew? Having Joey back in Castle Rock… that's going to be - intense.”

“The plan is they’ll be here at least three weeks. Joey has the funds to stay longer, if anything. But Trevor has his reptile refuge and a wife of his own.” Pausing to consider the implications Emilia gave a soft laugh. “I don’t know if modern day Castle Rock can handle Joey, you’re right. He’s the excitement that cab driver wishes would find this place.”

*(Her name is Diane but she calls herself Jackie after her uncle, the one who tried to kill his wife and kid didn't he? That's awful, happened at some fancy hotel in the winter right -)*

He blinked, cutting off the new influx of consciousness floating into his head. From Emilia, was it?

“Jackie Torrance?” he asked, pausing from washing himself again. “The cab driver- that's her name, right? Or well, Jackie isn't her real name but… you know what I mean.”

*Just as Henry isn’t… ah, no bother. She gets it.*

The chair creaked as Emilia gave a start. “How did you… you know about her, just from that mention?”

“I didn't. But you were thinking about her name, and about her uncle who tried to - kill his family? Dark stuff.” His hands resumed scrubbing the soap onto his skin. “Radio - doesn't turn off, until it does.”

“Well… I suppose it’s more convincing than someone who claims to hear messages transmitted via the fillings in their teeth. Have you always… heard things like this?”

“I have, but I haven't been around as long as Henry. Not him though. It was when he came over from his time, that it started. Funny though, Matthew spent so much time trying to get him to hear the voice of God… and now we can hear thoughts.”

“Almost as if you were…” Emilia failed to complete that thought. The shadow shook its head. “But to have to hear all- *that* constantly, on and off, it has to be… tiresome. No wonder you’ve been sleeping so hard.”

“Haven't slept well in awhile, either. A lot of noise up there. It's nice to feel- safe enough to sleep hard.” A moment of relative silence passed before Nick spoke up again. “Sorry, though. We don't mean to intrude on your thoughts.”

“No, it’s not that. If you can’t help it, you can’t help it. Just… is there a way to filter any of it, to make it easier on you? You say it’s like a radio. Can you just… stay tuned to a certain frequency?”

“...Probably. We’ve never actually tried to keep listening. As soon as it starts, we usually try to cut it off, so we don't have to hear. There was only one time where it felt like we couldn't, but we had a concussion then. Why?”

To that even The Bad had a derivative answer: *Because if the fix involves repeated blunt force trauma- huh, you can just count us out, missy. Skull fractures have enough wind whistling through them already.*

He let out a whistle of air at the words, but no response. It was right, for once. No need to fight or engage with it over that - him and Henry would rather continue to work on tuning out on their own than go through another incident like the beating from Reeves.
Because one (or two) needs to have goals, right?

Thinking on his conundrum, Emilia seemed to arrive at an answer. “I know who you ought to talk to. She helped us find this place. Maybe she can help find a quiet spot for you, too?”

He waited a moment, to see if the radio would blare her thought again, but it didn't - not even a crackle of static.

“And who is that? Anyone Henry might know, from before?”

Reminded of the difference, Emilia seemed to backpedal. “Oh… on second thought, maybe not, I… she’s our realtor, Nick, not… not anyone he knows, knows.”

The Bad sneered accordingly. Hmph. Too late, love. Like he didn’t know Dennis from before? What do you say, Henry? This ringing any bells yet?

Don’t respond to that-

No, Henry cut in, ignoring his warning. He let out a hiss at the response, part in frustration and part in exhaustion. No, I… I didn’t know anyone who became a realtor. But I want to know. Ask her, Nick, please?

…Fine. But don’t respond to it any more.

“What's her name, at least, though? It might… ring a bell or two for him.”

Emilia hesitated one final time before letting the cat out of the bag: “Molly Strand?”

Yeah. That Molly Strand- the same one you accused her husband of shooting, remember, Nicky boy?

A new wave of emotions crashed into him - panic and sadness and confusion, all coming from Henry. Swamped, he lost control for a moment, swept up in the surprise, arms and hands becoming loose and splashing into the water as he let out a whimper.

No no no, you're going to stay calm, Henry, stay calm - I'm going to take control back, right? Keep us both safe?

(He felt a smidge of resentment toward everyone then and there - Emilia, The Bad, Henry and himself, upset that he would - once again - be left defending Henry, but it wasn't anyone except The Bad's fault and his own for agreeing to ask so he forced the feelings away)

He regained control quickly, Henry being more than happy to give it up without further words, just breaths of panic as he tried to soothe the man back into the peace they had both been feeling.

“S-sorry,” he called out breathlessly. “Henry… he knew her very well. Something… bad happened to her, right before he came over here.”

“Bloody hell, I shouldn’t’ve said that.” The verbal kick Emilia leveled at herself was gratifying to hear - for all her positive qualities, she wasn’t picture perfect, just human, capable of saying the wrong thing as much as any of them. “I’m sorry, Nick. I knew it was a sore subject, but I didn’t… I didn’t think before I spoke.”

“No, it's fine. He'll be okay, just needs to calm down for a moment. She's a realtor, though, over here? That's, uh, interesting.” He closed his eyes after a moment, a wave of dizziness overtaking
him - again from Henry.

_Calm down, Henry, I'm not going to let anything bad happen again. We're safe, and this Molly is safe. We're good, just- just calm down, deep breaths and all that._

Emilia didn’t sound as though she wanted to talk realty options all of a sudden, either. “Are- are you okay? You’re not… feeling lightheaded or anything?”

“Just a bit, and some dizziness,” he admitted, eyes still closed and head leaned up. “But it'll pass, don't worry. Better I feel it than Henry.”

*Always gotta play the tough guy, don’t you, N?*

The ceramic of the bathtub gave a hollow *thunk* as he slumped down, knocking the back of his head against the edge.

There was a muffled, bruising pain, but The Bad hissed and went quiet, scurrying back down under its rock.

_Shut - UP._

The sloshing of water onto the floor didn’t go unnoticed. Next he glanced over, Emilia was peering out from behind the screen. “You… sure you’re okay?”

“Yes.” He bit his lip to stop a pained whimper from passing through. Any pain to their head seemed magnified after the concussion, but there was no reason to worry Emilia. Wasn’t it just his luck a hit to the head always guaranteed a few seconds of mental peace? His very existence was intended to help bear the hurt. “Just- a lot going on right now up there. Sometimes it's hard to try to stay in both- conversations.”

She looked at him a moment longer, holding the edge of the privacy screen. The quip about her serving as lifeguard suddenly felt very unnecessary and in poor taste. Not like he wouldn’t survive shampoo in the eyes (damn if it didn’t sting something fierce), and the tub wasn’t spacious enough to accidentally drown in (not for someone of his stature).

He had been through worse.

A moment later Emilia blinked and swallowed. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to- to stare, you’re just…”

The Bad stayed under its rock, but didn’t let that stop it from hissing: *Nothing but bones. Bruises and cuts to spare. And a face like chopped liver. Dirty clothes sitting outside in a garbage bag that might as well be stamped “biohazard”. Go ahead and say it. Shouldn’t be washing up now unless you count on hopping in a casket immediately after._

_Shut up._

“What?” Tiredly, he was sorry enough to have to prompt Emilia to finish her thought. But at least it made them even.

A flush crept over her face. “It just didn’t sink in until now. How are you still… alive?”

“I don't know,” he admitted, turning his head more up to look her directly in the eyes. “I don't think we should be. But we are, or even- undead.”

*The closest not-living definition, anyway.*
Emilia bit her lip, eyes darting aside in thought. “I need to do more research. There must be some explanation. I mean, not that I don’t think you’re right about everything you claim. It can’t be the first instance, not with this town’s pedigree.”

She says that now...

“Researching this town, I'm sure you'll find a lot of strange occurrences. We certainly aren't the first - although we may be the most noticeable.”

In a crowd, yeah. And make her swear now, no exclusive-access interviews for Local Color.

Even in hiding, that incipient little snake’s tongue kept flickering away.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Emilia declared, abruptly and with such conviction he couldn’t help a startled blink. “You’re not going to become this place’s next laughingstock, Nick. You don’t deserve that.”

That would be very nice - I had enough of that as a kid.

“Oh - th-thank you,” he stuttered out, caught off guard by the words. “Henry… he really appreciates that. He was the odd one out as a child, so he - yes, he really appreciates that.”

She smiled, thinly, but the curve was there. “That makes three of us.”

There was a moment of profound silence as neither of them spoke. Nick lifted his head up until he was back into a more comfortable position, head resting gently on the edge of the tub.

It wasn’t a pillow, but still better than a metal floor.

“So, when does Dennis come back today? Still late?”

Her once-severe gaze gentled, like the passing of an isolated storm cloud. “He won’t be in before eleven, at the soonest. But I don’t have any shopping lists he needs to see to tonight. Might make it before midnight.” Pause. “He thinks they assume you’re dead, just that the body hasn’t been found. There’s one advantage you can count on, for a few days, anyway.”

“That would make sense. No way we should have survived that fall.” He shrugged, the water level rising and then falling. “Me and Dennis talked about it, too - he said if I avoid the bar I should be okay, which isn't hard to follow. But after awhile… I don't want to get you guys in trouble, from Shawshank or anything.”

Emilia’s smile returned. “You know the night after we met, Dennis said the same thing?”

“He did?”

“The day after, I overslept, and there must have been a mistake on the passengers roster, because the bus left without me. I had… been wishing out loud, I guess, asking if I could meet him at the bar the following night. And I thought ‘Well, this is fair play for getting his hopes up.’

“When he turned up an hour later than we agreed on, I wasn’t in any position to be precious. We went in and talked, but I didn’t mention being stranded until closing. My motel room was only covered for an overnight stay. I was scared out of my wits, thinking he would just leave me to find somewhere else to crash for the night. If anything he was more concerned about the trouble I’d get into for not going home with the tour, or having to call my parents to wire money, taking a chance on a stranger like him. I could’ve had the worst luck, had he not turned out to be so charitable.” She
shrugged. “Instead, here we are. I know something about what it is to be at someone else’s mercy.”

*Explains a lot. ...But there’s more, isn’t there?*

Yes, definitely. And he had already shared so much of himself with both Zalewskis, Emilia was the one he knew less of. That story explained the origins of her and Dennis’ relationship, but before that, there was more - what events and upbringing molded her into being so understanding and compassionate (and naïve), that she could look at a trainwreck like Henry Deaver and see something salvageable? Redeemable?

He turned to look right up at her face, to smile right along, but it faded out in the same moment.

Another face - another *vision* setting into place over her features, another woman’s face, like a mask, taking shape -

( *They hadn't been on the best of terms but that didn't mean she would leave his side, breath and hands both shaking as she sat with her back straight beside the hospital bed, looking at his neck, his mangled neck and his dark apologetic eyes, because a prisoner had done that to him, with their teeth it seemed like, someone biting into her husband's throat like some sort of animal, who would do such a thing* )

“-alerie? Valerie?” He hadn't realized he had been calling out the woman's name - Chris Boyd's once-estranged wife, that's who she was, the last frantic thought to cross the guard’s mind before the blood loss made him faint, the first face he had seen waking up after surgery - a reflection of a story of a memory - before he heard it himself, quickly shutting himself up with a weak gasp of air.

*Almost forgot about that, didn't you two?*

Emilia must have read the same meaning between the lines.

Next he dared to glance at her, there were tears gathering in her eyes.

Question was, who were they for?
Trespass

September 20th, 2018 (con’t)

And that, folks, is why you should answer when someone calls when you don’t expect.

Because then you can helpfully/hopefully(?) avert any misunderstandings that might ensue.

——-

Nick didn't flee the same way he did. There was no hysterical crying or mind boggling panic, just a quiet sort of shame that sent him slinking away, back pressed up against the door, a silent protector in his own exile.

Which was fine with Henry. Nick spent so long trying to defend him, answer questions for him, bear the brunt of their illness and injury, do almost everything for him - he could hold himself together long enough to nod and smile at Emilia, be as polite as possible.

( He would be lying if seeing the tears in her eyes hadn't forced a few of his own up, a keen on his lips as Nick tried to shield him from the despondent image of Valerie, trying to keep him safe to the end)

Which was how, after a quiet end to the bath, and a rather snag-filled hair brushing session,

( With new, incredibly soft clothing that he found himself touching in some sort of wonder, fingers rubbing over the soft inside of the cotton sweater he was wearing)

he found himself sat down at the kitchen table, hands in his lap, with a small, almost bite-sized biscuit in front of him. It looked almost laughably puny compared to the circumference of the plate.

Well, this certainly wasn't Wonder Bread.

Just try it, Henry, Nick said, the first words he had really spoken since spontaneously uttering Valerie's name, about an hour ago, before bowing out. It's sort of like bread, yeah?

It's- it’s not bread, though... I - I'm not sure.

He shifted in the seat, eyes catching those of Emilia, who sat across from him with a worn-looking book in front of her. She hadn't opened it just yet. Instead she waited, a hopeful look on her face, as his gaze kept flickering between her and the biscuit.

Undoubtedly she wanted to hear his review on it.

Without words, that is.

C'mon, Henry... just one bite. A small bite, and I bet you'll like it.

He bit the inside of one cheek (still tasting the residue of toothpaste; now there was an escapade worthy of television, or so Emilia later lamented, having supervised his attempt to brush), but raised a hand, placing it on the plate next to the biscuit. It couldn't be… awful, could it? Not as an insult to Emilia's baking prowess, but after so long of just eating bread, it was a big step forward to eat anything else.
Anything else truly normal, that is.

She wasn’t trying to pressure him. If anything, this was her idea of an apology - for asking too much, for the arduous hair-brushing. As many non-verbal messages as she could manage, she was trying to abide by the no-talking rule he was so bound by.

He couldn’t fault her for trying.

Evidently looking to break the tension, knowing there was no end to the perpetual staring contest (a rigged competition at best; the biscuit had no eyes), Emilia attempted a joke:

“It’s not Pillsbury, but my next best attempt at it. They’re supposed to be that small. Not a crumpet, but… not a cracker, either.”

He smiled at her, before returning his attention to the biscuit, picking it up after a moment of hesitation.

*Henry, please, just try it,* Nick sighed, sounding half affectionate and half exasperated. *It won't kill you.*

(No. Not after everything else had tried so hard - his John Doe death certificate would not read “death by baked good”.)

*Okay, okay, I will just - give me a moment.*

He picked it up, letting himself stall for another moment by turning it over, staring at the bottom of it.

*Just a bite, c'mon.*

Without responding he took the plunge, raising the treat to his mouth and taking a small bite, chewed once, then froze, letting the taste sink in.

It was - good, actually. Better than stale Wonder Bread, that was for sure.

Without chewing, poised with the food still lifted to his mouth, he glanced over to check Emilia’s reaction.

“See?” Elbows on the table, chin in her palms, she was smirking at him. “Not so bad, is it?”

He shook his head no, taking another bite without finishing chewing his first. After not eating for so long,

( *When was the last time he actually ate, without anyone else puppeting his teeth and throat? He hadn't been force fed during his fevered rest, he was sure, and by the way his stomach was starting to growl for more of the biscuit, more food)*

it was hard for him to not wolf it down in one piece. But who knew how many, *if* any more Emilia had made? Best to savor the one whilst it was in front of him.

Which was easier said than done, of course.

It didn't take him long to get through the biscuit, though, forcing himself to not inhale it in front of her, but only just barely.

And to not immediately scour the plate for crumbs.
The ravenous excitement must have shown on his face. Emilia laughed at the sight. “That’s why I made the whole batch.” Across from her book sat another plate, piled with a small hill of biscuits - not the aforementioned whole batch, but a fourth of them. “You want another, then?”

He nodded eagerly, any hesitation or shyness leaving his system. How could he be, when there was more food to eat - food that wasn't stale bread, food that tasted so good? He could get over almost any amount of anxiety for that.

*Good job,* Nick said, sounding almost proud of him. *Told you it wouldn't kill you.*

*Yes, yes, you were right - let's eat more now.*

Always mindful of reality, Emilia lifted the loaded plate over, sliding three new morsels onto his, before cautioning: “Not all at once. Finish chewing one before another, okay?”

He nodded again, already having picked one up and shoved it in his mouth. He did follow her instruction, though, chewing the first biscuit and swallowing it before making for the second one.

*Slow down just a bit, okay? I know we’re hungry, but I at least would find it embarrassing if we choked.*

*Okay,* he sighed, biting only half of the next biscuit, trying to chew more carefully. *That would be... slightly mortifying.*

And not even that funny, besides.

Not to be left out, Emilia took one for herself, using her fingertips to pry it apart, studying it before popping it in her mouth. The center looked as soft and fluffy as it tasted. “No eggshells, brilliant. Last time I tried making these Dennis swore he could still taste the ground-up shell.”

*Is she really trying to bore you two into your next death already?*

He bit down hard, almost as a reflex and straight onto his tongue, letting out a groan when he did so. The Bad had to come in at the worst possible times, didn't it? It couldn’t even allow him to have a nice meal, the first real food he had enjoyed since being released from Shawshank.

The first real food he had enjoyed on this side of things, period.

But some of the wording was... odd, to say the least. Nick caught onto it, too, judging from his following question.

…”Next death’? What’re you getting at?

*Just what it sounds like, you dimwits. ‘Undead’? You don’t really think that’s the word for it?*

“Henry?” Emilia’s voice broke in, ever concerned at the sudden deviation in his behavior. “You all right?”

He nodded, slowly chewing and swallowing the rest of the biscuit in his mouth.

Just what The Bad meant though... that's what he wanted to know. Was it a fear tactic, something to keep both him and Nick in line, lest the entity stopped, what, keeping them alive?

Or was it being truthful?

*But - are you saying we're... dead, already?* Nick sounded just as baffled as he was, even breaking
his own rule of engaging The Bad. *How is that even possible?*

_Hmph. How, who really knows? But why do you think this world’s Henry Deaver was ever adopted? …Maybe Matthew knew, knew the truth from before the start, and-

“Henry.”

He almost jolted away, straight out of the chair, at the feeling of a hand touching the back of his.

Emilia frowned at watching him flinch, but the concern hadn’t gone from her eyes. “Is- is Red talking again?”

He nodded, almost numbly, the words from The Bad on repeat in his mind. It made a sick sort of sense, didn't it? His own Matthew had a similar idea on that last day, didn't he,

( _Because he had been caught between him and Alan, hands raised and back turned to his real father, trying to get out of the line of fire, knowing there was a chance that anything, anything could happen_)

didn't he seem to get more and more violent and bitter over the years as his suspicions grew?

Who was to say Matthew didn't kill him, in this dimension, because the pastor knew since before he was born? Deaver knew his last name should have been Pangborn?

_You think I’m lyin’ about this one? Either of you?_

_No, he thought softly. It's not a lie, Nick. Matthew… he probably did. He was going to kill Mom, he would have killed me next, right?

_Don't listen to it, Henry, Nick pleaded, ignoring the question and the subject entirely. Defaulting to his/their rescue, once again. It's just trying to rile you up, again, whether it's the truth or not. What matters is that you're alive, right? And you had your mom and dad?_

_A skin-tight set of bones - you call that ‘alive’, Nicholas?_

_Shut up, he snarled, one fist raised to the door, pounding back at the entity behind it. We're alive, and we're doing well. You're just bringing up Matthew and Alan to upset him._

_Well, what else do I do for fun around here?_

_Looking on, Emilia cut back in before either of them fathomed a retort: “Henry, Nick - the more you listen to it, the more it will just keep talking.”_

_He started out of the conversation at her voice, eyes swinging off of the plate to her face. His mouth opened, but no words came out. She was right, of course. Nick had said almost the same thing himself before._

_Don’t engage it, don’t get upset, it's just trying to rile you up…_

_And it worked, well. Especially the talk of Matthew and Alan, almost making his heart race at the mention of their names, a rocky ride over a bad road. How could it not hurt, when his father was the one to shut the trunk on him? Made sure Lacy got away with it?_

_He didn't know, Henry._

_I know he didn't, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt._
After a moment he nodded to her instead of speaking, shoulders coming up to shrug and then back down.

Again, the hurt must have shown on his face. He couldn’t muster the energy to keep it blank. He could only take solace in that fact he was in the company of someone who wouldn’t take advantage of his vulnerability.

He had been in worse places, certainly.

The table wasn’t so wide across Emilia couldn’t reach his hand. This time he didn’t balk or shrink away from her touch, patting the back of his hand with hers.

Her fingers were as soft as the sweater on his back.

“You don’t have to listen to it, Henry. Maybe you thought you had to all along, being where you were, there was no other choice. But out here, it’s just one more noise among many. There’re better things to hear, right?”

How did she always seem to know just the right thing to say, with just the right amount of encouragement and sympathy in her voice? Because she was right, again - who would he rather listen to: The Bad, or Nick and the Zalewskis?

He nodded again, this time much more confident. Nick had shut The Bad up on numerous occasions for him - there were certainly ways to make the noise stop, or ignore it.

Emilia smiled and nodded back. “Nick says it’s like listening to a radio - radios can be good or bad. You can just let them be background noise, or jam a pair of headphones over your ears. Either way, it’s listener’s choice.” She plucked another biscuit to set on his plate. “And if Red doesn’t want to listen to us jabber, it can do the same.”

He picked the biscuit up before looking at her, trying to convey his appreciation for her through his eyes alone. He didn’t want to hand control over to Nick just yet - not for fear that he wouldn't get it back, but out of the want to let his protector rest. He could manage to communicate with Emilia for a bit, even if it was non-verbally.

She seemed to appreciate the look for what it was - mute acceptance was still acceptable. “I don’t suppose it cares much for me, or Dennis?”

He scoffed at the idea that The Bad could ever like either one of the Zalewskis and shook his head no. Totally bogus. He tore the biscuit in half then, stuffing half of it in his mouth. Best not to get too ahead of himself again.

It never ended well.

“I can’t say it’s disappointing to hear. But it sounds like a very selfish… aspect unto itself. It’s the only reason Chris ended up hospitalized, not you.”

He froze at the mention of Boyd, swallowing down the rest of the biscuit in his mouth harshly. It went smoothly, even the gears in his head caught and ground.

Was it the only reason, though? He had been - complacent and complicit, at least, to allow The Bad to take control over, ever gave it enough free reign to hurt the man?

It could have been Dennis, so easily, if only he didn't care so much to ask questions of the man. And where would that have left Zalewski? With Emilia beside keeping vigil by her husband’s
hospital bed, instead of Valerie?

He shrugged, reaching for the other half of the biscuit, but not eating it just yet. Suddenly, he didn’t feel as hungry.

Perhaps that was where Emilia was actually partially wrong: not everything to do with this mess had to stem from his being a semi-innocent bystander.

Undeterred, she kept pondering aloud, content to speculate even if he couldn’t reciprocate. “If it was all you, we wouldn’t be having this… conversation. I just think it’s amazing you held onto yourself as long as you did. Most wouldn’t, or if they did, well… that’s what- people like Nick are here for.”

It helped that he had practice, for being in uncomfortable and dark situations for who knew how long from his childhood. Matthew had taught him something, if not what he was actually hoping to impart - how to deal with a frightening, long term situation.

Nick came along after, of course, to help. Just as Matthew giveth that lesson, he taketh as well - could anyone be expected to reasonably cope by themselves, after finding himself in another situation like that?

He set the biscuit down, hunger almost completely evaporated. There was enough in his stomach by then anyways, enough to tide him over until his next meal.

Regarding his turn in mood, Emilia picked up the half-finished plate and stood. “More for later, I understand. I’m glad you liked them, though.”

There was an open Tupperware container waiting on the counter. She had just tipped the plate over to slide the remainder in before a sudden knock-knock-knock at the front door startled them both still.

Someone's here? Who could that be? Is it… Shawshank?

It's not Shawshank, Henry - think, who is supposed to be coming over for their nephew?

Already?

Adjusting her robe, Emilia stole an apprehensive glance at him ( she doesn’t know, either ) before setting the plate down. She crossed over, disappearing around the entryway’s corner. There was another pause, followed by another knock .

Then a muffled voice: “Em, you home?”

Just as quickly she stuck her head back in the kitchen. Her expression was caught somewhere between horror and shock. “Henry, bedroom, closet, now .”

He stood up at the command, looking around for the bedroom where he was meant to be. He was meant to hide, not reveal himself to the Zalewski brothers just yet, right?

Dummy, of course not, we were just talking about this!

Fighting either a scoff or a laugh, Emilia took a half step closer, waving him away. “Down the hall, past the bathroom, on the left, go .”

He stumbled out of the way, almost tripping over his own feet as he followed her directions. Thank
God their house wasn't huge, big enough to lose his way, or he might have had to just hide in the first room he came across.

*A little more speed, Henry,* Nick cautioned. *It would certainly not be good if we were found trying to hide from her guest... in the bedroom.*

He didn't take a moment to pause in front of the bedroom door, instead opening it as quickly and quietly as he could, shoving himself in and the door shut behind him.

The slatted closet door was already open, almost directly across from him and adjacent to where the Zalewskis’ bed was - already made and in pristine condition, it seemed.

*How about we admire the bed some other time - get in the closet, now.*

*Okay - sorry.*

He went slower then, almost tip-toeing to the closet, shutting the door behind him as slowly as he could to make sure it wouldn't creak. Once he was inside he looked around at the dark space, eyes already adjusted to the change in lighting.

Or more so, his eyes had to adjust to lights outside of the closet. Twenty-seven years in that hole, it was the other way around.

It wasn't a crowded closet, mainly holding what seemed to be old clothes and spare items for around the house - including folded linens and blankets. It smelled faintly of soapy laundry detergent.

*That would be a comfy spot, wouldn't it, Nick?* he thought, smiling to himself at the idea. *We could just hunker down in the blankets and listen to what's going on.*

*Might as well make ourselves comfortable, since we have no idea how long we'll be here.*

The plastic hangers clattered softly as he brushed by them. He stepped over to the pile, carefully lowering himself into the center of it, so that he could pull the blankets over him. To make sure every part of him would stay warm.

*Almost like being a kid again, after Matthew, right?* Nick asked as he began to wrap himself up in them. *When Alan used to wrap you up in the comforter when you didn't feel good? Remember? “There. Now I don’t have to chase you down: these’ll keep you good and fixed.”*

The name didn't give him the same terrible pang in his chest as it did other times with the mention. It made him feel some sense of longing, instead of sorrow - that Alan, his dad, wasn't the one who shut the trunk on him, he was the nurturing one, who took care of him when he came down with the flu.

He wrapped another blanket over on top of the other, intent on making sure they were layered around him.

*Exactly like that.*

It didn't take very long to get all the spare linens onto him, an effective disguise if the guest just so happened to open the closet. He could simply slump over so he was on the floor, and *voila* - he would just be a mountain of blankets.

*I wonder who it is, though - Joey, or Trevor?*
C'mon, you think Joey would just knock? Nick teased. But if you want… I think we could listen. Like the radio - we can dial in on their conversation.

He considered the offer before nodding. What would it hurt, if he listened in? They probably wouldn't be talking about him, from the way he was commanded into the closet.

He could already picture what ensued in his absence - Emilia would stop and compose herself, in appearance and in thought, before answering the door. She evidently already knew the voice, and the person who wielded it. He had been Dennis’ best man at their wedding four years prior.

No need to be hesitant or put off by his sudden intrusion, however ahead of schedule it was.

Trevor probably looked much the same, if framed photos hanging in the living room were anything to go by. He wasn’t the blue-eyed, coppery redhead either of his older brothers were - his look was more the brown-eyed brunette their mother had been. He was also the only one to wear glasses. Maybe he still did, or those had since evolved into contact lenses.

How could someone with such vision problems work with small, venomous creatures?

Was he still the shortest?

He listened. Eventually he started to register the voices from down the hall:

‘...gets for not answering his phone.”

Trevor.

“I tried to tell him last week. You know how that goes.”

“All too well - ‘yeah, I know, no, don’t gotta bean me over the head with it.’ Little does Dennis know it takes repeated- messages for anything to sink in. It always has.”

That sounded like Dennis, didn't it? Emilia was the one who seemed to get it on the first try, while he… he took a bit more prompting.

( Even as a kid it had been that way, in class Dennis was the one to go over the lesson again, have the teacher repeat herself, not that Henry minded because he had usually been drifting in and out of sleep the first time through)

“Well, he’ll be in for a surprise tonight, regardless, you being here. Unless…”

“No, I didn’t text him. He doesn’t need to be thinking about me while he’s in with the stir.”

Well, it certainly would be a surprise then, wouldn't it be?

How long do you think we’ll be in here, Nick? What if - Trevor stays here, for the visit?

Oh, hush. We're not going to be in here the whole visit, Henry, we're just waiting it out right now.

“...if it's not imposing. I should've at least let you know, instead of this.”

“It’s no trouble, Trevor. Like I’m going to send you away and say ‘come back three days from now.’ What’s the occasion, besides? Allison lock the door on you?”

“Once I insisted on driving, yeah. I don’t care if flying would’ve been cheaper, that’s one industry I don’t care to put my life in the hands of if I can avoid it.”
Trevor was always the cautious one - that much he could remember. Although, having an antivenom business now (probably just his way of helping both people and animals out west), perhaps some of that caution had been thrown to the wind.

Or maybe it was just the allure of animals. The three Zalewski brothers had always enjoyed their natural history. Paul Zalewski pressed it into them early on. And Castle Rock didn’t exactly have a corner on any other hobby-inducing lifestyle choices.

Legal ones, anyway.

“...eaking of which, did Joey tell you?”

“What?”

“Well, that answers my question. Now I can’t tell you, or I’d have to kill you.”

“Trevor…”

“No… no, really, I-I can’t. It’s too- I don’t know, too good to blow the surprise.”

“Trevor, please, anything involving ‘Joey’, ‘good’, and ‘surprise’ in the same sentence, you know that’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

Like the time he climbed the fire station, as a ‘surprise’. That was a mild catastrophe. Instead of a cat up a tree it was the neighborhood Spider-Man wannabe who needed saving via truck ladder.

“Hey, if there was a chance anyone besides him would be hurt, you know I’d just tell you now.”

“Like the time you didn’t tell us how he took that tour group up the discontinued trail path, almost caused a mudslide, and ended up twisting his ankle, tumbling down the hill?”

“The tour group was fine, though!”

“You could’ve talked him out of it.”

“Pft. You give me too much credit, Em. No one can talk Joey out of anything. And I know better than any person alive what happens to those who try.”

It will be… interesting to say the least when he gets here, won’t it, Henry?

Interesting in the least, yes. Him, back in Castle Rock - it might even be crazier than us being out.

What do you mean ‘might’?

“He isn’t flying ahead, too, then?”

“Nah, not last I knew. Has a few coats to hang up before he can head out. Say what you will about how bonkers he gets, you know what they’re calling him now?”

“No…?”

“Ranger - Z. …Yeah, he’s like the park service’s own in-house superhero or something. People are booking tours to see him more than some infamous peak in the Rockies or an almost-extinct species of mountain goat.”

“Why, because he promises excitement? Close calls? Hefty lawsuit settlements?”
And up-close sightings of Bigfoot as a nice surprise bonus?

“...All of the above, yeah.”

Why does it sound like Joey never even grew up?

Because he didn't, Nick drawled, although he sounded slightly amused himself - happy to see this was not so different from where they came from. That guy’s still the same wild thrillseeker he was before. Has to be. Remember how Alan used to have to chase him around? When we left, Joey must’ve just had free reign of Castle Rock.

Pity to those who still lived there.

And those residing here now, by the sound of things. Hard to believe it was the quieter, unassuming brother who turned up first to give his sister-in-law fair warning.

As spoiler-free a warning as possible.

“...pretty ripe in here. You sure everything’s okay, Em?”

“That couch is on borrowed time, Trevor. Sorry about the smell. I was baking earlier today, but I can turn the wax warmer on, if it bothers you too much.”

“Yeeeah. If it’s not too much trouble…”

“Not at all. Be right back.”

Said warmer was in the bathroom. Listening, he heard her footsteps, padding down the carpeted hallway floor. But as they drew even closer, and he heard the door creak, from that it was clear she had made a slight detour.

He heard her sigh upon finding an empty bedroom, presumably relieved he had hidden as directed. Creeping over to the closet door, she whispered between the slats:

“Just- sit tight, Henry. We’ll think of some way to tell him.”

He nodded, realizing only after a second that he couldn't really respond to her - and that she didn't expect him to. His eyes felt heavy as well, a feeling he hadn't experienced without a fever for a long time.

Just sleepy, Henry, Nick said, sounding tired as well. It's been a big day, with a bath and food. And our daily mind crippling confessional.

We should rest up for the next one then, huh? He thought back, even as he settled down onto the floor, cocooned in the blankets, and the ensured solitude. Perhaps next we can admit to Trevor we know him from another time.

Save that one for Joey, he'll find it funnier.

Touché.

——-

“Jeez. What’s Ally feeding you out there, man?” Dennis asked this in lieu of the first thought to cross his mind: baby bro turned out taller than me? Since when?
Also, because the instant terror sinking it’s teeth into his heart left him unable to think clearly for perhaps three minutes. The short message from Emilia - T’s here - came in just as he closed his locker door.

A drizzly rain saw him home. An hour later, the Chevette’s headlights gleamed off the formerly-dusty Silverado as he turned into the driveway. Turning it off, a glance at the pickup’s Nevada license plate almost confirmed his worst fears. He opened the front door, paid no mind to the damp entryway floor, and crossed the kitchen without taking off his muddy boots.

Arms crossed behind his head, watching a late-night news segment, Trevor Zalewski was stretched out in his recliner like he owned the thing.

(Or maybe he was unintentionally practicing his Joey impersonation.)

Eyes on her book, Emilia was stretched out on the couch. Her phone sat on the cushion beside her hip.

The other was covered in a sacrificial bedsheet. No sign of Deaver.

Standing petrified in the archway, wondering where their original guest(s) was, Dennis belatedly remembered there not being a forty-inch flatscreen hanging in their living room that morning.

Trevor smirked and hit MUTE on the remote before vaulting out of the chair. “There you are, I was starting to think you took a detour.”

Caught in a hug, Dennis could only blink and splutter, “You’re here, already?” To which Trevor only scoffed and squeezed once before releasing him.

Peering over the covers, languid as a sunbathing cat, Emilia made no move to stand up. “We went over that, Dennis. New question, please.”

Which was how he effectively broke out of his stunned spell, regarding the few inches of height difference Trevor now boasted. That, and his thin-framed glasses were completely absent. Other than these two factors, he looked just the same as he did last they convened.

At their parents’ untimely wake.

“You jackass, you bought us a TV?”

“It’s not what you think,” Trevor rolled his eyes. “Joey’s treat. He had the thing shipped to me, to drive across country. …To save on shipping and installation.”

What? As though it would have cost very much after-

Facepalming, Dennis managed a bemused scoff. He had to stop and remember - that was just how Joseph’s gift-giving logic operated. “You showed up three days early to play home entertainment technician?”

Not to mention almost blow the lid off the greatest not-escape in Shawshank’s history?

The latter thought went without saying. Emilia’s calm, upturned eyes said everything behind the scenes was under control, even if they weren’t disclosing how.

And Trevor seemed none too privy, either. If anything he was probably wondering about the nervousness his oldest brother seemed to radiate. And he asked about it just as predicted: “You
have a rough day or something? Even eat dinner yet?”

“He usually skips it,” Emilia admitted, to her husband’s silent annoyance. “Leftovers are our lifeblood.”

Trevor raised an eyebrow. “But… if you’re always here to make them, how’re they always leftovers to you?”

_Cheeky blighter. Warming us up for Joey, because you know we need it._ Smirking, probably thinking as much, Emilia crossed her ankles, smoothing a hand over her middle. “I haven’t always been on maternity leave, either.”

Part exasperated already, Dennis rubbed at his face. It felt stubbly, in need of a shave again. “Don’t get her going, Trev. It’s been too long a day for me to keep you two from going to blows.”

“Dear, you’re dripping on the carpet.”

Not that it was raining that hard outside, or the worst the floor had seen, but Dennis was grateful for the distraction. It was an excuse to go hang his coat up and kick his shoes off. Whatever front Emilia was putting up to keep Trevor off the scent, it was working. He would do well to follow that plan.

He took the aforementioned detour to retrieve his effects from the car, and to open the glovebox and assure himself the envelope remained untouched.

Locking the hatchback up, his phone chimed. He tried his head against the rain, pulling it out of his jacket. Droplets of water speckled the screen.

_Closet. All day._

Back inside, Dennis set his thermos on the counter. He stopped to appreciate the closed container full of dusky gold biscuits. The tray he had seen Emilia fill that morning surely would have made more than it could hold.

He thought about it, slipping his wet footwear off. Had she shared them with Deaver? Tried to? Was she successful, or was it Trevor responsible for the missing portion?

He wouldn’t fault her for trying. Again.

What else had gone on she hadn’t texted about, trying to keep him from fretting?

“Yes gonna settle down and join us, Den?” Trevor asked, watching from around the archway’s edge. From that angle, he looked very much like the boy Dennis remembered, the baby of the family who never was one-hundred percent sure of the movies Joey had preselected to pick from on Friday nights.

While the rest of Castle Rock caught high school football games in the autumn, the three brothers stayed neatly shut in up until middle school (neither Julia or Paul were real sports stats people). Joey liked to watch the classic tough guy action titles (John Wayne and Clint Eastwood were his pop culture heroes) while Trevor preferred the animations of Disney and Warner Bros (because both studios were brilliant in their own ways).

In his preteen years, Dennis wasn’t as savvy or opinionated on matters of TV media (even if he did have a soft spot for science fiction). He tended to like whatever caused the least amount of bickering between his siblings. And whatever was short enough on runtime it wouldn’t jack up
their sleeping patterns for the rest of the weekend - that was preferable, too.

“Lemme get a change of clothes, then you can show me the new toy, okay, Trev?”

Trevor’s face scrunched in the way that said he didn’t approve of the TV being dubbed a toy, but he conceded with a wordless shrug and stepped aside.

Just managing not to sprint down the hall, Dennis closed the bedroom door behind him, then flicked the lightswitch. Looking about the lightly-furnished room, he didn’t see (or smell) anything amiss. Not a wrinkle on the bed. The drapes over the window remained closed, a light patter of rain audible against its surface. The dresser drawers had been pushed back in. The closet appeared untouched, no out-of-place noises coming from inside.

How utterly deceptive it all appeared.

Gingerly, he leaned close, listened, then grabbed the knob and slowly pulled.

*Don’t jump, don’t jump, whatever it is, don’t... oh.*

The space wasn’t a real walk-in closet. There was just enough headspace to accommodate a shelf full of plastic boxes and folded stacks of shirts. A hanging bar situated just beneath was only half-loaded with long-sleeved shirts, empty spare hangers, and sweaters. Below that there was a short stack of boxes, and at least three spare, compact blankets rolled up for storage.

But not anymore. Curled up on the floor those same linen blankets were now a disheveled mound, all trussed up together around a now-familiar body. There was no evidence of just who slumbered inside the pile, besides a few stray locks of brown hair sticking out. This was the only clue he needed.

Covering his mouth, Dennis fought off an urge to laugh instead of gag.

A welcome change of pace. There was no longer a musky, filthy smell of sweat-laced mud and body odor. All cleaned up and fed, despite being startled by the unexpectedly-early company, Deaver had made himself at home in his impromptu hideout.

Again.

Dennis listened, but didn’t hear disoriented murmurs or labored wheezing.

If anything, he heard muffled, contented snoring, and smiled.

*From one nest to the other. Figures why he’d take more of a shine to such a small space. And, for once, it’s to his advantage. Just as carefully, he closed the door on the sight. Best leave it that way... for now. Rest up while you can, buddy. Tomorrow’s gonna be even more tiring.*

Fortunately, with Trevor now here, he had enough legitimate reason (and personal time saved up) to call in sick.
So. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any more dicey…

I woke up to this.

——-

Plugging his phone in to charge overnight, Dennis didn’t set the alarm. There wasn’t a need to. Everyone was nicely situated: he and Emilia, safe in their bed, Trevor, on the nicer couch, and their as-yet-unlisted skeleton, nesting in the closet-

No, cat in the bag. There’s a kinder metaphor.

All things considered, the wake up call they all received wasn’t anything they expected the next morning.

Although, once pressed, Trevor admitted to having prior knowledge.

No one got hurt.

That was the important thing.

——-

“Dennis… there’s a helicopter in our front yard.”

Emilia knew this without having to see it. The way the framed pictures continued to rattle and bounce against the walls was evidence enough.

Seething as quietly as he ever had, he finished wrenching a sweater over his head. Yes, said as though I wasn’t right there beside you, Em, feeling the entire - house shake as if a Chinook just set down on the roof. Fucking downdraft effect, rocking the hell out the foundation and supports, there’s a reason heliports exist. Minimum safe distance, that’s a thing in aviation, right?

He figured out who it was well before actually laying eyes on the man.

Wet leaves plastered the outside of the house. Their two plastic garbage cans laid on their sides, lids blown off (and still rolling, almost having made it to the edge of the surrounding woods). Storming out the front door, slippers on in lieu of boots, Dennis briefly thought he had walked onto the set of Good Morning, Vietnam.

Briefly.

Then he noticed the aircraft wasn’t military, and saw the face in the pilot’s seat. Even with the headset, mic in front of his lips, and the large, opaque-lensed sunglasses, he recognized the ever-infuriating smile below them.

Typical- “Joseph Randolph Zalewski!”

The one and only.
He had to scream to be heard over the motors powering the still-whipping rotors. The wind lashing at his shirt and pant legs must have made him look like a total buffoon. But the animated motions of his hands seemed to get the message across, regardless.

The smile fell. Shaking his head, Joey pointed toward him with exaggerated intent - once, then twice. *Behind you*, the gesture said.

Dennis figured it out a second later as hands landed on his shoulders, pulling him back to the porch. Then Trevor (Arliss, *“Mom came so close to naming you after those two hayseeds, little bro, but you didn’t hear it from me”*) shouted in his ear: *“Not until the engines are off!”*

And there went his hopes to go race over and rip the cockpit door open.

Back inside as quickly as he had gotten out, the eldest Zalewski rounded on the youngest. *“You knew he was up to this?!”*

Visibly torn between mirth and genuine fear, Trevor stepped back - out of immediate punching range. *“Yeah, I knew. I didn’t know if he’d pull it off, though!”*

“What? Renting a goddamn Huey to play Rambo, announcing his return?”

Trevor scoffed, taking a second to listen to the rotorwash slapping the house. *“A Huey wouldn’t fit in your yard, Dennis. That’s an AW109.”*

“For fuck’s sake. It’s pretty damn close *enough.*” Sensing how powerless he was to stop this from ensuing, as it was rapidly approaching already-happened status, Dennis fumed one last time, leaning his head against the archway edge. *“I don’t see how he got it by the FAA.”*

Smirking, Trevor scoffed again. *“What makes you think he did?”*

——-

He had awoken with a start at the first signs of rumbling, body and mind both conditioned to respond to the first sign of trouble.

(*Matthew taught him that and Lacy reinforced it*)

*Henry? What's going on?*

*I don't know,* he responded back to Nick, sitting upright when the rumbling didn't stop. Instead it seemed to get even louder, feeling as though the whole house was shaking. The very walls were trembling. *But it can't be - great.*

*We should listen... I think Dennis is going outside,* Nick suggested, just as alert as he was. The rumbling hadn't stopped, but it had decreased to a minimum, a barely there hum in the closet.

There was nothing to hear at first, making his anxiety double. He wrapped the blankets wound around himself even tighter, breath starting to come out in short, fearful pants until he heard Dennis scream -

*“Joseph Randolph Zalewski!”*

*Oh. Ohhh. Ah, that makes... sense.*

He relaxed then, letting the blankets slump and slide off, piling around him, because if it was Joey - they weren't in any immediate danger.
Well, at least not any that Joey meant to happen.

-----

The rotors had barely slowed to a stop by the time the pilot stepped out.

Boots on this time, Dennis pounced.

“Flying an unregistered aircraft over populated airspace? That’s not silly, Joey, that’s downright moronic!”

Pinned against the helo’s passenger compartment door, headset knocked askew, sunglasses pulled off, Joseph Zalewski grinned, empty hands raised in a classic I-come-in-peace posture. “Check your facts, Den, she’s registered! And look, twenty feet of clearance on all sides - no sustained winds, clear visibility, lands on a dime, nothing to be concerned- hey, you gonna throttle me or hug me first? Ow! T-throttle, it is! Tee, little help?!”

Keeping far out of fisticuffs range, Trevor stood well aside, shaking his head. *Nope. This much, you’re on your own, buddy.*

Seething, Dennis aborted the headlock as he realized the futility of continuing to shout his dismay. Yeah, the house and both vehicles were now plastered with a thin layer of sticky, damp maple leaves.

But at least he wouldn’t have to worry about raking for a time.

And no one had been hurt.

Heaving an already-weary sigh, he shoved Joey aside (quietly lamenting that the lanky jerk still held a height advantage even more pronounced than Trevor’s). “You ass, you’re lucky Em’s made of what she is.”

The younger man staggered, catching his balance against the door before mustering another Cheshire grin. “Yeah, she’s titanium, dude. Not paper machè. I knew she could handle the excitement.”

“And yet you sent Trevor ahead with a not-warning to offer?”

Scoffing, Joey straightened up, tugging his cargo vest back into place - vest and sweater and khaki pants and hiking boots, the entire L.L. Bean ensemble. It suited his rugged profile and lean physique, right up to the roots of his bright red hair. “Eh, for the record, Trev, I did not send him. I just so happened to… disclose my plans while he was en route, then took off. Told him to share what felt prudent to. Something got lost in translation, happens all the time, right?”

“Like you would’ve believed me if I said he already bought the thing, Dennis?” Trevor countered, faced with a sullen, accusatory glare. “Last you knew he was only going for ultralights, not a full license.”

*Last I knew, I was hoping he wasn’t serious.*

Dennis glowered at the vehicle in question. The chopper overlooking them was a clean thirty feet long, nose to tail. It stood on a tricycled set of wheels, as opposed to skids or pontoons. The exterior shone a dusky, red-maple shade of crimson, the ventral side white like the underbelly of a deer.
“You should’ve stuck with ultralights,” he finally groused.

Joey huffed, still leaning against the helo with arms crossed. “You’re just jealous of Whirly. I can tell already.”

“You named it?”

This was met with another eye rolling scoff. “I did. You name our nephew yet?”

Waiting for some kind of sign, he eventually got one in the form of Emilia knocking on the closet door.

“Henry? …Nick?”

He sat up from his slumped over position on the floor, blankets falling around him as he did so. After the moment of panic he had almost wanted to sleep again - being so thin and depleted practically mandated it. Every hour taken to rest was one hour earned toward breaking his fever, but instead he forced his eyes open for just a moment.

Nick? You wanna take over?

Sure, I’ll speak for us.

“Yes? Emilia, what’s… what's happening?” he asked, even though they were both almost entirely sure just what was going on. Just knowing it was Joey cleared most of the mystery up.

She didn’t pull the door open, and from this vantage point, he could just see her eyes, peering at him through one of the slats. “You might’ve guessed already: Joey just buzzed the house.”

He let out a huff of air at the confirmation, but nodded back up at her - assuming she could see said nod. “So, they're both here now. I should… just stay in here, then? For… awhile?”

“What do you want to do, Nick? One way or another, we’ll have to break the news to them. But not before you’re… ready.”

Oh. That one wasn't entirely expected to him, to be honest. Him making the decision, of when he should be found out?

( The pressure of a decision like that immediately gathered onto him it felt like, making his throat tighten with worry)

“I… I don't know,” he admitted, hands tightening in the folds of the blanket. “What do you think? What does Dennis think?”

Without getting too verbose, Emilia explained, “We think, whatever the decision, you shouldn’t be left out of it. I mean, there’s no ideal way to go about this, and I know how you, and Henry, can be about meeting new people. You’re safe for now, but… but it won’t be long before one or both of them sniff us out. You can’t very well stay in there the whole time.”

Not the whole time, maybe.

“Can I… stay in here, just - just a bit longer?” His breath caught in his throat, an extra edge of
panic lodging itself deep in his throat. “I'll be quiet, and think about when I should come out. And not to be stressful, or a bother, but - do you think I could talk to Dennis sometime, when he's not busy with his brothers?”

“I’ll pass that on, yes. Are you certain you’re okay in there, though? Do you want anything to eat, drink… brush your teeth, even?”

“Can I have a cup of water?” he asked. It had been quite some time since he drank anything, perhaps since Emilia had first given him a drink - two days or so. “It's okay… whenever you - can get it is fine.”

A faint hint of sternness crept into her gaze, a sign that said he wasn’t in for being babied today, same as yesterday, but she nodded all the same. “Be right back.”

He didn’t object. By the sound of it, the brothers were still outside, in the yard. Whatever aircraft it was Joey opted for in favor of a car, it would effectively hold his siblings’ attention for some time. Emilia would use said time to the fullest. That much was clear.

He wasn’t getting out of talking so easily.

——-

Seconds earlier, Dennis had been thinking of every reason he could, to talk Joey into flying this multi-ton, four-bladed contraption to someplace ‘official’ to be parked and kept for safekeeping. Now he was using it as a very convenient distraction.

And Joey promptly called him out on it: “Dude. Now you’re just avoiding the question.”

Dennis continued to stare at the incomprehensible control panel, close enough his breath fogged the glass. He pretended not to hear.

He heard yet another scoff, then Joey (mercifully) turned his attention on their youngest brother. “I guess trying to make you talk wouldn’t get me any further?”

“Nope.”

“Figures. Dennis, old boy.” Before he could think to duck aside, Joey’s arm wound around his shoulder in a side-on hug. Just like that, he was trapped. “There is the matter you haven’t picked out a name yet, right? You’re feeling so reluctant to share ‘cause the one you did choose is a… flagrant affront to our very bloodline?”

Dennis felt his ears grow several degrees warmer. Like you have room to talk, Mr. Ineligible Bachelor.

It must have shown, the insolent anger mounting in his expression, being needled over such a once-trivial pursuit. Undeterred, Joey snickered and squeezed him reassuringly. “No, man, I take that back - it must be a good one. Em wouldn’t have anything else. That’s why she hasn’t told anyone, yeah?”

…Wendell Alan Deaver… just sounded good…

Snorting, Dennis pried the taller man’s arm off. “Where’d you get Whirly from, anyway?”

That’s it. Let him gush about his ‘baby’ for a while. You know he’s dying to… why else would he
bring her along?

She couldn’t have been gone more than a couple minutes.

He sat up again when he saw her shadow fall across the paneling, rubbing one sleepy eye with the back of his fist. After a beat she opened the closet door carefully, making absolutely sure that it wasn't going to creak and possibly alert anyone to what was happening.

“Thank you,” he said gratefully, half standing up to accept the cup - still holding the blankets around him. Who said he and Henry couldn't be cozy?

There was no straw this time.

Handing it over, Emilia seemed to pull another face, holding her words long enough to take in some behavioral notes (no doubt, she was the observant sort).

He tried, for a moment, to pretend he hadn’t noticed. The water was pleasantly cool and refreshing. He focused on keeping the cup’s edge held to his mouth, trying not to wince as the scabbed furrows flexed.

Next he looked up, Emilia was still there, arms loosely folded, framed against the deep blue wallpaper of the greater bedroom. The bedside lamp cast a yellow glow across it.

Before he could ask, she risked a question first, “You… sure you’re okay?” Pause. “In there?”

“Yes, I'm okay in here,” he said, staring down at the cup of water. “We both are. Can I ask you, though, and this might sound… rude, or odd - sorry if it does, but why no straw?”

Emilia took a belated glance at the cup, clearly only just noticing the absent instrument. Meeting his eyes again, her cheeks flushed. “Sorry, it- slipped my mind. All the ruckus outside. Dennis and Joey sound like they're shouting each other down.” The flush faded away. “It always seems to happen between them in the beginning, but after giving us the wake up he did, Joey deserves at least a bit of verbal thrashing.”

“That sounds like them,” he smiled at her, trying to reassure Emilia that it was okay. He knew if he heard intense yelling, even from two people he knew like Dennis and Joey, he wouldn't be able to focus (Because it would remind him of Matthew, cause Henry to shut down and he would have to retreat, try to draw him back out)

on what he was trying to do. “It's no worry, I was just wondering. Joey definitely deserves whatever thrashing Dennis is giving him, though I doubt he's taking it very seriously.”

“He is, on some level us mere mortals cannot comprehend,” Emilia remarked wryly. “Dennis just needs time to remember how futile it is.”

“I remember, and I never even actually met him.” He grinned at her from around the door’s edge, a gentle jab at his own creation. Because it was the truth - Henry had met and knew Joey, not him. “Dennis must just forget how… awe-inspiring it can be.”

To her credit, if she found the distinction bothersome, Emilia still smiled at his attempt to make light out of a potentially-heavy situation. “That must be it: Joey forgot to cue up the angelic choir.”
Or if he remembered, they went on strike, being stubbornly silent now.

“You sure you don’t need anything else?” She reiterated her question so abruptly it seemed almost jarring. His grin dropped. “How long you’ve… been in there, and all?”

Saying she understood his mistreatment was one thing.

Seeing the strange effects of it was quite another.

“I'm fine, really. Henry is, too. He's content to just sleep all day if he's allowed.” He smiled at her, again, understanding what it must look like - the two of them more than okay with staying in a small, dark, enclosed room all day. Most people wouldn’t be. “I know, it probably seems weird, since we just barely got out of a cage, but it feels comfortable for us, in a good way.”

It’s familiar. Familiar settings are easier to stay calm in.

“Because it’s all you’re used to,” Emilia seemed to answer her own query, but hearing it straight from him (them) had to at least help the impression take shape. “And sleep, given your state, probably isn’t a bad thing. Just…I don’t know, with them here now, ahead of schedule, it’s got me a little flustered. I expected to have some time to actually figure out a way to explain… you.”

So did Dennis. And is he? No, right now he’s more concerned with the high-flying nutcase claiming to be his little brother. How much will those three have to hash out among themselves, never mind the not-fugitive you’re keeping in the linen closet?

“I'm sure everything will work itself out, somehow. I know it might not seem okay, but we really are fine staying in here as long as you need us to. We both know how - delightful Joey can be, and with Trevor here as well - it's bound to be stressful.”

The flush crept back up Emilia’s expression. Clearly she was already torn between catering to the normal side of her life versus the peculiar side project she had dragged over the threshold - like a cat with a half-dead mouse they intended to nurse back to health.

“Well… I appreciate you understanding, Nick. I was worried you might think we’d go back on our word so quickly, about helping you, with them here.”

“I figured once I showed up on your doorstep sopping wet and wasn't immediately hauled into the back of an ambulance you would be keeping me.” He grinned at her, taking another sip from the cup of water afterwards. “We can figure everything out later. Joey and Trevor deserve both of you two's attention. I can look after Henry, in the meantime - asleep, probably.”

“I'll check on you when I can, then. Besides that, just… stay put, all right?”

“We will, don't worry about us. We'll just sleep, until Dennis can come by.” He settled back down with the cup of water, bringing it back up to his mouth to take a sip.

The last, as it turned out. The cup was only half-filled.

Emilia nodded and took it back with one last thin smile, then closed the door.

Almost all the way. Left it open a crack.

Nice thought, Mrs. Zalewski, but not practical.

He waited until after she had left the room before closing it completely.
It took another thirty minutes to talk Joey into the house. Even with his chopper (sorry, *Whirly*) locked and parked until further notice, her pilot still insisted on giving Dennis the runaround. Literally.

Sniffing around the yard, Joey zeroed in on the old toolshed in no time flat. It was impossible to notice from the air, apparently. “What d’you mean, you haven’t unlocked it?” Without giving anyone time to answer Joey have a cursory tug on the rusty padlock. The door, even pitted with holes and rot, didn’t give. “Real estate lady should’ve done that, hell, it’s just as much about making sure the property is as up to code as the house.”

“It’s- it’s not hurting anyone, leaving it closed,” Dennis stammered, looking belatedly to Trevor for a verbal backup. Right now he didn’t want to think about surprises hidden behind locked doors. “And you want me to think you just flew a few hundred miles to check out my excess storage, you got your priorities backwards, man.”

*As always. Whatever piloting school stamped your application had to be crossing their fingers.*

Trevor, hair still tussled and sticking up in a bed-do, clad in off-white longjohns, kept the duffel bag slung over his shoulder (cargo from Whirly that had been unceremoniously bestowed upon him), paid them both one last resigned look of *here we are* and gave the order: “Joseph?”

Almost instantly Joey’s fidgeting with the padlock stopped. He appeared to be inspecting the keyhole, assessing it for possible picking. But he didn’t drop it until Dennis gently pried his fingers off.

Trevor set a hand on his shoulder. “You might want to come inside, come down a bit, y’think?”

*In more ways than one. You blew in, made a scene, got us all stirred up. Just like old times. Now get over it.*

“Em has to’ve put the coffee on by now, too. You gave her enough time.”

“Pft.” Shaking his head, Joey ran a hand through his hair, pulling a face as he paused to scratch behind one ear. “I suppose I did, all that carrying on.”

Rolling his eyes, Trevor slapped his back again. “You haven’t even hugged me yet.”

“Now you’re just asking for- well, there you go.” Dennis cut himself off, watching as the much-delayed hug ensued. Trevor gave a cursory fuss, as he always did, trying to squirm free as Joey mercilessly noogied him. The down moment passed, and the grin was back like it never left.

“Assuming she doesn’t bar your ass from the premises, c’mon. I’m sure Em will be some kinda glad to see to see- hey! You- I already- got my hug.”

“First one didn’t count,” Joey retorted, indulging in one last clench before letting go, and they began trekking back across the yard. “Besides, you can never get too many, you old grouse.”

*It’s Mr. Gander, not grouse.*

Or so Emilia might have insisted. She did love a good pet name.

Dennis shook his head, trying to hide a good humored smile, and losing. “I’m not *old*.”
Shot over one shoulder, Joey’s look was the definition of blandly unconvinced. “You’re about to have your first kid, man. Your days are numbered.”

——-

Emilia used the time to herself wisely. Besides see to their hidden ‘project’ in the closet, she had taken the pains to get dressed, brush her hair, and start the coffee. She was seated at the table, steeping her usual black raspberry tea, when Joey barged in, shortly followed by Dennis and Trevor.

Dennis - still looking as disheveled as if he had jogged through a tornado - felt very unkempt all of a sudden.

Smiling over the edge of her mug, Emilia was quick to say as much, “Looks like you fought the storm and lost, dear.”

“I went easy on him. No, don’t get up.” Circling the table, Joey leaned over her chair to hug from behind. She did her best to return it, hugging his arms over her collar. “Oh! Poor thing, what’s he done to you?”

At that Emilia rolled her eyes, twisting around (barely) to push him away. “I’m surviving the experience just fine, Joseph, hello to you, too.”

Trevor deposited the duffel bag just inside the living room archway before wearily taking a seat, beginning to fitfully ginger-comb his hair.

Dennis gathered three mugs from the hooks above the sink. “Still take it black, Joe?”

“You know I don’t.” Slinging his cargo vest over the seat between Emilia and Trevor, Joey surprised him in walking over to the counter. “Hand me one of those, I’ll doctor it up myself.”

Only because you always manage to dose it wrong.

The accusing look Dennis aimed at him silently said as much. Joey nodded back toward the table. “Go sit. I think I can handle playing bartender a few seconds.”

Knowing how futile it was to argue, Dennis did as he was told. Emilia spared him another poignant glance over taking a sip of tea.

Don’t think about it. You’re cool, she’s cool. Act like he’s not even here. Like everything is perfectly norm-

“So when did you get your license, Joey?”

“And who did you have to bribe?” Dennis followed it up tersely, hard fazed by the way Emilia shot him a sideways look. “I’m serious. There’s no way you afforded a six-million dollar plus helicopter on your own.”

Showing admirable restraint, Joey poured their coffees, fixed his own with a generous amount of creamer, then delivered them to the table and took a seat. “You’re right, Den, I didn’t. But I didn’t steal her, either.”

“Didn’t say you did.”
“But you were thinking it.” Stirring until it was sufficiently blended, he took a hearty draw, then smacked his lips in appreciation. “Ahhh, that’s better.”

Wincing, as if only remembering now how rudely they had been awoken, Trev sipped at his coffee. “Joey, cool it. Seriously. It’s too early for all your… exuberance.”

“Eight o’clock is early?”

Not compared to some camping outings they had been on.

“When you’ve spent the last ten hours driving and only slept about three in between now and then.”

Some seriousness settled into the middle brother’s visage. “You sleeping okay, besides?”

Avoiding his gaze, Trevor rubbed his eyes. There were ashy gray half circles forming beneath. “Yeah. We didn’t rendezvous after all these years for me to say I’m not, J. Still.”

“You didn’t bring any aids?” Dennis asked. Ever since the onset of high school Trevor had slept lighter and lighter. More than once he had conked out over a textbook on the library, pencil clenched in hand.

Today, he waved the suggestion off. “I did, but the side effects… I’ll take one tonight.”

Please do, man.

Joey favored him with another concerned glance before shrugging. “I didn’t buy Whirly, either. She was a gift.”

“You’re shitting us.”

“Dennis, language.”

“I’ve heard worse, Joseph,” Emilia pointed out, still looking rather nonchalant. “You should hear him after a bad day at work.”

Trevor blinked, brow furrowing. “It was a gift?”

Joey paused again, taking another gulp of coffee before glancing around at the three of them. “What can I say? All kinds like to go camping, hiking, climbing. Rich, poor, morally corrupt, doesn’t matter.”

“When’s the last time you took a gangbanger on a nature hike?”

“Never personally, but it does happen.”

Emilia nodded over her mug. “Continue, Joseph.”

“Occasionally, kids wander off without a map, leave it to the park service to round them up. Six weeks ago, South Dakota - I spent three days tracking down this brother and sister who didn’t make the summit meet with the two couples on the same trip. There weren’t any aerial units in the vicinity, most were out fighting fires. The sibs’ parents - some old money family from upstate New York - came through with the equipment, including old Whirly out there.”

“But… you said it took three days, to search?”
“From the air.” Joey nodded, undeterred by the doubtful utterance. “Once we sorted out her engine trouble, yeah. I logged a lot of practice hours, brought my instructor from the school on as another set of eyes. Flew at least six sorties a day. Trial by fire- figuratively, thank god.”

Dennis set his elbows on the table. “And?”

“We found those two on the opposite side of the mountain- hungry, more than a little peeves. They took the long way around, in a spiral, instead of straight up route like everyone thought they would.”

“Blimey. And the parents, they just… let you keep Whirly?” Emilia finished the story off on a bewildered note.

Bewildered enough, Dennis could almost believe it was the wildest story she had heard.

With the exception of one.

Joey scoffed, shrugging. “They’re middle-aged insurance agents, just happy to have their twins back. What do they need a late model helo for?”

“Wasn’t she appropriated to serve the park service?” Trevor added.

“Which happens to be my line of work. They’re happy enough to let me keep her fueled up and at their beck and call. Besides this three week siesta, I was thinking of taking her out to Montana. Get some altitude training in.”

“Meanwhile, you’re free to use it to buzz my house whenever you feel like a chuckle?” Dennis grumbled.

“Just the one time, dude, on the little guy’s honor.” Joey nodded sideways at Emilia, a small satisfied smile on his lips. Evidently he had gotten the urge out of his system. “Won’t do it again.”

“We’ll hold you to it.”

He shrugged again. “She’ll probably sit there until departure day now, Dennis. Don’t get your boxers in a twist. I can’t afford to waste the fuel load on anything else.”

*Including rides. Not that I’d trust myself in a rookie pilot’s hands, neither would Trevor.*

“Speaking of dates,” Joey rambled on. “What about you, T? When’re you wheels-up?”

Midway through a pull of coffee, Trevor winced all over again. “Same as you, barring no emergencies at home.”

“Like Ally waking up to a gila monster in the bed?”

Emilia’s eyebrows shot up. She had not heard this yarn yet. Dennis shook his head at the reminder. “Nevada’s too far north for those.”

“Wiki says otherwise, bro,” Joey grinned. “Aaand just like the time-”

“It will be the last time I leave you alone with the cages,” Trevor snorted, combing again at his hair. “I can go without the bimonthly reminders, too, from you *and* Ally.”

“It was only a baby, few inches long,” Dennis half-explained, holding his thumb and index finger out to approximate the size. “Still dangerous, though.”
Joey huffed, indignant. “Not to me. He was so docile.”

“You were wearing gloves. My gloves,” Trev went on, a silky anger underscoring his words. “That went missing not an hour after you showed up.”

“And you, what, left him on their bed?” Emilia asked, with all the amazed disbelief anyone would rightfully show. Joey’s lost hikers sounded more believable.

The off-duty ranger promptly rolled his eyes. “I set him down there, is all. My phone blew up. I didn’t look to see who was sleeping on the other side. And I didn’t leave him on the pillow.”

From the flat stare he gave, Trevor wasn’t assured. “You’re lucky Ally sleeps like the dead.”

“Except when she doesn’t. You could hear that scream all the way over in Reno.”

“Anyone call to verify that?”

“No, but I can just imagine it’s because they somehow knew it was Allison.”

“Also, no one got hurt, T, isn’t that the important thing?” Joey summed up the lesson in such a misunderstanding. “I mean, yeah, Ally probably won’t talk to me for the next five years, but you know I didn’t mean anything malicious.”

“You’re still banned from my property until further notice.”

“Got a restraining order in your back pocket?”

“I’m giving you a fair chance to heed my words and not force us to file one, okay? Next thing I know you’d be ‘borrowing’ my animals for some on-the-side daredevils’ petting zoo.”

“Quit teasing me. You know I’d never get something like that covered for liability.”

“You manage to for everything else.”

“Don’t go dangling an idea like that in front of me when you know it can’t happen, then.”

“Being a baby bush pilot isn’t excitement enough for you, Ranger Z?”

“Eh, for the record, the nickname wasn’t my idea, either. I can’t help it if fans get a little carried away.”

“‘Fans’?”


“No fans, at least. You’re not a movie star.”

Relegated to the outskirts of this discussion/budding-debate, Dennis soared his equally-quiet wife a wry glance. She returned it with matching exasperation, but she still smiled in spite of whatever true irritation must have been building.

This was what they wanted, right?

Before either of them knew what Block F had in hiding. Now here they were in a quasi-imitation, with their bedroom closet standing in as an unlocked cage in the open water tank of a bedroom.
As yet, Joseph and Trevor may not know.

But they would soon enough. They thought they had been called back to their hometown to meet their nephew. Each of them had managed to spare three weeks of money and emotional support.

Enduring their banter in the meantime was just an unavoidable fringe consequence.

Probably the least most harmful shower due to pass.

Compared to the thunderhead following along behind.
Marvel

September 21st, 2018 (con’t)

I woke up to that.

The following evening, Deaver woke up to his own surprise.

Sorta.

——-

Well, it was bound to happen at some time.

He awoke once again, eyes bleary and head fuzzy - the way it had been when he was a child and woke up from a nap, almost feeling worse than before.

His stomach growled, making him cringe at the weak feeling it brought with it. The biscuits had been good, but they had also awoken his hunger from its own dormant sleep.

How late was it, anyways? It wasn't morning anymore, he knew that much. In fact, he was fairly sure the lights in the bedroom were off, with Dennis and Emilia sleeping inside.

That nap… was a bit more of a slumber, wasn't it, Henry?

It must have been late at night, or at least night. Perhaps everyone turned in a bit early, from the excitement of the day? He knew at least he and Nick fell asleep fairly quickly after his talk with Emilia.

Yes… but you did say we needed it.

He stood up, stumbling forward as the blankets around him tripped his feet, one hand landing heavily on the door with a thud. He froze, waiting for someone to rouse, or perhaps one of the visiting brother’s voices to call out with a question.

Or for Joey to just come bounding in, certain someone has broken in… because that's Joey.

When none came he relaxed back up against it, slowly untangling himself from the spare linens. Everyone must be asleep, right?

Still have to be careful if you go out, though, Nick warned, just as he began to creak the door open. There isn't a spare room here, is there?

No, not besides the one directly across from this one. He knew without being told it was a nursery of some description.

He grimaced at the reminder - of course there was Trevor and Joey to worry about. Was it worth it, trying to get something to snack on, but risk being found out by them earlier than anyone intended?

His stomach grumbled again, louder this time. He froze to wait the sound out. It felt as if it were empty, had been empty for years. The feeling didn't bring up any good memories, that was for sure.

(Sitting in that cage just waiting for a death that wouldn't arrive, too weak to even truly lift his
A shiver ran through him at the memory before it ended abruptly, instead a warm feeling replacing it. Comfort, from Nick it felt like - his own little heat source.

Definitely worth it. I'll be silent, Nick - don't worry.

I always do.

The door was pushed open a touch more, a slight pause as he waited to see if anyone would notice - but still, no questions came. He could hear shallow breathing from Emilia and Dennis in their bed, and faint line of light trailing in from the hallway.

They hadn't closed their bedroom door all the way it seemed, open just far enough for someone to slip through. For him, perhaps?

He wouldn't put it past them to plan ahead.

And one plus to count for being so underweight was having a light step. The flooring beneath the carpet barely creaked with each pace. Stepping outside, he noted the only lit light was the overhead bulb in the kitchen, it’s glow faint in the distance between this door and the living room.

Bingo.

There was faint snoring coming from the living room, making him pause for a moment longer to determine whether it was still safe or not. It seemed so, the person's breathing still going in and out slowly, steadily.

That was one brother, then - but where could the other be? He couldn't hear another set of breathing, only the one. Perhaps in the bathroom… which if they were, it would be imperative to get his snack, and return to the closet as soon as possible.

He tiptoed as fast as he possibly could without making too much noise. Tempting as it was to stop and look, see which one it was currently snoring away on the couch, that would be asking for too much trouble, satiating his curiosity. More than he could presently afford.

The kitchen was thankfully as lit up as he imagined, so he wouldn't have to fumble around blindly in the dark as quietly as possible. That would just lead to someone waking up and discovering him, which would then lead to either a stern talking to or a very, very awkward conversation.

Oh, hello there, don't mind my banging about - just getting some midnight snacks. Delicious, right?

Yeah, let's avoid that, Henry. Dennis would be better to do our introductions.

Agreed.

His eyes didn't have to search far to find a plastic tin, filled to the lid with biscuits. Emilia must have left them out for someone to grab - that someone being him.

The whole container, she might not have meant it, thinking he would show restraint, but he could feign ignorance if she wondered where all the biscuits had gone, and the container.

With prize in hand, he turned around to head back to the closet, eat his food and then drift off to sleep until the morning, when Dennis could talk to him about a plan. There was no real good way
to introduce himself, but almost anything would be better than a late night run-in, right?

Walking through the living room, he kept an ear out still for the one set of breathing, relaxing just a touch when it was still slow and steady. The other must still be presumably in the bathroom then, but would be out any second. He didn’t stop to look for a light under the door.

Shuffling faster after the thought, he slipped inside the bedroom with little incident, holding tight on the container to make sure it didn't rustle any noises to anyone. Dennis and Emilia were both still sound asleep, nestled together under the covers, front to front. The sight gave him a pang because -

(He and Marren had been the same way, him usually still lying there with eyes open as she slept, one hand tracing letters and numbers onto her shoulder, listening to her breathing until he drifted off himself, finally content she was deep asleep)

_Nope. We aren't thinking about that tonight, Henry, back in the closet we go._

He started out of the melancholy thoughts at Nick’s command, grip almost loosened on the biscuits before he regained it, fingers pressing harshly into its sides.

Into the closet, indeed.

His new cage, as it were.

The door was already open a crack from him leaving, enough so it didn't create any loud noises when he opened it with one hand, stepping inside and -

There was a man, sitting in his untidy pile of blankets, leaning back against the wall, hands folded behind his head.

_What?_

He froze at the sight, eyes widening at him, intent to bolt before he saw the newcomer’s face more clearly.

Red hair, cropped short, blue eyes, a faint coat of freckles, that same mischievous grin somehow forever-plastered onto his face… he knew exactly who this was, even if the last time he saw the boy, he was a child.

Joey Zalewski, grown and in the flesh, sitting in the closet.

“How there. So you’re what all the fuss is about?”

He gaped for a moment, no words coming out of his throat at the casual nature of the words.

_Nick?!_

_Let me handle this, I'll speak to him - t-this is Joey, remember._

He shut the door behind them after a moment, a complete afterthought, still wordlessly standing there before his throat opened enough to allow some jumbled words out.

One question layered itself over the next: “Wha- I thought you… were in the bathroom? Dennis-told you?”

Joey scoffed. The grin metamorphosed into a smirk. “He didn’t have to. I did some sneaking about
while Trev made them lunch. Gotta tell you, man, get it out of the way- you’re just adorable when you’re asleep.”

“I- uh, thank you? …You- watched me sleep?” Unwittingly he blushed at the idea, untimely embarrassment taking the place of panic at the words.

But it was preferable to a fever blush, too.

Nonchalant as you like, Joey shrugged. “Just a minute or two, then I closed the door. I don’t think Dennis would’ve liked that I found you before he was ready to say anything. Like I was snooping for presents before Christmas or some shit.”

“I don't think- he would’ve liked that much… and now you waited for me, in here?” He shuffled aside a few steps, edging toward the opposite corner of the blanket heap to sit down - as far away as he could manage. Might as well be comfortable, if Joey intended on speaking, right?

He didn’t look like he was in a hurry to leave, at least.

“Just wanted to say hey. Anything wrong with that?” Sitting forward, bordering on nonplussed, Joey unfolded his arms, held out a hand. “Joey Z. And you are?”

He crouched down, taking his hand without speaking. What should he say?

Hi, I'm Nick - I'm the one who actually speaks. Henry is shyer, you'll be able to tell when he's in charge. Maybe you remember a story about your Henry Deaver, from your childhood? …Yeah? I'm not the same guy.

Perhaps something a little shorter than that, something much simpler. Not as incriminating or mystifying?

“I'm… I'm Nick.” He sat down after taking his hand back, bin of biscuits still snug in his lap.

Scooting back into his own corner, Joey nodded and refolded his hands. “Just Nick, huh? No last name basis? That’s cool. Probably better if I don’t know, right?”

“B-better? Probably… best for just first names now.”

How awkward would it be if I opened this container up right now, Henry?

Very awkward, but I say go for it. It’d be more awkward to just sit here.

He did so, popping it open as quietly as possible. Should he offer one to Joey, or just start eating? What was polite, and what was rude?

Either way, the redheaded man didn’t seem immediately interested. He only raised his eyebrows at the sound of the vacuum lid going.

For a time, there was no sound besides the gentle snores of the married couple in the adjoining bedroom.

All they were missing inside the closet was a singing cricket.

“...What? I say something funny?”

“Biscuits,” he said, before mentally slapping himself. Was that the best he could come up with? Uh, check. Who was he, again? The snarky, aggressive one who could trade wits with Dennis on
He held one up for a moment, before asking, haltingly as before, “How much- do you know? Not… much?”

Joey snorted, a light amused sniff that spoke of louder laughter he was undoubtedly smothering. “Depends, Bones. What d’you mean by ‘know’? How much has Dennis actually told me?”

“I’m guessing nothing… but you probably could put some stuff together on your own?” he phrased it like a question, taking a hesitant bite out of the biscuit in his hands afterwards.

But he didn’t take his eyes off his visitor.

“You’re something to do with his work, I figured,” Joey replied, eyebrow arched. “Am I right?”

“Y-yes… but I wasn’t a prisoner, in the normal sense.” he admitted, shrugging at his own words. “I was… falsely imprisoned.”

“Uh huh… I got that much. Who else would Dennis rent out his closet to besides a good guy? You been here long?”

“A couple days, I think? I was really sick when I first got here, spent it on the couch. This is the first time I’ve been in the closet.” He gave Joey a weak smile though, finishing his first biscuit. “It’s cozy, though, I like it.”

“Cozy’s one word, yeah,” Joey agreed, casual as ever. “So the couch with the biohazard sign on it, wrapped in crime scene tape, that was your doing?”

He fought another shamed blush, along with a self-depreciative smile. “It was, yeah… sorry, if you had to sleep on it, I fever sweated through that thing in no time.”

Scoffing, Joey waves dismissively. “No worries there, dude. Em told us to steer clear, we listened. Besides, Whirly’s passenger compartment works for me. And here is the only other place you could go? Guess they didn’t want to break in the new crib just yet.”

“I think I’m a bit too tall for the crib.” He smiled again, imagining them trying (most absurdly) to fit in a crib. Who knew there could be tighter quarters than the cage? “You might be better for that. Whirly… that’s what you came in on, shook the whole house?”

Sent Dennis into a screaming tizzy right quick.

Joey beamed at the mention. “Better her than a cab, huh? Dennis didn’t care for it, but he rarely has for any bright idea I’ve ever had.”

“Well, I guess it’s better than spending money on a plane ticket… Dennis sounded quite angry, though. But it worked out? You’ll be staying here, with Trevor?”

Answering in stride, despite the rapid change of subjects, Joey only paused to stretch his arms, as a cat would it’s forelegs. “A few weeks, long enough to see Em doesn’t covertly strangle Den somewhere between here and the hospital on the big day. She’s such a small gal, her condition now is almost silly.”

“Doesn't stop her any, though,” he muttered, remembering conversations he had with her before, the way she could give commands out and have them followed, without question or room for doubt. “She's- fiery, if anything.”
“Again, that’s one word for her. But that tyke ought to keep her slowed down long enough to feed and change occasionally. Not to mention…” Joey trailed off, raising both eyebrows again. “How long you thinking of crashing here?”

*How long? Nick, it’s barely been three days.*

*I know, I know, Joey just doesn't know the whole situation, don't panic.*

“Not sure,” he admitted after the pause. “There's a lot of…circumstances, about me that- are hard to figure out. I haven't been out in society for a long time.”

*Or out anywhere, really.*

Eyes roving with thought, Joey seemed to appreciate the gravity of that statement. “So… what’s your story, the short version? I know, Dennis brought you home from the pound, but how’d you get there?”

Hmm… a super condensed version may do, right? We can leave a lot out, the more… supernatural parts. *Keep it vague, no names besides Dennis… that may work.*

“Someone thought I was the- reason Castle Rock was evil, full of so many problems, or I was the Devil, something like that. They- they built a cage, in Shawshank, where no one would find it and then…” He shrugged, unsure of what else to say. “They managed to get me down there, kept me locked up for awhile until they - died. Dennis found me by luck, before I could die myself.”

“But you still came close- to dying?”

“Starving,” he said softly, but didn’t allow himself to feel any leftover fear from the word. There was still Henry to think about, unsure of the unfolding encounter as he still felt. “Almost starved to death down there.”

“Then… what? They just let you go, after running a background check?”

“Um… not exactly. I hurt someone else, a prison guard, so they kept me until they grew too paranoid and well, let me out. Shoved off a bridge while I had a fever, of course - because nothing can be easy.” He huffed at the memory of just what had happened. How much was too much to share with Joey? If it was, he couldn’t take it back now. “Then I managed to make it here… and that's my story.”

“How are you not dead?” For the first time, some genuine disbelief seemed to color Joey’s expression. “I mean… no offense, but… you’re thinner than a toothpick.”

*Well, you see, Joey, we have a malevolent cosmic entity keeping us alive - and yes, I mean us. You know Henry Deaver?*

No. He couldn’t just come out and say that.

“No idea. Luck of the draw? A miracle?” He gestured at the container of biscuits in his lap, grabbing another one. “All I know is that *this* is much better than regular bread.”

End of story.

Question mark?

True to form, Joey didn’t simply let the matter drop. Without waiting for an offer he reached over
and plucked a biscuit out for himself. “That’s some luck, man. I’ve heard of lost spelunkers who’ve had it easier, stranded for a week in a caved-in tunnel.”

“Hey, those people decided to go down there,” He shook his head at the idea of putting oneself in that situation. Him and Henry liked a confined, cozy space, but a cave? That was a no go. “They’re all sorts of crazy.”

“Crazier than someone thinking one guy is to blame for Castle Rock’s three-hundred years plus of hardships?”

Interesting question. Would your opinion change, if you knew who was along for the ride with us?

“...Not crazier than that, no. But pretty high up there in my book, at least.”

Pondering this, Joey took a delayed bite out of the biscuit, cutting it down to half its size. “Caving is the opposite kind of fun for me, too. I always wanted to go up.”

Mountain-climbing park ranger turned helicopter pilot. Was that really so hard to believe?

“You must really enjoy Whirly, then, getting to be so high up. I'm good with neither for right now - this closet is fine for me.”

“Middle ground? Must feel pretty good, after what you’ve been through.”

“It does. Plus the added benefits of good food, and all these blankets - I lucked out, meeting Dennis.” He took the moment of quiet to stuff a whole biscuit in his mouth, not very much caring for what Joey would think of the behavior - hunger outweighed his manners, sometimes.

Finishing his own morsel, flicking crumbs aside, Joey paused long enough to let quiet settle. His gaze wandered toward the slats in the door. “Sounds like it. He feels the same, I'm guessing - glad he was able to actually help someone for a change, not just lock a door on them.”

“He's a good person. Shouldn't be working in Shawshank, that's for sure, but…” He shrugged. Where else would he work and truly be able to provide for his growing family? “It's Castle Rock.”

Or at least, this version. Mine was far better off when I came back. Still had its share of troubles, but... what town doesn't?

I know, Henry. This place is just... depressing, and we haven't even truly been in town yet. It has that... feel. No wonder Em stays home with all her books.

“I know I couldn’t wait to leave,” Joey lamented, still safely ignorant of the parallels playing havoc with Deaver’s perspective(s). “You can only climb Black Mountain so many times.”

“Now you can climb anywhere you want,” he replied, some deep seated instinct to calm and soothe arising. That was what he was created for, right? No wonder it came out every time he heard even a hint of distress or melancholy, in himself or others - he was always on the lookout for it with Henry. “And you have your own chopper.”

“Got what I wanted, even if it took several years.” Musing, Joey’s mood seemed to grow somber before he shook it off with a shrug. “Whirly was a lucky break, really. No way I could have afforded her pricetag, plus expenses.”

“Good for you, then, right?” The instinct rose, almost crashing over him with some overwhelming amount of concern, a need to see the man feel better right now. It shrank back with him shaking the
mood off, leaving him tired for a moment. “Lucky, to have her.”

Joey raised an eyebrow, probably at the agitated insistence in his voice, but nodded all the same. “Sure. But I’m not… bothering you, am I? You always get so- fixated?”

*Nick.* Tone it down. He doesn’t need such reassurance. He never has.

*I know,* he said, slightly abashed at himself. So far it had always been Henry who stumbled in conversations, unsure of what to do or say. For him to be the one misstepping, insisting on getting his own reassurance on Joey’s emotional state, it felt odd. *I just - it doesn’t switch off sometimes.*

“No, I’m fine. S-sometimes, I guess… I like making sure people are okay. Always have, I guess. You sounded - somber, for a moment.”

Joey scoffed lightly. “I get that way from time to time. Don’t worry. With highs come the lows, like Mom always said. It’s only natural to veer from one to the next. Peaks and valleys, zigs and zags… other poetic metaphors.”

“I can understand that,” he muttered. How many dramatic mood swings had Henry undergone just in the past week or so? Enough to leave him exhausted, swinging from panicked to elated, happy to unconsolable in a matter of minutes, seconds. “As long as you’re okay.”

“Pft, I am, man. Again, worry for yourself. If I swing too far one way, Dennis or Trev always get me back on track.” The smirk reappeared. “I made it here without kamikazing into any cliffs, yeah?”

“That’s true, at least. The fact you made it here at all, in Whirly, will no doubt stay with me the rest of my life.”

Joey snorted, stifling another laugh. The overly-literal, straight-faced response was funny in its own right. “Dude. You’re just mocking me now.”

…Are we?

*I don’t think so - that moment of panic while the whole house rocked will stay with me at least.*

“You think? I was just sleeping in here, when all of the sudden the house started shaking… it’s seared into my memory, for real.” He grinned at Joey, breaking another biscuit in half to eat it.

“What? Nothing so exciting ever happened in Shawshank? I topped all of that?”

*Nothing we can share with you, no.*

*And in that cage - the walls dripping water were usually the most exciting parts of our days.*

“Hmm… perhaps not all of it, but definitely a jolt awake for me. Was at least an interesting first introduction with just who you are, Joey.”

*Of course we already knew, but it was nice to be re-introduced. It's nice to talk to you, Joey. Even if you're just as borderline-*

“Most would call me crazy, but I’m used to it. Nice to meet you, too, Nick. I just didn’t think, with how secretive Dennis was acting about you, the less intimidating an intro I could give, the easier both of us would get by it. Make sense?”

“Makes sense, although you still gave me a scare just sneaking in here,” he teased, popping half of
the biscuit in his mouth before speaking around it. “And watching me sleep - not cool, man.”

“It was just the one time. Promise, I won’t make a habit of it. If I feel the urge I’ll go stare at Trev. He loves waking up to me hovering.”

Hmph. Except when he doesn’t.

“I’m sure he loves that. I don’t have any siblings, but something tells me they don’t exactly enjoy it when you do things like that to them, Joey - just my advice.”

“Noted, sir. In my defense, I did have to make his life somewhat miserable, at least starting out. All older siblings are contractually obligated to. And Dennis would agree with me.”

_How many times did he practice that one in front of the mirror each day?_

_Enough so that he can automatically defend himself._

“How many times did he practice that one in front of the mirror each day? Enough so that he can automatically defend himself.

“Noted as well. I never got the memo, sorry, since I didn't have siblings. Well, I hope you're better to each other now that you're adults, but I heard some of the yelling outside - didn't sound too playful.”

“No, that’s just the usual dust-up that happens whenever we see each other. Mom and Dad’s funeral? I slugged Dennis before I hugged him.” Closing his mouth with a sharp click, Joey realized what he let slip. “Sorry, I… that was just one of the last times we’ve seen each other, before now.”

“It's okay. I'm sorry for your loss.” He bit his lip, unsure of whether he should bring up his own dead sort-of-parent. Matthew was awful to Henry, of course, but the boy still loved him, for a long time, believed he was his actual father. That kind of imprint would never completely vanish. “My-sort of dad, he passed away as well. Very differently, though, I'm sure… I didn't exactly care.”

“Your sort of dad?” Joey repeated. The vernacular got his attention quick. “What d'you mean?”

Unsurprisingly, Henry objected: _Nick, you don't have to go there. Joey's no worse or better off not knowing everything Dennis does._

_I won't tell him the full truth, don't worry. Just - me trying to reassure... as always. You of all people know its my greatest strength and biggest flaw._

He shrugged, keeping the story as vague as possible. “He wasn't my real dad, I thought he was. He was abusive, though, so I didn't really care when he died. I am sorry to hear about your parents.”

Joey’s expression screwed up at the cryptic reply, but he didn’t pry. “Thanks. So was I. Can’t say I was as teary as I should’ve been. But it was cold that day. Didn’t want to have to mop my face in minus 20° temperatures.”

“Too chilly for that, I understand. Grieve the way you want to grieve, who cares what others think. No such thing as being too teary or not enough.”

“Right. I gotta tell that to Dennis. He needs a reminder.” Stretching his arms again, Joey shifted position, leaning against the tower of cardboard boxes to his left. “You gonna eat all those in one go?”

_We shouldn't. Ever heard of the refeeding effect, Nick? It could actually kill us-._
I know, Henry. What you know, I know. I'll be careful, I promise.

“No,” he sighed, setting the container aside. “Knock yourself out, if you want some more. Still gotta get more of an appetite up.”

Leaning forward, Joey grabbed both the container and its lid. He took one more biscuit before snapping the top on right. “Not too much, too fast, yeah? Even if you're effectively- you really should be in a hospital. A stiff breeze would blow you over.”

“No. No hospital, no police - nothing.” He took a deep breath after his words, forcing his hands to uncurl from the fists they had become - definitely Henry's doing. Their palms would be littered with half crescent cuts if it continued. “I can't- have anyone else know I'm alive, sorry.”

Joey looked equal parts startled and exasperated. “Because you got tossed out like yesterday’s garbage? I get it, man. Chillax. They think you’re dead, we’ll keep it that way.”

“Thank you. Sorry, I didn't mean to- to freak out on you, Joey. I just… don't know what will happen, to me or Dennis if anyone finds out.”

“Something will, just nothing good. I can figure out that much, too, bud.” Popping the biscuit in his mouth, Joey crossed his legs. The heels of his white-socked feet brushed the closed door. “Mind if I get comfortable, stay a while? This beats going out in the cold, or listening to Trevor snore.”

“You can stay in here, of course. We can both sleep, although I’d say it would be best if you left before Dennis or Emilia get up and check on me - that might be a bit… awkward.” He settled himself into a more comfortable position, burrowing under two of the blankets and leaving one underneath him.

“Hm. Awkward is my middle name, N. And the story of this town. I don’t think we need to worry there.” Wadding up a spare linen into a roll, Joey shifted sideways to lay down, tucked it behind his neck. Another he draped over his lower half. “Promise, no footsie play, either.”

Um… you don’t find this a little… weird, Nick?

Yes, it is a little weird. But I'm not gonna tell him he can't sleep in here, when there's enough room. It's his brother’s house. We'll be fine, Henry, I promise.

“Goodnight, then, Joey. Nice to… meet you, and all that.”

“Back at'cha, Bones.”

It must not have proved too weird after all. Within five minutes, both of them were out like lights.

——-

It was actually sunny today, a completely cloudless sky, but a chill still permeated the air.

Walking to school wasn't usually tough for him - he ended up a little sweaty, a little breathless, but never in any bad capacity. The worse was in the winter, when snow caked the iced-over sidewalks, making it hard to find a clear, non slippery path through. It was twice as much work to walk.

But even then, it was never as bad as he felt now.

He had done the clip between his backpack straps for the first time ever perhaps, hanging onto them for dear life as he staggered every couple of steps.
The cool weather should have felt nice on his skin, but instead it felt like no amount of chill could take away the fever-heat roiling in his body, only serving to make him somehow feel hotter inside. Sweat on his face, exposed to the frigid temperatures, was instant shivering fuel.

Mom told him to stay home with Dad, listen to what he said and sleep the illness away - but that wasn't going to happen.

Not if he could help it. At least in school he could rest an hour or two, instead of dragging himself through the forest on the lookout for phantom voices, right?

A siren blared behind him, one sharp whoop that almost startled him into a fall, just barely catching himself.

*Ah, shit. Alan - Mom musta figured out.*

He thought about running for a brief moment, before discarding it. If he did, Alan would get upset and tell mom, then Ruth would get upset and she might tell dad, and who knew how Matthew would react?

He didn't want to find out. So instead, he slowed to a halt, crossing his arms in frustration as the siren wailed again, two short blips before Alan's police cruiser sidled up onto the side of the street he was on.

*Time to brace myself... he's not going to be happy.*

He sighed, wiping a mittened hand across his sweaty face before walking up to the passenger side door as it rolled down. Alan Pangborn peered back up at him through the window, face a mix of concern and disappointment.

“So, you thought you’d just go to school, Henry? And your mother wouldn't find out?” he asked, one eyebrow raised at him. Something in his stomach dropped at the look, making him almost want to cry - although that was probably just his feverish mind messing with his emotions.

“Maybe,” he said, a touch breathless. “I was gonna try.” Alan shook his head at him, letting out a long sigh of his own at what he was seeing.

“You're sick, Henry. Only kid I know trying to go to school when they can't… get in, I'm taking you home.” The sheriff gestured to the door, indicating for him to open it.

*No way. I don't care what you say, Alan - you don't know what Dad is like.*

“No - I'm fine, I really can go to school, I promise,” he begged, but took a step toward the car anyways. “Look, I feel so much better.”

“Well, you look terrible, kid. Get in the car, you know I'm not asking. Jesus, you getting any sleep nowadays?”

*No, but I bet you can't guess why.*

“Yes, I get sleep,” he said crossly, opening up the car door to slide in. He had been driven around by Alan so many times he didn't even have to think about how to buckle, or unlock the door. “Not that it's your business.”

“Huh. That's some attitude you got there, kid.” But the sheriff didn't sound angry at him, only concerned and perhaps a tad taken aback. “I'll call the principal. They’ll be on the lookout for you,
if you try this crap again. Doubt they’d appreciate you sharing the germs. You need some rest, take a nap when I drop you off, okay?”

“You know I don’t want to go back there, Sheriff.”

“Well… if you told me why, maybe I could help?” Alan said the words gently, but they both knew it was futile. Trying to get him to talk was futile - there were some things he would never crack on. But the cop in him had to at least try and fish for some legal wrongdoings. “You gotta help me, help you-”

“Take me home, please, sir, if you're gonna.”

Best to get this over with. Perhaps Dad will finish up early, and I can go back in bed, actually sleep for awhile… that would be nice.

Alan watched him out of the corner of his eye for a moment as he set his bag down and buckled up.

“…Okay, kid, we're goin’. Just know you can talk to me, all right? I'm here for you, just like your Mom.”

He didn't mention Dad, of course. He may not know everything, but cops are smart like that - they can tell. At least on TV they can.

“Sure.” The car started up, a familiar faint roar as it did so filling his ears. Half the time he welcomed it, but other times, like today, he hated that sound.

He knew it meant he would be back with Matthew, soon enough.

——-

Initial rattlers set aside, Dennis managed to fall asleep, knowing everyone was where they should be. And no paths had crossed between them without his direct supervision.

Then he woke up to see the closet - left open a crack the night before - was completely shut.

Arms around her pillow, Emilia didn’t stir as he slid out from under the comforter. Once again, she seemed to be banking hours of sleep rather efficiently since Deaver reappeared at their house. If the baby was feeling any shared stress, it wasn’t translating into her.

Again, how steady she was proving to be about every latent twist and turn to their life was remarkable.

Stepping past the foot of the bed, Dennis stopped short, rethinking the strange impulse to knock on the closet door. Since when had he cause to ever do that?

He pulled the door open a few inches, trying to will it to sound quieter, looked, then paused.

Well. Didn’t expect that.

Conked out, mouth agape, Joey rested against the back of the space, head wedged into a corner. He managed to look bizarrely relaxed, limbs splayed all about, bent at every last joint, a blanket draped over his front.

“It’s not what it looks like.”

Hand still on the doorknob, Dennis glanced left, then down.
Deaver’s eyes were closed, but undoubtedly he was awake, folded up in the only other available corner of the closet, seemingly trying to avoid being hit by any flailing limbs. No less than three blankets were wound around him.

Blinking out of his latest disbelieving stupor, Dennis managed a soft half laugh. “I-I didn’t say it was.”

“You were thinking it… promise, this was just sleeping.” Deaver’s eyes opened then, gingerly stretching his legs as far as they would go without accidentally bumping into any part of Joey.

“Regardless, I take it you two have met?”

“We met, yes - well, he met me. Not Henry yet… wasn't sure how much we should tell him.”

“Good call.” Standing back, Dennis gestures toward the bedroom. “You wanna step out for a minute, to talk?”

“Uh, sure.” He blinked before throwing the blankets off of himself as carefully as possible - no reason to wake Joey up when he was still fast asleep. He got to his feet in a few seconds, shuffling past Dennis and into the bedroom without hesitation.

Closing the closet up, Dennis folded his arms, taking an appraising look up and down. Odd how in only a few days’ time he had forgotten just how much taller the former prisoner was (still taller than Joey, as the comparisons turned out). “You feeling better? Face not hurting so much?”

Because it had become practically customary to ask.

“My face feels fine, yes. I feel a lot better than a couple days ago, thank you.” Before Deaver might have awkwardly stood in front of him, shaking, unsure of where to look or how to act, but a couple of days rest and hygienic care seemed to make a world of difference for his comfort. Or perhaps that was just Nick - able to force their body into being comfortable anywhere, for Henry’s sake. That’s what he was there for - to bear the hurt.

“Physically, you must,” Dennis acquiesced. “What about the old noggin? Things settle down in there yet?”

“It’s been quiet,” he said, before he frowned slightly. “Henry - he's been… okay. Adapting well, I think.”

“Well as he can, considering?” Wiping one last stubborn bit of fogginess from his eyes, Dennis ran a hand across his face. “I know, we already went over this, and you’re probably already sick of hearing it, but… you don’t think it’ll be a problem? The two of you, and Red?”

“I don't think so,” The semi-frown transformed into a full one. “As long as I'm here, Henry will be safe. And Red can be reasonably taken care of - Henry just has to learn how to not listen.”

“Em told me you know - about Valerie Boyd.”

He stiffened almost entirely at the name, eyes boring into his face - on the look for any sign of anger or disappointment, any hint of negative emotion. Whatever he saw, the man didn't comment on, instead loosening after a moment and replying.

“We saw her- by Chris’s bed,” he admitted, one hand raising to his mouth, as if to bite the nails. “Em was- thinking about Jackie, and then about her… we didn't mean to look, i-it just happened. We don't mean for a lot to happen, it just… does.”
“That how it’s been all along - something about jumping timelines, having Red around, you can read minds when the mood takes you?”

“What’re you getting at?” From anyone else the words may have sounded angry or hostile, but from Deaver's mouth they sounded fearful. “Do you… not believe us? We really don't mean to-read minds, we promise.”

Dennis resisted the urge to fold his arms. He didn’t want to look the part of a stern, disapproving host. Not here. “Man, I’ve seen too much at this point to not believe you. It’s convincing everyone else that’s the hard part. Emilia was easy enough, she’s so open minded, and so is Joey, even if you haven’t given him the full version. That just leaves Trevor. And if mine’s anything like the version you knew, you know he’s a born-and-bred skeptic.”

Deaver did bite his nails at that - Nick showing off the agitation Henry must have felt. “I… but I don’t know how to prove it, without giving Red control.” He shrugged helplessly. “And I don't wanna do that ever again. But - I'm not supernatural. Trevor would at least believe me? That I'm different from Henry?”

“That’s a start. I mean, not that any of us are licensed quacks, it’s just- there’s no other word for what you are. Em did some digging- dissociative identities typically defy psychiatric definition. We could say you’re that without bringing up any mentions of- of demons or ghosts or jumping dimensions, right? You’ve just had a rough go about it.”

Deaver nodded slowly at his words. “That sounds good to me. If he accepts that much, I think Henry will feel much more at ease. Joey will, too, I'm guessing, from the type of stuff he said. Has he… ever been diagnosed? With anything?”

“Joey?” Dennis couldn’t help repeating it, as though his little brother’s name was synonymous with a disorder or disease. “Yeah, he has a perpetually bad case of not knowing his limits, is all. Yesterday? Blows in here on a chopper, unannounced- that’s just his usual brand of- nuts.”

“Henry thinks…” He trailed off, before shrugging again. “Henry was just wondering if he’s ever been actually diagnosed. The brain, the mind, all that stuff - he loves it, knows a lot about it.”

“Putting on his neuro airs, is he?” Chancing a look at the closet, waiting until he heard one fresh snore, Dennis explained, “Well, besides that, what would Henry say if I told you our mother was bipolar?”

…know what crazy looks like...

Deaver's eyes lit up, face going blank for a moment before a shyer expression appeared on it, back curving as if to make himself smaller. Henry making his appearance to explain, then.

“Bipolar disorder is somewhat genetic,” he said, in a voice much less confident than Nick’s, but still excited, eager to speak on something he was knowledgeable in. “If someone in your family has it, you have an increased likelihood of being diagnosed bipolar yourself. I mean, I can't diagnose Joey, formally, but you saying that and his general behavior, what I saw, would indicate something akin to a bipolar disorder.”

Dennis shook his head. “He’s never had an episode that severe as I’ve seen, though. Mom used to spend days just laying in bed. And her mood swings, she never got a wild hair and went out to raze Castle Rock to the ground.”

“I do-don’t know,” Henry's mood seemed to deflate, not yet ready to engage in any discussion
where he would have to defend his opinion just yet. Even with Dennis it was that way, it seemed. “I don't know. I'm sorry about your mom, though - and father. Joey told us they passed away.”

On that subject Dennis couldn’t put off the rush of once-repressed emotions. His face burned two shades darker. But he could dodge it just as easily. “Thanks, but that’s a story for another time, pal. Right now you’d do well to go freshen up while everyone else is out. Brush teeth, comb hair, remember?”

“Okay. After that you want - us to meet Trevor and Joey? Formally?”

“Think you can handle that? The sooner we get it over with…” Dennis shrugged, sparing the half-unmade bed a look. “Em’s got an appointment today. Be a weight off her mind, knowing you all’ve been introduced.”

Weight off her mind. And mine.

“I can handle that,” he said, sounding more certain than before. “Emilia doesn't have to worry about me, or Nick. You'll be… going with her, I'm guessing?”

“Well, I’m not gonna make her drive.”

“And leave Joey in charge… or Trevor - that would be the better choice.” A faint smile found its way onto Deaver’s furrow-lined face. “I'll get ready now, and let Nick take the lead again. He's better with new people.”

“No one’s in charge, man. It’s just the three- four of you, guests in the house. You can all be adults about it, right?”

*Even Joey - yes, even he can be kind of responsible. What’s his alternative here? I’m not about to bring him along to uphaul the waiting room. “Den, the magazines are all three weeks old.” “So read from your phone, dipstick.” “Ohhh…”*

“I wouldn't be sure about that. One youngest brother, one middle brother with a clear problem with sitting still, plus two identities in one body… might just spell recipe for disaster.” He smiled before hastily adding, “But we'll be fine, I'm sure.”

“Well. When you put it like that, of course it sounds like a bad idea.” Dennis smirked. “Wouldn’t be my first one, though. Far from it.”

“We'll be fine, I'm sure. Put Nick in charge, he can handle the responsibility,” His smile widened. “He's basically a big brother anyways.”

“Ey, don’t get too full of yourself. Around here, you’re both little bro stats, at best.”

The smile froze, then fell flat. “At best?” He scoffed. “Sure, I can accept I may be lowest on the totem pole, but Nick is definitely higher. Between you and Joey, I would say.”

“Sorry, but Joey won’t go for it. He’s always been protective of his secondborn title.”

“He likes Nick well enough, we can convince him to hand it over.” There was a moment of quiet before he sighed. “Might as well get this over, then, if it’s going to happen. We'll get cleaned up in the bathroom.”

“Good. And don’t think you gotta hide behind Nick all the time. Joey will give you a fair shake, too. And whatever he and I say is cool, Trev usually follows. Just- be relaxed about it.”
“Maybe… maybe they can meet both of us,” Deaver suggested, taking a few steps toward the door leading out into the hallway. “Maybe I'll be - introduced, then Nick can take the lead.”

“Sure, man. Play it by ear.” Reasonably confident in this plan, Dennis waved him on. “Now go on, before Trev wakes up.”

With one last glance over his shoulder Deaver left the room.

A second later, Dennis heard the closet door creak, and felt his heart momentarily stall out. “Bro, who the hell were you just talking to?”
The next morning went about as well as any of us could expect.

That is, we had no idea what to expect. So to say it went well is already - by default - a gross overstatement.

But, for all the stressors, no one got bit. I’ll take my victories where I can.

As best he could, Dennis explained ‘who’ he was talking to. It was surprisingly easy. Joey’s mouth actually stayed shut long enough to give him ample time to put on a defense. Which, as it turned out, was time enough for Emilia and Trevor to also wake up.

And an untimely coincidence for Trevor to practically run into Henry Deaver at the bathroom door. Were the toothbrush not crammed into his mouth, Henry surely would’ve yelped in fright. They stared each other down in frozen uncertainty for at least ten seconds.

Instead of saying hello, Deaver closed the door in Trevor’s dumbfounded, round-eyed face.

Dennis spent the next twenty minutes trying to convince him to unlock it.

( Maybe twenty minutes was hyperbole. In reality it was closer to five. )

In a word, Joey was elated.

“Dude! So you not only adopted, you adopted that guy from Split .”

“Not helping, Joey. Shut it.” Knowing pounding on the door was next to useless, Dennis tried the knob again. It didn’t budge. He braced a shoulder and shoved, to no avail. “I’ve got bigger-problems right now. Henry?”

“Give me a minute, I’ll be out.” Deaver's voice didn't sound too frightened, at least - which meant Nick was most likely in charge, perhaps trying to calm Henry down inside the locked room.

Room and mind, that is.

Calming Henry down was always a long ordeal, if nothing else.

Nick didn't blame him. Spending your early childhood abused, then twenty-seven years in a cage, it made sense why the man would spiral into despair the way he did. That didn't mean it didn’t exhaust him , though, being the one in charge of bringing Henry back into working shape.

But that’s what he was created for, right?

His reaction time was quicker than Henry's, shutting and locking the door on Trevor as fast as he could. The toothbrush was still in their mouth so he took it out, placing it onto the sink with shaking hands - Henry's nerves, no doubt.
He barely remembered to spit the barely-used dosage of toothpaste out, rinsing it away with tap water.

*So, that didn't quite go as expected,* he began before the man could say anything. *But that doesn't mean we should -*

*Dennis didn't want him to see us yet, though, and we ruined it - what if he gets mad? What if we just messed everything up?!*

Their fists had curled against his will, jagged nails from being bitten pressing hard into his palms.

*We didn't mess anything up, Henry - none of us could have known Trevor was going to walk in like that. Calm down, okay?*

His hands uncurled after a shaky beat, enough so that he could press them flat against the sink. Best to not give Henry any more opportunities to physically show his panic and nervousness.

*I can't,* Henry cried out in his mind, loudly enough to make him grit his teeth. But that was as worse as it would get, he knew - a moment of panic before he would allow himself to be reassured back into a placid state of mind. *I don't want anything bad to happen, or for Dennis to get mad at us -*

There was a knock on the door that cut the thought off.

They both paused for a moment, neither sure of what to do before Henry stepped away, letting him clear his throat and ask his question.

“H-hello?”

“Henry, it’s Dennis. Open up.”

*No, no, Nick, please. Buy me a minute, please?*

...*Fine, let's calm you down first.*

“It's Nick,” he called back, still facing away from the door. “Henry needs some- time, sorry.”

He heard a clamor, a shuffle of feet, before another higher voice piped up. Thankfully it was not directed at them.

“The *fuck* is going on, Dennis? Who is that?”

A third soon joined them - a lighter voice that practically had a skip to its step.

“G’morning, Trev! See you guys have met… or, are you still getting there?”

*Still getting there,* he thought - not bitterly, just a bit exasperated. *Henry, how about we open the door -*

*No. Give m-me a minute, please.*

...*Fine.*

“Good morning,” he called back to Emilia (assuming it was her - who else could it be?). “Just Nick so far, I think… Henry needs a moment.”
Trevor practically spluttered in disbelief - just as they thought he would. “Who the… is there someone else in there besides him?”

“Nick, it’s Joey, not Em. You mishearing things all of a sudden?”

...And the cat is out of the bag, if it wasn’t already. “Joey, this is Henry. He would say nice to meet you, but he’s in a bit of a meltdown right now.”

“Sorry, it’s just - stressful, right now… with Henry.” No better way to say it, right? Joey would find out anyways, no need to hide it.

Dennis piped up while he had a chance. “It’s okay, Deaver. You don’t gotta lock the door.”

Toothpaste washed away, he shut the faucet off. “I know, I just- did it because Henry was freaking out. He's not ready yet, but I promise he will be.”

Now, perhaps? Dennis is here, we'll be safe.

But you just told Joey and Trevor about us, Henry thought back fearfully, but sounding much calmer than before - marginally. What if - they don't believe us?

It's a chance we took with Dennis and Emilia, we can take it again, Henry.

“-ck, seriously, it’s nothing to be scared of out here. Just us.” Joey’s try at consolation was nearly on par with Dennis’. “Trev’s only a little spooked. It’s fine.”

“I know, but Henry doesn't,” he muttered, mostly to himself. “We won't lock ourselves in here all day, I promise.”

I won't let that happen again. No self-designated cages, all right?

That's not what this is, Nick, I promise. You're the one who locked the door.

For you - he cut himself off. Getting into arguments was not going to help their situation any. Nevermind, I'm sorry. In a minute we'll go out there.

“All day?” He heard Trevor repeat that in a near-whisper. “He’s been- staying here?”

Dennis sighed, resigned. “Long story, Trev. We’ll get to it soon enough.”

He turned away from the sink, inching his way closer to the door. Henry didn't protest, just shrank back further in his mind, as far away as he could get.

“We'll come out soon,” he said, one hand almost touching the door. “Henry is ready… I think.”

“Who is he talking about?”

“T, you saw the movie, right? The guy’s pulling a Kevin Crumb on us.”

“I didn’t see the movie, Joey. You’re gonna have to give me something like a real answer here, or I’m calling the cops.”

His hand shrank back, lightning-quick, at the mention of cops. Henry was not happy to hear that one, and for once he agreed - no cops.

He's going to call the police on us, Nick! And we know how Castle Rock is, and remember what
happened last time with cops? With Dennis?

Don’t you dare do this right now, this Dennis isn’t going to hurt us, he won’t let the cops be called - He took a stumbling step back from the door, back knocking into the sink.

There were few subjects that panicked both of them in equal measure, but cops was one of them.

The two older Zalewskis jumped to their rescue, fortunately enough.

“Trev, no police.”

“It’s under control, man. You don’t gotta be afraid of him.”

The youngest brother fired back in short order: “It’s not about being afraid, Dennis. Did you take a look at that face? He could pass for the fucking Grim Reaper! And you’re saying he’s welcome?”

Are we welcome? What if Dennis changes his mind? What if he does call the cops? What if- what if it’s Alan?!

(And then a flash of a trunk and his father opening it up, finally he was safe, but there was no recognition in the sheriff’s eyes, no cry of “Henry!” there was just a sharp sort of curiosity and then hands on the hood of the trunk)

Calm. Down. I won’t let that happen, you know I won’t.

“No cops,” he called out. “Please, whatever you do - no cops.”

“What is going on here?”

Cutting through the bickering like a scythe taken to a clothesline, the fourth voice (much more noticeably feminine and accented to boot) was equal parts very welcome and very nerve-wracking to hear.

Predictably, Dennis answered first: “It’s under control, Em. Trev just ran into him.”

“‘Ran into’?” Emilia’s very tone demanded elaboration.

“Emilia, answers, please: just what the hell is this about?”

“Maybe the less asking you do, the sooner we’d get an intro, T.”

Emilia is here, she’s definitely not going to let anything happen, right, Henry? She won’t let the police be called.

“An introduction? So he has been here a while?”

“Just a few days, Trevor. We were going to tell you. Just- put the phone away. Please. It’s nothing to worry about, honestly.”

Giving you a little too much credit, is she, Nicky?

With as extraordinarily bad timing as ever, The Bad arrived without warning, sounding as smug and confident as always did.

Like the snake it epitomized.
Go away, go away, go away, he chanted in his head, too desperate to think of any more clever a response. He already had to calm Henry down from the commotion going on outside, he didn’t want to deal with any internal conflict as well. Go away, go away, go away, go -

“- away, go away, go away.” It took a moment for him to realize he was chanting the words aloud as well, fists already curled once again. A joint effort between him and Henry to block the entity out.

By the time he was of presence of mind to stop, the hissing had subsided. The shallow sea went back to low tide. No longer did it look like a bone dry desert, but the ocean was reappearing, in reverse. The heat of the fever was replaced, degree by degree, with cold uncertainty.

Just as his health improved, hour by hour, so did The Bad’s grasp.

Listening, he noticed - with no small amount of confusion - things in the hall outside had gone quiet, too.

“...Dennis?”

“Henry. Please unlock the door. You’re safe. No one out here is gonna hurt you.”

...Do you wanna speak?

Sure, I’ll talk - to Dennis.

“N-no cops,” he said - voice changed from the switch of personality. Even panicked, Nick still sounded more certain and in control than he ever managed. “We d-don't want the cops, please.”

“There’s no cops, pal. There won’t be any cops. Not if I have anything to say about it. My house, my rules. Trev understands that. Right, Trevor?”

“...Yeah. Yeah, got it, Den. Sorry.”

“...Okay? I’m sorry he startled you. But doing this, locking doors on us- it doesn’t make it any better, right?”

“I know it doesn't, but…” he trailed off, shaking his head at his own thoughts. It was hard to explain, how almost locking himself in another cage of some sorts felt good, because that should be the opposite of what felt good, right? It was supposed to be bad, being so confined. “Nick wanted me to calm down.”

“Did it work? You sound… okay. I know, we made a ruckus out here. But that’s just what people do when they’re startled- make a lot of noise. We got a grip on ourselves now. How you doing?”

“I feel better. Just got… scared, because of what Nick said, telling them about me.”

“Well, they know now. Can’t unring that bell, pal. …Want to come out now, say hi? It’s safe, I promise.”

No one’s upset, see? Best to just - go on out there, get those awkward first few minutes over with.

...Okay.

“Okay,” he said, shuffling over to the door after a moment of hesitation. “We'll come out now.”

He turned the knob slowly, still unsure of whether he was truly ready or not - but really, would he
ever be? Like Nick said, it was better to get the first few minutes over and done with.

Can’t hide forever.

He opened the door fully, took a look around and almost went to close it again after seeing everyone’s faces, but Nick stopped him.

*No can do. Step outside, Henry, it's gonna be fine.*

He didn't reply to him, instead begrudgingly following the order and stepping out of the bathroom, back into the hallway with everyone else -

And immediately ducked for cover behind Dennis and Emilia.

Sensing the opportunity for a quip (because he always did, that radar was never off) Joey laughed. “Now, what’s this about?”

Both husband and wife turned to look at him, bewilderment mirrored off of each other’s faces. Emilia found her voice first: “Henry, you don’t have to hide.”

He didn't have to, but it felt better when he did. He shrugged nervously at her and Dennis, still attempting to do so even though he was much too tall to really effectively use them for cover.

Another relative irony to marvel at - the cage always made him feel so inept and small, with its too-low ceiling and box-like dimensions. He had virtually forgotten how relatively short the average person was to him, by comparison.

Looking at them now, side by side, compared to the likes of Joey and Trev, it was glaringly obvious. How ludicrous did he look, half stooped-over to hide his face behind Dennis’ shoulder?

In a word - very.

Grinning bemusedly, Joey didn’t seem to be laughing at him over it. More like the behavior in itself was funny. Looks aside, he wasn’t acting at all like an unwelcome houseguest.

More like the shy five-year-old caught by the well-meaning stares of four adults.

Chalk another one up on the irony board.

“So. This is the part where you explain to the audience, Dennis. …Go on, explain it.”

“Not before everyone takes time to- y’know. Em?”

Though she pulled a face at his suggestion, Emilia spared Deaver a sympathetic smile and a pat on the arm. There wasn’t anything she could say that he could respond to.

Trevor’s expression of horrified suspicion had dulled. He waited until after the bathroom door shut again, leaving the four men alone in the hall, before chancing a remark: “You brought home a stray inmate?”

Joey snorted - a barely-repressed laugh. “T, there’s no such thing.”

“Where else would he’ve come from?” Trevor squinted. “Unless by inmate I mean ‘escaped mental patient’?”
“Neither of the above, man.” Dennis stopped, hearing the muted whine Deaver couldn’t quite
smother, being so close to his ear. “Henry’s not dangerous.”

“Yeah, you want to ex-plain that now? Words. Phrases. How isn’t he? And just what the hell
happened, to make him look like- like that?”

One thin hand found its way to his arm, carefully wrapping around it and drawing Deaver closer to
him. It wasn’t a deathgrip, just a way to hold onto his protective shield, to make sure Dennis wasn't
going to leave him alone.

Of which he currently had no intention of. Joey still had Trevor’s phone in hand, a safeguard
against any sly, unseen cry to 911. But even if the middle brother knew more than the youngest,
Dennis supposed now was the only time he might get all three of them on the same page.

“It’s a long story, Trevor. More than I can put into a short, utterly-convincing version here and
now. But what if I told you Shawshank had one prisoner too many, for years?”

“...And?”

“Being kept underground, in a cage, by the warden himself?”

Joey blinked. “For real?”

“As real as real gets,” Dennis retorted, feeling fingers grip the sleeve of his robe. “Dale Lacy kept
him under Block F, in an old water tank, and damn near starved him to death.”

‘Near’ is as close as they need to know. Just like they don’t need to know what happened to-
Trevor’s squint grew more critical. “Lacy? Didn’t he go missing? It was on the news.”

*If the current events websites you frequent can be called that, T.*

Sharing a ponderous look with him, Joey added, “And then they found him, in the prison, but it
looked like- like someone had- ”

“We found him dead, doesn’t matter what happened after. The tabloids run with what’s colorful,
not what’s true.” Dennis interjected, knowing all too well how his own investigation had dug too
deep, in all the wrong directions. “It… it was my idea, in part. They brought in the new warden,
Porter, and one of the first thoughts was how to try and- relieve overcrowding. Block F hadn’t been
used in years, plenty of beds to spare if it could be cleaned up. I thought… it was worth putting out
there.”

The fingers squeezed harder into his arm for a moment before relaxing, the other hand joining the
first. More reassurance to be had for Deaver then, nervous about the conversation, and where it
had almost gone. Talk about how Lacy was found would inevitably lead back to just what Deaver
had to do to survive.

And it was nothing pretty, fit for civilized conversation.

“Anyway, this is… that’s where things get complicated, guys. It took me at least a week to wrap
my head around it, and that was with- Nick telling me all kinds of wild shit: why Lacy kept him
down there, where he came from, what his name is- ”

“Name?” Joey blurted out. “How is that in the realm of ‘wild shit’?”
Thinking again of the hands on his arm, the person cowering behind him, Dennis decided to bite that bullet. There was no dancing around this matter. And crossing his fingers both of his brothers possessed an understanding of discretion. “You guys remember Henry Deaver?”

He kept his head down most of the conversation, eyes trained on Dennis's neck, fingers finding purchase on his arm.

While Nick was always a comforting figure to remind him to be calm, that he wouldn't allow anyone to hurt them, he couldn't physically be there. He couldn't reach and grab Nick's hand or put himself behind the other identity.

Sometimes it was nice to have that physical barrier as well.

( Like with Alan, coming home sick and Matthew opened the door with his stone cold face, all of the sudden he found himself crowding behind the sheriff, nails digging into his coat’s sleeve, but Alan couldn't do anything for him at the time, had to dislodge him and hand him over)

And to have Dennis steer the conversation away from points that could be used against him. Like with Lacy, and the way they had found his body - mangled and torn apart like some wild animal came across the corpse.

One had, in a way.

*Just keep calm, Henry, the way you've been doing,* Nick encouraged him in their shared headspace, voice somehow both hopeful and cautious. *Dennis isn't gonna let anything happen. Even if they don't believe, he does.*

“Name? How is that in the realm of ‘wild shit’?”

*I know - but it would be so much easier if they did as well.*

“You guys remember Henry Deaver?”

-----

*Thunk.*

Joey let the bottom of the mug hit the table - the next best move he could pull in lieu of an actual headdesk move. “Fuck. And you want us to babysit him? …Today?”

Trevor, sitting at his left, frowned over the brim of his own coffee mug. On it, the jovial looking caricature of a moose tap dancing atop a half-crushed sedan seemed terribly uncomedic all of a sudden.

Looking at it, sitting across from him, Dennis felt as though his telling of events over the past hour had been reduced to a mangled pulp, not too unalike said wreck. “Joey, I wasn’t going to ask, but…”

*That’s on you guys - turning up three days ahead of when we expected you.*

“Oh, you don’t gotta. We’d love to!”

“What?”
“What?!”

Practically overlaid by Trev’s shout of dismay, Dennis had to stop and glare, a nonverbal don’t-go-there before his youngest brother could start hurling out counterpoints. “You say we, you mean you, Joe. Trev can decide for himself.”

“And, hey, for the record, I’m still deciding,” Trevor affirmed. “I’m just trying to understand how this is at all possible. He’s the Deavers’ kid, the… the one who died in labor, before they adopted?”

“No, not the exact same, Trev- another version of that kid.”

At that Trev shot yet another probing look at their as-yet-silent defendant.

Seated a few scant inches away, Deaver glanced up at him before hurriedly looking away from whatever he saw, instead going for Dennis with a pleading look.

Can you convince him, somehow?

“It’s okay, Henry.” Virtually saying it on automatic, Dennis sighed, then turned a half glare at his brothers. “I warned you this was all batty as you like. But the point I’m getting at hasn’t changed: Henry - isn’t - dangerous. He’s a fucking victim, not just of the system, but of whatever cosmic or supernatural shit this town can’t seem to get out from under of.”

Henry let out a quiet huff of agreement with his words, nodding his head to them as well.

Glancing sidelong at Joey, Trevor gently set his half-empty mug down. “And Shawshank kicked him to the curb because, what, his story was too fantastic to believe?”

“They wanted him dead, period, didn’t matter why,” Dennis bristled. “And that alone is some jacked up shit in my book. Nevermind being imprisoned on bogus allegations. Involving me as much as they did, best way to stick it to them is to make sure he lives.”

“How is he alive, though?” Trevor pried. “All that, and he hasn’t died, does he just have nine lives or the heartiest constitution ever?”

“Heh, both, I’d say,” Joey smirked, elbows on the table, fingers steepled. “Nick’s one tough hombre. He’d have to be. Giving up is just too damn easy.”

“Too easy,” Deaver echoed, his first words since leaving the bathroom. He almost didn’t even seem aware he had spoken, merely repeating what Joey said.

And it didn’t result in an instant cringe. Dennis waited a few precious seconds before downing the last of his coffee. “Like it or not, that’s where we are, guys. And why you can’t call anyone about him. He doesn’t belong anywhere, but he’s got nowhere to go. He found his way here, and until I say different, he can stay as long as he likes. Got it? I’d do the same for either of you if you were ever in as much trouble.”

“Aw, thanks for thinking of us,” Joey’s smirk widened. “But again, about the babysitting, how long you gonna be gone today?”

“A few hours, at least. Gonna stop for groceries.” Dennis paused, seeing the resentment rise in Trevor’s gaze. “What? You guys are gonna be bugging me for snacks within a day if we don’t.”

“You don’t have anything here?”
“Unless you count fake fruit and expired bags of popcorn,” Emilia interjected, gliding into the kitchen with the least stress-marked attitude of any of them. She was dressed for travel, in a billowy blouse and slacks, a light weather jacket already on. Appraising the room’s offerings, she came up empty with more suggestions. “It’s not like Dennis has been around to snack.”

Trevor raised an eyebrow. “What, no craving merit badges to brag about? You sure you’re even pregnant?”

Joey snorted. Rare as it was, Trevor’s humor always got a snicker out of him - minimum. “That isn’t a beach ball under there, man.”

“List,” Dennis half-demanded, in the spirit of just spontaneously lashing out. “Anything more specific than chips and beer?”

“Biscuits?” Henry asked suddenly, in the conversation like a light was flipped on. The mention of food was enough to draw his attention right to whoever was asking. “More?”

Emilia’s smile was immediate. She plucked a piece of paper from a jacket pocket. “Ingredients are already on the list, Henry. There’ll be more by tonight.”

“Pft, and some baby food purée packets besides,” Joey scoffed, and at their uncomprehending looks, he added, “Smoothies? Nutrition, you know? Don’t spend your cash on those meal supplement shakes. You gotta get his taste buds in gear again, without overspending on a bunch of food that’s gonna make people suspish, or go bad before you convince him it’s worth eating.”

“Baby smoothies,” Dennis had to sound it out for himself. The notion made sense, and yet not. “Sounds- kinda wrong.”

“Well, duh, when you say it like that- the smoothies aren’t made out of babies.”

The way Joey said it, so unaffected and matter of fact, Emilia instantly went into barely-contained giggles. Even Trevor boasted a weird half smile in response. “Bad mental images, man. Funny, but bad.”

Even Henry let out a half groan, half laugh at the words, one hand going up to muffle his sounds.

“I think - you can handle watching him for that long, Joey.” Switching gears, Dennis picked up the topic from where it fell. “We’ll try not to be too long, but if they find something wrong or worrying, we may be in for a longer exam.”

“And then you’ll go shopping?” Trevor finished, still with his strange little grin. “Sounds almost natural.”

“Because it is, Trevor, that’s what we want around here: normal. No talk of escaped not-convicts or identity-crisis suffering agoraphobics, right?” Switching the coffee pot off, Emilia grabbed the decanter, pouring the remaining amount into Trevor’s mug - uninvited. “We’ve got excitement enough without that.”

He seemed to deflate an inch, but relented nevertheless. “Yes, ma’am…”

“And you-” She zeroed in on Joey next. “You’ll not mention this anywhere, to anyone, no matter who calls. Yes?”

“Yeah, don’t gotta worry there, Em. Better we keep this guy all to ourselves.”
“He’s not a dog to keep. He’s a guest, same as you,” Dennis reaffirmed. “And he’s staying anonymous until further notice. I ought to put up some no-trespassing signs around the four corners of the yard.”

“Think that’ll keep people out? A helo in the front yard and everything.”

“It’s our own private retreat if we want it to be. Anyone calls the cops, I’ll be us keeping the snoops on their heels. He’s stayin’. End of story.”

——-

It wasn’t as scary as he thought it was going to be. Joey accepted them (as opposed to him) with open arms, and Trevor seemed to at least begrudgingly understand he was outnumbered in the household, effectively outvoted. All in all, a more promising start than they could’ve hoped for.

(That didn’t mean he didn’t remember a threat of calling the cops, and the way Joey held the phone afterwards, almost as if the only way they could stop Trev was physically taking it away)

Not as scary, but just as uncertain. The aftermath, with Emilia and Dennis leaving, made him feel almost as shaky as his first reluctant meeting with Emilia.

They met Joey last night, yes, but this was different. They weren't in a confined closet space, whispering amongst themselves as the others slept soundly around them.

He didn’t know the full story, then. Still didn't, really, but there were certain things that he didn't think they had even told Dennis yet.

(Specificities he couldn't really remember, but one stood out - they hadn't told anyone about Alan's part in the kidnapping out of fear for his image, had they?)

Maybe they never would. Time would tell, if Henry ever grew comfortable enough to share it with him. But for the moment, his most pressing concern was surviving an evening with the two brothers.

Time would tell if Joey was a fit babysitter or not - best to just settle and buckle up for the ride.

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Punching the button on the microwave, the door swung open. The buttery aroma of fresh popcorn filled the kitchen in seconds. Unmoved by the claims it was expired, last it’s use-by date, Joey poured the contents into two waiting tin bowls.

In charge of the remote, Trev panned through the available titles with a most sullen glower on his face.

Well, I guess this is what we’re in for, eh, Henry?

A few hours, that's all, he thought back. He had curled himself onto the corner of the couch, the perfect spot to watch both of the brothers. Joey practically begged to sit next to him, something he wanted to deny the older man, but one look at Trevor left him nodding his head yes.

Trev could take the armchair, no complaints from him. Better to let the younger brother take the seat he wanted without any contest from the looks of him.

We can ask what people want to watch, Nick suggested, trying to sound casual. They were both on
edge, though - how could they not be, home alone with two relative strangers? Get a conversation started.

...If you're gonna say anything, say it to Joey. Something tells me Trevor doesn't want to talk right now.

One look confirmed it - Trevor avoided their eyes most determinedly. He most definitely did not want to speak, just continue to flip through movies on the television.

I'll ask Joey, smart idea.

“J… Joey?” He called out, some of the first words he spoke since Dennis left, besides answering a few questions that couldn't be satisfied by a yes or no head shake. “What are we watching?”

Dragging the coffee table across the room, directly adjacent to the good couch, Joey smirked over his shoulder. “Trev’s got some ideas. I’d say ask him, but that’d ruin the surprise.”

Pft. Didn’t Dennis tell him how much we don’t care for those?

Yes, he sighed. But it's Joey... as long as it's not anything bad in his book, something tells me we're in for more.

“And you made popcorn, that Dennis said was… expired?” he switched tactics, raising an eyebrow at him. He didn't put it past Joey to eat it all and get ill. One sick person at a time, please - he wasn't quite over his turn with the title.

“Ah. There.” Table situated, Joey held off on answering long enough to fetch the bowls from the kitchen table. “That’s just what some set of numbers on the plastic said. I tried it already, tastes fine.”

“Anything to doctor it up with, at least?” Trevor asked, without taking his eyes off the screen. Scrolling through a turnstile style menu, dismissing one movie poster after the next, he kept scrolling.

Despicable Me... The Croods... Frozen...

“Not unless you count on adding more salt and butter.”

Animated movies. Children's movies, that was the genre Trevor was scrolling through, wasn't it?

Because of us, you think? Henry asked, almost amused. Too fragile to watch anything above a PG rating?

No, I think Joey probably pegged Trevor for a childhood-favorites kinda guy. Because -

That's Joey, I know.

“D-do you have an idea, Trevor?” he asked then, stuttering with a bit of nerves. His relationship with the youngest Zalewski was decidedly the worst, but that didn't mean they couldn't speak, right? “For a movie?”

“One that isn’t computer-generated waste of space, yeah,” Trevor groused. “The latest isn’t always the greatest.”

Joey snorted, setting one bowl on the table. The other he set in his lap, flopping down to sit next to Deaver. “Sounds like a tagline for the next film you and Ally would go see.”
“Don’t go there, man.”

“Too late. Seriously, chick flicks galore with her,” Joey explained, throwing an arm over the couch’s backrest. “Watch at your own risk.”

_Huh. Like we planned on that - a cross-country trip on short notice to meet our biggest critic’s wife, ask her what kind of movies she’d like for date night._

_You're sassy today, huh? Good to hear it - much better than panic._

_Don't push your luck,_ Henry huffed, but didn't sound upset with him. _Joey brings it out, if anything._

And it was preferable to smoothing over yet another panic attack.

“Duly noted,” he said aloud after a moment, probably an awkward pause to the brothers. “If and when, we will be warned.”

Joey snickered again. Trevor spared them a begrudging glance before pressing another sequence of buttons.

Listed by year, the movie posters turned over. A row of images showcased hits of the 90s.

_The Lion King… Balto… Aladdin…_

_Some good movies. Dad used to love coming back home and watching one during winter, all of us snuggled up together on the couch._

_I know… best not to dwell, though. That can lead to sadness and worse memories - I get it._

“And Balto was Universal.”

Joey snorted, selecting one puffy morsel from the bowl, pretending to examine it with a critical eye before giving it a nibble. “Might wanna find something in which the protagonist isn’t a social outcast, man.”

_Oh, I wonder who that’s for? I’ll have him know I was highly respected in many scientific fields, plus I had a fiance._

_Cool it down, buddy. You wanna just watch a kids movie without getting all bitter?_  

_Whatever._

“That would be preferable.” he said, giving his own little grin when Henry scoffed. There was no reason he couldn't poke a bit of fun at the other personality, right? He was created to protect, but that wasn't all he was good for.

The posters flipped around again. The 90s gave way to the 80s.

Spotting a likely candidate, Joey was quick to cite it: _“All Dogs ! Yes. Haven’t seen that in years._
Have you?"

Trevor froze, remote poised in the air. “Yeah, not too long ago. Ally had her daycare tape on. You sure you… want that one?”

“Eff yeah, starts with a prison break. It’s perfect!”

So social outcasts are a no go, but prison breaks are okay. Priorities - Joey has them.

Will you be fine with it, though? He asked, deciding to gloss over the sarcastic remark. Because I can say something, ask for something else if it's gonna upset you.

It won’t, I promise. Besides, it's a kids movie, it should be fine.

...Okay. But you say at any time if you need a break and we can take one, right?

Deal.

“It's fine with us, if you both want to watch it as well.”

“We have to, it’s one of Trev’s favorites. You can deny it all you want, bro, but that poor tape, you ran her down to barely-there film, rewatching it over and over.”

“Well, thanks for giving away my prejudice.” Hitting the play button, Trevor leaned forward to grab his offered bowl of popcorn. “All the more reason to keep my mouth shut. Spoilers.”

“If it's anything with- animals, we'll watch it,” he shrugged, even though it wasn't the whole truth. Because really, they would watch anything, period. Twenty-seven years without any true form of entertainment had set their standards ridiculously low. “Or… anything, really.”

Sold, Joey clapped them on the shoulder. “We’ll start you off easy, pal, don’t worry. Nothing like Pulp Fiction or Die Hard until you’ve banked some easier-to-digest titles, okay?”

Before he could respond, Trevor dialed the volume up.

“ -thing out. What, are you trying to kill me?”

“I’m so sorry, boss, but the pipe. Here, let me try this…”

“...Itchy. I think that might be a water main.”

“No, Charlie. Water mains are green. This is red.”

“You’re colorblind. You’ve always been colorblind.”

“That’s true, but this is green.”

“It’s red.”

“Red…?”

As it turned out, the prison in question wasn’t for people. Charlie and Itchy’s mishap allowed them to unintentionally flood the New Orleans City Pound in a bid to escape.

Which was fine, for them. In fact, any animal getting out of a pound by any means necessary was good news for Henry at least.
Certainly relatable.

You remembering about…

Yeah. But I'm not dwelling, don't worry. Just - enjoy it yourself as well, all right, Nick? You don't have to be on red alert all the time.

Okay. I'll try, but just… just tell me, if you don't wanna watch.

I said we had a deal, I meant it. Relax a bit, for yourself.

He shifted on the couch, out of the corner and closer to the middle. Joey had taken up the middle cushion, but left enough room for him to move around, instead of being crowded. Thoughtful, in his typical way.

He tried not to fidget. Watching the first few minutes, already it seemed like he had gotten off easy compared to the dachshund and German Shepherd - beaten over the head and then tossed off a bridge, versus their dodging bullets and pulling themselves under a fence.

Talk about an over provisioned dog pound.

“I can't help it, Charlie. I itch when I'm nervous.”

“Well, don't be nervous!”

That sounded familiar - how many times did he tell Henry to calm down? Only a few days of ‘being’, and he had long since lost count.

You still good?

Nick, I appreciate and love you, but please stop asking me if I'm okay. I am perfectly fine… are you?

W-what? Of course I am. I'll leave you alone now, sorry.

Carefully, he glanced between Joey and Trevor. Both were equally silent, watching the action unfold with rapt attention. Regardless of how many times they must have watched this same movie in their youth, at least they could quietly agree on its appeal. The tension between them evaporated instantly.

Shelved. For the time being.

One final bullet sent a freed Charlie and Itchy scrambling over a hill in the road. The full title rolled into view, gold, glinting letters, one of them adored with a glowing, yellow halo.

Reading it, he couldn’t help a dubious scowl.

All Dogs Go to Heaven.

“You're such a grouch!” an off-screen Itchy rasped.

Clink.

The halo dropped, hooking over the top left tine of the H like a discarded baseball hat.

Joey chortled at the sight of him frowning, then thrust the bowl of popcorn into his chest. Looking
down at it, he brought his hands up only to keep any from spilling over. “It gets better, just watch.”
Had he a third hand to spare, Dennis would have kept his fingers crossed the whole three hours they were gone. About a mile down the road he had contemplated turning back, calling to see if the appointment couldn’t be rescheduled a few days later.

Instead, he followed Emilia’s lead. The checkup went fine, no obvious abnormalities, and a tentative window was drawn up, when they could expect the first signs labor was imminent.

Shopping afterward went just as well. He remembered to stop by the hardware section for the patching shingles desperately needing to be installed above the entryway. Emilia handled the grocery list with her usual efficiency, even if it was twice the normal budget to account for three more mouths to feed.

On the way back, they discussed her figuring. “He only eats, what, bread and now your mini-biscuits? Might as well keep him on them for a while. It’s all Lacy ever gave him.”

“Before he took that away, too,” Emilia retorted. “Like or not, Dennis, he needs to start eating right again. You said yourself, you’re not trying to be his next jailer. Besides treating him right, that means getting him back to health, inside and out.”

Assuming we can - with Red keeping things unbalanced. Who knows if that- thing can even keep Deaver from regaining his weight? Wouldn’t surprise me, but if it can be kept repressed, somehow…

Slowing to heed a stop sign, Dennis kept his eyes on the traffic around. In the rearview mirror he could see the pile of gray plastic bags packed into the back seats.


“Dennis.”

A short honk from behind spurred him to press the accelerator, roll through the intersection.

“Sorry,” he muttered, half to himself, besides to the world around him. In his peripheral, a much-more modern Suzuki swerved to speed up and pass them. “Just, after all that… feeling a little tapped out.”

“Talked out, you mean,” Emilia clarified, with a mild smile to match. “This morning, that was a lot to go over.”

You’re telling me.
Even now, a few hours hence, Dennis could see the confusion, the intrigue, and the dismay - in equal to unproportionate measure - both Joey and Trev regarded him with. Sitting around the kitchen table, the four of them, it had felt like an impossible mashup episode of television: Law & Order meets Twilight Zone. Trev and Joey were the prosecuting attorneys, while he was the lawyer, representing a client whose story was anything save ordinary.

A story for which there were no relevant past court cases to refer to.

Of course they had reason to be skeptical.

They weren’t hearing the story firsthand. But at the time, Deaver - Henry, that is - wasn’t in any mood to recount the tale. And his alternative persona, Nick, didn’t show any signs of willingly taking the stage for his read of the same story.

Dennis did the best he could to condense it

Having other things, obligations, on his mind only kept him from giving the full account. He didn’t make any mention of Red, or how Chris Boyd was hurt, or that Henry Matthew Deaver was the same one responsible for provoking a fatal heart attack in Dale Lacy.

The fewer supernatural aspects told to them, the better. And Emilia agreed on him with that much. Just the idea Deaver had somehow jumped timelines, only to be captured and imprisoned by some religious zealot, was hard enough to sell.

“It was a lot to go over, the first time, and I pressed him hard enough, he practically blurted it all out just to shut me up. And it worked. I can only hope Joey and Trev look at the facts and think ‘cool origin story, now do you want a beer’.”

“You don’t think Trevor was serious, about calling the police?” Emilia asked. Bagging her crossed-off list in her purse, she pulled out a set of phones - hers and Trevor’s, the latter taken as a precaution.

He would get it back in the short thirty minutes left it would take to drive home.

“He was serious, Em. He’s never been one to pull legs. And how he and Nick ran into each other, I can’t blame him for thinking to. Not at first. It’s what any reasonable person would do.”

So does that, by default, make us the unreasonable family on the block? The ridiculously-tolerant, forgiving ones? The devil’s-advocate ilk?

“But he seemed to come around, before we left, yes? To at least hear you out?” Sparing the confiscated Samsung a piteous look in lieu of its owner, Emilia restowed it for safekeeping. “He’ll keep listening. The more he knows, the less… troubling Henry will seem to him.”

Hands on the wheel, Dennis hooked his thumb under his palm, the nail scratching against his wedding band again.

Less troubling.

They could only hope.

The pit that formed in his stomach had turned into a black hole by the time Alan rolled up to his
house, threatening to engulf him.

He felt shaky, and not just because of the fever. Lately all it seemed to take was thinking about Matthew and he broke out in shivers, his body physically reacting to the mere idea of being around his father.

“Wait - ” he managed to wheeze out, only to realize the sheriff had already exited the car, walking around in front of it to get to his door. He would rather take his chances trying to get back to school than get back in the house.

But Sheriff Pangborn wasn't about to allow that, not without some answers. Answers he couldn't give him - so back in the house it was.

His door was opened for him, backpack hefted up without a word. “C'mon now, Henry. Your mom's already worried sick, let's not draw this out anymore.”

“I don't feel good,” he muttered, but allowed himself to be led out of the cruiser and up the steps to the front porch. “I-I think I should - stay with you or - ”

“Can't do that. Sorry, kid,” Alan put a hand between his shoulders, the other making a fist to rap at the door. “But we can talk, anytime. Just let your mom know you want to.”

Matthew must have been waiting right by the door for them, because in a matter of seconds the door was open - and he was behind the sheriff.

Pressed as close as he could get without crowding the man, his fingers dug into the softness of Alan’s jacket. Anything to shield himself from his Dad's cold, unrelenting gaze, boring into him.

Please, don't leave me with him, please, don't, please, don't -

“Mr. Deaver, sorry to bother you,” Alan began, glancing over his shoulder at him with a concerned look. “But I thought you ought to know - Henry here was trying to get to school today, running a fever - I've brought him back to rest up.”

“Oh. Was he?” Curt as ever, Matthew craned his neck to get a better look. “He told me he was up to going, just running late.”

“No, sorry, sir. Your wife called, said he was sick as a dog this morning, but might try to go anyways.” Henry let out a whimper he was sure the two of them would take for demonstrating his sickness, but in truth it was just fear overriding his brain, squeezing his vocal chords unannounced. “Probably be best for him to get some rest, instead of attempting to get through the school day.”

Why would you tell him that? How mad will he be?

Behind the civil expression, the anger already had to be churning up, slowly being brought to a boil.

But here and now, in front of the sheriff, there was only so much Matthew would chance showing. “Well, son, this is what you get for trying, isn’t it?”

What I get for trying to leave you, you mean - not for trying to go to school.

He shook his head numbly, still hidden behind Alan. “Yes, Dad.”

Matthew didn’t hold out to Alan a hand for a shake of gratitude. He only took a half step back,
opening the door a fraction wider in invitation. “Go on up to your room, then. Leave your bag here by the stairs. Put on some pajamas. I’ll be there check on you in a few minutes.”

Alan gently pried one hand off of him, before he let the other one slide off his arm in defeat. Time to get inside, and face whatever Matthew wanted from him.

*Best not put on pajamas, though. We’ll be going for a walk.*

He took his bag from the sheriff without a single word between them, not even looking back as he shuffled in, doing as Matthew said and leaving his bag by the stairs.

If only he really would be getting some sleep.

Beginning the climb, he heard a murmur of words, presumed thanks, forced pleasantries between the county sheriff and the town pastor, before the front door swung shut.

He paused on the stairs, intent on just hearing what his father wanted right then and there. It wasn't like he would be getting as far as his bed, no reason to go to his room.

Only to his surprise, looking back down the staircase, he saw Matthew spare him a contemptuous frown - and an entirely unexpected order: “Go to bed, Henry.”

“W-what?” he let the question slip without thinking, before shaking his head rapidly. “Uh, okay - thanks, Dad.”

*Why do you have to make it so hard? One day you seem to hate me and next you do this.*

Matthew didn’t grace him with a response, much less an answer. The pastor merely broke eye contact and veered away into the living room, out of sight.

Climbing the last few risers, feeling the shakes finally subside, Henry only wished he could put the man out of his mind so easily.

——-

“...keep the girl and make a fortune, and you... you get to go to heaven. Don’t you want to go to heaven, Charlie?”

Opening the door, Dennis frowned at the cacophony of noise emitting from the living room. Some kind of tacky instrumental score to illustrate great peril. Prior to a television being installed, he remembered that space being decidedly quieter.

Already, he kind of missed it.

Exiled to the kitchen table, self imposed or otherwise, Trevor looked up. A nearly-set array of playing cards were arranged in alternate-length stacks in front of him, most turned face up, a small remainder of the deck sitting face down. Solitaire was about to commence.

“Tired of your new toy already?” Without pausing to let him answer, Dennis slung the first round of grocery bags inside, then turned to hold the door. Sidestepping, Emilia managed to skirt by without bumping into him or the doorframe, barely.

Trevor only frowned and set the card he was holding down, standing up. “Need help with the bags?”

Dennis didn’t, but he could spot an understated request to talk privately a mile away when it was
Trevor doing the asking. Nodding, he waved for the younger man to follow him back outside.

“So. Now, with all that out of the way, did you come to your senses?”

*Right to the chase, T is.*

Effectively shielded behind the Chevette’s raised trunk, Dennis leveled a flat look at his critic. Oddly enough, he felt for a moment like Warden Porter. Her words from a scant week ago drifted up, seeming in need of reitering: *…a little more goddamn specific, if you would.*

He refrained from voicing them, watching Trev’s expression sour all over again. “Dennis, I know you don’t want to hear it, but this is fucking nuts.”

*Uh huh… elaborate, please.*

“As in?”

That was cue enough for Trevor to throw his hands up. “As in all of it! I know unstable thinking runs rampant in this town, more contagious than goddamn influenza, but to see it get its hooks in you, did you ever stop and think what you’re doing, getting involved in this?”

Leaning against the quarter panel, Dennis pretended to gaze upward and admire just how blue the sky was today. “Repeatedly, man. That’s what comes with having… special dispensation.”

“Don’t try to cover it up with big words. The fact is you’re going way above and beyond for that-freak. You’ve known your toothbrush longer than him. Helping the guy while he’s locked up and mistreated may be one thing. But inviting him into your home-”

Bristling, Dennis cut him off: “What was I supposed to do, Trevor? Toss him back out, have his death on my conscience? Shawshank may have wanted him dead, but I’ll be damned if I unintentionally help them finish the job.”

The ire dropped from Trev’s expression. “Why not call the cops, though? Call anybody?”

“I told you why. You think anyone would believe him? They’d write him off as a loon, someone who fell through the cracks, can’t remember who he really is no matter what medicine they dope him up with. He’d spend the rest of his life in a padded cell.”

Until he managed to outlive all his immediate caretakers. *Would probably be another twenty years before his effective-immortality claims were proven true.*

Scoffing, Trev ran a hand through his hair. His restlessness was barely contained. “No, a mental asylum might not be the nicest place ever, Dennis, but at least they would be equipped for him. After the baby comes, your budget’s gonna go from shoestring to spider-silk thin.”

*Not counting the nice fat wad of green in the glovebox. Which will stay there until further notice.*

“We’ll manage, T. I know, you have a thing about worrying, but I didn’t arrive at the decision overnight. Even now I’m using my saved-up personal time to cover for you two turning up in advance. I’m not going about this totally blind.”

*I’ve seen the most of anyone at this point. How can I not be?*

Ultimately, the movie itself wasn’t anything special. The animation was dated, the color palettes
between scenes not completely consistent, and the musical numbers all seemed a tad forced - particularly the last. What was up with that overweight alligator?

But one haunting line kept whirling about, stirred into the neverending blender of their thoughts.

*You can never come back.*

Joey and Trev may not have known what resonance it would hold for them. But like it or not, the thing wedged itself in - an unexpected splinter from what-should-have-been a smooth, finished porch railing to lean against.

Which begged the question, why did he tentatively ask to watch it again?

Joey had grinned at him, wider than even before when he asked, obviously delighted by his request. Because it was his, not Henry's, for once.

*You okay? I know you're usually the one asking, but it's not like there's any secrets between us, Nick. I know what you're thinking about.*

*I'm fine. If you don't wanna watch it again, I'll ask -*

*No. You want to watch it again, let's watch it again.*

“Is that okay?” he asked again, glancing between Joey and Trevor. The latter didn't seem as outright delighted, but he didn't seem opposed to the idea. “If we - do that?”

“Told you it was a good one,” Joey declared, before Trev wordlessly tossed him the remote - an easy catch. “Don Bluth at his storytelling best.”

“Your first movie in a couple decades, right?” Trevor asked instead, a careful monotone keeping worse tones at bay. “What’d you think?”

“It was good. We both liked it,” he said, almost wanting to take the words back. Referring to both him and Henry - he hadn't done that with anyone besides Dennis and Emilia it felt like. But there was no reason to keep it a secret anymore, so why not speak truthfully? They could accept it or ignore it. “Although I'm sure it wasn't necessarily what we thought we would be watching first.”

As expected, Trevor called him out on it. “Can you at least say *I* instead of *we* in conversation? We're talking to *you*, Nick. Not- Henry.”

Immediately the urge to argue came up, some same instance of the protective instinct rearing its head, wanting to defend Henry from any sort of criticism.

*That's not fair. You deserve to be part of the conversation, too, even if you aren't - physically here.*

*Maybe it's not, but we don't want to upset him anymore than we have, Nick. Can't expect everyone to accept us.*

*He doesn't have to accept us, but he could at least respect you.*

“I - I just wanted to include him, make sure he's not left out,” he said, but he knew he didn't sound overly defensive - more like a weak attempt to change Trevor's mind. “I didn't mean to upset you.”

*No promises, though, huh?*

*What can I say? I'll say ‘we’ when I please.*
Trevor didn’t look at all mollified. “Yeah, well, in terms of who is… doing the talking, y’know how weird it is for the average person to hear? People don’t refer to themselves as we and us in daily nomenclature.”

“Nomenclature?” Joey wheezed, on the verge of an astonished laugh. “Fuck’s sake, T, most people don’t use words that big in casual talk, either.”

“We know most people don’t,” Deaver replied, taking some satisfaction in continuing to use the plural. “But most people - they’re just them. We’re not… that’s why we use, we and us, not me or I. Just because I’m the one doing the talking doesn’t mean they’re not Henry's words, or what he's hearing.”

“So you’re still one and the same, save for the fact you go by two names?” Trevor shook his head, hitting PLAY on the remote with some exaggerated flair. The TV screen flickered accordingly. “You’ll have to forgive us mere mortals, Deaver - it’s more than a little confusing.”

“I - I'm sorry. I - we don't mean to be confusing. It's like… like there's two people, right? But one body. We take turns, and we can talk to each other.”

“So why doesn’t Henry speak for himself?”

_Don't tell him the truth, Nick. We don't need to prove ourselves this much, I promise you._

_I know, I won't - I just don't like his tone. He's being a jerk to be a jerk. Not believing, I can deal with that, that's reasonable. But he's making us sound crazy._

_I mean…_

_Don't say it._

“He speaks to Dennis, I'll speak to everyone else. It's all he can deal with right now, considering everything.” He took the chance to glance at the suddenly-quiet Joey, hoping he wasn't upset. “That's what I'm here for - dealing with the world.”

Which included the likes of them.

Trevor’s frown didn’t abate. “That’s all?”

Joey cut in before he fathomed a response. “Christ. What’s with the third degree, T? You know his sitch. What’s the ish?”

“The issue isn’t apparent enough?” Leaning forward, using his legs to fold the footrest back into the recliner, Trevor sat up and stood. He tossed the remote back to Joey. “Enjoy your rewatch. I’ve got other business to see to.”

Waiting until he was out of sight, hearing the bathroom door close (where the youngest Zalewski’s luggage was stowed), Joey scoffed. “Sorry, guys.” The opening escape sequence was replaying. He hit PAUSE before Charlie and Itchy could make their escape all over again. Time enough for them to take a few deep breaths. “Jesus H, and Den says I take after Julia. Little Trevie’s got a corner on her prissiness I could never hope to compete with.”

He let out a half chuckle at the words, appreciating them for what they were. That was classic Joey, always ready to diffuse a tense situation with some sly wordage or sarcastic remark.

_Always knows just what to say. Or - scratch that. Always knows just how to make someone feel_
better. One may say that Dennis got the nurturing traits that it seems skipped their mother, but Joey got them, too… in a different way.

Don't go swooning over him, Henry, he teased, although he very much agreed with him. He's not the type to settle down.

Ha - ha, you're very funny.

“It's okay,” he said aloud after his mini conversation with Henry. “It's a lot to take in, and adjust to, for everybody. Sorry, by the way - for not telling you everything in the closet. We were nervous, I guess you could say. You definitely caught us off guard.”

“Did I? …Mission accomplished, in other words,” Joey agreed, with an easy smile to match - one completely devoid of suspicion or animosity. “If he had his way, Dennis would’ve kept you in there for a week while he got up the nerve to admit just what critter he brought home to rehabilitate. No offense, Deavs, but it’s something the three of us were all into, or still are, to some degree. Dennis just went wrong in signing up to work with animals on two legs.”

“More used to those on four legs, I get that. Well, we're glad you spoiled his idea, then - as much as Henry would've liked staying in there for a week, it’s probably best for us to get out of the whole dark-enclosed-space mentality.”

“Now that’s thinking smart - you don’t gotta stick with the institutionalized diet plan. Glad I could help shake it up, make it happen faster.”

“Even if it did startle us,” he teased Joey, pointing a finger at him. “Definitely wasn't what we expected. You're lucky we didn't run out screaming for Dennis and Em - Henry recognized you.”

Raising an eyebrow (who, me) Joey scratched at his ear. No matter how accepting he was proving to be, it had to be odd to hear - this was not the version of Deaver he had grown up hearing about, after all. “Was it the hair? Usually is. Or my radiant personality?”

“Both,” he admitted. “Orange hair, and you grinned at us like we were the only person you would ever expect to see - you do that to everyone, no matter the… place.”

“Because why make you feel any more out of sorts? Not my jive - I don’t judge. Takes the fun out of everything.” Stretching out, propping his feet up on the table, Joey glanced sidelong at them. “You probably don’t remember the word: f-u-n. It’s what it means to not be so sour and dreary all the time.”

“Well, we feel personally attacked. That's it, friendship revoked.” With a small jolt, he realized it was the first time outside of the cage that he and Henry had done just what Joey was talking about - had fun.

Of course Dennis and Em are fun - it's just harder with them, since they know everything.

Plus Joey isn't gonna think we actually feel offended. As everyone has seemed to say… it takes a few times for Dennis to get it. He would worry his head off, I bet, wondering if we were joking or not.

...I would retort, but you're right.

“Meaning I better start the flick again and shut my mouth, yeah?” Joey quipped, flipping the controller around his fingers like an oversized baton. “See if I can earn your friendship back?”
“You better.” He nodded, fake-serious. “It’ll take some time, but I’m sure with hard work you’ll get there. We’re forgiving people, Joey, long as you watch the movie with us.”

Crossing his ankles, Joey smirked. He jabbed PLAY. The escape resumed. “I think I can manage that. Promise, I won’t sing-along this time.”

By the time it wrapped up and Charlie earned his pass back to heaven, Deaver sort of wished Joey had.

If only to take his mind off all the somber implications.

——-

The following morning, he almost expected an encore of melodrama and tension to set in.

Instead, before the alarm could go off, Deaver belatedly heard the closet door open, and a hushed voice rousing him from slumber. “Pst! Henry, Nick… ey! Up and at ‘em, boys, c’mon.”

He didn’t move. Then, pouncing like an overexcited/very-oversized toddler, Joey proceeded to shake them awake. Or he did his best to try, while they sleepily fought back.

*Remember when you begged for a sibling when you were twelve, Henry, and how upset you got when your parents laughed it off? …Be grateful they did.*

*Yes, I can recognise that now - just get him off, he's acting wild.*

“What?” he groaned, trying to squirm away from the hands shaking him. Somehow Joey managed to unwind and throw his blankets off, half tossing them aside whilst trying to get him up. “What do you- want, Joey?”

“C’mon, get up, quick.” Undeterred by his meager protests, Joey resorted to grabbing one of his arms with both hands, tugging earnestly. “Before Their Majesties catch us. You gotta see what I found.”

*Don’t - I know it's just Joey, but I don’t want him grabbing us, Nick!*  

*I know, I know - I'll take care of it. Best to just see what he wants us to.*

“Don’t grab us, we’re getting up,” he grumbled, a bit cross. “Let’s go see what you found.” He stood up, rolling his eyes slightly when Joey's hands didn't let up - intent on dragging him all the way to wherever they were going, then.

Like he expected them to bolt or something. Where could they run to that he couldn’t follow?

“You’ll forgive me when we get there. C’mon.” Practically scurrying ahead, Joey led the way. Sparing a brief look at Dennis and Emilia, both still slumbering away, Deaver belatedly wondered if their waking up would have made any difference.

Trevor dozed on the couch, folds of blanket held beneath his chin.

The first roadblock came in the form of the front door. Joey grabbed a waiting flashlight from the kitchen counter. The clock on the wall declared it was only 6:03 AM. “You got socks on, right?”

He glanced down without answering, a moment of tension passing through his body. The question was just a bit too similar to commands Henry had been given in the past.
But this was Joey, not Matthew - an excited one at that. He wasn't about to drag them off into the forest to track down imaginary voices.

“Yeah,” he finally answered, smiling down at the socks in question. They were gray, and adorned with knit little foxes - definitely a choice from Emilia. “I've got socks. Where are we going?"

“Outside, that shed over at the edge of the yard.” Taking a second look, Joey shook his head, threaded his feet into his waiting boots, and reached for the doorknob. “Shoes. *Shoes* are what’s next on the to-do list for you, Deaver.”

“None of your shoes would fit us,” he complained, but didn't hesitate to follow when Joey walked out the front door, onto the porch. “Or your brothers’. But if you wanna find us shoes, we would gladly accept any that fit.”

“Later, man. Socks will work for now.” Clicking on the flashlight, Joey scanned the packed driveway - unlikely as it looked with the Chevette, the Silverado, and the *Jurassic Park* chopper herself, Whirly - sitting stoic against the dark. “Worst that can happen, you get a little mud on them. Mud washes off.”

“Okay, but - what's in the shed?” He would admit, despite the rude awakening, the middle Zalewski sibling had his and Henry's curiosity piqued. What could be so important Joey would wake them up first out of everyone? Before daybreak?

…What was *he* doing up before daybreak?

*He is that insomniac we always thought, huh?*

“No. It’d ruin the surprise. C’mon.” Trekking over wet leaves in the near-dark, Joey’s flashlight beam led them around the side of the house.

Or it intended to. The forest, oaks and maples mostly devoid of foliage, glowed against the backdrop of the flashlight, frighteningly enough that he stopped where he stood, before taking a step off the porch.

Not frightening to Joey, though, most likely. The forest didn't have the same unsavory meaning to him that it did Henry. Where it seemed to symbolize happy memories for all the Zalewski brothers, it was the exact opposite sight for Deaver.

*(First Henry was dragged in there night after night, with no rests in between, a repeated instance that exhausted him, made him fragile and upset, then fleeing from Dennis, because the kid from the basement - he needed to go in there, Molly said, we need to listen to him)*

He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until it became apparent he needed to breathe - he did so, letting out the air he had been holding to suck in the new. It tasted crisp, brisk compared to the air indoors.

His feet still felt frozen, though, for a moment or two.

Joey didn’t give him but a few seconds before barking: “Bones. Seriously. It’s nothing bad, I promise. You’ll see when we get there.”

Breathing out again, he willed his feet to move. The ground turned his socks cold and moist within four steps.
The shed looked like little more than a square, wooden structure, hardly bigger than an old timey outhouse from the 1800s. A case could be made it somehow stood for over a century, with how it looked. The door hung lopsided by its bottom hinge. The top one had come unmoored by whatever force Joey had used to pry it open. The space inside, as seen from outside, was inky black.

“I don’t… think Dennis will be very happy when he sees what you did,” he commented, near offhandedly, but didn't stop following Joey into the shed. The moment of terror from the forest passed relatively unnoticed by Zalewski, thankfully. “Just what in here is so important?”

“Shh!” Joey aimed the flashlight about. The clutter inside seemed to consist of several cardboard boxes, sitting atop wooden crates. Tools hung on the walls to either side of them. Obviously the space was more for basic storage than for working in. “I didn’t think I heard it at first, but then- back there, behind the boxes. Hear that?”

Oh, God, if he's asking if we hear any damned voices-

Mew!

Freezing anew, Henry cut himself off at the tiny cry. That was definitely not a human voice of any nature, in fact it sounded like - like a cat.

(Like Puck for a moment but younger, much younger)

There was another faint cry, this time making him gasp and look up to Joey with wide eyes. “Is that - a kitten?”

Vindicated, Joey beamed at him. “Yeah! So I wasn’t just hearing things.” He only frowned at seeing the veritable pile of junk standing between them and the hapless feline. “Somewhere back there, but- I didn’t want to move anything around too much. If something fell and we didn’t know where she was- ”

“We'll have to be really careful, then, to save her,” he interrupted, equal parts rattled and excited, too nervous to go without saying something. “We have to, Joey, we have to get to her.”

(“If you’d just done as I said, this wouldn’t need to happen. Take a good last look, Henry.”)

“That’s why I brought you, pal. Hold this, keep it where we can see by it.” Taking the flashlight as asked, Joey’s hands were free to reach for the first lopsided box atop the pile.

He did as instructed, obediently holding the light in place, practically overhead, so they both could watch as Joey began to slowly move the boxes out of the way, carefully rearranging them to create a path to the trapped kitten.

Henry may not have performed as many animal rescues, but he had been familiar with cats at one time, before the practice was forcibly stopped.

It would be nice to try and help again, without fear of the repercussions.

“How… how old do you think she is? What color - she's a talker, I bet, can you hear her meow, Joey? Siamese talk a lot.” His mouth rattled off random questions and facts, chest tightening as they slowly made progress - some excitement again, and some nervousness.

“I’m wondering- how she got back there.” Heaving another box atop the new stack, Joey paused to listen. The cries seemed clearer, as though they were indeed much closer already. “If it’s what I think, she can’t be less than a few days old. A few weeks, at most?”
“A little baby, then… she's probably hungry, poor thing. And there's only the one? Maybe she was - left behind.”

“We’ll see soon… enough.”

Whatever was in the spotted, stained boxes could wait. Against the back wall a small recess was revealed. There, the shed’s floor had long since rotted away with time, leaving a vaguely-circular nest of dead grass. Fortunately no boxes had toppled over to crush what lay inside.

Another gasp left his mouth at the sight, his own soft cry of surprise to match the baby kitten that was lying there.

“Joey - she's so tiny.”

“Making a lot of noise to compensate for that. Mama must’ve run off.” Leaning over the last few boxes, Joey used both hands to scoop the kitten up. The plaintive mew-mew-mews grew louder as he held the find up to the light. His expression was dead serious - as though his earlier antics were entirely someone else’s. “I called it - at least a week, no more than two. Her eyes are barely open.”

“We need to bring her inside,” he begged, although he was certain there wasn’t a need to. Joey was already thinking the same thing - he needed another set of hands to get this far. “Get her warmed up, get her something to eat - she's so little, she won't survive on her own.”

“You’re preachin’ to the choir, son. C’mon. Don’t worry about all this mess. Dennis left it alone for years, why would he start caring now.”

Because he’s had bigger things to worry about - including yours truly. …Ain’t that right, fellas? Stop, Henry hissed, surprising him into freezing. Stop talking, now's not the time at all.

When was it ever?

Henry, don't speak to it - let me handle this, okay? He's right, though, stop talking. You're not going to get any response from us.

“Wha… what type of cat do you think she is?” he managed after a moment, talking quickly to interrupt The Bad if it would try again. “She's so little, it's hard to tell.”

Side by side, they started back across the lawn. Joey kept the kitten cradled against his chest, fingers encircling to provide warmth. The muffled mewling grew a tad fainter. “Right. Too little to tell, pal. You might not be far off with Siamese, but a few more weeks would show for certain.”

Pft, few weeks. Assuming it’ll survive a few days-

Shut UP.

“She'll survive,” he muttered, eyes trained on the little bundle in Joey's hands. “We'll make sure she does, no matter what happens.”

No one will make us hand her over, I promise. If Dennis or Em want her gone we'll find her a home ourselves.

Or we could keep her?

We could - if they say yes. But I promise, she's not going to the pound... not like before.
If Joey noticed any of their ramblings, already so intent and fixated, ping ponging between now and then, he paid it no immediate heed. There was a bigger priority on their hands now.

However small.

The evening to follow introductions had gone as well as Dennis could expect. Returning home to see Deaver so engrossed by the television - it was a sight as weirdly endearing as it was subtly worrisome. Was it the notion of the moving pictures keeping him entranced, or the central story arc of All Dogs?

Even as the end credits rolled out, their otherworldly guest hadn’t seemed fit to comment. His unblinking eyes stayed riveted to the screen. On a whim, Emilia pulled out her phone and chanced taking a picture. The clicking sound it would’ve made, she thought to mute.

The flash - she hadn’t disabled.

Deaver started as soon as it went off, immediately pushing himself further into the corner of the couch before he realized what it was. But once he noticed just what it was he froze instead, haphazardly shoved against the couch’s armrest with a wide-eyed expression to match.

No one laughed outright, except for the stifled noise Joey emitted. “Surprise, much?”

Cheeks reddening, Emilia smiled apologetically. “Sorry, you just… I gave in to impulse there, Henry. Sorry.”

Looking on, Dennis raised on eyebrow.

First time ever… or have you been keeping a photo record?

Sheepishly, Deaver relaxed against the couch, his own face reddening at his reaction. He seemed to make a point of looking Dennis in the eye as he spoke. “It's okay, we were just- surprised, didn't expect it. H-how did everything go?”

“No news is good news. Baby’s fine, and shopping didn’t hit any snags.” Stowing her phone in her purse, Emilia paid Trev’s waiting hand a glance before reluctantly returning the ‘borrowed’ mobile device. He didn’t hesitate to stash it in his back pocket, safe and sound. “How’s the biscuit situation holding up? I’m told… a little mouse made off with the entire container last night.”

Guilty as charged. Nick smiled at her, still looking red with embarrassment. “I think there's a few left, in the closet. For the record Joey ate some as well, wasn't just us.”

“I admit it,” Joey retorted coolly. “Perfect gossip snack, Em. You’d be crazy not to make more.”

“Ixnay on the azcray, man,” Dennis made a sideways slicing gesture over his throat with one hand. “That’s the one word I will not have in my house.”

Curse all you want. That one’s off limits.

“Since when?” Trev muttered, still clearly a few degrees sulky.

Deaver tensed at his words, then looked away from all of them, as if he were trying his hardest not to engage with the youngest Zalewski. The redness faded from his face, replaced by a nervous pallor.
“Since I said so, T. Go clean up your cards. Help Em put away the groceries.”

Cowled, knowing how fruitless it would be to keep arguing, Trevor sidled back into the kitchen. Emilia followed.

Eyebrows raised, Joey held up a preemptive hand, inviting himself to be called on next.

“Yes, Joseph?”

“Permission to leave impending heart-to-heart conversation, sir?”

_Because of course that’s what you were going for. Do I need to make it any more obvious?_

“If you don’t mind, yes.”

“I’ll get you back somehow, don’t sweat it.” Grinning, Joey bounded out of the room. The front door gave a rickety clack as he made his escape.

Waiting perhaps half a minute, anticipating any pending interruptions, Dennis moved the two popcorn bowls to the opposite end of the table. One was still filled to the brim, the other empty. Space cleared, he sat down.

Watching through the sides of his eyes, Deaver remained folded up in his corner of the couch.

_Well. Em said he wanted to talk, without the bros around, at some point._

“So. How’d things go here?”

“It was good.” Arms folded, Deaver shrugged, not seeming particularly happy, but not particularly bothered. “We watched a movie, then… we wanted to watch it again. Trevor doesn't like that we say we instead of I, though.”

“Does he?”

“No, sorry.”

“Why’re you apologizing on his account?” Dennis didn’t mean to sound so flat, but it was rather unavoidable. “That’s hardly fair, and Trev knows the deal. Not like you’re gonna rag on him for playing too much bluegrass country music or anything.”

“I guess so, but I don't- exactly like country music.” He gave Dennis a weak smile, before it dropped off his face. What did his tastes in music amount to, after so long without it? “We just… feel bad, for him. He's your brother, and we're just someone sort of - random. He didn't sign up for us, yet we're here anyways.”

“Stuff happens, man. You know how many times I walked in on him trying to hide a skink in a mason jar? Or a squirrel with a busted leg in a fish tank?” Dennis didn’t wait for a reply. “He may not’ve signed up knowing, but unless he wants to get right back on the road and miss meeting his nephew - his call. I’m not just gonna keep you shut up in the closet to make him happy.”

“Okay. If that's your call, we'll follow it as well. Joey is really nice still, almost exactly the same from before.” He smiled at whatever he was thinking about - probably remembering what happy times their families did run into each other, once upon a time. And this time the smile stayed.

“Henry recognized him immediately.”

“Not surprising. He didn’t grow up so much as he got taller… taller than me, or Trev.” Dennis
scoffed, not unaffectionately. “You got all of us beat on that front, at least.”

“That I do.” Deaver’s smile grew wider, almost proud at the remark. “Dad used to measure me
every month, I swear, just to see if I got any taller. I think he was just happy when I stopped
growing.”

“Because he ran out of clearance in the doorway, right? To your forehead’s dismay, I’m sure.”

“That, and I grew taller than him kinda quickly. They were worried they were gonna have to
renovate the house just so I could fit through the doorways… almost, but I stopped just in time.”

“I think I know how they must’ve felt. Just about every door I’ve got you have to duck through,
too.”

“It’s okay - happens almost everywhere for me.” His face turned more serious, but not sad or upset.
“They would’ve done it for me, you know - they were amazing like that. Dad always used to tell
me to just let him know and it would happen.”

“I don’t doubt that, pal. Never did. Pangborn’s a good man, no one in this town would tell you
different.” The thought was enough to give Dennis new reason to pause. What would be worse -
for one’s parents to be dead and gone, or alive with no notion they even were parents at all?

“You think… you’d want to see him sometime? Meet him, that is?”

Rather than look excited, a reaction that would have made some sense, Deaver froze even more.
He looked pained, as if the idea brought him grief instead of happiness, or even nervousness.

“Um, I would love to but - he wouldn't… he wouldn't want to see me, I'm sure. But I would want
to, if we could just get past - what happened.”

*And what did happen there?*

Dennis was tempted to ask. But the look on Deaver's face stopped him cold. It was the face of a
man looking back in abject terror on a subject that caused insurmountable grief and nothing else.

*Best not.*

“‘You think so?’"

“‘He wouldn't. But I would want to, for sure. I don't even have to talk to him, or mom, but it would
be nice to just… see them, sometime.’”

*Don’t know if I can swing that anytime soon. But consider it noted.*

“We’ll see what we can do, Henry. I can’t promise it on a handshake, but…” Taking a page from
Joey’s playbook, Dennis lifted a closed fist in offer. “Bro fist, maybe?”

Deaver let out a little laugh at it, before making his own, raising it to tap against Dennis’s. “Sure,
why not. My first bro fist - welcome to the family, huh?”

*Why not, indeed.*