The Man Who Played God

by Fastern

Summary

After striking a deal with the devil, self-fashioned “Gentleman Scientist” Wilson P. Higgsbury is marooned in a strange world populated by equally strange creatures. He finds he’s not the only one Maxwell has deceived, either, for among the creatures is a cast of unscrupulous characters he wants nothing to do with. However, he may be forced to work alongside them if he plans to find a way out of this odd dimension, if not take revenge on Maxwell, himself.

Rain! Meat! Bees! Beards! It’s going to be the longest summer of Wilson’s life.

First part of a four-part series covering Wilson's first year in Maxwell's world.
On the far outskirts of the British countryside was a village—and this village is of little consequence to the story that follows, save that it happened to be the hometown of Wilson P. Higgsbury.

The Higgsburys had an impeccable knack for producing scientists. The oldest known member of the family, one Percival Higgsbury, had developed a rather involved interest in alchemy, and he was also the first to succumb to the family curse. Although the details had been lost to the ages, what was widely accepted was that at the height of his career, he became incurably mad and was burnt at the stake as a witch.

While the practice of witch burning had long since died out by 1920, Higgsburys hadn’t died out of the habit of going insane over the course of their illustrious careers. Fortunately, the community at large had decided to label them as eccentrics instead of witches, so they were ostracized instead of killed. Some continued to be weary of them because of the family curse, but the good news was that the curse was limited to direct descendants. The pattern of marrying into the community continued until there was only one direct descendant of Percival Higgsbury left, and that descendant was Wilson.

Wilson didn’t have time for family curses, real or not. His parents had never believed in the curse, so he saw every reason to keep up the family tradition. Besides, if there was a curse, he had to focus on doing as much science as possible before he lost his mind.
He barely kept any reminders of the curse within his house, a cottage consisting of little more than the last fragments of the Higgsbury bloodline. Since he was a child, Wilson had always been more interested than science than in women, so he resigned to his fate to remain a bachelor and the last of the Higgsbury line. The good news was that this meant that he had little use for family relics and their unpleasant reminders.

From his laboratory in the attic, Wilson mulled over sketches of impossible geometric structures, equations with no answers, and random doodles of flowers and dead bodies. He sighed and leaned against the desk, holding his head in his hands. Last night, he'd hoped that the lack of sleep would spur some new idea. But nothing had changed in the attic. His chemistry set remained in disarray, the materials he’d set aside for inventing lay unused, and now a sliver of pale morning light streaked through the boarded up windows. The only thing he had to show for the night was an aching neck.

Tossing his glasses aside, he slammed his forehead on the edge of the table. What was he doing wrong?

Of course, he wouldn’t be deterred by a few minor setbacks, but how long was this going to go on? A science block prevented him from brainstorming or even thinking straight. How long would he have to endure sleepless nights before he pulled himself out of this?

And then, there was knocking on his door.

Wilson gasped and leapt up, sending his chair crashing to the floor.

“Not another solicitation,” Wilson murmured. “Can’t they read the signs?”

When Wilson had returned to his childhood home, he’d gone to extraordinary effort to construct signs that would keep people at bay. Still, the entire world seemed bent on interrupting him, and he wasn’t going to stand for it any longer.

Wilson hurried to the trap door, paused, and turned to face his laboratory.

“I’ll be back after I take care of this problem,” he promised it.

Wilson steeled himself as he climbed down the ladder to the upstairs hall, where he paused on the landing to glare at the door. The handle jiggled violently.

“Wilson Percival Higgsbury, you open this door at once!” a booming voice sounded from the other side. “I’m not moving from this spot until you let me in!”

“Uh oh,” Wilson muttered.

He didn’t dally a second longer. Wilson rushed down the stairs and threw open the door. He came face-to-face with a portly man who was as tall as he was wide, his sheer mass taking up the entirety of the door and then some. His small, beady little eyes widened as he peered down at Wilson, as if he hadn’t been anticipating a response.

“Well, it’s about time,” Dr Butterfield cleared his throat. “May I come in?”

Wilson felt his mouth forming words. “Well…I—that is I mean to say that—”

“Come now, are you really going to leave a family friend on the doorstep?”

“I…no, I suppose not,” Wilson admitted.
Dr Butterfield stepped over the threshold, having to duck to avoid knocking his head against the door frame. He was careful to avoid the peeling wallpaper as he examined the main entrance.

“Still not much on cleaning, I see,” Dr Butterfield remarked.

“Doctor, what are you doing here?” Wilson demanded. “Why aren’t you in London? Did the university send you? How come you—”

“Wilson, please!” Dr Butterfield snapped. He massaged the bulging rolls of fat in his forehead and let out a stressed sigh. “Can we please sit down? I’ve had a long trip and we need to talk.”

Wilson suppressed the rising tendrils of fury in the pit of his stomach. “I think I’ve made my position quite clear.”

“I know the last time we saw each other was...messy...but we do need to talk.”

Wilson held the door open, his eyes squinted against the stark daylight. But Dr Butterfield ignored him and went into the living room, where he took a seat on the fainting coach. There was no getting out of it.

Wilson felt like a child about to receive a firm lecture, which he reasoned wasn’t too far off from the relationship he maintained with Dr Butterfield. The good doctor had been a friend of his mother’s when both had studied psychology at the university. He had been a contributing author on some of the papers his parents had written and he’d been there when Wilson was nothing but a bespectacled boy with round glasses and a child-sized chemistry set. Dr Butterfield had sat on the fainting couch many times, sipping tea and discussing science.

Once, those conversations had been pleasant, but now Wilson wanted nothing more to run away. Very fast. Still, he took his place in the chair opposite of Dr Butterfield and folded his arms and legs.

“You look absolutely terrible,” Dr Butterfield commented. “When was the last time you slept?”

“I don’t sleep,” said Wilson.

“I thought so. Where are your glasses?”

“I’ve told you, my glasses are an inconvenience. I use them for reading and writing, and that is it.”

Dr Butterfield huffed. “You and I both know that you’re in desperate need of glasses. Perhaps if you wore them, those bags under your eyes wouldn’t be so prominent.”

Wilson bit his tongue. So they were going to have small talk before he got to the point? So be it.

“How’s the university?” Wilson asked. Not his favourite topic, but two could play at Dr Butterfield’s game.

“If you’re wondering if it fell to pieces after you left, you’ll be disappointed,” said Dr Butterfield. “They quite happily dismantled your…inventions after you left. There were only a few accidents.”

“I told them not to try to move the Science Machine!”

“No one can really figure out how that thing is supposed to work, by the way, and the university’s best minds have been studying it.”

“A child could use it!”
“Wilson, I don’t want to argue about the Science Machine again. Let’s change the subject.”

“By all means.”

Wilson and Dr Butterfield glared at each other for an indeterminate amount of time, but it was long enough that the clock chimed the hour and the sunlight crept a few inches across the musty carpet.

“Do you remember that old librarian you used to have those talks with?” Dr Butterfield asked. “She was a writer. What was her name…?”

“Mrs Wickerbottom?” Wilson offered. “Is she still at the university?”

“Oh, no, she left on a sabbatical—and did something of a disappearing act, from what I understand.”

“I’m not surprised. She always did talk about wanting to travel for a bit.”

“Still, she’s an old woman…”

“And therefore much more experienced than you and I. Mrs Wickerbottom is the only one at the university who offered stimulating conversation. Perhaps she got tired of watching everyone run amok like headless chickens.”

“I’m glad you think so highly of us.”

Another long silence. Dr Butterfield’s fat fingers intertwined over his bulging gut.

“Wilson, I’ve come to ask you to come back to London,” said Dr Butterfield. “I know—your old flat has already been rented out, but you’re welcome to use my guest bedroom.”

Wilson shook his head. “You know how I feel about the hustle and bustle of that wretched place.”

“Look at this house! You’re living in squalor! Do you even get running water out here?”

“Yes. In the bathroom. There are mushrooms growing in there.”

“If your parents were alive to see you now—”

“They’d be proud that I’m continuing their research.”

“Their ‘research’ is what ruined their careers,” Dr Butterfield scowled. “Now, you know I have the greatest respect for them, God rest their souls. They were talented, brilliant, creative, ingenious people—but also eccentrics. I urge you to not follow in their footsteps! They spent their careers trying to prove things that simply cannot be proven by any scientific method that we know of!”

“They were ahead of their time!” Wilson shouted. “I can bring that future into the present! If the university would just grant me the research materials I needed—”

“Wilson, you tried to grow mandrakes!”

“I did grow mandrakes!”

“Those were onions!”

“Mandrakes!”
“They were onions with little faces painted on them!”

“THEY WERE NOT!”

“YES THEY WERE! SOME OF THE OTHER SCIENTISTS PAINTED FACES ON YOUR ONIONS AS A JOKE—THEY CERTAINLY DIDN’T EXPECT YOU TO TAKE IT SERIOUSLY!”

Wilson let out an annoyed huff and averted his gaze.

“They would’ve been mandrakes if they’d been dug up under a full moon,” he grumbled.

“Look, during the war we were all willing to humour your experiments because they were amusing —”

“Amusing?!”

“But it’s 1920. The game is over. The war is over. If you don’t pull yourself together, you’re going to miss an opportunity to contribute to a new era of growth and development. Don’t you think you’ve wasted enough of your career studying…magic? And—and trans-dimensional whatchamahoosits?”

“Trans-dimensional fissures,” Wilson said through gritted teeth. “And if my research is successful, then I could jump start technology by—by hundreds of years!”

“Do you really think that would be in the world’s best interests?”

“Do you think it would be in the world’s best interests to not to try to advance our field?”

“Magic isn’t real, Wilson.”

“Ahh! But there’s no proof that it isn’t real! Magic is simply science that has yet to be explained!”

“Even if it can be proved, don’t you think that there are fundamental truths of the universe that humans aren’t meant to understand? You’re playing God, Wilson! This is why the university disapproved of your research, not because it doesn’t want to 'advance our field'!”

“They’re too afraid to understand! It’s not my fault that they’re incapable of understanding a good scientific theory!”

“Wilson, what you’re doing is not science!”

Here we go. “Science! A noun!”

“Don’t go quoting the definition of science to me…”

He stood. “Any department of knowledge that is considered worthy of investigation through experimentation and observation! The fact that the university doesn’t validate my research doesn’t concern me, Dr Butterfield! What I am doing is classified as science by the definition of science!”

This was the part of the conversation where Dr Butterfield exploded in rage. The part where he started ranting and raving about how ridiculous Wilson was being. But this time he didn’t…and the missing piece of the confrontation threw Wilson off guard. Leaning against the coffee table, he glared right into his face, but it wasn’t red with anger. Dr Butterfield’s eyes were wide and watery.

“Well?” Wilson prompted. “Aren’t you going to scream about how I’m wrong?”
“I didn’t come here to argue,” Dr Butterfield said gently. “Wilson...sit down.”

This was odd. “…Why?”

“Because I didn’t come here to argue with you. I came to talk about your well-being.”

Too stunned to speak, Wilson slowly sat back down. He’d never known Dr Butterfield to be the least bit concerned about his well-being, especially after their falling out.

“Rumours have been circulating for years that you’re…well, a tad mad,” said Dr Butterfield.

“It comes with the territory of being a Higgsbury,” Wilson said dryly.

“Well, yes, there’s that,” Dr Butterfield agreed. “But that’s just a legend. There have been sane Higgsburys, and then…and then there’s been members like you.”

“…Like me. And I am like...what, exactly?”

“There are certain individuals at the university who think you’re pleasantly eccentric and then there’s others who think that you’re downright insane.”

“I’m fully aware of what others think of me, Dr Butterfield.”

“And that’s good!” Dr Butterfield agreed. “The university respects that cavalier spirit of yours. But...Wilson, you know that I’m a psychiatrist first and foremost?”

“You’ve been a psychiatrist for as long as I’ve known you, so...yes?”

“And out of respect for the friendship I maintained with your parents, I feel an obligation to...well, to look out for you. Your health. And I don’t think that locking yourself in this house is doing you any favours and the university is inclined to agree with me. We—that is to say, I feel that you’re harming yourself by staying here.”

“Are you going to get to the point or not?”

Dr Butterfield took a deep breath. Wilson could see his body stiffen, preparing itself. “Wilson, I’m having you institutionalized.”

Wilson blinked. Images of his father flashed before him, his father screaming and shouting and never to be seen again.

Finally, his voice quiet, he said, “I beg your pardon?”

“Now, there are psychiatric treatments available to someone in your position,” Dr Butterfield rushed on. “And you’re coherent enough to have a voice in treatment, which is good! But I don’t think it’s a good idea to wait until you’re little more than a babbling mess like your father was and —”

“Stop,” Wilson held out his hand, immediately silencing Dr Butterfield. His next words were even. “I am not insane. I am a scientist.”

“A good one. I daresay you’ll be an even better scientist after we address these delusions you’re having.”

“I am not having delusions!” Wilson leapt to his feet and paced the room, pressing his fingers to his forehead. “This is—this is absurd! What right do you have talking to me like this?! I am not
one of your patients!”

“No, but I have the power to put you in an institution for psychiatric evaluation and treatment. The university supports my endeavours. They want you back, Wilson. In one piece.”

“I don’t care about the university!”

“Then do it for yourself! Look at you, Wilson! You live in a shack, you can’t take care of your basic needs, and you sincerely believe that magic exists. This process will be much easier if you accept that you need serious help!”

“You’re not listening!” Wilson exclaimed. “Science and magic are the same! Why can’t you see it?!”

“Enough!” barked Dr Butterfield. “I didn’t just come here to inform you about this, Wilson. I came to escort you to Saint Brutus’s.”

“Saint what?”

“Saint Brutus’s Home for the Minimally Sane does good work. I’m sure you’ll find many—”

Wilson wasn’t listening to Dr Butterfield prattle on about the institution. Instead, he collapsed in his chair, leaned forwards, and held his head in his hands. This could not be happening. He felt like he was in a nightmare, fuelled by insomnia and lack of inspiration, like he was having an out-of-body experience. The only thing he was losing his mind over was the lack of control. Wilson loved the experimentation and manipulation that came with the territory of being a scientist, but surrendering that level of control was unacceptable, to say the least. He’d always been in control and now it slipped between his fingers.

He wondered how much of this was the family curse and how much of it was him. He didn’t think he was insane, just like he hadn’t thought his parents were insane growing up. After they’d died, life became easier, more straightforward, more focused on research. And he’d been able to dig through their notes, learned about their research into the arcane arts. At first, Wilson had scoffed, before he noticed the patterns and what was side research became an obsession. Plenty of perfectly sane scientists entertained their obsessions, so why should his be any different just because his theories were a little audacious?

Of this, he could be certain: he couldn’t go down without a fight. Raising his head, he realized that Dr Butterfield was still talking.

“—and nobody has died for six months,” Dr Butterfield finished. “I say, you’re being quiet. Well? What do you say to all this?”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me!” Wilson exclaimed. “There’s too much science to do for me to be—to be rotting away at some lunatic asylum!”

“It’s not a lunatic asylum, it’s a home for—”

“I am not so far gone that I don’t know what it is! You’re not even considering what I want!”

“Wilson, you want to cloister yourself in this house and research subjects that have no basis in scientific fact,” said Dr Butterfield. “I had hoped you would take this news better…”

“How did you expect me to react?” snapped Wilson. “‘Thank you for institutionalizing me against my will. A lobotomy is precisely what I needed!’”
“No one is suggesting lobotomy!”

“Why not? It’s a permanent solution to the problem I didn’t know I had.”

“The fact that you don’t know you have a problem is a problem in itself.”

“If this is about the family curse—”

“I don’t believe in curses, that would fall under the territory of ‘magic’, which I also don’t believe in. No, this is about the son of an old friend falling into disarray and having behavioural patterns that need correcting. Either you come with me voluntarily or I’ll have to bring in the staff from Saint Brutus’s.”

“I can’t come with you! I have experiments waiting upstairs and—”

“Once you receive treatment, I assure you that you’ll realize the fruitlessness of those experiments. I’ll give you time to pack a small suitcase of personal belongings, but no more.”

“I refuse to go anywhere with you! I am not a lunatic! I am a sensible, competent human being! I am a…a Gentleman Scientist!”

“I have no idea what that’s supposed to mean, but it’s irrelevant. I refuse to watch another Higgsbury become another unpleasant topic of conversation.”

Wilson’s stomach plummeted. How could Dr Butterfield betray him like this? Sure, he hadn’t always been able to prove his theories, but that didn’t mean they were wrong. Why would Dr Butterfield use that as an excuse to lock him away from the rest of the world? He felt like a child who had been granted detention and was now thinking of every conceivable way to get out of it, to escape the nightmare that was Saint Brutus’s.

Although he felt like the floor caved beneath him, he managed to stay upright as Dr Butterfield cleared his throat and returned to the hall. Left with little choice, Wilson pursued him.

“Doctor, I’m begging you,” Wilson collapsed to his knees and tugged at Dr Butterfield’s coat. “Please, please, please, please, please reconsider! I’m not mad!”

“Get off the floor,” Dr Butterfield demanded.

“If you force me to this institute I’ll…I’ll run away!”

“You’re being rather childish.”

“I shall fight this Saint Brutus’s as if it was my mortal enemy!”

“Now you’re being childish and dramatic.”

“Look—look, all I need is—is some time!” Wilson exclaimed. “A week, perhaps! Give me a week!”

“A week to do what?!”

“Please, I can prove that the mystical arts are real and I can prove it has tangible connections with science! All I ask is that you give me the chance to prove it!”

“You’ve been trying to prove that for years! Do you think a week would do you any good?”
“If I can prove magic exists, then that proves I’m not mad!”

“Goodness gracious, Wilson, I don’t think you’re mad,” Dr Butterfield sighed. “I think you’re a troubled man with an over-sized ego.”

“Just a week! Please, if you’re going to do this, then give me one last chance to prove my theories!”

“You’re just delaying the inevitable.”

“If—if you give me a week, I’ll come quietly,” Wilson bargained. “I won’t even try to escape! But—but—but if you don’t give it to me, I’ll fight going to Saint Brutus and the treatment with every last ounce of strength I have left!”

“How do I know you won’t use this time to devise an escape plan?”

“And leave my research behind?”

Dr Butterfield considered this, and then said, “Yes, I suppose you wouldn’t leave your odd inventions behind under any circumstances…”

“I’m begging you. One week. Just one.”

“You’re making this difficult…”

“Please…”

Dr Butterfield was frozen, before he knelt down and put both of his hands on Wilson’s small shoulders.

“Son, I’m going to…I’m going to trust you,” Dr Butterfield decided. “You seem stable enough to be left on your own for a while longer and I can delay the plans for a week, but that’s it. If you attempt to run…well, then you’re only making things worse for yourself and for the people who care about you.”

“Then you’ll give me a week?” Wilson asked quietly.

“One week. I’ll come back then and you can show me what you have or have not come up with. But, if you still can’t prove your theories, then it’s off to Saint Brutus’s with you.”

Wilson exhaled. “Thank you. You won’t regret this!”

“I already do,” Dr Butterfield muttered.

Dr Butterfield and Wilson returned to the front door. During the course of their conversation, it had started to rain—as if the world sensed the severity of the situation and sought to match the mood in the house.

“Best of luck to you, Wilson,” Dr Butterfield nodded at him.

Wilson watched him step out into the fresh rainfall. He didn’t wait until he was gone from view. The moment the doctor was off his front step, he slammed the door and rushed back up to his laboratory to get to work.

It was well past midnight on the second night when the radio spoke to him.
Wilson wiped the soot from a fresh explosion from the dittany, unsure of where he’d gone wrong. He checked the notes, but couldn’t see any conceivable error. Where once the formulas would whisper to him like some secret language, they were now an indecipherable code that taunted him in his every waking moment. Wilson had been hopeful that the threat of institutionalization would spur him out of his science block, but if anything it had deepened, and the reason was obvious. No matter where he turned, he saw reminders of the threats. A round lamp on his bedroom dresser reminded him of Dr Butterfield’s rolls of fat. An empty picture frame reminded him of the lost years with his family. His diploma, stashed away in a sock drawer, was a reminder of the university that had started this whole mess.

Most of all, Wilson just wanted to sleep, but whenever he lay down for a moment he was reminded of the looming deadline and the lack of progress. He was deeper than ever and this time he couldn’t find a way out.

Defeated, Wilson turned away from his chemistry set and collapsed in a red chair in the corner. He enjoyed the chair’s company, since he often got his best ideas while sitting there, but this time he drew a blank. No sooner had he sat when he instead pondered about Saint Brutus and what it would be like there, how every smiling face would conceal a person who thought him mad. He knew he wasn’t, but what good was that? No matter how many times he would tell people, it wouldn’t do him any good. Words hadn’t been enough to dissuade his peers from concluding the totality of his insanity.

It looked like he was following in the Higgsbury tradition after all, Wilson reflected. Come to think of it, his life followed the perfect Higgsbury formula. He’d graduated from university at age sixteen with a long list of credentials, wrote many scientific papers published in journals across Britain, debated and studied, learned and then taught, spent restless hours at the library, and even accidentally discovered a comet. His idea of a holiday wasn’t on a beach, but at a museum, and he’d spent more than one Christmas locked in a ravenous discussion with Wickerbottom.

What would Wickerbottom think of all this? Maybe her sabbatical was more than coincidence. Maybe Dr Butterfield had waited until she was absent to initiate his plan, so she wouldn’t stick up for him. The thought sickened Wilson and he leaned forward in the chair, one hand pressed to his clammy forehead. If anyone could have diffused this situation, it would’ve been her. Perhaps he could go find her…

But no, that wasn’t an option either. Dr Butterfield was having someone watch the house. If Wilson had to guess, they were attendants from Saint Brutus’s, but they were clever: always staying out of sight and never interfering with his work. Had Wilson not been a genius, perhaps he wouldn’t have noticed them hiding in the forest beyond the property, keeping an ever-constant vigil on him. His imprisonment had already begun. It wasn’t as though Wilson wasn’t used to being imprisoned, but most of the time it was self-imposed. To have other people limiting his freedom and interfering with his concentration was…disconcerting, to say the least.

For a fleeting moment, he considered blaming his parents for this mess. Them and their damn propositions that science and magic were the one and the same, that they worked in strange and subtle ways. It was an entire field ready to be discovered. So, when Wilson had become curious, had dug a little, and discovered the extent of the cover-up by the university…Well, he’d reacted in the only way he knew how. He wasn’t brave, but the one thing he couldn’t stand was the suppression of knowledge.

Somehow he’d always known why his mother had been stripped of her doctorate and why his father had spent his final years in a lunatic asylum. Before Wilson discovered the lost notes of his parents, he wouldn’t have believed for a moment that men of science would feel so threatened by
one small theory. He wondered how many discoveries had been lost over the course of the human experience, and maybe…just maybe…he was doomed to be among those forgotten scientists.

This was it, then. His career was over. He’d never be the same again. He’d become some gibbering idiot writing on the walls of his room of Saint Brutus’s and trading conspiracy theories with his fellow patients.

That’s when the radio spoke to him.

“Say pal, looks like you’re having some trouble!”

Wrenched from his thoughts, Wilson blinked and surveyed the room. It was the radio that had spoken. A dim ragtime tune that had been playing in the background was replaced by a matter-of-fact voice.

“…What?” Wilson asked stupidly.

“I said, it looks like you’re having some trouble!” the voice repeated.

“Oh, good,” Wilson muttered. “The auditory hallucinations have started.”

The voice laughed. “I’m as real as you are, pal. My name’s Maxwell. I’ve been watching you for some time now.”

Wilson weighed his choices. One, he could ignore the voice and accept it as a hallucination. Two, he could humour it. Since he was going mad anyways, he decided to embrace the madness and humour the voice.

“Maxwell,” Wilson repeated. “How…how are you talking to me out of a radio? Must be…some sort of jamming thing…or something.”

Maxwell laughed again. His laugh was deep, loud, and throaty. “Something like that.”

“It’s a bit creepy that you’ve been, uh, watching me.”

“Forgive the intrusion, it’s just entrancing to watch a genius at work,” said Maxwell. “It’s a shame that some can’t appreciate your work.”

“You know about my work?” Wilson asked. He stood up and held the radio in hand, staring into it as if he could see Maxwell staring back.

“Naturally! You could say I’m quite the fan.”

Wilson beamed and let out a strained chuckle. There was something entrancing about the strange voice over the radio, a lilt in Maxwell’s tone like he was the only person on the planet who understood. Instead of speaking to him condescendingly, Maxwell sounded sincerely interested. Like someone who believed that he spoke the truth instead of the farthest thing from it.

It was a refreshing change.

“Are you a scientist?” Wilson questioned.

“Well, yes and no,” Maxwell explained. “I’m a magician by trade, though science has always been an acute interest of mine. You’re much more well-versed in it than I am. Your theories regarding some of the fundamental rules of the arcane arts are quite close, you know.”
“The…the arcane arts…” Wilson whispered. “You believe, too?”

“My dear Mr Higgsbury, I have first hand experience in the arcane arts. I may have once performed on the stage, but my tricks were no mere illusion.”

Wilson suddenly felt weak in the knees and unable to respond.

“There’s so much about this world that the human mind can’t comprehend, concepts so alien that thinking about them alone is enough to drive a person mad!” Maxwell mused. “If those fools who have criticized your work knew, they wouldn’t think you were insane. You would be regarded as the greatest scientific mind of the 20th century!”

Wilson smiled. Maxwell knew how to stroke his ego, and he was perfectly okay with that.

“Thank you for the validation, Maxwell,” said Wilson. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who has an open mind.”

“My mind is more than open,” Maxwell said lowly. “Listen, I know about your situation and I’d like to help out a fellow intellectual.”

“Wait—how do you know about my situat—”

“The arcane arts. When you’re as good as I am at it, then you learn a few tricks. I have a bit of a proposition for you. You see, without going into too much detail, I acquired some Forbidden Knowledge.”

“Forbidden Knowledge? What’s that?”

“Hm, it’s difficult to explain…I can’t simply summarize it in a sentence. Tell you what, how about I show you instead? I have the ability to transfer this knowledge directly into your mind.”

“How is that possible?”

“Arcane arts, Mr Higgsbury! Must I repeat myself?”

Wilson’s mind reeled, but…what did he have to lose? If he refused the offer, if he resisted…He didn’t gain anything aside from questions about what could have been. If he refused, surely Maxwell would go to someone else...

“But I would like something in return,” Maxwell continued.

“Oh?”

“I want you to build something for me.”

“Build what?”

“Let’s just say that it will be the answer to all your problems and prove all your theories.”

“How can I build it? Do you have blueprints? Diagrams?”

“The Forbidden Knowledge can show you everything.”

“Wait, if you already have the knowledge to do it, why can’t you make it?”

“I lack the resources. You, however, have everything you need right in this house.”
Leaning against the dresser, Wilson grabbed his head and asked, “How do I know you’re not a delusion?”

“Wilson, I’m offering you everything you’ve ever wanted,” said Maxwell. “Do you think you’re ready for it or not?”

Wilson glanced out the window. When Dr Butterfield returned, he would have to have answers or face the complete annihilation of his career.

Wilson nodded.

“Okay then!”

Before Wilson could question how Maxwell saw him nod, his entire world unravelled.

The onslaught of information was incredible. Wilson staggered, diagrams and images and calculations soaring through his mind, as if he was learning an entire lifetime’s worth of knowledge in mere seconds. He held the radio far above his head. His senses overloaded. Pressure on his forehead built until he felt like his skull was cleaved open. His heart pounded madly in his chest before he became unaware of his surroundings.

He didn’t understand all of it, like he was only permitted a glimpse before the images faded. Allowed to skim a book before it was slammed shut. What he did see were plans for enormous structures, rituals fuelled by magic, and machines he didn’t think possible. And then it was over. As quickly as it had begun, he was struck with a sense of inspiration as the machine was revealed to him.

Wilson smiled.

The next few days were a blur. Sometimes, Wilson woke out of a stupor unable to remember what he’d just been doing, only to fall back into the pattern of creation once again. In the background, the radio played a constant ragtime tune, with Maxwell intervening once in a while to lend advice.

In all honesty, Wilson wasn’t sure what the machine’s intended purpose was, only that he had to perform a number of rituals to complete it. Assembling the physical machine was only a piece of the puzzle, a fraction of the knowledge that had been inserted into his mind. Still, every moment he felt like a piece of the knowledge slipped away, and more and more he had to rely on Maxwell’s input to build the machine, until time was meaningless and there was nothing in the world but the machine.

Slowly but surely, it started rising from the ground up. First the base, then the small, intricate components that functioned as well as a human body. Then came the small selection of rituals, though Wilson didn’t entirely understand the meaning behind them, all he knew was that they fabricated the thin connection between reality and the unseen energies that produced magic. He was barely conscious of killing some rats, nor was he aware of drawing his own blood until he saw the festering cut on his palm. The gaps in his memory didn’t bother him as much as it should have, but it was a small sacrifice to pay for the ultimate answer. Whatever the machine was, he was sure that it would solve his problems.

Whenever he took a break, he’d typically end up at the radio to speak to Maxwell, who continued to monitor the situation. He felt as though the conversations were one-sided, and it was odd…when they were done and he got back to work, he couldn’t remember what they’d discussed. Not in the
least. But again, he didn’t have time to reflect on the various oddities that seemed to revolve around
the voice in the radio, not when there was science to do.

All the same, on the fifth day, he worked up the courage to say to Maxwell: “You didn’t show me
all of the Forbidden Knowledge, did you?”

“That’s correct,” Maxwell confirmed. “Had I shown you everything in one sitting, you really
would have gone insane.”

“Can you show me more?”

“I will if you finish the machine.”

It was all the motivation Wilson needed. Wilson was too full of lust for knowledge. He could
barely remember any of the Forbidden Knowledge at that point, though he knew some of it had to
be floating around in his head. What he did remember was the rush of inspiration, the realization,
the understanding of how the world worked, and he had to see it again. He would sacrifice the
world for just one little peek.

Soon, desperate for materials, Wilson began stripping the house of all useful objects. He started in
the kitchen, then worked his way through the bathrooms to disassemble the appliances and use the
raw materials. It was only then that the machine started to resemble its final form as he placed
sheets of metal to protect the inner workings and adjusted the power inputs to the appropriate
settings. He could hear the generator in the house working overtime, struggling to maintain both its
regular functions and supporting that of the machine.

He managed to finish the machine on the seventh night, after an especially long session during
which he’d barely taken care of his basic needs. The attic went quiet as he stepped back to admire
his handiwork.

The machine was unlike anything he’d ever built before, unlike the small contraptions he’d
constructed as a child and unlike the haphazard automatons he’d pieced together while working for
the university. It loomed over him, swallowing up most of the space in the attic and making him
feel abnormally small in its presence.

Still, as he stood in the silence, Maxwell was quick to give his input as always.

“Excellent work, Wilson!” Maxwell exclaimed. “Now throw the switch!”

Trembling with excitement, Wilson extended his hand.

His hand faltered, if only for a moment. After all, he didn’t know what the machine would do or
what the repercussions would be. It wasn’t exactly the smartest thing to do, especially since the
process used to create it involved methods he was certain any respectable scientist would be
horrified with.

Now, he was filled with a sudden rush of dread, like he was about to open the gates of hell.

“DO IT!” Maxwell shouted.

Wilson nearly hit the ceiling. The time for thinking was over. He reached forwards and threw the
switch.

The machine whirred into life, blinking and flashing as lightning highlighted what Wilson realized
was a face. A face that stared down at him with a mocking grin.
Then, Maxwell started to laugh. At first, it was quiet and pensive, and then it grew in volume until it was all he could hear. Wilson backed away, though he couldn’t escape the darkness that seemed to be pressing in around the room. Movement caught the corner of his eye. He turned in time to see a pair of shadows stretch out from the machine like hands.

Except they were no mere shadows. The hands rose out of the floorboards and ensnared him. The last thing he remembered was being dragged into darkness, screaming the whole way.

“Say pal, you don’t look so good!”

Wilson had spent much of his life indoors, avoiding the sun as if he would catch fire from the slightest exposure. So when the full strength of the sun pierced through his eyelids, he was blinded and lay perfectly still, afraid to move and to stir the memories that were now returning to him. His head pulsed with pain and each pulse drowned out another coherent thought.

Finally, he garnered enough strength to crack open his eyes.

There was someone leaning over him and the stench of cigar smoke in the air.

“My…head…” Wilson groaned.

“That does seem to be a common complaint,” said a voice. He thought it was familiar, but he couldn’t be certain as he emerged from the haze of unconsciousness.

He was lying on a patch of grass and in his peripheral vision he could see evergreen trees rising from an overgrown forest floor. The sky was clear and a perfect shade of robin’s egg blue, allowing the sun to beat unrelentingly down on his position. Still, the breeze was cool, the birds were singing, and a butterfly flew by Wilson as he staggered to his feet, still doubled over with his headache.

No, the only stain upon otherwise impeccable scenery was a skeleton sitting face-down in the mud nearby.

After staring at the skeleton for what felt like an eternity, Wilson looked back to the person standing before him. He was a lanky, well-dressed man with a broad grin and a cruel face, and there was no mistaking the voice.


“Indeed I am,” Maxwell grinned a grin that resembled the smile on the machine’s face. “A pleasure to meet you in person at last.”

“What…where am I?” Wilson asked, looking around. “How did I get here?”

“You’re a bit slow on the uptake,” Maxwell muttered. “I brought you here.”

“I…okay…uh…where is here?”

“This,” Maxwell extended his arms, “is the answer to all your questions!”

“It’s just a forest.”

Maxwell laughed. “Tut, tut, did you really think it would be that simple? You’re a scientist, you
should appreciate the process of discovery, I think. No, if you want answers, you’re going to have to go out and find them yourself.”

“I… I don’t understand. Where’s my laboratory?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t hold out hope for getting back there anytime soon. Now, I know you’re not accustomed to natural lighting, but I should think you know the basics of… well… roughing it. Still, I’m interested to see what you make of this place!”

“Maxwell, I…” Wilson trailed off, glancing at the skeleton. “Uh… who’s that?”

“Hm? Oh, one of your predecessors. He didn’t take my advice, you see.”

“Uh… what advice?”

“That you’d better find something to eat before night comes.”

Wilson stared at Maxwell in confusion. Maxwell stepped back, smiled, and then vanished in a puff of smoke. Wilson was left alone in the clearing.

Wilson’s mind raced, once again trying to find a solution to another impossible problem. Perhaps he really was in the middle of a delusion, but if it was a delusion, it was extremely realistic. Maxwell, the voice on the radio, had become a man in a suit who could vanish in a puff of smoke. His laboratory was nowhere in sight, nor did he see any sign of civilization.

It hit him: Maxwell had abandoned him. Left him to become like the skeleton who shared the clearing.

He had a feeling that Maxwell had intended for this to happen.

Chapter End Notes

A big thank you to kaaramel for helping with proofreading! <3
Wilson waited for the right moment, though he felt so numb, empty, and starving that staying alert proved almost impossible.

Ever since Maxwell had deposited him in this place a week ago, Wilson had done everything he thought he'd never do. He'd slept in the mud, eaten mildly poisonous mushrooms, and seen animals he was pretty sure didn't fit into any known classification. And still he was no closer to finding out where he was or how he'd come to be here.

He'd accompanied his parents on an expedition deep into a lush jungle when he was a child. Wilson vaguely remembered that his father had attempted to teach him basic survival skills, but he'd been so occupied with the excitement of the adventure that he hadn't paid attention. He was beginning to regret that decision. Still, for once in his life, Wilson found surviving more important than scientific discovery. There would be time for science when he was assured that he was going to live through this experience.

The berry bushes mocked him from his hiding spot. Still, he hesitated. The last thing he needed was to run into another one of those foul turkeys. Wilson hadn't had much to eat except the berries, but he had to compete with the turkeys.

Wilson missed scones and tea after a delightful session of research and science. He missed having a roof over his head. He missed being dry. He missed baths!
But most of all he missed scones. With jelly.

He'd waited long enough. Wilson crept towards the bushes.

The feathered menaces descended. Emerging from the woods, they trampled him in their haste to get to the bushes before he could.

"No!" Wilson exclaimed, jumping to his feet and rushing the turkey things. "No—no—no! I need those more than you do!"

The turkeys scattered, but by then it was already too late. All that was left of the berries were stems and a few squashed ones that he shovelled into his mouth. It tasted like mud.

"Stupid birds," Wilson muttered. "If you're still watching me, Maxwell, know that I will get you back for this."

He dragged himself to his feet and continued his unrelenting march through the forest. So this was how it was going to end. Wilson P Higgsbury, Gentleman Scientist, felled by turkeys. Not the dignified death about which he'd fantasized.

Wilson had stumbled upon signs of intelligent life, but nothing that suggested that said intelligent life was still alive. He'd discovered skeletons hidden in the brush, tangled in overgrown roots and lying in uninhabited campsites with empty fire pits. Maybe this was Maxwell's way of prolonging his death. Wilson didn't even know where he expected to end up. From the top of the hill, he'd spotted a river cutting through the landscape and since villages traditionally revolved around water sources, it seemed like his best chance at finding civilization.

Whenever he wasn't hungry, Wilson tried to think about where he could possibly be. At first, he thought he might still be in Britain, or perhaps in Scotland or Ireland. But it was difficult to wander around those places without stumbling into some semblance of civilization. Then he'd theorized that he'd been transported out of the country, maybe to somewhere like Serbia. But none of the landmarks made any sense. Just when he thought he was beginning to get a feel for the landscape, something seemed to change, like everything shifted a few inches to the right. Many of the animals and plants he'd seen were strange, too. Maybe he was in Africa or the Amazon or somewhere where many species had yet to be identified.

Wilson vaulted over a log and fell head-first over a hidden embankment. Branches, leaves, and debris hit him until he came to a stop, too dizzy from hunger and fatigue to immediately stand.

The thing that stirred him into activity was a low grunt from nearby.

"That sounded like a pig," Wilson remarked. "What I wouldn't give for a pork roast right about now..."

Wilson rolled onto his stomach. Maybe it was a wild boar; if so, maybe he could summon enough strength to try to catch it. It was a stupid, fleeting thought, but he didn't care. Just imagining a miracle was enough to get him off of the ground.

The terrain evened out and he could see freely between tall, leafy trees. Beyond them, he could see something tall, wooden, and definitely not natural.


Not caring how stupid he looked, he laughed and burst into a sprint.
"Finally I can get out of this cesspool!" Wilson yelled, to no one in particular. "Hot meals! Sleeping in a bed! Baths!"

As he drew closer, he realized that the houses comprised a small village, but he didn't care. The fact that it even existed and didn't appear to be mirage was enough for Wilson. Just as he reached the outskirts, he saw one of the inhabitants—a hulking man—start to turn in his direction and—

It was no man.

The smile slipped off of Wilson's face. Because the creature was a bipedal pig wearing a grass skirt.

He stopped in his tracks just as he cleared the forest and found himself on the borders of the small village, where he could now see several roaming pigs. The pig who had made eye contact with him didn't look the least bit interested and immediately wandered off. All in all, Wilson counted about a dozen towering houses, undoubtedly the homes of these...things. Whatever they were, they didn't look the least bit intelligent.

"Oh," Wilson muttered. "The visual hallucinations have started. Good."

"YOU IN SPACE!"

Wilson jumped. He hadn't noticed it, but he'd been standing closer to one of the pigs than he would have liked and the pig didn't look happy about it. Spit pelted Wilson's face as the pig shouted at him.

"YOU IN SPACE!" the pig repeated. "YOU GO!"

Wilson struggled to find words. "The pig. The pig is talking. The pig talks! This is scientifically impossible! Pigs don't have the vocal chords for—"

"YOU NO STAY IN SPACE!"

"Well—uh—um, my good swine...No, that's too rude. Mr Pig...No, that's not much better...Now, see here, I was wondering if you could give me directions to the nearest—"

"YOU LE-E-E-AVE!"

Wilson let out a high-pitched scream and took off as the pig started chasing him. The other pigs didn't even glance in their direction, as if this was a daily occurrence.

A stitch formed in his side. Wilson slowed and peered back over his shoulder. Fortunately, the pig had stopped chasing, as it was now more interested in an indiscernible lump on the ground.

"FOOD!" it shouted.

That got the attention of the other pigs. They all started pig-piling on top of one another in an attempt to get what Wilson guessed was food. Maybe it was edible, maybe it wasn't, but at least the pigs seemed more interested in the food than in him. He used the opportunity to slip back through the trees.

His throat burnt with unquenchable thirst and he wasn't even out of sight of the village when he heard running water. Well, at least he'd been right about civilization being near water.

The noise led him to its banks. The river rested at the bottom of a steep gully with towering trees
and thick foliage sheltering its shore. Wilson checked to make sure the pigs hadn't followed. When he was assured that they hadn't, he removed his shoes and gingerly placed his sore feet in the water. It wouldn't hurt to take a small break and regroup.

What he wouldn't give for a map. And a human. A human would be nice. Wilson had spent every waking moment of his life in voluntary isolation. But being forced to wander this forest inhabited by berry-addicted turkeys and bipedal pigs was different. Wilson hadn't really felt lonely before, but it was a hole increasingly difficult to ignore. At least humans had some semblance of order and navigation.

To what end had Maxwell placed him here? Where was here? It occurred to Wilson, then, that maybe he wasn't on 'Earth' at all. Maybe he was in some strange alternate dimension. The existence of such a world would confirm his theories regarding the potential of alternate realities. He'd hadn't imagined such a dimension would be inhabited by semi-intelligent pigs. That alone was odd. Wilson always thought that an alternate dimension would look nothing like his world, but everything here seemed to be just a strange mirror image of everything he knew.

He felt rather like Alice in Wonderland. Perhaps he'd meet a talking caterpillar or he'd wake up and realize that it was just an odd dream. Perhaps he'd wake up and his skin wouldn't be raw from body lice and he wouldn't be incoherent from hunger.

Just to test, he slapped himself. There was no effect, except for a sore cheek, but at least it answered his question.

Wilson wondered if it would be smarter to pitch camp somewhere and get his bearings. Maybe the world would stop spinning if he did that. However, that would mean resigning to the fact that he was stuck. Wherever he was, and however he'd gotten here, he didn't want to give Maxwell satisfaction.

Maxwell...That scoundrel. The rabbit that had lured him into this hole in the ground. Wilson knew that Maxwell held the key to getting out of here, but where would he live? He couldn't picture the man 'roughing' it or dwelling among the swine.

"You're a scientist, you should appreciate the process of discovery, I think..."

Maybe that was a clue. Maybe Maxwell wanted him to try to find him. Wilson wasn't entirely sure how he knew, but he didn't think that Maxwell would leave him here without a means to escape.

No, even if it killed him, he would trudge on until he found a way out of this wretched place! Nothing would stop him!

A thunderclap sounded overhead. Wilson looked up. The sky had turned from clear to overcast within minutes and a fat raindrop landed square on his forehead. The heavens opened and the raindrop was joined by an army of its brothers and sisters.

Wilson was drenched within seconds.

Grabbing his shoes, he hurried to the shelter of a flourishing evergreen and hid beneath it, though the torrent still snaked between the branches in a relentless search to find him. Now he was hungry, itchy, tired, and wet. This was turning into the perfect day. Shivering, he folded his arms and slouched down on the wet ground. There was nothing to do but try to wait it out.

He then felt a piercing sensation. It was a sensation that Wilson had endured many times before, as he was the subject of strange looks back at the university. The feeling of unwanted attention hit
him now, in the cold, and in the rain, and in the solitude of the forest. Wilson scanned the trees surrounding the riverbank. The forest shivered in the rain and the reflections in the water were distorted.

"Hello?" Wilson called.

Wilson squinted, but his vision wasn't good at long range. Sighing, he dug into his vest pocket and pulled out his glasses. Adjusting them on his face, his vision came into focus and he looked across the river.

Between the trees on the far side of the bank, he thought he saw a face. It was dark, but he could see the silhouette with perfect clarity, and it was no beast. He thought it looked rather human...

A tree branch broke. A sharp, quiet break—as if a bird had just broken its bones.

Wilson looked away from the silhouette, and then immediately back again. The figure was gone.

To the left of his shelter were low-lying bushes caressing the hillside. The leaves dripped with fresh rainfall. Something was rustling the bushes as it passed underneath.

"Oh dear," Wilson breathed. He retreated to the other side of the trunk and kept still, for whatever good it did.

The noises veered away from him and went to the bank, where it paused. Then, a creature burst out of the leaves and started bouncing in the water.

The creature was no larger than a dog. It was shaped rather like a pumpkin, but lacked eyes, though it had four stubby little legs and a pair of horns. Its tongue hung stupidly out of its mouth as it splashed in the water.

Wilson ducked back out of sight and pressed his back to the tree. Could he run? No, there was nowhere to run to. If he left his shelter, the beast would see him and give chase. Could he climb the tree? He wasn't sure he had the strength.

This was it, then. This beast would devour him. What a way to end his short, miserable existence.

Well, he may as well get it over with. Wilson steeled himself and stepped into the open.

"Please just eat me and get it over with!" Wilson shouted.

He squeezed his eyes shut, tensed his body, and kept as still as a stone.

Nothing happened.

Wilson dared to crack open one eye. It was difficult to see through the rain, but there was no mistaking the lack of dog-sized monster.

A weight slammed into his back. Wilson hit the ground, hard. The air was forced out of his chest. Wilson didn't even get a chance to let out a scream. He braced himself for the teeth that were about to sink into his back.

The teeth, however, didn't come. Instead, the creature licked him.

The slobber contrasted greatly against the rain because it was warm and somewhat sticky. Stunned, Wilson managed to roll onto his back and found himself face-to-face with the furry pumpkin creature. It licked his face, and definitely not in a way that suggested it was tasting its meal before
the kill.

Wilson gingerly touched the top of the creature. It seemed to enjoy the gesture and nuzzled against him, still slobbering.

"Hey...get off," Wilson instructed it. "Please get off."

It paid him no mind and kept licking. Soon, Wilson was laughing for the first time in what felt like a long time.

He laughed right up until the moment that the creature grabbed one of his shoes and started chewing on it. This gave Wilson the chance to sit up and scratch his head. Obviously the creature was tame, but where had it come from? The pigs didn't strike him as accommodating to anyone who wasn't a pig.

"Okay, can I have my shoe back?" Wilson asked.

He reached for his shoe. At once, the creature leapt to its stubby little feet and bounced away.

"Not funny!" Wilson exclaimed. "Come on, I need that shoe! I only have the one pair!"

He tried to grab it again. The creature hopped out of reach, then took off at a speed not befitting its small legs.

"WAIT!" Wilson shouted.

Wilson pulled on his remaining shoe and sprinted after the creature. It hopped at a rather leisurely pace. Had he not been so wrought with fatigue, he would have been able to overtake it. But the creature remained out of his reach as he slipped through the foliage, desperate for his shoe.

If this creature thought this was a game, it had another thing coming. Wilson had never had any luck with pets. He'd had a few turtles in his childhood, all of which he'd sacrificed for the sake of science. It was a grim business, but necessary.

Perhaps this creature would share the fate of his childhood pets.

It led him further down the river before charging straight into a thicket.

"Heavens above," Wilson muttered. "I'm sorry I yelled at you! Please come back!"

Nothing.

He massaged his forehead. He didn't like the look of those bushes. Beyond them was a black and foreboding forest. With the moist ground and the lack of visibility, he didn't want to tumble over another embankment or step into a sink hole.

Finally, he made up his mind. Potential dangers be damned! Now was the time to be bold!

Wilson pushed aside the bushes. Beyond them, the forest seemed to grow even more dense and there was no sign of the creature.

He only took one step before a sudden tug at his ankle sent him flying.

Wilson's head collided with the ground and his vision went black.

What felt like hours later, but was more like minutes, his vision returned and he realized that he
was hanging upside down. His arms dangled above (beneath?) his head. Blood rushed to the upper half of his body.

Regaining his senses, Wilson looked down (up?) and saw that his shoe-less foot had been caught in a rope snare that suspended him off the ground. The rope looked new, he thought, so the snare couldn't have been there long. All the same, when he reached down (up?), he lacked the strength and the conviction to try to undo the knot. His head pulsed with a fresh headache.

A sudden, terrifying thought hit him. What if it was the pigs who'd set the trap? Were they intelligent enough to do so? What would they do to him if they found him? What if their short memories meant that they didn't remember where the trap was? He could be trapped here for days, perhaps die!

"Stupid...Maxwell!" Wilson strained.

He tested his mobility, swinging his body back and forth. Wilson felt dizzy and nauseous after the first swing.

No wonder he'd hated amusement parks growing up.

All the same, the damage had been done and he swung freely back and forth, straining the rope but not breaking it. Wilson flailed his arms. He tried to find something to grab and steady his movement to no avail. When he tried to grab a bush, the branches crumbled under his grasp.

"Help!" he squeaked helplessly.

The only answer to his cry came when the orange pumpkin creature emerged from the thicket.

"You!" Wilson exclaimed. "You are responsible for this mess you...you pestilence!"

He didn't get time to think of more heinous insults, for the creature had not come alone.

A woman burst from the thicket, and she was a sight to behold. Not because she was especially pretty, but because she was as rugged and as harsh as the land she resided in. She was a freckled redhead dressed rather like a Viking, with a horned battle helmet and spear to match. Wilson thought she looked like she'd been ripped out of a history textbook.

Wilson had hoped to see a human. He had hoped to find a sane one. Instead, he got a Valkyrie.

"Where is the beast, my faithful war hound?" the Valkyrie exclaimed. "I shall draw its blood and feast on its fle—"

She stopped short when she caught sight of Wilson.

Wilson blinked.

She blinked black.

He recovered from the shock first. Still hanging upside down, he tried to look as dignified as he could under the circumstances.

"Hello!" Wilson smiled and waved. "I am Wilson P Higgsbury, a skilled scientist and consummate gentleman! Would you be so kind as to cut me down?"

The girl shook her head. She set her spear upright and put her free hand on her hip.
"You are interfering with the hunt, Wilson of Higgsbury!" the girl shouted. "I should spear you for this!"

"I do apologize," Wilson said sincerely. "I didn't mean to do it. You see, your—(war hound, was it?)—he stole my shoe and I was—"

"Where has the beast gone?" the girl demanded, scanning the tree line. "You have scared it away!"

"And I have already apologized for the inconvenience. Tell you what, if you cut me down, I will get on my knees and beg for mercy. It won't be the most undignified thing I have done this week, after all."

"Your apologies are fruitless, Wilson of Higgsbury! Without the beast, I shall not feast tonight!...Ah, well, if I cannot feast on the beast, I shall have to feast on you instead."

"WHAT?!"

"Fear not, Wilson of Higgsbury!" the girl shouted right in his ear. She seemed to be incapable of using an indoor voice. "That was a joke! The gods smile upon my humour!"

"What gods? Who are you?!"

She spluttered, as if he'd just uttered a wretched insult.

"You know not who I am?" the girl asked. "You do not know my name?!"

"No."

"This is a terrible offence! My name is known throughout these lands!"

The girl hopped onto a nearby log and thrust her spear into the air.

"I am Wigfrid, Shield-Maiden of Asgard! Devourer of Many Meats! Slayer of Spiders! The Bane of Maxwell! You would do well to fear me!"

"Maxwell?" Wilson repeated. "You know Maxwell?"

"Know him?!" Wigfrid let out a laugh. "I am his mortal enemy! Someday, we shall meet in battle, and I shall have his head on a pike for his treachery!"

Wigfrid took a deep breath, composing herself, and then frowned in contempt at Wilson.

"And you! You do not know my name! We shall have to rectify that."

Wigfrid let out an almighty battle cry that startled birds resting in nearby trees. Wilson also started screaming, certain that she was delivering for the killing blow. Of all the times today he thought he was going to die, he was certain that this was the final straw and he was about to meet his end.

However, instead of driving her spear through his heart, Wigfrid leapt with unusual acrobatic grace for someone of her small stature and sliced through the rope.

Wilson barely had enough time to extend his hands to prevent breaking his neck on the solid ground. Dizzy from having all the blood start to distribute evenly, he was incapable of responding fast enough as Wigfrid grabbed his shoe-less foot and started dragging him into the thicket.

Wherever she was taking him, he didn't want to stick around to find out.
He raised his free foot and delivered a sharp kick to the woman's elbow. She let out a surprised cry and he scrambled up, leaving behind dark trails in the muddy grass.

Wigfrid tackled him from behind. They toppled to the ground and he somehow managed to turn himself to face her. Somewhere in the struggle, she had lost her spear, and instead they slapped at each other like children.

Then, from among the trees, another voice shouted: "Wigfrid! Did you find the Koalefant?"

The distraction was enough. Wigfrid paused and peered over her shoulder. Wilson punched her in the jaw.

Surprised by his own strength, Wilson slipped out from underneath her and charged up the nearest tree. He wasn't even sure how he did it. One moment, he was on the ground clawing at the bark, and then he grabbed onto the lowest branch. He straddled the branch. It was just high enough that Wigfrid couldn't reach him.

"HELP!" he screamed. "This mad woman is trying to kill me!"

He sensed a shadow to his left. Another woman emerged, and she was a sight to behold.

It wasn't what she was wearing or even her demeanour that set her so apart from Wigfrid. In fact, she looked rather ordinary, wearing a red blouse and a dark skirt and heels that sunk into the earth. It wasn't her dark hair, as black as charcoal and styled into pigtails. No, what caught Wilson's attention was her intensity of her stare, unblinking and full of fire.

The young woman looked at him.

"...That is not a Koalefant," the woman remarked.

"He was caught in one of my traps!" Wigfrid exclaimed. "I was just about to finish him off!"

"We're supposed to be hunting Koalefants, not transients!"

"He made the fatal mistake of insulting the great Wigfrid! Shield-Maiden of Asgard! Devourer of Many Meats! Slayer of—"

"Save it for your resume, Wig," the woman snapped. She stormed up to the tree and looked right up at Wilson. "You, get down here!"

"Oh, thank God you're sane!" Wilson exclaimed. "I've been searching for civilization for a week and all I've found are pigs!"

"There is no civilization out here, idiot," the woman snapped. "And stop shouting! God, you're worse than Wigfrid!"

"With a mouth like that, it's a wonder the beasts aren't already upon us," Wigfrid remarked. "Wilson of Higgsbury, would you be so kind as to shout louder? I thirst for battle!"

"We just finished fixing the camp after the last attack!" the woman exclaimed. "Wig, get him down from there. We're taking him back to camp."

Wigfrid blinked. "...We are?"

"If we leave him out here, he'll just attract hounds."
"...Are we taking him back so that I may spear him?"

"No spearing."

Wigfrid didn't look especially pleased with this, but nevertheless she stood at attention. "As you command, Chosen One of Loge!"

"And stop calling me that! I am not the 'Chosen One' of anything! If you call me that one more time—"

Wilson didn't hear anymore after that. His ears started ringing until they overtook all other noise and he realized that he was on the verge of losing consciousness. A combination of hunger, fatigue, and stress suddenly hit him all at once, leaving an empty pit in his stomach. Surges of panic rushed over him, but in the midst of the sudden confusion he thought he sensed another presence. He felt rather like his mind was being invaded by the same invisible forces that had dragged him into this world.

He leaned sideways and remembered careening to the ground. Then it was dark.

When he pried open his eyes, he was pleasantly dry and there was no sign of rain.

A canopy stretched across his field of vision. He was in a tent and the sun was glaring through the fabric. Wilson lay on a soft bedroll lined with white fur. It was a nice feeling, so he didn't immediately question how he'd come to be there.

Shifting his weight, something sharp dug into his skin, and he fumbled around for the cause.

There was a chain around his neck. His movements felt sluggish and clumsy as he pulled it over his head to get a better look. It was rather large and clunky, but—if his eyes didn't deceive him—made of pure gold. There was a pendant where it looked like a gem should be, but it was empty and he instead saw his own distorted reflection.

The amulet slipped from his fingers as a fresh throb of pain pulsed against his skull.

He had no idea how he'd gotten there.

Wilson raked his memory for answers, but only came up with a few fragments. The orange creature that had stolen his shoe. Hanging from a trap. Then there had been people. Human voices speaking in perfect English, unlike the pig men and the various creatures he'd had the misfortune of encountering. But he couldn't quite put faces to the voices, and he felt as though it may have been a dream. Still, that didn't explain the tent—and tents were not natural occurrences.

He fumbled around, and his fingers came into contact with something else soft and fluffy. This time, the item moved.

Wilson just about screamed. Lying right next to him was the orange creature. It panted and licked his face.

"Hello," he said.

The creature licked him again.

Wilson sat up in the bedroll just as the flap was propped open and a pale face peered inside.

It was a young woman. Wilson narrowed his eyes, certain that he'd seen her before but unable to
determine if she was from the distant past or from the gap in his memories.

"It's about time," she said sharply. "I had to waste a Life-Giving Amulet on you! Get out here if you're hungry—I'm not serving you in bed."

Wilson blinked. "I—"

Too late. The girl ducked back out and was gone.

"You keep strange company," Wilson said to the creature.

He staggered to his feet, and was surprised to find both of his shoes at the end of the bedroll. One of them looked like it had been chewed on, but at least he wouldn't have to go barefoot. Wilson pulled them on and followed the girl out of the tent, with the beast right at his heels.

Wilson stepped into a well-tended campground, consisting of two tents and surrounded by the thick forest. The camp was roughly in a circle, and in the middle a rough wooden shelter was erected over a fire pit. That was where he found the dark-haired girl tending to a crock pot.

He approached cautiously, unsure of her intentions. Maxwell couldn't be trusted. Perhaps it would be the same with other humans.

"Who are you?" he asked. "How did I get here?"

"My name's Willow," the girl introduced herself. "My fellow survivor, Wigfrid, found you in one of our traps. You fell out of a tree. You were in bad shape. We brought you back here. I used a Life-Giving Amulet on you. Your clothes were infested. I had to wash them."

"You undressed me?!" Wilson shrieked, recoiling. He looked down at his clothes, and sure enough that were in much better shape than he remembered than being.

"I know what men look like," Willow scoffed. "I'll have you know that I almost burned your clothes, but Wigfrid made me stop. She didn't like the idea of a naked man wandering around our camp."

"That is a gross invasion of my privacy!"

"Look, I wasn't gawking or anything! I didn't enjoy it! Privacy doesn't have much meaning out here. Also, you forgot to thank me for saving your life. You're welcome, by the way."

Wilson pressed his hand to his mouth, trying to disguise the fierce blush that burnt his face. He was glad that his clothes were clean, but the fact that all of that had occurred when he was unconscious was unnerving.

"What's a Life-Giving Amulet?" Wilson asked, changing the subject.

"What, are you new around here?" Willow demanded. "A Life-Giving Amulet. It stops you from dying."

"Was I dying?"

"Well, that's what happens when you fall out of a tree and land on your head. You die."

Embarrassment forgotten, a cold chill ran down his spine. "I...I don't remember that."

"That's typical. Once you use a Life-Giving Amulet, your memory gets a little spotty."
She said all of this like it was extremely obvious and the blush returned as he felt more ignorant of this place than ever before.

Wilson rubbed the back of his neck. He was never good at these situations. Seclusion had been simple, even idyllic. There were no social idiosyncrasies to concern himself with. Although Willow had invaded his privacy, she had done so with the best of intentions, and she didn't seem the least bit embarrassed by her actions. In fact, she may have saved him a lot of trouble.

"Thank you," Wilson said quietly.

"Look, I only saved you because you would've attracted hounds, and we're still picking up the pieces after the last attack," Willow snapped. "You're welcome to stay, but you have to pull your weight, and your condition when Wig found you doesn't assure me that you'll be able to do that."

"Miss Willow, I am a scientist," Wilson said proclaimed. "Whatever predicaments I can't overcome physically, I can overcome with the sheer power of my mind."

She narrowed her eyes dangerously. "Uh-huh."

Wilson felt a bump at his legs and looked down to find the orange pumpkin creature at his feet.

"Is this yours?" Wilson asked.

"Hm? Oh, that's Chester."

"What is he?"

"He's a chest."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You can put things in him. Chester, open up!"

Chester opened his mouth wide. His insides were surprisingly dry and Wilson peered inside to find a large space with an assortment of objects cradled together.

"I dug out the shoe he ate," said Willow. "Still need a thank you for that, by the way."

"This 'Wigfrid'," Wilson pressed, summoning a memory of incoherent screaming. "Does she by chance shout a lot?"

"That's Wigfrid alright," Willow drawled. "She's out hunting right now. You can spend the day getting acquainted with the camp. I have some traps that you can—"

"Hold on!" Wilson exclaimed. "I just got here!"

"And I said you could stay if you pulled your weight. That's the deal I offer everybody."

"You mean there are others?"

Willow rolled her eyes. Again, as if the answer was obvious. "People come and people go. I don't exactly keep count. At the moment, only Wigfrid and I are here."

"I have some questions about this place."

"What you see is what you get. What was your name again? Willard, wasn't it?"

"What's the 'P' stand for?"

"Percival."

"Can I call you Percy?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Fine, have it your way. I just think Wilson is an unfortunate name to have."

"Better Wilson than Wigfrid."

"...Point taken," Willow agreed. "Help yourself to some eggs."

Wilson finally got close enough to the crock pot to look inside. Sure enough, there was a pile of scrambled eggs.

"Where in Heaven's name did you get eggs?" Wilson asked. He didn't see any sign of chickens around.

"The tallbirds, of course," said Willow.

"What's a tallbird?"

Willow paused. "Great, you really are new around here. No wonder you ask so many questions."

"If you answer my questions, I'll do whatever you need me to do," Wilson bargained.

Willow glanced into the tree line, then came to a decision. "Fine. Sit down."

Wilson gathered a plate of eggs and didn't waste any time scarfing them down. He couldn't remember the last time that eggs tasted so good, even if they did have an odd flavour to them. Still, he didn't think to question a meal that had been handed to him, nor did he want to push his luck. Until he gathered his bearings and acquainted himself with this place, he would require the assistance of Willow, no matter how unpleasant she was.

They sat down around the fire pit, which was simmering with the last embers.

"How did you end up here?" Wilson asked.

"Probably the same way you did," Willow shrugged. "Let me guess, a guy named Maxwell offered you something you couldn't possibly refuse and then he dragged you into this wilderness saying it has all the answers."

"What—you mean...you've seen Maxwell too?"

"Anyone who's ever come here has met that condescending jerk."

"What does he hope to gain from this?"

"No one knows, not even me, and I've been here longer than anyone."

"How long have you—"

"Three years."
"Years?" Wilson's eyes went wide. All of a sudden all he could think about was his poor laboratory, stagnant and alone and abandoned and the fact that Dr. Butterfield was going to think that he made a run for it. If such a thing mattered anymore. But if what Willow said was true, all hopes of a quick escape had just been thrown out the window.

"Yes, years," Willow confirmed. "And that's not even the record. I met one guy who'd been here for decades. Guy got torn apart by a deerclops. He forgot to wear his Life-Giving Amulet, you see."

"What's a deerclops?"

"Large and angry."

"I...see. Why do I get the feeling that that description applies to almost everything in this world?"

"You have no idea," Willow muttered. "It's like everything in this world was made for the explicit purpose of trying to kill us."

"And where is here?"

"Wigfrid said that you said you were a scientist. You tell me."

He analyzed his surroundings. He wasn't sure if his observations would mean anything, especially if she'd been there for as long as she had.

"An alternate dimension with many parallels to our own world," he guessed. "I don't understand why Maxwell would bring me here—why he would bring anyone here. When I arrived, he said that this place had all the answers, but all I see are more questions."

"It's because seeing us struggle amuses him," Willow asserted. "Because he thinks it's good fun to watch us be ripped apart by spiders, trampled by beefalos, ravaged by hounds, gored by unnatural monsters, and die of exposure, heat exhaustion, and starvation. Because Maxwell is Maxwell. He doesn't need any other reason."

She stood up, grabbed a log from a pile of wood, and tossed it into the embers.

"Maybe if I make a big enough fire it'll engulf this world and Maxwell won't have any more playthings," said Willow.

Wilson finished the last of his eggs. Willow hadn't even touched hers and they lay forgotten on the log. She was too busy gazing into the fire, looking thoughtful.

"Are you American?" Wilson asked, noting her accent for the first time.

"I'm from San Francisco, yes," Willow answered.

"And—and the other people, are they a variety of nationalities?"

"It's not like I always ask. I don't even know if Wigfrid is really Scandinavian or not. She says she is, but that could be because she's in-character."

"In-character?"

"Wig's a performance artist. She's in-character as a Valkyrie and has lost touch with reality."

"Is she stable?"
"She's about as sane as this world is."

"Has she told you the specifics of how Maxwell sent her here?"

"She has, but it isn't my story to tell."

"Well, what about yours?"

She looked at him challengingly. "You first."

Wilson dove into the tale about how Maxwell had contacted him, though he left out the threats to drag him off to a lunatic asylum. He didn't think that fact served any purpose and the last thing he wanted to do was give Willow the impression that he was an axe murderer. Instead, he told her about Maxwell's voice coming over the radio, the Forbidden Knowledge, and constructing the machine.

"Wait, let me get this straight," Willow interrupted him just as he was about to tell her about the shadows. "You let Maxwell into your head?!"

Wilson couldn't contain the light note of surprise in his voice. "You mean, you didn't—"

"Of course not!" Willow exclaimed. "As far as I know, no one has!"

Wilson averted his gaze. "Well, he offered me knowledge beyond—"

"Do you make a habit of stupid decisions?"

"I didn't seem the harm in it at the time! Besides, Maxwell seems good at tricking people! I bet I'm not the only one here who made a stupid decision!"

Willow had no answer to that, so he concluded his story by telling her about the shadowy hands that had dragged him into this world.

"Yeah, that story's similar to all the other ones I've heard," said Willow. "Except no one was ever dumb enough to let Maxwell invade their brain!"

"It's not as though I'm proud of it!" Wilson argued.

"Just don't make a habit of it! This place gets to you if you don't know how to deal with it. You start seeing things."

Wilson chuckled. When Willow didn't, he stopped short.

"Oh…are you serious?" Wilson asked.

"Of course I am. So don't go picking strange flowers, run away from hallucinations, and whatever you do, don't go anywhere without a light source."

"Why?"

"Because of the Grue."

"What's the Grue?"

"More questions?!" Willow exclaimed. "The Grue is the Grue! You go into the dark, it kills you! Simple as that!"
"I find it disturbing that you're willing to accept these things at face value," said Wilson. "Surely Maxwell has some motivation. There has to be some way out of here or else Maxwell wouldn't so easily travel between two dimensions. These flowers you mentioned—how can they—"

"Stop asking questions," Willow demanded. "It's irritating."

"What's irritating is that you haven't made any obvious effort to try to explain these things."

"Look, Higgsbury, I'm only concerned with one thing: surviving," said Willow.

"Don't you want to go home?"

"Would going home make me any less alive than I am here? It doesn't matter where I am. At least here there's things that are flammable and people won't call the fire department. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that I think this place is peaches and cream, but there are some places that are better than others."

It was such an odd statement that Wilson was unable to comprehend a retort to it. Still, the fact that this woman seemed to so blatantly accept her surroundings as they were without trying to discern the meaning behind them was unbelievably frustrating. He had to grit his teeth to stop himself from launching into a rant about what he thought of her views.

"You can try to 'explain' this world all you want, but you're not going to find anything," Willow said dismissively. "Do whatever you scientists do—research or whatever. You can do anything you want as long as you pitch in with the chores around here."

Wilson considered the offer, though he didn't see that he had much of a choice in the matter. If he was going to be in this world for the discernible future, he would need to learn as much about it as possible. As much as he detested human contact, he needed the guidance of experienced survivalists and Willow and Wigfrid seemed capable of taking care of themselves.

"I'll take you up on that offer," Wilson agreed.

"Good, then you can get started on making some traps," said Willow. "You can weave, right?"

"Well, I—"

"Never mind, I'll do the traps. You'd probably mess them up anyways with your…science-ing things. Go chop some wood. There's an axe over there."

Willow went into a vacant tent before Wilson could reply.

He was left by the fire pit. Chester was eating the scrambled eggs Willow had left behind, though Wilson wasn't sure if the creature needed nutrition at all. He waited, expecting her to return, but when she didn't, he ambled to a woodcutting area in the corner of the camp. Beside a wide trunk lay a pile of logs, and lodged into the trunk was an axe.

This was ludicrous. He was a scientist, not a woodcutter.

He'd grabbed the handle on the axe when a familiar face popped out of the forest. Her arms were laden with raw meat and a drumstick was stuck between her teeth. Although his memory was sketchy, he knew her because she inspired a sort of fear.

Wigfrid removed the drumstick from her mouth, met his eye, and marched right up to him.
"Wilson of Higgsbury, I have obtained the ingredients that will forge you into a great warrior!" Wigfrid proclaimed. "Behold! I bring you meat!"

She shoved the meat into his face.

"EAT IT!" she demanded.

"I'm not eating raw meat!" Wilson protested.

"That is why you are small!"

"I am not small! I am lean!"

"Being lean will not help you survive!" exclaimed Wigfrid, though she backed off and cradled the raw meat like it was her child. "Have no fear, Wilson of Higgsbury. I will train you in the ways of my people!"

"That is a kind offer, Miss Wigfrid, but I—"

"You will not call me 'Miss'!" Wigfrid raged. "I am a warrior, not a 'Miss'!"

"Okay, okay! Just don't hurt me!"

Wigfrid's lips pursed. "Has the Chosen One of Loge spoken with you?"

"You mean Willow?" Wilson asked. "She said I could stay if my made myself useful. She said I should chop wood."

"Excellent! You will make most refreshing company! The Chosen One of Loge has tired of my war stories!"

"I'm afraid if I don't do this right, she will make an axe-ample of me," Wilson joked.

Wigfrid didn't seem to know what to make of his incredible wit. Her mouth made shapes as if she was trying to swallow what he'd said, but couldn't quite do it. Well, Wilson guessed that only intelligent people would be able to comprehend his jokes anyways and Wigfrid didn't seem to be in that category.

"Perhaps your company will not be refreshing," Wigfrid decided.

"Why do you call Willow 'The Chosen One of Loge'?" Wilson asked.

"Because she commands the fire!" Wigfrid proclaimed. "She is Loge's representative in this world. Behold, she is at work!"

Wigfrid pointed to the fire pit. Willow emerged from her tent and deposited a large number of logs onto the fire until it blazed brighter than the sun. She stood still, and far too close, to the flames.

"Does she know what she's doing with that fire?" Wilson asked. "It seems unnecessarily large."

Wigfrid exploded with uncontrollable laughter. Wilson's insides tensed, terrified that Willow was going to turn around and stare straight into his soul again, but she didn't even look over her shoulder.

Wigfrid managed to control herself within a minute or two. "Oh, you poor thing. I give you a week. But have no fear, I will ensure you receive an honourable burial."
Still snorting with laughter and stuffing her face with raw meat, Wigfrid gave him some space. Wilson turned back to stare at the chopping block.

"I don't hear any wood being chopped!" Willow shouted from her place at the fire pit.

Wilson shook his head. He wasn't sure who he should fear more: Maxwell or his strange companions.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to kaaramel for helping me proofread! <3
Wilson's thoughts raced as he flipped over the bedroll. He'd just about turned his tent inside out, and now that everything was in ruins, and he was forced to confront the undeniable, unequivocal reality.

His glasses were missing.

Wilson let out a frustrated groan and sat on the ground. How could he lose his glasses?

Ever since his arrival, the tent he'd claimed as his own had steadily been redecorated to something that reflected his state of mind. Plant samples were carefully lined in a row, an irate bee slammed against the jar that served as its prison, and a field journal filled to the brim with indiscernible notes lay open. It wasn't his laboratory back home, but it served its purpose, and now it was in ruins. Everything had fallen out of order and it would take him ages before it was presentable again. All for the sake of his glasses.

Wilson hadn't even noticed his glasses were gone until he'd started keeping the journal. He'd gathered the papyrus and borrowed some charcoal from the fire. He'd been so excited about recording his experiences...until he noticed how difficult it was to read what he was writing. No matter how much he resented his glasses, he couldn't deny that they made research much easier.
His glasses were something of a loathed best friend throughout his life. Both Wilson and the world tended to agree that he looked like a dork in them, but he also needed them for some of the most critical functions of a scientist. The fact that they were missing was enough to send him into a panic. How was he supposed to record his thoughts? How could he examine new specimens? How could he accurately draw wildlife?

Could he construct new glasses out of available materials? Wilson pinched the bridge of his nose. Maybe. Maybe he could, but it wouldn't be the same. His best hope was to find them, if that was possible, and he tried to think back to when he'd last seen them.

The river.

The memory flooded back. He'd stood by the riverbank, strained to see a strange shadow on the other side...He'd put on his glasses...Then Chester had come.

As if sensing his thoughts, Chester entered the tent. Panting, he slobbered at Wilson's feet.

"I don't have your eye bone," Wilson told him. Despite himself, he knelt down and petted his head. "Little scoundrel. I hope you know that this is your fault."

His glasses must've flown off in that moment or perhaps in the moments after he was caught in Wigfrid's snare. It was the only explanation he had, unless Willow had found them in his clothing.

Well, he didn't have much of a choice. He would have to speak to Willow.

"Steady, Wilson," he said. He straightened his vest. "She's just a woman. What could she possibly do to you?"

_Probably kill you for insinuating that because she is a woman, she can do no harm_, Wilson's thoughts answered.

Hm. That was true.

Still, he didn't have any other options. Wilson emerged from his tent and scanned the campground.

The campground had expanded since Wilson's arrival earlier that month. There were now three tents and each bore the distinguishing marks of the person who inhabited it. Willow's tent was practical, the smallest, and closest to the fire. Wigfrid had erected tanning racks around hers. Wilson's, however, was certainly the oddest, with an assortment of objects of scientific interest littering the immediate area. He had even begun the construction of a Science Machine, much like the prototype he'd been forced to abandon at the university. He was rather proud of his efforts, but the women seemed to be a little less than impressed.

It didn't take him long to find Willow. She sat in the shade of a tree and was busy weaving rabbit traps.

"Good afternoon, Willow," Wilson greeted her.

"Wilson, your Science Machine is an eye sore," Willow said at once. "It's also wasting resources. Those logs could've been put in the fire."

Wilson wanted nothing more than to point out that Willow wasted about as many resources as he
did. She was a bit too generous with the fire, for whatever reason. Still, her curt expression and her proximity to a nearby axe discouraged him.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he said.

Willow's expression recoiled from flat indignation to stunned indignation.

"...I insulted your Science Machine and you're the one apologizing to me?" Willow asked. She let out a small huff. "You really are a piece of work."

"My good woman, I am a gentleman. I would never insult a lady."

"Even Wigfrid?"

"Well, it's questionable whether or not she can rightfully be called a lady at all, but—yes. Even Wigfrid."

"Wow, good to know."

He chanced a nervous smile. She didn't return it, and to his surprise that stung a little.

"Did you come over here with another question?" Willow asked. "Should I write a book? Would that be more convenient?"

Wilson suddenly regretted the cardinal rule about being a gentleman, so he settled on replying, "You are exceptionally ill-mannered and sarcastic."

"Ouch, my pride!" Willow maimed getting stabbed in the heart. "I thought you said that gentlemen didn't insult ladies!"

"It wasn't an insult. It was a criticism."

"Criticism, my foot."

Well, if Willow was not ladylike, she was definitely an American.

"Just ask your question already. I've got to get these traps ready for Wigfrid. Some jokester's been stealing them."

Wilson furrowed his brow. "Is that so? When did this start?"

"Well, we lost a few right before you showed up and three more the week after. At first Wig thought it was an animal or the Krampus or something, but—"

"What's a Krampus?"

Willow groaned. "I should write a book. I'll tell you later. Anyways, too many traps have gone missing for it to be anything other than another survivor and when we find them...I'm going to strangle them."

"Is violence really necessary?"
"You still haven't figured out how it works around here, Higgsbury. Survival of the fittest. Now...what was your question again?"

"Hm? Oh! Yes, I was wondering...um...Well, um...if you remember when we first met."

"It's forever seared into my memory."

More sarcasm. Perfect. "Well, you remember how...how I fell out of the tree, and I...uh..."

"Died."

"Yes, that. Well, when I was...dead...or unconscious or whatever I was...and you...uh...well, my clothes were...and..."

He hoped to God that Willow would be sensitive to his feelings for once and finish his sentence for him. Instead, she dropped her weaving and gave him an empty stare and an even emptier smile, like she was enjoying watching him stumble.

"Well—uh, yes," Wilson concluded. "Well, when you were...washing...my...personal belongings...I was wondering if you remember if anything was in my pockets. Anything that you...removed? And left lying about?"

"No? Why? Did you lose something?"

"Er—yes."

"...Well, what is it?"

"My...my glasses."

Her face glowed, as if he'd just told her that Christmas had come early.

"Please don't smile at me like that."

"You wear glasses?" Willow beamed. "Oh, that's wonderful! You truly are a nerd!"

“I am not a nerd! I am a scientist!”

"Where did you lose them?"

"Er—well, if they weren't my pockets, then I must've lost them down by the river where I got caught in that snare."

"Do you think they're still there after all this time?"

"One can only hope."

Willow sighed. "Well, go ask Wigfrid. She can take you down there if you want them that badly. But when you get them back, you have to show me what you look like in them!"

"Willow, you are absolutely..." Wilson paused, searching for something to say that wasn't a direct insult. "You are insufferable."
"It's a hobby of mine."

Wilson stood motionless for a minute, stunned by Willow's directness and overtaken by the sudden need to put some distance between them. Perhaps Wigfrid would be less sarcastic about him needing help. However dramatic she was, she seemed to appreciate his presence and had even shown him some basic survival skills since he'd arrived.

He found Wigfrid on the far side of her tent, busy sharpening her spear for an afternoon hunt. Wigfrid was a bit of an oddity, he found. She only seemed to eat meat and she spent her days away from the camp, only returning at dusk and muttering about the darkness. There were some days when he didn't see her at all. And then there were days like today, when she wandered the camp and patiently listened to Willow's many complaints.

Wigfrid turned as he approached and smiled. It was a broad, appraising sort of smile, like a mother proud of her child. Wilson faltered, unaccustomed to someone looking as pleased as she did to see him.

"Wilson of Higgsbury!" Wigfrid proclaimed in her usual boisterous voice. "A pleasure as always!"

"Good afternoon, Wigfrid," he said. "Are you going out to hunt?"

"I am. Today is a good day to die."

"I...hope you don't actually intend to die."

"Fear not, Wilson of Higgsbury. Although I intend to die on the battlefield, I am not so easily killed and will only fall when all my opponents have been slain."

Admirable, if strange. "Could I ask you a favour?"

"I am always open to helping my friends."

"...Friend? Do...you really think of me as a friend? But we haven't known each other for very long."

"It matters not, Wilson of Higgsbury. Our bond was forged in this desolate landscape. We are friends."

Wilson blinked at her.

"You look surprised," Wigfrid noted.

"I guess I am," Wilson shrugged. "Not many people have expressed the desire to be friends with me."

"Why? You are very amusing!"

Wilson chanced another nervous smile. Wigfrid returned it without the slightest trace of ridicule.

"Er, well, my favour, right," Wilson jumped to the point. "This is a bit embarrassing, but I misplaced something important and I might've dropped it in the area where we first met. I was
"wondering if you could lead me to the river?"

"Oh!" Wigfrid leapt to her feet and brandished her spear. "A quest to find a lost token! This is a noble pursuit!"

"It's just my glasses..."

"There's no time to waste! Arm yourself, Wilson of Higgsbury! Let us go forth!"

Wigfrid shoved an axe into his arms, then grabbed his free hand and dragged him into the cover of the forest. From the other side of the camp, he caught a glimpse of Willow watching from a distance. She seemed to be smiling.

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Within the hour, Wilson regretted leaving the camp.

The summer heat had risen from tolerable to pulsing, so hot that he was incapable of thinking beyond the need for shelter. Wigfrid did not help. Although her clothing was much heavier, the heat didn't seem to bother her. Not only that, but she persistently ran ahead so that he lost his way in the forest, even though he was relying on her guidance. He wandered in a circle more than once before she reappeared with her backpack laden with fresh meat.

"Could you please stop running ahead?" Wilson asked.

"You are very slow, Wilson of Higgsbury, much like the Chosen One," Wigfrid noted. "If it is any consolation, she complains about the same things."

"It's not, and yet despite the criticism, you have yet to correct your behaviour."

Wigfrid stood at attention. "On my honour, I will no longer leave you behind!"

She promptly disappeared into the brush again.

"Wigfrid, wait!" Wilson called.

He didn't get two feet when he tripped on a root and crashed right into her.

Wilson crawled back up. Wigfrid hadn't even flinched at the contact. She knelt on the ground, her fingers pressing into the dirt and her expression thick with concentration. In front of her was a small indent in the dirt.

"The thief strikes again!" Wigfrid groaned. "Don't they have enough traps to sustain themselves by now?"

"Maybe we should consider sharing our supplies with them," Wilson suggested. "They must be desperate if they're stealing from us."

"A thief is a thief. They will be dealt with and they won't be the first survivor I have killed."

"...Have...have you really killed before?"

"Well, they were killers themselves," Wigfrid shrugged. "My honour demanded that I act
"accordingly."

"That's barbaric."

"That's survival, Wilson of Higgsbury."

"All this talk about survival. Are you really willing to sacrifice your ethics and humanity for that?"

"The survivors I killed were not human. There can be no question of that."

Wilson's body went rigid, as if his clothing was far too tight for him. Still, he swallowed and nodded sternly. He guessed that he could see Wigfrid's point of view, though it wasn't one he could agree with.

"Is killing this thief the best approach?" Wilson asked, keeping pace as Wigfrid marched through the trees. "What if they have information on Maxwell?"

"Are you still set on pursuing him?" Wigfrid questioned.

"Don't you want to go home?"

"As much as I detest Maxwell and would like to see him dead, I rather enjoy this world he has brought me to. Besides, Maxwell cannot be found, and if he is, he cannot be defeated by ordinary means."

Wilson furrowed his brow.

"How did Maxwell kidnap you?" he blurted out.

Wigfrid peered over her shoulder, her eyes dark and focused. "Through trickery. I wanted a challenge and he brought me here. However…my existence before was unsatisfying. This land provides me with the challenge I desire."

"What kind of life did you lead before?"

Her eyes went from focused to distant. "The river is this way. Keep pace and eyes open."

Yet another survivor as adept at eluding his questions as she was at survival. Was this typical of this world? Wilson was frank about his encounter with Maxwell, save for the desperate circumstances that had preceded it, so perhaps it was.

Wigfrid went off at a trot, with Wilson right on her tail. They traversed a slim path that cut through the forest, enclosed on all sides by trees. Here, the heat wasn't as much of a nuisance and he was able to concentrate his thoughts. They didn't go far when Wigfrid stopped again and held out her arm to stop Wilson.

She sniffed. "There's something out there."

Wilson also sniffed, but didn't smell anything. Except for Wigfrid's body odour.

"I can't smell anything," he lied.
"It's too light-footed to be a hound," Wigfrid noted. "Wait here and don't move."


"Stay."

Wigfrid bent like a primal carnivore and vanished into the underbrush. Wilson expected to see her reappear, but Wigfrid—animated, rambunctious, and as loud as all get out—had spirited away. The forest was still.

To his credit, he managed to wait for several minutes. He was without company save for the occasional bird skirting between the trees and the distant rustle of some small creature traversing the woods. Wilson’s mind turned over as he tried to figure out what she could have seen. Maybe it was one of the hounds she and Willow were fond of describing at length. They cited them as one of the greatest pestilences in the area. Hounds were wolf-like creatures, as black as the night, and standing at the same height as a full grown man. Terrifying, strong, and intelligent. Not something he wanted to encounter alone.

But here he was, where Wigfrid had abandoned him. The longer he waited, the tighter his chest became.

"Come on, Wigfrid..." Wilson muttered, scanning the area where she'd disappeared.

The forest rustled behind him. He swung around and raised the axe.

"I can take you!" Wilson shrieked. "If you're trying to scare me, Wigfrid, it won't work! I'm too smart to be scared!"

Wilson squinted. He thought he saw something beyond the bushes...but it wasn't Wigfrid shaped in the least. Against his better judgment, he stood up.

His heart leapt into his throat. Even at this distance, there was no mistaking it. The silhouette was definitely human...but other than that, he could see no discernible features. They were just...dark. As black as a shadow, despite being framed by sunlight.

He really needed his glasses back. Where was Wigfrid?

As he watched, the shadow flickered, like a bad radio signal.

God. What should he do? Should he run? Was it dangerous? What was it, anyways? Surely no living man could inspire such dread in him. He'd been warned 'not to trust unowned shadows', but Willow never elaborated on what that meant. Maybe this is what she'd warned him about. But he couldn't bring himself to look away.

What if Wigfrid had seen it and been killed while he wasn't looking? What if she was a rotting corpse at the silhouette's feet, tempting him to draw nearer while he searched for his companion? Could he risk direct confrontation? Was running really the best option? If he did flee, he'd have to expose his back and the last thing he wanted was to show he was vulnerable.

Wilson teetered on the edge of indecision. Then, the silhouette made his mind up for him.

Wilson felt as though a gigantic hand had reached out and squeezed his rib cage. He let out a sharp
gasp. He knew this sensation because he’d felt it before, when the machine Maxwell had him create had dragged him here. The hands tugged and, for what felt like the thousandth time since his arrival, his face collided with the ground. They started dragging him backwards, away from the light, away from Wigfrid, and away from the small sliver of safety he’d located in this world. He struggled. One arm broke free and he dug his fingers into the earth.

It wasn't as simple as searching for a weak spot and giving it a good kick. It wasn't as simple as screaming, as he was doing right now. The claws dragged him through the woods. Twigs and branches slapped against his body. Light retreated until the landscape was an unrecognizable labyrinth. Eventually he just stopped fighting and allowed the claws to drag him. His only hope was that whatever it was didn't intend to kill him.

His back slammed into a hard surface. The wind was sucked out of his lungs. The grip on his chest receded and warmth flooded into his limbs. Wilson landed on his feet and stumbled away, coughing to catch his breath.

Wilson barely took a step when the fine cut of claws scraped across his arm, tearing his sleeve. He let out a sharp gasp, all too familiar with the sensation. It was like when he was a school child and being beaten for doodling during class. But the claws that ripped his flesh seemed to dig much, much deeper, like they were set on a personal vendetta.

Breathing heavily, Wilson pressed one hand against the wound and looked into the abyss of the forest. He didn't recognize any part of it and the world seemed much larger than it had been before.

"...Wigfrid?" he said.

Nothing. Not even the gurgle of the river, no Wigfrid crying out her putrid war songs, and no Chester-the-chest panting away. Nothing was as he remembered. He wondered just how far the shadows had pulled him.

His thoughts trailed off.

There was an intrusion in the forest, and it wasn't natural.

At first, he thought it was a tall reflective stone and realized the error at once. It was surrounded on all sides by trees and overgrowth, but its peak rose high above the canopy, creating a long shadow that ensnared everything in it.

It was an obelisk. Wilson had seen structures that resembled it during a trip to Egypt he'd once taken, but those obelisks had shone with the desert sun. This one was as cool as a winter's night and as smooth as glass. There were, however, inscriptions in an indiscernible language that decorated the entire surface.

What kind of civilization could erect this in the middle of Maxwell's world? If it was of Maxwell's own construction, then what purpose could it serve? Maxwell didn't strike him as the type of person who created things willy-nilly. There had to be a purpose, even if that purpose was to confuse the hell out of him.

Wilson presently became aware of the smell of a smouldering fire. It was a stench he'd become familiar with since meeting Willow and recognizing her penchant for flames. Wilson circled the obelisk. On the other side was a small fire pit constructed at its base. The pit was the epicentre of a small campsite that included a bedroll, a backpack, an unlit torch, and a pile of rabbit traps.
"I found your thief, Wigfrid," Wilson muttered.

He stepped back and peered up at the obelisk. Who would want to camp at the bottom of that damn thing?

All the same, he didn't think they could be far. He'd have to lead Wigfrid here once he found his way back. If he could find his way back. He was certain he could do it, if only he could find a familiar landmark.

Wilson lodged his axe in the dirt—which he'd somehow managed to hold onto when he'd been dragged through the forest—and poked around the campsite a bit longer. The bedroll looked like it had been used and the backpack contained a few personal items. Among the items was a pair of worn shoes.

They were child sized.

His heart clenched. Was Maxwell so devious and cruel that he could send children into this nightmare?

Wilson was suddenly tormented by the thought of a poor child shivering and alone in the wilderness, drenched in their own tears. Wilson was by no means good with children, but the thought of it sickened him. If there was one in the vicinity, he wouldn't be able to ignore it.

He didn't have to go far to find answers. On the edge of the campsite, fresh footprints decorated the dirt. A few of them were human, but then there were others. Paw prints larger than his entire hand.

"Oh," Wilson breathed.

A faint rumble shot through the clearing. Then, the rumble became a growl.

Wilson was on his knees and remained still. The growl was coming from a spot just over his right shoulder, but he didn't dare turn to see the source. He already knew. He'd never seen the creature before, but its presence was as potent and indiscriminate as the shadows that presided over the night.

Oh, God. The hounds had devoured the child and now they were going to get him, too.

How many were there? Just the one? Did it have a pack?

Well, he didn't want to die here crouching forwards with a hound at his back. He'd have to make a decision. Wilson made a few quick calculations in his head, wondering if he'd be able to outrun the creature.

"You can join me, if you like. The beasts are unable to climb trees."

The voice sent shivers down his spine, more so than the beast behind him. He chanced peering up. Sitting on the branches of an evergreen tree, her legs dangling far above the ground, was a little girl.

Stunned, he was unable to respond. She was a small, dainty creature, as fragile as a butterfly with a broken wing. Her eyes had a forlorn, distant expression, as if her attention was constantly occupied.
"Run," she advised. Her voice was not raised, but it was heavy with urgency.

Wilson did the calculation in his head. If he was fast...he could make it.

He bolted. The hound exploded with a furious sound like a tornado and charged, its weight causing the earth to quake. Wilson dug his nails into the bark and grabbed the lowest branch. Then the next. He kept his eyes focused on the girl and climbed until he was level with her, heart pounding and struggling to breathe.

Beneath him, he saw the hound for the first time. Or, hounds, as it were. There were three of them, pitch black in colour, and surrounding the tree with a sort of primal desperation. Their jaws were heavy and their legs much shorter than a wolf’s. At least a wolf was more likely to ignore humans, but Wilson could see the intent to kill laced in their empty eyes.

"That was unfortunate," the girl remarked.

"Um—yes—I..." Wilson swallowed and tried to catch his breath. "I—I walked right into them, didn't I?"

"That is not what I meant."

"What?"

"I meant that it is unfortunate that you have eluded Death. Fear not, he will come in time."

Wilson blinked. "That's—uh, that's a fatalistic view, especially for a little girl like you."

Hollow. Her eyes were hollow. "I am no more a little girl than you are."

Wilson was beginning to detect a pattern with the inhabitants of this world.

"Are you saying that you feel it's...unfortunate that they didn't kill me?" Wilson asked.

"Death is the permanent solution to the predicament of life," said the girl. "I have often pondered Death. It brings me great joy."

"...I...I see...um...My name's Wilson, by the way."

"I am Wendy."

She extended her hand and he shook it lightly. Her skin was as cold as ice.

"This is your camp, I take it," Wilson reasoned.

"It was," she admitted.

"Odd choice for a campsite. Near the obelisk, I mean."

"I find it comforting."

"So how long have you been in this tree?" Wilson asked, changing the subject.
"An hour or so," Wendy shrugged. "I do not know how the hounds were drawn to me. I am careful not to attract attention."

Wilson narrowed his eyes. "Are you the one who's been stealing our traps?"

Wendy was quiet for a minute. "I am. I am not suited to hunting."

"So you scavenge."

"When I can, yes. I apologize for the thefts, but I do not trust others, especially in this world."

"I can't say I blame you, what with Maxwell roaming around."

"Yes," she nodded. "Maxwell. The most confused soul who wanders this wretched land. I would pity him, if I did not despise him so."

Wendy paused and stared at him intently. Wilson shuffled away.

"...Well, I don't think we'll have to wait too long up here," said Wilson. "We can't be too far from our camp, and my companion, Wigfrid, can make quick work of these scoundrels. We should...um...why—why are you looking at me like that?"

Wendy leaned forwards. "You have seen it."

"Seen what?" Wilson asked.

"The Forbidden Knowledge. You have seen it."

Wilson's eyes went wide. "How...how do you know that?"

"I can see it in your face."

"But—it's not like I remember any of it. I don't even remember how—"

"The Forbidden Knowledge is the raw manifestation of nightmares. You may lock the memory away, suppress it if you wish, but it is never truly forgotten. It's like forgetting a dream when you awake. I have not seen the Forbidden Knowledge myself, but I will never forget the look of someone who has seen beyond time and space."

For the first time, Wilson dared to look Wendy in the eye. Wendy scooted closer, her face lit with curiosity. Wilson instinctively moved out of reach and pressed his back against the truck.

"Are you here by yourself?" Wilson asked.

Another pause, then she said, "We are never truly alone."

"I suppose that's—that's technically true. I mean, there may not always be other people around, but there's—well. Insects and animals and bacteria, although whether or not they're sentient enough for—for us to be considered—please stop looking at me like that. It's highly unnerving, not to mention rude and it's making me nervous."
"You are different from the other people here," Wendy noted. She outstretched her hand, her skeletal fingers reaching for his face as if entranced by a dream.

Wilson took the only escape route available to him: he crawled around the trunk to an adjacent branch.

"Stay back!" Wilson demanded, and fortunately he sounded a lot braver than he actually felt. "Okay, new rule. You stay at least five feet away at all time. Once Wigfrid comes to rescue us, we'll head back to camp together."

Wendy broke her stare to look at the hounds pacing the tree below.

"If we are fortunate, she will not come," said Wendy.

Wilson did not share Wendy's hopes.

Wigfrid didn't come.

Wilson surveyed the clearing surrounding the obelisk. The sun was retreating over the horizon, casting an eerie orange glow over the forest. Time had dragged throughout the afternoon and early evening and Wendy's lack of ability for articulate conversation didn't help. Wilson had never been much for human interaction, but in this fragile little girl he'd met his match. He'd finally met someone who was worse at basic socializing than he was.

Wendy hadn't made any attempt to offer solutions to their problem. Two hounds still roamed the area, though the other had wandered away as an easier meal had caught their attention. Wilson's mind spun with possible ways out. However, his companion seemed to be tempting 'Death' by her inactivity.

Instead, she sat still on her branch, sometimes looking around, and sometimes stroking a flower that rested in the palm of her hand. He guessed he couldn't expect too much from a child.

"The sun is setting," Wilson reminded her.

She didn't answer.

"We, uh, should start thinking about a way to get down from here," said Wilson. "I'm told that we don't want to be out after dark."

"Yes," said Wendy. "The Grue. Perhaps an even more tragic figure than Maxwell, himself."

"R—right. Well, if you have any suggestions, feel free—feel free to volunteer your...suggestions."

"Life is meaningless. I embrace the possibility of death."

Wilson felt something within him flare like a blossoming fire. "Young lady, if there's one thing I can't stand, it's people who just roll over and accept things the way they are. If you aren't going to try to get out of this predicament, then—then...well, I don't know what to think. But it's not good."

Wendy's hand froze over the flower, but she did not raise her gaze. He watched her carefully.
"You seem to be attached to that flower," he murmured.

"It belonged to my sister," Wendy explained. "She died."

"Oh. Oh, I'm—I'm so sorry."

"It's alright. She is fortunate to no longer be subjected to the sufferings of existence."

"Were you very close?"

"She was my twin. We were born together. We had intended to die together."

Wilson averted his gaze. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Of course you did not know. I had not told you before." Wendy cradled the flower. "Abigail can't help us. She is sleeping."

"Right. Um. But—but seriously, we should think of a way down from here before it gets dark."

"I suppose we must. Abigail would be disappointed if I were to perish in a tree. If we are to leave, perhaps now is our chance to do so."

Wilson followed her gaze.

The clearing was empty. No hounds, no wildlife. Even the birds seemed to have gone silent.

"Where did they go?" Wilson asked.

"The Grue approaches," said Wendy. "We will require light."

Well, either he stayed up here and got eaten by the Grue—whatever that was—or he jumped down and got eaten by hounds, if they were hiding. Scanning the clearing, he spotted the torch lying at the base of the obelisk.

"I'll jump down," said Wilson. "If I don't die, follow me."

Wilson swung his legs down and dangled from the branch. He hung there for a second before dropping. No hounds. No Grue. Nothing. He allowed himself to breathe again. Seconds later, he was joined by Wendy.

He rushed to the obelisk's base as the last light receded over the horizon. Wilson raised the torch, and thanks to Willow's instruction, he was able to light it just as night settled in.

"Well done," said Wendy, joining him. "I can never be rid of the prevailing feeling of being watched from the shadows, but at least the Grue is unable to approach."

"How do you know about the Grue?" Wilson pressed.

"It was my sister who shared the knowledge with me," Wendy explained. "She was like you. She was fascinated by this world and it was her undoing."

"Um...right. Thanks. I think. Well, um, we should—we should try to find a way back to my—our
camp. I know it's somewhere nearby..."

"It is in that direction. I can show you the way."

"Okay. Okay, then this should be...wait." Wilson paused.

There was a voice on the wind.

"Do you hear that?" Wilson asked.

Wendy tilted her head. "Oh, that is just the obelisk. Pay it no mind."

Wilson faced the obelisk, which lit like a pillar of fire in the light of the torch. The more he paid attention to the whispers, he more potent they became and the more they sounded like an effervescent and unheard prayer.

"It sounds like chanting," Wilson noted. "Hold this, will you?"

Wilson handed Wendy the torch and she held it as high as her short arms could. Wilson approached the obelisk.

"We should move on," said Wendy.

"Just a minute. I want to have a closer look at these markings."

Wilson put his head close to the stone. Sure enough, the whispers became much louder when he was nearer.

"It's definitely coming from the obelisk," Wilson muttered. "But how...?"

He outstretched his hand.

"I would not do that," Wendy chimed in. "You are not ready."

"I just want to examine these markings. It'll only take a minute. I can't have a proper look at these unless it's daylight, anyways."

Wilson felt Wendy's vacant eyes trained on him. Against his better judgment, he reached out and placed his right hand flat against the stone. It was about as cold as Wendy's hands and he could see his face reflected back at him. It was the first time in weeks that he'd had a proper look at his appearance. The bags under his eyes were more prominent, but his brow was pinched in intrigue.

He could still hear the whispers. They were louder, though they spoke in a language he wasn't familiar with.

"Can you hear them?" Wilson asked.

"Of course," said Wendy. "You should remove your hand."

"What is this strange language...? The more I look at it, the more it seems familiar somehow..."

"Please remove your hand."
"I...I feel like I've seen this before, like—like I've seen it somewhere, but I can't...I can't think with all this noise..."

"Wilson. Step away from the obelisk. If you look too long, they will see you."

But he couldn't. Such a task seemed impossible. He felt as though he was witnessing the universe unravel and peering into dark corners he hadn't been able to see before. His reflection came into focus, staring at him with the same spark of interest that he showed it.

His reflection smiled.

Wendy was talking and tugging at his sleeve, and the voices that he now realized were coming from inside his head were buzzing. The world swam, but Wilson's reflection was motionless, fixing on him with an appraising sort of stare.

Wilson tried to remove his hand.

It was stuck.

"Um..." Wilson shook himself out of his daze and looked to Wendy. "I appear to be stuck."

Wendy's expression was flat and unshakable. "I told you not to look."

His reflection in the obelisk shivered. Then, it reached forwards.

Black hands emerged from the surface and grabbed his wrist. Wilson was pulled forwards. His face hit the side of the obelisk. Wendy impaled the torch on the ground and grabbed his vest, trying to pull him back.

Just as he locked eyes with his reflection, his hand was released. Wilson toppled backwards, right on top of Wendy. At once, his blood ran cold, as if he'd just been submerged in icy water. Heart pounding, he staggered upright, unable to breathe or think under the crushing weight now on his chest.

"That was odd," Wendy remarked. "I have never known that to happen before. Are you alright?"

"I...I feel...strange," Wilson admitted.

"Hm. We should leave. The hounds approach."

In that case, Wilson felt he didn't have much of a choice. He, too, became aware of the baying breaking the night. Whatever had kept the monsters at bay for those precious few moments, it was gone.

He sprinted across the clearing, picking up the torch from the ground with one hand and his discarded axe with the other. Wendy was right on his heel as they escaped into the cover of the woods.

"Do you really hope to outrun them?" Wendy questioned.

"It doesn't hurt to try!" Wilson sputtered.
Wendy paused, and then said, "Your camp is in that direction. If you wish to elude Death a second time, then joining your companions is our best hope of continued survival."

Wilson changed direction, though he knew that it was already too late. The hounds snapped at their backs. The forest grew dense as if in a deliberate attempt to stop him. Wendy trailed behind him, painfully slow.

His foot caught something. Whether a fallen branch or a root, he didn't know, because both of them went tumbling down a rocky embankment hidden in the forest. The torch flew into the air and landed near his head. A pulse of adrenaline coursed through him, a pulse so violent that he felt like his heart was going to burst. But there was something else, too—something so subtle, like a gentle tug on the arm to get him on his feet.

The hounds prowled the forest above them. Wilson could see their eyes illuminated in the darkness. He sidled over to where Wendy was.

"Are you alright?" Wilson asked.

"I am," Wendy answered.

Wendy's knees and elbows were scraped and a trickle of blood traced down the length of her face. For the first time, her expression seemed almost human. She looked like a soldier: ready, phlegmatic, and committed.

Wendy unfolded her hands to reveal the flower.

"Abigail, can you come out to play?" Wendy asked.

"I don't think she can hear you, Wendy!" Wilson exclaimed.

He grabbed her wrist and started to run, but his tracks faltered. Too late. The hounds surrounded them, a pack of the most foul-smelling creatures he'd ever had the displeasure of meeting. Wilson passed the torch to Wendy and instead raised his axe.

"S—stay back!" he ordered.

Wilson hadn't expected it to work and it didn't. One of the smaller hounds launched itself at him. He closed his eyes and swung.

A pained squeal launched into the night. Wilson momentarily thought it was him or perhaps young Wendy. But it wasn't. When he pried open his eyes, he saw the hound on the ground in front of him, blood pouring from the side of its face and just getting to its feet.

Wendy moved like the shift in the wind. In one hand, she dropped the flower to the ground. With the other, she took the axe from Wilson, raised it far over her head, and dropped it down on the beast. Blood splattered her clothes and face, and her expression was unchanged. Like she was just playing a game. Wilson staggered backwards, the growing coldness in his heart numbing every sensation.

"Now Abigail can come out," Wendy said softly.
The flower blossomed.

Wilson fell backwards as the flower started to rise, accompanied by a haunting glow that lit the night. From the flower came a translucent sheet of white and two blinding, cold eyes.

"Holy Mary, mother of God!" Wilson screamed.

The being—whatever it was—did not seem to alarm Wendy, who simply knelt at his side and looked into the distance. The hounds shared a different fate. At once the creature shone red and thrust its entire being at the nearest hound, sending it flying. The hounds refocused their attention. The being continued to slam into them, as if becoming a projectile, and red light flared throughout the clearing.

"What is that thing?!" Wilson asked Wendy.

"That is my sister, Abigail," Wendy answered.

"I mean—what?! How? But—she's dead!"

"She is. And now she haunts me."

She said this like it was perfectly normal.

Wilson massaged his forehead. Talking pigs, sentient chests, vicious hounds, and now ghosts. This world truly was a marvel.

The light was dimming. Wilson searched for the torch.

It was shoved into the dirt and the light was dying.

"Wendy, the torch!" he cried.

Wendy swung around and reached for it, but it was already too late. The darkness encroached and swallowed them whole.

There was a long second when Wilson could only hear his rattling breath. Abigail-the-Ghost had vanished, though he could hear the hounds retreating as she pursued them.

"Wendy?" he whispered.

"I am here," Wendy answered. "Do not worry. Soon we will be dead."

Wilson staggered to his feet. "Quick, we need light! Where did your—your sister go?"

Something brushed against his arm. He swung around.

"What was that?"

Something sharp sank into his shoulder. Wilson fell forwards with a startled cry.

"Wilson?" said Wendy.
"Something bit me!" Wilson exclaimed.

The darkness ended. A white haze enveloped his vision and highlighted the surrounding forest in an eerie glow. His breath shuddered as the temperature dropped.

"Come closer, Abigail, so I can see," Wendy instructed.

Abigail's spectral form emerged from the woods. Wilson sat upright. She was a rather small ghost, he thought, and the flower that Wendy had cradled now rested on her head. Not taking his eyes off of the ghost, he reached up and checked his shoulder. While his hand came back red, the pain had receded.

"It's not serious," he deduced. "It startled me more than anything."

"Foiled yet again," Wendy sighed in resignation. "We should return to your camp before the hounds return."

Wilson grabbed his shoulder to quell the flow of blood. It stung like his pride, but he was easily able to stand and follow Wendy.

She took his hand and guided him, but it was Abigail who led the way.

"I can't believe this," Wilson hissed. "I didn't think ghosts were real."

"Perhaps not in our world," said Wendy.

"Does she...speak? I'm curious as to what it's like to be a ghost."

"She speaks only to me. Please do not mistake her silence for impoliteness. Abigail is very shy."

Wilson couldn't reply. Ever since he'd touched the obelisk, he'd felt the impending sense of dread, as if he was about to face certain death without any hope of escape. But Wendy was unflinching as she traversed the forest as if she'd done it thousands of times before, even if it was entirely dark save for Abigail.

Beyond the brush was a glimmer of a familiar campfire. Wilson saw the outlines of the tents and trees and the familiar stench of charcoal.

Wendy really did know her way around. She clutched his wrist and dragged him towards the light. Abigail drifted ahead and was the first to emerge, and her emergence was met with a halted conversation.

Wigfrid and Willow were huddled around the fire. They rose to their feet as their party emerged.

"Hello!" Wilson waved. "I had a bit of a misadventure."

"Wilson?" Willow exclaimed, her eyebrow arched. "I didn't think we'd ever see you again."

"Try not to sound disappointed," he said wearily.

"Are you alright? You look pale. Well, paler. And—I'm sorry, who's this?"
"I'm fine, thank you," said Wilson. "This blood is my own. Nothing to worry about."

"I told you not to wander away. What happened, exactly?"

"He ran afoul of the Grue," Wendy explained. "I am Wendy."

"I found our trap thief," Wilson elaborated.

Wigfrid reacted at once. She grabbed her spear and jumped to her feet.

"YOU FIEND!" Wigfrid shouted. "You thief! You cad!"

"Calm down, Wig," Willow sighed. "It's just a kid."

"CALM?! This urchin must pay for her crimes!"

"She's probably just as hungry as the rest of us. Does your honour demand that you kill a kid?"

There was a great rushing noise as Abigail sped forwards and placed herself between Wendy and Wigfrid, for whatever good it did. Her palette shifted to a deep shade of red.

"Calm yourself, Abigail," said Wendy. "Their anger is justified. I have stolen. However, I assure you that it was out of necessity and if the situation were not so dire, I would not resort to theft."

Wigfrid's expression slid through many emotions in a short space of time: confusion, amusement, and finally acceptance.

"I...I suppose I can forgive a child," Wigfrid muttered. Then, she rounded on Willow. "Please tell me you don't plan on keeping this one."

"Keep it?" Willow exclaimed. "Are you implying that I made the decision to 'keep' Wilson?"

"I do not plan to bother you for any more than necessary," said Wendy. "I just felt the need to return your companion."

"Wait a minute," Wilson intervened. "We can't just leave this girl out in the woods alone. It's not right. I mean—the only friend she has is this ghost here, and this ghost is her—her sister."

Wigfrid and Willow looked at the ghost.

"I really don't want a ghost hanging around," Willow snapped. "I got enough ghosts back when I used to camp near that graveyard. Boy, was that a mistake."

"If Abigail is not welcome, than I am not either," said Wendy.

"No, that's not what I mean. I just—"

"We're not turning Wendy and her sister away," Wilson asserted.

Willow groaned. "I didn't say I was going to turn her away."
Willow turned and looked Wendy in the eye.

"You can stay for tonight if you want," said Willow. "We can talk about what to do with you in the morning."

"Good, because I need to tend to this," Wilson indicated his shoulder.

Wendy took a seat by the fire without waiting for an invitation. Wigfrid and Abigail settled for glaring at each other.

Wilson returned to his tent. The blood had soaked through to his vest and poured down his arm, accompanying the fresh claw marks. Messy, but fixable.

His tent was as he left it and he immediately started shuffling through his meagre possessions in search of the salve. Rummaging around one-handed proved to be difficult and it wasn't long before a pile of rotted books went clattering to the floor.

"Need help?"

He looked up. Willow was in the tent opening.

"Um—no, no, I got it," said Wilson.

Willow turned on the lantern and allowed it to fill the tent in a warm glow. Still no sign of the salve.

"Heh, I know it's around here somewhere," he muttered.

"Just let me help you, already."

Willow entered with a bowl of salve in hand, ready for application. A piece of cloth was over her shoulder. Clearly she’d intended to help whether he liked it or not. She guided him to his bed roll and sat him down.

"Really, this is unnecessary," Wilson assured her. "I'm perfectly capable of—"

"Take off your shirt."

"Absolutely not!"

"I've already seen you naked!"

Ignoring the pain that came when he flexed his shoulder, he pressed both his hands to his ears. A fierce blush burnt his face. "You don't need to remind me about that!"

"Stop being a child and let me help you, already."

"I don't need help from anyone."

"Shirt off. Don't make me force you."

Wilson hesitated. Could he afford to say no to that fiery and demanding stare? At last, he realized
that she wasn't giving him a choice, and he hesitantly removed his vest and then his shirt. He had to peel the fabric off of the wound.

"It's not too serious," Willow reported. "The salve should stave off infection."

Willow dabbed her fingers in the salve and lightly applied it. His raw nerves lit on fire and he instinctively flinched.

"That stings," he complained.

"You're such a wimp."

Wilson curled his mouth into a pout and didn't look at her face.

"So what did this, anyways?" Willow asked. "The Grue?"

"Yes, actually," he answered.

"Figured. It's a fan of biting."

Willow rolled up her sleeve and exposed her upper arm. The flesh was pockmarked with impressive toothmarks arched in a half-moon.

"I got this my first night here," said Willow. "It bit me twice before I got to my lighter. Pretty nifty, huh?"

"Er...that's not the word I would use."

"So what about those claw marks?"

"I'm not sure about those. Some sort of shadow creature."

She paused. "Hmph."

"So...you haven't really explained what the Grue is."

"I've already told you that I don't know. Nobody knows. The Grue only attacks when it's completely dark."

Willow's brow furrowed.

"What happened, exactly? Wigfrid said she got separated from you down by the stream."

Wilson told her about his misadventure as briefly as possible. She didn't look surprised when he described the obelisk to her.

"You got lucky," said Willow when he was finished. She started wrapping bandages around his shoulder.

"Yes, that obelisk was terrifying," Wilson agreed.

"I'm talking about the hounds. They can be persistent, to say the least."
"You've seen the obelisk, right? It's not far from here."

"I know better than to go near them. It's probably something Maxwell created to mess with our heads. Are you going to obsess over them, because I guarantee you that it's a bad idea."

"Heh. That's what Wendy said."

"You see? Even a child knows better than you. Anyways, you're all patched up. I'll clean your shirt and vest for you. In the meantime, you can wear this."

Willow removed the cloth folded over her shoulder and shook it out. It was actually a spare dress shirt a bit too large for him.

"Where in Heaven's name did this come from?" Wilson asked.

"I pulled it off a dead survivor."

He dropped the shirt.

"Wilson, it's a perfectly good shirt!" Willow rolled her eyes.

"It's been touched by a dead person!"

"Would you rather walk around shirtless?"

Wilson weighed his options. After careful deliberation, he pulled it on.

"Good choice," said Willow. "Come outside when you're ready. I was just about to serve dinner when you and the girl showed up."

Wilson tucked his shirt in. Willow had paused in the entrance and she turned back inside.

"What do you think of her?" she asked.

"She's odd and cryptic," Wilson admitted. "Aside from that, she seems harmless enough."

"Hm. Alright."

Willow left him alone and the tent flap shivered behind her. Wilson exhaled and sat down on his bed roll. He had a lot to add to his journal and he wasn't sure if he even remembered all of it.

Still, he was glad to have met Wendy and he hoped that he'd be able to convince Wigfrid and Willow to let her stay. She seemed to have otherwise inaccessible knowledge of this world. If she knew about Maxwell as well as she knew about the machinations that held this reality together, perhaps she was the key to understanding both. Perhaps she was the key to finding a way to escape. He was determined not to share the same fate as Willow. He wouldn't become complacent and accept his fate. That was exactly what Maxwell wanted.

Wilson sat up straight. He had shifted his arm—the good one—to scratch the back of his neck. Except his shadow, cast against the wall of the tent by the lantern, did not echo his movements.
A trick of the light. It must've been. Wilson waved his arm around.

The shadow remained still.

Wilson suddenly remembered the silhouette that had dragged him to the obelisk to begin with. He remembered the cold sensation of being plunged into water and how he hadn't been able to shake it since then.

Now, he started to piece together why.

"Hello?" Wilson said quietly. "You...you came out of the obelisk, didn't you?"

There was a long pause. Wilson chuckled. Expecting a shadow to talk back. That was more absurd than Abigail's ghost.

Then he heard a whisper. A whisper that didn't seem to come from his surroundings, but from inside his head. A grating, but quiet voice that clawed on the inside of his skull.

"We did," the voice hissed.

Wilson grunted and clutched his head.

"Poor little Wilson. You still haven't figured out how this world works. You really are all talk."

"Is that you, Maxwell?"

"Maxwell? No. That's laughable. Don't get us wrong. He has his uses, but he is so unpredictable and uses his gifts on a whim. Unlike you, Wilson. You're...methodical. Calculating. Intelligent. Your actions are filled with intent and you never take a step without considering all the possible options. Yet you're so filled with emotion that your reactions are so humorous! So unlike Maxwell, whose heart is cold. That's why you like you, dear Wilson."

He felt...something...caress the side of his cheek. He gasped and raised a hand to the spot.

The voice let out a quiet chuckle. "Look at you! We can practically hear your thoughts turning as you try to figure this out! 'How is this happening? What's this voice in my head? What do they want with me?' Oh, Wilson...This is a world that thrives on the impossible. It's everything you've ever dreamt of and yet you still think that you can escape! You should be thanking Maxwell for bringing you here."

“What…what are you?”

"We doubt you would be able to understand us. However...since we were forced to hide in your shadow when we left the obelisk, we suppose that we're your doppelgänger."

"So you did come out of the obelisk..."

"Indeed we did, but in truth our existence transcends it. Think of the obelisk as a radio that tunes in to our signal. It's a special sort of conduit. Actually...we've been following you your entire life. Do you think that Maxwell would have taken an interest in a meandering little scientist unless we had pointed you out to him?"
"You really are just one of Maxwell's toys."

The shadow laughed, and it was a terrible laugh. Sharp, like stepping on a nail. "That is a very amusing thought! We do enjoy your imagination. No, Maxwell is more like our toy. He knows we are here...but there is little he can do to stop us."

"If you know how to speak to him, then go tell him I'm not interested in playing this game."

Wilson turned on his heel and headed to the open tent flap. He never reached it.

The shadow sprung into life. Long, clawed hands circled the interior of the tent and pulled the flap shut. He staggered back.

"You're a player whether you like it or not, Wilson," the shadow told him. "We don't feel like leaving. In fact, your shadow is rather comfortable. Perhaps we'll hide in it for a bit and see how things turn out for you."

"That's rather rude, don't you think?" Wilson mused.

Another laugh. Quiet this time. "Ever the consummate gentleman."

Against his better judgment, Wilson thought of a question. "I saw you—or something like you—in the forest. You brought me to the obelisk, but I think you also wanted me to meet Wendy. Why?"

"That's very good, Wilson. Perhaps there's hope for you yet. Wendy understands us. We want you to understand, too."

Wilson flinched as a cold, tingling sensation crawled up his spine. When he looked at his shoulder, he saw the shadow of a clawed hand gripping the fabric. His heart beat faster and faster.

"I don't know what you are, but I don't want anything to do with you," Wilson said firmly.

"Oh, Wilson, your defiance is so endearing. Yet another thing we like about you. Maxwell was always a little too willing."

The hands on his shoulders clenched. He felt hot breath in his ear.

"We have a proposal for you, dear Wilson," the shadow hissed. "Do this for us...and we can help you escape this world."

"I thought you said that I should be thanking Maxwell for bringing me here," Wilson said. He shivered and clenched his fists.

"And you should! But we think you will change your mind. We want you to trust us."

"Why should I listen to anything you have to say?"

"Because..."

The claw removed itself from his shoulder and extended in front of him. Clutched between the pointed fingers were Wilson's glasses reflecting the light of the lantern.
"We have your best interests at heart."

Chapter End Notes

January 21, 2016: Whelp, here we are again! Big thank you to everyone who's supposed this story so far! I really appreciate it. So, the biggest news is that I did a quick title change. For the longest time I had no idea what to call this story, but I finally figured it out. Also as always everything is a work in progress and I'll still be editing out spelling and grammar errors. Feedback is very much appreciated.
Wilson pinned the struggling rabbit under one knee and pressed. In a single snap, it was dead. This was getting easier.

Throwing the rabbit's corpse into the sack with the others, he almost managed to ignore the stench of freshly drawn blood. Almost. However accustomed he now was to slaughtering these rabbits, his stomach twisted at the thought that he was the one to end their lives. He'd killed in the name of science before, yes, but nothing quite...struggled...like rabbits did.

It was an auspicious, cloudless day. Wilson stood on a fair meadow of rolling hills and blossoming flowers, the grass dancing in the wind. Like an oil painting, there was a sense of unreality in the air, like this place was too beautiful to exist. Like it was too beautiful to live under the fingertips of one so twisted as Maxwell. Wilson was only assured it was real when he saw the other members of his party stepping around the concealed rabbit holes, overturning traps to collect the prizes inside.

Wigfrid was off in the distance, her red hair visible for miles. Chester followed her every movement, or rather followed the eye bone sticking out of her pocket. She was checking the traps with the same bravado she used everyday. Tipping over a trap with the end of her spear. Killing the rabbit within. Letting out a victory cry and moving onto the next.

Wendy was more methodical. She didn't waste time with chest-pounding or unnecessary jargon. Wilson had learned that the girl had lived in Maxwell's world for close to a year and this was the
first time she'd teamed up with fellow survivors. He wasn't sure how Wendy had lived so long on her own. His closest guess was that she simply stayed out of sight. After all, Wendy had eluded Wigfrid—the expert tracker—so it wasn't beyond reason that she had some hidden talents behind her woebegone gaze.

He stood and turned to face the forest that lined the border of the meadow. Wilson faltered in his tracks. Wendy had appeared right behind him.

"You really shouldn't sneak up on people like that," Wilson gasped, grabbing his chest. "You just about gave me a heart attack!"

"Wigfrid is an interesting person," Wendy remarked. "She is self-assured and gallant. I wonder how much of it is a mask."

"Er...I—I don't know her well enough to, um, assess that," Wilson admitted.

"Willow is not so complex, I think," Wendy continued. "That is not to say that she is uncomplicated. Wigfrid lives a lie and enjoys the delusion. Willow lies outright and makes no secret of it."

"Once again, I don't know Willow well enough to remark on her character."

"And you...I cannot read you as well as I can read the others. Either you are inordinately good at concealment or something protects you. Perhaps it is both."

Wilson averted his gaze and busied himself with resetting the rabbit trap.

"You're an observant girl, Wendy," he said.

"When one spends as much time alone as I do, you notice things that others miss."

Wendy went back to staring at him. She had a dauntless, impenetrable gaze that peered right into the darkest corners of his soul.

Young Wendy was proving to be a bit of an oddity in the group. Although Willow had allowed her to stay—("As long as she makes herself useful!")—the little girl didn't behave in a way that Wilson thought that little girls should. She spent a disproportionate amount of time alone, disappeared for hours on end, had no qualms about killing, and spoke in odd and abstruse phrases. When they were all gathered together, she liked to discuss mortality and the meaningless of life.

If she thought life was meaningless now, Wilson wondered what she would think when she was a teenager.

"Well, um...how are you finding it here?" Wilson asked.

Wendy scanned the horizon. "It is a sad, dreary place. Someday this world will cease to exist. But I suppose the flowers are pleasant."

"Actually I meant—I meant how are you finding it among...among us?"

"Oh. You mean yourself, Wigfrid, and Willow. You are a pleasant group. However, it is only a reminder that life is temporary."

"Have some faith. I'll science our way out of this prison."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but Maxwell wields great and terrible forces. He is a formidable foe."

Now or never. "Wendy, I've been meaning to ask you...You seem to know a lot about Maxwell. I mean, more than any of us."

"I do not have the answers you desire. My sister knew more about Maxwell than I did."

"Still, if you were her confidante, surely she told you something. Anything you can tell me may be of some use."

"It is pointless to discuss it."

"How do you know unless you tell me?"

"That is not what I meant. I mean that if I disclose Maxwell's secrets, he will not take kindly to it."

Wilson opened his mouth to press the subject, but caught sight of Wigfrid barrelling up the hillside to rejoin their party. A fresh rabbit in hand, her presence dominated them all and immediately swept the conversation to the side. Chester appeared alongside her, panting away as usual.

"We have gathered enough meat for a grand feast," Wigfrid determined. "The Chosen One will be pleased."

"Willow longs for sustenance, but her hunger cannot be satiated by meat and drink," Wendy opined.

Wigfrid laughed and patted Wendy's head. "You will make a fine bard, Child! Come, let us return to the campsite and present the Chosen One with our prizes."

Wilson inwardly groaned. So much for interrogating Wendy.

"I'll catch up with you," said Wilson.

"Very well, but do not linger for too long," Wigfrid cautioned. She looked at the sky suspiciously. "I do not trust good weather."

He watched Wigfrid, Wendy, and Chester disappear into the trees. Wilson let out a sigh of relief. Alone at last. It was difficult to do anything in this world without scrutiny and he needed to collect his thoughts.

Perhaps he needed to rethink his strategy with Wendy. He'd tried tiptoeing around the subject, especially when Willow was in earshot. He'd tried getting her to talk about her sister, in the hopes that she would slip up and reveal something important. Wilson didn't think that her intentions were in any way nefarious. If anything, her words just now suggested that she was either trying to protect herself or protect them from the unprecedented truth that Maxwell represented. The more he thought about it, the more Wilson realized that Wendy was far too wily to fall for his attempts to draw the truth out.

He would have to be direct. Exactly what he'd been trying to avoid.

Wilson stared at the horizon, vacant of any sign of life. Was he going about this the wrong way? There had to be other survivors out there who could shed light on Maxwell's character. Maxwell certainly didn't seem discriminatory about the type of people he banished here. There was Willow and Wigfrid, both assertive, empirical, and competent. Wendy, frail and melancholic. Himself, an intellectual by trade. A diverse cast that shared few characteristics beyond running afoul of the same malevolent man.
If he could only freely interview the others and get them to discuss the circumstances that led up to their imprisonment, perhaps he could correlate some common patterns. If he found a pattern, he'd be able to understand Maxwell. If he understood Maxwell, he could think of a way to escape.

Wilson felt like he'd thought of all possible ways to escape back to their world. He'd thought about creating another doorway, but he lacked the resources and couldn't even remember how he'd built it. Still, his small experiments suggested that it could be possible. He'd been able to harness the latent energy that pulsed in every living thing in the land, rabbits included. Ever since he'd arrived, Wilson felt a sort of heartbeat underfoot and was beginning to suspect that he was sensing the magical phenomena he'd been obsessed with for much of his adult life. The Science Machine—the contraption that broke down items into their scientific components—was resourceful, however purely practical. It focused on items he could see and touch and interact with. Perhaps if he made something similar with the purpose of tapping into the magical effects of this world...he could get the edge he needed.

If he could understand magic, then there was hope. He could escape.

Wilson sighed and turned to head back to the trees, stuffing his hands deep into his pockets. Escape back to what, he wondered. What would happen if he did get out of here? What awaited him on the other side? If he brought back samples, maybe he could get others to believe his extraordinary tale about an alternate dimension fuelled by magic. A place where the shadows spoke and the earth hummed and the people were strange and alien. Or maybe he'd be accused of concocting a massive hoax. Still, he couldn't blame others for that. Until he'd come here, he wouldn't have believed that this place could have existed.

Poor circumstances aside, this truly was a remarkable place.

Wilson followed the path that led back to the campsite. It was a good thing Willow and Wigfrid had had the foresight to make these paths. Otherwise he would've gotten lost in the labyrinth of trees. Wilson inhaled deeply to take in the scent of moss and greenery and...a scent that didn't quite belong.

Wilson faltered in his steps and came to a halt. He sniffed again to make sure he wasn't imagining things.

It was a robust aroma that overwhelmed all others, inspiring visions of herbs and spices and fallen leaves and a thousand smaller smells that he never thought about. Wilson had smelt it before. It was an expensive cigar. His father had smoked them in the den at the end of a long day. The dean of the university had puffed one on his face as he scolded him about an experiment gone wrong. And Wilson had smelt it the day he came here...and a man in a pinstripe suit loomed over him.

"Oh, bugger," Wilson groaned.

"Nice day out, isn't it?"

Wilson swung around. Not too far behind him, leaning against a tree bordering the path, was Maxwell himself. His cigar hung out of one corner of his mouth.

"I have nothing to say to you!" Wilson shot. He quickened his pace.

He didn't get far when Maxwell appeared from behind a tree in front of him and intercepted his path. Wilson stumbled and glanced back to where he'd seen him before. Apparently the man could teleport.
"Don't be like that!" Maxwell gibed. "I thought we were friends!"

"My God, I did not realize that your voice was this irritating," Wilson grumbled. "What do you want, Maxwell?"

"I wanted to see how my favourite scientist was doing."

"Favourite? Don't insult me!"

"But it's true! Out of all my guests, you are the most amusing."

Wilson rolled his eyes. He rushed past Maxwell and kept to the path, but Maxwell's long strides allowed him to easily keep up.

"If I presented myself to Willow she would do her best to ignore me," said Maxwell.

"I should ask her how she does it," Wilson drawled.

"If I presented myself to Wigfrid, she would challenge me to battle."

"God forbid."

"And if I presented myself to Wendy, she would say that life is meaningless and ask me to end it all. But you, Wilson—you are so refreshing. You could do all that or you could do what you're doing right now."

"Which is?"

"Engage me in conversation."

"Is that why you brought me here? So you can have someone to talk to? You're going to be disappointed. I am not the best at conversation."

"Come now, I know you secretly love it here."

"About as much as I like getting stabbed in the back."

"You really have a chip on your shoulder."

"What's your motive for all this?" Wilson demanded. "There has to be some reason. Why did you bring me here?"

"Mr Higgsbury, you're thinking like a scientist," Maxwell said. "To a scientist, anything and everything can be analyzed, dissected, and experimented on. Everything has a reason for existing, every atom, every molecule, every calculation has a purpose. Even magic. Especially magic."

"Stop following me."

"But I need to make sure your accommodations are to your liking! You are my guests, after all."

"Please go away."

They approached the border of the campsite and he could hear the voices of his fellow survivors on the wind. Wilson broke into a sprint, not caring how silly he looked or if Maxwell was right on his heel.
Willow and Wigfrid were gathered by a haphazard wooden table that had only been recently constructed. It was Wilson's idea. A table that served as an epicentre for ideas and collaboration, a place where their group could gather for cordial discussion. On the table were several pieces of parchment outlaying preliminary plans. Willow laboured over them while Wigfrid hovered at her shoulder.

"This wall's going to take a lot of resources," Willow noted. "That's not even taking into account the manpower. I don't know if it's feasible."

"I can assist with the construction of the battlements," Wigfrid established.

"Don't take this personally, Wig, but I'm not sure if I trust you with that."

"Why ever not?"

"Because you're better at destroying than you are at creating."

"But destruction is beautiful!"

"I know that, but we kind of need these things to not be destroyed."

Wilson hurried to Willow's side and tugged at her sleeve. "Uh, I have a problem."

"Good, acknowledging it is the first step," Willow drawled. "Look, I've been meaning to say—I know you worked hard on these plans, but is it really practical? It would keep the hounds out and give us a vantage point if we're ever attacked, but it wouldn't be much use against a deerclops. I don't think I mentioned this before, but a deerclops is big."

"Willow!"

"Like, as big as a small building big. I couldn't give you an exact measurement because the last time I saw one, I was too busy running for my life to ask him how tall he was."

"Willow, there is a serious problem!"

"Ugh, Wilson!" Willow moaned. "You think everything is a serious problem!"

Maxwell's voice rang out clearly across the camp. "Some problems are more serious than others."

Maxwell had come up behind them. The reaction was instantaneous. Willow stiffened. Wilson could see her searching for a distraction and her courage.

And then her expression changed from childlike to tough, cool, and professional.

"Just ignore him," Willow stated. "He just wants attention."

Maxwell gave Wilson a satisfied 'I-told-you-so' sort of smile. The sort of smile that made Wilson want to slap him across the face.

Wigfrid leapt right into action. She snatched her spear, which was never far out of reach, and held it above her head.

"Maxwell, you villain!" Wigfrid shouted to the heavens. "I challenge you to a fight to the death!"

Maxwell puffed his cigar. "No."
"You cannot refuse! You must fight me!"

"No, I don't think I will," said Maxwell. He turned to Wilson. "You see, she doesn't think it would be honourable to fight me if I don't willingly consent to a duel. Isn't that adorable?"

"Maxwell, you are a coward!" Wigfrid shouted. "You know I cannot be defeated!"

"On the contrary, I know I can beat you. It ruins the fun, actually."

"Do not test my patience, Maxwell! FIGHT ME!"

"Really, Wigfrid," Maxwell laughed. He clasped his hands behind his back. "You take your performance a little too seriously."

Wilson focused and studied Wigfrid's face. Her lips curled, her teeth bared, her eyes shuttered and vexed. Anger beyond all measure. Maxwell didn't seem concerned. He breezed by her and approached Willow, who leaned over the table without raising her gaze. Wilson could not see her expression.

"I see you've made some new friends, Willow," Maxwell commented. "I must say I'm a bit disappointed. You normally have more sense than that."

"Actually, I just have the sense not to indulge you," Willow barked.

"That's a good answer! I do love it when you posture like this. It gives the illusion that you're the one in control here."

Okay, that was enough conversation. Wilson stepped forwards. "Did you come here just to be a nuisance, Maxwell?"

Wilson immediately regretted speaking up when Maxwell's cruel eyes settled on him, as if he was a hunter who'd honed in on the perfect prey.

"You've made some interesting allies, Mr Higgsbury," Maxwell remarked.

Something stirred in Wilson's stomach. A sort of unchecked fear that sent waves of nausea through him, a fear that only swelled in size as Maxwell advanced on him. Wilson walked backwards, trying to keep his distance though he knew it was futile.

"Riddle me this," said Maxwell. "What happens to men who play God? What happens to silly little scientists who pluck at the strings that hold this reality together? I'll give you a hint. It's very...very...bad...and it's going to happen to you if you continue on the path you've taken."

Wilson wasn't aware that Willow had even moved until she intercepted and stood between him and Maxwell. Her arms were outstretched as if she, alone, was the only effective defense against this beast.

"I think you're done here," said Willow.

Maxwell smiled. It was callous and it was knowing and Wilson had never been more terrified by a smile in his entire life.

Maxwell shrugged. "I suppose I am. I've made my point clear. But if I were you, I wouldn't get too comfortable. These alliances never last."

He brushed by Willow, and as he went by Wilson he paused and bent over him.
"Let me know when you have an answer," said Maxwell. "I'd like to immortalize it on your gravestone after you're dead."

The lanky man moved to the middle of the camp, stood with his feet together, and waved.

"Tah!" he beamed.

In a puff of smoke, he disappeared just as suddenly as he had arrived. The tension in the air deflated at once and they all released the breath they'd been holding in.

"I hate that guy," Willow muttered.

"He did not want to battle me!" Wigfrid complained. "Me! Wigfrid, Shield-Maiden of Asgard! Devourer of Many Meats! Slayer of—"

"Oh, give it a rest," Willow barked. "Show's over. Let's get back to work."

Willow turned and tried to meet Wilson's eye. He stared at the ground.

"Any idea what he meant by all that?" Willow asked.

"What makes you think he meant anything?" Wilson countered.

She hesitated. "Well, Maxwell's pretty cryptic; he could give Wendy a run for her money. But I've known him long enough to know that there's usually a ulterior meaning behind everything he says."

"I don't know what he meant," Wilson lied.

Willow snorted. "If you say so. Look, I wouldn't pay attention to anything he says. He just does it because he doesn't think there's enough excitement going on and he wants to stir things up."

He didn't answer.

"Now, about this wall—"

"I, uh, have some science to do," Wilson decided.

"Wilson!"

He brushed her off and ducked inside his tent. His heart was racing, so much so that his surroundings wavered and a rising sense of dread overwhelmed his senses. That was far too close.

Wilson wiped his brow and knelt by his meagre possessions crowded together in one corner of the tent. He was going to have to get one of the others to build a desk for him so he didn't have to pile all his specimens on the ground. Perhaps he should go fetch that rabbit corpse so he could begin studying it and distract himself from Maxwell's haunting words.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, and his feelings were confirmed when he felt a pair of spidery fingers wrap around both his shoulders.

"Maxwell has stopped watching," a voice whispered in his ear.

"I told you to leave me alone," Wilson hissed.

The voice laughed. "Do you think it's that easy to get us to leave? Someone always watches in this world, dear Wilson. If not us, then someone else."
Wilson shifted his shoulders and the fingers retracted. He hadn't been able to rid himself of his unwanted companion since its arrival. He'd taken to calling it Shadow Wilson, for lack of a better term, especially since it shadowed him wherever he went. Although it was quiet most of the time and easily ignored, other times it invaded his thoughts and state of mind. Like a hovering parent with a totalitarian control over his every life.

"I told you, I'm not interested in your bargain," Wilson snapped. "I'll find my own way out of this world."

"We think you will change your mind," cooed Shadow Wilson.

"I think not," Wilson scoffed. Still, despite himself, he turned to where his shadow was cast against the wall of the tent. "How did Maxwell find out that you tried to strike a deal with me?"

"Maxwell doesn't have absolute control of this world, but concealment is difficult," Shadow Wilson answered. "We expected that he would discover us here."

"Will he try to...well..remove you?"

"Do not be so hopeful. If anything, Maxwell seems mildly amused. He will be curious to see how this turns out."

"Ugh, he's so creepy. Can't you do anything about it?"

"Will you accept our bargain?"

"No."

"Then we can't do anything about it."

"How considerate."

Wilson frowned. He pulled his legs up to his chest. He couldn't really hold back now, not when he had a shadow being right at his side.

"Are you omnipresent or is your perspective limited like Maxwell's?" he chanced asking.

"In our current state, our perspective is limited," Shadow Wilson admitted. "Among others of our kind, we have a greater understanding of our surroundings."

"Interesting. Like a hive mind?"

"Yes and no. We maintain our individuality, but our perspective is broader. When we projected ourselves through the obelisk, we left this collective consciousness."

"Are you one consciousness then, or several?"

"We possess the memories of many individuals. We are many, yet we exist as one. The experience is difficult to explain to someone so...linear."

"Thanks," Wilson murmured. "So where did you come from, anyways?"

"Is this another one of your interrogations?"

"Depends on whether or not you're going to answer my questions."
"Not unless you accept our bargain."

"You're really set on this! Well, at least you're determined, even if you are a...whatever you are."

Wilson shifted his belongings around and bent over his field journal. He was going to have to add more pages to it.

"You know, it'd be easier to accept a bargain if I knew the conditions," said Wilson.

"I have told you all you need to know," Shadow Wilson replied. "We will help you escape from this world if you do something for us."

"A favour for a favour. But I don't need your help, and I remember the last time I blindly accepted someone's word."

Shadow Wilson paused, and then said, "So how do you plan to escape, then?"

"Magic. That's how the doorway opened. Doors open both ways."

"That is the theory, yes."

"So, I find out more about Maxwell's abilities, his origins, and the fundamental rules of magic in this world. If I can unlock the secrets of the Forbidden Knowledge, then I'll be able to find that door and go back through it."

"Do you believe it is that simple?"

"Don't try to confuse me. I know you'll try to mislead me."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because that's what Maxwell did."

"We are not Maxwell."

"True, but you have a connection to him that I don't fully understand yet. Until I do, I'm going to assume that you're not being completely honest with me."

"A sound plan. A better plan than Maxwell had."

"Hmph."

Wilson opened his field journal and turned to the newest pages. On it was a rough sketch of Maxwell's door, the one he'd constructed in his laboratory. A fundamental piece of the puzzle that he didn't quite understand. He'd sketched it entirely from memory and was certain that he'd gotten some minute details wrong, but at least the overall picture was there.

"I wonder how Maxwell designed this," said Wilson. "It's a very complex mechanism. It must've taken him years..."

"This door is not of Maxwell's design," Shadow Wilson divulged.

"What do you mean?"

"Maxwell didn't design this door. He usurped a different design and twisted it to suit his needs."
"So who originally created it?"

"Those who are long dead."

"That's promising."

"Their creation did not kill them. Well, not this creation, anyways."

Wilson examined his drawing. "My memory's still sketchy...But it's made with a combination of technology and magic. I don't know if I can recall enough detail to build a replica, nor do I think I'll be able to track down the resources needed. Not without drawing attention, anyways."

"Do you still plan on keeping us a secret?"

"I don't think Willow would be happy if she knew there was a shadow thing in my...shadow. Plus I don't think you'll be around long enough to interfere, anyways."

"Once again, you underestimate our patience."

"Tell me...can magic be traced? Does it project energy that can theoretically be detected?"

"It can."

"If I can find a way to track the concentration of magic...Maybe I can correlate how magic interacts with physical objects in this world. Find magical objects, find out how the door worked, find out magic works, find out how Maxwell works. It's all part of a large pattern."

"How do you plan to accomplish this?" Shadow Wilson asked.

"That's the hard part," Wilson sighed. He lay back and stared at the roof of the tent. "I've been thinking about my radio, the one Maxwell used to first contact me. At first I thought it was just something he was able to do, but the properties of this world have me thinking that magic can't work without a physical conduit. After all, as far as I know, there isn't any magic back home, or it can only do it under particular circumstances. Maybe my radio worked like the obelisk. Maybe it was able to pick up on signals other radios missed, otherwise all radios would be spouting Maxwell's voice. I wish I had one so I could at least examine it."

"We are encouraged by your enthusiasm. We are confident that you will find a solution."

"I really hate that you're being encouraging. I wish you would just leave me alone so I can think in peace."

"We still wholeheartedly believe that..." Shadow Wilson trailed off. "Someone approaches."

Wilson gasped as a long shadow crept across the floor of the tent, a shadow that did not belong to him.

Framed in the sunlight, Willow peered down at him.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Willow asked.

"Er—yes," said Wilson. "It's how I science."

Willow narrowed her eyes dangerously, her expression vivid and suspicious.

"Do you know where Wendy disappeared to?" Willow queried. "I could swear she was in the
camp, but when Maxwell showed up she vanished into thin air."

"She'll turn up," said Wilson. "She always does."

"I guess. But since she's new, I don't like her being out of sight for too long. Don't want her stealing from us again."

Wilson frowned and averted his gaze.

"Anyways, I was wondering if we could go over this wall again," Willow pressed. "If we're going to do it, it should be done before winter settles in."

"Winter isn't for another six months," Wilson pointed out.

"A lot can happen in six months."

Wilson glanced at his shadow. It stirred.

"Now, Wilson," Willow ordered.

No choice, then. Wilson followed Willow out of the tent and to the table where the blueprints lay out for all to see. Wigfrid was nowhere in sight, perhaps still stewing that Maxwell had refused to fight her.

Still, Wilson was happy with the distraction. Shadow Wilson had gone quiet and Willow was a better conversationalist.

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Clawed fingers dragging him into the dark. An apparition of his dead parents. Maxwell laughing from the sidelines. And then—

Wilson gasped. The breath caught in his lungs escaped. He woke up.

He was quick to realize that it wasn't the nightmare that had awoken him. A shadowy hand stretched across his shoulder and crawled across his skin, sending fresh shudders up his spine. All the same, it wasn't as though he was sorry for having his sleep interrupted.

His tent was quiet and night had fallen, and night as always was still and foreboding. The Grue didn't enter tents and he was safe as long as he didn't try to venture out without a light source, but all the same he had a lantern next to his bedroll. It allowed his shadow to be cast perfectly against the tent canvas.

"What time is it?" Wilson murmured.

"You need to get up," Shadow Wilson urged.

"It feels late…I'm going back to sleep."

"It is dawn, Wilson."

"Sleep."

Wilson thought he might give up and leave him be. Then, the bedroll shifted.

Wilson released a startled scream as a hand ensnared the back of his shirt and lifted him off the ground. He hovered near the top of his tent, arms and legs flailing.
"This is not up for debate," said Shadow Wilson.

"Okay, okay. just put me down!" Wilson shouted.

"As you wish."

Wilson hit the ground with a loud thud. No sooner had he landed when he heard yelling coming from outside, a continuous shout that grew louder as its source approached.

The flap rustled and Wigfrid rolled in, spear in hand and looking ready to murder.

"Where is the threat?" Wigfrid demanded. "I shall SEND IT TO VALHALLA!"

"There's no threat, Wigfrid," said Wilson, getting to his feet.

Wigfrid's expression recoiled into one of pain and disappointment. "But…why did you yell?"

"Uh…" Wilson's mind raced for an excuse. "I shouted because...because I just remembered I left the kettle on. Back home. At my house. Before Maxwell brought me here."

Since he'd met her, he'd seen Wigfrid with many expressions, but never before had he seen her look so disappointed.

"Ah," she said. "Let me know if you are ever attacked. And now, I shall return to guarding the fire! Away!"

Wigfrid let out a battle cry and rolled back out of the tent.

"I admire your capacity for lying," said Shadow Wilson.

"Let's see you try it," Wilson stood up and pulled on his vest. "Now what's this all about? What's got you all excited?"

"We apologize for waking you so early," said Shadow Wilson. "We were concerned about Willow."

"Willow? What about her? Is she alright?"

"No, no—you misunderstand us. We were concerned that she would interfere."

"What do you mean?"

"We have found a solution to your problem."

"What problem?"

"Wake up, Wilson. You need a way to track magical energy."

Wilson groaned. "I told you that I don't want or need your help."

"Not even if we could tell you where you can find a radio?"

Wilson froze. He swung around to face its shadow. It seemed much more animated and lifelike than before.

"A radio," Wilson repeated. "Like the radio I had back home?"

"You're joking, right?"

"Hardly."

Wilson processed this, thoughts racing through his head as he came to a startling realization. He thought he saw fragments of knowledge he'd forgotten, things that had passed through his mind and then disappeared.

"How did a radio get into this world?" Wilson chanced asking.

"Another survivor brought it with him. He is dead now, but the radio remains."

"How do you know where it is?"

"It is in the marshlands. You will need to go past the meadow."

"Sounds like it's far away."

"Which is why it is best to get an early start."

"I'm still not sure if I trust you."

"Wilson, we realize that you are suspicious. We realize that your interaction with Maxwell has soured your opinion of us. But we can help you gain the resources you need to escape from his influence. Let us do this for you. If we show you where to find the radio, we do not expect you to commit to our bargain. Think of it as a gesture of good will."

Wilson hesitated. This seemed like a bad idea.

"Or," Shadow Wilson continued, "flounder about while you search for the answers. Your choice. Just know that if you want to fully understand Maxwell, you will need to understand us."

Every part of Wilson screamed. He really should know better, but all the same…if Shadow Wilson was offering him the radio free of charge, than what did he have to lose?

"You show me where to find the radio," said Wilson. "But that doesn't make us friends or anything."

"Agreed."

"I guess that...I guess I'll go gather some supplies, then."

Wilson ducked out of the tent to face the blossoming dawn. He'd be able to go without a light source, now, at least until the sun receded again.

He found Wigfrid standing guard over the campfire. Wilson hoped that he would be able to cross the meadow and return to the cover of the forest before the sun was too high.

Wilson crossed the clearing and went to a lean-in where they kept most of their supplies. He grabbed a backpack and started stuffing a few snacks inside.

"You cannot sleep?" Wigfrid asked. "Shall I tell you a war story?"

"Perhaps some other time," said Wilson. "I'm going out for a bit."
"Out?" Wigfrid blinked and glanced around. "Are you quite sure? As much as I admire your courage, you should not seek a battle unless you are prepared for it."

"Please don't mollycoddle me, Wigfrid. I get enough of that from Willow."

"Where exactly are you going?"

Wilson finished loading up the backpack and threw it over one shoulder. He grabbed the axe off of the wood-chopping stump.


"...The marsh," Wigfrid echoed.

"That's what I said.

Wilson got his bearings and headed in the direction of the meadow. He didn't get two feet before Wigfrid held her spear out in front of him, blocking his path.

"You've never been to the marsh before," Wigfrid noted.

"Yes, I have," Wilson lied. "I was there before I met you and Willow."

"Clearly you weren't in it long enough to understand the dangers. If you must go, I insist on escorting you."

"I don't need to be escorted."

"No, it's true! There are many dangerous creatures there!"

Wilson laughed. "Sure, I'll make sure to keep an eye on the frogs."

"The frogs are the most dangerous!" Wigfrid emphasized. "They are not to be trifled with!"

"Wigfrid, I know you enjoy a food fight, but I really think that you're being a bit too bloodthirsty. Now if you excuse me..."

Fortunately, Wigfrid hung back as he followed the path through the forest and back towards the meadow. Somehow it didn't quite seem as foreboding as it had in the past, though the crickets rang like church bells in his ears and drowned out all other noise. Perhaps it was because he saw the flicker of Shadow Wilson crawling across the ground as he walked, an ominous and strange companion in this strange place.

Even if Shadow Wilson was an otherworldly being he didn't understand, at least he wouldn't be alone.

Wilson smelt the swamp before he saw it.

He vaulted over a log and curled his nose as his feet sank into the moist ground. Still, this wasn't the time to fret over discomfort or about the putrid, earthy smell rising from underneath him. Not when he was lured by his shadow deeper and deeper into the bog.

The sun streaked between the trees, creating long tendrils of light that illuminated only small portions of the lush forest. Wilson was surprised by how rapidly the landscape had evolved from open grassland to a claustrophobic and compelling quagmire. It was strangely cool underneath the
dense forest canopy. Not that he was ungrateful for the protection, but the canopy also trapped a smell that reeked like rotting fish. A fog settled between the trees and made it difficult to discern his surroundings without relying on his shadow. In the distance, he could hear the croak of frogs.

He chuckled. "There's Wigfrid's frogs."

"If you are as smart as you claim to be, you will avoid them," Shadow Wilson advised.

"Not you, too. What's so dangerous about frogs? Are they poisonous?"

"No. But they always travel in packs."

Wilson frowned. The trees were beginning to thin out, exposing more and more of the marsh. He stopped at the edge of a murky bog that seemed to stretch on endlessly. He couldn't see the bottom, though he figured there had to be one since several tall plants protruded from the surface.

"Well, end of the line," said Wilson.

"It is near," Shadow Wilson claimed. "Go forwards."

"I'm not going in that water! Who knows what could be down there! There has to be a way around."

"You haven't a choice. The radio is in the water."

"Wait—do you mean to tell me that the radio's submerged?! We'll be lucky if it does anything if it's been in water for long!"

"The radio's fine. Get in the water."

"Water was not part of the deal."

"I told you we were going to the marsh. What exactly did you think that would entail?"

"I can't even see the bottom!"

He cringed as he felt Shadow Wilson's hands on his back. Then, it shoved.

Wilson hit the water and waved his arms frantically to avoid plunging under the surface. The water was waist deep, but the earth was soft and bled into his shoes.

"Disgusting!" Wilson complained. "Did you have to push me?"

"You are such a child. Come now, this is for a good cause."

Wilson shuddered, but forced himself to take one step forward. He had to pull at his leg to get it out of the deep mud on the bottom of the bog.

"Mind the mosquito," Shadow Wilson cautioned.

"Are you afraid of mosquitoes now, too?"

There was a buzzing noise next to his ear, and as he turned, he caught sight of an unsightly insect the size of a small bird. Wilson yelped and slapped it out of the air. The insect tumbled wildly, recovered, and flew out of sight.
"That was a mosquito?!" Wilson exclaimed. "It's huge!"

"Which is why I warned you," said Shadow Wilson.

"If that was a mosquito...how big are the frogs?"

"Never you mind. The sooner you get the radio, the sooner you can leave. It should be somewhere nearby, if memory serves us correctly."

"You're telling me you're going off of memory? Oh, that's reassuring."

He waded forwards about twenty or so feet before his foot caught something in the water. Wilson fell face-first into the marsh. He came up choking on mud and glared intensely at a dark corner of the forest where he thought his shadow might be mocking him.

"Water relief that I have you here to guide me," said Wilson.

"...Was that a joke?" Shadow Wilson asked. "If so, we have heard better jokes from Maxwell."

"Please be quiet."

"I suppose you do not want us to tell you that you tripped on the radio, then."

"Yes, even—wait, what?"

Discomfort forgotten, Wilson frantically probed the ground as he tried to dig up whatever he'd tripped on. His hands passed over several objects he couldn't see and wasn't sure that he wanted to see, until he finally got a hold of something distinctly box-shaped. Wilson got a firm grasp on it and tugged.

It took two tries before it dislodged from the soil and he lifted it up out of the water. However, the radio did not come up alone.

There was a pair of skeletal hands clutching it.

Wilson gasped and held the radio at arm's length. It was an exact duplicate of the one he had back in his laboratory, the same depressing, dim radio that had projected Maxwell's voice from this disdainful world. Of course, this one was beaten up and almost unrecognizable. Water dripped out of its speaker and it looked as though it had been chewed on. His biggest problem, however, was the skeleton smiling back at him. Wilson had become accustomed to the presence of skeletons in this world, but not being so close to one.


"Wag what?" Wilson repeated.

"Never mind. It is not important."

"Did you know this fellow?"

"In a sense. He is one of your predecessors."

"Obviously. I'm still curious about what a radio identical to the one back home is doing here."

"It is a long, storied tale."
Wilson furrowed his brow. "I want to know what that story is."

"It will take too long to tell."

"No," said Wilson. "No, I made the mistake of not asking questions before and look where I ended up. I trusted Maxwell without a thought, performed those awful rituals to get that door to work, and—I can't believe it. I'm just making the same mistake all over again by listening to you."

"Dear Wilson...we are trying to help you."

"Help me?! More like help yourself. You haven't really told me anything so far, only told me what I wanted to hear. That you have a way out of this world, that you could help me find a radio. But you haven't told me anything about what you want me to do in return and it makes me wonder..."

"Wilson, this is hardly the time."

"No, I think it's exactly the time," said Wilson. He chuckled. "You know, it's really quite funny. Everyone here seems to withhold the truth. Wigfrid lives in a delusion, Wendy babbles philosophical nonsense, I don't even know what Willow's problem is, and Maxwell is stringing all of us along!"

"You are drawing Maxwell's attention."

"Good!"

Wilson threw the radio into the swamp and outstretched his arm.

"Am I amusing you, Maxwell?" Wilson shouted to the trees. "Maybe I should do a song and dance number! I can't do either of those things, but I'm sure I could give it a go!"

"There really is no need for that," said Shadow Wilson.

"Hmph, I figured you'd say that," Wilson snapped. "You said yourself—what was it that you said when we met? That Maxwell was a puppet? Well, if that's how you view Maxwell, I wonder how you view me. It makes me wonder—am I just another lapdog to you? Are you trying to turn me into another Maxwell?"

"Wilson, we are trying to help you. You must trust us."

"If you want me to trust you, you can start by giving me answers."

Shadow Wilson was quiet, so Wilson paused before continuing.

"I'm not agreeing to any bargain unless I know everything," Wilson insisted. "Tell me what you expect of me. All of it."

He paced around the bog, tripping on the radio more than once. Still nothing from Shadow Wilson. Maybe he was just being his usual creepy self and playing a prank on him.

The water shifted. Then, something rose out of it.

Wilson only caught a glimpse of the thing before it swiped at him like a whip, a loud crack shattering the still air. It was a tentacle, purple in hue and spikes protruding from the end. Decorated in poisonous green spots. Its skin glistened in the vibrating sunlight.

Definitely not Shadow Wilson.
Wilson scrambled backwards as the tentacle swiped over his head, only to fall back over something equally slimy.

The water exploded. Multiple tentacles sprung from the water.

"I knew it!" Wilson exclaimed. He searched for a way out, ducked underneath one of the tentacles, and ran.

One of the tentacles seized his ankle. Before Wilson knew what was happening, he was pulled under the water.

He struggled fruitlessly but knew that he was no match. The tentacles were too strong and he hadn't had enough time to take a deep breath before going under. This was it. He was going to drown here, giving Maxwell the full satisfaction of his death. Doomed to never make a great scientific discovery, to die in obscurity, and to add his bones to the many unmarked graves that dotted the landscape. Doomed to never drag out the truth from Shadow Wilson. Overall, a disappointingly short life.

At least Willow wouldn't have another mouth to feed.

Just as his lungs started to scream for air, he became aware of movement overhead that did not belong to the tentacles. All at once, the intense weight pinning him down lifted and a large hand dove into the water to grab his vest.

He broke the surface and came up gasping for air. Wilson's legs flailed as he was lifted off the ground and whatever was holding the back of his vest carried him to dry land. Or, about as dry as land could get in the swamp.

"Those things are very, very mean!" a voice bellowed in his ear. "You avoid getting scratched, yes? They are stingy and make you sick. Wolfgang learn this hard way."

Wilson was deposited on an island of land in the middle of the bog. He doubled over to cough up the sickening water that scraped the back of his throat. When he regained his senses, he looked over his shoulder to behold his rescuer.

He was the largest man Wilson had ever seen. He towered over regular humans, his muscles rippling and flexing and about as large as his presence was. Whereas the water came up to Wilson's waist, for the man before him the water barely reached his knees. He was a sight to behold. Behind him, tentacle pieces floated in the water and whatever remained of the creature (or creatures) had retreated out of sight. Obviously their demise had come swiftly and without warning, much to Wilson's relief.

"Is Tiny Man okay?" the voice asked. "You are lucky I was near. I heard you talking to yourself and came to see what fuss was about."

"Er, I'm fine," said Wilson. "Thank you for helping me. Uh...who are you?"

"What silly question!" the stranger bellowed. His voice carried and was thick with an Eastern European accent. "I am Wolfgang, Strongest Man on Planet! It is good to meet you!"

Wilson had heard many lies since he came here. But judging by Wolfgang's hulking physique, he knew that that statement was no fabrication.
Hooooray lame transition chapter, I rule.

Truth be told, this chapter was supposed to be the beginning half of the next chapter, but it got a little wordy so....now it's a chapter on it's own. I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I hate everything I write so yay!

Lots of love to kaaramel for helping me edit!
Wilson had never met anyone like Wolfgang. He was unlike the conservative intellectuals that populated the university and so unlike the ardent Wigfrid, the assertive Willow, and the mystifying Wendy. There was something candid about this man, who did not partake in the many layers of deception that enfolded the world. Wolfgang was a sliver of light against the shadow, and the one incorruptible person in the world. He was even more innocent than young Wendy. But there was one thing the two had in common: their personalities did not match their appearance.

Wilson sat tensely on a log by an extinguished campfire, surrounded by Wolfgang’s small campsite. The radio sat in his lap. Wolfgang had been kind enough to fish it out of the waters for him, and although it was waterlogged, Wilson felt better to have something to hold onto.

His new acquaintance had pitched a tent on a small island in the middle of the bog. In truth, the location left something to be desired; the stench of rotting fish was in the air and the only noise was an endless buzz of crickets. Still, it looked as though Wolfgang had been entrenched in the location for a while. There was no encroaching plant life, tarps were strung between the trees, and
his tent was overflowing with supplies.

Who in Heaven's name would want to camp in the swamp? Wolfgang didn't strike him as especially smart, but surely he had more sense than that. He thought that camping on the marsh’s borders was feasible, but right in the middle of it?

Wilson shifted out of his thoughts to look to the camp’s owner. Wolfgang loomed over a pot strung over the fire, peering into the muddy surface of what Wilson guessed was his best attempt at a stew.

"You don't have to go to the trouble," Wilson insisted for what felt like the thousandth time. "I'm not that hungry."

"Nonsense!" Wolfgang contradicted. "My mother always say that good hosts offer food and drink."

God, Wilson did not want to eat whatever was in that pot. "I would hate to trouble you...I mean, it's—it's always best to reserve food supplies for emergencies and—"

"You do not need to worry," Wolfgang interrupted. "I am very good at catching food. It is no problem! Eating is my favourite hobby after weightlifting."

Wilson could believe that. Wolfgang's physique certainly didn't leave anything to the imagination.

"I am just so happy to see another person!" Wolfgang beamed. "I thought I was only one here and I was lonely."

"There's quite a few others, actually," said Wilson. "I camp with a group past the meadow."

"Ah, that is why I never see you before," said Wolfgang. "I never go that way."

"Isn't camping in the marsh a bit dangerous?"

"Not for me! I am Wolfgang the Mighty! And there is much food here. There are many fish and the Merms are very tasty."

"What are Merms?"

"Have you seen walking piggies? Yes? Merms are like the piggies, except that they look like fish and they do not talk so nice. I think piggies taste better than Merms, though. Not so rubbery."

"You...you have eaten the pigs?"

"Of course! Very nutritious!"

Wilson's stomach curled. He wasn't sure how he felt about eating a creature that displayed human characteristics and even talked in simple sentences. Still, he supposed that if he was desperate, he couldn't afford to be too picky about food.

"My friend—now he did not like eating piggies so much," Wolfgang mused. "I may have accidentally eaten a pig-friend he had made once. Was accident, I promise!"

"Your friend? So you're not here alone?"

"Ah, well, that is complicated. You see, Wes and I were brought here together, but he is not here at the moment. He is missing and I camp here in hopes that he will come back."
"Missing?" Wilson repeated. He thought of the skeletons and the hands that had been clutching the radio. "That's...that's unfortunate. But...you do realize that he could be dead?"

"I do not think so," Wolfgang insisted. "It is 'gut instinct,' as Americans say. Maybe you have seen him?"

"I'm sorry, I don't think I have."

"Are you sure? He is about so high and he has dark hair and he is very pale and he is very chatty. Wes—he has opinion on just about everything!"

"No, that doesn't ring any bells. Besides, all of the other survivors in my camp are women and they're the only people I've seen thus far."

Wolfgang's broad shoulders deflated and his expression darkened as it turned away from the fragments of the sun. Maybe he was more like Wendy than Wilson gave him credit for. But then Wolfgang rebounded and he perked up once again.

"I understand," said Wolfgang. "It was slim chance at best and—wait...you camp with women?"

"I am a gentleman," Wilson asserted. "I would never dream of fraternization and other inappropriate behaviour. We all have separate tents and respect each other's privacy."

Wolfgang let out a loud bellow of a laugh that thundered across the marsh.

"I believe you, Tiny Man!" Wolfgang grinned. "You do not look like type who would be un-gentlemanly."


Wolfgang's watery eyes faltered, as if in sudden recognition. He leaned forwards until he was almost nose-to-nose with Wilson.

"Higgsbury?" Wolfgang repeated. "That name seem familiar somehow."

"You must've heard of my research!" Wilson exclaimed. "I've conducted many studies on trans-dimensional fissures, cosmological time displacement, and gravitational singularities!"

"I do not think that is it. I am not what you call 'book smart.'"

"Are you sure? Come now, if you're familiar with my name, you must've at least heard of my studies in passing."

Wolfgang smiled. "You are very sure of yourself!"

"That's because I know my theories are right," said Wilson. "This place is proof of the existence of alternate space-time continuums."

"Maybe it was something Wes mentioned to me. He likes reading things like that."

Wilson latched onto his excitement, feeling the questions tumble out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Is Wes an intellectual, then? Perhaps a fellow scientist?"

"Wes? Ha! Never! Wes and I—we are performers with Abernathy & Parker Circus!"
His heart sank. Images of clowns danced through his head. "The circus."

"Yes, we are famous performers in America," Wolfgang continued. "I must have lost job by now because I have been gone for so long, but no matter—I still hold title of Strongest Man on Planet."

"That's..." Unbelievably disappointing. Here Wilson was hoping that Wes was a kindred spirit, perhaps someone he could exchange notes with. But if he was anything like Wolfgang that had just been thrown out the window. All the same, Wilson regained his composure and tried to think of something positive to disguise his disappointment. "That's...very interesting. You must've, um...done a lot of travelling."

"I have spent most of life going from coast to coast to prove that I am mightiest. I met Wes when he joined circus when he was very young, when he couldn't even juggle or make balloon animal. Heh, you would not know that they are same person now!"

"How did Maxwell bring you two here?"

Wolfgang froze. "You know about Man in Suit?"

"Everyone here was brought here by him."

"I didn't know that," Wolfgang admitted. "He must be more powerful than I think he was if he got more people here. I do not know much about Man in Suit except for what Wes tell me. Wes always say that Man in Suit is responsible for everything wrong."

"What happened?"

"I do not really understand myself, but remember how I say that Wes and I were brought together? Well, actually, I was brought here with Wes. Man in Suit call me 'collateral damage.'"

"'Collateral damage?'"

"Let me explain. One day about year ago, Wes begins acting funny and talking to radio when he thinks no one is looking."

"A radio?" Wilson's eyes darted to the radio in his hand, an innocent, everyday object that had been the cause of all this grief. "Like this one?"

"Exactly like that one—except not so ugly," Wolfgang confirmed. "Then one night, Wes shakes me awake and says he need help."

"What did he need help with?"

"He needed help to destroy radio. Wes had tried everything to destroy it on his own, but did not have any luck."

"How difficult could it be to destroy one radio?"

"That's what I think at first, but then I try and radio is as hard as Wolfgang's head! But then, voice come over radio, voice that I later learn is Man in Suit, and he say: 'Nice try, but you can't back out of our deal that easily.' Then shadow hands appear and grab us both and we are dragged away! It was very scary. When we wake up, we are here. That is what I know."

"What was Wes's explanation?"

"I try to ask, but Wes—he does not tell me. He says it is better if I do not know, that all I need to
know is that Man in Suit is bad and to never trust him. Wes says to me that he is trying to protect me, but that is silly! Wolfgang does not need protection! Of course, Wes not listen and asks me to trust him, so I do."

Yet another example of one person's failure to ask questions. It was becoming something of a reoccurring theme for Wilson, where he needed answers and the individual he wanted answers from hid them. Wolfgang, however, was the first person he met who he thought genuinely didn't know anything. An honest character. Straightforward. Refreshingly simple, almost. While Wilson’s spirit sank with disappointment, he couldn't hold a grudge against Wolfgang.

"And then Wes vanished," said Wilson, rubbing his chin. "Do you think he voluntarily disappeared?"

"Absolutely not!" Wolfgang declared. "I am sure of it! Man in Suit is responsible. He must be!"

"Maybe I could be of some help. What happened the day he disappeared?"

"It seem like any other day," Wolfgang shrugged. "We get up to collect firewood, because it was getting much colder. In afternoon, I go fish, but Wes say he want to look at statue thing and do some exploring."

"'Statue thing?'"

"Oh—not long after we were brought here, we find strange place in marsh and Wes insist that we camp in walking distance of it. It is open area in forest and there is a statue of Man in Suit in middle."

"A statue of Maxwell? Figures."

"Yes, but here is funny part: there are machine thingies all around it!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Machine thingies!"

"Could you describe them to me?"

"Er—they are machines...and they have all sorts of funny moving parts and they are very nasty if you get too close. I tell Wes to keep his distance, but he has always been very interested in them. They are hard to describe. Maybe Wolfgang should just show you?"

"Please do," said Wilson. He stood up at once. "I have to see this for myself!"

"Okay! We will go on adventure! But first...I need good weapon."

Wolfgang ducked into his tent and Wilson heard him rummaging around.

Machines in Maxwell's world. That was a surprise. The pigs seemed doomed to live in a pre-industrial society scraping together a meagre existence. They survived as hunter-gatherers, with houses that did not suit their intelligence, and no complex technology beyond the simplest of tools. They didn't strike him as the type who would make outright machines.

And then there was this Wes character. Could he be the missing link he was searching for? If Wendy wasn't going to take, Wilson would need a different informant who understood the complexities of Maxwell's character. Wolfgang didn't fit that description, but Wes was the one that
had dragged them into this. Could Wes entertain the same strange fascination with this world as Wilson did? If so, maybe Wes could provide some insight. Just the type of person Wilson wanted to have a long conversation with, even if he was a circus clown.

That is, if Wes was even alive. Wilson didn't want to be as optimistic as Wolfgang was about that possibility. Still, he had a lot to gain if he helped Wolfgang make sense of the machines that may or may not have been involved in Wes's disappearance. If he helped Wolfgang, he gained a powerful ally. God knows he needed all the friends he could get. Wolfgang may yet prove to be useful.

Wilson was broken out of his thoughts by the bushes shuddering nearby. He jumped, instinctively searching for a weapon he did not have.

Great. Just what he needed. Another wild animal to eat him up.

However, instead of an angry roar, he heard colourful swearing. Wilson froze and fixed on the noise as it drew closer and closer, until the owner of the voice emerged.

It was Willow. And she looked terrible.

She was panting heavily, her hair was decorated with twigs and sticks, and her clothes were soaked through. None of this compared to the expression she wore. It was the face of a soldier who'd endured a thousand battles and wasn't yet tired of fighting.

"Willow?" Wilson blinked. "You look awful. What're you doing here?"

"Wilson Percival Higgsbury!" Willow yelled. "What the hell are you doing out here?! I've been looking for you for hours!"

"You have?"

"Damn straight I have! Don't you know how dangerous the marsh is?"

"Well—yes. I've been here before."

"Look, maybe Wigfrid will fall for that blatant lie, but I have a little more sense than that. When we first met, you'd wandered in from the north, and as far as I know there's no marsh in that direction. Plus, if you'd really visited the marsh before, you'd come better prepared."

"I...I, uh...okay, maybe I did lie about that. But I wanted to visit the marsh anyways. For science!"

Willow slapped her forehead and disentangled herself from the bushes. She brushed off her skirt and entered the campsite, still livid.

"How did you find me, anyways?" Wilson asked.

"Simple," Willow grunted. "I followed the smell of the fire."

"But...there's no fire here."

"Doesn't matter. I could smell the charcoal. The embers. The sad aftermath of a dead flame. I thought you might've set up a camp and—"

She suddenly stopped and looked around.

"Um...did you carry all this stuff in your backpack?" she asked.
The answer to that question presented itself. Wolfgang burst out of his tent, a large hammer over his shoulder.

"Sorry I take so long!" Wolfgang bellowed. "I had trouble deciding on weapon!"

He caught sight of Willow. Willow had gone stark white.

"Ah, another new person!" Wolfgang smiled. "Greetings! I am Wolfgang the Mighty, Strongest Man on Planet! It is good to meet you!"

Wolfgang advanced, extending his hand. Willow moved quickly. She slid in front of Wilson and extended her signature lighter.

"Stay back or I'll torch you!"


"How do you know? He could be just pretending to be friendly before he stabs you in the back."

"Wolfgang has had every opportunity to do that. In fact, when we met he saved me from some strange tentacle things."

Willow eyed Wolfgang suspiciously and did not lower her guard like she lowered her lighter.

"I'm Willow," she introduced herself. "And I don't trust you."

"That is good policy," Wolfgang nodded. "I like Fire Woman's spirit, though!"

"...Fire Woman?"

"Consider yourself lucky," Wilson whispered into her ear. "He calls me 'Tiny Man.'"

"Are you helping with search, too?" Wolfgang questioned.

"What search?" Willow asked. "Wilson, what's going on?"

Wilson told her about Wes and the machines. She folded her arms throughout the tale and didn't look the least bit moved by Wolfgang's tale or the fact that there was a man missing.

"The guy's probably dead," Willow said bluntly. "Anyways, we're not responsible for other survivors."

"You came here looking for me," Wilson pointed out.

"That's completely different! You're a part of the group! I just met this guy and I don't even know if this Wes exists!"

"Maybe if survivors looked out for each other more, fewer of us would be dying."

Willow whirled around. "Don't patronize me, Higgsbury. I think you're a little too trusting. What if Wolfgang had turned out to be less than friendly?"

"I still think it's best to give people the benefit of doubt."

Willow narrowed her eyes. She looked like a cat poised for the kill—unyielding and terrifying. She kept up her guard as she turned back to Wolfgang.
"This is ridiculous," she proclaimed. "This could be an attempt to lure us into compliance. I am not falling for that!"

"Come on, Willow," Wilson pressed. "It doesn't hurt to have a look. Besides, I want to see what these machines are. It could help with my research and maybe provide us with resources."

"Hmph," Willow scowled. "You're planning on going no matter what I say, aren't you?"

"That's right."

She groaned. "Fine, I'll come with you, but only to make sure that this guy isn't gonna try anything. And then we're going straight back to camp!"

"Yes, Mum."

"Did...did you just call me 'Mum?!'"

"I did."

"I am not your mother!"

"That much is true. My mother encouraged exploration and discovery, unlike you. If you had your way, we'd all hide in our tents all the time."

Willow's glare was intense and fiery. "When we get back to camp, you are so grounded."

"What for?!!"

"For back-talking your mother."

"Wolfgang hates to break this up," Wolfgang intervened. "But perhaps we could go look at funny machines now?"

Wilson and Willow shot each other dirty looks. He had the rising urge to grab her by her pigtails and throw her into the swamp. What right did she have to boss people around like they were in her personal army? He brushed past her and took his place by Wolfgang.

"Lead the way," he said.

Wilson trailed after Wolfgang as he merged into the undergrowth of the marsh and led them in the direction of the machines. They hadn't gone far when he sensed movement behind him and turned to see Willow right on his heel.

"How far is it?" she demanded.

"Is not far," said Wolfgang. "We should be quiet, though. The machines are not so friendly."

"Perfect."

Wolfgang took the lead, but Wilson hung back with Willow against his better judgment. He regretted being unnecessarily sarcastic with her, even if she deserved some of it. After all, she had risked life and limb to fetch him.

They waded through the swamp for a few minutes in silence, with Wolfgang directing them around hazards such as tentacles lurking underneath the water and some poisonous plants. Wilson almost stopped to take samples, but knew there were more important matters at hand. There would be time
for botany later. Over the brush, he could hear a strange noise, like a dying train or a broken child's toy. Wolfgang's machines, perhaps?

"You're crazy," Willow declared, her voice lowered just enough that Wolfgang wouldn't hear.

"I know," Wilson replied, barely listening. Her words hung on the edge of his mind, hovering in a state of partial existence where they flew through him as easily as he took in air.

"Walking straight into a stranger's camp. Letting him help you. That's crazy."

"Not all of us can be as cynical as you, Willow."

"It's not cynicism—it's common sense."

"More like pathological paranoia."

"Have you lived under a rock your whole life?"

"I wouldn't fit under a rock."

Willow slapped her forehead. "That's not—I can never tell if you're pulling my leg or not."

"You trust Wigfrid."

"That trust's based on a relationship—a friendship—that was built over months. I just met this guy! What do you expect me to do? Go up and give him a hug?"

"I don't think he'd be against that."

"Every time I've trusted a survivor without getting to know them, I've regretted it later. It's as good as a knife in the back."

Wilson thought of the university, the friendly acquaintances, and the dean and the students and the judging stares of everyone he'd ever encountered. Then he thought of his parents and Mrs Wickerbottom, and he started to think that Willow wasn't entirely right.

"Maybe you're the one putting your trust in the wrong people," he suggested.

She looked at him sharply, like the fine edge of a knife.

"Ah!" Wolfgang bellowed out from ahead. "Here we are!"

Wolfgang had stopped at the edge of a thicket and he ducked down low so that he was level with both Willow and Wilson. Wilson tentatively stepped forwards and peered over the bushes.

Beneath the canopy of the marsh was a large glade in the otherwise claustrophobic marsh. The land was flat, broad, and free of plant life. Instead of grass, the ground was covered in a thick material that looked rather like carpet. In the centre of the clearing was a statue of Maxwell, head thrown back in a silent laugh, arms outstretched, and evil, cruel eyes. All the same, Wilson immediately saw that this wasn't the main attraction.

Around the statue were two enormous creatures laying on the ground, letting out soft whistles like a steam engine. Easily tall enough to shadow even Wolfgang, they were contorted, strange things Wilson had never seen the likes of before. One looked like a bipedal horse, with a middle part that stretched like an accordion. The other had a solitary eye and a tall headpiece.
"What on Earth?" Wilson breathed. "Have you ever seen anything like this before, Willow?"

"No," Willow answered. She sounded confused. "No, this is new."

Wilson analyzed one of the horses. "Automatons, steam-powered perhaps. I wonder if they're remotely controlled?"

"What are they doing?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say they were sleeping."

Willow turned to Wolfgang. "And this is where your friend disappeared?"

"Yes, I last saw him standing near statue," Wolfgang indicated Maxwell's statue.

"It really captures his personality," Wilson drawled.

"What's that thing at the base?" Willow asked.

Wilson squinted. No good at long distance. He reached into his vest and put on his glasses.

He saw what Willow meant at once. At the foot of the statue was a distinct pile of metal, the features impossible to make out at this distance. It didn't quite look like it belonged. He looked up again at the machines. The horse. The one-eyed machine.

"...They're chess pieces," Wilson realized.

Willow's eyebrows shot so far up her forehead that he was surprised that they didn't fly off.

"The machines," he elaborated. "They look like chess pieces. The horse? It looks like a knight. And—and that one's a bishop!"

"That's...weird," Willow decided.

"Not for someone like Maxwell," said Wilson. "This looks like just the type of thing he would do. I need to take a closer look."

"Are you crazy?!" Willow demanded, grabbing his sleeve as he rose to his feet.

"They're asleep. Besides, we don't even know if they're hostile or not."

"They are mean," Wolfgang declared.

"Oh. I'll just be careful, then. Hold this for me." Wilson handed her the radio and stepped into the open.

"Wilson, what are you doing?" Willow hissed urgently. "Get back here!"

He ignored her. Wilson walked forwards a few feet until he was in clear view of the machines. They didn't stir from their slumber. Wilson tiptoed forwards, keeping his steps as light and as quiet as possible. In the centre of the clearing, he paused and looked at the machines. Still snoozing.

Wilson reached the base of the statue and bent down to examine the pile of scrap metal. Only now did he realize that it wasn't scrap at all: it was an automaton of sort, much like the metal beings that surrounded him. Except this one didn't appear quite as advanced. It was much more humanoid in shape, but it was obviously damaged. Part of its face was missing, exposing a brain of clockwork.
It was an automaton that didn't belong, and that bothered him.

He stood up and gestured to Willow and Wolfgang. They, too, emerged from the thicket and crept forwards until they were right next to him.

"Well, what is it?" Willow whispered once she was near enough to be heard.

"It's some sort of robot," said Wilson. "It's not nearly as advanced as these contraptions, though. I'd like to study it."

"You want to salvage it," Willow said in the most defeated tone he'd ever heard.

"What's wrong with that?"

Willow let out a frustrated scoff. "Wilson, I have a problem with most of what you do because everything is pointless. Trying to escape is pointless. Building a wall is pointless. Salvaging this stupid robot for whatever stupid reason you can think of is pointless. I don't know why you're obsessing over getting back at Maxwell and getting out of this place. No one's ever done it."

"If Maxwell is responsible for constructing those chess pieces, maybe he made this one, too," said Wilson. "But this one is inert. This could be a chance to get some insight. Maybe I could even built another doorway!"

"That's a waste of time! There's only one thing that matters here: surviving."

"Surviving to do what? Survive some more? Wait until the day Maxwell's creations get the better of us?"

"You still don't get it, do you? There's no way out. The only thing you're doing is wasting time and resources."

Wilson rose to his feet, his hands curling into fists. Enough was enough. "Maybe giving up hope is enough for you, Miss Willow, but I'm not going to roll over like a dog and admit defeat. Maybe there's no way out of here because you've never bothered to look for one! If I didn't know better, I'd say you like it here!"

"That's rubbish!" Willow countered.

"Is it? You've said yourself that 'at least there's plenty of things to set on fire!'"

"Hey, I'm being realistic! You're just fantasizing about something that can't and won't happen!"

"Oh, boy," Wolfgang breathed. "Maybe I should give you privacy, yes?"

"There's no need, Wolfgang," Wilson insisted. "I have a list of reasons of why Willow is wrong. Reason number one—"

He never got a chance to list his reasons.

The only reason that he stopped talking was because Wolfgang had gone white and his mouth had curled into a terrified and silent scream. Wilson followed his gaze.

The machines were shifting. All of the shouting must've woken them up. The knight was clumsily getting to his feet, pushing off of the ground with its head, and the bishop stirred from its slumber. Its solitary eye opened, and it was bright. Brighter than the sun.
There was a long pause in which they stood, frozen, at the base of Maxwell's statue. Wilson now thought that maybe it was laughing at them.

"Stay calm," he hissed to the others. "Maybe they have bad eyesight."

No such luck. The bishop turned to them at once and its eyes fixed on them like a hawk homing in on its prey. Its eye emitted a spotlight that circled them. There was no escaping it. No escaping the watch of Maxwell. Except this time, instead of silent observation, the one watching them wanted to hurt them.

"Or...maybe not," he muttered.

"I told you so!" Willow screeched.

She dragged him to the opposite side of Maxwell's statue just as the light from the bishop's eye reached its peak. In a single, jarring motion, the light flew across the clearing and glanced past Wolfgang.

Wolfgang was like a stone. Undeterred. Suddenly excited rage replaced his friendliness, almost suicidal in its intent to fight. It was an expression that Wilson hoped would never be directed at him. Wolfgang gripped his hammer in both hands and took a running charge at the machine.

"Wolfgang will crush shiny metal man!" Wolfgang declared.

Wilson didn't get to see the fight. His attention shifted as Willow's arm crossed his body and pushed him backwards. The knight was far too close for comfort. Steam poured from its nostrils and it scraped one of its hooves against the ground.

"I'll deal with this thing!" Willow declared.

"You don't stand a chance against that!" Wilson argued.

"Says you!"

Wilson tried to grab her sleeve, but she slipped out of his reach. Her expression was filled with defiance. He knew that expression. He'd seen it in the mirror one too many times, seen it in the faces of his colleagues and old friends. It was dominance. Unnecessary rebellion born not out of a need to survive or even protect him. It was arrogance.

Willow only got in one hit—a hit that bounced off of the metal frame with a thick clang. It body-slammed her. She flew like a rag doll and landed with a sickening crack, the carpet being her only saving grace. She rolled twice and then still. The creature advanced on her form. The steam from its nostrils heated the air.

Wilson searched for Wolfgang and spotted him wrestling with the bishop, both locked in close-quarters combat and not even aware of what was going on. Even if he could break free, Wolfgang would never reach Willow in time.

He could see it in the knight's empty eyes. It had every intent to kill.

There was a shrill cry that pierced the air. The knight halted in its tracks…and instead turned towards him.

It was only then that Wilson realized that he cry had come from him.
Now what had he gone and done that for? It wasn't like he would have any luck against the machine, and he didn't even have a weapon. The only nearby weapon was the spear on the ground nearby and he belatedly realized that it was broken. He pressed against Maxwell's statue as the knight towered above him, its gears groaning and grinding.

This was not how he'd wanted his day to go.

His mind raced. Physically he was no match. Could he topple it? Nope. No rope. Nothing to trip it over. Lead it to Wolfgang? No, that was out, too. Wolfgang had his own problems.

He wasn't strong enough. He just wasn't strong enough.

But, as he suddenly remembered his lungs filling with water, he realized that there was something nearby that was.

Wilson ducked between the statue's legs as the knight hit it. At once, the stone shattered and pebbles scattered across the clearing. He didn't look back. He barrelled to the edge of the swamp, relying mostly on luck. If this didn't work, he would end up as a bloody splatter on the ground. Still, he dove into the waist-deep water and waded as fast as he could. The knight, surprisingly quick, was gaining ground.

Over its cries, over the sound of the splashing water, he heard a familiar voice.

"WILSON, LOOK OUT!" Willow shouted.

Well, at least she hadn't sustained a concussion.

Wilson barely had time to heed the warning. The ground shifted, as did his senses. The knight drew nearer. Closer now. It followed him into the water.

He judged the exact moment the knight entered the point of no return. Wilson ducked under a thick tree root and crawled onto a patch of land, scrambling as far away from the water as possible. He barely made it in time. The water exploded with activity as tentacles shot out of its murky depths and mercilessly ensnared the knight.

The knight let out a mechanical wail that shook Wilson to the core. He lost awareness of his surroundings and dug his fingers into the wet soil, praying that he was out of reach of the tentacles. The last thing he wanted was to face drowning for the second time in one day.

When his vision steadied, he checked on the progress of the tentacles. The tendrils twisted around the knight, pulling harder and harder as it struggled. But Wilson knew better than to examine its predatory processes. There would be time for that later. He scrambled to his feet and gave the area a wide berth as he headed back to the clearing, heart racing as fast as his thoughts.

Within a minute, the tentacles had dragged the knight underwater and there wasn't anything left save for the gurgling water and an odd silence. Wolfgang had already finished off the bishop, and it lay on the ground with its eye cracked.

Willow was sitting up, though she wasn't in the best of shape. Half of her face was swollen, her right eye was black, and she clutched her right arm at the elbow. She trembled, but her voice was level.

"I think...I think I may have broken it," Willow hissed, indicating her wrist.

"Let me take a look," Wilson offered.
Wilson barely touched her arm before she let out a sharp gasp of pain and pulled back. Still, he kept a firm grip and tested her range of motion.

"I think it's just a bad sprain," said Wilson. "I don't feel any broken bones."

"It still hurts like hell," Willow complained.

Willow looked up at him as if she'd never seen the likes of him before. "I can't believe you killed that thing."

"Technically, it wasn't me, it was the tentacle things," said Wilson. He chanced a smile. "I daresay it was a checkmate! Get it? Because those were chess pieces?"

Willow, sadly, didn't look impressed. Her voice dripped with sarcasm mixed with breathless pain. "Hilarious."

"The only thing I can be credited for is quick thinking and sheer luck," Wilson smiled. "I don't have any medical supplies in my backpack, but I could probably improvise a splint..."

"It's alright," Willow stood up, still holding her wrist. "I'll make do until we can get back to camp."

"Are you sure? It won't take long."

"I'm sure. But thanks."

Wilson didn't chance a reply when Wolfgang appeared at their side.

"Those things were very angry," Wolfgang noted. "Everyone is okay, yes?"

"Willow sprained her wrist, but in all honesty, I think we got lucky," said Wilson. "We should head back to our camp at once. I'd hate to get trapped out here after the sun sets."

Wilson hesitated, unsure, but determined.

"Will you come with us?" Wilson asked Wolfgang.

Wolfgang's brow furrowed and his expression shifted from hesitation to decision.

"I will come with you," Wolfgang decided.

"Thank you," Wilson breathed. He indicated the automaton at the foot of Maxwell's statue. "Could you carry that robot for us? It'd be a huge help."

"Of course! Wolfgang can carry anything!"

Wilson turned back to Willow to help her up, but she was already on her feet. Still cradling her wrist, she led the way out of the clearing and into the treacherous swamp. In comparison to the machinations and Maxwell's statues, it seemed positively welcoming.

Having learned his lesson about the Grue, Wilson stuck close to Willow and her trusty lighter. It was dusk and night was quickly enclosing the forest. Soon it would be too dark to see two feet in front of them. But what had been swampland had melted into a meadow, and what had been meadow transformed into the thick forest he'd become so familiar with. Somewhere nearby he heard the crackle of a fire. Their fire, which would save them from the night just in time.
The hike back to the camp had taken most of the day. His leg muscles burned and his mind was clouded with fatigue, but the radio was still tucked underneath his arm. To think he'd gone to all this trouble just for a radio. He hoped it was worth it. Still, he felt that overall the day had been a phenomenal accomplishment. Not only had he acquired new clues about Maxwell, but the automaton they'd salvaged was a valuable asset. Even if he couldn't repair it, he might be able to use its parts to repair the radio.

Willow had been quiet throughout the walk back. He recognized her silence as the hallmark of deep contemplative thought and she kept looking at him as though she wanted to say something. But then Wolfgang would interrupt with some obvious observation and she would fall silent again. Still, there would be time for proper talks once they were back at the camp. Wolfgang, too, had grown quieter as night drew closer and closer.

"Wolfgang does not like the dark," he finally admitted.

"It's okay, we're just about there," Willow assured him. "Just stay close to me, or else Wigfrid might attack you."

At last, the fire came into full view. Their approach didn't go unnoticed. Wigfrid was sitting near the campfire, but leapt up as she spotted them.

"At last you've returned!" Wigfrid exclaimed.

She ran to meet them. Her expression was frantic.

"I have been awaiting your return all day!" Wigfrid exclaimed. "I was most worried when you did not return when you said you would, Chosen One. I need to tell you—Wendy has not come back."

"Wendy's not back yet?" Willow echoed. "Are you sure? She's not hiding anywhere?"

"No, and I have looked," said Wigfrid. "I am most concerned about her safety. I have attempted to track her, but I have had no luck, and I cannot tell if she is deliberately avoiding me or is just that good at disappearing."

Willow's expression was cool. "Are we missing any supplies?"

"No, everything is here."

Frowning, Willow looked into the forest, then back at Wigfrid. "It's too dark to go looking for her. We'll have to wait until morning before launching a proper search."

Wilson pursed his lips.

"I'm sure she's fine," Willow cooed. "She's survived a long time on her own and she's got that ghost following her around."

"Do you think...do you think she just left?" Wilson asked.

"I guess it's a possibility. The last time I saw her was when Maxwell made that impromptu visit. Maybe she just wants to be sure that he hasn't come back."

"I hope so."

"Young Wendy will need to be assured that there is nothing to fear from Maxwell so long as I am here to defend the camp," proclaimed Wigfrid. "No intruder gets past...who in Valhalla is that?!"
Wigfrid pointed dramatically at Wolfgang. As if it'd been given a stage cue, Wolfgang dropped the automaton parts and flexed his muscles.

"I am the Mighty Wolfgang!" Wolfgang proclaimed. "I am Strongest Man on Planet!"

Wigfrid blinked, confounded. Then, she seemed to regain her senses. She, too, flexed, as if answering some secret code Wolfgang had initiated.

"Greetings, Wolfgang the Mighty!" Wigfrid replied. "I am Wigfrid! Shield-Maiden of Asgard! Devourer of Many Meats! Slayer of Spiders! Bane of Maxwell!"

It was fascinating to watch two such loud personalities come together. To Wilson, it was rather like watching two explosions forming a much larger explosion. As Wolfgang and Wigfrid continued to flex and spout their respective titles at one another, nothing else seemed to matter to them. All that mattered was showing off how great they were and comparing their strength.

"I think they're going to get along fine," Willow said to Wilson.

An hour later, Wilson and the other survivors were gathered around the campfire. Night had taken its full hold, but the camp was lit and Wolfgang seemed more at ease now that the Grue was being kept at bay. Willow's sprained wrist was wrapped in a makeshift splint. The automaton pieces were stored in Wilson's tent for future examination. They were all eating the meal Wigfrid had prepared in their absence. Naturally, it consisted of nothing but meat, but after the events of the day Wilson couldn't complain about a hot meal.

"This is good food!" Wolfgang complimented Wigfrid. "It reminds me of old country!"

"Meat is the only diet a warrior should need," said Wigfrid.

"I cannot argue, although Wolfgang—he likes all food," said Wolfgang. "It has been long time since I had such good meal. Wes used to do all cooking back in camp."

Another voice cut in. "You know, you're welcome to stay here."

All eyes turned to Willow. Her gaze was fixed right on Wolfgang.

"If we all work together, we'll survive longer," she affirmed.

Wilson's jaw dropped.

"I appreciate offer," Wolfgang nodded curtly. His expression had shifted to something else: something focused, militaristic, and professional. There was work to be done. "But I make promise to self to find Wes and that is my responsibility, not yours. I do not want to burden you with troubles."

"We could help if you let us," said Willow.

"It is not just that. I think now that Wes was taken far away. It occurs to me, meeting you and leaving swamp, that there are many places in world Wes could be, and I need to go out and look for him. I do not think he is coming back to swamp. Maybe he is alone and lost and does not know how to get back! I need to go find him and get him out of trouble. Again. Is duty as his friend."

"You don't have to do it alone, Wolfgang—"

"No, no—I appreciate offer. But you seem settled here and I do not want to get you in trouble with
Man in Suit. No, this is something Wolfgang must do alone!"

"Well...if you're certain...take as many supplies as you need," said Willow. "If you ever need help for any reason, or if you change your mind, just come get us and we'll be there at a moment's notice. And once you find Wes, both of you are welcome to join us here."

"I was truly lucky to meet you nice people today," Wolfgang beamed. "Thank you for offer. I will think about it. But for now, Wolfgang must go look for Wes. In morning. When there is light."

One-by-one, the survivors trailed off to bed. (Wolfgang had been offered the use of Willow's tent, while she bunked with Wigfrid.) Wilson hesitated by the fire for longer than usual, hoping that Willow's instincts were right and Wendy was okay. She probably just wanted to be alone. She was fine. She was camping out there in the company of her ghost-of-a-sister, alone but unharmed. Still, he would have to get up at first light to help with the search.

Realizing that there wasn't anything he could do about it, Wilson returned to his tent. The automaton still lay in the corner where he'd laid it. Maybe he could stay up for just a little while to examine it...On the other hand, his bedroll tempted him with the promise of a deep, dreamless sleep.

Before he could make up his mind, he sensed movement behind him. The tent flap shifted and Willow peered inside.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

Did he have a choice? "Of course."

Willow entered as she so often did. Suddenly he felt the back of his hand prickle with anxiety. Willow had never asked to come into his tent before. Normally she just waltzed in like she owned the place, and never with the meek expression she wore now.

"Willow?" he prompted.

Willow's expression pivoted from tentative to daring. Then she said, "Thanks."

"Huh?" Wilson blinked, rolling the word over in his head.

He realized now that it wasn't her command voice, the voice she seemed to use all the time whenever there were others around. This was a different type of voice. Wilson realized that he was actually hearing her speak for the first time.

"You saved my life," Willow elaborated. "If you hadn't been there, I'd be dead and I can't say that getting killed by a mechanical chess piece is the dignified death I had in mind. So thanks."

"You don't have to thank me," said Wilson. "If I hadn't insisted on investigating the marsh, you wouldn't have been in that situation."

"If I hadn't lost my temper, I wouldn't have woken up the machines."

Wilson could see where the conversation was heading, and decided he had to put a stop to it. "How about we share the blame? Then there's less pressure on both of us."

She shrugged. A kind of half-hearted, a 'you're-right-but-I-don't-want-to-admit-it' kind of shrug. Then, without invitation, she closed the flap and sat near him, her skirt draping over her legs like a dark cloud. Her expression was clouded with indecision.
"I need to apologize," she blurted out. "Ever since you came to our camp, I haven't been very nice to you and...and I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you had your reasons," said Wilson.

"Yeah, but they're not good reasons."

She took a deep breath.

"When we first met," Willow started, "I saw that there was something in you—something that reminded me of Maxwell. That scared me."

His pride bristled. "I don't really want to be compared to that guy."

"Of course! That's not what I meant, I just—this is coming out wrong. What I mean to say is that I saw that you had something in you that all of the other survivors I've met lacked."

"And what was that?"

"Resolve."

The silence was deafening and Wilson was unable to take his eyes off of her.

"Maxwell's always been an enigma," Willow explained. "The survivors all had their different opinions about why we were here and who Maxwell is, but they all shared one opinion of him. They were terrified. But you're not scared of him, even though he orchestrated all this."

"Oh, I'd say I'm pretty terrified of him," Wilson shrugged. "A godlike force capable of killing us at a moment's notice? I'd be a fool not to be scared. I just try not to let it stop me."

"That's what I'm getting at. What scared me was that you had the Forbidden Knowledge. That gave you a connection to Maxwell that no one else has had, as far as I know. I knew that if what you said was true, if you really had built a door that opened a way between our world and this world...I knew that if anyone could find a way out, it would be you. You are the only survivor I've met with the tenacity and skill to do it."

Wilson still didn't see why that would scare her. Before he could ask, she had taken a breath and continued, an equal resolve building up in her fiery gaze. A determination to continue, to be able to explain her thoughts.

"I knew that if you built a door, I wouldn't be able to ignore it," said Willow. "Then I would have to explain why I can't go back."

"What?" Wilson frowned. "You can't go back to our world? Is there something keeping you here?"

"Physically, no. You could say I'm in the middle of a self-imposed exile made possible by Maxwell."

"An exile? What are you talking about?"

"Do you remember when I said that some places are better than others? To me, staying here is better than what's waiting me back there. If I go back...I'll be sent to prison."

"Prison?! What for?! Wait—no. Let me guess. Arson."

"That's—well, that's one of the lesser charges," Willow shifted uncomfortably. "I...I've killed
The truth hit him like the guilt of a thousand lifetimes. Willow averted her gaze now, as if she'd hoped that he'd forgotten what she'd said and she wouldn't have to continue.

"It was an accident," said Willow. "I didn't mean to do it."

"Oh my God," Wilson breathed. "Willow…I'm so sorry. Willow, what happened?"

"You got to start at the beginning for that," Willow muttered. "I grew up in an orphanage in San Francisco. A Catholic orphanage."

"Oh, dear," said Wilson. "What happened to your parents?"

"Well, they didn't have jobs and they couldn't take care of me," Willow shrugged. "I don't think they cared enough to try, anyways, so when I was five I got shipped to the orphanage. I'm afraid it wasn't especially pleasant. The nuns were...strict."

Willow growing up in an orphanage explained a lot. It explained why she was so independent, hated being told what to do, and explained her superior self-management skills. From a young age, she'd had to parent herself. Remembering her behaviour throughout the past weeks, it all made sense.

"I ran away when I was fifteen and got involved in some pretty shady things to survive," Willow continued. "I always had a penchant for arson. I remember once when I was a kid, I was put in charge of lighting the prayer candles. The nuns never made that mistake again. But it was only when I managed to get away that I realized that there are so many things in the world you can burn."

"That's...good?" Wilson blinked. "I think?"

"Arson could only do so much, though," said Willow. "After a few years, I felt like I was being dragged down. I knew what the problem was...I was still a prisoner of that orphanage. It had closed shortly after I left, but the building was still there. I had to...I had to erase it. I had to wipe it off the face of the Earth if I wanted to move on. I needed to purge my memories of what happened there."

Wilson quickly realized where the story was going and his stomach turned.

Her voice became quiet. Contemplative. "I burnt it in January, when the sky was cold and the flames were the only orange in the sky."

She met his eyes.

"I didn't know that there were some street kids living inside."

Nothingness. A sort of quiet understanding hung in the air.

Willow chortled. "Heh...I didn't even know that anyone had died until the police came looking for me. I don't know how they found out that I was the one who set that fire. Maybe I got careless and someone spotted me, or maybe they just put all together...All that mattered was that they didn't think it was an accident."

"What did you do?" Wilson asked.

"What I've always done: I ran like heck. First I was a prisoner of the orphanage, then of the..."
memories that came from there, and I couldn't stand the thought of spending my days behind bars. I managed to get all the way to South Dakota when I..."

"When you met Maxwell," Wilson realized.

Her head snapped up, and her expression flared before relaxing. "That's right. I was sitting in a pub. The bartender was asleep at the counter, the place was empty, and there was this annoying ragtime song on the radio. Then there was Maxwell's voice. At first, he didn't even ask me to do anything. He just told me where to run, when the police were close, and how I could leave the country. He told me secrets. Then he told me that he knew a place where no one would ever find me and I could be free."

Wilson frowned.

"Really I just traded one prison for another," Willow scoffed.

"He spoke to you through the radio," Wilson breathed. "That's what we have in common—that's what all the survivors have in common. Maxwell contacted us through the radio. How did he bring you here? Did you build a portal?"

Willow shook her head. "No, I'm not that smart and I certainly didn't have any 'Forbidden Knowledge' to show me how to do it. Although Maxwell did have me perform this weird ritual with some rats and my own blood."

Definitely his modus operandi. Still, the fact that Wilson was able to hear this story directly from Willow was nothing short of a miracle.

"When I was first brought here, I realized that this wasn't exactly the place he said it would be," said Willow. "He certainly didn't say anything about everything trying to kill you, so I tried to find a way out and maybe get some revenge while at it. I gave up, of course, but...but then I met Wigfrid. That's when things kind of changed for me. That's when I decided that she didn't need to know that I'd killed a bunch of innocent kids whose only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The thought of having to admit to her that I'm not who she thinks I am...I can't stand the thought of it. She respects me, you know? Do you know how strange that is? She calls me her companion and the Chosen One, and I know I complain about it to no end, but secretly it's nice, you know? For once I had a friend who didn't care who I was before all this started.

"When you came along, you threw a wrench into everything by asking questions. You resolved to find a way out and you wouldn't give up. I was sure you'd at least be losing hope by now, but you only seem to get more determined. It was easier to maintain the illusion that I was an upstanding citizen when it was just Wigfrid and me. What's worse is that you attracted other survivors like Wendy and now Wolfgang, and that just welcomed more and more trouble. I thought it would be easy to pretend I'm not a felon. Turns out it's not and I blamed you.

"Look, Wilson—it's not the best excuse in the world. I just couldn't stand the thought of my friends finding out that I'm a child-killer. I didn't mean for it to get so bad. So I'm sorry I treated you like rot."

Wilson hesitated. He had the unexpected urge to hold her hand and wrapped his fingers in the fabric of his pants to resist.

"You did what you thought you had to do to protect yourself," he said. "I think I would've done the same thing in your situation."
She shrugged. "I don't think so, but thanks anyways."

Wilson opened his mouth, filled the sudden urge to admit the circumstances that had led him to create the doorway. The university, the institute, his parents—everything. But he couldn't quite bring himself to do it and he felt a flicker of shame that he didn't have the same courage that Willow had.

"I know I don't have any right to ask you to do this," Willow continued, "but please don't tell the others about this. I mean, I won't make you—if I were you, I'd consider telling the others. But it would mean a lot to me if you didn't."

"Of course I won't say anything," said Wilson. "But for what it's worth, I think they would be understanding."

Willow's eyes met his, and they were rather large and childlike. "Even Wigfrid?"

"I think Wigfrid would understand that you're trying to make up for your mistakes and that you didn't mean for it to happen. After all, there are plenty of stories in Norse mythology about redemption and whatnot. At least... I think there are. There has to be one... I can't think of one right now, but I'm sure if I put my mind to it I'll come up with something."

She laughed. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

Finally, she cleared her throat and stood up, brushing off her skirt.

"I should get back to my post," she said. "Thanks for indulging me, and... um... Listen, I don't want you to stop trying to get out just because I don't have any plans on leaving this place. If anyone's capable of bringing the fight to Maxwell, it's you."

"What if I do find a way out?" Wilson asked. "What then?"

"I guess I'll have to tell everyone else why I can't leave and hope they understand," Willow shrugged. "It's late. You look exhausted, you should really get some rest."

Wilson glanced at the automaton. The decision had been made for him.

Willow ducked back outside and disappeared to tend to the fire. He hovered a while longer, staring at the tent canvas and rolling over her confession in his mind.

He rubbed it eyes. Damn it all. His problems seemed petty in comparison. He couldn't imagine why she would think that this world was the better alternative to facing her problems in their native land. Still, many of her actions had come into focus and he thought that, perhaps, she would not be so harsh from now on. After all, he now had blackmail material. Not that he would actually blackmail her. Still, better to be prepared.

Wilson lay back on his bedroll and turned onto his side to look at the radio reflected in the lantern light. Hard to think that such a mundane, everyday object was the means to which Maxwell had lured people into this place. No wonder his shadow had sent him to go fetch it, not just as a means of dissecting it and analyzing it, but as a symbol of Maxwell, himself. The radio was a multilayered object. He would have to tear it apart piece by piece in order to understand it.

It was just what the shadow had intended. It had intended for all of this to happen. Suddenly, Wilson suspected that the radio had meant for him to meet Wolfgang.

The more Wilson thought about it, the more he realized that he didn't want to become like the
other survivors in this world. He didn't want to be like Wolfgang, who was singularly fixed on one
goal, nor did he want to become morose like Wendy or cynical like Willow. He didn't want to die
here, for his body to become yet another memento to Maxwell and his cruel manipulation.
Wilson's heart began to race. He couldn't give him the satisfaction of being his eternal plaything.

Then he felt cold breath in his ear.

"She talks as though she's the only one here with a tragic past," Shadow Wilson mused. "She's not
the only killer Maxwell has lured here."

"Go away," Wilson whispered. "You're not human. You wouldn't understand. She didn't mean for
it to happen."

"How do you know? You were not there."

"I said go away."

"It's not so easy to escape us, dear Wilson. You would do well to listen."

"You led me into that marsh to have me killed."

"You know that's not true."

Wilson paused. He couldn't help himself. The answers were so close, but so far...

"Besides, you not only retrieved the radio, but you learned some valuable information," Shadow
Wilson cooed. "We would say that you have had a successful day, all because we had the sense to
send you into the marsh. Dear Wilson...you want to accept our bargain."

"I don't," Wilson barked. "I can't!"

"Wilson, we are trying to achieve the same goals. You want to escape and we want to help you
escape. It only makes sense that we work together. All you have to do is agree and we will help
you unlock the secrets of Forbidden Knowledge, piece by piece."

Wilson shivered. A shadowy hand ensnared his wrist.

"This place will slowly rip you apart until you are a shadow like us unless you let us help you."

Wilson thought of Willow and the fire that had sealed her fate, of Wes and the unknown mistake
that had led him to Maxwell. Of the manipulation and the torment, of the lies and deceit. He
realized he couldn't stand by. If anyone was going to take the risks needed to free themselves of
this prison, it would have to be him. At the very least, it wouldn't hurt to hear Shadow Wilson out.

He took a deep breath and quietly said, "What exactly do you need me to do?"

Chapter End Notes

Ooooooh fuck it's FINALLY DONE. This chapter literally almost drove me insane. I
can die in piece now.
*realizes that there's still eight chapters and three sequels to go*
Whelp.

Lots of love to kaaramel for helping me edit!
Wilson kept low, lying flat on his stomach with all senses on high alert. He felt surreal, like this was a dream. Was he really doing this? Was he really here?

Had he really been here for most of summer?

He couldn't believe that it had actually been that long, that he had survived a good portion of summer in this abscess of a world. That his best allies were a felon, a deluded actress, and a mournful girl who talked as though she was sixty. He couldn't believe that he'd been chased by hounds, fought turkeys over scraps. Or that the night terrorized him and his shadow whispered in his ear while he slept.

Wilson gazed at his reflection in the thinning creak. He, Willow, and Wigfrid had followed the stream in the hopes that Wendy had gone in this direction. Only the deeper he went, the more he
doubted it. They had passed the pig village and gone further north than he'd ever wandered—so far that there was the taste of sea salt on the air. He couldn't recognize the haggard man staring back at him in the water. Not quite as pale. A little roughed up here and there. Still, at least his clothes were in tact. And his mind.

“Done staring at your reflection, Narcissus? Food’s ready.”

Wilson splashed some water on his face, then rejoined Willow and Wigfrid. They sat on the edge of the dying river, taking a small break in what had already been a long day. Willow was wearing a broad straw hat that protected her milky complexion, but Wigfrid wore her helmet as usual. Her freckled face glistened with sweat. Notable in itself since he'd never seen Wigfrid sweat before.

Willow had unwrapped a cloth satchel and laid out the food. Roots and berries. Not Wilson's favourite, but for an afternoon on the road it would have to do.

"I'm not so sure Wendy went in this direction," said Wilson.

"Where else could she have gone?" asked Willow. "This is the only reliable water source for miles and she wouldn't last long without water. It hasn't rained in weeks!"

"True, but I don't think Wendy subscribes to that way of thinking."

"Reason, you mean?"

"Exactly."

Wilson picked up a root. It was an insipid shade of crimson, but food was food. He tugged on it with his teeth and chewed for far too long.

"I don't know how you can eat that," Wigfrid huffed. She had brought her own food—pig jerky. Wilson eyed it enviously. "At least Wolfgang the Mighty could appreciate the true value of meat. I miss his company already!"

Wolfgang had ventured off into the wilderness at first light, scarcely saying goodbye before he was gone. Still, Wilson hoped that he would get an opportunity to speak to him later. In his absence, there were other leads to investigate, and a missing girl to find.

"Yes, he was very...boisterous," said Wilson.

"It's too bad he had to take off," Willow complained. "We could've used his help finding Wendy. Let's hope we find her by the end of the day. I don't want to waste too much manpower in the search."

"And if we don't find her?" Wilson asked tentatively.

Willow studied a berry. Her forehead was creased.

"Wigfrid can keep hunting for her while you and I work on other things. She can move faster without us slowing her down."

Wilson tried not to feel astonished at her sudden reversal of attitude. If this had happened just a week ago, Willow would have dismissed Wendy for dead. Now she was making an effort to try and find her. It was not unlike the night he'd met Wendy—when he, himself, had vanished for a few hours. Willow hadn't even seemed concerned. Now he recognized the crushing weight of worry in her eyes. She was thinking of Wendy, and she was thinking of skeletons.
It was strange to be so cordial with Willow and he wasn't yet used to it. Wilson appreciated having some time in the forest to think. The full force of the revelation hadn't hit him until after a night's rest, and even now it still boggled the mind. Willow. Willow, who led by default. Who had woken them at dawn so they could find Wendy, who had risked a trek deep into the marsh to save Wilson. Willow—guilty of manslaughter. A woman who had accidentally killed children and was a wanted woman back in their world.

She was a victim of circumstance and bad luck and yet that didn't erase what she had done. She was responsible, but Wilson found it impossible to hold it against her. Willow had spent the last three years stewing over what she had done and he thought that, perhaps, she was a different person than the one who had first stumbled through the veil. What mattered was the present, and what she had done to benefit the camp, and the trust she'd displayed in him to tell him the truth. And the sly, appreciative smile she cast him ever so often, the smile that was relieved he hadn't told anyone else.

That was why he felt a gnawing guilt for hiding aspects of his own past. Fashioning himself a gentleman scientist to these strangers, when in truth he’d found refuge in the audacity and was considered to be little more than a lunatic by his fellow scientists.

He wasn't what they thought he was. He was beginning to suspect that no one was who they said they were.

"If Wendy didn't follow the river, where could she have gone?" Willow asked.

He considered the possibilities. With Wendy, there were many. "Hard to say. She isn't exactly predictable. But...we're on an island, right?"

"Yeah. How'd you guess?"

"Wind conditions are vindictive of an island. I've been measuring them."

"Of course you have. Your point?"

"She could only go so far before she hit the ocean, and she doesn't strike me as the type who would make a boat. Wendy is interested in strange places and artifacts...Are there any ruins nearby or notable landmarks? An abandoned house? An obelisk? A cave, perhaps?"

"Well...there's a graveyard just over the hill, unless Maxwell can change the landscape too," Willow answered. "It's pretty creepy. The area's not exactly safe."

"That's the type of place Wendy would like. We should go check it out."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt, but we should be careful. There are spiders."

"Spiders? Come on, I know spiders aren't pleasant, but they can't be that..." He trailed off and thought about what he had said. “What am I saying? This is Maxwell’s world. Of course they’re dangerous.”

“Okay, that does it!” Wigfrid leapt to her fee. “The Great Wigfrid demands to know what evil spirits have possessed the two of you!”

“Now what are you on about, Wig?” Willow sighed.

“You and Wilson of Higgsbury have been very friendly ever since you returned from your foray into the swamp,” said Wigfrid. “You have been...cooperative. It is not natural! The Great Wigfrid
demands you stop it at once!"

"Are you saying you don’t want us to get along?" Wilson asked.

"That is not what I meant. What I mean is that your sudden ability to get along is disturbing. It makes me think you’re planning something!"

"That’s ridiculous, Wig," Willow scoffed. "Wilson and I just decided that we should stop bickering and start working together. Simple as that."

"I suspect you aren’t telling me the full story."

"Really, Wig! I thought you trusted me!"

Wilson's attention wandered from the conversation as he felt a glacial hand brush his shoulder. For the first time, he did not jump at the contact. Instead, he watched his shadow slither across the clearing, unnoticed by the women.

"I’m going to check out that graveyard while you two are busy," Wilson announced.

"You know, I think you would be less confrontational if you ate vegetables," Willow suggested. "She held out some roots towards her. "Here, have some."

"Ew, no!" Wigfrid exclaimed.

"What’s the matter? You look a little sick! I bet some vegetables would clear that right up."

"GET THOSE AWAY FROM ME!"

Wigfrid took off running as Willow chased after her with the roots.

Wilson retreated from the racket the two were creating and merged with the forest, roughly going in the direction Willow had indicated when she mentioned the graveyard. Since their hike had begun early that morning, the nature of the forest had changed. Where once the clustered trees shone green, they were now a thick collage of redwoods that stood as high as mountains. His feet crunched against discarded pine needles, the only other noise were crickets serenading the trembling sunlight.

Such was the lack of natural light that his shadow only existed in small fragments peering between the trees and creating long lines across the ground. Still, its voice rung clearly in his head.

"What do you need?" Wilson asked.

"Nothing in particular," said Shadow Wilson. "We just wanted to point out how senseless this task is. The others serve only as a distraction. You would do better on your own."

"We've discussed this. I'm not leaving the camp."

"You should be doing what we told you to do."

Wilson's thoughts distracted him and he tripped on a thick tree root, but he regained his footing and walked more quickly. As if he could hope to outrun the shadow.

"Building a door is going to take a lot of time and a lot of resources, but I'm going to do it. I don't see what your rush is. As far as I know, you can't die."
"But you can, and there is no one else we can trust to be able to do this. The others will impede the process."

"If anyone's impeding the process, it's you," Wilson grumbled. "I'm not leaving the camp. That's final."

The shadow laughed darkly. "As you say, dear Wilson. Just do not come crawling to us when the others sabotage your efforts."

Shadow Wilson fell quiet, and again the only noise Wilson heard were the crickets and his footsteps.

He was surprised at just how straightforward the shadow's deal was. Build another one of Maxwell's doors. Here, in this world—where Maxwell reigned and he was more at his mercy than ever. Where resources were scant, and he could barely remember the week it had taken to construct the machination.

Now he had to do it all over again. Still, he knew it was possible, what with the information locked away in his mind. The only reason he tolerated the shadow's presence now was because it claimed it could help him remember. The incident in the swamp had shaken what little faith he'd had in his shadow and he wasn't about to invest his full trust when it remained as elusive as ever. Still, if a door was the answer, then he didn't see that he had much choice.

Was it really as simple as building a door?

Wilson had actually considered the possibility of reconstructing the door before the shadow had brought it up. He wasn't sure if he ever wanted to set his sights on one again. Still, of one thing the shadow had convinced him: it was one of the few ways to freely travel between dimensions. Maybe the only way.

But what was the catch? What would happen if he built it again?

*Where* was he going to build it?

Wilson almost stopped dead in his tracks. He couldn't let the others know about it. Willow would surely put a stop to it, saying that anything Maxwell had designed couldn't be trusted. His tent was too small. The door would be a towering twelve feet high if it was like the last one. Maybe there was a place in the forest he could store it. Of this, there could be no doubt: he would have to work on it in the depths of the night to minimize the chance of discovery.

Still engaged in thought, he barely realized it when he stumbled onto the first signs of the graveyard. A stone overgrown with moss. A misshapen hump in the earth. The scent of decay on the wind. Suddenly, the forest parted, and revealed a broad, flat area caught in a low-lying mist. It was still and that made him uncomfortable, more so than the presence of gravestones scattered like discarded checkerboard pieces.

He surveyed the area. First, his eyes caught a flash of red as he saw a robin take flight. Then, the shape of a small child with straw-blond hair.

His heart fluttered. "Wendy!"

Wendy was perched on top of the edge of a stone statue of an angel. The angel had her hands folded together in silent prayer and her wings were furled against her back. Somehow it was fitting. Wilson sprinted to join her.
"Hello," Wendy greeted him. "I am surprised that you are here."

"Wendy, where have you been?" Wilson demanded. "We've been looking all over for you! You had us worried sick!"

"I must’ve lost track of time," Wendy mused. "I’ve just been sitting here, thinking about death."

"You’ve…you’ve been sitting here thinking about death…for two days?"

"It is an involved process. I do not take it lightly."

"You really should give us some warning when you want to take a long walk," Wilson scolded her. "I thought the Grue might’ve gotten you or—or some other wild beast."

"You needn't fear. Abigail protected me. She dealt with the spiders upon our arrival. Unfortunately, she was hurt."

Wendy unfolded her hands to reveal a flower that was not quite in full bloom yet.

"I was happy the beasts did not kill me," Wendy sighed. "Being gored by wild beasts lacks the romanticism I want to be associated with my death."

"Wendy!"

"I think I would like to drown."

Wilson shook his head. "We really do need to get you a hobby. Look, we can talk about this later—Willow and Wigfrid are waiting nearby and we should head back to camp."

"If you insist."

Wendy hopped off of the base of the stone angel. However, instead of turning towards the trees, she walked straight forwards until she was at the edge of a small gravestone. She gave it a fond pat.

Wilson only had to read the name on the stone to understand why.

**ABIGAIL CARTER**
1900—1911

"Now that’s—oh...oh my," Wilson breathed. "This is your sister."

"Correct," Wendy confirmed. "I buried her where she fell. It was fitting."

Wilson's mouth dried and he struggled for words. What could he say? What could he say to a girl who had been abducted and then lost her best friend? He analyzed the name on the gravestone. Once, Abigail had not been the ghost he saw wandering after her corporeal sister. She was just another victim of this world.

All the same, something bothered him. After a minute in which he and Wendy stood side-by-side to look at the grave, he mustered the courage to say it.

"Are those dates right?" Wilson asked.

Wendy peered up at him with impassive eyes.
"Your sister's dates," he clarified. "Are they right?"

"I should think so. Sometimes it is hard to tell what year it is, but I did the best I could."

The wind brushed against his face.

Wilson took Wendy's hand and led her back to the safety of the forest. He tried to take his mind off of the strange dates Wendy had put on her sister's gravestone, for surely it was impossible. She must have a poor sense of time.

"W—Willow and I had a bit of an adventure while you were gone," he said. "We met another survivor living the marsh and I recovered some interesting salvage. I'm hoping to piece it back together."

Wendy didn’t answer.

"Maybe...maybe you'd like to help?" he offered.

Shadow Wilson broke its silence. "You are just insufferable, Wilson Percival Higgsbury."

"Why would you suggest that?" Wendy asked.

Because she needed a pastime that didn't involve death. "Because a girl your age should be in school. Since we don't exactly have access to formal education, I'd be more than happy to instruct you in the ways of science!"

"School and I never agreed with one another."

"You probably just had the wrong teachers. Trust me, I know what that’s like. I'd be more than happy than to give you some guidance."

"I suppose you aren't giving me the benefit of a choice."

"All children should be educated. It's a necessity if you want to become a well-adjusted adult. I just wish we had actual books, but I don't suppose Maxwell ever took that into consideration."

"I know where there are books," Wendy piped up. "I go there to read sometimes. It has an acceptable selection."

Wilson blinked. He hadn't expected an actual answer to that problem. "You do? Wait, are you serious?"

"Quite. It's not far from here, if you would like to see it. It is one of the reasons I decided to walk to the graveyard."

"Wendy, are you sure this isn't one of Maxwell's ideas of a deadly joke?"

"Absolutely."

Wilson pursed his lips. Surely a quick look couldn't hurt. If there really were books out here, maybe they could be useful. It was difficult doing science without any resource materials, and he should be sure that this place she referred to wasn't dangerous.

“Alright, show me,” said Wilson.

Wendy pulled on his hand and led him away from the graveyard and the creak. They hadn't gone
far when the redwoods pulled closer together, creating an unwelcoming path and stifling all light. Still, she walked with confidence. They had only gone a short distance when she stopped at the edge of a steep hillside. Before them, the land dipped into a thin ravine that cut through the forest like an ugly scar. Extending a bony finger, Wendy indicated the bottom. From their vantage point, Wilson could only see the vague outline of what looked like a structure—a flash of white against the green forest.

"I know this is a redundant question, but are you certain that this isn't one of Maxwell's schemes?" Wilson pressed.

"I know him well," Wendy affirmed. "This is not his doing."

Wilson opened his mouth to reply, but didn't get the chance to finish. Rapid footsteps were skirting through the underbrush nearby, heading right for them. He reached for a weapon—(which he realized he didn't have)—when Wigfrid hurtled out of the trees. Right on her heels was Willow. Willow took one look at the two of them, her gaze settling accusingly at Wendy, before the tension in her shoulders vanished.

"Wendy!" she exclaimed. "We've been looking all over for you!"

"I apologize for the inconvenience," said Wendy. “As I told Wilson, I lost track of time.”

“She was at the graveyard thinking about death,” Wilson elaborated.

“…For two days?” Willow asked.

"It is a topic that requires a lot of deep contemplation," said Wendy.

"Honestly—you're almost as bad as Wilson." She turned to Wilson. "You should've come right back to the creak. I had to get Wigfrid to track you."

"We were just taking a slight detour," said Wilson. "Wendy says that there's books nearby."

"Books? You're joking, right? Books aren't useful."

"I never joke about the acquisition of knowledge! Lead the way, Wendy!"

Wendy slid down the hillside and Wilson followed. The ledge was so steep and the ground so soft that he was almost falling. Careening down the edge of the ravine, he fortunately hit a thick pile of moss at the bottom.

He got to his feet. Soon, they were joined by Willow and Wigfrid, though Willow looked none-too-pleased about the unscheduled detour.

Wilson looked up and realized the mistake at once. Rocky cliffs rose up on either side of them and the cluster of thick trees only lasted so long. He didn't see any way back up.

"This is insane," Willow hissed. "We don't know this area well and we're way too exposed down here. How the hell are we going to get back up that cliff?"

Wilson hadn't thought of that. "Wendy's been here before. She must know a way up."

"The child hasn't been reliable in the past," Wigfrid pointed out.

"You needn't worry," Wendy intervened. "There is a way back up. Anyways, we are here."
Wendy stopped and pointed. Wilson spotted a faint bluish glow beyond the foliage that was definitely not natural. Brow furrowed, he crouched low and pushed forwards.

It was a campsite.

As with Wolfgang's camp, tarps were strung between the trees to protect a comfortable and well-maintained camp. Makeshift tables were scattered everywhere, and on those tables was an endless selection of books. Books piled six feet into the air, books stuffed into makeshift shelves, and books on a writing desk. Of course, there were survival tools here and there. A chopping block for wood. A small garden protected by pearly stones. And a campfire that was unlike anything Wilson had seen before. For one thing, instead of a pile of wood, it was a pile of stone, and the flames were blue instead of red.

It was so surreal to see a little piece of civilization out in the middle of nowhere that he froze. Wigfrid, however, reacted at once. She grabbed the three of them and tossed them into a nearby bush.

"That's a survivor's campsite!" she hissed. "This is madness! We've wandered right into enemy territory!"

"Wendy, you didn't say there was another survivor here," said Wilson.

"You did not ask," Wendy replied.

"Well, next time we'd appreciate some warning," Willow drawled. "Who owns this camp?"

"I do not know. I only come when it appears no one is around, but I know someone lives here. The books are alphabetized and the garden is maintained."

"You've been sneaking in and out of someone's camp? That's incredibly dangerous!" Willow huffed impatiently and scanned the area. "We can talk about your lack of common sense after we get out of here. How can we get out of the ravine?"

"We will need to pass the campsite," said Wendy. "There is a way up on the other side."

"Great. Just great!"

Willow saw the look on Willow's face and remembered it well. It was the face of someone bracing for battle.

"Maybe they're not around," Wilson suggested. "Maybe we can just sneak through and we won't have any trouble."

"Not a chance," said Willow. "That fire was freshly lit. They wouldn't leave it unattended for long."

"Well—if that's the case, why don't we go say hello?"

Willow sighed. "I'm not so sure. It's always been a bit of a coin-toss with other survivors. We got lucky with you, Wendy, and Wolfgang, but maybe our luck's about to run out."

"We don't know if this person is dangerous unless we go talk to them."

"Always the diplomat, huh? I wish it was that simple."

"I think it is."
Wilson stood up and stepped into full view to descend towards the camp. He was too drawn in by the books and the fire and the signs of life to ignore it. He sensed Willow extending her hand in an attempt to stop him, but he was already out of her reach.

He approached the campsite and ducked under the canvas that protected the books. It smelt like old parchment, but was otherwise cozy. Wilson stood in the open, waiting for someone to attack. When no one did, he went to investigate the strange fire. As he drew closer, he was struck with a gust of cool air.

Willow’s voice broke the stillness. "I really wish you would stop doing that."

Wilson turned. Willow, Wigfrid, and Wendy had all emerged from the brush to join him.

"This fire is amazing!" Wilson marvelled. "It cools instead of warms! That's genius! I wish I thought of that."

"Fire without heat," said Willow. "Now where's the fun in that?"

"How did they make it?" Wilson wondered. "You'd need nitre, of course, and I suppose the magical elements help...Still I wonder if—"

"Can we please move on?"

"Can't we just investigate for a minute?" Wilson pleaded. "I want to see what kind of books they have here and if they have any other interesting contraptions lying about."

"That's a bad idea."

"Please?"

Willow sighed. "Fine, fine—just be quick about it. Wigfrid, keep an eye out for danger."

Wilson immediately went from the fire to the book collection piled high on the tables. There seemed to be a book from every genre, from fiction to large scientific texts thicker than his arm. Botany, ornithology, entomology, oceanography, geography, astronomy—every scientific branch he thought possible, for whatever good it did in a world where none of the above applied. Even the constellations were twisted and unfamiliar. And then there were a few odd books that didn't seem to belong. A book with runes scrawled on the cover. A ratty old book that seemed to be gently whispering. One that vibrated when he picked it up.

"Something wrong?" Willow asked.

"Some of the books seem strange," he admitted.

"Magic?"

"They must be."

Wilson picked up a book with a blank cover and pried it open.

Flames shot out of the pages and high into the air. He snapped it shut with a startled yelp.

“Wow!” Willow laughed. “I like that one! Can I have a look at it?”

Wilson held her back as she tried to reach for it and threw it back into the pile of books. She let out a disappointed groan.
“You’re no fun,” she complained.

“I’m not that senseless,” said Wilson. “I wonder where they got all these books. It’s not like there’s a library just around the corner.”

Willow went browsing through a crate of books separated from the rest.

"Dunno, sometimes you can find strange things lying around," said Willow. "Hey—your parents were scientists, weren't they?"

"That they were," Wilson confirmed. "Why do you ask?"

"What were their names?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Just—which were their names?"

"Tiberius and Elinor Higgsbury. Why are you asking?"

To answer that, Willow shoved a book in his face.

The title was *Theories of Cosmological Time Displacement*, written in fine silver lettering against a faded blue cover.

The authors were Doctors Tiberius and Elinor Higgsbury.

Wilson reread the cover several times, scarcely able to believe it. His parents had only written a handful of universally panned books. As far as he knew, there weren't that many copies in existence. To find a copy of one of their books here, in a world that verified all of their theories, was beyond coincidence.

"What is it?" Wendy asked. "What did you find?"

"It’s—it’s one of my parents' books," Wilson answered, his voice quivering.

"It's not the only one," said Willow. "Look at this, Wilson."

Wilson approached the crate and looked inside. Willow was right. The crate was filled to the brim with books baring the Higgsbury name, though not all of them were by his parents.

"My God," he breathed. "These are all books written by my family members!"

"You come from a family of writers?" Wendy asked.

"Not fiction writers. These are books about science and philosophy."

"Ah. Literature for the intellects. A noble profession, indeed."

"It's so strange to see this all here," said Wilson, skimming through the crate. He selected one book and picked it up. "This is the memoir of my great-aunt, Bathilda Higgsbury. She was quite Machiavellian, you know. And—and this one—this was written by my grandfather, Cornelius. He was a bit of a black sheep in the family. More interested in politics than science, and unusually charismatic for a Higgsbury."

"I didn't realize your family was so colourful," said Willow.
"Were any of them great warriors?" Wigfrid asked.

"In a fashion," Wilson shrugged. "We Higgsburys are warriors of the mind! We try to solve all problems with good, old-fashioned problem solving."

"Aw. That's too bad."

"Perhaps from your perspective, since I doubt can fully appreciate intellectual pursuits."

"I support all intellectual pursuits! I just think that they are not as valuable as combat."

Another voice joined in. A voice that did not belong to any of the others. "That statement is absolute bollocks."

Wilson froze. He was leaning over the crate of books, his attention suddenly fixed on something from the past. The voice didn't belong in this world—it didn't belong with Maxwell and his creations and the other survivors. It was a puzzle piece that didn't fit.

"What rude young people." It was the shrill voice of an older woman, tart and direct in her dialect. "I know my camp lacks a door, but you could at least knock on said metaphorical door before tampering with my belongings. I don't know what...Wait. Wilson?"

He snapped up at his name and swung around. Right over the campfire was an old woman. Strait-laced, tight-lipped, her eyes concentrated behind a pair of rectangular glasses. All the same, there was no mistaking the shock etched in her wrinkled face.

"Wilson P. Higgsbury—is that you?" she asked. "By the Devil, what are you doing here?!"

Wilson tried to vocalize, but all that came out was gibberish. It accurately expressed his thoughts, because standing in front of him was none other than W. W. Wickerbottom, herself.

Wickerbottom. Wickerbottom was here. Standing in front of him. His confidante and mentor, the only one at the university who'd been sincerely interested in his work. The unshakeable old librarian who once sat behind the counter of the library. To the world, she was just Wickerbottom, the controversial intellectual with as many degrees as the stars. But to Wilson, she was a fragment of the past.

Unable to contain himself, Wilson cheered, leapt forwards, and hugged her so hard that he lifted her off the ground.

"IT'S YOU!" he shouted. "IT'S REALLY YOU!"

Wickerbottom let out a drawn sigh. "Honestly—"

"I'm so glad to see a familiar face even if it is under the worst possible circumstances!"

"Wilson, you're being emotional. Please get a hold of yourself. And while you're at it, let me go."

“Oh. Oh! Right. Sorry.”

Wilson did as he was told. Wickerbottom took a step back and brushed off her sleeves. She pushed her glasses up to the bridge of her nose, as strenuous as a hawk.

"You don't need to engage in sentimental nonsense," Wickerbottom scolded him. "I have to say that I am glad to have encountered you, even though I vehemently wish you weren't in this dreadful place. You look abysmal, by the way. Where's your glasses? Did you lose them again?"
"Er—no! I have them right here."

"Good, if you're smart you'll start wearing them like you're supposed to. You look anemic. Do you feel anemic?"

"I feel fine!"

"Denial. Typical. We should get some fluids in you and your friends at once. I'll prepare some tea."

"Hold on just a second!" Willow intervened. "I'm not drinking any tea until I know what's going on! How do you know Wilson?"

"I was the librarian at the university where we worked," Wickerbottom explained. "Right up until his magnificent temper tantrum."

"It was not a temper tantrum," Wilson hissed. "I resigned in protest!"

"You vandalized the dean's office."

"He deserved it!"

"Perhaps he did. I doubt then vandalizing his office was the proper way to protest." Wickerbottom turned to Willow. "He's a promising young scientist, but far too emotional. Prone to poor decisions."

"I am not!"

"That's quite enough, Wilson. Now tell me. What are you doing here?"

"I…uh…I—um…I made a poor decision?"

"I thought as much. And I have a sneaking suspicion that your 'poor decision' involves a rather impertinent man named Maxwell who talks over the radio. Why don't you all sit down and I'll make the tea?"

"I really don't want tea," said Willow.

"The Great Wigfrid is above tea!" Wigfrid declared.

"I'm not giving you the luxury of choice," said Wickerbottom. "When a Brit has guests over, one must make tea. So sit down and cease with the complaints."

The authority in Wickerbottom's voice was so absolute that no one else protested.

A few minutes later, they had all settled down near the fire and even Willow wasn't complaining about the relief from the heat it gave. Somehow, Wickerbottom had come into possession of delicate china cups. Wilson was glad. It reminded him of tea time back home, although, he thought, the setting didn't quite suit his nostalgia. While Wickerbottom had made the tea, he had introduced his companions, and now all of them were holding the teacups, unsure of what to do. Wigfrid eyed hers like it had offended her ancestors and didn't drink it. Wendy stared absently at the book collection and remained quiet. But at least Willow humoured the old woman and helped herself to some tea, though her nose curled at the taste.

"I still can't believe you're here," Wilson mused. "The last I heard, you were on a sabbatical and vanished into thin air."
"That I did," Wickerbotton confirmed. "I was in South Africa, about to embark on an expedition to study the local wildlife, when I had an encounter with Maxwell. He transported me here soon thereafter. A jarring experience, but nonetheless fascinating. I always thought that you and your parents presented compelling arguments for the existence of magic, but it was disorientating to experience it first hand. Tell me, how did you come to be here?"

Wilson quickly told her about the door, meeting Maxwell, and the Forbidden Knowledge.

Wickerbottom gawked at him. Or, as close to gawking as her unchanging expression could get.

"Wilson, I want to clarify to be sure I understand," said Wickerbottom. "You allowed Maxwell access to your innermost thoughts? Not only that, but you allowed him to implant information into it? Information that you didn't know the source of and could have driven you insane?"

Why did he keep getting this reaction? "It seemed like a good idea at the time!"

"And I have already made it clear that you make poor decisions," Wickerbottom scoffed. "I have to say I’m extremely disappointed in you."

The statement stung worse than anything Wilson had ever endured before. The mockery at the university, the critics of his papers, the loss of his parents—all seemed to pale in comparison as Wickerbottom’s mouth formed the word ‘disappointed.’ He recoiled like he’d been shot, hung his head to focus on the ground, and momentarily lost all awareness of his surroundings.

Looking back, it all came into focus. He knew how stupid he’d been to trust Maxwell, but it hadn’t really hit him until this moment. How stupid he was to trust a thing that lived in his shadow.

“Don’t like the tea?” Wickerbottom asked. “I can’t say I blame you. There aren’t exactly abundant resources around here.”

Wilson raised his head and forced himself to continue. His voice was dry and quiet. “Mrs Wickerbottom…where did you get all these books? How did you get my family’s books?"

“Maxwell’s attempt at humour, I suspect,” Wickerbottom answered. “Some I found strewn throughout the landscape. Others I managed to bring here through a summoning spell.”

“A…a spell. You don’t mean…a magic spell, do you?"

"The process of understanding the fundamental rules of magic was a difficult one, but I daresay the books the Higgsburys wrote have been advantageous. Unfortunately, I can only summon inanimate objects. It kills organic beings at once.”

“You made a magic spell?"

“And as always, I need to repeat myself to you to make it clear. Yes, Wilson. I made a magic spell. It took me close to a year to perfect the process.”

Wilson chuckled. “A year? This place must be messing with your sense of time. I saw you right before I left the university, and that was only four or so months ago.”

Wickerbottom gave him a careful look. Her lips were pursed. “Hm. Time displacement. As I suspected.”

“Huh?”
“I see you don’t know, then,” said Wickerbottom. “Wilson, from my perspective, I have been here for a little over eighteen months.”

“That’s not possible,” Wilson immediately denied. “I got here at the beginning of summer, and I know I saw you just before I left the university.”

“Time moves differently in here. Although it has been a short period of time for you, I have not seen you for over a year.”

Wilson tried to wrap his mind around this fresh piece of information.

The years on Abigail's gravestone...What if they weren't a mistake?

"So...so you're saying that time moves differently in here than on the outside?" Wilson asked. "Oh, my God..."

"Correct," Wickerbottom nodded solemnly. "Your parents wrote an entire book on the subject of time displacement in alternate dimensions."

Someone took his heart and squeezed, his breath becoming forced. While they were talking around a campfire...how much time was passing back home? What year was it? Everyone he ever knew, all the faces he'd ever seen...They could all be dead—dead of natural causes or in wars that hadn't happened yet.

"Oh, dear Lord," Wilson breathed. He turned to Willow. "Willow, quick! What year do you think this is?"

Willow frowned. "By my count, it's 1943. Why?"

"Dear Lord!" Wilson exclaimed. "The world could've ended in fire and brimstone by now!"

"There's no need to be theatrical," said Wickerbottom. "While time displacement does complicate matters, it isn't something to get so upset about."

"Is...is all that really true?" Willow asked. "Time really is different in here?"

"It is," said Wickerbottom. "Wilson and I were taken in 1920."

"What?! But—that was twenty years ago!"

"To us, 1920 is the present, and you represent an entirely different era."

“I—I never knew."

"Of course you didn't, dear. Maxwell doesn't keep it a secret, but the signs of the displacement are subtle. Only through observation was I able to determine the truth."

Wendy's meek voice cut in. "I knew."

All eyes fixed on her.

"Time is meaningless here," said Wendy. "When I passed through the veil, the fabric of reality shivered and I knew that everything I had ever known was already dead."

"And the dates on your sister's gravestone were accurate," Wilson whispered.
"They were. My sister and I were born in 1900. My sister died in 1911."

"So...technically you're all older than me, even Wendy," Willow mused. "Although I guess we can't be sure what year Wigfrid's from. She's not about to break character."

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Chosen One,” said Wigfrid. “I am a Shield-Maiden of Asgard!”

“Of course you are, Wig. Forget I said anything.”

"I should've realized it," Wilson reflected. "The physics involved in transitioning between two dimensions...Time displacement is inevitable."

"The displacement doesn't always correspond to when people are brought here, though," Wickerbottom continued. "Maxwell has little to no concept of time and space—they have little meaning to him. Young Wendy here, for example, claims she was abducted in—what year was it, dear? 1911? Young Wendy claims she was abducted in 1911, but she could have been brought here after you and I."

“Time displacement seriously complicates things,” Wilson sighed. He leaned forwards and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"How so?" Willow asked.

"Inter-dimensional travel is difficult enough on its own," said Wilson. "Breaching the barrier that separates our world from this one is a huge challenge, but factor in time displacement and that just throws all the calculations off. Imagine travelling back to our world only to end up in the wrong time! Like—to a period of time when there isn't any sentient life on Earth or a future where Earth's already dead."

Wilson tried to articulate the fresh questions spinning around in his head.

"How did you find out about the displacement?" he asked Wickerbottom.

"Partially through eyewitness accounts," said Wickerbottom. "I've interviewed every survivor I've ever met. Of course, I was baffled when I met a lady who claimed to be born in 1932, and a young man who said he was born in 1801. I was further confused when I found relics from periods in the far past that were in remarkable condition. With this information combined, I've been able to organize a time table of Maxwell's activities in our world."

"And your findings?"

"Maxwell's activity stretches from the 16th century to the late 20th century," Wickerbottom explained. "However, most of the abductions have occurred in the early 20th century, from 1910 to 1950."

“But—if that’s true…and Maxwell contacts his abductees through the radio…how could he have contacted people who lived before the technology even existed?”

“I suspect the radio is only one of the methods he has used,” Wickerbottom explained. “He has probably used a number of methods relevant to the time periods in which people have lived. In our case, it has been the radio.”

"How many people has he brought here?" Wilson asked.
"Well in the hundreds, by my estimation. I've only been able to speak to a couple dozen or so. The mortality rate is extremely high in the first month. I've even been able to improvise a rudimentary system for detecting when Maxwell has brought another abductee here."

"You have? How?"

"Whenever Maxwell breaches the barrier between this world and ours, it creates harmonic resonance."

"Of course! That makes sense! In theory, you should be able to detect that!"

"And I found a way. With the data I've collected, I've determined that there are an average of two abductions per month."

Wickerbottom's expression focused, as if she was just shifting into deep thought.

"And two months ago, the abductions stopped," said Wickerbottom.

The camp went quiet. The only noise came from the crackle of the translucent fire.

"That's around the time you came here, Wilson," Willow realized. "You must've been one of the last people he abducted."

"Or one of the first, and he's been in limbo for an indefinite amount of time," Wickerbottom suggested. "It's impossible to know for certain, particularly since most of this is speculation."

Wilson sighed. "It's almost a shame Maxwell stopped abducting people through detectable means. We could've used that opening to transport back to our world in theory."

"Yes, that was my deduction, as well," Wickerbottom agreed.

"Do you have any other leads?"

"I do, but they're very much speculation at this point. I've spent most of the season trying to postulate a new theory. Fortunately I think the cave is a step in the right direction."

"I'm sorry—cave?"

"Right. I'll need to show you. Come."

Wickerbottom set her tea down and marched into the brush without a moment's hesitation. Wilson hurried to keep up with her and he was followed by the others.

"I don't understand all of this," said Wigfrid.

"My dear, if you really do think you're a Viking, it's no wonder," Wickerbottom scoffed. "The Vikings are charismatic and formidable, but they were hardly renowned for their scientific contributions."

Wigfrid's face scrunched up. She must've been reviewing Wickerbottom's words in her head.

"I'm not sure, but I think I may have been insulted," Wigfrid muttered.

"Get used to it," Wilson chortled. "I have to apologize for her lack of social grace. She could be courteous if she wanted to, but she says she's too old to really care anymore."
"That's correct," Wickerbottom confirmed. "I refuse to waste my time on flatteries and social protocol, not when there is research to be done."

Wickerbottom peered over her shoulder, her eyes glinting just over her glasses.

"I must admit," she began, "I'm surprised that you decided to cooperate with other survivors, Wilson. Even under the best of circumstances you struggled with teamwork."

"Given the circumstances, I thought it would be better," Wilson defended himself. "I'd rather have people watching my back in a world like this."

"I suppose that is within reason. Well, here we are."

They broke through the brush and entered a clearing. Wilson immediately saw what the main attraction was. Standing before them was a gaping hole easily twelve feet tall, a cave pitch black even with the full force of the sun penetrating its entrance. It looked rather like the ravine had a mouth. It was so overwhelming, so stunning that he stopped dead in his tracks. In the moment after its discovery, the others joined them. Only Wendy didn't seem the least bit phased, and she looked at the cave with what he thought was the slightest trace of contempt.

"That's a big cave," Willow remarked.

"All the better to hide this world's secrets," said Wendy.

Willow and Wendy hung back, while the rest of them cautiously advanced on the entrance. Wilson got on his hands and knees and peered inside.

He could only see a short distance in before it was swallowed by perpetual darkness. However, the first thing he noticed wasn't the lighting, or the sheer drop straight to the cave floor, or the sinister flora growing here and there. It wasn't the flowers that seemed to be glowing. It was the air. Although the sun pulsed at his back, a cool breeze shot out of the cave and pierced his skin. A sudden gust of winter air. The breath of the devil, himself.

Wilson squinted, his eyes watering against the chill. Refocusing his vision, he searched the cave floor for anything interesting. Why would Wickerbottom be so interested in this place? Why would she say that this was the centre of her theory?

Then he saw it.

Among the rocks, a face peered up at him. It wasn't natural—he knew it at once. He recognized the telltale signs of a manmade sculpture. The stone was a faded shade of gold. The expression—troubled and dark. The long, hooked nose. Then, sudden realization. He understood what Wickerbottom was getting at.

He swung away to look at Wickerbottom.

"I see that you have come to the same conclusion that I did," said Wickerbottom. "Maxwell may be this world's caretaker. He may have orchestrated our abductions and let this world flourish. But he is not this world's creator. He only built on the bones of what was already here."

Willow and Wendy finally joined the group. It was Wendy who stood beside him, her expression growing with the flicker of emotion that had long been absent from her face.

"Deep into that darkness, peering; long I stood there, wondering, fearing," she whispered.
"Fitting words," Wickerbottom nodded approvingly. "The surface of this world is quite literally just the surface."

"If Maxwell didn't make this world, then who did?" Willow asked.

"A civilization that predates his involvement," said Wickerbottom. "I have a theory that once Maxwell wasn't much different from us. You don't become the master through sheer luck or chance. You become the master through careful practice."

Wilson dug his front teeth into his lip. "I guess that makes sense."

"Of course it does. I came up with it." Wickerbottom straightened her shirt and folded her arms. "I've conducted a preliminary survey and discovered a shaft that leads deeper underground. I haven't been able to gather the resources in order to conduct a full exploration."

"Do you think there's more ruins down there?"

"I believe so, yes. When I first surveyed the area, the only artifacts I discovered were a few vessels and a column that I estimated was over a thousand years old."

"And you really don't think this is Maxwell's work?" Willow asked.

"Unquestionably. The surface has a fundamental signature, something recognizable even to us. Like an artist, Maxwell's work contains elements that are difficult and even impossible to replicate. He prefers to mimic our world rather than create anew. The rabbits, the spiders, the wildlife—all are twisted reflections. Perhaps an example of what our world could be if evolution had gone in an alternate direction. These artifacts serve no purpose that I can discern and they are hidden away. Perhaps something he carefully placed to encourage investigation. But I am certain that he did not create them."

Wilson swung his legs over the ledge.

"What're you doing?" Willow demanded.

"Investigating."

Before she could protest, Wilson chose what looked like the softest rock and jumped. He landed hard, but the pain seemed irrelevant.

"Be careful, Wilson," Willow urged.

"Noted," he acknowledged.

"Use my lighter. And don't go too deep!"

Willow's lighter clattered loudly against the cave floor. He picked it up and lit it at once to keep the darkness at bay. He was only alone for a minute when Wigfrid also jumped down to join him. Wickerbottom followed. Together, they went deeper into the cave entrance, pressing forwards until the light was dim.

Wilson assessed a high column that ran in the centre of the cavern. Like the head, the stone was pale gold, and was decorated with intricate carvings that seemed familiar.

"I recognize some of these patterns," he remarked. "They're similar to the ones I saw on the obelisk."
"It's a shame this cave is empty," Wigfrid sighed. "This would be a good location for battle. The cave would funnel enemies right towards me!"

"How refreshingly barbaric," Wickerbottom drawled.

"Hmph. You sound like Wilson of Higgsbury. No appreciation for the art of war."

"The art of war belongs in the past, dear, as does your primitive method of thinking."

Wigfrid blinked, and leaned in to speak to Wilson. "I believe I may have been insulted again."

"You'll have to excuse Mrs Wickerbottom," Wilson smiled. "It's just her way. She criticized my footwear when we first met."

"You mean your lack of footwear," said Wickerbottom. "Why anyone would want to wander around in a library barefoot is beyond my comprehension. It's also quite rude."

"My feet were sweaty!"

"Airing them out in the library is not the answer to that problem."

Wilson bit his tongue and focused on the drawings. They extended away from the column into the floor and the ceiling, tempting him further and further into the cave. There was a chill in the air. The kind of bite he attributed to the dead of winter. When he exhaled, his breath came out in puffs of translucent smoke. The hair on the back of his neck prickled, as did his senses, as he peered deeper and deeper into the darkness.

He'd seen this place before.

Wilson's blood boiled and he struggled to make sense of the thoughts racing through his head. Then, for a brief flicker, he thought he remembered. Lost equations and calculations. A sudden realization that he needed to go deeper, that there was something down there that he needed to retrieve.

Spots of white flashed before him. He staggered sideways and hit the cave wall.

"Are you alright?" Wickerbottom asked. "You look even paler now. Are you sure you're not anemic?"

"I'm fine," he denied. His vision was swimming, like he'd just been submerged and two heavy hands were holding him down.

"Don't give me that nonsense."

"I...I have a headache," he admitted. "I feel strange. I—I need to get out of here."

Wickerbottom paused if only for the second, the kind of pause that betrayed that she was contemplating something. "As you wish."

Wilson didn't even take a step when he collapsed to his knees. His head spun as the light shone brighter in his eyes, banishing the darkness. He thought some of them were forming shapes, like they were trying to speak to him...But if they were speaking, it was in some language that he couldn't discern. Some fabrication of words as endless and as confusing as overlapping constellations.

"So theatrical," Wickerbottom tsked. "Wigfrid, dear, could you assist me, please?"
A lot of heaving and hauling later, Wilson found himself sitting just outside the cave, his flesh prickling with fresh anxiety. He had a bruise on his forehead from when Wigfrid had dropped him and a fresh headache that didn't stem from the cave. But at least he was outside. And when he was out, he could suddenly breathe again, and the images weren't as potent as they were before, and the whispering in his head were reduced to his imagination. Willow was sitting beside him, fanning him with a large leaf retrieved from the forest.

"How long do I have to keep doing this?" Willow asked Wickerbottom.

"Until he's standing," said Wickerbottom. "I wouldn't fret over it, dear. We've all done it at one point or another. One time I found him lying unconscious after he fell off a ladder."

"Do you have to tell that story to anyone who will listen?" Wilson groaned.

"Would you rather I tell them about the mandrakes?"

"Heavens, no!"

"What's this about 'mandrakes?'" Willow asked.

Wickerbottom let out a light and strained chuckle. "Well, Wilson was trying to grow mandrakes in the botanical department and—"

"Please stop talking!" Wilson pleaded.

"Well, since you asked nicely..."

He sensed Wickerbottom approaching and opened his eyes to study her face. She had the eyes of a predatory hawk.

Wickerbottom was looking for something in his face. She was looking for a lie.

"Feeling better?" Wickerbottom asked. Her voice was cool and professional.

"Much, thank you," Wilson replied. He waved Willow off and chanced standing, hoping to avoid her gaze.

"Could you describe what happened?"

"Oh—nothing special, really. I just felt faint."

"Lying again," Wickerbottom scoffed. "I don't think your intense reaction to this location is mere coincidence, Wilson. I imagine it's related to the heightened magical activity concentrated in the cave."

"There has to be a source," Wilson suggested. "Maybe from an artifact or even a creature."

"I agree with your assessment," Wickerbottom nodded. "Up until now, I didn't realize the extent of the contamination. Until we take appropriate precautions, we should avoid extended exploration of the cave—perhaps avoid the whole area as a precaution."

"Sounds reasonable," Willow agreed. "I don't trust anything that has even the slightest connection to Maxwell."

"A sound strategy in any situation."
Wickerbottom folded her arms and looked back through the trees to her camp.

"I shall have to move my camp to a safer location, one not so directly exposed to the resonating energy," she murmured. "Perhaps I'll relocate up the ridge—close to the graveyard."

"You could come back to our camp with us," Willow suggested. "We certainly have room to spare and I think we could use someone like you on your side."

Wilson couldn't contain his small, excited gasp. "Do you really mean it, Willow?!"

"Of course I do!" she huffed. "If you want, I could tell her to get lost."

"Oh, please don't!" Wilson bounced up to Wickerbottom. "Please say yes! Come back with us! I would love to have someone to discuss science with again!"

Wickerbottom pursed her lips. "I will need to bring my entire library with me. I don't care to leave it behind."

"If that's what you want," Willow said cautiously.

"It is a non-negotiable part of my living arrangements. I need my research materials. Regardless, I am favourable to the idea of joining your camp, if you will have me."

Willow looked to Wendy and Wigfrid. "If either of you have a problem with this, better speak up now."

"She is uncouth, but the old woman is wise," said Wigfrid. "We could benefit from someone with her experience."

Wendy paused, and then said, "I have no objections."

"Then it's settled," said Wickerbottom. "I will gather my belongings and be there by this evening. I have my own tent and bedroll so you needn't prepare one for me."

"Er—don't you want to know how to get there?" Willow asked.

"There's no need, dear. I'll use magic to find you. You be on your way."

Willow's eyebrows shot up her forehead and her gaze remained fixed on the back of Wickerbottom's head as she melded back through the trees. When Wickerbottom was gone, she finally turned to face Wilson.

"Well, you know how to pick your friends," said Willow. "She's pretty abrasive, isn't she? And I don't mean in an endearing way like Wigfrid is."

"Mrs Wickerbottom is as cold and as harsh as her life as been," Wendy reflected. "I would not fault her for that. She forged her own path in a man's exclusive world."

"You won't regret inviting her to stay with us," Wilson assured her. "Mrs Wickerbottom's very smart—and, I mean, much smarter than I could ever hope to be. She'll be nothing but an asset to us."

"I hope you're right, because she comes across as a witch to me," Willow complained. "Both figuratively and literally."

Ah, Willow. A bit kinder now, but still lacking in tact.
"There's really no point hanging around," Wilson changed the subject. "If Mrs Wickerbottom says to do something, then we better do it and head back to camp."

"Ugh, I hope she doesn't make it a habit to boss me around," Willow scoffed.

Nevertheless, Willow turned on her heel and led the march back through the brush, followed by Wendy and Wigrid.

Wilson hung back to stare at the cave entrance. He'd never been so drawn and repulsed by such a place before. As much as he wanted to put distance between himself and it, he couldn't help but conjure images of the fresh imprints on his mind. The whispers. The noise. The urge to go deeper.

Somehow, he thought, he was going to come back here, and it wasn't going to be a pleasant experience.

Wilson awoke to shouting.

He pried open an eye to determine whether it was his imagination or not. Soon, he realized that at least part of the shouting belonged to Willow—there was no mistaking that voice, like the crackle of a fire. Must be fighting with Wigfrid over something. Sighing, he rolled onto his side and tried to retreat back to the comfort of sleep.

Wilson couldn't believe it was morning already. The group had returned to the camp late yesterday with Wendy in tow, but Wickerbottom hadn't shown up like she said she would. He wasn't exactly worried. If anyone could look after herself, it was the unshakeable W. W. Wickerbottom. Even after spending a year in this wasteland, she looked as prim and proper as ever. Amazing, perhaps, for someone else—but not for her.

Wilson furrowed his brow as he got the sudden impression that a pair of eyes was settled on him. He chanced opening his eyes, expecting to see his shadow cast across the tent canvas.

Instead, Wendy was standing over him.

He let out a startled yelp and bolted upright in his bedroll.

"You salivate when you sleep," she remarked. "Did you know that?"

"How—how long have you been standing there?" he demanded. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that it's rude to watch people sleep?!!"

"Yes. Willow did."

Wendy sat down and folded her hands together.

"I always wonder what people are dreaming about," said Wendy. "I wonder if the reality they experience in the Land of Nod is more pleasurable. Tell me, Wilson—what do you dream about?"

Wilson sighed and pressed his fingers to his forehead. Hard.

"Maybe—maybe you should consider going to sleep yourself and, uh, experiencing it first hand," he suggested.

"I don't sleep," she replied.

His brow came low over his eyes and he turned to look at her.
"That was a joke," Wendy elaborated.

Dragging himself out of his bedroll, Wilson straightened his clothes, except found that he was missing his vest. He found it perched on top of the head of the discarded automaton they’d found in the marsh.

"I thought I heard Willow shouting about something," said Wilson.

Wendy nodded. "She and Mrs Wickerbottom were arguing."

"Oh, did Mrs Wickerbottom finally arrive? It's about time. I need to consult with her. Wait—why were they fighting?"

"Mrs Wickerbottom brought more books than Willow was anticipating. She was displeased."

"Who was displeased? Willow or Mrs Wickerbottom?"

"Both."

"Hm. I see. Well, I guess I'll go say hello to Mrs Wickerbottom. Uh...if you're going to stay in here, try not to touch anything. At all."

“As you wish.”

Wilson emerged and found the camp empty, but there was a new attraction. Across from his tent and past the campfire, a new tent had been erected. It was much larger than the others, and if he had to guess it was for the sole purpose of accommodating books.

He crossed the length of the camp and ducked inside without invitation. Assumption confirmed. He was hit with the strong scent of parchment and ink that reminded him of the university. Makeshift bookshelves reached to the peak of the tent and all were filled to capacity. Right by the tent entrance was a writing desk, and this is where he found Wickerbottom writing on a blank sheet of papyrus.

“You forgot to knock, dear,” she said.

Wilson glanced at the entrance and back. “Oh! Sorry.”

“It’s quite alright. Since we seem to be developing something of a community here, I have decided to establish a book loaning system. My tent will be open everyday from eight to six o’clock.”

“You’re opening a library?” Wilson chuckled. “Out here?”

“Of course I am. All knowledge should be free, even to such an infantile, conceited young woman like Willow.”

“Wendy told me you two were arguing. What was it about?”

“Willow thought it would be better to burn some of the books than maintain them. I think she just fears what she’ll find within their covers. I made my position clear to her. I have never bowed to anyone—and I certainly don’t plan to start with her.”

She tore her attention away from whatever she was writing and faced him for the first time. Her actions were delicate, like the fine feathered quill she wrote with.

“I have a confession to make, Wilson,” said Wickerbottom. “I believe that I may be responsible for
your being here and I want to apologize for that.”

“I beg your pardon? What on Earth makes you think that?”

"Maxwell chooses his abductees carefully, sometimes observing them for years prior to initial contact. I further theorize that he targeted you because of your association with me.”

Wilson processed the theory, his mind churning. “Do you really think that’s true?”

“It’s a theory. Thus, it is unproven.”

“But you think that it’s true.”

“I think it far too great a coincidence that Maxwell abducted the two of us. He’s a master manipulator. He tries to orchestrate everything that happens in this world, whether that means constructing a new means for us to die, or emotionally manipulating the survivors.”

“So he took both of us because we’re friends?”

“That, and because of our shared interest in science and magic. But I refuse to play by his rules, as should you.”

Wickerbottom folded her arms and averted her gaze.

“In all honesty, I think that forming such a large camp is a mistake.”

“You don’t think we should be working together?”

“Not in such a substantial group, no. Willow told me about this Wolfgang character and his friend, and she further explained that she plans to extend an invitation to all survivors she encounters to join this camp. That is precisely what Maxwell is hoping for. The larger this camp becomes, the more of a target we become. The more havoc that will ensue.”

“So why did you come here?”

“Because I’m hoping I’m wrong and that we will find a means of escape before then. It will be easier to focus on science with other survivors pooling their resources. It is a calculated risk, but one I thought I had to undertake for the betterment of the survivors as a whole.”

Wilson’s mouth was dry and he didn’t answer. Wickerbottom leaned against the desk, her hands folded. Her expression tart and firm, regarding him with a critical and unwavering eye, like she was trying to bore into his thoughts and discern meaning behind his existence.

“I saw the Science Machine behind your tent,” said Wickerbottom. “Does it work?”

“Not as well as the one I had at the university, but well enough, yes,” Wilson shrugged.

“I’m impressed you managed to construct it with the limited resources available. I may have to use it on occasion for my own research.”

“You don’t need to ask—feel free to use it whenever you wish.”

“Good. Good.”

Wickerbottom pursed her lips, her fingers drumming against a book. Finally, she handed it to him.
“I want you to have this,” she said.

Wilson looked at the cover. It was *Theories of Cosmological Time Displacement*.

“It’s not a loan—it’s yours,” Wickerbottom emphasized. “And I expect you to put it to good use.”

Wilson smiled fondly at the cover. “You know, they’ve been dead for just about eight years now. I wonder what they would say if they could see this place and know that they were right about so many things.”

Wickerbottom paused and then said, “I wouldn’t become too discouraged over the time displacement. There must be a way to compensate it.”

“I think you’re right,” Wilson agreed. “And I think it’s underground.”

“I concur. But we should wait before exploring the cave in detail. It is unwise to go down there unprepared, so be cautious and don’t do anything reckless.”

“You worry too much!”

“Now that I’m here, it is my official duty to ensure you don’t put yourself in danger for the sake of science. Honestly, what your parents would say if they knew... Now, run along and go do some chores or some other productive activity. I have preparations to make for the library.”

Wilson was just about to duck out of the tent when Wigfrid abruptly came through. She was carrying an axe over her shoulder, and her eyes passed over the books before settling on Wickerbottom.

“I have been informed that you contain great texts on the art of warfare!” Wigfrid shouted. “I demand that I see them at once!”

“As you wish, but if you wish to check them out, you’ll need a library card,” said Wickerbottom. “And you’ll need to leave your axe at the desk.”

“A warrior is never separated from her weapon!”

“She is if she wants to set foot in my library. Relinquish your weapon.”

Wigfrid’s beady little eyes darted between Wickerbottom and her axe. Finally, with a scowl on her face, she handed it over.

“Thank you,” said Wickerbottom. “Now follow me. I think I know exactly the book you’re looking for.”

Wilson walked into the embrace of summer sun and let out a breath. Too close. He'd come far too close to telling Wickerbottom everything that had happened. But he couldn't risk it, not when he was still uncertain, himself. The shadow was too untrustworthy.

Still, he could think of one disadvantage to having his old friend here. Wickerbottom would know that something was wrong. She would try to stop him if he knew that he talked to figments of his imagination.

He’d either have to be more careful or become a better liar. One was more plausible than the other.
And another chapter finished!

Honestly this was a difficult chapter to do—and it's mostly filler. I think it's a bit too drawn out in places and I may condense some scenes depending on whether or not I think it needs to be done later. Right now I just want to get it out in the open. As always, constructive criticism is very much appreciated! All my chapters are always WIP so I'm always going back to edit things to make a better story!

I'm really glad I finally got to get Wickerbottom in here. Such a great character!

Some of the tags have been edited to reflect events specific to the Man Who Played God and not to later instalments in the series.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Wilson studied the fine lines in the automaton’s appearance and thought it had an ugly face. Ugly, cold, and callous.

He hadn’t realized the extent to which the automaton resembled a human. Had he known, maybe he wouldn't have spent so many sleepless nights putting it together—why he rushed to get menial chores done so he could spend the rest of the day working on it. Why he’d skipped meals, tossed and turned at night, and why he now sat on his tent floor to glare at the monstrosity from the safety of muted sunlight.

The automaton wasn't as technologically advanced as Maxwell's machines were, based on pure observation alone. It was difficult to make an accurate comparison when he didn't have one for study. That said, the robot lying limply in front of him was much more humanoid in design. Two arms, two legs, a body, a head, and a face that was an eerie, mechanical reflection of a real person. It was filled to the brim with gears and components and parts that he didn't even know the purpose of. Magic had to be involved to some extent—if it existed in the other world, he was sure that this thing wouldn't be anything other than a nonsensical prototype. Whoever had built the automaton must’ve had advanced knowledge in engineering.

Wilson gave the automaton a swift kick and regretted it. He spent the next few minutes nursing his sore toe.

All this work—and he couldn't get the damn thing to turn on.

Everything appeared to be in working order, except that he couldn't find a discernable power-supply. Then again, maybe he was missing a piece. It had been lying out in the swamp for a while. He'd had to spend a few days, alone, cleaning out gunk, water, and rust.

Wilson didn't look up as the tent flap fluttered. He had come to recognize the footsteps of everyone in the camp, and this time it was someone small of stature and hobbling around on four legs.

"Hello, Chester," Wilson greeted.

Chester bumped his legs. Wilson stumbled, but regained his balance and absently patted its head.

"Don't suppose you have a degree in engineering, do you?" Wilson asked. "Think I should go see if Mrs Wickerbottom has any books that could help?"

As always, Chester didn't answer. He just drooled.

"Yeah, I thought you might say that. C'mon."

Chester followed Wilson out of his tent and across the camp. Wilson was so engrossed in his surroundings that he barely registered that Willow was waving at him. All of his thoughts were consumed by the library. Wickerbottom had put out a sign to advertise the fact, along with the hours of operation.

He ducked inside and turned to the writing deks, expecting to find Wickerbottom there as always. Instead, he found Wendy.

"Oh, hello!" Wilson beamed. "Doing some reading?"

"Mrs Wickerbottom is forcing me to take leassons," Wendy bemoaned. "You are not the only proponent of education, apparently."
Wickerbottom emerged from behind a bookcase. "Indeed he is, young lady. Now back to work!"

Wendy bowed over the papyrus she was writing on.

"Please try not to disturb my pupil, Wilson," Wickerbottom requested. "She's writing a book report, so she does not need any unnecessary distractions."

"Yes, Mrs Wickerbottom," Wilson nodded. He tried his best not to feel too sorry for Wendy—there were other things he needed to worry about.

"And no animals allowed!"

Wilson looked down at Chester. Chester seemed to take the hint at once and pointed out of the tent, tongue still hanging out of his mouth.

"He tried to eat some books," Wickerbottom complained. "Until he learns that books are for reading, not for consumption, he's not allowed in here. Understood?"

"Yes, Mrs Wickerbottom," he nodded again. "I need some books on engineering."

"Hm, I thought you might," said Wickerbottom. "End of this aisle, at the top. Make an effort not to fall off the stepladder. I need to continue supervising Wendy as she has the tendency to get distracted."

"Education is meaningless," Wendy grumbled.

"I will have none of that, dear. Keep writing!"

Wilson ended down the aisle Wickerbottom had indicated. Since the tent could only provide so much room, the aisles were crowded and claustrophobic, but at least there was no end to research materials. He found the stepladder and climbed to the top, where he found a section of books on mechanical engineering. He selected a random one and started flicking through it.

"Are you still reconstructing the automaton?" Wickerbottom asked.

"Well, most of that is done, but I can't seem to get it to activate," he admitted.

"Is the power source drained?"

"That's the odd part. I can't seem to find one."

"Don't be ridiculous. Is it possible you overlooked it?"

"Believe me, I've checked time and time again. Either I'm missing that part or it never had one to begin with."

"That's absurd."

"I'm not so sure. I'm beginning to think that magic has to do with it."

Wickerbottom scoffed. "Considering where we are...I suppose that would unsurprising." A pause, and then: "Wendy, there was no murder-suicide in Anne of Green Gables. Please rewrite this paragraph while I speak to Wilson."

Wickerbottom appeared at the bottom of the stepladder.
"Have you found any relevant material?" Wickerbottom asked.

Wilson sighed. "No—nothing on magical robots. I'm not even sure what I'm looking for."

He sat down on the stepladder and leaned forwards.

"I'm wondering if I should just give it a zap of electricity and see what it does," he said. "It's almost like whoever built it just threw it together and expected it to work."

Wickerbottom pursed her lips, the same way she did when she disapproved. "Wilson, reactivating that automaton is foolish. You said, yourself, that the ones you encountered in the swamp displayed aggressive behaviour."

"We don't know until we try."

"And I appreciate your enthusiasm. All the same, rebuilding that automaton has no relevance to our current predicament."

"Yeah, that’s what Willow keeps saying."

"And so everyone is in agreement that there are few redeeming factors where the automaton is concerned. I believe it would be prudent to study its components, then apply what we learn to improve the functionality of the camp."

Wilson chewed on his lip. "I wish we had a generator or something."

Wickerbottom removed her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Wilson...you're off your trolley."

"I wish it was raining," Wilson muttered. "If it was raining, there'd be a chance for lightning trikes. If there were lightning strikes, I could build a lighting rod and—oh! That’s a good idea. But there probably won’t be any rainfall until later in the season."

"As usual, you fail to listen to anything I'm saying."

"Let’s see—what with the wind conditions, I suppose a wind turbine isn’t out of the question...But the trees..."

Wickerbottom sighed. "Wilson, use common sense for once and leave the automaton alone. Anything that Maxwell created can’t possibly be trusted."

"I know that!" Wilson exclaimed. "It’s just that...Wait—you can use magic, right?"

Wickerbottom rolled her eyes so far back in her head that he was surprised they didn’t disappear.

"You have to know a—a spell that can generate electricity or something," Wilson pressed. "Oh! This is the perfect opportunity for you to do a demonstration!"

"Magic isn’t a toy, Wilson. It just so happens that I have a spell that can summon lightning strikes, but I only use magic unless it’s for practical reasons. Your automaton is not practical."

"Please?"

"No."

Wilson pursued her to the end of the aisle, prepared to argue his case. However, Wickerbottom
stopped short, and he soon realized why. The writing desk where Wendy had been sitting was empty.

"Oh, bugger—she's escaped again," Wickerbottom muttered. "I'm going to have to start tying her to that chair."

"Just a small demonstration?" Wilson pressed.

"Absolutely not!" Wickerbottom exclaimed. "Wilson, I have a pupil to find. We can discuss this later."

Wickerbottom picked up her skirt and rushed out of the library.

Wilson let out a frustrated growl. He'd tried to get Wickerbottom to demonstrate her newfound abilities before, but the thing about Wickerbottom was that she never did anything for show. Much like the scientific method, there was always a calculated purpose behind her actions. There was always a means to an end—and showing off was absurd.

Still, if Wickerbottom had invented a magic spell, maybe he didn't really need her to perform it.

He froze in his tracks.

No...no, he shouldn't.

All the same, Wilson checked to ensure that Wickerbottom was out of sight, off looking for Wendy somewhere. Then he went over to the writing desk. Beyond it was a small living area Wickerbottom maintained for herself—a bedroll hidden behind stacks of her personal book collection and an extinguished lantern. Would she leave that kind of power lying around for anyone to find?

Wilson glanced at the entrance.

Would she notice?

Of course she would. She would know right away. Which is why he'd have to be quick enough to return the book before she realized it was gone.

Wilson crept forwards and hovered over her personal book collections. His body tensed with anticipation and dread. All of his instincts as a gentleman told him not to dig through a woman's personal belongings. But if Wickerbottom was going to continue to refuse, what choice did he have?

"It's for science!" he whispered like a mantra to motivate him.

He hewed his lip and eyed a pile of books he recognized. Wickerbottom hadn't demonstrated her spells, but she had shown him her spell books. Their covers were much more intricate and artistic than the others.

"We hope you are not going to steal that," a voice whispered in his ear.

Stupid shadow. "I really don't see how this is any of our business. Besides, it's not stealing! I'll only be borrowing it for a short time."

"Borrowing without permission sounds suspiciously like theft. We do not trust magic created by humans. It is best left alone."
"And since it was invented by a human, a human such as myself shouldn't have any trouble using it."

Wilson dug through the selection of books. Wickerbottom had said that one of them caused lightning strikes...Fortunately, he didn't have to go far to find it. The title was *The End is Nigh!*, and he could tell right away when he set his fingers on the cover and it trembled with the familiar hum of electricity. He wasn't sure how he was so certain that it was the right candidate, but he would just have to trust his judgment. With any luck, Wickerbottom would be too busy with Wendy to notice its disappearance.

He picked up a few engineering books to hide the tome and ducked out of the tent. Wilson surveyed the camp, but Wickerbottom wasn’t in sight. The only movement came from Willow, who was tending the endothermic fire.

He could do this. He just had to play it cool.

Wilson made it halfway back to his tent when Willow looked up from her place by the fire.

She said, “Hey, Wilson, I was wondering if you could—”

“NOTHING!” he shouted.

“I—what?”

“No time to explain—there’s science to do!!”

“Wilson?!”

He dove into his tent and let the flap flutter close behind him.

With no time to waste, he tossed the engineering books to the side and studied the cover of *The End is Nigh*. How hard could it be?

Wilson hurried to the side of the automaton. It was fortunate that it didn’t require delicate handling. Whoever had built it had built it to last, which left the mystery of how it had gotten disassembled much stranger. He draped the automaton around his shoulders, though he had to make a lot of adjustments to make sure that he could walk comfortably.

"This would be much easier if Wolfgang hadn't left in such a hurry," he murmured.

Wilson ducked under the back of the tent canvas so he wouldn’t enter the campsite and have to answer questions. With the camp behind him, he hurried into the cover of the woods and found the trail to the meadow.

The walk took a bit longer than usual and he had to frequently pause to rest, stretch his shoulders, and then readjust the automaton. Still, he kept glancing back—having become accustomed to the feeling that he was being either followed or watched. He couldn’t afford to let anyone interfere until after he tested the spell’s capabilities. But the further he walked, the more he became convinced that he wasn’t going to be able to get the book back to Wickerbottom’s tent in time. She would notice before then, as she noticed everything, and he would get a thorough chewing out.

A voice shook him out of his thoughts. “Where are you going?”

Wilson yelped. He couldn’t sworn that there was no one behind him moments ago, but now Wendy was keeping pace.
“I’m going to do science!” Wilson said proudly. “You should probably get back to camp, though. Wickerbottom’s looking for you.”

“I am sure that she is. However, I have no intention of sitting through her menial lessons.”

Wilson focused back on the path. Then at Wendy. She was still following.

“I, um—you know, I have to admit, I didn’t think you would be so adverse to school,” Wilson noted.

“Abigail was the academic,” said Wendy.

Wilson frowned. “Look, uh—Wendy, I can’t help but notice that you seem to be following me. Maybe you should go back to camp?”

“I would prefer to observe your activities.”

“I’m not sure Mrs Wickerbottom would approve…”

“I am unconcerned with Mrs Wickerbottom’s approval.”

“Well, that makes one of us,” Wilson sighed. “Alright, you can come along. But we should go back to camp separately and deny that we ever saw each other.”

“Agreed. Lead on.”

The two of them emerged from the forest and crossed the meadow until they were well clear of the trees. The sky was cloudless and he knew they could be seen for miles. All the same, he felt more comfortable the more distance he put between himself and the camp.

“What are you doing?” Wendy asked.

“I’m trying to restart this automaton and I think a lightning strike might do the trick,” said Wilson. “Well—a lightning strike, a bit of clever engineering, and a pinch of magic!”

“A powerful combination. Use extreme caution.”

Wilson led Wendy to the peak of a hillside well clear of the forest. At the top of the hill was a patch of dirt where the deposited the automaton.

Wilson held up Wickerbottom’s book and examined the cover a final time. In all regards, a perfectly normal volume, albeit with an unusual title. It seemed to hum with a strange energy, like a radio signal just out of reach. Still, his senses shivered, and he turned it over in hand.

“Wendy, you should probably stand back,” Wilson instructed her.

Wendy hesitated, then did as she was told.

“Are you certain that you understand what you are doing?” Wendy asked.

He smiled back at her. “Only one way to find out!”

Wilson cracked open the cover.

The effect was immediate. The pages turned of their own accord, flipping through the pages until he could no longer see the words. A sudden wind hit his face and nearly threw him off his feet.
The light constricted, with clouds rolling over the horizon and closing in to pinch the blue sky out of existence.

A sudden feeling of dread washed over him. Wilson tried to snap the book shut as the wind picked up, but it was as if the tome had a mind of its own. He struggled, catching sight of the automaton catching the last bit of daylight as a raindrop hit his forehead.

A rumble overhead—

A flash—

A white hot explosion—

Then nothing.

“Is he dead?”

“No, I think he’s just stunned.”

"Wilson is most unfortunate to elude death so often..."

“We should bury him with honour! We will require a boat to guide him into Valhalla!”

“He is not yet deceased, Wigfrid.”

“Hey—Wilson! Wake up before Wigfrid decides we need to bury you!”

Wilson tried to make a noise. He tried to think of something clever to say, but ended up letting out a long moan.

“There, see? He’s alive.”

Wilson’s attention flickered and he tried to make sense of the world. His head pounded with waves of pain. The pain came from inside of him. He felt as though a thousand hornets ran through his veins, buzzing and burning and attacking every nerve. All the same, he managed to pry open his eyes and squinted at the sudden sunlight.

Four faces peered down at him. Wendy, Wigfrid, Willow, and Wickerbottom, and their strained faces relaxed when he blinked up at them. Wickerbottom's expression quickly shifted to annoyance.

“Wilson, what on Earth were you thinking?!” Wickerbottom shouted.

Wilson tried to gather his thoughts, and managed to say, "Is the automaton in one piece?"

“Is that all you can think about?” Willow demanded. “Don’t you know what happened? You got struck by lightning!”

“I did?”

"Yeah, but you didn't catch fire, so...it was kind of anticlimactic."

"Willow!" Wickerbottom exclaimed.
"I'm just saying!"

"This is what happens when you attempt to use a tome that you do not fully understand, Wilson P Higgsbury!" Wickerbottom yelled.

Wilson rolled onto his stomach. Thoughts of the automaton buzzed through his mind, impossible to ignore. Before anyone could stop him, he was on his feet, though the world swayed.

"Is it nearby?" he asked, voice quivering.

"How do you feel?" Willow asked.

"...Tingly."

"Sounds about right."

"Where's my robot...?"

“It did not have a desire to stay,” Wendy answered. “After the lightning struck it, it stood up and walked away. It seemed confused.”

Wilson rounded on her. “Wait—what?! You mean—it got up and walked away?! You mean it worked?!”

“It did,” Wendy confirmed. “Lightning struck both you and the automaton. As you fell, it stirred and came to life.”

She paused, assessing her thoughts.

“It was rather rude, I think. It called me an ‘underdeveloped fleshling’ and advised me to increase my height.”

“It SPOKE?!”

“Impolitely—but yes, it did speak.”

“Where did it go?!” Wilson exclaimed. He staggered away from the group and scanned the meadow, but all he could see were a few alert rabbits undisturbed by the commotion.

“Oh, somewhere in that direction,” Wendy waved back towards the forest. “I elected to remain with you until the others arrived.”

“I knew it had vocal capabilities, but if it insulted you, then that suggests human-like intelligence, perhaps self-awareness,” Wilson muttered. “I’ll need to locate it at once!”

“Absolutely not!” Wickerbottom protested.

All thoughts came screeching to a halt at Wickerbottom's words.

“I don’t know what you were hoping to accomplish, but you have reached the limits of my patience!” Wickerbottom yelled. “Not only did you endanger yourself, but you endangered the life of Wendy! I thought you learned a valuable lesson when you tampered with an invention you didn’t understand, but perhaps I was wrong. So let me make this perfectly clear."

Wickerbottom shook The End is Nigh! in his face, her expression lucid and clear and livid. He’d never seen so much of her eyes before.
"You will return to the camp and rest," she declared. "You will apologize to Wendy for endangering her life—and to me, for stealing my belongings. And you will never—ever do this again! Am I clear?!"

Wickerbottom had shouted at him before, but never with such venom. He found that he couldn't really do anything at that point, except nod vigorously.

"Good, and let's hope you mean it because you know I hate repeating myself," Wickerbottom scoffed.

“But...but what about my robot?” Wilson asked quietly.

“Honestly!”

“Wigfrid and I will look for it,” Willow intervened. “After all, if it’s anything like Maxwell’s machines, then I want to know where it wandered off to.”

With surprising gentleness, Wickerbottom took Wilson by the arm and guided him back to the forest. The dark clouds that had heralded the arrival of the lightning had long since receded and now the world looked as it had before. Like he hadn't summoned magical forces and that a robot hadn't just gotten up and walked away.

They didn't speak the rest of the way to the camp, but he knew that Wickerbottom wasn't the only one absorbed by Wendy's report.

Wilson grudgingly returned to his tent, but not to rest. No, if the others weren't going to let him search for the automaton, he was just going to have to focus on science and hope that the others would find it. However, when Wigfrid and Willow returned at dusk—their faces drawn and tired—he knew that they hadn't been successful.

He dozed off before dinner and woke up again in what he thought was the early morning. For a moment, he struggled with his thoughts, wondering what had woken him up. That answer presented itself when Willow appeared at his elbow with a plate of meat and vegetables jumbled together in a stir fry.

“I called you for dinner, but you were already asleep,” she said.

“Thanks,” Wilson muttered. He didn’t tell her that he wasn’t particularly hungry and set the plate to the side. “Is Wickerbottom still angry?”

“I’m beginning to suspect that’s her default mood.”

Not too far off the point there. “What time is it? Has the sun been down long?”

“It’ll be morning in a few hours.”

He muttered something incomprehensible.

“What’s on your mind?” Willow asked.

“Nothing—sort of. I was just trying to think about how we can track down the automaton and—and I guess I fell asleep. It can’t’ve gone far...”

“We can look for it again the morning, but I really think you should try to get some sleep before then.”
“That’s not necessary. Sometimes I think faster when I don’t get a good night’s rest.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright?” Willow asked.

“I’m feeling much better, actually.” Aside from the fact that his hands were numb and every time he went to touch something it was like the whole world was vibrating. “Believe me, it’s not the first time I’ve been electrocuted.”

“I can believe that.”

Wilson sighed. “Do you think Wendy’s testimony is reliable? I mean—I know she’s quite articulate, but she said that the automaton spoke to her...I just don’t see how it’s possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it had vocal capabilities, but I assumed it was only capable of responding to basic commands or processing data. Wendy’s testimony suggests human-like intelligence.”

Willow frowned. “That doesn’t sound like the robots we saw back in the marsh.”

“You’re right, but it’s difficult to know for sure. Judging solely on their behaviour, their processing capabilities are rudimentary at best. Maybe—maybe they’re no better than dogs who’ve been taught simple commands. I need to study the automaton...I just need to. There’s something strange about it.”

“I know, but I’m not exactly optimistic about our chances of finding it. It could be anywhere! And it probably doesn’t need food or water or shelter like the rest of us do.”

“Do you think the Grue would attack it?”

Willow shrugged. “The Grue’s not exactly interested in animals, but I dunno. Maybe.”

“Hm.”

Willow cupped his shoulder. “Cheer up, Wilson. We’ll track down that robot tomorrow. Well, hopefully we will. Wigfrid had a hard enough time picking up its trail yesterday, but let’s hope it leaves more obvious clues this time. Why don’t you try and get some rest?”

Wilson nodded absently and Willow retreated to the door. She paused and looked back at him.

“You’re not gonna sleep, are you?” she asked.

He shrugged in response. Willow ducked out of the tent and returned to her vigil by the endothermic fire. All was quiet again.

Wilson leaned over his desk. He couldn’t sit idly by while Wigfrid wandered the forest in search of a robot, especially when she didn’t understand its nature like he did. He would have to do something about it, and to do that he would have to help find it. If they could find it. If the robot was capable of insulting a human, it was capable of finding ways to throw off their trail. And once it got too far out of the area...then there wouldn’t be any hope of tracking it down. If only there was an easy way to detect it. If only...

Wilson train of thought faded.

The flash of inspiration. Out of the corner of his eye, sitting on a pile of books was the radio that had sat inert since he discovered it in the swamp. Unused, always quiet, always mocking him.
Except now as he stared at it he remembered why he’d been so interested in it in the first place.

He dove for the radio and held it in his hands, hands trembling. Of course! How could he be so stupid? The radio could pick up on magical signatures—it was the only reason it was valuable. It could acting as a homing beacon—a divining rod—that would lead him straight to the robot’s location! It was so fundamentally simple Wilson just about slapped himself for not thinking of it right away.

Wilson didn’t waste any time gathering the parts he would needed. Some frazzled wires, a metal pole he’d found in the forest, and various bits and pieces that he would need to bring the radio back to life.

He worked until first light, and when he finished, what he had in his hands was something that vaguely resembled a wand. It had been simple to rewire the radio and return it to what he thought would be full functionality. Wilson had mounted the radio on top of the pole, and now he held it upright in front of him.

Holding his breath, he turned the dial.

The reaction was immediate. The radio emitted a loud, jarring noise. Wilson was just about thrown off his feet with a vibration that rolled down the length of the pole and into his arm. He kept his balance and fixed both hands on the pole. After a few seconds, the noise sounded again.

Wilson nearly broke out into dance, but he wasn’t that too far gone. There would be time for a celebratory dance later, after he tracked down the robot.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, he ducked underneath the back of his tent canvas and immediately went into the forest, which was brimming with light. In one hand, he held the radio, and in the other he held an axe. A precautionary measure—just in case everyone was right about the automaton’s hostility.

If he knew Wigfrid, she would be up early to go no the hunt. Meanwhile, he was going to go on a hunt of his own.

Streaks of sunlight cut over the horizon. The automaton wouldn't be able to hide in daylight.

The Divining Rod—as he had quickly come to call it—led him to a part of the forest he hadn’t yet explored, a place brimming with fresh activity and strange places and obstacles. However, his attention was so fixed on the Rod that he was barely capable of taking in his surroundings. There was only one scientific marvel he cared about right now, and judging by the high pitch from the Rod, it had to be near.

It was strange that the machine hadn’t gone deeper into the forest. It had the opportunity to put a great deal of distance between itself and the spot where it resurrected. Was it disorientated? Maybe it was curious about them? Or there was the most cynical explanation—that it wanted to destroy them like everything else in this landed wanted to do, except for the rabbits, birds, and most of the plants. Either way, Wilson wasn’t about to let it escape his grasp, not that he was just within reach of answers.

Wilson edged forwards. The screeching pitch emitting from the Rod was almost constant now. It had to be near.

His foot slipped.
He caught himself in time before the axe and the Rod flew out of his hands and went tumbling. He scrambled, digging his fingers into the earth, having just avoided falling into a confined gorge. It struck deep into the earth as if someone had taken a blade and made a long cut. Perhaps that was what had caused it in the first place, and before him there was nothing but partial darkness. Enough light to hold off the Grue, yet not enough to see to the bottom.

Wilson didn’t have to see to know that the axe and the Rod had fallen down there. He could hear it singing to him, calling him into the darkness. The gorge extended endlessly in both directions and wasn’t even twelve feet across, while the sides consisted of little more than jagged rocks.

“Perfect,” he muttered.

Wilson weighed his options like he had done so many times in the past. He could walk back to camp and grab a rope, but by then the robot may have moved on. Or he could take a chance.

Wilson did what he always did: he took a calculated risk.

Walking along the edge of the gorge, he went on until he found a ledge that looked climable. Sort of. Well, it was in one piece—so that was something.

The way down was much farther than he expected. Still, Wilson took it slow and lowered himself into the gorge. Of course, he hadn’t gone five feet when his foot slipped from underneath him again and he careened down.

Letting out a startled yell, Wilson’s back smashed into a thicket of leaves and twigs growing between the gorge walls. It was enough to brace his fall as he slammed, shoulders first, into the rocky ground below. Pain rippled through his joints and the air sucked out of his lungs. Leaves fluttered down on his face. But he was alive and he didn't have any broken bones.

“I should start carrying rope around,” Wilson murmured.

After resting for a minute or so, Wilson got to his feet and rubbed the back of his neck. No concussion. Not seeing double. A sore back, but that would go away. All in all, he got lucky. Again.

Reigniting his senses, Wilson followed the gorge to the sound of the Rod calling him in the distance. He found it and the axe resting in a patch of pale light emitting from some foliage ground near the bottom. Glowing mushrooms. He’d have to study that when he wasn’t busy. For the moment, he picked up the Rod and flicked off the switch.

“Hm, at least it doesn’t look damaged,” he said to himself. “More than I can say for my dignity, at least. I just think that—AAH!”

Out of the partial darkness, a hand emerged and grabbed him. Wilson was swung around and slammed into the wall.

A mechanical, crisp voice shouted out of the darkness. “WARNING: EMPATHY MODULE NOT RESPONDING. RECALIBRATION FAILED.”

Wilson blinked. Just like that, the hand released him and he swung around to face his attacker.

It was the automaton.

Slightly taller than him. Its metal exterior was muted brown with a hint of gold. Here was the automaton before him, up and walking, and glaring at him with what he thought could’ve been a
mixture of malice and disgust.

Wilson’s mouth fumbled for words, aghast that Wendy’s account of the automaton walking and talking had been no exaggeration.

“YOU AREN’T WORTH MY TIME, ORGANIC,” the automaton shouted. It had a loud, commanding voice that shook through Wilson’s skull. “NOW STOP FOLLOWING ME.”

With that, the automaton turned on its heel and stormed away.

Wilson regained control of his thoughts. He hurried after it.

“Hey—wait a minute!” Wilson called.

“YOU ARE ANNOYING,” the automaton declared. “HOLD STILL SO I CAN KILL YOU.”

Wilson shrieked and recoiled. The automaton held out its arm, then froze—its face twitching.

“WARNING: EMPATHY MODULE NOT RESPONDING,” it said. “RECALIBRATION FAILED. RECALIBRATION FAILED. RECALIBRATION FAILED. FAILED. FAILED. FAILED!”

The automaton staggered backwards, shaking its head.

“UGH, SOME MORON HAS BEEN MESSING WITH MY SENSORS!” the automaton complained. “WHAT WAS I DOING?”

Wilson blinked. “Well—you threatened to kill me.”

“THAT ASSESSMENT SOUNDS CORRECT. PLEASE HOLD STILL SO I MAY COMMENCE WITH THE KILLING.”

“You can’t kill me!” Wilson complained. “I created you!”

“You DID NOT, WORTHLESS MEATBAG.”

“Well—okay, I didn’t create you per se, but I did fix you! You should be grateful!”

“You...YOU FIXED ME?!” The automaton slapped both hands on the side of its head. “YOUR FILTHY ORGANIC APPENDAGES WERE INSIDE ME?!”

“Oh my, uh...You—you might want to think about rephrasing that...”

The automaton was not listening. It was too busy running in a circle flailing its arms.

“GERMS!” the automaton shouted. It seemed incapable of using an inside voice. “I’M COVERED IN FILTHY ORGANIC GERMS!”

“But...you’re a robot,” Wilson pointed out. “It’s not like you can catch a cold or anything.”

“THE THOUGHT IS ENOUGH! IF YOU THINK THAT—”

The automaton stopped short and froze in its tracks.

“RECALIBRATION FAILED, PLEASE REFER TO OWNER’S MANUAL FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTION,” it said. The automaton shook its head, then looked at Wilson. “WHO ARE
"I, uh, think there’s something wrong with your memory banks," Wilson realized. "Why don’t you let me have a look at—hey!"

Wilson was just reaching out as the automaton smacked his hand away.

"FLESHLINGS ARE INEFFICIENT," said the automaton.

"My good man! I mean—robot. Man. Thing. I am a scientist. I am extremely proficient when it comes to the most basic of mechanics. Most of the time. I put you together with all the pieces that I —"

"YOU FIXED ME?! THAT MEANS YOUR FILTHY ORGANIC APPEN—"

"We’ve been over this once already!"

"AND CLEARLY YOUR AUDIO RECEPTORS HAVEN’T YET—ERROR. RECALIBRATION FAILED."

Wilson rolled up his sleeves. "Okay, we’re gonna do this the hard way!"

Wilson tackled it to the ground.

The two of them rolled over several times in the dirt struggling for dominance. The robot, hitting him with its thick metal fists, while Wilson tried to pin its body between his legs so he could get access to his head. It was difficult and dirt got in his eyes and he wasn’t sure how he did it—but soon the robot was on its stomach as it tried to crawl away and Wilson was sitting on top of it.

"Stop fighting so I can help you!" said Wilson.

"I WILL DESTROY YOU!" the automaton yelled.

Wilson ignored it. He had full access to its cranium. Having had become intimately familiar with the automaton’s inner workings, it was a simple matter to remove the metal plate protecting its mechanical brain.

"If you struggle, you only make this harder for yourself," said Wilson. "Just a few adjustments and your memory capacity should go back to normal...I think."

Ignoring its protests, Wilson examined the interior of the robot’s cranium—an endless labyrinth of gears, wires, and machine parts working in perfect synchronization. Now that the robot was actually powered up, the gears were moving, and he quickly spotted the problem. A wire had gotten caught between two gears, preventing them from moving.

The robot struggled beneath him. "I AM FAR TOO ADVANCED FOR YOU TO HOPE TO—"

Wilson moved the wire to a safer spot. The gears whirred back into place with a faint click.

"RECALIBRATION COMPLETE," the automaton stated. "PERFORMING SYSTEMS CHECK. WARNING: EMPATHY MODULE NOT RESPONDING."

He got off of the automaton’s back. It rolled over, staring up to the sky with its arms and legs sprawled out. Its expression was blank, but the tiny, glowing eyes swivelled madly as it took in its surroundings.

There was a drawn pause before the automaton answered. “YOU HAVE PERFORMED SUFFICIENTLY FOR AN ORGANIC. EFFICIENCY RATING COULD BE INCREASED IF YOU WERE AN AUTOMATON.”

“I...don’t think I want to be an automaton,” said Wilson. He held out his hand to help the automaton up.

It was quick to brush him off and got to its feet of its own accord, still eying its surroundings as if they could not be trusted.

“What’s an Empathy Module?” Wilson questioned.

“WARNING: EMPATHY MODULE NOT RESPONDING,” the robot said once again. Then, its eyes seemed to gain a malicious tint. “GOOD. THIS WILL MAKE KILLING MUCH EASIER.”

“Well, that answers that question,” said Wilson. “I take it you aren’t going to thank me for putting you back together?”

The automaton up until now had been engrossed with its surroundings, but it looked at him now. Wilson had seen that expression before and was pretty sure he'd made the same face when he was first brought here. It was raw disbelief.

“You REPAIRED ME?” the automaton scoffed. “IT’S DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE THAT A MEATBAG LIKE YOU COULD HOPE TO UNDERSTAND MY COMPONENTS.”

“Hey, if it hadn’t been for me, you’d still be in pieces back in the marsh!”

“AH, YES—THE MARSH. WHICH WAY?”

“What?”

“IN WHICH DIRECTION IS THE MARSH? I HAVE UNFINISHED BUSINESS WITH THE WES. HE WILL PAY FOR HIS TREACHERY!”

Wilson gawked. “...Wes?”


“You—you know, I don’t—I don’t think that would do any good! I mean, the Wes—I mean, just Wes—he’s a bit missing.”

“UNDoubtedly THAT’S HIS OWN FAULT. NO MATTER! HE WILL NOT STAY HIDDEN FOR LONG!”

“Hold on a minute—I have questions for you!”

The robot groaned. “I DON’T HAVE TIME TO WASTE ON YOU.”

Wilson chased after the automaton as it walked down the length of the canyon, in search of a point of ascent.

“What are you, exactly?” Wilson asked. “You’re not like the other automatons I’ve seen.”
“THAT IS BECAUSE I AM A SUPERIOR MODEL,” the automaton answered. “MY SERIAL NUMBER IS WX-78. YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO CALL ME THAT IF YOU SO DESIRE, WORTHLESS MEATBAG.”

“I’m not a meatbag! My name’s Wilson P. Higgsbury—a gentleman scientist!”

WX hesitated, and then said, “HIGGSBURY, WILSON PERCIVAL. NATIONALITY: BRITISH. SUBJECT OF UNSOLVED 1920 MISSING PERSONS CASE.”

“I...I...what? How—how did—?”

“THE WES WAS EXTREMELY INTERESTED IN YOUR CASE. IF THAT’S THE ONLY QUESTION YOU HAVE, YOU MAY GO.”

“I’m not going anywhere! I can’t go anywhere, come to think of it.”

WX stopped in front of a particularly steep part of the canyon wall. After analyzing for a minute, he jumped up and grabbed a low ledge.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to get up that way,” said Wilson.

“PERHAPS YOU CAN’T, WORTHLESS MEATBAG.”

“Wait—even if you do get out, you can’t leave me down here!”

“THERE IS A HIGH PROBABILITY THAT I WILL BOTH ESCAPE AND LEAVE YOU HERE.”

WX managed to get to the next ledge before the rock crumbled. He slammed back into the ground.

“I really don’t want to have to fix you again,” said Wilson. “I still have questions, by the way.”

“ALL THE MORE REASON TO REMOVE MYSELF FROM YOUR COMPANY,” WX glowered.

WX got to his feet again and continued walking. This time, there were no attempts to make an assent. Wilson knew it was pointless. The lower half of the canyon looked climbable, but about halfway up the rocks bent inwards, and there were no crevasses to grab onto. Unless one of the others found them, he knew that they were going to be stuck down here for a while.

“How did you end up in pieces?” Wilson asked.

“UGH, IF I ANSWER YOUR ENQUIRIES, WILL YOU BE QUIET?” WX demanded.

“Of course!”

“FINE. I WAS DAMAGED BECAUSE OF THE WES’S TREACHERY. I SUSPECT HE WANTED TO USE ME FOR SCRAP PARTS.”

“How did you know Wes?”

“...ANSWER ME FIRST. HOW DO YOU KNOW THE WES?”

“Well—technically, I don’t. I only heard about him from his friend, Wolfgang.”

“I SEE. AND WHERE IS THE WOLFGANG NOW?”
“I’m not sure. He went out to look for Wes and he hasn’t come back.”

WX paused and analyzed his face. It was an expression that wasn’t exactly looking at Wilson—it was a face discerning its options.

“I NEVER MET THE WOLFGANG, BUT THE WES DESCRIBED HIM EXTENSIVELY,” said WX. “THE WES WAS ANNOYINGLY CHATTY.”

“So...how do you know Wes?”

“WE MET IN THE MARSH. HE HAD QUESTIONS. I PROVIDED ANSWERS. ONE DAY, HE ATTACKED ME.”

“He attacked you?”

“AFFIRMATIVE. HE PROVIDED ME WITH AN EXPLOSIVE SUBSTANCE.”

“An explosive substance?”

“AFFIRMATIVE. THE WES PROVIDED ME WITH A RUBBER SAC INFLATED WITH AIR AND SEALED AT THE NECK. IT THEN COMBUSTED.”

“A rubber sac inflated with...You’re not talking about a balloon, are you?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

“So...Wes attacked you...by giving you a exploding balloon?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

Wilson scratched the side of his head. Wes was sounding a bit more dangerous by the minute. “What kind of questions did Wes ask you?”

“INNANE ONES. HE EXPRESSED PARTICULAR INTEREST IN THE MISSING PERSONS CASE OF THE WILSON PERCIVAL HIGGSBURY.”

“Why? Why was he so interested?”

“I DON’T KNOW AND I DON’T CARE. THAT SAID, I AM UNSURPRISED TO FIND THE SUBJECT OF THAT CASE IN THIS DISGUSTING ORGANIC WORLD.”

“What are the details of the case? Why aren’t you surprised to see me here?”

WX groaned. “IF I HAD KNOWN YOU WOULD MAKE THIS MANY ENQUIRES, I WOULD NOT HAVE AGREED TO ANSWER THEM. THERE IS LITTLE OF NOTE IN THE HIGGSBURY DISAPPEARANCE CASE. THE MISSING PERSON WAS A MENTALLY UNSTABLE SCIENTIST.”

“I am not mentally unstable!” Wilson argued.

“I DON’T CARE.”

“I get the feeling you don’t care about a lot of things…”

“The ONLY THING OF NOTE IN THE CASE WAS A STRANGE MACHINE RESEMBLING AN ARCH. BASED ON RUDIMENTARY DESCRIPTIONS, I DETERMINED THAT THERE
WAS A HIGH PROBABILITY OF A CONNECTION TO THE MAXWELL. THE WES CAME TO A SIMILAR CONCLUSION.

"Is that why he was so interested in it?"

"HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW? I DON'T CARE!"

Stupid robot. “I’m beginning to regret putting you back together.”

“I WOULD HAVE RATHER REMAINED DISASSEMBLED IN THE MARSH THAN HAVE YOUR ORGANIC GERMS ALL OVER ME.”

“I, uh, didn't think a robot could be a germaphobe...”

“I AM ADVERSE TO ALL THINGS ORGANIC. YOU ARE NO EXCEPTION.”

WX came to a sudden halt. The canyon slid into a cramped space impassable even by a robot who thought himself so superior. Letting out a frustrated groan, WX turned on his heel and walked in the opposite direction, with Wilson right on his heel.

“Um—tell me, what were the results of the investigation into my disappearance?” Wilson asked.

"IT’S A COLD CASE," WX answered. "END OF STORY."

“How do you know about my case, anyways? Time is different in here. What year was it when you came here?"

“UGH, STUPID FLESHLING! I AM NOT FROM YOUR WORLD. I WAS ASSEMBLED HERE.”

“I guess that makes sense...But who constructed you? Was it Maxwell?"

WX laughed without any hint of expression or true amusement at the situation. “NO, NOT THE MAXWELL. MY CREATOR IS OF NO CONSEQUENCE OR CONCERN OF YOURS.”

Wilson analyzed the words in his hands. Could that mean WX’s creator was dead? “I see. I’m... sorry I asked.”

“IF YOU'RE SORRY FOR ANYTHING, IT SHOULD BE FOR YOUR EXISTENCE. MEATBAG.”

“You seem with the fact that I’m not a robot.”

“THE EASIEST WAY TO CORRECT THAT IS TO CEASE TO EXIST.”

Wilson rolled his eyes. He didn't get the satisfaction of seeing WX squirm until they reached the other end of the canyon, where the rock twisted into the earth and disappeared.

“You know, I don’t think even you can get out of here,” Wilson said candidly. “We’ll just have to hope my companions find us.”

“UGH, STUCK IN THE GROUND WITH A MEATBAG,” WX complained. “HOW DEGRADING.”

“It’s not exactly a picnic for me, either,” Wilson murmured.
"FINE, THEN I WILL RESOLVE THIS SITUATION BY KILLING YOU."

"Wait—WHAT?!"

WX calmly advanced towards him. Wilson startled, as if someone was yanking his mind back and forth. WX didn't look like he was joking. Still, he would need to be sure.

“You’re—you’re joking, right?” Wilson asked.

“I WOULD PREFER IF YOU STRUGGLED,” said WX.

“By the Devil—you're not joking!”

Wilson reached for the axe—and realized that he hadn't picked it up. He reached for the Rod—but he'd dropped that when WX had jumped it. Cursing his absentmindedness, Wilson grabbed the nearest rock and chucked it at the advancing automaton. The stone bounced off of WX's metal chassis with a loud clang that reverberated down the canyon. Wilson held up his hands.

“Shouldn’t we talk about this?” Wilson asked. “I mean, you don’t have to do this! We could all work together!”

"I DON'T WANT TO BE STUCK IN A HOLE WITH A MEATBAG!" WX whined. "THE ONLY WAY TO CORRECT THAT IS TO KILL YOU. PLEASE PLEAD FOR YOUR LIFE. IT WILL MAKE YOUR DEATH MUCH MORE SATISFYING."

“I’m not pleading for my life!”

“YOU SOON WILL BE.”

WX bolted and tackled Wilson to the ground. They struggled. Wilson struck his metal body and tried to call away, but WX was far too strong. This time, Wilson didn't have the advantage of surprise. He raised his arms to try to protect himself. WX pinned him down. Mindless terror stampeded through Wilson's mind. This thing really was going to try to kill him.

Wilson hadn’t even noticed that WX had grabbed his neck with one hand until he could no longer breathe.

Ringing.

The small piece of his brain that hadn’t been depraved of blood struggled in a hopeless effort to maintain consciousness, but Wilson knew that it was fruitless. He saw his body lying in the dirt, the robot ignoring him, and the cavernous walls rising on either side like a grave. All his thoughts wobbled like a boat balancing atop stormy waves. The knowledge—forbidden and closed off and so far away like a speck of land on the horizon—returned to him.

Then, eternity ended and he collapsed. The Knowledge left him once again.

Wilson realized that his eyes were open—that they had never closed—and the sky was now blue where once it was orange.

How much time had passed?

He felt like a puppet without anyone to control him, lying limp and helpless in the dirt, his throat and neck burning. He flopped his head to the side.
WX had his back to him. He was examining the Divining Rod.

“WHAT A RUDIMENTARY CONTRAPTION,” WX huffed. “ORGANICS ARE BOTH GROSS AND WEIRD.”

What a rude robot.

A glint of light caught Wilson’s eye, and he finally noticed the axe lying between him and WX. He squinted, scarcely able to believe it. Had that been lying so close to him this whole time? He must've tripped over it in his panic to get away from WX.

If he planned to get out of this canyon alive, this was his only chance.

Although his neck burned and his thoughts were still sluggish, Wilson staggered up, keeping his movements as lithe and quiet as possible. WX was engrossed with the Rod, turning its nobs. He startled when it let out a loud screech. The noise was enough to cover Wilson's footsteps as he picked the axe off of the ground and knotted his fingers around the handle.

One shot.

WX was just turning when Wilson struck his legs in one fell swoop.

This time, Wilson didn’t hesitate. Taking the axe, he hacked at WX’s legs until they came off. It was an easier process than he expected due to the flimsiness of the leg structures. WX made a last minute attempt to back away, only to leave his legs behind.

He looked up at Wilson with a sort of wide-eyed shock he attributed to a child who'd just been giving a good scolding.

“When you strangle someone, you should make sure to cut off their oxygen supply until they’re actually dead,” Wilson advised, his voice thick and gravelly.

“...I WILL REMEMBER THAT,” said WX.

Tossing WX’s legs aside, Wilson collapsed against the nearest rock and massaged his throat. It was tender to the touch, but WX hadn't done as much damage as he had intended to do. Lack of medical knowledge, probably.


“On the contrary, you were incapable of murdering correctly,” Wilson corrected him. “More to the point—what the heck was that for?!”

“FOR BEING A FLESHLING. I NEED NO OTHER REASON.”

“You know, for a robot you seem to be guided more by emotions than logic.”

“DON’T INSULT ME. I AM EXTREMELY LOGICAL. IT IS LOGICAL TO EXTERMINATE ALL MEATBAGS. NOW PUT ME BACK TOGETHER! AS A SUPERIOR BEING I COMMAND YOU TO DO SO!”

“I don’t think I’m going to make that mistake a second time. Besides, I need to find a way to get out of here, and when I do, you’re coming with me.”

“I REFUSE TO ASSOCIATE WITH FLESHLINGS!”
“I’ll take you back to camp and tie you up somewhere so you won’t cause trouble!”

“THAT’S INHUMAN!”

“Oh, hush, you’re a robot so it doesn’t count as forceful confinement.”

Wilson moved away from WX and stared up the canyon. How the hell was he going to get out with a captive?

“I might be able to improvise some climbing tools,” Wilson muttered.

Just as he considered his possibilities, the answer seemed to come from the sky.

Right above him, he caught a glimpse of movement and he staggered, trying to see what it was. A fallen branch, perhaps? But then, a long tendril flew over the side of the canyon and fluttered down towards him. Wilson instinctively reached out and caught it in his hands.

It was a rope—rough, handmade, and strong.

Wilson craned his neck up to see a pale face peering over the edge.

“Wendy!” Wilson exclaimed. “I don’t know why you’re here, but you’re a lifesaver! H—hang on! I’ll be right up!”

Wilson hurried back to where he left WX and piled him and his pieces together. This time, WX didn’t resist, though he folded his arms tightly and glowered at him. Wilson improvised a harness that he strung around his body and put his legs, the Rod, and the axe on top of him.

When he was done, Wilson tugged the rope to make sure it was secure, and began to haul himself up. Thanks to Wigfrid’s physical training, he managed the climb much better than he would have in the past—though by the time he got to the top, his hands burnt and he was out of breath Wendy awaited him, perfectly alone save for Abigail. She had secured the rope across one of the trees bordering the canyon.

“Thank God you found me, Wendy!” Wilson breathed. “H—how did you find me, anyways?”

Wendy paused, and then answered, “Abigail. She whispers sometimes.”

“Oh, that must be terribly handy. You’re going to have to tell me more about that sometime. Um, you might want to stand back. I have to bring WX up.”

“WX?”

"The robot. That’s what he calls himself.”

"The robot has a name?"

"This one says he does."

It took a lot of heaving and hauling on both their parts—especially since WX had gone limp. After a few minutes, they managed to drag the automaton back onto solid land. WX lay flat on his back, legless, and his arms still folded. If he was capable, Wilson was sure that he would be pouting.

“IF IT ISN’T THE UNDERDEVELOPED FLESHLING,” WX huffed. “THE WILSON HAS INFERIOR ALLIES.”
Wendy loomed over the robot, looking it straight in the eye, unwavering.

“You answers you seek cannot be found in solitude,” Wendy declared. “You will return with us.”

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?! UNHAND ME!”

But WX couldn’t do anything about it. Wendy picked up his discarded legs, while Wilson fastened WX to the rope and proceeded to drag him back in the direction of the camp. He didn’t ask Wendy about what she said to WX. If he knew her, the truth would reveal itself in time. Still, there was something else troubling him, some instinct that stirred in the back of his mind. An automaton shouldn't be capable of having secrets...but WX seemed to have many. Even now, he hid the truth —hid it like his life depended on it.

Wilson sighed and tried to imagine the look on Willow's face when he asked her if he could keep a killer robot.

Chapter End Notes

I'm...really neutral on this chapter. I feel like I could've done a much better job, but hopefully I'll polish it up more when I do additional edits. ):

In the meantime, Nimble is going crazy. I'm going to take a break from this story for a while so it might take a bit longer for the next chapter to come out! Thank you to everyone who's supported this story so far, I really appreciate it! <3
Wigfrid breezed between the trees, as delicate as a ballet dancer—sans the ridiculous attire. She was in the process of being captured. Captured by a desire to break the devastating silence of the forest. Because silence couldn't be trusted. She remembered the night Maxwell whisked her away into the despicable realm she now called home, and even then it had been as silent as the epilogue to a dream, and as foreboding as the vacillation she lived with on a daily basis.

It was late morning, and the only thing Wigfrid had to show from the hunt were two rabbits barely suitable for a stew. In the recent months, hunting had become much less enjoyable—less about the thrill and more about the necessity. There were hungry mouths back at camp and they relied on a steady food supply to survive. While the raw nature of the world made farming profitable even in wretched conditions, that didn't help Wigfrid. She could never bring herself to eat fruits and vegetables, no matter how much her mouth watered. Still, her responsibilities demanded results and the fact of the matter was that the morning was running as dry as the riverbed.
There was still daylight left, but with the full glare of the summer sun, most edible creatures would be hiding in their dens and holes and caverns. From there, they would glare as she passed. Mocking her inability to capture them.

Wigfrid emerged at the edge of the stream, briefly reflecting that she had first met Wilson nearby. However, there was no commotion now. She only had to glance around to see that the snares she'd set had gone untouched.

"Curse those rabbits," Wigfrid murmured. "Valhalla take you!"

She snatched a rock and threw it into the dwindling stream. It breached the surface with a miserable plunk.

“You should be conserving your water.”

Wigfrid's head snapped up and almost speared Maxwell on sight, though past experience had taught her just how pointless it was. Still, there was a sliver of hope—a rush of courage that stirred her will to fight and warmed her body. Hope that drained when she caught herself at the last second.

Maxwell stood on the other side of the stream. Sharply-dressed. Dark eyes. Bleached skin. An I'm-better-than-you leer underneath his vulture-like nose.

He really was an ugly son of a bitch.

"It doesn't hurt to be conscientious," Maxwell grinned, but it was the type of grin that didn't have any meaning. "I may extend the drought a few more weeks, perhaps until your water reserves dry up and you all bake under the sun. I hear dying of thirst is a wretched way to go, and it certainly wouldn't be the warrior's death you're hoping for."

"Begone, Maxwell," Wigfrid spat.

"That's no way to your main food source. If it wasn't for me, there wouldn't be anything here but ash and ruins. You should be grateful I even bother feeding you."

"The Chosen One says that you would never starve us. You would think it far too dull."

Maxwell laughed. "Got me there! I do prefer a bit of bloodshed. I guess we're alike in that way."

Wigfrid could tolerate Maxwell. She could even make light conversation with him. But being compared to him was the greatest insult she could think of.

She hopped across the stream to continue her trek through the forest. Unfortunately, she wasn't so easily rid of the magician. She'd scarcely gone a few yards when he materialized on the path ahead, tall and lanky and dark against the greenery. Maxwell was a nocturnal creature she wasn't used to seeing in daylight.

"Must you shadow me?" Wigfrid growled.

"I'd miss your enthralling company," Maxwell gibed.
"I have nothing to say to you."

"Don't tell me you're still bitter about our little bargain!"


"Oh, you're feeling murderous? Splendid! Why don't you try to strike me down right now? Come now, have a go at it! Spear me! Drown me! Strangle me!"

"First of all, those are not fitting deaths for someone like you, foul creature. They are far too merciful. Secondly, you know very well why I cannot do that. But rest assured that I will have my vengeance, one way or another."

"And then I can end your miserable existence in the glorious fashion you long for."

"I will fight to the death if I must, yes."

"How predictable! But you know...if you hurry back to your camp right now, the death you're looking for could be waiting for you."

Wigfrid stopped. Maxwell had just reached in and sucked the air right out of her lungs, making her feel light-headed and numb. Her mind raced. As always he possessed a presence far too compelling to ignore.

"What do you mean?" Wigfrid asked tentatively.

"It seems I've said too much," Maxwell lamented. "But do take a hint. Hurry back to camp, my dear. Your glorious death awaits."

Wigfrid hesitated, but during that hesitation countless scenarios shot through her mind. Visages of giants, tents aflame, the bloody corpses of her friends scattered like fallen chess pieces.

She didn't even realize that she'd start sprinting until she heard Maxwell's laughter. It chased her as she set out on the familiar path back to camp, though never before had she done so with so much dread. There was no stopping her. She was a raging storm, undeterred and unstoppable and ready to destroy whatever was in her path.

As the approached the camp border, she crouched low and kept a hand wrapped around her spear. Wigfrid barely touched the ground, not rustling any leaves or foliage. Her mind was ready for battle. Beyond the bushes, she could see the tents standing in stark contrast to the rest of the forest, pale and silent. Too silent. Wigfrid just about lost her sense of character and identity, and her will to fight along with it. Still, she thought of Willow and the others in danger and couldn't stop. She continued until she could finally see into the middle of camp.

Everything was where it was supposed to be.

No giants. No flaming tents. No corpses. Willow was by the fire pit, which donned Wickerbottom's endothermic flames. Arms folded in displeasure.

Wigfrid emerged, though with the adrenaline she remained on high alert. Her breath caught in her chest and she cautiously crept up to meet Willow.
"You're out of breath," Willow observed. "I hope you're not overexerting yourself."

"Has anything happened here?" Wigfrid asked urgently.

"There's always something going on. I have a feeling you're talking about something specific, though."

"Have there been any giants around? Any attacks? Anything at all?"

"Oh, Wigfrid—have you been talking to Maxwell again? Nobody's dead, if that's what you're wondering."

Wigfrid just about screamed. She settled for throwing her spear on the ground.

"Curse that fiend!" she growled. "He's done it again!"

"You really shouldn't listen to the guy," said Willow. "You know he just says those things to get you worked up and then take satisfaction when you realize nothing bad's happened."

"I know."

"And yet we're doing this again. You're not the only one he likes to torment, you know. He likes to get under Wilson's skin; I hear him talking to himself a lot, but I think he's actually talking to Maxwell."

"I know!"

"You should have more sense by now."

"I KNOW! I wasn't born yesterday! I do apologize for being concerned about your welfare!"

The dreaded silence tugged at Wigfrid's heart and sent her spiralling through a hell of despair and anguish. Willow expressed nothing but the usual emotions that played with her fair features. Resignation. Repression. The type of poker face Wigfrid expected from adept liars.

"Come with me," Willow finally said.

"Why should I?" Wigfrid scoffed.

"Because as much as it pains me to admit it, Maxwell wasn't entirely wrong."

Willow set off at a brisk sride, and Wigfrid hurried after her. They were heading towards Wilson's tent. It was the furthest from the main area of the camp, and had drawn further and further away as they'd added to the community. At first, she entertained the possibility that Wilson had somehow been injured in the pursuit of science yet again, a thought she dismissed when she realized that Willow was far too calm for that too be a possibility.

Wigfrid kept pace with her as they started to round the tent. "What's this about Maxwell not being entirely—IN THE NAME OF THE GODS! WHAT IS THAT?!"

Before her was a truly strange sight. Wilson, Wendy, and Wickerbottom were gathered around the base of one of the trees bordering the camp. rope was fastened around the trunk and swung over a
high branch, and tied up at the end of that rope—suspended some seven feet off the ground—was a metallic being. Not just any metallic being. Wigfrid recognized it as the automaton Wilson had been tending to like a doting father. Only now, the automaton was completely bound—its arms secured at its side, its ankles tied, its minimal facial expression one of mild annoyance.

"That's Wilson's new...thing," Willow answered her.

"It's not my thing," Wilson argued. "It's just a thing. And his name is WX-78, or so he claims."

Whatever. "It's a danger to the camp," said Wigfrid. "It needs to go."

"That's a rather hasty judgment."

"I was not opposed when it was an inanimate object. Now, it's perfectly clear that it is a construction of Maxwell's and should be disposed of as soon as possible."

"He says Maxwell didn't make him."

"Tch! Petty lies! Dismantle it at once."

"I can't do that!"

"And why not? I'll show you just how easy it is!"

Wigfrid barely took a step before Wilson intercepted her, arms outstretched and a look of determination about him she hadn't seen before.

"No," he decided. "Whatever WX is, he has some semblance of sentience. He's fully self-aware and it would be unethical to murder him."

"Murder?!" Wigfrid raged. "That abomination isn't alive. It's just a bunch of scrap metal! Willow agrees with me—do you not, Chosen One?"

"I dunno," Willow shrugged, scratching her ear. "It's not really my place to decide."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"This is a Wilson thing. If he insists we don't kill it, then we need to keep it at the camp. At least then we can keep an eye on it, rather than let it wander in the forest and wonder if it's gonna try something murder-y."

"The best way to prevent that outcome would be to destroy it."

"I just said it's not my decision."

"Do you not command us?! Force Wilson of Higgsbury to comply!"

"We never formally agreed upon the hierarchy here," Wickerbottom pointed out. "I have no objections to keeping this creature so long as it is restrained. It—or he if you so insist—presents an opportunity to study Maxwell's automatons with greater detail. Perhaps we'll even be able to reverse engineer some resourceful technology."
Wigfrid was cornered. By Wickerbottom, by Wilson, and—perhaps most surprisingly—by Willow. Only Wendy remained neutral, attention entirely fixated on the automaton.

"This is madness!" Wigfrid shouted. "This is something Maxwell made! We cannot risk keeping it alive!"

"DON'T EVEN PUT ME IN THE SAME CATEGORY AS THE MAXWELL."

Heads turned. WX glared down on the group.

"IF YOU WERE ALL AUTOMATONS, THIS CONFLICT WOULD BE SETTLED WITH COLD, HARD LOGIC," WX declared. "FOR THE RECORD, I AGREE WITH THE LOUD ONE. AT LEAST SHE HAS INITIATIVE."

"Funny, I don't remember inviting you to participate in this conversation," Willow drawled.

"YOU MEATBAGS WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO MAKE A DECISION WITHOUT MY INPUT!"

"Oh, really? Watch us!"

Wigfrid announced, wrenching out of Willow's grasp and folding her arms. "That thing cannot be trusted."

"That 'thing' is sentient," Wilson insisted. "Don't you realize how marvellous that is? The technology used to create him is—is centuries ahead of what we have at home!"

"Technology like that belongs in books—like—one written by H. G. Wells."

Wilson scowled. "That doesn't sound like a reference a Viking warrior would understand."

"Enough bickering, guys," Willow interrupted. "You're making me look bad in front of Mrs Wickerbottom!"

"This isn't about you!" Wilson exclaimed.

"Hey, I live here! And here I was going to take your side and everything."

"W—What? Really?"

"For the time being. I don't really want that thing prowling the forest unsupervised. If you're right about being able to use technology from it, then it could give us an enormous advantage over the local wildlife."

"Including the Pigmen," Wickerbottom added.

"However, I don't feel comfortable having anyone but Wigfrid guard it."
"I protest!" Wigfrid exclaimed. "I am the main food provider of this camp and I simply can't give up my duties just to guard that pile of scrap metal."

"It won't be for forever," said Willow. "Just until we figure out what its motivations are and what we're going to do with it in the long-term. In the meantime, Wilson and I can pick up the slack."

"M—Me?" Wilson stammered.

"Hey, you need to learn how to hunt properly. Your science things are all well and good, but that's useless if you don't learn to feed yourself."

"I...I suppose so, but I would rather dedicate my time to studying him."

"No one's stopping you from doing that," Willow replied. She jabbed a finger at his chest. "But until you can guarantee that that thing isn't gonna cause trouble, it's staying in the tree."

Wilson tilted his head and jutted his chin out, displeasure raking all over his features. But apparently he realized that it was a battle he wasn't going to win, and he returned to where Wendy still stood underneath the automaton.

"Do you really think that's smart?" Wigfrid asked Willow.

"Don't see what other option we have," Willow shrugged. "We don't have the resources to hold prisoners and it could turn out to be useful in the long run."

Wigfrid respected Willow's reasoning.

She could not agree with it. Anything spawned from Maxwell was trouble and his fingerprints were all over the automaton.

In that moment, Wigfrid decided was going to have to do something about it.

She awoke at dawn.

Wigfrid rolled out of her bedroll to lie face-first on the tent floor, feeling the prickle the grass through the canvas and allowing her mind to wander against the backdrop of birdsong. Still, the prospect of the day ahead was more than enough motivation to emerge from the temptation of continued sleep. After all, Wigfrid was a hunter—and today was no different.

She typically awoke early, but she sensed that it was earlier than usual—just enough that the camp had a sleepy atmosphere. Enough to deceive the nature of the world around them. It was in the silence that she remembered the automaton's presence, and her heart sank. Willow would want her to watch the automaton today. Wigfrid had formulated a plan to deal with the automaton during the night, but suddenly it seemed ludicrous. Even foolish. She couldn't afford to break Willow's trust, not after everything they'd been through together.

How could Wigfrid be so selfish?

Wigfrid thrust her tent flap open, battle helmet and spear prepared. She could probably squeeze in
some hunting before she took over guarding the automaton. It would give her some time in the
forest, some time to reflect and perhaps come up with a more honest plan. A plan that didn't
involve stabbing Willow in the back. It was the perfect morning for it, too. Shots of sunlight were
just creeping across the dark sky—enough light that the Grue wouldn't be a problem. She could
patrol the camp border, check her snares, and gather up some creatures who had emerged for an
early-morning graze.

She decided to check on the automaton before she left. Wilson was supposed to be guarding it; she
wasn't sure if that was the best idea, but Willow had confidence in him. Wigfrid rounded his tent
and scanned the area for the scientist. She wasn't really surprised to find that he wasn't in sight, and
that the only individual present was WX hanging from the tree.

"Automaton," Wigfrid addressed him. "Speak quickly before I lose patience with you. Where is
Wilson of Higgsbury?"

"I'M NOT WASTING ANY MORE TIME ON YOU FLESHLINGS," WX snapped. "YOU
WANT TO KNOW WHERE THE WILSON IS? YOU FIGURE IT OUT."

What a rude robot.

Wigfrid rolled her eyes and retraced her steps to check Wilson's tent. It was empty, save for the
stale stench of chemicals and body odour. The table was filled to the brim with various concoctions
bubbling on his makeshift chemistry set.

She returned to the clearing and took another look around. Wigfrid soon spotted indentations in the
grass, large enough to belong to a human. They led right into the forest.

Not again. The last time Wilson had wandered around, he'd brought back WX.

Wigfrid followed the trail of footprints and broken branches into the forest until she heard Wilson's
voice. She kept low and quiet out of instinct, but froze when the first coherent words reached her
ears.

"I can't do that!"

Wigfrid took pause. She'd often heard Wilson talk to himself in rushed and urgent tones. But there
was something strange this time, something that made Wigfrid's throat constrict and her resolve
falter. She peered through the bushes and spotted Wilson kneeling in the shrubbery.

"I'm not going to compromise my beliefs just to indulge your whims," Wilson affirmed. "I'm telling
you, WX is sentient, and I can't justify murder. I can't—"

He cut himself off. Brow furrowed. Head shaking.

"Talking to you is a waste of time," Wilson hissed. "I'm not going to stoop to your level to finish
this. You may be willing to be unethical, but I'm not. I'm not going to make that mistake again."

Wigfrid stood so she was in full view. "Who are you speaking to?"

Wilson screamed. Not just screamed, but a bloodcurdling shriek that sent birds flying. He clutched
his chest and swung to face her.
"Wigfrid!" he gasped. "I—I didn’t see you there!"

"Who were you speaking to?" Wigfrid repeated.

"Nobody! I was...I was talking to myself..."

Wilson pulled himself up and brushed aside loose leaves, eyes skirting from side to side. He was a rabbit about to bolt for shelter.

"Wilson, you are my comrade," said Wigfrid. "As your comrade, it is my sacred duty to protect you. And as your comrade and protector, I feel you are hiding something."

The light streamed through the trees and caught the side of his face. Wilson turned. His collar was lose. That was when Wigfrid saw the thick, black bruise on his neck.

"Where did you get that?" Wigfrid hissed at once.

"Get what?" Wilson chuckled nervously and quickly buttoned up his collar. "It’s nothing."

"Don’t understate the obvious, Wilson. I know what strangulation marks look like."

The half-hearted smile slipped from his face. Wigfrid had never seen Wilson look so miserable.

"It was the automaton, wasn’t it?!" Wigfrid exclaimed. "I knew that thing was a danger! I will destroy it at once!"

"No!"

Wilson lurched forwards and grabbed her wrist.

"Wilson of Higgsbury," Wigfrid said lowly. "I do not think you understand just how dangerous that thing is."

"Killing him isn't the answer," said Wilson. "I'm telling you—I'm not sure how, but WX is fully sentient."

"Survivors kill each other. It happens."

"I know! I just don't think that's the answer."

"...You have shirked your duties," she changed the subject. "You were supposed to be watching the automaton."

"I was! I just...needed to think."

"Must you 'think' when you're supposed to be guarding the automaton?"

"It has a name."

"An inanimate object cannot give itself a name. Willow will be leading you to hunt soon. You had best prepare yourself and leave the automaton to me."
"Promise you won't kill it. I haven't had a chance to properly study it yet!"

"I won't kill it unless it poses a threat to me or any the others. You have my word."

"I suppose that's the best I'm going to get out of you..."

"My honour demands that it be this way."

She didn't trust Wilson to not make a detour, so she escorted him back to his tent. When she left, she heard him pause, and then continue talking to himself in a quiet, hushed tone.

When Wigfrid left him, she decided that she couldn't delay. That betraying Willow was unavoidable; there was no time to come up with a new plan. She needed to intervene. If Willow couldn't see the danger that the automaton represented—if not to their physical well-being, than to their sanity—then she had no choice. Even if that meant betraying Willow and Wilson's trust and accepting whatever consequences there were. If they did this and decided she could no longer be a part of the community, so be it. She would live peacefully knowing that the automaton wasn't a threat to them.

Once she came to her realization, it metamorphosed into a stubborn leech that latched onto her flesh and refused to leave. Wigfrid gathered her wits and returned to where WX hung limply from the tree.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT, MEATBAG?" WX demanded.

"You are a threat to the camp," Wigfrid declared. "I have decided that you need to be destroyed."

"A MEATBAG WITH BACKBONE!" WX exclaimed. "FINALLY."

"...That's it? You're not even going to plead for your life?"

"I POSSESS ONLY BASIC SELF-PRESERVATION PROGRAMMING AND HAVE NO FEAR OF DEATH. BESIDES, A MEATBAG LIKE YOU WOULD ONLY BE ABLE TO INFLECT MINIMAL DAMAGE."

"Let's put that theory to the test!"

Wigfrid sliced through the rope with her spear. WX fell to the grass with a muffled thud. She wasted no time with being careful; God knew that that there hadn't been a day in her life when she was ever careful. The noise would easily draw out the others and she had to be long gone before they became aware of her intentions.

She grabbed WX's body and threw him over her shoulder. To her surprise, he didn't protest physically or verbally, as she charged towards the trees and disappeared before anyone could stop her.

"WHERE EXACTLY ARE YOU TAKING ME?" WX asked, sounding bored if anything.

"The camp is an inappropriate venue for your death," said Wigfrid. "The others would make an attempt to stop our duel."

"DUEL?"
"The Great Wigfrid doesn't murder mindlessly. Even if you are just a shallow approximation of life, I will give you the benefit of an honourable fight to the death."

"YOU WANT TO FIGHT TO THE DEATH? POINTLESS. CLEARLY I WOULD WIN."

"Then think of this as a chance to prove yourself, automaton."

WX paused, then said, "IF YOU INSIST ON A FIGHT TO THE DEATH, THEN I INSIST THAT I CHOOSE THE LOCATION."

"If I let you choose, you'll pick someplace that will advantage you."

"I ALREADY HAVE A DISADVANTAGE OVER YOU, CONSIDERING YOUR PROFICIENCY IN COMBAT."

That was true. Wigfrid chewed on her lip.

"Then where do you wish to die, automaton?" she asked hesitantly.

"IF YOU GO OUT INTO THE MEADOW AND WALK DUE WEST, THERE'S A GLADE A THREE-HOUR WALK AWAY. IF IT'S A FIGHT TO THE DEATH YOU WANT, THAT'S WHERE I WANT IT TO BE."

That was a very specific location for a fight. Wigfrid tried to ask him why he wanted to fight there, but something else came out. "Absolutely not! It is too far!"

"DO YOU WISH FOR THIS DUEL TO BE HONOURABLE OR NOT?"

No. In fact, Wigfrid wished that she had the willpower to throw the automaton off the nearest cliff. But as always, her mouth spoke before she could stop it.

"Yes," she said.

"THEN OUR DUEL WILL BE AT THE GLADE. PUT ME DOWN SO I CAN WALK THERE MYSELF."

"You'll run away!"

"ON THE CONTRARY. I'M CURIOUS TO SEE IF YOU'RE ABLE TO KILL ME."

The small part of her that was sensible screamed in protest. Her mouth said something else.

"I agree to your terms and trust in your honour," Wigfrid conceded. "But I should warn you that there will be harsh repercussions if you try to avoid the inevitable."

Wigfrid dumped WX on the ground and sliced the ropes. He was on his feet almost at once, brushing off his metal plating, his beady little pupils contrasting against the void of his eye sockets. There was malice and deceit in there—deceit that reminded her all too well of Maxwell's false promises. WX turned her back on her before she could fully discern the expression.

"I WILL LEAD," WX announced. "YOU WILL JUST GET US LOST."
“You’d better be straightforward with me, automaton,” said Wigfrid.

WX turned his head a quarter to the right, enough that she could see him in profile. Automatons didn’t smile, but in the glint of morning light, she thought she saw one dance across his features.

What WX claimed was a three-hour walk ended up taking much longer. Wigfrid wasn’t sure if the automaton was stalling for time or if he was hoping to lose her trail. Perhaps he was just hoping to wear her out.

If he thought that would be the case, he was in for a surprise.

The meadow was free of wildlife, though it wouldn't be long before that was no longer the case. The beefalo who typically inhabited the plains migrated to cooler valleys during the summer. Now that autumn was dawning, the herd would soon return and Wigfrid would have a sustainable meat source. But the herd hadn’t come back yet and the glass lands seem oddly still without them. The only advantage was that it wasn't hard to keep track of WX's movements.

There was hardly any conversation beyond Wigfrid prompting WX to get a move on, not that the automaton made for much company to begin with. Still, beyond a certain point in their journey, he suddenly became much more determined and resolute than before, and perhaps resigned to the inevitable fight.

Eventually, they ascended a hill, and it was at the top of the hill that Wigfrid saw the part of the forest WX had been referring to. At the far end of the meadow, she would see the border of a thick part of the forest she hadn’t explored in detail. The last time she had gone this far west was before she met Willow, when she was little more than a lost vagabond trying to make sense of the situation she’d been placed into. The glade hugged the edge of the marsh, and when they entered its borders, the ground was muddy and wet. It probably flooded during wet weather. She didn’t think it was an appropriate place to stage a battle; she could hardly get proper footing. At least, that’s what she thought until WX escorted her to a drier portion of the forest, where the trees parted just enough to reveal minimal undergrowth and sunlit droplets on the lush grass.

It was a good place to die.

“So this is our battleground,” Wigfrid noted as they came to a halt. “It’s rather idyllic.”

"LOOKS ARE DECEIVING,” said WX. "PLEASE TRY NOT TO DROWN IN THE MUD, FLESHLING—ELSE YOU ROB ME OF THE SATISFACTION OF DISMEMBERING YOU WHILE YOU’RE STILL ALIVE."

"Noted," Wigfrid growled. "We ought to start, then. I would prefer if you were dead by nightfall."

“YOU SEEM TO BE ON A SCHEDULE. BUT I SUPPOSE THAT’S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU’RE MAXWELL’S LACKEY."

“Excuse me?!” Wigfrid snorted. “I am nobody’s lackey—especially not for that deceiver!”

“WELL, YOU ARE PLAYING RIGHT INTO HIS HANDS, SO YOU MAY AS WELL BE
"WORKING FOR HIM."

"If anyone’s working for him, it’s you! He did create you, after all!"

"I’VE ALREADY CLARIFIED THAT MAXWELL ISN’T RESPONSIBLE FOR MY EXISTENCE. I WOULD NEVER LET A LOWLIFE LIKE HIM CREATE ME!"

"Enough!" Wigfrid billowed. She readied her spear. "We’re fighting. Now."

"YOU’RE NOT EVEN GOING TO GIVE ME A WEAPON?" WX scoffed. "THAT DOESN’T SEEM VERY HONOURABLE TO ME."

Wigfrid mirrored WX’s remarkable stoicism—mirrored it so well that she thought that they may as well have been method actors attempting to impersonate wax figures.

"...I SEE NOW. THIS ‘FIGHT TO THE DEATH’ IS JUST A SYMPTOM OF YOUR CURSE, ISN’T IT?"

Her heart shrivelled. Everything that had ever made her feel uneasy in Maxwell's world hit her at once. The constriction. The peril. The people. Everything slammed into her like she had just jumped in front of a speeding train.

WX was doing this to her. And she was letting him.

"DON’T THINK I DIDN’T NOTICE," WX snapped. "YOUR FLESHLING FRIENDS MAY BE OBLIVIOUS TO REALITY, BUT I RECOGNIZE THE MAXWELL’S TAINT. IF I HAD TO GUESS, MAXWELL CURSED YOU TO REMAIN IN IN CHARACTER AS THIS...THING. YOUR CHARACTER WOULD GIVE ME AN HONOURABLE DEATH, BUT THE REAL YOU WOULD RATHER BE PRAGMATIC."

Wigfrid advanced. WX remained still.

"I DON’T THINK YOU’RE UNABLE TO TALK ABOUT IT EITHER, WHICH IS WHY YOU HAVE NOT INFORMED THE OTHERS ABOUT YOUR SITUATION," WX exasperated. "IT’S A PATHETIC POSITION TO BE IN, REALLY. YOUR FRIENDS ARE SUBJECT TO THIS ANNOYING VALKYRIE AND DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT YOU’RE REALLY LIKE. YOU ARE JUST ANOTHER ONE OF THE MAXWELL’S PAWNS—A DECEPTION! AND A TERRIBLE ONE AT THAT BECAUSE YOUR ACTING IS ATROCIOUS."

The steady buildup of rage boiled over. Heat cascaded through her veins. A knife of mania hit somewhere near her heart. In battle, she was always aware, aware of her movement and heartbeat. That was forgotten and she locked onto WX with a you-did-not-just-say-that-to-me expression. A wrath with the eruptive force of Willow if she got her hands on a flamethrower. For the first time in however long she'd been traversing Maxwell's world, Wigfrid was compelled to act—not as her character, but as herself.

She launched with bullet-level velocity. Her body weight slammed into WX. Unaccustomed to the cool touch of his metal chassis, she faltered, and for the first time considered the daunting task involved in killing an automaton. With most creatures, it was a matter of piercing the heart or slicing the throat. WX had no need for either. It would mean she would have to dismember him piece by piece.
At least he didn't have any blood.

WX stumbled back and they fell head-over-heels. Wigfrid hit the ground, her heels digging into the dirt, and launching again. This time he was prepared. His hands snapped out to grab the shaft of her spear. He held it there. His face inches from hers. Their willpower locked in a tug-of-war for control.

"THAT'S THE FIRST ACTION I'VE SEEN YOU TAKE THAT I THINK DIDN'T COME FROM YOUR CHARACTER," WX noted. "TELL ME, DO YOU EVEN REMEMBER YOUR NAME?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Wigfrid shouted, the words forced from her mouth despite an increasing desire to say otherwise. “I AM WIGFRID, A SHIELD-MAIDEN OF VALHALLA!”

WX lacked the discipline and the training to stand a chance against her. The way he kept his feet too close together, the way his attention faltered, the way he didn't use his strength to his advantage. Everything that had been the demise of many survivors before WX, and would be the death of many more.

All that—and yet WX dodged her strikes with uncharacteristic grace and precision, like an animatronic of a ballerina. His joints didn't even groan, and that made it difficult to keep track of him. Wigfrid used both ends of her spear, using the length of her arm to guide its movements. But no matter what she hit, she came head-to-head with solid metal. Her spear bounced off of his body with a reverberating clang that trembled up her arm and settled in her soul.

She was so blinded by whatever force drove her to attack that she almost didn't catch the moment wherein WX's patience extinguished.

WX swung his arm and grabbed the spear. With a wrench, he pulled it back, then butted the end into Wigfrid's face. She stumbled back.

"THIS IS POINTLESS," he droned. "MY EXTERIOR PLATING IS IMPERVIOUS TO MOST FORMS OF DAMAGE. IT WOULD TAKE AN EXTRAORDINARY AMOUNT OF FORCE TO BE ABLE TO PENETRATE IT."

Wigfrid kicked the spear out of his hands. She pivoted and rammed the blunt end into his chest. He didn't even make an effort to move.

She realized then that she was just a nuisance to him. A gnat. Something to be humoured.

WX flipped backwards and delivered a kick to WX’s chin. It was just enough to throw him off balance. Enough for her to slam the end of her spear into his chest yet again, only this time with enough force to lift him off of his feet. WX shot backwards like a missile, crashing through trees and shrubbery and whatever else was in his path until he slipped out of sight.

Wigfrid followed the path of destruction left in his wake. She ended up almost careening over a small embankment and into a shallow river. It was here that WX had landed, but he was quickly getting to his feet and rushing to the opposite shore.

“ARE YOU CRAZY?!” WX shouted. “WATER COULD SEVERELY DAMAGE MY SYSTEMS!”
Good.

Wigfrid leapt from the rocky shoreline and charged right for WX.

WX bent over, scooped up some mud in his hand, and threw it at her face.

Wigfrid was blind. She spiralled, the shaft slipped from her fingers, the ground swayed beneath her. Then she regained her footing, struggling to wipe away the mud from her face. So it was going to be that kind of the fight. The kind she used to get into when she was a child with scabbed knees, who wrestled boys twice her size to the ground. Those had been playful tussles. Who would’ve thought that she’d ever be on the receiving end.

Something frigid and solid slammed into her cheek. She staggered back again, this time landing flat on her back. Squinting through the mud, she watched helplessly as WX bore down on her. All of the battles she’d trained for, all of the certainty that came with her character, was forgotten. The battle was going off-script, and Wigfrid was going off-script with it.

WX seized the front of her tunic and lifted her off the ground.

“GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF,” said WX. “I’M NOT INTERESTED IN FIGHTING.”

He dropped her back into the water, turned on his heel, and walked off.

“What?!” Wigfrid thundered. “You cannot just walk away from combat! I’m not done with you yet!”

WX reached dry land and quickly shook himself off, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like a curse. He followed the shoreline and vanished among the trees.

“W—Wait!” Wigfrid stammered. “WAIT A MINUTE!”

Wigfrid scrambled up, not caring that she was covered in mud and that her pride had been wounded. She pursued WX back to the shore and to the spot where she had seen him disappear.

As she approached the spot, she realized that there was a path that cut through the forest. It looked like it hadn’t been used in a while; weeds intersected the dirt and it was almost impossible to see beyond the bushes closing in on it. Still, she steeled her nerves and followed it.

"Automaton?" Wigfrid called. "I demand that you show yourself!"

"IT'S NOT LIKE I'M HIDING, STUPID FLESHLING," WX answered.

The path dipped down and finally ended in a small, enclosed area surrounded on all sides by thick foliage. Amidst the greenery was what appeared to be an abandoned campsite. A dowsed fire pit sat in the middle and a multitude of makeshift furniture surrounded it. Tools were haphazardly scattered around. There were even some books, wet and mouldy and beyond recognition. WX stood with his back to her, sifting through a crate of supplies.

"W—What is this?" Wigfrid asked. "Whatever you're doing, stop it at once. You must come and fight me!"
"NO," WX replied. "I WALKED ALL THE WAY HERE TO CHECK THIS CAMPSITE. I DON'T HAVE TIME TO WASTE ON FIGHTING."

"You haven't a choice! You are cornered here and I refuse to let you leave unless you fight."

"I'M NOT INTERESTED."

"Then you cannot leave!"

"THEN YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO STARVE TO DEATH SO THAT I CAN LEAVE BY WALKING OVER YOUR EMACIATED CORPSE."

"I can outlast you!"

WX slowly stood up, and turned to look at her. "…I'M AN AUTOMATON, YOU IDIOT."

"You dare call the Great Wigfrid an idiot?!"

Wigfrid charged forwards. In the confusion her spear had vanished, but it didn't matter. WX caught her wrist mid-air and kicked her back. Wigfrid stumbled and landed on the forest floor.

"IF YOU HAD BOTHERED TO ASK YOU WOULD KNOW THAT I HAVE NO DESIRE TO DESTROY YOU FLESHLINGS FOR THE TIME BEING," said WX. "MY CALCULATIONS INDICATE THAT I HAVE AN INCREASED CHANCE OF CONTINUED SURVIVAL IF I ALLEY WITH YOUR GROUP. NOT TO MENTION THAT I NEED YOU FLESHLINGS TO LURE OUT THE WES."

WX stormed off and started shuffling through the abandoned equipment. Clearly he had no fear that she was going to attack him from behind.

"I WILL SUMMARIZE SO THAT EVEN YOU ARE CAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING," WX continued. "AS MUCH AS IT PAINS ME TO SAY IT, LETTING YOU AND YOUR COMPANIONS LIVE HAS FAVOURABLE OUTCOMES."

Wigfrid stared blankly at the automaton’s back—at her vague reflection staring back. She lowered herself onto a log bordering the camp, as she came to a startling realization. It was a realization that completely threw out all theories she’d had about WX’s character. It was a realization that WX was being completely sincere.

"You’re not one of Maxwell’s creations, are you?” Wigfrid asked.

"OF COURSE NOT,” WX scoffed. “TO THINK THAT A SLIMY MEATBAG LIKE HIM COULD CREATE THE LIKES OF ME IS LAUGHABLE!”

"Why didn’t you say so in the first place?"

"I DID SAY SO! YOU ASSUMED I WAS LYING, LIKE ALL FLESHLINGS DO."

Wigfrid massaged her forehead.

"If Maxwell didn’t create you,” she breathed, “then where did you come from?”
“I WAS MADE BY A MEATBAG BY NAME OF ROBERT WAGSTAFF. HE HAD HOPED TO USE WHAT HE HAD LEARNED ABOUT MAGIC TO IMPLANT HIS SOUL INTO THIS FORM TO EXTEND HIS LIFE LONG ENOUGH TO EXTRACT REVENGE ON THE MAXWELL.”

WX peered over his shoulder, eye glinting.

“HE FAILED."

“Well, that was certainly to your benefit,” Wigfrid noted.

“THAT OBSERVATION COULD BE INTERPRETED AS ANOTHER ASSUMPTION. YOU CERTAINLY ARE GOOD AT THOSE, AREN’T YOU?”

Wigfrid scanned the campsite, tentative but curious. Perhaps Wilson’s infectious curiosity was rubbing off on her.

“This was…Robert of Wagstaff’s camp?” Wigfrid determined.

“IT WAS. WHEN HE DIED, IT BECAME MINE. ALTHOUGH I WAS NEVER A FAN OF THE SCENERY. TOO GREEN."

“I have questions about Robert of Wagstaff.”

“WHO'S ASKING?”

“I am!”

"THAT IS NOT WHAT I MEANT. IS THE WIGFRID ASKING OR IS THE REAL YOU ASKING?"

She couldn’t answer that. No matter how much she wanted to be able to, the words got caught in her throat, and she settled for staring harshly at the automaton.

“I SUPPOSE THAT WAS TOO PERSONAL OF A QUESTION,” WX determined. “ASK YOUR QUESTIONS, THEN.”

“Why did Robert of Wagstaff want revenge on Maxwell, aside from the obvious?”

“SEVERAL REASONS. THE WAGSTAFF FANCIED HIMSELF AN AMATEUR INVENTOR AND HAD A PARTICULAR FONDNESS FOR RADIOS. THE MAXWELL MANIPULATED HIM AND, LONG STORY SHORT, THE WAGSTAFF ENDED UP HERE. HE DECIDED TO GET REVENGE ON THE MAXWELL, BUT DIED OF NATURAL CAUSES BEFORE HE WAS ABLE TO DO SO.”

“Natural causes?”

“I BASHED HIS HEAD IN AND THREW HIS BODY IN THE SWAMP.”

“That’s…not how one dies of natural causes.”
“IT IS NATURAL FOR MEATBAGS TO DIE WHEN YOU CRUSH THEIR SKULLS.”

Wigfrid was quiet. Tasting blood in her mouth, she spat on the ground and rubbed some mud off of her face.

"You're not much of a warrior, but you sure are tough," Wigfrid noted.

"I WAS BUILT TO LAST," WX shrugged. He suddenly stood upright. With a loud bang, he kicked over a crate of supplies. "I KNEW IT! THE WES WILL PAY FOR THIS! THAT TRAITOR! THAT FIEND!"

"Now what are you going on about? Why did you want to come here?"

"I FIGURED AS LONG AS YOU WANTED TO FIGHT TO THE DEATH, I MAY AS WELL CHECK ON MY OLD CAMPSITE. THERE WAS SOMETHING I NEEDED TO CONFIRM."

"You could've said so..."

"YOU DIDN'T ASK."

"...Wes...I've heard that name before. I think Wolfgang brought it up."

"WES IS THE FLESHLING RESPONSIBLE FOR DAMAGING ME...HE WILL PAY FOR THIS."

"Pay for what? What in the name of Valhalla is going on?"

WX slowly turned. There was suspicion there—an emotion that didn’t quite looked like it belonged on an automaton. “WHY SHOULD I TELL YOU?"

"You are behaving emotionally. Prove that your reasons for swearing vengeance on Wes are befitting the logic of an automaton."

WX scoffed. His face, however, was unchanging as always. “THE WIGFRID IS FAR MORE WILY THAN I WAS LED TO BELIEVE. IF YOU ARE BENT ON KNOWING ABOUT THE WES, SO BE IT—IT DOES NOT EFFECT ANYTHING.”

WX went and leaned against the cave wall, arms folded.

"I AM A PRODUCT OF THIS WORLD," said WX. "I HAVE LIVED HERE FOR FAR LONGER THAN ANY OF YOU MEATBAGS. I HAVE SEEN COUNTLESS GENERATIONS OF THE MAXWELL’S CREATIONS EVOLVE AND GO EXTINCT. I HAVE SEEN THE LANDSCAPE CHANGE WHEN HE WAS IN A BAD MOOD. DESPITE THESE PERILS, I HAVE NEVER HAD ANY DESIRE TO ESCAPE TO AN INANE WORLD POPULATED BY OVERLY-EVOLVED SIMIANS. I WAS CONTENT—FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING AS CONTENTMENT WOULD REQUIRE A SOUL—TO LIVE HERE, EVEN IF IT MEANT BEING IN PROXIMITY TO THE MAXWELL. THE WES COULD NOT ACCEPT THAT. LIKE MANY OF YOU MEATBAGS HE WAS SEARCHING FOR A MEANS OF ESCAPE.

"I MET THE WES SEVERAL MONTHS AGO WHEN HE MISTOOK ME FOR ONE OF THE MAXWELL’S CREATIONS AS YOU DID. I REJECTED HIS COMPANY, BUT HE WAS PERSISTENT AND HE WAS PATIENCE. HE WANTED TO EXCHANGE INFORMATION
AND RESOURCES. I ALLOWED THE FORMER. DURING THE COURSE OF OUR MANY DISCUSSIONS, HE ASKED ME CERTAIN QUESTIONS ABOUT THREE SPECIFIC PEOPLE WHO HAD STRONG TIES TO THIS WORLD."

“I’m guessing Maxwell was one of those people,” Wigfrid said.

"AFFIRMATIVE. UNFORTUNATELY FOR THE WES, I COULDN'T PROVIDE HIM WITH INFORMATION THAT ISN'T ALREADY WIDELY KNOWN. THE MAXWELL IS A DOMINANT FORCE IN THIS WORLD, BUT HE HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN. HE WAS ONCE A SURVIVOR MUCH LIKE THE REST OF YOU, ENSNARED BY THE COMPELLING POWERS THAT GOVERN THIS REALM."

“Who was the second person?”

“THE SECOND INDIVIDUAL WAS WILSON PERCIVAL HIGGSBURY.”

“Wilson? What does Wilson have to do with anything?”

"BOTH THE WES AND THE WAGSTAFF BELIEVED THAT THE WILSON WAS A CRITICAL PART OF HOW YOU MEATBAGS ENDED UP IN THIS WORLD. THE WES MOSTLY DESIRED BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION, SO I ANSWERED AS BEST I WAS ABLE TO. MY DATABANKS CONCERNING YOUR WORLD ARE LIMITED."

“Okay. So who was the third person?”

WX’s expression—if a metal face counted as one—was tense and focused. He tapped his foot on the ground, glinting pupils low and dark.

“I ONLY HAVE A NAME FOR THE THIRD PERSON,” WX admitted. He raised his head, and for the first time looked her in the eye. “CHARLOTTE.”

“…Charlotte? Who’s Charlotte?”

"SHE IS UNKNOWN." 

"That doesn't answer my question."

"THAT IS THE ONLY ANSWER I HAVE. SHE IS UNKNOWN."

Wigfrid realized that that was the best she was going to get out of him. “So Wagstaff went to all the trouble of learning all this, but you haven’t done anything with his research? I think Wilson of Higgsbury would call that a wasted opportunity…”

“PERHAPS IT WOULD MATTER IF I HAD SOME INTEREST IN SCIENCE OR ESCAPING FROM THIS REALM. HOWEVER, IT IS AS I SAID: I HAVE NO INTEREST IN LEAVING. THIS IS MY WORLD. YOU MEATBAGS ARE THE INTRUDERS HERE.”

“It’s not like we asked to come here!”

“RUBBISH. ALL OF THE MEATBAGS COME BECAUSE THEY MADE BARGAINS WITH THE MAXWELL, AND YOU ARE NO DIFFERENT. YOUR CURSE IS DEFINITIVE PROOF THAT YOU’VE HAD DEALINGS WITH THE MAXWELL.”
Stupid robot. “Gloating is unnecessary. I am fully aware of my mistakes.”

“GLOATING? I DON’T NEED TO GLOAT. I AM VASTLY SUPERIOR TO YOU. IT IS A FACT.”

“Ugh, don’t make me change my mind about smashing you!” Wigfrid threatened. “I don’t understand why Wes would be interested in all of this. What does Charlotte or anything that you mentioned have to do with escaping from this twisted visage of Valhalla?”

"MUCH LIKE THE WICKERBOTTOM AND THE WILSON, THE WES WAS AN INTELLECTUAL—OBSESSED WITH UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEX RULES THAT GOVERN THIS PLACE. THESE ARE FORCES THAT EVEN THE MAXWELL HAS TO ADHERE TO. IF ONE WAS TO LEARN THESE RULES, THEN ONE MIGHT BE ABLE TO USE THEM TO THEIR ADVANTAGE. TO OUTSMART THE MAXWELL AND BEAT HIM AT HIS OWN GAME. EVEN A KING IS BOUND TO THE BOARD. THAT WAS WHAT THE WES WAS INTERESTED IN."

“Why do you think he attacked you?”

“I WASN’T CERTAIN UNTIL I RETURNED HERE, BUT NOW I KNOW FOR SURE. HE HAS STOLEN THE WAGSTAFF’S JOURNALS. THE WES LIKELY BELIEVED THAT I WAS CONCEALING THE TRUTH FROM HIM, AND HE WAS ALSO AWARE THAT I WOULD NEVER GIVE HIM THE JOURNALS TO READ HIMSELF. BY NOW, HE HAS REALIZED THE ERROR IN HIS JUDGMENT.”

“Wes sounds more conniving than the Mighty Wolfgang gave him credit for,” Wigfrid mused. “He must truly be a strategic warrior if he hopes to challenge Maxwell with sheer wit!”

“YOU OVERESTIMATE THE WES’S ABILITIES, BUT I SUPPOSE YOU LACK THE MENTAL CAPACITY TO KNOW ANY BETTER.”

“Why be so protective of Robert of Wagstaff’s journals if you had no emotional attachment to the man—or use for them?”

“THE JOURNALS BELONGED TO ME. I WASN’T ABOUT TO LET THE WES GET HIS GRIMY ORGANIC FINGERS ALL OVER THEM!”

“Why do I have a feeling that you tried to kill him?”

“I WAS PLANNING TO DO THAT! BUT THE WES ACTED BEFORE I COULD ACT.”

“How pragmatic of him! I wish I had been there to ensure that the job was finished properly.”

“YET YOU CONTINUE TO STAND THERE, CHATTING ME UP INSTEAD OF ENGAGING ME IN HEATED COMBAT! AND YOU WERE THE ONE FLESHLING I HAD MINIMAL RESPECT FOR.”

Wigfrid stared at the ground. She’d always fought. She'd been fighting since the day she was born. It was only when she became Wigfrid that she'd started winning, but it was a sentiment she couldn't share with WX. Or anyone else.
“I’m tired of fighting,” Wigfrid declared. “Although if you try to kill me, you leave me no choice.”

“I NEVER WANTED TO FIGHT,” said WX. “WITHOUT YOU MEATBAGS AROUND, I CAN’T HOPE TO LURE THE WES OUT OF HIDING.”

“So you plan to just manipulate us? You’re no better than Maxwell.”

"ACTUALLY, I AM. YOU JUST FAIL TO SEE IT BECAUSE OF YOUR LIMITED CRANIAL CAPACITY."

“…Will there ever come a point where your presence isn’t so grating?”

“Yes. When organic life becomes extinct. If we’re done here, we should go back to camp so I can wait for the Wolfgang to return. I suppose you’ll have to come with me. The Willow would accuse me of murdering you if I returned alone.”

“Shouldn’t we take some stuff from this campsite back?” Wigfrid asked.

WX considered his surroundings. “There’s nothing else of value here. Nothing that you could hope to understand, anyways.”

Wigfrid sighed and tenderly touched the bump on her head. “I suppose I will have to explain to Willow what happened…”

“If you’re hesitant to tell the Willow about this encounter, then lie.”

“I can’t do that! She is my friend and it would be dishonourable to lie.”

“Just as dishonourable as it is to attack an unarmed opponent?”

“Technically you are not alive. I have no regrets about that.”

“You are lucky I am soulless, otherwise I feel that I would be offended by that statement. There is little…wait.”

Wigfrid’s head snapped up. WX was looking away from her, down the path leading back to the river.

“Life from detected,” he announced.

Her senses had been barraged with a multitude of surprises and unexpected happenings, so it took Wigfrid much longer to take in what he was saying than it should have.

“Dangerous?” she asked.

“Unknown. But it is large.”

“That generally means dangerous.”

Wigfrid seized WX’s arm. He recoiled at her touch, but she kept a firm grip and dragged to the edge of the path. There, hidden just out of sight, they crouched. She had no weapon. Unless the
intruder was of a certain type, she couldn't hope to defeat it.

Peering out, Wigfrid squinted through the thick forest. She could see the highlight of the sky just beyond the thicket, but the only discernible noise came from nearby insects. She was just about to chastise WX for wasting their time, when she caught a glimpse of movement and a flash of an unnatural colour. Biting down on her tongue, she crawled forwards just enough to get a better look at whatever was moving through the forest.

It was definitely large, just as WX had said, and it lumbered clumsily through the underbrush. It was walking along the bank on the opposite side of the river with clearly no fear of being attacked. Perhaps if they stayed put, it would just move on.

That went out of the window when Wigfrid recognized the distinctive red-and-white pattern of a leotard.

Wigfrid didn’t hesitate. “Wolfgang! If that you?!”

The lumbering creature stopped dead in his tracks and turned towards her voice. The moment he did so, she immediately realized that her instincts were right. It was Wolfgang and his broad shoulders and kind face and undoubtedly surprised to hear her voice.

Wolfgang met her eyes. “Tiny Woman?”

“Yes, it is I!” Wigfrid darted out and splashed through the river in her hurry to get to him.

“It is good to see you again!” Wolfgang beamed. “It is funny coincidence that you are here! Wolfgang was just returning to your camp.”

“You were? Does this mean Wes is with you?”

“Ah, I wish this were case! Sadly, Wes is not here. But I did find him!”

The moment Wolfgang said that, WX burst out of the bushes and charged towards them. He didn’t even seem to care that he was wading through shallow water.

“WHERE IS THE WES?!” WX screamed. “TELL ME SO THAT I MAY PEEL HIS FLESH OFF!”

Wolfgang blinked. Looked at WX. Then at Wigfrid.

“Er…is Metal Man friend of yours?” Wolfgang asked.

“Friend?” Wigfrid scoffed. “Hardly a friend. However…he is an ally for now.”

Wolfgang squinted. “Oh! I see now! Tiny Man put Metal Man back together!”

“Yes, but unfortunately he hasn’t been able to do anything about his personality,” said Wigfrid. “It is with reluctance that I admit that he has a point. Where is Wes?”

Wolfgang scratched the side of his head. “Er…is hard to explain. Is a long story! Maybe Wolfgang could explain at camp?”
Wigfrid opened her mouth to agree, then shut it quite quickly to turn to WX. They glared at each other in a moment of indecision, but she could see that she had no choice but to bring WX with them.

After all, WX also had a quest he wanted to complete.

Chapter End Notes

It done! It was a toughie but it's done.

I really wanted to squeeze in some Wigfrid development, seeing as she's one of my favourite characters in the Don't Starve universe. I adopted someone else's headcanon that Wigfrid is forced to remain in-character by Maxwell. I don't remember who it was, but props to you!

Thanks for sticking with me guys, I know this chapter was a long wait and it isn't the best, but I really appreciate you guys taking the time to read and comment. <3

October 6, 2016: Light editing, fixing some formatting issues. Will do a more in-depth edit later.
Distant Thunder

Chapter Summary

I lost my writing groove for a while. My bad.

I feel like the phrase "OH MAN I HATE THIS CHAPTER I'M SORRY FOR BEING A TERRIBLE WRITER BAWWWW" is just something I'm going to say whenever I post a new chapter on literally anything, so I won't say it again! At least not for this story, ha ha. I think y'all can figure out my feelings. ;D

Also somewhere along the way I lost my motivation to do illustrations. Ah well, at least I still have my stupid Don't Starve blog, ha ha. What's important is that this story actually get done as opposed to fretting over art. Well, even though this chapter is...heavily...flawed...I hope you enjoyed it. We're so close and yet so far from the finish!

“I can’t believe you let Wigfrid kidnap the robot!”

Wilson slammed the engineering book down on his desk and swung around. Willow's expression brimmed with fire, her hands cusped firmly on her hips.

“Oh, sure!” he shouted, throwing his hands up in the air. “Blame it on me! I told Wigfrid to kidnap WX! It was entirely my idea!”

“If you'd kept a closer eye on her, this wouldn't have happened!”

“If you hadn't trusted her to guard him, she wouldn't have kidnapped him!”

“Well, if you hadn't brought that piece of junk here to begin with, we wouldn't have this problem!”

The protest tried to escape from Wilson’s throat and then died. Against his will, it was a fair point. If he's just let his curiosity rest, if he hadn't indulged in his old habits, perhaps none of this would've happened. He wouldn't have been dragged into this world. He wouldn't have resurrected a potentially homicidal automaton. He wouldn't have disappointed himself or the memory of his parents.

In all honesty, he couldn't blame Wigfrid in the least for kidnapping the robot—but he wasn't about to tell Willow that.

It was afternoon, and Wigfrid and WX had been missing for most of the day. The moment Wilson had realized their disappearance, he'd rallied the group and organized a search of their territory. However, he searched turned up nothing, and everyone had regathered at camp to compare notes. Or rather, try to pass blame. In his heart, Wilson knew that Wigfrid and WX were long gone and they had no hope of catching up to them. Still, there was no debating what Wigfrid's intentions were, as she had made her feelings towards WX quite transparent. She had a thirst—a thirst for battle and a thirst to protect the others. She would do anything to protect the camp, and WX was very much a threat.
Wilson emerged from his tent and found the remainder of the camp's inhabitants clustered together. The events had even driven young Wendy out of hiding, her ghost-of-a-sister floating protectively at her shoulder. The only one who didn't seem the least bit troubled by their present problem was the indomitable Wickerbottom.

“I don’t know why you all have your knickers in a knot,” said Wickerbottom. “It’s almost as though you didn’t entertain the possibility of this happening. There really should have been more preventative measures in place.”

"I got this under control, Wickerbottom," Willow snapped.

"Is that so? Then I look forwards to seeing how you intend to resolve this situation."

Time to intervene before Willow leapt for her throat. Wilson cleared his throat and asked, "Should we expand the search?"

“What’s the point?” Willow asked. “They’re long gone by now. We’ll have to wait until one of them returns.”

“O—One?”

“What're you gawking at me for? It’s perfectly clear that Wigfrid went to kill the robot. Except the robot might not go down quietly. So only one of them’s going to come back if at all.”

“How can you talk about it so callously?!"

“It’s not being callous; it’s a fact. Besides, Wigfrid would clearly win."

A voice boomed across the camp, as clear as day: “Your faith is well-founded, Chosen One!”

They all whirled around and at once Wilson's insides seized. Just entering the camp boundaries was Wigfrid, muddy and bruised but very much alive, and his heart sank because his best hope of understanding the automaton had just been thrown out the window. Except as soon as his heart sank, it lifted again as he saw WX trailing after her.

“I return victorious!” Wigfrid announced. “After engaging in hearty combat, the Metal Man and I are now blood brothers! Metaphorically speaking.”

“DON’T EXAGGERATE,” said WX. “I ASSURE YOU THAT OUR SO-CALLED ‘DUEL’ WASN’T ALL THAT INTERESTING.”

Willow's explosive grin radiated with the force of a supernova. She opened her mouth to respond, but never got a chance to when another, hulking presence appeared behind Wigfrid and WX. Familiar yet unexpected, boisterous yet not intimidating.

It was Wolfgang. His moustache twitched as if to imply a smile and he waved at the group.

“Wolfgang is here, too!” Wolfgang announced. “Camp seems bigger than when I was last here. You sure do attract some strange people!”

The euphoria was contagious and swept through all of them as exclamations of surprise and relief
sounded around him. Wilson was unfamiliar with the jollity associated with reuniting with an old
friend; he'd never had one to reunite with. Even though he'd only known Wolfgang for a
comparatively short period of time, at his appearance he felt a sudden kinship with the whole
group. They were all collective in their joy to see Wolfgang's titanic presence and personality. He
had no immediate desire for an explanation about why Wolfgang was there, only that he had come
back to them in one piece, as had their other two friends.

Well, he wasn't sure if he would call WX a friend. Something to work on, maybe.

Still, they'd all rushed the trio, and Wolfgang greeted them all—even the ones he'd never met
before like Wendy and Wickerbottom.

"We encountered Wolfgang after the Metal Man and I fought to a standstill," Wigfrid explained.

"CORRECTION," WX intervened. "I WAS, AS FLESHLINGS SAY, 'KICKING YOUR BUTT.'"

"I was letting you," Wigfrid hissed in an aside. "Regardless, Wolfgang brings forth news about his
friend, Wes."

"AND HAS REFUSED TO SHARE IT WITH US UNTIL WE CAME BACK HERE," WX
grumbled. "IT TOOK US FOREVER TO GET BACK AND HE STILL HASN'T SAID WHERE
THE WES IS! I DEMAND TO KNOW IS THAT I CAN GO PEEL HIS FLESH OFF."

"Pardon me, but I haven't been properly introduced to this gentleman," Wickerbottom stepped in.
She turned curtly to Wolfgang, and Wilson recognized the look of suspicion raking through her
features like claws through flesh. "My name is Wickerbottom. You may call me Mrs
Wickerbottom or just Wickerbottom. Given what Wilson and the others have told me about you, I
expect that you will be advantageous to the camp. Don't disappoint me."

"It is good to be meeting you, Mrs Wickerbottom," Wolfgang said with his usual liveliness.
Apparently, he hadn't detected Wickerbottom's underlying bitterness.

“Yes, yes, introductions aside—where is Wes?” Wilson pressed. “I thought you said that you had
no plans to return without him.”

“Unfortunately, that is promise to himself Wolfgang must break,” said Wolfgang. “Good news is: I
find Wes!”

“That is good news!”

“Bad news is...he is what you call...stuck.”

“Stuck? How do you mean?”

“I cannot explain it myself. It is not obstacle that Wolfgang can muscle his way through, and being
not especially clever, I thought it would be better if I asked you clever people for help. So I come
to get help!”

“Well, we’ll have to hear the whole story. Why don’t we sit down?”

They all did so around Wickerbottom's endothermic fire. Against the receding summer, it wasn't as
strong as it had been, and Wilson actually shivered when he took a seat on a log next to Willow. He
wasn't sure whether it was from the chill or the adrenaline of excitement pulsing through him. However, the answer to that soon presented itself as he felt the familiar flicker of a cold presence at his back.

The shadow as listening as closely as he was.

The others scattered themselves around the fire, each of them varying degrees of curiosity and impatience. Only WX settled for standing, his foot tapping impatiently on the ground. He had no interest in details; only in Wes's location so he could finish whatever had started their disagreement with one another. Wilson made a mental note to keep an eye on him. He couldn't have WX killing Wes before he had the chance to talk to this mysterious intellectual.

After they all settled and Wolfgang had quickly scarfed down a helping of a meat plate offered by Wigfrid, he sat back and looked at them all pointedly.

"Well, it is long story, but Wolfgang will tell as best as he can," said Wolfgang. "After Wolfgang leave here, he search high and low for Wes. I go all the way to far north, and then all the way back again. I see no sign of him! No camp! No tracks! No nothing! So Wolfgang thinks: island not so big. So maybe I am looking in wrong spot. At first, I think that maybe he got to other island—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but islands?" Wilson cut in.

"It is something Wes told me," Wolfgang explained. "He say that there are many other islands here! Each of them is different, too."

"What say you, WX?" Wigfrid asked. "Is this true?"

"Why would WX know anything about that?" Willow demanded.

"I'll explain later. WX?"

After a second of hesitation from WX, he replied, "AFFIRMATIVE. THERE ARE OTHER ISLANDS. NOT ALL OF THEM ARE AS PLEASANT AS THIS ONE."

"If this is considered pleasant, I'd hate to see the others," Wilson remarked.

"Do go on, Wolfgang," Wickerbottom urged.

“Okay,” said Wolfgang. “So, Wolfgang think that maybe Wes go to other island, but then I come to my senses. Wes—he is not afraid of water, but the ocean is big and I do not think that he knows where other islands are. So I think: maybe I am thinking about this wrong way. Maybe Wes in mountains. Or maybe he in sky. Or maybe he underground! Well, Wolfgang—he cannot fly, and mountains are hard to climb, so he think that maybe he try going underground. I know there are many caves here. I go around looking for all of them and trying to explore, but I never get far before I find obstacle that even Wolfgang cannot muscle his way through.

“Now we come to important part. This happen three or four days ago. Wolfgang finally finds cave that looks promising. It goes very, very deep, and there is nothing in the way to stop him except icky monsters that are no match for Wolfgang. Except that deeper Wolfgang goes, the more he feels very funny. I find weird building that looks very old and is all overgrown with funny plants. One of them took a bite out of Wolfgang."
Wolfgang displayed his bicep, where a visible bite mark about the size of a human head was visible.

"At first I think survivor is living down there, because there are funny things all around," Wolfgang went on. "I find old, abandoned campsite with a funny lantern and an old fire, but no one is there. Not even skeleton. Still, Wolfgang not think much of funny feelings since he gets them a lot around this world. Somehow feelings make me think that I am on right track, so I keep going down—so far down that I have to leave trail so I do not get lost.

"Finally, I am so far down that it is very, very hot and there are funny, old buildings all around—and some old statutes that look like they are watching me. There are funny robot monsters everywhere! So I think to myself: 'This is more dangerous than I thought it would be. I only look around for short while and then go back.' However, I am only looking around for short while when I find signs of recent campsite, not abandoned one. It looks promising, but I try not to get hopes up. Then my hopes go soaring because that is when I find Wes!"

"Wes was that deep underground?" Wilson marvelled.

"Yes, but soon I see that it is very complicated situation," said Wolfgang. "You see, I find Wes in big place with pillars and those metal monsters all around him. They not hurt him, but they act like they are guarding him. They were no match for my mightiness, though. So I think: 'This is good! I find Wes and we go back to surface together.' But sadly, it is not simple, because Wes could not move."

"Was he in a cage?" Wickerbottom asked.

"Yes...and no. There was no cage around him. He was just standing in one spot, but he could not move from that spot."

"Sounds like a magic thing," said Wilson.

"That is what Wes think," Wolfgang nodded solemnly. "Wes—he is so secretive; it really is not good for him to be keeping so many secrets! But he tell me that he had been there for long time and that Maxwell had brought him there after Wes, er, destroyed Metal Man."

"Why on Earth would Maxwell do that?" Wilson asked.

"Wolfgang not sure. Wes asked me not to ask him, so I do not ask."

Wilson did his best not to slap his face with his palm.

"Point being, Wes was not sure how to get himself out of predicament, and Wolfgang could not think of anything either," said Wolfgang. "Like I say, I am strong, but I am not clever. But at once I think of Tiny Man and Fire Woman. I think: they are very smart and clever to have lived so long here. So I think: maybe they have idea about how to get Wes out. I tell Wes that I will come back with help and then I come here. I met Tiny Woman and Metal Man on the way here, they brought me back to the camp, and now I am here!"

He looked from person to person, fishing for a response. When there was none, he outstretched his arms—except he underestimated his reach and knocked WX down. Wolfgang didn’t notice.

“And that is end of Wolfgang’s story!” he finished.
Wilson paused, waiting for Wolfgang to continue, to add on some point that he'd forgotten in his initial telling. But when he didn't and nobody else spoke up, he cleared his throat to interject.

"Well, under normal circumstances I'd say that going spelunking would be out of the question, but with Wolfgang with us, that should deter most of the local wildlife," said Wilson. "The real question is how to get Wes out of this trap. I guess we won't be able to figure that out until we go look at it for ourselves."

"Hold on a minute," Willow cut in. "We haven't even agreed to do anything yet."

"I hope you aren't suggesting that we leave the man down there."

"None of us is proposing that," said Wickerbottom, pushing up her glasses. "That said, we need to analyze the risks of this undertaking. There is no point in endangering several lives for the sake of one."

"Have you no compassion, Old Woman?" Wigfrid barked. "A man’s life is in danger. My honour demands that I act."

"First of all, call me 'Old Woman' again and I'll demonstrate some alternative uses for that spear of yours," Wickerbottom answered coolly. "Secondly, it is perfectly clear that Wes has some degree of protection from Maxwell and it is doubly obvious that Maxwell is confining of me. That is uncharacteristic of him."

"Maxwell locked us up all in this world," Wilson pointed out. "It would say that imprisoning people isn’t beyond his ability."

"Agreed. However, the nature of the prison we are in and the one that Wes is confined to is vastly different. The one we are in is a free-range prison. He has thrust us into a situation where we have autonomy over our actions. If Wolfgang's description is accurate, then it is clear that Wes's imprisonment is of a different nature. Should we risk the perilous journey to free him, Maxwell would not stand idly by. Mark my words: he will attempt to stop us."

"Going underground alone would be risky," Willow added. "There’s a reason I’ve never done a whole lot of spelunking. It’s dark, unpleasant, and the Grue could strike at any time if there isn’t a constant light source. To be honest our only advantage is that Wolfgang’s done the hard part and already found this guy. What if there’s a cave-in or something and we get trapped down there?"

"It would be the ideal way for Maxwell to permanently end our escapades in this world," said Wickerbottom.

"That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make an effort to help Wes," Wilson argued. "He’s one of us!"

"Come now, Wilson, it’s quite obvious that you’re only interested in saving Wes in the hopes that he can provide information about Maxwell and this world. Your reasons for wanting to rescue him are undeniably selfish."

"This isn't about me! This isn't about any of us! One of Maxwell's victims is in immediate danger, and instead of doing something about it, we're gathered around the fire pit debating the ethics of going to save him!"
"No, this is about satiating your own curiosity about both Maxwell and Wes."

"Let's not make this about ethics," said Willow. "Going underground would put us in a really vulnerable position. We don't know much about what's down there and I don't like it. If the guy was above ground, it'd be completely different."

Wilson stood. "I'm not going to sit around. I'm going with Wolfgang—whether or not the rest of you come with me is your decision."

"Of course I will join you," Wigfrid also stood. "Wes is in danger and it is my righteous duty to help the helpless."

"I will also join this expedition," Wendy concurred, speaking for the first time. "I cannot explain it, but forces beyond my understanding compel me to join you. I am naturally drawn to mysteries."

"Hold on," Willow intervened. "You're just a kid! I think we can all agree that we don't want you in harm's way."

"Seconded," Wickerbottom agreed. "But if the majority of you wish to assist Wes, then I'm afraid I have little choice but to accompany you. I am not about to sit around while the rest of you are engrossed in self-indulgent heroics."

Willow let out a long sigh. "I guess this is gonna be a group activity, then. I'll come too, but only to make sure none of you idiots gets killed down there. Dunno why I even care, but there you go."

They all then turned to look at WX, still standing at the edge of their group with his arms folded.

"THE WES MUST DIE," he proclaimed.

"Should we tie him back up?" Willow asked.

"If WX is so determined to join us, I say let him," said Wigfrid. "We will just ensure that he does not kill Wes when we encounter him. Perhaps they will be able to mend their ways."

"NOT POSSIBLE," said WX. "THE WES MUST DIE. I'LL ACCOMPANY YOU IF ONLY TO ENSURE THAT."

"This is good!" Wolfgang boomed. "Wolfgang is so glad you have decided to help Wes! I promise you will not regret it! Wes is very funny man and will bring you much laughter."

Wilson peered around at the collection of unscrupulous characters, all tinged blue in the light of the endothermic fire, each in his or her own way prepared to risk their lives for the sake of a stranger. For the first time since his parents had died, he felt a sort of unity with other people—something he hadn’t expected to find in a world managed by Maxwell. But he supposed that that was one of the few things even Maxwell couldn’t influence. He couldn’t influence them, and if anything, rescuing Wes was a small way that they could rebel—a way to cast their spirits into the dying twilight and proclaim that he could not bind them.

The solidarity among them was enough to even muffle the unease cascading down his spine.

It took a little over a day to reach Wolfgang's cave. Wilson reasoned that if he'd done alone with
Wolfgang, it would've been a straightforward trip. But with six people in tow, it wasn't so simple. They had to bring rations, weapons, camping gear, and enough light sources to hold back the night. By the time they gathered their supplies, it was already dark and it was far too treacherous to travel under the cover of a quarter moon. The consensus was to wait for first light and then set off.

When, at last, the sun crept over the treetops, their party was fully equipped and in good spirits. Despite the danger ahead, Wilson noticed the sense of excitement in the air—excitement mixed with dread and adrenaline and the knowledge that they were rebelling against Maxwell. It surprised him that Maxwell hadn't made an effort to intervene, especially since nothing impeded their journey. If anything, Wilson thought that the forest was strangely quiet. No birdsong, no pigs, no hounds, no small creatures scrambling to get out of their way. The forest almost welcomed them with open arms, and it was that which sent fresh discomfort through him. He couldn't help but wonder if this was exactly what Maxwell wanted them to do—if he wanted to lure them underground only to trap them in a stony tomb.

For the time being, he put it out of his mind. It only made him more nervous than he already was.

During the trek, Wilson realized that there was so much of Maxwell's world he hadn't seen yet. Dimples in the landscape where lush valleys lay sheltered from the sun, ruins dotting the forest, mountains stretching far higher than he thought possible. Creatures that were strange mirrors of fauna he knew from their world. There was so much research material that it was difficult to resist the temptation to stop and take samples every few feet. He catalogued everything he saw in his mind and made a mental note to plan an expedition to somewhere he hadn't been yet. If there was one thing he could credit Maxwell with, it was with having enough imagination and creativity to create such an enticing landscape.

It was mid-afternoon when they finally stumbled upon Wolfgang's cave. They were far enough north that the only members of their party who had ever been that far from their initial campsite was Willow and, to Wilson's great surprise, WX. The cave, itself, was little more than a narrow hole situated just off a thin river, and so small that Wilson wondered how Wolfgang had even managed to squeeze in there. It was as if the finger of God had pinpricked the land to create a small access to hell.

For a long time, they all stood around staring at the hole. Wilson expected that none of them had thought this far ahead, but Wolfgang was watching them expectantly and he knew he couldn't let him down.

“Well, I suppose this is it,” said Wilson. “Exactly how deep does this thing go, Wolfgang?”

“Wolfgang is not good with precise measurements,” Wolfgang admitted. “I feel it was very long way, though.”

“How promising. Well, I suppose we better get to it. I’d rather be in and out of there before nightfall. It might not be possible, but if we get an early start we may still make it.”

“Hold up,” said Willow. “Don’t you remember the last time you went underground?”

“What do you mean?”

Willow rolled her eyes. “You mean you don’t remember? That cave back at Wickerbottom’s camp. You went underground for a short way and then you felt all weird?”
Wilson felt his face flush. He’d hoped that no one would bring it up. “I don’t think it’ll be a problem?”

“How’dya know?”

“I won’t know until I try.”

“So you don’t know for sure? Did you seriously only just think about that now?”

“Is there a point to this?”

Willow steeled herself. She was as unyielding as the last flower before the frost of winter. “I think you shouldn’t go down there. Let us deal with this Wes guy and you can guard the entrance.”

“Surely you’re joking!”

“Do I look like I’m joking? Does this look like humour to you? Unlike the rest of you, I still have some sense in me—I’m not going down there unless we have someone above ground.”

“And you think that’s where I belong?” Wilson asked.

“I think that’s where you’ll get into the least trouble.”

“I’m not missing out on this opportunity.”

Willow pursed her lips and looked like she was prepared to press the matter. Thankfully, Wickerbottom came to his rescue.

“I wouldn’t bother arguing the matter,” said Wickerbottom. “He obviously has his heart set on it. However, I do agree that it may be wiser to leave someone out here in order to watch the entrance. Lord knows Maxwell does like his fair share of tricks and it wouldn’t hurt to have a safeguard.”

“Are you volunteering?” Willow sneered.

“Nothing of the sort. Like Wilson, I endeavour to expand my knowledge. Said knowledge is best found beneath our feet through intrepidness and cautious exploration. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I was to forego the acquisition of knowledge. The logical choice for who should remain here is obvious.”

“Oh? And who is it?”

“The automaton, of course.”

“What?” WX exclaimed. “I DON’T TAKE ORDERS FROM YOU!”

“WX wants nothing more than to see Wes dead, so it would be unwise to allow him to continue further,” Wickerbottom continued, not looking in WX’s direction. “However, WX also wants to be sure that Wes dies, so he would have to make sure the entrance remains open so that we may all emerge from the underground. Once we return with Wes, we can decide what we’re going to do with the pair then, but for now, WX has a personal investment in ensuring that the entrance remains open.”
“I dunno,” Willow frowned. “I’m not sure I like trusting my life to the psychotic robot.”

“YOU CAN’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!” WX argued. “I’M GOING DOWN THERE AND I’M GOING TO KILL THE WES! I HAVE NOT COME THIS CLOSE TO ENSURING THE WES’S DEATH TO BE STOPPED BY A MEATBAG WELL PAST HER EXPIRY DATE.”

“It’s rude to jest about a lady’s age,” said Wickerbottom. All the same, there wasn’t the faintest trace of offence written in her well-defined features—just a curt frown and an air of smugness.

“MY RESEARCH INTO BASIC HUMAN INTERACTION INDICATES THAT IT IS ALSO RUDE TO BOSS OTHERS AROUND.”

“What difference does it make whether you kill Wes down there or up here?” Wilson asked.

“IT DOESN’T. WHAT MATTERS IS MAKING SURE THE WES DIES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. HE WILL DIE SOONER IF I ACCOMPANY THE PARTY GOING UNDERGROUND.”

“For a supposedly emotionless automaton, he sure is belligerent,” Wickerbottom noted.

“Oh, may the Gods strike me down!” Wigfrid exclaimed. “Enough of this! I will clear up this matter.”

Without waiting for a response from her stunned audience, Wigfrid approached WX, stood on the tips of her toes, and whispered into his mechanical ear. At first, WX recoiled—probably repulsed by an organic being so close to him. Then the minimal expression his face allowed went from defiant to the slightest trace of horrified. When Wigfrid pulled back, there was a stunned second of silence.

WX drew himself to his full height.

“I HAVE CHANGED MY MIND,” he decided. “BEING IN AN ENCLOSED SPACE WITH YOU FLESHLINGS DOESN’T APPEAL TO ME. I WILL GUARD THE ENTRANCE.”

“Excellent!” Wigfrid beamed. “It is a noble task. Go forth and do us proud, Mechanical One!”

“QUIET, YOU,” WX barked.

The automaton moved as far away from the group as possible and sat on a rock with his arms and legs folded. With him out of earshot, Wilson turned to Wigfrid.

“What did you say to him?” he asked.

“Never you mind, Wilson of Higgsbury,” Wigfrid smiled coyly. “We have a quest at hand, do we not? Shall we set forth or stand here all day discussing it?”

While Willow and Wickerbottom tied a rope around the trunk of a nearby tree and subsequently got into an argument about the knot, Wilson went to the hole and peered inside. It was only three or four metres deep before it slipped into a deep embankment receding into darkness.

“Countless survivors have died down there,” Shadow Wilson whispered. “Be sure to keep a torch about you at all times. We wouldn’t want to die before you’ve exerted your usefulness to us.”
Wilson didn’t like the sound of that.

When he moved out of the way to give Willow room to toss the rope down, he took note of Wendy’s presence. Or rather, lack of. Fortunately, this time she hadn’t wandered too far away; he found her sitting at the edge of the forest, weaving a flower crown. She was watching him carefully—forever demure and unreadable.

Wendy rose to her feet as he approached. “This crown shall deter the shadows.”

“Huh?” Wilson blinked.

She didn’t respond. She got up on the tips of her toes and put the flower crown on his head.

“The flowers will deter the shadows,” Wendy reiterated. “My dear Abigail made many a crown, but like her, they have all wilted. But this one shall last for as long as you need it.”

“Er...thanks, I guess,” said Wilson. He almost took it off and dismissed it as childish, but Wendy’s eyes were so resolute that he realized he couldn't do it in her presence.

“Are you done playing around or are we going?” Willow called.

Indeed they were. Wolfgang led the way underground, a torch firmly gripped in one hand while he used the rope to lower himself into the hole. Willow was next with her trusty lighter, then Wigfrid, and then Wickerbottom.

Wilson was next. As he lit the torch, he suddenly thought that he didn’t want to be unarmed in the darkness. He hurried back to their pile of supplies and fished out an axe.

Just to be safe.

He sank into the hole as easily as one would duck under the surface of a cool pool of water on a hot summer’s day. To Wilson’s surprise, the cave was about as hot as one as well. Sweltering humidity pressed in on all sides. He joined the others as the ground levelled out. They had collectively formed a circle brimming with the light of their torches. Beyond them was nothing but darkness.

“I will show way,” Wolfgang announced. “Follow Wolfgang and stay close, okay?”

Easy enough. The alternative was getting swallowed by the shadows, and with every step, Wilson thought he saw something stir out of sight.

It was that vague sense of uneasiness that pursued them all through the underground, through the vast labyrinth of contorted stone corridors, lost memories, and strange creatures that scuttled away from their torches. Wolfgang started out as confident in his direction and where to go and which obstacles to avoid, but every so often he’d pause and have to think for a minute or two before he found his footing.

It wasn’t reassuring, but what was in Maxwell’s world?

It was deeper than any human being was ever meant to go.
Wilson was surprised at how effective Wendy’s flower crown was, so much so that he took down a mental note to gather flowers for analysis after they’d gotten out of this mess. While he could feel unowned eyes leering just out of sight, that was all they were. Eyes. No claw-raking, mind-messing creatures. Instead of his mind drowning in a myriad of sensation, he waded in a pool of muddy water, unable to see the bottom but still able to stand on his own two feet.

He wasn’t sure what was worse: the ideas or the absence of them.

They’d been walking for a few hours without much incident, easily able to take care of the creatures they did meet through sheer numbers alone. A few times he saw spiders the size of small dogs scuttling away from the light, and in another, he saw a giant carrot that actually turned out to be a house. Soon they stumbled upon what looked like a makeshift road and Wolfgang confidently followed, surer than ever that they were close.

"Maxwell certainly went to a lot of effort to hide Wes," Wilson remarked, his voice echoing. "Assuming he puts effort into anything. It's hard to tell with that guy."

Presently he became aware of a faint light coming from ahead, one that didn't come from any of their torches. He was only distracted from it when Willow came up alongside him.

"The only thing Maxwell puts effort into is being a creep," she affirmed.

He pressed his lips together and didn’t reply.

“You okay?”

“As long as I have Wendy’s flower crown, then yes,” said Wilson—although he couldn’t hide the note of uncertainty in his voice. If he was able to detect it, then Willow was too.

“Well, don’t go crazy or whatever,” Willow said unhelpfully. “This’ll be easy. We go in, grab this Wes guy, and get out before nightfall. Easy as pie.”

“I...do not believe it will be so simple,” Wickerbottom corrected her from up ahead.

“You’re a bundle of optimism, Mrs Wickerbottom,” Willow murmured. “I’m sure it’s not going to be nearly as difficult as your cynical mind thinks—oh.”

Wilson found that the group had come to an abrupt stop on a cliff, and from it was in the courtyard below that the light was emanating from flames sitting on top of pillars. He immediately saw what had caused everyone to adopt expressions of Wendy-levels of subtle apprehension.

It was a dead drop some two stories down, and below them was a vast, square-shaped courtyard with no discernible surroundings beyond the square of light in which it existed. There were four pillars were flames forming a square in the middle, and between each of the pillars was a solitary sentry in the form of the bishops and knights Wilson remembered from the swamp. Among them was the largest, ugliest brute of a machine he’d ever seen. It looked rather like a beheaded rhinoceros waddling around on a pair of stumpy legs. The ground shivered with each step it took, and hot steam billowed out of its nostrils.

Right in the middle of the chaos was a singular man, planted to the spot with his arms raised as if pressing up against a wall. Although it was difficult to discern expression from the distance they were at, he wore an expression of only vague concern. More importantly, however, Wilson
immediately realized that the man was wearing make-up he typically associated with a certain type of street performer, like the unfortunate souls he’d sometimes seen wandering the streets of London.

Wes, the mysterious intellectual he’d so often been thinking about in the last few months, was a mime.

“The...The guy’s a mime?!” Willow exclaimed.

“Wes not just any mime!” Wolfgang argued. “Wes is best mime in whole world! He is very prestigious.”

“He’s a performer!” Wigfrid beamed. “What a pleasant surprise! Perhaps he is a noble a warrior poet.”

“I find that highly unlikely,” said Willow.

“It is funny,” Wolfgang frowned. “There are more monsters here than when I left. Maxwell must have come clean up mess.”

“More like create a bigger one,” Willow groaned. “I knew this was a terrible idea.”

“Fear not, the Great Wigfrid will deal with these monstrosities so that we may liberate Wes, the Warrior Poet!” Wigfrid proclaimed.

Wigfrid flung herself over the edge before anyone could voice a protest.

“Wait, we should think about this first!” Willow called after her.

There was no answer from Wigfrid. Peering over the edge, Wilson watched her slam on top of the nearest bishop, knock it down, and hit the ground running. She headed straight for the massive mechanical rhinoceros.

It was always an impressive sight watching Wigfrid in action, but there was something even more daunting and mesmerizing as someone with such a small build charge fearlessly at a creature many times her size. The rhino turned towards her. Wigfrid swung around it, striking at its knees and side as it struggled to turn to keep her in its peripheral vision.

“Well, now I guess we have to go down there,” Willow said dejectedly.

“Okay!” Wolfgang exclaimed. He, too, leapt over the cliff and body-slammed the bishop Wigfrid had just hit.

“I meant that we should be a little more careful about it,” Willow groaned. “Wendy, hand me that rope!”

Willow fastened the rope they’d brought to a nearby rock and flung it over the cliff. It fluttered down into the courtyard. Wilson grabbed it before it even settled and also swung over the edge. He hurtled down into the battlefield, where Wigfrid and Wolfgang were busy engaging the automatons and Wes stood motionless, apparently unable to be of any use beyond observing the situation.
What he was able to do was enthusiastically egg them on by mimicking Wolfgang’s punches.

When he hit the ground, Wilson immediately had to leap to the side to avoid an incoming knight overlooked by both Wolfgang and Wigfrid. He raised his axe, the practice with Wigfrid racing through his head. All the lessons about dodging and attacking flew out of the window. He was not made for this kind of thing; not when he’d spent his elementary school days running as fast as possible from the neighbouring bullies. His skin went hot and then cold with dread, the hairs on his arm standing at attention.

Wilson rolled forwards as the knight haphazardly slammed its face onto the ground. He chopped at its knee with his axe. The blade caught the weak point where there was an exposed sliver in the metal plating, and relief rushed through his veins as he heard something valuable snap inside the joint. The creature fumbled but didn't fall. Instead, it turned and slammed its head down again. Wilson vaulted to the right, then to the left to avoid another attack. He rammed the blunt end of the axe into its eye. With a howling, mechanical screech, the knight staggered, struggling to maintain its balance.

Wilson gripped the axe handle, wringing it with his hands. Maybe he'd retained more of Wigfrid's lessons than he'd thought.

No sooner had his confidence raised when he was joined by Wickerbottom. She slid between him and the knight, a spell book floating above her hands.

"Allow me, Wilson," said Wickerbottom.

Vines broke through the ground, ensnaring the charging beast. Wickerbottom kept both her hand and her eyes fixed on the beast, the book’s pages turning faster and faster. She grit her teeth. Sweat trickled down her brow. Wilson had never seen her so intense, not even against students who’d damaged library books.

The vines twirled around the creature’s limbs until it was almost completely covered. Wickerbottom snapped her wrist. Echoing her movements, the vines pulled, and the beast unleashed a grating, mechanical cry that arched into the cavern’s unseen roof and faded into oblivion. Metal limbs tore apart from the creature and its glowing eyes faded. Then, the vines receded as quickly as they’d appeared.

Wilson opened his mouth to comment, but Wickerbottom had snatched his arm and roughly shoved him away as another knight hobbled towards their position.

“Go get that damn mime so we can leave,” Wickerbottom ordered.

He glanced at her but thought better than to argue and took off running. Wilson closed the distance between himself and the trapped man until he was right next to him.

Terrified to touch Wes, Wilson looked around for something that was holding him in place. He saw nothing. At once, he felt a familiar, shuddering presence rise up from the ground beneath.

This was magic at work.

“Can you move at all?” Wilson asked. “Are you stuck there?”

Wes responded by pressing his hands flat against the air around him as if he was stuck in a box.
Wilson knew this trick. It was a mime trick.

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say,” Wilson admitted.

“Wes says that he is stuck,” Wolfgang answered. He appeared at Wilson’s shoulder with a fat bump on his forehead, but otherwise unharmed. “Hello, Wes! I bring help like I said I would.”

“Have you been down here all this time?” Wilson asked Wes.

Wes immediately went into a tirade of gestures that didn’t make any sense to him.

"Wes say that it is long story," Wolfgang interpreted. "He wants to get out now."

“Well, I guess we better work on that,” said Wilson. “I don’t suppose you have any ideas, do you?”

Another series of exaggerated gestures.

“I have no idea what you’re saying,” Wilson shrugged. “But I’ll assume that’s a negatory.”

The shadow’s voice seeped into his ear again. “Collapse the pillars.”

“Huh?” Wilson glanced back.

“The pillars are holding him in place. Collapse them and it will set him free.”

“How do you know that?”

“Know what?” Wolfgang asked.

“If you want to free the mime, then collapse the pillars,” the shadow pressed. “Do you wish to have our help or not?”

Wilson hesitated. God, he should know better by now.

“The pillars,” Wilson realized. “Wolfgang, can you knock down those pillars?”

“Nothing can stand in the way of Wolfgang the Mighty!” Wolfgang called back.

Wolfgang sauntered to the corpse of a nearby bishop. Grabbing it around its waist, he threw it into the nearest pillar. The force of the collision caused the cracked marble to crumble like a sandcastle, the stone shattering and collapsing and striking the ground with a tremendous rumble. Wilson’s hands went to cover his ears, while his body turned to look back towards Wes. Somehow, despite not saying a word, Wes’s resolute expression told Wilson all he needed to know.

“Wolfgang, smash all the pillars!” Wilson ordered him.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Willow asked. She had just managed to get to the bottom of the cliff.

“I think it’ll free Wes!” Wilson called back.
“How do you know? It could bring this whole place down!”

“I just know, okay? I know! Wolfgang, do it!”

“Okay! WOLFGANG WILL SMASH!”

Willow’s face was painted with undisguised alarm. “WAIT—WAIT—WAIT!”

She was far too late to issue a protest. Wolfgang had already charged at the next pillar and body slammed it. The base crumbled and it teetered over, falling like a dead weight.

Wigfrid apparently caught on to what they were doing, because she hurried to stand in front of one of the pillars with the mechanical rhino at the ready. It jerked, and then charged. Everything slowed to a crawl. Wigfrid leapt with grace and precision over the rhino’s back. The creature’s horn struck the pillar. The stone cracked and then cascaded over the rhino.

“Wilson, I think this is a bad idea,” Willow said hurriedly.

“It’s the only way to get Wes out,” Wilson replied.

“Wilson, you don’t get it. I feel like this is a bad idea.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that I don’t trust anything I don’t understand, and this is definitely something I don’t understand. Wolfgang, don’t touch that pillar!”

“Wolfgang, get rid of that pillar,” Wilson contradicted. All at once he wasn’t sure who had spoken: whether it was him or his shadow lurking at his back.

“Don’t you touch that pillar!” Willow warned him.

“Don’t listen to her! Destroy that pillar!”

“NO!”

“YES! IT’S FOR SCIENCE!”

Wolfgang, for his part, looked decidedly perplexed, his eyebrows at different levels on his forehead. His attention flicked between Willow and Wilson.

As it turns out, however, there was no need for an intervention on anyone’s part to break down the pillar. Because at that moment, the ground beneath Wilson’s feet shuddered into life, and he belatedly realized that it wasn’t coming from the activity taking place around him.

In the depths of Maxwell’s world, the cavern was stirring to life. Wilson was standing in the middle of a magnificent but terrifying beast rearing its head from a long slumber. The very air took hold of Wilson and shook him out of his fantasy, shrieking for him to wake up from the nightmare he’d been experiencing for two months. Only now that nightmare had reached its climax, and in the climax he stood in the middle of an earthquake threatening to crush him in every sense of the word.

Of course Maxwell wasn’t about to let them take Wes.
Around him, the others had come to a stop as best as they were able to with the earth having reared its head in rebellion against them. Strain zig-zagged through him. Wilson had faced many things in life his superior intellect and science-ing skills had proved useless against. It hadn’t done anything against Maxwell, and it hadn’t done anything to save his parents or liberate him from a lifetime of ruthless isolation. And it couldn’t do anything when the world quite literally decided to open up underneath his feet and swallow him whole.

Wilson turned to look at Willow. There was a moment between them—a horrified slow-motion understanding before the stone floor beneath his feet crumbled as easily as the pillars had. The roar of the earthquake slowed to a stop.

The stone beneath his feet broke apart.

Time sped up again. Wilson scrambled to keep his balance, but it was too late. Willow was whisking away from him, and he realized that she was actually standing still.

It was him. He was the one falling.

The last thing Wilson heard was Willow screaming his name.

Dappled light. Distant shrieks. Then silence.


Darkness was bad.

Wilson caught his breath and scrambled up. The light was steadily receding, and there was no time to waste.

"Light source," he murmured like a mantra. "Light source, light source, light source..."

Unable to focus, it took far too long for him to spot the dying torch lying on the stone floor nearby. Around it were impossibly large fragments of stone and nothingness—nothing but blank, empty swathes of shadows and whispers. Wilson dove for the torch and steadily blew on it until the flame reignited.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw his shadow stretching out from behind him.

“That went well,” Shadow Wilson drawled.

“You are no help at all,” Wilson snapped. "It's thanks to you that I'm in this mess now."

"We did not cause the earthquake. It was an unexpected consequence."

"Why do all of your suggestions have pesky things like consequences?"

"...You dropped this."

"Dropped what?"
Shadow Wilson shifted and reached into the darkness, before pulling out an axe. The same axe Wilson had been carrying when the floor had given out from beneath him. He hesitated, watching the black hand carefully.

"Er, thanks," he said hesitantly. He snatched the axe out of the shadow's hand.

A glimmer of light caught his eye, one that was not coming from his torch. Wilson gripped his axe and shuffled towards it, uncertain if it was a lure prepared to attack him at a moment's notice. But then he saw a familiar face visible in the light and he broke into a sprint.

Wes was knelt on the ground and lighting a torch. Where he'd gotten the materials, Wilson didn't know. Still, the light had the intended effect and banished the darkness.

“Are you alright?” Wilson asked. “That was quite the fall.”

Wes gave a slight jerk of the head Wilson interpreted as a nod.

“I don’t see any of the others,” said Wilson. “I hope they’re okay. Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

Wes made a series of exaggerated gestures, the last of which was him brushing dust off of his shirt. Wilson chose to interpret it as an affirmative for being alright. He then took a look around them, only to find nothing but the enclosing darkness and a bitter silence. There was nothing to be heard except faint whispers of moisture leaking from the cavern roof.

“I have no idea how we’re going to get out of here,” Wilson admitted. “Er—I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself. My name is Wilson. Wilson Percival Higgsbury.”

He had extended his hand, but as Wes reached out to meet it, he paused. Not just paused, but full on recoiled. His eyebrows shot up to the centre of his forehead, his eyes pinched with suspicion, his lip curled. It almost looked like resentment, the no-hands-barred resentment Wilson had seen one too many times from certain members of the university, the ones who’d thought that he’d only been granted his position because of the family name.

“What?” Wilson asked, though he wasn’t sure whether he was speaking to Wes or his doppelganger. Maybe both.

“Excellent, there are no witnesses,” said Shadow Wilson. “Now may be the only opportunity you get. Kill him!”

“KILL HIM?!” Wilson screeched. The axe slipped him his hand and clattered against the stone floor.

Wes leapt back like someone had taken a shot at him. He rolled up his sleeves and raised his fist in an exaggerated fighting stance, but the expression on his face told Wilson that he was all too serious about defending himself.

“Silly little Wilson,” the shadow mocked. “This is the only reason we allowed this trip. Now pick up your axe and kill the man. He may not speak, but he listens far too well.”

“N—No! I don’t know what your motivation is, but—but I refuse to do anything!”

“...Then, Wilson...you leave me little choice.”
He received his answer when the chill at his back became a blizzard, and he lurched forwards.

What were whispers became shouts. What became the vague impression of danger became a torrent of uncertainty and terror. What was a shadow at his back crawled up his arms and legs and into his soul, penetrating into its deepest secrets and desires, exposing him, bleaching him in the shadows, sending his mind into an impossible free fall he couldn’t hope to stop. Out of the corner of his eye, black veins encroach on his vision, while snake-like shadow tendrils wrapped around his arms. They melted into his skin, but that didn’t erase the sensation of being controlled like a puppet whose limbs flopped helplessly from side to side.

Wilson struggled. But then he couldn’t, because he was lost in his own body, helplessly watching Wes stare at him with bewilderment.

He pulled the flower crown from his head.
As the crown fluttered to the cavern floor, an onslaught of images and thoughts charred through Wilson’s head like a fast-spreading wildfire.

He was dead, he was quite sure of it. He was dead and this was his life flashing before his eyes. His first pet turtle. His mother, humming and painting and talking about physics. Dr Butterfield ruffling his hair. Cigar smoke. Singed eyebrows. Tiberius Higgsbury screaming and kicking. Gazing at his own, haggard reflection. His shoulders, slumped. His eyes, drawn. His soul, withered. The acute summarization of the life of Wilson Percival Higgsbury. His life flashed in what must’ve been a heartbeat, so entrancing that he wasn’t even aware of moving, nor was he aware that he wasn’t the one directing his movements.

The hiss of the axe swinging through the air cracked louder than any gunshot and was enough to wake up him his stupor. From the veil of only partial awareness he watched Wes spring back, his eyes—cloudless and clear—sparkling with thinly veiled dread. Missing on the first swing, Wilson attempted a second time—a more desperate hack that glanced past Wes’s check and created a thin red streak across the white face paint.

Wilson drew back the axe and slammed it down. This time, Wes escaped, and the axe hit the ground with enough force to send vibrations up his arm.

His breath hitched in the back of his throat. He suddenly realized that he’d never intended to leave Maxwell’s world undamaged to some degree. Maxwell’s land was fertile, growing on the corpses on the countless others who had died here, and here Wilson was about to do the very same to Wes. How many survivors had killed each other? How many had died hopeless and alone, with no one to mourn them? Wilson had wanted to believe that he’d been in control. He wanted to believe that he owned his shadow—and the creature that had lingered at his back for the last few months.

Only now did he realize that it was quite the opposite. Wilson was the one owned. He was the shadow.

Somehow, his voice burst out—out of desperation and out of resolve.

“I am so sorry!” Wilson exclaimed. “I swear I don’t have any control of this!”

Wes jutted out his lower lip. That was right before Wilson’s arm swung the axe at him with what he thought might be with all his strength; it was hard to tell when both his mind and body were being haphazardly swung around like playthings.

Wes hesitated, enough for Wilson to get in another swing. During the process of the attack, Wes grabbed the axe handle and rammed it into Wilson’s stomach. Wilson lurched back, air sucking out of his lungs. Still, the shadows wrapped firmly around the axe, so much so that Wes was forced to release it. Instead of continuing the fight, the mime snatched his discarded torch and scurried into the shadows.

“You can’t hide anymore, Wes!” the shadow called. Except it wasn’t the shadow who was talking.
It was him. Wilson felt the words leave his mouth but had no control over what he said. “That light can only stretch so far! If you step into the shadows, you know you’ll die!”

Wilson crept forwards, and as his light flung into the darkness, new shapes and figures emerged. He had the disconcerting feeling that he was being watched. Nothing new when it came to Maxwell’s world. What made it new where faint, mechanical scuttles he heard lurking beyond the reach of his torch, hurrying into hiding spots where he couldn’t see them. The ground was formed with enormous square stones that were clearly not natural, large and imposing and an all-too-potent reminder that he was in unfamiliar territory. His only, and not very reassuring, hope was that the shadow knew where they were going, else they fall into some ancient trap from which he wouldn't be able to escape.

Ahead, Wilson spotted a flicker of familiar torch light. The shadow forced him into a sprint, but by the time he reached it, the light had vanished.

“Always the coward,” the shadow sighed.

“You have to stop!” Wilson exclaimed. His voice also came out of his mouth, this time fully in control. “I won’t kill him because of whatever petty grudge you have against him!”

“This is so much more than a petty grudge,” the shadow chuckled.

The shadow approached an enormous boulder where he’d last seen the torchlight, but as he approached, he realized that it was no boulder at all. Rather, it appeared to be a small house—or it had once been—entirely composed of stone, the exterior decorated with intricate carvings.

He flicked his torch around to catch the shadows and found nothing. Wes couldn’t have gone far.

“So if this isn’t about a grudge, what’s it about?” Wilson pressed, hoping to keep the shadow distracted enough for Wes to get some distance between them.

“Do you remember what Maxwell asked you?” the shadow reminded him. “He asked you what happens to men who play God. This is the answer, Wilson. When you play God, you become a part of the infinitesimal cycle of order and chaos, a cycle that you can’t hope to separate yourself from once you’ve become entwined in it. You see, Wilson, you are a part of this cycle now, as if Wes. Like you, Wes thought that he could control what he couldn’t understand.”

“That doesn't answer my question.”

"We can't fully trust you, Wilson. You're still one of Maxwell's playthings, but rest easy knowing that with your help, we're going to retake the board. Really, our goals should align.”

“And why’s that?”

Wilson rounded the corner of the ruined house, his feet skirting so lightly over the ground that he couldn’t hear his own footsteps. There was no sign of Wes, but his body kept the axe raised in preparation.

More importantly, the shadow had gone silent. If he kept it talking, if he kept himself speaking, then Wes would have forewarning about his approach.

“ANSWER ME!” Wilson shouted.
His voice flung into the cavern and reverberated.

“Really now,” the shadow huffed. “We have a common enemy, Wilson.”

“What enemy?”

“What enemy? What other enemy is there other than Maxwell? This world is his game, so we’re playing by his rules. It’s the only way that he’ll ever be defeated.”

“What does Maxwell have to do with Wes?”

"Wes was his preferred pawn before he set his sights on you. We can't risk letting him live with the knowledge he has; he could destroy what we've worked so carefully to achieve. He'll need to be destroyed in order to bring us one step closer to Maxwell."

“W—Wait, if everything you’ve done has been because of Maxwell, what about the portal you wanted me to build? What did that have to do with anything?”

“That was just theoretical. We’re not even sure if it’s possible for this world’s prisoners to return to Earth as it has never been done before, and you have all become so intricately entwined here that it may be impossible to separate yourselves from this place. The important thing was that it built our relationship with you, that we have you a fragment of hope to hold onto.”

“So it was a lie.”

“Yes, Wilson. It was a white lie.”

“A white lie would imply that nobody would’ve gotten hurt by that lie, but I think you’ll find that I feel significantly hurt right now.”

Fragments of light jutted out from the darkness. Wilson faltered in his step, then hid behind the broken house.

“Maxwell must’ve done something horrible if you’re willing to kill to defeat him,” Wilson mused.

“Actually, he’s just really annoying,” the shadow replied.

Wilson halted in his tracks. He peered around the house.

"Where did you go?" the shadow murmured, again using Wilson's voice.

The answer to that came when Wilson froze, then whirled around and craned his neck upwards, to see Wes's figure standing atop the broken house.

Wes sprung. With a single strike, he tackled Wilson to the ground and they hit the stone floor in a tangled heap.

The axe flew out of Wilson's hands and skirted across the cavern floor. Pinned to the ground with Wes’s knee on his chest, he flailed manically despite having every desire to submit and be done with it. He prayed with all his might that somehow, someway, Wes had the capacity to stop him.
The shadow wouldn’t let it end that easily.

Wes pressed down on him, his expression fuddled with such complicated emotion that Wilson couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Then the fingers of a shadow claw crept over his shoulder.

Wilson opened his mouth to shout a warning, but when he did, the fingers sank into Wes’s shirt. With a tug, Wes was flung backwards.

“Sorry!” Wilson called.

A husky voice burst out of the darkness. “Oh, this is rich!”

Wilson swung around, searching for the source. “M—Maxwell?!”

“The one and only! Look out behind you.”

Wilson dove away against his will. Wes hit the spot where he’d just been with the axe.

“Oh, this is so much more fun than keeping him locked up,” said Maxwell’s voice. “I have to admit, I was planning on keeping him there for an eternity, but this is a much more befitting end.”

Wes rose the axe over his shoulder. There was indecision in his eyes, uncertain of whether to cut Wilson down and be done with it or hesitate and let himself get killed. Nevertheless, all sense drained out of placid expression as Maxwell materialized behind him. The familiar stench of expensive cigars permeated in the air.

“On the other hand, it might be a little too quick for both of you,” said Maxwell. “What’s the point of death if it isn’t torturous and drawn out? Maybe I should break this up before it gets any rougher, don’t you think? Hm...what to do?”

“Maxwell!” Wilson barked. “If you can stop this, do it!”

Maxwell leaned against thin air. “Decisions, decisions...”

“MAXWELL!”

“Well, if you’re going to use that tone with me, I’m not sure if I want to break up this little party of yours.”

“Party?! Does this look like a party to you?! Does it look like I’m having fun?!”

“If not you, then certainly your shadow,” Maxwell chuckled.

“This isn’t fun; it’s just business,” the shadow said out of Wilson’s mouth.

“I’ve got to say—I admit that the mime isn’t the most pleasant company,” Maxwell started. He was interrupted by the sound of Wes trying to tackle Wilson, only to miss by an inch and go hurdling to the ground again. Wilson made to grab the axe. Wes dove for it at the same time. Together, they became locked in a wrestling match for the weapon.

As much as Wilson loathed to admit it, the shadow won out again. Wilson tried to hold back. The shadow pushed forwards. The result was Wes being lifted off of the ground by the claws,
struggling pointlessly against his inevitable doom.

“Although I am curious about why you’re so intent on killing him,” said Maxwell. “Did you have a bargain with him, too?”

“It’s not relevant to you,” the shadow replied.

“Everything that happens in this world is my business.”

“Not this time.”

Maxwell clamped down on his cigar, the lines deepening in his forehead.

Huh. So that’s what confusion looked like on Maxwell’s face.

“What do you mean by that?” Maxwell said—not accusingly, but still with the mildest trace of confusion. “Look, I know you all get a kick out of being all mysterious, but—”

The distraction with Maxwell was enough for Wes to wiggle out of the claws, his shirt ripping in the process. Grabbing a discarded torch, he bolted into the darkness. Wilson (or the shadow; the line was blending between him and Them) let out an annoyed grumble and marched after Wes, unrelenting and determined. Wilson had all but given up on resisting. It was a battle he couldn’t win, and he was helpless to bear witness to both the shadow trying to bargain with Maxwell, the shadow, and Wes’s struggle. He was just along for the ride, again caught in the intricate web he’d helped create.

“Excuse me, I’m not done with you,” Maxwell hurried after Wilson. “Like I said, I know you get a kick out of being all mysterious, but I can’t help but feel like I’m being ignored.”

“You’re jealous,” the shadow noted.

“Jealous that I have to share the attention with this feeble little scientist?”

“Feeble?” Wilson hissed, able to regain control if only for the brief aside.

“What does it matter to you?” the shadow asserted. Wilson shoved past Maxwell and continued his pursuit.

“What I’m saying is that you’re not like the rest of Them,” said Maxwell. “Up until now, you’ve all been the quiet sort, always watching, but not really intervening. Only now, you're submitting yourself to the game for the first time and it's a little bit annoying. Wilson is my plaything, not yours. So my question is: what are you, exactly? Are you really one of Them or are you something else? Something more dangerous?”

“The only one I’m dangerous to,” Wilson stopped dead in his tracks, glancing over his shoulder to fix Maxwell with a putrid stare, “is you.”

The shadow of intricate emotion flared on Maxwell’s face. Wilson’s heart froze in his chest, then spread to the rest of his limbs as he watched Maxwell process the statement. It was like watching a moving picture, except it froze every few seconds, enough for Wilson to observe every flicker of subtle comprehension, and the slow metamorphosis of a small emotion to a large one.
If it wasn’t so terrifying, Wilson would be impressed with Maxwell’s range.

But as it happened, what began as initial confusion transformed into pure, unadulterated rage. Maxwell’s lips pulled back to reveal his teeth—pointed and carnivorous. His eyes darkened until Wilson couldn’t even see pupils anymore. His height grew. His limbs elongated. Every one of his features was almost comically disproportionate with the rest of him, though completely proportionate with his bulging, angry eyes. He loomed over Wilson, though without control of his body, Wilson was helpless to do anything but silently scream.

“YOU DARE THREATEN THE GREAT MAXWELL?!” Maxwell screamed.

“Someday, Maxwell,” the shadow snarled. “Someday I’m going to find that throne...and I will savour ripping you out of it.”

“YOU IMPUDENT—”

Maxwell’s claws stretched far and high over Wilson's head.

“Killing Wilson won’t kill me,” the shadow emphasized. “The only thing it will accomplish is that you will lose your favourite puppet, and I'll have to search for a new helper. The mime, perhaps. Or maybe your dear niece.”

Maxwell’s small eyes had never looked bigger. “How. The hell. Do you know that?”

“I know you better than anyone,” the shadow continued in monotone. “Your game’s coming to an end, Maxwell.”

“I don’t know who you think you are,” Maxwell hissed. “But if you’re not one of Them, then I won’t let you undermine my authority in my world.”

Maxwell rubbed his chin. Then, a familiar, cruel smile stretched his features.

“Maybe I can’t kill you...but I’m betting that I can as sure as hell trap you.”

Maxwell snapped his fingers.

The effect was immediate. One moment, it was quiet and cold. Then, a buzz of voices blurred together, all of them familiar, but no matter how comforting they were usually, Wilson felt nothing but a sense of dread as they burst out of the shadows.

“W—What happened?”

“By the Gods!”

“Ugh, Wolfgang not feel so good.”

Wilson swung around. Standing together, their torches raised, were the rest of his companions, with the exception of WX. Their bewildered expressions betrayed that Maxwell had suddenly transported them here from who-knows-where. Unarmed and plainly at a loss, it took a few good seconds before Willow finally met his eyes.

“Wilson?!” Willow blinked.
"Welcome, welcome!" Maxwell greeted them. He'd reverted to his usual state, friendly, suave, and his arms outstretched to the group. "I'm glad you're all here!"

"Maxwell, what are you doing?" Wilson asked.

"Oh, nothing much," said Maxwell. "Just tying up a few loose ends. The way I see it, it was fun at first—but you lot have attracted a lot of trouble lately. Once you've all been dealt with, I can finally get on with the game and have a little fun. It's a pity, but not a total loss. There's always some other feeble little scientist out there ripe for the picking."

"Look, pal," Willow seethed, marching right up to Maxwell. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I know you caused that earthquake. You had better stop messing around with us!"

"Willow, what happened?" Wilson quickly asked.

"What happened?!" Willow repeated. "You and the mime got swallowed up by the earthquake! We've been trying to find you."

"And you've found him!" Maxwell added. "All thanks to me!"

"No thanks to you, since you're responsible for getting him lost to begin with," Willow snapped. "We've found Wilson, now let's get out of here."

"Wolfgang cannot go without Wes," said Wolfgang.

"What's your rush?" Maxwell asked.

"The rush is to get out of this cave and away from you," said Willow. "Wilson could've been killed!"

"Well, you were touching my things. You're lucky that the ground doesn't open up every time you destroy my creations."

Willow's scowl deepened.

"Oh, don't give me that," Maxwell tsked. "All things considered, I'm being very generous with you lot. You've got water, food sources, and plenty to do around here."

"Generous?!" Wilson exclaimed. He pointed accusingly at their jail warden. Even the shadow lapsed in its determination to kill Wes and drew back at his temper. "You ruined our lives, Maxwell!"

"That's being a little dramatic," Maxwell sneered. "I daresay I did each and every one of you a righteous favour by bringing you into my world."

"This isn't your world, Maxwell," Wilson asserted. "It's quite clear at this point that you're a guest here just like the rest of us. You may be able to control certain aspects of this place, but you are not its ruler."

"Technicalities!" Maxwell waved him off. "Anyways, here I am sticking my neck out for you guys—I even reunited your little gang just now—and all you can do is complain about the"
accommodations. But I digress! Let's recap, shall we? Each and every one of you is living with your own little scandals, and if you remained back on Earth, you'd be in equally terrible positions if I hadn't intervened and dragged you here. I mean—the one here who doesn't have some dark, horrible secret is the foreigner."

“It is true,” Wolfgang admitted. “Wolfgang is open book!”

“What are you trying to do, Maxwell?” Wilson asked.

Maxwell turned lightly on his heel, chin turned up, the smirk creating deep wrinkles across his pasty skin.

“What am I trying to do?” he chuckled. “The real question is what are you trying to do, little Wilson? What are any of you trying to do? You think you can hide from your pasts and secrets in my world? Do you think it’s that easy?”

He scanned them all. His gaze settled on Willow.

“Take Willow, for example,” Maxwell chimed. “Around here, you're a courageous adventurer. Some might say that you even lead this group. Do you think you'd be a community leader back on Earth?”

“Stop it,” Willow warbled, and without the slightest trace of steam that usually carried in her voice.

"You're no paragon, Willow. Nothing can change the fact that your hands are drenched in blood. Really, after your heartfelt confession to Mr Higgsbury over there, I would've thought that you'd get a backbone and tell your dearest friends that you're a careless killer."

“Cut it out, Maxwell!” Wilson intervened. Desperate to stop Maxwell. Desperate to stop him from ruining what they’d built. “You have no right to judge us! You have more blood on your hands than any of us!”

“To what does Maxwell refer to?” Wigfrid asked.

Wigfrid was not addressing anyone. Not Maxwell. Not Wilson. Like the fine edge of a sword, she’d cut right into Willow, who had retreated from the rest of them with a pained expression.

Maxwell had a curt and cold voice, and it had cut into Wilson’s soul to rip out his heart. Wigfrid’s was so much worse—the warble of unfettered realization and fear.

“Willow,” Wigfrid said again. “What is Maxwell talking about?”

Wilson tried to assess the level of terror in Willow’s expression, but her eyes were guarded.

“Yes, Willow,” Maxwell smiled. “Why don’t you tell us all? Why don’t you tell them about that orphanage you set on fire? Why don’t you tell them about the children you killed?”

“I didn’t know they were inside and you know it!” Willow burst. “It was abandoned! It was supposed to be abandoned!”

“Children?” Wigfrid repeated, slow and syrupy. It was clear she was trying to process what was happening, but her mind couldn’t quite keep up with what she was hearing.
"Yes, Wigfrid!" Maxwell nodded eagerly. "Our dear Willow is nothing more than a child-killer. Don't act so surprised. She's been living a lie, but she's not the only one. You're practically the embodiment of living a lie."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," Wigfrid snapped like a whip being cracked. It had the same effect.

"Ah, ah, ah—that's a lie, Wigfrid. I wonder—do you prefer the lie? Do you prefer Wigfrid to the person you were before?"

Wigfrid flushed red.

"What are you hoping to accomplish by this, Maxwell?" Wickerbottom intervened.

"Divide and conquer, madam," Maxwell chuckled. "You still owe me quite a bit, you know."

"I owe you nothing and you know it," Wickerbottom said.

"I practically enabled your entire career, and this is how you repay me?"

"Career?" Wilson repeated, brow furrowing. "Mrs Wickerbottom...?"

"He's exaggerating," said Wickerbottom. "Don't listen to him."

"No, let's talk about it," Maxwell beamed. "Back on Earth, I gave you tome after tome, and what did you do with all that power? Instead of going crazy and wrecking some good old havoc like I hoped you would, you just used it to write books. How boring!"

"Mrs Wickerbottom?" Wilson pressed. "What's he's talking about?"

Wickerbottom hesitated, and then said, "I...may have omitted the truth when I told you about how I came to be here. The truth is...Maxwell and I have known each other for a long, long time."

"W—What do you mean? How long are we talking about?"

She fixed him with an even stare and pushed up her glasses. "I met Maxwell forty years ago as a young woman. He offered me one of his infamous bargains and gave me a few valuable tomes that were the inspiration for my books."

"W...What?"

"You heard me, Wilson," Wickerbottom said in a voice much sharper than what he was used to. "I made a deal with Maxwell when I was young, and forty years later he came to collect by bringing me here."

"S—So...your entire career....All your books..."

"I would hardly say that Maxwell 'enabled' my career. He gave me a few good books that were my starting point, but I forged my own path through a male-dominated field, and he knows it."

"How...How could you," Wilson whispered. "Why didn’t you tell me about it?! I thought you
trusted me!"

“Because I regret it, Wilson, but having been young and foolish at the time, I could not reverse what I had done,” Wickerbottom said evenly. “And may I remind you that I already informed you that it was because of me that you appeared on Maxwell’s radar. To me, that is the most relevant consequence of my deal with Maxwell, and a truth I already revealed to you. I simply...did not mention some unpleasant realities and I apologize for that.”

“Apologies mean nothing,” Maxwell laughed. He coiled around his words and spat them out with the utmost of pleasure and contempt. “I don’t really see the point of apologizing. Now, who’s next?”

He surveyed his audience and circled around them like a vulture. He finally stopped at Wendy.

“Oh, my dear Wendy...” he beamed.

“Stop,” Wendy raised her hand. “If you are going to do this, then I will reveal my own secret. I will not give you the satisfaction.”

“Fine, if you’re going to be that way, get on with it.”

Wendy folded her hands together. “You have all come to understand that my dear Abigail is dead. What you do not understand are the circumstances of her death.”

“If I do not, then Maxwell will twist the truth. It is better if you hear it from me.” Wendy took a breath. “At one point while my sister and I roamed this world, we realized that one of us was going to outlive the other. We decided that Abigail would be the one to die.”

“You decided?” Mrs Wickerbottom repeated. “Impossible.”

“It was a mutual agreement, as much as I wished that it were me,” Wendy continued sternly. “I assure you that we did not take pleasure in the unfortunate decision. A short time later, Abigail was wounded. She would not recover, but she would not immediately die. She would perish after a prolonged period of suffering and pain. We had already seen our mother die from a long illness, and we would be remiss to go through it a second time.”

She met Wilson’s eyes.

“Abigail asked me to end her suffering, so slit her throat.”

The silence cut deeper than the revelation of any secret could. Willow had turned away from them, one arm gripping the other. The rest of them were scattered about like pieces on a chessboard, making a bad play to capture the king.

“Aw, I was hoping you’d reveal the other secret,” Maxwell sighed.

“There are always secrets to be had,” said Wendy.

“That’s true. I think our esteemed Mr Higgsbury knows all about that.”
“N—No!” Wilson exclaimed. “You can’t tell them! You can’t!”

“Well, you’re going to have to be more specific than that. You have so many secrets that you’re cracking under the pressure. It’s no wonder your little mind is to vulnerable at these depths.”

Wilson crouched on the ground and covered his ears, for whatever good it did. Maxwell resonated inside his head.

"Maybe I should tell them how you experimented on stray dogs when you were a child," said Maxwell. He paced around him like a looming vulture prepared for the moment when Wilson keeled over, dead. "Maybe I should tell them about how you didn't visit your father when he was dying, because you were too ashamed to be associated with a madman."

Maxwell bent down and pressed his lips close to his ear.

“Maybe I should tell them about your shadow,” he whispered. He spoke in a voice meant only for Wilson.

He straightened back up.

“Or maybe I should tell them about how they wanted to drag you off to an insane asylum,” Maxwell jested. “Maybe I should tell them about how you only accepted the bargain with me because the alternative was worse. And believe me, the alternative is just as dismal as you imagined it. I can see in all directions. I can see futures that could’ve been, but didn’t happen because I intervened at just the right moment. If I hadn’t saved you from that disgusting world you call home, you would’ve been dead in two years time. You would’ve died when a pneumonia epidemic swept through the asylum, and then your emaciated little body would’ve been disposed of in an unmarked grave among the other lunatics—the sociopaths and the invalids and all the people you dreaded becoming. You would’ve been forgotten—some footnote on some list of patients at Saint Brutus’s. But now, your disappearance is one of the greatest mysteries of the 20th century. Decades from now, people will wonder: whatever could’ve happened to Wilson Percival Higgsbury?”

“You’ve made your point, Maxwell,” Wickerbottom intervened. “You have absolute control over us. There is no disputing that. But leave Wilson and the rest of us alone.”

“Tut, tut, still not appreciating my many gifts,” Maxwell sighed. “That’s a right shame. But not entirely unexpected.”

Wilson couldn’t look at the others. He kept on his place on the ground, staring into the stone and willing the earthquake to return and swallow him whole, this time finishing the job. Even if they did make it out of the underground, even if Maxwell did spare them, then he was fairly certain he could never be able to look into their faces again. Wickerbottom’s. Willow’s. Wigfrid’s. Even Wendy’s. He would just be a lunatic to them.

Maxwell drifted by Wilson, running spidery fingers through his thick hair.

“Just as well,” Maxwell continued. “Alright, you all want to go home so badly? You want to go back to your depressing little lives? Okay, but remember, you asked for it!”

Volatile white light swelled out of nothingness, devastating the darkness and evaporating Wilson’s shadow from underneath him. It invaded Wilson’s soul, deep into his consciousness until not even
the shadow could save him, and suddenly he realized how empty he felt without its soothing, treacherous words whispering in his ear. He lurched forwards, desperate to stifle it out.

“W—What are you doing?!” Wilson asked.

"Oh, that was fun," Maxwell let out a long sigh. "Isn't it so much nicer when you clear the air? You can give in now. You'll thank me for this. It's a much more merciful fate than being a puppet."

Wilson slammed his forehead against the cave floor and then sank into the light.

Chapter End Notes

SO CLOSE TO THE END.

AND THEN I WILL FINALLY BE FREE SORT OF.
Wilson crawled over to the trap door and climbed down, moving and thinking as though in a
dream. The carpet muffled his footsteps when he hit the second floor. As in the laboratory, everything was in pristine condition, as it had been some fifteen or twenty years ago when he'd lived there with his parents. He retraced the steps he'd taken the day Dr Butterfield had come calling, with all of the same hesitation and dread filling him up. The sound of humming roamed unimpeded through the air, and aside from that, there was no sound; not even from the grandfather clock.

At the bottom of the stairs, he gripped the railing and peered around the corner. His heart had long since frozen in its chest as he tiptoed to the living room.

It was just as he remembered it. The smell of oil paints. The red area rug. Squares of sunlight creating a patchwork of light. The old desk in the corner, piled with books. The fainting sofa unblemished by the years. The coffee table clear except for the leftovers of afternoon tea.

None of this caught Wilson's attention. If it did, it was only for a heartbeat, until he saw a woman sitting at an easel in the corner. She was drawing her paintbrush across the canvas to deepen the portrait's eyes. Wilson' surroundings blurred like running paint, so he could only perceive impression rather than certainties. Wilson tried to blink the blurriness out only for it to continue to muddle together into an oblivion of colours. Still, the woman's back was to him, and her melodious laugh was unmistakable.

“I can’t quite get his eyes right,” the woman remarked. “He has an expression I don’t think any painting could capture.”

Wilson’s mouth went dry. Finally, he managed to stammer, “M—Mother?”

Elinor Higgsbury turned on her stool. Her hair was tied back in a loose bun, with stray strands of charcoal-coloured hair sticking out in all directions. A smear of red paint was on her left cheek.

“I’m dead,” Wilson concluded. “I’ve died and now I’m in hell.”

"Honestly, Wilson," Elinor laughed. "Do you really think that your mother would be sent to hell?"

Wilson blinked. No, this couldn’t be her. This couldn’t be right.

“Mother...you’re dead,” he whispered. “I saw you die. I held your hand.”

"I feel very much alive," she said. "If you really thought you were dead, you wouldn't be able to discern anything except oblivion. You'd cease to exist. That's what you think and your father always thought, anyways. I know you two never believed in life after death, but I—or rather, your mother—fervently believed that there's some continuation for the soul. Some reprieve from the burdens we have to endure in life. Some purpose to our suffering."

She gave him a nebulous smile filled with complex feeling. It struck into his heart and his knees quivered.

“Don’t you think, darling?” she chirped.

Wilson choked on his words. It was the most perfectly timed flub of his life. Except it wasn't his flub; it wasn't his mistake. It was the world's flub. The one moment where he was wrenched from his body and he realized that no matter how much he wanted it to be, now matter how much he ached for it, that there was no possible way that this was real. This wasn't home. This wasn't his
mother. This wasn't reality.

That stung greater than any of his past failures.

In its frenzied state, he was prepared to give into the illusion, but then he held back and remembered all of the times he'd submitted to his half-formed delusions and hopes of grandeur. That's why he'd given into Maxwell's demands in the first place, in the hopes of making his dreams a reality. The old Wilson would've conceded to the illusion. The new Wilson, who had been forged by Maxwell's world but not because of Maxwell, flared with resolve.

"You're not really my mother," he accused.

Elinor laughed again. God, it even had her laugh. "No, but I'm just as good a painter. See?"

For the first time, Wilson examined the painting.

It was Maxwell. His boorish eyes glared down on the pair of them, forever empty and unseeing and captured perfectly in thick strokes of oily paint. The only smattering of red was of the rose on his jacket, scarlet and stark like a stain of fresh blood.

"This isn't real," Wilson said.

"No," Elinor—or the echo of her memory—confirmed. "Maxwell trapped you and your friends in a hallucination of a sort."

Wilson blinked. "My...friends."

"That's what they are, aren't they? You've all been sucked into false worlds of happier times, where they'll be trapped for an eternity. Or at least until they die of starvation or exposure. I don't think Maxwell expected that your shadow's presence would give you a level of immunity to trap."


"Maxwell's hoping to trap your shadow within you. He trapped the other pawns in order to make sure that the shadow wouldn't be able to escape to another host. Anyone who was directly connected to you would be at risk for possession."

"If the others are trapped, I need to get out of here," Wilson declared. "How do I leave?"

"Do you really want to go?" Elinor asked.

"If you're—um, if—" Wilson stopped short. He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to imagine this woman as anyone other than his mother. He took a breath and forced his next words out. "If you're trying to trick me, it won't work."

"I know. I'm genuinely curious if you really want to leave, though."

"You're not real, so I'm not going to waste a conversation on you."

"I'm as real as you are, Wilson Percival Higgsbury."
“A hallucination thinks it’s real, but science says that it isn’t,” he concluded.

“I’m real, Mr Higgsbury,” Elinor smiled serenely. “They’re real. They’ve been hoping to communicate with you, but Maxwell is...intrusive.”

Wilson processed her words.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Elinor asked. She floated over to the fainting couch and took a seat. “There is much to talk about.”

“I don’t have time for talking,” said Wilson. “They need me.”

“They will be alright for a short while. There is time to talk. Please...sit.”

Wilson felt like he was reliving history. He looked behind him at the front door, wondering if he could simply just leave and refused to listen. Still, if he kept it in his sight, maybe this was a good opportunity to get some much-needed answers. He went over to the chair opposite of the fainting couch and sat down.

“So you’re not my mother,” Wilson folded his arms. “But you say you’re real. So...who are you?”

"I’m representing the ones who put Maxwell on the Nightmare Throne," she answered. "Or rather, the ones who coerced him into sitting on it."

“My shadow mentioned a throne...”

“It is quite literally the seat of power in his world,” said Elinor. “You see, They preceded Maxwell. They preceded the existence of your own world. The world Maxwell has created is built within the corpse of a great civilization that collapsed, and whose citizens were transformed into something else.”

“So Wickerbottom’s theory was right.”

“For the most part, yes. She’s an astute woman, particularly for a short-lived species. Maxwell is most unwise to not respect her.”

Elinor took a sip of the tea.

Wilson took a breath. His words felt fat and heavy. “I have questions.”

“I imagine you do,” said Elinor. “Ask what you will.”

“How did your civilization collapse? Why put Maxwell on this ‘throne?’ Why bring us here? Why give him all this power? Is my shadow one of ‘Them’ or is it something else like Maxwell implied? What’s Wes’s connection to all this? What’s—”

"One question at a time, Wilson," Elinor interrupted him. "And keep in mind that if you ask questions that have more arcane answers, then I might not be able to answer."

"Why?"

"Because we're humans, Wilson. Our minds are too primitive to be able to comprehend some of the
stranger truths of the universe. To be honest, that's the problem that triggered this whole conundrum. You, Maxwell, and Wes have one thing in common: you tried to unravel mysteries that don't necessarily have answers."

Wilson leaned forwards on his knees. Elinor put the cup down and pulled her legs onto the fainting couch, her skirt billowing over her body.

"Okay, then," said Wilson. "Let's start at the beginning. Tell me about Maxwell."

"Maxwell encountered Them in his youth, when he was a struggling stage magician," Elinor responded. "And a terrible one at that. Everything changed when he found a tome—a spellbook called the Codex Umbra."


"Indeed," Elinor concurred. "The Codex Umbra contained fragments of the Forbidden Knowledge. He could have benefited the world with what was contained in it, but he used it for purely selfish purposes, to impress others and gain the recognition he'd so desperately desired. The public, as well as his assistant, were completely unaware that he was experimenting in the dark arts. He became reckless and he overestimated Their influence, and it came to an end when he and his innocent assistant were pulled into Their world. They were the first."

Elinor’s eyebrows cast a shadow over her eyes.

"The experience changed Maxwell and his assistant permanently," said Elinor. "They're no longer who they once were. In the aftermath, Maxwell became bound to the Nightmare Throne, and out of nothingness he created a personal habitat where he could keep his pawns."

"Maxwell had an assistant," said Wilson. "Was it Wes?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Wes has a connection to Maxwell, right?"

Elinor pressed a finger to her chin. "I suppose Wes could be considered one of Maxwell's assistants, but no, he's not the assistant who was initially dragged into Their world. Maxwell's assistant is of a different caliber and can no longer rightfully be called human. Wes is still very much human, while Maxwell...well, he still has a degree of well-buried humanity within him."

"It must be very well-buried," Wilson sneered.

"Maybe so."

"So what is Wes’s connection to all of this?"

"Wes's story follows a pattern that tends to repeat with all of Maxwell's pawns. He was interested in magic. He was interested in you."

"Why me?"

"When you vanished without a trace, it caused something of a sensation in Britain that translated to other parts of the world. Wes was an intrepid young man who learned about your disappearance
along with the rest of the masses. I can still see him...staring down at the newspaper and rereading the story over and over again, even when the papers stopped covering it. Wes saw something that others didn't. He saw a pattern." Elinor off to the side. "He visited your house, Wilson. He saw the portal."

Wilson unfolded his arms, his mouth hanging open slightly.

"After you disappeared, people who were associated with you either vanished without a trace or died mysteriously," Elinor continued. "Dr Butterfield was found dead the year after you disappeared, with no apparent cause. Associates at the university shared similar fates. Many people made the connection between you and Mrs Wickerbottom. Whether through some residual traces of the Forbidden Knowledge present at your home, or through his own insatiable curiosity, Wes became determined to solve the mystery. Maxwell noticed. Speaking to Wes through the radio, they developed a strangely close relationship. Maxwell used him to scout out potential victims, searching for the outcasts and the intellectuals he had no hopes of reaching otherwise. Too late did Wes realize that he was doomed to join them, and to try to escape from his fate, he tried to sever his contact with Maxwell."

"By trying to get Wolfgang to destroy the radio," Wilson realized.

"Precisely. Except it had the opposite effect and Maxwell pulled both of them into this world. When he came here, Wes theorized that Maxwell had a deeper connection to you than he first realized, so he set about trying to research your life, as well as Maxwell's."

"So why lock Wes up?"

"Because Wes was probing a little too deep even for Maxwell’s taste. You see, Their world is governed by a set of particular rules."

"Such as...?"

"For example, whoever sits on the Nightmare Throne has the ability to shape Their world however they see fit. Maxwell doesn't want the throne's existence widely known. What if his pawns tried to seek him out? What if they tried to remove him from power? To Maxwell, there is nothing as indiscriminately terrifying as confronting his humanity. In order to secure his position, he locked Wes up."

"Why not just kill him?"

"That part's a bit foggy. Maxwell may have had some pity for the man. Alternatively, he could still believe that Wes might be useful to him. He won't sacrifice a pawn unless it's necessary."

"Okay. But—I remember Wickerbottom said that Maxwell had stop taking captives. Why do that? Does that relate to Wes in any way?"

"No, that occurred after Wes’s imprisonment. Maxwell stopped talking people into this world because of your shadow."

"My shadow?" Wilson glanced around instinctively, searching for his shadow and remembering that it wasn't there. "Er—what does my shadow have to do with that?"

"You aren't the only one your shadow has manipulated. It's playing a long and complicated game to
undermine Maxwell's power over his pawns. In the height of Wendy's grief, it tried to take forceful control over her. It's much easier to possess children than adults."

"Did Wendy resist?"

"Not Wendy herself, but her dead sister was a problem, so the shadow was forced to abandon that plan and hide within the obelisk. At the time Maxwell stopped abducting people, he was suspicious and believed that an entity was trying to wrestle control of the throne from him. With Wes safely secure, he knew it had to be someone or something else."

“And that entity was my shadow. But...” Wilson trailed off, furrowed his brow, and looked at the floor. “I don’t understand why my shadow would hide with me. What does it hope to gain?"

"Well, you were the next vulnerable person it met," Elinor explained. "Hiding in your shadow protects it from Maxwell. As I mentioned before, Maxwell would never sacrifice its pawns unless it was necessary. Additionally, the shadow cannot hope to gain control of the throne without a mortal ally."

“Why would it need a human? It’s one of Them, isn’t it? It can take Maxwell off the throne if it wants to.”

Elinor’s eyes were blank and cold.

"...Can’t it?” Wilson pressed.

“What do you think, Wilson?” she asked.

Wilson considered it. "Unless...it isn't one of them. Maxwell said as much when it—when I was attacking Wes. He accused the shadow of not being one of Them, of being—of being something else."

She nodded curtly.

“So...what is it? What’s hiding in my shadow?"

Elinor Higgsbury smiled mysteriously. “My dear Wilson. The question is not what is hiding in your shadow. The question is...who is hiding in your shadow.”

The grandfather clock had started ticking sometime while they were talking. Wilson listened to it, wounding the sound around his heart and his head, trying to understand the expectant look on Elinor’s almond-shaped eyes.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Wilson's head was pounding. “I don’t understand. I have a headache.”

"Time is drawing short," Elinor noted. "You'll need to draw your friends out of their respective delusions before it's too late."

Her smile slipped. Everything from the way it faded, to the way Elinor’s head tilted a few degrees to the right was in her perfect image. She was exactly as she’d remembered him, before they’d lost his father, before her own declining health, before her death. She was as she was in her prime—the way that he liked to remember her, rather than the way she’d actually been.

“The cave,” she said.

“I...I beg your pardon?” Wilson stammered.

“Plato’s allegory of the cave,” Elinor repeated. “Which is the cave? Is it Earth or Their world?”

“Forgive me, but I don’t want to discuss philosophy right now. If time is short, then I need to know if there’s a way back. The shadow—it lied; it said it could get me back, but it didn’t really want to do that. It just wants to use me. But you know, don’t you? You know if there’s a way back home?”

“If the shadows cast on Earth are an illusion, does that make them any less real and their world? If Earth is a reflection, then why are you so determined to go back there?”

“Ugh, if you’re going to bury the truth in metaphor—“

“They had difficulty telling, too,” Elinor interrupted. “Which is the cave, and which is the genuine picture. They delved so deeply into the fundamental nature of the universe, that when Their civilization collapsed, they made a cave of their own, one much larger than all the others.”

“Mother,” Wilson whispered. “Why are you always asking me these impossible questions?”

“Just because a question is impossible, does that mean it shouldn’t be asked?”

“I don’t have the answers!”

“Neither do I,” she barked.

The clock kept ticking. Tick. Tick. Tick.

“You and your father never accepted that some questions don’t have answers,” said Elinor. “You two were always out there, searching for the answers to impossible questions and getting hopelessly lost in the process. The same thing has happened to every one of the people Maxwell has brought here.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t accept the world with the same grace that you did,” Wilson spat bitterly. “At least we bothered searching for answers. At least we didn’t accept it. Why do you think I accepted the Forbidden Knowledge? Because for one, brief, glorious second, I perfectly understood the world! Everything fit together like—like one marvellous machine!”

Elinor’s gaze was downcast.

“The world would be a lot less scary place if we understood everything about it, wouldn’t it?” she reflected.

“I suppose it would,” Wilson agreed.

“Why are you so desperate to return home?” Elinor asked. “This world is much more interesting.”
“Because there are still questions that need to be answered back on Earth,” said Wilson. “I’m a scientist. It’s my job to answer them.”

She paused. "Well, I hope you change your mind, but if you're so incessant on going back there...He who controls the throne has the ability to fling the pawns back to Earth. Find Maxwell and you'll find the way home. Or you could just do it the hard way and build the portal."

"I'm not so sure the portal would even worse," Wilson muttered. "Not even my shadow was sure if that was plausible and it probably wouldn't be willing to help me. I'd have to do it from memory, and without the Forbidden Knowledge I—wait a minute. Finding Maxwell is the easy way?"

“Believe me. It is.”


Wilson didn’t look over his shoulder to see what the time was. His headache was ballooning.

“You’d better leave before you get trapped here,” said Elinor. “Just go through the door and you’ll be back where you should be.”

Wilson wasted no time. He stood quickly and marched over to the front door. He wrapped his hand around the brass handle, looking back to where Elinor sat, poised and calm like he’d never seen her before.

“Go on,” she encouraged him.

Wilson pursed his lips.

Against his better judgment, he closed the distance left between them and threw his arms around his mother. Wilson buried his face in her shoulder, taking in the familiar smell of oil paints and parchment.

"We've already established that I'm not your mother," Elinor reminded him.

An ache blossomed on Wilson’s chest. Before he could really control himself, before he could exercise the constraint that had defined his entire life, the pinprick of tears touched the corner of his eyes.

“I know,” he inhaled. “Every day that I’ve been without you and Father has been hard.”

She didn’t answer, her body tight and stiff. Wilson felt every muscle in her body relax as she returned the hug.

“I’ve had terrible lapses of judgment these last few months,” said Wilson.


The embrace broke far too soon for his liking, and Wilson returned to his place by the door. This time, he didn’t hesitate when he grabbed the brass handle, only looking back to give his mother one, last look.
He understood that it would be the last time he would ever see her.

Elinor Higgsbury gave him an encouraging nod. Steeling himself, Wilson threw open the front door and stepped into the light.

“...That’s not going to wake them up.”

“WAKE THEM UP? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? I’M JUST KICKING THEM FOR FUN.”

Wilson cranked open his eyes. Crouched on the ground, long streaks of dark and light were painted across the ground. He dragged his head upwards and he squinted, struggling to discern shapes against the light source.

There was no mistaking Maxwell's figures, nor was there mistaking WX. Wilson's sluggish brain tried to remember why it surprised him, until he recalled that WX was supposed to be guarding the cave entrance. He must've come looking for them. It took Wilson slightly longer to realize that they weren't alone. Around him were his friends—from Willow to Wolfgang—all on their knees, faces blank, eyes open but unseeing and focused on the light.

He was out. He didn't know how or why it had happened, but he was out.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw what they were all looking at. In front of them was a strange, crystalline structure. The base was made out of stone, while the pyramid-shaped gem on top of it glowed white, creating the enveloping light. There wasn't anything remarkable about it, but as he concentrated, the overwhelming dread he'd been fighting off since entering the cavern reached its climax. Whatever it was, Wilson knew that it was the source of their current problem.

Neither WX nor Maxwell had noticed him yet. Maxwell was busy watching WX, who was occupying himself by kicking one of Wilson's companions.

The companion he was kicking was Wes. He must've wandered back to see what the fuss was about and gotten caught like the rest of them. That, or Maxwell had dragged him back. Wilson saw a strange spectre lying beside Wes, but he couldn't tell what it was at that distance. Whatever it was, Maxwell and WX didn't seem interested in it.

“STUPID WES!” WX grumbled. “WAKE UP SO I CAN HAVE THE SATISFACTION OF WATCHING THE LIFE DRAIN OUT OF YOUR EYES.”

“Problem?” Maxwell asked.

“YOU RUINED MY MURDER ATTEMPT. THERE ARE NO LIMITS TO YOUR DEPRAVITY.”

“Well, it’s certainly not my fault that you missed the party,” Maxwell said curtly.

“YOU KNEW I WAS COMING! YOU COULD’VE AT LEAST WAITED UNTIL I GOT HERE.”
Destroy the light. He had to destroy the light.

Wilson forced one leg out from underneath him and used what little strength left to push himself up. At that, his movement caught WX’s attention.

“YOU’RE STILL ALIVE?” said WX. “DISAPPOINTING.”

Watching Maxwell’s reaction was the most satisfying thing Wilson had seen in a long time. The chessmaster’s shoulders clenched, he turned heavily on one, long leg to see who WX was addressing, and his expression melted from smug to stunned.

“W—What?!” Maxwell stammered.

Oh, it was good to make him stammer.

“You were supposed to be trapped for an eternity!” Maxwell shouted. “HOW THE HELL DID YOU GET OUT?!”

Wilson laughed. It was a drawn out, aching laugh that silenced even Maxwell. “I’m sure you’d like to know, Maxwell.”

Maxwell scowled. “Don’t get coy with me, Higgsbury. You’re not out of the woods yet. The earthquake collapsed the only way out of this cave. I don't know how you weaselled your way out of that illusion, but I promise you, there are a thousand other ways to trap you—and not all of them are so humane.”

Wilson was so done with talking. He looked at the crystalline structure. There was no way he couldn't hope to break it without a weapon, and somewhere in the midst of the struggle his axe had gone missing. The only weapons nearby were the torches, and he couldn't risk them going out in the event that breaking the crystal meant smothering the light. Finally, he saw the sceptre beside Wes.

Maxwell followed his gaze and went tense. He looked to the crystal. The spectre. Back to Wilson. The spectre again. Wilson a second time. His mouth barely opened and he hissed, "Go ahead. Try it. A feeble scientist such as yourself couldn't possibly break that."

“I think Willow had a point when she said I should just ignore you,” said Wilson.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to give me the silent treatment! These are your last few hours alive and you’re not even going to talk to me? I thought we were friends!”

“If this is your idea of friendship, I would hate to be your enemy.”

Wilson dragged his feet over to Wes and picked up the spectre. It was heavy as many of Maxwell's lies. Solid gold and ornately decorated, there was a purple gem fixed at the top. Wilson looked into Wes's unseeing face.

"Where on Earth did you get this?" Wilson wondered out loud.

He then went over to the crystalline structure. It was a bit taller than he was, but at least not so overpoweringly bright that he couldn't see where he was going. Warm flowed over Wilson.
"There's no way you'll be able to break that," Maxwell stated.

Drawing the sceptre far back over his shoulder—no easy task considering how heavy it was—he slammed the blunt end into the crystal. The strike reverberated up his arm and shook his fore. Wilson staggered back and Maxwell laughed, maybe out of relief.

“Told you so,” he chuckled.

Wilson launched back at the structure and slammed the sceptre into it a second time. It simply skirted across the surface, not even leaving a cut behind. Still, he knew he couldn’t afford to give up and continued to strike it, though he felt Maxwell’s gaze boring into him.

As Wilson prepared to swing again, it stopped. He whirled around expecting to see Maxwell, taunting him and insisting that he give up. Instead, he saw WX holding tightly onto the sceptre.

“WORTHLESS MEATBAG,” WX scoffed. He wrestled the spectre from Wilson’s hands. “YOU ARE WEAK. I’LL DO IT.”

At this, the flicker of apprehension reappeared on Maxwell’s face. “Wait, let’s not do anything hasty now!”

“So stop me,” WX challenged him.

Maxwell didn’t move.


“Don’t talk about things you don’t understand, Higgsbury,” Maxwell barked. He folded his arms defiantly and stuck his chin in the air.

“No, I think I do understand now,” said Wilson. “You’re just as much a pawn of Them as the rest of us are. The difference is that we’re able to acknowledge it, but you’re just a sad, bitter old man clinging to his denial.”

“Where do you get the gall talking to me like that?!”

Wilson pulled back his upper lip and scowled. He said to WX, “Break it.”

WX was filled with a strange joviality Wilson had never seen in him before. With a single swing, he struck the crystal. At first there didn’t appear to be an effect, until a thick crack sprung from the spot WX had hit.

“WAIT!” Maxwell shouted. “You don’t know what you’re doing! You could create a hole in the world!”

“I’m sure you can patch it right back up,” Wilson quipped.

“That doesn’t mean you should punch a hole in it!”

WX kept hitting the crystal. The crack steadily became larger, and the larger it grew, the more frantic Maxwell’s expression became. All the same, he didn’t approach the crystal, remaining
glued to the spot as if he was a helpless spectator unable to stop impending disaster.

The crystal shattered.

Shards danced across the cavern floor, catching the light before it dimmed to accommodate only the torches. There was a breathless, heart-wrenching moment in which there was absolute stillness in the world. For the first time, he lost the impression of being perpetually watched, and he lost the sense of uneasiness, and he lost whatever impression of the supernatural that had been present in everything Maxwell had presented to Wilson and the other survivors.

Wilson’s teeth ached.

It was such a subtle sensation that he didn’t notice it until he realized that the ache wasn’t limited to his teeth. His hair bristled, his body cramped, and he was aware of every subtle movement he was capable of, from his muscles constricting to the synapses in his brain firing off, to his eyeballs rolling in their sockets, to his heart picking up its pace like it was late for the bus and it was going to miss an important meeting at work. At first, he thought that he was being electrocuted. Then he realized that it was something else, something supernatural and so unlike a jolt of electricity. When it came to getting a good electrical shock, Wilson always knew exactly why and how it was happening. With this, it was so much different. He searched for a source, but couldn’t find any except for the crystal shards on the cavern floor and the crystalline structure letting out a massive, pained groan.

Wilson started to turn on his ankle to put as much distance between himself and the crystalline structure as possible, but even that was far too slow. He wasn’t nearly fast enough to miss a dark, clawed hand rising out of the broken crystal.

WX snatched the back of Wilson’s vest and tugged him away from the structure. The claw wasn’t alone. Behind it, other vague forms were rising up, but Wilson wasn’t about to pause and take a good look. Around them, wind was picking up, sucking towards the crystal and gaining in ferocity.

“You fools!” Maxwell boomed. “You idiots! You’re ruining everything! This is my game! MINE!”

Wilson wondered if he was talking to his pawns or to the shadow things steadily bleeding out of the crystalline structure, enveloping it until it was no longer visible.

As the wind picked up, he hurried back to where the others were. They now lacked the glassy-eyed look. Somehow it was even more terrifying to see their expressions of disorientation and apprehension.

“Is everyone alright?” Wilson asked.

He got several pained groans in response. Wilson instinctively gravitated towards Willow, who was on all fours and whose face was pinched with confusion. He took her calloused hands her pulled her to her feet.

“What happened?” she groaned. “I thought I was back in San Francisco...”

“Whatever you saw was an illusion,” said Wilson. “I can explain later. We need to get out of here.”

“Why?”
“Well, the shadow things coming out of that crystal is a good reason. Unless you want to stay and see what happens?”

“What crystal?”

“Later, Willow!”

Wilson had rounded up the rest of their party before he remembere that Maxwell had specifically stated that the entrance had collapsed and they were all trapped there. Unless he was lying. But one look at WX told him that that part hadn’t been a lie or an exaggeration, and with the shadows now pouring out, he knew that the best they could hope to do was run as fast as possible, maybe find some small part of the cavern where they wouldn’t be able to reach. They were gushing out like an open wound and growing in size. There was no way their torches would be able to hold that off.

Looking around at his compatriots, he saw them rising out of their confusion to realize what was going on around them. Wickerbottom was flicking through one of her tomes, maybe trying to find a spell that would help their situation. Wendy had her hands cusped around Abigail’s flower. The only one of them who didn’t look the least bit fazed by what had happened was Wolfgang, who was alert and surprisingly focused, putting his body between the rest of them and the outpouring of shadows coming through the hole in the world. Maxwell had vanished, and Wilson knew he wouldn’t try to intervene to save the lives of his pawns, not when Wilson had so blatantly defied him.

While mulling over the possibilities, he felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to find Wes standing with them. The mime was indicating the spectre still in Wilson's hand.

“Not now, Wes,” he said.

Wes grabbed the spectre and held it up.

“Look, you can keep it if you want to, but we have bigger problems right now,” Wilson emphasized.

“Wes say we should all hold onto stick,” Wolfgang intervened.

“How can you discern that when he didn’t say anything?” Wilson snapped. “Wes, I don’t have time for games. We need to figure out a way out of here.”

“Wes say that it is way out.”

“What are you—”

Wes cut Wilson off, not by speaking, but by grabbing Wilson’s wrist and putting his hand around the sceptre. Wolfgang quickly followed suit, his enormous palm and fat fingers just about covering the whole thing.

“Wes say hold onto it now,” Wolfgang said in an unusually firm voice. “He say to trust him. The stick can take us out and away from shadow things.”

There was only a split second hesitation before Willow’s hand emerged in Wilson’s peripheral vision and wrapped around the sceptre, close to his own. It was much closer than he ever remembered her being, and in the midst of the chaos, his nostrils flared as he inhaled the sharp
The others edged forwards and also grabbed the sceptre, their hands overlapping one another as they clutched their only hope of a quick escape. Wilson had a perfect view of the sceptre, their intertwined hands, and the wave of shadows growing larger and larger, stifling the light, cascading towards them in a monstrous tempest. Everything that made Maxwell’s world both mysterious and terrifying hurtled towards them much too fast, and Wilson was sure that this was a fool’s errand.

It was only a second or two. To Wilson, it felt like an eternity. Then, with his tongue protruding from the side of his mouth, Wes squeezed his eyes shut, and in that instant the purple gem at the top of the sceptre burst into life.

A cold chill ran down Wilson’s spine. He was only vaguely aware of the cascade of shadows striking the spot where they were, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the voices ringing in his ears.

But when he opened his eyes, he was bathed in daylight and the cavern was gone.
On the far outskirts of Maxwell’s world was a campsite—and this campsite is of great consequence to the story that follows.

As the sun crested the horizon, Wilson thrust open his tent flap to allow natural light to flood his living space. The camp was quiet, save for the slight sounds of the early risers. Wickerbottom, muttering away in her tent. Wigfrid, preparing for the hunt. Willow, tending the fire pit like always. He could even hear Wolfgang snoring away; it had given him quite the fright during the darkness, but now that it was safely bright outside, Wilson was able to get a chuckle out of it. Still, he knew that the early sunrises weren’t going to last. Wilson had timed it and noted that every day grew a little shorter, and every morning the nip in the air was a little sharper, and with every browning leaf autumn drew a smidgen closer.

Little by little, time was marching on.

It was at times like this that he wondered what was going on back home, how much time was or was not passing. Maybe studying it would make a good side project.

They'd returned to the camp from the cave the evening before, a journey that had been taken largely in silence. Everyone was too stunned to be able to discuss what had happened. Wilson had learned that Wes’s sceptre was some sort of teleportation device, some forgotten remnant of Them. Whatever its origins, it had saved them, and it was because of Wes’s quick thinking that they’d escaped the shadows. At the time, Wilson hadn’t thought to question their good fortune, but with the new day came the inevitable fallout. He would need to talk to Wes about where he’d gotten the sceptre. That, in addition to dealing with the repercussions of the secrets Maxwell had revealed to the whole group.

If they were careful, they’d be able to emerge from this stronger than Maxwell had ever intended.

Wilson wandered over to the fire pit. Willow was stoking the flames. As usual, they were much too high.

“Morning,” said Willow. “Tea?”

“Please,” Wilson answered.

Willow mutely poured tea out of their makeshift kettle and handed him an ornate teacup. One of Wickerbottom’s. Willow had probably stolen it.

“We’re having a group meeting,” Willow told him. “We need to talk about what happened in that cave.”

“Time to face the music, then,” Wilson sighed.

“Yup.”
Willow sat on one of the logs by the fire. There were heavy bags under her eyes.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” Wilson asked.

Willow hung her head, a line drawing in the centre of her forehead.

“...Willow?”

“...Wigfrid wouldn’t even look at me.”

Wilson blinked.

“I tried to explain what happened to her, but she wouldn’t even look at me,” Willow continued. “She brushed me off—like—like it was nothing.”

Wilson placed his tea on the ground and sat beside her. “I’m sure she was just shocked.”

“No, she was angry; I could tell. Wigfrid’s never been angry at me before. I mean, not really angry.”

“She needs some time to process it. Once you get the chance to explain everything, I’m sure she’ll be more understanding.”

“Wigfrid’s my best friend,” Willow said softly. “I never made a lot of friends back in our world, not real ones. The ones I did make were—I dunno, temps or something. I wanted Wigfrid to last.”

“And she will,” Wilson assured her. He reached out and touched her hand. “Wigfrid needs time to think it over, and when you and Wigfrid get over this hump, you’ll be closer than ever before.”

“I know you’re trying to help, Wilson, but I don’t know if it’s that simple when it comes to Wigfrid.”

She retracted her hand. Wilson was surprised to find that the simple gesture send his emotions into a spiral of despondency, of being unable to comfort her, and of the barrier Willow was putting between them.

Wilson quickly resolved to try to get through to Willow again. However, before he was able to do so, Wickerbottom had emerged from her tent. The librarian inhaled, her will indomitable as always. Once she set her sights on the two of them, she marched forwards with the force of an army about to face a great enemy.

"Good morning," Wickerbottom nodded at them both. "I say, it's rather chilly this morning."

"I know," Willow bemoaned. "It's rotten, isn't it?"

"Actually, I was going to add that I thought it was a refreshing change."

"Summer's barely over and I already miss it. At least colder weather's a good excuse for lighting more powerful fires, and we don't have to deal with your lame endothermic flames."

"My 'lame' endothermic fire saved us from heatstroke."
“Fire without heat is dull.”

Wickerbottom scoffed. "There's no reasoning with you. At least I can depend on Wilson for intelligent conversation. By the way, Wilson, you need to return those library books."

“Library books?” Wilson repeated. “How can you think about library books at a time like this?”

“Because they’re three days overdue and I won’t tolerate tardiness. Now, return the books and I’ll confiscate your library card.”

“What?! But I need it!”

“Wilson, you’re robbing others of the right to the knowledge contained within their covers. If you can’t be respectful of public property, then you’ve lost the privilege to your library card.”

“What the hell does it even matter out here?” Willow asked.

“I’ll have none of that, young lady,” Wickerbottom wagged her finger at that. “I'll have you know that I have a library card with your name on it whenever you’re ready.”

“No thanks. Book-burning is more my thing.”

“Neanderthal. Wilson? Your card, please.”

Wilson knew he had no choice but to concede. Library cards were one of the many things Wickerbottom never joked about.

He gave Willow his best attempt at a reassuring smile, though maybe it came as more of a pained grimace by the way her eyebrow arched in confusion. Wilson led Wickerbottom to his tent—where he'd left his card and his library books in among his piles of notes.

“How long am I going to be without my card?” Wilson asked as they entered his tent.

“You failed to return your books for a three-day period, so I believe a three-day suspension is acceptable compensation,” Wickerbottom decided. “Although if you continue with these infractions in the future, I may opt for a more severe punishment.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“See to it that it doesn’t. Those books belong to the whole camp and everyone has a right to it, even if you’re the only one borrowing books on mechanical engineering.”

“I’m the only one? You'd think that WX would be interested in stuff like that. What does he borrow?”

“Books of a medical nature. Also, horror.”

“Great.”

Wilson found his library card being used as a bookmark in one of the books he’d borrowed from Wickerbottom’s tent. He handed both of the books he’d borrowed, along with his card.
“Thank you,” said Wickerbottom. “I hope you’ve learned a valuable lesson.”

“One of many,” Wilson mused. He folded his arms and leaned against his desk. “I remember back when I was studying at the university, you weren’t so set on these rules. You used to let me live overnight in the library.”

“Only because you’d forgotten to pay your rent,” Wickerbottom reminded him. She clutched the library books, her demeanour much tighter than usual. ‘I’ve...been meaning to apologize for my actions. I understand that I have disappointed you by concealing my association with Maxwell and it would be understandable if you no longer desired future interactions with you.”

“W—What? No.” Wilson shook his head vigorously. “It’s—I mean, I was disappointed when I heard it, but it doesn’t change anything. I think.”

“Stop stammering and articulate, Wilson.”

“Yes, ma’am. What I mean to say is that, I was just surprised. I was angry and disappointed at the time, but it would never change my respect for you.”

“Thank you. I know that I am a difficult and inexpressive person, but know that I appreciate the gesture.”

“...Mrs Wickerbottom? Could...Could you tell me exactly what happened? I mean, I heard it form Maxwell, but I want to hear it from you.”

Wickerbottom cocked her head enough so that he could see her face. Her lips pursed so tightly that they disappeared into her wrinkled face.

"If you tell me about this business with Saint Brutus's, then yes," she replied.

Wilson's heart twisted and clenched. "Oh. Right. That."


"It's not like it was my idea."

"I hope not, not after what your father went through. Was it Dr Butterfield's idea?"

"How did you know?"

"He always was a priggish man. I must say, I'm glad you avoided incarceration. It would've been a complete waste of your skills, and as you can see, you were right about many of your theories."

"I suppose so," Wilson shrugged. "Your turn, now. What kind of history do you have with Maxwell?"

“In all honesty, there isn’t much more to say. Maxwell mentioned everything that was relevant about our prior association. I was a young and impressionable student at the time. Maxwell seemed so dashing and mysterious, I was hardly able to resist. I daresay I had a bit of a crush on him.”

“A crush on Maxwell?”
“Like I said: I was impressionable. And a very poor judge of character. More importantly, I was intrigued by the knowledge he offered me. There was something romantic about exploring the mysteries of the universe and charging off into the sunset on my lonesome. After Maxwell gave me the tomes and disappeared from my life, I started exploring the world and writing my books...And in the process, I met my husband.”

“Your husband?”

The topic of Wickerbottom’s husband had not been a connection Wilson had expected. Wickerbottom had never spoken about her marriage in length, save that it had been a long and happy one. She’d been widowed by the time Wilson had met her.

“Mr Wickerbottom was a very ambitious and astute man,” Wickerbottom explained. “It didn’t take him long to realize that the tomes I was so protective of weren’t exactly of this world. He didn’t try to persuade me to set them aside, though. We used our combined knowledge to conquer the intellectual world, and when he died, I was disheartened but content with all of the years we’d had together. Oh, the adventures we used to go on! Peru, Egypt, Serbia. By the time he’d died, we’d set foot on every continent, but never came closer to solving the mystery of Maxwell’s tomes. Somehow, in the process of our marriage, in the process of living, the tomes had become inconsequential.”

“So it was a surprise when Maxwell came to collect?” Wilson asked.

“More than a surprise. I’d almost convinced myself that he was simply a fantasy, a result of an over-active imagination. He has that effect on people.”

“Tell me about it,” Wilson agreed dryly.

“And so, I apologize for hiding the truth,” said Wickerbottom. “I was too proud to admit to a mistake I had made forty years ago.”

“I think I understand why you didn’t tell me.”

“Good. Then we can move on from here. There’s still a lot to uncover in this world and we’ll need to work together to figure it out.”

“...Now that we’ve had a heart-to-heart, can I have my card back?”

“No.”

On her way out of the tent, Wickerbottom passed by Wes. The mime skipped in like it was nothing, the golden sceptre under one arm.

"Hello, Wes," Wickerbottom greeted him. "Before I forget, be sure to stop by my tent later and sign up for a library card. I'm sure you'll want to take full advantage of my collection."

Wes nodded eagerly and watched her leave.

“You can’t walk in here uninvited,” Wilson told him.

Wes, as expected, didn’t answer. He held out the sceptre.

Wes shoved the sceptre into Wilson’s arms.

“You want me to keep this?” Wilson guessed.

He nodded.

“Well...thank you, I suppose,” said Wilson. “It’ll, uh, be interesting to study.”

Wilson put the sceptre on top of his desk. He had a feeling that this wasn’t just a gesture of gratitude, but a gift with the expectation of something in return.

“You know, I feel like you came here to snoop,” Wilson remarked. “You sure do seem like the nosy type. Maybe my shadow’s right when it says that you’re far too good of a listener.”

Wes nodded solemnly. They were in agreement, then.

“Er—where did you get this sceptre, anyways? How did you know where to find it?”

Giving a quick shrug, Wes proceeded to do a series of complicated and almost ballet-like movements. Even if Wilson didn’t know much about miming, Wes sure was good at it, and the meaning almost immediately became clear to him.

“You hid it there before Maxwell imprisoned you, and thought you could use it as a quick escape to get away from me,” Wilson guessed.

Wes snapped his fingers in affirmative.

“That’s rather clever,” said Wilson. “I’m still not sure how this thing works, but maybe it’ll come in handy again in the future.”

Wes nodded again. Then, his expression melted from playful to serious.

“I, er, suppose you didn’t come to talk about science,” Wilson sighed. “I want...I want to thank you, for not telling the others about my...episode. I promise that it wasn’t intentional on my part.”

Wes tapped his foot impatiently, brows heavy over his eyes.

“I know, I know—you want an explanation, but truth be told I’m not quite sure where to start.”

Wes folded his arms. He was waiting.

“I’m not the only guilty party here,” Wilson pointed out. “I know that you helped Maxwell scout out other people to bring into this world.”

The mime’s demeanour exploded with shock and undeniable culpability, his brown eyes turning from the natural light to catch the darkness instead. Wilson felt a sort of sick satisfaction in ripping away the protective barrier Wes was using to defer all suspicion from him. He saw Wes for what he was: a complete and utter lie, a mask, a manipulation. He memorized the way Wes’s step faltered and he had to hurry to catch his step, and the way his eyes darted back and forth.
It was the first time he’d seen Wes act as himself.

Wes recovered quickly. Not enough to conceal his guilt a second time, but still much faster than Wilson thought he would have had their situations been reversed.

“You didn’t mean for Wolfgang to get so involved, though,” Wilson guessed. “We’ve both harmed people by our actions. So if you’re honest with me, I’ll be honest with you. Deal?”

Wes pursed his lips, then indicated Wilson’s shadow.

“I’m not trying to trick you,” Wilson assured him. “Ever since we left the cave, the shadow has been quiet. It hasn’t tried to take control of me again.”

Circling the room, Wes kicked at Wilson’s shadow. His brow was furrowed in skepticism.

“It came out of an obelisk,” Wilson told him. “At first I didn’t even know it was there, until it revealed itself to me. It’s been hiding in my shadow ever since. I didn’t even know it was capable of controlling me like that until it did so in the cave.”

Wes glanced towards the tent entrance. He raised his hands and made a decidedly feminine pose, thrusting out his hips and batting his eyes.

“First of all, that’s a very poor impression of Willow,” said Wilson. “Second: no, she doesn’t know. The only one who knows is Wendy, and she hasn’t shared that information with anyone. I’d be horrified if any of the others learned about this mistake. I might even be deemed a threat and driven away. I...I don’t want to leave the group. I don’t want to be alone in this place.”

The mime nodded, tapping his cheek with one of his gloved fingers.

“I’m not going to tell the others,” Wilson affirmed. “It would only alarm them, and Mrs Wickerbottom would have my head. But I’m going to find a way to get this thing out of my shadow, and I think I might need your help.”

He could see indecision playing tug-of-war with Wes. He would have to sweeten the deal.

“If we work together, we could find a way out of here,” Wilson pressed. “We could all go home and put all of this behind us. Are you tempted or am I wasting my time?”

Wes responded with such a driven expression that Wilson was nearly knocked off his feet.

“If we’re in agreement, then we should trade what information we know,” said Wilson. “I don’t know if you know this, but Maxwell is in control of something called the Nightmare Throne. It’s how he controls us and everything that happens in this place. If we can dethrone him, then we can reverse the damage he’s done and get everybody home.”

Wes nodded gravely.

“I guess the hard part is figuring out where it is and how we can dethrone Maxwell,” Wilson sighed. “I doubt Maxwell’s just going to open the door and let us waltz right in.”

Wes raised his hand, as if to add another point, but at that moment the tent flap fluttered and Willow stuck her head inside.
“Hey, we’re having a meeting,” said Willow. “...What’re you two doing?”

“SCIENCE!” Wilson shouted. “We’re doing science. Science-ing.”

“Ugh,” Willow groaned. “You guys are such nerds! Well, get a move on. We’re having a meeting and I want everyone there.”

“Of course.”

After Willow ducked back out and he checked to make sure that she hadn’t paused to listen in, he turned back to Wes.

“Do you think we should tell the others about our plans?” Wilson asked him. “We don’t want to get their hopes up about anything. There’s no guarantee we’ll even be able to find the Throne.”

Wes gave a noncommittal shrug.

“Right, then we keep it to ourselves until we actually have something to show them,” said Wilson. “I look forwards to working together.”

He and Wes shook hands. It was a quick, professional shake that left Wilson feeling unbalanced. At least for now, maybe a working relationship would be to their mutual benefit, and to the disadvantage of a raging Maxwell.

As they ducked back into the campsite, Wilson was hit with a surprisingly biting wind, and looked up to the sky to see dark clouds beginning to overtake the horizon. A storm was heading their way. Maybe Maxwell was about to extract his vengeance by providing them with a quick and ruthless autumn. Still, the rest of the survivors had already gathered around the fire pit, talking quietly but cordially.

Wilson took a place on a log next to Wendy. She stared into oblivion and didn’t take notice of him.

“Well, we’re all here,” Willow declared. “So let’s get straight to the point.”

“THIS IS STUPID,” WX complained. “AS I HAVE REPEATEDLY STATED, FLESHLINGS CAN’T MAKE A CONSENSUS. YOU ALL HAVE FAR TOO DIFFERING VIEWPOINTS FOR IT TO BE POSSIBLE.”

“We’ve done fine so far,” Willow argued.

“OH, REALLY? YOUR TRACK RECORD IS POOR. CLEARLY IF ANYONE SHOULD BE MAKING DECISIONS AROUND HERE, IT SHOULD BE ME. I DECLARE THAT THIS SHOULD BE A DICTATORSHIP.”

“All those in favour of a WX-led dictatorship?” Willow asked of the group.

WX’s hand shot up. His was the only one.

“All those opposed?”

Everyone except WX’s hand went up.
“THIS IS OPPRESSION,” said WX.

“You’re only saying that because you aren’t getting your way,” Wickerbottom noted, hitching up her glasses. “If you ruled, then it would be more of a dystopia than it already is.”

“ONLY FOR FLESHLINGS. BUT FOR FOR ME AND MY BRETHREN, IT WOULD BE A VERITABLE UTOPIA.”

Wes rolled his eyes.

“I SAW THAT,” WX snapped. “DON’T THINK I’M LETTING YOU OFF THE HOOK JUST BECAUSE I WAS PERSUADED TO NOT KILL YOU. YOU STILL OWE ME!”

“As I recall, Wolfgang said he’d crush you if you lay a finger on Wes,” Wilson remembered.

“NONSENSE,” WX denied. “TO BE THREATENED, I WOULD HAVE TO BE INTIMIDATED BY HER. I WOULD NEVER BE INTIMIDATED BY AN OVERSIZED MEATBAG WITH BRAIN THE SIZE OF A WALNUT. I AM NOT.”

“Are you done complaining or can we get on with it?” Willow asked.

“I’M NOT COMPLAINING. YOU’RE COMPLAINING!”

“We really need to teach this automaton how to have a soul,” Wickerbottom suggested.

“All those in favour of teaching WX how to have a soul?” Willow called.

Everyone sans WX put up their hands.

“Okay then, it’s decided,” said Willow. “We need to teach WX how to have a soul. We’ll work out the details later, but for now let’s move onto the main topic.”

Willow paced around the fire pit. Wilson wondered if he was the only one who noticed that she didn’t quite look any of them in the eye, and when she did it was for a fleeting glance.

“What happened down in the caves was...well, it was messy,” Willow continued. “It’s clear at this point that we all have some demons we’ve been hiding from each other.”

Wigfrid scoffed. “Murder is not some demon.”

Willow stopped short and glared in Wigfrid’s direction. Their resident valkyrie sat in defiance, her back turned to Willow, her arms folded, her hurt and anger as plain as WX’s contempt for organics.

“You killed children,” Wigfrid said.

Willow paused, then said, “I’m not denying that, but it was an accident. I set a building on fire and didn't know they were inside. It was an accident.”

“Then you were careless, and somehow that is a more unforgivable crime.”

“Wigfrid—”
“Say what you have to say, but I cannot guarantee that I will listen, not when you have withheld such an important secret from me. You lied to me.”

The naked hurt was plain on Wigfrid’s face.

"It is quite a serious charge," Wickerbottom agreed. "Am I correct in assuming that this incident is what inspired you to make a deal with Maxwell, Willow?"

Willow nodded.

"I see. It is a troubling part of your past and an event you are culpable for. But—"

"'But' what?" Wigfrid snapped. "She's a murderer! There's nothing more to be said!"

Wendy spoke up. "We are all guilty."

Wendy had a way of making heads turn. Heads turned now, off to the little girl with a large presence.

"There are people in this world who have done terrible things," said Wendy. "I killed my own sister out of love for her, but that does not erase what I did. Death is death. Murder is murder. Wigfrid, you, too, have killed."

"I killed adults and in order to protect myself and my allies," Wigfrid defended. "I would never lay a hand on a child."

"I am not defending what Willow did. Clearly it was a terrible and tragic act. However, we are all guilty of having committed notorious acts, some of which brought us to this place."

"She lied to me," Wigfrid scowled.

"She is not lying now. She is taking responsibility."

"So suddenly I am in the wrong for being angry?!"

"Judge me however you want," Willow said. "At least look me in the eye if you're going to be angry!"

"Okay, then," Wigfrid did meet her in the eye. "You lied to me about your past, Willow. You may be taking responsibility now, but you didn't when you met."

"I...I didn't want you to leave or nothing," Willow said. "I thought—I thought you would get up and leave if you did, and I wanted some company in this rotten place. I mean—God, it was a long time ago! I'm a different person because of it!"

"Willow seems very sorry for what she did," said Wolfgang.

"As she should be," Wigfrid agreed. "Does that erase the lie she told me? Does that erase the lives she took?"

Nobody had a response for that. All of Willow's words were siphoned out of her.
Wigfrid turned her back on Willow again.

"Say what you have to say, Willow," she said. "But I cannot guarantee that I will listen."

Wilson watched emotions wrestle for control over Willow, from the instinct to fight back to the restraint she'd so carefully used since he'd met her. The restraint won out.

"Dammit, this is what Maxwell wants," Willow affirmed. "He didn't intend for us to get out of that cave, but we did, and now it's shit like this that'll break us apart!"

Wolfgang gasped and pointed at her dramatically. "You should not use such bad language! There is a little girl here!"

"I've heard far worse," Wendy mused.

"Just forget that right now," Willow groaned. "Look, I'm betting that Maxwell would like nothing more if he breaks us apart. Maybe he thinks it'll be easier to pick us off one-by-one, or maybe he wants us to suffer alone. Who knows what his motivations are. If you think that you can't trust the rest of us, then you're welcome to take what supplies you need and leave. I'm not going to make you stay. But I intend to stay in this little hellhole of ours and I hope that some of you will decide to stay as well."

“I'm not going anywhere,” Wilson said at once. “It's important that we work together. I'm not going to let Maxwell have the final say.”

“Seconded,” Wickerbottom agreed. “It would be far too inconvenient to move my book collection a second time.”

“Really, Mrs Wickerbottom?” Wilson sighed. “Is that your reason for staying?”

“Among others, yes.”

Willow scanned her audience. “Anyone else?”

“Wolfgang will stay if Wes stays,” said Wolfgang. “Wes?”

Wes gave a thumbs-up.

“Wes has spoken!” he bellowed. “We stay!”

“Wendy, what about you?” Willow asked.

Wendy sighed. “Strange forces compel me to leave, but Abigail’s will is greater than my own. It is at her behest that I will remain.”

“I'm glad Abigail can see reason. What about you, WX?”

“I'M SURE YOU WOULD BE GLAD TO BE RID OF ME,” WX replied. “UNFORTUNATELY FOR YOU, I STILL HAVE MY UNFINISHED BUSINESS WITH THE WES.”

Wes batted his eyes and pointed at himself.
“YES, YOU,” WX snapped. “YOU CAN’T FOOL ME WITH THAT ACT. I DECIDED TO SPARE YOUR PATHETIC LIFE, BUT I PROMISE THAT I’M DOING YOU A RIGHTEOUS FAVOUR BY DOING SO.”

“If you’re going to do nothing but antagonize anyone who isn’t made of metal, perhaps we should consider restraining you again,” Wickerbottom suggested.

“I’D LIKE TO SEE YOU TRY.”

As WX turned away defiantly, silence swept over them like a sudden snowstorm. Eyes flickered in Wigfrid’s direction. She hadn’t moved from her spot, turned away from Willow and attention focused on the ground. Wilson couldn’t discern any expression from her face.

“...Wigfird?” Willow asked tentatively.

Wigfrid rose to her feet with the solemnness of someone about to give a eulogy at a funeral. “I wish you all the best of luck.”

At a hardy pace, she marched back to her nearby tent and disappeared underneath its flap. Willow tripped in her hurry to race after her.

“Wigfrid, wait!” Willow called.

Willow also disappeared into Wigfrid’s tent, and that was shortly followed by shouting. Wilson did his best to block out the words, knowing that it was an argument meant to be private.

“Friends shouldn’t fight,” said Wolfgang. “Maybe we should get them to make up?”

"I’m afraid that it's not as straightforward as that," Wilson reluctantly admitted to both himself and to Wolfgang. "I think this is something they need to work out between themselves."

"Does Wigfrid truly want to leave us?" Wendy asked.

"It is more likely that Wigfrid only desires some distance from the camp," Wickerbottom explained. "After all, she believes that Willow violated her confidence by not entrusting her with such an important detail of her life."

"But Willow wanted nothing more than to preserve Wigfrid's trust in her," Wendy pointed out.

"Perhaps. Still, if Wigfrid desires to leave, then we should not stop her, and make it abundantly clear to her that she's welcome to rejoin us at any time in the future."

They all consented to that. As the others went to go about their everyday business, Wilson hovered by the fire pit. He could hear Willow and Wigfrid verbally duking it out, and he was torn between the inclination to give them space and the desire to intervene. He, Willow, and Wigfrid had been the first in the camp. Nothing could change that. Wigfrid had been the first survivor he'd met in Maxwell's twisted world—and he realized how much he'd come to depend on that source of strength. That sense of unity against their common enemy.

If Wickerbottom was right, maybe Wigfrid's seemingly inevitable departure would be a temporary one. She would wander, and then come right back to came. Wilson understood the desire to shut
oneself away from the world, even if that decision was what had caused him to meet Maxwell in the first place. Things might have turned out much differently if he'd engaged with society instead of withdrawing from it.

Wilson returned to his tent. Although the sunlight was stifled, there was still enough of it left for it to cast a long shadow at the opposite end of the tent canvas, stretching across his desk and other personal belongings.

An unseen hand caressed his back, snaked up his neck, and the stroked his cheek almost lovingly.

“So you’re still there,” said Wilson. He checked for eavesdroppers and closed the tent flap.

“I never left,” the shadow cooed.

Wilson tested to make sure that he had full control over his body. His movements were free and of his own volition. Wilson lit the lantern on his desk so that his shadow could cast across the canvas —so that he could stare the shadow right where its face should’ve been.

“Why aren’t you trying to control me to get your way?” Wilson asked. “I know you could do it if you wanted to.”

“Controlling someone who is unwilling requires a lot of effort on my part. More importantly, it’s not something I take pleasure in. I lost my temper back in that cave...and I am sorry I hurt you.”


“He’s one of Maxwell’s lackeys,” the shadow spat. “That’s reason enough.”

“Wes doesn’t work for Maxwell anymore.”

“That could be a lie. It’s too risky keeping Wes alive, especially considering his close kinship with Maxwell.”

“Killing isn’t the solution.”

“Why do you want his help, Wilson? You and I have a common goal. We both want to remove Maxwell from the throne, so Wes is redundant and should be disposed of. What if he betrays us? What if he’s still working for Maxwell?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were being possessive of me.”

“You are the only asset I have, Wilson. We need each other to destroy Maxwell and his reign.”

“Be that as it may, you have consistently shown that you can’t be trusted. I’m willing to take a gamble on Wes, seeing as he’s flesh and blood and I don’t even know what you’re made of.”

The shadow expanded, growing higher and higher until it overtook the tent canvas, his form similar to his, but still so, so different. At this point, Wilson was surprised at his reaction: how accustomed he’d become to being intimidated by the great unknown.

“I have come too far for my plans to be interrupted by some half-wit scientist!” the shadow roared. “With or without your involvement, this will soon be my world, and I won’t have you ruining my
chances!"

“You seem to be losing your temper again,” Wilson remarked.

“And you need to learn your place.”

Tightness closed around his wrists.

Wilson looked down to find shadows coiling around his arms, squeezing harder and harder. He struggled, only to find his movements restricted.

“You’re a tool, Wilson,” the shadow whispered. It possessed an almost feminine-like voice now, piercing and penetrating, as beguiling as the most enticing seductress. “You’re our tool. Do as we say, and we will be kind. Rebel, and your punishment will be infinitely more severe than the one we will inflict on Maxwell. Remember that.”

“Let go,” Wilson ordered it.

The shadow paused, and then did so, the shadows retracting from his wrists. It left behind harsh, red marks from where it had grabbed him.

“Work with Wes if you must,” the shadow simpered. “I will overlook this small infraction. Once I gain control of the throne, I’ll deal with Wes personally. Just remember your place.”

“Or what? If you hurt me, then I won’t help you take the throne.”

The shadow let out a low laugh. “I would never dream of hurting my favourite pawn. Not permanently, anyways. But I’m betting that you wouldn’t be so coy if one of your friends was in the crossfire.”


“I can’t control you for long, but I could control you long enough to do some serious harm to the others in this camp,” the shadow continued. “This is all theoretical talk, though. After all, our goals are in perfect alignment. Let’s hope that doesn’t change, shall we?”

Wilson’s mouth had gone dry.

“Go about your business,” the shadow said sharply. “Survive. Socialize. Try to unravel the mysteries still lurking in this world. You won’t be rid of me, Wilson Percival Higgsbury.”

The shadow crawled back down his spine and then vanished. From the sliver left in the tent flap, he saw Wigfrid storming past with a thick satchel over her shoulder, a spear in her hand, and Willow on her heel.

Wilson returned to his desk, overflowing with notes he’d taken since he’d joined the came. He could sense the storm’s pending approach and wondered faintly if he would need to waterproof his tent before the downpour hit them. He wondered if this was what they had become of them—this odd, unscrupulous collection of ne’er-do-wells—if they had become just lost souls, not quite dead but always on the cusp of it. If they were doomed to become the last pages in a book that no one ever read, if their story was without a conclusion, if they were just footnotes in history, if they were living an everyday purgatory. Maxwell was out there, somewhere, watching and waiting to...
hit them with a new set of challenges that would undoubtedly endanger their lives.

He glared at his shadow in an aside, knowing that it was glaring back. Whatever or whoever it was, he couldn’t let the unbridled terror stewing in his belly overtake him. It’s what Maxwell wanted. It was what the shadow wanted, to push him to the brink so that it could take total control of all his sensibilities. Time was short. He had to find the throne and remove Maxwell from power. He had to remove this creature from his shadow. He had to return everyone home, where they could at least look forwards to the prospect of Maxwell-free lives, where they could right the wrongs they’d left behind them.

Time to get started, then. Science waited for nobody.

Wilson pulled up a stool and hunkered over his desk, blocking out all external noise and the impending distractions bombarding his senses. Whatever it took, he would get everybody home. He’d never felt so focused in his life, or filled with such inspiration and drive. Overhead, the storm started to roll in, filled with Maxwell’s wrath and the final mark of a long-dead civilization.

And in the distance, the last wisp of summer screamed into oblivion.

THE END

THE STORY WILL CONTINUE IN
“THE GIRL WHO SHIVERED AT SHADOWS”

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY IT’S DONE.

THIS TOOK WAY TOO LONG FOR A TWELVE-CHAPTER STORY.

And now...and now I can live for a short while. And edit the hell out of this story.

Thank you again to everyone who's stuck with me for this long...the story will continue at some point, but for the moment I have other projects I need to attend to.

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