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**Assorted Sketches**

by **OneTrueStudent**

**Summary**

Character sketches

**Notes**

Mara and her family
The Mara stories are now called "Bedtime Stories"

We had discovered that putting a slice of warm potato on the cat's head paralyzed it. This was the greatest discovery in the history of mankind. Calvin said it was obvious. "Cats are controlled by mind control from the wizard's tower. The potato blocks the signal, so they freeze."

The cat was Runtface. Hector named it, and there's a story behind that. The potato had to be warm but not hot. We'd tried with one too fresh out of the pot, but Runtface just flicked the slice off and looked contemptuously at us all, judging us for our slice-of-potato-on-cat-head-placing ways. A warm slice did great though. First Runtface froze, and then his lips curled back above the fangs. His head retreated, but his body stayed put, making him scrunch up into his neck. His eyes went wide. Then he stayed perfectly still until he'd sneeze the potato off. He usually sniffed and walked away, but sometimes he ate it.

I didn't know cats ate potato.

Naturally we made a betting game on this. The stakes had to be high, because Runtface would only allow one potato slice a day on his head. Marbles weren't significant enough. I'd suggested money, but no one else ever had any. Hector said shoes.

"And walk around barefoot?" I demanded.

"Only if you lose."

"No! We'll go home, Mom will say, 'Give her back her shoes,' and that will be the end of that."

"But until then you've got no shoes!"

That was a stupid idea. I told Hector. He hit me. I hit him back. Calvin jumped on us both and started hitting everybody. Rufus jumped on Calvin and started humping him. We banded together to throw the dog in the pond, and he splashed among the lilies. Then Rufus bounded out, shook, and now everyone was wet. Runtface was gone because he wanted no part of this, but he'd come back. He acted tough, but he whined if you went too long without petting him. The three of us sat and tried to think of a wager.

"All right. We go with time. Whoever picks the highest time without going over wins," said Calvin.

"We agreed on that," said Hector.

"We need a bet."

Hector had another idea. He rounded on me grinning. "If I win, you have to tell us got that dragon scar."

I put my head down and scraped a hole in the ground. My shoe dug blunt furrows.
"Oh, good bet!" agreed Calvin. "I bet that too."

"No." I didn't look up.

"It's the bet!" yelled Hector.

"No! What do I get if I win?"

"I'll cook the potatoes," offered Hector, indicating our little fire and the pot. Too hot potatoes rested on a board with a carving knife. Mom hadn't been terribly concerned about the knife. You could cut yourself, but when Calvin had tried, he had really had to try. He succeeded, of course. Calvin got it done.

"We already cooked them!" I retorted.

"I'll throw my shoes in the pond?" offered Calvin.

"Enough with your stupid shoe ideas."

"They were his stupid shoe ideas," argued Calvin. "This is my first shoe idea, and it's brilliant."

"Actually, it doesn't matter," said Hector. "We automatically win. I'll go first, so I can pick a number. But whatever number you pick, Calvin can just pick the number that's one higher. So you can't win."

"If you guys are making the same bet, you should have to pick the same number."

"No." Hector looked at me like I was crazy. "We have to go boy, girl, boy."

"That is what you said when we cooked the potatoes," Calvin agreed. He looked at me like I had no choice.

"It should be ladies first," I muttered.

"That doesn't help. Then Calvin picks the number right above you, and I'll pick the number right below. You can win if you get it exactly, but no one ever gets it exactly," Hector replied.

Hector was right in that we never got it exactly.

"Also, Runtface isn't here. Why don't you just tell us while we wait for him?" agreed Calvin.

"No! If I have to pay my bet, you have to pay your bet!"

"Fine. I bet you a Rufus," said Hector.

Rufus had been chewing on his nuts, and he looked up excitedly.

"Authentic wet dog smell!" agreed Calvin.

We all looked at Rufus. Rufus beamed back. God, that was a happy animal. Dumb as a box of hammers, but the happiest animal on earth.

"I'll bet you a dry Rufus," I counter-offered.

"We don't have a dry dog," argued Hector, to which I yelled, "Then you two better dry him!"

They thought about it. "All right," said Hector, and he ran to get an old towel. He returned with
Helen, who had probably forced him to talk by having ears.

"This isn't really a bet," I said to Helen. She was on my side because I was about to satisfy her ravenous curiosity. "This is a trade. It's an involuntary trade. It's robbery. You're robbers."

"Thus end all democracies," replied Calvin, arms full of dog. Rufus loved getting dried. He hated getting wet, loved swimming, and loved getting dried. He was not a bright animal.

"What?" asked Hector.

"We're the masses voting ourselves largess from the government coffers. We're the proletariat, Mara is the government, and Helen is the bourgeoisie. The renter." Calvin glared at her in Bolshevik scorn.

We three exchanged looks.

"Viva le proletariat!" screamed Calvin and charged.

"If you hit me I will knock your block off!" screamed Helen.

"And I'll go inside, and I won't tell anyone anything!" I yelled.

Calvin paused. The revolution held its breath. Hector didn't know what was going on, but he wanted to see violence. Rufus was chewing on himself again. Helen and I stood firm against Calvin's aggression.

"Come, Comrade Hector. We must return to our work. There are parasites about," said Calvin, and he went back to drying the dog.

Before dinner time Helen tattled.

"Calvin punched me," Helen told Mom.

"Did he?" Mom replied, shooting a level glance at her and me.

I stayed out of it. Without a timeframe, I couldn't say anything about the integrity of her statement.

"Yes," Helen replied.

"Did you punch him?"

"You can't win an argument with Calvin by punching." Helen snorted. "That would be like winning an argument with you by going to bed on time."

Mom took a moment to keep it together. "I'd be so surprised if you did that, I don't know what I'd say. It might work."

Helen had been looking down, but she lifted her eyes grimly. "Why do you turn the kitchen into a den of lies?" she demanded.

Mom did another thing where she didn't laugh, and right now she was not laughing so hard she was turning blue. "I'm glad you've learned the inevitable futility of violence," she said, voice shaking.

Helen had to think through that one. Mom gave her some time. "Did Calvin punch her?" she asked
"When?" I asked.

"Today," answered Mom.

"At any point today? And do you mean from midnight or when we woke up?" I replied.

Mom has always impressed me. Again she kept it together. "Did Calvin punch Helen recently for which he hasn't been punished?"

"At all? Jeez, yes!" I snorted.

Mom had to walk away. I saw her turn her back in the dining room and just shake, hands on the table. Her face was turning purple, I knew it. She couldn't laugh in front of us. She didn't even like Dad's 'punch him back' strategy. I didn't see anything wrong with it. It was obvious Mom and Dad were different people, so it made sense they thought differently.

"But what if I was bigger than he was?" Helen demanded.

"I think she means then someone would be bigger than you," I told her.

"But I wouldn't punch them, so they'd have no reason to punch me."

"But Calvin would still punch you."

"Not if I was bigger than he was."

"Do you really think Calvin wouldn't punch you just because you were bigger than he was? Do you remember the cannonball?"

Mom returned. She looked cool. "Both of you, go. Tell Hector he can help me cook dinner if he comes now."

"Why can't I help?" demanded Helen.

Mom looked at her. "Would you like to help?"

Helen was trapped. She looked between me and the floor, before considering the windows. "I'll go tell Hector if I have to!" she wailed and ran out.

In her absence, Mom and I had a stare off. She didn't say anything. I lifted my chin and turned away.

Before bed Mom came into Helen's and my room. "Hey, kiddos. You ready?"

"Yes," we agreed.

"Okay. I've got to grade some papers, so your father is going to read to you tonight."

There was a grim silence.

"Does he have to?" Helen demanded.

"She means, can't you read to us?" I asked.
"I wish I could, but I'm way behind. But your father will read for you."

"His stories are terrible," muttered Helen.

"Oh, that is not true!" yelled Mom. "Don't say that."

"She's right," I had to agree. "Dad's stories are not so good."

"Both of you, I don't want to hear it."

"Hear what?" demanded Hector. He was in the doorway.

Mom tried to tell him to go to bed, but I cut her off. "Dad's reading to us tonight."

"Ah, crud," muttered Hector.

"Listen! I don't want to hear that out of any of you!" insisted Mom, trying to turn so she could face all three of us. Between Helen and I in the bunk-beds and Hector in the door, she was surrounded.

"Hey, Dad!" yelled Hector.

From downstairs Dad yelled back. "What?"

"If you read us a story tonight, what would it be?"

We waited. Even Mom, but she was trying to outthink this problem. She didn't get anywhere before Dad replied.


We all stared at Mom in silent accusation.

"If we're lucky we'll get to the sequel about the US Cordage inventory write-down. It's got a surprise ending!" Dad added.

"Thank you, sweetie," called Mom. She smiled. None of us were smiling.

"Get your brother," she told Hector. "One story. It's got to be quick."

Mom's stories were the best when she raced. Mom didn't have time to establish why the fifty princes had to find fifty wives or why fifty swans were the reasonable choice. The other fifty wives had been eliminated in brutal sectarian killings, and the good witch deposed the bad witch via terminal defenestration. Mom hit something like a hundred murders over the course of one bedtime story. She really got into it. By the time the lights were off we were all too excited to sleep, but she packed us off and retreated to her office. It lasted a few minutes until Hector and Calvin snuck in, and we talked.

"Mom has the best stories," Calvin said, which didn't even need to be said.

"Yeah, but she really gets upset when we fight," said Hector. "It's kind of weird."

"No, because bedtimes stories aren't real. Until you turn into a swan, stop punching people!" I hissed at Calvin.

"I didn't say anything," Calvin replied.
We sat in the silence.

"You never said how you got the dragon scar," said Hector.

I grumbled at him.

"He's right," said Helen. "And we did dry Rufus."

"You didn't dry anything!" yelled Hector, and everyone shushed him.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said finally.

"We don't care," replied Calvin. "We made a deal. So tell us how you got the scar."

"I fell."

"No, you didn't."

"I did!" I snapped, and they all shushed me. Quieter, I added, "I did. Fine. This is why I fell."
"Number forty seven, Mr Nist."

"Here!"

There weren't many people in the pharmacy at that time of night, but he called out loudly as he hurried to the dispensary counter.

"Mr Nist, you haven't completed your forms. What's your first name?"

"Pay."

"No, you don't have to pay now. You pay when- Oh, you mean Pay's your name. Excuse me. Alright, Mr Pay- Nist."

Nist already had his wallet out and his driver's license between two fingers. He offered it to her with a complex expression. He was tired because it was four AM. He was sick of having this conversation. He hated the world that had named him Pay Nist.

"I am so sorry," the pharmacy tech whispered when she read the ID.

"Yep," he agreed.

The tech looked mortified. She was alone behind the counter, and there was no line of people to break the awkwardness. The two of them were paralysed together.

"It was exactly as bad as you think," he said to break the tension. For being nineteen, he wore old bitterness. The tech wasn't that much older than him, and she looked curious. She didn't look like she was about to try to find a joke that wasn't old. "Yes, high school was how you think it was. Iowa is the only state in the nation that won't let me legally change my name until I turn twenty one. Since this is a prescription for a controlled substance, people typically need to confirm the ID is real, so if you call the FBI and give them the number, they'll confirm it. The number's on the sticky on the back."

"I'm sorry."

I'm used to it."

She called the state police which had an office open. Nist didn't say anything but waited, staring out at the raining night. Street lights across the way cast christmas shadows on the windows. The pharmacy tech, Amy, gave him back his identification. She looked mortified. "The pharmacist will see you now."

"You don't have it?"
"No, you need to meet her to confirm the prescription. Come around the side, please."

Amy left him in a consultation office. It had industrial metal chairs with rarely used upholstery, and a large desk overfilled with papers. There were several charts, a B.S. and Master's, both in Chemistry, and a Ph. D and Certification from Pharmacy School hanging on the walls. Nist leaned back against a plastic wall and closed his eyes. They were sandy. He sat perfectly still until he twitched awake, looking around, and then settled back into repose. He bolted again.

The pharmacist came in. "Mr Nist. I'm Dr Megan White. Amy told me she may offended you about your name, and she wanted to apologize."

"It's all right. I get that a lot."

"Yes, Mr Nist. You have a prescription for Vioxel from doctor Gibli, and we need to go over the safety information."

"Go ahead."

"You are being issued thirty tabs of 3 mg Vioxel. Your records indicate you've previously been on both Lunisleep and Somnulence, but Vioxel is an entirely different affair. Overdosing on Lunisleep results in serious gastronomic distress, but Vioxel will kill you. You can't take more than one a night. It doesn't matter if it doesn't work immediately. Nor can it be combined with either alcohol or other over-the-counter sleep aids. While you are on this, you cannot consume any alcohol at all. Not at a party, not earlier, not at all. You may not take liquid cold medicine if it has alcohol in it."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll read and follow the instructions."

Dr White looked at him, trying to make eye contact, but Nist's half-lidded eyes wouldn't meet hers. She frowned.

"Mr Nist, I'm cancelling your prescription. You'll need to go back to your doctor."

"What!? No!" he yelled, and bolted upright.

"Mr Nist, you aren't listening. You're acting like a standard, spoiled teenager that thinks he's immortal. Listen carefully. Vioxel is the strongest sleep-aid that can be self administered. It is under debate about whether it should be self administered at all, but the lack of narcotic properties and low scores on addiction and habit forming tests got it a legal back door. Mr Nist, Vioxel will kill you if you underestimate it. You may have a prescription for it, but I'm the one filling it, and if you do not impress me that you understand the seriousness of this medication, I will not do so."

"Ma'am-" Nist tried to argue, but Dr White rolled over him.

"Every year hundreds of teenagers think they can drive, and they overestimate their skills, and they die. That is what Vioxel is. I will not have your blood on my hands."

"Ma'am, please. I do understand the seriousness of this medication. I've been self administering my sleep aids for years. I don't drink, and I don't mix medications. I was in two clinical trials for other sleep aids, Elmesdense and when that didn't work, Miremense. I really do understand the seriousness of this medication. I think you're mistaking my exhaustion for apathy, and I assure that isn't the case. But I haven't slept in a week, and I haven't slept well in almost a year. That's why I'm here."

Dr White dissected his appearance. He had black bags under his bloodshot eyes and his skin was unhealthily pale. But he had very white teeth, and he looked and smelled clean.
"Roll up your sleeves, please."

"Why?"

"I'm looking for track marks. Also remove your shoes and socks."

Nist blinked a few times but did so. She examined his elbows, checked between his toes, and explored several other places people thought their injections would never be found. He was clean, both hygienically and chemically. She gave him the more invasive inspection, hoping he'd leave, but failed to both drive him out or develop any traces of drug abuse. He got cross-examined on his medical history against his folder, but in the end she couldn't find any discrepancy.

"And you're not on any other medication?" she asked.

"I am. I'm on a bismuth supplement for the Lunisleep. I cycled off Lunisleep almost a month ago, but I still get a bit queasy sometimes. My last doctor said there's no reason I couldn't keep taking the bismuth if I wanted too."

She was irritated he hadn't fallen for her trap. Absently she concurred. "No, there isn't. If it regulates your bowel movements, you can take it as long as you want. You shouldn't make it an excuse to maintain an unhealthy diet though."

"No, ma'am. I don't. I abstain from sugar and caffeine, and otherwise I eat pretty well."

Ultimately Dr White knew she had to make a choice, and she stared at the rejection line of her forms. There were yes and no boxes waiting her check, but a line that read, "If no, explain why." Dr White thought about listing 'personal misgivings.' She turned the idea around in her mind, considering how she'd justify it to her boss. If she overrode Dr Gibli, there would be a meeting about this, and Dr Gibli did not forget.

"I think I'm going to modify the quantity to fifteen," she mused and went for her pen.

"Ma'am, I take medication situationally, but that means when I need it, I can't drive. This is a long taxi ride, and I'm a student. I can't afford to make the trip more often then absolutely necessary. Dr Gibli said thirty was standard, and I've got to have a secondary exam when if I get the first refill. Between the taxi and the copayment, that's a lot of expense for a student."

Dr White bit her lip. She glared at the paper, looking for something she could change. After a long time she swallowed her irritation and reluctantly signed as the dispensing official. "Very well, Mr Nist."

Leaving him to fill the order herself, she strode out in a huff. Nist leaned back against the wall again and waited, letting his eyes close. They did so in flutters, trending downwards until the lids met, but jumping apart repeatedly. His eyes were so dry they hurt.

She returned and gave him a childproof bottle. It had skull-and-crossbone warnings in red on black, and the documentation regarding administration was a thick packet of stapled papers. "Pay at the counter. Goodbye, Mr Nist."

"Thank you, ma'am. Good bye."

He left and met Amy again. She gave him an embarrassed smile, and he couldn't tell if it was about his name or her boss's treatment of him. "Is that all? Do you want some eye-drops? You look like you need them."
"I do," he agreed. "Check with your boss though. She's kind of intense."

Amy did. Dr White allowed it. He tried to smile as he left, and the tech replied with an awkward smile in kind. He sighed. He couldn't smile naturally when he was this tired, and she probably thought he was crazy. He was a crazy man named Penis. It was two years until he could change that. Nist briefly hated everyone and everything, but didn't have the energy to hold the thought. He caught a ride back to campus and retreated to his room.

"And why is it twenty one?" asked his roommate, Jarvis Kennedy, on the other side of the couch.

"Because I was prescribed narcotics. If you're prescribed narcotics for longer than a month or so, you can't change your name until you turn twenty one. They're worried I'll get multiple prescriptions from different doctors and either OD or sell them."

"Never heard of that."

"It's only in Iowa."

"Got any?"

"Got any what?"

"Narcotics," retorted Jarvis.

Pay rolled his eyes at him. "I took them all. They're not fun. They just make you sleep."

"Damn." Kennedy looked back to the television, wherein the nature channel was having a special on terrestrial predators. "You said the tech was hot?"

"The pharmacy tech? Yeah. But the name was a turn-off."

Kennedy scowled at him. "Nist, I'm serious here, people aren't as obsessed about your name as you think they are. Yes, assholes in highschool probably were, but those were assholes in highschool. You can't keep thinking everyone's laughing at you about it."

"Kennedy, I'm named penis."

"Yes, I know. People don't really care that much."

"You should have seen how she looked at me."

"Whatever, man. You're probably just paranoid because you're sleep deprived. Go take your pill and conk out."

"I will. I'm just waiting to go to the bathroom first."

"Why? Do you pass out so hard you'll piss yourself in your sleep?"

"Yes."

Kennedy twisted away from Animal Hunters. "Wait! Really?"

"Yeah. This is some serious stuff. It's on the warning sheet and everything."
"Good God! The hell is wrong with you?"

"Whatever. I'm going to see if I can hurry matters along and pass out."

"Sleep well! The clowns in your closet probably aren't watching you!"

Nist muttered profanity and left.

It hit him like a truck. Nist was shoving pillows around while the gentle hum of a fan filled the air with white noise, and then he was gone. It was oblivion. He didn't start dreaming until almost eight hours later, when the initial blast of the Vioxel had worn off. Then he bounded through meaningless fields, playing in a house that merged with his elementary school until he realized he was dreaming.

He was so surprised to be asleep he startled himself awake, but the drug was too strong. He surfaced and looked at his ceiling, which was lined with daylight. Rolling over once his cheek found cold pillow, and he closed his eyes to enjoy the contrast between that and the warm blankets. He sank back into the same dream.

It continued playing out on its own, with the field diverging into two paths through his old school, one to the gym and one to the cafeteria. Sitting in the first was a wolf and the second a bear, animals Nist recognized from the nature show. This pleased him, and the dream wavered. He pushed back towards waking, but the Vioxel pulled him down. The dream shoved him into a choice between the wolf and the bear, and if he fought, he receded towards the surface. It was so easy to relax, let the Vioxel have its way, and Nist walked down the path of the wolf.

There was a long, winding stair of irregular stone blocks that resembled less and less the concrete mass production of his school as they descended into snow and cold. The walls became stone mountains, and always down, down, twisted the stairway. Now it went through a canyon, gnarled vertically as well as laterally, and looking up there was no sky or ceiling, just frosted rock. The dream stabilized, and Nist became aware of it even as he stopped caring. His bare feet weren't bothered by the snow, and he guessed it was because in the real world, his toes were wrapped in blankets. So down, down, into the pit of Vioxel he went, and let his mind wander over the wolves that went with him.

When the mountains ended the stairway jutted through fir trees into a snowy copse. The wolves left him and went in singles or twos to play. In the middle of the clearing sat the pack alpha, a white-haired canine of immense size and fur. He was shaggy and still, with patient eyes. His voice was soft.

"What is your name?"

"Jack," the human replied.

"You must be an alchemist, Jack, for you could not be here if it were not for drugs," continued the wolf, and because it was a dream, Jack agreed. "This is good. We have need of someone to craft for us, and we have waited here for just one such as you. It is good we found you quickly, for this place is not safe. Now we will run to the north, where you may howl at the wind and hear it reply. Come."

The alpha turned and began trotting away from the stairs, which Jack would later learn were seven hundred and seventy six in number. As the alpha went, his pack put aside their games and trotted
after him, pushing close around the human to nip his legs when he did not move fast enough. There was nothing sinister in their biting, and he let them urge him forward.

In the trees the needles were gold and red on the ground, and the trees were frosted green. They ran until the firs thinned, and for the first time he saw the auroras. Snakes of emerald and saffron squirmed in the sky, putting the colors of the woods to shame. The wolves nipped him, and the alpha began to lope.
Phu couldn’t have sex for two weeks because he’d urinated on a bee-hive for fun.
Wind Callers

Chapter Notes

Not on Earth

On Martin's third day the senior partner took him and everyone else from his graduating class aside. Partner Burns was a quick-speaking abrasive man who gave not a damn. He collected the new hires in a corked board room, and gave them the full introduction.

"Martin, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Never wear those shoes again. They're fashionable and you probably put some money into them, but never wear them again. Any time I tell you to run somewhere, I don't mean walk fast. I mean haul ass. Time is of the essence, and you can't run in those heeled idiot-markers. If you can't run, you get a horse and ride, and you'd break your leg getting out of stirrups."

Burns went after the others one by one. "You. Fineas? Same. Rupert? Same. Henry? Those don't look asinine, but you'd better be able to run in them. Venessa...Good God. Fix yourself."

All of them wilted, and Venssa flushed to her bones.

"The partners should have told you about this. They haven't, so it's probably a hazing thing. I'm telling you now. You're all out of the Academy, but sometimes they fill your head full of theory and not enough practice. This is what you have to know.

"We, and all the other major trading desks, operate across distance by the use of wind callers. Properly His Majesty's Most Glorious Summoners and Callers of the Wind, we call them Callers, and the communications medium the Wind. There used to be traders that operate via ships and riders, but we put them all out of business. The only ones still around are in markets too small for us or unserviced by the high streams." Partner Burns looked over them again, and noted the white tassel around Venessa's neck. "You're a caller. You're going to be doing a lot of running."

He glanced over her clothing again and flicked his eyes aside in scorn.

To the others he continued, "The callers work on the top floor of the tower. Between the pipes and the strings, they don't have to run the stairs that much any more, but when they do it's thirty stories and time matters. What they, and you all, must understand is that the wind is open. Anyone can hear anything you say. Whatever you put- Are you snickering?"

"No, sir," said Rupert.

Burns was deadly silent, staring at Rupert. "I see. Let's solve that now. Your wind jokes are funny. No one else's are, but yours are hilarious. Everyone else thinks jokes about wind are old. They'd all been made before, but yours are fine. You've come up with new and ingenious jokes. Tell me, does the term wind remind you of farting?"

"No, sir," said Rupert, who was now not smirking.
"Sure it does! Farts are hilarious!" demanded Burns in withering scorn. "Aren't they great? They're from your butt! Good God, that's sophisticated comedy right there. And I want to certainly hear the next witticism you concoct, because it's going to be new and clever. What have you got?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir."

Burns glared at Rupert long after the matter should have been laid to rest. The senior partner's open hostility stretched and dragged. Eventually Martin thought he'd say something but just opening his mouth caught Burns' anger, and the old man's eyes hit him. Burns looked down at the desk. Rupert wasn't looking up. Burns looked around at all of them.

"I swear to God I'm going to fire one of you. One of you little jackasses will think you're funny, or tough, or whatever, and only then, only when the rest of you pampered little-old-lady kitties realize I am not here to play games, and your families's money won't keep you in a job. You're here to make your families money, not spend it to not get fired. I cannot wait." He finished in a low, furious hiss with his teeth ground together.

"Now," he said. "Everything called across the wind is open, which means all of our competitors can hear it. There are two ways to beat this. First, every one of you should be fluent in Haymith. Are you?"

//Yes, sir.// said Rupert in guttural, hoarse tones.

//Good.// Burns pointed at Martin.

//Yes, sir. I am.// agreed Martin quickly.

Burns went around the circle, and everyone assented in the old language of Gibero. He especially pressed Venessa, not simply taking her agreement but asking her questions, going back for details, and speaking in fast, clipped tones himself. She handled it well, never stumbling, and even getting the horrible pluperfects, past, present past, present, future, future past, future present, and future present past, perfect.

//Good.// he said, as if it satisfied. "Those are state secrets. If you are convicted of teaching anyone Haymith, you will be hanged. Don't ever use it outside work, because there's no reason to. If a girl or boy approaches you in a bar and tries to talk Haymith, you act dumb."

He paused. "Three years ago Jeffery of Maenmarth got convicted of teaching the language to a Landian. His family thought their money could get him out of it. He dangled. None of you are Maenmarth rich, so don't think you're special.

"Of course, Haymith is compromised, so we mostly use code. This is what you should have been taught, so listen carefully to how it is.

"Codes are a consumable resource. They're only unbreakable so long as you don't use all of it. Suppose I wanted to send a buy or sell order to our office in Landa. I could work out a code where berries means sell and cherries mean buy. Then Venessa calls, "Cherries," and the Landa office knows to buy. But we can only use that a few times. Specifically, we can only use it once. Now suppose I have her call, "I think I'll have cherries for dinner." Now we can use that more. A listener wouldn't know if the codeword is I, or cherries, or dinner, or for, or what have you. We could probably use that a few times. And as the message gets longer, we can get more secure. Suppose
it's only the food associated with dinner that's the codeword. Vanessa can call a three paragraph menu for the weekend retreat, and it's just about unbreakable. But it is breakable, and if we keep using the same codewords, their breakers will break it."

Burns stopped and looked them over again. His eyes landed on Rupert. "You're a breaker."

"Yes, sir."

"How do you do it?"

"Well, sir, we look for patterns."

"Exactly!" Burns pounced and looked to see if the others had caught that. "Patterns. That's how you break a code. Now, we don't do word substitution much, because it gets too long. Suppose I want a buy order on wheat for ten bushels at five, fifteen bushels at six, twenty bushels at seven, and so on, from five to fifty. There's no way to make that a sentence, and even if we could, you can't just call indefinitely. Right?" he demanded, pointing at Venessa.

//No, sir. It has to be a single call on one breath, and you have to break between so other callers can get in,// she replied.

He pointed at her with angry pride, looking at the others to ensure they'd heard. "Say that again in King's Gibbing," he instructed, and she did. Afterwards he looked at her a bit less caustically. "You callers can always talk Haymith in the building, but I'm not sure these ones hear and speak it well enough yet." Then he frowned. "I like hearing Haymith out of the callers. I want to know you're using it right."

//Yes, sir.//

"Good. We use ciphers, and ciphers are even more consumable than codes. Take a most basic one, letters to numbers, add a fixer, and batch in fives. So A becomes 1, with a fixer constant of 7 it becomes 8, and we batch in five numbers at a time, so 88301 batch 51282 batch 0 is AA wheat. She has to say batch between batches so the other callers know she's still calling, and she has to get all of that out in one breath. You, what's AA wheat?" he demanded of Fineas.

Fineas panicked and hit him with a doe-eyed stare.

"Pay attention!" yelled Burns, snapping. "It's a fine wheat, typically ground twice. Useful for confectionaries because it powders, bought and sold by the pot. Runs about three times regular single ground wheat. Spoils fast when sugared and explodes. Anyway, if I want to send a buy order on AA wheat, I might put that together with 92832. Now everyone knows this cypher, but if they didn't, you'd see we could only get so much use out of it. The breakers at Lando castle or Maburgh are listening and recording. That alone wouldn't be enough to give them a pattern, but if every order ends in either an 92832 or 26121 batch 919, they'll figure it out right quick. So we get more elaborate. We use longer fixers. We start the conversation at some arbitrary number, and count by threes. We put in batches of gibberish or cyphered gibberish.

"But we can't just go on forever. She's calling this, remember. She's not just whispering the words. She's shouting across the sky, so she's got to use air, and she only gets one breath at a time. Even then, with other people listening, we've got to keep the messages as short as possible. A single iteration of a pattern is no good to anyone, and generally, you can get up to five with perfect certainty, but then the cypher runs out. We can't be calling cyphers-

He interrupted himself. "The Mayburgers are working on doing that. What we do is send secure
ships with a season's worth of codex to each of our trading houses, but that means we've only got so many cyphers, and even there, you've got to tell the listener what cipher you're calling. Do you cypher the name of the cypher? That's another bit of pattern, and it's not telling the other trading desk anything. This is a problem."

He paused and stared off into space. They let him be for a while, until timidly, Rupert asked, "Then what's the solution sir?"

"There isn't one. Rather, there's many of them. Right now, we're converting notes to numbers and adding a converted message. The caller then sings the message during the call. Songs are good because they naturally have breath points, and you can get more message out in a single call. But the weak part is still the converted letters. Songs are good if we want an order to be secure for a few hours, maybe a day, and there are always more songs. They don't last though, so we can't do inventory or status of positions." Burns drummed his fingers on the table.

"This will be your problem," he said to Rupert and Fineas, with another dire glare at the latter. "Have you ever called to music before?" he asked Venessa.

"No, sir."

"Learn."

Deciding that the meeting was over, he left, instructing them all to be properly attired the next day. They were dismissed and should not mistake his kindness for weakness.

The recent graduates looked between each other with wild eyes.
The Ending summoned his furies before him, and they came on winged feet. His name was Gorat in the oldest tongue of men, and it meant 'Final Doom.'

His palace climbed from the top of Mount Kyr, the tallest and greatest of peaks and separated from the world by the veil of time. Whether it exists at the beginning or the end no one can say. His manse is sprawling and mad, made in the style of every culture which has vanished from the face of the world, and inside are altars to every forgotten god. Chiaroscuro towers lance the skin huts between ramparts of black jade and paper. In places the thinnest of snow and ice houses look forever on the verge of melting, but they are as permanent as extinction. His furies landed beneath black sky where giant red stars made war against the bulbous sun and rushed to his throne room.

Gorat sat shackled on his throne of magma, made of the core of worlds. He was old, white bearded and his hair was wispy as silk, yet he raged against the obsidian chains. Already he was younger than he had been, and every great surge, every effort of ancient muscles reminded them of youth and vigor. Terribly, the milky film was draining from his eyes. More terrible was the empty loom beside him, where his hair was woven into fate. Destiny was missing.

“Furies!” he yelled, and his voice was a flood from the elder days. “A doom is needed! Someone walks the world who needs havok to fall on his head! His bread should be catastrophe, and ruin his drink. My bride has gone missing!”
"You remember that time your brother bought the haunted doll because he wanted it to come alive so he could fight it?"

Emily hit me with enough scorn that it became a physical force. "Yes," she said.

"Didn't he hide it in the bathroom-

"He mounted it in a box of mirrors so it stared at itself, in the dark, forever!" she interrupted. "And there was only one opening which looked right at the sink, so every time I washed my hands after using the toilet at night, I'd see it glaring at me in the dark! I wanted to kill him!"

"Good times." I smiled encouragingly.

Winston, who didn't know Jimmy, looked at her in open-mouthed amazement. "Why would anyone do that?"

"I told you, he wanted it to come alive so he could fight it," I repeated. "He's the kind of guy who said "Bloody-Mary" over and over again in his rearview mirrors."

"Make that bitch do her cardio," Emily quoted, fingers to the bridge of her nose like the words caused her physical pain.

Mongo, who also didn't know Jimmy, asked, "Wouldn't she just appear in the back seat?"

"Motorcycle," I explained.

"Still. You can put a passenger on a motorcycle."

"He's an idiot!" snapped Emily.

"Emily is implying his plan may not have been completely thought out," I said.

I worried this would get out of hand. I hadn't forgiven her for the spaghetti comments, so I wanted to irritate her, but she was getting legitimately mad. Jimmy had just come out of the hospital, so she might be worrying about him.

"What is Bloody Mary?" asked Winston, leaning in over his beer.

"Who. You say "Bloody Mary" three times in a row, and she appears in a mirror and grabs you."

Winston thought about that. "On my motorcycle, you can't see the passenger portion of the saddle in the mirrors."

"She's a ghost! You're worried about sightlines!" yelled Emily.

"Well, I'm just saying by the internal consistency of the legend, which I admit I don't know, he might have given it some thought," replied Winston and leaned back, away from us all.

"So he has a haunted doll he puts in the bathroom and it scares the bajebus out of you?" Mongo asked Emily.

She nodded acidly.
"He summons ghosts in his mirrors while driving? On the freeway, I presume."

Lower PH nod.

"And he just got out of the hospital for losing a fight with a deer?"

We achieved 1.0.

"I think I like this guy," said Mongo, and suddenly Emily wasn't frustrated any more. She was mad at Mongo.

Mongo was not perturbed, because his arms were bigger than her waist. He toasted her and sipped his water. "How did he get the deer to stay and fight? They typically run away."

Before the girls arrived, allow me to introduce Winston and Mongo. Winston was in my year at med-school. Brilliant guy, moderately oblivious to the world, and general good nut. Don't let him talk uninterrupted for too long, because you'll want to kill him. He wanted to be a neurosurgeon, but everyone wanted to be a neurosurgeon. If I had to put money on long odds, I'd back Winston making it. He's a fast horse in a packed race.

Mongo was a year behind us and several years older. He wanted to do two things in life: cut people open and lift weights. He and Winston were moderate friends, but Mongo wanted to be a trauma doc. He liked guts. He'd done time in the Army (I think), that he got really evasive about, and pre-med as an undergrad. Now he was grinding through Northshore with us. He made Winston-level grades on his practical classes and passed his lecture classes adequately.

The girls were Emily's friends, and I didn't know them. This worried me. She had terrible taste in women, female friends that is. I didn't know what she was like when I wasn't there, obviously, but the girls she introduced to my doctor friends were horrible people. On the other hand, I don't know, maybe I'm being possessive. You'll find out.
"No, let's just go home," I said.

"Are you sure? I've got cash for once. I can give you a hundred dollars if you need it," she replied, looking between me and the grocery store I'd left without groceries.

"It's a bank thing. I'll call and get it fixed."

She fussed at me, and I got colder and more polite. She looked between the front seats and raised her eyebrows.

"No. Please." I gestured toward the exit.

Her hands twitched on the wheel as we pulled out and entered traffic. We passed a few blocks to the sounds of cars and other people's radios. She was stealing glances at me around her shades.

I sighed. "If you've been awake for more than a few days, you lose perspective. You react all wrong. It's a bank problem, and I can get it fixed at home, but if I'm not careful I'll go ballistic. That caused me some problems when I was younger. But I know about it now, and I'm watching. We'll go back, and I'll fix it. It will take two minutes."

"You could just let me loan you money while we're at a grocery store." She turned her head down and raised her right eyebrow.

"No. Thank you."

I wasn't mad. I was fine. But it was there, a stray thought away, and my thoughts plunged wild. It had only been three or four days at most, but those first few, when you still had the energy for fury, or a tantrum from outside, were the trickiest. In a day more it wouldn't matter, one way or another.

We were in a weird moment in time. We had to drive. Someone, a human, steered the car, worked the pedals looked at traffic. In ten years the cars would drive themselves. I put in a PIN the machine didn't like three times, and in fifteen years or five, it would take my thumb print or voice ID. I had to call someone to fix it. Helen drove, eyes on me, and I watched the road.

My last sleep had been sixteen hours of near coma, ending in a dream. I had risen, went to the bathroom, gone, and walked back to bed when I'd realized I still had to go. Did I have prostate problems? I was too young. That excuse didn't convince me, because if I had them, I did. My bladder ached. I leaned against a bookshelf, thinking about my family. Any of the men have prostate issues early in their lives? And then I woke up, and I still had to go.

It relieved me, and I'd been awake ever since.

Helen parked. I got out, she stayed, and I didn't talk to her around people. Inside I worked.
One phone call fixed the PIN. It was out of sequence, or I would have done it from the store. If you get out of sequence, live in the now, you forget you're tired. Then you start screaming. The bank teller helped. Good guy.

By nightfall I'd finished two cases, filed the briefs, and sent them to my primary. Steve read on Monday. In the dark Helen and I talked. Not much. She thought I should eat more.

She cooked me rice and beans, sweetly arguing me into eating, and then I woke up hungry and alone.

"Helen?" I said.

No answer. I was starving. I cooked, rice and beans, ate, went to the bathroom. My cases were still done. I filed a third.

"You should get more exercise," Helen told me. She sat in the corner over my shoulder.

"I did. I ran, and yesterday I did sprints. I even did that class you wanted."

"And you ate?"

"And I ate. You cooked for me."

"I did."

I nodded at her.

Her hair was darker than the shadows, and only her eyes showed. She sat on her chair because I was days away from her sitting on the ceiling. She liked the space above my diplomas, between the fan and the air vents, where she could watch me sleep. She said-

I lay in bed for eight hours, eight long hours. Who told me to lie down for eight hours a night? Dr Hyde?

"Any monsters under the bed?" I asked around midnight.

"They're hiding."

"Scared of you?"

"Scared of me." She smiled. I smiled at her teeth. Her mouth was dark, but her teeth bright. She bit my ear when she looked over my shoulder.

"Did you read the third case?"

"It's good."

She smiled again, leaned back in my chair. Her toes gripped the floor. She never wore shoes if she could.

I closed my eyes, and talked in the stillness. Her voice crept up on me, sneaking closer, and her subtle pressure tightened my blankets. Her voice was in bed with me, her breath on my ear.

"Go to sleep, Daren."

"I am sleeping. I just don't know it."
"How do you know?" She bit me. Her teeth scraped my ear without drawing blood.

"I'm talking to you."

"You should take your sleeping pills."

"I took one."

"You should take more."

"Dr Hyde says just one."

"Take another, Daren. Sleep and dream."

"I'm dreaming of you."

Her arms felt like blankets. One leg reached across my hips, locking me. "Take another pill, Daren."

"No. Then I'd have to get up."

"They're right here." She put the bottle in my hand.

"No. Dr Hyde says just one."

"Don't you want to dream of me?"

"Always, Helen. Always."

"The pills will make you dream of me."

"I always want to dream of you, I don't want to dream of you always."

She was tricksy, but I was tricksier.

She kissed me. "Don't wake up, Daren." Her voice was love in my ear until the alarm screamed and scared her off.

Another day of work came with four hits of the snooze button.
Chapter Summary

One of the things I'm playing with is a magic-school type scenario. It had a couple of problems. The first was that things worked out so well there was no plot. This was an attempt to get away from that, and there are more conflicts buried in the story, as well as threads of later development. Miles might be too dislikable to anchor the story, hence why I turned my hand from this, but he certainly sows plot threads wherever he goes.

The other problem was that anything I wrote would be compared to and critiqued against Harry Potter. If I enter that arena, I'm going to do it deliberately.

"Mr Wentworth, while there is a program for rolling admission, you've missed both that and the registration deadlines. In light of both your grades and the disciplinary condition of your leaving Northshore, we simply don't have a place for you."

"Have you looked at my extracurricular qualifications?"

"They're non-existent."

"Not those. I don't do clubs and groups. No, my financial qualifications. To wit, I'm rich as a motherfucker."

Byron Winston, seated behind Miles Wentworth, nearly passed out not laughing. The dean, Jonathan Reeks, did not. He blinked a long slow blink, but Miles was just getting started.

"You didn't. Let me break this down. Earlier this year you rolled over your debt financing, and as a part of that, added eight hundred thousand marks for overdue building maintenance. I rode the elevator, I checked, and that thing's two years out of date. Three hundred thousand marks for upgraded fire suppression systems. Fifteen thousand marks for field lighting. Dean Reeks, you are literally borrowing money to keep the lights on.

"My grandmother is stupid rich. She's got the kind of money that causes communist revolutions. She runs House Opel Shipping, and if you own anything that travels by water, she had a piece of it. We live on an island, so you do. She's got four kids, all rich as balls, and they all hate each other.

"My Dad, Lucid Wentworth, rage-quit the family at sixteen, joined the army with precisely dick, and made a four billion mark fortune. His brother, Romney, graduated Northshore, became a financier, and right now he's got two trillion marks assets under management. Do you know how much two trillion is? Can you visualize it? The answer is no, because Phi doesn't have two trillion marks printed. Think about that shit. He's literally got more money than there is money," and Miles went into his breast pocket for a fat roll of bills.

"Now my aunt Fiona's a nun, so don't ask me what that's about. But my other aunt, Elizabeth, is married to the Sec. Treas. You know that guy? Fat bastard. He wanted to be a cook. Aunt Liz wants to be First Lady. Don't bet on the fat man. Oh, as an aside, she owns Grey Heron Food. Who does your cafeteria here? Her silhouette's on the box. Check.
"So this is how it works, dean. I get in. You write my dad a letter and tell him I'm a cock bag. He knows how it is, so he believes you. You get a check for thirty k a semester. Call it a foundation or some shit. Name a building after him.

"Cause the fact is you are in a world of fucked. You got building code violations. You got lights out in the hall," and Miles dropped the first One Thousand Mark note, crisp and clean, on Reeks's desk. Miles leaned forward, looking hard into the dean's eyes, and cupped the stack of money.

"You're missing letters from the sign on the street.

Thousand marks.

"You need a digital sign, because what is this? The dark ages?

Thousand marks.

"You need computers for that sign.

Thousand marks.

"You need electricity.

Thousand marks.

"You need to pay some professor to put up with my ass.

Thousand marks.

"Which ain't going to be cheap.

Thousand marks.

"Cause when you tell my dad I'm a fuckoff, you won't be lying.

Thousand marks."

"Mr Wentworth, our interview is over. Your mannerisms are unconscionable, and I do not take money in exchange for academic credentials." The dean had not touched the money.

"Oh, I know I can't fail. Trust me, people will check. No, that game doesn't pay. But I need a place to pass with a 2.0 average in feminist studies, or whatever liberal arts horse-shit gets me a degree without ever thinking."

Dean Reeks closed his eyes in contemplation of this young man in their Women's Studies program.

"No, that is not going to work."

"Sir," said Byron, hulking in quiet silence in a charcoal grey suit. "May I add something?"

"Yes," stuttered Reeks, noticing the big man was indeed there.

"Sir, my employer is correct about legitimately passing. Furthermore, while his Northshore grades are suboptimal, his prep school grades should make him competitive with your freshman class. I have the transcripts if you don't have those before you."

"No, thank you. I'm familiar with his performance at both Northshore and Royal Etenmoot
"Academy," trying to see around Miles Wentworth.

"Yes, sir. The thing is, Mr Wentworth requires a diploma. His Father, Messr Wentworth, has decided the Army should instill some discipline within him, and enlisted or commissioned, to the Army we will go."

"Mr?" asked Dean Reeks, realizing he wasn't aware of who this hulking polite man was.

"Wiinston. Like wine-stone."

"Right. Mr Wiinston, there is the reputation of the school to be considered."

"Yes, sir. That's where the Wentworth Foundation may help."

"Excuse me, Mr Wiinston. And you are?" asked the dean, squinting at him.

"Mr Wentworth's attache, sir. I will be enrolling in Holy Gospel with my Wentworth. I would like to major in cartography, sir. I've heard good things about the program."

"Yes, we're very proud of it," said the dean absently. "But the deadlines have passed."

"Yes, sir. Foreseeing Mr Wentworth's difficulties at Northshore, I preemptively applied in the fall. I was accepted, pending tuition suitability, which Messr Wentworth will be footing, should it become relevant." Byron nodded to the younger Wentworth as he invoked the father.

Dean Reeks looked back and forth between the small, smug Wentworth and his huge manservant. Miles had, in fact, rolled out of bed in the clothes he now wore, some four thousand marks of rumpled designer suit. Wiinston's simpler suit was tailored and pressed, but the bald man was big enough to have troll blood in him. There were twenty years between them.

"What did you study, Mr Wentworth?" asked the dead. He lowered his head to regard Miles through his eyebrows, a dry expression.


"We don't have a major like that," noted the dean.

"I need a degree, and then I'm off to the Army." Miled shrugged.

"With your history of disciplinary problems, you'll be on probation."

"I didn't have those kind of problems," said Miles. "But whatever you have to do."

Reeks wrestled with the indignation of giving Miles what he wanted, but waved the young man and his attache out. Miles strolled out without a glance, and Byron thanked the dean for his time before returning the seats to their original position. Reeks felt sick. The attache closed the door behind him, and Reeks was alone with eight thousand marks. He aged two years in ten seconds, staring at the money.

I was warm for January. Snow hid in the deepest shadows, but even there it was murky slush. The two new students stepped onto dry pavement outside the administration building. Leafless trees reached over brown grass, but the wind was pleasant. Byron gave Miles a phone.

"Call your father."
"Ah, he'll know."

"Warn him Dean Reeks will be calling, and the Wentworth Foundation was mentioned," added Byron.

Miles scowled at him. Byron shook the phone. Miles took it and finished the conversation in under a minute.

"He's overjoyed I'm gonna be a scholar."

"Good," said Byron. He spotted the registrar on the map. "Give it an hour, then try to register for classes. I'll go rent a place. There should be student housing somewhere."

"Oh, right. Handle that."

Byron left. Miles shuffled to a wooded hill where dense firs wrapped the feet of a building. He followed a flagstone path to unused benches. Even so close to the semester no one was there. Miles cupped his palm and beckoned.

First there was nothing. Then a tree shook, and a head lifted from a branch. A faerie wearing a pine-needle hat, tall and pointed, and coarse brown skirts climbed down the branch and hopped to Miles's hand. She was joined by another who greeted the first with glee. More appeared, leaping down, until Miles's hands were full of people, none taller than his thumb. They jumped and talked, and paid him no attention at all.

"Damn shame," said Miles, covered in dryads. "It's a damn shame."
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Tried to get the emotion of departure. Not the short term goodbyes of vacation, but the adult, maybe permanent, sense of this could be it. We may never meet again. A bit wistful, a lot unsaid, and most of that understood. I liked how it came out.

When I was thirty two and no wizards had revealed my secret destiny, I left the city of Tyr for the Island of Celephias. My mother didn’t understand.

"But you're an apothecary."

"I know."

"You make good money."

"I do."

"Will you make good money in Celephias?"

"Don't know."

"Don't you want to make good money?"

"I do."

"But you won't in Celephias!"

"Might not."

"Why don't you want to make good money? You're an apothecary!"

And so we went, round and round. My father was different.

"You're going to Celephias?"

"Yes."

"When are you leaving?"

"Next week."

"Good. You can help me fix the stairs."

He didn't understand either, but he didn't judge. If I was going to Celephias, maybe never to return, I had better help fix the stairs first. We never just spent time together, my Dad and I. If I was home for the holidays, there were doors to be rehung. For a long time it infuriated me. I avoided him and home. Then I came, not to understand, but appreciate. We hung the doors and fixed the roof. The stairs didn't creak anymore.
My father had been a great warrior. I knew that growing up but didn't understand. He didn't talk about it. It wasn't until I started putting names together that the epics of Gil weren't holiday songs for the drunk and musical, but stories of my Dad. He'd slain a dragon with a sword, and the only thing he'd tell me about it was that was a damn stupid way to go about it.

My mother had been a great beauty. I hadn't known what to do about that either. Beauty was to be lusted after, sought, taken as a muse or inspiration to do great things. She was my mother. She was upset I wasn't wearing a scarf. Paintings of her in pearls and lace, soaring above the battlefields where my father won her hand, hung in the citadel, and they filled my friends with lewd passions. The artist had been incredibly absorbed in glorifying my mother's tits. No one but me found that weird. I didn't know what to say.

I mentioned them, the paintings, to her once. She paused in her fussing.

"Milton, it doesn't matter as much as they say. Don't think you're going to find the perfect girl, because they're just as bad as you lot. What's important is after, when you compromise more than she does, because she's compromised more than you are either."

"That doesn't make any sense," I told her.

"It will make sense later. When did you wash that shirt?"

"Yesterday."

"No, you didn't."

My younger brother carried on the family name. He was in the southlands kicking ass, racking up the glory. Twice he had been the last man standing when brutal attrition had wiped the field. At Gol he had sent back a demand for surrender with a cactus, that the invading general had something to wrap the surrender round when he sat on it. Satyr and I - I don't know. He got me, and I got him, but we weren't close. If he was around he would have reacted like Dad, no judgement, but no emotion. My decisions were weather to him.

Dad helped me carry my bag to the port while Mom stayed home crying. We arrived early, but the tide wouldn't come till noon. Fishing boats were already gone. Dad gave me by bag, and the two of us watched the Crystal Moment from the head of the dock. Once I walked down I'd be swept up by the sailors, put to use or stowed out of the way, and a part of the journey for all we stayed in port. I looked at my father, old Gil, without anything to say.

"You'll meet elves in Celephias. You've met them in Tyr, but on human terms in a human city. It will be different there. Elves aren't people, Milton. They look like us, they talk like us, and they're tall and fair. You might think they're just humans that turned their backs on aging. They are not. Each elf is fundamentally alone, and they interact by power. Elves can't pat each other on the back. They can bear their will and drive each other to extremes, but they connect by power and old lore. When you-" But he stopped, like he'd lost his way, and stared out at the sea birds.

He was old. He'd surprised me a few times in the last few years. His hands weren't man killing engines, but his back was corded with old muscle. If he couldn't slay dragons, he could hoe all day, clean boards and saw logs like the killing juggernaut he had been. His face was wrinkly. He must know his bladework to shave.

He started up again, same matter, different tactic. "Wherever you go, you're going to have your battles. They will be great and terrible. Someone will tell you they're not, and try to weigh the sixty trolls he slew against the one you evaded. Be smarter than me and ignore him. Remember two
things. First, your mother and I care much more about your battles than his, because the troll is chasing you, not him. And two, if after your battles, you're cut with wounds that don't bleed, come home. We want to see you, and if you don't understand why you're hurting from a battle you won, we will. Humans- humans have a way of- ah, back to elves. Take care, son. Don't get kidnapped."

It was a dad thing to say, but I liked hearing it.

"Take care, Dad. You going to do the mantle?"

"I haven't decided," he said, then admitted, "I will."

"Good luck, Dad."

"Good luck, Milton."

We parted, and I sailed for Celephias.
Anna was attaching party hats to her ferrets, because she was a responsible adult. The tricky part was of course the ferrets. They would not stay still. However she had mounted the hats on elastic bands and would lure the ferrets through the snare with bits of cheese. Then she released the band, and it secured the santa's hat to the ferret's head (or frequently neck. This was not a precise science). Currently there were four hatted ferrets climbing around her lap, and she was trying to get a picture of the group when her doorbell rang.

"Ooh, a gentleman caller," she announced to herself because responsible adults read lots of Emily Bronte. She did wonder momentarily about who it actually might be. A few days ago a flier had been posted to her door about a meter reading, so it was probably building maintenance. The ferrets could not escape because her operations had been within a dry baby pool she kept in her living room, so she got out and answered her door.

It was the most adorable man she had ever seen. He was tall and dark haired with grey eyes. They matched his suit. Up close his jacket was intense grey, a blend of numerous shades herringboned together. He had a briefcase in one hand.

"My God, I was right," she hissed out loud.

"Ma'am?" he replied confused.

"Nothing!"

Momentarily derailed, he got back on track. "Ma'am, I'm detective inspector Marcus Bronn with Newport PD. I would like to use your residence as an observation point for the-"

"Yes, you absolutely may."

"What?"

"You can. You're with the police? You can come in."

Mr Bronn blinked. "Ma'am, you haven't seen my badge yet."

"You've got one, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," he began, and in fact the badge was already in his hand. He showed it to her. She gave him an unsurprised expression. He tried to continue but abandoned his words in a flustered knot on his tongue. "Ma'am, you don't know if I'm a serial killer or not!"

"Are you?"

"We're not doing this." He scowled. "Ma'am, you can't let random people into your apartment, even if they do claim to be the police. I haven't shown you a warrant, and I'm not in uniform. Go call the
police department and confirm my identity. Our number is in the phone book."

"I don't have a phone book."

"Well, get it online."

"You'd be a terrible serial killer," she muttered and left him in the doorway to check her computer. The desk sergeant confirmed one Marcus Bronn would be on his way to her residence to set up an observation point.

"Is it a stakeout?" she asked.

"No," answered both the desk sergeant and Mr Bronn. She was looking at him while talking on her phone, and he answered anyway. Generally he agreed with what the desk sergeant was telling her, but she wasn't really paying attention to the phone. "A stakeout is directed at a specific target, either person or residence. An observation point is directed at an area, wherein there may or may not be something going on. I had been parked outside, but an AC compressor went down and the cranes blocked my sightlines."

"Well, thank you for clarifying that. Is there anything else I need to do?"

"No, you just need to let me in. Which is what you were trying to do already. But it's safe now."

"Of course," she murmured and again invited the man in.

He stepped into her apartment, past the kiddie pool full of hatted ferrets, and Anna suddenly realized what exactly was about to happen. Her eyes went wide in horror. She checked; she was wearing pants. Thank God.

"Excuse me, I was just-" Just what? "-playing with my-" Tuberats. "-pets."

"Oh, no problem." He went immediately to the windows and sighted through the blinds. "It's the sort of thing you pet-people do."

And with that he was dead to her forever.

"Pet-people?"

"Yeah. My mother used to put the dog in sweaters all the time. The dog didn't mind, and she liked it. May I move this chair?"

Aw, he told her about his Mom. But he spoke of "pet-people" as an alternate species. Dead forever, with slight chance of zombie.

"Yes, you may."

While he was moving the chair, she neatly snatched up her little guys and took their hats off. It required far less effort than getting the hats on. She shoved them into their wire and glass enclosure, and they scattered, darting through tubes and stairways. Then she put the pool away, and started quietly hiding everything about zombies, the final ferret assault on Skull Mountain, and pictures of animals beyond the first ten. She figured ten was reasonable. Normal people had ten pictures of their pets. That's only 2.5 pictures per ferret, and she had more than that of her human relatives.

"This is perfect," Inspector Bronn noted pleased. He looked over at her with obvious satisfaction.
"All right, ma'am. This is the way it works. Have you ever hosted an observation point before?"

"No." Should she have?

"I didn't think so, but every time I assume that, it turns out someone has. Anyway, I'm scheduled to be here till dark, so about six hours. That's when the installation crew for the compressor should be done, so at that point I'll be heading back to my car. During that time you are more than welcome to remain here, of course, and please do whatever you would normally do without paying attention to me."

Yeah, no, she thought.

Inspector Bronn continued, "Please avoid any cleaning tasks or similar that requires access to the windows. I know it may just take a moment, but sometimes those moments are the only worthwhile part of a surveillance. If you need to leave for any reason, and you don't feel comfortable leaving me here alone, I can call the station for a second officer. Likewise, if you're uncomfortable being alone with me in here, I can call for a chaperone."

A chaperone? Was she in seventh grade? "If that's something you're worried about, don't you have a partner or something?"

"Yes, but he's working something else. I've been going alone to look for a good observation point. The trees in front of the building blocked the windows on the first two floors."

"If you're partner's doing something else, doesn't the police department assign you a new one?"

"Honestly? Budget cuts. I can't be assigned a partner of lower grade than inspector detective, but there aren't many of us around. I can request another officer come join me, but that takes someone off the street. Less boots on ground, as it were. So we let you make that decision. If you don't request a second officer, that other officer stays on the beat, and if you do, I can tell my budget committee backup was requested by a civilian." He shrugged at her. "It's really up to you."

"I'm fine."

He nodded and started setting up a small camera tripod. It sat neatly on the sill, and peered out through the blinds.
3 Dog Night

Chapter Summary

The purpose was to build conflict and establish antagonist's personality/motivations. Antagonists are harder than protagonists.

I own three dogs: Relentless, Ruthless, and Fluffy.

Relentless is a corgi and (corgi owners, stop reading) the dumbest animal on Earth. If you don't know corgis, they shed twice a year, from January 1st to December 31st, and occasionally on leap day. It's dog-hair madness. I was sitting down with Relentless and brushing him down one time and, being bored, started forming the hair brushed out of him into another dog. It was a sort of tan-white pile, but I shaped it, gave it a little nose, etc, and when Relentless was done, turned him around to show him my work.

The stupid dog lost his mind. He barked at it nonstop for ten minutes, wet the floor, and hid under the bed.

It was his own fur! Dogs are supposed to have incredible senses of smell! It was him! How could he not recognize it?

Ruthless, the other corgi, came running at the sound of barking, and Ruthless is no smarter than his brother but more agreeable. If there's barking to be done, he wanted in. So Ruthless started barking at the fur corgi too, bouncing around in that little excited jump they do, until finally Relentless ran off, and I got Ruthless to sit still so I could brush him too. He loved it.

The last is Fluffy.

Fluffy can't be around children. He's a good dog, but he needs a very stable environment. It's not his fault. A lot of people, kids, adults, etc, think all dogs are big puppies, and around the corgis, that's fine. If some kid sees Ruthless or Relentless, and runs up to them screaming and starts putting his hands everywhere, the corgis won't mind. Now there's a risk the small child might fall into the dog and be absorbed by the fur, especially unbrushed, but then we have a friendly chat with the parents.

"Ma'am, your child has been absorbed by dog hair. He'll be fine. I figure I'll brush the little mongrel down on Thursday, so you'll get your kid back on Friday. In the meantime have a date-night or something. ... Oh, don't worry. There's plenty to eat in there."

(Corgi owners, start reading again) They're corgis. They're just adorable, friendly little animals. They have floppy ears. Using dogs with floppy ears as wingmen is like hunting for dates with WMDs. (It's awesome. They've got little scarves, and I put goggles on them so they can ride in my motorcycle sidecar. Ladies, you're done. You don't even know it yet.)

Fluffy... is a serious dog. He's a belgian shepherd, a retired military attack dog of questionable antecedents, I think Ukrainian. I don't know. That dog has seen things. He can't be around kids, because if the kid thinks he's a puppy and runs up shouting, Fluffy will think he's being attacked. Fluffy has been trained for that.
You have to treat Fluffy with a lot of respect. Approach from the front, making soft noises, and
offer him the back of your hand, preferably in a loose fist. Fluffy will sniff you. He really is a good
dog, so he'll probably lick you, or at least sit around, and that means he wants to make friends. If he
doesn't, if he leaves or starts growling, that's it. You're done. Go away to a non-threatening
distance. But that rarely happens, so he'll sniff your hand and ignore you. Then reach forward, so
you don't go over his head, and scratch his chest, and once you've made contact, loop your hand
around to scratch his head, behind the ears, and all those good, dog-scratching places. He will
regard you with regal dignity and noblesse oblige until you get that spot on his flank where his leg
starts thumping. Even a serious dog isn't serious with a thumping leg.

The point is, he's a dog. He's not a big puppy, but he's not a chain saw. Treat the dog with respect.

The only real problem with Fluffy is that he doesn't really get fetch. Well, he doesn't play the way
we do. Fluffy plays fetch to win. Throw the stick, and he runs off, gets it, destroys it, and brings
you back splinters with a 'suck on that' expression.

Anyone who spends time around dogs can get an idea of what they're thinking. They're dogs.
They're not that complicated. If you're eating and the dog is salivating at your feet, you should be
able to figure that out.

When Fluffy returns with stick shambles, Ruthless and Relentless in tow, spits out the sawdust, and
just looks at you, his expression says, "Fluffy, 1, Human, 0. You lose, meatbag. Throw another
stick. I dare ya."

The corgis meanwhile are usually derping hard, half their ears upright, and sometimes fighting over
the piles of stick. They're great. They're so much fun, because whatever you do, they're fine with it,
and they're so fluffy they're unbreakable.

I was sitting on the floor watching TV one time. They whine too much when I sit on the couch,
where they are not allowed to go, so I usually watch movies and stuff from the floor. They flop
around and generally act like little oafs. Fluffy was sitting on the other side, ready, and I was
watching a football game so I'd have something to talk to my coworkers about.

Aside, most of the people I work with, as in all but the accounting temp, are men, and we really
don't have anything in common. As such, I watch sports. I don't care, but they're all football fans.
Dealing with adult, human males requires simple, discrete tricks. Two to five minutes of research a
week gets me scores, some trivia, and then we have something to talk about. I watch three to four
games a year for the same reason. If we ever got to the post-season I'd have to watch those games
too, perhaps even develop opinions about them, but I'm from Washington DC.

Anyway, the game was on, it was boring, and it broke to commercials so I looked at the dogs for
entertainment. Fluffy was waiting for ze Germans to attack. Relentless was staring off into space,
panting. Ruthless was pretending to sleep.

I grabbed Relentless and just threw him into Ruthless. He gave me one split second of an injured
expression, et tu Brute? then poof, furball hit furball. Ruthless bounced to his feet and started
jumping, because if we were jumping, Ruthless wanted in on some of that. Relentless forgot he
wasn't jumping, and seeing Ruthless jumping, he started jumping too. It was like watching
amoebas fight. The furballs were fluffing all over each other, explosions of high pitched yipping
with fur shrapnel, and tumbled across the carpet.

Laughing, I looked at Fluffy.

"You're thinking about it, aren't you, meatbag?" Fluffy's expression said. "You're thinking hard.
You're feeling lucky, aren't you?"

I talk to the dogs. Get over it. I said, "Look! They're playing games! They're having fun!"

"Try it, meatbag,"

I reached out, cautiously, respectfully, and scratched him about the chest, then around to the ears, and got both hands in for that good, double ear scratch. He countenanced my affection.

"Guess what? We're playing games, Fluffy!"

I grabbed him by the head and stretched his skin back so he looked surprised.

"Meatbag, unhand me at once. Cease these shenanigans."

"Are you sad because you don't like games, Fluffy?" I stretched face down, so he looked like he was moping.

"Meatbag, I did not fight in two foreign wars for this indignity."

I got both hands in there, stretching his face around. The furballs rolled into my leg, I bounced them across the carpet. Fluffy clearly didn't want to see the corgi-carnage, so I wrapped his ears over his ears, and then flicked them back, one by one.

Fluffy sneezed, pulled his head back, and walked off with his injured pride. If he really could talk, he would have said something with civilians as a pejorative. I regreted nothing. The furballs forgot they were fighting and looked at me expectantly. Ear scratches all around. The game came back on. Someone scored. The game cut to someone else on the sidelines, not playing, and great tension was revealed by the announcer. Apparently sideline guy hadn't scored all game. This was big news. I'd be talking to my coworkers about that!

I don't own any guns. I don't have a security system. I have several signs warning any prospective attackers of dogs on premises, and I hope to God they don't discount them because they see Relentless or Ruthless. Do you have any idea what would happen if Fluffy found an honest intruder, a legitimate target? Do you have any idea how much that would hurt?

When an attack dog strikes, the weak point in that chain is the dog's teeth. Human flesh won't break or tear, and the dog's muscles and body are like chains. But their teeth are weak. They might lose or break a tooth, so if a dog strikes you and that happens, you might be able to get away.

Fluffy has titanium teeth. If he bites you, there is no escape.

Fluffy trotted back, gave me a look, and curled up. He wasn't upset, but he was a little disappointed. I started stacking couch cushions on the corgis. This is how we party on a Sunday night.

Everyone was talking about scoreless guy on Monday. He hadn't scored later either, and that meant something. Exactly what was open to interpretation, so we interpreted, and I interpreted too. I'm coming across more cynically than I mean to. I've got to talk to people. Well, I guess I don't have to, but I'd be miserable if I didn't, so it's worth a three hours a month, two to five minutes a week. I'm a professional researcher. This what I do.

The woman in the office, Melissa Rekyk, was a different affair. Talking to women requires a different series of techniques, but application no more or less clinically. Ask them about themselves in a open-ended questions and listen. There's no research required. What is interesting is that
straight women like talking to straight men about how to pick up other straight women. I don't really know why, but there are enough cases of this for me to notice. Melissa asked about my dogs, and I mentioned my doggy wingman theory.

"Some women," she said. "It wouldn't work on me."

"Oh, but that works too."

She blinked at me. "What?"

"You're just not into dogs. That's fine, but now I'm not interested in you. I've got three of them, so if you don't like dogs-" I shrugged.

What I didn't realize was that I had just told Melissa that I was out of her league. Because she didn't like dogs, I was someone outside her sphere of influence. I had become someone she couldn't have, and because I had done it flippantly, she knew I wasn't saying that as a play for her attention. Honestly, I wasn't really paying attention to her at the time. I was being friendly as she upgraded my retirement contribution from nine percent to ten, but I might as well have slapped her, shouting, "You're not good looking enough to overcome your lack of interest in dogs!"

Melissa narrowed her eyes, sizing me up in lean animosity. The retirement contribution form swished under her hands.

"Thanks for getting that done. See you around!" I said.
Carol and Anne were receptionists at Lucky Seven Motel in western Virginia. They were both twenty, nominally students at Blue Ridge Community College, and living with their respective parents. Carol was single and had always been with several short exceptions lasting not more than three weeks. Anne had had a boyfriend or one on the line since she'd turned fifteen.

"There are just no decent men anywhere," Carol was saying, oblivious to the statement's implications. "None exist."

For the third time in this repetitive conversation, Anne attempted to offer some constructuve advice. "There are several at my church. The youth group kids still hang out, at least those of us still here do."

"No. I know all the people in there." She seemed prepared to resume blasting Anne's boyfriend Frank with collateral vitriol, and his predecessors, and raise unpleasant implications about Anner herself, so the shorter, non-angry one tried to head her off again.

"There are plenty of decent guys out there. Hon, I'm finding them, and you can too. You need to put yourself out in public though, and talk to people."

"I'd talk to them if I knew where one was!" Carol exclaimed, and this final straw of absurdity broke Anne's good temper.

"You wouldn't talk to the perfect boy if he fell in your lap!" she retorted. Carol snorted, left the little office, and went to the desk wrinkling her nose.

In one of the coincidences Fate loves, the perfect boy walked in a few moments later. He was a little taller than her with big, wide eyes. There were a soft, complex brown filled with gold flecks in a warm, deep combination. He had full lips and walked confidently, approaching her directly.

"Hi. Carol. Pitr. Have a moment?" he asked, smiling politely. His teeth were perfect.

He was, in fact, not only incredibly handsome but shockingly so. Carol was so astonished that she had to snap out of daze to hear his question. At being called by name she lost it again; that she wore a name tag utterly forgotten.

Some part of her managed to say, "Sure."

"Is there a tire store around here?" he asked, still smiling, but with a new hint of abashed awkwardness.

"Sure," Carol said again. She answered on autopilot. "It's back towards the freeway on the left.
You can't miss it."

"Are you sure?" asked Pitr. "Do you have a map or something?"

"No," she said. She did. "But don't worry. You really can't miss it."

"Okay, then. Thank you, Carol," Pitr said and nodded. He beamed again and left.

She stared out the door after him for a good ten minutes without moving. If she had gone to it, she would have seen him quickly and efficiently removing a flat from his car and mounting a donut. He worked fast, being fairly competent, and had strong, sure hands. It was getting dark, though, and he really needed someone to hold a light. Since no one came, he managed alone. Then he left, drove past the motel twice while lost, but finally found his way.

Carol never saw him again.

"Who was that?" Anne asked shortly later, regretting her snappishness earlier. "Did he need a room?"

"No, just directions," Carol answered, still flushed and dazed.

Anne recognized the symptoms instantly. "Was he the perfect guy?" she asked, pleased to see hints of romance.

"No," Carol replied. She lied. He was. She'd been thinking about him. "He's too good looking. How can I have a conversation with someone when I keep getting lost in their eyes?" she said without a hint of irony.

Pleased vanished. Anne just stared at her, then released the most disgusted, disdainful grunt she could and stalked back to the office.

Shortly thereafter another young man appeared. Carol, mentally running through fields of bunnies, deer, and wild flowers, was addressed with, "You. Short on. Do you have a vacancy for the night?"

The young gentleman thought he was being clever.

Being taller than Anne, Carol was average height for a woman, but this man was unusually tall. His nose was a bit too big for his face, his jaw too small, but height, health, and good skin put him comfortable in the middle of the pack appearance-wise. When he smiled, he was ahead. When he smiled because of how clever he thought he was being, he was behind. He was also deeply irritating. In a few years he would be the love of her life, but there was no portent of that yet.

"Yes," she answered, emerging from her head to the real world. "What would you like?"

"What have you got?" he rarely answered questions directly if he could counter with another question.

Carol clicked away at her computer, getting a list of availabilities. "I have a queen, non-smoking, a king, and two queens, smoking."

"Give me the smoking," he replied.

For the first time she completely eliminated him from her mental list of possible men. Here she did have good reason. Her father had died young of cancer of the everything, compounded by liver failure, brought on by heavy smoking, drinking, and a diet rich in things ending in -ine. Albert
Grouse, his ID named him, was a serious smoker. She gave him his key, and he left.

Albert Grouse was moving back home, having failed out of Georgia Tech. He had excellent grades but attended exactly zero classes his sophomore year. His family did not know. He had checked into the motel to delay meeting them for twenty four hours, and after that would not meet Carol again for six months.

They would talk once at school, begin seeing each other around in the small, almost escape proof community, and wind up dating. Nineteen months after that first day, she would accept his proposal on the condition he quit smoking. He promised to do so. They got married, though she never told him she remained on the pill. Eight months after that she caught him smoking after swearing, again and again, that he was done. She delivered an ultimatum, and he called her bluff.

She wasn't bluffing. they were divorced within one year of the day they were married.

There wasn't much room for them to avoid each other in Appalachia. About a year after the separation they met again. Mutually desperately lonely, they spent an evening together which ended at the hotel with mad, wild sex driven by need. It was need not to be alone as much as need for each other. By now these were effectively inseparable in both of them.

In the morning Carol finally asked the question she absolutely had not broached, had not even thought about before.

"Do you still smoke?" she said timidly once they were both dressed. She was standing by the door, and Albert was sitting on the bed, looking at his hands.

"Yes."

"Don't ever talk to me again."

She left, slamming the door. Albert didn't move, and dry, sex-bedraggled hair clung like a helmet to his head.

Two weeks later she saw him in a restaurant, sitting by himself and staring at an untouched burger with more malice, a purity of hatred so intense it honestly unnerved her. That made her uncomfortable. That made her approach him.

"Hello, Albert."

"I want a fucking cigarette, go fuck yourself," he snapped so quickly it was a machine gun blast of nastiness. It was even more shocking than the look he was giving his food. Albert expressed anger with steadily mounting cynicism and mockery, usually climaxing in biting insults. This was nothing like that. It was coarse, brutal profanity that shot out of his lips.

Carol was astonished, like long ago, but this time her pride failed to react instead of her head.

"Are you not smoking?"

"Of fucking course I'm not smoking. I'm not smoking so fucking hard it's a full time thing." Words spilled out in a rush. Other than his lips, his body was perfectly still. Every muscle was clenched. He hadn't met her gaze, but felt it one him, through a haze of pure anger.

Carol didn't know what to do. She hated being cursed at, and remembered telling him to avoid her forever. She felt stupid for breaking her interdiction herself when he hadn't, especially to be sworn at. She was also startled. He'd never spoken to her like that, and he'd quit smoking lots of times.
She watched the first sign of movement he made. It was a faint, slow drumming of his fingers on the table, so slow as to be silent. Every movement was calculated, forced, and intentional.

"Good luck," she said quietly.

He said nothing for a heartbeat, then, "Thank you."

It was totally sincere without a shred of anything but gratitude. Carol made herself walk away.

Four weeks later she saw him again. He was in his car, parked far from everybody, and staring at an open pack in his lap. Again she approached but said nothing.

"I can't do it," he said softly, and his voice was full of guilt and shame. "I can't not do this."

He sounded weak.

Carol leaned down, and she could smell the smoke in his hair, on the hands he was scratching his head with. By smell and experience, moreso than the number of white cylinders remaining in the box, she calculated he was six into it. She took the lighter, collected up the pack, and pulled the strays out of his lap between his legs. It was the least sexual thing she'd ever done.

"There's another in the glove box," he whispered, sounding like he was begging. She went around the car, took it, and walked away. He said something else, but this she refused to hear.

That night she went home and tried to cry. She couldn't. Tension she was unable to release built up in her like sickness, and her stomach refused to take any dinner.

Carol was taking two classes a semester. She'd changed her major once to physician's assistant and had not done anything during her marriage, the months before or after. Now, including breaks, she'd been in school for over six years, working towards an Associate's Degree. Anne had kids and had dropped out. Carol had nothing. She had credits towards a degree she didn't think would get her a job, experience as a hotel clerk, and no prospects for going anywhere. At nights she sat at home with her Mom or sat alone in movie theaters. She didn't know which made her feel like less of a loser. At least she finally stopped seeing Albert at college.

That dull grief started to go away as time healed old wounds. She told herself she was young yet. She was only twenty five. She was still young, she insisted. For all that she knew it logically, she couldn't make herself believe it.

One night the doorbell rang. She answered it. When she saw Albert, she was unable to distinguish regret it was him and relief.

"Can I help you?" she asked politely. She did not invite him in, and he stood on the step in a light rain.

"God, I hope so," he said quietly. "I cannot do this. How do you do this?"

It was her resentment talking when she answered, "You just don't smoke."

He flinched, trying and failing to respond. After struggling he gave up entirely and just looked at her, beseeching her aid, her advice, anything.

"Have you tried the patch?" she asked.

He shook when she said it. She felt bad for that but delighted in the way mention of it, merely
talking about the thing he had left her for hurt him.

"It didn't work," he explained. "You don't need to smoke, but that's because you can feel it in you. You can feel it. It's like maggots under the skin, eating even though they feel great. It's also expensive, but that doesn't matter."

"Why are you avoiding me?" she asked.

"You told me too," he said back, and this time it was her turn to flinch.

"No!" he exclaimed. "No. That's a lie. I just wanted you to ask how I could say that so I could win. No, I'm sorry. That isn't it. I moved out of my parents house. They all smoke. I couldn't do it near them. I live with this dude up eighty-one. Between rent, the car, the gum, I tried the gum, and food, I can't afford to go back to school I just work." The first words were the same panicked rush as when he'd sworn at her in the restaurant. They slowed down by the end.

"But I told you to quit," she said quietly.

"But I'm not doing this for you any more. You're no longer the reason. I just-" He stopped. When he finished he was weak again, like she seen him in his car. "-can't do it without you."

"How long?" she asked.

"This morning. They're in my car. It was four days before that."

"People laugh about it," she observed, trying to relate to this struggle he was telling her about. "I didn't think it would be this hard."

"It is. It's impossible. Please." His hands began to creep out, and his fingers stole over her arms to her sides. "I have to have you."

And it was at that point that she understood, because as badly as he wrestled, the sudden, violent, agonizing longing for his touch that blossomed under his skin nearly crippled. She needed to pull his hands off and tell him he wasn't allowed to touch her. She needed to pull away. She needed to remember that she almost had a degree and would have it if it weren't for him. She needed to remember the lies, the curses, and that in spite of everything, Albert wasn't that great a guy. He was weak.

She also needed Albert to fuck her right now, right now, and she needed it worse than she needed any and everything else. Her hips were begging for him, and his arms were slowly pulling her in.

"You can come upstairs if you want."

"I'd like that very much."
One by one the stars were going out over the ocean. They twinkled until one shimmer took them dark, and from there they did not return. They left a growing patch of black sky on the far horizon. Behind the stars appeared other things, great sweeping spirals and long arcs of pallid color, but these dwindle as well. Soon the darkness that stole over the sky had left the small half circle over the waves and penetrated the sky above and behind.

King Aramoche looked at his councillors for guidance but received nothing useful. They disavowed any expertise as one. He could not blame them. If they were all equally ignorant, it was best the ignorant king made his own decisions. The cost was on his own head. He adjusted his crown, a dense onyx thing with gold above the brow and sapphire at the crest. It was almost never worn. He looked back over the sea, and the first sounds of metal crashing on metal came from far behind. They were faint and singular. A single blacksmith could make that much noise working unhurried.

Over the sea it was harder to see the mist pooling out of the dark spot in the sky, but when it came close starlight from above punctured it, nailing the mist to the foamy waves. The darkness had slowed near moon height, and above the bright stars Rigel, Koan, and Jyr burned too bright to wink. Their pattern was the pattern of sapphires on his crown, but no one but the king knew that it. It wasn’t secret, but few people looked straight down at the crown, and few of those knew the constellations by heart. The mist came closer, and the waves began breaking, sometimes through. Their smashing foam burst out the sides of the fog bank, that creeped towards the beach, moving many miles a minute. The horizon was fifteen miles away for a standing man, the mathematicians said, and the fog had come in almost nothing. How fast must it be moving?

Aramoche looked once more at his advisors. They hoped with desperation. His bodyguards were gone. Behind the wise men huddled the nation, panicked, disciplined, silent in their fear, and behind them all came the ringing of metal. It was still quiet.

The fog broached the outer breakers, raced up the weed-strewn sand, and crashed, spewing foam and mist over them all. It was cold and dry, leaving tiny beads of moisture on his skin. Before the king was a narrow stone bridge, lit on both sides, and on it were a legion of grim, dour men.

Their leader’s foot crunched seaweed with a loud, immediate sound. He kicked sand as he advanced. The horde remained perched on the misty bridge to watch and their leader walked forward alone. When he was three yards from the king, his knees were level with the king’s feet, but his head was above the crown. The giant nodded to the lord.

“I am Ajax of Bolg,” the pale giant said to the black king. “Who summons me?”

“I am King Aramoche of the Crystal City, Lord of the Thirteenth People, and High King of the Evening Fall. I sent my prayers to the gods of Ice and Fire—”

“And they have heard you and sent me.”

The giant’s intrusion startled King Aramoche, who was not used to being interrupted. Yet the noble did not at once object or reply. He waited, and in the silence Ajax was forced to continue.
“Bolg heard your offer. He wants to know why you should ask to renounce your own gods and take His mantle.”

The pale army on the bridge might have been swamp wisps, for the fog and dim fires made them glow. Their vanguard had spread out over the lower part of the sand. A sharp demarcation of black sand, colored by algae and drifting plats, marked the lower part of the beach, where waves broke around the bridge piles and set salt foam against their heels. Above them, above the black sand, on the white dunes that were still pale even in the darkening night, forty thousand men, women, and children, all with skins the color of stone and deep earth, waited in silence. Aramoche felt he could hear their needs and wanted to chose his words carefully. He did hear the rising sounds of steel, the dawning of the final battle. Perhaps it was the lengthening of shadows into twilight. He had no time.

“Our old God is a cruel beast. He expects mortal sacrifice, and His prophets are mad. They foam at the mouths, running amok through the cities, biting, and those they bite die. He has send red comets across the sky and filled the rivers with blood. His prophets claim they are punishment, yet we have tripled our sacrifices, tripled them again, and sent our children to His temples. We have given Him the best we have, and His rage is unmatched. We cannot abide him any more.

“Wanderers tell us of the Lord Bolg. They say He keeps fires in the hearth, and winters to the peaks. It is said He shepherds snowstorms with his hounds. I have heard He demands a sacrifice of wheat, not blood. His tithe of a son or daughter from every housefather is not to be spilled on His altar steps but raised in the priesthood.

“Ajax, I am between my people and my God. That is what it is to be king. I enforce my God’s rules, and chastise any who rebel. But I cannot whip a man for refusing to send his sons to the knife. Even should I kill him for his disobedience, how can I consider that a punishment if he has died to save his family? I pray my own death is for something that worthy. Ajax, I am willing to turn from the path of a dark god, but his fist tightens around me.”

“Rekkun’s fist is not yours to worry about right now,” Ajax replied, and at the dread name, the people recoiled.

“It is not wise to speak His name,” cautioned Aramoche. “It brings His attention, and that is harm.”

“Let Him stop me,” grunted Ajax. “For that’s why I’m here. First, King Aramoche, before the harm of Rekkun falls, be certain of what you speak. Bolg has no interest in human sacrifice, true, but His burdens are not light. If you invoke His name because you are weak, His yoke will crush you. His is a great and perpetual weight. You see me, and you see His army I lead before you? This is an army of the dead. Death is not the end of His service, for we are commanded to rise again.”

Ajax let that sink in, and Aramoche looked at the ghostly horde. They glowed with pallid translucence, the corpse-light.

“In old, this was a place of power,” Ajax said. “It was here Bolg presided over the birth of the first flames, and the smoke He husbanded into the first storm. Did you know this?”

“Yes,” replied Aramoche. “It is why we fled to this place.”

“Then that was wise and risky. You have no further place to flee,” Ajax acknowledged. “But your words have import here. There is no light conversation, and what you say will bind you and yours until your blood runs thin, and your children’s blood is too weak to raise your children’s children. Renounce your old God, turn your back forever on his name, and lift the Mantle of Bolg. It may break you, but if you are weak of spirit, your oaths are not worthy of his time.”
Ajax lifted from his shoulders a dark, weathered cloak. It had been sun-stained by many years, and now it was tattered. Even light ocean breezes whipped it. The giant held it with deadly intensity and offered it to the young king. It would be a humbling garment to wear over his mail and gold.

“I, King Aramoche of the Thirteenth People, and High King of Evening Fall, renounce Rekkun in the name of me and my people.” The stars began to scream, and the sapphires of the crown shattered. “I renounce His worship and His services. I cast aside the bonds of His faith.” The crown itself began to smolder and crumple, shrinking. It bound tight against Aramoche’s forehead, burning as it constricted, and blinding him with pain. Ajax did nothing. The king fell down, clawing and tore off the crown, removing much of his scalp.

“I pledge myself and my people to Bolg.”

Inwardly, he hurt at his words as well. He had secured no bargain, and he had no choice. He had not negotiated at all. But his head scalded him with fire, and now there were many blacksmiths behind his people, working on many anvils.

Ajax leaned down and cupped his hands under Aramoche’s head. A stream of blood filled it. The giant’s hands were like shields, and they lifted the blood to the stars. In silence he consecrated the king. Then he baptised him in Bolg’s name with his own blood, and settled the faded cloak on Aramoche’s narrow shoulders. The king crumpled, and his shoulders bowed. He was forced to dig for purchase in the sand.

“If you are worthy, stand,” demanded Ajax.

It was a two pronged test. Aramoche strove on his hands and knees to get up, showing he was worthy, and Ajax watched him strive to make himself worthy to stand up. Veins bulged out of dark skin. Blood mixed with sweat. The shifting footing of the sand was treacherous, and the deceptive burden of the old cloak wafted on light breezes. The sea winds did not have to lift to carry the faith of Bolg.

It was a matter of one leg going from a downed knee to a downed foot, and then the other foot followed. Aramoche formed an arched table. He put a hand to his thigh, then the other, and then adjusted the immense weight of the cloth. His back straightened. Glacially, the king rose.

“Good,” judged Ajax. “It seems my God’s will won’t crush you. Now, lead your people to freedom over the bridges. Rekkun’s weak vengeance must be looking for me, and the dead and I will go present him with a target.”

Ajax whistled to his men, and the pale legion began to file past. They leaped from the bridge, marching upwards, and filtering through the crowd. They bore swords and spears, armor and shields, and at the forefront walked the indomitable giant Ajax who was armed only with his immense man-killing hands. They passed through the Thirteenth People towards the dawning warfare behind.

As they went, one pale man with a piercing eye and deadly spear stopped by the king’s advisors. “You can help him now,” he told them, taking one by the arm.

Most rushed to their lord, but the warrior did not release his grip. His palm was hot, wet with seaspray, and his grip hurt the old wizard attached to the arm.

“The walk along that bridge is long. It will take several days. The bearer of the mantle must always be first, and the bearer must be the king. If it proves too much for him, carry him, and if he dies, his successor must take the same oath, bear the same load, and stay at the fore.”
“I understand,” replied the thin man. His jeweled sleeves were cutting into his arm.

“I hope you do,” the warrior replied. “Bolg is one of the kinder war-gods. One of the kinder. Kind-er.”

“Praise his name,” replied the old wizard, scared and distracted by pain. It was a safe thing to say.

“Do not fail him.”

“We will do our best.”

The terrible man smiled then and did not release the old man at once. “Do your best? Did Rekkun only ask that you do your best? I fear you are in for a dark awakening, for Bolg is not satisfied with your best. Bolg demands you win.”

Then the Basilisk released the terrified wizard and joined the rest of the silent army, filing past the living crowd towards warfare.

“Ho, Rekkun!” boomed an immense shout across the night. “Your aim is short, your arm is weak, and your eyes are blind. What is it like, being a fake god? Or should I expect no answer from the God of the Dumb?”

Lelan, holding a creature out of madness at bay with his shield, recoiled when he heard that cry. The nightmare did not and rushed him, all claws and teeth. It got over the shield when a javelin caught it in the shoulder, tearing it and Lelan’s shield away. The beast tumbled backwards, further than Lelan could throw a javelin at all, to shatter against a rocky mound. Lelan barely understood, comprehending only he wasn’t dead.

“Boy,” demanded the Basilisk, pulling him up to his feet. “You’re a brave one, and your people need you. Congratulations, your king was worthy. Go join your people and flee across that bridge.”

Boy was inaccurate from anyone whom hadn’t been dead for ten centuries.

“I swore I would defend them unto death,” argued Lelan, confused, and still suffering the confusion of battle.

“Then you’ve succeeded!” replied the Basilisk cheerfully, unlimbering his second javelin. “For we are the dead.”

Things began to filter through Lelan’s mind, like the white skin of the Basilisk, and the strange make of his weapons. He looked around, spying Ajax charge a horde of terrors, raining divine judgement on their heads. The pallid army kept coming, over the wall of hills he had been defending.

“The king did it?” Lelan asked. He still did not understand.

The Basilisk nodded. “Yes, your king did it. A way has been opened to a new land. We will hold until you are gone.” For one so frightening, the dead warrior spoke gently. “Bolg is your new god. Go, and join your family.”

With that revelation Lelan comprehended. He had held a fake hope that was less faith and more refusal to despair. The Basilisk seemed to know this, for his piercing eyes gored the man, and went to that stubborn refusal. Lelan was not prepared for the courage of spite to be vindicated, and when
he understood, when he truly believed, he wept as he ran. The Basilisk smiled faintly at him, then
turned to the dark army before him. He grinned.

This was not Rekkun’s true assault. This was just the vanguard. It was a half-hearted gesture that
showed how little the dark god estimated the Thirteenth Nation, and when it crumbled against the
fury of Bolg’s might, the few survivors struggled back bearing bewildered accounts. Scouts went
before and reported that Rekkun’s next assault could not come until dawn at the earliest. There was
a camp behind the hills, and it was thrown into confusion. Scouts from behind reported Aramoche
had begun walking the bridge, nearly crippled by the Mantle’s weight and supported under either
arm by his stewards.

“How long?” the Basilisk inquired, leaning on his javelins.

“That many? Moving no faster than their thin king bearing a nation’s burdens? Could be a day,
could be more,” Ajax judged. “We may be here long enough to get hungry again.”

“I hope not. Hunger isn’t something I miss.” The Basilisk snorted.

“Then rejoice, for unlike most men, you aren’t limited to dying once for our God.”

The Basilisk smiled. “That is why I answered Doom’s second trumpet. Do you know how I
entered Bolg’s halls the first time?”

“No,” Ajax replied.

“Battle. Dragon. I’ve asked, but it was too long ago. No one knows if I won or not. And in all this
time, I’ve had but one regret. I wanted to be able to test my mettle against men in the end. A great
wyrm,” the Basilisk shrugged. “There is no scale in that. The greatest hero can lose, and an idiot
win via blind luck. But men, death in a fight against men. You have a measure.”

“Battle of your time was sorely different from mine if there was no luck in it.”

“Luck or destiny, two sides of the same coin.” The Basilisk dismissed the argument. “It is the strife
that matters, the measuring of conflict. A man against a dragon is weighing wheat against the
wind. A man against men is honest measure. Let this Rekkun bring his hordes. I don’t intend to die
with spears unthrown.”

Ajax looked down at him. “That end I expect you will receive. Now be cautious. Something
approaches, and it might be a man.”

It had been once but was no longer. It was a beast on two legs, yellow jaws unhinged, ears bent
like a dog’s, and shoulders twisted. Its eyes were red inside green inside yellow without white or
pupil, deep set under shaggy brows. Its indeterminate sex did not bear thinking about. Men called it
Spider the Many-Legged.

“I am Ajax of Bolg,” the giant introduced himself. His dead army was arrayed thickly on the
Coruscant Hills, and behind them the stationary pall of fog squatted on the beach. The hills
themselves were compacted sand, some parts translucent, and all colors of the rainbow. They were
also hard and jagged, mounted into razor points. Great Ajax was perched on a boulder before them,
his tattooed arms painted in flames from wrist to bicep.

“I care not what—” began the beast, and Ajax slew it. It was a single overhand blow that shattered
flesh and set those fragments burning.
“Not here to talk?” The Basilisk was deeply amused.

“He, it, said it cared not. That isn’t how to open negotiations, so I saw no point,” Ajax rumbled.

The Basilisk threw his head back and laughed, and they waited.

The next assault began with the dawn. Ravening northwards from their camps, beasts of all manner came loping through the scrub brush. The hot sun was just cresting the horizon, and casting deep shadows across the field. Otherwise the field was neutral, with the dead having the advantage of defense. Rekkun’s hordes came into their killing ground fast.

Archers took a first toll, and the javelins took a second. Then spearmen extracted their price at the cutting base of the hills, lancing flesh that tried to scurry up and over the already cutting ground. Those that made it met the wrath of fists and steel, but distracted some of the dead from their ranged reaping. The black arch of arrows dimmed, and more beasts made it to the melee. They mounded up over the greatest of the piles and nearly overtopped it when fire came down on them. The horde scattered, retreated or died, and the archers picked up their bows to take a second toll. Reforming, the horde pressed in again, paying Bolg’s due to attack, and mounded up like before. Now the dead were prepared, and if the beasts attacked with greater fervor, the dead smashed them. Corpses began to burn in the sun.

The horde adjusted and attempted to flank the Coruscant Hills to reach Bolg’s Beach from the side. That went poorly. Soon the sea was choked with bodies, and the Thirteenth Nation, huddled as they waited to cross the bridge, saw horrors of the Old Gods’ war. Rekkun’s beasts were thrown back again. They rested and attacked in fury. There was nothing but bleeding and annihilation as the sun passed its noon zenith and began to descend.

The dead did not leave new corpses. They crumbled into dirt and stone, thick black loam that smelled fresh and fertile. Rekkun’s beasts burned or bled, and tainted whatever they touched. Between them formed a seething hot mud where blue flames raced from node to node. The shimmering colors of the sandstone hills were blackened. Replacing those colors were rainbows cast by the setting sun amidst the fumes of corpse fires, rainbows that burned in the air with their own light. These cast more rainbows, until the air up to the level of the higher hills was a multicolored horror. Bolg’s pallid army got painted as bizarrely as Rekkun’s horde. They worked each other like meat grinders until the sun began to settle towards the western hills, passing over nothing but warfare the whole day. Finally Rekkun’s minions began to falter and drew back, scampering away from the killing ground. Bolg sent a wind, and smell of copper and death fader from the air, replaced by seasalt.

“You found your measure yet?” grumbled Ajax, perched up on a high spire and sucking in the fresh air.

“No one’s managed to take it yet,” answered the Basilisk. “Many tried, but Bolg found them wanting. Piss and wine, I’m thirsty.”

“Ha! Bolg tests you.”

“Bolg should provide me a drink,” the Basilisk retorted. Ajax laughed at him.

Scouts went backwards to see the status of the Thirteenth Nation and found it was more than halfway onto the bridge. Aramoche had posted his arch wizard Morrexus and lieutenants to remain behind until the end, and these went back to meet Ajax.
“What do you have by means of provisions?” asked the giant when the magi reached his points.

“Quite a bit,” answered the Morrexus. He had vigor in his age, given to great labors his long life and now had a spirit to endure. “In haste our people are dropping everything they cannot carry. They keep grain, but breads, cheese, wine and other things lay in piles on wagons.”

“Ah, bless your news.” The Basilisk rejoiced.

At once a rotation was developed for to head to the beach in turn and pick over the leavings. The people, clustered by the water’s edge, saw the pallid scavengers come and go, and murmured to themselves, but they were still frightened by the fighting they had seen earlier. They grew courage when they saw the warriors eating, consuming water and wine like living men, and lost a little of their fear. For their part the dead had little time, but they were polite before hastening back to the bulwark of the hills. Some were disappointed to find out they needed to sleep, but another rotation was devised.

Wagons climbed a sandy ramp to the bridgehead, carrying the old and infirm, seeds, and livestock. Progress on the evacuation slowed and was not aided when the sun set. Word came that King Aramoche had collapsed under his burden entirely, prostrate on the cobblestone with the tattered cloak on his back, and everything stopped. He must recover.

Ajax set men to watch for another attack, but Rekkun send a new messenger, more polite than before.

It was a woman, human in form, tall and lithe in particulars. She had skin the color of midnight emeralds, and in the darkness after sunset she looked like a shadow. Only her eyes and teeth were clearly visible. Her silhouette was shrouded in hints by the thin robe of gauze, but her words were firm. She approached the Coruscant Hills openly, making signs of her coming, and Ajax met her.

“I am Ajax of Bolg,” he greeted her at the outskirts of the land he considered his to defend.

“I am Temara of Rekkun,” she replied, mimicking him. “Should I fear you, Ajax? Or may I speak with you without the shadow of violence?”

“Shadows are everywhere at night.”

“Then should I wait for dawn if I fear for my life?”

“Yes,” agreed Ajax. “You should. A rage may fall upon me at any moment, and then I will kill without warning. Indeed, I may slay you now so your killing will be a warning.”

Temara’s confidence slipped, and she scowled at the giant. “If you are nothing but a mute murderer, why did you come forward when I’ve come to talk?”

“Because I am the highest mute murderer. We won’t fail to respect our dues and waste your time with a lesser statue.”

A second time Temara tacked. She explored his demeanor with a long pause. If time was as little to him as he represented, he would show no impatience. This proved correct, and winds scuttled clouds across the moon and brought sea breezes to the battlefield while Ajax waited with the solidity of ages. Rekkun’s emissary composed herself deliberately, picked her words carefully, and crafted an approach.

“Who are you, Ajax of Bolg?”
“Ajax.”

“Why are you here?”

“Bolg sent me.”

“Why did Bolg send you?”

“Because I am his servant.”

“You have beautiful tattoos.”

“Thank you.”

“We forgive Bolg for your failings.”

He stopped. She waited.

“You are not one to forgive or blame Bolg for anything,” he cautioned, and his great arms tensed under the shadows of night.

“Indeed not. Rekkun does.”

“Rekkun may swallow a python.”

“Is that how you died?”

He lashed out at her then, and flames make a wake behind his fist, great dovetails of them that set fumes of corpse gas aflame. Temara was but a shade when his arm passed through her. A circular blaze licked around him before dying. The starlight returned, gentle and faint, and Temara was in the moonbeams.

“My apologies. I did not know that was a delicate matter,” she said.

“May you swallow a python.”

“I would enjoy it,” and she smiled with a mouth full of teeth.

Ajax knew then that he had made a mistake. He was thinking her a mortal, a creature of flesh and bone. Rekkun had not sent a living woman to negotiate with Bolg’s army of the dead. The giant considered his next action with meticulous care, ultimately deciding to turn and leave without another word.

She taunted him as he went, crying, “But Insangelous Ajax, come back! I am but a woman. I only wish to talk.”

“It is you who said it.” He returned to the dire hills and told the Basilisk to transfix her with spears. But a cloud passed over the moon, and the starlight fell to darkness. When it returned she was gone.

She came once more, but the Basilisk put spears through her shadows before she was within hailing distance. She skittered this way and that, eluding his missiles, while she attempted to get close enough to spin her words, but that only brought her into the reach of other spear throwers. Then the sharpened hail was too much for her, and she fled. The men went out to recover their
weapons, and then Rekkun unleashed his disciples.

Spears killed them, but their shadows skittered across the sand, clicking as they came. The Basilisk tried to anchor those shades with more spears, but they flowed past his weapons. Finally dread Ajax lit his hands and threw a huge pillar of fire into the sky, and Bolg’s horde understood they were beset by spiders wearing the skins of men. When Rekkun’s prophet’s tore their mouths open to scream, it ripped the silk threads that held their faces together, and those strands tumbled down their chins like foam. When they died they abandoned their vessels and scuttled forward to do Rekkun’s bidding. Their abdomens were striped with emerald green, mounted on long black legs covered in a crude hair. One the end of each leg was a single hard claw, made for grasping and holding instead of climbing, that rapped on the broken stones mixed into the sands.

“Run,” ordered Ajax. “Run the beaches, and soak them in oil. Push Aramoches’ people onto the bridge, and there hold the line.”

It was done.

The spiders came slow, for their legs were unskilled at crossing sand. But they wove thickly with their silk, until the dunes looked like white-capped mountains. Thick glaciers ran among the summits, and human forms staggered among them like giants stepping in and out of the black swarm.

Ajax fired the beaches. Tiny deprived screams came from uncountable arachnid throats when walls of fire kept them from the humans, and Aramoches’ people abandoned even their food and clothes, climbing over each other in fury to get onto the bridges.

“Halt, you cowards!” thundered Morrexus. The old man perched on a railing and beat the horde with his staff to instill his will on panicking crowds. They did not calm.

The flames began to die, and the men of Bolg broke up abandoned carts and threw them into the fire. The blaze grew again.

Beyond the flames the spiders began to work, coalescing around a few human shapes. Sand and stones were bound together in armor, and spiders allowed themselves to be woven into place. Moving golems began to rise visibly between the flames. On another mound Temara appeared, capering delightedly and dancing. Her hips rolled welcoming, and shadows twisted over her skin, weaving a white silk gown. She called to Ajax.

One by one the shambling golems mounded up above the highest flames. Their faces were blob-like; every feature was coarse, covered in thick waving hairs about the length of a spider’s leg. To these hairs layers and layers were anchored like muscle impregnated with rock, until the thing could move under its own power. Then they walked, striding through the flames that ignited their skins while screams of entombed spiders cut through the night.

“My God has given me the greatest gifts,” hissed the Basilisk softly. His eyes were like diamonds, and he waxed ecstatic. “I had thought to be tested against men. Bolg has given me a war against pure terror. Praise His name, He will measure me against myself.”

“How blessed are we, sent to hell and pulled back that we might know our demons in the waking world,” agreed Ajax softly, and then raised his voice. “Come, men of Bolg! Blessed are we!”
“Blessed are we!” shouted back the surprised crowd, and then they saw the Basilisk assault and their leader follow. Golems infected by flames lumbered towards the beach, screaming and hissing in heat and steam. The spiders woven into flesh shrieked as they burned in their holes.

“Blessed are we!” agreed the warriors of Bolg, louder than before, and they turned from their labors to pick up their arms.

“Blessed are we!” screamed the dead in a cry that shook the heavens, and they charged. A ray of sunlight pierced the sky, and the dawn broke through the clouds. The sky was saffron and rose with flame.

“Blessed are we!” and they who had no reason to fear death went back to it.

Behind them the Thirteenth Nation mounted the bridge, awed and silent. Morrexus guided the crowd that was willing to listen now and urged them to haste with gentle words. Over their heads he watched the battle beyond, knowing his people would survive to take the bridge and flee.

“But what then?” Morrexus asked. “What manner of God are we yoked to?”

Chapter End Notes

Myth from the Gloaming
"It's all grey in here. I can't see what's what."

"Have a light."

"No, the wiring. It's all grey. I can't even figure out what's hot or grounded."

"If you use a flashlight-"

"You're not listening to me. Stop talking and listen." Steven Mobbs retracted his head and shoulders from the wiring duct, what should have been a room, but was instead a narrow chute in a non load-bearing wall.

Albert was already opening his mouth again, and Steven rode over him.

"Stop talking. Stop. Stop talking. Every wire is grey. There are no red wires. There are no black wires. Every wire is grey. There are no color codes. Every. Wire. All of the wires. That's every wire," Steve paused and stared at Albert for an uncomfortably long period, enough to make the silence distinct and unpleasant. "Is grey."

Albert had to say something, so he chose, "Well, that's just bad wiring."

Steven Mobbs was born Ahmad Mohammed, but he was an electrician in Lusk Wyoming so his business cards said Steve. He was an immigrant from Texas. He was dark-skinned with a thick mustache, fifty extra pounds, and bad hair. His face was covered in minute scars from his days in construction, as well as his hands. He owned three cars: an Acura he drove to and from the office, a Sprinter van he drove as a mobile office, and a Ferrari he never drove.

Albert Jones, born Albert Jones, had a mustache twice as big as Steven's, had a flannel shirt twice as untucked as Steven's, and drove an Acura that needed an oil-change twice as much. He was ten years younger, exiting his twenties, and raised outside Chicago. He was on parole for beating a man senseless for calling it Chiraq. The two of them, with Little Al, Mobbs's son, made up Steven Mobbs Industrial Wiring and Electricity.

Steven looked at Albert, thought hard, and elected not to respond. He turned to Kas Tyrn, who's building this was.

"I'm not touching it," said Steven.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not touching it. You probably got a great deal on having that done, and you got what you paid for. Whoever you hired had a few spools of grey, and they used that for everything. It's a safety hazard, and I'm not going in there again. I can tell you the rats are getting in through the emergency drainage, so you need to hire an exterminator. Is there a cavity under the floor?"

"There's a crawlspace," said Kas, taken aback and trying to think through it.

"It's probably full of rats. You need to hire an exterminator, maybe brick something up, but I'm not fixing your wiring. Find someone else."

"Can you get the system running?" demanded Kas.
"You're not listening," snapped Steven. "You have rats nesting in your power supply. There are literal rat's nests in there. You've had at least two fires that I can see. I will not touch that until- How much voltage are you running?"

"The PMTs take ten thousand," said Kas, thinking hard and fast.

"You've got ten thousand volt lines?"

"They're everywhere. All through the walls. The PMTs need voltage, but they barely draw any current: peak amperage a mil, maybe two."

Steven goggled at him, so Albert blustered, "That needs to be fixed."

"That's why you're here!"

Steven refused. "Won't do it. Won't touch anything, especially not when I can't tell grounds from high voltage. Hire an exterminator and get rid of the rats, but I won't touch that wiring as-is."

Kas turned on him while he tried to figure out if that was an intentional error. "What do you mean as-is?"

"The wiring needs to be redone, and it needs to be redone right. Color codes, proper cabling, get the wires off the ground and into bundles." Steven thought. "You're looking at a hundred hours of work, including the branch lines, double checking the safety boxes..." He waved his finger around at other bits of work.

"I need these, running, now," said Kas in slow tones. He spoke as if he was restraining his anger against a misbehaving but stupid child. "I am losing a million dollars a day-"

"Then a hundred hours shouldn't be a problem!" interjected Alber.

Kas breathed. "I'm not sure if you know what a profit margin is, but I assure you mine aren't deep. I'm spending nine hundred eighty thousand dollars a day to make a million, and that's before labor, taxes, or anything else. I don't have the cash to fix that."

Albert opened his mouth to argue, but Steven shushed him. The senior electrician made him wait until Kas indicated he was finished.

"I'm not negotiating," said Steven. "I won't go in there unless that gets fixed. Now, I'm sure you can hire someone to do it. I don't know if the wind-power guys take this kind of job, but I can give you some names. This is not a blind or hard-ball," he added, trying to properly convey his point. "That's a death-trap, and I want to live."

"I've already called three of the wind-power guys. None of them have the equipment. They can't order until Monday, it won't arrive until Wednesday, and that's six days from now." Kas squeezed the bridge of his nose.

Steven took one angry breath, and then a slower, patient one. "Mr Tyrn, I understand. I do. I know how fixed costs work, so I understand your concerns. But I won't negotiate this point. This is a take it or leave it deal. I won't go in there unless all of that mess is fixed. I will, while fixing the mess, fix your problem because it's all got to come down anyway. There shouldn't be any rain this week, so we can block the drainage, the exterminator can pump gas while my guys work, and we can be done in-" Steven bounced his head back and forth. "Four days. We can start tonight."

"How much?" asked Kas.
Kas Tyrn was a thin-necked son-of-a-bitch from San Francisco who had started four failed businesses. He's sold one for half a mill and started his sixth. He had the stubble city-folk liked to wear these days, black horn rim glasses, thin tie, and designer jeans. Mr Tyrn built filtration systems for buildings, and so far this year had saved probably twenty thousand lives in China.

"I can get you an estimate," said Steven.

"Mr Mobbs, if you understand me, know that I understand you. You are correct in that you have me over a barrel, but I'm not willing to write you a blank check for however many hours you care to bill. I want a contract with a maximum."

Steven shrugged. "That will take me about an hour."

"Please."

The electrician shrugged. "Albert, go to the shop and get me a statement of the wiring inventory."

"I can get it online," interrupted Albert.

"I don't need it online! Just head back and-"

"I can get it online!" interrupted Albert and pulled out his tablet. Steven was telling him to stop being insubordinate and get the paperwork, when Albert shoved the tablet at him. "Here it is."

Steven blinked.

"That's all of our inventory. All of it. Everything," said Albert. "I told you we put it all online."

"Well, you'll still need to go back and pick up little Al," Steven muttered, scanning the inventory. "If we wind up doing this job. Mr Tyrn, why don't you call an exterminator. No matter what, you're going to need to kill the rats. I'll get you a time estimate."
Insomnia is the symptom

Insomnia is the symptom, not the disease. The disease is currently unnamed as best I know, but I’ve heard it referred to as sleep irregularity. Sleep irregularity is notable in its vagueness, like calling excessive bleeding, ‘feeling drained.’ Accurate, yes, and literally correct, but both are somehow lacking.

After three consecutive days of sleeping eight hours a night, something even my unafflicted friends didn’t manage perfectly, I had neglected to set an alarm one evening and crashed for eighteen consecutive hours. It wasn’t a deep slumber. This was sleep like death, paralyzed unconsciousness, waking up with my book on my chest because I hadn’t rolled over once. Sunlight hit me like a hangover, and when I made it to the kitchen later for breakfast, I still felt drunk. I hadn’t had alcohol in two months, but imaginary excesses were pounding me.

Objectively a bit of brain talked in the fuzz about dehydration and lack of movement interfering with proper blood flow, but that was washed out in a thundering light-induced headache. Gods, it was bright. There was orange juice in the fridge, which meant this was within a week of payday, and unopened things in packages. I ate and drank leaning against a bland beige wall, feeling terrible, and more exhausted than the day before.

It was noon. My ‘nap’ had begun at six PM, after work and a conversation with Becky via text. Becky had started seeing her ex-boyfriend again, mentioned this in passing as she declined my weekend invitation. I felt obligated to feel annoyed or distanced, either by the rejection or its medium, but had to admit I would only be creating a reason for it. Two dates in three weeks didn’t meaningfully require anything more than a text-based break in contact, and honestly, clarity and all that, meant matters were at least distinct. Becky had never said anything about the ex. She had been good people. I wish things had gone differently. They hadn’t.

It was Wednesday, thank God, and there was nothing that needed doing. I called one of my neighbors who was always up for mischief.

“I can’t talk; I’m shaft deep in drywall,” was his greeting, and he immediately hung up.
We need to talk about Dave

Chapter Summary

I'm going to add in some better speaker descriptors.

"We need to talk about Dave."

"Sure. We'll do it at the next Tuesday, when he's here."

"No. It's about last Tuesday. We need to have this conversation now."

Phillip, who until now hadn't been particularly paying attention, put his beer down and looked at Andre, who had approached him about the Dave matter. The Frenchman had a thin divided mustache, casual dress shirt and suit pants. His jacket was over a chair in the back-booth they preferred. Phillip was wearing khaki's and a polo, leaning sideways against the bar with one eye on a football game, turned to put both eyes on Andre.

"We should wait until Tuesday."

"That's the thing. We're voting him out. He won't be there next Tuesday."

Phil thought hard, then took his beer and followed Andre to the booth.

Edgar and Mongo were waiting. Phu was in the bathroom. They didn't talk until Phu returned, each one silently nursing whatever drink they had. Then Edgar went outside to smoke. They didn't talk until he got back.

Mongo couldn't find a suit that fit him, so he'd given up. He ordered everything bespoke. Even in the dingy bar, he looked over dressed in soft blue twill, wool vest, and had made the singular allowance to comfort of undoing his tie. It hung in double columns of royal purple, both ends tucked into the vest. Phu, a little Thai fellow, sat in the bench with him because between them, they averaged to the size of one American. Phu wore the IT uniform like Phillip, with the addition of a badge chain hanging from his neck. He drank a lot of black coffee.

When Edgar returned he sat down, cleared his drink from before him, and put his hands palm down. He had index cards. He was wearing a t-shirt and jeans, the only one so dressed, and allowed them all to take their time to face him.

"Dave missed last Tuesday and the Tuesday before. We're voting to put him out of the group. These are the pros and cons.

"On the one hand, he had a good excuse. No, not an excuse. Good reason. His kid got sick, and he's been home taking care of her. That's what he should be doing. On the other hand, that was the third time since Finland he's missed, and second time in a row. We couldn't do anything last Tuesday or the meeting before. We cleaned the office. We're going to miss next Tuesday as well, because we couldn't prep for it. From a safety perspective, I absolutely won't hurry through prep to get it done in one day, because that's how people get killed. But that means we're going to miss this event.

"Look, guys, it doesn't matter what we're doing. We aren't going to make it if we're not consistent.
If we were a basketball team, we'd need to make practice every week. If we were writing code, we'd need to make deadlines, hit the git pulls and architecture meetings, and if we were a race team, we couldn't win without track time and a running car. The thing is, the way this all works, we can't do anything with five people if we're running a six man team. We couldn't do anything with seven if we had six. So we can either switch to a five man team and recalibrate for that, or we're going to lose Australia like we lost Finland. He's a good guy, but he's a parent. He's supposed to put his kid in front of us losers. But as the losers, we're not going to win anything if we're out a guy."

"You're talking about voting Dave out because his kid got sick," said Phillip, expression flat.

"No, I'm talking about voting him out because he doesn't make meetings."

"Because his kid gets sick."

"It doesn't matter why! I'm not blaming him for anything! I'm saying I want to win! And we can't win if we don't prep, and we can't prep a man out. It's the bullshit of trying to run a serious group, the old coven limitation. This is why people in the old days ran threes. Look, we can't strengthen a six point star with five people. One end will be open. We will die. That's math. A six is better than a five, but a five is better than no six, and we have no six." Edgar's hands had risen from firmly pressing on the table to waving in the air, making sharp, stabbing motions at the center of the table between them. He began to flush, and as soon as he caught himself, he stopped talking to take a deep drink of water.

"What you're talking about is going from a hobby to serious. Going pro, if you will," said Philip. "Because that's the difference. The purpose of hobbies is to be low stress, try to make every session, but if you can't, no worries. The purpose of going pro is winning, and then yes, missing a session, even for a good reason, is unacceptable, much less three.

"But you're half-assing it, because if we're going to hold Dave staying home to take care of his kid against him, if we're going to hold outside factors against a member, then we don't half-ass it. We aren't going to win unless we start hitting all of those factors."

Phillip stopped to look hard at Edgar, who knew what was coming. Everyone else did too, but they faked confused expressions, like they didn't know what Phillip was talking about.

"I'm talking about money, Edgar. I'm talking about money. We missed Finland because of money. No worries. Finland wasn't a big event anyway. We missed South Africa because of money. Not because people missed sessions, or we couldn't prep right, but because we didn't have the money to fly us and all our equipment to South Africa, and that was a big event. And if we're talking about winning, about putting money down, then let's not throw stones in our glass houses. Let's talk money."

The elephant in the room started trumpeting. Phu and Philip stared down at the table. Mongo looked at his hands.

"Mind if I take a sip of this?" asked Philip, touching the wine bottle between Mongo and Andre. Andre didn't say anything, and Mongo waved him on. "It always amazing me that the Black Cat has such a wine cellar. It looks like a dive, right? But provided you're willing to buy the whole bottle, you can get some pretty decent vino here. I make no pretensions of knowing my wine. I call it red because it is red, and the details of the grapes can be left to those who care.

"Let's talk money, Edgar. I will not vote Dave out to take the group from a hobby to something serious if we're doomed from the get-go because we don't have the money to make a serious play. I
like this as a hobby, because my job has all the stress I want. I make every session because, well, I'm a creature of routines and schedules. Most of us are. Mongo goes work, gym, home, work, gym, bar, work, gym, meeting, repeated, and Phu tags along. I'm sure Andre does as well. We've all thought about going pro, making it serious, but we aren't going to do that because how do we pay for it?"

No one looked at Phillip but Edgar, who sat in his t-shirt and jeans.

"So what do you want to do, Ed? Want to throw that stone at a guy who missed a meeting to take care of his kid? Because if we kick him out to get serious, but we can't get serious because one of us doesn't have the money, that's a real dick thing to do."

"You're trying to make me the asshole in this?" demanded Edgar, flush creeping down his neck.

"You tried to vote Dave out of the coven because he missed a few days when his girl had the flu! You are the asshole!" snapped Phillip.

"Hey," said Mongo softly.

The two of them looked away from each other, staring around the bar and glancing at TVs and old posters. Andre sipped his wine.

"That's what we wanted to talk to you about. Phu and I have decided we're going to Australia," said Mongo, still pitching his voice soft and bashfully. "Andre said he's coming."

Both Philip and Edgar stared at him, Phillip startled, and Edgar shocked and hurt. Phillip looked to Phu, who nodded. Andre nodded too.

"We're going. Either of you can come, if you can come, but we're going. We can run a triangle, and we've got over a week to prep. But we decided we can't miss Australia. We've got to make this one." Mongo kept hoping either Phu or Andre would take over, but they seemed content to let him talk.

"But I can't-" whispered Edgar, trailing off.

"Yeah. We understand." Mongo nodded, shoulders hunched up around his jaw."Sorry."

"I have to think about it," said Philip.

"We understand. We're running prep every night this week at the glen, starting tomorrow. If you can make it, come at the usual time. Otherwise, we understand. We'll see you in a few weeks when we get back."

"But if you go to Australia and we done, you'll be running ascended circles. We can't-" complained Edgar, again unable to finish his sentence.

Mongo couldn't say anything. He just nodded.

"That's how it is," said Andre. "I'm going to go close my tab."

He went to the bar, and Phu went with him. The other two stared at Mongo, trying to force a reaction from him. He swished the bottle of wine, and found there was maybe a glass left. "You can finish it, if you want. Good luck." He slunk out of the booth and walked away.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" demanded Philip of Edgar, trying to glare at him while watching the three that
were going.

"Fuck you."
Narn

Chapter Summary

Fits between Ghosts and Sonder. Short silliness.

Narn tried out his new legs and found them sufficient. He walked slowly from stonewrought wall of the bedroom to the fireplace, one hand always on the immense flagstones of the inner wall. It radiated the heat of the trapped fortress, brushing his fingers warmly, unlike the thermal vampire of the outer curtain. That one should be warm too, with a thick layer of mud and straw between it and the true outer curtain wall, but should and would meant wasn't. The curtain wall was like ice.

Narn got to the fireplace and stood still, sweating. That was also ridiculous. He shouldn't be sweating from a ten step walk, not ten, mincing steps such as old drunkards might take. He was. His legs groaned with sharp protestations that caught fire and burned when he walked back. His knees wiggled and quivered, swooping by the time he hit the starting wall. He sat without deciding too, as his legs fell out from under him and he rode the unhelpful traitors down to the bed with a semblance of grace. Thud, he hit the hard cot and mattress of fur in a wool sheath. It was a comfortable bed, he admitted. His shins burned like fire.

There was a rapping, and Thane Masseron looked in immediately after. Narn didn't understand the point of knocking. That wasn't true. He did. It was Masseron's hall and Masseron's room, and Masseron's door, so he knocked to inform Narn he was coming and came to inform Narn about his hall, room, and door. Narn had better get used to it.

"Thane," said Narn politely.

"Can you rise?" asked Masseron.

"It will take a bit."

"We have time."

Narn sighed. Then he straightened and worked his way to the wall, and levered himself up with his hands and hip. Towards the top he spiderwalked around to face the thane and tried to bow. Instead he fell and grabbed Masseron's beard. It was a marvelous handle. His royal personage winced and dropped with the Red Cloak, but Masseron was laughing as Narn climbed his host to get back upright.

"I invited you to the welcome of my halls, not my beard," chuckled the thane.

"And mighty halls they are, sire," said Narn. The thane helped him back to his cot, and Narn thudded again down to sit. His back and legs ached.

"They truly are," Narn added. "My gratitude is deep."

"Rememebr that. Tell me of your meeting with my sister."

"Ah," Narn sighed and winced. His shins burned. "She's a beautiful girl, of magnificent presence, impeccable charm-"
"The point, Narn. Find it."

"Beautiful girl," hedged Narn, and grabbed a wool-wrapped pole to rub his legs. It relieved the burning in his calves. "I joined her for a mug. She had the white wheat. Beautiful girl."

"What did you say?" the thane demanded, and perched on the other bed. His eyes were like skewers.

"We didn't talk."

"You said you had a mug with her!"

"I did! I did! I- she looked like she was interested. I looked at her face, and she didn't look away. I looked at her mug, and she drank it. I had nothing to say. I tried."

Thane Masseron winced, and rubbed a hand over his face. His face foliage was shaped like an arrow, shooting down from his broad mustache to the pillar of hair on his lower lip. Across his jaws his beard was finely trimmed by his wife, who hated the thing, but if she had to look at it, she was going to make sure what she saw was neat. She clipped his mustache separate from his sideburns and worked the long point into an orderly spearhead. It struck down at the stag and falcon on his chest. Her needlework, Narn guessed.

"Swordsman, my sister is indeed young and beautiful, but she doesn't strike men dumb," Masseron said in a low, level tone.

Narn shrugged. "I had nothing to say. I tried. My mind was blank." He sighed and pressed his own temples. "I tried. She looked like she was interested in talk. I couldn't find words, so I hobbled out."

"Swordsman, you have got to talk to girls," ordered the Thane.

Narn glowered at his temporary liege. Masseron's wife was putting him up to this. Narn was sure of it. Masseron would be at most peripherally interested in Narn's romantic activities. Lady Tilde chased single men with her pack of female relatives like the Wyld Hunt. Masseron's black-thread stag might as well have marked all men.

"Why didn't she talk to me?" demanded Narn. "She was there. It's her hall. She's my host."

The thane shrugged. "Swordsman, you're not wrong, but the plain fact is most of them won't. You argue that she should, and I don't necessarily disagree, but she won't. She wants you to make the first move. She thinks her job is to be available, and you may trust she chose to sit with you to achieve that material concern, but she won't broach a conversation. You must do that."

"She could just say hello," muttered Narn.

"Yes. You are correct. I agree with you." Masserone nodded seriously. "Now that we concur you're morally in the right, you've got to start a conversation."

"Yes, my lord. I will obey."

"You can ask her about her day. That's a reasonable sally. That's what you Swordsmen call the opening of a fight, right? A sally?"

"A sally is a massed attack. An initiation is the beginning of engagement. Thane, I've never spoken to her before. Why would I ask her about her day?"
"To start a conversation," said Masseron with heavy emphasis on every word. "That's what asking a girl about her day does. Narn, there's a short hand to this. They've decided you have to make the first move, but they leave these little tid bits for you. When you ask a girl you don't know about her day, both you and her know it's to initiate a conversation. This isn't a secret. She knows. You just have to be the one to ask."

"She could ask me about my day," muttered Narn.

"And now you're whining," chided Masseron. "You have your orders. Be that as it may, you said earlier I had your deep gratitude. I want it."

"I thought we were talking about that?" asked Narn, put off.

"No, my sister is-" Masseron paused. "She's family. That's personal. I want the gratitude of a Swordsman in red."

The man on healing broken legs blinked slowly and looked up through his heavy brows. Masseron pulled his cloak tight. Narn spoke carefully.

"Who?"

"I don't want you to initiate on someone, necessarily initiate on someone, I don't mean I want you to, by gratitude I don't automatically want you to make someone dead," stuttered and started the Thane before crashing into a disclaimer of an unmade statement. "I merely want you to be present and provide advice."

Narn nodded slowly. His face was still flat. "We give...pointed...advice, Thane Masseron. Who exactly do you want advised?"

Masseron opened his mouth to say, "Me," and then very deliberately did not do that.

"Let me be direct. My southern neighbor is Thane Drome. His holdings begin over two passes, the Cirkuk and the Foss. Between them is a mean, useless valley where nothing but rocks grow. He has good lands, a score and five landholdings by heathhome as well as two landholdings by his extended kin. It is his extended family... He has many kin. Many."

"Numbers," demanded Narn.

"Forty men live in his hall. With older boys and calling in his kin-levies, perhaps five score, perhaps six. Not more than six."

"And you can call?"

"Four score. That's the kin levies, and loyal housefathers."

Narn calculated. "If you could keep them from getting inside the walls, you could do it. Or do you mean to sally against him?"

"He's coming here for Summersset. He will bring- if he brings just the family of his keep, he could bring five and forty."

"And they're going to come inside," said Narn.

"I can't very well feast them on the lawn."

"Tell them to feast themselves on a glacier," said Narn.
Now Thane Masseron hardened. "No, Swordsman, that I will not do. The hearth law is clear. I
invited them, and that I will do. I won't invite them in because they deserve it, but because I aim to
be the man who obeys hearth law. I deserve to be someone who keeps his word, and I deserve to be
someone who does the right thing to those that don't deserve to have the right thing done to them.
If I aim to be only a little better than someone else, we'll both shoot arrows down into the abyss,
and I intend to hit the stars."

"Never seen anyone shoot a star, sire," said Narn.

"Well, if I miss and the arrow falls on Drome's head, that's his own fool fault. He should have been
looking up."

Narn shot him a wry smile that Masseron caught. "What is my role in this?"

at the Swordsman to see if his point was clear. "He may come in peace. Drome does like to drink,
and he lives with seven score of his kin. I'll not deny a man a chance to walk over a hill and drink
with a neighbor. Seven score of his kin. I'd drink too."

Narn couldn't very well argue that.

"But I want you to be aware. To keep your eyes upon him. He'll be coming into my hall, but
perhaps a lowlander in a red cloak will make him think twice. He's like a snake. He won't go
looking for an ankle to bite, but he'll surely bite a fat vole that walks by. Maybe a Swordsman
should walk by the snake first and make the serpent think of his digestion."

"Summersset? I'm not doing a great job of walking, sire."

"You'll be fine."

Narn rolled his eyes. It was the tail end of high summer, and the long noon of the year was deep in
shadows of evening. In the high fields the harvest was being taken in. Down here in the low
valleys they had more time. Low valleys. Narn breathed deep and thought of his arrival, when his
lungs had screamed for air with every step. He'd not called Masseron's Hall in Running Stag Valley
a low valley then. But soon he'd been able to walk, and he'd been able to walk for such a short
amount fo time.

Narn thought jealously of his earlier self that had thought of walking as a stilted right. He'd had no
gratitude to walk. He'd demanded it and blamed his own lungs for preventing him from doing it.
He'd teamed up with his legs against his chest. He was looking forward to walking now.

"Do you have any men that aren't needed in the fields, Thane Masseron? Perhaps not in the
mornings or the evenings, and perhaps they would like to talk with me about the sword? We
learned that lesson hard in the Red, and I'm not Varad."

"Did you learn from him?" asked Masseron, cautiously. He spoke like asking another man about
his religion.

"Yes," said Narn. "Your men, sire. As many as you can. I'll advise them."

"Drome may just be coming for a drink," Thane Masseron reminded him, putting a box around an
idea and putting that box away. "He's more than welcome for a drink."

"Of course."
"And you need to ask my sister about her day."

"Why do I hear your wife's voice when you say that, sire?" demanded Narn.

"In the mountains we do not talk of other men's wives," lectured Masseron and swept from the room.

The injured red cloak glowered at the door, and worked his way sideways on hands and rolling buttocks to a burlap bundle. He pulled it apart and took the black sheathed sword from its heart, handle done in silk with knots done by old, skilled fingers. The blade was long and heavy, well balanced even wearing the black sheath. Narn didn't draw the blade but let it rest erect in his hand. Its name was Vision.

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Thane Masseron had four sisters, the youngest being nearly twenty years his junior. The eldest had been his elder twin, first in line for the throne, and had coughed herself to death one winter. Much of the keep had gone with her. Her name had been Monna, and she had been blonde, beautiful, and tall.

After her came Jynna, who had married early into Droggon's hearthhome, and lived in the nest of high valleys and dells that was Sunrise Land. They were tiny valleys and closely tied together, well suited to being by one family. The Skydrop falls cut deep into Mount Done, and from Droggon's hearth, the sun rose from the water after turning it to gold. Narn had never met her. She was said to be a pleasant woman, but everyone said so in cautious, wary tones. Much praise was given to her will. She took after her mother with dark eyes and face.

No one knew what became of sister Tryst. Six months into her twenty second year, she'd taken horse, sword, and pack and ridden north alone. No one had seen her since, nor had rumor returned. Masseron listed her on the kin list. Welcome would always be given, hospitality her due, aid even to arms and war without debt if she just made the request, but she never returned. One evening Narn had heard Masseron list the kin and all their due honors, some of which would be hundreds of years old now, and after naming Tryst and her not appearing the Thane had murmured, 'My best to you. I hope you did not leave because words said or unsaid here.' It was idle thought, though, for Tryst never returned.

Finally there was sister Blain, to whom Narn was not good at speaking. She was eighteen, or maybe twenty something, Narn hadn't asked, who looked enough like Masseron it was joked she could wear his beard. This was not joked around her. Women took oddly to remarks about beards. She was a pleasant woman, determined to be useful as the sixth child in a big family, nineth in line for the throne behind Masseron's own children and her older siblings. She could read, write, sing, paint, weave, and cook.

Narn had absolutely nothing to say. She was sitting right next to him. Narn had nothing. Pretty girl. Friendly laugh. She had good table manners and handwriting. Dogs liked her. Narn's mind was blank as snow on rooftops.

With was worse because Thane Masseron and Lady Tilde were sitting almost directly behind them and making emphatic gestures every time he so much as blinked in their direction. Narn tried to ignore them. Lady Tilde was shaking her fists while Masseron made pushing gestures. Narn coughed, and lady Blain looked at him like he was about to say something.

"And that's why turtles shouldn't have feet," said Narn.
She blinked. "What?"

"Amputate them right at the knees. Sharp knife. Snip, slice," said Narn.

Blain stared at him long enough for the silence to be long and unpleasant before demanding, "What is wrong with you?"

Narn wanted to murder everyone. He got up and staggered in the opposite direction, leaning on a wall for support.
"Hold on," said Calvin. "Trolls don't snatch."

All three of us looked at him like he was stupid. "Yeah, they do," said Helen, and no one could look at you like you were stupid like Helen.

"No, they don't, because trolls aren't real!"

"Oh, really? Then what happened to the Billy Goats Gruff?" demanded Hector.

"The Billy Goats Gruff aren't real!" yelled Calvin.

"Shush," said we all.

"They're not!"

"Shush!" yelled Hector, and I added, "We need to be quiet."

"I'll prove it!" decided Calvin, and he marched out of the girls' room.

We three rushed to the door and looked. He wouldn't- he did. Calvin walked right down the stairs and into the family room where Mom and Dad were talking.

"Honey, but we still- Why are you out of bed?" said Mom.

"Are goats real?" asked Calvin.

We couldn't see them, but there was a silence like Mom and Dad were just staring at Calvin. Mom answered. "Goats are real, Calvin. Don't you remember seeing the goats?"

"I saw goats?"

"You were very young. We all went to the petting zoo. You petted a goat," agreed Dad.

"I petted a goat!?" yelled Calvin.

"Yes," said Mom, and Dad asked, "Why aren't you in bed?"

"You can just pet goats?"

"No! You cannot just pet goats. They're animals, so you shouldn't pet an unknown goat!" interrupted Mom. Dad grunted. I bet Mom had poked him.

"Calvin, you know you should always approach animals carefully," said Dad. "Even dogs."

"Well, yeah, but I didn't even know goats were real," said Calvin. His voice was full of wonder.
"They are. Goats are real," said Mom.

"Go back to bed," said Dad.

He walked back around the corner and climbed the High Stairs to the second floor. Helen, Hector, and I were staring at him from Helen and my room.

"Wow," said Calvin and walked past to his room. We chased him. "Sorry, I can't talk. I have to go to bed."

That wasn't a problem, so we all followed him. We hadn't been told to go to bed. We had been told to go to sleep, and we would. Later. We piled into the boy's room and sat on the bottom bunk.

"So trolls are real, too," said Hector when the council had again convened.

"They are real," I said.

"I don't like this," said Calvin. "If trolls are real, what are we going to do? What if a troll grabs me while I sleep?"

"You punch him," said Hector curiously.

"Yeah, why wouldn't you?" I asked.

"I didn't really think about it," muttered Calvin. He sounded confused.

"That's why you should only punch trolls," said Helen. She sounded very smart. "Because if a troll grabs you, you have to punch him. But if it's someone else, well-" Helen shrugged like we all knew why that was wrong.

Calvin thought for a while, and then turned to me. "Can you find me a troll?" he asked.

"No."

"I want to punch him."

"No."

"But it's a troll!" hissed Calvin, remembering not to yell, and Hector, the traitor, agreed with him. "He should be able to punch a troll."

"I want to punch a troll," said Calvin, and the boys presented a united front.

"No!" I looked to Helen for help. She was useless.

"You were telling about the dragon scar," said Helen, and she was not only useless but another traitor too!

"No, I wasn't! Calvin was telling us he wants to punch a troll!"

"Okay, but that doesn't matter. Calvin always wants to punch. You can't talk about whether he wants to punch someone. You can only talk about if he does punch someone, or if there are trolls. So there are trolls. Baby Daren told you, but you said you've seen them before," repeated Helen.

"You've seen them before!?" demanded Calvin. His eyes were wide and terrible.
"Yes," I said into my shirt.

"In the house?" he pressed.

"Yes."

"Where?" whispered Hector.

"They're in the walls," I told my shirt. "That's why Rufus sleeps in our room. The trolls are scared of him."

"They should be scared of me," muttered Calvin, angrily staring around into the darkness.

"Why aren't you in bed!?" demanded Mom from the doorway.

Everyone whirled on her, but Calvin, who seethed in discontent. Hector whirled, but scampered up the ladder to the top bunk, leaving Helen and I alone.

"We are in bed," said Helen, looking right at Mom.

Mom had none of it. She grabbed us by the hand and put us back in our room, and scolded us from the doorway. "Now do not get out of bed until morning. Do not get out of bed. Go to sleep."

"What if I need to go to the bathroom?" asked Helen.

Mom had none of that either. She walked into our room and stared Helen down, eye to eye. Helen slept on the top bunk too. "Helen, if I find you anyplace but your bed or the bathroom, you will be in big trouble."

I couldn't see them, but I knew Helen was shrugging innocently. Mom was glaring at her. I waited. Mom's legs stood by the front of the bunk as she glared a reminder at Helen. I didn't say anything. Finally Mom's legs moved away, and she pivoted and walked towards the door.

"Hey, Mom? Would you put Rufus in here, please?" I asked.

"You are not getting out of bed to play with the dog."

"I know, but I like when he sleeps on the floor. He makes me feel safe."

Mom moved further towards the door, but her face came into view. She squinted one eye at me. "Fine. Do not get out of bed."

"Yes, Mom."

She glared. I looked innocent. Helen was looking innocent too, but I looked innocenter because I actually was innocent. If Mom had been Dad she would have grumbled at us, but she wasn't, so she turned off the lights firmly and walked out. A little later she returned with Rufus, who walked in, sniffed the room, and turned three times on the red carpet before sitting down with his nose under his tail. I could just reach his head for scratches. He wagged his tail, gave me dopey dog grin, and curled back up to sleep.

"You didn't really see trolls?" asked Helen from the top bunk. She didn't lean over the side to look at me.

"Yes, I did," I said.
"I bet you didn't," she argued. I didn't answer, and she didn't say anything else.
Jack, the Alchemist and the Immortal

Chapter Summary

Follows the earlier sketch on Jack and the wolves

In Malice Brand the Artificer created the Fountain of Youth.

Jack ran north with the wolves on soft carpets of blue fir needles. Now they were brown and red, and the trees black and white. The wolves competed as they ran, each vying to lead. When he ran no more but walked, they ranged out until he was the center of a planetary pack, alone in his proximity but always aware of white and grey fur among the trees. Before he slept they came to a small wooden hut, and Jack began to wonder how long he could dream.

"Inside is Ajax," said the alpha. "He must take us north. Go."

Jack went.

The hut was one room with a dirt floor so hard it felt like stone. After the pine barren, the rigid ground felt hostile underfoot. The walls were thick and low, and the ceiling was shallowly peaked. A fire smoldered in the hearth that smelled of pine.

Beside the fire was a bed, and in it lay an old woman. Her skin was translucent leather, splotchy but so thin he could see her veins. He could only see her head and hands.

Also present was the giant Ajax. Seated, he was as tall as Jack standing. His arms were bigger than Jack's waist. He sat on a throne-ish cylinder of tree, holding the old woman's hand or she was holding his finger. Her palms rested on the ridge between his thumb and index finger, and his other hand hid hers. Ajax looked up when Jack appeared.

"Good evening. Would you take a seat?"

Jack sat. There was another log nearby, so he sat down. Like she just noticed him, the old woman reached out and Jack held her hand. They were warm and small, very weak but still. She seemed content to touch without moving. For a while the three of them sat in silence, until Jack realized the giant was waiting for him to speak.

"I'm Jack. I'm with the wolves," he said.

"I am Ajax. You must be an alchemist."

Jack blinked and would have leaned away, but the old woman's grip was so weak that subtle movement would dislodge her. He stayed still. The giant misunderstood his surprise.

"Wolves keep no secrets. What one knows, all know."

"I see," said Jack and couldn't find words to follow.
"I've asked the wolves to bring me an alchemist for Periboea. What can you do?"

"What can I-" Jack stopped and stared at the woman. "I can- What ails her?"

"The world," Ajax shrugged. The antipodes of his shoulders swayed. "She'll be eighty nine years come midwinter."

"Oh," whispered Jack, and he thought of telling the wolves he was an alchemist. It was only a dream, and the Vioxel was deep enough he could know it without waking. He opened his mouth to reply, but sat, open-faced, saying nothing.

"Is it?" asked Ajax, in words aimed for his own ears. "It is. She is. Don't pay the prices of power for spite. I'm not here out of spite."

"Are you here?" asked the old woman, Periboea. Her voice was smooth and soft. She sounded like a singer waking.

"I'm here, baby."

"That's good. How are you?"

"I'm well."

"How was your day?"

In reply Ajax began a story about chopping wood which had no beginning, middle, or end. It started among the trees and narrated him felling one, stripping it, and carving it into burnable logs before starting on the next. Jack listened to him discuss three trees that way waiting for a point or punchline, but Ajax merely started on the fourth tree in the same tone. Jack didn't see four trees worth of firewood. Periboea listened to his soft rumble for a long time before interrupting him.

"Do you remember the old wood pile?" she asked.

"I do."

"It was so nice. I remember when we first cut it down, and you said you were going to make chairs out of the trunks. Those were the white elms in front. Most of the wood was pine, which you said you couldn't burn, but the white elm burned lovely. You made chairs out of the trunks."

"Yes, baby, I did."

"Do you remember those chairs?"

"I do. I'm sitting on mine now."

"Good." She talked for a while about the chairs and asked Ajax if he remembered the wood pile. He did. She asked him if he remembered making chairs from the white elms. He did; he was sitting on one now. She talked about the way pine burned in the fireplace, and asked what was burning now. Ajax said pine. She said that was nice and began to doze.

Jack had uncomfortably retained her hand. Her hand wasn't unpleasant. It was small, soft, and dry, but Jack thought he should be saying something.

"Is Periboea your mother?" he asked, guessing the giant was more likely her grandson.

Ajax smiled. "She is, but this isn't my mother. She's named after her."
That didn't make any sense. That was going the wrong direction.

Ajax smiled again. He had a gentle smile of a softly breaking heart, one that bent and frayed so easily it was without pain.

"This is my daughter," Ajax said. "She's the last of them. Minoa joined her mother years ago, she was young, and Periboea and I remained aside. When Minarcus went ahead, excuse me, her husband, she came back to live with me. Ah, baby, you were always so small," whispered Ajax and stroked her tiny hand.

Jack didn't understand.

"I am the Immortal," said the giant. "I asked the wolves to bring me an alchemist out of a silly hope. If you have any magic, do what you can. If not, we will not wait long."

They waited for three days. Those were soft moments in a still forest, in a hut was warm and dark. Periboea remembered three or four stories, and she would tell them whenever she was awake, switching from one to the next without the slightest inkling of memory. Her stories were from when she was young. She remembered the wood pile and meeting Minarcus. She remembered their house in Lomman, and she remembered coming home when Minarcus didn't. The two men sat and waited with her, and on the third day she died. They buried her simply and shut the door without locking it. There was nothing inside to steal.

"And now northwards," said Ajax, while Jack tried not to look at him, and not to look away. Ajax was crying, which Jack couldn't fault, but he didn't like it.

"Northwards?" said Jack, looking that way.

"To Malice. That's where the wolves want to go. I promised them admittance."

"Oh. Ajax, I didn't-"

"Hush, son. You did me a great service. I am much in your debt. Battles and warfare are a quick eternity in the vision afterwards. Three days in a hut is forever when there's nothing later. I will take you and the wolves to Malice to show you the Fountain of Youth. I'd tell you not to drink it, but you wouldn't listen."

That got Jack's attention, and he looked back. The giant was wiping his eyes. Both their faces were sooty, and as Ajax worked the grime around, his tear-streaks vanished into an all-over dirty.

"The Fountain of Youth?" Jack prompted.

"Of course." Ajax sighed. "Brand worked too well. He was too clever. He did it. He couldn't see the trap he was laying for himself, because he built the trap too well. He was too careful. I'm not convincing you. Would it help if I said it was full of bears?"

"Is it?"

"No. Nor will I lie on my daughter's funeral. But bears would be better."

Jack nodded.

The wolves returned then and ringed them. Ajax called the alpha by name, Hroll, and agreed to be
their guide. They took off running, heading back into the soft pine trees, and for a long time they
didn't talk. The wolves urged them on. Then Jack had to walk, and Ajax slowed out of politeness,
though the giant was winded hard. They walked quickly, as the pack ranged out around them.

"So, the trap," said Jack.

"It's not a trick," said Ajax, and Jack was pleased the other had his composure back. "It's not a word
game. You don't have to drink at the full moon or be turned to stone. Brand created it, and it's one
of the worst things he ever made. He made it for himself with all of his skill. It might be his
greatest work. But it is- It's deadly in itself. Immortality isn't- The people who can endure it
wouldn't take it."

"What do you mean?"

kill you can be healed in time, and youth is nothing but time. Brand crafted it, so he could throw it
in Ozymandias' face. It's perfect. No sickness, no infection, wounds close. On the battlefield you
become a power. All the lustful thoughts you've had about youth and time, they're fulfilled.

"You can't die unless you're killed," said Ajax and spoke like that was the most important point of
all. "But that's the trap. You cannot end until you're defeated. Maybe by an avalanche, maybe by
violence. Brand didn't think he could be defeated."

Jack picked his words with care. "There's a subtlety that's lost on me."

"Have you ever loved and lost? Tried and failed?"

"Yes."

"Still think about it sometimes?"

"Sometimes."

"I think about Periboea, my third wife, still. I'll think about her and my baby too. I've been married
three times, and each time I swore never again. Nights get lonely when you live forever. You bring
it all with you. Memories, strong as youth, so you find solace in soft arms. And then they die. How
long does a widower carry it? Fifty years if he knew her but a decade, a single decade if he knew
her for five. I was married to Aegina for fifty. That was three hundred years ago, and we had no
children.

"You're young. The world is so bright, so intense, and you see no shadows. Ah, you're not
listening."

"No, I'm listening," said Jack, and he was, carefully. He would remember everything. "What about
the wolves?"

"They'll do well. I'm surprised they're interested." Ajax shrugged and some gutshot hit him. He
turned away from Jack and wept brokenly, bent over and hurting. Jack stood baffled. He didn't
know what to do or say, and finally walked next to the giant. He stood inside the giant's vision and
stared at the trees. The wolves closed their circle. A couple sat by the crying giant and stared at the
trees like Jack, long tongues lolling in and out while they panted. The others lay down and slept or
wandered through the wood. Neither man nor canine had anything to say.
Why Mara believes in trolls

Helen moped across the carpet with downcast eyes across the carpet and stopped. She sighed. Fast expressions played across her face, regret, excuses, denial, but she sighed again and lifted her head.

"I'm sorry I sat on your head and farted. That was not okay," she said to Hector.

"I forgive you," said Hector, and he gave her a hug. Both of them turned to look at the parents.

Mom and Dad were wearing complex expressions. Dad's lips were a narrow line cinched together, and he was frowning hard. He sort of looked mad, but usually when he looked mad, he pursed his lips. His eyebrows shook threateningly. Mom was frowning as well, but she tried to look even scarier by putting her hand over her mouth like a beard. Dad always looked super scary when he wore a beard, so Mom was trying to be scary too. They exchanged an intense look.

"Why don't you go play outside," ordered Dad. He said it like a question, but it wasn't.

Helen put her head down and moped outside.

"You too," said Dad to Hector.

"What? Why? I didn't fart on anybody!"

Mom glared into her hand. Dad frowned extra hard. "Your mother and I need to talk. You aren't in trouble. Just go play outside."

"Aw," muttered Hector, and he stomped out the sliding-glass door behind Helen.

"Can I go outside!?" yelled Calvin. His voice echoed from the other side of the house.

"Where are you?" demanded Dad.

"I'm in the corner!"

Mom closed her eyes. She wouldn't talk.

"Yes, you can go outside," yelled Dad.

Thud, thud, thud! "Yay! I'm going outside, and I'm not in trouble anymore!" screamed Calvin as he rushed past.

"You are in trouble, you're just in trouble outside!" yelled Dad.

"Yay! I'm in trouble outside!" yelled Calvin with no loss of aplomb and thundered out the sliding glass door too.

The parents looked at me. I hadn't farted on or been farted on, nor had I spraypainted the dog, but I knew that look. I tried to look as dignified as Helen usually did and gracefully removed myself from the premises. Mom's look at Dad was even intenser. He had tucked his lips in. They shut the sliding-glass door and pulled the blinds closed after I was out.

It was hot and yucky. Rufus came out, and he looked fantastic in purple. He was extra fluffy after being blow-dried, and rolled over to put his paws up and really scratch his back on the gravel. Hector threw a tiny rock at Rufus, and it bounced off his belly. Rufus didn't mind. Helen sat on the
broken swing and muttered, and Calvin went to the tree-fort tree.

"The sticks are gone," he said.

I walked over.

"The climbing sticks." He pointed to the base of the tree, where we usually kept the two four-by-fours we had found in the in the woods. They were just tall enough that placed together, we could reach from them to the biggest low branches and swing up into the heights. Now they weren't, because they weren't there.

The climbing tree was a maple that branched in four just above arm's reach and branched again above that. Between the two was the fort, which needed more boards. We didn't have enough. It was in the back corner of the yard by the fence, downhill of the house, and surrounded by safe ivy.

On the other side of the fence were the woods. There was a lane of grass as broad as a yard between the fence and the woods, interspersed with bracken and sometimes thistle, but a tall adult could see over the tallest bushes. That ended with the drainage ditch, a ravine taller than the biggest adult, that served as flood relief. It wasn't dangerous unless it was flooding, but we weren't allowed to play outside in the rain anyway. Beyond the drainage ditch was the wide forest, none of us had seen the far side of. It was woods, so not safe, but not necessarily perilous. Once Calvin had seen a bear. I had seen a skunk.

"Think Dad threw them away?" I asked.

"He might have," mused Calvin. "He mowed, and you know how he gets when we leave the sticks in the grass when he mows."

I nodded. "We need new sticks. Hector, we need new sticks!"

"Okay."

Hector trooped over, but Helen refused. Calvin rounded on her. "You have to come. We need new sticks."

"No," she grumbled.

"We're only out here because you farted on Hector," said Calvin. "You have the responsibility of guilt."

"But I didn't steal the sticks," argued Helen.

"No, Dad did, but we can't ask him about it because he and Mom are talking. So we're out here with no sticks."

Helen grumbled. In normal times she would have won, but she was upset she'd had to apologize, so she was off her game. The broken swing was a two sided bench, suspended by four chains to the swingset, but one side had cracked and Dad had taken the chains down. Now Helen grumbled at us from the low side. "Fine."

We marched into the woods.

No sooner had we passed the Back Gate when Rufus bounded past us and dove into the uncut grass. His head leaped in and out like he was breaking waves. A dozen birds broke cover and flew, Rufus barking madly after them until he plunged into the edge of the woods and retreated yelping.
He fled almost back to us before crashing into a puff-ball that exploded when he touched it. Rufus froze. He snapped at another puff-ball, which poofed into white dust, and then the dog rushed sideways across the uncut grass, chasing wind-borne spores.

"Turtle?" suggested Hector.

"Maybe. He's been scared of them since one bit him, and he had stitches," I agreed.

"Turtle," decided Hector.

"No time for turtles," argued Calvin. "We need sticks!"

"I bet you won't find any sticks," muttered Helen.

Hector paused. "For how much?"

Helen looked at him. "What kind of sticks are we talking about. Climbing sticks, or just tree sticks?"

The H's threw calculating expressions at each other and entered negotiations. Calvin told me he was going to look by the pond, a short walk downhill where the drainage ditch opened into a broad depression. Sometimes people left stuff there. I said I would climb down the ditch and go up. We agreed. Rufus went with Calvin because he had problems getting in and out of the ditch, so I went alone.

It was cooler underground. The trench walls were thick with thorn-bushes, prickers, and thistles, but also safe ivy and grass. Grass was the best. When the slopes were muddy, the dirt would give way under foot, but grass had deep roots and was easy to grab. I scrambled down where silt and small rocks formed the stream bed, and chased the stream towards its roots. It meandered from side to side along the bed, rarely more than a foot wide and usually just deep enough to soak shoes above the sole. It was easy jumping. I went up and around a corner, and found trolls.

There were four of them, and they were eating a bird. They had plucked it and roasted it over a sooty fire, and the trolls were hunched over eating feathers while it cooked. None of them was more than waist tall. They had gray hair and bony heads, dirty brown shirts and lumpy hats. None of them had pants. But they did have grasping hands, sharp teeth (full of feathers), and bright yellow eyes. They looked mean, but they didn't see me.

I tried to think of what to do. I didn't know. Hector would say hello. Helen would tell them they were eating the bird wrong. Calvin would punch someone. I decided to spy on them.

I scrambled up a narrow crack in the dirt wall, where long grass was deeply rooted. Once I was high enough that they would have to look up to see me, I peered over the edge. Here the dirt wall was an accumulation of rock, and any little touch sent pebbles avalanching into the stream. I peered over the edge, but mostly I listened.

"We need a plan," said one of the trolls, whose name I would learn was Chiron. "Why do we need a plan?" demanded another. His name was Titus. "We go in, and we eat the babies. What other plan do we need?"

"They're not babies any more," said Temora. "They're kids."

"I hate kids," said Titus. "They're too stringy."
"They get stuck in your teeth," agreed Chiron.

"They have hard, crunchy shells," added Andromache.

"They report earnings pro-forma!" yelled Chiron.

"They smell like feet!" screamed Titus.

All shuddered.

I sniffed myself. I smelled delicious.

"Silence, all of you!" yelled Temora, and she out yelled everyone else. "You'll eat your children and you'll like it! Don't you know there are starving trolls in the City of Screams with nothing to eat but rocks and knuckle sandwiches? No whining!"

The trolls grumbled but fell silent. I admitted I didn't like the thought of eating rocks or knuckle sandwiches either.

Temora continued. "Good. Now listen up. I've sent away to the City of Screams for help, and they said they're sending Aurelius-"

"The Snatcher in Darkness!" hissed Chiron in evil awe.

"That's right!" grumbled Temora, who disliked being interrupted. "The Snatcher in Darkness. He's coming, and we'll snatch those children up. And you know what we'll say then?"

"Dog!" wailed Titus.

"No, we won't say dog. What is wrong with you?"

"No, DOG!" wailed Titus.

The trolls whirled.

Standing in the middle of the ditch was Rufus, war-painted and staring at the four trolls with wide doggy eyes. For a moment no one spoke. Temora moved first, making calming gestures towards Rufus as Titus hurriedly spat feathers out of his mouth.

"Get 'em!" I yelled.

Rufus got 'em. Barking, he charged all four trolls, biting and snarling and dashing right into their midst. They scattered and ran. Andromache tried to grab him, but Rufus jumped clear and bit her. He lifted the troll and worried her fiercely, back and forth while she yelled and cried. Chiron jumped in to punch the dog, but Rufus only dropped Andromache and bit him back. The girl-troll ran, and once Chiron realized Rufus was on him, Chiron ran too. Titus was already gone. Temora ran for the bank, stopped, ran back, took the burned pigeon, and ran back for the bank with Rufus close on her heels. He chased them all right into the ground where a root-filled hole sank under a slab of rock and scrabbled fiercely at the dirt outside.

I crawled down, and checked to make sure the coast was clear. It was. Only Rufus was left in the stream-bed, and he barked and scratched at the hole. His snarls echoed down underground. I approached him very carefully, making noises to make sure he knew I was coming, and didn't pet him until he had looked at me. Even then I only scratched his ears from the side until he lowered his hackles. Rufus growled meanly at hole, panted at me, and then sat down to chew on his leg.
"What happened?" asked Calvin, comin around a corner of the ravine. "I heard Rufus barking. What are you burning? Did you find any sticks?"

I looked at him for a long time and looked at the hole. I even looked at Rufus, but he didn't say anything. Calvin looked at the fire and picked up some feathers. They were partially burned and all dirty. They looked old.

"Nothing. I didn't find any sticks," I said.

"Why was Rufus barking?"

"He saw some animals."

"Get 'em, Rufus," encouraged Calvin, and Rufus stopped chewing on himself to pant happily at Calvin.

"He did," I said, and scratched Rufus's furry head. He smiled a broad, doggy grin. "He's a good dog."

"He is. But we need sticks! I think I found some, but I need help. They're by the pond."

"Okay," I said, and we went back downstream towards the pond. Rufus bounded happily after us until he saw a turtle, and then he peed on himself and hid.
Chapter Summary

I'm working on a main project that's getting grim. This just optimism.

"Karen, I have a question for you. Stop whatever you're doing. This is the fate of the world."

"Okay." Karen Shea paused 'Cake it or Make it.'

"How do you fix a soap clot in the squeezy bottle nozzle that plugs the hole?"

Karen unpaused 'Cake it or Make it.' She did mute the TV. "The next time you're washing dishes, which I presume you're doing now, you take a cup or bowl and fill it with the hottest water your sink can make. Throw the tip in there. While you're doing the rest of the dishes-

"How can I do the rest of the dishes if I don't have dish soap?" interrupted Edmund.

"You do have dish soap, it will just come out fast. Be careful. Anyway, you need to scrub the little bits of food and dried ketchup off."

There was a long silence. "Maybe."

"As I was saying, you put the nozzle in a cup of hot water and let it sit for a while. The plug will dissolve. Let it dry. It happens when water gets into the nozzle, so be careful about that. Why are you calling me about this instead of Mom?"

"Because if I call her about anything domestic I'm going to get a lecture, and then some memories, and then," he slipped into his matronizing voice. "Do you remember when you were five and you pooped your pants? I remember when you were five. You were so cute with poopy pants." He returned to normal. "For half an hour, and she makes me feel like I'm five and embarrassed again. I just need a simple answer."

"But I'm younger than you are. I still live at home."

"Blatant sexism. You're female. I assume you know these things."

Karen tried to stare frigidly at him but couldn't because chef Mario was doctoring a skyline of New York cake. She furiously put together her most scathing rebuttal. "Well, I do. And you're an ass."

"At least I don't live at home," said Edmund, and Karen said nothing.

In a plastic kitchen with linoleum tiles and fluorescent lights, Edmund smiled. He would have winked if anyone had been around to see it.

"And you should be an adult! How did the Army not teach you this!?"

"In the barracks I used this thing that was a handle with a scouring pad on the end, and the soap came in the handle. There wasn't a nozzle. I also didn't do a lot of dishes, because I ate at the DFac."
"Manchild."

"Give my love to Mom and Dad when they come home tonight!" chirped Edmund.

"Die in a fire."

The loving siblings disconnected, and Karen watched television until the prompt asked her if she was still there. She stared at it unseeing for nearly twenty minutes. The sound had never been turned on.

Karen got up and went upstairs. She was twenty four, brown hair and slim, but not as slim as she had been when she'd been in Track and Field in college. In her old room her diploma in English Literature hung framed on the wall, and her high school desk still had pictures of Lowmont High, prom shots, and group photos. Unconsciously she opened her computer and turned it on. The loading screen was a picture of her and Jessica Barns, her best friend from high school the day they left for university. She had been seventeen. Karen and Jessica had their faces pressed together and they beamed for the camera with huge, unfaked smiles. Karen stared at them until her ancient laptop wheezed into Windows, and the image was broken.

Karen reached out and very pointedly closed the machine. She stared at the walls. She stared at the carpet. She stared out the window. Posters, carpet, and trees, remained unchanged. She stared at her machine, wondering why exactly she had turned it on in the first place. Closed, it was grumbling and wheezing its way to sleep. She had had it for-

"Karen," she said out loud. "Wake up. You don't have to be ready. You just have to do it."

"I still don't see why I couldn't just live with you," grumbled Karen in the passenger seat of her brother's car.

"Because I'd strangle you. Don't worry. This is my girl, Elizabeth. She's good people. She's friendly, works too much, and she's very clean. Real talk. You know I used to say you were OCD? You aren't. Liz is a clean freak. Super nice person, but when I asked you about how clean you were willing to keep your space, I wasn't just giving you problems. Liz..." Edmund paused. "Liz has toothbrush scrubbed a bathroom. Like, she probably does it every week. You each have your own bathrooms, and just take my word for it that's huge, but you need to be on your game here. I'm not trying to put you off, though. She's a good friend. My girlfriend works with her." Edmund was dating a girl named Holland (Holly) Feng, and had been for most of a year.

"Well, as long as the building is close to a bus line."

"It is. That's the stop-" Edmund pointed. "And here we are." He pulled off the main boulevard into a loading and unloading area in front of an eight story building with brick facade between false cement columns.

Edmund was a little bigger than his sister, but not as muscular as he'd been in the Army. He also had more hair and thick stubble. His mind swept the building, wondering again if the cement covered load bearing structures or if it was decorative like the brick. He looked down at Karen, who was also looking up at the building.
"Sis, you can't wimp out now. I will make your life a living hell. Honestly, I kinda want you too, but I'm looking out for you here."

"God, do you ever shut up?" snapped Karen, and she got out of the car.

"Rarely," he admitted. They were in thirty minute parking, so he left the car. "Like I said, this is a good thing. Liz is cutting you a deal on rent because I promised her you'd be neat. She had a few bad roommates, and she's gun shy. I wouldn't, like, make heroin jokes for a few weeks though."

"Edmund, please shut up."

"No. Don't screw this up. Now get your ass inside and wow your prospective roommate."

Karen looked over at him, and saw him sitting on the hood of the car. He'd taken motions towards the door, but reconsidered and sat with the air of one prepared to wait a long time. "I thought."

"Really no reason to. Go to it, killer."

The brother and sister had a short stare-off, wherein Karen refused to leave and admit defeat, but shortly realized that staying down here to fight would be an admission of defeat of its own. There was no way to win. As that thought rolled through her head, her brother winked and shot her a horrible, victorious smirk.

Karen opened her mouth, thought better of it, and went inside.

Elizabeth Neumar was Asian, and Karen's mind involuntarily clicked through labels until stopping on first-generation Japanese. She spoke with a Jersey accent. Liz opened the door wearing an Auburn hooded sweat-shirt and and jeans, no shoes, and house socks. She smiled politely, and they sized each other up.

"Please, come in," said Liz, almost before the pause was noticeable.

"Thank you," said Karen.

Inside the main door of the condo lead to a short tile hallway with folding closet doors on the right and a narrow kitchen on the left. A low shelf held a pair of running shoes and set of summer sandals. Liz passed that to go to the living room, where a grey corduroy couch faced a moderately sized TV across a glass table. There was no dust on anything. The carpet was thick and soft, and only lines of footprints from a side corridor to kitchen and couch interfered with the lifted-thread pattern left by a vacuum cleaner. The room was lit by intense, almost harsh, white LED lights behind paper screens, but that was offset by the broad glass doors that lead to a tiny balcony. They let the sun break in. Karen gasped and went straight for the balcony.

"You have such a lovely view!"

Liz, who had a battery of questions prepared, paused. "Yes, thank you."

"It's so good!" Karen urged the sliding door open and went out, for a moment leaving Liz hanging in her own living room. Unconsciously she checked the carpet, and noticed Karen left untreaded footprints on the vacuum tracks. She'd stepped out of her shoes and left them by the door.
I was losing an argument about my own work, and that peculiar enough to throw me off my game.

"But I drew it!" I complained and pointed my finger at a silver-framed portrait hanging on Jessica's wall. It was a mountain scene, large, hoary headed peak in the backdrop, and two people stood on a rising pathway, arms around each other and staring at the camera. Oil on ceramic, so-called double-portrait size, or about two pieces of typing paper side by side. Truthfully, it was oil on ceramic, untreated foyer tile size, because my downstairs neighbor was redoing his daughter's house, and he had two cases they ordered wrong. He gave them to me for the pain of me unloading his car for him. It had been a long day. The tiles caught oil beautifully, and canvas was expensive.

"Exactly, and that's what I like about it so much!" retorted Jessica, and she waved her hands back.

Jess and I waved our arms a lot when we fought. We had learned not to discuss politics, money, or her boyfriends at restaurants.

"So I'm telling you that that's not how it's supposed to look! You should have the backing frame the image and covered the extraneous bits on the side!"

At issue were swatches of oil on the rim of the tile. These tiles weren't homogenous, and colors didn't turn out exactly the same across the boxes. I made tons of little dabs as I worked so I knew that on this tile, this color would look like that. Jessica had not hid them. The work was shadow-box framed with a green backing that looked like felt. (It was acid free cardboard with wisp texture.) The matte backing didn't cover the rim. They were right out there for anyone to see, unprofessional dabs of "What is green?" by me, who should have known better.

"No! I want those bits! I want to be able to look at that and see it's the original. It's mine! I'm in it! I took that picture, and I didn't commission it from some print shop, I had you make it for me!"

"But they look bad!"

"They don't look bad! The painting is fantastic. But the little bits are the only bits I have that prove that's me, not some blank scene-"

"Ah, no. The fact that it's you proves it's you!"

"Yes! It is me! But it's personal! It's not a print or a production, and it wasn't printed by some technically awesome non-person machine on tile as a gimmick. You guys in your pursuit of technical perfection are so inhuman. If I wanted something cold, I would have just printed and framed the picture, and that's a billion megapixels so with a microscope I could have seen my own eyebrow hairs. I don't want that. I wanted something I participated in, and that a person I know made. I want something connected to me, something mine. And I like those little dabs because they mean you sat down and worked it out and- okay, you actually probably grumbled a lot and muttered to yourself while scowling like an angry hedgehog."
I gave her nothing. "I was in creation ecstatic."

"Angry hedgehog. But that's you! You're a person! And that's me! And it's really me. If I just wanted something technical, I'd get a print and I didn't."

"In creation ecstatic!" I did not want to let this go. "I was very dignified when I painted."

"Lee, you look like a paint store exploded afterwards."

"Collateral damage from tearing form from primal chaos!"

"I'm not saying you're wrong. You are wrong, though. I'm just saying I don't want something neutral, something that I can find off the internet. Lee, there's person in there. I'm not going to smudge the center or put fingerprints in it to show it's real paint. You created it, and I don't want to change it. But I want to show that it was created for me, that a person made it for me, and that was a special time in my life."

"What happened to the guy? Myron?"

"Byron. Dropped him like a hot rock."

"Special."

"It was!"

We glowered at each other.

In the red corner, we have Lee Harper, your egocentric narrator. Standing five feet ten inches tall, weighing in at one hundred and seventy seven pounds, he is a practitioner of the oil style with belts in watercolor, charcoal, and fountain pen. Personal favorite: #2 pencil. He has a professional record of eighteen part-time jobs, appearances in nine Northshore Academy for the Arts shows, two by-line private shows, and sixteen paid commissions. Born in Nirmo and resident of Celephais since art school, he trains out of Walter-Whitfield Publishing, where he does illustrations in children's books. He is the challenger.

In the blue corner, we have Jessica Abernathy. Standing five feet two inches tall, weighing something-something, she is a master of the legal arts, filer of the court documents, and champion for the Crown in the Court of Tax Filing Adjudication. Fighting out of Celephais, the city of her birth, she has home court advantage because my apartment is a death-trap in a tenement. She is the reigning champion and STILL owner of the art in question.

"So I can hang it however I want," she finished.

"You can, but what does it feel like to be that wrong? Does it tingle?"

"No, I get that taken care of at the place that does my nails."
A Deal with a Vampire

Chapter Summary

I was going to run with this, but during the plotting realized it didn't go anywhere. There's something in it, but I'm not sure what to do.

The vampire sat me down. "This is the deal. In exchange for your soul you'll be young and beautiful forever, I'll give you a hundred thousand dollars, and you can eat whatever you want without getting fat." He ticked the points of immortality off on his fingers.

I thought about it. "I get the feeling you're leaving a few points out."

"Yeah. Listen, you've read Dracula. You know how it works. No sunlight, stake through the heart kills you (though that would kill you anyway, so we're not sure if really makes a difference vampire-wise), and you give up your soul, so crosses are an issue." He shrugged apathetically, hinting at an impatience I would not have expected from someone intending to live forever.

I hemmed and hawed. "Well, I'm not Christian, so I'm not sure about the cross-"

He interrupted me. "It'll be something. We got some brown people who can't handle the yin-yang. Maybe it will be the crescent, or a math text book. I don't know. I don't really care, here. Vampirism! You know how it works. Do we have a deal?"

I continued to vacillate.

He was certainly a pretty one. Pretty was the word, not handsome. He had effeminate, graceful features. Tall, fair skinned, slim (key), and perfect teeth. Not fangs either. I don't know if they came out on command, or he intended to bite with what God gave him. He wore a private-label bespoke suit with scarlet pocket square, mechanical chronograph, and synthetic leather shoes. I assume it wasn't because he had moral problems with leather.

"See, you're really rushing me right now and-"

"Dude! Eternal life in darkness! This is not a new thing!" He snapped his fingers a few times. "You've thought about this before. Everyone's thought about it before. At some point you got high and decided. Stop screwing around, say yea or nay, so we can get on with it."

"If I say nay, what happens?"

"I bite you anyway, you die, and get no power. Is there a God? You'll find out. And you can tell him you died nobly for... I don't give a shit. You don't get brownie points for saying no."

I drew back. The bloodsucker shrugged and pulled out a knife, a disturbingly modern looking auto-opener with tefloned blade and leaf point. It snapped open, click-click.

"Do I at least get powers or something!?" I demanded and backed up.

"Yeah," he said, waving idly with the knife. "You get the vampire suite. It's different for everybody. Pretty much everyone gets one enhanced sense, and aside from IMMORTALITY, you
usually wind up with enhanced strength, toughness commensurate with IMMORTALITY, and prettiness. Did I mention the immortality? It's awful nice compared to immanent death." He made stabbing motions with the knife.

"Well, I mean I don't know-


"Okay, right now I just think you're a crazy stalker, and-

He picked my oak table up and broke it with his bare hands.

I stared at him. I had made that table. Old boards are everywhere and, with an eye and varnish, can be made into incredible things. That table was no joke. It had been an ornamental door for a McMansion that had been torn down in Queens, and I'd pulled the planking out of the construction dumpster. Nearly two inches thick of good wood, that thing could stop a bullet. The pale skinned bloodsucker hadn't bothered to put the knife down. He just grabbed and yanked.

I felt the edges. If there was trickery, I couldn't find it.

"I'm silent beyond all reason, which isn't useful for demonstration, I can rip your arms out of your sockets, and my sense of smell defies reason. It's literally an evil power. I can smell what day of the week it is. But honestly, I don't really care that much any more. I'm going to murder you. Do you want to get bitten or stabbed?"

"Well, I mean, not stabbed, but-

"K," he said and snatched me off my feet. I sort-of half-assed fought, but it meant nothing. He held me by the throat, pulled my head over, and bit for the carotid.

It did not feel good, but it wasn't a metaphysical experience. Skin ripped and muscle tore, and his teeth crushed and cut into my neck. I think I spasmed once or twice. The world faded towards white.

"Power," I whispered. "I want the power."

He killed me and didn't immediately respond.
The Boyfriend

Chapter Summary

Recurring characters, Northshore, 1st person POV, female narrator. Should give a pretty good impression of narrator and boyfriend.

The boyfriend called me.

"Hey, have I send you any weird, one word texts recently? Since Thursday?"

"Hello, sweetie, how are you?" I replied. "I'm great, thanks!"

"Yeah, yeah. All that. Since Thursday," he repeated. I made sure the sigh hit the phone mic. "Yes. I asked you if you wanted to marathon the Pride and Prejudice series with me, and your phone autocorrected your response to no. You obviously meant yes."

He paused. "Oh. Sorry about that. I'll be busy."

"It's on Netflix."

"I'll be busy."

"We can watch it whenever."

"Busy then too."

"You're busy whenever?"

"Yes. I'm moving to Tibet to be a hermit. Going to be busy forever. Sorry."

You can't scowl at someone over the phone. I tried, though. "You're moving to Tibet to be a hermit?"

"Yep. Mainly so I don't have to watch Pride and Prejudice. Now, seriously, one word texts that make no sense. They would have been real words though."

The boyfriend was resolved to be neither deterred nor civil. There was no point in fighting him.

"Not that I recall. What do you mean?"

"I was talking to Byron about redoing his car. You know he's real into cars, right? Well, he's doing an engine swap so he needs another pair of hands, and Emily is banned from the garage-"

I like Emily. She was a small, bookish girl, who tended to ruin the curve at Northshore, but she was very sweet. She would make copies of her notes and email them to you if you asked. I didn't know about Byron. He was a professional student, thirty something, at least or about ten years older than Emily. They were good together, but it was weird.
"Why is Emily banned from the garage?" I asked.

"Oh, she's terrible," derailed the boyfriend. "She doesn't care about cars. That's fine, but it's sort of a point with her. When Byron's working, she'll come out and talk to him and start fidgeting with stuff. She once fidgeted through an egg tray full of screws, mixing them up and putting them in the wrong cups, so now she's not allowed in the garage when Byron's taking a car apart. Which is always. She's like your brother and cleaning."

I opened my mouth to say something and paused in the process of inhale. That hit uncomfortably close to home.

My brother refused to clean because he was a guy, and cleaning was women's work. His place was trashed. Well, not trashed. He didn't have much trash because he would pick up after himself, but he never cleaned. His sheets were frightening to conceive, and I don't think he owned a vacuum. But it was a thing to him. He did not clean because women cleaned, and he was asinine.

Except I did the same thing. I felt the same way Emily did about cars. They were nice little boxes with wheels, but I couldn't imagine recreationally taking one apart. The thought eluded me. The problem was that on no small number of occasions I had thought, Oh, that's not my problem, and actively turned off from learning something that the boyfriend likened to my brother. The boyfriend was uncomfortably facile with such comparisons.

"--so I text him, 'Kill.' Just that," finished the boyfriend and paused for me to laugh.

I had no idea what the joke was. It was obviously a joke. Laughter was expected. His voice did the little thing where it sped up and raised pitch right at the end. He was grinning expectantly on the other side of the phone now.

"Oh, sweetie," I said and laughed.

"I know, right?" he exclaimed. "Anyway, the keyboard might have done the same thing to you. Have you gotten anything like that."

Oh God, I actually had to know what he was talking about.

"I don't think so," I said. "What happened to Byron's car?" Was that the joke?

"Oh," said the boyfriend, and he halted. That was not the joke. He was dredging up something else entirely. "Well, he did it. I mean, he got it. He mounted the four-banger on top of the sled, that's what you call a battery pack that fits on the bottom of the machine. There were big problems with ventilation because an electric car obviously doesn't have the setup for the air intakes an ICE needs, so he had to redo all the ducting. The thing's faster than horrors in a nightmare, but it's got no AC and the pedals are high under the steering column."

"Huh," I said. I don't think a serious response was expected.

"Yeah, it's pretty weird."

We sat in silence. I searched my memory. It was blank. I had no idea what he had been talking about.

"There's really no reason for an electric car to have pedals at all," he mused. "They do, though. I wonder why."

"I do not know," I said. Absolute truth.
"Anyway, what are you doing tonight?"

"Studying."

"Want help?"

"I do, but I also want to pass this class. Thaumaturgical Methods, with Wright."

"Oh, God. I have to take that next semester. How is it?"

"Um." Long pause. "She speaks very clearly, so at least you can understand the lectures."

"Baby, the way you say that worries me."

"Good luck," I added.
"Mom and Dad are fighting," said Hector, coming into the girls' room and sitting discontentedly on the bottom bunk.

Why?" asked Helen. She was lying on a shelf by the window with her feet laced through the headboard, holding her book towards the ceiling so it made a roof, catching sunlight.

"Mom ended a sentence with a preposition."

"Oh." Helen nodded. She went back to reading.

I was also in my bed, but it was my bed, and I didn't want Hector sitting on it. So I kicked him. He ignored me.

"Stop sitting on my bed!" I yelled and kicked him again.

He wiggled but didn't move.

I kicked with both feet, my legs a cyclone, and smote him in the back. Hector made a "bleh" sound and held it, turning my kicks into drum beats. Helen snorted at us from her book, and I stormed out of the room.

I couldn't go downstairs. Hector said the parents were fighting. They might not really be fighting. The parents were weird. Sometimes they got into intense arguments that sounded like fighting but they were laughing. They might be fighting though. You can't end a sentence with a preposition.

The parents were weird.

So I couldn't go downstairs. Hector was on my bed, so I couldn't go in my room. That left the upstairs bathroom across the hall from my room, boring, the parents bedroom next to the bathroom, not allowed, the boys' room next to mine, too many boys, or the closet. I went in the closet.

The Linen Closet had sheets and towels, and the Blue Stripey Blanket we could only borrow, not keep. The bottom shelf was really the ground. I climbed in and pulled the door shut behind me.

The secret to a good lair is packing the blankets down so you don't lie on scratchy carpet. You also want to make sure there are no cracks. Baby Daren could see the trolls in the cracks, but I hadn't told anyone else. I wanted Rufus, but he was in doggy jail. I tucked the blankets in tight and folded them up so they made a nest, sticking up on top to line the walls. I had taken the Blue Stripey Blanket. Anyone could take it, but we had to put it back. No one could take it to their room. I wanted it, and I didn't need to put it back if it never left the Linen Closet. I curled up on it, feeling how fuzzy it was.

"I was sleeping on that," said the dragon.
"Well, I'm sleeping on it now," I said. I didn't want to say it after I had said it, but it was too late then.

I realized I was talking to a dragon, but I didn't care. I was mad.

"You're not supposed to take that when someone is sleeping on it!" hissed the dragon.

"You're a dragon!" I yelled.

"And I was sleeping!"

"Pssh. Loser dragon."

The dragon's head went flat, and he glared at me through red, burning eyes.

The closet dragon wasn't much bigger than me, probably curled up on the shelf above because only his head stuck down between the door and the sheets. His face was upside down. He had a long snout and pointed ears, with good dragon teeth and a forked tongue, but his head was mobile, like he had a squishy skull. As he scowled at me, his ears stretched way out to the sides and his jaws poked forward. His forehead was almost flat. His lips didn't curl when he frowned, but they pulled back.

I glared back at him. "What are you going to do about it, Closet Dragon?"

"What did you call me?" he hissed. Dragons do that a lot.

"Closet Dragon."

"Oh," he snarled, and that was the final straw. He reached out a long arm with three elbows and only two fingers, and grabbed the hinges of the door, claws going into the screws. They had always wiggled, and I had always wondered why. The dragon knew. He twisted and scratched the hinges, pulling on levers and twisting hidden knobs, and I really wanted to watch but I was busy being angry. I missed it. Instead he hit a switch and a lever, and all the sudden the floor fell away.

I gasped and fell down a long chute. I didn't even have the blanket.

I landed in rocks and moss and just then, for the second time ever, I saw trolls. They were big. They were mean. They were ugly, and they were being chased by a bigger, meaner, uglier dragon.

I gasped.

One of the trolls in front, an extra ugly one with one red eye and one yellow eye, pointed at me.

"A baby! Grab it!"

Hey! I wasn't a baby! I was... oh this was a bad time to argue.

I turned and ran. The trolls chased me, the dragon chased the trolls, and the rocks were sharp underfoot.

We were in a stone house that had its outdoors inside. The floors were stone, broken and cracked with grass sticking out. Moss had fallen off the walls. There were no chairs or tables, but great logs and the stumps of old trees lay every which way in the huge rooms. The rooms were bigger than my yard. Everything was dragon-sized and not closet dragon-sized, but old dragon, ancient dragon,
wyrms of the deep Earth-sized. Doors I would have to run to touch both sides of lay open, seared with sulfur and brimstone.

I raced under a fallen redwood and jumped onto flat slate. It was smoother, so I could go faster. The trolls were quick behind me, and the great dragon right behind them, but the beast had to go over the tree and lost time. On the slate I could outrun them. The trolls howled and threw stones, pelting my back and arms.

"Come here, little girl! We won't hurt you! We just want to snatch you!"

Pssh.

I dashed around a corner and made it to the walls, past the canyon of the window-box where ancient waterfalls tumbled from cave-mouth casement to stone underfoot. It was slick, and I had to put my feet carefully. The dragon hit the spray behind the trolls and sent up a terrible cloud, hissing as his fire hissed in the steam, and the trolls began looking back at him as much as they looked forward at me. I wasn't looking at anyone.

Before me, routed into the stone baseboard was an arched mousehole, lined with blue writing and partially hidden with moss. It had a small doormat marked, "Go AWAY!" I got there and tried to go in, only to find that the door was locked.

"Ha!" yelled the trolls, and they rushed for me. The dragon had lost time the water, and the trolls were in the clear.

I kicked aside the doormat and found the key. I yanked the door open, jumped in, and slammed it on the trolls' faces.

"Ha!" I yelled back.

"Little girl, come out here!" yelled the trolls.

"Doom!" yelled the dragon, and his coming was a hurricane. The trolls fled.

I thought about opening the door to laugh at them, but then I thought about the dragon, and I decided to be gracious in victory. Helen would put civility first.

Inside the mouse hole there were no mice, or if they were here, they were hiding. There was a line of mouse-bottles hanging from the ceiling with long stems, each with a great brass ball bearing. Also there were four exercise wheels, and some bowls of wood shavings. It was a very nice little hole. There was a door in the back that was closed, and a tube that lead up through the ceiling instead of stairs.

The trolls might be eaten by the dragon, but if they weren't, they'd be back. That meant I needed to escape. I could go out the door or the tube. Trolls ran bent over, sometimes on two legs and sometimes four, and they made great time across flat surfaces. But they didn't look like they could go up very well. I climbed the tube.

It wasn't like stairs. There wasn't another room right above the first. The tube went up into the wall and tunneled through the stone. It wound and curved until I felt like a string racing through knots. When it ended, I was in a room behind a picture frame.

The room was spartan, a look-out for the mice. There was a picture in the frame, sewn with threads as big as my arm, that from a distance was opaque, but up close I could peer through the cracks. This was a different room, a forested dining room where mesas of black stone overlooked deep
woods of green and brown. A dragon slept on the mesa with his head tucked against his leg, no wings, and plumes of smoke wafting from his nose. He looked comfortable. He should be, because he was sleeping on my Blue Stripey Blanket!

I felt like Calvin, and thought about going down there and punching him. But I didn't, because he was a dragon, and that was not a good plan.

Instead I seethed. When I finally looked away, I went to the climbing hole to descend. Before doing so, I listened and heard trolls.

"Shut up!" hissed the first to the second.

"No, you shut up! I'm being quiet."

"I'm twice as quiet as you are!"

"Then shut up!"

"You shut up!"

"Both of you shut up!" said a third troll, and the first two yelled in unison, "We're being quiet!"

There were several seconds of silence, and then one of them bit another.

That way was closed. I went back to the picture frame and looked out, but this time I looked at the wall around the frame. There was moss and ivy, and whole trees growing in hanging wall pots. The sounds of scuffling in the climbing hole were getting louder if not closer, but I had a sudden intuition that another troll, a clever one, was climbing past the fighting trolls in silence and would soon be very close.

I squeezed between the picture frame and the wall, and climbed down an ivy ladder. Its leaves were white-tipped with green hearts, and they grew thick on the brick wall. Sometimes I grabbed plants and sometimes carvings, great heads and faces that jutted out of the stone, and made my way to a hanging planter with three elm trees ringed by a small hedge. I jumped in and hid.

A long-nosed troll head with one yellow eye and one red was sticking out from under the picture frame, looking around and sniffing like a dog. His expression was crafty and mean. Staying low, I scurried to the other end of the planter, but there the ivy had all been cleaned away. It was unclimbable stone. The troll was still looking around, sometimes for me and sometimes at the dragon, which ignored us all as he slept.

Trapped. Trapped like a mouse in a tree planter over a sleeping dragon. The worst kind of trapped. Unless there were spikes. Being trapped with spikes would be worse. So the second worst kind of trapped.

Maybe being trapped by hornets is even worse, but hornets are flying spikes so they count the same.

Either way, I was trapped.
Parent are fighting, part B

Chapter Summary

This concludes the story that Mara was about to tell at the very beginning. Now you know how she got the dragon scar.

B

Some time passed, and I put my thoughts in order.

The worst way to be trapped was by flying spiders being ridden by angry teachers who were waving rulers and you couldn't go outside because lava was raining from the sky but the ground was breaking up and you were going to fall into a pit of lava snakes who had bees for eyes and sometimes crickets jumped right in your face.

That was the worst way to be trapped.

I really wasn't trapped that bad.

Oh, I forgot about vampires! Well, I wasn't going to wait around for the vampires. I was no damsel.

I'd later learn that the heterochromatic-eyed troll was Aurelius, the Snatcher in Darkness, and he lurked behind the picture frame above me, waiting for a sign of motion. Behind him, in the mouse lookout, his troll minions were fighting while below us all the great dragon with the Blue Stripey Blanket dreamed dragon dreams of fire and gold. I was in a wall planter with three elm trees and a low hedge, but I was no longer trapped. Once you're trapped in the hundred and ninety-ninth worst way to be trapped or higher, it's no longer a concern. I decided to get out.

"Hey, dragon!" I yelled. "We trolls think you should give up your blanket!"

Silence fell heavy and terrible with the last of my echoes, and even the fighting trolls stopped. Aurelius's multicolored eyes opened wide and fixated on the dragon to see what he would do.

The dragon snores stopped, but the smoke plumes remained, twin spires of grey soot that climbed without spreading. They reached the ceiling and curled among the stalactites, much like smoke dragons between waves. As terrible silence remained the dragon's great claws closed jealously on the blanket. It sank into his coils.

"No," rumbled his great voice.

"We're watching you from the picture frame, and we want you to stop stinking up our blanket!" I yelled and scuttled to the side of the planter farthest from.

"We didn't say that!" yelled a troll from behind the picture, and then I heard punching and shushing.

Aurelius spotted me as I moved, and he glared at me, his sharp troll head full of malice. The coarse hairs on his chin bristled. He couldn't do anything, though. I made faces at him.
"Who is there, whispering trolls?" hissed the dragon in words that coiled through the room. "Why do you argue among yourselves?"

"Because we didn't say that!" yelled a voice from the picture, and the shushing gave way to biting and yelping. They started fighting.

"I see you," whispered the dragon, and his great eyes fell on the Snatcher in Darkness. Aurelius froze, for the gaze of an ancient dragon is a terrible thing. It pinned him to the wall as he tried to hide behind the picture frame, holding him fast as his little arms scrabbled to retreat.

I giggled.

That was the moment. That was it. Up until the giggling, he was just a troll, albeit a cruel and evil one, looking for something to eat. But when I laughed at him as the dragon glared, Aurelius marked me forever.

"And the sound of a little girl giggling," whispered the dragon, for a double whammy of bad. "Now why would a little girl be laughing with the trolls? I think-"

We all froze, and I slapped my hands over my mouth.

"-I will come see," hissed the great dragon, and his scales sighed on the mesa.

Oh, this was bad. Dragons were worse than vampires, and vampires had been the worst!

I peaked around a corner, not daring to look for the dragon but hoping to glimpse his shadow, and he was gone. The mesa was dark and empty. The blanket was gone too. The last ropes of smoke coiled upwards from empty space, and trees shook, either from a dark wind or the movement of a great beast. The dragon was nowhere to be seen. I looked up at Aurelius, and he looked at me with troll fury. His lips pulled back and his teeth gleamed yellow, and his snatching fingers clawed at the wall. He was so mad, but the dragon was coming. With a last look, he retreated behind the picture frame, and the trolls back there went silent.

I was safe!

But if the dragon looked, he wouldn't find trolls. And he might look for kids. He would find me.

I was doomed.

I had only a little time, for the trees still shook with his creeping. I put together a plan, but I didn't have four spoons and a trebuchet, so I got rid of that plan, and then he whispered, "Hello, little girl," and the dragon was right behind me.

"Wow, you are big," I said.

His head scraped the tree branches with his forearms on the hedge. His great jaws were wide as caverns, and his eyes red-water pools. Each scale was bigger than a dinner plate. Clinging to the walls of the immense inside-out house, he stared at me with his head cocked sideways, just enough off vertical to make me dizzy. Everything about him was disorienting.

"Did you expect any less?" he purred.

"The Closet Dragon was kinda small," I admitted.

The great dragon considered this. "Closet Dragon?"
"Yeah. The Closet Dragon. He wasn't nearly as big as you are."

The dragon chuckled, a deep sound of hisses and growls. "Closet Dragon. I like that."

"He didn't," I said.

The great dragon smiled. "That makes me like it even more."

"Yeah, I-" and I paused, looking at the immense old dragon laughing to hear the smaller dragon had been hurt by my words. He chuckled and plumes rolled from his nose, dancing smoke that slithered to the ceiling. Even his eyes narrowed, and I think his amusement was real, but his laughter was mean and old. He laughed, of course, like a dragon. "You really think that's funny?"

"Of course. A dragon's pride is his size. It is good you mocked him for failing."

"Oh." I looked down and to the side.

"I approve. Let me give you my mark for your cruelty."

"No, I don't want that," I said and tried to move away. The dragon did not care about what I wanted, though, and inhaled, sucking his smoke plumes from his nose to his lips. He wadded up a great ball of noxious gases in his mouth. When he breathed, fire and smoke leaped at me and they stank of cruel words. They knocked me from the planter, and I fell.

It was a really long fall, and I was really happy there were no spikes.

I hit the trees and thought I was going to die, but the pine needles were soft and cushiony. For a while I lay still. A square patch of sky showed through hole in the branches I made when I fell, and I stared at the ceiling, far away and filled with coils of dragon smoke.

The great dragon, no longer interested in me, turned to the picture and tore it from the walls. He snapped at something inside, hissing and belching flames. A hail of sharp rocks caught him in the head as the trolls fought back, and the dragon dodged. Fountains of dark smoke bellowed from his mouth. Then he turned back, snapping and biting, and something small and blue fell as he climbed about on the great walls.

It was the Blue Stripey Blanket, and the dragon was busy, fighting the trolls. That made me get up and run, sprinting across the carpet of brown needles and fallen sticks to where it fell. It was fine, only dirty, and I snatched up before anyone else could take it.

The dragon and the trolls were still fighting, like they had been when I arrived, and I didn't want to be here when one of them won. It was time for me to leave, so I did, running the long way to the great doors out, and sneaking through the next room and the one beyond. Other dragons, though not so great, stalked those halls and slept under the redwood logs, but so long as I was quiet, they didn't notice me. I searched for hours until I came to a gravel floor with bits of moss, and a short chute that fell out of the wall.

I climbed it like I had the mouse-tunnel, and emerged into my lair in the closet. I hurried out of there right quick, but stopped in the hallway.

The house was quiet. I could hear the parents talking about tenure downstairs, and Hector was bugging Helen in my room, trying to make her agree to play baseball. She didn't want to. Calvin was in trouble. He had to wash Rufus, who didn't mind, and also wash Runtface, who REALLY minded and did not intend to go quietly into that good shower. But now it was just me, the hallway, and the closet.
I unmade my nest, put all the blankets back, and put the best blanket on top with its stripes and extra fuzzy parts. I also checked the door hinges, but couldn't figure out how they worked. Well, I knew how they worked the door, but not the trapdoor. I'd figure it out later. With the blanket back, I went back to the bathroom and washed my face because I smelled like dragon-smoke.

The was a black scar like a curled lizard on my arm, teeth biting its own tail.
Bedtime Stories and Jaguar Man

Chapter Summary

The Mara stuff is collectively called Bedtime Stories now.

I would love to hear from anyone who reads these. I think they're hilarious, so if you do too, please let me know.

A

Two nights after the robber's bet, that night I had tried to tell the others about the trolls, Helen wasn't home. She had gone to a sleep-over, and I was alone. I liked it, but it felt weird. There was no other person in the top bunk. There was no yelling from the top bunk and Helen didn't mind if I sat on her bed, but the room was empty. The bunkbeds wiggled when I moved. There was something light about them.

Rufus usually slept in my room, but tonight he was at the vet. Rufus was sick. It had happened like this.

Hector had permission to stay inside and watch TV. He got the big chair which was right in front of the TV and pushed the couch aside. He had a glass of water, Mom had made him chips, and he was watching the Jaguar Man. He even won an argument with Dad over it.


"Mom said I could have this chair if I did my homework early, and she checked it," said Hector.

"That's my chair-" said Dad, in an abstract tone, and Hector immediately said, "I asked you, and you told me to ask my Mother, and she said yes if I did my homework early and she checked it."

Dad looked caught. I don't think he knew if he had told Hector to ask Mom or not, but he wouldn't admit it. "What are you watching?" he asked cautiously.

"The Jaguar Man. It's educational."

Dad looked like he wanted to argue. He pursed his lips way over to the side and looked askance at Hector. My brother didn't budge. He looked right at Dad with his water glass in his lap, but he didn't move. Jaguar Man's theme-song started playing. It was full of all kinds of cat.

"Do you remember?" Hector asked.

"I'm going to ask your mother," grumbled Dad, and he walked off.

Dad disappeared down the littler stairs into the family room, the den beyond, and Hector moved the chip bowl right onto his lap. Dad's chair was huge and rocked. It didn't have rockers but some intricate mechanism of pivots and hangers under the seat. It was very old. We weren't allowed to sit
in it, usually, and the armrests were too high for comfort. Hector lorded in it like a throne.

Later Dad remembered he had lost his seat and stuck his head out of the littler stairway. Hector was still there, glued to the TV as the Jaguar Man showed a lion kitten practicing his pounce. Hector didn't even notice Dad look. I did. Dad scowled at me, and I bet he grumbled. He went back into the den.

Not much later Helen strode down the stairs and announced to everyone that she was going to her first sleep-over ever. So much for us.

"Goodbye, little people," she said, waving like a princess. "I'll remember you when I go."

"When are you leaving?" I asked.

"In two hours."

"Do you want to watch Jaguar Man?" asked Hector, wiggling his eyebrows.

"No, I don't need to watch TV when I have places to be." Helen snorted.

"Hey! Why is that jaguar sneaking up on that crocodile?" I interrupted.

Hector didn't respond, but he grinned.

"The jaguar isn't going to attack a crocodile," said Helen from beside the couch.

Hector grinned even wider.

"Jaguars do not eat crocodiles!" yelled Helen.

Two hours later, when Dad drove her to Samantha's house, he found her on the couch with me, watching Jaguar Man

Before she left the phone rang, but I answered it first.

"Hello. This is Mara Harmon!" I said. I was excited because normally no one let me answer the phone.

"Hey, Mara. This is Dr. Brady. I have your dog. Can I talk to one of your parents?" he asked.

"Is Rufus okay?" I asked, and Brady said, "Kiddo, nothing's wrong with Rufus. He's going to be fine-" and couldn't say anything else when I started yelling and Mom took the the phone.

I could hear the conversation from where I was. "Hello, Mrs. Harmon. This is Dr. Brady. Rufus got out of his kennel and somehow climbed the fence into the quarantine area. We think he interacted with some fluids from a dog with M. Rella, which is like the canine flu. It's fine. He's fine. Rella isn't dangerous, but he's going to get sick in about twelve hours, and, ah, there's going to be a lot coming out of both ends."

"Oh, dear," said Mom, and she squeezed her nose.

"Yes ma'am, it's going to be colorful. Ma'am, again, Rufus is going to be fine. It isn't dangerous.
Treatment is just observation and administration of fluids as necessary. But we think he got out of his kennel because one of our techs left his cage open, so this is really our fault. If you'd like, we'd be happy to keep him overnight until things, ah, work themselves out."
"No!" I screamed. "I need my guard dog!"

But Mom said, "Slow down." Into the phone she asked, "How bad?"

"Ma'am, it's going to be a long night."

Mom looked at the phone. Mom looked at me. I gave her my biggest, scaredest puppy-dog eyes. I quivered. Mom looked back at the phone.

"Why don't you call me tomorrow when we should come pick Rufus up?" she asked the vet.

"No!" I wailed, but Mom had turned her back on me.

It was terrible! It was atrocious! I slumped, forlornly, into the TV room and Hector said, "Well, you can sit down and watch Jaguar Man." He raised his eyebrows.

I wailed. "No! I can't watch TV! My dog is sick! He needs me! He's alone! Why is that man tormenting a leopard?"

"He's the Jaguar Man!"

"But that's not a jaguar. That's a leopard. He's poking it."

Hector looked back at the TV and back at me. "He does things with all big cats, not just jaguars. He's trying to get that cat out of a hen house."

"By poking it?" I asked. That did not seem like a good plan.

"Cat's don't like being poked," said Hector.

I stared at the TV, where the Jaguar Man was really irritating that cat. He was poking it with a stick, and the leopard snarled at him and unsheathed its claws.

"That cat does not look happy," I said.

"He does not," agreed Hector.

The Jaguar Man announced it was a female leopard, and she was really mad. I couldn't look away.

"I hope he doesn't get mauled," I said. "But if he does get mauled, I want to see it. You shouldn't poke a leopard." When Helen left I was on the couch.

And that's how I had no sister and I had no dog when it was time for bed. Mom read us a story about bears that was tamer than usual. Goldilocks got what was coming to her, and the Three Unstoppable Juggernauts of Doom lived happily ever after. Afterwards she asked me if I wanted to sleep in the boys' room.

"No, I'll be okay," I said. She nodded.

"It's important to be able to sleep alone," she told me. "You're being very brave."

"Yes, Mom."

"Sleep well. I love you, sweetie," she said, and she turned out the light.
I was alone for less than five minutes when Calvin came in. His eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"Did you see any trolls?" he asked. I could hear him grinning. "Any of them?"

"No, um, the lights were just turned off," I said.

"I thought they came out when it was dark! Maybe they're in your closet. I'm going to check!"

"Um, okay," I said, but Calvin was already searching.

There were no trolls in the closet. He didn't find any under the bed. He made me go up to Helen's bed so the bottom bunk was now, technically, under the bed, and he stalked it, looking for trolls. He didn't find any. Hector came in to see what we were talking about.

"I'm looking for trolls," said Calvin. "You two. Get into the bed and stick your toes over the edge."

I looked at Hector. Hector looked at me.

"Is this like poking the jaguar with a stick?" I asked.

"I don't think that's a good plan," said Hector.

"Quit your whining. Was the Jaguar Man mauled?" scoffed Calvin.

"But I don't want to get mauled either," I said, and Calvin was having none of that.

"But the Jaguar Man didn't get mauled!"

This was true, sort of. The Jaguar Man had not been mauled.

"I don't think we should do that just because it happened on TV," said Hector, and Calvin had none of that either.

"Then don't poke a jaguar with a stick. This is about toes. Now toes out. I want a troll."

I just did not think this was a good idea. Calvin's ideas were sometimes not so good. "Calvin, no," I said, and got down off the top bunk and into mine.

"Yeah, I'm leaving," said Hector. He climbed down the stairs, because it was too late for jumping, and walked out the door. Calvin chased him.

"But I'm right here! I'll protect you!"

"Calvin, you're trying to poke a jaguar with a stick," said Hector.

"The Jaguar Man wasn't mauled to death!" yelled Calvin.

"Go to sleep!" yelled Dad from downstairs. He was in his chair. I knew it.

"I'm going to bed," said Hector, and he walked away.

"Yeah, I'm going to bed too!" I said, and I walked after Hector.

Calvin stomped on the floor, right by my bunk and waved his arms angrily. "I just want to get snatched by a troll!" he yelled and I looked back at him.

Gleaming under the bed were two yellow eyes!
I whirled around as fast as I could, but I was moving in slow motion. Calvin was about to stomp again, and long fingernails gleamed underneath the bed. Was it the Snatcher in Darkness? His eyes were like lights, saying "Beware" and "Danger!" I reached out to say "No!"

-and a three-fingered hand snatched Calvin down under the bed!

I gasped! Hector gasped! He had seen it too! We ran towards the bed, but not too close, and listened to the dark noises from the shadows.

There was nothing. Then there was faint shouting. Then there was a sound of terrible violence, and the cry of, "I AM AN UNKNOWN GOAT!" with the sound of punching!

"I think I hear biting," whispered Hector, concerned.

I nodded. I knew that noise. I had bruises!

"Should- should we do something?" I asked.

Hector looked at me. "What do you want to do?"

"Hector, I didn't say I want to do anything. I just asked if we should do something."

"Like?"

"Um."

Suddenly a troll scrabbled madly out from under the bed and tried desperately to crawl across the floor. It flailed with its little arms. Calvin emerged shouting and grabbed it with his hands and teeth. Before the troll could get away, Calvin yanked it back under the bed.

The room went silent.

We stared as Dad yelled, "Go to bed!" from downstairs. But he wouldn't get out of his chair.
Chapter Summary

I've been playing around with the structure of these. I want them to remain short, mostly stand-alone stories with independent arcs, but I need some form of compartmentalization for working purposes. I'm playing around with three-scene construction, similar to the very first Mara story, and I like the way it works. This is part B of Jaguar Man.

Is it easier to read posted all-together or in chunks?

We kids held a shortened council.

"Um."

"Ah," we said.

We repeated them a few times, exchanged them, and stared at the shadows under the bed.

"We should rescue one of them," I said.

"Which one?"

I looked at the bed. Hector looked at me. We both looked under the bed, and back at each other.

"Yes," I decided.

"Why don't you kids ever go to bed when I tell you to?" demanded Mom from the doorway. Her eyes were wide and disgruntled, and her hair flew up in strays.

"I tried," I said.

"I tried too!" added Hector.

"What stopped you?" demanded Mom again, looking even more disgruntled.

"Calvin," said Hector.

"He's under the bed," I added.

Mom squinted. "Why is he-"

"He wants to fight a troll," said Hector.

Mom was about to say something until she made Calvin-face. Everyone makes Calvin-face. Mom, Dad, other adults, anyone who meets Calvin sooner or later makes Calvin-face. No one made Hector- or Mara-face, but Mom was making Calvin-face now. She was making it hard. Calvin-face lead to deep breathing.

"Okay, kids," said Mom. "Mara, go back to bed. Hector, go back to your room, and go to bed."
When Calvin emerges, he too shall also go to bed!" she added, throwing her voice at the bottom bunk.

"I don't know if he's down there. He might be with the trolls," I said, but I got into bed.

Mom looked at me, and she looked like she was grading papers again. With visible effort, she calmed. "Mara, dear. Are you worried?"

"Of course! I'm worried about trolls!"

"Mara, we talked about being brave. Can you be brave?"

"That's easy for you to say," said Hector. "You don't believe in trolls. You're just encouraging her creativity."

"I'm-" She paused, one finger up, and Mom was trapped. Mom looked like Dad had when Hector took his chair. Hector looked at Mom the same way he had then, big eyes and earnest expression, and she didn't say anything for a very long time.

I was in bed, but I didn't like it.

"Okay," said Mom. "I am going downstairs, and your father and I are going to watch TV. We will be listening. When the adult TV is over-"

"What's adult TV?" gasped Hector. "Is it swearing and guns?" He hopped up on his toes.

Mom squinted at him. "Kiddo, have you met your father? We're watching business news."

"Ah, man," muttered Hector.

"-As I was saying, when we're finished watching TV, one program, thirty minutes, you'll know because your father will have stopped yelling, we will come up here, and we expect four heads in beds, mercy, Helen's at that sleep-over, three heads in beds and no more yelling, or everyone's grounded!"

"You yell too, Mom," grumbled Hector.

"Yeah! You remember English Lit for Student Athletes?" I sided with my brother.

Mom stared at the ceiling for several long, tense seconds until declaring, "Everyone, go to bed!" as she strode from the room. Neither Hector nor I could say anything else.

I looked at my brother. He frowned at me.

"We have to go get him," I said. "Otherwise we're grounded!"

"This so unfair." Hector grumbled, angrier and angrier, until he made Calvin-face too. We both took a deep breath and crawled under the bed.

The wall at the back of the under-bed had swung open, forming a trap door to a cluttered corridor. It was full of forgotten things. Set into the rusty iron wall was an immense lever topped with a red handle. Hector tried it and found the trap door opened and closed silently. It could be locked with peg-latches.
"Those fiends. They have my socks," I muttered, searching for traces of Calvin. "I don't see him anywhere."

"Should we keep going?" asked Hector.

"What else are we going to do?" I replied.

He didn't have an answer.

I lead the way on. We had to sidle forward to squirm through the narrow walls, brushing against sharp, rusty metal on either side. Around the house we went, passing suspicious trapdoors with sinister levers, spy-holes, and cunning listening points. Several places the iron tunnel went right underneath the ventilation grates, and we looked up at our rooms from behind bars. The tunnel sank into the house. We had gone a long way before first hearing Calvin, who was being kidnapped at high volumes.

"Ah ha!" sneered a troll. "You think a mere matter of four kicks to the head, twenty nine punches, three bites, an eye gouge, two sharp smacks, and nine stomps is going to stop me?"

"Rah!" yelled Calvin, and I heard a terrible growling.

"Four bites," corrected another troll.

"Get him off!" yelled the counting troll as I remembered his voice.

The counting troll was Chiron, one of the four trolls I had first found in the deep woods. I had had Rufus then. Now I only had Hector. The other troll was Temora, the terrible one who had summoned Aurelius, the Snatcher in Darkness. I didn't know where he was now, but sometimes he whispered to me from in the air conditioning ducts or down the cracks between the carpet and the walls. He was always lurking.

These tunnels must be how he got around, but that meant he might be here. There were at least two trolls up ahead, maybe more. Calvin thought he could fight the trolls, and this is where he wound up. We would need to be sneaky. I looked at Hector and made sneaky eyes. He nodded.

In the fight that followed I heard Titus's name too. Andromache was somewhere else, tending to the cook pot, and they were fighting with each other as much as with Calvin. Maybe mostly with Calvin. But they were definitely fighting, because Temora wanted to tell the Snatcher in Darkness that they'd captured a kid, and Chiron did not.

"But Aurelius demands first bite, and I want first bite myself!" said Chiron. "I've been bitten enough to earn it."

"But he's the Snatcher in Darkness!" gasped Titus. "We promised him first bite."

"We just won't tell him," said Chiron.

"Pff," Calvin spat dirty troll fur out of his mouth. "You're fat and hairy. You don't deserve first bite!"

"What!?" yelled Chiron, and he punched Calvin right on the nose.

Calvin struggled, but Titus and Temora had his arms, holding him down against the wall. Calvin stomped their toes and kicked their shins, but other than yowling, they held still. Finally all three of them grouped up on Calvin and carried him away.
"The cook-pot's in the basement," said Temora. "We have to be careful that the dog doesn't find us."

"It's all right. I'll throw a bucket of water on him if he tries!" said Chiron, brave words but he sounded scared. They stomped off, Calvin doing a lot of the stomping.

They didn't know Rufus was at the vet! Of course. They hadn't waited around after they'd snatched Calvin! I didn't know what to make of it, but as the trolls disappeared, Hector whispered that he had a plan.

"But I have to go get some tools," Hector said. "Can you spy on them and follow them to their lair?"

I thought about the dark, the small tunnels, and the Snatcher in Darkness. "I don't want to, but I'll do it."

"Good. I'll be back," said Hector, and he ran the way we had come.

I was alone, and no one would know if I went back the way we'd come or just stayed here, hiding. But I had a job to do. I went sneaking after the trolls.
Chapter Summary

Last part of the Jaguar Man short. This was surprisingly challenging. I had a hard time getting things to work, and it took more grinding than usual. I hope you like it. I'll turn my hand to other things for a bit, but I'm about to start a new job, so time may be sparse. I hope not.

I really enjoy writing these. When they're effortless they're a joy, and sometimes the finishing of them is just a relief, but either way they're a ton of fun. The three part structure has potential, though I'm not sure about a three-part posting schedule.

Thanks for reading.

One of my old fuzzy socks had been lost under the bed, and I had just found it again. It had too many holes to be worn with loose threads sticking out, but I hooked one thread on a rusty screw and used it to leave a trail. Hector should be able to find it if he came back. It was easy to follow the trolls, because Temora bullied the other trolls as they carried Calvin deep underground. She made a lot of noise, and my sneaking went unnoticed. But deep we went. There was a hole underneath the Den Dad had called a sump, and once I had helped him drain it. We went far below that.

When I was almost out of sock they came to a iron-wrought door, the kind people put on mailboxes. It had hinges at the bottom and a red flag that was down, and it opened and closed from up to flat down. It might be a drawbridge, but there was no moat. Calvin had gone quiet, and the trolls might have thought he had given up. Temora left the other two to hold him as she went away to pull the door down.

Fools.

As soon as her back had turned, Calvin fought with a vengeance! He kicked, bit, and screamed, and dug his fingers into troll hides to yank great fistfulls of dirty fur out. Chiron dropped him almost at once, and Titus was left to hold him alone. He did not have a good time. Temora was trying to open the latch on the wide metal door without it slamming on her, and Calvin broke free, stomping the troll's feet before running away through a dark side passage. It was lit by glowing moss and lightning that crackled between the unshrouded lightbulbs and the walls.

Temora dropped the door and it nearly crushed her feet as she jumped back to kick Titus for falling down. She had pulled her leg back and was about to yell when a soft, raspy sounded from the grim iron door-mouth.

"Don't you think you should be going after the boy instead?" asked Aurelius, his differently colored eyes the only mark of him visible from within the shadows.

Temora froze. All of them froze. I froze too.

"Because that's my meal running away, and you weren't going to deny me first bite, right?" continued Aurelius. "You promised, after all."
None of the trolls spoke for a long time, and I stopped breathing.

"No?" answered Chiron.

"Right," said the Snatcher in Darkness, still in his soft voice. "Go get the boy."

None of them moved.

"Now!" he yelled, and at once the trolls were falling all over each other, fighting and kicking, and scrabbling as they tried to be first to run after Calvin.

Aurelius didn't run after them. He stayed still, eyes like hanging lanterns in the doorway, and I caught a glimpse of a fire behind him, a large cookpot on top that had not yet begun to boil.

"But I smell human," whispered the troll. "And I think I will eat you myself."

I was so scared I wanted to cry. But I didn't. I didn't make a sound. I dropped the sock so I could hold the sounds back in my mouth.

Aurelius was bigger than any of the other trolls. All of them were as big as kids or bigger, but Aurelius was a full head taller than any of them. He had long arms with clutching fingers, and a nose that hooked back around towards his face. His ears curled. Everything about him was twisted or crooked, from the way his fingers slithered into fists to the bend in his back when he stood up. His red eye was higher than the yellow one. Worse was how mean he looked, and the subtle way he sniffed the air, bending forward until he went from two legs to four to taste the air and sniff the ground. His short vest was made of cast-away papers and the warning labels of deadly cleaners.

Calvin had gone down a side passage, and if Hector came, he would have to go past Aurelius. If he didn't come, I should go back- No. If he didn't come, I had to go ahead, after Calvin.

Hmmm. I wanted to whine, but I didn't, because if I did, a troll would eat me. I couldn't even whine a little. That made me want to whine even more.

"I smell your ugly feet," said Aurelius, as he got down on hands and knees to sniff the ground. "I smell your stinky breath."

(Hey!)

He crawled out of sight. "I smell you...over..."

I stayed still.

"Here!" he yelled and pounced on a rock.

I was not a rock. I wasn't even near the rock. I was on a pipe.

"Rocks and children all look the same," muttered Aurelius, and he kicked it.

After grumbling about the rock, Aurelius turned around and trudged back to the cook-pot, where Andromache was making the ingredients for a human stew. He pushed her out of the way and started making the stew himself. "They had better bring me a child back."

Aurelius hadn't smelled me at all! He was lying! I should- Oh, I needed to go rescue Calvin.

I shook my fist at Aurelius and stalked off down the corridor after my stupid brother.
Down through iron-wrought tunnels where metal pipes wove in and out of the walls like veins, I crept after Calvin. Sneaking through the passages made me think someone was sneaking up on me, and my skin was creeping as much as I was. Twice I thought I had lost him, until ahead I heard echoes of fighting. The trolls would gang up and try to grab him, but Calvin fought them off. Each time there was a lot of shouting.

Finally I found them. The metal walls had become stone, and the floor was moss and dirty. Some of the cracks dripped with swamp water. In the middle of a wide mouse-hole, Calvin had thrown over an exercise where and climbed on top. The trolls circled him, yelling. On the far wall was a hole that lead to the great, underground inside-out house, but Calvin couldn't make it. Titus was by the door, and Temora and Chiron were nearby.

"We'll get you," threatened Chiron, whose nose had swelled to twice its normal size. It was now like another face on his face. "You were safe in the tunnels, where we couldn't fight you all at once, but we'll get you here!"

"Who will be the first to try?" asked Calvin.

A grim silence descended on the trolls as they stared at him through thin, beady eyes. Chiron broke the quiet first.

"She will," he said, pointing at Temora.

"What? No, I won't! You will!" she snapped at him.

"I will not! He never wouldn't have gotten away if you hadn't left to open the door!" yelled Chiron. "I got kicked in the nose!"

"Why don't both of you go at the same time?" suggested Titus.

"Why aren't you coming?" demanded Temora.

"I'm watching the door," he said and threw his arms across the door. He had long arms, and there was no getting outside without him snatching you up.

The trolls began to bicker, and I came up with a plan.

First I got a rock. Then I waited until Calvin distracted the trolls. He didn't know I was waiting for a distraction, so if he stayed quiet, my plan wouldn't work.

"You're stupid!" yelled Calvin.

Thanks, Calvin.

While he was yelling at the trolls and they at him, I snuck around the side of the room, hidden by a mouse-couch and two mouse-water-bottles. Once there, I had to wait until Calvin wasn't yelling, which took a lot longer. I got bored and started thinking about clouds. But eventually Calvin didn't say anything for a while and the trolls kept on fighting about who was going to go first, and who was going to wait and try to snatch Calvin while he was beating up whoever went first. They didn't think to go all at the same time. While they were fighting, I picked up my rock and threw it over Titus's head, so it bounced against the doorframe outside.

He snatched it right out of the air! His hands moved like frog-tongues, and before I could do part
three of my plan, he already had the rock. I gasped. Temora and Chiron at once jumped on him, thinking he had Calvin, and tried to snatch the rock back.

Calvin, who had been yelling insults so hard he got his shoelaces tied together, was sitting down untying his shoes when this happened. He looked up, but no one could see him over the edge of the mouse wheel. It was dark down here. I ran over to the wheel and climbed up, hissing.

"Ssh. Run!"

Calvin tried, but he fell over because his shoes were tied together.

"How did you do that!?" I yelled, and then the trolls knew where I was too!

"Get 'em!" yelled Calvin, and he yanked off his shoes to throw them like bolos.

They wrapped around Chiron, and both shoes kicked him in the fat nose. He fell down shouting. Calvin jumped off the wheel and charged, and Temora and Titus ran, leaving Chiron rolling on the ground. Calvin chased for only a moment before turning back and running, with me, back the way we had come.

"I saw you in the mouse hole. I made a distraction!"

"Oh," I said, running.

That was pretty smart. I couldn't say it because we were running, but I felt sorry for some of the bad things I thought about him: a few of them from earlier today, the ones before lunch.

We ran. It was a while before the trolls stopped fighting and started chasing, and by then we were well back the way we came.

It wasn't long before we were outside the room where Aurelius was preparing kid stew. All they needed were kids. The three trolls behind were gaining on us because Calvin couldn't run very fast with no shoes. For a moment I thought we were trapped, but then I saw Hector, waiting in the shadows on the far side. We waved. He waved back. We could get there, but Andromache was sitting in the right middle of the room, complaining because she wasn't allowed to help.

"You go get me some kids!" yelled Aurelius.

"Why don't you snatch some kids?" demanded Andromache. "You're the Snatcher in Darkness!"

"Because you want to cook them so you get to eat them first," argued Aurelius. "I'm on to your schemes! Now get me a kid, or better yet, a baby."

"I do like eating babies," admitted Andromache, but there were no babies here.

"Let's fight her," hissed Calvin.

"No. Stop fighting. The one cooking is Aurelius, the Snatcher in Darkness, and we're not going to fight him and four trolls." I refused to even think about it.

"Then what do we do?" whispered Calvin.

"Something that doesn't involve fighting!"

"Weak," muttered Calvin.
Sometimes Calvin was very frustrating.

"I want to eat some babies!" whined Andromache, and she pouted.

"Woof!" yelled Hector from the other side.

At once Andromache and Aurelius froze and crouched low with long fingers ready. They looked nervously between each other and the dark corridor. Andromache moved first, running back into the troll kitchen to get buckets, and both of the trolls got ready to splash them. The others were close now, yelling at each other as they ran up the passageway behind me, but the echoes distorted their noise. They sounded like dogs.

"They got around us," whispered Aurelius savagely, slitting his eyes to look our way.

"But there's another ahead of us too!" said Andromache.

"Get ready. We'll snatch them when they come."

The two trolls lurked in the shadows, and even when I knew where they were, it was hard to see them while they hid. Calvin and I were trapped. Trolls ahead and behind, and I didn't understand what Hector's plan was. We got ready for the end, and I knew Calvin was going to go down fighting.

I wasn't. I don't like fighting. I like being sneaky! I grabbed Calvin and got behind a pipe, and unwillingly, Calvin hid beside me. Hector started growling on the other side and sometimes threw low barks, like an angry Rufus on the scent. Troll eyes gleamed like deadly stars in a black night.

Titus, Chiron, and Temora ran right out of the tunnel shouting, not even looking around. Aurelius pounced and snatched up Titus. Titus screamed and bit him. Andromache snatched Temora, who shouted and punched her too! Chiron ran away shouting. Hector ran in from the other side, grabbed a bucket of water, and doused them. Now all the trolls were shouting! I grabbed Calvin and ran, and we made it across the room while the wet, angry trolls rolled on the ground, biting.

Trolls are dumb, but they're not that dumb. Once we had run past, they stopped fighting and got up, slipping and tripping on the wet floor. They bounced off each other and into the walls, but they could run fast, loping on hands and knees across the jagged floor.

Calvin had to go first, because he was the slowest and we didn't want to leave him behind. Hector pushed me after him, saying I had rescued him so he was my responsibility. I said okay, and ran. Hector came behind, yelling at the trolls, just mean, unfriendly things. That was so weird. The trolls yelled back, and Aurelius told us he was going to snatch us up and eat us all! Hector grinned, and caught up with Calvin and me, making us go faster.

We ran way up the corridor and looped through the walls of the house, going over stairs that were hidden in the house walls, and climbing ladders that went from the Den to above the parent's room. They chased us every inch, yelling the whole time while their cries bounced off the walls. We got to the gate to the Girls' Room, and dashed from under the bed, the trolls only inches behind, when Hector slapped a sting, and baby gates fell down around the bed.

The trolls were trapped! They screamed and howled, but Hector has set up the gates well. He'd taken them from the hallway, where the parents used them to make sure Rufus didn't get upstairs. For a moment the girls' room was full of shouting, and Aurelius glared at me, reaching his long, three-fingered hands through the baby gate, but there was nothing he could do. He was trapped, and I giggled.
"I remember you, little girl," he hissed, full of fury. "I remember you from the dragon. I will get you yet!" he promised.

"But not tonight!" said Hector, and he flipped on the lights.

All of the bedroom lights came on at once, and blasted the trolls from every light bulb. They sent up such a shouting and a hollering that they shook the walls. They started fighting again, but this time it was to get back under the bed, and they didn't stop fighting and running until they had shut the trap-door behind them and ran screaming down the corridors beyond where the echoes reached.

"What are you kids doing?" asked Dad, completely bewildered.

He had appeared in the doorway while we cheered, and looked down at us and the mess. The baby gates were everywhere, all the lights on, Calvin had no shoes, and all of us were filthy. Crawling around in the dark was dirty business.

"We have defeated the trolls," said Hector.

"For now," I added.

Dad stared at us. We stared back at him. No one moved.

Dad blinked first. "Your mother is about to have an aneurism, so I am going to see you go to bed. Everyone in the boys room. I'm going to read you another bedtime story, and there will be no more shouting. So wash up, shut up, and get ready for the structure of scientific revolutions."
Jonathon had a peculiar affection for elegant things. The thing itself was less important than the
elegance. He liked pencils with smooth black paint and hand-sharpened points, cigarette boxes
while they held twenty cigarettes, and cars without aero. John kept a collection of plain white
paper in spiral notebooks, sometimes to write on and sometimes to enjoy the stark perfection of
unmarked pages. There were no wasted gestures in ink splashed across the surface.

He was currently intoxicated. Not so much as to be drunk. He could walk, talk, write, and carry a
conversation without giving a sign of his condition, but he did not feel level. The world moved
ever so slightly slower than his head did. He turned to look at something, and the walls rushed to
keep up, over accelerating in the corners and spinning out, unable to brake fast enough to stop
when his eyes did. He put the speed advantage in his head to good use in the solitude of his
apartment, twitching with unusual rapidity and stability. There was no one to see, interfere, or
judge. He stalked like a T-Rex through the small hallway from his bedroom to the fake kitchen.

It could hardly be a kitchen. It had no oven and no stove. A lone hot-plate rested on tile beside a
full sized refrigerator. There was a sink with an aftermarket garbage disposal, one he had to remove
when he moved out. Basic plumbing was much easier than everyone believed. The internet and
any hardware store opened doors to temporary home modification he had not believed in college or
before, the dark times, when he had lived at home.

Of course, that didn't matter now. He was skating on the edge of drunk and pulled a majestic aerial
over oblivion as his T-Rex arms hunched up inside his shirt. It was Thursday night. Snow fell like
traffic bombs on northern Virginia, ruining lives. Whole inches, most of one, lay across the ground.
The populace hid at home in terror. There was no work tomorrow, and the Belgian white had been
four percent if he was secretly a leprechaun.

One beer, albeit two liters of it. It had gone down so smooth. This was why there was no point in
driving at all. Not only was the carpocalypse in full force outside, Mad-Max madness consuming
greater metropolitan area as people abandoned their cars to the white walkers, the wendigo, the
tow companies of the ruinous waste. Nothing but white chaos until morning.

God, it had only been one beer. A big one. Did the math work out? It had to, of course. The math
worked in reality, and it was plans that failed to work to math. He couldn't very well have not
consumed enough alcohol to be inebriated. He was, so it was a mere matter of preemptive
mathematical errors in his prediction. But he didn't have to drive. He didn't have to do anything. He
would be ravenous in an hour. There was frozen pizza. The world rained blessings down upon him.

T-Rex Jonathan rounded the corner, past the micronesia kitchen and craned his head at the second
room. He needed, like, chairs or something. Perhaps a bookshelf. Books. A television. He had four
plants, two lilies and two aloe vera, monsters all. The lilies were four feet tall in twenty gallon
pots. The aloe spikes would have served Vlad the Impaler if he'd meant execution to carry more
irony. But there were no things. The bare carpet held nothing.

Four weeks into the job, research chemist at a DoD food preservation lab, and he owned no things.
The money flow wasn't stable yet. First check went to deposit. Second check went to rent. Third
check was coming and had been preemptively spent on food, toilet paper, electricity deposit, and
heat. Hopefully the bank wasn't due for a sudden bout of efficiency. In a month he'd have good
money. Well, no, because there were those loans. But it was good money. In six months he'd have
good money. The T-Rex sounded his thunderous cry of death and hunger.
Rap-tap knocked his door.

John stared at it for a good five seconds, before standing up straightening his back, and wiping back his non-existent long hair. His head was almost shaved. Right, he remembered. He took a deep breath. Nothing happened at the door. John approached it like a bomb and opened up.

On the other side was no beautiful woman, come to rush into his life and answer all his worldly problems. Instead was a large elderly man with a coarse black beard, white-winged hair, and polo shirt tucked neatly into khaki pants. He was wearing suit-boots. John regarded him for a split second in something very close to dread because John couldn't remember this man at all. There was a complete blankness to him. John decided the only possibility was he didn't know him at all.

"Hello," said John.

"Good evening. Name is Ryker Thomas. Are you-" Mr Thomas paused and consulted a sheet. "Jonathan Browning?"

"Yes," said John.

"Good. You have been served," said Mr Thomas and slapped a broad manilla envelope into Jonathan's chest.

John didn't take it, but stepped back, looking up and down curiously. The envelope hit the ground at his feet.

"Still counts," said Mr Thomas. "Good day, sir."

The tall man walked away, and seemed to care nothing for John or the envelope. John watched him go. He looked down. It was an envelope. It looked paper-thick. John looked after the other, but he was alone in the unclean hallway. He looked down. The envelope remained.

"Geez, man," said John and took the envelope inside.

He was summoned to appear at small claims court for violating a neighborhood ordinance regarding offensive sigils and signs of demonic possession.

John was suddenly concerned he was much drunker than he thought he was and stared at the paper for a good long while. He couldn't get the words 'demonic possession' to clarify into something else. He put the summons down, retreated to his kitchen, and drank a big bottle of water and ate his pizza.

Later he still wouldn't drive, even if northern Virginia hadn't been plunged into anarchy by white stuff falling from the sky, but he was somewhat leveler of head than before. He reread the summons.

His apartment complex's HOA was suing him under title whatever for hanging a dreamcatcher outside. It was not on the list of approved exterior wall hangings. They could not be serious. There was a list of approved exterior wall hangings. Dreamcatchers did not appear. There was a list of banned exterior wall hangings. Offensive sigils and signs of demonic possession were collectively item forty three. These fuckers could not be serious. They couldn't be.

Alexandria General District Court had a website. He looked up his summons number. He was being sued for hanging signs of demonic possession outside his window. This was actually happening.
John sat down and put his head in his hands for a long time. Eleven more months on the lease. His first lease in his name. The entirety of his housing record. What would, hopefully, be a housing reference for someplace else, better, nicer, maybe cheaper and closer to work. They didn't even send him a letter asking him to take it down. They sued him for a dreamcatcher.

Signs of demonic possession. They were serious.

John stared at nothing for a long time, and asked himself if he were an adult, what would he do?

Take the dreamcatcher down and move in eleven months. That was the smart thing to do.

A dreamcatcher? Seriously?

If the first stage of grief was denial, John was trapped for minutes, staring between summons, website, and the small ornament outside his window. He thought, 'They can't actually, I mean actually, for real, they can't seriously open up with litigation for a dreamcatcher. At the very least they would have to try to, say, ask me. I mean, this doesn't make sense.'

John felt the anger, the terrible temptation of it, the ease of fury against a righteous target. It sang to him. It sang too sweetly. He would have fought them if the thought hadn't tasted so sweet, rage against a deserving target. He took the thing down.
Rufus

Chapter Summary

Helen's POV

Wolves are returning to Malice

The vet let Rufus and I in. Rufus didn't walk so fast. He trudged up the small ladder to the table and sat down, panting with his eyes closed. The vet excused herself to do something at the sink. I worked my fingers around Rufus's head, and the big mutt smiled. He had a bulldog's face. I scratched under his jowls and around his shoulders. The was doing something, but it didn't matter. She was giving us time.

"Dumb dog," I said. Rufus didn't hear me. He'd been deaf for years. His muzzle was shot with gray. His fur was still soft and thick. "Big dumb dog."

I scratched his forelegs and he thumped over on his side. He couldn't lie on his stomach any more, so he slept sideways with his eyes and mouth open. He drooled like a faucet.

"Ma'am?" asked the vet. She had three syringes.

"Go ahead." I couldn't look at her.

Rufus got the first shot, and he whined. Rufus never liked shots. He didn't feel it by the time she was done. I kept scratching.

"I'm going to check his blood work," she said, putting the needles someplace I didn't have to see them. She hurried out.

Rufus was high as a kite, drooling, tongue hanging out. No one got messed up like dogs. I shifted over to his head and belly, double fisting like at the college parties. I scratched his ears and rubbed his belly. He drooled on stainless steel.

The vet's office had a hard tile floor, two stainless benches, and a few cabinets. Everything could be hosed down. A small wire and glass cage enclosed a drain and shower faucet in the corner, and two laminated posters showed the proper method of brushing a cat's teeth. Another showed how to approach strange dogs.

"Old fleabag. You've got too many fleas." Rufus drooled. I was about to cry. "Stupid, mangy dog."

He'd been lying down too long. Already he was wheezing. I pinched his tongue, and he drooled on me. I let go to return to scratching. He smiled a wide, dopy grin.

"Dumb dog."

The vet came back and professionally gave him the second shot. He was out in seconds. She picked up the third needle.

"He's out now," she told me. "He fell asleep with you petting him. You can leave if you want."
"Just do it."

She gave him the third shot, and I stroked his furry side until his ribs stopped shaking. The vet checked him. Rufus slept with his eyes open. She closed them.

I stopped petting my dog and walked away.

It was Tuesday at ten AM. My morning class should have just ended. October winds blew leaves off the trees at the edge of being cold. I had a sweater I didn't need. The parents were paying for everything so there was nothing else to do. Nothing to sign. Rufus stayed there. I went walking.

Home was weird. I don't remember a Tuesday morning in fall I had no place to be. I was always in school or sick, maybe on an errand but then impatient and hurried. Rufus walked at dawn. Any latter was playing with fire. I walked through quiet streets. Kids played outside. Dogs barked. I walked.

I met Daren, who I had not seen in years. He had always been more Mara's friend than mine. He was my cousin. Now he was my brother. He smoked cigarettes in the same trees I went in to hide, and we had to talk to each other.

"Hey," he grumbled.

"Hey."

Could I pretend not to know him. Now? Was that even possible?

"Shouldn't you be in high school?" I asked.

"I tested out."

I would bet Mara money he was lying.

"You started smoking," I observed.

"I smoked for fifty years."

"I thought you'd quit when you came back here."

"I started again."

I made a half smile. He smoked.

I'm not sure what I was trying to accomplish. Daren was a few years younger, taller, with perfect white hair. He smoked with casual disregard. Long ago, the last time I'd known him, Daren had smoked aggressively, hitting the cigarette. Now it was tamped down to something that looked like rebellious angst. He must had just started again. He inhaled air with every puff.

Daren had probably killed about forty people. I'd contracted him for three. Excellent work. Clean, no witnesses, no collateral. I remember the hit we'd put on Lucritus. Most reliable assassins wouldn't take contracts on women. That was back the last time he smoked.
He was skipping high school.

"So, ah, you going to prom?" I asked.

He looked at me. Daren's eyes distilled contempt down to, "No."

Long silence. This is why we weren't friends.

"Why are you back?" he asked.

"I just put Rufus to sleep."

That took him a minute. "Rufus was still alive?"

"Was."

I've never really liked Daren.

"Where do you think he is now?" asked Daren.

"Dead, at the vet."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know exactly what you meant," I told him. "Rufus is dead," harsh pause. "-at the vet."

Daren looked at me and hit the cigarette. His shoulders moved. He'd been teen-angry before,
difocused, but a sudden hard edge took him. His whole posture changed. He stood straighter.
Somehow I'd entered his world by pissing him off.

"I've met dead dogs before, Helen," he said. "Dead ones. Big ones. Wolves."

"And you never will again," I snapped. "We won't. Ever."

"Goodbye, Helen," he said. The cigarette died.

"Goodbye, Daren," I replied.

We didn't see each other again for twenty eight years.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Mara

Hector and I were on the kids' bench. We weren't fighting, yelling, running around, shouting, punching, screaming, eating, spilling, or ruining anything. It was a boring party. Hector had some juice. He offered me some, but I think he backwashed. I said no.

Uncle Wilson sat on the bench next to us. He was drinking straight Coke. Coke smells a little different when it's adult Coke, but Uncle Wilson had to drive. He looked tired. He glanced over at Hector and asked, "How are you doing, kiddo?"

"I'm okay. You look tired."

Uncle Wilson shrugged. "Your parents have been bugging me to decide what I'm going to do when I grow up."

Hector lowered his juice box. "Aren't you already grown up?"

"Not according to your mother," he said and sipped his Coke pointedly.

Hector nodded. I nodded. There was nothing to say to that.

"What about you? What do you want to be when you grow up?" Uncle Wilson asked the question with peculiar openness. Normally adults ask that when they're excited or looking to take an interest in The Children, but Uncle Wilson sounded like he was looking for suggestions.

"A dragon," said Hector.

Uncle Wilson paused and some wall slammed down behind his eyes. "You can't grow up to be a dragon, kid."
"Why do you crush my dreams?"

Uncle Wilson opened his mouth, closed it, and put his hand on his forehead. He stayed that way for several seconds. His mouth moved like he was talking, but at first no words came out.

"Go to it, kiddo. Dragon as hard as you can be. Horde some gold." Uncle Wilson got up, waved at the both of us, and walked off. He left the party almost immediately after that.
A young man walked back into DogFur. He cut a hard right past the doors and did some hip-limbo to get around the tills that directed customers towards the merchandise, approaching my cash register directly.

I was thinking about winged angels, because their back muscles should be huge. Their chests should look round. We had some birds in the back. Birds generally have rounded torses, so a winged angel should look like a barrel. I was actually staring at the young man for a few seconds without seeing him until he coughed, and I woke up, embarrassed.

"Uh, hi?" I asked, because I completely forgot my script.

"My dog's a shoplifter," he replied and pointed down.

There was a new but chewed up Dental Bone on the counter. It was green, and they're supposed to improve dog-breath. I'm not sure if it works. They do make the dogs slobber like crazy. The bone had a pink price-tag on it, which meant it had been priced this morning.

"That is a lot of chewing."

"Drool everywhere. It's disgusting," replied the boy, but he shrugged. "I got a bully. I'm used to it."

"At least he likes it."

"Yeah, he does," agreed the boy. We stood in silence. "However I need to pay for it."

"Oh, right! Dog shoplifting!" Right, because that was what he had said, and that's why he was here, and oh, god, I'm an idiot.

There was no barcode. There had been a barcode, but it was gone now. Our new system wouldn't let me manually put in a price, so I excused myself to run to the back. The boy spaced out and started playing with squeaky toys. I hoped he didn't buy one, because a mastiff would eat them like popcorn.

My manager caught me on my return and asked me what I was doing away from the register. I explained I was looking for a price, and the customer said his dog stole it when he had picked him up from his grooming. My manager, Karen, is a crazy bitch. She hates theft and people, likes dogs, and doesn't really like me. I could see her seethe.

"He had it in his mouth. I don't really go near Tim's mouth area, what with the waterfall," admitted
the boy. I wondered what his name was.

Karen didn't respond immediately. When she did, she sounded weird. "Was Tim a rescue?"

The boy looked startled. "Yeah?"

"I thought so. He's very friendly, but I could feel the scars. You do well with him."

The boy ignored the compliment. "Scars?"

"Scars, on the head and shoulders. That's why I asked if he was a rescue. He was a bait dog. It's why he's he scared of other dogs."

The boy stared at her like she was a martian. "Bait dog?"

"Yes. Dog fighters use bait dogs to teach other dogs to bite."

The boy just kept staring, before the slow shift of his face indicated a thought so appalling he hadn't conceived of it before. "I, I don't know. He's not around other dogs. I don't- I mean, I thought it was the slobber. People can be shocked at how much slobber a bully actually makes, and I thought- I mean, he was scared when I got him, but I thought that was because of the pound and a new owner."

Karen didn't say anything either. She watched him like predator, and angry-bitch coiled behind her eyes. The dragon rested. When the customer stammered himself to silence, Karen nodded slowly and gave me her manager card. "Take half off. I'll be in the back."

She walked off, taking hard steps where her shoes cracked against the tile.

I rang up his bone, which slimed my hands, but you don't work in a pet store if you're that scared of dog drool. I keep a rag by the register. Then I bagged him and wiped my hands while he was paying with a card. He didn't say anything, and went through the transaction in an odd daze.

"I met Tim this morning," I said. If the customer had given me his debit card, I could have gotten his name. I would have gotten slobber on it. He couldn't be frightened of that. "He's a good boy, very friendly. We have some private places for dogs who're scared of other dogs in the back. Tim liked everybody."

"What? Oh, yeah. He likes everybody. Drools a lot. Some people don't realize bullies-" The boy paused, and I watched him space out, like seeing him sink into a pool while I was stuck on the surface. The water was so clear his eyes never wavered, but they retreated until he was gone in the depths.

"He's a good dog," muttered the boy, and he took the bone bag and left, almost wandering. He nearly ran into the wall before reorienting himself and going through the doors. I watched him go.
Bedtime Stories The punishment

Chapter Summary

Changed aunt Martha's name to aunt Janet.

It was day four of the Punishment. Dad read from the worst bedtime story ever in the boys' room. Calvin refused to listen and curled up with his arms crossed facing the wall. He fought to stay awake so he could show Dad the plot had failed and merely boring Calvin to sleep was unsuccessful. Hector dozed on the top bunk. He was susceptible to being bored to sleep, and Dad's evil plan was working.

Helen and I couldn't listen in our own beds, so we had to sit on the boys' floor. They had cleaned it okay, so that wasn't a problem, but I missed my bed. I'd tried faking sleep so Dad would carry me back when he was done. He just poked me until I got up. Punishment was brutal.

That night Dad sat down on the chair from downstairs and paged through the yellow book while Calvin loudly harrumphed and curled up. Hector lay down reversed with his feet on the pillow, head towards Dad and the door. Helen wriggled around and got comfortable, and I tried to sleep so the boring wouldn't hurt.

"Philosophically then, the arbitrary idea of scientific paradigm's collapsing to fundamental truth is at best inaccurate, for the reasons of the last chapter," read Dad to start. "Those same paradigms-"

"No, they didn't!" yelled Helen, an unusual interruption in her sulky silence.

"Hush, I'm reading," said Dad.

"But the last chapter wasn't paradigm collapse!" yelled Helen. "It was architecture!"

"Helen, hush, young lady. I'm reading," insisted Dad.

Helen jumped up and stomped, and Hector tried to stop the argument. "He skips chapters. The last page from last night had two paragraph breaks. This one has one."

Dad paused. He looked confused. I'd thought Hector had fallen asleep.

Helen stormed over to Dad's chair. Without even looking at Dad, she leafed back. "You have to read it right!" she said. "It's- is it this one?"

"Keep going," murmured Hector. "It has two white lines on the left, and all black on the right."

"Helen, sit down," ordered Dad in an odd voice. "This isn't a bedtime story. You're in trouble for upsetting your mother."

"It is a bedtime story!" insisted Helen. "Our punishment is the worst bedtime story ever, but it's not no-story, so you have to read it right! Is this it?"

"Is it the paradigm of western epistemology?" asked sleepy Hector.
Helen checked. "Yes."

"That's it."

Dad took the book away from where Helen was looking at it. "Helen, this isn't a fun story. You upset your mother. You hurt her."

"But you said you'd read, not send us to bed with no reading, so you have to read it right!" demanded Helen.

"I didn't hurt Mom," said Calvin, rolling over. "No one hurt Mom."

"Yes, you did!" insisted Dad. "She told you to go to bed, and you stayed away fighting. That hurt her."

"It hurt her feelings," I said.

"Oh. Feelings," said Calvin. He rolled back over.

"Your mother loves you very much!" Dad replied. He looked at Calvin. "And when she tells you to do something and you don't, that hurts. She's worried about you."

"You're ignoring me!" yelled Helen.

"He doesn't think bedtime stories are important," I told Helen. "He thinks the only thing that matters is the reading, so he skips ahead. He doesn't know the story matters, so he thinks you're just upset because it's the worst bedtime story ever, and he doesn't care, because we're in trouble."

Dad snapped his head away from Calvin to stare at me. Helen followed his gaze, but I wasn't doing anything, just lying there. She didn't see anything surprising.

"What?" asked Helen, confused. "Don't you know bedtime stories are important?"

"I mean, of course," hemmed Dad oddly. "That's why we read every night."

"He just thinks the reading is important," I repeated. "He doesn't know the story is important too."

"It's okay Dad. You're a good reader," said Hector.

"But you have to read it right," said Helen.

Calvin wouldn't look at Dad. Dad looked surprised and actually a little scared. That didn't feel good at all. I got up and patted him on the knee. Helen pointed at the book, which in his distraction, he'd put down on his lap again.

"That's where you stopped last night. Start from there," she said.

"You have to say please," Hector murmured.

"Please," said Helen.

"Kids, hold on," said Dad, and he picked Helen up so she sat with him. "Do you all know why you're in trouble?"

"We didn't go to bed. Calvin went under the bed, and Hector and I yelled," I said.
"I wasn't there," Helen pointed out.

"The next day you were jumping on the bed, throwing pillows, and shouting," said Dad.

"Okay, fine," she grumbled.

"Your mother cares about you! She worries! We both do, and it's not good for you not to get enough sleep. It does hurt her feelings, and that does matter. Feelings matter, Calvin!" insisted Dad.

"Why!?" yelled Calvin, rolling over. "Reading matters, but you don't even read the story right! You skip ahead. Why should feelings matter when they're your feelings, but stories don't matter if you don't want them? If you can ignore stories when you want, I should be able to ignore feelings when I want!"

Dad just wasn't ready for that. He stared at Calvin. We were all quiet, staring at Dad. He looked weird, and his eyes flicked from Calvin to all of us. He slowly half frowned and let that erode away.

"I promise I'll read it right," said Dad.

"Promise?" repeated Helen.

"I promise."

"You can start from there," said Hector in a whisper. He was a little awake. "You don't have to read the parts you skipped before."

Dad looked even weirder, but he said, "Okay. Calvin, feelings matter. We're going to talk about this tomorrow."

Calvin didn't know what to say either. He rolled over and grumbled.

"Right here," said Helen. She tapped the book. "Please."

The next day was Thursday. Mom had to work late. Dad made Calvin help him make dinner, and after dinner, he made everyone sit down with him. He looked grave.

"Minions," he said. "Let's talk about bedtime stories."

We looked at each other. Calvin didn't look like he expected to be in trouble, and Calvin knew about getting in trouble.

"So, honestly, your mother has the best bedtime stories?" Dad asked.

Four heads nodded emphatically.

"Right," said Dad. He frowned a little, but he looked serious, not mad. "I need to work on that."

"Yours aren't bad-" I started.

"They're terrible!" yelled Calvin.

I ignored him as Dad made Calvin-face. "Mom has really good bedtime stories, though."
"What about when she rushes?" Dad asked. He squinted at me.

"Those are the best!" said Calvin. "Did you hear the one where the babies are eaten by wolves?"

Dad turned and really squinted at Calvin.

"It's about why we need to tell someone if we're going into the woods," explained Hector. "It's important because I do not want to be eaten by wolves."

"That sounds mighty bad," I agreed.

Dad squinted one eye, opened his other eye wide, and looked around at all of us slowly. Calvin nodded with a huge grin. Hector and I were serious. Helen glanced at Hector and agreed with him.

"Let's move on from that for a moment," Dad said. "Now, no fun stories until I finish the book, because you're all in trouble."

He glanced at Calvin. Calvin nodded glumly. Dad looked at the rest of us. We also nodded. We were in trouble.

"But I will be reading you regular stories when I'm done, and they're going to be good," Dad said. He added, "Maybe with fewer wolves."

"Oh, there were a lot of them," said Hector.

"They were dripping off the trees," explained Helen.

"Kids, your mother's a weirdo."

When Mom came home that night, Helen tattled.

"Mom!" Helen caught her in the doorway, trying to sidle in with arms full of jackets and bags. "Dad called you a weirdo!"

Wow! Helen tattled on Dad to Mom! That was the greatest tattle. It's super tattling!

Mom looked confused. "Who? Your father?"

"Yeah!" exclaimed Helen. Her eyes were alight with evil glee.

"The man who reads Black's Law Dictionary, for fun, called me a weirdo?" repeated Mom.

"Yeah!"

"Okay, sweetie. You tell him that's nice."

Mom finished maneuvering through the door and went to the kitchen. Helen's face fell in three phases that never found bottom. Instead she trudged away. It had been a hard few days, so I asked her if she was okay.

"I'm not mad," said Helen. "I'm just a little disappointed."

Later we all had to apologize to Mom, and then the parents went to the Den to talk and we kids
went upstairs to talk about the important things: when we went to bed, we were going to be eaten by trolls.

Helen was mad because she'd had to apologize, but not as mad as when she'd had to apologize to Hector, so she complained, "We can't even fight the trolls because we'll get into trouble again!"

"We could fight them without shouting," I said.

"You can't fight without shouting," scoffed Calvin. "There's fighting and there's not shouting, but you can't do both at the same time."

"I didn't really mean fighting," I said, rubbing my arm. "I really meant sneaking."

They looked at me. I shrugged.

"But what kind of sneaking would we do?" asked Hector. "We're in our beds. You can't be sneaky in your bed if the trolls know you're in your bed."

The phone rang downstairs.

It was mine! I blasted out of the room, shoving slow Calvin into the hamper, and dashed down the stairs. I lost my footing on step eight, fell, caught myself, and still made it to the kitchen before anyone else. They had barely gotten halfway down when I lifted the receiver and by the rules, I was safe.

"This is Mara Harmon," I chirped. I had answered the phone again!

"Hello, Mara Harmon. This is your aunt Janet. Is my sister or your Dad around?" She sounded tired.

"Yes!" I said. "I think. Hold on. Talk to Hector."

I gave my other slow brother the phone and went down the Littler Stairs to the Living Room and the Den.

Dad was sitting on Mom's chair, looking up at her as she mulled some thought. She leaned against a filing cabinet. Both of their desks were piled high, and the big globe that we couldn't touch rested on the bookshelf behind them.

"I think you did fine," said Mom to Dad. "That late when- Yes, sweetie?"

"Aunt Janet is on the phone. She would like to speak to you."

Mom and Dad exchanged a look, and Mom left. Dad tried to catch me by the head but I ran. I had taken the call. Mom might need me!
The One Where Helen Dies

Chapter Summary

I thought I was going somewhere with this, but nothing panned out. I really like it, though.

Dad was having a battle to the death with the dog. Rufus had gotten some broccoli which always gives him the wind. He launched the initial attack. Dad got really mad and ate beans, and now the two of them were sitting on the couch, blasting at each other.

Mom said Rufus was a dog and couldn't really know what was going on, but Rufus knew. Rufus knew.

We went outside.

Hector and Cavlin had been playing outside already, and they dug a hole in the sandbox and filled it with water. They put the hose on the uphill side and build a great berm across the middle. On the low side rose sculpted towers of gold, mere inches from the Eating Sea. Calvin had taken out his people, and he and Hector had placed themselves. They were doing voices, mostly screaming, while the water built up against the berm.

"Can I play?" asked Helen when she and I ran out the door.

"You can play next game," suggested Hector.

"Why not now?"

"Because you died," said Calvin.

Hector nodded. "Your person climbed into a tiger cage to pet the murder kitty."

Helen began to argue. Her face scrunched up and she opened her mouth indignantly, but she stopped. She sat on a stump.

"That's fair," admitted Helen.

"Can I play?" I asked.

"No. You were taken out by snipers when you ate Helen," said Calvin.

I stared at them for a little while. Hector had wet sand up to his elbows. He was on the grass, leaning over the plastic wall to pack sand into roads while Calvin knelt in the doomed city. He was scraping stairs into a castle wall and ridging the berm with his fingers. I sat next to Helen.

"I don't know if I'd eat you," I said. "Even if I was a tiger."

"But you might," admitted Helen. "That's why we're not allowed to play with tigers."

I nodded.
The boys played until the city died in fire. When the water broke over the wall, the lanterns tipped over, spilling oil across the waves. So the people drowned in a flood of burning oil while the tigers swam around eating people. Then sharks swam in and tried to eat the tigers, but the sharks caught fire. So the burning sharks fought the swimming tigers, which was a pretty even fight until Mom yelled at us to turn off the water. Then everything turned muddy.

"I think the sharks would win," I said. I didn't want to admit it, but I had too. "Cats will try to get out of the water, but that's just fire. Sharks can swim down, where there isn't any fire, so they'd just eat the tigers after they burned up."
Another random thing. Didn't go anywhere.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you don't follow the women's purse market very well?"

Inspector Jackson Lloyd was an overweight black man with a handlebar mustache and watery eyes. He put the work in at the gym and avoided the vegetable aisle, giving him a barrel body and thick hands. Like usual he was wearing a cheap three piece suit with expensive tailoring, an American flag tie clip, and a Korean flag breast clip.

By answer the room either breath-laughed or shook their heads.

"Excuse me, but everytime I assume that, I'm wrong. Let me fill you in. To begin with, most of what we call purses women now call bags. It's a combination functional and stylistic item, ranging in cost from a few dollars to a few thousand."

He stopped to glance around the room. Everyone in there was a man.

"Functionally, the bag serves to replace pockets. Women's casual wear has pockets sometimes, but as the progression moves upwards into formality and higher style, pockets cease to exist at all, or at least exist functionally. The replacement for this is the bag. For our purposes, there are a few key points.

"The first being that since the bag is a separate item from the clothing, it must match, but cannot be an integral part of the outfit it matches. Notice I have pockets in my trousers?" He inverted them. "They match the pant, and I don't have to do anything about that. Likewise the pockets in my jacket or vest match as well. This is not the case for women's bags, so women need a variety of them. Secondly, pricing and functionality is generally in line with the items of clothing they're intended to match.

"For our purposes, that's what this is all building up to. Pricing is in line with matching clothing. A kilogram of high quality handbags can resale for several thousand dollars. These can be produced for as little as tens of dollars per kilogram, resulting in 99% profit. A shipping container of counterfeit handbags could easily hold millions of dollars of product.

"They are indetectable to dogs. Xrays cannot distinguish between most cloth matter. They store dry, with no noise, and do not require air or light. They are almost perfect contraband.

"Finally, the only limiting factor is time. As an element of women's fashion, there is a strong seasonal connotation to them. The smuggler's need to move product, and they need to move it fast. While a black market producer can purchase a designer original, reverse engineer it, produce, ship, and resale within months, that can eliminate as much as half the retail lifetime of the product. No one's going to be impressed with a ten thousand dollar bag that's last year's model."

Jack paused and looked around. The Korean contingent sat on the left side of the room, very proper, every suit grey or navy. He'd put them off early, that opening had been too informal, but
they were drawn in now. Wheels were clicking behind their eyes, measuring shipment values against contraband weights. The Chinese contingent wasn't hooked yet. They were waiting for the attack. He had to be careful.

The only other American in the room, Peter Matheau, didn't look like he could find a way to care less.

"This is a high priority to our governments. Individually, several Italian and French design firms have agreed to move some manufacturing to both China and Korea in exchange for increased prosecution of counterfeiters. What has long been a low priority has turned politically toxic when images of the November raid made it onto social media. Pictures of police arresting hundreds of women at sewing machines did not go over well. Our governments listened to popular opinion and have pivoted to target the smugglers themselves. They are our targets.

"It's important to keep in mind we're talking about a multibillion dollar criminal industry. Individual players can make millions of dollars on a successful shipment. In many ways, counterfeit item smuggling is as profitable as the illegal narcotics trade, and done with lower risks. Convicted narcotics smugglers get life in prison. Handbag smugglers may get a fine, sometimes nothing more than loss of a shipment. Low risk and high reward is bringing some of the active parties from other trafficking operations into durable soft-good smuggling." Jackson had switched to durable soft-good on the fly. He liked it. "Drug and human traffickers are moving into this industry, and bringing their methods with them. We need to be careful."
In the nature of dreams I woke up when it ended.
More accurately, I startled awake and after a brief instant of immobility, I bolted upright and looked around in confusion. I was on Jessica’s soft white couch, with a bit of a blanket kicked to the floor, and a cold breeze floating through the window. The room was very quiet save for the static of the TV, which was displaying nothing but snow. There was a smell of burnt meat in the air.

“Oh, hey. I’m sorry. Did I wake you up?” asked a concerned voice from behind me.
Groggily I turned around and stumbled over the blanket to find my host in the kitchen, grimacing in embarrassment.

“Are you all right?” she continued on a moment later, when I just stared at her.

“What?” I replied, utterly confused.

“Are you all right? Did you sleep well?”

I looked between her, the couch, the snowy TV, and the open window in a jagged circuit several times, finally asking, “Why is the window open?”

“I burned breakfast. I forgot about it, and the smoke alarms in this building are very sensitive. So I put a blanket on you and opened the window,” Jessica replied, very factually.

She had perfect make-up in pajama bottoms and a tank top. There was a faint smell of hair fixative in the air, but more prominent was burned toast and boiling milk. While I looked baffled, she put a pan in the sink, and the sizzling boil of water instantly vaporizing on hot metal filled the air. Steam plumed up in front of her head like clouds. I retreated, sat back down on the couch, and stared at my fingers.

“What time is it?”

“Seven thirty. I have to leave for work in twenty five minutes. I always do that,” she said chattily. Jessica got going quickly in the morning. “I put the milk on and start the toast, and then go back to do my hair. I never remember to come out halfway through, though, until the smell gets me. I even keep my door open for that reason. They had to evacuate the building once, and I nearly had to pay the fire department. Do you know how expensive that is?”

“No. No,” I murmured, repeating myself. “Would you like me to do that? So you don’t get behind?”

“Why don’t you go back to sleep?” she offered. “I’ll just have it cold.”
“Weird dreams,” I admitted. It sounded like mourning, but sleep muffled my emotions to the point I was half zombie. “Actually, I’d like to do that. You’re letting me crash here, after all.”

“Well,” she vacillated, eyes rolling to the clock. Its hands marched on relentlessly. “All you need to do is warm the milk but stop it before it boils, and cook the toast.”

“Don’t you have a toaster?”

“Yes, but it’s artisanal. You have to watch it.”

“Jess, you have an artisanal toaster?” A bit of dry sarcasm came out of my sleepy fog for that.

“It makes great toast!” she defensively replied with a faint hurt expression.

“I thought you keep burning the toast?”

“Well, that’s not the toaster’s fault. I just forget about it while I’m doing my prep in the morning.” She probably knew how ridiculous that sounded.

“Well then don’t worry. I’m an artist. I will artisanally toast with professional pride. Go finish getting ready.”

Time moved on, and in her carefully budgeted morning, even this short conversation was throwing her off rhythm. The good hostess in her wanted to refuse. The lawyer wanted to make it to work on time. I entered the kitchen and politely pushed her out of the way, and she didn’t put up a fight.

The toaster nearly required a PhD in EE. It had no ‘on’ button. But in the battle between over-expensive toaster and professional painter, the painter won, though it was a bloody, hard fought battle. I was sucking my burned fingers and putting some sort of lemon, cinnamon spread on the toast when she emerged, power suited and coifed. She gave the impression of wearing no makeup, and that was a carefully and intricately developed farce.

“Okay, that’s amazing toast,” I admitted, partially as a peace offering, and partially because it was incredible.

“I know! Isn’t it? I get the bread from the bakery across the street, but the toaster is half the battle.” She gushed with morning-person enthusiasm, something I could never understand. “Have you tried the cranberry sugar-bread?”

“No. I will,” I vowed.

“You should,” she ordered, equally intently.

There could be no argument. This needed to be done. She ate one of those carefully orchestrated, balanced breakfasts rich people eat, and I shoved things into my mouth until I wasn’t hungry. Then she gave me the pass-code to the electronic lock and darted out the door, exactly on time.

Already in the kitchen and feeling snoopy, I explored. She had whole wheat anything. There was a jar of imported chocolate with a time lock, called The Rationer (TM), which was sealed until seven PM tomorrow evening lest she violate her meticulous dietary regime. My habit of thinking of her as a bit silly became cemented by everything I found. The only thing to wobble my mild amusement was a bowl of fresh fruit that involved such off-piste things as papaya and oranges, neither of which was currently a fashionable food. (Don’t ask me how I knew that.) Fortunately that moment was corrected when I saw her delivery ticket and discovered Jessica had fresh fruit, milk, and meat delivered on long term engagement.
Then, because I was bored, I toasted some cranberry sugar-bread and ate it with the lemony stuff. It was fan-fucking-tastic. In the old days people wrote sonnets about shit like this. I needed to get back to a poor district before I developed an opinion about criquet and the Federal Reserve.

Jessica rented a two bedroom apartment basically because she had too much money. Apparently it was cheaper than her last place, which must have been a slightly more upscale address than home of the gods. I shut the windows because everything had aired out and lit a candle that smelled like autumn. Don’t ask; I have no idea. Then I trundled into her spare room, officially the office, that was never used and rummaged through all of my worldly belongings, looking for some sense of continuity.

Before you get a bunch of ideas, let me tell you a few things about me and Jess. We couldn’t date. I don’t mean we were prevented from doing so by status or social mores. We, the two of us, could not do it. It didn’t work. We’d tried like six times because we got along so well. First there were the fights, then the make-up sex, then more fights, then a sense of mutual distancing, then tears, discussions to see other people, other people, getting back together, and trainwrecks of second chances that never panned out. Now I was staying in her house, feeling sort of alone and vulnerable, and it wasn’t even a subtle pitfall that stood before us. I had a road map of where to go into that continuing disaster and how it was going to go apocalyptically bad. Jess was too nice to put a time limit on how long I could stay, which meant we all knew where that was going. Jess was also really hot.

You’re getting ideas, aren’t you? I’ve had those same ideas. Jess and I both did, as I said, six or so times. It really, really did not work. Right now you’re saying the exact same stupid stuff to yourself as I keep repeating in my own head. You’re saying she’s nice. You’re saying she’s fun. You’re saying she’s attractive. You’re saying she’s got cinnamon whatever bread and that lemony stuff, and honestly, you have got to try that. I might go through the heartbreak for time number seven for this stuff, except I can buy bread in a store, except I probably couldn’t afford it, and-

We are not having this conversation. I’ve been there, resolved, weakened, resolved, and now I had to go.
Life is brutal, and the end is terrifying.

I had been stabbed and lay bleeding out on the battlefield. My troops were put to rout behind me, and I watched their traitorous backs as they fled the field. Already the crows circled overhead. The red mud stank, and the injured groaned, and yet I didn't die.

It took a while to bleed out. Ex-sanguinate. A slow process of drip, drip, drip, while my legs didn't work and my arms held no strength. I could still fight, cognitively. I could plan and conceive war. I could do battle in my head. My limbs were as faithless as my troops, and the vultures circled overhead. Did I say crows? They must be vultures. Perhaps ravens. Hopefully not ravens. My sword was broken at the hilt, without even a stub of blade.

The winning generals retreated victorious from the field. They left us to the foot soldiers, who picked through our ranks. Some of the living injured got a pointed end, some didn't, and I didn't know which to hope for. I didn't stop bleeding.

Footsteps squelched by me. They'd come to me. I resolved not to go out quietly.

"Evening, sister," said my brother Edmund who crouched down beside me. He wore hard boots splattered with blood, his gloves were wreathed in gore, and his helmet had the plume cut off. None of his cuts looked deep. He sat on his heels and blocked the sunlight so I could look at him. "You seem to be having a bit of trouble."

"Luck isn't with me," I said.

"Or fate is with me. I heard once that when the world was made, luck and fate threw dice to see who would rule the world, and all history has been an experiment to see who won. Any insight on that from your position?" he asked. Edmund had a toothpick, always a damn toothpick, and he worked at his teeth.

"I'll be happy to send you to observe the far veils," I offered.

"No, ladies first," he replied. "You'll no doubt know the answer before me."

"You have the soul of a gentleman."

"Several," he agreed and used the toothpick.

"Are you going to help me?"

"Goodness no, not in either direction. I am bound by laws I dare not break not to lift a hand against you. I wouldn't dream otherwise. I don't actually know who did put it in you. Looks like a gut shot. Did you catch his name?"

"Missed it," I admitted. "He was wearing a shirt just like yours, though."

Edmund looked down at his saffron robe. It had salt stains from sweat, blood in the cuffs, and creases from sleeping in the saddle. It looked like a metal jacket had been torn off, bracers shredded, and collar and shoulder armor rent. Good. I chuckled and coughed.

"You may rest assured he's probably dead. Your own people tried their darndest. Before the
running and the crying, and that little bit where they threw their weapons down and fled. Did you
catch that part, dear sister?"

I wouldn't answer.

"It fulfills a number of legal requirements, you know. Oh, Scarlet. I will raise no hand against you,
but I see that's not good enough now. I won't let my men come near, that you might beguile them
with some witchery of your tongue. I won't even let the ravens get you. Ravens always wanted a
piece of you. Perhaps you would catch one in your teeth and break his neck to drink his blood. I
won't even suppose what you're capable of. No chuckle? Pressure when you laugh? You probably
got it in the lungs. Good to die in battle, hard to do the dying."

"You could give me a knife, and let me finish it myself."

"I could," he admitted. "And I've thought about it. But I got to wondering, what would the most
ruthless thing to do be? In that moment, what would be the vilest action of all? I must admit, the
one that springs to mind is taking a mercy knife trying to cut my eyes out with it. That's perhaps the
worst. Would you do that, Scarlet?"

"No." I tried to pur at him and croaked.

"Ah, Scarlet. I have lifted no hand against you. I didn't even command the force that brought you
down. I enlisted. Do you know what that was like? Enlisting? It burns. It galled me, Scarlet. It hurt
my soul. Someone tried to 'train me.' Pushups in the mud. Inspections. Drill. I forgot hating anyone
like I hated that sergeant. God. It was like a sickness, the fury. The anger. But in the darkness,
when I wanted to kill that sergeant in his tent when I slept in the rain, when I memorized the details
of his stirrup, when I fantasized about his eyes and my thumbs, when I came to my darkest
moments, bleak silences in the night, then I thought of you, dear sister. I thought of you. I thought
of this army that I didn't command. I thought of how I would raise no hand against you, nor
command no troop. I thought of nothing but you. I did pushups in the mud, Scarlet. I shaved with
dry razors. I was inspected. All for you. Lies my recruiter spilled that I had to believe. All for you.

"You believe me now. I can smell it. You'd spit the final curses, call the gods down on my name. If
you had but an infraction of the Divine Law, you'd lay heaven and hell against me. The highest
gods would be yanked to earth by the oaths you'd lay against me, and the darkest devils would
quail at whatever vengeances you demanded on my head. I hear nothing. I beat you, Scarlet."

And God, it hurt my pride even as being a foot-soldier must have hurt his. He hurt my pride to look
him in the face and hear his soft, understated gloating, and feel nothing in the dark recess of my
soul where the final vengeance was supposed to lurk. The last bullet in the silent chamber to take
out whoever took me down, and it was missing because he hadn't done it. I wasn't ready for that.
Pride hurts when the body goes into shock. It hurt like the knife hadn't. I wanted to throw myself at
him, get my fingers in his eyes like he'd dreamed about with that sergeant, and I had no blood. My
army was gone. My veins were empty. I kept going on old power and spite, but they weren't
enough to kill this brother. I'd always thought if I came to this, at least I'd be able to curse him. I
was wrong. God, it hurt.

"Well, Sis, it comes back to this. I won't leave you alone. I fear what you might do. Not what I
expect, but the chance. The unfathomable chance. You, oh, Scarlet, you wanted to be feared. You
may rest assured you are. I'm terrified of you, Sister, and I won't let you out of my sight until time,
fate, luck, whoever it is ushers you forth on Charon's meat-wagon to the winged gates of I-don't-
give-a-damn. You won't be here. That gut shot's a life ender. I can see the hate in your eyes. I fear
your hate, but you must know I know it. I've measured your malice. If you had guile left in you,
you'd kill me now. If you had a scheme, you'd do it. I won't try to outguess your schemes. I will try
to outguess you. You hate me too much right now for duplicity. God, Scarlet, the world will be a
better place without a hater as powerful as you."

Ravens flapped in low circles, and their caws were furious demands for my end. The birds hated
me as they picked at the other dead. God said nothing, and I bled.

"I've been stabbed too," said Edmund, almost conversationally. "Did you know that? Mandrake. I
don't think he meant to kill me. He obviously didn't. But I got out of line, and Mandrake is one to
draw lines. He drew one right through my guts. I thought I was going to die, so I ran. Blood coming
down my legs, I had a fist inside my belly like a plug. Ever do that? Is your own fist acting as a
plug now? I see you know what I mean. I'd never been stabbed before, not seriously since. It scared
me, Sister. It scared me bad."

Edmund looked up at the crows, and the sky refused to darken. I had hours of spite left in me,
enough bitter rage to keep me alive as it sapped the will from my limbs to strike. It was a glorious
self-fulfilling poison. I drank it like a river, and Edmund talked to kill the time and me.
Fragments

I want to take her in my arms, gently push the hair back from her face, and kiss her like a long, slow swim in a pure mountain lake. Let my tongue taste hers like beauty that doesn’t need eyes. I live with you in my thoughts.

Two fingers roll over a rough surface

Gliding on its ridges and bumps

I love you, girl, and can’t remember a time when I didn’t. Your hair falls off your neck in waves, waves that bunch across your back. You keep shrugging and turning your head, hoping to get it to lie flat. You have a way of talking that leaves you slightly ahead but vulnerable. I can barely listen to you without kissing your lips shut.
Chapter Summary

Character building

Mick walked in the office. He’d gotten away from the engineer’s uniform of white shirt, khakis, and tie for the sedate manager’s uniform, polo-shirt, khakis, and ID badge in a lanyard. We shared a lab, eight of us, and it was too many people in too little space. Benches were stuck every-old where, with the huge silicon oven making a closet between it and a wall. The low EMI room was ringed by scopes and sig-gens. There’s an old saw spaghetti is done when you throw it at the wall and it sticks. An EMI-shielded room is used when the wires stick to it like black pasta, and something is always tweeting or blinking. Mick sat down, looked at his computer, and didn’t log on. He spun in place to stare at us like he was seeing the lab for the first time.

“Hey, Mick. What’s up?” I asked.

It was Monday morning, and I wasn’t working. I technically was. The email client was syncing. I was staring at a bar moving. Monday had come too early.

He opened his mouth to say something. It sounded like a revelation. He was discovering his words as he said them, but the intensity didn’t match the statement.

“Nothing. I’m fine. I’m fine.”

There was a meaning to that statement that was true, and the obvious one was physical. Mick didn’t look like he had believed it thirty seconds ago.

“Do anything fun this weekend?” asked Alexa.

Alexa was the project lead. She was a better engineer than manager, and people kept trying to make that about her sex. It wasn’t. She was bored out of her mind, reading spreadsheets, filing budget statements. She avoided her paperwork like a monster. I couldn’t blame her emotionally, because I’d done her job when she was out for a few weeks. It was purge-your-brain-boring. I could blame her for not filling out my purchase request authorizations, because that was on my personal credit card and I needed the money. Good person. I wish I didn’t work for her.

“I got shot at,” said Mick.

Ives, Pietr, and Mohammed turned in their chairs in odd unison, spinning away from their computers. No one was doing any real work yet. The scopes drew flat lines save the ambient, which chirped its usual 2.4 GHz bump. No one cared. Ives put his feet up and looked at Mick, while Mohammed leaned back in his chair. Sooner or later it was going to fall under him. Mohammed was no little man. Pietr wanted blood.

“Who shot at you?” I asked.

“A boyfriend. I didn’t know he was a boyfriend. Not true. I knew he was a boyfriend, but I didn’t know the girl- do you know some women don’t like being called women? It’s like missus. They think it means they’re old. They don’t like missus or ma’am. Same with woman. She told me to
call her girl. It was a thing. That’s not odd, right? Should I have noticed that? I did, but I didn’t think about it.”

Mick spoke in a rush of flat water. His words were quick, and his expression abstracted. He might have been reciting a speech he forgot the meaning of.

“Ma’am does make you sound old. Some people think Missus does too,” said Alexa with a carefully neutral, supportive expression. “Girl doesn’t surprise me. How old was she?”

“Twenty eight.”

Alexa nodded slowly. “That’s about when you start noticing,” she said to herself. “Who was it?”

“I didn’t notice,” said Mick, and I had to reach back to figure out he was answering his own question. “I thought I was getting catfished.”

“By who?” asked Pietr.

“I met a girl online. Odd girl. I had a feeling things were off, so I made her send me a picture of her with a potato. I thought I was getting catfished. The chemistry had inconsistent levels. Ever notice that? She responded quick, but she was willing to put more work into the conversation than her interest level supported.

“Text conversations with people you’ve never met take work, you know? People don’t notice it. Girls don’t. Girls honestly aren’t that good at it. They don’t ask leading questions, and they don’t say things you can respond to. I think they’re used to texting people they know, so there’s a lot of common ground to fall back on. Online dating doesn’t have that. They don’t know, but they text so much they think they know. Blindness of practice. It was my second match. The first was a bot.

“You can tell bots. She asked me how I was doing, I said fine. I had a funny story about the grocery store, so I said I’d just bought some fruit, and she told me to plow her like a field. I’m a reasonably good-looking guy, but I don’t think my grocery shopping drives the ladies wild. Bots have no chill. This one was a bit different, but I didn’t know what was going on. Text conversations are a little weird. You don’t get feedback. You can’t read body language.

“She didn’t sound interested. She send a lot of short texts: So? Really? Nice. But if I didn’t reply, she sent another. I couldn’t figure out if my senses were off or not. Bots don’t do context well. I mentioned I had seen a movie, and we could talk about it. I talked. I usually don’t talk that much with girls. They talk more. It’s fine. She asked, I answered, but she asked with context, which bots don’t do well. I thought it was a human, but I figured it was a catfish. I asked her for a picture of her with a potato. I compared it closely to her profile. She’s cute. It was the same girl. She was in a kitchen. I figured she was human. She asked me if we wanted to meet up. I couldn’t get a read on her, but like, if I’m not exactly great at reading people, maybe she wasn’t great at giving the right signals. Some people just aren’t great at talking to new people. It was Webbie, a dating sight for technical professionals. It turns out girls are people too, and a lot of them are kinda awkward too. Where would such people be? Webbie, dating for nerds. It seemed reasonable, right? She didn’t want me to call her woman. She was a girl. Webbie said she’s twenty eight. There’s no chance she was below eighteen.”

Everything flooded out of Mick in a rush, and then he stopped. The undercurrents of sarcasm never peaked, but they cut the flow of words and broke his speech into ripples and currents. Pietr had repeated the ‘girls are people too’ bit, but Alexa shushed him. Pietr didn’t have a read on Mick. Alexa did. We waited.
Mick looked up. “She had a boyfriend. He had a gun. I ran.”

There was a long silence before Alexa said, “Good!” with peculiarly defeated intensity.

What else would you say to that?”

“You got shot at?” I asked.

“Yeah. He was pissed. We’d gone out a few times. It wasn’t- they weren’t real dates. Two weren’t. We had coffee. Very public. Lot of other people. She didn’t immediately respond after that. Not much spark, but some interest. We had another coffee date. It was weird. I asked her if she wanted to go someplace else and suggested a time. She was busy. I suggested a different time. She was still busy. Okay. I said I looked forward to seeing her again sometime, and figured that was that. People do get busy, you know? I’ll try twice. But a day later she started texting me again, and we went out for coffee again. Different place. I got the feeling she couldn’t get a read on me either, but now I don’t think that was it. I did then. I tried to be myself. That’s what you’re supposed to do, right? Third time, third time we made a connection at a roller derby. It had come up in conversation. Apparently she liked roller-derby, and I always thought it was weird, but maybe exciting. I’d go if she wanted to. She did. Her boyfriend showed up in the parking lot out back, and he started shooting. I ran. I spent the night at the police station. There is a lot of paperwork in getting shot at.”

Again Alexa broke the leaden silence that followed.

“I wouldn’t have expected an armed boyfriend from her asking you to call her girl, not woman,” said Alexa.
The Black Ring

Jack sat in a dive bar in Washington DC with an iridium ring in his hand. It was disturbingly heavy and lacquered in fine black. Gold writing wrapped the inside and out with looping curves. Jack sat and his too-expensive whisky sat with him as he twisted the ring in his hands.

Emory entered and ordered, looked around, spotted him, and took her own drink to join him. Jack had taken command of a booth, but sat facing out of it, his rear end towards the wall and elbows on knees in the tight aisle. He looked up from the ring when she arrived. "Early for you, isn't it?"

"Lunch-time into the end of Friday. My boss told me not to come back. I'm only having one. The cops around here are insane."

"How is old Lucky?"


"Sounds like you need a new job."

Emory's mouth opened glib but only sighs came out. She tried to bite it off, but got a belly grunt caught in her teeth. She grimaced. "Don't say that. I'm not looking, and I don't want it passed around that I am. What is that? A ring? You giving that to someone?"

"This? Oh, no. It was given to me. It's iridium. Feel the weight. No, take it with your palm. It's surprisingly heavy."

Emory let him drop the ring into her palm to humor him, but startled when it pulled her hand flat to the table. She focused on it and made the ring rise up so she could see it. It wasn't that heavy when she was prepared for it, less than the dumbbells at WeFitness, but it was half a dumbbell in a package that could loop around her thumb.

"That is heavy," she admitted.

Jack looked at her for a while and let her hold onto it as he remembered his drink. The aged whisky burned and tasted of peat, fires in old places, years in barrels deep underground. It tasted good. It had better. He sipped again, and noticed that there were no ice cubes. Four grey blocks of granite, rough in shape and revealing the crystal shear planes, radiated cold. Perhaps they absorbed heat. He hadn't taken physics since undergrad.

"Hey, this isn't, like, an engagement ring, is it?" asked Emory carefully.

"No. I got it from a guy I work with. Deep red. Thinks libs are the devil. He likes pipe tobacco. I got him a two ounce bag of Cuban leaf when I was in Havana. I can bring it back because my Dad's from Cuba, and he can accept it provided he doesn't resell it. I do not foresee that happening. He gave me this in return. Said he found it in a knick-knack shop he foreclosed on."

"What happened to the shop owner?" pounced Emory.

"I believe heart disease," said Jack and sipped his firewater again. "As it was told to me, I make no promises this is anything close to being true, she was a stubborn old bird who intended to work until the day she died and did. Customers came in, found her splayed out behind the counter, called
911, and she was dead being loaded into the ambulance. She was ninety two. Don't know what to
tell you. Sad to see anyone go, but ninety two, working your own store, no suffering. She just fell
over dead. Hopefully not for many years, but I wouldn't mind going out like that myself."

"Stop being morbid." Emory reached out, pulled Jack's hand from his drink, and pushed the ring
into it. "I'm glad she died doing what she loved, and I'm sorry for her family."

"Yes. Anyway, my coworker, Ting Jones, moonlights as a liquidator, and the previous tenant
owned the row house. He bought it, cleaned it out, and thought this was interesting. He knew I was
a big Tolkien fan. It looks like the one ring."

"Or a dwarf ring," said Emory. "Look at the writing. It's hard and angular. This was definitely one
of the seven."

Jack looked sideways at her, smiled, and Emory shot him a flat expression. "I sit corrected."

"Learn your rings, son. How is your office?"

Jack sighed and tried to rub his face, but succeeded in smacking himself with the ring. He put it on
and admired it. Then he glanced at Emory for approval. She gave him a thumbs up. They toasted,
and he answered the
question.

"The Bipartisan Congressional Budget Office, where the young and fanatical come to get into the
industry. Obviously colleges just got out, so we have a fresh crop. They live, eat, breathe politics.
The reds think the idea of taxation is a sin against God. This is the budget office, mind. I had a
woman try to send a response to inquiry form addressed to 'jackass.' It was the Chairwoman of
Ways and Means. We caught it when she dropped the forms in the hallway. She wants to be a PL. I
was pooping this morning, and there was literally a screaming match about Tennessee redistricting
math going on between the two guys in stalls on either side of me. Sorry if that's too much
information, but that's where I work."

Emory looked at him flatly.

"So I'm drinking," said Jack and sipped.

Emory looked like there was a lot she wanted to say but didn't. Jack breathed heavy. "Whatever it
is, thank you. I'll buy you another if you promise to not say whatever you want to say and aren't
saying right now."

"No, I told you. One only. I'm metroing out to my car, but the cops are just insane in Fairfax. They
pulled some woman over for DUI, and she blew a 0.00. They thought she looked shifty though, so
they arrested her and impounded her car. She's suing everybody. I don't think she'll win."

"I'm sorry to ask this but was she black?"

"Nope. Old white lady."

"Better than PG County," shrugged Jack. "I hear they just shoot them out there."

"Jack, if you're interested in switching jobs, and you sound like the idea isn't completely
unthinkable, the Institute for Legal Justice is hiring."

"They want to send me back to law school," said Jack, refusing to look at her. "No vertical mobility
until I pass the bar. I asked. I've got an offer. I'm sitting on it."
"Would law school be so bad?"

She watched him sink in on himself, his shoulders slump, and his head hang. He put the glass down, and the sharp black band of the ring gleamed over the amber liquid. The granite hissed and sloshed. Jack gave up two inches of height and gained ten years of age.

"I could do it," he admitted. "My LSATs are good. I know a guy at Georgetown. They're doing well, but good test scores and guaranteed funding plus exit placement would get me a lock."

Jack's eyes drooped and his cheeks sagged. He looked over at her like an alcoholic in a bottle store.

"It's a good deal. Law school paid for. Almost no debt. Guaranteed job. That's a good deal." He nodded as he spoke.

"So you don't want to switch jobs, and you don't like your current place. What are you going to do?" she asked him.

Jack shot her an expression of pure hopelessness and found his cup was empty. "What are you talking about? I love this place."
Grass Fed Chicken

My hobby is finding my friends at work and asking them the stupidest questions imaginable.

“Is this chicken gluten free?” I asked Timothy Westing, Tim.

“Yes,” he assured me.

“Is it grass-fed?”

Tim paused. “No. No, it’s not.”

I looked earnest. “Do you have grass-fed chicken?”

“No, sir. Chickens don’t eat grass.”

I looked more earnest. “But your sign advertises grass-fed meats here.” I tapped the sign.

Tim kept a straight face. His boss was behind us both, not really paying attention to what was going on in the butcher department as she straightened some cereal boxes. She interleaved the boxes to make a circular wall of off-brand wheat hexagons, white boxes with golden cereal at the center. She was a bit of a witch. Tim wasn’t allowed to have social interactions at work.

The store was dead. At 930 on a Wednesday, McClarren’s Grocery was a ghost town. All around us were high rises and office parks, with basically no residential areas. I think they got the land cheap. Tim was working the butching shop, and I know most of his product was shipped out to local butchers within a few miles. I don’t know why they didn’t close the place to the public and make it industrial access only. The after-work rush must have been worth it.

Tim said, “Well, sir, we do have grass-fed beef. We also have organic, ethically raised, free range chicken. But chickens don’t eat grass.”

I looked him dead in the eyes. “But I want grass-fed chicken.”

Tim opened his mouth. He had jokes, but his manager was right behind us. He stared at me.

No one can compete with my straight face. It’s my mutant power. I did not smirk. I didn’t grin. I didn’t allow a hint of weakness. I just stared at him cold.

“Okay, but dude, chickens don’t eat grass. They eat grain-”

“I read on the internet that grain is bad for meat! I want grass-fed chicken!”

“Good morning, sir. I hear you’re looking for some fresh-cut meats,” said Tim’s manager, looming at my side.

Tim blinked. I looked at her.

I was in too deep.

“Yes, ma’am. And I’m having a lot of problems.”

“God, you son of a bitch,” thought Tim. He thought it so loud we could all hear it. Instead of replying out loud, he turned and walked back into the cutting area to find out he’d wiped his face
with his bloody glove. Now he looked like an axe murderer.

“Well, sir, how can I help you?”

“I want grass-fed chicken, and he’s not giving it to me. He’s hiding it!”

His manager didn’t even pause. “I will get you some. How much do you need? One bird?”

Ah, hell. “That would be fine.”

Moments later she reappeared with a nicely diced bird. “Here you go. This is our last one, and it was hidden in the back.”

“Grass-fed?”

“Oh, yes.”

Tim’s manager was named Alice. She stared me dead-eyed back. And I was in too deep.

“Thank you so much. It’s a shame that other guy wasn’t that helpful.”

“I’ll speak with him,” Alice promised.
Letter to the woman who'se dogs I'm watching

Chapter Summary

Letter from the author

Ma’am,

Your dogs have discovered I am a wimp.

Specifically, Sebastian has discovered this. He’s completely without dignity or honor. He lies with perfect impunity. As discussed Sebastian and Marbles eat in the evening, and are then put out for an hour while I cook. I stick my head out the back door a few times, but they’re fairly self contained and can chase squirrels without supervision. I don’t want to leave them alone too long, so I eat on the patio, and that is when Sebastian lies. Ma’am, your dog is a deceiver. When you return, do not listen to him. The things he implies are frankly untrue.

Sebastian pleads for food. He begs. He whimpers. He drools. He puts his little head on my leg as I use your patio table and looks up at me through the frosted glass. It’s the whimpering. I thought myself a hard-hearted person, but your dog sniffed out the truth. Sebastian’s diet was not looking good.

I have, however, discovered means of retaliating.

Ma’am, we’re in Boulder. I’m a hippy. I eat a lot of vegetables: broccoli, beans, carrots. Ma’am, I’m one of those people who actually likes kale. Earlier this evening, Sebastian began whimpering for a tidbit, and finally, in malice, I gave him one.

I tossed a bit of broccoli off the edge of the table and he consumed it before he knew what it was. But he learned. Oh, ma’am. He learned.

He learned pain. I’ve never seen a dog stricken like that. I thought he was going to faint. He rolled over and stared at me like I’d betrayed everything that was good and true. I think he cried, and I knew he would never forgive me.

Fortunately, and I don’t say this to be mean, Sebastian isn’t that bright and he forgot in about a minute. But that minute was full of recrimination.

I also don’t mean to ignore Marbles, but let’s be honest here, Marbles was licking his privates. Whenever I don’t talk about Marbles, he’s licking his privates. Day and night. I won’t let him sleep in the family room with me any more. Slob, slob, slob. If people are reincarnated, I don’t know if Marbles was a good or bad boy in his past life, but I do know he was a 13 year old male, and he died with unfinished business.

You say you neutered him, but someone should check with the vet to be sure the neutering took.

Anyway, Sebastian never trusted me again until a minute later when he forgot why he was upset. He begged again. As I said, I’m a wimp. I threw him more broccoli.

I admit, it was just malice at this point. I’m a cruel man. I tortured him. I gave him vegetables, and
if the dog would slow down long enough to taste anything he ate, he would notice it before he swallows. He didn’t. I betrayed him again and again. He’ll never trust me.

I’ve been checking online, and broccoli is fine for dogs. They don’t like it, but it’s not harmful. Kale isn’t either. I won’t let him have carrots, because they’re a choking hazard. I think spinach really broke the camel’s back, and now he won’t look at me while I eat. Sometimes he sits by his bowl in the evening and cries. Ma’am, your dog is consumed by the spirit of deceit. Do not trust him. I’m being awfully liberal with the definition of ‘one-scoop’ of dog food. If I used his feeding numbers in a paper for school, I have a few profs who wouldn’t accept the data without much wider error bars than typically allowed. Sebastian maintains he is about to die.

Do not trust him.

We are locked in a battle of wills, your dog and I. I aim to win. I’m smarter, I’m bigger, and I have kale.

Marbles is under my chair right now, and God, he is going at it. I’m about to put the cone of shame around his nethers. Seriously ma’am, I understand we’re all pretty liberal around these parts, but I don’t want the dog to be that liberal around his own parts. Can we introduce him to Sarah Palin or something? He doesn’t even beg for food. Just crotch, crotch, crotch.

Anyway, the dogs are great, and I’m looking forward to seeing you in two weeks. No accidents in the house, and no recurrence of the fleas. I think it was that dog park. Enjoy your time in Massachusetts, and I’ll see you when you get home.

TAWhitney
Mephistopheles

Chapter Summary

Into to a tragic hero. Want the audience to care about this one who tries greatly and fails.

I rode a stolen motorcycle north out of Denver. I hadn't stolen it, but I'd shot the mad who had. That made me the owner. My name was Black, the bike was white, and Colorado was brown.

Growing up black in America I was only allowed to be one thing. I could pick the thing, but I could only pick one. I could be an athlete or a nerd, a ganster or a revolutionary, an artist, a musician, or a dancer. I had to pick one. Change later was not allowed. I refused, and the institution crushed me.

I only understood the institution later in the Army. The secret was that the Army didn't care. It would crush me, kill me, grind me up and spit out my bones with or without medals, equally dead. If I learned to work it the Army would build my life and spit me into high-paying jobs, honor, and a lifetime of Thank You For Your Service. But the Army didn't care. It saw PT scores and counselling statements, counted the later for times I'd succeeded or failed at showing up on time in the proper uniform. It didn't care about me, didn't care about my boss, didn't care he hated me for being black and bragged about it because he hated Mexicans, white trash, women, and the gays too. The tank tread kept on rolling, and I got out from in front of it. I ran sideways.

When Mephistopheles made me a deal, I took it.

Mephistopheles cared. He was an evil son-of-a-bitch, but he cared. Coming home to a world that didn't care about my past because it wasn't hand-receipted TA-50, I fell for the evil bastard because I told myself I could work him. I could play angles. I was smart enough.

I was. I did. I tried. I failed.
Loneliness

Chapter Summary

Some swearing in this one. Character sketch.

My cousin Ami had gone on vacation with her ex-husband Jake. I had the dog. Chiggun, their mutt, hadn’t left the corner in three hours. He had done this before. When Ami and again Jake had flown to Atlanta when Jake’s parents had been in an accident, and they’d stayed for eleven days from the hospital visit to finishing the funeral arrangements. Chiggun had not liked that at all. He didn’t like this either. He liked me, but I wasn’t Ami.

I’ve got a back-yard that’s nice for dogs. It’s covered in rocks and sticks, and strange animals wander through. The grass is waist high, gone to seed, and the bushes attract larks. I’ve seen coyotes and foxes. My landlord doesn’t have a fence but the neighbors do, boxing us in. Now I was boxing in the dog. I sat next to the door, with a water bowl and box of dogfood, reading Literature. Chiggun hadn’t moved. I could be here all day. The light was great.

In the Literature some idiot had just had sex with her sister’s husband because she wanted a stable relationship when I finally heard toenails clack on hardwood. I barely moved, shifting my gaze to the top of the page so my peripheral caught the room. Chiggun creeped two dog-lengths from the corner to the edge of the couch and stopped. He put his head on his hindquarters and turned furry dog-butt to me. I kept reading.

It turned out sister’s-husband-fucking was not that great an avenue to a stable relationship. The sister, who was never supposed to find out, did. The husband, who would keep the affair secret and ongoing lest the sister (for him, wife) find out, was suddenly less interested in keeping the affair than keeping the wife. The evil bitch decided this was all a conspiracy against her, but I gotta tell you, the evil bitch got stuff done. Evil bitch took the high ground and ordered a few killings. Husband entered a room with a view and a murderer. I didn’t know how this was going to go. Wet dog-nose touched my hand.

A movement like lazy wind put my hand on Chiggun’s head. The ears didn’t even rise. They hung against his head. I started scratching lazily, very easily, like I sometimes scratch my legs when I’m reading and there’s no itch. It’s the faintest sensation of contact, a presence without a will, an acknowledgment of being. I didn’t even change the direction of Chiggun’s long hair. My fingertips merely got under it and pressed the scalp.

“I’ll level with you, dog. I understand your perspective here. Being by your human for, to your mind, forever, is pretty terrible. I get that you don’t understand weeks. But Ami needed a vacation. It’s been three years, minus the Atlanta trip which wasn’t exactly restful.” I looked down at Chiggun. He listened but looked outside. Grass waved before the wind, beating its heads together in explosions of seed.

“She’s also taking Jake with her. Or he’s taking her. I’m not sure the interplay. But they’re together for two weeks. They may get remarried. You like Jake, don’t you?” I asked the dog.

Chiggun did not react.
“I know what you’re thinking, dog, and I don’t have an answer for you. How do the coyotes and foxes get in? There aren’t any gates back there, and I’ve looked for holes in the fence. There weren’t any that I could see. Is that what you’re thinking, dog? Well, it’s too early to see them now. They only come out at night.”

I looked back at Chiggun. He looked up at me as an Atlas carrying the world’s suffering. He was alone forever.

“Two weeks, dog. Two weeks.”

The dog farted like death.

I betrayed that dog like Judas and locked him on the back porch when he ate. It was just terrible. I think it was shifting him from one brand dog-food to another. I bought the generic ‘medium-sized dogs’ dry food at Farmer Supply, and Chiggun didn’t seem to mind. But dear God. I cried. Tears in eyes. I locked the dog out.

I’m not a monster, so I went out with him. I just put him downwind of me.

I do human resources work from home. Southern is a contract HR department and we work for a few hundred little businesses across Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. I work response. If some employee at Jane’s Coffee Barn doesn’t think her paycheck is right, she emails Southern, who forwards her email to me, and I resolve it. Employers are learning that having an actual human being look into problems is worth the cost, so firms are switching away from AI and chatbots to outsourced companies like Southern. Jane’s Coffee Barn probably doesn’t have enough employees to have someone like me on standby worth their while (they need three of us working overlapping shifts), but a few hundred together do. Busy time is the year end, but with the kids getting out of school, early summer presented opportunities for a lot of overtime. Working from home is nice, but I’m getting lonely. It’s good to have a dog around.

Chiggun was torn between moping and running through the wild back yard. He’d been looking at it since yesterday morning. I had my laptop and was resolving a 401(k) contribution issue, hand on dog-head, when the dog-head in question rose and jumped with a thump from bench to deck. I looked up. Chiggun regarded the yard. There were birds.

“Get’em, Chiggun,” I urged him.

Chiggun tried. Clat-teky clack, toenails clattered on wood and he leaped magnificently, smashing into the wall of grass. He barked madly. Gorse bushes exploded in little birds, and thump-thump-whack! Chiggun crashed through a bush. He must have had hound in him, for he bayed. It was a low, deep sound from a relatively small dog.

“You missed, dog. I’mma go out on a limb and say it was the barking. I’m on a limb, dog. Like the birds you missed. Dog, this is comedy gold.”

Chiggun didn’t appreciate it, and he farted like death. This is why Ami left him behind on vacation. She needed to get laid by her ex-husband for a few weeks.

The client had entirely too defensive a retirement allocation for someone in their late teens, so I told him to increase his numbers if he could, up the equity allocation and lower bonds, and hit send. We advertise 24hr response, but Southern likes to see responses sooner. My two hour average put me on the overtime short list. I didn’t need approval; I could just work.
That was what I did: work. I finished my queue, and Chiggun chased birds. He chased ripples of grass in the uncut lawn, and snapped when they broke. All he got for his trouble was a mouth full of grass seeds. Chiggun peed on every rock he could find.

It was good to have a dog around. I work too much.
The Boyfriend Barked at Dogs

Chapter Summary

There's going to be more of this

The boyfriend barked at dogs.

When we met, I was in a vulnerable place coming from a bad one, and I wasn’t willing to go out with him anywhere that made me feel indebted. I refused dinner and an evening. But the boyfriend was really annoying, and he pestered me in an odd, extroverted way. He liked to call me Emily Dickinson. I liked Dickinson, so that didn’t bother me, but he kept bugging me to bake him cookies and I wouldn’t do it.

The problem was he really thought he was hilarious. He kept hiding giggles while he bothered me. There was something very innocent and sweet in him that combined with the fact that he really was not funny that got to me. I started smirking at him. He thought I liked his terrible jokes, and I didn’t. But I started laughing at how hard he laughed at his own jokes, and it’s really hard to scowl at someone when you’re snickering too.

“Come on. Go for a walk with me. Around the block. Two blocks if you’re into it. Our second date can be the park.” He wiggled his furry eyebrows.

“Fine!” I yelled. I’d said no so many times before that this sudden admission of defeat in the face of annoyance startled him, but he pounced, smirking as he took my hand. “But you have to stop being annoying!”

He looked me dead in the eye.

“No.”

“I’m serious! Stop it!”

The boyfriend put his hands on my shoulders and looked deeper into my eyes.

“No. Not even close. We’re only going on this walk so I can annoy you more. Just wait. I got jokes.” He nodded emphatically, eyes-wide, and looked like he was about to break into snickers.

I started to whine and fake-cry.

“That’s the spirit!” He took my hand and pulled off, walking fast, and I had to run a few steps to catch up with him.

It was calm and relaxing. Once half a block from work he slowed down and made conversation. He did most of the talking, which was fine because he kept trying to get me to talk and I didn’t want to. He’d ask a leading question, and I would redirect it back to him where he’d take the hint.

The boyfriend, Ryan Clark, worked in the manufacture and quality control of high explosives. He’d been a demolitions expert in the Army and now monitored Quality Assurance. His degree was in Chemical Engineering. Ryan didn’t do much engineering at all.
“The quality checks are honestly pretty simple,” he said as we walked along. He still had my hand. I think he thought I might run off if he let go, which… but I couldn’t because he kept pulling me close so he could giggle at his own jokes at me.

“The thing about them is, I absolutely have to do them for every batch, and every batch has to be documented perfectly. That perfection is the hard part. The tests aren’t hard. They’re time consuming but simple. Every piece of paper work must be perfect. Every batch must have a clear chain of custody.”

“You have high explosives next to a bakery?” I asked, a little befuddled. I wasn’t entirely sure if this was a joke or not, and had been playing alone. I was starting to believe it wasn’t.

“Mm hmm.” He nodded. “Right now we have almost sixty grains.”

I looked at him. He wasn’t giggling. He had a terrible poker face.

“How much is that?”

He thought. “If it went off you might hear it. It would sound like a heavy book being dropped from waist high.”

“Would it kill you?”

“No. If all the samples were put together in on pile and you held it in a closed hand, it would probably blow your fingers off. Maybe not off-off, but you’d need surgery. If you did it in an open hand, you’d be okay if you didn’t get burned. Actually, the real problem would be the blasting cap. AnFo is so hard to set off you’d need a serious cap and accelerant to make it go, and that could hurt you. Obviously we don’t have any of those.”

“Oh. So when you say grains-” I paused and looked at him.

“I mean grains. An imaginary grain of barley is one grain, the unit, so we have about sixty grains of barley worth of explosives. About four grams.”

“Oh,” I said again.

“For comparison, a typical can of spray paint is about a hundred to a thousand times as explosive. Depending on how you measure it, of course. Spray paint is also more sensitive. You can set spray paint off in the oven.”

“Oh,” I said a third time.

He made it sound so reasonable. I didn’t entirely believe him because the boyfriend was an idiot, but I believed he believed it.

“Don’t you need permits for that?”

“We have them. I’m a permitting officer. The permitting board-” and he paused to bark at a dog.

This is when I learned about the barking.

Ryan and I both worked in an industrial park that abutted a residential subdevelopment. I was an accountant at a Green Mountain Bakery. We have nine storefronts throughout Denver and Boulder, and made pastries, sweets, and cakes in front of the customers. Bulk bread, rolls, and all storefront
baking sauces are made here. We come as close to farm to table baking as is possible, to the inclusion of specialized grain milling.

Grain milling presents explosive hazards. Some pastry flours are ground so fine they effectively atomize in air. They’re flammable and suspended in oxygen, can blow up. Thus we had some clean-room style facilities.

On the other end of bakeshop we have the business office. The owner works in storefront in Lakewood, but most of us company wide mucky-mucks work here. I’m the Vice President of Finance; ie Accountant Number 2. I’ve got a little sign and a desk placard. I started at GMB as a store baker, went to to UC Denver on a GMB scholarship, and came back as an accountant. Ryan really wants me to make him cookies. No.

I might be willing to make him cookies if he wasn’t obviously asking just to be annoying. And if he could stop snickering. I wanted to grab his face.

Ryan met me during a meeting with the safety inspector. He works next door at HEM. Their signage doesn’t explain the acronym, and none of the address books do either. They never have big trucks go in or out, just a procession of old Hondas and the occasional Subaru. They have one Hazmat truck, and people I work with have seen it move.

Across the parking lot are residential areas where we went for our walk, little houses with brown yards, some nice, some overgrown, and one with a big, bored dog. It barked. Ryan barked back. I looked at Ryan like he was an idiot.

He got down and roof-ed, three low, deep barks. The big dog barked back. Ryan replied. They had their little conversation, and the dog licked his crotch. Ryan got up and grinned at me.

“Okay, sweetie,” I said dryly.

Ryan reached out slowly and caught my hand again, then pulling me towards him. I didn’t help or fight. His other hand slipped around my back and squeezed. I felt his belt buckle against my stomach. I felt him let go of my hand and cup my hip. While I was deciding to play hard to get he kissed me anyway, and he had rough, hot lips.

“You taste like flour.” He giggled, breathing on my face.

“I work in a bakery.”

“I know.”

He kissed me again, very slowly, no tongue. Just the pressure of his lips on mine, his arms around me, and the body of him against me. Sometime along the way I’d closed my eyes and put my hands on his waist. He kissed me again.

I opened my eyes when he had pulled back, and he was stroking my face with the back of his index finger. He had soft blue eyes and a scratchy chin. His hair hung wild. It needed to be cut. I liked his face.

“Make me cookies,” he whispered.

“No.”

He kissed me again. I closed my eyes to enjoy it.
“Cookies,” he whispered.

“No.”

He kissed me again. I hadn’t opened my eyes in between, but this time I did.

“You can keep kissing me all you want, but I’m not making you cookies!” I said in a normal voice, and he pounced.

“Thanks! I think I will!”

“What? That is not what I- Hmpf.”

That hmpf was not a word. It was just a sound. I didn’t really mind. I repeated it later when we could talk.

“Go out with me tonight.”

I squinted at him. “Will you be annoying?”

“Yes.” He nodded enthusiastically. “Extremely.”

I tried to glower at him, but you really can’t do that while you’re being kissed by a pretty boy. They way he kept giggling to himself in smug little giggles was both innocent and hilarious, and I wound up smirking back. He took that as an invitation, and he wasn’t wrong.

We went out that night.

The girl downstairs decided no one was coming in for a while. I told Ryan that a few days to see how he would react. He had asked about movies, and I said I hadn’t seen any of the first Star Wars. There was the usual yelling about living under a rock. I rolled my eyes at him.

“Hold on. Before I make fun of you more, do you pointedly not watch them or just haven’t?”

“Just haven’t,” I replied.

“Do you want to? I have them. They are an essential part of Americana at this point.”

“You mean at your place?” I asked.

Ryan thought about that. “I mean, that’s where they are.”

It was time. “Ryan, I’m not going to your place for a long time. I am not even close to ready for that right now.”

“That’s fine. You don’t have to. But you know what you should do?” He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

I put my hand on his arm before he could say anything about baking. “Ryan, I’m serious. I’m not ready, and I’m not going anywhere that makes me feel like I should do anything before I’m ready. We’re not going to your place.”

“Are you ready for baking?”
“Ryan, stop.”

“Fine! Look, Maria, that really isn’t a problem. If I know what’s going on, I can set my expectations accordingly. I want to see where this goes, so I’m not on a schedule.” He was trying not to smirk, but his face just did that. He looked serious for a moment. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” I replied, which was an interesting statement.

“Are you okay with the baking jokes?” he continued.

“They’re really annoying.”

He looked at me like I was the idiot. “Yeah. That’s why I make them.”

I sighed and put my hand over my face. “If I just bake you the damn cookies, will you shut up?”

“I’ll have too. I’ll be eating cookies.”

“Fine. You’re not coming to my place and I’m not going to yours, but I will make you cookies. Amazing ones. Ones that you will have to shut your big mouth to eat.”

“I accept your terms,” he said profoundly and shook my hand.

I was aware at the time that the baking-joke question was him trying to establish ground rules. I also wasn’t really annoyed. I was a little annoyed, but Ryan’s an annoying guy. I also knew that by submitting here, he was just going to keep going. I was okay with that.

I wasn’t okay with the other thing, and I wanted to see how he would take it.

I really didn’t mind baking either. I had been a baker. I worked at a bakery. But bakers make $12.75 an hour, and accountants make $30.
The Wolf in Norway

I was recently in Norway where wolves are an endangered species. It is illegal to kill one almost ever.

When I was there a wolf had been taking a reindeer farmer’s reindeer, and after some effort the farmer had trapped the wolf. This was in winter. I was on a long term hike to see the northern lights and snowshoe, the sort of economical trip for poor people in great shape that rich people take to torture themselves. We were snowed in this little Norwegian town for several days, and while talking to the locals, learned the story and that a wildlife control agent from down south would be up to take the wolf in a few weeks, weather permitting.

During this time the wolf had to be kept alive and well. To this end the wolf was kept in a metal pen with a locking gate that connected to a feeding area with another locking gate. The outside gate allowed humans to enter the feeding area while the wolf was confined in his den. It was controlled by the mayor, who served double duty as policeman and therefore wildlife control agent. The inner gate allowed the wolf in and out of the den. This was controlled by the farmer.

The wolf escaped.

Both gates had been left open, and farmer and mayor insisted it was the other’s fault.

The farmer argued that the mayor was the only one authorized to open the outer gate, and if the outer gate hadn’t been left open, the wolf could not have escaped. The farmer was furthermore forced to rely on someone else, the mayor, to feed the wolf, and none of this would be a problem if he could have just shot the thing. Guns are as illegal in Norway as killing wolves.

The mayor pointed out that the farmer needed only check to see if the feeding pen gate was open before opening the wolf-den gate to avoid this problem, and that task was demonstrably too difficult. There were times when the outer gate needed to be opened, and it was incumbent on the farmer to take due caution. While the mayor did concede that the outer gate shouldn’t have been left open, if the inner gate hadn’t been opened recklessly, there would have been no problem.

The wolf cared nothing for fault, and ate two reindeer and the mayor’s dog.

We snowshoed out two days later underneath beautiful auroras, and never saw the wolf.
The Boyfriend Barks at Dogs 2

Upon obtaining boyfriendtonium, I promptly lost him for a week to Wyoming.

Ryan had to watch a series of deliveries to a job site, some form of mine. He explained one evening on the phone. Shipments went out in the morning around 0400 because they had to go by special roads.

"It's hazmat," he said on Monday evening. His voice sounded thin and grainy. I didn't even have a good contact picture for him on my phone, so he was just a name, a green handset icon, and a voice. "We're not allowed to drive HE through Denver, so we have to take allowed side roads. But the locals complain if they see a HE-hazmat truck on their roads, and then the zoning boards ban us from their roads, and we have to find a new route. Routes are a pain. Google doesn't make HE-hazmat filters yet. So we go really early before anyone's awake."

"Is it dangerous?" I asked.

"No." He sounded sleepy. "It's AnFo. We have a little TNT this time, but not enough to matter. AnFo is the Snorlax of high explosives. TNT is not."

"Oh." I took my phone away from my ear and looked at the clock. It was eight thirty. He should go to sleep. "Do you need to go to bed?" I asked.

"I'm in bed. I'll go to sleep when I hang up."

He didn't. He fell asleep on the phone, and I listened to him snore.

There is nothing less threatening than hearing someone snore. Ryan whistled when he snored, and when he inhaled he tooted. Sometimes his heavy breathing broke up into burbles before stabilizing. I sat on my couch with the TV on mute and listened to him snore. Ryan wasn't a frightening guy. He did all these things that sounded frightening, but I listened to him whistle in his sleep.

He didn't call the next day. He texted but just a note. He called on Wednesday and fell asleep again. He said the job would be done by Friday.

On Saturday we went out again. He called me up in the morning. I hadn't been waiting by the phone but I did catch myself avoiding going out. My apartment needed cleaning anyway, and I folded the laundry on the chair. That chair-laundry had been there before Ryan, and I laughed at myself when I noticed getting rid of it to waste time in case he called.

Still, it's a pile of laundry on a chair. I wasn't exactly dying for love yet.

He called around noon. "Hey, you. You busy?"

"No," I replied. The chair laundry was mostly gone. I had taken it to the edge of defeat, but I was a merciful queen. I would let it live for now. "How do you feel?"

"Tired. Slept late. I was going to call you yesterday but fell asleep."

"I sort of expected that."

"Yeah."
We had a silence.

"Want to shoot some pool?" he asked.

"Pool?" I repeated.

"Yeah. You said you don't want to do anything that makes you feel like you owe me something, which is fine. There's a pool hall by my apartment that has fifty cent games until five. The food's not bad. It's bar food, but this is Hippy central, so they've got a eight-lettuce salad and vegan options. God bless Denver, but I understand why my friends make fun of me for living here. Anyway, if you bring some quarters we can alternate games, so the most you'd ever owe me is a fifty cent game of pool."

That was really not what I meant when I talked about owing him anything, but him remembering was nice. I asked the name of the place and looked it up. Alister's Billiards. Fifty cent pool until five. Vegan and lo-carb options. Micro-brew draft.

"Are you going to stay awake?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll get some coffee. I also slept like ten hours last night."

If he'd gone to bed at eight, ten hours would have ended around six AM. Why was he calling me at noon?

I put on two sweaters and met him there. Alister's Billiards was in a strip mall west of the city. It was outside Lakewood, almost in Golden. Before the mountains rose a line of shield hills, great brown slopes that rose to the west without any rounding. At the top they just stopped and fell. They were the little cousins of the Flatirons outside Boulder. I didn't go that far. The mall was a concrete L with a parking lot in the center, more brown concrete impregnated with pea-gravel, and the mall itself was fake slatted with brown boards. Colorado had a lot of brown. The sky was thinking about raining, so I waited two minutes and walked towards the bottom end of the L where Ryan was glowering in some trees.

I stopped. He stood in a little end cap of a line of parking spaces where several scrub pins alerted drivers to the curbs. The curbs themselves differentiated driving lanes from parking lanes. Ryan frowned at nothing and made little faces. When I looked at him, he made little faces at me too.

"Ryan?" I asked.

"I'm waiting here because the woman ahead of me thinks I'm a serial killer."

I stayed where I was. "What?"

"That one. See her?" he pointed at a woman walking quickly out of the parking area to the sidewalk. "She parked right next to me, and jumped out of her car when I was getting out. My key fob is dead, so I had to lock the door manually, which let her get ahead of me, but she's a slow walker. I tried to cut left so I wasn't walking right behind her, but you see the way the parking lot is designed to funnel people toward the Safeway? I wound up right behind her anyway, and she started doing that little power-walk half-running thing, so I said the hell with it and stopped in the tree. I'm getting rained on, because she has little legs!"

"Oh."
Ryan scrunched his face up and pursed his lips. He was hamming it up for a laugh.

"Well, that was nice of you," I told him. I looked at the woman entering the grocery store. "But she's probably taller than I am, so her legs aren't that little."

"Yeah, they are." Ryan snorted. He took my hand, and his fingers were warm and calloused. He had tons of tiny little scrapes over the pads on his hands.

"But her legs are longer than mine!"

"And your legs are tiny!" Ryan launched himself into speech. I could hear him get going, and there was just no stopping him. "They're miniscule! You take two steps for every one of mine. I can't wait for your birthday or Christmas when I can get you roller skates because I've got places to be!"

I looked levelly at him. Was he done? Nope.

"You know what I'm going to get you? One of those triangle ropes they use to tow water skiers on boats," he answered his own question. "It's gonna be great. I'll be walking normally, and you can be following along behind on your roller skates, and you'll say, 'Ryan! Slow down!' and I'll say, 'I'm walking!' and you'll say, 'But you're walking too fast!' and I'll say, 'We're being passed by a duck! A duck!' That's how it will go."

We stepped out of the parking lot onto the sidewalk, and Ryan stopped. He leaned right up close to me and nodded emphatically. He had my hand so I couldn't get away.

"A duck, Maria. Not even a goose. A duck."

Ladies and Gentlemen: the Boyfriend. I was in love with this man.

He added his other hand to the one he was holding mine with already, I think to make absolutely sure I couldn't get away. Ryan had things to say. He pulled me along the sidewalk and in the middle of his stream of babble pointed out that the entry to Alister's was around the corner. The strip mall was actually two buildings, and between them was a narrow alley. The upright part was a little smaller than the cross part, but it was all Safeway, while the cross part had the pool hall, a barber shop, marijuana store, and a coffee shop. We walked along the front of the Safeway to the narrow alley and turned right, into a small concrete walkway. It was, of course, brown. There was a sign in Alister's window, though, so I didn't feel like I was about to be mugged.

The thing about Ryan was that I felt safe with him. He got really excited when he pulled me along, but he was careful not to yank my arm. He glanced back, pulling himself out of whatever stream of thought consumed him, to see how I was and caught a shopping cart that rolled towards me.

Beyond that, Ryan would never hurt me. He never forced to wear certain clothes or told me how to do my makeup. He was never going to make me feel worthless or like less of a person.

Well, not figuratively like less of a person. Ryan thought short-girl jokes were really funny. REALLY funny.

Ryan was going to insult me eventually. I have a few deep insecurities I'm nowhere near ready to tell him about, and I knew Ryan was going to blunder into one chasing a joke like a dog chasing a rabbit. I just knew he wasn't trying to be mean. I don't know. I wasn't looking forward to him starting to joke about sex.

Alister's front door was not just down the dark hallway between the two buildings but actually around the corner, sort of in the back. They had a disability access ramp as well as a walkway to three small stairs. Just before Ryan put his hand on the door, someone stuck his head out a tiny
window high on the wall and yelled, "Wait, wait, wait!"

Ryan froze, hand inches from the doorknob. "What?"

"Can you wait for a bit?" replied the bald head out the tiny window.

"Ah." Ryan uncertainly glanced at me, and I shrugged. I could wait. He stepped away from the door and down a stair so he could face the head at a better angle. "Yeah. Why? Are you closed or something?"

"No, they painted the inside of the door this morning, but the manager forgot to put the screws back in the door, so the handle was just held on with dried paint. Guess what?"

"Someone ripped the handle off?"

"Yeah. They're screwing it back on now, and then they got to paint and tape again. It will only take a minute."

"Take your time." Having said this, he looked at me again, but I still didn't mind. The head disappeared.

I stood where I was, and Ryan walked into me. He put his arms around my waist. Since I was up a stair, I was actually a little taller, so I said, "Hah!" and stretched my neck. I could see over his head. Ryan laughed and put his chin on my shoulder. He slumped, and the weight of him pressed me, even though he barely leaned.

"You smell nice," he whispered into my ear.

"Thank you." I probably smelled like laundry detergent and dryer sheets. Maybe a little like pine-scented Pledge. And cinnamon. "Is that a baking joke?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. You're just warm. Smell nice. I was enjoying not being in Wyoming. Nice place. I'd rather be here."

"This is nice," I agreed.

"Yes," he murmured and went still.

All boys, ALL boys, ever, are at their cutest when they're silent and cuddly. That's why they're so adorable when they're asleep. I was a little cold, but Ryan didn't feel like he was about to move. I made fists inside my sleeves and wrapped my arms around him, and we stayed like that for a while.

We'd been dating for less than two weeks. A week of that he'd been in Wyoming. It was entirely too early to miss Ryan. I didn't need him, he was only sometimes nice to be around, and I entirely did not miss him last week when he had been gone. I hadn't missed him at all.

I squeezed him. Ryan squeezed me back. We stayed still, and a wind blew off the mountains, over Denver's hills. It wasn't cold, but it was coming.
“Babe, I’m just worried.”

“About what?”

“Jeanne. She’s been looking at you.”

I paused. I tried to look serious, but I happened to catch my reflection in a crystal vase and looked confused. I knew I should probably watch my words, but I was struggling.

“Which one’s Jeanne?” I asked.

“Oh, you know. The pretty one.”

Ami tried not to look at me, but did so out of the corner of her eye.

“The really short one?” I asked.

“No, the- who are you thinking of?” Ami did look at me now.

“Jeanne. She’s short. Like, really short.”


“Oh.” I frowned at her.

Ami frowned back at me. “Who are you thinking of?”

I didn’t directly answer. “I guess that’s not really a good answer. All your friends are short.”

“No, we’re not!” Ami insisted.

“Yeah, you are. Look sweetie, you can be paranoid all you want. It’s probably healthy. But you’re all short. I don’t want to hit on any of your friends even in your paranoid fantasies or else Dorothy might drop a house on me.”

Ami was so unamused it inflicted physical pain.

That meant I was probably hilarious. “Being your fantasies, you’ll probably drop a house on me. But seriously, which one’s Jeanne? She the redhead?”

“I don’t know why I put up with you,” said Ami and tried to stare into space. We were in a waiting room. There was no space to stare into. Our two chairs faced an empty pair of chairs, and both of us had micro-end tables with crystal vases and fabric flowers. The flowers looked artsy. They weren’t the fake flowers that tried to be real, but rather obvious art flowers. Hers was yellow. Mine was green.
“You know, the redhead. The one’s who’s really a brunette.”

“You’re thinking of Sarah, and she’s actually a redhead. She does red highlights. It brings out her color.”

“The one who was hitting on my brother!” I suddenly made several connections. “Does she want his number? I think he’s looking.”

"Mike, you can stop now, thank you," said Ami.
The Boyfriend Barks at Dogs 3

Four men stacked on a reinforced steel door.

Point shifted his left leg. Number Two stood with his kneecap in the crevice of Point's knee. He leaned back. Number Three stood with his rifle on Number Two's outside arm, staring up at rooftops. The weapon barrel was over all their heads. Number Three shifted his weight.

Tail had his back to Number Three, and his legs were in the spaces Three's weren't. Three was right leg forward, against the wall and under Two, and Tail's left leg was under Three's knee. Meanwhile Three's outer foot was back, and the way Tail knelt, he was almost sitting on it. When Three shoved his back foot into Tail's right calf, Tail caught it and scanned behind them one last time. He shoved Three.

Three leaned into Two.

Two pushed his left leg forward into Point's left knee.

Point nodded, but no one but Two saw. Point sent the nudge back again.

This time the nudge hit Tail and he broke off, turning to his right, away from the wall, and running outside the stack to the door. Before he arrived Three was facing behind them and Two was scanning the rooftops. Point watched the door. Tail slapped something that looked like fat tape from the doorframe to the minor gap in the floor as he swung his rifle down and let it hang behind him. Point put his head down as Tail swung to the far side of the door, a little black box in his hands with two wires that ran to the fat tape on the door. It had a fat red button and a big switch.

Two squeezed his eyes tight and Three tried to keep his open, but he hunched his shoulders. It was almost invisible under body armor. Three didn't have a plate carrier yet.

Tail hit the switch and button almost simultaneously. The door blew open, destroyed twice. From top to bottom where the tape had laid, it was cut open, ripped cleanly like a tear down folded paper. Outwards of that, towards the hinges, the hole door bent in, and as it swung round and slammed, it smashed new holes in the wall.

Point charged in during the sound, while echoes smashed the confined interior of the stone, mud, and cinderblock house. There was a sofa in front so he went left, turned when he hit the wall, and moved in.

Two had followed right, U-turning around the wall and dodged the bouncing door with its waving steel edge. The room still echoed.

Something moved on the right side of the room, and Two went tap-tap with his trigger finger, soft noises after the blast. Something fell.

Three came in, saw the couch, couldn't decide which way to go, and jumped it. He landed on something soft, something moving, and tap-tap-tapped it. It stopped moving.

Four swung around after, black box gone to some pocket and rifle in hands. He saw Three, the sofa, and tried to go right but the door was swinging shut on him. He crashed into Three and moved. Both of them hit dirty ground and dirty carpets and rolled. The door banged shut.

Nothing else moved.
Point hit the far wall and swept back until he was sighting the door over Three and Tail's heads. Two had jumped the something and landed awkwardly, hitting the same wall as Point with his shoulder but separated from him by a door. Two's rifle was on it, just outside the doorframe.

Three got up. He'd shot a lumpy pillow. There were feathers everywhere.

Tail rolled over and got up. There was a dead guy almost underfoot, long white tunic red. His throat was gone, and his eyes went blank before he stopped breathing.

Tail searched gasping Local National, and Three put himself against another wall, covering Tail and the kill.

No one had yet spoken. They wouldn't have been heard if they did. The room rang inside earplugs and over-ear hearing protection. It didn't ring like a bell; it was just one loud note.

By the time the Local National died, Tail knew he had died unarmed. They found four AK-74s under the couch and a tupperware full of spiderboxes, little plastic project boxes with a line of exposed wiring bridges. Tail moved the tupperware and AKs to the corner of the room.

Two reached down and pulled a grenade out of the carpet. It was an old Chinese thing with exterior fragmentation cuts, long spoon, and big pin. The markings were unreadable. Tail put it in the pile.

Two searched the sofa and shoved it against the wall, out of the way and concealing the weapons.

Four men stacked on an interior doorway. A curtain of hanging beads demarcated the rooms. The nudge went back, forward, and back again. Tail broke off and covered the door.

Point hit the beads and went left. Two followed, hooked right again, followed the wall he'd just stacked on to a right angle, turned to follow it, and faced down a long wall. A doorless archway opened into a kitchen and a man with a short, well trimmed beard and round hat made eye contact with Number Two. They both had rifles. Two tap-taped, and between taps, the man with the hat pulled the trigger, ta-ta-ta-ta. Bullets hit the wall with dirty cracks, smoke and secondary frag blasting Two and Three.

There was no sofa in this room. There was nothing but little stools like ottomans around a table, and Three charged over them. He couldn't see Two's target, but he saw the muzzle flash. Three opened up on the wall, the doorway, and the floor. Bullets ricocheted.

Tail came behind, and didn't understand anything that was going on. He didn't know where to look. Point yanked his hand off his rifle and chopped at the doorway, four fingers together in black gloves. Tail shot through the wall.

Tail was the odd man out without a M4. He carried a M249 machine gun, a fundamentally different beast than the AR-based weapons of the rest of his stack. It fired the same rounds, but did so differently. It broke the walls. He smashed through bricks. The man in the hidden kitchen, for so it was, kept his trigger back for almost three full seconds before breaking and running as the doorway in front of him exploded.

Two was out of the line of fire. Three continued to lay into the wall. Tail shot the wall apart, moved sideways, and determined there was only one pantry for concealment inside the kitchen. He shot through the pantry.

Brass stopped falling.

Point said something, but that didn't matter. He chopped at the door and yelled at Two, and Two knelt, nose welded to the charging handle. Tail stepped backwards. The barrel of the 249 glowed.
The casting marks were brilliant red against darker areas, and without speaking, Tail hit a lever, yanked a handle, and pulled the whole barrel off. He shoved it into a steel pipe on his hip and replaced it, Point tried to watch everything and failed.

Nothing moved in their room.
Two tried to get up and fell over, and couldn't figure out if he'd been shot or not.

Three covered the kitchen. Tail covered the only other door, the beaded archway. Point ran to Two, pulled the rifle out of his hands, and tucked both of them into his calf, behind the knee, so when he knelt the weapons stayed clear. Point clawed at Two. All ten fingers bent, he dragged his hands down Two's torso, checked his fingers, wrapped his hands around Two's head and clawed the back of his neck, checked his fingers, clawed Two's right side, checked his fingers, left side, fingers, leg, fingers, other leg, fingers, arm, fingers, other arm, fingers, looked Two dead in the eyes, and waved one dirty finger.

Two stared back for a long while before following the finger. His pupils didn't vibrate.

Point leaned back and took several deep breaths.

The room was filled with the same ringing, a single aharmonic note than managed to be discordant with itself.

Four men stacked up on an interior door to a hidden kitchen.

The nudge went back, forward, and back. Tail broke around and covered the door. Point charged in. There was a body hanging out of the panty, unrecognizable with bullet holes. Before Point could focus, Two came through behind him, Three followed, and Tail followed Three.

All four bunched up in a kitchen about the size of a port-a-potty with a corpse on the floor.

Tail left first, took a knee in the middle room, and covered the exterior door through the beaded door. Three came out behind him and started searching. Two walked away from both of them and stood facing a wall. Point checked the corpse. The second Local National was dead beyond triage or consideration.

Point found a hidden compartment under the pantry floor, and pulled up a black bucket full of powdered aluminum. He and Three made a pile in the first room: spiderboxes, firearms, explosive accelerant, and one grenade.

Ryan woke up alone in bed and pulled a mask off his face. It was a clear plastic thing, like the masks that supposedly fall from the ceiling if a plane crashes. This one fit his face better and had a soft plastic seal. He woke up slowly, and for a while stared at the stuffed animals in the corners, the fluffy comforter, and small square pillows without comprehending anything. He had his mask.

The air-pump whined a single tone.

It took him a good thirty seconds. Ryan finally squinted and looked around confused.

I waved at him from my chair.

"Why are-" he looked at me.

He looked at my bed, in which he sat.
"Why am I-"

He looked down at the small positive-pressure mask attached to a near silent pump. It wasn't too near silent. It was a close neighbor to silent but certainly not a roommate. It was also Ryan's. It made a noise like a box-fan with a motor on the edge of dying.

Ryan looked back at me.

"What?" he asked, and I could see him give up on refining the question.

"You fell asleep," I told him.

We were silent together.

"You're in management, aren't you?" asked Ryan.

"I'm assistant to the assistant to the CFO!" I beamed at him.

"Maria, what?" demanded Ryan and swept his arms at everything.

"I bought you a beer. We went to your pool hall, and you did very well. Do you remember that?"

Ryan said, "Yeah. The first game took forever, and I scratched on the second break. We played it anyway. Then on the third, technically fourth game-" Ryan paused.

"I got something to eat, and because I was getting sick of feeling like a nun, I bought us each a drink. It was the light beer they don't need a regular liquor license to sell. 3.2%.

Ryan stared at me for a long time before closing his eyes as if he was in horrible pain. "I was on cold medicine."

"And extremely tired. Do you remember the car ride home?"

"No."

"Do you remember telling me you really like me, but you didn't want to have sex with me, but you kinda did and were sorry about it, and crying?" I asked him brightly.

His face wooden and eyes still closed, Ryan said, "No."

"Now I still don't entirely believe you. That's not true," I admitted. "I do believe you, but I'm sticking to my line. I don't believe you can fake cry that well, so I guess I do believe you actually got black-out drunk on half of one 3.2 beer. So I believe you didn't scheme all this to get into my bed. But I'm still not ready to sleep with you, so you're alone in there, buddy."

"Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome!"

"You do know that if you tell anyone about this, any of your girlfriends, or gossip about it, I will break up with you instantly. And that's the sort of secret no one can hide, because you girls will think it's hilarious when your drunk. And I will never talk to you again."

I lost my smirk. The air-pump whined.

"Are you threatening me?" I asked.
Ryan opened his eyes. "No. I will never harm you. But I need a lot of space too, and I've always respected your space. If you're the type of girl who thinks other people should bend over for her, but she doesn't need to do anything for them, then you are not the person I thought you are."

He was in my bed.

The air-pump whined.

"How did you get that?" demanded Ryan, pointing at the sleep apnea machine.

"It was in your car. You made me get it. You told me I had to hold it right. 'Maria, you have to HOLD it right,'" I repeated, heavily emphasizing the word. "So why do you have a-"

He interrupted me. "The engine's almost dead. You can hear the whine. I have to take it to the VA and get a new one," he replied. "I keep putting it in my car, but I hate the VA, so I put it off. I don't really need it; I just stop breathing if I don't use it."

"You jackass!" I yelled at him. I threw Edgar the stuffed walrus at him.

"I start again!" Ryan yelled back at me, and threw Mamut the Woolly Mammoth at me.

This was not a good fight. Ryan was in my bed, and he had a lot more stuffed animals than I did.

I took Mamut and hugged him. "Big jerk. Throwing Mamut at me like that."

"Adebedaba!" yelled Ryan and shook Edgar most unkindly, waving my walrus in the air. I don't think Adebedaba was really a word.

I decided to be the mature one. "Again, I guess I believe you a little bit, if only because black-out drunk you put on a sleep apnea machine. And I do think you were pretty toasted. How do you feel now?"

"Honestly, not too good. I'm still pretty groggy. Do you have a couch or something I can sleep on?"

"No, you're fine there. You're too tall for my couch. We tried. You kept banging your head on the table."

Ryan sighed. "Look, Maria. We need to talk. I'm honestly okay with no sex-" he paused. "So long as no sex is not the end of the discussion. It is important to me. But I get that you've got some things to work through, and people change, so don't think I want to you decide what's what now. You can also change your mind later, of course. If later on we have this conversation again, we have this conversation again. Okay?"

That was- "Okay," I said.

He continued, "But I feel like I'm getting catfished on Tinder. I don't know where you live. Hell, I'm here, and I don't know where here is. You never talk about you. You're the only Spanish girl I've ever met who doesn't talk about her family. I'm not okay if the depth of our relationship is I have pictures of a hot girl on my phone to show my friends."

I had thought about this. His approach surprised me, but I'd seen this talk coming.

"I'm not like Spanish girls because I was adopted by white people and raised in Florida."

Ryan stared at me in the dark and finally said, "Oh."
"You know where route 10 leaves Jacksonville, heading west towards Tallahassee? I grew up there."

"Oh," Ryan said again. "That's, like, country Florida."

"You didn't notice I'm a little country?" I asked him.

Ryan made that noise again and waved his hands. It was the verbal equivalent of an angry shrug. "Brothers or sisters?"

Ooh, bad direction. "No. Ryan, come on. You had to notice something."

"I noticed you were being cagey, but I didn't know why. I still don't know why. I kinda thought it was because of me. I was an Army guy, and people who watch too many movies think we're all PTSD timebombs waiting to go off in mass murder."

"Don't you remember talking about this? Like, a bunch of times? Where you yelled at me because I hadn't seen any movies?"

"Well, yeah, but, I mean, like, it's a thing," he replied.

I made faces at him. He threw stuffed animals at me. Not hard. He lobbed them. I glared at him and kept my stuffed animals.

"I still want to know something about you. Where did you go to school? Do you have any proof? Are you a spy?"

"Ugh, fine!" I yelled, and stormed over to my closet. My yearbooks were all the way in the bottom, under piles of stuff, and I had to throw clothes everywhere to get them out. "I was going to fold those!" I yelled at Ryan.

"No, you weren't!" He snorted.

I glared at him. "You don't know that!"

"Those clothes were under your Christmas decorations! It's October!"

I refused to dignify that critique of my housekeeping with a response. I turned some lights on and sat down on the bed, and Ryan's arms just sort of slipped around me. He was nice and warm.

"This is me, junior year of college," I said. "I was working at Green Mountain by that time."

Ryan stared at the picture before replying, "Egads," in that fake way people do.

"I was in my angry I-hate-camera's-phase," I said.

Ryan grimaced at me and nodded.

"Much better," admitted Ryan. He looked at me. "You're cuter now. But that's a good picture."

"Thank you. And yes. I like it."

Ryan leaned back and dragged me with him, and soon I was wrapped in a boy's arms in bed with him. It was actually nice and a little romantic, other than the air-pump grinding.
"Are you going to get that replaced?" I asked him.

"Are you going to fold your laundry?" he riposted.

"What is your obsession with my laundry?" I demanded.

"Army thing. Clean closets are something we actually do get brainwashed into paying attention to. That and haircuts. Also I'm trying to find jokes because the baking jokes are getting old and you still haven't made me cookies!"

"Would you shut up about the cookies?" I yelled.

"No, probably not," he admitted affably and squeezed me as he lay back.

This was just not acceptable. I should have been a lesbian.
My half-brother walked into the room, put the gun on the table, and said, “So, let’s talk.”

It wasn’t pointed at either of us. The barrel had, no doubt by accident, pointed off to my right though the handle faced him. The trigger was on his side, and the barrel mine. But it wasn’t pointed at anyone, of course. It just lay there.

The table was old ivory from back when you could get such a thing. The walls were mahogany and ebony, the elegance of both spoiled by ages of old tobacco smoke. They should smell like old money, but instead they stank of hillbillies. The bathroom at the Exxon smells like this room, half a million dollars cheaper, and at least Exxon has the good taste to put up a no-smoking sign. There are outlets in the walls and HVAC ducts in the floor. It’s not as bad as my whining indicates.

“What do you want to talk about, Ryan?” That was good: nice and calm. My voice gave nothing away.


“You should do it. Use the gun.” Tap, tap, tap, the metal thing rattled under my finger. “But don’t talk about it afterwards. Keep it to yourself.”

“No, Simon, no. That’s not— Did you kill her?”

Since he’d made up his mind already there was no reason to make the gasp believable. “No, no, no, Ryan, how could you ask that?”

He just stared, two fingers on his right temple, fingers curled over his mouth. He didn’t even bother to open his eyes the whole way.

“Ryan, buddy, my baby, and favorite, brother, Ryan. How could you suspect that? How could you suggest it?”

“Because someone shot her, and yesterday you screamed ‘Bitch, kill yourself and save us all some trouble.’”

Thank God he’d gotten to the point quickly. That was downright uncharacteristic of him. He might actually be upset. “Yes, of course. There wasn’t any love lost between us. But before one jumps to conclusions, Amber did have a little of a problem. Do you remember her coke habit? Remember that? Ryan, yes, your memory is fine, but the bitch was a coke-head. People like that don’t die of old age.”
Ryan waited. He stank of doubt. The gun lay between us, and his right hand was on his temple. He wasn’t stupid though. He would have taken out the bullets.

“Did you kill her, Simon?” Ryan asked.

“No.”

We stared at each other dead-eyed.

“When did she die?”

“Yesterday.” He put his hand down and rubbed his scruff. He thought the unshaven look made him dashing. It made him fit right in with the tobacco smelling walls: an unshaven man in a five thousand dollar suit, perfectly orthodontored teeth turned yellow from drinking too much coffee. He had a smart watch, but the thing was dead. He never remembered to charge it.

“Called the cops?”

“Yes.”

He looked proud of that. He arched his eyebrows, moved his head to accent the word.

“What did they say?”

“They’re looking into it.”

He was looking for a mistake. That’s what he was doing. Playing games. He wanted to hear a detail before he told that part of the story.

“How did she die? Shot? Where?”

“The head.”

“Ouch. Geographically where. In the house?”

“No. Bathroom of the Exxon.”

“Had she been…earning her coke?”

“The autopsy will take a week. They’ll find out.”

He put his head back to his right hand, still waiting, and the gun lay between us. It was a big piece of metal. The side said .45 ACP. Walnut grips, or something designed to look like them, sheathed the side, and the safety was off. It looked like it was ready to fire.

The gun was garbage. Ryan mattered. What was he trying to do— Was he smirking?

“You son-of-a-bitch, you’re not asking who did it, you’re trying to convince someone—” and my hand caught him like Amber deserved. He yelled and dropped, and two suits charged through the door with all the subtlety of a dead cokehead in a bathroom.

“Morning, boys. A wire Ryan? You could have done so much better.”

They had nothing. The gun hadn’t moved. They had nothing but my damned smirk, and Ryan looked like it was poisoning him. The smack hadn’t hurt. It had startled him, but he wasn’t in pain. But he stared into my face and swallowed. My cheeks hurt from grinning. Ryan was white with
little finger-prints on his face, and the two suits picked him and the gun up. They used a tissue and put the firearm in a bag. Ryan swallowed like he wanted to vomit and didn’t.

“You son of a bitch,” he whispered, and the cops tried to carry him out. They were cunning as dogs but knew when to walk away.

“You mother’s the dead one in a bathroom.”

Oh, God if they could powder Ryan’s expression and sell it by the gram, they’d have my soul in twenty-dollar bags. Ryan wanted to explode. His face was white, the hand-print red, and it was really pinking up now. His eyes stuck out of their sockets and the cops, Ryan’s cops, the cops he had brought in to run my frame, carried him out so he couldn’t start swinging. Someone needs to powder that feeling. It’s better than killing a bitch in a bathroom.

“See you at probate!”

And the cops carried him out as he started screaming.

He was wearing a wire, wasn’t he? Maybe my lawyer could get a copy of that tape for evidence. Oh, God it was wonderful.

What kind of idiot needs drugs when there are people?
On July 3rd, 2083 the Devil got so disgusted with humanity he abandoned us. Watchers of the Black Spire in Denver saw him stand up from his desk. In zoom lenses and from drones outside the World Capital Exclusion Area, they watched the Devil pull off his sunglasses and look back at them. Dead Therin lay rotting. Choasman's body pieces had mostly desiccated under the high sun, even though bugs and most scavenger birds could not ascend the ten thousand feet to reach his corpse. The Garu Team hung off scaffolds overlooking the city. The Devil stood above them and looked down.

And he left. The Spire turned white as it had before Blasphemy strikes, but instead of unleashing fire and ruin, it shot a beam of pure light into the blue heaven. It consumed the Devil. Before the intensity fried optic circuits and analog photographers had to look away, they saw the Devil retreat as if submerging. The light-beam increased in power until those on the ground turned aside. The summer sun paled beside it. The light beam shot into the sky, turned northward some distance overhead, and continued straight again until the horizon arced before it. And the Devil did not return.

I operated from Lookout Point as a forward observer. Buffalo Bill's graveyard had long since become a target of ecological protests but under the 'Let the Dead Sleep' act was now merely silent. The original protesters had erected a small concrete monument detailing the effects of Buffalo Bill's work on the American Buffalo. That and the original parking lot were all that remained. Teenagers came up here to be romantic, have sex, or screw around making their parents think they were having sex while they threw rocks at bigger rocks. Half of them sat on overlooks of the city playing with their phones. They made me feel old.

Since the Devil had raised the Black Spire eight years ago, someone like me had always been here. I sat there on a CIA issue lawn chair under a CIA issue umbrella, both of which you can buy from Target. That's how the CIA got them (They didn't have to pay sales tax if they bought directly, but did have to reimburse me for sales tax if I went to Target myself). I had two sets of binos, analog and augmented, and a small cooler with two liters of water left. I tried to drink five total per shift. I had a tablet with a passive minidish, an asterix shaped antenna on the cooler, and only one app, a chat function I kept open with my handler in Langley. Shawna was good people. She pinged me every hour so I could text back, 'No change' for her reports. Since I started working with her my performance evals had been steadily in the ninety percents.

When the Spire went off I hit the emergency observation button, and slapped up the augmented binoculars. They blew before the Devil disappeared. I used the project function to turn the analog set into a projector and watched it on the side of a white rock. I couldn't actually stare at the Blasphemy Strike itself.

I expected to be scared, but it was all so routine. My app had a bar of emergency buttons, and the bottom one for Blasphemy Strike hadn't been used since I came on. It's the 'A city is about to die' button. I remembered Paris, when the Devil decided he didn't like the French. I'd been trained on images of Beijing and Pyongyang. The Spire turned white and light rose, and I had a moment where I thought, 'This is the last thought I may have,' and awareness of it flooded me. I didn't think I was going to die, but if I could predict my own death with a thought, this would be it.

But I hit the Blasphemy Strike button and spoke aloud. "The Spire has gone white. The Devil is standing on top, looking over the city. He has remove his sunglasses. While light is emanating from the top of the spire towards the sky. White light is intensifying. White light is now too bright
for the digital binoculars, and I am switching to analog project. I can see the devil within the light. I am covering my right eye. He is moving back or the light is getting brighter, and I can no longer see him. I can only see the white.

"It's going up, and it turns to the left. The white light is making a line across the sky. It is past the horizon. It is- gone. I am aiming the failsafe automatic telescope at the Spire top, and uncovering my right eye.

"The top of the Spire is empty. I do not see the Devil. The bodies of Therin and Chaosman are gone."

You know something I didn't understand until then? How an alcoholic or an addict could have difficulty deciding not to drink or take drugs. I didn't understand what it meant that that decision was, 'Hard.' I didn't disbelieve, but I didn't get it.

I understood then, because saying the next thing was hard. I've tried to explain it, like to my younger self, but I don't have the words. The question I asked was hard. It took effort to say something. I got tired asking this next thing. It took my breath away.

"Where did it hit?" I asked Shawna.

What city died? What nation is no more? How many people just ceased to exist? Eighty million like France? Was it only twelve million like Beijing? We still don't know the count from Pyongyang. Vancouver was oddly low, less than a thousand.

What was the meaning of what I just watched?

Voice-to-text caught what I said but it's never good at catching meaning. You don't learn that until you live by it. I wonder if that's like a hard decision too.

"No one is reporting a strike," said Shawna. Text-to-voice ripped her cadence apart. It what she said and stripped meaning out of it too. "SatObs reports strike did not arc back to Earth. It- Tracking is coming it with the strike leaving the Solar Plane. It's going sidereal up."

After a moment she was orders again. "Observe the Spire. Near target drones are being launched."

I sat in my lawn chair and watched near target drones come right to the edge of the exclusion area. I saw planes get redirected around the Bravo. I watched the Black Spire in Commons Park and made reports. I shot temperature readings and spectroscopic measurements. They meant nothing, but someone in Langley thought they might be useful later. I never learned if they were.

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