The Mysterion Mythos: Cthulhu Fhtagn
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Summary

Seven years after the crisis in the Gulf of Mexico, Kenny's journey to discover who he is leads him deeper into the Cult of Cthulhu. Stan and Kyle face their own challenges but are desperate to help, and Butters and the rest of the town heroes verge on chaos and insanity.

Notes

ALL CHARACTERS AND EVENTS IN THIS FAN FICTION – EVEN THOSE BASED ON FICTIONAL PEOPLE– ARE ENTIRELY MADE-UP. ALL LOVECRAFT REFERENCES ARE RESEARCHED... POORLY. THE FOLLOWING STORY CONTAINS LEWD SEXUAL HUMOR AND DUE TO ITS LONG INTROSPECTIVE MONOLOGUES IT SHOULD NOT BE READ BY ANYONE.

See the end of the work for more notes.
My name is Kenny McCormick. For the most part, I am quite proud to say that I am rather exhaustingly normal. I consider myself to be fairly tall—I hit 5’10” by my sixteenth birthday—and of an average body type; or, well, I could probably stand to have a little more meat on me, but I can’t help being on the thin side, since my family is unable to afford good food most of the time. Like most guys my age, I just go through school during the week, work in the afternoons, and blow my weekends doing stupid shit with my friends, or catcalling the twentysomethings at the mall. I grew up and reside in South Park, Colorado; proud to say I’ve traveled a great deal, though. I’ve even seen Heaven and Hell.

Yeah, that’s where “for the most part” ends.

At sixteen years old, I have died over five hundred times. My first death was at age eight, in the third grade, and through the years, I have died on and off, sometimes with alarming frequency, sometimes going a few months at a time without. I have been shot, stabbed, blown to pieces, torn limb from limb, and been hit by almost every vehicle on and off the road. I have known Death for far too long, and, to be honest, I’m tired. That is not to say that I have given up and allow myself to die. Far from it.

I have devoted my life now to discovering the truth of what I am. I know this much: I am an Immortal, cursed in the womb and born to careless parents who attended a meeting of a cult devoted to an ancient, otherworldly deity known as Cthulhu. Cthulhu and the other Old Ones hold, I am sure, the secret to my immortality, and can take the curse away from me. The only thing now is trying to figure out how to get out of that with my life. Sure, I’ve known Death, but I am certainly not ready to die. A kid should have rights, right? I’m sick of dying. I just want to live.

It was Eric fucking Cartman I wanted to die, on the morning this whole thing began. The morning of my sixteenth birthday, as a matter of fact: March 22nd, smack in the middle of the doldrums of the school year.

I’ve had a pretty tight group of friends, I’m happy to say. Most of us have been tight since preschool, while others I started hanging out with more starting in elementary and middle school. Cartman is one of the guys I’ve known just about forever. We’ve done some crazy shit together, and most of the time, I can tolerate him, at best... if not even sometimes consider him a fellow human being worth holding conversation. As kids, I even took pity on the guy and let him call me his best friend, though as we grew up, I began avoiding him a little more, for various reasons. The problem with Cartman is his blatant self-centeredness, and his intolerable bigotry. Cartman, a brown-haired, brown-eyed loudmouth and the fattest kid in our grade—holder of that title since preschool, actually —has the astounding ability to turn any conversation around to be about him.

“Oh, hey, Kenny,” the asshole greeted me in the hall that morning. I was standing at my pale green locker, stuffing my bag full of hastily-covered books for the day. “What’re you doing for your birthday? Oh, that’s right, your parents are too poor to get yo—”

“Shut up,” I snapped back, muffling my words into my scarf, which I hadn’t had time to take
off yet. Even for late March in a frigid mountain town, there was an awful amount of snow falling that morning. “Maybe you’re expecting a car for your birthday, fatass, but did it ever occur to you that I d—”

“Oh,” he scoffed, “no, no, not just any car.”

“Goddammit, if you take that magazine out again, I will fucking gut you,” I muttered. Since Christmas, Cartman had been carrying around an auto magazine advertising the latest model of some car the jerk probably couldn’t even work the parking brake for with his fat fucking hands, and the vast majority of the rest of us in the sophomore class (and probably the rest of the high school, come to think of it) were pretty damn sick of it.

“See—Kenny, Kenny, look,” Cartman went on.

I had an algebra book in one hand, and I couldn’t stop myself: I whacked Cartman upside the head with the heavy, hard-bound textbook. I heard a crunch, and instantly felt pretty satisfied, utterly forgetting where I was. Sure enough, the next thing I heard was the shrill voice of one of the office staff members. “Kenny McCormick!” she reprimanded me.

“Fuck,” I growled. I had much better things to do that night than rot in detention. Maybe I should just kill myself and push it all off until tomorrow. “It was self-defense,” I pleaded with the secretary, or vice-principal, or whoever the hell she was. I don’t pay attention.

“Were you fighting on school grounds?!”

“I just said, it was self-defense!” I repeated.

“I can’t understand what you’re saying,” the woman barked. She handed me one of those dreaded white slips of paper and ordered, “Detention for an hour after school today.”

“There is no justice, if you don’t bag him for harassment too!” I shouted, pointing over at where Cartman had fallen after my blow.

“I still can’t understand you. Room 301, promptly after school, Mr. McCormick.”

“Oh, fuck you,” I mumbled into my scarf. If she couldn’t make out my words, screw her. I stuffed the white slip into my pocket. I had no intention of sitting in that damn room after school. I’d come up with some way to evade it later.

Seconds later, as Eric Cartman was still in shock on the floor, I felt a punch on my shoulder. “Hey, dude!” Stan Marsh—locker neighbor, and a much better friend than the fat lump on the floor beside our row. “Sixteen today, right, Kenny? Nice.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, trying to forget my sentence for afternoon hell. Now that I had a moment to breathe, I removed my scarf and hung it in my locker. “Is it fucking freezing outside, or what?”

“Ugh, no kidding,” Stan concurred. “Only braved the weather and came to school today because I wasn’t about to stay cooped up in the house with my dad. And cuz it’s your birthday.”

“Hah, right,” I grinned. “What’s up with your dad?”

“Oh, some other fake illness or something he heard about on TV. That bastard is such a hypochondriac. Whatever. Anyway, you’d better not have anything planned after school, cuz me and Kyle’ve—”
“I just got detention,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

“What the fuck? How?”

“That,” I growled, pointing down at my morning nemesis.

“Oh,” said Stan, looking down. “Hey, Cartman.”

“Aye!” Cartman snapped. “Don’t just stand there, get me up!”

“Figure out how to stand up yourself, you fucking manatee,” Stan quipped right back.

“Asshole!”

“Back at you. So you guys have detention together, dude?” said Stan, his attention back to me. “Sucks.”

“No, just me.”

“Fuck that,” said Stan, leaning against his locker. He gave me a grin, one hand on his hip as he leaned half into the narrow space. “Hey, who sentenced you? Teacher or office?”

“Office.”

“Which one?”

“Uh... brown hair, stupid voice?”

“Sweet, you got it easy. She doesn’t remember who she gives those things out to. Is your name on it?”

I checked, and realized, “Nope.”

“Give it to me.” I did, and Stan produced a pen from his slightly messy locker, then scrawled with his inoperative left hand the name ‘Eric Cartman’ and tucked it into the backpack of the one still moping on the floor. “There, done,” Stan smirked, clicking his pen closed.

“Damn... thanks,” I said, stunned (and a little mad that I hadn’t thought of that myself).

“Well, happy birthday,” Stan laughed. “Anyway,” he transitioned, walking me away from the lockers, “now you’ve got tonight, right?”

“Get back here, assholes!” Cartman called after us.

“Too bad you’ve got detention,” Stan yelled over his shoulder.

“Screw you guys!”

“Eh,” Stan shrugged as we rounded the corner, both heading for first period English. “He’ll be over it by tomorrow.”

I laughed, glad to be freed from that obstacle. Stan has always been good at not getting into trouble, and learning how to avoid trouble, even though sometimes weird things tend to follow him. Weird things follow all of us, though, so we take it as it comes.

Stan Marsh, I should introduce, is just about Cartman’s opposite. Again, someone I’ve
known since preschool, Stan is a free spirit, and always has been. He’s always looking out for others before himself, and is a very doting partner to his girlfriend of several years (on and off), Wendy Testaburger. Despite being all things one would expect a high school guy to be—star quarterback, honor roll, all that stuff—Stan doesn’t have an ego to match. He spends more time volunteering at places like the animal shelter than he does coming up with plays for the next season, and I respect him for that.

I also respect him, and Wendy, for trying to help set me up with nice girls, even though, more often than not, the nice ones seem turned off by me for some reason. Oh, hell, I know what the reason is. I’m poor. I am fucking poor. My parents are broke as fuck and don’t do a damn thing about it. Oh, sure, they come up with ways to get money, but once they pay the electric bill, they blow the rest on booze and pot before they remember they have a family to feed. My older brother Kevin is no better. Our dad is a terrible role model, so Kevin’s still at the house, and pretty much just exists as an errand boy so our parents can be even lazier with their time.

For the past few years, I’ve been making money on the side, for myself. My parents aren’t going to see a fucking cent of it. It started with odd jobs; one day a week here and there, that kind of thing. That’s become more frequent now. For the most part, I paint things. I rebuild fences and give them new coats, I do house exteriors, signs, sometimes even cars. I get paid under the table and am therefore not liable to pay taxes. Every bit of it goes into a bank account my parents don’t know I have. Since they sure as shit didn’t start a college fund for me, I started one when I was ten. All my friends are going to college, why the fuck shouldn’t I? I plan on showing my parents off by becoming successful. Sure, like a lot of my friends, I have no clue what I want to do, but dammit, I’m going to do something with my life.

Which brings me right back around to saying that, hell yes, I want to keep living. I’m just sick of dying all the time. It would be one thing if I was mourned, but I never am. Sure, for the time being, probably, but part of the curse is that nobody ever remembers my deaths. One of these days, though, it’ll happen. One of these days, I can be a normal guy with normal concerns. Until then, though, I’ve got work to do.

Every last one of us was groggy and hung over from a week of unyielding and unmerciful midterms. Many students, boys and girls alike, were slumped in their seats, still sporting hats and scarves—and some even coats—meant to make the prolonged winter weather that much more tolerable. I admit that I used to be one of the worst, in that I’d wear my full parka in school all day long, despite the classrooms and halls providing a strange sort of sanctuary of warmth in comparison to the mountain chill; it was only this year, a new year’s resolution, actually, that I started shedding layers in school. My house has no heat, so I save my faux fur-lined parka for home, sometimes sleeping in it. One of these days I’ll snag a nice girlfriend and figure out a way to stay with her all the time. Until then, I’m the only one in the house with the sensibility to start a fire. Granted, I burned myself to death one night, and I woke to find that one section of my bedroom had been hastily boarded back up, but sometimes even death is worth it to stay warm.

My most recent death fucked me up pretty bad, though, since I’d needed to study last minute that night. That’s what you get, Kenny, I told myself. Put off Physics and get nailed by a semi crossing the road. That’s just what you get. At least that one was instantaneous. Most of the time, vehicle deaths are long; the pain gets drawn out, and the longer it goes on, the more people try to help me. “No, no, young man!” they’ll yell at me when I plead them to just let me get it over with and die. “You have so much to live for!” Yes, I do, but dying this time will make that living so
much easier, rather than deal with rehabilitation and therapy. Well, screw it. One of these days, I’ll figure it all out.

In fact, since some of my friends and I had stolen some beer and whiskey the weekend after midterms, I’d completely forgotten about the assessments this week until the second Stan and I entered the English room full of lethargic teens not unlike ourselves. I was hit with a bit of worry, but nothing too serious; I was expecting something in the ballpark of a B- in English. It was true that I was trying my hardest in school lately. Freshman year I slacked, but it was hitting me now that if I did want to go to college and show up my parents, I had to start now.

Stan, as previously stated, does very well in school, and helps me out sometimes, but even he has to cram to get the grades he does. Someone to whom studying and high ranking comes all too naturally was also in the room that morning, and utterly unaware of our presence. The English room was situated such that the door was in the back corner, with all of the cramped little desks facing forward to the wall-length dry-erase board behind the teacher’s desk; two large windows on the left-hand wall gave us students an all-too-distracting view of the football field, famous for midday breakups and the odd senior driving the maintenance golf carts out into the middle while being chased by half-interested teachers or hall monitors. Bookshelves and stupid motivational posters covered pretty much the rest of the room and held little of our attention most of the time, to the point that we forgot they were there until the teacher either walked over to one or deliberately pointed out ‘the green bookshelf’ or something to that effect.

Actually, there is no green bookshelf. Green’s just on the mind, given the color of the ushanka hat Stan craftily removed from our friend Kyle’s head as we snuck up on either side of him, where he sat in the center of the room, a book open in front of him already. Kyle Broflovski is the most intelligent in our foursome (that’s me, Stan, Kyle, and that dick Cartman... he’s a jerk, but he’s more or less our friend, and we four all tend to get into the same kinds of weird situations together), and also the shortest (I’ve got him by two inches; Cartman by half an inch, which he will not shut up about). Lately he’s developed a bit of a complex about being the shortest, but is confident that he still has more growing to do. Stan, Wendy and I generally tell him he’s got nothing to worry about; he’s still one of the best players on the basketball team. I’ve always considered this kid to be the smartest in our grade, and my thoughts have been proven by the fact that Kyle seems to be well on his way to making valedictorian again.

Just like Stan, Kyle is sensitive, and always tries to do what’s best and right. He provides a conscience for all of us, when our own intuitions fail, and sets only the best examples for his younger —adopted Canadian—brother, Ike. On the nights that we can’t kidnap Stan away from Wendy, Kyle and I will come up with random things to do, whether we chuck snowballs at each other until we freeze, then get on each other’s cases about girls over coffee afterward, or just laze around playing videogames and taking advantage of pizza delivery deals. His parents are very kind, too, and, even though I don’t really like charity, I’m grateful that they’ll sometimes ask me to stay for dinner—his mother, Sheila, is a great cook—even though I just know that Sheila and Gerald are in the other room feeling sorry for me that my own parents leave me and Kevin with a box of cereal and no milk instead of bothering to spring for a rotisserie chicken or something. Again, planning on making it better for myself. Things just take time.

“Hey—what the—” Kyle yelped when he felt his hat go missing. Stan started laughing right off, and I joined him after a second. Kyle looked up and frowned. “Very funny, Stan,” he smirked, outstretching a hand upward and backward. “Give it back, I’ve got hat hair.”

“If that’s hat hair—” Stan started teasing.

“Oh, shut up and give it back,” Kyle interrupted. Kyle has always had the worst luck with
his unruly red-orange mop. When we were kids, he had a full-on, frizzy Jewfro, which he flattened under a similar ushanka for years. Once middle school hit, his hair had started driving him crazy, to the point that he secretly went to a salon with his mother behind our backs. It just so happened that our mutual friend Clyde had caught sight of him, and Cartman, Stan and I did not let Kyle live that moment down for the longest time. The joke was on us, though: Kyle had clicked with a style-savvy chick from our class, Heidi, there, and the two had dated right up until last year. Heidi, I admit, worked wonders on Kyle’s hair. In her absence, it had started to get crazy again, until, just last month, Kyle swallowed his pride and went to get it cut. His hair now lacks the complete Jewfro effect, but is still full and wavy; curls will often fall out below his hat, which he still wears most of the time in the winter and spring. My hair, in comparison, is boring: dirty blonde, shortish (I cut it myself, unevenly, when it starts bugging me), and subject to bedhead at all hours of the day. As for Stan, I’ve caught Wendy cutting his black hair close and short before, even though he prefers it shaggy.

“Come get it!” Stan teased, holding the coveted green ushanka up above his head. Stan, I’ll add is the tallest one in our group, having just hit six feet, lucky bastard.


“Pff, no you won’t, you pussy,” Stan taunted.

“Yeah, you wanna try me?” Kyle challenged.

While Stan wasn’t paying attention, I climbed up onto the chair behind him and triumphantly claimed Kyle’s hat for myself. That won me a venomous glare from the redhead, and got me laughing. “Thanks, dude,” I said, sitting down on the desk with my left foot on one chair and my right foot on the chair of the desk next to Kyle, in which Stan generally sat. “Just what I wanted for my birthday.”

“Nice try,” said Kyle, reaching over to reclaim the hat from off my head. I relinquished the hat to him with an exaggerated bow, but just as Kyle was dusting the old green thing off, Stan attacked.

Stan does have a tendency to fuck up Kyle’s hair. We all have our greetings, but one cocktease of a game Stan plays is removing Kyle’s hat and messing with his hair, which he did furiously now.

“Yo! You’re fucking it up even more!” Kyle warned.

“Whatever,” Stan smirked, claiming his seat. I wondered if anyone else, Stan and Kyle especially, noticed the subtext from all of that like I had. Yes, Stan and Kyle are best friends, and always have been, but over the years, I kept noticing little things that made me think that maybe Stan was investing a little more in the friendship than Kyle. To be blunt, I’m pretty fucking sure he’d flirt, even if he didn’t mean to. There’s the normal things they’ll do, challenge each other to mindless games, punch each other for pointless reasons... and then Stan will go and do something like that; play with Kyle’s hair. Maybe it’s just me, maybe it’s just the fact that Cartman has ripped on them and called them queer since third grade, maybe not. Time might tell; who knows?

Kyle shot him a look and pulled his hat back on, tucking a couple of escaped corkscrews up into the hat and out of his face. “Plan’s on for tonight?” he asked Stan as he gave me a little grin.

“Yeah, what’re you guys plotting?” I wondered, wide-eyed as an eager kid at Christmas. “Stan won’t tell me anything.”
“I’m not, either.”
“Did you get me a pony?”
“Fuck, no, dude, why would you want a pony, anyway?”
“Eh,” I shrugged.

We couldn’t get any further in our dumb conversation at that point anyway, since the teacher, a dusty old man in a dusty old suit, had entered the room, and the collective tenth-grade groan rose up in the room.

The good news from class was that I’d been scaled up to a B+ on my midterm. The bad news was being assigned more chapters from a book than I usually liked reading at any given time. I don’t really have time to read much. That isn’t from lack of wanting to, or even trying. It isn’t even due to me dying all the time, or my odd jobs.

See, there’s one other thing that occupies my time.

When we were kids, my friends and I started playing a superhero game. At age nine, I created a vigilante alter ego for myself, under whose name I could get away with things and have access to files I could, as myself, never get away with doing or seeing. The town grew to know my alter ego, and even cheered me on. So I figured I’d keep it going. When I told Stan and Kyle I planned to keep it up, they went along with it. Hell, South Park can be crazy, but it can also be pretty damn boring sometimes. Being outside the law could keep things interesting for us.

During the day, there’s school. In the afternoon, there’s work.

At night, I’m Mysterion.

I discard my street clothes, don a skin-tight long-sleeved greyish purple shirt and pants, brown boots, a well-stocked utility belt and a deep evening-colored cape, the hood of which bears my symbolic green question mark. Underneath it all, I always take care to wear a black half-mask. Call it lame, but it feels fucking great. Mysterion: the hero unable to die.

The best part is, every night, I feel like I get closer to discovering more about myself. Sure, there are down weeks, even months, but I live for those nights when I’ll find one tidbit of information that can send me in the right direction. Even if it’s just a night of shacking up in the little ‘lair’ that Kyle and I started setting up when we were ten and reading, it’s a victory if I uncover something.

When we were nine years old, a handful of us were part of the superhero game. Eventually, we got caught up in something huge: an interdimensional struggle against the very being I need to someday soon confront... the undead, immortal Cthulhu. After that fight, I started talking to Stan and Kyle about keeping the whole thing up. I needed answers. We could get closer to answers if we kept on working under different identities. They were a little confused—of course, since they never remembered any of my deaths, though they sure as hell remembered the circumstances surrounding each death—but agreed. I mean, we were nine and ten years old. It was still just playing, just fun.

Once we hit sixth grade, it really got serious. We were in it, full-fledged vigilantes. We stopped caring about the consequences of sneaking around. During our League meetings, we could be different. There were no other obligations, no school worries, no family worries, just tasks at hand. We’d fight crime, sure, but we also started delving into dark secrets, sneaking around to hear
just enough crazy shit from cult meetings to get babysteps closer to solving the riddle of my existence.

It may sound self-gratifying, but the rest of the guys get a lot out of it, too. I mean, we are all doing great things. We set things right. Having been doing this for so long, yeah, I can confidently say that we’ve turned South Park around a little.

Once we got to high school, I started to get worried that the other guys would get bored with the whole thing, and think it was childish, and move on. No such thing happened. In fact, we’re all more serious about the League now than ever. So much weird shit goes on in South Park, the town kind of needs us now, and we love that. We don’t do it for money, or praise, or anything. We do it for the town, we do it for whoever needs any one of us at any given time. Mostly we work as a team, but sometimes we work alone, or as partners, or in groups of three.

We call ourselves the Coon League—changed from Coon and Friends when we were in sixth grade because, in Stan’s words, “Coon and Friends just sounds fucking gay”—based on Cartman’s nocturnal alter ego, the Coon. We’d kicked him out back in fourth grade, but let him back in once we got bored of hearing him bitch about it all the time. We keep tabs on him, though, and it’s easier now that we have a much better fucking headquarters than his basement.

Headquarters is all thanks to our rich as fuck friend, Token Black. Token, first baseman for the high school baseball team, richest kid in town, and only African-American kid in South Park, goes by the alter ego of TupperWear within the League, and, with some of his own secret savings, has been able to provide us a perfect, out of the way place to meet, equipping it with old computers (his parents buy new computers every time there’s an upgrade, they are that fucking rich; hell yes I’m jealous). Even when we don’t have League duties, it’s a great place for us to just go hang out. We all have keys except Cartman, who thinks that Token is the only one with a key, so it’s also a great place to escape from his self-serving shenanigans sometimes.

Also in the League are our friends Timmy and Clyde. Timmy is wheelchair-bound and mentally handicapped, but he gets what we’re doing and is actually a great bodyguard, especially given that he decks out head to wheels in armor, calling himself Iron Maiden. Timmy doesn’t say much, but he’s a good part of the group. Clyde Donovan, sophomore class president, center on the football team, and basketball team forward and co-captain, is another one of those kids that just has everything going for him. Like Stan, though, he’s really sensitive and nice... even dating one of the most difficult girls in school—Bebe Stevens—hasn’t inflated his ego any. Clyde just likes doing good things for people, and often, as Mosquito, serves as a leader for our team. He’s definitely the most organized out of any of us, aside from maybe Kyle, which makes his leadership position well-deserved.

Stan and Kyle take the hero thing completely seriously, too, and get really into their respective alter egos. In the League, Stan calls himself Toolshed, and has, as a result of that, become overwhelmingly good at picking locks. He really is, in all practicality, exactly what a team like ours needs. He can get into and out of anywhere, from locked gates to bolted-up buildings. And when Stan on the ground gets stumped, we’ve got Kyle in the air. Literally. As the Human Kite, Kyle has, over the past seven years, come up with some sick aerial shit that keeps flooring all of us. He wears a retractable hang glider on a harness, and knows exactly what kind of momentum he needs to get airborne. I’m fucking impressed.

On again and off again in the League, too—and, actually, the only other one without a key, only because he requested not to have one—is our friend Butters Stotch. Butters is an interesting case, and I’m pretty sure he has MPD or something, not that I’d hold it against him if he did. He just seamlessly changes personae, even if they’re all intrinsically him. At night, he goes by Professor
Chaos, an alter ego he created for himself at the age of nine in order to hide his usually vulnerable characteristics behind a fully evil facade. Over the years, we have teamed up with Chaos every now and then, always warily, because he and his partner—a sixth-grader who goes by General Disarray—tend to get their hands on some information that even we may not be able to uncover. Chaos’s help always comes at a price, but his League involvement is always appreciated, since he is pretty crafty, and great at setting traps.

When Butters isn’t being himself—neurotic, shy, and otherwise average—or Professor Chaos—strong-willed and fearless—he’s in drag. We’ve gotten used to that over time, too. Butters’ daytime alter ego is Marjorine, a girl we all sort of invented back in fourth grade to pull one over on the girls in our class. Coming down to it, though, Marjorine was mostly Cartman’s idea, and Butters became her wholeheartedly. Marjorine persisted after that first ordeal, though, even if none of us knew about it until middle school, when Butters just showed up in drag on the first day of eighth grade and said, “Hey, fellas, today I’m Marjorine.” And that was that. Over time, Butters has even grown his hair out quite a bit, and ties it back or tucks it under a hat on his ‘normal’ days, and wears it out and styles it as Marjorine. It’s also no secret that he’s bi, though he tends to flirt with girls as Butters, and with guys as Marjorine. They’re two sides of one person, so, again, we’re all used to it.

All of us, the League and even Professor Chaos, have become a well-known presence in town, and very few people know who we really are. In fact, Cartman’s mother Lianne—shameless whore by reputation and trade—and Token’s parents are quite likely the only ones who really know about all of us, being the only ones who have approved headquarters for us at any given time. It has also been guessed by several people that Cartman is the Coon, but this fact is often overlooked. Most of us remain hidden. And all of us do a world of good.

And one of these days, we’ll get ourselves right back up against that damned Cthulhu, and I’ll have my answers once and for all.

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Getting out of detention had been easy as hell, and it was true that nobody noticed that I was missing, which was fantastic. Even so, I caught up with Stan at our lockers at the end of the day and rushed him toward the front door, so that I had no chance of being spotted by the woman who had issued me that slip in the first place, or, worse, Eric Cartman, the newly condemned. “Text Kyle!” I hissed at Stan as I pushed him through the doors and out into the freezing afternoon. “Tell him to get his ass out here!”

“I can’t text and be shoved across ice at the same time, dude, hold on!” Stan protested, taking out his brick of a sliding phone. Stan never really keeps up with fads, so his phone was still a few years older than, say, Clyde’s or Cartman’s. Kyle only cared that he had a smartphone of some kind. I just cared that I had a cell phone at all.

As we stood out on the school’s front step, I pulled up my scarf and hid from one of the girls who was exiting the building, since she probably wanted to hit me. She was a sexy little thing, blonde-blond-blond and skinny and tall, everything a guy could want in a Norwegian chick. Her name was Inga something-or-other, and she was still pissed at me for breaking up with her the week after Valentine’s Day. Didn’t bother me, though, she’d be gone in a few months. That was the best thing about foreign students.

Since the fall of ninth grade, I’ve been banging the foreign exchange girls. They’re always hot, and I teach them the only English they really need to know, and it’s no problem if I die on them and they don’t remember me, because they won’t be around for long, anyway. It’s a terrible way to look at things, but I have really shitty luck with the girls I actually want to go out with.
We have a new exchange student each semester, one each half of the year. Ninth grade started off with an adorable Japanese girl named Yoko, who was all the fuck over me in all the right ways (and gave stereotypically awesome massages), and then the rest of the year I was with this French girl named Belle, who knew more positions than even the Raisins girl, Mercedes, who I’d dated in eighth grade. Yeah, Japan and France in one school year—nice, right? It was the best way to travel without ever leaving my bedroom. I died on the last girl, Guadalupe, from Peru, sometime in November, after I was out investigating a drug ring that we in the League were still trying to snuff out. Really sucked hearing her break up with me, since I’d kinda clicked with her—one of those intelligent and sexy girls. Peru, man. Then there was Inga, from Norway. As previously stated, really hot. She kinda overwhelmed me, though, so I broke up with her, and the karma gods punished me with an icicle through the skull a few days later. That one was probably messy, not that the cleanup crew would remember it later or anything.

There was one girl in school I really wanted to date, just based on conversations we’d been having ever since a school trip back in eighth. I had no idea if I stood a chance with her, though. Damn, I thought, wouldn’t it be nice if Stan and Kyle somehow got me in with her for my birthday. I had a feeling whatever that night was had to do with girls in some capacity, since I still did wank about Inga every now and then, to which Stan usually said, “Dude, either get back with her or listen to me and Wendy’s suggestions!” The nice ones really are so hard to hold down though. Someday, Kenny. Someday.

“‘Kay, he’s coming,” I heard Stan say, which drew me out of my preoccupation with trying to avoid the trolltag wrath of Inga.

“Where is he?” I muffled out into my scarf.

“Oh, some gay shit about his AP class,” said Stan, tucking his phone away. “Kyle’s gonna study himself into an aneurism one of these days. I keep telling him to fucking chill, the world’s not gonna stop if he doesn’t take every AP history class available.”

“I just can’t even think about wanting to study that hard,” I admitted. “I get headaches thinking about that.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Isn’t Wendy also in AP?” I wondered. “Do you tell her to stop, too?”

Stan laughed. “I think Wendy’s trying to compete with Kyle for valedictorian the same way she’s pissed at Clyde for losing the presidency this year,” he said. “I can’t tell her to lay off, dude, she’d eat me alive. She’s got annoying study habits, too, don’t get me wrong, but it’s all good.”

I rolled my eyes and said nothing else. Kyle joined us a couple minutes later, and after we’d given him shit about being too serious about his schoolwork, he smirked and shoved me off in the direction of the parking lot. Once there, the two blindfolded me and shoved me into the back seat of an unidentified car. “What the fuck?” I laughed. “Is this all just some big plot for you to gang rape me or something?”

“Shit, Kyle, he’s onto us!” Stan replied, adding extra snark to the already stupid response, just to make sure the message was clear to me since I couldn’t see that he was probably rolling his eyes or something.

“Plan B! We drown him in Stark’s Pond and make a getaway before the body’s found,” Kyle responded, being just as over-the-top as Stan.
Like that plan would work anyway.

It turned out that the car belonged, based on the subdued muttering I heard coming from the front seat, to Stan’s sister, Shelley Marsh. Shelley, a college freshman, was home on her spring break, and had apparently been blackmailed or something in order to drive us around, since it was not something she would do out of the kindness of her heart. Shelley is a very solitary person, more of an observer than a doer, but she has a strong personality, and usually holding conversation with her is hard before she gets bored of you and shuts you out. The fact that she was driving was vaguely promising, too… when a friend wasn’t in the driver’s seat, the only thing I could think was that whoever was had been roped into being a D.D. I liked this plan.

We continued joking about what could possibly await me at whatever our destination was—sell me into prostitution in Chinatown; they’d discovered I was actually a mob boss and they were turning me in; I was being taken to be sacrificed for a better crop season. The drive seemed to take for-fucking-ever, which led me to believe we were either on our way out of town or Stan had just made his sister go around South Park a couple times, taking different routes.

Then, finally, she parked the car, muttering something about gas prices. “Now get out,” she added.

“We’re taking a cab back,” Stan told her.

“You guys are disgusting,” Shelley added.

Stan and Kyle ushered me out of the car, and as soon as Shelley had booked it out of there, they made a big show of undoing the blindfold. Disgusting, as Shelley had said? Yes. Worth it? Oh, hell yes.

“This was so worth putting up with Shelley,” Stan grinned.

The plan had to do with girls all right. Hooters girls. Yeah, I wanted to bag myself a nice chick one of these days, but in the meantime, I can’t help it. Girls in general have been my main interest since I was about seven years old. I’m a shallow little fuck and something of a sex addict, and mostly proud of it. Okay, so I’ve died of syphilis, gonorhea (that was from Mercedes), auto-erotic asphyxiation, and personal enjoyment. Whatever. In those cases, it had always been worth it.

“Woo-hoo!” I exclaimed, thrusting my fists in the air the second we walked in. “God, guys, you’re good. Thank you.”

“You’re sixteen, dude,” Kyle grinned, thumping me on the back, “enjoy it.”

“Hey, Stan, if this place is so ‘worth it,’ how come we didn’t come here on your last birthday?” I pointed out, as an exceptional brunette showed us to a table.

“That’s cuz he was being pussy-whipped at the time.”

“Oh, ha, ha, thanks, Kyle,” Stan said sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

“Eh, I know this isn’t your thing, anyway,” I told Stan, grinding my knuckles into his shoulder. “You’d rather be at some hippie save the forest rally than a place with good fuckin’ food and inhumanly hot girls.”

“Dude, I’m not a hippie, shut up, I just like animals.”

“Whatever, hippie.”
“Shut the fuck up!”

We were shown to a table already occupied by Clyde, Timmy, Butters and Token, which was pretty great, since this was a League gathering on top of a regular old surprise party. I’d be distracted as fuck with all the girls around, but as far as dudes went, I couldn’t ask for a better group. I was tighter with everyone in the League than I was with a lot of the other guys in school… while I try to get along with everyone, I’ve always found myself mostly running with my usual group of four, and then after that, I do kinda like my alone time. I always have, even before the Mysterion thing started. Yes, some of that time is used to masturbate to any number of my collected mags, but a lot of the time, I just need time to think. I just need time to be alone and fucking think. Because it was impossible to explain my situation to anyone. They’d just forget it, eventually. Actually… that’s a lie. There was one person who believed everything I said, but that person only knew Mysterion. That one person had been my Cult liason for years.

Anyhow, that’s not important right now.

What was important was how fucking great the rest of that night went. Stan and Kyle kept on insisting that I order anything I fucking wanted, and Clyde played wingman for me that resulted in a delicious makeout session with a C-cup named Portia, one of the girls who had graduated early to Hooters from Raisins (I mean that in both ways). Most of the Raisins girls did end up at Hooters, I mean, it was good job security. Also, they were hot as hell. So I did see Mercedes, and Butters averted his eyes from his old flame, the svelte blonde Lexus. There was one other girl I had history with, too: Jetta, a brunette whose name used to be Tammy Warner. I’d gone out with Tammy in elementary school, contracted syphilis after she gave me a blow job, never went back to a T.G.I. Friday’s ever again as a result, and of course, we had to break up right after I’d come back to life from that one. We were still friendly, but she hadn’t come to school in years, so it wasn’t too awkward.

I’m pretty sure Clyde knew the bartender, too (Clyde seemed to, starting freshman year, just know everyone), since we were able to order mixed drinks under certain code words he’d devised with her. It was easy enough (order a Roy Rodgers, get a rum-and-Coke, that kind of thing), and we kept it at a minimum, since, even though I’d be fine getting arrested for my sixteenth birthday, people like Kyle and Butters would have been up shit creek for a while. (I say that with confidence because of Kyle’s overly protective mother, and Butters’ bottom-of-the-barrel, dipshit parents.) The group of us stayed pretty much until closing, and we parted tipsy, worried about no consequences whatsoever.

Before we could leave, however, Butters pulled me to the side and said, “Hey, Kenny, listen. I gotta say this to the other guys later, too, but I figured you should know first.”

“’Sup?” I wondered, not expecting anything work-related to come up that evening, despite most of the League being together.

“I, uh, or, well, Chaos…” Butters, weak after just one beer (on the house from one of the girls, which was hilarious when it had happened) began, “Chaos has to be at the next meetin’, okay?”

“What?” I tried to blink off my buzz, which I really didn’t want to do, but when it came to League duties, I had to stay on my toes. “Why?”

“Don’t wanna mess up your night with information,” Butters admitted, “so it can wait. Hasta, anyway.”

“Sure,” I said, nodding, letting the buzz come back. Whatever it was Chaos was onto, I was sure the wait would be worth it.
Stan, Kyle and I started back into town on foot. We knew the whole layout of the town and its surrounding cities well, from our League activities. It helped that Stan’s dad, Randy, was a geologist, and Stan himself had recently taken an interest in cartography based on books schluffed onto him by his dad’s co-worker Nelson. As we walked, we basically shot the shit, talked about nothing important, teased Stan about Wendy’s latest cause (she was getting really vocal as the head of a county-wide feminist book club), roasted Kyle for being single, and I was ripped on for being the total whore. “What exotic country is next on the list, eh?” Kyle prodded at one point. And then Stan burst out laughing and pointed out how fucking Canadian he could sound sometimes.

I was the one to pussy out about the weather and demand a cab after a while, and the guys conceded. Once Stan and Kyle had dropped me off after our equally ridiculous ride back in—again with those two insisting on paying for the cab—and I had thanked them again for, seriously, the best birthday I’d had so far, I slunk through the house toward my room.

My house is a shitpile. It really, really is. It’s a single-storey, sparsely-furnished, rat-infested, crumbling piece of shit. I died of lead poisoning from a patch of paint that chipped off and fell in my soup when I was twelve. Cold soup, I’ll add. Our gas had been turned off that day. I’m surprised I haven’t been poisoned by asbestos in my own house yet. It’s that bad. But it’s where I’d always lived, and I only had the hope of riding the fuck out of need-based scholarships to college keeping me optimistic that I’d someday get out of there.

I was sure I’d be the only one awake by the time I got in, but there was a light on in the kitchen. Since I really didn’t want to talk to either of my parents, or my brother, I tread softly through the house. I vaguely heard my mother muttering something, and, just as I was heading down the hall, she snapped off the kitchen light and walked out into the common room. No stranger to staying light on my feet, I crept into a shadow, though it was a little more difficult to hide in my hunting-season orange coat than it was to move around unseen, dressed like dusk.

“Kenny?” my mother’s cracked Southern drawl came out through the too-quiet house. “Kenny, you home?” Just to see what would happen, I remained silent. I can even hide my breath. “Oh. Never mind.” Mom didn’t say anything for a while, then said, “Dammit.” Raising her voice to a holler, she walked right past me, yelling, “Stuart, I think we’re due for another one!”

“Another what?” I wondered, stepping out to where she could see me. The streetlamps outside provided a small patch of light filtering in from the glassless window at the end of the hall, so I chose that square and stared my mother down. I’d outgrown her by a few inches in recent years, and had discovered that I liked using that.

“Kenny!” she yelped, whirling around to look at me, her eyes wide. Something I’d noticed about Mom; she seemed to get more and more tired as years went on. Maybe it had to do with how rocky and abusive her relationship with my dad was, or maybe, just maybe, it had something to do with my deaths. I hoped it was that one, and I’d been trying to trap her into saying something about it for a long time. If she remembered, if she watched her son die, over and over again, I had to know. I had to know what it was like for her, and why she remembered, and what exactly went on at that meeting she and Dad attended when they were dumb, drunk twentysomethings. “You startled me, I didn’t—”

“Another what?” I repeated, trying not to sound too much like Mysterion, as whom I had collected more from my parents than ‘Kenny’ ever could. “What were you just talking about?”

“Well, why didn’t you answer me in the first place?” Mom tried.

“Carol, what the hell is going on?” I heard Dad shout from their bedroom.
“Nothing, go back to sleep.”

“Don’t wake me up for nothing, bitch, I actually work tomorrow!”

“At eight p.m., you lazy shit!” Mom snapped back.

“Oh, God, fuck this, I’m going to bed,” I muttered, taking my coat off and chucking it back into the living room. I’d pick it up later, maybe.

“Kenny, you get back here and you answer my question!” my mother attempted to scold me.

“You don’t answer my questions, I’m not answering yours,” I replied.

Aaaaaaand, buzzkill.

I slammed my door and threw myself down onto my mattress, the same one I’d slept on since I was out of a crib. I’d had to get rid of the actual bedframe once I got too tall for the twin size, since of course we were too poor to get a full. A spring dug up into my spine, so I wriggled around until it was in a less irritating spot. My parents were still griping at each other through the thin walls of the house, and my first attempt to drown it out involved me holding one of my pillows over my face and ears.

Realizing that would most likely suffocate me, and not wanting to die like that after such a great birthday, I then got up, shaking off the last of the loopy effects of the alcohol, went to my closet dresser, and dug into the back of the top drawer. The secret compartment. I had started this routine for fun. As a way of distracting myself. Of feeling important, of feeling like something bigger than what I was. Then the Gulf crisis happened, and a hobby became a purpose.

I chucked off my clothes from the day and donned the familiar uniform of my six-years-running alter ego. There was never a night that couldn’t use a watchful eye. Most nights, I’d go out for an hour or two, just on patrol, keeping an eye out on the city. Sometimes I’d come upon another League member, but we generally parted ways after that.

After all, we were onto something now.

I crept out of the house with acquired acrobatics, and silently hid all traces of my boot prints in the snow. Once away from the house, I tightened the black cloth mask, glanced back at my uninviting house, pulled up my hood, and made my way back into town, keeping to the shadows, keeping to myself.

Our latest mission involved a growing drug ring, some members of whom we had already caught and dropped off into the hands of the police, who issued the proper sentences for dealers and buyers. Having a real mission was great, even if it did take time away from my learning more from the still-strong Cult, since it affirmed our continued need to be a force in this town as long as possible.

As we neared the end of sophomore year, I was becoming concerned about the longevity of the League. Would colleges scatter us? Would the town accept our departure? It would have to. After all, we couldn’t stick around just for a nighttime routine that never paid cash. It paid, yes, but it sucks that one can’t survive on good deeds alone.

My trek brought me to the downtown district, to the developed streets with the larger companies towering over the small-town businesses—larger companies with larger parking lots and back doors, where many busts took place. I scaled the side of the Home Depot, where sometimes I would run into Toolshed, and perched on the roof. I’d been convinced, for a while, that one of their
delivery guys had a hand in the drug ring, since he drove into work from so far out of town.

“Spying again, are we?” I heard someone say from behind me. Now, Toolshed would have been expected, but the voice wasn’t his. It was low, but smooth—a voice that had taken some time to perfect, that seemed to have dropped while his alter ego’s hadn’t. And, ultimately, it wasn’t one I generally liked hearing. But I’d been warned earlier. I almost could have expected it.

“I’m not spying, Chaos,” I answered, without turning to look at him. “I’m doing the real work the police are too afraid to dirty their hands with.” I changed my own voice, when I spoke as Mysterion. It was affected, gravelly, lower, close to a constant growl. I’d been able to keep it up for six years so far.

“Because you’re outside the law,” said Professor Chaos.

“Outside, but doing what’s right,” I corrected, standing. There was no activity below, anyway. “What do you want?”

I turned, and found that he was alone. More often than not, Chaos was seen side by side with General Disarray, but that night had brought him on his own. He stood several feet from me, dressed in varying shades of green, from his vest to his loose pants to his billowing cape, and what was not green was silver. Hard metal, which I did not put past Butters to have created on his own. When we were kids, it was tinfoil. By high school, it was cold, hard steel: the Spartan helmet, the gauntlets on the gloves, the chained fasten on the cape. His arms were folded, and his long blonde hair spiked out from the open top of the helmet, wild and, yes, chaotic.

“I was hoping I’d catch you alone,” he told me, approaching with heavy steps. I crouched, ready to attack. I kept on me, at all times, an arsenal: *shuriken*, which I’d mastered (and successfully taken Chaos’s left eye out with) as a kid (Butters had a transplanted, but perfectly functional, eye now), a .45 pistol and extra bullets, a wired receiver to call any other member of the League based on frequency, and, of course, a wide array of fireworks. “No need to rush to decisions, Mysterion,” he added, “I’m only here to make a trade.”

“I have nothing to trade,” I growled back. “Therefore, I can only assume you have a hidden agenda. What is it?”

“Just a fair trade,” said Chaos, producing, from the folds of his cape, a manilla envelope. “I don’t want to fight tonight, hero, I’m only here to secure a spot in that next meeting of yours.”

“That’s it?” I asked. “That’s the trade-off? You come to a meeting, and I get… what?”

“Something I think will make this little drug chase a little more interesting for you.”

Cautiously, I reached forward and took the envelope he outstretched to me. Keeping an eye on him, I opened it, and withdrew a stack of four photos, taken from easily recognizable places around town. One location was behind the high school. And who should be present in every one of the photos but a classmate of ours:

Craig Tucker.

Craig was something of a friend, but Clyde and Token knew him well. He could be something of a loner, and had always been something of a cynical dick. He was sarcastic, dark, dismissive, and bored easily. He also seemed to be a little depressed. And apparently, he was one of our main targets.

“Where did you get these?” I demanded of Professor Chaos, setting my full attention back on
him.

“Here and there,” said Chaos. “I have my own sources, you know.” Disarray. It figured. “It may also interest you to know,” he went on, “that I have reason to believe that Cult obsession of yours may be linked to the person in the photos.”

“Huh?” I glared back at the stack, flipping from one to the other. “Where’s the proof? Chaos, you’d better be able to back this up, or—”

“Oh, I can back it up. I just need your help, first.”

“What do you want out of our next meeting?”

“I’ll tell you when the time comes. Just get me in. You won’t regret it.”

Against my better judgment, I agreed. After all, if this really was linked to the Cult, I had to take a chance. “Fine,” I said. “But we’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“Oh, Mysterion. Not everything has to be as dramatic as you think it should be. For all you know, I’m only taking a little more interest in your League…” With that, he grinned, turned, and walked off toward the fire escape. Chaos never had been exceptional in his physical feats, which made him easy to chase down. It was Disarray that proved to be the acrobatic nightmare.

But I had a lead. A lead more close to home than I’d been expecting. A possible hit that could end our current mission in a high-stakes bust, a classmate to question on Cult activities, and an oddly reliable source of information in Professor Chaos.

My day just got interesting again.

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Episode 2: We, The League

Stan

The Wednesday after Kenny’s birthday came faster than I’d expected. It was huge, too, since he would not shut up about it. Since high school started, getting out of the house on Wednesday nights had become much, much easier. It was routine, it had always been routine. And every one of us lived for it. Us, of course, meaning the League.

Under the usual pretense of having a weekly study session at Token’s—an easy lie, since the Blacks honestly had a library in their house—I left after dinner and joined Kyle and Cartman halfway. We kept conversation simple during the walk... things about school, and the latest crappy Hollywood remake of a former classic; Kyle asked me how everything was going with Wendy, and I asked Cartman how the pet hunt was going (which was a hard choice for a topic, since he was still torn up over the death of his childhood pet, Mr. Kitty). We did not mention anything dealing with the additional items each of us carried; I and Cartman cleverly having tucked all the essentials in among the books we packed to keep suspicion away from our respective mothers, and Kyle with his additional nondescript briefcase.

Only when we reached the high-end side of town, where the Blacks’ resplendent yellow mansion stood surrounded by nothing but high gates, high trees, and deep, fresh snow, did things change. The mansion itself was not our destination that night, but a smaller building beyond a smaller gate, barred by a lock, the code to which changed weekly. While Cartman and I kept watch, Kyle clicked the five numbers for that night into place, swung the gate open for the three of us, then pulled it closed and replaced the lock. We then traveled down a snow-dusted path, each of us kicking bits of snow behind us every few paces to cover our tracks. This was second-nature to us by now; this was the third year running we had come, every Wednesday, to this particular spot. After the usual five-minute walk through a bit of forestry, we came across the small auxiliary building, which was still on Token’s parents’ land, and could be passed off as a storage facility if Mr. or Mrs. Black were ever to be asked about it. The lights inside the large one-storey building were on, indicating that we three were not the first to have arrived, and a figure stood outside the door, leaning against the wall and lit up by the glow of a cell phone.

“Marjorine?” Kyle greeted once we were close enough to catch who the figure was. “You came tonight?”

“Hey, fellas,” Marjorine smiled, lifting her head meekly to give us her attention. She was hardly dressed for the weather, like many of the girls in South Park tended to be this time of year, with the promise of spring just around the corner: she huddled inside a fuzzy, light blue sweater, but her knees knocked together under a high-hemmed brown skirt, with little else between that and her boots. I was surprised, too: Marjorine tended to be a little body-conscious, especially concerning—as we all heard when it was ‘her day’—hands, feet and legs. “I was just finishin’ a phone call.”

“Butters—Marjorine,” Cartman sighed, “you know you shouldn’t make calls from here, they can trace ’em online.”

“Oh, but this isn’t a computer phone,” Marjorine explained. “I have a different one. Butters’ phone is at home.”

“Still, I have to agree,” Kyle said, “you should be careful.”
“Speaking of...” I remembered, digging into my pocket and switching my own cell off. I don’t have a computer-linked phone either. The other guys generally do, so that they can keep up with Facebook and all that at any time—Clyde especially seems glued to his—but that kind of thing never really interested me. I don’t need Facebook, or news alerts sent to my phone. If I want to find out about something I’ll ask, or watch the news, or read a paper. I’m probably in the minority of high schoolers who read newspapers, but I don’t really care.

My action alerted the other three to do the same thing, Marjorine a little reluctantly. “Plus,” Cartman found it necessary to add, “we can’t always trust you.”

Marjorine gave a nervous laugh, and twisted her low ponytail with one index finger. “Don’t worry about it, Eric,” she grinned up at him. “It’s him you have to worry about. Not me.”

“Butters, I swear...” Cartman muttered.

“Marjorine,” Marjorine corrected him. “Butters hasn’t been feeling well,” she added, standing away from the wall and patting Cartman on the arm, “so get used to seeing a lot of me, sweetie.”

Before the situation could become any more awkward for him, Cartman cleared his throat and knocked on the heavy wooden door. It took only seconds until the door was checked from the inside, then unbolted and opened to reveal a satisfied-looking Clyde, who rushed us in so as not to let too much cold air in. He shivered once under his zipped-up red sweatshirt before finally greeting, “Hey, guys, seven exactly! Glad you could all make it.”

“Are you kidding me?” I said eagerly. “We’re really onto something, apparently. Wouldn’t have missed this week for anything.”

“I was just saying to Marjorine before you all got here, I’m surprised she’s not grounded,” Clyde laughed as he led us from the atrium toward the mudroom and kitchenette, where Token was pouring himself a cup of coffee. He lifted his mug to us as we entered, and I at least nodded in return, both of us indicating that we’d all catch up later.

“I can’t believe your parents are still so strict,” Kyle marveled as he shrugged his backpack off and slid it into the shelf marked KB:HK. The back wall of the mudroom, which existed as the point at which we ceased speaking about whatever happened during the meetings, was entirely shelves and safes, marked with our own initials and a signifier for our League identities. Mine, for example, read SM:T; Cartman’s EC:C, and so on—TB:TW, CD:M, TB:IM, the honorary BS/MS:PC, and the seldom-filled and oft-ignored BB:MBC. A new shelf was being added on, on the lowest level, for our newest addition: Kyle’s ten-year-old brother, Ike. Whether or not Ike would be at that night’s meeting was something even Kyle did not know, nor was he now at liberty to discuss the possibility.

“Well,” said Marjorine, blushing as she set her cell phone into her safe, “they try, anyway. He’s neurotic, you know; they don’t like that. And I, well... they don’t really like me...”

“Sure, they like you,” I said to boost her confidence. “You’re their kid. All parents like their kids to some degree.”

“That’s a debate for the ages,” Kenny’s voice came from outside the mudroom. We had all finished tucking our belongings away and hanging our coats and hats—with the exception of Kyle, who preferred to leave his hat on—and left with Clyde to join Token and, now, Kenny, in the front rooms.
“Hey, Kenny,” Kyle and I said simultaneously. Kenny smiled a little before hiding himself behind his mug of coffee. I wanted to change the subject as soon as possible, since the last thing we needed was Kenny getting angry about his family that night. In his defense, though, the guy had it pretty bad. His ramshackle house stood on the other end of town, far from the decadence that surrounded Token’s neck of the woods... far even from the comfort of the middle class that most of us thrived in. It was no secret that Headquarters felt more like home to Kenny than his parents’ house. The McCormicks lived in poverty, and had since before Kenny was born. He was generally quiet about the states of affairs regarding his family, preferring to put up his best image as just another friend.

Though he did not want it to look like a blatant act of charity, Token often offered up Headquarters to Kenny for the night, and Kenny quietly accepted. Headquarters had, in fact, been mostly Kenny’s idea, and a lot of the planning had been done by him on and off for three years before the idea was finally implemented. After all, Kenny had been in operation undercover for slightly longer than the rest of us. It was his racket first, and we all saw him as entitled to claim ownership over Headquarters and the League, despite it taking Cartman’s name and being mostly under Clyde’s leadership.

It was Clyde who brought the conversation around by ushering us all into the common area. This was the main room of the front of HQ… we kept the meeting room out back. It was the room Mr. and Mrs. Black hadn’t seen since we as a group repurposed it, so to speak. The common area, though, was your average living room. Sofa, TV, scattered chairs, that kind of thing. Essentially, the place could double as a rec room. Most of us had rec rooms, in our home basements, hell, even Token had an actual rec room… he was just rich enough to have another one, too. And nobody questioned that. We kept a computer in that room, too, but all our mainframe computers were out back. This was just our place to hang, in general, where we’d shoot the shit before meetings, and sometimes wind up on odd afternoons anyway. The common room also had a stocked minifridge, despite the fact that the kitchenette was only a good ten feet away from the sofa. Whatever. The more convenient shit was, the better.

“Who’s on food tonight?” Cartman griped as we all found seats around the place. He, as usual, claimed the left side of the sofa. “I’m starving.”

“God, think about something else,” Token complained as he walked in with his coffee. “Here,” he added, chucking the remote at Cartman, “find a good channel. Occupy your brain with something other than food.” Cartman shot him a glare, but went about his task all the same. “What’s up, guys?” our host then said to me and Kyle.

I’d made right for the mini-fridge, where I grabbed two root beers and tossed one to Kyle, who had claimed a seat in an overstuffed tan bean bag chair off to the far right of the sofa. “Nothing,” Kyle answered, twisting the cap off the soda. “Yep,” I agreed, taking a seat straddling the mini-fridge as I opened my own bottle. “Same old, same old. Can’t wait till fuckin’ spring break, though.”


“Oh,” said Marjorine, kneading her knuckles together, “I don’t wanna be—”

“Fuck’s sake, get in here,” I told her.

“Right here,” said Clyde, pointing to the spot in the middle of the sofa. Cartman rolled his eyes.
Kenny helped out by giving Marjorine a little shove as he crossed over to sit in the chair off to Kyle’s right. It was funny how the three of us always seemed to migrate together, no matter what setting. Once, in middle school, Kenny had mumbled something about feeling like a ‘third wheel’ around me and Kyle, but I’d shrugged it off, and since then, we were a bit more of a threesome. Cartman had his moments, but he loved himself so Goddamn much we didn’t feel like excluding him (whenever we did) was anything devastating.

“Hey!” Marjorine scolded Kenny from where she stood. “Don’t shove a lady like that.”

“Whatever, Marjorine, you’re not much of a lady,” Cartman muttered, clicking through channels.

Marjorine’s face flushed red, and just when she seemed like she’d explode, there was a knock at the door. She stormed off in that direction, muttering, “I’ll get it,” while the rest of us glared at Cartman for his insensitivity.

Clyde went ahead and punched him. “AYE!” Cartman yelped.

“Dude, not cool,” Clyde warned.

“Yeah, dude, Marjorine’s fragile,” Kyle added.

“Fragile my balls, he’s also Professor Chaos,” Cartman spat back. Well, none of us could argue that.

Luckily, none of us had to. At that very moment, a familiar high voice rang out from the entrance: “You guys are all dicks!” I glanced over at Kyle, and we both immediately started laughing. The voice belonged to none other than Ike Broflovski. Despite his upbringing, a hint of his Canadian roots came out in his voice more and more as the kid grew up. I think it’s just ingrained in Canadian blood or something. Regional pronunciations usually came out especially when Ike was irate.

Ike, short for a sixth-grader due to his young age, still dressed for the weather in a blue and black knit cap, blue trench coat, and black snowpants and boots, stormed into the common area, with Marjorine following him with a stack of four large pizza boxes. “All right!” Kenny grinned. “Pizza’s here!”

“It’s Pizza’s here my ass!” Ike complained, yanking his hat off and flinging it at Kenny, who dodged it in a fit of laughter. “Who sends the ten-year-old across town in this much snow?! Next time we order out!”

“We can’t order out from here and you know it,” said Token plaintively, taking the pizza boxes from Marjorine. He walked over and kicked me off the mini-fridge in order to use it as a table for the boxes. I complied and stole half of the bean bag from Kyle instead. “Plus, sorry, kid, you lost the contest to see who went.”

“You could’ve called my brother!”

“No cell calls from here,” Token reminded him, starting to laugh as well.

“You could’ve picked a contest other than arm wrestling, buddy!”

“Dude, what’d we miss?” I laughed.

“Ike being a pussy,” Kenny smirked.
“It’s called being fucking ten!” Ike bit back. “Sorry I haven’t built up my upper arm strength yet.”

“Soorry,” Kyle, Kenny and I mocked him. ‘Sorry’ and ‘about’ were Ike’s most Canadian words, and, damn, did we ever rip on him for it. He never attempted to make the adjustment to the American pronunciations, though, which was his own ‘fuck you’ to us, which we respected by continuing to berate him. Sheila would get on us about it, but I’d caught Gerald laughing with us a few times before.

Ike passively flipped us off, narrowing his black eyes, then made for the mudroom, leaving a wet trail of melting snow in his wake. Ike could fake emotions pretty well, but I’d known the kid long enough to tell the difference—he really was just joking around this time, he wasn’t actually angry. When Ike got really angry, he got fussy and complained a lot. Around us, faking anger, he’d usually model his actions after what Kyle did when he got worked up.

Marjorine watched Ike leave, then silently entered the room and sat down on the middle cushion of the couch, making sure to sit ever so slightly more on Cartman’s side than Clyde’s. “He’s pretty sore, huh?” she said, sounding hurt.

“Ike’s fine,” Kenny shrugged. “Kid’ll get over it.”

“Well, okay…”

“Ah, let’s leave it,” Token suggested. “Let’s just eat.”

Clyde made for the kitchenette to grab plates, and I assigned myself to soda duty, tossing around bottles and cans from the minifridge based on preferences. Ike walked back in, de-snowed, as Clyde was returning, and rolling in behind them was Timmy Burch, our wheelchair-bound friend and ally. According to Token, Timmy had been there for a while already, doing work. He and Ike were the ones in charge of keeping track of everything; despite mental handicaps, Timmy was exceptionally organized, especially when it came to the League, and he’d been spending a better part of the afternoon helping Clyde shelf documents and newspapers that detailed our old missions.

Conversation was light and stupid, as usual. Talking about things within the League rarely happened outside the meeting room and out of character. That was part of what being in the League really was: taking on an alter ego in order to accomplish things that we normally (read: within the law) would never have been able to do. Kenny and Butters were the biggest exceptions, since Mysterion and Professor Chaos were, respectively, more tethered to their normal selves than, say, Toolshed was to me, or Human Kite was to Kyle.

When seven-thirty rolled around, food and drinks were bussed away into the kitchenette, and we each found our way to the mudroom at various times to collect anything we needed for the evening. Clyde was the first to dismiss himself, as usual, followed by Cartman and then Kyle, based on the lengths of their respective preparation times. Token ducked out after Kyle, then Timmy, Ike, and Marjorine. Kenny and I remained discussing the events of last week for a few minutes more, and then I let the conversation die, claimed my belongings, and ambled into the back.

Something about Headquarters that had surprised me from the start, and still floored me was the fact that each of us had a room we could go to. They were small, but still, it was better than any of the rest of us would have been able to come up with if HQ was based at any of the rest of our houses. Yes, the Blacks were in on the whole thing, so we were easily accommodated for. Each room had a modest bed, a wardrobe, and plenty of room to prepare. They were more like cloakrooms than anything, but it was a place to shack up if we needed to.
It was strange, but comforting, how routine this all was. Sometimes, my conscience would catch me, and I would ask myself if what we were doing was strange for guys our age, but then I was able to console myself: ‘strange’ was too general a term for anything that happened in or to the residents of South Park, Colorado. ‘Strange’ was relative. What we were doing had merit, gave us confidence, and benefited the town, its justice system, and even the wellness of others far and abroad, who may never have even heard of our simple little mountain town. I did not know at the time whether or not Wendy knew of my involvement with the League, and my alibis were perfect, as our meetings took place on the same night as her feminist book club meetings. If she did know, I never asked, and she never mentioned it.

My family certainly did not know, nor did any of our families, relatives, or significant others. The only exceptions were Token’s parents, Cartman’s mom, who forgot from time to time anyway, and a few of Timmy’s relatives, since he was an exception for transportation. Ike, roughly now the same age we had been when ‘Coon and Friends’ was first established, had pieced together his brother’s secret identity when one of Kyle’s stories to his parents hadn’t quite lined up. Ike had covered for Kyle that night, and subsequently expressed interest in working with us. Kyle was skeptical to let his younger brother join, but in the end, there was really no stopping him.

Kyle and I generally came up with lies that involved each other, as they were easy to sell, and we had been coming up with similar stories for years. The Wednesday night meetings were an easy cover, but sometimes it would be something along the lines of, “Stan needs me to fix a bug on his computer,” or, “Kyle and I are heading out to work on a science project,” or, more recently, “We have band practice.” The band cover wasn’t wholly a lie, but we didn’t use it often, since our parents would certainly soon ask us when and where we might perform. We had formed and broken up bands several times before, in several different garages and basements, but now it was pretty much just me with my guitar, and Kyle with his bass and sometimes keyboard. Plus, he can deny it all he wants, but the guy can sing; I mean sing. If I had to pick a great singer out of any of us, I’d honestly say Kenny—who once took opera lessons or something—but Kyle is a very close second. I’m too critical of my own voice, even though Kyle insists I’m good, and I just plain hate giving Cartman the benefit of the doubt as far as talent goes, even though he can at least stay on pitch.

Anyway, this isn’t about bands, or even the lack thereof. It’s about the League.

I enjoy being in the League. I really do. I think that the work we do is important and inspiring, and I even got caught up in the ulterior motives Kenny uses Headquarters for: researching an ancient text called the *Necronomicon*. I had yet to fully understand his obsession with that book, but I helped him out nonetheless. Mostly, I’ve always just liked to escape reality for a little while. Reality is full of standards and expectations. In the League, we only expect one another to respect all opinions (a problem which sometimes arises with Cartman), and, most importantly, to have each other’s backs when we’re out on the job.

The particular talents I bring to the League are essential, but I never get egotistic about it. Again, I just like to help. And so, with that as my goal in mind, I changed clothes for the evening, swapping out my jeans for a darker pair, my brown shirt for a white one, and my sneakers for black and red work boots. Checking to make sure everything was in place, I strapped on my defining toolbelt. I could spin and work a Philip’s head now the way I’ve seen some guys work a butterfly knife; it’s convenient that everything on that belt that can help out in a normal situation can also be used as cunning weapons, and I know the secret use of all of them.

After securing onto my back the latest addition to my arsenal, a sledgehammer I’d acquired one day while Clyde and I were scouring the town dump for ideas (and just for the hell of it), I reached back into my bag for the sculpting wax I always had for League purposes, and ran it through my hair. Spiking it now was a little hard, since Wendy had just recently cut it for me,
despite my usual protests, but I reached the desired effect quickly, wiped my hands dry quickly on my jeans, then pulled on my black and red work gloves, and drew out my yellow safety goggles. Remembering my most recent detail, I added as well a bit of black charcoal eyeliner around my eyes before sliding on the goggles. At the highest risk of being unveiled, I had come up with the eyeliner idea a few years back, and it proved thus far to work as intended.

At ten to eight, I made my way back to the meeting room, which was already occupied by Iron Maiden, Mosquito, and the youngest, Red Serge. Red Serge—Ike by day—was exactly what his name implied: ridiculously Canadian. His uniform consisted of a literal red serge, the same uniform worn by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (the Coon originally called Red Serge ‘the Mountie,’ but Ike preferred the other), down to the wide-brimmed cap; to the standard uniform, he added a black half-mask to cover his eyes. His weapon of choice was a thin sword, much like a fencing foil, and when he made his way into a fight, his small size worked to his advantage, as did an exceptional knack for acrobatics, which were all more or less self-taught.

TupperWear entered from another side of the room right around the same time I did, and the two of us ambled in to join a discussion already underway between the Coon and Human Kite. “Check it out,” the latter beamed, grinning from ear to ear as he held up a spool of what looked like simple white twine. “I figured this out last week: it’s twice emulsified, and now it’s stronger than chain link!”

“Oh, very impressive, Human Kite,” the Coon mumbled, feigning interest.

“Better than any ideas you’ve come up with lately, Rodent,” he sneered back.

“That’s Coon!”

“I dunno,” I added in. “Rodent seems to suit you just fine.”

“Aye!”

“Gentlemen!” a commanding voice buzzed from the back of the room, causing us all to turn. “The time is now eight o’clock, and the meeting is in session.”

I had to give Clyde credit: he was a fantastic leader. Sophomore class president, football team co-captain last season—despite his being only a second year student—and acting head of the now-seven-years-running Coon League. Back in sixth grade, when we had considered abandoning the League due to each of us thinking the rest had lost interest, Clyde had been the first to have an active voice in saying that he wanted to continue. He’d even switched his costume around a little at that time, replacing an old piece for a Mardi Gras-style mask with a red and brown design and a long, pointed ‘mosquito’ nose, both for practical, identity-shielding purposes and as a reminder that this whole thing took off due to a crisis down in New Orleans. His voice, as Mosquito, was cleverly disguised by a constantly pinched nose, too, giving him a more high-pitched, nasal sound than usual. The rest of us generally opted to lower our tones to disguise our voices, Mysterion and the Coon opting for a full, almost whispered, growl. Red Serge was the only other one to alter his voice higher.

We took our places around a rectangular table. We’d thought about having a round one in the past, but we’d started out with a rectangular one, and kept that as the standard. Based on who needed the floor, we’d alternate the head seats on either side, and each had a permanent place on the longer ends. There were two vacant seats on each side as well, on the off-chance we’d add in a new member. Or on the off-chance we’d get another visit from Mint-Berry Crunch. Mint-Berry Crunch, alter ego of our former classmate Bradley Biggle, was rarely heard from nowadays. He’d stop in occasionally, but for the most part spent his time on—this is going to sound ridiculous—his home
planet, piecing together the mysteries of his past, and honing the power of mint and berries. I had no idea mint and berries had power, but the guy was an alien. So whatever. Again: very little seems ‘strange’ to me anymore, after having grown up in this town.

The meeting table was surrounded on all sides by computer and television screens, as well as two whiteboards, a corkboard with clippings of leads for our latest investigations, and file cabinets. It was here that we kept up with the news, kept tabs on local crimes and national crises, and would do occasional research into Kenny’s obsession with the Necronomicon and the local Cult of Cthulhu. One of the whiteboards was completely full of scribblings, mostly in Kenny’s writing, on Cult meeting times, passages from the ancient book we’d managed to scrounge up, and a timeline of Cult activity since Stuart and Carol McCormick had first visited a meeting sixteen years ago, especially detailed after the Gulf crisis. We all knew Kenny had some kind of tie to Cthulhu, but for the life of me, I could never remember everything we’d learned. It usually just seemed like an obsession.

Just as I was looking over that whiteboard to see if he’d added anything new, Mysterion, generally the last to join the meetings, marched in and took his place at the table. Mosquito currently held the floor, and called for us to be seated. “Red Serge, how are we for attendance?” he asked our youngest member, whose seat was between Iron Maiden and the Coon, on the side of the table across from where Kite, TupperWear and I sat. Mysterion’s place was directly next to the Coon’s, and across from Mosquito’s normal one, on Kite’s left. I couldn’t help but notice that he looked more driven than usual that evening. And why wouldn’t he? He always got that way when it seemed like we’d be wrapping something up soon.

“The numbers don’t add up,” said Red Serge as he finished his tally. In front of him was a clipboard with a roster, which he switched out every Wednesday and replaced afresh, based on activity. There were some nights that not all of us could make, but either Red Serge or Iron Maiden was always around to keep numbers in check. “We’re still missing—”

“No,” Mysterion corrected, looking up, “he’s here.”

We all turned our attention to the meeting room door, which opened and closed heavily as our irregular member made himself known. It wasn’t every week we teamed up with the usually solitary Professor Chaos, but this week was quite the exception. Mosquito motioned for Chaos to take the seat at the other head of the table, but the latter preferred to stand. If ever the opportunity arose for him to have everything in the palms of his hands, Chaos would take it.

“Mosquito,” said Mysterion, standing as well, “if I could..?”

“All yours,” he nodded, taking his regular seat at the table and giving Mysterion the head. I was on the edge of my seat. Mysterion and Chaos were, arguably, the two strongest forces in the room, and history told us that collaboration between them was not an easy or desired thing. Whenever Chaos had attended meetings in the past, it had usually been as a way to escape blackmail, which was easy enough for us to come by, but tonight, Kenny had even confided in me at school earlier, had been entirely Chaos’s idea.

“All yours,” he nodded, taking his regular seat at the table and giving Mysterion the head. I was on the edge of my seat. Mysterion and Chaos were, arguably, the two strongest forces in the room, and history told us that collaboration between them was not an easy or desired thing. Whenever Chaos had attended meetings in the past, it had usually been as a way to escape blackmail, which was easy enough for us to come by, but tonight, Kenny had even confided in me at school earlier, had been entirely Chaos’s idea.

“Right,” Mysterion growled, his eyes not leaving Chaos’s for a second. “Now would you mind telling us how and why you came by this?”

From his cape, Mysterion pulled a manilla envelope, which he passed around starting with Mosquito. When they got to me, I paused, stunned. Craig? Craig Tucker was involved in the drug ring?

“It started when my assistant and I,” Chaos began, “were making our way to the school to
make use of its chemistry lab.” Aha. A few months ago, we’d stopped Chaos from breaking into the school for that very purpose. His plan that time had had something to do with erosion, though the full memory of that scuffle was hazy—I remembered Kenny disappearing at some point when we finally caught Chaos, and days later his whole plan was abandoned, so none of us had really thought about it since. “Our break-in was interrupted by Craig and his little drug deal, but I happened to notice that one of his clients arrived wearing a robe.” Here, he pointed with a flourish at the Cult board. “A robe belonging to a member of the very cult that your League is devoted to studying.”

“What is it you want from us, Chaos?” Mysterion demanded.

“A seat at your meetings for no less than five weeks.”

“Consecutively?” I wondered, passing the photos across the table.

“No,” Professor Chaos grinned. “Any five meetings I want.”

“A tip-off isn’t worth that much!” TupperWear argued. “No deal.”

“This is more than a tip-off, you fool!” Chaos snapped. I couldn’t help it: I still could barely believe that he and the overly-friendly Marjorine were the same person. “I happen to know that Craig has a deal set up for tonight in his usual spot. Go ahead, bring him down tonight, and you’ll see. You can bring down the drug ring as fast and easily as you’d like, but without me, you’re not going to get any closer to that Cult than you are right now!”

“What do they have to do with something as petty as pot and heroin?” Mysterion demanded.

“I have reason to believe something other than substances are being passed through hands at these transactions,” said Chaos, his eyes, sapphire and maliciously gleaming under a thick coat of black, shadowy makeup, dead set on Mysterion’s. “Whether or not Craig has a hand in the Cult, I have yet to discover, but I am willing to work with you on this. Provided that I have access to no less than five meetings in addition to this one.”

“What do you stand to gain?” Mysterion barked.

“More information on what your League is up to,” Chaos answered. “That’s all.”

“I don’t buy it,” the Coon said, narrowing his eyes, absconded by a fur mask, at Professor Chaos.


Mysterion slammed a fist down on the table, causing us all to turn and give him our full attention. He glanced over at his whiteboard, then closed his eyes and sighed before returning his attention to our long-standing nemesis. “Five,” he agreed, “so long as I or another member of this League chooses three.”

“The bargains can keep adding up—” Chaos began.

“We choose three!” Mysterion shouted. “That’s my only offer! Take it, Chaos, and take us to the scene of this transaction! I’m not going to talk this over any longer, I have much better things to do!”

“Very well,” Chaos gave in. “Five meetings, three chosen by you. To be filled within this year.”
“Deal. The end. Done.”

“Wait, Mysterion—” Human Kite tried to reason.

“Nobody argue this!” Mysterion interrupted. And from there, we didn’t. None of us ever opposed Mysterion. When it came down to the Cult, we really couldn’t deny him anything. His obsession with that did seem unhealthy, and I worried about him from time to time, but I also had a gut feeling that his obsession was not without reason. A gut feeling that we’d all soon be drawn further into the obsession ourselves, and we wouldn’t be sorry that we let him get his way with investigating the Cult all this time. “We’re done here,” said Mysterion. “We’re moving out. Chaos, lead us to Craig. Coon, TupperWear, I’m charging you with keeping this guy under control.”

The two accepted their assignment, and thus the evening began. In the end, it was destined to take a turn, but all we knew at the moment was that we were heading much deeper into the mission than we ever thought we’d go.

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We divided into three field teams: first wave was me, Human Kite, and Mosquito; TupperWear and Coon were with Professor Chaos on standby; Mysterion, as usual, was alone. We all respected his need for solitude, and general preference for working alone, even if it did make us a little nervous sometimes. He never wandered off too far, though, and always had a good sense of where the rest of us were.

The three of us on first wave went ahead toward the high school, while standby hung back. Mysterion was undoubtedly around, and hopefully the other two were keeping a good eye on Chaos. The Coon usually got to him before anything too strange could happen. Chaos was known for, well… chaotic things, and would sometimes help us out only to lead us into traps or start up diversions. I knew that, beneath it all, it was just Butters wanting attention… Chaos just went about it in a more Machiavellian way that Marjorine did.

“You think Chaos was right?” Human Kite asked out of nowhere.

“Huh?” I wondered.

“I mean, what if he’s leading us on? He’s done it before.”

“I trust Mysterion’s judgment enough to believe he’s telling us the right thing,” said Mosquito. “I’m skeptical as to what Chaos wants, though.”

“Same here,” I admitted. “I mean, have you guys noticed that Butters has been really… kinda out of it lately?”

“Yeah,” Kite nodded, solemnly. “Considering how often Marjorine’s been showing up, plus as Chaos he’s been…”

“Abnormally idle,” Mosquito offered.

“Exactly.”

“Guys, I’m worried about Butters,” I confessed. “I mean, the kid’s had it bad his whole life, but d’you ever think he might really just be kinda insane?”

“How can you be so—”

Mosquito interrupted me by raising a hand. The three of us stopped short, and fixed our eyes on the same spot. Standing beside the dumpster just under the window that looked into the first-floor chemistry lab stood, just as Chaos had tipped off, Craig. This was the senior parking lot, tucked away behind the school, and in enough of a convenient location to allow privileged seniors easy access to the back door. Apparently, it served plenty of other purposes, too.

Our dark-haired, dark-expressioned classmate was leaning back against the brick structure, counting out bills in his black-gloved hands. Oddly enough, I’d never thought that Craig would choose to run with such a seedy crowd. He never showed any signs of use. Then again, if anyone could hide it, he could. He was impossible to read as it was. The question was now whether he was waiting to buy, or had just made a transaction.

“Shit,” Clyde muttered, accidentally dropping character for a second. “It really is Craig.” A general naysayer but all around average person and student, Craig had been good friends with Clyde for a while, though Craig had seemed to become more and more of a loner since entering high school. His ways were rather mysterious, and I never did know what that guy did after school—he had no club activities, nor was he involved with any sports or the arts. Well. I guess setting up drug deals was one way to waste extra time.

“I know you’re there,” Craig said. The three of us held our breath, making no movement. It was possible he didn’t mean us. “You’ve been riding my ass way too long, and it’s pissing me off. I’ve got another client coming, so get the hell outta here.” Okay, he most likely did mean us.

Just then, four silhouettes appeared, coming round the other side of the building. Kite, Mosquito and I were positioned in the shadows off a sports equipment shed, which stood a few good yards away from Craig. “You guys catch that?” I heard Mysterion hiss into the communication wire in my right ear.

“What, that he’s got a transaction coming up?” I wondered.

“Not just that. We’re not alone.”

“Yeah, his clients,” said Human Kite.

“Someone else, too.”

“Someone else?” I repeated. “Who the hell else is there?”

It clicked for all of us at once: “The Cult?!”

Mosquito shushed us and directed our attention back over at Craig, who slipped little bags of white powder into the hands of one of the silhouettes, who in turn handed Craig a generous roll of bills. “On three,” he said. Kite and I nodded. “One… two…”

“I warned you, you skeaze!” someone called out.

“Fuckin’ a,” Craig muttered, quickly pocketing the wad of cash.

“Damn, Tucker, you said you were alone!” one of the silhouettes yapped.

“I thought I was,” said Craig blankly. “You got your stuff, get outta here. This bitch is—”

“Who are you calling a bitch?!” Just then, someone leapt down from the fire escape landing
above the chem lab, made a perfect three point landing in front of Craig, stood, backfisted him, then made for one of the silhouettes.

“Mysterion! B Team!” I called into the wire.

“Way ahead of you,” said Mysterion.

“Is it that little Dissaray asshole?” the Coon wondered.

“No!” said Human Kite. “It’s…”

“Who the hell is that?” I wondered.

We moved closer, both to gain ground and to get a better idea of who and what we were up against. Obviously, this newcomer was anti-Craig, but whether or not they were on our side was questionable. “Coon League!” Mosquito announced, taking the lead as the three of us stepped out of the shadows and directly into what was going to become the brawl. He held forward his stun gun, showing he meant business. He usually does. “We’ll take it from here.”

“No way,” said the newcomer, back to us, “this is my bust.”

“I don’t think so.” That was Mysterion, who appeared silently from where the four buyers had come.

“Craig,” another of the buyers warned, “if you set this up—“

“Hell, no,” said Craig. “Look, you got your shit, leave. I’m not a part of this stupid little club, okay? They’re all a bunch of pains in my ass.” He lifted his head and glared over at the one most hell-bent on stopping him. “You hear me, Marpesia?”

“Marpesia?” Mysterion echoed.

“That’s right,” said the newcomer. I took that time to analyze what I could of Marpesia.

First off, no getting around it, Marpesia was a girl. She looked pretty tall, but, then again, she had a good couple inches in her heeled combat boots. The boots, black with a serpentine pattern sprayed on in silver, laced up to just below her knees. She then wore black spandex under a metal-plated, heavy black pleated skirt. A utility belt was strapped around her waist, over what must have been a bulletproof vest which, like her boots, was black and sprayed silver in a pattern. She wore shoulderpads, forearm gauntlets, and gloves with the same design. Her hair was black, streaked silver, and tied into a braid that reached halfway down her back. She wore a high black collar, and her head was completely covered by a Greek-style helmet. I hadn’t gotten a look at whatever I could of her face yet, but her voice, low in pitch, echoed inside the helmet, giving her, really, that Greek god-like feel. Just one thing…

…Who the hell was she? And how long had she been active?

Apparently Craig knew about her, where were we all that time?

“Stand back, boys,” Marpesia said, cracking her knuckles, “and let me handle this.”

Without so much as a go-ahead nod from one of us, Marpesia turned and swiftly dealt a high kick to one of Craig’s clients. Her boot hit him square in the face; the man choked and hit the ground hard on his back. I gulped back a “Holy shit!” and glanced over at Mysterion, who was keeping a close eye on Marpesia’s form. And why not? The girl could fight. As she effortlessly
brought down man after man, I found myself less concerned with who she was, and more on what her motives were. I was so focused, in fact, that it took me a few seconds before I heard the Coon spitting, “Hey!” into the wire. “Toolshed, you lazy asshole, back us up. Craig made a break for it!”

“Shit!” I actually did yelp this time. I glanced around and noticed that Mosquito and Human Kite had already answered the call. “Mysterion?”

“I’ve got this,” my cloaked ally assured me. “Go do what you need to.”

“I’m on it,” I said into the wire. “Where are you?”

“Boundary gate,” said the Coon. “Hurry up!”

The boundary gate was a ten-foot-high chickenwire fence that stretched the full length of the football field, and a little beyond, back toward the baseball diamond, where it had a small door cut in just before it became the padded, solid right field wall of the diamond. Beyond the confines of the high school grounds, open fields (old cow pastures, I think) stretched for a while before turning into tilled farmlands at the foot of one of our town’s mountain boundaries. It was both a brilliant and stupid move on Craig’s part, if he was aiming for that door: the snow was sure to slow him down, but if he made it out, we’d lose track of him in seconds. It was too risky to carry the fight out into farm country, and even the averagely studious Craig was smart enough to know that. Of course, Craig was apparently full of surprises—I had no idea he was streetwise enough to be involved with South Park’s less-than-finest.

I arrived at the gate to find Chaos tied there (probably with a length of Kite’s emulsified string) with his hands behind his back. Mosquito had his stun gun trained on Chaos while TupperWear and the Coon blocked the gate door. Human Kite was in position on top of the gate, one hand holding him steady for balance, the other on one handle of his hang-glider, so that he could make a move at any time.

I figured out right away why they needed me: after Mysterion, I was the fastest. Even with a sledgehammer strapped to my back. (Believe me, that shit’s light after running laps in football gear for several consecutive seasons.) Coon and TupperWear were great for guarding, but—due to the Coon’s bulk and TupperWear’s armor, they were the two slowest in a fight. And Craig was thin, quick, and pissed off, which was giving them a hard time. So, using my agility to its fullest advantage, I rushed up behind Craig and dealt a blow to the head.

My boots had crunched into the snow, however, so the bastard heard me coming. He dodged and ducked, then quickly spun round and attempted a low kick. Before I could be tripped, I grabbed off my sledgehammer and, using the mallet as a weighted base, I put the long wooden handle to use as a staff, propelled myself off the ground and got in my own kick, right to Craig’s sternum. He took the full hit and flew backwards, right into TupperWear, who hit him with a double-fisted crush from overhead.

Craig crumpled down into the snow at TupperWear’s feet, but remained conscious. Then, in a feat I had never thought to give anyone outside the League credit to (especially someone as laid back as Craig), he arched his back, propped himself up into a handstand, locked his legs around TupperWear’s neck, and flipped him over and smack into the Coon. “Dammit!” Mosquito shouted. “Kite, stay on Chaos! Toolshed, take my right!”

But even he and I weren’t able to stop Craig from breaking through out the other end of the fence. It was the second between Kite leaping down to relieve Mosquito and me ditching the sledgehammer that Craig chose to make his getaway. Had to hand it to the guy for being crafty, I guess. Of course, he rose on all of our ‘suspicious people’ lists that night.
“Fuck!” Human Kite spat, punching the wire fence behind Professor Chaos. “I coulda caught him if—”

“Stop,” I said, picking my sledgehammer back up in defeat. I was always stopping Kyle from overthinking and overanalyzing. Sometimes, I’d let my closest friend rant at me till he ran out of words, but being on the job was not the time for that. As Coon and TupperWear helped each other up, I added, with some aggravation, “None of us were expecting that from Craig.”

“No shit,” said the Coon, coughing to get his breath back after the shock of being bludgeoned by TupperWear’s entire armored body. “Chaos, the fuck? Did you know about that?!”

“I’m as stunned as you are,” said Professor Chaos, Butters’ normal, nervous tone ringing through just enough to let us know he was serious.

“How about that Marpesia girl?” Human Kite asked. “Do you have any affiliation with her?”

“Affiliation? Who?”

“Marpesia!”

“I don’t know her!”

“Bullshit, I don’t buy it!” Human Kite slammed Professor Chaos back into the fence. This was pretty standard for him. When pissed, when provoked, Kyle got really fucking angry.

“Tell me the truth! I don’t want everything to stack up against us tonight!”

“Dude, chill,” I tried.

“NO!” Kite barked. “Didn’t you even say—”

“Look, I don’t know who you’re talking about!” Chaos tried again, sounding more and more like Butters every second.

“Marpesia, the girl with the helmet!”

“Jesus, I didn’t even know there was a girl here!” Butters was out in full, and definitely confused.

“OKAY!” I snapped, cutting in the middle of everything. “Let’s all calm the fuck down. We had a loss tonight. It happens. We can catch Craig again. I say we just go back, tell Mysterion what happened, and get whatever facts we can from this Marpesia chick, okay? Okay.”

Human Kite shoved Chaos against the wire gate one last time, then led the way, stomping, back toward the parking lot. He hated losing. He was such a go-getter, being set back was never something that settled well with him. It didn’t settle well with any of us, no, but he really shifted through mood swings. The Coon took charge of wrangling Professor Chaos once Kite had stormed off, and the rest of us followed. I took up the rear, glancing back over my shoulder, just in case Craig would come into view again. Of course, he didn’t. We’d catch him, though. I was confident that we would.

We returned to the parking lot just in time to see a slew of cop cars heading away, sirens blaring. Craig’s buyers were gone—with the police, undoubtedly—and Mysterion and Marpesia were locked in a staredown, neither one seeming to want to move. “Hey,” I finally called over. “Barbrady was already here?” Officer Barbrady, one of the heads of the South Park police, had
been a town presence for ages. My guess is that the guy started going senile at age thirty. He was a little inept, but our work basically helped him keep his job. We’d catch people for the cops, they’d come in, they’d sometimes take all the credit, but for the most part, we’d have our fair share of praise from the town paper, and sometimes even the evening news.

“Yeah,” Mysterion said as we approached, not moving. “Where’s Craig?”

“He, uh, kinda—”

“He kinda what?” Mysterion demanded, glowering over at me.

“He was kinda more to handle than we expected,” TupperWear offered.

“More to handle?” Mysterion repeated. “More to handle?!! There were five of you, and you couldn’t stop that one fucking guy??!”

“We fucked up this time, okay?” I said. “It happens. Question is, what do we do about her?” I gestured over toward Marpesia. The girl was showing an incredible display of self-control. To be honest, it made her pretty attractive, even though I couldn’t even see her face. Her stance was attractive, anyway. Appealing. Her helmet, I now noticed, was not the only thing shielding her face. The helmet armored most of her head, even sporting a nose plate, but she also wore a black half-mask underneath, completely concealing her eyes from recognition.

“If it isn’t too much to ask,” said Marpesia, “I’d like to join you.”

“That’s asking a lot!” shouted Mysterion. “Especially after you distracted us tonight! You can’t deny that this was all one big distraction! Give me one good reason why we’d even consider teaming up with you!”

“Look, I apologize for the inconvenience tonight, but I really do want to help!” Marpesia insisted.

“Oh, no,” said the Coon. “No, no, no, no. No girls. Girls can’t be superheroes.”


“None of them have good movies!” the Coon insisted, snapping right into ‘asshole Cartman mode.’ Check that. Just ‘Cartman mode.’ “You can’t be a superhero without a good summer movie!”

“SHUT UP!” Mysterion hollered at him. “Listen, I’m pissed off that we didn’t get any further information on the Cult tonight. Marpesia, if you can guarantee us a lead, I’d consider talking to you, but—”

“I’ve been trailing Craig for a while,” Marpesia told him, holding her ground. She really was holding her own, and I began to respect her for that. Knowing that she was not affiliated with Professor Chaos was enough of a relief, but knowing that she really could be a potential ally was even better. “I’ve seen robed men come and go during his drug deals. I haven’t caught any, but I’ve followed them. I know the kinds of people you’re looking for. I’ve admired your work for a long time, and I want this to be my time to come forward and say that I want to help you. I do. Believe me.”

Mysterion was silent. The rest of us were at a loss. The Cult, again, was primarily Mysterion’s thing. This, we all silently but unanimously agreed, was his call. However he wanted to deal with the Marpesia situation, we’d let him. Aside, maybe, from the bigot in the group, but he
could always be dealt with.

“So,” Mysterion transitioned after a few moments of contemplation, eyes again glued to the new presence, “how long have you been active?”

“Only about three months now,” she answered. “Since this whole fiasco started. I thought about alerting you, but—”

“Why didn’t you?”

Marpesia paused, tapped her foot in thought, then asked, “Can we talk about this somewhere else? I shouldn’t reveal everything here.”

“Why?”

“Possible wandering ears.”

Mysterion growled to himself, then glanced around at each of us for second opinions. Well, I figured, if it was answers we were after… here was someone who might have them. “I say we chance it,” I said.

“I’m with Toolshed,” Kite nodded his own approval.

“Guys, she’s a chick!”

“Shut up, Coon!” Mysterion snarled. “Jesus, God, just shut up! I’m so close to kicking the shit out of you right now. Okay! She comes with us! Kite, blindfold her.”

“How do I blindfold someone wearing a helmet?”

“I don’t—ugh. Let’s just go.”

“My eyes are closed,” Marpesia assured us. She even went so far as to tuck her hands behind her back, to let Mosquito cuff her if he wanted. The fact that she was dealing with everything so willingly, that she was being so compliant, helped me trust her. I didn’t know how the others felt, but nobody else fought her strange loyalty. It was seeming more and more likely that she was someone we knew. The question then was… did she ‘know’ us...? “Lead on.”

So, none of us speaking the whole time, we made our way back to the base. The air around all of us was heavy: defeat from the bust blended with mixed feelings over the possibility of adding a new member to the League. I had a feeling that she could be an asset, but I also got the sense that she might disrupt things. That we’d have to keep an eye on her, especially now that we’d promised Professor Chaos attendance at five additional meetings as well.

Once we were back around the table at HQ, Mosquito took the time to explain to Iron Maiden and Red Serge the events of the evening, primarily focusing on Marpesia’s interference, and that the mission more or less failed. “I wouldn’t say ‘failed,’” Marpesia interrupted. Human Kite sat her down in the far head chair, while Mysterion took the other.

“What do you mean by that?” Mysterion demanded, still in a mood.

“I’m saying we can work together, if you’ll let me…”

“That does it!” Mysterion shouted. “Who are you?! Who are you working for?!”

“I’m only doing this for myself, for now,” said Marpesia. “It started out as a story for the
school paper. I am a reporter, you know.”

“And a high schooler…” I realized.

Marpesia smirked over at me. “That much should’ve been obvious by now, Toolshed.”

“Okay,” said Mysterion. “You know us. Now—”

Almost regally, Marpesia took in a deep breath. She set her hands on either side of her helmet, jostled it a bit, then lifted it off of her head and set it down on the table in front of her. She then removed her half-mask and said, in her normal, dulcet voice, “Listen up, guys, I really do admire you. If you let me work with you, I promise, this Craig fiasco will be over before you know it. I won’t even publish the story. I just like the work you do.” She lifted her head. “I swear. What you’re doing is fantastic. It’s what this town needs. I’m—”

I couldn’t stop myself. My heart thudded, and my world turned completely upside down. This… kinda changed everything. Unable to stay silent, I came right out and blurt, “…WENDY?!”

It was true.

The girl who had intervened that night was none other than my girlfriend.

— — —
Wendy Testaburger.

**WENDY TESTABURGER?** Really?! I mean, *okay*, yeah, she always had fought for her morals, always stood up for the good things people did, but she was one of those people who could do it without needing the alter ego. She was someone everybody expected good things from. Wendy didn’t need another identity. She *was* a superhero. Which was probably why Stan broke character so fucking fast once his girlfriend took her helmet off. Once he’d done that, we were screwed, and we all knew it.

If Wendy didn’t join, our work could very well be compromised.

How, I wasn’t quite sure. But Stan’s conscience would probably have something to do with it. Then again, we needed Toolshed so badly… I didn’t want Wendy joining the League to throw him off, to make things awkward to have a couple around. But Wendy treated everything calmly and professionally, just as she always treated everything, so I primarily took the time to listen.

It was her origin I was most interested in. I mean, what would prompt her to start working undercover like that, rather than right out in broad daylight like the flag-waver she always was?

Many of us, upon her reveal, were keeping it cool, even with our shock. Token broke character a little—he’d always sort of had a thing for Wendy, and had surrendered her more than once back to Stan after a couple of flings—and Human Kite and I exchanged glances between each other, and then around the room, both thinking the same thing: everything was going to rest on Stan. Even if everyone else unanimously voted her in, the two of us were sure that the final approval would have to come from him.

And right now, he was staring at her like he’d never seen her before. I understood his mute, dumbfounded reaction, though: this was a side to his girlfriend he hadn’t known about. He hadn’t even realized it was her, at first. Honestly, seeing the awkward looks they were giving each other, I was a little glad I didn’t have a current girlfriend. With all the sneaking around we did, it was a wonder anyone could keep up a steady relationship with few questions asked. Clyde was master of it, and Kyle had done well back when he’d been with Heidi. None of my flings ever cared, and most of those ‘relationships’ had been superficial. But this was huge. This was something we’d never planned on.

The best way to describe Stan and Wendy’s relationship is ‘small town iconic.’ Every generation has one: the couple that starts off as school sweethearts, goes on again and off again, and then at the ten-year reunion, they’re just as well known and have a couple perfect kids. Even though Clyde and Bebe were growing to be that way, as well, Stan and Wendy had been ‘that couple’ for around eight years. Even when they weren’t together for a while, you’d wonder how they felt about each other still.

Well, I was certainly wondering what the fuck must have been going through both of their minds at the moment. More than that, I wondered just how much Wendy knew about her boyfriend’s double-life, and, therefore, if she knew about me, Kyle and the rest…
“Since when are you into vigilantism?!” Stan, completely out of character now, demanded of Wendy.

“Since… I can’t really put a date on it,” Wendy confessed. “I’ve been reading about Mysterion since fourth grade, though. Who in town hasn’t? Then the whole League came together, and… and there was suddenly this onset of hope for the town to rally behind—! I always thought, I want to make a difference. But here’s this group. This group, in our town, in South Park, that really is.”

“Enough,” I said. I almost said ‘Enough kissing ass,’ but bit back the rest of the words for the sake of the Mysterion image. “Tell us about your involvement with Clyde’s drug schemes.”

Wendy nodded to oblige without hesitation. Stan removed his Toolshed goggles and shot his girlfriend a testing, We really, really need to talk later glare, but let her speak out.

“Well,” said Wendy, “I’m heavily involved with the school’s newspaper. Since I’m not on counsel this term,” she added distastefully. Mosquito handled the stab well by not reacting, just in case Wendy hadn’t figured him out yet. It was no school secret that Wendy was determined to beat Clyde out for the presidency in the following year, and then fight her way to president of the whole student counsel senior year. I swear to God, Wendy’s gonna be President. She just… most likely is. “Craig was being more than a little suspicious, starting back when I first overheard him in January.

“I’d been working on this Amazon armor as a project for Latin class, but I put it to use instead. I had a backup project, anyway.” Of course she did. “Look, guys… as I said, I really, really admire the work you do.”

“When did you realize you wanted to join us, though?” I asked her.

Looking right at me, full of determination, Wendy answered, “Since I realized I could make a difference as someone else much more than I could make a difference as Wendy.”

“Dude… woah, just… woah, for a second,” said Stan, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Wendy, just… out of curiosity… how much do you, y’know… know about us?”

His girlfriend flushed a little and looked over at him. “I… sorry, sweetie, but I’ve kinda known about you for a little while,” she said with a slight shrug. Stan dropped his hand and glared over at her.

“What?”

“I figured it out, Stan, that’s all! I never said anything, did I?” Wendy said in her defense. “Because I respect what you’re doing!” With a slight grin, she added, “You’d make a good detective, Stan…”

“Oh, my God,” he muttered, covering his face with his hands, his elbows resting on the table, “this is not happening right now.”

“Stan…”

“Ke—Mysterion’s right!” Stan growled. “Tonight was a big distraction, Wendy, you can’t deny that you kinda burst in on us—“

“I’m sorry! I realize I could’ve been a little more tactful about approaching you guys, but I had no idea you were going to be there tonight! I told you, I’ve been tailing Craig for three months
“You must be good,” I heard Professor Chaos say, mostly to himself, from his honorary seat beside the Coon, who was keeping a close eye on him. “I’ve never seen you.” That really was saying something, and I was glad I’d heard him say it. There was a reason Professor Chaos had never been caught. He was too sly, too crafty. Shadows were solace to Professor Chaos. There are patrol nights when I wonder if I’m being followed, since even I sometimes have difficulty keeping track of him.

I gave the whole thing some thought. On one hand, we could use Wendy. Having a reporter on the team, someone with an eye and ear for detailed goings on, would be an asset. So far we had plenty of manpower; we had computer prowess, we had stealth, we had cunning, we had street smarts and determination… but we always had to be careful on the research side. Sure, people like Token, Ike and Kyle, and sometimes even Stan and Clyde, were studious, they were the ones who could pass for being in libraries for hours on end, but none of us knew how to ask the right questions to lead to the answers we wanted like a reporter could.

Weighing the possibilities and the prospects, I got caught up in thought a little too much, remembering how all of us came together in the first place. The League was something that had come together on its own. I always liked to think that the team had hand-picked itself, so surely new members could be crucial to the team as well… it had just taken longer for us to require the specific new talents being brought on board…

As I’ve said, the superhero game began in fourth grade. For most, anyway, it was a game. For me, it was real from day one. As I became, as Mysterion, more and more of a symbol in South Park, I recruited Kyle for help. He was sharp, great with computers, and even once posed as me, to protect my identity. He revealed himself as Mysterion to the town, so, as thanks, I revealed myself to him. “I don’t believe it,” he’d said, stunned and awed. He kept my secret safe, and, a few weeks later I, as Mysterion, helped him out of a bind involving a wrongful bust for shoplifting at the hobby shop, thus clearing his name as well. Outside the hobby shop, he thanked me, then glanced up into a display window at a large kite.

“You know, Mysterion,” he said, as I pulled him back into the midday shadows with me, “I’ve been thinking… if I’m going to be helping you, I might as well go in all the way.”

Despite my initial protests, he ended up convincing me. It all happened only a few nights later, when a drainpipe I was climbing up gave way. I was sure I’d fall and meet another death on the pavement below, and therefore lose a night of keeping watch over the town, but a length of strong string was lowered down to me from the rooftop of the building I was dangling off of. I clambered up the string, and, at the top of the building, came face-to-face for the first time with the Human Kite. After that, we worked on and off as partners. We were on patrol together, in fact, the evening our third member came on. We had a good lead, and needed to get into an old warehouse; with impeccable timing, out of the shadows stepped Toolshed to our aid. His identity was a little obvious, as was ours to him, and I understood right away his willingness to help us out.

And thus our trifecta was formed. Meanwhile, the Coon, not to be outdone, had gathered a team of his own. Our teams crossed paths every now and then, until fate pushed us together for good on the night we teamed up to stop our common enemy, Professor Chaos, and his young assistant General Disarray, from removing all of the hubcaps from the cars at the used car dealership. Chaos back then was crafty as he continued to be, though a little more large-scale. He knew his limits now. In fourth grade, he had no idea what the hell he was going to do with the hubcaps or
why.

We captured Chaos after Disarray (a second grader at the time) ran home, and the Coon mentioned that he had a holding cell at his base, so we brought the villain to the Coon Lair in Cartman’s basement. After much discussion, and more hesitation on my part, we agreed to team up. After all, the basement was a bigger lair than our small meeting place, and one could never have too many allies. And it would be easier to keep tabs on that reckless Coon the closer our teams were.

The Coon then requested—demanded—that, since his cover was blown by his basement (and totally not his body type at all), we all sign ourselves to the group by revealing our identities. “Okay,” he segwayed, “it was my idea, so you guys go first.”

“Nuh-uh,” Toolshed argued. “It was your idea, so be the bigger man and show us who you are first.”

“But… but myeh,” the Coon whined (a habit that, thank God, has become more subdued in Cartman in recent years). “Oh, whatever,” said Mosquito in his nasal wheeze. His costume back then had achieved the effect by strapping a vuvuzela around his nose. He had switched to the Mardi Gras design in seventh grade. “Here, I’ll go first.” That said, he unstrapped his vuvuzela and cap, freeing his brown hair and thus revealing himself as none other than Clyde Donovan.

“Clyde?” Human Kite exclaimed. “Nice, disguise, dude!”

“Thanks,” said Clyde. Punching Cartman on the arm, he said, “Now you, fatass.”

“Uh! Why me?”

“Oh, come on,” groaned Human Kite. “Like it’s all that hard to figure out that you’re Cartman. And you guys, sorry, are Token and Timmy.”

“Timmah,” affirmed Iron Maiden.

The Coon scowled, then made a huge deal of removing his mask. “Uh. Kay, fine,” he yipped. “Yes. I am Eric Cartman.”

“Well, I knew it,” said Chaos from his corner cell.

“Shut up, Butters!” Cartman snapped. “I know it’s you, too.”

“I—uh, buh—I, uh—” Butters stammered. “Aww, dangit,” he gave in, kicking at the ground.

“Maybe I need a mask,” Token thought aloud, removing his TupperWear helmet.

“Token,” Cartman said tersely, “you’re black. Black superhero, black kid in town, you’re a little… duh.”

“Hey, shut up,” Token barked back.

“And I’m Bradley Biggle!” announced the odd one out. We all stared at him, the kid with the blonde bowl cut, a pink half-berry mask covering most of his face, decked head to toe in pink and mint-leaf green. We hung with Bradley, sure, but he never really… rolled with us, you know? He’d always just been a classmate. But he wanted to be a superhero. Whatever. I figured he’d
Hah.

Ignoring Bradley completely, Cartman scoffed, “Meh, well it’s not like it’s so hard to figure you guys out. Stan,” he said, pointing to Toolshed, “you’re so obvious it hurts.”

“Don’t be a douche,” he retorted, removing his goggles.

“Yeah, and you, Kyle,” Cartman ragged on, pointing to the Human Kite, “you’ve been helping fuckin’ Mysterion for so long, I figured you’d come along with your own gay little costume.”

“It’s not gay!” Kyle growled. Stan patted Kyle’s shoulder reassuringly as that red poof of hair was let free from its hood.

“And Craig,” Cartman finished, his Coon-taloned, accusing finger set on me, “you’re just an asshole. Of course y—”

“I’m not Craig,” I said, keeping up Mysterion’s tone.

“Oh, come on, yes you are.”

“No,” I said, simultaneously pulling down my hood and removing my mask, “I’m not.”

The entire room was taken aback, but the fatass was just plain stunned. Eyes wide, mouth open for another insult that never was uttered. He was shocked, and looked, quite possibly, guilty. “Huh… buh… Ke… Kenny?” he stuttered.

“What?” I wondered, back in my normal tone. “Poor people can’t be superheroes? Or some shit like that?”

“Guh—y-yeah!” he burst. “Kenny, you’re such a dick. I bet you’re just pretending to be Mysterion so—”

Enraged, I reached forward and grabbed him by the collar. Getting right in close, I spat, “I am not pretending. All right? Unlike you, I’m actually doing this town some good. Insult me one more time, and the deal is off.”

Needless to say, bullying was, especially at that point, the only language Eric Cartman understood, so we had an agreement. We had a team. Cartman insisted on calling us “Coon and Friends,” which had prevailed for three years, even after Cartman deviated and went to the Gulf of Mexico to team up instead with the dark lord Cthullu.

Cartman’s ability to hold the Dark God under his will was the only reason I still put up with him in the League. And why I agreed to keep “The Coon” plastered on our collective name. If it were up to the rest of us, we’d call the League just that—The League. It was all we needed, it was all we were.

Because we were so tight, it took a lot for us to let new members in. Ike’s induction was due to a ‘right place, right time’ sort of situation, and things seemed to be leaning that way for Wendy, as well. Ike had joined us two years prior, when he was eight years old and between fourth and fifth grade.
He’d started catching on to Kyle’s constant sneaking around, and dressed himself up and followed us one night, when Toolshed, Human Kite and I were alone on patrol. We’d run into Professor Chaos and General Disarray, who were attempting to free a pen of quarantined, rabid cats and dogs from the back of the animal shelter. Toolshed broke us in, but Disarray tripped the alarm and a panic erupted. Kite and I went after Chaos while Toolshed attempted, with his whisperer-like talents, to get the animals under control. That still left Disarray and the alarm to deal with, and that was the moment Red Serge burst in. With his knack for working with computerized devices, he disabled the alarm without destroying anything, and caught General Disarray, tying him to one of the dog pens with a rope from his belt.

Chaos and Disarray ended up escaping, as they always manage to do, and before we could ask anything of our mysterious new helper, Barbrady arrived with a small team, sirens blaring to beat hell.

“All right,” the hapless cop dully intoned as he and two others strode into the building, “what’s going on in here?”

“It was Professor Chaos again, Officer,” I explained.

“Oh! Mysterion, it’s a good thing you were here.” Despite it being near midnight, Officer Barbrady still wore his square, dark sunglasses, large even for his thick, equally square face. “What’s Chaos doing now?”

“Attempting to spread rabies,” Toolshed said, gently quieting down one of the mutts that had broken out during the fray.

“No part of the plan was carried out,” Human Kite added, to reassure the cops. “And we kind of, uh…” He glanced over at Red Serge. “We sorta had help…”

“What?” Barbrady glared skeptically down at the fourth-grader. “Who’re you?”

“Just a purveyor of the law, visiting from Canada,” he answered. Tipping his wide-brimmed hat, he introduced himself: “Call me Red Serge.”

After that day, Red Serge showed up every now and then, almost always when electronics were involved. Kyle was obviously a computer genius, too, but we needed the Human Kite’s physical abilities much more than his technical prowess. If Red Serge was trying to send us a message, we certainly got the hint. He became official just before school started back up that year.

And now here we were, two years later, face to face again with someone desperate to join the League. Wendy had entered as Marpesia just as influentially as Red Serge, in the midst of a fight, but her eagerness was a little more obvious. Wendy was all fight, while Ike was more charisma. I rarely use that word, too, which is saying something about the little Canadian kid.

“A reporter, huh?” I said, glancing over at the corkboard. Giving Wendy my attention again, I asked, “Have your dealings with Craig led you anywhere near the South Park branch of the Cult of Cthulhu?”

“I know a little,” Wendy admitted, “but mostly my focus has been on ebbing the flow of narcotics through town. I keep discovering more and more people dealing with illegal substances on the side. My involvement started out as simple detective work, reporting on views of the heightened availability of illegal narcotics within different socioeconomic circles. When it hit the high school, well…” She trailed off, since she’d explained that much to us already. “Craig’s particular branch is more than suspicious. He sees strange clients, but apparently they pay him well.”
The Cult. There we go. We were getting somewhere, albeit slowly.

I nodded over to Red Serge and Iron Maiden. A determined, “Timmah,” could be heard in an echo through Iron Maiden’s armor, and Red Serge turned to the computer directly behind them, typed up a few things, and then the printer to his right whirred. A moment later, he took the printout over to the corkboard and tacked up the new photo for our watchlist. Craig was on the board now. An official target of the League. Obvious Cult involvement. Sketchy as fuck.

“Here’s a question,” said Stan, “d’you have any idea where Craig learned to fight like that?”

“Hmm?”

“Yeah,” Human Kite chimed in, more or less giving himself away for being Kyle at that moment, since he was once again functioning as Stan’s echo. That was one of the obvious things about those two. They had similar ideas at similar times; they built upon one another’s thoughts more frequently than Bebe could finish Clyde’s sentences. “The five of us thought we could head him off while you and Mysterion were still dealing with his clients, but Craig… well…”

“…Moved way too fast,” TupperWear, back in character, finished. “Faster than I figured he’d be able to.”

“Same here,” said Stan, keeping careful not to look at Wendy directly. “We didn’t even know about his involvement with the drug deals until just now, but if you’ve been after him for a while, has he fought you before? Plus, Professor Chaos, have you ever fought Craig?”

“I never have,” Chaos answered. “Just observed the guy.”

“I’ve fought him off sometimes,” Wendy admitted. “I know he has some moves, but I wouldn’t expect he’d be able to get the best of all five of you.”

“When’d he start fighting back?” I wondered.

“Oddly enough, right off.”

“So he’s been trained. What the hell is he protecting?”

“I knew it,” said Professor Chaos, getting all of our attention with the comment. “The narcotics are the cover.”

“Stupid cover if you ask me,” the Coon scoffed.

“No kidding,” I had to agree. “He’d put himself…”

“Well, actually, if you think about it, it makes sense,” Wendy offered. “If he’s going to get thrown in jail for something, better for it to be something obvious, to divert attention from what the real deal is.”

That did it. I pointed across the table at her. “I want you in,” I decided, “as long as you can help us catch him and get out of him what that ‘real deal’ actually is. League?”

“I like what she’s said so far,” Red Serge offered.

“And she’s a good fighter,” Mosquito consented.

TupperWear, Iron Maiden and the Human Kite all gave their own approval, but leave it to the Coon to, utterly breaking character, be a dick about it: “Guys,” he whined, “this is a
“brotherhood. Girls can’t be in brotherhoods.”

“Yes,” I argued, “they can.”

“Uh, no? Are girls in fraternities? No! They are segregated into sororities because—”

“Shut up, Cartman!” every single one of us at the table snapped, Wendy included.

He mumbled to himself and slunk down in his seat. “Ugh, weak,” he added to whatever profanities he had previously been muttering.

Then, all eyes were on Stan. “How about you, Toolshed?” I asked him, prompting him to slide his tinted goggles back on. “Your vote matters.”

“Mine doesn’t?! I’m the motherfucking Coon!”

“And nobody cares!” I barked at Cartman. Back to Stan, who had returned in character to the Toolshed ego, I asked, “What’s your vote? You can think about it if you need to, and—”

“Marpesia,” said Toolshed, affected voice and all, “the Coon is right. This is a brotherhood. That means everyone around this table is a comrade first. Beyond this room in this building, whatever happens, happens. But in here, and on patrol, and on duty, on guard, we’re brothers-in-arms. That’s it.”

“Comrades first,” Wendy nodded, sitting back a little. She retied her half-mask, and secured the helmet back onto her head. “As an Amazon, I respect that.”

“Private lives stay private, got it?”

“Of course I do, Toolshed.”

Toolshed was silent for a second, then said, “All right, my vote’s in. At least on a trial basis, Marpesia stays.”

“I like the trial basis idea,” Human Kite said. “After all, we’ve got Chaos here for another five meetings, too. Might as well keep tabs on both at once.”

“I’m for the trial as well,” I added. “All in favor?” There were none opposed. “All right. Chaos gets five meetings with us, and so do you. If, after five, you’ve proven yourself, you’re completely in. Sound good?”

“Perfect,” Marpesia grinned. “I’m honored, Mysterion.”

“Great!” the Coon piped up. “Well, getting late,” he added, shoving away from the table, “so —”

“Meeting’s not over!” I shouted. “As far as I’m concerned, we’ve still got a lot to talk about. I’m willing to push this into next week’s meeting, as long as tonight ends on a consensus. Most importantly—” I pulled from my belt one of my shuriken, and chucked it across the room. It spun over Clyde’s head, but he ducked all the same, and a second later it was lodged in the corkboard, coming to rest right between the eyes of the newly-posted photograph of Craig Tucker. “I want to know everything about Craig’s involvement with the drug ring and the Cult! I want any and all information about the Cult’s involvement! I want to know why Craig is involved, and if anyone else at school is, too! Wendy…” I turned to glare at her, while everyone else was staring at me, as they usually did when I got as heated about a subject as this, “this is your chance to get on board with the
League. You’ll be at the meeting next week. Butters, you, too. Nobody misses next week, got that?! Wendy, I want the whole story by then.”

“Is he always like this?” I heard her whisper to Toolshed, who just cleared his throat nodded for her to be quiet as his way of saying, You have no idea, probably. To me, she said, “I may even have it to you prior to Wednesday.”

“Perfect,” I said. “I want the drug ring down and headway made into Cult dealings before we get full-blown into spring! Got it?”

Oh, the League got it, all right. I didn’t care if later any of the guys called me crazy. Someone we knew was dealing around information about the Cult. Someone other than the Goth kids, let me put it that way.

South Park has a group of resident Goths, the four of whom are all members of the Cult. Oh, I get their help every now and then, but the more headway we as a League could make on our own, the better. The Goths were good for filling in the mythos details, but they weren’t about to take down their own nonconformist religion. And I wasn’t so much interested in taking the Cult out once and for all as I was just getting into the intricacies of how and why.

How they had managed to make a pact with Cthulhu to make me Immortal, and then all of the obvious whys.

Why did they do it? Why my parents specifically? Why did nobody ever remember when I died? What was the whole damn point?

Whatever it was, I had to find out.

The meeting ended with me feeling… mixed. Yes, we’d just wasted a night on a distraction. Yes, we’d made a little headway. But we hadn’t caught anyone specifically important, and all I knew was that the mind behind that night’s drug deal had escaped, and now he was onto us. Yes, we had some new, good help, but it was still possible that we’d fucked ourselves over.

When I returned home that night, I slipped in through my bedroom window, discarded my street clothes, showered, found no towels, streaked back through the house since I knew no one was awake, and if they were they wouldn’t care, and threw on a pair of boxers and an old t-shirt before attempting to sleep.

Sleep, however, was being a bastard and wouldn’t come, so I dug out a box I kept in my closet, the key to which was affixed to my utility belt (of which I had three… one official and two backups, only one of which I kept at home). In that box was a smattering of papers about the history of Cthulhu and the Cult.

I read up on the article I’d already poured over thousands of times since fourth grade. Plain as day, there was that photo of my parents getting arrested for being caught with the Cult. One of these days, Goddammit, I needed to get them to talk.

Maybe I could have use for Marpesia’s talents yet…

The following morning, I was dead tired. I barely registered anything as even happening until lunch, when Kyle slammed an energy drink down on the table in front of me. “Kenny!” he shouted, to get my attention.
“Dude, don’t even bother.” That was Cartman, who slid himself into the seat next to mine, while Kyle sat across from us. “Kenny’s checked out,” Cartman went on. To prove his point, he jabbed my shoulder. I didn’t, couldn’t bring myself to, react. He was right; I was out of it. “Kenny! Hey, Kenny! Remember this morning? Kenny! At the bus stop out front when Bebe fell on the ice and you could see her thong? Eh? Eeeehhh?” He stopped poking me and said, this time sounding like his mouth was full of food, “See? Totally checked out.”

“Ugh,” Kyle groaned. “Kenny, drink this, for the love of God. It’s that coffee one.” I lifted my head, glared at Kyle, taking in his concerned expression, then focused my eyes as best I could on the can in front of me, moist from the cold sweat that covers soft drinks fresh out of the cooler. Forcing my right hand to move, I took hold of the top of the can, then leaned forward, propping my arm up on the table, and pressed the cold can to my forehead. That action brought on the most relief I’d felt in the past couple of days.

When things go wrong for Mysterion, I always feel let down afterward. Mysterion is a symbol, not just another screw-up sixteen-year-old who can’t accomplish anything. Mysterion, if anything, is the part of me that really, really fucking likes to succeed. So, obviously, when I fail, it’s ugly. Back in elementary school, I’d sometimes kill myself to get myself to stop thinking about losses. My routine had recently become staying up way too late reading through old, piled-up Cthulhu research. Sometimes fatigue did still kill me, but it was less frequent.

“Oooohhhhh,” I heard Cartman comment from beside me.

Kyle caught onto the same thought: “Kenny!” he hissed at me. I opened my eyes to look at him, but said nothing. “Dude,” said Kyle, leaning in closer so as not to be overheard, “you’re not hung over, are you?”

I shook my head slowly, then set the can down, slid the rest of the cold sweat from the can across my forehead and through my bangs, and said, “No. Might feel better if I was. I’m just really fucking tired. Thanks for this, though,” I added, making myself grin as I popped open the can, the soothing click of the tab and rush of carbonation sounding like the sweetest music in the world.

“Hey, guys.” Another figure joined us, sitting beside Kyle. I mistook the newcomer for Stan, which was an easy flub, but a second glance and another sip of caffeinated glory told me that it was in fact Clyde, who, oddly enough, looked almost as tired as I felt.

“Hey,” Kyle greeted, being the kindest (and probably most awake) of all of us at the table. “What’s up?”

“Actually,” said Clyde, taking out a slip of folded paper from his sweatshirt pocket, “here.” He slid the paper across the table to me; I took another sip, then unfolded the paper, on which was hastily scrawled a conversation. The entire thing was in Clyde’s writing, and, barely legible, were words that he had marked as belonging to either ‘me’ or ‘him.’ “Saw Craig this morning, but, in case you haven’t noticed, he didn’t come to school. Don’t read that here, it’d take forever anyway. Sorry about the handwriting, dude, but I wrote it all hunched over on the bus.”

I felt myself grin as I tucked it away into my jeans pocket. “Thanks, though, dude,” I said to Clyde, who nodded and started in on his lunch. “Anything you can say about what he told you, though?” Clyde shook his head.

When he set down the slice of pizza he was eating, he said, “I really can’t. Sorry. But read it when you can, and then I can copy it out for everyone, ’kay?”

“Gotcha.”
Clyde was handling the deal well, considering the fact that he and Craig were fairly close friends. As much as I hated to say it, the friendship was a good thing, for our purposes, since it was possible that Craig might say something to Clyde, maybe even to Token. Of course, I realized, looking at my coffee-energy-abomination of a drink, I realized there was probably one other person who might know of any non-school locations we might find and interrogate Craig: Tweek. Tweek Tweak was a neurotic mess, and son of the owner of the independent coffee shop in town. The overly-caffeinated, highly-strung classmate of ours was, however, the closest thing Craig had to a confidante, since Tweek was always too damn nervous about consequences to tell anyone anything he’d ever learn. We’d have ways of getting him to talk, though. Just knowing that Craig was on the run now made me look forward to the chase. I had the feeling we were on the cusp of something good.

“Anyone got any money?” Cartman asked out of nowhere, snapping me out of my thoughts.


“No, I don’t,” said Kyle, stabbing into a tomato in the salad he’d brought from home. Kyle rarely ate cafeteria food anymore, and I couldn’t blame him. I died choking on a chicken bone once in the high school cafeteria. I hadn’t been eating chicken.

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t,” Kyle said more firmly, “and why the hell are you asking, anyway?”

“I need somethin’ else to eat,” said Cartman. “Clyde?”

“How’d you inhale all that food so fast in the first place?” Clyde asked, his nose wrinkling up in disgust as he looked at Cartman’s tray. “And no.”

“You guys suck,” Cartman muttered, starting to look on the floor around him.

“Dude! That’s so fucking gross,” Kyle snapped. “Just eat slower, fatass!”

Cartman flicked him off as he continued to look around on the floor, mumbling something about the fact that someone always inevitably dropped money in the cafeteria. Meanwhile, Kyle, Clyde and I attempted to start up a discussion about new digital albums that were coming out within the next week, and also where the hell we thought Stan was (entangled in Wendy’s clutches, I think, was the consensus). Only about a third of the way through our mindless talk, Cartman surfaced. “Hah!” he announced, slapping some coins down on the table. “See? Found money.”

“I never said you couldn’t,” said Kyle, rolling his eyes, “I said you shouldn’t, because it’s gross.”

“Yeah, but check it out, I found five bucks and two dollar coins! That’s like… that’s almost like finding two dollars.”

We all glared at him. “It is finding two dollars,” Kyle said flatly.

“Psh, huh-uh, not like it’s real money that people use all the time,” Cartman scoffed.

“Yes, it is,” said Kyle. “It is real money.”

“Dude, why would they make paper dollars and coin dollars? This is like a token or
“Oh, my God, that is not how it works at all, no,” Kyle groaned. He set down his fork and buried his face in his hands, grabbing at his hair under his staple green ushanka. “Dollar coins are printed by the U.S. Mint. It’s money. Just shut up.”

“Nobody cares about dollar coins!”

“I’ll bet someone poor on the street would!” Kyle snapped, uncovering his face.

Cartman, shit that he was, offered the dollar coins up to me. “You don’t want these, do you, Kenny? It’s not like they’re real money,” he said.

“Do you ever listen when you blabber out hateful shit like that?” I barked at him. “No, I don’t want your fucking spite money.”

“There,” said Cartman, “see, Kyle? Not even someone as poor as Kenny wants stupid dollar coi—”

“We’re supposed to dissect fetal pigs in biology tomorrow,” Kyle growled, his eyes burning as he glared at the bigot, “but I’d really like to dissect a fully-grown one instead right about now.”

“Hey,” a voice came from above, just in time. I glanced up and noticed that Stan had finally arrived from wherever the hell he’d been, full tray of food in hand. “Sorry, I got tied up. What the hell’s going on?”

“Ugh, Stan, thank God you’re here,” Kyle sighed, rolling his eyes. “Conversation was getting pretty retarded.”

“Ooooh, Staaaaaan,” Cartman chided at the redhead in falsetto. Kyle shot him yet another glare, which just prompted more taunting. “Thank God you’re heeeeeeere, Staaaaaan.”

“Shut up, asshole,” the two said in unison, which got the bastard laughing.

“Oh, my God. Clyde, Kenny, did you guys hear that?” he snickered. “Clyde, you might wanna move over so the lovebirds have more room to cuddle.”

Stan slid into the seat next to Kyle, casually unwrapped a straw he had on his tray, balled up a wad, stuck it in his mouth, fit the straw to his lips, and, just as casually, spat the wadded-up paper with incredible accuracy straight into Cartman’s right eye. “Cuddle that, dickhead,” he said to follow it up, stabbing the straw into his box of coconut water while Kyle, Clyde and I started laughing.

“AYE!” Cartman yelped, recoiling. Well, I was awake now.

“Serves you right,” I laughed as Cartman dug the spitball out of his eye and went about wiping the spot clean with a napkin. Clyde and I then raised our drinks to Stan for a job well done toast, and drank to the stupid little success. Cartman muttered some expletives at all of us, then rose to purchase more food with his found seven dollars. “Thanks, dude,” I said to Stan, “I needed that.”

“Same here,” Clyde grinned.

“Any time.”

“So, what gives?” Kyle wondered, giving Stan a little punch on the shoulder. “Lunch
period’s almost over.”

Stan nodded, chomping down on a rare cafeteria offering—a black bean burger, utterly
drowning in added condements, probably to cover the fact that it, like most cafeteria food, tasted like
peppery cardboard. After swallowing it down with another gulp of coconut water (something the
entire football team had started drinking for added electrolytes during the season that year), he said,
“Wendy… won’t… shut… up.”

“Aha,” said Clyde, removing and separately eating one of the pepperoni slices from his
pizza. “I was wondering.”

“She got you by the balls, or what?” I asked.

“Not so much that as just… I mean, duh, now she’s asking me all these questions,” Stan
groaned.

“League questions?” Kyle asked in a whisper.

Stan cleared his throat. “I don’t mind some of them, it’s just that she picks the worst fucking
times,” he told us. “She thinks like a reporter, I get it. But when I’m hungry, no, I really don’t want
to tell her the whole story behind Professor Chaos and the five meetings thing. I just don’t. And no,
I don’t want to tell her the whole story of when I started and why.”

“Just tell her she’s dating Stan and not Toolshed,” I suggested.

“This is kinda awkward, though, huh?” said Kyle. “Having her in the group?”

“Awkward is a good word for it, yeah.” Stan agreed, forcing down another bite of the
burger. “Ugh, what do they put in this, scraps from shop class?”

“Wouldn’t put it past them,” I said. “But are we worried? Guys? Should we reconsider
her? She’s not official yet.”

“I say we talk about it later,” Clyde suggested calmly. He always was one of the best at
keeping things separate, between real lives and alter egos.

It did come up again later, and consensus ended up ruling that we’d stick with the trial basis
idea. One thing we didn’t have to worry about with her was deviation. Even if our final answer was
no, Wendy wouldn’t jeopardize us. She wouldn’t reveal identities, she wouldn’t take anything out
on us, she wouldn’t blackmail us. At least, not of her own volition. And the fact that Chaos knew
who she was made me realize even more that she should stay within our sights, since Chaos was
probably the only person who did have shit on any of us, and could potentially talk what he wanted
out of Wendy. She’d take a long time to break, but Chaos was not to be underestimated.
Episode 4: I Can't Believe It's Not Butters

Butters

I can never help feeling like I’m responsible for everything.

Well, maybe not everything—everything, but everything around me that seems to go wrong, or can be considered weird and unnatural. Probably because my whole life my parents brought me up to think that I was weird and unnatural. They’ve always acted like they were the most faultless people on the planet, who just happened to get stuck with a kid who screwed everything up. And, you know, for a long time, I believed them. I believed that I was a rotten little shit. I believed that there was something inherently wrong with me and that I couldn’t fix it, no matter how hard I tried.

Until I realized I didn’t have to always be ‘me.’

I mean, here’s the thing. My name is Leopold. Nobody ever calls me Leopold. To me, Leopold is some strange enigma I’ll never understand. Even my parents call me Butters. Everyone calls me Butters, unless I’m in a mode that requires them to call me something else. Just never Leopold. I came to the conclusion a while ago that maybe Leopold is the person that my parents think they see, and he is one messed up demon spawn of a kid. He fucks everything up, and makes everything go wrong.

Maybe I do have MPD. I doubt it, though. I’ve taken meds for it. Hell, well, I’ve taken meds for a whole bunch of things I probably don’t have. Maybe Leopold does. I’ll never know.

Because as far as I’m concerned, I have control. I have control over who I am and when and why. When I was a kid, I always had playtime. Every kid has playtime. Every kid pretends he’s something else, or someone else, whether it’s a fireman or Godzilla. Every kid pretends.

I don’t.

I become.

I’ve always become.

As I grew up, I ‘became’ less, narrowing playtime down to personalities. Or, should I say, people. Ideas. Sides of me. Id, ego, superego? I have no idea. Probably. Because it breaks down pretty well.

Ego’s easy. Butters. Most of the time, I’m Butters. Cuz I’ve always been Butters, as far as I can tell.

Id’s easy, too. Professor Chaos. I first became him back in fourth grade, and relied on him ever since.

Then superego. I don’t know if she’s superego or just a second ego, but if we’re going for three parts, here, the best in the trio has got to be Marjorine.

It was the costume aspect that did it. ‘Butters’ has always been too afraid to change too much. I get this. Change is too hard. But the costume… that was another story.
It was just like stepping onstage and being someone else in a play. I’d done it for so long, as a way to bring out different sides of myself that just wouldn’t make sense to reveal as plain old Butters. Chaos was one end of my extremities. Chaos didn’t take shit, Chaos was the culmination of every destructive thought I’d ever had. Marjorine, though, was different. I could really let loose as Marjorine. I could be outgoing; strong in a different way, rather than the kind of strength Chaos had. Marjorine was confident, popular, fun… lots of things nobody would expect of Butters. I liked being able to change. I liked being able to escape.

If there was one thing I couldn’t escape, though, it was still that pressured feeling of guilt. Or was it guilt? Maybe it was exhilaration. I don’t know. I’ve been so confused all my life, maybe I read words wrong in my psychology books. Maybe I read things wrong in the dictionary. I have no idea.

I just know that I always kind of felt that the reason Mysterion and the League continued as long as they did was sort of thanks to me. Well, Chaos. As Chaos, I liked playing puppetmaster, since I could never pull strings around my parents. I could give people a run for their money, so to speak.

Back in elementary and middle school, it was an absolute ego trip. The League paid more attention to what Chaos was doing than the guys at school seemed to listen to me and my opinions. I mean, that’s what it started out as. Wanting to get noticed. After that, though, it became an ongoing battle. Chaos against the League.

Chaos against the world.

Now, it’s become more of a one-upping. The League, I’d begun to notice, had taken a heightened interest in the goings on of the local Cthulhu Cult. As Chaos, I’d been locked up (thanks to Eric Cartman) for most of their rendezvous with the real Dark God Cthulhu, so I could only ever speculate on what they’d been doing, and why that otherworldly monster was so important.

General Disarray was the one who filled me in.

I’d signed on a redheaded kid named Dougie, two years my junior, to be Chaos’s assistant, General Disarray, pretty much from the beginning. To be honest, the kid had good ideas, and could call me out when mine weren’t grand (or original). And, in fact, he’d been known to, from time to time in the past, do things independently of Chaos, such as his prying into the Cthulhu case.

He came to me a few weeks after the original Cthulhu battle in the Gulf of Mexico, with a notebook full of observations and newspaper clippings. This was during one of our meetings, which happened far less methodically than the League meetings, I should add, in the storage unit we were able to use. It was strange: he’d called me for the meeting that time. Otherwise, it was always the other way around, and had been ever since. Of course, I hadn’t known he’d done any outside research, so it was a good thing he had lured me down.

When I arrived, he, only a second-grader at the time, dressed to compliment Chaos in silver (tinfoil, back then), General Disarray stared through his silver-coated glasses at me across from our small briefing table, and slid the notebook over to me.

“What’s this?” I wondered.

“Stuff we should think about,” said Disarray.

I thumbed through the notebook, through the chicken-scratch scrawlings of a seven-year-old hand, through the clippings of old arrests for Cult activity, until I was able to read a full account by a
man named Jack Brollin on the full Gulf story. It was the battle that ultimately saw the end of the American national superhero Captain Hindsight (I may or may not have also been responsible for that), and the rise of Mint-Berry Crunch as a new symbol, though after the Gulf battle, he was nowhere to be found. Mysterion was mentioned as well, as was the Coon.

The Coon had, apparently, been able to team up with Cthulhu… get him under his command somehow. Eric could do that. Eric was a very manipulative person. Or, well, he’s a strong personality. He’s one of those, ‘if you can’t beat him, join him’ kinds of people. I’ll admit that I’m a joiner. Minus the Chaos thing.

During their partnership, Cthulhu and the Coon had caused unprecedented chaos. All that destruction, and I’d been stuck in a cell with nothing to do but wonder how long I was going to be grounded for once I got out.

Angrily, I slammed the notebook back down onto the table. “Chaos?!” I shouted, pointing emphatically at a quote from Brollin’s article. “Says so right here! *Nationwide chaos. That’s our platform, General Disarray!*

“Right!” Disarray agreed with a nod. “So, what’re we gonna do about it?”

“We’re… we’re gonna… well, we’re just gonna have to do something even worse, that’s what!” I proclaimed. I’ll admit that Chaos hasn’t always been as strong a personality as he is to me now. Originally, he was thought-driven. He was how I punched out my anger, so to speak. This was the first time I’d been faced with making a real decision. “Tell you what,” I decided, “let’s keep reading about this. Well, I’ll bet there’s all kinds of chaos Cthulhu can—can unleash if we can figure out how.”

General Disarray grinned so broadly his freckles disappeared under the frames of his glasses. “I like it!” he said. “So where do we start reading?”

“Elementary school, my dear Disarray,” I answered. “Elementary school library, that is.”

“School library doesn’t have anything,” said Disarray. “I checked.”

“Oh. Well, all right, then. Town—“

“Town library doesn’t, either.”

“Then there’s always—“

“Right, the internet.”

“Nope,” I grinned. “Inter-library loan.”

“So that’s our course of action?” Disarray wondered. “We read? Reading stuff isn’t very evil. Even if we’re reading about evil things.”

“If we don’t understand what we’re up against, Cthulhu might not surface again,” I told him. Even though, yes, in the back of my mind, I was stalling a little, since I had no idea how to proceed even if we did get all of the information on the Dark Lord we needed. I told myself we’d figure that out over time.

And, wouldn’t you know it, we did.

Reading up on the subject, of course, took a while, but I had my ways of getting around and
gathering information here and there. Other things distracted us in between, of course. The Cthulhu deal was basically so that we could beat out the Coon, Mysterion and the rest of the League. Whatever we could do to deal them a loss was sure to be satisfying. It just always seemed to come back to the Cult with them.

I started sneaking around the Goth clique starting near the middle of sixth grade, since sometimes I’d see Mysterion trying to get information out of them. Oddly enough, they were colder toward me for a while, until the day I caught up with them directly after one of their meetings.

General Disarray and I had been staking out at the McElroy place, attempting to listen in, but with the ultimate goal of the evening to get a one-up on the Goths over Mysterion. We managed to grab one in conversation: the oldest of the four, a thin, sullen boy with curly black hair and a fixed look of apathy, who walked with a cane and wore beaten coattails no matter how hot or cold the weather. The only way we were able to talk to him was by Disarray stealing his lighter as the guy went for a smoke.

"The hell do you want?" he asked of us tersely, the unlit cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth.

"Information," I answered, taking the lighter from Disarray. I tossed the thing up in the air and caught it, over and over; teasing a dog with a toy. "I collect it. I live on it."

"Aren’t you that Professor Chaos guy?" the Goth wondered, starting to chew on the cigarette for need of nicotine. "Shouldn’t you be, like, off causing chaos? What’s this information crap?"

"I want to know more about Cthulhu," I stated blankly, glaring at him. "I hear he’s got a bit of a reputation for chaos himself."

"You want chaos," said the Goth, managing, with lightning reflexes, to nab the lighter before I could catch it again, "you should look into his messenger instead. Who the hell knows when Cthulhu’s gonna wake back up." He struck the lighter twice, igniting a flame which then allowed him to fill his lungs with smoke. Pocketing the lighter, the Goth, breathed the smoke out into my face, and I held my ground so I wouldn’t cough.

"Messenger?" I wondered.

"Read the damn Necronomicon," snarled the Goth. "If you can find one. Meantime, here. Drew this earlier today. Didn’t know the reading would turn out to be so lame as just having to talk to Professor Chaos, but whatever." With that, he drew a card out of his trench coat pocket and slapped it down into my hand. "If you do happen to meet up with the messenger, though, I might be impressed. We need it if this is ever gonna work."

"This?"

"Summoning Cthulhu again."

"But—"

"I’m done talking to you now."

And so we were left, quite literally, in the Goth kid’s smoke. Disarray looked up at me and said, "Want me to go after him?"

"No, let him go," I decided, glancing at the item in my palm. It was a yellowed Tarot card, turned face-up. On it was an illustration of what I can only describe as pure chaos. In a decidedly
medieval style, it showed a man falling from a burning, crumbling tower being struck by lightning, and the whole thing was bordered by skulls.

*XVI: The Tower,* the card read.

I kept that card in with my Professor Chaos gear from then on, after Disarray and I returned to our slowly-perfecting base to look up the meaning of it. Among the readings are: Chaos. Crisis. Ruin. Disillusion.

But, then again…

Revealing the Truth. Explosive Transformation.

Damn, did that card ever say a lot about me.

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That card, though it remained with my Chaos gear, influenced another, shall we say, ‘explosive transformation’ of mine. One that sometimes gets Disarray questioning my loyalty to Chaos. I keep reassuring the kid, I’m still Chaos, too. I still have that side of me that yearns to be on top, that needs to have one over the League, that needs to cause destruction and annihilate the things that have made my life unbearable.

But there’s also Marjorine.

Middle school sucks. It just does. It does for pretty much everyone who ever has to go through it. I’ve always sort of had a sunny disposition, even if I was, as a kid, prone to wake up to the sounds of my own screams. So I took middle school like I took everything else: as best I could. Between added coursework, and figuring out what track I wanted to take once I got to high school, and getting ripped on by the guys for signing up for the artistic things instead of baseball or cross country or whatever, and getting yelled at for things I didn’t do by my parents, I got very close to breaking down. Sometimes I got too depressed to even go on a usual Chaos rampage. Sometimes, I just wanted to be happy.

So I started thinking back. What, in elementary school, had made me happy? Was there any one particular moment that really made me shut my mind off, forget about absolutely everything, and be happy?

It was a small sliver of time, hardly even a day, but there was one instance that stood out. When I’d separated from my usual friends and been, instead, one of the girls.

The whole thing was Eric’s idea, and it was all to steal something from Heidi (the cute brunette Kyle ended up dating a couple years ago) and the other girls in class. He’d come up with this elaborate scheme to infiltrate Heidi’s slumber party—this is back in fourth grade, again—and get that coveted item for the boys instead. Obvious solution? Fake a guy’s death and send him in as the new girl. Eric’s choice for the role was me, and, as I’ve said, I’m a joiner in most of Eric’s schemes, so I went along with it.

I faked my death right in front of my parents and got a wig and some girly clothes at a second-hand store and called myself Marjorine. And once the girls had accepted me, I loved it. I loved it. It was liberating, it was almost ambitious. The girls had been cold at first, but Wendy, bless that girl’s heart, seriously, had suggested a makeover to cheer me up. That night, the makeover was more than just hair and makeup… it targeted my self-esteem. Marjorine was a Pygmalion. She was fun, outgoing… on her way to becoming popular.
But I couldn’t keep pretending I, Butters, was dead. The façade had to end, the clock had to strike and all that. Marjorine, though, while she hadn’t reappeared physically, lived on in my mind. I wasn’t done with her yet. So I called on her to save me, the summer before eighth grade.

One night, online, I used some saved-up gift cards for eBay that had been sent my way from various family members who probably didn’t even know how old I was on the birthdays they’d sent the cards along, and perused the auction site until I found exactly what I was looking for. The ‘kicker’ part of the idea, if you will. It was a blonde wig. A layered one, with bangs, made of real human hair, that fluffed out like feathers but could still be styled, and hung down to the shoulders. Before I could second-guess myself, I clicked the button to finalize the purchase, and two weeks later, I had it in my possession. From the school drama closet, I stole a second mannequin head, and propped it up in the dark part of my closet next to the head that modeled my (at that time) newly updated Professor Chaos helmet.

When my parents were away, I took out the mannequin with the wig and set it up on my desk. For a while, I just sat there, kneeling on the floor, head propped up in my arms, which I’d crossed along the front of the desk, admiring the wig, wondering what I should do with it. It was expensive, not that I’d used real money to buy it, but still. I messed with the ends a little, and then, before I knew it, I lifted it and set it on, making sure it was securely in place.

The rest came together almost in a blur. I had a sewing machine and an old green bedsheet; one met with the other, and a few minutes later, I’d made a skirt. It was summer, so I made it short, and it paired well with a white tank top I usually didn’t wear, since it was kind of tight. I took a few minutes to wash up, setting the wig back as inspiration on the desk; even though my body hair’s really light, since I’m blonde, I went at it anyway, shaving off everything on my legs, and even armpits. Once out of the shower, I felt like a clean slate. Making sure my hair was thoroughly dry, I went back into my bedroom and put everything together. I threw on a pair of tight black bicycle shorts over a pair of briefs, then pulled on the skirt, which wasn’t bad considering I’d whipped it up without much thought, then the tank top and finally that fantastic wig.

Taking in a deep breath, I sped down the hall back to the bathroom, where I paused in front of the mirror. A little smile crept up onto my face, but I wasn’t done yet. Not caring about the consequences, I raided my mom’s makeup. I knew the whole deal: foundation, rouge, eye primer, eyeshadow (I chose a soft gold), liner, mascara. Just a little lip gloss and I was done. Now I could take a look.

And, what do you know.

Marjorine was back.

I don’t like to brag, but I think I made a pretty convincing girl. All of a sudden, I was filled with confidence. Seventh grade had been horrible, but Marjorine made me feel like eighth was my chance. If I could be Marjorine, I’d have a totally different experience. She could turn things around for me. If I could just get everyone else to accept her.

Calling the guys didn’t even cross my mind. Eric was away at summer camp that year (another of his mom’s attempts to make him mildly sociable, rather than maliciously sociopathic), not like he’d be the best person to go to first with this… Kyle and Stan buddied up all summer, so they were hard to reach, even though they’d probably have been the nicest to me if I’d gone to them first… the other guys, well, they just weren’t ready, yet.

The only logical person that came to mind to call was Wendy.

I use logical to describe both the idea and the girl herself. She’d be the one who’d get the
situation. Who’d understand my need and want to try something new. Assuming I could get past
the inevitable shock stage with her, since even she would most likely react that way first. I wanted
her advice, though. I wanted her support. If I was gonna do this, by gosh, I was gonna do this. I
was going to become, if only temporarily, Marjorine again.

Before I could second-guess myself any more, I picked up my cell phone, looked up her
home number, and dialed. I chewed the inside of my cheek while I sat there waiting for her to
answer. My left hand was clinched around my cell, and my right gripped the hem of my skirt at my
knees. This was the most terrifying thing I had ever done. And I had done some terrifying things…
just nothing ever this personal.

Finally, after three rings, there was an answer.

“Hello?” came the voice on the other line.

“Hi, Wendy?” I tried, telling myself not to freak out and get scared.

“Yeah, this is Wendy. Who’s this?”

“It’s Butters.” Even dressed as Marjorine, I had to use that over the phone, especially if this
was going to work.

“Butters? What’s up, why’re you calling me?”

“I, uh… I had a little question,” I said, still forcing strength into my words.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Can I swing by sometime?”

“Butters, what’s the matter?”

“Please, Wendy? It’s… well, it’s real important.”

“…Sure, I guess,” she conceded, sounding pretty confused. Who could blame her? I wasn’t
making any sense. “Do you mean now? My parents are both out, so—“

“Could I?” I said. My voice was failing on me, but I had to press on. I had to get Wendy on
my side. She’d been so good to Marjorine, she was always so nice to everyone. Even when she and
Stan had their falling-outs and breakups, she’d stay nice to the guy and support him. Wendy was a
powerhouse of a girl, but she was not unkind. “Wendy, it’s real important…”

“S-so you’ve said,” said Wendy. “Well, I don’t mind, Butters. I’m happy to give you advice
if you need it. Is that what this is about? Advice?”

“Something like that.”

“Then come on over.”

So I did. I found a little clutch my mother never used, and swept a couple of things in
there… wallet, keys, a little brush I could use on the wig. To secure it even further, I found a green
headband and slid it on, careful not to mess up the style. Before leaving for Wendy’s, I checked
myself in the mirror, and again let myself smile.

In the reflecting glass, Marjorine smiled. Because I was well on my way to feeling happy, maybe. I didn’t know if trying to bring her back would work, but I had to try. When I left the house in last-minute drag, I realized this was the most impulsive thing I had done on my own—without involving Chaos—for a while. Chaos had a special time and place. Marjorine… Marjorine could exist at any time, anywhere.

Marjorine very well could have been freedom.

I stepped lightly all the way to Wendy’s house, half-afraid that one of the guys, or, worse, my parents (who weren’t due to return for a while, but that had never stopped them from being in awkward places before), should see and accost me. Luckily, nothing happened, and the next thing I knew, I was standing on her front step.

After drawing in a deep, ‘what the hell am I doing?’ breath, I steeled myself and took action.

“Wendy?” I called out, as I knocked on the door.

“Butters,” I heard her say from within, “hi, I was just wonderi—” The door opened, and Wendy was instantly aghast. I couldn’t blame her.

I knew that she did not want to be the next one to speak. She shouldn’t have to be, I realized. I was the one that had to do a whole heck of a lot of explaining. Nervous, I began kneading my knuckles together, and began, “Uh, heh… h-hey, there, Wendy. I guess now you know why I said this was urgent and all…”

“Get in here!” she hissed, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me inside. She shut the door, didn’t really slam it, not really-really, behind me and pressed her back up against it. “Stand there,” she commanded, waving her hand at the general area in front of her. I stepped over a little bit, but Wendy shook her head. “There!” she pointed, to a spot more in the light. “There!”

I took the place she asked me and looked down at my feet. I was wearing flip flops, since they were the only shoes I had at the time that went with what I’d chosen to wear that day. Wendy took a good, long look at me, then dug at her hair with her nails.

“Marjorine was you?!” she spurt out. “You were the one at Heidi’s party back in fourth grade?! You were the one that—”

“Y-yeah,” I said, kneading my knuckles together again. “Guess you’re pretty mad at me, huh?”

“Well, no, I’m not mad, I’m just wondering, like… why? When did you decide you wanted to—”

“Well, originally, it was Eric’s idea,” I told her, wincing. I was so used to my parents hitting me after coming out with reveals like this, I never put it past anyone else to want to. “He said that if our group had a girl…”

“Eric Cartman!” Wendy screamed. “That fucking asshole! What kind of personal gain was he going for that time? What kind of—”

“But, Wendy, I like it,” I interrupted. “M-maybe Eric meant it for something else, but I liked being Marjorine. I liked being one of you girls. I-I kinda miss it. I only went back that night cuz my parents thought I was dead.” That had been a mistake. My father had chained me in the basement for a week after that, claiming that I was some demon spawn. My mother had only let me out when she noticed I wasn’t eating. No thanks to them, of course.
Wendy paused, then looked me up and down again. “So,” she said after a moment, while I stood there awaiting her review. “You want to be Marjorine.”

“A-at least for a while.”

“Why?”

“To escape a little,” I admitted. “To not feel like I have to be Butters.”

“But why Marjorine? Why a girl?”

“Cuz sometimes I feel like I should be!” I blurt out. “I don’t know. I’m always feeling real confused, but when I got to be Marjorine, I felt like I could fit in a little. And think straight. If I don’t start thinking straight now, in high school, I’m gonna go crazy!”

“And you want me to help you?” Wendy wondered.

I nodded. At that moment, I realized I was probably being stupid. Of course she wouldn’t have just sprung at it. Nobody in their right mind would, I thought. I was just being weird again, right? “I just… I just thought that, maybe, cuz you helped me out when I was Marjorine before, and cuz you’re real nice and all… I mean, I’ll do you a favor, too, Wendy, heck, I’ll do you lots of favors, but…”

“I-it’s okay,” Wendy said. She drew in a deep breath, sighed it out, then continued, “All right. Just tell me exactly what it is you want me to do. Like…”

“I dunno, help me be a convincing girl?”

Oddly enough, Wendy stifled a bit of laughter. She looked at me kindly, then smirked and said, “I always kind of thought you’d make a decent girl. All right, I’ll help you. But you’ve got to totally commit.”

“Oh, I will!”

Wendy then offered me iced tea, and we moved the talk into her kitchen. I was eager, ecstatic, overjoyed. We talked a little about Marjorine. About how I’d bought the wig, and about my insecurities, and all the while I’d make sure to throw in compliments to Wendy, so I didn’t feel like I was mooching off of her time and generosity. The more we talked, though, the more genuine she seemed to want to help me out. I’d been right to come to her after all.

“If you ask me, Butters, the person who needs the most convincing is you,” said Wendy, stirring sugar into her iced tea.

“We—you just called me ‘Butters,’” I pointed out. As I said it, I retreated into myself. I sank into the chair, fiddling with my knuckles.

“Right,” Wendy nodded, without skipping a beat, “because I look across the table and that’s what I see. You aren’t committed to Marjorine yet. I don’t think you’ve figured out who she is. If she’s really a different part of you, like you said, then let me see that. Why did you want to be Marjorine again, anyway?”

“Sh-she got me to be more confident,” I told Wendy, who nodded again.

“Okay,” she said, turning it into a leading statement. She tapped her spoon a couple of times on the rim of her glass to dispel any excess sugar, then set the thing aside. “So is that the first thing
“What?”

“What?” Wendy repeated. “Let’s see confidence.”

“I—Wendy, I—“

Again acting without hesitation, which is one of Wendy’s strongest points, she walked around the table and gently took hold of my hands. Because I was interrupted, I stopped knocking my hands together, then instantly looked down at them and realized what Wendy was doing. Kneading my knuckles together like that was a nervous habit that I, Butters, have always had. Most of the time, I barely notice, but Eric had pointed it out to me (kind of loudly) before I’d ‘gone undercover’ as Marjorine that first time, so I started off really watching out for it, trying to keep it under control… but later into the evening, I hadn’t had to worry, because I, Marjorine, wasn’t nervous enough to do it.

I lifted my head and saw Wendy smile. “You ready?” she asked me. I answered with a nod. “All right, come on. Let’s give you another little makeover.”

“You mean it?” I wondered.

“I do.”

Before I knew it, I was up in Wendy’s room, and she was sifting through boxes in her closet for clothes to lend me, and I was standing at her vanity nearby peeking at her wide variety of makeup. Wendy organized her things very neatly… by color in some areas, and by brand in others. She wasn’t really a brand person, though, so that seemed to mainly be skincare, rather than eye and lip stuff. It all fascinated me, though. I poked through her eyeshadows, matching and blending colors on the back of my hand until Wendy had finished her own task.

“These are last season, so let’s hope we don’t see Bebe until we can get you something new,” Wendy said, handing me a stack of clothes. Bebe Stevens was so fashion-forward, even going into eighth grade, that I believed Wendy had reason for saying that. Despite her best efforts, though, Bebe wasn’t always a bitch. I think she liked the mean girl façade because it let her get away with things, but when it’s just her and Wendy, Bebe is actually very nice. Just very concerned about what one wears.

I rifled through the clothes, trying tons of things on until I found a sundress I particularly liked. It was white and blue, with a summery A-line and ruffles at the top to cover the fact that I was very obviously flat. Wendy helped me pick out complimentary eyeshadow and lip gloss, then taught me the secret to smudgeless mascara. I listened and watched intently.

It really was like Pygmalion.

The transformation was almost immediate… the gratification was instantaneous. Wendy worked magic, all summer long. She’d help me out with just about everything, from clothes to mannerisms to mode of speech. There were times when I would have to re-convince her that, yes, I wanted to be a girl. I wanted to get everything exactly right.

As I developed her, Marjorine became, just as I’d hoped, much more confident. For the most part, Wendy took me around to places that I didn’t usually go, to give me a little boost in terms of talking to people and carrying myself. She asked for very little in return, even though I felt like I’d sort of shoved her into helping me. At one point, she said the greatest thing ever, which made me
feel pretty darn great: “You don’t have to do anything for me, Marjorine. The way I see it, I’ve
gained a new friend.” I was quick to hug her for that one, and we kept getting tight as days and
weeks went on.

I’d never really had a best friend. I had people I’d hang out with and such, but nobody I’d
ever hang out with exclusively… unless you counted Dougie, but that was just as Professor Chaos,
and unless you counted Eric, who kinda used me and who I kinda felt a little differently about in
terms of friendships.

At the end of that summer, just before eighth grade started, Wendy arranged a little ‘girl-talk’
at Tweek Bros. Coffee, the local café at which one of our classmates worked. He was indeed there,
that day, too… Tweak, the most neurotic kid in class. Since his father owned the place, he worked
just about all day every day there during the summer—even at only thirteen—the poor kid.
Naturally, some of my nerves came back once I approached the counter. Not that he was one of the
more judgmental guys in class, but still… he’d been in on the original Marjorine plot. He might’ve
had a different opinion than, say, the cashier I’d never met at the Gap.

Turns out, though, Tweak may have been a half-focused mess, but he wasn’t narrow-
minded. He didn’t even recognize me at first, but when I told him to call me Marjorine, he said, in
his twitchy high tenor, “Oh. Oh! Uh… yeah. I remember you. You wanna be Marjorine now?”

“I’m trying it out,” I answered.

“That’s cool.” At that point, Tweak’s father called for him from the back, and he flipped out
before excusing himself to head to the storeroom far behind and away from the counter.

Wendy and I walked over to a table with a street view from the window, and when I sat
down, I couldn’t even start to drink my coffee, since I’d started laughing. I looked down at the drink
I held in my hands, nails polished yellow, skin glowing, and let myself laugh. Because, darn it, I
was happy. We’d done it. I felt happy, and outgoing, and confident and bright and new.

And I told Wendy that, and thanked her again. Wendy smiled, took a sip of her extra-foamy
latte, then said, “I think you’re totally ready to debut, Marjorine.”

“Yes,” I grinned, grabbing a couple of sugar packets off of the cart on the table to sweeten
up my own drink. “I feel better. I think this is gonna be a good year.”

“I think so, too,” said Wendy. “Which is why I invited a couple others to come hang out
today.”

“You what?!”

Wendy laughed. “Today is girl time, remember?”

No sooner had she said that than who should stroll in but Bebe Stevens and a selected
entourage. If anyone knows how to make an entrance, it’s Bebe. I mean, the girl is put together:
long—long—blonde hair that falls into enviable natural curls, big, expressive hazel eyes that pop no
matter what eyeshadow she’s wearing, and the fashion sense of a Fifth Ave designer. At the time, I
remember thinking that I wanted Bebe to get taller so she could be a model (though now, as of
sophomore year, it still wasn’t looking likely).

The entourage included Annie, Millie, Red (Kenny’s middle school, and even high school,
crush), and of course Heidi (who at the time was dating Kyle). As a group, they flocked over, and
Wendy got up to hug her friends, starting with Bebe.
“Hey!” she lilted, her voice inflecting up a bit. “Thanks for coming!”

“Oh, please!” Bebe laughed. “You mention meeting for coffee and I’m there.”

Wendy smiled once she’d made the rounds, then gestured to me and said, “You remember Marjorine, right?”

It took a couple of the girls a minute, but they all more or less made the connection at the same time. None of them seemed weirded out, though. Had I decided to keep Marjorine going only a couple years before, maybe they would have thought it was strange, but with everyone at collectively thirteen or fourteen years of age, high school mindsets were settling in, and judgments were carefully thought out.

“Hey, yeah.” Heidi was the first to speak. “Good to see you again.” She was smiling when she spoke to me, so I smiled in return and gave a wave. Heidi looked around at the other girls, then said, “But, uh… just to clear it up, you are actually, um…”

“You guessed, huh?” I figured, stirring the sugar around in my coffee with a wooden stick.

Heidi shrugged, and sat down, prompting the other girls to find seats as well. Wendy started going around taking orders from everyone and collecting five-dollar bills. Smart, Wendy. She was leaving me with the throng, alone to socialize. That girl had such a talent to understand everyone. “Pieced it together pretty easily, yeah,” Heidi said.

“But, you’re gonna be Marjorine now?” Bebe wondered.

“Well, maybe not all the time, but sometimes,” I told her. “I like being Marjorine, and all, but sometimes, I gotta be Butters, too.”

“Hey, that’s cool,” Bebe shrugged. Her eyes then went wide, and she grabbed my hand to make a thorough inspection of my nails. “Oh, my God, I totally love this color! Where’d you get this? I can’t find yellow like this anywhere!"

“U-uh… the drug store, actually,” I said, surprised at how quickly conversation had started. “You gotta root around for the really good stuff.”

“I guess! Did you do your nails yourself? They look amazing.”

“Thanks,” I returned, realizing I was probably grinning madly. “You should get some, it’d match your sunglasses,” I noticed.

“These?” Bebe guessed, reaching up to where her bright yellow aviator sunglasses pushed her hair back on her head. “You’re so right!”

“I like those, by the way, that’s a good style.”

“Right? They’re J-Lo, but I found them cheap.”

And just like that, Bebe and I had started up one of the most normal conversations I had had in a long time. The other girls joined in, as well… we talked fashion, movies, summer recap. Wendy returned, and we continued for well over an hour. Girl time. It was fantastic.

When we started to disperse, Bebe gave me a wave and said, “See you in school?”

“Sometimes,” I reminded her.
“Sure. Just let us know when you feel like hanging out.”

“Yeah, Marjorine,” Red added, squeezing my shoulders as she stood up. “You’re one of us, okay?”

My heart thudded. “You mean it?”

“Sure we do!” Heidi chimed in.

“Gee, thanks,” I said, grinning too broadly yet again. “I… well, that means a lot to me.”

The other girls nodded and we said our goodbyes, but Wendy walked out with me. “There, see?” she said, taking and squeezing my hand in hers as we left the building. “Things are gonna be okay.”

I thanked her yet again, and marched on home brimming with satisfaction and confidence. My parents threw a fit, they’d been throwing fits all summer about me being in drag, but I blew them off. Marjorine was free. I didn’t have to take their lectures if I didn’t want to. I’d made it through summer. Now it was time for the rest.

Little by little, I ran into the guys over the remaining few days of summer. Kyle found out first, when he was set to meet up with Heidi after she and I had been with a few others at the mall for a while, and then of course Stan found out from him. (Stan and Wendy were on one of their break periods at that time, otherwise I’m sure it would have been the other way around.) Clyde found out from Bebe, and Kenny caught wind pretty fast. Token and Craig got word from Tweak, and so on and so forth until there was only one to go.

As I’d been planning, I attended the first day of school that fall as Marjorine. I went in before anyone else so that I could speak to the teachers to prepare them, and request that, despite all records, they only call me ‘Butters’ if I showed up as Butters.

Once everyone else started filtering into the halls, everyone feeling the rush that came with being eighth graders, I flitted seamlessly between groups, greeting friends and welcoming younger students as well. Eventually, I found myself in conversation with the trio of Stan, Kyle and Kenny. We were able to just talk normally, too. Nothing came up about Marjorine vs. Butters as far as appearances. They just treated me like a friend, which I was, and which was all I asked of them.

But of course, with the three of them around, the fourth was bound to arrive. And arrive he did. Eric Cartman, the entity that had been missing from town all summer, lumbered into the hallway and greeted the three that most often put up with him, “Hey, cocksuckers, what’s goin’ on?”

“Oh,” said Stan, “I was wondering why summer had gone so smoothly this year.”

“Fuck you very much, sir,” Cartman retorted, shoving through to claim a locker (in middle school you just grabbed whichever locker you could, and slap your lock on it first and hope you got a good one). “God, my mom sucks. Summer camps are for gay little wusses and little fucking kids! God! Now the bitch wants me to get a job, too. I’d just tell her I’d kick her in the—”

“I’d totally listen, except I don’t care,” Kyle muttered, which got me and Kenny laughing a little. Now that I’d actually made myself vocal, Eric, upon stuffing his locker, turned to look at me, expecting Butters, but getting, of course Marjorine.

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“W… what the fuck is this?” he sputtered, looking me up and down quizzically, his pointed eyebrows arching in awkward positions through a range of expressions. I couldn’t help it… I blushed, and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.
“This is Marjorine,” said Kyle, almost forcefully. His subtext read, *So be nice.* I showed a sideways smile.

“But…” said Eric, flabberghasted, “that’s Butters.”

“Yeah,” Stan said, “but it’s been Marjorine for a while, now.”

“She’s one of the chicks now!” Kenny added, muffling his words into the scarf he was wearing. In September, Colorado mountains were already quite cold.

Eric, as was to be expected, just started laughing. Most likely directly at me.

Kyle started fuming. “Goddamnit, Cartman,” he snapped, “you are such an asshole!”

“Butters is dressed like a girl!” Eric chuckled, as if nobody else knew.

He knew just how to make me feel all awful. “You know, Eric,” I said, feeling my hands clench into fists, “I’m pretty sick of you picking on me like this.”

“It’s too easy, Butters, what are you, a fa—”

That did it. “You can just shut up, okay?!” I shouted at him. “Well, I’m tired of this. This is me, and if you don’t like it, well… well, that’s too bad.” And with that, I stormed off.

I didn’t know why I kept trying to impress Eric, but I did. Oh… okay, that was a lie. I damn well knew. And I’d keep trying and trying, and pushing and pushing, no matter how stupid the result always ended up being, no matter how bad I felt afterward. I tried as Marjorine more than Butters, actually. Another perk to her.

Oh, once school started up and things started making me angry again, Chaos routinely came back, too, but every couple weeks or so, I’d end up spending a few days as Marjorine, right up to the end of middle school and beyond.

Which brings me to now.

Now, the end of sophomore year of high school, everyone at school, even if not especially the teachers, knew me as both Butters and Marjorine. I did get treated differently depending on who I felt like being that day, but I figured people were just interpreting my shifts as separate entities. I could see how they’d think that. After all, each name carried different characteristics. There were a few people who could and would be able to blur the line a little better, and they were: Wendy (of course), Bebe sometimes, Clyde sometimes, Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Eric.

Eric did behave differently around me as Marjorine, but I think that had to do with the fact that I don’t take his crap as readily when I’m her. Eric liked pushing me around, and I kinda liked letting him, as Butters. But as Marjorine, I liked to see how far I can push him in retaliation. It’s a game I started playing. A game I was especially good at on the weekends.

On the weekends, see, Eric worked. He’d kept up a job since he was thirteen, believe it or not, at one of the downtown electronics stores. At only fifteen, he’d wormed his way up the ladder to assistant manager. To keep the title, he was required to work every weekend. It kept his mother happy, and gave him a steady cash flow which he subsequently enjoyed flaunting. Then again, we all had jobs by that point, at least in the summer and at Christmas if not also on school-year weekends, but we’d let him brag it out.
One particular weekend, the weekend after I’d learned about Wendy being the new town hero Marpesia, incidentally, I drifted into Eric’s store. It was a slow Saturday, and I caught him at the counter, chewing gum and flipping through a magazine… most likely the same auto mag he’d been toting around since his mother had admitted that she was getting him a car once he turned sixteen (which wouldn’t happen until July).

“Working hard, huh?” I asked, walking right up to his counter.

Eric, unemotionally, let the magazine fall closed and blew and popped a bubble. “The hell do you want?” he asked me.

“I was just riding through town and thought I’d say hi.” I’ll mention, at this point, that as soon as I’d turned fifteen, I’d bought myself a moped. I’d saved up and bought a moped. I kept it locked up at Wendy’s, but for the past year I’d been riding the thing to school and through town, and it was pretty darn nice.

“Kay,” he said blankly, “you said hi. Get out.”

I pouted and leaned against the counter. “Not like you’re busy right now,” I pushed, leaning right up close to him.

Eric snapped his gum at me and rolled his eyes. “Marjorine,” he griped, “I don’t have time for this right now. Clearly, I am a very busy and important person.”

“Looks like you’re just reading a magazine to me,” I said, glancing down at the mag, then back at him. “Okay,” I transitioned, “pretend I’m a customer. Help me out, Eric. There’s something in this store I want.”

“So go get it and bring it back to the fucking counter.”

It took a lot of restraint to not laugh. This was my game. See how far I could get and hope I wouldn’t get pushed away. “Actually,” I said, noticing a thread on his shirt and flicking it away for him, “I’m pretty sure this is one-stop shopping.”


“So, what’re you doing after work?” I asked him. It was rare that I actually got up the guts to ask Eric out. I had a string of rejections behind me, but I’d kept trying. Just to see if my fascination for the irritating guy really was a crush. And to see what might happen if he ever agreed. “That new burger place just opened up a few blocks down… I could give you a ride, maybe, and we could—”

“Already been,” Eric shut me off. “I was like, first in line when they opened.” Well, I’d no doubt about that, really.

“Okay,” I shrugged. “But if you’re free, I—”

“Ugh, are you… seriously, are you asking me out?” Eric wondered, giving me an awful, disgusted look. That guy really did have a huge cold side. I was bound and determined to find the part of him that was normal, though. I liked something about him, what the hell was it..?

“If you don’t want to, your loss,” I said, leaning back away from the counter.

“I’m not going out with a dude, Marjorine, that’s lame. And also gay.”
“Duh?” I laughed.

Eric’s eyes narrowed to points, and he stood back, folding his arms over his chest. Oh, hell. That was it. I liked his aggression. I liked how easily he could take control. As I’ve said, I’m a joiner, when it comes to him. I’d do anything he said. Even if it was…

“Fuck off.”

“What?” I’d expected rejection, just not that strong. Then again, I never knew what to expect from him. He was, if this makes any sense whatsoever, a predictable wild card.

Eric sighed. “I’m not gay. You’re creeping me out. Get the fuck out of my store.”

I stopped short. That was it, game over, he’d won again. Oh, sure, I could try to push further, but it wasn’t going to work. Not today. “Fine,” I conceded, backing off. “One of these days, though, Eric,” I added, as I was backing up toward the door, “you’ll see I’m not all that bad to be around.”

“For now, you’re pissing me off,” he grumbled.

“Well, fine!” So I left.

I rode home alone, found myself back in my room, and promptly tossed a pillow against the wall. I stormed over, picked it up, and tossed it again. “Why do I do these things?” I shouted at myself, picking up and throwing the pillow again. “Why do I even bother?” Pace, pillow, toss, repeat. “I’m so stupid! Ugh, maybe I’m just always being stupid!”

Pacing this time brought me to my closet, which I slid open. As I stood in the doorway, I stared over at my Chaos gear. Angrily, I grabbed up the Tarot card that was still in my possession and brought it over to my bed, where I sat in a huff. I grabbed at my hair, which had grown pretty long over the past few years, and stared down at the image of the burning tower.

Chaos, change, explosive transformation…

One of these days, that was all going to make sense. One of these days, I’d settle.

Lately, I’d come to realize something. The more effort I put into personalizing and becoming both Chaos and Marjorine, the less I knew about Butters. It shouldn’t have been any big secret to myself… being Butters wasn’t easy. I was constantly either confused or being told that I was for reasons I couldn’t piece together.

I did start getting concerned that maybe one day Butters would be gone for good, that either Chaos or Marjorine would win. I’d adapt depending on who I felt like being around, and sometimes it seemed like Butters wouldn’t fit in anywhere, as much as it would have been great if I could.

I was sixteen after all. Life was gonna have to start sometime.

– – –
By all accounts, sophomore year should have been easy. For the most part, it was. Classes went smoothly, I was able to keep up with after school activities—both related to the school and not—and I felt more or less sane and stable. I did, however, find myself trying to fill every second of my spare time so that I could avoid ‘the talk’ with my parents.

And no, I don’t mean the sex talk. That’s a whole different story. For my parents, ‘the talk’ meant ‘the college talk.’ The talk I spent every free second trying not to think about.

My parents are great people. They are. They’re just a little overbearing. And to be honest, at fifteen, I was already sick of them bitching at me about college. It was the fact that they didn’t start when I was fifteen, or even fourteen. They’d started when I was twelve. Maybe even younger. They’d slip it into conversation casually, give me hinting looks… my dad would have me help him out in his law office so that I could ‘get a feel for things.’ It was the fact that they didn’t want to talk to me about colleges, they wanted me to accept whatever choice they made. That choice seemed to be law school. Their plan had one fatal flaw, though:

I had no idea what the fuck I wanted to do.

Law was already tiring me out. I didn’t feel like spending eight years after high school listening to droning lectures about something I only held a passing interest in. I could see myself grant writing, or maybe even working in forensics, but not representing somebody in court. I knew that I liked helping people… hell, I loved helping people. I just liked really getting in there and doing it. Maybe psychology… who knew? All I saw at the time was: I was fifteen, most of my friends weren’t even thinking about college, and I—here’s the clincher—hadn’t yet worked up the nerve to confront my mother.

So I filled my time in other ways. Basketball season went fine, even if I was benched for a few games after getting two Ts in one half. (It was in a game against our rival team, a guy had caught me on a bad day and had been out of line, and I’d retaliated by making a few blocks that may or may not have involved me ‘accidentally’ shoving the guy into the stands on one instance and almost knocking him out on another.)

And then there was always stuff with the League. I think I can pretty safely say that that particular ‘extracurricular activity’ kept just about all of us sane. Looking at it in some ways, it was weird that we, a group of fifteen-to-sixteen-year-olds (and one sixth grader), kept up with something like a vigilante group, but the good always outweighed the weird with us. Sometimes, we’d look at each other and say, “What are we even doing?” And then the answer was always, “Oh, yeah. A lot of really good stuff.” Thus, we continued.

It gave me an excuse to research things outside of school, too, to really get in and do detective work on town records and crime rates and that sort of thing. Not that I really had any interest in going into private investigation or law enforcement or anything, I just liked putting pieces together. Same way I liked studying for just about any class at school. One thing led to another, and facts add up. It’s interesting, that’s all. It’s logic. I enjoy logic.

Even if I myself possessed a quality that seemed illogical.
Only a couple people knew about it, and it didn’t come up very much, so sometimes even I forgot. In fourth grade, I suffered a trauma in order to prove to the unsquelchable Eric Cartman that psychic powers were not real, and that everything that happens has a logical explanation. At the time, as I was recovering, objects in my hospital room inexplicably shook. Later, I checked the foundation, and talked to some of the doctors, who admitted there was construction going on nearby, so I thought nothing of it. It was just a drilling tremor. Fine.

After that… especially after the Cthulhu Gulf crisis, I’ll add… things would happen every so often. Lights would go out around me when I was in an irritable mood, glass would shatter if I worked up into a loud enough rage. It was only when I was incredibly angry. But whatever, I thought. Lights burn out. Glass is poorly made.

Everything is logical. The unexplainable can be explained.

And yes, I say this fully aware that strange things always happen, like a Dark God from another dimension being summoned, but just because they’re strange doesn’t mean they’re illogical. Cthulhu was summoned because of a vapid oil company’s poorly thought-out move. And Cthulhu existed because… of… something. In my spare time, I was working on that.

I’d been working with Kenny (or, should I say, the Human Kite had been working with Mysterion) for years now on what exactly Cthulhu was and where it came from. Our research had narrowed it down to a rough longitudinal estimate in the Polynesian waters, but very few illustrations existed of the city from whence the Dark God had been able to rise. The rising at all had been a fluke. A logical fluke, but a fluke nonetheless. The Cultists were still working hard on re-summoning Cthulhu, but there was some kind of piece missing in their plan.

It became our job to figure that out before they could.

We hadn’t made headway lately, though, due to the drug case. Which seemed more connected to the Cult than we’d ever suspected. Researching the Dark God himself could wait. All of us were too interested in what the fuck our pseudo-friend and classmate Craig was really up to.

On Sunday, since most of us were free, we agreed to meet up at the base for the first official, full reading of the note Clyde had passed to Kenny in the lunchroom. Stan, Wendy, Ike and I journeyed over together, opting to walk, rather than drive, since it was actually a nice day, for once. Stan kept his hands in his coat pockets during the entire walk, and seemed to prefer keeping the conversation between all of us, rather than sometimes splitting off and just talking to Wendy, which was interesting. But we managed to talk about other things. Ike was the one to talk primarily, and, on one of his favorite subjects, he chose to talk about school.

Specifically the fact that our old teacher, Mr. Garrison, had been switched around in the grades yet again and was, for a third time, in charge of Ike’s class. Garrison was one of the most eccentric people in South Park, and that’s saying something. He acted out like a kid sometimes if things didn’t go his way, had once had a sex change, and talked to himself a lot. He used to use mascots back when we were in third grade, a puppet and—at one point—a stick, but now, as Ike was confessing to us on this walk, Garrison would just go ahead and argue with himself in front of the class. Ike had started making money on the side by tutoring his classmates in subjects that Garrison didn’t understand and therefore plowed over in favor of talking about media gossip.

“I can’t believe that guy still has his teaching license,” Stan remarked as we were getting close to Token’s.

“Well, what else would he do, dude?” I said. “I mean, think about it. That one time, all he did was write that gross book.”
“Oh, yeah. Hah, remember when we wrote that book?” Stan grinned. “You, me, Kenny and Cartman. What was that called?”

“Oh, fuck, dude, the one when Butters—”

“Yeah!”

“Hey, Stan,” Wendy cut in, “is this going to be like a normal meeting?”

Stan looked like he was suppressing a sigh when he looked down at his girlfriend and said, “Nah, but seriously, Wendy, don’t mention it out here, ’kay? We can talk about whatever once we’re there.”

“Oh,” she said. “Sure. Right.”

By that point, we’d made it to the gate, which I opened with the latest code. The walk down the path to the building itself was silent, but luckily didn’t last long, and Ike bounded ahead to knock for entry. I glanced over at Wendy while we waited to be let in. She tugged at Stan’s right sleeve, and he slid his hand out of his pocket to clasp hers. Wendy laced her fingers between his, but neither of them said anything.

I couldn’t wonder too much about that, yet, since next thing I knew, the door opened and Clyde let us in. Stan brought his left hand out to usher me and Ike in first, then walked in behind with Wendy. Their hands dropped to their respective sides once Clyde led us to the front room, where Kenny and Token were ending a discussion, the former in his favorite chair, the latter on the sofa. Nobody else was present. It was tough getting Timmy to additional meetings, and we knew Cartman was working. As for Butters, he didn’t know about this extra get-together, and had apparently not been invited. Chaos could only be privy to so much.

“You came, too?” Kenny asked Wendy, passing a look between her and Stan. I noticed Stan shrug… couldn’t tell if Wendy did or not. Hopefully not, since it definitely read, What could I do? She’s my girlfriend and she wanted to come. I wondered if maybe it wouldn’t have been easier if Wendy had joined on during one of her and Stan’s breaks. The League would have brought them back together in that sense, I have no doubt, but as it was now, I’d started to wonder if it might have the opposite effect.

“Bearing gifts,” was the way Wendy answered Kenny, producing from her pocketbook a file folder, sleek, black and professional. There was a label on the front which read, File 20: Craig Tucker and Cult Activity, January-March. “From what Stan told me, today sounded like a show and tell. So here you go.”

Kenny stood, walked over, and took the file from her, and as soon as he opened it up and began flipping through the pages, his eyes widened. Stan, Ike and I looked from Wendy to Kenny and back. Stan’s girlfriend was looking pretty smug, and Kenny, wouldn’t you know it, appeared wholly impressed. So naturally everybody wanted to know what kind of snooping and scouting Wendy had been able to do that Mysterion hadn’t. “This is all first-hand stuff?” Kenny asked her, prodding the file with one index finger.

Wendy nodded. “All recounted to the best of my ability,” she said. “Also, to my knowledge, he’s unaware of Marpesia’s identity.”

“Hmm.” Kenny flipped through the file again, then glanced over at Clyde and said, “Well, identity brings us right into what this whole meeting is about.”
“We gonna head out back?” Token wondered, rising in order to double-check that the door was thoroughly bolted.

Kenny nodded. “No need to be totally official about it, but I think we need the board,” he said. “Thanks for this,” he added to Wendy. “I’ll read it all over before Wednesday.”

“Oh, just trying to help,” Wendy said with a genuine smile. She went to take Stan’s hand again, but he silently refused her and followed Clyde and Token back to the main meeting room. He said nothing to any of us, just went on his way. I exchanged a quick, worried glance between Kenny and my brother, then held my right arm out to stop Wendy just as she was calling out to her boyfriend and taking a step forward.

Kenny gave me a little wave and wandered back himself, beckoning for Ike to follow. I didn’t get many chances to speak to Wendy alone, which, given how much we had to interact during school and all that, was almost weird. She was my best friend’s girlfriend, but everything I knew about her, I knew from him. The most I’d ever interacted with Wendy otherwise was back when I’d been dating Heidi, who ran in Wendy’s social circle. So, yes, it was rare for me to talk to her alone. And we usually talked about the same thing… one particular person’s well-being.

“What?” Wendy wondered, glaring up at me. Yeah, glaring. She wasn’t thrilled.

“Look, Stan takes League work really seriously,” I told her. “Remember, missions take priority in here.”

Wendy tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, then popped a hip and folded her arms. “I’m just interested in what goes on,” she said in her defense, “that’s all. He doesn’t have to get all cold about it.”

“He’s just getting used to the idea of you joining,” I tried to console her.

“Oh,okay,” said Wendy, not sounding thoroughly convinced.

Well, that was the best I could do for now. It was difficult trying to reassure somebody I didn’t know all too well, especially when I didn’t know the full angle from which she was coming. I didn’t know exactly why Stan was shunning her, I didn’t know exactly why Wendy seemed so desperate to get in on League affairs. It was pretty much spelled out, though, I realized as I showed Wendy the way to the back meeting room. They must’ve been on the fence again. That was not a thought to be pondered within these walls, though, so I made my brain drop the subject.

Once in the confines of the meeting hall, we took our usual places, and Wendy was ushered to sit beside Ike, near the computers. We had once thought of name plating our respective seats around that rectangular table, but had dismissed the idea altogether when it became apparent that we’d always end up in the same place anyway, and it was such a tight group, we didn’t need anything but face recognition during meetings.

Ike had booted up the main database computer, and Kenny was unpinning a few things from the corkboard when I took my own seat between Stan and Token. Clyde, I noticed for the first time since arriving, looked awful. It must have had something to do with that paper he’d given Kenny, since that was the whole reason for this meeting in the first place. He’d seemed fine that day at lunch, but Clyde was great at faking being okay. When he was worried to a certain point, though, he’d really let you know.

“All right,” said Kenny, walking back over to the table. He took the head seat, and spread out a few things in front of him: the transcript from Clyde’s conversation with Craig, a clipping from
Thursday’s paper that had published the names of the men Mysterion had handed over to Officer Barbrady to arrest, and the photo Ike had printed out of Craig. “This guy,” Kenny went on, slapping a hand down on the photo, “is obviously a lot more dangerous than we’ve given him credit for. This meeting was called so we can all more or less be unanimous on the decision to take him down.”

“What’s the big threat?” Token wondered.

“Here,” Kenny said, handing Token the transcript.

Token read it over, and his face turned grave. Without a word, he read it over again, then passed it to me. I set it down between me and Stan, so we could speed things up. And apparently, yes. We did have a lot to worry about.

The conversation had gone thusly:

*Clyde:* Dude, bus stop’s that way.

*Craig:* Yeah, not going to school today.

*Clyde:* How come?

*Craig:* Cuz a certain group is being a pain in my ass and I need a break. (The underlining was Clyde’s, for extra emphasis.)

*Clyde:* What?

*Craig:* Like you don’t know what I’m talking about.

*Clyde:* Craig, seriously, what?

*Craig:* I don’t want to go to jail, Clyde. If you can give me that, I won’t say anything about you jerks, kay? Especially that dick Mysterion. They’re pissed off at me enough as it is.

*Clyde:* Who’s they?

*Craig:* Who’s asking? You or some asshole vigilante?

*Clyde:* What the fuck?

*Craig:* Catch your bus, Mosquito.

“Oh, shit,” I couldn’t help saying once I’d read through it. I handed the transcript over to Ike and took a look around the table. Once Ike and Wendy read through it, the air in the room seemed to get thicker. Everyone was stone-faced and contemplative, each in their own way. Wendy looked almost guilty. Kenny looked mixed. Stan looked ready to strangle someone.

“Pretty much what was going through my head at the time,” said Clyde.

“So he knows who we are?” Stan guessed.

“He at least knows who I am,” Clyde grumbled, “but it sounds like Kenny’s safe. Gonna go ahead and guess he knows at least about Token and Cartman, too.” The two dead giveaways, of course. “Whatever he knows, we can’t let him spread it.”

“All right,” Kenny commanded, “list time. Let’s just rattle names off. Ike?” On the prompt, Ike nodded and started up a file on the laptop we had specifically for League purposes, which he had
sitting in front of him, and rigged it to the computer directly behind him, so that anything he searched for or typed in would be visible to everyone. Kenny, meanwhile, walked over to one of the whiteboards and uncapped a black, felt-tipped marker. “Everyone Craig’s had an extended conversation with since January. Let’s just rattle names off and see if we can come up with something.”

“Like what?” I wondered.

“Any possible leak,” said Kenny. “How he could’ve found out about Clyde, how maybe he knows about more of us. Who’ve we seen him talking to?”

“Well, jeez, if it’s since January, you might as well put me and Clyde on the list now,” Token started. Kenny nodded and wrote their names down.

“Why write down Token and Clyde?” Wendy asked Stan in a whisper across the table.

Stan looked reluctant to answer, but leaned over to clarify to her, “Just having their names up there might remind someone of a conversation at some other point. We’ve gotta start somewhere.”

“Oh.” Wendy sat back. “Well, you might as well put me on that list, too,” she announced. Kenny whipped around and shot her a glare. Wendy stood her ground. “We’re in History together. He was even acting shifty in class. I put that in my report,” she added, nodding over to the file she’d handed over earlier.

“Hmm,” was all Kenny said. He nodded to Ike, who tacked away at the keypad while Kenny turned back to the board and wrote Wendy’s name down under Token’s. “Keep ’em coming, come on.”

“Uh… Tweak, about how his coffee was too light,” Stan recalled.

“Oh, right!” Wendy confirmed. Must’ve been one of their dates.

“Cartman,” said Clyde. “Craig got in an argument with him about something having to do with homework.”


“Red?” Kenny wondered, pausing for a second. I was only doing exactly what he’d requested, looking back on random events we’d witnessed that had involved Craig, but I’d completely forgotten about the incident with Red. And, for all I knew, Kenny still had a thing for her. It was a crush that had started back around seventh grade, and nobody knew if Red noticed or even cared, or why her specifically, but Kenny was almost uncharacteristically subtle about it.

“Yeah,” I said, “I saw her talking to Craig out in front of the school sometime last month. I don’t remember what it was about.”

“Oh,” said Kenny, remaining composed as he tensely wrote down Red’s name.

The names kept coming, even though some of them were total stretches. Then again, teachers he’d go to for help on work more often may have been a clue, or even the counsellor, who he’d have to pay visits to often for refusing to do things he didn’t want to do in class. Then, Kenny requested that Token read off the names of the men Barbrady had arrested.

Token did, then added, “Says they were both from Colorado Springs.”
“Colorado Springs?” Kenny and Stan repeated in unison.

“That’s where Shelley goes to school,” said Stan, perking up a bit more. “Give me that.” Token handed him the newspaper clipping, and Stan read the names over. “I don’t know if these guys are affiliated with her university, I mean, it’s a big town but—Kenny, dude, what’re you doing?!”

While Stan had been reading over the clipping, Kenny had written down Shelley Marsh under the existing list of names, then had drawn an arrow between her and the arrested men with a note reading, Colorado Springs. “Sorry, man, but we’ve gotta write everything down as a possible lead,” Kenny shrugged.

“I guess,” Stan muttered, “but my sister’s totally not part of the Cult.”

“She’s scary enough,” said Kenny.

“Shelley’s not scary, she’s just angry ninety per cent of the time,” Stan refuted. “No way is she involved.”

“We can’t rule out everyone just because of relations, though,” Clyde reminded him. Stan clamped up and rested against the table, glaring at the clipping about the arrest.

Of course, I didn’t believe that Shelley could possibly be involved, either… Colorado Springs was a large town. But that begged the question, “Dude, why were guys from Colorado Springs coming all the way to South Park?” I wondered. “No way it was just for… what was Craig dealing that night?”

“Cocaine,” both Kenny and Wendy answered.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “So, I’m sure there’s plenty of seedy back alleys in Colorado Springs to score coke. Again, why come here?”

“Because South Park’s a bumfuck, out of the way town?” Ike suggested, still ticking away at the keyboard.

“That’s way too obvious an explanation,” said Stan.

“It’s just Craig,” Wendy said. Everyone turned to look at her. She tensed a little, but ended up sitting up straight and delivering her response like an oration to a classroom of student judges. “Craig has obviously been on this racket for a little while. It’s also apparent that he does, whether he knows it or not, have some kind of link to the Cthulhu Cult in South Park. Maybe we don’t know his exact in, since… is he part of the Cult himself?” We all were able to tell her a confident ’no.’ “Okay, but he’s doing work for them on the outside. Plus… South Park can’t be the only town in Colorado with a Cult following, right..?”

Kenny’s eyes flared open, and he triple-underlined the words Colorado Springs. “Colorado fucking Springs!” he shouted, walking back over to the table and writing the words CULT INTEL on the printed photograph of Craig. “Ike—”

“Cult activity within the last twenty years in Colorado Springs,” Ike finished for him. “On it.”

While Ike was conducting his search, Kenny heaved out a huge, aggravated sigh. “Clyde, dude,” he said, “sorry, but we really need to figure out how the hell Craig knew about you being Mosquito. So—”
“Don’t even think about cutting me out of this Wednesday,” Clyde warned. “Kenny, I’m not gonna run just because Craig knows who I am. So fucking what?”

Kenny glanced over at him. “So, isn’t he, like, your best friend, or some shit?”

“I was already committed to arresting him before, how should Craig knowing who I am change that?” Clyde challenged. “It’s our credo, right? In here, things’re different.” Taking in a deeper breath, he added, “I’d even turn Bebe in if she ended up doing something this illegal.”

That started up another few seconds of awkward stares between Stan and Wendy. We’d all agreed to it. Even if a friend, girlfriend, whatever, got on our hit-list, within the League, we’d stick to the work first. None of us wanted any of our good friends or loved ones to be involved, hence Stan’s immediate defense of his sister and Kenny’s small shirk when I’d mentioned the girl he’d on and off been thinking about asking out for a while. Now that Wendy was in contention for being added to the League roster, she was the most ‘involved’ since Ike. And her glances at Stan all asked, Would you have done that to me?

“Colorado Springs,” said Ike, breaking the minor silence. “Here’s an article from about… sixteen years ago.” I saw Kenny tense up. “Arrests in Colorado Springs for wild Cult activity. Another article from almost four years ago, Attempted Theft Attributed to Local Dark Cultist.”

“Thief?” Kenny wondered.

“Yeah, about some item on loan at… at UCCS.”

“FUCK!” Stan shouted, standing in a frenzy. University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. Where now Shelley Marsh was finishing up her freshman year. “Does it give a name? Is it the same as one of these bastards?” Stan demanded, holding up the newspaper clipping.

“No,” said Ike, clicking around. I was able to see all of his cross-referenced windows on the mainframe computer screen. “But one of the guys that got arrested last Wednesday is mentioned in this article as being a professor. I’ll check to see if he’s still employed there. What’s your sister’s major?”

“She’s undeclared. I have no clue what classes she’s taking.” Stan sounded determined enough, but his body language read all nerves. His fingers were digging into the table until his knuckles turned white. “What if he’s one of her professors..?”

“Stan…” Wendy tried.

“Then we interrogate her,” said Kenny, all business. Stan shot him a scathing glare. “Toolshed doesn’t have to. It’ll be one of us.”

“Shelley’s not involved!”

“Dude, chill,” I tried.

“Don’t worry about it, anyway,” Ike then interrupted. “He only teaches graduate studies now, he’s part-time.”

Kenny walked right over to where Ike was sitting and leaned over to read over his shoulder. “Part time since when?” he wondered.

“Since this article, almost four years ago.”
“Keep tabs on him,” Kenny assigned Ike, who nodded and began frenetically posting bookmarks. “So we have these guys from Colorado Springs, now. Who came to South Park for something from Craig.” He walked back over to the whiteboard and wrote down Cult Interactions, and underlined it. “From this, we’ve figured out this much: there are most likely several Cult branches in Colorado alone, and Cultists are being drawn to South Park because of whatever it is Craig is actually dealing.”

“So the obvious next step is, we get in there, too,” I suggested.

Stan nodded. “This is getting deep, but we all kinda knew it would, yeah?” he said. “I second the fact that we need to seek out sources from inside.”

“Can I lay down another voice on that?” said Clyde. “I want to know how much any of the Cultists knows about any of us. I’m pissed knowing that maybe the whole Cult knows who I am, and probably more of us, too.”

“I know who we can ask, if it comes down to it,” said Kenny somberly. “But we’ve all got to be in agreement if we all need the help.”

Stan perked up and leaned forward, his fingers digging into the side of the table, where he gripped it. “Hold up, you’re not talking about… y’know… Bradley?” he wondered. That got me, and everyone else, quiet and staring at Kenny for an answer. It was no secret that Kenny hated Bradley Biggle, though none of us really knew why. He was just pissed at the kid (who only seemed to show up every now and then if he ‘sensed we really needed him’).

“Fuck. No,” Kenny said, firmly. “I’m talking about our other connection.”

“Huh?” Stan wondered. This was then followed by an immediate, “Oh. Them.”

“The Goths?” Ike guessed.

Kenny, Stan and Ike each had a solid Goth connection, and the Goths, in turn, were all a part of the Cthulhu Cult. Though there were three in the League with connections, only Kenny ever got anything out of them. I sometimes wondered just how much Mysterion collaborated with them. Some nights would go by when Mysterion would be unavailable, and it sometimes seemed more than obvious that he was working with them in some way or another. If we weren’t so sure Mysterion was, you know, good, those meetings would be incredibly suspect. They were always passed off as Kenny’s unstable infatuation with the Cthulhu mythos, and we’d only worry until another mission started and Mysterion was fine.

“Yeah,” said Kenny, “the Goths.” He set about starting to re-tack the gathered papers to the corkboard, but he left the whiteboard untouched, probably so that we could go over it again on Wednesday. “I’d say we can pretty much end now, if we can agree that we need to talk to them. I definitely can find the time, but guys, if you have any chance at all…”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Stan offered.

“If the Goth in my grade comes to school this week, me, too,” said Ike.

“Great.” Kenny walked back over to the whiteboard and wrote down in large letters: Next benchmark: GOTH. Connection? “If they know Craig at all, if they can say anything about Craig at all, we can link things up more. Also this,” he added, stabbing the marker again toward the underlined words Colorado Springs. “This is the icebreaker, okay? We ask if anything interesting has been happening in Colorado Springs. We’re going to break this. We’re going to fucking break
“Break in?” Token wondered.

“Yeah,” said Kenny. “I’m positive that, once we take Craig down, we’ll have our biggest in on the Cult yet. Here, let’s narrow this list down.” Next to Clyde and Token’s names, Kenny drew and arrow, and then the words, no threat. “What do we think, guys? How about these other names?”

So we began categorizing. Butters and Tweak were labeled with possible threat, since Tweak was high-strung enough to spurt out information if provoked. Cartman was labeled general asshole but probably no threat. Shelley was labeled probably no. The two arrested men were labeled definite.

“So that just leaves…” Kenny said, the marker hovering over Red’s name. Man, he really had a thing for her, I realized. Again, I had no idea why her, or when it had started, but the thought of her having any even far-fetched relationship to the Cult was unsettling to him.

“I-I’m sure Red isn’t involved, either,” I offered quickly.

Kenny just wrote probably no next to her name on the whiteboard, then capped the marker and sat back down at the head of the table. He flipped through Wendy’s file again, then asked, “She… doesn’t have reason to be, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What the hell, Craig?” Kenny grumbled, scowling at the photo of our now-adversary, back on the corkboard. “Dammit.”

“Dude, I wouldn’t worry about it,” Stan tried.

“Yeah, I just… Goddammit,” Kenny muttered. “I was gonna… seriously, this week, I told myself I was gonna… but—fucking ugh. If she’s—”

“Ohmigod!” Wendy gasped, her face going bright. “Kenny, do you have a crush on Red?!”

Kenny shot her a glare, then dug at his messy hair while muttering, “Maybe Cartman was right about chicks in the group. I don’t want these extra meetings to turn into gossip hour.”

Stan pinched the bridge of his nose and sank back into his seat. “Meeting adjourned please?” he requested. “We can carry this outside.”

“Yeah, agreed,” said Kenny. We all were in consensus, so Ike shut down the computers, and we made our way out, with Clyde locking up the door behind us. Conversation eventually winded down, and Stan left with Wendy rather quickly, probably to discuss with her again what could and could not be talked about within the walls of the meeting room (and, for that matter, outside of it as well).

Despite the awkward ending to the meeting, the entire thing had caused us to make some headway. Wendy’s involvement was still confusing me a little, and I was concerned for Stan’s ability to keep it together during future meetings, if Wendy’s presence in the League was going to bother him as it seemed to be. Of course, she was probationary… we could still tell her no. Time would tell.

Time would also bring us closer to figuring out what exactly that Cult was all about.
Episode 6: Of Sex and Sledgehammers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kyle

On Monday, during English, Stan looked incredibly tired. He still shot the shit with me and Kenny before class started, but he definitely wasn’t at one hundred per cent. This was confirmed when he scrawled on my notebook in the middle of the current lecture about Cold War literature, *I need a distraction.*

*Middle of class,* I wrote back underneath it, in my own margin. I hated having written conversations between friends on my notes, but I’d done the homework that the teacher was covering (for the majority of the class that hadn’t), so I could let this one slide.

*Not now—after school,* Stan wrote back.

*Where?*

Stan wrote back three question marks, then quickly retracted his hand as the teacher turned back around to address the class. We were unable to continue the conversation on paper, but once class ended, I agreed to help Stan find a distraction somewhere downtown. Sometimes that meant not-so-secretively browsing the aisles of Home Depot for new ideas to add to our weapon arsenals in the League, but I had a feeling today was going to be more like wasting change at the arcade, which was one of our current favorite distractions.

Craig was nowhere to be spotted again in school on Monday, but I caught up with Clyde at one point. He ended up confiding in me that Craig *had* shown up for first period, then faked a cough or something and left for the rest of the day. Great, so he was onto the fact that we were onto him for being onto us. This was one hell of a stupid struggle. Something told me that good things would come of getting Craig to talk, though. After all, Chaos was convinced that Craig dealt directly with the Cult, and the title of Wendy’s report seemed to confirm that. Truth be told, I was getting anxious to read what was in that report. It had been a while since the League had been onto something so deep.

Otherwise, school passed as quickly and methodically as it usually did. Teachers droned on, I stressed about the looming threat of SATs, Cartman got on Kenny’s nerves and Marjorine got on Cartman’s. Wendy had managed to whisk Stan completely away during lunch that day, and they seemed to be fine. The next time I saw Stan in the hall, though, he reiterated that he still needed a distraction.

Stan and I had our last period of the day, chemistry, together, so we decided to leave right from there. The class itself was enough of a distraction for me. Again, I enjoy logic. I like looking at formulae and getting the same result in the physical world that I got on paper. A method said two elements were compatible, and a bunsen burner and a few drops of a couple different liquids could prove it. Chemistry was satisfying. Not satisfying enough for me to *desire* a career in it, but if I could go to a college that would allow me to enroll undecided, I might be persuaded.

I think that was my problem, in the ongoing Kyle vs. Broflovski Household debate that had
been going on for some time now. Saying “I want to be an undecided freshman at a school of my choice” was apparently way too hard to say to my parents, so instead I just settled on bitching at them to leave me alone when they tried to talk up their own ideas. I dreaded the talk that would eventually come. The one I couldn’t escape.

Ugh. I needed a distraction, too.

The bell rang, and the entire chemistry lab sprung to life with girls pulling out their pink-cased iPhones, with guys carelessly cramming notebooks into their bags, of couples hooking up and leaving together, of teenagers talking about anything but what we were just being taught. Stan and I, among those cramming our bags and wondering how the hell all that shit had fit in there prior to class but apparently didn’t anymore, hung back until most of the room had cleared out, then made the decision to head downtown, since Stan had been able to snag control of his dad’s car for the week.

Stan’s birthday was in October, and he was on the cusp of the cutoff date, which made him one of the oldest in class. He’d also managed to get his license on the first try, and South Park was so lax about the ‘kids driving kids’ policy that he’d started right off during the end of football season giving people rides. It was usually his dad’s car he borrowed, under the condition that he take exceptionally good care of it or else he’d never get one of his own before college; it was easy to snag, too, since these days, Randy Marsh’s coworker at the geology lab, Nelson, had been offering carpooling.

So, long story short, Stan had the car, and we would therefore have free reign of the town. Assuming, of course, we could maneuver our way out through the packed high school hallways first.

As we crossed the hall out of the classroom, who should I run into but Heidi, my ex. She gave me a shy smile, which was more than she’d given me most of the year, but which managed to set me in a foul mood. The breakup had been entirely her idea, though I admit I’d been starting to doubt my loyalties toward the end as well. Heidi’s reason, though, was that she “wanted to have other options,” and not date anyone for longer than two years. So, great, I’d realized, my girlfriend was fickle so who needs her anyway. I’d called her a shallow bitch and we hadn’t spoken since. So to see her smile at me in the hall was weird and misleading. Whatever. I wasn’t about to date her again. We’d both been single since the breakup, and the next person I wanted to date was someone, just about anyone, else.

Stan noticed the look she’d given me, and veered me off to the side, since he’d correctly assessed that I had a tangent coming on. I tend to do that. I have to talk things out when they bother me, and nobody has the patience to listen like Stan. Not even my own brother.

“Did you see that?!?” I hissed out. I wasn’t even paying attention to where I was walking, but Stan steered me away from crowds and doorways as we made our way through. “What the hell does she think she’s doing? I mean, really! What, is she sick of being single and now all of a sudden I’m okay again? God! Girls can be so… confusing sometimes!”

“They confuse the best of us, dude,” Stan offered as comfort. He’d walked me outside at that point, and we began making our way out to the student parking lot.

“I just… honestly! I was clearly not good enough for her before—”

“Kyle, it’s over,” said Stan. “You said it’s over. It’s over. Don’t over-analyze it.”

“Maybe I should cut my hair,” I muttered. “She’d love that.”

“Dude, no!” Stan protested. “Don’t do that.”
“Why not?” Yes, it would have been lame as hell, the whole ‘cut your hair to forget a relationship’ thing, but for me it could very well have made sense. My hair was a constant mess, and it wasn’t until Heidi had taught me that just because I had curly hair didn’t mean it had to look that way that I’d started taking note of how long or short I ever kept it. I took my hat off and added, “I mean, look at this mess, I could use it!”

Stan frowned and grabbed at my hair, fake-massaging my scalp with his long fingers. He had a firm grip on a fistful of hair when his frown turned to a smirk and he said, “Come on, Kyle, don’t hack this off.”

“Give me one good reason,” I said, swatting his hand away so I could muss with that red thicket again myself. I couldn’t really imagine myself with hair any shorter, and I did like the way I’d learned to style it… it was just that Heidi had helped me with that, and I wasn’t happy with her at present.

“It looks fine. I like it.”

“Oh, jeez,” I said, rolling my eyes. “That’s your most convincing argument this year.”

“Also you’d regret it,” said Stan. He nudged me so I’d look at him. Looking up was weird. I was still getting used to it. Stan had shot up over the course of the fall, and now was one of the tallest guys in school, let alone our grade. I lagged behind, but was confident I had another spurt coming. “I know you would, and so do you. Don’t touch it. It’s fine.” I sighed and mussed with my hair once more before pulling my hat back on. “Plus,” Stan added, “isn’t it more of a ‘fuck you’ to her if you keep it like that?”

“Point taken, Stan, I won’t cut my hair.”

“You’d better not.”

“I won’t.”

“Fine, then.” He then started laughing at the stupidity of the conversation, and I joined him after a moment. It was always good to know that things would eventually come back around to more lighthearted moments when the two of us were hanging around each other. Even if the subject at hand had been something as stupid as how not to act around my ex-girlfriend.

Stan unlocked the car and we tossed our heavy bags in the back; I slid into the passenger seat and had a fight with the seatbelt for no less than ten seconds before coming up the victor. God knows why, too, but once I’d settled in, my brain looped right back around to the very subject I’d wanted to steer clear of.

“While we’re on the subject, though,” I said, as Stan started up the car, “and sorry if this comes up for you a lot, but… how’s everything between you and Wendy?”

“Ugh,” Stan groaned, and I instantly felt awful. I slumped back in my seat, and rested my head on my right hand, my elbow on the armrest that was built into the door. Stan went right through the motions of backing out the car and easing us into the after-school, backed-up traffic. “Dude,” he then answered, “I don’t even know. I just hope that after this Wednesday’s meeting, we can go back to normal.”

“So much for ‘what happens here stays here,’ huh?” I offered.

“Nooooo kidding,” said Stan. Then, watching the halted line of cars ahead of us for a chance to let up on the brake, he started to confide in me: “But, hey, it should get better, right? I—we just
That didn’t sound good. And Stan sounded skeptical, or at least nervous. The way he was gripping the wheel confirmed the suspicion about him being all nerves. “What exactly is she doing?” I wondered.

“Asking too much.” His hands tightened on the wheel. “Pestering. She’s _pestering_. It’s not like her.” Stan shook his head. “Toolshed was the _one thing_ I had that had nothing to do with Wendy. The one thing, and now that’s gone. It’s like, I like her and everything, but I still need my fucking space.”

“Have you thought about—”

“Taking a break again?” Stan finished. The line of cars began moving slowly forward. “That’s another thing I’m worried about. I’m telling myself, it’s been less than a week. She’ll get out of it.” Taking in a deep breath, he added, “I’m afraid one more break’ll do it. The end. We’d be done. I’m sixteen, Kyle, I can’t keep playing that game forever. We either stay a couple or we stop.”

“Wendy’s not the only girl out there, though, you know?” I tried, still feeling bad that I’d brought up the subject at all. “Have you thought about going out with anyone else?”

Stan shook his head again. We’d made it to the front of the line now, only to be halted by the crossing guard. Leaning forward onto the wheel, Stan said, “At this point, I have no idea. I don’t think I could date another girl. Not for the rest of high school, anyway.” A little to my surprise, Stan snapped himself out of his funk with a laugh. I sat up, wondering basically, what the fuck, and in response to the odd look I gave him, Stan just said, “Remember what Chef used to say? What was it… ‘There’s a time and place for everything…”’

“…And it’s called college!” I chimed in to help Stan remember the rest. “Man,” I added as Stan steered out onto the road heading downtown, “I haven’t thought about Chef in ages! Dude, talk about a throwback, way to remember that!”

“Yeah,” Stan grinned, already in a much better mood, as was I, “I got thinking about that wisdom of his recently. Guy had all the answers, didn’t he?”

“Right up till the end,” I recalled.

“Yeah…”

We both fell silent for a moment, remembering our old friend. Our elementary school chef (one of the only other African Americans in town other than Token’s family) had been so much more than his title implied. He had been, in his own (raunchy) way, a sage; one of the only adults we’d ever trusted and sought out for help. Even though we’d seen him die, in a gorge, back in fourth grade, Chef’s wisdom had never left us, and every so often over the years, we’d wonder what he would have said in any given situation.

“Hey, uh…” said Stan, being vocal for the first time since we’d left the parking lot, “we’re gonna be driving past the graveyard, anyway. Want to, you know…”?

“S-sure,” I agreed, looking out the window at the bland, common scenery passing by. “We haven’t for a while.”

“As long as we’re thinking about it.”
“Yeah.”

We were quiet the rest of the way to our added detour. Stan parked at the cemetery gate, and the two of us walked side by side down through the rows of slate grey headstones and the odd mausoleum, listening to nothing but the crunch of brown spring grass and remaining snow beneath our boots. When we arrived at our destination, a large square stone bearing the name of our departed friend and mentor, the air between us was a mix of remorse and relief.

There was no body buried beneath the ground at this particular site. The only thing we as a town had been able to bury in Chef’s memory had been his spatula. Chef’s body had been recovered by the society that had done him in, the Super Adventure Club, which, in very recent years, had itself been destroyed in its entirety by Crab People. We didn’t really talk about Crab People, we just knew they were there. Kind of like Cthulhu. Just there. But it was good knowing that, with the end of the Club, maybe Chef really was at peace.

Even though the body was nowhere near the grave, we still spoke to the stone as if it was. “Hey,” Stan was the first one to speak. I glanced up at him, but his eyes were glued down to the stone. “Been a long time, huh?”

“We’re gonna be juniors next year,” I added. I bent down to brush a bit of snow off of the engraved letters on the headstone. “Can you believe that? Kenny just turned sixteen.”

Stan managed to laugh a little. “You’d be proud of him, Chef, he’s slept with every foreign exchange girl the high school’s had so far.”

“And Stan and I are still lame enough to have only been with one girl each,” I said, laughing as well.

There was another pause, and then we both said at once, “And Cartman’s still a virgin.” That was one of the bragging rights most of us had over the guy who was otherwise too full of himself to care, so we brought it up every chance we could. Not that it was anything contemptible in anyone else to be fifteen and a virgin (I mean, come on), it was just the fact that it was Cartman, and it wasn’t by choice that he was. So in that sense, it was funny.

“Anyway, miss you,” Stan transitioned, so that we didn’t have to stand around in the graveyard long. “Sure could use some of your advice from time to time.”

“Thanks for what you gave us, though,” I put in. “We’d never have grown up right in this town of idiots if we hadn’t known you.”

That much was true. Sometimes, I felt like we were among the only sane people in town. Which was a thought that stayed with me through the League conflicts that were to come.

Stan and I paid our final respects of the afternoon, and trudged back to the car. We didn’t talk about Chef for the rest of the day, even though visiting the grave had been, probably, one of the best things we’d done in quite a while. The rest of the afternoon was filled with blissfully mindless activity. We hit the arcade, we bought a bag of chips and took bets on how many girls on the mall escalators would get stuck, and with what article of clothing: skirt, heel, or coat. Basically, we distracted each other from thinking about anything else. Stan didn’t have to think about Wendy, and I didn’t have to think about Heidi or the long-winded talk I knew was waiting for me back at my house. The subjects we tried to avoid did come up a couple times, and I suggested once to Stan that he really lay down the law with Wendy, and he offered once to me to have dinner at his place so I could avoid the verbal onslaught that came with dinner at home. We both kindly denied the other’s idea (Stan was not a ‘lay down the law’ person with Wendy, and I wasn’t someone who could keep
The dread came back the second we were back in the car, though. For the past year, I’d hated going home after school. Every single day was the same thing. My parents would bug me about college. Same damn thing. Every damn day.

Stan did a good job of keeping conversation about other shit, but once we were in the driveway, even our nonsense couldn’t shut out what surely was waiting for me any more.

“Last chance,” said Stan, rolling down and leaning out the window as I dug my backpack out of the back seat of his car. “You sure you don’t want to have dinner with us?”

The backpack successfully unearthed, I slung it over my shoulder and shut the door. “Dude, if I have dinner one more time at your place this month, your mom’s gonna think we’re dating,” I laughed, leaning against Stan’s car with one hand on the roof.

“Aww, we’re not?” Stan joked. I punched his arm, since I was within perfect range. Stan laughed, then shifted into reverse and said, “See you. And hey, if your parents start giving you shit, just chuck Ike at them and make a run for it.”

“I’m sure that’ll go over swimmingly,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You never know.”

“Later.”

Stan gave me a little salute, and backed out of the driveway. I took in a deep breath, and prayed I’d be able to fight past whatever fortress my parents had devised for conversation that evening.

Once inside, I tried sneaking upstairs, but it was no good. My mother’s supersonic hearing trapped me before I could get to the bottom step. “Kyle?” she called in from the kitchen. “Is that you?”

This would have been the perfect time for me to come back with some stupid retort like, *Nope, just somebody robbing the house*, like Stan or Kenny would’ve been able to do, but I was so conditioned that instead I just sighed and called back, “Yep.”

“Come in here for a second, sweetie, I want to talk to you.”

“Ma, I’m loaded down with homework,” I tried, sneaking in a hopefully effective lie. The homework lie worked every so often, and it was one of the only ones I could say convincingly. I couldn’t use it all the time, though, since my parents were the type who would actually take it up with the school if they thought a fifteen-year-old was working too hard.

“It’ll just take a second.”

I heaved out a breath, dropped my backpack at the bottom of the stairs in a heap, and started back toward the kitchen. I hadn’t even noticed that the living room, our front room, was occupied. There on the couch sat Ike, dutifully tutoring Flora, the girl from his class he’d been dating for some time now. Flora was blonde, cute, musical and studious, all things that pretty much summed up Ike’s perfect woman (probably give or take the blonde part), and would often come by for dinner. My mother could never stop gloating about what a good girl she was, and the constant praise made even my brother sick. Mom had doted on Heidi, too, which had been sort of surprising, since she always acted like she’d be very particular about who I—or Ike, too, for that matter—would end up dating.
Ike gave me a black-eyed glance that said, *Mom’s in one of ‘those’ moods, so good luck,* so that just made me feel fan-fucking-tastic as I wandered into the kitchen.

I unzipped my jacket and tossed it onto the back of the chair I usually sat in at the table in the dining room, then leaned up against the kitchen doorway and asked, “What? I really do have a lot to do tonight.”

“No need to get angry, bubbe, I just wanted to ask you how things are going,” my mother said. She was calmly flipping through a recipe book while stirring something on the stove, but she glanced over her shoulder at me when she spoke.

“Oh, for the—you said it’d just take a second,” I reminded her.

Sheila Broflovski—short, stocky, greying red beehive hair—has ‘stereotypical overzealous Jewish mother’ written all over her. She’s nice, and has a fairly good reputation, but she’s a gossip who acts too rashly on her causes, and in my opinion could always tone it down more. She’d gotten the whole town rallied for God-knows-what several times. But underneath all the fire, she really was just a pesky mom who wanted what was best for her kids. And that boiled down to Ivy League schools and intelligent girlfriends. This conversation was doomed to go in one of those directions or the other.

“I just wanted to say, Kyle,” my mother began, her Jersey background bouncing her intonations all over the place, “that your girlfriend Heidi—“

“Ex-girlfriend,” I reminded her coldly.

“Well, she called here a little while ago, honey, and I think you should call her back.”

My stomach flipped. “Nnnnnnnnno,” I said firmly, humming the word out to make it sound like the thought deserved an iota of consideration.

My mother turned to look at me and frowned. “Kyle, the respectable thing to do would be to call her back,” she scolded.

“No way,” I argued. “Look, I know that maybe you liked her, and you like that Flora’s here and you miss Heidi too or whatever, but last I checked we still weren’t talking, and I’m not calling her back.”

The glare Mom gave me was something near destructive. Like Vesuvius surveying Pompeii to see if it should be taken out or not. “You’re a good boy, Kyle,” she said, “I don’t want to see you falling into any bad habits when it comes to women.”

I was angry enough at the conversation by now to actually start yelling. “Bad habits?! She dumped me. I’m not obligated to do anything, and frankly, I don’t want to!” This was the most vocal I’d been about the breakup around either of my parents… pretty much at all. “Plus, her reasons were stupid and typical, so—”

“Typical?” Mom pried. “What’s typical?”

“Typical!” I yelled. “I don’t know! What do you think is typical for a shallow high school girl?!” And that did it. I know my mother is a ticking time bomb, but I’ve never known how her brain works, which is something I’m thankful for. All I do know about my mother’s thought process, though, is that faults go off in her head as these extreme offenses. So, typical was probably not my best word choice, since it was too open to insane interpretation. And, of course…
“Is this something sexual?” Mom burst out. I swear I could hear Ike muffling a laugh in the other room. Oh, to be ten and off the hook again. “Now, you’re right, she may have seemed nice, but if that girl is a—”

“You are reading way too far into this!” I shouted. “Is it so hard to believe we just didn’t want to date anymore?!”

Apparently that was a yes. “Tell me what happened,” my mother pressed. “Did she sleep with someone else? Is she sleeping around? Are you a jilted lover, Kyle? If you need me to do anything, I’ll—”

“Ma, if you go on a rampage about this, I swear to God—”

“Hey!” Ike shouted in from the living room. “We can’t study with all the bitching going on!”

Ike was such a genius. That turned our mother’s attention completely. “What-what-what?!” she shrieked, walking off into the living room. “What did you say, Ike? You use the word arguing in this house, or—”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I say ‘bitching’?”

“Ike!”

I heaved a sigh and dug my cell phone out of my pocket. Before I could listen in too much on how then Flora began saving the entire household by calming my mom down with mentions of her better qualities, I sent out a mass text. I had a few groupings in my phone, but the most used one was titled ‘Pickup Game.’ This was the front for the League, since we were all known to get together on random occasions for street hockey, basketball, or basketball or rugby or some game one of us invented one day or whatever. The text I sent out was, Anyone in tonight?

I got back a few, No, but Wednesday works, and one, Dunno if I can, dude, sorry, which was from Stan. Kenny, however, текстed back, So no game but I need help studying. A few seconds later, another came back from him reading, Bring your stuff just in case though.

We all had shorthand, especially those of us who worked in smaller groups of two or three. For Mysterion and Kite activities, we’d use the ‘Pickup Game’ group and use needing to study as the front. When Toolshed got involved, we’d text about going fly fishing. And when it was just me and Stan, we’d just say, Pond? for League related things, and, Stark’s Pond, for non. Either way, our parents never figured out where we actually were, even when we did get our phones confiscated for a day or two and most likely had all of our texts and photochats read.

So my mood was lifted a little after my mother’s short but irksome tirade; I reclaimed and pulled on my jacket, then crossed through the living room, perfectly timed to when my mother scurried back to the kitchen to save whatever was on the stove from burning. As I hoisted my backpack over my shoulder again, I looked over at Ike and said, “You’re the greatest brother ever, and I owe you one.”

“Any time, buddy,” Ike grinned. “By the way, can I have that in writing?”

“Funny. Anyway, I’m leaving for a little while, so—”

“What was that?! All of a sudden, my mother had reappeared in the room, having tamed dinner again.

I never really rolled my eyes around (or at) my mother, but at that moment, I wanted to.
She’d been getting on my nerves more and more since I started high school. College was the only end in sight, unless she and Dad uprooted and moved to wherever I’d end up… which, knowing their erratic ways, wasn’t the most far-fetched fear. “Kenny texted me, we’re gonna study tonight,” I told her. “I’ll be back by eleven.”

“Eleven? Kyle, you are staying home,” she started in. “How are you going to get home? Tell Kenny he can study over here and we’ll take him home after dinner.”

“Okay, I’ll be back by nine,” I conceded.

“What about dinner, Kyle? You need to eat!”

“We’ll get burgers or something. I just really have to go, okay?” I couldn’t tell her it was because I couldn’t face her. I’d go up against all sorts of things, different kinds of people, different threats, severe and non, but I was rarely ever able to oppose my mother. I kept telling myself that one of these days, I’d have to, and I’d be able to, once that time came. It would come down to the very last minute about college, but something, I was sure of it, would make me suck it up and tell her exactly why I’d been avoiding the conversation all the time… why I’d been avoiding all of her conversations.

Because she scared me away from making my own decisions.

The thing was, I felt too much. I cared about my family too much. I didn’t want to let them down, and I wasn’t yet able to assure myself that, somehow, no matter what I did, I could still make my parents proud. Even if it wasn’t what they told me to do.

As I was leaving the house, my phone buzzed again. Kinda need to study too, a text to me and Kenny only came from Stan. Can do in 2 hours.

We’ll fill you in, Kenny ended up sending right back.

Sweet. That meant an all out ‘let’s just waste shit’ session. After all, we had to keep in practice on our off-days. ‘Studying’ with Mysterion most likely meant catching up on articles and that kind of thing. Once Toolshed was in, too… training session. I had a few new things I wanted to work on, anyway.

– – –

Meeting up at the base, even when Token wasn’t around, was never a problem. As long as we had keys and the most recent code, we could go ahead through the gate. When I got in, Kenny was there already, sitting in the common room with his back against the base of the sofa, Wendy’s report on Craig open on the floor in front of him. An open notebook, a laptop, and a mug of coffee sat in no particular order nearby.

“Hey,” I said with a sigh as I stepped in and tossed my backpack somewhere into the room. “I didn’t get a chance to grab any extra gear, but I figured if we’d be here, it’d be fine.”

As I wandered into the kitchenette, to find that Kenny had brewed up a full carafe of coffee, Kenny called in, “You get attacked or something?”

“You could say that,” I called back. I took out a mug and poured myself half a cup, drowning the rest of the mug with milk and sugar. I can take coffee, but only so much. “Heidi called and Mom wouldn’t shut up about wanting me to call her back and all that shit.”

“Dude, it’s over, though, right?” Kenny wondered. Satisfied with how my coffee had turned
out, I walked back into the common room, set the coffee down on the floor, and took off my jacket. “I mean, it sucks, cuz you guys worked, but…”

“No, it’s totally over,” I reiterated. I went for my backpack and hauled out a notebook. “She’s just being weird for some reason.”

“Heidi or your mom?”

I gave Kenny an unimpressed look. “My mom’s always weird. Heidi,” I answered. “Heidi’s being weird. But I’m not caving, we’re done, the end.”

“You gonna date again?” Kenny asked, going for his coffee.

“Who knows?” I shrugged. “I don’t really care right now. Can we drop it?”

Kenny nodded into his mug and started looking over Wendy’s compilation again.

“So what’s in there?” I wondered, getting onto the real subject of the evening.

“Actually, a lot,” said Kenny, sliding the report over to me. “Wendy detailed every single transaction she watched between Craig and his clients. Descriptions of the clients to the best of her ability, dates for all of them, that kind of thing. Looks like he deals either weekly or biweekly, and it’s always behind the school.”

“Does Craig use?” I had to ask. I flipped through the pages in Wendy’s report. Everything was neatly bound and compiled like an AP essay, right down to the perfectly-aligned title page. Just what one could expect from Wendy. Everything was indeed detailed chronologically within, and Wendy listed facts first and then personal reflection, either on action that she as Marpesia had taken or thoughts on what else Craig could have been up to.

“He must, dude,” Kenny said. Since becoming more committed to his duties as Mysterion, Kenny himself had stopped using a few things. He used to dabble in drugs here and there, but decided that Mysterion had to be clean. Kenny now only drank socially and smoked cigarettes on occasion. I did practically none of that stuff. I’d have a rum and coke or something if the other guys were drinking, but I didn’t really have the stomach for alcohol, and tobacco made me sick. Pot, whatever, I didn’t care if my friends did it. Crack, though? Heroine? Were people in our class seriously into that? “I mean, look at how much he obtains and how much he deals out. He gets some kind of cut of it. He definitely uses.”

“Huh,” I remarked. “So does Wendy point out anything really interesting?”

“Yeah. Check it out, page twelve.” The report was around twenty pages, so I flipped roughly to the middle and found the page in question. “Goes along with what Chaos told me. Craig deals info.”

On page twelve, Wendy had written: 10:30 pm. In exchange for a small stack of bills estimated to be at least two hundred dollars, Craig has handed over four ounces of pure cocaine, as well as a stack of roughly ten weathered papers. Papers seem to have passed several hands. Clients and dealer alike wear gloves. 10:35 pm. Client has mentioned a Cult ‘messenger.’ Messenger is revealed not to be Craig, but another entity.

“Messenger?” I wondered.

“Yeah, I’d never heard of it,” said Kenny. “But it seems like Craig is playing delivery boy for some other messenger.”
“And you think we’ll figure out who or what that messenger is once we take down Craig?” I guessed.

“Yeah.” Kenny grinned, and took another sip of coffee. “I dunno, Kyle, I’ve just got a really good feeling about this week’s mission.”

“Nice. Oh, speaking of mission, did you get that Stan’s joining?” I asked, indicating Kenny’s cell, which was also on the floor beside him. “We’re training tonight, too, right?”

“Man, I’m ready for that when you are. Finish your coffee, I wanna get out, I’ve been reading for the past hour.”

I laughed. “Sure. I gotta read this first, though. You’ve got me all interested.”

Kenny gave me the go-ahead, and I read through Wendy’s file. Within, it was detailed mostly by date, chronicling when she had started actually physically fighting him as Marpesia, and how much Craig would actually say during any given transaction. Craig was a man of very few words, so it was intriguing when she did write down that he’d said something to his clients. It was usually along the lines of, “I don’t see why you guys need all this, but here.” That seemed like typical Craig. He just did what he did because he did it. Of course, that begged the question as to why and how he’d learned to fight the way we’d seen him fight.

At least, this week, we’d be prepared.

After I’d read through and was satisfied, Kenny and I ceased the ‘studying’ section of the evening, and skipped right to what both of us really needed and wanted to do: hone our field skills and figure out the best way to counter.

Out beyond the boundary of the base was a training field, which we made use of so often there was an extra equipment shed shrouded by some of the trees that bordered the whole large field. A few trees grew randomly through the otherwise open stretch of land, as well, which served as great targets and shields alike. When we were kids, we’d go out back there and pretend to shoot at each other, yelling things like, “I got you, you’re dead!” at whichever hero we’d ‘offed’ that afternoon. It had become a place over time, though, to hone skills. For Kenny to test his shuriken accuracy and set off test fireworks and smokebombs; for Token and Cartman to race and wrestle, armored or not; for Stan to test out exactly what he could do with certain tools, in order to rule some out; for Clyde to work out the reach and levels of his stunner.

For me to fly.

Honestly, when I’d first designed that hang glider, my life had changed, and so had my role in the League. At first, I’d been attached more to the research side of things. I still was, but Timmy and Ike had completely taken that over during actual missions. My persona, the Human Kite, had always been associated with flight, and the glider had started out as just a test, to see how far that could go.

It was kind of ironic that the trauma that had maybe probably not really given me some kind of hyperawareness was the result of cardboard wings. Yes, I’d just been repeating the dumbass move Cartman had attempted in all seriousness (again, I was proving a point), but the .2 seconds prior to hitting the snow and getting knocked out had been pretty great. And as I grew up, I realized I was a good runner. I was light on my feet. Maybe I had light bones, I thought. Maybe I of all of my friends could pull it off.

And pull it off I did. The glider had gone through several different stages, but I had a
fantastic, more or less perfected design by now. It could expand and retract like wings, mostly in the
interest of being able to keep it hooked up on my back at all times but not be restricted by keeping it
extended, and the frame was made of both wood and a light steel alloy. All of the materials had been
swiped from the junkyard at one time or another. I just knew where to look, and exactly what I was
looking for. I kept the tri-colored glider attached to a brown leather harness, which could be adjusted
to be looser or tighter around my shoulders, and there was padding on the top so the wood and metal
wouldn’t chafe the back of my neck in flight.

Due to my added ability, I’d also started, once the glider was a keeper, wearing a brown
leather, mad-bomber-style cap and goggles as part of the Human Kite’s ensemble, but kept the
primary-color (mainly light blue) scheme that I’d come up with from the start. The goggles served
both as an identity shilder and a wind guard.

And I could keep it up for a while, too. I had to start from someplace high, and how long I
could stay airborne always depended on how much of a running start I was able to give myself.
Even if I didn’t get a running start, I’d figured out the right trajectory angle at which to leap. I’d
count to about two, then would expand the glider. It could lock into place if I wanted, as well, so
that I could free at least one hand in order to also engage in combat or even—I’d figured this out
during a training session the previous year—give Ike a lift. (He was the only one light enough for
me to lift, but hey, the glider could take both of us, and he could hit the ground running from just
about any height. Ike didn’t go into battle much, but when he did, we teamed up when we could,
mainly because I didn’t want to let him out of my sight.)

That evening, I focused mostly on flight, while Kenny opted to work on aim and accuracy.
When I needed a break, I shot foam darts at him from one of the fake machine guns we’d kept
around in the shed since we were kids, so that he could practice sprinting and dodging. It was never
until training nights like this that Kenny blurred the line between himself and Mysterion. Whenever
League nights came around, his attitude, the way he carried himself, everything would change. He’d
become fully committed to Mysterion. For most of us, myself included, alter egos were generally
similar to who we really were; we’d just tweak certain things so as not to be found out. Kenny,
though, was harder to see in his other identity. Mysterion was quick, sharp, shadowy… all things
Kenny generally was not. Kenny was astute, yeah, but for the most part, he was loud and lewd and
acted out a lot. Nothing you’d expect of a hero by night.

Stan joined us after about an hour, showing up and saying something about needing to clear
his head. So we got back to individual training. I ran a few laps, leaping and dodging snowbanks
where I had to, since there were still a few piles of snow here and there around the otherwise plowed
field.

Stan, or, well Toolshed’s latest discovery was how to shoot bits out of an electric drill. He’d
bought an advanced drill a while back, one with more settings than any electric drill should really
have, and found that one setting kept the bit just loose enough that it could be shot out if he aimed it
properly. I was sure they hurt like hell if they hit someone, too. So he’d set up a firing range for
himself and the others who used guns, namely Clyde (his stun gun) and Kenny (his .45 and
sometimes a flare).

It sort of bothered me knowing that Kenny carried a pistol. I had to tell myself it was for
shock value more than anything.

While the other two were going about their weapons work, I eventually got around to
climbing trees and flying off of them again. I’d never get sick of that. I mean, I’d figured out how to
fly. Short distances, sure, but it was more than anyone else within a few hundred miles could do.
I was getting to the top branch for the third time since I’d restarted that particular part of training, when I heard Stan yell, “Hey, Kyle!”

“What?” I wondered from my current altitude of about forty feet. I was damn fucking good at climbing trees.

“Let’s try a ricochet!” Stan called up to me. We’d attempted one before, with a boomerang, which was kind of stupid, looking back on it. He’d chucked a boomerang up at me and I’d hucked it right back, which is exactly what a fucking boomerang is supposed to do anyway, but we thought it was the greatest idea ever, at the time.

“What’re you gonna throw?”

“This thing!” He held up the sledgehammer.

“Oh, shit no, dude, it’ll throw off my weight too much!” I hollered back.

“Not if you catch it at the right angle, and not if you plan on landing, anyway.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“Because it’ll be awesome!”

“Famous last words, dude,” I warned.

“Can we just try it?” he pleaded. Stan was a very logical person, too, but he would sometimes forget about things like, oh, gravity and centrifugal force when usual adolescent antics were involved.

The thought, I had to admit, was pretty cool. “Give me a second,” I requested. “Where’re you gonna throw it from?”

“You taking off from that tree?”

“Yeah-huh.”

“How about…” Stan went five paces east, putting him between the tree and a smaller, mangled one, “here? This small one’s the target.”

“I’m trying to take it out?” I guessed.

“Yeah.” After a beat, Stan called over, “Kenny, you might wanna move!”

“The fuck’re you guys doing?” Kenny wanted to know. He was mid-target practice with the shuriken, and had hit the vital points of three dummies, which we collectively had built a couple years ago. We always said we weren’t interested in kill shots, but we had to defend ourselves. Kenny’s accuracy was a little scary, like he was planning for something. Then again, who knew how big the Cult opposition could get…

“Something you’re going to want to watch from… not there,” said Stan.

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” said Kenny, hurrying the hell away from where he’d been and far from the hopeful trajectory of the sledgehammer.

I calculated the distance and angle in my head. Stan had estimated a pretty good spot. If I caught the sledgehammer directly overhead (and assuming he’d move), it would haul me directly
downward if I caught it anywhere but close up to the top of the hilt. Plus, I’d have to keep it elevated as best I could, maybe even get it up over my head, so that it could thrust me *backward* instead. Yes. Overhead. Then that way, I’d have a better shot. “All right,” I called down, “let’s do it.”

“You’re sure?”

“You tell me when!” I thought a beat, then added, “And make sure you move! I don’t want to kill you!”

“Gotcha,” Stan laughed. Thanks to the League, he’d become really fearless. Fearless, and sometimes reckless. Stan would go all-out when it came to fights. Not to say that I, or anyone else for that matter, didn’t, but I’d get worried about him, since he was all offense and almost zero defense. Even the way he protected himself involved immediate offensive retaliation. None of us really wore armor but Timmy and Token, and I thought about that often. We all should have at least worn bulletproof vests or something, even though our opposition was never usually that tough. Marpesia, I remembered, had outfitted herself with one, as well. If I were to start, I’d need to rehash the entire design of the glider, since it would add a lot of extra weight. But for people like Stan, Kenny and Clyde… those guys really should have invested in something.

Well, that was a thought for another time.

Because, before I could think too much about that, Stan shouted, “Go!”

Quick on my reflexes, I was ready in an instant. I jumped forward and upward from the top branch of the tree, extended the glider, and kept my eyes on Stan, who, once I’d locked the glider in place, threw the long sledgehammer up at me.

I totally missed.

I caught it in the wrong spot on the handle, and did indeed fall with it into a snowbank. When Stan came over to help me up, I’d already started in on a stream of profanity directed at him for making me attempt something so stupid, but Stan just laughed and suggested we try again. Kenny, too, was laughing (from wherever he was, I couldn’t even see him), and called over something about wanting to watch it again anyway. A few other muttered profanities later, I was back up in the damn tree, having checked for damage to both myself and my gear.

This time, I jumped higher, and swept myself into an angle once airborne. I didn’t watch Stan, since he called out to me when he was going to throw the thing, and instead I set my focus on where I knew the tool was bound to come into view. Both hands ready, I caught it just under the anvil and hoisted it up over my head, which proved to be a little more force than I’d been anticipating, but that was due to my lack of weight training, especially compared to Stan. I kept firm hold of the thing, though, and managed to stay airborne as I let the handle slide down through my hands, behind my back, until I had a grip on the bottom. I was steadily losing altitude, so I quickly hurled the sledgehammer over my head and down toward the small tree.

The force from the toss sent me plummeting, but I caught onto the handles of the glider, unlocked it, and made a swift and luckily well-calculated landing just as the sledgehammer came down and split the tree right down the middle.

“YES!” Stan exclaimed, thrusting his hands up over his head, fists victorious. He started laughing, while I just stared stunned at what we’d just been able to accomplish. “Dude, fuck *yes!* Did you *see* that?! Holy shit!”
“Holy shit…” I repeated, only my words came out under my breath.

“Dude, that just happened!” Stan kept on laughing, running up to me and latching an arm around my shoulders. “Do you fucking see that shit?!” He seemed to find it necessary to point out, both vocally and physically, the damage we had just collaboratively done to that small tree.

“Oh, yeah, Stan,” I said, “I see it. I just… how’d you know it’d do that?”

“I didn’t!” he grinned. “I just figured it’d do something.”

“And it split a tree…” I said, admiring the damage again. Split. Clean down the middle. Was my aim that good? Or had the angle been just that right? There was no saying we could do it again, but the fact that it had happened once proved that it could be done again.

Logic.

Idiot logic.

We were good at that.

Still grinning, and laughing every couple steps too, Stan walked over to retrieve the sledgehammer, yanking it out from the tree like Excalibur from the stone. Kenny, meanwhile, had come up behind me and remarked, “Damn, dude, you guys make such a good team.”

“I had no idea that would work,” I admitted.

“But it did, and you guys should keep it up,” said Kenny. I glared at him, wishing he wasn’t serious. Knowing Kenny and his commitment to the League, though, he was. “I mean it, we need more combo things like that.”

“Says the guy who’s always all, ‘Sometimes I need to work alone,’” I taunted.

“Kyle. We do need stuff like that.”

“I get you, but—”

“Man,” Stan interrupted inadvertently, walking back over to us, sledgehammer slung over one shoulder, “I knew adding this in was the right idea.”

“Dude,” I said, “now Kenny’s expecting us to do it again!”

“Right now?” Stan’s face lit up.

“How about you climb the tree this time?” I suggested, hoping we could just start joking about it and be done for the evening. I didn’t exactly want to keep trying to catch sledgehammers midair in the dark.

Luckily for me, Stan laughed, and Kenny came to my aid by saying, “Not now, but you guys really should keep practicing things like that. We’ve got a lot of individual talent in the group, but the more people can start teaming up, the better.”

I chewed the thought over as the three of us set about putting things away, out of the field, and after all of us had showered, so as not to arouse parental suspicion on how we’d managed to break a sweat during a study group, I said to Kenny, “Dude, it kinda sounds like you’re preparing for something… big…”
Kenny, who was currently shoving things back into his backpack in the common room, replied, “You never know. If Craig is dealing information between Cult branches, it’s obvious we’re on the cusp of something huge.” He fell silent for a few seconds, then looked up at me and Stan, who had just re-entered the room, and said, “I think, based on what we need to be up against on Wednesday, we should start thinking about talking to the Goths again.”

“I can’t be the first,” said Stan. Kenny shot him a look. “What? Sorry, dude, but every time I talk to them, they assume it’s because I’m rocky with Wendy.”

“You are rocky with Wendy,” I stupidly pointed out, garnering me a scathing look from my best friend. Oops. “But you don’t want to talk about it,” I remembered.

Stan sighed and slumped down onto the sofa, towel-drying his hair. “Dude, I just have to see how it goes,” he said. Something about the way he spoke sounded to me like he was trying to convince himself more than us. “Either way…”

“It’s fine,” Kenny shrugged. “I’ll do it. I’ve been meaning to, anyway.”

Kenny really was our biggest in with the Goths, or, rather, Mysterion was. The Goth kids seemed to have some kind of fascination with Mysterion, despite the fact that he was a ‘conformist’ town hero. When it came down to talking to them, I’d gladly leave it up to Kenny. I personally found the Goths unapproachable, since they would contradict everything I ever tried to say. I generally have an optimistic outlook on life, and being surrounded by so much bleak pessimism and sturm und drang, even for just a few minutes, usually was enough to bring my own feelings down. So I’d leave it.

“I’ll see if Ike can get anything out of his classmate, too,” I ended up offering, regardless. “Not that the kid is ever the best one to talk to.”

But for the most part, I wanted to leave it up to Kenny. We left it that he would, then left League dealings behind us in the base as we walked away from the gate and to the auxiliary garage Token’s parents had started letting the few of us who could drive park cars during meetings. We tried to change the subject once we got in Stan’s car, as he navigated the roads to Kenny’s small house. We managed, but once Stan parked out front, he grabbed Kenny as he was getting out of the back seat and said, “Hey. When you talk to them, try to find something that proves Shelley’s clean. Like… not a part of it at all.”

Kenny looked ready to say something more along the lines of, We made the pact, though, remember? But, being the nice guy he was, Kenny said instead, “I’ll do what I can, dude.”

“Thanks, Kenny,” Stan grinned.

He waited until Kenny had gone inside, then turned out onto the street and started off toward my house. “For what it’s worth,” I said, watching a lamppost flicker as we passed it on the way to our side of town, “I don’t think Shelley’s the type to get into or even know about the Cult.”

“Thanks, man,” Stan sighed. “I hope not.”

We dropped the subject after that, and instead started reflecting on what other cool kinds of combo moves we could try. The ultimate decision was that the sledgehammer ricochet should be perfected and used often, and also that Stan should teach me how to use his electric drill gun. I, in turn, pointed out that he should figure out how to make a self-reloading gun, since I’d never be able to reload it well or fast in the air, and it would be to his advantage in general anyway.
The drive ended, though, with me wishing Stan good luck with Wendy, and Stan wishing me good luck against my mother. Luck was with me that evening, though, since all Mom ended up saying when I got back in was that she was glad I’d come home on time and hoped we got all of our work done.

*Not quite,* was the real answer I thought to myself as I ascended the stairs to my room. *We’ve still got a lot of work to do.* But hell. We were ready.

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Chapter End Notes

Chapters 5-6 could have been one chapter, but when I first started writing, I thought it'd be too long.

...haha...

(Warning: chapters will get pretty darn long...)
**Episode 7: Dying in the Name of Death**

*Kenny*

I consider myself good at a fair number of things, especially when it comes to interacting with people. I’m good at getting girls, and getting other guys with girls if they ask me to play wingman. I’m good at pleading for extensions on homework (sometimes). I’m really good at lying to my parents.

I suck at talking to people that don’t like being spoken to.

For example: the Goths.

There’s only one of them who ever gives me the time of day during the day. Otherwise, I’ve had to rely solely on midnight calls as Mysterion, which I’ve always needed to be sure are well-timed, and have a definite purpose. The Goths, for whatever reason, are okay with Mysterion, mainly because we’ve had, since I was in fourth grade, a bargain. They supply me with things they know about Cthulhu, R’lyeh and the *Necronomicon*, and I in turn tell them anything I remember about actually being in R’lyeh.

But here’s the catch about that: I don’t always remember. Or, at least, until recently I didn’t. Hard to believe an eighth grade field trip changed that.

Death is strange, even to me. I know I’ve seen Heaven and Hell. I know I have. I’ve even been a ghost before. I get that it happens, and I know that somehow it all works out. The R’lyeh connection was harder to figure out.

R’lyeh itself is a sunken, ancient city under the ocean somewhere out in Polynesia. It is described in the *Necronomicon* as a barren land strewn about with mossy, decrepit columns, a dank green the primary color of the stone. It’s a land inhabited by Immortals, ancient gods from another world that have been sleeping under the Earth since before man, all of whom are, for all intents and purposes, dead.

Except not.

Cthulhu, I have learned, is just the tip of the iceberg. He’s like a priest for the other Immortals, keeping them and him alike ‘dead but dreaming.’ Or so the Goths have told me.

R’lyeh seems to be the ultimate destination for all Immortals, and I myself was once banished there (no thanks to Cartman, who at the time had teamed up with Cthulhu) along with everyone else in what was then known as Coon and Friends. Everyone else that mattered, anyway. When we arrived in that sunken city, the others were naturally scared, but I remember feeling the odd sense that I knew the terrain.

Only after I killed myself in R’lyeh did I start making connections between it and death.

Even for an Immortal like me, death needs to have rules. A body dies, and the soul has to go somewhere. And thanks to one of the Goths, I had recently (during my self-inflicted deaths, at least) learned how to choose which way I went. The whole point to that was looking for R’lyeh.

I guess this requires some explanation.
In eighth grade, shit got real. It all started on a field trip to a museum in Denver. I, like the other guys, was totally apathetic. If I’d had my way, I’d’ve spent that trip mercilessly hitting on my gorgeous classmate Red. Rebecca, nicknamed Red for the color of her straight, shoulder-length hair, ran with Bebe’s crowd, was a cheerleader and tennis player, and had a cute smile and a tight ass. She could be a bitch, but what girl isn’t, at least every once in a while, right? Plus, I like assertive girls. Better in bed. I think, anyway. But only one thing in the entire fucking world could distract me from the girl I was crushing on, and that thing was strooned all over that museum like graffiti on the back wall of the high school.


A bas-relief of none other than the thing that had cursed me in the womb. Cthulhu.

The guys let me go ahead of them. Kyle warned me not to get too obsessive, but this was my history. On display! I read the plaque underneath the bas-relief. The collection was on loan from a town called Arkham, all the way in Massachusetts. I felt compelled to, right then and there, hitch-hike across the country and ask the New Englanders what was what. But I had this whole display, right at my fingertips.

Our chaperones gave us free roam over the museum, but I stuck to that exhibit. I think we were supposed to be studying Native American and Colonial Midwestern art or some shit, which was on display at another part of the museum, but I’d take the F if it meant I could spend all day taking illegal snapshots of things with my cameraphone and furiously jotting down descriptions in the spare notebook Kyle lent me because I’d forgotten mine.

It was the bas-relief that held my attention most. The sculpture was encased in glass, but I felt like it gave off an eerie, far too familiar vibe. Cthulhu was hewn into a stone very similar in color and texture to the natural land mass of R’lyeh, from what I could remember from fourth grade. It was a sickly kind of green, and looked like it could have been a free-standing photograph of the real thing.

Taking out the notebook, I jotted down the information the plaque gave me. The thing itself dated back to 1925, attributed to a mad artist named Wilcox. “Bas-reliefs such as this,” the plaque read, in a note from the anonymous curator of the exhibit, “have also been found in the possession of a voodoo cult in New Orleans, as well as a society of monks in China.”

New Orleans? New Orleans? I read over the plaque again and underlined the city’s name furiously. I made a note to look into the Chinese monks, as well, because the Gulf crisis had hit upon, apparently, two big centers for Cthulhu Cults: New Orleans, Louisiana, and South Park, Colorado. Since the exhibit was from Massachusetts, I made sure I’d look into activity there, as well.

I could not believe my dumb luck. I was standing in an entire room devoted to the history of the Cult of Cthulhu. Curious, I read the curator’s notes on the far side of the room, which stated that he (I assumed the writer was a ‘he,’ although ‘he’ remained anonymous) had begun bringing the collection together after the Gulf crisis roughly four years prior. There was a wealth of information stored at Miskatonic University, in Arkham, and the bas-relief had been sought out for the purpose of a visual. Most accounts of seeing Cthulhu and the other Old Ones, the curator’s notes went on, had historically been dismissed as madness.

But when Cthulhu itself was televised during the Gulf crisis, many Cultists rejoiced, and most of the world was made aware of Cthulu’s existence. Things had, of course, gone back to normal after he’d been locked back in R’lyeh, but the Cult was surreptitiously rising again.
Wandering around, I finally saw it. The key to everything. The one artifact that could change the course of my search from then on:

The Necronomicon.

“Holy shit,” I whispered to myself, rushing over to the case in which the ancient tome was displayed. It was a dusty old thing, encased in glass, opened to reveal two of the pages. On the left was illustrated a familiar scene: the great, strange stone pillars of R’lyeh, and the rocky terrain on all sides. Beneath the image, most likely an ink drawing, was written, to confirm, the word R’lyeh. The right-hand page displayed old, precise handwriting, also in ink; calligraphic in style and most definitely in Latin. Fuck. I couldn’t translate it.

But I knew someone who probably could.

I glanced around and, seeing no security, snapped a photo with my phone. A quick glance at the screen told me that I’d snagged a good enough picture, and I figured, hey, I’d upload the photo onto the Mysterion computer at the base, and if security did catch onto me, with tapes or whatever, I’d just throw myself under a bus and not have to worry about getting caught for it. Stupid way out, yeah, but effective. For me, dead was always better than arrested.

The plaque underneath it provided basically the same information I already knew: “Written in 738 by a half-crazed man, Abdul Alhazred, the Necronomicon has been translated into several languages, beginning with the first Greek volume in 950. Displayed here is a handwritten Latin volume based on the 1228 work of Olaus Wormius. While this version of the Necronomicon was considered missing since 1250, it has resurfaced time and time again in the hands of collectors. The Necronomicon itself is a dark and oft-studied volume detailing the lives of the deities Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, and others.”

“Yog-Sothoth?” I wondered, peering at the open page to see if the name surfaced anywhere there. The handwriting was a headache to read under the awful museum lights that cast a glare off of the glass casing. I needed a better look at that thing. Maybe I could schedule a private viewing, I thought, as I stood back to write the name down.

Only the pen I had was out of ink.

“Motherfucker!” I shouted, scribbling the pen across the page furiously, trying to get even a light line out of it. No luck. And I had no clue where the guys were… I’d try to bum a pen off of the museum, maybe, or—

“Run out of ink?”

I stopped my frantic scribbling and whipped around to see the girl who had spoken. Immediately, my face felt hot, and I cleared my throat, embarrassed. Red. Who better to make an ass of myself in front of than the girl I’d been crushing on. This was sure to go well. “Hey,” I managed, trying to keep cool. “Uh… yeah,” I shrugged, holding up the pen, trying to make my plight seem like no big deal, “ran out of ink. But, y’know, just notes, right?”

“Here,” said Red, extracting from the binder she was carrying an extra pen of her own. “I’m about done taking notes, anyway. The girls all went to the bathroom—” (okay, and, yeah, why do girls always go to the bathroom in groups, seriously?) “but I wanted to take a look around in here.”

“You did, huh?” I wondered, adding, “Thanks,” as I graciously took the pen and discarded the other one into my pocket. “You’re into this kind of stuff?”
“Not particularly,” said Red, glancing around. “It’s weird, but if it’s out there, we should know about it. This stuff was news, like, four years ago.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” I said, playing that I had much less interest than I’d actually invested in everything there. Red walked over, right beside me, and glanced down at the *Necronomicon*, tucking her hair back out of her face so she could look at the script inside. I turned around and stepped in a little closer to her. She didn’t move. Nice. “So, uh… ever seen anything like that before?”

Red shook her head. “I’ve seen some super old books, but this one’s, like… really old,” she said. “I went to this one restaurant here in Denver, once… it had a bunch of old books lying around for atmosphere or something, like a library.”

“That’s cool,” I said, noticing that, at this angle, I could see down her shirt. She stood back, though, so I snapped myself up as well, so as not too look all suspicious for that, but I was just as interested in the little look she gave me when our eyes met, for seemingly the first time. “So, uh, you did dinner around here once?” I guessed, words very quickly leaving my mind and making no sense.

“Yeah, wasn’t too bad.”

Before I could shut myself up, I asked her, “So, you want to, maybe… y’know, do that with me sometime? Dinner?” Fuck! Wow, that was… horrible.

“What?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged, coming off way more awkward than I meant to (in my defense, at the time, I was thirteen), “you know. Like, no big deal, but like… and, not… not now, cuz… cuz this is kind of a field trip…” I was never this fucking awkward with girls. Ever. Then again, I’d never crushed on one like I had with Red; usually I just went for it.

Red laughed. “Kenny,” she said, sweetly I thought, “are you asking me out?”

“Yeah, why not? Whatever,” I said, again trying to make the whole thing seem like not that big a deal, while inside my stomach was doing somersaults. “If you want, it’d be neat sometime.”

“Sure.”

Come again? “Really?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

Oh, halle-fucking-lujah, I had a date. Too bad it wasn’t going to happen, but I didn’t know that yet. At the time, my insides had gone from somersaults to aerial flips. Fucking hell, I was thrilled. But I didn’t show it. Last thing she needed was me following up the date confirmation by acting like a perv. And I mean, I am a perv, and I admit it, but you don’t ever show a girl you like that side of you. Shouldn’t, anyway. “All right,” I said, grinning, “cool. Sometime this weekend.”

“Sure,” said Red, her face all lit up and perfect. At that point, Bebe and the rest of the girls came looking for her, so she gave me a small wave and left saying, “Don’t run all the ink out of my pen, okay?”

“I reeeeeeally hope that’s a euphemism,” I muttered to myself after she’d gone.

Unfortunately for me, I was only able to jot down a few more things from the *Necronomicon* before we were ushered back onto the bus to South Park, but I asked one of the guards on duty at the
entrance how long the Cthulhu display would be around.

He said, “Leavin’ tomorrow, kid, sorry.”

“Tomorrow?” I yelped, then bit the word back, since I’d come off as very obviously disturbed. *Tomorrow? I don’t have till tomorrow, I need this shit!*

Well… I thought, between talking with the guys on the ride back and wondering how I was going to follow through with Red without getting all awkward again, maybe it isn’t Mysterion’s thing, but… who was to say I couldn’t actually *have* what I needed?

After all, as someone cursed by Cthulhu, didn’t I kind of have a right to it?

So, that evening, I printed the photo from my phone, donned my gear and set off in the direction of a house that I had never stepped foot in during the day, as Kenny, but which I knew very well from routine Mysterion visits. One room of it, anyway, which could be accessed by an old, knotted tree in the back yard. Muted Cocteau Twins music could be heard filtering through the window I climbed the tree toward, and the smell of clove cigarettes attacked my nostrils even out in the open, behind the closed glass.

I leapt from the branch to the ledge, and tapped twice on the upper panel. That had been our signal for quite some time. A minute later, the window slid open, and I jumped down into the clove-scented, candle-lit room. The window was slid shut behind me, and I looked up to see her, veiled in a cloud of smoke from her cigarette.

Henrietta.

Bradley Biggle’s older (adoptive) sister, and only female Goth in town, Henrietta had been my only link to the Cult of Cthulhu for three years, at that point. She, a modest fifteen, was cloaked, as usual, in a spidery black dress that hugged her buxom frame, and her eyes were caked in black eyeliner, swirling in a decidedly Egyptian design. “What,” she quipped down at me where I knealt, black-polished fingers drumming on her hips, “are you doing here?”

“Why do I ever come here?” I said simply as I stood. We were matched in height, but the Goth still looked down on me.

“But it’s *Tuesday*.”

“Right. Painful poetry night. Whatever. Listen, what if I told you I had some information that would be worth your while to investigate?”

Henrietta barked out a laugh, and took a long drag from her cigarette. “Right,” she sneered. “Look, Mysterion, I’m not a goody-two-shoes conformist super P.I. like you or whatever. I don’t investigate. I just want your R’lyeh stories.”

“Yeah,” I said, commanding eye contact. “And this is the best story yet. Drive with me to Denver.”

“Um, no? Why should I?”

“If you do, this is what’s in it for you,” I told her, producing the photo I’d snapped of the leather-bound tome. Henrietta’s eyes widened as much as they could under her thick makeup, and she bit her cigarette holder. Taking the damn thing out of her mouth, she asked, “Is that… is that a *real Necronomicon*?” With an acquired flourish, she snatched the photo from my hand, and studied the likeness of the book as she again brought the quellazaire up to her black-sheened lips. “Where is
“It’s at an art museum in Denver,” I answered. “There’s an exhibit there from Arkham, Massachusetts, all about Cthulhu and the other Old Ones. It’s only there until tomorrow, so if we’re going to break in, it has to be tonight.”

“Break in?” Henrietta actually grinned. “You’re growing on me, panty boy.”

Under my mask, I probably flushed. My costume had always involved me wearing a pair of white briefs over my already tight pants. When I switched to boxers in middle school, I kept a stash of briefs around just for Mysterion purposes. “They aren’t panties,” I grumbled. (I will note that I ditched the briefs not long after that, replacing that part of the uniform with just a grey piece.)

“Whatever. Anyway, fine. But the others are coming, too.”

“Why?” I wondered. “Wouldn’t you rather have bragging rights over them? For nonconformists, you four are awfully tight.”

She was, of course, referring to the three other South Park Goth kids. The two older boys were in were in tenth and seventh grade, respectively, at that point, and the younger was a classmate of Ike Broflovski (making the grade, then third). The Goths were a gang as easily spotted together as my own gang of four, completed with Kyle, Stan and Cartman. However tight Henrietta and her friends were, however, it was her help alone I needed, since she had been the only one to offer.

In fact, the way I managed to team up with Henrietta at all was due to our combined dislike of her brother Bradley. Check that. Mint-Berry Crunch.

That little fucker had stolen my spotlight during the last Cthulhu crisis in New Orleans, back in fourth grade. Not only had he barged in and single-handedly dragged the Dark God back to the city of R’lyeh below the sea, but he freed the rest of the team from that dimension AND he got the fucking hero reveal. We learned, during that ordeal, that Bradley was not from Earth at all, but from some stupid-ass planet in some stupid-ass galaxy that had something to do with motherfucking mint and berries and crunching. Or whatever. I hated that kid. That should have been my win. That had to do with my fucking life.

Well, now it was my fucking story, and it was time to really start getting into what this whole Necronomicon was all about.

It took some convincing, but eventually Henrietta conceded to driving me up to Denver alone. The less people around, the better. Even she couldn’t argue that. The entire ride up, we did not speak. Henrietta’s mother’s car was a beaten old thing, but it got us from point A to point B, and it had a rattling stereo system that mercilessly thumped out Bauhaus, the Goths’ collective favorite band. Henrietta muttered something awful at me when I made her turn the stereo down once we were coming up to the museum, but again, she went along with it, since at the end of the drive a real Necronomicon was waiting for her.

Now, normally, I would have been completely against theft. I would have turned someone else in for doing what we were about to do. But nobody had to know. I needed what was in there if I was ever going to start to understand.

Henrietta, already fit for midnight vigilantism in her standard Goth attire, drove me around to the back of the museum, where we came upon a team of nondescript white vans, parked and prepared to move the Cthulhu display to its next location. With any luck, men would be around and leaving doors open. Unfortunately, that meant that security was also stepped up.
I’d been four years active as Mysterion by that point, however, and was no stranger to the shadows. During some of our training sessions, Kyle and Token had even rigged up a labyrinth of sensor-alarms, so I had a couple tricks up my sleeve in case I had to take some detours.

The back parking lot supplied me with ample shadows through which to travel; I slipped unseen from Henrietta’s station wagon though the lot to the back brick wall, which, luckily, provided an open duct I could enter the building through. Prior to the trip, while waiting for the Necronomicon photo to print, I’d gone onto the museum’s website to take a brief look at the floorplan. Had I had Ike or Kyle helping me out, then, I probably could have gotten full blueprints, even for the duct lines, but I’d been in a rush. So, trusting that I could work myself out of the piping somewhere on the first floor, where the book was being kept, I climbed in.

I unclipped a flashlight from my utility belt, clicked it on and held it in my mouth for visibility through the small crawlspace. I slinked through relatively easily, though turns were a bit of a bitch, and eventually found myself over the right room. Through the grate under my hands, I could scope out the still-unmoved display, and noticed a robed figure leaving the room.

So the Cult itself is curating this traveling collection, huh? I thought to myself. This was certainly getting interesting.

I unscrewed the grate and carefully set it aside in on the floor of the duct, peered out to make sure I was indeed alone, then dropped down into the room and tucked my flashlight away as soon as I was standing once again in the presence of the dusty old Necronomicon.

“Hey, there,” I whispered to it, glaring at the thing. “You’re gonna take this curse away from me.”

Of course, I didn’t yet know how that was going to happen, but I was confident that it would. So, using a trick Toolshed had taught me, I picked the lock on the display case, drew from the lining of my cape a square of black cloth that Henrietta had supplied me with prior to our setting out, wrapped the Necronomicon in it, and made a run for it. If the man in the cloak could move about freely, it was most likely that the alarms would not trigger. It sucked that I couldn’t hang around and take a look at the rest of the display again, but I figured, if I could get a solid partner out of Henrietta, who was part of the Cult herself, I might have a chance of coercing the display back Colorado-ward again.

Everything was going swimmingly until I got back out into the parking lot.

“All right,” someone said from the direction of the vans, “let’s get some light out here.”

No, no, no, bad idea, no light, really bad idea, I repeated over and over in my head, my heart pounding as I kept to the shadows on the way back to Henrietta’s car. Luck left me, though, and a bright spotlight flooded the parking lot with the intensity of a harsh artificial sun. I was exposed.

“Hey,” another man said, taking a few steps toward me and pointing in my direction, “who the hell is that kid?”

“Kid, what’s that in your hands?” still another shouted over at me.

“Evening, gentlemen,” I said, backing away so I could cover as much ground as possible before they’d surely be after me. “Just here checking in. I’ll be going now.”

“Checking i—hey, what’s that thing you have?!”

I backed away further, just as another cloaked Cultist burst out of the back door yelling, “It’s
gone! The Necronomicon is missing!"

“Right,” said the first man who’d noticed me, drawing a pistol and aiming straight at me.

“Shit,” I couldn’t help myself saying. The man fired, and I was off as soon as I’d dodged the bullet. The probability of me surviving the night was looking pretty low, since no less than ten men took chase, so no matter what, Henrietta had to get her hands on that book.

Tucking the Necronomicon under my arm, I took out a couple Roman Candles and my lighter, struck the fuse and lit up the small fireworks. As I slid the lighter back into its holster on my belt, I chucked one of the explosives at the men chasing me, and it burst into a distraction of flashing lights. The other I tossed off to my left, then kept running.

Only to feel a bullet catch me right in the fucking lung.

I stumbled, but pressed onward. Just a few more yards. I took in a deep breath for one last push, my vision already blurring. Fuck. I really hadn’t wanted to die that night. It had been such a great day, too.

“What the fuck?” I finally heard my Gothic chauffeur say. I hadn’t even realized I’d made it to her car. She kept the back seat of the station wagon down, to give it a more hearse-like feel whenever she stole it from her mother; kind of ironic that I’d gotten a ride in the thing only to die after the fact.

“Take it,” I growled, shoving the shrouded Necronomicon into her hands.

“You’re kind of dying.”

“No shit,” I coughed. My lungs were burning. God fucking dammit, I hated slow deaths like this. At this point, all I wanted was for one of those assholes chasing me to shoot me through the neck or head or heart or something to make it quick. Either that or tell Henrietta to run me over on her way back to South Park.

Fuck, I’d become so damn apathetic about death. I wanted it to either come for good or live in fear of it like everybody else.

The rest of my life for that night comes to me still in a bit of a blur. I was definitely shot again, at the base of the skull. That last bullet shattered my spinal cord and I was dead in less than a second. I—my soul or mind or whatever—drifted through darkness for a bit, but rather than immediately see a void of stars and then rise up to Heaven or plummet back down to Hell (the Hell count was a fuck of a lot higher), I found myself in a barren, seemingly solid place that stretched on for miles and miles on all sides.

Well, now. Purgatory, eh? That was new.

Just as I was about to explore, I saw the usual light that meant I was going back, but before my eyes opened to the living world in my bedroom again, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a small patch of black, like a tar pit.

I wondered about that black pit all the following day, right up until English class, where I caught up with Red to give her back her pen. She acted as if we’d never spoken. “How’d you get this?” she wondered, staring at the writing utensil.

“I, uh… you lent it to me yesterday,” I said, hoping to spark something. That was the worst. I was already too heartbroken to ask her out again. It had taken everything to ask her in the first
place, and even then I’d acted awkward as hell. Goddammit.

“When was that?”

“During the…” I sighed, giving up. “You dropped it. During the field trip. I borrowed it to finish up some notes, hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh. Sure. Thanks for giving it back, but it’s just a pen.”

“Kay.” It hadn’t been, to me, but… oh, well.

I got so pissed off after that, I didn’t talk to anyone for the rest of the day. The guys were naturally worried as much as they ever were when I’d get weird after a death no one remembered, but I knew they’d get over it. And I’d get over it. After school, I poured over my notes, to find that at least those had stayed intact. Sucked the same couldn’t happen for memories.

The weird thing was, people usually just lost memory after me dying. They’d remember other events. I mean, obviously, the field trip had still happened. Maybe it had something to do with the Cthulhu shit we’d been around when I’d asked Red out. I was so damn angry at that entity, I was starting to come up with a list of ways I’d try to gut and skin it.

That evening, I, as Mysterion, paid a visit to Henrietta, who I found alone in her room, lighting black candles. “Knock,” she commanded when I let myself in through the window.

“I’m having an off day,” I said in return. Henrietta groaned and lit a cigarette on the candle closest to her. “Listen up, not much time to explain, but—”

“Explain what? Yesterday?”

I paused to take in a breath. “Yeah,” I confirmed, eyeing her cautiously. “What do you remember about yesterday?” Henrietta said nothing. “Okay, some background,” I began for the countless time. “I can’t die.” No reaction, but she turned and stared at me through half-closed, grey-shadowed judgmental eyes. “Ever since I can remember, I die and come back, die and come back. Long story short, I died again last night, but I want to know whatever you took away from yesterday or if I’m just sounding stupid.”

“You died, huh?” Henrietta wondered, tapping out the ash from her cigarette into a half-full tray on her desk.

“I understand if you don’t believe me.”

“Oh, I’ll believe you,” said the Goth, her tone no-nonsense and sharp.

My heart skipped. “You will? Why?”

Henrietta grabbed something off of her desk, set down her quellazaire, and walked over to me. In her hands was a book wrapped in a black cloth, and she unwrapped the folds to reveal the *Necronomicon* underneath. That’s right—I’d gotten it out of there and given it to her; this was the best streak of luck I’d had in a very long time. “Cuz I remember you telling me about this. I don’t remember getting it, but it’s kinda obvious you’re an Immortal,” Henrietta said.

“Right,” I confirmed with a nod.

Our eyes met for a few seconds, and then Henrietta wrapped the book back up and said, “Dunno about the other guys, but I’ll say I owe you for this, if I can keep it.”
Just to get everything out, I asked, “Why?”

“If you’re an Immortal, you can go to R’lyeh,” said Henrietta. Her eyes were grey and hungry for answers of her own. “Once I get this translated, I can get you there. The *Necronomicon* lets humans pray to the R’lyeh gatekeeper, Yog-Sothoth, but it’s Cthulhu I want to know more about. That little pussy did *nothing* during the Gulf crisis, and my stupid little brother was a total dick to me about it afterward.”

I couldn’t suppress a laugh. “You’ll help me to get back at your brother? And Cthulhu…?”

“Look, if I can get Cthulhu to crush that little skidmark, I’ll do it,” the Goth growled. “Humans can only get to R’lyeh if an Immortal sends them there, and you can’t get to R’lyeh as an Immortal unless you die, since I guess you die all the time.”

“I’ve even told you that before,” I muttered.

“Well, I don’t remember you telling me.”

“But you believe me.”

“Good enough.”

And thus, we began our strange partnership. Henrietta began hand-translating the *Necronomicon* from Latin to English, and over the next couple years, leading us back to the present, had to make a few revisions to the script, but by the time I started sophomore year, we were able to start experimenting with trips to R’lyeh.

During one of those experiments, I found myself back in Purgatory. This time, I was given a little more time, and I even ignored the light of home in time to rush toward that black pit I’d seen back in eighth grade.

And then I was in shadow. Or darkness. Or nothing. Wherever I was, it was black, muggy, and smelled like fog on a lake. The scent became more like a bog as I stood there in the nothingness, and the humidity intensified.

A moment could very well have been a day by the time my eyes came into focus, as if waking up for the first time, not to the sight of my plain old bedroom, but to the familiar greenish, hazy, rocky terrain that was R’lyeh.

…R’lyeh…?

“How the fuck’d I get here?” I wondered aloud.

Only a few steps in, though, and I saw the light again. I took a long look around before the light became so oppressive I had to follow it, but I still could remember no other instances of stepping foot in R’lyeh prior to the time my friends and I had been banished there during the Gulf crisis. It felt very familiar when I was there, and that tar pit wormhole in Purgatory, or whatever it was, just seemed to prove that I had the ability to get to R’lyeh again.

Even so, when I came back to Earth, my mind was filled with currently unanswerable *whys*.

Such as why I hadn’t woken up in my bedroom. It was more like I came to after being passed out for a long time. I’d been in plenty of comas before, too, during which I’d moved through the afterlife as a detached soul, but that time I had been, no question about it, dead. Like, shot myself in the trachea dead. And I’d shot myself right in front of Henrietta, in her room (which had, by that
time, become like an office away from the base to me).

“Wow,” I heard the Goth saying. “It worked.”

“Worked?” I sat up with a jolt, disturbed to have found myself elsewhere, and still dressed appropriately as Mysterion. I coughed; breathing was a little difficult, and it hurt to keep up Mysterion’s tone. “What worked? What’d you do?”

I scanned the room for Henrietta, and discovered her sitting on one of her two newly acquired Victorian velvet armchairs, the Necronomicon on a side table to her left, an ashtray and quellazaire holder on a table to her right. “I read aloud,” said Henrietta. “Where’d you go?”

“Purgatory,” I told her, “and then… I found R’lyeh.”

Henrietta almost smiled. “Thought so,” she said, patting the dusty old leather-bound book with her left hand. “There’s a passage in here that can open the Gate. I doubt I did that, but I think I did get through to Yog-Sothoth, the Gatekeeper. I get now that we’ve gotta get through Yog-Sothoth before we can get to Cthulhu.”

Yog-Sothoth, the entity I’d read about back on the field trip, had been an enigma only until Henrietta had cleared up the hierarchy for me. There were apparently many Old Ones, and Cthulhu acted as their priest. To pray to Cthulhu, as the Cult did, was to invite the influence of all other Dark Gods as well. Cthulhu was the one, though, the Cult was sure, to bring about the End Time, as they called it. The Gulf crisis wasn’t good enough for the End Time, so Henrietta and I had both figured out that something bigger was on the way, something that would attack the entire world.

At the moment, though, I was only concerned with my recent journey.

“But… but the last time I was in R’lyeh,” I recalled so that Henrietta could hear, “I had to kill myself to get out. How’d you do that? How’d you read me out?”

“I guessed.”

“But you guessed correctly.”

“Because you’re an Immortal. I kinda figured it out.”

“IT?” My heart was pounding. I’d fucking worship the crazy Goth girl if she’d cracked the code.

Henrietta held up the Necronomicon, took a drag from her cigarette, and began to read: “The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Not in the spaces we know, but between them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen.”

“Right,” I said dully, mulling over the cryptic words. “And translated into English?”

“I’ll read the Latin,” Henrietta threatened, narrowing her swirling Egyptian eyes. “It took two years to get it this good.”

“Would you just simplify it for me?”

Henrietta groaned, got up, walked over, and blew smoke in my face to spite me. “It means that if you’re an Immortal, you’re not living or dead. Because you were born to human parents, I’m assuming, you get to walk around on Earth and age like a normal person. But you can be killed and come back, which means you’re never ‘dead’ in the full human sense. Meaning you can walk
“Yes,” I urged her on. “I just saw Purgatory. And then a black pit, and then I was in R’lyeh…”

“So you found the ‘between’ space the book talks about,” said Henrietta. She eyed me oddly, then added, “Nice scar.”

“What scar?”

Henrietta indicated to my neck with her quellazaire, so I took off my left glove and felt for the spot. My eyes went wide and I gasped in a breath. There was indeed a scar, right where the bullet had sailed through. An awful bump on my neck marking the fact that I’d endured a trauma.

I’d never scarred after a death before. I’d always come back totally fine, brand fucking spanking new. But this scar proved I’d died and returned. Henrietta had found a loophole. We had found a fucking loophole.

“What the fuck?!” I sputtered nonetheless. Shocked and a little traumatized, I had a bit of a backlash. Long story short, the scar opened up, I choked on my own blood, and a while later I woke up in my room, in a shirt, my old orange hoodie, and a beaten pair of jeans. I’d been waking up in that same outfit for about a year now.

Setting a hand on my throat, I discovered that the scar was gone, meaning I’d come back to life by usual means, even though I couldn’t remember much of the interim. I still remembered my brief visit to R’lyeh, though, and I later had Henrietta confirm that she remembered me coming back, but she didn’t remember the scarring and me dying again. But she remembered something, and she’d started up a deal with the Gate.

Through it all, I was stoked. I had never found a loophole to death before other than the couple of odd comas. And I hated comas, they took too long.

Ever since that experiment, I’d tried out other forms of dying and coming back, and had successfully made the trip between Purgatory and R’lyeh around seven times. Whether I had been there prior to that time during the Gulf crisis I still did not know, but I had the feeling I would soon find out.

Working the route with Henrietta, and having her remember a few details of those deaths she had read me back from, had established a connection between me and the Cult, hopefully without the rest of the Cult catching on. Now it was just a matter of getting more out of them.

There was also the matter of keeping myself refreshed on the contents of the Necronomicon. The more I understood about that book, the more I’d understand the Cult, and the more I’d eventually understand myself.

And I was so close to a victory now, I could almost taste it. Just hoped it wouldn’t leave a bloody aftertaste.

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Taking with me the clipping about the arrest and the photo of Craig, upon which I had scrawled, *CULT INTEL*, I suited up and made for the Goths’ usual evening haunt. Tracking them down was easy. Talking to them was difficult. Each and every one of them was stubborn and, though they’d deny it, conceited, and there were several instances of conversations with them that left me feeling just as depressed as they always were. Which was just fucking wonderful. I hoped that tonight was not going to be one of those.

The sooner I got to it, though, the sooner we could get things moving within the League. Once again, I scaled the tree (once again not being noticed by family or neighbors) as I had done countless times before, and, finding the smoke-stained window ajar, leapt down into Henrietta’s room unannounced.

“How many active Cult branches are there in Colorado?” I demanded, standing straight up. The four were sitting around the room as usual. The eldest—the tallest and thinnest of the group with painstakingly upkept tight curly black hair—sat on the foot of Henrietta’s bed, chewing on the butt of his latest cigarette, while the two other boys—the sophomore with red streaks in his hair and the sixth-grader with long black bangs and the whitest skin I’ve ever seen—had found places on the floor. Henrietta herself was seated in her Victorian armchair, looking like a fuller-figured Elvira, veiled in smoke.

The Goths all turned to glare at me, and I saw the oldest one roll his eyes. “Juliet,” he said to the only feminine presence in the room, “you’ve got to tell Romeo here to fucking stop coming in through your balcony.” That last part was directed at me, complemented with an awful sneer.

“Trust me,” Henrietta groaned, exhaling smoke skyward, “we’re nothing like that.”

“Whatever,” the youngest brushed it all off. Staring at me with a hollow-eyed glare, the kid asked, “What do you want?”

“I want to know about Colorado Springs,” I said forcefully, steeling myself. At my full height, I had a good two inches on even the tallest Goth, whose growth had most likely been stunted by all the coffee he drank. It helped, being kinda tall (I guess 5’10” is tall, even though I often feel average), as far as coming off as persuasive went. Or maybe it was my relentlessness as Mysterion that got the Goths to tell me anything. Of course, they were snarky and sullen every damn step of the way.

Like right now, for instance, the Goth from my grade flicked his red-streaked bangs and said, “So look at a fucking atlas. What are we, Wikipedia?”

I rolled my eyes, stormed up to the guy, grabbed him by his unwashed collar and growled, “Look, we’ve got a deal, all right? I’m going to open the Gate to R’lyeh for you, despite the fact that it is an incredibly stupid idea, so you’ve got to help me in the meantime, got it?!”

“Ugh,” the Goth groaned, shoving me off, “calm down, Caped Conformist, we’ll tell you whatever.”

“Good,” I snarled at him. “And it’s ‘Mysterion.’”
“We really don’t care what your name is,” said the eldest. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Names were about as important to the Goths as sunlight. They never called each other by name, and honestly I rarely called Henrietta by hers… I just happened to know what it was. Hopefully, though, they knew the names of other Cultists. That would be a help.

“The other night,” I said, getting right to the point by taking out the newspaper clipping, “two men from Colorado Springs were arrested here in South Park. I want to know if they’re a part of your little Cult.”

“Give me that,” said the sophomore, grabbing the clipping from me. He peered at it and read off, “Johansen? Ugh, isn’t he that annoying artist guy?”

“This man is an artist?” I asked for confirmation.

“More like a hoarder,” said the taller boy. He tapped one bony finger against his walking stick and added, “He came to our meeting, like, a week ago and said his name about fifty times so we’d know it. He’s a professor or something. Fucking academic conformist.”

“A professor?” I repeated. “An art professor?”

“Guess so,” the red-haired one shrugged.

Henrietta and I exchanged a brief glance. An artist and collector… this Johansen guy was more than likely linked to the Cthulhu exhibit from two years ago. And UCCS as well.

“So what did he tell you?” I demanded of the Goths, every one of whom gave me the same blank stare in return. “What did Johansen talk about while he was here?”

“I dunno, something about a statue people’ve been trading around for a while,” said the eldest. “How he was all stupidly excited to own this one statue but said some guy here in South Park wanted it.”

It didn’t take a stretch of the imagination to piece together that the statue in question was the bas-relief of Cthulhu that I had seen at the exhibit. That entire memory of the trip that had set my journey of literal self-discovery back in motion kept on playing back to me now that it was piecing back together again. I only hoped this Johansen guy wouldn’t come for Henrietta’s Necronomicon… assuming he got out of jail any time soon.

“There’s a lot of art based around the Cthulhu legends,” I pointed out to my dark advisors. “What’s going on lately? Why the push of interest in it?”

“Duh, cuz Cthulhu got summoned a few years ago,” said the red-haired boy with a flick of his bangs. Taking a drag from his cigarette, he added, “Lot of new members came on after that.”

“And they’re coming here to South Park?”

“Guess so.”

“WHY?” I was getting impatient and irate. I tend to get that way, especially around people who need to be prompted so heavily for information. If it weren’t for their convenience as Cultists, I’d never want to talk to the Goths at all.

“You’re asking a lot of questions,” the youngest said to me, disapprovingly. I shot him a glare, and his hollow eyes stared right back. He was testing me. Reading me. It was enough to
make me want to get the fuck out of there and be done for the night, but I wanted to learn at least one more thing before I left.

“I’m entitled to,” I snapped. “Fine, don’t answer my last question, but at least give me this.” Sharply, I pulled out the printout of Craig, held it out to the Goths, and demanded, “Do you know this person?”

Henrietta took a drag from her cigarette, bit the end of her quellazaire, and answered, “I think he goes to our school.”

“Right, but is he a part of your Cult?”

“Apparently, if you’ve got it written right on there.”

“You’ve never seen him at one of your meetings?” This was getting more intriguing by the second.

“No,” spat the eldest, “we have no idea who that guy is.”

“Would you leave, already?” the youngest added.

I managed a grim smirk. “Oh, I’ll leave,” I assured the kid, “but you’ve helped me out more than I thought.”

“Oh?” said the red-haired one, skeptically. A knock came on the door, and I knew my time was up, anyway. I always left before Henrietta’s tired mother could ever barge into the room.

“If you’re really unaware of any rendezvous with this person, Craig Tucker, than your own Cult is keeping things even from you.” That said, I tucked my papers away again and ducked out the window.

“There’s a deadbolt on my door for a reason, mother!” I heard Henrietta hoarsely shout as I scaled down the tree and made for the shadows.

Things were stacking up. The drug racket was a front most likely set up by Cthulhu art collectors, and this Professor Johansen seemed to me the most obvious candidate for ringleader. I still had to figure out his exact tie to Jim McElroy, the leader of the local Cult, and why the Goths—the four youngest members at the meetings by at least ten years—weren’t in the loop. If Craig had found out about Clyde’s League involvement, there was no doubt he, or someone within the trading circle, knew other identities as well. At least, if the Goths were mostly uninformed, hopefully Henrietta and her Necronomicon were safe. Unless they were being held out because someone knew about her possession of the book, in which case I was definitely on their shit list.

But before they found out who I was, or even (especially) if they already did, I was getting more and more motivated to shut the whole thing down. Whatever they were hiding, I’d find it. I had to get my hands on whatever it was they were trading around.

Because I was more than certain that it would unfold much more about who and what I was.

The bitch of it all was, now that I was all riled up and ready, now that I had more than my fair share of ideas on what Craig had been dealing around and among whom, I died on round one. I’d worked out a small rendezvous mission with only Toolshed, Human Kite and Marpesia (who I figured should come along due to her previous Craig involvement, and also to test her on the field
with us), since Craig was known to be having a ‘meeting’ behind the school on Tuesday night.

But one of his clients had caught me. This client had a knife in his boot, and soon it went from his boot to my gut, and I was out of commission.

And of course, Wendy, Stan and Kyle had no fucking clue any of that had happened come Wednesday morning.

It was kind of a good thing I was forced to wait, though, since at our next meeting, Red Serge had more news, drawn out of the Goth kid from the elementary school. Ike must have had great investigation skills, since I rarely heard the little one speak. He was the one most bent on getting Cthulhu back, and the one who seemed to be harshly against me in the Goth clique. While the other boys went along with it, and Henrietta kept working to pay me back for getting her the *Necronomicon* (and to eventually beat the ever-loving shit out of her younger brother), that kid always gave me pause. The other Goths were irritating at best. The kid was downright creepy.

But somehow he’d slipped up, or maybe even purposely shared information. I’d earlier given the League the tidbits I’d learned about the Johansen guy we’d gotten arrested earlier, and Ike, little genius he was, had looked up the professor’s entire history, starting with his undergraduate study at—*aha*—Miskatonic University in Arkham, Mass., and leading up to his becoming graduate art history faculty at UCCS.

And now that we had a name, it put Stan at rest, since none of Shelley’s professors even had a *J* last name. I still wasn’t counting her out of possible involvement, though, since, even if it wasn’t voluntary, Shelley was susceptible to Cult activity. All UCCS students were.

“So it seems,” Red Serge started, once the meeting was underway, “Professor Johansen here was on a ‘business trip’ to meet in South Park with this guy.” Up on the screen appeared a police sketch of a plain-looking thirtysomething, with slicked hair and wide, dull eyes. “Got your printout right here,” Red Serge added before I could ask.

I took the printout and studied the image. The man was no one special, or, at least, he didn’t look that way. One could never really tell a Cultist from any old civilian, though those who followed Cthulhu did always seem to have an edge. This guy had nothing. Then again, it was just a sketch. “So who the hell is he?” I wondered.

“Here’s the thing,” said Red Serge, “we have no clue. Iron Maiden and I have been referencing and cross-referencing all day, but we’re coming up cold no matter what. This man’s name is Wilcox, but it appears he’s nobody.”

“Wilcox?” I froze. That name struck an unsettling chord. “This man’s name is Wilcox? He’s definitely not nobody.”

“Timmah?” Iron Maiden wondered.

“Because,” I said, storming over to the corkboard, “a Wilcox was behind *this.*”

From the corkboard, I unearthed an image I’d tacked up two years ago… a long-searched-for photograph of the Cthulhu bas-relief I’d seen on the eighth grade field trip. I smacked it down on the table and passed it around, starting with Mosquito. “From now on,” I said to the League, “we keep track of last names. Everything is leading up to something. Wilcox, Johansen, maybe even McCormick. I don’t know. Red Serge—”

“Already started the Excel document, Mysterion,” he assured me.
“Good.”

“Timmah?”

“Yeah,” Toolshed agreed, “may as well go all the way… Black, Broflovski, Marsh, Burch, Donovan—”

“I’ll even add Gintz, just in case,” said Red Serge. That wasn’t a name we heard much at all… Ike’s birth surname. As far as any of us were concerned, the kid was and had always been a Broflovski. “What’s next? Got McCormick… Cartman… Stotch… Testaburger…?”

“Add Tucker,” Marpesia suggested. “I’ve been trailing Craig for months, and I’m still confused as to his motives.”

“Which reminds me, we should move out,” I said. “But here’s the deal. I’m convinced.” Slamming both fists on the table, I shouted, “All of the Cult branches across the country are gathering their artifacts and remnants of old evidence of Cthulhu coming to Earth. I’m pretty sure this Wilcox name proves it. They’re planning something huge, and they’re using Craig to trade the collection around. Tonight, we intercept! We’re shutting down that drug ring and cutting off the Cult’s flow of documents once and for all. Gather what you can tonight, League. Cthulhu’s not getting summoned until we’re good and motherfucking ready!”

Tonight, I wasn’t going to die. I could feel it. This was it. Something was finally going to happen for us.

That night, in fact, we were so sure of the mission, we beat Craig to the site (the parking lot behind the high school, yet again) and divided up into squads. I’d be first wave alone, since Craig—according to Wendy’s reports and what I’d recently seen—was always unarmed (his clients were another story), and had Toolshed, Mosquito and the Coon on immediate standby. Human Kite and TupperWear were positioned on their own, the first from the top of the school, where he could easily watch activity from all sides (and either attack or usher in help if needed), and the second from the side lot, in hopes of catching the clients as they arrived.

TupperWear also volunteered to keep an eye on Marpesia, who was discouraged that she wasn’t my choice for standby, but took what she could, since we were still in trials with her. Also in position, in unmarked cars around the school, were Officer Barbrady and a handful of local policemen, who had temporary limited access to Kite’s wire. Iron Maiden and Red Serge were, as usual, back at headquarters, monitoring the whole thing and recording the audio feed from our wires. The recording had been Ike’s idea, in case something came through that one of us missed.

I wondered if we’d still get feedback on the recordings on a night I got killed…

Couldn’t wonder about that now, though. Tonight, I had to live. I could experiment with death again later, especially now that Henrietta and I were slowly making headway with knowing exactly where and how to find the Gate.

Craig himself came onto site a little after ten, a beaten old bag slung over one shoulder. Not very subtle, for a dealer, but a nice tip-off to me that tonight’s trade-off was a hefty one. My heart even skipped a couple beats as I wondered whether or not the bag might contain the Wilcox bas-relief from the 1920s.

“I’m moving in,” I said quietly into the wire, and the others confirmed that they were ready in
position. Quiet as the night around us, I slinked into position on the fire escape landing just above the young dealer’s head.

“That you?” Craig wondered, perking his head up just a little.

“Not who you were expecting, I’m sure,” I answered. “Not the best idea, dealing behind your own high school. You’re too easy to find.”

Craig scratched the back of his neck and muttered, “Awesome. Just great.”

“Craig Tucker, is it?” I continued, dropping down to the tarmac. I straightened, letting the moon hit me for full effect (because I fucking loved that shit), and stared my overly nonchalant classmate down.

Passively, Craig lit up a cigarette and took a drag. He shook out the match and tossed it into the snow, where it was promptly snuffed out, and kept his eyes on me. “What the hell do you want?” he asked me. Craig never really demanded anything, never really forced anything. His voice and disposition were entirely straightforward. In a way, I was glad Craig was involved, because he wouldn’t put up a struggle. I could even, possibly, let him off the hook easy, if he pointed us in the right direction of the real problem.

I held up the sketch Ike had collected. “Do you know this man?” I asked.

“Yep,” said Craig, smoke billowing up into the night as he exhaled. This was almost easier than I had been expecting. But Craig Tucker really was just a bland, ‘this is the way it is’ kind of guy. Usually, it annoyed me. Tonight, it meant I might actually get some fucking sleep. Assuming he didn’t fight back again, that is.

“Are you currently involved in a transaction of illegal narcotics with this man?” I pressed on.

“Yep.” Craig looked me up and down, but his blank, open-eyed expression did not change. “Hey, Mysterion,” he said, “aren’t you a little old to be dressing up at night and stalking people?”

“Aren’t you a little young to be involved with seedy people like this and killing your brain with crack?” I countered harshly.

“Gee, wow,” said Craig emotionlessly. “I totally feel like changing my life right now. How eye-opening a conversation this has been.”

“Funny.”

“Right. Get lost. I’m making money, here.”

I sighed and tucked the photo away. “I really didn’t want this to turn into a struggle,” I said, walking forward, “but you leave me no choice.”

“What, are you gonna arrest me?” asked Craig, killing the butt of his cigarrette by tossing it to the ground and squelching it with the toe of his mucky old boot. “You’re wanted, too, aren’t you? The hell’re you gonna do to me?”

I picked my head up and said, “You really didn’t think I came unprepared, did you?”

With that as his cue, Toolshed slinked out from the shadows behind Craig and put him in a simple but effective strangle hold. “Don’t move, or you’ll be unconscious,” he cautioned, rough in tone.
“What the hell is this?” said Craig, his voice not breaking to a different emotion, not even surprise, not even a little.

“Give it up, kid,” the Coon snarled from his position at the dumpster, his favored rendezvous and mission starting point. “You’re surrounded.”

“Okay,” said Craig. “Now I’m being attacked by the whole South Park hero league. How could my day get any better?”

“That’s Coon League!” spat the Coon.

“I don’t really give a rat’s ass.”

“I’ll give you one more chance to answer me,” I said. “Who is the man you are meeting, and who do you work for? We’re shutting this ring down, whether you like it or not, and you can get off easy now if you cooperate with us.”

“Um. No?” Craig vaguely knit his eyebrows in discontent. “I’m making money, asshole. More than I’m sure can be said for your faggy little job.”

I snapped my fingers. “Mosquito.”

In seconds, Mosquito was at Craig’s side, stun gun poised at his neck. “This thing stings like hell,” he warned Craig in his unique, nasal tone. “I’d get a new job, if I were you.”

“I don’t want to have to force information out of you,” I explained, folding my arms. “I really don’t want us to have to use violence, because you aren’t a real threat.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“I’m only asking for one thing. Who you’re working for. Is it the man in the photograph?”

Craig snarled just a little, then said, “Get that gun off my neck, you tactless loser, and I’ll tell you.” He paused, and I nodded to Mosquito, who stepped back, but kept the stun gun at the ready. “And you,” he added, slapping backwards at Toolshed. “Get off.”

“No way,” Toolshed argued. “You’re going to cooperate first.”

“Fine. Whatever.” Craig stared at me, and confessed, “The guy in the sketch is just my best customer. He’s an accountant. I’d smoke crack, too, if I were an accountant.”

“You do smoke crack,” said Mosquito, bluntly.

“Only sometimes. I’d smoke more if I was an accountant.”

“That’s completely objective,” I growled. “Who do you work for?”

“I don’t work for anyone, but the guys who supply to me are these total washout dorks,” said Craig. “No clue what their names are. Couple of gay-ass sci-fi nerds who live in some basement somewhere.”

Toolshed’s head snapped up, and we exchanged a knowing glance. The Star Trek nerds. We had no idea what their names were, either, but we knew something much more important: those two were part of the Cult of Cthulhu.

“I’d smoke a looooot of crack if I was them,” Craig felt it necessary to add. “Like, a lot of
“Thank you for your time,” I said. Pressing the call button on my belt, I asked into the nanowire, “You catch all that, Kite?”

“Loud and clear,” the Human Kite responded over the wire. “And so did Barbrady’s squad. We’ve got a squad on standby.”

“I’ll move in when ready,” TupperWear added.

“Perfect.” Turning my attention back to Craig, I asked, “Do you know anything else about your providers? Or this client of yours?”

“I don’t see what good telling you would do,” Craig muttered. “You just killed my evenings.”

“Spend them doing something productive,” I said hurriedly. “Now, tell me everything you know about those sci-fi nerds.”

“Just that they’re total pissing losers and that they worship that weird octopus thing that was in the Gulf a few years ago,” said Craig. “Can I go now?”

I nodded to Toolshed, who eased up his hold. I had to hand it to the guy… he made negotiating almost a thing of the past, when it came to his strangle and choke holds. Football drills had probably helped condition him that way, though I wouldn’t have put it past him to try things out on his own. Mosquito kept his stun gun trained on Craig, who glared down at it, then up at Mosquito, then back at the gun. Unmoved, he shrugged and pulled out his pack of cigarettes to light another one. “Am I going to jail?” he asked, appearing unfazed.

“That’s your call,” said the Coon, joining us. “You gonna just get right back into dealing on your own, or is this the end of the road?”

“Do you gaywads just run around at night snuffing out drug rings so you can get all the shit for yourselves?” Craig wondered, biting out the flame of the match. Biting. That kid was so strange. Then again, he’d pierced his own tongue on a bet back in the beginning of ninth grade… he probably couldn’t feel a little flicker of flame on his already-destroyed taste buds. “That’s pretty lame.”

“Our motives are nothing that obtuse,” I assured him. “Kite,” I called into the wire, “get Barbrady or one of his men over here. The kid’s still got a story.”

“Hey!” said Craig, nonplussed. Finally, he showed a hint of an emotion. “I told you guys what you wanted. Why bring the cops in on me?”

“So you can hand your stash in to them,” I explained.

“Goddammit, I am not going to jail!” Craig finally snapped, kicked the stun gun out of Mosquito’s hand, then lunged directly at me.

He threw a punch at me, but I managed to dodge and trip him in a single move. Craig caught himself on his hands and sprung back up again. Immediately back into the fight, he surprised me with a quick backhand and made a run for it. “Fuck!” I muttered. “He really can fight.”

“See?” said Toolshed.
“No time for that, though, back me up!”

And with that, Toolshed and I sprinted off after Craig, who made for the auxiliary shed behind the school. After a nod, I drew out and lit a small Roman candle, then hurled it right into Craig’s path. The firecracker flared up, and the runner stumbled back, momentarily blinded, which gave Toolshed time to haul out a wrench—I was glad he’d gone for something more blunt in his arsenal—and rush in to get a few strikes in while Craig was disoriented.

He still fought back blindly, though, and swung out with the bag that he was carrying, hitting Toolshed square in the gut. As my comrade was recovering, he coughed out, “Mysterion, there’s something heavy in that bag, I think—”

“Shit,” I muttered, “I know what it is.”

“You… huh?”

“No questions now, he’s making for the shed, come on!” That strike was all the information I needed. Craig did have the bas-relief in there, and it was Wilcox he was delivering it to. That only begged the question as to where he was.

But that answer came soon enough when, through the small, half-patched (with duct tape) windows of the shed, both Toolshed and I became privy to human activity. Well, now. The Cult really was becoming more intriguing to me.

“Thanks for the advance!” Craig shouted into the little ramshackle building. “Brought your shit, but you should’ve come sooner!”

The door opened a crack, and Craig hurled the bag inside. I sprinted for the door but it slammed shut and I heard four bolts going into place. “I need backup to restrain Craig!” I shouted into the wire. “Toolshed, you break in!”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Toolshed returned. “Mysterion, get ready to break in, I suggest you make for the roof! All right guys,” he said into the wire, “we’ve got people, most likely Cultists, on site.” (To which I also heard Craig mutter under his breath, “Oh, shit.”) “Kite, I need you!”

“Now?!” I heard Human Kite ask into the wire.

“Ricochet, in ten!”

“Fuck, give me—”

“Nine—”

“I’m so gonna kill you later.”

“EIGHT, KITE, GET THE FUCK OVER HERE.”

“Taking off in two.”

“Seven, target’s the door!”

By the time Toolshed, still counting and running, got to three, Human Kite was airborne and overhead. Should’ve figured they’d try the ricochet in action, and I was glad they were… I just didn’t want to get caught in any kind of crossfire. I barely had time to make it to the top of the shed before Toolshed shouted, “One!” and briefly stopped to hurl his sledgehammer skyward. In a
singular span of time, Kite caught the sledgehammer and hurled it down while Toolshed tackled Craig and got him standing with his hands behind his back. I doubled back as the sledgehammer hit its mark directly on the auxiliary shed’s bolted wooden door, knocking the whole thing down.

“Holy shit, what the fuck was that?!” I heard a nasal whine come from inside.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” another added.

“No, wait—” came a shaking, unfamiliar male voice. Wilcox. Had to be.

Within seconds, just as I suspected, the two sci fi nerds, one a gangly blonde and the other a portly man with brownish hair (both the epitome of intelligence without common sense), burst out of the broken door. Human Kite landed just in time to grab the scrawny man by the collar and deal him a swift right hook across the face. The impact was enough to hit the man off-kilter and shake loose a few bags of telling white powder from his coat. The fat one made a run for it, but was stopped by the Coon, and a scuffle of larger proportions (hahaha) began.

Wilcox still wasn’t emerging, so I jumped down and ordered the others back. Thinking quickly, I grabbed a smoke bomb from my belt, yanked out the key, and tossed it in through the open door. It exploded once inside, and the shed filled with irritant smoke. Seconds later, the very man I was hoping to catch stumbled out, and I caught and cuffed him as he hacked smoke from the blast out of his lungs.

“You hardly seem like a guy who can keep down his narcotics,” I snarled into his ear. “What’re you here for?”

“Just… arrest me…” came a hoarse answer. “The nightmares came back. They always do. I had to…”

“Nightmares?” I repeated. “Had to what?”

But he doubled over hacking and coughing, and I was given no answer. Well. Someone was going to be getting routine prison visits from me. I recovered from him, however, a rucksack, which I knew we’d all be riffling through for some time to come.

TupperWear and Marpesia arrived a moment later, followed by a handful of cops, Barbrady at the head. I heard, over the wire, TupperWear instructing Red Serge to get Barbrady’s superior, Sargeant Yeats, on the phone and involved, since we were pretty certain this was a county-wide (if not state-wide) issue. Yeats was useful most of the time, but he and Barbrady were kind of equally aloof more often than not, so we’d go with the Officer as our primary contact since he asked less questions. Yeats we could deal with now that we’d be wrapping things up.

I handed the rucksack off to Marpesia, who took a quick survey of what was inside. Turns out he was carrying papers. Stacks of them. “What are those?” I asked our trial member.

“I can’t tell,” she said, “it looks like they’re written in a different language, but I can’t place the origin.”

Wilcox made no comment.

The Human Kite had successfully beaten his opponent to a near bloody pulp, while the Coon’s target was looking slightly scuffed but mostly just winded from the exertion, but Mosquito was writing down testaments from both of them, who could not deny their active role in what I overheard was a rather large drug ring. They were shelling out names, though, mainly because Toolshed and the Human Kite kept on threatening more beatings, and all the while Craig looked
disenchanted and oblivious to everything going on. I knew at that moment that turning him in could be a backwards step for us. Something else could possibly be arranged.

“These are the men you’re after, Officer,” I let Marpesia be the one to announce. Craig’s head snapped up, and he looked absolutely furious… until I directed Barbrady and his men at only the three from the shed.

The nerds put up a verbal fight, but were ushered into the back of one of the unmarked cars. Wilcox went silently, and gave me an awful, haunting backwards glance before a cop led him away. That look gripped and chilled me, and confirmed in my mind that his name was not a coincidence. He was a relative of the artist who had sculpted that little statuette of Cthulhu I’d seen. Before Barbrady himself could leave, I instructed him to not let Wilcox have any visitors but me or another member of the League. He agreed, then turned to one of his men to start filing the report, while TupperWear and Mosquito negotiated rights to the evidence from that evening. (They worked out that, of course, the cops would dispose of the narcotics and shut down the operation that had indeed been based in the nerds’ basement, while we could keep the stacks of gibberish papers found on Wilcox’s person, which TupperWear sealed in one of his characteristic tupperware evidence jars.)

While that was going on, Craig stared wide-eyed at me and the rest, being Marpesia, the Coon, Toolshed and Human Kite. “Why aren’t you turning me in?” he asked in a voice low enough to escape police ears.

“There’s still something we need to discuss with you,” I told him. “Plus, we won’t turn you in if you agree to help us out.”

“Help—wait, what?”

Once the smoke had cleared and the cops had gone, Wilcox and the nerds in tow, I called TupperWear and Marpesia in to help me scan the shed for the bag Craig had been carrying. After several minutes, I lit a flare and called in Human Kite for an extra set of eyes (which was kind of dumb of me, as Kyle had needed driving and reading glasses for the past year, since starting driver’s ed, and therefore didn’t have the keenest up-close eyes for investigation), but we still came up empty.

“Where is it?” I demanded, storming out of the shed and right up to Craig.

“What?”

“That bag you were carrying earlier!”

“Like I should know!” he snapped. “I ditched it, so if it’s gone it’s not my problem.”

“Do you even know what was in there?!”

“No, I never fucking look at what they give me, it’s all too weird.”

I grabbed him out of Toolshed’s grip, holding him down by the collar (Craig was even taller than Stan, probably only by about an inch, but still) and shouting, “Then what the fuck is your involvement with the Cult?!”

“Mysterion, chill—” Toolshed tried.

“I’ll chill when I get my hands on some motherfucking evidence, thanks!”

“Look,” said Craig as he shoved me off, glowering at each and every one of us, “it’s not like I asked to be part of this, okay?”
“So who put you up to this?” I demanded.

“I told you, those two basement-dwellers,” Craig snapped. “It started out as just pot, okay? So sue me, I’m a sixteen-year-old who sometimes likes to fucking smoke pot. But our meeting times with the dealer ended up crossing over cuz they were taking too Goddamn long, and the next thing I know, one of ’em trains a gun on me and tells me if I wanna live, I’ve gotta meet this other guy and give him some disc or something they gave me. Like I’d care about what they were talking about anyway. I didn’t even listen.”

“But you kept it up?” Mosquito asked for clarification. “Even though you were dragged into it?”

Craig shrugged. “The hell was I supposed to do? They were gonna kill me, and I wasn’t about to go to the cops and tell ’em what happened, or I’d get arrested.” Nonchalantly, he lit up another cigarette and added, “Turned into a good way to make money. Pass around some discs and papers, deal a little coke and shit, score free weed. Whatever.”

“Not whatever!” I spat at him. Angrily, I grabbed the cigarette out of his mouth, crushed it on the wall next to his head, and slammed him back against that wall to hopefully snap him into a better state of compliance. “Do you have any idea how powerful that group you were dealing for is?!”

“Shut up, I’m stopping, aren’t I?”

“Dealing drugs? Yes,” I growled. “Dealing information? No. If you don’t want to go to jail, there’s something we need you to do for us.”

Craig shoved me off and glared over at Mosquito. “Seriously?” he wondered.

“Don’t look at me like I’m the nonbiased party,” Mosquito said, folding his arms while keeping one hand on a stunner. “It’s jail or redemption, Craig.”

“Redemption,” Craig repeated. “This is so retarded.”

“Call it what you want,” said TupperWear, “but you’ve already helped out the Cult. Might as well help us out in doing what’s right.”

“Right and wrong can kiss my ass,” Craig snorted. “Pay me.”

“What?” the Coon snarled.

“You heard me. Pay me.” Craig reached for his cigarette pack again, but I grabbed it out of his hand and chucked it behind me into the dumpster. Craig scowled and looked ready to strangle me, but he didn’t. “If you want anything from me, I need motivation more than just blackmail. They paid me. I want—“

“No fucking way!” said the Coon.

Craig shrugged. “Then you’ve got a runner.”

“FINE.” We all stared over at TupperWear, who had spoken. Perhaps the only one of us who could afford to pay Craig at all. “If it’s what we’ve gotta do,” he said to us, while Craig looked on in what may have been shock. It was so hard to tell with that kid. “Twenty for random encounters, fifty if we think it’s really important.”
“Actually,” Mosquito cut in, “I’ll even pay you right now if you tell me how you knew about me.”

Craig glared at him, then took a survey of the rest of us as well. He glossed over me and most of the others, but passed his attention mostly between Mosquito and TupperWear. “That crazy art guy you guys already arrested knew,” said Craig. “Don’t ask me how, I don’t know. It kinda pissed me off. But whatever. All those guys piss me off.” That said, he held a hand out. “Pay up.”

Mosquito and TupperWear exchanged an odd look, and then the former turned to Craig and admitted, “I don’t carry money on missions. I’ll pay you tomorrow.”

“You’d better.”

“And you will help us?” TupperWear asked for confirmation.

“As long as I get paid and you don’t rat me out.”

And thus, we’d signed on another reluctant ally. It bothered me a little that the only inside eyes and ears we had were in the form of highly belligerent individuals, but I’d take what I could. The Goths could snap at me and Craig could be an asshole, but so long as I made out with more intel on what the Cult was dealing around and what their plans were, the better off we’d all be.

If there was one thing about Craig, though, it was that we could more or less depend on him to be trustworthy. He’d do things as long as he knew he wouldn’t be caught. He was someone who dabbled in the illegal and immoral, but he hated doing time, and would avoid getting into trouble whenever possible. With that much as backup, we allowed him to go free that evening.

But one thing still troubled me.

“One last question,” I growled, pulling Craig off to the side.

Craig rolled his eyes and asked, “What now?”

“Where and when did you learn to fight like that?”

Craig shrugged. “I picked it up.”

“Nobody just picks up techniques like that!” I argued. “That’s trained combat practice. Where the hell did you pick that up?”

Shrugging me off, Craig said, “I’ve had to fight off the same jerk a few times. I don’t like getting my ass kicked, so I figured out how to fight back. Okay?”

“Who, Marpesia?”

“Not just her, this other douche, from California.”

“California?” The network was getting larger, spreading the length of America. From Massachusetts to California, hitting Louisiana and Colorado along the way, the Cult sure had dug its roots in deep. I wanted to uproot that shit so badly.

“Los Angeles,” Craig clarified. “Never caught his name, but he dresses funny. He’s tried to steal my shit a few times.”

“Including the papers?”
“Yup.”

“So, who is he?”

“Do I look like I know?”

“Well,” I barked, “find out!”

“Find out,” Craig repeated in a bland tone. “Right, whatever.” As he walked away, pocketing his hands to combat the cold, I heard him mutter, “One of these days, I’ve gotta just move. This town is so stupid.”

For once, I sort of disagreed. For Mysterion, South Park was just getting interesting. No matter what it took, I was going to follow the Cult’s Goddamn paper trail all the way to Cthulhu.

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Once the police report had been filed, the papers were once again abuzz with talk of the League, and I woke up really fucking early… like nine a.m.—this was a Sunday, and I had long ago stopped going to church with my family—so I could be one of the first at the store to nab one.

Fishing a couple quarters out of my deep pockets, I clinked the change onto the counter and walked out of the convenience store satisfied. It wasn’t every week, hell, not even every month, that I made the paper, let alone front-page news. The drug bust was apparently bigger than I’d thought, to be the center story that week. Front and center! If only I could shove it in my parents’ faces. _Ha, ha, your son is successful._

I tucked the paper under my arm so as not to get run over or fall down a manhole before I could read it (it wasn’t even my eagerness to read the paper, so much as how irritating it would be to have everyone the next day be all, “Didn’t you read the paper, Kenny?”), and ducked into Harbucks. I snuck the paper out again for a good look once I was in the safety of the Order Here line, and indulged myself with the headline: **Local Hero League Puts End to 20-Year Drug Ring. Mexicans Actually Not Involved.**

Damn! Clyde would like this one. Clyde kept a library of all of the League’s newspaper and magazine mentions at the base, but (and Kyle hated this) not chronologically. He categorized things by the size of the article. This one was totally going right up top.

The line moved along, and before I knew it I was at the front, when a familiar voice said, “‘Morning, Kenny. The usual?”

My head jerked up so fast I almost got vertigo. If that wasn’t obvious…

The girl behind the counter gave me her little sideways smile, her half-grin I’d been noticing for years now. She had her straight red hair pulled back into a glossy ponytail that poked out from the back of her uniform baseball cap, the front of which sported a couple of pins that appeared on her bag during the school year: one of them her SPHS cheerleading pin, the other a shamrock. Somewhere down the line, I guess I’m Irish (McCormick is Irish, right?), so I liked that one.

“Hey, Red,” I greeted, playing it cool as best I could after almost giving myself away. “Actually, I wanna try something different today.”

“No Americano?” she guessed.

“Nah, too heavy. I want something different.” I glanced up to pretend to look at the menu, only to place my strategic question a few seconds later: “What’s your favorite?”
“Um… I like the frozen ones,” said Red, “but you like more coffee-coffee, right?”

I shrugged and looked back down at her. She wasn’t too awful short, maybe average. I’d been with girls of various heights, so height was never really something that passed my mind. In cheerleading, Red wasn’t one of the really small ones, the ones on the top of the pyramid whose skirts you can see up with no problem, but she got flipped around.

“How’s this? I’ll take one of those frozen ones, just add more espresso,” I decided. “It’s hot out, anyway.” And for April, that meant about 60°, but whatever.

“Yeah, it is, huh?” said Red, grabbing a medium-sized clear cup and writing out some barista gibberish on the side in a light blue pen. When she picked her head back up, I noticed that her eyes were that same blue. I liked that combo, with her red hair. That girl was put together. Damn. If only she remembered my other advances.

I’d tried to date Red a couple times, starting way back in seventh grade. Every single time, though—every single time!—I’d get murdered, mutilated, mauled, maimed, what the fuck ever… I died just before we could see it all through, and she’d have no recollection of it the next day. It was like she’d never even agreed to go out with me. It sucked. The one time I actually wanna date a girl because I wanna get to know her, I get killed. Thanks, Cthulhu. I blame you for me being a total fucking whore.

Not that I don’t enjoy being a whore sometimes, but that’s a different matter.

As Red rung me up for the drink, she glanced at my previous purchase, tucked back into the crook of my arm. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “Is that this morning’s paper?”

“Huh, this? Yeah. Why?”

“Oh, my God, I haven’t found a copy all morning! It flew off our racks like crazy,” she said. Keep going, keep going… “I have a break in like fifteen minutes, I’m gonna go all over and look for one, if they haven’t sold out everywhere else.” YES. YES. Thank you, God, YES.

“I’m planning on sitting in,” I said. “I’ll have this read in the next fifteen, you wanna just borrow this copy? It was the last one at the general store.” That was totally a lie, but I didn’t care. It may as well have been the last copy, anyway, if the issue was selling so fast.

“Really?!” Red’s gorgeous eyes lit up. “That’d be awesome! Thanks so much, Kenny!”

“Hey, no problem,” I grinned. “I’m gonna be over by that window, ’kay?”

She handed me back my change. I never usually tip much, since I have to hold onto whatever money I have (I do tip when I can, though, since I believe—probably more than anyone—in karma), but for her I left two bucks, and hoped she’d get all of it. After my drink was called up, I stabbed a straw through the domed lid, cast a glance back at Red, who gave me the cutest little wave, and made my way over to the far window, where the most comfortable chairs were, in a very rare instant, available. Everyone wanted to be outside today, I guess.

I took a quick survey of the room. Pretty much everyone who had anything to read was reading a copy of the newspaper. Some people had books or magazines, but I wasn’t alone in reading this article, which put me out of further suspicion. It was a great article, too, and I briefly wondered what Wendy would think of it, being a reporter herself, but it was the guys’ opinion I wanted even more. And, in fact, I was eager to hear about what Red thought. I wanted to know
what she thought of Mysterion. Too bad I couldn’t use *that* as a pick-up line.

The article was great, without giving too much away. None of us were ever interviewed much, but we did every once in a while allow a phrase or two to go on record, just to prove that we weren’t afraid of the media. We never wanted to run the risk of being exposed, but now that the Cult was after us anyway, I’d figured, bring it on. I’d say a few words for the paper. And they’d printed them. I’d gone on record with a reporter just after the incident (after League approval, of course), and I was now out all over the papers:

> “This is just the beginning,” hometown hero Mysterion told us briefly after the bust, the paper read. Hometown hero. I liked that; nice touch, lame as it kind of was. “Our mission is to protect this town, but we’re on the cusp of something bigger than we’d imagined. All I can say now is, don’t panic. The League’s here to handle it.”

Goddamn, sometimes I can be pretty fucking awesome.

I just hoped Red would think the same.

The rest of the article detailed how long the drug ring had been in operation. Luckily, Craig’s name was not printed. Professor Johansen’s was, and Mr. Wilcox’s was, which definitely meant that the Cult would come after us for getting those names out there on the front page.

*Bring it,* I thought to myself as I re-read the article while taking a few sips from the frozen coffee concoction Red had given me at the counter. Whenever we had a good victory, I’d treat myself to something like that. I just hoped that maybe I could walk out of this coffee shop with still more reasons to feel victorious.

And over Red walked, after those fifteen minutes were up, giving me that little wave again, and a bit of a sideways smile. All Harbucks employees wore black shirts, green aprons, and baseball caps, but she’d dismissed all three of those for her break, revealing the tight blue tank top she’d had on underneath, which brightly complemented her eyes and definitely drew attention up from the black capris that completed her little ensemble. She’d kept her hair back in a tight ponytail, and it bounced side to side as she walked with a perky gait up to me.

> “Hey!” she greeted, sitting in the chair across from me. “Thank you so much for sticking around just so I could read that article, Kenny, you’re the best!”

I laughed and surrendered the newspaper to her. “Just for the article?” I teased. “Is the pleasure of my company a drawback?”

“No,” Red snickered, waving the idea off. “I’m happy to have company. Usually I don’t get to do much on my breaks, so it’s nice to have someone to talk to, too.”

> “Don’t let me distract you, though,” I grinned, nodding to the paper.

Red smiled, her face flushing ever so slightly pink. God, fuck, she was cute. She had all the right ticks that gave her a sweet, endearing personality, but I knew she could be harsh when she wanted to be. The fact that she was being nice to me was something.

I watched her as she read the paper, finishing up the rest of my drink all the while. Red was fully invested in the article, but she totally lit up toward its end. I took a guess on which part it was that had made her react like that, but I asked anyway, “What was that all about?”

> “Huh?” she wondered, picking her head up as she folded up the paper.
“You got all swoony,” I laughed. “You got a thing for Mysterion or something?”

“Oh, my God, shut up!” said Red, swatting me with the newspaper before surrendering it to me again. “Don’t even,” she warned. “Mysterion is a symbol. You know?” Oh, do tell. Red sighed. “I always kind of crush on guys way out of my league.”

Goading her on, I asked, “Who says Mysterion is out of your league?” Okay, maybe I wasn’t goading her on as much as I was indulging myself. But whatever I was doing was fun. And revealing.

“Hello?” Red said, raising her eyebrows. “Like I said, he’s a symbol. Like anyone could even compare to anyone in the League. It’s so exciting that we have a team of heroes in this town. Keeps things less boring.”

“You get bored here, too, huh?” I wondered. South Park did only have so much to offer, being a small town stuck in the mountains. Despite that, a lot of weird shit did still tend to happen there. Possibly because of its small town status.

Red leaned forward onto her knees. Hello, cleavage. Look up at the face, Kenny. Look at the face. Yeah, that’s nice, too. Okay, we’re good. “Sometimes I do, yeah,” she admitted. “But, hey, what can you do?”

I was at a bit of a loss to keep going on that conversation, so I tucked my paper off to the side and searched for something completely new to say, since we were rapidly running out of time. Red was one of those girls I wouldn’t mind talking to. A lot of girls, they’re pretty, I’ll kiss ’em, I’ll fuck ’em, but it’s rare I want to date for good reasons. Hell, it’s rare I can date for good reasons. Once again, fuck my life. Deaths. Whatever.

“This was good,” I said, holding up the frozen drink she’d sold me. “Thanks for the recommendation.”

Red smiled brightly. “Oh,” she said, “no problem. I’m glad you liked it, I was wondering if you would.”

“So, uh… it’s a given you’ve got good taste in coffee,” I went on, transitioning into a hopeful date proposal. “What’s your favorite place to eat around here?”

“Downtown?”

“Yeah. I don’t eat out much. And when I do, it’s same-old, same-old. What do you like?” I managed to hold her gaze through everything we were saying. I’d caught her… time to see if I could reel her in.

“Oh, um… no place special, really. When I go out with the girls we usually just go to Denny’s or something, but there is this one place I’ve kinda wanted to try that people say is good,” said Red. “That Italian place on the corner. You know which one I mean?”

“Yeah.” No idea at all. “What time do you get off work?”

“Two. I-I mean… wait, what? Why?” She looked so damn cute right then. She was blushing and playing with a strand of her hair, but she looked happy. This was the first time since eighth grade I’d had the balls to ask her to dinner, and she’d agreed before, even if she’d forgotten.

Please, God, just give me this, I prayed in my head. For once, don’t let me die on a girl I like.
I shrugged. “No real reason,” I said. Lied. Whatever. “We should go tonight.”

“What, to that restaurant?” Red wondered.

“Yeah. This town’s boring, remember?” We both laughed. “I promise, if you come have dinner with me tonight, we can beat the boredom. ‘Sides, you’ve gotta get back to work, now, but I kinda want to keep talking…”

“I… well, I mean, me, too,” Red admitted. Playing with her hair again, she asked, “So, dinner tonight? Just… just us two?”

“If you’re okay with that.”

“Y-yeah… I mean, no problem.”

Score? Score! Yes! As Red’s break ended, we confirmed the location and agreed it wasn’t a date, it was just finishing up the conversation. At an Italian restaurant. Yeah fucking right it wasn’t a date, but I let Red call it or not call it whatever she wanted.

I kept to myself most of the rest of the day, and stayed downtown, mainly so I could figure out which restaurant it was Red was talking about. I surveyed the menu and got some money out of the ATM, since fuck it all I was gonna pay for the whole meal, then found out of the way places to read through the article a couple more times. Things would start looking up now. In the League and, hopefully, in my personal life as well.

And, wouldn't you know it… this time, I didn’t die. The date went off without a hitch, we had a nice, normal dinner conversation, and I even got to walk her home. It started off nice and easy, we met up on the corner by the restaurant and said our hellos. I’d surprised her by making a reservation, which started off my lucky streak with her right off.

She’d changed clothes since that morning, too, and was now wearing, under an open red spring coat, a loose, flowery shirt that she cinched together with a large brown belt around her waist, brown flats and lightly faded skinny jeans. I fucking love when chicks wear skinny jeans. Best fashion invention ever. Other than maybe the thong. She had her hair straightened and down, too, and I immediately wanted to mess it all up. That could wait, though. I was happy to start off with conversation.

We talked about little things. I asked her about her job, and if she liked it (she admitted she’d rather work in retail but that it was too hard to do during the school year), and she asked about mine. I mentioned the odd jobs I did here and there, and oddly enough, that drew more of her attention than almost anything else we’d talked about.

“That’s really cool,” she said, leaning forward on the table just enough.

“You think?” I wondered.

“Well, yeah, because, um…” Red sat back again, but she looked me in the eyes. “No offense, Kenny, but, because we—I mean, my girlfriends and me—don’t know too much about you, it’s like, well…”

I shrugged. “You can say it,” I said. “I don’t care. I’ve been supporting myself since seventh grade, since my parents kinda stopped doing anything. I’ve got a bank account and everything, but I don’t really tell anyone. Everyone knows I’ve always been poor. I don’t care. I don’t want to be, so I’ll make money while I can.”
And caught. Red’s pretty eyes lit up, and her nice full lips spread into a camera-ready smile. “Kenny, that is seriously one of the greatest things I’ve heard of a guy doing,” she told me. “I had no idea you were so… motivated.”

“If I wasn’t,” I grinned, “I never would’ve asked you out.”

Red blushed, and I knew I had it in the bag.

We didn’t stay much longer; Red was even the one to suggest we leave, since she admitted she’d rather take a nice long walk than sit in the restaurant the whole evening. I denied her offer to help pay for dinner, and did every chivalrous thing I could think of while escorting her out.

We walked around town for a little while, and I let her window-browse a bit. All the while, we kept talking about small things. School, motivations, ‘my parents are weirder than your parents’ stories. At one point, we passed by the electronics store, with the TVs all set up in rows in the windows, and the anchor was covering the drug ring story, so of course a pretty stunning (if I do say so myself) image of Mysterion was flashed in the upper right-hand corner, and Red flushed at the sight. If only, if only. But I was doing well on my own, and by the time we started heading back, we’d become quite friendly with each other, which was something I usually bypassed, since I did have a talent for talking girls right into bed. Didn’t want to go that route this time though. This time I wanted something.

“That was a date, wasn’t it?” I asked her as I began walking her home.

“Yes,” Red laughed, “that was a date.”

“Cool. Thanks for clearing that up.” Red just kept laughing and lightly hit my arm. With a telling smirk, I caught her hand and held it for the remainder of the walk.

While spring melted away some of the dreary snow from the ground, the sky still rebelled and took on evening shades far too early, so we stuck to the path lit by streetlamps as Red led me back to her house. I’d never felt so fucking full. We’d made headway in League activities (despite the loss of the bas-relief, but I was planning on visiting Wilcox soon to talk about that) and gained an ally. I still had Henrietta on my side, so we could use up some time now doing more R’lyeh death experiments. And now I’d had the first meaningful date I’d been on in what felt like a very long time.

“Maybe,” I said as we stood on Red’s front step, the mark of the end of the evening, “if we’re still together by, like, Homecoming, I can be cool enough to borrow a car to drive you around in.”

“I like your honesty,” said Red, giving me a quirky grin.

“For what?”

“Admitting you’d have to borrow a car.”

I shrugged. “Hey,” I said, “I’m not poor; my parents are.”

“Also,” Red pointed out, grabbing onto my coat one hand at a time, one on either side of the half-drawn zipper, “you said something about us being ‘together...’”

“Too soon?” I wondered.

“No, um… not at all. Well…” Red bit her lower lip and gave me a slightly pleading look.
“Okay, here’s the thing, Kenny, um… I like you, but I’m kind of not looking for anything… too intense at the start. Is that okay?”

“Like, start off slow and see where it goes?” I guessed. Red nodded. “Nah, that’s fine, me, too.”

Red looked puzzled. “Really?”

I laughed. “I know, from me, that sounds weird, but I’ve gotta be honest,” I admitted, “I’ve been wanting something more normal for a while.” In girls and in life, but I didn’t add onto that. “Look, Red, I don’t say this much to anyone, but I like you, and I’m good with whatever you are.”

Red smiled, then, cautiously, rested her forehead on my chin. Just to test the waters, I set my hands on her waist, since she hardly had hips to speak of, then pulled her in, massaging her lower back just a little. “You’re really nice,” Red whispered. “I knew you would be, I just didn’t know how nice…”

“Yeah?” I said, feeling myself grin.

“Yeah…”

I nudged her a little, which got her looking up at me. Our eyes met briefly, and then I just couldn’t hold it back any longer. Taking things slow, as she’d requested, I kissed her lightly. Red hesitated for a second, then tightened her hold on my jacket, so I could feel her fingers just a little pressing against my chest; I felt a spark and kissed her again. She rested into and returned that one, and a few moments later, we had definitely established something.

Some girls drench themselves in unnatural perfumes. Not Red. She just had a nice, showery smell, clean and natural. Like life. I clung to her and breathed her in and felt like I was embracing life. The one thing that always eluded me.

I just wanted this one thing. Just this one thing to make everything else seem better.

I stood back, still warm from the kiss and filled with the want to keep going, to really get something started with this girl, to finally have a nice, ‘real’ girlfriend for once. I kind of wanted to break the foreign exchange girl track record I had going, anyway. But only if it meant I could have something steady.

“How can we do this again?” I asked her, not letting go of her waist.

Red, who hadn’t eased up her grip either, asked, “Wednesday?”

My heart skipped. “Uh, Tuesday’d be better,” I tried.

“Tuesday, then. Um…” Red pulled back, only to unearth her cell phone from her purse. “Here,” she said, “let me give you my number. And I’ll get yours, ‘kay?” This was going so much better than I’d even planned. There had to be some kind of catch. The hell’re you planning, death? I had to wonder.

But we exchanged numbers, and death still did not creep up on me. First the numbers, then another kiss, and then a very promising “good night” as I watched Red walk inside. Second date. Fuck yes, I had a second date.

From there, I walked, watching my every step, back to the base, where I planned on spending the night. It was a longer walk to the bus stop, sure, but it was worth it to stay there if it
meant I didn’t have to withstand the hazards of my own house and risk death by bedspring or paint again. I slept easily through the night, and left the newspaper bearing our bitching headline on the table in the small kitchen so Clyde could file it later. I showered and dressed in an extra set of clothes I kept in my room there, and set out.

I even met up with Token on the way out, and his mother gave us both a lift to school, which meant no traffic accidents in the morning. “Dude,” he said after Mrs. Black dropped us off in front of the school, “you’re in a good mood. What’s up?”

“Uh… events from last Wednesday?” I said unconvincingly.

“That’s not it,” Token laughed, elbowing my arm. “You’ve got that look. Who is she?”

I laughed as well and shoved him back. “Not tellin’,” I said.

“You sleep with her already?”

“No, shut up, I can take it slow sometimes.”

“Like when?”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Hello!” I heard Stan greet us both from behind, and a second later he had us both in headlocks. “Fuck Token why?”

“Not my fault,” said Token. “Kenny’s over here all puppy eyes and apparently didn’t even sleep with the girl that got him looking like that.”

“Bullshit,” Stan grinned. “Who is she?”

“Didn’t tell Token, not telling you.”

“What’s the big secret?”

With perfect timing, as we rounded the next hallway, I ran into Red, who was taking a couple books out of her locker. As she was shutting the door, she checked her eye makeup in a small mirror she’d hung in there, and must have caught sight of us behind her, since she quickly stuffed the books into her backpack, shut the locker door, threw the bag over her shoulders, and walked over toward us.

“Hey, Kenny!” she greeted me brightly.

The guys stopped short. I turned to smirk up at both of them, respectively, then turned back and walked up to Red. “Hey, Red,” I grinned, meeting her halfway.

“How’s your day?”

“Just getting started,” I laughed. Red blushed, but I smiled to show her it was nothing to be embarrassed about. “And already looking up.”

Red hit a hand against my shoulder, and I took it. I was so ready to be the annoying new couple at school. If she’d have it, that is.

“That heavy?” I asked her, nodding to her backpack. Red gestured to it, and I nodded, and though she tried to pass it off as nothing, I said, “Gimme that, I’ve got it for you. Where’re you
“Um, world history,” said Red, handing the bag off to me. I slung the thing over my shoulder, which got a sweet little smile out of her. “Thanks.”

“Any time. Upstairs?”

“Yeah…”

“I’m heading up there, too, c’mon.”

I glanced back at Stan and Token; Stan was still grinning, and waved me off as if to say, *Don’t give us the time of day, fucking go for it.*

And I did.

And it continued. I didn’t even die. A week went by, and each day things got better. We’d meet up after school, we’d go for dinner. I think the only day we missed each other that week was Wednesday, which was an out-of-uniform meeting with the guys (and Wendy) to talk about the paper coverage and how it felt nice to be able to take a week off.

By Thursday Red was grabbing my hand in the hallway, and by Friday we’d taken to sneaking out during our shared study hall to make out under the back stairs. And by Sunday it was official. (“Ohmigod I’m gonna put it on Facebook and everything,” Red said at one point that day.)

So on Monday, I could finally say it.

I had a girlfriend.

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As soon as I read the paper, I started kicking myself for not asking to attend the meeting and subsequent mission that had led up to the League shutting down the drug ring. Craig started coming back to school after that, and only a handful of us seemed to know why things appeared strained between him and his best friends, Clyde and Token. Most people passed it off as Craig being Craig—he was aloof and sometimes just did things because he felt like it, and ignoring people was one of the things he felt like doing often… that and choosing not to be a part of something.

When I, still on my Marjorine kick, asked Wendy at lunch one day, over a week after the paper had come out with that article, what exactly had happened that night, she said, “Oh, um… I’m sorry, Marjorine, but Stan is already pretty mad at me for trying to talk about that stuff outside. I’d love to talk, but I don’t know if I should…”

Before either of us could even start to speculate on whether or not Wendy revealing anything would be necessarily a bad thing, we were joined at the table by the usual crew, one by one. Heidi, Annie, Nellie… and then, hooked arm in arm together, Bebe and Red. We exchanged our usual hellos, and then Bebe plunked Red down into the seat on my left, then sat across from her and said, “Ladies, we’ve got something to celebrate!”

“Oh?” said Nellie, perking her head up with a sudden whip of her brown braided pigtails.

“It’s not all that big a deal,” said Red, modestly. She was beaming, all the same.

“Oh, come on!” laughed Bebe. “It’s adorable!”

“Ohmigod, Red, you’ve got a boyfriend?!” Heidi guessed, lighting up with excitement.

Red nodded, then held up one index finger while she pressed something on her phone. “Okay, now it’s on Facebook,” she grinned.

“So who is it?” Nellie wondered, leaning over the table, her eyes wide. “When’d it start?”

“Um… yesterday,” Red laughed. “Well, we made it official yesterday. It’s been a week.”

“Wait, I think I know who it is…” said Annie. “You guys left math together last Friday in the middle of class.”

“Ohmigod who is it?!” Heidi pressed.

Grinning broadly, Red answered, “Kenny McCormick.”

Cue the collective squeal.

“Red, that’s awesome!” Wendy exclaimed. Sneaking a glance at her, I noticed that she was the happiest she’d looked all day. God, I admired her selflessness. Wendy really was an amazing role model. She had the seamless ability to put others first, making her own troubles—and even victories—seem like nothing of major consequence.

“Congratulations!” Annie chimed in.
“Aww, thanks, you guys,” Red smiled. She proceeded to tell us the adorable story of how Kenny had talked her into a nothing-doing date the previous Sunday, and of how much she was learning about him. “I mean, I was kinda nervous at first, cuz Kenny’s kinda—”

“Hot?” Bebe fed her.

“Driven?” I tried.

“Intimidating,” Red corrected. “You know, the foreign exchange reputation, and all.”

“So what?” said Heidi, grinning coyly. “Means he’s good in bed.”

“Heidi!” Red scolded, her eyes going wide. “Whatever!”

As the girls kept chatting away, I sat there listening in, every once in a while throwing in an encouraging comment. After all, the news did make me happy. I was glad for both of them. I knew that Red had always wanted a fun, friendly relationship with someone she found both nice and attractive, and I knew that Kenny had crushed on Red for a long time, so it was great that something had finally worked out. I liked seeing other people happy, and I’d get sad when things didn’t work out.

Relationships kind of scare me. The concept is daunting. But it’s the one thing on the lips of every highschooler, no matter one’s stance on the subject. I hadn’t been able to hold up a steady boyfriend or girlfriend at all. I’ve thought I was golden in possible relationships before, only to be rejected. So if rejection was all I was going to get for the rest of high school, I figured I’d just focus on the one person who could reject me time and time again, but still give me the time of day in other respects. I even admitted to myself that my efforts were pretty sad. But I kept at it anyway. And I kept it to myself.

That whole chat with the girls that day, I tried hard to play the listener and stay on the outside of the conversation. I was just happy to be a part of it at all. I was an observer, mostly by choice. I liked getting all sides of the story, when it came to my ‘circles.’ For example, I knew that Kenny was something of a legend to the girls, due to his promiscuity, but at the same time, they all thought he was one of the hottest guys in the school (after Clyde, Bridon Gueermo, and one of the seniors). I also knew that Kenny kind of knew that, and some of the promiscuity was played up because of that. Red was a good choice for him, I thought. They’d be sweet together.

“Your turn, Marjorine!” Red nudged me.

“I—huh?” I wondered, snapping to attention. I hadn’t realized I’d drifted so far into my thoughts until I looked up and saw everyone focusing on me in anticipation.

“We’re talking crushes, now!” Heidi said. Oh, Jesus, son of Mary, wife of Joseph. “Wendy, Red and Bebe don’t count.”

I laughed a little. “Tell me yours again,” I prompted. “Sorry, I’m out of it.”

“Okay, so Annie likes Kevin Stoley…” Heidi began.

“Heidi, shh!” Annie tried, going red. Kevin, another guy in our class, sometimes ran with Craig’s crowd, and was indeed sitting at a table nearby with Craig, Tweek, and a few others.

“Sorry, honey,” Heidi smiled.

“How about you?” I asked Heidi.
She got a wistful look on her face and sighed, “Bridon Gueermo.”

“Oh, my God,” laughed Bebe. “I’ve got a crush on Bridon Gueermo. Who doesn’t?” The rest of the table laughed with her, each of us basically admitting that it was true. Bridon was a grade behind us, but had started playing junior varsity basketball as an eighth-grader, he was so good. And popular, too, whew. That boy had a fanclub. He’d had some girlfriends, and as far as I knew, he was dating one of the freshman field hockey girls and was currently unavailable. After we’d shared a laugh, though, all eyes were back on me. “So, Marjorine?”

“Oh, I, uh—“ I began, accidentally giving Wendy a nervous side glance, since I was sure she knew. Stupidly, I added, “You don’t really wanna know…”

“If you start off like that,” said Nellie, “we’ve gotta know.”

“It won’t leave this table,” Bebe promised.

I felt my face get hot. My crush, just my own stupid little maybe, embarrassed me plenty just thinking about it on my own. The last thing I needed was a boatload of comments like, “Oh, honey, you could do so much better,” or, “You’re just setting yourself up for disappointment.” I knew that stuff already. Even I second-guessed it. Only to get all flighty thinking about it again.

“Oh, I, uh—“

“Unless it’s one of us,” Red grinned. “Is it Bebe?”

Luckily, I was able to laugh. “No, it’s not Bebe,” I said. “I don’t really crush on people who’re in relationships.”

“I know,” said Red, “I’m just teasing.”

Something else fortunate about all of my friends was how they (Eric aside) never teased me for being bi. They never thought I was weird or a slut or anything. Sometimes, bad stereotypes can very unfortunately befall LGBTQ highschoolers, especially in small towns like mine, where ‘atypical’ (not straight or white) was almost ‘alien.’ Fortunately, South Park stood out a little, since this town generally had bigger problems than just which minorities to single out. Aliens, people from the future, Cthulhu, that kind of thing. What a weird place, this town.

“Oh, I, uh—“

“Okay,” Annie prompted, “if it’s not Bebe, then who is it?”

“Uh… kinda the total opposite of Bebe,” I said. I’d never anticipated being put on the spot about it like this. The others leaned in, eager for my awful secret. I held my breath and muttered out, “Eric.”

“Who?” Heidi wondered, looking confused. Which was understandable. The vast majority of the student body had always called him by his last name. I was pretty much the only one who called him by his first.

But then, too scared of what kind of onslaught could follow, I lied: “Or, who’s the guy that plays him? Eric, from True Blood.”

Another round of laughter. “Ohmigod, that’s so not fair,” laughed Red. “We’re talking school crushes. I think if you like men, you’re like… programmed to be in love with Alexander Skårsgard. Am I right?”

“But I think Marjorine has a better chance with him than Heidi does with Bridon Gueermo,” Wendy taunted.
“Whatever!” Heidi squealed, tossing an M&M at Wendy, who caught the candy and ate it, giggling.

“Okay, so Marj passes,” Wendy then said, still at my aid. I seriously owed her one. Another one. “How about you, Nellie?”

“Can I say a celebrity, too?” Nellie wondered, tapping her orange-polished nails on the table.

“Nooo, because I know who it is already,” sang Bebe, nudging the girl in pigtails.

“But—I… I don’t want to make anyone angry…”

“You won’t,” Heidi assured her.

Nellie gave her a testing look. “Yeah? You sure?”


The color drained from Nellie’s face, and she folded her hands on her lap. That was a yes if I ever saw one. And my guess was that Kyle was oblivious. Honestly, I doubt he’d’ve really noticed Heidi’s crush if she hadn’t been so darn obvious. Kyle, I knew, had been kind of jaded, or ambivalent, about women since an incident in third grade with a curly-haired homeschooled girl named Rebecca Costwalds.

“What?!?” Heidi exclaimed. “Since when?!?”

“I dunno,” Nellie shrugged, “like… fourth grade?”

“Aw, oh, my God, that’s so cute!” Red beamed. “You should totally go for it!”

“Yeah!” Bebe joined. “Fourth-grade crushes are important. I started liking Clyde after we dated again in fourth, and Wendy and Stan got back together for the first time in fourth…” Yeah, my thing for Eric had probably started around then, too, come to think of it. “Oh, wait… sorry…” Bebe glanced at Wendy.

“What?” she wondered. “Bebe, what? We’re fine.” Wendy flashed a fake but perfectly photo-ready smile. “Me and Stan are totally fine.”

A look of polite disbelief arose on Bebe’s features, and she looked like she might probe the matter further, so I decided to jump in and return Wendy’s earlier kindness. “Has anybody been to that new purse store at the mall yet?” I randomly asked. The comment did the trick, and the girls were off, quick as accessory-hungry cheetahs, talking about bag brands and fashions. I caught Wendy’s eye for a moment and she gave me a smile that I knew meant to non-verbally convey her appreciation. Well that was one minor debt repaid. The discussion stayed away from crushes and relationships for the rest of the lunch period. A fact that I was thankful for.

The reprieve did not last long, though. When the period was nearly over, Wendy and I left the other girls early to head by our lockers before our next class. On the way, Wendy deliberately elbowed me in the arm. Not so much that it hurt, but it was quite insistent.

“Why’d you chicken out?” she asked me. “You didn’t even let them try to guess who you meant before you covered it.”

Of course, Wendy knew who I had really been thinking of. I tugged on a strand of hair from my ponytail, and tried to downplay my reluctance. “Well, there’s nothing going on between us… at
all… so the idea of there actually being anything is kind of out there. It’d just be too weird.”

“And you coming out to everyone as Marjorine isn’t?” she inquired.

Going on the defensive (and, I admit, a bit desperately), I exclaimed, “Well, what about you? Why did you gloss over how you and Stan have been acting lately?”

I immediately regretted my words as soon as they were out, as Wendy cut her eyes abruptly away but not in defeat. “We’re just going through a rough patch right now. It’s not worth having the girls get all worked up about it.”

I thought this might be sugar-coating the truth a bit as well, but I let that one go in favor of maintaining our mutual trust. “It’ll be all right, Wendy,” I offered. “I’m sure Stan’s just still getting used to you being… on the team.” I altered my words as a pair of seniors walked past us.

Wendy let out a tired sigh. “Hm, that’s what most everyone keeps saying.”

“Well, it is a lot to deal with. And you’re still getting used to it, too, being a part of the team and all.”

“Yeah…” she looked up at me again with a slight smile. “And I can understand why you might be a little hesitant on admitting that thing about Cartman. He doesn’t exactly have the best reputation at school.”

I smiled as well, in spite of myself. “Well, that’s true.”

After that, we continued our trip to class in average conversation. For a long time after that, however, I became aware of a little change in Wendy, or at least in her usual upbeat attitude. That girl was a fighter, and had always seemed to be able to work through things with grace and confidence, but lately she was starting to look… just plain sad. No, things weren’t okay between her and Stan, and it became obvious if not to others then at least to me. I’d see them talking, every once in a while, in one of the quieter sections of the sophomore hallway or out in the parking lot.

I saw them both try, very hard, to keep things going. They would clasp hands but say nothing. Stan would kiss Wendy on the cheek before a class, but leave her behind without a word. Wendy would throw on a smile for him, and chat with him blithely about events of the day, but I could almost see the black cloud looming over her.

One day in late April, Wendy called me to meet for coffee and do some summer shopping. I hadn’t been in a Marjorine mood until she’d called, so I made a quick change, slipped out of the house past my parents, ignoring my father’s scornful death stare, and walked into town. Over coffee, once I’d inquired after the obvious, Wendy told me halfheartedly that things were starting to look up again. She didn’t believe herself, and when I asked why she wasn’t with Stan that day, she let out an awfully painful sigh and replied that he was ‘with the guys again.’

‘The guys’ didn’t seem to include Kenny, since, once I made Wendy leave the coffee shop so we could at least walk around so she could have some fresh air, we passed by him and Red, the very picture of a blossoming relationship. Kenny only had so much money to his name, but it seemed like he wasn’t too hesitant to spend a little of it on his girlfriend—we saw them as they were walking out of a store, and immediately upon exiting, Red yanked Kenny down for a kiss.

My heart skipped—both out of delight for them and out of excited fear for wondering what that kind of intimacy must feel like—and my eyes fluttered over to Wendy, who looked a little disheartened. We said a little hello, and went on our way. As we ambled on, Wendy linked elbows with me, and whispered, mostly to herself, “It’ll get better. It’s looking up, it really is.”
I couldn’t offer many words of encouragement, being much less experienced in the world of healthy relationships, but I could be a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes I got a little tired of that, but on that day, I just wanted to be there for a friend. I really do hate to see couples that once worked so well split up, so I backed Wendy up as best I could, pulling for her every step of the way. After all, she’d helped me so much, and it was thanks to her I could feel like a strong, supportive person, as Marjorie, at all. I still owed that girl so much.

Days sort of rushed together after that. I, as Chaos, chose to attend another meeting in early May, but the League had nothing new to report. I already knew enough about the Goth kids on my own, and it sounded like the League was just focusing their attention on working with them. Then again, they could very well have hidden things and talked about things of less consequence, knowing I’d be at the meeting. I wouldn’t be surprised.

So I started doing what I’d always done: sneak around and spy on them.

At the end of May, Kyle turned sixteen, so of course we all got together to celebrate. There was a new Hibachi place in town (much to the chagrin of Mr. Lu Kim, who owned the Chinese restaurant City Wok and had some kind of awful vendetta against anything even remotely Japanese), so we met up there. I managed to work my way into the seat beside Eric, who pretended to ignore me for a while.

When it came to gifts, Eric gave Kyle a library copy of Mein Kampf (“What? It’s good literature, Kyle,” he said in his defense when Kyle gave him a stone-faced, unimpressed glare…), which, it was noted, had incurred about two months of late fees, so Kyle had better hurry up and read it, Eric said.

I love birthdays. I think they’re fun. I mean, mine never are, but other people’s always seem to be. So I try not to be in Chaos moods on other people’s birthdays, because I like to enjoy them. I tried to use the get-together as an excuse to spy a little anyway, but the guys never talked about League things outside of meetings, so I came up cold.

I came up cold when I tried talking to Eric, too. As we were leaving, Stan held Kyle down so Kenny could jokingly punch him sixteen times, and Eric and I ended up standing off on our own together by the restaurant entrance. I took advantage of this opportunity to try and have a semi-decent conversation with the boy I inexplicably liked. “That was nice of you to give Kyle a book, Eric, knowing how he likes to read and all.” I was reaching, it was true (and I’ve never been terribly eloquent as Butters), but I had to start somewhere, right? And what better method than an attempted compliment to the king of narcissism.

Said royalty raised his eyebrow at me in an incredulous glare. “Yeah, but I only gave it to him because he’s a stupid little Jew-fag and that book can maybe scare some of the ‘Jew’ out of him.”

“But you understand him enough to know the kind of thing he’d like.” I was trying so hard to not to suck at this… so far not so good. “You are really good at reading people, at knowing what they’re really thinking or feeling.” …Better.

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

I half-shrugged and looked down at the ground for a minute, kicking a bit of gravel absentmindedly with my right toe. “That you get people, even if you don’t show it too much,” and here I looked up at him from the side with my head still bowed and attempted a small smile. “I like that
about you, Eric.”

Eric abruptly hauled me to the side and said to me firmly, “Stop it.”

“Huh?” I asked, a bit stunned. “But I wasn’t doing anything…”

“Not doing—ech,” he scoffed, rolling his expressive brown eyes. “Butters, it’s bad enough when you do it all dressed as Marjorine, but—”

“But, Eric, I—”

“Just stop.” Narrowing those usually wide eyes into slits, he added, “I am not gonna have people thinking weird stuff about me. All right?!”

I gulped and nodded, and took it as Eric shoved me into the wall and walked away, trying to catch Kenny’s attention about something. My heart was pounding as I watched after him, from the rush of what had just happened. Yes, he was an asshole. Yes, he was a control freak. But I still liked the way he pushed me around. Someday, I kept telling myself, I could fight back. For now, I’d just take the abuse. As Butters, I always did. Marjorine was a little stronger.

Chaos, though… now Chaos would’ve fought back. But I had the feeling that people didn’t always take Chaos seriously. I knew Mysterion did, and for the most part Marpesia did, because Wendy knew how passionately serious I’d been about developing Marjorine from the onset, and Chaos was no less real than she was. The Coon more or less did, too. And so did General Disarray.

Things that summer and fall would have turned out a lot differently if it hadn’t been for Disarray.

When June hit, while I was shuffling through final exams and more and more and more SAT prep along with everyone else, Dougie called me one day and demanded we meet as soon as I had time. Since Dougie wasn’t someone I really hung out with on a regular basis (his being an eighth grader didn’t help), I knew it was Chaos he needed to talk to. I made him wait until the end of finals, and it was with luck that the last thing I’d been cramming for had been my German written exam. Wendy, Eric and I all had German together, and usually formed a study group in that class (because Eric always tried to cheat off of Wendy), so I felt confident when I left the room. Having Wendy as a study-buddy was always a plus.

And because I’d studied so hard, the language was fresh on my brain when, later that weekend, I met up with General Disarray at our hideout, just as a thunderstorm was gathering outside.

Not one for beating about the bush, my partner in chaos held up what looked like an incredibly old manuscript and simply said, “I got one.”

“Got one what?” I asked, walking over to where he stood by our main work table.

“A Necronomicon,” he proclaimed and sat the book squarely in front of me on the flat surface.

My eyes widened in amazed disbelief. “A real… how?”

“The channels of private collectors.” Cult activities. That meant my partner had tapped into the private network that the League had lately been obsessing over. A part of my mind was bothered that I had been oblivious to this particular movement by the person acting as my subordinate, but I was too impressed by what lay in front of me at the moment to really give that thought time. He
continued his explanation, “The discussions for dealings are hard to get into from the outside, but I managed to secure this from an independent source. There’s just one problem.”

At this point I opened the book to a random page and found the writing to be not what I expected. Meaning not English (though I don’t suppose I should really have been surprised). What was great, though, was that I did still recognize the language. It was a slightly archaic form of German. I could even pick out a couple words already from glancing at the page. This was not the ideal circumstance, sure, but it could have been a whole lot worse. This was even manageable.

“No problem, Disarray,” I assured him, smiling my most satisfied evil-madman grin. “Just give me some time and I can solve this puzzle.”

It proved to be a bit more complicated than I thought, since even the words I thought I knew turned out to have slightly different meanings in this older dialect. And the confusing poetry didn’t really help the translating either. But I managed to consistently chip away at the foggy obscurity of the volume and start making some sense of this mythos we had been attempting to penetrate for so long. Disarray helped me as best he could, but not knowing the language himself, he mostly left the work in my hands and settled for encouraging me on and trying to help put the cryptic pieces together once I had translated them.

The purely villain part of Chaos relished the fact that we could now have a leg up on our rivals in the League. It was clear from the meetings I attended that the group of superheroes was learning more every day about Cult activities, and their veins of influence that spread throughout the country, but they all had to rely on second-hand accounts of the myths. None of them had a prize this valuable. At least, not to my knowledge. And I didn’t see why any one of them would have kept something like this apart from the others. What would they have to gain?

The summer months free from school obligations gave me plenty of time to work on translating. But, as I said, it was not easy, so it was not until September, just before I turned seventeen, in fact, that I uncovered something which really piqued my interest. It was a passage making reference to a ‘messenger.’ I recalled the curly-haired Goth’s comments on the messenger of Cthulhu and hoped that maybe they were the same entity.

On the opposite page of the one containing the reference was an illustration. It showed a temple of sorts made entirely out of skulls (some human-looking, some not) in a weird locale of decaying pillars and daunting, jagged cliffs, with a lighting storm behind it.

I reached into a pocket on my costume’s belt and pulled out the Tarot card the Goth had given me on that same day he’d fed me that information. The scene was surprisingly similar.

And I felt that, finally, here was a tool that could point us in the direction of our goal.

It was never more clear that I now possessed the instrument to ultimate chaos.

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In the League, things were going great. Things were fucking awesome, actually. Craig brought us news within his first couple weeks sneaking around the Cult for us—news of a weird new bookstore that had popped up in South Park, that only seemed to be open when a Cultist needed to go in. Naturally, Kenny sprung right on that (this was sometime in April), and the Goth girl Henrietta somehow let Mysterion convince her to check it out. Craig was forced to tag along with her, and when Mysterion, the Human Kite and I rendezvoused with them later, the two simultaneously lit up cigarettes and said it was nothing special.

That got Mysterion in a pissy mood for a few minutes, until Craig handed over what looked like a report from the 1940s, bound together in a spiral, and clearly written up on someone’s home typewriter. It contained information about a strange presence in Los Angeles, and weird happenings surrounding a pimp that had simply gone by the name of ‘Mr. Skin.’ Which Craig said was weird because a man from L.A. he’d had trouble with in the drug ring a few times before had called himself exactly that. Henrietta then brought up evidence of the same name having been used back in the 1920s; in fact, a lot of our Cthulhu data was bringing us back to that decade. Needless to say, Mysterion wasn’t pissed anymore, at least not until we could find no more leads on the guy.

None of us gave up on it, though, and Craig and the Goths did start bringing in a steady flow of documents on Cult activity. Primarily, we learned about a deity called Yog-Sothoth. A second forced trip for Henrietta and Craig to the bookstore yielded, in early June, a long sought-after old handwritten page of notes on this new Old One. Yog-Sothoth, it said, was like a void—the thing that guarded the Gate to R’lyeh, more or less the Gate itself. Mysterion appeared to already know a little about that deity, but made a big deal of telling the rest of us about it.

“What?” the Human Kite wondered at one of our meetings. “Are we planning on infiltrating R’lyeh?”

“I’m not discounting it as a possibility,” said Mysterion, “at least for me. The rest of you can choose to do what you want, but I have a personal score to settle with Cthulhu.”

“Man,” the Coon commented, “Cthulhu’s kind of a pussy.”

“Oh, do tell,” Marpesia snapped at him.

“What?” said the Coon. “I just don’t get what’s so important about him. Yes, he’s some dark god from another dimension, and—“

“Yeah,” Mysterion cut in, glowering at the one among us who had singlehandedly wrangled Cthulhu during the Gulf Crisis, “he’s ‘some dark god’ that the Cultists are trying to wake up again so that, oh, the world can be destroyed. I’d say that’s pretty fucking important.”

“Well, fine, okay,” the Coon said, “but how ’bout let’s actually figure out when they want to do that so we’re not just sitting here talking about gates and shit.”

That—we all had to admit—was pretty logical. It even silenced Mysterion for a moment. The Human Kite and I exchanged a brief glance, and Marpesia was the one to ask, “Did he just… have a pertinent idea?” Which won her a glare from the person in question.
“Listen,” said Mysterion, “I’ve thought of that, too, but not even Henrietta knows.”

“So make Craig do it,” Mosquito suggested. “We’re paying him anyway.”

It made sense, so we put him up to it. Apparently it was harder information to dig up than we thought, however, so we were yet again forced to wait and conduct what research we could. Things were getting exciting in those respects, if a little scary, just because it felt like something was encroaching.

And I was to find out, that fall, just how deep we’d gotten ourselves.

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We reached a lull by summer, though, so I decided to take the time to attempt to sort out my personal life.

I felt like I still wasn’t used to Wendy, as Marpesia, being a part of the League. She’d done her fair share, though—her skills as a reporter really came in handy, and, though we hadn’t had to fight anyone off much lately, she was great to have as backup, too. The problem was how she wasn’t able to blur the line.

And it eventually came down to Wendy wanting to know too much about everything I did. She tried to get me back into Facebook. I told her fuck no, I hate Facebook, I have a phone. Then, of course, I’m never one to be very reliable with my phone, either. I’ve actually lost the thing a couple times, but my parents have been nice enough to replace them when I do.

One incident, in early summer, though, set the tone for the way our relationship was sort of doomed to be strained from then on out. Now, I liked Wendy. A lot. I enjoyed her company, and admired her dedication to her morals. I liked being her boyfriend, I liked having someone to stand up for—someone who, despite her feminist agenda, enjoyed me acting like that. But I started thinking about what made us tick. We’d been together, on and off, since third grade. I’d never been with anyone else, but she had dated other guys plenty of times on our breaks.

What bothered me was that, if I’d been so replaceable before, why now was she trying so damn hard to keep me around? The answer was bound to come, and it all started one evening after I’d actually had a pretty fucking enjoyable day. It had started out being me, Kyle and Kenny, enjoying one of our last summers of high school before things started to get too crazy. Kenny’s phone eventually went off, and he ditched us for his girlfriend, which was completely understandable.

Kenny had seemed a lot happier lately, even when we had setback weeks in the League, and it was all because of Red. He was still lewd as ever, but he stuck up for his girlfriend in a very traditional way, and Kyle and I joked that she’d probably put him up to acting like that. Cartman said he was pussy-whipped. And it was kinda true. And kinda hilarious. But he’d almost wanted it that way for a while, so it all worked out.

I even made the comment that day, too: “Dude,” I said to Kyle, “I think Cartman was right about Kenny.”

“Did you see that?” Kyle agreed with a laugh, as we meandered through town with no discernable destination. “He picked up after, like, one ring! Think she was just booty-calling, or what?”

“Dude, with Kenny, who knows?” I smirked. “Chances are he’ll get some by the end of the
day no matter what, though, so we shouldn’t laugh.”

“Dude, fuck off, you have a girlfriend, too,” said Kyle, shoving me a little. “You could make that happen, easy.”

I patted my pockets and laughed. “I left my phone in the car,” I realized. “Couldn’t even if I wanted to!”

“Oh, my God, Stan, just go live in Amish country, already,” Kyle said, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t think I won’t,” I joked back. “I’ll go build awesome furniture the rest of my life while the rest of the world complains that there are no 5D televisions.”

Kyle shoved me again, this time a little more playfully. “Like you could resist the allure of small-town Colorado that much,” he laughed, keeping it up.

Rather than just shove him back, I went a step further and yanked Kyle over to the side by latching my right arm around his neck, then proceeded to mess with his hair, since for once he wasn’t wearing a hat to cover it. I went right at the plates I knew he spent way too long trying to get right so he wouldn’t have to deal with the curls, tangling it all into a differently splayed pattern. Kyle wrestled my arm up and over his head, then ducked away after giving me a backwards slap on the arm. “Nah, you’re right,” I ended up saying in response to his last quip. “This is a crazy-ass town, but there’s a lot to like here.”

“Not to press the earlier issue,” said Kyle, almost out of nowhere, “but, uh… how is it going with Wendy?”

I shook my head and shrugged, pocketing my hands. “Who knows, dude?” I said. “I mean, I like her and all, but now it’s like, she knows something’s weird, and she’s acting either clingy or distant almost like she wants to make it weirder. That make sense?”

“Kinda. I dunno. I don’t know Wendy too well,” Kyle admitted, which was true, “but she does have strong opinions.”

“And strong mood swings,” I added, sort of muttering. Despite it all, I managed to laugh. “Man,” I remarked, “girls are impossible.”

“No they’re not, according to Clyde,” Kyle snickered. “Just buy her some new shoes.”

“Dude, Wendy is not that shallow.”

“I bet she is!” Kyle said, taking a jab at my ribs. “If all girls are equally impossible—“

“Don’t fucking turn dating into physics!” I warned; he’d gotten me going, laughing, though. Kyle smirked and went on, “No, do it, dude, I’ll prove it! She’ll be all—” and here he affected a purposefully awful falsetto and leaned up into me to imitate Wendy, “oh my God, Stan, you are sooooo nice, I’ll totally stop bugging you all the time now!”

Awkwardly enough, I couldn’t even get out the laugh I knew I had in me, since, of all things, my gag reflex acted up—the one I’d been able to control for a while but which still posed a problem when I got flustered, almost exclusively around Wendy. I cupped one hand over my mouth at the last minute and stopped walking. Kyle fell into a fit of laughter and had to keep his balance by grabbing onto my shoulder.
“Dude, did you just almost puke?” he wondered. His face was flushed red from laughing so hard, and he wore a broad, white grin.

I coughed into my fist a couple times and swallowed back, the familiar burning sensation of acid slid down my throat and my entire body begged for me to find water fast. “Ugh,” I said, disgusted at the fact that I’d almost not caught it, “sorry, dude, that was weird. I thought that was just a Wendy thing.”

Kyle stood back, and we continued walking as he said, “Yeah, dude, I’m definitely not Wendy.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

As I was rubbing my throat to try to help ease the discomfort of the accidental upchuck, Kyle shrugged and said, “Eh, must’ve just been my Oscar-worthy rendition of her.”

We left it at that and carried on. I sort of wanted to get back to my car then and there, just to see if Wendy had called me, but walking back would have meant most likely ending the day, and I really didn’t care for my phone that much. It was probably out of battery anyway. Besides, Kyle wanted to stay out as long as possible. Anything, he said, to keep avoiding the college talk. He was avoiding that like the plague, now more than ever, especially now that his parents were starting to plan college visits at various places around the country. I knew I wanted to stay in Colorado. Most of us did. College was the one topic, though, that Kyle and I never talked about, because I respected his unease about it. I’d learn when I’d learn.

At the end of the day, I discovered that my phone had indeed been drained of its battery, so I plugged it in as soon as I got home to discover an alarming assortment of fifteen texts, voicemails and missed call alerts from Wendy. Huh. Shit. Maybe I should have gone to check when I’d thought of it.

Talking on cell phones at home still seemed kind of redundant to me (plus I had shit for a signal and could only really text anyway), so I called my girlfriend from the landline, which I brought up to my room in case things got ugly during conversation. No time like the present to keep trying to sort things out, and things with Wendy were as strained as they got.

Wendy picked up after two rings; her response was a frantic, “Stan?”

“Yeah, hey,” I said. “Look, Wendy, I wanted to say sorry I didn’t get your—“

“Stan!” Wendy cried over the phone, utterly ignoring my attempts at placating her before a shitstorm could start. “What the hell?! I’ve been trying to call you all day!”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I said, deleting the last of the fifteen alerts on my cell while trying not to be angry about it. “Look, I left my phone in my car, sorry about that. You know I don’t really care if I do that.”

“Where were you?” she demanded.

“Just hanging out with Kyle,” I told her, “no big deal.”

“No big de—I’m coming over!”

“Wendy, what the hell?”

“I’M COMING OVER, STAN.” Well, that was that. I figured I had about ten minutes
before she’d be storming in, so I called down to warn my dad she’d be over, then paced around my room wondering how to handle the shitstorm I was about to be dealt.

I couldn’t even figure out what she was so Goddamn angry about. So I didn’t have my phone on me all day. Whatever. I’d told her on several occasions that sometimes I wished I didn’t even have a cell phone.

That first five minutes was spent trying to calm myself down. Nothing worked. Because Wendy was unpredictable, and she had sounded pretty upset. The second five minutes dissolved into how I could just build up my defense against her. I didn’t think I needed one, because the defense was, simply, *I don’t care if I leave my phone off or where I can’t find it.* Besides, South Park is a relatively small town. Wendy could have just walked around and found me if she really needed me.

Ten minutes exactly before the VW Bug pulled up in our driveway. Another five seconds before the knock.

“STANLEY!” I heard Wendy shriek from downstairs.

“Up in his room, Wendy,” I heard Dad say to her. “What’s going on with you two?”

“Hi Mr. Marsh, sorry, this is between me and your son,” said Wendy quickly, the volume of her voice telling me that she was booking it up the stairs.

Not about to be outdone, I squared myself in my doorway and waited. About two seconds later, Wendy stormed down the hall and punched me in the shoulder. “I’m okay with talking,” I said as evenly as I could, staring my girlfriend down, “but I’m not about to get in a fight with you.”

“Oh, we’re already in one,” Wendy snapped, shoving me backwards into my room and slamming the door behind her.

“Okay, what gives, Wendy, what the *fuck*?” I demanded. “So I left my phone off today.”

“What were you *doing*?” she hollered.

“I fucking told you!”

“Well what were you doing with Kyle?!”

“I don’t know!” I shouted, throwing my hands up in defeat. “What do we ever do?!”

“You tell me!” screamed Wendy, before collapsing into tears.

“Wendy—Wendy, aw… awwww, come on,” I said, frustrated but concerned. Wendy could often have mood swings like it was her job. Sometimes I just pegged it that she was having her time of the month and I’d leave her alone and we’d be fine once that was over with, but at other times, she really would just get overemotional. It seemed to be more frequent now that she’d joined the League, too.

Testingly, I walked over and set my hands on her shoulders, which surprisingly, given her outbursts, she let me do. After another second, I drew her in for a hug. It was almost weird, how desperately I tried to argue with myself that I still needed Wendy. I’d grown tired of her pestering, but at the moment, I couldn’t think of what I’d do if we didn’t at least try to keep going. Yes, I thought she was being a little unreasonable, but I couldn’t deny that I didn’t have my moments, too.
We managed to do it again, though. After I promised her to be more attentive, and after she promised to stop asking so many questions about what I considered to be the more private segments of my life, we kissed and made up. Again. Just like we always did. We almost rushed back into it, too; or maybe we really did. Our relationship was filled with more fights than ever, but they only ever reached a boiling point before we’d both immediately shut up, quietly give in, and pick up where we’d left off.

All the while, though, fight after fight, make-up after make-up, I felt like we were picking at a wound we should have left alone. Something like our relationship had to either be healed completely or accepted as an old battle scar and leave it at that while moving on. But no, we kept it up, and for the most part we were glad we did. It wasn’t healthy, though. Because now, we were skeptical of each other. We’d breached each other’s limits.

Nonetheless, we went into junior year as a couple, and once Wendy was back in school with her girl clique, things seemed to be fine. She and Bebe began talks of Homecoming, throwing all of their support at me and Clyde right from the beginning of the school year, even though the season had just started and he and I were more concerned with League activities than being on varsity football (which was almost weird, but true).

And life went on, as usual. For a while.

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The bane of every junior’s existence at SPHS was, without a doubt, the mandatory college advisory sessions with the school’s counselor, the young and overly perky Ms. McKay, who never, despite her best efforts, got totally through to anyone. I was doomed to a session with her a couple days after school started, and she swept me gleefully into her office at nine a.m., interrupting second period to do so. I actually had kinda wanted to pay attention in that class, so this added torture was an unwelcome bitch.

“Stan Marsh!” Ms. McKay sang. “How are you?” As if she knew me at all.

“Fine,” I mumbled, slumping down into her guest chair to make damn sure she saw how uninterested I was with this session.

“So let’s get started!” she chimed. I rolled my eyes. “Now, Stan, have you given any thought to what you want to study after high school?”

“Yeah, I’m going to CSU.”

Ms. McKay blinked, something she did erratically; whether or not it was a tick she was unaware of was something we students often took bets on. “Well, yes, that’s an option, but what field do you want to pursue?” She chose to stress her words in a way that I was sure, in her head, meant she was milking information out of me, but to me just sounded strained for no reason.

“I’m going to CSU!” I repeated firmly. “That’s all I know. I’ll figure the rest out once I get there.”

Ms. McKay’s small face squinched up to show her displeasure. I remained indifferent. College had never been anything that worried me, insofar as personal goals. Shelley had gone into school undeclared, and I was planning on doing the same thing. I was an average student with average ideas about the future—whatever. I knew I liked helping out nonprofits for the environment, but did that mean I was going to go into business or forestry? Not necessarily. I always figured the future would sort of reveal itself to me.
“Mr. Marsh, I know this is a daunting time for students like yourself, but could you even see yourself touring other colleges around the country, just to get a feel for what it is you could do?” Ms. McKay tried. “I spoke with your own girlfriend earlier today, Stan—you know that she’s looking at places like Barnard… Simmons…”

“Yeah, all-girls and all.” We’d talked about college a little, Wendy and I. She’d snapped at me once for having ‘low expectations,’ but then she’d also gotten mad once that I hadn’t tried to talk her into going to the same school I wanted. Wendy was getting tougher to read by the day, it seemed. “Look,” I tried, “I’m really set on not leaving Colorado. Maybe I’ll change my mind later and look into transferring, but I’m not just blindly throwing out CSU. It’s a good school and it’s where I want to go, okay? The end.”

Only in the interest of time, Ms. McKay conceded, and we bantered for the rest of my fifteen-minute time slot about SATs and how maybe I should take another prep course or hire a tutor. She rattled on about other things, too, but I got distracted by the U.S. map behind her desk, where she’d stuck pins into places around the country that I guess she was recommending to students. Simmons was one of them, I noticed… all the way across the country, in Massachusetts. Harvard was there, too, and Yale in nearby Connecticut—two obvious schools Mr. and Mrs. Broflovski had picked out (for both of their sons).

That map bothered me, and for the first time, I let myself be scared about college. Not for myself, really, not out of any fear for taking exams and writing entrance essays and choosing a track and whatnot… but about everyone else. Fuck, Clyde and I were both bent on CSU, since we’d both agreed we were going for athletic scholarships, and Bebe was following him; Token was on the fence, but even Cartman and a few others were thinking CSU as well. Kenny could only afford the application fee on so many schools, but CSU was one of them. If I lost Wendy and Kyle to the east coast, though, it would make the rest seem a little pointless, I realized.

I was someone who relied on constants. Despite some setbacks, I’d always had those two, and now time seemed to be closing in on how long I’d have them around. There was no way a long-distance relationship with Wendy would work. Not the way we were going. So I had a choice. We could break up now and try to be friends, and stay in touch and everything, or we could draw out what we had as long as we were both in South Park, which, in the long run, would probably hurt even more.

The talk with the counselor had set me in a weird mood, and one I kind of remained in for some time. It helped (or at least seemed to) with Wendy, for a while. I started seeking her out during the day more, and decided to apologize, even though I wasn’t entirely sure it was a justified thing for me to do; I wasn’t sure what I was sorry for.

But it brought us through September together, and into October, when the school exploded with talk of Homecoming. Homecoming was hardly something exciting in South Park, since pretty much everyone who had lived here always came back, but every year, the faculty (and the cheerleaders) tried to turn it into some big-to-do, like we were Denver or something. My seventeenth was approaching, as was the talked-up Homecoming game.

And then, in the midst of it all, it happened.

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And, despite the lead-up, it still seemed to happen all too soon. It was on a rare night of what was meant to be passion. When we’d started spending a lot of time alone again, we still weren’t saying much for a while. For the most part, we simply held hands whenever we could. We’d meet in the halls between classes, but we rarely kissed in public anymore. Sex didn’t last as long, and felt
kind of like a plea. This particular night was different, or it started out feeling that way. I could almost feel the spark coming back, maybe due to the heightened energy surrounding the talk of Homecoming, but then things degenerated quickly when Wendy brought up a touchy subject.

“Time for a cut, sweetie,” Wendy purred. Coyly, she wove the thin, milky fingers of her left hand through my hair, grasping at the back to assist her point. Trapping me in a fast kiss, she then bit and held my lower lip. Nonetheless, I got out a, “Hmm?” in the midst of it. “Your hair, Stan,” my girlfriend clarified, sitting back onto my legs. The offbeat jazz piano music she’d put on for atmosphere provided an awkward background for her as she gently let go of my head, in favor of massaging my neck. In fact, the music was enough to turn me off, and set me on edge. Normally, I’m all for some of the experimental stuff Wendy likes to listen to, but this was just basically crap. If I had my say, we’d never listen to music at all in bed. I mean, I read it like she wanted a fallback in case I bored her too much, or she desperately had to paw for a topic of conversation. Given that the music had been the subject of talks before, I knew I wasn’t far off the mark.

“Wendy, no,” I said, idiosyncratically pinching the bridge of my nose and squinting my eyes.

“What?” she whined, moving now to run her hands down my chest. I barely felt it. That music was pissing me off. Wendy snapped my mind back to her briefly when she leaned down to kiss my collarbone, leaving a warm impression on the spot she’d touched. “Not up for this tonight?”

“No, I mean my hair,” I amended my last comment. “Not this time, ‘kay?”

“Stan, don’t be silly,” laughed Wendy. She sat back again and tucked a strand of her fine, glossy black hair behind her right ear. “You know you should keep it short, especially during football season. If it was any longer, imagine the—”

“Wendy, babe, I really think I know my own comfort levels on these things,” I said, getting short. The piano crescendoed into an incomprehensible coda. “How about I just keep it like this? Don’t shear the back.”

“Stan, you’re being difficult,” Wendy frowned.

“Um... no?” I countered, propping myself up onto my elbows. “Look, hon, maybe you like how it looks or whatever, but to be honest, no, I don’t like how it feels when you shear it close like that. I like it longer.”

“What, like Kyle’s?” Wendy tried, squinching her pretty face up to show her displeasure.

“No,” I laughed, “not as nice as Kyle’s, but—”

“Oooouuuhh!” groaned Wendy, getting up only to sit back down on the foot of my bed with her arms crossed. “Here we go.”

Was I going crazy, or was the music angering her, too? “What?” I wondered. “Wendy, what?”

“You just did it again!”

“Did what?”

“Oh, just the way you—the compliment, and—”

“Compliment?” I sputtered, sitting up a little more. “What?”
Wendy sucked in a deep breath, and glared at me from where she sat. Tears clung to the corners of her eyes, but she hadn’t seemed to notice them. “Stan,” she said, trying to speak evenly, “do I annoy you?”

I sat up with a jolt and crossed my legs; there was now a space between us, which felt a lot larger than I’m sure it actually was. “Excuse me?” I said, raising my eyebrows at her.

“I feel like I do!” said Wendy, looking away. “Everyone keeps saying, ‘he’s just getting used to you being in the League, Wendy.’ Is that true? I’ve been with you guys for a few months, now, but you’re still being—“

“Oh, my God, please turn this music off!” I hollered. Fed up, I stood to do the deed myself.
I crossed to my dresser, where Wendy had set up her iPod dock, ready to smash the whole device. Under normal circumstances, I would either have laid back and let the playlist work itself through, or perhaps even suggested a change of pace in music choices. As it stood, however, I was too incensed to even have the decency to just plain pause the song. Giving it no room for thought, I yanked the cord out from the wall, dropped it onto the dresser, then drew in a deep breath of calming silence. I let the breath out slowly, placing my palms flat down on the dresser.

“Stan..?” Wendy tried.

“Wendy,” I bit back. “You’re being crazy. Stop it. You’re being ridiculous and paranoid.”

“Ridi—ridiculous and paranoid?” she practically shrieked. “Look at it from my side, would you? Whose advice do you value more than anyone’s? Kyle’s. Who do you call when you’re depressed or not feeling well? Kyle. Who’s the first person you go to after we fight, Stan?”

“Wendy, I—”

“KYLE.”

I whipped around and slammed my right fist down on the dresser behind me, an action which caused a now pale-faced Wendy to jump. “Are we seriously having this conversation?” I said brusquely. “What do you want from me, Wendy, huh? So we hang out a lot; big fucking deal. I’m not going to ignore my best friend—since we were two, Wendy, Jesus!—because my girlfriend is feeling paranoid and judgmental! It’s not like you! When did this start, anyway? And you know what, how would you feel with these accusations? You go off, you have your ‘girl time’ with Bebe and them, you have your book club, and never once have I considered that a front for flirtatious behavior between you!”

“Then why are you getting so defensive?” Wendy demanded through clenched teeth.

“T’m not! Oh, my God. Okay, what? What do you want me to do, Wendy?” I challenged her, opening out my arms to show that I was up for discussion, however cross she and her music had made me for the rest of the night despite whatever else came out of it. “Do you want me to lay off talking to Kyle?”

“Stan, that’s not the point,” Wendy said. Her earlier aggression was fading, and her voice was drawing back into more of a whimper.

I shook my head, still in disbelief of her accusations. “Wendy…” I began, not entirely sure of where I was going with that thought. I could feel it coming on… the one thing I was kind of expecting, but wasn’t prepared for. Her paranoia was making it worse, and was already starting to dig into me. Was it trust, maybe? My discomfort with her in the League could be traced to how quickly she came on, and I was still on the fence about whether we could trust her with those secrets. So now she was breaching my trust on an everyday level. She couldn’t trust me to have my own life and do my own thing without her watching, was that it? “Okay,” I settled on saying. “What is the point? Please, I’m serious, tell me, what’s the issue here?”

“You see it, too,” Wendy argued, trying hard to look at me without judgment. “I can tell. I don’t come in first to you. You don’t even come in first to you. Let’s face it. You’re a great guy, Stan. You’re wonderful. You do a lot of great things for a lot of people; you just… do good, and I love that about you, sweetie, I do, but you don’t see everything that’s happening directly to you. You don’t see me anymore.

“Is that it?” she went on, as she stood and began collecting her things. I watched, unsure of
how I felt. We hadn’t gone all the way that night yet, but she was down to her underwear, black with yellow lace trim, though obviously not for long. I felt like I was watching a movie. The scene where the guy loses the girl. Except, fuck—that was me. But I was still stuck there watching. Feeling… nothing. Because one of my constants was about to leave. “Is that why it’s hard having Marpesia in the League? And maybe I’ve been asking you a lot, honey, but have you asked me anything? Anything at all? No! I’m just… I’m just, like, an accessory right now, I’m not a girlfriend. I feel like an accessory, a… a—a—a tool! Oh, and that’s just perfect, for you, as—“

“Wendy, stop it!” I hollered. “You’re jumping around all over the place, just stop, just—I don’t—God!” I grabbed at my hair in frustration, unable to think. I hadn’t been treating her badly, not at all. Dully, maybe, but not badly by any means. “You’re not a tool, would you stop that? You know I like you, girl, but—”

“Oh! So there is a ‘but!’” Wendy cried, her arms full of her streetclothes now, her eyes tear-stained and bleak. “Just admit it, we’re done. You don’t see me anymore!”

“What are you—“

“Look at me!” Wendy commanded, throwing her arms out to her sides, exposing me to her slender, half-naked frame. Her clothes once again fell to the floor, and her face flushed pink, offsetting her wide, misty eyes. “Do I even excite you, Stan?!”

I swallowed back, but realized it wasn’t the old gag reflex acting up; I was just plain choked up. Because I was watching it end. I was watching years of my life just stop. “You’re beautiful, “ I told her. “I don’t see what’s…”

“The question wasn’t, Do you think I’m pretty? It was, Do I excite you?” Wendy said, looking a little more forlorn. After a few seconds of us staring at each other with no words between us to fill the empty space, she sighed and started pulling her clothes back on.

“Why are we doing this?” she asked me, shaking her head. “Why are we still even going out?”

“Wendy… jeez, I don’t know, because—“ I tried, then stopped myself. Because I’d said those words: I don’t know.

I don’t know.

Those words translated into so many different things. Things like, Because you’re a constant. Because I don’t want to be single. Because I’m too afraid to try to start something with anyone else.

I don’t know.

“This hurts, Stan, but I can’t do this anymore,” Wendy sobbed. “I’m so sorry, but I need time. A-and space, and... well, a lot of things.”

My heart skipped. My head shook itself no. I was almost seventeen. We’d been together for practically ten years. Yes, we’d taken breaks before, but I’d even said it aloud: one more would be the end. Seventeen is so much different than nine. Seventeen is almost adulthood, it’s when you’re supposed to start figuring yourself out, and it seemed like Wendy was forcefully wanting me to do that on my own.

Things spiraled around me. What would I have, once she left? My ‘average’ college plan seemed stupid. I’d go in single and undeclared and probably end up settling for geology just because
I knew a little about it and could come back to South Park and work for my dad and be just another one of those stories. There was the League, that was a constant, but how long after we got to the core of the Cthulhu thing would that last? And then, there was…

“Wendy,” I tried to reason with her, “we can work this out…”

“You haven’t wanted to so far,” she pointed out, not looking at me. “Please don’t make this hurt any more than it does.”

“If it hurts, then why are you breaking up with me?!” I demanded.

“Because I love you, Stan!” Wendy cried. My heart froze. Love was one of those words I couldn’t really describe to myself. The older I got, the weirder the word seemed to be. I used it in the casual sense, to describe activities and foods and such I particularly enjoyed, but when it came to romantic love… that was a different beast entirely. And I found myself embarrassed that I hadn’t really thought to define it in terms of however it was I felt about Wendy. “I love you,” she repeated, “so it hurts that we’ve been so damned empty to each other lately. You look at me, but I don’t seem to be here to you, you know?! Just… look at yourself first and try to figure it out. Don’t be with me just for the sake of it, okay? I have to… we have to… we have to stop.”

The worst part was, I couldn’t argue. Because I didn’t know if I loved her. Those words again. I don’t know. I don’t know what love is. I don’t know if I love you. I cared for Wendy, deeply, and was proud of her and sometimes even envied her.

But she ripped my heart out when she made me realize I didn’t love her. I found myself nodding, and wondering what the hell was going to happen next, now that I was alone and troubled. Not to mention paranoid. Had I really projected enough to make Wendy think I was cheating on her? Did I really seem that out of touch around her? And did anyone else think that about me and Kyle as well…?

My heart pounded, as if each beat was telling me, Don’t let her leave. Don’t let her leave. You’re losing a constant. Don’t let her leave.

We didn’t even hug goodbye. I threw on a shirt and walked her downstairs. At the door, she added one last thing:

“I’ll talk to you again when you get over yourself,” Wendy sighed, “and when you figure out what’s really most important to you.”

And then she drove away.

I withdrew into the house, trying not to play back the past hour or so in my head. I didn’t succeed. The school was sure to be full of the news the next morning. News that Stan Marsh and Wendy Testaburger had broken up. Fuck. It really was over.

And my stupid, crazy fucking father didn’t help.

“Trouble in Paradise, huh, Stan?” Dad asked me, sounding cocky and self-assured. I hadn’t even noticed him on the couch.

Already halfway up the stairs, I begged, “Oh, my God, Dad, not now.”

“You know, when I was your age, I—”
“I said not now! Jesus!” I snapped. I turned to shoot him a stern glare before charging back upstairs to my vacant bedroom.

I paced for a second, then sat down with an exaggerated sigh on the edge of my bed. I stared at the far wall, not wanting to focus on anything. Goddammit. Goddammit. I’d just lost Wendy, and my Goddamn mind wouldn’t tell me how I felt. That did it. I had to talk it out.

I fished out my cell phone, then chucked it across the room when it showed no bars (it luckily landed in a pile of clothes and therefore didn’t break) and hoofed it downstairs again. “DAD, JUST SHUT UP,” I hollered before he could even say anything. I stormed quickly through the living room and into the kitchen to grab the wall phone, then hurried back upstairs, once again drowning out any more of his useless blather by shouting, “I DON’T WANT TO HEAR IT.” Dad really needed to learn that he was fucking old, and old people go to bed early. Mom sure had gotten the memo and went to bed at fucking eight. Dad usually passed out on the sofa when he tried too hard to stay up. When Shelley still lived at home, she’d sometimes have to punch him awake.

Phone in hand, I stormed back up to my room, shut the door, and dialed almost absentmindedly. I sat back down on the edge of my bed and tapped my foot impatiently, wondering exactly what I’d say to start the conversation off. Wendy broke up with me, maybe. Wendy left and got me paranoid, so… Oh, God, that was not the right way to start it.

Just as always, two rings and then a click. The click sent my stomach churning, and my heart seemed to leap right into my throat. I managed to swallow it down as Kyle’s high tenor came over the receiver, “Stan? What’s wrong, dude?—it’s late.”

As I was opening my mouth to speak, to pour out my troubles to my well-intentioned friend, to describe every detail of the gaping hole Wendy had just torn into my otherwise seamless life, my brain shut down. I was caught in a whirlwind of guilt, shame, and confusion, my mind turning to the points Wendy had assessed that had resulted in my calling her crazy. Here I was, though, doing just what she’d said: here I was, calling Kyle.

“Sorry,” I said, bowing my head as I came up with a quick lie. “It was a misdial.”

“Stan?”

“See you tomorrow, Kyle,” I mumbled, trailing off when I spoke his name. After hanging up, I placed the phone gingerly on the dresser, then bent over myself and held my head.

This wasn’t good. I felt sick. Wendy was gone and I was one big walking case of confusion. I thought about calling Kenny and asking for advice, knowing that he had an idea for any situation, but decided not to because it was late and because he was probably having a much more pleasant night with his girlfriend than I’d had with mine.

With my girlfriend. My ex-girlfriend.

Too paranoid and put-off to even talk to the one constant I could always rely on, I sighed and got up to change my bedsheets, which still smelled like Wendy’s honey-vanilla perfume. As I tossed the sheets into the laundry basket in the bathroom, all I could think of was how sad my mom was going to be about the breakup. She’d really taken to Wendy, and I couldn’t understand why. Wendy was a really nice, pretty, motivated girl.

I just… didn’t love her. And she got that before I did.

I shuffled through the linens in the hall closet, found some faded plaid sheets that fit my bed,
and set about draping them on, since I still sucked at making my own bed. After I dug my cell phone out of the laundry pile in the corner, I checked it briefly before shutting the damn thing off, so it wouldn’t distract me any. I lay awake for a couple of hours, just wondering how strange things were going to be, then finally fell asleep when my digital clock burned the time 3:41 through the dark bedroom. I’d woken up earlier that day feeling average at best, if not even slightly hopeful. I was falling asleep nervous, downright paranoid. And single.

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I made an appearance at school the next day, despite how gruesome I felt. I arrived at school a good ten minutes late after hauling myself out of bed and tuning out a lecture Dad had decided to give me on how to win women back (which was pretty bad coming from him, seeing as he and Mom had a track record similar to mine and Wendy’s… together and split and together again…). The secretary then got pissy at me and gave me a talking-to about punctuality, and I took my late slip without a comment and took my time being even later to History. I suffered through first period fine, but second period English was where things got odd.

For English, we’d been reading Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When I got to the classroom, I slid down into the seat I normally took and skimmed through a few pages, registering nothing in the words. I was reminded, about two seconds after trying to make the black blotches on the page form sentences, that we were supposed to have studied up on the themes for a short quiz that morning. Start the day off with a nice F—things couldn’t get any better.

Everything Wendy had said had gotten me shaking. I slid the weathered paperback into my backpack and checked my phone to see if she’d texted me anything. Like maybe an apology. I did notice that there was a missed call from Kyle, from about ten minutes after I’d hung up on him and shut my phone off the night before. And another from this morning.

Class started quickly and efficiently; the teacher handed out the quiz, repeating the same rules about making sure to keep our eyes on our own papers and all that, and I emptily took the words in. It was so weird going through the motions, trying to pretend nothing was wrong, that nothing in my life had changed. People were sure to notice soon enough, though. That was sure to make me feel fantastic.

I stared at the quiz, still finding it hard to make words form in front of me. A couple minutes in, once they finally did, the prompt materialized: *Select three of the four following topics and write a brief (two or three paragraphs) response, citing chapter examples where possible. One paragraph on the fourth topic will count for extra credit.*

*Topic 1: The significance of allusion to other literary works.*

*Topic 2: The significance of aestheticism.*

*Topic 3: Your reaction to Lord Henry’s statement, “No woman is an artist. Women never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly.”*

Before I even got to the fourth question, I pounded out some nonsense about the third. In the back of my mind, I kept thinking stupid things like, *Women are just fucking evil,* and, *Oh, sure, women are artists—they can completely destroy a man’s perception of himself.* Despite how bitter I was about Wendy, I was pretty sure I managed something at least semi-plausible.

After that, I went on to the first prompt and scribbled out some hopefully legible crap about Shakespeare, since *Hamlet* had sure as hell been pounded into us long enough sophomore year. Aestheticism wasn’t something I was really ready to tackle, so I read further down on the quiz.
The last prompt was: **Topic 4: Your reaction to Wilde’s homoerotic overtones as a reflection on Victorian expectations and notions of decency.**

“What the…” I muttered under my breath. Was this going to be one of those worries that followed me around no matter fucking what?

A grossly oversized lump formed in my throat, and, right hand shaking, I picked up my pencil and began scrawling something about aestheticism under the second prompt. It was the worst response I’ve ever written on anything in my life. But I was distracted. Distracted by Wendy’s words that pounded the nail into the coffin, distracted by the fourth topic, distracted by how distracted I let that last topic on the quiz make me.

When I glanced up at the clock, I noticed we still had a good five minutes to go. So rather than sit there and accept the monstrous response I’d let my pencil spew all over the second page of the quiz, I apparently decided to torture myself by flipping to the fourth. After glaring at the topic again, I bit and chewed the inside of my lip and started to write:

“As a homosexual writing for an overly critical audience, Wilde reverted to blatant subtext as a vessel for poignant social commentary.” (I was of the ‘use big words and you’ll get a good grade’ school of thought.) “Whether or not the inherent homoerotic qualities that play into some relationships in the novel are clear to the characters seems to be up to the interpretation of the reader. A modern readership is likely to approach the subject with a different eye than a Victorian one—“

I stopped. And read over what I’d written. I slapped a period down at the end of the last sentence I’d thought to write out, then turned my quiz over, folded my arms on my desk, and buried my head in them, really wanting to just fall asleep and wake up to a world that spelled itself out for me.

It was probable that I may have even fallen asleep, since the next thing that happened was the teacher firmly repeating my name to collect my quiz. I sat up a little, handed him the stapled sheets of what I was sure was the worst collection of responses in junior English class history, then glanced over to my right, where Kyle was sitting, looking ready to punch me if I hadn’t snapped out of it and responded to the teacher.

“Dude,” Kyle hissed at me, his eyes filling with concern behind the frames of his reading glasses, “Stan, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

The lump in my throat got worse, and I responded with a slight shrug, then looked away. I heard Kyle let out a disapproving sigh, and knew this wasn’t over. He’d want to talk about it—why I’d called, and ultimately how I’d come to break up with Wendy. And I was really not in the mood to talk about it, at all. Not until I’d had some time to think.

How had Wendy ended it? “I’ll talk to you again when you get over yourself.” Get over *what*? The thing she’d fabricated to make me freak out? Because… she had just thought it up, right?

Or was I missing something?

Was it really that obvious? Could I really have not noticed something about myself, something so significant, despite the answer being right there?

No. No way, I thought. Wendy had just gotten me paranoid. I was losing it. I couldn’t recognize myself without her, that was all. Yeah. That had to have been it.
But what if I am? my conscience dug at me all through trigonometry. I told my conscience to shut up and focus. Trig was hard enough for me; I sure as hell didn’t need any more confusing mental distractions. At the end of class, I left thinking I’d ask Kyle for help on my trig homework later.

One problem, though. I hadn’t been able to speak to Kyle all day. Every time he was anywhere near me, I’d shuffle off in the opposite direction; if he tried to ask me something, I’d shrug and make an excuse. I was worrying myself sick and I knew it. Sick to the point that my gag reflex triggered a couple times, even.

This could lead to nothing good. That was my only thought.

But still, no. No, I tried to tell myself. Now, Stan, let’s analyze this. Wendy’s insane, I rationalized it. I mean, first of all, I was in no way, shape or form cheating on her. Cheating would have implied infidelity, and I sure as hell wasn’t sleeping with Kyle. Gag reflex. Swallow it down. Okay.

These thoughts flitted in and out of my mind frantically as I pushed my way through the hallways toward my next class. By the end of the day, I was still thinking about it. I’d used my varsity privs to get out of lunch in the cafeteria and was barely able to find an appetite while I aimlessly wandered around the grounds instead. I’d ended up forcing down an apple and calling it good.

I’d completely forgotten about fourth period. Chemistry. The one and only class I had with Wendy. Incidentally, also the only class Kyle had with Wendy, despite their similar tastes in advanced-placement courses. So all three of us in the same room meant one glorious mindfuck for me.

I wasn’t quite sure of my stance on God, but I definitely believed in a higher power that period if only for the fact that He, She or It decided that it was not a lab day, and was instead a lecture day. Had it been a lab day, I probably would have broken somewhere—Kyle and I had been lab partners in Chemistry since freshman year, as had Wendy and Bebe. The two girls, in an odd turn for Wendy, were writing notes back and forth all period, and I half-expected Kyle to do the same. He gave me one begrudging look at the start of class, and then was engrossed in the lecture for the rest of it.

While I blankly copied down notes, I sorted out my thoughts again. Wendy was being paranoid. She’d broken up with me due to her own insecurities and my admitted anger at her for being too invasive.

Sure, I’d admitted to myself that I could never see myself with another girl at SPHS. That didn’t necessarily mean girls in general. Right? …Right? And it’s not like Kyle and I ever did anything that would make her think I had some kind of attraction to him. We just hung out. All the time. We were just guys, we just fought about dumb shit like guys do, we’d punch each other for saying stupid things, I’d fuck up his hair because I knew how stupid he’d get about the upkeep. So I’d made a game of it. So we’d done almost everything together all through school. We were friends and we lived in a small town. I shouldn’t have had to justify it that much. …Right?

All the same, when the bell rang, I was the first one out of there. Just my luck, though, God (or Whatever) turned a blank eye and I was accosted right off by Bebe, who grabbed me by the sleeve of my sweatshirt and said, “Hey, would you talk to Wendy?”

“Bebe, the fuck?” I snapped. “Let go.”
“Jesus! Okay,” she said, backing off and splaying her hands out as if to say, No harm done, and you’re a wackjob. “Seriously, though, Stan, what did you say to her?”

My eyes flared open and I found myself leaning over to laugh right in Bebe’s face. I’m not normally rude, but the current situation wasn’t exactly normal. Bebe shrunk back, and I came back at her with: “She’s got nothing to complain about! What did she say to me is more like it!”

And with that, I totally blew her off and continued down the hall to my locker, letting my frustration just build up. I ripped my locker door open and shoved my Chemistry books in, then noticed something in there that was now completely out of place. And then I went from angry to confused again, and drew in a breath that reminded me of the one thing I hadn’t actually thought all day:

It’s over.

We were over, and I was left from it feeling… disenchanted. Just… blah. I couldn’t tell if I was relieved or not, because I was too fucking paranoid. I didn’t know if I was sad, or what. I just could not think.

Just as I was heaving a sigh and tucking away the photo of Wendy I had kept on the top shelf of my locker, I heard the smash of someone punching the locker to the right of mine, and then, in the blink of an eye, the door to my locker was slammed closed, and I barely had enough time to yank my hands out of the way as I jumped back from the sound. “Dude!” Kyle’s annoyed tone shot through the air. My stomach flipped again, due to nerves. There was no avoiding the fact that what Wendy had said was still bothering me. All a night’s work, I’d become obsessed, in fact: she had honestly set my mind wondering, and now I was in a constant state of fear. I’d looped right back around to it. Suppose she was right. What then? “What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Well, maybe... maybe,” I began, not even believing my words as I spoke them, “there are things I’m entitled not to tell you. Maybe I should stop telling you every single detail of my life. Goddammit, Kyle, you know too much about me already, so—so this is where it stops!”

Kyle paused for a second, raised one eyebrow, then just sputtered, “What?” He splayed his arms out in front of him, indicating his confusion. “Stan, I don’t know what the fuck is going on, but
are you even listening to yourself? Of course there’s stuff I shouldn’t know. Whatever. We’re friends, we’re not the same person. I just think I should know why you seem so pissed at me all of a sudden!”

“I’m not pissed at you!” I shouted. I paused when I noticed that several people were staring at us, or, well, me for being such a loud fucking idiot. I just wanted that day to be over. That day needed to be over. That semester needed to be over. It was only October. And already things were… awful. I had no idea what this meant for the League. I hadn’t even really thought about the League all day, I was so damn preoccupied. It was terrible. I wanted to lie down. “I’m not pissed at you,” I repeated on a lower volume. “I’m… Wendy said some shit and I just really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” said Kyle. “That’s fine.”

“Especially with you,” I stupidly blurt out.

“…What? All right, now you’re just being an asshole,” Kyle scolded me. And he was absolutely right.

“Look, I can’t talk right now.” As an afterthought, I added, “Sorry, I’ve… I’ve gotta go.” So that was my excuse? I was just going to walk away? I beat myself up several times over in my head for that.

It sucked how horribly things could get fucked up in a single day. I ended up driving with no destination in mind for a while. I didn’t want to go home. I heard my phone go off but ignored it. I didn’t want to go fucking anywhere, or face anything. Eventually, I pulled into an abandoned parking lot.

I sat there idling in the lot for a while, trying to force my brain to focus on something… anything else. Wendy was gone—for the last time, and we both knew it. I was too frazzled to talk it out with Kyle. Hell, I didn’t know if I could talk to anyone, because any detail about the breakup would eventually lead me to Wendy’s first argument about it.

I groaned and leaned against my steering wheel. “Cheating?” I muttered. “Really?” After that, I felt myself choke up again, though what the actual source of this particular onset was, I couldn’t place. I just responded by letting out an, “Oh, fuck…”

Wendy had told me that she thought I didn’t know myself. Well, she’d been right about me not being in love with her. I couldn’t deal with this right now. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to. There was enough to be worried about without bringing my sexuality into question. School. Games. College. The Cult. I really didn’t want to deal with anything that personal, and I was angry at Wendy for turning my mind into a spinning circus about it.

The flash of lights from beyond my windshield jerked me out of my doldrums, though. I gasped and sat back, dimming my own headlights in case it was a cop. (For some reason, the fucking police force liked giving tickets to teenagers who idled in lots specifically marked with signs that warned motorists to turn off their engines.) It wasn’t, which was a relief to me at first, until I realized I was actually kind of fucked.

In my anger, in my mode of wanting to escape, I hadn’t recognized the lot I’d pulled into. The Cult robe of the guy who crossed through the lot now sure helped. I’d driven right into the lot outside the new used book store, the one that the Goths now routinely chain smoked in front of (and where sometimes Craig could be seen bumming Henrietta’s choice cloves every once in a while, too). It was only open whenever a Cultist needed it to be, and right now, I wasn’t Toolshed… I was
just a dumb fucking teenager who was *idling in the Goddamn parking lot.*

I really didn’t want to end up dead right after the breakup, that would have sucked. Then again, the Cultists weren’t really known to kill anyone. Not yet, anyway; or, not recently. There had, in the past, been routine sacrifices to Cthulhu, and nobody in South Park had gone missing, meaning no real issue.

But what I saw that evening was bad enough. Stupidly, I decided to stick around to do a bit of spying, since at least I still had the Cult going for me, and fuck it, I wasn’t about to lose that yet. Lights dimmed, I kept a watchful eye on the bookstore.

The man emerged from the store a couple minutes later, carrying a brown paper bag. He checked it a couple of times as he walked back through the lot, and when he removed his hood, I choked back a yelp. I’d helped this guy sort maps before at my dad’s office. I knew him. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I fucking knew one of the Cultists.

He lifted his head, and I could have sworn he saw me, too. But he kept on walking. I felt like a wasp’s nest had been kicked over in my chest, my heart was beating so fast, so hard. As soon as he’d left, I hightailed it home, keeping both hands on the wheel. The man didn’t follow me. “Shit,” I whispered under my breath. “Shit, shit, shit, shit.”

As if I didn’t have enough to deal with.

Nothing really came of the encounter, but that almost made it worse. Because I knew he’d seen me. He must have. If Clyde had been uncovered, who’s to say I wasn’t next? Oh, this wasn’t good. This was not good.

Junior year so far was nothing promising.

In the course of a day, I had lost my girlfriend, become paranoid on a subject I never would have reached on my own if Wendy hadn’t screamed it out, and confirmed the identity of another Cult member as someone close to my family.

All I could think was that something good had better come out of at least one of those things, and soon… or I was pretty sure I was going to go crazy.

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Episode 11: Or They Could Sacrifice the Cat

Kenny

It had been weeks. Months. Months, with only two accidental deaths, neither of which fucked up anything with Red. (I got shot in the head by a deer hunter coming home from school one day, and one afternoon during the summer some reporter in a helicopter dropped his camera on me. That one hurt.) I’d carefully picked a few days through the summer to experiment with dying and going to R’lyeh, planning them far away from other Mysterion activities and big date plans with my girlfriend.

Henrietta and I were really making headway with the Gate. She admitted that there were some passages in the Necronomicon she was still shaky on, as far as translation went, so we didn’t touch those yet, even though we both knew they’d be key in our ultimate understanding of how that dimension worked. She said, though, that there seemed to be a sister couplet to the one that had haunted me since I was nine:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons, even death may die.

That had to be it. That second couplet, whatever the translation was, had to be my answer. The thing that would finally make me understand my curse.

As for the Gate, though, the closer Henrietta got to making a complete pact with Yog-Sothoth (the deity I knew but still hadn’t seen), the easier it was for me to navigate the afterlife and the in-between. I was able to ‘feel’ the entrance to R’lyeh from Purgatory. As soon as I died, Henrietta would read to Yog-Sothoth, who would open the Gate, and I could sense which direction I needed to head in order to find that black tar pit-looking void that sucked me through space into R’lyeh. I had seen Cthulhu’s tomb a few times while there… heard the thing breathing loudly in its half-dead sleep, but had not seen the beast itself quite yet. I was getting a good feel for making my way through R’lyeh, all the same. The Goths were earning themselves a pretty detailed map from my excursions. It was the Gate itself I never saw. I wanted to know what the Gatekeeper looked like, what the Gate looked like, and where it let out, if it let out at any discernable place on Earth. Or if opening it would lead to Earth becoming a void of its own.

Coming back from R’lyeh was always tricky, because I’d be left with a reminder of how I’d died in order to get there in the first place. I shot myself in the head once, and when I came back, I not only had a scar on my temple, I also kept having awful migraines until I died again and told Henrietta not to read me out. If I cut myself—scar. Shot myself—scar. So on one instance, I attempted cyanide, and when I came back, I felt sick and couldn’t taste anything. Each time left some kind of reminder. Only when I didn’t go through R’lyeh did I seem to reset. It only caused me to wonder more about the logistics of the usual times… as well as how things would turn out if I did end up breaking the curse for good; I’d just have to hope I wouldn’t get too badly cut up before.

In the Park County jail, under the semi-watchful eye of Sargeant Yeats, the Cultists we’d arrested during the drug busts sat waiting for bail. The fact that nobody from the Cult had bailed them out was kind of unsettling. Maybe they were considered safer there, I thought. In which case, what the hell was coming for the rest of us?
I, as Mysterion, had full access to their cells, since the force trusted me wholeheartedly. Johansen, the man we’d arrested with him, and the two sci-fi nerds all shared a cell, but Wilcox was locked up in solitary. Yeats informed me that he was prone to fits of laughter, sleepless nights, and seizures, all of which Wilcox had informed the force were hereditary ticks. And whenever I went to visit the haunted man, he never spoke. He’d shake sometimes, and mutter to himself, but he never looked me in the eye. He never said a fucking thing.

On one occasion, he did, however, mutter the words: “Cthulhu fhtagn.”

Though their cell was far, far away from his, the other arrested men echoed back, “Cthulhu fhtagn!” The sound carried through several halls, and when I left Wilcox’s private cell to see what was going on, a few officers could be seen having to restrain the men, who were putting up a little struggle against their cell door.

It put me on edge, enough to try to catch up with the Goths on how things were progressing in Cult meetings.

“We’re getting close,” Henrietta told me one Tuesday evening. The Goths were all crowded around in her room as usual, reading from their bleeding-heart tomes and smoking cigarette after cigarette to the delight of their tortured lungs and larynxes. “The Cult’s been waiting for the right time to summon Cthulhu.”

“Right,” I said, from my position at the window, “so when is that?”

“All Hallows,” said the kid. His sallow eyes stared at me behind a curtain of pitch black, half-washed hair.

“All-what?”

“All Hallows,” the eldest repeated. “What you conformists call ‘Halloween,’ now that you’ve turned it into another commercial—“

“Okay!” I cut in. “Whatever. How are you going to do it?”

“What?” asked the red-haired kid, exhaling more smoke than the banged up tractor my father sometimes took to work, when he did work.

“Summon Cthulhu!” I shouted. Seven years of putting up with their shit and I still got worked up when they decided not to answer me in complete sentences.

“Probably a sacrifice,” said… Craig. Whipping my head in his direction, I tried to hide my shock. I hadn’t even noticed him sitting over in the corner, lighting up a new clove for himself, then holding out his lighter for Henrietta to catch the flame.

“Craig?” I wondered, almost accidentally slipping out of Mysterion’s tone. “What’re you doing here?”

He flicked his red Zippo closed and shrugged. “I was out of cigarettes,” he said dully.

Had I not been Mysterion in that moment, I would not have hesitated to ask Craig (or, bug the shit out of him) about him and Henrietta. Ever since we’d started sending both of them in to spy on Cult activities, Craig and Henrietta had been spending an awful lot of time together, even around school, which was odd, since Henrietta never broke from her clique and Craig had most certainly not gone Goth. Now, I myself had thought—on more than one past occasion—about attempting to hook up with the busty, curvy Goth chick, but there were two fatal flaws in that thought. One: she probably had no fucking clue who Kenny McCormick was, and I wasn’t about to tell her, and two:
she didn’t believe in love. Which, oddly enough, made Craig kind of a good choice for her, since I’d never known anyone so irritatingly apathetic. Plus, I had Red now, so no harm done at all.

“Fine,” I said to pass Craig off on his last comment, in favor of focusing on the first. “What makes you think they’re looking for a sacrifice?”

“I dunno,” said Craig. He stared blankly up at me from his seat on the floor as he exhaled smoke from his nostrils, then added, “Isn’t that what cults always do when they want something? They sacrifice people. That’s why it sucks that I just had to get involved.”

“Why?” I wondered. “Are they going to sacrifice you?” For failing the drug cover? It wasn’t improbable.

“Doubt it,” said Craig. “I might be worried if I was one of you.”

“One of… you mean the League?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, can anyone back this up?” I asked, opening the floor to the Goth gang. I really did not like the way that younger kid was glaring at me. At all of, what, twelve, Ike’s classmate was still the Goth I had the hardest time dealing with. I was pretty sure that, while the others were certainly not very fond of their fellow man, the kid hated everyone and everything that wasn’t him or Cthulhu. He carried up to five pocket knives at a time, too, which were only occasionally used on himself. Kid had issues, but he was definitely someone I hadn’t ruled out having to bring down once the Cult prepared to summon their deity. “You’ve told me Halloween. What happens on Halloween?”

The three older Goths all exchanged a look. Craig took a long, unimpressed drag. Finally, Henrietta, biting the tip of her quellazaire, said, “We don’t know.”

I groaned. “What do you mean, you don’t know?” I snapped.

“We don’t always hear everything,” said Henrietta. “There are meetings within meetings.”

“Yeah,” said the eldest, “it’s a fucking hierarchy, which makes it stupid.”

“Then why do you still follow it?” I wondered.

“The hell else’re we gonna do?”

Something productive, I almost said, but didn’t. I didn’t want to get them too pissed at me. “All right,” I gave in, “fine. Craig and Henrietta, if you two can dig up any more on why this Halloween is important, inform me immediately.”

Henrietta rolled her eyes, but I knew she’d agreed. “Assuming the elders in the Cult let anything slip, whatever.”

Good enough. Besides, I had plenty of information to chew on.

Using me as a sacrifice would have been in the Cult’s best interests, but I still had no idea whether or not they knew about me and my obvious tie to their deity. So if they just plain killed me, no harm done to anyone. I’d be back sooner or later. Unless, of course, they did know about the curse (they’d been the ones to curse my mother in the first place, after all, since the bitch had been drunk and followed Dad to that meeting while little fetus Kenny was still in gestation), in which case
I wanted to know exactly how they’d do it and when, so I could make a plan or at least start writing a new will.

I wrote wills all the time, actually, just in case I’d get a reprieve and actually die for good. Final Death, as I’d been calling it for a while now, was one of the options for my future that I wasn’t ruling out as possible. After all, it seemed that there were two options: kill Cthulhu, thus breaking my bond to the deity, or let Cthulhu or another Old One kill me. Seemed kind of cut and dry, but it all had to do with the Old Ones, and there was still too much about immortality that I didn’t understand… still too much about R’lyeh and loopholes through death to be discovered. Now that I had more to live for, I obviously did not want Final Death to be the answer, it just existed as a probability that I needed to be prepared for.

Which sucked. The more probable it became, the less I wanted to say goodbye.

That fall, the exchange student was a blonde Canadian girl named Philippa. Yeah. Philippa. I totally wasn’t missing out by making that the ‘year of the real girlfriend.’ Even if the exchange student had been hot (but I mean, foreign exchange from Canada?—why not, like… Italy?) (not saying Canadians can’t be hot, just saying this girl wasn’t), I wouldn’t have done her, just because her name was motherfucking Philippa. My adoration of the Canadian comedy duo Terrance and Philip had never died, and doing that girl would’ve been like doing, y’know, Philip. So, no. Besides, Red was too damn perfect. I was so fucking lucky.

We’d kinda turned into ‘that couple’ at school (you know, the hot item nobody can shut the fuck up about, like everyone suddenly becomes a strictly verbal Us Magazine about it) (not that I ever look at Us Magazine and not that, assuming I did, it was just for those ‘stars in bikinis’ pages), and I kinda really fucking liked it. It was kind of great to be recognized as something other than ‘the poverty kid.’ And to have been elevated to Brad and Angelina status at school… fuck, I’d take it. Especially because Red was so Goddamn great.

I mean it. That girl was with it. When I didn’t work, sometimes I’d go out to the field to watch the cheerleaders practice, and watch her limber up those tight arms and legs of hers, watch her cartwheeling and vaulting over other chicks and work herself into an alluring sweat before I walked her home. I spent a lot of time at her house, too, which was fucking awesome. Her parents were nice to me, and accepted me once I spilled it about my contract jobs (basically saying, ‘I’m not my parents, your daughter does, in fact, not eat Pop-Tarts for dinner when we go out’), and she and I even got some studying done when we were together at her house. Red was an average but motivated student. She was on the fence about what she wanted to go to college for, and, admittedly, I was too. We just both knew we were going to college, no matter what. I just hoped we’d last past high school so that we could share those college years together, too.

And, yes, I was seriously thinking that. When I first started thinking about college, it was all, “Woohoo, sororities!” and that kind of thing. (Confession that, no, I would not mind at all if my girlfriend were to take part in, oh, a wet T-shirt contest or sorority Jell-O wrestling or something like that. Actually, I’d bring a fucking camera. For… posterity…) Now, though, I knew I really did want to go so that I could make something of myself. Assuming I’d live through it all, of course.

The only downside to Red’s house was something I discovered about the second time I took a tour of her bedroom. Now, despite the fact that Red had gone into the relationship wanting to take it slow, we clicked pretty fast, and she consented to sex first a few days in. I, she’d told me earlier on that date, was her first, which I thought was too fucking adorable, so I made sure to make that first time memorable. And, see, that was when things started getting really good. I’d charmed the fuck
outta that girl already, and damn if she didn’t have a pretty strong hold over me, so adding a couple nights a week of great sex on top of what we’d already built up was just the icing on the best motherfucking cake in the world.

So, yeah, that second time, though. Man. Totally did not know Red owned a cat until that night. See, I have this thing about cats. Male cats in particular. Did you know one of the easiest ways to get high is to let a male cat spray in your face? I got addicted to that shit when I was nine, and have strayed far from male cats ever since. In fact, by the time I was sixteen I didn’t use at all anymore, at least not while the Mysterion work needed keeping up. Role model and all that. I’d drink, that was about it; I just didn’t touch anything my parents ever did… one more thing to distance myself from them.

Red and I were alone in the house that night. Because we were alone, we didn’t care that the door of her bedroom was a little ajar. I sure as hell didn’t care. I was too preoccupied with letting my girlfriend work her fingers on my skin, shoulders down. She wanted to try being on top that night, so I figured, what the fuck, we could give it a shot, and her magic fingers had just lightly touched my pelvic bones; she was about to do us both the favor of removing my boxers when a Goddamn meow came from the doorway.

Naturally, cats were not a part of my plan that night, so I kind of possibly flipped the fuck out. It went something like this:

“Oh, fuck!” I yelped. It was fight or flight for me, against cats, and this time I apparently thought it was a good idea to propel myself backwards, right into the wooden headboard of my girlfriend’s bed, which meant that my next shout was a quick, involuntary, “Ow!”

“Kenny?” Red wondered. She sat back, alarmed, her face flushing pink and her hands finding a place on her bent knees, having, now, nowhere else to go. “What’s up?”

To make things even better, the little black-and-white dustball of a cat walked in and leapt up onto the mattress, purring and eyeing me like it fucking knew. My voice came out a little strained when I said in a rushed sentence, “You didn’t tell me you had a cat!”

“Um… oh…” said Red, giving me a funny little look as she scooped her pet up into her arms. That little fucker had no business being as close to her rack as I’d just been. Goddamn cats. “Yeah. Everything okay?”

“I just reeeally shouldn’t be in the same room as that thing,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t end up feeling guilty enough to have to explain the embarrassing addiction I’d once had (and would probably get right back on if it ever happened again).

“Sorry. Are you allergic or something?”

Oh holy fuck I’d never thought of using that as an excuse. Inga’s host family had had a cat and I’d been an idiot and told her I had a past trauma involving cats (not wholly wrong) and had a fear of them. The truth is, I don’t have a fear of cats so much as I have a fear of myself when I’m around them. “Yeah,” I lied. “Allergic. Yep.”

“Oh! Okay, totally didn’t know. I’ll let this guy out and wash my hands then, I guess.”

“Sorry, baby,” I apologized, gaining some of my calm back and giving her a little grin. It was enough to keep her pleased, and the cat never posed a bedroom threat again.

We always did use her bedroom, too. In fact, I wasn’t even sure if my own parents knew I
had a girlfriend; or, if I’d told them, they were too stoned at the time to remember anything I’d said. Whatever. It wasn’t like I really wanted Red to know my parents anyway. And hers were so damn nice and never minded me spending the night and totally knew what we were up to and still didn’t care. I’d struck gold.

Every time we did anything together, I kept thinking, *This can’t possibly get any better.* And then it did, and it was amazing, and *she* was amazing, and I started to get very protective of her. Because I had a feeling that this Halloween thing I’d been warned about was going to lead to something of bigger proportions than we in the League had been thinking thus far; I wanted to keep Red safe through all of it. So everything I did for her was kind of like a promise, even if she only read it as open affection.

In the afterglow one night, Red pressed up against me, her skin soft and smooth, her hair ripe with the smell of the most intoxicating pheromones, and she said, “I was never expecting this, but you’re, like, the best thing in my life right now.”

Tell me *that* wouldn’t make any man want to be more protective.

I grabbed her hair and slid on top of her, stimulated from the comment for another round. Before completely losing myself to feral impulses, I held her down and kissed her wildly; she nipped my nose impishly just as I slid back to tell her, “You, too.” And then I entered, and we escaped, again, into this incredible thing we’d created. Having her was like a fortress I could always rely on.

But I was still scared. And every time we lay there together, waiting to coax each other to sleep, I’d think—hope—plead—pray: *Don’t ruin this for me. I’ll beat Death for this. Just don’t fuck it up before I can.*

October brought with it the usual autumn chill in the air, and frost on the ground early in the morning. Things got colder in the school halls, too, once Stan and Wendy broke up. They no longer spoke to each other, and passed each other frigidly between classes. At League meetings, they’d interact somewhat to build on conversation, but things were still obviously strained. And it wasn’t just Stan and Wendy. While things with my girlfriend got progressively better, things between a lot of my friends seemed to be getting more and more—for lack of a better word—off. Craig and Clyde, for example, were still not exactly best friends again yet, thanks to the trust breach that had happened that spring; summer had only seen them interact when Clyde was fully committed to being Mosquito and Craig was being forced (but paid) to help us out. Token, who was in the middle of it, tried to play peacemaker, mostly by ignoring the fact that there had been a problem at all, thereby showing that it was no big deal. Even Butters was in some kind of a funk—I hadn’t seen Marjorine around as much, and he’d (as I heard Cartman saying once at lunch) suddenly shot to the top of the class in German, a class he used to struggle in. Cartman was… well, Cartman. He certainly wasn’t succeeding in the Homecoming date department, and when he asked me to help, I just sorta laughed. Cartman in turmoil is funny. Just saying.

Wendy, though… God, I don’t even know, but I picked up a little from what Red would tell me during some of our “how was your day?” talks. It was no secret that she was the one who broke up, which made sense, as Stan was (sorry, dude) too much of a pussy (read in his words: too much of a romantic) to call it off himself. I lost Red to a few ‘girl days’ that she, Bebe and the others took Wendy out on to cheer her up more. But still, Wendy was the one of the broken pair that was surviving better on her own.

Stan and Kyle were pissing me off. I really didn’t get what was so difficult that they couldn’t just talk it out. Or fuck it out, whichever came first. Yes, I said it; I’ve thought it before, and I’ll
stick to it. The more those guys fought, the more obvious they made themselves, at least to me.

This particular argument seemed to have stemmed from nothing, though, of course, it could all be traced to the breakup (which I’d seen coming but hadn’t dared to tell Stan so—that guy is a volcano of emotions and he would’ve erupted if I’d said anything). And it wasn’t so much an argument as it was just Stan not saying a fucking thing and Kyle shouting at him to lighten up or open up or sometimes even fuck off. Kyle had a high tolerance level for bullshit, but Stan was testing that a little too much by (again, in my opinion) not either sorting himself out or just plain giving rational thought a chance.

Because we still had lockers one right next to the other, I cornered Stan there one morning and demanded, “Hey, dude, what the fuck?”

“Kenny, what?” Stan muttered, loading a heavy textbook into his bag.

“Oh! Cool, you can still talk,” I badgered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What’s up with the silent treatment around Kyle?” I asked, attempting to get a good look at Stan’s expression. It didn’t work, he looked just as hollow as he had since the day it was announced his relationship with Wendy had ended.

Stan shook his head and grabbed something else out of his locker. “That’s not important.”

“Um, yeah, it is,” I said. “It’s kind of affecting everything.” ‘Everything,’ of course, being code primarily for ‘especially meetings.’

“Well, it’s nothing you should worry about,” said Stan, kind of abruptly. He shut his locker and leaned back against it to speak to me. “Obviously, I’m going through some shit right now. And it’s just nothing I can talk to Kyle about, okay?! I mean… it’s nothing he’d understand, so—“

Fed up, I grabbed Stan down by the collar so that I could speak to him in strictest confidence.

“Look, you’re a team and we need you,” I hissed, on a volume nobody else could hear. “Whatever all this is, don’t let it affect you guys in the League, okay? Especially not this week.”

“Okay, Kenny, don’t worry about it,” Stan dismissed. “It’s just… don’t dig into it too much.”

I suppressed a groan. “I will, whatever you say,” I insisted. “You guys both know this fight is stupid.”

“Kenny, I’ll take care of it,” Stan said, rushing his words together. As he slung his bag over his shoulder and turned to leave, he added under his breath, “If it’s what I think it is…”

Huh. Well that meant shit was going to get interesting. Slightly satisfied, I wandered off myself, hoping things would sort themselves out before I had to stage any interventions.

I lost Red to the girls at lunch again that day, but we snuck in a good few minutes of making out (while we were in the back of the lunch line) and talking about nothing (as we progressed toward the front and kind of had to see where we were going). I walked her to the table she and her usual clique occupied, and made my way down a couple rows to a table that was oddly unoccupied. Of our usual group, only Kyle was there, looking unenthused as he flipped through a book and picked at a pita sandwich.
“’Sup?” I said, sliding in across from him.

Kyle picked his head up pretty quickly, suggesting I’d startled him just by saying something. I guess if he was so used to getting the silent treatment lately, hearing someone address him would be kind of shocking. His expression relaxed after a second, and he flipped his book closed.

“Hey,” said Kyle, sounding about half as energetic and awake as he usually did, “how’s it going, dude?”

“Fine,” I said, giving him a skeptical look as I started to brave the cafeteria’s version of a taco. “You okay?”

“Me? Yeah,” he shrugged. He glanced around the room, then leaned forward and asked me, “Hey, Kenny, this is kinda last minute, but d’you know of any girls still looking for a Homecoming date?” I’ve always thought it was kind of funny that the guys came to me as wingman before anyone else. What can I say, though? I pay attention.

“I thought you weren’t going,” I remembered. Homecoming had been a minor topic before a meeting one Wednesday; Clyde had brought it up. This was back when Stan and Wendy were still together, and Wendy had sounded pretty excited for the dance that always followed the football game, while Stan seemed not to care as much about the dance as discussing game strategies with Clyde. Kyle had voiced his opinion on school dances (not a positive one) and had said something to the effect of, “No offense, guys, but after the game, I’m done. I don’t do dances.”

“Well, I changed my mind,” Kyle said, kind of quickly. “Plus, it’s been a long enough time since Heidi. I think I’m ready to date again.”

Aha. I got it right off. “Is this just to piss Stan off?” I wondered, resting my chin in one hand, my elbow propped on the table. “Because your stupid fight is getting old.”

“No,” Kyle snapped. “Stan can do whatever the fuck he wants. I want to date again. That’s all.”

“Whatever you say, man,” I shrugged. I didn’t like getting in the middle of conflicts, but this spat between Kyle and Stan did have me worried. Whatever the real story was, I didn’t pry. Even though I basically knew. “I think Nelly’s still looking,” I said, getting back to my neglected soda. “She’s always kinda had a thing for you, too.”

“Nelly?” Kyle’s face lit up. “The cute one with the pigtails?”

“That’s her. If you wanna ask her, I think you’ve got it in the bag.”

“Damn. Thanks, Kenny!”

“Sure.” Just don’t be too stupid about it, I added in my head.

In the next period study hall that we had together, I watched Kyle lay on the charm while talking to Nelly. It started off simple: he offered to help with her algebra (of course that bastard had already advanced to AP Calculus, but whatever), and then they shot the shit as things progressed from there. I would have been proud of him if I’d actually believed he was flirting with her for real reasons other than “Stan’s being a dick.” Which was totally exactly what it was, in reality. You don’t spend your entire life growing up with your closest friends and not end up knowing exactly what’s going through their heads all the time. Stan and Kyle were best friends, they always had been. They’d fought before, and sometimes they’d give each other the silent treatment for as long as a couple of weeks… but they’d always come out of it, after spending plenty of time backstabbing
each other and whatnot. Kyle’s advances were just payback. Or maybe he was bored. But nothing
in the past year had suggested that he actually felt like dating again, since he’d really liked Heidi, and
was focused too much on schoolwork to play the field. In my opinion, this was all sexual tension.
From both of them. It sucked that I couldn’t say anything about that, or I’d probably get bitched at.
Nothing for me to do but wait and observe, and give advice when I was needed.

Plus, I was plenty busy keeping a steady girlfriend of my own. I was surprised by how well
Red and I were doing, actually. Death still hadn’t come between us, and as long as I kept up that
streak through Homecoming, I’d probably have it in the bag for the rest of the year. It was nice
having something consistent… and damn, was she good in bed, and she grew from nervous (because
I’d been with quite a few other girls) to excited about the shit I could (and would) do. Not that sex
was the be-all end-all of our relationship, but if I died again I’d have to go about losing my virginity
for a fourth time. Tell me that doesn’t suck. Not that I lose anything each time, it just kinda feels like
every time I come back, it’s a quote-unquote fresh start. Ugh.

Red was really cute, though, and we had a lot to talk about. I wanted really badly to tell her
about my activities as Mysterion, since, if nothing else, that’d turn her on for sure, but I held to the
vigilante rule. Significant others can’t know. Bebe didn’t know. Wendy hadn’t known, until she
joined. Heidi hadn’t known, even Ike’s little girlfriend had no clue what he did on Wednesday
nights. Red couldn’t be an exception. Maybe once I beat the curse, I’d tell her something, in strict
confidence… assuming she stuck with me.

The shittiest thing, in that sense, about dating and dying all the time, was that nobody could
fucking cover for me, since nobody ever fucking remembered. I kept thinking about that all through
study hall, and found, by the time I snapped myself out of those thoughts, that the only thing I’d
managed to do all period was scratch my pencil deep into my notebook paper, leaving a big grey
graphite smudge in the middle of one page, which now had a rip in it since the pencil had eventually
gone right through. Oh, well. I could never do homework during study halls anyway.

The end of the period marked the end of the school day, so I sluggishly gathered my shit
together and got ready to leave. Kyle rushed up behind me before I could leave, though, and
clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Dude!” he exclaimed, looking happier than he had in the past few
days. Huh. Maybe he was playing the field for real reasons after all. Color me surprised. “Kenny, I
can’t thank you enough,” he grinned. He held out a fist, which I bumped as was our general
‘handshake,’ and I felt myself laugh.

“You’ve got a date?” I guessed.

“Hell yeah,” Kyle boasted. “Actually, we’re gonna go grab something to eat right now.
You and Red wanna come with us?”

“Like to, man, but I’ve gotta work,” I said, which was actually not code for Mysterion
activities for once. I’d lined up a chipping and painting job at one of the shops downtown, which
promised to continue pretty regularly. Extra money was great, especially now that I had a girlfriend.
I wanted to pull out all the stops for Homecoming since, as a cheerleader, I knew the ordeal meant a
lot to her.

“Maybe next time,” said Kyle.

We glanced over at the same time when Nelly called out for him, and he grinned over at her
before saying to me, “Sorry, dude, gotta go.”

“Go!” I urged, slapping him on the back. “Congrats, Kyle, have fun tonight.”
“Thanks again!” he said, and then he was gone.

Well, good luck, I thought to myself. Stan had apparently, based on what he’d muttered earlier, come to some kind of conclusion, he just wasn’t being vocal about it. Kyle had a date, which probably meant that Stan would regress right back into not saying a Goddamn thing. I was sure to be forced into the role of liaison soon, which was sure to be a whole hell of a lot of fun. And on top of that was all this shit about Cults and curses.

So, basically, my brain was kicked into overdrive. I had too many roles to fill, and I didn’t want to fuck up any of them, since I knew failing one would trigger a chain reaction of an absurd suck-level of failing the rest. First and foremost came Red. I’d been waiting too long to have a real relationship to let that go. But being Mysterion was right on par. Plus, I had a day now: Halloween. Something was coming, and I had to be prepared to hate, overcome, or possibly stop whatever it was. Then, of course, I had to play mediator between all my friends, in awkward places at that. I had a feeling Homecoming was going to turn into some kind of awful, testing event, but damned if I wasn’t going to let myself enjoy it with Red.

The only way I could think to make the guys in strained situations talk (sometimes at all, let alone each other or rationally) was to call extra meetings and excursions. Besides that, the Goths were getting so on my nerves with all that ‘we have no idea what’s going on’ bullshit, I decided one night to just take matters into my own hands and demand that we, once again, spy on a Cult meeting.

I did not inform the Goths that we were going to be lurking around, since a part of me thought that, if they knew, they’d avoid the meeting. But spying was fairly easy without inside help, especially given the teams I knew would work. The Cult always met in the basement of one creeper of a local guy, Jim McElroy, so it was already simple enough to access. I placed TupperWear, the Coon, and Marpesia around as guards. The Coon had, initially, been skeptical of adding Marpesia to the guard post (using the ever-popular “it’s a bro thing!” argument), but after she’d kicked him across the face with her heavy boot and pressed him into the ground, he came around. Mosquito and Toolshed flanked me a good distance away as immediate backup, and of course the Human Kite was sent to the roof.

It had been a while since I’d spied on a meeting myself, and even longer since we’d done it as a team. This was not from lack of need so much as lack of availability—as we got older, not all of us were always free all the time. So I made damn sure to spell out to the others just how heavy things were getting. At that week’s League meeting, I brought up Halloween as the date to watch out for, and that we needed to spy on the Cult to catch whether or not they were particularly planning a sacrifice.

And, of course, what exactly the sacrifice would be for, and if it was going to be one of us. Specifically, me.

We left Craig on the perimeter with a wire as a lookout, placing him between TupperWear and Marpesia’s positions in case he tried to bolt. His ear, however uninterested, would be helpful, in case he recognized any names or instances from when he had been doing work for the Cult. He’d already informed us of a ‘Mr. Skin’ from L.A… a name that had surfaced again decade after decade. If that guy wasn’t another Immortal, I didn’t know what to think. Whatever the case was, I had to keep digging. Maybe—assuming the Cult knew of my curse—he was the one set to kill me. In which case, no thanks. I didn’t want to accept Final Death until I learned a few more things.

And that night gave me exactly what I needed.

The meeting (which I was in the best position to hear, cloaked in the shadows surrounding the basement window) began with one cloaked man reading minutes, and got things going right
away. The Cultists’ gathering was a modest basement with rows of chairs that had recently grown in number. As most places of worship do, a podium was set up in front of the rows, with candles on either side and several images of their deity around it. The bas-relief we’d missed out on nabbing that night that Craig had had it on display. It looked just as I remembered it… a squat little figure of the awful Immortal I wanted so badly to bring down. That night, it almost seemed to be glowing.

The men we’d gotten arrested—collector Johansen and artist Wilcox—had been in jail all summer and into autumn, and their status was confirmed as idle by the man giving minutes. I was wondering why nobody had bailed them out. Apparently, they were exactly where they needed to be.

A hush then fell over the basement as the leader, McElroy, took the podium. I trusted the shadows to hide me as I listened in:

“My dear brethren,” he began for the cloaked masses, “the time is at last upon us. The day we strike to awaken our new Messenger!”

“Ìä! Ìä!” the crowd echoed back their sordid amen.

“Messenger?” I muttered to myself.

“Mysterion, what’s going on?” Human Kite asked over the wire.

“Hold on…”

“Yes…” McElroy continued, and I leaned in further to be sure I didn’t miss a single word, “our Messenger has served our kind well for centuries, but at last, a new era is upon us! The Mist shall dissipate to the depths of R’lyeh as the Shadow rises, and the Gate shall open!”

“Ìä, ìä!”

“And as the Shadow rises, so shall our dark lord, Cthulhu!” McElroy cried out, raising his arms, fingers curved like greedy talons, his wizening face catching the worst of the light from the basement’s candles. “Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’neg fhtagn!”

“Ìä, ìä!” sang back the captivated crowd. “Cthulhu fhtagn!”

They repeated the phrase ad nauseam, to the point that I got uncomfortable enough to want to leave. I was glad I stayed, though, since what happened then froze me to the spot.

“Now,” said McElroy, his voice cutting straight through the room, straight through the cloudy night around us, “let us prepare ourselves for All Hallows. The day our new Messenger will at last be given his roam of Earth!”

“Ìä! Ìä!”

“To awaken the Messenger,” he continued, “we must prepare one sacrifice.”

“One to awaken!” the crowd sang back. I noticed, however, that Henrietta and the other two high school Goths were silent. They’d been telling the truth. The Goths had no idea what the Cult had been brewing up.

Those three didn’t, anyway. The little kid spoke every word.
“Two to appease the Gatekeeper!” Shit…

“Three to summon the Great One, Cthulhu!”

“Let the three shed blood on the last day of this month! Three close to our new Messenger, to speed the awakening!” McElroy announced to his devoted crowd. My ears pounded with the words the masses had just chanted in such dissonant unison. A man nearby walked over to the bas-relief and held it above his head. “Let us free the heir of the artist and sing the Old Ones’ names across the Earth!”

“Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn!”

I was done. We were so out of there.

I slipped into the night and told everyone to retreat and meet back at the base. I made it there first and stormed back into the meeting room, where Iron Maiden and Red Serge were eagerly waiting to take notes or orders. “Halloween!” I shouted at them. “They’re busting Wilcox out of prison on Halloween!”

“Inform Yeats of a possible insurgence,” said Red Serge, ticking away at his keyboard. “I’ve got it covered.”

“Keep that guy under heavy lock!” I added. “Iron Maiden!”

“Timmah!”

“Are you prepared to be stationed on guard at Park County Prison that night?”

His response was positive and enthusiastic. Since Iron Maiden rarely saw action, he was always willing to spring on an opportunity. Nobody could get past him and his hidden swords.

“Mysterion!” I heard Toolshed shout from the door of the meeting room. I turned to see him entering with the Human Kite a couple paces behind. Five seconds later, Mosquito entered as well. “Why’d we abort so quickly? What the hell is going on?”

“What’re you up to?” the Human Kite asked Red Serge, walking over behind him to read over his shoulder. His eyes, behind his goggles, went wide. “Oh, shit…”

“Oh, shit is right,” I muttered. “Let’s wait for the rest, and then we’re making a fucking plan.”

And in they came, not two minutes after Mosquito had arrived. First the Coon and Marpesia, then TupperWear, and finally Craig, angrily yanking his wire out of his beaten blue jacket. “What’s going on?” Marpesia wondered. “There was no activity, as far as any of us could tell…”

“Everyone, sit,” I commanded, but nobody did. We took our places around the table, but nobody sat down, except Craig.

“What’d you hear in there?” the Coon asked the question on everyone’s minds.

“Sacrifices,” I said. The room itself seemed to hold its breath. “Craig, you were the first one that mentioned the possibility…”

He shrugged. “I said I just thought it was possible. I didn’t say I actually heard it.”

“But you were on the right track. You and Henrietta keep up that research. As for everyone
else…”

“So, wait, sacrifices, like, how?” asked the Coon.

“And why?” Mosquito added.

I took in a deep breath, shuddered at the image my mind still had of the man holding up the slightly glowing bas-relief, and told the League, “The Cult is going to go after three sacrifices to summon Cthulhu. They mentioned something about a Messenger, and I think I have a pretty good idea who it is.”

“Who?” the Human Kite wondered.

“This guy,” I said, pointing to the image of Wilcox we still had printed out and hanging on the corkboard. “He’s the descendent of an artist who sculpted an image of Cthulhu, so he’s obviously linked. And the Cult is planning on busting him out of jail on Halloween. He hasn’t said a fucking word to me when I go question him.

“They also said the three sacrifices had to be close to the Messenger,” I went on. I’d shuffled through all of the possibilities in my head on the way back to the base, but hadn’t sorted any of them out until I got them out verbally. “There are four other people in prison with Wilcox now that are part of the Cult. It’s pretty safe to say three of them are going to die.”

“Shit,” Toolshed muttered. “So, what, did we do them favors by arresting these guys?!”

“Why would they sacrifice their own people?” the Human Kite wondered.

“Cuz they’re a fucking Cult,” the Coon pointed out.

“It’s true,” Marpesia confirmed. “Cults have historically killed their own for the group’s greater aims. And sacrifices in those cases usually go willingly.”

“So, what, we’ve gotta protect those guys in prison now?” TupperWear asked.

“It’s looking that way,” I sighed. “The Cult wants to open the Gate and summon Cthulhu on October 31st. That gives us a little time to prepare, which is good.”

“Yeats has been informed,” said Red Serge, looking up. “I’ll get on telling Barbrady and the local force, too.”

“Good.” I drew in a deep breath, glared around the table, and said, “I’m not ready to let this Cult awaken that power. I don’t want them with fucking any power. If we stop them on Halloween, we can stop or at least stall this attempt, and we’ll know the means by which they’ll be trying to get what they want. We need to strategize. Next meeting, we’re going to the Park County force’s central office. We’ll scope out the perimeter, figure out what we need to do for our counter.”

“It’s a good thing we can really work for a while on this,” Toolshed agreed. He seemed almost nervous, but hid it well. “I will tell you all that I witnessed Cult activity outside that bookstore of theirs recently, and I think it’s a safe bet to say that they know we’ll be ready for them.”

“Right,” I said. “So we go in knowing that and still kick their asses. It’s a fortunate location, too… the cops can put up extra security.”

“No offense,” said Marpesia, “but they won’t be very discreet about it.”
“No kidding,” I realized. “But we’ve got time to work that angle, too. Let’s just count ourselves fortunate that we have this much time to prepare, and give it everything.”

For the rest of the evening, we sketched out a preliminary plan. Red Serge printed out an aerial view map of the Park County station, and we began marking areas we thought needed to be most covered. Naturally, Human Kite would take the roof. Iron Maiden would be needed inside, and we’d test blind spots later to see where TupperWear, the Coon, and Marpesia should be. Mosquito had to be the one keeping an eye on the cops and on the action, while Toolshed was most needed at the back entrance. There was an alley back there, with a gate that only he’d be able to break through… plus, he was the fastest, and would be able to make himself available in other areas quicker. I’d take the side of the building, toward the front, in case the Cult really would be able to just walk right in. Red Serge would man the base, and we would probably make Craig and Henrietta help out as well, but I’d work on those logistics later.

Last year, my Halloween plans had involved stripping my foreign exchange girlfriend of the time naked in her host family’s hot tub. This year, my plans involved stopping an evil Cult from destroying the world. Life’s weird that way.
I don’t like school dances.

I think they’re lame and over-hyped.

Because everyone knew that, I got all sorts of weird stares and comments along the lines of, “Wait, are you seriously going to Homecoming?”

To which I replied, “Yeah, why not?”

And of course, the answer was always: “Because you don’t like school dances.”

I honestly thought that the school could do much better things for fundraisers, but there were things like Homecoming and Prom that had places in all high schools, and I knew they meant something to some of the student body, but to me they were just... unnecessary. Homecoming, however, just happened to fall during a time that I was realizing I needed to start sorting some things out, and go with some things that were inevitable.

Well, whatever. Anyway, I did want a girlfriend for a stupid reason. To avoid more college talks. Homecoming was another excuse to get the fuck out of the house, and until Stan broke up with Wendy and started being a stick up his own ass, I’d kind of wanted to see if he’d ditch with me so we could both rebel against the tradition we both thought was pretty stupid. He’d skipped out on Homecoming before, and Wendy hadn’t cared; she’d just gone with the girls. Now, though, he was being... weird.

Stan would get weird, from time to time. Sometimes he’d get so withdrawn I’d almost give up. More often than not, I’d get pissed off and that would be enough to snap him out of it. Usually the remedy was just to wait until some other weird happening occurred in South Park that neither of us could avoid (and these things happened often, so it was a logical thing to call a remedy). He’d come right out and told me, though, that the next time he and Wendy broke up would be the last. So he was probably just all angsty about that, but I didn’t see why he had to clam up around me all the time.

So for the most part I ended up ignoring him. And wouldn’t you know it, Kenny had picked out a pretty good date for me in Nelly. She was really short, which was kind of adorable, and actually quite smart, which was something I’d found out the afternoon I’d first taken her out.

Kenny had set us up in study hall, and I’d only had to flirt with her a little and ask her once before she agreed to be my date for the dance. So that I’d have more of a chance to get to know her, I took her out right that afternoon, which had gone rather well.

“Want me to take anything for you?” I offered her after class. (If study hall can be called a class.) Nelly and I had stopped by her locker on our way out, so that she could lighten her load. I watched her pigtails swiftly bob behind her as she reached around in her nicely-organized locker, the door of which was plastered with magazine clippings of actors and musical artists, most of which I
didn’t really pay attention to. It would give me conversation topics, though. In addition to books, folders, and the usual school junk, Nelly had a small black case on the locker floor. “What’s that?” I wondered. “D’you need that?”

“That’s my clarinet,” she said, finishing up her sorting. “Could you hold these, though?” She turned, her pigtails swishing around her face, and handed me a stack of four textbooks, which I caught in open arms just in time. I glanced down at the books, liking what I saw. I’ve always found academically-inclined girls attractive. Kenny could be the cheerleader type all he wanted (and I gave him props for Red, since she wasn’t as flippant as, oh, say, Bebe), but I liked having issue-based conversations. Heidi, for example, was really into style and fashion, as many of her friends were, but she also put up fantastic debates on ethics surrounding cosmetic surgeries and what should and should not be medically legal in the US. Nelly’s textbooks showed that, despite her standard math course, she was taking advanced biology, was already in fourth-level French, and had opted to take an AP History course. Nice. Good choice.

“You play the clarinet?” was the first dumb thing out of my mouth, though, despite all that.

“Yeah,” said Nelly, “I’m first clarinet, so I sit right near your friend Marjorine. You know she plays flute, right?”

“Oh, oh yeah,” I remembered. Marjorine had picked up the flute in eighth grade, setting her one more level apart from Butters, who played the drums. I never really paid much attention to the band. I just knew that I usually talked over them at the football games Kenny and I would go to, and that I totally drowned them out of my head during basketball season.

“Okay!” Nelly announced, taking her books back to shove them into her bag. “Done. Where are we going?” She smiled up at me warmly, and I detected very light, light freckles under her eyes. She was cute. No getting around that, she was cute.

I just had to keep convincing myself that I really did have a whole long list of reasons for wanting to try going out with her. Other than the one I kept denying around Kenny. All my other friends had girlfriends, except Butters and Cartman… the latter of whom wasn’t really a friend, though, so whatever. And Stan was single and pissed about it. Well, as I’ve said, pissed about something, I had no idea what. I just didn’t want to deal with his shit. I wanted to try being happy, dammit. Nothing wrong with that.

Happy with an excuse to not talk to my parents.

“Downtown, definitely. Want me to drive? Or, it’s a nice day, we could just drop our stuff in my car and walk,” I offered.

“Walking sounds great.”

So walk we did. I locked our bags up in my car, checked for my wallet, and held Nelly in light, fun conversation on the way into town. “You take French, huh?” I wondered, as we were getting closer toward the rows of shops that my friends and I always frequented.

“Oui,” Nelly replied with a light laugh.

“I always thought it seemed like a great language,” I admitted. “I ended up in Latin, though. You’ll have to teach me French sometime.”

“It’s the language of love, you know.”

“Is it, now?”
Nelly laughed again, and ventured to walk a little closer. And, you know, it was nice. I was really starting to enjoy her company. We’d already locked in Homecoming, which was nice, since now it seemed we had more of a kickstart point to go from. By the following week, I was hoping I could genuinely call her a girlfriend, rather than just a date. Sleeping with her hadn’t really crossed my mind yet, but I’d see where things went. Maybe we’d get to that point. But realizing that I wasn’t even considering that was more proof to the fact that I really did have stupid reasons for wanting to date again.

Stupid reasons which I tried to put out of my mind that afternoon. And the next. Lather, rinse, repeat—we ended up going out a few times after that, and began seeking each other out at school. She was an intelligent girl with bright ideas, but I got a little withdrawn when she herself brought up the forbidden topic.

“I think I want to go to school to be a nurse,” she said one day while we sat outside Tweek Bros.’ on one of South Park’s milder October afternoons. “There’s some great programs in Colorado, but I might want to study in California. Have you ever been to California?”

“I kinda lived there once,” I said, and proceeded to tell her about the time that my father had pulled a Randy Marsh (read: been a total retard) and had decided he was too cool for South Park because he drove a fucking Hybrid. Apparently that had been reason enough to move us out to San Diego, but we wound up back in South Park eventually.

“Oh, my God, I remember when the Hybrid thing happened!” Nelly said, stirring sugar into her tea. “Your friend, Stan… Stan Marsh? He wrote this song about it, I remember them playing it on the radio.”

For some reason, my heart jumped. “He did?” I wondered. No, I remembered that, vaguely… at least him mentioning something about it. I glared down at my coffee. Why the fuck had I ordered it black? I hated black coffee.

Nelly laughed. “You should make him play it sometime,” she suggested.

“I dunno, Nelly,” I said, leaning up against the table, “Stan’s been really closed off lately. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Sure,” Nelly shrugged. “What was I—oh, right! School. Yeah, nursing seems like a good field right now… that’s why I’m taking advanced biology now, so next year I can take Anat. and Phys. How about you?”

“What?”

“What’re you thinking for a college track, Kyle?”

Somehow, I got the feeling that I wasn’t making a very good impression that day, and was therefore glad that this wasn’t our first date, since I could hopefully just pass this off as an off-day. I did feel kind of off; just couldn’t fully explain why. I shook my head to herald my response. “This is gonna sound awful,” I said, “but I don’t like talking about college plans. I don’t have anything solid in mind yet. Can we just… something else? Talk about something totally different?”

“Oh. Hmm… okay.” Nelly was easy to please. That was another good thing about her. “So… after Homecoming, we’re still gonna, y’know, do stuff like this, right?”

I shifted so that I rested my head in one hand, and gave her the smile that had worked on Heidi before. “I’d like to,” I said. “Why? Did you have something in mind?”
“Well, I was mostly wondering about Halloween.” And my heart skipped twice. I was going to be really, really fucking busy on Halloween. You know, stopping an evil cult from raising the Dark Lord Cthulhu again, and all that. “Do you want to—”

“I actually already have plans,” I said, hoping I hadn’t spoken too quickly. Yeah, bad impression-making day.

“Oh…”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to brush it off, “me and the guys have this thing we just always do. Maybe the day after, though.”

Nelly smiled, and said, almost flatly, “Sure.” After a couple seconds, she noticed, “You aren’t drinking your coffee.”

“Oh, um… no.”

She saw me looking at her extra sugar and cream packets, and instantly started laughing. “Guys are so weird!” she commented, passing the sugar and cream over to me. “Why do you think we’ll always expect you boys to order black coffee? There’s nothing wrong with liking it lighter.”

She got a smirk out of me. “I don’t think I was going for that, necessarily,” I said. “I think I just forgot.”

“Where’s your brain today?” Nelly wondered.

Honestly, all over the place, but I told her I was fine, that there was nothing to worry about. When she mentioned college, I got a little nervous. When she mentioned Halloween, I got, for a moment, legitimately scared.

We knew what we were up against, of course, and Mysterion had the whole thing perfectly planned out. Halloween was on a Tuesday, so it was incredible that Henrietta (high priestess of the Goth Tuesday poetry wangst session or something) had agreed to come with us. That had me feeling skeptical, to put it lightly. After all, Henrietta herself was a part of the Cult… it worried me that Mysterion was so damn sure that she wouldn’t take their side. Wasn’t she and her clicque also interested in raising Cthulhu? What was stopping her from going the Cult route?

At least Kenny seemed to know what was going on. I felt kind of bad for not doing as much of my own research into the Cult’s sacred mythos as I could have been, even though I was usually one of the first to start pouring through the resources that Craig and Henrietta grabbed for us from the Cult’s new suppliers at the bookstore. Henrietta had what seemed to be a working knowledge of the Necronomicon, so having her on hand would be useful, but it was one more person we’d have to watch out for, come the night of the thirty-first.

And of course, there was the personal crap attached to everything, too. Toolshed and I were the secondary attack team, after Mysterion on his own, but the more closed off Stan got, the more I wondered how much his recent funk would start affecting League activities as well. I mean, he turned seventeen and acted like it was just another day. We all tried to do something for him, and he managed a few ‘thank you’s, but that was about it.

In regards to his birthday, I’d ended up not getting him anything, but I’d written him a note, which I slid into his locker the afternoon of October 19th in hopes that he’d find it. Basically, it was just a note telling him happy birthday, and that I hoped he’d come around soon, since we all missed him when he got so out of it. I’d finished it by saying that I’d owe him something for his birthday, whenever he wanted to cash in on that. He hadn’t said anything lately, so I figured he simply hadn’t
gotten the note. Stan’s locker is a mess; I wouldn’t have been surprised.

It kind of sucked, though, that Kenny was right to guess that another reason I’d started going out with Nelly was to get away from Stan’s recent apparent insensitivity. I could sense that he had something to say, he just, for whatever reason, didn’t, and I wasn’t feeling up to coaxing it out of him. I still considered him my best friend, though; I mean, I always had and always would; so of course I stayed concerned, and that part of my brain didn’t shut off even when I was trying my hardest to have decent dates with Nelly. Homecoming, I was sort of anticipating, might change that, or at least kickstart something more significant with her, but there was still no way of knowing.

The scattered conversation Nelly and I were having soon diverted into something else altogether, thanks to the sudden but welcome surprise of Kenny and Red happening on the coffee shop at about that time. Red sent Kenny inside to place her order (though she offered, I noticed, to pay), and immediately started getting chatty with Nelly after all four of us had said a brief hello and turned the rest of our stay at Tweek Bros. into a double date.

The girls wanted to talk Homecoming, so Kenny and I attempted to figure out some kind of conversation between us that had absolutely nothing to do with the League, since, obviously, that was what both of us really wanted to talk about. We ended up discussing something having to do with Kenny’s displeasure over his Okama GameSphere finally giving out (he was the only one in town that had still had that archaic gaming platform).

“And that’s why now I’ve only got porn at home to entertain me,” Kenny finished up his lament.

“Sick, dude, your girlfriend’s right there!” I admonished him.


Red glanced over at him and rolled her eyes. “About your stupid porn stash?” Kenny grinned and nodded. “Ugh, yes, but what guy doesn’t have one, seriously?”

“Kyle doesn’t,” Kenny laughed.

“Dude!”

“I’ve never seen you with a single Hustler or Playboy, so unless there’s some amazing vault in your house somewhere——"

“There’s no vault, that’s fucking gross.” I noticed Nelly smile through all that, and I added for her, “You’re welcome.”

Not long after that brilliant discussion, Nelly and Red excused themselves in the interest of shoe shopping (and hadn’t I just told Stan, back when we were still talking, about the whole shoe thing? —I stand by it), which obviously drove me and Kenny to want to head toward the base. Prior to departing, though, Kenny grabbed Red for a kiss, and I honored Nelly with the same. The girls were then on their way, and Kenny and I were forced to think of slightly non-League related topics on our trek across town from there.

“So, how’s all that going?” Kenny asked me as we walked.

“What, Nelly?”

“Yeah.”
I shrugged. “She’s all right, I like her enough,” I told him. “Thanks for kinda kickstarting it, by the way.”

“You’re welcome, even though you guys kinda have already hit the boring stage.”

I glowered up at him—though not as far as I’d had to earlier in the year, thanks to the summer allowing me to grow another half inch. “The fuck does that mean?” I wondered.

“Dude, I get that you were eager to date, but don’t do it till you’re fuckin’ ready,” said Kenny.

“Look, she’s cute and she’s smart, she’s nice to talk to,” I said, punching Kenny’s arm even though I knew that wouldn’t be the end of the discussion.

“Yeah, but have you fucked her?”

“Dude!” I snapped. Kenny muffled a laugh into his fist. “Seriously, how’ve you kept a steady girlfriend for six months still acting like that?”

“Oh, don’t get all ‘you don’t respect women’ preachy on me,” Kenny said. “Not everyone’s a hopeless fuckin’ romantic like you.”

“I’m not a hopeless romantic,” I argued, folding my arms. “I’m chivalrous.”

“Chivalrous.”

“Yes, chivalrous. Shut up.”

“Look, all I’m saying is, sometimes, respecting chicks gets you nowhere,” said Kenny, going dating guru on me. “Sometimes even the nice ones like it rougher.” I groaned. “I’m serious! When you find someone you’ve really got it hard for, dude, I bet you respect isn’t gonna factor into it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be sure to let you know when that happens,” I said, putting special emphasis on how done with the idea I was.

Conversation changed long enough to get us to the base, where we made directly for the back meeting room. With very little discussion, we got right to work on pulling up the Halloween plan. Ike had printed out several blueprints of the Park County station and the surrounding blocks, so that we could make plays. One of them was scrawled all over with Clyde’s and Stan’s handwriting in some kind of football-inspired gibberish; in the corner of that one, Cartman had written, This doesn’t make any sense. You guys suck. Wendy and Token had worked out a good defense plan on another map, and Kenny pulled out the one that he, Stan and I had all contributed to, to talk offensive strategies.

“Here’s the thing,” I started saying, “I get that I’m gonna be starting out on the roof, but shouldn’t we have at least one person ready to scale up in case I come down and get tied up here?” I pointed to one of the side alleys. “Or here?” I pointed this time to the front steps.

“There’s gonna be a lot of us,” Kenny reminded me, “so I’ll just make sure Stan and Clyde are in position to cover for you.”

“But not make one of them scale the outer wall?”

“Kyle, you’re the fastest climber and you know it,” Kenny pointed out. “Stan’s fast, but he’s fast on the ground. I’m willing to scale up in case you need backup, but remember that there’s a
good chance I might have to be on alert inside the building, too.”

“Okay, here’s the other thing,” I said, standing back. “How many of them are we expecting will be there? The Cultists, I mean.”

“Based on what I heard at their meeting, at least a good handful,” said Kenny. “I wouldn’t rule out a dozen. We’ve gotten in their way before, so they know how many of us are usually around. That’s why adding Timmy in this time is gonna give us a little more of an advantage. But still…”

I sighed. “Right,” I said, looking back at the map. “So I’m starting on the roof and there’s a good chance I’m going back up. But what if I need backup?”

“Then we will send Stan up.”

“And he’s the only possible person who could serve as my backup?”

“Oh, my God, Kyle, I’ve told him, and I’m telling you, this stupid fucking fight of yours can’t get in the way of this!” Kenny insisted.

“I’ve got no problem with it!” I fought back. “I’m just saying, what if he doesn’t step up to it?”

“What’re you saying, then? That you can’t handle something alone? That you absolutely need backup for this?”

“I don’t know!” I hollered. “What even is ‘this?’ I mean, it’s great we’re making plans, but what if—”

“This is the thing we’ve been worried about for seven fucking years!” Kenny argued, almost snapping into his Mysterion tone he was so worked up. “We know for a fact that the night of the thirty-first is huge on the Cult calendar, and they’re gonna try to free this guy and make him their new Messenger or whatever. Are you forgetting how shitty things got the last time Cthulhu rose?!”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, Kenny, listen to me!”

When I shouted those last three words, the dim lights in the room flickered, a few of the chairs slightly scraped the floor, and one of the maps fell off the table. Fuck. Not again. This really had been happening on and off, and always when I got angry. But it had been kind of a windy day. The power lines and foundation probably just felt an extra gust.

Kenny didn’t think so.

“Dude,” he said, staring at me. “Kyle, what was that?” He seemed in awe. And why wouldn’t he? Kenny took superhero mythos as seriously as my parents took their faith. While many of us went along for the ride, and enjoyed doing good on a human level, Kenny believed almost too strongly in the unexplained. And again, there was so much I’d believe, too, once I saw proof for it. Cthulhu. Curses. Sure. But I was normal. There was nothing to me that science couldn’t explain.

“What was what?” I asked, smoothing over the whole thing in hopes that he would, too.

Kenny wouldn’t buy it. “The, you know, thing that just happened,” he said, giving me a disapproving look. “Does that happen a lot? Are you, y’know…?”

“Am I what?”
“Psychic.”

“No!” I said quickly. Goddammit, of course Kenny wasn’t going to let that idea go. Hell, he’d probably try to work it into the game plan. Right. Like that would happen. “That’s stupid.”

“Kyle,” said Kenny, “I’m being completely serious, dude. Don’t rule out the possibility that you just might have a little bit of a psychic quirk.”

I shook my head. “There’s no such thing,” I argued.

Kenny snorted disapprovingly. “You’ve got a really open mind to a lot of things,” he said angrily. “Don’t pass this off. How often does stuff like that happen?”

“The lights flickered,” I said. “It happens all the damn time.”

“The lights flickered and things shifted,” Kenny corrected me. “Are you just trying not to believe in it? You’ve got two options: ignore it, which you seem to be doing, or test it.”

“Test it,” I repeated skeptically.

“Yes, test it, Kyle!” Kenny shouted. “Maybe it’s something you could fully train, maybe it is just a quirk, but if there’s even a chance that you’re able to harness some kind of telekinetic control, do you know how much we could use that, here?! It’s not something we should write off, dude; look into it.”

Then, pushed too far, I completely exploded. “Kenny, I don’t want to talk about it!” I yelled at him. “I don’t! Weird stuff happens, okay, sure, but there is no proof I’m causing it! Look, is anything happening now? No. Flukes happen, and there’s always something behind it. Physics. Inertia.”

“Inertia, Kyle?!”

“YES. It’s—“

“I know what inertia is, and to me it sounds like you’re a cause against it!” Kenny argued. “Velocity obviously changes in a psychic flash like that, and I sure as hell didn’t just feel an earthquake, so something just provoked everything in the room into action.”

“Kenny, I don’t want to talk about it!” I repeated stubbornly.

“Oh, my God, I’m done. D’you know what you sound like right now? You have got to talk to Stan,” Kenny grumbled. “You’re both being major pains in the ass.”

Really not wanting things to devolve into that for the rest of the afternoon, I just gave in. “All right,” I said. “Sorry. I’m over it. Let’s just… let’s just get this thing mapped out, okay?”

We then went on with our work, hardly speaking of personal matters at all, which was just what I wanted out of the day anyway. Of course, Kenny tried to bring up the psychic thing a couple more times, but, once again, that really was something I wasn’t ready to discuss or accept. There was no proof. No logic. Nothing to convince me.

So little was logical, lately.

And it wasn’t about to get any better.

– – –
Wendy looked awfully sore after the breakup. Just like the leaves that lined our streets, she was losing her color. A hush seemed to fall over all of us who cared about her, since we all knew what made it so hard for Wendy: she’d really loved Stan, and he never returned it.

Bebe, Red and I took Wendy out the afternoon after it had happened, hoping to get her mind on something else. Each of us told her that she shouldn’t hesitate to ask if there was anything any of us could do; Wendy was thankful, but she never took anything, so she simply smiled for our offers but requested nothing. I was determined, though. I owed her, after all. This seemed like the right time to try to pay her back.

During German class one day, while—on the side—I was secretively translating another passage from the *Necronomicon* using one of the teacher’s middle-German dictionaries, I overheard Eric talking to Wendy. I perked up to listen a little, figuring he’d just be bugging her for homework help again. Instead, what I overheard alerted me to something quite revealing. And a little heartbreaking, to me.

“Wendy,” said Eric in a loud whisper.

“Do your own work,” Wendy nipped back.

Eric rolled his eyes. “Ech, would you stop crying, already?”

“Shut up!”

“No, seriously,” he pressed, “stop, it’s distracting me.”

“Whatever,” Wendy muttered.

Wendy was, I noticed, puffy-eyed and sniffing, and hardly focusing on her own worksheet. She stopped writing mid-sentence and set her pencil down, then rested her head in her hands. This wasn’t like her. This wasn’t Wendy, not the same strong girl I knew and idolized, who stuck up for her morals and treated everyone she knew with a mutual human respect. She’d thrown herself off. I knew that the breakup was her idea, and now it was hurting her. I wanted to see that girl happy. She was one of the few people who, I thought, deserved to be.

“Seriously,” Eric repeated, nudging her.

“Stop it,” she warned.


“Okay!” laughed Wendy.

“Okay what?” Nudge.

“Okay, I’m done! I’m done! Now, quit that.”

Satisfied, Eric smirked and went back to pretending to study. Oh, my. Well, I sure knew what that was all about. Passively, I turned back to my secret work and kept translating. For a while, I let myself be angry, but that soon passed. Because I knew what it was I had to do. “You’ve
got a mission, Butters,” I told myself, “and you’ve gotta see it through all the way.”

No matter how much it would take out of me.

Minus the day I’d helped out Wendy with the girls, I hadn’t been in much of a Marjorine mood since Disarray had come to me with the **Necronomicon**. The subject matter didn’t suit the perpetual optimism that being Marjorine required, so I’d mostly been attending school as normal since the start of junior year. When it came down to helping Wendy, though, that was all Marjorine’s territory.

So the following day, I dressed accordingly, and sought Eric out during lunch period, cornering him before anyone else could join up with him. Naturally, he glared at me over his tray of a little too much cafeteria food, then said, showing the greatest lack of enthusiasm possible, “What, Marjorine?”

“Hear me out,” I asked, as I threw a bag of chips I’d just bought down on the table in front of him.

“The hell is this?” Eric wondered, eyeing the bag, and then me.

“Peace offering,” I said, sliding into the seat across from him. “I gotta talk to you about something.”

Eric gave me an awful, testing look, then reached forward, popped open the chips, and said, “You’ve got till I finish this bag.”

The way to that man’s heart, mind, or whatever the hell was floating in there, was definitely through his stomach. I didn’t consider myself a very good cook, but I kept trying every once in a while, because, dammit, one of these days, I’d give him something from me to see if that would do anything to appease him. Well… maybe, I realized. Because if this plan ended up working, I’d have to stop flirting with him.

It was going to be hard, but the more invested I became in my **Necronomicon** work, the less personal trivialities seemed to bother me. Maybe this was the last thing I needed to give myself that final push to get that translation finished. Just cut off everything. Everything, for Wendy, for the friend to whom I owed so much. She’d made me happy. So I owed her my happiness. Whether or not this would work was still questionable, but there was nothing too terribly wrong with trying.

“Okay, listen,” I began slowly, getting around myself with every word I spoke, “I know you’ve kinda got a thing for Wendy, and, well, I’d sure hate to see her dateless for Homecoming, since she’s got such a pretty dress and all.”

Eric crunched down on a chip. “So?”

Of course he wouldn’t get it right off. But I had a feeling I knew what I was doing. I—was doing good, wasn’t I? “So… why don’t you go with her?” I suggested.

Eric made a show of eating another chip, like illustrating another grain of sand sliding down through an hourglass, and asked sullenly, “Why would I?”

“Cuz you both need a date!” I said quickly, fed up with how much he was making me lead him around before he just gave in and got the idea. But the whole thing was hurting me. This was the most he’d ever talked to me—me, Marjorine—and truth be told I was sort of waiting for him to get mad at me about the idea. That actually would have been kind of nice. For him to get mad and tell me off, and then I wouldn’t have to think about it again and I’d jus keep on owing Wendy.
But…but she had seemed to flirt with Eric herself on and off in the past. I mean, if I liked the fight in him… maybe she did, too. “And I think,” I added, calming down, “you guys maybe might work together.”

“What do I get out of it?”

I stared Eric down. Seriously? He really was an idiot sometimes. “…A date with Wendy,” I said firmly.

As if he wasn’t giving me enough reasons to get all flustered, Eric started laughing, and even went as far as to set the bag of chips aside. It wasn’t all that far-fetched an idea, was it? Boy, was I digging myself deep with this one. My head was all over the place—I mean, this was a hard enough subject for me to approach, and of course Eric was being his usual, domineering, insensitive self, and honestly, had I not driven myself into the right mindset to be Marjorine that day, I probably would have gotten angry and left right then and there.

“Eric, it’s not funny,” I scolded him instead. “Answer me: do you or don’t you have a crush on Wendy Testaburger?”

That sure shut him up fast. Eric never admits to much, especially to matters of the heart, because the person he loves more than anyone or anything else in the world is himself. Despite that, though, there are times when he’ll give himself away. There are even rarer times when he’ll even go as far as to talk about it. This was not one of those rare instances, but the fact that he paused was enough of an answer. He did not elaborate, saying if there was some kind of crush or not, but I figured the idea wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. I’d figured as much.

“Marjorine,” he began, trying to catch himself and stay in control, “where are you going with this? Wendy would never—”

I was finished with trying to reason with him and say things nicely for my own sake. The only thing that guy ever listened to was hollered demands, so if that was what he wanted, that’s what I’d give him. And I knew something else about Eric, too: he hated to lose. He hated appearing to be on the losing or weaker side of things, and to prove it he made bets. Even when he lost those bets, he’d celebrate the fact that he made them and alter the rules round in the end to make him some kind of victor anyway.

“Eric Cartman, I dare you to ask Wendy to the Homecoming dance!” I finally shouted.

“Oh, so that’s it!” he chortled. “You don’t actually think I have a chance.”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.”

“Then you’re on, ho,” Eric smirked, picking up the bag of chips again.

“Well, all right then,” I said. Looking up, I noticed Wendy entering the cafeteria at that point, so before Bebe or anyone else could swoop in and snatch her up into conversation, I stood up a little and waved over to her. Wendy smiled, and I flagged her over to us. “Okay, bet’s on,” I said to Eric. “Here’s your chance.”

“Hey, hold up!” Eric tried.

I couldn’t help laughing. Because, well… for once, I’d kind of won. I’d been playing this game with him forever. Push him, push, push, push, just to see how far I could get. I’d take my own small victory when I could, even if that meant passing Eric over to someone else.
“What’s going on?” Wendy asked when she approached.

“Well, Eric here has something he wants to ask you,” I told her, holding that smile on. This was for her, I reminded myself. So she’d stop looking so sad all the time. So she could go enjoy herself for a night. Because dangit, I owed her.

Wendy frowned and sat down beside me. “If it has anything to do with our last conversation,” she warned him, “you still have no concept of history, and no, Teddy Roosevelt did not use teddy bears as a spy ploy against the Russians.”

“Whatever, why else would he—“

“Do you even have any idea when the Cold War was, Eric?!” Oh, my. I’d forgotten that sometimes Wendy called him by name, too. I’d also apparently forgotten about how much they fought, but again, the fact that I liked fighting with Eric tipped me off that maybe she liked it, too.

I set a hand on Wendy’s shoulder and said, “Nothing all that stupid, Wendy.”

“What, then?”

I nodded across the table and said, “Go ahead, Eric.”

Eric almost went pink; he cleared his throat and asked, trying to stay cool, “Right, so, Wendy, I know you broke up with Stan and all, but’re you gonna go to the game anyway?”

“I… I was thinking about it,” Wendy answered, going about her answer very tepidly. I didn’t blame her. You never know what you’re getting into when you start talking to Eric. “Why?”

“How about the dance after?”

Wendy sighed. “Um, maybe, like… just to see the girls and all. Why do you want to know?”

“You know, like, in case you needed a ride. Or dinner and stuff.”

The look on Wendy’s face told me that she didn’t know whether she wanted to laugh or puke. Yeah, that’s another thing you get with Eric. “Are you asking me out?” she wondered.

Eric shrugged, then smirked and said, “Yeah.”

“Are you seriously asking me out?” Wendy asked, giving him the what the fuck? look that he was probably so used to by now it didn’t even faze him. Nothing ever seemed to faze him. Or sway him, either.

“Marjorine thinks I shoulda.”

Wendy stared over at me. Her eyes were asking me if I’d lost my mind. Maybe I had. After all, I’d been dealing with the Necronomicon plenty, lately, and the original was written by a madman, so it wasn’t too far off to think I might be out of my wits. Then again, this was just a simple little date. Right? Not like it was any fate of the world thing. I could think that maybe I’d still have a chance with Eric in the future. After all, we still had one year of high school after this. Unless, of course, Cthulhu rose and ruined everything.

But, as I’d read in another text Disarray had absconded for us from his hidden source, this one in Latin: “Ex nihilo nihil fut.” From nothing comes nothing.
In the end, it’d all be chaos, anyway.

So this really shouldn’t have mattered. That was all that was letting me ignore how reluctant I really was to be passing him over like this.

“Marjorine, really?” Wendy asked me quietly.

“If you want to,” I told her. “I… I think you guys could work. And I mean, it’s just a dance, right? You always love dances, Wendy, I’d hate to see you go without a date.”

Still looking a little skeptical and hesitant, Wendy drew in a long breath and said, “Sure. Why not. It’s just one date.”

“No backin’ out,” Eric warned her.

“I won’t,” said Wendy, taking up the challenge. “Look, I’ve gotta ask Bebe something, but I’ll be back, okay?”

I patted her on the back as she stood to leave, then turned back to Eric. I’d succeeded, I guessed. Later, I told myself, I’d get the scoop from Wendy on whether or not I really had done something right. For now, though, I was just happy that I’d sort of won my own game of pushing Eric toward something without him telling me off. In fact, this time, he went as far as to sort of compliment me.

“Hey, Marjorine,” he said.

“Yes, Eric?”

“Maybe you dress like a girl, but you’re an okay wingman,” he said, reaching over and slapping me on the shoulder.

“Well, I’ll take that.” Since I knew, from him, it was the only recognition I’d get.

“Why’d you really do that?” Wendy asked me later on. She caught up to me as we were crossing through the halls between classes, on our way to German. I still had my flute case in my hand from band practice the period before, and tightened my grip on it as I walked.

“So you could go enjoy yourself on Friday at the dance,” I said.

“Why?”

“I dunno, Wendy, I feel like I owe you one,” I admitted. “Ever since you started helping me out, figuring Marjorine and all that, I’ve just wanted to do you a big favor, so…”

“Well, if you wanted me to go to the dance,” she half-laughed, “why didn’t you just ask me yourself?”

I stared down at her, even as we continued walking. “What?!”

“I mean Butters-you,” she added with a shrug.

Well, honestly, I hadn’t thought of that, only because… well, I liked Wendy a lot as a friend. She was wonderful. But I couldn’t ever bring myself to date her. I liked our girl time, but we didn’t hang out much when I wasn’t having a Marjorine day. That was just the long and short of it. It
wouldn’t have worked. “If I had,” I ventured, “would you have even said yes?”

Of course, Wendy got it, too, and her answer was an easy, “No. You’re right.”

“Well, there, see?”

Wendy sighed. “Thank you,” she told me, “and… well, you were right that I do kind of… ugh, I don’t know what it is about him. Sometimes he’s just…”

“Really interesting to listen to?” I suggested, trying to laugh.

“Something like that.” Wendy then fell silent, to the point that I could hear the clack of my green flats on the stark linoleum hallway. Before our walk could come to an end, however, Wendy slowed her pace and linked arms with me. In almost a whisper, she then asked me, “So why didn’t you ask him?”

“To go with me?”

“Yeah.”

I patted Wendy’s arm and answered before I could think anything up, “I’ve been rejected enough lately. I couldn’t take another one right now. Besides, I think the only thing that would get him to say yes to me would be if the world was ending, and even then, I don’t know.”

“But Marjorine—”

“Wendy, just go, I want you to! Just have fun, okay?”

Unconvinced, Wendy squeezed my arm and said reassuringly, “Something will work out for you someday, Marjorine. I just know it.”

Despite my doubts, I still smiled and said, “Thanks, Wendy. Now just promise me you’ll have fun.”

“Okay,” Wendy laughed, “okay.” And then the bell rang.

Oh, something may work out, I thought, but not for Marjorine. Not even for Butters. No, nothing the normal world could offer. Nothing ever worked out for me in the real world, not all the way through to the end. I could do good all I wanted, as much as I tried, but bad things came in my wake. With a sigh, I opened my German texts and turned my notebook to the page into which I’d tucked the latest copied page of the *Necronomicon* I was planning on translating. I’d written out the word *chaos* from that book enough times to know which path now lay ahead of me.

I’d made a winning bet with Eric Cartman that afternoon. Now, matching words to their translation to uncover a passage about a sentient Mist—to which Cthulhu cults also paid homage—I knew that I’d soon be making a deal with something far more terrifying.

– – –

Stan

The League was the only thing keeping my head up at all. My personal life was shot to shit, and it was my own damn fault for letting things get to me, but in the League, I was Toolshed. Toolshed was a set side of me… within the League, I had a set way of acting and reacting, a set way
of sorting out information I was given, a set way of fighting and keeping the peace. For those purposes, I could suck it up and step up and, just as my ex-girlfriend had said, do good.

It bugged me that I was sort of failing the good part outside the League.

Wendy had gotten me nervous. Then I’d graduated from nervous to seriously postulating, and then from there I’d started keeping a mental list of my world views, life views, life goals, and, again based on what Wendy had said, what was important to me. And because I was too freaked out to talk about it with Kyle, I started talking to myself.

“Okay,” I said to myself in my room one day, “let’s sort this out again.” I was lying on my back on the floor, with my knees bent over my mattress so that my legs were half on the bed. I’d been attempting to keep my mind off of things by doing crunches (since coach was probably going to fucking murder me if we didn’t win Homecoming due to me slacking on physical training, which was bullshit but whatever), and had just sort of stopped, and started thinking again. “Right. So, she said important stuff. Like, family.” I groaned. “Way to be lame, Stan,” I scolded myself. “But it is important. Mom and Dad are together right now, that’s something. Shelley’s okay. Yeah. But I doubt that’s what Wendy was talking about.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and massaged the area between my eyes. “God, this is so stupid; I’m talking to myself. Okay, so… no… it’s not like I was neglecting my family for Wendy. No, she—“ I started doing crunches again—“thought I—was cheating—on her—with—” I dropped down to the ground and couldn’t make myself finish the thought.

Nervous again, I let out a groan, flipped myself over onto my side, landed just far enough from my bed to get my toes on the ground, and once I was all stretched out I started doing push-ups, again with the stupid intent to get myself to shut the fuck up.

“I wasn’t—ever—” And then push-ups no longer helped so I got up to sit cross-legged and stewed for a second, then got fed up even with that and stood to start pacing. “Okay, let’s assume she’s right,” I continued aloud. “Let’s say I did have a thing for Kyle. Let’s just say she had reason to think I was cheating. I mean, well, no, like, what do we do? We just hang out, we’re friends, that doesn’t mean…”

I stopped abruptly, and my eyes shot open when I realized what I was doing. Groaning again, I combed my hands through my hair and grabbed two fistfuls; I stood there, trying to make myself breathe. “Fuck…” I let out.

I’d been doing exactly the same thing Kyle always did: rant out loud, no matter who was (or wasn’t) listening. He’d come to me and just go sometimes, and I’d let him. Alternately, I obviously always went to go talk to him, too. I choked around anyone else… or around anyone else, whatever I had to rant about just totally didn’t matter.

Keeping it all to myself was—well, pretty painful, I realized. I sort of hated myself for being so closed-off, for not being able to talk to him. Okay, then, I thought… “Okay… let’s… let’s work that part out. Why not talk to Kyle? Maybe—” Quick gag reflex, aaaand, “Shit!” I hated this. I hated talking to myself. But I kept fucking doing it. “What the hell’s wrong with me?!”

Taking in a long, deep breath, I ignored that particular question to myself, and went back to: “Right… okay… just… a-as if scenario.” I slowly lowered my hands, only to discover that I was shaking. Seriously—why was I getting so nervous about this…? “S-so what if maybe I do like Kyle?” I tried to pep-talk myself around… whatever shit it was I was trying to get around. “I mean, there’d be reason. Yeah. Kyle’s a nice guy. And he’s smart; maybe Wendy was just getting jealous of that or something,” I ended up laughing. But I kept going. “And, hey, the guy always knows the
right thing to say, and we’ve been so tight for so long, I—I know him, I get him. And he’s… he’s attractive, right? For a guy? He’s actually kind of c—oh, my GOD."

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, fuck, oh, fuck, what am I thinking? What am I doing?

If that didn’t answer something for me, nothing would. I’d started thinking about it and I couldn’t stop; my mind was racing and it wouldn’t slow down. I slapped both of my hands over my mouth to block a scream I never ended up letting out. All I’d succeeded in doing was adding more evidence to Wendy’s theory, rather than convince myself otherwise.

Fact: I’d be a wreck if I stayed single. Fact: I was not interested in any other girls at school; even around town. Fact: I wanted to talk to Kyle but just couldn’t because…

Heart pounding like crazy, I sped across the hall to the bathroom, where I slammed and locked the door and made right for the sink. Cold water came shooting from the spigot when I turned the knob, and after a deep breath, I cupped my hands under the steady stream and bent over and doused my face. The first shock was enough to get me to breathe, so I splashed my face a second time. Satisfied that twice was enough, I heaved out a long, vocal sigh, turned off the faucet, and tilted my head back, letting the multiple droplets of cold water roll down my skin and onto my clothes, into my hair, doing what they could to wash out any negative thoughts.

This was supposed to be positive. Right? Sorting oneself out is a positive thing, or should be. I had to do this. I had to really dig into my own mind and decypher myself. What mattered. Who I was. How I viewed myself.

Slowly, I tilted my head back down, gripped either side of the sink, and stared down my reflection. Watching each move, I took in a deep breath and let it out. No matter what I discovered, that reflection wasn’t going to change. That was the reflection of Stan Marsh—SPHS junior, average student, quarterback, hero by night. Nothing changed that.

I closed my eyes and thought about Wendy. About what I’d seen in her, what chemistry we’d had. I enjoyed her activism, but saw in our history a lot of clinging for the sake of familiarity. Because we’d decided in third grade that we were going out, and then it just kind of escalated from there. Until she’d accused me of cheating on her with my best friend, and tearfully broken up with me.

So then I let my thoughts wander to Kyle. Kyle, to whom I’d told nothing of what Wendy had said, since I knew it would shake him, and I’d be too lost to elaborate. The guy I could always talk to, who called me on my shit. Yeah, our mindless afternoons meant a lot to me. Yes, sometimes maybe I had a little too much fun playing with his hair. And yes, I valued his opinions more highly than anyone’s, no matter the subject.

My eyes flared open when I realized how lost in thought I’d become, and I leaned against the mirror, so that my forehead touched the glass. I drew in another deep, now staggered, breath, and stood back. It’s no big deal, I thought to myself. Just… say it and see how it sounds. Maybe you are. Maybe you aren’t. Enough questioning. Just do it. Just say it. Just in case.

I mouthed the words first, and already my eyes stung. My heart thudded up into my throat; I swallowed it down and tried to gather my voice. Just say it.

Just to my reflection, to nobody but myself, I squared myself and said aloud, though hardly above a whisper, “I’m gay.”

My throat closed itself off; I couldn’t stop my damn eyes from stinging, but I refused to tear
up—I refused. “No big deal,” I whispered to myself, leaning up against the mirror again. “N-no big
deal, no big deal, maybe it’s not even… no… no big deal…” I stood back again, and I could’ve
sworn I’d snap the sink right in half, I was gripping it so tightly. Under my breath again, I repeated,
as if for a second opinion, “I’m gay.”

That was followed by an immediate, “Oh, fuck.”

I bent over the sink and couldn’t look in the mirror anymore. My heart had sped up to the
rate of a hummingbird’s, and my mind was blank, like someone had just cleaned off a chalkboard
covered with all the details of my life. Clean slate.

No big deal.

Fuck.

“Stan?”

“Shit!” I whispered. My mother’s voice had caught me off guard, and I shoved off away
from the sink. She’s shocked the wind right out of me, so I took several deep breaths to try to get
myself back up to speed. I’d completely forgotten about everything and everyone else. About all
my obligations. About everything. I wasn’t functioning; I couldn’t face my parents right now, not
when I was right on the verge of digging so deeply into myself. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I
just needed time alone.

I pressed my back against the bathroom wall, hoping Mom would just forget about whatever
she had to say and leave me alone. Just my luck that she didn’t. “Stan, honey, dinner’s ready!” she
called up.

Dinner?! Like I could fucking think about food right now.

“Suck it up,” I muttered to myself. “Come on, Stan, just suck it up and just go, just… deal,
and go… oh… fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…”

“Did you hear me?”

She wasn’t letting up. Shit—shit—fuck—“Y-yeah!” I managed to holler down to her. Regaining
my breath a little, I stumbled toward the bathroom door and opened it just a crack so that I
could follow up my response with, “I’m not hungry.”

“Stan, come on, you have to eat!”

“Mom, I said I’m not—“

“Listen to your mother, Stanley!” my father called up. Goddammit, didn’t they know I was
in a fucking crisis?

“Fine! Whatever.”

After answering them, I retreated back to the bathroom for a minute. Quietly, numbly, I dried
my face with a hand towel and stole a look back in the mirror. Dissatisfied, I shook my head and
left, letting my feet carry me with heavy steps downstairs. I wasn’t convinced… or, wasn’t ready to
be. I wanted to think it out more, talk to someone.

But who the fuck would I talk to if I couldn’t talk to Kyle?
My stomach churned, and I felt like crying. Just thinking about talking to him got me nervous and flustered—I’d never gotten like that about him before. Then again, nobody had pointed ‘that’ out quite like Wendy had before. She’d drilled it into me. I couldn’t escape from it. Because it was looking more and more like she was right.

Mom had made spaghetti, and it smelled great, but I just couldn’t eat. I poked the noodles around on my plate a little, and eventually ate a corner of a piece of garlic bread just to show my parents I had the ability to eat something, but they still looked worried.

“Everything okay, honey?” my mother asked. I shrugged and peeled off another bite of garlic bread. Mom sighed. Ever since Shelley had gone off to school, Mom had started getting empty nest syndrome, and was taking a much more active interest in everything I did, so of course she pressed on. “I’m worried about you, Stan. If this is about Wendy, sweetheart, I—”

“It’s not about Wendy,” I muttered gruffly, even though it partially was. I peeled off another piece of bread and tossed it down into my dish of noodles.

“Stan,” Mom frowned, “you’ve been acting really withdrawn since you two broke up. Are you feeling depressed, honey? Do you want to talk to someone?”

I shook my head and forced down another mouthful of carbs. I still felt both empty and nauseous.

“Like a therapist, or something,” Dad felt it necessary to add.

“I know what she meant, Dad,” I snapped at him, glaring across the table. “The answer’s no.” What was I going to say? I really want to talk to Kyle, but I can’t because I’m pretty sure I have a crush on him? That’d go over great. Of course, then I got all nervous again since I’d even had that thought:

_I think I have a crush on him._

I shoved away from the table. “Can I be excused?” I requested quickly. “I’m really not hungry.”

“Stan,” my mom tried, “please try to eat something. You boys, I don’t get it! One minute eating everything in sight and the next on a hunger strike over some girl…”

“Who said anything about a hunger strike?!” I shouted. Pretty much anything she or Dad said was setting me off. All I wanted to do was be alone to think. Was that so much to ask? All my parents did was say crazy things, distract me, piss me off. I needed space. Time to sort shit out. Figure out if everything that was worrying me was true. And how I’d go from there. “Mom, is it so hard to believe I’m not hungry? Can I just go? Please.”

Mom sighed, and looked over at Dad, so as to pass her intention on to him. Which was a bad idea, because I rarely—if ever—gleaned anything from Dad’s ‘girl advice.’ But he tried anyway. “Stan,” he started off, “we know it’s hard for you right now, but consider other things. Like… you have that big game tomorrow. And who, knows, maybe you’ll meet some other girl who—”

I drew in a deep breath and said through my teeth, “There isn’t gonna be another girl.”

“It may seem that way now, son, but—”

Blocking out anything either of them tried to say to me after that, I pushed back, stood, and headed back toward the stairs.

I couldn’t say the whole phrase to my parents, possibly because I still wasn’t sure if it was true. *I don’t like girls. I’m not attracted to girls. I’m—*

I couldn’t even finish the thought in my own head. I thought back to Wendy, but I was still so mad at her for leaving my mind such a mess I couldn’t sort out how I’d liked her. She was pretty, I knew she was pretty, and she was nice, and she was good in bed, and all that, and I enjoyed her company. The end. I’d been… sort of attracted to her, right? Just—not in love with her.

So what really mattered to me? And would that even matter at all?

Back in my room, I locked the door and leaned back against it.

All afternoon and evening, I’d just been confusing myself. I didn’t know which side I was arguing for. Obviously, there was nothing wrong with being gay. I had gay friends, gay role models; hell, Kyle and I were a big part of the reason Colorado allowed gays and lesbians to marry, based on some study we did back in fourth grade. But there was the catch: something else I’d done with Kyle.

Always him. It *always* came back around to him.

We’d always been together. We just… always had. We’d played together, fought about stupid things, gotten in trouble together, stuck up for each other, taken falls, placed blame, all the normal stuff. Boys will be boys and all that.

Until one of them figures out he wasn’t always playing.

I sighed and left my room, not wanting another night of little sleep. I ambled down the hall to the bathroom, grabbed some NyQuil out of the medicine chest, and returned to my bedroom, where I proceeded to choke down two of the sleeping pills. I lay down on my bed, over the covers, and covered my head with my second pillow, as if that would shut my head up at all.

Eventually, I did fall asleep, but I did so with the realization that tomorrow would be the first day I’d have to face not only Kyle but everyone after coming to terms with what I’d figured out that evening. I’d just have to try to not let on about it.

When I left for school the next morning, Dad gave me a pat on the back and said, “Keep your head in the game, Stan!” I knew he meant the football game that night, but that was the furthest thing from my mind. In fact, my ambivalence toward Homecoming would probably mean we’d lose, and that’d be one more thing for me to worry about in days to come.

I chose to take his comment to mean something else, though. There was only one solidly certain thing in my life, and that was the League. I had duties there that I wasn’t going to fuck up, no matter what. In fact, I was half-considering just abandoning Stan and only focusing on Toolshed for a while. But that was stupid. Being Toolshed required a certain amount of self-discipline, and a very exact set of orders. And I sure as hell wasn’t controlling myself very well.

Especially when I made the shitty decision of entering the school through the library entrance. I figured I’d avoid more people that way and could just go through the day being as awkwardly quiet as I’d been since the breakup. But before I’d gone ten feet, I heard a quiet voice behind me:
“Uh… Stan…?”

I turned to see Marjorine, in an odd turn of events. Butters had been showing up as himself more and more often, so it was almost a surprise to see her standing there, arms full of a stack of upper-level and arcane German texts. I decided (and later regretted) not to find anything amiss with that, and just said, “Hi. What?”

“Did you find out yet?”

“Find out what, Marjorine?” Great. I was already fed up with people and I’d only said two things.

“Oh, Jesus, so I guess you didn’t,” she started panicking. She ticked her head to the side, meaning I should follow, so I heaved an aggravated sigh and walked with her to a secluded table, where she set down her load and started playing with her hair. “I… I wasn’t thinkin’ about everyone when I did it,” she started rambling, “so I kinda forgot that you might get real mad…”

“What’d you do?”

Before she could answer, though, I was crunched into a strong headlock from the side, and pulled down to the eye level of none other than Eric Cartman. Of our group, I’d always felt the most alienated from him; when we were kids I was constantly defending the fact that we could hardly be called friends at all. “Stan!” he greeted, overdoing his enthusiasm. “Bro! How’s it going?”

“I’m not your ‘bro,’ dude, get the fuck off,” I snapped.

“Stan, Stan, calm down, take a seat,” said Cartman, succeeding in pushing me down into one of the chairs at the table.

“Eric, don’t,” Marjorine warned. “I was gonna tell him easy—”

“Nah, this way’s easier! See?” Cartman grinned. “He’s right here.”

“What do you want?” I stewed, glowering up at him.

Cartman smirked, and leaned against the table with one hand, so he had one free to gesture-narrate as he said, “Just gotta make sure you’re cool, man, that Wendy became available once you guys broke up—”

My stomach churned. Maybe I wasn’t in love with Wendy, but I cared about her enough. Enough to not want to hear the rest of this situation play out. “She said she needed time,” I said through my teeth.

“Hmm, yes. But—”

“Don’t you fucking say it,” I warned.

“Hey, your loss,” Cartman shrugged. “Just sayin’, hope it’s okay that I’ve got a date with your ex tonight.”

“No, it is not okay!” I shouted, propelling myself out of the chair and grabbing that asshole by the front of his shirt. “It is most definitely not okay!”

“Yo, she was single—”

“Yeah, I’m fine if Wendy dates other guys, but just—not—you!” Why? Why of all people
—Cartman? I decided then and there that I shouldn’t care about Wendy’s opinions anymore if she’d even ditch me for fucking Cartman. She hated him. Hated him, beat him up on numerous occasions for their opposing viewpoints, hated him. The fuck was she trying to prove to me by dating the bastard?

To make things worse, he just kept grinning. “Girls are easy,” he gloated. “And Wendy is __”

“Oh, my God, shut up, shut up,” I commanded, slapping my hands over my ears and turning to tune him out; “this is not happening.”

Two things were about to happen right there: one would have involved Cartman continuing to rub his triumph in my face, and the other would have been the librarian finally coming over to pound us both into detention come the end of the day. Neither of those happened, however, because the next thing I heard was Cartman shouting, “Ow!”

I glanced back over and saw two newcomers, which immediately got me all worked up in a few different ways. This was, by far, the worst start to a day I’d had in a long time. Kyle had broken up whatever fight Cartman and I were about to get into; he now had a firm pinch hold on Cartman’s left ear, and showed no intention of letting go. Nelly stood nearby, holding a couple sets of books and looking a little confused at what was going on.

“Oh!” Cartman spat again. “Kyle, that—ow, let go, bitch!”

“Shut up,” Kyle said firmly. “I get that you like being a dick—” he squeezed Cartman’s ear harder and dug his nails in, and Kyle, unlike me, does not bite his nails, “but quit rubbing it in.”

He let go before Cartman could have the satisfaction of shoving him off, and the defeated party left for the hallway. I would have glared after him and started wishing plagues upon him and Wendy both, were I not distracted by the fact that now I had to deal with a wholly different issue.

I just stood there and stared at Kyle, my fist tightening around the strap of my beaten old messenger bag. I pressed my lips shut tight, for fear of saying anything… for fear of how I’d sound. Desperate? Anxious? Was I already a dead giveaway? I couldn’t fucking tell. But I couldn’t even squeeze out a ‘thank you.’ I just… stared. Trapped—lost—captivated.

Fuck.

And, oh, God, this sucked, because I really wanted to thank him for saving me from the rest of that awful conversation—because now I owed him. I owed him but I couldn’t even face him.

“Stan?” Kyle tried, waving a hand in front of my face. “You okay, dude?”

My mouth opened and I heard myself say, “I—” He was standing way too close. Gag reflex. Goddammit, fuck!

“Hey, Kyle,” said Nelly, who I had completely forgotten about, “can we go?”

That was it. That was the issue.

Even if I were to admit anything to Kyle… what would happen? What did I want to happen? Honestly, standing there, thinking about it, I kind of wanted the outcome to be him saying, “Oh, hey, me, too,” or something like that. So we’d once again have something we could help each other through.
But Kyle was, well, dating. A girl. He was into girls. And there was no evidence to the contrary.

It was almost insulting how quickly Kyle and Nelly started going steady. It seemed like everyone around me had a girlfriend, actually—Clyde of course had Bebe, Kenny had finally hooked up with Red… and that gloating fat asshole Cartman had somehow grabbed Wendy away from me.

I fucking hated being single, and I fucking hated the fact that the longer I thought about it, the more I realized I had a full pool of words stuck inside me that one of these days I was just going to spew out.

Kyle gave me an odd look, then shrugged at me and walked over to his girlfriend saying, “I guess, yeah.” I knew he hadn’t meant for me to hear what he said next, but I did: “Jeez, you try to help someone…”


Kyle fought it for a second, then straightened and turned to face me again. “Stan,” he started. “Stan, are you gonna be completely checked out again today, or can I finally talk to you?”

The obsessions were driving me nuts—what I was thinking about, what I was avoiding thinking about, what I was thinking about even more by trying to avoid thinking about it—so eventually I made the incredibly dumb move of just walking past the two of them and out of the library. Once in the hall, my heart started up again, and I made a beeline for my locker, only because I knew I probably needed something from there.

I didn’t want to think about anything. I didn’t want to talk about anything.

Well—no. I wanted to talk to Kyle. I wanted to talk about Kyle. I wanted to be the only fucking person who could talk to Kyle.

“…When you figure out what’s really most important to you,” Wendy had said.

What was most important to me?

Answer: our friendship. A friendship I didn’t want to fuck up. I just needed more time, and then I’d be able to talk to him. As friends, like we’d always been.

But on came the distractions.

“Hey, Stan—” I suddenly heard Kyle say from my right. Heart pounding, I sucked in a deep breath and withheld a reply. “Stan, would you just—”

“I’m not talking to you,” I muttered as I closed my locker door. My voice cracked.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” spat Kyle, getting annoyed again. “What did I do? Huh? Can you at least just tell me that? What the hell could I possibly have done for you to be ignoring me like this?” I had nothing, so I didn’t respond. “Real mature, Stan! Real mature.” At this point, Kyle yanked me back.

“Hey!” I yelped, freeing myself and backing up a couple steps. I looked down at him and instantly wanted to run, since I felt myself flush. It had been hitting me for a while, especially now. I didn’t like looking down at Kyle. We’d been the same height all the way up through ninth, and then I just had to go and get taller. It felt like we were disconnected because of that, somehow.
“There. I got your fucking attention.” I shot him a glare, then turned to leave. I really didn’t want to talk yet. I was afraid of what I’d say if I started. “Stan!” I continued walking. “Stan, stop, I swear to God!”

I hadn’t gotten far before Kyle rushed around and planted himself in front of me. We were locked in a staredown for a while, which he ultimately won.

“Stan, what happened?” Kyle tried. “All I ever wanted to do was maybe help you out a little. I know it hurts, dude, and I agree that Wendy had no right moving on so fast, and with Cartman of all people, but… I’m here for you, Stan. I just want to talk. That’s all.”

I didn’t point out to him that the fact that he’d ‘moved on’ was bothering me even more. If he was single, would that have made a difference? Probably not, I realized, as I’d been giving him the silent treatment for a few days before Nelly came into the picture. I didn’t tell him so, but I didn’t think they worked as a couple. They just didn’t.

“Sorry,” I got out, my voice cracking, “I just can’t. Talk. I can’t.”

Kyle’s bright green eyes went soft and sad, and he looked like he wanted to retreat, but didn’t. That was something else I liked about him. He didn’t give up. Just… this time… this time was different. “I’m your best friend, Stan!” he said after I didn’t elaborate. “I miss you.”

That stung. I’d heard him say that before, but I’d never been so obsessed with the levels of our friendship before. I missed him, too, but I couldn’t explain why. The more I did obsess over Wendy’s words and my epiphanies of the night before, the more I started to feel it. But I couldn’t say anything. I’d fuck things up for good if I said anything. I just had to let it pass. Besides, Kyle had a girlfriend now, and I wouldn’t want to fuck that up, either. I was so worried about what he’d say, it made me sick.

“I’ve gotta go, Kyle. Sorry.”

“Stan, what did I do?” he cried, looking, honestly, a little lost.

“Nothing!” I snapped, still not looking at him. “It was nothing you did, okay?”

“Then what the hell?!?”

“Goodbye.”

“Stan!” Fuck. Fuck, fuck, shit, I wanted to turn around. In a moment of weakness, I did, and Kyle showed a tiny smile. “Good luck tonight, anyway,” he said. “Even if you don’t wanna talk to me ever again, I wanna at least say that.”

For the second time that morning, I couldn’t even get out a ‘thank you.’ I just muttered, “See you later,” and continued down the hallway.

It had happened before. I’d get down, I’d feel ashamed, I’d choke up and not know what to do. And when it got too serious, I wouldn’t go to Kyle. I’d hold it in. I wouldn’t talk to anyone. I’d just wait for it to blow over and get better. It happened time and time again, and as years went on, as I desperately clung to Wendy, the reason I sometimes found it so hard to talk to my best friend was because I didn’t want to say the wrong thing. There was now an unuttered phrase looming over us, and if I said it, it would make or break everything.

So I let Kyle get mad at me. I let him rip me apart. I let him try to talk it out, let him tell me I was being selfish, immature, immoral, unapproachable, that I was alienating myself.
But I was still afraid that, one of these days, I’d snap. I kept my hands pocketed around him when we talked, so I wouldn’t itch to just grab him and tell him everything.

Especially now that Kyle had a girlfriend again.

So I withdrew. Again. I avoided him. Again. I ignored Clyde and Kenny and Token telling me to chill the fuck out. I ignored Cartman trying to flaunt my ex in front of me. I ignored my own fucking feelings and shut myself off; shut myself out. Shut myself so fucking deep into a closet, you’d need an archaeological team to dig me out.

Yeah. That kind of closet.

I was that in love with the guy. So help me, God, I knew it, but I hid it.

We won Homecoming that night, but my head was only half on the game.

While everyone else went out to celebrate that night (my idiot dad included), I stayed home, once again having refused dinner, and let myself become a time bomb of nerves.

Happy, Wendy? I thought as I lay there staring at my wall. I figured it out.

Now what?

I wanted to talk. I did. I just couldn’t.

And I didn’t.

I wasn’t able to say anything to Kyle until Halloween.

Kenny

If I stopped to think about it, most of the circumstances around me weren’t the greatest right now.

My friends were all not speaking to each other. They were speaking to me, but not amongst themselves, and that was just fucking awkward. I wasn’t being used as a go-between or anything like that (that’s the extreme that they weren’t talking with each other, not even through a reluctant messenger), and they were hardly ever around one another, so I never had to choose between talking to one or the other at the same table or anything, but it was still awkward as hell to know that I was currently the only constant in their verbal exchanges.

As to what they were all pissed about, I could guess at most of it. Kyle was pissed that Stan was avoiding him like the plague without an obvious explanation. Stan was pissed that Cartman was going out with his ex, and at that stick that currently reached so far up his ass I was pretty sure it was affecting his brain functions. Cartman wasn’t really pissed, so much as being his usual dick self and no one had the patience to deal with him right now. I would honestly have to say that I was a bit pissed at all of them myself. Even Kyle, mainly because I considered him to be above all this shit. But currently he was being stubborn and a bit in denial by dating Nelly. Even though they did seem to be having an ok time hanging out with each other, I knew Kyle too well to not know that he was partially using her as an excuse to not have to face the real issue. Also, that day at the base, something had definitely happened that was not exactly normal, but, once again, Kyle was in
ignoring the issue that was staring him directly in the fucking face.

Long story not-so-short, my friends were being a bunch of pussies. But, as the most easy-going member of our group, I typically still tried to alternatively hang out with and tolerate the others, despite whatever drama was going on between them.

It was ironic that my natural personality leaned heavily toward nonchalant (that’s right, I can use big words, too), when my superhero alter-ego was, without a doubt, the most obsessive and, at times, I admit, uptight member of the League. I knew that most of my teammates sometimes wondered how two such apparent contradictions could naturally come out of the same person, but they were both me. That had always been true of my dual identities. In fact, having developed Mysterion at such an early age had probably even led my everyday-self to develop so freely in the other direction; I had a specific outlet for my dark, moody, seriously obsessive moods, so I never had to bother with those characteristics much when I wasn’t wearing a mask. However, there was one thing that did tie my average-teenager Kenny and my super-hero Mysterion personalities together: confidence. That’s where my impulsive actions and blunt speech came from as Kenny and my stubborn determination and need for action came from as Mysterion. It was my core quality, I guess you could say.

It was also probably why I hardly ever let my panties get in a bunch like the rest of my friends currently had. (If I wore panties, which I don’t. I’m not that kind of kinky.)

Though I was, of course, concerned about these other aspects of my life, without a doubt, my main focus right now was our upcoming mission. The last bit of information we’d discovered about the Cult’s activities was actually pretty frightening. We’d managed to confirm that they were willing to kill, possibly innocent people, for Cthulhu to return. We’d even gotten some clues as to who those people most likely were, but there was still a lot of hidden meaning in the words McElroy had used during that meeting. I tried to get some potential answers out of Henrietta, but, as usual, her replies frustrated more than aided me. She had no idea what the ‘Shadow’ might refer to, or how it was supposed to ‘rise,’ but she did say that the ‘Messenger’ was to come to the leader of the Cult in the form of the ‘Crawling Mist.’ When I pressed her further, she didn’t elaborate, and I left almost immediately after that, thoroughly pissed. That meant the League had to rely on educated guesses as to who the potential victims were, so we went with my initial hunches, mostly since nobody else had any better theories.

We tried to prepare accordingly, coming up with various strategy plans for different scenarios on how that night might go down. Of course, it was impossible to come up with a plan and counter-plan for everything, but we had enough schematics on the floor and ink stains from the dry eraser board markers on our fingers that you knew we had given it our best shot. For a change, it seemed like every one of my teammates was just as concerned about preparation as I was, and there was just reason for it. Having confirmation that the Cult was willing to cross the line to murder was unnerving, to say the least, but that knowledge gave us a dire responsibility. The League had to come up with a plan to stop these sacrifices or we would be responsible, however indirectly, for the deaths of three victims, and nobody (not even Cartman, apparently) wanted that. I, personally, did not relish the thought of carrying other people’s deaths on my conscience besides all of my own.

There was something else worrying me going into this mission, though, something from within our group, and that was our current disharmony. Everybody was pissed at everybody to some degree, and that was honestly not the best way to go into a major fight, no matter how often we said our ‘normal’ lives were not to affect our behavior in the League. This mission was too important to risk failing because our team members couldn’t play nicely with each other. I was capable of leaving all the shit behind once we got out into the field, but I didn’t know how much baggage the others would end up carrying into it, even unintentionally. So I was pissed at them all for that, too.
But, thankfully, I had better things to do for one night. And that was take my girlfriend to
the dance.

I still never got tired of saying that: ‘I have a girlfriend.’ I had had… well, sex, with girls
before (newsflash of the fucking year), and I even went on a few dates with some of them before-
hand (a couple I even enjoyed talking to). But I had never had someone who I actually looked
forward to being with. It didn’t matter what we were doing, I just liked being able to have something
consistent in my life that I enjoyed and was so refreshing and relaxing to be in (as in, not Mysterion
or death-related, neither one particularly getting me closer to inner peace anytime soon). I had always
had great companionship with the guys (when they all weren’t being giant douches with fucking
chips on their shoulders the size of kitchen tables), but this was different. For one thing, guy-
companionship definitely does not equal girl-companionship. There were the obvious reasons for any
straight male, and also the fact that with guys you could shoot-the-shit and relax, but you’re supposed
to do all the primeval-male things, too, you know, like tease each other and fight for the shit of it and
stuff. With girls, you had nothing to prove. Once you clicked with a girl, you could just do whatever,
as long as it was still considerate of her and your relationship and everything. And I was considerate.
I was considerate as hell. Contrary to my previous reputation as a man-whore, I am proud to say, I
knew how to treat a chick right. And you bet your ass I treated my girl like a goddamn queen for
how amazingly incredible she was to me.

That’s why, when Homecoming came around, I went all out for Red. Of course, I was
limited a bit by my modest budget, and I didn’t dip into my life savings or anything, but I made sure
my cheerleader girlfriend got to the dance in style. We had been going out long enough by that point
(six months, mother fucker) for me to know all the details that would be the icing on the cake for her.
Red’s favorite color was dark blue, so I had on a dark blue tie. Being on the squad was important to
her, so I planned on telling her at some point during the dance to go hang out with the rest of them
for a while so they could have their girl time to talk about the game and squeal over decorations and
shit like that.

Thankfully, I managed to borrow a car from Token (he had an extra, the rich asshole), so I
picked her up at her house. I only had to wait a few seconds for the door to open after I rang the bell.
That was another thing about Red, she wasn’t one of those girls that made you fucking wait forever
because they thought ‘leave at 7 o’clock’ meant ‘you come over at 7 o’clock and sit awkwardly on
the couch for twenty minutes while I go through five thousand outfits.’ She was ready, so much so
that she had everything she needed right when she answered the door, clothes, jacket, purse and all.

She was wearing a light peach, off-the-shoulder dress, which complemented her skin tone
really nicely and managed not to clash with her bright hair, which she had styled very smooth, but
with a bit of a lift to it at the top and at the ends. She had it all brushed over to one side so that it hung
over her right shoulder. She had on heavier make-up than usual (as to be expected), but not so much
that it was overdone. The perfect balance. And whatever lipstick or gloss or whatever she used made
her mouth just pop the same color as her hair.

She was absolutely fucking gorgeous.

I made absolutely no attempts to hide my approval of her outfit, though I did have the
decency to wait until after she stepped out to join me on the stoop and closed the door. Then, I
promptly kissed her hard on the mouth, both of us lost for a moment in flat-out lust. Once that
glorious moment passed, I leaned back and smiled at her. “You look great, baby,” I said.

“Well, thank you,” she giggled a little, “I would never have known you approved
otherwise.”
“Oh, I have my ways,” I smirked, and planted a smaller, but just as sincere, kiss on her. She complemented my tie (check), and I helped her slide her jacket over her porcelain shoulders (yet another reason to hate the cold Colorado weather). I linked arms with her and walked her to the passenger side of the car, opening the door with a corny-as-hell sweep of my arm, followed by my proclaiming in an equally-cheesy voice, “Your chariot, mi’ lady.”

She laughed, bowed back a little, and said “Why thank you, kind sir,” as she pecked my lips before sliding into the seat. I closed the door carefully and made my way over to the driver’s side. I didn’t care what might come up at the dance, this was going to be a fucking spectacular night.

It may have been selfish of me to think, but I wanted this night to go well for another reason, too: I wanted a moment of normal, cliché high school fun before all the shit went down on Halloween. I wasn’t sure exactly what would happen if we didn’t manage to stop the Cult from completing whatever ceremony they had planned, but it probably would mean that the League would have a major crisis on its hands, leaving little time for a social life, if it would even be possible. So, I decided to get plenty in before-hand. Just in case.

And honestly, the dance turned out to be pretty fun. There was free food that didn’t taste like shit and punch that someone (I bet one of the seniors on the football team) spiked. The music was mostly crap, but it was a beat to move to. Red and I danced for a few songs. When an older one started that was obviously the work of ancient (read: now thirty-something) teen pop idols, she squealed and said that she used to love this group back in elementary school. I was reminded of the time back in fourth grade when Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and I had been in a boy band ourselves. That, of course, got me thinking about the guys.

We decided we were done dancing for the moment, so I told Red she should go talk to her girlfriends for a bit. “Are you sure?” she asked with a look of uncertainty on her face. “I don’t want you to be bored just sitting at a table somewhere.”

“It’s cool, really,” I assured her, “I’m gonna see what some of the guys are up to, so don’t worry about it.”

She smiled warmly at me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Kenny. I’ll find you again in a bit, ok?”

I kissed her cheek as well. “Sure thing,” I said, and she squeezed my hand before making her way over to a bunch of her friends who had come as a stag-group (double check). I watched her ass for a minute and then looked around the room to see where any of the usual suspects had gotten to.

Stan, of course, was nowhere to be found. It was a bit odd, him being on the football team and all and skipping out on the Homecoming dance, but I wasn’t in the least surprised. He had been acting so retarded lately, I had been surprised that he had actually remembered which way to throw the fucking ball during the game.

The main cause for his new state of existence as a walking, breathing douche was over at a table with Eric Cartman. The fat tub-of-shit was devouring a pile of cookies he’d gotten from the food table. Wendy was sitting there with her hand holding up her chin, looking vaguely out at the dance floor, trying not to show how disturbed she obviously was his intensity. I felt slightly sorry for the girl, but she had brought this circumstance on herself. I wanted her to keep it together for the League, but fuck the rest of it.

Kyle and Nelly looked like they were having a good time. They had been dancing a bit, and Kyle seemed like he might actually be enjoying himself, despite all his protestations against these types of things. They were sitting at a table toward the back of the room, so I made my way over. He
was laughing really loud at something, but Nelly looked almost concerned. I wondered what about, but as I got closer, I noticed he had a cup of punch held tightly in his hand.

Oh. That’s why he was so happy. He was drunk.

Well, so much for Kyle genuinely enjoying a superfluous school function. The kid had probably only had two drinks, he was such a fucking lightweight.

Kyle was still laughing when I got to the table. Nelly looked up at me as I greeted her. Kyle hadn’t seen me approach from his right side, he had mostly been leaning over to his left, but he turned at the sound of my voice. His eyes widened at me. “KENNYYY!” he shouted, waaay too loudly. He grabbed me around my legs and awkwardly hugged me as best he could while sitting. “What’s up, dude?”

“Hello, Kyle,” I said in an amused tone, “having fun?”

“Oh, yeah,” he started laughing again, mumbling his speech a bit. “In fact…” and here he relaxed his grip to look up at me again, smiling insanely, “I’m as high as a fucking KITE!”

“Oooooo-k,” I said hurriedly, fully extracting his arms from around my legs. This party was over. “I think it’s about time you went on home, buddy.”

“Haha, you said ‘buddy’ like Ike does.”

“You know, maybe you should just spend the rest of the night with him,” I suggested, since another League member was apparently the only safe place for Kyle to be right now.

Nelly didn’t seem to mind going home. She didn’t seem mad, but I got the feeling she may have been dealing with drunk-Kyle for a good while before I made my appearance. They had carpooled with Token and his date (the rich asshole had driven his other car there), so I offered to drive them back myself. Red was fine with leaving, having had her fill of the event all ready.

I dropped Nelly off first, since she lived closest to the school, then Kyle, making sure Ike took him from my hands. That red-head could have a big mouth when he wasn’t watching it. Finally, I drove back to the house of my own red-head.

As amusing as the evening had been so far, I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t been looking forward to this part. Red’s parents had left for some late dinner-cocktail thing that old married couples do, so we had her place to ourselves for a while.

We, of course, took complete and utter advantage of this happy circumstance.

It started off slow, but insistent, mainly because we were both still wearing nice, more-expensive-than-usual clothes, and we didn’t want to hurt them or anything (at least I sure didn’t, since when I have something nice I tend to try and make it last as long as fucking possible. Case in point…). I was sitting on the edge of Red’s bed, and she was straddling my lap, a position made even more provocative by her severely-ridden up skirt and the fact that she had on nothing else besides her underwear. Our mouths were locked together, alternatively kissing and biting in a slow, deliberate rhythm. I had already chucked my jacket as soon as we had entered the room, so Red was now patiently undoing my tie for me, which she then slowly pulled through my collar. It made a soft hissing noise, which Red then oh-so-fucking-sexily imitated as I rubbed my hands along her legs from her knees to her sweet ass. She got a little more insistent at that, and quickened the pace of our lips as she undid the buttons on my shirt. I let go of her to shake off my sleeves, then promptly grabbed her ass again with my left hand and behind her shoulders with my right and swung her
around onto the bed behind me. I used the jump in the bedsprings to help launch myself on top of her, and we immediately continued the work our mouths had been doing in a far more persistent manner.

I worked her dress up her torso as far as it would go and ran my hands all over her stomach and her sides, causing her to let out some insanely spectacular noises. I then pulled her up to a sitting position, her legs bent up at the knees, and carefully pulled the dress over her head, our mouths only parting long enough to let the fabric pass between us. I tossed the dress away somewhere, and gently pushed my girlfriend back down onto the bed. She worked at the buttons on my pants as I slide my hands under her to undo her bra.

God, this was awesome. I managed to keep a steady relationship for half a year. And it was with someone sexy as shit who could keep up with me in bed and in conversation. We just meshed together well. Both of us riding this bitching wave of a relationship as it took us on this freaking awesome ride.

Having both succeeded in our missions of clothing removal, our underwear was the last obstacle between us and mind-blowing sex.

I paused and pulled back for a minute, looking down at Red. She was already sweaty and panting pretty heavily with her mouth still open from the tongue-lashing we’d been giving each other. She looked up at me with half-lidded eyes and ran said organ fully along her bottom lip.

Sweet Jesus, thank you for this.

That night, that fucking night, that was beautiful. I made love to my girlfriend with more intensity than I ever had to anyone; she was mine, and I was hers, and everything else around us was nothing but shadows.

I was in metaphoric heaven now, but I hoped that I wouldn’t really end up there by the end of the month. As much as I hated to admit it, I realized I actually was a bit scared as to what was going to happen when we went up against the Cult. We’d never had a full confrontation with them before. We’d gone up against Cthulhu back when all this started and then small factions of Cult members since, but never the entire group. And that might be exactly what was waiting for us when the moment finally came.

Was I worried about Halloween? Fuck yes. Did I think the League could come out of the encounter unscathed? I sure as hell hoped so.

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Chapter End Notes

The first multi-perspective chapter. Also, nearing the start of the second arc of the story! :3
I didn’t know if I’d make it through the Monday after Homecoming. Oh, I survived the weekend fine, only because I did nothing. I left my cell phone off and plugged into the wall, and I barely left the house. Which, of course, got my parents—Mom especially—all worried, but I kept them placated by actually doing a little studying. I couldn’t finish reading the new Chemistry chapter, though, since it just reminded me that I’d have to suck it up and take part in some kind of conversation with Kyle as his lab partner once that class rolled around again. Unless the teacher decided to keep doing lecture classes, which would buy me some reprieve.

Monday, though. Monday sucked. Monday sucked and there was nothing I could do about it. The halls of SPHS were too small, the extent of the walls cut me off from any good place to get away, even for a second. I accepted the random congratulations I would get for winning the game on Friday, and managed different kinds of responses when people said they missed me during all the celebrations afterward—the dance, a couple parties that had happened on Saturday.

It was just really hard to even so much as hear the name ‘Wendy’ spoken anywhere near me. I had lost all respect for that girl over the weekend. Every time we’d broken up in the past, someone would inevitably start the “Wendy’s just a slut” rumor, since she’d get another boyfriend so fast, and this time I believed it, given her choice of date. The fact that she and Cartman had one date together at all didn’t settle well with me, and the fact that they still seemed to be together on Monday was not only surprising, it was kind of cruel.

That much may have made me ill, but it wasn’t even out of a want to get back together with Wendy. Her being with that asshole just made me not even want to talk to her. I hardly considered Cartman a friend, so by dating him, Wendy was proving herself just as detestable, which sucked. Wendy was supposed to have been above that. I’d even kind of started hoping that, yeah, maybe she and I could be friends again once I came out to her.

The thing I’d been chewing over all weekend was primarily that, too: coming out. How. When. To whom. Should I wait till after high school? After the football season (at least)? Before Halloween? (But that only gave me a day.) After? Should I even do it at all? Maybe I needed more time. Should I try to go to a meeting first? Maybe talk to Butters about the school’s pride meetings… but that would mean the first person I came out to was Butters, and that didn’t seem right. My parents were out of the question. Not them first. Because Mom would start trying to work out my ‘next steps’ for me, and Dad would… be Dad. That wasn’t what I needed. Somehow, Wendy had seemed like a good first choice, since it kind of figured that she already knew, but fuck her if she had morals that would allow her to date the most intolerant person I knew.

I stumbled through the day half-aware. My head too full to try to sit through study hall, I used my athlete privileges to skip out, but rather than go for a walk to clear my head, I stayed inside, and chose to do the most mindless, stupid task I could think of: clean my locker. I’ll admit I’ve always had a bit of a hoarding issue, but I was also just a messy seventeen-year-old; so what? There were lockers that looked way worse than mine. So I stole a trash can from the bathroom at the end of the hall, and started throwing things I didn’t need, and stacking up the things I did.
Books—keep. Current notebooks—keep. Papers, cough drop wrappers, a Coke bottle from last week—toss, toss, toss. It was all mindless work; it was great. It made me only focus on what was in there… focus on something immediate. The top shelf cleared off fast enough, but the bottom needed work. I found a pair of cleats I thought I’d lost buried under a stack of syllabi in the back corner, so I cleaned the grass off the bottom of those and shoved them into my bag. Papers had fallen through into my locker and formed a little pool at the bottom, but I cleaned it all out easily, making sure I went through each thing individually, just in case it was something that really should be filed to study later, or something my parents should have received a month ago.

And then I found it. Something I’d obviously been meant to find, eleven days before. It was a good thing I found that at the end of the task, too, otherwise I was pretty sure my locker would continue spilling out into the hall and I’d never get the rest of the cleaning done.

It was an envelope, clearly containing a note of some kind, with my name written on an otherwise blank white surface, in Kyle’s swift, precise handwriting. Quickly, I shut my locker, reclaimed my bag, returned the trash can to the bathroom and stole a look at my phone’s clock before heading to the back stairs that led only out to the teachers’ parking lot. Nobody used that staircase during or between classes, and if any of the staff walked by, I’d just flash my priv card and they’d leave.

I selected a stair halfway down past the second landing, shrugged off my bag, and sat against the wall under the stairway’s only window in order to read. The envelope was sealed, so I carefully, neatly tore it open, and found inside just a folded piece of lined paper, torn from a notebook and bearing pen and pencil marks, suggestions and shadows, from what were probably earlier attempts at the note I then unfolded.

*Stan,* it started off, Kyle’s handwriting not straying from the lines even a little, *I know you didn’t want to do anything for your birthday this year, but you’re getting this lame note anyway whether you like it or not. I want to say again that if you ever need to talk about anything, just ask me. We’re all worried about you. You’re missed when you get checked out like this. So, yeah, just come find me whenever you’re ready. And I owe you a real birthday present, too. Let me know whenever you want to cash in on that. Whatever got you down, I hope you feel better soon.* —Kyle.

I read the note again, if only because my hands wouldn’t let me fold it back up again quite yet. I loved it. Sure, it was simple, sure, it was lame, but I was so fucking glad I’d found it. It was exactly what I needed to get me started on getting my nerve back up to talk to Kyle. He really was worried; he really was upset. I really was being a total, lame, stupid jerk. I’d do it. I’d find him. I’d apologize. And hopefully not throw up.

When I finally did fold the note back up again, I kept it in my pocket for the rest of the day. I’d reach in to grab my phone to check the time (seriously, all that thing was good for was to function as a glorified watch), and my fingers would brush against it, reminding me, *figure out what to say and say it.*

The chance to catch him passed as the school day wound down. It was October 30th, the day before our huge mission, so of course Kyle had some date planned with Nelly, just like Kenny was spending all afternoon and evening with Red, since Halloween had been written out of all of our calendars days ago. I didn’t let it get to me, but I was still itching to talk to someone, just to see if I had the ability.

Once football practice let out that afternoon (and after enduring more ‘dude, why’d you disappear all weekend?’ comments from Clyde and my other teammates), I didn’t go straight home, even though I was fucking starving. Reading that note from Kyle had seriously woken me up or
something. I was motivated again. Maybe I was still subconsciously hoping that I’d talk to him and he’d dump Nelly and we could… work something out… but I tried to let thoughts like that slide. Apologize first. Then worry about if I should come out to him or whatever.

Almost without thinking, I went to my odd choice for a safe-haven on the far side of downtown. Well, not too odd, considering my alter ego. I went to Home Depot, which I’d go browse during the day (and sometimes buy a flashlight or pack of screws or something so I wouldn’t look too suspicious) for things to add to Toolshed’s arsenal. Home Depot was good for a lot of things, and one of them was friendly advice. Or, well, the place itself wasn’t; one of the student workers was.

I walked up to the service counter, where two attendants were ticking away at their computers. I ignored the first, and walked right to the boy with the perpetual smile and slick blonde hair. Though I’d spent a lot of middle school ignoring him, Gary Harrison, the middle child of our town’s only Mormon family, had ended up being someone I came into more contact with once high school had started. Of course, he didn’t know it, but I’ve been talking to him as Toolshed for longer than I’ve come to him for advice as Stan. Gary started working at Home Depot when he turned fourteen and could legally work, apparently in order to save money for Brigham Young University, and for donating to endless charities. Being such a nice kid, of course he’d even help out one of the town’s vigilantes, and he got me, as Toolshed, a bunch of deals on equipment, as well as advance sales of certain models (hence the awesome sledgehammer I’d been hooked up with). Anyway, once I started relying on him as Toolshed, I started considering the kid a friend again, and I knew he wouldn’t question it because he’s one of the most genuinely kindest people in South Park.

“Hey, Stan,” he greeted me, looking up from his work, “what’s going on?”

“Dude, do you have a minute?” I wondered, folding my arms on the counter.

“Uh-oh,” said Gary, setting his hands on his hips, “that doesn’t sound good. If you don’t mind my asking, does this have anything to do with Wendy?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah. Sorry I’m dumping it on you.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’m not busy,” Gary shrugged. “I was sad to see you two break up. You seemed like such a good couple. But you know what? I wouldn’t be depressed about it, if I were you.”

“Yeah, I was hoping you could give me some advice on getting over it,” I admitted. “I’m not in love with her or anything, but I’ve been angry about her going with Cartman, so…”

“It’s kinda useless to be angry, though, don’t you think?” said Gary, grinning somewhat. “I mean, maybe some people are nicer than others on the surface. But I would say, trust that Wendy knows what decisions she’s making. See the good in it, you know?”

“Mmph, I guess,” I said. “Thanks, but, the whole thing is kinda…”

“Getting you down?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, hey, if you’re ever sad, don’t think about how sad you are… just think about how you can make it better!” That was so Gary. He was never angry. That kid had growth mindset written all over him. “Everything happens the way Heavenly Father intends, Stan. Maybe you weren’t
meant to be with Wendy, because you're gonna find someone even better!"

I had no idea how he did it, but I did feel better. I’d thought on and off again about trying that Mormon thing again (Dad had tried to get the whole family converted, once… then again, Dad has also attempted being a bunch of other things, including an atheist, before, so…), then realized I had no connection to the religion (or most organized religions, for that matter) and didn’t feel like spending two years trying to get people to convert to something I didn’t believe just because being Mormon seemed like it could possibly make me a little happier sometimes. Whatever I thought, I did appreciate Gary’s help. He’d only said a few words, and I felt better.

The drive back home was spent trying to figure out exactly how everything needed to play out now. I had to keep myself in a positive mood, that was for damn sure, and after having a reassuring conversation, I was pretty sure that would be easy enough to do. Plus, there was that note, which hadn’t moved from my pocket and which I read again that evening. It was so stupid of me to be reading it so many times, but it helped me break out of my funk. It reminded me that, hey, I hadn’t fucked anything up in our friendship so far… so a late and what was sure to be awkward apology surely couldn’t do any kind of lasting damage.

Mom had prepared stuff for burritos that night, and she was understandably surprised when I wolfed down two of them and still ended up raiding the fridge afterward for something else. “I was wondering when you’d start eating again,” she made a point to comment while I was starting in on an apple and waiting for a bagel to toast. I shrugged and thanked her for dinner, but didn’t tell her anything else. My parents were kind of last on my list of people I needed to sort things out with. Besides, Mom was astute enough that she’d probably start figuring something out on her own.

For the rest of the night, I holed up in my room and took out a notebook I’d been keeping hidden from my parents’ view for ages. I’d always hide it in different places, but it was usually at the bottom of a trunk of clothes Mom was always yelling at me to get rid of because I’d either outgrown them or rarely wore them. The excuse was always “I’ll get to it,” and thus it became the perfect hiding spot.

It was a notebook in which I kept track of things we’d discussed at meetings. I didn’t write in it much anymore, since we met so much more frequently, and things stayed fresher in my head, but I had to get myself into the right mindset for the following day. Cthulhu had obviously always been Mysterion’s thing, his weird obsession, but it concerned all of us, too. I, for one, was in on the League for personal fulfillment. I felt like, no matter what we did, it was for a good cause. And what better cause was there than stopping Cthulhu from rising and destroying mankind, right?

The notebook started out with the chickenscratch writing I’d only managed to perfect somewhat since fourth grade. I’d started in Coon and Friends when I was nine, and had found it necessary to write down a few things like, “Cthulhu keeps fucking up New Orleans. That sucks ass.” Which was the best way any nine-year-old would know how to react to news like that. I’d scrawled out a few things about Cthulhu and the Cult, too, and just looking at that notebook made me remember, from time to time, why I was still involved, and why I cared about fighting off the Cult at all.

Because the League had basically stayed together thanks to the fact that the Cult threat wasn’t going away. We’d done plenty of great work in the meantime, but they were always there, under everything, which Mysterion often reminded us. As I looked into the notebook again, I remembered how terrifying things had been for everyone when Cthulhu rose, all those years ago. It could only be worse, now. I knew the rest of the League shared my sentiments, too; we were going to see this thing through. Maybe we didn’t know the Cult’s full motives, but we knew that we weren’t exactly ready for the world to end. I figure that’s a pretty damn good reason to want to do anything.
The morning of Halloween, I had a plan. I woke up early, Monday having been the only one of a few nights recently that I hadn’t taken a pill to help me get to sleep, went for a jog, showered, and was still at school on time. Those of us in the League knew what that evening meant, but we didn’t let onto it. There were no club or athletic responsibilities that afternoon… in fact, the only thing running was detention, which we had to bail both Cartman and Craig out of if we were going to get anything done. (They’d apparently gotten each other there, which sort of made sense; they were kind of similar personalities, so they clashed, and had gotten into some brawl about another historical event Cartman got wrong. Craig was probably just being passive until he ended up punching Cartman in the face. I didn’t care to learn all the details… I just knew I didn’t care to bail out either of them, but they had to be a part of the plan that evening.)

We all pretty much headed directly for the base once school let out, walking in separate groups. I’d been planning to go alone, to sort out the last of my thoughts before that evening, but Kenny slid into the passenger seat of my car as I was turning the key into the ignition. “Kenny, dude, what the hell?” I said, glaring over at him.

“You’re driving to your house first, right?” he grinned in response. “It’d be stupid if you left your car outside Token’s.”

“Yeah I’m driving home first, but—”

“Then go! I gotta talk to you.”

I rolled my eyes and backed out of my parking spot, then slowly started to make my way off school grounds and toward my street. “My house is farther from Token’s than the school,” I reminded Kenny. “If you needed a ride, drive with him.”

“I don’t have to talk to him about anything yet,” said Kenny. He picked up my CD wallet from the floor and started flipping through the sleeves, probably just for something to do.

“Kenny, I’m gonna talk to him,” I said, knowing the conversation was leading there anyway.

“And by him you mean Kyle,” said Kenny firmly, flipping to the next set of CDs stuffed into those clear sleeves in no particular order.

“Of course I mean Kyle.”

“Just making sure. You talking to him before or after?”

I sighed. “After, Kenny, don’t worry about it,” I grumbled. “I have to, and it has to be today, but it can’t be before we do any of this Cult shit or I think we’d both get distracted.”

“Distracted?” Kenny half-laughed. “Dude, all you’ve gotta do is apologize.”

“I know,” I shrugged. My face felt hot, but I tried to hold myself together long enough to get through this conversation, “But it’s more complicated than that.”

I felt Kenny staring at me in a quizzical way for what felt like about an hour, though it couldn’t have totaled more than five seconds before he said, “Whatever you say, dude.”

Once we pulled into my driveway, we made straight for the base, and I distracted Kenny by asking him how his Homecoming weekend had gone, and right off he started spilling out this elaborate story of how he felt lucky for the first time in his life, that he and Red were already
planning what sounded to me like the first real family Thanksgiving Kenny would ever have (with her family of course, not his), and how incredible his girlfriend was and all that. I was glad that things seemed bright for at least one of my friends, and Kenny kind of deserved it. I was glad he and Red were working out together, glad he had someone he could always go to.

I thought, once we only had about another mile to walk to Token’s, about having Kenny be my guinea pig. About coming out to him before anyone. After all, Kenny didn’t judge, and he’d always been pretty supportive. Actually, he’d probably be the least weirded out by the bomb drop than anyone, and I could maybe even use him for advice. But I didn’t get the chance, since by that point we crossed paths with Clyde, and conversation shifted completely.

I had to apologize to Kyle, though, no getting around it. I wanted to, and needed to; I was sick of not being able to talk to him, sick of myself for being so closed off. It couldn’t happen until after we dealt with the Cult, though—as I’d told Kenny, any talk I had with Kyle beforehand would only succeed in distracting both of us, and we were still working together as Toolshed and Human Kite just fine. The thing was… sure, I’d apologize to him, I’d admit, yeah, I was being a total dick, but I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to stop myself from saying more. From telling him Wendy’s accusations, and how I’d figured out that, yeah, I had a thing for him. I just didn’t want to fuck anything up. I couldn’t fuck it up. Which was why it had to wait until after we stopped the Cult.

We were all feeling pretty confident that afternoon, too. Kenny went to suit up immediately in order to make it back to the common room, probably to wait for our unorthodox arrivals, but Clyde and I spoke somewhat in the cloakroom. He couldn’t stop talking about the mission, now that we were within safe walls, which started to get me good and focused.

“Dude,” he said, shaking his head as if in disbelief, “I can’t believe we’re finally getting into some action against these guys! All this research and everything is great, and all, but this is what I do this for.”

“The actual fights?” I wondered.

“Hell, yeah, man, it’s a test of what we’re actually able to do.”

I liked that. Leave it to Clyde, who could always so easily step into a much-needed leadership role, to be able to bring what we were doing to light so simply.

“I just hope we’re not out too late,” said Clyde as an afterthought, which made my stomach flip. I hadn’t thought about that. “I mean, I’d imagine once we hold these guys back, the cops can take over, like usual, but I’m not ruling out an extra-long struggle tonight.”

Crap. That had not crossed my mind once. Way to interrupt the plan. When Clyde left, I lingered in the cloakroom for a minute, trying to think of something to do.

There was a green ushanka on the top shelf of the coatrack, and a midweight hunting-season orange jacket hanging below. I had to laugh; Kyle hadn’t strayed from the color scheme that worked for him since we were kids, especially this time of year. I hung my own lined coat next to his, then, a thought hitting me, dug into all of my pockets to see if I could find a scrap of paper. Luckily, there was an index card in my coat, stuffed in there when I hadn’t needed it for a stack of study notes I was writing out, and I borrowed a pen from the lower shelf, where I just knew Ike would have one stashed somewhere.

Just in case we were out too late, or for some reason I wasn’t able to get around to it, I still had to let Kyle know things were looking up, and that I was over being silent and dismal. Then, of course, a block hit me as I wondered what the hell to write… how his note had cheered me up, how I
was sorry I’d been so closed off… but all of that could wait for the actual conversation. Summing everything up, I simply wrote, Kyle—Got your note. Thanks, dude. Talk soon. —Stan. Yeah. Yeah, that was good enough. Normal enough. And it still gave me plenty of room to sort out what to actually say.

So that I’d stop obsessing over it, I tucked the index card into Kyle’s jacket pocket, next to his cell phone, and made for my private room just as the door was opening to signal the arrival of that night’s two additions.

I went through the motions as usual, casting off everything from the day in favor of giving my all to being Toolshed. More than just the attire… it was the outlook, too. That much was easy enough though. Just like Clyde, just like everyone, I was ready for this fight. It was something we were all ready for, something we’d known was coming since fourth grade. I was just glad the Cult hadn’t been able to attempt anything before all of our field-active members were sixteen and seventeen—the older and more trained we got, the better chance we had of stopping them. The more research we did, the more missions we accomplished on the side… oh, hell, we were ready.

The final touch, I masked my eyes in charcoal black and slid on my work goggles. Pulling on my gloves and fastening my toolbelt, I left the private room and headed straight for the meeting hall.

I cast a brief glance into the common room before I left, though, and saw that both Craig and Henrietta had indeed shown up. Craig would show up as long as there was something in it for him, but Henrietta was indeed a surprise. The pasty Goth, with her tangled Siouxsie updo and swirling Egyptian makeup, was sitting uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa with her lace-gloved hands folded over a dusty old book. She looked rigid and uneasy, but I realized after Craig made a brief complaint of his own that it only had to do with the no smoking indoors policy that we had at the base. The fact that she’d shown at all was saying something… though it troubled me that I didn’t know what.

Casting aside my uncertainties for the time being, I walked back into the meeting hall, where I claimed the sledgehammer I’d left there after the last time we’d met and fastened it to the straps on my back. Seeing the League all assembled and prepared was such a welcome sight. My arrival was the only one the others were waiting on, so as soon as I approached the table, Mosquito called for the pre-mission meeting to begin, and Mysterion began going over the full battle plan we’d worked out. From the start of the meeting, each and every one of us was ready to kick some serious Cult ass. The plan was complicated and intricate, but we’d gone over it so many times it was if we’d carried it out already. Mysterion would head into the Park County station first, to alert the force of our impending arrival. It was then up to Mosquito to take charge and deploy police forces as backup in inconspicuous places (since the force was usually unable to place themselves anywhere but the Goddamn spotlight), while the defense team got into position. That included Iron Maiden, who was excited to get a piece of the action, and even Craig, who got roped into tagging along and was to be on guard with Iron Maiden, since he’d met with Wilcox and the nerds before. (He’d be wired again, and Red Serge was setting up to record everything.)

The Goth girl was indeed set to be a part of the mission that night, and her involvement both surprised and worried me. Human Kite shared my suspicions and kind of demanded that she be stationed on the roof with him, so that he could keep an eye on her.

“Too risky,” said Mysterion, shaking his head.

“Having her at all is too risky!” Kite argued. “Where would you put her, down close to the door where she could do the Cult a favor? I don’t think so.”
“I’m with Kyl—Kite on this one,” I said, stopping Mysterion from stating his case any further. He shot me a dark look, though, so I continued, “I know you might trust her, but she’s still a Cultist.”

“Her motives are different.”

“How so?” I barked. He’d said something to that effect before, which didn’t make putting up with her any less troublesome. “You haven’t told us. So unless you’re gonna waste this time explaining the Goth brain to us, I say put her with Kite. He can keep an eye on her, restrain her if necessary, and if we need him for backup, at least she’s stuck on the roof.”

“I’m actually for that, too,” said TupperWear.

“So am I.” That was Marpesia. Her agreeing with me was probably the best thing I’d heard from her in days, but I didn’t show that I’d been affected.

“All right,” Mysterion gave in, “all right. She’s on the roof.” Kite cast me a little glance of thanks, which got me totally out of character for a second, and I smiled back, to tell him, *No big deal; you’re welcome.* “Anything else we need to go over, or are we—”

“Actually,” said the Coon, raising just one taloned finger to command attention, “I’ve kinda got news.”

“That being?” Mysterion prompted.

“Ran into Chaos this morning.”

Well, *shit.* We could have learned *that* about, oh, three hours ago. “Chaos, or Butters?”

“Chaos.”

“Why didn’t you send out an alert?!” Mysterion growled, unimpressed.

“Because,” answered Marpesia, glaring at the Coon testingly, “he misplaced his phone in Stark’s Pond and he’s waiting for his mom to buy him a new one.”

“Aye! Don’t even—”

“Okay!” I hollered, not about to let this turn into some… thing between Cartman and Wendy. It still freaked me out. Especially within League halls. “We don’t care. What’d Chaos tell you?”

The Coon smirked at me somewhat. As much as I didn’t want it, or didn’t care, Cartman was still probably going to remind me as often as he could that he had Wendy. Whatever. I was almost over it, honestly. It was weird to think about, but I was just done trying to sort it out. My new outlook was just that: *whatever.* Not my problem, not anymore. I told him that with a glare of my own, which made him snap back into character in order to say, “He just wanted me to deliver a message, kinda. He wants in on tomorrow night’s meeting.”

Everyone tensed. “Does he know what we’re doing tonight?” Mosquito wondered.

“And why’d he send the message with you?” Human Kite added.

“Look, Chaos does weird stuff,” said the Coon. “I don’t think he’s gonna do anything tonight, but he might be onto us.”
“Well,” said Mysterion, “it seems pretty clear he knows something big is going on tonight. Everyone should keep an eye out, just in case. Any other questions?”

Nobody rose. Nobody spoke.

“All right. This is it, then.”

This is it.

No room for failure. The primary goal was to stop the Cult at all costs. Stop them from busting their allies out of jail. Stop them from summoning this new ‘Messenger.’ And no matter what… no matter what… stop them from summoning their great, frightening deity. They’d try to open the Gate to R’lyeh that night.

But we knew that the news would be full, the following day, of buzz about how our League stopped them.

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Red Serge gave us the signal to move out.

We arrived in our separate teams at different times, starting with Mysterion around five. The Cult only moved after sunset, so we knew we had time. As second wave, Human Kite and I went next, escorting Henrietta between us. Had she not been there, I knew I’d have been tempted to break role and discuss, well… what needed to be discussed. But I’d already decided: no distractions beforehand. Hell, if anything, it’d make me more motivated, knowing I’d set a goal for myself for afterward. And what a goal, too.

We did make conversation on the walk, though, mostly because neither of us knew what to make of the Goth girl. “Seriously,” Kite asked her, glaring through his goggles at her with those omniscient green eyes, “why help us at all?”

“I told you jerks,” said Henrietta, marching forward and barely acknowledging either of us, “I have a deal with Mysterion. The rest of you are extra baggage, but whatever.” Even though the sun was setting by now, she was carrying a black, Victorian lace parasol. Kite and I actually shared a good eye roll over that one, which further showed that we were fully capable of a normal conversation later on (which was a pretty fucking fantastic notion). In her other hand, she held her own ratty copy of the Necronomicon. That was primarily the part that was worrying us.

“Other than your weird obsession with Cthulhu,” I added, “what do you and Mysterion even have in common? Why the deal, what’s it about?”

Henrietta probably would have laughed, if Goth Code (or whatever) allowed her the luxury, but instead a haughty snort came out of what was probably a fairly attractive face under all that powdered makeup, and she answered in what very well could have been a riddle: “You guys seriously don’t know? You’re pretty lame teammates if you don’t know about the real link between that mystery leader guy of yours and the Old Ones.”

“Link?” Kite and I repeated simultaneously.

“What link?” I added alone.

“Wow,” said Henrietta. “He wasn’t kidding. You seriously have no idea.”

“What are you talking about?!” Kite hissed at her.
Too late, though. We’d made it to the station and had to assume our positions. Before parting ways, Kite and I exchanged a glance that was basically both of us reaffirming that he’d keep a really fucking good eye on her during the course of the evening, and the he hoisted her up to the fire escape (and I couldn’t help but watch and marvel over his impressive upper body strength, since the girl was no stick) before hurling a grappling hook up for himself. Now, he very well could have taken the damn stairs, but I understood his need to see just how fast he could scale the station wall. With Kyle, I was sure he’d studied the heights and dimensions of everything in the surrounding area.

I found myself grinning as I worked my way back to my own position. Honestly, that note of his had been all I’d needed to get me back on track with my life. I was still a little nervous about the talk itself, knowing I’d probably choke again, but I told myself to get over it. The biggest debate now was whether or not I told him everything right off, or kept a few things for later on. Apology first… apology first, that was it. Then go from there.

The alley behind the Park County station was already darker than the rest of the street, though I knew I’d be in total black soon. Surveying the area, I saw a chain-link fence to my right, just past a little alcove where I chose to place myself, behind a leaning pile of discarded two-by-fours and several other lengths of plank wood.

Wait… two-by-fours. May as well make good use of the time I had before Mysterion’s check-in for positions. The best part of my role in the League was that I was one of the only ones who could turn anything into a weapon, suitable for anyone to use. So I crouched down, selected a few two-by-fours, and set to work pounding a few nails into one end of each of them. Instant mace.

Once those were done, I scoured the area for other ideas. The fence itself posed an interesting prospect. There was a door in it, locked of course, but nothing my loop of skeleton keys couldn’t handle. I kept it locked for now, but didn’t rule it out as an escape route. There was one fire escape almost directly above me, with about a ten-foot drop from the last landing.

The rest of my arsenal was promising, too: two drill-bit guns, made from converted electric drills; hammer and nails; awl; couple of sharp fuckin’ screwdrivers; and, of course, the sledgehammer. Kite and I hadn’t practiced the ricochet lately, but we’d be able to pull it off again if we needed to.

After a good fifteen minutes, the wire crackled in my ear and Mysterion’s voice came over the communicator: “Right… everyone in position?”

“Coon defense team in position,” was the first answer.

“Perimeter’s secured,” TupperWear added in.

“Human Kite in position,” was the next. “One eye on the streets and one on our little Goth friend. No movement on either, yet.”

“Force backup is in position,” Mosquito buzzed over the wire. “Toolshed, I think I’ve got your six.”

“You’re watching way too many cop shows, Mosquito,” I chided back, even though I could see him behind me in the alley. “Toolshed in position; alley so far secure.”

“Timmah.”

“Guys this is really lame.”

“You’re lame, Craig!” That was the Coon.
“If we’re done,” Mysterion cut in again, “let’s be on alert. Let’s make this quick and easy, guys: nobody’s waking any Dark Gods tonight.”

Getting in the last word before we fell into a silent watch, Mosquito added, “We can do this.”

*We can do this.* Let that be the mantra, League. That was all we needed to have on our minds. Just hold their forces back, just stop the station’s threshold from being breached. *We can do this.*

A good twenty minutes passed before the first signal. “Look alive, boys,” said Marpesia, “I’ve got three in cloaks, East checkpoint.”

“Shit,” Mosquito’s voice came in soon after. “Three West, too.”

“And some fucker with a book,” Human Kite added on. “Mysterion, he’s all yours. Two guesses as to what that book is.”

“Sure as hell isn’t *Catcher in the Rye,***” Mysterion growled back. “It’s McElroy. Gotta be. I’ll get him. Kite, see if Henrietta can identify anyone.”

Oh, so that was another good reason to have her come along. We knew plenty of the members, sure enough, and I was still sort of freaking out over the fact that I recognized the guy I’d seen coming out of the bookstore several nights ago, but in cloaks, they were all the same. Plus, we very well could have been dealing with members from Cults out of town.

Not to discount that ‘Mr. Skin’ guy Craig had talked about. The one that had tried to steal the papers and artifacts he’d been dealing. Early meetings about Halloween had seen us suggest that the mystery man from L.A. could be another candidate for Messenger, but things seemed to fit too perfectly into Mysterion’s main theory: that the Cult was breaking Wilcox, blood relative of the mad artist who had first introduced New England to the horrors of Cthulhu with that statue, out in order to see him rise to that occasion. And there were three sacrifices in there with him. Talk about giftwrapping an ideal package.

“Mosquito, you need backup?” I asked in a hushed tone, in case the wire carried (which, of course, Red Serge had made quadruply sure it wouldn’t, but it was habit nonetheless).

“I’d watch the fence if I were you,” he answered. “I think I can get these guys easy.”

I peered out from my hiding spot just in case, though, and saw that he was more than capable of taking care of his new task. Mosquito’s stun gun would hurt like hell, and could paralyze a man for a good few hours, with very few cases of lasting effects. It did really suck that at least some of the Cultists knew Clyde’s name, since if he was ever caught as himself with those weapons, he’d be doing five in jail in a heartbeat. Not that, you know, a sledgehammer and drill guns were any less harmful. In fact, my arsenal was probably worse.

“All right!” I heard the Coon shout, probably since he’d forgotten to silence his communicator. “Bring it on!”

“Coon, how many’ve you got out there?” I wondered.

“‘Bout five, but I can deal,” he answered. “The Coon’s always on alert.” Some superhero comics bugged me when I was a kid because of the hero’s tendency to narrate in the third person. So whenever the Coon did that, I always had to bite back some kind of juvenile comment. Well, sometimes I’d go ahead and berate him for it, but tonight wasn’t the right time to worry about dumb personal matters like that.
“Mysterion!” Human Kite suddenly shouted into the wire. “What’s the latest on McElroy?”

“Not now, Kite, I—FUCK.”

“Mysterion, what?” I wondered.

“Decoy. Fucking decoy!” Mysterion hollered. “Stay on every single fucking cloak that comes in, guys, got me?!”

We all responded to the affirmative, and at that point, the fence was scaled. Four robed Cultists successfully climbed and jumped the chain-link, so it was time to move. There was an eight-foot plank of wood directly to my left, so I took aim and kicked it down, clocking one guy on the crown of his head, and with a little extra force, I’d shoved him to the ground. I released the safety on the drill gun strapped to my right hip and walked out into the now-moonlit alley. The unsuspecting Cultists had come up with no kind of discernable formation, so I clipped two of them—one in his right shoulder, one in the left—with one bit shot each. The last of the four infiltrators was within close enough distance that I was then able to turn right around and hit him across the face with the back of the drill gun; while he was recuperating, I elbowed him in the nose and heard a telling crunch before spinning back and kicking him to the ground.

Another two cloaks were in position on the opposite side of the fence, so I put target practice to damn good use and shot right through two diamond-shaped openings. One of the guys I grazed on the side of his head, and from the blood and shouts that came from him afterward, I knew the shot had gone clean through his ear.

None of us ever aimed to kill, not even the Cultists. But there was no rule against fucking with an enemy’s hearing. Hell, I’d done worse to guys in football. (Yeah, yeah, the QB shouldn’t tackle, but we always do. Too fuckin’ satisfying.)

And so it continued. On, and on. Mysterion had fathomed a dozen… more like a gross. From everyone’s frantic updates, it seemed that there was no end to the waves of cloaked Cultists advancing on Park County station that evening. Mosquito and I alone had about twenty guys down between us, and we weren’t sure if the numbers would ever stop.

“You guys doing okay down there?” Kite called down. “Hardly any activity up here.”

“Hold your position!” Mysterion advised. “Everyone hold positions until another party is threatened. These guys are just pawns! We’ve got worse on our hands to come.”

Yeah, no shit. No sooner had he said that than another half dozen or so were sent in. No time to even catch my breath—thank God I’d finally slept well the night before, because shit, this was ridiculous. Before I could even request backup, though, Kite hollered, “Hold position, my ass! I’m going down there!”

The Cultists were many in number, but awful in formation. They clumped, probably under the assumption that if we knocked one down, the rest could mow just one of us over. It was clear that fighting wasn’t their forte… they were waiting for their deity to take care of that. And as long as there was a clump, there was a damned easy way to scatter it.

“Ricochet!” I shouted. We were out of practice, but, fuck, this had to work.

“My thoughts exactly!” Kite hollered down. “In five!”

After a two-count, I hurled my sledgehammer skyward, and had no time to check whether or not Kite had actually caught it, since I had a Cultist at my back. With no time to draw an extra
weapon, I just turned and punched him with a swift left hook, then tossed him into the concrete wall of the next building over just as my sledgehammer came down at a perfect angle to pin one man down and send another two running in opposite directions. Mosquito had his own hands full, but he stunned one of the runners for us; Kite was then on the ground, having landed square on his feet, and he spun out a length of emulsified string. Once it had unraveled to his desired length, he managed it like a whip and struck down the second Cultist with a single blow.

“Thanks,” I grinned at him, retrieving my sledgehammer.

“I wasn’t about to let you guys have all the fun, are you kidding me?” was his reply.

Another wave was approaching, so the two of us went back to back, I facing the fence and he preparing to take on anyone that filtered in past Mosquito. There was a back entrance to the station from the alley, so the infiltration was understandable, but also annoying and unsettling. “I wouldn’t call it fun just yet,” I commented. “This is getting exhausting.”

“I’ve got your back,” Kite assured me.

“Thanks, dude.” And I’ve got yours.

And so the next wave came. From the rest of the updates, it was becoming clearer and clearer that their primary focus was indeed the back door. We called for backup again, which brought the Coon in, but even four of us in the alley wasn’t enough. Eventually, TupperWear was called to switch out with Mysterion, who finally joined the fight behind the station.

We were horribly outnumbered, but we held our own. With the Human Kite on the ground, with the Coon providing defense and Mysterion helping us swiftly dispose of a great many Cultists, things were looking a little brighter. Every one of us seemed to be in the alley now—the only ones still positioned elsewhere were TupperWear, Marpesia and Iron Maiden. Mosquito was onto his second stunner, which we all knew held less of a charge than his primary one, so it basically stood that that first one had to recharge fast. When he got in a bind, I rushed back and tossed him one of the two-by-fours I’d modified at the start of the evening, and not a second too soon—he caught it and instantly whipped it around to knock out an armed man behind him.

Wait—armed?

“These guys have guns!” Mosquito warned the rest of us in his commanding nasal pitch.

“Then we’re fighting dirty,” Mysterion decided… or basically ordered. “Coon, get as feral as you fucking want.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he grinned, extending his arms to brandish those polished talons. The Coon really was a force to be reckoned with—he’d been working with an undisclosed source on making sharper and harder finger armor talons over the past few years, and the latest design was his most vicious yet.

Five men ganged up on him, but he was at peak stamina. Seriously, if there was one thing I ever had to hand the guy, it was how he managed to keep up with the rest of us on League missions, even though he couldn’t even jog a quarter of a mile. This was his element, though, and the more people he got to beat the shit out of, the better.

The Coon took out a man with each hand to start, yanking their hoods off and giving them matching claw marks down the sides of their faces. I couldn’t help but cringe…but, hey, the method worked and was still non-lethal. The wounded men retreated immediately, and the Coon took
another few swipes at his remaining opponents, only one of whom started to give him a run for his money.

Guns and knives were pulled, but we really had been ready for this fight. We were all being pushed to our limits, and there were several times I wondered if I’d be able to keep breathing steadily, but whenever I had to ease up on my method of attack, the Human Kite was there to fill in and take down more than one opponent, or Mysterion would hurl a *shuriken* without skipping a beat in his own personal struggles.

“Mysterion,” I finally found the breath to ask, “what exactly is going on?!”

“I’m not sure, they’re taking a really indirect approach!” he hollered, clearly upset that we were so outnumbered, and that the Cult leader, McElroy, hadn’t even shown his face yet. “I thought that this was about—”

“One to open the Gate,” I heard someone say. Oh—now, there we go. Their strategy must have just been to wear us down… to go for their sacrifices once we’d put all of our efforts into holding back the first several waves of Cultists.

Even while fighting back my own opponents, I glanced over at the sound of that voice. The voice of the man I’d seen that evening in the bookstore parking lot. Someone struck me from the side, so I pulled my focus back to my own fight for a second, in time to yank my hammer out of its sheath on my toolbelt and brain the man who’d tried to attack me. He crumpled to the ground, where I knew he’d stay for a good long while. Sliding the hammer back into place, I then flung the mallet of my sledgehammer down onto the concrete to propel myself up and kick down one cloak; I still had enough speed going to then plant my feet on the brick wall behind me and flip forward—once my feet were back down on the ground, I hurled the sledgehammer up over my head and brought it down clean into the unsuspecting back of yet another Cultist, who then took the full brunt of the hit and was sent flying back into the wall.

I glanced around for the man who had spoken, and that was when Mysterion intervened. He lit up a Roman Candle and shouted, “*Bomb drop!*” That was his code for the rest of us to shield our eyes, and I know that at least I was able to do so just before the firecracker set off a booming, blinding flare. A gutteral yelp told me that Mysterion had then gotten in a clean attack on his target. “Where’s McElroy?!” he demanded. “And what the fuck are you all doing? Aren’t your sacrifices inside?! Or is this what you want?!”

“Mysterion, what’re you doing?!” Kite shouted.

I opened my eyes to the scene, now that the flare had died down and the alley was back in only lamplight. The Coon and Mosquito were holding off the final wave of armed Cultists, but some had still made it through to the alley. Mysterion was holding one man up against the brick wall, and… had a gun pointed to his head.

No, not the Cultist.

Kenny had just pulled a gun on himself.

“Dude, what the fuck?!” I hollered over.

“You want me?!” Mysterion was screaming gruffly at the cloaked man. “Am I the fucking sacrifice, is this what it’s all about?! Take me, fucker, I can’t die!”

“Mysterion, what the fuck are you talking about?!” I yelled. What was he talking about,
"STAY OUT OF THIS, TOOLSHED. This isn’t your problem!"

"Yeah, it damn well is!" I accentuated the statement by drawing my drill bit gun and taking aim directly at another cloaked man who had made it into the alley. He took the hit right in the kneecap, so I gave him a matching set. Kite, meanwhile, had a guy in a chokehold with his emulsified string; after a few gasping seconds, he then knocked his opponent out with a swift blow to the back of the head, followed by a knee to the ribs for good measure.

“What are you really doing here?” Mysterion shouted. “Who’s really the sacrifice?!”

“There are three.” Oh, fuck. I hadn’t been manning the chain link fence. Mysterion, Human Kite and I all turned at the sound of Jim McElroy’s voice. He appeared in the alley, washed out in the lamplight… the only Cultist who wore his hood down. “No need to be so melodramatic, Mysterion,” he grinned, as the pale lamplight cast upward shadows that increased the hollowness of his wizening face. That really was, if I ever had to describe it, the face of terror. “It isn’t you we need to kill.”

What the fuck was going on?

“Shit!” I heard the Coon shout from behind us. “Fuckers just keep coming!”

“TupperWear, Marpesia, backup, now!” Mosquito hollered desperately into the wire. And where the hell was the force? Had the Cult knocked them all out?

“HENRIETTA!” Mysterion shouted up to the roof. “PLAN B!”

“Oh, dear,” said McElroy, taking a few steps closer to us. Mysterion let go of the man he’d been shouting at and holstered his pistol, in favor of taking on a ready stance that showed his want to take the Cult leader on with his hands alone. “It sounds like you had an interesting backup plan, but our new Messenger will arise tonight.”

“Like fuck,” Mysterion growled. “Let’s go, motherfucker.”

McElroy just smiled, and Mysterion sprang into action. I wasn’t able to watch much beyond his initial attack—he rushed forward, feinted back into the shadows, then pushed off the wall and clotheslined McElroy at the neck—since I had my own problems. Sound carried well, down into the alley, and I heard a female voice cut through the air. Henrietta had better have been executing Mysterion’s Plan B… that was for damn sure. I figured we’d find out soon enough.

Then again, nothing was certain that evening.

I definitely hadn’t planned for what was coming next.

Kite and I were faced with another three cloaks each. I took two out fairly quickly, as did he, but just as he was delivering quite the blow on his third, that voice came out again:

“One… to open… the Gate…”

The slightly startled man from earlier held up his pistol and took aim. Right at my comrade.

Right at Kyle.

Pseudonyms… alter egos… whatever the fuck they were… second names… didn’t matter
anymore. Hero mission or not, Kyle was Kyle, and I still owed him an apology. I still owed him a lot.

He wasn’t going to die that night. But something ate at my stomach, at my heart, telling me that somebody was. We’d gone into this fight so confidently.

None of us had even considered the fact that someone might not make it out.

Talk soon, I’d written in that note to Kyle earlier in the day. God, I thought, now, I still fucking hope so…

I knew it was happening the second I measured the man’s aim. Somebody should tell Kyle to wear black, I thought. Light blue is too easy a target. “Kyle, get down!” I shouted over at him.

“I...? STAN? What the hell are you doing?!” I heard him cry out behind me.

I closed my eyes and felt tears. Wendy really was right. I liked hearing his concern. Even in that moment, I could be selfish enough to indulge in that. Wendy, no matter how weirdly I thought of her now, deserved to know that she was right. And Kyle deserved to know… to know everything, from my worries and fears to my deepest confessions, even if he couldn’t reciprocate. As the bullet hit, I knew exactly why I’d taken the full shot. I was just protecting what mattered most.

Then came the pain. The bullet shattered a rib. I felt the bone snap, and then the bullet sailed right up into my heart before digging its way through arteries, muscles, tissues, and then bury itself right into my back, or somewhere further back than my heart, anyway. I hadn’t paid much attention in freshman year biology. Oh, well. Like that mattered anymore.

I felt myself scream, and heard it a second later.

Drowning out even my screams was Kyle, shouting out my name again. I was losing blood fast, and I started feeling dizzy and exhausted. My head spun, and my knees buckled. Shit. Death really did hurt. And I really did see my life flash in front of me. I was so fucking young, but so much shit had already happened to me and my friends. Hah, whoops, that time in preschool when we’d set our teacher on fire... still felt bad about that. Then there was the day I got my dog... my parents getting divorced and making up—I was still happy about that... Wendy, together and apart,
together and apart... my friends and I, and everything we’d done, all the trouble we’d caused or
gotten involved in, all the aliens, celebrities, even just kids we’d met, wronged, fucked up or even
loved... Peru... the forming of the League... all the way up to high school, where it was all about to
end.

Sorry, guys. It’s just you, now.

“Stan!” Kyle cried. I was falling; he caught me, but I couldn’t hold myself up. I managed to
move my arms enough to grasp at his as he tried to keep me standing, even my left arm, which
caused even worse pain in my broken rib. “Stan, hold on, I’ve got you, just—j-just hold on, okay?
S-Stan?” His voice trembled with anticipation of the end.

Scrambling to keep my feet, I lifted my heavy head to look at him, through blurry eyes and
those tinted goggles. Seeing him unhurt was fine for now. Yeah. That was a good way to go. If I
had to go. Sure as hell seemed that way. “You’re okay...” I managed to say. My voice sounded
cracked and feeble. Finding the breath to speak was hard enough, I was surprised my vocal chords
pulled through for the rest.

“I’m fine, Stan, but what about you—?”

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” I admitted. My knees gave, and I felt dizzier than before. My
heart had almost completely given out. I slipped; Kyle did his best to keep hold of me, but I had no
strength or will to stand. A dark, sleeplike blanket was winding its way around me, it seemed,
shielding me and promising me comfort if I’d just close my eyes. Huh. That’s profound for a last
thought. Maybe the Goths and their poetics had had a lasting influence on me after all.

“Stan, no, we’ve gotta get you out of here!” Kyle insisted. “Call an ambulance! Ike!” he
cried into his wire. “Someone! Call an ambulance! We’ve gotta get him—”

“Kyle—” I managed.

“Y-yeah.?” he asked, his voice sounding farther and farther away.

“Sorry,” I apologized. My voice had been reduced to a whisper, and a chill rushed through
me. My heart wasn’t beating anymore, I couldn’t feel it.

“Stan—” His eyes were wide and green and blurry with tears and—God help me—
beautiful. One to open the Gate. That was me, huh? Damn it. I’d failed so many people in too
many ways. I didn’t want to leave.

I didn’t want to leave Kyle.

At least not before...

“Kyle, I...” I tried. No good. My body was spent, I was done. I had no more breath to
support a thought, I had no means by which I could keep myself going. That dizzy feeling got worse
and worse until I simply gave up and let it shut me down. I felt like I was falling asleep after being
awake for days on end. Kyle lost his grip, and I fell. Upon impact, I could no longer feel a thing.

My ears had gone almost completely deaf, my eyes almost completely blind. But I saw him
fall to the ground beside me, just barely felt him place his sturdy hands on my shoulders, managed to
gather one last burst of energy in order to place my right hand over his left. No energy for anything
else. Nothing else.

My body went numb, and I felt myself stop breathing; let my eyes shut, let myself fall into...
whatever was waiting next.

“Stan!” I was somehow able to hear Kyle cry out. “Stan, no! Come on, dude, stay with me!”

_I wish I could, Kyle. I really do._

_See you on the other side._

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Chapter End Notes

The alley/death was one of the first parts of this fic I wrote; I had no idea how long it would be after that, but I'm happy with the end result. Chapter 13 is the start of the second arc.
Episode 14: The Rest Is Not Silence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kyle

I was paralyzed.

Everything came to a standstill. I could hear the others calling out, possibly to me, but my ears registered only noise; my mind was too blank and confused to extract any meaning or clarity. When we had agreed to join Kenny in his quest, strange as it seemed, to unlock the true secrets of the Old Ones, I had anticipated unnatural things happening, as unnatural things had followed us, all our lives. On my life, however, I had never thought to prepare for something like this. At times, my own best judgment can fail me: I have lost my little brother one too many times to crazy schemes, I have alienated friends and alienated myself.

Death was something I was not ready to deal with. Particularly the death of my best friend, the person who had always been there for me, even when we’d had our falling outs. We had grown up together, we had promised back in preschool to look out for each other, and now here we were, twelve years later… or, rather, here I was, alone.

My eyes were glued to the spot. I will never be able to un-see that whole morbid scene. Clear as day, Stan lay in front of me, a prominent bullet hole torn into his white shirt, staining faster and faster with his own blood.

Minutes ago, he’d been breathing. Seconds ago, he’d been alive. Just earlier that day, he’d come to school, just like everyone else, he’d set out on this mission with the rest of us in the League, he’d held his own against countless denizens of Cthulhu. But then, seconds ago, or eons ago, it no longer mattered, he had jumped into the line of fire for me. He’d planted himself right between me and a loaded gun.

And now he was gone.

This was impossible. This was simply impossible. We’d made so many plans. We’d been best friends for so long. We’d been League partners for seven years. We’d egged each other on, pushed each other’s nerves, and formed a solid friendship that could never be rivaled. What now?

What now?

This wasn’t supposed to happen. This wasn’t a part of the plan. Sure, we hadn’t really spoken in a while, but we hit those down patches every now and again. All friends do. But I’d been so hopeful that things were looking up.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

So there I was. Frozen. Empty.

My hands trembled, where I grasped his shoulders. His hand still covered mine, but it had since gone limp. There was no grip. No pulse. No life. His eyes were closed, his lips still slightly parted from the last thought he’d tried to say to me. I’d never know. I’d never know what he’d
meant to say, not if he was gone. The lamplight was washing out his skin. He looked too pale.
Much, much too pale.

“No…” I managed to say, my voice cracking as I spoke. Nothing else mattered, nothing else bothered me. If there was still a fight going on, I had no idea. I just could not look away. “No, get up…” I tried, being childish and unreasonable. I shook Stan’s shoulders as if to jostle him awake.
“Come on,” I pleaded, ‘don’t do this. Don’t—you can’t die, don’t die, don’t you fucking die!’

That was it. I’d lost it. Because I’d said it. My voice had returned, only so that I could scream out my fears and frustrations, my grief and agony, my utter dread of having to face anything ever again. Dead. That meant no more. Nothing. Gone. Buried. Fucking buried, I didn’t want to fucking bury him.

The shock of what happened hit me again, and, finally, emotion hit. “STAN!” I screamed, leaning further over him. Even speaking his name hurt. He was supposed to answer, Goddammit! “What the fuck?! WHAT THE FUCK?! STAN!” My eyes were too fucking blurry, everything was so fucking warped. I pulled my hands back and ripped off my cap and goggles; I tossed them aside, not caring where they fell, then shrugged off my harness and turned my attention back to Stan, where he just lay motionless. There was just nothing. No response, nothing.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit, SHIT! Stan, come on!” Fuck, was I being irrational. What else could I do, though? I wasn’t gonna calmly accept that this had happened. He’d taken a bullet for me. LITERALLY. He had jumped in front of a fucking bullet and taken it right—through—the—chest. I could not accept that. I could not accept that he’d been so full of life one second and completely bereft of it the next. “Stan, come on, dude, answer me!” I screamed, shaking him by the shoulders again. No reaction. “Get up! Get UP! You’re not allowed to die before me, you fucking idiot, get the fuck UP! You’re not allowed to die!”

“Kyle!” Kenny’s voice. That was Kenny’s voice. Or, Mysterion’s. He’d kept up his tone. How he could at a time like this was beyond me—could he not see that one of his friends was dead? This shouldn’t have been the time to worry about anything else. “Kyle, what just—”

“He’s dead…” I found myself saying, my voice weakening as reality hit harder with every passing second. “He’s dead. They killed him.” My stomach churned, and I felt sick. “Oh, my God…” I let out, holding my head as if that could somehow jostle me into some other state and make everything go away or restart or something. No dice. Nothing could change the fact that I was kneeling over my best friend’s body. He was gone. Just fucking gone. Tears burning my eyes, I whipped my head around to glare at the Cultist responsible. “Oh, my God!” I screamed again, boiling up with rage. “You killed Stan, you bastards!”

“Kyle, wait!” Mysterion tried again.

But I drowned him out. My ears were buzzing, like there was a pressure, a pulse, surrounding my head and shutting out everything in the world. The only fucking thing I wanted was revenge, and I knew just how to get it. Tossing all logic aside, all rationality, all moral thought, I pulled the flathead screwdriver out of Stan’s toolbelt and stood, shaking. It was one of the sharpest tools in his arsenal, and it was going to go to damn good use.

Trembling, and holding back every urge to break down and cry, I tightened my fist around that screwdriver, narrowed my gaze on that one pathetic excuse for a man, and made my feet carry me forward until I’d grabbed the man by the neck and driven that screwdriver like a knife into his left shoulder. He let out a holler, but I did not fucking care. As he was recovering, I spotted the sledgehammer lying a couple feet away…the same one Stan himself had been doing such masterful work with until only precious moments ago. That might do. I walked over to retrieve it and picked
it up with ease, even though my grief made it feel much heavier than before, as it now carried its own weight, as well as the weight of too many memories.

But I had it in my hands and I was going to do some Goddamn damage with it. As I stormed back toward the killer, every one of my comrades tried to shout at me to stop, but I’d have none of it. I was being completely fucking irrational, but the world had stopped being rational, so why should I listen?

“Kyle, the hell are you doing?!” I must have been in an awful state, if even Cartman was trying to stop me.

He stepped in to intervene, but I held out the sledgehammer threateningly and snapped, “Get the fuck out of my way!”

As soon as he’d backed off, I lifted the sledgehammer up over my head, picked my pace up to a light jog, and, screaming out my rage, bolted at the Cultist and swung out to continue my attack in a possessed frenzy.

“YOU!” I screamed at the Cultist, who was trying without success to dislodge the screwdriver from his shoulder. “You killed him, you stupid—” I swung and missed, so I used the velocity of the swing to kick the man around to the other side of me— “horrible—” I swung again and successfully broke his right arm, but even the satisfying crunch of the mallet snapping his bones didn’t do anything for me— “twisted—” I swung again while the man was crying out in pain from the damage I’d done to his arm, and this time I hit him in the ribs, “fucking bastard!” One last swing of the sledgehammer got him down on his knees, down on the ground where that walking heap of dirt belonged.

Still in a rage, I lifted the sledgehammer over my head, ready to smash that Cultist’s skull in, but before I could, two sets of arms pulled me back. “Let go of me!” I screamed. “I’ve gotta fucking kill him!”

“Kyle, stop!” Cartman commanded. That fucking asshole had a tight grip, and I really should have worried about getting nicked by his finger armor if I struggled, but that, again, was not something that crossed my mind.

“NO! Let go of me!”

“It’s tough for all of us, Kyle,” said the second voice, the still-modified nasal tone that belonged to Clyde, “but you’ve gotta stop. This isn’t you.”

“Not me?” I repeated, feeling myself start laughing from the sheer insanity of the situation. “Not me?!” I dropped the sledgehammer behind me, and while Kenny dragged it to a different location a few feet away, I shook Cartman off, spun around, and grabbed Clyde’s shoulders and shouted, “Of fucking course I’m me, I’m standing here, aren’t I?! I’m breathing, I’m talking to you, but you know what, Clyde? That’s not Stan!” I screamed, pointing over to the other side of the alley. “That’s not Stan, that’s just his body!”

“Kyle, calm—”

“No, I am not calming down!” I cried, letting go of Clyde and focusing my attention again on the Cultist who was now trying to pick himself back up. “This fucker took Stan away and he does not deserve to live!” That shouted, I kicked the Cultist in the back of the skull, then picked him up and tossed him down the alley into the brick wall of the station.
My heart was beating so heavily… I felt like my body was just choosing all of my actions for me. Everything was a fog. My head, my gut, my whole fucking life. Things had just become so twisted, all in a matter of seconds. And there was no going back. There was no getting any of that back. That wasn’t the way the world worked. Not even the crazy, fucked up world I’d always known.

Right?

Dead just meant dead in this world, no matter what. …Right…?

“Kyle, stop!” Clyde tried again, now fully unmasked. “I-it’s all really fucked up, but do you really think beating the shit outta this guy is going to bring Stan back?!”

I shook my head and cupped my hands over my ears, not wanting to hear another word on the matter. No. No, I knew that nothing I could do could bring Stan back. No amount of pleading, screaming, killing, hating, bargaining… nothing. I had just watched a man kill my best friend and there was nothing I could do about it, and taking that man’s life would ultimately do nothing for me.

I just wanted something. Something, a glimmer, a ghost, anything. At this point, I didn’t care. Obviously, I wanted someone to say that, oh, wait, no, Stan’s not really dead, it’s just a coma. He just blacked out for a while. That, though, was impossible.

And instead of any kind of consolation… I was about to receive worse.

“No.” Clyde’s question to me was answered, but I wasn’t the one who said it. It was that unmistakable Mysterion tone again. Every one of us turned to look at him, the grim, silent Cult leader included. McElroy, I noticed, was the only other Cult member left standing, and he had not yet opened his precious Necronomicon. Mysterion, it seemed, was taking advantage of the fact that the Gate had apparently not yet been opened. “No, it can’t,” Mysterion continued. “But I know what can.”

“Are you insane?” I shouted at him. I choked again as I continued, “He’s dead, and there’s nothing anyone can do now!”

“Yes there is.”

That shut the entire alley up. Even the bastard with the screwdriver lodged in his shoulder. Everyone shut the fuck up as soon as Mysterion said that. Of course, I really did think Kenny was crazy for thinking that. Dead was dead. Stan was dead. Stan couldn’t come back. Nobody could come back. That wasn’t logical. Nobody could cheat death, as far as I knew, as far as I could currently remember.

Kenny was going too far. Hadn’t he even said something only minutes ago? I can’t die. Of course he could die. Any of us could. Stan just did. God fucking dammit, my life had turned so meaningless in the past few minutes. That was it, that was the only thing on my fucking mind. Death. You can hate it and curse it all you want, but it doesn’t make deals.

So I thought.

“Listen up,” I heard Mysterion instruct Clyde, who himself was shaking pretty terribly, but doing a better job than most at keeping it together. “You’ve always been great as a leader, so I need you to do something for me.”

“I don’t think I like where this is going…”
“Listen!” Mysterion repeated. “I need you to get everyone back to headquarters, and I need you to keep Henrietta around at all costs, got that?!”

“Why, what are you—”

“This fucking Cult isn’t going to get away with using Stan as a sacrifice.”

It was good to hear him say that, but I didn’t like the gravity of his tone. Something told me Kenny was about to do something completely irrational; Clyde shared that concern, as he asked, “So what are you going to do?”

“Something a little crazy,” Mysterion admitted. “I haven’t tried it before, but I’m gonna try to follow him.”

“Follow—what?! That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Of course it doesn’t.”

Mysterion planted himself square in the center of the alley, and cast a glance around at all of us, giving a special, contemptuous glare to the Cult leader, still standing there, book at the ready but eyes hardly focused on the prize, as it were.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” McElroy warned him, his voice dark and cold.

“Well, then,” Mysterion growled. “It’s a damn good thing you’re not me.” To the rest of us, then, he said, “Bear with me, guys. There’s a way, and I’m gonna prove it.”

“Dude, what the hell are you doing?” I barely heard myself ask. It was getting harder and harder to keep composure. Every second I spent breathing was one more second of ‘life after Stan.’ Every second made less sense than the one that preceded it. I had no control. There was no control. No point. Nothing…

“I hope this works,” Mysterion then said, mostly to himself. He drew his .45, drew in a deep breath, and shouted out to us, “Listen to everything Henrietta says! And for fuck’s sake, someone has got to try to remember this!”

The nightmare continued when Kenny pulled down his hood and shot himself in the head.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” I screamed. He hit the ground right off, face down in a pool of his own blood. “Kenny, what the fuck? What the fuck, what the fuck, what the FUCK?!” The hell was he talking about, remember? How could I forget?!

How the fuck was I going to forget the night I lost my two closest friends?

“Oh, Jesus. Oh, shit. Oh, God. Oh, fucking hell, what the fuck?! WHAT THE FUCK?!
Not both of you! NO!”

On that last word, I felt that pressure around me again, making my ears buzz under the thud of my own heartbeat. May as well have been the last fucking heart still beating in the world, now that both Stan and Kenny were gone. No more Kenny. No more Stan.

No more.

No more logic.

I snapped my eyes shut and screamed under the weight and pressure of everything I’d been
witness to that evening, and I gave up everything. Every last ounce of control I had over any unnatural thing in my life. Every shred of sensible thought. I drained out my own disbelief and opened my eyes to an alley lit by rapidly flickering lights.

My sights were set on the Cult leader, McElroy. He was the cause of all this. He’d been Kenny’s main target, so now he was mine. This was the fucker that had let Stan die, just so they’d have someone dead as a sacrifice to summon Cthulhu. Oh, I was ready to take that damn Dark God on myself by now. But McElroy first.

The buzzing in my ears grew louder and louder, absolute din pulsing in my head, throbbing against the mind that normally so loved sense and order. Facts. Proof. Yes, usually, I loved all that. But right now it wouldn’t do me any good.

Louder, louder—gravel, pebbles, leapt around at the man’s feet as if jostled by a minor earthquake. McElroy, eyes wide but in awe, took liquid steps back as I staggered forward, not knowing exactly what I was going to do… just knowing I had to do something. And ‘something’ was exactly what happened. Something unexplained.

Something totally illogical.

My headache got worse as the air around me thickened. Sirens and car alarms were set off in the distance; the lights in the station flickered, and one of the bulbs on the wall affixed to the building that closed in the alley burned hot until it burst. As the glass from the bulb clinked to the ground and hissed with the memory of its direct and alternating currents, I reached one hand out, purely driven by impulse, just on the wish that I had something there I could use as a weapon.

A few seconds later, boards came flying out of the alcove down by the chain link fence, where Stan had been stationed earlier—some smacked the Cult leader as they flew across the alley and into the next wall, but one two-by-four hit my palm directly. The end was sharp with nails, hammered into the wood in a pattern that screamed Toolshed’s influence, and, with this new opportunity, I stepped forward again and hurled the board, nails out, at the robed man. It nicked him in the side of the head but did little damage, which just got me angrier, and my rage was accentuated by an even worse headache, followed in turn with the rapid, inexplicable movement of other random objects from the alley flying about in all directions as I tried to shake the migraine away.

In the midst of it all, however, McElroy retreated. He found refuge through the fence, and went on his way. That was it? He got to go free? That fucking insane murderer got to just walk away?!

“Get back here, you piece of shit!” I screamed after him.

“Kyle, wait!” Clyde shouted.

“I’m going after him!” I barked back.

Suddenly, a pistol sounded behind us.

Already, the sound of a gunshot was making me jump for more than the obvious reasons one would think. A gunshot had ended Stan’s life first, and then Kenny’s. I. Fucking. Hated. Guns.

So I winced at the sound, which had only done good for me by making my damn headache go away, and turned to see a tall, thin silhouette at the end of the alley, pitch black against the moonlight that spilled through a haze onto the street beyond. I only recognized the figure from the tip of his signature chullo hat, and as he moved into view of the one remaining (though flickering)
lamps that had survived destruction during my weird little outburst, the pistol holder was revealed to
be none other than Craig, who tucked the gun away into the back pocket of his black jeans as he
moved in.

“‘Kay,” he said blankly, just as he did every other word that ever came out of his mouth, the
distinctive click of his tongue ring on his molars accentuating the clipped syllable, “so tonight totally
sucked.”

“What the hell, Craig?” Cartman demanded.

“Get Henrietta down from the roof,” Craig instructed the general group as he took out his
trusty pack and lit up a cigarette. After taking a drag, he blew the smoke out into the thick night air
and said, “We’re gonna take it from here.”

“Why?” Clyde growled. “Mysterion put me in charge, and—”

“Yeah, and he said listen to Henrietta,” Craig reminded him. “So someone go get her down
from the roof and listen to me.”

“Why?” Clyde demanded again.

“Because I kinda know what’s going on,” said Craig. “It’s stupid, but I know.”

“Do you know about whatever the fuck that just was?” Cartman wondered, pointing over at
me.

“Cartman, shut the fuck up!” I snapped; my words were accentuated by a rattling behind me.

“There, that.”

“SHUT UP!”

“Kyle—” Clyde tried.

“I don’t know,” said Craig. “I don’t know. A lot of this is stupid, and there’s some stuff I
don’t know. And some stuff I do.”

“If it’s stupid, why are you helping us?” Cartman demanded.

Shooting him a testing glare, Craig walked over, breathed out a gust of smoke into his face
(which I would have applauded him for had I not been at the end of my own fucking rope at the
time), and said, “You guys are using my car, and paying me for my time. Two of you guys are dead,
and honestly I can’t say I have much better things to do. I really don’t care about anything that’s
going on. I really don’t. But I’m gonna help.”

“Why?” Cartman hissed.

“Cuz Mysterion promised me overtime.”

He was a selfish son of a bitch, but at least he pulled through.

Now that the mission was over, though, everything started to barrel down on me all at once.
I couldn’t hold on. I couldn’t. I’d lost too much. Everything I’d always been able to count on was
gone.

My whole body shook. My knees buckled, my lower lip quivered, my stomach sank and
flipped. At last, the gravity of the situation did me in. I went to pieces and hit the ground on my knees, which were scraped open upon impact. Streams of obscenities flowed out of me; I cursed mostly to myself for shame of being able to do nothing.

The alley smelled of death. Of blood and gunsmoke, of burst electric wires, of missed opportunities and failure. Like an awful, dense mist that now hovered overhead as if to threaten rain.

Finally, I broke down. I let down all the rest of my defenses and became a mess of choking and sobbing, drained down to just a shell of who I’d always been. People are defined by what they do in life, by how they’re raised, and by who they work with or befriend. Losing Kenny was awful, unbearable. Losing Stan cut me so deeply, I couldn’t find words to even begin to describe the pain that was steadily settling in.

I didn’t want to talk to anyone or say anything. I didn’t want to process what had happened. I could not think. I couldn’t function.

“Kyle…” Clyde tried again as he walked over toward me, his voice trembling but strong and concerned. “Kyle, what was that? How did you do—“

“I don’t want to talk about it!” I shouted, slapping my hands over my ears. “I really don’t want to talk about it!”

“But if it’s—”

“Leave me alone!” I screamed. A few nearby items shook—a dumpster, a pile of lumber, and some neglected crates toppled to the ground. There was an explanation for it, of course, but not one I currently wanted to give. Because my mind was mud. There was a ringing in my ears that wouldn’t end. Tears shot out of my eyes before I could stop them, and I held my hands over my mouth so nothing could come up. I bent over myself, sobbing with no idea how I felt.

Kenny was dead.

Stan was dead.

I’d always tried to be a really logical guy. I’d always tried to handle things my own way, and not get sucked into fads or schemes. Every once in a while, I’d deviate, and Stan would help pull me back. He’d always been there for me. It seemed like only yesterday we were eight years old, building a clubhouse for Wendy… like only yesterday we’d held each other’s hands on the first day of first grade…

Now I had no one to defend me. That had been the last thing he’d done. What had happened? My brain had been scrambled, I couldn’t figure out what was up or down; I couldn’t remember entering the alley, or when the last time we’d spoken was… I remember that we’d been in a fight, but of course my head just went back to all the good times, which outweighed the bad by a longshot.

Broken, and with nothing to say to anyone else, I crawled like a wounded child over to the body of my best friend, curled up beside him, and fell asleep. I wanted to wake up and have this all be a nightmare, or else I didn’t want to wake up at all.

Against my wishes, I did wake up, quite some time later, washed and out of my uniform. I sat up and glanced around the room, recognizing instantly my Human Kite private room at the base. Slowly and rigidly, I sat up and rubbed my eyes as I tried to adjust to the dim light. I realized I’d
have a lot more to adjust to, now that I was practically friendless. Who could I even go to? Not Wendy, I was still angry at her for hurting Stan. Token, maybe, or even Clyde… but I didn’t know them as well. I couldn’t even go to Kenny.

Just as I felt myself hiccup out the onset of another tear-fest, my door swung open, and my answer entered the room. “Hi, Kyle,” he said, his head hanging somberly, his black-eyed expression sympathetic and pure.

“Ike!” I cried. If I was still sore from the fight, I ignored it well. I flew from the bed and met Ike halfway into the small room, where I collapsed on the floor in front of him and hugged him close. I clung tightly to my little brother, my one last little ounce of sanity left in the world. “Ike, thank God you weren’t there,” I went on, speaking through embarrassing heaves and sobs. “I’m so glad you couldn’t get hurt, too.”

“Thanks,” he said, patting my back, which just got me to cry harder. “I’m really sorry, Kyle. I don’t even know what to say…”

“He’s—gone,” I choked out. “Stan’s—gone, and I—couldn’t—help—him…”

“I… I know…” The usually overly loquacious Ike was even at a loss for words. Maybe he knew more than anyone how hard this was hitting me. Stan may as well have been a second older brother to Ike for the kid’s entire life. The news must have been unbearable for him, too. And then there was Kenny, who had taken Ike on as a part of the team, despite even my protests, who had served as a mentor in vigilante activities to our youngest member, who had now helped us more than we could ever have asked. “Hey, Kyle?” he said, after letting me cry for a while.

“W—what?”

“Henrietta is here.”

“So?”

“She brought the Necronomicon.”

I sat back and dried my eyes as best I could. This news meant nothing, yet, but it at least made me think about something other than the clear image in my head of Stan and Kenny both getting taken down. “So what?” I mumbled. “That book’s trouble.”

“Sometimes,” Ike agreed. “But it’s got a chapter we can use.”

“Are we seriously still talking about this?!” I complained. “Kenny and Stan are dead, Ike! They’re dead! Mission over!”

Ike shook his head. “It’s not like that,” he told me. “It’s about bodies and souls.”

“Huh?”

“How, well, you’ve got a body life expectancy, and a soul life expectancy. That’s the research Kenny was doing with her, I guess. If the soul is actually supposed to live longer, there’s a secret to keeping the body alive until the soul comes back.”

“What?!” I burst, my heart suddenly springing to life again. No way he could mean… “Ike, are you saying…”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But you should come out.”
“Maybe… are they… are they out there?”

“Stan and Kenny?” I nodded, and Ike sighed. “Yeah.”

“I don’t want to see,” I said. “I can’t, Ike.”

“Kyle, everyone else needs you to, so we can talk about what we have to do.”

“They can come in here!”

“Kyle, please.”

Heavily, I picked my head up, and for a moment just stared at my brother. If he looked so wounded, I could only imagine how awful a state I must have been in. I felt so empty, I didn’t know what to do. Hell, I barely had the sense left to tell myself to breathe. Nothing had ever hit me this hard. Then again, nobody had ever risked his life for me before like that. Risked it and lost it.

“Come on,” my brother urged. I felt myself shake my head, even though I knew I had to follow. I wasn’t ready. Not ready to see those bodies—just bodies, nothing else. All life and personality gone. No. No, I wasn’t ready at all. “Kyle, everyone needs you, okay?” said Ike, tugging at me to get me to move. “Come on, buddy, you’re way stronger than this.”

“No, I’m not,” I refuted, my voice barely audible.

“Yes, you are, dude, come on, please.”

When Ike said that phrase, he shifted so that he patted the top of my head, his fingers having no choice but to get all tangled up in my hair. Talk about triggering a fucking memory. Barely thinking about it, I reached up and grabbed Ike’s hand, making him let go. “Don’t,” I commanded, probably a little too coldly; again, no control over how I did or said anything.

“Huh?” Ike wondered. “Sorry, I—”

“Just don’t.” Stan had messed around with my hair so much it was a game. Nobody else did that; just Stan. No one else ever could, either, I realized now, or I’d probably explode.

I sucked in a breath. Eventually, I talked myself around everything and remembered what Ike had been telling me in the first place. Henrietta… whatever her involvement with us was, apparently had been onto something. Thinking about it, I actually felt kind of stupid. I really had been slacking on the research we’d once delved so deeply into. That, I had a feeling, would soon change.

Bodies and souls. That’s what Ike had said. The possibility of a soul, what… returning? It seemed totally impossible, but given how weird and cryptic everything had seemed lately, I figured I should at least be open to hearing about such insanity.

“Sorry, Ike,” I said. When I tried to smile for him, I just wound up feeling worse, so I didn’t attempt it. Instead, I let him help me up to standing, and, my bare feet aching on the coarse carpet, I took a few shaking steps toward the open door.

“It’s okay,” my brother shrugged, patting me on the back as he walked beside me, guiding my steps as we ventured out together.

“So… where are we going?”
Ike only walked me out into the common room at the front of the building, but he explained along the way that Henrietta and Craig had brought Stan and Kenny into Kenny’s private room. None of us ever really went into each other’s rooms at the base; we were all expected to keep our own rooms clean and free of anything that could give us away if someone from outside of the League ever stumbled in. Kenny, apparently, had kept a lot of secrets in there.

I’d apparently passed out for a full hour after the fight, after getting so emotionally fucked and drained, after somehow tapping into that weird quirk I’d never taken the time to hone or try to explain. During that hour, Craig and Token had somehow driven everyone back, and Clyde (as Mosquito) had had an incredibly long and angry conversation with the Park County force for not doing their fucking job. Wendy apparently fell to pieces when she saw what had happened, and Ike admitted he was having an awful time dealing, but he’d managed to step up to help out in whatever way he could.

Kenny’s room, he told me, was full of papers. Documents upon documents, books up on books, all dealing with death. Death rituals in cultures around the world. Speculations on immortality. And, more than anything, everything he had gathered, dated from fourth grade onward, about Cthulhu. He’d expanded his research to other kinds of cults as well—almost everything came down to ritual. What the Cthulhu Cult had done in the past, here in America and abroad, and, very specifically, what kinds of curses they dealt with. He had pages from the *Necronomicon* bound together in one thick journal, and even what was admitted to be Henrietta’s old book that told the history of the *Necronomicon* itself, which she claimed to have no use for now that she had a dark book of her own.

Ike had just gotten through telling me that when we stepped into the common room, where we were greeted by a small assortment of vacant faces. Had it been only Kenny who had died, Stan probably would have dropped the silent act and we’d hug each other through it; if it had been only Stan, Kenny might have come to talk to me immediately, to see if I was okay, to see if there was anything he could do. But neither of them had made it through the night, and I wasn’t as close to any of these guys, so all any of us were able to give each other yet was that same hollow stare that read, *What now?*

Token was sitting uncomfortably on the arm of the sofa, his eyes shifting so as to suggest that he was somewhere deep in thought. Nearby, Timmy sat in his chair, totally silent; he hadn’t even seen the worst of the action, but of course the news must have been hard. Even that egotistical shit Cartman didn’t look like he was holding up so well. But he rose when I came in, which got me immediately on the defensive. No matter what it was he had to say, I knew I wasn’t going to like it.

“So, Kyle,” he said, folding his arms as he approached, “you gonna explain any of that?”

“Not now,” I warned him through clenched teeth.

He had that look on his face, like he was going to try to prove something. Like he was covering up something else. There was no way even Cartman couldn’t feel *anything* for seeing two of his friends die… ‘friends’ used in a much looser manner, in this case, but still. He’d done shitty things in the wake of tragedy before, but every time, I still hoped that he might learn something, because I believe that everyone deserves a conscience.

But he barreled on, as always, proving that he must have just completely lacked compassion. “Oh, so you’re gonna just deny that psychic display we all saw?” he scoffed at me.

I felt Ike tense at my side, but I still had too much fight in me to let this slide. This was not the conversation I wanted to have right after everything I’d just been through. “Jesus, are you seriously hung up on that?!” I spat. My outburst caused Token to stand, and keep an eye on the
argumentative jerk I was fighting off. “That’s really not the most important thing that’s happening right now.”

“Maybe, but you have to admit it—”

“Fuck you!” I shouted. “Honest to God, Cartman, two of your friends are dead, and that’s all you can fucking talk about?!”

“I know what I saw, Kyle!” Cartman shouted.

“Cartman, no!” I insisted. “Come on. I don’t have psychic powers!”

“Then what the hell was that?” Cartman asked. “Jew mysticism?”

“Oh, my God, would you shut up?” I shouted at him. “You shut your fat fucking face, or so help me, God, I’ll fix it so you never say anything again!”

“Woah,” Token cut in, stepping right in between me and the reason for every ounce of hatred in my soul, “hey, okay, let’s stop here. All right? Cartman, quit it, or I’m locking you out. Kyle, just take in a deep breath.”

“How come I gotta shut up, and all the psychic wonder-Jew has to do is breathe?” Cartman bit back.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” I screamed.

“Jesus Christ, Cartman, I meant it when I said I’d lock you out,” Token warned.

“God, fuck you, Token, what, do you own this place?”

“…YES! Yes, I do!”

“…Yes, I do!”

“Oh. Fuck. Right. Well—“

Before I could push past Token to inflict any more damage on the blathering asshole, he was cuffed in the head from behind, and fell to the floor. Token stepped back, allowing me to see the room’s current savior, whose face was about as messy and tear-streaked as mine must have been. Wendy drew in a long, shaking breath, then cradled the hand with which she’d knocked out Cartman and whimpered a quiet, “Ow. Fucking jerk has a hard skull.”

Her hair was out of its braid, and fell straight down her back. She was dressed as loosely as the rest of us were, in a paint-stained old t-shirt and denim capris, and she’d neglected to set her trademark beret back on over her hair. She wore no makeup. Wendy Testaburger was in mourning.

“By the way,” she spat down at the unconscious nuisance, “we’re done.” She kicked him once, for good measure, then stepped over him and walked straight up to me. “Hey,” she sighed.

“Thanks,” I managed.


“For what?”

“Well, first of all, for what I did to Stan…” Wendy’s eyes teared up, and she looked down, averting my eyes.
“When?” I wondered. My head was so muddled with just the events of that evening, I almost couldn’t remember anything that had come before.

Wendy wiped her eyes gracelessly and choked. I’d never seen her like this. Wendy always kept herself up; the very definition of ‘girl power,’ if I ever saw it. No, I didn’t know her well, but I knew about her plenty, enough to know that she hardly ever cried. When they’d been dating, it was always kind of obvious that she had thicker skin than Stan. She could take anything. Just not this.

“When we broke up,” Wendy sobbed, still not looking at me. “Wh-when we broke up, Kyle, I said something to him that really messed him up. I think… I think that’s why he got so quiet for a wh-while, and… I-I didn’t know it’d hurt him so much, but… I’m… I’m so sorry…”

It was a good thing she wasn’t looking at me, since my eyes narrowed right off. “Why’re you apologizing to me?” I demanded.

“Be-because I hurt him, and that hurt you. I should’ve known he’d react like that. I… I should’ve known…”

“Wendy, he got so depressed he didn’t even want to talk to me,” I said scathingly. “What did you say to him?!” At least now I knew Stan’s issues really hadn’t been about me, even though I’d thought it at the time as well. But it had hurt. He was my best friend, and he hadn’t wanted to say a word to me, even lashed out when I’d tried to approach him. As if he was protecting or hiding something. As if I was just in the way.

And then he’d died for me.

Oh, Goddammit.

“Kyle,” Wendy said, collapsing into sobs, “I’m really, really sorry!”

“Wendy…” I tried. I came up empty. I hadn’t even been able to say much to my own brother. “It’s gonna be…” Second attempt was no better. Actually, it was worse. But I set everything behind me, wordlessly forgave Wendy for whatever it was she’d said that had set Stan off, and hugged her. It was the only thing I could think to do.

It was an awkward embrace, and it had followed one of the longer conversations I’d ever had with her, but at least we were in mutual mourning. And at least I knew the source of some of the things that had been hurting Stan. Even that knowledge could do nothing for me, though. I still felt so fucking empty.

Clyde entered the room a few minutes later, Henrietta and her Necronomicon in tow. Wendy stepped back, and smacked Cartman away when he tried to talk to her, since it was clear she was done talking to him, and was, as everyone should have been, much more interested in whatever Clyde (or Henrietta even more) had to say.

And it was Henrietta who spoke first. “So… hi,” she said in her no-nonsense, batcave alto. “Gonna be honest, guys, I kinda prefer the conformist Gap clothes to the superhero tights.” Even though nobody wore tights… not even Wendy, actually.

“I’ve been going over a bunch of Kenny’s research with Henrietta and Craig,” Clyde told us somberly. “It, uh… it’s a lot to digest. Honestly, I don’t think I can make much sense of it.” He didn’t say why, but I figured it had something to do with the fact that Clyde, like most high school guys, just wasn’t all that fond of reading. “But I got enough.” He chewed his bottom lip for a second in thought, then said, “Guys, we’re about to go a lot deeper into this Cult thing than I think
“What’s deeper than stopping a bunch of crazies from summoning Cthulhu?” Token wondered.

“Uh…” Clyde looked over at Henrietta, who shrugged and let out a pensive sigh.

“I’ll talk about it once we go do the ritual.”

“R-ritual?” I wondered. “What… what ritual?” Ike was at my side a second later, and grabbed my right hand. Thank God for my little brother.

“It’s something I’ve done a bunch myself before,” said Henrietta, flipping through the yellowed pages of her book, “but this one’s gonna take more time.”

She looked like she was about to say more, but I burst in before she could: “Is it… is it true that there’s some kind of—o-of soul link or something?” I hoped I was remembering Ike’s words properly.

Henrietta shot me a glare, which meant that she certainly did not like being interrupted, but I was about to take on anyone or anything; I didn’t care. “There are exceptions to death,” she answered. “Yeah. Mysterion’s got it easy. It’s the other guy—”

“Stan,” I said quickly.

“Okay, whatever. Anyway, it’s gonna take extra effort to get him back.”

It felt as though I’d stopped breathing. I simply stared at that girl, dressed for the funeral yet offering life. My heart felt like it was thudding three beats at a time, once to echo each syllable: Get him back. Get him back. “What?” I managed to say.

“I said, we can get him back, if everyone listens to me and doesn’t fuck anything up,” Henrietta answered. Clyde looked pale, like he’d heard this from her earlier but was still trying to wrap his head around the idea.

While I was still trying to figure out what exactly it was Henrietta was saying, she continued. “Gonna need you, you’re Kyle, right?”

“Y-yeah…” I confirmed, shaking so much my tremors were probably passing into Ike through our clenched hands. “Why?”

Taking a sheet out of the center of the Necronomicon, Henrietta pursed her black-lined lips in contemplation. “Clyde,” she read off what could only have been a list of all of us, while she pointed respectively around the room based on names. “Met you, know you’re kinda the leader. You must be Token,” she said next, pointing accurately. “So, gonna need you to help with evidence. Kyle,” she then said to me, “this says you’re good with research and things like that.”

“What’s that list?” I asked her.

Henrietta flashed it, but without my reading glasses I couldn’t make out whose handwriting appeared on the page. “Mysterion left it,” she answered. “Or, uh, what’s his real name, Kenny. Set of instructions for who should do what if something like this happened.”

“Something like this?” I repeated. “Kenny planned for this?!”
Before Henrietta could answer, Cartman interrupted, “What’s it say about me?”

Asshole.

Henrietta consulted the list, glared at him, and decided, “You must be Cartman. It says in parentheses, ‘the fat guy.’”

“Aye!” he spat. “You’re fat, you stupid bitch.”

“Yeah, well, at least I wear a bra for my tits, lardass,” Henrietta shot back without skipping a beat. Okay. Creepy Cult shit aside, I decided Henrietta did all right by me. She went back to the list, though, and answered, “Uh, it just says, ‘Cartman, I hate you. Lighten up.’”

“Ech,” he muttered, “Goddammit, Kenny.”

“Anyway,” Clyde interrupted, speaking with some difficulty. “We’ll get started with that pretty soon. Craig’s in there making the final preparations, but in the meantime, guys, I think he’s awake…” He followed that thought by pointing down to the floor. Wait, no… the basement.

“Who’s awake?” I asked.

“The guy we brought in from the fight.”

My heart leaped, and I felt sick all over again. Within seconds, I was plowing my way down to the basement, not caring who else was following me. Down there, we had our own makeshift prison, a place added in as one of those ‘just in case’ afterthoughts. We’d had little need of it before; Cartman had locked Butters down there a couple of times just for fun, I think, not because of anything major Chaos had done, even though Chaos had gotten himself in there before… but he always had a way of breaking out.

This prisoner, though… oh, this asshole wasn’t going anywhere.

As soon as I heard footsteps coming down behind me, I gathered the nerve to speak.

“What is he doing here?” I hissed, glaring at the huddled and beaten shape of the cloaked man from the alley. He wasn’t even behind bars or chained up; he wasn’t really able to move. But still, that was him. Nobody answered me. “What the fuck is he doing here?!” I shouted, as my hands clenched tightly into fists.

“We brought him back for questioning,” said Cartman.

“Plus, he heard some of our names,” Clyde added. Stan and I were the reasons for that, of course, but that fact was omitted. Or overlooked. “Henrietta said one of her friends is good at hypnosis—“

“He’s not my ‘friend,’” the Goth corrected in a voice as bitter as black coffee. Why she followed us down, I had no idea… probably to identify the guy in case we couldn’t. “Friendship is a ruse concocted by Disney to—“

“Fellow non-conformist, then,” Clyde interrupted. “He’ll wipe this guy’s memory once we —“

“No,” I said, looking the beaten mass over. In the end, I was glad I hadn’t killed him. This was better. “Let him know. We’ll lock him up after this. I was ready to kill him in the alley, but now I’m glad this bastard’s alive. Let this fucking asshole live with what he did. You conscious, you
fuck?” I lashed out at the man. “I need to talk to you!”

He moaned, which was answer enough. I stormed forward and yanked him up by the collar. His hood fell over his face, but I saw that his chin was torn and bloody. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?!” I barked at him. “You just deliberately shot two high-schoolers. Did you know that?! You just fucking killed—”

“Stanley Marsh,” the man said weakly, “and Kenneth McCormick.”

A jolt hit me, and the shock caused me to drop the Cultist back into a bloody heap. I turned to look at the others. Wendy tensed, and Cartman shook his head to imply, We didn’t say anything else to this guy. Glaring back at the man, and forcing strength back into my voice, I demanded, “Who are you?”

No answer.

I hauled him up and shoved him against the wall, hearing a snap of what must have been an already broken bone in his shoulder. “Who are you?” I growled again. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how well we knew some of the Cultists already. How well did those bastards really know us…?

The man chuckled a little, but the disturbing sound was cut off by a cough. “Their deaths, Mr. Broflovski,” he said, making me ill when he tersely spoke my last name, “were simply experiments. We’ve been watching you boys closely for a long time… you who chose to befriend that McCormick boy…”

Anger pulsing through me, I punched the man across his shrouded face, then finally, savagely, tore off his hood. Wild grey hair fell over his face, so to catch his features, I rammed his head back into the wall, my palm flat up against his forehead. Face flushed with fury, I studied the man, and knew him instantly. The long, crooked nose, the wide cheekbones, the thin, now torn-up chin… this man had known Stan for years. Went to his football games, shot the shit constantly with his father.

The man’s name was Nelson. He was a geologist. He was Randy Marsh’s motherfucking co-worker. Research partner. Friend.

God. Fucking. Dammit.

I became more than furious. More than enraged. Stan had told us, he’d told us he saw Nelson the other night, outside the Cult’s secret bookstore. He’d seen him one night when he found himself in that parking lot, and none of us had thought anything of it. Nelson was just one other guy, one other South Park citizen involved in that shady Cult.

Yeah, just the guy who had just killed his co-worker’s kid.

Nelson glared right at me, and Stan’s violent end played once again in front of my eyes. Rationality left my body, and the next thing I knew, I was choking that unethical murderer, my hands clinched around his scrawny neck, my thumbs poised to pop every fucking vein. “You…” I sputtered, my voice a broken scream, “you—!”

“Stop!” It was Clyde again, grabbing me off, pulling me back.

“Don’t touch me!” I bellowed, whipping around. One glare at him sent Clyde flying back against the opposite wall.
Well, fuck, *that* had never happened before. Shit moved around a lot when I got angry enough, but I’d never moved a person. My eyes flared open, and as Token got Clyde back up to standing, I had to apologize. “Dude… Clyde, holy shit, I’m sorry,” I said. “I—I didn’t mean—I—fuck, shit, sorry, I can’t—”

Clyde, dazed, shook his head to dismiss it as nothing, but he did say, “Kyle, you’ve gotta… something, man. Control that shit, or something.”

Numbly, I nodded.

Yeah, but control *what?* I certainly didn’t believe I was psychic or anything. Everyone else seemed pretty damn convinced, though, and besides… I had been witness to it. I could do unnatural things. It was horrible, but I had to accept it. Just like I had to accept a lot of things now.

“I need to leave,” I told Clyde… and everyone, really. “I don’t want to be near this… this thing,” I said, gesturing over toward Nelson, “anymore.”

“But Kyle, we should—” Token tried.

“But. Now.” I was snapping, I was being an absolute shit, but I couldn’t help it. “Guys, I’m sorry. I just can’t right now. I have to… just… something else…”

With that, I threw my hands up and left the room. Ignoring the pressure against my head, the ringing in my ears, I stormed back upstairs and paced around in the common room for a minute or two, my hands still itching to beat the shit out of the cloak in the basement. I wanted revenge. I wanted redemption.

I wanted my fucking friend back.

Acting on an absolutely horrible, twisted impulse, I walked into the cloakroom, where everything looked exactly as it had earlier in the day. There was Kenny’s beaten, oversized, faux fur-lined parka, hung just as lazily as always… and a few hangers down, right next to mine, Stan’s coat. It was a new one, a medium-dark blue; he’d just bought it the year before. There was less memory in it than in most everything else of his… Stan held onto things forever… but there was a year’s worth there. Still so much; more than enough.

As I stood there, I heard the distinctive trill of my phone receiving a text message, so I dug into the pocket of my coat to rummage for it, on instinct. It was probably my mother wondering where the hell Ike and I were. I didn’t want to respond to her. As I closed my hand around the phone, though, I felt my fingers brush against something else, so I slid that between my index and middle fingers and pulled it out as well.

Looked like an index card. I hadn’t remembered putting that there. And on one side, completely illegible pen marks. Since I’d need them to figure out the message on my phone anyway, I pulled my reading glasses out of the inner pocket of my coat, slid them on, and read the text first.

*Kyle it’s Mom. Where are you?? Do you know where Ike is??*

*Hi,* I typed back, knowing she’d just freak out worse the more time went by; I plunked out the words emptily, hoping they made sense. *Found Ike, both really tired. At Token’s, gonna stay tonight.* Fuck, I couldn’t even lie about that? This sucked.

A few seconds later, my mother texted back, *GET IKE TO SCHOOL.*

To which I responded, *ok,* and nothing else. God it sucked my mom knew how to text. She
rarely did. She saved it for when she was feeling particularly overprotective and knew Ike and I would use our shit filter to drown her out if she called. Texting’s great. Just not for parents.

Plus, that didn’t concern me much right now. I slipped my phone into my pants pocket and turned over the index card. I only had to take one look at the handwriting before I lost it.


Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. FUCK.

“FUCK!” I shouted.

Goddammit, nothing was giving me a break that night! One thing right into the next. It was bad enough Stan and Kenny were dead… now I had to go and find this…? Proof that the silent spell was finally going to end. Proof things could get back to fucking normal. And—no. Just no. Nope, sorry, said the universe, that can’t happen.

Stupid fucking universe.

Broken, I stuffed the index card into my pocket as well, blankly grabbed at Stan’s coat for a second, and choked out still another awful sob. God damn, was I grieving… but there was nothing else I could do. This was so far beyond the realm of things I could accept, how could I not cry?

“We’ll talk…” I found myself saying. “We—we’ll talk. I dunno how, but H-Henrietta’s got a way. We’ll talk again, Stan. I swear to God.”

But at the same time, I put in a little prayer: Please, I begged to the God I sometimes doubted was even there, but who I’d put so much faith in so many times, just, please. I can’t put up with silence forever.

— — —

Ike had saved me once again after that, and forced me to talk about other things. He made me drink coffee and listened to me rant for about ten minutes on why I hate black coffee. Then I heard myself rant about other things, my mouth just needing to prattle on about something, in some attempt to make my mind shut up. I did that all the time, and it was usually Stan who listened and ultimately snapped me out of it and changed the subject. He’d mastered it, now. Ike did okay, but there was still, very obviously, something missing.

After what felt like far too long, Craig came into the common room and told everyone to get to where he’d helped Henrietta set up. I really didn’t get Craig. He said he was only in it for the money—other than that, he rarely did stuff with us at all. We were more acquaintances than friends with Craig, but he kept pulling through on all this weird Cult crap, and even seemed really close to Henrietta. Really close, I noticed as I took a deep breath and entered the room. Like, if either of them had feelings, I’d think maybe they were dating. But, again, not something on my mind right now.

Because now I was back in the nightmare that had started in the alley.

There they were, laid out in Kenny’s darkened room, on makeshift biers—Stan’s body on the left, Kenny’s on the right. They were both still dressed as they had been, but the blood had, for the most part, been washed away. A streak of browning red still clung to Kenny’s blonde bangs near the shot wound in his temple; the left side of Stan’s shirt was ruined and red around the area where the bullet had hit.
That’s not Stan, I’d shouted at Clyde in the alley, that’s just his body.

I was still trying to figure out the whole sentiment on that. Obviously, it was just the body. Stan was completed by all of it… personality, ideals, voice, light, life. I was on the fence about God and Satan, but shit, I had to believe in souls. So where was his? Not here, anyway. Not where I could see it. I was just left with this gruelling reminder of what had been lost.

Reality hit again. If Stan stayed dead, I’d be the one telling his family, I was sure. How could I bring myself to do that?

Fuck.

I still couldn’t move. All I could do was stare. There was nothing else I could do. Everything I’d always known had become so fucked up. How the shit was I going to survive school the next day? How were any of us going to say anything about… anything?

I didn’t want to look, but I had to. In fact, my feet carried me further into the room, until I stood directly over Stan’s body. Hours after he’d been shot. Hours after I’d watched him die. Life after Stan. What the fuck.

He really did just look asleep. Asleep but pale. Clearly unmoving. Stiff—empty. There was nothing in there. Just a body… just a body, right… but the body of one of the biggest influences on my life, of the greatest friend I’d ever had. Pale as snow; no color, no life. Just half of Stan. Just… nothing.

Though still dressed in full Toolshed attire, his goggles had been removed and the charcoal washed from around his eyes. He looked almost too clean, for having been fighting so hard for such a long time… until, of course, I factored in the gunshot wound. Blood all around, and a bandage, I noticed, stuck in place under the ripped hole in his shirt.

God, those hours were hell. Why was I making it worse for myself by standing there?

Henrietta shooed me away after a few minutes and started explaining to us that there was only one way to bring Kenny and Stan back. It was by way of a pact which, as long as we did it in the next few minutes, could be completed on the next new moon. Stupid Goths and their stupid obsessions with moon events, right? I didn’t want to wait until then. That was, like, six days away, judging from the way the moon had been slivering down that evening.

But if six days was all I had to wait, it was a hell of a lot better than a lifetime.

“All right, here’s how it’s gonna work,” Henrietta announced. “The deity Yog-Sothoth guards the Gate. The other guys didn’t get it open tonight, but I’ve been opening it for years. Your friend Kenny can’t die. I know, because I’ve brought him back plenty of times myself.”

I was doing all I could to keep quiet through all this. Everything had been pushed so far beyond belief, I wanted her to slow down and make everything sound more logical. But at the same time, I knew my usual manner of thinking would get me nowhere. We were deep into something different now.

No going back.

“R’lyeh, where the Old Ones rest, is the space between life and death,” Henrietta went on to explain. “It doesn’t care if someone is there in body or soul. Living status doesn’t matter. So Mysterion—Kenny and I found the link that can get you there if you’re dead. I can make a pact with Yog-Sothoth any time we want and he’ll just come back.”
“Are you serious?!” I couldn’t help but blurt out.

“Done it plenty of times,” Henrietta said tensely, again hating to be interrupted. “I translated more of this Latin *Necronomicon* recently, and got that Immortals aren’t the only ones who can pass through, necessarily. So we’re going to try to sneak Stan in through the Gate, assuming Kenny finds him by the time I finish the pact. That’s why all you guys have to be here. Yog-Sothoth’ll probably listen, the more people are in on the deal.”

“And this will work?” I pressed.

“Look, I already got the bullets out, what else do you want me to say?” Henrietta lashed out at me, gesturing toward the table between Stan and Kenny. On that table were two of Token’s tupperware evidence trays, each holding one bullet each.

My eyes going wide, I wondered, “H-how’d you do that without… au… a-autopsy…?” That was a fucking hard word to say, in reference to my two closest friends.

“I told you. Pact. The fact I got his out at all,” she said, pointing to Stan with her thumb, “proves he’s got a chance.”

*He’s got a chance. Get him back. He’s got a chance.*

God, nothing made sense, but I didn’t care. I didn’t care—fuck logic. If ignoring it was all I had to do to talk to Stan again, so be it. He didn’t deserve to die.

*I can’t put up with silence forever.*

Henrietta then went on to instruct us into position around the room, while Craig watched the whole display, looking almost interested. I was standing between Ike and Wendy; the latter of the two still looked somber and awful, and as soon as I was standing next to her, I noticed she was still softly crying.

“Wendy…?” I started, not exactly knowing what to say.

“H-hey, Kyle?” she said without looking at me.

“Yeah?”

“I loved him,” said Wendy, catching in a few breaths. I felt her trembling beside me, so I did the first thing I could think of and grabbed her hand. For desperate want of something familiar, she threaded her fingers through mine and clasped my hand, hard. Our palms clung together with sweat excreted from panic and remorse. Neither of us was angry anymore, not at each other, anyway. We were just hollow.

“I know you did,” I murmured in return.

“I loved him so much,” she repeated, a sob choking its way out of her, “but he never loved me.”

I glanced down at her, confused. Wendy only stared forward. “That’s not true,” I told her. “Stan adored—*adores* you.” I switched to the present tense, since speaking about him as a presence that *had been* was far too painful. “He’s always sticking up for you, and protecting you, and—”

Wendy sighed. “He does that for everyone he cares about,” she dismissed. “He’s done it for you.” Lowering her voice to a whisper, she said, “He’s always got your back, Kyle. Honestly, I
was always a little jealous.”

“W-we’re best friends, Wendy,” I said, starting to tremble again. “It’s just… it’s just what we do.”

Wendy went quiet again, and the others began filtering into the room. “I miss him,” she added, as the circle completed itself.

“So do I,” I said, with difficulty.

“I hope this works.”

I swallowed down a lump in my throat, and looked around at everyone who had gathered around the biers. Henrietta was the only one not taking part in the circle, and was instructing everyone to clasp hands the way Wendy and I already were. I reached out blindly to my right, to find my brother’s hand. “So do I,” I whispered to Wendy. “God, Wendy, so do I.”

Once the circle was completed, Henrietta, with a flick of her lace-covered wrist, opened her ancient *Necronomicon*, consulted a notecard stuck within the binding of her desired page, and began to read aloud in a language that certainly wasn’t one spoken fluently anywhere on Earth.

I recognized the words *Yog-Sothoth, R’lyeh* and *fhtagn*, the last of the three from the Cult meetings we’d dropped in on before. There was no change in atmosphere, no great crashing of lights, no rushing of wind or anything I would have expected of a weird, dark ritual. Because nothing felt like it was happening, I shut my eyes tightly and prayed again.

*I’ll do anything, I pleaded. Anything, if they come back. Please, please bring them back.*

They had to come back.

They had to.

There was still too much to say.

– – –

*Kenny*

Henrietta had pulled through. I was in Purgatory.

There were a few times—very few—that I had passed others in Purgatory, and watched them leave like memories to ascend or descend, depending on the soul. Whether or not other souls remembered Purgatory once in Heaven or Hell, I had no idea, but I knew they always ended up here first. Which was why, even if the chance was slim, I had to try.

That Goddamn fucking Cult. Once I went back to Earth this time, no more playing around. I was bringing them down and I was bringing them down hard. We were so fucking stupid. I was, anyway. Dragging my friends into my shit. Death meant so little to me, I forgot that it was, well, lasting to other people. Forgot that other people *could* die. That people I knew could die. And one of them had.

But if a recently re-translated passage from Henrietta’s *Necronomicon* meant anything, there
might be something I could do. I was damn well going to try.

I ignored the pull I always felt toward the entrance to R’lyeh, hoping it would stay open long enough for me to search a little. To my surprise, it didn’t take long. The barren nothingness of a terrain that was Purgatory helped, since nothing was in the way of any view. It was luck that I walked in the right direction, or possibly some kind of coincidence that we’d end up in the same general area due to the fact that we’d died in the same place and within minutes of each other, but ultimately, I found him.

He was lying down on his back, just as his body had been in the alley, the mark from the bullet prominent even on his manifested soul, as most of the dead bore the mark of the way they died, at least in Purgatory and Hell (I was sure I had a pretty great bullet mark on my head, too). But I’d caught him before he even became aware of where he was, which was good. The judgment hadn’t started. I had time.

I rushed up to him and knealt, giving him a little nudge to get him aware and moving. “Stan,” I said, smacking his shoulder again. “Hey, Stan!”

He lay still for a beat longer, but then, after a couple seconds, Stan blinked his eyes open.

“…Kyle…?” he wondered. One-track mind, that guy, even just as a physically manifested soul. Couldn’t say I blamed him. I was already worried about how long I’d be gone this time and how I’d explain any kind of absence to Red. “Oh… Kenny…?” With some difficulty, Stan propped himself up onto his elbows, and then his eyes went wider. “Wait… Kenny!” he exclaimed. “What the hell? Are we dead? What’s going on?”

“Well,” I said, as I started to get a feel for where my portal would show up this time, “you were shot and went down pretty hard.”

“Y-yeah, I remember, but…” Stan looked down, and sat up further, setting his left hand against his ribcage. “I can’t feel anything,” he said, patting the spot around the bullet wound. “That was the worst fucking pain ever, but now it’s like my rib never broke.”

“Souls don’t have ribs,” I shrugged. Stan pressed his lips together tightly, his eyebrows knitting as he worked through what I’d told him, and what he was experiencing. “Your body’s still dead, Stan. Souls look like the person’s body, but you’re not gonna feel any pain or anything.”

“I’m not even breathing,” he noticed.

“No,” I confirmed.

Stan set his hand down, and bent over himself, shifting again so that he sat cross-legged on the hard ground. “Then I’m really dead,” he lamented. “They killed me. So I guess you’re dead, too?”

“Yeah.”

“This sucks. What now?”

I shook my head. I was so used to death now, talking about it was just another topic. And for Stan’s sake, we couldn’t loiter here while he tried to sort things out. “They wanted to use you as their first sacrifice,” I told him. “I couldn’t let them open the Gate tonight, not for their own purposes, not by bringing down one of my friends, so I followed you.”

“You… let them kill you? Isn’t that, kinda, counterproductive or something?”
“No, Stan,” I said gravely, “I didn’t give them the satisfaction. I shot myself.”

“Shot yourself?! WHY?! If they needed two more sacrifices—”

“McElroy said they didn’t want me,” I told him. “Come on, I’ll explain as we go.” I offered Stan a hand, which he took cautiously, and then I turned and started walking. The heavy pulse from the portal was somewhere south of where we’d been standing, and I couldn’t waste a single second. If there was even a chance that this plan could work, I’d have to go for it.

“Go?” Stan wondered, cautiously following me. “Go where? Kenny, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t,” I sighed. “Just… bear with me.”

This was going to kind of be a bitch, having to explain the death thing to Stan, since he didn’t remember anything previously—no one did—and it was bothering me as to whether he’d remember anything after we got back. If anyone would remember. Or would they only recall him coming back? Either way, this was a new chapter in my learning about that curse I’d been born under. It was a setback that I’d probably stay dead for a while, at least however long Stan had to be in order for Henrietta to make the right deal, but I really did try to think of it as a learning experience. Besides, I couldn’t argue that having company might be nice, as shitty as it was that Stan had to die at all.

After a couple silent minutes of walking, Stan stopped short, after slowing his pace considerably. I turned, to see him standing frozen, staring straight forward, his gaze fixed on me. “What?” I wondered.

“Kenny, how did you die?” he asked, blinking himself out of his trance.

“I told you,” I said, “I shot myself.”

Stan shook his head. “That can’t be right,” he said, taking a step back. “This… this is gonna sound crazy, but…”

“But what?”

“This is so weird… this is so weird, dude, I could’ve sworn I already saw you die.”

What?

WHAT?

“Seriously?!” I asked, striding up to him. In shock, Stan doubled back, his eyes shifting to try to retain focus on something. This was unheard of. Unprecedented. Nobody ever remembered my deaths, not that I ever knew of. Henrietta believed me all the time, which made sense because she was constantly helping me come back, but one of the guys? Never. This had never happened before.

“Yeah, only it wasn’t in the alley, it was—”

“…Behind the school…?” I offered, after racking my memory for the last time anyone had seen me die.

Petrified, Stan nodded. “Uh… y-yeah, dude, how did you…”
Had I been alive at the moment, I probably would’ve stopped breathing just from the excitement of hearing that. “Honestly?! Stan, what do you remember?”

“I just… I don’t know, I remember being out on one of the missions against Craig and the drug ring,” said Stan, speaking very slowly and evenly, probably in an attempt to get himself to believe it, “and we were behind the school, and…”

“And?”

“And you got stabbed,” Stan recalled accurately. The night before we’d actually arrested Wilcox and the sci fi nerds, we’d attempted another go against Craig. I had indeed been stabbed that night, and fuck had it ever hurt, but, as always, nobody remembered anything the following day. Stan included. “You stepped up, and you got killed, and everyone stopped, and Kyle called them bastards for doing it, and—”

“HOLY SHIT!” I cried out. Before he could step away again, I grabbed Stan by the shoulders and stared right at him, wide-eyed. “Stan, honest to God, do you really remember that?!”

“I think so, but a lot of stuff is really weird right now.”

“I know, I know,” I said, laughing despite the horrors of the rest of the situation we were in. It was just too good to be true, and I told Stan that. “This is incredible, dude, nobody ever remembers!” I grinned. “Thank you!” I added, shaking Stan a couple of times in hopes of getting him to display some other expression than frightened and confused. “Stan, you have no idea—”

“Okay…” he said. “I’m still confused, Kenny. What do you mean, no one ‘ever’ remembers…?”

“Well, see,” I said, letting go of his shoulders, “I’ve died before, but there’s this curse on me, see, so nobody remembers when I do, and… this… this sounds really insane, dude, doesn’t it?”

Stan nodded stiffly, still giving me an awful, skeptical look. “Yeeeah,” he confirmed.

“Well, come on,” I suggested, unable to ignore the pull toward R’lyeh any longer. “I’ll explain a little more once we get to—”

“Kenny,” Stan protested as we kept walking, “I’d kinda like some explanations now. Like… how do you know where we’re going? Where are we going? Why? I’m dead, and—”

“And it’s weird,” I nodded, “I know. Just bear with me, I can tell you soon enough.”

Stan didn’t speak for a while after that, and once again we walked in silence. This time, though, I was feeling a little more uplifted. How the hell could Stan remember my last death? Had we broken some part of the curse? Or had the Cult really opened the Gate, and now everything was just flipped and crazy?

No. No, there was an explanation:

“Of course…” I realized as we walked, as I sorted the situation out in my head, “of course it makes sense. Of course! It’s a paradox!”

“What is?”

“You remembering.” I turned so that I was walking backwards, hoping I could start to get things explained for him. “I’m dead, but not by the means you remember, so… holy shit, of course!
It’s because you died with me!”

“Technically, I died before you did, Kenny,” said Stan, “and—” Stan halted, prompting me to once again do the same. “Dude.”

“What?”

Wide-eyed and terrified, Stan was staring past me, and slowly his gaze was shifting up. He pointed in the direction he was looking, and asked, “What is that?”

“Huh?”

I turned to follow his point and gaze, and instantly doubled back. Rising from the usually barren and uneventful horizon was the clouded silhouette of some kind of tentacled creature, which appeared to be getting larger by the second. It wasn’t Cthulhu, but I felt like I’d seen it before. That didn’t stop me from being scared out of my fucking mind when I saw it, though.

“What the fuck is that?!” Stan yelped, tripping backwards at the sight of the looming monstrosity, positioning himself behind me a couple steps. As if I knew how to deal with that thing! Then again, I had kind of given myself away for having been here before; Stan just had no idea what I’d ever come up against. That thing was not usual.

“Whatever it is,” I said, “I’m gonna go ahead and say we run away from it. Now. We can’t get tired here, so we’re just gonna run and come up with a plan as we go. Got it?”

“Whatever you say!” Stan concurred quickly. On a more or less simultaneous step, Stan and I turned on our heels and booked it as fast as we could away from that creature. “Wait a sec… I can run…?” Stan gawked at his re-found ability. “Dude, I’m not even breathing, how come I can run?! Kenny, what the hell is going on?!”

“I’ll explain once we get there!”

“Get where, dude, we’re in Hell!”

“Trust me,” I grumbled, “if this were Hell, you’d know.”

“There’s a huge fuckin’ monster back there where we’d been walking, and you’re telling me this isn’t Hell?!?” Stan shouted. He glanced behind him, and instantly started sprinting faster. “Jesus Christ, it’s following us!”

“It’s what?!” I cast a look over my shoulder, and saw the creature, just a mammoth, shapeless pile of yellow-green scales and tentacles, slithering toward us. It was a really bad time to recall the Japanese porn my exchange girlfriend Yoko had made me watch. “Fuck!”

“Dude, I thought you knew all about being dead!” Stan hollered at me.

“I do, but sometimes shit comes up that’s different!” I yelled back. The pull toward the portal shifted, and I yanked Stan by the arm over to the left. “This way, come on!”

“Well, should we do something?!” Stan wondered as we sprinted the fuck away from that thing across yards and yards of nondescript Purgatory terrain. “We’re still Toolshed and Mysterion, dude, can’t we fight it off?”

“Okay, first of all, I have no clue what it is,” I admitted, “even though I’m pretty sure it came from R’lyeh—”
“That thing came from R’lyeh?!” Stan yelped in a panic. “Did they open the Gate?! FUCK! Shoot it!”

“Stan, I really don’t think anything either of us has could hurt that thing.”

“Then what the fuck do we—”

“THERE!”

There it was—dead ahead. The black tar pit. Henrietta had read open the portal using her pact with Yog-Sothoth.

The last time I had met with Henrietta, she had finally linked together a passage she had never been able to translate before, thanks to something that had come up at one of the Cult meetings. I was, of course, the link between R’lyeh and Earth… between the mortal realm and the ‘space between.’ I could journey, depending on the death, through every manner of afterlife, and even be revived if I went through R’lyeh first.

But as someone with access to the ‘space between,’ I had the right to bring a guest.

I grabbed Stan’s arm and said, “We’re heading for that black patch over there.”

“What black patch, Kenny? I don’t see anything!”

Huh. Well that was news. And it was useful, but I had time to postulate later. The fact that Stan couldn’t see the portal did make sense, as he wasn’t an Immortal, but it did mean extra work for me, making sure he got through. “Just hold on, then!” I instructed. “Grab my arm, dude, and whatever you do, don’t let go!”

Stan let out a final, alarmed yelp, but grabbed onto my arm with his opposite hand, then snapped his eyes shut as we each got a foot into the portal, at exactly the same time. If our timing had been even a little off, I could only imagine the repercussions, but the fact was, I still had hold of him, and now it was only a matter of time until the portal spat us out.

There was that familiar, strange sensation of being pushed and prodded against an unearthly current, the blackness around me, and then the point at which I just stopped running, halting Stan along with me, as the portal, like a wind tunnel, carried us the rest of the way on its own.

With a final gust, the two of us tumbled out of the makeshift Gate and onto the cold, soggy, green-tinted ground that made up my usual entrance to R’lyeh. Hisses and calls from the slumbering Old Ones filled the sky, and the tentacled tomb guardians could be seen roaming the rusty-skied horizon. All around us, monoliths crumbled, strange stone columns lay shattered and mossy, once grand, now a part of the terrain. Used to the ill, dreary welcome, I picked myself up and brushed myself off, then held a hand out to help Stan to his feet. He took my hand in confusion, then looked around.

“Dude…” he said, his eyes going wide as he surveyed our surroundings, “this is pretty fucked up right here.”

“That’s R’lyeh for you,” I answered.

Stan whipped around, his wide eyes now flaring wild behind his goggles. “R’l—R’lyeh?!” he exclaimed. “We’re in fucking R’lyeh?! I thought I was dead!”

“You are,” I told him, glancing around to find something I could use as a bench, “just
“OKAY!” Stan shouted, throwing his hands out in front of him, sounding fed up and terrified at the same time. “Dude, just STOP, I do not get a single word you’re saying!”

I supposed I couldn’t blame him, and as different as it was to have someone else I knew around in the afterlife (well, more like between-life, I guess), I should have realized it would require more explaining than anything. Then again, what had I been expecting? That we’d sit around and shoot the shit all, ‘oh, yeah, death’s a bitch,’ together until we both got back? Hell, no—I had to remember I was there to make damn sure Stan didn’t stay dead. Henrietta and I technically were the only ones who had any chance of connecting soul to body again, so… yeah. I had to get used to the idea of playing textbook for a while. A Brief Guide to Being Not-Really but Kinda Dead, by Kenny McCormick. Bestseller.

“Sorry, sorry,” I apologized, getting him to lower his hands.

Stan folded his arms and glared at me to demand answers. Before he shifted, though, my eyes fell on the bloody bullet hole ripped into his shirt, and that was enough to get me to focus more seriously on the situation. I really did treat death like it was nothing, and finding Stan in Purgatory had been proof enough that I could have the power to bring him back. But the few minutes I’d remained alive in the alley afterward had been pretty fucking terrible for everyone else.

Remembering Kyle’s raw anguish, the screams, the protests, every single stage of grief and then some all rolling into one fireball of heartwrenching emotion—that, I realized, was the part I always missed. I’d only ever died. I’d never borne witness to the events in the living world afterward. I never knew how many funerals I’d had, how many people had come, if anyone ever really did grieve over me.

I had died a very slow, painful death once. I’d contracted muscular distrophy, and for once in my life had seen a lot of people—my friends, our old voice-of-reason mentor Chef—in grief over the fact that I was dying. But, once again, nothing afterward. The process, the moment itself… and then, after a rather long stay in Hell that time, back home as if nothing had ever happened. Stan and Kyle had been really torn up that time, back when we were little kids, and it eventually got to the point that Stan couldn’t even come to the hospital anymore. In that respect, I was kind of glad it was Stan who was starting to remember my deaths now, even though I was sure that being dead, to him, was even worse.

And Kyle, I was beyond positive, was probably halfway to dead from grief himself by now. If both of them had teared up so much several years ago, I couldn’t even imagine the anguish now. For the first time, in matters of death, I started thinking a little differently… maybe even feeling a little selfish. Because no matter how many times I died, no matter how many times people forgot… there still must have been some kind of grieving period for each one.

I decided not to describe to Stan the moments that had followed him getting shot, since that would have been too much to start off with, so I let him guide the conversation. He could ask the questions he needed to, and then I’d fill him in on the rest.

“Kenny,” he said, “I get that you probably don’t think much about death. Based on what you said, anyway. I believe that you die all the time, man, I mean… I kind of have to if I remember one, but I wish you’d slow it down for me.”

“In that case,” I said, “I hope you’re up for hearing a pretty long-ass story.”

Stan shrugged, then feigned a smile as he said uncomfortably, “I’m dead, Kenny. I’ve got
time."

Right… but, hopefully, death wouldn’t last very long. In the meantime, though, at least I had a good way to fill time other than just mapping out more of R’lyeh. I had someone to talk to, who fucking remembered. Maybe this was just the beginning. Maybe more paradoxes were on the way. I had to hope that, once we got back (because I was confident that we both would get back), others would start to remember, too. Once that part was taken care of, maybe this fight against the Cult could be made easier. So long, of course, as I was the only one who died after that.

But Stan’s death really had opened more doors. Henrietta would be able to make the deal to get us both back, I was sure of it. The only thing I was nervous about now was how to talk to my girlfriend once I got back this time. Hopefully the guys could handle it, and come up for a plausible story for our absence in the world. But in the meantime, I finally got to play storyteller to someone who would listen. And remember everything.

– – –

Butters

Getting a call from Eric wasn’t something that happened very often. Getting a call from him at ten minutes to midnight was unheard of. I was awake, of course… I tended to always pull late nights on Halloween, but that year was already turning out to be different. I had been planning Chaos’s next moves, which I’d decided to reveal to the League the following day, at their meeting. It had gotten to the point, now that I was seeing all of my friends becoming less sociable (and especially since it seemed that putting Eric and Wendy together had indeed been a good thing… for them), that I was just about fed up with being myself—even Marjorine. It was getting to the point when I had to put the reading of that Tarot card to good use.

The Cult was moving, and so was Chaos.

But Eric’s call distracted me. It was hard to hear him at first, I made out something about a tragedy, but eventually it wound down into just a heavy, angry, “Goddammit, Butters, get your fag ass over here!”

What a bitch. But of course, I went. He’d told me to come straight to the League base, where he’d let me in and keep the gate unlocked, so I slipped out of the house, knowing full well my parents would ground me (even though I was seventeen) once they found out. I walked until I got to Wendy’s, where I unlocked my moped to take that the rest of the way. Usually, I only used that on Marjorine days, but I didn’t have a car, and stealing my dad’s would have just gotten me into deeper trouble, so I passed on the idea before it even came.

When Eric let me in that evening, everyone was gathered around in the common room, looking horribly grave. Clyde and Token seemed to be reaching for topics of conversation, but nobody in the room responded. Wendy sat on her own, next to the minifrige, hugging a blue pillow to her chest and staring off at nothing. Kyle, sitting so that he bent over his knees in the chair off to the side, looked like he’d been hit by a bus. He’d looked tired all day, but now the effect was worse:
his eyes were sunken and sad, and he held on tightly to a small object I couldn’t really see.

“Hey, fellas,” I said to the room. “What’s going on?” And then, after a glance around, “Where are Stan and Kenny?”

“Oh, God,” Kyle choked out, bending further over himself. “I can’t. I’ll see you guys back there.”

That said, and without looking back at anyone, Kyle left for the meeting room in the back, and was soon followed by Ike and Wendy. “What’d I say?” I wondered.

“Cartman,” said Clyde, “you called him over here, so you explain it. We’ll see you back there.”

And with that, it was just us in the common room. I stared at Eric, who once again was trying to put distance between us to make up for the fact that I was about an inch and a half taller than he was, and asked again, “What’d I say? And why’s everyone so gloomy, Eric? What happened?”

In a turn of character for him, Eric looked sullen. He folded his thick arms, resting them on the natural shelf his girth provided, and answered, “Whatever I tell you, Butters, it does not leave this room, all right?”

“Well, all right,” I agreed. “But if I was coming to tomorrow’s meeting anyway…”

Eric shook his head. “Dunno if we’re even having one.”

“What? Why?”

“Butters…” Eric sighed. There wasn’t much that was hard for him. He was so thick-skinned (in all senses of the term) that nothing bothered him. Eric Cartman rose above everything. But there were actual, real tears in his eyes when he said, “Kenny and Stan are dead.”

“What?!?” I yelped. “Oh, Jesus, Eric, really?!”

“Yeah. It… it was cuz of the Cult,” he went on.

“Did—did you see it happen? Why didn’t you call the police?!” I shouted.

“Calm down!” Eric snapped. “I saw it happen, yeah. Cops can’t do anything, but that fat Goth can.”

“What d’you mean?”

“She says she can bring ’em back,” Eric explained. Then, roughly and unexpectedly, he grabbed the front of my shirt and shouted, “I swear to God, Butters, it’s gotta work! Cuz Kenny—”

He couldn’t finish his thought. Eric bowed his head to hide whatever emotion he was actually weak enough in that moment to show, and I took this small opportunity to be compassionate, and patted him on the shoulder. After another second, after I heard Eric sort of cry, I went for it and attempted to hug him. He broke it in an instant, though, and said, “I didn’t ask you to hug me, Butters, I was just saying Kenny can’t die!”

“Well, okay, fine,” I said, backing off. “I just thought maybe you could use a little comforting, that’s all.”
“I’m fine,” he lied, wiping his eyes all the same.

“Sure.”

He couldn’t deny it for long, though; probably even saw me smile, since I was pretty proud of him for actually admitting that something was hurting him. That he, for once, was having a tough time coping.

“You don’t tell anyone you saw this, okay?” he barked.

“I won’t tell, Eric,” I promised. He didn’t thank me, but that was, once again, just fine. He hummed himself into a plotting state, and paced a little. “Now what’re you doing?”

“I’m thinking,” he said. “Somehow, we’ve gotta figure out how not to tell anyone they’re dead. Not just yet. Gotta wait to see if that Goth thing worked.”

“Is that why I’m here?” I wondered. “I gotta be in on not telling anyone they’re dead?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, hamburgers.” I didn’t know if I could lie about something this big that long, but, then again, keeping the knowledge of their deaths and witnessing their hopeful return was good for both everyday me and Chaos alike…

“What should I do, Butters?” Eric asked, stopping in front of me again.

“I dunno, Eric, I’m sure you can think of something,” I tried, giving him another reassuring pat on the back. “I mean, you’ve always got some great ideas and all…”

“You think my ideas are great?”

“Well, sure I do. You’re a real smart guy. You’ve got lots of—“

“Oh, my God. Butters!” he said quickly, standing back and grabbing me by the shoulders. “Y-yes?”

“Butters, I’ve got it!” he went on, shaking me a couple times. “I know what to do!”

“You do? Well, that’s great, Eric!” I said, trying to hide the real adrenaline rush he was giving me. “What’re you gonna do?”

“Hmm…” he began, “it’s gonna be tricky, but… no time! No time, let’s go!”

“Okay!”

As we began to leave the room, Eric just had to comment, while rolling his eyes, “You’re such a fucking cheerleader, Butters.”

“I can be,” I realized. Then again, the cheerleading would have to end soon enough. I was still more angry at the world than I was pleased with it. Chaos at least had to give this plan a try… but there was no harm in figuring out what Eric had in store for Stan and Kenny.

“You guys!” Eric announced as he barged back into the meeting room. Everyone still looked awful, Kyle especially. He stared over at us with vacant eyes, and I could actually see him thinking, Why couldn’t it have been you? “You guys, I’ve got it.”
“Got what, Cartman?” Clyde wondered, just to humor him.

“We’re at a standstill,” Ike added.

“No, no… how we’re gonna deal with everyone else,” said Eric, approaching the table. He slammed his large hands down on the end of the table, took a good survey of everyone in the room—and I could see all of the skeptical reactions from the others, from my position a few feet behind and away—then announced: “We fake them being alive.”

The silent room became even more so, until finally, at the end of his rope, Kyle shouted, “WHAT?”

“No, no, listen,” Eric went on. “It’s just like faking death, right?”

“No, it isn’t!” Kyle argued.

“Yes it is, Kyle. Look. Goth girl needs till Tuesday, right? That’s three days of school, plus the weekend, plus a Monday teacher meeting day.”

“Great. You can do math.”

“Shut up, Kyle!” Eric snapped. “So six days we have to fake. Easy. They’re sick. For school, they’re sick.”

“Oh, right,” Wendy cut in, fighting it. “So how do we get around their parents?”

“Kenny’s easy, cuz they don’t care.” Nobody could argue that, even though I was sure everyone wanted to. It really sucked that Kenny’s parents didn’t care. If I died, my father would probably still try to ground me. “Stan’s gonna be tough, but we can do it.”

“How?” Clyde wondered.

“Funny you should ask, Clyde,” Eric grinned, “because we’re gonna need you to pull it off.”

All eyes went to him. “Me?” Clyde asked skeptically. “Why me?”

“Guys,” said Eric to the rest of the room, as he began to pace around—something he enjoyed doing while concocting plans, “has anyone ever heard Clyde impersonate Stan’s voice?”

“Huh?” Token wondered.

“I have. Tell ’em, Clyde.”

Clyde’s eyes narrowed. “Cartman, that’s really stupid,” he said. “I can’t really impersonate his voice… just sometimes I can sound like him and Coach gets us confused on—”

“Then try,” Eric commanded.

“Are you serious?!” Clyde fought. “No, I mean… how would I even, like… what? What’s he sound like? Like…” Clyde cleared his throat, and his eyes shifted as I saw him figuring logistics in his head. “Like this?” he wondered. “Back of the throat?” He had indeed pushed all of his vocal qualities to the back, and doing so resulted in a smoother tone than his normal voice, which was very forward and nasal. Some of those qualities kept, of course, but the adjustment did sound enough like Stan to convince me if nobody had said otherwise. Stunned at what he’d accomplished, Clyde cleared his throat again and touched one hand to his adam’s apple. Still in the pushed-back tone, he added, “Is this seriously working?”
“Holy shit…” I heard Kyle say under his breath.

“Oh, God…” Wendy added, tearing up.

“Well, then!” Eric grinned. “We have our voice double.”

Kyle shook his head frantically, and leapt up to standing. “This isn’t gonna work!” he shouted. “It’s just not gonna work! So Clyde can sound like Stan, but nobody looks like him enough to—“

“Craig does.”

“OH MY GOD NO.”

“And you,” Eric went on, pointing to Kyle, “know more about Stan than anyone, so you keep track of his phone.”

“Cartman, this is fucking stupid!” Kyle screamed. “I’m not gonna have a hand in this! I can’t… shit… no!”

“Kyle, we have to do this!” Eric insisted.

“No,” Kyle repeated, “no, no! I can’t do it! I can’t just pretend everything’s okay! I can’t just pretend that nothing happened and they’re just sick, I can’t!”

“Kyle,” said Ike, evenly, succeeding in getting his brother to stop talking for a moment, “we’ve gotta try.”

“What??”

“It’s the best we can do right now.”

The room fell silent, and then an agreement was reached.

For the time being, the excuse would be laryngitis, which Token’s mom was actually sick with right now. Together (though Kyle gave the least input) we concocted a plausible story about what we’d all been doing on Halloween. Token had a huge entertainment center at his mansion, so part of the story had to do with watching horror movies there. Stan, who hadn’t been speaking to people much, had made an appearance, and to make things up had offered to help out with something Mrs. Black had asked the boys to do. He and Kenny had contracted laryngitis. That was the story.

To make it more plausible, Token agreed to be absent from school on Thursday and Friday, saying he came down with it as well, and Craig offered to sit out of school all week under the excuse that he was sick, too. That was just Craig wanting to get out of school again, but it was agreed that it made sense. Clyde and Token would also forge doctor’s notes if needed, and Eric would handle notes from parents. Wendy, the story would go, had not been anywhere around; she and Eric would have been elsewhere. Whether or not that ‘elsewhere’ would have involved them breaking up was something I guess the two of them had to keep talking about later. I felt bad that the one thing I’d tried to do had ended in another breakup. Way to go, Butters.

It was then decided that, as far as parents went, Clyde and Kyle would just do check-ins with Mr. and Mrs. Marsh, and the task of keeping Kenny in contact with Red went to me. I can’t exactly remember how I ended up agreeing to that, but it was Eric’s idea, so I went with it. We dispersed from the meeting room from there; Kyle left immediately for the common room where he plunked
himself down onto the sofa and didn’t talk to anyone for the rest of the evening.

“How come I gotta be the one texting for Kenny?” I wondered, taking the phone from Eric and staring at it.

“Cuz you get women, Butters, you’re like, kind of a girl!” said Eric. “Kenny’s into chicks, so—”

“Being feminine and having a lot of experience with girls are two totally different things,” I told him.

“So what?”

“You just don’t respect women,” I muttered. Eric was pretty chauvinistic. Which made me wonder again why I’d stuck him with such a feminist.

“Just text his girlfriend, Butters, come on!”


“It’s not intruding, Butters, it’s—”

“It’s intruding.”

“Whatever! Just tell her something.”

“Like what?”

“Say you miss her pussy or somethin’ like that,” said Eric, prodding me once I’d opened the text response box. “Kenny says stuff like that all the time.”

“Eric, that’s real disrespectful,” I argued.

“Yeah, well, Kenny’s a little ho-bag! Just say it!”

I swallowed back a lump in my throat and texted to Red, as I read aloud what I was typing, “Hi. Miss… your… pussy… Got sick… but… uh…”

“Say somethin’ about a date.”

“I can’t promise dates for Kenny, Eric, well, I don’t even know when he’s coming back!” I protested.

“Goddammit, Butters, just do it!”

“Okay, okay!” I gave in. “Hot date soon. How’s that?”

“You’re a natural, Butters, nice.”

Ooooh, I’d keep that compliment in my head for a while.

At least as long as I was helping out. After all, I’d had my own plans before this whole thing with Stan and Kenny came about. I couldn’t neglect Chaos, or the work I’d been doing with Disarray and the Necronomicon. It could wait a little longer, perhaps.

Eric left me with the phone after that, to go try to patch things up with Wendy by offering her
a drive home. After a while longer, Token returned to his main house, and then Clyde left, giving Timmy a lift out and offering me a ride as well. I passed, even though I knew I had to leave the building with him so he could lock me out, but before I could leave and reclaim the moped, I took a last glance into the common room.

Ike was half asleep on the floor, his head on one of the throw pillows. He was facing the couch, probably to keep an eye on his brother. Kyle had fallen asleep with his glasses on, and with one hand clenched firmly around Stan’s cell phone. Even in his sleep, he looked uncomfortable and lost.

I slipped Kenny’s phone into my pocket, dreading what I’d have to come up with if Red texted back, and prepared myself for a few extra days of being Butters. It was misty outside, in the pitch dark. As I left the League base that night, I wondered how long it would take now. How long it would take until the promised Explosive Transformation, the reading of that Tower card, would come into play.

How much longer I could hold onto the rest of me before I stopped helping the League out. Because I knew the identity of the Messenger the Cult had been speaking of, and I knew how to call him out. I knew what that ancient deity could do, and what opening the Gate promised.

Chaos.

No. It wouldn’t be long, now.

I just had to be ready.

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Chapter End Notes

Kyle’s segment of this was oddly one of my favorite parts to write...
The physical act of dying had been, with little room for exaggeration, the most painful thing I had ever experienced. I had been shot before (in the arm); I had spent a day on a bus poised precariously over a steep cliff; I had been in the line of fire at home and abroad. All of those ‘almosts’ should have prepared me a bit better to know death when it came, but of course it caught me by surprise. Coupled with the mental anguish of never seeing my friends and family again, of never getting the chance to grow up and experience life beyond high school, death was pretty brutal, and unforgiving.

The first several minutes of death had been spent wrapped in blackness, hearing echoes of the last few things ever said to me repeated over and over and over again. And then I’d opened my eyes to Purgatory, and before I could even become adjusted to death, before I could even begin to cope, Kenny had diverted me—or, my soul, or whatever ‘I’ was—to R’lyeh where now my head became flooded with instances throughout my life I’d forgotten, or had just never regarded as true.

Kenny, too, was dead. He had died before. Several times.

Every single one of them, I had forgotten once I’d slept through the night that followed. Apparently, everyone forgot. As far as Kenny knew, or so he told me, nobody on Earth ever remembered his deaths, no matter how many they witnessed. I felt like I asked him similar questions a million times, and at some points he appeared to be losing patience, but he slowly and calmly walked with me and explained everything as best he could.

“Look,” he said, “all I know is that, somehow, the Cult cursed me in the womb during a ritual that my parents attended when they were young, drunk, and stupid. Because of that, all my life, I’ve seen death after death after death, only to wake up at home again, with nobody but me remembering what happened. Somehow, I guess the Cult must know about me being an Immortal. I’m pretty fucking sure they know my identity.”

“Well, if they do,” I said, “why keep up the Mysterion ruse at all?”

“I just figured that much out tonight,” he told me. “Or last night. Or whatever time it is on Earth right now. It’s always tough to tell, here. Anyway, I don’t think the Cult knows I’ve been getting into R’lyeh on my own for a few years, now… I’m just sure they need me alive for whatever they have to do, since I’m kind of a link to it.”

“So… you killed yourself because they need you alive?”

“But I’ll be back.”

I pressed my lips together tightly and nodded, then groaned with frustration and shook my head in disbelief. “This is… this is insane. Kenny, this is crazy. I’m…” I paused. “I don’t know, dude, I want to apologize for never remembering your deaths, but… I didn’t remember till just now, so…”

We’d been walking for quite some time, and we came now to an area that gave me a chilling feeling of déjà vu. All of R’lyeh looked the same to me. Greenish rocks everywhere, fallen pillars, weird, tentacle-like flora, a sky that called to mind toxic radiation. Yet this place, this particular
grouping of rocks and pillars… this was familiar. There was a ledge off to our right, and—no…

I looked twice at two sets of markings embedded in the ground. Tire tracks. Wheelchair tracks, to be exact: Timmy’s, from fourth grade. This was where we’d been. We, the League, no, Coon and Friends… we’d been here. And the ledge… I knew that, too; I could suddenly watch the scene that had transpired there plain as day in the back of my mind.

“Wait…” I said, tepidly stepping out toward the precipice, “wait, I know this place. We were here before. This is—this is where Cartman sent us back in fourth grade, wh-where he made Cthulhu send us.”

“Glad you remember that much,” Kenny muttered.

“And… there,” I remembered, pointing over the ledge. “You died over there.”

“What?”

“You killed yourself over there.”

“Holy shit!” Kenny exclaimed, rushing up to me and grabbing my shoulders again. “Stan, you remember another one?!”

“I—I—kinda?” I said. “It’s fuzzy, but, I can see it. It’s there. You jumped over that ledge, there. But then you were killed behind the school. We had that attempt at stopping Craig that one night, and you disappeared, but… no, n-no, you didn’t disappear, you died!”

“Any more?!” Kenny asked frantically.

“Huh?”

“Can you remember any more?!”

“I don’t know, dude,” I said, beyond frightened, “this is really freaking me out.”

The fact that I had died along with Kenny was more than likely the reason, the catalyst, the paradox… whatever it was, I couldn’t deny that I was remembering. It was like a fog had cleared, like a heavy curtain had lifted to unveil a stack of memories that had always been there, somewhere, but that I’d buried without meaning to. Everyone had.

“Sorry,” said Kenny, “I know it must be weird for you, dude, but for me, this is like fucking Christmas.” He chuckled a little, then tilted his head back and laughed, “I can’t believe someone finally remembers! Honestly, Stan, thank you.”

“You’re… welcome. I guess. I mean, yeah. You’re welcome,” I said with some difficulty. He could thank me all he wanted, but what would it amount to in the end? I took another look out over the precipice, then turned and started heading back in the other direction, with no idea of where I was going.

That was just death, wasn’t it? Just the constant feeling of having no clue where you’re going. Sure seemed like death, kinda like how I’d always pictured it. You just… wander, cuz there’s nothing else. But I was in R’lyeh, a place for both living and dead. I hadn’t gone to Heaven or Hell. I was just… kinda there.

“Kenny, why’d you bring me here?” I wondered, once I knew he was following me.
“I was about to get to that,” he said. “Maybe we should sit down somewhere.”

“Sure,” I muttered.

As I walked, looking for a place to settle for a while, I felt for the area where the bullet had hit, and of course came up with nothing. Did I have an eternity of looking forward to that, too? Just remembering how I died, and wondering about the result back on Earth? Fittingly, as I was thinking about that, Kenny asked, “What’s up, dude?”

“Huh?”

“You’re being all quiet. Well, I mean, you’ve been quiet for a while… just wondering if there was anything you wanted to share, now that… y’know.”

Maybe I couldn’t feel pain anymore, but the reminder still hurt. “Now that I’m dead?” I finished. I got an image in my head of my parents and sister in black; of the guys having to carry on without me. Kenny got to go back; he’d been back before. But I wasn’t like him, I wasn’t cursed. I was just, for all intents and purposes, gone. Better me than Kyle, though. God, I’d never have been able to forgive myself if I hadn’t been able to save him. Before I could even really formulate the words, I said aloud, “I wonder how Kyle is…”

Kenny didn’t answer right off; I heard the crunch of his boots on the strange gravel as proof that he was still walking with me, but he took his time before he answered, “I’m sure it’s hard.”

God, I didn’t even want to think about it. All that time, wondering how to talk to Kyle, stressing over what I could say and how I should say it… all that for nothing…? “But…”

“Hey, Kenny?” I cut in, feeling the confession coming on.

“Huh?”

“I was quiet all that time cuz…” I trailed off, and once again took everything into account. If Kenny didn’t hear it all now, none of my friends ever would. I had to continue doing the right thing somehow; may as well start with coming clean on why I’d shut down. “Oh, what the hell!” I fumed. “There’s absolutely no reason for me to keep hiding it. I’m dead. I’m fucking dead, so what’s the point?”

“Stan, dude, calm down a little,” Kenny tried.

“I can’t calm down. I haven’t been able to calm down for a while. I haven’t been able to face anything for a while. And you know why? You know why, Kenny?”

“Um… why?”

I flung my hands out to my sides, and shouted, “Because I don’t love Wendy. I never loved Wendy.”

“I gathered that.”

“But she’s not the only one. Nope! All those days I was totally checked out? Well, guess what I was doing? I was going through a really awesome existential crisis. Oh, it was great. I couldn’t even eat. I couldn’t talk to anyone. I kept questioning everything, and once I finally figured it out—” Oddly enough, I started laughing. It just happened. But it sort of made sense—it was a strange sort of defense mechanism or something, welling up from deep inside me, covering up the real pain behind the fact that I’d lost everything. Given up everything for everything, and now…
“I DIED!” I shouted, totally losing it. “I jumped right in front of a bullet and got myself shot.”

“Stan!” Kenny shouted, shaking me quickly, which jolted a sudden reaction and made me snap back to the present. “You have got to not do that!”

“What?”

“Let your mind go like that, it’s dangerous here,” Kenny warned me. “It’s not dangerous for me; I’m an Immortal. It could be bad news for you, if you’re not careful. When normal people witness R’lyeh, sometimes they…”

“What?”

“They go crazy.”

“SUPER!” I shouted, throwing my hands up into the air and sitting down hard on a sliver of one crumbled pillar. “Die, go crazy, what’s the difference?”

“Stan—”

Feeling utterly defeated, I bent over my knees, held my head, and wished I could make sense of it all. So much had happened since I died: I’d experienced Purgatory, seen with my own (sort of) eyes another Old One, one of Cthulhu’s brethren, been sucked into the sunken city of R’lyeh, and learned that one of my closest friends since childhood was an Immortal and that I’d probably seen him die hundreds of times and never remembered. And yet the biggest feeling weighing me down was still guilt. Such was the nature of a ghost, or something, I guess. Unfinished business, and all that.

“Kenny, man…” I found myself saying, “how do you do it?”

“Do what?” he wondered.

“Cope with all this. Like, this dying thing, this R’lyeh thing, how do you do it?”

“I dunno,” Kenny answered. “It’s already getting old.”

“I bet…” It seemed like there was so much I could never hope to understand.

For some time, then, we sat in silence, each of us clearly wanting to learn about everything that had been building up for so long in the other. And because he was such a selfless person, Kenny had the talent, foresight, whatever, to read through me and get me to talk first. Which, in the long run, was a good thing, since I’d already started complaining about it, and I’d be horribly distracted if I didn’t keep going.

“I, uh,” he began, trying to be as sympathetic as he could, “I know, dude, it sucks being dead. Especially cuz…”

“Cuz I shut off beforehand?” I offered.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” I muttered. “I fucked up, Kenny. I fucked up big time.”

“What d’you mean?”
I glanced around at the unwelcoming terrain, at what I was afraid would become my permanent home from that day on, and thought about all of the ‘sorry’s I owed. “I… I died with… with a lot to apologize for. I was being such a dick to so many people, and…”

“What,” Kenny guessed, “like Wendy?”

“Not just Wendy, dude… my parents, and—” I shook my head, reliving in the back of my mind again the very last few minutes of my life, “and Kyle… as far as Kyle knows, I’m still pissed off at him, and for no reason!” Fuck, that was right, I’d gone totally out of commission before I could say anything to him. I’d gotten out one apology, but there was so much more that I needed to say. Angry at myself to no end, I buried my head in my hands and shouted, “I’m such a horrible friend, Kenny! Who does that? Who fucking does that to his best friend?”

Calmly, Kenny reached over and patted me on the back. It was weird, what I could and couldn’t feel as just a soul. I registered that something was there, but for the most part, nothing had substance, not even me. I got that I was moving, and talking and all; it was weird. But the action was still a little comforting. “If you’re talking about that fight you guys were having, Stan, drop it,” Kenny suggested when he retracted his hand. “A bunch of people fight among friends. Hell, dude, remember a couple weeks ago it seemed like Craig and Clyde were never gonna say hi to each other again. Shit works out.”

“But, Kyle—“

“Stan, you just jumped in between him and a guy with a gun,” said Kenny, standing and taking another look around, signaling that he was kind of already done with the conversation. Even in Purgatory, he’d been on the move; I wondered what exactly was up with that. “You just died for him. I’m gonna go ahead and say he forgives you.”

The sentiment was there, but I was obsessing. Now that I’d come to terms with everything I felt, now that I’d sorted out Wendy’s words and discovered more about myself and let the right things dawn on me, there was nothing I could do about it. Worry was all I could do. Worry and guilt trip myself all over the place.

“I just owe him more than that,” I said.

“More than—God,” said Kenny, almost muttering. He paced a little before looking over his shoulder at me and saying, kind of cynically, “Sorry to be bringing this up in your afterlife, Stan, but that’s really gay.”

Had I been alive, I probably would’ve gotten whiplash from how fast I picked my head up. Way to call it, Kenny. That was the first time someone had come right out and said something like that since my breakup with Wendy. The first time I realized that, yeah, the phrase really did apply to me. Something I realized, right then, about being just a soul or a ghost or whatever, was that, without a physical body, I was basically all emotion. Which meant the words hit harder, that I felt so much more. Which was just more justification to the fact that, yep, yeah, I was gay. No big deal, of course, but I’d died before anybody knew. Awesome.

Kenny backed off, since I realized I was glaring at him, and he started off by saying, “Sorry, that was…” Then, his eyes widened. “Oh. O-oh!” He almost smiled, and finally he walked back over and squatted down in front of where I was sitting on the fallen pillar. “In that case,” he amended his statement completely, “I’m really sorry.”

Of course Kenny got it. Kenny picked up on things, he was a worldly intelligent person. His grin told me that he understood.
Figuring it was useless to come out and say the phrase itself, I went on to ranting out the rest of my frustrations: “I was gonna do it, Kenny. I was gonna talk to him. I was going to explain why I was being such a dick and all… but I died with a lot of things unsaid to too many people. I just wish I hadn’t been so Goddamn stupid for the last couple weeks of my life.”

What happened then was just about the best news I’d received in what felt like a hell of a long time. Kenny’s grin broadened, he glanced around, then stood up a little, still leaning over his knees so that his eyes were level with mine. “What if I told you,” he said almost smugly, “you didn’t have to stay dead?”

…What? “I’d say you’re crazy,” I said flatly.

“Welcome to R’lyeh, a lot of stuff’s crazy here.” Kenny then stepped back and raised his arms up, to beckon me to stand, then looked around, prompting me to do the same. “But there’s a trick I’ve figured out with Henrietta,” he went on. “She’s onto the reasons why I followed you, and we’re gonna try really fuckin’ hard to get you back.”

I could not believe a single word I was hearing. “Get… get me back?” I repeated, whirling around to stare at Kenny, just waiting for him to admit that he was kidding and that he was really just going to usher me on to real Hell or something.

“With every trick we’ve got, dude,” he smirked, “it’s gonna work.”

“Well—but—wait,” I said. “I’m not gonna end up, sorry… I’m not gonna end up like you, am I? I’m not gonna keep dying over and over again…?”

“You shouldn’t,” he answered matter-of-factly. “I mean, you’re not an Immortal. Even if you did, though, all my work’s been on trying to get the curse broken anyway.” And that pretty much summed up why none of us ever really grasped why Mysterion was always so secretive about a lot of things. Obviously, we’d been incapable of understanding before. I had a feeling, though, that this time would be different.

“But I can seriously go back?!” I said, just to get my mind around the thought. “Like, just wake up, or what? Just… be alive again?!”

“I’ve done it a whole bunch of times myself. Henrietta says it could work on normal human souls diverted to R’lyeh, too.”

I couldn’t help it, I hugged him. The guy fuckin’ deserved it. “Holy shit, Kenny, seriously?!” I exclaimed. Standing back, I wondered, “Why didn’t you tell me right off?”

He shrugged and admitted, “I honestly kinda wanted to hear you say all that stuff first, dude.”

“Why?”

“Cuz I called it a while ago and wanted to see if I was right.”

“Whatever,” I said, shrugging and rolling my eyes. Damn, talk about a new outlook on… fuck, is saying new outlook on life too lame? Whatever it was, I was handling this being in R’lyeh thing a little more easily now. “So how long’ll it take?”

“What?”

“To be alive again!”
“Hard to tell, here,” Kenny admitted. “I’d guess a few days.”

Better than a few years, I guessed. “Fuck,” I said all the same. “So in the meantime… what?”

“In the meantime…” Kenny started walking again, setting his eyes on a certain point several yards away, “it’s like you said: we’re still Toolshed and Mysterion. Let’s get some fuckin’ work done.”

So that was what was up with the traveling. Damn. Mysterion really didn’t take any rest. Assuming we got back, I promised myself I’d start up a much more critical outlook on our opposition with the Cult. Death sucked, and Kenny had worked hard enough already. He shouldn’t have to deal with dying anymore… deal with his own girlfriend probably not remembering anything each time.

“Work, huh?” I wondered, glad to at least have some kind of current goal.

“Yeah. We’re gonna build up a map of R’lyeh.”

“A map?” I reiterated. “That’s—huh, actually, that’s a really good idea. Are you seriously thinking the battle’s gonna shift here at some point?”

“It’s beyond probable,” Kenny answered. “I’ve gotta know this place by heart, but for fuck’s sake, I gotta find that damn Gate!”

“Well, then, come on, dude, let’s go find it!” I said, picking up my pace.

Kenny gladly matched my steps, and we set out. Okay, maybe I had no idea what exactly I was looking for, or if I as a plain human could even see it—I recalled Kenny saying something about a black pit or something back in Purgatory that I hadn’t noticed at all—but, fuck, we were gonna win this fight, we were gonna do it as a team, and we were gonna make damn sure that Kenny McCormick wouldn’t die again until he was good and Goddamn ready.

“Hey, Kenny…” I said, as the thought crept up.

“What?”

“Maybe there’s not much I can say right now, dude,” I admitted, “and maybe I’ll never fully, like, get what it is you must’ve gone through your whole life, but there’s one thing I’ve really gotta thank you for.”

Kenny’s expression changed considerably once I’d said that. If there was one word that could really describe that kid—and I mean looking past all the sex addiction, the lewdness, all of how he generally acted at school—the word was *loyal*. He was a selfless friend, and somehow a perfect, if even somewhat classically romantic, boyfriend for Red. In the League, he was always looking out for all of us, not to mention the whole town. But how often did the guy actually get to hear about all the good he did?

“Thanks for not giving up on us,” I said. “Even though we keep forgetting your deaths, Kenny, it’s not like it was ever our fault. We’ve all got each other’s backs, dude, and it sucks that we don’t remember. But you stuck around us anyway, we all stayed friends, so… thanks.”

Very slowly, the corners of Kenny’s mouth twitched upward to show a smile. “Damn, dude… that’s… wow,” he said. “I mean, shit, Stan, of course I stuck around. Thank you for that. And you’re welcome, I guess.”
It did occur to me that Kenny probably really wasn’t complimented often. We’d congratulate him on things we knew meant a lot (like getting with Red or new discoveries for the League and such), but obviously Kenny couldn’t reap all the benefits of being thanked by the town for his work as Mysterion. I got where the link was, now, between Kenny and his vigilante ego. It was all in the interest of breaking his curse, and yet he still put others first, which had probably set him back quite a bit. That much was beyond admirable.

As we kept walking, though, committing to memory the various turns and twists of the eerie landscape, observing where the tentacled plants grew and if any of them were sentient, Kenny started laughing.

“What’s up?” I wondered.

“Nothin’, it’s stupid,” he said. “I’m just being a douche.”

“What about?”

“Okay,” Kenny laughed, somehow managing to lighten the mood completely, “so, actually, kinda got something I wanna ask you.”

“What’s that?” I wondered.

“Right, so, obviously, chicks dig me,” he said, shrugging to indicate the fact that such things really didn’t need to be said, for being such a known and well-accepted fact, “so I know where I stand on their lists.”

“The fuck does your sex life have to do with R’lyeh?” I had to ask.

“It doesn’t, dude, stay with me, this is really stupid, but…” He paused to laugh, shook his head, then said, “I’ve always wanted to ask a dude about it.”

“About what?”

“If I’m top rank on those lists, too.”

“Oh, my God, Kenny, seriously?” I wondered, almost laughing myself.

“Dude, Stan, this is serious. If Mysterion is ever People’s ‘Sexiest Man Alive,’ I’ve gotta know if the vote’s unanimous across genders!”

“You are so fucking stupid sometimes, Kenny, I swear to God,” I laughed.

“Humor me, Stan. Gay perspective. Am I hot?”

“Dude!” I chided. “There’s way worse stuff to be concerned with right now. Besides, I’m not exactly the right guy to ask.”

“I know,” Kenny smirked, “but, dude, whatever. Just answer the question.” He shifted to be walking backwards, thus facing me, and asked again, “Gay perspective, am I hot?”

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I rolled my eyes and quickened my pace so he’d have to double back, then decided on answering, “Not so much with a bullet hole in your head, dude, no.” Kenny just kept laughing.

“Other than that, though,” I shrugged, “I’d say you’re a good-looking guy.”

“Woohoo!” Kenny exclaimed. “Just as I thought, completely irresistible.”
“You’re such a fucking whore.”

“Nah, see, knowing dudes think I’m attractive makes me more of a chick-magnet, right, cuz…”

“You’ve got a girlfriend,” I scolded him, “don’t be all—“

“I’m not,” he laughed. “It’s just tough bein’ away from her right now, so I’ve gotta keep myself up somehow.”

“Oooohhhh,” I realized, feeling kind of bad that I’d pressed the issue. “I’m sure stuff’ll be fine. But to keep you occupied, Kenny, sure, keep celebrating. Just get rid of the bullet hole.”

“Will do.” After a few seconds, he added, “Even once that’s gone, I’m still no Kyle, though, right?” That said, he yanked me in by the neck and noogied my head as best that action could be performed, given our metaphysical states, and I nodded, finding myself grinning before I could even come up with an answer.

Assuming I got out of this, assuming I did get to live again, I decided… no more being checked out. No more forcing myself into awful (and, let’s face it, selfish) funks. I learned something, in R’lyeh… the only thing I should ever have to be was honest. And if I got to live again… fuck. Honesty first. Be present. All that stuff.

I was glad that we got the major talks out of the way early, though, since after that, Kenny pulled up his hood to assume character as Mysterion, and everything became business. We fucking scaled R’lyeh. The slimy terrain went on forever, but was winding, almost prehistoric, and absolutely littered with crypts for the Old Ones.

Because we were not there in body, we couldn’t feel any changes in temperature or altitude, which allowed us to venture closer toward what could only be volcanoes, belching out clouds that filtered into the toxic waste-colored sky. Some smaller (as in, smaller than the massive Cthulhu—to be honest, I’d always kind of compared that Dark God to, say, Godzilla or something) tentacled creatures roamed about, but most of them failed to notice us. We had free roam over the entire sunken city.

Mysterion did express some disappointment at a few points, though, that he could still not find the exact, proper Gate, nor had he ever seen Yog-Sothoth, the deity Henrietta dealt with to grant him access to and from R’lyeh. I suggested that perhaps it was because Kenny wasn’t a fully-fledged Immortal. That, obviously, he was still human. He agreed with me, but kept his frustration.

Despite everything, though, neither of us had much to complain about anymore… or at least we didn’t dwell on it. Kenny really had become my guinea pig, in terms of finding someone to come out to. And I’d gotten quite the life (death?) story from him, as well. Everything was off my chest for the time being, and he’d gained a research partner of sorts in me, which I accepted gladly. Now that I knew I’d be able to make it out of R’lyeh, I wanted to learn and remember as much as I could, so we’d have one up on the Cult. It was even kind of funny, thinking about how they’d react once both Mysterion and Toolshed were back out in the field.

I’d been offered a second chance, and I wasn’t going to waste it. The plan, too, was simple: apologize to everyone who needed one from me, re-focus myself, and get that Cult back right where it would hurt them the most. They weren’t going to kill me twice.
After getting something like three hours of sleep, I awoke at five in the morning and spent about twenty minutes staring at the wall behind the television. I felt sick, stiff, drained and useless. Happy November. The first thing I felt was the pressure of Stan’s cell phone in my palm, reminding me of a presence I’d have to spend the day without. Day one of six. Get through it, Kyle, just fucking get through it.

I sat up, aching from the fight the night before, my head throbbing with the memory of somehow instigating unnatural phenomena, my heart heavy with guilt and loss. Sitting up, I discovered that I’d fallen asleep with my reading glasses on, and peered through the black frames at Ike, who had camped out on the floor and was still in a deep sleep. He didn’t have to be at school for another two and a half hours, and he’d pulled an awfully long night, so I let him sleep.

Before staggering to the bathroom to take the shower I so desperately needed, I did probably the worst thing for myself and crept toward Kenny’s personal room, where Henrietta had conducted her little séance the night before. It still crepted me out how that was supposed to work. Stan’s and Kenny’s bodies lay in there on biers, dead to the world, but preserved, according to Henrietta, in the same general way the Old Ones were kept in half-dead slumber in R’lyeh. She needed till the new moon to complete whatever pact she’d made with Yog-Sothoth, the Gatekeeper. Just a few days, just a few nights, and then they’d be back. I had to hold onto that, even though the heavy pressure in my chest, the awful sensation of utter loneliness, was enough to make me skeptical that the plan would work at all.

No—it had to. It just had to. They’d be back; they’d be back; they’d come back. Waiting just really, really sucked.

I stood in the doorway, staring at the biers, for about five solid minutes, then sucked in a breath and grabbed a couple of Kenny’s books. I’d make myself start digging into his research if it was the last thing I fucking did. Sure, I selected the books at random, but I figured no matter what I took, it’d help. No use wasting time. I was going to get back at that fucking Cult for killing Stan. Fucking assholes. I had half a mind to go beat the shit out of Nelson in the basement that morning, but, realizing it would accomplish nothing, just took a long shower instead, giving myself time to talk my way through what I had to do that day.

After I’d showered and dressed again, I discovered Ike awake and in the kitchenette pouring cereal. When he offered me some, I accepted on autopilot. I wasn’t hungry, but I made myself eat. It amounted to about two spoonfuls before I just shoved the bowl away and buried my head in my arms on the table.

“I can’t do it, Ike,” I muttered. “This plan is horrible, I can’t do it.”

“Yes you can,” my brother assured me. “I know you can.”

“Sure.”

I left to gather my things for the day, numbly tucking Kenny’s books into my bag as well. Stan’s phone, still holding a full charge, was safe in my right pocket; I slid my own into my left. Token entered the building to check in on us just as I was claiming my coat from the cloakroom, and he chose to stay silent and give me a moment in front of the two unclaimed garments: Kenny’s parka,
Stan’s jacket. Stan’s note to me was in my own coat pocket, and I almost unconsciously grabbed at his just before heading out for the day with Ike and Token, who had offered us both a ride. Soon…

Just my luck, right after Token had dropped Ike off, Stan’s phone vibrated in my hand. Tears instantly clung to the corners of my eyes, but I ignored them and slid on my reading glasses to decipher the message on the screen from Stan’s mom, who still had no idea of anything that had transpired:

Did you get to school ok? Worried about you. --Mom.

Biting my lip so I wouldn’t lose it and start crying, I set my thumbs over the keypad, knowing of Stan’s tendency to respond immediately to texts only if he cared to check his phone on any given day. His lack of interest in the thing gave me some reprieve in that I wouldn’t always have to respond to texts, but if he got a call and I wasn’t anywhere near Clyde, I had no idea what I’d do.

Day one—I was pretty fucking sure I’d break, and Cartman’s plan just wouldn’t work. I was too fucking distraught. Faking life for my own best friend? What the fuck was I playing into?

But I texted back anyway… typing out the worst lie ever told: Everything’s fine.

God, everything was kind of the opposite of fine. Everything fucking sucked. I needed a distraction. I needed a distraction bad.

“Hey.” When Token spoke, I just about leapt out of the damn car. I yelped, snapped Stan’s phone closed, and whipped my head to look at the driver. Token gave me a concerned look, and asked, “Dude, you gonna be okay?”

“I… I dunno,” I admitted. “I just… this is… I don’t know.”

“Just think of it as only six days,” Token suggested. “Could be a hell of a lot longer.”

Like forever?

“I guess,” I sighed.

Once we were parked, Token hesitated for a minute, then said, “Hey, one thing.”

“What?”

“Uh… try not to get angry today,” Token suggested. “Or… whatever it was that made that—whatever happened, uh… happen.”

“Let’s just call it a glitch,” I suggested, wanting the psychic conversation to be completely over, even though I knew now it never could be. Everyone had witnessed that, and I couldn’t hide it. All I could do was really exactly as he’d suggested: not get angry. The last thing I needed was anyone outside the League (and Cult, for that matter… shit) witnessing me being the cause of something like that. Ugh, I couldn’t even imagine.

Leaving it at that, we walked in silence toward the school, for what was probably one of the worst school days of my life. I felt sick all day. It was like I had pins and needles running through my whole damn body, and at one point, when role call was taken and I was put on the spot to explain where Stan was, I had to excuse myself to the bathroom, where I hid in a stall for a few minutes to gather my wits and almost puked from nerves.
I couldn’t fucking handle anything. Holding it together was almost impossible; I was a wreck. But who wouldn’t be? I fucking watched Stan die, I saw Kenny kill himself, and I was supposed to pretend everything was okay? My options were basically fake it or shut down. I did a little of both.

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Early that afternoon, I broke up with Nelly.

It was just one other thing that happened in among all the other shit I was dealing with that day. I’d come to school so empty in the morning, so deprived of sleep and so afraid that the stupid plan wouldn’t work, I’d ignored her in the hall. After that, my phone went off like crazy between each class, with her trying to see what was wrong, if I was feeling sick, that maybe I should go lie down, that if I wasn’t sick and was just upset we should talk about it. So when I saw her at lunch, I told her to knock it off.

“I was just checking in on you,” Nelly tried to explain.

“Yeah, well, it’s kind of annoying,” I told her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, lightly taking my hand. The contact was nice, but the sentiment I wanted wasn’t there. The only comfort I’d take right now was in the form of the random, “You’ll be okay”s I was getting from my brother, and even then sometimes it was tough to deal.

So that was when it hit. I didn’t want to keep around a girlfriend I only had for shallow reasons anyway. Hadn’t I broken up with Heidi because I’d called her shallow? Way to be a hypocrite. “Nelly, c’mere,” I suggested, leading her out into the hallway, where, at least for a couple minutes, we could be alone.

“What’s up?” she wondered, her voice bouncing up when she asked the question, probably in hopes to invigorate a happier conversation. No deal, sister; sorry.

“Nelly, listen,” I said, dropping her hand. “Homecoming was… i-it was great and all…”

“You got drunk, Kyle,” Nelly laughed. “It’s okay, I don’t mind if—”

I shook my head. “Let me finish,” I interrupted. Which shut her up. God I felt like an asshole. “It was great, but it’s done. I’m sorry. I thought there could be something, but there isn’t.”

Nelly froze for a few seconds before finally saying anything. “What?” she wondered, looking absolutely pathetic. Girls would get like that. Like the end of a brief high school fling was the end of the world. Like being friends just wasn’t enough and they couldn’t survive without that ultimately insignificant date. Until the next one came.

“Look, you’re a great girl, and I like you and all, but I just can’t make this work right now,” I said, wanting to let her down as easily as I was presently able to.

“Why?”

“I’ve just… got a lot of shit going on,” I said quickly. I really didn’t want to get angry at her. Honestly, based on what had happened the night before, I was trying not to get angry about anything, for fear that ‘something’ might happen again. “My parents are on my ass about colleges, and there’s just… there’s a lot of other stuff, so—ugh, sorry. I just can’t do this right now.”

“But Kyle—” she insisted, reaching one hand up to touch my hair.
Acting on impulse, I grabbed her hand before she could, and probably squeezed a little too hard as I commanded, firmly, “No.”

“Kyle, what the hell has gotten into you?!” Nelly wondered, pulling her hand away. “You look like you haven’t slept, and you’re acting weird. Weren’t we fine on Monday?”

“Y-yeah,” I said, realizing I hardly had any reason for breaking up (from her point of view) … other than my feeling guilty for going out with her for stupid reasons. And being, oh, kind of completely fucking emotionally unstable. “We were. But I’ve been thinking, and I just… I just don’t see this as the right thing to be doing right now. I’m going through a lot.”

“There’s no way I believe this is all because of college.”

“Maybe it isn’t, Nelly, you know? Maybe it isn’t,” I agreed, trying hard not to snap too much at her. “And maybe I’ll feel differently a few weeks from now. But can we just… sorry, I really kind of feel like I rushed into this, and… it’s me, Nelly, it’s totally me. I just can’t be dating right now.”

“Oh. Well. Great.”

“I’m sorry.”

Nelly closed in on herself, and came back at me with, “If you’re sorry, give it another chance.”

“N-not that kind of sorry,” I cut in quickly. “I’m sorry if I led you on. I’m sorry I wasn’t ready. Okay? I’m sorry I just don’t feel like I’m stable enough to be your boyfriend right now. I’m sorry.”

“But maybe—”

“Nelly. It’s done.”

It was over just as quickly as it started, and in precisely the same way: as a spur-of-the-moment decision. Yes, she was nice. Yes, maybe I could have brought myself to be more interested in her if given more time. Just… not at a time when I was coping with something as heavy as two friends being gone from my life. They had that chance of resurrection, of course, but even that promise was surreal. The truth of it was, they weren’t there that day. That was all that mattered. One day at a time, that’s how things always had to be, and I couldn’t fucking stand it.

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My life, that day, became one giant search for answers. Answers to questions I never thought I’d ask… that I never knew I needed to ask. All day, morning to night, I was distracted with fears and anxieties, and only one thing could put any of that to rest: facts.

There was a pretty easy way to go about getting them, too, even though there was a good chance that taking that route would rob me of a little bit of sanity. Back in fourth grade, before I even knew that Kenny was the town hero Mysterion, I had taken a fall for him. Mysterion had asked me specifically for help, and thus our vigilante work had begun, quite some time before the creation of the Human Kite.

Clyde wasn’t the only one who shared vocal qualities with someone on the team. I could pretty convincingly mimic Kenny… or, more specifically, Mysterion. And I’d done it, taking that fall seven years prior. I’d posed as Mysterion and been thrown in jail for a night because of it.
(although we later sorted it out and cleared my name), and Kenny and I had ever since been under an agreement that, if anything happened to him, I was more than free to do it again.

Of course, I hadn’t considered something ‘happening to him’ included ‘killing himself in order to divert Stan’s soul through R’lyeh so he could live again,’ but the opportunity had come up nonetheless. And the idea haunted me all day, coming to full fruition after school when Cartman caught up with me in the back hall and said, “Hey, me and Clyde got talkin’ and we think we should have a meeting tonight.”

“Um, why?” I wondered, shaking, as I had been on and off—both from the memory of the previous night and my awful lack of sleep.

“Cuz—” Cartman at least had the sense to glance around before pulling me aside and saying in a hushed tone, “Chaos is on the move and we really shouldn’t waste time.”

“What? How d’you know?”

“Butters isn’t good at hiding much, ’specially during German.”

“Well, then,” I snapped, shrugging him off, “nice move giving him Kenny’s phone yesterday!”

Cartman rolled his eyes and pulled something from his pocket. Once he held it out, I recognized it to be the very cell phone in question. “Kyle, we’re having that meeting.”

“Fine,” I gave in. And once the idea hit, I couldn’t go back on it: “Just don’t expect the Human Kite to be there.”

“Dude, lame! You can’t just back out.”

“I didn’t say I was backing out,” I muttered. “I just said not to expect Kite.”

“Right, that doesn’t make sense.”

“You’re just too stupid to get it,” I groaned, and left without having to suffer through saying or hearing another word.

The thing was… I couldn’t bring myself to be the Human Kite again until I could repay Stan as Toolshed. That was just how I saw it. Not until I could pay him back or just do something for him when we both had assumed our alter egos. The Human Kite owed Toolshed. Kyle owed Stan. That was just…it. The end. That was how I saw it. I’d spend the rest of my fucking life thanking him and looking out for him and paying him back if I had to, because that was what that sacrifice was worth. My life. That’s what he’d saved, and that’s what I had left.

And yes, it was going to be hard… really, really ridiculously hard for me to instead tackle the Mysterion persona knowing that Kenny was dead. Mysterion was so much a part of him that I did feel like I was stepping over some kind of boundary nobody else in the world should ever cross, but it seemed like the best and only thing for me to do. Kenny wanted me picking up on his research? Fine. I wanted to anyway. It would just be easier now if I went ahead and actually did it as Mysterion.

Thinking about Mysterion, and how his image had sort of taken on a life of its own, I started thinking about Henrietta, and how deeply involved she was. The Goth knew more about Kenny than any of the rest of us, to the point that he trusted her with the list of how the rest of us should proceed in the event that he had to take a lengthy stay in R’lyeh, as was the case now. If I was going
to get anywhere with research (an area I’d failed in all day due to nerves and still kind of feeling shitty for breaking up with Nelly), I had to suck it up and work a little with her.

This is going to sound stupid, but the Goths depressed me. Their utter lack of empathy, their violent hatred for living and all things the world had to offer… it was exhausting listening to them. I was generally pretty moral; I went through existential phases a few times a year, but thriving on being miserable wasn’t something that ever came to mind, for me. It was horrible that I even had to talk to one of them at this point in my life… witnessing death first-hand and then turning around and talking to someone who obsessed over the beauty of it? No, thanks. But it had to be done.

I worked out something resembling a plan in my head on my walk home to pick up my car (and my brother) for the meeting, and part of it involved talking to Ike first. I texted him when I was about a block away, and once I’d arrived in the driveway, he was in the passenger seat with my keys, reading an Excel file on his PDA.

“Hey,” I said, sliding into the driver’s seat and tossing my backpack into the seat behind me. When I held out my right hand, Ike deposited my keys into my palm. “Thanks for waiting in the car.”

Ike shrugged. “Ma’s getting on my case right now,” he admitted, scrolling through his file again.

“What?” I wondered, starting up the car. “Why?”

“Honestly?” Ike narrowed his thin black eyes at me.

I groaned and set the car in reverse. “It’s cuz of me, isn’t it?” I guessed.

“Kinda.”

“Goddammit,” I muttered. The very reason I’d texted Ike was so that I wouldn’t have to deal with my parents that afternoon. That was one thing I knew I couldn’t do. My mother would argue me into a frenzy—I couldn’t fake it around her. Ever since I was little, my mother has kind of completely terrified me. I still had a hard time standing up to her. It took a lot out of me whenever I did, and I was so fucking drained now, there was no way I could even hope to begin a conversation with her without breaking. “She shouldn’t be doing that.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Ike, “but she does.”

“No kidding.”

We drove through town in silence for a little while after that, before Ike finally asked, “You do okay today, buddy?”

“I almost threw up,” I answered. “I still might.”

“You don’t look so good,” Ike observed.

“I probably won’t till next Monday night, dude, sorry.”

“Want me to drive?”

Any other day out of that whole fucking year, I might have laughed, but at present I just couldn’t, and instead shook my head. Ike fell silent again, allowing me the rest of the drive to think out what it was that needed to be done. Obviously, my main plan was to patrol town as Mysterion
that evening, so the town wouldn’t miss his presence and so that I had something else occupying my mind for the night. Plus, it would be a little easier to sneak into the Cult bookstore as Mysterion.

The bookstore had to be the target. Nelson had been there a few days before, and now Stan was dead because of him. Henrietta and Craig had been going into that bookstore for us, but Kenny was the one who saw most of whatever they were able to scrounge up in there… not to mention the fact that he understood more than any of us. Now he’d put me in charge of research, and fuck was I going to get us just as prepared as we could possibly be to go up against the Cult again once Stan and Kenny were back.

Feelings were mixed at the base that afternoon and evening. Everyone was coping in their own ways, but it was still pretty obvious that I was the one taking it the hardest. Cartman and Clyde both tried to talk to me again about my ‘glitch,’ but I passed that off as unimportant in the grand scheme of things. I’d deal with that once I had a slightly less frenzied mind. Though, of course, it seemed kind of obvious that the glitch only surfaced when I was under extreme pressure and worsened the angrier I got; I sort of doubted it was something I could control at all. Time would surely tell.

When everyone dispersed to prepare for the meeting, I peered into Kenny’s room again, just to solidify my idea in my head. I kind of felt like I was going crazy for trying something so ridiculous. But it had to be done. That was the mantra. It had to be done. Hold it together—just fake it. Whatever ‘it’ entailed. Sanity, calmness, rationality, logic… whatever. Fake it till things made sense again.

I had in my private room the spare Mysterion gear. Again, we had an agreement. I hadn’t actually taken on the Mysterion persona in a very long time, but it was something I’d been prepared to do, just in case. I wasn’t going to let that night go to waste. Infiltrate the bookstore, figure out some new fucking topic to bring up when I finally confronted Henrietta and her fellow Goths.

I was the last one to enter the meeting, and when I did, a hush fell over the room. Some of the looks I was being given were looks of awe, but even those turned to glances of confusion once it became clear that I was not Kenny, that, no, he hadn’t already come back from the dead. But nobody spoke anyone’s real name within the meeting hall, so nobody was really in much of a position to argue my motives. So I took it upon myself to address the choice in my own way:

“I know what this looks like, and believe me, I have some hang-ups about it, too,” I said. “But we need to keep moving. We’ve got a few things to be mindful of tonight. One: obviously, stay on the lookout for any new Cult activity. Two: Chaos is up to something, so be on alert in that respect, too. Any questions?”

“Oh, yeah,” said the Coon, eyeing me skeptically “What exactly are you doing?”

“What’s it sound like? I’m going on patrol,” I insisted. “The town can’t go a single week without resting assured that Mysterion’s still got an eye out. I won’t take long, but I’m not going out alone.”

“You need backup?” Mosquito asked, clearly offering himself if needed.

“I do, but…” I set my sights across the table at our newest member; it was time she had a better chance at proving herself anyway—“Marpesia.”

“Yes?” She lifted her head, her helmet somehow catching even the dim light of the meeting room.
“You’re with me tonight. Everyone else, you’re with Mosquito. Just keep the basic goals in mind, guys, got it?”

Marpesia nodded to accept her position, and with that, we divided and dispersed.

For just about the only time that day, I had a clear head. I had one single goal in mind and that was get to that fucking bookstore and don’t leave until I’d learned something useful. I kept to the shadows, as I knew Kenny liked to do, and Marpesia kept up a few paces behind, until we approached the store’s lot.

“Thanks,” said Marpesia, “for having me come along, but… why me?”

“You deserve the satisfaction of kicking someone’s ass tonight as much as I do,” was all I decided to answer.

“Well… I appreciate it. Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. Just stay alert.”

“Of course.” Just before we reached our destination, Marpesia added, “One more thing…”

“What’s that?”

“TupperWear and I have been talking… we’re going to try to design some kind of protective gear for everyone,” she said. “We’ll need to fit you guys later, okay?”

I agreed, since it was a perfect idea. I’d thought it myself from time to time… everyone in the League needed protection. Bullet-proof motherfucking vests. The second Stan came back I’d slap one right the hell on him. Jesus. Of course we needed armor, and having TupperWear and Marpesia on that task was perfect, since they were the most heavily armored of any of us, and knew the right way to make lightweight gear that still held up and did what it was supposed to do.

Old habits die hard—I took my first position that night on the roof of the bookstore, while Marpesia stalked the back lot for activity. One quick pace around the roof and I managed to get even more pissed at the Cult than I already was: locked ducts and fire escapes. Honestly. Everything was locked and coded, including the ventilation ducts. There was just no way in without a key or contact, and I’d forgotten to stock up on Mysterion’s old standby—firecrackers. I couldn’t blast the building open. Nor could Toolshed come break us in.

God fucking damn it, was it Monday yet?

Well, I was successfully distracted. In hopes of snapping back into focus, I slunk to the edge of the roof to look out over the lot, about to call for Marpesia to see if she’d found any other possible entrances to the Cult’s mysterious front.

And who should I find in the lot but Professor Chaos’ silver-clad right hand: General Disarray. The kid, at all of about thirteen, has nearly overstayed his welcome as sidekick by now, and was well on his way to becoming our full-fledged enemy in his own right. Dougie was highly recognizable as General Disarray, and I had the feeling he kind of intended it… keeping his ginger hair exposed and unaltered, wearing only silver industrial goggles to hide any part of his face. If his presence didn’t raise enough suspicion, the fact that he was sitting cross-legged in the parking lot with a book and two burning black candles certainly helped.

Thinking quickly, I scaled down the side of the building—remembering at kind of the last second that I didn’t have my Kite glider and couldn’t just fly off—and approached Disarray from
behind as he was muttering words in the language all too recognizable as the one often uttered by members of the Cult. “Having a séance, are we?” I growled at him in Mysterion’s tone.

Disarray broke his apparent meditation, but did not stand. “Hello, Mysterion,” was all he said, buying every second of my performance. “Nice night for a walk. Why don’t you keep going?”

“I don’t think so.” I grabbed him up by the back of his collar and requested assistance through my wire: “Got some interesting activity over here, Marpesia… I could use a hand.”

“On my way,” was her response.

“Can’t handle a kid and his book on your own, Mysterion?” Disarray chided, attempting a backhand. I caught his wrist and swiftly flipped him over my arm, which got him to the ground, but he swiftly scooped his book up before I could make a move toward it and made a run for the edge of the lot.

Before he could even get close, Marpesia leapt out from behind a car and got in a flying kick, directly to Disarray’s gut.


“Don’t be so tactless as to shout out your targets, Mysterion!” chided General Disarray. “Besides, you’re not the only one with backup!”

On that word, Disarray hurled the book up toward a parked sixteen-wheeler. It hadn’t gone two feet, though, before Marpesia intercepted it and turned around just in time to whack Disarray across his heavily-freckled face with the book’s spine. She glanced down at the item, probably in shock that she—an admitted and obvious bibliophile—had just attacked someone with a book, but her mood soon shifted, for the next thing she did was haul Disarray up by the collar and shove him against the side of that large truck.

“What are you doing with this?” Marpesia demanded, leaning in so close her helmet clinked against his metal goggles. Disarray, in retaliation, only sneered.

“I’m gonna take a guess as to what that book is,” I growled, walking toward them, “and I’ll just go ahead and assume I’m right.” Anticipating my next question, Marpesia kneed Disarray in the ribs to make damn sure we had his attention. “What are you doing with a Necronomicon?!” I shouted.

“And where’d you find it?” Marpesia added. “This isn’t something to be toyed with! It causes real—”

“Chaos?” Disarray grinned.

Wait a minute…

No way. This was going too far, even for Professor Chaos, I thought. Then again, hadn’t both Wendy and Cartman expressed some kind of concern for Butters (and Marjorine) recently? His unfamiliar brooding, his recent tendency to be seen in odd places, his sudden expertise in archaic German, his failure to maintain Marjorine as he slipped further and further into a mindset more befitting of Professor Chaos…

His secrecy and how little we in the League had heard of any of his plans as of late were also disturbing factors to figure into the equation. Was he just toying with us? Had he been, this whole time?
“Excuse me,” I said to Marpesia. She stepped aside so that I could be the one cornering Disarray, and I slammed my gloved palms hard against the truck behind him. “What are you up to?” I barked, almost breaking out of Kenny’s iconic character and into my own… or even myself. “Are you and Chaos siding with the Cult?! What the hell is going on?”

From above us, a familiar laugh was let out, and it echoed through the moonlit lot. I glanced up, but he was already gone. Just as I was about to take out a great deal of frustration on General Disarray, the voice sounded from the hood of the semi. “Sides, Mysterion, don’t even factor into it.”

“Chaos…” I heard Marpesia say—and I realized, then, that this was her first real encounter with him since joining the League. Now, I knew Wendy and Marjorine were very good friends, so I could only imagine how she must have been viewing the current situation. Butters, Marjorine and Professor Chaos barely felt like a package deal. Each and every one of them was a wild card, and one never knew which would be drawn. “Mind explaining yourself?”

“Oh, answers will come,” Chaos assured her from his current position, leaning, arms folded, against the windshield—the very image of a villain, basking in the last thin light of the moon before it waned completely. “Ask me only one question tonight, heroes. You’ll get an answer to one alone…”

“Why do you have—” Marpesia began before I held out my right hand quickly to stop her. I heard the clink of her armored boots on the gravel as she stepped down to give me the honor of asking, and I gave myself just enough time to consider my options.

If I asked something to general, How much do you know?, that opened up too many possibilities for his answer to be along the lines of, Enough. A question more like, What are you doing with a Necronomicon?, could be answered with a smart, You’ll find out. So I went for something that he couldn’t fake an answer for:

“Who’s the Messenger?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The Messenger!” I shouted, still almost irate enough to break out of the Mysterion voice (which was starting to hurt my throat). “The one the Cult keeps talking about, who is he?!”

“The current one? That’s easy,” laughed Chaos, jumping down from the hood of the truck. While I wasn’t paying attention, Disarray slipped down under my left arm and darted over to Professor Chaos’ side, giving me and Marpesia a fantastic scowl. “Sounds like you’re slacking, Mysterion, if you haven’t come across anything about Nyarlathotep.”

“Who?”

“Nyarlathotep!” General Disarray repeated. I couldn’t even figure out how the fuck to make my mouth form that name, let alone say it, but the two of them were doing it with ease. If this Nyarlathotep guy was one of the Old Ones, or associated with him, I had some Goths to speak to. “He’s been Cthulhu’s Messenger for aeons.”

“And with strange aeons…” Marpesia recited in a whisper.

Professor Chaos smirked. “Even death may die,” he completed. “Come, Disarray,” he then beckoned, walking right up to the stunned Marpesia and taking the book from her by distracting her with an incredibly awkward-looking kiss on the cheek. “True chaos waits for no one.”

And with that, Disarray collected his candles and was on his way.
When Disarray was out of earshot, Chaos turned and said to me, almost under his breath, “I thought you were dead.”

“Well,” I decided on answering, “I guess I’m just full of surprises.”

“Aren’t we all, Mysterion… aren’t we all…”

Huh.

Well this wasn’t good.

No matter what move any of us made, things just seemed to be going from bad to worse. But at least now… now I had a name. Now I could at least delve into some research, and, against my better judgment, consult the Goths on a subject that was going to drain a hell of a lot out of me to study.

The following day, I was the most distracted I’d probably ever been, in terms of having my mind elsewhere at school. I snuck out Henrietta’s old book about the *Necronomicon* during my study hall, and was disappointed to find that the majority of it was written in some kind of rune-based language, which I quickly and accurately hypothesized that it was the language of the Old Ones, that strange tongue through which the Cultists prayed to Cthulhu. I took notes where I could, though, sketching copies of what the book detailed to be the Gate in the back of my English folder, writing down Kenny’s own ledger notes about the original *Necronomicon* and how many copies had been translated and published.

Distraction came in another form when I had to snap out of my little trance when the English teacher began passing out stacks of our collected pop quizzes from the last couple of books we’d been assigned to read. For some reason, some teachers liked doing that, just collecting all the quizzes and passing them back in bulk after letting the students stress for a good long time over what the fuck grade they got. My own stack averaged an A, so there was nothing for me to worry about yet (though I was slightly concerned that my grades—particularly in class participation marks—would plummet significantly in the three school days following Halloween), but I tensed up when I was handed a second stack.

“What’s this?” I asked, though the answer came as soon as I held the stack of papers in my hands, as soon as I saw the name written on the top line of the top page. “Oh.”

“I know that you and Stanley are good friends,” the English teacher said, “so please pass these on to him at your earliest convenience.”

“Oh… y-yeah,” I managed. “Sure.”

I withheld a sigh, and tried awfully hard not to stare at the empty seat beside me. While the teacher continued making rounds, I peered, my hands shaking all the while, through Stan’s papers. His grades and Kenny’s both were going up, even though Stan could still stand to improve on his essay formatting skills. The quizzes were all within the B range, with a couple of A marks and one C. Curious, I leafed through the one with the ‘average’ mark, and noticed that it was the quiz we’d had the day after Stan and Wendy had broken up. His handwriting was all over the place, and sentences didn’t flow together quite as well. Other papers had groupings of several graphite dots, from where Stan would tap his pencil when he couldn’t think of anything to write. Whenever that happened, I’d smack him or elbow him or something, since the woodpecker noise would cut off my concentration. Thinking about that, I really did look into the seat next to me, this time half expecting
him to be there.

Between classes, his phone went off in my pocket, and I couldn’t bring myself to look at it until after school. *Any afternoon plans? --Mom.*

I paused at my locker to respond, and managed to type out, *Hanging w/Kyle and Kenny. Late.* At least the lies were easy, even if they were hard to tell. It was true that, the way all of us always did things, we rarely saw our parents except at dinner and when we griped at them in the morning for waking us up. Sharon Marsh was one of the smarter moms in town, though, so I could only hope that she wouldn’t notice anything wrong. She had, at least, surrendered to the fact that sometimes, no, Stan wouldn’t be home for dinner, unlike, say, my mom, who went into cardiac arrest if I was out any later than nine-thirty. God… I just really, really didn’t want to have to break it to Mrs. Marsh that Stan would never be home for dinner again.

That on my mind, I booked it directly to the rarely-used side entrance to the school, where I knew I could find the four people who would provide the rest of that day’s distraction. And there they were, as usual: the Goths. All four of them, stoned about on a patch of graffitied concrete, listening to a tape (yes, a tape) of some dark, tortured group from the 1980s… the tallest one, the ‘leader’ as the rest of us kind of knew him, lay on his back behind the boom box and was shuffling a deck of Tarot cards while exhaling smoke from the cigarette tucked off to the corner of his mouth; the one in our grade, with his red-streaked hair and signature pink Docs, sat against the brick wall as he lit up a clove; the youngest, the one in Ike’s class, was bent over burning ants with his lighter; and Henrietta, who now knew the identities of everyone in the League, sat cross-legged in front of the stereo, balancing her quellazaire with the tips of her long fingernails, and had a book open in her lap. As soon as she saw me approaching, she flashed the cover of the book to reveal that it was just a collection of Lord Byron poetry, rather than her *Necronomicon.*

She wasn’t the first one to address me directly, though. That honor went to the red-haired kid, who glared over at me, exhaled a ring of smoke, and said dully, “Oh, look, it’s the valedictorian here to do his conformist duty and tell us not to smoke.”

“Honestly,” I responded quickly, “I don’t care what you do. I have to talk to you.”

The tallest of the group sat up, unable to look less amused if he tried, and tapped his cane a couple times against the concrete. “So what do you *want*?” he asked.

“I’m doing a science report,” I lied off the top of my head, “about unnatural disasters, and I’m focusing on the Gulf oil spill from a few years ago. I don’t know anyone who knows more about the Cthulhu part of that—”

“Ugh, noooo,” the red-haired Goth argued without delay, rolling his eyes. “Someone else asking about the Goddamn Gulf. Look, we don’t worship Cthulhu anymore, all right?”

“Right,” I scoffed, “so you just go to Cult meetings for fun.”

The Goth’s eyes narrowed, and he snapped, flipping his long bangs out of his right eye, “How do you know about that?”

“Craig,” I made up on the spot. That got Henrietta some scathing stares from her three companions, which she then turned on me. Okay, so I was totally on their shit list now, unless… “Or… okay, fine,” I gave in. “You want the truth? I know Mysterion and I know he trusts you.”

“Somehow,” said the red-haired Goth, “this sucks harder.”
“And,” I hissed through clenched teeth, “he’s in R’lyeh as we speak.”

“What?!” The mention of the sunken city got all eyes back on me.

I grinned. “Now that I have your attention,” I said, “I really could use your help.”

“Whatever.” The Goths all exchanged a brief glance, which seemed almost timed to the synthesized drumbeat of their moody music, and after a shrug from Henrietta, the red-haired Goth turned back to me to say, “Fine, but only if you’ve got something to tell us too.”

“I’m sure I’ve got plenty.”

We all agreed that outside the high school was not the best place to talk, so I reluctantly met up with them all later at Henrietta’s (since I was sure the guys would have a fucking field day if I brought them back to the base…), bringing with me a slew of Kenny’s books and notes. Due to my interaction with Chaos the night before, I was able to cut right to the chase.

“Tell me everything you know,” I demanded once I’d snuck into Henrietta’s dark, unwelcome room, “about this Messenger person.”

“Why do you want to know about the Messenger?” the youngest demanded. “The Messenger only reveals himself to those worthy of his—”

“I know his name’s Nala-something and he has something to do with the Cult and Mysterion,” I said, rushing my words so I wouldn’t have to listen to too much of the Goths’ awful poetics.

“You mean Nyarlathotep?” asked the red-haired kid.

“Yeah, that. What is it?”

“Nyarlathotep is another Old One,” Henrietta answered. “Neither living nor dead, just like Cthulhu. How’d you hear about him, anyway?”

“I have my sources,” I decided on answering.

The eldest took an overzealous drag off his cigarette, then exhaled saying, “Listen, overachiever, we really don’t fucking care about any of this weird town hero shit going on.”

I stared at Henrietta, who flicked one lace-gloved hand up in the air as she said, “You can pretty much say anything here. We don’t care.”

“L-look, I don’t know you like Mysterion does,” I said, “I’m just looking things up for him while he’s in R’lyeh. I heard about Nyarlathotep from Professor Chaos and h—”

“Professor Chaos?” the red-haired kid repeated, tapping a foot against Henrietta’s moth-eaten carpet. “Isn’t he that douchebag in the cape?”

“The silver guy?” the eldest added. “Oh, yeah, he’s the reason I’m missing a fucking card from my deck.”

“Why not just buy a new deck?” I wondered, having no idea what the shit he was talking about.

“Not that easy.”
“Whatever. So, I know that Chaos has a *Necronomicon,* and…”

“Then, here,” said Henrietta, digging another book out from her desk and handing it over to me. “There’s more about Nyarlathotep in there.”

“Can someone just give me the basics?”

In response, all four Goths took a collective drag off of their respective cigarettes. The room became a cloud of grey a few seconds later, and the four somehow silently voted that it would be the boy in the pink Docs who would grace me with the information on this enigmatic new Old One.

“Nyarlathotep,” he started, “is Cthulhu’s messenger. There’s a tier of Old Ones, Cthulhu’s just the one people go to most. Because Cthulhu can’t surface on its own, Nyarlathotep gets sent up, even though nobody ever knows how he’s gonna show himself.”

“Nyarlathotep isn’t all kinda dead and everything with the other ones?” I asked for confirmation, stumbling over the Egyptian-sounding pronunciation of the deity’s name.

The red-haired Goth shook his head, then tossed his bangs out of his eye. “He’s the Messenger, so he gets to come to Earth. Coulda fuckin’ used him during that Gulf thing, but whatever.”

“You said he’s different each time or something,” I recalled. “How’s that work?”

“No clue.”

“What?”

“It’s usually something you can’t really see,” the eldest added in, as he walked over to Henrietta’s turntable to reset the needle into the grooves of some old Goth record that had been playing on there. “Like a mist or fog. Another name for Nyarlathotep is the Crawling Mist.”

*The Crawling Mist.* That sounded like something Kenny had overheard and written down for the rest of us after the most recent Cult meeting we’d staked out to listen in on: “*The Mist shall dissipate to the depths of R’lyeh as the Shadow rises, and the Gate shall open!*” I recalled that line to the best of my ability, and it was the youngest who completed the call:

“And as the Shadow rises, so shall our dark lord, Cthulhu.”

A chill went down my spine, based on the ease with which the kid had spoken those words. So there was an otherworldly Mist we had to be wary of—I knew I’d start watching my back if the town ever got foggy. And hadn’t it been a little misty on Halloween…? But the Gate hadn’t opened then, right?

That still begged the question, too: what the hell was the Shadow? That probably had to do with that shady Wilcox character… the descendent of the artist. And as much as I wanted to know about his involvement, I really did want to leave it for Kenny. It seemed like that part really was *Kenny’s fight,* and I didn’t want to rob him of it. Assuming he really did come back to life, of course.

Getting information on Nyarlathotep was more than enough. I buried myself in research after that, searching for the name in the new book from Henrietta, spending hours at the town library making photocopies when nobody else was even remotely close by. My research would continue. I knew that much. And this time, we were really on to something. Something that soon none of us could escape from.
Thursday dinner, just like the rest of that whole fucking week, wasn’t easy. In fact, I hardly even registered that it was happening until my name was spoken midway through.

“Kyle?”

I perked my head up, almost forgetting where I was. My mother, who had spoken, was wearing an expression of heightened concern, and Dad, too, looked worried. Ike, the only one who knew exactly what was going on, tried not to look at me at all, and I thanked him silently for that. We could talk about the real details later. “Huh?” I wondered. “Sorry, I, uh… spaced out…”

My mother set down her utensils, exchanged a brief glance with my father, then said, “Sweetie, is something wrong? You can tell me if—”

“It’s okay,” I said to pass it off as nothing. “I just don’t feel well.” I stirred my soup blankly, then pushed it aside. “I… Stan and Kenny are…”—Ike picked his head up a little—“r…really sick,” I corrected quickly, “and I think I might be coming down with something.”

“Well, honey, you should eat—“

“I’m not hungry.”

My mother shook her head at my father, who had nothing to add. “Kyle,” my mom tried after a couple minutes of watching me unenthusiastically re-butter the roll I wasn’t planning on eating, “how’s everything at school?”

“Fine,” I muttered.

“How’s everything with your girlfriend?”

Pins and needles—ugh, I’d already forgotten about that whole issue. Fuck. Not caring about consequences that night, though, I just shrugged and gave my parents the truth: “We broke up.”

“What-what-what?”

“Ma, not now,” I said dully. “It’s no big deal.”

“She seemed so nice, though, Kyle!” came the argument.

“Look, I just don’t want a girlfriend right now,” I snapped. “Can I be excused?”

“Calm down, Kyle,” Dad tried, attempting, as usual, to be the peacemaker between me and my mom. “Go ahead if you need to, but—”

“Kyle, sweetie, we never talk about these things,” my mother interrupted, which just got me to stand up even faster. “Why don’t you open up about—”

“Because you can’t stop asking me things even after I tell you it’s no big deal!” I had to stop myself from screaming. I managed something just above speaking volume, but I was losing it.

“But—“

“We’re not going out anymore! It’s just… it’s done, whatever!” Bzzz. Stan’s cell went off. “Aaah!” I couldn’t help yelping. My eyes welled up and I made my way upstairs, ignoring whatever it was my parents tried to call me back to the table with.
Once in the safety of my room, I shut myself in, lay back on the bed, and dug Stan’s phone out of my pocket just as it buzzed again. It was from Clyde—*Sry sent mass txt*. I checked my own phone to confirm that he’d sent out something to the entire ‘Pickup Game’ group of us in contact, and the first read, *Friday on?*

Friday.

Just a couple more days. That was all. Just a little longer, making myself hold on.

The night was long and dreamless, and the morning hardly seemed any better. Into Day Three. I felt like a fucking zombie or something. Going through the motions, just go, just deal, one foot in front of the other—that was all there was.

Friday afternoon could not have dragged on longer if it tried. All fucking day, I just wanted to get to the weekend so I wouldn’t have to fake and lie my way through school anymore. So that I could just be at the base all weekend and shut the fuck down. Cartman had come up with the weekend plan as well, and the story was that we were all getting together for a couple nights of camping in the woods up one of our town’s bordering mountains. It was a pretty good lie, since none of our parents would bother to come look for us out there, and cell phone distractions would be kept more or less to a minimum. Which was good, because I didn’t know if I could handle another Sharon Marsh reminder of what was missing from my life.

It was already killing me. It was always killing me. There was no way I could get away from it, even if I had tried. Stan was everywhere in my life… or should have been. The empty seat in my classes, the lonely sledgehammer propped up against the wall at the League base, fuck, even the silent floor of my bedroom where he crashed during our sleepovers. There was no place in my life that Stan was not, or had not been. And I knew all of this before. Every time we fought, I would be reminded of it by all the trouble it took to avoid him. But this time, I just hurt everywhere I went. There was no way to distance myself from Stan’s absence. And then, I had to carry his cell phone around with me in case his parents sent him a message. I was forced to carry a physical reminder of him. I kept the phone in my pants side-pocket usually, and every time it vibrated, I was once again reminded that Stan was not there. It was like a Pavlovian signal. *Bzzz, Stan’s gone; bzzz, Stan’s gone.* Maybe he was dead, but I was in Hell.

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The texts I could handle. It was when Mrs. Marsh *called* that I really started to lose it. Luckily, Clyde was around at the time. It was after school on Friday, and Clyde had faked a rotated ankle in order to get out of football practice and get an early start with the rest of us on the camping weekend lie, just to get us all shacked up at the base doing nothing but research and drills. (And, in Wendy and Token’s case, *making armor.*)

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

“What?” Clyde wondered.

“This phone, Stan’s—” Clyde clapped one hand over my mouth before I could say too much in public. I muffled out, “—phone keeps going off.” into Clyde’s hand, and drew out my best friend’s old, outdated slider and offered it up. “It’s ringing this time,” I realized as my eyes started itching with the tired onset of misting up. “Would you mind…?”

Clyde looked a little put off. “Really?”

“She’s just gonna keep calling back, and then she might start calling me or you or any of us
who know him…”

“Okay…” Cautiously, Clyde took Stan’s phone from me, and we ducked far, far out of
earshot, where Clyde slid the phone open, cleared his throat, and answered the call in the pushed-
back tone that could indeed pass for Stan’s, “Hello?”

I half-listened to the conversation. I couldn’t deal. Not with listening to Clyde throw his
voice like that. God… seriously, I was such a fucking wreck, but that same image from the alley
kept haunting me. Every single hour was one more without Stan and Kenny around.

The gist of Clyde’s conversation with Sharon Marsh eventually led to us needing to make some kind
of convincing appearance at Stan’s house, for him to pack up his things and check in with his parents
before heading out for the weekend. Clyde had tried the, “I’m seventeen, why the hell do I have to
check in?” approach, but it hadn’t worked.

So we turned to our resident liar to make it work.

Cartman gathered us into a group of five: me, Clyde, Token, Craig, and himself. Craig took
some convincing, since he was Cartman’s choice for the body double.

“I don’t look like Stan,” was the argument. Which was true.

“Craig,” Cartman fought back, “you’re six feet tall and you have black hair. From the back,
you look like Stan.”

“This is retarded.”

“You gotta do it, Craig!”

“No, I don’t.”

“How much?” Token wondered with a slight sigh.

“I don’t even want to get paid anymore,” Craig said. “What the hell would ever make me
agree?”

When nothing else worked, I stepped in (even though I had my own hang-ups on the plan),
grabbed Craig by the front of his jacket, and warned him sternly, “If you don’t, I’ll beat the shit out
of you.”

“Why?” Craig wondered.

“What?”

“Why? Why would you beat me up?”

“Honestly, that part’d just be because I’ve gotta take something out on someone,” I admitted.
“But you know, you’re right. I don’t have to. I could just turn you in for trafficking cocaine.”

And that was the clincher. I think even Craig had forgotten why he’d been blackmailed (and
yet hired) into helping the League at all. That guy just really did not want to go to jail. Honestly, I
didn’t want him wearing Stan’s clothes, either, but I was so hollow and numb and not caring what
happened as long as I made it to Monday, I even let that go.

Craig ended up having to just slide on the jacket Stan had left hanging in the cloakroom, but I
memorized the location down to the very hanger, so that it could go directly back there afterward.
We drove to the Marshs’ in Token’s car, since it was the roomiest (and could make it back to the base most easily without being detected), and pretty much everyone made sure I sat in front so I wouldn’t lose it being sandwiched between Craig and Clyde in the back. I hated the whole thing. Pretending things were fine. That was no way to get on in life. That was no way to stay sane.

Once at Stan’s, I basically held my breath as we moved inside as a unit, with Token (the tallest of us) in the front, and Cartman blocking pretty much any other views, so that Sharon and Randy hopefully wouldn’t notice anything totally off. Sharon didn’t even address us until we’d made it upstairs. Cartman basically shoved me into Stan’s room, which almost got me hyperventilating, and demanded I be the one to pack up whatever I thought he’d bring for the weekend.

“Dude, why me?” I hissed.

“Cuz you and Stan are so Goddamn close you, like, wear each other’s clothes and shit,” was Cartman’s answer.

“We do not,” I argued. But I couldn’t argue that we were closer to each other than anyone else in the group, nor would I ever have wanted to. We were best friends, we helped each other get by. It was just eating me up that we hadn’t fucking spoken in so damn long.

Standing in his room didn’t make coping any easier. Everything looked just the same as always. Hell, his bed was even still half-made from leaving his house on Tuesday morning. A sting hit my chest again, this time actually forming a stinging pain just a little below my heart, where Stan had taken the bullet. I mean, I knew it was a phantom pain and that I was making myself feel it, but still.

As I slowly started to go through Stan’s things, feeling like my head was in a fog the whole time, Sharon called up, “Stan?”

“That’s you, man,” Cartman nudged Clyde.

Clyde glanced nervously between us, then cleared his throat and shouted, altering his voice to mimic Stan’s, “I’m just grabbing some stuff before I go, ’kay?” His tone was pretty spot-on, I had to admit. Enough to give me chills. There was one slight difference, though, that I just knew Sharon would catch onto: Clyde’s voice was still ever so slightly more nasal than Stan’s, and no amount of opening his throat could hide that.

“Stan?” Sharon called up again. “Honey, are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, just kinda got a cold,” Clyde hollered back down. “No big deal, a couple other guys on the team got it too.” Cartman wheeled his hand around in the air to indicate, Good, but hurry it up.

“Well, take some sudafed with you this weekend, Stan, it’s in the medicine cabinet.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Aw, crap, now we’ve gotta take it so she knows it’s gone,” Cartman muttered. “Kay, Kyle, go get that, and then we human shield it outta here.”

“This isn’t gonna work!” I insisted again.

“Yes it is, Kyle!” Cartman hissed at me. “Who’s the expert on lying to get something accomplished? I know what I’m doing, okay?”
“God, whatever…” I muttered, storming out toward the bathroom. I knew Stan’s house so fucking well, I only had to open the mirror over the sink to figure out which side of the shelves behind it the Marshes kept the sudafed stocked on. I grabbed the bottle out and closed the mirror again, pausing when I caught a glimpse of my reflection. I looked like shit. My eyes were still bloodshot from crying so fucking much the day before, and they were accentuated by awful black circles underneath to indicate the sleep I wasn’t getting.

_Three more days, _I reminded myself. _Just three more days. Then we get Stan and Kenny back._

Back, yes… I just hoped nothing would change.

I met back up with the guys, in Stan’s room, which we hurried right out of, once again making sure that Craig and Clyde were directly next to each other so that the voice doubling would match up convincingly. We’d almost made it completely through the house and back out to Token’s car before Sharon stopped us with a, “You boys are leaving already?”

“Gotta make good time before the sun sets,” Token answered, sliding Craig into the back seat. There was one mission done… maybe. Hopefully.

“Well… wait,” Sharon tried.

“No time, Mrs. Marsh, we gotta go!” Cartman hollered back.

“Stan, honey, call when you get there, okay?”

“Yes,” Clyde shouted back.

While everyone was piling into the van with its perfect tinted windows, I hung back, as I always did, letting everyone else take places first. Because I was the last one standing in the driveway, I heard Sharon say into the house, “I just don’t get it, Randy.”

“They’re teenage boys, Sharon,” her husband responded from wherever he was in the living room. “I didn’t see my parents for weeks, sometimes.”

“I don’t know… I… I just worry.”

You and me both, lady. I had no idea how we were going to keep pulling this off. I had no idea if Henrietta’s plan would work. All I could do was nod and play along.

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My research continued through the weekend. We didn’t hear from or see Professor Chaos, or Butters, or Marjorine, at all. And I realized why, sometime before dinner on Saturday. I’d taken my reading out into the kitchenette, a mug of overly milky, sugary coffee sitting on the table in front of me, my brother on his PDA to my right, copying down notes he thought were significant enough to add into a spreadsheet he was making for Kenny, for when he came back. The book I was reading was open to about three-quarters of the way through, and in an account given from a man who had experienced unnatural phenomena attributed to Cthulhu’s Messenger back in the 1950s, Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Mist, was also referred to as the _Crawling Chaos._

“_Chaos is on the move,” _Cartman had said on Wednesday.

Yeah, no shit. Just hopefully not out of R’lyeh and into our world. There were only two people that I wanted to see come out from R’lyeh, and both of them belonged here.
Two more days to the conclusive séance. Just two more days. Hold your breath, Kyle—hold on. Hold on for just two more days… and then, after that, you’ve got a hell of a lot of thank yous to start passing around.
I’d never been met with adversity in R’lyeh. In fact, my time there with Stan was more riddled with obstacles than all of my previous trips combined. I figured it was due to two factors: one was, obviously, the fact that Stan (a regular human soul) was there at all, and the other had to do with how damn long we had to stay there. Before that trip, I’d stayed maybe a day, tops. Jesus, I’m talking about this like it was a fucking vacation. Or maybe a business trip is more accurate. Yeah, business trip. And did we ever get down to fucking business.

Something I’d learned about the ‘living’ things in R’lyeh was that they functioned under a hierarchy. Everything was in service to something else. The more important ones slept and plotted… whatever it was they were plotting. World destruction, I’d gathered that much. (I doubted there was a why to it, but it would’ve been nice to learn something about the how.) But while they got to sleep in their crypts, other, lesser creatures stalked the pale green rocky terrain, things with multiple eyes and nefarious tentacles. They moved slowly and awkwardly, like slugs trying to maneuver across snow, but they were still massive in comparison to a couple of full-grown humans, and therefore seemed to pose a threat.

Toolshed and I had to get creative when fighting them, since losing even one bullet, shuriken or drill bit, we figured, might fuck with the ways our arsenals were still set up with our bodies back on Earth. (Henrietta would probably have had the sense to not have anyone switch out our clothes.)

But the things we came up with were pretty bitchin’. On one instance, something—a ten-foot or so green tentacled blob of a thing with freakishly thin arms and ragged talons—caught us by surprise from behind a rocky pass in a gorge. We were pretty practiced by then, too, having gone far past the let’s figure out what the fuck to do while we sprint the hell away for now stage, so it was nothing we couldn’t immediately handle. Thinking quickly, Toolshed called for me to rush at it, top speed, and when he himself didn’t move, I got the drift of his plan. I backed up for a good running start, grabbed a jagged rock from the ground, and sprinted back toward him; he crouched and laced his fingers together, and I leapt with perfect accuracy into what became a basket toss. Toolshed hurled me up at the creature, and I got in a flying kick to what could be construed as its face, before landing on the back of its head and jamming the sharpest part of that rock into one of its six eyes.

The beast let out an earsplitting shriek, and as it was recovering, I noticed that Toolshed had gathered up a length of spiked wild vine and was now securing it around a tangle of the creature’s unorthodox ‘feet.’ I leapt off just before Toolshed tugged at the vine and tripped the beast; once it was on ground level, he tossed me his Philip’s head while claiming the hammer from his arsenal for himself, and together we took out the rest of those eyes.

“Fuck yeah!” he exclaimed once the creature was completely down. Satisfied, he twirled his hammer around once before sliding it back into his belt.

“Nice,” I complimented both of us, handing him back the screwdriver and holding up my other hand to initiate a congratulatory fist bump.
“Dude, we kick ass for being dead,” he grinned, snapping right out of Toolshed mode.

“You sure are handling this afterlife thing a little better,” I noticed. I never broke Mysterion’s tone (if I could help it) as long as my hood was up, and Stan was always good about not minding, and addressing me accordingly.

“I’ve gotta, dude,” he said, as we resumed walking. “I’ll just be shitty company if I let it get to me now. Besides, we get to go back soon, right?”

I sure as hell hoped so.

We’d been gone for quite a while by that point, and ended up walking through that gorge for what felt like three days. When we got to the end, though, the long—mostly boring—journey was worth it. I’d been making a mental note of everywhere we went, so that I could add those places to the map once we got back, but this was a sight I knew I could recreate in detail.

At the end of the gorge, we found ourselves on the banks of a sprawling lake, grey and dismal, with a fog hanging over it, threatening to lift—and possibly unveil something twice as terrifying—at any moment. Faintly on the other side, I could make out the ridge of an asymmetrical plateau. The toxic sky had disappeared into the mist, and in the far, far distance, I could hear the wheeze of the sleeping, ‘dead but dreaming’ Cthulhu.

“Damn,” Stan whispered in awe from beside me. “Hell, dude, I better remember all this.”

“At this point,” I answered, “I think it’s kind of impossible to forget.”

Slowly, almost cautiously, the mist over the lake began to shift and move. It did not dissipate, didn’t rise into the air, cleared by the sun like a normal mist, no, it moved. Like a predator, it crept up toward the plateau, and only when it cleared the ledge did it disappear altogether.

And that was when I saw it. When I finally, finally saw it:

The Gate.

A gigantic pillar of shadows, surrounded by standing, though crumbling and crudely carved, obelisks, guarded indeed by what could only be Yog-Sothoth, an amorphous beast made up of glowing spheres, boasting a terror of a maw and eyes that lacked distinction. This was the thing with which Henrietta made constant contact, to pull me in and out of R’lyeh between life and death. This thing was the guardian of a void, a rift in time and space that humans weren’t meant to know anything about. It was through him that Cthulhu had to pass, it was him with whom even the Cult would have to bargain.

As I stared, I felt a strange pull toward the Gate, as if a current had opened up in the space between me and that rising black pillar through which everything in R’lyeh had to pass. I registered that feeling, after a few seconds, as one I had previously known. Yog-Sothoth opened its whaleish mouth, and, in a droning tone, words spilled out of it. Henrietta’s words, slowed down and spoken with a tongue that knew the proper pronunciations.

“Kenny,” Stan asked me quietly, “what’s going on…?”

“Those words open the Gate,” I answered. Patting him on the back, I added, “Brace yourself, dude… sounds like we’re going home.”
I had spent what felt like a month doing nothing but R’lyeh research. The weekend days passed slowly, and through them I saw very little of the others. Ike and Timmy busied themselves with matching stories with the cops, being careful not to ask outright about any reported deaths on Halloween. As it turned out, as far as the police were concerned, that night had amounted to nothing but a failed bust, which would have sucked in any other instance but the one we found ourselves in, so we took the news well. Token worked the entire weekend on armor designs, and Wendy joined him when she could, spending all of Saturday at the base going over materials and measurements. Clyde volunteered and pressured Cartman into helping with reorganizing all of our documents. Clyde had kept quite a library of everything we’d gathered in the past, but that weekend, he finally took the time to clean it all up and get things into some kind of order.

I barely slept. I read until words became nothing but black dots on the page, and even then I’d swig down coffee and make myself keep going. I studied Kenny’s maps of R’lyeh, wrote out onto the whiteboard in the meeting room the hierarchy of the Old Ones, right down to Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep. In one binder, I gathered together as many clippings as I could find on past news articles from times of Cthulhu’s rising to Earth, piecing with it images from Kenny’s collection: photos from the Gulf crisis, pictoral renditions of the Dark God himself.

Another binder became home to my Nyarlathotep research. No matter what, I had to get ahead of Professor Chaos and General Disarray. After all, a deity which himself was called the ‘Crawling Chaos’ could not be allowed to have contact with those two, as I truly believed Professor Chaos might just do something dire this time. Nyarlathotep took on many forms when he came to Earth, and I was just compiling everything, making a collage of every image of every form of the deity I could find, when my brother found me.

I’d been in my room at the base, shut in with my research, the remains of a grilled cheese (the most I’d eaten since Tuesday), and a mug of lukewarm, cream-laden coffee, when the knock came. That whole damn weekend could have been a year by that point. I was drained. Totally drained. Stan’s cell phone would buzz and I would check it, staring with stinging dry eyes at the ‘just checking in’ texts from his mother. Not much longer, I kept telling myself as I plowed through the research. Not much longer… and I’d thought those words so much, for such a damn long time with hardly any rest, that I’d nearly forgotten that the time to all gather again in Kenny’s room would finally come.

“Hey, Kyle?” Ike’s voice came from the other side of the door.

“Huh?”

“Open up, guy, it’s me.”

That just went to show how tunnel-visioned I’d become over the course of those few days; I’d locked myself in without knowing it. Rigidly, I picked myself up and walked over to open the door for Ike, who looked up at me with bright black eyes as he said, “Henrietta’s getting stuff ready, which means…”

My heart leapt up right past my throat, into my ears, then plummeted back down and hit my stomach, such were my nerves once I took in my brother’s words and let them echo in me for a moment. “Wait,” I began, for clarification, “what time is it?”
“It’s almost six,” my brother answered. “She said any time during the new moon cycle and now it’s the new moon and the sun’s down, so I guess this is it.”

This is it.

How long had I been waiting to hear that? Days of waiting, long, long hours of wondering —too much time spent lying, spent feeling sick to my stomach, losing sleep, losing focus and sometimes even losing hope. But now… now Henrietta Biggle was about to attempt the previously unthinkable. If this worked—God, I didn’t even know. This was like nothing I’d ever put stock in before. But I had to let go and believe it would work. That I was now only moments away from seeing my two best friends again.

There were no words.

Ike helped me clean up—my room, my research, myself—and then the two of us made for Kenny’s room, where Henrietta was making preparations of her own. She had her *Necronomicon* open on a tall, narrow table behind and between the two biers, and set everyone up in a circle around them again, just as we’d been during her first séance on Halloween. Apparently, the moon cycle was an important factor only because she was trying for the first time to call someone through who wasn’t ‘like Kenny.’

That was something else that required explanation, but it was one that Henrietta wasn’t about to give. She held that Kenny should and would be the one to tell us, and it was looking more and more likely that we’d be getting his full story that very evening. It was weird, though… something was telling me, something in some part of my recent memory, that Kenny had told us before. What, though, what exactly… I couldn’t say. Not yet. But he’d shouted himself in the alley, *I can’t die.* He just had to string together the what, why and how for us.

The room was now dim, lit only with hope from everyone there. I stood, as instructed, on the far side of the room, almost directly across from Henrietta, and between my brother and Clyde this time, while Wendy got to stand near Stan, between Token and Henrietta. Before the Goth could begin reading, she prefaced for all of us, “I need to read this off twice, so they’ll come out of R’lyeh one at a time. I have no control over who’ll be first, that’s Yog-Sothoth’s thing. Whoever’s up first has gotta get into the circle before I can read again, got it? We can break it for a minute, but it’s gotta rebuild."

We all nodded, and the next words out of Henrietta’s mouth were indecipherable. It was so strange that I’d finally found myself there, minutes, moments, seconds away from seeing my friends alive again. I still felt really fucking numb. Numb, drained, frigid, all sorts of things. I had no idea how any of that might change in the next few minutes. Would I thaw, break down, or just still feel so damned empty it would take another week to fill me up again?

I closed my eyes, to remove myself from having to watch what could turn out to be a kind of morbid scene… to just separate myself from the unnatural enough to accept that *something* had happened, so long as I didn’t have to explain *why.* Ike squeezed my hand, and a shiver ran through me. *Please…* I began praying, *please let this work…*

Henrietta stopped speaking, and just a second later, I heard a familiar voice shout, “Ow, *fuck!*”

I looked up, and my heart just about stopped. I was among those taking in a collective gasp—not a one of us was unimpressed by the fact that Kenny had just sat bolt upright on his bier, same as ever, breathing… fully, completely alive. As if nothing had ever happened. He wasn’t even moving stiffly from rigor.
“Oh, my God!” I heard myself cry out, having little to no control over my own voice or volume. “Kenny!”

As he shook off both of his Mysterion gloves in order to feel with his right hand the bullet scar in his temple, Kenny surveyed the room, as if to confirm that everything was in order. He showed no shock for having just been brought back from death, no look of puzzlement for seeing everyone there. Then again, he had indeed had the mind to leave us all detailed instructions on what to do in a situation like the one we’d found ourselves in. It was like Kenny treated death the way the rest of us treated the common cold: it was annoying, but it would eventually go away. I couldn’t even imagine.

Kenny winced when his fingers brushed the scar, but he quickly shook himself out of it and sat up completely. “Hey,” he said to the room. His voice wasn’t even exhausted. Everything about him was just as it should have been. The only thing that suggested he’d been dead at all was that scar, and it wasn’t even that big. He didn’t seem dizzy, drained or disoriented. Just… alive.

“Holy shit,” I heard Clyde say under his breath beside me.

“You guys get my notes?” Kenny grinned.

Because Henrietta had given the okay, I dropped my hands and marched right up to Kenny’s bier, exclaiming, “What the fuck?! You’re seriously alive!”

“Yeah, dude,” he said, standing, “I knew it’d work—“

“HOLY SHIT!”

Before I even knew it, we were hugging, and I think something to do with the fact that he was still dressed as Mysterion (though some other factors may have come into play… other in the ‘otherworldly’ sense) helped jostle something in the back of my mind. About Mysterion, about R’lyeh, about that incident in fourth grade. But just celebrating the fact that my friend was alive was enough to distract me from thinking about that for now. Kenny stood back, clamped his hands on my shoulders, and said, “Thanks for pulling through.”

“ Barely,” I groaned, heaving out a sigh. “I-I watched you shoot yourself in the fucking head, dude, it’s not like—“

“And you remember it?”

Huh? “Of course I do, it’s kinda not one of those things I’d easily forget,” I said.

Kenny just smiled, since we both knew he’d most likely expand on whatever any of this meant soon enough. For now, though, we were all still holding our breath. Kenny included. He looked past me, at the bier behind me that I couldn’t bring myself to glance back on again quite yet. His gaze then turning to Henrietta, he asked, “What gives? He’s still there.”

“Get in the damn circle and I’ll get him out,” Henrietta responded quickly.

“What’s with this one at a time shit?” Kenny wanted to know.

“I don’t make the rules! I just do all the other work.”

“Wait, wait,” I said to cut off their conversation, getting Kenny’s attention back. “He’s still there, you mean…?”
“Yeah,” Kenny nodded. “Stan’s in R’lyeh.” I felt my eyes widen, tear up, and dry all in about two seconds. So close—so fucking close… “Didn’t lose sight of him for a second,” Kenny added for my benefit, grinning again. I couldn’t help it—it was mostly the lack of sleep, but I was trembling again. Stan’s note was folded up in my pocket, right next to his cell phone, and I read it through again in my head: Talk soon. “He’s on his way, dude, don’t worry.”

“Get in the circle, now,” Henrietta snapped at Kenny, who just cast her a testing look. I followed instructions right off, and started back over to my spot.

“You look real pale, man,” Clyde noticed when I took my place.

“You too,” I noticed. Everyone had that look of shock. Everyone, I noticed, but Henrietta and, oddly enough, Cartman. Did that guy have any emotion at all?

“No, but, like… you really don’t look too good.”

“I’ll be fine,” I dismissed. Even if I didn’t feel it. I was still in Life Without Stan. There was still a dead body on that bier, that was all. Until I saw life in him again, I’d feel sick to my stomach, empty and dissatisfied. Kenny was back now, which helped lift me a little, but… fuck, I had too much to thank Stan for. I’d been starting to feel guilty that he’d died; I mean, yeah… he took the bullet for me. If he hadn’t… I shook the thought away. Again.

“Circle up, panty boy!” Henrietta lashed out one last time at Kenny.

“Yeah, I’ve got it, hold on, let me change.”

Between Kenny and Stan, we’d laid out changes of clothes. We’d all figured that the two would obviously want to wash up as soon as possible, but just in case, we’d prepared the room with extra clothes and a few bottles of water. So, before anything else could happen, Kenny stripped off his Mysterion gear and made for the pile of his own clothes, tossing on a surprisingly clean white t-shirt and jeans; he dismissed shoes altogether, which was understandable, and he grinned around once again at everyone before giving a nod to Henrietta and wedging his way into the circle between me and Clyde.

“It’s really good to have you back,” I whispered to him shakily as we all clasped hands again. It was so weird, feeling the skin of his hand. It wasn’t cold from the memory of death at all. Not flaky or clammy or anything one would expect of a corpse. Simply because… he wasn’t a corpse, and technically never had been. He’d just been separated from his body, and now he was back. Oh, there was no logic in that at all, but it was true, wasn’t it? Kenny McCormick, himself, flesh, blood and soul, was standing there, wasn’t he? Kenny really, honestly could not die.

“Thanks, dude,” Kenny returned. “You holding up okay?”

“It’s uh… a-a lot to process,” I decided on answering.

“I bet. Ready for this?”

I nodded, and Kenny and Ike both squeezed my hands lightly as Henrietta started to read again. Whether the words were different for Stan, I couldn’t tell, I just knew they were being spoken for him. To plead his soul back. To bargain a second time with the Gatekeeper, Yog-Sothoth. This was such a gamble. We had no idea if this would work. We were going on possibility, but Kenny had said he’d been with Stan in R’lyeh. There was hope, there was still time, there was still a chance.

I bowed my head, squeezing my eyes shut as I repeated my honest little prayer over and over
and over in my mind. Please... please let this work, God, please... No more silence... please...

His cell phone buzzed once in my pocket, and I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from losing it right then and there. Henrietta’s strange, nonsensical words tapered off, then, and a second later Kenny nudged me from the side. I shook my head, almost without knowing why—but I didn’t want to stop begging for something positive to happen, not for an instant.

“Kyle,” I heard Kenny say, as he nudged me again.

“Ssh,” I commanded, “I’m—”

“Dude, you don’t wanna miss this.”

The sound of someone else (Wendy, I realized after a second) gasping, coupled with Kenny’s urging, got me to lift my head and look up. Just in time to hear Stan take in a breath, to see him stir, to watch him open his eyes. A yelp choked out of me, and I stared, heart beating thousands of miles an hour, as, for once in my life, I marveled at and silently cheered on the benefits of the most illogical idea in the world. Death could be bargained with. Henrietta had done it, Kenny had done it.

Stan was alive.

He sat straight up with a start, heaving heavy breaths to catch himself up, coughing out a few times before his lungs could adjust to their simple, wonderful task again. I was so overcome I couldn’t even move.

Stan, unlike Kenny, took a moment to adjust. He blinked a few times to get his eyes accustomed to the dim light of the room, gave himself several seconds to regulate his breathing, held his right hand out in front of him so that he could watch himself clench and unfurl his fingers, testing his motor skills. All the while, I stood frozen in disbelief. The night he’d died, everything had been drained right out of me, and every day that had followed steadily took more and more, so by this point, I was running on empty... but once I convinced myself that this wasn’t a dream, I slowly began to feel functional again. Life hadn’t stopped; it had just been on pause for a while.

Thank you, God, thank you for this, thank you for bringing them back, so the mantra in my head went now.

Kenny was the first one to make a move. He patted me on the back a couple of times, then strode to the center of the room, where he greeted Stan with an enthusiastic, “Welcome back, dude, you made it!”

“Kenny?!” Stan exclaimed. His voice wasn’t suffering, either. That night in the alley, it had tapered down to a whisper, and then disappeared altogether. Now it seemed as if the séance had not only brought Stan and Kenny back from the dead, it had reversed whatever internal damage had been done that had factored into the deaths in the first place. Back to life; good as new. “What the hell? Are we—“

“We’re alive,” Kenny grinned.

Stan’s eyes widened, and he took stock of himself again as he swung his legs over the side of the bier so that he was sitting on the edge, then cast a look around the room, at everyone standing around marveling at his improbable return. His, too, was an expression of disbelief, but so bright and full of more life than he’d been showing even in the long, dismal days prior to Halloween. He was back. Completely back. No more silence.
“Dude…” Stan said, probably at a loss for any other words, “this is…” —he drew in a deep breath, probably just to prove that he could— “fucking incredible,” he exhaled.

And that was what prompted the others to become a crowd. Henrietta didn’t move, and I was still stupidly frozen, but everyone else got their respective ‘holy shit’ and ‘welcome back’ in all at once. I noticed that Wendy was crying. She rushed right around to speak to Stan face to face and sobbed, “Are you okay?!”

“I’m, uh… I will be, I hope,” Stan answered, managing a feeble smile for his ex-girlfriend.

“I’m really sorry,” Wendy added.

“It’s okay,” said Stan. “I mean, really, it’s okay. I’m…” He trailed off, but gave Wendy one of those looks that the two used to have, the we’ll talk about it later look that I knew so well from the many years of looking on at their complicated relationship; I never heard the stories of how those talks went afterward, but I could always tell judging by how Stan would act afterward… if he needed a distraction, or if he just bounced back, or if he got all sullen and needed cheering up. This one looked like it would probably fit into that second category: something that they could both handle on their own but that wouldn’t seriously alter either of them; nothing that would push them any closer together or any further apart. That was probably for the best, and they were lucky as far as exes went, in that it was possible for them to keep getting along.

Of course, as far as I knew, Wendy was still sort of with Cartman, despite how damn well she’d been working with Token all weekend (and how much happier she’d seemed during those armor-designing sessions). Whatever, it wasn’t my problem.

“Way to pull through, dude,” Clyde congratulated Stan then, stepping in and changing the tone in the crowd at just the right time.

“Thanks, man,” Stan grinned, just as Ike bounded up to say his own hello. “Yo,” he greeted my brother. “Dude, what time is it? Aren’t you out a little late?!”

“Very funny, guy,” Ike scolded him, daring to add in a light little punch to Stan’s arm. “Way to make everyone worry!”

“Yeah,” Stan sighed. “Wait… wait, Kyle!” He picked his head up quickly and glanced around again, until finally he caught sight of me. When he was staring right in my direction, I felt a pang in my stomach, threatening to get me all sick and worried again, due to the replaying memory of the scene in the alley over and over in the back of my mind. “Are you—“ he started to say, speaking directly to me. But his voice cut out, and he winced with a sharp, quick cry of pain.

Stan set his left hand over the now-bandaged part of his ribcage. “Ow…” he said, getting his voice back as he hissed a breath out through his teeth. “Shit, forgot about that.”

“Oh,” said Henrietta, “yeah, that’s happened before.”

“Huh?”

“With Mysterion,” she clarified. “I doubt this’ll suck too much, though.”

“What?”

“Dude, look,” Kenny said, getting Wendy to move so that he could stand directly in front of Stan, and pushing back his bangs to reveal the little nick of a scar on his temple, where he’d shot himself. “Whenever Henrietta and Yog-Sothoth bring me back, I get scars and sometimes things like
headaches or upset stomachs. They go away again once I die another time and come back, uh… however I usually come back, I don’t really know, but for you I’m guessing there’ll be some minor repercussions. How’s it feel?”

“Not broken,” Stan answered, “just, like… kinda sharp and sore.” He grinned, though, and his bright blue eyes lit up even more when he said, “I’m not complaining, though. If I’ve gotta live with it, I’ll live with it… cuz, hey, it lets me know I’m alive.”

“Can you stand?” Kenny asked.

“Yeah probably,” said Stan. His voice broke to a laugh, which made me feel so fucking—God, even relieved doesn’t begin to describe it. It was just… here he was. As always. Just alive. Life ahead of him and everything; he could just pick up where he’d left off. Fuck, it was… insane, completely insane, but incredible. “I think I’m gonna sit for a minute, but I’ll catch up if you guys wanna get started.”

Satisfied with that, Henrietta closed her Necronomicon, blew out the candle she’d been using to read it, and left the room before anyone else. Kenny grinned and clapped a hand on Stan’s shoulder, then turned to address the rest of the group.

“Okay, guys, come on!” Kenny said in a good, strong, commanding tone. “Let’s give Stan some space to figure out how to walk again, then we’re all gonna sit down and have us a meeting, and then I’m taking a fuckin’ shower and calling my girlfriend!” As people began herding out, he added, “Cartman, go make coffee.”

“Aye! Why do I gotta do it?”

“Cuz I said and cuz everyone else has real stuff to do.”

“Make Kyle do it!”

“Kyle’s staying here,” said Kenny, glancing back at me. “Got that, dude? Stay here and help Stan—you guys come find us when you’re good to go.”

And with that, he shut the door behind him, and the room filled with silence.

No—no, I wasn’t putting up with silence, I wanted to hear things. Lots of things. Breath, a heartbeat… words. All of that was possible again—all of that was there. When Stan looked up and over at me directly, I choked on my own breath, heard my own heartbeat thudding in my ears, lost the ability to think of a single word to say.

But I could finally move. Shaking step after nervous, shaking step, I made my way over to the bier on which my best friend was sitting, unsure of how long I’d make it without losing my grip again and crying. Not long, I was sure.

“Hey…” he said as I approached, looking guilty yet happy nonetheless.

“Hi,” I managed. My throat jammed up, then, and I suffered an awful block. What could I say? What could I even begin to say that would sound right? ‘Thank you’ was nowhere near enough. Something did find its way out of me, though, and my eyes already started misting up as I said, “You’re alive…”

Stan nodded, getting a little teary himself, and gripped the edge of the bier so tightly his knuckles turned white. “H-hey, Kyle…?” he began.
“Yeah?”

“Dude… I’m so sorry.”

“Stan—” It wasn’t that I had nothing to say… no, I had far too fucking much to say, that was the problem. I kept choking. I couldn’t say anything. What the fuck?

“I’ve gotta apologize before I say anything else,” Stan went on, his expression nothing but desperate. “So I—ow.” He cut himself off and winced, once again clutching the area near the bullet wound in his side. “Dammit,” he hissed out. “I gotta try to stand, I’m sorry…”

“I-it’s okay,” I said, “here. Where d’you want me?”

“Huh?”

“I’m… I’ve gotta help you up,” I clarified, somehow able to smile. Well, wait, of course I was, why the hell wouldn’t I be? Last time, I’d held him up as long as I could, then watched him slip away when there was no longer anything I could do to help. Now I could make up for that, now I could actually start to pay him back. “Come on, just… you can put your weight on me, but, which arm?”

“My right,” Stan decided.

“Sure thing.” I positioned myself to support him from my left; Stan wrapped his right arm around my shoulders, clamped his left hand down on my right forearm, and I helped ease him up onto his feet. Upon first hitting the floor, he fell forward a little, which got my nerves acting up again as muscle memory reminded me of the last seconds he’d been alive in the alley, my last desperate attempt to keep him standing and breathing. But this time, he righted himself, drew in a deep breath and let it out, then stood back, showing a kind but guilty smile just before wincing once again from the wound in his side.

“Sorry,” he said quietly, “I-I’ve gotta, um…”

“Um… adjust…?” I offered, still keeping myself squared to keep him standing.

“Yeah, uh…” He let go of me, then yanked his Toolshed gloves off and tossed them aside.

Both of us acknowledged it then: the bullet hole itself. The torn part of his shirt, stained red, splattered in all directions with his blood. I cringed again, and Stan said, sounding disgusted, “I gotta get out of this.”

I didn’t blame him. Moving carefully, Stan stood back, supporting himself just fine, and pulled off his ruined shirt, allowing me to see the full bandage underneath. It was one of those Ace bandages, with the gauze concentrating around the actual wounded area while the rest supported his full ribcage. Once he’d tossed the Toolshed uniform shirt (of which he had a few) aside, Stan, too, looked down at the wounded area, and reflexively touched his left hand to the bottom part of the bandage. “Holy shit, dude,” he let out on a whisper. “I can’t believe I’m alive…”

No kidding. Stan had been given this second chance. This opportunity to live again. He was lucky. He was so. Fucking. Lucky.

We both reflected on that in our own ways for a spell, and then, all of a sudden, Stan’s face flushed red, and he grabbed the shirt off of the pile we’d gathered together for him. He pulled the new, dark blue t-shirt on, heaved an enormous, intentional sigh, and looked right at me, right directly into my eyes.
And for nearly a full minute, neither of us said a thing. I mean, where the fuck could we start? The facts, the sequences of events, were still so obvious: Stan had broken up with Wendy, he’d gone silent because of it, we’d been in some strange kind of fight, he’d laid down his life for me and I’d spent the last six days wondering how it was even remotely possible to bring him back to life. And now that he was here, what? Thank him first? Ask him what the hell first? Welcome him back first? I mean, what? I hadn’t planned this far. I just wanted to see the guy alive.

“Hey, dude, I—” both of us started at once.

“You go,” I urged, wondering when words of my own would finally fucking kick in.

“Okay,” said Stan, nervously, “but… shit… shit, Kyle, I’ve really gotta apologize before anything.”

“But you saved my life, Stan!” I interjected. Once I’d said that, I started to feel it again… that desperation from that night in the alley, the fear, the frustration, the anguish. “That’s totally not important.”

“Yes it is.” Stan shook his head, then started speaking so quickly and desperately I almost couldn’t keep up: “I was totally acting out of line, I was being a dick. I’m really sorry, Kyle, you know I fucking hate fighting with you. I was just really messed up for a while, there, and I didn’t know how to—”

That was when I lost it. Yes, I wanted words, but words weren’t even enough. So I just let go and hugged him, tightly enough to cling right on and hear that heartbeat, but being cautious enough so his rib wouldn’t hurt too much. Stan hummed out, rather than complete his sentence, and returned the hug.

“I missed you so much,” I told him, my voice barely coming out above a whisper I was so choked up.

Stan’s grip tightened a little, and he leaned in a little to rest his head on my shoulder as he said in return, “I missed you, too.”

We stayed that way for a good long while, neither of us moving, both of us just there, just breathing. He was breathing. I felt it, I heard it, it wasn’t just an awful, mocking dream. Somehow, that Necronomicon had really pulled through and brought Stan back. And as I stood there, arms wrapped around him in case Death tried to haul him back again, all I could see in the back of my mind was the moment it had happened. I heard the shot again, smelled the heavy mixture of gunsmoke and blood. Stan’s grip tightened again, though, and there I was, back in the present, where he existed again, where he was allowed to live.

I was steadily losing my ability to cope with everything I’d gone through over the past several days, though, and couldn’t keep myself from getting choked up forever. After a couple of solid minutes of silence, I pulled out of the hug and lost it. I cupped my hands over my face, and let go, sobbing. It’s not every day the mourned party returns to tell you everything is going to be all right. I’d cried plenty the night it had happened… in the alley, into the comforting, light embrace of my little brother, and now the flood of emotions—the worry, the hurt, the relief of the past few minutes—all came rushing out of me like a fucking waterfall.

“Kyle…?” Stan started, which just got me going harder. “Kyle, are you okay?”

At a loss for words, I just shook my head, keeping my face covered. Stan let out a calming breath, then set an arm around my shoulders. “I-it’s okay,” he tried to assure me, and it did help.
“I’m sorry. I mean… I’m back. We came back, I don’t really know how, but we did, so…”

I shook my head again. “I still watched it,” I managed to say, my voice cracking despite my best efforts to control it. “It happened. I saw you die. I thought you were gone, Stan—you were just… not here. It sucked, I didn’t—”

Stan shifted, so that once again, we had each other in a tight hug. He grabbed onto me and said calmly, “It’s okay… dude, it’s okay, it’s gonna be okay…”

Somehow, that got me going even worse, but Stan stayed right through. God, the one person I could cry to about his death really was the guy himself.

I’m a really messy crier. You know, you see those movies where the guys will look all stoic when they actually cry, how they manage to uphold some kind of heroic quality and just let the tears come and pass. I’m not one of those guys; I never have been. I hold things in until I explode. It’s almost embarrassing how frantic and awful I probably look and sound when that boiling point is reached.

But it was fine. I could cry around Stan. I didn’t care, he didn’t care. We cried to each other all the time. Nobody else ever really saw that side of either of us, with the exception of Ike for me and maybe Wendy for him. But the reasons for crying, for both of us, were always really personal, very deep, much too hard to explain to anyone else, so we’d always kind of been able to mask it around everyone but each other. He knew that sometimes all I needed to do was fucking rant shit out until my mouth went dry; I knew that sometimes he needed space to himself and a reassuring word or two whenever he felt down.

Nothing had ever hurt quite like this before, though, so hardly anything had felt quite as relieving, as rewarding, as touching and wonderful as that moment that day. The day Stan Marsh got his life back; the day I got my best friend back. The day we made a new, silent promise to protect each other no matter what, from that minute onward.

“Hey, Stan?” I started.

“What’s up?”

“Even if we’re in a fight,” I choked out, clinging to Stan tightly, not wanting to let go until long after I’d said my peace, “even if you get all depressed again, Stan, find me. I’m here for you, dude, I always have been and I always will be. This sounds so fucking stupid, but—fuck it. Just… never, ever be afraid to talk to me, Stan Marsh. Please.”

“Thanks, dude,” said Stan, his tone low and kind. He gently stroked my back as I got out the last of my embarrassing heaves, then slowly started to shift things back to a more normal tone for us by sneaking his free hand up into my hair and giving it a good mess around. “Feeling better?” he asked when I stood back again.

“Ugh, it’s gonna be a slow process,” I said, managing to laugh at myself a little, as I rubbed at my eyes to get things cleaned up before having to show myself around anyone else again, “but yeah… getting there.”

“That’s good. Oh, hey, Kyle?”

“Huh?”

Stan smiled and locked his right arm around my shoulders as he said, “I’m glad you’re all right. Like, unhurt all right. Right? I mean, the Cult didn’t do anything after… that, right?”
Stan’s eyebrows raised in confusion as his face molded into an expression that tried to pry more information out of me. “In, uh… what way?” he wondered.

“I’m sure we’re about to talk about it,” I said, “a-and I can only think about what I did so much. You think you’re good to walk?”

“Unless I can have a piggy-back ride,” Stan smirked.

“Dude, no, I can hardly even carry my backpack right now, I’ve been so out of it,” I laughed. “I’ll be a crutch, but I’m not gonna be a pack mule.”

“Fine,” Stan mock-groaned, lifting his right hand to muss with my hair again before I wrapped my left arm around him and sturdied myself to catch him if he had to trip from adjusting to his healing rib.

“You good to go?” I asked.

Stan took in a deep, wonderful breath, then let it out on, “Yeah.” We started out—Stan was a little shaky at first, but by the time we’d reached the door, he was pretty well adjusted. As we left the room, he added, “Thanks, dude. And, I mean it, Kyle, thanks. Like, for still doing this even though I’d been so—“

“Dude, don’t worry about it,” I said. We were out in the hallway, and I shut the door to that dismal room behind us as soon as I could. “We’re best friends, Stan, nothing like a stupid fight is ever gonna impede on that, okay? Plus, you kinda just saved my life.”

“Kinda,” Stan laughed. “So, then, I guess, thanks for that.”

“For what?”

“Being my best friend, dude. Always having my back.”

That got an easy smile out of me. Most guys our age had moved so far beyond using the term ‘best friend,’ thinking it was childish or girly, and had switched instead to just use the general ‘bro’ all the time, which was a word that just plain did not describe me and Stan at all. We tried using it once, freshman year, and ended up laughing so hard it hurt. We were just under the consensus of, ‘who cares if it sounds lame, it’s accurate.’ So in response to his current thanks, I said, “You, too, Stan,” as we made our way down to the meeting room, step by step away from that horrible six-day nightmare.

No more Life Without Stan.

No more silence.

– – –

Kenny

“Standing ovation!” I shouted to everyone in the meeting hall when Stan and Kyle finally
made their appearance through the door. I hadn’t been in there long myself, honestly, since I’d opted to shower first, change clothes yet again, and brush my teeth about six times (I had no proof, but I had this stupid fear that every time I came back from the dead my breath smelled like maggots) before starting the meeting, and even then those two took their time joining us. Couldn’t blame them, though.

I was elated that the deal had worked. Stan was back. I’d successfully guided his soul through R’lyeh and back to the land of the living. It was the understatement of the year to say that it would have sucked not to have him around anymore. But we did it. We fucking did it. It was nice to know that my constant trips through that creepy-ass realm had paid off. My curse had been the source of good for once. I’d actually helped somebody. And that somebody was one of my best friends in the world. It was pretty sweet, actually. I did hope that eventually he’d get to tell Kyle all that he had confided in me while we were in R’lyeh. But, however it played out, I knew he’d do the right thing.

Everyone in the room—except Henrietta, who I’d dragged in there as it was, when all the poor Goth wanted to do was smoke her lungs out—obliged to my standing ovation request, which got the inseparable two laughing until Stan finally said, “Fuck, guys, I’d bow, but my rib might snap again.” Dude, if he was handling death so lightly by now, I could only imagine how dumb I must have sounded every time the subject had come up around me in the past. Then again, humor is kind of a universal tool, something everyone can use to make light of bad situations, so Stan’s comment wasn’t at all out of place.

As Kyle walked with him over to the table and the two of them took their seats, Stan added, “Plus, guys, isn’t it Henrietta who deserves the most for this?”

“I don’t take thank yous,” Henrietta said flatly.

“Then let me buy you a pack of cigs or something,” I offered as we all sat back down. “I owe you something for getting Yog-Sothoth to agree to that.”

“That works,” she shrugged. Well, she kind of ticked her head to the side. Goths don’t shrug, I don’t think. They just kinda stare either over here or over there, and you pick up on stuff from there.

“Kenny, you, too,” Kyle added.

“What?” I wondered.

“We’ve gotta thank you, too.”

“Yeah,” said Clyde, “if you hadn’t, uh… well, done that, we’d be having a funeral instead of a celebratory meeting right now.” Wasn’t that the truth.

Kyle cringed and leaned forward against the table, resting his forehead in his hands. He looked ready to cry again before Stan set a hand on his back, and then the redhead’s high tenor rang out through the room: “I’m sorry, but I can’t talk around it. Kenny, you shot yourself in front of all of us, without warning. Without explanation. It was… I don’t know, dude, it was really hard to watch.”

“I know,” I sighed, “and I’m sorry. But it accomplished what I wanted to do.” The way I’d left things on Halloween night was pretty fucked up. And now here I was, crisis averted. It felt great to be on the winning side of things. Even if it might take some time to talk everyone around to knowing why I’d ever think that killing myself was a good idea.
“So, um,” said Kyle, dropping his hands so that he could look right at me, “maybe now we could hear exactly why?”

Yeah, here it came. Another explanation. I’d tried before, a few times. But of course, everyone always forgot. But if Stan had remembered, that was enough to get my hopes up that others could. Maybe just one person remembering could kickstart a chain reaction or something. Maybe the curse was closer to being broken than I thought. I sure as hell hoped that was the case. “Just to make sure,” I said, glancing around at everybody sternly, “you guys do all remember what happened in the alley?”

“Everything,” Clyde confirmed.

“I didn’t get there till later,” said Token, “but I saw enough.”

“Me, too,” said Wendy, barely on a whisper. Oh, yeah… she would have been pretty fucking torn up about Stan, too, I realized. I didn’t know Wendy too well, but if I knew one thing, it was that she still cared about her ex like crazy, even if she played it otherwise in front of everyone else.

“Yeah,” Cartman said then, “you guys went down, and then Kyle—“

“We are not—talking about that… yet,” Kyle cut in, holding up a hand to stop Cartman from saying any more. “That’s not… no. No, listen. Kenny,” he said to me, “I’m going on like eight hours of sleep—“

“Last night?” I wondered.

“Total,” he corrected. The poor guy looked it, too. Even if he looked like he was recovering from all that grief, his eyes were still dark and wandering; he was exhausted. “This weekend, anyway. I’ve been going through all your books and everything, dude, and I’ve come up with a lot of interesting stuff. But I think we all want to hear it from you. Why’d you kill yourself?” And then, the kicker. “Why did you say you couldn’t die?”

No use coming up with any kind of introduction. The guys wanted the truth, and obviously I wanted them to know it. I’d wanted them to know it and fucking remember it for years. Know that I was some sort of ritual gone wrong or something, know that I had an eerily close attachment to R’lyeh and especially Cthulhu. So I began:

“Because I can’t.”

I heaved a sigh, since the words got harder to say the older we all got. The longer time went by from the first Gulf crisis, the longer we stayed in the League… things were now getting more and more dire, and if at the end of everything we were going through right now I really would die for good, I at least wanted to die knowing that my friends knew why.

“Guys, I’m cursed,” I went on.

“Cursed?” Clyde repeated. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, before I was even born, the Cult placed some kind of curse on me, and now I can’t die. And nobody’s even remembered until now,” I added, glancing over at Stan. Seeing everyone else’s confused expressions, though, got me riled up, so I stood, stormed over to the corkboard to grab a printout of a Cthulhu illustration, then slapped it up with a magnet on the dry-erase board behind me (which made everyone but Henrietta and Cartman react with some kind of shock), pointed back at it, and shouted, “This thing is my fucking target because this thing is somehow the
reason I can’t live a normal life! Everything changed for me when I realized that Cult was in on it, and to be honest, I feel like shit for dragging all you guys in on my stupid—ugh!” I sat down again so fast I felt a jolt, then folded my arms on the table and buried my head in the makeshift pillow they provided.

“I’m an Immortal,” I went on, my words coming out a little muffled due to the position of my head. “I’m just like all those other sleeping monstrosities in R’lyeh.” Lifting my head, I kept going: “That’s how I eventually learned the way there. I die, guys. All the time. I die all the fucking time, and until recently it’s just been straight to Heaven or Hell for me before I somehow wake up at home again.

“Henrietta’s got a real Necronomicon,” I explained, nodding over to her in the visitor’s chair, “and that has a passage that lets me travel through the afterlife a little, since R’lyeh is open to anyone, living or dead. So we knew we could save Stan, too. I just… guys, really. Guys, I’m so fucking sorry I dragged you all into this. This is ridiculous,” I realized, “it’s all my stupid problem, and—“

“No.”

I glanced over at who had spoken. Of course, it was my recent R’lyeh companion. Stan’s voice cut through my rambling apology, and everyone else had remained silent when I was speaking. They’d been listening, but whatever they’d gleaned from it, I didn’t know.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” said Stan, pushing himself up to standing by keeping his palms flat on the table, “but I think I speak for everyone when I say… it’s not just you, anymore, Kenny. It’s all of us. I mean, take a look around.”

I did as he asked, and saw that every single set of eyes in the room was on me. That was when I knew that I could explain all day long, apologize as much as I felt was necessary… and still have the League behind me. The Cthulhu thing was my obsession, but it was one the others fought against just as passionately.

“Do you guys believe me?” I asked, my voice coming out a little cracked and hesitant.

“Yes,” Kyle answered right off, which really got me. Back in fourth grade, he’d sort of insinuated that I was crazy for claiming I couldn’t die, when I’d first tried to tell the guys everything. Plus, he was the smartest person I knew, smart in like the astrophysics sense. He could explain how everything worked, and didn’t put stock in many things that couldn’t be explained. Like curses. Right? But here he was, the first to step up and confirm belief in this. “Kenny, what we all just went through was real, and it was terrifying,” he said. “The things I’ve been reading are even worse. If something like Cthulhu cursed you, dude, then let’s fucking break it.”

“Seriously?” I wondered.

“It’s hard to believe,” Clyde admitted, “but I do. Obviously, you were gone and now you’re back. And, bonus, you got Stan, too. Why’d the Cult curse you, anyway?”

“Trust me, I wish I knew,” I admitted.

“Well, then, let’s find out,” said Token.

“I agree,” Kyle put in before I could say more. “I’ve found a lot of really useful stuff. There’s so much evidence of previous tragedy and chaos caused by Cthulhu. We’re not gonna let him or the Cult use you. Or whatever.”

“You’re not like those other things in R’lyeh,” Stan added. And from him, that really meant
something, since he’d even seen Yog-Sothoth. “Kenny, everything that Cult is planning is eventually going to be reflected on the whole town, maybe even the whole world. We all own a piece of this. We’re the fucking League, dude, we stand for this. Whatever that Cult is trying to do, we’re going to stop them. So if one of the things they did is curse you, then, fuck, yeah, we’re gonna get at them for that. Right?!"  

The loud cheer that went up from the table then was one of the greatest things my ears have ever registered. I hadn’t even had to go through with my whole explanation. These few… everyone around the table… fucking everyone… were all at that table that night for a common cause. Our mutual target was the Cult. Mission? Stop them from destroying the world.

Could we do it?

That night, it sure as fuck was looking likely.

So from there, we planned. Stan and I hauled out a huge sheet of paper and drew up a new R’lyeh map based on where we’d been. Stan isn’t much of an artist, so he wrote out explanations of the creatures we’d seen while I drew, at last, what the Gate looked like, also rendering to the best of my memory a likeness of Yog-Sothoth. We were back in the game, the whole League.

It was out that I was an Immortal, and with time, I was sure other people would start remembering my previous deaths. Even if this was the only one they really remembered, though, still… everybody remembered one at all. It was incredible. I finally felt like I was on my way toward a solution.

At one point, though, I did get the thought, “Holy shit, guys, I just realized… how fucking long have we been dead?!”

“Oh, yeah,” said Stan. “Dude, and what day is it?”

“Monday,” Cartman answered.

“MONDAY?”

“Yeah,” said Kyle, rather somberly. “It’s been six days.”

“SIX DAYS?!“ Stan exclaimed. “Dude, I’ve gotta call my parents!”

“No, no, man, we covered for you,” said Cartman, pulling something out of his pocket. “Here you go, Kenny,” he added, sliding the item over to me. Only when I picked it up did I realize it was my cell phone. “You guys have been talkin’ to people this whole time. But you’ve had laryngitis.”

“Dude, you had my cell?” I snapped at him. “What the hell’d you do with it?”

“Oh, you know,” he said haughtily, folding his arms and leaning back like he was king of the fucking world. “Just made sure Superman still had a date with Lois Lane, that’s all.”

“Ugh, dude, don’t call me and Red Superman and Lois Lane,” I grumbled, “that’s fucking retarded.”

“Kenny, you’re a superhero with a girlfriend, so—“

“There are other superheroes with girlfriends! Whatever. Thanks, I guess.” After a pause, I realized, “Laryngitis?”
“Yeah, but the symptoms and all would be gone by now,” said Token. “You guys should be all set.”

“Who had my phone?” Stan wondered. As if that was even a question.

Shaking again, Kyle pulled Stan’s cell out of his own pocket, and set it down on the table in front of his best friend. “Every time it went off, I thought I was gonna break,” he admitted. “It wasn’t easy pretending you guys were alive.”

“Mmmes,” said Cartman, “but it worked.”

“Yeah,” Kyle conceded, glancing down at his hands, now folded on the table.

“So, dude, you’ve been talking to my parents for me?” Stan asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, uh… Clyde did, too, though.”

“Clyde?” Stan picked his head up to glance over at him; I, too, was curious as to how that had worked.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” said Clyde, modestly. “I, um…” He cleared his throat, concentrated as he sat up a little straighter, and said, in almost a perfect echo of Stan’s voice, “I can kind of sound like you sometimes.”

Stan’s eyes snapped completely open, and he sat back in shock. “Dude, that’s fucking scary,” he said. “Damn…”

“But it wooooorked,” Cartman sang out again. “I believe I am to thank for that.”

Too stunned to think otherwise, Stan and I both did thank him, even if it was one of the only times either of us had meant it.

“So, yeah,” said Kyle, “Clyde did the talking, I did the texting. Oh! Right, um… you got one a little while ago.”

“Really?” Stan wondered, sliding open his phone.

“Yeah, back in the, uh… before you guys…”

“Gotcha,” said Stan, saving Kyle from having to say anything too uncomfortable about the fact that we’d both been dead not long before the present moment. “Sorry, guys, just wanna check… oh. It’s just from my dad.” Stan’s eyebrows knit together, though, and he read off, “Working late? Dad never works late, that sucks.”

Suddenly, Kyle slammed a hand down on the table and asked, “Did he say why?”

“What?”

“Did he say why?”

“Yeah, dude, nothing big, just… one of his co-workers hasn’t shown for—wait.” Stan slid his phone closed, pocketed it, then glared at the table. “Guys…” he began shakily, “guys, out of
curiosity, do you know who from the Cult killed me?”

“Yeah,” Kyle answered angrily, “and he’s locked up in the basement whenever the two of you need to vent anything out on him, or, Kenny, if you can get him to fucking say anything about the Cult.”

“Who was it?” Stan demanded.

Shit. “It was your dad’s co-worker,” Kyle said, confirming the underlying suspicion. “Nelson.”

To me, the news hit hard, but to Stan, it affected his entire family. That kind of shit was the last thing we needed… the Cult getting too damn close to anyone. Obviously, Nelson being locked up in our basement prison meant a shifting schedule for Stan’s dad… and had any others been really taken out that night? The elementary school shop teacher, Mr. Adler, for instance… possibly, just possibly… one of the Goths? We knew so many of the Cultists. We couldn’t underestimate that anymore.

“That asshole…” Stan said, anger carved into his face. “That fucking asshole, I’ll kill him!”

“That’s exactly what I said, I think,” Kyle made the point to comment.

“Actually, yeah,” Clyde added. “We had to pry Kyle off to stop him from actually doing it.”

“Seriously, you almost killed him?” Stan wondered, staring at Kyle in amazement.

“Yeah, dude, he fucking shot you, and then Kenny killed himself! How else was I gonna react? Oh, wait…” Kyle groaned and slammed his head down on the table, then covered his head with his hands and continued, “Oh, fuck, I guess we need to bring that up.”

“What?” I asked.

“Kenny, you’ve already seen it,” said Kyle, lifting himself up again. Then, he shook his head and said, “I’m sorry, guys, I can’t. I can’t talk about it right now, I really don’t want to, I’m already so fucking drained.”

“But it’s—” Clyde tried.

“Can we please not talk about it tonight?” Kyle requested. Under his words, I heard something rattling, and the computer behind Ike turned itself on. The younger Broflovski, thinking quickly, shut it back off again before Kyle could see, but I understood right off. Okay, Kyle didn’t want to admit that he had some kind of psychic quirk, but obviously, it was there. I told myself I’d catch him later about it. But for now, we were all pretty damn tired, which was the perfect excuse to get things wrapped up. “I’m just… I’m really just so exhausted.”

“We all are,” I agreed, glad he’d repeated what I’d already wanted to say. “I think we can call it off for tonight, guys, we’ve all been through a lot. But, hey, it’s Monday, right? Meeting again in two days. Informal, okay? We’ve just got a lot to still talk about. For tonight, let’s just get some rest. We’ll get really technical on Wednesday.”

“Thanks,” said Kyle.

“Sounds fine by me,” Token added. “Wendy, maybe you and me can actually show the guys what we made then, too.”
“Oh!” Wendy exclaimed, perking up for once that evening. “Yeah, perfect.”

“Meeting adjourned, then, guys,” I said, standing up. “Henrietta, thank you. You can leave whenever you want, and I hope it’s all right with everyone if I say you’re welcome back here on Wednesday, too.”

“Maybe,” she muttered after the others gave the idea their okay.

Everyone stood, though, and more welcome back sentiments were passed around. I did stare back at that image of Cthulhu on the dry erase board, though. I’m coming for you yet, asshole, I thought to myself, willing the Dark God to hear me, which in fact was highly probable. Keep sleeping till I kill you.

I then found myself in a small conversation with Token, who was very pleased with the armor work he and Wendy had done, and I told him the idea for armor couldn’t have been better; I really was excited to see what they’d done.

And then, before I could go, I just had to find myself at the end (literally) of an awkward situation with Cartman.

“Well,” he said, getting ready to leave the room, “good to have you back, Ken.” Ugh, he’d do that sometimes, he’d abbreviate what was already my nickname, like we were tight bros or something. And this time, the crazy asshole just had to accentuate it with a slap on my ass.

“OH, Jesus, noooooot whose hand I wanted to feel back there as soon as I got back,” I growled, turning and whacking him in the shoulder. “The fuck was that for?”

“What? Guys do it all the time.”

“Uh… no,” I corrected. “So whatever the fuck that was, don’t do it again.”

“Jeez, Kenny, chill, fine,” Cartman shrugged, pretending to pass it off as he crossed to speak with Wendy.

Okay. Some things about Cartman. I hate Cartman. I really do. I appreciate having the Coon in the League, and sometimes (as evidenced by the past six days) he could even do something useful, but as far back as I can remember, he’s always had a talent for pissing me off. He’s sort of a friend, but I hate that bastard, because he’s so self-centered, self-serving, and so on and so forth. When I’ve got friends like Stan and Kyle, it eventually came around to feeling sorry for Cartman and therefore letting him be a friend at all. He goes to great lengths to make me feel stupid or inferior for being a welfare kid, and for most of my life I’ve just waited for him to get what’s coming to him. One of these days, I was sure he’d get dealt back all that he’d handed out all his life. But one big mystery about him was why. Why he felt it so necessary to be the best at everything, why he tried so damn hard to make me feel like shit. Sometimes, he wouldn’t even berate me, and rip extra hard on Token or Kyle or someone else. And apparently sometimes he’d think slapping my Goddamn ass was okay.

I sort of pieced it together when I saw what became an argument between him and Wendy after that. His ‘relationship’ with her could be boiled down to one thing: if he could dominate her, if he could dominate the biggest fucking feminist in five counties, he’d have won the privilege to be what I was sure was his concept of the ideal male. White, middle-class, straight, above women, all that junk. Straight my stinging ass. Stan had come out to me, and that had made sense (and I was really proud of him for doing it, honestly), but I’d had the feeling for a while that Eric Cartman was secretly gayer than a bag of Skittles. But whatever. What the fuck ever. He was a dick and didn’t
deserve anyone, male or female. So if Wendy could put that guy in his place, so much the better.

But more worrisome than anything was how nonresponsive he’d been when I’d announced my curse (AGAIN) and how I’d known to take the path through R’lyeh. Like he already knew, or something. Okay, maybe Cartman even scared me a little. He was almost as unpredictable as Butters in some respects. Usually, I could tell when Cartman was about to pull something stupid, but leave the guy alone with a secret… and that was a different story. So maybe he knew. The question was how… and mostly how he’d managed not to forget every time. Some kind of loophole, maybe.

Or, maybe, I realized… just maybe… something to do with why he’d been able to ever manipulate Cthulhu in the first place. I’d always sort of assumed it was because Cartman (even at nine years old) was a little selfish prick who would stop at nothing to get back at one of us if we pissed him off, and also maybe because Cthulhu hadn’t planned that awakening and was therefore open to whatever… but maybe something else was at hand there. Something I currently did not want to think about.

The thing I wanted to think about was making sure I still had a girlfriend after nearly a week of being dead.

So as not to leave the base feeling put off about that weird little happening, though, I made the rounds checking in with everyone else. Primarily Stan. I pulled him to the side before I made for the door, and asked, “You doing okay, dude?”

“So far, so good,” he said with a simple grin. “Honest to God, though, Kenny, whatever I can do to help out from now on, let me know.”

“Just keep remembering,” I requested, “that’s honestly the biggest thing to me right now.”

“Gotcha.” After a beat, he added, “And, dude, I meant it when I said you’re not alone. This is our fight. Whatever the hell the Cult deals out next, we’ll get ’em. You’re gonna break your curse, dude, I know it.”

“Thanks, Stan,” I said, exchanging a quick sideways fist bump to solidify the idea. “That means a lot.”

And we really would be ready this time. Kyle’s newest notes would come in handy soon enough… Wendy and Token had devised perfect new armor… Chaos provided a minor drawback, but hopefully we could secretly ride his coattails right to the heart of the Cult’s next plan.

Above all, I felt satisfied and happy that the League had collectively accomplished the undoable that day: we’d outsmarted death. Hopefully, I’d be saying the same thing to the other Immortals before too long.

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The meeting was done, I’d showered (thank God), and I’d said all I needed to say to everyone for the time being. It was time to get to my girlfriend’s house.

Not wanting to show up unexpectedly after such an extended absence, I texted as I walked (making damn sure to watch where I was going; if I had a freak-accident death on the way to Red’s house, I would be more pissed off than Cartman at an all-you-can-eat buffet that was stocked solely with Jewish food). I started things off simply. Hey.

I got a fairly quick response. Hi there.
Can I come over?

Sure. Bout fing time.

I took that as a good sign (reading into the sarcasm of the remark), typed back, *On my way,* and put the phone back in my pocket, concentrating all my efforts on getting over there as quickly, and safely, as possible. I was even a little out of breath when I rang the doorbell.

I heard the click of the door being unlocked and then it swung open to reveal the girl I’d been missing this past week. She leaned her left arm against the door itself above her head and propped the other against her sexy-ass hip. *Damn,* was Red a sight for sore eyes. She smirked up at me. “Hey, handsome,” she intoned.

I smiled back at her. “Hey, beautiful.” I was so happy just to see her again. This was the longest death I’d had since being with Red, and coupled with all the added insanity of this particular death, it felt like one of the longest ever (with the exception of only one past experience). So, this was the longest I’d gone without seeing her for a single stretch of time since we’d been official. I hoped I’d never have to be away that long again.

“You wanna come in?” she said, snapping me back into the reality of my present return.

“Yes,” I confirmed unnecessarily. Red stood back, still leaning against the door, to allow me enough space to enter. I stepped in and turned around as she shut the door behind me. Feeling frisky (and seriously deprived), I took the opportunity to not-too-harshly pinch her ass. She yelped in surprise and turned to backhand me in the chest, her nose adorably wrinkled in mock frustration. I’d seen her parents’ car in the driveway and knew they must be home, so I couldn’t do much more than that while we were out in the open.

“Guess this means you’re feeling better?” she teased me.

“Hm, definitely later,” I assured her, feeling like the challenge had been laid out for me to live up to those standards. However, I was still ridiculously drained, both physically and mentally, from my long stay in R’lyeh, the cross-over and playing catch-up afterward, so, I made an honest request. “For right now, though, can we just hang?”

“Yeah, sure.” Red didn’t seem put out at all as she smiled up at me. She tucked her phone in
her jeans and led the way to her room.

My nature got the better of me, though. Watching her butt in front of my face up the stairs was too much, and once we were safely behind her closed door, I pushed her against the wall and Frenched her like crazy. She wrapped her arms around my neck and I gripped that sweet, sweet, taunting ass of hers. Fuck, I had missed Red. Everything about her. Her smile, her taste, her ability to perfectly match my sarcasm (read: bullshit) level, her sincerity … her rear end, though that’s already been well established.

After a gloriously long make-out session, I pulled back, insanely satisfied. Red met my eyes with a look reading, *I thought you said that was going to wait?* I tried to smile back in a way that was at once both sultry and sheepish. “Sorry,” I said, “had to get that out of my system.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining.” She kissed me once more and gave my own ass a squeeze before we both pushed away from the wall. Goddammit, that chick was amazing. I couldn’t even begin to deserve her, honestly. Offering an alternative activity, she asked, “You want a snack or something?” I hadn’t really eaten anything aside from coffee since I’d gotten back, so I took her up on the offer of actual food.

While Red went back downstairs to the kitchen, I took my cell phone out and scrolled through the text log, taking a closer look at all the ones ‘I’ had sent over the past few days. Cartman had apparently taken it upon himself to expand the definition of ‘kinky’ to a whole new level. There was some shit in there that even I thought was pushing it. Actually, I could have sworn I recognized some of the longer lines from a few better-known porn films. The thought of Cartman watching porn, much less porn that *I had also watched*, was highly fucking disturbing. So, trying very hard not to unintentionally create any mental pictures, I stuffed the phone back in my pocket. I really didn’t want to be thinking of Cartman right now anyway, in any capacity.

Thankfully, at that moment, Red came back into the room with a bag of chips, some salsa and a couple of sodas. I thanked her and she grabbed some pillows off her bed so we could settle down on the floor against its side, the way we usually sat when eating in her room. (Her parents had a rule about not getting food in her bed. Because they cared. What a novelty.)

And we just chilled, talking between bites. About whatever mostly. She asked me about the trip I’d supposedly taken with the guys. I didn’t like lying to her, so I glossed over any details and basically just said it was fine, but that we probably wouldn’t be going back anytime soon. (I did add in a part about Stan and me getting chased by a really large, really pissed off bear that I thought was kind of ingenious). I mostly let Red talk, though, prompting her by asking about her weekend. She told me about hanging out with some of the girls over at Bebe’s house on Saturday. There was a rather big development as well in that the day before Red had gotten a new weekend job at a clothing store downtown. She seemed pretty excited about it, which made sense, since she was into fashion and stuff. I congratulated her, of course, since she’d been talking about it before, and now she was in a position she liked better than the barista racket. I was glad she was going after what she really liked doing… and glad that going out for coffee wouldn’t sound like such a lame date in my head anymore.

It felt so relieving to just be there in Red’s room having an awesomely average conversation. Really, it was better than any therapy I could have had. This was exactly what I wanted to be doing right now, and I couldn’t have been happier.

Still tired, and it being a Monday night and all (I had to go to school tomorrow… shit, talk about diving back into the norm), Red and I decided to get ready for bed. I didn’t even have to ask to stay over at this point. That’s how comfortable we’d gotten with each other, with our relationship. I
gave my girlfriend a thorough kiss goodnight, and we curled up under the covers, her back pressed against my stomach, my arms hugging her tight to me, her left hand gently grasping my own.

Things were going to get interesting from now on, I was sure, but at the core of it all, at least I had something, someone to cling on to. Someone other than myself to fight for. Red and I were going to last. I knew it. If that extended death couldn’t break us, nothing would.

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Stan

Once Kenny had left the meeting, everyone else pretty much dispersed as well. Clyde and Token checked in with me, making sure everything was okay, and I got a “Good to have you back,” from Cartman, which was nice but kind of surprising. Wendy and I had barely looked at each other after she’d apologized earlier that evening, but before she left, she hugged me without a word. I returned it, but we didn’t linger together. It was just one of those things. I was glad we’d had that little moment, though. It established that, yeah, we weren’t a couple and never would be again, but we were over being mad. She was over me suppressing things and I was over her being kind of a bitch. We were friends—it would probably take a while to be close and really talk to each other again, but Wendy and I were friends.

On the subject of friends, I realized as I took a quick shower after the others had left, fuck, had I lucked out. I mean, everyone in the League was just awesome. No other group of guys would have done something like that… waited around for six days, researching and planning to fight and counter the forces that had taken two of their comrades away… stuck it out in the face of the laws of nature and brought those two back from the dead. Back from the dead. Kenny had a free pass, of course, but the sentiment was the same for both of us. Beyond just being brothers-in-arms, those of us in the League were just plain tight. And going through something like that… hell, little else could ever shake us, I was sure. I felt pretty lucky that I was able to come back to such an awesome welcome.

Even though Henrietta had left earlier, I made a mental note to thank her personally as soon as possible, since she was obviously one of the most instrumental factors in my return. The Goths didn’t usually take thanks, or any expression of kindness and goodwill for that matter, but I didn’t care. If someone deserved thanks, they were going to get it from me, dammit. Kenny was sure to be hearing me say it plenty, no matter if it bugged him or not. I mean, the guy had killed himself in order to divert me through R’lyeh and bring me back. Tip: when someone does that for you, you say thanks. I couldn’t even begin to think of ways that I could pay him back. If Kenny’s seven-year stint as Mysterion had reflected anything about his character, it was that he did good things just to do them. He didn’t always want thanks. Oh, he’d get it, I’d make damn sure of that, but what he’d been able to do really was incredible.

And then there was Kyle. Kyle, who, being his usual generous self, was sitting out in the common area with his brother, waiting up for me so he could drive me home. I couldn’t even fucking begin to sort out exactly how to go about spilling everything to him, but at least things were already pretty much back to normal for us. An opportunity to keep talking presented itself when my phone buzzed again, as I was finishing up getting re-dressed.
Figuring that, even with the insanely accurate job Clyde had been able to do in copying my voice, Mom would want to actually hear from me for once in the past week, I responded with a call rather than another text. Mom, probably more eager than she’d ever been about anything, picked up halfway through the first ring with a, “Hi! Stan, honey?”

“Hey, Mom,” I said, trying not to sigh for relief of not hearing any anger in my mother’s voice, for actually being able to have a normal conversation with her. I’d been awful to my parents, too, recently. It was past time to make up for that.

“Stan! Where are you?”

“I’m on my way back,” I answered, glad that it really was the truth. “Kyle’s giving me a ride.”

“Oh, good. Have you boys eaten?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, tell Kyle he’s welcome for dinner if he wants. Your father’s working late again tonight.”

“Yeah, I got your text, that sucks.”

“At least he’s getting paid overtime.” Mom trailed off a little, sounding like she was going to continue longer on that topic, then said instead, “Don’t hurry, but come on home, Stan. Dinner’ll be ready when you get here.”

“Sure. See ya.”

As soon as I hung up, Kyle smiled a bit and said, “I bet your mom was happy to hear from you, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Oh, and, uh, she says you can have dinner with us if you want.”

“Really? That’d be—oh, no, wait,” said Kyle, glancing over at his brother, “Ike…”

Shit. I mean, Ike would obviously be welcome, too, but I kind of selfishly wanted to just have that evening to talk things out with Kyle. If it came around to that. It depended on how much he could take, really… how much and how fast I’d tell him everything. Just having a good, long night with him was a nice start. Just some way to start making up for my horrible silence, just time to enjoy his company.

Ike read all that and said, “I’m wicked tired, guys, so you can drop me off at home.”

“You’ll face Ma alone?” Kyle wondered, looking a little nervous.

Ike shrugged. “We said we’d been gone all weekend, she can’t get too mad,” he said. “If she gets all crazy on me, I’ll figure something out. I really am just tired.”

Kyle thanked his little brother for sticking it out once again in front of their overprotective mother, and the three of us finally gathered everything together and left the base. It was kind of weird for me, knowing I’d missed six days. My bag was still stuffed full of everything from Tuesday, for one thing. But that was something I could take care of without Mom getting
suspicious, since she wasn’t one of those moms that went through schoolbags to make sure that everything that needed to be there was (and that no foreign substances had worked their way in).

Whenever any of us drove to the base, we were able to use Token’s—get this—six-car garage, which we all got the code for each time (Mr. Black had to keep switching it up, mainly in the interest that some people—Cartman—wouldn’t feel too tempted to make off with one of his luxury vehicles). Kyle’s modest car was docked in the far right door, and after he’d locked the garage again, he began maneuvering his way down the darkened streets of the town I really had missed way too much during my sleepless time in R’lyeh.

That was one thing, I realized as we drove around, as Kyle dropped his brother off and the two of us were back on our way, that would probably take a while to talk about. R’lyeh. What it had really felt like being there. What it had felt like to be dead, to be removed from everything I’d ever known, to be nothing but a ghost full of regret and worry. Obviously, we didn’t want to focus on that right now. There was too much to be celebrated. I didn’t want talk of death to overshadow the life I’d been given back.

“We’re,” I couldn’t stop myself from saying, as I watched the town go by out of Kyle’s passenger window, “this is incredible.”

“What?” he wondered.

“Just, like… God, I’m gonna get really fuckin’ lame, dude, sorry, but something as simple as just sitting here in a car, seeing the town, looking out at everything…”

“Breathing?” Kyle offered.

“Oh, yeah, especially that,” I agreed. “It’s true what they say, man, we take it all for granted.”

“Just please don’t get preachy about it,” Kyle begged.

“I won’t,” I said with a grin. “It’s just… it’s life, and I’ve gotta enjoy it.”

Kyle didn’t say anything to that at first, but he did reach over and set his right hand on my shoulder, still keeping his eyes on the road. Quietly, after a few seconds, he said, “It’s really good to have you back.”

“Thanks,” I said, for the thousandth time that night. “I’m glad I’m able to be.”

After that, the conversation devolved into a dumb little game reminiscent of the ending to It’s A Wonderful Life, in which Kyle started laughing and pointing out random things we’d pass by (“That dumpster, did you miss that dumpster?” “How about that row of trees?”), and I’d lay on the melodrama and make up some shit about how important every tiny fucking detail of South Park was to me, and how I’d keened and pined in R’lyeh to see it all again.

Okay, I hadn’t keened and pined like someone out of a Russian novel, but I really had missed everything. Especially exactly what we were doing. Just me and Kyle, hanging out, just being a couple regular idiot kids out for a drive and otherwise doing nothing of consequence. In fact, I’d missed it so much I started wondering just how much that might get fucked up if I happened to say the wrong thing when the time came round for me to talk everything out with him. Oh, well. I’d feel it out. I’d see where conversations went. After all, I hadn’t spilled everything the second I’d seen him again; I’d just been so damn glad to see him, so damn glad to be alive again, that saying anything else would have been overkill. I’d just see how it played out. It would all be out
eventually.

As soon as we walked through the front door, Mom rushed right into the front room, and I immediately saw color literally burst into her face. She looked almost as pale as Kyle had back at the base a couple hours ago. And that was because my mother wasn’t stupid. She could hear stories of where I was all she wanted, but she knew her kids. If something was wrong with me or Shelley, Sharon Marsh knew. So she’d probably been worried sick about me ‘being sick,’ and about the ‘trip’ we’d all supposedly been on. Kyle had given me the bag he’d packed up for me to help keep with the lie, so it did convincingly look like we were back from that very trip, but still, Mom was all relief and smiles when she saw me.

“Hey, honey,” she greeted me. As soon as she hugged me, my thoughts went to, Oh, fuck, what do I say about my fucking rib? Whatever I said, I’d have to make sure everyone else knew the story, too. God, I hated lying about something so huge, but saying to either of my parents, “So, by the way, I was dead for a while, miss me?” was kind of… kind of just a big no. Bad idea. “Did you boys have fun?”

HAHA. I got a little worried for both me and Kyle right there, but when I didn’t tear up and neither did he, I knew we’d be able to get through dinner okay. “Yeah,” I lied, “it was a good trip.”

“Well, it’s getting cold up there on the mountains, Stan, so you boys better not do that again till spring,” Mom cautioned me as she stepped back. Thing was… I really was wondering when we’d inevitably have to head to R’lyeh again (this time in our living bodies, of course). And what any of us would have to say. “Hello, Kyle,” Mom then transitioned. “Thank you for giving Stan a ride.”

“No problem,” Kyle shrugged. “You sure it’s okay for me to stay for dinner?”

“Oh, of course!” And with that, Mom was off, getting the table set and the food all out from the kitchen. As I set my bags aside, and Kyle and I debated taking off our coats in the still-chilly house (we eventually decided on yes), Mom went on, “It’s so weird that Randy’s co-worker went missing. Stan, you know your dad’s friend Nelson, right?”

Kyle grabbed my arm when the shock of the name hit us, but he let go and we both managed to keep our expressions blank when my mother turned in our direction. Did I friggin’ ever know that asshole. “Yeah, why?” I said instead of anything else that wanted to come up.

“He’s been missing from the office for almost a week, can you imagine?”

“Oh, huh. Yeah I think Dad texted me about that,” I said, hoping my tone was coming off as convincingly bewildered. “That’s really weird.”

“Oh, well, someone will figure something out, I’m sure,” Mom dismissed. The subject wasn’t brought up again, all through dinner.

There was plenty on my mind through the meal—which was fucking awesome; I don’t even remember what we had but it was amazing just for the fact that I was able to eat it and enjoy it—but for the most part I let it all slide. Because moments were what I’d ended up missing so much when I was in R’lyeh. Enjoying life for the sake of enjoying life. Little details, that kind of thing. I’ve always been kind of easily brought down, since things hit me really hard, and I take a lot of things personally, but experiencing death had been the mother of all wake-up calls: don’t rush anything, don’t force anything, don’t ignore anything, don’t be stupid… just live.

But then a very interesting subject came up, when Mom asked that usual mom question of
Kyle: “Now, remind me, Kyle, are you seeing anyone right now?”

“Huh?” he said, looking a little shocked. “Oh, uh, no.”

What?!! I managed to hold my tongue, and actually bit it to keep myself from yelping, or anything else that would have probably given something away. If Kyle and Nelly had broken up, I had no idea when or how that had all gone down, but it was obviously something that, under normal circumstances, I’d know all about, so I managed to just keep quiet. And it was kind of awful to think it, but, if Kyle was single…

“Oh, I thought you were with that, what’s her name… Heidi,” my mom said.

“That was a while ago,” Kyle reminded her. He was starting to look put off about the subject, but then again, talking about Heidi never really found him in a good mood. “I was with this girl Nelly for Homecoming, and we tried to make it work, but it didn’t, so we broke up. It’s fine, no big deal.”

“You boys,” my mom commented. “I can’t keep your dates straight. Well, I’m sure you’ll both find nice new girlfriends eventually.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Kyle answered, which was his way of passing it all over, even though to me it was the reminder of, Oh, right, he’s into girls. Damn.

My answer would have been, I doubt it, but I didn’t say anything, letting Kyle’s comment pretty much do the trick. God, I had a lot to still sort out, didn’t I?

And even though I’d sorted all my thoughts out in R’lyeh, once I was back in real time, facing the real challenge of saying everything I wanted and needed to say, it all becamehorribly daunting again. I mean, I had my life back, and the way that life functioned would change the second I came out to my parents. I knew it would. The main promise I’d made to myself in R’lyeh was be honest. Especially to myself. So if something suddenly seemed so difficult to do… maybe the honest thing was to wait it out. Let everything take its course. Take the time to be myself for a while, then gradually ease everyone else into hearing that truth.

Regardless of what came out when, though, I had a great evening. We helped my mother clean up after dinner, and when she dismissed herself upstairs to get some latenight work done, Kyle and I took the time to relax on the couch in my living room, both just leaning back and staring up at the ceiling for a while, not even attempting to turn on the TV for some pretend thing to do. We just sat there with no distractions, no present League worries, nothing like that.

Stupidly, though, the first thing out of my mouth, when I finally got the urge to talk again, was, “So you and Nelly broke up, huh?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Kyle answered, hardly sounding upset about it. “It was weird. I mean, she was nice and everything, but it just didn’t feel like the right time to date, you know?”

“Yeah…”

“How about you and Wendy, dude, everything okay?” Kyle wondered.

“Yeah, I think we’re fine,” I said. “We’re just never gonna go out again.”

“You okay with that?”

“Yeah. And I’m over being all pissed and stupid.”
“That’s good.” There was a bit of a pause, then, before Kyle sat forward onto his knees, drew in a deep breath, and asked, “So… you wanted to talk about something?”

“Huh?”

“Your note,” he said, taking out the now-crumpled index card I’d set into his coat pocket on Halloween and smoothing it out onto his palm. “I…”

“Oh.” Seeing that thing, and the state it was in, got me feeling all weird and guilty again. Obviously, yes, I did want to talk, but now that we’d already sort of achieved that ‘normal’ stage again, I wasn’t sure how to start. “Sorry, dude… when I wrote that, obviously, I didn’t know that, well, that was gonna happen.”

“Nobody did,” Kyle said, trying to shrug it away. “I’m just saying. If there’s anything you wanna talk about, Stan, I’m ready when you are.”

I chewed my lip, trying to come up with a decent answer. Though, of course, the answer had already come. I’d already been thinking it, all evening. So I smiled and set a hand on Kyle’s shoulder, leaning forward along with him. “I mean, some of it can wait,” I said. “Honestly, Kyle, I’m just so happy I get to be alive again, it’s almost like… fuck everything else, you know?”

“I-I’d imagine.”

“Mostly, I just wanted to apologize.”

“And you did, Stan,” Kyle half-grinned, “it’s okay.”

“So we’re cool?”

“Yeah.”

Then, after another moment of almost-awkward silence, Kyle brought the mood back up by asking: “So what do you want for your birthday?”

Okay, now there was a question. I hadn’t even thought about that much, but he had said he wanted to owe me one, right? This sort of opened itself up as an opportunity for me.

I laughed a little, then, without hesitation, brought up my left hand and messed like crazy with Kyle’s hair, my fingers catching on the segments he’d somehow managed to keep in waves rather than curls (seriously, he did way too much work, but I wasn’t complaining). God, I’d missed that. Could I help it if his hair was just begging to be played with? “Can I say something lame?” I asked him.

“Dude, say whatever the hell you want,” he said, catching the laughing jag himself. “Just don’t say you want an entire day of this,” he added, grabbing my hand and prompting an extra mess through that tangle on his own accord, “or my damn hair’ll never recover.”

“Aww, okay, fine.” We both dropped our hands, and I leaned further forward onto my knees, looking up and over my shoulder at him as I requested, “How about, uh… can I, um… can I have just, like… a chance…?”

“A chance to what?” Kyle wondered.

“A chance to make things up to you,” I decided on saying. “I want to take you on a date,” all over the place, but I let the subtext hang as just that… subtext. For now. “I
was being so stupid for way too long, dude, I just want a day where we can just hang out and be normal again, you know? When I was… well, dead… it was the simple stuff I missed the most. We’re teenagers, man, we’re supposed to just enjoy life. And that’s exactly what I wanna do.”

“Sure,” he agreed without delay. He lay a hand on my back, but just at that point, I felt a sting from that annoying bullet wound in my rib, and had to sit back. That rib was going to give me some serious trouble (especially in football, ugh), but the fact that it had healed right up was pretty promising in and of itself.

Once I was sitting back against the couch cushions again, Kyle shifted so that his arm was wrapped completely around my shoulders. He was admittedly drained, which probably factored into his choice to then rest his head on my left shoulder. Though of course, that sort of got me thinking, Huh, maybe there is something… but neither of us was saying it, just in case. Oh, well. This was beyond fine, for now. Adjusting a little, I wrapped my arm around him as well, and Kyle continued, “I-I just want things to be back to normal, too, so whatever you wanna do to make that happen, dude, I’m in.”

“Thanks.” I drew in a slightly shaking breath, and began, “Hey, Kyle…”

“What?”

“So… about, you know… this whole fucking month…”

It was all there. All there in my head and on the tip of my tongue… but just as it had been with my mom, I had to take everything into account. All factors, not just things involving me.

If I had told Kyle everything, right then and there, I would have broken him. He would have completely broken down, and I’d have possibly just made things worse. Sure, I’d been prepared to, but after seeing how hard he’d taken it, seeing how—almost irreparably—drained he’d become, I couldn’t. I couldn’t burden him with that much more, not all at once. He could tell me one thing, tell me I could come to him and tell him anything, and I would, of course, but it had to be over time, because if it all came out that night, he probably wouldn’t have been able to take it. I’ve seen Kyle in his moments of weakness, I’ve seen him depressed and beaten down; this would have given him too much to think about, and I respected him too much… I’d be torturing him with troubles, and that was the exact opposite of what I wanted.

I was still going to tell him, in my own way. I thought long and hard about a way to say my peace by using words he could interpret in whatever way he wanted. Because at least I’d know that I’d said everything. Everything that mattered. I could build onto it over time, because I did have time now, but essentially everything would be out. Just in a way I knew Kyle would be able to handle.

“When Wendy broke up with me,” I began, “she told me I needed to take a look at what really mattered to me. What was really important.”

“Did you figure it out?” Kyle wondered.

“I’m working on it,” I told him, which was already a bit of a stretch, since I damn well knew. “But I already know a lot of things that I do think are important.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and, um… this is one of them.”

“Huh?”
“Promise you won’t laugh when I say this,” I grinned, knowing he might.

“I promise, dude, what?”

I took in a deep breath, nudged Kyle in the arm, and said, “Having you for a friend. I lucked out, dude, and I don’t want to fuck this up.”

Kyle grinned broadly, and gave me a playful shove back as he said, “Did you seriously just come back from the dead to be a big pussy?”

That got a real laugh out of me, and him as well, and that pretty much set things in stone. We’d completely made up. However I was acting prior to Halloween didn’t matter. The fact that I’d died and returned was there, and was yet another turning point in our friendship, but it hadn’t ruined a thing. We were so solid… I knew it was smart to not fuck anything up with blatant new words yet.

And for another hour or so, we did just what we’d always done, what we’d already started doing earlier that evening. Just hung out, eventually did turn on the TV (but due to actual interest, to see what was on), eventually raided the fridge for leftovers… all that general stuff that friends do. This time, though, we had a new, protective thing going on. Kyle stood closer, making sure I could stand well enough, making sure nothing strained my side too much. I went to hug him more, and he even allowed me to grab his hand or wrist to lead him around. It wasn’t too too different, but knowing that I was flirting now sort of made it all accelerate in my head. Kyle probably wasn’t analyzing it nearly as much as I was. Whatever… I’d see where it went. We’d see what would happen.

Kyle left after receiving a text… he’d ignored one from his mother announcing curfew, but responded to the one from Ike, since that was when he knew the curfew thing was serious. Him going home wasn’t really something we’d thought about, but it obviously had to happen, so we both exchanged another thank you, and at the door I asked, feeling even a little lame about it, “Let me know when you get back.” Actually… lame my ass. It was that protective need coming back. You don’t save a guy’s life and then stop looking out for him. I just always wanted to know where he was and that he was safe. (So fuck all once we went up against the Cult again, whenever that would be. I was actually really looking forward to getting back into planning mode.)

“Sure,” Kyle agreed. Followed by a hug and the most promising words I’d heard all day, “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” See you tomorrow. See tomorrow at all. I’d sleep and wake up and start a normal day again. (Even though it was kind of lame, since the truth of it was, Hooray, you’re alive… now go to school. No break, man, I swear.)

I withdrew into the house once Kyle had driven off, then made my way up the stairs with my ‘luggage.’ Before I could even start unpacking, though, my mother knocked on the frame of my open door and said, “Hey, sweetheart.”

“Hey, Mom,” I said, “what’s up?”

“Oh, I’m turning in. If your father comes home while you’re awake, make sure you say hello.”

“I will.”

Mom smiled, and turned to go, then turned back and said, “I’m so glad you’re home, Stan. Maybe you think I’m being a little protective, but I just feel like I haven’t talked to you in a long
time."

“Huh?”

I stood, concerned when my mom’s mood suddenly shifted. While Dad would probably have called it menopause, I called Mom’s current state just plain love and worry. Mother’s intuition and all that… she could probably tell that something was wrong. Maybe not that I was actually dead, but that something just hadn’t been right. Plus the whole rest of the month on top of that. She had a right to look sad.

“I’m sorry, Stan,” she apologized, trying not to cry, “and I know just about every mom goes through this, but you’re going to college in two years, and I hardly see you now!” Out came the empty nest syndrome. I couldn’t always really relate to my mom, but I could see where all her nerves were coming from. “I’m sorry, I’m just tired,” she sighed. “And I miss my son sometimes. Maybe you could try to be home for dinner every now and then?”

That was easy enough, now that I knew I’d be around. “Sure thing, Mom,” I said, and before she could go, I went ahead and hugged her. Honestly, I could’ve done much worse for a family. I was actually pretty lucky, considering. “You’re doing a good job,” I complimented her, then stood back. “I just like having time out of the house,” I added with a shrug. “Goodnight.”

If I’d been nervous at all about Mom catching on to the fact that ‘I’ had been lying about the past six days, all that was gone now, since I’d done probably exactly what any mother would ever want of her teenaged son. “Goodnight, Stan,” she said, then closed the door for me as she left down the hall.

I sighed out, glad I was back on good terms with her, and started going through my things, packing up for the following day. I’d have to ask Kyle about missed schoolwork, I realized, so I drew out my phone and texted, Hey when you get home I have a question. Then, I slid the phone closed, sat back against the lower frame of my bed, and reflected on where I now found myself. Alive. Ready to just get it all started again, ready to pick up and go.

A couple weeks before, I’d gone to bed nervous, alone, and confused, dreading life and whatever I’d have to do to get over myself and talk to my best friend again. Now, though… now that I had spent six days half-dead in R’lyeh, I’d come back and was instantly able to look at everything positive in my life. I had it pretty good, and things were just looking up from here.

My phone buzzed a few minutes after I’d sent my text: Just walked in the door, Kyle’s text read. You ok?

Yep, fine, I texted back. Then, Thanks again dude.

No prob. What’s your question?

I had a question? Oh, right: Homework?

Worst question ever.

I laughed as I typed out the response: No shit. So is there homework?

I’ll email you. Then, a couple seconds later, Get Facebook. I mean it. Easier.

No fucking way, I texted back. Then, Facebook sucks.
You suck.

Thanks.

Hold on. I’ll just text it.

Jesus, we’d really gotten right back to normal. It was fantastic. My room had been set up just the way I’d left it, but my life at least wasn’t such a mess. Things were getting better, looking up, and getting back to normal, or even better than normal. How great that was for Kenny, too, now that he was back and had the whole League knowing about his curse. We’d break it. Somehow, we’d find a way.

Slowly, through the course of getting my shit together and taking my pants off and throwing on an old shirt, which was tattered at the bottom to the point that it sank below my boxers, just as something to wear to bed, Kyle texted me the different bits of schoolwork I’d missed… mostly just reading, so I’d do it all in the morning before first period. We kept texting like a couple of middle school girls for a while after that, too; mostly I’d just send him new and inventive ways to avoid his mother, and he’d come back with something like, Dude I swear she ALMOST took the phone that time.

The texts then tapered down to him saying, Really. Glad you’re back.

Thanks. Me too.

Exhausted. See you tomorrow. God, only Kyle would text ‘exhausted’ rather than ‘tired.’ Then again, neither of us really used text shorthand or slang, so that wasn’t too abnormal in any sense.

Thanks again.

I dropped the phone down onto my chest, then sank down into my mattress and pillow and felt myself smile. And a couple seconds later, I was laughing. Damn… life really was such an incredible thing, and I was gonna take care of it from now on. My own; the lives of my family; the lives of my friends. No fucking way was Kenny gonna put up with that constant death shit for much longer… and no fucking way was I letting Kyle out of my grasp for an instant.

I had everything I needed to start building my life back again. I wasn’t going to waste it. I wasn’t going to let anything bring me down again.

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Chapter End Notes

I’m going to pause in uploading for now, but will continue posting tomorrow. Thank you for reading! :3
Wednesday’s meeting, I had the feeling, was going to be one of our most productive yet, primarily because nobody was really in the dark about anything anymore. If there was something one of us didn’t know, there was a good chance the rest of us didn’t, either, so that unknown could be a jumping-off point for further study. I was immensely looking forward to taking a look at Kyle’s research, since I was positive he’d come up with things I either hadn’t yet or had before but forgotten (because Kyle’s about a hundred times more organized than I am).

Plus, I had that revised map of R’lyeh now. Even our resident Goth advisor (for whom I bought two packs of regular cigs and one thing of cloves as thanks) seemed excited about that. After all, getting the map—the real map, not just a guess based on descriptions—was one of the big payoffs I was giving the Goths to thank them for their (however reluctant) help. The sketch of the Gate was to stay within only the base for now, though. Mainly because I still didn’t trust the youngest Goth. He was still one of the cloaks, much more than the others… I could just anticipate bad things from him.

I made for the base right after school, and figured I’d be first, but as it turned out, Stan, Kyle, Cartman and I all pretty much arrived at the same time. It was amazing that Cartman didn’t have detention, but downright weird that Stan was there so early.

“Dude,” I said to him as we all made our way back toward the meeting room, “shouldn’t you, like, be at football practice or something?”

“Ugh, kinda,” he replied. “It sucks I can’t be there to work on plays, but at least I can be here. Fuckin’ coach told me to take it easy this week, doesn’t even want me on the bench.”

“Is it because of your rib?” I guessed, glancing him over to see if he had a noticeable lean or limp. He hadn’t the first day, but sometimes wounds’ll catch up. He didn’t appear to have any difficulty walking, though, which was good.

“Partially,” Stan answered, looking almost guilty. “I mean, you and I’ve both ‘had laryngitis,’ plus I guess I look ‘fatigued,’ and then on top of that the rib thing. I didn’t think I had a limp, but that guy really notices. Sometimes I throw left-handed just to switch it up, so I guess it was more in that than anything.” Then, after a pause, he asked, “Dude, how do you do it?”

“What?” I wondered.

“Put up with that kind of, like, picking up right where you left off,” he said.

“Sometimes I don’t,” I shrugged. “Sucks, but I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Well,” he said strongly, as the four of us took seats around the table, “you’re not gonna have to put up with it for long, that’s for sure. We’re gonna break that fuckin’ curse no matter what.”

“Yeah,” Kyle added, “we’re backing you all the way.”

“Thanks, guys,” I said, glad that my friends were finally in on exactly what had been plaguing me my whole life, glad that I could finally have real help, “but I still think we should put
our main focus on keeping that Cult from, y’know, destroying the world and stuff.”

“Good point,” Kyle shrugged, “but you’re getting out of this curse-free anyway.”

I grinned, even though a part of me still doubted it. If there was one thing I couldn’t tell the League, one thing my friends and my girlfriend could not know, it was that I still wasn’t ruling out the possibility of having to give up my life, curse and all, if that’s what it came down to. The Cult was not taking over with Cthulhu, that was just all I had to say about that. So if there was anything I, another Immortal, could do to get those Old Ones the fuck away from our dimension, then fine, I’d do whatever I had to do. I didn’t want to, but the possibility was there.

“Thanks,” I said again. “So let’s get started. Kyle,” I said, pointing across the table at him—he and Stan sat side by side directly across from me and Cartman—I know you’ve probably done a hell of a lot of reading lately. I’m interested to see what you’ve got, even before the other guys get here.”

“Oh, and I can’t wait to talk about it,” he admitted. “Hold on.” That said, he got up to leave the room, in order to collect his research. I watched Stan watch him leave, and had to wonder how long things were gonna go unsaid there, but I didn’t say anything due to Cartman being in the room, since a comment from him would’ve been the last thing those guys needed.

“How long till the next fight, you think?” Stan wondered, looking back over at us. “Like, when’s the Cult gonna attempt something next?”

“We beat up, like, most of ’em on Halloween,” Cartman pointed out. “Does Goth lady know anything?”

I shook my head, having spoken to Henrietta as Mysterion the night before (in order to give her those cigs, primarily). “Henrietta’s got nothing. The Cult still meets Saturdays, but they passed their possible Gate-opening day. I guess they’ve gotta figure out when the next one is.” Then, to Cartman specifically, I asked, “Did McElroy, the leader, say anything after we died?”

Cartman thought for a second, then came up with, “Mmmnope, not really. He just kinda left.”

“Just… left?” I repeated.

“Yeah, Kyle went on some crazy psychic rage thing and then—”

“I’m not psychic,” Kyle, who I hadn’t even noticed re-enter the room, demanded as he walked back toward the table.


“Dude, shut the fuck up,” I snapped at him. “And I’m not poor, my parents are. I work, so shut up.” He shrugged it off like he’d said nothing, so the rest could be ignored.

My eyes fell hungrily on the two binders, two books, and single spiral-bound notepad Kyle set down onto the table with a satisfying thud. There were coded tabs inside the two binders, one of which was green while the other was black, and several sticky-note flag bookmarks in both of the books, one of which I recognized as the book Henrietta had given me as a trade for the real Necronomicon I’d stolen from the exhibit a few years ago. “Damn,” I commented, “you got a lot of reading done.”

“Dude,” Kyle said as he slid back into his seat, “I had to do something, and I couldn’t sleep.
A lot of those notes are false leads, but I left them in just in case you find something I couldn’t make sense of."

“Sure, awesome,” I said. “So where do we start?”

“It’s gonna be tough,” said Kyle, resting against the table, “but if we want to make headway now, it’ll be in our best interests to question every single member of that Cult. Individually.”

“Oh,” Cartman scoffed, rolling his eyes, “sure, Kyle. We’ll just go knock on their doors and __“

“I didn’t say it was gonna be easy, ass-face,” Kyle bit back.

“Aye! Don’t—“

“What’s the plan, then?” Stan interrupted, saving Kyle (and me) from an unnecessary argument. “How would you recommend we do the interviews?”


“Huh?” Kyle wondered.

“Why?” I repeated. “What’d you find out that made you want to interrogate?”

“Oh. This,” said Kyle, sliding his clipping-filled black binder in front of me, open to a page of neatly handwritten notes opposite an illustration collage. Each image was a photocopy, which he said was possible thanks to Token ‘donating’ his mother’s portable copier to the research cause, and every one of those images showed a likeness of a man, varying in type but similar in slightly but obviously inhuman qualities. The images were all centered around one particular etching, which Kyle had marked in red pen as being circa 1382, of a dark-skinned, lanky, long-faced man dressed in the trimmings of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh. Carved in with the etching as well were hieroglyphics, which made me feel as if the image was timeless. Kyle had, again in red, translated the letters to what looked like a random jumble: “NYARLATHOTEP.”

“Nyarlathotep?” I read, struggling a little with the pronunciation. Once I had said it, though, the word felt to my tongue unsavorably familiar.

“Yeah,” said Kyle, sliding on his reading glasses and leaning across so he could point out bits of research to me, “check it out, dude. This guy—Nyarlathotep—“ (his pronunciation was even more awkwardly forced than mine) “is said to be the Messenger of the Old Ones, Cthulhu in particular. This is our guy. He can walk among humans and even speak Earth’s languages.” My heart skipped a beat, but I held my fears and comments in. At least until Kyle had finished talking me through his research. “He presents himself in a different way in each region he visits. It says here,” he went on, tapping a photocopied clipping from a 1928 Rhode Island journal, “that Nyarlathotep visits Cthulhu cults all around the world. He’s even mentioned in the Necronomicon as ‘The Crawling Chaos.’ He makes people go crazy. Like, insane crazy. And the more susceptible to belief a man is, well… to him, the better.”

“The Crawling Chaos?” Cartman repeated. “Huh, that sounds right up someone’s alley.”

“Yeah,” said Kyle, “and it is.”

“What?” Stan and I wondered together.

Kyle’s expression grew hauntingly grim, and he leafed through the green binder until he’d
come upon the desired page. He chewed his lip and flipped open the spiral notebook as well, so that he could match up a page from the binder to a page of his notes. “There’ve been a bunch of different copies of the Necronomicon made over the years,” he said.

“Yeah,” I agreed, letting on that I knew.

“Right, so Henrietta has, what, a Latin one?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there was one written in German, too,” Kyle went on, “a long time ago. Like, old German, something you wouldn’t be able to translate now unless you had a really damn good grasp of the language and its history.”

“Fuck,” Stan let out before anything else could be said.

Nothing else really had to be said. Butters had been getting better and better at German, recently, to the point that I think he had higher marks than Wendy in the class. (I took Spanish, so fucked if I actually knew.) ‘The Crawling Chaos’ suited him, all right. Almost too well.

Kyle went on to let us in on the Wednesday before, the day after Halloween, the night of which he’d taken on Mysterion’s responsibility of keeping watch over the town (which I thanked him a couple times for, since we had, long ago, agreed that it was something he should do if anything happened to me). On that night, he and Wendy, as Marpesia, had had quite the odd run-in with Professor Chaos and General Disarray, which I instantly felt a little jealous about, since I always wanted to keep one step ahead of Chaos and know everything he was up to, since his moves could never be calculated.

Chaos had his own Necronomicon, an old German copy, and apparently he and Disarray had managed to translate it much faster than Henrietta had been able to work through the Latin one. He’d caught up to her and possibly even passed her in the translation, and seemed bent on summoning Nyarlathotep himself.

Cartman saw Butters in school more than any of us, so I asked him if he’d noticed anything weird going on with him lately, to which he said, “I dunno, he hasn’t said anything.”

“Anything about Chaos stuff?” I guessed.

“No, like, anything,” said Cartman. “He kinda talks to himself, but that’s about it.”

“Ugh,” Stan shuddered. “I keep forgetting sometimes that Professor Chaos is actually serious.”

“Honestly, me, too.” I admitted. “Especially with the whole Marjorine thing. But I’ve never fully trusted anything he does, to tell you guys the truth. Guy’s a time bomb. We’ve gotta keep an eye on him. Kyle, did he say anything else about Nyarlathotep?” That name was getting easier to say the more I so much as thought it, which was kind of disconcerting.

“No,” Kyle told me, “but he did seem to be getting really familiar with that couplet the Cult keeps reading off all the time.”

That fucking couplet. I heard the words in my sleep, I knew them so well. I knew them and hated them, because they were always just there, over my head, taunting me. I still couldn’t make sense of them. Not without knowing what was supposed to come afterward. There was more to the creepy ancient poem. Whatever it was would probably lead me toward some kind of answer, if not
“Right,” I sighed, looking back at Kyle’s collage of Nyarlathotep imagery. “So this guy. This Nyarlathotep guy, what’s the big catch to him?”

“Well,” Kyle said, “it’s the shape-changing that got me most. See, I’m thinking that if he can make himself *look* like a human, who’s to say—“

“—That he isn’t in the Cult right now!” I exclaimed, completing the thought. Satisfied that I was in good company with the idea, I glanced again at the notebook, then at each of my friends individually. “Guys, this is totally our break. I’m with Kyle. We’ve gotta start making rounds and figuring out exactly who these Cultists are.”

“You really think this devil pharaoh guy could be in the Cult right now?” Cartman asked, playing, as always, devil’s advocate.

“Dude, weirder shit has happened in this town,” Stan shrugged. “I’d be more surprised if he *wasn’t.*”

“What if he isn’t, Kenny?” Kyle wondered, catching my determined gaze. He looked guilty for some reason, but that’s Kyle for you. He empathizes before an event can even occur. “What then?”

“Then we scope out other Cults,” I said, straightforwardly. “I’m completely serious about this. This guy,” I proclaimed, tapping down on the collage of images, “is the link between human Cultists and Cthulhu. The link between Earth and R’lyeh. If we don’t find him, then… then we start looking for signs, and we track him down.”

“All right, sweet,” said Cartman, finally sounding a little excited about it. “We can totally start right now.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Clyde and them?” Stan wondered.

“Nah, bro, we got that one guy down in the basement.”

Oh. Right. Nelson. Talk about the perfect starting point, even though the very idea of talking to him made the three others of us tense, Kyle especially. I’d witnessed the moments after the shot, and obviously hadn’t known the rest of the evening, but I was suddenly fascinated by how fucking well Kyle had held up after watching me and Stan go down. He was functioning again now, sure, but that night must’ve been fucking awful. Again, that’s the part of death I never saw. The aftermath, the cleanup, the grieving. It really must have sucked.

“That’s actually a good idea,” I found myself saying. “Guys, I think I *would* like to have a word with that bastard in the basement.”

The color almost completely drained from Kyle’s face, especially when Stan, determined, stood up and said, “If you don’t mind, Kenny, so would I.”

“Not at all,” I said. “You deserve a word with him as much as I do, if not more.”

“I dunno about more,” said Stan. “I mean, he might’ve been one of the guys who cursed you, dude, so—“

“Yeah, but he kinda shot you,” I pointed out. Stan couldn’t argue. “Look, I hate all those damn Cultists equally. New members or old, I fucking hate all of them for what they did and what
they’re trying to do. This guy’s higher on my shit list right now, and McElroy’s at the fuckin’ top. So, let’s go suit up and—“

“That might not be necessary,” Kyle cut in, shaking his head stiffly. “He referred to you guys by name. I think if you wanna talk to him as yourselves, you might get more outta him.”

“He knew?!” Stan shouted. “That fuck!” He pushed off from the table and winced from the wound in his side, then shook it off and said, “Come on, Kenny.”

Oh, I was already leading the way. Stan was only about a step behind me, with Kyle only a step behind him. Cartman brought up the rear, probably finding it useless to not follow along (or probably hoping to use the Cultist for a new punching bag).

As I descended the stairs to the nondescript, grey basement, I couldn’t help but feel a little excited. The subject matter was nothing to feel great about (you know… curses and world domination and all that…), but the fact that every single step we took now was one in the right direction. I almost didn’t care if I broke the curse so long as I found out why the Cult had cursed me in the first place and what significance my being an Immortal could possibly have on current and future events. I certainly wasn’t about to let those fuckers use me for anything, and I knew one thing already.

On Halloween, they had needed three sacrifices to awaken their new Messenger and open the Gate. Stan had been the first, but because I’d killed myself before anyone else could die, their whole plan was stopped. An Immortal, I guessed, would only compromise anything having to do with any attempt at opening the Gate to R’lyeh, since Immortals have free roam over everything past it. Maybe they saw me as a threat, or maybe they saw me as a help. Either way, I was too important for them to lose. If it came down to it, I’d play that angle like crazy just to keep my friends alive.

The Cultist, Nelson, lay in a mangled heap on the floor, his heavy breaths suggesting he was in the middle of a deep sleep. Not for long, though, as I decided to greet him with a nice wake-up kick in the gut. He choked awake and rolled over onto his stomach, then weakly pushed himself up with only one arm and struggled to regulate his breath. “Rise and shine, motherfucker,” I spat, stepping down on him again to shove him face-first into the floor. “Guess who?”

Nelson laughed into the floor, which got me to step back; he rolled over onto his side, stared up at us with hollow, sleep-deprived eyes, and said, “Alive again. Just as we thought.”

Oh, this bastard was going down. “Yeah,” I growled, “and you’re gonna tell me how you know that, and why.”

“Am I?” said the beaten shell of a man.

“If you know what’s good for you,” I spat right back. The four of us circled around him, Stan and Kyle to my left, Cartman on my right. Nelson had absolutely no chance to hear sympathy from a single one of us. If anyone in the League wanted to play ‘good cop’ to this guy, it wasn’t any of us four. Especially not the usual voice of reason, Kyle… who had been the one to deal all the damage to this guy back on Halloween, and looked like he still had a hell of a lot of fight in him that he needed to work through. “Why did you try to sacrifice someone in the League?!” I hollered. “The guys you wanted are still in Park County Jail. The fuck did you go after Toolshed for?!”

“I was aiming for that one,” Nelson grumbled, sitting up and glaring at Kyle.

Kyle, unable to hold in his rage much longer, shouted loud and clear, “You fucking bastard! No matter what you say, it’s not gonna make your situation any better, y’know.”
“The Marsh boy’s still dead, is he?” Huh, someone’s peripheral vision was off.

Next thing I knew, Stan had made his move. He’d been looking more and more tense the longer we stood there in the dank basement, and finally he stepped forward, grabbed his father’s co-worker up by the front of his robe, and shoved him into the wall. “Hi,” he spat, staring the Cultist down. “Disappointed?” Nelson had nothing; for a moment, Stan only stared him down, before he demanded, “Why’d you do it?”

Nelson cricked his head toward me, his greasy grey hair sliding about in all directions, accentuating his already deranged look to horror movie status. On any normal day, the guy looked perfectly normal, if a little haunted, but six days of sitting essentially to rot in what we’d made to be a cell didn’t help him any. “You reversed the sacrifice, McCormick!” he said to me, taunting me with praise. “I never expected that from you.”

My stomach churned when he called me by my last name, and Stan and I exchanged a brief glance. I wanted to break every bone in that asshole’s body. The hell did he mean, reverse the sacrifice? I got my friend back. Fuck that Cultist. Fuck the whole damn Cult.

Stan punched Nelson hard across the face and let him fall to the ground; I moved in quickly before he could recover and kicked his face into the wall, holding him there with the beaten treads of my sneaker. “Quit being cryptic,” I commanded, “and listen up. We know about your precious Messenger, you fucking hole. Where’s Nyarlathotep?”

Once again, that creaky, awful laughter shot out of him, and Nelson answered into the wall, “That question proves you know nothing.”

“Bullshit we know nothing,” Cartman cut in. He didn’t even have to move to deal damage. If there was one thing that guy could do, it was cut you with words, no matter what he said or how he said it. Yeah, he’s that much of a dick. “Kenny,” he then said, “kick his teeth in.” SEE?

“Gladly,” I said, since I had to agree the idea was enticing. “Unless,” I added, grinding my toes into Nelson’s torn face, “you tell me something I wanna hear.”

The Cultist muttered something into the wall, so I let go and let him flop to the ground again. “What was that?” I barked.

“Nyarlathotep moves among us,” he said more audibly, without looking up to speak to either of the four of us, “but in no form you could comprehend.”

“Nuh-uh,” Cartman fought him defiantly. “Jew-boy here’s got a whole stack of files upstairs that tells us exactly what to look for,” he went on, pointing over at Kyle with one thumb.

Nelson moved his head where it lay on the cold concrete floor, grinned so broadly the tear in the flesh of his small chin leaked open and dripped red, and said, “Ah, always the intuitive one, aren’t you, Mr. Broflovski?”

“That does it!” Kyle practically screamed. Now it was his turn to get back in on beating the cloak for answers. Hardly having to pause before executing his move, Kyle ran up to the Cultist we all so despised, and snapped back his already-broken arm. “How do you know us?” he demanded, his voice at nearly a roar as it echoed across the barren walls. “How do you know any of us?! Have you been fucking spying on us? WHAT?!”

Nelson only laughed.

“Listen,” Kyle snarled through clenched teeth, “if you don’t answer our questions, I’ll break
With a smirk, the Cultist replied, “Careful… wouldn’t want that fragile mind of yours going haywire, now, would you?”

Indeed, some of the boxes stacked against the far basement wall could be heard rattling together, and the small light that dangled above Nelson’s squared-off cell began to shake. Kyle, his eyes narrowed and stern, lowered his voice to a cold command: “Answer the question. NOW.”

Under the flickering light, Nelson turned his soulless gaze on me, and said, “We are interested in only one thing.”

“No we’re getting somewhere,” I sneered. “What is it?”

“Simple,” said our adversary. Can I just say, right now, that I have always hated the way those Cultists speak. I could even deal with the Goths more than the rest of those damn cloaks, because, as depressing as everything the Goths ever said was, at least what they said made logical sense in some form or another. Those older Cultists always got all cryptic for seemingly no reason, and it pissed me off. “To give our Dark Lord passage from his realm to ours. Then all will be as foretold.”

See what I fucking mean? “Yeah,” I barked, “and what is that? What the fuck was foretold, you asshole?!”

“You will find out, Immortal.”

Oh, no. No. No way did I just hear that.

Whatever ritual they’d performed on my parents, years ago, whatever curse they’d meant to inflict and succeeded in branding me with, whatever it was, they knew they were getting an Immortal out of it. They knew the newborn kid would share some awful kind of bond with Cthulhu. That was not okay. Not okay at all. The fact that they all knew about me, about Kenny McCormick, about Mysterion, about my race to beat them… that seemed to prove that they wanted something from me. That they’d been following me.

“What the fuck did you just call me?” I bit out, taking a couple of heavy strides toward the Cultist at our mercy.

Another gut-churning grin. “An interesting group of friends you’ve surrounded yourself with,” he said. “Best to let them go now.”

THE HELL?!

“What’s your deal?!” Kyle hollered at the man, shoving him back against the wall again. “Are you planning another attack?”

“Is that what this is all about?” Stan added. “Is your Cult coming after the League specifically?”

It wasn’t looking like Nelson was going to grace us with any more answers, and just at that point, the basement door swung open, and I heard Clyde call down, “Hey, you guys down there? We’re gonna get started.”

None of us moved. Four pairs of eyes glared down at the beaten, mangled man on the basement floor. One thing was obvious: there was no fucking way this guy was Nyarlathotep. He
wouldn’t have sat around in a dim cell that long waiting to see if I’d come back from the dead. He would have known. And the Cult probably would have busted him out. So that meant he was still out there somewhere. I was still convinced Wilcox had something to do with this whole Messenger thing, so he was next on my list. But for now, I had the feeling all four of us wanted out of that basement and into a civilized conversation.

I’d heard enough. The Cult was stalking me, stalking my every move. Stalking even my friends. Because of me. That made me feel kind of shitty again, for roping them into it, but they’d all affirmed that they wanted to help in any way they could, so I wasn’t about to complain.

We’d rise above it together.

Kyle was the first to speak again, standing as he said, darkly, “I’m done here, anyway.”

“We’ll deal more with you later,” I assured the Cultist before I could turn to leave.

The four of us exchanged a quick glance around to confirm that we were ready to move out and onto other things, but Stan lingered back for a second. “Just tell me this one thing,” he demanded from where he stood. “Were you using my dad to get to us?”

Nelson, once again, just laughed.

Stan’s blue eyes flared open and his fingers clenched into fists in a rage, but it was Kyle who made the move. “Oh my God,” the irate redhead spat out angrily, “that fucking does it.”

The lamp overhead hissed and burst; shattered glass clinked to the ground around Nelson, while other shards found his robes and skin. Kyle’s right hand flew out to his side, and he created the motion of a perfect baseball pitch… which sent a medium-sized box full of something or other we’d packed and stored down there flying in the arched motion of his toss across the room. It knocked Nelson senseless and clattered to the floor elsewhere in the darkness, but Kyle didn’t seem quite finished yet.

Before anything else could happen, Stan rushed forward and grabbed Kyle back, wrapping one arm tightly around his waist and clamping his other hand firmly over Kyle’s mouth. Kyle muffled out something that sounded akin to, “This bastard shouldn’t be alive!” before he gave in and let Stan start leading him upstairs.

Cartman was the first out of the basement, only because I shoved him up the last few stairs while he was saying, “Dude, how are we all not fucking addressing the Goddamn psychic—“

“Shut up!” I snapped, shoving him further out onto the upper floor. “This is really not the time for that.”

“Kenny, what’s going on?” That was Token, who I noticed was standing a few feet away with Clyde and Wendy.

I waved them off. “Just get back to the meeting room!” I instructed. “We’ll be right there. You, too,” I added to Cartman.

“Uh, no,” he protested. “You can’t just order me around like this, Kenny! You know what, screw you if I keep gettin’ these shit jobs a’ight?”

“Cartman, what the fuck?” I snapped.

“No, you need to chill the fuck out!” he argued, prodding me in the chest with one index
Oh, I’m chill!” I hollered, outstretching my arms and putting my height advantage to damn good use over the guy. “I am perfectly fucking chill for a guy who was cursed in the fucking womb, who can’t die, and who has a worldwide motherfucking Cult out to get him! What do you want from me, asshole?!”

“Respect!” Cartman bellowed, then turned and signaled for Clyde and the others to follow him to the back.

God fucking dammit, I didn’t understand that guy. For a minute, there, I started getting nervous that he might leave. But no. Why was he sticking with us if we weren’t ‘respecting’ him? Did it have to do with going against Chaos? Or maybe he still had some kind of tie to Cthulhu himself, after controlling the beast for that period of time seven years ago. Whatever his reasons, he was presently pulling through. So we’d all have to take that.

Stan and Kyle had been having their own share of problems at the now-closed basement door; when I turned around to see how Kyle was dealing, the first thing I heard out of his mouth was, “I should’ve killed him when I had the chance.”

In response, Stan hugged him; I could hear Kyle’s uneven, anguished breaths. “Kyle,” Stan tried, “calm down. You don’t want to kill him, you’re just upset.”

“But he killed you!” Kyle protested. His hands, which still hung at his sides, flexed for a second until his fingers curved in like claws, as if wanting on their own to scratch Nelson’s eyes out. I really didn’t blame him, but the psychic meltdown, or whatever it was, seemed to be accentuating the post-Halloween fury he’d otherwise been able to control.

“No he didn’t,” I was able to hear Stan say, despite the softening of his tone. “I’m right here. It’s okay.” He looked up and over at me at that point, in order to say, “You go ahead, dude, we’ll catch up.”

“Sure, yeah,” I began, “but…” I knew it was testing dangerous waters, but I went ahead and addressed Kyle: “Uh… you gonna be okay to talk about your research to the other guys? Kyle?”

He nodded into Stan’s shoulder, and answered, “I just have to calm down.”

“Take your time,” I told him.

And with that, I locked the basement and started back toward the meeting hall. As I was leaving, I heard Stan say, “Sounds like you need a distraction, dude.”

“Do I ever,” Kyle sighed in return.

Yeah, and again, I was sure I figured there was more implied behind that than at least one of them realized. But whatever… for now, I’d stay out of it.

I was surprised to find that Cartman had more or less filled the others in on what had gone on in the basement with only a few biased comments thrown in there. He then surrendered the table to me… mainly because I started talking a few seconds after I’d walked in.

“Guys, I don’t want to go around saying anything unnecessary to get this meeting going, so I’m just gonna cut right to what the four of us figured out before you got here,” I said, marching right over to the whiteboard and writing out the beginnings of a fresh plan. “Kyle’s figured out the identity of the Cult’s Messenger… or at least his R’lyeh name. There’s pictures in that black binder,
and it’s some deity called Nyarlathotep, or, the Crawling Chaos.”

“Oh, that’s right!” said Wendy. “Professor Chaos told me and Kyle a little about that last week. I didn’t do too much digging myself, though…”

“No, you were busy,” I said, turning to face the group again, “it’s fine. Let’s wait for Kyle to get back here to explain more about the Messenger, but Wendy and Token, I’m interested to see what you guys have.”

The two shared a glance and a nod, and then Token drew out his sleek silver laptop and walked it over to where Timmy and Ike (who must have come in at some point between us going to the basement and Clyde and the rest arriving) were sitting. Ike took one glance at the laptop screen, showed a huge grin, and plugged a cable into one of the USB ports, linking it then to the main computer so that everyone could have a look at whatever he called up on screen.

“Keep in mind we’re still in the planning stage,” said Token. “Wendy and I figured out what materials to work with, and if we both build, we can have lightweight, sheet-type under-armor done for everyone within… what do you think?”

“A few weeks?” Wendy shrugged. “If you guys let me take measurements tonight, we can get the basic design work down.”

“And then ultimately, we’re aiming for something like this,” Token finished, calling up a detailed 3D image on Ike’s main screen. Shown in blueprint form was what looked like your average bullet-proof vest, only minus the bulk. Whatever Wendy had built her Amazon armor from to achieve Marpesia’s almost entirely bulletproof design was indeed lightweight and malleable, if it could fit to the contours of the human frame without distracting. Token’s TupperWear armor was a similar type, only, fitting to his assumed ego, his had always been blue.

The vest design was admittedly Wendy’s idea, and based on, according to her, 17th-century English and Spanish armor. A breastplate and backplate slid over the neck and shoulders and clasped at the sides, with the ultimate goal of providing full coverage of the torso while still allowing someone’s regular flow of movement. Additional designs included shin and arm guards, but they weren’t the priority.

Obviously, if the Cult was shooting to kill, they’d aim right for the chest, so the focus remained there.

“Looks awesome, guys,” Clyde complimented them. “I can’t wait to give it a go.”

Stan and Kyle entered the room while Token was going over a rundown of materials; Ike took notes on how much the materials would cost, even though Token assured him it was no big deal. Before moving on to further topics, Wendy took and jotted down measurements for everyone but herself, Token and Timmy (the three who were already fully armored), concerning herself mainly with shoulder width, as well as chest and waist measurements, and asked for us to give our weight, or at least an honest guess.

“Eric Cartman,” she had to whine, “for the love of God, you know how much you weigh… if you don’t want to say it out loud, just write it down!”

Cartman grumbled and obliged.

The last to be fitted was Stan, even though he was the reason the idea for under armor came about in the first place. He cringed from discomfort when Wendy took his waist measurement, and I
heard her add the comment, “I’ll make it a sturdier alloy on your left side, how’s that?”

“Whatever you need to do,” he urged her. It was kind of weird seeing them be all normally friendly, but something we’d all get used to.

Once that was taken care of, a fully-calmed Kyle went again over his in-depth Nyarlathotep research, giving special focus to the fact that this particular deity could walk among humans and speak our language. “He could be anywhere,” Kyle said, “which is why I think we should interrogate every Cult member we can.”

“And that’s what this is,” I said, gesturing back to the whiteboard. “Let’s come up with a game plan for that. If we all go at once, obviously, we’re gonna get found out. So we’ll split up; conquer more ground that way.”

“Did Nelson say anything to you?” Clyde wondered. “It’s not him, is it?”

“No,” said Stan, “but he’s still kinda proof that we can’t claim to ‘know’ anyone in the Cult. He’s obviously not who my family always thought he was. We can’t trust any of these guys.”

“So what about Henrietta?” asked Wendy. “She keeps helping out, and I feel like she can be trustworthy.”

“So do I,” I agreed, “only because she’d been helping me for so long. We’re gonna keep those other Goths in check, though.”

“Anything else we need to discuss?” Cartman prompted then, glaring at Kyle.

“No,” Kyle said firmly. “We’re good.”

We didn’t talk any more about Kyle’s ‘quirk.’ I didn’t want to push him, since that would sort of be counter-intuitive. He had to talk about it himself once he was good and ready. Which I hoped, for his own sake as well as everyone’s, would be pretty soon. One thing was for sure, it was a gift that could possibly come in handy in R’lyeh, assuming the fight led us there. After all, his reactions were getting stronger and stronger; if it was something he could really use, so much the better.

At the end of the night, I essentially told Kyle to take a fucking vacation. God knows the guy needed it. He still looked tired from his week with barely any sleep. “Just take a breather this weekend,” I suggested. “I think we all should, while we still can.”

The idea settled well with everyone.

We all had to keep the League and our public lives separate as long as possible. I, for one, was gonna keep enjoying the hell out of my life with Red, and I knew the others had plenty going on in their regular lives, too. Our League work couldn’t consume us, but it did take some priority over things like taking long trips, or maybe sports. But we really did have to enjoy our lives while we could. Just in case a revelation or an attack came sooner than we were expecting.

The whiteboard at the end of the meeting divided everyone up into teams of two, and each pair was charged with cornering as many Cultists as they could on a different Saturday, outside of the Cult’s meeting. Marpesia and TupperWear were on for that coming weekend, and Mosquito and the Coon were set for the next. Then Red Serge and Iron Maiden, and finally Toolshed and the Human Kite. I was basically a floater; I’d be seeing more of Wilcox and Johansen in prison soon enough, once I dared venture back toward Park County Station, and of course, there were my routine meetings with the Goths.
And to appease the Coon, I gave him an extra job.

Hunt down Chaos.

Seemed like the right kind of mission for him, and it was one that he took gladly. Besides, the more we could learn about Chaos’s moves, the better. The guy was tricky; we’d really have to stay far out in front of him if we didn’t want the Crawling Chaos descending on us any time soon.

– – –

Kyle

I took Kenny’s words to heart pretty fast. Take a vacation. My fucking brain needed a vacation, I was so wiped. I didn’t want to think about Halloween. I didn’t want to think about the Cult, or Cthulhu, or Nyarlathotep or any of that. I really didn’t want to think about my quirk. So I managed to turn it off over the next couple of days. It was hard, but I managed. But real life didn’t provide me much of anything easier to deal with. Not being part of the Broflovski house.

It was probably an act of God that I was able to keep up with my schoolwork in addition to all of the Cthulhu research I’d been doing, otherwise, my parents would definitely have caught onto something, and I would not have liked the result of that. My dad was doing a pretty good job of staying out of my mom’s way when it came to her trying to get me to talk about college. To be honest, Dad kinda lost points in my book for just blindly going along with what she said and wanted. I knew that the longer I refused to talk about it, the more my mom would complain and the less sympathy I’d get from my dad, but I was kind of getting to the point of not caring.

Mom wanted me to keep my grades up as high as possible (I was already valedictorian, what the hell else did she want?) in the interest of sending me off to some Ivy League school, which still didn’t interest me. I’d missed the tryout date for the basketball team that year, which didn’t really bother me, but which Mom read as me wanting to focus more on my studies because I was listening to her, when in reality I’d missed the date because my two best friends were dead at the time and I wasn’t really thinking about anything else. Of course, she didn’t know that, and she could see Stan and Kenny with her own eyes now just fine, so my only excuse was I just didn’t want to. Mom was leaving out literature all the time, which I screamed at her was just counter-productive. It was getting to the point where I was considering yelling at her that I was going to go off and join the army instead, since that probably would at least make her shut up and concede to letting me apply to state schools instead, but I wanted to make her agree with me without having to get that dramatic.

College still wasn’t really on my mind, but when I thought about it, I became more and more convinced that I wanted to stay in Colorado. I wanted to be at least in the same state as all my friends, if not at the same school. To be honest, I was also getting nervous about the Cult and this whole Cthulhu plan. What if we couldn’t stop them before we graduated next year? What the fuck would happen if we all went off all over the place and nobody was around to stop them?

Kinda made it all seem pointless, in that case.

But I tried not to think about it. I had plenty else to distract me, and even that didn’t
work, I had Stan, who knew exactly how to make me stop overthinking things and stressing out unnecessarily. One of those things came up on Thursday, during English.

“Dude, check it out!” Stan announced, slapping a newspaper clipping (more like ripping, actually) down onto the open page of my book the second he walked into the classroom. And leave it to Stan to clip something out of a newspaper rather than print out an online ad for the same thing. I’d always sorta respected that about him, his ability to be as net-free as he was I mean, and I tried to keep my time divided between print and computer now, since I figured if Stan could do it, it shouldn’t be too hard (I’d successfully not touched Twitter since breaking up with Heidi, who used that site more than she texted to ever get in touch with me).

“What’s this?” I wondered.

“This weekend,” Stan grinned, “they’re doing a marathon run of all three Indiana Jones movies. We’ve gotta go.”

“The original movies?” I asked hopefully, picking the ad up for a better look.

“Yeah, dude!”

“None of that lame crappy remake bullshit?”

“Yeah, the old film reels.”

“Sweet! Hell, yeah, we should go.”

Best idea I’d heard in a long time. Stan and I have always loved those movies; actually, we kinda had a hand in stopping Spielberg and Lucas from releasing the digitally re-mastered and CG-butchered version of Raiders, back in elementary school. One thing I could thank our respective dads for was raising us on good cinema. (We sadly weren’t able to stop the unmentionably mindfucking fourth movie from being made, but we don’t talk about that.) So any chance we got to see movies the way they were originally meant to be seen was worth it. In middle school, for a while, we actually got into watching B-movies from the fifties, since together we figured there was no way those could be any worse than what Hollywood kept churning out now (in many cases they were better, to be honest). That phase only stopped when we both had enough of Cartman calling us ‘a couple of gay-ass pretentious hipster fuckwads,’ mainly because we were about the farthest thing from ‘hipsters’ ever. Outside of the League, honestly, I didn’t really think we fit into much of a subculture… we were just a couple of regular guys, who just happened to appreciate actually good movies. We still watched B-movies after that, but sparingly; interspersed with new stuff just to give it a chance.

We made the plan to get tickets for Saturday, which I insisted on paying for since Stan admitted that he wanted to basically have the marathon work into his birthday present. In all honesty, it was probably the most exciting non-League-related thing we’d come up with since planning Kenny’s Hooters trip earlier that year, so we really wanted to make the most of it. Especially when Stan pointed out, “It’s kinda crazy to think we can be doing this in light of all the Cthulhu stuff, huh?”

“We’ve gotta carve out time for fun, though, you know?” I said in return. “If we didn’t, we’d all get really boring really fast.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Stan grinned. “If Kenny can do it, any of us can.”

That was true enough. Kenny still acted so differently around everyone else than he did
around us in the League, and especially me and Stan, the two he trusted probably more than anyone else. The three of us were really tight, and by now it was kind of a fight or flight thing. Growing up in a small town, you find your group kinda easily. I was just glad ours turned out so well; I loved how we all looked out for each other. But, man, Kenny was quite a story on his own. How he managed to keep things from Red, I’ll never know. It probably took a hell of a lot of self-discipline to not spill and tell her absolutely everything, given how close they’d turned out to be.

Thinking about Kenny and Red, I felt a little bad for Nelly. The circumstances surrounding our breakup had been… really sucky. I knew she and I weren’t really going anywhere, but I could have let her down a lot nicer than I’d ended up doing. She was still nice to me in the hall and everything, which almost made it worse. But for right now, I decided, I was kind of done with girls. There wasn’t any time to think about looking around for a date, and even asking Nelly out was kind of pushing it, and an act of desperation. I was at peace with the fact that I neither needed nor wanted a girlfriend, not that it ever felt like a necessary thing.

I had no idea what Stan’s thoughts were on the subject, since, well… he kinda hadn’t talked to me about anything since his breakup with Wendy, let alone his take on relationships now. He and Wendy seemed to be getting along okay now, though, and he’d become much, much more social as the week after his return went on. Which was great. We were right back to being normal, and were able to hang out a lot more now that we were both single again.

To be honest, I was kinda starting to feel a little responsible for him. It sounds weird, but I was. I kept taking it upon myself to make sure his wounded rib was healing up fine, and that he wasn’t suffering any after-effects from having been half-dead in R’lyeh for so long. Mainly, I kept making sure he wasn’t still upset about anything. When he’d fallen silent around me during the days after the breakup, I feared somewhat that I’d said something wrong somewhere. He hadn’t let on whether or not that was true, I just still didn’t want to fuck anything up. Stan and I always went to each other about everything, so it hurt whenever he kept things in, and I took it personally whenever that happened. I felt lost whenever he wouldn’t open up, even if I couldn’t explain exactly why.

So for now, as long as we could just enjoy a day of basically doing nothing but have the chance to sit and enjoy something we’d both always liked, then I was satisfied. It was actually pretty great to get my mind off of everything else that Saturday. The marathon started at one in the afternoon, so we met up at eleven to make what we called an ‘attack plan,’ which started with making sure we both had plenty of caffeine in our system, courtesy of a couple twenty-ounce Harbucks monstrosities of espresso and sugar. The theatre was allowing patrons to bring in food, and as we ran through possibilities while waiting for a crossing signal, who should show up but Kenny, also carrying a couple of iconic white and green cups. One was some enormous frozen drink domed with whipped cream, the other a more modest coffee.

“Yo,” he greeted, “what’re you guys up to?”

“Not much yet,” Stan answered. “Indy marathon in a couple hours, dude, you going?”

“Dude, I’m working,” Kenny answered, nodding down to his shirt. He had a brown autumn coat on, open over an old orange shirt that was absolutely covered in paint. The crossing signal came on, and we stayed on the same path as he went on, “I knew this guy who knew a guy who got me to come in and work on this new office building, and it’s getting painted, like, all weekend, so, hey, Christmas money for Red, right?”

“You spoil her like crazy,” I teased him, punching his shoulder.

“No, you think?” he joked back, holding up the frozen drink. “Told her I’d grab her favorite on my break.”
“Doesn’t she work at Harbucks?” Stan wondered.

“Nah, dude,” said Kenny, his face lighting up, “she got a new job, check it out!”

“Check what out?”

“It’s right here,” he laughed. I hadn’t even noticed we’d been following Kenny until he was balancing the drinks and prying open the door to a boutique. It was one of those stores I’d never really noticed (and if Heidi had ever dragged me in there I hadn’t paid attention), and before I knew it we’d followed him in and over to the service counter, where his fashion-forward girlfriend was busy folding clothes. “Hey, baby,” he greeted her, setting the drink down on the counter for her.

“Hi, Kenny!” Red lilted, giving him a peck on the cheek as thanks. Then, to us, she added, “Hey, guys.”

Stan and I each lifted a hand in a sort-of wave.

“Thanks for coming down, sweetie,” Red said to her boyfriend, who had pretty much settled on ignoring us from there on.

“No prob, how’s it going?”

“Fine. You smell like paint,” Red laughed. “Kenny, you are so underdressed for this store.”

“Nuh-uh,” he argued, “that’s what the coat’s for, see?” He stood back and zipped his coat up to cover his freshly-stained shirt.

“You’re so clever,” his girlfriend teased.

“Know what?” said Stan, nudging me as Kenny leaned over the counter to entice Red into a casual makeout session at the front of the store. “I think we could leave right now and he’d never know he even talked to us.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I laughed. Just to test the theory, I called over, “See ya, Kenny!”

“Mmmuh-huh,” he muffled into his next jarring kiss with his girlfriend; he waved us off with one hand, which moved in more of a ‘get going already’ gesture than anything.

“Hope he doesn’t get her fired,” Stan chuckled as we left the store.

“Aww, dude, that’d suck,” I agreed, still laughing myself.

“Yeah. Man, I dunno, though, I kinda feel like a slacker,” Stan admitted, once we resumed our trek to the theatre. “I only get summer jobs. How many people do we know who keep up jobs in the winter?”

“Well, I don’t, a bunch of people don’t,” I said. “I kinda feel slacker-ish, too, but then add homework and, y’know, other stuff, and time gets tight.”

“Right,” said Stan. And then, after a few seconds for an orchestrated pause, “And an Indy marathon is way more important than making a couple extra bucks on the weekend.”

“So much more worth it,” I agreed with as much sarcasm as he’d delivered his last thought. “So where’re we buying food with the money we’re not making from winter jobs?”

We decided fuck it and ordered a whole pizza. Some people heading toward the movie
theatre seemed to be treating the occasion like a tailgate party, burgers, grill, beer and all, while some couples looked like they were going for pseudo-romantic carry-out or picnic lunches. We ran into Clyde and Bebe there, who had a couple bags of City Wok Chinese takeout between them. Man, Clyde had lucked out with her—neither of our ex-girlfriends would ever have agreed to go to a movie marathon like this; we made a point to congratulate him on that. But, again. No girlfriends necessary, not at this point, not for me, anyway. Not for Stan, either, I figured; I’d hear his take on that eventually.

Stan and I had mastered that theatre, and the art of sitting in exactly the right spot. As we grew taller, through middle and high school, we learned not to find seats behind empty chairs, but just seats behind shorter people, so we knew that nothing could ever obstruct the view. As luck would have it this time, we were behind a group of fourth-graders, which got us both laughing.

“Glad some kids still have good taste,” Stan laughed, then leaned over to speak to the kids, adding: “I’m proud of you, whoever you are.”

“Who the hell are you?” one of the kids snapped back.

Stan just laughed again and sat back, but for my ears only, he said his response, which was, “Toolshed. Bet they’d be surprised to learn that.” His grin was enough to tell me, as if I didn’t already know, just how proud he was of everything we always did in the League. I was, too. How couldn’t I be? I loved what we did. I was proud of everyone. And it was awful, but I felt like I still didn’t have the right words to thank Stan properly for what he’d done on Halloween.

The pizza surprisingly lasted well past Raiders and into Temple of Doom, but by the end of Last Crusade we were getting kind of hungry again. Not that filling up on a trio of timeless movies couldn’t keep us going for a while. I really couldn’t have thought of a better way to occupy one of what could be our last stress-free Saturdays than to spend all day in a movie theatre with my best friend. Honestly, those eight hours (six for the movies, two for the breaks) kept my mind off of absolutely everything else in my life. Just like Stan said he’d wanted, just a day where we could hang out and just be teenagers. No League obligations, no family pressure, just heading out and having fun.

As we were walking back to Stan’s afterward, we kept the marathon as the subject of our conversation for a good long while. I think the consensus on what we’d thought of it was somewhere in the ballpark of ‘fucking awesome.’ It was pretty nice that we were in a place in the League where, despite several truths steadily crawling toward us, we could all still have time to function the way everyone else did.

About halfway to Stan’s house, my mother just had to call. I fought myself on picking up, but caved on the last ring and said a clipped, “Hi,” into my phone.

“There you are!” my mom intoned brusquely over the receiver. “You haven’t picked up all day!”

“I’ve been out all day, I told you.”

“Oh, well, when you come home, bubbe, I have some things I want you to take a look at for me.”


“Not necessarily…”
“It is! Ma, quit calling me about that stuff, I’ll talk about it when I’m ready!” I all but shouted at her.

“Kyle, you’ve been saying that since eighth grade—“

“Right, cuz I wasn’t ready then and I’m not now, and the more you keep prying, the less likely I’ll want to discuss it, okay?!” Oh, shit, I felt a headache coming on. And not the usual kind of headache a kid gets when his mother won’t shut the hell up. (I know I sound like an asshole, but who doesn’t think that about his mom sometimes? I mean, come on.)

“Dude, calm down,” Stan whispered beside me.

I took in a deep breath. He was right. Calm down. Calm down.

“Just promise me, sometime before the new year, sweetie,” my mom begged.

“All right,” I gave in. “All right, Ma, that’s fine. Thanks for understanding I need time.”

My mother was crazy, but she wasn’t altogether dim. She was just very opinionated, and it had taken her a long time to come around to admitting that sometimes her sons had their own ways of doing things. Dad was such a bystander when it came to her tirades, though, he really was. Oh, well… I had no opinions on that.

As I slid my phone back into my pocket, Stan asked, “Everything okay?”

“Okay’s a really general word, Stan,” I cautioned him.

“Nah, I know. Just sounds like your mom’s a little extra crazy this time.”

“It’s about college, dude, of course she is.”

“Ah.”

“How’s your mom taking it?” I wondered.

Stan shrugged. “Shelley’s already gone, so she’s mostly kinda quiet about it,” he said. “She and Dad don’t really bug me about that.”

“Lucky,” I told him.

“Hmm…”

We continued on in silence for a minute, only because I knew what it was I needed to talk about next, as much as I hated the idea of bringing the topic up myself.

“Dude,” I finally said, once nobody was around to listen in, “I’m kind of getting nervous.”

“What about?” Stan wondered.

“My, uh… that… thing I can do,” I said, kicking at a rock that lay in my path. I watched as it rolled down the sidewalk and veered off into a snowbank, and instantly wondered if I could have any possible mind control over its path if I concentrated hard enough. “My quirk. Obviously, I can’t control it, and I don’t even know how to shut it off. It only really happens under extreme duress, and nobody lately sets me off more than my mother. So, like, what do I do? Like if it happens around her, what do I do?”
“Oh,” said Stan, “huh. I hadn’t thought of that. Is that why you hung up so fast?”

“To stop it before it could start? Yeah,” I sighed.

“Well, maybe you can learn to control it. I bet you could.”

“But, dude, what if I can’t?”

“You think way too much,” Stan laughed, messing with my hair. Every time he did that, it felt... pretty comforting, actually. It was weird. Heidi had told me what to do with my hair, to get the curls smoothed down and all, but she’d never really touched it (except when keeping it neat wasn’t exactly on her mind, like, oh, in bed). That was always kind of Stan’s thing. I think it had started when I’d stopped wearing a hat all the time, and he’d decided that to tease me about it, he’d fuck up my hair so I’d want to hide it or something. It had gone from that to just one of those things; from teasing to just... something we did. Like how Kenny always greeted us with a fist-bump now, that kind of thing. Just another idiosyncracy, but one I kind of relied on. Because, yeah, as I said, it was comforting, it calmed me down. Especially now... now that he was back, now that he’d been alive again for almost a week.

I wondered if that would ever go away. My relief, that is. I wondered for a couple of seconds, then decided it was kind of stupid to even think that. I’d almost lost him. Of course I’d be happy he came back, of course I’d think about it all the time. Maybe eventually it would wind down to once a week rather than every single day, but it wasn’t something that was ever going to leave me. He’d died for me and then he’d come back, and I found myself watching every one of his movements like it was some kind of milestone achievement, I was just so fucking glad he was there.

“Hey, Stan?” I found myself asking, once I’d shrugged his hand out of my hair and given his arm a light punch to return the favor.

“Yeah?”

I couldn’t believe I was asking this. Couldn’t believe I was touching the taboo topic: “What schools are you thinking about applying to?”

“I dunno, dude,” he said, “I haven’t really thought past CSU.”

I sighed. “I feel like that’s what everyone says,” I realized. “Kenny and Clyde’re going there, too, right?”

“I haven’t really thought past CSU.”

“Applying, anyway, last I heard. It’s, like, a year from now, though, so whatever.”

“Not whatever for me,” I mumbled, shaking my head. “Trust me, dude, I wanna apply there, too. I’m just... my mom might kill me if I do.”

“Kyle, your mom does weird things, but she’s not gonna kill you if you apply to CSU,” said Stan.

“How do you know? She might! Well,” I groaned, “maybe not kill me, but I’ve been sort of afraid for a while that she’d do something drastic if I went there. Like make me pay my own way or disown me or something.” I shook my head again, more furiously this time. “Never mind, dude, I don’t want to talk about it. You’re right, we’re not applying anywhere till next year.” I sighed, “I’ve got way more to worry about than that.”

Stan, reading my mind as always, wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and tried to pull my focus by saying, “Just try to keep calm, Kyle. You can do it. I really think you can learn to control it
if you try.”

“I don’t like it, Stan,” I admitted. Tears clung to my eyes, and I shook my head again, trying to get it all to go away. “I don’t like knowing I can do this. I don’t like not knowing what I’m capable of. I try so fucking hard not to think about it, I try so fucking hard! I mean, I’ve already gotten over yesterday, it’s just… God, it’s still there. That fucking quirk is still there.”

“Then train it,” Stan suggested. “How’s this: sometime before it gets too fuckin’ snowy, we go out back of the base and work on it, huh? I’ve been wanting to get back there and bring myself back up to speed anyway. And we can perfect the ricochet, we’ll figure a bunch of stuff out.”

“Sounds good,” I sighed. “I guess I should just kinda live with it, huh?”

“Live with it and work with it, dude, I bet you could do a lot with that,” Stan grinned.

“You think?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Okay,” I gave in. Smirking, I added, “But who’s to say I won’t freeze up over a pit of snakes?”

Stan started laughing, and roughed up my arm a little in another taunting game. God, was he ever good at helping me stop my mind from going all over the place all the time. Lately, though, there really was so much to worry about, in every sphere of my life. There was a lot that was confusing me, too, a lot of things about myself that I couldn’t explain. My quirk, my feelings of disdain toward my parents, my increased interest in what the *Necronomicon* had to say, the wave of relief that washed over me daily, knowing that my best friend was alive and that he wasn’t going anywhere. Relief, yeah… and respect, too. A respect for all he’d ever done, for how he always knew the right thing to say, and how I knew it was pretty mutual. A kind of respect that didn’t have a name… maybe didn’t even need one, so long as we both acknowledged that it was there.

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*Butters*

It might be cliché, but the holidays always made me a little depressed. Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Christmas, they all centered around the ideas of family togetherness and love. I wasn’t really that close with my family. As a matter of fact, most of my life my parents had either been scared of me or, even more often, angry with me. Usually for things that I couldn’t really help. Or were not true. So, needless to say, the holiday spirit never really settled on my house. Most years, I didn’t really mind. Once I’d become less oblivious to such things, and realized that we were never going to have the Hallmark-card-holiday promised by so many TV specials, I just kind of accepted the way things really were and went about as normal, largely ignoring the fact that things were supposed to be festive around the house. My parents still decorated and got each other and me presents and everything, but I knew something was missing. The same thing that was missing all the other days of the year – real, actual, honest trust and love. So, I looked for it elsewhere. I wasn’t a Grinch or anything, no matter what else I might do as my villainous persona. I still had faith that those things existed, I just admitted the fact that they would have to come to me from outside sources.

Chaos typically took a break over the holidays for this exact reason. He was still fairly
prevalent this year, as I was, of course, quite deep in deciphering the Necronomicon, but even evil masterminds needed a break now and then. Thus, the approaching holidays did manage to get me in more of a Marjorine mood for the first time in almost months since making headway in my research. So I went out and did something that was exclusively associated with my feminine persona.

A while ago, in the interest of getting in some more practice, I’d asked Tweak if it was okay if I played my flute in his parents’ coffee shop. He’d gotten their permission, and I was granted a venue in which to play that wasn’t my house. I didn’t really mind other people hearing me, in fact I liked having a place to go where people actually seemed to like hearing me play. Or at least didn’t mind it. Tweek’s parents said the music added a nice atmosphere to the store, so I at least felt like I was providing a nice service. The flute was Marjorine’s territory, so one of these sessions felt like just the right occasion for me to get out as her.

When I opened the corner of my closet that I reserved for my Marjorine attire, I paused for a moment, deciding which outfit to wear. It felt like forever since I had even looked at these clothes. Standing there, I felt a little twinge of guilt that I had been so negligent of this part of me for so long. It’s not that I had been avoiding it or anything, but the priorities in my life right now just didn’t coincide with Marjorine’s strengths. Chaos didn’t need Marjorine. In a lot of ways, he was stronger than her. For now, though, I actually wanted to focus on Marjorine, if only for a little while. I felt like I owed myself that. So, I got dressed, grabbed my flute and went downtown.

I walked into the Tweak Brothers’ Coffee Shop, the clinging bell on the door alerting the sole attendant behind the counter, Tweek, that I had entered. He flinched, just barely preventing the pile of saucers he’d been stacking on top of the espresso machine from toppling over. (I’d thought before how the already overly-high-strung boy could do without the bell, it being just one more stimulus jarring his fragile senses.) He breathed a small sigh of relief as I waved at him, nodding his head in his own greeting, his eye still twitching a bit. Once he saw my flute case in my hands he guessed why I was there. I ordered a vanilla latte for myself, to be a good customer and all, and then went to set up in the corner I usually occupied during these sessions. I put my drink down on a nearby table and pieced my flute together, leaving my case open on the floor in front of my stool, just in case any of the patrons felt generous. I typically used these sessions to play pieces that I liked or new ones in a no-excuses, uninterrupted run-through. I hadn’t really played the instrument much lately (again, the flute being solely a Marjorine thing, and me not being Marjorine much recently, meant less practice time), so I went through a couple pieces that I just liked playing, mostly because they were easy but still had a nice melody to them.

I was flipping through my sheet music looking for what I might want to play next, when a vague thought struck me. A while ago, I had started humming this small random tune. I hadn’t known where it had originated, but I was pretty sure I’d heard it playing in a dream I’d had the night after Halloween. I didn’t think it was anything that I’d heard before, like from television or an old song I hadn’t thought about in a while or anything. But it had seemed to come from somewhere. I’d been known to make up songs in the past, so I guessed something had just struck me and this tune had been the result. I wondered if I could replicate it on my flute. There weren’t too many patrons in the shop, and I didn’t think any of them were paying much attention to me anyway, so I assumed I wouldn’t be bothering anyone too much if I tried.

I put my flute to my lips, considering my first note. It probably wouldn’t be hard. It was more of a succession of notes really, rather than a melody, mostly long and drawn out. But there was a definite, distinctive sequence to them, and that’s what I tried to imitate on my flute.

I’d gotten about halfway through the strain before a reaction made me stop. “GAH!” Tweek exclaimed from a distance. His yelp was echoed by the clattering of porcelain, to which he reacted, “Oh, jeez!” I set down my flute and glanced up to find the nervous boy fretting over something a
couple tables back. He’d gone on a break after I started playing. At first, I thought he was concerned only with the now-scuffed state of both his coffee cup and his dad’s establishment table, stained the color of his highly-caffeinated drink, but Tweek’s usually wandering eyes were plastered to me.

“Hey, there, Tweek,” I greeted cautiously. “What’s wrong?”

“What are you playing?!” he demanded. Tweek’s voice is normally strained. It has been since we were all kids, and it has to do with his abnormal coffee intake, as well as a dose of general nerves. I’m high-strung and messed up a little, too, but nerves took to Tweek much differently. “Why are you playing that?! GAH! Just—nnngh—”

“What, this?” I wondered. I trilled the notes again, and Tweek slapped his hands over his ears and cried out again. “Aw, come on. I can take a hint, Tweek, but it doesn’t sound all that bad, does it? Plus, you always let me practice in here. Sometimes people even tip me—”

“No, no, no, no,” Tweek rattled, “y-y-you can play, just—GAH—just not that! How do you know that? What is that?”

“Oh, I dunno.” I set my flute down in my lap and glanced down at it as I continued talking to Tweek. “It sounds kinda funny, huh? Honestly, I heard it in a dream. Sounds crazy, I know, but I’ve been thinking about my jury for a couple weeks, now, and I had to come up with something, so I think I dreamed this up—”

“But I know it!” Tweek insisted. My head jerked back up so that I could look at him. He was even more jittery than usual. I could hear his chair legs rattling under the shaking of his entire wiry body. “I swear I know it! I hear it at night! I know those notes, and they—nnnngggggghhh, just, just don’t play them anymore! I can’t take it! It’s too much pressure! My brain can’t take it!”

“Ok, Tweek, fine, it’s all right,” I tried to calm him down, “how about a nice waltz instead?” I began playing the piece I’d randomly selected, hoping its more soothing melody would take away any strain I’d just caused him. It seemed to work all right, but I was honestly disturbed by Tweek’s reaction. I knew I’d heard that phrase in my sleep. But Tweek had heard it, too. The tune was too odd to be mistaken for anything other than itself. Was it some kind of collective unconscious thing? Could it be merely coincidence?

Or was it just another instance where I was the cause of someone else’s unhappiness?

This last theory got another dose of evidence after I left the coffee shop an hour later. I’d driven my moped back to Wendy’s where I kept it and was at the far side of the garage, chaining it to its makeshift stand. I thought I might take advantage of already being in Marjorine mode to hang out with Wendy for a little bit, since we hadn’t really had a lot of time together lately. I had my back turned to the driveway and was hidden by the side of the house, so I didn’t see the person who came up to knock on the door. The noise was the first thing that alerted me to anybody’s presence. The knocks had been loud, insistent, and a moment’s silence on the inside caused the person to knock even harder a second time, and also yell.

“WENDY! Open up, I know you’re in there!”

Oh, jeez. It was Eric. At Wendy’s house in what was probably supposed to be a private moment. I didn’t mean to be a spy for this, but I turned into one. There was no way for me to get out behind the house, since there was a fence between Wendy’s and the one adjacent, marking off the backyards. And I couldn’t leave normally since there was no way I wouldn’t be seen by anyone at the front door. I was stuck.
Eric knocked again and finally Wendy opened up. I didn’t dare look around the wall, but I could certainly hear everything. “What do you want?” she asked, none too friendly.

“Why’d you blow me off?” he demanded. I didn’t know whether Eric meant a specific date or their relationship in general, but I knew from talk at school, and from Wendy herself, that the two were definitely not a couple any longer. They hadn’t been since Halloween.

“Cause I’m ignoring you.” She made it seem like the answer was painfully obvious.

“Annnd you’re reasoning for this is…?”

“Because a relationship can’t be based on self-gratification, asshole.”

“Wendy, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s because you’re too stupid to get it. And that’s the point.”

“Wendy, Wendy, come on.” Man, that boy would just not give up. I couldn’t help but feel a slight pang of jealousy that he was being so persistent toward Wendy and had always told me to get lost. Sure I had put them together, but I still had my idiotic crush. “Let’s just go out and talk about this.”

“I don’t want to go out with you anymore, Eric!” Wendy practically screamed. “How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“But, Wendy-”

“But nothing, now get the hell out of here!” and with that she slammed the door.

I heard Eric mutter something about a ‘stuck-up ho-bitch’ before he finally did stomp off back to his car. I waited until I heard him drive away before I bolted out of my hiding place, running all the way back to my house, all thought of talking with Wendy completely obliterated from my mind.

Here it was again. Here was more evidence that I just could not get anything right. No matter what I did or who I tried to help, everything I touched just seemed to go sour. Granted, maybe Wendy and Eric had never had much of a shot at a long relationship to begin with, but I had encouraged them (you might even say, forced Eric) into being together in the first place. They had gone through the anxieties and pain of breaking up only because I’d gotten them together. If I hadn’t, they probably would both be happier right now.

Why had I even bothered?

What’s more, the old festering wound of my own attempts at going out with Eric had opened up again. I’d managed to put my feelings aside while he and Wendy had been a couple, but now it hurt again. Horribly. I still didn’t know why I was fixated on the most intolerant, inconsiderate jerk in the entire state, but I was. God help me, I was, but it was looking likely that I’d never succeed.

I slammed the front door when I finally made it home. I ignored my father’s yells from the kitchen and didn’t stop running until I was inside my room, and slammed that door, too.

I was pissed. There was no other word for it. I was not ‘upset,’ or ‘bothered,’ or a ‘touch angry,’ as I might have said in my typically dewy-eyed vocabulary; I was pissed.

I kicked off my boots and flung them in the general direction of my closet. I tore off my winter coat and threw it onto the bed. I took the elastics out of my hair, pulling a few strands out as I did, though
I ignored the pain, and threw them on the floor. I ran my hands forcefully across my scalp in an attempt to make my hair fall back together from its two parts. I then made this effort pointless by tearing my girly sweater over my head and throwing that onto the floor by my bookcase. This last move caused me to turn so that I was facing the full-length mirror on the inside of my door. I stopped and looked at my reflection.

I usually treated dressing as one of my respective alter-egos as a ritual of sorts. I would don each piece of that persona methodically in a specific order so that I really felt like I was becoming someone else with each small layer I added. I wouldn’t stop until I was through. And I never looked at myself in the mirror until the transformation was complete.

Now, I was staring at myself in a state of transition. Something I almost never saw. I was wearing plain white socks. I still had on Marjorine’s black tights and light blue skirt. The T-shirt I had on under my sweater was plain white as well, one of Butters’ old things. My face was covered in make-up, pale pink lip gloss and light blue eyeshadow to match the skirt. My hair hung limply down the back of my neck, a style I only had it in when I was going to bed; it always had an elastic in it somehow otherwise.

I was a mish-mash of styles, of personas. Right now, I wasn’t anybody. I was just some kid trying to play dress-up. Some kid who had no idea where he stood in the world or how to interact with it. A lost little child who couldn’t deal with anything on his own, so had tried to find some courage in a blonde wig. It was pathetic really, but it’s what I’d always done; I’d always created new personas for myself to pretend to be.

But there was only one persona through whom I had made any progress. Only one that actually succeeded in his endeavors. But maybe that’s because he wasn’t trying to create anything, only destroy.

Butters couldn’t move beyond naïve child. Of course, I’d matured a bit as I’d grown up, but I was still the lame one, the one that would have been stuck in the corner, fully ignored, if I never said a word. And nobody would care if I didn’t.

Marjorine was the side of me that was supposed to have changed all that. People paid attention to her, liked her, invited her to do things, included her in average social interactions that most kids took for granted. But she was failing. In all the things I’d tried to do as Marjorine lately, I kept failing. I couldn’t stand it anymore. No matter how much good I tried to do, it always ended up in ruin.

It always ended up in chaos.

So why fight it anymore? Why pretend like I could be anything other than what I was?

I went to the closet, to the dresser in the back on which rested the mannequin head holding Professor Chaos’s silver helmet. I pulled it off and held it out in front of me. The bright light from the sun shining off the surface made it a blank white slate, impossible for me to see my own reflection.

Just the way I wanted it.

As afternoon moved to evening, I had plenty of time to work more on my research. I abandoned the last of my Marjorine vestiges, simply replacing the skirt with a pair of green pants for now and washing my face clean. I brought Professor Chaos’s helmet over to the desk, where I set it down above my work area.
I began once again to pour over the pages of the *Necronomicon*. I dove back into the task with a new fervor. I was determined now, more than ever. I would figure out the way to bring chaos to this town, to this world. I’d made excellent progress so far, if I did say so myself. I had managed to translate over three-quarters of the tome. But there were some markings that I just couldn’t seem to figure out. They were written in a horizontal line across the bottom of several successive pages of the book. I thought they might be runes laid out in a pattern that I couldn’t decipher. They weren’t any part of the Arabic alphabet, I knew that much. I stared at them, trying to determine if they looked like any alphabet I did know.

As I sat there, I found myself absent-mindedly humming the strains of the tune I’d attempted to play on the flute earlier. Then, a sudden thought struck me, like a bolt of lightning. I leafed through those pages again, then quickly copied them as simple black dots down onto my blank ledger paper, in the order they appeared on the page. Of course… of course, it all made sense.

It was sheet music.

And it spelled out a call, the means with which to bring the Great Messenger out with the most primitive instruments of humankind. Nyarlathotep could be summoned with the sounds of flutes and drums. Wasn’t it lucky that I could play both. The flute seemed to be the better of the two calls, though, since flutes are lyrical while drums are percussive. So all this time, without even knowing it, even Marjorine had been furthering what was becoming Chaos’s ultimate plan. I was ecstatic at this revelation, and knew that I had to act on it immediately.

Later that night, it was time for Chaos to rise. Rise to an occasion most befitting of that name. If one person in town had heard the music in a dream already… why not start chaos from there? Why not attack the very subconscious of the weak? If Nyarlathotep needed an army, there was no place better than South Park to find him masses of lunatics who would follow him blindly.

I called for General Disarray, and, taking the flute with me, climbed to the bell tower of the church. It was the only ‘tower’ I knew of in town, and that Tarot card fit too well into this situation for me to want to attempt this anywhere else. It was a little morbid, but then, I was becoming more and more convinced that Chaos had the answer. Had the answer, was the answer… Chaos, or nothing.

Having committed the music to memory, I told Disarray to keep still and silent, then, managing to work the keys even through my gloves, I set my lips over the mouthpiece and began to play. The flute echoed through the tower and spilled out into town. Whether others heard it was something that would surely be answered soon, and indeed a form of an answer did come.

A mist began to gather, and the air felt tense. I didn’t stop. I played on, and on, more in tune to Professor Chaos now than ever. Revenge on the world, that was what I wanted. Chaos to everyone who’d had their perfect lives, who’d seen me as only nothing. No threat, no promise, nothing.

Sorry, everyone, but chaos was just too tempting.

I’d made a pact with the Great Messenger, Nyarlathotep, that night. I could not be stopped. Chaos could not be stopped, not now… not anymore.

When I returned home, my parents were asleep, but I heard the television in their room through the walls. A news bulletin… about hundreds of reports of what seemed like a strange shift in the weather. A hanging, but moving mist. Which sounded, as it moved, like the trill of a flute.
I made another decision that night, when it came time to stash the flute away. I'd always kept it with Marjorine’s things. Her girly accessories, her phone, her whole life, that whole side of me. Still as Chaos, I gathered all of those things together, but set the flute aside, and, not giving myself time to second-guess, shoved them all into a large green suitcase, which I then locked. I kept the key on one of my belt loops, but ignored the fact that it was there.

"Marjorine, my dear," I said, as I tucked the suitcase into the far back shadows of my closet, "this is where we say goodbye."

Then I closed the door on that part of me.
“Carol! Goddammit, bitch, I told you to turn the television down!”

My parents were arguing again. Surprise, surprise. One rare night at home was enough to remind me why I chose to stay at Red’s all the time. Other than that whole six days in R’lyeh thing. Note to self, Kenny: when Red’s house is a no-go, stay at the base.

“It’s not the television, dirtbag, it’s your stupid tractor stereo, I don’t hear a damn thing!”

“Shut up,” I groaned, closing my pillow around my ears.

I was lying on my back, my head propped on a pillow older than I was and a book open on my bent knees to a page Kyle had bookmarked with Nyarlathotep information. The bed, if it could be called a bed, in my room was fucking freezing, colder than the bier I’d woken up on when Henrietta had called me and Stan back to life, which was saying something. Snow fell carelessly outside my curtainless windows, and the distinctive aroma of pot clung to the walls, courtesy of my brother’s new stash. The most he’d spoken to me in about the last year had been earlier that day. Three whole words: “Want a hit?”

To which I’d said, “Shove it up your ass,” and left to attempt to do some reading in my room.

Really bad idea, by the way. I couldn’t get a damn thing done in that house anymore, not a thing. Not even shower, thanks to the frozen pipes. I had much better things to do than let myself rot in that shack. I really did. I’d gone home out of pity. Every once in a while, I’ll take stock of where I am in life, remember why people like Cartman would still rip on me for being poor, and check, just check to see if maybe this time my parents were going to do something about it.

Nope, never. Their life was a nonstop Springer episode, I swear to God. It sucked. My parents never tried to better themselves or our family situation. I was so looking forward to graduating. To getting that diploma and bidding them my final fuck you on my way to a college I could pay to attend on my own.

Assuming I lived past junior year, of course.

So many things were bothering me about the Cult. More now than ever. I wanted to know if they knew about the location of the Gate in R’lyeh. I wanted to know when they’d next try to summon Cthulhu.

Learning about Nyarlathotep was certainly the most enlightening thing any of us had touched upon yet. That ‘Mr. Skin’ that Craig had had a run-in with… the guy from Los Angeles? Nyarlathotep incarnation. He’d been spotted many times over the years, and I had almost too much information from the early 20th century to back up previous encounters with Nyarlathotep, Cthulhu, and other deities of the R’lyeh hierarchy. Now that it was known that Nyarlathotep had indeed been walking around on Earth recently, it begged the question… why open the Gate?

Who was the new Messenger the Cult kept talking about, and in that case, what purpose did Nyarlathotep even serve?
I could think about none of this, however, because in the background all I could hear was the *blah, blah, blah, redneck bullshit, blah* of my parents’ squabbling. My eyes crossed as I tried to make sense of the words on the page. Nothing was helping; Carol and Stuart McCormick were in rare form that night, and their pitched arguments came piercing through the paper-thin walls, threatening to tear apart my eardrums. I was only able to get through about fifteen minutes of muttering a, “shut up, shut up, shut up, shut the fuck up,” mantra before I finally snapped, “That *does* it,” and gathered up my things.

And as far as I was concerned that night… that *really did it.*

Now, it had been going through my mind for a very, very long time by now. Maybe since I was around ten or eleven. I wanted to leave home. Every so often, I’d just get the itch and want to leave. As a kid, I couldn’t. I had nowhere to go. My friends had always been able to put up with me at their houses for a while, but all of our parents were always so tight, they’d weasel me back into my parents’ clutches somehow or other. Besides, every time I died, I’d just wake up in that house again. So up until that night, it was all kind of useless.

It still didn’t mean I couldn’t try.

Knowing full well I’d probably experience a death sometime soon that Henrietta wouldn’t be able to read me around, I still squared myself and started gathering my things, shoving just about everything that mattered into my school backpack, and throwing on an extra sweatshirt underneath my parka to combat the cold air I’d be hitting soon enough. I didn’t know if I was leaving for good or leaving for the night, but either way, I was just plain leaving.

My house was a hindrance. That’s all it, and my parents, had ever been.

This was confirmed when I walked out from the hallway with the sparse bedrooms out into the open living room area, and my mother was chucking an empty bottle of Jack Daniels against the wall. It shattered and echoed her piercing tone as she shouted, “Don’t go blamin’ me for shit that ain’t my fault!”

“You done throwin’ shit, or can I come out there and turn your Goddamn music down and then shut you up?” Dad retorted from the room my parents still shared despite their domestic squabbles.

I sighed and stepped over broken glass as I made my way to the front door, unnoticed.

“You done throwin’ shit, or can I come out there and turn your Goddamn music down and then shut you up?” Dad retorted from the room my parents still shared despite their domestic squabbles.

I sighed and stepped over broken glass as I made my way to the front door, unnoticed.

“How the hell should I know? Some classical girly crap!”

“How should I know? Some classical girly crap!”

“Oh, that does it, smartass, I—“

“Oh, that does it, smartass, I—“

“See ya,” I muttered, wondering if Mom would even hear me. And hear me she did, surprisingly enough.

“I see you too.”

“Kenny, where the hell’re you goin’?” my mother slurped through her beer.

“Out,” I snapped back.

“Out where? It’s a Goddamn blizzard outside, you’ll die of pneumonia.”
“Is that a fact?” I growled. “What would you do if I did?”

Oddly enough, my mother froze. In her stupor, she stared at me, stared the way a child will marvel over something new and exotic he’s never seen at the zoo. And for a second, there was some connection. Some kind of connection between me and the woman who had brought me into the world. Whatever that connection was, though, she wasn’t about to give me any indication as to what it was. We were connected through that curse, somehow, that was for sure.

She knew, she had to.

One of these days, I’d break her. I’d break Carol McCormick and I’d know everything in her words. But for tonight, her words were:

“You get your sorry ass back in here, Kenny, you’re not gonna go dyin’ of pneumonia tonight.”

“Maybe not,” I muttered, “but I’m not coming home.”

“What did you say?” Mom shouted.

The words churned up inside me, from a pit in my stomach to a sting in my heart to a burning sensation in my throat as I hollered at the top of my lungs, “I’M NOT COMING HOME!”

“Kenny!” my mother gasped. The words were even enough to get Dad out of the bedroom, to listen in on what was going on. Good. I wouldn’t have to repeat myself.

“I’m done, Mom,” I said firmly, finally letting years and years of words I’d been meaning to say just spew out of me, out into the world, words my parents might finally listen to. “I’m sick of living here. I’m sick of you guys arguing about really stupid shit. I’m sick of being pitied just because I happen to be related to you! Fuck you! Both of you! Fuck you. Fuck you. FUCK. YOU.”

“Kenny, you’re just gonna end up back here anyway,” I thought I heard my father say as I turned to leave. And maybe I did hear him. But I was so fucking angry, only one thing was on my mind. Get the fuck out of there and focus on what was really important.

There was too Goddamn much going on. I needed to be Mysterion. I had to stop the Cult from awakening Cthulhu. I had to bring down Chaos before Chaos could run rampant on us. I had to be the person I wanted to be, not some kid stuck in his house on the bottom rung of society’s ladder. My parents weren’t going to hold me down anymore.

I was out of the door and down the street before I even realized which direction my feet were carrying me. Obviously, I had two main options of where to go: the base, or my girlfriend’s house. My mission still burning into my mind, though, the decision came without debate. I made for headquarters.

It was fucking freezing, and snowing to beat hell. I pulled the lined hood of my parka up over my head and zipped it right up to my neck, tightening it as best I could so the frigid wind wouldn’t burst my eardrums or shatter my chattering teeth. Snow soaked through my pants, socks, and beaten sneakers. I really should’ve worn boots.

Life had to turn around. It had to turn around if I was ever going to really know what it was like to be alive. All this time spent dying, all this time spent rotting and waiting for my next death in that piss-poor shack… all that had to stop. Stop, stop, stop. Maybe I’d die at the end of it all, and hopefully I’d be remembered for what I had accomplished, and not for what my parents didn’t do.
Or maybe, just maybe, I’d find a way to really beat the curse and live. Either way, the rest of my life wasn’t going to be spent uselessly.

Well. There was someone down at Park County Jail who was living through his own Cthulhu nightmare, and he probably wouldn’t mind a midnight visitor any more than he minded one in the middle of the day. I’d yank answers right out of his throat if I had to, but that Wilcox was going to talk.

I made for the base first, and showered before anything, just to warm myself up a little. I had to get my home life out of my mind completely, so I just stood there and literally washed it all away. I had to focus. I had to focus.

We’d made progress. It was slow, but we had made progress. We were leaps and bounds ahead of where we’d been a year ago, as far as knowing what the Cult was up to and what they believed. I knew much more about R’lyeh. I now knew what the Gate looked like, and how to get there. I knew that there were Cthulhu cults around the world, and that there was this other deity, Nyarlathotep, who was supposed to be some kind of Messenger, and that if Professor Chaos knew about it, we could very well be in seriously deep shit.

After my shower, I sucked up my masculinity and awkwardly used Wendy’s hair dryer that she kept at the base, since there was no way in Hell I was gonna sit around waiting for my hair to dry so it wouldn’t freeze to icicles under my Mysterion hood. Satisfied that no one would ever know about that, I dressed and set out, pleased to find that the snow and wind had calmed considerably, keeping to the shadows as usual, slipping through the back lots and little-used roads to make my way to Park County Station.

It was my first time back there since Halloween, I realized upon approaching. Out of pure curiosity, I wandered to that back alley, where Nelson had killed Stan and I had killed myself. Where Kyle had gone all but insane. Where the cops had done absolutely fucking nothing. I didn’t know what I expected to see. Blood on the pavement? Chalk outlines of two bodies? Honestly, I’d wondered on and off, my whole life, about what exactly happened to my body each time I died. It had come to the point where I was just so used to dying and coming back that it wasn’t much on my mind anymore, but that day, it was more than ever. Something obviously had to happen to me. What brought me back to my bed, without fail, every single time? Did a void just spit me back out, or what? Was I in a new body each time, or did the one I’d lost just… reanimate? I’d blown up a few times, and burned, and lost vital parts. I had to come back anew, that seemed more logical. Not that anything was really logical about me, but whatever. I was what I was, and something about Cthulhu had to be an answer.

The alley was a wreck. That was all I noticed. Planks of wood were strewn everywhere, there was a heap of broken glass on the ground. There were signs that something had happened there… maybe the police just never used that alley. Maybe they just didn’t care. Given that they hadn’t helped us, that was likely.

And it got me good and pissed.

I leapt up to the fire escape—thanks to two factors that had come to be in my favor over time (agility and height), I was able to rush at that back wall, jump and hit it with one foot at an angle, and land right on the bottom platform of that escape with both feet solid. From there, it was an easy climb up to Yates’s office. Windows were kind of my thing. I visited the Goths through Henrietta’s window, and checked in with the cops through the window of that office.

I didn’t even wait for them to notice me. I slipped right in and hollered, “Where the fuck is
Sargeant Yates?”

The office was alive with activity, though many men seemed to only be doing mindless paperwork. What a bunch of dickholes. An entire force sat back and did nothing while an incredibly dangerous Cult infiltrated their grounds and shot a seventeen-year-old in cold blood, and were totally about to kill more. And here they were doing paperwork. Way to know what’s really important, fuckwads.

Mitch Murphy, a teammate of Yates, approached in a frenzy after telling the rest of the staff to carry on. “Mysterion!” the prematurely grey officer called out once he was only about fifteen feet away from me. “What is it?”

“Where the hell was your team on Halloween?” I growled, storming into the office the rest of the way to meet the man where he stood. When I’d (thankfully) hit 5’10”, I finally had something of a height advantage over some of the force, and Murphy was one of them. Mysterion’s presence had always given me an edge… getting taller was just an added perk. “We needed you on backup!”

“With all due respect, Mysterion,” said Murphy, “Sargeant Yates has little reason to believe that Cthulhu Cult poses much of a threat.”

“Little reason?!” I hollered right into his face. “Where’s Yates? I need to talk to him!”

“He’s out on patrol, but I’ll tell him you were here.”

“Not good enough,” I said, “where’s his desk?”

“Mysterion, what’s going on?” Murphy wondered, leading me over to the desk in question. While Yates called the shots, Murphy at least had the gall to appear skeptical when he didn’t agree.

“More than anyone on your force is ready to believe,” I decided on answering. Once shown to Yates’s desk, I wrote a pretty nasty message on his PC, which he’d left on: Yates—When the League needs backup, we NEED BACKUP. The Cult is no laughing matter. Your ‘efforts’ are disappointing.—M. If I’d been writing as Kenny, it probably would’ve looked more like Dude, you suck, what the fuck? but Mysterion was better than that. And Yates deserved a second chance. I’d been helping the force out for years. They kind of owed me.

Murphy was all nerves by the time I requested access to the jail cell now shared by Wilcox, Johansen, and the sci fi nerds from the Cult. Even if it killed me (haha), I’d get some answers out of them that evening.

The Park County Station is a pretty big place, but I’d only seen a little of it… just the upper-tiered offices, the main lobby, and a few of the jail cells. Whenever I was escorted to the long rows of cells on the basement level, I’d be taken by way of the staff elevator, usually accompanied by either Yates or Murphy, and one or two of their lackeys. That evening, it was just Murphy, and I was taking strange delight from watching the sweat roll down the side of his angled face from the pressure of having me, arms folded, judging his every move from behind.

“I’ll let myself out,” I finally told him when I stepped off.

“Mysterion, the rules,” Murphy tried, “state that an officer must be within—“

“Yeah, and that’s the reason I haven’t gotten a word out of these guys yet, I’m sure,” I snapped. “Having one of you guys at the door is still too close. Just leave me alone down here.”

Murphy was shaking, which wasn’t something anyone should see a middle-aged man in
uniform do. How anyone could have any faith in the police force with them being a bunch of cowards was mind-boggling. And a lot of people really didn’t like the force that much… before Mysterion became a recognized presence.

You’re welcome, South Park.

Ignoring whatever else the officer was going to say, I left him in silence as the elevator doors slid closed, and walked with determined strides down the long hallway, lined with the bars of cells upon cells, many of which were empty, one of which was full of life. Why the police decided that keeping all four together would be, for now, a good idea, was over my head, since I thought it pretty stupid. But there they all were, sharing a nondescript, four bunk square plot of concrete panels and steel bars.

“Good evening, boys,” I said, noticing that all four were awake. The sci fi nerds were in their bunks on my right, reading comics, the skinny one on the top bunk, both of them seemingly unfazed by my presence.

Johansen, the professor from Colorado Springs, was an unflattering wreck, dressed in what should have been business casual but what looked like some kind of desperate fallout ensemble. His thinning hair was all askew, and he stood up from the bottom bunk on my left and said, “You again! What are you called? Mysterion?”

“That’s right,” I confirmed. “You guys finally ready to talk?”

“Get me out of here and we’ll discuss,” Johansen tried to barter.

“No can do, professor,” I said. “See, I have this thing about not letting the world get destroyed. Maybe it’s just me.”

“Don’t you think some of us wish it wouldn’t happen?” Wilcox finally said, from the very back of the cell, which grabbed my attention. “Some of us know the true horrors the Dark Lord’s reign will bring, but you’ve got to understand, it’s hopeless. There is nothing we can do.”

I tried very hard not to grin, given this new piece of information. So there was reluctance even within the Cult? Hadn’t been expecting that… then again, they were all pretty unpredictable. “I’m planning on stopping it,” I told him, “all the same. Now, come on. Isn’t there anything any of you can tell me? What can I expect from this… Nyarlathotep?”

Every man in the cell froze at the mention of the Messenger’s name. Johansen backed down, and to my surprise, the artist Wilcox stepped forward, his haunted face pasty and devoid of feeling, his steps almost like the erratic, unsteady movements of a marionette. “You know of the Crawling Chaos…?” he asked me, trembling.

“I know that it exists,” I said, “and that it, or he, or whatever, has been to Earth recently and is apparently going to be summoned again. He goes around to Cthulhu cults around the world, right?”

“To all cults,” Wilcox confirmed. “Enacting the wills of the greater ones, spreading madness. There is no stopping it. And there is no stopping Cthulhu in the wake of such insanity…”

“You say there’s no hope, I say there is!” I yelled, despite the fact that Wilcox stood more or less directly in front of me now. “Tell me how to stop it!”

“I can’t,” said Wilcox.
“I doubt that,” I bit back, staring him down. “Isn’t it true you had a relative who knew about Cthulhu? He’s risen before and gone back, there’s gotta be something I’m missing that’ll push those guys back now!”

Wilcox’s lips trembled with an answer, but he kept them sealed. After about thirty seconds of keeping me in suspense, his voice finally creaked out, “I am a haunted man, Mysterion. There is nothing I can say that will help you.”

This Cult could honestly not make me angrier if they tried. I mean, we had Nelson beaten to a bloody pulp, and he still wasn’t talking. The guys in this cell had nowhere to go, and were sharing nothing. The Goths were just… not entirely reliable. But I had to get answers, in some way other than constantly killing myself and diverting to R’lyeh, since that was just a big waste of time, and I didn’t want to rely on my Immortality to beat Cthulhu.

“Nothing?” I repeated scornfully. “There’s really nothing? Nothing from you, or Johansen over there?”

This time, Wilcox fell utterly silent. He looked so ready to break, though, I had to play my moves carefully. If he wouldn’t give me answers directly, perhaps there was another way to get him to snap. One thing. All I needed that night was one thing. Technically, I’d gotten something, just knowing that there might be some resistance, but that wasn’t really all that useful. I still had a whole night ahead of me.

I decided to leave the men in silence, and return some time later. But I had only to turn my back and begin walking away. That was the moment I got what I wanted.

“His uncle’s memoirs,” Wilcox said after me, which got me to pause, though I did not do him the favor of turning back to look at him. If feigning disinterest was the only thing that would get me anywhere, then I’d better take it and let the information come to my back.

“What are you telling him, you fool?!” Johansen shouted.

“It’s both of us!” Wilcox called. “You were right to send us here, Mysterion, in fact, I thank you. Better here and unnoticed than in the public eye!”

“Damn you, stop talking!” the professor snapped.

“Why?” I couldn’t help asking. “Why not be in the public eye?”

“It’s all happened before,” said Wilcox. “A relative of mine went mad with fits and dreams, and each generation since has had the same fragile mind and proneness to spasms. My relative saw Cthulhu in a dream, or perhaps in waking death—“

“Waking death?” That got me to turn around.

“Cthulhu fhtagn!” Wilcox quoted. “Cthulhu dreams! If our human dreams and his align… Cthulhu is neither dead nor living, he lies dreaming in waking death. Nyarlathotep lives and stalks the Earth, and his many forms will make themselves known in due time. The coming of both Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep is proof that the End Time is coming, Mysterion! I plead you to stop it, before all of humanity knows the same terrors that I have known my entire life!”

“End Time?!” I shouted, marching right back up to the cell. “What the fuck is the End Time?! How do I find out about it? Tell me!” This was a million times further than I’d ever gotten with the Goths. Maybe now that I had the information their little clique refused to tell me, I could actually coax something more relevant out of them.
“Madness,” said Johansen, glaring at Wilcox.

“Insanity,” the two sci fi nerds echoed.

“Chaos,” Wilcox completed. “Nyarlathotep shall prepare the Earth in his own way, and Cthulhu shall rise for the final destruction.”

“Then what’s the Cult all up about a ‘new’ Messenger for?” I demanded. “Is it one of you?”

Wilcox shuddered, which could mean nothing good. “This Cult in South Park has much to fear in Nyarlathotep. I do not blame them for wanting to summon another.”

“That’s just gonna make Nyarlathotep angry,” said the blonde nerd.

“No way,” his friend argued. “What I think is that the new Messenger is gonna team up with Nyarlathotep and they each take half of the Earth. Remember, there was that cult in China that—”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” the first fought back.

“Oh, my God, everyone shut up!” I hollered. “You!” I snapped at Wilcox, grabbing him up to the bars of the cage by the front of his disheveled shirt. “You said something about Johansen’s uncle. Do I find answers in those memoirs?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“His uncle—his great-uncle… survived a trip to R’lyeh.”

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Memoirs, huh? Sounded like something that might be in a book. A book that could very plausibly be on a shelf in a certain bookstore that had recently come to town. Needless to say, I left Park County Station and headed straight for that very shop. Kyle had told me that he’d tried to break in on the night he and Wendy had gone on patrol together, but I wasn’t afraid of being caught if I broke in. I’d’ve feared for Kyle’s, or anyone else’s, safety, but it wouldn’t matter if I was found out or even gunned down. It may even be beneficial, I thought, if the Cult figured out I was trying to rob them blind. I’d already taken their precious Necronomicon, years ago in Denver. What were a few more precious documents? Maybe they’d open the hell up and be straight with me for once rather than feeding me more cryptic bullshit.

Or, well, a guy could dream.

I didn’t make it into the bookstore, though… just to the parking lot, which seemed to be the closest any of us were getting lately. Including someone that very evening. I’d almost forgotten that I wasn’t the only one who liked to go out on patrol alone. The sound of the steps and the range of movement told me immediately that the team member stalking the night that evening was none other than the Coon. And the echo of a familiar laugh through the lot told me just what he was doing there.

“Give it up, Coon,” Professor Chaos’s increasingly confident voice rang out through the night.

“Show yourself, Chaos!” the Coon hollered back.
I ducked behind the last building in the strip of which the Cultist bookstore was a part, far out of both earshot and moonlight, which flooded the lot with what on any other night could have been a calming silvery glow. Far from my line of vision, a confrontation was well underway between the two old rivals, and I listened in, waiting for the opportune moment to arrive on the scene.

“Not gonna open your ears, eh?” Professor Chaos taunted.

“I’m not out here for a private concert, Chaos,” the Coon spat back, “it’s a little piece of literature I’m interested in!” Hearing that, if nothing else, convinced me that Cartman really was with the League in our endeavors, though it was still interesting not knowing whatever was making him stay. He could still divert, but he was handling things against Chaos like he had no other place than in the League…

“Nice try, my friend, but the Necronomicon is hidden somewhere miles away from—“

“It’s probably just at your house or your shitty-ass base,” said the Coon, plainly.

I peered around the corner at this point, now that the voices were closer. The Coon stood at the center of the parking lot, squared and ready to fight, while Professor Chaos, the dark circles under his eyes even more apparent in the shadows cast by the moon overhead, crouched, poised, on the tin green awning of the bookshop, Marjorine’s flute absently clutched in his left hand.

Now, what the hell did he need that for, a lightning rod? Chaos had always kind of associated himself with lightning storms, so perhaps. But the lack of Marjorine’s presence, as of late, made the picture much more disturbing. As if he was holding one of his alter egos hostage. As if Marjorine’s moral influence on Butters and Chaos had been reduced to a memory in a melody.

Well. I was soon to discover how much deeper and impact that flute was to have. On Chaos… and on the town.

“Nice try, hero,” Chaos taunted, standing, his steel boots almost crashing against the awning, with an echo through the lot, “but I’m not as predictable as I used to be. Not as gullible, not as weak, nowhere near as naïve. I’ve made a deal with something far worse than you could ever imagine, worse than this worthless mountain town has ever seen!”

That declared, he fitted the flute to his lips, but before he could play, the Coon chided, “I think we’ve all known worse than your shitty flute playing.”

Chaos’s eyes narrowed, and, pure disgust ringing in every syllable, he shouted: “KNOW HELL, ASSHOLE!”

Okay, things were getting both personal and out of hand. So that was my moment. I tossed a smoke grenade out into the lot and made my entrance as it cleared. Chaos was either stunned or amused… either way, he gave up playing in favor of breaking into a laugh much wilder and darker than any I’d ever heard from him before.

“What the hell?” the Coon spat out at me.

“You looked like you could use some backup,” I said.

“I had it covered.”

“Well, well, isn’t this a surprise!” Chaos said almost gleefully. “The Coon and Mysterion, right here in the palm of my hand. Sit back and enjoy the symphony, boys! While you can, anyway.”
Now, music was not a weapon I’d ever fought against before. (Hell, I thought only hardcore punks used music as a weapon, and that was just in the figurative sense… and usually not with a flute.) There was no way to counter sound, was there? Short of a barrier or other sound, it didn’t seem so. So the Coon and I could do nothing but listen.

I’m kind of a singer. I took opera lessons once, and joined the high school chorus briefly my freshman year to get in the French exchange girl’s pants. So I was familiar with some classical music… it was by no means my favorite, but I knew what to listen for. And this sure as hell wasn’t Mozart.

In fact, it was like nothing I’d ever heard before. Or… maybe it was. It resounded strangely in my ears, and kind of made my stomach hurt, even burn. The bullet scar on my temple throbbed, almost in time to the odd, measureless, meterless melody. For the most part, though, all the tune did was bother me. It wasn’t even seeming to have any effect on the Coon.

What was Chaos trying to accomplish, then, if neither of us reacted in the slightest to the flute music?

“Cut it out, Chaos, that’s really annoying,” the Coon yapped up at the awning.

Disgruntled, Professor Chaos stopped playing, and slid the flute like a sword into a new notch in his belt. “Hmf,” he snorted. “Neither of you, huh? Guess I’ll have to get rid of you on my own.”

As soon as he’d jumped down to the pavement, the Coon snarled at me, “Leave this to me, Mysterion.”

“But—“

“Stand back, Mysterion,” the Coon growled, “this is my mission.”

Oh, fuck. That’s right. I’d given him the task of tailing Chaos on his own. Not that I’d anticipated a situation like this, though. I wanted to get an explanation straight from Chaos’s own traitorous mouth, but I wasn’t underestimating the possibility that the Coon might turn on us again as well. We had to keep him in the League, if only so that we always knew what he was doing… and hopefully he’d soon let on to how he was able to control Cthulhu in the first place.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll leave Chaos to you, but is Disarray around?”

“Little fucker didn’t show tonight.”

“Then I’ll take a look around to see if he’s still waiting to make an entrance,” I decided. “Chaos is yours. Call me if you need backup.”

The rest of my night was, by comparison, uneventful. Disarray was indeed nowhere to be seen, and there was no breaking into the bookstore with Chaos around. The night had fed me answers, sure, but all the same, I felt like I’d been dealt still more cryptic questions I didn’t know if I had the time to deal with.

Fucking Cult. Fucking Chaos. Well… whatever. At least things were moving along.

The next morning, I woke at the base, almost forgetting that I’d had to make a grand exit from my parents’ house at all. Trying to keep my head on just school for the time being, I made
breakfast, reviewed some notes while I ate, and walked to school, even though I very easily could have asked Token for a ride. My head was in too many places, and I wanted to try to focus on just good things that morning, since there was a little too much going wrong.

Okay, the bad: obviously, Chaos was totally against us now, and was getting in our way; Wilcox and Johansen had revealed a few things, but that had only made the Cult’s ultimate goals seem worse; we still had no idea who or what the new Messenger was; I’d left home but would most likely end up back there soon anyway.

The good: at least we were making progress.

And at least I still had Red, who I found the second I walked into the building. She was doing last-minute makeup adjustments in her locker, so I hung back while she finished, then dove in to hug her from behind as soon as the locker door clicked closed. Red started laughing as I pulled her in closer, then exclaimed, “Kenny!” as I poked my fingers into her ribs just enough, since, a while ago, I’d figured out that she was just ticklish enough in that spot. (There, just under her chin, and the soles of her heels, actually, and I was determined to find more.)

“Morning, baby,” I greeted, nipping her neck with a harsh kiss. She smelled fucking incredible, an intoxicating mix of citrus and some other fruity kind of thing I couldn’t place but was awfully tempted by.

“Wow, you’re never here this early,” Red commented, turning around to look up at me. She gave me a little sideways smile, which I read correctly; I leaned in and caught her lips with mine, shifting us into a deep good morning kiss which probably would’ve been flagged as indecent if the staff monitors had actually been roaming the halls that day. “What brings you here before the bell?”

“Aww, you’re not answer enough?” I smirked when we pulled back. “I think this is a good enough reason to start getting me outta bed ahead of schedule.”

“Oh, you charmer,” Red mocked me.

“I try. So how’s your thing going?” I asked, remembering her telling me something earlier that week about something her squad had been practicing for.

“Huh?”

“Your thing, there, cheerleading thing.”

“An articulate charmer,” my girlfriend laughed, jabbing my waist with her thumbs as she snapped a quick kiss out of me. “The thing is a preliminary state competition, and it’s tonight. If we make it up to state finals, I want you to come!”

“Yeah, I’ll be there,” I promised, hoping I could keep it.

“Good, good! I’m gonna push the girls to win this one. It’d be so cool to get to finals.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Okay, I was done talking about that, and I was pretty sure she was too, given the way she yanked me down at that point. I held her back against her locker, and shrugged off the kid trying to get into the one next to hers initially, before Red noticed and laughed; she moved us a couple steps out into the hallway, where she filled me up for the day with her sweet, sweet taste.

Red’s locker was positioned awfully close to where Stan, Kyle and I all had first period, and sure enough, those two showed up a few minutes before the first bell, and, again sure enough, they had to pause to make fun of me for being all clingy all over my girlfriend first thing in the morning. I
expected nothing less.

“Awwww,” Stan started, “isn’t that cute.”

“The Kenny in his natural habitat!” Kyle grinned.

“Preying on young women half his size,” Stan added to the nature documentary direction Kyle’s comment had been going.

“She’s fun-sized!” I said, proving my point by picking my svelte girlfriend up from the back so her feet were several inches off the ground.

“Aaaah, Kenny!” she squealed in false protest before she started to laugh. “Kenny! Kenny, put me down!”

I complied to her request, and kissed her cheek once her feet touched the ground again. Keeping my arms wrapped tightly around her, I glanced back at the guys and said, “How’s it going, guys?”

“Great,” Stan laughed.

“But we don’t want to interrupt anything,” Kyle said, nodding at Red. My girlfriend waved one hand in greeting and settled back against me.

The four of us made idle conversation for a while, which was a breath of freaking fresh air, given the types of conversations I’d had the night before, but things kind of wound down once Kyle’s AP Psychology teacher appeared in the hallway as a monitor, and my studious friend had to do his nerd duty and grab the guy in for a word about an assignment.

While Kyle had his back turned, I made Stan look at me, and asked with obvious eye movements, Well? Stan’s response was a pretty confused expression, so I huffed out a breath and actually nodded toward Kyle, then mouthed, You tell him yet? That got Stan red for a split second, and he shook his head, looking a little guilty. So I just mouthed, Pussy, which turned into a grin when Kyle turned around again. Honest to God, it’d been going on for how long, now? Oh, well. They’d both come around soon enough, I figured, the both part coming to mind by the way Kyle then chose to push Stan along by the shoulder.

“Come on,” he said, “we’re gonna be late for first period.”

“No, we’re not,” Stan said. “We’ve got like five minutes.”

“By that I meant, let’s get there so we don’t have to stand here and watch Kenny and Red make out for those five minutes, Stan, jeez.”

“Oh, yeah.”

The four of us exchanged see you later waves, and then Red was laughing again. “You have the funniest friends,” she grinned, turning so that she could look right up while pressing close against me, her hands flat on my chest.

“They’re pretty great, yeah,” I agreed.

“I wanna hang out with you guys sometime,” said Red, fake-pleading with me. “You’re friends with Clyde, right? You, me, Clyde and Bebe should double-date! That’d be fun!”
“Yeah, maybe.” If we had time.

“Oh, God, I almost laughed. Well, kinda did. Just not too loudly or for too long. “No, they’re not.”

“Really?”

“Believe me, I’ve been waiting for them to suck it up and admit it for years,” I told my girlfriend. “Whatever, they’re just taking their time.”

“I repeat,” Red said, rolling her eyes, “you have the funniest friends.”

“Trust me, I know,” I grinned, then let my hands slide down her back and into the back pockets of her jeans. “Funny or not, though,” I said, leaning down to tease my girlfriend with a quick kiss on the cheek, “I’m taking Kyle’s comment as a challenge.”

“Oh?”

“Mmhmm,” I managed, nipping her lower lip to get us started. We had five minutes. Ready? Go.

The night before, I’d been freezing for a while in my room at my parents’ house, but that morning, with Red, I could’ve been wearing absolutely nothing (really woulda liked it, actually, but at school that was kind of a no-go) and she could’ve warmed me up all the same. The way her fingers brushed against me, the way she would kind of laugh with delight into a kiss every now and then, the still very innocent way she’d clasp my hands, or sometimes just link her pinkies with mine. I’d never been able to be this intimate with a girl before. Never lived through a relationship long enough to feel so important, or to feel so strongly about the girl I was with.

We lasted about three minutes out of the challenged five, since Red admitted she’d rather cuddle for the last two, which was fine… I thought word was kinda girly (as in I’d never say it myself if she hadn’t first), but Red was about as girly as they come, so it was cute. Cuddling basically meant letting her lean on me, every few seconds sneaking a kiss somewhere. Probably a better option than feeling her up in the high school hallway, especially now that the monitors were out and I wasn’t someone who could afford getting detention (anymore).

Everything went fairly well, and normally, for the rest of the day. Right up until about two minutes after the final bell, when my phone buzzed with a text message. It was from Cartman, and had been sent to the entire ‘Pickup Game’ subgroup that all of us had in our phones. Need one tonight guys. Seriously.

To which I, and everyone else, texted back some form or other of, WTF? Why?

Crazy shit, that’s why, was the only response any of us needed.

So perhaps he had gotten something from Chaos the night before? That was the best reason I could think of for calling a mandatory meeting. I accepted that it was something that needed to be done, and tried to get myself back in the mood for it. Luckily, Red had some big cheerleading competition or something (I totally listen, I just don’t get all her words sometimes so maybe it was a competition or maybe it was some just… thing, or something, I dunno) (I usually stop listening after ‘cheerleading’ cuz I get that picture in my head of her in her uniform), which was out in Conifer, so she had to leave for that right after school anyway, so my only League distraction was out of town and, best I knew, safe. So of course I was ready to see what the hell Chaos was plotting.
Or, well, I could say I was ready all I wanted, but the reality was that I just could not be sure of anything anymore. When we had all gathered at the base (Stan and Clyde being a little late due to a football practice they both managed to get out of early), it was pretty much understood that we needed to gear up. Stan was given the first of the under-armor prototypes that Wendy and Token had made; it really was undetectable, even under a white shirt. Those without armor were advised to stay hidden, once we went out into the field, until it was known whether or not we’d end up in combat.

The Coon took pleasure in a rare stance at the head of the table, from which he tossed a small slip of paper, the size of an index card, into the center. Mosquito was the first to pick it up, and his immediate reaction was, “What gives?”

“My thoughts exactly, Mosquito,” said the Coon. “Gentlemen… and you,” he added to Marpesia (ugh, shoot me, I knew they’d broken up and Cartman was pissed, but that had no place at this table), “looks like Professor Chaos has started sending out calling cards.”

“Calling cards?” I wondered, taking the paper from Mosquito. Indeed, it read *Tweek Bros., 9 PM. All shall be chaos.* I handed it off to Toolshed, who just about cringed at the words, and I continued, “What did he say to you last night?”

“Somethin’ about ‘those prone to madness will be the first to fall’ or some gay shit like that,” said the Coon.

“That actually sounds really important,” Marpesia scolded him.

“Those prone to madness?” the Human Kite added. “That sounds like a good portion of this entire town.”

“Yeah,” said the Coon, “and he did say somethin’ about an event bigger than this town has ever seen.”

“Aaaaand, we’ve seen some pretty fucked-up shit,” said Toolshed. “I say we move out.”

Best idea I’d heard so far that evening. We were closing in on 8:45, we had to follow the calling card if we were going to glean everything from that meeting. It was decided, as we approached our destination, that I’d move in first. Chaos was planning something, but why Tweek Bros. as a location… that much was over my head. So we set up teams of two that took up position within certain distances of the actual location. We’d set it up something like a target, or dartboard, with the coffee shop as the bullseye. Anyone could move in at any moment, but I’d have the first endeavor.

It starts getting dark early in South Park, as seasons move into winter, so nine o’clock felt like midnight, which was probably more or less fitting to Chaos’s plan. Nothing seemed wrong, for a while, as I circled the seemingly empty building, until, at nine exactly, the melody from the night before drifted out through the walls.

“I’m moving in,” I announced into the wire. “Coon and B-team, you guys set in case I need you?”

“Position secure,” the Human Kite confirmed.

“We’ve got your back, Mysterion,” Toolshed added.
“Let’s get ’im,” the Coon finished.

And so, using my preferred entrance method of finding the perfect window, I slunk inside.

All was silent in the vast main room. I had frequented this place for quite some time, now, always during the day and always with the same crowd. It had always held a pleasant, warm, inviting atmosphere. That night, however, the large empty room felt ominous, and unearthly.

A clatter came from the storeroom behind the counter, and I slipped into the shadows, clasping one hand around a shuriken in my belt in case I had to quickly be on the offensive. Another clatter—and then, the ringing of an all-too-familiar, high-strung voice: “Go away! GAH! Get out! Get out! Where’s it coming from?”—CRASH!—“GET OUT!”

I stepped out only slightly, crouched and ready to either attack or run. My timing was spot-on. As I became bathed in moonlight, so did he.

Tweek, twitching with his usual ticks, but also scratching at his ears in an unsettling way, stumbled out from the storeroom and knocked right into the front counter. “It led me here,” he muttered to himself, “I’m sure it’s here, it’s gotta be here—NO—GAH!—OUT!—get out—it’s here—it’s somewhere—“

“Stop,” I commanded, straightening and making myself known.

“GAAAAAAAHH!” Tweek screamed, falling backwards over the counter, hitting a stool as he went down. He scrambled to his feet and backed away, keeping his eyes on me. His pupils were unhealthily dilated, and the circles under his eyes were worse than I had ever seen. His teeth clattered and his shoulders shook furiously. His hands clutched at everything they could, even things that perhaps he saw in his mind but which did not actually exist, and his legs were as unsteady as a calf’s. “You’re Mysterion! Get—get out of here! Why are you here? Go away! I can’t take this!” He scratched at his ears again, like a dog scratching at fleas. “I can’t take this! My ears are bleeding! Can’t you hear it? Are your ears bleeding, too?!”

“Ears bleeding?” I wondered. “What are you talking about?"

“That music!” Tweek screamed. “It keeps getting worse! It’s too much! It’s too much pressure! I can’t take it! It led me here and now my ears are bleeding!”

“They’re not bleeding,” I tried to assure him, stepping closer but staying on my guard. “Let me talk to you. What music?”


He shook for a moment longer, then closed his eyes.

I had never, ever seen Tweek close his eyes. Not in the serene way his lids pressed together now, at any rate. I had known him at this point for at least ten years, and never once had he closed his eyes. I knew, then, in an instant, this was more than I would be able to grasp. Surreptitiously, I pressed the call button on my belt to signal for help, and hoped that someone who was in the vicinity would back me up soon. I couldn’t die, not tonight, not without knowing what fate awaited Tweek behind closed lids.

Just as I was about to ask him more, Tweek started laughing.

I had never heard him laugh, either. He was too high-strung. Everything scared him, where others might be worried, or gladdened, or entertained. Tweek showed a very small range of
emotions, and amusement was not one of them. This was not, however, an amused laugh, by any means. This was a troubled laugh, one of utmost instability.

This was the laugh of someone who had lost his mind.

“MY EARS ARE BLEEDING!” Tweek cried out again. Then, as if moved by a different force, his center of gravity violently shifted, and he was leaning back, his hands still at his ears, his thin fingers digging into his papery skin, and an even more wild laugh escaped from him. A human hyena. The laugh was crazed, savage.

Mad.

Nyarlathotep had called, and Tweek had answered.

Chaos was the goal and madness was the means. That was the gist of what Wilcox had revealed, anyway. In a world gone mad, Cthulhu would truly have nothing standing in his way of global destruction. The laughing masses would let it happen, probably even delight in it. That was why the Cult needed the Messenger. To break down anyone who wasn’t already a Cthulhu follower. It was probably an awful risk, but for some reason, they were taking it. And so was Professor Chaos.

Tweek Tweak, the most nervous, easily-agitated person in South Park, had been the first to go. And sadly, I knew nothing of any kind of cure. The only thing that awaited this poor kid now was a straightjacket and padded walls.

It was a low blow, for Chaos, breaking down someone’s mind like that. I knew that Chaos was behind it, why wouldn’t he be? He’d deliberately driven Tweek to insanity, but I doubted Chaos knew the gravity of what his summoning Nyarlathotep would be. Either way…

…Sanity wasn’t something we could afford to lose.

There was no way in Hell I was going to sit back, watch everyone go mad, and be left to face the Dark God on my own.

Toolshed and the Human Kite had been in closest proximity to the coffee shop, and were the ones that helped me drag the writhing, broken Tweek to the police, his arms bound back with a healthy length of Kite’s emulsified string, his mouth clamped shut with some of Toolshed’s duct tape. But I was the one who kept a firm grasp on his arms, to make sure he didn’t run. He showed no intention of doing so… he merely twitched arrhythmically, and every few steps we’d hear him hum a tune that was grating on my ears.

It was that same music. That same tune that Chaos had coaxed from his flute. What was the connection? How did any of this relate to Chaos’s plan, and how did Nyarlathotep factor into it all?

Disturbed, troubled, we left our manic classmate, insane now beyond repair, in the hands of Officer Murphy at Park County Station. I wasn’t a fan of those guys right now, but I knew that they were the ones better suited to deal with a situation like this. We gave them the stipulation that Tweek be well cared for and that they damn well better be more available as backup from now on, and Murphy shared an interesting tidbit with me as well:

Wilcox had been moved to a private cell. At nine o’clock, he’d fallen into spasms.

Needless to say, the three of us didn’t even have to make conversation to know what was
going on. It was pretty close to obvious that Professor Chaos had allied himself with something nearly as fearsome as Cthulhu itself. If not, in some cases, more. Safety was called into question, never mind sanity. Wilcox was one thing, but our own classmate? Those prone to madness will be the first to fall, huh?

Roughly translated, the people of South Park were facing something worse than mortality. We’d all be facing our own grips on reality.

Tweek had a very loose one. He’d always been prone to odd spasms, and I’d always assumed that most of it was due to his high caffeine intake. It could very well have been, though, that the boy was disturbed. Enough to hear whatever the real meaning behind the music Chaos played was.

So what chance did the rest of the town have? Weird things always happened here, and it almost seemed like the townspeople invited it. This time, someone literally did. Called on the very personification of madness and let it run free. I could only hope that those of us in the League would be able to hold on, now that we knew what we were up against.

And, (possibly) lucky us, we found ourselves in Chaos’s company a few more paces down the street. He sat on the rooftop of a two-storey building, flute in hand, green cape catching the wind behind him. If I didn’t know any better, I could’ve sworn that I saw doubt in his dark expression.

“Chaos!” I shouted up.

All doubt vanished, and the malevolence of the night before took over. Honestly, I’d never seen the guy get this… evil. His string of activities before had always been general, and ultimately harmless, mayhem. Something must have pushed him over the edge. Probably an obsession with that Goddamn book. That fucking Necronomicon. The core of all my problems.

“What do you want?” he growled down on us, his tone more condescending than it had ever been.


“Up until now, I’ve been nothing. Unnoticed. A follower.”

“That’s not true,” Human Kite tried to reason with him.

“Isn’t it?” he asked scathingly.

To be honest… Butters was, and had always been, a confusing kid. He acted out. He’d had his brooding moments. But this was going too far. “You don’t have to do this,” said Toolshed, hoping to get through to him.

“Well, I tried everything else!” Chaos roared. “And it blew up in my face!” He stood, and his grip on Marjorine’s flute tightened. “Now I’m returning the favor.”

“Then, in that case, the deal’s off!” I shouted up to him. “No more bargains between you and the League. You’re not coming to any other meetings, if this is the path you’ve chosen to take!”

“Fine by me, Mysterion!” Professor Chaos yelled back. “I have no further use for your League, anyway. Everything is going as planned.”

“You sure about that?” I snarled.
A dark smirk spread across his face. “I’ll bring them all crawling, Mysterion,” said Professor Chaos. “One by one and days apart… Chaos is coming to this town, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“This isn’t like you!” I tried.

“What is?” he lashed out at me. “I’m Chaos, Mysterion, or have you forgotten? I’m the end of the fairy tale.”

“You’re really sure you want to make enemies of us?” I growled. “I don’t think you know what it is you’re dealing with.”

“I know enough,” Professor Chaos bit back. “I’m done with everything this life ever baited me with.”

“What?”

“Goodbye, Mysterion. And don’t worry. The symphony’s over. For now.”

And with that, he was gone.

We returned to the base rife with new questions. More of them. They just kept piling up. All of us felt oddly drained from knowing just what had happened to poor Tweek, drained from knowing that we had so much to be wary of in Chaos, that we hung up our uniforms for the night and continued on as ourselves. I had a feeling things were going to start blending, soon. That day and night would interact a lot more than they had before, in terms of identity, in terms of how each of us moved through our lives.

This was the breaking point.

There was really no going back now.

Stan, Kyle and I joined up with everyone else in the meeting room once we’d returned, and Ike got his brother immediately in conversation about how we’d dealt with Tweek, so that he could file a report. Clyde, Token and Wendy were pouring over one of the books Kyle had inserted post-it notes in, but looked at me and Stan for answers as we approached. Cartman looked like he didn’t know what to do. For once, the guy seemed to be at a loss. Which was odd. He always fought his way around anything, always had to appear to be in control… but for a minute, he seemed realistically lost in thought.

“Learn anything?” Clyde wondered.

Stan shook his head, and I answered, “Nothing, really. Just that we’ve really lost Chaos. He can play a tune on that flute that coaxes out the madness in people, or something…”

“That sounds right along these lines,” said Kyle, re-joining the group while Ike nervously ticked out notes on his computer. “Nyarlathotep is associated with the sound of flutes and drums. Weird music. I didn’t get a good listen myself, and that’s probably good.”

“He played it for us,” said Cartman, looking up from his seat, where he’d just been picking at a hangnail. “Me and Kenny, but nothing happened.”

“What’s the flute supposed to do?” Stan wondered, flipping open Kyle’s green notebook,
which lay on the table as well. “Summon Nyarlathotep?”

“Right,” Kyle confirmed, “but Nyarlathotep appears a bunch of different ways. How the hell do we know if we’ve seen him or not?!”

“Maybe one of his forms is madness,” Wendy suggested.

I shook my head. “The R’lyeh deities are all a little crazy,” I told the group. “Nothing about that place makes any sense.”

“It’s true,” Stan confirmed, shuddering.

“But they’re all physical forms. I’m pretty confident that’s true of Nyarlathotep,” I went on. “The weirdest thing is that crawling mist. Was it foggy tonight? I was too distracted to notice.”

“Come to think of it,” said Token, “it was kind of hazy where me and Wendy were standing guard, a couple streets back…”

“Hazy, like, misty?” I guessed.

“Yeah.”

Everyone fell silent after that. Nobody knew how to proceed. Things were getting out of hand, and dangerous. Even if we did get the cops on backup again, how much good would they be able to do against Chaos? We all sat down at that point, everyone gathering around some book or notebook or another. I went for a truce and leafed through the black binder with Cartman, while Token, Wendy and Clyde passed the book on to Stan and Kyle, who traded them the green notebook. Ike went about his own research on the computer.

And Ike was the one to finally ask, “So… why Tweek?”

“Those prone to madness…” I quoted again.

“Man…” said Clyde, who’d been a fairly good friend of the guy. “Tweek was crazy, but…”

“Is there a Cult connection?” Ike wondered. “Kyle, that book you’ve got, doesn’t it have some Cult members listed in there?”

“Oh, yeah!” said Kyle, perking up and flipping through the pages of the book. “I totally forgot about that, thanks, Ike! Guys, this is one of the things Craig and Henrietta got from the bookstore. It’s from over fifteen years ago, there are registries in here. I’ll just see if anyone in his family’s in here. Right,” he said, arriving on his desired page, “here we go, this shows—“

“What?” Stan prompted, when Kyle stopped mid-sentence.

Kyle said nothing, but lifted his head, slowly, and glared across the table at Cartman. I punched him in the shoulder when he didn’t look up from the binder, and he couldn’t even get out a word of protest before he practically shrank back from Kyle’s death glare. “Okay…” said Kyle, trying to keep his voice level, “I think we’ve just found something huge.”

“About Tweek?” Cartman guessed.

“No.” Kyle’s words were hissed out, now, more than said. “About you.”

Stan glanced over Kyle’s shoulder at the open page on the table, then immediately followed the redhead’s glare. “Dude…” he muttered under his breath.
“Guys, what?” Cartman demanded.

Kyle shuddered, then asked, through clenched teeth, “Cartman… how was it that you were able to control Cthulhu during the Gulf crisis?”

Cartman shrugged. “I dunno, little of this, little of that, why?”

“Little of what?” Stan demanded. “Dude, you were completely siding with that Dark God, there. And you were in control.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, was there any kind of connection?” Kyle asked, slapping a hand down on the table. “Any kind of brainwave thing or anything like that we need to know about?”

“No! Assholes, it was just easy, okay? Why?”

“Because,” said Kyle, darkly, “I just learned something really interesting about your dad.”

Cartman laughed, but I tensed.

“My dad?” Cartman said doubtfully, folding his enormous arms. “My dad didn’t do shit. He played for the Denver Broncos and then I had him ground up into chili.”

“Yeah, and that’s still fucking disturbing,” Kyle grumbled, “but take a look at this.” He slid the book forward, and in that moment, I noticed that the open pages were a two-page spread of a single photograph showing several men in Cultist attire, some with the hoods up, some down. McElroy and Nelson appeared without hoods, as did a now-deceased man with red hair and a thick moustache. “Right there!” Kyle shouted, pointing to that man. “Jack Tenorman, your father, was a member of the Cthulhu Cult the year Mr. and Mrs. McCormick went to the meeting, the year Kenny got cursed, the year before any of us were born!”

Well, fuck me sideways. This couldn’t be good.

“What the hell?!” I roared, diving at the book. “Give me that!” I grabbed at the book and stared at the page, then backed the fuck away from Cartman. No. No, no, fucking no! This was not going to turn into another one of those situations. First Bradley Biggle, now Eric fucking Cartman?! I DIDN’T THINK SO. But there was a photo of his birth father, plain as day, standing there in Cultist attire, probably one of the assholes who cursed me. “You fucking—“ I started sputtering, at a total loss for words and thought, “Cartman, you—you—God—fucking—WHAT THE FUCK?! You’ve had a Cult connection this WHOLE TIME?!”

“Like I had any idea!” he shouted back, standing and throwing his massive arms out to his sides. “How the crap was I supposed to know about anything my dumbass Ginger dad did?!”

“Well, don’t you think maybe it’s kind of weird you’ve been saying there’s no connection to how you were able to wrangle Cthulhu?!”

“Look, I was pissed and so was that pussy Dark God! What?!”

“What is your connection?!” I practically screamed at him.

“Kenny, I DON’T KNOW!”

“Well, fuck you anyway!”
“Kenny—“ Stan tried.

“Someone pinch me and tell me I’m fucking dreaming!” I shouted, ignoring him.

“Kenny,” he said again, more firmly this time.

But no, I wasn’t going to turn my head for a second. “This is bullshit!”

“KENNY!”

Suddenly, I was being yanked back; Kyle on one arm, Stan on the other. Probably a good thing, too, since I was more than ready to rip Cartman a new one. Why shouldn’t I? The Cult was my thing. The key to my history. My fucking story. If there was one person, one person on Earth I didn’t want interfering with that, it was that self-centered asshole. Being held back, all I could do was glare.

Angry wasn’t the right word for me at the moment. Betrayed? No. Mostly… put off. I was just so… put off by the whole thing. This jerk had ripped on me my entire life, and now I learn that the man who’d helped an easy slut bring that bastard into the world had been a part of the Cult that had doomed me to being an Immortal. Fuck that. Fuck that. No.

“You…?” I snarled at him, feeling my skin crawl with rage. “YOU?!” I erupted. “I’m an Immortal, I’m one of the damned, I’ve known nothing but death after death after painfully unremembered death because of something associated with you?! WHAT. THE. FUCK?!”

“You…” I snarled at him, feeling my skin crawl with rage. “YOU?!” I erupted. “I’m an Immortal, I’m one of the damned, I’ve known nothing but death after death after painfully unremembered death because of something associated with you?! WHAT. THE. FUCK?!”

“Kenny,” Stan tried again, “come on…”

“Yeah, dude, you’re kinda freaking me out,” Kyle added. “Come on, let’s just figure out what this all means.”

“I’ll tell you what it means!” I shouted, feeling like my insides were completely on fire. Like you could just open me up and find Hell right there. “It means everything just got really unnecessarily FUCKED UP.”

“Holy shit,” said Ike, “that doesn’t mean you’re also Immortal, does it, Cartman?” I shot Ike a scathing glare for that one.

Cartman’s face lit up a tiny bit—asshole—and his reply was, “No, but it’d be sweet if I was.”

“OH MY GOD, THIS IS A FUCKING CURSE!” I hollered at him. Damn, Stan and Kyle were doing a really fucking great job of holding me back, because I was more than ready to lash out. “How dare you make a comment like that, you piece of shit, how dare you?! Here. Wanna see if you’re Immortal? Let’s find out. I’ll kill you myself!”

That was the moment I was able to pull myself out of my friends’ grip… or, oddly enough, it felt more like they let go of me. Either way, I was free to move on my own, and I cornered Cartman against the table; for a second, his face actually displayed fear. My hands twitched with the want to strangle him. Obviously, yeah, my real issue was with his father. The father that Cartman himself had had killed when we were kids, long before he even knew he was related. But there was the thing. I couldn’t go interrogate Jack Tenorman himself, his wife had died along with him, and the son he’d actually raised, Scott, had gone off the deep end a long time ago (I guess anyone would, if they’d been forced to eat their own parents, which was the fate Eric Cartman’s half-brother had met as an eighth-grader). So the last line was Cartman himself. Oh, I’d be having a word with Ms. Lianne Cartman very soon, too, that was sure, but Cartman’s mom wasn’t someone who generally shared any information with anyone. Well… Mysterion would pry it out of her, no getting around
But at the moment, I was pissed, and I wanted to beat up the son of one of the Cultists responsible for my abnormal life. “Listen up,” I snarled at him, grabbing him by the front of his shirt, wondering which limb to dislocate first. “If this means… if this in any way means you have some deeper kind of Cult connection, and if you act on it… just… I don’t know. Don’t you dare turn this into something about you. You hear me? Don’t you dare, Cartman. Don’t you dare get in my way.”

“Kenny, quit being a dick!” Cartman snapped, standing up straight and shoving me off.

“Oh, I’m being a dick?” I fought back. “Sorry, okay, excuse me for being a dick because the biggest thing wrong in my entire fucking life can be traced down to you.”

His eyes narrowed, and he backed off. “I really don’t get what’s so bad about this,” he said.

“What part of ‘you’re the son of a crazy fucking Cthulhu Cultist’ isn’t clear to you?” Kyle commented. He and Stan still basically flanked me, ready to yank me back again if I ended up acting out, but obviously they still had my back. We always expected shit of Cartman, but for the love of God, there was no way he was going to use this to steal my motherfucking moment. And there was no way I’d let him get away with a damn thing if he betrayed us again. None of us would.

“Well, obviously, I didn’t really know my dad, a’ight?” Cartman tried to argue.

“Right,” said Stan, “but you also have kind of a personal history with Cthulhu.”

“Yeah, but—“

“Everyone shut up!” Clyde hollered. We all turned to look at him, as he slammed a fist down on the table. His eyes were stern and his expression solid. One of the things that made Clyde a great leader was his ability to be a nonbiased party. If there was only one thing any of us needed right now, it was to keep a level head. We all, myself especially, I admit, had to calm the fuck down and properly process this awkward wealth of new information. “Kenny?”

I grumbled under my breath, but stood down in the end. With a stern warning glare at Cartman, I walked away and took a seat on the opposite side of the table with Stan and Kyle, while Token and Wendy filled in the seats near Cartman, so that he was now sandwiched between Token and Clyde, either of whom could take him down in a second if need be.

“Can we continue?” Clyde asked the group. Whether gladly or begrudgingly, the answer from everyone was yes.

“Okay,” said Clyde, keeping position as the leader of the current situation. Now, Clyde had been known to defend Cartman before in the past, but Clyde was the kind of nice guy who would defend just about anyone. He really saw that ‘innocent until proven guilty’ quality of everybody, which was a good quality, and one that a lot of us lacked at times, because things would generally come down to bias. “Guys. Obviously, there’s a lot more to any of this than any of us thought. Obviously, we’re not gonna get to all of it tonight. I suggest, while we’re all still sane, we sleep on this one. Yes, it’s weird, and yes, we’re gonna keep looking into it, but who knows? Maybe this is a good thing. I think it’s safe to say the Cult knows who we are. But it’s gonna be a surprise once they find out we’ve got info on them.”

There was a little silence, but only because we were all generally in agreement. Almost too much had happened that night. We’d witnessed first hand the kind of madness the deity
Nyarlathotep could spread to all mankind. With any luck, Chaos would keep up the idea of sending calling cards. If anything, the fact that he did was proof enough that a piece of him was still the overly moral kid we’d always known. He was just currently kind of led astray.

Hopefully, we could figure out some way to bring people back to reality from this otherworldly madness, and hopefully we could stop the spread before it could start. ‘Days apart,’ Chaos had said to me. So he was pacing himself. The Cult was waiting for something as well.

But what?

What day, what hour, what moment?

There was still too much to be discovered.

“So we stick to the plan?” Stan guessed, bringing my own thought out into the open. It was probably the thought on everyone’s minds. “The interrogations continue?”

“Yeah. Only this time, let’s try to ask after Jack Tenorman,” Clyde suggested. “It’s a starting point, anyway.”

Fucking hell. I could only hope that lead would end up being a dead end, even though I kind of knew it wouldn’t be. If Tenorman had been one of the guys who had cursed me, though… I probably really might get angry enough to do something dire. No telling till I knew, though, so for now… honestly… I did just kind of want to calm down. I had to find some way of keeping everything in check. A lot of these new developments sucked, and they were all terrifying. But until we had more answers, we couldn’t go public with any of it.

“Fine,” I agreed. “We’ll keep things focused in that direction.”

“Right,” said Kyle. “And at the same time, we’ll see if anyone had any contact with Tweek. Or Butters.” True enough. We couldn’t lose focus on the other kid with quirky connections… the one specifically after something.

Yes. That seemed good enough, for now. Keep interrogating; keep after the Cult. That was what we presently had the ability to do, so damn it all, we were gonna do it.

Well, Chaos was right about one thing. This really was spreading to the entire town. One thing was for sure, we’d be keeping a closer eye on Cartman, and whatever he decided to do. It really was strange. Cartman himself has more to do with the Cult than anyone originally thought. Whether he knew it himself, or even if it mattered much, it was a new turn in our Cult understanding that wasn’t going to be ignored.

Something else I’d hold onto was the odd sort of promise, from Chaos, that ‘the symphony was over for now.’ Maybe we’d hit a little reprieve. Get some down time. Focus on what mattered, sort things out. And have just enough time to figure out where to go from here, now that a path was being laid out before us.

Even though it was really fucking close to midnight by the time I was out of my Mysterion gear, I took a chance and called my girlfriend. If there was one thing I was hoping all of us would take advantage of in our free time, however sparse such time may be, it was the chance to be with the people we cared about. For some people, that was family. For me, Red was all I had, outside of my buddies in the League. Sometimes, it felt like she was all I had period.
Awful things were heading our way. Tweek’s insanity was proof of that. We were all trusting Cartman… for now. But we all had to take stock of where we were, and remember to retain personal lives as long as possible. As long as they existed.

As long as something could keep us sane.

Red picked up after three rings, sounding pretty tired. “Kenny?” she wondered.

“Hey, baby, sorry I’m calling so late,” I said.

“Kenny, it’s like, midnight! What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just…” I sighed. “Well… okay. I walked out on my parents.”

“Oh, my God!” Red gasped. “Where are you? Do you need me to come get you? You can stay here, sweetie. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay talking to you,” I admitted. “I’m actually kinda close. Can I just call you when I’m outside?”

“I’ll talk you all the way here,” said Red. “Oh, um, unless you don’t have enough phone minutes…”

“Nah, I’m good, that’d be great.”

God fucking damn. That girl was amazing.

She talked me all the way to her front door. We talked about simple things… did we both finish our homework, how was her cheerleading thing, would she make sure her cat was down in the basement… all that stuff. The stuff that kept me normal. Red hung up as I was coming up her front walk. Then, her door opened, as did her arms. I stepped in, grabbed her close, and closed the door behind me with one foot, shutting out the cold.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” she asked me, grabbing tightly to the back of my wind-chilled parka.

“I’m fine now,” I told her. “Thanks for this, baby. I’ve got a place to go most nights, but tonight I just wanted to see you.”

“You can stay here, Kenny,” Red offered. “We have room.”

“Nah, it’s cool, your parents already do a lot for me, and it’s great. I wanna keep you special.”

“Hmm?”

“For nights like this.”

*Keep me grounded,* I pleaded, as we locked together. *Keep me sane.*

My girlfriend led me up to her bedroom, where the still darkness invited us even closer. There was much to be feared in the darkness, so I as Mysterion had learned, but so much to be embraced as well.
Now that things were getting serious in the League, all of us seemed to be desperately grappling for something normal. Something ordinary. Sure, ordinary rarely could describe anything in South Park, but it was something to strive for, anyway.

Kenny, especially.

Honestly, I couldn’t help but feel really bad for the guy. All the shit he must have gone through his whole life… and on top of that, he’d just left home. Plus, there was all this new crap with Cartman. Kenny and Cartman were not talking. Kenny was just plain turning the cold shoulder for now, at least until someone could dig up all the dirt on Jack Tenorman, and, oddly enough, Cartman was staying the fuck out of Kenny’s way. Now, I didn’t totally trust the fatass, either, but I try to see both sides of things when I care to (mostly when it seems like there’s more going on than what generally shows), so I could kind of see why Cartman was handling it the way he was. Not much ever shocks him, but lately the usually quick-witted bigot was losing steam. Maybe it had something to do with Butters, too… I couldn’t tell.

Butters was the only one in our circle of friends who still took Cartman’s shit and let himself get pushed around… until recently. Butters had gotten so dark, and none of us were speaking to him, because none of us could really trust him anymore. Marjorine was just plain gone. Chaos was literally filtering into daily life. And without a punching bag, Cartman was kind of nothing, and in a twist of circumstances, he was letting Kenny’s anger dictate his own actions. I had no clue if he was aware of it, but that’s what I saw.

Kyle was with me one hundred per cent. He and I were obviously both backing Kenny, and we’d remind him, on a daily basis, that if there was anything either of us could do, he shouldn’t hesitate to ask. Kenny smiled and agreed he’d let us know. His primary comfort was in Red, who probably needed to win some kind of ‘best girlfriend in the world’ award or something for being so incredible, so supportive, for her boyfriend. I was pretty sure Kenny might’ve gone off the deep end without her, there was so much occupying his mind. I was proud of him for being able to maintain himself the way he did, even in the face of his curse, even in the face of the madness Professor Chaos was bent on spreading across our town.

There was an initial shocker among the student body, and around some parts of town, about Tweek’s insanity. His parents appeared on the evening news, shaken, distraught… but they only closed the store for a couple of days. “We have to carry on somehow,” Mr. Tweak was quoted as saying, followed by his wife’s admission: “We should have seen this coming.”

What an awful thing to say. Ugh… I could only imagine what Mr. and Mrs. Stotch might say if they found out what Butters was really up to. Seriously, my parents are kind of weird, but I do feel like, for the most part, I’ve lucked out. Compared to a lot of South Park adults, my mom is very normal. Dad’s a little off sometimes, but for the most part…

…Anyway, that wasn’t important now. What was important was how disturbing it was, that
things went back to more or less normal at school. Tweek’s name went from widely discussed to hardly spoken in a matter of three days. Life went on.

The rest of us were holding our own. We did what we could do. We went out in our teams of two, in the League, to continue questioning the Cultists, hoping to get something—anything—out of them.

Way into November, we had already seen a whirlwind of activity. Mosquito interrogated and later had arrested a man who had admitted to knowing Jack Tenorman (though not personally), and who had killed someone in the mid-1990s in an early attempt of sacrificing human life to raise Cthulhu. (The body was never found.) TupperWear and Marpesia hit two dead ends and one good lead: a Cultist who had helped to gather artifacts for the exhibit in Denver, now four years prior, and who had confirmed that the Cult, as yet, had no knowledge of the location of the Gate in R’lyeh, but that it was their goal to find it. (Mysterion and I shared a little congratulatory moment for that one, and later Kenny made an awful joke about wanting to kill himself to get back to R’lyeh and put a flag there.)

Mysterion himself was getting more and more frustrated with Ms. Lianne Cartman. “Fucking bitch just keeps trying to seduce me,” he grumbled.

“Just get her drunk,” Craig suggested, at one meeting. Craig had started attending again now that things were getting more serious… not that he’d ever started and stopped, really, but it was becoming a more regular thing. He had never usually been one to go along with the atypical things that we did (and by we I primarily mean me, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman), but lately his interest had grown beyond just getting paid and staying out of jail. It could have had something to do with his not-exactly-but-basically-official ‘relationship’ with Henrietta, who herself was joining us more and more, or perhaps with his concern for Tweek, who’d been a trusting friend of his for a while… or maybe Craig really was seeing how serious things were getting, and really did want to help us do something about it. Whatever his reasons, he didn’t want to actually join the League, which was fine, but he brought his own brand of blunt observation to the meetings, usually with fairly decent results.

“It’s against my code to get anyone drunk for information,” said Mysterion, to Craig’s latest idea. “Especially someone who might just get looser.”

“Aye!” spat the Coon.

“Don’t like it?” Mysterion barked. “You get her to talk, then! It might garner you an ounce of respect from me if you do.”

“Fuck that, I ain’t tryin’ to get Cult stuff outta my mom.”

“Wuss,” I heard Marpesia mutter to herself.

“Then I’ll keep distrusting you till something clears your name,” Mysterion decided firmly.

And that, for a little while, settled that.

– – –

The day after that meeting, Kyle found me at my locker after school, as I was attempting to keep things in order (no dice) on the shelves as I unloaded the books I didn’t need for homework; he grabbed my right arm discreetly and asked under his breath, “Can I talk to you?”

“Yeah,” I said, giving him my attention rather than the mess in my locker I was only making
worse, despite having just cleaned it, “what’s up?”

“You don’t have practice today?”

“Nah, season’s winding down,” I told him. “There’s no way we’re making states, and coach is still whining at me to rest up and just make damn sure I’m better next year.”

“Oh, okay,” said Kyle, clearly troubled. “So, uh, you have anything else you need to do, or can we go?”

I held my breath, taking in my best friend’s worried expression, and the desperation in his tone. Kyle wasn’t just troubled…it seemed like he felt he was in trouble, and I had a few guesses as to why, but none of them were anything that could be brought up in the halls of SPHS. Actually, none of them were anything that could be brought up around other people period.

So when I said, “Sure thing, dude, where were you thinking?” I pretty much already knew the destination.

I was right. “I was thinking out by the field, you know,” was Kyle’s answer, meaning the field behind the base. As we started walking, he kept a hand on my arm, grabbing the worn material of my jacket, and said, “So, I have my car and all, but could you drive?”

“Y-yeah,” I said warily. I kept him on the right path, essentially leading him through the halls, down a flight of stairs, and out into the back student parking lot. “Kyle,” I began tepidly as the two of us kept walking toward his car, the location of which I remembered from when he’d given me a lift that morning, “dude, you okay?”

He shook his head and said, “I really can’t talk about it here.”

“We’re away from—”

“I really can’t.”

“Okay,” I said, rubbing his back reassuringly and keeping my tone calm. “We’re almost to your car. Got your keys?”

Kyle drove an old station wagon that had been in the family for a while—the beaten old thing was still performing as any point-A-point-B car should, actually better than a lot of high schoolers’ cars to be honest, and no doubt it would be Ike’s in a few years. When he gave me the keys, his hand was shaking, and when I started up the car, Kyle bent over his knees and grabbed the hair at the back of his head, digging his fingers in. Once again, I set a hand on his back as he drew in a deep breath and let it out, but I didn’t ask him anything else. He didn’t need any distractions, he just needed to work out whatever it was he had to say, meaning I had to get us to the base quickly, since Kyle wasn’t someone who could keep words in for long.

I respected that, even envied that about him. Sometimes we switch up, but for the most part, Kyle’s always been the talker, and I’ve always been the listener. It was a sign of the friendship whenever the roles did shift, though…and Kyle had become, over the years, a great listener himself, and he always had really positive things to say afterward. He had this amazing talent to find the positive in just about any situation.

But when he got like this, when he just couldn’t seem to contain himself, I’d do everything I could to hold him up. That’s just how our team worked. The best thing going, through all the literal insanity that we were faced with, was that Kyle and I were really operating as a unit again. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. Or… well, okay, maybe I would’ve liked to see, just… just
see, if we could possibly work together in another sense, but I really didn’t want to ruin or rush anything. I’d always done everything I could for him, always supported him, always come back after a brawl, because I just cared so much. All that caring, all that respect… all of that had built up over the years into a very unique kind of admiration that, yes, finally manifested in my adolescent brain as a pretty deep crush. But however I felt about him, it wasn’t the kind of thing that I’d want to change the way we were. I liked the way we were, the way we operated, the way we kept each other going; I didn’t want to fuck that up.

Even so, I knew I’d have to have that talk with him soon. I’d been putting it off like crazy, just enjoying our friendship, which, honestly, kind of seemed to have accelerated somewhat recently. For the most part, we’d just become extra protective of each other. Much more so than usual. Of course, some of that had to do with all of our League activities… the more serious the situation got, the more we were on the lookout, ready to attack or defend in an instant.

But a lot of it was personal. I still felt awful for having shut down around him after I’d broken up with Wendy, and I knew he could tell that there was more I wanted to say than I already had. He kept telling me, “If you need to talk, I’ll listen,” and things like that. Today was my turn to listen again, but soon, soon I’d let him lend an ear. I wondered, on and off, if he knew…

…In which case, would coming out to him be more awkward? I hoped not. All I knew was that there was no way to have ‘the talk’ without revealing how I felt about him specifically. And, really, what else was there to say that he didn’t already know? I complimented him all the time, in regards to the things I liked about him… it was just the coming round to the realization—the confession—that all those qualities uniquely attracted me to him.

Ever since I’d realized it, I’d probably become more obvious, too. I was flirting almost fucking shamelessly, but the thing was, Kyle never tried to get me to stop. I’d grab his hand and he’d hold on tighter, I’d mess with his hair and he’d give me a light shove right back. And whenever we hugged, it was a struggle to get either of us to let go.

Kenny noticed, of course, and kept bugging me to make a move because, in his words, “being a lovesick little pussy doesn’t suit you, Stan.” I kinda had to agree, but it was just hard to figure out where to start.

Especially when Kyle was in a state like he was that day. He barely said a thing until we were finally out in the League’s practice field. We’d walked through the building to get to the back, as usual, but the second we’d set foot on Black property, Kyle kept his mouth covered with both hands clamped tightly around it. Then, there, in the middle of the field, he dropped his hands and instantly broke into a long, loud cry, not quite a yell, not quite a wail, just… a long, unbroken cry of frustration. He paused at the end of his voice, panted for a few breaths, then drew in another deep breath and cried out again, this time doubled over, his hands digging at his hair again.

And this time, there was a word: “FUUUUUUUUUUCCKKKKK!”

Okay, that was the moment I had to do something. “Kyle!” I shouted, rushing up to him and grabbing him by the shoulders. “Kyle, what’s going on? Stay with me, stay focused, come on…”

“I can’t take it,” Kyle panted out. Fuck. OH FUCK. He wasn’t hearing the music, was he? Chaos had been silent for days on end. There’d been no calling cards, but according to a testimonial from Tweek’s parents on tv, he’d been complaining about that music for a while, the way as a kid he would complain about gnomes. So there was no telling… But, seriously, Kyle? Kyle as the next target? Guy was the most sane person I knew. I’d peg just about anyone before him, other than maybe Kenny.
“Dude, what?” I wondered frantically.

“This… thing!” Kyle groaned. “This Goddamn quirk! It’s really fucking me up, Stan, I don’t know what to do.”

“Well… well, what’s going on?” I asked, glad that it wasn’t anything mythos-related, but at the same time overly concerned for Kyle’s safety.

“It’s just… fuck, fuck, dude, remember how I said I was afraid it might happen around my mom…?” Kyle began, his voice shaking.

“Uh-huh…” Shit…

“Last night, Stan, it happened last night. Last fucking night. I can’t control it. I can’t. I really can’t. I can’t control it…”

“Sshh,” I coaxed, pulling him in for a hug, trying everything I could to get him to calm down. Kyle grabbed hold of me, clinging on as he drew in and released incredibly unsteady, worried breaths. “It’s okay. It’s okay. Kyle, just tell me what happened.”

“She makes me so fucking frustrated!” he shouted into my shoulder.

“I know.”

“I can’t fucking stay here!”

From the corner of the field, I heard the door to the supply shed rattle, which just made Kyle grip on tighter, his fingers pretty much digging into me through late autumn layers; he shook his head furiously and heaved out an agitated groan. “Stan, I’ve practiced,” he said, “I’ve tried. I can’t control it.”

I’d been there. Kyle had tried to figure out his quirk several times during scheduled League training sessions, and he and I had come back to the field on our own twice since the day I’d cashed in on my birthday gift from him, when the idea had first come up. For the most part, all that was ever really figured out was that Kyle couldn’t control when it would happen, but it was, as he had said, only when he got overly frustrated or furious that the quirk would manifest. Once piqued, he tried to get some control over what happened, and tried to calm himself down, but for the most part, it didn’t work. I’d been able to calm him down before, and other times it wasn’t as serious, so he didn’t need much extra support. But the main fact was… there was something illogical about him, and Kyle couldn’t stand that.

“What happened with your mom?” I asked.

“Dude, she’s gone totally fucking insane,” Kyle muttered. “Trying to stick early curfews on me, and then last night she threatened…”

“What?”

“Prep school.”

“What?”

Kyle’s grip seemed even more desperate, now, and for about a solid minute, he didn’t say anything. Jesus Christ… prep school would be the end of it. There were no prep schools around here, and I doubted Sheila meant Denver. That woman really was controlling, and everything she
did ‘for her sons’ was, to some end, self-gratifying. But… fuck, no—no, we weren’t losing Kyle to prep school. Fuck no. I wasn’t gonna lose him to something like that. I couldn’t.

“I mean, we were both mad,” said Kyle, “and I know we’re gonna talk about it again when I get home today, I just… I couldn’t… and, I mean, Dad talked to me after, said he’d have a talk with her, thank God, but… I don’t know, dude, just the fact that she could get like that…”

“And it’s all about college?”

“Yeah.”

“Just tell her you don’t want to go to Yale.”

“It’s not that easy, Stan!”

“So instead you… wait, what did you do?” I wondered.

Kyle sighed. “Shit fell over, a light burst in the kitchen,” he told me. “The TV went all weird. Ike covered for me, said he hit something wrong, and my parents bought it, but he and I both know that someday I might do something he can’t come up with a fake explanation for…”

“Hey, Kyle?”

“Huh?”

“How about if I come over when you talk to your mom today?” I offered.

“Dude, I wouldn’t.”

“If Ike can’t cover for you, I can,” I insisted. “Kyle, I’m not letting your mom pull some dumbass move like sending you to fucking prep school. Okay? So, just… dude, let me help you out with this. Please.”

Kyle heaved out a long, relieved sigh, and loosened his grip a little. “Really?” he wondered, sounding like he was in a bit of a better place with the reassurance.

“Of course, are you kidding me?” I said, getting a smile out of both of us. “Your mom’s not getting away with something stupid like that, dude, no way.”

“Yeah…” said Kyle, warily, but gratefully. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Once I was sure he was pretty fully calmed, we took a few minutes and just walked the perimeter of the field, kicking at leaves and piles of snow. We slowed our pace as we were nearing the back door to the base again, then made our way through the building and back out to Kyle’s car, where we’d left our things. Token and his parents weren’t home yet, which was probably a good thing, so we left as simply as we’d come, and tried talking about other things in the car.

Kyle called his father specifically, skipping right past the house phone and calling his dad’s cell, to let him know I’d be joining them for dinner; likewise, I texted my mother as soon as we’d cleared the front door. And, honestly, my being there had the exact effect I’d hoped it would on Sheila Broflovski, who was a very opinionated woman but not altogether inhuman. She wanted what was best for her boys, yeah, but sometimes what was best for them was… being normal. It usually took her a while to get that, but there I was, a pretty significant example of Kyle’s social life, and Flora was there that night as well (which Ike had probably planned), so their mother behaved and even apologized. Yes, she ended up telling Kyle to look through his college packets again, but
for the most part, we’d won.

“There,” I said, as I was getting ready to leave. “Feel better?”

“Yeah. For now anyway. Thanks, Stan,” Kyle grinned.

“Any time.”

Jesus. Talk about a crisis averted. We had way more things to be concerned with, but, damn it all, I really did want Mrs. Broflovski to ease up a little. Or a lot. She drove Kyle and Ike so hard, my own mom looked kind of lazy by comparison. But at least we’d dodged one of her fastballs, and I was glad to have had a hand in it, even just a little.

I was glad that Kyle knew he could come to me about things like that, glad to know that I was the one who could help him suppress that quirk, however momentarily. More would surely come of that quirk, that much we both knew (hell, everyone in the League knew), but Kyle, like all of us, was taking ‘ordinary’ where he could. Respecting that, I treated my help with his one illogical trait like any other problem, let him rant about it to me, let him spill whatever it was he needed to say.

And he kept on telling me, in return, that I could talk to him. He knew I had more on my mind, and, hell, was he ever right. I’d been taking my time, yeah, but my own talk couldn’t be far away now. It really was just a matter of when and where.

– – –

Finally, one afternoon, it just kind of happened.

There were so many other elements at play, I was really not expecting that to be the day that wound down into the talk. I mean, it had been almost two weeks since Tweek had been bussed over to the asylum, two weeks since Professor Chaos had essentially declared himself a doomsday agent. Two weeks of more solid research, of getting after the Cult for more information that might help us. But in the midst of it all, in those two weeks, we had to function normally. We had to keep going to school, keep our parents in general conversation, all that kind of thing.

So there we were, me and Kyle, on the floor of my bedroom, with our homework spread out all over the place around us. We had four classes together, so we had the excuse to study together a lot. Then Kyle would always have to move onto one of his AP things, and I’d just sit there with a magazine or my GameBoy or something and be a total slacker while he went the extra step in schoolwork. That afternoon was just regular stuff, though, math and chemistry. But it was still homework, and it was weird that we were just sitting there doing it, that we weren’t out trying to get answers out of the most cryptic people in Colorado.

“Why are we doing this?” Kyle asked out of nowhere, setting his pencil down and sitting up onto his knees. Of course he was the one to point it out. He’d started thinking about it, and couldn’t give up the thought till he’d said something.

“Huh?” I wondered, glancing up at him.

Kyle’s entire body showed nothing but concern; his shoulders sagged, his eyes were unfocused, his teeth were grinding together ever so slightly. After a second, he huffed out an agitated breath, shook his head, and repeated, “Why are we doing this?”

I sat up as well, setting my work aside. “Doing what?”

“This!” Kyle said, gesturing toward his textbook with a flat palm. “Homework! Why are
“we… how are we just sitting here, doing work right now, when we just dragged Tweek off to the asylum?” He lifted his head to stare directly at me, and continued, “Huh? How are we doing this, Stan? How are any of us pretending to be okay with this? He went crazy and so did that guy in jail. And did anyone else notice how weird Butters has been in school lately? I mean, okay, Butters is always kind of weird, but he’s been like… weird, dude, you know, and… I just… dude, I can’t. I can’t, I can’t. I don’t know how long this double life thing is gonna be able to stay separated.”

My heart thudded, and my stomach flipped. My nerves were going haywire, because I shared each and every one of those concerns.

No kidding about the double life thing. Slowly, very slowly, events that were usually kept under wraps at night that had stayed out of our daily lives were starting to have a bigger effect. The League was becoming a more prominent topic of discussion in town, and we had to feign ambivalence to added knowledge when we found ourselves in those conversations.

Despite it all, though, Kenny had said that we were still far enough removed that we could enjoy our normal lives a little while longer. We were all going to do that, as long as we could. Sooner or later, we all got the feeling, the League would take priority over our average social lives. Until then, though, we needed to carry on as usual. Homework, housework, weekend jobs for some. Family gatherings, holiday planning. All that stuff, we had to just keep going through. We all had to just keep going.

“I mean, first Tweek, now what?” Kyle continued. “I mean, no, I didn’t know the guy well, but I feel bad for anyone who might end up like him! You know? He didn’t deserve that, nobody does. I just… who’s next? I know that’s all I’m gonna be thinking about: who’s gonna hear that phantom music and go crazy next?”

“Well, it won’t be one of us,” I said confidently.

“Are you really so sure?” Kyle challenged me.

“Dude, it’s just not, okay?”

“Well,” said Kyle, “I’m glad you can be so sure of things, cuz I can’t.”

“I mean,” I shrugged, as I started picking up some of the mess of papers around me, “I don’t know what Chaos is up to, and frankly, yeah, I find it scary. But I kinda feel like we all have a one-up over something like this. Y’know?”

“One-up? The hell is this, a video game?” Kyle taunted.

“Dude, you know what I mean,” I said. “Like, we’re too smart to fall for it.”

“Most of us,” Kyle grinned.

“Most of us,” I corrected. None of us would ever call Cartman smart (when it came to basic intelligence), but we didn’t mention the fear that he could still fuck us all over in the end. Extra manic energy was not something that guy needed.

“I guess,” sighed Kyle, attempting to look his work over again. “Are we kinda done with this stuff, though?” he wondered.

“The homework?”

“I’m almost done.”
Glancing over the half-assed work I’d done myself, I realized that was only about as far as I’d get. I didn’t have my mind on school. At all. It would take a lot to get me thinking on that track again. “I guess I am, too,” I realized.

“We can double check if you want—“ Kyle offered, just as I felt my phone buzz in my pocket.

“Hold on a sec, dude,” I said, “I’m getting a call.”

“Sure thing,” said Kyle, getting back to the last of his math problems.

One glance at the caller i.d. on my cell’s screen was enough to get me nervous. Of course I still had Wendy’s number in my phone, coupled with that same pretty photo of her I’d taken once when we’d gone out on a nature hike together. I just hadn’t gotten a call or text from her in a very long time, so it threw me to see her i.d. pop up, and of course my heart skipped a couple beats with nerves stemming from the fear that she might be calling to make up and ask me out again. I was prepared to reject her, if that was the case, even though it was pretty obvious that Wendy was completely over us as a couple.

“Hello?” I answered testingly.

“Hi, Stan,” said Wendy, her voice lacking the lilt it used to have during our phone conversations. “I was going to text you, but it bounced back.”

“Oh,” I said, “my inbox must be full. What’s up?”

“Oh, um, nothing, really. Token and I finished up the new vest for you.” Phone code for the armored plate, nice. “Whenever you want to come by and try it on, just give one of us a call, okay?”

“Sure, thank you.” After a second, I added, “I really appreciate it.”

Wendy hummed out a little sigh, then asked, cautiously, “So how are you? Like, how’ve you been?”

“Fine,” I told her. “Good, even with everything that’s been happening.”

“Yeah.”

“You?”

“I’m okay. We should catch up sometime,” Wendy suggested without a hint of flirtatiousness.

“Sure,” I agreed. “Yeah, we can sometime.”

“What’re you up to right now?”

“Oh, uh…” My heart skipped again, and for much different reasons this time. I couldn’t help but glance over at Kyle, who was setting his work away, as I answered, “Kyle’s over, we’re kinda doing homework.”

“O-oh,” said Wendy quickly, “I won’t keep you then. Yeah, just… it’s ready whenever. Just let us know.”

“Bye, Stan.”

“Yeah.”

She hung up before I did, and I let out an almost involuntary sigh as I slid my phone closed and set it up on my chest of drawers.

“That was Wendy?” Kyle asked me. I almost couldn’t look at him, but I had to. He folded up his reading glasses and tucked them away into one pocket of his coat, which lay on the floor nearby.

“Yeah,” I answered as I slid my own work away, out of sight, out of mind. I shifted to sit cross-legged, leaning down over my knees, and tried to calm the butterflies in my stomach. No good. I was nervous. I was really fucking nervous.

Kyle turned back to face me, and sat in almost the same position, mirroring me. I knew at that moment that this was my best (and maybe only for a while, if things in the League continued going the way they had been) chance to tell Kyle everything I’d been keeping in. I wanted to come out to him, of course, but I wasn’t sure if I’d admit how I felt about him.

I’d been waiting for the right moment… it was just so tricky, now that the opportunity had come. Coming out to Kyle was so different from coming out to Kenny. There was so much more at stake.

“You guys aren’t getting back together, are you?” Kyle wondered.

“Huh? Oh… no. No, we’re not,” I said.

“Okay, cuz you told me yourself that one more time was it,” Kyle said with a friendly smile. “It’s good that you know you can handle it like that. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking down at my hands. “It never would, anyway.”

“What, with Wendy?”

I bit my lip. “Any girl.”

“What?” said Kyle, clearly not getting it. “Dude, that’s kind of extreme, don’t you think?”

I shook my head, then slowly lifted my gaze and took in a deep breath. “Not really,” I answered. “Um… Kyle, there’s something I’ve kinda got to talk to you about.”

Shit. Fuck, this was it.

“Sure, dude,” he said, utterly unaware, “what’s up?” His look of naïveté in that single, simple moment was so sweet I almost wanted to blurt out everything right then. But that was the thing, he seemed totally naïve about this. Why not? We’d always just been friends, just a couple kids messing around. Hell, I hadn’t even figured out I’d been flirting with him till recently. So how the fuck should I proceed…?

“First of all,” I pleaded, “promise me your opinion of me won’t change once I tell you this.”

In response to that, Kyle just glared at me. “Dude,” was all he had to say to that. Yeah, yeah… my request did seem kind of ridiculous. His comment did get a little grin out of me, and I was able to continue.

“Okay,” I said, “okay. It’s just… it’s new to say it, like, to other people, so—“ and I froze…
“shit, fuck, dude, I don’t know, I’m scared!”

“Of what?” Kyle wondered.

“To say it.”

“Say what?”

“The thing I have to tell you.”

“Which is…?”

“God,” I muttered, grabbing nervously at my hair, “I’m gonna puke I’m so fucking nervous.”

“Well,” said Kyle, “maybe if you tell me what the hell it is, you won’t be!”

“Okay!” I blurt out. “I just… okay.” I took in a deep, deep breath, let it out, shakily, an told him, barely raising my voice above a whisper, “I’m gay.”

“What?” It was a what? of not hearing what I’d said, rather than for clarification.

“I—“ I sucked in another breath, looked my best friend right in the eyes, and said much, much more strongly, “Kyle, I’m gay. I’m gay, I’m gay, I’m gay, and when I figured it out, I got scared and I couldn’t talk to anyone and that’s why I was so shut off for so long after me and Wendy broke up!” Burying my face in my hands, I added, “I’m so sorry.”

“S-sorry for what?” Kyle wondered. “Stan… Stan, dude, hey—“ He leaned over and set his hands on my shoulders. “You really didn’t think you could talk to me about this? Even me? Dude, I’m your best friend.”

“I know. I know…” I half-groaned, knowing all of my earlier mistakes. “I told you, I got scared, Kyle, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Stan,” he said, “really. I mean, what do you have to be sorry for?”

“Blowing you off, not talking, all that stuff,” I muttered.

“Okay, that, maybe. I just wanna make sure you’re not apologizing for… you know… being you.” I managed a slight tick of a smile when he said that, and Kyle let me take hold of his hands; they dangled in the space between us after he moved forward a little more. We were both still sitting cross-legged, and our knees almost touched. “So,” he guessed, “it’s true?”

“Huh?”

“You’re gay.”

“I think so.”

“You think so?”

“I am… I mean, well… yeah,” I said, “I guess… n-no, I am… I am.” Tears clung to the corners of my eyes for reasons I could very well explain but didn’t want to. I really didn’t want to become an emotional wreck. But again… fuck… there was just so much at stake.

“Stan.”
“Hmm?”

“I’m not gonna say anything,” said Kyle, kindly, “but this is what you meant when you replied to my note, right? When you wrote yours?”

Getting more nervous by the second, all I could do was nod.

“Okay. So, now, here we are, we can talk. So tell me what’s up, dude. Tell me whatever you need to say, I’m right here, I’ll listen.”

I took in a deep breath, facing down everything, and began, hoping I’d stay calm. “It kinda started with the breakup,” I said. “Me realizing it, I mean. Wendy kinda called it… she mentioned something, and… that got me nervous, and thinking, and… I dunno, I got kind of obsessed, so I shut down so I could work it out. And, I mean, how fucking pathetic is that? Fucking Wendy had to point it out. I was so oblivious, I needed my fucking ex-girlfriend to spell that shit out for me. I’m so fucking stupid. So… so I had to figure out if it was true, and that took me fucking forever. But then I did. And I realized… yeah. That’s me.”

“Well,” asked Kyle, setting a hand on my shoulder briefly, “is that why Wendy broke up with you?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “It was bound to happen sooner or later. I don’t… like girls. Kyle, I just don’t. Wendy’s really nice. And she’s pretty, and I mean, I like her, but… not… in that way. I mean, third grade’s third grade. But there was never anybody else. So… yeah.”

Fuck… fuck, I had to look away. I couldn’t look directly at Kyle, not talking about this, not while I was so Goddamn nervous. “So… so I figured it out,” I kept going, starting to rant, “and that just got me scared. You know? I just got… really scared.”

“Why?” Kyle wondered, eyeing me oddly.

“Because!” I shouted illogically, burying my face in my hands, as if that could grant me some kind of reprieve from having to spout out any more incoherent words. I just wanted everything to make sense. I just wanted… well…

Damn it.

“I haven’t told my parents,” I said, and was instantly struck with the worry of how exactly to go about doing that. Correction: how to do that without Dad getting all smart-alecky on me. Not that he’d disapprove, he’d just be weird. “Kyle, I haven’t told my parents, and I don’t know how, and I don’t know what they’re gonna say, dude, I’m scared, I don’t know anything of what anyone’ll say…”

“Dude,” said Kyle, keeping his calming eyes right on me. “It’s okay. Nothing has to change, Stan, you’re still you. You’re gonna be fine. Your parents’ll be fine with it; of course they will. You don’t have to be scared, dude, not about this, not about who you are. You’re still my best friend.”

“I know,” I sighed. “Thanks, Kyle. I just… it’s just all really hard, you know? It’s confusing. I’m still confused, I mean… I… there’s just so much else going on right now, dude, I shouldn’t—I don’t—“

“Hey. Stan?”

“Yeah?”
“You know what I’m gonna say right here,” Kyle laughed. “I’m gonna tell you something you’re always telling me…”

I grinned. “Stop thinking,” we said together.

“There you go,” said Kyle, smiling and giving my arm a reassuring squeeze.

“Thanks again,” I said. “I mean it.”

And then, Kyle said, in an echo of something I’d told him recently: “Any time.”

Beyond grateful, I drew him in for a hug, which he promptly returned. When we sat back again, the air was kind of clear. I certainly felt better, slightly less stressed. He really did have a talent for making things seem less chaotic.

Kyle’s wonderfully comforting smile stayed on, and relief washed over me. Relief enough to ease all my tension, which allowed everything the chance to come out. For a moment, I forgot where I was; I forgot about everything going on around us. And I felt myself tilt closer, heard the words, “Thank you,” escape from me again, this time in a soft whisper; felt his warm, smooth skin against my lips as I left a small kiss on his cheek.

In that instant, everything seemed to make sense… and at the same time, nothing did. I sat back, just for a second, just long enough to catch a quick glimpse at Kyle’s unreadable expression. But I gave myself no time to think. No time to analyze. If I didn’t try it now, I’d never know. There was so much between us. So much we shared. And for everything he’d ever done for me, for everything he was… I was beyond grateful. He kept me in check, kept my life in order. Yeah… he was everything. What mattered most.

And in gratitude, in that moment, with the force of all I knew, I clasp his arms, keeping a tight but gentle hold, and pressed my lips to his. I kissed him with no shame, without feeling the need to justify a thing.

For a moment, it was wonderful.

There was only the warmth of his touch, the pounding of my heart, the sound of our unsynchronized breathing.

I’d only begun to both question and embrace my sexuality, but this was the first time I’d ever actually kissed a guy. And not just any guy, but Kyle. The boy I’d grown up with, grown up trusting, backing up, counting on. I’d uttered the phrase to him before, a few times, when we were kids and the meaning was less clear, but I really could see myself falling in love with him. That kiss, for that one frozen moment, felt like everything. The confirmation of a crush, the affirmation of a friendship, the gratitude for our long-standing, unshakeable bond.

But it hit me, a few seconds in, that the slightly melodic moan I heard rise from his throat could possibly be one more of protest than pleasure.

So I sat back, realizing what I’d done, snapping back into reality. My eyes opened to Kyle’s, wide and green and wanting an explanation. And, so help me God, the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. Even if I was about to be met with rejection, that guy meant everything to me. I cared for him so much, for so many years, he was just one of the constants in my life. I liked him so much, at times, it hurt. I’d known for a long time just how important he was to me, but only recently had I come to realize my level of devotion. We’d gone through so much, and had our share of fights, but in the end, he was always right there.
Except now I might’ve fucked it up.

Obviously, I hadn’t intended to go that far. I wanted to tell him, yes, but I wasn’t trying to force anything on Kyle. And now I felt like I might have. The very last thing I needed right now, the last thing I wanted, was to lose my best friend, my constant.

So what did I do?

I fucking broke down.

I was just so full up, there was nowhere to go but down. I went right back to where I’d been after my breakup with Wendy, and this time literally curled in on myself and hid. “Oh, shit…” I felt myself whispering, “oh, shit, shit, shit…” I backed up against my dresser, tucked my knees up close to me, and buried my face in my hands, not wanting to see Kyle’s reaction, not wanting him to see me fall apart. I was so motherfucking Goddamn embarrassed. What a stupid, dumbass move, Stan Marsh. Way to ruin the best thing you had going. Or so I kept thinking.

Because I’d been hiding for so fucking long. I’d kept it to myself, hell, I’d kept it from myself for a long-ass time. But I’d missed Kyle when I’d shut myself out. And whenever I missed him, I felt out of touch with myself. God, fuck, I felt so vulnerable and awful and confused and tired. In the middle of all the horrible things that were happening around us, pertaining to the Cult, I just wanted one thing to keep me happy. Just one thing, was that so much to ask? And I had a great friendship, which I could just not afford to fuck up. Which was exactly what I was afraid I may have just done. And it’d be my own fault, if that were the case, for leaving things pent-up for so long.

“I’m so sorry,” I started, hearing my voice shake. “I’m sorry, Kyle, oh, fuck, fuck, I’m so sorry. I didn’t… I wasn’t… oh, God, Kyle, I’m sorry…”

Surprisingly, he spoke right off. “Hey, Stan?”

But I was still being stupid. “I didn’t want to fuck anything up and I totally did,” I groaned. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to do that, I didn’t, I swear, dude, I’m sorry, I…”

“Stan, calm down,” Kyle said, kindly but quite firmly.

“Dude, I really—“

“Calm. Down.”

Given that prompt, I drew in a long, shaking breath, then groaned it out, hoping to dispel the nerves that had built back up in that moment, letting out the frustration I felt with myself. I was a little surprised, but mostly grateful, that Kyle hadn’t run after that. He hadn’t even stood up or demanded an explanation. And that was what was so Goddamn perfect about him. Nevertheless, he did look confused… and I really couldn’t fucking blame him.

“Better?” he asked, to which I nodded. A nod wasn’t good enough, though, since the next thing Kyle said was, “Dude, if you shut down on me, I swear to God…”

“I won’t, I’m not!” I insisted. “I’m just… God damn it…”

I averted my gaze; my heart was going a million miles a second. I wanted to see Kyle’s reaction, but at the same time, I really didn’t. I mean, something like… that… fuck, that really had just happened. Out of curiosity, I shifted only my eyes to catch his actions. Granted this little bit of silence, Kyle had more of a chance to get that ever-logical mind of his whirring, back on topic, and he brought one hand up; it hovered in front of his mouth for a few seconds before he finally touched
his fingers to his lips, his expression almost completely unreadable.

“Um…” I tried, “Kyle, I…”

He let out a little hum, then started speaking, almost as if the air were his only audience. “So. Okay. So. Um. So, there’s… that right there, that’s something we should talk about…” he said, piecing the words together carefully.

“Yeah…” I agreed, massaging the spot between my eyes, at the bridge of my nose. “I’m sorry.”

“Dude. Don’t apologize. Please. I’m just trying to—“

“Okay.”

“So look at me.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not,” said Kyle. “Look at me.” To add to his emphasis, he nudged my right leg, which did get me to finally shake myself momentarily out of my complicated overthinking and look him in the eye. “There we go. Hi.”

“Hi,” I muttered.

I kind of smiled, while Kyle was paralyzed, his face still a mix of emotions—mostly several different kinds of confused—that I just couldn’t read. But his voice was barely strained when he asked, “How long?”

I understood what he meant. How long had I known? How long had I been keeping it in? God fucking damn it, I hadn’t planned for this. I was still trying to sort things out myself, I shouldn’t have gone and done something so stupid and reckless. But it really was him. It was all him. Embarrassed for what I’d done, I wanted to run, but I just couldn’t. I had to see this through. We’d been through so much together that I couldn’t abandon him now, not after dropping this on him.

“A while, now,” I answered. My voice wasn’t at its strongest, and I hung my head again, too nervous to look at him. “But I only realized it recently, after… once Wendy told me to figure out what was most important to me.”

Kyle didn’t say anything for a while, then just said, “…Okay.”

“I talked myself around it for a little while,” I kept going, staring down even when Kyle hit my leg one more time to try to make me look at him. “It was almost weird, and kinda scary to think about. Any ‘what if’ is scary, you know? So, I mean, I talked myself around the possibility, and I started thinking, like, okay, so… what if I am attracted to you, and…” I shoved my head further into my folded arms and groaned. “This sounds awful to you, doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t, Stan, it’s fine,” Kyle tried to assure me, which got me looking up again. The look on his face was so—natural. Kyle was someone who could freak out easily, but at the same time, there were some things that he took calmly, rationally, things that he could remain strong and composed through. Thank God this was one of them. He probably read that I wouldn’t have been able to handle a freak out, but at the same time, I was wondering if he really wanted to explode and actually be angry. I didn’t want him to be, and he didn’t appear to be, but everything was so hard to read to me at the moment. Even my own nerves. I’d been going from nervous to relieved to totally out of touch. Everyone has those moments, I guess… when just nothing seems to make sense, no
matter what. And I mean, things made sense, I was just too nervous to realize that. Basically, I was thinking and feeling in circles. Kyle got that, which was probably why he wasn’t saying much.

So I kept ranting. “It’s like… I almost want to be embarrassed, but it’s… it’s you, and…” I sucked in another deep breath and held it for a second before letting it out.

Everything caught up to me, when I gave myself the time to think. I’d struggled with right and wrong before, but that, that—that new little obvious turning point, there, that had felt like such a natural progression of things, I didn’t feel like it was up for debate. Because I had, for a few seconds, felt so damned relieved. It was out, it was completely out. I’d admitted everything. Everything I’d been holding in.

Because of our long-standing, time-tested friendship, I didn’t feel right being so nervous around Kyle. It was awkward. Awkward felt wrong. We were solid; we were golden. I’d just… taken the next step, the next logical step, based on where we were and how I felt. I’d done it, however, without asking, without saying anything first, getting his stance on the whole thing. And thus, I was nervous as hell. Relieved to have gotten everything out there, but nervous as hell.

“Please don’t be mad,” I asked him, hoping I didn’t sound to awful and desperate.

Kyle shook his head. “I’m not, don’t worry,” he said… which was kind of flooring. Very, very nice to hear, but still. Seriously, I didn’t know what I was expecting, so I’m pretty sure Kyle could’ve said anything and I’d’ve been just as nerved up about it.

“What?” I wondered.

“Why would I be mad?” he wondered. He was a little flushed, I noticed, and his eyes darted back and forth, looking for something to hold his focus. He was processing, that much was clear. If I knew Kyle, it would take him some time to fully come round to any kind of result, maybe even days. This late afternoon was something that would be revisited in conversation, no doubt about that. But at least—at least he wasn’t angry. “I’m… kinda stunned, maybe, and, I mean, yeah, it does kinda put some things into perspective, and it’s something we’ve gotta figure out…”

A sting in my chest—we? He had said we, right? Jesus—God, I usually don’t let things bother me this much. It was just the fact that I had to step so carefully, with this. Try to keep myself in check. But that we he’d thrown in there… that meant I wasn’t going to be figuring things out alone. As with just about everything, we were going to work through this together.

“Kyle…?” I started, without really knowing where I was going.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Stan, go ahead,” he prompted, “it’s okay. I said you could talk, remember? Keep talking till you really don’t want to anymore.”

God, he was so… genuine. Honestly. How could I have not realized I was falling for him? “It’s… this is…” I shook my head, trying to jostle the actually cohesive thoughts to the foreground. “Kyle,” I finally said, “you’re such a great friend, and I really like you. I like… really like you, but… dude, please, please don’t let that fuck up our friendship. Please. That’s what I’ve been worried about this whole time, Kyle, I can’t lose that.”

“You won’t, Stan, I’m not going anywhere, jeez,” Kyle said, trying to laugh a little in there. “Would you calm down? Really.”
“Okay, okay,” I said, picking at a loose thread in the outer seam of my jeans. “But, you get why I’m so… _eh_,” I asked, making a swirling motion with one hand over my head for emphasis on the _eh_, “…scatterbrained?” I tried. “Nervous? Awkward? Kinda stupid?”

“Dude, you’re not being stupid.”

“I’m a seventeen-year-old acting on his emotions, Kyle, I’m _stupid_,” I said, surprised I could find a lick of humor in the whole situation. Actually, the fact that I did, though… that kind of made things better. Everything was better when I could laugh at myself, which was always a laudable feat whenever I was feeling as down as I’d let myself get back in October. So being able to finally lighten up (a bit) gave me a little added hope that things would all eventually work out. If Kenny could joke about dying all the time, I sure as hell could joke about being kind of in love with my best friend. Totally different situation, but whatever. The fact is, it was incredibly personal, but I wasn’t going to let it put me in a weird mental spot forever.

Kyle, thankfully, laughed at that. “Yeah, Stan,” he grinned, “I get it. And I mean it, this really does kinda help put some stuff into perspective for me. But, I mean, as far as my spin on this… on… _this_… um…”

“I know,” I sighed. “You’re into girls. I get that.”

“Well…” The stalling made my stomach flip. Fuck. Oh, fuck, seriously? He wasn’t about to… “Stuff like this isn’t always black and white, it’s not necessarily a matter of straight or gay, or girls or guys or whatever. I don’t think it’s a big deal no matter who gets with who, as long as it makes ’em happy.”

“Uh… where’re you going with this?” I wondered.

“Honestly, I don’t really know,” Kyle admitted. He was looking straight down, and after a few seconds of fighting himself to move, he grabbed my hands. Swear to God, my heart stopped a second time. Started back up again, but still. I hadn’t known what to expect, no, so just about everything he was saying or doing was throwing me through a loop. “I’m kinda just…”

He sighed and shook his head.

“Look. Stan… not everyone can say they have a friend they know will die for them,” said Kyle, firmly clasping my hands as he worked through his thoughts. “I still feel awful for, after that, not knowing what to do, for freezing up. And, this sucks, but I just… I don’t know what to do now, either. Or still. Or… whatever. D’you get what I’m saying?”

“Kinda,” I realized, though I wished he’d explain it.

And of course, being Kyle, he did. “I just…” He sighed, then reclaimed his hands so that he could run them back through his hair as if the action would jostle a thought. “Okay, first of all, I’m proud of you. For a whole bunch of stuff, like… how you handle stuff so well in the League and all, and… well, okay, mostly I’m thinking about right now, Stan, yeah, I’m proud of you for coming out and telling me everything. Finally,” he added with a joking nudge. “Coming out’s no easy thing, so… th-thanks for coming to me, and, y’know, you can trust me not to tell anyone else if you don’t want me to. And, I mean, as far as you… l-liking me, well… I mean, that… that makes sense…”

“Are you gonna go all logic and equations on me?” I guessed.

“Dude, that’s how I work,” Kyle reminded me. “And, I mean, that’s kinda where I stand now, y’know? I… I-I haven’t solved the equation. That make sense?”
Yeah. That made perfect sense. He was doubtful, as far as his own feelings went. He had a lot to process. And, well, thinking about the month surrounding Halloween from his perspective, jeez… I’d been the one who’d died, but he’d been the one to watch the whole thing, the one left waiting and stressing the fuck out while I was in R’lyeh, and, yeah, I’d seen how conflicted and emotional he’d gotten the day I came back… a hell of a lot had happened. He wanted ‘normal’ as much as I did, if not more. But Kyle was a thinker, and an overthinker, so sometimes it would take him a long time to arrive at an idea; sometimes he could think on his toes, too, but now wasn’t one of those times.

“No, yeah, I understand,” I told him.

“It’s just…” Kyle kept going, “maybe… maybe you’ve gotten things all figured out for yourself, and… and I’m glad for you, dude, really, I am, I just… I don’t. I just kinda… n-need some time to think about this. Okay?”

My heart skipped.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, absolutely.” Yes, it was okay. Of course it was okay. He hadn’t confessed, himself… but he hadn’t pushed me away, either. Kyle wasn’t running away. Just as he’d said, he was still right there, with me. And that was much, much more than I could’ve asked for.

I could not have been luckier to have Kyle Broflovski for a friend.

“But we’re gonna figure this out,” he went on, turning to face me completely, his green eyes studying my face, my every movement. “All right? I’m here for you, Stan, we’re always gonna be friends. As far as this goes, though, just… give me a little more time.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, finding myself, again, smiling. There was some of the relief back, which was fantastic. More time was no problem at all. There had always been the chance for him to say something more like, *Dude, what the hell is wrong with you?* There had been room for him to say, *Thanks, but no,* or, even just, *Stop.* But he hadn’t. He’d been calm… this was another of those situations that saw us equally talking and listening. His talent for being the listener, for being such a positive reinforcement, had been one perfected over the years, and, really, his compassion was one of his best qualities. “Thanks again, though,” I added.

“Yes,” said Kyle. “No problem.”

“Uh, can we just keep this between us for right now, though?” I requested.

“Yeah, of course, dude. Just this, or…”

“Well, the whole thing.”

“Gotcha.”

The whole thing then came to an abrupt end when I heard my mother call up from downstairs: “Stan? You boys almost done with your homework?” Kyle and I shared a glance in a moment of shock, then shook ourselves out of it, each of us somehow laughing. “It’s getting late, and I don’t want Kyle driving home in the dark.”

Well, that certainly changed the atmosphere in the room. I’m pretty sure both of us had completely forgotten that we’d been doing homework at all, or that anything else had been going on, ever, for that matter. But now that I’d pretty much spilled everything I’d needed to spill, ‘normal’ felt almost attainable, if even in short bursts, which was a pretty good thing.
“I should probably, uh…” Kyle began.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Here…” I helped him look around to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything, as he packed up and double-checked his bag, and reclaimed his jacket, patting the pockets to find his glasses and keys.

Once we were both pretty set to head downstairs, and after I’d called down to my mother to give her the ‘few more minutes’ answer, we stood there, at my door, for almost a minute, not saying anything. We both had a lot to think about, to mull over, but at the same time, it didn’t feel like anything out of the ordinary. He’d made me feel more secure, that afternoon, which I couldn’t thank him enough for, and I knew he understood where I was coming from. I’d been needing to have that talk, and, yes, it had gone further than I’d anticipated, but I wasn’t walking away from it with any doubts. That much was pretty fucking awesome.

“You gonna be okay?” Kyle asked me before we could leave.

“Yeah,” I said, “thanks.”

“Sure.”

The air in the room became a little awkward again when Kyle’s expression changed to a more contemplative one, but then his eyes shifted again, seeming more at ease. He got this look on his face, a slight smirk, cocked eyebrows, a slightly pink tint to the skin on his well-carved cheekbones… then, he shook his head with a little, voiceless laugh, and I heard him say, lightheartedly, “Fuck it,” before grabbing me into a hug. I returned it right away—that little hug, tight but simple, seemed to bring everything from that afternoon to something of a close: it was brief, but it reaffirmed the fact that we were secure. That everything was still all right. That things wouldn’t change, they’d just… progress, in one way or the other.

When we broke out of it, Kyle gave me a little assuring pat on the arm, and then I was the one to finally open the door and suggest we head downstairs. Primarily in the interest of Sheila not calling and bitching her son out to get his ass home. (Things between Kyle and his mother remained strained, but at least the prep school scare had been momentary and admittedly out of left field.) Once at the front door, just as Kyle was opening it to leave, I noticed the green ushanka draped lazily on our coatrack, so I grabbed it with a grin and teased, “Don’t forget your hat.”

“Thanks, dad,” Kyle laughed back, punching me for messing with his hair before reclaiming the hat and yanking it down over his piles of thick red waves. Then, with a real, perfectly genuine smile, he changed his tone and said, “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see ya,” I said, absently reaching for and grabbing his hand before he could go. Kyle grabbed hold, gave my hand a light squeeze, just a little pressure, then pulled his hand back, turning the action into a slightly awkward wave.

“Stan,” my mother hollered out from the kitchen, “would you close that door? You’re letting in the cold air!”

“Gotcha,” I yelled back. “Right…” I said on a level tone, looking back at Kyle. “See you later.”

“Yeah.” Carefully, Kyle made his way down the few but sometimes icy front steps, then turned as he shivered to adjust to the outside air, ticked his head up toward me and added, “Later.”

“Bye.”
I watched him get into the car, start up the ignition, curse at his heater for not working faster, and back out of my driveway. I started getting lost in thought, reflecting on the events of that afternoon, when I was shocked back into the present with my mom screeching, “Stanley Randall Marsh, you shut that door right now! What part of that didn’t you hear?”

“Sorry, Mom!” I called into the kitchen as I did what she’d asked. “There.”

“You, now would you help me set the table for dinner, please? Your father’s on his way. Thank God he finally got out of work at a decent hour, I swear…”

Having no reason to argue, I went about that simple task as well, and humored my mom in conversation about how things were going at school, about how I was kind of glad football was pretty much over, at how, yes, fine, okay, Mom, okay, I’d take the extra PSAT prep course in the spring. Dinner conversation was all fine and normal, too, other than the fact that I still couldn’t bring myself to contribute much more than an, “Uh-huh,” or a, “That sucks,” to my dad’s work situation. My parents brought up the Tweek thing, too, briefly, almost inadvertently, just based on the fact that Mom had gone in there to buy coffee earlier that day and that Mr. Tweak still didn’t seem his best, especially with training the new employee they’d had to hire. I really, really wanted to contribute to those conversations, but I just couldn’t.

But at least I knew I could do something about it. I was doing my part to help. The town, Kenny, everyone. I just wanted to help out in whatever way I could. Not to mention keep myself and the people I cared about free from whatever the hell it was Chaos was plotting.

And, yeah, Kyle was included in that list of people I cared for; of course he was. I’d already pretty much gone to extremes for him, but I’d do it again if it came down to it. I just would. That’s all there was to it.

When I was alone in my room, at the end of the evening, I gathered up my own notes and went about filling my bag for the following day. Business as usual. But I did pause once I’d finished, took a look around my room, then heaved a sigh and lay on my back in the middle of the floor. Staring at the ceiling, I clamped my hands over my mouth, remembering every thought, every action, just about every second of my conversation with Kyle. It felt great to have it all out. It really did. I felt better than I had in… well, in a very long time. I still felt nervous, since things were both secure and undecided, but positive at the same time.

Because I knew, no matter what came out of this, Kyle was and would always be one of my constants.

Ups and downs, he’d been there for me. I’ve had periodic bouts of depression, times I’ve slipped a little… there have been times when we’ve both pushed or been pushed so hard it’ll seem like there’s nowhere to go anymore. When we’ve turned our backs or given up. But at the end of it all, we make up, we settle things, we’re right there for each other. Because it was all a part of what made us work… what made us friends… what made us solid. And all this was secured, all of my nerves and fears just left my body, when my phone buzzed with a text message. Sliding the phone open, I noticed a simple message from Kyle on the screen:

Don’t worry.

I heaved a huge sigh of relief when I read that.

There was plenty else to worry about right now, things involving other parts of my life, things involving the entire town. Kyle and I would be fine. This was just one more step in our friendship, one thing between us, and nothing would really even change all that much. We’d carry
on as we always did, and take things a step at a time.

He’d said he needed more time. That wasn’t a rejection. If anything, it sort of gave me something to look forward to.

In all of the chaos going on around us, at least I knew that one segment of my life was secure. I had one thing to keep me from slipping, one thing to help me keep a grip on reality. I liked my reality, I liked where it was heading, and I wasn’t about to let it go.

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Chapter End Notes

The first time I published this chapter was on October 19th, which I thought was kinda neat.
“Give me a little more time.”

The hell was that all about? I mean, shouldn’t I have known, one way or the other? Oh, no. No, too easy. For me, anyway. My mind found itself in so many different places all at once, nothing could be easy.

Alone, quiet, in my room, I just sat on my bed, against the wall, and processed. First thing was first. Stan was out. My best friend had come out. To me, anyway; I had no idea if anyone else knew. Maybe Kenny… maybe. If that were the case, I… was actually kind of jealous. He’d’ve known first, since it probably came out in R’lyeh. Somehow, that scenario just made sense.

Just like a few other things made sense. My mind immediately rushed to that moment, and my right hand flew to my mouth, followed by my left. “Oh, God,” I felt myself saying. My eyes misted up and closed, as I tucked my knees up, rubbed my feet together in their wool socks, and bowed my head, replaying that moment, hardly half an hour before. “Oh, God, oh, God.”

Okay. So. Oh, God.

Now what?

This was… a lot to process, especially right smack in the middle of everything going on. Being so involved in the League was making me forget about all that normal stuff teenagers go through. Even though Kenny kept stressing that we enjoy normal life as long as we could, it was difficult. I was lacking in my studies—part of the reason my mother had been so hard on me lately—and I’d given up on Nelly at the start of November. I’d broken up with my girlfriend (however short-term I’d known she’d be) because I couldn’t handle the stress. Because I couldn’t…

…cope. Because at the time, I just couldn’t deal with Stan being gone. I couldn’t function when he was gone, and I’d been keeping him incredibly close since the day he’d come back. He’d been really close with me, too, and, yeah, now that I looked back, he kinda had been for a while. As if the way he played with my hair wasn’t indication enough, there were all those times lately… how often he’d take my hand, how tightly he’d hold on when we hugged. And, I mean, I was prompting that kind of thing, too. Taking his hand to tell him he wasn’t alone… holding onto him as assurance for both of us that he was safe, that he was alive, he was all right, he wasn’t going anywhere.

I’d been a little shocked when he’d kissed me… stunned, but by no means angry. It had just been—unexpected, and I hadn’t, in the moment, had time to process and react. Now that I was here and reflecting, I squeezed my eyes shut and listened to the pulse of my heart throbbing in my ears.

It was pretty much up to me, wasn’t it? It was up to me to more or less make the decision on where we’d go from here. He was out… he’d confessed his attraction to me, and, I mean, I really was proud of him for saying all that. I didn’t know if I was flattered or what, I just knew I was all right with it. But I did need time. There we go. I needed time… just… just a little while, to see how
I wanted to proceed. To see if the attraction was mutual; to test out exactly how I felt about him.

Several things were certain. One of them was that I really hated it when Stan got down on himself. It happened from time to time, and whenever it did, I felt kind of useless. He’d tried a few different coping mechanisms before—total solitude, alcohol, depression meds—but during one of our last big tests of friendship, freshman year, he’d actually come right out and told me that having me listen was better than anything. Granted, he’d been on some scary weird meds at the time, so I don’t know if he remembers that day like I do, but I do believe he’d meant every word. From then on, I’d taken to listening more, and that much I knew he’d noticed. So when he’d gone right back to moping around and being all silent after the final breakup, of course I’d get a little pissed that talking and listening didn’t work that time around.

Looking back on that, and on other similar times as well, I started kind of feeling like a jerk. For not respecting the fact that, yeah, it was an annoying coping mechanism, but it was what Stan needed. Just to be alone. And obviously nothing could make me get over it better than, oh, watching him come back from the dead after six days of being convinced that he’d be out of my life for good.

Even though there was nothing I really could have done, once that bullet hit, I still felt mildly at fault for letting him die that night. And I thought about how I’d felt after that, so directionless, so empty… how I knew that if I ever lost him, if I ever even let him down, I’d feel like that again. So what could I do about that? Simple: take care of him. Look after him, protect him. Make sure he was all right, make sure I did my part, because no matter how I looked at it, we were a team. So, then, now, the question became, what do I want back?

What did I want back? And did it necessarily have anything to do with sexuality, or did it have more to do with just simple morals? I mean, okay, on the sexuality front, yeah, I liked girls, fine, sure, whatever. Girls exclusively? Well… not necessarily, I could be open, I supposed. I’d never wondered otherwise. Okay, so did I like guys? Did I necessarily have to identify as bi in order to accept that I might feel anything for Stan?

Well, I’d spilled it to him, why the fuck couldn’t I get it through my own head? I’d said word for word: “Stuff like this isn’t always black and white, it’s not necessarily a matter of straight or gay, or girls or guys or whatever. I don’t think it’s a big deal no matter who gets with who, as long as it makes ’em happy.”

So, what made me happy? Or, what could?

There we go, there was a good jumping off point. All labels and everything else aside… would being with Stan make me happy?

…“Kyle,” I muttered to myself once I came up with that, “that is the dumbest fucking question ever.” Because obviously, yeah, being around him made me happy. Hell, being friends with him was one of the best things going in my life right now.

But. Was this the way things were really meant to play out for us?

If it did happen… would I mind? Would I be opposed to it happening?

And that was what made me realize… no. I’d be willing to give it a try. Honest to God, I would. I wouldn’t mind. I just wouldn’t want to rush anything. Which told me that, shit, I wanted to be practical about it. Take things slowly, logically.

God, could I ever think, over-think, and second-guess to beat hell.
The only thing that got my mind momentarily on other things was Ike pounding on my door telling me to come to dinner. I managed to suck it up and pretend I wasn’t actually having some kind of major existential crisis around my family that evening, but my head was swimming with questions and possible outcomes for a couple hours as I lay awake that night in bed.

Turning to face the wall, reflecting again on the events of that afternoon, I flattened my lips tightly together and cupped one hand over my mouth. I felt the aftereffects of the replay, and wondered exactly how I’d handled it. How Stan read my reactions. If I’d appeared, at all, cold, or unaccepting. “Give me a little more time.” Afraid I might’ve been irreparably unreadable, I grabbed my phone in a slight panic, held it out so I wouldn’t need my glasses, and texted Stan:

Don’t worry.

There.

Okay. I had time to think again.

… “What the fuck is wrong with me?” I scream-whispered to myself, yanking my pillow over my ears and hugging my arms tightly over my head. “Come on, Kyle, breathe. Breathe, breathe, breathe, breathe, breathe.”

But I’d started, and I couldn’t stop. I looked back on everything. Fucking everything. Everything between me and Stan. And that was a long-ass catalogue, let me tell you. I’ve known him since we were toddlers. We’ve been tight from the beginning, and we’ll be tight till the end. It had just become a matter of how. And the potential was there. Now I knew he wanted it, and I knew I wouldn’t mind. Repercussions didn’t even play into it, in my head. It was all just… me and him: would it work? Or would we somehow manage to fuck everything up? Oh, God, please not that. I couldn’t afford to fuck that up. So the options were, kind of obviously, don’t start it at all, or go for it with confidence and know that it’s right.

I almost felt sick. This shouldn’t have been a concern. It really, really shouldn’t have. I was making way too big a deal of it. But I just could not afford to fuck it up. So, basically, all I knew at the end of the evening was that I was probably going to be awkward as fuck the next day, because I’d still be processing, still filtering logic. Well… at least I’d worked through my thoughts a little. At least I knew I wasn’t opposed to giving it a shot. There was just more I needed to test out first. I had to be completely confident, or not try anything at all.

You know how things look one way on paper, or sound logical in your head? And then you actually start the thing and you’re like, Huh, what the fuck did I do all this paperwork for? Yeah, so, that totally applies to laws of attraction. Or what the fuck ever it was that I’d been sorting out all night. I could think things through for hours and hours and stress myself out like crazy and have two distinct possible outcomes… but I still found myself at a different kind of square one some time later. At least I’d gotten one thing right. I was beyond awkward. But I was so wrapped up in over-analyzing that I didn’t get why.

The following morning, Stan texted me asking for a ride just as I was wondering if I should ask him if he needed one. Ike was conveniently on the bus to school already, since middle school started earlier than high, and he liked getting there long before the first bell. I still woke up around the same time as my brother, though, so I arrived at Stan’s house at 7:30. For some stupid reason, I felt like being all formal, and, leaving my car running for heat (because, fuck, it was freezing), I made my way up the shoveled walk and rapped a couple times on the front door. I heard Stan holler a goodbye back to his mother, and then a second later, the door opened.
This was just like any other day. Just… going to school, nothing weird, nothing different. So why the fuck did a simple, “Hi,” come out so strained?

Not that his usual, “Hey,” didn’t seem to have more weight to it, either.

“Come on,” I suggested, gesturing back toward my car with my right elbow, since my gloved hands were shoved deeply into my coat pockets for warmth, “I left the car going.”

“Didn’t lock yourself out, though, did ya?” Stan teased me as he followed me back to the driveway.

“Ha, ha,” I replied as flatly as I could, rolling my eyes.

The second I got in the car, I yanked my hands out of my pockets and held them against the heaters to warm them up. I tended to feel colder in the morning, I’m sure just about everyone does, everyone who has to leave the comfort of his own bed and haul his ass to school by 8 a.m., at least. Once sufficiently thawed, I eased my car into reverse, backed out onto the street, and kept, oddly enough, just below the speed limit on the drive to school.

I really was feeling weird about going to school lately. It seemed like a waste of time, and I’ve never thought that before. I’ve skipped out before, when nothing was really at stake if I did, but now I was actually starting to wonder how much longer any of us could put up with it. How much longer it would even matter. I told myself I’d study hard for finals, to keep my parents happy, but what bothered me was that the Cult could make a move at any second. I knew that Kenny carried his Mysterion gear around with him, but it wasn’t quite as easy for me to just become the Human Kite at the drop of a hat.

And, as far as today went, I even felt removed from that. Like Kite’s activities were someone else’s job, someone else’s burden. Something for another day. Please, God, I begged, no mission tonight. Now, of course, I wanted to make headway on League activities, of course I did, it’s just that I could only deal with one thing at a time. Whenever I get stuck on something, it becomes an obsession, and I don’t like giving it up till I’ve got it figured out. So, not thinking about school, not thinking about the League, what was I left with? Honestly, a pretty significant distraction—and yet hardly a distraction at all, really. And he was sitting in the passenger seat of my car.

At a four-way stop, waiting for a bus to pass through, I shifted my focus over to Stan, who smiled nervously and said, “What’s up?”

“Huh?” I wondered.

“You haven’t said anything yet today…”

“Yeah, I did,” I tried to argue, at the same time realizing that, no, we hadn’t been having a conversation at all.

“Right, okay, you said ‘hi,’ I’ll give you that.”

“I’m concentrating on the road,” I said quickly. The bus was gone, and I had the right of way, but I hate following large vehicles on potentially icy roads, so I clicked my brights on for the guy across from me to take the turn. When he didn’t take the hint, I clicked them again, then finally laid on the horn and shouted, “I’m letting you move!” (This is the point where I’ll admit to having some minor road rage.)

When the driver finally passed, he flicked me off, which was probably the only thing that could’ve gotten me to roll down my half-frozen window on a morning cold as that one, in the interest
of yelling back, “I was doing you a favor, jackass!”

“Dude, calm down,” Stan tried, as I sat back, rolled up the window, and finally took my right turn.

“No, no, I’m calm, I’m calm,” I said, attempting to convince myself. “I just don’t like it when people don’t get simple signals on the road.”

“Why’d you even tell the guy to go, then?”

“Because I don’t like following busses, Stan, okay?”

“Okay.” A few seconds passed, giving me some time to sigh out a little frustration (mostly with myself), but then the awkwardness from the first ‘hi’ was back. I bit the inside of my lip, trying to figure out what to say next, but Stan beat me to it. “Um… I didn’t set you on edge, yesterday, did I?” he wondered.

“No!” I said, maybe too quickly. “No,” I repeated, making myself sound more controlled. I let out a breath, which sort of admitted my actual tension, once I thought about it, and said, “I’m not on edge, Stan. Don’t worry about it.”

“Sure,” said Stan, not wholly convinced. He let a few seconds pass, then added, “Thanks for yesterday, though, Kyle. I’m really glad I could talk to you.”

“Yeah,” I said, shrugging one shoulder. “Yeah, no problem. Did, um… was it… are you, y’know, are you glad to have come out?”

“I… yeah,” Stan answered. “It’s just one of those things where, like… it’s fine, I know it’s fine, it’s just… I get nervous about actually saying it.”

“Did you tell your parents?” I asked out of curiosity, glancing over at him. Slightly flushed, Stan shook his head and looked out the window. “How come?”

“Because,” he said, “it doesn’t feel right yet.”

“Am I the only one you’ve told?” I wondered.

“Uh… no, actually, Kenny knows,” Stan told me. “As I’d thought.

“Oh, okay. That makes sense. So what’d he say about it?”

Stan shrugged. “He asked me if I thought he was hot.”

“He would,” I laughed. “Jesus, leave it to Kenny.”

“Yeah…”

And that cut through the tension for a while. We were able to talk about normal things on the way to school, things about daily life, even though both of us, as usual, practically couldn’t wait until we’d be in the right place to discuss League dealings again. It was nice that things were always pretty much able to shift back to normal for us, no matter what kinds of situations we found ourselves in or events that transpired, but this time, my brain wouldn’t shut the fuck up. Even when we were talking as we always did, even getting on other subjects, my mind was just still insanely preoccupied. Because I’d read into everything Stan said. Analyze the way he said it. Analyze my own responses. Why couldn’t I, for once in my damn life, stop being such an over-thinker? Such a
Honestly. If things were awkward, it was my own damn fault. Yeah, things were hinging on me right now. It was my response, my final analysis, my feelings that needed to be sorted out and filtered through. I had to look at everything from all sides, and the more I got myself thinking about everything, the more awkward I’d get about it. Which was something Stan always got, which was why he’d taken to practically commanding me to stop thinking. I think, I obsess, I worry, but all in the interest of making sure that things work the way they’re supposed to. Making sure things make sense. That I can find logic.

I parked in the lot out near the football field, momentarily anxious to finally get to senior year when I could be granted a better spot, and paused for a second, looking out over the frosted grass. Out toward the utility shed, which had undergone reparations since the night we, the League, had arrested Wilcox and gotten Craig working with us. That drug bust seemed like such a long time ago, like something almost inconsequential, compared to what we were up against now. Stan walked around to my side of the car, folded his arms across his chest for added warmth, and stared with me, most likely thinking the same thing. Everything we were dealing with was now pretty easily divided into before and after Halloween.

So, then, as soon as I thought about that, a question kind of escaped from me: “Hey, Stan?” I started.

“What’s up?”

“How’s your—uh…”

“My what?”

“You know,” I said, clipping my words short, still glaring out over the frozen field as I spoke. “Your rib.”

“Oh.” I heard Stan take in a deep breath—maybe even just for my sake, to remind me that he was breathing at all—before he continued, “It’s fine. Hurts a little every now and then, but I’m fine. It doesn’t feel too bruised anymore.”

“Good,” I said. “Okay. That’s good.”

Satisfied and much too cold, I turned and started heading toward school, numbly moving from one thing to the other. Again, so damn much in my head, I had to go for one thing at a time. When I didn’t hear a second set of footsteps beside me, I turned back to see that Stan was still standing there, giving me this concerned, You sure you’re okay? look.

I kind of nodded, let out a quick sigh, and walked back over. Absentmindedly, I grabbed Stan’s hand and pulled him in my direction, saying, “Come on, dude, it’s freezing.”

“Uh—“ he started, tensing out of surprise, even though our hands dropped once I’d gotten him walking.

“What?” I wondered.

“Nothing,” he covered.

I got what he’d read out of that, and that was fine; maybe I’d even meant more, but I honestly couldn’t tell with everything swimming around in my head that day. So I just let it be what it was. I clamped a hand reassuringly on his shoulder as we stepped inside, and he retaliated by stealing my
hat off and fucking up my hair.

While I could, just as Kenny had said, I had to enjoy this ‘normal’ lull, since none of us knew how brief it’d be. I went about my day in just as average a way as I could, fully aware that any of these upcoming school days could be the last—that any day now my League duties would come front and center, and Kite would be much more than a nighttime alter ego. All the more reason to figure out exactly what it was I wanted, and soon. Before it had a chance to get taken away.

At lunch that day, Red joined us at our regular table, clinging like a leech to Kenny’s arm. You’d think those two were married already, jeez. They were pretty adorable, though, couldn’t deny that. Ever since Kenny had left his parents’ house, too, he and Red were getting noticeably closer. He’d remarked, a couple times lately, about how happy he was that he hadn’t died since Halloween, and those comments kinda brought me down a little. I felt awful for not remembering Kenny’s innumerable previous deaths, for knowing that nobody had, until Stan had kick-started a paradox that had allowed us all to be aware. I didn’t want his deaths to keep fucking up his personal life. Kenny was a damn good friend and a damn good person, and as invested as he was as Mysterion, seeing him with Red was like seeing him in his exact element. It’s amazing what relationships can do for some people.

(Huh, what a thought.)

Oddly enough, Wendy, too, joined us that day, having the excuse of sitting by Red for the regular school audience, but when Kenny’s girlfriend got up to go buy herself and Kenny each a cup of coffee (at his request, and with his money), Wendy leaned in and said, “Guys, I’m getting really worried.”

Because he was the one she—understandably—was looking straight at, Stan was the one to ask, “What about?”

Disheartened, Wendy rested her head in her hands and sighed, “Other than everything… Marjorine.” Oh. A cold hush fell over the table. “I feel like I’ve just totally lost one of my best friends. Guys, Butters has been just plain scary lately. I don’t know what to do. I tried reaching out, but he’s like a different person. I don’t know what to do.”

I was at a loss for what to say. We all were. Obviously, he was a friend, and we wanted to help, but it’s really hard to help someone who refuses to respond. I’ve totally run into that with Stan before, but his issues were, again, all bouts of real depression. What was happening to Butters was an actual change, a literal darkness descending and warping him into the true Professor Chaos, an entity to be feared. The days of sweet, all-loving Marjorine seemed to be completely over. And Wendy, from what I knew of her, was such a nice girl, she was probably taking her friend’s absence personally.

In a very, very odd turn of events, the first person at the table to utter a response was Cartman. “Okay, fine,” he said, “I’m on it.”

“What?” Wendy asked.

“I’m on it, I’ll get him to talk.”

Kenny shot him an odd look as Wendy said, “Eric, really?”

“Eh,” Cartman shrugged. This was weird, especially coming from a) the guy who was
always such a dick and b) the guy whose biological father (who he’d had killed) was a Cultist. Then, glaring at Kenny, he added, “It’s my job.”

Wow.

Okay, so it was highly, highly probable that there was some kind of ulterior ‘any excuse to beat the crap out of Butters’ motive in there or something, but Cartman’s seemingly honest compliance to the task made me wonder how much this Cthulhu situation was changing all of us. We all had our usual drives, but stakes were now higher. Much higher. Sanity was on the line. Lives were threatened. Two separate forces were actually trying to destroy the world.

Red walked back over at that point, so to strike up a more believable conversation, Wendy said, “So I think I’m good on about all my finals except calc, so…”

“Well,” said Cartman, fully himself again, as Red sat down and handed Kenny his coffee, “see, Wendy, Wendy, what you gotta do is just copy off math-brain Jew over here—“

“Goddammit, Cartman, shut up!” I snapped. “Quit being an intolerant racist, already! God!”

“I’m not racist, you just have to be Jewish to be good at math.”

“You’re just pissed off cuz you failed algebra twice, shit-for-brains!”

“No need to fight it, Kyle. It’s simple genetics.”

“You don’t know anything about genetics!”

“Okay!” said Kenny in an authoritative tone. “All in favor of kicking Cartman off the island?”

Not surprisingly, all hands were raised. “Sorry, dude,” Kenny shrugged, which got his girlfriend laughing.

“Well, screw you guys! I didn’t wanna sit here, anyway.” And with that, the annoyance was gone. Kenny, Wendy, Stan and I exchanged a brief glance, saying we’d stand by his promise to deliver info on Chaos, but that was all. We were still testing his loyalties to the League… Kenny especially. Mysterion wasn’t taking any chances. None of us were.

I found myself taking a brief but reassuring hold of Stan’s wrist, where no one could see—just a quick, You’re not going anywhere, reminder. I saw him smile, after that little action, but he didn’t prompt anything in return. It really was all pretty much hanging on me. Stan knew enough not to go another step further until I’d caught up.

As the lunch period was winding down, Wendy excused herself in favor of hanging out with Bebe, and not long after she’d gone, Kenny glanced at the clock on the wall to his right and said, “Okay, let’s see… few minutes left. Baby, you got a mint?”


“Cuz,” Kenny smirked, “I’m gonna take you out to the back hall before the bell, and I didn’t think you’d wanna make out if my breath smelled like shitty ol’ cafeteria coffee.”

Red snickered. “Maybe I like the smell of shitty cafeteria coffee.”

“Weak,” Kenny laughed.
“Just kidding. Open up.”

Kenny stuck his tongue out, and Red dug into her pocket for a box of mini Altoids, three of which she then pressed down on the center of her boyfriend’s waiting tongue. Kenny chewed them down, stood, and offered a hand to Red. As he helped her up, he grinned over at me and Stan, bid us, “Later,” and then started leading Red away.

Once they were gone, Stan started laughing. “Kenny cracks me up, dude,” he said. “I just don’t get how he can still be so… him under pressure, y’know?”

“Yeah, Kenny’s funny like that,” I admitted. But he was dedicated. That guy knew exactly what it was he wanted, all the time, and went for it. He wanted Red? He got her. He wanted to send himself to college? He’d opened a bank account and worked all the damn time. He wanted answers? He was sure as fuck gonna get ’em, whatever it took. I kind of envied that. I’m moral—and highly opinionated—but sometimes I just don’t see myself as strong-willed as, say, Kenny, or Stan. I couldn’t stand up to my own mother, I had an (okay, I’ll admit it) odd psychic quirk I couldn’t control, I stressed out for no reason. But I liked order. That’s all. I liked to make sure the reasons I did something were right.

God fucking damn, I’d already started obsessing again. I really needed a distraction.

Glancing up at the clock himself, Stan’s eyebrows knit in a mocking glare. “Few more minutes, Kenny?” he remarked. “More like twelve.”

“But he’s gonna wear Red down,” I laughed, managing to break out of my thought cage for a minute.

“I dunno,” said Stan. “They’re kinda going at the same pace, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” I had to admit. “Kinda lucky that way.”

“Yeah.” After a few silent seconds, Stan looked back at me and asked, “You wanna skip out till next period?”


Completely joking, Stan put on an awful, cheesy, seductive tone and echoed Kenny: “Cuz I’m gonna take you out to the back hall and—“

“Dude!” I laughed, slapping his arm.

He let himself laugh as well, but once we were off it, he showed a real smile and said, “Seriously, though, let’s just go for a walk or something.” The expression he wore seemed to add, I want to talk about something, just not here.

Realizing I wouldn’t have been able to say no, regardless, I agreed, “Sure,” and followed him out of the cafeteria, down a short hall, and out one of the back doors to an area nobody really used, even for smoke breaks.

It was the time of year when we all took to keeping our coats on inside, so the chilly air was less of a shock than it would’ve been if we’d walked out in just our sweatshirts, and Stan stuffed his hands in his coat pockets for extra warmth, letting out a long, visible breath into the brisk atmosphere as we began a slow trod around the little-used area. There wasn’t much back there but some untrimmed hedges and a stone bench that had been added in just in case someone wanted to go back there for recreation, but the truth was, most of the school forgot that area was there (even the Goths,
or I was sure they’d probably have used that corner for their hours of Cure and cloves).

We’d been out there walking for a few minutes before either of us spoke. It was Stan who broke the silence, by saying, “Hey, Kyle?”

“Huh?”

“I really hope you don’t think I was forcing anything on you. Yesterday.”


“All right,” said Stan, looking guilty nonetheless. “I just, um… I can tell you’re thinking about it.”

Thankfully, I was able to laugh. “I’m that obvious, huh?” I guessed. Then again, Stan just plain knew me, so it wasn’t a surprise. He just shrugged, which told me I wasn’t projecting anything too much to anyone who didn’t know. Which meant anyone but him and possibly Kenny.

I thought back to about two minutes before, when I’d been watching Kenny and his girlfriend interact. Those two were really just together by now, just very complimentary, very real, and, something I’d never earlier have expected of Kenny, very wholesome and honest at the same time. Oh, sure, Kenny was still dirty as shit, but he was a sweet boyfriend to her.

Huh. Okay. Maybe that was my issue. Labels. Yep—plain and simple, that was it. Assuming something started, between me and Stan, obviously, labels would have to come into play somewhere, at some point. Another reason I’d broken up with Nelly was because I just simply didn’t want the pressures of being someone’s boyfriend. I felt like there was a lot of this weird, expected responsibility that came along with labels like that. And if it came down to it, if I realized I did have a thing for Stan and I did decide to pursue something with him, I wouldn’t want there to be any of that kind of pressure or expectation.

And, deep down, I knew he wouldn’t want it, either. I was just over-analyzing again. Neither of us wanted anything to change too much, but sooner or later, things were going to move in one direction or the other. And whatever it was, as I kept thinking, that decision had to be exactly right.

Fuck. Sometimes I really hated being such an over-thinker.

Okay. No labels, no pressure, just get your mind to shut up, Kyle, and what’s there? I asked myself. What’s there, in regards to Stan? Well, obviously, I cared about him. He helped me out a lot. I liked knowing that he knew he could depend on me. There was a lot to admire about him, too. He had strong qualities, he was a good speaker, he was very adamant about his morals.

Looking directly at him, I noticed (where probably I’d been neglecting to) that his thick black hair had grown out a fair amount, now that Wendy wasn’t clipping it so close all the time. Stan liked it shaggier, anyway, and it was getting to that point, now; that purposeful mess really did seem to suit him more than the shorn cut that Wendy had preferred. It stayed out of his eyes, though—and, oh, shit, that was when I figured out I’d almost been staring, getting all analytical, so I looked away.

I still had a lot to sort out. A lot of my own inner rantings I had to get over. But I’d keep entertaining the possibility. Of. Whatever. Whatever it was. God, shit, I was so hung up on words. Until certain words or phrases or labels or what have you clicked in my mind, I wasn’t going to be satisfied with any of the roundabout thoughts I’d been having. So until I figured all that out… whatever. Right?
“Kyle!” Stan’s voice shocked me out of my current round of over-analyzing.

“What?” I wondered.

“I asked if you wanted to go back in.”

“Oh. How much time do we have?”

“I dunno, like seven or eight minutes.”

“Huh. Maybe a few more?” I suggested.

Stan agreed with a simple, “Sure,” and the two of us continued walking, ambling just a little further from the brick school wall before turning around to slowly head back.

Once again, the tension was too thick for me.

Fuck it.

Maybe I really did just have to stop thinking, around and around in circles. Maybe I just had to start up a new idea instead.

Okay, something about me: I don’t flirt. I don’t. Not really, anyway. I just kind of talk, and a couple times, things sorta worked out. My girlfriends had done the flirting. The hand-grabbing, prompting the little gestures. I just talk. According to Kenny, from what he’s observed of my ‘tactic,’ I can smooth talk, but I’ve never really thought about what or how I do that kind of thing, I just do. I’d never really tested out any normal, attention-seeking flirting tactics.

So—deep breath, Kyle, deep breath—this was a time to try that out. Right. I’d just... see if this was the road I wanted to take.

As we walked, I nudged Stan’s right arm with my left. When he didn’t show much of a reaction, I nudged him again, hoping he could at least take a hint. Which, that time, he did. He drew that hand out of his coat pocket and let it fall to his side, where, just testing out the thought again, I let my knuckles brush against his, giving myself a second to process exactly what I was doing and how I was going about doing it. It felt fine, in the moment, so I took hold of his hand, keeping a light grip, just in case I second-guessed. But when Stan, after a little beat, brushed his thumb against my skin, as just a calm, kind little gesture, I relaxed and was able, for now, to stop thinking. I tightened my grip a bit, and he, in response, tepidly wove his fingers through mine, so that our hands were clasped and locked, which was how they stayed for the next several minutes as we continued our walk.

We went back inside with the silent understanding that it... might happen. Maybe it’d happen soon, maybe not. I just had a little more thinking to do. Which Stan knew. Both of us knew I needed to take my time. No rushing. Logic. Make it work if it was meant to. Sort out the words I couldn’t quite place yet, and make sure that if and when it happened, it would be absolutely right.

– – –

Into the afternoon, now in the ‘maybe... not yet, but maybe soon’ mode of the whole ‘should we?’ issue, something totally set me off. As the calendar crept into December, it had now been almost two months since Stan’s breakup with Wendy. Almost a full month of him being alive again after the Halloween scare. Two months, I guess, was enough for some people, and I saw in the hall, that afternoon, one of the girls in our class, Millie, issuing a couple flattering compliments before asking Stan out for coffee (and potentially other dates as well).
I watched as Stan let her down easy, explained that she seemed like a very nice girl, that he appreciated her compliments, but that he didn’t want a girlfriend right now. Didn’t say anything about why, just that he didn’t want a girlfriend. And, even though I knew the reasons, even though Millie truly posed absolutely no threat to me, I felt an odd surge in my chest, and had to look away.

Jealousy. Was that seriously jealousy? Something that petty? No way… no way. It was more. Protectiveness. That’s what I’d been doing, that’s what I’d been acting on, this whole time. I was just… being protective.

I pressed on through the hall toward my next class, heart pounding, mind going absolutely fucking nuts.

What’s going on? I wondered. He comes out to me, and now all of a sudden I’m all confused?

Oh, that was a lie and a half, and I knew it. It sure as hell wasn’t all of a sudden, not at all. That morning wasn’t ‘all of a sudden.’ That walk after lunch was like the antithesis of ‘all of a sudden.’ And I certainly wasn’t confused. I was processing. If anything, it was more like I’d been granted the freedom to start sorting out what was already there.

Oh, God…

“Oh, God…” I whispered.

It was already there.

That appreciation. That respect that had no name. It was attraction. Pure, simple attraction. Devotion. Great, I set the thesaurus off, but really. That’s what it was.

The attraction was mutual. I still had feelings to sort out, to weed through and extract exact words and meanings from, but they were there.

What a time to figure it all out. Right on the cusp of finals. It was awful, awful, awful, awful, but I couldn’t let anything really distract me from that right now (and there was plenty else distracting me within the League, too). Not if I was going to stay in my own house through senior year, anyway. Okay, so… goal. Goal: get through finals, study hard, keep all this in mind, but just get through that week of finals first. Then, I’d have the freedom to dive right in and keep searching.

Even so, even with that goal in mind, that didn’t stop me from taking hold of Stan’s arm when we left school together that afternoon. Didn’t stop me from grabbing his hand once no one was looking. Didn’t stop me from feeling that surge, again and again, day after day, wondering when the hell I’d wise up and just say something.

Because, honest to God… starting something might just be, I realized, one of the safest, sanest things we could do.

– – –

Butters

Insanity was the only logical option.
Whenever I tried to create order in my life, it fell apart. No matter how big or how small a foundation I started to build, it would always crack and crumble into dust beneath me. So, with that in mind, the deductive solution was to abandon these futile efforts and, instead, work to create its opposite. Disorder. Destruction.

Chaos.

And that was my entire focus now. It was freeing actually, in an even more complete way than I had yet experienced in all the years I’d been Professor Chaos. Because I wasn’t distracted anymore. Though I had become Chaos out of a need to act out my darker impulses, I had still continued to pander to popular expectations and tried to function within the standards set by society and my idiotic parents. And my feminine persona had distracted me even more, leading me further away from Chaos’ true potential.

No longer.

Now, I had one single goal before me: to bring insanity to the world. And I had a specific means to do just this: with the flute and the twisting influence of Nyarlathotep.

I had never been more singular in my outlook on life.

And I was happy to give back to the world what I had been given all my life (turnabout and fair play and all that, right?), but my partner had been harboring even grander thoughts.

It came out during one of our information briefings. General Disarray had recently gone back to that bookstore to obtain some more information for us. He hadn’t told me exactly how he was able to do that. He as much insinuated that he threatened tidbits out of the Cult members that frequented there, but I had started to suspect that he might have an actual ‘in’ with them somehow, since what he came back with was usually too good and detailed to have been threatened out. He usually even had a book or folder of clippings. But he never went into detail, and I never pushed the issue. His results were too good, and my sights were focused on our goal and immediate practical work.

Disarray was showing me a rough sketch of R’lyeh he had obtained from his last visit. It had been drawn by a man from the early nineteenth century who claimed to have seen this place in a fevered dream, and, shortly after creating it, had fallen completely mad (surprise) and been condemned to a sanatorium for the rest of his life. Disarray was pointing out an area almost in the center, marked simply, ‘where They sleep.’ “That’s where the Old Ones are,” he said, “where they lie ‘dead but dreaming.’”

“But Nyarlathotep doesn’t sleep, right?” I asked, confirming my understanding of the mythos. “He can move between the worlds.”

“Right,” Disarray responded, “but when we get there, we’ll have to know where the others will be.”

“‘When we get there?’ What are you talking about?” I asked, glancing up at him. That was the first time I had heard that thought mentioned by my partner.

“After we bring chaos to this world, it stands to reason that we’ll want to leave it behind. They’ll be nothing left anyway. Plus, if we go into R’lyeh, then the chaos will have an even greater effect and it’ll spread even quicker.”

I blinked at him. I knew what we had been working toward. I had been under absolutely no false impressions that what we were doing would not leave the world in desolation, altering it forever with no hope of reversing the effects. I knew we were dealing with things much bigger and older
than we were, and giving those powerful, evil forces the means to destroy human civilization. Even the animals would start to go crazy, and there would be no sound mind left on the planet. But that was the first time I had thought of an ‘after.’ What we would do after the world was overtaken by chaos. It honestly had yet to cross my mind. What Disarray was saying made sense. We would leave the ruined world behind and cross over into a new world.

And, honestly, I didn’t care what was waiting for us there. It couldn’t have been any worse than here, where nothing I ever tried to do, say or create ever ended in anything other than desolation anyway. Many said this planet was already dying anyway. Why shouldn’t I help it along? Let the world drown in its own chaos, I would remove myself from it even further.

I would leave it all to rot, and I would not look back.

We determined that, to get into R’lyeh ourselves, we had to build a gate to get there. My deal with Nyarlathotep would get us through, but we needed a physical doorway to contain the portal that would open for us. We drew up a diagram of the gate on the other side, compiled from various accounts and documents from Disarray’s files and a few pages of the *Necronomicon* itself. We decided to build it in the woods behind my house. That way, it was close, but also well concealed. There was an area back there that had once been cleared for one reason or another, and then abandoned (that’s stellar city planning for you). No one ever went back there. The road leading to it had long since grown over with shrubs and small trees, so there was no risk of people finding it. The crews had left huge piles of dirt and chunks of rock, which they were probably going to use to create a foundation for something. We could use those same materials to build our gate. I had found the clearing years ago during a few particularly bad events during seventh grade. It had been my own private escape then, and it would serve as the setting for a more definite one now.

I had borrowed a couple tools from my dad’s shed to aid in our construction. It being early December, and not really fix-it season, I didn’t think he’d miss them.

I should have known better.

Only my obsessively anal-retentive father would check his shed a month into winter just to check that everything was in its proper place even when he was typically the only one who ever went in there.

And who was the first person he naturally accused when something was out of place?

“Butters!”

I couldn’t help but appreciate the banal predictability.

I was in my room when I heard the familiar shout. “Yes?” I called back.

“Butters, come down here, we need to talk!”

*Oh, joy,* I thought to myself. Talks with my father never ended well. For me.

I reluctantly put away my textbook. I had been having a momentary lapse of normalcy, studying for finals the next week. It was intriguing that my life now revolved around the contents of another, much older, text which I found significantly more worthwhile than calculus. I headed downstairs to face the accuser. Half of the time my father punished me for things, I had had absolutely nothing to do with whatever issue he had invented. Three times out of ten, he’d changed the rules on me or added a new one, so I really had no chance of defending myself then. The rest of the time… I was
actually guilty. The last percentage was noticeably small (proof of how often I was ‘in trouble’), but in reality it had gone up over the years. This was thanks in large part to my feminine persona appearing and reappearing later in my teenage years. But, it was also because I didn’t care if I got in trouble that much anymore. I used to be paranoid as anything, at the time still desperately trying to please my parents.

But I had grown out of that delusional state.

Besides, they would find reasons to punish me regardless, so why should I waste my energies trying to avoid the inevitable?

I expected that this time, knowing what I had recently done, was one of the actually guilty occurrences. But this instance was further unusual in that I had to lie about it. Outright lying was relatively new territory for me. I, in any sense, always favored half-truths and word play as opposed to outright lying. It began as younger Butters not wanting to do anything against the rules and progressed into Chaos enjoying the thrill of manipulation. With more of Chaos’ influence on me lately, I had been exercising that talent more as well.

I made my way into my father’s study. This room was understandably his favorite place for these confrontations. Here, he had the power, and I was simply a pawn to be sacrificed. Or however it was he saw me. The rules in this house had never been fair.

Oh, just you wait, dear father, till you see what I’ve got planned.

He stood next to his armchair rather than sat. I had nearly reached him in height, and I was pretty certain that bothered the hell out of him, since he could no longer lord it over me physically as he had once done. His only tool now was his voice, which came out as always, clipped, succinct, and the words hardly ever varied:

“Butters, do you know why I called you down here?”

“No,” I muttered. Lie number one.

“Well,” my father said, lifting his chin in an attempt to maintain power, “would you like to tell me why I am missing two things from my shed?”

“If I knew,” I said blankly, “I would tell you.” Lie number two.

“Don’t play coy with me, Butters,” my father snapped, his face flushed red with rage. “I suppose you think you’re being very clever, but this is serious.” I personally thought there were much more serious issues going on in the world than an absent shovel, but maybe that was just me. “If there’s one thing your mother and I can’t stand, son, it’s this constant disregard for order!” You don’t say. “This house is to be run neat,” Dad shouted, slamming his hand down on the back of his armchair, “and tidy,” he finished with another slam. “And when things go missing—”

“Can we be done?” I interrupted. My father stood back and blinked in alarm. Oh, dear, oh, dear! Had I opposed him? Oh gracious, what ever would happen to his perfect home now?

“As long as you live in my house under my rules, you will do as you’re told mister.”

Oh, he was just asking for it now.
My parents had stood in my way long enough. Badgered me long enough. Tried to sculpt this perfect child out of little Leopold, and in so doing had created a monster. Their tactics had all failed. Their minds were—

Their minds were—

Perfect targets.

“Whatever,” I muttered to my father, to end the first of what would become a few sessions of rising up against him. The tool thing was never resolved. Let Dad go crazy over a couple missing things for now. We’d see just how crazy he could get.

I had my plans for that evening, and they couldn’t go undisturbed. But he’d get his. He and my mother both. They’d see. They’d soon know the consequences of their actions. I was gonna enjoy this.

—–

There was one immediate obstacle in our path – the Coon.

The guy had been following me lately like a very annoying pest, much more persistently than he ever had before (Butters could only dream of receiving this much attention). I supposed the rest of the League heroes had appointed him as my personal wrangler. Though I had tried to work with them for a short period, the League and Chaos were, and always would be, naturally opposing forces. Their group wanted to maintain order; I wanted to annihilate it. However, my greatest, and first true, adversary was the Coon. We had been performing this dance the longest, before the rest of the former “Friends” appeared on the scene. Even before Mysterion. Thus, we both knew best how the other operated, which meant he could most easily thwart my plans, validating the League’s choice. But, of course, conversely, I could also predict his moves and prepare counter-measures accordingly. Little did the League know the mistake they had made in setting the Coon on me – a familiar obstacle was also the most easily overcome.

Case in point: I had a plan this evening to try and shake him from my trail.

Not being the best at physical prowess, I utilized my mind for personal defense. I was really good at evasive strategies (what does that say about my level of patheticness?) and setting traps. Tonight, I played the part of the poacher.

I planned to catch a Coon in my proverbial net. Now, if this was simply Cartman, I’d throw a bag of Cheesy Poofs under a suspended cage and wait for him to show. But, unfortunately, the Coon tended to be a bit more... discerning. So, I had to be more cunning than that.

Of course, there was also no reason why I couldn’t secure a few more items for my evening’s cache.

So, that night found me standing at the corner of an arbitrary rooftop downtown, picked for no other reason than it provided an open view of the neighboring vicinity.

It was a rather cold night, even for Colorado at this time of year. I breathed out into the chill night air, and saw my breath curl out in front of me like a miniscule ghost, lingering just long enough to claim it existed, then vanishing as if it had never been. That’s how I felt about my feminine persona now. She had existed for a time, but now she was gone, vanished without a trace. Disappeared back to wherever she had come from within me.

And, as far as I was concerned at the time, she would stay there.
Still, I couldn’t deny her residual influence on me, however small. After all, I wouldn’t have been able to accomplish this task without her.

I extracted the flute from the loop on my belt, and brought it up in front of my lips. The metal was cold even through my gloves, and just about burned my lips with its icy touch. (All the moisture in them had been sapped by the frigid air, so I ran no risk of them being stuck to the mouthpiece.) I drew in a deep breath, the coldness stinging my lungs. Then, I played.

Tonight, there was no target. Tonight, I would let chance decide who would fall next into insanity’s embrace. Chaos was random after all.

I stood up there, playing, for almost ten minutes before I heard any consequences of my efforts. But it wasn’t maniacal laughter or crazed screams that I heard; it was a screeching, a piercing whine of metal on metal coming from behind my back. It succeeded in breaking my concentration and I moved the flute away from my mouth, the last note still lingering in the night air, as if the cold gave sound ephemeral substance as well, and gripped it instead in my right hand. I turned around to locate the source of the heinous noise.

The screeching stopped, and claws swung forward after leaving deep gashes in the heating unit perched on top of the roof. “That tune’s getting old, Chaos.”

There he was. The Coon. I guess what you’d call the source of my greatest frustration. And not just in this facet of my life, but all of them. The whole cliché ‘unrequited love’ thing didn’t really suit me, but wasn’t that what I had? Or, more accurately, lacked?

But I wasn’t acting that role tonight. I had given that up, shoved it into the back of my closet with my make-up and skirts. Tonight, I was focused on different reasons for wanting to catch him unawares. And I refused to submit to any of the bull crap he usually dished out.

But that didn’t mean I wasn’t making it personal.

He had undoubtedly heard the music, and determined its location, finding me as well. I hadn’t exactly made it hard for him, but I didn’t care. I wanted him to find me. It even appeared as if he had me literally cornered as I stood at the exact point of two sides of the building. Still, I acted as if I had nothing other than the usual planned.

“Why must you persist in following me, Coon?” I asked, maintaining my charade.

“Psh,” he rolled his eyes, ever the mocking menace, “because it’s my job, dicks for brains.” He pointed a pudgy thumb toward his chest, drawing attention to the giant ‘C’ emblazoned there. “Superhero,” he said, as if explaining shapes to a baby, then switched to point his index finger of the same hand directly at me. “Supervillain. Do the fucking math.”

The fact that he thought I measured up to the ‘super’ standard did not go unnoticed in my mind, but I quickly moved past those implications. The simplicity with which he stated our roles made it seem like he still viewed this whole affair as just a game. A couple of kids running around the town in costumes trying to out-do each other. Well, I had moved beyond that now. My recent goals were much more serious than they had ever been as a lost little fourth-grader.

Now, I really was trying to bring the world to its knees.

Letting the irony drip as thickly as it could, I addressed him, “I appreciate the attention, Coon, but I’ve more important things to do than play games with you tonight.” That said, I slipped the flute into its secure loop, and broke into a run, heading straight along the nearest ledge, feigning that I was
trying to escape past him, down the only ladder that reached up there. He ran to cut me off, but, at
the very last second, I twisted and went down, ducking underneath his reach. I immediately
straightened up again and ran in the other direction, toward the far wall. I heard him stumble and
shout after me, but I didn’t pause. I reached the far corner of the building and flipped over the side,
grabbing onto a large pipe I knew was there to guide me down, where I landed squarely on my feet.
I looked back up toward the ladder at the opposite side of the wall, where I could make out the
Coon’s face, annoyed and incredulous. I grinned, gave him a little wave, and ran off down the alley.
I thought I vaguely heard a curse and the phrase “little fucker!” before the clanking of metal rungs,
which meant I was being pursued. That didn’t matter; I had a good head-start, and, if there is one
thing I could be sure of, it was that I was a faster runner than the Coon.

I bolted down the alley and made my way between the adjoining buildings. I kept a fast pace, but
made sure that the Coon could still follow me. I could hear him puffing along behind, his
stubbornness winning out over his need for oxygen. He was about one city block behind me.

Perfect, I thought.

I turned into the next alley, this one a dead end, and used my momentum to jump over a large section
of space just past the opening. I landed on the far side and skidded to a halt, turning around as I did.
The Coon appeared at the opening a few seconds later, clearly winded, and stopped there for a
moment to catch his breath. Again, I was seemingly trapped.

“You’re not getting away this time, Chaos!” he yelled, already acting victorious. “This time, I’m
taking you down!”

I grinned wickedly. “Come and try it, then. I dare you.”

The taunt worked, and he barreled straight toward me. I stood my ground, apparently in preparation
for his attack, but before he could get to me, my trap sprung into action. He stepped onto the patch of
ground that I had jumped over, and immediately his foot was caught.

I had set up the elaborate mechanism the night before, when I knew I wasn’t being observed. I had in
my possession one of those tools you use in a show store to measure your foot size (an old gift from
Bebe that she had procured from Clyde’s dad’s store when I had been trying to determine the
difference in male and female shoe sizes). Having no further use for it, it had become the main snare
in my trap. As soon as the Coon planted his right foot in the contraption, it spring-loaded shut,
pinning his toes and the back of his heel in its vice-like grip. Then, two other metal panels that I had
added flipped over, wrapping around his ankle, further securing him in place. That done, I reached
out and tripped an invisible wire directly to my right, and two cables shot down from either side of
the roof and perfectly snared the Coon’s wrists, pulling his arms out to his side so he couldn’t
maneuver his short claws.

And that was it, I had him. I had caught the Coon in my trap.

The music had no effect on him, for whatever reason, so I had to get creative with another way to
bring him down. Something that would stop him being a throbbing thorn in my side. Disarray didn’t
know about this part of the plan. I was simply supposed to go and play the music to spread more of
the insanity. This victory was all mine. I knew the Coon would be on patrol alone, and he wouldn’t
call for back-up; his ego wouldn’t allow it.

I had him all to myself.

He was mine to do with as I saw fit. But, before I went through the end of my plan, I wanted to have
a little fun with him first.
So I did what any villain worth his salt would do with his adversary trapped in his clutches: I gloated like hell.

I laughed wickedly. “Impressive, isn’t it, Coon? Amazing how something so simple can be so effective.”

He was struggling back and forth, trying to free himself from the wires, but they were construction-grade. Only steel-cutters could tear threw those filaments. He glared daggers at me. “You fucking bitch, what the hell is this?!”

“A trap. And you fell for it.” I was on a high. I had won. I planned to leave him stuck out there in the cold all night. He wouldn’t freeze to death, not with all the layers to his costume, but he would come close, and then he and the rest of the League would know that once-playful Butters meant business now.

But, then the unthinkable happened.

He got loose.

He reached his index fingers to the side of his thumbs and flicked the base of those respective claws. A hidden panel extended and those claws became twice as long, long enough to reach the wires ensnaring his wrists, and they sliced clean through.

My mouth dropped open in shock. “You shouldn’t be able to cut those!” I yelled, appalled.

He shook the wire remnants off his hands, then bent down and sliced the metal panel off the back of the foot contraption, allowing him to simply pull his foot back and out from its hold. He straightened up and wiggled the metal-tipped digits of his right hand at me. “New modifications,” he stated simply.

My bubble of euphoria burst and I crumbled.

I dropped to my knees, my gloved hands clutching at the hair I could reach through the gap in my helmet, pulling on it so hard I almost tore some of it out. “NO! No, no, NOOO!!” I screamed. Why? Why could absolutely nothing I tried to do ever come out right? All of my plans led to ruin, all my ideas turned to dust. I was a complete and utter failure as a villain, as a person.

I couldn’t even create someone worthwhile.

I couldn’t keep dealing with this, I couldn’t keep facing my failures over and over and over again. It had to stop. I had to make it stop.

I looked up. The Coon stood there, facing me, almost as if he was waiting for me to get over my momentary breakdown so he could attack properly.

If it was a fight he wanted, well then, by God, I was going to give him one.

“Fine, then,” I whispered, my eyes narrowing underneath my silver helmet, “let’s make it personal.”

I rushed toward him, and saw a flicker in his eyes, betraying his surprise at my offensive action. But it only lasted a split second, then he barred his teeth like his animal namesake, and prepped his metal claws to defend himself.

I was too quick for him though. I ducked under his first swipe with his claws, and blocked his
second, though the points did dig into my arm. I winced slightly, knowing the pain was much more severe than I was currently feeling, but I was too focused on my objective. I quickly pulled my free right arm back and punched the Coon in the face as hard as I could manage.

“OW!” he yelped as I pulled my injured arm away from him. “You fuck, you broke my nose!” There was indeed blood dripping down his face, but I wasn’t sure if I’d punched him that hard. Oh, I had wanted to, but I honestly wasn’t sure if I was that strong, and Eric did tend to blow things out of proportion. Still, I had hurt him; that was all that mattered.

I was at a severe disadvantage though. I didn’t carry any weapons with me, as I never (typically) engaged in hand-to-hand fights. I cursed myself now for not at least carrying something as a back-up, a tool of last resort. I had to make do with whatever I could get my hands on.

Unfortunately, what was at hand was not much. The alleyway was essentially empty except for the remains of my failed trap and an empty garbage can at the far end.

I made a dash for the can, planning on using the lid to knock my opponent unconscious, but I hardly made it two steps before the Coon had his wide arms around me. He’d grabbed me from behind and pinned me in a bear hug, crushing my arms to my sides, even lifting me off the ground a bit. I growled out loudly in frustration and did the only thing I could do and swung my head backwards, connecting his unyielding head with my equally unyielding, but also very hard, helmet. He let out a groan and dropped me. I landed in a bit of a heap, trying to recover from nearly being squashed and, unfortunately, a bit dizzy myself from the cranial collision. I finally managed to recover enough to scramble to my feet and attempt to run for the garbage lid again, but, just as my nonexistent luck would have it, the Coon had recovered first, and this time, he grabbed me by the shoulders and threw me to the side, slamming my back firmly against the brick wall of the alley. I gasped for breath, but he made it even more difficult for me by pressing his forearm against my neck, right under my chin. His other hand grabbed and held my wrists together in front of my stomach. He leaned his substantial weight into me, pinning me securely to the wall.

I started to unreasonably panic.

I attempted to struggle free, but it was like I was in a vice. I couldn’t get away. This wouldn’t stop, he wouldn’t let go. No matter how many times I tried to break his grip, he wouldn’t give an inch. I couldn’t break his hold on me.

“Why?!” I shouted, desperate, almost pathetically pleading at my adversary. “Why won’t you just let me go?!”

“Because I want you to give me some fucking answers, asshole!” he yelled in my face. “Tell me what you’re planning!”

Mysterion’s words, coming out of the Coon’s mouth. Maybe he was just their puppet now, their errand boy sent to handle the trash while the rest of the League took care of the real threats. I stopped thrashing and gave myself a moment, looking straight down at the space between us, breathing hard, and told him in a dark tone, “Mysterion already knows. I’m bringing real chaos to this town now.”

“How?” he demanded, “with that shitty music?”

I let out a small laugh, in spite of myself. “Tch. It’s not just a bunch of notes. It’s a call. To Nyarlathotep. I call, he hears it, and brings his madness to those caught in its wake.”

“That Nyar-guy again?” he asked incredulously. “So, what’s the deal, Chaos? How’d you get in cahoots with the likes of him?”
“I did just that – made a deal. We both want to watch the world fall into true madness.” Why shouldn’t I simply confess the whole plan to him? It’s not as if he was really going to stop what I’d already set in motion.

And then a thought occurred to me, one that I hadn’t planned but seemed just crazy enough to be plausible. Crazy was the theme of late, anyway. I couldn’t help myself, I had to tempt him.

I glanced up, catching his eyes with my own and ventured to reason with him. “I thought you would understand that, Coon. Don’t you enjoy making people squirm?”

“Yeah, when I’m doing it, not when it’s little bitches like you.”

I ignored the insult. “Then help me.” I stated. “Help me make the world drown in its own insanity. Then, we’ll head to R’lyeh ourselves, and leave behind the chaos we’ve created.” I’d just given away more of my plan, but that didn’t matter now, not when I was suddenly clinging so firmly to this wild possibility.

“You’re trying to get into that creepy place?”

I tried harder, trying to catch him in my words. “Tempting, isn’t it? A place where you can get away with anything. Where morals have no meaning. Where you’re free to do anything you could ever want.”

He was quiet for a moment, his gaze never faltering, and then, “Any... anything I want?”

I smiled. He had loosened his hold on my wrists, so I reached up to grip the front of his outfit, pulling him ever so slightly nearer to me. I hardly dared to consider what I was so close to achieving. “Name it and it’s yours, Coon. You could have masses at your feet. Cities crumble beneath you. If you come with me, you’d have the world.”

He was hesitating, I could see it. For a moment, he was lured by my proposition, into the fantasy I’d painted for him.

Then, the glorious moment was passed, and he snapped back into his obnoxious tone. “I don't want your world, Chaos. I'm the motherfucking COON!” What that was supposed to argue, I really had no idea. If anything, I supposed it would have strengthened the argument for him to join me. But, Eric being Eric, his words did not always follow logical conclusions. At least to sane people.

But that list was slowly shrinking.

He unpinned me and instead grabbed my shoulders, throwing me to the side. I landed hard on the ground.

I slowly got to my feet. I saw the Coon staring at me, taking in my appearance, and he seemed a little sickened by what he saw. I didn’t blame him. I probably looked like how I felt: a mess. I was dirty and scratched from the concrete and the brick wall, I could tell I had several bruises forming, my hair was wild from when I had grabbed it, sticking out at odd ends from my helmet, and I knew I had huge bags under my eyes, a result of my considerable lack of sleep lately.

I didn’t need a mirror to know that I looked like hell.

I saw the Coon’s eyebrows rise up underneath his mask. “Dude,” he said, “if I didn’t know better, I’d say that evil god or whatever is starting to drive you a bit more unstable than usual, too.”

I glared at him and spat out, “Why would you care?”
I had obviously lost this fight. I was done, beaten. There was nothing left for me to do but make my
debated retreat.

But, before I did, I wanted to get in one last kick.

And I did just that: I ran up to him and kicked him with the force of all of my boiling frustrations, my
embarrassments, my inadequacies.

I kicked that fucker right in the balls.

He let out a loud wail, but I didn’t stay to bask in the satisfaction of the pain I’d caused him. I turned
on my heels and ran. I ran away from that alley, ran away from him, wishing I could outrun my
failures so easily.

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I heard reports on the news later confirming that seven people had suffered symptoms similar to
Tweek that evening and had been taken to the asylum for containment and treatment. None had any
history of mental illness. The only thing they all had in common was that they had been in the same
area of downtown earlier that evening and, gathered from their mad babbling and screaming, kept
referencing some kind of music.

Seven. Well, at least the evening hadn’t been a complete loss.

Though I’d divulged a good portion of my plans, I hadn’t admitted that Disarray and I were already
working on a version of the gate. That part would remain a mystery to the League. So, we would
keep working on it, and I would continue to play the notes, bringing more and more people to their
wits’ end. I didn’t care who I caught in my net, they all deserved it. They all deserved nothing more
than the purity of sheer madness. I was doing them all a favor, really, sending them into insane bliss.

It was more than I’d ever received from the world.

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You know what sucks?

Getting a mid-coital text message.

No, I’m totally serious. When your phone is still close by and someone texts you, and you’re all, like, dude, weak, cuz you just climaxed. It sucks.

Okay, so this one didn’t come exactly mid-coital, but it was during foreplay. Which sucks just as much. Red was down to her delightful black 32-B (or, as I often complimented her, more like a B+) and matching lace panties, which I had promised to strip off, or begin to anyway, with my teeth. I ran my tongue across her tiny pelvic bones, rough taste buds discovering a new ticklish spot against her smooth, pearlescent skin. When my motherfucking phone went off.

I don’t keep it on vibrate or anything, so that annoying beeping started happening right when we were getting to the part I’d been waiting for all fucking day. I tried to ignore it, but Red definitely noticed, and finally said, “Sweetie, I think your phone’s going off.”

“Ugh,” I groaned, “I know.”

“D’you think you should get it?”

I lay forward onto her flat stomach, and pressed a kiss above her bellybutton. “Don’t want to,” I muffled into her skin.

It beeped again.

“Kenny,” Red whined, kicking me in the side a little, “go get it, it’s bugging me.”

“Fine,” I muttered, sitting back. Red smirked up at me, letting me know that we’d be able to shift right back into it as soon as I shut off my phone or turned it on silent. I walked over to where I’d left my jeans, dug the phone out of my pocket, and started to turn down the volume. Until I saw what the text was.

I glared at the name of the sender. “Who is it?” Red wondered.

“Cartman,” I growled. “Eric Motherfucking Cockblocking Cartman! Hold on, I’ve gotta yell at that fucker.”

“Kenny—“

“It’s a dude thing, hold on, babe.”

“Kennyyyyyy…”

Oh, I wanted to get back to it just as much as she did, but in life, as in the League, Cartman was (as if this was any surprise) pissing me off a lot lately. This was just kind of the final straw. I wanted to slow the fuck down in my personal life and enjoy as much time with my girlfriend as I could before I as Mysterion had to run off to God knows where to stop the inevitable second (or was
it third or fourth?) try for the Cultists to raise Cthulhu. I hadn’t been called out that night, so of
fucking course I was gonna stay in and pleasure my girlfriend just as long as I Goddamn pleased. Except, no, I had to get a text message from the person I always hated getting text messages from.

So I hit the ‘call sender’ button and waited three and a half rings for him to pick up, giving
him barely enough time to say, “Hello?”

“Dude, what have I told you guys about texting me after 8 pm?” I hollered, cutting right to
the chase.

“Uh… nothing?”

“Well, new rule,” I snapped. “No fuckin’ texting me after 8 pm.” Behind me, I heard Red
laugh. At least she was finding humor in it, because my testosterone levels sure as fuck weren’t.

“Jesus, sorry, what, you tied up or somethin’?”

“Almost literally, yeah.”

“What’s that supposed t—heh, Kenny, gross!”

“Shut the fuck up and just don’t do it again,” I warned him.

“Just read the text, fuckin’ playboy fag,” Cartman muttered.

“That insult doesn’t even make sense!” I shouted back before hanging up. I then switched
my phone off and tossed it back down on top of my jeans.

I turned back around to find that, while I’d been yelling and arguing, Red had sat up, and
now had both of her hands positioned delicately over the center clasp of her satin bra. Away went
the clasp, off came the lingerie, and immediately my mind was miles away from whatever the hell I’d
just had a phone conversation about.

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As fucking incredible as things had turned out the night before, I did check my text inbox the
next morning. It took me a little while to remember, since we had to go through the routine first, of
waking up at quarter of seven, helping each other wake up for a few minutes, then figuring out who
was going to shower first and have to deal with the first ‘oh, good morning’ stares from her parents.
Nah, they were great people, they just liked being all snarky about the fact that Red and I were not at
all secretive about what went on in her bedroom whenever I stayed the night. And, I mean, yeah, it
was really hard to hide it; I just wanted to be on that girl all the time. When we went downstairs to
breakfast, Red missed pouring granola into her bowl twice from me either tugging at her waist or
sucking on the skin of her neck from behind. She laughed the whole time, but insisted, “If I make a
mess, you’re cleaning it up.” Which I totally did, because I am a Goddamn chivalrous boyfriend.
Or, had become one, anyway. Which did feel pretty damn awesome.

The text that had come in the night before, though, was kind of an awful wakeup call. Not
that I ever forgot my duties or what was going on that needed attention, I just liked keeping my time
with Red separate from all that. Sooner or later, though, things were bound to cross over, which was
why I kept telling the guys to keep things normal as long as any of us possibly could. Shit was
getting real, and that text kind of solidified just how real:

*Bad game tonight, Cartman had texted in code, too foggy. Lost anyway.*
He’d gone after Chaos. Lost didn’t necessarily mean lost, I thought, but it definitely meant Chaos had gotten away with something. I discovered a part of what that was when I arrived with Red at school that morning to find Stan, Kyle, Token, Craig and Clyde all hovered around a more irate than usual Cartman. Kyle, adding insult to injury, was laughing his ass off, gripping onto Stan’s arm in order to stay standing and breathing.

“It’s not funny, Kyle!” Cartman was snapping at him when my girlfriend and I walked up hand in hand, in that same slightly-off intonation from the phone call the night before. “Shut up!”

“Situation maybe not,” Kyle laughed, “but the way your mom fixed it is fucking—” He immediately got cut off on his own laughter, and I soon saw why.

Cartman was stewing, and had a horribly-done splint and bandage job done on his nose. It was awful. There was off-set gauze tape slapped shoddily on over a cotton swab and small metal splint on the left side of his nose. A bit of his left cheek was bruised as well, and he was standing in what looked like a fairly uncomfortable position against his locker. Red and I couldn’t help but join Kyle in laughing, and it seemed like Token and Clyde had already gotten their fill, so Kyle was glad to have added opinions.

“Oh, wow,” my girlfriend giggled.

“Dude, you hit a wall or something?” I snickered.

“For your information, Kenny,” Cartman fumed, “I was mugged.”

“That’s really funny for some reason,” I said.

He went from silently furious into overly vocal the second Craig snapped a picture with his iPhone. “Craig!” Cartman sputtered. “Weak! What the fuck?!”

Craig shrugged and went back to his iPhone, scrolling through and most likely starting up either a text chain or a Facebook thread. “What?” he said. “It is kinda funny.”

“It’s not funny, Craig, you’re a dick!”

“Yup,” said Craig. “But at least I’m not a whiny pussy who can’t put up with a bruised nose.”

“It’s broken, asshole!” Craig passively reached over and punched Cartman in the shoulder. “The fuck?!”

“Is your shoulder broken now?” Craig muttered.

“Maybe!”

“See? You’re a pussy.”

“Seconded,” said Token.

“Third,” Clyde put in.

“Hey, sweetie?” Red said, sidling up to me as the guys carried on with insults.

“Hmm?” I wondered, rubbing her back as I looked down to speak to her.

“No offense, but I think I’m gonna go find the girls.”
“We a little too dumb for you?” I guessed.

“Right now,” my girlfriend laughed.

“Fair enough.” So she left me with a kiss, and I turned back to whatever the fray was about now.

In the, what, five seconds I’d turned away, it had apparently escalated into Cartman spouting some awful nonsense insulting Clyde, Token and Craig all at once, and turned, then, into the three of them being bigger than the situation and peaceing out. Kyle was just coming down from his laughing jag, though he was struggling to catch his breath. To the point that Stan had to ask, “Dude, you gonna be okay?”

“God, I don’t know,” Kyle said, “I haven’t laughed that hard in a while.”

“Sorry I wasn’t here from the start,” I smirked. “Seems like I missed something.”

“What’s not to miss?” Kyle grinned at me. “It’s right fucking there on Cartman’s face!”

“Kyle, swear to God—“

“Yo, shut up,” I snapped at Cartman. “Bad nose job or not, I’m still mad at you about yesterday.”

“Oh, God,” said Stan, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, “what happened yesterday?”

“I’m sure you guys got a text last night?” I asked the two of them. Cartman was continuing ragging on about something, but none of us were listening.

“Oh, yeah,” Stan said, “that was weird. Cartman, what was that all about?”

“Tell you when we have a meeting,” said the brooding fatass.

“Ugh, whatever,” Kyle passed off. “So why’re you mad about it?”

“I was at Red’s,” I said, answering Kyle but glaring at Cartman.

“Oh,” said Stan and Kyle in unison.

“Yeah, that does suck,” Kyle agreed.

“Know what?” said Cartman, turning around to start digging through his locker, “screw all you guys.”

Stan, Kyle and I exchanged a brief glance and equally confused shrug to pass off a ‘whatever’ on the whole thing, and then, after a second, it seemed slated that I’d be left to talk something or other out with Cartman alone.

“Come on, dude,” said Kyle, tugging Stan along by the sleeve, “I wanna see if we can get our lab results from last week before the chem final tomorrow.”

“Are we even being tested on that?” Stan wondered. “I thought that was overlap.”

“Dude, of course it’s gonna be on the test, why the hell wouldn’t it be?”
“Okay, okay.”

Stan managed a quick wave back at me while Kyle kept ranting on about his final exam anxiety, and I picked up on that while Cartman had his ‘broken’ face shoved in his locker to dig something out. I also just happened to pick up on how Kyle still hadn’t let go of Stan’s arm the whole time they were walking away, even when Stan reached over with his free hand to nudge at Kyle’s hat, obviously threatening war against his hair. After that, they rounded a corner, which was slightly disappointing. Watching those guys was like a spectator sport. (A spectator sport that usually ended in either a tie or a forfeit, but still.) So I was just left to contemplate exactly how right I was about them for a few seconds before Cartman shoved something back at me, even with his head still jammed into his locker. I had to wonder if he was stuck.

“The hell’s this?” I asked him.

Cartman forced a sigh. “It’s from my mom,” he said. “Got it outta her last night when she fixed my nose.”

“You cry to her for it?” I snorted.

“Just look at it, stupid dick,” Cartman muttered.

Pissed at him (essentially for just being him) but slightly intrigued, I stole a glance at the notebook he’d handed me. It was a tiny black steno pad, with only a few pages filled out in Cartman’s near-illegible handwriting (and horrible grade-school grammar). But the first page was written out entirely in capitals, and read: TRUTH ABOUT DAD.

Oh.

…Oh.

And the pages that followed were words Cartman would never say. They were his mother’s words, and he’d most likely written all of this out while keeping the pad of paper out of her sight, getting down her every word to the best of his easily-distracted mind’s capability.

“You’re being helpful,” I said, glaring at the notepad, then back at him. “Why?”

Cartman scowled, then said one of the more appropriate answers I think he’d ever given: “Cuz I’m not losing fuckin’ anything to Butters, ’kay? Fucking Butters.”

“Oookay,” I replied, not wanting him to go into any more detail. I get when Cartman has grudges and obsessions and all, but hearing him go off on derogatory tangents was so low on my list of shit I could bear listening to, I’d sooner stick my head in a blender. (I have never actually died from sticking my head in a blender, by the way, but I did bleed to death on a cheese grater once.) (Cheese grater. Yeah.)

But I was glad to have the notebook. At least I finally had Mrs. Cartman’s own words on however the hell Jack Tenorman had had any Cult influence on her life (if any, as, to my knowledge, Eric Cartman had been the result of a one-night stand). And I had a long-ass study hall that day, during which I could read it. Now, if Red had been in my study hall, I wouldn’t have even remembered that notepad existed, but since she wasn’t, I had plenty of time to read through what Cartman’s mom had to say.

Jack Tenorman had been with the Denver Broncos when he’d fucked Lianne Cartman nine months before the day the bastard first breathed, but long before he’d even been signed, Tenorman had been a part of the Cult. Lianne had apparently known something was ‘funny’ about him, and
thought it gave him a ‘dark and mysterious edge’ that the rest of the team just didn’t have. So she’d fucked him and he’d apparently promised her he’d come back if he needed her.

Which, a few months after that one-night stand, he did.

Because, according to what was on the pad, the Cult had attempted a séance earlier that year which they thought hadn’t worked, and was looking for a woman who ‘met her qualifications’ (read: was pregnant and stupid) to try again. Thinking Tenorman was essentially just coming back for another go, she went for it, but left before things got too ‘out of hand.’

So, essentially… let’s see. The Cult had done something to my mother while I was in the womb, and I’d been born an Immortal. Then they’d tried something out on Mrs. Cartman, which only led me to believe that this suddenly made Cartman’s predisposition for being a manipulative asshole bent on warping things to his will kind of justified. Still horrible, but justified. It justified, too, his ease for wrangling Cthulhu during the Gulf crisis. His father was a Cultist who had tried to get something done for Cthulhu using his own bastard son. Yeah, I’d say that explained Cartman’s link pretty solidly.

The fact that he was acting… rather normal, that day, led me to believe that Cartman was stirred and possibly even scared by that fact. Indeed, Cartman hated knowing that some things were beyond his control. So I felt like I’d kind of won this. He wasn’t going to gloat about being another kid affected by the Cult (even though I was still pretty pissed about that anyway), because it bothered him that maybe he’d’ve been born slightly average if his whore mom hadn’t gone off to get some ritual done on her. At least it wasn’t successful. He wasn’t cursed. Just… linked.

But it was a link we could use, and a link we talked about at a quick meeting the four of us—me, the bastard, and Stan and Kyle—decided to have right after school (before Kyle had to be all lame and go study or something). Red was working that afternoon, and I told her I’d stop in if I could, but was essentially planning on spending the night diving into more planning against the Cult, and against Chaos.

We carpooled to the base, and from the start, Stan and Kyle were filled in on everything in the little notepad Cartman had passed off on me earlier. Joining us as well was Henrietta, who had cut school that day to re-read the Necronomicon. Her reactions were, as usual, silent and dull. The guys, however, were more vocal. “Dude,” was Kyle’s first reaction, “your mom sucks.”

“Don’t be a dick, Kyle!” Cartman barked across the table. “I don’t see your mom winnin’ any awards!”

“Guys, can we shut up and focus on the main issue in all this?” I cut in before things could get too heated. The two backed off, and the air settled a little. “So we know that Jack Tenorman did play a part in the Cult when I was cursed,” I said, just to have it out there. “It pisses me off, but it’s just… one more thing I’ll deal with. Cartman,” I added, “thanks for giving me that notebook and talking to your mom and all, but I’m serious, if you make this about you, I’ll fucking end you.”

“Kenny, jeez—“

“I’m serious,” I added, so he wouldn’t try to make light of anything.

“Honestly,” said Henrietta, “I wouldn’t be too concerned about fatass over there.”

“Aye!” Cartman spat.

“But he could manipulate Cthulhu,” Stan reminded her.
“Which is strange, I’m not doubting that,” said the Goth. “I’m just saying, there’s no way he’s Immortal.”

“By the way, Henrietta,” I said, wanting to change the subject a little, since I really did hate it when Cartman managed to pull focus (whether or not he was the one actually doing it), “anything you come across earlier today?”

Henrietta gave me a look of pure ennui, mixed with some disdain for the ‘no smoking on the premises’ rule, and set her *Necronomicon* on the table. “I was reading about Gate rules,” she reported, sliding the book over to me. “You guys saw the Gate in R’lyeh, right?”

“Yeah,” Stan and I confirmed together.

“You’re really lucky you haven’t gone crazy, then,” Henrietta said, to Stan specifically. “Lost minds and total destruction are pleasing to the Old Ones. That Professor Chaos guy keeps speeding things up, from what I hear.”

“He’s doing them favors, isn’t he?” I wondered.

“He’s certainly not helping you any,” the Goth answered. Nodding to the book, she said, “That’s what I re-translated of the Gate description. You guys look it over and make sure it’s right. The more accurate I can picture it in my head, the closer I can read you to it, I think, next time you die and have to go there.”

I did as she asked, but still overheard Stan asking, “Can, uh… can the living go to R’lyeh, too?”

“They have before,” Henrietta answered. “R’lyeh doesn’t care if you’re dead or alive or what.”

Finding the description accurate, I slid the book over to Stan, who set one hand nervously over the pages. I saw him shiver and wince, probably remembering the awful six days he and I had spent there prior to returning to life.

“The Old Ones,” Henrietta continued, “are just down there sleeping, and dreaming of the End Time. When everything becomes black.”

“Are you still for that?” I asked her.

“I honestly don’t know,” she admitted.

“But it starts here, right?” I guessed. “It starts with Earth?” She nodded.

“From chaos to chaos, neither Cthulhu nor Nyarlathotep will stop until he’s satisfied,” said Henrietta.

“And that’s when everything’s gone, right?” Kyle guessed, making a nervous grab at Stan’s hand, where it still lay over the Goth’s book. Stan set his free hand reassuringly over Kyle’s, but leaned forward on the table to give Henrietta most of his attention.

“Pretty much.”

“Any more news on when the Cult’s planning to strike?” I asked her.

“I think there’s a general consensus of waiting to see what that Chaos guy does,” Henrietta
“Jesus,” I muttered. “What exactly is he doing? Cartman, you went after him last night, right? What the fuck happened?”

“He broke my Goddamn nose, that’s what the fuck happened.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “Craig’s right, dude, you are a pussy. Just tell me what happened.”

“Uh, bunch of people went crazy, like, seven I think, I fought him off, he t—oh, yeah.”

“What?”

“He told me he was tryin’ to get into R’lyeh,” said Cartman.

“Why?” I demanded, my gut flipping at the thought of Chaos breaking through to the in-between.

“I dunno, he didn’t say. But then this mornin’ he got all emo-angsty and told me not to say anything.” Well, I couldn’t say I wasn’t glad he did. “Oh,” he added as an afterthought, “and then he put this in my German book. I dunno why he didn’t just give it to you.”

“How do you know it’s for me?” I wondered.

Cartman rolled his eyes and handed me the envelope he’d been talking about. Sure enough, it bore on the outside nothing but a large green M. No mistaking the target recipient, that was for sure. Curious, I tore it open right there, while no one else was around, and drew out the calling card, written in Chaos’s erratic script:

*Seven o’clock,* it read. *What’s your favorite color?*

“At least he’s sending calling cards again,” said Stan, as I mulled the note over. “Did he send out *anything* for last night? Seven people, that’s ridiculous.”

“Nah, he didn’t,” Cartman griped, feeling for his bruised nose.

“ Weird,” Kyle remarked. “So, what’s it say, dude?” he asked me.

I read it off, and the other three showed similarly confused expressions, as I’d expected. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Cartman wondered.

“Your favorite color…” I read off again.

Wait.

Oh, shit.

“Red,” I let out on a whisper.

“Huh?” Stan and Kyle asked together.

“He means Red!” I shouted, slamming the card down onto the table. “That asshole! He’s really sinking low!”

“Jesus, no kidding,” said Stan, eyes wide with shock. “Does he say where?!”
“He didn’t need to,” I growled, shaking my head. “Red gets off work at seven. That fuck… that fuck!”

I stood in a rage and stormed over to the whiteboard, where we’d constructed a hierarchy of our greatest threats, and swiftly changed the positions for Chaos and McElroy, who had been, respectively, third and first. Staring at that mug shot of the scheming Professor, it was all I could do not to add a kill on sight notice to it, I was so angry.

Fuck. He was not dragging my girlfriend into this. Hell, no. He wasn’t going to take away one of the very few wonderful things in my life. Well, my night was cut out for me. No fucking way was I losing her. Not that night. Not to Chaos.

– – –

Despite Toolshed and the Human Kite’s offers to help, I had to go it alone that evening. I thanked them, of course, but I had to take on Chaos’s challenge alone. A while after the meeting ended, I suited up and set out, taking a sweep through the town, as usual, giving minor glimpses here and there so that South Park knew Mysterion was alert and on the job.

The town was cold and quiet that evening; a fresh layer of powdery snow lay on the ground, and the clouds that cast shadows across the moon seemed to be threatening more. I’d long ago made a thermal version of my Mysterion gear, using the same stuff Stan and Clyde wore underneath all their football garb, so I was well-shielded from the cold. I took position on the roof directly over the building in which Red worked, and started my watch at 6:15, just in case Chaos tried anything early.

He was awfully prompt, though.

At seven precisely, a fog rolled in that covered the moon, and that faint flute melody could be heard on the biting breeze.

Red was walking away from the building with her head tucked down, absorbing as much of her scarf’s warmth as she could. Pinched around her ears was what I could only thing would be her best defense: a set of light blue earmuffs, the kind that, due to thickness, blocked out a fair amount of sound along with the cold. Even so, I followed her, silently as I could, on the rooftops above, waiting for that moment.

It came abruptly. As Red prepared to make a right turn toward the lot where I was assuming she’d parked her car, a long, thin object fell down in front of her, blocking her like the bars along railroad tracks. It didn’t take long for me to guess what that object was, or who was holding it. I steeled myself, sought out my best route down to the ground, and waited for my moment.

Indeed, Chaos stepped around the corner, clamping his other hand around the flute he’d held out with only one to block Red’s path. She gasped and stumbled back a couple of steps, and her wide blue eyes filled with horror when they met his, so sunken and sallow they barely looked human anymore.

“Hello,” he greeted her. “Awful night to be walking alone, isn’t it?”

“W—what do you want?” Red asked, backing up a little more, her terror adding to the chill that drove a wild shiver down her spine.

It was disgusting, the scene I saw playing out below me. And it hurt, to know that Red was unaware that beneath the frigid, washed-out exterior of the manic man so intent on driving the word to madness still beat the heart of one of her closest friends. That was enough to make me remember
that I had to be careful around Chaos. If possible, I didn’t want Butters to be a casualty. Hell, I didn’t want anyone to be a casualty. As someone who knew Death all too well, it was part of my duty to direct others away from it as long as possible.

“Do you like music, my dear?” Chaos asked, advancing on her a single step. Red whimpered and scrambled to find another place to step back. “I have a couple of ideas for you this evening. One,” and here he held up the flute, taking just one more step, “I could play you a song. It’s a pretty nice tune, I think. You’ll see things you could never dream to be real. It may be unsettling, but you’ll never feel the pressures of the world again.”

“P-pressures?” Red retaliated, standing her ground despite her persistent backward walking. “I don’t feel any pressure. I like my life.”

“I see,” said Chaos, tucking the flute away. “Then perhaps you’ll prefer option two. I could put you up to a little job for me.”

“You’re Professor Chaos,” Red finally acknowledged.

“That I am.”

“I’d never do anything for you.”

Chaos’s haunted eyes flared open with rage, then narrowed again, looking like an irate bull about to charge. He whipped the flute out from its loop again and hollered, “Music, it is!”

That was my cue. That was all I needed; I had plenty of time to leap down to an awning below me in order to get my bearings before finally planting my feet on the ground, where I clamped my hands around Chaos’s wrists before he could begin to play.

“Mysterion!” Chaos exclaimed, grinning like a skeleton upon my arrival. He shook me off and stood back, as if to give me a good damn look at what I’d be up against that evening. I held my ground, forming a shield between him and Red. “How kind of you to show!”

“This needs to stop, Chaos,” I snarled at him. Behind me, I heard Red gasp. Not every day someone gets personally saved by Mysterion… I was sure that she more than appreciated the action now. “You’re not getting away with anything tonight!”

“Oh, no?” he sneered, as a fog began to gather. “But you’re just in time for the show.” That said, he leapt back and fit the flute to his lips again. Knowing he was now too far away from me, I turned and grabbed Red close to me. God, was it ever a good thing she was wearing those earmuffs.

“What’s going on?!” Red asked me in a panic.

“Just close your eyes and don’t listen to anything that’s going on, all right?” I advised. “Concentrate on something you know will keep your head in a level place and tune everything else out!”

“Mysterion—!”

“Just do it!”

The mist began to curl in on itself, until it took on a solid form. It built upon itself from the ground, swirling from fog to flesh, into the shape of a large winged sphinx, with a face more grim than Death itself. I followed it up with my eyes, and held Red’s face to my chest, keeping my arms firmly locked around her head, to make damn sure those earmuffs stayed in place.
“What the hell—?” I began.

“Feast your eyes, Mysterion,” Chaos called over, “on the one and only Nyarlathotep!”

Seeing it there, seeing that beast, putting one form to the name for the first time, something cleared up in my mind. Chaos was a tool. He wasn’t the one directly causing insanity—the deity he was summoning was. Chaos had only so much control, or so it seemed. He’d forged himself a partnership with Nyarlathotep, in the same sort of manner that the Coon had bonded with Cthulhu. Chaos drew the Messenger out… Nyarlathotep finished the job.

Well. He wasn’t finishing Red. That much was damn certain.

“Doubt you were ready for this!” Chaos called out into the night air. “Nyarlathotep, I’ve got a good one for you tonight! This night will end in chaos!”

“I don’t fucking think so,” I growled, setting a hand on a Roman candle in my belt. “Cover your ears,” I instructed Red. She did as I asked and pressed her earmuffs close to her head; I heard her humming a popular tune to herself to drown out the noise around her, and she was keeping her eyes tightly shut. Good… good, nothing was harming that girl, not on my watch.

Extracting my lighter from its holding place, I lit the Roman candle and hurled it up at Nyarlathotep, hitting the ancient god right in the face as it went off. The beast bellowed and shirked back, shaking it off as it dissipated again into nothing but a mist, only to reform again a few yards closer. Nearby, Chaos looked on intently, his face becoming more and more grim with every passing second.

The sphinx leaned over to stare me down, but I wouldn’t give it the satisfaction. I positioned myself in front of Red, grabbed my gun and fired two bullets straight into Nyarlathotep’s eyes. It hissed but persisted, and a sound escaped from it as if to tell me something.

A whispered voice passed through my ears like an electric shock: “…and concealed in Shadow lies…”

As if sped up to complete a task, the clouds that hung in the night sky rolled over the moon, and all light seemed to be simply sucked out of the street. Shadows surrounded us, to the point that I could no longer see Chaos, or sense where I was. There was no wind. No sound. No light.

Just shadow.

And Nyarlathotep.

Red, too, had vanished from my sight, so I knew I had to get this confrontation over with, since God knew what could happen if Red was alone with Chaos. “What do you want?” I demanded of the beast before me. “What is this End Time you Old Ones are after? And where the fuck is Cthulhu?”

“Cthulhu,” came that whispered shock, pronounced in a tongue much better than any accent a human voice could affect. The sphinx stood back, dissolved into a mist again, and reformed… this time as a tall, expressionless man, dressed—just as in the etching Kyle had found—like an Egyptian Pharaoh. Words came from his mouth, but sounded from all sides. “Cthulhu sleeps,” he said. “Cthulhu dreams. I am here to spread the nightmares.”

“You’re Cthulhu’s Messenger?” I spat.

“I am a Messenger,” Nyarlathotep corrected me. “I am chaos.”
“What have you done to Butters?” I growled, convinced that Red couldn’t hear me.

“A mind sways itself,” said the ancient being. “It’s you that’s more interesting to me. You, getting in my way.”

“Funny,” I bit back. “I keep thinking the same of you. Only an Immortal can kill an Immortal. You should be more afraid of me.”

“How funny indeed,” he said, his expression unchanging.

Nyarlathotep held a hand out, as if about to summon… any number of awful things that I didn’t want to wrap my mind around. So I beat him to the chase. I hauled out a shuriken and whipped it at the swarthy man, aiming for and directly hitting his throat. The thing let out a shriek and dissolved, at which point, flute music could be heard on the air again.

The shadows seemed to part, and the mist re-formed back into a man, who charged, but I lit another Roman candle, hurled it at him, found Red out of the corner of my eye, and turned to shield her just before the firework could go off.

“GODDAMMIT!” I heard Chaos scream. The chill of the night air dropped, and I felt a hand against my back, the flute escalating to an alarming level.

As long as the flute played, Nyarlathotep could move. That was the trick, huh?

Easy enough. I just needed a clean shot.

“Stay here!” I commanded Red, spinning around to punch the still-pharaoh-shaped Nyarlathotep, who was indeed the one behind me. I hauled out my .45 and shot the Immortal in the skull, hoping it would slow him down at the very least. Another otherworldly cry escaped from him, and as he once again had to re-form through the mist, I locked my eyes on Chaos, erratically playing that instrument of torment.

“Symphony’s over, Chaos!” I shouted, flinging another shuriken in his direction, aiming for the mouthpiece on the flute.

Now, Chaos, shuriken and I go way back. In fact, I’m the reason for Butters’s only physical handicap. His left eye is a transplant. When we were nine, I’d accidentally taken his eye out with one of those weapons, and Chaos still knew better than to fuck with me when I hauled those out. The shuriken would essentially always end a fight between me and him.

So he hauled that flute away before the shuriken could get anywhere near his face, and ducked his head to the side. The weapon, after slightly grazing the edge of Chaos’s helmet, still lodged itself deep into the flute, however, cutting a new hole into the metal and therefore making the instrument unplayable… at least for the time being.

The mist lay dormant, and Chaos turned slowly to glare at me again. “Oh,” he growled, his tone still much, much darker than I’d ever known it to be, “you bastard.”

“You don’t know what you’ve summoned, Chaos,” I reprimanded him.

“You and your whole League just keep getting in my way!” he hollered.

“Take a step back and look at what it is you’ve been doing,” I challenged. “You’re attacking innocent people. For what reason? I don’t think chaos is what you’ve always expected it to be!”
“And how would you know what I want?” Chaos returned.

“Let us help you,” I tried. I had to get through somehow. Someone had to fucking try. I held my arms out to show that I had no intention of grabbing another weapon, of calling peace for the evening. “Yes, sometimes the world can deal you a bad hand. I know that. But there are other ways out of it. Don’t drag innocent people into this, please!”

For a moment, Chaos pondered my words. For just a split second, maybe, Butters heard me out. But it was only a second. His eyes were too clouded, now. They only saw ruin.

Goddammit. Of course, the one spreading chaos was the one who was unaware that he’d gone mad.

“Hmf,” said Chaos, yanking the shuriken out of his flute and tossing it into the snow at his feet, “I’d say we’re done for today.” He set his eyes on me, narrowed and hollow; the natural blue irises had dulled to the point of almost being pitch black pits. Whatever the hell Butters had done to himself, it was looking less and less likely that he’d be able to pull himself out of it. Chaos was winning. I’d known even before that night that he couldn’t be underestimated, but now that he’d gone as far as to deal a personal attack, I knew that something must have gone horribly awry in Butters’s brain.

“If this is the path you’re taking,” I said, “leave this town alone. You’ve done enough damage, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, I’m leaving,” he shot back. “I’ll be leaving this town for good soon enough, leaving it to drown in its own self-inflicted chaos. The town you love is slated for ruin, Mysterion! Give up and accept what Cthulhu can offer.”

“You’re better than this, Chaos,” I tried, hoping to get through to Butters again, assuming his influence was still in there. Butters was in a very deep, dark place… and that place was called Professor Chaos. It was just a question of whether he could escape.

Chaos just snarled and turned away, with a full swing of his heavy green cape. As he marched off, toward the edge of town, he called back, “I’ll have my day, Mysterion. Nyarlathotep needs an army, and I’ll have masses pleading to be followers at my feet.”

Those weren’t his words. I didn’t know how I knew it, but something really didn’t sound right. Something else was spurring his decisions. He could very likely have been being manipulated into believing he was in control, which could have accounted for his sorry state. Whatever was happening, something had to be done to save that poor kid from himself, and soon. I just didn’t know who could do it or how.

But he was gone before I could say any more. One thing that stayed consistent about Chaos was that once he was done with something, he was done. Nobody else would be subject to the horrors that flute could play, not that evening. So I was able to give my full attention to Red, still shaking against me.

“He’s gone,” I told her.

Slowly, Red stood back, and I let my hands fall to my sides, hoping my eyes were still hidden enough by shadow for her to be unable to guess my identity. She was so shell-shocked, though, she was hardly even looking at me for my face. She was looking at me as others did. As a symbol. As Mysterion was meant to be. “You saved me,” she breathed. “Thank you.”
“No need to thank me,” I dismissed. “I look after everyone in this town. And now it’s my job to see you safely to your destination. Lead the way, and I’ll be keeping an eye out around you.”

Now, I knew every path to Red’s house. I knew about six different short cuts I was sure even she was unaware of. She took me on one of the main drags that evening, back along the main street—which was understandable, what with it being so well-lit—where I followed along behind and beside her, but far out of sight. It hurt a little to see her walking alone, shivering under her jacket in the chill of the night air, blowing on her fingers for added warmth. Kenny could’ve given her an extra layer, or rubbed her hands for added friction and heat, but Mysterion had to slink along in the shadows, only observing, only doing the duties required of the town’s most recognized symbol.

Once she approached her house, I slipped out of hiding, which got her to draw in a gasp. Her light cheeks had tinted pink along the walk, and now flushed brighter, almost matching her brilliant hair. “I didn’t know if you were still there,” she admitted.

“I told you I’d see you here safely,” I said, keeping away from the lamplight from the bulb over her front door. She spoke to me from the front step, while I stood calves-deep in the snow bank off to the side of her house. “I’ll be off now. I’m glad you’re unharmed.”

“We’re in such good hands, with… with you guarding the city,” said Red. There was a nervous undertone to her tone, one I’d hardly ever heard from her. It was the tone one often involuntarily affects when meeting someone of great status, when meeting an idol or other revered figure. I’d always known Red had kind of a thing for Mysterion, that she’d always admired the work reported on the League. And this, I realized, was our first interaction as hero and citizen. Not many townsfolk got the privilege to speak with me. I’d usually leave with a nod before conversations (mainly questions) could begin. But for Red, I could make a few tiny exceptions. “Thank you, Mysterion. For everything.”

“Just be careful,” I decided on saying, as I turned to go. “I don’t want to see this town suffer.”

“You’re incredible,” I heard Red whisper. I looked back over my shoulder, letting my alter ego’s curiosities get the better of me, only to find that she was fitting her key to her front door. Satisfied, I prepared to go, when all of a sudden, Red muttered to herself, “Oh… damn.”

“What?” I asked her, hoping she wasn’t locked out.

“Oh, nothing,” she said, glancing over at me with a shy smile. “I left my car in the lot, that’s all. If I leave it, it’s gonna get a ticket tomorrow. Oh, well.”

“Where is it?” I offered. Then, forgetting that ‘Mysterion’ wouldn’t know, I added, “What’s it look like? I’ll get it.”

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“Huh?” Red was swooning again by this point, but I had to keep a straight face.

“Give me your key,” I requested, holding out a hand. “I’ll find it. You’re not going back out there tonight.”

Red hid a giggle under her scarf as she unhooked her car key from her heavily-decorated ring from which the house key also hung. “Are you serious?” she wondered. “The one and only Mysterion is going out to pick up my car?”

“Chaos is down,” I said. “My work is done for the evening.”

Red bit her lower lip in a half-grin, which was a tell of hers that she was trying not to laugh.
Then, shaking with giddiness now, rather than fear as she had been earlier, she tossed me the key and said, “It’s… it’s red, a little red sedan. I… I’m Red, too.”

“Excuse me?”

“My name,” she said nervously. “My name is Red.”

I had to hide everything, which was kind of difficult for me. I had to hide the smirk that threatened to show when she’d introduced herself to me. I had to conceal my identity, no matter the cost. I had to hide my true concerns for her well-being that evening, and hide my full relief that I’d managed to see her safely out of harm’s way.

“I know,” I said. “I know every citizen of this town. I’m doing my best to see that no more of them fall into Chaos’s ill-meaning hands.”

Red flashed me that sweet, shy smile again, then gave me a grateful nod before unlocking her front door and stepping inside. Content that she was not leaving the house again that evening, I tied her key to my belt and went on my way. It was a stretch, saying I’d go get her car, but it was still something I knew I had to do. My work was, for the most part, done that evening, anyway.

Chaos and his motives would continue to haunt and bother me, though. That night, I had seen the face of Nyarlathotep. Two of them, anyway. That beast seemed to have as many forms as I had a list of ways I’d met my death. Now I knew that it was here to amass an army. But an army for what? For Cthulhu, or for something else? Cthulhu seemed to enjoy spreading destruction on his own.

Maybe ‘army’ was a general term. A ‘group,’ more like. I realized, perhaps, that the people Chaos personally drove crazy with that flute could potentially be risks to the sane who made up the rest of the population. Maybe it was like an epidemic. Nearness to insanity could breed insanity. That went along with what Henrietta had been saying, at least.

So many things had come to light that evening. We were nearing an inevitable confrontation. Nearing darkness. Nearing something this town wasn’t ever going to be able to forget.

But despite it all, there was one girl I wanted to look out for… one person I wanted to focus slightly more of my attention on keeping safe, above everyone else. It was the only thing I let myself be selfish about. No matter what happened, Red had to stay safe. No matter what fucking else. It was not going to get her.

So, of course, there was no way I was going to go the rest of the night without keeping an eye on her, that much was pretty certain. So I took a quick detour and swung through Token’s. It wasn’t too late, so I knew the sound of the garage opening and closing for Red’s car wouldn’t be questioned much. I changed as quickly as I could, slapped on some deodorant and cologne (cuz I knew she loved that shit) to cover the fact that I’d worked up a sweat as Mysterion, and was back out at her car in plenty of time to still believably be within Mysterion’s time frame.

As I was driving, though, I gave Red a call, rolling down the window so she’d have the sound of the night breeze in the background to make it seem like I was walking. When she picked up, I realized it’d have to be a short conversation, so that I could figure out exactly what the fuck to do with the car once I got back to her house.

“Hello?”
“Hey, baby,” I greeted her. “How’re you?”

“Kenny!” Red lilted over the receiver. “Oh, my God, you’ll never believe what happened to me tonight.”

“Yeah? Hey, is it cool if I swing over?” I asked. “I wanna see you.”

“Please, please come over,” Red begged. “I want to see you, too. But you’ll never, ever guess what happened. Oh, my God, it’s just… oh, my God.”

I laughed a little, hoping I could keep myself from making any tell-tale comments once she actually told me the story of everything I’d just done, “All right,” I said, “I’ll be there soon. Can you hold it till I get there?”

“Uh-huh. Oh, Kenny?”

“Huh?”

“Be really careful walking here, okay?” God fucking damn, that girl was sweet.

“It’s not icy,” I said, pretending not to know what she was talking about.

“No, I know, but… just be really, really careful.”

“I will, babe. See you soon.”

“Okay.”

I rolled up the window, so I wouldn’t freeze to death on the drive, and made my way safely back to her house. So as to separate Mysterion’s activities from mine, I parked the car as silently as I could in her driveway, then ran around to the back of the house, following the footprints I as Mysterion had made earlier. The kitchen window at Red’s doesn’t ever quite close completely, so I knew I could nudge it open in order to leave her car key on the windowsill. I then hung out around her house for about five minutes—about as long as I could stand to be out in the cold—before slipping back out to the street in order to make about a half-block of footprints that suggested I’d been walking the entire way from Token’s.

I’d only gotten through a single knock before Red flung open the door and latched tightly onto me. “Kenny!” she exclaimed. “Oh, my God, sweetie, you’re never going to believe the night I had!”

“Yeah?” I wondered. “Let’s go in, come on, it’s too cold outside.”

“Kay,” Red agreed, drawing me back in. She didn’t let go for a second.

Red nuzzled against me; when she spoke, her words were lost a little into the fabric of my parka, but I understood everything she needed to say. “It was so crazy, it was so bizarre,” she began. “Kenny, you’ll never guess… Mysterion saved me tonight!”

“Mysterion?” I said, hoping to sound convincingly questioning.

“Uh-huh! He saved me from Professor Chaos. It was incredible. I don’t even…”

“Are you okay?” I asked her, glad to finally catch onto how well she was holding up after that night’s events. “Red, what happened? Honest to God, are you okay?”
She nodded slowly, digging her fingers in. “I am now,” she said sweetly, ticking her head back to look up at me. “I got out of it fine. It was just… it’s like I’m just now catching up on how awful that really was…”

“Tell me if you ever think you’re in trouble, baby,” I said, catching her bright blue gaze as I smoothed back her hair. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

“Well… maybe we can let Mysterion take on Professor Chaos and stuff,” said Red, giving me the most adorable smile, “but thanks, sweetie.” Throwing her arms around me, she added, “Thank you so much for being here tonight, Kenny. I really didn’t want to be alone.”

And with me, as long as I could help it, she wouldn’t be. Ever. I’d stop those fucking Old Ones and get this city chaos-free, no matter what.

I hated to think it, but I’d do it… even if it killed me.

– – –

Stan

The last day of finals brought a close to a lot of things. The end of a semester, the prelude to the end of a year (a very full year at that). The last time I’d see my own house for a while. The end of one part of my life and the start of another. The end of ‘normal.’ Technically, too, the end of childhood.

And it was all because of someone’s recent obsession with that monster known as Nyarlathotep.

My day had started out perfectly fine. I had two exams that day, and hadn’t had to go in for them until 9:30, which was nice. I’d thought about calling Kyle as soon as I finished my last test of the day, to ask just how (not even if) we were going to celebrate the end of the semester, but he had a longer schedule thanks to his last tests being for AP courses, so I decided not to get on his shit list if I happened to disqualify him by making his phone go off. Especially since things seemed to be moving along for us. It was nice, knowing there was potential. Or, potential, hell, something had kind of already started. But no matter what happened, I knew he’d be there, and for that, I was more than grateful.

Especially after the events of that afternoon.

It happened as soon as I got home from school. Things were supposed to be really normal that day. Dad had finally been given a schedule that allowed him to be home at five like a normal person, instead of the extra late-shifts he’d been having to pull to make up for extra work.

But he was home early. On the couch, as I often found him… but watching snow. Static buzzed ominously from the television, and Dad’s eyes were wide, white, and glued to the spot. This had passed unusual and had gone straight to chilling. Mom wasn’t home yet. It was just me, standing there in the doorway, staring at my father who in turn was staring at dead static.
“Um… hey, Dad,” I attempted. “I, uh… I’m home….”

“Oh, hi, Stan,” he said, in a hollow tone that I knew meant nothing good. A chill tickled down my spine; the hair on the back of my neck bristled, and I felt my insides tense. My dad was a long list of things, but none of those words could describe the way he was acting that afternoon. “Stan?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Come here, I need to show you something.”

I slid my bag off, set it cautiously aside, and said, keeping my guard up, “O-okay…”

The first chance at having a real conversation with my father for the first time since before Halloween, and he had to be acting all weird. Now, my dad had been weird in many ways before, but this was the awful kind of weird. The ‘you sure you’re okay?’ kind of weird. The kind I wasn’t ready to deal with.

I stepped into the living room, perturbed at the persistence of the static on the tv screen. “Can you hear it, Stan?” Dad asked me.

“Huh?”

“It’s pretty great music, don’t you think?”

“Music?” I repeated. “Dad, there’s no music coming from the tv, there’s nothing coming from the tv. There’s no mu—si—oh, my God! DAD!” I shouted, running right up to him and shaking his shoulders. Dad didn’t really respond. It was as if he’d been pumped full of tranquilizers. He was just limp, nonresponsive, a Goddamn zombie, for all intents and purposes. Fuck—fuck, fuck, not my dad. The fucking chaos, the shit that had gripped Tweek and those other unfortunate people who had fallen victim to the trill of the manic flute—it had my dad. And it wasn’t, as far as I could tell, letting go. “Dad!” I cried out. “Dad, snap out of it, there’s no music playing! Dad! Come on!”

Nothing.

“Where’s the remote?” I asked aloud, as if empty air would just make things worse. “Where’s the Goddamn remote?!” I tore around the room, overturning pillows and moving misplaced magazines, but I couldn’t find it. So instead, I stormed over to the tv, where I could not for the life of me find which button was the off-switch. That was when I realized my eyes were so misty with tears of rage I could barely see. I blinked them back as I stood and stumbled around behind the tv set in order to just unplug the thing from the wall.

The second I did, words started spewing from my father’s mouth, words in a language I knew he’d never heard, words to please the Old Ones, not for human ears. Shit, damn it, I wanted to take this right up with Cthulhu. Fuck Chaos, Nyarlathotep and the Cult, Cthulhu started it, and with that deity it was going to end, and I wanted to go gut that fucking monster myself for what I had to bear witness to that day.

The worst part was, I was unable to help. Dad started writhing in seizures, every few seconds letting out a laugh or a string of words in that awful otherworldly language. I felt sick. My stomach flipped and I honest to God thought I was going to get sick. I did what I could, in my state of panic. I pleaded, I bargained, I screamed, I swore—I shook my father and tried to shock him back to reality, or at least bring him down to a level that average psychology could help to cure, but
whatever had caused this had come long before I’d gotten home. Dad was gone. Mad. Just totally mad.

He didn’t respond to any of my shouts, any of my demands, anything at all. His eyes didn’t focus on anything; certainly not on me. He just stared, like he knew nothing. Like all he saw was a place beyond human comprehension.

And that was when my mother came home.

The door opened, and in she walked, unaware of the horrors she was about to face, at first, but quickly catching on and crying out.

“Randy…? Randy, oh, my God!” I heard my mother scream. I lifted my head and saw her in the doorway, her hands cupped over her mouth and her eyes wide with fear. My heart sank, looking at her, because I had no idea how to continue. For all his general insanities, Mom still loved my father, which I had always respected her for. Hell, despite all of the stupid shit that seemed to happen, I had always cared deeply for my parents. In that moment, I rose to the occasion and stepped up to try to make things better, or at least try to explain and provide comfort, but everything happened in a blur.

One minute, I was consoling my mom, letting her scream out her terrors, making her look away, and then the next thing I knew, I was standing in the imposing waiting room of the insane asylum, surrounded by sparse walls and blanched faces. Being in there was like seeing a glimpse of the possible future, the one that Cthulhu and his ilk were preparing for. I did not remember how I got to the asylum. I couldn’t remember if I had driven, or left with my mother, or walked. Everything was just happening too quickly.

I looked down and saw a visitor’s pass on my wrist, marked with my last name and the room number for my dad. Finding mom nowhere in the waiting room, I showed the pass to one of the white-clad guards and stalked down the halls to find his number. Along the way, I heard, coming from one of the rooms, a familiar verbal tick. Each small room had a little window that allowed me to see in just enough, and I let curiosity lead me to that one first. Just as I’d thought: Tweek.

The poor kid looked worse. His face was white as a sheet, and he sat twitching arrhythmically on the edge of his bed, an awful grin on his face. He gnashed his teeth together, and his lips moved slightly in a repeating pattern. Tweek was saying something, and I knew, somehow, I had to figure out what. It could be a lead. But still, other things were on my mind now. So I left, praying that Tweek would someday get over this added insanity. The thing was, even if we were able to pull other people back from the clutches of Cthulhu and the other old Gods of madness, I still feared for him, since he’d always been teetering on the edge of real madness anyway.

My dad’s room was much further down the same hall, and there was a small bench outside the door, where now my mom was seated, her eyes, frozen wide, staring down at a slip of paper in her hands. When I drew closer, I noticed it wasn’t just paper, it was a travel ticket.

“Mom?” I said, approaching cautiously.

“Stanley!” Mom stood and rushed over to me, hugging me and thereby pushing me back away from the windowed door. “Don’t look in there, sweetie, I really wish you wouldn’t.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just—your father, he—”
“Mom, what?” I wondered, getting more panicked by the second.

“Well, it’s just… oh, I hate thinking about it!” Mom drew back and, with her hands on my shoulders, stared me in the eyes and cried, “Insanity isn’t contagious, Stan! Why is this happening to so many people? I know your father isn’t the most level-headed of imbeciles out there, but—”

Inhaling deeply to calm myself, I set one hand on my mother’s back, to give support, to show that I could step up and be the anchor for the family. I was ready, too. Mom was right: Dad never has been the sanest of people, but he’s more an easily led-astray idiot than anything else. He’s still a good father, and a hard-working man, and he does everything he can for our well-being. He and Mom are a team, and without him, I understood why my mother was a little lost. So it fell on me. Shelley could get by, Shelley was away at school, and therefore a little safer from the targeted attacks on South Park. As far as emotional support went, I’d take that responsibility.

It was my duty to myself and to my family.

And, as Toolshed, I had a new duty to my town.

“We—we’ll be okay, Mom,” I said, trying to make myself believe it at the same time. “I’ll make sure we will. All right?”

“I’m so proud of you, Stan,” said my mother, grabbing at my shoulders. “Your father is, too. Don’t forget that.” That said, she hugged me again, and I felt her trembling.

It was—terrifying.

There’s a point in everyone’s life… that point where family becomes something different. In a year, I’d be eighteen, an adult, a member of society with more rights than I’d known as a child. Someone expected to be able to take charge, to take on heavy tasks and burdens. But things were more challenging now than they’d ever been. At only seventeen, I was taking charge. I was responsible for my parents and sister. I wasn’t the kid going to his mother for help, I was the young man consoling this broken woman whose reality was steadily unraveling. And she heaved out her sobs, aware of that, too.

There was no knowing if there was any way to bring Dad back from whatever he’d just slipped into. It was an absolute fucking nightmare.

And Mom wanted out.

“Stan…” she said, clinging to me as if to hold me as a child just one last time, “Stan, honey, let’s go.”

“Go?” I wondered, making her stand back so I could look her in the eyes for a straight answer. “Go where?”

Hands shaking, Mom held out in front of her the travel tickets I’d almost forgotten I’d seen. My heart jumped. “Bus tickets?” I suspected.

Mom nodded. “There’s a travel agent here at a permanent kiosk now,” she said, “did you know that? Just in case people want to leave town after dropping…”

I finished her sentence in my head when she trailed off, but I was still frozen. I couldn’t leave. I could not leave South Park. Toolshed could not leave the League. “Where—?” I started.

“Colorado Springs.”
“Oh. Shelley,” I realized, and Mom nodded again. “You’re planning on leaving right now?”

“I was hoping to,” Mom admitted. “Oh, Stan, we just need to get away for a while. There’s been so much on the news about these crazy things happening, and… and with your father like this, honey, I just don’t know if sticking around here is the right thing to do. So let’s—“

“Mom, I can’t leave,” I interrupted her.

“Stanley!”

“I can’t,” I said, more firmly. I held my ground, impressed with myself that I wasn’t shaking where I stood. Yes, I was terrified, absolutely terrified of everything that was and everything that could still happen, but, fuck, I was Toolshed, and I was going to do something about this. I had to not break. I had to keep going. “I’m sorry, Mom. I just can’t.”

“What are you talking about, Stan?” Mom asked me, sounding more nervous than I think I’d ever heard her. “Why?”

“Just… just in case Dad needs me,” I decided on saying. I really didn’t want to have to break our code and tell my mother I was Toolshed. I hoped that this would be enough. “Mom, please, someone’s got to stay here. You go find Shelley, okay? You guys’ll be safe in Colorado Springs.”

“But, Stan, you can’t just say you’ll stay here,” Mom protested, “where are you going to go?”

“I’ll stay with Kyle,” I came up with on the spot, knowing it was the most logical answer, and one she’d instantly be okay with, “it’ll be fine. Sheila and Gerald are gonna find out what happened anyway. Mom, someone in this family has got to stay here. If there is any way to help Dad, at all, I swear to God, Mom, I’ll find it. Okay? I just want you and Shelley to be safe.”

Mom fell silent, staring at me with a mix of concern and pride, a mix of adoration for my willingness to step up the way I’d chosen to, and of the hellish fear of leaving her only son behind. But in the end, it seemed, she knew that my decision was right. I had to remain home. I had to be the one to fight to make things even slightly normal again.

She gave her consent with a smile, and the words: “Be careful, Stan.”

“I will, Mom, I swear.”

My life again fading into a blur, I walked her out to the bus stop, and let her lean against me on the bench provided in the slightly-heated grey depot area. I wrapped an arm protectively around my mother’s shoulders, and held my breath with the hope that the next time I saw her, I’d have had a hand in making this town a safer place… with the hope that Dad would be in his right mind enough to stand there and welcome her home with me.

The bus rolled up and hissed to a halt ten minutes later, and after Mom hugged me, tearfully, goodbye, she pressed the second ticket into my hand and said, “Don’t hesitate to use this, honey, if you know you need to get away.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I managed. “Call me when you get to Shelley.”

“I will, Stan. I love you so much.”

And then, just like that, she was gone. I was all that was left. Alone.

Suddenly, nothing made sense. I was confident that Mom and Shelley would be safe, at least for a little while, but who the hell was I going to be able to protect if I was alone? I didn’t want to just sit around and wait. I had to be somewhere. I had to do something.

I had to not go crazy.

I almost felt like I was going to, when I walked my mother outside. When she handed me her car keys, when she put on an attempted smile.

Once Mom had left, once I saw her get on that bus and leave, my own foundation started to fall. I’d been more than ready to stay strong and keep things moving for Mom’s sake, but now that she’d be away, I was left to face what had happened alone. And, stupidly, I went back in to check on my father. Mom wasn’t kidding, that I shouldn’t have looked in. He was being restrained, strapped by the wrists, legs and chest down to a table, shouting things in that language he’d been spewing out before.

Seconds later, I found myself running out of the asylum. My hands shook around Mom’s keys, but I managed to drive myself home, haul myself inside, and scream into my empty house. As if this whole fucking thing wasn’t personal enough, having been shot and stuck in limbo and R’lyeh for a few days. Why my family? Why my fucking family? Looking over at the couch just made me think of coming home earlier, expecting things to be normal, watching Dad descend into that awful state of madness, my heart breaking when Mom returned, everything spinning and spinning and making me sick.

Still only half-aware of anything I was doing, I rushed upstairs, threw a few things into a duffel bag, packed up my laptop and all my League documents and accoutrements into my backpack, and stumbled back down to the ground floor. I left, locked the house with both shaking hands around the key, managed to make it to my car, and sped out of my driveway, my hands clenching the wheel until my palms sweat.

I bit back everything, held everything in. I had to talk to someone, and I had to go somewhere, and only one place had ever made sense to me in times of need. The next thing I knew, I was throwing my car into park outside of the Broflovskis’. I shut off the ignition, yanked my foot off the brake, and leaned over and bit my steering wheel, letting loose another frustrated groan, hoping that, once inside, I could behave enough like a rational person around Sheila and Gerald long enough to keep up appearances before finally spilling my half-remembered evening to Kyle.

Goddammit.

The world was bound to go crazy sooner or later. I just wished it hadn’t had to start so close to home.

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Kyle

The knock was too frantic to mean anything good. Stan’s presence at the door made things seem even worse. I was the one that had answered the knock, though my curious mother was only steps behind me in the living room.
“…Stan…?” I wondered, eyeing my best friend cautiously. He looked awful. Pathetic, even. More than anything, lost. He’d been fine earlier in the day. Something must have—

…Oh, shit.

“Dude… what’s wrong?” I asked, opening the door to him a little further.

He didn’t step in. Just stood there on the front step, loosely clutching a duffel bag, his eyes glassed over. “My dad’s crazy,” he said, his voice near a whisper. Stan had said similar things about his father for years now, but I knew that this time, it was serious. It wasn’t about Randy Marsh getting sucked into some new kind of trouble… it was about him literally going crazy.

My eyes widened, and my head spun with everything this meant, now. For Stan, for us in the League, for the safety of the town… everything.

“I—I’m sorry…” I got out, not knowing what else to say.

“Kyle, what’s going on?” Mom wondered, coming up behind me. Her nosiness was actually a help in this case, since if the situation came down to just me and Stan right now, it would probably amount to little more than both of us staring at nothing until we finally came to consensus that we had to alert Kenny and the rest of the League. This was so damn personal, though, I had to let Stan talk through it before we went right for a point of attack.

“Stan’s here,” I told my mother, still looking up at him, hoping his expression would change, “and, um…”

“My…” Stan said, his voice sounding more nervous when Mom approached, “dad’s in, um… in the—asylum.” He cast his gaze down, reading through the events of his day. “I got home and he, just, he lost it. And… I—shit, I…”

“Stan, it’s okay,” I tried.

“Mom… mom went on a bus to see if Shelley’s okay,” Stan went on, his eyes still focused downward as he worked through his thoughts with broken words. “She couldn’t drive. She got Dad to the asylum, but then after that she had to take a bus, cuz she couldn’t…”

“Oh, God!” my mother exclaimed, with all the sympathy her Newark tell allowed. “Stanley, you poor thing!”

Terror clinched my gut, and momentarily froze me. This new development opened up so many new things to be afraid of. Yes, it had gotten a little personal with Tweek being gone, and yes, it was seeming more and more likely that Butters was well on his way out, too, but Stan… for him to have to deal with this induced insanity, directly in his family, so soon after getting his life back… Stan’s expression made the entire situation hit home. This was the point at which I knew there was no turning back. Not for him, not for me, not for Kenny, not for any of us. If we didn’t do something, and soon, the asylum would fill up, and Nyarlathotep’s mad army would have free roam of South Park.

“So I was wondering,” Stan went on, “if, maybe, I could—I-I could stay here, for a little while…”

“Oh, of course!” Mom insisted. “Kyle, help your friend with his things. Stan, do you know if your mother has her cell phone with her? I’d like to call her.”

Stan shook his head. “I’ll give you Shelley’s number later,” he mumbled.
“All right, yes, that will do. Come on in, please, dear, it’s freezing outside.”

“Oh,” said Stan, hollowly. “Yeah. It is. Thanks.”

He managed to lift his eyes to acknowledge her on his thanks, which was enough for my protective mom, who then turned and walked back to the dining room, saying, “Ike, bubbe, set another place at the table for Stan.”

I also heard my father ask, “What’s going on, Sheila?” At that point, Stan winced and snapped his eyes shut, trying to close out what had happened.

“Hey,” I said, speaking on a level that my parents and brother couldn’t hear, “come on in, dude. Here,” I offered. I bent and hoisted Stan’s dropped duffel bag up onto my shoulder. “You got any other bags, in your car or anything?” Stan shook his head, and didn’t look at me. “Well, get in here, come on.”

Stan, usually so stalwart and steadfast, slouched and seemed to crumble as he stepped inside. I closed and double-bolted the door behind him. “So, you could have the pull-out sofa down here, or I could set up the air mattress in my room, if you want,” I said, speaking as normally as I could in hopes that Stan would at least say something back.

Kenny had warned us that this might happen. He’d said to keep an eye on the people we knew and loved, putting, of course, family above all else, and personal well-being even in front of that. No matter what, we couldn’t lose one of the League. I was beginning to fear that Randy Marsh losing his mind was going to throw even Stan’s sanity off a little, even though Stan had always been so good to keep himself the sanest and healthiest member of his family.

“Stan?” I prompted.

Cautiously, I set a hand on his shoulder, and his head jerked up, his eyes wide and terrified. It shocked me enough to make me recoil, but Stan caught himself, took in a deep breath, and pinched the ridge of his nose, between his eyes. “Sorry, dude,” he said, his voice still shaking somewhat. “I… I might be a little jumpy for a while.”

“I-it’s okay,” I assured him. “You’ll be safe here, though.” I hoped that was true.

“Mm. Thanks.” Stan lowered his hand, and contorted his mouth into a smile for me, then said, “I’ll take the air mattress.”

“Thought so,” I grinned, making for the stairs. “That way, we can talk if you need to. I mean it, Stan, even if you have to wake me up at like four in the morning, I’m here for you.” Stan gave no reply. “Hey, ma!” I called into the dining room. “We’ll be back, I’m setting up a bed for Stan.”

“Oh, yes,” Mom called back, “Stan, do whatever you need to be comfortable, honey. I’ll call your sister later.”

“Thanks,” Stan got out for her, then followed me upstairs.

We dropped his sparse baggage off in my room, and then I had him follow me down to the linen closet, fearing that giving him a second alone might trigger something and send him off the deep end. I couldn’t have that. I wasn’t about to deal with losing my best friend a second time, this time really beyond repair. It was weird, knowing we could cheat death but not insanity. Even Henrietta had admitted that once Nyarlathotep has you, he doesn’t let go. From chaos to chaos.
Blankly, as if this was just like every other time Stan had spent a night or weekend at my house, I handed him the sheets that fit the air mattress, which itself I extracted from a pile in the back of the closet. I made him talk, while we were loading the mattress with batteries, blowing it up on one side of my room, dressing it with sheets. I didn’t make him talk about his family, or anything personal. I just made him talk. Made him answer, really. I talked about what Mom had made for dinner, and about Ike’s latest plot to try to get Dad to get him a puppy.

But then I started running my mouth, and my heart started pounding for reasons I almost couldn’t explain. “Remember,” I began, which I already knew was a dangerous word, the second it left my mouth, “how many times we did this when we were kids? I remember that one time… I think it was like fourth grade… dude, fourth grade felt like it went on forever… anyway, there was that time—we—Stan..?” I paused when I noticed his reaction. He looked more nervous now than forlorn, and was grabbing at his jeans.

“Can we stop?” he requested, not unkindly. He still wasn’t looking at me. “Let’s just go eat, okay? I can’t talk right now.”

“Oh…” I said, hurt that I’d obviously gone and said too much again, “sure. Sorry if—”

“No,” Stan dismissed, shaking his head, “you’re fine, don’t worry about it. I’m just in a weird place right now.”

“I—I know. I’m sorry.”

“Dude, stop apologizing.”

“Okay, sorry.”

“Kyle!”

“Agh! Sorry!” I clamped my hands over my mouth, and tried so hard not to laugh at myself for submitting to my own nervous tick. At least Stan picked his head back up after that, to shoot me a very normal-looking—albeit testing—glare. I stood, hoping I could get him to talk it out a little more—in hopes that Stan could beat his fears and get stronger and more motivated for coming to terms with how madness had swooped down on his home—after dinner, and offered him a hand. With a little effort, I hoisted him up to standing, and as soon as Stan was on his feet, he hugged me.

“Thanks, Kyle,” he said, holding me even a little too tightly. The way he clung to me was desperate, but it made sense—after all, someone in his position would have to cling to something. I remembered the Tweaks holding each other firmly, barely speaking, after Tweek was admitted to the asylum. With Sharon and Shelley out of town, of course Stan would come to me. I was glad he had. I was glad he was here now, where I could keep an eye on him, rather than out on his own, out in the midst of all that chaos. I’d decided, hadn’t I? Keep him close and keep him safe.

“No problem,” I said, patting his back a couple times. “You’d do the same for me, right?”

“You know I would.”

When I pulled back, Stan’s eyes seemed to have cleared a little, but he still looked nervous and lost. He made direct eye contact with me for a few seconds, then shook himself out of it and let me go.

“You hungry?” I decided to ask.

“Not really,” said Stan.
“Sorry,” I shrugged. “But you should eat.”

“Did you just say ‘sorry’ again?”

“Oh, shit! Sorry. AGH!” I mentally slapped myself for that one.

Stan really did laugh, just a tiny bit, and mussed with my hair as we began to walk out. “I thought Ike was the Canadian Broflovski,” he teased, “not you.”

“That’s racist.”

“It’s true, though.”

“Well, soor-ry,” I said, affecting the Canadian accent for that one. There. That was the way to keep Stan sane. Just keep things normal. Which was going to be hard through dinner, since of course my parents would want to talk about it, and then afterward of course Ike would be watching the news.

I tried my best to avoid the topic during dinner, making sure I started up conversation first and talked about one of the only normal things that had been on my mind lately: finals. With that week out of the way, though, and the week of pre-semester syllabus crap coming up, I couldn’t say school was much on my mind at all anymore. It was a stretch, but I managed to keep something going. Ike chipped in, as well, since he knew as well as I did that Stan wouldn’t want to discuss his dad much in a non-League setting. The guys would fully understand. My parents wouldn’t.

Not that they weren’t helpful, though. My dad and Randy Marsh have been good friends for a long time, so naturally he was shaken with the news. Maybe it was for all our sakes that my mom was able to hold her tongue on the subject until after dinner, when she pulled Stan aside to ask him a couple of things quietly. Stan stood there nodding, until at the end he numbly opened his phone and gave my mom Shelley’s number. Then, I heard him say, “Sorry, I’ve gotta…”

“Oh, of course, Stanley,” my mother said, giving him a pat on the arm. “Now, make yourself at home, honey, tell me if there’s anything we can do.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re handling this very well, Stan,” she added. “I’m sure your mother is very proud.”

Stan paused for a second, managed, “Thanks,” then walked back over to me, set a hand on my back, and said for my ears only, “I want to talk to you.”

“Gotcha,” I nodded. I cast a brief glance back at Ike, who was indeed now planted in front of the tv with a notebook and his PDA at the ready, and he gave me a little ‘I won’t let anyone go bug you’ nod as Stan and I made our way up the stairs. Halfway up, I grabbed his hand for reassurance, and he took hold tightly.

We didn’t let go until we’d made it into my room, where Stan dropped my hand and walked right to the center of the room, exasperatedly ran his hands back through his hair, and let out a frustrated groan. I closed and, after a second thought, locked my door, then gave Stan my full attention as he started out, in an attempt to keep calm, “Okay. Oh. God. Okay, just… woah… Okay. Fuck.”

“Hey,” I said, hoping to keep the air calm and rational. Stan turned to look at me—he was obviously full and boiling over with a thousand reactions to his father’s situation, but there was also that need being projected, that need to just find a way to deal and be done with it, and move on.
And, honestly, there was something I kind of wanted to talk to him about, too. Something that had been itching at my mind for a while.

But his needs came first. I suggested we both sit, so he’d be stable while he talked it out, so we both took a seat on the edge of my bed; I wrapped my left arm around his shoulders and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. “Okay, Stan,” I said, keeping my voice level for him, “what happened?”

“It was really sudden,” he said, shivering a little. “He was already mostly gone by the time I got home.” He continued on for a while, giving me every minor remembered detail of what he had seen that afternoon. I sat there with him and took in every word. Stan was holding up incredibly well, given everything he was recalling for me. Or, at least, he was until he finally burst, once he’d given me all the details of his afternoon and evening. He was spent, and needed a reprieve.

“I just feel like life is just falling apart, Kyle!” he rattle on, his eyebrows knit in pain, eyes wide and glassy with dread. “Since this fall, I’ve had no fucking clue what’s coming next. Shit always happens, shit always happens, but this is fucking ridiculous! I just don’t know… I-I don’t know…”

“Stan… h-hey, Stan?” I tried, rocking closer to him, with one arm still wrapped reassuringly around his shoulders. When he didn’t respond, I said, “It’s gonna be okay, dude… don’t worry. It’s gonna be okay.”

When Stan responded, he didn’t lift his head. Gingerly, he raised up his left arm, and squeezed my hand, where it dangled over his shoulder, tightly with his, but that was the only movement he made. His voice came out cracked and empty as he said, “My dad’s in the asylum, Kyle. My dad has finally, actually, literally gone crazy, and I don’t know if he’s ever gonna get better. Mom’s halfway to Colorado Springs, and I have no idea what’s going to happen to her and Shelley. I’m scared, dude, I’m terrified! I’m all that’s left, and how long’ll it take till—”

“That’s not true,” I said firmly, cutting him off.

“Huh?” Stan finally lifted his gaze a little, to look at me out of the corner of his eye.

“I haven’t left, have I?” I went on, pressing on through my words carefully but with every ounce of confidence I could muster. “I’m still here. I’m still here, and I’m not leaving, Stan. No matter what.”

“Oh, God…” Stan sighed out, bowing his head. I knew that action, I knew it much too well. He’d reached a limit, he was draining. There was probably more he wanted to say, but was too caught up with his own nerves to do so.

“Dude, don’t shut down on me, please,” I said, running my hand up and down his back to try to keep him feeling assured. “You’re stronger than this, Stan, come on.”

“I just wish—I don’t get why—“ he started, his mind all over the place. “Kyle, I’m… I don’t… I…”

“Okay,” I said, “come on, deep breath. You with me? Ready?”

Together, we drew in a deep, long breath, and together, we sighed it out.

“We’re gonna get through this together,” I told him again, holding onto his arms. “Just like we’ve always done. I’m not gonna let this break you.” I felt my grip tighten as I continued, “I’m not gonna lose you. Okay? We’re gonna get through this together.”
Stan drew in another deep breath of his own, then caught my gaze and smiled. I’d been getting this sense from him, all evening, that he was mentally in many places at once, and was just kind of looking for a direction. He only wanted to focus on one thing at a time, and I didn’t blame him… I just wanted him to focus on something positive, rather than something that would make him only look back on what he’d seen prior to coming for help. Luckily, he seemed to be heading for the positive, which I was grateful for. I wanted to hold him up, but I wanted to know he’d be all right if I did have to give him a moment alone.

“How do you do it?” he asked me.

“What?” I wondered.

“How do you… you know… just stay up all the time?” said Stan, cautiously running his left hand back through my hair. As he spoke, he continued to weave his hand through, petting my hair rather than aggressively messing with it, setting a couple of curls that had escaped flattening that morning back into place behind my right ear. “You’re always helping people,” Stan went on; “you’re always helping me. You’re incredible, Kyle, I—“

He stopped.

But I didn’t want him to.

“Oh, shit,” he said, “sorry.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“For—well, I mean—dude, I’m fucking up all over the place. I come here all fucked up and then I spill all this shit to you and then I go and—”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “Stan, it’s okay. It’s okay.” When he tried to pry himself back, I grabbed him in, my right hand on the back of his neck, and got him close enough so that our foreheads were pressed together. I saw Stan’s blue eyes squint in confusion, then soften into a different kind of questioning glance as I worked my hand up into his hair—and gave him a little taste of what he was always doing to mine—and repeated, “It’s okay.”

Gathering myself, I let things transition into what I’d been meaning to say to him. Things had obviously been moving along—in strange, terrifying ways for the League, and in slow, natural ways for the two of us. Night and day were indeed crossing together, now, though, and while there was still time to get something out there, I knew I had to say it. It certainly had the potential to make the oncoming dark times a little easier to get through.

Cautiously, I shifted to sit on his knees, my legs on either side of his, and wrapped my other arm around him as well. Stan perked up, giving me an odd yet strangely inviting look, and asked, hardly vocally, “What’re you doing?”

“Is this okay?” I wondered, giving him the opportunity to slow things back down again.

“Um, I mean, yeah, but I wasn’t sure if—”

“Stan, listen…” I said, keeping my arms around him, making sure that there was still something I could do to hold him up, “I learned something today. Even before you came here, dude. I’ve been working it out in my head all day. All week. I just… started figuring some things out.”

Stan paused for a second, set his hands, after a second of hesitation, on my waist, and asked,
“Like what?”

“Like how… like… I don’t know, like how sometimes it doesn’t matter what you call something, as long as it’s real.”

“Huh?”

“Like… friend labels.” Oh, God, I’d started. I’d started and I wasn’t going to be able to stop until I’d said my full peace. But once I got to the end, I hoped, things would start to get easier. “There are so many different kinds of friendships. You’ve got peers, and then acquaintances… people you’re nice to just because you know their names. Then you’ve got your good friends. Your teammates, your co-workers. Then there’s the people you really trust. Like all of us in the League. We’re tight. We’ve got each others’ backs. And then there’s that ‘best friend’ label. The person that really gets you. Who knows your secrets, and you know theirs. Then… then there are the people you know you can’t live without. I believe that, for everyone, there’s at least one other person who can help them make sense of things. Who’s just… there, who never backs away, and…”

I let myself trail off, spent for words in the absence of that one fucking word that I still couldn’t completely put my finger on, in my mind.

I sat back, and took a look at him. At Stan Marsh, at the guy I’d already given so much to, and probably already taken so much from. I knew him, I knew he was strong; strong-willed, very mind-over-matter, someone with strong morals and strong connections to what he cared for. But at the same time, I knew that he was fragile. That a situation like the one he’d experienced that evening could affect him in a few different ways, depending on how other things moved around it. I’d made up my mind that I wanted to keep him out of harm’s way, and it was pretty set in stone that I’d be thanking him my entire life for what he’d done for me on Halloween. Other times, too. For all the times he’d been there for me, even when I was being stupid or weak.

And so, more words just… started to come.

“Stan?” I started, looking him straight in the eyes.

Those blue eyes were glassy with tears brought on by his hellish afternoon, and by his own self-doubt, and yet there was a slight sheen, a glimmer, a little hope. “Yeah?”

“You’re the person I can’t live without,” I told him, laying flat out a collection of the heaviest, truest words I had ever spoken. I’d been realizing it, over time, but more and more, lately, I was coming round to understanding, to making sense of whys and hows. I knew Stan needed me. I knew, in many ways, I needed him. It was, now, simply understood. I could not live without him. I knew I’d freeze if I were forced to. “I just… I respect you… so much… I have so much to thank you for, more for every year I’ve known you, and I… I mean, literally, Stan, I wouldn’t be alive without you. Maybe there’s no word for it, or—o-or maybe I’m still a little scared of what’s to come, but all I know, Stan… all I know is that you mean… y-you mean so much to me, and I want to protect you. For the rest of my life.”

Extreme? I don’t know. But I had to talk it out.

And, damn, was I glad I had. It was like my entire body had heaved one huge sigh of relief, as if to say, Okay, got that out of the way, now let’s keep going. Nothing had to stop. No, if anything, things were really getting started.

There was a slight moment; a little glance, a couple seconds for the two of us to catch up and start on the same page. Stan quietly studied my expression, taking hold of both my arms in his own
protective way, his eyes asking, *Really?* To which I smiled, and, resting against him, nodded my affirmation.

I’d been ignoring it and putting it off long enough. We needed this.

Stan’s eyes widened, and there was a kind of raw innocence to his expression. A spark that showed me that same kind of respect I’d always had for him, mixed with just the slightest bit of doubt. But there was really no room for doubt here. It had taken him a long time to arrive at his realizations, and longer for me to come to terms with mine, but when it came down to it, there was no way to talk ourselves around pure fact anymore. I cared for him more than anyone else in the world.

And I wanted to show him that.

I fought myself for a moment; I made a couple of attempts and held back, just in case this wasn’t the right thing to do. But then… fuck it. Of course it was right. Of course it was mutual. What else could it be?

His eyes trapped mine again—that beautiful, brilliant blue—and with everything I had in me, I brushed my fingers back against his skin and through his hair, and kissed him.

It tasted like memories.

Sour and sweet, bitter and bold, simple as childhood and brisk as mountain snow.

And I loved every second of it. I’d started out a little nervous, but Stan returned it right away, allowing me to feel more at ease. His hands locked around my upper arms and did not cease their grip for a moment. I drew in a long breath and pressed myself into him; my fingers latched around full tufts of his hair, my tongue ablaze with the sense of his taste… my entire body overflowing, yet relaxing and feeling whole all at once.

That was it. My confirmation. My confession. When I pulled back, I hoped I hadn’t gone too far, but that was quickly ruled out when Stan drew me in for what was, up until that point, the tightest, just the warmest hug in our history.

This was right… this was warm; this was everything I needed. I fell into the embrace and held him in return. I’d failed to save him from death in the alley. That wasn’t going to happen again. I wasn’t going to let him go again. Because I cared more for him than anyone else in the world. Because I owed him my life. Because I couldn’t live without him.

“Oh, God,” he whispered, pressing his face into the crook of my shoulder, “oh… God, Kyle, I…”

“Mmhmm,” I hummed out, still so deeply invigorated by the moment, I let my fingers dig desperately into him, to just hold him there, just keep him there so he couldn’t leave.

Stan drew back, only a little, only enough for us to stay pressed together, closer than we’d ever been, only to initiate a kiss himself, testing the waters, asking, “You sure?”

Allowing myself to let go, and simply enjoy what was happening, what was starting, what we were creating, I pressed into that kiss, holding one hand against his cheek. Stan laughed into it somewhat, then, as if daring himself to do so, shifted his hands again, testing his fingertips against the skin of my lower arms, against my neck and face, until his right hand wound itself back into my hair, where he clung on tightly, where his grip remained until I finally gave a reply of, simply, “Yeah.”
“This is something?”

“Yeah,” I repeated. “I mean… wouldn’t hurt to try. Right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. Well, I mean, I’m glad y—“

I cut him off, pressing my lips to his, and Stan fell instantly into it, holding me tightly, content in our decision to allow things between us to move forward.

Desperately, Stan worked his hands around to my chest, and for a moment, he continued the exploration for his sense of touch, pressing and sliding both palms down against my ribs, finding the heat of my neck as he coaxed me into another velvet kiss. But then he grabbed at the front of my shirt, and yanked me in close, so close that our foreheads touched, our noses pressed together; his skin against my lips won another warm kiss, and another—another, until again I felt his tongue lightly pressed on my own, and I settled into his rhythm, my hands absently massaging his shoulders as we moved together.

As Stan’s grip tightened, he tempted me into one more deep, breathless kiss, and then we pressed against each other, both panting, both surrounded by the beauty in the sound of nothing but breath, when Stan’s bright blue eyes trapped mine, and he pleaded, his fists still clenched firmly around the material of my shirt, the ghost of our last kiss still tingling in my mouth:

“Stay.”

Oh, God.

Of course I’d stay. We needed each other as the ocean needs the moon; without that constant presence, neither of us would have any sense of direction. Without that constant, there would be no hope for logic. He was my constant, and I was his.


“And I’ll never leave you, Kyle,” he promised in return. He winced a little, and the two of us each set a hand immediately over the still-bothersome area of his ribcage. He lay his hand over mine, and added, “You’re everything…”

Everything… everything… God, he was everything. We were everything. Together. Just us. Just… us.

Inside, I felt that surge, that incredible rush… stemming from the beautiful simplicity of my recent interactions with Stan, it was a powerful drive that filled me with a new sense of purpose. And the words flitted around in my mind again, the words I’d never been able to see, or read, or analyze, the one single word I’d been trying to reach this whole time, to describe just what our bond was, to describe just how I felt about him. It should have been so obvious. It was there. It had always been there.

I choked before I could speak again; I felt the heat of his skin on my palm, on my fingertips, heat from the bullet wound, from the shot that, had Kenny not intervened, would have ended his life. That would have ended everything. Ended us. But that heat, that scar, because Stan had lived… that was triumph. Proof that we could stand against whatever the world threw at us. Affirmation of our mutual want and need to protect one another.

“Stan…” I managed to get out, tasting tears on my tongue, though from which of us I couldn’t be sure.
“Mm?” He kissed my eyelid and calmly stroked my hair. Heart beating. Lungs breathing.

“I…” I began, stumbling somewhat for the right way to say that one last piece, “that word… that… everything… everything I’ve been trying to say, I—I know… I know it. I figured it out.”

Passionately, desperately, I grasped his shoulder with my free hand; his hand on mine exerted a pressure so strong and present, I thought I’d just fall down crying with relief and joy before I could say a single thing. But I managed. Because these words had to be said. Because…

“Stan, I love you.”

“…What…?” His voice was a whisper, but it echoed inside me.

“I love you,” I repeated. “You’re everything. I love you.”

Blue met green. His lips teased mine with a light touch. I felt him say his own words, against my skin where we touched, inside, where his voice reverberated: “I love you, too.” A small kiss, and then: “Kyle… I love you.”

We always had. We always would. Because we, what we shared, who we were, all we loved…

…We were everything.

I’d be his voice if he ever went silent again. I’d be his sanity if he ever felt that he was losing his grip. I was prepared to be—I wanted to be—everything he needed to fill his life, so that he in turn could fill mine. I loved him. I was so achingly in love with him. And I had been, for years and years. Questions had always gotten in the way. My incessant need to sort things into tidy piles, to make formulae of thoughts and words, to turn human emotion into logical equations on paper… all of that had formed an awful mental dam that I’d finally breached. I was flooding over. Labels later. I was in love. It was just one more thing I’d had to talk myself around into realizing. But this wasn’t just another hypothesis of mine. Just as I’d told Stan… this was real. This was real, this was me, this was us. This was the only logic that mattered.

And because we had each other… because we had each other and neither of us would ever let go again… because of that, we’d survive.

I left him with one more kiss, then hugged him close, and for quite some time, we simply stayed there, together, holding each other so tightly we could almost shut out the rest of the world. That pivotal moment changed everything, though—the rest of the world couldn’t be ignored much longer. I’d been wondering when that would happen. When the League would literally become this town’s—this country’s, this planet’s—only defense.

There was so much more I had to be strong for, now.

First thing was first, though. “You okay?” I asked Stan, calmly stroking his back.

“I will be,” he promised on a quiet breath.

“No going crazy on me, all right?”

“I won’t.” There was a slight pause, then, and I felt his spine collect a shiver, which then passed up my arm, where we connected, and through me as well; I felt his fear and his unease. Whatever it was he’d seen, it wasn’t pretty. And we were all about to see more of it. “Kyle?”
“Hmm?”

“What happens now?”

“In terms of what?” I wondered.

“Anything,” Stan clarified, pulling me in a little closer.

“Well,” I said, giving him a little kiss just under his right eye, “we stick together. There’s that much. We stand together and we get through it together. Okay?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, smiling a little.

“I mean it,” I added, firmly.

“So do I.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” Stan’s eyes held mine in focus for a little while longer, then shifted far, far away from me as his concentration went haywire. “What about this chaos, though? What do we do?”

“We fight,” I told him.

“Easy for you to say, dude, you weren’t there. I’ve seen it. I watched it.” Stan let go of me at that point, and I shifted to sit beside him, keeping an arm around his waist as he once again buried his heads in his hands and let out a frustrated moan. “It’s like he wasn’t even my dad anymore, Kyle,” he said frightfully, and I knew he was re-watching whatever he’d seen in the back of his mind. “There were spasms and seizures and words in that fucked-up Cult language, and he doesn’t sound like that, my dad doesn’t sound like that. He’s fucking stupid but what the fuck?!”

“I’m sorry…” I tried, since there was so little else that could be said of his awful situation.

“It just… it just sucks, you know?” said Stan, dropping his hands; he clasped them together as he leaned over his knees, head bent, shoulders trembling. “It sucks not knowing what to do. I don’t know if I can help. I don’t know if he’s ever gonna come out of it. It sucks feeling like there’s just nothing I can fucking do!”

“Stan,” I said firmly, shaking him a little.

“What?”

“There is something we can do,” I told him, gearing myself up to believe the words as well. “Something else I’ve realized is that this, all this, everything that’s going on, dude, it’s not something any one of us can take on alone.” That struck a chord for Stan, and he set his right hand on my knee, digging desperately into the denim I wore as if to make doubly sure I was there. I lay my right hand over his and grabbed hold as I continued, “So we’re gonna stick together. And it’s gotta be about the League right now, dude. You know it and I know it.”

“No, I know,” said Stan, laying his head on my shoulder. “I don’t want anyone else to have to see something like—what happened today. Plus, there’s Kenny. Dude, we’ve gotta help Kenny.”

“So we will,” I said. One of us had to have plenty of resolve at a time like this. It took a lot to work up, but I had to keep things in as positive a light as possible. “We’re gonna help Kenny, and we’re all gonna get through this as a team.”
Stan sat up fully again, and as he did, I gave him a little kiss on the forehead, once again out of a pure promise to keep his well-being a priority at all times. “I’m serious,” he said, trying to let himself laugh, “you always know what to say.”

I shrugged. As Stan wound his right hand up into my hair, I grinned and replied, “I’m your best friend.”

…with benefits, was kind of implied at this point, especially when Stan went for another kiss, and I returned it as if we’d been carrying on that way for years. Now that we’d moved into it, it had become almost beyond obvious that this was what both of us needed. We weren’t calling ‘it’ anything, because as far as we were concerned, ‘it’ was just between us and ‘it’ was too normal to be elevated to anything really official. Plus, official be damned, there were way more important things to be concerned with. So the general idea behind what ‘it’ was went something like: *Fuck it. We don’t have to call this anything, but we just need to be together right now.* And since there wasn’t really a label to describe that, we didn’t fucking use one. I was stupid to have gotten caught up on something so trivial. *Fuck labels.* Love just happens when it does and with whom it’s meant to, that’s all.

We sat there together, bonded, for a while, hardly moving. For once, I wasn’t contemplating logistics. I was just letting something happen. Right now, it was through silence and unspoken understanding, but it was much more than that.

A couple quiet minutes went by, and then, breaking the evening into parts again, Stan’s cell phone rang. He dug it out from his pocket frantically, and answered before he could even check the i.d. I figured only one person would be calling him at that time of night, anyway, though, and his tone gave it away in a second.

“Hello?” he began cautiously. Then, he froze, smiled a little, and said, more quietly, “Oh, hey. Hi. I’m glad you made it.”

*It’s my mom,* he mouthed to me, then stood and walked into the middle of the room. Wanting to be there, to hold him up if he needed it, I followed him, and slowly wrapped my arms around his waist from behind. I felt Stan relieve a little tension, but he kept his focus on his phone conversation.

“Yes…” Stan said, responding slowly and calmly to his mother’s words, “yeah… it’s okay… uh-huh… yeah, Sheila told me. Yeah… I’m with Kyle…” When he said those last few words, he placed his free hand over my arm, and I dared to tighten my hold on him just a little more. “Um, Mom…?” Stan then started, and I felt him shake. “Mom, there’s something I… there’s something I’ve gotta tell you.” Of course, I knew what he meant to say, but at the last second, he changed his mind and said instead, “I love you. I love you, and Shelley, too, and Dad. We’ll be okay again. Mom? …Mom? …We’re gonna be okay again. …I’ll tell him. …Night, Mom. …I love you, too.”

With a sigh, Stan hung up the phone and set it down on my nightstand, then turned around to hug me in close. “Thank you so much,” he whispered to me, burying his face in my hair. He kissed the top of my head and went on, “Really, Kyle, thank you… I’d be halfway to crazy myself right now if I didn’t have you.”

“You, too,” I told him, gently stroking his back. A silent moment passed, and I had to get the question out there: “You were about to come out, weren’t you? Why didn’t you tell your mom?”

Stan shook his head. “I couldn’t, dude. Not over the phone. Not like that. I want to tell her when I see her again. I respect her too much to drop it on her over the phone.”
“Drop it on her?” I repeated, wrinkling my nose in distaste for his choice of words.

“You know what I mean. I still dunno how she’ll take it.”

“She’s your mom, dude, and she loves you,” I affirmed.

Relaxing a little, Stan smiled, and pulled me in again. As a gesture to show that he had all my support, I lightly squeezed his right shoulder, then followed his arm down until I had his hand clasped in mine, woven together with the promise that we’d see everything through together, no matter what.

“Okay,” he sighed out. “So what’s the plan?”

“Huh?”

“League-wise.” Ah; he needed a topic shift again. Something told me Stan would be weaving in and out like that for a while, but if that was the way he needed to work, that was fine. Whatever kept him from going crazy, too. “What’s the plan?”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday.” Like we would’ve been able to concentrate with going to school, anyway. Stan wouldn’t have made it and we both knew it. “Let’s have a meeting. Kenny and the guys have to know. How much longer till Chaos goes after the rest of the town? We’ve gotta fight.”

“Why hasn’t that stupid Cult done anything?” Stan grumbled.

“I don’t know. It’s bugging me, too,” I admitted. “So that’s stuff to talk to Kenny about.”

“Yeah,” Stan sighed. “God, it’s really starting now, huh?”

“We’re gonna make it,” I said quickly, not wanting to think about a world of nothing but darkness and chaos. Stan fell silent, his eyes on the ground, his palm hot and wet with anxiety. “Stan,” I said, pinching his fingers between mine and staring at him until he looked at me, “we’re gonna make it.”

“Yeah,” he echoed. Then, he shook his head, getting his mind back on our collective primary goals. In a second, his drive came back. He let go of me and crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes shifting from searching for focus to having arrived at a decision. “This is it. We’re gonna beat them at their own game, Kyle. Whatever that is.”

“Stop Chaos and save the world,” I laughed. “Sounds like a pretty short list of things to do.”

Stan laughed, messed with my hair a bit then said, “So let’s do it, dude. We’ve got this.”

“Gonna have to perfect the ricochet,” I suggested.

“Hell, yeah. And let’s get that quirk of yours under control. If you can use it…”

“I’ll try,” I said. “Not gonna make any guarantees.”

“Gotta use whatever we got, though.”

“I know. We will.”

We stayed up a while longer after that, discussing things we knew so far, and possible plans of action from there. It was a great way to keep Stan distracted from what had happened to his dad, though of course the misfortune also served as a means for him to want to be more focused on
stopping Chaos, Nyarlathotep, Cthulhu, the Cult, hell, anything that stood in the League’s way. So by the end of the night, we had a few new plans to run by Kenny and the guys, a few new ideas on what could possibly have caused the flute music to spread like a plague, and something a little more personal, something we’d keep to ourselves for a while, or at least that we wouldn’t advertise. However secretive (or not obvious) we’d be about it, though, I was glad it was happening. With each other, we had something to cling to, something to believe in, something very personal to fight for.

Late into the night, I was tossing and turning. I was much too uncomfortable to sleep; my mind was too busy a place. So, after giving myself a minute to think about it, I stumbled out of my own bed and crept over to the other side of Stan’s air mattress. He was sleeping lightly, his face serene and his breaths undisturbed.

Cautiously, very cautiously, I slid onto the mattress beside him. My stomach flipped with nerves, but I needed this. I needed to be beside the person who could keep me grounded, who could keep my racing mind still.

His blue eyes fluttered open, and before I could apologize for waking him, he shifted, and drew the sheets over us both. Wrapping my right arm around him, I slipped him a gracious kiss goodnight, which he returned, sending his warmth and courage into me. The fingers of his left hand wound up into the uneven waves of my hair, and we pressed up against one another, holding on tightly until sleep came.

After the first peaceful sleep I’d known in weeks, we kissed each other awake, and lay there, together, in silence, tightly grasping each other’s hands, ready to stand strong, as one, against whatever came next.
“Come on, Kyle,” I urged.

“I can’t do it with everyone watching,” Kyle protested.

“Dude, you gotta try.”

“No. Come on, Stan, don’t put me on the spot like this.”

“Hey, don’t make this sound like it was my idea,” I scolded him. “It was Ike’s, but I think he’s got a point. You’ve gotta commit to this, Kyle. You can do it.”

Kyle was standing in the middle of the field behind the base, where Token and Clyde had earlier cleared off most of the snow in order for us to start having rigorous League training sessions, which we knew were up and coming, since Kenny had told us he had a lot to fill us in on, and knew almost exactly what we were up against. So Kyle had agreed to give a psychic test another shot. The setup for the session had been his brother’s idea, but now that we were actually going through with it, he was second-guessing.

“I can’t just make myself control it!” Kyle hollered over.

“If you wanna practice something like this you gotta dive right in!” I called back.

“Oh, my God,” he groaned. “I know what I said, but I really don’t think it’s gonna work.”

I stood several feet away, with Cartman, Token, Wendy, Timmy and Ike. Kenny and Clyde were tied up with other work, but once they finished, we’d be going inside to get the rest of the meeting underway. This was primarily a time-killer… at least for now. A large barrel of tennis balls separated me and Ike from the others, and the understanding was that Kyle would try to stop or divert a moving object in mid-air. The idea behind that approach was due to the fact that, for the most part, Kyle’s psychic quirk had only been destructive and random—he’d only semi-consciously moved an object (in my presence, anyway) once, back when we’d been questioning Nelson, who Clyde and Token had since dragged off to jail to rot with the others.

“Come on, let’s go!” Cartman said hungrily from off to my left. “I wanna throw stuff at Kyle.”

“Oh, you wish, fatass,” Kyle snapped back.

“It’s the best way to see if you have any kind of control over your psychic quirk,” Ike called over.

“I know, but what if it doesn’t work?” Kyle wondered, folding his arms in protest. “What then?”

“Well, then,” said Cartman, “I’m just gonna do this anyway.” With that, he picked up a tennis ball and hurled it at Kyle.

“Dude!” I snapped, punching Cartman in the shoulder. “What the fuck? We didn’t start
“Ech, well, excuse me, Stan,” Cartman griped, “but I was under the impression I got to throw stuff at Kyle today.”

“Yeah, with the purpose of testing to see if he can control the quirk, and not until Ike gives the Goddamn signal,” I argued. Glancing back over at Kyle, I called out, “You okay?”

Kyle held up the tennis ball and said with a half-grin, slightly mocking me, “Yeah, Stan, caught it. Let’s just do this, let’s just get this over with. I still don’t know if it’ll work.”

The whole idea itself had come about after breakfast. Once Kyle and I had gotten around to talking about when we needed to get everyone filled in on what had happened to my dad, at least.

We’d given ourselves plenty of time to lie awake and be connected, that morning; plenty of time to accept everything we’d both promised the night before. We were still such kids that way… clinging on so tightly, making such bold, incredible statements we fully intended to stand by. I’d risen to the occasion for my family, and fully intended to see my mom and sister safely through this madness, not to mention try to help my father. It was the same for Kyle. I’d promised him my life, and he’d promised me his. In a way, though, I loved being able to let go around him a little. Let myself be submissive for once, let myself fall into his promise to protect me.

Once Kyle had told me he loved me, that had been the moment that finally brought everything to a beautiful culmination for me. When Wendy had said the very same thing, I’d felt lost. I’d known something was off, for me and her, because I couldn’t match her affection. But with Kyle, I could give. I’d already been giving for so long. I knew that I loved him, and knew, now, that he loved me; we’d created a bond—a pact, to keep each other safe, no matter what. Something I really admired about him was his honesty, his openness to reason. He didn’t shy away from his feelings, the way I had; he didn’t let nerves scare him away. No, he worked through, accepted, and expressed everything with that rational ease that was just so inherently him.

As dark as things were, I still awoke that morning to everything. The feel of his fingertips on my skin, the steady rhythm of his breathing, the sweet little moan that he hummed into me when we locked into a deep, desperate kiss—all of this, all of him, everything, gave me just that much more to cling to. The severity of the situation around us had hit home; mornings and moments like this wouldn’t last, but while they could, I’d enjoy them for all they were worth.

We didn’t really talk for a while—we’d said so much the night before, and had now moved beyond words. We helped each other up from that little air mattress; I drew Kyle up onto his feet, and immediately we had each other in a tight, protective hug. Now that there was no doubt or hesitation, we could press onward. We could keep going.

“You’re gonna be okay,” was the first thing Kyle said to me that morning. It wasn’t a question, it was a statement of fact. Or, something that he’d make sure was fact.

In response, I said a quiet, “Thank you.” And, almost without thinking, I added, “I love you.” God, I’d never felt so fucking liberated. Having the freedom to tell him that just felt so healing.

Kyle pressed against me, and told me in return, “I love you, too.” Stroking my back, he continued on, “Things are gonna get better. I promise.”

“Thanks,” I said again, keeping a secure hold.
When I’d dropped Dad off at the asylum, I’d seen the potential for everything I knew to start tearing apart. That thought worsened once Mom left. But Dad wasn’t the only person in the asylum. There were others, and there’d be more. I wasn’t the only person in town who’d lost someone. The Tweaks had lost their son. Others had lost friends, family members, loved ones, lovers. I didn’t want to lose anything else; I didn’t want anyone else to feel as lost and confused as I’d been, or, worse… to feel the way my mother did. What would happen if the entire town tore apart?

Easy. Chaos. Ruin. Everything the Cult had been aiming for, for years now. So there was only one thing to do, just as Kyle had said, just as Kenny had been reiterating: we’d fight. We’d train and get better. We’d take them on, and we’d take them down.

Which was exactly why, after a fairly quiet breakfast (awkward mostly with Sheila’s bustling, not knowing how delicately to talk to me, what with the news of my dad, but saved by Ike and Gerald bringing up topics of how the news media was covering the Chaos attacks so far), Kyle and I essentially kidnapped Ike into a brainstorming session. I texted my sister to let her and Mom know that nothing else attack-wise had happened overnight, and then the three of us set ourselves up in the middle of Kyle’s bedroom floor, with Ike on his laptop, and a notebook and two pencils waiting at the ready in front of me and Kyle.

Ike, as Red Serge, was always in charge of minutes and that kind of thing at meetings, and had a secret, locked file on his laptop of League-related activities that his parents knew absolutely nothing about. In that folder was what was essentially a detailed roll call list. A spreadsheet giving stats on each of us, on strengths, weaknesses, arsenals, and major accomplishments. The Mysterion part of the spreadsheet had obviously been recently updated with the fact that Kenny was an Immortal, but there were no further notes on how he could possibly break that curse. I hoped to God that could be resolved for him at the end of all this. He deserved to not have to put up with that anymore.

My own stats sheet noted my death and revival. It was eerie listening to Ike read that off. It was something there, something that divided my life into a clear before and after—Kyle’s, too—but I think the fact that it had happened to me as Toolshed brought it to a new level. Only when Ike read it off as something on Toolshed’s file did I associate the events of Halloween as something done by, well, a hero. I’d broken character when I’d taken the bullet, but it was still something in Toolshed’s own ‘mythos’ as it were. Weird. I mean, I’d been doing the hero thing for years, we all had, but part of the ‘after’ of that event had been my wanting to be more on Mysterion’s level, as far as the inevitable Cthulhu battle went.

Kyle, too, had that ‘oh shit’ moment when Ike read his stats. “You… you have the Human Kite listed as a psychic?” he asked his brother once the words were out in the air.

“Sorry, buddy,” Ike shrugged, “but it’s something important about you. If I were you, I’d be trying to learn how to use it against our enemies.”

“I’m not ready,” Kyle said quickly.

“Kyle,” said Ike, sternly, glaring at his brother until he had his full attention. “If you don’t figure out how to control it, and crazy things keep happening the way they have been, you might really lose control. I mean, you might really hurt someone.”

Around Ike, I didn’t have to be discreet about taking hold of Kyle’s hand once he’d grabbed mine, about folding my fingers around his and holding on with the intent of keeping Kyle present and focused, and just as strong as I knew he could be. Kyle had been about to say something in retaliation to Ike’s statement, but he choked on the thought, swallowed it, and bowed his head,
brushing his thumb gently against my skin. “Okay,” he gave in. “I understand that.” He drew in a deep breath, gave Ike a confident smile, and added, “No, you’re right. I don’t want to accidentally hurt anyone. If it’s something I can use, I’ll use it.”

That decided that for the time being. We continued on, talking about TupperWear, Marpesia and Iron Maiden as our defensive line (Jesus Christ, of course I’d be lining things up in football terms—actually, come to think of it, that’s probably why Mysterion never let me lead missions; Clyde could drop it, but I couldn’t), and talking about Mosquito’s offensive (there I go again) strategies and his leadership qualities, plus, there was the Coon. We were all on and off about what to do with the Coon. He was pissing Mysterion off for the most part (all of us, really), but we needed him, just in case he could help subdue Cthulhu again.

Eventually, we came to the mutual agreement that this would be much better talked about at the base with the rest of the guys, so I sent out a mass ‘Pickup Game’ text, and got everyone’s eager responses within thirty seconds.

Everything still seemed kind of surreal. My mom was miles and miles out of town, and Dad lay, fully crazed, in that nightmare of an asylum downtown, where Tweek and Chaos’s other victims were being kept. We knew that building would start filling up, but we weren’t ready for Chaos’s attacks to be so personal. He’d gone after Red, we all knew that much, and Kenny had hardly left her side since.

I couldn’t blame him. I knew the feeling of wanting to keep a protective eye on someone you just had to hold safe, no matter what.

Except somehow, over the course of the day, it had gone from lying in bed beside him to chucking tennis balls at him across the field. Proof that hardly anything had changed, and it’s not like we were announcing anything to people. On League grounds, it was business as usual. Business that day just happened to be a little trial that we were taking a huge chance on.

Kyle drew in a deep breath and stood back to accept his challenge. “Here goes nothing,” he said.

“Okay!” Ike signaled the rest of us.

At first, Kyle was overwhelmed, and ended up getting pelted a couple of times, but after getting fed up with that, he finally closed his eyes. Once he had, his reflexes climbed—he was dodging the tennis balls with more ease (and, I’m sorry, how many tennis balls did the Black family just happen to have?—I’m just saying…), but the ultimate goal hadn’t been reached. He still hadn’t exactly shown any sign of his psychic quirk, but, then again, he wasn’t necessarily being provoked. God knows I didn’t want to think up any ways to try to make him angry (hell, I’d just spent so much time telling him I’d keep him safe, and I’d hold to that), but something was bound to get him riled up sooner or later…

“‘Come on, Kyle, this is fucking boring!’ Cartman spat.

Aaaand, there we go.

“‘Shut up, Cartman!’ Kyle shouted back. ‘I’m trying to concentrate!’”

Cartman chortled to himself and grabbed another tennis ball. (I saw Wendy roll her eyes and mutter, “Oh, my God,” under her breath.) “‘Dodge this, dumb Jew!’” Cartman hollered, winging the ball toward Kyle.
“Goddammit!” Kyle spat, swatting it away. “I am fucking warning you!”

And, sure enough, a couple of awful slurs later, Kyle shouted, “That fucking does it!” The ball currently being shot toward him stopped midair when Kyle’s eyes snapped open. “Ike!” he called over, eyes still focused on the one ball still hovering. “Hit me!”

“Okay…” Ike agreed, while the rest of us could only stare.

Given the prompt, Ike hurled another tennis ball out onto the field toward his brother, and as it approached, Kyle raised up his left hand; he quickly shoved his hand out to his side as if tossing something himself, and the ball’s path diverted, completely missing him and rocketing off in the direction his hand was pointing. “Hit me again, guys!” he shouted. “All of you!”

“On three,” said Ike, making sure everyone had a ball. “One, two… three!”

We each tossed one out onto the field, giving Kyle six different angles to cover. But he kept his eyes directly on that ball that remained in the air directly in front of him, and, with a deep breath, he curled his hands into fists and swept his arms down to his sides, causing each of the new six to rebound right off of him, as if he had a forcefield around him, at least a foot in all directions.

Then, as he heaved a sigh, the other dropped to the ground.

“Holy shit,” I heard Token say.

“Ooooooohhhh,” Timmy agreed in admiration.

And while Ike darted over to start kicking Cartman’s shins for the slurs that had earlier been spilling out of his mouth, the base’s back door swung closed behind us, and two sets of footsteps approached. “Daaaaaaaamn,” Clyde complimented as he and Kenny walked toward us. “Kyle, that was awesome!”

“Mmmm, really?” Kyle wondered. Glancing back at him, I noticed that he was uncomfortably massaging his temples, probably having incurred a pretty awful headache through all that specified concentration. Hoping he wouldn’t pass out, and simply hoping the headache would pass, I walked over to him and asked if he needed anything. “I’ll be fine,” he said, shaking his head.

“Kyle,” Kenny called over, “that was really impressive. But you gonna be okay, dude?”

“Yeah, y-yeah,” Kyle told him. “You guys go back in, I just need a minute, okay? I’m totally done with this for now… there’s other stuff to talk about.”

“Sure thing,” said Kenny, nodding a quick understanding over to me as he and Clyde gathered the rest together to head back in. “Do wanna address this in the meeting, though.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We’ll clean up,” I offered. “Be right there.”

Once Kenny and Clyde had corralled everyone in, Kyle heaved out a long, forced sigh and dropped his hands, remarking, “Dude… ow…”

“Okay, for real this time,” I said, setting a hand on his arm, “are you okay?”

“It really was pretty incredible to watch,” I complimented him when he yanked me into a hug. “You’ve really got something…”

“Mmhmm. Right,” he then transitioned, pulling back, “let’s clean up and head in there.”

“Huh? Oh, sure, I guess.”

Kyle’s eyes were wandering all over the place. He’d agreed to the session, but nothing changed the fact that this quirk bothered him. I’d only known it from an observer’s perspective... I could only imagine how it must have felt for him, how taxing it must have been on his mind, maybe his entire body. So I respected his want to work through it on his own, and walked around the field gathering the various scattered tennis balls, of which there were quite a few. Kyle did his part, too, and each time we passed to return the equipment to the barrel, I brushed his arm, letting him know he had my support, before we walked off in opposite directions to continue searching.

“Hey… Stan?” Kyle finally said, from a few feet away.

“Yeah?” I turned, finding that he had his back to me and had stopped dead in his tracks. Upon walking up to him, I noticed that he was holding one of the tennis balls in his hands—it had to have been the one he’d successfully blocked, as it showed signs of wear and impact, and he was staring down at it intently. “What’s up?” I wondered, setting a hand on the small of his back.

“I got one, huh?” he said, holding up the ball with one hand.

“Yeah,” I said, “it was pretty amazing, when you started getting the hang of it.”

“It felt all right, I guess,” Kyle admitted again. He chucked the ball back over toward the barrel, and added, “Jesus, I really am psychic.”

“That’s not a bad thing, though,” I assured him.

“I guess.”

Kyle wandered over to pick up another tennis ball and hurled it back over toward the barrel. That being the last of them, he stepped back over to me and quietly took hold of my hand. He pulled a little, which suggested we should go back in, but as we walked toward the building, he grabbed hold of my sleeve with his free hand and said, “I didn’t want to have to accept this.”

“The quirk?” I guessed.

“Yeah.”

“At least you’ve started being able to control it,” I said. “That’s something.”

“It’s just kind of uncomfortable,” Kyle admitted. “I wish I could make it just go away.”

In response to that, I shifted, drawing Kyle in by the waist as we walked, giving him all of my support, telling him I’d hold him up no matter what. “Maybe it’s something else we can fix in all this,” I suggested. “And in the meantime, you can use it to help people. No matter how you go about it, Kyle, you’re constantly helping out, so just... maybe use this, too.”

It took a few seconds, but Kyle smiled, then threw an arm around my shoulders and yanked my head towards him to give me a quick but charming kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Stan,” he said.

“No prob,” I grinned.
Kyle let out a small laugh under his breath, and rubbed my shoulder a couple times before we dropped our hands and made our way back inside and into the meeting hall.

Kenny and Clyde had set a giant map of R'lyeh out over the entire table, saving a little room for Henrietta to keep a stack of books. They had apparently been doing a bit of digging into whether or not there was a kind of tie between Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu, along the lines of if destroying one might weaken or even destroy the other. The other enormous question on everyone’s minds was whether or not Chaos and the Cult were working together. Most of us doubted it, but it was something worth investigating.

Clyde took charge of the meeting, asking everyone for brief check-ins, so of course I came forward with the news about my father. The room fell silent upon hearing my news, and Kenny was the one to ask if I was holding up all right, if there was anything I needed. Wendy, I noticed, had both of her hands clamped around her mouth, and her eyes were wide with worry. I gave her a little tick of a smile and assured Kenny that I was all right. “We’ve just gotta keep going,” I said. “Plus, my mom’s out of town, now, and she can call me if weird things start happening outside of South Park. That’s kind of a good thing.”

“But your dad…” Wendy tried.

“I’ll be okay,” I assured her. “But I do want to make sure we figure out some way to break the effects of whatever it is Chaos and Nyarlathotep are doing.”

“Gotcha,” said Clyde, writing that down on the whiteboard as one of our goals.

The next things written over the course of the meeting were: Training sessions!, Find next summoning date, Chaos?, Cult activity and personal ties.

When Wendy and Token gave their combined check-in, they revealed their newly completed and perfected armor for everyone in the League. They’d even made something for Craig, which got him a stare from all of us. “What,” he said with a shrug. “I keep coming here, I might as well get something.” It was still up for debate if Craig was officially a part of anything, but having his help was never looked down on.

We did fittings of the armor, and Kyle expressed wanting to try his out with his glider fairly soon, just in case the lightweight design actually did make anything more cumbersome. He was questioned pretty heavily during the meeting, too, though Kenny and I tried to filter comments from getting to be too much for Kyle to handle. He went ahead and admitted that he was psychic, though, shut Cartman up before he could say anything, and went on to suggest that any further sessions we held outside would need to keep including his exploration of gaining control of the quirk. He then politely requested that we leave it at that and move on.

Probably one of the best things to be announced at that meeting after that was Clyde’s development of a new weapon for himself. As Mosquito, he’d been using stun guns for quite some time, but now that we were seeing Chaos force people off the deep end so frequently, Clyde had added two new guns for himself.

Tranquilizer guns.

The perfect defense against the insane.

Since we all knew that Kenny really could just die at any time (with no knowledge on our part of how long it would last), Clyde had really started stepping back into a leadership role. Mosquito and Mysterion were inarguably the ones most fit to keep the League on track, especially
with the two separate threats against us. Chaos was our biggest concern at the moment, but we could not underestimate the Cult. They were lying in wait for something, and were probably going to ride Chaos’s coattails all the way to the end, since he was essentially doing all the preparation work for them.

The final piece that was brought forward was from Henrietta. “I’ve never cared very much about names,” she said, laying out the tome of Johansen’s memoirs in front of her, “but one of you guys is a Donovan, right?”

All eyes were on Clyde, still standing at the whiteboard. “Uh… yeah,” he answered. “I’m Clyde Donovan. Why?”

“Any idea if you’re related to this guy?”

Clyde’s eyes sparked open, and he darted around to stand behind Henrietta, staring down at the pages of the book, where her pasty, black-polished index finger pointed to a specific line that made Clyde blanch. “No way,” he breathed.

“What?” Kenny wondered.

“Apparently, that Johansen guy, the one who early last century saw R’lyeh,” Clyde managed to get out, though he was almost shaking, “he went with a crew. None of ’em made it, but the one that got through furthest with him was… was Donovan.”

“What the fuck?!” Kenny exclaimed. “Let me see that.” He rushed around to join Clyde and Henrietta, then shouted, “How fucked and convoluted is this gonna get?!”

“What’re the odds it all just happens to go down in South Park?” Craig stated blankly.

“Craig,” Clyde said quickly.

“What? It’s true. The odds are weird.”

“No, I mean, Craig,” Clyde pushed.

“What, Clyde?”

“Dude, you always knew I was Mosquito, right? As in, even the Cult knew, back when you were dealing?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“No ‘oh, yeah,’ dude!” Clyde barked. “How’d you know? Who knew?”

“I don’t know, Clyde, they just did, they all did.”

“Because of this,” Kenny concluded, smacking a hand down on the book, causing the Goth girl to recoil. He then drew in a deep breath and glared across the table at Cartman. “So you’re not the only other one involved,” he added, which got Cartman to perk his head up after he’d been obsessing over the bruise again. “I’m a little sorry, I guess. I shouldn’t rule out the fact that other people might have ties.”

“Huh,” Cartman coughed. “Well, okay, then.”

“You should probably watch out for your family, dude,” I said to Clyde.
“Yeah, true,” Kenny agreed, clapping a hand on Clyde’s shoulder. “Might be a predisposition or something. Or else an immunity. Dude…”

“Yeah, this is… like, I don’t know if it’s big or not,” said Clyde. “Thanks, though. I’ll be on watch. And I’ll go through my dad’s genealogy to see if I’m really related. Holy shit, guys, this is getting… real.”

So connections to R’lyeh now included, past Kenny: Cartman, for his mother failing to get the full brunt of another curse sixteen years ago and thus for his natural ability to sweet-talk Cthulhu; Clyde, for possibly having a distant relative that had seen R’lyeh and Cthulhu up close almost a hundred years ago; and me, for having been ‘dead’ for six days there. Not to mention that all of us had seen R’lyeh for a short period of time back in fourth grade. Add in Henrietta’s earlier involvement with the Cult and her pact with Yog-Sothoth, Craig’s earlier dealings, and Kyle’s weird quirk, and it was seeming more and more fortunate that this was the team that had assembled around Kenny—well, Mysterion.

We continued the meeting until we’d been able to call ourselves back down to an average coping level for the rest of the day, since Kenny admitted that he wanted to enjoy another afternoon off, if he could swing it. So Ike and Timmy catalogued the armor, Clyde added, Check genealogy, to the checklist, and I saw Kenny and Cartman talking it out a little, probably still dealing with Kenny not wanting Cartman to blow his own involvement out of proportion, but going along with his minor apology. God, Kenny really was a selfless guy… going as far as to issue a little apology to someone he really couldn’t stand, all because none of us could deny that there was a chance anyone could discover a Cult connection at pretty much any moment. Token and Clyde checked in with Kyle as he and I were heading out, expressing their amazement at his earlier psychic display, and giving him support and congratulations. Kyle thanked them, but it was pretty apparent that he was done with the subject for now.

As we started out for the rest of the day, though, Kenny caught up to me and Kyle, throwing his arms around both of our shoulders from behind, sticking his head right between us. “Hey, guys,” he said.

“Uh… hey,” I said in response, giving him an awkward look. Kenny could so easily snap between business mode and having that carefree outlook again; I really was kinda jealous. “What’s up?”

“Just checkin’ in on you guys,” Kenny shrugged, hardly moving his position at all; he only had to tick his head to one side to speak directly to me. “Stan,” he started, “how you holding up?”

“What,” I wondered, “like about my dad?”

“Yeah.”

I sighed, getting that image in my head again from Friday afternoon. “It’s tough,” I admitted, “but as long as there’s a chance he can get better, that’s kinda all I want to think about, you know? Plus, at least I know Mom and Shelley are safe.”

“Yeah. Lemmie know if I can do anything,” Kenny offered. Then, after I thanked him, he looked directly at Kyle and asked, “How about you, dude, how’s the quirk?”

“Honestly,” said Kyle, “a little, um… a little easier to deal with.”

“Huh,” Kenny remarked. “That got something to do with this?” he wondered, getting a little secret-hungry.
“With what?” Kyle wondered.

Kenny laughed, then grabbed and turned my head so I was facing Kyle. “This!” Kenny clarified. “This guy. What, you guys think I’m not gonna notice somethin’ like this goin’ on?” On the emphasized this, Kenny slapped our hands, which I just that second realized were clasped pretty tightly.

“Oh!” said Kyle, “uh…”

“Jesus, guys, is it going on or isn’t it?” Kenny smirked.

I knew he’d be the one to figure it out. Him before anyone. And we were fine with Kenny knowing, because as long as Kenny knew something, he’d just be happy that he did, he wouldn’t spread it out everywhere. So I answered, “More or less.”

“We’re just kinda keeping it, y’know,” Kyle added, “not really public.”

“That’s cool, that’s cool,” said Kenny, grinning with satisfaction. “Congrats, guys. Oh, and by the way,” he added, walking around so that he could be in front of us, walking backwards, “this,” he said, making a circling motion between us, “right here, this? I totally called this. I said it first. I called it.”

“Okay, dude,” I grinned, “you called it.”

“You want a prize?” Kyle laughed.

“Nah, I’m good.” Kenny looked like he was about to say more when his cell phone trilled in his pocket. He slid it out and glanced at the screen, then smirked back at us and said, “Keep it real, guys, see you tomorrow.”

And with that, he was off ahead of us, answering his call. It was always so funny hearing the pitches change in Kenny’s voice, based on what he was talking about and who with. His stern, straightforward tone at meetings, and obviously the even more controlled Mysterion tone… then there was the way he talked to all of us, the normal, raunchy, fun-loving Kenny we always knew, and then there was that girlfriend-tier voice, his pseudo-suave and purposefully seductive glide that came out even saying something as simple as, “Hey, baby, what’s up?” over the phone.

From the tone of his voice then, it sounded like Kenny had a pretty good day planned ahead of him. The guy deserved it. God, didn’t all of us wish we could just slow down and enjoy normal life again. The fight hadn’t even happened yet, and we were already yearning for what could come after.

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After that meeting, even though it was December, we all agreed that the best thing we could do for ourselves would be to just keep training. Weekly meetings were a thing of the past. We met every single day. If one of us couldn’t make it, the rest of us pressed on. Henrietta and Craig attended regularly, contributing what they could. Henrietta was actually showing some human emotion, lately, too—though it was mostly concern that her brother Bradley might come back. Which was something I didn’t think any of us would be prepared for, but it was not only a possibility, it was an option still out there to strengthen our defense. Kenny downright refused to accept Mint-Berry Crunch back into the group, while Clyde kept saying “We’ll keep the option open.” Which was probably the only time Kenny ever really got angry with anyone other than Cartman. It was confirmed that Clyde was indeed related to the man in Johansen’s memoirs, if only
because he’d hit a gap in his dad’s family tree. It gave Clyde more drive, though (as if he needed more), and he pretty much led practices from then on out, other than when Kenny had something particular in mind.

The training sessions we had were intense. I’d leave some of those afternoons or evenings feeling more sore than I did after rounds of football drills or weight-training classes. If hurling that sledgehammer wasn’t enough on the ground, chucking it up into the air for the ricochet repeatedly was almost ridiculous. When I was getting winded during one session (Kyle and I had managed to perfect a few different angles on the ricochet that day), Kyle tried to move the tool on his own, using just his mind, to get some of the stress off of me and open me up to attack on the ground quicker. He succeeded twice.

Kyle was becoming more confident with his abilities, though we did sort of have an unspoken rule that we wouldn’t talk about it if we didn’t have to. What he managed to accomplish was incredible, though. He’d always had good reflexes, but now he could dodge and send straight back something that was hurled in his direction. He could deflect almost as easily as he could destroy. With a thought, he could topple an unsteadily balanced object, and at one point even managed to make something hover for a few seconds before it fell. But whatever he could do, however it was that he actually managed to do it, he certainly did not like talking about it.

Kyle and I kept mostly to ourselves, when we had down time. During the day, and into evening hours, we’d be working ourselves so hard, reading through documents to make sure we had all the facts, pouring over the map of R’lyeh so we could plan for any kind of fight that could take place there—so by the time we had a moment alone, we were both pretty tired.

With all the awful things going on around us, I was so lucky to have him, and told him so whenever I didn’t feel too out of place for saying it. When I did get awkward or apologetic, Kyle would kiss me and tell me that everything would be fine, which always succeeded in making me admire him even more. Being with him, being so open in the things we could talk about now, having him there… hearing him whisper reassurances to me, feeling his arms lock protectively around me—all of our interactions were teaching me new ways of being resilient, of being strong, of being sane and moral.

Ike noticed not long after Kenny had, but didn’t say anything, especially to his parents, which was nice. Sheila and Gerald were being incredibly kind and inviting, and didn’t ask anything of me while I was staying in their home. It being such a giving time of year and all, the sentiment of what they were doing (which I knew they would have done regardless of time of year) really hit me, and I insisted on helping out around the house anyway. It was the least I could do to repay them.

Kyle, Ike and I did talk a couple times about them, though. About how we had to keep an eye on them to make sure they didn’t fall to the Crawling Chaos as my dad had. As more and more people seemed to be doing.

When the mayor lit the tree in town that year, the crowd was smaller than it had ever been. Chaos’s victim count had climbed to a few dozen, which accounted for some of the absences, while a number of people had either left town (or, in a couple cases, the state), or had done what my mother had, and gone off to find family elsewhere while other loved ones were stuck in the asylum. It was nice to be with the Broflovskis through the holidays, but being the only one of my family around at Christmas was kind of tough. Kyle went with me to check on my dad, a couple days before the holiday; I didn’t want to linger, just say a quick *Merry Christmas* and go.

Christmas night was pretty tough. Chaos didn’t make a move, which was good, but all of us were wondering the same thing: if Butters might, just might, give his actions a second thought during
the bright holiday season. Kyle and I discussed that briefly that night after my mother called.

We were sitting on the floor, my back against the base of the bed, Kyle leaning back against me, my arms around him, with his hands clasping mine. My phone lay to the side, just in case Mom or Shelley needed to call again, or just in case we’d get any word from Kenny or the other guys. It was both scary and invigorating to be on call at any time, and I had to admit it was pretty impressive that Kyle could actually keep a spare glider in his closet without his parents noticing.

Kyle had given me a couple minutes after I’d hung up with my mother, but now that the phone had lay untouched for a little while, he finally asked, “How’s she doing?”

“Hmm?”

“Your mom. She okay?”

“She doesn’t sound like herself,” I admitted.

“I’m sorry,” Kyle said, running one thumb across the backs of my fingers in a small, reassuring gesture.

“Thanks,” I said, resting my head on his shoulder from behind. “I’m glad she and Shelley are out of town now, but it must be real hard on her.”

“She’ll be able to come back, Stan,” Kyle tried. “We’ve just gotta kinda pave the way for that.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Hey Stan?”

“Yeah?”

“I keep thinking,” said Kyle, setting my hands on his knees and leaning forward to use them as a pillow. “I dunno, it’s weird, I’ve been thinking about this on and off for like the past couple months, but… dude… we’re heroes.”

“Huh?” I wondered, prompting him to go on.

“The League, dude. We’re heroes,” Kyle clarified. “It’s one of those things we’ve just always done, and yeah, we’ve gotten recognized for doing good stuff before, but lately I keep thinking about what we actually stand for. Like, what we do. Like how we actually have the power to, I don’t know, change things. Or—sorry, I’m rambling.”

“You’re getting there,” I laughed.

“I have a point, I swear.”

“Okay.”

Kyle nudged his elbow back against me, but that was kind of the end of us joking around, since the next thing he said was, “We’re going after a lot of things. You know what I mean? We’re trying to bring an end to the Cult’s plan, and Chaos’s plan, and all, but we don’t just have to stop things. We’ve got the ability to save people, too. I mean, don’t we?”

“Oh,” I realized, “yeah. Like the people going crazy?”
"There’s gotta be a way, right?"

"I hope so. I really hope so." After giving a little thought to everything going on around us, I added, "Dude, what about Butters?"

"Huh?"

"D’you think he even, like, wants to get better?" I wondered.

"I don’t know, dude," Kyle admitted. "He’s been acting… well, he’s really not himself, you know? I thought at least being near Christmas would snap him out of it a little."

"Jesus, right?" I said. "Not like the holiday feels as much like it usually does for anyone, though…"

"Mm."

Kyle went silent after that, meaning he was thinking. Whether or not we’d keep talking on that same track was up for debate, but something neither of us really liked was empty silence. Closing in the dead air, I leaned forward as well, and kissed the back of Kyle’s neck, then freed my right hand to stroke back through his hair. He turned, after a few seconds, to look at me, and, moving as a unit, we pressed against each other, silently reaffirming our pact. For another moment, we could shut out the problems of the outside world, just one little moment of forgetting and being content.

Any day now. Any day now, things could change.

The air mattress was still set up in Kyle’s room, but since I’d begun staying there, only a couple nights had seen both that and his bed in use at the same time. As nights wore on, with no promises that the next day would see us all safely through, Kyle and I would inevitably wind up together, on one mattress or the other. By New Year’s Eve, we were just plain sharing his bed, with me pretty consistently on the left, Kyle on the right. Nothing physical had happened yet; it was mostly just us reassuring each other nightly that the other was still there. I wasn’t letting him out of my grasp, and he wasn’t letting me out of his. Oh, we loved each other, that much was out there as solid fact, but we didn’t want anything physical to feel forced, and since we were always so damn tired, it just hadn’t felt right to start. It was the action of falling asleep together and waking up beside one another, just simply the knowledge of keeping each other safe, that kept us both going.

On New Year’s Day, having no known obligations, we stayed in the warmth of Kyle’s bed for a good long while after waking up. There weren’t many mornings that gave us the luxury of taking our time, so we took advantage of it and held each other close. We exchanged our whispered good mornings, and a kiss for the coming year.

"New year, huh?" I said, stroking Kyle’s back, sweeping my thumb against his shoulderblade.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Kinda hope we can enjoy some of it," I threw out there.

"No kidding. I wish we could know when this would all just be over," said Kyle, mournfully. "I hate feeling sick all the time."

"Sick?" I wondered.
“Don’t you feel like that? Like something’s always gonna happen. We don’t know what’s coming. It’s scary, and it’s making me sick.”

“Nah, I’m scared, too,” I admitted. Keeping a protective hold, I pulled Kyle closer to me, and shifted my head on the pillows so that my face was just as close to his as it could get. “We’re gonna make it, though.”

“Yeah,” said Kyle. “We have to.”

That was our creed. Those words, among others, kept us on track.

Whatever was coming, we’d keep going. Into battle and beyond. However close or far away that time was, we’d rise to the challenge, and we’d see it through.

Just after the new year started, everything escalated. To the point where we’d all be going out on ‘patrol’ during the day in South Park, hardly worrying about anyone learning about the tricks all of us had up our sleeves. Kenny, Red, Clyde and Bebe went out a few times over the season, on what the girls called double dates, but that the guys knew was a case of strength in numbers. Wendy set herself up as something of a shield around all of her friends, Red and Bebe especially, and would sometimes, with Token as an escort, be a part of those ‘strength in numbers’ outings. I did wonder if those two were together in a romantic sense again, since Wendy had been with Token before, and I really did want to see that girl happy. We hadn’t really talked in any kind of personal sense in a long time, though, so I didn’t want to get out of place asking her yet. Besides, I wanted to come out to her at some point, and thank her, too… but things like that were so second-string right now, I couldn’t feel too concerned with it.

Wendy and Token tag-teamed it with Clyde and Bebe on one of those afternoon patrols, too (further giving proof to my theory of them as a pair). At the same time something else happened that would eventually change our understanding and point of attack for good.

Red was working, so Kenny accompanied me and Kyle, with Cartman plodding along beside us. Venturing out into town just wasn’t what it used to be anymore. The more people fell, the less anyone went out to do anything. There were still things happening, since the bulk of South Park really is so stupid that of course everyone would just go about their daily lives, accepting this as the new norm—hence why Red and Kenny still somehow had jobs. There was just an awful darkness over town. Maybe only the team of us saw it, maybe not, but it was awful.

Things had threatened South Park before. Aliens. Angry mobs. Natural disasters. But during those times, the League hadn’t been in formation yet. Now, we were gaining attention. Mysterion especially. It just seemed understood that Mysterion and the League would take care of things. People were putting their faith in us, trusting that we knew what was going on and that we’d save them. That we’d save South Park.

What the town did not know, however, was that Mysterion was an Immortal. That Kenny really was the only person around who could do away with the real, final threat. Cthulhu. It was strange that we hadn’t heard anything recently about another revival attempt for the Dark God, but the events of this particular day gave us another glimpse into just how connected to R’lyeh Kenny was.

The four of us were walking down the main stretch of town, trying to discuss things while keeping our words in code, when we passed by an establishment that had opened that summer: a bar with an outdoor patio, which was still open and in use (with space heaters) during the winter. One
thing about that bar that was probably the dumbest idea of all time, though… it had a dartboard on
the patio.

Which, when Kenny McCormick walked by, was just an accident waiting to happen.

Oddly enough, and morbidly enough, I almost saw it coming. We were discussing things
one minute, and then the next, a guy was shouting from the patio, “Hey, kid, watch out!”

To which Kenny muttered, “Oh, shit,” before I even noticed the dart that had completely
missed its mark—

—and sailed straight through Kenny’s forehead. Kenny choked, stumbled back, and then
was flat on the ground, dead in an instant. The dart was buried into his forehead, and blood seeped
out of the open wound and onto the snow-covered ground, causing the other three of us to jump
back. “HOLY SHIT!” Kyle shouted.

“Oh, my God!” I shouted involuntarily, staring off at the guys on the patio. “They killed
Kenny!”

“You bastards!” Kyle hollered at them a beat later.

“Huh,” we both remarked at once. It must’ve hit him at the same time it hit me. There was
something familiar about that… yeah, we’d reacted that very way many, many times before. Hell of
a lot of times when we were, what, eight years old? Damn.

“Dude, we’ve said that before,” I remarked, looking at Kyle to agree. “Haven’t we?”

“Yeah, definitely,” he said.

We stared back down at Kenny, completely stiff, unquestionably dead, dart through the skull,
and instantly Kyle’s tone changed again. “Dude, what the fuck?!” he yelped. “He’s just—they just
—oh, God, what the hell do we do?! What just happened?”

“Oh, Kenny just died,” said Cartman.

“Yeah, dumbass, I get that part,” Kyle snapped.

“Get the knot outta your panties, Kyle,” Cartman scoffed. “I’m just sayin’.”

do?!”

“Uh… huh, good point. Funeral?”

“Dude, I’m not planning a fucking funeral!!”

“Well that’s what you do when someone dies, asshole!”

“Don’t call me an asshole for being a concerned friend!!”

“Guys!” I interrupted. “Guys, just… woah. Woah, woah, woah. Can we just hold on a
second?” That got their attention, and I let out a breath, staring down at Kenny again as I tried to
figure out the next steps. “Okay, so… obviously, now we know he can’t die…”

“Right…” Kyle agreed, still looking perturbed, “but… dude, what happens to his body?”
“I was just wondering that,” I admitted.

“Should we go get Morticia?” Cartman wondered.

“Henrietta?  I dunno, man,” I said, squatting to study the fatal injury in Kenny’s forehead. It was a pretty gory sight. The dart had dug through, leaving a gaping hole that went pretty deep, so that only the tail of the dart was visible as a protrusion. From the hole leaked messy, already caking blood, mixed with a sampling of other matter. Not exactly something you want to see coming out of one of your closest friends’ foreheads. “Ugh. Aww-awww, dude, I think there’s like, pieces of his brain here.”

“Oh, gross!” Kyle shouted. “I don’t want to look at that. Dude, so how do we move him, what’re we doing? This is so fucked up!”

“Well, what’ve we done before?” I wondered.

“Let’s see…” Cartman started to ponder. “Are we trying to do this undetected?”

“Dude, I really don’t want to be thinking about this,” Kyle admitted.

“I don’t really, either,” I said, standing again, “but I figure we’ve kinda got to.”

“Uuuuuuugh, this is so fucking… Jesus, I really did not want to deal with this again!” Kyle groaned.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I said, rubbing his back. “I mean, we know he’ll be back, right? Let’s just… move the body, and…”

“Ourselves?”

“Gotta be,” I said apologetically, “I don’t want to get any doctors involved. That’d just complicate things.”

“Hmm, kay,” said Cartman. “Kyle, go get your car. Me and Stan’ll stand guard.”

“No!” Kyle protested. “I am not driving around with a dead body in my car!”

“Me and Stan don’t have station wagons, Kyle!” Cartman argued. “You’re the only one that’s got room to fit him in!”

“Well, we can just lay him out in the back seat of one of you guys’ cars and you can walk,” Kyle spat back at him. “Or we get a taxi—“

“A taxi, Kyle?” I repeated back.

“Okay, yeah, that’s ridiculous, but… better idea!” he exclaimed, holding his palms out in front of him. “Better idea, much better idea. We call Clyde. O-or Token. That’d be faster than me walking back for my car anyway.”

“Uh, let’s call Token,” I suggested. “If Clyde’s with Bebe, I don’t think, ‘sorry, gotta go move my friend’s dead body,’ is gonna be a very good excuse for cutting a date short.”

“Yeah, good point.”

Kyle nervously called Token while Cartman and I stood watch. Cartman kept his eye out around, but I couldn’t help pondering over Kenny. That poor guy. How many times had this
happened, now? How many accidents had occurred that we’d just forgotten about, due to the curse? What an awful thing—what an awful fucking thing for someone to have to live with. No, no, he shouldn’t have to live with that, I figured. It wasn’t right. Kenny deserved to be just as normal as he wanted to be, just as mortal as everyone else, if it meant that what he did would be remembered. I knew that was his angle. He just wanted a chance to enjoy his life, no matter how much of it he had left.

Fuck. He really was a hero. More than that—he’d become pretty damn inspirational, beyond the realm of everyday good deeds. Kenny had a life he wanted, and he’d keep working toward it, no matter what it took. I only hoped he could keep Red through all of it, since she seemed to be the only thing outside of the League keeping Kenny up and going, while he was alive. Shit—he really fucking deserved to live.

Token was, of course, pretty damn shaken when he and Wendy pulled up to help us move the body. There was room for all of us plus Kenny’s body in Token’s car, so we made right for the base after Kyle and I had done the fantastic cleanup job of kicking snow over Kenny’s spilled blood on the sidewalk. Clyde and Craig were texted with what had just happened, and soon the entire League was assembled, including Henrietta, who admitted that there was, in this instance, nothing she could do to divert his soul through R’lyeh.

And so we found ourselves with a dead body splayed out over a cloth that we’d laid on the bier in Kenny’s room. It was fucking morbid that he’d kept that there, but, then again, there had been no telling when it might need to be used again. Kyle filled everyone in on exactly how the accidental death had happened, and possible next steps were tossed about the room like ping-pong balls for about an hour. Then we turned to books, at Clyde’s suggestion.

“We’ve gotta keep up research anyway,” he said, “so let’s see if any of these have anything to say about Immortals dying.”

“I don’t think Kenny came with a user’s guide, dude,” Craig commented.

“Dude, shut up, there might be something.”

“The bookstore wasn’t exactly stocked with R’lyeh for Dummies.”

“Craig—“ Clyde warned.

“Or A Brief Guide to Immortals.”

“Craig, dude, shut up, this is totally serious!”


Clyde punched Craig in the shoulder for that one, and Craig almost laughed. Actually, a lot of us almost did. Which was fucked up. I mean, how could we even find humor in this at all? Had we done that before? Had we just moved right the fuck on after Kenny had died?

Dude. We’re bastards. What the fuck.

Readings and other discussions of possibilities went around for a while, when, now about four hours after the actual death, Ike perked his head up and stared over at the bier. “Uh… guys…?” he said, standing from where he’d been sprawled out on the floor and pointing over at the bier. “Guys, is anyone else seeing this?”

“Huh?” Kyle glanced up and over, then barked out, “Oh, fuck me, what the hell is that!!”
Which got my and everyone else’s attention, and not a moment too soon. We’d had the light on in Kenny’s room, rather than have to sit around with the candles the way the guys had done during the séance that had brought Kenny and me back from R’lyeh, so shadows in the room were, for the most part, pretty small and controlled. But Kenny’s own shadow had grown, spilling out over the cloth we’d laid out for him. Then, for a quick flash, the entire room was plunged into darkness, and an awful chill shot down my spine. When the light came back, Kenny’s shadow now loomed over his body, as though it had become its own sentient thing. Almost taking on the shape of an enormous snake, an opening appeared like a gaping maw at the ‘head’ of the shadow; it then slithered back down toward Kenny’s body and devoured it whole. I heard Wendy scream and Clyde let out an, “Oh, fuck!” I know at least I let out a yelp of surprise as well as the snaking shadow twisted its shape around, seeming to be scouring the room.

“No!” I heard Kyle shout—I’d grabbed defensively onto him when the shadow had grown, but he went a step further and hauled me in, turning his back to the shadow and steeling himself as a shield between me and it. The lights in the room flickered, and a couple books fell off of their shelves before the shadow shot out to all sides, plunging the room into total cold darkness again for a moment before finally dissolving.

And it had taken Kenny with it.

Shaking, Kyle pulled back, then drew me up to standing with him. He patted my arm reassuringly, his face full of both relief that I hadn’t been hauled back to R’lyeh and fear for what that shadow was, and what it had done with Kenny.


“Dude,” Kyle said, his voice echoing through the room. “What. The. FUCK.”

“I-I haven’t read about anything like that,” said Ike, who was just standing back up again after having taken cover behind a chair. Kyle beckoned his little brother over to him, and Ike, letting himself act the child for once, stumbled over and grabbed Kyle around the waist.

“You okay, Ike?” Kyle asked him.

“Yeah,” said Ike, burying his face into the material of his brother’s sweatshirt, “but… damn.” Feeling awful for the kid, I patted his head a couple times, giving him my own support. Kyle had always been very protective of Ike, and over the years, I’d helped keep an eye out for him, too, feeling like he was almost family.

“No shit,” said Clyde. “E-everyone okay? We all still here?”

“That was really weird,” said Craig, who, I noticed, had a hand tepidly set on Henrietta’s shoulder. She wasn’t reacting much, but her shiny black lips were pressed together as if she were contemplating something… or maybe trying to hide an emotion. “You know anything about that?” Craig asked her.

“That’s not in any of the books,” Henrietta admitted. Glancing over at me, she asked, “Do you know anything about it?”

“That’s not in any of the books,” Henrietta admitted. Glancing over at me, she asked, “Do you know anything about it?”

“Why me?” I wondered.

“You died with him that one time.” That one time, indeed.

“Well, yeah, but I-I don’t know,” I said. “I never saw anything like that in R’lyeh.” Then again, hadn’t Kenny told me in Purgatory to run toward a shadow? A shadow that I couldn’t see but
that had acted as a portal from Purgatory to R’lyeh… did it claim his body every time he died? Is that how it worked? “Are we just seeing this now because we actually know he’s an Immortal?”

“I’m not sure,” said Clyde, “but… oh… jeez… damn, no, this has happened before.”

“Huh?”

“Not seeing that shadowy thing, but Kenny dying! How’d I forget that time he shot himself back when the base was at Cartman’s?!” Clyde exclaimed.

“There—there were a few times,” Kyle corrected. “Kenny shot himself a few times, to… prove a point, and… holy shit…”

“Holy shit is right,” I breathed.

I wasn’t the only one who remembered anymore. As the night wore on, everyone, it seemed, started to have minor recollections of seeing Kenny die in the past.

And the memories built by the dozens. Ike even started keeping track. Kenny had died over and over again, over years and years—deaths accidental, self-inflicted, as acts of heroism, as a result of sicknesses he couldn’t control. He was Immortal. And now that this was a death Henrietta couldn’t talk him through, we as a group were stuck, now, for the very first time, wondering when he’d come back.

—–

Kenny

One minute, I’d felt the shock of a sharp bar dart cutting through my skull and shutting down my brain (which, outdoor darts, guys, really?), and the next, my eyes snapped open to early morning sunlight. In a room I had not seen in weeks. I’d died, felt a few hours of cold, seen neither Heaven nor Hell, and then, as it had always been, woken up in my Goddamn bedroom.

What the fuck.

All that windup I’d gone through to finally fucking leave my house, and I really did end right back up there. I sat up from the beaten old mattress and looked around, having almost successfully forgotten what that slum of a bedroom looked like, with its peeling paint and broken furniture; its stacks of magazines and rat holes stuffed with newspapers in the base of the walls. Shit pissed beyond belief, I glared down at my hands, then kicked off the single thin sheet that had been draped over me, discovering that I was wearing the same fucking thing I’d woken up in for the past few years.

“God fucking damn it,” I muttered, standing and punching a hand into the wall. “Dammit, dammit, fucking—FUCK.” I heaved out a groan, smacked the wall again, then stepped carefully over the mess on the floor that had probably been building since I’d left, and opened a drawer to grab out a pair jeans and some socks, then yanked out the parka I knew would be hanging in my closet, stuffed my feet into a pair of unlaced sneakers, and stormed out, down the hallway and through the front room, fully intending to just walk right back out again.

But my mother’s voice rang out from the kitchen:

“Mornin’ Kenny, you want toaster waffles or cereal? We don’t got milk, so you’re gonna have to eat it with orange juice.”
I froze, tensed, clenched my hands into fists, and, against my best judgment, turned and kicked myself into the kitchen and glared at my mother. She was wearing pajamas and a robe; her bare feet were blue on the frigid floor. She looked tired to beat hell. Bags sagged under her eyes, her red hair was streaked with more grey than I remembered, and her face was pale and pasty. Going through the motions, she shoved a couple of frozen waffles into the toaster and pulled a paper plate out of a bag in a cabinet above her head.

She knew something. She had to.

“No hungry,” I lied, leaning against the kitchen doorframe. “Mom, what the hell?”

“It’s just breakfast, Kenny,” she said, pouring herself a cup of orange juice.

“No,” I snapped. “Seriously. What the hell? How’d I get here?”

Not looking at me, my mother replied, “You came home last night.”

“No I didn’t,” I argued. “I never wanted to come back here.”

Mom totally fucking passed it off. “Well,” she said, “we’re glad you did, so—”

“Are you?” I growled. “Why?”

“Dammit, Kenny, just shut up and eat your waffles.”

“I’m not fucking hungry!” I shouted.

“Kenny, what’s got into you?” Mom asked, staring at me with her tired eyes. For a few seconds, we had something resembling a connection. Each of us was withholding something from the other.

So I kept on challenging and pushing her. “You wanna know what got into me?” I said, making sure not to shout. “You wanna know what ‘got into’ me, Mom? A fucking dart. A fucking dart through my brain.”

Mom’s eyes narrowed. “What the hell’re you talkin’ about?” The waffles popped up, and we both ignored them.

“I didn’t come home last night, Mom, I died,” I said. “I fucking died.”

“Kenny, that’s crazy talk,” my mother snapped.

“No. I know what ‘crazy’ looks like, and this isn’t it.” Another staredown. Break, you dumb, horrible bitch, break! “Tell me what you know,” I demanded.

“Know about what?” Mom drawled.

Fucking bitch. Fucking horrible, secret-wielding, most likely hung-over bitch. Fine. Fine. My own mother wouldn’t tell me a Goddamn thing? Fine. I had other ways of figuring shit out. I felt for my forehead, discovering that not a mark remained. After another thought, I let my fingers run to my temple, where I’d shot myself on Halloween, the last death I’d suffered prior to this one. Even that scar was gone. Just as it had been, with my different deaths since experiencing R’lyeh.

And Carol McCormick just pretended not to notice. She had to be pretending. No way she could watch her kid die over and over again and not have some knowledge of how he always came back.
“You know what?” I said, backing away, letting her once again watch me walk out, hoping that maybe this time it’d fucking sink in. “I’m done. I don’t even know why I’m having this conversation with you. I’m leaving.”

“Kenny—“ Mom tried.


When I walked away, she once again made absolutely no attempt to stop me. Proof that my parents just plain didn’t care. Well, fuck them. Fuck my family and fuck my curse. I had people who did care. Which was proven when, just as I was stewing on my walk toward Token’s, where I knew I’d get some fucking support, my phone (which just happened to be in my parka pocket, as it always was) trilled with a text message from my incredible girlfriend:

**Morning sweetie! Just saying hi : )**

I almost fucking cried. How the fuck had I gotten so lucky with her?

Checking my phone to confirm that it was still the weekend, I then texted her back: **Hey baby —gotta work today but I wanna see you soon k?**

**OK!** Red texted back, adding a little heart to the end.

Shit. God. Would it be so much to ask to just live a normal life? So much to ask to just lie down with her and not worry about whether I’d go dying on her and have to deal with the pain of her not remembering? I was so fucking glad she hadn’t seen me die, or else that very well could’ve been the case this time around.

At least she’d gotten me in a slightly better mood. I hadn’t really wanted to go through my day pissed about another death and another pointless conversation with my deadbeat mom.

Minutes later, I walked into the base to a much different scene, and one that I almost want to call beautiful. The guys, all of them, even Wendy and Ike, even Craig and Henrietta, were gathered in the common room. Ike sat in the middle of the room on his laptop, with Stan and Kyle on either immediate side of him, reading directly over his shoulder. Token, Wendy and Clyde had the sofa and Henrietta had claimed the armchair, and the rest were scattered around the floor, contributing to the conversation when they could.

“Okay, um,” Stan was saying, “then there was the time he drowned…”

“Which one?” Kyle added. “Weren’t there a couple? Didn’t he drown in—ugh, at the water park that one time, that—ugh…”

“Oh, right, right.”

“How about when we tried to go back in time?” Clyde put in. “When we used Timmy’s wheelchair as the device, and then—“

“Yeah,” Craig said. “Or there was that time in seventh grade, when they were doing construction on the school…”

“Speaking of stuff falling,” said Stan, “I remember once with a piano.”

“Syphilis,” Cartman said.
“Semi,” said Token.

“Choking,” Wendy added.

“The cliff in R’lyeh,” said Kyle somberly. “Can’t believe I forgot that one.”

“A bullet,” Henrietta contributed in her poetic tone, “ripping through flesh and tissue, rendering the essence of life utterly useless—“

“He got shot in the lung?” Craig translated.

“Yes.”

Deaths.

All of them.

My deaths.

“Uh…” I said, approaching the room cautiously. Everyone’s heads turned toward me at the same time. Some stares were wide-eyed, full of disbelief, others were sympathetic. Henrietta was the only one who did not turn. She didn’t remember, always, no, but she’d always believed me. And that was what they were talking about, right? My deaths. Remembering my deaths.

Maybe there was hope.

“Hey, guys,” I greeted, walking in and sitting down cross-legged a couple feet away from Ike, Kyle and Stan. I was basically in front of the TV, and everyone watched me more closely than they’d ever watched the idiot box behind me. “What’s up?”


“So, uh…” I said, “I died…” For the first time, I felt awkward about it. I was relieved when Stan had started remembering my deaths, but now I was, for once in my life, in a room full of people who knew. A room full of people aware of what I was, and who were standing by me all the same.

“Y-yeah, you did,” said Kyle. His eyes showed nothing but sympathy. Same with just about everyone else in the room. But, jeez, Stan and Kyle especially. Dude, seriously. Could I have asked for better friends? Not to be all lame or anything, but honest to God.

“We’ve, uh, we’ve been listing off the ones we all remember,” Clyde added.

“Oh!” Ike perked up, ticking away on his laptop. “There was the one a couple years ago when we were out on a mission and the electrical fuse blew…”

“Dude…” I said. “You guys all remember?”

Stan smiled a little and nodded. “It’s kind of a lot to catch up on,” he said, “but we’re listing ’em off so we can understand a little better.”

“Holy shit you guys,” I said, almost laughing. “Honestly, I can’t even… you’re all fucking amazing.”

“You’re our friend, dude,” Kyle shrugged. “And it fucking sucks you’ve got this curse. If we can remember all of ’em, it’ll be easier to apologize for forgetting.”
“Dude, Kyle, guys, you don’t have to apologize,” I said. “I don’t want you to feel like you’ve gotta do that, you couldn’t help forgetting. Just… wow, though. I appreciate it.”

“The more we know,” said Clyde, echoing Stan’s earlier comment, “the better we can help you out.”

And so we moved into a discussion about my deaths. For once in my life… once in the long years of suffering the consequences alone… I could openly talk about my curse. I could openly talk about my deaths and have people remember. People I actually cared about, people who actually cared about me.

But of course, something else just had to come up. It was during the discussion of the time I had died from what was essentially TSS (I’d shoved a tampon up my ass when Cartman had me convinced I was on my period; I was a kid and stupid, okay?) (ow, by the way) in third grade, when Cartman remarked, “Oh, yeah, that one was always one of my favorites.”

Which got him a couple awkward stares, especially from me. Because that word was one hell of a qualifier.

“Wait, what do you mean ‘always?’” I wondered.

Cartman shrugged. “You know,” he said passively, “all the times you kept dying. You had some good ones, you had some bad ones, but that one, dude. Sweet.”

“Jeez,” said Kyle, “I’m glad we’re finally able to remember.”

Cartman kind of laughed. “How the hell could you guys forget? ‘Specially the funny ones, man, that’s—“

“Wait, wait, wait…” I cut in before anyone else could say anything, rising and staring Cartman down, “you’ve always known?” That was fucking disturbing. No… moreover, why hadn’t that dickwad said anything?! I’d known him for years and not once had he made any mention in my presence of actually being aware of the fact that I couldn’t actually die. Fed up with people keeping things from me, I stormed over to him, grabbed him up, and flung him against the wall.

“OW! Kenny, the fuck?!” Cartman spat.

“YOU KNEW? YOU ALWAYS KNEW?” I hollered at him. “You knew and you never told me?!”” The others rose behind me; Ike collected his laptop and backed away while Clyde, Kyle and Stan hung out on standby, any one of them being probably the best to break up any brawl that was about to start. It always fucking came down to me wanting to beat the shit out of Cartman. Seriously, why the hell had he stayed in the League?

Stepping away from the wall, Cartman held his hands out, showing that, for once, he didn’t want to fight, and said, “I dunno, I just figured it was kinda just somethin’ that happened. You know.”

I growled and grabbed at my hair. “How is someone dying over and over again normal?!” I bellowed. “How the fuck do you remember? How the fuck did you know this whole Goddamn time?!”
“Dude, I don’t know.  I figured everybody else knew, too.”

“What’ve we been talking about this whole fucking time?” I sputtered.  “I can’t fucking believe how Goddamn stupid you are!  Remember when I told everyone I was an Immortal?!  You think maybe you could’ve said something then?!”

“I just thought maybe you liked talking about it.”

“OH MY GOD, I HATE YOU!”

I lunged but was instantly stopped by Clyde stepping in and pushing me back away from Cartman. “Kenny, stop!” he commanded.

“Let me just fucking cuff him once!” I shouted.

“Bring it, bitch!” Cartman challenged.

“Guys,” Clyde tried.  “GUYS.  Stop it.  This fight isn’t gonna get you guys anywhere.”  He gave me a stern glare and nodded back to suggest I back off a little.  When I stepped back, I found myself stepping between Stan and Kyle, who were both ready to hold me up or hold me back.

“Cartman,” Clyde continued as calmly as he could, “that was kinda stupid.  Kenny,” he said to me, “it’s okay, it’s over, please try to chill.  Whether we remembered or not, there’s something new we’ve gotta talk about.”

I snorted over at Cartman.  God fucking damn it.  Come to think of it, though, I could recall having made contact with him a couple of times when I was dead.  Which had *sucked* that he was the one that I could get through to, but I had to admit that it made sense if his biological father had woven him, however purposefully or inadvertently, into the mythos as well.  I also recalled having signed up to be an organ donor when I was seven or eight… I later learned that Cartman had once been given my eyes (though after that day was out, they’d reverted to his natural color), which may have stabilized the connection further.  Ugh.  Still… fucking Cartman.  Hated that asshole.  “Fine,” I agreed with Clyde.  “So, by something new, you mean remembering me dying?”

“Well, kinda, that, but we saw something,” said Clyde.

“Yeah,” Stan followed.  “There was some weird shadowy thing…”

“That was so fucked up,” Craig agreed.

“What shadowy thing?” I wondered.

“We figured it must’ve been from R’lyeh,” said Kyle, his eyes focusing on something past me; he was probably watching whatever it was he’d seen again.  “This thing that kind of came from your shadow… or was your shadow, only it kind of became its own thing.  The thing that ate you.”

“I didn’t get eaten,” I remembered, “I got hit in the head with a dart.”

“Yeah, and then that shadow ate you.”

“WHAT?”  Never saw anything like that before.  Then again, I’d never seen myself die.

Just then, a timer went off.  I hadn’t noticed a particular aroma wafting in from the kitchenette, either, until Wendy perked up with a start and exclaimed, “Oh!  The muffins.  Will you help me?” she asked Token, who agreed almost without a thought and stood with her and set a hand between her shoulders as he led her out of the room and toward the small kitchen.
“Muffins… what?” I wondered.

“Let’s continue in the back,” Clyde suggested. “All of us,” he added, casting a stern glance at Cartman, and then at Craig and Henrietta.

Ike folded up his laptop and was the first to march back there, so the rest of us followed. I brought up the rear, but Stan and Kyle hung back until I’d caught up with them. “Whatever it is, man,” said Stan, “we’ll figure it out.”

“Maybe seeing it was what helped us remember,” Kyle chimed in. “I’m glad I do. Remember, I mean.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Thanks, guys. It really, really means a lot that you do.”

The team of us then gathered around the table in the back, and as Clyde got things underway, Wendy and Token joined us with a couple large plates full of assorted muffins. “We didn’t know if you’d be really hungry after coming back from a death,” Wendy shrugged, “and there was muffin mix, so here we go.”

Come to think of it, yeah. I was hungry after coming back. I had been before, too, but my own house had always been so stocked full of fucking nothing (except alcohol and cigs and sometimes, sometimes Pop-Tarts) that I’d gotten used to not eating that it hadn’t registered in a long time. The guys gave me first dibs on the platters of what must have been three dozen muffins, and I went for a modest two before an entire plate was slid in my direction. When that happened, I looked up and scanned around the table.

For the first time in my life, I had something incredible: full support. Each and every person at that table knew that I was an Immortal. Each and every person at that table knew that I could die and return, and had done so repeatedly for sixteen years. And now there they were, ready to take on whatever new things they might learn about me, ready to follow me to R’lyeh to take down Cthulhu once and for all.

And on top of all that, they fucking baked me muffins.

“Guys… holy shit,” I said, propping my head up in my hands against the table. “Thank you so fucking much.”

I was met with further support. Further reaffirmation that I wasn’t alone. God, how fucking incredible were these guys? Honestly. I couldn’t have asked for a better, tighter group of friends. Maybe I was cursed in some respects, but I had seriously fucking lucked out when it came to friends.

So I sat there, contentedly eating muffins, while they recalled exactly what they had seen of my most recent death, from the moment I’d been hit with the dart to the scramble to bring me to the base and the eventual rising of the shadow to devour my body. Well, I didn’t have to wonder about that part anymore. Whenever my soul went to Heaven or Hell or Limbo—basically, whenever I wasn’t in R’lyeh—something had to have happened to my body in order for me to come back in it. But something was still bothering me. What brought me back? Somehow, I had a feeling my mother knew, and the bitch just wasn’t telling me.

And then—it hit me.

“Wait,” I said, slowly rising from the table, keeping myself steady with my hands on the table. “Wait a minute. Just… wait.”

“What’s up?” Stan wondered.
“Shadow,” I said. “I was eaten by a shadow?”

“Yeah,” Kyle confirmed. “Came right out of your own, dude.”

“How long after I died again?”

“A few hours.”

Long enough for my body to be clinically dead. Long enough for my soul to pass on. Long enough for whatever kept me Immortal to kick into gear. That thing was tied to R’lyeh. Had to be. Did my soul pass through R’lyeh, even if I wasn’t aware of it? Something told me that somebody knew. Somebody I wanted to talk to even less than my own mother. Quite possibly the only person I legitimately wanted to kill.

“But it was a shadow,” I repeated. “…And concealed in Shadow lies…” “The Mist shall dissipate into R’lyeh as the Shadow rises…” “McElroy,” I growled.

“What’s up?” Clyde asked.

“McElroy can tell me what happened. The fucking Cult. The Cult can tell me what that shadow was,” I said. “It might be the Shadow. Whatever the fuck it is they’ve been talking about since before Halloween. Henrietta, what do you know about the Shadow?”

“Just that it’s something the Cult’s been looking for for a while,” said the Goth, who was the only one at the table that hadn’t eaten a muffin (too happy a food for her, I guess). “How long, I’m not entirely sure. But it’s their key to getting Cthulhu once and for all.”

“That’s all I need to know,” I said. Determined, I added, “I’ve got a request, guys. Tonight, I’m going on a mission. I’ll wear a wire, and I want you all on standby, but I’ve gotta do this one alone.”

“What’re you gonna do?” wondered Clyde.

“I’m gonna go pound out answers from that fucking Cult leader,” I said. “When I come back, we’re gonna fucking know what this Shadow business is all about.”

That evening, I suited up and made for the site of all the South Park Cthulhu Cult meetings. There was no activity there that particular, frigid night, but that was for the best. I wanted this to be between me and that bastard, McElroy.

I knew a lot about the Cult by now. I knew how they worked, I knew what they were after, and I knew the identities of all of their members, including one deceased. But one thing I did not know was what they intended to do once that Gate was opened. They wanted darkness. Okay, got that. But what was in it for them? Weren’t they all going to go crazy like the rest of the town? Or was that where the Shadow came in?

Only one way to find out.

I made no attempt to sneak in. I made a fucking entrance. I kicked in one of the basement windows and dropped into the Cultists’ meeting hall, immediately going for the bookshelf McElroy kept behind their twisted altar. Dripping red candles lit the room and filled it with the scent of embers and ancient wax. Fitting to my reasons for infiltration, shadows flickered and darted about the floor in the candlelight, my own among them.
My own shadow had changed and devoured my body hours after my most recent death. Somehow that disturbed me more than the fact that I could die and return over and over. I’d wanted to know the hows and whys, but the more I learned, the more removed a part of me wished I could be.

“Greetings, Mysterion.”

The voice came from the basement door. Sure enough, there stood McElroy, cloaked but for his head, his face only two-thirds visible in the light from the candles. A small, tight smile snuck its way onto his face, and the Cult leader continued, “A little extreme, destroying my window.”

“A little extreme,” I dealt right back, “damning me. Don’t you think?”

“Have you finally come to your senses, Mr. McCormick?” Oh, that fucking stung. Using my real name when clearly I intended to take him on as Mysterion. That asshole. Using my real name at all. Knowing my real name at all. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for nothing you’ve got planned,” I growled. “Whatever you want from me, count me out.”

“Yet I get the sense,” said McElroy, “that there is something you want from me? Things you need to know? Yes?”

“Look,” I growled, “I know I’m an Immortal, and I know that I must be connected to your Dark God, Cthulhu somehow.”

“You’ve done your research,” the cloak mocked me.

“Just how deep does this go?” I demanded.

“Only as deep as you have ever allowed it,” said McElroy, extending his arms to indicate everything. The long sleeves of his Cult cloak draped ominously from his wrists, and I saw his hands tick erratically once, as if to demand I give him something. “Everyone you know, all of your friends, your peers, your family… you’ve grown up and built quite a web around you, Kenny McCormick.”

“Do you have any idea what’s happening out there?!?” I shouted. “The town has gone crazy! One of my friends was killed, and one of your own even admitted it was for an experiment to see if I’d bring him back with me. Why?! Why do all this?! What’s your point? What’s your goal?”

“You, Kenny,” McElroy answered, giving me that dark smile, coupled with his vacant, wide-eyed stare. “Of course, we meant to give you a more fitting name, but your parents were taken away from us before we could raise you as part of our group.” For once, I was proud of them for getting drunk and arrested, hearing this. I held my ground, and let McElroy continue. “We kept watch over you nonetheless, knowing your time would come.

“It was you we meant to breed into the next Messenger of the Old Ones,” he went on, taking a step toward me, causing me in turn to take an instinctive step back. “You were born to be Cthulhu’s Waking Voice, and that time is now. It is your destiny to be as Nyarlathotep, only more powerful. Much, much more powerful. A being with the blessing of the great Cthulhu himself.”

“Wait, wait, you’re saying I’m supposed to be on par with that— that creepy Egyptian thing?!” I spurt out, gesturing out the window. “You want me to be like that?!”

“Within you is the potential to—“
“I don’t cause chaos!” I shouted at the Cult leader. “I end it! What the hell made you think I’d ever fucking agree to that?!”

“What better way to persuade you back to us than to set your friends and loved ones on the brink of death and madness?” McElroy grinned.

“You are so fucking twisted,” I snarled at him. “Did you really think that was going to work on me? Did you really think I’d just give up and beg you to turn me into one of them?!”

“You are one of them.” I shuddered. “And you must fulfill your duty as an Immortal.”

“I’d rather die,” I growled.

“But you can’t.”

“NO THANKS TO YOU!” Infuriated, I rushed at him. I drew a *shuriken* and sent it flying into his neck, then was on him and beating him senseless. McElroy put up no struggle, which made the fight so much less satisfying than I wanted it to be. “Fight back!” I demanded. “I want my life back! I want my fucking revenge and you’re not giving it to me!”

McElroy grinned, two seconds before I cuffed him across the face. But he just would not fight back. “Why did you do it?!” I shouted, rushing him forward in order to slam and then pin him against the drab concrete wall. “Why did you lay that curse on me all those years ago? Why me? What do you want from me?!”

“It is as I have said,” McElroy answered hollowly, staring at me with eyes I did not want to classify as human. This guy was the fucking monster, not me. “It’s you this world has been waiting for, Kenny McCormick. You, the Walking Immortal; you, the human deity. You should be much more grateful, boy, what we did for you was a favor. Any man should be proud to be the very Shadow of Cthulhu.”

“The Shadow of—C—” I began to repeat his words, but found that my throat stopped short of speaking. The new Messenger. That was what they wanted of me. *The Mist shall dissipate into the depths of R’lyeh as the Shadow rises…*  

Nyarlathotep would be no more. And the Shadow… the Shadow…

I let go of the Cult leader and backed away. Outside, lightning struck the snow-crested ground, but I felt the shock in my heart. “I’m… I’m the Shadow…?” I wondered, barely getting my words above a trembling whisper, barely keeping up my Mysterion tone.

“The Shadow of Cthulhu,” McElroy confirmed, holding himself up against the wall, breathing awkwardly with that *shuriken* still lodged in his jugular. “The Dark God’s own will, in semi-corporeal form. You cannot die, Kenny, for you were born as They are. You came into this world a brand new Immortal. Your place in R’lyeh is at great Cthulhu’s side. Won’t you—“

“Shut up,” I commanded.

“I beg your pardon?”

“SHUT UP!” I hollered, walking up and grabbing McElroy again, only so that I could fling him into the center of the room, where he collided with a row of folding chairs. Another bolt of lightning flashed outside, casting new shadows along the walls—and, was it me, or were all other shadows now, suddenly, swirling and contorting around my own? “Listen here,” I growled at the Cultist, advancing strongly with each step, prompting him to back away with fear in his eyes but a
deranged smirk on his face. “I’m nobody’s fucking messenger boy.” Outstretching my arms, I shouted, “I am Mysterion! I stand for justice. I fight for the good and well-intended. I know what it means to act with human charity much more than you and your twisted little Cult ever will. So how dare you… how fucking dare you try to paint me into a monster?!

“I don’t belong in R’lyeh and you will see none of my compliance to this so-called ‘destiny!’” I went on, hauling McElroy up again by the threads of his collar. “I’m a man of my own making, and I will see to it that this End Time of yours never comes. YOU GOT ME?!”

He only laughed. “Why are you being so fucking passive?!” I hollered. “Give me the secret to breaking this curse! I know you know it! Why are you being so PASSIVE?!”

“Because—“ I punched him—“I am not the one—“ UPPER CUT—“that can—” kick to the face—“fix anything,” McElroy got out as I clubbed him over the back of the head with my fists locked together.

“Then who can?” I hollered, kicking him over onto his back. For emphasis on the gravity of the situation, I drew my gun and cocked it. Part of me really did want to shoot the bastard right between the eyes, but that would have gone against everything else I’d been working toward. It would have shunned me from the League. “Tell me right now, you son of a bitch!”

“You,” he coughed, “already know the answer to that.”

“Only an Immortal can kill another Immortal,” I recited, “I know.”

“Then there lies your answer.”

I kicked McElroy in the crotch and removed my shuriken from his bleeding neck. He’d live, if he wanted to. What happened to him after I left was not my problem, not my concern. Angrily, I stormed out of the dank, wretched building and began my trek back to the base, back through my ghost of a town, through familiar streets that lacked their old personality.

That trek reaffirmed that this wasn’t just about me.

First and foremost, this was about my town.

But by God, by whatever, I was going to kick the bloody shit out of Cthulhu for planting in me whatever seed it was that was supposed to make me his new Messenger. For the Crawling Chaos that had swept through South Park, I was going to put an end to Nyarlathotep.

And I was probably going to die.

But one thing, only one thing was certain, before anything else:

We were going to do something. We were going to fight. And no matter what it took, we were going to win.

I returned to Headquarters, where the others sat patiently waiting, where they were hard at work determining whether or not the Old Ones had any weak points, where they’d been passing time, eager to hear my inevitable news.

Nobody prompted anything out of me. I probably looked like hell. Approaching, I removed my hood and mask. Fully myself, my thoughts turned immediately to Red, who knew nothing of my deep secrets… but I returned to the present, forced myself to keep my head high, and marched back toward the whiteboard.
The whiteboard currently had a display of Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep clippings, followed by the mug shots of McElroy and Professor Chaos. Beside that display, I drew my emblematic question mark, and, hand shaking, wrote in capital letters:

**I’M THE SHADOW.**

I slapped the marker back down onto the whiteboard shelf and stepped back, giving everyone a clear look at what I had written. And as if they couldn’t read and weren’t shocked enough already, I said aloud, “I’m the Shadow. I’m the thing they’re trying to use to open the Gate to R’lyeh.” Fed up, I took my place in the chair at the head of the table, but felt instantly drained, folded my arms on the table, and rested my head down. “When they cursed me, I was fated to be the Shadow of Cthulhu. They want me to be one of them.”

“Shit…” Stan breathed out. “No way. No fucking way, Kenny…”

“We start our counterattack now,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not one of them. I’m Mysterion. We’re the League. It’s started, guys. Town’s emptying out. Chaos is getting what he wants. That fucking Cult is actually gonna come after me.”

“Well,” said Kyle strongly, standing, “they’re not gonna get you.”

“Guys,” Stan added, standing as well, and prompting everyone else to do the same, “I’ve got an idea. I move that we change the League’s name.”

“What does that have to do with—“ I began.

Stan looked over at me and showed a smile. “We’re in this for the town, dude, but we’re also in it for you. We’re in it for everyone. But it’s your curse first, Kenny,” he said. “I say, let’s give it all we’ve got. Let’s hit ‘em where it hurts. Hope you don’t mind, but I just got an idea for a new name for us.”

“What’s better than—“ Cartman began.

“Guys, d’you agree with me?” Stan opened it up to the floor. “A rename for Kenny. To show that fuckin’ Cult that if they mess with him, they mess with us.”

“So who are we?” asked Clyde, eyes bright with the idea of a name switch.

With a grin, Stan walked with sturdy strides over to me, set his left hand on my shoulder, then erased with his right hand the word, *I’m*, and wrote at the bottom of the whiteboard, *League. THE SHADOW LEAGUE*, the board now read.

“What do you think, man?” Stan wondered, supportively patting my shoulder a couple times. I stood, glanced around the table once briefly, then looked back at Stan’s brilliant idea.

Oh. Oh, I liked it. Just like Kyle was now owning the fact that he was psychic, I should take this chance to own the fact that I was an Immortal. That, weird as it was, the Cult would probably grovel around me until the next time they tried to summon Cthulhu. That I could learn exactly what being the Shadow actually entailed and use it. Use it against Chaos, against Nyarlathotep.

Against Cthulhu.

Use it until that fucking Dark God could take the title away from me and, hopefully, let me be human.
“The Shadow League, huh?” I said, turning to face the others. “You guys on board for this?”

“Nice,” Clyde grinned, folding his arms. “Got a ring to it.”

“Sounds about right,” Kyle agreed.

“I like it a lot better than ‘Coon League,’” Wendy added. Damn, even her?

“And it’s true,” said Token, “you’re the one this League is here to fight for.” Shit, I honestly had lucked out with this team.

“Shadow League?” Ike asked, fingers poised to make it official on all of his documents.

Cartman rolled his eyes. “Shadow League,” he agreed.

“Then let’s do it,” I said. “I like it. Taking a stand against all this insanity by claiming a name from them? Fuck yeah.”

And thus it was official. We’d undergone our second, and final, name change. We, everyone gathered at that table, all formed the Shadow League. South Park’s watchful eye, the planet’s primary defense against the Crawling Chaos.

And fuck—

I was going to do everything I could to break my curse. We were going to do everything in our collective power to end and reverse the damage Chaos was causing. And we were gonna save the world.

— — —
Our first official Shadow League mission happened not long after we’d decided on the name change… not long after I had discovered what I really was.

The reaction to the goings on in South Park had been mixed throughout the nation. Most people ignored it. Some out of town hicks said things along the lines of, “Well, up there near the mountains, folks’ve always gone crazy,” hearkening back to the old Westward trek days, which was just plain stupid. One news reporter was even quoted as saying, “Further investigation states that the town of South Park, Colorado has more committed insane per capita than any other town in America. And we as a nation look on and ask, do we really care?” Some Hollywood reaction even included, “They deserved it.”

Oh, people could hate on our little podunk town as much as they wanted, but eventually, the media did care. The nation did care. It all happened the day Mayor McDaniels was committed.

It was midway through January, and things just went downhill from that day for the rest of the town. It happened during an assembly, while the Mayor was essentially calling Professor Chaos out, with plenty of camera crews in attendance. The ordeal was, I had to admit, both the gutsiest and the absolute dumbest thing that woman had ever done. On one hand, calling Chaos out so that the world could know who he was and what the fuck he’d been doing was the best way to send out a national cry for help. On the other, though, it was essentially lining up cows for slaughter. If one note was played on a national broadcast, that could be the end of anyone watching.

Needless to say, we, the League, were prepared. Stan had called his mother prior to the late afternoon broadcast, pleading that neither she nor Shelley watch, but stay inside and call him if anything strange began happening in Colorado Springs. He then, as Toolshed, had my immediate back, where we stationed ourselves at the town hall. Mosquito and the Coon had an eye on the opposite side, while the Human Kite and Red Serge (glad to finally get out into the action) took the roof. Marpesia, TupperWear and Iron Maiden were stationed closer to the mayor as first-wave defense. Because I no longer trusted the cops (and because, to be honest, I was really surprised neither Barbrady nor Yates had been committed yet), we offered our services directly, with no additional backup. Other than a couple of ambulances, should anyone need to be carted away.

Mayor McDaniels, a slightly inept, blue-haired woman who had held the position for quite some time now due mostly to the fact that nobody ever really ran against her, took her place at the platform on the steps of the South Park Town Hall, behind her emblematic podium, flanked by her two male attendants in suits. Her speech was no-nonsense, which was kind of nice; she addressed anyone watching in regards to what had been going on in South Park, and reached out to other towns, counties, and states for aid, or for information if any other towns were suffering the same fates her citizens were.

Just then, a fog rolled in. That awful mist hung in the air above the crowd. And the mayor noticed. How could she not? She looked up, mid-sentence, and got out the words, “Oh… my… God…” before, with a jarring tick of her head, she let out a scream and fell into a fit. The man on her left held her up for a moment, but two seconds later, he was down, too.

“Shit,” I barked into the wire. “Guys, let’s move in.”
As soon as the mayor’s second attendant had fallen victim to the Crawling Chaos, based on whatever the hell those three had seen after the summoning, Mosquito drew out of hiding just long enough to hit them each with a tranquilizer. “Mysterion, you take this,” he instructed, once the crowd was flung into a panic. “You can get these guys under control. Don’t let the chaos get through to everyone.”

“I’m on it,” I said.

But as I began to move, the town hall doors burst open. With no regard to decency or morality, out onto the platform stepped Professor Chaos. We in the League remained momentarily still, but were all at the ready. We’d secured the inside, and I knew that Kite would’ve noticed someone going through, so I could only imagine Chaos must have had some kind of trick up his sleeve that had gotten him inside the town hall in the first place. That didn’t matter now, though. What mattered was that he was out in the open, showing himself to the town—no, to the entire country. Possibly the world.

“Well, now,” he said, approaching the three unconscious bodies at the podium. “Look at that. No more justice. No more law.” In an oddly jarring motion, he bent over and removed a pistol from one of the mayor’s attendants’ belt. That… was not his usual thing. Chaos never used weapons. As far as I knew, Butters thought that guns were wrong. Well. Based on the next thing said, it was clear that Butters no longer had a say. Outstretching his arms wide, the self-made villain addressed the crowd, reveling in what he had begun: “Chaos is in control here.”

“Who are you?” one of the news reporters had the balls to ask.

“Who am I?” Chaos laughed. He pushed the podium down and began his descent from the stairs and out into the crowd toward the man who had posed the question, causing the smarter people to scatter, and the more intrigued ones to stay petrified, watching his every step. “I am everything that makes you scream. I’m your recurring nightmare, the fears you never tell a soul, the darkness every human being tries to hide away and forget.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, once again opening himself to the crowd, spinning to face the opposite direction and a different camera crew, “I am Professor Chaos! Bringer of destruction, and the man who’s about to turn your sad little world around. Because I bring with me a being beyond man’s comprehension. I bring with me the answer to all that makes you sad and unfulfilled.

“Cthulhu still waits dreaming,” he shouted up to the sky, raising the pistol with his left hand, “but we’re just getting STARTED!”

With that, he erupted into laughter and shot a bullet skyward.

It sailed back toward him, however, and he held an arm up in front of his face just in time to get it to knick the side of his right gauntlet. It was at that moment that I noticed that Kite had taken off, and he now folded in his glider and plummeted down toward Chaos, kicking him to the ground and flipping backwards to stand at the ready for another attack.

Toolshed, Mosquito and I moved out at that point, and I was the one to make our own announcement: “Not today, Chaos! Your little tune has played long enough.”

“Think it’s still as easy as that, Mysterion?” Chaos chided, glaring back at me over his shoulder. “Oh, no, no. Symphony’s over, just as we’ve determined. But it was just enough to bring Nyarlathotep here. I called him to dinner, and now he’s sampling the buffet.”
“You twisted *fuck*!” I hollered, advancing on him.

“Everyone, clear out!” Mosquito shouted to the crowds. “We are the Shadow League, and we’ve dealt with Chaos and his ilk before. Please leave this in our hands and return home! And at all costs, keep your televisions off and your ears covered! This is for your own protection!”

And then there was panic. The crowd scattered, and Chaos took a few steps back, laughing. “Shadow League!” he barked. “That’s new! Cute that your little League still thinks I’m stoppable.”

“I’ve accepted what I am,” I snarled, walking forward with each backward step Chaos took. Behind me, the others saw to it that the crowd was dispersing, and formed a barrier around the area while a few brave EMTs rushed up the town hall steps and began taking the crazed mayor and her attendants away. “The question is, what have you become?”

“CHAOS!” he called out to the chilled air. One of the cameras was still rolling. And, putting on quite the show, Professor Chaos shifted the pistol into his right hand, took aim, and shot down the ambulance’s two back tires, making it impossible to bring the newly insane to the safety of the asylum. “Valiant effort,” he called over to the EMTs, “but do you really think even that will do anything at this point?”

Angered beyond all belief, I ran up and threw a punch that Chaos dodged—*fuck,* when had he gotten better?—and a kick to the throat he couldn’t avoid. As he stood there recovering, I wrestled the pistol out of his grip and shoved it into my belt.

“I’m getting so tired of you, Mysterion,” he growled, reaching forward and grabbing me by the collar.

His eyes were black pits. His face was one of a man who knew Hell.

What in God’s name had happened to him?

Whatever it was, Chaos’s black eyes displayed a muted spark of an idea, and he tossed me away, throwing me down into the snow beneath the last remaining camera. “I’ve said all I needed to say, hero,” Chaos said, storming back up to me.

“Mysterion!” I heard Toolshed call out.

“Maybe there’s something you’d like to say to the world?” Chaos prompted, hauling me up again and reclaiming his gun.

“Let go of me!” I snapped. It was a risk, with his helmet, but I managed to headbutt him, then knee him in the face as I flipped over his back.

Chaos was left standing in front of the still-rolling camera as I hollered, “Just what are you trying to do? What are you trying to prove?”

“There is a Gate to madness in every person’s mind,” said Professor Chaos, grinning right into the lens. “I just happened to find the key. Enjoy the bliss I never knew.”

That declared, Chaos punched a gauntlet-armed fist into the camera, shattering it to pieces upon impact. The camera fell backwards onto the man behind it, who had so bravely kept rolling throughout Chaos’s speech, and who just narrowly avoided being crushed by it. He rolled over onto his side, but apparently he now found the entire situation hilarious. A jackal’s laugh barked out of him, followed by the all-too-familiar phrase:
"CTHULHU FHTAGN!"

Even without the flute. Just like the mayor, just like her men. Just as Chaos had announced. If the music had been the key, he’d only been fitting it to the lock so far. Now it was all cause and effect. Nyarlathotep had free reign over South Park; I assumed the flute would only be needed now for direct attacks. It had only ever been needed to summon the Messenger from the beginning—it was the tool that kept the ancient being connected to Professor Chaos, and he to it.

That was enough to clear the rest of the crowd out of there. And enough to get Chaos laughing again. “We’re clear!” the Human Kite called out. “Wait—"

When the crowd had scattered and gone, one man remained. He had been standing in the back, and was now walking slowly forward, clapping his hands. Well, now. That motherfucker had recovered fast, after I’d beaten him to a bloody pulp down in the Cult meeting room. “Brilliant show,” he said, as if reflecting on a night at the fucking opera.

The man, draped in his Cultist attire, was none other than Jim McElroy, somehow up on his feet again after I’d beaten the shit out of him, the night he’d told me I was Cthulhu’s Shadow. His neck, I noticed when he removed his hood, sported a wrapped bandage, with gauze slapped over the spot my *shuriken* had dug into. His face looked just as dark and cold as ever.

Since that night, I had not died again. I was being careful. I’d instructed Henrietta, however, to not attempt to divert me through R’lyeh anymore, curious to know whether or not the guys would actually see the Shadow again, and curious to see if, now that I knew about it, I might possibly be able to remember something about the instances after death this time. Or, more importantly, what happened to bring me back.

“My, my, my, this *is* a fortunate evening,” McElroy went on. “Mist and Shadow, well met! To think the inevitable clash would occur right here on Earth.”

“What are you talking about?” I growled, standing my ground.

“You appear to be misinformed as to what I am,” Chaos snarled a second later. He stood back, pistol at the ready. I kept having to tell myself—no way. No. No way had he fallen so far as to actually be ready to kill a man. Sure, I wanted McElroy dead, too, but I wasn’t about to go as far as to intentionally kill someone. No way was Butters that far gone. …Right?

“Oh, no, no, Professor,” said McElroy. “We have followed your movements just as closely as we have his.”

Completely ignoring my presence, Professor Chaos strode forward. As he and I roughly matched in height, he had a fair advantage over the Cult leader, which he milked for all it was worth. “You need to stand down, there,” Chaos warned. “You, who are nothing better than a small, insignificant man. Look around. I have achieved things in mere weeks that you could only dream of for years.”

“Yes,” the Cultist nodded, “and we thank you for it. You see, without your proneness to—“

“Are you mocking me?!” Chaos roared, grabbing the Cultist by the front of the cloak. “I’m not doing this for you.”

“Perhaps not, but we value your efforts all the same.”

In a fit of rage, Chaos altered his grip so that his hand latched firmly around McElroy’s wounded neck. He got up in his face and hollered, “Do you have any idea what I could do to
you?!” With his gun, he gestured back toward the writhing cameraman. “That’s only the beginning!” he went on, setting his pistol against McElroy’s ear.

“Every life lost is a victory for the Great One, Cthulhu!” McElroy cried out joyfully.

All around us, then, came the triumphant chant: “Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn!”

Slowly, a new score of cloaked Cultists appeared from out of hiding, on all sides. I glanced around, noticing that my team had already formed into a barrier around us. Marpesia, Iron Maiden, TupperWear and the Coon were at North, East, West and South points respectively, with Mosquito, Toolshed, the Human Kite and Red Serge (having come down from the roof) were on the inner perimeter. Mosquito had his stunner drawn and trained in one direction, while Toolshed had a drill gun out and trained in the other. Red Serge’s weapon of choice was his thin rapier, and, though I had offered the Human Kite one of my pistols, he’d refused. Even without his hatred for guns, Kite was, in general, more fond of hand-to-hand combat. Or, tonight, mind over matter as well.

I really had to hand it to him for stepping it up with his psychic abilities. Over the past month, he’d gone from cautious to confident, and, though I knew it must have been mentally exhausting in ways that even I could only imagine, he’d been adamant on bringing his all to whatever fight we knew may come that day.

And now here we were at the start of it. If anything, at least we now knew for a fact that Chaos operated alone. Or, at least, that he tried to. It was almost funny that the Cult was turning to stalking him to get things done. It still stood, however, that we had two sets of opponents and, while he once could be counted on for bargained aid, it seemed quite clear that this newer, more treacherous Professor Chaos had absolutely no intention of setting aside differences and helping us in the League push back our mutual enemies.

Chaos did, however, spin round and hurl the Cultist at his immediate mercy back in the direction of the town hall. McElroy fell into a four-foot snow bank, and that was the action that signaled his men to advance.

I hadn’t expected them to show up that night. Then again, now that I knew I was the Shadow, they were probably after my compliance more than anything, and were therefore, to try to get me twisted onto the Cult side, targeting my League. My friends. My web of consistent, uplifting support. Yeah, like hell the Cult was going to touch a single one of them. Again.

We had all learned from Stan’s earlier misfortune, and had come prepared, all of us wearing the incredible armor Marpesia and TupperWear had designed and forged. I noticed, too, that the one holding back the least was Toolshed. When a wave of seven cloaks pushed past Iron Maiden’s defense, Toolshed had each one of them down in a matter of seconds, with seven rapid but dead accurate shots from his drill gun.

“Mysterion!” I heard Mosquito call out. “Behind you!”

I turned in the nick of time. I heard the cock of a pistol in my left ear, but spun, grabbed the barrel of the weapon and punched back with it into the face of the un-hooded man who’d tried to get the shot. Well, I thought as I kneed the guy in the gut and pushed him down into the snow, so much for sacrifices, I guess.

He’d had a gun on me. Meaning they’d be fine with killing me. Was that supposed to do something? Now that the Shadow had been seen—or, at least, some form of the extent of my Immortal power had appeared to drag my dead body away through the afterlife—by human eyes… was that meant to awaken something in me?
I hadn’t felt any different, lately. But I did get the sense that one more death would signal something. Maybe even force the Gate open. I’d been wondering a little what exactly being the Shadow entailed. Would it give me some kind of added ability that could take down Cthulhu? Would I possibly be able to shut the Gate closed for good? Whatever I was, I wanted to use whatever I’d been given to help humanity. No way in Hell was I getting on board with the rest of the Old Ones in this End Time crap. I was born human.

I wanted to die human, too.

“Motherfuckers!” the Coon shouted, from off to my right.

I took a shuriken from my belt and made off in his direction. Mosquito and the Coon were back to back, surrounded on all sides by a formation of armed cloaks. When one went down with a jolt from Mosquito’s stunner, another would take his place. Some retreated, battered and bloody with wounds from the Coon’s finger armor, but he—despite his recent extra push in training—was getting a little winded; I could see him scoping out the scene, looking for a possible break in the advance.

“Duck!” Mosquito instructed him. The Coon did as he was warned, and struck out with one hand at the same time, slicing right through a man’s cloak and clothing to get in what sounded, from the man’s scream, like a deep, traumatizing gash. Simultaneous with that action, Mosquito charged up his gun and shot another with a shock to the trachea. Both cloaks went down, and I took out another that had been encroaching on Mosquito with the shuriken I’d drawn. “Thanks, man,” Mosquito said to me.

“Shit, didn’t we already take all these assholes down?” the Coon griped. He grabbed a man in and cracked his head over one knee, then hurled the body back into another line of men, bringing them all down as if he’d thrown a bowling strike.

“There’s no telling how many Cultists are around,” I reminded him, drawing my pistol and taking out three men with shots to the knees. “And no telling how many extra members they’ve gotten since this whole stupid Chaos thing started.”

“Yeah, go break Chaos’s fucking spine for me, ’kay?”

“You want me to?” I wondered. “You wouldn’t rather do it yourself?”

“Oh, no, I want to, but I’m really fuckin’ busy!” the Coon growled,striking a man across the face as I grabbed another and knocked him unconscious with a strike to the back of the head.

“You guys got this section under control?” I asked, opening the question to Mosquito as well.

“We’ll let you know if we need you,” said Mosquito.

I nodded, kicked down one more cloak, then rushed out into the middle section, hoping to find Chaos. I hadn’t realized I’d lost track of him until that moment. Perhaps he wasn’t working with the Cult, but they were providing an awfully great distraction. I’d met with Nyarlathotep once. For all I knew, that deity was close to coming back, any minute now.

“Mysterion! Incoming!” I heard Toolshed call out.

I jumped out of the way just in time for a cloak to go sailing by, having been knocked right off his feet by a swing from Toolshed’s sledgehammer, which he held at the ready now as he approached. “How’re you holding up?” I asked him.
“Man, I got this,” he said, glancing around. “Little easier now that we know what they’re capable of.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Question is, what the hell is Chaos capable of now?”

“I was just thinking tha—“

Before Toolshed could finish his thought, a streak of white, followed by a streak of red, rushed past us. We glanced in the direction of that action, just in time to see Red Serge, who had just tackled a Cultist, punching the man unconscious.

“Can’t really chit-chat on the battlefield, boys,” Red Serge grinned up at us before taking up his foil again and chasing down another Cultist who was heading in TupperWear and Marpesia’s direction.

“Damn, that kid can fight,” I remarked.

“Hey, he’s learning from the best,” said Toolshed. “Now, where the hell is Chaos?”

“Look alive, guys!” TupperWear’s voice came from behind us.

We turned again, and this time, Toolshed, working with his quick instincts, raised his sledgehammer up over his head just in time to bring it down on a man’s shoulder. I grabbed yet another and punched him aside, while yet a third was struck in the back of the skull with one of TupperWear’s blue hurling discs. The disc angled off of the cloak and sailed back toward our comrade, who caught the weapon as he walked toward us.

TupperWear was yet another who preferred fighting hand-to-hand, but he’d invented those discs a while back, once he knew he couldn’t shake the ego name he’d made up for himself when he was nine. He carried eight discs at a time on his belt, along with his evidence jars and a couple butterfly knives, and each one was lightweight, just like the armor he and Marpesia had made, but packed a punch. Four of them were sharpened just enough to do some real damage, too. He had a new trick to his ensemble, as well: he always wore two backplates, one of which could be removed and used as a shield.

“I’m not seeing an end to them,” he said, “are you guys?”

“No,” said Toolshed, casually elbowing a guy in the face when he rushed up to the right. “Any idea what the aim is, at least?”

“I mean, probably something to do with me,” I admitted.

“Something to do with the Shadow?” Toolshed guessed.

Just then, another two cloaks were dropped at our feet, and the three of us stepped back as the ones responsible strode forward from either side. From my left came Marpesia, who picked up the man she’d just beaten down and headbutted him with her helmet, then flipped him over shoulder to get the body out of the way. The other was lifted off the ground by pure force of will, and levitated there for a moment.

Coming from my right was the Human Kite. When he thrust his left arm out to one side, the body of the levitating Cultist flew off in that direction and landed face down in the snow. “Didn’t expect this to turn into such a long night,” he remarked.

“No kidding,” I heard Red Serge say as he bounded up to us.
“You doing all right?” Kite asked him.

“Yeah, I got this.”

We couldn’t be too confident, though—that was the lesson from Halloween. Which was why conversation came to a halt when yet another wave of cloaks started advancing on us.

“Like fuckin’ cockroaches,” I muttered.

It came down to the six of us being surrounded. “Damn,” Marpesia scowled as we backed into each other to face all sides. “Right, what’s the plan?”

“Let’s see,” said TupperWear, “Coon, Mosquito and Iron Maiden are still pretty busy. Guess we push our way out.”

“Okay,” I said. “Toolshed, you and me first wave. You got enough bits?”

“Just reloaded,” he told me. “Wait, Mysterion, your fireworks.”

“Right,” I said. I’d been fully prepared to just draw my pistol and call that good, but fireworks were, in this case, a much better idea. I took a Roman candle and my lighter from my belt and stepped forward. I lit the fuse and shouted, “Bomb drop!”

Rather than simply duck and cover, the other five divided to conquer once I hurled the Roman candle toward the cloaks nearest me. The flash came at just the right time, blinding about a dozen men. I spun around to get a glimpse of the action, and saw that Marpesia was busying herself taking down a circle of a more manageable four cloaks, all of whom, I was sure, would be recovering for weeks after a hit to the head from her armored boots or gauntlets. TupperWear already had a few unconscious, and called out that he was going to find the others to back them up.

Toolshed had knealt during the flash, and was shooting past me with his drill gun, nicking and taking down the men who were still trying to stumble through. Red Serge rushed past us and toward the line directly behind the ones who had taken the full flash to the eyes. He drew his rapier and cut through two men but was caught by another.

“Little kids shouldn’t play with toys they can’t handle,” the man scolded, which just got him a punch to the teeth from Red Serge, who then wrestled out of the man’s grasp and high kicked him down.

“Watch what you say to Canada’s finest, asshole,” he spat down at the crumpled heap.

As our battle against the cloaks wore on, I noticed, off to the side, the unmistakable silhouette of Professor Chaos. Arms folded, eyes narrowed, he watched the entire fight, and probably had been there for quite some time. His eyes showed nothing. No human sympathy. No empathy. Not even interest. We were below him. That was all the proof I needed to know for a fact that Butters was gone. One thing that I can say about Butters with no offense intended to his real self: mentally, he was weak. He wasn’t unstable, but he was easily swayed, and was someone who would blindly heed to requests if he thought it was the right thing to do.

This was just another case of Butters being led astray. Though this time, things had gone horribly, horribly wrong. He’d become something nobody could control. Professor Chaos was just that:

Chaos.

Butters had to still be conscious in there somewhere. I had to believe that, since I believed, too, that snapping him out of it would be the key to breaking the madness of everyone else in South Park. Either that, or ending the so far deathless life of Cthulhu. Both were tall orders, but I was prepared to tackle either.

When it became clear that Chaos had no further plans but to watch pawns duke it out on a chessboard, I got my head back on the immediate fight. And just in time, too. Now, just about any of us could be personally surrounded and hold our ground. The exceptions were the Coon, who lost stamina faster than the rest of us, and Red Serge, simply due to his height and strength disadvantage. At only ten years old, he was still holding his own better than we’d been able to at that age, but it still stood that he wasn’t up to our level now.

So the Cult took a low blow and had a firing squad of five set on him. “Red Serge!” I called out. “Guys we need backu—"

Now, I’d been hoping that maybe TupperWear or Marpesia could step in and flank the kid with armor, or TupperWear’s shield, but just about everyone had their own problems to deal with. I grabbed another Roman candle and prepared to light the fuse when someone else stepped in.

Five guns were cocked, five triggers were pulled, but not a single one went off. As the men puzzled over the problem, Red Serge ducked back, and, one hand out in front of him, the Human Kite strode forward. His fingers, I noticed, were curled at each joint—one for each gun, I realized; holy shit… he’d stopped the bullets right there in the barrels. “Put—those—down,” he ordered.

“Who the hell are you?” one of the men shouted, picking up his gun and aiming it at Kite nonetheless.

“Someone you really don’t want to fuck with,” he returned, curling his fingers into a fist. As soon as he did, the guns dropped from the men’s hands, and Kite rushed forward, quickly and efficiently bringing down each and every one of the cloaks that had threatened the life of his brother.

When another few came down on us, Kite was still in a rage. He raised his arms out to either side and above his head, and the camera Chaos had earlier ruined was lifted from the ground. Kite drew in a deep breath and splayed his fingers, causing the camera to break in midair into smaller, sharper pieces, all of which remained concentrated in one area above, until Kite spun around and swiped his hands in the air in front of him, causing the camera bits to sail out and hit each of his desired targets.

The cloaks went down, and the Human Kite, now at the top of his game, splayed his arms out to his sides and shouted, “Anyone else?! Anyone else wanna fuck with the Goddamn Shadow League?!”

Well, it was a damn fucking good thing he was on our side. And I was sure the Cult was thinking the exact opposite.

Nonetheless, they kept coming. For at least another good ten minutes. I had to resort to another Roman candle partway through, and loaned my extra pistol to Mosquito once both of his stunners had lost their charge. He could have switched to the tranqs, but I understood why he’d prefer to save those. Toolshed kept up his work with the sledgehammer for a while, but eventually had to switch back to his drill gun… and when his ammo ran out, to the smaller tools in his arsenal; screwdrivers and such. The Human Kite kept several men back with pure force of will for a fair amount of time before giving up and switching back to just using his fists and lengths of his
emulsified string. The Coon was fading fast, and TupperWear had brought out his shield. Marpesia could still pack a punch, but was losing stamina when it came to tossing men aside as she’d been doing earlier.

But even then, others came. A line of twenty were the final wave.

Shit—we were all so fucking tired. Was that their whole plan? Just wear us all out so we’d be too run down to take on Cthulhu? It would be a damn shitty plan, but one that would make sense for a bunch of low-blowers like the members of that Cult. “Okay, guys,” I said, as we all took a step back. I glanced around at everyone. The ones who looked most fit to press on were Toolshed and Mosquito, with Marpesia and TupperWear still looking pretty alert, too. The Human Kite looked about ready to collapse; I could not understand how he was holding it together. Red Serge and the Coon looked like they had about two more strikes in them, each. “Let’s just give it all we’ve got. We can do this.”

But before any of us could make a move or attempt to make some semblance of a plan, our wild card pulled through. Swords out, Iron Maiden plowed through the final formation, knocking everyone in that line down and at least too wounded to keep going, if not unconscious. And, just like that, the Cult had, for that night, been subdued.

As we all stared in astonishment, Iron Maiden spun around to face us, a grin inevitably painted on his face under that helmet. Satisfied and confident, he said with resilience, “Timmy.”

That was it. This battle was over.

When we got back to the base, Kyle was the first one to change back into his street clothes, and once he had, he passed the fuck out. Stan caught him and carried him to the sofa, and the rest of us figured the best thing to do would be shower, change, and reconvene, hoping that by the time the rest of us refreshed, Kyle could be woken and join us.

I changed fairly quickly and ambled back to the meeting room to discuss the events of that day with Craig and Henrietta. We’d called Craig in after the fight to drive some of the casualties (read: the insane) to the asylum, and he’d arrived back around the same time we had. He’d offered his car as a service in case anything like that, or like, oh, say, me dying again, would come about.

“Dude, that asylum’s getting really full,” Craig mentioned to me and Henrietta.

“I’d imagine,” I said. “Were they shocked to see the mayor?”

“Yeah. It was kind of weird. But they took her and she’s in a private cell.”

“So, what now, anarchy?” Henrietta wondered, biting her quellazaire, as was her new habit indoors, since we weren’t letting her smoke. “I mean, without a mayor, who’s taking over?”

“I’ll call Yates and Murphy about it,” I told her. “Hopefully they can shuffle someone into the position soon enough. After all, anyone watching the news tonight just saw her go crazy. They’ll know South Park doesn’t have a head of state, so to speak.”

“How about Kyle’s mom?” Craig suggested. “She always gets shit done.”

“Actually, that’s kind of a good idea,” I admitted, “but that would almost be inviting her to find out who we all are, and I doubt she’d be cool with that.” Sheila Broflovski had been known to form committees and even mobs in the past, but giving her mayoral power wasn’t necessarily the
best thing for a lot of people, and I was sure Kyle would be the first to say no, anyway.

“Someone from school? The principal?”

“Man, I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. Token and Wendy wandered through the doors at that point, and Clyde followed soon after. “It’s getting to the point where there aren’t many options for a lot of people in any position.”

“We talking about the mayor?” Clyde guessed.

“There’s gotta be someone around who can do something,” said Wendy. “God, this is nerve-wracking. Not a lot of people in town have ever really dealt with politics the way they should as mayor…”

“Anyone with political experience would be fine right now,” I reminded her, and everyone. “How about one of your parents?” I suggested. “Or yours?” I added, looking at Token.

“Actually, yeah,” said Clyde. “Dude, Token, your parents are the only ones who know about us and what we do.”

“They kind of have jobs,” Token said.

“It’d just be to wear the title so the rest of the state and country doesn’t gripe on us about not having a mayor,” I said. “This country’s so fucking stupid, of course that’s the thing they’ll worry about first, before any of this Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu crap.”

“I, uh, I guess I’ll ask them…”

Cartman walked in just as we were discussing who else could possibly hold the position if not one of Token’s parents, and as we were filling him in, Ike and Timmy joined us, so we backtracked a bit and kept tossing around ideas. The fact that Stan and Kyle hadn’t joined back up yet could only mean that Kyle was still passed out from overexertion or overstimulation or whatever… man, I respected him for coming forward and doing what he could with his psychic quirk, but if it was going to be this taxing, I didn’t want him to feel like he had to push for it all the time.

Luckily, it took only about another five minutes after I’d had that thought for the two to join us. Kyle was walking fine, but he slumped forward in his seat, leaning against the table. “Dude,” I asked right off, “are you okay?”

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” he said, as Stan set a bottle of aspirin on the table. “Just… dude, really, really bad headache. Really bad headache.”

“What you did out there was amazing, though,” I complimented him.

“Dude, it was fucking awesome,” Clyde added.

“Not to mention you totally saved my life,” Ike piped up.

Kyle lifted his head to look over at his brother and smiled. “I’m glad you’re okay, Ike,” he said. “You’ve really gotta be careful, okay?”

“I gotcha, buddy.”

“Oh, and major props to this guy, am I right?” I added, gesturing over to Timmy, who took a
modest bow as the rest of us applauded.

“It was a pretty good test of abilities,” said Clyde, rising and heading over to the corkboard, under which were a few stacks of the books and papers we’d accumulated, “but we’ve still got a long way to go if we actually do have to fight Cthulhu.” He picked up a stack of books, and Craig rose to grab another. “Let’s keep reading up, guys,” Clyde went on. “If anyone catches anything, tell Ike. You got a document going, right?”

“Already open,” Ike told him, scanning through the files on his computer.

“Wait, wait, hold up,” said Stan. “What about Chaos? The fuck was up with that tonight? Can we just talk about that real quick before we get to reading?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “It’s disturbing, whatever it is. Chaos and the Cult aren’t affiliated—“ and Clyde quickly set down what he’d been holding to go to the whiteboard and jot that down— “but it’s tough to tell which one we have to be more concerned with.”

“Chaos is just being a dick,” said Cartman.

“Yeah, a dick who’s wiping out half the town,” I reminded him. “It’s fucking empty out there, did you guys see that? It’s awful.”

Discussion continued for quite some time after that. We tossed around ideas about what we thought Chaos’s ultimate goal was… wondering especially if even he knew. The topic eventually smoothed back out into what the Cult’s main goal now was. Obviously, it was still all about raising Cthulhu and bringing about the End Time. And I was supposed to be connected with that somehow.

When the guys brought up again the night they’d seen the Shadow, I speculated a little more on what exactly that meant for me, then felt, for once, uncomfortable, and dismissed myself so I could take a walk outside.

Even if it wasn’t the end of the world, something huge was coming. I huddled under my parka and paced the perimeter of the base, watching my breath mist out in front of me, watching my shadow follow along beneath me in the light of the moon on the snow. What the hell was I? What did being the Shadow mean?

What was going to happen to me if I killed Cthulhu?

What was going to happen to anyone? They’d forgotten my deaths before… what if I died for good? Would anyone remember that Kenny McCormick had existed at all?

Shit.

I hated getting all existential. I really hated it.

I glared down at my shadow again, half expecting it to start moving of its own volition. I did notice, though, how shadows of other things—trees and clouds and such—seemed to be attracted to it. I concentrated down on it, wondering if maybe I could make it move, the way Kyle could manipulate physical objects… maybe I could manipulate shadows.

Well, it could’ve had something to do with me being too afraid to try, but nothing really happened. My shadow shifted a little, as did the others around it, but settled back after a second.

Maybe it was a power that could only fully be realized in R’lyeh. Where it belonged.
I glanced back at the base and shivered. I wanted to belong up here. Here, Earth—fucking *South Park*, where I’d grown up, that dumb little town I wanted to defend. That dumb little town we all lived in, where I wanted a couple more real, normal years with my friends before the probable, inevitable college goodbyes. With my girlfriend, who kept me feeling wanted when even the guys’ support seemed to pass through my ears like any other words.

I hauled out my cell phone, started to text her, then called her instead.

“Kenny!” she exclaimed when she picked up. “Kenny, sweetie, oh, my God, thank you so much for calling. Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine, baby, how’re you?” I asked.

“I’m totally in shock. Did you watch the news tonight? Are you at Token’s? Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine,” I told her. “I saw what happened.”

“Oh, my God, Kenny, I’m getting really, really scared,” she whimpered. “I’m so scared of that Professor Chaos guy. I don’t know what he wants, but he just really scares me, Kenny…”

“I know, i-it’s really fucked up,” I said. “But, hey, hey, Red, hey, it’s like you said,” I went on, trying to calm her down when it sounded like she was choking on a couple heavy sobs, “Mysterion’s got this. Chaos’ll go down soon.”


“I’ll come over,” I offered.

“No, Kenny—no,” Red dismissed quickly. “Don’t go walking anywhere tonight, sweetie, please, please don’t.”

“Oh… right, yeah, okay,” I realized. “I wanna see you tomorrow, though, Red, okay?”

“Okay. Can we go out somewhere special?” she wondered. “Just, like, just once before this whole town goes to Hell?”

“You got it, babe,” I promised her. “I’ll see you real soon.”

“See you soon, sweetie. Good night.”

“Good night, Red.”

I waited until she hung up before I shut my phone. Taking in a deep breath, I scoured the grounds around me again. Nothing ominous loomed on the wind for now, nothing beyond the usual winter threat of frost and freezing. Nothing, for now. I glared down at my motionless shadow again, and snorted out my breath.

So fucking what if I was the Shadow? That’s right. I just had to focus. Focus on what had to be done. Focus on how to defend what I wanted, how to stare Cthulhu down and keep the world safe and sane.

Much more controlled, now that I’d spoken with Red and come again to terms with my fate, I returned inside, and continued my work.
Later that night, everyone in the base had managed to fall asleep but me, and in the stillness, I walked around, noticing that this rest was meant to be temporary. Everyone in the League was pushing so hard. The guys were at their limits, but they were still sticking with the mission, more now than ever before. In the main meeting room, Clyde was literally face down on a newly marked map of R’lyeh, bearing new color-coded marks for possible infiltration routes. Under the corkboard, Wendy was curled up against Token, his coat draped over her shoulders; both of them had fallen asleep sitting up, and with piles and piles of papers around them, bearing facts and sketches. Even Cartman had a book open in front of where he was using his folded arms as a makeshift pillow, on the other side of the table from Clyde.

Out in the hall, Henrietta, who I thought never slept, was displaying a rare show of compassion; she had her arms folded across and her head resting in Craig’s lap, where he sat propped against the corner of two walls. The Necronomicon lay clutched in Henrietta’s lace-covered hands. Back out in the common room, Ike was on the couch, laptop in hand and a couple notebooks under his pillow; his breaths were erratic… this was hard work for a kid, and Ike was pulling really long hours, more than he ever had. On the floor nearby, Stan was wrapped in Kyle’s arms. A thin blanket lay over both of them, and a battery-operated reading lamp still shone over the Latin textbook, book of Johansen’s memoirs, and notebook bearing a few different samples of handwriting that had been the guys’ source of ‘final push’ research that evening, all of which were scattered about the floor.

I noticed that Stan had his cell phone clenched tightly in one hand, just in case any more news came from his mother. Sharon Marsh really could be one of our best sources of information now… well… now that South Park was becoming such a ghost town. It just sucked that Stan seemed to hurt the most with the reality of what was going on. I mean, his track record wasn’t the best: he’d died, seen R’lyeh, come back to life only to, within a few short weeks, watch his own father go completely insane. If he was being tested, I couldn’t imagine why. At least he’d maintained his own sanity, with Kyle around. In a lot of ways, I wished that Red could have known about my life as Mysterion… I really wished she could have known, so that I could be sharing everything with her, the way Stan and Kyle were holding each other up now. But it would have hurt my girlfriend so much to know the truth about me. I’d just have to trust that she’d still be there at the end of it all.

If I came back from the end of it all.

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When we met up in the meeting room again, we shared what we knew had to be our next steps. Clyde stood at the whiteboard to write out everything that came of the meeting, and Ike ticked away at his laptop with Timmy as a second set of eyes to make sure we were filing all of the information correctly.

It was Stan who brought up the final piece of the puzzle. I was glad it was him. The first one to remember my deaths, the one to suggest we rename our League to spite the curse that plagued me. “So, uh,” he started, “me and Kyle were reading through that Johansen guy’s memoirs, and there was this one part we kept passing over. I think we’ve passed over it before a bunch of times. I think I stared at that page for about five minutes before I got it.

“There’s a date in here,” he went on. “It’s here, and, Henrietta, you’ve seen this date come up before, right?” He slid the book over to her, and the Goth nodded. “Not just a date, but a whole month. It comes up over and over again. It’s the month when the most seizures, the most accounts
of normal people going insane occurs.”

“I matched it with some articles Ike found,” Kyle added. “Early 20th-century, mid-19th, further back, further back. It’s always this month, and more often than not, this date.”

“It happened on that date almost seventeen years ago, now,” Stan continued. “Reports of people having visions, going insane, dying from fits and spasms.”

“What date?” I dared to ask.

Even though, somehow, I felt that I should have known. That something in me always knew.


Everyone in the room fell silent, even Henrietta, who did not know the significance of that date, as the others did.

“My birthday.” I breathed out before I even knew I’d had the impulse to speak. “The worst of it always happened on my birthday?”

“That’s what it looks like,” said Stan.

“Well, shit,” I muttered.

So I really had always been carved out for something. The Cult must not have chosen my parents at random. They must have been studying the whole town, to see whose child would be born that month. That was why the ritual hadn’t completely worked on Lianne Cartman. My mother had been pregnant with me when she and my dad had been coerced to the meeting by free beer. They knew they’d be expecting a child in March, but they’d gone anyway, young and stupid as they were. The Cult wanted them for the ease of their compliance, and the significance of their child’s expected birth date.

“You gonna be okay?” Stan asked me.

“Well… I don’t know,” I admitted. “I mean, yeah, dude, yeah, it sucks, but I should’ve figured something like this would happen, something’d come up. I can’t say I’m too surprised, but I’m disturbed. Actually, Stan, thanks for finding that.”

“What? Why?”

I walked over to Clyde, asked for the marker, and wrote MARCH 22 up on the top of the whiteboard. “Because we have our checkpoint,” I announced to the League. “They’re gonna keep trying shit between now and then, and now we’ve got our chance to get ahead, without wondering when they’re going to attack.”

A collective, “Oh,” sounded from the table, and the looks I was given were of pure support.

The Cult’s next summoning attempt was going to be my seventeenth birthday.

And now, we had nearly two months to prepare, get ahead, and end this End Time talk once and for all.
Butters

“…now we’ve got our chance to get ahead, without wondering when they’re going to attack.”

I held the wire between my partner and myself. We had our heads positioned close together, the better to both hear the exchange happening on the other end of our receiver.

We were standing behind a group of trees near the back of the heroes’ base. Our device had a good range, but we still had to be within one hundred feet for it to work. Disarray had somehow managed to get a bug on the Goth girl (specifically, on the bottom of her silver cigarette case, guaranteeing she would have it on her person at all times). We suspected she would be at the heroes’ meeting that night. After the battle, I had met up with Disarray at the clearing, where we’d continued the work on our gate for some time. Though it was quite late, evening already stretching into early morning, I knew the heroes would be up and processing their next plan of attack. We’d set up at our current location and waited for the official business to begin inside. Chaos may have been barred from attending their meetings, but I could still obtain information directly from the source.

And what an informative session it had been.

“So,” I addressed my partner as I turned the knob to end the audio feed, “March twenty-second.”

Disarray pointed at the receiver, indicating the words we’d heard through its radio waves, and said, “We can use this. We can beat them there. The gate’s almost complete, so we can make it as soon as a few days.”

“Wonderful,” I acknowledged.

Satisfied that our spying mission had been fruitful, we quietly snuck through the sparse trees, making sure to leave our hiding spot undetected.

But, before we got too far, a dark figure materialized out of the night’s gloom directly in front of us. I stopped immediately, anticipating we’d been caught and for one of the League members to begin an attack, but I realized the size of the person was less than that of their youngest member. It wasn’t until the figure stepped closer and the light drifting down from a nearly-full moon caught his face that I recognized him. It was the smallest Goth, the one that was now in seventh grade.

I relaxed my stance, unconcerned. It was indeed odd that he should suddenly appear here, and I had no idea as to why he might, but I almost didn’t care. The only reason I asked him, “What do you want?” was out of mere curiosity.

The small Goth looked at my partner, and I followed his gaze. Directing his words at him, and essentially ignoring me, he said, “I came to make sure you remembered our deal.”

Disarray seemed unsurprised by these words. He replied, “I do. Don’t worry, I’ll see that everything is set in motion.”

Apparently pleased, the Goth turned to leave, but glanced over his shoulder to give Disarray one final message. “Don’t forget, you’re saving me a seat in the halls of madness.”
And with that, he vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

I looked back at my partner. He had been following behind me, but had stepped out to the side for his ridiculously brief conversation with the Goth kid. Once the latter had gone, Disarray had resumed his place at my back and now held my gaze expectantly, ready to continue our trek as if nothing had happened. Suddenly suspicious, I found that my intentions had been rearranged.

“What was that about?” I asked him.

“He was checking on the plan,” he told me, “but it’s all going according to our schedule, so there’s no need to worry.” He rattled off this information as if it was simply logical.

But to me, there was nothing ‘simply logical’ about my partner apparently making deals behind my back.

“What did you agree to do for him?”

“He wants in on the new world order. It was a fair trade for all the information he’s been feeding me up to this point.”

“He’s been your ‘in’ with the Cult?” I asked, incredulously.

“Yes,” Disarray confirmed, nonplussed. He then stepped around and walked past me. “But we need to get going now. We’re lingering too long.”

I made no move to follow him. I was angry. He’d done something without my knowledge, without my consent. He’d made a deal with an outsider, a member of the Cult, and someone who had ties with another cooperating with the League, the group trying to stop us. And it seemed that his plan held steps of which I was completely unaware. He was keeping things from me.

I was supposed to be the one in charge here.

I stood a bit straighter and planted my boots firmly in the ground. “That does it, General Disarray. Tell me your entire plan right now, all of it, or I am not taking another step!”

My partner turned around and looked worried for a second, but shook himself out of it quickly to reply, “Ok, Professor, calm down, I’ll tell you.”

And he did share some revealing information with me. The ultimate goal, he said, was to not only raise Cthulhu, but all of the Old Ones. There were tiers of them—in R’lyeh and in spaces beyond. Their madness came in waves of all kinds. Raising them together, once we set them loose on the world, they would create a new era of destructive chaos where they would rule. Nyarlathotep, madness personified, would be given full charge. And for our trouble in aiding their cause, we’d be given places of honor in the new hierarchy. The young Goth had been supplying information to Disarray with the concession that he also be a part of the new order. I suppose he preferred to survive alongside the Gods of destruction rather than perish like the rest.

I honestly didn’t care about any new ‘order.’ There was no order at the end of this as far as I was concerned. I decided that, though unbeknownst to me at the time, the Goth’s information had been useful in aiding our plans, so I let my partner’s transgression slide.

Besides, I still had a few more things to take care of before our final departure.
I don’t know why I was bothering to go to school anymore. I didn’t pay attention in class. I avoided virtually all human contact. I might as well have been a walking zombie within the school hallways. I knew I projected as much by the few times someone came up to me trying to talk, to make a connection. But I shrugged them off. I’d already separated myself from anything they had to offer.

Still, that didn’t mean that I wasn’t keeping my eyes and ears open for opportunities.

I discovered one, in fact, as I was walking through the halls between classes, a few days after the event with the mayor. I saw Wendy and Bebe talking in a corner by some lockers. They looked over as I passed and stopped their conversation mid-sentence. It was one of those odd times when you just happen to catch another person’s eye. And we three did. They looked nervous about it. Bebe projected the concern of an old friendship which ended awkwardly, which I guess is as good a way as any to describe my lapse in conversing with her of late. Wendy, on the other hand, I knew was harboring much deeper concerns. She was aware of my other role as Chaos, and though we had only marginally interacted in that capacity, she knew what I was capable of.

And as I rounded the corner, leaving the two of them behind, I realized something else I was capable of.

It wasn’t entirely a new thought. I had already gone after Red. But I had done so as a way to get at Mysterion. She just happened to be the unlucky victim.

But now, it felt like I was going after her friends intentionally. Like my soon-to-be-complete severance with this world also meant severing all connections I had had with it.

And leaving those connections in as great chaos as I was able.

That thought saw my next calling card being sent to Marpesia. Beauty, I wrote, cannot escape madness. Wendy and Bebe, I knew, would often get together during the doldrum winter months, and I also knew, from experience, exactly where and when to find them.

When I did, I would simply wave my fingers and they would taken. It was so easy at this point it was almost absurd. All I had to do was trill the notes on that flute, and the voice or image of Nyarlathotep, lord of chaos, would appear to whisper his victims into insanity. He could coax madness out of anyone. Having had our fill of the already stupid masses of that little mountain town, I decided we would next go after a pair with slightly more willpower.

Nightfall found me lurking around the outdoor area of the mall, what I thought would make a lovely open venue for the performance. I waited patiently for my quarry to show. Clenching my fist around that flute, I was reminded again that she, however I avoided her now, was not entirely gone. Nor was the weakness of will associated with Butters. So, now… what easier way to fully embrace Chaos than to dispose of the last of their individual influence?

That’s why tonight wasn’t just another mark, a random ‘drive-by’ attack of the mind, this was a personal ritual. Just as I was cleansing the town of everything but blissful madness, I was also purging myself of my more pathetic tendencies.

I would become one with the chaos I was creating.

From my hiding spot I saw the two girls appear from the other side of the fountain in the middle of the courtyard. They were chatting away, heedless of danger despite my warning note. Like they didn’t take my threat seriously, despite Professor Chaos’s recent, quite serious, attacks.
Well, I would prove them wrong.

I made an entrance. People screamed and scattered, running pell-mell in various directions. I was getting to quite enjoy the reactions I received from the average person upon seeing me, the villain, appear seemingly out of nowhere. Proof that the masses now feared me, feared what I could do, what would happen to them if they crossed my path.

I felt powerful. And I liked it.

“Evening, ladies,” I greeted the two girls.

Instantly, upon seeing me, Bebe screamed and stumbled back. Wendy—sweet, valiant Wendy—threw her arms around her friend and turned her away from me. “Cover your ears, Bebe!” she shouted.

“Wendy, what’s going on?” the usually cool-headed Bebe shrieked.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said Wendy, giving me an awful, admonishing glare.

“Isn’t it obvious, my dear?” I asked, raising the flute and presenting it as if in explanation. “You’re both about to be without a care in the world. Now doesn’t that seem nice?”

Wasting no time, I put the flute to my lips and played. It didn’t take much anymore, only the first few notes were all that was needed. Then I stepped back, spreading my arms out to my side as the fog rolled in, sentient-like, seeking its prey.

As it crept over the tops of the buildings behind me, I saw Wendy put a hand to her ear and shout, “Backup! I’m with Bebe. Please help!” I assumed she must be calling the other heroes. Well, let them come. They should arrive just in time to see the birth of two newly freed minds.

She turned to her companion, instructing her to stay down and keep her ears covered, then she looked back at me, advancing slightly. “Chaos, this has to stop,” she said, an imploring tone in her command.

I smiled indulgently at her. “Oh, I’m afraid it’s too late for that. The plan is well on its way to fruition. I’m merely clearing up the loose ends.”

An angry grimace set on her face. “I don’t want to do this, but I will,” she said, and with that she rushed toward me, apparently willing to fight even without her hero outfit. Meanwhile, the mist was still slowly inching along, reaching almost halfway across the courtyard by now. I backed up as Wendy came at me, the two of us moving off to the side by an outdoor café. I maneuvered out of the way while she tried to catch me in a hit. I wasn’t too concerned. While I was dodging out of her reach, between chairs and metal railings, I still managed to follow, through stolen glances, the progress of the Messenger’s influence. The smile never left my face as the mist silently skirted past us, advancing on the helpless girl still crouched with hands clasped over her ears and eyes shut, oblivious to what was about to befall her.

Wendy’s frustrated scream brought my attention back to my immediate circumstance. “Why!?” she demanded, “What are you trying to prove with all this?”

“That Chaos is the only release from the world’s stupidity,” I answered, as if by rote, so many people had been demanding the same answer lately.

“That doesn’t make any sense!” she argued, “You’re not thinking this through!”
“Believe me, I’ve had ample time to consider things,” I countered, blocking an attempted punch of hers with my right forearm.

“But what you’re doing is insane!” Wendy brought her right arm around to try and get me from the left, but a quick reaction and flip of my still raised right arm and I had both of hers secured within my grip.

I leaned in, Wendy’s face inches from mine and replied darkly, “Exactly.”

Surprising me with her force, she ripped her arms out of my grasp and managed to finally connect and hit me right in the gut. “Wake up!” she shouted. “What the fuck are you doing?! We’re your friends, you idiot!”

Recovering, I backhanded her across her face, sending her flying back, sliding across the ground for a couple of feet.

But before I could make a scathing retort, the cape-wearing cavalry arrived.

Three of the League heroes ran into the square, Mosquito, TupperWear and the ever-persistent Mysterion, the final hero calling out to me, “Chaos, STOP!!”

Then all movement ceased as I heard a high-pitched laughter, one free of any inhibitions or cares echoing around the courtyard.

They were too late. One more victim had fallen.

“BEBE!!” I heard Wendy scream.

Shaking themselves out of their momentary hesitation, the three heroes took over Wendy’s lost fight. Mysterion acted as defense, standing in front of the girls, perhaps thinking he could protect them with his presence, as he had done with Red. I knew it was too late for one of them, though.

The other two heroes came right at me. Mosquito took the first strike, which made sense; I had just taken down his precious lover, after all. He growled out, “You fucking bastard!” before punching me hard across my left cheek. I staggered back a bit, but regained my balance quick enough to block TupperWear’s uppercut.

I wasn’t interested in a fight with them. I had proven my point, even if I’d only succeeded in fulfilling half of my goal. So I took my leave of the chaotic scene before me. The mist dissipated as well, also gratified with the evening’s kill. I dodged the two heroes next attacks, and spun around to run past them, back across the courtyard. Once I reached the other side of the fountain, I looked back, intending to flash a gloating smile of triumph. But, upon doing so, I caught Wendy’s eye, and my satisfied smile dropped into a frown. Her look confused me. It was angry and frustrated, understandably so, but there was another layer to it, something that caused me to linger for a split second.

She was glaring at me like she despised my very being.

Realizing this, shaken out of the moment, I turned and ran.

—

Kenny
The madness spoken of in the Necronomicon, at least according to Henrietta, was meant to be one that liberated logical human minds from burden, to make mankind content in everything that chaos implied... so that mankind would think nothing of its eventual destruction. Darkness loomed but the insane were carefree and undiscerning.

Which is exactly what I saw in the usually calm, collected face of the beautiful Bebe Stevens. Her eyes went so wide they seemed almost entirely white, and her manicured, bony fingers tickled her ears as she processed the music now permanently playing in her mind in a much different way than it played in Tweek’s, or Randy Marsh’s, or anyone else’s, for that matter. Her insanity was all her own.

“Bebe!” Clyde tossed off his cap and mask, and stood firm, now petrified, fear painted over his face and his eyes lit with very little hope that he could call his girlfriend back to reality. “No, no, no…”

Bebe’s normal world revolved around Clyde, so even in her delusional state she went to him, stepping with no heed to normal functions. She draped her arms over his shoulders, and poor Clyde went white as a ghost as his girlfriend opened her mouth and began blabbering out strings of words in the Old Ones’ language. And then, to the horror and dismay of everyone in the courtyard, she addressed him directly:

“Isn’t it beautiful, Clyde?”

“Bebe,” Clyde tried pleading with her, grabbing her waist to hold her up steady, “honey, please, don’t do this. Come on. Snap out of it.”

“It’s beautiful, Clyde! It’s beautiful! Everything is beautiful when there’s nothing to be afraid of!”

When Bebe started laughing again, Clyde steadied her with his left arm and took hold of her chin in his right hand, forcing his gaze on her. Bebe’s eyes both stared and wandered. “Honey… please…” Clyde asked again, his voice on a soft tone that I knew was only meant for her. “Bebe, look at me. Please, please, Bebe, come on, look at me.”

“I see you,” Bebe said in a faraway tone. “I see you and the bliss of all things. Dance me to the End, darling, dance me to the End!”

Standing nearby me, Wendy looked on in silent pain as her best friend lost her grip. Against the laws of gravity, Bebe started up a little dance, and spun Clyde, trying to get him to join. His face was filled with more pain than I believe I've ever seen a man display, and after allowing her a couple seconds of freedom, Clyde stopped moving and took hold of Bebe by the shoulders. “Please, stop,” he asked her, pleading against what had already been carved out.

Bebe’s mouth twitched up into a smile that wasn’t hers, and that was when Clyde conceded. He pulled his girlfriend in close with one hand, but with the other drew one of his tranquilizer guns. Tightening his grip on her back, I heard him say, “Love you, babe. I’m sorry.” And with that, he shot the tranquilizer into her arm. Bebe fell limp against him; Clyde caught her, pulling her down with him as he sank to his knees.

Positioning his body protectively over hers, Clyde held his girlfriend—his mad, unconscious girlfriend—in tightly, stroking back her thick blonde curls, keeping her shielded from any further harm.

Several had fallen victim to Chaos’s attacks at this point, but Bebe was the first significant
other down. Clyde and Bebe had always been one of those couples that could function perfectly autonomously in public, saving their most intimate moments for each other. So, while I rarely saw the romantic side of Clyde, I knew that something had kept those two working for years. But just like that, she was gone. Mad, not dead, true, but it was becoming harder for us to determine which was worse.

Wendy, who knew Bebe much better than I knew Clyde, rushed forward and knealt beside him after giving him about a minute on his own. “I’m sorry,” Wendy sputtered out. “Clyde, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I should’ve been more prepared, I should’ve been able to stop him, I—“

Clyde shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, Wendy,” he said. “There’s nothing you could’ve done.”

“It’s just not fair, I—“

“No,” Clyde affirmed strongly. “No, it’s not fair. Nothing he’s been doing has been one bit fair. There’d better be a release from this, that’s all I know.”

“There is,” I offered. “There has to be.”

Clyde fell silent after that, but didn’t choke and spill a couple tears until Wendy set a hand on his back. Token, offing his hero persona, called Craig for both his support and his car, and a blur of minutes later, Craig and Clyde were off, driving the still-unconscious Bebe to the asylum, to be tended to with the others.

I ran a brief report through the wire, and was given confirmation that Toolshed and the Human Kite were on Chaos’s trail. It was just a damn good thing all of us had gone out on patrol that day. Wendy found me once Craig and Clyde had left, and she took some calming down, but I finally got some discernable words out of her.

“I thought if I was with her, I could protect her!” she insisted. “Instead, I just walked her right into Chaos’s trap. What the fuck, what the fuck?”

“Wendy, you’d better stop blaming yourself,” I said. “Please. None of us has any control over what Chaos does, when or why. He’s being immoral and illogical.”

“He’s not being himself,” Wendy snarled.

“No kidding.”

“Why Bebe?! She and I were the first ones to accept Marjorine!” Wendy cried out. “Why is he doing this, Kenny, why is he doing this?!”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but it looks like it’s pretty clear that’s what’s next on our list, huh?”

Clyde did not speak and would not be spoken to for the first hour of the meeting that was called later that evening. He attended, but he looked so shut down, so drained, so lost. None of us really knew what to say. Stan offered him a few words, having had the experience of watching his father go mad, but knew in the end that the two events were such different things.

She looked horribly guilty about it, but Wendy went against usual seating order so that she could be shoulder-to-shoulder with Token. It was the first time I saw them holding hands. Clyde noticed, but, again, said nothing. Relationships were precious at such a trying time. It was terrible
that the guy who’d been in such a solid one the entire time—and pretty steadily since elementary school, too—had to be the one alone now.

We talked around it for a little while, until Clyde finally erupted, shouting, “Guys, go ahead and just say it! Jesus Christ. Say what it is we’ve gotta do and why. Please. I wanna keep my head in this, it’s all I want to do right now, okay?”

“Oh, sure,” said Clyde, shakily rising. “Okay. So we know that the Cult’s aiming for March. We’ve got some time. What we don’t know is what the fuck Chaos is doing. I don’t trust him. I don’t trust him at all. I don’t care,” he snapped, when a couple mouths moved to speak, “that he’s being inconsistent with the old Chaos that Butters had invented, I want to see him drowning in that asylum, all right?! I want him locked away, not my—not—not anyone else,” he said with difficulty.

“If I could,” Kyle said, once Clyde sat back down, “I, um, I have an observation.”

“Go ahead,” I nodded.

Kyle didn’t stand. He and Stan, I noticed, only had their outer arms on the table; the others must have been clasped about as tightly as Token’s and Wendy’s, under the table, and neither of the guys was about to let go. Fuck, I wanted to see Red. She’d be shaken from the news about Bebe, too; I knew it. Red and Wendy had essentially just lost two constants in their group—Marjorine, of course, and Bebe, the inarguable leader. Jesus, I really, really wanted my girlfriend to know.

“Okay,” Kyle began, “so after that incident, we—Stan and I, I mean—tracked Chaos for a while, trying to bring him in. We followed him back to the Stotch house, but he didn’t go in or hang around or anything. He left up some beaten path through the woods and disappeared. We even lost his footprints. I didn’t have anywhere to take off from, or I could’ve tracked him in the air. But we know more or less where he’s going after his attacks.”

“So this next time, we can follow him,” I deduced.

“Next time?” said Token sourly. “What do you mean next time? Wait till someone else goes? I don’t think so, we should check it out as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, man,” I heard Clyde say under his breath.

“No, no you’re right. I meant the next time we head out,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Can… can I say something?” Wendy asked. She didn’t stand, either. But she looked right over at Clyde when she spoke.

“I don’t want another apology,” Clyde cut her off.

“I know,” said Wendy, “I won’t. I just want to say, to you, to everyone… just… I’m really worried about… not Chaos, but, like, the rest of him.”

Clyde shook his head. “He’s gone,” he said. “He’s just… checked out. It’s just Chaos, now.”

“It seems that way, and believe me, I’m angry, too,” Wendy affirmed. “But—“

“Wendy, he’s beyond help,” Clyde snapped. “We’re bringing him down.”
“No,” Wendy said firmly. “No, I’m not going to believe that. We’ve gotta try to get through to him, guys. Rescue mission.”

“You’re awfully strong on this,” I noted.

“Look, Marjorine and I are really close friends, okay?”

“BEBE IS YOUR GODDAMN FRIEND,” Clyde spat.

“Clyde, please,” Wendy begged. “It’s really hard for me, too. It is. It’s really, really hard for me. I love Bebe like a sister, Clyde, it hurts, it really does. It hurts to see everything Chaos is doing. But if there’s one tiny piece of her or of Butters left in there, I want to find it before he kills himself with this stupid madness.”

“It’s worth a shot,” I realized. “It kinda seems like he’s being possessed.”

“So what the fuck can we do?” said Cartman. “We need a priest.”

“Shut up,” Wendy snapped. “Don’t pretend you don’t care.” Cartman opened his mouth to say more, but backed off. Wendy was one of the only people who could subdue him, and Butters had been one of the only people who saw another side to Cartman, beyond the shit he’d deal the rest of us, not to mention one of the only people who actually took what was dealt. Cartman had been looking dour, with Chaos as our primary target now, but probably only because none of us tolerated his bullshit. “This is serious, and I think bringing him back around is something that’ll help all of us finally get to Cthulhu.”

“It makes sense,” said Kyle. “If we take that flute out of the picture, we can stop the madness from spreading, or at least I hope it will.”

“No, the flute isn’t the only thing anymore,” I reminded him. “The attacks are random.”

“Well, doesn’t he have a Necronomicon?” Stan pointed out. “Let’s go after that and just… I don’t know, burn it. Anything we can try might help.”

It was a good point. If Butters was being possessed, destroying that book would probably destroy the source of the plague. Clyde eventually came around to agree that we should give it a shot, but said to Wendy, very firmly, at the end of the meeting, “Look, I know how you’re feeling about this. I know how the guys are feeling about this. But assuming Butters comes back, or assuming even further that Marjorine does, I’m going to have absolutely nothing to do with him if Bebe can’t come back, too. I won’t forgive him until she does.”

We all stayed within the safety of the base for a while after that. I buried myself in Johansen’s memoirs, reconfirming that the man—the current Johansen’s foreign relative—had seen R’lyeh with another, a Donovan distantly related to Clyde, and that the ship they’d been manning had been taken hostage by Cultists on March 22nd (my fucking birthday, ugh), which set them straight on a course toward the maddest of known places. It bothered me that they had been able to steer there from a place on Earth, which was proof that a Gate portal could possibly exist in our plane of existence. Proof that Henrietta was probably not the first to make a pact with Yog-Sothoth, though hers was indeed something unique.

As I prepared to leave, after getting a text from my girlfriend and realizing that, more than anything, I wanted to be with her now, I took in a breath and walked back to the meeting room, where Clyde had remained. I found him there still, standing by the corkboard, studying the various clippings we’d been collecting over weeks… months… years.
“Clyde?” I said, approaching carefully. He acknowledged that I was there, but didn’t say anything yet. “Hey, dude. You doing okay?”

“Hey,” he responded. He hung his head. His shoulders slumped. Clyde was one of the more confident guys I knew; he was definitely more popular than any of the rest of us in school, and had a lot of great things going for him. He was a great leader, a great teammate, and a supportive friend. Seeing him down was just wrong. In addition to being confident, I knew Clyde to be sensitive, too, though. When we were kids, he’d cry a lot, but he’d grown out of that by middle school, and was now mostly just an upper in every conversation. Now, though, I had no idea what to expect from him. “Sorry, Kenny,” he went on. “No, I’m really not okay.”

“Any… anything I can do?” I wondered.

“Maybe,” Clyde muttered. He choked, then steadied his breath and turned to look at me. “Hey, Kenny?”

“What’s up?”

“You know what it’s like, don’t you? I love Bebe. Loved? Love,” he corrected himself, shaking his head. “I love her, dude, she didn’t deserve this.”

Oh, shit.

To be honest, ‘love’ was one of those words that I didn’t use or think about much. My parents obviously didn’t love me. I had no family support. Sometimes I’d get a text from my estranged sister, sometimes my brother would say something resembling a word. Nothing resembling familial love. And when it came to girls… I’d slept with a bunch of them, I’d lusted after still more. But I had Red now. But, without understanding it, how could I know? Did I?

Oh, shit.

“So, Kenny, you asked if there was anything you could do?” Clyde asked, snapping me out of it.

“Uh… yeah? What’s up?”

“Listen up. I get that only an Immortal can kill an Immortal,” said Clyde, glaring, misty-eyed, at the printout of Cthulhu on the board. “I get that in the end it’s your fight. It’s always been your fight. But I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“What’s up?”

“I’ll get you there. I’ll get you there, and you’ve got my total support, the whole way, man, no matter what. But once we get there, once you get your chance, dude, you’ve gotta kill this thing.” Clyde shook his head. “No, not just kill it.” He gave a final glare at the image of Cthulhu, then turned to look at me, grabbed my arm, and requested, his tone so dark and solid I knew that he meant every word: “Cut his heart out, Kenny. Cut his fucking heart out, since that’s what he just did to me.”

Hoping to give him a little distraction, since he admitted he needed one, I called Clyde along with me, Stan and Kyle on our next daytime mission. Going out during the day was always risky, since we’d be in our street clothes (though still usually wearing armor underneath), but in some ways, being among some of the supposedly ignorant masses sometimes got us better answers than
the things people would either embellish or hide from, say, Mysterion or Mosquito.

But it was obvious that the best time to explore those woods behind the Stotches’. Chaos’s attacks happened primarily at night, and during the day, people might be around whom we could ask about goings on in that area.

Clyde was pretty quiet during the walk, and there was so little to talk to him about. I mean, later on that day, I was set to go out on a date with my girlfriend, set to stay the night with her and keep her safe. Essentially everything Clyde wished he could’ve been doing with Bebe at that very moment. He kept his gaze forward and narrowed. Even when he did say a word or two, he didn’t look directly at me. Stan and Kyle carried on a couple quiet conversations behind us, though I knew I heard enough key words from one of them to know that Kyle was expressing fears about his quirk. I heard enough select words from another to hear, in a nutshell, “It’s not gonna happen to you.” Once again, everything I was feeling about Red, too. Keep her out of harm’s way. Keep her mind free of madness. Keep holding onto everything she’d given me, and everything I’d found in her.

When the four of us approached Stotch property, I could just feel the gloom oozing from the perimeter. I had no idea whether or not Butters’s parents were clued in on what the fuck was going on—I doubted it. It was really fucking incredible that they hadn’t gone crazy, to be honest. Weirder still that they hadn’t been the first to go.

“Are we seriously just going to go knock on their door and ask about the woods?” Kyle asked as we approached.

“Dude, we’ve gotta try everything,” I said. “However lame it seems.”

“Okay…”

But before we could even cross the street to the house, a man appeared beside us. He wasn’t a Cultist, not to my knowledge, but he looked familiar… just one of those guys about town I knew I’d seen before but couldn’t place the name of.

“Whatcha boys doin’ wanderin’ around out heah?” he asked in an awful mountain drawl. His face was wizened underneath a wide-brimmed hat, and he wore grease-stained overalls under what I suppose was a winter coat.

“Um, who are you?” I wondered.

“Oh, God, this guy?” Stan muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Lotta weird stuff goin’ on round that house,” the man said, as if I’d asked nothing.

“ Weird stuff?” Kyle wondered. “Like what?”

“Yuh,” said the man. “Seen some weird things goin’ on up those woods up theah.”

“The woods past that path?” asked Stan.

“Up that path… yah,” the man said, staring off at it. He hadn’t looked at a single one of us once. “Seen a man goin’ up that path ’bout every night. Lotta strange—“

“Okay,” I cut in, “okay, we get it, weird stuff, strange things, we kinda get that, the town is kinda going steadily crazy.”

“Yuh.”
“So what the hell is going on up there?”

“Man’s buildin’ somethin’,” said the old cryptic guy. Whoever the fuck he was, he bothered me, but I guess we kind of had to thank him for his quirky information. “Yuh, got a big project goin’ on up theah. I hear might be somethin’ like a gate.”

“A ga—a Gate!?” I spat.

“Sir, is there anything else you know?” Clyde demanded.

“Just don’t go up theah, boys,” the man said. His tone was flat, so it was hardly a warning. “Stay in yer homes, ya hear me? Go up that path, ya might not like whatcha find.”

“Um… thanks…” I managed.

“Yuh.” And with that, the old man took his leave.

“How is this town still so goddamn weird even factoring out this Cthulhu shit?” Kyle groaned.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but we’ve kinda got our answer, guys, don’t you think? We’ve gotta check it out.”

“No,” said Clyde. “Not during the day, not like this.”

“Huh?”

“That was a warning. It was a weird one, but it was a warning. We know that Chaos is planning something up there. We go tonight. We go to-fucking-night.”

It was decided.

We chose to call it Operation: Chaos. Whatever that would come to mean. Hopefully to subdue, and not to fall beneath.

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At Red’s house, later on in the day, I held my girlfriend close for a good, long while, as she cried over her friend Bebe, and expressed her fears for things that were threatening to come. I felt awful, knowing I had to leave her for a mission that night, but she cancelled plans on me as well, saying that she and some of her remaining friends—Annie, Esther, and Nelly, I believe—were meeting to discuss a new idea.

A safehouse.

Red had a soundproof basement. It was against most codes to have a basement without windows, but her home had once been part of a fallout shelter during the Cold War, so she was living above the proper facilities.

“I don’t want to just sit back and wait for awful things to happen,” she told me. “I want to do my part, too. Me and the girls want to help as many people as we can, so we’re gonna clean up my basement and make a safehouse. It won’t be able to hold much, but it’ll be a place to go.”

“You’re amazing, baby,” I told her. “I, uh… that’s kind of what we’re doing at Token’s, too.” It was more or less the truth. It was a safe, untouched part of town, and it was the last line of defense for those of us in the League.
“Kenny, you’re incredible,” Red said, hugging me. “Um, but if it does come down to it, I want us to be in the same place.”

“Okay,” I agreed. God. It was about all I could do not to up and tell her fucking everything.

Someday, I told myself. She’d know someday. She’d know about Mysterion, about my curse, about my life and deaths, about everything. But for now, I just wanted her to keep being the strong, wonderful girl she was. Just keep her as my one tie to a possible life outside the fucked-up world to which I really belonged.

I didn’t say it, but I continued pondering Clyde’s words. I kept wondering if I could actually define the word and say I loved her.

Sure, it wasn’t looking like I had much time to slowly sort things out, but, all the same, I’d think a little longer. I’d wait until I knew.

After all, I had quite the tumultuous night ahead of me.

– – –

Butters

After watching Bebe succumb to the madness, I had gone out to the clearing to meet up with Disarray to work on the gate, that being our pre-set plan. I found that I couldn’t focus very well, however, so I left early.

I slid open my bedroom window from the outside and slipped in, stumbling a bit as I did. I had entered my room this way many times, but I was shaken tonight, from what I had just seen. It wasn’t the sight of Bebe succumbing to the madness, I had witnessed enough people’s descent by now for that to be a passing fascination. It wasn’t even the punches I’d received from the League members, God knows I’ve been beaten up enough times in my life to be able to shake off a few jabs by now.

No, what really shook me, shook me almost to my core for some inexplicable reason, was the look on Wendy’s face as I had left. That was truly bothering me. It’s not that I was surprised by it. I had been attacking her, so it only made sense that she would feel some anger at that. But it was the way she had been looking at me, almost like I was someone else, someone that she…

Hated.

But Wendy didn’t hate me, she was my friend. No, she was her friend, and Chaos was the one who had orchestrated the attack tonight. She wasn’t glaring at her friend, she was glaring at Chaos. And she hated him. She absolutely hated him for what he had done to Bebe, what he had been trying to do to her in turn. But… Chaos was me. She was glaring at me. I had done those awful things. “We’re your friends, you idiot!” That’s what she had yelled at me. Wendy had been my friend, my best friend. What had possessed me to do something so horrible to my friends?

Something caught my eye, and I looked up and saw myself. Light from the streetlamp outside must have reflected on my helmet and shone in the mirror on the back of my door. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d looked at a mirror. I hadn’t glanced at this one since the night I’d shoved her to the back of the closet.
I stood there and gazed at my reflection. Professor Chaos stared back at me. This was his moment, really, his peak of glory. I’d done what I set out to do: I’d invited the Old Ones’ Messenger, Nyarlathotep, to this town, half of the population had gone mad, and society was in disarray. All thanks to me.

This was my greatest victory.

Then why, all of a sudden, did I feel so troubled?

I thought back on the actions I had taken that had led me to this point. I had chosen them, I had done them all of my own free will.

… Hadn’t I?

I examined my outfit in the mirror. Strangely, it didn’t feel right, like I was wearing somebody else’s clothes. My gloves were too loose, my cape too heavy, my helmet too tight.

What was the matter with me?

I advanced toward the mirror, searching it as if it could give me an answer to the question I voiced aloud in no more than a whisper: “Who are you?”

I raised my left hand toward my face, intending to grab the left side guard of my helmet, maybe even remove it. But, at the last second, I stopped. No.

I had done this, I had caused this madness to descend on this idiotic town.

I had wanted this. And, for once, I had actually gotten exactly what I wanted.

I curled my hand into a fist and stared, steely-eyed, into the gaze of my own reflection. I noticed my pupils had gotten very large, in spite of the dim light. So large, in fact, that they nearly consumed my irises. There was hardly any of the light, pale blue still perceptible. Only black.

Explosive transformation.

This is what I had become.

I was Chaos.

The next few days found me mostly confined to my room. I busied myself with last minute preparations. It would be soon now. And then, I wouldn’t have to be troubled with any more phantom doubts.

Things were fine until dinner one night, when my parents decided to be themselves.

It had been obvious for some time that my grades at school were slipping – being more preoccupied with spreading mass hysteria to your town than important dates in European history and calculus equations will do that. And tonight, it was the main topic of conversation. Or rather, I should say, of my father’s excuse to berate my life.

“Honestly, Butters, this really is unacceptable! How do you plan on graduating when you’re in danger of failing almost every subject? You’ll end up alone on the street, giving handjobs to strangers to make money only to spend it all on crack-cocaine and pornographic films at the naughty movie theater downtown, where you’ll give out more handjobs to the other patrons and—”
“That’s it,” I interrupted, pushing away from the table, “I’m done. I’m not listening to you anymore.”

“Oh, no, Butters,” said my father in his usual, stern tone. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“You haven’t been excused from the table,” my mother added lightly.

“Then I’m excusing myself!” I snapped. I stood and backed away, prepared to head upstairs to do further reading, or else just escape that house once and for all. “Jesus Christ, how old do you think I am?!”

“You’re still under eighteen, and that’s good enough for us,” my father frowned. Rolling his eyes, he added, “God help us the day you do go off to college, provided you get your act together. What are you going to do without telling you what to do, son?”

“I don’t know, but it’ll sure be better than the shit you put me through right now!”

“BUTTERS!” my mother gasped. “Did you just swear at your father?”

“Probably,” I snarled at her. “What the fuck does it matter?”

My mother screamed at my continued use of expletives, and my father stood to oppose me, taking my ‘attitude’ on as a challenge. “Butters, you are grounded, mister! Go up to your room this instant!”

“Oh my God, SHUT UP!” I yelled. I left and did retreat to my room, but not at the whim of my tyrannical father. No, I went up to change into something a bit more appropriate for what I was about to do.


“Affirmative,” he responded efficiently.

“Good. We’re leaving,” I told him. “Tonight. But meet me at the house. There’s a small matter I want to see to first. And don’t forget the book.”

“Got it.” He hung up, and I got changed.

My partner and I had already been planning on leaving as soon as the gate was finished and we had ensured that the madness was spreading on its own. Nyarlathotep had certainly taken over the reins. People’s minds were failing almost every day now, whether I went out with the flute or not. I had only been concerned with a few more specific victims before my time here was done.

And the last two on my list had just made it painfully clear that the time for their descent was now.

I picked up the gun that I had taken off the guard at the mayor’s rally. I’d kept it in a drawer after returning to the house that night, but now I thought it might come in handy, so I slipped it into my right pocket.

I always went out my bedroom window whenever I was dressed as Chaos. But tonight was not a typical night. I put my hand on the doorknob and glanced at my reflection in the mirror before me, just in front of my face. Professor Chaos in all his glory. I smiled, the corners of my nearly-black eyes lifting up from the grin, and turned the knob. I left my room for what I assumed to be the last time and walked to the head of the stairs. I felt a thrill run through me. This was it. No more games.
No more hiding.

No more Steven and Linda Stotch.

They’d finally pushed me over the edge. Or maybe, rather, I finally had it in me to fight back, to stand up for myself. Well, talk about better late than never.

I made my way down the stairs, the rumblings of a lighting storm echoing in the distance. How appropriate.

Walking into the dining room, a brilliant flash illuminated my silhouette in the doorway. My parents looked up and screamed, surprised by my appearance. “Wha-what’s going on?” stuttered my father.

I wanted to absolutely savor this moment, this perfect moment of revenge, so I started slow. “Wanna hear a bedtime story?” I began with a grin.

“Pro—Professor Chaos?” said my mother, backing away. “Where… where’s Butters?”

“You know,” my father added, “our son Butters has Multiple Personality Disorder. One of his personalities thinks he’s you.”

“Stephen…”

“You’re a very simple, stupid man, Mr. Stotch,” I said, marching into the room, shoulders squared. “Do you mean to tell me that this entire time, you weren’t aware? Of course you weren’t. Nothing is ever your fault, is it?”

“Now, this is just silly!” he stubbornly insisted. “Butters, you march right upstairs and take off this little Halloween costume and—”

I marched over to my father and did something I have never once in my life had the audacity to do before – I physically fought him. I grabbed him by the shirt-front and hurled him to the side. “I am Chaos!” I shouted, picking him up again and ramming him against the wall. “I’ve always been Chaos!”

“Stephen!” my mother screamed.

“Butters,” my father tried, “Butters, you’re just… you’re just sick right now, son.”

“Sick of you,” I corrected, lowering my tone to something near a growl. “Sick of your persistent neglect, your talent for forcing blame on everyone but yourselves, of the years of confusion, the years of self-doubt, the years of being cast aside and singled out by everyone I’ve known, all because of you!”

“Stop!” he cried out. “Stop this, r-right now, Butters, please, stop. We—we’ll get you to a doctor, we’ll put you on some medication, son, and if that works, I promise we’ll never ground you again!”

Oh, that was rich. I could only laugh in his face for such a simplistic comment. “You’re as funny as you are stupid,” I scowled. “You really think words like that will reach me anymore? I’ve got a thicker skin than you could ever penetrate with your meaningless threats now, father of mine. I see hell every day, but I live to spread it out to the world.”

“All right!” he cried out. “All right. Listen, l-listen here,” he attempted to bargain with me—
and oh, for a moment, I drank in every second of that, “now, if this is about how we’ve handled, well, your… your little hobby—“

A hobby? Calling her a hobby? Something recreational and time-wasting and nothing more? Yes, I’d been doing all in my power to rid myself of her lingering hold over parts of me, but calling her a hobby would be calling Chaos the very same thing.

Fed up, I hauled Stephen Stotch away from the wall, dragged him out into the living room, and tossed him into the right-angle corner of the nearest wall and the staircase. His collision disturbed the bookshelf off to the side, and the entire mount came crashing to the ground.

It hit me that I was destroying everything. Bringing down family values, family ties, and, with luck, every last memory of the neglect, abuse, and sheer inhumanity that dripped from the walls of that house. This was the only way out. Chaos was the only key to getting my own life in order.

Chaos was the only way to freedom.

“When I was four years old,” I recalled, advancing on my father, “I cried out from a nightmare. Do you remember what you told me, when I called to you for help? When I called to you, to the man—“ at this point, my mother had rushed out, and I grabbed her without a thought and threw her down beside my father, continuing as she hit the floor with a scream, “and woman who brought me into this world. Do you remember what you said?”

“Butters, honey, please, stop,” my mother pleaded again.

“You said,” I pressed on through grated teeth, “that if I made another sound, the darkness would get me. Do you remember that?”

“That—that was just—just a fairy tale,” my father tried, “to caution you to—“

“Oh, no, no,” I corrected, “it was much more than that. The darkness would get me, you said. Things would crawl out of the night and into my head, you told me, if I made another sound. Well, now, this went on for years, didn’t it? Every sound I made, every waking night I knew I could not rely on you two to do a Goddamn thing, well, that brought on that darkness. Monsters are real, Mr. and Mrs. Stotch. And I’m one of them.”

I took a few steps toward them and they flinched and cowered slightly under my intimidating presence. Oh God, this was satisfying. “Take a good look,” I commanded, raising my helmet above my head, poised for a moment. “Take a good look at your son. I hope you’re happy. Are you proud? Have I pleased you yet? No. I never will. Because nothing is ever good enough for you, is it? I’ll never be boring and stupid enough to fucking please you!” With that, I secured the helmet back on and approached the two huddled together on the floor.

The front door crashed open, perfectly timed to a clap of thunder and several flashes of lightning from outside, and, just in time, there came General Disarray. “Is this it?” he asked me.

“Get over here,” I demanded, holding a hand out.

I needed him there only for the Necronomicon. These two deserved special treatment. Butters had nothing left here. Her voice had almost faded. It was time for me to accept my path, accept where I was going, and sit at the top of the new world flung into chaos and disarray, the new world at the end of everything.

General Disarray walked forward and planted the ancient book in my hand. Even through my glove, that evening, it felt like it was burning, calling out for home, for R’lyeh, begging me to
carry it there and give the Gods of that world the freedom They deserved.

“Chaos begins at home,” I said, to the last of my direct victims. Two of the last ties that girl and Butters had to this insignificant plane of existence. Lifting the book, I flipped through to the page of summons.

Nyarlathotep whispered through the doorway, his chaos cold on the wind. My parents crumpled and cringed, holding their hands over their ears. But they’d heard it, they’d heard his tune and his call, and they would always hear it, as long as there was a Messenger to make that music play. The flute was still strapped to my belt, the notes embedded in it as long as my contract held.

“Iä, iä, Cthulhu fhtagn!” I read, making a show of it, waiting to see exactly how long it would take for the ignorant, negligent Stephen and Linda Stotch to snap. “Nyarlathotep, Great Messenger, bringer of strange joy to Yuggoth and the void, Father of the Million Favoured Ones—“

My mother broke first. She broke, screaming and flailing, keening and laughing, her thin frame weakened and shaking. My father held on only a bit longer, but lost it when, for the first time I’d ever seen, he went to my mother with no motives other than genuine, loving concern. Touching, that his only selfless action would see him to his madness. Touching, that they went together.

I clapped the dusty old book closed, and turned to view General Disarray at my side. “Are you with me?” I asked him, feeling a mad grin spread across my own face. “We’re not turning back now. We’ll wake the Old Ones, we’ll crown Nyarlathotep the leader of all, Disarray, you and me, and we’ll watch the world drown in chaos.”

“What about Mysterion and the League?” General Disarray asked, raising his voice over the sound of my parents’ erratic laughter. “What’re we gonna do about them?”

“Keep them around for now,” I answered. “We’ll need them sane as long as possible. It’s Nyarlathotep’s madness and chaos I want, not Mysterion’s little revenge plot against Cthulhu.”

“But the two are linked,” Disarray pointed out. “We’ll have to stop them sometime.”

“And we will,” I said. Looking back at the two broken shells of humans on the floor, I added, “We just need an army first.”

I left my parents like that. Without a fucking backward glance. I was officially done with them. I was done with everything. I had performed my last act of perfect revenge on my mother and father. They were gone now, flung into the swirling vortex of their chaotic minds, and, as long as the madness had a hold of them, they would never break out of it.

They would remain tortured prisoners in their own heads, forever.

And, with that action, there was nothing else tying me to this world. This town was well on its way to being completely overrun with its own madness. My work was complete. It was time to take my leave. And I didn’t plan on coming back for anything.

It was time to go.

My partner followed me out the back door of the house and to the edge of the woods. We made our way down the path we now knew well, defined but still tangled with weeds and creeping vines which caught on the edge of my cloak. I didn’t care. Let nature rip the cloth to shreds. It was just another testimony to the world that would never stop in its efforts to pull me down. But I kept going, stomping on as many plants as I could, squishing them to the ground with resounding satisfaction.
We finally reached the clearing. Our completed gate stood before us, a huge doorway of rock and earth. It was silent now, but that would soon change.

Another clap of thunder sounded. The storm was fast approaching, but the rain appeared to be holding off for now, perhaps waiting for the opportune dramatic moment. I wondered if Nyarlathotep could bend the elements to his will as well.

I still held the Necronomicon in my hands. Once Disarray and I stood directly in front of the great opening, I lifted it up, and the tome fell open, almost of its own power, to the page of the summoning of Yog-Sothoth, the Gate-keeper. I was trusting that my pact with the Messenger would give us passage past the guardian. If not, the worst that could happen would be we would release the Dark Gods into this realm prematurely.

And I saw no real difference in that turn of chaotic events.

I began to recite from the book, and at once, a dark vortex appeared in the center of the gate, as if the air was pulling in on itself, like a small black hole. As I continued, the vortex grew and grew until it encompassed the whole interior of the gate. When I reached the end of the passage, there was a loud impact, like cannon-fire, and the vortex morphed into a wavering pit of swirling darkness.

The gate was open.

I closed the book and looked over at my partner. He was staring at the gate, wide-eyed. Then, he turned to me and resolutely nodded his head in assent.

We were ready to go.

We each took one step toward the gate, when I heard behind me, again, the same words shouted at my last foray into public: “Chaos, STOP!”

I turned and saw the entire League running out of the woods and into the clearing, Mysterion in the lead. I had no idea how they had discovered this spot. Maybe I was right about the youngest Goth’s questionable loyalties and he had ratted on us, or perhaps they had simply followed us here. It didn’t matter; once again, they were too late.

But this time, I was not going to take any chances. I pulled the gun from my pocket and aimed it directly at Mysterion. The action did the trick, and they all stopped at a reasonable distance away from us.

Mysterion glared at me, almost with complete disregard for the weapon I held, and threw empty demands my way. “This ends now, Chaos,” he said, “put the book and weapon down and come with us. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“No, Mysterion,” I refused, “I think today I’ll take my chances with the unknown.”

Just then, I heard a scuffling to my right, and realized that there was one member of the League that I had not seen standing before me.

How could I have forgotten about him, of all people?

I turned swiftly just in time to see the Coon running toward me. But at the last second, I grabbed the arm he was reaching out with and threw him to the ground. He recovered quickly, and made as if to move toward me again, but I pulled the gun up and pointed it directly between his glowering little eyes. That got him to stop. The weapon wasn’t more than an inch away from his forehead, so he knew I would have a hard time missing at that range.
I glared at him, my eyes narrowed to slits. “Stay the fuck away from me.” I demanded, my tone serious and even.

He swallowed, but tried to act as if he wasn’t in danger of losing his brains with a misplaced step. “Butters, I am so seriously.”

“Chaos,” I growled. “Get it through your skull or you’ll get a bullet through your head.”

“Butte–” I cocked the gun.

The Coon froze. For a minute, nobody moved. I had lost track of what Disarray and the other League members were doing. It was just me and the Coon, staring directly into each other’s eyes, daring the other to act.

Then, I saw him take a deep breath and move with a speed I didn’t know he possessed and knock the gun out of my hand. He then grabbed at my shirt front. Angry, I grabbed his as well, pulling him toward me, and we were locked in another staring contest. I looked slightly down at him. I’d forgotten that I was actually taller than him by about two inches, even without Chaos’s boots, and if we both stood normally (as in, without one of us being shoved into a brick wall). It was a battle of wills. He had always been exceedingly stubborn, but now I refused to give an inch, refused to give into him. He pushed me, so I pushed back, challenged him to push me further, like he always did, and dared him to see what would happen now if he tried. I was not his stupid little Butters anymore. I was fucking Chaos, and Chaos did not lose to a mangy, overweight boy too pig-headed to see that he no longer had power over me. He’d already lost. I had the power now.

Amused by the thought, I told him, “I see now why you like it so much.”

The Coon narrowed his eyes and asked, “What?”

“Power,” I replied. “It’s exhilarating. Watching people run away from you, fear you. But I’m the one in charge now.”

A large imploding noise jarred us out of our tête-a-tête. We both turned to stare at the gate, from which the sound had come. The whole structure shook with a violent tremor. It was as if the gate could not continue to hold the power contained within its frame. Cracks broke the outer circumference, the darkness within swirled angrily like a sea in a typhoon. Disarray yelled from my left, “Come on, Chaos, we’ve got to make this future. It’s not just going to wait for us!”

I turned back to the Coon, and jerked him forward, before he could thwart my action. I then brought my mouth right up to his ear, and whispered words for only him to hear: “How’s it feel to lose?”

I shoved him away, putting my whole body into the resolute push. He landed hard on his rear end. I shifted my gaze to address the entire group before me, though still with words that only the Coon would fully understand. “It’s my world now.”

The gate would not hold much longer. The moment was now or never.

My partner and I rushed toward the failing gate. Our one remaining advantage was that the portal’s imminent demise kept the heroes a safe distance away. Still, they did not cease in their pathetic attempts to reason with me.

I heard the Human Kite shout, “This doesn’t have to be your future! You can still choose.”

I turned and sought him out in the crowd behind me, standing just to the side and a little in
front of Toolshed. “The choice was made for me,” I answered.

“No!” pleaded Marpesia. I ignored it.

Mysterion made the last attempt: “Is this seriously what you’ve carved out for yourself? The choices you’ve made? You don’t know what’s on the other side. You belong in this world!”

“No anymore.”

And without looking back, I stepped through the gate and into the darkness.

— — —

*Kenny*

With deafening rumbles and crashes, the swirling negative space in the makeshift Gate Chaos had created began to implode. I caught one final glimpse of Chaos, at the madness that man had become, and then he, his partner in crime, and the black vortex disappeared. He’d left Earth for the place we’d known for quite some time this battle would lead us.

Chaos was in R’lyeh. And we were running out of time.

“No…” I heard the Coon mutter under his breath. His voice grew louder as he hollered out, “No, no, NO!” He stood, then rushed over to the gun he’d loosed from Chaos’s grasp, turned, aimed it toward the crumbled Gate portal, and fired. “Fucking Butters! Get back here you stupid fucking pussy, I’m not done with you!”

“STOP!” I hollered. TupperWear and I rushed forward to grab him off, but the Coon kept firing until the gun was out of bullets.

“You can’t win against me, Butters!” the Coon carried on, once he dropped his hand and let me and TupperWear pull him back. “You couldn’t even fire the gun.” He hung his head, and then became dead weight against us. “You couldn’t even fire the fucking gun…”

For a stretch of time, then, the only sound was the wind. It rustled through the dead branches of the trees around us, and whispered through the debris of the rocky portal Chaos had constructed for himself. One of our opponents was gone. Shit… I wasn’t sure if we even had until March anymore.

Chaos had to be stopped. And soon.

— — —

“All right,” I said, slowly standing to address the others. “I guess we know what we’ve gotta do now.”

Back in the meeting room, and back in our street clothes, none of us had known what to say to one another for the longest time. We’d found out that Chaos had secret doings in the woods, yes, but we’d discovered that too late. We’d journeyed out there for a couple nights now, hoping to catch onto something, but had found nothing. Until tonight. Until we’d lost Chaos.

Before us, on the meeting table, lay the most newly-marked map of R’lyeh. I doubted Chaos
had plotted his course as well as we had. We had to count our losses and move forward. We could get ahead of the Cult yet, but Chaos needed to be brought down as soon as possible.

“Yeah,” said Stan, staring down at the map. “We follow him.”

“Into R’lyeh?” asked Kyle, looking from the map to me.

“It’s where this mission has always been leading,” I said, feeling an awful sinking feeling in my gut but pressing on nonetheless. “You guys with me?

Wendy looked pale. She let her eyes dance over the map, then grabbed Token’s arm and said, shakily, “…To R’lyeh.”

“Let’s do this,” said Clyde, forcefully. He looked more desperate and prepared than anyone.

I glanced around the table at the others. Everything had turned so somber, now. Everything and everyone we all cared about was in danger. We couldn’t stand idly by and let the world collapse, the way Chaos had allowed that gate portal to crash in on himself, trapping him away from the world to which he truly belonged.

“Okay,” said Kyle, tensely, placing one of his hands over Stan’s and taking hold. “But… how do we get there? Chaos’s Gate closed. I don’t want us to have to… you know, be—be read there, the way—“

“No,” I cut in before he had to go through with that thought. “We’ll build our own portal. There’s plenty of room in the field. Henrietta, can you supervise that?”

“Yes,” said the Goth, from where she stood by the corkboard. “I don’t get it, though. That guy that went through? That’s seriously the same guy who’s always wearing bows and Hello Kitty skirts?”

“He just fell a little,” Wendy insisted. “Butters can come back. Ma—Marjorine can still come back.”

“You seriously think so, Wendy?” Cartman said hoarsely. He lifted one thick arm from the table and felt for the side of his nose, which he’d since taken the awful bandaging away from, but which still showed a minor contusion. “He pulled a gun on me.” I was not used to hearing Cartman sound so—beaten down and normal. But his words came out as clipped and with as much difficulty as everyone else’s. “Butters doesn’t know how to fire a gun.”

“But if he—“

“Wendy,” Clyde cut in. “Stop. Please. If she comes back, she comes back, but Chaos seems really set in his new ways.”

“Okay, guys,” I sighed, walking up to the whiteboard and grabbing the marker, “come on. Let’s keep this moving. I think it’s pretty clear what our new goals are, here.” I erased Clyde’s old list and wrote instead:

*Build Gate portal.*

*Prepare for R’lyeh.*

*Bring Chaos down.*
“If necessary,” I said, standing back and drawing an asterisk next to the last bullet point.

“Bring him down? But—wait, what if Wendy’s right and it’s not really him?” Cartman argued. Change on a dime, that guy— “We gotta get that Nyar guy, not Butters.”

“Dude, Butters is fucking gone,” I reminded him. “I don’t want things to have to actually get violent against Chaos, no, but if necessary, guys, we need to prepare ourselves for anything. Any means necessary.”

“Any means necessary,” I heard Clyde repeat dourly. I glanced over at him. Shit, he really wasn’t doing well. His eyes had gone cold. I hadn’t seen him smile or grin about anything since Bebe had gone mad. Clyde Donovan was all business and nothing else.

“All right,” said Henrietta, walking up to us. “I’ll go look at what you’ve got to work with. I need you,” she said, pointing to me, “and you,” she went on, pointing to Stan, “to help most.” Stan and I nodded without hesitation.

The Goth walked over to the table and placed a notebook down on top of the map, then held her hand out to Craig, who handed over a calligraphy pen, which got Henrietta sketching out an idea. Discussion continued for a while, on what needed to be done before we made it to R’lyeh—primarily making sure we stayed trained, that we didn’t count out the Cult for possibly doing anything else odd, and making damn sure we were all on the same page.

Well. Same page could be said for most of us. But when things escalated back around to what we hypothesized Chaos could possibly be planning—after all, he had said something about this being ‘his world,’ which could only mean some form of that End Time—something completely unexpected happened.

Cartman stood. He lay his hands down flat on the table. He glared at the map for a good half minute. And then he pushed off, and backed away from the table.

“Cartman?” I asked after him. “Cartman, where the hell are you going?”

“I’m going home,” he said. His voice was rough and dull.

“We’re not finished, here,” I said firmly. “We still need to figure out—“

“I quit.”

You could hear a pin drop. The meeting room had almost never been more quiet. Now, on the brink of everything, at the very edge of the end of the world, his words cut through the air and hit each of us hard. The truth was, we wouldn’t be able to do as well on this mission without him. Without the Coon’s ability to wrangle Cthulhu under his control, the rest of us stood much less of a chance of success. Plus, R’lyeh was becoming quite the battlefield. Chaos and Disarray were there. They’d opened their own Gate and now had free roam over the terrain—the largest trap Chaos could ever set. We were at his mercy, not just the Old Ones’. And there were only the few of us. We needed him if we had any hope of bringing Cthulhu down.

And now he was leaving the group.

“You what?” Clyde snapped, his eyes narrow and stern as he glowered at Cartman, judging, now, his every breath.

“Guys,” said Cartman. “It’s over. I quit.”
“Why?” I demanded.

“I can’t do this.”

“But—“

“Shut up, Kenny!” he hollered at me. “This is your fight? Go ahead. Take it. Not my problem.”

“Oh, you—“ I began to threaten him, unsure of what would spill out of my mouth.

“It’s everyone’s fight,” Kyle argued. “Everyone here has been affected, everyone here is involved. Don’t you care that we’re the only ones who can stop this?!?”

“Yeah,” Stan agreed. “We’ve all lost something, dude. You can’t back out now.”

“Yes I can,” said Cartman. “Watch.”

With that, he pushed off, away from the table, and began walking out of the room. “Get back here!” I shouted. “Do you really not understand how important this is?! This is a really stupid time to be selfish and leave!” Cartman stopped, tensed, and whipped back around to face us, but it was clear that I had not gotten through to him. I couldn’t exactly reconcile with someone I didn’t much care for, but—shit, the League did need him. “Look, I know we kicked you out once in the past. I know we’ve been wary with you through the years. But we can’t do this without you!”

“No,” Cartman said, very simply. Just the way he’d always been. Really fucking simple. “Screw you guys. I’m going home.”

And with that, he turned and left. He walked out that door and didn’t turn around.

“What th—what the fuck just happened?!” I shouted. “Do you really not understand how important this is?! This is a really stupid time to be selfish and leave!” Cartman stopped, tensed, and whipped back around to face us, but it was clear that I had not gotten through to him. I couldn’t exactly reconcile with someone I didn’t much care for, but—shit, the League did need him. “Look, I know we kicked you out once in the past. I know we’ve been wary with you through the years. But we can’t do this without you!”

“No,” Cartman said, very simply. Just the way he’d always been. Really fucking simple. “Screw you guys. I’m going home.”

And with that, he turned and left. He walked out that door and didn’t turn around.

“What th—what the fuck just happened?!” I shouted. “Get back here, you asshole!”

“K-Kenny, Kenny,” said Wendy. “Stop, hold on. Maybe—look, I… sorry, I mean, I kind of know the guy—” well, they had ‘dated’ recently— “and… I mean, I don’t know him as well as maybe Butters knew him, but Cartman’s head works in a really weird way.”

“You think?” Clyde muttered.

“He can only focus on one thing at a time. This must’ve been sensory overload.”

“We have kinda been treating him like shit lately,” Token admitted. “Always assuming he might do something wrong.”

“And the only person who was ever really his friend is gone,” Wendy added.

“So… what?” said Kyle, through clenched teeth. “We just sit around and assume he might come back? That—“

“We can’t keep assuming!” Clyde hollered. “We have to get this done, the best we know how! Am I right?”

“Clyde, dude, maybe we should wait a little to see if he joins back on…” Stan tried. “Kenny, don’t we need him? For the whole Cthulhu thing? I mean, that’s the other thing we’ll be up against in R’lyeh. It’s not just Chaos. It’s Chaos under the influence of fucking everything down there. There’s demigods and all sorts of shit. Look, if we got worn out the night the mayor went, guys, we’ve really gotta step it up if we’re gonna plow through all those things and Cthulhu and probably
Nyarlathotep, too.”

“Guys, there’s always…” Clyde began. We all glanced over at him, and he ticked his head toward the back of the room.

“Oh, no,” I said. “No, no, we’re not that desperate. No.”

“Only two people have ever been able to subdue Cthulhu,” Clyde reminded us. “The Coon, and…”

“NO,” I growled.

In the back of the room, attached to the wall behind cluttered shelves, was fixed a small glass box. That glass box, of Token’s design, bore a sign in my messy seventh-grade handwriting: Break in case of extreme loss of dignity. Because in that little glass box was a little pink and green transmitter. It was about the size of my girlfriend’s makeup compact, and bore only a small white button at the center, to call for the holder of its counterpart. We hadn’t used it. We had never broken that glass. And I still really, really did not want to.

“No,” I repeated, glaring individually at everyone around that table to make it damn clear that nobody was to touch that box without my permission. “We don’t do that unless it is absolutely one hundred fucking percent necessary.”

“Dude,” said Clyde, “we lost the Coon.”

“We’ve still got all of us. Come on. Let’s keep building our own Gate. We’ll give him the window to come back,” I suggested. “There’s no saying he won’t. But I am not, I repeat, am not okay with using the thing in that box unless we know for a fact that we’d fail miserably without… you know…”

Mint-Berry Crunch. I hated saying that fucker’s name. Hated every molecule in his alien body. Spotlight-stealing little asshole. I did not want to make us seem lost enough to have to rely on his help.

I had to beat Cthulhu. I had to be the one to yank the curse right out of my body.

But, all the same… here we were, at the beginning of the end. We’d all suffered losses, but we all knew there’d be more. Nyarlathotep finally had free reign over South Park. Chaos had moved on, to discover the dark potentials of another world.

We had to press on. That was all we could do. We—the Shadow League… this world’s last defense against madness and ruin. And I, the Shadow, at the head of it all… trying not to lose my dignity, my hope, or my humanity. But ready and willing, I realized, here at the end, to wager my very soul, if it meant that all the rest of the world could go on living.
With Chaos gone, an awful hush had fallen over the town. Mist rolled in nightly, threatening to take someone new away from all their cares and send them in fits to the asylum. Schools and offices were still open, but hardly anyone had their head in their work during the day anymore. I know I sure as hell couldn’t concentrate on much else other than getting our own Gate portal built, on much else other than carrying on with my League work. A few months ago, hell, even a few weeks ago, had I really just been another guy, dime a dozen, worried about things like college? That was sounding more and more trivial to me. Anything past the immediate work we needed to do seemed like a different world.

It was happening. It was actually happening. We were standing on the edge of the End. After Bebe, we’d seen others fall into fits of madness. Friends, acquaintances… family. Tweak Bros. was closed for good, now that Tweek’s parents had succumbed to Nyarlathotep’s influence; our friend Jimmy Valmer (Timmy’s best friend since grade school) and his parents went all at once; several teachers were absent but the town tried to run as normally as possible. Businesses stayed open as long as they could.

One of the best things going for us was having Stan’s mom and sister as eyes out of town. Shelly heard talk around her campus about Professor Johansen, and apparently UCCS was tossing around talks of a lockdown, though no significant threat had come that way yet. Things were peaceful there, as they still were out of state. For now. But at least the cell phone towers were up and running, and Stan was the first to hear about how the world outside of South Park was yet feeling influenced by the seemingly permanent summoning of Nyarlathotep.

Kenny had stepped in right off, though. Henrietta, we discovered, had kind of a backup plan in case anyone else got to R’lyeh before us. Because of her pact with Yog-Sothoth, Henrietta had a bit of seniority over Chaos, in terms of mortal presences in R’lyeh, which was so damn fucking lucky on our part, we were actually able to breathe minor sighs of relief. It wasn’t something that came free, though—Henrietta had to keep her Necronomicon open to a specific page (which, thankfully, was a page that gave us all the Gate information we needed) to appease the Gatekeeper, and it was kind of understood that Kenny was the link. The mental and physical link between us, R’lyeh, and the Spaces Between. As long as Yog-Sothoth had some sort of counterpart in our world—read: Cthulhu’s Shadow—Chaos could be slightly monitored. As in, he wouldn’t be able to pull any major shit against Earth as long as that book stayed open.

If it was hurting Kenny, we never knew. But even Stan admitted that sometimes he felt a little ‘off.’ When I asked him what that meant, he replied, “I don’t know… weightless or something. Like how I felt in R’lyeh.” It never lasted longer than five seconds, but I wasn’t about to stick around and wait for it to last longer. I wasn’t about to watch Stan suffer here based on his six days half dead… nor—oh, fuck no—was I gonna lose him again. Not Stan, not Kenny… nobody.

Well… I could wish the ‘nobody,’ anyway. Eventually, we all lost something.

A few days after Chaos had left, we began construction on our Gate portal. Token’s father,
who had indeed stepped into position as mayor for the time being, knowing that something had to be
done, gave us full use of the field behind their property, as well as any resources we needed,
including natural ones, and including access to his charge account at Home Depot. Stan, as
Toolshed, had an in there as it was, and was able to finagle a few extra things we needed out of that
connection, as well.

And, as we’d kept saying, we kept on training ourselves. My head was a buzzing battlefield
of activity, but I managed to keep myself well enough under control. During regular training times,
I’d take it easy, as far as my psychic abilities went, and just go for keeping up physical endurance…
practice fist fights with Kenny, learn better accuracy with Stan’s drill gun. The drill guns were fine,
but I still refused to touch a regular fucking pistol. First Stan, then Kenny, then Ike—nope. No
guns.

It was disturbing me that Ike was so intent on following us into R’lyeh. I did not want him
to. After what had happened during Mayor McDaniels’ broadcast, I didn’t want Ike anywhere near
any more action. Stan and Kenny kept reminding me that we’d all seen R’lyeh when we were only
nine (granted, that was an accident and all Cartman’s fault), but I couldn’t help it. I wanted my little
brother out of harm’s way.

“My hands are tied, dude,” Kenny said when, after one particularly exhausting afternoon, I
came to him with my concerns on the matter. “If the kid wants to fight, we should at least give him a
chance, you know? We need all the help we can get.”

“Sorry,” I said sourly, “but I just don’t want Ike marching off to his death while Cartman sits
at home pissed off! Excuse me if that sounds awful.”

“It doesn’t, Kyle,” said Kenny. “You’re just looking out for your kid brother, and I get that,
dude. Trust me. I do.” His expression went raw after that, and he looked away, past me, at
nothing. “I really, really understand, Kyle,” he said on a lower, more cautious tone.

“Why? What’s up?” I wondered.

“Nothing, nothing,” Kenny said, waving it off. When I glared at him to keep going, he
caved and sighed. “Just… okay, I had this talk with Clyde after Bebe—”

“Yeah,” I said, knowing that neither of us wanted to conjure up that night in our minds again.

Kenny shrugged. “And I just got thinking about her a little again,” he told me, “that’s all.
Haven’t really had the time to, recently, and I feel awful about it. I know she’s safe, though, if it
hasn’t even gotten to Colorado Springs. She’d tell me if she wasn’t.” He drew in a deep breath, let
it out, then looked at me again, and said, “Look, dude, I’ll have a talk with Ike. You don’t want him
in R’lyeh, I respect that. I also respect that he’s got a right to have at least some say, but I get where
you’re coming from.”

“Ohkay,” I said, slightly confused, “thanks.”

It took me until later that night to realize who he was talking about. I’d assumed ‘her’ meant
Red, but that didn’t make much sense. Kenny had been talking about his sister. Three years
younger than Kenny, Karen McCormick had left town the summer before we entered high school.
With her brother’s encouragement, she’d applied to a private girls’ school in Utah, secured a
scholarship, and hadn’t really been seen since. I knew Kenny kept in touch with her a little, but for
the most part, he didn’t even mention her. League activities had consumed Kenny’s life, and for
good reason, and over the past three years, Karen had hardly been a whispered name among us.
I realized that Ike could have had the same opportunity. He’d thought about the potential of leaving for a better school system as he was nearing the end of elementary school, but in the end he had said no. Better for our parents to save for our college educations, he’d said. I repeat: was I seriously that kid concerned with higher education just a few weeks ago?

Instead, what was I now?

I was someone who could make a difference. I knew that much.

Accepting my abilities had been no easy task, and now that I was pushing myself to hone them further, I was starting to wish I hadn’t passed them off as just an unnatural quirk for so long. It was all a matter of concentration; of will. The headaches that always came right along with the psychic feats I managed to perform under pressure turned out to be the byproduct of astute signals I would get from certain things around me. Stan drilled me like crazy, mostly at my request, because we both knew if I was left alone to figure it out, I’d get fed up and quit. Stan stepped in as the voice of reason telling me not to (which basically summed up the relationship I’d always had with him anyway, come to think of it, and was one of the things that held us together… our constant give and take), and pushing me even further. It took a lot of encouragement, which he was more than ready and willing to give, but the way he approached helping me really got me to stop doubting myself. For lack of a better word, it was one more thing he helped me see the logic in.

Our one-on-one psychic figuring sessions all pretty much had the same general feel to them. I’d start off trying something, and when Stan would ask, “Okay, now, what’re you feeling mentally when you do this?” To which I’d come back with, “I don’t know, my head just kinda hurts, Stan. I don’t know.” And his response would be a quick, “How, Kyle? Figure out how and you’ve got it.”

So I’d press on. And I slowly started to piece together how my brainwaves were affected by certain natural presences. Everything around me, I was able to realize, exerted a certain amount of pressure. Fuck, it really was just physics. Inertia. An object in motion will stay in motion until it is forced to stop. I was the force that made it stop. Just by counteracting the pressure. It was concentration at its highest. And it was a big motherfucking headache, but I learned to deal. Thanks to cold packs and a lot of aspirin, yes, but I learned to deal.

One night, long after returning home from an afternoon of Gate portal construction, even after the curfew that Mr. Black had called for in one of his first acts as mayor, Stan and I threw on our coats and boots and headed out into my back yard, where we set up something of an obstacle course. My dad had some spare lumber under a tarp from a roofing project he’d been working on that past summer, so we scattered various pieces of what was left over around the snow-dusted yard, making sure there was enough to give me a few different things on which to concentrate.

I’d perfected stopping things in midair. Stopping and backfiring. All I had to do was concentrate on the object I knew it was—whether I could see it directly in front of my face or not—and tell it to stop. An added physical push, usually holding out one or both hands, helped me keep my focus narrow so my mind wouldn’t wander. Whenever I did need to stop something, I’d feel a pang in my head, like a quick electric shock, usually in my temples or right above my ears. At the beginning, I’d heard a ringing in my ears as well, but lately, getting myself more focused, I could keep my sense of hearing clear while my eyes and mind were concentrating elsewhere.

Something I had to work on was moving an object of my own volition, without it already in motion. So Stan laid out the lumber in the yard in a random pattern, and one he wouldn’t let me look at until he’d finished setting it around. “So, why’s my back turned?” I asked him, watching nothing but the mist in the air that materialized with my breaths.

“So you can’t come up with a plan till I’m done,” was Stan’s answer.
“Wait, this is about me just… moving stuff, right?” I remembered.

“Yeah,” said Stan. “I’ve seen you do it, Kyle. It’s fucking amazing.”

“I don’t know how I do it,” I argued, for probably the tenth time that day.

“What’s it like when we’re in the middle of a fight, then?”

“I don’t know, it just happens,” I said. “I get stressed out and angry and just want something to happen and it does.”

“Okay. That’s kinda what I figured. You can turn around now.” On the prompt, I did, and found myself looking at a jumbled mess of lumber across the lawn, as well as a pile of snowballs over to Stan’s right. He had a two-by-four slung over one shoulder, as well, and said, “So here’s what I’m thinking, to challenge you. I’ve seen you move things on your own, I’ve seen a bunch of stuff you can do in a fight you haven’t done in practice. So we’ll start out with stuff you can do.”

And with that, he picked up one of the snowballs, hurled it up in the air, and hit it toward me as if the two-by-four were a baseball bat. It had been in the air about a second by the time I realized the snowball was mostly ice, and therefore wouldn’t lose form easily, so before it could hit me, I held a hand out to physically block it, even though my brain had already beaten me to it.

“Hey!” I called over, once I’d deflected the ball of ice off to the side with a quick thought. Like sonic feedback, there had been a little pressure beating on me from the air the ice had been moving through, so my role had been to redirect the object’s path, which I could do with the aid of turning my hand in the direction I’d wanted it to go. It was like I had a magnetic field around me—as if I controlled direct and alternating currents of the electricity in the air. Read it and change it. That was my ability. All from an awkward fall when I was nine years old… who knew? “Warn me if you’re gonna—” I started to add.

“Nope, no warnings in a fight!” Stan called back, batting a second ball of ice at me from a different direction.

I stopped that one as well—then another, and another—and a plank of wood, another plank… all rapid-fire: one of Stan’s specialties on the field, really. He had this keen sense for when and how to send the exact amount of volleys—be it of drill bits or other objects—needed to take down his targets. He hardly ever missed. You’d think he was a sharpshooter or did shotput or something, I swear. Nope. Just football and self-training. And not giving up.

“We’re not even supposed to be outside right now!” I hissed, deflecting another ball of ice he batted toward me. “Stan, would you quit that?” He hurled a two-by-ten in my direction. “Stop!” I called out. Both hands in front of me to strengthen the will, I stopped the object in midair.

“Okay, that right there, whatever you’ve got in your head, memorize that,” Stan instructed. “Figure out where that’s coming from, and—“

“Yeah, got it,” I said, “I do this all the time, I’ve got it. What I’m trying to figure out is—“

“Reverse it.”

“What?!”

“It doesn’t always have to be this big, complicated process, Kyle,” he grinned. “However you’re doing that, think about the opposite of it. An object stops, an object begins to move. Same principle, different thought, am I right?”
Holy shit, he was.

Slowly, I lowered the two-by-ten to the ground, let it fall, felt it fall, then tuned in to the sharp twinge I felt just above my right eye. I winced from the discomfort, but raised my left hand. Huh, just like anything else—a synapse from either the right or left brain told me how to move things with my mind. Reversing the sensation I felt, I willed the plank to lift again, and after a moment of concentration, it did as I asked. Holding that plank in place, I raised my right hand and divided my focus, lifting another off the ground a good fifty feet away.

“There you go,” Stan complimented me. “You get what that feels like?”

“Y-yeah, I do,” I said, moving both planks back under the tarp where we’d found them, without so much as taking a step. Shit, it really was getting easier. “Hey, uh, my mind’s all revved up, but I’m freezing,” I admitted. “Can we go back in?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, if you want to,” Stan agreed, kicking over his remaining pile of snowballs to destroy some of the evidence that we’d been outside past curfew (since my mother would throw a fit). “You’re doing great, though.”

“Thanks,” I managed. “I’m still getting used to it, but… it’s… it’s getting easier.”

We didn’t speak much as we cleaned up the rest of the obstacles, sliding the lumber back under the tarp and double-checking to make sure I hadn’t splintered anything (I’d damaged one, but we buried it, hoping my dad wouldn’t notice). The entire time we cleaned up, I started over-thinking. As I’m known to do. It wasn’t about my abilities, really—it was about how I wondered Stan felt about them. He was doing such a great job helping me train, which was impressive in and of itself. I just hoped I wasn’t disturbing him with what I could do. Or, anyone really. Just… him specifically.

“How do you do that?” I wondered, as he was walking toward me with the last of the lumber.

Stan lay down the planks and helped me tie down the tarp, then straightened and asked, “Do what?”

“I mean… I’m the one with this quirk,” I said, “but you can get me focused and keep training me like it’s nothing. You figure it out before I do, it’s like you’ve already got it down, dude, how d’you do it?”

Stan just laughed and messed with my hat, thereby completely ruining my hair. “Easy,” he answered, “I just… know you.” With that, he kissed my forehead, then wrapped an arm around my waist and led me back inside.

The night we’d kind of… started things… he’d told me—and he told me again—that I always knew the right things to say. I guess that’s true sometimes, but he always knew the right things to do, too. Or at least the right way to say and do things. He knew just the right way to keep me calm, and keep me present. I didn’t have to thank him or anything, and he never had to thank me; it was all just a part of our understanding. We could be intimate one second and neutrally ridiculous the next. I liked that. It was familiar. It was one of the last familiar things I had in my life.

Everyone goes through changes. Never anyone as much as those of us in the League, though—at least not in recent years. Kenny had lived with a curse all his life. Clyde’s world had been flipped upside-down in the course of a few minutes. Stan had died and returned to life. I was a Goddamn psychic. These were all just things that we accepted now; new things that made up who
we were, and where we were going. Things that gave us a basis for the sacrifices we all had to make… or the strengths we needed to build up so that sacrifices wouldn’t necessarily be needed.

“So… wait,” I said on our way back upstairs, once we’d discarded our hats, boots and jackets, “what’re some other things you guys’ve seen me do?”

“Well, based on the fight the night of the broadcast,” Stan recalled, “you did a shit-ton of things I haven’t seen you do again.”

“Like what?”

“Stop bullets from getting fired.”

“Dude, those assholes were gonna shoot Ike!” I said. “I had to do that.”

“Right, which means you could do it again,” Stan pointed out. “Am I ever glad you figured out how to do that in the moment though, holy shit. Do you remember what you did?”

“I… Jesus, I don’t know,” I said, feeling a normal headache coming on just from overthinking. “I don’t want to think about that tonight, though. Let’s see, what else is there…?”

At this point, we’d made it back to my room, and from the silence through the upstairs hall, I knew that my parents and Ike were still asleep. Well, Ike was debatable—there was a good chance he was up reading under his covers—but my parents, definitely.

“You tired?” Stan asked me after he closed the door, looking me over to check for signs of fatigue.

“Nah, actually,” I said, “I’m almost too awake. I wanna keep going, while we can.”

“Okay. Just don’t push yourself too hard,” Stan cautioned, walking over to his all but forgotten backpack, where it lay in the corner. He unzipped a couple pockets and started digging through. I was just opening my mouth to ask him what he was planning to do now when he unearthed a small calculator, one of those little ones with just the basic functions, nothing he needed for trig or chemistry. “Here we go,” he announced, standing and walking over to my desk, grinning at me and brushing a hand along my shoulder as he crossed.

“What’s that for?” I wondered.

Stan set the calculator down and pulled the chair out for me, patting it a couple times to indicate that I was to take a seat. “So, I’ve seen you take apart a giant camera,” he began as I walked over and sat down. Stan leaned over me and angled the calculator so it lay straight on. “I wanna see you disassemble this.”

“Dude, that was a fluke,” I dismissed.

“Nothing you do is a fluke, Kyle,” he insisted, shaking his head. “You’re psychic. You’ve got this. You can literally do anything if you put your mind to it.”

“I dunno about anything, Stan,” I sighed.

He let out a little hum and kissed me just above my right ear, then said, “Yes, you can. I know you can. Now,” he transitioned, straightening the calculator again, “concentrate on this. I think you just have to want it. Just make it important enough, and you’ve got it. Focus and concentration, that’s all it takes.”
“Okay, sure, coach,” I laughed at him.

“Ugh, do I sound like that?” he wondered, laughing as well.

“Just a little. Sorry. I’ll, uh… I guess I’ll give it a shot.”

“You can do it,” Stan assured me again, before he let go and sat on the three-legged stool beside me. He picked a Rubick’s Cube (a stress-chaser Ike had given me back when I was in eighth grade) up off my desk and started turning the blocks absentmindedly as he watched me go about my task.

Just make it matter enough. How had I done it last time? Well, the Cult had been threatening my brother’s life, that was something. Suppose he was in trouble again? Or Stan? Or Kenny, or anyone? And what if something like this was the only way I could help? *Don’t think of it as a stupid calculator, I told myself. It’s something that could help save a life.*

And—okay, I knew something about that tiny machine. It wasn’t just one object. This was just like moving multiple planks of wood. It was made up of layers of smaller objects. Down to each gear, each microchip, each wire, each interlocking plastic plate. I just had to separate the objects before I could move them.

On came the minor headache, but I ignored it, and held my right hand out over the calculator. My fingertips buzzed with the air pressure the small machine was emitting, and I focused each of my fingers on a separate point. It was easier to think that my hands did play a part in the *hows* of my abilities, even though I knew it was about all mental.

But I splayed my fingers, exhaled, and just willed that calculator to snap apart. Which it did. Just like that. I wanted it broken, and it broke in the very pattern I’d expected it to. It divided right up—the top casing levitated a second before I let it drop, and a couple layers of chips and wires split out from the bottom of the outer case.

“I did it!” I exclaimed in spite of myself, like a kid proud to finally learn how to ride a bike. As soon as I broke concentration, the headache died, and I sat back, again feeling stimulation more than fatigue.

“Dude, that was *awesome!*” Stan congratulated me, rubbing a hand across my back as he leaned over to marvel at what I’d just done.

“I, uh, I’d say I’ve improved from randomly making lights flicker, huh?” I said, grinning.

“It’s a *gift*, Kyle,” Stan said, sounding, actually, quite proud. “Own it.”

“Here, let me try something else,” I said, getting a quick spark of an idea. I turned toward Stan and quickly got the Rubick’s Cube out of his hands and in the air between us. *Now this* was a mental workout. It was already mostly done, so I turned the rest of the blocks, just thinking about where I wanted each one to go, my fingers twitching the pattern a good five or six inches away from the Cube itself.

“Oh, nuh-uh,” Stan commented.

He looked on in awe as I mentally completed the puzzle, then caught it with both hands.

“Dude, I give *up* on those after seeing that,” he laughed.

I grinned and set the Cube aside, next to the broken calculator, and admitted, “Okay, now
I’m just having fun with it.”

“Well, I’m glad for that,” said Stan, catching my hands and holding them between us. “I tell you, though, it’s incredible watching you work through that stuff. You’re amazing, Kyle.”

“Amazing is kinda pushing it, Stan,” I said, lacing my fingers through his as I looked down at our hands.

Stan began his argument by pressing his forehead to mine and commanding eye contact. Once I was looking at him again, he said, “Don’t sell yourself short. You’re amazing.”

“Maybe I—“ I didn’t even really know where my thought was going, but I didn’t have to make myself figure it out. Whatever words I was about to attempt were stifled to a hum when Stan kissed me, sweet but forceful. My grip on his hands tightened as I pressed deeper into the kiss—just as it usually did, it felt reassuring, and protective. But this time, there was even a little more… just a little more intent, which I matched, gladly.

Moving his hands to my waist, Stan pushed me just a little further back into the chair; my hands itched for a place to hold on, so I combed them aggressively back through his hair. Neither of us had really been sure if we were… well, ready… but with time closing in and the two of us getting closer, it was kind of bound to happen…

Just not that night, since, just as we had both kind of accepted the stage we’d reached, my mother knocked on the door. Stan yanked himself back, and I pushed him off just for good measure, my hands snapping down to his shoulders while he just plain dropped his and sat back onto the stool.

“Cockblock,” Stan mouthed with over-exaggeration, which got me laughing and therefore probably in more trouble, so I got back at him with a punch on the arm. He took it and covered a laugh himself.

“So not funny,” I hiss-whispered at him.

“Worth it,” he returned in the same way.

“Boys, you aren’t still awake, are you?” my mother asked through the door, her shadow seeping in through the small crack between the door and the carpet. “Your light’s on, Kyle. Why on Earth are you awake right now?”


“Well, turn that light off and try,” she fussed. “You boys think you can stay up all hours but you need your rest. Stanley, that means you, too.”

“Gotcha,” he said, loud enough to appease her.

My mother didn’t linger, though I did hear her mutter something about how dangerous things were getting and about how everyone had to take precautions and go about things as normally as possible for as long as they could. Of course, we—the League—knew that we were running out of time. We didn’t want to rush the building of the Gate portal, but we were getting nervous all the same. It had taken Chaos a while to build his; I just hoped Henrietta’s pact could hold him incapable of doing too much damage while we took the time to build ours. (The main thing was, of course, making sure that it wouldn’t collapse once we went through, as his had. Kenny had even offered to test it out first, even though the rest of us were pretty much willing to give it a go either way.)
“She’s kinda right, I guess,” Stan said, shrugging toward the door to indicate that he was talking about my mother. “We probably should rest at least a little.”

“Mm, I guess so,” I agreed. “I get kinda restless with that much of a mental workout, though.”

“Yeah, I bet…” said Stan, looking a little guilty.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. I waved it off, and added, “I’ll probably realize I’m tired the second we turn that light off anyway.”

To that, Stan just smiled, kissed the bridge of my nose as he stood, then made his way over to the mostly-neglected air mattress and started messing with the sheets. I swept the broken calculator into the top drawer of my desk, then stood as well. On my way over to my bed, I smoothed down Stan’s hair a little, and bent to kiss the top of his head. Even if nothing major happened that night, I didn’t want distance. He kept me focused; he kept me calm. “You sleeping on the air mattress tonight?” I wondered as I sat down on the edge of my bed.

“I dunno,” Stan shrugged, “I guess. I mean, after catching hell from your mom, she’ll probably check back in later.”

“I doubt it,” I said confidently. “She’s never done that, she wouldn’t start now. Trust me, she doesn’t go that far. Or… I dunno, dude, d’you think she would?”

“Do we care?”

“I don’t know,” I said, lying down on my side, watching him while we still had the light on.

It was weird. To even think that we could be concerned with little things like—well, okay, so the subject of a relationship wasn’t exactly a little thing, but still. We still treated that part of our lives so normally, even though we were obviously met with constraints from our League lives. And as long as something even marginally normal could exist, I wanted to make the absolute best of it.

“Fuck it,” I groaned after a few seconds of silent pondering, “if she finds out, she finds out. Come on.”

“You sure?”

“Get up here, Stan.”

Smiling softly, he dropped the air mattress sheets, stood slowly, and switched my table lamp off before carefully sliding into bed beside me, taking his usual spot on my left. I turned to face him, and we drew the sheets up together before settling into the mattress and pillows. “I just get used to things, y’know?” I said quietly, locking my right arm around him.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “I do.”

Just as I’d anticipated, I did find myself feeling pretty tired now that I was lying down in the dark; resting, warm and safe, against the one person I could rely on more than any other influence in my life. The one person who could inevitably keep me sane, even though I knew that my mind was just as—if not more—susceptible as any to the Crawling Chaos that steadily made its way through our horribly quiet mountain town.
That was, however, the last night my mother had any sway over the way an evening went. That was the last night of the crisis I stayed in my own home. Because the following day, Stan, Ike and I returned to an empty house. My parents’ cars were both parked as usual, but the lights were off indoors and out. The house felt dismal.

It was completely empty of life.

That morning had been fine. We’d all five of us had breakfast as usual. I’d had a normal ol’ fight with my mother about some academic thing or other (at this point I swear to God I wasn’t even paying attention, I just retaliated because I knew I’d disagree with whatever she said), and Dad had asked Stan if he’d been keeping in touch with his mom and Shelly off in Colorado Springs. Ike had mentioned that his girlfriend, Flora, had gone to stay at the safehouse Red had started setting up with some of the other girls, and that he’d probably walk her there after school. Just a normal day. Just a normal day.

Until.

Until shit just had to happen. To my parents.

Stan had been driving, which was probably a good thing, because I got so nervous when we drove up, I probably would’ve laid on the gas and driven us right through the garage if I’d been behind the wheel. But Stan put us in park as calmly as he could, but kept the car running, just in case.

“Why are the lights out?” I wondered aloud.

“Kyle…?” Ike began, from the back seat.

“Shit… shit…” I whispered.

I got out before we could even discuss anything. This was too eerie. Too awful. I remembered Stan recalling for me the night he’d come home to find his father slowly descending into madness. I was petrified, but I made myself move. I had to know what had happened.

The door wasn’t locked. As I stepped in and called out a, “Hello,” I heard Ike and Stan behind me. “Ike, stay close, okay?” I instructed my brother. He said nothing, but he moved closer. “Hello?” I called out again. To an empty house.

“Kyle…” Stan tried.

“I just want to know if they’re here,” I said in a hushed tone.

Cautiously, I took out my phone and speed-dialed my dad’s cell. A couple seconds later, I heard it ringing on the kitchen counter. My heart skipped a few beats in sheer terror. Ike let out a yelp and clung onto me, and from that second on, I knew we weren’t going to find anything of comfort in that house that evening.

The three of us moved carefully through the first floor of my home. No signs of struggle. Nothing. Just—nothing. As if normal, as if routine, had never once mattered here. As if whatever lives we’d built up within these walls had just come to a halt.

It sort of had.

A knock on the door got my insides flipping all over the place, got my heart racing a fucking marathon. “Ike, stay in here with Stan,” I instructed, giving them both a quick glance so they
understood. Stan nodded and placed a hand on my brother’s shoulder, but kept an eye on me as I strode to the front door to answer it.

At the door stood a man in a white uniform. An i.d. tag was clipped to his shirt front, and his face looked drawn and dour. That was the face of a man who had seen things I knew he would never be able to describe. All light and pigment seemed to have drained from him. He was probably halfway to insanity. I couldn’t blame him, once I figured out where he’d come from.

“Hi,” I said, keeping the door open only a little. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Kyle Broflovski?” the man asked me after consulting a clipboard; he struggled somewhat with my last name.

“Yeah. Why?”

“All right, you’re the one we need, then.”

“Need for what?”

“I need you to come bear witness and give an outside eye for me. Your parents are Gerald and Sheila?”

“Yeah.”

“We need you to come identify them for us.”

“Identify?!” I cried out, flinging the door open wide. “What the hell?! What happened? They’re not—they’re not dead, are they?!”

“No, sir,” said the man, shaking his head. “Just class A, certifiably insane. We still need a next of kin for i.d., though, Mr. Broflovski, if you—“

“Oh… God…” I found myself choking out, holding onto the doorframe to steady myself. Shit. SHIT. “Both of—both of them? Both my parents are…?”

“The Crawling Mist rolled through. Gone, now, but your parents’ incident reports came in at the same time this afternoon, Mr. Broflovski, I’m sorry.”

Unable to respond, I clamped my hands over my mouth and just sank in the man’s continued stream of empty words.

“Says here on your file you’re only sixteen, but times as they are, we need to go ahead and list you as head of household; also says here you have one dependent… a younger brother, so we just need to go over a few things with you after you confirm an i.d., okay?”

“How can you be doing fucking paperwork?! I screamed at the man. “Half this town has gone crazy and you guys are still hung up on PAPERWORK?!”

“We’ve gotta take all measures, sir, I’m sorry.”

“Quit saying you’re sorry!” After that outburst, though, I took in a deep, deep breath, and let it out shakily. I couldn’t lose it, I couldn’t break down, not in front of my brother, anyway. Oh, I’d scream my frustrations out later with Stan, I was sure, but I had to keep my guard up for Ike. “Just—ugh. Fuck. Where are they?”

“Asylum, top ward.” I felt bile rise from my stomach, but I swallowed it down. “You’re
actually pretty lucky, Mr. Broflovski—all the wings are filling up.”

“Lucky?” I spat, staring the man down. “My parents just went completely insane, and I’m lucky?”

“Look, it got my wife, too, all right, kid? I know.”

That was the first time in our conversation the man had referred to me as a ‘kid.’ Other than that it had been ‘Mr.’ and ‘sir’ and ‘head of household’ and all, but that was a wakeup call. Kid. I wasn’t a kid. I couldn’t be. My brother was a kid. His girlfriend. A bunch of others in town. But me—I was sixteen. I was sixteen and I was the head of the fucking household. But for a moment, and several layered moments for the rest of the evening… no, I’d never felt more like a child, not in years.

It was just at that moment that Ike wandered up beside me. I wanted to be angry at him for not staying back, but I couldn’t blame him for his curiosity, nor could I deny that I was glad he was right there, that I had my brother right beside me. “Sorry,” I heard Stan say from my right, while Ike grabbed onto my jacket again from my left. “I figured since it was taking a while, he should hear…”

“It’s fine,” I told him. “It’s… it’s fine. You’re right.”

“What’s going on?” Stan wondered at that point.

“Too much,” I answered, shaking my head. A minor headache began to buzz, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to get rid of it. I had to ignore it if I was about to head toward the asylum, though. Shit, that would really not be the place to lose any of the control I’d built up.

“Who’s this?” the man at the door asked.

“Th-this is my younger brother,” I managed to say, placing a hand on his head, “Ike. A-adopted Canadian, but he’s my brother. And this is my, um…” I began, setting my other hand on Stan’s shoulder before I realized we didn’t have a label and I therefore tripped around exactly how to announce him, “my—no, okay, this is…”

“Stan Marsh,” he introduced himself, managing to do one thing I hadn’t even thought of: shake hands with the guy on the doorstep. “I’m a friend of the family; I’ve been living here since—“

“Oh, right, Marsh,” said the man at the door. “Your father’s Randy Marsh.”

“Um… yeah…” Stan said solemnly.

“Used to play poker with him some nights. Shame he went so early. Sorry for that.”

“Thanks,” Stan managed.

Ike tugged at my jacket, so I ignored the conversation Stan kept having with the doctor or EMT or whatever the hell he was and knelt instead to hug my brother, who, I discovered, was shaking a little. It was possible that I was, too. I’d felt so confident the night before, so confident in my abilities… and now, for this little window of time—I’d never felt so utterly useless. I always knew my parents would probably hear the call and go, as it were. I just hadn’t been prepared for it.

Neither had Ike, who was usually so calm under pressure, so mature for his age. No, at that moment I remembered again that he was just a kid, and that if this was a lot on me, it must have been petrifying for him. “Kyle, what happens now?” he asked me, when he hugged me for protection.
“I—I’ve got some stuff I’ve gotta do, Ike,” I said. “I’ve just gotta sort some stuff out, and then, I guess, um… then we’re going to Token’s. We’re gonna stay at the base from now on.”

“Got both of them?”

“Both of them, Ike. But I’m not going anywhere, got that? I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you. We’re gonna stick together as a family, okay?”

Ike nodded against me, then took in a deep breath of his own and said, forcing confidence into his voice, the same way I knew I’d be for some time to come, “We’ll get ’em back.”

“Y-yeah…” I said, wishing I could speak without faltering. “Yeah, we will, Ike. But for right now, we’ve just gotta stick together.”

Stan kept the man at the door in conversation for about another minute, and then the three of us retreated into the house while the man waited outside, so that we could discuss the next steps. It didn’t take much figuring for us to finally come to the decision to leave home that night. To pack up before heading to the asylum. Stan would drive, I’d go in and confirm the i.d., and then the three of us together would leave for the base. For one of the last safe places in South Park.

Ike tagged along with me and Stan as we packed up our few essentials in my room, and the two of us similarly tailed him as he stuffed all he needed into two bags, one of which I carried out for him. I stopped by the bathroom to grab a few other essentials I knew we couldn’t use too much of at the base, then went around to make sure all the windows were shut and locked, that no faucets were leaking—I can’t believe I had the head to even begin to do that kind of stuff—then closed and locked the door behind us, making sure I had even the spare key.

After loading up Stan’s car, Ike slid into the back, keeping still and silent with his laptop briefcase hugged securely to him, while I opted to sit in the passenger seat, especially after Ike told me he’d be fine on his own. He was ten, he didn’t need coddling, but I still wanted to keep a close eye on him. I’d promised my parents back when I was little to look after my brother, and even if he rarely expressed it, I knew that he was glad I still did. Even if my parents were over the edge of madness, I had to keep that promise I’d made them. I had to at least hold onto that.

Stan backed out silently and followed the man’s truck back toward the asylum. I could see him tense. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. Why the fuck wasn’t he wearing gloves? Oh, well. None of us were thinking all that hard about stupid things like gloves in early February. We were mostly concerned with the, so who’s safe now? crisis.

I tried talking to Ike, starting about a minute after we’d begun driving, but he didn’t want to talk. I noticed, at one point, when I looked back, that he had his cell phone out—he was either updating his calendar or texting his girlfriend, and I figured the latter was more probable. So I switched to conversation with Stan, trying really hard not to have the asylum be the topic, even though it was one of the only things either of us could think about.

“You holding up okay?” he asked me, still staring straight forward at the half-lit road.

“I’ll be all right,” I said. “That guy just announced it so suddenly, it was—it sucks.”

“Yeah, it really sucks,” Stan agreed grimly.

“I wish this part didn’t have to be so hard,” I admitted. “I want to just leave, I don’t want to see all this.”

“Leave, like, for R’lyeh?”
“I don’t know, maybe. I just want it over. This really, really sucks.”

“It’s scary,” said Stan, glancing over at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road. “They were doing really well, too…”

“I know, but… fuck, dude, I guess I kinda figured they’d have to go sometime…”

We both fell silent for a moment, until, at a turn, Stan said, with full confidence, “Let me know if you need anything, Kyle. Swear to God. Anything I can do at all, just let me know.”

“Thanks,” I said with a slight sigh, setting my left hand on his shoulder and brushing his arm a couple times. After another beat, I added, “And I mean for everything.”

I saw him smile, just a little, as if afraid to under such awful circumstances. Truth was, though, I’d rather have a nice distraction at a time like this, rather than dwell on the negatives. We faded into another silence at that point, which was fine; I patted his arm a couple more times, checked back on my brother, and then stared straight forward, until something else was brought up.

“…Boyfriend,” I just barely heard Stan say, in a tone I knew Ike couldn’t hear. If Ike was paying attention to anything at all.

“What?” I wondered, glancing over. He was in full contemplation mode, kind of smiling, still, but mostly in the process of focusing and sorting things out. Guess I wasn’t the only over-thinker.

“At the door. You almost introduced me as your boyfriend, didn’t you?”

“I, uh—I don’t know,” I admitted, feeling a surge in my chest, “maybe. It was just… under pressure, it just seemed like…”

“Kyle, it’s cool, it’s okay. I wouldn’t mind, if you did.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine,” said Stan, trying to pass it off a little, even though I knew that the sudden label was kind of huge for us to be thinking about. “I mean, I doubt it will, but if it comes up again and it slips out, it slips out. You know? And we can just… talk about it later.”

“Like, maybe way later,” I said as a precaution.

“No, yeah, I figured. Just, don’t get caught up trying to talk around something like that, ‘kay? Just focus on the big stuff right now.”

“That’s not big?”

“You know what I mean, Kyle.”

I hadn’t even noticed that we’d made it to a large, dreary parking lot by that point. White vans and ambulances made up most of the unfathomable number of vehicles around us, making me feel that much more uncomfortable with being there, sitting in Stan’s darker-colored, standard little car, which he now slid into park. Before he could turn off the ignition, I unbuckled and leaned over to give Stan an awkwardly-angled hug, and a quick kiss to further express gratitude for everything he’d done so far, and for how grateful I was that he was there now.

The label issue was then completely put on the back burner, and I had Ike stay directly at my
side as the man who’d led us there now walked the three of us into the building. Once inside, Stan completely blanched, and I honestly thought he was going to get sick. He glanced absently down at one hand—I remembered him talking about the wristbands they gave you here… and sure enough, a woman walked up to us, had a brief chat with our escort, then slid a band on each of us before we even knew what exactly was now going on.

Ike stared at his wristband and just about froze. I heard my name being spoken, or, my last, anyway, and figured I might as well pay half-attention to what a new pair of attendants was telling me about my parents’ ‘situation,’ as they called it. I cannot for the life of me recall a word that was said. My mind was so fuzzy, and in the midst of it all, one thought began to ring out louder and more clearly than anything:

_Take down that fucking Nyarlathotep._

Somehow. Fucked if I could figure out how to do that right now, though. Fucked if I could even remember I had the ability to fight. I just wanted out of there. I hadn’t even seen my parents yet and I wanted out of there.

Soon enough, after a couple pens were forced into my hand and after I read over and signed a couple of documents stating that I’d take on responsibility as the head of the Broflovski household until one or the other of my parents was released (which did not presently seem likely), I was being asked to come with a grey-haired woman in a lab coat to whatever wing it was that my parents were being confined in. My heart started beating a race against my chest, and I told the woman I needed a minute.

I knelt and hugged Ike, saying, “Stay out here for a bit, Ike, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“Is it possible it isn’t them?” Ike wondered.

“I don’t know, but I still have to give an i.d. Then we’re out of here, all right? Once we leave, I’ll know what to do.”

“Don’t take too long, buddy,” my brother said, patting my back a couple times.

“I won’t,” I promised. I watched him slide into a chair, his feet still several inches off the floor, and asked again that he stay put; he nodded, and sat straight and still.

I stood and turned, then, to Stan, hugging him immediately and saying another, “Thank you.” The woman asked for me again, and I glanced over at her. A headache started up again, this time from all of the noise, right down to the humming of the fluorescent lights above us.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Stan offered, keeping my face turned toward him so that my eyes wouldn’t wander too much.

“No,” I answered as evenly as I could, “no, I—just, please, stay here with Ike. I don’t want him out here alone, and if he doesn’t want to see, he shouldn’t have to.”

“Sure. I’ll take care of him,” Stan assured me, giving me a warm kiss on the cheek before hugging me close again. “Kyle, please, be careful of whatever you see and hear, okay? Please.”

I nodded, my head spinning with so many possibilities of everything that could come. Hardly anything was certain anymore. Clinging to one of the only certainties I had left, I said, “I will, Stan, I promise.” Ticking my head up, I pulled him in a bit and kissed him firmly; he grasped my shoulders, keeping our promise solid. “Take care of Ike,” I asked again as I stepped back.
“Yeah. See you in a few,” said Stan, taking and squeezing my hand for one last little push of support.

Empty and petrified, I followed the grey-haired woman down several halls, some dark and narrow, some bright and packed; some lined with doors and some bearing only a couple. She led me down wing after wing, and all around me were cries of men, women and children in fits of madness—some of them laughed, some shouted out words in Cthulhu’s tongue.

I tried to ignore the fact that I knew some of the voices. They were voices of people I knew, but twisted nearly beyond recognition. South Park was falling. I heard Bebe’s voice—her voice, but not her words…and I thought of Clyde, of how broken and militaristic he’d become in the wake of her joining the insane. I even heard Randy Marsh, going off on something I didn’t bother listening much to. I decided not to mention that to Clyde or Stan. It was bad enough just knowing that Bebe and Mr. Marsh were there at all. My heartbeat, drumming in my ears, drowned everything else out. Everything else was just a constant buzz of confusion and nothingness.

I felt the air beat down around me.

Making the final stretch to the room down the hall, I felt chillingly alone.

By the time the woman gestured to the room, and mouthed something that I couldn’t bring myself to strain to hear, I felt wandering and weightless. What could I do? What the hell could any of us do now? Well, there was one thing, one thing my body just sort of did on its own. I looked inside.

It was them, all right. Or, had been. My mother was washed out but wild, her long, greying red hair unpinned and tangled out to all sides like the writhing snakes on the head of a Gorgon. Her fingers grabbed in the air at nothing, and on her face was a cracked, inhuman grin. My father was in a straightjacket, and barely sat on the very edge of the cot on the far side of the room, ticking slightly every few seconds, his eyes plastered open and words that didn’t exist spilling out of his mouth as easily as if he were reciting a well-known poem.

“That’s not Stan,” I’d said to Clyde in the alley the night Nelson had shot him down, “that’s just his body!”

Oddly enough, I felt the same way now. Those broken shells weren’t my parents. Their bodies, sure, but not them. Their minds were gone—just gone. Gone deep into the recesses of their own broken brains. Chaos had stood at the precipice of madness and allowed R’lyeh to swallow him up, body and all. What Nyarlathotep was doing was just taking the minds and leaving the shells.

If there was any way to get them back, any way at all, the answer was probably in R’lyeh. But for the first time since this whole ordeal had started, I felt defenseless. Helpless.

I had no idea what to do.

I wanted to help. I wanted so badly to help. But I’d never felt so frozen, so terrified. There was only one thing I knew: I did not want Ike to see this. Ike could never, ever know.

“That’s them,” I said quickly, turning back to the grey-haired woman as I backed the hell away from that awful little room. “That’s… yeah… yeah, I… can I go now?”

“You’re free to leave,” the woman nodded. “Mr. Broflovski, if there’s anything we can do—“

“Yeah, there’s something,” I said. I felt like every fuse in me had blown. Where the fuck
was all the logic in the world now? I was so fucking—frozen. “You can tell me if you think this is curable.” I stared the woman down, challenging her. I knew she probably didn’t have the answer, or anything even resembling an answer, but I demanded it of her nonetheless.

“How can I tell me if you think this is curable?”

“Is there a cure?”

“For insanity, Mr. Broflovski? I’m sorry, but—”

“I figured,” I cut her off, storming on down the hall. I really did just want to get out. Out, out, out—out of that asylum, out of that fucking nightmare. It wasn’t misty that night. Nyarlathotep was being a fucking coward. Shit, I even wanted to rip Chaos a new one for this. He’d brought that thing here, and it was tearing everything apart.

It really had all come down to chaos.

For the first time that evening, even though we’d been at the base earlier, even though it had come up in conversation, I really started wondering about Cthulhu. If it was still all ‘dead but dreaming’ down there in R’lyeh, what was it going to take for that thing to wake up? What did that mean for us? For Kenny? For our town, for the world? If this Messenger guy was doing this much damage…

…I really did not want to find out what Cthulhu could do. Or, worse. The other Gods. There were more. We knew there were more. There were more, and if the Cult got their way, Cthulhu would usher in an era of darkness that only the Old Ones could control.

“It’s my world, now.” Chaos had said before he’d left. I had no idea what he was talking about, then, but now I was piecing it together.

He’d placed himself on the same tier as those other Gods. Hadn’t he? He meant that the world didn’t belong to mankind anymore. That was how I read it, anyway. And, walking through those halls, hearing the screams and chants of the committed, I realized… no.

No. It wasn’t our world anymore. Not now anyway.

But we’d get it back.

My brain was still everywhere, but I managed to make it back to the waiting room, where I zeroed in on Stan and Ike. Everyone else in the room was just a white flash in the corner of my eyes. Fight or flight responses went off in me like wildfire. Get out of here. Get all three of you out of here. Get the fuck out of here.

“Okay,” I said, striding toward them, keeping my eyes just as dry as I could manage, “come on, guys, let’s go. Ike, come on, it’s late.”

“Like that matters,” my brother fought me. He looked frightened, still, but was taking a stand for once that evening. “I wanna know if Mom and Dad are okay!”

“Ike, we’ve gotta go,” I said. “Now.”


“I’ll tell you later,” I assured him. “Ike, come on.”
“You’re freaking me out, Kyle!” Ike insisted, firmly planting himself in his chair. “Did you see Mom and Dad?!"

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. I leaned down, and put my hands on my little brother’s shoulders. If there was one thing Mom had always complimented me on, it was how protective I’d been, for years and years, of that little kid. Ike was my brother—people had to get through me to get to him. Nobody messed with that kid, not on my watch. I had enough in me to stay protective. That was it, though. I figured it might take a while for me to build the rest of my confidence back up, though. “Ike, I’m sorry, we really need to go.”

“Was it them, Kyle?!”

“Yeah,” I told him. “Yeah, it was, and… look, Ike, please, we’ve got to just go. And re-evaluate, and just…”

“Oh, I finally gave in. “Just don’t you go crazy, buddy…”

“I’m not going to,” I told him strongly. “Ike, I swear to God, I’m not gonna do that to you. I’m your guardian, now, and we’ve gotta go.”

Fuck.

Just—fuck.

The drive back to the base was almost entirely silent. I did sit in the back seat with my brother this time, and obsessed over that last thing I’d said to him. I was his guardian. Not just his older brother, his fucking guardian. Assuming this all passed, assuming we beat Cthulhu and came back… but assuming that my parents stayed crazy—fucking hell, I’d have to raise him. The paperwork couldn’t be revoked unless one of my parents came around. Head of household. Head of fucking household. Me. Fucking—sixteen-year-old me.

Please, God, let us all get through this, I prayed, snapping my eyes shut. Please let them be okay. They can’t stay like that forever. Please let them be okay. Please, please, let all of us be okay.

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Once at the base, we checked around to see if anyone else was staying there through the night. Not even Kenny was around, though, so we figured he was probably out at Red’s… either that or taking stock of the town as Mysterion. Probably both, knowing Kenny. He couldn’t leave either alone for a minute.

I helped Ike unpack, and unloaded the few bathroom essentials I’d brought, and was just wondering what the hell was next when Ike passed right out asleep. It wasn’t very late, but I couldn’t blame him for being exhausted. It was probably better that he’d fallen asleep that early, to be honest. God knows I had plenty of my own stress I needed to work through.

So I grabbed Stan, and—as neither of us had thought for a second to take off our damn coats or boots—walked briskly outside to the training field, where the mid-construction Gate portal loomed over everything. No mist. No fucking mist at all, not that I could see. An insultingly clear night. And my parents had lost their minds all the same, in a random afternoon attack.

“Kyle, what—“ Stan started, at the very same second I bent over myself and screamed into my hands. “Kyle!” he yelped, setting his hands quickly on my shoulders; his strong grip encouraged me to straighten my back, just a little. But, fuck, it was hard to stay standing.
I can’t do this!” I cried out, completely overflowing. I stood completely and grabbed Stan in for a desperate, aggressive hug, my fingers digging into his back as if to convince me just that much more that, yes, he was there, yes, I had something solid to cling to. Even though my mind was just this vortex of illogical—shit. Just shit. Just, everything collapsing and forcing me into this head of household role that I was just supposed to up and accept. No. No. Fuck. No, I was the Human Kite. That first. That first, but—still… Goddammit, my head was just swimming. Barely keeping afloat.

“Kyle, Kyle, it’s okay,” Stan tried, speaking gently. Fuck, he was warm.

“I can’t do this, Stan, I can’t do this!” I shouted. “I can’t fucking—do you know what that means, what that thing I just signed said?!?”

“Ssh, Kyle, I know—“

“I can’t raise Ike on my own, Stan, I’m sixteen years old!”

“Your parents can come back,” he said reassuringly. He started stroking my back calmly, keeping a steady pattern. “They can, okay? I know it. Your parents, my dad, we’ll get them back.”

I loved and appreciated his words, and the deep, deep sentiment with which he spoke them, but I still needed a moment to vent and be irrational. “I wanted my mother off my back, but I didn’t want this!” I screamed. The second my tone raised, Stan pulled me in closer, so my words muffled into his jacket. I shook my head and repeated, “I can’t do this…”

“Yes, you can,” Stan assured me. “Breathe, dude. Breathe. I know it sucks. I know it sucks. But you helped me with this, too, remember? It sucks right now, but you can pull through it. You’re strong enough. Okay?”

“I guess…” I said, my words coming out rushed and frantic. “I guess. I don’t know. I—ugh, fuck!” I shouted, when I heard the rustling of the wristbands we were both still wearing. I stood back and snapped mine off, then grabbed at Stan’s arm and yanked his off as well.

I tossed them both far off to the side, my head and stomach both these boiling pits of rage as I remembered what it was like walking through those awful, awful halls in the asylum. “Shit!” I screamed.

“What?”

“My parents are in the fucking mental ward, Stan!” I erupted, at the end of my rope. “So’s your dad, so’s like half the fucking town! Bebe, Jimmy and his parents, Tweek… Ike’s friend, Filmore, did you know that?! Oh, and that CULT?” I kept rambling, hitting a fist against Stan’s shoulder just to vent out my frustration. He took it, but caught my hand after a second to try to get me to calm down. “That fucking Cult! They tried to kill Ike. They—they tried to kill Ike!” I remembered. “They did kill you!” My head started buzzing, and a pressure wave fell over me as I almost involuntarily played back that scene once again. “They killed you, Stan, you were gone! I just—I watched you just—“

“Kyle,” he said firmly, locking his arms around me. “Kyle, stop,” he coaxed, holding my head against him. “Stop. Shh, stop, stop, you’ve gotta calm down a little, Kyle, please, come on…”

“What if they win, Stan?!” I burst. My head was going absolutely haywire. Like my emotions were just draining out every ounce of confidence I’d had.

“Don’t think about that,” he tried, keeping his voice calm. I don’t know how he did it. Then
again, I could do the same for him; it was just what I needed to hear right now. He started calmly stroking my back, and exaggerated his breathing so that I’d match his more controlled pattern.

“Is it so much to just ask for one normal day?” I asked numbly. “Just one more normal Goddamn day before the whole fucking world gets flung into chaos?”

“We’ll get it back,” Stan assured me, his voice low and comforting, reverberating through me. He brushed back my hair with soothing, even strokes, and left a kiss above my ear. “We’ll go to R’lyeh, Kyle, and we’ll get it back.”

At that point, I realized I was crying. And I repeat: I am a really messy crier. I grabbed onto the material of Stan’s jacket, and buried my face into the warm crook of his shoulder, and just bawled out all of my anxieties. I really fucking hate crying, but I was on such mental overload, I couldn’t help it. There were only a few truths I was able to hold onto, and, damn it all, I was going to cling like hell to every one of them.

He’d told me that, without me, he’d go crazy. The same was true for me. Hold on to what you love, that was pretty much the general feeling for everyone in the League now. Hold on to what you have left. Love while you can. None of us had much left. I had Ike, I had my little brother, and I was going to make damn sure not a single thing happened to him. I’d take care of him and show him familial love in our parents’ absence. I’d do all I could to keep him far from madness, far from any threat at all.

And then I had Stan. Realizing I loved him had freed something in me. I was stronger. I had more focus. I had more drive. He was right there, always ready to hold me when I slipped into a moment of weakness, always telling me everything would be all right, even when we both questioned whether that was actually true. He was right there, at that moment, holding me and letting me cry like a six-year-old, so stressed and overwhelmed, I didn’t know which way was up. He’d seen me at my absolute weakest, and he’d stayed right through. And I absolutely loved him for that.

It took a few minutes, but I finally, slowly began to regain my calm. I made my breaths deeper and bolder, and swallowed down my insecurities. This wasn’t a time for me to be feeling that way. I had to hold on. Take charge. Be in control of myself, my actions. There was too much I had to take care of. Too much I had to do. A moment of weakness like this was necessary to help me see that, but it needed, now, to pass.

“You all right?” Stan asked me, when I stood straight back, lifted my head, and drew in a long, confident breath.

“Yeah,” I nodded, to convince myself more than anything. “Thanks for… you know, for…”

“No problem,” he said. He stroked my back a couple of times, to make sure I was holding up all right, then led me back inside.

I checked in on Ike, glad that he was still sleeping fine, then retreated with Stan to my room, where I blankly started going through the motions of putting things away. I hardly even felt a sense of accomplishment in doing that busy work, and doubt crept up on me again as I kept moving just for the sake of doing something. I realized, too—for as long as we’d be here before heading to R’lyeh, that little building was ‘home.’ The small size of that room seemed to be a kick in the face reminder of how life was downsizing. For everyone.

As I busied myself, Stan took a seat on my bed. At times, he watched me, at others he stared down at his hands. It didn’t take long, though, for him to finally look over at me and say, “Kyle.
Stop.”

“Stop what?” I wondered, re-folding a shirt I’d just shoved into a drawer in the small chest the room had been stocked with.

“You’re way too worked up,” he warned me. “I’ve seen you fold that like four times.”

I let out a harsh sigh, shoved the shirt back in the drawer, and turned toward him, taking in his concerned expression. “Oh,” I realized, when his gaze didn’t ease up. “Oh, no—no, I’m not… Stan, I’m not going crazy. Trust me, I’m not.”

“I trust you,” he said, “I trust you, but you’ve gotta slow down.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Come here.” He set a hand down beside him, but I couldn’t move. He ticked his head down to his hand, and when I realized that, yeah, standing was just going to keep me nervous, I walked over and sat down beside him.

“Now what?” I wondered. Jesus, wasn’t that the statement of the fucking month.

“Okay,” said Stan, splaying his hands out in front of him and catching my gaze to help keep me calm. “Okay, just… deep breath, Kyle, okay?” I did as he asked; I took in a deep, sweet breath as he lifted his hands up a bit, then let it out as he pushed his hands back down toward the floor. It did help me relax somewhat, but I was still all nerves, I walked over and sat down beside him.

“Now what?” I wondered. Jesus, wasn’t that the statement of the fucking month.

Okay,” said Stan, splaying his hands out in front of him and catching my gaze to help keep me calm. “Okay, just… deep breath, Kyle, okay?” I did as he asked; I took in a deep, sweet breath as he lifted his hands up a bit, then let it out as he pushed his hands back down toward the floor. It did help me relax somewhat, but I was still all nerves. I mean, really—End Time meant… meant end. The freaking… end. Of everything. We could swear protection all we wanted, but that shit was fucking scary. “Okay,” Stan repeated. “So… feel a little better?” I nodded. “Okay. So, now, what can I do?” he asked me.

“What?”

“What can I do?” he asked again, smiling a little. “What can I do right now, Kyle, to make things better? Or, um… well, what do you want? There we go. What is it you really want to do right now?”

“I…” I started. I choked on the thought. There were a lot of things I wanted. Resumed normalcy, for one, but that was a long way off. Answers as to how the hell I was going to raise my brother on my own if my parents couldn’t be cured. Fearlessness. I doubted that anyone could be truly, completely fearless, but still, I could wish. But at the moment—no, all I wanted was exactly what Stan had already started. Time to breathe. I wanted time to re-evaluate. I appreciated Stan asking me what I wanted, since that was kind of something I always sort of put aside. I did a lot for other people, and I pushed myself to make sure others were safe and happy, but around all that, I rarely took the time to step back and ask myself exactly that. What I wanted. What was best for me. Yes, what was best for me included the safety of the people I cared about, which I’d try my hardest to provide, but I did need some time to just… relax my brain a little.

“I wanna take a shower,” I finally sighed out.

“All right,” Stan grinned. “Then, there you go. Go for it.”

“I want you to come with me,” I added at the last second. My words rushed together, thanks again to nerves, but I literally could not think of how I’d function or what crazy psychic tantrum I might accidentally start if he was so much as a room away from me.

“Are you serious?” he wondered, giving me a look I couldn’t quite define.
“Just come on,” I urged. I hauled him up by the arm and kept hold of his wrist as I led the way down the hall toward the bathroom.

It was all out of that need to not be alone. I couldn’t pinpoint what I wanted, but I could pinpoint what I didn’t want, and that was being left alone. That had been my fear since Halloween. "This isn’t the end," we kept on saying to each other. "This isn’t the end." Well, the more we said it, the more I think both of us really started to fear that it was. Which meant that every breath we drew, every step we took—that could be the very last, before complete, lonely darkness. Which meant that every single thing we were capable of was very literally now or never.

I brought a clean pair of boxers and pajama pants with me, and kept them folded in the corner of the bathroom. After I stepped in, Stan lowered the lid to the toilet seat, which sat just about a foot away from the bath and shower, sat down, and stayed right there in the room as I started talking out all of my worries again. It was all stuff Stan knew, and some things I’d already said, but it felt good to let it all just ramble out of me again.

The shower was definitely relaxing, and helped to kind of set up a transitional barrier between the first part of that night and the rest. The things I chose to talk out to Stan switched from what had happened to my parents to what our League duties were now. “Stan?” I wondered as I rinsed shampoo out of my hair.

“Yeah?” he asked from the other side of the curtain.

“That portal’s gonna be done soon, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what Kenny says.”

“Well, good. Kenny hasn’t been looking too great.”

“We’re all losing sleep,” Stan pointed out. “I hope we get time to rest up before we leave. Kenny especially, dude, you’re right.”

“Do you think we’re ready?” I ventured to ask.

“Huh?”

“Like, to go to R’lyeh. D’you think we’re all ready?”

“We’re at least close,” said Stan. “We’re way more prepared than we would’ve been a month ago.” Neither of us said it, but it was understood, though, that a month ago, we would’ve at least still had Cartman on the team, to wrangle Cthulhu. None of us wanted Bradley back, except maybe Clyde, who was all about adding all the manpower we could to the team before we left, and Mint-Berry Crunch did banish Cthulhu last time. We just didn’t want to have to call in the wild card.

“Well, I guess we’ll all just have to do the best we can do,” I said. I let the warm, soothing water run down over me a while longer, then squeezed off the faucets and heaved a sigh. “Will you hand me that towel?” I asked Stan, opening the curtain just enough to glance over at him and hold a hand out for the object.

“Even though you walked in naked like ten minutes ago?” he teased me.

“Just give me the towel, Stan,” I asked again, rolling my eyes a little, glad we could have a slightly lighthearted moment in the midst of everything.

Stan laughed a bit and handed the clean white towel in to me. I closed the curtain again to
towel off, somehow hyperaware of the feeling of the cotton against my skin. As if I was telling myself to pay attention to every single tiny thing, every small moment like this, something as simple as dabbing that towel into my hair or against my face, as simple as the scent of the fabric softener, as simple as the cold air that hit my back after that long, hot shower. As if knowing little things like that really couldn’t last forever.

I don’t know why I bothered with the trivial actions that usually follow a shower. I got out silently, the towel wrapped around my waist until I discarded it to pull on the boxers and flannel pants I’d brought in with me. After hanging the towel on its proper hook, I took out the hairdryer I’d brought (primarily since I’d’ve felt weird using Wendy’s) and sent a few jets of hot air into my hair, paying attention to the angles so the waves I’d pressed out a couple days before would hold, and I wouldn’t have to re-style it that night. All of that was so trivial. All of that was routine. A routine I guess I had to hold onto as long as I could.

As I was finishing up, Stan stood, and walked up behind me. I watched him in the mirror as he stroked back my hair with his right hand, felt his fingers brush soothingly through; his left hand followed my left arm down, until he took a light hold of that hand from behind. It was a complete indulgence, watching his every move in the mirror, from the way his eyes slid closed when he kissed my hair, to the way he angled his head when he leaned down to leave another kiss on my shoulder. He moved his right hand, then, light as a breath of air, down against my neck. The force of that hand grew stronger, grasped tighter, as he moved it further still, down my back, down along my ribs.

A surge bolted up through me when his fingers grazed my hip bones, and I turned, grabbed his face in my hands, and pulled him in for a long, deep, unwavering kiss. Stan stepped back a little from the force of my action, but grabbed hold of me again as soon as he returned that kiss; his hands on my waist, kneading my skin as we developed our rhythm. I moved forward as he moved back, until his back was against the wall, where he pulled me in closer, where I took up his challenge and pushed my body against his, dropping my hands and clinging tightly instead to the front of his shirt, where I felt his rapid heartbeat. I listened to every one of Stan’s breaths as we moved into another kiss, and another—each and every one strong, brilliant, protective. Just that little extra push we needed to keep going.

My mind was cleared of everything else. My worries could wait for tomorrow.

Thank God I had him. Thank God I had something to cling to.

My hands found the edge of his shirt, and I nudged them up underneath it, splaying my fingers against his warm, bare skin, keeping us connected, keeping our rhythm, keeping him so close I knew I wouldn’t lose him.

With a mutual nod against each other, Stan kissed my cheek, and the corner of my eye, and took hold of my arms—we must have moved, but everything was such a blur; within moments, he’d led me back to my small room, where I closed the door and yanked him in, just to make sure we weren’t about to stop what we’d started.

It hadn’t felt right to start before, but that night, everything fell into place. I wanted him. I wanted to connect with him. I was fighting for him, after all. We needed each other; needed to make this added, solid promise. We moved together, silent, fluid, warm, until I felt my leg knock into the edge of my bed.

Slowly, his hands still holding my waist, Stan lowered himself to be seated on the mattress, and I guided him down; lips locked, skin tingling, hearts like hummingbirds, my fists tightened around the material of his shirt and I yanked them up, helping him out of the garment which then fell negligently aside as I lay him down on his back over the sheets. My hand lay flat on his chest, until
Stan took hold of my arm and pulled me down to him again, then wound one hand up into my hair. The calming combing of his fingers on my scalp sent my mind reeling and rushing, and I took this single moment to study him, to sit back and admire all that he was and all that this meant. All that we could bring to each other, even at the very end of the whole Goddamn world.


His hands slid down from my waist, smoothly, nudging down with them the couple simple things I’d decided to wear, and his eyes caught mine with a question. I knew. I didn’t entirely have the answer, but I knew. I knew his nerves; I felt them, too. But his breath on mine, his taste, his incredible, incredible warmth—everything he had, and everything he was instilled in me something that only he could provide: security. Plain and simple. That’s what he always had been; what he always would be. The symbol of security.

Security that was strong enough to melt off most anxieties about the milestone we knew we’d reached. We simply had to embrace what was happening now, this moment, this second, this one frame of time. Learn from each other, as we’d been doing all along, and just create.

Just be. And just create.

And so it moved forward. And so we sealed ourselves as more than we’d ever been. And so my admiration was lifted to new heights, each action a challenge to carry things still onward.

He was gorgeous. He was fucking gorgeous and he was fucking incredible and he was mine. My net, my barrier, my solid ground, my constant—my constant, the one thing I knew, just... knew I could rely on in this world, no matter what happened to all the rest of it. No matter what happened to anything else, anyone else, any other thing affected by space and time... I just... had... this.

And this was beautiful.

My guard built back up. Because hell—I had this. I had... everything. I had to hold on to everything. Guard it, guard him, and therefore guard myself and whatever else I’d ever loved.

By the time we collapsed against each other, the world still hadn’t ended, and so I pressed back up against him, holding his face in my hands, pressing my forehead to his, stabilizing this brilliant new connection, this new bookmark, embracing this new chapter we’d begun to write on the slates of our lives, embracing all that we could ever be. The sheets clung to me by beads of sweat; Stan clung to me in desperation and pure, radiant love; I clung to him and to my renewed goals, to my life, to my world, to my world, and to the actions, the deeds, the steps I needed to take, the ground I had to cross. For him. For me. For everything.

The words I love you were, from both of us, whispered out into the dark room; vocalized, but hardly necessary, because—we just... knew. We knew what we had. We knew what was there. And we knew precisely what needed to happen in order to keep things as they were. We knew exactly where we needed to go, and what had to be done, to ensure that this world, even just this little sphere of ours, would survive.

After that night, we both had a renewed sense of purpose.

Waking up beside him, I held him in a new light. My friend, my life, my lover.

Because of him, I had all the reason I needed to keep my head up, to keep moving. I’d faltered, the day before. Not anymore. No more lack of focus. No more doubting myself or my
abilities. No more wishing—no, I had to take things into my own hands. And I would. I had all the support I needed. I was many things, and only now could I accept the responsibility to become all of them.

Because now, I could take on the world.

— — —

Stan

Kyle and I didn’t go to school the day after his parents were admitted into the asylum. I woke before he did, that morning, but lay still so I wouldn’t disturb him. Exhausted, he woke up about an hour after I had, around nine o’clock, according to the analog clock on the wall. We lay there in silence for another minute or two, just holding onto a moment together as long as we could, pressed close together. Holding on to everything we had left.

He moved first, bringing up his right hand and brushing the backs of his fingers across my cheek; a calm, easy motion, which woke me up a little more, and filled me with a bit of confidence for the day. His eyes held mine for a few seconds, then closed, and he leaned in to kiss my neck. After another moment, he drew me in for a tight embrace, then lay his head back on the pillow. His eyes were misty, but full of faith in how things would be from that day on. We still had a lot of ground to cross, a lot of obstacles to overcome, but we’d make it. We weren’t about to just let things stop here.

“Hey, Stan…?” he said, barely vocally, inflecting to make his words a question at the last second.

“Hey,” I said, stroking his back, “what’s up?”


“Hi,” I returned, unable to stop myself from laughing just a little. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just… not awake. Sorry.”

“Sorry?” I repeated, mocking the Canadian intonation he’d slipped into.

“Oh, my God, shut up.”

“Sorry,” I said again, this time meaning it sincerely. I worked my left hand up into the tousled mess Kyle’s hair had become, and as soon as I started petting, he grabbed me in for a full kiss. I held him tightly and returned it, giving him all I had, all the protection I could provide, everything that had been building up in me for so long. When I’d first started figuring things through for myself, just touching on little questions that turned out to be truths, I hadn’t even imagined that having a relationship like this was even possible. But now it was the purest and sanest part of my life, so far into the mixed-up time we were all pushing through.

Kyle pulled back, lay his hand on my neck, and closed his eyes. “Five more minutes,” he requested.

“Sure.”
Five more minutes hidden away from the horrors of the real world, wrapped instead in something—still very perfectly real, just not something we’d really have the time or ability to enjoy again for a very long time. I’d take it. Five minutes, ten minutes; shit, I wanted it to go on longer. More time to keep building and learning, to keep figuring out the life we’d essentially just made clear that we wanted to share. But that had to wait. Things like that had to wait, and we both knew it.

The world was in fucking jeopardy and we knew it.

So we took just that, just five minutes, five minutes to be selfish and just stay innocent and connected and unaffected by anything else… and then we were up and showered and dressed and forcing each other to eat breakfast, even though neither of us was hungry. Kyle started stressing out when he discovered a note from Ike stating that he had indeed decided to go to school that morning, and had found Token for a ride. After checking his phone, Kyle found a text from his brother as well, which basically admitted that the only way he could keep his head was to sit in school and be lectured to. That made sense, for Ike. Most of his friends were still fine, and he still had Flora, which was fantastic for him. The kid was doing his best to hold on and contribute as much as he could.

Token and Wendy were pretty much the only ones of us going to school anymore, I realized, especially after Kyle and I talked it out a bit more. We weren’t going anymore. We decided that day that we’d just stop. Life was the League, now. Kyle was the Human Kite and I was Toolshed. Interchangeably. From that morning on. Until the end. That was the sum of our breakfast conversation, which was a lot more colorful than breakfast itself, which otherwise just consisted of lightly buttered toast and additional conversation about Kyle’s nerves in regards to his parents.

I texted a hello to my sister, basically just to let her and Mom know I’d made it through another day, and I think watching me do that was what got Kyle all nervous about his own family again. So far, we were the only ones whose parents were down. Even Kenny’s parents were still fine… but I wondered how much of that had to do with their Cult connection. They pissed Kenny off, we all knew that much, for never revealing whether or not they knew anything about his death and rebirth cycle. Something told me we’d find out soon enough, though.

Kyle was just getting down about the whole thing again when, speak of the devil, Kenny wandered in from outside. I knew it was him just from the forceful way the door opened and closed. He paused only briefly, just in the cloakroom, I guessed, before wandering into the kitchen. I know even he’d pardon the expression, but he looked like hell. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days. His unruly blonde hair was clean but mottled like crazy, his eyes didn’t look very focused, and, worst of all, he looked paler. I’d caught him coughing a bit recently, but we’d been doing a lot of work, and in fucking cold temperatures, too. But still. Kenny had died of muscular distrophy before, and I remembered, now, how awful I’d taken that, as a kid. He’d been coughing for days before he was finally hospitalized. We couldn’t fucking lose Kenny now. Well, I mean, not ever. Not as a friend, not as Mysterion, just… no. We could not lose Kenny. But something was telling me that cough wasn’t just from a common cold. It had to do with his link to R’lyeh.

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Even though he looked pretty sick, Kenny kept his head up, and made himself smile when he walked in and saw us.

“Hey, guys,” Kenny said in greeting, pulling out a chair for himself and sliding in across the table from us. “What’s up? Kyle, dude, you okay?”

Kyle attempted a nod, even if that wasn’t how he really wanted to respond, and said on a broken tone, “My parents went. Both at once.”
“Oh…” said Kenny, understanding. He gave me a quick glance for confirmation, and I was probably already displaying all he needed to know. “Oh, shit, man, I’m sorry.”

“It’s… it’s okay, it’s okay,” Kyle tried to pass it off. “I just… it’s just really hard to think about what’s next, you know?”

“Well… honestly,” said Kenny, looking at me again, probably just so he knew he’d be directing his words directly at someone, “the portal’s almost done, guys. I, uh… maybe this is selfish, but I kinda want to wait till after Valentine’s Day. Promised Red I’d…”

“No, Kenny, go,” I encouraged him. Kyle nodded, as well. “Dude, be with your girlfriend while you can be with your girlfriend. How’s she doing, anyway?”

“She’s great,” Kenny answered, sounding slightly distant. “I was just with her last night. Now she’s working on that safehouse. She—“ Kenny was cut off quickly by his own coughing fit. He held up one index finger to indicate that he still had a thought in him, and coughed into the elbow of his other arm. “Shit…” I heard him gasp out in between coughs.

Thinking quickly, I stood, and Kyle even pushed me a little when he rose himself; while he went directly to Kenny, I first grabbed open the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water (we’d switched to bottled exclusively once Clyde had brought up the possibility that the town water might be contaminated… with what, we didn’t know, but we didn’t want to risk anything). I yanked the top off of the water bottle and set it down in front of Kenny, who took it up and swigged down about a third of it while Kyle kept a hand on his back, ready to provide any extra assistance he might need.

“Dude… Kenny, breathe, man, you okay?” I said, leaning against the table.

Kenny nodded into the water bottle before taking one last gulp and setting it down onto the table with a sigh. “Thanks, man, I needed that,” he said.

“Stop working so hard if you’re sick,” Kyle suggested.

“I’m not sick,” Kenny protested, shaking his head. “Guys, honestly, I’m not sick. I feel like shit, but I’m not sick. I don’t think.”

“You about coughed up a lung, Kenny,” I said. “You’re sick.”

“No,” he growled, leaning forward and holding his head in his hands, “I’m not. I can’t afford to be. This is bullshit. I’m not dealing with that.”

“Dude, have you slept?” Kyle wondered. Kenny just groaned. “Okay, I’m gonna play the annoying friend card and tell you to get some fucking sleep today, then.”

“There’s too much to do,” Kenny said firmly.

“Okay, what?” I asked. “If it’s busy work, let me and Kyle do it, and we’ll get the other guys on board when they get here. You take a fucking nap or something.”

Kenny sighed, then turned to look at me. “You feeling okay?” he asked me.

“Where’d that come from?” I wondered.

“R’lyeh,” Kenny answered flatly. He gestured to where my bullet scar was, and repeated, “Are you feeling okay?”
“Oh. Yeah,” I said, “I mean, it’s not too uncomfortable.”

Kenny shook his head. “Take care of your mind, Stan,” he warned. “You’ve seen R’lyeh. The closer we get to being there—“

“I’m not going to go crazy,” I said firmly.

“You’d better not,” said Kenny. “Same goes for you,” he added, looking at Kyle.

“Ohay,” Kyle promised. “Now you go lie down before I knock you out. You really don’t look so good.”

“It’s just because of that book,” Kenny shrugged, standing. “It’ll only be a little bit longer. I’m not gonna get sick or die between now and us leaving. I guess, though,” he added, finally showing something resembling a smile, “if you guys could, like, I dunno, clean up a little, see if we’ve missed anything, that’d be great.”

In unison, Kyle and I responded, “We’re on it.”

A more genuine grin crept up on Kenny’s face as he said, “You guys are fucking awesome.” Then, catching us by surprise, he yanked us both in for a quick, tight hug. “Thanks for everything.”

It wasn’t until later, after we’d finally convinced Kenny to go fucking lie down and give himself time to rest, that I realized his thanks sounded almost final. Like he was anticipating something momentous, and not necessarily anything good. Like he knew—and was, in his own way, letting us know—that his next death could very well be his last, and that it could come at any moment.

But I hadn’t chosen the name Shadow League at random. We were behind him all the way. We were his League. And we sure as hell weren’t going to sit back and let our leader die.

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The world around us was collapsing. And in the midst of it all, in this one building on one end of an afflicted town, somehow, all of us were managing to discover ourselves. Our potentials. We were being driven to the absolute ends of our ropes, pushed far past our limits, but for the good of everything, we had to keep going. It had been coming to this for a while. Life sped up, life as we knew it seemed to be getting pushed further and further away. Happiness, hell, normalcy, was something we couldn’t just look for and hope to find, no—we had to fight for it.

As I looked around at what everyone was bringing to the table, now, too, I couldn’t help but feel a little overwhelmed. Or maybe even underprepared. Clyde—holy shit, that’s all I can say. That guy did not quit. I couldn’t blame him. He’d shot his own girlfriend unconscious, and it was a wonder he was mentally holding on himself. Everyone… everyone seemed to have bigger and better tricks up their sleeves they could bring with them to R’lyeh, that they could perfect by the day.

Other than my knowledge of the R’lyeh landscape, I wasn’t sure what else I had to offer. And I was getting nervous about it. It was a stupid time to get nervous about anything, but I couldn’t help it; I just get that way.

I felt confident. I’ll say that much. I felt confident with what I had. I was fucking destructive with that sledgehammer, and a dead shot with my drill guns. Plus, close-hand combat? I was one of the best. Kenny kept assuring me so, at least, but I still felt… not quite complete. I mean, this was R’lyeh we were talking about. Yes, I had a lot I could do, and yes, my dual attacks with Kyle were fucking deadly, but when Kyle alone was such an unstoppable force… how could I
Not to mention Kenny. Clyde and I even talked it out at one point after a target practice… we were both pushing ourselves pretty hard, but we had to agree that with Kenny and Kyle’s abilities, the rest of us were almost just as good as lookouts and backup. Oh, we knew that wasn’t true, but being on a team with two guys who had actual supernatural abilities… we were kind of bound to feel intimidated.

Now, okay, no, Kyle’s psychic prowess didn’t bother me much… and in fact, I encouraged him to do everything he could; helped him practiced, helped him stay focused. It took me until really seeing it to believe it myself, and then I knew that all I wanted to do was help him out with discovering each and every level of his potential.

I just had to figure out where my own potential was.

I mean, I was good, I’m not down-talking myself, I just wanted there to be one extra thing I could bring to the final fight. The closer we got to completing that Gate portal, the more I felt it. Almost everyone I knew was either in the League or in the asylum, and that was—really not okay. It had become a fact of life that South Park wasn’t a safe place anymore, and that it was just expected that people would drop and go insane, but I didn’t want that to be reality anymore. I wanted—we all wanted—that old, ridiculous town back. With all its faults and everything, we didn’t care.

So—what could I do to step up my game?

Eventually, the answer just came to me. It was while we were waiting for Token, Wendy an Ike to get back from school, waiting to meet up and check in, while Kyle and I were in separate parts of the building, doing a massive clean-up, as Kenny had requested, in order to find any notes or ideas we may not have looked at in a while, in case there was anything else we needed to touch upon before leaving. And that was where I found my solution.

Buried under stacks of notes in my personal room, I discovered something I’d been stashing since summer. (I still hold that I don’t really have a hoarding problem…) A catalogue. At Home Depot, Gary Harrison—my ‘in’ as Toolshed—would often allow me glimpses of the next year’s models of certain tools that he was able (and, he said, without breaking any rules or Commandments) to supply me with ahead of time. Well, as long as the store was still open, I figured I’d glance through the inventory, to see if there was anything new that I could benefit from adding to my arsenal.

I sat down on my bed and started flipping through, glad to give my head a little break. Man, I really hadn’t done anything like this in a while, but once I started, I was engrossed.

I’d just made a pretty interesting discovery in the catalogue when I heard a knock at my open door. When I glanced up, Kyle was leaning against the doorframe, watching me with bright, careful eyes. “Hey,” I said, “what’s up?”

“Not much,” he shrugged. Then, with a little side-grin, he added, “You lose track of time?”

“Huh?” I yelped, setting down the catalogue in a panic. “What time is it? Shit! Where’m I supposed to be?”

“Don’t worry about it, Stan,” Kyle laughed. He stepped in, closed the door gently behind him, and walked over to sit down beside me. “We’ve got another ten minutes before Kenny wants to have that meeting.”
“Oh, nice,” I said, glad I hadn’t completely spaced. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” Kyle set a hand on my back, and slowly started a light, soothing, almost circular motion in the spot between my shoulderblades, then leaned against me and asked, “What were you reading?”

“Hmm? Oh,” I said, picking up the catalogue again. “Boring Toolshed stuff.”

“Woah, no way—let me see that!” Kyle grinned, opening the cover with his free hand. “Are you gonna get something new?”

“I was thinking it wouldn’t hurt,” I admitted.

“Nice,” Kyle complimented me. “I’m psyched to see it.”

“I figure I’ll head over tonight,” I said, “if you wanna come with.”

“Kite and Toolshed, though, right?”

“Right.”

“Sure. We really shouldn’t be going out alone anymore.”

“Even though Kenny always does,” I laughed.

“Dude, I’m starting to think Kenny isn’t scared of anything,” said Kyle. And now that the thought was out there, neither of us could let it go. “D’you think?” Kyle asked, his tone much, much softer.

“What?”

“That Kenny isn’t scared of anything.”

“I don’t know,” I said, realizing the truth of that statement as I said it. I set the catalogue down again as Kyle wrapped his arms around me, and rested his head on my shoulder. Hoping to keep us both as positive and reassured as possible, I set a hand over his arm, closing my fingers around the cotton twill of his loose sweatshirt. “I mean,” I started to speculate, “I’m sure he’s scared for, like, Red, y’know, and the safety of the town. But, yeah, dude, he’s just… really confident, isn’t he?”

“D’you think he’s afraid of death?” Kyle wondered.

I found myself staring at the floor, remembering those six days in R’lyeh. I could barely even call that being ‘dead,’ I realized. Kenny had died plenty of times, sure, but one thing he’d never addressed was the end. The very end. If he had one.

Or if this was it.

“I mean, think about it,” Kyle went on. “He’s sacrificed himself a bunch of times, he’s always taken his Mysterion work so seriously…”

“Maybe cuz he knows he’ll be back…?” I tried, doubting the words as I spoke them.

“I don’t know,” said Kyle, speaking for both of us. “I think that’s just who Kenny is.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.
Kyle nestled closer, and I bowed my head as both of us took a moment of silent reverence to reflect. To reflect on our own lives, on the choices we’d all made, that got us this far, on how much we were willing to risk, and how highly we valued the lives we had. And on Kenny—on the reason for everything; I realized he was kind of the glue that held us all together, not just as a League, but as friends. Hell, without the League, none of us would be where we were. We may not have ended up as tight. Without the background we’d had, knowing Kenny the way we did, who’s to say Kyle and I wouldn’t have let a lifetime go by before we’d realized anything? Everything I had, that any of us had… relationships, ideals, morals, outlooks—just about all of it could, in some way, be traced right back to Kenny. Every last one of us owed him so much, even just as thanks for teaching us the best things about ourselves, and the best parts of life. God damn, that guy deserved to live.

“Hey, Stan?” said Kyle, kissing my cheek and resting his head on mine.

“Hmm?”

“I’m glad we did this.”

“What?” I wondered, just now coming fully out of my thoughts.

“Oh, uh, any of this, now I think of it. I’m glad we’re a part of the League.” Another kiss on the cheek, and he added, “I’m glad we’re together.”

I turned my head to face him, and pressed a hand to his cheek as I guided him into a kiss—that warm promise of protection that had become inherently ours. “So am I,” I told him on a breath when I drew back.

Kyle smiled—almost sadly, and I understood why—and touched the tip of his nose to mine, just a quick, sweet nudge before saying, “We should, um… we should probably head to the meeting.”

The first one to speak at the meeting was Ike. Something about an upbringing with Kyle, I guess, was that Ike sometimes also had the tendency to ramble when he was nervous. And knowing that both of his parents were institutionalized was a pretty fucking good reason for him to not be feeling one hundred percent. He was the one to bring up the idea that we all keep our wires on at all times—even Kenny on his visits to Red, even Clyde and Wendy when they left the premises to see their parents—and that we put tracking devices on the wires as well, so that we didn’t have to go through the trouble of tracking cell phone calls anymore to figure out where anyone was.

Then, however, Ike brought up the kicker to the whole situation.

“Guys,” he said, “school’s closed.”

“What?” Clyde wondered, lifting his head. He’d been picking at a spot on the table obsessively, his eyes down, probably focused on the last time he’d seen his girlfriend sane.

“I went to class today,” Ike went on, and his nerves got him a pat on the shoulder from Timmy, “but things got so much worse. Mr. Garrison—you guys remember him?—had a seizure and lost it right in the middle of his lesson.” Everyone at the table exchanged glances. We were, of course, sad to see Garrison go, but subconsciously we were all thinking the same thing… that we were surprised the poor bastard hadn’t gone sooner. “A couple kids in all the grades screamed and went crazy after that. The Goth kid in my class didn’t really react, but I think we need to keep an
eye on him. After Mr. Garrison’s seizure, Principal Victoria started going insane, and it was sort of a chain reaction after that.” His black eyes narrowed, and he continued, “The only teacher left sane at the end of it all was that Cultist, Mr. Adler. He just sat back and watched the whole thing happen, and then casually got on the intercom and announced that schools were closed.”

“Schools plural?” Kenny wondered. “He closed the high school? He can’t do that.”

“Well, he did. But maybe it’s best for school to be out,” said the studious Token. “Face it, guys. Right now, it’s kind of a distraction.”

“Agreed,” Clyde added. Standing to take on his usual authoritative meeting stance, he announced, “If this settles all right with everyone, I’d like to suggest that we all remain here. The less we expose ourselves to what’s going on outside, the better.”

“Unless it is absolutely necessary to leave these grounds, I’m with Clyde,” Kenny said. “Plus… I apologize if any of this was my fault. I mean, it kind of is. I’ve dragged all of you into this crazy, fucked up world that’s really only my problem, and—”

“We’re a team, Kenny,” I reiterated. “We’re your team. We don’t blame you for anything. This is our problem. This involves everyone. This shit was all going to happen, anyway. The only difference is, we’re sticking by you and we’re going to fucking fight it. We’re seeing this whole fucking thing through to the end.”

Kenny nodded. “Sorry. Lapsed, there. Guys, we’re looking at portal completion within a few days,” he said. “Until then, we keep going. If we’re all going to be here all the time, it’s for the best.”

“I want to call my mom and dad and tell them to stay at Red’s safehouse,” Wendy admitted, “but I agree.”

“We’re not at a bigger risk of attack now that my dad’s mayor, are we?” Token wondered.

“We’re always at a big risk of attack,” Clyde pointed out. “But the more we just plain stick together, the better our chances are of beating out whatever comes down at us. Guys, really, today on, it’s the push. We go, and we just fucking get this done.”

“With or without the Coon,” Kenny added. “And totally without,” he went on when Clyde opened his mouth for the suggestion, “Mint-Berry motherfucking Crunch.”

“Agreed,” Kyle said.

“He’d be an extra hand,” Clyde fought.

“He’d be fucking annoying,” Kenny lashed back. “No Bradley. We don’t call him, we pretend we haven’t even been thinking about him.”

“What about Cthulhu?”

“I can beat Cthulhu!” Kenny shouted. He really didn’t look so good when he said that. His eyes were dull, he was completely washed out. But somehow he looked stronger.

“Kenny,” said Henrietta, who had been silent as usual; so silent we’d all forgotten about her presence. It was weird hearing her address anyone by name, especially him, since even out of uniform she usually called him ‘Mysterion.’ We all turned to give the Goth our attention, and she bit the tip of her empty quellazaire and continued, “As the Shadow, are you feeling anything weird
Kenny shook his head. “I don’t feel my best,” he admitted, “but I honestly don’t feel anything off enough to consider myself anything but what I’ve always been. Why? Are you expecting—”

“I don’t know what to expect,” Henrietta admitted. “But I think the closer we get to your birthday, the more you might start feeling maybe a little different.”

“I figured that was a possibility,” Kenny grumbled, “but I’m not gonna allow Cthulhu to control one fucking aspect of my life. Plan stays the same. We go to R’lyeh and we take him down.” I didn’t want him to add anything about himself to that statement, and he didn’t, but I could almost see him thinking it. That killing Cthulhu might also mean—

No, I really didn’t want to think about it.

*Plan stays the same.* We had this. We could do this.

We could end this. Before the End.

When the meeting ended, I cleared a leave that evening with Kenny (who was fine with it only when I said I wasn’t going alone), then spoke to Token for the use of an old pay-as-you-go phone that we kept around in the meeting room. It was something that only we in the League ever used, and only in the event of absolutely needing to use it, just for something non-traceable. Well, I had a service order to call in, I’d decided, so that phone was the only way.

I dialed the number and extension, and a couple rings later, I got through to the very voice I was hoping to hear:

“Powertools and Home Maintenance, this is Gary.”

“Gary,” I said, using the lower tone I always affected for my alter ego, unable to keep myself from grinning a little at my idea, “it’s Toolshed. I’m calling in a new order.”

Just as we’d set up over the phone, I arrived at Home Depot ten minutes prior to the store’s closing time (which these days was quite early, due to curfews, but still dark as hell given the time of year). The Human Kite kept a lookout for unnatural activity from the roof while I waited, drill gun loaded and at the ready, at the service entrance for my oft-visited department. Ten luckily uneventful minutes went by, with Kite calling down the five-minute markers over the wire. A minute after he’d given me ten, the door beside me opened, and out stepped Gary Harrison, smiling as usual, even given recent circumstances.

“You realize you’re saving lives by doing this for me, Gary,” I said after nodding a hello.

“And I’m not yet nineteen!” laughed the ever-optimistic Mormon. “Come on in, you’re gonna love this.”

“Got a partner with me tonight,” I told him, keeping my wire on. “Kite, everything set?”

A second after I’d asked, I heard the rush of the glider behind me and glanced back. “Set a camera for the next fifteen minutes,” Kite announced, standing from the crouched position he’d
landed in. “We’ve still got a view. Hey,” he then said to Gary, ticking his head up in greeting. “I’m here to step up security.”

“Oh, my gosh, well, I’m honored,” said Gary. “Pleasure to meet the Human Kite in person. Now,” he added, stepping back to grant us entrance, “let’s go get you set up to save the world.”

Kite stuck by the door once Gary ushered us in and locked up. Gary always kept the good stuff back by that door, as well as new stock that wasn’t quite ready for shelving. Sometimes he’d have pre-modified drill guns set and customized for me, or little things he knew would help. My screwdrivers dulled every now and then, and Gary would always have a few new options all lined up for me.

I’d given him pretty much the low-down over the phone—how we were preparing to take the fight to the source, and were bent on putting an end to the madness once and for all. So it stood to reason that he had a fresh arsenal all lined up for me. New screwdrivers, a new awl, four packs of extra drill bits and a new gun, all of which I just plain added to my arsenal, rather than replace anything, since I couldn’t be over-prepared. It would still take a lot for me to feel weighted down, too, so I had nothing to worry about in terms of stocking up.

“You’ve outdone yourself,” I complimented him. “What’s the price?”

“Flat, as usual,” said Gary, writing up everything in a binder specific to my purchases as Toolshed. Flat meant he’d stock me up for an even fifty, even though the price tag was at least twice that. It was kind of understood that I was one of the most eligible people in South Park for discounts there. “How’s that sledgehammer holding up?”

“Tried and true,” I answered. “Hasn’t failed me yet.”

“Good to hear,” Gary said with another white grin. “Now… I’ve got something you’re gonna love. This one’s on us. All of us.”

Gary tucked away the binder and drew out of storage an impressive black case, fitted with a strap that would allow me to carry this new item without it being too cumbersome.

“This the one I was thinking about?” I wondered.

Gary set the case down on his service counter, patted it a couple times, and said, beaming proudly, “It’s better.”

With that, he clicked open and lifted the lid of the case, to reveal the most incredible chainsaw I had ever laid eyes on. It was battery-powered—rechargeable, too, with an unobtrusive charger I could keep on me without adding much extra weight. The chainsaw itself was actually pretty fucking beautiful. As a kid, I’d been fascinated by powertools, and that awe had only built as Toolshed.

“The sharpest, most lightweight, and most user-friendly chainsaw on the market,” Gary announced. “What do you think?”

What’d I think? I was gonna give Cthulhu a run for his money, that’s what I was thinking.

The chainsaw was about the length of my arm, and, I discovered when I lifted it out of its case, much lighter, as Gary had said, than I’d expected. The chain was a shining silver, and the base a matte black, boasting on one side—and here, he really had outdone himself—my signature, encircled T.
Oh, hell, yeah, this is what Toolshed was gonna be carrying into battle. No clue what we could be up against, but I was sure whatever it was couldn’t survive very long after a hit from that thing. Kite could be the formidable psychic force, Mysterion could be the destructive wave from the shadows.

I had fucking horsepower.

“Oh, this is fantastic,” I said, feeling myself grin.

“Think that’ll do well for you?” Gary asked.

“To say the very least,” I replied, testing out the hold and weight.

“It’s got a manual starter,” my—let’s face it—weapons technician pointed out, “and a backup automatic one if you’re in a bind. Oh, auto-sharpening chain, too.”

“Jeez, is this thing even real?” I laughed. “You sure you don’t want anything for it?”

“It’s a gift,” Gary insisted. “Just put it to real good use.”

“I appreciate that,” I told him. “You do great work.”

“Thanks.”

As I set the chainsaw back in its case, Gary took off his work apron and wrote something down on a post-it note beside his department computer. He walked me back to the door, and at that point, I saw a bit of remorse in his expression. “Well,” he said, almost guiltily, “this is goodbye, then. I’m glad you caught me now, Toolshed. I’m actually leaving town tonight.”

“You’re what?” I wondered, almost accidentally slipping into my normal tone.

“Well,” Gary shrugged, “my family’s from Salt Lake City, and I’m actually the only one of my siblings still here in South Park, so…”

“Getting out while you have the chance,” Kite observed, when Gary had trailed off.

“Yeah, pretty much. But, hey, it was great working with you. The Shadow League’s getting pretty famous, y’know. Even back home in Utah. My little sister Amanda and her friend Karen really admire you guys.”

“Take care of yourself, then, Gary,” I said, extending my right hand. He took it in a firm handshake as I added, “You’ve been a huge life-saver. Tell your sister and her friend we’ll get things under control.”

“Mysterion’s got us in good formation,” Kite added as Gary stood back. That was primarily, I could tell, to try to wrestle up more information on Karen, so that we could return to Kenny with any news of her, since we both knew he’d appreciate it.

“Mysterion,” Gary reflected with a smile. He looked, actually, pretty sad to go. He and his parents loved South Park, I knew that much. The move back to Salt Lake, however sudden, was more than justifiable, though. “He’s Karen’s favorite. Not that all you guys aren’t awesome, though, am I right?” he added. Still ridiculously cheerful, in spite of everything—I had no clue how he did it. “Best of luck, you guys. I’ll keep you in my prayers.”

And that, coming from him, from the most honestly devout person I knew, really meant a lot.
For all I knew, Gary very well could have been the reason for the miracle that occurred only a few days later.

He very well could have sent that angel…

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Kenny

I hated to admit it, but lacking the Coon at our meetings was a major setback. A few weeks prior, I’d been geared up and ready to kick him out myself, but now that we knew so much more about the Cult, about my curse, and even about Cartman’s link to everything, we were really at a loss. There was no use asking him to come back—we just had to accept that he either would or wouldn’t. If I had to guess, I’d say he was most likely struggling with the fact that lately he almost been showing himself to have a conscience, to have empathy. He’d quit after losing a final stand against Chaos. Hopefully, he’d get his fucking drive back, and son. However the hell that could happen. I wasn’t about to guess. I had my own shit to deal with.

Everyone else, though, was pulling their weight and then some. TupperWear and Marpesia were really stepping it up, running sprints in their armor, and Marpesia created a new, metal, adjustable quarter staff for herself as an additional weapon. She and Toolshed were getting back on better terms, I noticed, and the two of them would sometimes spar, quarter staff to sledgehammer, when Toolshed wasn’t perfecting (still, and with increasingly better results) the ricochet with the Human Kite, or working in ways to incorporate his latest weapon: the chainsaw. I was a little surprised he hadn’t had one before, but at the same time, he was right—we weren’t just fighting other people this time. We were up against creatures of destruction. A little extra horsepower definitely wouldn’t hurt.

Kite was not failing to impress me at every turn. His focus had increased tenfold, and he could now match accuracy with intention every time. His headaches were getting admittedly easier to handle, and I saw him moving several objects at once. He could disassemble objects with his mind, hold objects in midair, and force threats away with a single controlled breath.

“Dude, how do you do it?” I asked him at one point, after he’d deflected a surprise volley of rocks that had fallen from our half-constructed Gate portal.

To that, he grinned, shrugged, and said, “I just had to learn to make it logical.”

Now, of everyone, if anyone wasn’t holding back a bit, it was Clyde. He drilled himself even after the rest of us had stopped for the day or just for a break, constantly sprinting further, setting up more targets for himself, and challenging anyone and everyone to no-holds-barred fistfights. Kyle proved to be his best opponent, since only he could literally stop Clyde if he got carried away, but I admit that I liked the challenge of going up against him, since Clyde’s newfound intensity kept me on my toes.

As for me, nothing too out of the (loosely-termed) ordinary had happened. Yet. I knew something was coming. I’d started feeling a little off, just a little… not all composed—like part of me wanted to be somewhere else. My sleep pattern got fucked up, mainly in that I could barely sleep
anymore. I just couldn’t. Sometimes I’d just lie there awake and stare at nothing. Sometimes I’d hear things, but I always ignored them. Henrietta was convinced that my true power, true potential, whatever that was would fully manifest in R’lyeh. It hit me, when she predicted that, that I had only been to R’lyeh alive once, back in fourth grade, and I hadn’t been there long enough to discover anything else unnatural about myself. Nor had I really known of my Shadow status before. This was certainly sure to be an eventful trip.

Especially when we found ourselves with the added hand of an already on-the-fence member. Late one afternoon, we were just starting in on our routine practice session when out onto the field, stone-faced, strode none other than Craig. Strapped to his back were twin swords—I vaguely remembered him getting into ninja swords at one point when we were kids… he’d bought a katana at the same time I’d first started using shuriken—and on each hip was holstered a sleek black .38 pistol. I probably didn’t want to know where or how he got any of those (because damn, Craig has some scary connections), but I did want to know why all of a sudden he looked just as intent to fight as the rest of us were.

“Craig?” I asked. “Dude, what gives?”

“I’m gonna fight with you guys,” he said simply. I noticed he didn’t say he wanted to. He was going to. Meaning he had to, for some reason.

“Why?” Clyde wondered.

“Look, I’m already helping,” said Craig. “I got you guys books. I kept you guys’ secrets. I set up all that shit back when Stan died. I drive crazy people to the asylum. Now I’m gonna fight. You guys could use me.”

“I, uh,… don’t doubt that,” I said, still dumbfounded. “How are you with those swords?”

Emotionless, Craig offed his hat and dropped it to the ground. Nearby was a line of target dummies; without even scoping out the scene, still just staring right at us, Craig unsheathed his twin swords, backed up three steps, then proceeded to slice the target to his right into thirds. Hardly a beat later, he’d lodged the blade in his right hand back into the target now behind him, keeping the left up as a shield. He kicked down the target he’d just struck down, and with a simple swipe up and back down with both hands, yet a third had been destroyed.

Sheathing the swords again, Craig stood straight up and said, “I’m better when they’re moving.”

I didn’t want to know how he learned to fight like that. I just wanted the guy in the fucking League. Now.

“Holy fuck,” Stan remarked, summing up pretty much everyone’s thoughts as we all stared with a probably stunning array of wide eyes and dropped jaws. Holy fuck was right.

“Dude,” Token added when he was capable of speech again. “I am so glad you’re on our side.”

Craig just shrugged and said, “Yep.”

He participated fully in that session, even going as far as to box it out with Clyde, who, even adding in his recent extra push, almost lost. Almost, but in the end wouldn’t allow himself to. At the end of the session, I pulled Craig aside and said, “Dude. Craig. Honest to God, man, that is some sick shit you can do. Why’ve you been holding out on us?”
“I haven’t,” he said. “It just got personal, that’s all.”

“Oh, shit,” I remarked, holding back my comments.

“I drove someone else to the asylum this morning, Kenny,” he said, still hardly showing any emotion. He spied his chullo hat in the snow nearby and stepped over to reclaim it. He knelt to pick the signature garment up—Craig had always worn a hat like that, I’d noticed. All through grade school, middle school, right up through. He’d go through them, wearing one through till he outgrew it or it became threadbare.

“Who?” I ventured to ask, figuring I’d find out momentarily anyway.

Very delicately—so unlike the Craig I knew—he pulled his hat on and stood. I knew right away that whoever it had been he’d just had to commit, that person was the reason he always had a damn blue chullo. Craig adjusted the fit, then looked at me intently and said, “My sister.”

Instantly, my stomach flipped, and my heart jumped up into my throat. I’d started thinking more about her recently, after my intense talk with Clyde, actually, but only when Craig mentioned his little sister did I begin to truly fear for the safety of my own. Our sisters had been good friends, back when Karen still lived here, before she and I had finally figured out the best way to get her the fuck out of South Park and have the good life she deserved. For all I knew, they’d kept in contact over the past couple years.

I gave Craig my deepest sympathies, but began feeling selfish at the same time, going from wanting to fucking needing to talk to Karen. I’d resorted to texting her, these past couple of years, when calling made us miss each other too much. I tried so hard to keep her in the very back of my mind, knowing she was better off in Utah.

Stan and Kyle had assured me, after checking in with Gary Harrison, whose sisters both went to the same school Karen had ended up at, that she was doing well, but I still wanted to be sure of her safety myself. So, after declaring Craig an official new member of the League (alter ego-less, but we really didn’t care, since he was such a good fighter), I finally gave Karen a call.

Four rings and a click. She hadn’t answered. Fuck. Fuck, fuck. The one thing I thought I could trust to be okay in all this. Fuck. I never should have let her out of my sight, not for a second. (Ugh, I’ve gotta be careful or I’ll sound like that old Captain Hindsight douche.)

Despite her being unavailable, I still got to hear my sister’s voice. “Heeey!” her sweet tone sounded on her voicemail. “this is Karen! I can’t answer right now but I will call you back as soon as I can, ‘kay? Yeah! Bye, now!” Honestly, I couldn’t think of a more positive, upbeat person. I couldn’t help but feel proud of that… I—and Mysterion—had helped my little sister on her path to being a confident, kind young woman… so much so that she was able to give herself a great life far, far from the shithole house I was still stuck in.

Forcing any and all fear from my voice, I began speaking after the beep. “Karen, hey,” I said. “Surprise! It’s Kenny. Haven’t heard from you in a while, sis, just checking in to make sure you’re okay. Uh… South Park’s kinda going to shit, but I’m holding on.” I drew in a deep breath, feeling worse and worse about losing touch by the second. “Hey, uh,” I added, “listen… I haven’t forgotten about you. I just… trust you’ve been okay, and I’m still gonna come back for you. You’ll see. I promise. Take care, Karen. Call me back when you can, ‘kay?”

Wishing there was more to be said, I hung up. Now an entire portion of me would sit and do nothing but wait for her to return my call. It really was awful. Karen and I were so close, even being three years apart. Or, we had been, growing up.
I rarely called Karen anymore simply because it always broke my heart to remember one of my more selfish reasons for encouraging her to get away:

I didn’t want my little sister to watch me die.

One member of the McCormick family deserved to be happy, and as far as I was concerned, that person was her. I’d looked after her since she was a baby. Taking her outside to play when our parents got into violent arguments, coming to her aid as Mysterion whenever she felt sad, bullied or alone.

But that was just the thing. I wanted Mysterion to be her hero. Not Kenny. I chose Mysterion’s image so that anyone could see whatever they wanted in him, be it good or bad. Kyle understood that from the start, hence why he could play the part so well, and why in the back of my mind I was preparing myself to ask him if he’d keep Mysterion alive in the event of my Final Death. And Karen never knew. She had never connected us. If she’d figured it out in recent years or months, I had no way of knowing, since our discussions were so short.

Yes. It broke my heart to remember why I wanted her to leave and pursue a better life. But I knew that it would destroy her so much more if she grew any more attached to me, or found out that I was indeed Mysterion, and had to see me die. I just wanted my baby sister to be happy. And I’d take it, even if it meant she’d have to forget all about me.

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For the love of God, was it so much to ask for a real Valentine’s Day? You know, like a day that I could use to tell my girlfriend how much I appreciated her, a day I could just be with her and listen to her laugh and make love to her till we just fell exhausted against each other. A day like that.

I got to be with her, but it was unlike any other Valentine’s Day most other couples on Earth have ever experienced, let me tell you that. It was actually really fitting that it happened that day, come to think of it. I wasn’t feeling well, for starters. I hadn’t been feeling well, for a very long time. It all had to do with Henrietta’s pact with Yog-Sothoth. I kept feeling the pull, the same way I would in Purgatory, whenever I felt the draw toward the shadow pit that led me to R’lyeh. It was that same spiritual tug. The shadow pits in Purgatory, I easily figured out, were probably mini-shadows set by Cthulhu, so that his true Shadow could always return. To which, I mean, fuck that. I really was feeling uneasy about this whole ‘I’m Cthulhu’s actual Shadow’ thing. Uneasy mostly because I had no idea what that meant for me. Oh, I owned it. I’d accepted it. I just had that one tiny fear that it might consume me.

Just dear God, I kept thinking, please not around my girlfriend. Not on this one day.

We managed to make a decent day of it all the same. I mean, hey, how could we not? Red was up and running that (highly successful) safehouse… she knew exactly how dire the whole situation was. She’d been calling me twice a day, and I tried to see her just as much as I could. On Valentine’s Day, Clyde—poor guy, honest to God—took over construction of the Gate portal, which at this point pretty much meant giving it several looks over to make sure there were no cracks or instabilities, and I spent the day, what felt like it might be the very last day, just as myself. Just Kenny. Just Red’s boyfriend. Or, well, no, no justs about it. That was the life I really wanted.

This was what I was fighting for. There was much, much more, of course, but if I could be selfish about one thing, this was it.

Red’s entire house was safeguarded. Every window covered twice, every door secured with padding and locks. Her father had a freezer in the garage, and her mother had stocked up on canned
and boxed goods, as well as flashlights, matches, first aid and other necessities. I was so fucking proud of all of them, honestly. How could I not be? They were doing their part to save the world.

Red welcomed me into her transformed home with open arms and a warm, comfortingly delicate kiss. On an intake of breath, I lifted her up until her eyes and mine were level, and her toes could barely brush the ground. “Kenny…” she breathed, wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. I shifted to adjust, but held her right there, wishing I didn’t have to let go. Ever. “Thank you so, so much for being here today.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I told her.

Red smiled warmly and nuzzled against me. God, I did not want this part of my life to get taken away. Not this. Please, God, let me cling to this…

I slipped her another deep kiss; Red clung on tightly, and I took a few testing steps away from the door. After I’d traveled with her a ways, Red slowly unlocked her legs from around my waist and I set her down gently onto the floor, only for her to pull me down to her level to keep things moving.

I’d been paying Red a lot of visits, lately, but we hardly ever had time to fool around, or have a quick go, or even just have low-key, intimate moments. We understood that there were things that required our attention, and that we’d have time alone eventually. If I had one fear, though, it was losing her. I didn’t even think about the possibility of her going the way of Bebe and so many others. I didn’t want to consider my Final Death, or worse… my taking an awful new place in the Mythos. I was afraid of having to surrender my free will.

But today—none of that. Just her.

Even just one last time.

I made it count, too—over and over. We said nothing else on the way up the stairs. She gently shooed her cat out of her room, and with the clicking of the door behind us promising full privacy and controlled silence, I was on her. I lifted her sensationally soft sweater up over her head, pushed up her camisole, running my fingers over her satin skin, my mouth on hers, her tongue pressed almost desperately keeping time to the secret, silent conversation that belonged only to us.

Her fingers worked nimbly to help me shed each layer; my hands slid and groped as I began to grind against her. We’d been needing this. Oh, fuck, had we been needing this. Being with Red, being so comfortable with her, had weaned me off of my sex addiction, so times like this were always out of this fucking world. She was incredible. Incredible.

We started off standing, Red moaning and whining gently with her back to the wall as we moved—shared breath, shared fucking everything. When I pulled out, Red pushed me back toward her bed, where we continued, harder, tighter, where we paused to pet and kiss and breathe, where I told her that she was beautiful, where she thanked me for being a part of her life. Where I realized again that what I had with her was unlike anything else I had ever known.

We were so lucky. I was so lucky. Lucky that, even now, we had something like this. Because, even when it came down to the very, very End, however close or far away that day was, I could at least look back on my life and say that, for a time, I had something wonderful.

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The day rolled on, granting us a pretty kind reprieve. At least for a while.
“Hey, c’m’ere,” Red beckoned, a while after our thrilling morning, drawing me back toward the kitchen. “I wanna cook lunch for you.”

“Babe, you don’t have to do that,” I told her. I was grinning anyway, and kept my hands on her sweet little swaying hips; there was something sweet and soothing in the rhythmic kind of pattern she was moving back on. That, and fucking intoxicating. I leaned down and brushed against her face with mine. Jesus, I didn’t want to let this go. The feel of her skin, the sound of her voice…

Mother of God, I’d been hung up on the word, but it wouldn’t leave me alone. I was pretty fucking sure that this, what I felt, what she gave me, what we had—was love. I didn’t want to dwell on it, though. Love had too much baggage attached. It was Red I was worried about hurting. I didn’t want her to deal with all the shit I always carried around with me… mainly, I never, ever wanted Red to see me die. Mysterion, yes, sure, yes, I wanted, somehow, someday to tell her about all of that. Tell her, without her having to see.

“I want to,” my girlfriend insisted, pulling me out of those thoughts for a moment. She sat me down at her kitchen table, kissed the corner of my eye, then stood back with an impish smile.

Red took out a wok, then blushed as she opened her freezer and pulled out a couple of storage bins, filled completely with meat and vegetables. “Sorry,” she apologized, “we don’t really have too much, and you can’t get fresh stuff in town anymore, so I hope fresh-frozen stir fry is okay.”

Being from a house of frozen broccoli without the means to cook it up, frozen stir fry was more than okay to me. “Sounds great, baby,” I said, “do whatever you gotta do.”

Watching her work was incredible. Every little flick of her wrist to toss or season the food, the way she kept on tucking her hair behind her ears to get it out of her eyes, every swish of her narrow hips as she shifted her stance—every bit of it filled me up, satisfied me like a drug. I adored that girl. Everything she did. Everything she said. Every minute, every inch.

I’d found the world I wanted. I really didn’t want to give it up.

When Red finished, I stood and walked up behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist from behind and kissing, twice, the top of her head. “You done?” I asked, feigning childish impatience. “Huh? Red? You done? You done?”

“Kenny, this is a hot pan!” Red scolded me, laughing. “Let me go and I’ll put it into bowls and we’ll eat.”

“Nope,” I grinned, “you gotta do it with this distraction on your back.”

“That distraction had better give me enough room to work if he doesn’t want to get burned,” my girlfriend joked back. “Kenny!” she laughed when I just tightened my grip. She abandoned the wok after double-checking to make sure she’d turned off the burner, then turned around and grabbed my upper arms, smiling broadly and beautifully up at me. “You are seriously way too much.”

“This holiday? I’m totally allowed to be,” I grinned.

Red smirked, and responded by groping one hand up to the back of my head, clenching her fingers around a clump of my hair, and drawing me down to kiss her. Her lips were always so perfectly moist, her taste always fresh and pure. Like a drug indeed. I only wanted her more, the longer we stayed connected. Man, I’d struck gold. She was beautiful, smart, funny, and the forerunner of one of the last lines of defense for the people of this town.
I laughed into her hair and kissed her freely, nipped her ear, nipped her neck, marking her mine. That girl, that outstanding, inspiring girl, was all mine. And I’d give my all to keep her safe, because she’d given so much to me already, and still had so much to give the world.

We drew lunch out as long as we could, poking fun at each other’s little habits, telling truths and minor secrets (like how she enjoyed watching me sleep, and how I liked it when she kept her nails long, and the way they felt when she’d pet in bed), stealing time for us to be us before we finally cleaned up and went down to the basement to help her parents and friends keep things running.

Her basement was probably the most lively place in the entire town, even with the somber air hanging over the large series of connected rooms. There were divided segments for men and women, and a designated spot for couples and families. I was glad to see a lot of kids in the well-protected bunker, our age and younger. Ike’s girlfriend Flora was there with her parents, and a scattering of kids and one parent or the other, or else an older sibling, were milling around, while Red’s parents walked through to make sure everyone had what they needed.

Red and I stuck together as we did our assigned duties of handing out water and taking down new names and any special requirements anyone had. Midway through the late afternoon, Red paused with her friend Nelly—Kyle’s Homecoming ex—to play with the kids. Nelly’s admitted new boyfriend (and this kind of caught me by surprise) Bridon Guermo got me in conversation while our girls entertained a couple guardianless toddlers; I didn’t know the guy well—he was about ten times more popular than I was, for one thing—but a crisis like this could give even the most disparate parties something to talk about.

“You think this’ll pass?” he asked me.


“Where d’you think that crazy Professor Chaos guy went off to, anyway?” Bridon wondered, flicking back his frosted brown hair.

“Wherever he is,” I said, careful not to project that I knew exactly where he was, “Mysterion’s gotta be on it.”

“Dude, how fucking cool is that Shadow League, am I right?” Bridon grinned. “They are so fucking awesome.”

I bit back a thank you, and instead just agreed. It was nice to know we were being recognized, though. Revered, even. Damn, I really wanted to live through the final fight, even just to see how the town would react. I had a feeling Clyde, Kyle and Stan could pretty much take care of everything and sort out any loose ends if I didn’t make it back, though. I hated having thoughts of the end, but they persisted. To drive them out, I looked over again at my girlfriend, just watched as she kept a little kid engaged in a game, just watched her be totally in her element of nothing but giving.

I’d guard her with my life.

I’d guard this town with my life.

Bring it on, Cthulhu. Bring it the fuck on.

— — —

Or so I confidently thought at the time. It sucked that fate kept finding me, but, then again,
the events of that evening were—well, highly unpredictable, to say the least, and still almost unbelievable to describe.

All of us were utterly unprepared when the Cult stormed the safehouse. It started with the sudden busting in of the front door—with an iron-tipped battering ram, no less—and then became almost a blur. “Stay here,” I instructed Red upon hearing the noise, kissing her hard and fast before I bolted up the stairs.

McElroy was nowhere to be seen, but the first floor of Red’s home was swarming with cloaks. “Backup,” I barked into the wire I was so fucking glad I was wearing.

“What was that, Mysterion?” I heard someone say.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I warned the speaker, who, I realized, was leading this charge.

The small figure—due, probably, to his obscene coffee intake—removed his hood, and glared up at me with gleaming, scheming yellow eyes. Oh, that little shit. I knew I didn’t trust that little Goth kid…and now, here he was, revealed at last to be the threat I should have better prepared for him to be. “What’s the matter, Shadow?” he asked me condescendingly. Gutsy for a tiny little prick like that to think he could look down on me. “Don’t want to risk being exposed?”

“I’m willing to negotiate with you,” I leered, “elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere, you say? Let’s make it a party,” the little Goth said, in his voice so strained and hoarse from years of smoking.

“Got your request for backup,” I heard Clyde say into the wire. His voice then pinched into Mosquito’s intonations when he added, “I’ve got a team heading your way now.”

“Great,” I said. I coughed a couple times from the now constant irritation, but didn’t let the burning in my lungs slow me down. “Hurry. And tell Henrietta that the—“

No good. I couldn’t get the rest of my thought out. I was clocked in the back of the skull and blacked out immediately.

– – –

I woke an indeterminable passage of time later, groggy and pissed off. After blinking to adjust to the dark room I found myself in, I moved my stiff neck to take a look at my surroundings. Oh, that room was a little too familiar. The Cultists’ meeting room. McElroy’s basement. Those bastards, what the hell were they trying to pull?

I tried to sit up, but barely got past the stage of lifting my head and chest, since my arms, bent at the elbows and raised over my head, I realized, would just not move. The rattling of iron rang in my ears with the intensity of an empty cavern, and my heart beat a rhythm of panic when I realized I was strapped down. Attempts to move my legs yielded similar results. My wrists and ankles were shackled. I’d been taken hostage.

My head still throbbed from the blunt attack back at Red’s safehouse, but I forced myself to focus. Find a way out. That was all I had to do. “Is this on?” I tried to whisper into my wire. I wiggled my left ear, where I usually kept the feeder hooked. No luck; I couldn’t feel it. Hopefully, Mosquito and the others had kept Red and everyone at her home safe, even if a couple Cultists had managed to make off with me.

Footsteps approached, clacking against the dirty cement floor, and paused in front of me. I
found myself looking up into the face of the youngest Goth kid, the little fucker who’d stormed Red’s house and had me taken out and captured. Others strode in behind him, but did not move. Beside him were two standing fixtures, each fitted with a thick black candle. A glance down at my feet showed me two similar posts. The Goth himself held a small, thin red candle, probably meant to be the flame source for the other four.

“Well,” the little Goth said. “Good evening."

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I spat at him.

“Preparing for the new era of madness,” he sneered. “I’m gonna enjoy watching you rise to your potential.”

“Rise to—wait… wait!” I barked. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

“Waking you up,” said the kid. “The sleeping you, anyway. Your powers have been ‘dead but dreaming’ inside you for a long time, Kenny McCormick. Don’t want to keep Cthulhu waiting.”

“I’m not doing a fucking thing, for him or for you,” I said darkly.

“Oh, no, see, you don’t have a choice in the matter,” the kid said, his words clipped, precise. “You were born to be this. You’re the be-all, end-all that this Cult has been waiting for from the beginning.”

“The Cult can suck my dick,” I muttered.

“From the beginning, there has been a plan for the End,” the kid went on, as if I’d said nothing. “When Tony Hayward drilled on the moon, the Great Cthulhu rose to Earth. We saw that as a blessing, and a sign. The Earth’s axis,” he said, and this part I tried to listen to, even though I was still incredibly pissed off, “was momentarily misaligned. And you, Cthulhu’s Shadow, bore witness to the event.”

“So, what?” I groaned, rolling my eyes. “Cthulhu sees his Shadow so you get seven more years of waiting?”

“Funny. But close. You were not ready, then, Kenny McCormick, but the stars are at last returning to the proper positions for the true, grand awakening. We have prayed to Cthulhu, and he has prayed to the Greater Ones in return. All will fall under Great Cthulhu, and you… you, his Shadow, will cover this world in darkness.

“Cthulhu’s a priest to the Old Ones,” the kid explained. I knew that, but didn’t tell him so. I just yanked at the iron binding me. “But you know what I heard? His Shadow’s the piece of him that’s sick of praying. You can move through every Space Between. You can be dead awake and never again know pain. Amazing, isn’t it?”

“You’re wrong,” I snarled. “I know pain. I know more pain than any of you selfish little fucks could ever imagine. I’ve been torn apart, hacked up in every way thinkable and then some, sick and ailing—I KNOW PAIN.”

“You don’t have to anymore. Not even emotional pain,” he added, “once we remove the catalyst.”

“Once you—NO!” I shouted.

I knew exactly where they were going to strike, and it was low. Low, low, fucking low.
“Yes, indeed,” said the Goth who had just soared with flying colors up to the top of my shit list. “She gets to watch the whole show! BRING HER IN!”

“No!” I hollered, hearing my voice crack. I yanked harder at the shackles. Shit… shit…

But there were more footsteps entering the dark room, and then, a whimper and a cry.

“KENNY!” I heard my girlfriend scream from far off to my right.

Horror clinching and freezing my soul, I spun my head in her direction. This was what I never wanted to see. She was bound, hands behind her back, and was pushed down onto her knees. Two cloaks flanked her, one with a cloth gag at the ready to silence her. “Red!” I cried out, wrestling against the iron that held me to the table. “RED! Let her go, you fucking bastards! Let her go! RED!”

“What’s the matter, Mr. McCormick? Losing the strength to fight?”

McElroy. That fucking asshole. Cloaked and un-hooded, he advanced toward the table. I rolled onto my back, snarled out my displeasure, then spat with perfect accuracy into his face. When he winced, I managed to free my right foot from its iron and kicked him in the chest. Other Cultists were on me, then, strapping me down tighter while the Goth lit the black candles at my hands and feet, and added a fifth, about a foot away from the crown of my head. A whisper tickled through my ears.

No.

No, no, no, none of this Shadow nonsense.

Not in front of her.

“Kenny!” Red cried again. “Kenny! Kenny! What are you doing to him?! KENNY!” I heard her then collapse into sobs, which then became muffled, as one of the cloaks beside her must have placed and tied the gag.

Fuck—fuck. I had to help her. Jesus Christ, this was the perfect time for Mysterion to show up. And I would have, if I hadn’t been the one on the Goddamn slab there in the middle of the room. While my girlfriend sat, breaking down, in the corner, alone.

I yanked against the iron strapped around my wrists, and tugged harder on the ones at my ankles. No luck. Pull harder—no luck. No luck. No fucking luck.

“Let go of me!” I hollered. A man stepped up to me and held me down with one hand on my chest. Another, behind him, opened that all-too-familiar tome, anticipating a reading. “I’m not gonna be your fucking sacrifice, or key, or Gate, or whatever the fuck it is. I’m not—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” McElroy leered, back up on his feet. “Not until the Shadow rises. The sooner, Mr. McCormick, the better. The Month of Madness is upon us. We need you to lead us to—“

“I told you, I’m not working with you,” I snapped. “I’m not one of you, I’m not serving you, nothing!”

“Oh no? Then suppose we take away your only motivation to stay…?”

“YOU LEAVE HER ALONE!” I roared.
“Her, or you, Kenneth,” McElroy said darkly, leaning right over me. “Who will it be?”

I glared at him in pure rage and spite. He’d gone from being an awful annoyance and thorn in my side to someone I truly just utterly detested. Hated down to his very core. That soulless, selfish fuck. Once I was fed up with giving him a single second of my time, I looked over at Red again. One thing was certain, now… she’d heard the Cult talking about the Shadow. In reference to me. That probably still meant nothing to her, but I had no idea what they could have told her in the time I’d been unconscious.

I yanked at the iron again like an idiot. What the fuck could I do? I couldn’t break out. All that happened was me jerking myself into a coughing fit when the damn dust in the room started to irritate too much. Red lifted her head and looked at me, straight on, with the deepest concern I’d ever seen anyone show me. Her eyes, clear and blue, filled up with tears.

If there was only one thing I could do now, immobilized, it was protect her. I gave her a nod, to tell her she’d be all right, and did not take my eyes off of her.

“Please, let her go,” I finally asked. “Just let Red go. Please.”

The little Goth snorted. Fucking Goths never believed in any kind of affection. Especially that little jackass. But he pushed another Cultist, twice his size, over toward my girlfriend, and the man did his one duty of untying her.

Red yanked her gag off and started running up toward me, but the two cloaks at her sides grabbed her arms and held her back. “Let go of me!” she screamed.

“We’re letting you go,” one of the men told her.

“WHY?!”

“Shadow’s orders.”

“What Shadow?” Red cried out. “What are you talking about? What are you doing with Kenny?! Who the hell do you bastards think you are?!”

“Get that screaming girl out of here,” McElroy commanded.

“NO!” Red shouted, yanking against her captors. I couldn’t look away, but I couldn’t bear to watch. She was wrenching against those cloaks’ grips, so hard and violently her hair whipped out around her, her arms twisted into awkward positions just trying to break away. “KENNY! Let him go, let him go! KENNY!”

“Mr. McCormick made his choice, my dear,” said McElroy.

“FUCK YOU!” Red hollered at him, flushed with anger. “Everything going on outside is all your fault, isn’t it?! This is all because of your awful little group of Cthulhu-worshippers! It’s hell out there because of you!”

“Yes. Lovely, isn’t it?” Oh, now he was even taking credit for what Chaos had done? Excuse me—and oh, I had a bone to pick with Chaos, too—but that was bullshit.

“Shut up,” I growled at McElroy. “Just shut the fuck up.”

“Lie back and hold still, Kenneth,” McElroy instructed me. “Just lie back and watch the shadows.”
“Mysterion isn’t going to stand for this!” Red kept shouting. “I’ll bet any second, that League is going to bust your door in and set you straight!”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” the Goth kid snapped.

Fuck—fuck, I hoped the guys were okay. Damn, damn, damn, damn—things were really collapsing. Collapsing and crumbling into darkness and madness… and now I found myself in the middle of a ritual that these fucks meant to use to make me a part of it. I felt stupid for thinking I could grant myself one more normal day.

I must’ve been in love. Love makes you do stupid things, right? I glanced at Red again, and asked myself if it had all been worth it…

I coughed, and another whisper tickled my ears. My eyes began to lose focus, and my head felt, suddenly, like it was under ten gallons of water. Pressure beat down on me, and my chest began to burn with a new, grating heaviness. Henrietta had called it. Something was off. Shit—shit, I didn’t want to lose control. I didn’t want to feel like anything other than myself. I’d come to terms with the fact that I was the Shadow… but because I had to beat it. I had to beat it, not—not this. Not whatever this was turning into. Not whatever I was turning into.

Was it worth it?

Worth having a few precious months of something that beautiful? Something that made me really feel alive?

Of course it was.

She didn’t deserve to see this.

“Where is he?” I heard Red fretting to herself. “Where is he? Where’s Mysterion? Mysterion, we need you… we really need you…”

“She’s annoying me,” the little Goth scowled. “Can I kill her now?”

Don’t you dare, don’t you dare…

“Do as you will,” said McElroy. “The Shadow needs a sacrifice, anyway.”

“NO!” I bellowed.

Just then, a shadow moved along the wall. Red took in a gasp as two of the candles went out, and I craned my neck up so that I could get a glimpse of the far wall. It wasn’t a shadow. It was a figure. A solid figure—seen for a flash, and then gone. This was a person… it was someone… but it couldn’t have been anyone from the League. Nobody else moved that way but me.

“What was that?” I heard one of the Cultists ask.

“It doesn’t matter! Re-light the candles!”

I struggled against the shackles again, only for a man to punch me down. My cheek stung from the impact as he spat out, “Don’t try anything!”

“Let… me… go…” I growled, trying hard to make my words sound like a warning.

“Get those candles lit, dammit!”
But once one of the men brought a flame flickering to life, it was blown out again, as was the next, and the next. And then, one of the men yelped and went down. While the others stared on in amazement, out of the blackness came that figure again, delivering a strong left hook to the man holding the *Necronomicon*, and a swift kick to two others. In seconds, all of the men were down, and the figure landed between me and Jim McElroy.

I couldn’t make out the figure very well. I could see only a silhouette. But I saw it plainly enough… a form-fitting black dress with a thigh-length skirt but full-length arms, or at least up until the long white gloves… a white utility belt with contents I could not see, and high black boots with white laces. Following up with my eyes, I confirmed that the figure was indeed female, and must have been highly influenced by Mysterion… to the point that she bore herself a long cape, though she operated without a hood; hers was black on the outside, white in. A white cloth mask was tied in place around her eyes, and her hair, of a color I could not make out in the dim light, was tied back into a ponytail. Pinning back her bangs was a large barrette bearing a simple symbol: a set of feathery white wings.

Now who the hell could—?

Wait.

Impossible.

Absolutely impossible.

But the cape fluttered around her thin frame like the wings of an angel, and when she spoke, I heard the self-modified voice of someone I heard from so rarely, but to whom I once had promised absolute protection. I heard her voice, I heard those words, and I knew that Red and I were going to make it out of that evening unscratched.

And the words she spoke were:

“Kenny McCormick is off limits.”

---

“Be a good girl, now, Karen,” I said to my sister, as her hand clung fast to mine.

“I wish you could come with me, Kenny,” she said in return, looking up at me with misty brown eyes.

“It’s an all-girls’ school, I wish I could,” I managed to joke with her, fixing the little green barrette in her hair.

“Kenny,” Karen laughed, “don’t be gross.”

I grinned and patted her head. “You gonna be okay, sis?” I asked her.

“I’ll try.”

“It’ll be all right. Don’t worry. Remember, Karen,” I said, kneeling down in front of her and placing my hands on her shoulders, “I’m right here. Okay? I can’t leave this town right now, sis, but someday I’ll come find you. You gotta be strong for me right now. Can you do that for me?”

“I don’t wanna leave!” Karen cried, grabbing and clinging to the front of my parka.
“Kenny, I’m having second thoughts. I don’t wanna go. I don’t wanna go.”

“Karen… Karen, please,” I said, pulling her in for a hug. “It’s gonna be so much better there. Remember those nice girls you met? Those nice teachers? They’re gonna take care of you. You deserve so much better than this town and you know it. You have this chance to get out.”

“But what about you?”

“There’s a few things I’ve gotta do here,” I told her. “I’ll stay in touch. I’ll come find you when those things are taken care of. In the meantime, I just want you to tell me you’ll be good, and you’ll be safe.”

“I love you, Kenny,” said Karen, throwing her thin arms around me. “You’re the best brother in the world.”

“And I’ll always be here to protect you, Karen,” I promised. “Even really far away. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you again.”

“Hey, Kenny?” Karen said, before she was beckoned away.

“Yeah, sis?”

“Thank you. I want you to get out, too. So maybe someday I can help you.”

That was the last time, and, as far as I knew, the only time, anyone had ever said they loved me. Ever since that talk with Clyde, I’d been obsessing over it. What love was, and how I felt about it. And now the only family I ever cared to have was standing right there in front of me, making good on her promise.

My little sister had come home to protect me.

“Nobody in this room lays a hand on Kenny McCormick,” she commanded, her voice purposefully hollow but hard. “Try it, and you’ll receive divine punishment.”

“Who the hell are you?” the Goth snarled.

“Hell?” my new protector laughed. “Funny choice for a word.”

“I am so sick of all you stupid, conformist heroes!” the Goth shouted, utterly forgetting that he had just issued a death threat on Red, in favor of lunging, now intent to fight the new presence.

Karen—as I had no other way to currently address her—crouched and said, “Just try it.”

The Goth pulled a switchblade knife out from the folds of his cloak and bolted forward, but my sister, in an impressive acrobatic display, dodged his strike, placed her hands on his shoulders, and flipped herself over him. By the time her toes touched the ground, she had a better grip on him, and along with the force of righting her spine, she flipped the kid over her head, sending him flying into the back wall.

Red let out a yelp of surprise, and I couldn’t swallow back a, “Holy shit!”

First Craig, now this?

Fuck, was my head spinning right now, though. Kyle had been talking so much lately about
how he didn’t want Ike fighting. Craig had just lost his little sister to insanity. Stan was glad as hell that Shelly was out of town. I couldn’t care less about my older brother (it was kind of insulting that he hadn’t gone crazy yet, to be honest), but, Goddamn, I still wanted to make sure nothing happened to my sister.

She then turned and took out her barrette, letting loose her flat, model-cut brown bangs. Her eyes, behind her white mask, fixed themselves on my iron shackles. She bit her lower lip, white teeth on white lipstick, and leaned over to pick the locks of the holds with the pin back of her hairpiece. Within seconds, my hands were free, and I sat up with a sigh of relief, then sat up to help her undo the bonds on my ankles.

I rubbed my ankles, and then my wrists, which were rough and red from being locked up, and while my sister was pinning her bangs back again with that brilliant skeleton key of a barrette, I stood, weak on my feet for the first few seconds. I was still somewhat dizzy from the earlier blow to the head, but the pressure began to subside, which hopefully meant that the Shadow influence would creep away, or just not boil up at all. Having something unnatural happen to me in front of Red was one thing. No way in Hell did I want my little sister seeing that, too.

“What are you doing here?” I asked her on an almost harsh whisper.

She did not answer; just scanned the room for the next threat. I took that to mean that we’d have that discussion later, which was just as well. Red needed me at that moment, anyway—I rushed over to her and grabbed her in my arms. “Did they hurt you?” I asked.

Red shook her head furiously, then clutched the front of my sweatshirt and buried her face into my chest. She drew in a deep breath, then choked it out. “Kenny… oh, God, Kenny… Kenny… Kenny, let’s go… let’s just go, let’s just go,” she pleaded. There was a sense of relief, awe, and raw pain that intensified each time she spoke my name.

“We will,” I promised, stroking her back gently. “I’ll get you out of here, I’ll get you home.”

“What were they trying to do to you!!” Red wondered, her voice shaking.

“I don’t know, but it’s over. I’m okay.”

“You promise?”

“I’m okay.” For now.

I lifted my head again and, keeping Red close, looked on as my sister began to pay back in spades each and every time I had ever protected her as Mysterion when we were younger. McElroy sent cloaks at her, but she kept them all back. She threw dead accurate punches, and could soar with a kick. Her small frame suited her to dodge on a dime. She could move like a feather on the wind; I couldn’t believe it.

A lot of kids grow up with heroes. They admire them, and many kids will even grow up and base their lives on choices their heroes made. Karen sure was one of those kids. Her admiration for Mysterion had inspired her to create this alter ego for herself, and I could only imagine how long she had been practicing on her own to get up to a level like that. Maybe she’d picked it up in Utah. Fucked if I knew, but… thank God she’d come.

With a swift motion, once the last of the men was down, Karen tied every Cultist in the room up together with the cords they all had looped round their waists, then shooed me and Red out of the basement and out of the house. “Come on,” she then beckoned. “I’m walking you home. You
two take the lead, and I’ll be right there at your side.”

“But—“ Red began to protest.

My sister shook her head and gestured forward.

“Come on,” I said in a gentle whisper. Red clung to my arm, which helped warm me somewhat, since it was fucking cold and I was only wearing a sweatshirt, but the cold air did help us speed up the walk back.

The night was awkwardly clear. The Mist was at least something that could be avoided, when one could see it. I’d seen Nyarlathotep take on other forms before. Now that he had free reign, why stay so hidden?

Our shadows stretched out long in front of us as the moon glared down. It was waning, which disturbed me. As if I was the fucking shadow across the moon. Thank God whatever ritual the Cult had been wanting to attempt that night had failed. It was another wakeup call, though. My potential, as they called it, would surface soon. If I absolutely had to become the Shadow, I hoped it could wait until R’lyeh, but a part of me was a little curious as to what exactly I’d be able to do once that potential did awaken.

The end of that night, though, I wanted to somehow build back up to the level at which it had begun… simply. Just a—possibly final—simple moment with my girlfriend.

Karen gave us the slip just after seeing us to Red’s driveway, and when I took in the house as a whole, I understood why.

Mosquito and Toolshed stood guard at the repaired door, stunner and drill gun respectively at the ready, while I caught the silhouettes of Marpesia and TupperWear on the left and right of the house itself. The Human Kite was keeping watch from the roof, and I saw Red glance around, searching for Mysterion. _Right here, baby_, I almost said, but held my tongue at the last second.

“Oh, God…” Red started to whimper happily as we walked up. “They all showed up… they’re all here…”

“Come on, baby, let’s just get back inside, come on…” I coaxed, keeping a hand on her back.

“All under control,” Toolshed assured us when we got to the front steps, ticking his head up. To Red, he added, “This safehouse is guarded under full League protection.”

“Mysterion and a couple others are setting up a security system,” Mosquito added for my girlfriend’s benefit, and to give me an excuse. “Cult’s not getting through here again.”

“Oh, my God…” Red repeated. “Oh, my God… thank you… thank you, thank you…”

She was trembling. I opened the door for her and walked her inside, and once the door was closed and bolted, she latched her arms around me. “Oh, my God, Kenny, you’re safe… you’re safe, sweetie, I can’t believe it,” she said, almost crying. “Who was that? Who was that? Doesn’t matter—doesn’t even matter. Can you believe what’s going on?!?” Red lifted her head, and I raised a hand to smooth back a few flyaway wisps of her soft red hair.

“I’m glad you’re safe, too, Red,” I told her, keeping her close. “I’m so, so sorry you had to go through with that tonight, baby, I’m so sorry.”
“It’s not your fault, Kenny, that Cult is just twisted and sick,” Red said, shaking her head. “But outside—did you—well, of course you saw it!” Her face lit with wonder, and she went on, almost as if in a trance, “The entire Shadow League, Kenny. The entire League is guarding this place! First just Mysterion, but now all of them! It’s like I just have this team watching out for me all the time…”

“Well, you’re saving lives, too, baby, this safehouse idea was amazing,” I said proudly. God, I wanted to tell her… I wanted to tell her, I wanted to tell her…

“Kenny, you’re staying here tonight, right?”

“Of course I am. I’ve got you. I’m not leaving tonight.” I knew it meant sleeping in the basement around everyone else, but I didn’t care. I did not care. I had her. The guys were all right—like I really had reason to worry there—and they had it covered. And then, of course—

I noticed someone else in the room with us at that point (and I had to give her credit… I had no idea how she’d gotten in there or how she planned to leave), and unintentionally took in a gasp. Red looked up at me, then followed my gaze but did not let go of me even for an instant.

“You’ve made it home safely,” our savior of the evening said. “I’m going to take my leave, but I’m not going to go far.”

“Who are you…?” Red asked, her beautiful voice just above a whisper.

My sister did not answer for a moment, but she strode toward us, then paused and reached up to set one hand on Red’s cheek, another on mine. Her white-painted lips smoothed into a smile, and she said dulcetly, “I’m your Guardian Angel.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was kind of an immediate response to The Poor Kid; it was fun being able to work Karen in.

I’ll pause here posting again, and continue posting more tomorrow. Thank you for reading! :3
Butters

R’lyeh.

We were here.

Dilapidated ruins littered the landscape. Jagged, crag-filled hills pierced the dirty maroon sky. In other places, deep, dark pits plunged down with no end. Everything was a pale, sickly green that drew up something from your gut that threatened to burst forth and consume your very being. Here there were creatures beyond mortal man’s reckoning.

Here was the true home of Chaos.

This is what greeted my partner and me on the other side of the barrier. All the accounts had been correct, there was nothing here but mayhem and disarray.

Perfection.

We were looking for the resting place of the Old Ones to, as my partner had outlined, unleash a new dominating order on the world we had just left behind. I didn’t much care what would happen to the old world at that point. Hardly anything at all, in fact. As far as I was concerned, this task was superfluous. I’d go along with it, and aid Disarray in waking the Dark Gods, but I wasn’t doing it for any particular reason other than throwing a tub of salt into the wound we’d gashed across the face of the Earth. Just another layer of punishment to those still in their right minds to experience it. And they wouldn’t be that way for long, I imagined.

We made our way through the scarred terrain. There was much to be feared in this place, but none of it phased me. I was past the point of fear. We did still give a wide berth to the spikes and giant, moving tendrils that stuck up like weeds from the ground. The random, non-Euclidian geometry of what buildings there were, some of which were perhaps former monuments, made it virtually impossible to tell where we had been and where we hadn’t. There was nothing to provide any sense of direction, certainly no stars in the clouded sky. However, Disarray clung to the map we had created from all our compiled research and led both of us through the bedlam with impressive certainty. I saw weird monsters flying in the distance, but nothing tried to impede our progress or attack us. Much was alive here, but none of it seemed terribly interested in us two.

Except for a shadow that was following us.

It had caught my eye as we were passing through a narrow ravine. At one point, I randomly glanced behind us and distinctly saw a dark patch move across the ground, quickly disappearing into another shadow. I wasn’t sure what to make of it. I shrugged it off initially, thinking maybe my mind might be starting to experience some of the madness now that I was actually in R’lyeh. But only a little while later, I glanced back again and witnessed the same phenomenon. This time it had been on the wall of the ravine and had dove down to meld with a large boulder’s projection. I looked up through the gap in the rock walls at the sliver of polluted sky just visible, seeing if there was any creature lurking along the edge of the walls or hovering overhead. There was nothing. And then, the shadow immediately rose up again, zigzagged in an erratic but fluid motion, and dove back into another shadow of a smaller rock, this one within a foot of my own shadow, which dragged
behind me like an extended cape. Obviously, this was strange, but to not to have expected odd
behavior in this place, even such a thing that didn’t adhere to the laws of average physics, would be
ridiculous. From its last movement, I discerned another aspect of its behavior – this shadow had
intent. It was purposefully following us. I briefly considered that maybe the thing casting it was
simply invisible, but I knew that wasn’t the answer. The shadow itself was the entity moving along,
and it slunk and darted in our wake.

Of course, I had no way of knowing what its intention was, if it even had any. But, thus far,
all it had done was follow us. If anything, I suppose I would say it was watching. Perhaps waiting
for us to actually make some kind of move. Was it anticipating our plan, preparing to strike once we
tried to raise the Old Ones? I had no way of knowing. And since it was doing nothing to hamper us
in the meantime, I didn’t mention it to my partner. I saw no immediate threat, so I simply kept going,
letting it tag along at a distance.

A long while later, and after we were well out of the ravine, Disarray halted, prompting me to
stop as well behind him. I waited, silent. He scrutinized a portion of the map, glanced to the right and
left of our current position, and then raised his sight to the definite incline before us. He reached his
right arm straight out and pointed directly at the peak of the incline. “It should be right over this hill,”
he said.

We reached the crest and looked down into the valley before us. This was indeed the place.
The entire central expanse of the shallow valley was populated by huge rectangular slabs of stone
colored that same sickly green which could only be described as one thing – tombs. This is where the
Immortals, the Dark Gods, slept ‘dead but dreaming.’

There were dozens of them. And that was only a guess. The valley was huge, stretching on
below us.

This was the force we would attempt to awaken.

We made our way to the edge of the Immortal graveyard. The tombs were of varying sizes,
some were simply enormous, while others were smaller than an average full grown man. Still, we
knew each one held a creature that was more powerful and terrifying than anything created on Earth.

We followed the edge of the valley around the gaggle of tombs. We weren’t looking for the
biggest one, or even the one with the most intricately detailed carvings, but the one at the top of a set
of stairs carved into the side of the valley. From the accounts we’d read, we knew that that would be
the one holding our quarry, the Dark Priest himself.

Cthulhu.

We found the stairs not too far from where we had entered the valley, and we began to climb.
The stairs were far too large, making it so that we had to hoist ourselves up each ledge and take
several steps before reaching the next level. It was harder on Disarray, as he had always been of a
slightly shorter stature than average, but he never let up an inch, never asked for any help, never gave
any indication that he was having any trouble. He gripped the folded map and the Necronomicon
tightly and made his way roughly up the steps one-handed. He looked driven, bent on a single
purpose, as if whatever waited at the top would fulfill some deep need. I followed behind, keeping
pace but with significantly less intensity. I didn’t see the shadow as we climbed. Perhaps it had
finally abandoned its pursuit, or else was simply waiting for us at the bottom, still watching.

Finally, we climbed the last step and found ourselves staring at the entrance to the Dark
Priest’s lair. This tomb was different from the others, which I supposed was appropriate. A huge
stone slab covered the mouth of a large cave, effectively sealing off the opening so nothing could get
in… or out. We both gazed up at it. The putrid-colored rock would have been unimpressive had it not been for more of the detailed carvings adorning the sides of the cave. They were like those we had seen on the other lesser tombs. There was no impression of a cohesive design. Groupings of symbols comprising the ancient language of the Old Ones, from which all copies of the Necronomicon were transposed, crisscrossed the entrance like molted scales. There were also carved images of the Dark One himself, in profile and posing with his huge arms and wings outstretched, raining terror on unseen victims.

I had never seen Cthulhu in person. I knew what he looked like from pictures such as these and replayed footage from the aftermath of the crisis in the Gulf. But though the entire hero League and most of the town, hell half the country, had viewed this monster spreading doom and pandemonium firsthand, I had not. And this was because during that entire incident, I had been imprisoned in the basement of one pest-like, cape-wearing asshole.

The Coon.

Or, as he was commonly known among his peers, Eric fucking Cartman.

Well, I certainly had beaten him at this game. I wonder what he thought of me now – quiet, timid little Butters grown into the instigator of world destruction.

… I’m sure he wishes it was all his idea. The bastard.

Well, screw him. I wasn’t concerned with him or his stupid little games anymore. I could care less what he thought or did. I’d left all that behind me.

“Now, Dark Lord Cthulhu, you shall be awakened.”

Disarray’s words jarred me out of my lost thoughts. I had still been staring, unseeing, at the cave entrance, so I turned my head toward him. He held the Necronomicon out in front of him in a pose reaching reverence. This was it. This was the moment when we would not only have set one destructive supernatural force on the Earth, but the granddaddy of them all, and then soon, each and every last one of the Dark Gods would descend upon the globe, annihilating everything.

Disarray moved to open the book, but then a dark shape flickered in the periphery of my vision. I glanced to the side just in time to see the shadow from before race swiftly across the ground and mold into the shadow cast by the book in Disarray’s outstretched hand, a split second before my partner laid his fingers under the cover and made to pull it open. However, the binding refused to yield to his efforts.

He tried again, obviously confused. “The hell is wrong with this thing?” he asked, and tried harder, but to no result. His face set in an angry grimace, and his fingers clawed at the binding of the Necronomicon. He pulled at the cover at both ends, but the tome remained shut, as it its pages had been glued together. Frustrated and with a grunt of annoyance, he dropped the book on the ground and attempted to wrench it open with different leverage. No such luck. I thought about trying to help him, but saw no point in it, so I just stood there watching his vain efforts.

I did, however, offer some explanation, saying, “It’s that shadow that’s been following us.”

“The what now? A shadow?! There’s a shadow that’s been following us?!” He obviously had not seen the apparition as I had. Disarray looked almost troubled then, as if this new information was something to be feared. It passed though, and he narrowed his eyes in a quieter annoyance. “The new Messenger must be trying to impede our progress,” he said. “I’ll have to find a way around that.”
Without the *Necronomicon* to read from, there was no way to awaken Cthulhu. That left us with no plan or course of action for our immediate future. Disarray sat down in front of the cave entrance, still unwilling to depart so soon and admit defeat even in the face of our obvious obstacle. He brought out the map and began studying it, though for what I didn’t know. Uninterested in finding out, I wandered off to explore the area around the cave. I wasn’t trying to find another means of access to Cthulhu or anything. I just found the idea of formulating more plans annoying, so I let my partner worry about our next step while I distracted myself.

There was a significant-sized ledge that wrapped around the cave mouth. I followed it to the left of the stairs. Eventually I was far enough along that I could no longer see my partner or the covered cave mouth. I kept going though, not caring how far we were separated. I’d make my way back eventually. And again, it wasn’t like there was anything threatening us. Other than the shadow, I supposed.

I turned a corner and found that the ledge opened out even further here, creating a kind of plateau directly ahead of me. In the center of this space was a stone slab, about three feet high and as intricately carved as all the other tombs I’d seen so far. But this one appeared much simpler in design. Surrounding it, in a perfect circle, where several metal polls, each of which ended in unlit, but flickering candelabras. My curiosity piqued, I walked closer. I stepped within the circle of candles, and swore I heard the faintest whispering as I passed, though it dissipated in an instant. It also seemed darker within the circle than without, as if I had passed over the line from day to night, though there was no difference in this place. Upon closer inspection, I realized that this was not an actual tomb, as I had assumed. It was simply a stone slab. More like a bier actually, nothing held within, but here something might rest on top.

I crouched down and examined the stone face. What I had thought were symbols of the Old Ones’ tongue were actually numbers, several of them, grouped together all around the stone in sequences of four, five, and six digits apiece. Inexplicably mesmerized, I took off my right glove and reached out my hand to touch the numeric scars on the cold stone. As soon as my bare skin made contact, a shadow fell over my vision, and countless images flashed through my mind. I saw hundreds of moments in time in rapid sequence, or it might have been all at once. They were all separate, but each and every one showed the exact same, oddly specific, event: Kenny McCormick dying. Hundreds of times in hundreds of ways I saw Kenny dying. Then the shadow passed, restoring my eyesight.

I gasped in a heap of air from the shock of the sudden influx of all that information and yanked my hand away from the stone, falling back off my legs. I had just witnessed, in my mind, Kenny’s repeated deaths. The circumstances had been different in each instance; I’d seen countless manners by which Kenny had died. There were also witnesses for many of these occurrences. And I had been there for a decent number of them. But there was something else. Now that I had seen them, I also remembered them. The ones I’d witnessed first hand, anyway. I had actually seen Kenny die, many, far too many times. But he’d always come back around eventually, and we never questioned it. We carried on as if it had never happened. And, as far as we were concerned, it hadn’t.

My now clear eyes passed over the myriad numbers canvassing the surface of the bier. There were hundreds of them, all over, hundreds of times when Kenny had been ripped from our world and sent here to this slab, to rejuvenate (or whatever happened to him) and then sent back only to have it happen all over again. I understood now. “They’re dates,” I whispered aloud to no one in particular. Staring at them, I realized their meaning by the reoccurrence of the last two digits of each grouping. They were the numeral designations of dates, 621 meaning June 21st of one year and 125 signifying December 5th of another. The years spanned almost the entire course of Kenny’s life.

These were all the dates of Kenny’s ‘deaths.’
I saw another number sequence, November 10th of the year we were all in fourth grade, and it brought forth a memory I could only now recall. That was the same year that ‘Coon and Friends’ was formed. I fully remembered the events of that day now. I was stuck in that stupid cage in the corner of the Coon’s basement, watching as Mysterion argued with his teammates, trying desperately to convince them of his inability to die.

This date marked his final tactic, begging them to remember that time, as he killed himself in front of them to prove his claims. I’d witnessed this moment, and also the one not long after when Mysterion confirmed that his plea had fallen on forgetful ears. Of course, afterward, none of those present had remembered a thing, but I did now.

So, he knew he died repeatedly. But did he know what happened to him when he reached this bier? I’d seen it when the shadow altered my vision. Each time after Kenny had died, he’d been transported right here via the shadow I’d seen. Perhaps it was even the same one that was following us now. Kenny would rest on this stone slab for some span of time, being restored, wounds being mended, bones un-broken, his body reverting to its purest state, before the shadow would take him away again, but though where, I hadn’t seen.

I certainly did not envy him all that pain. I had a passing impression of seeing Kenny as a kindred spirit. Though we both operated along very different social lines, we had each certainly experienced our share of injustice in our lives and domestic situations. Both his and my parents were the kind of people who would probably have been better never to have had children. As things stood now, it certainly seemed as if it would have been far better for both of us to never have been born at all. We could have avoided a lot of trauma and heartache otherwise.

But we each had to deal with the cards we’d been dealt, and we had done so in very different ways. He spent the majority of his energy trying to better himself and his situation, while I had predominantly just tried to be someone else. We had both obviously gone for the whole costumed alter-ego thing, but again, there was a difference: he wanted to help save the world, while I had helped it along its way to death.

I stood up and put my glove back on. Mysterion and I had chosen opposite sides of this fight for the world’s fate. And even though I was standing in front of physical proof that he repeatedly visited this place, I knew that my being here put me one step ahead of Mysterion and the League. And that was a satisfying thought.

I blinked once more at the stone that had provided so many unasked-for answers, then turned and walked away, back to the cave entrance, where Disarray was just rising from his spot on the ground.

“What did you find?” he asked me.

“Nothing,” I replied. I would continue to feign ignorance of this odd circumstance. There was nothing to be gained from telling him what I had found, which was just more proof of a vindictive, unfeeling universe. In the end, Kenny wasn’t a part of Chaos’s agenda.

Disarray had decided that, since we couldn’t hope to move forward with our plan with the Necronomicon closed to us, the best we could do would be to find some sort of place to make camp, a new base of operations. He had found a place on the map that might be appropriate not too far from here. So, we climbed back down the over-sized stairs and left the valley, travelling in a new direction.

We finally reached a vast plane with a few jagged mountains here and there. Off to the right was a tower, and I immediately thought of that Tarot card at the sight of it. It was quite tall, rising out
alone on the plain. It appeared to have once been well designed, by whose hands I had no idea, but now large chunks were missing, littering the ground at its base. One whole side of the top tier was completely gone. Cracks ran along its length. It looked like it had been a lightning rod for destruction.

I found it too perfectly appropriate to resist, and agreed that this would be our new base.

We had been travelling with hardly any break, so, needless to say, we were exhausted by this point. Or, at least Disarray appeared to be, I was simply even more numb than before. We decided to travel to the tower after a long rest in a small alcove at the base of one of the nearby hills.

I slept in fits. I hadn’t been sleeping well for the longest time, and it was impossible for me to relax in this dimension. I gave up on trying to force sleep for the time being and sat up, my legs bent up to my chest, my arms around my knees, my cloak pulled around my entire form so that only my helmet and boots stuck out. I thought about what I had found out about Kenny, what I had seen. I thought about Cthulhu and if we could actually follow through with our plan to raise him. I really didn’t care anymore. Sure, I was interested to see the Dark God for the first time in person, and no doubt I would appreciate the chaos he would inflict, but there was one definite hindrance in my mind to taking satisfaction from this thought: I wouldn’t be around to see it.

I had already decided, what seemed like forever ago now, that I would not be going back to Earth.

So, I sat there, at the base of a destruction-torn mountain, gazing out at the evil landscape.

This is where I belonged now.

– – –

Kenny

I woke the next morning knowing in my gut that this would be our last day on Earth. The last day before our departure, at least. Possibly my last day at all. I tried not to think about that, though, and spent several selfish, precious minutes wrapped up in the piles of blankets that made up the makeshift bed in the basement I was sharing with my girlfriend. She was clinging to me tightly, even still asleep. Grateful for all she was and all she had done, I kissed her forehead and held her to me, wishing that today didn’t have to be goodbye.

When she woke, we exchanged our good mornings, shared a kiss, and lay beside one another just a little longer, before the day began. And it began rather quickly, with hardly a second of pause between beginning and end.

The Guardian Angel, as she had called herself, held her own post at the safehouse through the night, but was gone by morning, which worried me in ways I was careful not to show. Red was explaining again the events of the night before to her troubled parents—and both of them had doubly expressed their gratitude to me for keeping her safe, even though we both verified the Angel story—when my sister called.

I picked up after half a ring, and my sister’s regular, upbeat tone sailed over the airwaves:

“Hi, Kenny!”
“Karen!” I yelped, coughing after my sudden burst. I’d been left from the evening’s failed ritual with an on and off pressure in my chest, and Red had even told me that my eyes looked ‘dark and shadowy.’ Of course, she’d passed that off as me needing more rest. She’d heard the Cult talk about the Shadow, but did not bring it up to me that day, which I counted as a blessing.

“Who’s Karen?” I heard my girlfriend ask, coming up behind me and wrapping her arms around my waist.

“My sister,” I told her.

“The one in Salt Lake City?”

“She should be in Salt Lake City,” I said, stressing my answer so Karen would get my drift.

“Mark Harrison gave me a ride down, cuz his brother Gary’s leaving South Park,” my sister answered, as if that was all I needed to hear to be okay with the situation. “So I’m here! Let me in.”

“He—here—here!?” I exclaimed in a panic. “Karen, you’re at the safehouse?”

“Yes!”

“Jesus!”

I grabbed Red’s hand, and together we bolted up to the first floor, where I unlocked the front door and tore it open. No sooner had I done that than I was greeted with an enthusiastic flying hug. “Kenny!” my little sister cried.

“Karen…” I got out, stunned, as I pulled her inside. Red closed the door, and Karen stepped back. The night before had been surreal, but this really cut hard. I’d been so content that she would be okay in SLC. She had a better life there. She was safe there. “Karen, why are you here?” I asked, looking her over. “You’re not hurt, are you? How long have you been out there? You didn’t go home, did you? Please tell me you haven’t been home.”

“I’m okay,” Karen assured me. Smiling brightly, she reached up and ruffled my hair. “Looks like my big brother grew again!”

Huh. Damn, it had been almost four years since I’d seen her, I realized. And in that time, my little sister had matured from a timid, doe-eyed ten-year-old to a bright, self-assured teenager. Her brown hair fell straight, just past her shoulders; she wore silver hoop earrings and a small amount of makeup. But she looked clean and healthy and happy, and that was all I’d ever wanted for her. She was dressed well for winter, wearing jeans, snow boots, and a lined green jacket with fur trim. On her back was slung a pink backpack, and I was pretty sure I knew at least some of the contents she was carrying with her.

“It’s, um… it’s great to see you, Karen,” I told her. “But you know how dangerous South Park is right now.”

“Well,” she shrugged, “maybe I can help out. Something I’m doing at my school is always helping people out. Me and Jenny and Amanda go do community service all the time, I love it!”

“Okay…” I said, warily. “I’m proud of that, sis, but I just want you to be careful.”

“I will!” Karen sang. She turned her gaze, then, on Red, and waved. “Hi! Are you my brother’s girlfriend?” she wondered.
“Um… yes,” said Red, smiling. “Nice to meet you, Karen. I’m Rebecca, but everyone calls me Red.”

“Nice to meet you!” Karen grinned, extending a hand, which Red shook, laughing. “This is your safehouse?”

“It is,” my girlfriend nodded. “Sorry it doesn’t look very welcoming right now. Town really is a scary place right now.”

Karen shrugged, then smiled up at me. “She’s super nice,” she commented. “I approve. Okay, put me to work,” she then said to Red. “I want to help out.”

Red was able to do just that, and almost immediately. Karen tailed both of us, and put in a tremendous amount of work, helping to clean up, passing out breakfast to the younger kids, and just being all-around genuine. Damn. I was so fucking proud of my little sister. What a great kid she’d turned out to be. I just wished the circumstances for our reunion could have been, well, thousands of times better.

While Red was helping Nelly and Bridon with laundry, I pulled Karen upstairs so that we could talk. Actually talk. My sister pretty much figured out exactly where I was going with the conversation the second I dragged her to the first floor, and smiled shyly to show that she was feeling a tiny bit of guilt for coming back home.

“So,” I said, walking her into the living room and sitting her down on the couch. “What’s the real reason you came home?”

“Um, I really did miss you,” Karen said, playing with the knit ends of her most likely handmade pink scarf. “I miss you all the time. And I missed my angel, too.”

“You figured that much out, huh?” I guessed. Karen always used to call Mysterion her guardian angel, which was all of the gratitude from her I’d ever needed. Of course, now she’d gone above and beyond, becoming the Angel herself, and coming to my aid. “When?”

“It didn’t take long, after I started school in Salt Lake,” Karen admitted. “But I never called and told you because I was afraid it might make you sad if you knew I’d figured it out. Me and Jenny and Amanda have been following all the work you do, you and your team, Kenny, you’re so awesome. And we were watching the national broadcast a little while ago. There’ve been a lot of vigils for South Park in Salt Lake City,” she continued on. “Mostly because Mark and Jenny wanted to organize prayers for their family and their friends. But after I saw that broadcast, I knew that praying wasn’t going to be enough. So I had to help.” She bowed her head, as if she’d done something wrong, and finished by saying, “When Mark said he was driving down, I had to come, Kenny, I had to! I tracked you down to here, and I saw that Cult drag you away, and I had to…”

Before she could cry, I set a hand on her back, patted a couple times, and said, “Honestly, Karen, I can’t blame you for wanting to help out. I’m really proud of you. Believe me. But I don’t want you to be too far in danger, sis, okay? The Cult knows I’m Mysterion, and they know that my League and I want to bring Cthulhu down.”

“And you’re going to,” Karen said firmly.

“We’re going to try.”

“You’re going to,” she repeated.

I smiled at that. God, was I glad she’d gotten out of South Park while she had the chance.
She was stronger, for having been on her own, and for being far, far away from our parents and brother. And because of her newfound strength, I slowly laid out for her the abbreviated version of our League plan to storm R’lyeh and destroy Cthulhu. The goals remained the same no matter how I told the story, but I omitted certain things about me that I didn’t want to have to divulge. As far as Karen or Red would know, the Shadow, in relation to me or to Mysterion, was only a coincidence. They would not know that I was an Immortal. Not yet, anyway.

But the entire story intrigued Karen, who told me in turn about how she had done some work as the Guardian Angel back in Salt Lake, and that only Amanda Harrison knew about her secret night duties. She was a symbol there just as Mysterion was for this town; her blatant angel wings to my ambiguous question mark. I hoped that the future would see us working together, if it happened to be in the cards for me. Especially when Karen asked me if she could join the League. I shook my head at first, but finally, after another plea, conceded.

“All right, Karen,” I gave in, “I’ll make you a part of the League… as long as you stick to a specific mission.”

“Sure!” she said, her face lighting up.

“I need the Guardian Angel to do just that,” I said. “Stand guard. My entire team is going to R’lyeh, Karen, and I can’t risk you coming, too. I already have one member staying behind, but if I can have more than one, so much the better. Okay? I’m going to have Red Serge stay behind at the Gate—“ and he didn’t know that yet, but Karen showing up pretty much solidified that for me, since I was feeling Kyle’s worries tenfold— “and I’ll put the Guardian Angel in charge of the rest of the town. Can you do that for me, Karen?”

“I can’t fight beside you?” she asked, looking a little forlorn.

“I’d love it if you could, sis,” I told her, “but it really is for the best if you stay here. Have you researched R’lyeh and the Old Ones at all?”

“Um… not… not really,” Karen admitted.

“Then I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “You can’t go to R’lyeh without any knowledge of it. Besides. I don’t want you to see what might happen to me there.”

“Why? What’s going to happen?!”

“I don’t know, Karen, and that’s just the thing,” I said. Honestly, it felt kind of good talking it all out with her. This was everything I wished I could be telling my girlfriend, so having this discussion with my sister was almost like the perfect practice, to figure out how I could abbreviate things even further for Red, if I wound up having enough time to actually have that talk. “Your big brother’s still got his eye out for you, though,” I added, “I promise.”

Karen was quiet for a moment, then slowly nodded. “I came here to help you, Kenny,” she said, “so whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it. You were always my guardian angel, so whatever I can do to be yours, then fine.” Fixing her eyes on mine directly, she said firmly, “The Guardian Angel will keep an eye on this town while Mysterion is away. But,” she said, prodding my chest with her index finger, “he’d better come back. Because I know of a couple girls who’d be really sad if he didn’t.”

“Yeah,” I sighed, pulling my sister in for a hug. “Just take care of yourself, sis. And take care of Red. I’ll be back tonight, before I need to leave for R’lyeh. All right? Can you hold the fort?”
Karen pulled back and nodded. “I’m on it,” she assured me. “Nothing’s going to touch this safehouse.”

When I got back to the base, it was about ten-thirty, and from the sound echoing forward from the field, the guys were all pretty much well into finishing up work on the Gate portal. I figured I’d be alone in the building for a few minutes before heading out back to help with the rest of construction, but when I passed by the living room area, I stopped short and couldn’t help but stare. Right there on the couch was a couple enjoying a pretty intimate moment, and it was neither of the two couples I figured I’d see stealing a second to make out, not at all.

I’d just walked in on Craig and Henrietta.

“Oh, shit,” I heard Craig mutter, shoving himself back once he noticed me. “Uh…” He turned back to Henrietta and said, unconvincingly, “So that’s what it’s like. You’re welcome.”

Looking bored, Henrietta leaned forward onto her knees and propped her chin up in one lace-gloved hand. She glared up at Craig and said dully, “Oh, and is that how it always ends, too?”

“Only when people walk in on you,” said Craig, glaring at me now. “Because then it’s awkward.”

“Uh, hey,” I said. “I was totally just passing through. Didn’t mean to walk in on you guys. You can keep going, don’t mind me.”

“Nope,” said Craig, standing. He was kind enough, though, to hold out a hand for Henrietta to take as he drew her up to stand beside him. Craziest height difference in any couple I knew, mainly because Craig was so fucking tall—not to mention one of the oddest pairs I could pinpoint. But the way things had been going, they worked, somehow. And I was glad even they’d been able to find something despite all the insanity. “We’re done. Gotta keep working.”

“The Gate portal is almost done,” Henrietta assured me, as the two walked out to join me on my way through the building, to the back field. “Whatever happens now, there might be a lot of interference between our world and R’lyeh.”

“Meaning weird shit to do with me,” I translated.

“Possibly, yes. Also.” At this point we were almost out the door, but Henrietta nudged my arm to get me to hang back. Craig stood close by and pretended not to be as interested in the conversation as he really was. “A lot of your League has quirks,” she said. “That’s what I’ve heard anyway.”

“Uh… really?” I wondered. “I mean, Kyle, I get, but, the other guys?”

“Not everybody, but there’s potential in a lot of them,” said Henrietta. “I wouldn’t be surprised if some latent things came out in R’lyeh. You’re definitely going to advance once you’re there, I can already tell.”

“Advance?”

“Like a video game?” Craig guessed in his blank tone.

“Not like a video game, that’s so ridiculous and such a conformist thing to say,” Henrietta scowled. “You’re Cthulhu’s Shadow, Kenny. If you aren’t already feeling off because of that, you
will. Each Immortal has distinct abilities, and a lot of them have to do with madness. It’s just the way it happens that varies.”

“Maybe I can use whatever I can do to counteract it?” I wondered aloud.

“It’s worth a shot.”

“It’s totally like a video game,” Craig muttered. I laughed, and Henrietta just started brooding (or continued brooding... it was hard to decipher between moods, with her).

I continued speculating on what other ‘quirks’ might possibly come out in R’lyeh, for myself and for the team. Now that I thought of it, a couple guys had also had interesting things happen to them in the past, Craig included, if I recalled our fourth grade (completely accidental and not at all our fault, for the record) trip to Peru correctly. If that was the case, though, I started to worry about what added abilities Professor Chaos might possibly come to possess... he who had already invited the Old Ones’ darkness into his life.

Ugh. I really, really hated thinking it, but... where the fuck was the Coon when we actually needed him? Honestly. What was that guy thinking? Or not thinking, which was pretty probable.

At least the Gate portal really was just about finished. As I approached, Clyde was checking for gaps in the large stone structure, while Stan and Token manned two work stations nearby: Stan was chipping down rocks with his sledgehammer and a large wedge, while Token was hard at work rigging up a metal scaffold, which was something he and Clyde had thought up in hopes of keeping our structure much steadier than Chaos’s had been. Wendy, Timmy and Ike were acting as runners, to grab any other materials needed, and Kyle, armed with work gloves and goggles, was fitting Token’s scaffolds into place with a portable soldering gun.

It replicated the Gate at which Yog-Sothoth stood guard perfectly. A large opening in the structure served as the spot through which we’d soon be leaving South Park for R’lyeh, bypassing all of the Spaces Between. All it really needed now was Henrietta’s touch. She’d seal a new pact with the Gatekeeper, open up the vortex, and we’d be on our way.

Damn.

This was it.

Craig and I stepped in with extra soldering guns to help Kyle with the last of the scaffold, and once Clyde, Stan and I gave it the final look over, we knew it was done. Our portal was complete. We had built our passage to R’lyeh.

“So what’s the plan?” Clyde asked me, standing back to admire our combined efforts. “Should we head out now?”

I shook my head. “I know we’ve been planning for this,” I said, “but it still isn’t something we should rush. Something’s telling me we’ve gotta stay here for at least the next twelve hours, and by that point, we may as well just get plenty of rest and head out first thing tomorrow morning.”

“We should leave before the sun comes up,” Craig suggested.

“Why?” I wondered, since Craig would probably know if there was some significance to that detailed in the Necronomicon, given how much time he (ahem) spent with Henrietta. (He wasn’t getting away from me that easy. I’d find out what the hell was going on. I still liked being nosy and annoying as hell, and I hadn’t had many chances to do that lately, so this was kind of perfect.)
“I dunno,” he admitted dully. “I just thought it’d be cooler if we left in the dark.”

“Craig, you’re an asset, but you’re an idiot,” I said.

“Thanks and fuck you.”

Once we were gathered back in the meeting room, the only conversation anyone wanted to have was one about the night before. Clyde had heeded my call, I found out, but the guys had just missed me—and Red—being taken from the safehouse by the Cult. My wire, Stan said, had been found on the floor, and the team had to stick around to ward off other cloaks that had descended upon Red’s house. Her parents had offered them payment for their help, and I was glad to hear that they’d refused.

But the thing I was most interested in hearing was their interactions with my sister.

“Man, that tripped us up,” said Stan. “It was like… all of a sudden, here was this girl, and we didn’t know what to think, cuz we had no idea who she could possibly be.”

“She unmasked for us, though,” Kyle added.

“Trusted her after that,” Clyde put in.

“Plus, she gave us pretty much a play-by-play of what happened at Cult headquarters,” Stan went on. “Dude, holy shit. That must have been intense. Are you and Red okay?”

“She’s totally fine,” I said. “I’m—dealing. But two major things from yesterday. One: that little Goth kid is a sneaky fucker and I don’t want us to keep any kind of guard up around him just because he’s a kid. He’s fucking dangerous. Two: my sister is pretty set on being the Guardian Angel, and I don’t blame her for wanting to help. I’ve put her in charge of Red’s safehouse. Maybe in the future, she can be a full part of the League, but for now, we’ve got to act separately.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” said Wendy, “but once the guys figured out who she was, we gave her a spare wire.”

“Really?” That was honestly a huge relief.

“Yeah,” said Ike, “she’s in the system. I even started up a log for her. The Guardian Angel, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“It fits,” Kyle grinned. “She saved your life.”

“Yes,” I sighed. “Yeah. She did.”

We couldn’t get much further than that, for the time being, since at that moment, Token’s cell phone rang. It was just past noon. Turns out my gut feeling that we had to stick around South Park for the full day was more than right, it was crucial.

It was a damn good thing Token had his cell phone on him all the time, that’s all I can say… and after that call, we all pretty much wished that Token’s dad had been mayor the entire time, since he was just about one of the only adults in the know, as far as who we were, and at the same time was one of the only people who, once he knew, would not be inclined to go spreading our identities
around, or abuse our help. When he called, that late morning, it was with a threat I should have figured would surface sooner or later.

Nyarlathotep was finally showing another form. The Mist had materialized.

Apparently, some of the remaining police force (and Barbrady, at this point, had joined the insane) had directed the call to the new mayor—that a good thirty people had all fallen into fits of madness when the Mist swirled and cleared around a newcomer. Dressed, according to the accounts, much like an Egyptian pharaoh.

“It’s him,” I growled, when Token recounted what his father had reported. “It’s the Crawling Chaos. If he’s come out of mist form, it means he’s probably looking for a fight.”

“And we’re gonna give it to him, aren’t we?” Clyde asked, cracking his knuckles.

“It’s either that, or basically bid goodbye to South Park,” I answered. “Let’s move out, guys.”

Fine time for me to have a fucking coughing fit.

“Kenny!” just about every voice in the room cried out. Ike rushed at me with a bottle of water, and the second he’d opened it, I was on that thing faster than I even knew I was moving. Gulping down about half of it got me feeling a little better, and I sighed out, leaning against the table, my head bowed as I caught my breath.

When I lifted my head, everyone’s eyes were on me.

“Ti-Timmah?” asked Timmy, from over in his usual corner seat.

“I’m fine, dude,” I assured him. “I’m fine,” I said again, for everyone’s benefit.

“You really don’t look well, Kenny,” said Kyle, concerned.

“I’m fine,” I reiterated. “Guys, really. This is just—it has to do with the Shadow. I’m fine. I’m really fine. I’m dealing. The sooner we get to R’lyeh... well, I won’t say the better, but you know what I mean. It’ll ease up. Right now, though, guys, we’ve got a mission. Ike, Timmy, Henrietta, I’ve got you guys here. And Karen’s got her eye on the safehouse.” I drank down the rest of the water, chucked the bottle with perfect accuracy into the returnables bin on the opposite wall, and said to my team, “Let’s move.”

As the others all filed out to suit up (even Ike and Timmy, who enjoyed the ritual of it even when they weren’t necessarily leaving the base), Stan caught up with me. Something I liked about the way he showed concern was that he knew the difference between concern and pity. I didn’t want anyone to pity me; that was weak. Stan was always really genuine, just a fucking good friend. I reiterate that I was glad it was him who’d first started remembering my deaths.

“You sure you’re feeling up for this?” Stan asked me, patting my back a couple times while I coughed.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him. “If anything, this’ll cure me a little.”

“Okay,” he said skeptically. “We’re all worried about you, dude. Let me or Kyle or any of the guys know if we can help you out a little.”

“You’re already heading into R’lyeh with me, Stan,” I grinned, coughing a couple times from
the constant irritation. “I’d say you guys’re doing a hell of a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

And… okay. While the moment was there, I had to go for it. “So,” I pried, “you and Kyle, huh?” I elbowed him in the ribs and felt myself smirk when Stan flushed with that, ‘Oh, shit, does he know we’re sleeping together?’ look (you know the one), which only egged me on further. “What’s going on with you guys?”

Stan laughed nervously. “Just… y’know,” he said, trying to just pass it off. “Yeah?” I prodded. “Man… you guys. Shit, it’s stuff like this that makes me miss school. I’d know fuckin’ everything if we were still in school.”

Stan laughed again and ground his knuckles into my shoulder. “Dude,” he said with a wide grin. “Cthulhu’s Shadow or not, I’m glad you’re still you, Kenny.”

Those words, honest to God, helped me get through the day a little better. It was tough knowing my sister and girlfriend were almost right in harm’s way, but the two of them had been so positive and reassuring… of me. Not Mysterion, but Kenny. Now adding in Stan’s words on top of that—I don’t know; it was strange, like I was almost considering Kenny to be one more person Mysterion had to protect.

*Oh, God,* I thought, *please let me get out of this with my life.*

I was prepared to die, and to accept death, of course, but in the end… it really was about wanting to live. Live, and just be me.

– – –

Nyarlathotep was easy enough to track down. We basically just had to follow the sirens. I kept up my endurance as best I could, even though my body seemed, the closer we got to the dark Messenger, to be screaming out for R’lyeh. The sun was out that day, but the sky was cloaked in an overcast grey. The Mist was growing stronger. By the day, by the hour—Nyarlathotep was making our town his playground. Madness loomed around us. It was hard to estimate how many remained sane, but we had to fight to protect whatever was left. This was still our home. The Old Ones couldn’t have it. As long as the Shadow League fought, South Park would not fall.

There was a barricade at the edge of town, out on the mountain road that led out toward the highway and the rest of (presumably untouched) Colorado. I couldn’t tell if it was manmade, or even, I realized, if Chaos had built it, but presiding over it, at the top and center, was that dark, tall man, his accoutrements glittering gold in the dim sunlight. He sat in a makeshift throne, but stood when we approached. We, the League. We all, I believe, got the same sense—this was our last chance. We had to push the Crawling Chaos back, if not defeat it completely.

“Nyarlathotep!” I called out, fighting back the need to cough.

“There you are,” said the man, whose true form had been shirked most likely only in the interest of taunting us with the idea that we’d have a fair fight. Oh, he’d get a fight. Fucker. He began a sweeping descent from the barricade, and held his long arms out, as if to show that he was unarmed. “Come to offer up your League to my ranks, Shadow?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I growled. “But to be honest, we don’t have time for small talk.”
As soon as I’d said that, I ducked back, allowing Craig and Mosquito to step forward, pistols drawn, and start to open fire on our nemesis. Nyarlathotep took the shots and laughed, glaring at me with empty eyes. Oh, shit. I’d seen that stare before. Hollow, black and white eyes, pits of hell more than anything…

Chaos.

“Chaos…” I felt myself say. I drew my own pistol and fired two shots between those eyes. Nyarlathotep fell back, evaporated into mist, and re-appeared in human form a foot away from where he’d been standing. “You’re possessing Chaos, aren’t you?!”

“What?!” Mosquito yelled.

“You must be,” I went on.

“What happened to no small talk, Shadow?” the true Chaos mocked me.

My lungs started burning. Whispers, like an incantation, momentarily invaded my ears. My tongue prickled with the need to speak, but what came out of me wasn’t English. I cannot for the life of me think of how to write out the words phonetically, but the thing that bothered me most was that I knew instinctively the translation of what I said:

“You should be more respectful when you speak to me, Nyarlathotep.”

“Mysterion!” I heard Kite and Toolshed call out together.

I don’t think I could have heeded them even if I wanted to. My focus was only on Nyarlathotep. My lungs still burned, but this time with the desire for more air. So I drew in a deep breath, and as I did, my hands and feet felt hot, despite the snow on the ground and the chill in the air. But when I moved my right hand to slide my pistol back into its holster, I understood why. My shadow moved out much farther than it usually did, exaggerating my own movement and even creeping to try absorbing other shadows around me.

Nyarlathotep took a couple steps back, and I couldn’t help but grin. “What’s wrong?” I said, glad to be in control over my words and language this time. “Scared of your shadow?” I held out my left hand on an impulse, and on the ground, my shadow warped into spiraling tendrils, rather than showing a silhouette of my fingers. Cthulhu, as I well knew, had that distinguishing feature of tentacles over his gaping mouth, so it stood to reason that the Shadow he cast would reflect that. “Or is it just Cthulhu’s?!”

Inside, I was trembling with fear. Fear of myself, fear of what I could do—but all of that was drowned out by my want and need to take this adversary down. I lifted my left arm up over my head, and with a rush of my cape, up off of the ground came my half-sentient shadow, snaking up like the odd fauna of R’lyeh and reaching out in all directions, blindly groping about for its target.

Okay, I’d have to work on accuracy, but now at least I knew more or less what I was capable of. I could control my shadow… or, well, it felt more like it was an added appendage. The burning my body felt was from the exertion of so much as having a shadow. The pressure left from the failed ritual was the source of my control. The Cult had wanted the Shadow to ‘awaken,’ something which, I was sure (as was Henrietta), was meant to happen only when I made it back, alive and accepting of death, to R’lyeh. To Cthulhu.

My shadow curled around Nyarlathotep’s leg, and I lifted him up—his struggling proved that he was incapable of shape-shifting while he was in my grasp. Well, that was good news. It meant
that I really could defeat him.

I tossed the pharaoh back into the barricade, atop of which was now perched, ready to strike, the Human Kite, whose psychic prowess delivered when he sent an avalanche sliding down on Nyarlathotep while the Great Messenger was still in human form and recovering from my blow. The barricade, built up out of scraps from town—doors, sheets of metal, all manner of otherwise unused lumber—crumbled down like a landslide. Kite took to the air long before he could get caught in his own destructive wave, and made a perfect landing beside me.

Craig (who was just plain exceeding my expectations for his first field mission) and Mosquito now crouched, both aiming at the spot where Nyarlathotep had fallen. My shadow had concentrated, and now swirled up slightly around me like a bog, but that didn’t stop Kite and Toolshed from staying close to me on either side.

“Nice going,” Kite congratulated me. “Guess you’re figuring out this Shadow thing, huh, Mysterion?”

“I’m getting there,” I admitted.

“Well, whatever you did, it seemed to work,” said Toolshed. “You guys get him?”

“Too soon to tell,” I growled. “I wouldn’t bet on it.”

With perfect timing to make things worse, TupperWear’s voice came over the wire: “Fifty cloaks inbound, guys. Stay alert.”

“McElroy and that Goth kid are in the lead,” Marpesia warned. “He’s got the Necronomicon.”

“Henrietta,” I heard Craig say into his own wire, “better keep that book open.”

“Should I read?” asked the only Goth I’d ever trusted.

“Probably wouldn’t hurt,” I told her.

“I’ve got some of the words memorized,” said Craig, “so I can keep up the Yog-Sothoth pact in case the wire goes out.”

“I am so fucking glad you’re on the team,” I said to him with a grin.

“Yep,” said Craig, keeping his pistol trained on his target.

“All right,” I instructed over the wire, “TupperWear. Marpesia. You guys do what you can with the outer ranks. Kite, Toolshed, you guys head out to hit them first. Craig and Mosquito, you guys—”

“Uh… Mysterion,” Mosquito said, sounding almost wary, but keeping his guard up. “I think we might need them to stick around here.”


I looked over at the barricade again, as I sometimes have the tendency to let my eyes wander while I’m doing nothing but communicating by wire, and now I wished I hadn’t looked away for a second. The barricade began collapsing on itself, and an awful, earsplitting roar bellowed out from beneath it. A rumbling was heard, and even felt underfoot, and a few seconds later, the entire
barricade seemed to explode out in all directions, sending pieces flying like shrapnel overhead at a rate that not even the Human Kite was fast enough to deflect. As the shadows of the objects that had once made up the large wall sailed past, my own shadow began to twist out in all directions.

The whisper I’d been hearing in my head started to form words. They weren’t English, they were Cthulhu’s language, but I knew what they were saying:

“Collect them.”

Collect them? Oh. Gather the shadows. Make them belong to me. Could I do that? Could I seriously do that? It was worth a shot.

I held both hands out and ticked my fingers forward and back, as that seemed to work on my shadows much in the way that a nimble puppeteer’s fingers can control his marionettes. Only this was literally no strings attached. My shadow just needed a sense of direction. So I grasped at the air while my shadow snaked around me, gathering up the shadows cast by the flying objects until I’d collected enough to shoot up overhead and create a black shield of darkness around all five of us, at least long enough to keep us out of harm’s way of falling pieces.

When the shadows then returned to the objects to which they belonged, I fell into a slight coughing fit. Fuck. Fuck—that had just happened. That ritual hadn’t even really gone underway, but shit had happened. Something was happening to me, and I was pretty damn sure I didn’t like it. I didn’t like feeling like I was burning up. I didn’t like having that much power.

Or did I?

NO. No, no, no. Keep your head, Kenny McCormick. Mysterion is a symbol of justice, not destruction. Use the shadows—don’t be consumed by them.

That was my new mantra.

Don’t be consumed by the shadows.

When the shadow died down, I didn’t look at the others. I knew they’d most likely be staring, and I couldn’t blame them, but we all had to keep our eyes on the fight. And right now, the fight meant figuring out how the fuck to subdue Nyarlathotep, who had again shifted form, this time into that enormous sphinx I had found myself up against on the night Chaos had gone after Red.

“Oh, shit…” I heard the Human Kite mutter.

“Gonna go ahead and guess we should save our bullets?” Craig said angrily.

“Fuck, I don’t have anywhere to take off from,” Kite snarled.

“No,” said Toolshed, and I got his drift as soon as he started speaking, “but you can climb.”

“Up that enormous fucking thing? I don’t think so.”

“I’ll distract it,” Toolshed offered. “Mosquito, Craig, you guys help me out. Sucks, but we might have to waste some ammo. It’ll at least annoy him and get his attention off of Kite.”

“And what’s the plan after I get up there?” Kite wondered.

“You get this,” said Toolshed, unstrapping his chainsaw from the new holster for it on his back, where it crossed his sledgehammer. “I’m gonna be using it for now, but you can lift it, right?”
“Yeah, easy.”

“Great,” Toolshed grinned. “Now, Mysterion, you’re the only one who can kill him, but do you see where I’m going with this?”

“Yeah, you’re a genius,” I complimented him.

“It’s just like those things in R’lyeh,” he shrugged. “Just, you know, bigger, scarier, and probably a lot angrier at us.”

“Oh, there’s that,” I remarked, rolling my eyes.

“No more wasting time,” said Mosquito, “let’s move!”

But before a single one of us could move, a line of ten cloaks began their advance. We were stuck. Nyarlathotep threatened in one direction, and the Cult strode forward, relentless, from the other. There was no way we could take on both threats at once. This was a good lesson for R’lyeh: *have a hell of a lot of other ideas ready.*

“Shit,” Mosquito snapped. “Someone’s gotta…”

“Ugh,” Toolshed groaned. “Backup plan, then?”

“No offense,” Craig said to Mosquito, “but I think you and me’ve gotta take these guys.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Mosquito nodded. “Can you guys hold up until we can get back to you?”

“We can manage,” I assured him. “You take care of the Cult. We’ll get things started here.”

The two nodded, and took off, leaving me, Toolshed, and the Human Kite to deal with the looming monster. “We can still stick to the plan,” said Toolshed, drawing out his drill guns. “I’ll just have to work double while you move, Kite, all right?”

“On it,” Kite nodded.

“Mysterion?”

“I’ve gotta get into his shadow,” I realized. “I’ve just gotta call up a little more to work with, and I think I can get there.”

“All right. I’m moving in.”

Despite our new disadvantage, Toolshed ran forward, loading and readying both drill guns as he moved. “I’m gonna scope out the barricade wreck for things I can use,” Kite said to me as the two of us approached at a slower, but still well-paced, gait. “What’s your plan?”

“I’m gonna get as close as I can,” I decided, “and then see exactly what I can do with this Shadow thing.”

“Keep your head, all right?” Kite said, prodding my arm once so he’d be sure I got his meaning.

“Yeah,” I said. “Same to you. Let’s bring this guy down.”

Kite nodded, and rushed forward. He must have found plenty of ammo left in the barricade
debris, as I saw him make full use of several sturdy bits of lumber and metal, sending them darting from the ground and toward the enormous sphinx, who towered above us and practically blocked out the sun.

Leaving things in shadow.

I’d told Stan before we’d come on this mission that this battle might help cure me, and now that I thought of it, the more shadows surrounded me, the better prepared I truly did feel. If there was one thing that could hold my focus now, it was the multitude of that natural, swirling darkness. Whenever my own shadow met with another, I felt stronger. I burned. Burned with drive. With power.

I had felt pain all my life.

For once… I felt Immortal.

Toolshed was not backing down. He’d chosen to challenge the beast head-on, and fired off almost too many rounds at that Messenger of madness, but I was sure that, to Nyarlathotep, the attacks were barely even scratches. Ugh. Something like that did not belong on Earth. Did not belong in our dimension. Did not belong in our town.

…Now, hold on.

Supposedly, I was the new Messenger. Meaning that I could travel in the Spaces Between. I had proven that I could carry others through as well. The Coon had once commanded Cthulhu to banish the rest of us to R’lyeh. As that thing’s Shadow, I was beyond certain that I could do the very same thing. My portals to R’lyeh from Purgatory had been small patches of shadow all along. Clues to myself, to my Immortal ability, most likely. Clues if not actual pieces. Shadows could carry one to R’lyeh, but not out. You needed the book or the Gate to get out.

Maybe I’d get the chance to kill Nyarlathotep, here and now—but at the very least, I could get him the fuck out of my town.

Nyarlathotep let out a livid roar, shook off the drill bits in his left paw, then brought that enormous, taloned foot down, trapping Toolshed beneath him. Nyarlathotep leaned down and snorted out a mist through his nostrils as he dug his talons in, causing his victim to let out an involuntary cry.

“Toolshed!” Kite and I shouted out at once.

“Shit…” Toolshed muttered. “Trying to kill me? Not gonna work this time.”

He sat up a little, which, I was sure, only drove one of Nyarlathotep’s claws in further. I had no idea what he was doing, but whatever it was, none of us liked it. Frantically, I looked around for additional shadows to call into mine. Call… call! That was it. Cthulhu had a call, which came in dreams. Nyarlathotep had a call in the form of those flutes and drums. I must have, too. What was it?

Those whispers?

I opened my mouth, ready to give it all over, then thought again. “Henrietta,” I requested over the wire. “You’ve got the Necronomicon open to the page with the pact, right?”

“Same page as it’s been on, yeah,” my informant answered.
“Is there anything there that you think can help me?” I wondered. “I mean to amp up the Shadow and get Nyarlathotep the fuck out of our dimension.”

“Probably.”

“Read it to me.”

“You get the fuck off of him!” the Human Kite shouted, holding out his right hand, then raising it above his head, bringing up into the air with it a large sheet of metal from the destroyed barricade that I hadn’t even seen lying nearby.

Henrietta began reciting words from the Old Ones’ vocabulary, and I heard the whispers echo her. The stronger the words came, the keener I was able to zero in on what my shadow ‘felt’ like—that warm, added appendage, which seemed to prefer a snakelike form. So I let it snake out from my feet, slithering along atop the snow as it licked up other shadows in its path toward Nyarlathotep.

But just at that moment, I realized why Toolshed had sat up. He had just enough room to grab his chainsaw from off his back and rev it up. Lying back down, he held the chainsaw to Nyarlathotep’s thick ankle, and pushed it forward. I heard the chain work like a charm, cutting through otherworldly layers of tissue, muscle, and then even bone. Nyarlathotep winced back, but Toolshed didn’t quit—he got up onto his knees and slowly got himself standing, all the while pushing that chainsaw through, until he had made a clean cut, and had succeeded in slicing Nyarlathotep’s left front foot off.

“KITE!” he hollered. “Get up there! Ricochet in ten!”

“Shit, I’ll never—wait, give me a boost!” Kite shouted. “Mysterion, or someone, anyone, I just need a quick basket toss!”

“I’m a little busy,” I said, as my shadow multiplied from a single serpentine into a full array of tendrils, the more it hunted and gathered.

Neither Craig nor Mosquito was presently available, but before I even had to wonder how they could get to us in time, Toolshed switched out his chainsaw for his sledgehammer, and, though he winced once before he moved, darted away from Nyarlathotep and toward me and Kite. “Jump onto the mallet!” he commanded.

Keeping the metal sheet suspended above his head, Kite did as instructed and gave himself a running start, and jumped at just the right time; Toolshed swung upward with the sledgehammer, which Kite was able to use to kick off from and make it up onto the sheet in midair, then kick himself airborne from there, spread his glider, and sail over to land on Nyarlathotep’s back before the monstrous Messenger could further react or retaliate from having lost an appendage.

Toolshed made a sudden stop, skidding in the snow, then grabbed his chainsaw, unlocked the safety, and hurled it up into the air. Kite locked onto it and moved it toward him; he caught it a second later, revved it, then ran up Nyarlathotep’s neck to bring the destructive thing right down into Nyarlathotep’s skull.

“FUCK YEAH!” Toolshed shouted, though I knew even he was aware that it was too early to celebrate just yet. Fucking shit, those two moved as such a fluid unit. The League really benefited from having teams; I’d always known that, even though I had preferred to take missions alone.
Or, wait. No. I wasn’t always alone.

I’d always had—no, I’d always been—the Shadow. My battle partner had always been right there at my feet and fingertips. Well. Time to put it to good use.

Nyarlathotep dissolved again into a mist, but was faltering. Kite fell to the ground but made a perfect two point landing. When Nyarlathotep materialized again, his appearance was human… and still missing his left hand. Shit… a human could do damage on an Immortal! Given how many times I’d died, I supposed that much should have been certain. Maybe that was the trick. If we killed him, he’d come back. If we wounded him enough, it might take a long time for him to heal.

Then again… I did have the power to kill him. And shit, was I working on that.

As Kite took the chainsaw down on Nyarlathotep again, resulting in another bone-crushing whine from the gears and a much more human-like cry from Nyarlathotep, Toolshed ran back over, pulling the awl from his belt. As soon as he’d made it over, Kite shut down the chainsaw and stepped back in favor of lifting up that large metal sheet again, while Toolshed grabbed hold of the Messenger.

“Nobody kills me twice,” Toolshed snarled as he shoved the awl deep into Nyarlathotep’s gut. “Got that?”

“Mysterion, your shadow!” Kite called out, still keeping the metal sheet high above his head as a backup plan, and, I realized in that moment, as additional shadow. “Take it! Go!”

I drove the tendrils toward the generous helping Kite had offered, and gathered the darkness around me. “Nyarlathotep!” I hollered out, locking my eyes on him. Toolshed got in one last good stab with the awl, then rushed back, so that I’d have no interference to worry about. My mouth opened again, and I echoed Henrietta’s words. It was the prayer to make the pact with Yog-Sothoth, to grant entrance to R’lyeh, and it did exactly what I’d hoped it would.

My gathered shadows turned the white snow black; opened a pit of darkness between old and new Messengers. That was the moment I knew. I was more powerful than Nyarlathotep. The Shadow was, at least. His movement ceased. Nyarlathotep had been the walking deity, the Crawling Chaos, but the stronger I’d get with those shadows, the less he’d be able to move, and he’d fall into a dead sleep just like all the others. Then it’d be all Cthulhu’s game, with me as the movable piece.

Oh, I intended to put a kink in whatever game that was, but for now, first thing was first. The shadow churned and licked across the ground, swirling and tossing without any regard to reason or order. My shadow was its own blind army. Tendrils rose from the blackness and caught Nyarlathotep by the arms, the waist, the legs, the neck, and finally, the tip of his cracked skull.

“Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn!” I shouted at my target. “Say hi to that fucker for me! Tell him he can dream all he fucking wants, but his Shadow’s getting restless!” With a final cry, Nyarlathotep was swallowed up by the grasping tendrils of my shadow, and dragged down, down into the earth, down further still into sunken R’lyeh, where his presence was sure to wake Cthulhu.

And I realized that was more or less exactly what I wanted. If I could pit Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu against each other, I’d have it kind of easy. Let those other Old Ones just take each other out, and leave the victor to deal with me.

I let myself relax, and the shadows dissipated, revealing the white snow, reflecting the sun as
“Did it work?” Henrietta asked over the wire.


“Where’d he go this time?” I heard Toolshed ask, as he and Kite walked up to me.

“I sent him to R’lyeh,” I said. It was at that point I realized I was panting for breath. That last shadow wave had really taken a lot out of me, and now that my shadow had decreased again to normal, I was feeling winded.

“Mysterion, that’s amazing,” said the Human Kite. On either side of me, my two closest comrades helped me steady myself, and then Kite spoke again, “You good to keep going?”

“Huh? I’m fine,” I said. “Can’t stop now. You know how it is. How about you guys?”

“Oh, I’m set to go,” Kite said. “I just don’t know about…”

“I can keep going,” Toolshed assured both of us. “Fuckin’ Nyarlathotep ripped up another shirt,” he grumbled, gesturing to the tear from the sphinx’s claw… located in exactly the same spot where he’d been shot on Halloween (and Kite really did not look happy about that). His armor, however, boasted only a scratch underneath, which was fortunate. “Otherwise, I’m fine. TupperWear,” he said into the wire, “what’s the count?”

“Fifty was all they came with,” was the answer. “We cut that down to about thirty.”

“You guys get Nyarlathotep?” Mosquito asked.

“I sent him back to R’lyeh,” I told him, finally mustering up some pride in what I’d been able to do as the three of us started walking, “but he’s ailing.”

“Nice,” Craig commented.

“Mysterion, way to go,” TupperWear added. “You guys good to help us finish these guys off?”


“I’ve got him kind of occupied,” said Marpesia, “but I’m pretty sure he’s looking for you.”

“No kidding.”

“Head West, Mysterion,” Red Serge instructed from the base. “I’ve got a lock on Marpesia.”

From the position of the sun, I found West easily, and changed course accordingly. Kite and Toolshed hung back when we came upon Mosquito and Craig, who were occupied with about a dozen cloaks that were putting up a hell of a fight. They were holding their own, Mosquito with his stunners and Craig with his fists and swords, but four sets of hands were much better than two, so I continued toward Marpesia on my own.

She and TupperWear were back to back by this point, and completely surrounded. A good fifteen or sixteen cloaks encircled them, with McElroy facing Marpesia head on, while the little Goth seemed to be squaring off against TupperWear. In the kid’s hands was, indeed, a Necronomicon. “Just stand down,” the kid was demanding. “It’ll be so much easier if you just hand him over.”
“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen,” said TupperWear. He grabbed one of his hurling discs and threw it accurately enough to knock the book right out of the kid’s hands. It flew skyward, and while the kid was muttering a slew of curses, TupperWear nudged Marpesia, who turned her attention off of McElroy in favor of climbing with a quick boost up onto TupperWear’s shoulders, where she caught the *Necronomicon*. She then leapt off and dealt a roundhouse kick to the three Cultists who broke formation in an attempt to grab her.

“No!” the little Goth barked, clearly furious that the assembled team had started to scatter.

I whipped out a *shuriken* and hurled it at the Goth, but he ducked at the last second, and the sharp weapon buried instead into the back of one of his companions. He scowled back at me, and made a rush at Marpesia, managing to wrench the *Necronomicon* back from her. But no sooner had the kid taken refuge behind a line of his companions, than our entire situation turned around.

A flash darted by, and when it was gone, so, too, was the *Necronomicon*, once again.

“What the hell?!” the kid scowled.

“Did you know,” came a familiar voice from behind the row of armed cloaks, “that not only are coons stealthy little motherfuckers…” —and here that entire row went down; blood flew as cloaks were torn, snow was stained but I did not care— “but they can steal whatever they want and nobody really cares. You know why?”

“Why?” spat the little Goth, as the last of his cloaked comrades went down.

“Because.” As the Cultist fell, the speaker was revealed. There he was again, back with all of his befitting arrogance intact. Fuck it. We’d take it, because he hadn’t diverted, and he hadn’t really quit. Up he stood, retracting his—holy shit—newly modified and sharpened, prehensile finger armor talons, and held up in his free hand the book that had gone missing from the Goth’s hands. Staring the kid down, the once-eponymous League hero flashed his teeth in a haughty grin just before he shouted, “Nobody fucks with the Coon!”

“Did I just hear—?” Red Serge yelped into the wire.

“He’s back?!” shouted Toolshed.

“Coon’s back, bitches!” the Coon announced. “Back and *pissed off*!” On that, he sprang at the little Goth. I was so fucking stunned I didn’t know what to think, but there the truth was. The League was all back together. It seemed that Cthulhu’s wrangler would be joining us in R’lyeh after all.

I rushed forward, and our small team of four easily cut down the remaining cloaks, leaving only the Goth and McElroy to deal with. “Ha, ha!” the Coon spat at the two of them. “I got the book!”

McElroy’s face twisted—he did not know whether to scowl or smile, and the result was just as distorted as his selfish heart. Of its own volition, as hatred for the man that had caused me so much grief lately beat in my heart, my shadow began to warp. Once again, it snaked out, and this time latched itself to the shadow of the book the Coon was holding. As if it could very well absorb the power of the *Necronomicon* that way.

Oh. It very well could. And did.

“Hello, Mysterion,” said McElroy. “Or, should I say, a pleasure to finally see the Shadow of Cthulhu, summoned at last, as I had always dreamed it.”
“What do you want from me?” I snarled at him, as my shadow split out into tendrils. I saw my companions shirk back a little as once again that churning mass swirled about from beneath my feet.

“Lead us, Great One!” the Cultist grinned, holding out his arms, as if he still had a following behind him to show off to me. “Lead us to the tomb of Cthulhu!”

“Oh, I’ll show you a tomb, McElroy,” I said, practically without thinking. “How about yours?”

“Not likely,” said the man. The Goth, I noticed, was taking this time to slink away. But he wasn’t my target right now. McElroy was. In several ways, this was going to be much more satisfying than what I’d been able to do to Nyarlathotep. In many other ways, however, it pained me more than I can describe. Because in doing this, I felt like I had lost a shard of myself, somewhere in the Shadow. “You see,” McElroy blabbed on, “I have been praying to the Great Cthulhu my entire life. I am as devout as they come. I helped to bring you into this world, Shadow. In the End Time, it is to you we are meant to come to be granted Cthulhu’s blessing and—“

“Quiet,” I commanded, as my shadow wrapped around his ankle.


“No thanks to you for being an annoying alarm clock,” I grumbled. “Do me a favor and shut up.”

“But you are only just brushing the surface of your potential,” said the man with the worst of one-track minds. “Think of the chaos you could spread to the world!”

“This isn’t chaos, McElroy,” I said, making damn sure he saw that I was serious. “This is what justice looks like.”

And, while he was caught in my shadow, I took him down. I took advantage of the situation, and willed every shadow around me into the tendrils I’d created. As shadows do, they followed the motion of my left hand, as I spun it around in the air in front of me, so the shadows twisted and swirled along the ground, creeping round and around the man I held responsible for my otherworldly lot in life.

Is this what you planned, by summoning the Shadow of Cthulhu, Jim McElroy?

I DIDN’T THINK SO.

His eyes widened, and for once displayed fear. The shadows pulled him to the ground, and the head Cultist lay there, face down in the snow. I watched, hardly even in control anymore, as the shadows then danced along the ground, regardless of the light source. As they washed over him like a tide of tar, rolled him onto his back, and seeped into his eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

And suffocated him.

The head Cultist’s body was then engulfed in shadows, and I felt an awful, erratic, mad kind of joy wash through me when the shadows subsided, and only the body was left. His eyes and mouth remained open, gaping and staring at nothing, his skin white and fragile as paper.

The Goth had escaped with his life, but McElroy had not. I heard footsteps approaching behind me, and Clyde’s un-altered voice asked from my right, “Is he dead?”
“Looks that way,” I answered.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying he deserved it.”

“Not at all,” I admitted, “but I just went against code.”

“Mysterion—“

“I killed someone in combat,” I said, shaking my head.

“Not really,” I heard Toolshed say as he approached. I turned away from the drying husk of a corpse, to look at my proud, confident companions, each and every one of them standing by, ready for anything. “Your shadow did. Cthulhu’s Shadow did.”

“Right,” I snapped. “I’m Cthulhu’s Shadow.”

“You don’t have to be.” That was the Human Kite. “Look, Mysterion, we’ve all been talking, since last night, and we all pretty much agree that you don’t have to be that. You’ve got your own soul and your own free will, and maybe you were born an Immortal, but you can break it.”

“And we’re going to help,” Toolshed finished.

“That’s the plan, and we’re sticking to it,” said TupperWear.

“We believe that you can separate from the Shadow,” said Marpesia.

“We’re going to break this curse,” Kite said firmly. “Break the possession on Chaos, and break whatever it is that happened to you seventeen years ago.”

I managed to smile, just a little. I was still uneasy, since I didn’t want to use these powers destructively, but all the same, I addressed the League: “Let’s take stock of what we’ve got, then, and—“

“Aye!” the Coon barked out, walking up from wherever he’d been. “No goin’ back without me, got that?”

“I thought you quit,” said TupperWear.

“Pff, what were you gonna do, replace me with Craig?”

“I didn’t replace you,” said Craig. “I’m better.”

“AYE!”

“Calm down, children,” Marpesia sighed, folding her arms.

“Craig’s in,” I told the Coon, “and you’re back in if you want to be, but let’s talk about it. We’re heading back to the base. As I was saying. Take stock, and see what’s left to do till we leave.”

We’d done well, that morning. And now we didn’t have to worry quite as much about the safety of our hometown once we’d left for R’lyeh. There was still the issue of the Cult to deal with, but the Guardian Angel had that covered. Things were looking up for the town.

Looking beyond the ruined barricade, though, we saw the earlier damage that Nyarlathotep had done. The road was destroyed.
South Park was isolated.

It was R’lyeh or nowhere, now.

On the way back to the base, it was pretty clear that Toolshed had taken the worst hit. Again. Then again, he was the one charging more fearlessly than anyone else, the one who had dared to go directly up against Nyarlathotep, while others kept attacking at a distance. Once we’d returned, Stan showered off, and Kyle and I essentially commanded him to take it easy. I would’ve stuck by them for a little while longer, were I not completely distracted by the returning presence in the group.

Everyone has limits, and just about all of us in the League had recently been pushed to ours. There were those who remained composed, at least when the time called for that, and others who had lost everything and were willing to risk everything as a result.

And then there was Cartman.

He’d quit the League, only to return in the heat of battle. He’d brought back with him the little Goth’s Necronomicon, and I ordered a talk with him alone in the meeting room, while the others took it easy while they still could. He seemed unhurt, physically, but bothered to an extent.

“So,” I said upon joining him. “You came back.”

He was sitting at the seat he’d always occupied, the book laying in front of him. Something was off. He had his forehead resting in his clasped hands, with his elbows propped up against the table; he looked downright contemplative. When he moved his arms to be folded on the table, I saw that he was glaring blankly at the Necronomicon, as if waiting for it to start shouting something at him, to give him something to react to.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You’re, uh… not really acting like you were during the fight,” I noted, taking a few steps closer.


He sighed, and bowed his head. “Fuck. Fuck everything. I gotta talk to someone. I just gotta talk.”

No one knew exactly what made him tick, but we knew his basics, what he thrived on. But that list was dwindling into nonexistence, and it had hurled him into a hole, a pit he couldn’t claw out of, due to his unfamiliarity with such a space. In short, he was drowning in reality, which, to him, was surreality, and he was slowly being forced to open his eyes and conform to its rules.

“Dude,” I said, keeping a cautious distance but leaving all previously standing judgment out of my voice, “what happened to you?”

“I don’t have anything, Kenny,” he said, his words broken and real. I couldn’t believe this was even him talking. But then, we’d all changed a little, lately.

“What’re you talking about?” I wondered.

“I mean I’ve got fucking nothing!” he spat, staring up at me, eyes cloudy and irritated, his usual fighting spirit all but drained completely. “All I do is fuck up so hard you guys hate me, and the only family I got doesn’t even know who I am anymore!”
“Your mom?” I guessed.

Cartman stood, pale faced, and pulled down the high collar of his jacket, revealing that his neck was roughed and red. I did not ask why. It was too obvious. Lianne Cartman was always smothering her son, over-coddling even into his young adulthood. The figurative smothering had turned to literal strangulation, and he had no one else to yell his frustrations out to, with Butters gone… after issuing death threats of his own, no less. For once in his sixteen years of fighting to stay on top, Eric Cartman had broken down. And because the situation was so foreign to him, he had no idea what to do.

“Oh, shit…” I remarked. Cartman snorted, and lifted his collar again. “Fuck, Cartman, I’m sorry.”

“Dropped her off at the hospital, like four this morning,” he told me. “They strapped her down and called it good. Now I’ve got nothing. I’ve got nothing, so you gotta let me back in!”

“Dude… dude, you’re in, you’re in,” I assured him, daring to reach forward and give him a reassuring hit on the shoulder. “We need the Coon!”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really!” I practically shouted. “Do I really have to spell it out? We need you to help wrangle Cthulhu. You’re still a part of the League. The other guys’ll all be totally on board with you coming back onto the team. All right?”

“Fine. But only cuz you did admit you guys need me.”

I rolled my eyes. He had a weird way of working through logic, but whatever he said, we always pretty much just had to take it or leave it.

“I’m just glad to have the team whole again. Come on,” I urged, “I’ll show you the Gate portal we made.”

Of course, I should’ve known that would’ve been a tough thing for him to so much as stand near. Clyde, Craig and Henrietta were outside quadruple-checking on that thing, and all of us bore witness to the way that Cartman just seemed to fade out when he saw it. “This is it,” I said. “This is our ticket to R’lyeh. What’s up?”

“Nothin’.”

“You sure?”

Cartman fought himself for a moment. He had a tendency to do that… snap out of his usual haughty calm and act like a person with a conscience, maybe even a heart. He shook his head and gave in. “I just… I kinda miss Butters, okay?” he got out.

“You do, huh?” I sighed.

It was the first time in a while the name ‘Butters’ had even been spoken around any of us. It was all just ‘Chaos’ now. But even then, there was some hope. I had the feeling that Chaos lay in wait for us in R’lyeh, but that his possession would start to take its toll. Perhaps weakening
Nyarlathotep had weakened him as well. There was no way of knowing until we got there.

Soon. Very, very soon.

“So let’s just go get him,” I said, when Cartman hadn’t reacted.

Our returning member glared at the Gate portal for a good minute before his old determined spark glittered in the corner of his eye, and he half-forced a grin as he said, “I just wanna kick that dumb kid’s ass.”

“Well, all right,” I said, slapping Cartman on the back. “Just a few hours to go, man. It’s good to have you back on the team.”

“Kenny.”

“What?”

“We are gonna win.”

I grinned fully, proud to have so much support, even from such hard-won teammates as Eric Cartman. “Hell, yeah we are.”

McElroy was gone. I was still on the fence of how I felt about that. Nyarlathotep was wounded and banished to R’lyeh. My sister had promised to protect the town while we were gone. Things really were looking up.

But, and I wasn’t able to hide this fear much longer, I did worry about my own abilities. About what the Goth kid knew, and how he might still try to use me. I only had a few hours to get over my fear.

And the events of that evening set me further postulating. I’d figure out my place in the Mythos soon enough. But it was all I could ask that I still had a place here. If anything, what happened that night only further justified my want to not die.

I had so much to live for. So much life I still wanted to see. And so many people who might be lost if I vanished from existence for good.

But no guarantees of survival. Just a head full of questions and credos.

– – –

Kyle

I should have figured—we all should have, really—that things would start getting worse after the Nyarlathotep attack. And as we were gathered in the meeting room that night, listening to Henrietta’s penultimate incantation in Cthulhu’s language, which she insisted upon reciting in order to prepare us for our departure the following morning, the Crawling Chaos struck a terrifying blow, despite having been banished.

And it all started when Stan complained that he was cold.

“It’s fine in here,” said Clyde, going back over the list on the whiteboard. “Go get another
“jacket or something.”

“Nobody else feels that?” Stan wondered, glancing around the table.

“What?” asked Kenny.

“It’s just like… in and out,” said Stan. “Like a quick chill and then—“ he winced and contracted, then shivered from the shoulders down, “there! There, it just happened again…”

I grabbed his hand under the table. For reassurance, but also just to check and see—and to discover that, no, his hand was just fine. Warm, if a little rough from the fight. Stan held out for a little while, while Clyde essentially talked out everything we already knew, for the sake of getting it out there and for getting Cartman caught up, but as he was touching upon an important point, Stan shuddered again.

“Sorry, nobody else is cold?” he asked. “Really?”

“Really, Stan,” said Clyde. “It’s the same temperature it always is in here.”

“If you say so,” Stan shrugged. “Sorry, I’ll be right back. I do need to grab my coat.”

“Stan—“ I tried.

“I’ll be right back,” he repeated.

But somehow, I doubted that. I felt his hand leave mine, I watched him walk out, shivering. And that was when it hit me. Stan’s susceptibility. He’d been to R’lyeh, he’d been the first to watch someone he cared about go insane. Plus, during the fight, hadn’t Nyarlathotep unleashed a mist on him?

“Guys…” I said, my gut sinking, “guys, I don’t think that’s normal…”

“He got cold, Kyle,” said Clyde, “it happens.”

“Not like that,” I protested. “Guys, Stan actually took a hit from Nyarlathotep.”

“You don’t think—“ Kenny began, his eyes flaring open. “Oh, fuck…”

I stood, knocking over my chair in the process. “I’m gonna go find him,” I said quickly. I couldn’t pause a fraction of a second. I had to just move. Move, move, move, get the fuck out of there and make sure he was okay.

As my feet rushed almost on their own to get me out of the meeting room and down the hall, I heard Kenny call out, “I’ll be there in a few seconds, too, hold on!”

I didn’t respond, but I was sure he knew I’d heard him. My heart was racing so fast I thought it’d just burst out of fear, and I felt sick to my stomach. This couldn’t happen. Not now, not ever. This was not allowed to happen to any of my friends. This sure as fuck was not allowed to happen to him. Not Stan. Not Stan—no, no, no…

When I found him, he’d made it to the cloakroom, where he was leaning back against the wall for support. His hands were clamped tightly over his ears, his eyes shut tight, and I saw, from his pained expression, that he was just barely holding in an awful scream. “Stan!” I cried out, grabbing his wrists so he’d look at me. He didn’t; just shook his head to drive something out. “Stan?” I tried again. He only continued shaking his head.
“Let go,” he asked, his voice weak and strained.

“No!”

“It’s freezing.”

“No it isn’t!” I protested. “Stan, stop it! Come on! Stop! What’s going on, dude, what’s the matter?!”

His arms going stiff, he let me pry his shaking hands away, and his eyes opened, haunted and hollow, dulled in color from their usual bright blue. “I can hear it…” he said, trembling as he spoke.

“Hear what?” I demanded, but realized what he meant the second I spoke. My own eyes flared open with the realization, and I shouted, “No! Stan, ignore it! Don’t listen!”

“I-I can’t help it, it’s there.”

“Don’t listen to it!” I screamed.

“It’s not going away, Kyle, just get me out of here!” he pleaded.

He looked awful—pale, troubled, out-of-sorts. His eyes stared at nothing, his breathing was off, and I swear to God, I could feel him slipping. I could see it, at any rate. I saw the steady pronouncement of the whites of his eyes, the fading of his vibrant spirit from the color of his face, from the way he carried himself.

“No…” I found myself saying, already bargaining against the situation.

“It’s freezing,” Stan repeated. He then snapped his eyes shut and shouted, “That music is so fucking loud!”

“NO!” Thinking fast, I grabbed my old green ushanka from the top shelf of the coat rack behind me, threw it onto Stan’s head, then yanked him down to the floor with me, where we both knealt, and I hugged my arms around his head, pressing my own hands over his ears, adding an extra layer of protection through the thick winter fabric of the flaps on my hat. “Don’t listen,” I repeated in a broken whisper, unsure if he’d even hear me. “It’s not there if you ignore it. Don’t listen, Stan, stay with me.”

His entire body lurched, but I held him down. I clenched my teeth together and forbade myself to cry, even though all manner of screams and yelps were stuck in my throat, threatening to manifest as tears any second. That would have been the last thing Stan needed, if I cried. The whole thing was so fucked up, though, and seeing him try so hard to fight it reminded me of how much all of us had already lost.

So many people had gone the way of madness. Other people had already died.

Not Stan. I caught myself choking, and tightened my grip so I wouldn’t cave to the pressure of emotion, and shoved my face between his neck and the crook of my own right arm, so close that I could feel both of our arrhythmic heartbeats in tandem. Just as I was beginning to wonder whether or not Stan would start reacting more violently to the sound of phantom music, he clung to my shoulders and asked, “Tell me something.”

“O… okay…” I agreed, pulling back somewhat. “Like what?”

“I can’t hear you.”
I released my grip on him a bit, and leaned in closer to speak directly into his ear. “How about now?” I asked, keeping my tone as calm as I could. Stan shivered and nodded. “So what do you want to hear?”

“I don’t care. Something good.”

“I love you,” I told him softly, wishing that that alone could be enough. But what was the lesson from Clyde and Bebe…? Love wasn’t enough to save anyone. That’s just how madness worked. “I love you, Stan. You have me, okay? I know it’s tough. I know there’s a lot you’ve lost. So have I… we all have. But we’re still here. We’re still here, Stan. We can fight. Please, please tell me you can do this. Please tell me you’re strong enough to do this. I love you.”

Stan choked out one single sob, and swallowed back any other cries that wanted to come. “I love you, too,” he said in a broken whisper.

“So let’s get through this,” I said, “okay?”

“It isn’t… going away…” he managed.

Trembling and terrified, I said as soothingly as I could, “Stan, you’ve gotta just ignore it, okay? Ignore it.”

“Kyle—“

“Focus, Stan Marsh,” I commanded, holding either side of his face and making him look directly at me. “I promised I’d stay, remember? So did you. I’m not losing you to this. I’m not.”

His eyes were so unfocused, I knew he didn’t really see me, and that cut me, practically hollowed me out. It was the alley all over again, only much, much worse, because we both knew what was coming now, and there was so much more at stake. Plus, there was no known cure for this insanity. We were just trusting that things would be righted after we beat Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu. But how far would we be able to get without Stan?

“…Stan…?” I tried, shaking him a little. “Stan?”

Nothing, for a few strained moments. I saw his fingers twitch, I saw him try to fight it. I saw him losing.

Shit. Shit—he was slipping. My anchor was slipping, and because of that, I felt myself starting to lose touch, too. Stan was shaking like a violent earthquake in my arms, and I honestly, for a moment of weakness, thought that maybe there was absolutely nothing I could do. “Please hold on,” I begged him, clutching him tightly. “For the love of God, Stan, hold on. We’ve almost made it. Hold on. Don’t go. Don’t go, please, don’t go. I can’t lose you. I can’t lose you. I can’t fucking lose you!”

“Kyle!” I’d almost never been more relieved to hear Kenny’s voice. “Kyle, dude, what’s going on?!”

“Kenny!” I said, whipping my head around to look at him. I was dizzy. Reeling. Desperate. Beside myself with fear. This wasn’t the way I had to be in order to storm R’lyeh. Hell, if Stan faltered now, I wouldn’t be able to keep my own wits about me much longer. “Kenny, help, please, if there’s anything—“

“Is he—?”
“I don’t know!”

“Come on,” Kenny urged, walking over to us and kneeling down cautiously. He looked over Stan with concern and determination. I saw him mouth, Oh, fuck, and then he bit his lip and lay a hand on Stan’s back. “Kyle, let’s get him out somewhere with more light.”

I nodded, terrified, and took my hat off of Stan’s head, but kept my arms wrapped around him as Kenny and I got him, staggering, over to the couch in the front room. Stan bent over himself, head between his knees, his hands digging into his hair, as if trying to hold his own sanity in. He was losing it. He was fucking losing it, and I was falling apart knowing that I couldn’t help him.

“Kenny, is there anything…?” I tried.

“Maybe,” he said, kneeling down in front of both of us. “Get him sitting up.”

I placed my hands gently, one on Stan’s right arm, the other on his back, and coaxed, “Come on, Stan, sit up, I know you can still hear us. Hold on. Hold on, please.”

He cringed, but I got him sitting up. “Fuck,” he whispered out, his voice broken.

“What?”

“It’s freezing.”

“Dude, if he goes…” Kenny started, looking a little nervous.

“He’s not going to,” I protested, shaking my head against Stan’s. “Stan, don’t go. Please. Because if you go—oh… shit…”

Kenny shook me, and gave me an awfully stern look. “Dude. Kyle. You hold it in, too, all right, man?” he said firmly. “I don’t want to see either of you go, but I’ll be fucked if you both lose it. Hold. On.”

“Kenny, I don’t feel well,” I admitted.

“Just hold on, dude,” Kenny said. “Hold on, hold on… I might… I might be able to do something.”

I nodded, sucking in a breath. I looked from Kenny back to Stan. Things could change in a single instant. God, I hoped Kenny could save him. Stan would probably need a lot of time to shake his fears off later, but as long as he didn’t surrender his sanity, I didn’t care how long the post-shock therapy would take. He hadn’t surrendered to fits and cries the way the rest of the unfortunate hundreds in town had, so there was hope. There had to be.

“Okay…” said Kenny, gathering himself, “this is—this is totally a long shot, but I’m gonna try it. Make him look at me.”

Trembling, I moved my hands as gently as I could, and got Stan to lift his head, coaxing him along with an easy, barely vocal, “Hold on. Please. Just watch Kenny… whatever he’s gonna do, it’s gonna help…”

Stan was just barely keeping it together as his significantly dulled eyes fought for focus. He managed to concentrate on Kenny, but didn’t seem to register exactly what was going on. I kept on stroking Stan’s back, and after a couple seconds I tepidly rested my head on his shoulder, wishing there was much, much more I could do. But this was beyond my realm, this was something only
another Immortal could fix.

So I left the job to Kenny, who lifted and stared at his hands before fixing his eyes on Stan. “All right,” he said, “you’re hearing a call, so I’m just gonna have to call it out.”

“It isn’t—stopping…” Stan managed to say. I felt him try not to twinge and shake when he said those words, but another chill rolled down his spine; I prayed that whatever Kenny was about to try would work. Otherwise, I’d be lost. I might lose it, too.

Kenny gulped, and held his hands, cupped in the middle, a few inches away from Stan’s ears. He closed his eyes, and I saw the lights flicker. Now, I knew I had nothing to do with that, but it all made sense when the flicker died and every shadow in the room had been re-cast, so that now the lights made all shadows spill long out over the floor and onto the back wall. “Stan, can you hear me?”

“It’s static,” Stan responded, his voice sounding ill and hollow. Shit… I realized, as I held onto him—he really did feel a little cold.

“But you can hear me,” Kenny deduced. Stan nodded stiffly. “Watch the shadows.”

“Where?”


“What’m I watching for?” I wondered.

“Just—watch.”

I was not in any place to argue. Stan was slipping. Whatever Kenny could do, I was sure would help, and I had to hold it together myself. So I kept Stan looking straight forward, and watched the shadows on the wall as well. I was able to see silhouettes representing the three of us, and then Kenny let his fingers slowly move apart. Between his hands, as shown in shadow, something else seemed to materialize, and then, I couldn’t help it—I watched as a new shadow, created in the space between his hands, took shape and began to move down the wall, still staying connected to the rest of the cast shadows. The lights in the room grew dimmer, and I began to feel the chill Stan had been talking about.

But then something seemed to slink past my ear, like a rush of wind, or a whisper, and I felt something looming over the wall behind us.

Then, everything went black. As if the room had been hit by the exact opposite of lightning. A bolt of shadow. Everything was dark, cold, foreign and lonely—and then, just like that, the light returned, and everything was back to the way it had been before Kenny started his little ritual, or whatever it was I could call it. I stared at Kenny, then felt warmth return to Stan’s skin and glanced to study him. Color flushed his face, and his eyes fell closed as he let out a breath.

As if we were outside in the winter air, mist escaped from his mouth. Kenny’s eyes narrowed, and he caught it with his right hand, clenching it into a fist. Scowling at that fist, Kenny then drew in a deep breath of his own, backed up a few inches, and opened his mouth to breathe out. With his own breath came another slinking shadow, which swallowed up his hand and then evaporated in the light. Kenny wiggled his fingers, testing out his hand again once the shadow disappeared, and by then the mist was long gone as well.

He had literally just extracted the call of Nyarlathotep. He’d caught Stan at just the right
stage, before the full brunt of insanity could kick in.

Stan’s eyes snapped open, and he winced, then leaned over his knees and cupped his hands over his mouth. “Oh, shit…” he said, his voice back to normal, though carrying with it a good deal of justifiable fear. “Oh… shit…”

“You okay, dude?” Kenny asked him. He looked a little nervous, but having just used his actual Immortal powers, I could understand why.

“Way better,” Stan responded. “Much better, but… fuck… fuck, it almost… holy shit… that was…”

“Kenny, that was fucking incredible,” I said.

“You saved me,” said Stan, reaching forward and grabbing Kenny’s shoulders. “Holy shit, Kenny, you saved my life. Thank you… holy fuck, dude, thank you.”

“Yeah, no problem,” said Kenny, trying to smile.

“You saved mine, too,” I confessed.

“Don’t mention it. You guys feeling okay?” Kenny asked us.

Stan turned his head to look at me, then dropped his hands so that he could wrap his right arm around me and pull me in by the waist. I tightened my grip on his back, took his free hand in mine, and gave him a firm kiss. Gathering his protective instincts back, Stan rested his forehead on mine and sighed out warmly, his breath on my face, and was the first to say, “I’ll be all right.”

“Me, too,” I got out, now that I got the full sense from him that he was over the scare. We both looked back at Kenny, then, who was finally showing a real, satisfied smile. Stan and I stayed pressed close together, and once I got my thoughts back on track of what had happened, I asked, “How about you?”

“Huh?” said Kenny, looking a little confused.

“Like, are you doing all right?” I wondered. “That was unreal, Kenny. You can control shadows…”

“Just like when Nyarlathotep attacked,” Stan added.

“Yeah…” said Kenny, staring down at his hands, “I’m starting to figure it out, anyway.” He sighed, then gave us his awful, rather forlorn look. Like he was looking at us, his friends, for the very last time. So not okay. It was bothering me that Kenny could even project that. It didn’t fit. Kenny never gave up. But, then again, everyone had their own feelings of unease. If any one of us had a lot to sort through, it was him. I couldn’t even imagine what he was going through. All I could do was be a friend and give my support.

“Henrietta said,” he began again after a momentary silence, “that all the other Old ones have some kind of power pertaining to madness. So, if I’ve gotta be one of them, I’m at least gonna choose to be a force against it, rather than for. I’m one against a pantheon, but fuck it. I’m human, I feel compassion, and I’m going to help people until I’m physically incapable of doing so.”

God. I really couldn’t compare to that. None of us could. Kenny was a true hero, on top of simply being a good person. His ideals were admirable and enviable, and he’d always been such a great friend. From the fun-loving kid we’d always known, he’d grown up to be somebody who tried
to see good in everyone, and took it upon himself to try to correct those who were immoral or unjust. Stan shared my thoughts, and the two of us, at that point, acted on the same impulse: we grabbed Kenny in, and the three of us sat there in an oddly-angled hug. Kenny grabbed hold tightly and didn’t let go, and I knew at that moment that, while he was many things, Kenny wasn’t entirely fearless.

“You guys are the best,” he said, still clinging on. “Swear to God. You guys are the fucking best. Thanks for sticking with me.”

“Are you kidding?” said Stan. “Thank you, Kenny. I owe you a lot.”

“We both do,” I corrected.

Kenny lifted his head, then, after heaving a sigh, finally admitted, “Listen… guys… I don’t know if I’m gonna make it out of this.”

“What are you—“ I began.

“If I don’t,” Kenny cut in, “I just wanna tell you, I’m glad I knew you guys. Sorry if this sounds lame, but you’re seriously the best friends I’ve ever had. I wouldn’t have wanted my life to go any other way.”

“We’re not going to let you die, Kenny,” said Stan, his tone stern and honest.

“Those bastards aren’t going to bring you down,” I added. “No matter what.”

Kenny sat back, thanked us again, and then, at that point, Clyde stepped into the room from the side hall by the cloakroom. He carried, I noticed, one of his tranquilizer guns, which was clenched firmly in both hands. Stan and I shuddered simultaneously, and Stan started off what was sure to be a slightly awkward conversation by saying, “Um… hey, Clyde. What’s up?”

“Hi,” said Clyde. Gravely, he stared down at his gun, and said, “I’m real glad I didn’t have to use this.”

“Were you just on standby?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“In case I—?” Stan tried.

“Yeah. In case you lost it.”

“Oh.” Stan paused for a moment, and secretly tightened his grip on my waist. “Uh. Thanks. No, I mean it, Clyde,” he said, strength forcing its way back into his tone. “It would’ve been the right thing to do.”

“How’d you snap out of it?” Clyde demanded.

“Kenny figured something out, with the shadow,” said Stan.

Clyde stared longingly at Kenny, as if pleading him to go back in time and do the same for Bebe, but she, from what I had heard, had been beyond repair from the moment of the direct attack. Stan’s insanity scare had been a delayed relapse, and one that had occurred after Kenny had started to figure out his abilities. But at least Clyde drew from the situation the best news we’d all learned: “At least,” he said as he passed through, “we know there’s a cure. Somehow.”
“Hey, Clyde,” said Kenny, standing to walk over to him. Before Clyde could leave, most likely for his room, Kenny grabbed him by the shoulders and said, “You’ll get her back, dude. Don’t worry.”

Clyde nodded solemnly. After a beat, he said, “I’m real tired, you guys. I’m gonna rest while I can, all right? Oh, and Stan. The other guys’re probably all lined up. We were all worried you might go.”

Sure enough, as soon as Clyde had left, the others trickled in to check on Stan. Even Cartman, whose presence was, we all had to admit, welcome. And even altered somewhat. Proof that everyone could change, and for the better.

Once the other guys had gone, Stan and I told Kenny good night; he left wishing us well, and was the only one to leave the building that night, since he wanted a last word with Red and Karen before our departure. He locked the door behind him, and then the two of us were alone again. Stan heaved a sigh of relief for having survived such a scare, and leaned back. I sat back with him, and turned sideways to face him best. “You sure you’re okay?” I asked him, brushing back his hair and touching upon cold beads of sweat as I did.

“Yes,” he said, propping his head up with his right hand, while gently stroking my arm with his left. “I’ll be so glad when this whole thing’s passed…”

“Yeah, same,” I admitted. We leaned in together, then, and pressed close as I breathed out, “Oh, God, Stan, I’m so glad you’re okay.” Shit, I couldn’t believe I’d almost lost him again. I literally could not envision how my life would be functioning without him.

“Stay with me,” he asked me again.

“I promised I would.” I grabbed the back of his head and held him to me, then said, “Listen. No matter what, Stan, no matter what happens, I’m not going to lose you.”

“I’m not leaving,” he said. “And neither are you.”

I drew back a bit, simply to study him. I saw something new in him just about every time I stole a second or two like this, but that night, in that moment, I saw the old in the new. In his expression, for a little beat of time, I did not see the steadfast young man he’d been even hours ago, when he’d taken such charge in the fight against Nyarlathotep… I saw instead the frightened boy he’d been the first time any of us had seen R’lyeh.

But then again… I saw that boy so often in Stan still, through all the years I’d known him. The boy above the influence, the one who had acted as my conscience so many times, the one I’d shared a childhood with, who guided me through hard times of my own. My best friend. The single most important person in my life.

No. I wasn’t going to lose him. The kind, well-intentioned boy he’d been, the selfless young man he’d become, the incredible man I knew he could still grow to be—none of that… none of that could be lost forever. I wouldn’t let that happen. Because I needed him, and I needed to be with him every step of the way.

I wouldn’t have been who I was at that very moment without everything I’d shared with Stan, and I knew that the same could be said of my influence on him. We saw things through together or not at all.

As one moment weaved into another, we kissed, lightly but desperately, then sat back again,
just… together. “Hey, Stan?” I said.

“Hmm?”

“Whatever happens tomorrow, in R’lyeh,” I promised him; “whatever happens, Stan Marsh, you’re not going to die. I’m not going to let you. You’re not going crazy, and you’re not going to die.”

“Neither are you,” he told me. “Swear to God, Kyle, nothing’s gonna happen to you. All right?”

“God,” I breathed out, “I’m glad I have you.”

Stan opened his mouth and took a breath to say the same, but at that moment, someone re-appeared in the room. “Um… oh,” he ended up saying instead, glancing past me. “Hey. W-Wendy. Hi.”

I sat up straight and turned around, noticing that Wendy had indeed wandered back in, and stood a few feet away from us in her pajamas, her hair up in a loose ponytail, and her eyes full of worry. “Hi,” she said. “Sorry if, um… look, I’m sorry if I’m interrupting, or anything, I just—I didn’t say much earlier. If this is a bad time…”

“No,” I told her, pulling away from Stan a bit, since neither of us knew exactly what his ex-girlfriend’s reaction would be to what we’d been developing. “What’s up?”

“Oh, I was just—shit, I don’t want this to be awkward!” she said, folding her arms when she caught herself fidgeting with her hands. “Stan, I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

“Yeah,” said Stan, smiling a little for her. “Wendy, I’m fine. Kenny helped me get it all out, I’m totally fine. I’m not going crazy.”

“No,” said Wendy, nodding quickly. She then changed gears, and her expression was that of a different concern. “Look, um… oh, I guess I can say this in front of Kyle, too, but… Stan, we never really, you know, settled stuff, after October. I’ve been feeling really, really bad about that.”

Stan shook his head, still holding onto a smile. “No, it’s okay, Wendy,” he said, kind with every word. “I just realized that, too. No need to feel bad—“

“But I said some really awful stuff,” Wendy protested, looking guilty. “I really do care about you, Stan. I just want you to be safe, and I want you to be happy.” She took a deep breath, sighed it out, and flashed a smile herself. “I mean, I wanted us to both move on. I did. I just didn’t want to sound that… I don’t know, I really said some shitty things.”

“It’s okay, Wendy,” said Stan. “Don’t worry about it, really. Same goes for you, by the way. I want you to be all right, too.” When Wendy glanced back out toward the hall, Stan added in the question, “So, you’re with Token now?”

Wendy blushed a little, and reached up to play with a loose strand of her hair. “Pretty much. He’s… he’s pretty great.”

“That’s awesome. I’m glad,” Stan told her. “You guys are great together, you really are.”

“Thanks,” Wendy grinned. “And, um… just, can you tell me? Just so I know? Are you, um…?” She pointed between us, darting her index finger back and forth.
Stan glanced at me, and I smiled in response, giving him the go-ahead. He took hold of my hand, and I laced my fingers between his as Stan answered, “Yeah.”

Rather unexpectedly, Wendy stepped forward, then leaned down and hugged both of us. Again, I had never known the girl very well... just that she was smart and moral, kind and pretty selfless. Most of the League, I realized, was. She was a good fit. A good addition. And I knew she was a good friend. “I’m really happy for you,” she told us. “What you guys have is really special. It’ll last, I know it.”

“Thanks, Wendy,” said Stan, a little shocked from the sudden embrace. My heart skipped as well. “You, too,” he added when she stood back. “I mean, same for you and Token. I’m glad you guys found each other.”

Wendy smiled warmly, and Stan offered her the spot on the couch on the other side of him after getting my okay. She sat down on the edge, angled to face both of us. “Can I talk to you guys about something?” she asked carefully.

“Sure,” I said.

“It’s... okay, I’ve talked to Token about this a little, but not much, and I really support Kenny, but I don’t feel like I know him well enough to say any more, but I just need to tell someone or I’m going to explode.” Since that could very well actually mean go crazy, we were all ears. “I...” Wendy started to confess, “I’m getting really nervous. Like, I can’t help but feel like there’s still so much we could lose. Maybe I am still feeling new, or something, but I think there’s something bugging me that’s got me more nervous than any of you guys seem to be.”

“Wendy, we’re all nervous,” Stan admitted.

“We just have to fight through it,” I added, “or we’d be setting ourselves up to let ourselves down.”

Wendy nodded. “I understand that,” she said. “Maybe it’s the way Clyde’s been acting lately. I don’t know. But I’m really scared for someone, and it isn’t me, it isn’t even anyone here.”

“Who?” Stan wondered.

But we both knew, before Wendy could even speak. “Marjorine,” she said. Immediately after the name came out, Wendy bit her lip, and I saw her eyes water. “I miss her. She’s gone. Bebe’s gone. I feel like Red is my only friend in the world right now, guys, it’s lonely.”

“Well,” said Stan, “I’ll be a friend whenever you need one. Kyle?”

“Same here,” I offered. “We’ve all got each other’s backs here, Wendy. If you need anything, just let us know.”

“Thank you,” Wendy whispered. “Then I just really have to say it. I’m really, really afraid for Marjorine. She’s like a sister to me, and what Chaos has been doing hurts. It just plain hurts. But I’m willing to bet it’s hurting Marjorine—it’s hurting Butters a lot more than it’s hurting me or anyone else, even if she, if he, doesn’t really get that right now. Okay, maybe this is more like a request. Please, please don’t tell Kenny or Clyde or anyone I said this.”

“What’s up?” asked Stan.

“Please, guys, please, don’t let Clyde kill Chaos,” Wendy asked. As soon as she’d spoken, she covered her mouth with one hand to keep from crying, but it was no good. She bent over
herself, black hair spilling like a waterfall over one shoulder, and coughed out a couple sobs, restraining herself to keep up her image as a hero. Stan patted her back a couple times, and Wendy continued, “I want to help her. I want to get my friend back. Token’s with me on that so far, even though we both know the main objective is still to fight for Kenny. But can I have you guys with me on this, too?”

“With you all the way,” I assured her. “Wendy, we don’t want Chaos dead, believe me.”

“Marjorine’ll be back,” Stan added. “If anyone can get her back, I know you can.”

“You think?” Wendy asked, sitting up a little again.

“I know,” Stan repeated. “Speaking as someone else you’ve recently helped out a lot… she’ll come around. She will.”

Wendy beamed and sighed. “Thanks, Stan,” she said. “Thank you, Kyle. I just don’t want to see anyone really have to suffer because of this crisis, you know? Especially her and Kenny. She’s been through enough, and the more I learn about Kenny, the more I admire him for what he’s had to go through.” As she stood again, she added, “You guys are great. I’m glad I’m in the League with you. Take care of each other, okay?”


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Her last comment, though, stuck with Stan through the rest of the night, to the point that he was too restless to lie still beside me when we finally made it to bed. After a several minutes in the near dark, Stan sat up with a start, and stared forward at nothing in particular on the far wall of his room. “Stan…?” I prompted, propping myself up a little and setting a hand on his back, afraid that Nyarlathotep’s call had come whispering through even after Kenny’s masterful exorcism (or what have you). “Stan, what? What’s up?”

“I…” he began, then looked back at me. “I want to call my mom.”

“Your mom? Why?”

Stan sighed, and slid back as I sat up. “Sorry, just… talking a little with Wendy made me want to… you know, just… Kyle, I know we keep saying we’re going to get through this, and we are, but just for peace of mind, I want her to know.”

I couldn’t deny him that. “About us?” I guessed.

“At least,” he said. “I’ve come so close a couple times to just plain telling her I’m Toolshed, too.”

“Well, play that by ear,” I cautioned. “I wouldn’t, no matter how dire things are.”

“I guess you’re right.” Managing a slight laugh, he added, “How is it that my hero identity is a more closet-worthy secret than my sexual preferences?”

“Priorities,” I said, laughing a little as I kissed his shoulder. “Call your mom, Stan. Then we really need to fucking rest.”

Since the insanity scare, I hadn’t really let Stan out of my grip, but I was so tired, I settled for
simply watching him closely as he walked over to unplug his phone, down to each beat of the next sigh he heaved, this one for finding that his cell phone still had a fairly good signal. We then sat together at the edge of his bed, and Stan held the cell out in front of him on speakerphone.

It was late, but his mother sounded happy to hear from him all the same. I stayed right there beside him as Stan assured her that he was doing well, and that he was safe. Trying to keep conversation normal, and steered far, far away from any End Time talk, Mrs. Marsh asked him little things about town, and eventually what he had done that day. Stan shifted a bit, and I set my hand over his to help keep his thoughts level. “Well, I…” Stan sighed, shook his head, then plowed through with, “Look, Mom, I want to talk to you about something. I really wanted to tell you before, but I didn’t like the circumstances, but circumstances are getting really bad right now and I don’t know if…”

“Stan,” his mother cut him off kindly, to keep things on a positive track. “Honey, what is it? You can tell me anything.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding even though she could not see it. He took in a deep breath, then let it out on another, “Okay. So I kinda ran into Wendy earlier today and—”

“Oh…” said his mother, sounding mildly concerned. “Is this about you two? You’re not… I mean, are you getting back together?”

“No,” he confirmed. “No, Mom, we’re not. It’d never work. Besides, she’s with Token now, and…”

“Oh, isn’t that nice,” she remarked sincerely. “Sorry, Stan, I do see where she could find a lot of good in him…”

“Yeah, no, I know, I think it’s great,” Stan said. “No ‘sorrys’ needed.”

“So, now, what else were you going to tell me? Did you find someone, too?”

“I, uh… y-yeah, Mom, I… well, I did.” He tightened my grip on my hand, and I leaned against him, reassuring him with all the love and support I could currently, silently provide.

“Well, who?”

“…Kyle.”

“Oh, that’s—” his mom started, sweet and doting as usual, before we heard the little gasp she tried to hide. “Oh. Oh, sweetheart… Stan… Stanley, honey, that means…”

“Y-yeah, Mom,” he said. It was coming out a little easier than I think even Stan was prepared for it to. He’d almost told her before, it was true, but he had a lot more resolve now. “Mom, I’m gay,” he told her, easily but calmly. “And… well, me and Kyle’ve… we’ve been together a little while, and, we just… I—we wanted to let you know. Before…”

“Before…?” his mom repeated, sounding truly worried now. “Before what? Stan, sweetheart, what is going on back home?!”

“Before…?” his mom repeated, sounding truly worried now. “Before what? Stan, sweetheart, what is going on back home?!”

“It’s just… it’s just really dark here,” he decided on saying. “It’s up to the League… you know, the League….” (she gave her vocal confirmation that she did) “to set things right. I think they can, but just in case… Mom, I just wanted to call you and tell you that, and… and tell you I love you. I love you and Shelly a whole lot, Mom. You always do so much.”
At this point, his mother was crying. But it was, as we were able to hear through her broken words, all nerves. “Stan, come to Colorado Springs,” she begged. “Please, sweetie. I don’t like all this End Time talk. I don’t like that thing you said about it being ‘dark.’ Come find me and your sister, Stan, you have that ticket…”

“There’s no more travel, Mom.”

“…Wh-what…?”

“They shut down the busses yesterday,” he told her. “There’re some fallen roads. Nobody can get out of South Park anymore.”

“Oh, my God…” his mother wept. “Oh… oh, my God…”

Stan’s grip on my hand tightened again. I understood why he wanted to tell her about his League involvement now, on the chance that it would give her a better feeling of security. That could honestly go either way, though, and could just make her worry more. So he didn’t opt for that route of conversation, and instead just gathered up his confidence, keeping his tone strong and level. “Mom, listen,” he said. “I’m safe. I promise, I’m still safe. I have every confidence in the League, and I hope you do, too. Look, the actual source of the insanity scare is gone, it’s just a matter of fixing it. We know it’s curable, Mom, so Dad can and will get better. Okay?”

“But if the roads are down, Stanley—!”

“It’s all right,” he said, “the town can rebuild. We’ve done it before, and we’ll see this through, too. Mom, in the end, it’s going to be all right.” The more he spoke to comfort her, the more I understood other reasonings behind this call. Keep your head, Mysterion and I had cautioned each other during the last fight. That’s what we all had to do. And after his scare earlier, Stan probably just needed to talk absolutely everything out. By assuring me, and Wendy, and now his mother that things would get better, he was building up his drive for the following day. Stan was so interesting that way—in order to keep himself focused and strong for his job in the League, or for anything really, he first had to have these calmer moments. I was like that, too, at times, and just based on how he’d rushed right out to the safehouse, so was Kenny. Having such a sense of conscience, I think, really helped us all stay on target.

“Stan?” his mother asked.

“Yeah?”

“Is Kyle there with you?”

“He is.”

“Let me talk to him, okay?”

“Huh? Um, sure…”

“Hi,” I said, calmly, after Stan gave me a little nod to go ahead. “Stan’s had this on speakerphone, so, if you still need to talk to him, too, Mrs. Marsh, you can.”

“Oh,” she said, “that’s good, then. How are you, Kyle?”

“I’m all right,” I told her. “You?”

“Fine as anyone can be,” she admitted, “watching all this apocalyptic news lately.”
“Yeah, it’s a little unsettling here,” I said, “but I can back Stan up in saying that things can and will turn around. There are safehouses.”

“Oh, my gosh. I’m sorry, boys, this is all just really frightening to be hearing about from a distance. Kyle, are your parents still—?”

“No,” I said after she trailed off, feeling a sting in my chest. But I was stronger from that experience, now. I was more confident, after seeing what Kenny could do, that all those who’d been sent to the asylum could be cured, once Nyarlathotep really was taken down. I’d still protect Ike with my life, but we’d see our parents well again; I had to believe that. “They were institutionalized not long ago.”

“Oh, Kyle, I’m so sorry,” said Mrs. Marsh. “Where are you boys? Is your brother safe?”

“We’re at Token’s, where there’s a safehouse,” I answered. “Ike’s safe, yes. Thank you.”

“You’re a very protective brother, Kyle,” she complimented me. “Now, I’ve got a favor to ask you, all right?”

“Sure.”

She made herself sigh, probably just to catch her breath from having been crying, then continued, “First of all, it’s true, about you and Stan?”

“Yeah,” I told her, shifting so that I could wrap my arm around Stan’s waist. I set my other hand over his, and said, “I’ve got an eye on him, too. Don’t worry.”

His mother let out a satisfied hum, and said, “That’s the favor I wanted to ask, too. Please, please keep my son safe. And make him happy.” My heart leapt, and Stan essentially confirmed that I’d succeeded in that so far by resting against me and leaving a kiss above my ear. “I have a question, too, dear.”

“Mmhmm?”

“Now, you’re… you are together.”

“Yes,” I confirmed. Together without a label, but together. Just as we felt, especially in these pressured, dark times, we simply had to be.

“Do you love him?” Oh, jeez, that was such a mom thing to ask. And it made me miss my own for a moment. But I drew in a breath. Stay solid. She’ll be fine, I reminded myself. Everyone could be sane again, everyone would be all right. There was just a lot we needed to do first.

“Yeah,” I answered, turning so that I could hold Stan’s attention. “Yes. I do. I really do.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” said his mother. “Thank you, Kyle. Thank you. Keep each other safe, all right? I’ll figure out a way to get back into South Park. This End Time thing has gone on long enough, don’t you think? I’ll make sure you two, and your brother, too, Kyle—I’ll find some way to help, or else some way to get you out of that town. All right? Thank you both so much for being so good…”

“Thank you, Mrs. Marsh,” I stressed.

“You can call me Sharon, honey, it’s okay.”
I felt Stan laugh a tiny bit. “Oh,” I said, caught a little off-guard. “Um. Thanks, Sharon. Don’t worry about Stan, all right?”

“Thank you,” she breathed again. “Stan?”

“Yeah, Mom?” he said, sounding even more sure and strong than he had minutes ago.

“Honey, don’t be nervous about anything,” Sharon said. “I’ll see you soon. I know I will. So, please, Stanley, please just know that I love you. You’re my son, sweetie, you have grown up so well, and I love you, and I am proud of every single thing that you do.”

In a way, well, in every way, really, that simple thing that Sharon Marsh said to her son that evening was directed toward Toolshed, and the entire League as well. Proud of everything he did? He’d beaten death and insanity, and was storming R’lyeh with the entire League only hours from that moment. I’d say there was a hell of a lot to be proud of there. It did make me want to, eventually—maybe even ten years from now, depending on how things went—let others we cared about know who we were. Our parents at least. Because what we were capable of… yeah, it was incredible. And it was bound to influence the courses of our entire lives.

I’d become more than what I thought I could be, through this whole experience. The same went for Stan, for Ike, even, for—oh, hell, even for Cartman and Craig; for Token and Wendy… for Clyde, who, I had to keep positive, would very soon be able to see Bebe again. I, too, was proud of every single thing that every single one of us could accomplish. I was right there at the side of someone I loved and who I’d fight for, no matter what; who’d fight for me, no matter what. I had a family to keep safe. As did Stan, and everyone in the League.

Kenny would make it through, too. He had to. End of story, he just had to. We were all in it together. This was something we’d see right through as a team.

When, some time after the phone call had ended, Stan and I were finally lying beside one another again, Stan held me and assured me that he felt much, much more settled. Much more focused, much more prepared. Having that little bit of extra support from his mother was nice to think about, too. We’d see everything through together, Stan and I, as a pair; we’d last, Wendy had said—through this, and onward.

I pulled him into a deep, comforting kiss. Tomorrow, things would change again. We’d embark on our greatest mission—heroes, and heroes only, for an indeterminable span of time. Tonight, keep him safe, keep him close, promise and promise again that everything really would turn out okay. Come morning, we’d be on our way. Upholding duties, fighting to save the world. As we lay there, we listed off all that we still had. Everything we had to keep safe, and everything we had to take stock of when—not if, but when—we returned. There were still those we had to save. Still lives we were responsible for, our own included.

This was it. The final hours. I made them last, but with each hour that passed, I started to get anxious. We were all prepared. We just had to assemble again, and be on our way. To R’lyeh, to finish it all.

—

Kenny
And so we’d come to the End. I felt prepared—a little frightened, but prepared. I had support. I had the greatest team I could ask for.

I just had one more thing to do.

I woke with Red that morning, helped her out with a few little tasks, but primarily obsessed over how I needed to leave. I couldn’t linger there, as much as I wanted to, but there was one thing I had to do before I left. One thing I had to tell her.

It wasn’t that I didn’t understand love, I realized. All this time, I’d been afraid of it. Afraid of being so emotionally attached it hurt to be away. I felt it for my girlfriend, and I felt it for my sister, though. I couldn’t help it, even after everything. My conversations with my little sister had dwindled to occasional, sporadic text messages, because it was too hard to listen to her voice and not want to rush right to her, to make sure, in person, that everything was all right. It was after my eighth grade field trip to the museum, after seeing all of those R’lyeh-associated artifacts, after stealing the *Necronomicon* for Henrietta, after being accepted and then rejected by Red before and after my death that time… it had been after that trip to Denver that I knew I wasn’t going to be able to take care of Karen any more. Not the way I had been.

The only thing I’d ever wanted to hear from her was the occasional, *I’m happy.* That was all. And that was what she’d given me, for the past two and a half years.

I hadn’t understood that all of that was out of familial love. And I certainly didn’t want my relationship with Red to dwindle down to sporadic hellos. Not at all.

I was glad Karen was around, I had to admit. She reminded me of my… self, for lack of a better word. Helped me really focus on *this life* of mine. Her presence was encouragement enough for what I needed to talk to my girlfriend about.

Karen was the one, too, who admitted two new additions to the safehouse that morning. Two very unlikely additions. We were on the first floor, me, Red and Karen, making certain that nobody suspicious was let in. So these two… well… they were kind of begging to be judged worthy of staying there. “Hi,” Karen greeted the two young men chipperly.

The shorter of the two scowled at her perkiness and said, “Gonna guess you can’t smoke here.”

“No,” said Karen, “sorry.”

The guy tossed his long red bangs and sighed. “Do you at least have coffee?” asked his taller companion.

“Um, yeah,” I said, walking up to where they stood, planting myself between them and my sister. “What exactly are you two doing here?” Lot of nerve, for those two Goths to show up, after all the panic that little one put is through, me and Red especially.

“What?” the tallest of the apparently now disbanded group said. “Everything sucks out there.”

“Right, and shouldn’t you be gloating?” I pressed. “You are a part of the Cult, aren’t you?”

“They’re too conformist for us,” that same Goth answered.
“Gone right downhill,” the red-haired one agreed.

“Um… okay,” I said, confused to beat hell.

“What’s going on?” Red wondered, bringing her own sweet voice into the conversation.

“Ex-Cult,” I warned in a whisper. “Watch these guys.”

“Sure,” she told me. Then, she gave her formal, “Hello. Welcome. If you head downstairs, Nelly—look for the girl with pigtails—will get you guys all set up. If you try anything funny, my father’ll handle that. Now, what’re your names?”

“Well, I’m not one for names, but if you must know—“

At that point, my phone went off, so I excused myself to answer. “Dude,” I heard Stan say on the other line, “sorry to bug you, but are you almost ready? Henrietta’s setting up, and Clyde’s getting really anxious.”

“Yeah,” I sighed, “yeah, I understand. I’ll be there soon.”

“We’ll wait up for you,” Stan assured me. “See you in a bit, man. We’ve got this.”

“Yeah.”

“Who was that?” Red asked me. I glanced over, noticing that the Goths had been taken care of accordingly, and walked over to take my girlfriend’s hand. I knew I didn’t look my best.

“Kenny?”

“Hey…” I said. “Baby, I’m real sorry, but um… I’ve gotta go.”

Her face froze in terror and blanched. Her blue eyes searched me with uncountable whys, and she asked, horrified, “What?”

“Here,” I coaxed, “come here, I’ve got something I’ve gotta tell you.” Red’s grip on my hand tightened, and her lips quivered into a precious, concerned pout. “See you later, sis,” I said to Karen, giving her a little kiss on the forehead as I passed.

“You’re the best, Kenny,” my sister whispered after me.

“Okay,” said Red, trembling as I took her aside, “what’s going on? Kenny, please, please tell me what’s going on. I’ve been so worried about you lately, sweetie, why do you have to go rush off?”

I really didn’t have much time. Shit. I should have done this sooner. So much sooner. But at least I’d finally get it out there. I wouldn’t have this on my list of regrets. “Red,” I began, “um… me and the guys—like Stan and Kyle, and Token and them—we’ve all been kind of, well… gearing up to do our part. To go against the Cult.”

“Wh-what?” Red stammered, grabbing onto me. “Kenny, you’re fighting?!“

“Fighting back, Red,” I told her. This was the easiest way to explain my need to leave without bringing my being Mysterion into it. Yes, I wanted to tell her that as well, but I just did not have the time anymore to explain all of that the way it was meant to be explained. If I wasn’t around to tell her all about that later, Karen could do a sufficient job; hell, the guys could let her know. In an ideal world, though, I’d tell her myself. Everything. All the hows and whys. But right now, I was

“Leave all that to the League!” Red cried. She looked so beautiful when she cried. Sad, and lonely, but beautiful. Because when she cried, all of her compassion came out. “To Mysterion! He’s the symbol for… f-for people to rally behind, and… oh, God.” Red sniffed, then buried her face into my chest and clung to me tightly. “You’re rallying,” she concluded, barely vocally. “Oh, God, I knew this’d happen.”

“Someone’s gotta take back South Park,” I said. “I can’t sit down and watch.”

“Kenny…” my girlfriend began, lifting her head a little.

“Hmm?”

“I’ve got something I’ve been meaning to say.”

“What’s up?”

“I can’t lose you,” Red whispered. “I can’t explain why, I really don’t know why, but I keep getting this feeling like… like I’ve seen you slip away. Like déjà vu or something. It’s so hard to explain. I admire what you’re doing, but I’m sorry, Kenny, but I feel like I’m losing you. I feel like I’ve lost you before. And it’s scaring me.” She shook her head rapidly, and shouted, “I understand that this town needs protecting, I understand that you want to help, but at least—I don’t know! Let me come with you, Kenny, I don’t want to be alone.”

“Karen’s here,” I said. “She’ll be a shoulder if you need one. I need you to stay here, baby. I need to know you’re going to be safe.”

“Then stay with me!” she pleaded. Oh, God—God, I wanted to. Red’s eyes were wide; blue, shining and sad, hollow with grief and brimming with life and passion, tears steadily streaming from each corner in uneven lines down her soft, tinted cheeks. “Stay with me, Kenny! You don’t have to go back out there, there’s no rule saying you have to subject yourself to this!”

“Red, please,” I begged; “baby, this isn’t easy—“

“You don’t have to be a hero, Kenny!” my girlfriend wailed, burying her face into my chest. My shirt became stained with her tears—if her mascara bled onto the fabric, fuck, I’d never wash those stains out. Red sucked in a long, tragic breath, her thin fingers digging into me so close to my heart it almost seemed like she could pull it right out and hold it there in her hands, and then she was sobbing. Her shoulders heaved, her voice became lost in gutteral, raw moans, and I held her against me, for what I was so afraid would be the very last time.

Stuffing my face into her silken hair, I kissed her, just above her ear, and told her something I had never told anyone before. Because if I didn’t say it now… then I’d be leaving this world without being able to say that I ever loved a single thing all my life. That wasn’t true. I’d finally found something I loved. Loved, hell, fuck—treasured, more than anything… anything else the whole damn world had to offer.

“I love you.”

“…What…” she breathed, more beautiful than anything I’d ever known.

“I love you, Red,” I repeated. “I love you, and I want to make this town safe for you again. I want you to promise me you’ll stay here, baby, no matter what. Stay here, stay safe.” I pressed against her and kissed her hard, passing to her every bit of comfort and security I could provide. “I
“Kenny, wait,” Red said, digging her fingers in. “Just, before you go, um…”

“What’s up?” I wondered.

“I love you, too,” she whispered. Then, louder, more resilient, she caught my gaze, and said again, “I love you, Kenny McCormick. And I believe in you.” Hugging me close again, she said, “Please. Please come back soon. Come back, Kenny, whatever you do, okay?”

“I’ll see you soon, baby,” I said, hoping that much could be true. “I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

We kissed again, and, as satisfied as we could be in our current situation, parted with a silent promise. No matter what happened, now, I’d always know that I was loved. And so would she.

From there, I took a strong leave, but even my determination to move into the next wave of duties I had to fulfill could not stop me from heeding one last call.

“Kenny!” Karen screamed after me as I made my way down Red’s frozen walk. I winced. I didn’t want to have to turn around. Turning around would mean second-guessing. It would mean taking a backward step. But shit… shit… just one more time… “Kenny, please, I want to go with you!”

“Karen, no,” I said, shaking my head. “Karen… Karen, you’ve grown up really well. Show me you’ve got this, okay? Show me you’re strong.”

Karen sucked in a breath, choked a little, then stood back, but didn’t let go.

“No, sis,” I said, stroking her hair. “Karen… Karen, you’ve grown up really well. Show me you’ve got this, okay? Show me you’re strong.”

Karen nodded firmly, keeping the tears away from her eyes. “Anything.”

“I need you to stay here,” I said. “Just as you promised before. Please, Karen, keep all these people safe. Keep… keep Red safe. And look after yourself. Whatever you do, Karen… no matter what path you take, wherever your life leads you, know that I’m proud of you. I know you’re strong, sis. So promise me you’ll help others see the strength in themselves, too.”

Tears streamed from my sister’s eyes, but she held her ground. She clenched her fists around my forearms, then said, her voice shaking, “Only if you can promise me something too.”

“What?”
“Come back for us,” she asked, looking up at me. “Like you always do.”

“Karen—this time… I don’t know…”

“Then try. No. Don’t just try. Do, Kenny. I know you can.”

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It was all moving so fast. For the first time ever, I watched my life flash before my eyes. My life, and my deaths. My accomplishments and my failures. My friends, my broken family. My little sister—and how proud I’d always be to call myself her brother. My girlfriend… that gorgeous young woman, that beautiful person, the girl who had done so much for me; the girl I loved more than anything.

God, had I gotten lucky. The League was amazing. Each and every one of those guys was something else. I hoped the best for them, since, whatever I did, I wanted to make sure that they all made it out of R’lyeh just fine, so that they could keep going. So that they could keep on doing good for the world. If I fell, Karen could take my place.

If I fell, I hoped Red would forgive me.

Atop the desk in my room, I left my wallet, keys, and cell phone along with a stack of letters I’d been writing when I thought of them. Letters, and instructions. Instructions on what to do in my probable absence. I left a will, and the information for my bank accounts, to be transferred to and have everything split between the League, Red, and Karen. It was all mostly thanks and apologies, and a written statement for the League, on how they had gone above and beyond any of my expectations. How I was eternally grateful. And how I hoped that they could carry on. That stack was a worst-case scenario, but it never hurt to be prepared. God. I really didn’t want to die.

But I could push aside my fears for the greater good. I always had. And I would again. The world needed Mysterion. I wasn’t going to let anyone down.

I took my time donning my Mysterion gear. I strapped the armor into place, admiring the handiwork of Token and Wendy, and double-checked my utility belt, stocking up on extra fireworks, extra rounds of bullets, and all of the shuriken I had left. I’m not much one for mirrors, but I stared into the one hidden away in my little room as I tied my black cloth mask into place. The uniform was a formality in R’lyeh, but it was ritual. It was right. This was a League mission.

Take down Cthulhu. Defeat or subdue Chaos.

And, if possible, break my curse. And hopefully save my life.

I washed my face of any emotion, and pulled up my hood, watching Kenny McCormick disappear in the shadow that hood cast. This was Mysterion’s work. This was just one more thing I needed to do.

This is how it was always meant to be.

I joined the others in the field, where Henrietta had set up the Necronomicon on the same pedestal she had used to read out of it back in November, to call me and Stan back to life. Now, that same book was our ticket into another dimension… and, with all luck, our ticket back out.

“Ready, Mysterion?” Mosquito asked me.

I looked past him, glad to know that he was such a great leader, that he’d keep things under
control, that at any moment he could take charge and lead the League to victory, no matter how hard
pressed… and into the empty opening in our Gate portal. That space wouldn’t be empty for long.

With conviction, I turned to address my League. “This is it,” I said. “This is the last push. We’ve got a lot of objectives, guys, but I think if we stick to what works, we can conquer all of them.” Everyone nodded, in turn. I then signaled Henrietta, who began to read.

I stared behind me, into the vortex that Henrietta opened up. That swirling black mass, so
similar to the one that had swallowed up Chaos not long before that night. Then, once again, I spoke
to the League, wishing them the best with every word.

“All right, everyone, remember: we stick to our teams,” I said, voicing the commands loud
enough so that the rush from the vortex would not drown me out. “Marpesia and TupperWear, the
key is constant vigilance. You guys got this.” The two nodded. “Remember, you’re on special
watch for Chaos. Red Serge, Iron Maiden, you’re scoping things out; you guys stick here with
Henrietta, got that? If we need backup, Iron Maiden, you’re in. If things get tight, Red Serge,
you’re in, too.” And once again, I was given nods of understanding. “Great. Now… I’m first
wave, but Kite, Toolshed, you two start out first wave with me; you guys are on primary offense—“
and another set of nods— “while Mosquito, you’re second wave with the Coon. Craig, you’re with
them. You guys’ main objective is getting the Coon to Cthulhu, got that?”

“Oh it,” said Mosquito.

“We’ve got this,” Craig added.

“Mysterion,” said Toolshed, getting me to look directly at him. “We’re ready. We can do
this.”

“The League’s got your back,” the Human Kite added. “We’re not going to let you down.”

“Let’s go!” the Coon hollered.

“This is it, guys,” I said, staring straight forward at the swirling vortex.

“But,” Toolshed said firmly, “it’s not the End.”

I felt myself grin. “All right. Let’s do it. And no matter what happens, guys… thank you.
Thank you.”

I cast one last glance over my team, and felt my heart pound faster. More resolute. And yet,
a little sad.

This was, in many ways, the End. The End of a chapter of our lives. No matter what
happened now, no matter what became of us, we had to look back and know that what we had done
was right. We were looking back on it all—on our lives in South Park, on our families and
relationships, on our loves and on our losses; on normal days and days when the uncanny and
unpredictable were as good as law. On becoming a League, on becoming a team… on everything
we stood for and why, and on everything we now were hoping to accomplish. No matter what
happened, we would know, from all that we were leaving behind, that there had been a time when
we fought for everything. When we took up arms and strode forward to face down all that we knew
needed to be conquered. We were the Shadow League. And no matter what became of us now…
we were strong.

And that being known, that truth tying us all together, we stepped into the vortex, and into
the shadows. And onward. To face down fate, here, at the Gate of madness.
Here. In R’lyeh.
Something that had surprised me about returning to life after my pseudo-death—I was still struggling with what exactly to call it—in R’lyeh was that I had not had nightmares, or any real post-traumatic stress to speak of. In fact, now that I stood there in the land of nightmares again, it only now hit me and seemed odd that I had had no dreams at all. And for a moment, realizing that, I was scared… scared that perhaps the entire life I’d led for the past couple of months had been something of a final fever dream, that I dreamt up the insanity that ended up plaguing the entire town of South Park, and that really I’d been dead in R’lyeh all along.

But that, I quickly concluded, was impossible, simply due to the vulnerability I felt there this time. Before, I had been breathless and weightless, unable to tire and unable to feel pain. My rib ached, though not to the point of insufferableness, and my mind buzzed with thought; proof enough that I was alive.

Connected to this strange world, now, somehow, but very much alive.

Just based on his fatigued, ailing physical state, I knew that R’lyeh had been calling for Kenny now for quite some time. It wanted him there, to take his place in the pantheon, but the music I’d heard and the chills that I had felt on the night before our departure told me that the grotesque land between life and death wanted me back, too. It wasn’t finished with me. This was a practically sentient dimension, with or without its monstrous inhabitants, and in the grand scheme of things, it was a predator. Living men did not get out with their minds intact (such was the lesson learned from Professor Johansen’s relative), not so long as Cthulhu prayed and Yog-Sothoth guarded the Gate.

Or, so it had been for aeons. But now, it was time for the Shadow League to turn things around.

“Here goes nothing,” I heard Mysterion say under his breath. “Henrietta, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” said the Goth, her voice backed by a considerable hum of static.

“Sweet, the system got through!” I heard Red Serge say triumphantly. “We should be good to keep in contact from here on out.”

“All right, perfect,” said Mysterion, scoping out the disturbingly familiar yet ultimately uninviting landscape. “Red Serge, Iron Maiden, you’re on standby, right?”

“Timmah.”

“Good.”

“How’s the camera system?” Kite wondered. “Are you getting a feed?”

Each of us, prior to departure, had been fitted with one of Red Serge’s miniature camera-GPS pins, which he and TupperWear had altered from something ‘borrowed’ indefinitely from the Blacks’ intricate security system. Damn, Token’s parents deserved the highest of honorable
mentions on the list of those who helped to save the world. Everyone had the pin affixed to a different point—mine, for example, fit right into the emblematic T badge I constantly wore on my otherwise fully white shirts. Red Serge and Iron Maiden were keeping an eye on our locations, assuming the GPS worked, and matching our movements to the map of R’lyeh they had back at the base.

“It’s on,” said Red Serge, sounding pleased.

“Excellent,” Mysterion grinned. “I was hoping so. That means R’lyeh is somehow fixed to the Earth.”

“What’re you thinking, Mysterion?” TupperWear wondered.

“Just thinking,” he answered, pacing a little toward the edge of the plateau upon which the Gate was perched, “if we can destroy Cthulhu here, we should take a crack at the Gate before we leave, to see if that removes R’lyeh from Earth for good.”


“Right, thanks, guys,” Mysterion said to our correspondents at the base. After a second, he asked, “Angel, you connected, too?”

There was a long hum of nothing but static, and then her young, lively voice could be heard saying, “The Guardian Angel is always on watch. Good luck, everyone.”

Mysterion thanked her, then beckoned us to follow him to another location, away from the Gate. Yog-Sothoth, the hulking, amorphous Gatekeeper, loomed over us, his shadow cast long over the sun-starved pale green terrain, but—oh, this was interesting—it shied away from coming into contact with the shadow that Mysterion himself cast. It seemed the other Old Ones knew well enough to leave Cthulhu’s Shadow alone, which could hopefully play to our advantage.

The wide canyon Mysterion and I had passed through last time sprawled out before us, past the large, toxic lake. A colorless haze surrounded the land around us, but the air was buzzing with more activity than I had picked up on last time. That healing spot in my side, in the rib that had been broken by the bullet intended to kill me, ached a little, which kept me on my toes. I had to stay sane. That’s all there was to it. Even if that spot now seemed to have a direct line to my mind, and that, in turn, seemed to have a direct line to the heavy air of R’lyeh. I lifted my head and looked out in a direction we hadn’t explored last time. We’d only gotten as far as the other end of the lake—now that we stood at the Gate, I knew that we were entering territory not even Mysterion had seen.

“Toolshed?” Mysterion asked in a firm tone, which got me to snap back to attention. The eight of us now stood a good few hundred feet from the Gate; Mysterion had found a small circle of stone slabs, clinging by a spiny moss to the ground, suggesting that these oblong pieces had once been a part of a row of columns or pillars. No one sat, though. All eyes were on me. “Did you see something?”


“What?” Mosquito demanded, setting his right hand on one of his tranquilizer guns. I didn’t want to think about who or what he intended to aim it toward, though I was pretty damn sure I was a likely target.

“That way,” I said, pointing off in the direction I’d almost involuntarily turned. Off on the horizon, I noticed, was a tall tower, rising ominously over yet another plateau. “There’s something
out over that way.”

“The tombs?” Mysterion guessed.

“Maybe,” I admitted, before realizing that it was possible he already instinctively knew, and
was only asking to see if I felt any kind of connection to them. “All I can tell is there’s something. So I’d say that’s the best place to start heading.”

“What’s that tower?” Kite wondered, holding his right hand up like a visor over his eyes in
order to peer directly into the distance, fixating on the structure.

“Never seen it before,” Mysterion confessed. His shadow shifted and slithered beneath him, and re-cast itself in that direction. “But I’d say it’s a good landmark.”

“The hell’s your shadow doin’?” the Coon asked, which was kind of the question on all of
our minds.

Mysterion’s eyes narrowed, and he glared down at his shadow which, I noticed now, was a
few shades darker than the faded grey the rest of ours projected as. He followed it with his gaze, out
past the tower, and then, with resilience, he said, “I think it knows it’s home. But it’s just gonna
have to be fucking patient.”

The idea was disturbing enough, but none of us voiced our concerns for him. He knew he
had our support, and we knew that we weren’t just going to stand back and let R’lyeh claim him.
So, all of us accepting (and worrying about) the fact that here, now, at the End, Mysterion basically
existed as two entities—himself and the Shadow—the eight of us sat gathered around those old
fallen, mossy pillars to solidify our plan.

It was decided, after very little debate, that we should split into two groups of four before
breaking off into our smaller pairs, since nothing had yet risen as a threat, and since we really could
not be too careful. The Human Kite expressed a want to head directly for the tower to see if he
could easily scale it and use it as a point of attack. He and I were then paired as a team with
TupperWear and Marpesia, while Mysterion would lead the second group, completed by Mosquito,
the Coon, and Craig. Before we could part ways, though, Kite and I grabbed Mysterion to the side.

I checked his eyes and noticed that he still looked sick. What little of his skin showed under
his mask was paler now than it had been even minutes before, when we’d stood in preparation on the
other side of the Gate. But despite his fatigued appearance, Mysterion stood tall and focused,
shoulders squared, back straight, ready for anything, as always. “Take care of yourself,” I cautioned
him, holding out my right hand.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said in return. He gripped my hand, then Kite’s, before he
stepped back and promised, “This isn’t the last thing we’re gonna say to each other, got that?”

Kite and I nodded, then grinned and saluted. My partner then said an encouraging, “Good
luck, Mysterion.”

“Good luck, guys,” our steadfast leader said in return. “All right, League!” he then addressed
the team, turning to get everyone’s attention. “This is it. Kite, you’ve got your group heading for the
tower. Mosquito, if I have to break off, keep these guys going under your lead, but right now, us
four are heading east of the tower. Guys, remember what we’re up against and what our targets are.
Chaos, Nyarlathotep, Cthulhu. Both groups, stay in contact. Henrietta,” he instructed into the wire,
“keep the Gate open, whatever you’ve gotta do. We can’t risk it collapsing. Not yet. Hands in,
guys.”
All eight of us closed to a circle, into which we each thrust our right hands. “We can do this,” said Mysterion. “You guys with me?”

“Cthulhu’s goin’ down!” said the Coon.

“And the Shadow League’s not going anywhere till this is over,” Mosquito promised.

“We’re gonna break that curse on you, too,” I told Mysterion.

“We’ve got your back,” Kite added.

“All right,” Mysterion said, showing a rare Kenny grin beneath his hood. “What do you say, guys? Ready to save the world?”

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To fill time and empty air during our journey from the Gate to the tower, I did my best to recall aloud, to the best remembered detail, what being in R’lyeh had been like during my brief death. My three traveling companions were more than grateful for my descriptions of the beasts Mysterion and I had come up against, and we started working out possible battle strategies for the four of us should anything pose a threat before we made it to our current destination.

I’d never really teamed up with either TupperWear or Marpesia, even given how long I’d been working with TupperWear, but I knew more or less what their strengths were, and the four of us were actually pretty complimentary to each other. TupperWear was the best defense of any of us, and while Marpesia was often on the defensive, she was one of the most balanced between combat and protective capabilities, given mostly due to the fact that her armor was more maneuverable and lightweight than her constant partner’s was. Kite was becoming better and better on the defensive, thanks to his practiced psychic capabilities, but he was still best suited for first-hand attack, as was I, hence why Mysterion had put us on first wave.

Mysterion’s ideas of first wave and second wave defense were simply in terms of who should get closest to the primary target and when. It was best, then, that Kite and I were teamed together in partnership with our primary defense, while Mysterion, first wave on his own, was teamed up with his secondary team as well as the Coon, who fit best on the defensive side, but who was the obvious choice to go after Cthulhu.

I had the feeling that Mysterion hadn’t chosen his course of East of the tower at random. He had a sense that something was out there. In R’lyeh—not that I didn’t back home, but here especially—I trusted Mysterion’s instincts. Much more than any map or story.

As we traveled, I kept an eye on the shadows. Shadows had saved my sanity, if not my life. The night before our departure had been terrifying. Touching insanity had been... well, more frightening than anything I had ever known. And I was trying not to think about it, but the longer we walked along with nothing interrupting our course, the more the thought haunted me. I’d distracted myself with conversations all the rest of the night, focusing on everything that made me feel as normal as fucking possible. Friends, family; my new relationship, my town. Normal. Sane. Things that I could pretend had no connection to R’lyeh whatsoever.

But now I was here again, where I could think of almost nothing but death and madness. R’lyeh forces it upon you. I kept a constant watch on my companions, making sure none of them were feeling any kind of disconnect—any drastic changes now that we were so far from what we’d always known as reality.
It really was bothering me, now that I had the time to think about it, that I’d almost gone crazy. Hell, why wouldn’t it? I just hoped R’lyeh wouldn’t take my mind once and for all. The chill I had felt that night was something I’d known, even as it was happening, was not normal. It was a warning. And I couldn’t handle having that kind of forced premonition, and as a result, I’d started sinking. I understood insanity a little better, now, though, and tried to be hopeful that my understanding would let me help my dad, and so many others. It was indeed a detachment. Discomfort to the point of not wanting to be connected to anything anymore. Seeing not the regular world, but a mirage of bliss. I’d been cold, and Nyarlathotep’s call had projected into my mind an enticing way to become warmer. By giving up and letting go. So whatever it was that my dad had felt, whatever it was that Kyle’s parents, that Bebe, that Tweek, that anyone had felt and heard and seen had to have been wildly specific to their situation at the time.

Not being able to understand that within the throes of insanity had thus made me incapable of beating it on my own. Kenny—or, well, the Shadow—had called it right out, though. I had no idea how he’d done it, but those shadows he’d projected had relaxed me and reminded me of my real surroundings.

But Mysterion was working hard enough already now. None of us could afford to lose it.

Luckily, though, nothing too drastic came up, at least not during the first part of our trek toward the tower. Things were actually quite uneventful and normal for a very long time, to the point that we’d gone from explanations of the Mythos to discussions of everyday things.

“Ugh,” Marpesia groaned at one point as we were walking, “I wish I’d had the foresight to make a better padding for these boots.”

“Thought of everything but the insoles, huh?” TupperWear teased her.

“Oh, shut up,” she said, giving him a light shove on the arm. “If the worst I get out of this is a few awful blisters, I certainly won’t complain.”

It was interesting seeing their dynamic outside of battle. While still holding onto TupperWear and Marpesia, the two still projected themselves as Token and Wendy, primarily in the way they could sneak a bit of flirting in, even given the situation and place. One way to deal with the nerves of being there, I guess; I couldn’t really blame them. I hadn’t really observed them lately, but they’d been giving off the impression for a while that they were together, and Wendy had confirmed it the night before. I was glad, though. Love was vital right now. It was such a good thing those two had found each other—and if it made them a strong team in the League, then that was fantastic, too.

I still preferred being entirely League-focused whenever I committed to being Toolshed, though. But it was with a healthy mix of personal and professional concern that the Human Kite remarked toward me on that walk, “You feeling all right? You don’t look so great.”

“Really?” I wondered. “I feel fine.”

“Kenny did get you totally cured, right?” he pressed.


“You really don’t feel anything weird?” he asked skeptically. “What was with you getting the sense to walk over here?”

“Oh,” I said, feeling bad for thinking I could pass over that, “well there is a—“

“Jesus! Don’t fucking scare me like that!” he shouted, glaring at me, alarmed. He fought
himself for a second, then shook his head, and, furious, walked a few steps ahead of me only to stop moving and grab me by the front of my shirt in order to stare me down. “I want you to be okay,” he insisted. “Don’t you dare lie to me.”

I felt a sting of guilt in my chest. I didn’t want him to worry, but at the same time, I reminded myself that I was comforted by the fact that he always would worry anyway, no matter what. “Okay,” I said quickly, “okay. Dude, look. I’m sorry. I am. I’m sorry.” Kite looked unconvinced, if even a little wounded. I sighed and removed my tinted goggles, prompting him to pull his goggles off as well and let them hang around his neck. I sighed, and let myself smile. “I’m fine,” I said calmly. “Look, okay, yes, I feel a little bit of a pressure here, but I’m fully aware of what I’m doing, I promise. Don’t worry.”

He looked me over, then let out a long breath and shook himself out. We both fixed our goggles into place again, thus stepping back out of that brief pause and into the roles we needed to play here in R’lyeh, and he said, “All right. You’re right. You seem better, anyway. Just can’t be too careful, you know?”

“I understand,” I said. “But I swear, here of all places, you’ll know if I’m not myself, all right?”

“Gotcha.”

I wondered, though, as we journeyed on, if R’lyeh cared as much about the line between mad and sane as it did the line between living and dead, which, according to Henrietta, was not at all. I got the feeling that, really, any of us could snap at any second here, so I ignored the chill that shook through me with that thought and pressed forward.

The land seemed to warp and change at random: one minute we could follow a straight, dry path, and the next we’d be scaling boulders to avoid pits. We eventually came upon a leveled gorge, made of spiraling pillars which were woven together by a thicket of tentacled vines. A row of pillars stood about twenty feet above our heads, and still another sailed a good hundred or so feet high.

The Human Kite kicked back a tangle of vines and climbed to the top of the lower line of pillars, in order to keep an eye out above us. He primarily had his sights on that tower which, we all had to admit, was probably the best place to be headed—Kite had good instincts; based on just the air and the strange pull that at least I felt, it very well could have been that that tower stood at the direct center of R’lyeh.

What awaited us there, I couldn’t fathom a guess, but I think we all instinctively knew that we wouldn’t be alone once we got there.

We weren’t alone in the pillared gorge for very long, either. After we’d come to what Kite estimated, given the horizon line, to be the halfway mark, something other than the tower moved into our lookout’s field of view. “Ugh,” Kite remarked. “Tentacled monstrosity at twelve o’clock. Get ready.”

“Born ready,” TupperWear commented.

“Kite, does it resemble Cthulhu at all?” I called up.

“No,” he said, “it’s like this… lizard thing, but the tentacles set it off. Not as big as Cthulhu, either, not even close.”

“All right, sweet,” I grinned. “That means it’s not an Immortal. We can kill it.”
“You’ve done that before?” Marpesia asked.

“Yeah,” I told her, “Mysterion and I got a few of these guys last time. I got a couple myself, so I know you don’t have to be Immortal to kill ’em.”

“Nice,” said TupperWear. “And if you two could bring one down, this’ll be a nice warm-up for four.”

“Well, the warm up’s right around the corner!” Kite warned. “Ready guys?”

“Wanna start this off right with a ricochet?” I asked.

“Two thoughts ahead of you, Toolshed. Let’s go.”

“Call it.”

Kite crouched down to prepare for a takeoff, that action alone giving me a fair estimate of how far off this beast was, then said, “Set in… five…”

That close? Damn. “Get ready, guys,” I said to Marpesia and TupperWear, who struck up a formation of their own. TupperWear dislodged his shield and stood a few feet off and diagonally to my right, while Marpesia spun out her quarter-staff and positioned herself a few feet back. I couldn’t help but equate their formation to a chess play in my head. Now, I know just about shit about chess, but I recognize at least what pieces can move where and when, and this was a play that the two of them would know pretty well (both Wendy and Token, I knew, were chess players, while the rest of us had given up on board games by sixth grade): he was a defensive pawn to her angled knight. I was interested to see how that would work into the fight.

Didn’t have to wonder long.

As soon as Kite called out, “ONE!” I hurled my sledgehammer skyward. Kite opted, I noticed as I unhooked and revved up the chainsaw (fuck, if we were gonna start this R’lyeh battle off right, we were all gonna go all out), not to go for the regular ricochet at that point, but he grabbed the sledgehammer and sprinted forward, then propelled himself up, kicked off of the larger row of columns to his left, and was airborne by the time the large creature he’d warned us about lumbered into view.

While Cthulhu had towered over every structure in South Park, as I recalled from seven years prior, this beast was probably just over of the height of an average two-storey building. It looked like something time had forgotten—well, given what R’lyeh was, that was an accurate thought. As Kite had described it, the thing was vaguely reptilian, in a Komodo dragon kind of sense, with tentacles covering the place one would assume its eyes should be, as well as taking the place of its legs.

Kite landed on the top of its massive head and swung the sledgehammer down, causing the beast to reel and scream. The tentacles on its face prickled up in discomfort for what Kite had done, revealing a single eye beneath. A perfect target, but we couldn’t underestimate this thing’s destructive powers, even if one of us managed to blind it.

“Go!” TupperWear called back to Marpesia, who rushed forward. He held his shield up as a step, and she ran toward it, stepped onto his back, then landed on the shield, which he then thrust skyward to give her a lift.

When she landed with perfect accuracy onto the creature’s back, she hit a lever on her quarter staff, causing a blade to slide out from the end of it, thus arming her with a spear perfectly characteristic of her Amazon exterior. “Toolshed, go for the gut!” Kite hollered down to me.
“Marpesia, aim dead center!” TupperWear called up to her.

Kite took another swing for the eye, and while the beast was distracted, I ran forward until I was directly under the thing’s stomach. Knowing full well I might be setting myself up for a shower of fucking R’lyeh blood this early in the game, I ran underneath the monster, held the chainsaw just a few inches above my head, and crunched it in. The beast had a thick, leathery skin that was tough to cut through, but that fuckin’ chainsaw didn’t let me down.

When I’d made it through—luckily unmarked by any of the blood, which turned out to be acidic—I rushed off to the side, knowing that thing would fall any second. Its blood sizzled up from the ground, and as soon as I’d made my clean getaway from underneath it, Marpesia stabbed her spear clean through.

“Toolshed!” Kite hollered down to me. “Weapon coming down!”

“On it!” I shouted back. I turned off the chainsaw, buckled it onto my back, then rushed around to the creature’s front in time to catch my sledgehammer.

Kite then took out a length of his emulsified string, lassoed it quickly around the creature’s neck, and hollered, “TupperWear, grab this and go!”

“Huh?”

“You’re hauling it down,” I translated, once TupperWear had grabbed the spool Kite threw down after his command. “Just pull!”

TupperWear was a good deal stronger than I was, so I understood why Kite would hand the task to him over me. As soon as Marpesia had dislodged her spear and she and Kite had leapt off, TupperWear yanked down on the string trap, similarly to the way Mysterion and I had figured out how to destroy those things last time, and dragged the beast to the ground.

“Marpesia!” I shouted over. “You and me’re going for the eye!”

“Right!”

She twirled her spear out again and sped forward at the creature’s head, while I selected my flathead screwdriver—I would rather have just shot the thing, but had to conserve drill bits while I could—and each of us ran up at an angle to stab, respectively, the left and right corners of that one hulking eye. The creature writhed and roared in pain for a minute as we rushed back, but ultimately, mostly from that severe loss of blood, keeled and ceased moving.

“Nice!” Kite complimented the group. He knocked my forearm with his in a ‘job well done’ gesture, then said, “Man, that was a good warmup.”

“Is it really down?” TupperWear wondered, snapping off the end of the string and handing the rest of the spool back to the Human Kite.

“Ugh, I felt it start losing its life on that last stab,” Marpesia shuddered. “It’s down.” She looked off into the distance, heaved an awful sigh, then took a towel out of her belt to wipe off the drenched end of her spear. She offered the towel to me, to clean off my own arsenal, then sighed. “Is this really the kind of awful thing Chaos has allied himself with?”

“Marpesia—“ TupperWear tried.

She shrugged. “It’s just mostly like… what the fuck?” she said, sounding disappointed.
“What the fuck…?” She thanked me as I handed the towel back to her, then kicked the ground and started walking again. “Come on guys,” she said, “let’s just keep going.”

“Be there in a second,” said TupperWear, as Kite and I exchanged a concerned glance.

This had, I was positive, everything to do with the concerns Wendy had come to me and Kyle with the night before. It almost seemed like all of Wendy’s—or Marpesia’s—motivation now had to do with, essentially, saving Marjorine from Professor Chaos. It made sense. Chaos had seemed, lately, to be holding both Marjorine and Butters hostage, or some other will, probably Nyarlathotep’s, had just kind of constructed this cage around all of Butters’ different sides, and fashioned Chaos into something incredibly dangerous.

Before any of us moved to catch up, TupperWear circled the fallen creature, then made an unexpected move. He crouched down to the beast’s open stomach, took out five evidence jars, small as an average test tube and among the array of empty glass ‘tupperware’ he kept clipped to his belt, and filled each one with a sampling of the blood. “Dude,” I said, hanging back while Kite, looking ready to hurl, continued forward, “what’re you doing?”

“This shit’s destructive,” TupperWear commented. “You saw how it kind of burned, right? It might come in handy as a weapon later on.”


“Thanks. I figure five’ll be good, if I ration how I use ’em.” As he stood, and he and I followed Kite and Marpesia, he went on, “Something I started thinking about before we got here was how I could try to kinda use the land against itself.”

“What do you mean?” I wondered.

“Part of being on defense,” he grinned, “is knowing how to perfectly counter your opponent’s strength. Nothing’s stronger than R’lyeh, so I want to figure out how to work it against itself. Maybe we can’t kill Immortals, but that thing we just killed lives in the same world they do. I bet that blood could at least do something to a big guy like Cthulhu.”

“That’s fucking awesome,” I said, unable to hide my astonishment. “Seriously, good thinking on that.”

TupperWear grinned, but the conversation was done. Kite kept on the ground, since the rest of the gorge was a straight shot forward toward the tower from here, and hung back with me and TupperWear now that Marpesia seemed to be leading the way. We discussed the quick fight briefly, but it was already something that everyone agreed was a task we’d have to get used to.

“Well, however that went,” said TupperWear, “I kinda like the four of us as a team.”

“Agreed,” the Human Kite nodded. “I know we’ll split off into pairs eventually, but let’s keep this going as long as we can.”

“Definitely,” I said. “There’s probably going to be a lot more of those around once Cthulhu wakes up.”

“You think Mysterion and them are getting close?” TupperWear wondered.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I’m sure it’ll happen soon enough.

“Anyone else get the sense that that thing was protecting something?” Kite asked us, opening
“Whether it was an Immortal or a secret, I don’t think we’re gonna figure out what it was here,” said TupperWear. “But I know what you mean.”

“Guys,” Marpesia called back. “Guys, come look at this.”

I hadn’t even noticed that, with the newly flat landscape, we’d arrived at the end of the columned gorge. The three of us stepped forward to where Marpesia now stood frozen, Kite and I on her left, TupperWear on her right, and followed her gaze out over what now looked like a drained and forgotten swamp, toward the looming tower. Dead flora rose up out of the land, which sank in various places down only a few inches, suggesting the bog that had once been there. A sulfuric haze hung over the ground a ways off, framing the base of the tower from the angle at which we were viewing it, giving me reason to believe that not all of the swamp had dried up. We were nearing water again, and should probably be careful not to get anywhere near it.

The thought of the instant death that would probably come by drinking or eating anything from R’lyeh was unsettling, but I’d thought ahead and had a few canteens of water clipped in with the rest of my arsenal. In fact, we’d all made sure to have a fair amount of water on us, to keep us going. The four of us paused briefly for a drink, then agreed that we should continue on and at least make it through the dead swamp before taking a real rest of any kind.

We traversed through fairly easily, finding that some of the sunken areas actually had stone bridges lazily thrown over them, made of the same pale green rock that made up so much of R’lyeh. The haze we’d seen, above what turned out indeed to be a small suggestion of a living bog, was odorless, but upon Kite’s suggestion that it was probably deadly to breathe in anyway, we opted to walk around rather than through it.

“Plus,” I heard him mutter, “I don’t trust anything that looks like fog here.”

A very, very good point.

Mysterion had banished Nyarlathotep to R’lyeh; he hadn’t killed it. Which meant that it was still on our to-do list, and pretty high up, too. The haze was almost like a warning, that we were coming up on the larger, sentient fog again. The Crawling Mist. The Crawling Chaos.

It took us what felt like a few hours to walk around the haze and get back on track toward the tower, which both Marpesia and the Human Kite kept their eyes locked on the entire time, but eventually, we made it to a disorderly formation of cracked boulders, with no regard to shape or symmetry, and were looking out on that structure, closer than ever.

“What do you think is in there?” I wondered. I was the first to sit down, prompting the others to do so as well, since we had decided that we’d rest before continuing forward. We had quite a way to go, still, and couldn’t waste all our energy now.

I unclipped a canteen of water and took a much-needed drink, savoring the water; R’lyeh felt dry and damp all at once, but I couldn’t stay hydrated enough here. Definitely different from last time. I wondered, for a second, about all of the travelers who had come before to R’lyeh, and how long they had lasted. None of them had come with a purpose, though. None of them had been here to fight. We knew full well what we were here to do, and weren’t stupid enough to get trapped.

I offered my water to Kite, who’d come prepared with slightly less than I had, and after he gratefully took a drink and thanked me, he stepped around the boulder the four of us were resting behind, saying, “I’m just going to take a look and see if I can get a look at anything over there.”
“Is there anything guarding it?” I called over to him. “Like that thing we just fought?”

“Can’t tell yet, hold on.”

We only had to hold on for a few seconds, since Kite ducked behind the boulder again much faster than I’d expected he would. “What?” I wondered.

“Oh, shit,” Kite muttered.

“What’d you see?” TupperWear asked.

Kite shook his head. “No room at the tower, looks like,” he said, sounding unnerved. “Unless we wanna fight our way in.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“Is it occupied?” Marpesia asked. When Kite nodded, Marpesia’s face turned dour, and she asked, as if already knowing the answer, “By whom?”

“Who else?” said the Human Kite, cracking his neck and knuckles to prepare for the fight we knew would come. “Professor Chaos.”

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Butters

The air had gone stale.

Now, I had heard, plenty of times, the phrase to taste defeat, and it was something that never crossed my mind as a possibility. I was Chaos, and this was R’lyeh. Defeat was not an option. But that damned stale air certainly had a taste to fit the bill.

It didn’t help that I was parched, and the only water to be found was hot and toxic. Dehydration only succeeded in forcing my head to spin round faster and faster, but in a land of delusion, hardly anything could, so to speak, go to my head. General Disarray had said so himself: our plan was to raise the Old Ones and become seated with Them in the new, dark world—therefore, I would not go insane. Or so my present understanding of the situation was.

On the whole, however, I was so far grossly unimpressed with R’lyeh. It primarily had to do with that damn shadow that persistently followed us, snaking around me and taunting me with its presence. It was such a hindrance; I hated it. Plus, no matter how Disarray or I tried, we could not open the Necronomicon. That much was infuriating.

But we had set up something of a home for ourselves in that tower, the only walls, I believed, that could or should contain Chaos, and would occasionally set out around it, in search of clues that would help us crack that book back open so that we could have what we had come to R’lyeh for in the first place.

On this fortuitous day, we found ourselves going what was most likely north of the tower, and happened upon a brilliant structure. It was an abandoned amphitheatre, at the center of which was a bier that looked as though it could be used for sacrifices. The crude theatre was carved with oblong seats up into a cliff that appeared to lead nowhere, extending high enough to brush that dour, maroon sky, out of which no sun shone. It extended out several hundred feet on either side, and the bier was large enough for at least a dozen fully grown men to lie upon, making me wonder whether
this had once been a place for ritual and sport. Just as the Romans had done, perhaps the Old Ones, when awakened, had a specific purpose for this place.

But now, moss and spiny vines clung to every stone in the surrounding area, but they shirked away from the slithering shadow that insisted upon once again following me. Disarray told me to ‘clear my mind’ and stop worrying about ridiculous things. Bored with his attitude, I wandered away, west, in search of something less disappointing.

Being here was supposed to give me answers, and power, and closure. Where the hell was that? Where the fuck were those new worlds I’d been ready to grasp? Nowhere, of course, if we couldn’t ever open that damned book. The longer it stayed closed, the more disgusted I felt. Or perhaps just sick. Sick of everything. Even in R’lyeh, did I really have to be met with such disappointment? If I was going to see the world rise under the greatest chaos, I had to discover something more than this dried up ampitheatre and that cold tower.

I was just beginning to get the impression that we were facing another unfulfilling day when I heard a cry of triumph sound from my partner in the distance. I made my way back toward the stone ampitheatre, where General Disarray had taken roost on a green stone slab just to the left of the rows and rows of forgotten, decrepit seats—or pews, I realized, as the case could very well have been.

“What is it?” I wondered. I walked up to him from behind, but I already knew that he was grinning with delight. “A breakthrough?”

“The best kind,” said General Disarray. He glanced up over his shoulder at me, his eyes aglow and perfectly matched in putrescence with the sulfuric tones of the land at our feet. His lips curled over his teeth into a skeleton grin as he said, “The book opened.”

“Did it?” I said, still feeling vaguely unimpressed with the whole thing. Not until I saw some results would I get my spark back.

But oh, what results would come. And what a spark.

What a spark.

“So we return to Cthulhu’s crypt, I suppose?” I added, glaring back in the direction of the tombs. My cape whistled and rippled out behind me in a sudden gust of warm air, on which a whisper rushed through.

After the whisper came a familiar tune, a trill of notes I would recognize no matter how faintly it played. It was Nyarlathotep’s call, and it sounded closer and closer the more intently I listened to it. Only when Disarray’s head turned at the sound did I realize that the tune was coming from the flute I had been carrying around all that time. The wind whirled through the mouthpiece and tickled the keys of the notes it wanted to play. Nyarlathotep was calling for me specifically, so that I in turn could do something for him.

Glad to feel purposeful again, I beckoned for Disarray to follow me, and he strode along at my side, if even sometimes walking ahead, his chin held high, suddenly looking more self-important than the world’s greatest orator. He still knew something that I did not, and this was more unsettling than anything else I had felt thus far in R’lyeh. My own partner was still hiding things from me. Were Chaos and Disarray really not concordant?

More importantly, would I need to destroy him in order to reach the final stage of—wherever it was I needed to climb now? To create a world free from strife, atrocity, and any kind of bond, how far exactly did I need to go? How far, until I truly became Chaos?
We did not need to walk for long. Disarray had discovered, through ancient texts and maps all provided him most likely by that young Goth—whose involvement I was still unsure of, and slightly disturbed by—that R’lyeh was affixed to the Earth somewhere deep beneath Polynesia, which led me to believe that somewhere along the way, we would see glimpses of the ocean. Indeed we did. Into view, and then merely yards away, there, laid out before us, was a dark body of un-navigable water, which I knew had led many, many men to their deaths here in this forgotten dimension.

Far into the vast expanse of the tumultuous sea, I saw an enormous creature setting off, diving beneath the waves into what I could only assume were depths of a greater terror than even the landmass of R’lyeh could provide. “Dagon,” I heard Disarray whisper in awe. “The Fish-God. That thing used to have a big following, too, I read. East. Innsmouth.”

“Do we need it?” I wondered.

“It can cause storms at sea,” said Disarray. “But I don’t know exactly how linked to the slumbering Old Ones it is. What we need to do is wake Cthulhu, so that he can pray the rest awake, and then Nyarlathotep can merge R’lyeh to Yuggoth and we’ll have the mad darkness of the Outer Gods reigning, too.”

“And all will be chaos,” I said sternly. “Where’s Nyarlathotep?”

Cued perfectly, the cry sounded again to my right, so I made off in that direction, with Disarray at my heels. There, less than half a mile from where we had been, on the banks of the rising waters, lay none other than the mighty Nyarlathotep, looking like a broken statue of the ancient world. In sphinx form, the great, shapeshifting Messenger of the Spaces Between was wounded—missing his left front paw, and barely looking solid.

“Oh, shit,” said Disarray, his eyes going wide before they narrowed with his incapability to accept defeat. “The Mist can’t—fuck! Come on.”

“You’re giving me orders now?” I scowled.

“We need him. Come on. I’ll find something in the Necronomicon that’ll bring the Crawling Chaos back up to speed, and then you can fix this whole fucking thing. Ugh!” he fumed, storming off. “No more setbacks!”

Taking off behind him, I snapped, “You avoided my question.”

“Nothing is important right now, Chaos, except for us getting the fucking world we deserve!”

Once we stood merely ten feet away from the deity, General Disarray leafed through the Necronomicon until he happened upon a page that pleased him. He practically thrust the book, then, into my hands, and I gave him a warning glare before once again looking over the Messenger.

All I understood was that he was necessary. Yet so was Cthulhu, so were all of the Old Ones. Everything that rested here in R’lyeh. Nyarlathotep was further connected, though, to a seat of madness in the stars. Cosmic madness and madness below the sea… meant to crash, to collide, and the result would be chaos upon the mortal world unlucky enough to have begged itself into the center. Would I really be given a seat with those Great Old Ones? Had Disarray any true idea of what my reading this passage would do? Or of whatever would result from the inevitable meeting of Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu?

Well.
At least R’lyeh wouldn’t seem boring to me anymore, no matter what happened next. I read out the passage that Disarray had selected, and discovered that it was something of a healing incantation for the Messenger, calling forth aid from the Void and, as I read at one point, “a sacrifice of mortal mind.”

What happened then was a blur. Fog covered the page until I could read no longer, and my vision and mind went black. The next thing I remember is waking, back in the tower, the Necronomicon lying at my side. I was sitting up, my back against the inner stone wall, and the only thing my bleary eyes could focus on was the fact that Disarray was leaning back against the wall directly opposite me.

How could his eyes still look so focused, so human, while mine had become black and hollow?

Did I care?

No, I decided. I cared about no one. I couldn’t. Chaos was fully disconnected from everything. All human feeling. That was the way it had to be.

So, my mind empty of everything, all I could say to Disarray was, “What?”

“You healed him,” Disarray grinned. “There’s a storm brewing outside, Chaos. It’s starting.”

I moved my neck to look out the open doorway of the tower, finding it stiff and sore, as if I’d just been strained beyond my limits. The flute dug into my side, from the angle at which I was seated. But I would not bring myself to think about how she could possibly be trying to claw her way back into my mind now. Gone, gone, gone, she was gone. I just needed that flute, that was all. Out of sight, out of mind. Far, far out of mind.

The clouds overhead rumbled and shut out nearly all of the pale light that had kissed the formless landscape of R’lyeh, and the familiar sound of thunder echoed in my ears. Like music. I stepped out of the tower, curious as to how a storm might brew here in R’lyeh, but I did not have to wonder long.

The Tarot card I had been given, that stayed strapped into my belt, depicted a tower struck by lightning. Image built upon image—it was becoming more and more apparent that this was indeed where I belonged.

No rain. Only light on the sky.

Until lightning struck the tower, then bounded off of the pale green stone and shocked me. It hit the metal of my helmet and bit into me, sending a jolt through my brain and through my blood. It did not hurt. As a matter of fact, it was intoxicating. The lightning surged and churned through me, and involuntarily I lifted my hands out in front of me. The lightning then discharged; as if it were normal static, I felt only a minor shock in my hands. But sparks flew.

I had just conducted, controlled, and shot out lightning. I had just become a weapon. And the remaining sensation in my body told me that this wasn’t just a fluke. This was Nyarlathotep’s gratitude. This was a power that was not going away.

I always had associated myself with the doom that rumbles through every ominous clap of
thunder, the fear that sends the heart racing with every flash of lightning. And now I could feel that very sensation pulsing through me like a new synapse, my body working double to house—yes! Natural chaos! Lightning can strike a single tree and thus destroy a forest. So could I, perhaps, strike down one insignificant thing and set off a chain reaction. It happened again when lightning struck after I’d given it a thought—down from the sky and into my brain, then rushing through me until finally the lightning became a blast from out my fingertips. No, this was certainly no fluke. As long as that tower stood tall, as a conductor, I could not be touched. Not even approached. Because I could control the very sky.

Explosive transformation. From one form of Chaos to another. From one threat to another. I heard Nyarlathotep’s flute call on the wind again, as the synapse sparked through my fingertips again.

“Chaos!” I heard Disarray call out.

I turned toward him, but did not answer. I felt the lightning surge through me, and I was sure he saw the change in me as well, as he looked well beyond pleased with the current situation.

“Check it out,” Disarray laughed. “The League is here.”

Were they? What an interesting turn of events. There, indeed, on the horizon, I saw the silhouettes of four of the heroes.

Marpesia among them.

Well, then. Let them come. Let them know true, unbridled, unforgiving Chaos.

—

Kenny

“Are we there yet?”

“Oh, my—shut up,” I growled back at the speaker. This was not the first time he’d asked that question. “For the love of God, Coon, do you want to be on this mission or not?”

“Yeah, yeah, chill, jeez,” he said. Annoying as it was, he was hiding behind humor, as he always did. Cartman had been severely wounded, psychologically more than anything, by one of Nyarlathotep’s last attacks—the Crawling Chaos had, as I’d already observed, taken away pretty much everything he had but the League—so the Coon was kind of working double, due to the fact that he did not want either of his (equally inflated) egos to appear at all weak. “So do you have any idea where we’re going?”

“I’ve got a good feeling we’re getting close to Cthulhu,” I admitted. “Everyone stay on alert. Mosquito?”

“Stunners and tranqs at the ready,” he said.

“Coon?”

“Yeah, yeah, ready for anything,” said the Coon.

“Craig?”
“What?” asked Craig.

“You good to help us out with this?”

“Yep.”

“Ugh,” the Coon commented. “How come you just keep callin’ yourself Craig? You need another identity.” It was kind of true. All Craig had done to conceal himself was don a blue bulletproof vest and a dark black pair of sunglasses, but the name was even more of a dead giveaway. Not that we needed to be concerned with that here, but still. If he were to stay on, he would probably eventually need an alter ego.

“No, I don’t,” Craig refuted.

“That’s so fucking lame, Craig, you can’t keep using your name.”

“Yes, I can.”

“But that’s lame!”

“If Jean Grey can be Jean Grey, I can just be Craig.”

“Both of you SHUT UP,” I commanded. “I need quiet for a while.”

“Craig started it.”

I whipped around and gave the Coon a very sharp warning glare, and he took the hint immediately. I knew I looked like shit, and was therefore even more of a sight when pushed to my limits, but if I was going to keep my head here in R’lyeh, if I was going to stay myself in this place that was just begging for me to become whatever it was the Cult had meant for me to be, I needed focus, which was something the Coon enjoyed taking away from anyone he was ever around.

Thankfully, he did shut up after that, and we were able to continue onward.

Yes, I knew, instinctively, that we were getting closer to Cthulhu with every step, but I wanted as much time to think my actions through as possible. My shadow knew exactly where it wanted to go, but I forced it to take a detour. I wasn’t going to give it the benefit of the doubt—I wasn’t going to just surrender it to Cthulhu, especially without knowing what would happen to me. My mind or my physical body. Ever since we’d crossed the threshold into R’lyeh, I had been feeling a different kind of pull. My shadow was stronger, darker, and practically solid, but it still followed below and around me, licking at the tails of my cape and seeking to devour other shadows we passed. It steered clear of human shadows, and therefore my teammates were safe, but I had felt it tugging toward Yog-Sothoth, and the Gatekeeper had hidden its own.

I’d been able to drag Nyarlathotep back down to R’lyeh by trapping him in my shadow—anything that cast one was at my mercy, but I had to be careful with the way I just let it snake around and take things. In the back of my mind was still the gruesome image of Jim McElroy’s final moments. The disgusting stark white of his brittle body, I realized, was attributed to a presence of too much light and no shadow. Mine had sucked it all away from him, along with his life. It had hurled him into years of madness in a single moment, and then taken what it wanted as a prize, leaving just the shell.

If I could cause that much destruction on a single human being, without even necessarily trying, I almost didn’t want to know what I could do conscientiously. Or to another Immortal.
Everything that moves casts a shadow. Everything that exists. And therefore everything belonged to the Shadow of Cthulhu. The Cult hadn’t just made me Immortal. They’d made me impenetrable. I doubted they’d known what exactly they were doing, but if they wanted a world of darkness, I guess looking to the shadows was the first place anyone would turn.

“Are you controlling it,” Mosquito asked me appropriately as I was pondering my own abilities, and once I was open to having conversations again, “or is it controlling you?”

“I don’t know if it’s either,” I admitted, “as much as we just have like minds.”

“Your shadow has a mind?” asked Craig.

“It feels that way. Like I was just born with this other thing attached to me. Like there’s human me and there’s Shadow me. This probably doesn’t make any sense,” I said, “but it’s kinda nice to talk it out. Sounds better to me, anyway, when I say it out loud.”

“So you really are two different things?” Mosquito deduced. “Me and Toolshed got talking a lot about that earlier, before we left. If you say your shadow’s got its own mind, then maybe all you’ve gotta do to break the curse is just figure out how to detach it.”

“Yeah,” I grumbled, “but everything has a shadow. Even corpses. If I didn’t, I wonder if I’d just go to dust.”

“Dude, that’s deep,” the Coon commented.

“And it sucks,” Craig added.

“Well, thanks, guys,” I sighed. “At this point, though, I’m just kind of taking things as they come and going from there. If I figure out how to break it, I figure out how to break it, but right now this is so much more about saving the world.”

Even though, yes, at the very core of it all, yes. It was about my curse. Everything was about my curse. The impulses that had driven me to continue my life as Mysterion. The secrets behind my many deaths, and my parents’ feigned ignorance thereof. I wanted answers, otherwise I’d be one hell of an angry ghost the rest of my afterlife. Assuming I even got that as a consolation prize for being such an atrocity of nature.

Dammit, I had to stop getting down on myself. I really did. My mind had been plagued so much with worry, lately. Worry of never returning home. Of failure. Of losing myself in my Shadow. But for fuck’s sake, I still wanted those answers. I still wanted a life. I had to focus on that. Just that. Break that damned curse and get home to my girlfriend and sister, then do whatever it took to hear the truth from my parents’ drunken mouths. I had to be a hell of a lot more positive than I’d let myself be lately. Yes, losing my life was an option. Losing myself was an option. But it wasn’t the only one.

I thought about my nine-year-old choice to symbolize myself with a question mark. Nobody knew who Mysterion was. I did not know what I was. I was an unanswered question. A smirk twitched itself out of my lips, though, when I realized that I was closer than ever to hearing what I’d been waiting for so long to know. I knew what the Cult wanted me to be. I knew that I was a human Immortal, and meant to be Cthulhu’s Shadow. But I still did not know if that meant that I could destroy Cthulhu. If that meant that I could keep my head and save the world. Even just my own little segment of the world.

My thoughts were interrupted by a crackle from the wire. “Mysterion?” I heard the Human
Kite said.

“Gotcha, Human Kite,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“You’re not going to believe this. We found Chaos.”

All four of us stopped short. I couldn’t help but look at the Coon, who of course could hear everything. His eyes went wide, and for a second, he looked like he’d blown a fuse. “You… found Chaos?” he asked.

“He’s been set up in that tower,” TupperWear’s voice came through. “We made it here, and that’s what we found.”

I looked, then, to Mosquito. He was emotionless. If he were fully leading this charge into R’lyeh, I knew there was a possibility that he would give their team a tall order to bring Chaos down. I didn’t want Chaos dead—I didn’t want anyone dead, honestly—but I knew that Mosquito had that option in the back of his head, still angry about what had happened to Bebe. “Are you going to attack?” he asked.

“If possible,” said Toolshed, “we’re going to try to talk him down from whatever delusions he came here with.”

“Careful,” I warned them. “Keep us posted on your progress.” The sky rumbled overhead, and I saw light flash in the distance as a slight breeze rose up. “I’m serious, guys, watch what you do.”

“We’ll stay in touch,” Kite promised, before ending that particular transmission.

I silently wished them luck, then called my own fragment of the team forward. Things were progressing much faster than I had expected. With Nyarlathotep in R’lyeh, Chaos would have that Messenger’s power on his side, and what I knew it would come down to would be Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu. And then, if things went the way I was hoping they would, Cthulhu and me.

Without their Priest to pray them living in their dead sleep, the other Old Ones would surely suffer. It was Cthulhu that needed to be destroyed, no matter what angle I was coming at this whole mission from. To break my curse, I had to destroy him; to free mankind from any further influence from R’lyeh, I had to destroy him; to stop the End Time before it could begin, I had to destroy him.

So we pressed on. I trusted Toolshed and the others to deal well with Chaos—and most likely Disarray and Nyarlathotep as well—and had only to rely on the Coon to help wake Cthulhu, to rely on everyone to do their part in bringing this entire crisis to an end. The ground beneath us was kind for most of our journey, flat and barren, with very little interference from local fauna. The sky remained ominous overhead, but there was no threat of rain, and the wind remained at a tolerable level, but I did feel a slight chill as we walked further and further from the Gate. Remembering that Stan’s momentary insanity had sprung up from a freezing feeling, I remained wary of every time I felt a chill, and how much time passed in between, checking in with the others as well to confirm that I was not the only one getting that sensation.

And then, there we were. At the base of the stairs that led to Cthulhu’s tomb. To the beast meant to awaken and plunge the world into darkness. This was the Cult’s ultimate goal—to see me seated beside this thing, so that the Dark Priest could cast his Shadow across the Earth. Once under that mad blanket of darkness, mankind would only have the sense to blindly obey. Too bad for them I wasn’t feeling up to the task.
“Well, guys,” I said to my fragment of the team, “here we are.”

“So let’s get up there,” said Mosquito, “and kill that thing before it wakes up.”

“Huh,” Craig remarked before I could respond.

“What?” I wondered.

Craig shrugged. “Nothin’,” he said. “This just feels too easy.”

“What do you mean?”

Craig folded his arms and looked around. “I dunno. Just… here we are?” he said dully.

“Just like that? This thing doesn’t have any guard dogs or anything? We just go up there and help you kill it? Is that really all it’s gonna take?”

“This isn’t going to be easy, Craig,” I told him.

“Okay. How do you know?”

“Jesus Christ, Craig,” the Coon spat.

“No, really,” Craig pressed.

“For one thing,” I answered, “I can feel it.” Every step I took in R’lyeh felt different, based on where my shadow was cast. It pulled at me like a dog tugging at its leash, begging to be reunited with Cthulhu, for me to live in undying death in a seat at the top of the new, decaying world. As long as my own mind stayed intact, though, I’d fight it. “The Cult would be able to raise Cthulhu on my birthday,” I recalled aloud. “That’s still a month away. We’re doing this now so that we have a time advantage. I don’t even want to imagine what my shadow could become by then.”

“Good point,” said Craig. And that was that.

“So let’s go!” the Coon urged. “What’s the plan?”

I thought for a moment, thinking about different courses of attack. I had no idea what lay at the top of that staircase, other than what had been detailed in Johansen’s relative’s memoirs. Oh, those had been plenty detailed, telling me exactly what I would see, but not what I would experience. Or what the others would. Clyde had lost a relative in R’lyeh, too—I wondered if it was at all possible that Cthulhu, or at least the land itself, would recognize him or single him out because of that? Unfinished business and all? Plus, it was clear that Cthulhu lay dead but dreaming in his own tomb. I didn’t know if perhaps there was an antechamber for the Shadow or not. Or if, upon reaching the door, Cthulhu would wake and attack just due to my presence.

“Coon,” I said, staring up the large staircase and contemplating each possible route. “Can you take the lead from here?”

“Me?” He sounded pretty pleased about that.

“You’ve tamed Cthulhu before. I’m banking on the fact that you could do it again. Whatever you did last time, do that again.”

“Uh… I might try something a little different,” he said nervously, “but I’ll get ’im.”

“Why?” I wondered, turning to look at him. “What’d you do last time?”
“Oh, you know. Like… just… easy stuff.”

“I bet it was really embarrassing,” said Craig. “That’s why you don’t want to talk about it.”

“No,” the Coon refuted strongly.

“That’s totally what happened.”

“God, fuck you, Craig! Why are you here?”

“Because—“

“Hey, guys, heads up!” Red Serge’s voice suddenly crackled over the static wire. My three companions and I shut up immediately and dove into a quick four-point formation, scanning each direction for a threat.

“Red Serge?” I heard Kite’s voice come through, with only some interference.

“What’s going on?” I asked frantically.

“We got fuckin’ ambushed, that’s what happened!” Red Serge shouted, sounding strained. “Guess the Cult caught word of us having a portal—“

“HENRIETTA,” I barked.

“Don’t you dare blame me, panty boy,” she snarled back. “I had nothing to do with this.”

“All right, all right,” I dismissed. “What exactly is happening?”

I listened in as Red Serge and Henrietta explained to me an ambush that had happened at the base—the Cult had shown up the evening after we’d departed (also giving me an estimate of how long we had been gone, though I knew I’d felt the passage of several hours as we’d been walking) in an attempt to storm the Gate.

Red Serge and Iron Maiden were fighting off the Cloaks as best they could, and the Guardian Angel appeared on the wire to inform me that the two Goths staying at the safehouse were not involved, but that she had, earlier in the day, pushed back another attempted Cultist break-in at Red’s. The main issue now was the little Goth kid, one of the—Henrietta estimated—ten men who had forced their way through our Gate portal before Iron Maiden had pushed back the rest of them.

“And a warning,” Henrietta added, “little shit’s got another copy of the Necronomicon.”

“Goddammit, how many copies of those in South Park are there?!” I shouted in frustration.

“At least they’ve got a few hours’ walk ahead of them,” Mosquito tried to console me. “We can—“

“A likely thought,” I heard that Goth kid say, from only a few hundred feet away, “though a stupid one.” I whipped my head in that direction and saw that he was alone, dressed in his Cultist robe and holding onto his new Necronomicon. “Did you know, Mosquito, that these books can always find each other? As long as I’ve got this, I can find and travel to any of the others around me.” Well, fuck. Neither Henrietta nor I had ever known that. “There are now three in R’lyeh.” Laughing, he added, “One for each sacrifice.”

“You still after those?” I growled at him.
“It wouldn’t hurt.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

“Told you it wouldn’t be easy,” Craig put in.

No kidding. So now we had a fourth bother to add to the list. And this was one that we needed to deal with quickly, since the Cult had a better chance of raising Cthulhu than anyone. Anyone other than the Coon, that is. Shit. I didn’t want to have to do resort to it, but I was close to sending the Coon up the staircase to wake Cthulhu on his own.

“Wait a second…” I realized. “Coon!”

“What?” the Coon wondered.

“You brought the Necronomicon, didn’t you?” I asked him.

“Of course I did,” he scoffed, pulling the book out from a secured holster he had added for it on his utility belt.

“All right,” I said, glancing up the staircase. The Coon was the best shot we had at raising Cthulhu. The best chance without risking me accidentally becoming something I wasn’t ready to become, anyway. And as long as we got to Cthulhu before the Cult did, I almost didn’t care what the methods were. “I’m going to make a wild request. Coon, I need you to get up there, and fast. Mosquito, Craig, you guys go with him. Whatever any of you guys do, don’t fucking die.”

“Mysterion,” said Mosquito, “why send us up ahead? You’re going to need backup against the Cult.”

“That’s where Cthulhu comes in,” I told him.

“Leverage,” he nodded.

“Us waking him up will at least piss the Cult off enough to distract them for a while, and hopefully we can have time to regroup.”

“And if we don’t?” asked Craig.

“Then we get Toolshed’s team back here as soon as fucking possible.”

Knowing that we didn’t really have the time to sit around and debate logistics, Mosquito eventually relented, and led the way up the staircase that his ancestor had climbed around a century before. The Coon assured me that he’d do whatever he could with Cthulhu, and followed. Craig brought up the rear, asking nothing; proclaiming nothing.

And just like that, I was alone, facing down the kid I could now only think of as McElroy’s protégé. It was as if I hadn’t killed the Cultist leader at all, such was the Goth’s intensity. He wasn’t giving up on wanting everything destroyed. But there was no way in Hell I was going to let him get any further than this. I just prayed in the back of my mind that the Coon and his companions could make it to Cthulhu and that he’d be able to successfully get that Dark God raised and under his control once again.

“All right,” I snapped at the kid, “so you made it to R’lyeh. Congrats, kid. Now what?”

“Now is the time for all darkness to fall upon man,” the kid announced to the air. He glared
directly at me, as if searching for an answer. “To Mighty Cthulhu and his Shadow we have come to pledge ourselves to the new dying world.” He opened the Necronomicon, and passed a hand over the pages. “It is not yet the Month of Madness, it is not yet that chosen day—“

“It’s called a birthday,” I scowled, “and I plan on celebrating my seventeenth like any normal guy should, or not at all.”

“Not likely,” the Goth said hollowly. “You have your destiny, Shadow. Don’t you want—“

“Look, I know what I want, and it has nothing to do with R’lyeh!” I hollered. “And quit addressing me as Shadow, you conniving piece of shit. I’m—“

“Cthulhu’s Shadow, the Whispering Shadow, the Shadow of the End… you are known by many, many titles, you know,” the kid went on. As if McElroy hadn’t been bad and cryptic enough. “The Link Between Worlds. The Shadow of Spaces Between. Don’t you understand what a triumph you are? An Immortal, called to life by human tongues! Given eternal life in a human body, to forever walk Earth and all Spaces Between! The Messenger of the End!”

“Shut up!” I shouted. “I’m not gonna be any of those things. I’m here to break this curse, kid, not thrive in it.”

“Didn’t he tell you? You don’t have a choice.” The Goth kid grinned, which was an awful sight, and he continued, “I’ve come to give you your new name.”

Ugh. Why did he have to shove through the Gate? This was such a set-back. Such an annoying fucking set-back. But one that could very well destroy me. I couldn’t treat that kid’s presence too lightly. I was trusting Toolshed’s group to take care of Chaos, trusting the Coon to wake Cthulhu—I needed to trust myself to rise above whatever this kid had planned now. I felt that, as long as I kept trusting the rest of my League, even those back home—Red Serge, Iron Maiden, and that wonderful Guardian Angel—I would not lose my grip.

The Goth stared down at his Necronomicon, then lifted his head to shout up the staircase, “Iä, iä! Cthulhu fhtagn! I come from the ranks of men to name and awaken the Great One’s Shadow!”

The words pierced my heart.

No, no, no, no, no—keep trusting—keep a grip—keep your head, Kenny—look up—look up—not to the darkness—keep your head—keep your head—

But it hurt. It burned. My lungs, my veins. Every inch of my body had been ignited, just from the reading of the Necronomicon in the land that it described. Somewhere in there was a passage about me, and I knew that that was the Goth’s point of attack. Counter, counter, counter, I had to counter. Fuck.

This was not a part of the plan at all. I needed a backup idea. And soon.

Shadows began to pool around me, and as each merged with my own, I knew precisely where each one was coming from. Every portal I’d ever come across in Purgatory had been a shadow, and I had assumed until now that I’d been finding the same one each time. It felt, however, like the pulse stretching out from the soles of my feet beat with the addition of several of those portals to my own shadow, suggesting that the Immortal me had been spread out across all manner of afterlives, all in the interest of eventually bringing me back here. Heaven. Hell. Purgatory. Even Earth. Wherever I went, I couldn’t escape the shadows. They would find me, devour me, suck me
back here.

Back home.

“Thus did Mighty Cthulhu seal away his Shadow,“ the little Goth read from the Necronomicon, locking his sickly eyes on me. I’m sure I was staring back with eyes no less haunted than his. It felt like bile was rising from my stomach. Like I was burning from the inside out. I burned—it was a source that felt stronger and crueller than flame. Ruin, armageddon, all of that... so many talks of the Apocalypse were centered around fire rising from the pits below or falling from the sky.

Wrong.

The true End was there at my feet. The Shadow’s true awakening would be the End. It would lick up everything in its path and wind itself like a boa constrictor around the world. And it all began with that passage the kid had started to read.

“Blessed in its own right by the mad tongue of the Great One, Azathoth, to be fixed in Immortal time to the Priest Cthulhu, the Shadow, Messenger Between Worlds, lies in the depths of R’lyeh on his bier. And it shall be the tongues of mortal man that shall call forth the Great Shadow and give unto it the name not even Dark Cthulhu knows.”

“STOP READING!” I hollered at the kid. I tore down my hood and shouted out in my normal voice, “My name is Kenny McCormick!” Pulling my hood back up and disguising my tone once again, I went on, “The only other name I go by is Mysterion! I’m here to destroy Cthulhu, and if need be, the Shadow, as well! Now shut the fuck up and get out of my way.”

“Not likely,” the Goth sneered. “You’re going to need a miracle, McCormick, and I doubt you’ll be given one.”

A miracle, huh? I thought for a moment about calling for the Guardian Angel. Even though Red Serge was first on my list for backup, part of me wanted to give a task like this to her. She’d freed me from a Cult ritual before, and she would be ready and willing to do it again. She was the only miracle I wanted to rely on now, if a miracle was indeed what I needed.

I still held onto the hope that I could tackle this on my own, however. Hurry up, Coon, I begged nonetheless in my mind.

“Listen up,” I said to the Goth. “You want the End? You’re not getting it. This is where your influence stops, becau—“

And then, all of a sudden, life fucked me. Hard. And it had nothing to do with the Cult. Nothing to do with the Mythos. Which was precisely what pissed me off so much about what happened next:

“Hang on, Mysterion!” a voice came from above. “I’ll help you!”

Oh, no.

Oh fuck no.

Fuck my fucking life, no.

Not him. Anyone but him. I didn’t invite him, and I was pretty sure nobody did. He just had to wait until now to fucking swoop in and think he could once again be the Goddamn hero.
I didn’t even turn around. “Get the fuck out of here,” I snarled at him.

“Nonsense! I’m here to—“

“I really don’t care,” I interrupted. “Go. Away.”

“Mysterion, what the hell is going on?” I heard Henrietta ask.

“Surprise visit,” I grumbled.

“Who from?”

Only then did I turn. Only then did I see that awful flash of pink and green land a few feet behind me, standing out against the dark tones of R’lyeh—entirely unwelcome. He’d grown, as had we all, but had not changed. What a fucking boy scout. Asshole.

“Who else?” I muttered. “Your brother.”

Her brother, Bradley Biggle. The bane of my existence, even more so than fucking Cthulhu. The lost and nearly forgotten member of our childhood play group, Coon and Friends, before things had gotten real. Before the League. Before any of this. He didn’t belong here. He was not welcome in the Shadow League. Not that guy. He had absolutely no place in this mission, no place in our lives, no place in my fucking Mythos. But there he was, the one and only.

Mint-Berry Crunch.

_ _ _
The idea to advance on the tower was an easy one to agree on, but one that needed a fair deal of deliberation prior to execution. None of us could go up against Chaos without some kind of plan, least of all Marpesia, with her incredibly personal score to settle with the self-made villain. Plus, it wasn’t just Chaos. Disarray couldn’t be underestimated, either, and there was no way Nyarlathotep wasn’t lurking nearby.

So what it basically came down to was sticking with our formation of four as long as possible, but if a separation had to happen, Marpesia would take on Chaos—either alone or with TupperWear, depending on the situation and how dangerous Chaos actually proved to be—while Toolshed and I would go after Nyarlathotep. The toxic blood samples TupperWear had taken from the cyclopean beast earlier might come in handy against that Messenger, so he was pretty much prepared to help in whichever battle needed his backup most, and he was good to go back and forth, if need be. Just in case, however, he gave me and Toolshed each one of those little vials, keeping the remaining three for himself.

All of this arranged, the four of us checked in with Mysterion—thick into his own quandary—and made our advance, as lightning crashed overhead.

Chaos did not speak when we arrived. He’d placed himself so high on a pedestal, he wouldn’t even acknowledge us until we made some kind of mention of him. Jesus—Wendy had plenty of reasons to be so concerned. That wasn’t Butters. He just would not do these things. Something had become horribly twisted in his head. There was no way he hadn’t gone crazy.

Oh.

Oh, that was it, it had to be: Butters had gone crazy, but functionally crazy. His brand of insanity was disguising itself as clearheadedness, and thus, traces of the real him could still be found. Just not enough to convince me, or anyone, that this was the same person we’d always known.

“Chaos!” I called out. He hardly made it clear that he’d heard me. I wasn’t going to give him any kind of satisfaction, though; I wasn’t going to just accept that he really was going to play the villain forever. If we were going to do this fight properly, we’d have to go in with at least a little hope that we could wake him the fuck up. Before it was too late. “You’ve come all the way to R’lyeh, but for what? Answer me.”

“Didn’t I make it clear enough?” he answered. “There’s a world I want, and it’s here that I can take it. Your League can’t last against the Old Ones.”

The four of us formed a line, standing just as firm and sound as we could against the person who seemed so intent on making himself our enemy, and I took a chance to take stock of our surroundings. The tower didn’t seem very easy to scale, but I figured I should try to anyway, if I got the chance, since it really was a perfect lookout point. All around it, the land was arid and cracked, rife with boulders and, here and there, piles of rubble that may at one point have been relics; pillars or statuettes to the gods of this dimension.
Just like those ruined pieces, even Chaos was broken. His unsettling black eyes looked like they had shunned both sleep and rationality for far too long; his skin was washed and deathly. Seeing the state he’d put himself in, I began to fear more than ever for Mysterion. For Kenny. He’d been looking quite sick for a while, and now that they were at the steps of Cthulhu’s tomb…

I shook myself out of those thoughts. I couldn’t afford to get concerned with any of that now, or I’d work my head right out of the battle at hand.

Nyarlathotep was nowhere to be seen, but I knew he couldn’t be too far off. Hopefully he’d still be wounded from the damage we’d done back home, but I told myself to be prepared for anything in R’lyeh. Anything and everything. This dead city was a nightmare to anyone who so much as spoke its name, but to someone who loved order as much as I did, it was even worse. Nothing made sense here. So I just had to be wary to keep my guard up more than ever. And not hold back. There was too much I had to protect—I had to keep my priorities straight, and attack with full force the second I started fighting.

For a couple of minutes, nothing happened. Chaos simply surveyed the four of us, and I half expected him to just start laughing. But he stood silently, glaring at each of us individually, but Marpesia in particular. After all, Wendy had been a direct target of his, hadn’t she? According to what I’d heard, Chaos had been intent on taking her sanity on the same night he’d taken Bebe’s. And, based on what we’d all seen from Chaos lately—and especially the Coon’s accounts of their personal fight, on the night Chaos had broken the Coon’s nose—he’d turned into someone who really hated losing.

Thunder threatened.

Lightning flashed, and a bolt hit the top of the tower. Shit. If there was an electrical storm now, no fucking way was I going airborne. Oh, well. I still had plenty of ways to fight.

The lightning bounced off of the tower’s sickly stone exterior, and hit the back of Chaos’s helmet. He hardly reacted, but I saw him square his shoulders and stand taller, as the lightning snaked down his arms and dance around his metal gauntlets before sparking away into the air as little more than static.

“Welcome to my new home, heroes,” said Professor Chaos, his voice dark and almost unrecognizable. “Are we ready to play?”

“You’ve lost yourself,” Marpesia said forcefully. “This isn’t you.”

“You’ve no right to tell me who or what I am,” Chaos lashed back at her. “Nobody does. Too long, I was told what to be, what to do, how to think. But now we’re playing my game. Now this is my world. No rules necessary, once the world becomes chaos.”

Narrowing her gaze on him, Marpesia stepped forward, drew her quarter staff, and briskly drew a line in the thin, pale green layer of dirt that blanketed the hard ground. As the line appeared, Chaos merely stared at her, arms crossed, eyes hollow. “This is it, Chaos,” Marpesia announced, stepping back to display her work. “This is where it’s going to end.”

“Telling me I’ve crossed the line?” Chaos mocked her, dully. “Cute. But that’s rather arrogant of you.”

“Arrogant, nothing!” Marpesia shouted. “That line,” she went on, gesturing to it with the quarter staff, “represents your functionality. One part ends at this line and another begins over there, where you’re standing.” Outstretching her arms to indicate the three of us behind her, and herself,
she continued, “We’re still standing here. Are you sure you want to be on that side? If any of us crosses that line, do you know what that means? We are still standing here. What does that tell you?”

Chaos was unaffected, unconvincing. She was trying to talk him down. Talk to whichever lobe of his brain still functioned with the innocence and honesty of either Butters or Marjorine. Marjorine had been such a well-done and well-loved ‘self’ to Butters, one he could rely on. Maybe he’d been afraid that ‘Butters’ would have been lost in the process of being her—after all, he’d been her more and more often, until this Chaos madness started. Why settle for Chaos instead, unless fear was involved?

“It tells me,” Chaos answered Marpesia, “that you come from an idealistic world, and not one that adheres to mine. Your world is a disease, and mine is the cure.”

I heard Marpesia biting back tears as she said, “Suit yourself.”

With that, the line was crossed. Marpesia stepped forward and threw the first punch in our battle against Chaos. He caught her wrist and tossed her aside with the ease of brushing away a layer of fresh snow, but she refused to fall: upon impact with the ground, she kicked off again, leapt for a boulder, and pushed off from that, flinging herself back toward Chaos and getting in a kick to the back of his shoulder. Chaos looked hardly affected, popped his arm back to test out the flexibility of that shoulder, then spun around and grabbed her by the neck.

“Marpesia!” the three of us called out.

“She’s holding back,” TupperWear noticed, shaking his head. “Come on. We’re going in.”

Marpesia grabbed at Chaos’s hands, trying to wrench herself free, but his grip was proving too strong. After scoping out every possible angle, TupperWear grabbed one of his hurling discs and flung it with perfect accuracy at Chaos’s wrist, being careful not to hit Marpesia in the attack. Chaos looked little more than irritated, but he let her go, and set his sights on the three of us instead.

“I’m already tired of this,” he said.

Lightning flashed again in the sky—

—and a second later it was coming straight toward us.

Marpesia was able to rush out of the way, but the rest of us would have been struck, had TupperWear not dislodged his shield and held it out at the last possible second, thus deflecting the lightning off to either side. As he was lowering the shield, I heard him mutter, “The fuck was that?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said Toolshed.

All we knew was that somehow, lightning had been directed straight at us out of the sky… but it didn’t remain a mystery for long. Haughty with satisfaction, Professor Chaos tugged down at his gloves, then held his right hand up in the air. He cricked his wrist so that his hand was positioned, fingers out, as if he were holding something. After a couple seconds, his fingers twitched as his eyes narrowed, and a flash of light darted across his black eyes when the natural electricity clashed again in the sky.

From the sky to his fingertips. A full electrical surge, like Tesla’s tower, burst skyward from the palm of Chaos’s hand, until he angled that hand down, aiming straight for us again. This time, all we could do was scatter and try not to look panicked.
FUCK. WHEN HAD THIS HAPPENED? SINCE WHEN COULD CHAOS CONTROL **LIGHTNING**?

When I dove out of the way of that attack, I found myself kneeling… and right in front of the mad Professor’s young partner in disorder. He sneered at me, which was enough to get me riled up and ready to fight that kid back. I glanced over to the side, then stood and slid back, having noticed a fair pile of rubble a good ten feet away. It hardly required any thought: I moved the entire structure of misshapen rocks with my mind, and flung it toward Disarray, only for every last one of them to be blasted to sand by another flash of lightning. I glanced over to where Chaos stood, and he gave me a look that showed more displeasure than I had ever seen anyone display.

General Disarray grinned, and then burst into a fit of haughty laughter. “You think you can touch us?” he mocked our team. “We’re at the top of the world! Disarray and Chaos, masters of fate, bringers of darkness!”

“Must be a strange view,” I tossed right back, “if the top of your corrupt little world is several fathoms below Polynesia.”

“Oh, shut up!” Disarray shouted.

Provoked and wild, the young villain sprung at me. Now, I had little experience fighting General Disarray, or even seeing him fight, for that matter, but I knew he was fast, had a quick fist, and wouldn’t go down easily. So when he approached, I had the instinct to catch the arm with which he’d thrown a punch, and clocked him in the back of the skull. He went down, but only for a few seconds.

As he righted himself, Chaos sneered down, “We can’t be too rash, General Disarray.”

“Shut up,” Disarray spat, “I know that!”

He lunged at me again, but before he could even get close, Toolshed rushed in front of me, sledgehammer at the ready, and caught Disarray straight in the gut with it. “See ya,” Toolshed then said to the kid, as he lunged into a full swing. The force from the sledgehammer swing sent General Disarray flying backward and into the side of the tower.

“Thanks,” I said with a grin.

“Don’t mention it,” he said, keeping the sledgehammer out as we both turned back to face Chaos. “Dude, where the fuck did that lightning power come from, you think?”

“No idea, but it’s really gonna make things interesting,” I grumbled.

Chaos glanced from the two of us, on his right, to Marpesia and TupperWear, on his left. Four against one. So why did this feel like an even match? I didn’t like knowing that our odds could be that low against him; not at all. Hold fast, though, that was all we could do. Push until we could literally go no further. Marpesia seemed lost in thought, I noticed. Hopefully she could keep things up on a psychological level; if Chaos had gotten this strong, and this confident with a new ability, then maybe that was the only way to go.

Sparks of lightning danced around Chaos’s hands as he cracked his knuckles, and a thick, dusty wind rushed through, carrying on it the string of notes associated with Nyarlathotep’s summon. I thought, in the distance, I could even hear the sound of ritual drums. F**k—no, no, no, this was not the place nor the time to let my mind play tricks on me, or even let myself be convinced that it was. I looked over at Toolshed, and then, once convinced that he was doing just fine, fixed my gaze back on Chaos.
What could I use, what could I use? Someone had to be distracting him first, before I went for a psychic attack, since I’d already learned that he could stop anything I moved with a bolt of lightning. Plus, I couldn’t deflect what wasn’t solid. If I was going to have any chance against Chaos now, I either had to do as much damage as possible with whatever material was available, or fall back to defense, and that was looking more and more like my best option.

“Hey,” I said to Toolshed, while Chaos had his attention fixed on the others, “can you help me out?”

“What’s up?” he asked.

I lifted a few small rocks off the ground with a simple thought, holding my left hand out over the spot where they now hovered between my palm and the place they’d been. I spun them around as my fingers twirled the pattern, and said, “I’m gonna try to build up enough of a wall to make an avalanche. That worked on Nyarlathotep; it’ll work on Chaos. Mind distracting him for me?”

Toolshed grinned. “On it,” he said. “That’s a good plan.”

“Thanks. But for God’s sake, don’t get yourself killed.”

He laughed a little, and, swinging his sledgehammer out a couple times, probably just for effect more than as practice swings, he said, “I’m not dying till I’m good and ready, and it’s not gonna happen here.”

“Good,” I said, letting myself smile a bit.

He gave me a nod, then ran forward. “Hey, yo, Marpesia! TupperWear!” he shouted over to the others. “Three on one, ready?!”

“Toolshed, what the hell are you doing?” Marpesia snapped. “We need a plan if we’re gonna—“

Chaos snorted and shot a bolt of lightning out, but Toolshed was too quick for him, and skidded to a halt, then ran behind Chaos at an angle, winding up with the sledgehammer and hitting our opponent right in the back. “We gonna take turns,” Toolshed called out, “or you guys wanna help me out right now?”

“And what are we doing?” TupperWear wondered, arming himself with another hurling disc as Marpesia stepped forward with her quarter staff.

“Something we haven’t done in a long time,” Toolshed laughed. “Totally winging it!”

And shit, did it work. Having no direct path for Chaos to follow, the three, attacking more or less at random, managed to hold him back, and completely distract his attention from me, which was perfect. Toolshed put away his sledgehammer and went instead for a couple of blunt mallets that he very rarely used, and which he often even left out of his arsenal, since he’d found them useless against opponents like the Cult. Against someone like Chaos, though, who we didn’t necessarily want to harm, they were perfect. And a whack from one of those to Chaos’s helmet was enough to get the villain reeling, and momentarily indisposed against his ability to control lightning.

After the hit from the mallet, Toolshed rushed back in order to give TupperWear the opportunity to rush in and hold Chaos back, while Marpesia then issued a swift roundhouse kick, giving herself a little more air by using her lengthened quarter staff as as an extension of self—she kept one end on the ground, and propelled herself up to kick him twice across the face. That gave TupperWear enough of an opening to trap Chaos in a rigid headlock, and he then flipped Chaos onto
the ground with more force and intent than I’d ever seen even a wrestler in a ring use.

Chaos propped himself up into a backbend after only a second or two of being flat on the ground, and sprang backwards up to standing, dealing TupperWear a kick in the side and spinning, his cape twirling out around him, to stare down Marpesia. Lightning flashed above us, and once again, sparks gathered down his bare arms, scorching his skin.

Marpesia noticed that, and screamed. Chaos grinned and shot out a blast of lightning at her, but Toolshed hauled her out of the way and hurled one of those little mallets back at Chaos’s head. Chaos ducked out of the way and lunged, but Toolshed once again claimed his sledgehammer and hit Chaos in the gut, which got him to his knees long enough for Toolshed to whirl back and ask Marpesia, “What gives, why’d you scream?!”

“His arms!” Marpesia cried. “His arms, his arms, his arms! Don’t tell me you didn’t see that!”

“Hey, calm down,” Toolshed advised her, but at the same time, I saw him taking a look at exactly what was making her so hysterical.

I couldn’t take the time to really look, though, since I was keeping myself pretty busy. While the three of them were fighting, I slinked along as silently as I could behind them, coaxing every moveable object into a wall, creating to the best of my ability a barricade of my own, based on the one I remembered seeing back in South Park, on the edge of town. I could move multiple objects with ease, and, though I hated to accept it, R’lyeh, with all of its false and confusing logic, gave me a little bit of a boost. I could move much larger objects with my mind than I had been able to before. The best I’d done back home was a large plank of wood or sheet of metal, but those were all things I’d normally have been able to lift up with my arms anyway. Here, I attempted to draw a few larger rocks toward me, and, quite to my surprise at first, they moved just as easily as anything I’d been able to control before.

The boulders wouldn’t really budge, and it gave me an awful headache when I tried, but I had a pretty good grasp on almost everything else. Rocks piled up, and piled up, until I could no longer see the action behind the wall. Testing out another momentary hypothesis, while I had the chance, I got a flat rock hovering midair, then ran at a boulder, jumped up onto it and then immediately onto the hovering rock.

“Come on,” I muttered. “Elevate, elevate…”

I’d only added my own weight—plus the rather lightweight glider and my under-armor—to the moderate weight of the flat rock, so I figured I might be able to give myself at least this much of a literal leg up. Given that I had slightly more control over what I could do, here in R’lyeh, thoughts for how to use that to my advantage were rushing through my head by the second. I obviously couldn’t get drunk on the possibilities, though, or I would undoubtedly go crazy. So if I kept my boosted abilities within the rules of the way I was normally able to move things, I wasn’t at as high of a risk.

And I found out that I could indeed carry my own weight in a simple levitation. The rock may even have been unnecessary, I realized as I continued to elevate it higher off the ground, in order to stand atop the, I’m guessing, fifteen-foot wall I’d created without even being noticed. There was the possibility—and I knew I’d try this out later—that I could even move just my glider.

How convenient would that be, if I could actually fly…?

I stepped off my makeshift elevator and onto the top of the wall, watching the action below
me. Chaos had thrown another bolt of lightning at TupperWear, who deflected it with his shield, which itself was already sporting a few too many scorch marks from similar attacks.

“Hey, Chaos!” I shouted, to distract his attention, now, from the others. “Look up!”

He did so, out of what looked like merely passing curiosity, and immediately the others took the note and got the hell out of the way. I saluted down to Chaos, then took a deep breath and drew my hands back, so that both arms were extended, with my left arm crossed flat in front of my right shoulder, my palms flat. I took a reading from the energy being expelled from each of the odd rocks from the R’lyeh landscape that I had collected into a defensive weapon, then swept my hands down in front of me, as I felt sparks going off in my head. I imagined the entire thing before it began to happen, and it went just as I’d planned.

The rocks rolled down like a solid wave, and I rode the rubble tsunami the entire way down, as I let the wall roll, crash and collapse over Chaos. He was buried, but definitely alive; I took the window of time I knew I had to jump off of the pile of rubble and re-join the others.

Marpesia was red and fuming. “I’ve gotta talk him down,” she was saying, as TupperWear and Toolshed were trying their best to keep her rational. “I’ve gotta talk him down, I have to—“

“Marpesia, stop,” Toolshed said. “Stop obsessing, I swear to God—unless you want to go crazy, you have to stop.”

“Calm down, babe,” TupperWear—well, Token—added, setting both of his hands on her shoulders. “Keep it present, okay? Stay here.”

“Oh, I’m here,” said Marpesia, glowering over at the pile of rubble, under which Chaos lay recovering from the shock of that hit. “It’s him!” she said angrily, pointing in that direction. “I’ve got to do this. Guys, I’ve got to do this.”

“What’s going on?” I wondered.

“Hey,” said Toolshed. “Nice going on that avalanche.”

“Thanks—he should be down for a minute, anyway. What exactly is—“

“Tell me you saw it,” said Marpesia, looking up at me. “His arms…”

“What about them?” I asked, rationally.

Marpesia shook her head. “Every time he uses that lightning, they get scorched, like his blood’s rebelling, like it’s burning him right up,” she recalled. “Being like this is killing him. I have to—“

A blast distracted us all, and cut Marpesia off. We were all, then, staring back at where I’d taken Chaos down. He’d blasted his way out of the pile of rocks with a shot of lightning, and was now slowly standing, shaking himself off. His helmet was a little dinged up, and the tails of his dark green cape were looking pretty tattered, but physically he’d only gotten out with a couple scratches. I saw what Marpesia meant about his arms, though. They had indeed been scorched, black from the sparks and red from the irritation, up and down his exposed skin. In the pattern of the veins that ran underneath.

I took that to mean only one thing. True chaos was indeed pulsing within him. Seeping in and taking over like a disease. His eyes looked blacker than ever when he stared over at us. Emotionlessly, he drew from his belt both the Necronomicon and Marjorine’s flute. I thought
Marpesia might lose it right there, but she held it together.

That dusty wind rose up from the rain-starved ground again, and blew through the flute, creating the string of notes it needed, without Chaos even needing to set his lips to the mouthpiece, without him even needing to hold his fingers over the proper keys.

And within seconds, the thunder pounded like a thousand drums, and a bellowing roar could be heard drawing close to us. “Here it comes…” Toolshed breathed out.

Mist rolled in and covered the tower. Only then did I remember that Disarray was still around there somewhere. Fuck. As much as I knew I shouldn’t, I did forget about and underestimate that guy. No more of that; no more. I needed to be a hell of a lot more focused. But all of my focus was on the Mist right now. It crept in, silent and foreboding, and then slowly began to take shape, once again in the form of that enormous sphinx. Much to my—and especially Toolshed’s—chagrin, he’d somehow re-grown that left front foot, which had been severed right off during our last fight.

Toolshed and I exchanged a nod with TupperWear and Marpesia. This was where we’d split up. Marpesia was hell-bent on taking on Chaos one-to-one at the moment, anyway, and she’d have TupperWear around to keep her head on straight, and provide a hand in the fight, if need be. What Toolshed and I had to do was get Nyarlathotep as far the fuck away from them as possible.

“Hey, Red Serge,” I asked quietly into my wire, “you got video feed for both teams?”

“Yes, and holy shit,” he responded, loud and clear. “You guys need any backup?”

“No yet,” I said, “we’ll let you know. But can you tell me which way Toolshed and I need to push this thing in order to get it closer to Cthulhu?”

“You sure that’s the best course of action, dude?” Toolshed asked me.

“If only another Immortal can kill it, then, yeah.”

“Oh, good point.”

“Head dead straight, then right,” Red Serge instructed me. “Actually, the sooner you can push Nyarlathotep over there, I think, the better. Coon’s almost to the tomb.”

“Holy shit, really?!” I nearly yelped.

“Yeah, so get on it, guys! Good luck.”

“Come on, dude,” I said to Toolshed. “Time for a clash of the titans, huh?”

“No kidding,” he agreed, rolling his eyes.

We checked one last time with TupperWear and Marpesia, then, satisfied that the two of them could hold up together against Chaos, Toolshed and I steeled ourselves and strode toward the massive Messenger.

“Hey, Nyarlathotep!” Toolshed called up to the dark sphinx, as he switched out his sledgehammer for his chainsaw. “Remember this?” He revved it up, and Nyarlathotep took a few steps back. Huh. So even Immortal deities had enough of a fight or flight instinct to know when they were being threatened. Interesting.
I heard Professor Chaos shout out a few words in the Old Ones’ tongue, directed at Nyarlathotep, and the beast took off… exactly in the direction that Red Serge had suggested we go. Not questioning the choice, only knowing what it was we needed to do, the two of us took off after him. We had no idea if we could cut an Immortal down to size, but we were sure as hell going to try.

—–

Kenny

There are a lot of things I enjoy, and a lot of things I hate. But very few things I just plain loathe.

And I just plain loathed Bradley Biggle.

He’d taken my chance, last time, seven years ago, when Cthulhu had risen due to DP Oil drilling on the moon and changing the Earth’s tides and therefore R’lyeh’s alignment to our world. Fucking Mint-Berry Crunch had gotten to step in, learn all about his bullshit past—he’s an alien, whoop-de-fucking-do—and save the Goddamn day. I’d killed myself after that one, I was so done.

But this time, there was way too much at stake for me to even care to waste any of my energy on hating that weak-stomached, super-morality-spouting, cookie-cutter-do-gooder piece of shit. Oh, if only Henrietta were here, she could take him right off my hands and issue her own dark form of punishment on her adopted brother. Which was more or less her own sentiment as well.

“Fucking Bradley is there?” Henrietta snapped into my earpiece. “Beat that little twerp outta the next twenty years, would you?”

“Wish I could, but I’ve got a lot on my hands, here,” I said. “Can’t you read him out and do it yourself?”

“I’m doing all I can to just keep the Gate up, but if you can get someone to push him back through the Gate, I’ll definitely be up to the task.”

“Dunno how possible that’s gonna be, but—“

“Hey, Mysterion!” Mint-Berry Crunch called over to me. “Mysterion! Hey!”

“What?” I shouted back.

He stood there like he had oh so much authority, and in such a non-smug way, too. One half of his face covered in some type of pink nylon, the other exposed to show his satisfied white grin and blonde, pageboy-cut hair—no, I couldn’t read ‘smug’ anywhere on the guy. Just boy scout. All over. Truth and justice and all that. He didn’t care about the Mythos. He wasn’t there to see South Park fall to insanity.

“Don’tcha need my help?” Mint-Berry Crunch asked, striking a pose with both hands on his hips. “I’m here to help, because Mint-Berry Crunch is always here to heed the call of—“

“Always—always here?” I sputtered, ignoring the Goth kid and storming toward my ex-teammate. My hands clenched into fists and my shadow began tugging in all directions beneath me, writhing along with my anger. Fuck… fuck, fuck, I probably shouldn’t be getting angry. Because anger, to the Old Ones, translated into vengeance. No… shit… wasn’t that what they were after, too?
To reclaim dominion over the world?

Henrietta had given me a book that had detailed something about that. "The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be..." Mortal man had been worshiping this pantheon for thousands of years, because the Old Ones had come long before, and whispered nightmares to men through the centuries, and the promise of a world free from all care. And so men had prayed, to give the Old Ones all that once was theirs.

I didn’t want anything the other Immortals did. Simply because all I wanted out of this was freedom and mortality. Freedom for the world, mortality for myself. None of this darkness, none of this madness. The world was a fucked-up, mixed up mess, but I loved it. So it was insulting to me that someone who hadn’t shown his face around us for more than a brief ‘hello’ in the past seven years thought that he could suddenly waltz in and take things into his own hands. Not after all of us had sacrificed so much to come this far.

“You haven’t always been here, Bradley!” I hollered.

“Mint-Berry Crunch!” he corrected, as if there wasn’t a fucking Cultist standing a few feet away ready to pray to God knows what and destroy everything at any second.

“Right, okay, whatever,” I snapped. “Listen up, you weren’t here when the Cult began gaining power. Where were you when the Crawling Chaos was summoned, huh? Where were you when Clyde had to stabilize his own girlfriend and take her to the asylum? Where were you when Chaos diverted?! Where were you last Halloween, you alien fuck, when the Cult killed Stan in order to awaken the Immortal part of me?”

“Oh, my gosh!” Mint-Berry Crunch exclaimed. “Stan is dead?!”

“Not anymore, but again, you weren’t there for that. So FUCK OFF.”

“But you need my help!”

“No, I don’t!” I hollered.

With that, I turned my back on him and gave my attention back to the Goth kid, who found absolutely no part of my heated rant against Mint-Berry Crunch to be amusing. In this instance, I was glad for the Goths’ consistency in ambivalence. That kid looked like he could go for a smoke, but rather than complain about his lack of cigarettes or cloves, as Henrietta constantly did, the young, robed Cultist simply opened his Necronomicon and kept his eyes fixed on me.

“You seem to be having some difficulties,” he said. If that was his attempt at humor, I didn’t catch it. “So it seems to me that you might need a little warm-up before I name you.”

“Warm-up?” I wondered.

The kid stopped looking up at my face, and instead focused his attention on the swirling shadows at my feet. I felt that heat in me, that pull toward Cthulhu’s tomb. Whatever it was that kid was talking about, it was obvious that he wanted me to fight using my shadow. To give it the chance to stretch and become more powerful.

What was bothering me more than anything was the apparent distinction between myself and what exactly the Shadow was. So many people, myself included, seemed convinced that the Shadow was a separate entity, fixed to me. It was definitely its own thing, but I could feel it and use it as if it were just another part of my body. Or perhaps my literal shadow wasn’t entirely it.
One thing that I did not want to happen was an actual physical change. Those beasts in R’lyeh were gruesome and terrifying. I was human, and I wanted to stay that way. There couldn’t be too much of a change, though, right? My shadow was the part of me that could warp and change, the part of me that was distorted and belonged in the realm of death and nightmares. *My shadow, yes... so how did it factor into Cthulhu?*

What the fuck was going to happen to me once Cthulhu was awake?

“You need to give yourself some time to discover your true potential,” said the Goth kid. He was McElroy’s prodigy all right. Honestly, it was like I’d never gotten rid of the guy. “I want to see what you can do. This time,” he went on, pulling a switchblade knife from a concealed pocket in his robe, “it’s gonna be worth it.”

“My shadow, what’s going on?” Mint-Berry Crunch asked.

“You know what, Bradley? You’re being a royal pain in the ass,” I snapped back at him. He hadn’t been there ten minutes and I was well beyond done. I glared at him, but he wasn’t getting any of my not-so-subtle hints. “What are you doing here?”

“I told you, I—“

“What are you really doing here?”

Mint-Berry Crunch stared at me like I was asking him why water was wet. He was one of those people who just figured that good deeds were good deeds that were done inconsequentially and without needing to know any of the reasons why awful things were happening that needed righting in the first place. He saw evil and pushed himself to stop it. Which, okay, that’s fine, that’s even admirable, sure. But what he didn’t understand was that sometimes a fight came out of the need to settle a personal score. If I wanted him off my back, I had to do more than just yell at him as if he was just a bad dog who’d disobeyed an order. And you know, if he wanted to help after hearing everything... maybe, sure, he could help, but only if he didn’t stick around just to steal my Goddamn thunder.

“Do you even know why I need to win this fight against Cthulhu so badly?” I asked him.

“To save the world!”

“That’s just the tip of the iceberg,” I growled. “Look at me.” Keeping an eye on the Goth kid, who in turn was giving me this little moment of pause to offer my explanation, I removed my hood and stared my once-teammate down. I felt awful, and everyone had said I’d been looking sick. I could only imagine how drained I must have appeared to be in R’lyeh. My shadow tugged against me at my feet, and for the first time, Mint-Berry Crunch’s expression changed. “I was born as something fixed in Immortality to Cthulhu. That change anything?”

“You... you look like death,” Mint-Berry Crunch noticed, stumbling back. He recoiled and looked like he was going to be ill, so I sighed and pulled my hood back over my head. Concealed myself in shadow. I probably didn’t even look functionally human anymore. I could only imagine. Was there too much of a presence of shadow cast over my face already? Did I look as hollow and miserable as Chaos? Pale as the dying McElroy had been? Or maybe just as sickly green as R’lyeh itself?

“And that’s exactly where we’re going to begin,” said the little Goth. I picked my head up, and behind me, Mint-Berry Crunch glanced around, now suddenly not so high and mighty. He did not know how to react to the ‘real’ situation. Whatever was about to happen, it was going to be at
least a little odd. I was wondering, honestly, why that Goth kid didn’t just stab the chipper, brightly-colored newcomer, but the kid probably had his reasons.

The Goth made an incision, just a small cut into his own right index finger with the sharp silver tip of his switchblade knife, then squeezed out three drops of blood onto the ground. My shadow pulled toward it, then slithered away, back toward me until I could feel it—ugh, yes—rising up into me. Heat burst through me; wildfire in my chest. The shadow both filled and surrounded me. I heard more whispers in my ears, but I ignored the words before I could attempt to make sense of them, or even acknowledge that they were there.

And then the ground began to shake.

“What’s going on?” I demanded of the Goth kid.

“You’re standing on a graveyard, McCormick!” he shouted at me. “Cthulhu has taken the lives of many travelers to this dimension, and he will take more! Before I read you to your Awakening, let’s let the dead remind you of what you are!”

Oh, fuck. Seriously? “Are you fucking kidding me?” I growled.

Nope. No, the little bastard wasn’t. Hands clawed up from the ground, and out of the stone structure that led up to Cthulhu’s tomb, hands thin and brittle, covered with a papery, near-translucent layer of skin, if it could be called that anymore. The hands soon connected to arms, and then shoulders, and entire bodies. Bodies of men, or what used to be men.

This was a pretty good time to forget everything Hollywood had ever tried to tell me about zombies.

These fucks were terrifying. Undead, sure, but something purely unsettling about those unjustly reanimated bodies was the clarity each of them had in their eyes. I thought all organs rotted away after death, but these eyes were plastered open, some without eyelids, still seeing the final moments of horror the men had experienced when they were alive. “Oh, holy shit—“ Mint-Berry Crunch coughed, probably about to get sick.

The young Cultist did not need to explain any more. Looking out at the sudden army he had at his disposal, I could almost experience the last minutes of life for every single one of them. As if a part of me knew how they all had died. This kind of death, stuck in a hellish nightmare for eternity, I was now aware was the fate of anyone claimed by induced insanity. This was the fate of everyone at the asylum in South Park, if we didn’t do something now. And the worst of it was, I wanted to pity the droves around me, but all I could currently see, with my shadow boiling and slithering around inside me, was their folly. Almost like the words the Shadow kept whispering into my head were, They deserved it. Or, It was inevitable.

Well, whether they recognized me as something attached to Cthulhu or not was irrelevant. Whether they had any conscious thought at all was irrelevant. They were coming after me, and it was clear that the Cult—represented only in one inane person—wanted to see me fight them all off using my Immortal power. Not gonna happen.

Instead, I pulled out my gun, and shot one of the corpse-men right through the skull. He went down, but I was still faced with far too many others. So I opened fire, then gave up on that and tossed out a single shuriken, which cut through six of my ‘opponents,’ but still left me at a disadvantage without using the Shadow.

The next five that advanced, though, were cut down with a shower of sharp leaves. That
smelled like motherfucking mint. I glared at Mint-Berry Crunch, who looked as though he’d found some resolve (but hardly grown a pair). He took a deep breath and admitted, “I have absolutely no idea what’s going on. But you gotta believe me, Mysterion. I wanna help save the world.”

“You have no idea what’s going on there, either, do you?” I ventured.

“Not a clue.”

“And I don’t know why the fuck you showed up,” I returned, “but if you wanna make good on whatever your take on the situation is, just use it here and don’t talk to me anymore. And don’t you dare get in my motherfucking way.”

“I-I won’t,” he said. He then spun around, and out from his hands came another shower of leaves that blew a whirling tornado through a slew of oncoming undead. Huh. Well, maybe this whole thing could keep him occupied while I took on the Goth, I figured.

I sped toward the Cultist, who simply took a step back as another three walking dead clawed their way up from underground. I kicked the head clean off of one of them before he could even get out of the ground, and sliced through the other two with shuriken I held in both hands. “Don’t tell me you’re running from me,” I leered at the sole cloak among the dead that surrounded us.

“You’re supposed to be harnessing your powers as the Shadow,” he sulked.

“Jesus, it must suck to be you that I’m going against your little prophetic End Time shit, huh?” I mocked him, advancing.

Just then, static hit my ears, and a voice I had actually been looking forward to hearing came through.

“Ey!” the Coon called into the wire. “Mysterion!”

“Kinda busy,” I said, “but what?”

“What was, is, and will be?”

“What?”

“It’s a riddle. Ask that little Goth fucker.”

A riddle? Not really. I knew the answer. I’d heard the Cultists say those words plenty of times before. Maybe the riddle was just for me to figure out what he meant. And that, even in the midst of this ridiculous zombie battle, was something I hardly had to rack my brain to figure out. There’d only be one reason the Coon would be basically quoting the Necronomicon.

Here we go.

“Hey!” I shouted over at the Goth kid, who turned to give me an awful scowl. “Got a riddle for you. What was, is, and will be?”

“What are you talking about?” the kid attempted to mock me. “The answer is the Old Ones.”

“Bingo!” I heard the Coon shout.

Two of the walking dead came stumbling toward me, but before I could think to quickly dispose of them, they were shot down, the head of each one exploding with the well-aimed shots, and as those two bodies slumped to the ground, Craig and Mosquito walked up on either side of me,
pistols at the ready for more.

“Great,” Craig muttered. “Now we’re up against zombies. Of course we’re up against zombies.”

“Yeah. Nice shots, all the same,” I complimented them, scouring our surroundings for other incoming threats.

“Dude,” I heard Toolshed’s voice come over the static wire, “what the fuck is happening over where you guys are?! Mysterion? Mosquito?”

“Read you, Toolshed,” I growled back, “but we’re all about to get pretty fucking busy. The Goth kid brought some cloaks here.”

“And there’s zombies,” said Craig.

“Zombies? Jesus Christ,” Toolshed complained.

“Yeah,” I said, “watch it, since I think the Goth raised a hell of a lot of bodies Cthulhu or something else here has killed before. So you might see ‘em soon.”

“Thanks, man, we’ll keep an eye out,” Toolshed said gratefully. “Hold steady, guys, I feel like that’ll gonna be the least of our problems. We’ve got Chaos and Nyarlathotep on our asses right now.”

“Do whatever you can to weaken Nyarlathotep, and get that fucking stick outta Chaos’s ass,” I instructed. “But for fuck’s sake, none of you guys die.”

“Same goes for you, Mysterion,” said the Human Kite. “Don’t give up against Cthulhu, or anything else.”

“We’ll get these guys,” Toolshed added, “At least gotta knock ’em both down a few pegs.”

“Good luck,” I said, before ending that particular transmission.

I hurled two shuriken out at a couple of approaching zombies, and both Craig and Mosquito fired out to either side of me. I took a page from their book, though, and pulled out my own gun again, realizing that I’d waste less of my precious resources that way; I fired only when I had a perfect shot, and took down a good ten reanimated corpses, while Craig and Mosquito both seemed tied with slightly higher numbers. How the hell many men had died in R’lyeh?

After a few solid minutes of that, though, Craig groaned and reloaded his guns, only to put them both away in favor of drawing his swords. “Guys, this is getting stupid,” he commented. “Also, I’m kind of bored.”

Mosquito and I stepped back a couple paces, then, and gave Craig first go at the new wave of five that were heading toward us. Kicking off the ground to get a running start, Craig held his swords out to either side, and as soon as he’d made it to that line of five, he cut the two on either side of the center from the gut up, slitting the bodies almost completely in half. He then ran up the one dead center, leapt off from its head into a midair backflip, and came back down on the walking corpse with both swords, hacking off both arms in the process. He then spun out just his right blade, cutting up through his opponent’s neck. That sword was recovered quickly enough, and he spun around to cut down the fourth with the sword in his left hand. He decapitated that one with a cross slice from both blades, then sprang into a backbend, wrapped his legs around the fifth’s neck, and snapped the neck broken before hurling the body aside and springing back up onto his feet. When
two others clawed up from underground behind him, Craig stabbed his swords back into them without even otherwise acknowledging that they were there.

“Told ya I’m better when they’re moving,” he said, stepping back toward us as he flung an awkward liquid too clear to be blood from off his blades. “Ugh, those guys don’t even have blood. The fuck is this, pus?”

“No clue,” I said. “Maybe R’lyeh just has some natural solvent in the ground that mummifies ’em or something…”

“Oh. Probably that,” said Craig, sheathing his swords again.

“That was awesome, though,” I told him.

“Yeah, you know.”

He drew his gun again, and the three of us stood in wait for the next surge. When another wall of zombies started making their mindless way toward us, I took stock of their formation and rolled my eyes, then said to my companions, “Bomb drop, guys. Gonna be a messy one.”

Once I’d issued my warning, I lit up a Roman Candle and aimed for the centermost target. Indeed, upon impact, there was an impressive explosion of plasma, bone, organs and tissue, and bodies went down in a two-way domino fashion, right on down the line, just as I was hoping the case would be. While I was mentally patting myself on the back for that one, though, of course that stuffy, juvenile voice belonging to Mint-Berry Crunch rang out: “Oh, gross! That’s disgusting!”

“Stuff it up your mint-berry ass, Bradley!” I hollered over.

“Hey, don’t call me tha—“

“I told you to stop talking to me!”

“Um,” said Craig, taking aim and firing at another reanimated body, “why is he here?”

“I have no idea,” I grumbled. “But I’m already sick of him.”

“And I regret even thinking about calling him,” Mosquito admitted, “now that I see him again.”

“We’re just gonna ignore him,” I said. “But what’re you guys doing here? You find Cthulhu?”

“Yep,” Mosquito grinned. “You ready for this, Mysterion?”

“Is the Coon on his way?”

“Should be,” said Craig. “We got kinda pushed away from the tomb or crypt or grave or home or whatever. It only let him in, so we figured we’d just come fight.”

“He just said, ‘I’ve got this, you guys,’ and went in,” Mosquito added. “I trust that we’ll be seeing him and the Dark One soon.”

And sure enough, we’d hardly been in the fight another five minutes before I heard a great, gaping, bellowing yawn come from the tomb at the summit of the stairs. My heart stopped and resumed, and the shadow that had slunk up into my body burst out from the soles of my feet again. It licked at the ground and yanked me in the direction of the stairs, but I held firm. I wasn’t going to
Cthulhu. That bastard Old One could come to me if he wanted me so badly. I had no idea what was in store, but I wasn’t going down without a fight.

Regardless of whether I lived or died, I was going to see Cthulhu go down first. That’s all there was to it.

With the burst of shadow, the rest of the walking dead did, in fact, lose all ability to move, and collapsed into the ground again, nothing but useless, motionless sacks of bones. The little Goth kid looked out over the valley below the tomb, horribly proud of the unnecessary carnage he’d just watched ensue, then cast his gaze skyward and held his greedy, pale little hands up at the sky, where lightning flashed and dreams gathered together into the worst of all nightmares.

The ground shook again, but this time coupled with an echoing footstep.

“Mysterion?” Mosquito tried again. “You still you in there?”

Only when he asked that did I realize I’d stopped breathing. It hadn’t affected me much, though. As soon as I’d heard that yawn, I’d entered another level of being in the Space Between life and death. This was going to be the true test of my power. The true test of what I was. Of what the Shadow was. Of what Cthulhu’s Shadow was capable of.

“Yeah,” I told my teammate. “But if I go…”

Mosquito nodded and took out his tranquilizer gun. I shook my head. “Stunner won’t do much,” he said.

“The other one,” I ordered him.

“The .45?” he spat in disbelief.

“Only if you need to. And spread the word.”

“Kenny, what are you even talking about?” he asked, snapping out of his Mosquito persona and just stating his question as Clyde.

“I don’t really know,” I told him honestly. “I feel like I’m burning up. My thoughts keep shifting around, and it’s terrifying. I’m gonna try to control it, but just in case I lose it to Cthulhu, I want you guys to be prepared to… y’know… not see me as me. Worst-case scenario.”

“I heard that,” Toolshed’s—Stan’s voice came through, taking a page from Clyde’s momentary casting off of his alter ego, over the increasingly static wire. I winced with the discomfort of the static, but neither Mosquito nor Craig seemed affected. Of course. Of course they wouldn’t hear it. Just one more thing to add to the obviousness of how badly R’lyeh wanted me to be a part of its pantheon. “Kenny, you’re gonna hang on.”

“You’re always Kenny to us, dude,” Kite—rather, Kyle—added.

“Thanks, guys,” I sighed. “Here goes nothing. I mean it, though. Keep giving your all!”

The same ‘voice’ from the yawn sounded out again, this time in a moan of a roar, which dissolved in the air against the crashing of rainless thunder.

I drew in a deep breath, tasting the murky air of R’lyeh. I felt that burning, that furnace of power in my chest that any normal human should not know. This was it. He’d succeeded. Cthulhu was awake. Now the fight had truly started. Time to stop playing this stupid cat and mouse with the
Cult and take on my true opponent: the ancient, deathless thing that had cast his Shadow into and
upon me.

Break my curse. Save the world. Live.

Easy, right?

Deep breath, Kenny McCormick. Here we go.

“Death’s gonna die, bitches!” the Coon shouted out his victory cry from several yards above
me.

And then I felt—nothing. Yet alive.

Butters

My entire body was alive with the surges of lightning I could call from the sky.

So why did a part of me feel as though I stood there dying?

It’s R’lyeh, I said to myself. Of course it might feel that way. But a part of me remained
unconvinced. A part of me I had tried so hard lately to destroy. The wind played the flute, now, not
me. Not her. Not any part of me that had or would ever exist.

This, I knew, was a time for me to make a choice. A choice on how to proceed. The spine
of the Necronomicon felt hot and dangerous in my hand; I felt riveted, powerful. I enjoyed being in
control. I was wild, intoxicated; proud of being the source of fear, not the child running from it. The
very world could be boiled down into nothing, and fit right there in my hands, all thanks to the words
that lay within that tome.

I felt rather like a Messenger myself. The words, through my tongue, could pray to each and
every one of the deities that lay around me. Those words could wake the ancient Dark One,
Cthulhu. They could set Nyarlathotep free upon the world again, and send Cthulhu, Priest to the
Dark Gods mankind had for so long forgotten, to reign judgment and darkness down upon
everything.

All would be chaos. All had to be chaos.

Otherwise…

Well. I hadn’t ventured to think.

And unfortunately, the League’s sole female member, Marpesia, seemed to have a few words
she needed to say on that subject. She spoke as if to convince me that I was in the wrong. But how
could I be in the wrong, I argued, if my own destiny had been written out for me? I believed that the
Necronomicon had found me and chosen me to read it. Only I could coax out the world free of pain,
and free of all mortal struggles.
I had been blessed by R’lyeh with a power fit only for one with the potential to stand on equal ground with these gods of madness. This simple girl and her companion couldn’t stand a chance. Or shouldn’t have been able to, anyway. Not against me. Not against Chaos.

“Let’s show these heroes what happens when they fuck with the End of the world,” Disarray grinned, his eyes darting between them.

“Distract him,” I ordered my partner, keeping my focus on the armored Amazon. “I’m only interested in her.”

“But if—“

“Disarray, you are not to question me!” I snapped, grabbing him by the top of his head. I tilted his head back so he was facing me, and continued angrily, “I’ve been disappointed in your actions lately. You take him down to prove you haven’t been going against me. I hate having secrets kept from me.”

“But Chaos—“

“DO IT!” I roared, shoving him forward, toward TupperWear, who started up the fight before Disarray could object to his mission. I really had been getting disturbed by his ambiguous ‘loyalty’ to me. First his secret partnership with that young Cultist Goth, then his apparent deeper understanding of the Necronomicon, his forcing me to read…

Ah, well. These were all things that I could think about after sending this young woman on her way to insanity. The other two were out of the way, and I felt the static spark of lightning dancing through my veins. Marpesia studied me with the intensity of a child taking stock of a hurt younger sibling. She showed too much concern.

Too much. I couldn’t take it anymore.

I let the lightning lick my palms, but did not attack yet. Glancing at her quarter staff, I wondered how well of a conductor that thing could be. I could bring her down in an instant with a bolt of lightning, perhaps. That would be the best course of action, right? Simply destroy her?

No, no, just madness. Yes, that was the fate she deserved. Madness more than death. The flute would suffice.

The look she was giving me was one of… of utmost displeasure. Disappointment. She did not look ready to attack, she did not look like she wanted to fight. And yet I wanted to waste my energy on her? Well—an opponent that wouldn’t fight back was boring, and useless, but if I did not take her down, I’d never be able to cleave myself from the attachment one part of my mind still seemed to have to the world from which she’d come. Even here in R’lyeh, two repressed lobes of my brain still existed.

They needed to go. Both of them. Sever my attachment. Sever them. Sever them or I would never be able to realize my potential as Chaos. Neither of them had a place in the world I was going to create. She had to go first. She was a whisper where once she sang out strong, but she was still there. Taking care of Marpesia was a chance to silence her. She was supposed to be locked away and forgotten. She was a stubborn little bitch, I’d give her that, but I no longer had the time or care to give two thoughts to what she had always called right and moral. She had no place in Chaos.

“What’s the matter?” Marpesia barked at me. “I can see your eyes wandering, Chaos. What are you thinking about?”
“The best way to dispose of you,” I snarled back at her. I began to circle her, in order to survey my best point of attack. She did not give me the satisfaction of searching for a weak point in her armor, as she circled me in return, until I stopped. And then, so did she. What the hell was she trying to prove?

“You look tired,” she noticed. “Aren’t you sick of playing this game? Aren’t you tired of hurting yourself so much?”

“No,” I said. “I’m tired of everything else. Tired of the world. All I’m doing is removing myself from the world that always rejected me!”

I took a swing at her, but she hit my arm away with her staff. I grabbed the staff and hurled her aside, but Marpesia stopped herself on her feet, then spun back around and rushed at me from behind. I felt the clouds above me surge with electricity, and a bolt crashed down from above and filled me with its destructive power. I held my left hand out and shot the lightning in her direction, but she dodged only a split thought before it could hit her.

As she caught her breath, Marpesia shouted at me, “The world didn’t reject you!”

She needed to shut up. I couldn’t be wasting my time on this. On her, or her reason. Not now, not anymore, not as Chaos. There was no reason here. In R’lyeh, reason was dead. Where happy endings came to rot and crumble to dust. Where sanity melted to madness. “This is my home, now, Marpesia,” I announced. “Your world rejected me, and so now I—“

“The world did not reject you!” she repeated forcefully, running at me. She was too quick for me to think of a way to counter, but rather than attack, she stopped herself directly in front of me, grabbed the front of my shirt in both hands, and pulled me down so that I was at eye level with her. Her eyes searched mine for a second, and then she said, shaking her head with disbelief, “You rejected the world.”

I had survived, for so long, on the anticipation for all that I was supposed to be given here in R’lyeh. That *Necronomicon* was supposed to read me a new world. Wake up, Chaos. I couldn’t let myself fall for this. I didn’t have the time to deal with her, nor did I have any interest in anything she had to say.

Right?

So how fucking hard was it to just stop listening? Just stop listening. That’s all I had to do. She was supposed to be one of the easier ones for me to take down, before I spent more energy on Mysterion and the Coon. She was just one girl. One stupid girl just begging to follow her friends to the asylum.

“Let go of me,” I commanded. “You know what I could do to you.”

“So do it,” she challenged me. “Kill me.”

“Kill you?” I laughed. “No, no, Marpesia, I wouldn’t kill you. I’d—“

“Why?” she demanded intently.

“What?” I scowled.

“Why wouldn’t you kill me? Why not?”

“Because insanity is the more logical—“
"Is it really? Are you sure?"

Put off by her irritating counters, I shoved her off and hollered, “What are you trying to do to me?!” I was faltering. I wasn’t attacking right away. This would not do. For true Chaos, this would not do.

“What you’ve been neglecting to do for yourself,” she snapped back. Her eyes narrowed, bright and brown and brimming with concern. “Look at you. Look at this,” she said, displaying an emotion I’d forgotten existed as she grabbed onto my left wrist and holding my arm up so that I could look at something, in order for her to prove a point. What was wrong with my arm? I saw nothing wrong. It was scorched from my constant use of the lightning; my veins ran red underneath the skin. That last blast, though, I realized, had opened a vein in my forearm, and I was bleeding somewhat. A small price, it seemed, for being chosen to usher the world into darkness. “Tell me you didn’t want this,” Marpesia begged.

“This is chaos, Marpesia,” I snarled at her. “It’s what I’ve always—“

“JUST—LOOK!” Marpesia shouted. She dropped my arm and stood back, holding her arms out, “Look around you! This isn’t where you belong, Chaos, how dare you say that?! You belong, just as much as any of us do, back—“

“Marpesia,” I said coldly, ignoring my ridiculous want to hear her out. “You are a stupid girl with a head still full of fairy tales. Your world has nothing for me.”

“Nothing,” Marpesia repeated, dropping her arms and picking up her quarter staff. “Are you sure? You’re really going to tell me that you don’t feel anything for the people you sent to the asylum?”

“They—“

“Look at the damage you’ve caused!” Marpesia—scolded me. Scolded me. Since when did she have any fucking authority over what I did? I was above her, I was Chaos, I had the Necronomicon and the secret to freedom through madness. I did not care about the damage I’d caused. No. I couldn’t. But that didn’t stop Marpesia from trying to use it as her argument against my actions. “Look at the pain people are in! Harmless people who got in the way. Did they ever wrong you? Did we ever wrong you?” Her glare intensified, and she jabbed me in the chest with that staff. “You look me in the eyes,” she ordered me sternly, “and you tell me you really think I was one of those masses of people who hated you and never believed in you.”

“Shut up,” I commanded.

Marpesia retracted her weapon, and continued, on the verge of tears. Weakness, in someone who called herself a hero. She did not let go and cry, but she was showing compassion to her opponent. I was her fucking opponent, and she needed to understand that. But still I stood and listened to her, as she continued to drill her morals into me. “I always believed in you,” she said. “Stan and Kyle, Kenny and the rest of them, Red, Bebe, the list goes on! The world isn’t out to get you, so why the hell are you trying to take out the world?!”

“SHUT—UP,” I roared.

I lunged at her before she could utter another word. Marpesia put away the staff, in favor of going on the defensive and acrobatically dodging every punch I tried to throw. That was simply annoying. What good was fighting if there was no satisfaction?
No satisfaction.

None. Anywhere. None I’d ever known. Was this ploy going to turn into yet another pointless venture for me? After I’d surrendered everything, every last tie I had to the life—the lives—I’d led in that sullied mountain town, would even the dark, bitter End have nothing for me?

No—this was not the time to second-guess.

I attacked again, narrowing my focus, building my intent. She moved with the grace of a dancer, and the rage of a lioness going for the kill. Marpesia was a much more even match for me than I had ever given her credit for. And for a while, the fight held my interest, once she came within range of my fists. I fought dirty, too—yanked her back by her long braid, only to come down with the elbow of my other arm, hitting her in the gut where her armor was not quite as hard.

She took that hit and went down, then kicked out with both legs to trip me and bring me to my knees. Furious, I called down a bolt of lightning and saw it through all the way to the ground; my fist came down with sparks flying a split second after she’d sat up out of the way, but I singed the ends of her shining black hair.

As I was picking myself up, she rushed at me again, and I struck out almost without thinking. Or completely without thinking. I honestly could not tell. My actions were becoming so fluid, now, it was almost as if I could shut my mind right off, and my body would continue moving, knowing exactly what to do. And it wanted to do damage, which was precisely what I managed to do.

My blow caused a crack in the right side of her helmet, and when I heard her cry out, I spun round for another strike, kicking her down with enough force to get her flat on her stomach, and gasping for air. I’d knocked the wind right out of her, and watched as she fought to breathe, face down in the hard green rock beneath us.

I stood over her, and stared down as she coughed breath back into her lungs. Shaking slightly, she forced herself to roll over onto her back, and stared up at me with pleading eyes. Those would not work on me. Not this time.

Marpesia set her trembling hands on either side of her helmet, and lifted it, wincing as she did so. She then removed her black mask, and balled up the cloth in her right hand. Breathing heavily, her eyes welling up, she set the cloth against the side of her head, at her temple, where I’d struck her. Blood leaked from the wound. Strands of her silky black hair clung to her face with a mix of sweat and caking blood.

The shock from my last strike had finally sunk in, and Marpesia was momentarily speechless as she simply stared up at me and recovered her breath. “Please stop,” she whispered.

“I can’t stop,” I told her. “I’m Chaos.”

“You fucking coward!” she spat.

“Stand up,” I ordered.

Sucking in her tears, Marpesia stood as I’d commanded. I stood back, and watched her struggle. The process was slow, and she was dizzy from the impact, and her current, rapid loss of blood. She stumbled against herself and fought for balance, then stared at me. But not with anger. With pity.

How fucking dare she show me pity?
I did not deserve pity. I was disgusting. I knew that. I’d committed sins and crimes many malevolent men could only have ever dreamed about. I’d given myself a place at the End of the world, all right.

Shoving any care I’d ever had out of my mind, I called silently to the sky for a new supply of power, and felt my arm burn and bleed with the new pulse of lightning that worked its way through me.

It was at that point that TupperWear came out from seemingly nowhere and planted himself and his shield in front of Marpesia, thus deflecting my next blast of lightning. Before I could gather another, TupperWear passed his shield back, and said, “Here,” prompting Marpesia to take it and keep her self out of harm’s way. He then came at me and cuffed me hard across the face with a strong right hook. “You don’t treat a lady like that!” he shouted at me. “You should know better.”

I stumbled against the force of the blow, and tasted blood in my mouth a second after. Standing, I touched two fingers of my left hand to the spot on my bottom lip that felt cut, and drew that hand back to see indeed a stain of blood on my glove. I rubbed my fingers against my thumb, to get the blood off, and licked the corner of my mouth. The bitter sting of iron hit the tip of my tongue, and the taste caked into my mouth.

I should know better than to strike a ‘lady,’ huh? That was an interesting take. And a terrible insult.

But both of these heroes… what was their point in proving to me that I could still bleed? What was the point? It was ridiculous.

Ridiculous—that I, Chaos, could still bleed like any other man.

Amusing—terrifying—yes, amusing: I could bleed and die like the rest of them. I could even… even I could…

The thought, the very idea just got me laughing. I started laughing, and could not stop. I stood back, and let the lightning hit me, my burst of guttural laughter shooting up to the sky as a bolt came down to strike. It surged through my body, eating me away, digging into every sound recess of my heart, mind, and soul. Ego, superego, and id.

Shock them away! **Shock them away!**

*Remove me,* I pleaded to the lightning, to the power the mad Outer Gods had given me here in R’lyeh, through Nyarlathotep’s watchful eye. *Make me as you are.*

A voice, deep and cold, slithered into my ears, asking, “Is that what you want? Your seat at the End? Power to bring all men to their knees for this world?”

“No!” I heard myself shout. Then, surprised at my personal denial of my own request, I began laughing again. Lightning struck twice in succession, and I gathered it up and, laughing so hard I could barely concentrate, shot it without aim. It hit the ground only a couple of feet away from the two heroes. It missed?! Hah! Of course it missed! I had the worst luck of any man in the world! Of course it missed! How amusing.

Laughter built, but then, with another crash of thunder and flash of lightning, which struck me through the forehead, I was able to stop.

I held my right hand out, and aimed toward Marpesia. Even that was not worth my effort now, though. R’lyeh was warning me of something. I had a greater task to accomplish. Right?
Not that this fight wouldn’t still stay personal.

I’d just continue against Marpesia later. She wasn’t worth a kill right now. Nor did I still feel any desire to kill her. Just send her over the edge, that was all she needed. No. She didn’t need to die.

She didn’t need to die.

I didn’t want her to die. Or maybe I just couldn’t kill her.

Could I kill at all?

I shot, instead, toward her companion. “TOKEN!” she screamed, utterly disregarding their alter egos for the moment. Which only served to worry me. Suppose she were to call me something other than ‘Chaos.’ What then?

What then, indeed…

TupperWear covered his face with his left arm, then immediately dislodged that part of his armor, leaving his forearm exposed, and the deep blue armor sparkling and smoldering on the ground. He examined his bare arm for a second or two, gave Marpesia a nod that he’d taken the hit unhurt, then glared back at me. She, in turn, heaved a sigh of relief and set her free hand on his shoulder, breathing out, “Oh, thank God.”

Her partner—in more than one way, it seemed—patted her arm, and kept his focus on me. He was unimpressed. As was I. I’d lost my drive, once he’d come out of that attack unharmed. Or perhaps I’d had none to begin with.

No, no, no, Chaos.

I had no place, getting into a war with myself. I shook my head to drive out any old influence another part or two of my conscience might just have, any word or phrase or thought that might leak through. This must have been a visible process, since the two before me made no attempts to take advantage of my overwhelmed state.

“What the hell, Chaos?” TupperWear said coldly, once I’d given them my attention again.

“You really need to wake up,” Marpesia added, still holding the now-soaked cloth to the side of her wounded head.

“Maybe I’m awake,” I answered her. I could not let on that I feared anything might be wrong. “Maybe I’m dead and dreaming. And maybe I’ll never know.”

“You’re crazy!” she shouted.

“That, too, is a possibility,” I realized. “But I’ve better things to do at the moment. So live while you care to.”

Marpesia shook her head and stumbled; TupperWear caught her, and I felt my eyes narrow. Affection. That’s what all that was. Something I’d never known, something that selfish world had never given me. No affection, no love, no support. “This really isn’t you,” she attempted to argue again.

“No?” I wondered. I was almost genuinely interested in hearing her argument.
Why was that?

I could feel my heart beating, as if for the first time. It felt like a foreign presence in my chest, almost moreso than the lightning. It horrified me, and yet it felt so familiar, as if it had always been haunting me, throughout my descent deeper and deeper into my potential as Chaos.

“No,” said—Wendy, her lower lip trembling, as she tried to speak without faltering. Strongly, she added, “You said you owed me one!”

I looked her up and down. She was alive, wasn’t she? I’d decided I didn’t need to—or maybe want to—kill her. I’d decided to move on to the next thing that needed to be done. I couldn’t be around her anymore. I could not stand there with her spouting those morals of hers, those talks of the world she thought held much more than I’d ever seen. She came from that disgusting world, and I was letting her live. She needed to see that.

“Then consider the debt paid,” I said.

Finished with the entire ordeal, I spun round on my heel and began walking in the direction I’d sent Nyarlathotep.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” she called after me. I did not turn, I did not give her my attention. “You’re turning your back on people who love you.”


Marpesia had rattled off a list, earlier, of those she was claiming had cared, even in a minor way.

…but so what? Right? I did not need pity, or compassion, or affection, or anything else I’d ever lacked.

Wasn’t that right?

Hadn’t there been a time, once, when I had indeed relied on others? When they had helped me, for almost no reason at all?

Doesn’t matter, I tried to convince myself. After all, that wasn’t me. That wasn’t Chaos they’d aided. And as Chaos, it should have been my foremost duty to get rid of the real problems first. The two I had been. I’d succeeded somewhat, even if they insisted on keeping themselves alive. It very well could have been that she had been the one to stop me from killing Marpesia, then and there, because one tiny thread of life still existed from the fibers of her being. Neither of them was completely gone…

No. Every time I read from the Necronomicon, they died a little more. I was so close to freedom from either of them. They grew weaker and weaker each time I read, while I grew—well, at the very least, less and less interested in anything at all that world had to offer. I’d become tired. Sick of it. Bored. Disillusioned. Life had dealt Leopold Stotch a bad hand. But I, Chaos, still held onto one card.

That Tower card would bring me a world that would suit me. As long as I had it, and the Necronomicon, and Nyarlathotep, I needed nothing else.

…Right…?
Unless—

No. No, there was one thing. How foolish of me to think that this could go unresolved. It was so obvious, I almost laughed again. But laughter no longer existed in me. Nothing thrilled me anymore, now that the novelty of my power over lightning had worn off, now that I’d been shocked out of the capability to be amused by anything. It was now just another part of what made me Chaos.

Yes, one last thing I had to do to sever myself from it all. One last obstacle to overcome, one last person to drown out.

You see, I had created and become such vivid people—Butters was arguably a creation, though a weak one; Chaos was creation and destruction all at once. But she...

She had been created by someone else. Of course—of course it was that easy. To get her out, I had to remove the variable. The outside influence on her. In order to remove myself completely from that world, I first had to destroy the primary opposition.

I had to remove Eric Cartman.

– – –
Nyarlathotep led us a fair distance from the tower, but I could still feel that foreboding structure soaring above us, as if it was watching our every move. Eventually, Kite and I found ourselves entering what looked like an ancient, abandoned amphitheatre, at the center of which was something that looked like a sacrificial altar. We couldn’t linger to study the area, though, since the great sphinx kept on running, leading us further and further from the tower, Chaos, and our teammates.

The sky seemed to change, and the air grew damper, the horizon greyer, as we approached the edge of a crag overlooking a dark, restless ocean. The Messenger turned, slowly, to face us, indicating that this was to be our place for battle. Nothing surrounded us. Nowhere for us to hide, no natural formations for Kite to scale in order to get up in the air, hardly any natural resources.

The spray from the ocean stung and froze my skin. I glanced over at Kite and saw him shiver, too, and I tried to warn him with a look that I knew that sensation. I knew it; that wasn’t an illusion. I had felt this before.

“Kite,” I said firmly when a shudder caused him to close his eyes and miss my warning.

“What?” he wondered.

“This is it.”

“What?”

“Aren’t you cold?”

“Yeah, but—” His eyes widened, showing that he understood, after giving it a quick thought. “Oh, shit…” he muttered. “Shit. Are you okay?”

“I feel fine,” I told him. “It’s just disturbing.”

Disturbing that I would have felt this sensation back on Earth, in a scare that threatened my very sanity. As if R’lyeh had been sending me a warning. Telling me that, the next time I felt that particular chill, something would be taken from me. It had gone after my sanity back home—here, it seemed pretty likely that that coldness was a threat against my life. Well, that translated in my head as the realization that this battle meant everything. All or nothing.

R’lyeh wasn’t just going to let me go after it had claimed my dead soul. As long as R’lyeh existed, bound to Earth, I realized, there was the high probability that it would come looking for me, to haul me back and force me to join the other ranks of dead men it had already taken. Well… I’d just have to fight to make damn sure that didn’t happen. I wasn’t going to surrender anything… not my life, not my sanity, not anything I had.

“Keep it together,” Kite cautioned me. “I’m not losing you.”
“I’ll be okay,” I promised. “Let’s take this thing down. I’ve got a feeling these Immortals are so used to just making people go insane, they’ve got no idea what to do when anyone fights back.”

“Ugh, and I hate to fight back with all this anti-logic,” Kite admitted, “but it’s what we’ve gotta do, I guess…” He shivered again, but steeled himself against the chill of the spray, forcing his focus forward.

Somehow I knew that here, on the banks of the ocean roaring with madness, would mark the last time I’d ever confront Nyarlathotep. Whether that meant we two could somehow beat the beast for good or not, I didn’t know, but there was only one way to find out. Kite and I were each armed with one of TupperWear’s vials filled with the blood of something from R’lyeh, which could potentially harm an Immortal… but we really had to use those wisely. One shot each. We had to make them count.

The sphinx before us dissolved into the Mist, only to re-form again, this time in a way neither of us had seen before. His form was human enough, but he hadn’t gone for the pharaoh look we’d come across last time. Rather, Nyarlathotep appeared to us now in a long white robe, at a height even taller than that of his pharaoh form, and with a pallor bordering on albino. The robe was tied round the waist with a cord, and a hood was drawn up over his face, making him look no different from any of the Cultists we’d ever found ourselves up against.

“So what gives, Nyarlathotep?” I called over to the ‘man,’ who barely lifted his head to regard my words. While it seemed that he was giving us a slight reprieve, I set my chainsaw in place again on my back and took out my two loaded drill guns, handing one over to the Human Kite. He took it without question—he had no projectile weapons of his own, and there was very little around here he could move with his mind, other than my own arsenal, and neither of us had any idea how much or little of that would be needed, so arming him properly was one of the best solutions to his nearly weaponless situation, at least for now. I held my own drill gun up to aim directly at the seemingly easy target standing several yards away. “Is that how you go talk to Cults? That’s you being Messenger?”

“I have always been the Messenger,” said Nyarlathotep. It was strange… his voice did not sound exactly human—it had an odd vibration to it; I registered what he was speaking as, you know, English and all, but I could recognize that there was something very detached from our world about him. “Preparing mankind for the End, no matter the means.” Narrowing his eyes on me, he then asked, “Did you not listen when I called you?”

“Listen to this,” I growled, firing my drill gun. There was no use talking to Nyarlathotep; no use attempting to reason with any Immortal. They couldn’t be spoken to or bargained with on a human level, I’d figured that much. Whatever Cartman’s story with Cthulhu was… I didn’t know, but that seemed like something I didn’t exactly want to figure out, especially mid-battle with another deity entirely. Cthulhu may have been the thing that could wake all of the Old Ones and destroy everything, but Nyarlathotep had been the one to start paving the way, the one that had sent so many people to the asylum. Time to do whatever I could to help send him to Hell.

The cloaked man dodged my first two drill bits, but could not escape the next several I fired forward. The Human Kite readied the drill gun I’d given him, and shot a round as soon as our opponent charged, white cloak flying out like a cloud behind him. I tucked away my weapon and reached instead for the Philip’s head screwdriver I kept close to my left hip—once Nyarlathotep was in range, I grabbed him by the shoulder, kneed him in the ribs, and jabbed that screwdriver up into his neck. The Immortal did not choke or react, but my right hand, where I touched him, even through my thick gloves, felt like it was grabbing onto a block of sharp ice that just threatened to suck the warmth right out of my body.
I yanked the screwdriver out and threw my opponent aside. “Toolshed, move!” Kite shouted over to me, and I did as instructed before I even had a second to guess what he could possibly be doing. Once I’d rushed back, I rubbed my hands together for friction enough to get the blood pumping and warmth restored in my right hand again, then saw a lasso fly through the air and catch Nyarlathotep perfectly around his wounded neck. The Human Kite held fast to the spool end of one of his seemingly endless lengths of emulsified string, and yanked forward, to get the Messenger onto his knees.

“How do we beat Cthulhu?!” Kite demanded, pulling harder. The hooded head went down, but I knew we’d have to do much more than this to bring down something of Nyarlathotep’s calibre. “How do we stop this fucking End?!”

The white-robed man simply began to laugh, and then he yanked his head back as the laugh morphed into a terrifying, ear-piercing shriek, which got the Human Kite to let go of the lasso in order to cover his ears. His eyes narrowed, though, and he stepped down on the spool, refusing to give up whatever hold he still managed to have on the Messenger. I switched out for my drill gun again, but as soon as I started firing, the cloak billowed up over the human shape before us, expanding out, along with Nyarlathotep’s arms, into enormous, leathery wings.

Louder and louder—the beast’s shriek did not end. I winced against it as long as I could, then, afraid my eardrums would just burst, I caved, tucked away my drill gun, and covered my ears, shutting my eyes as well in an involuntary action. “Fuck!” I heard the Human Kite cry out, and seconds later, I could feel that some new terror now loomed over us. “Ugh, Jesus Christ, that thing needs to—aaahhh!”

I narrowly opened one eye, only to find that he, too, was struggling against the sheer intensity of the sound coming from the Messenger now.

My eyes once again shut tightly, I began to feel sick. Desperately unwell. My skin was crawling with what the still-logical center of my brain knew was just a wave of phantom pinpricks, but which struck the rest of me as the freezing feeling of multiple icicles, piercing into me. My blood was rushing in an attempt to warm me, but since the sensation was entirely psychological, it did nothing but churn my stomach and drain my stamina.

Breathing became difficult. I couldn’t tell up from down. And then, for a few fleeting seconds—

I just felt really fucking free. Hollow, sure, but just… full, too. Like I’d reached some kind of escape I never knew I needed.

FUCK.

Neither R’lyeh nor Nyarlathotep was giving up. Neither had any intention on losing a victim. Thank God I recognized it before I could give in. Thank God.

But that was insanity. I’d touched it. I’d felt it. It was very, very inviting; I could see why so many people had fallen. The kind of insanity that these Immortals could inflict, or at least that Nyarlathotep could dish out, was different for each one if its victims, but with the same general attack: it was a false sense of security. It warped one’s perception into believing that the world was a terrible place one should only want to escape from… and thus each and every victim had basically been flung into his or her own personal Hell; the mind was breached, and the personality was wiped away without the victim ever noticing.

The fact that I could sense and understand it was good, but absolutely frightening. I couldn’t tell if my awareness would let me rise above the insanity, or if it meant that I was just one more step closer to succumbing to it. Neither alive nor dead; neither sane nor insane; neither light nor dark—
R’lyeh certainly was a ‘Space Between’ many things that every person on Earth had grown up seeing as concrete opposites. There had to be a way to rise above it. Had to be a way to force those things to make sense again.

“Nyarlathotep!” the Human Kite called out to our opponent over the earsplitting cry. “This isn’t an answer! How do we stop the End?!”

The shriek wrenched through the sky with the din of ten thousand un-oiled doors on ten thousand sets of rusty hinges, and I could make out words in static, pulsing in my eardrums, as if they were being forced through my communication wire: “Men—cannot—stop—the End—“

“STOP!” I heard Kite shout, though I couldn’t tell why, unless he was hearing the words, too.

“Men—nor—mere—children—no—children of—damned—“

“STAN, SHUT UP!” he hollered.

My throat burned, and my eyes flared open when Kyle’s words actually reached me through the static: I hadn’t just been hearing those words. I’d been speaking them. The Mist had crept in and clenched my own voicebox to filter out words while the Messenger had no mouth of his own. Upon realizing that, I screamed and clawed at my ears. If I could just get it out—if I could just get it out—!

Within the Messenger’s shriek, I could make out laughter.

I couldn’t lose. I couldn’t lose to this. Not this, not now—no.

*Brave it, just brave it, just stick it out—*

“A shadow slithered beneath me and snaked into a line that stood between us and Nyarlathotep. *Watch the shadows, Stan.* The burning-eyed bat slunk back, shifting in form again to the great sphinx, but I kept my eyes on that shadow. My vision cleared, and the burning in my throat ceased. I shook my head, and the static in my feedback from the wire died down.

“You good?” the Human Kite asked me. He was having a hard time figuring out how to handle the situation—as himself or as his vigilante alter ego—but he was once again balancing both very well; he reached me, either way.

I shuddered once, just to make sure those waking nightmares were gone. Focus. Focus. I had a fucking job to do. I had a lot to live for, and fuck it all, I was going to fight for it. Lifting my gaze, I glared first at Nyarlathotep, then calmly nodded my resolve over toward my partner, who let out a relieved sigh. “Okay,” I said, unhooking and readying my chainsaw, “we ready to do this?”

“What’s the plan?” Kite wondered.

“Whatever we do, this is it,” I said firmly. “I’m sick of this insanity bullshit. Let’s do this, dude. Let’s just bring this fucker down.”

“Think we can?”

“We’ve at least gotta try.”

Kite smirked, laughed a little, and said, “That’s what I like to hear.”
The bat rose above us, its massive, three-lobed eye searching us for the best way to deliver to each of us a slow, mind-burning death. It wasn’t going to be easy to bring Nyarlathotep down, now that this thing would probably be more apt to take to and attack from the sky, which was already so rife with static activity. The Human Kite surveyed the situation with painstaking precision, though, and then, sturdying himself, he said, “All right, I think I know what we can do to beat it.”

“What’ve you got?” I asked him.

“First off, I’ve gotta get up there,” Kite said, glaring up at the beast. I could see the gears turning in his head; whatever it was he was calculating, it was going to be good. “Do you think you can bring this thing down to a human shape?”

“Yeah, no prob,” I said. “It usually gets to that when it’s pissed and hurt enough.”

“Awesome.”

“You good with that drill gun?” I wondered.

“Yeah.” But I handed him an extra round of bits, just in case, which he belted and thanked me for. Then, with a slight nod, he cracked his knuckles and decided, “All right… I’m heading up.”

“How?” I wondered. “You gonna seriously climb that thing?”

“Ugh. No. I don’t wanna even touch it.”

“So, then, how are y—“

Kite’s proud grin cut me off before his words did. I’d seen that look before. He’d solved something huge, and he was going to use whatever the answer was to his greatest advantage. If we had more time, I’m sure he probably would have made me guess whatever it was he’d figured out, but time was of the essence, so he simply answered, in a low, confident tone, “I’m gonna fly.”

I didn’t get it at first. “Need a boost?” I wondered.

He just kept grinning. “Nope.”

“What?”

“I figured it out.”

“You figured what ou—oh,” I finally realized. He couldn’t be serious. “No.” My eyes widened when all he did was just keep that grin on his face and loosen up his glider. “No, dude, get the fuck out.”

My partner laughed and gave me a quirky sideways glance—oh, motherfucker, he was completely one-upping me in the middle of a fight—then held his hands out to his sides, forcing his glider to pan completely out, thus giving him the wingspan that usually could only carry him certain distances, with plenty of height or momentum. “Maybe not ‘fly,’ exactly, but levitate with accuracy, but that’s just not fun to say,” he told me. “I figured it out, dude. This glider is just another object I can move. I’m just going to happen to move with it.”

I let out a slight laugh of my own, while the bat was still calculating its own moves. “You are so not allowed to say you’re not amazing anymore,” I chided.

“Let’s wait till I actually start flying, huh?” Kite laughed.
“Be careful,” I cautioned him.

“Thanks,” he said, as we exchanged a knowing nod. “You, too.”

The Human Kite broke into a sprint, warming his mind up as he went, as evidenced by the parting of ocean-tossed gravel in his path, and then, sure enough, he jumped off the ground with only the momentum from his own run and was somehow able to carry himself mentally airborne. I had no idea how he was able to do it, or if it was even something that was achievable only in R’lyeh, but once he’d reached what looked like his peak altitude, I figured that, of course this was within his ability. He’d strained and practiced so hard to develop what had started out as just a little random quirk into a strong, precise—for lack of a better word—power, which was now just as much a part of him as, well… as Immortality was to Kenny.

Thinking about that helped me hold focus even more. We were here for the sake of the whole world, yeah, but it wouldn’t be a world worth returning to unless we all made it out of here. All of us together, all of us as one.

“All right, Toolshed,” I said to myself, starting up a little personal pep-talk. (Jesus Christ, I will never not be a football player.) “You’ve got a pretty big task here… let’s see, weak point… find a weak point.” I surveyed the gigantic bat, and figured: of course. Clip down the wings. “You’ve got a tool for every form this shapeshifting fuck can think up,” I grinned. “You got this.”

With the Human Kite distracting the bat’s terrible burning eye, I had the perfect opening to run forward. The terrain really was lacking in resources, but I didn’t necessarily need anything outside of my arsenal… though a place to take cover and regroup at points would be nice. Then again, my opponent was something that looked like it could see you no matter where you tried to hide, so even taking cover was a bit of wishful thinking.

I ducked beneath the shadow of the bat’s right wing, and, while its full wingspan was outstretched, fired five bits up into the joint that connected wing to shoulder. The bat screeched and reeled; while it shook itself into recovery, Kite, comfortably hovering just a few feet in front of our opponent, fired another several bits into one lobe of the beast’s burning eye. Outraged, the bat spread its wings and with a single pump was several hundred feet in the air.

Kite let out a yelp in shock, but before he could be caught in the gust, he dropped back down to the ground, then swiftly and aggressively yanked me off to the side. “What?” I wondered, once he’d brought us to a halt.

“The shadows,” he said as he caught his breath.

“Huh?” I glanced over at the massive tent of a shadow the burning-eyed bat was casting, and saw that another, disembodied tendril of a shadow was creeping around it. Probably the same shadow that had helped me clear my head, it was now winding around the overcast of the bat’s wings, and as hard as Nyarlathotep fought, it couldn't shake the Shadow’s hold, and the massive form came crashing to the ground.


“Yeah, true…” But we were both still concerned, even though neither of us said it. The Shadow was a separate but sentient part of Kenny, and it was meant to be a Messenger for the Old Ones, to help Cthulhu plunge Earth into darkness. Nyarlathotep had overstayed his welcome. The Mist shall dissipate into the depths of R’lyeh as the Shadow rises. This wasn’t even all of the Shadow, and already it had power over the Crawling Chaos. That could only mean…
“Shit…” I whispered. “Dude, I think Cthulhu’s awake.”

Kite nodded solemnly, took a drink of water from the canteen fixed to his belt, then said, “Then let’s hurry this up and get over there. Listen, I looked past the dropoff,” he started re-planning, ticking his head back toward the crag that promised a hard fall down into the roaring black ocean. “It’s gonna take a fuckin' lot outta me, but I’ve gotta get some of the rocks down on the water bank up here.”


“They’ll help, trust me.”

“All right…” I had a feeling that once this new wave of the plan got started, I’d catch right on, so I trusted his judgment and logic. “I’ll keep this thing distracted,” I said, “and keep trying to knock it down in size.”

“Thanks,” Kite grinned. “This’ll all make sense in a minute, I swear.”

“I’m sure,” I managed to laugh.

With that, he stood back, close to the edge of the cliff, and held his arms out and down—I knew the stance; he was getting what he called a ‘reading’ on the objects below he was hoping to coax into movement. Leaving him to his own task, I rushed again at Nyarlathotep while the deity was down. Kite had successfully taken out one lobe of its eye, so I aimed for another and hit my target dead on.

“The bigger you get, the better the target!” I shouted, after the beast had ceased screeching again. “You haven’t gotten through to me to make me go insane,” I taunted. “Why not just kill me the way men always kill each other? That’s what’s coming in the End, right? Mankind against itself? Come on, show me what the fuckin’ End is supposed to look like!”

Surprisingly enough, that simple tactic worked, and the bat contorted down to the swarthy form of a pharaoh once more. He picked his head up, fixed his two, slightly bleeding black eyes on me, and curdled out, “Now there’s an idea.”

The Shadow twined itself away, and Nyarlathotep picked himself up and darted forward. His feet barely seemed to touch the ground, marking him as a deity indeed, but in his face was a very horrifyingly human kind of anger. I shot two bits at him, but he swerved out of the way and tore after me. I tucked my drill gun back into my belt at the last second and ducked away from the strike he threw. Thinking fast, I grabbed my flathead, sidestepped out of the way of his next lunge, and stabbed the screwdriver backwards with perfect accuracy into his back.

The mind-shattering screech he’d been letting out as that enormous bat shot out of Nyarlathotep’s more human mouth. I winced at the sound and yanked my screwdriver out of Nyarlathotep’s back. Just as I was emptily wishing for a spot to take cover for a second to plan my next move, a medium-sized rock rolled right into place between me and the Messenger. Head spinning, I looked over at the Human Kite, who had succeeded in calling up a fair amount of rocks from the ocean bank, and was now in the process of placing them in what I figured were the most strategic places for his plan.

He’d need to seriously regroup himself right now, though, so why—

Oh, I got it. These were for me. I had to follow the path of them he’d made, using each one to whichever advantage I needed them for until I was once again at the dropoff, at which point he’d
have had enough mental rest to keep going. I took a quick drink of water, nodded over to him to let
him know I got it, then turned and shoved my awl into a crack in the rock behind me. Nyarlathotep
had just stopped screaming, so I double-timed myself and took out my sledgehammer, only to bring it
down hard against the awl.

Luckily, the rock shattered into several smaller chunks after that first strike, and I had just
enough time to slide the awl back into my belt and take a good golf swing at one of the fragments
just as Nyarlathotep started toward me again. The brittle green rock hit and nicked his collarbone.
The pharaoh snarled and snapped his head around, the gash healing over with a gust of mist that
seeped from the wound.

“Don’t let him touch you,” Kite instructed into my wire, so he wasn’t shouting. “I’ve figured
it out—anyone who touches one of these Immortals gets somehow connected to them. It explains
Cartman and it might even explain Butters. One more hit and he might really get you.”

“Thanks,” I said. I had a feeling it was something like that, especially once he’d declared he
hadn’t wanted to touch the bat himself.

I swung another large piece of the severed rock at Nyarlathotep, then sprinted back toward
the next rock, which I clambered up; once at the top, I switched out my sledgehammer for my drill
gun before the Messenger could reach me, and shot a volley down. The pharaoh was hit with a few,
and began to seethe. “Don’t go shifting forms on me, now!” I laughed at him, even though it was
hard to gather up that much strength to laugh in the face of something that had tried to rip the sanity
right out of me. “We’re playing by End Time rules, remember?!"

Before I could even see what Nyarlathotep was going to try, I leapt down behind that rock
and made for the next one. As I ran, I reloaded my drill gun and set it back in place on my belt.

He continued to storm after me, and the next few rocks became quick safe shelters for me to
take ten seconds to breathe before forcing my stamina back up in order to trap my opponent.
Something was bothering me about the way Nyarlathotep had started fighting, since abandoning the
bat form. He was reacting in much, much more human ways, which was making me fear all the
more for Kenny. If one Messenger was faltering like this, what did that mean for the other? Kenny
wasn’t about to lose out to the Shadow, was he?

*Hold on, dude,* I thought for him. *You’ll make it.*

“Toolshed, get him into view!” Kite instructed.

“You’re set?” I called back.

“Yes, let’s go!”

Gathering a strong breath, I took stock of myself, then, inhaling deeply, bolted out from my
current hiding spot and rushed diagonally forward toward the Human Kite, who had already started
laying his trap. He had both arms extended upward, and two spools of his emulsified thread hovered
in the air, slightly unraveled. Two other spools were behind held a fair distance away, more at waist
height. As soon as the irate pharaoh stormed into view, the spools of thread unwound and, as Kite
let out a, “Hmf,” for a quick boost, they tied themselves up. Kite clenched his hands together into
fists, and with that, a spool each caught hold of each of Nyarlathotep’s wrists, while the waist-height
spools trapped each of his ankles.

“Men cannot stop the End,” the Messenger warned in his echoing tone.
“Dude, shut up,” I groaned. I went for the chainsaw, swinging it down over my shoulder as I steeled myself and approached, much closer than I’d been really daring to go yet. Nyarlathotep could pull a fast one any second, we all more or less knew, so I had to play my cards right.

Making sure Kite had the Messenger firmly secured, I revved the chainsaw and ran around behind Nyarlathotep, then finished the job we’d started in on him back home in South Park. Putting aside the fact that, from the back, he looked like any other person who could be walking the street, I brought the chainsaw down on his head, hearing the crunching of what I assumed was bone. Nyarlathotep let out another bat shriek, but I didn’t stop there.

Once the chainsaw had dug clean through, I hollered over to Kite, “We’re gonna push him over, ready?!”

“In five!” he called back. “Four!”

I pulled the vial from TupperWear out of my belt.

“Three!”

I took off the lid and measured my aim. Right into that hollow cavern, quick, now, before Nyarlathotep could change into anything else.

“Two!”

I hurled the tiny evidence jar full of blood in, aiming so that it might end up deep. The shriek grew louder and louder as I switched out the chainsaw for the sledgehammer for what, in this battle, already felt like the last time.

“One!”

Kite released his hold on the strings and let the spools fall as he darted out of the way. I wound up and smacked Nyarlathotep hard in the back with my sledgehammer, which was just the force necessary to send the Messenger plummeting over the edge of the dropoff.

“YES!” Kite and I shouted in victory together.

No scream could be heard. I walked over to him, behind the rock he’d most likely placed as a strategic shield for that very instance, and in silence, the two of us waited a minute out. Nothing. My heart started pounding, wanting me to let go and feel triumphant in the fight, but I wouldn’t be content until I knew for a fact what the outcome was. “You think we got him?” I ventured to ask my partner.

“I dunno,” he admitted. We let a few more seconds pass, and took that time to gather ourselves, have another drink of water, and catch our breath. He was looking pretty drained, and for good reason, but he wasn’t on the verge of collapsing. Studying him, I realized I felt about the same way.

R’lyeh might be a dimension so rooted in insanity that inherent powers could be amplified, but it sure didn’t seem to be any kinder to plain old stamina. It was possible that there would be no way to run from any more battles in order to rest… and eventually, we’d all need real rest, at least a couple good hours’ worth of sleep if we wanted to keep going. I could hold out for a while; I figured we all could, but proper rest was a nagging concern, and we couldn’t overestimate ourselves.

Well… for now, I’d take a brief rest like this while I could, and hopefully be able to be a good judge of my own limits as we pushed forward.
“Should we take a look?” I wondered, ticking my head in the direction of the dropoff to the ocean.

“Yeah, probably should,” said Kite. “Before we do, though, nice going figuring out what I was trying to do. Sorry, I get vague when I’m thinking about too much.”

“It’s cool; I know,” I said, managing to laugh. “It was a great plan.”

“Let’s hope it worked…”

Carefully, cautiously, the two of us walked to the dropoff and peered over the edge. It was tough to see all the way down, but a couple seconds later, we didn’t have to. Kite noticed before I did, yelped, and once again yanked me out of the way—an enormous black form came bolting up from the rocky ground below, and the two of us stumbled back. A faint screech could be heard coming from somewhere in the oozing mass, and then it began to take shape, first as that burning-eyed bat, screeching and writhing in what must have been pain as it clambered further and further up the cliff and onto our level of ground.

Kite and I backed away as the great beast slumped down onto the ground, using its wings to try to pick itself up. Its head was split open and smoldering, oozing out what looked like thick black tar. The bat moved its head only to shriek again and collapse, then morph crudely into its sphinx shape again. Every time it tried to lift itself up, the split chasm in its head would hiss, churn, and continue pumping out that disgusting semi-liquid.

Well, we hadn’t killed him, but we’d gotten really fucking close. “You think this’ll do it?” Kite wondered, holding up the vial he still had.

But I couldn’t even think of a response. As Nyarlathotep painfully contorted himself into bat form a second time since re-emerging from the fall, a bolt of lightning came crashing down between us and the fallen deity. “Shit,” both Kite and I muttered.

Indeed, we turned to find Professor Chaos striding toward us, *Necronomicon* in hand. “Not another move!” he shouted our way.

“Chaos!” I hollered over. “What are you doing here?”

“Where are Marpesia and TupperWear?” Kite couldn’t help but add.

“Those friends of yours weren’t any easier to deal with than I’m sure the two of you would be,” Chaos snarled, walking still closer, “if I had the time to deal with you right now. I’ll be taking *Nyarlathotep* and going.”

“Going where?” I demanded.

Chaos did not answer. He flipped without thinking to a page of the *Necronomicon*, and began to read. Over his oration, the beast behind him let out another shrill cry, but as the clouds crashed together above us, the significant gash in Nyarlathotep’s head began to seal up. That entire fight we’d just had—nothing. We’d gotten him down to a point at which he would have at least stayed down until another Immortal could properly kill him, and now Chaos was praying him back to square one.

“What are you doing?!” Kite shouted.

Chaos ignored him and continued reading. As he did, we stood there as witnesses to a terrifying event. If I’m not mistaken, a transformation. Color further drained from Chaos’s face,
tinting the skin around his eyes an ashen grey... eyes which, themselves, appeared more and more hollow and inhuman. Wounds on his arms caused by lightning damage opened and bled a little, and as soon as Chaos had completed the passage, he doubled over, coughing. At the end of his fit, he coughed out a significant amount of blood into his hand, but shook it off and stood as if it hadn’t bothered him.

Nyarlathotep, however, was back to full health, and it extended a wing, which Chaos climbed up on, in order to stand on the dark Messenger’s back.

“Chaos, really, what are you doing?” Kite hollered. Both of us were equally appalled and concerned at having witnessed that incantation. Chaos had read his own health away in order to revive Nyarlathotep, and it wasn’t all that hard to figure out that his doing this before, for months now, had contributed to Butters’ rapid loss of self. He’d been wasting himself away for the sake of Nyarlathotep’s successful spread of insanity. “And what the hell could you possibly be using that thing for?” Kite added, gesturing to the great bat.

“I need to tie up a loose end,” Chaos answered darkly. “Don’t follow me.”

“NO!” Kite hollered. “Just—no. STOP. Chaos, you have to stop.” When Chaos merely glared, Kite flew into a near rage, fists clenched, and he shouted, “Do you realize you’re killing yourself?! You’re not creating an ideal world, you’re removing yourself from any world, completely! Is that what you’ve been doing? Making Nyarlathotep more powerful by reading that?”

Chaos just stared at the Human Kite, then shifted his gaze to his still-open book. Lifting his sunken black eyes again, to glare at us, he snapped the book closed and looked away.

It was absolutely awful to watch. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind, if ever there had been any, that Butters really had been possessed. Those eyes only saw the world as wretched, those eyes were Nyarlathotep’s view of mankind and the world. Butters had fallen into the worst tier of insanity, the point to which all men were supposed to plummet in the End.

I knew what insanity was. I’d seen plenty of it, and I’d felt it try to do me in. With it, there’s a feeling of helplessness that one will just do anything to shake, and now Butters was getting that twisted world view chiseled into his brain, and there seemed to be so little left of him that it was hard to tell if he could find his way back out.

So I tried to fight him with reason. “Chaos,” I said before he could go. He did not turn, but he granted me the time to speak. “Listen,” I continued, speaking firmly but by no means shouting, “I think I know what’s happening to you. In fact, I’ve been there. I know. And I know how to beat it. I’m sure, at one point, there must have been something a lot more important to you than this End of the world crap. If you focus on what that is, you can stop it. This isn’t you, dude. Nobody has to suffer this insanity.”

Chaos hesitated for a moment, and tucked his Necronomicon away. But he did not even answer before Nyarlathotep took to the sky. Damn it! “Get back here!” I called after him. “It’s killing you. You keep falling into that, you’re gonna die!” But my words didn’t reach him. Nyarlathotep was gone. “FUCK.”

“Dammit, fucking—UGH,” Kite groaned, punching the rock we were standing closest to. “Jesus, there is no end!”

“Hey—“ I tried, hoping to catch him before he could fling himself into a rant R’lyeh might
consider insane enough to try to claim him.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m—okay, I’m okay, just… okay,” said Kite, pushing his hands out in front of him. “Let’s go. We’ve gotta go after him. Come on.”

Before I could give an answer, or even begin to think of one, over the wire came Mosquito’s voice, “Toolshed! Kite, any of you guys hear me?”

“Yeah, gotcha,” I said. Huh. The wire didn’t seem so rife with static anymore…

“You guys busy?” Mosquito wanted to know. “If any of you can, get over here. Mysterion’s… kinda checking out, and Cthulhu’s awake, so—“

“Shit,” I said. “Come on, let’s get to the—“

“Going somewhere, boys?”

“FUUUCK,” both Kite and I spat. We’d barely even begun to walk away before that damn voice sounded out.

Right there in our path stood General Disarray, arms smugly folded across his chest, eyes sharp and gleaming with the pride of almost having gotten his way. Lightning sparked above us, and Disarray grinned.

“What?” Mosquito wondered.

“Unfortunately gotta take a rain check on that,” I said. “We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Just gotta sort out a little disarray first,” Kite quipped, snapping his words in our new opponent’s direction. “We’ll get to you guys, don’t worry. Good luck in the meantime.”

“You guys, too. Keep your heads up… and that applies to everyone!”

“Gotcha,” I said, and then the wire cut out.

“You two are really putting a damper on my plan,” General Disarray snarled at us.

“Your plan?” I repeated. “How so?”

“You aren’t supposed to be able to bring down Nyarlathotep! You can’t do that! I’m going to stop you right here so you can’t do any more damage to my Goddamn plan!” Disarray hollered. “Let’s make this fun, huh?! Lightning says, we go… that way!”

He held out one hand, and a bolt of lightning shot out from his palm, back in the direction of the amphitheatre we’d passed through. Kite and I split out of the way of the blast, and Disarray laughed.

“Chaos isn’t the only one the Great Messenger blessed here in R’lyeh!” he exclaimed. “Now, move it! We’re gonna have some fun now!”

Kenny

I had always tried to be the best I could, for the past seven years at least. I’d risen above addictions—sex and drugs—and really cleaned myself up; I’d taken charge of my own fucking life, assuming financial responsibility for myself, and seeing my little sister off to a better life of her own, far out of our parents’ reach. I’d worked hard to be a good friend and teammate, a good boyfriend to a girl I
knew was eagerly waiting for my return.

Thing was, though, I had never been so afraid that I wouldn’t make it back. I’d come to terms with the possibility, even made peace with it—but now, literally standing in the Great Cthulhu’s shadow, I was finally gripped with a paralyzing fear.

And it was the fear of it that did me in.

It wasn’t death I was afraid of, though. Not anymore. It was the thing that had been sleeping inside me since I was born that scared me now. The part of me that was bound to by a curse to the Dark God standing before me.

Cthulhu itself was an impressively terrible beast. Its massive height put every building in South Park to shame; a bulbous, octopus-like head perched awkwardly, tentacles and all, on a lanky yet bloated body fit to be either bi- or quadripedal, and a thin set of bat-like wings could somehow lift that beast into the air. I knew what it was capable of. I’d seen it crush human lives, reduce men to ashes and memories.

The question was: what did it need me for?

“Great One!” the young Goth lauded his deity’s presence. “O, Dark Cthulhu! Iä! Iä!”

“Jesus Christ,” I heard the Coon spit down. “Is that little asshole still here?”

My head was spinning, and I found it difficult to keep my eyes focused on any one thing. Black spots clouded my vision, making me feel almost inebriated. Nothing seemed to be up or down—and then, each one swirling into view at a different time, the black spots in my vision blinked to light with a view of another location. I could see the skies of R’lyeh, Yog-Sothoth and the Gate, a great black ocean, a view of an abandoned amphi-theatre from the ground up. Even our own portal back home, back at the base… even a corner view of the basement safehouse, showing me clearly that both Red and Karen were unharmed.

I could see everything. Every piece of the world—Earth, R’lyeh, and the Spaces Between—in which a fragment of the Shadow still slithered and lurked. The fact that a piece of it was keeping watch over the people I loved proved to me that the Shadow truly was a part of me, just as much as I was a part of it. Its presence at both the Gate and our own portal, however, proved my connection to Cthulhu. His Shadow wasn’t supposed to follow him to Earth to cause the destruction promised in the Necronomicon. His Shadow was meant to lead him there.

I was connected to every shadow in R’lyeh. Every one of them touched at some point or another, and every one of them found me.

Getting frantic, I forced myself to reclaim my own vision, ignoring the swirling spots I couldn’t completely shake, and stared up at the Dark God. Perched right there, on his shoulder, was the one and only Coon, successful in the one mission we’d been counting on him to follow through with. He seemed, as far as I could tell with my bleary focus, ready to continue following through; Cthulhu appeared to so far be listening to him, but how long would that last?

“Great Cthulhu,” the young Goth continued his praise as if the Coon had not just insulted him. “Behold, I bring to you your Shadow.”

“You brought?!” I howled at him. Underneath my normal voice was a hiss, like a canned echo, akin to the whisper that would often slink through my ears. Beneath my feet, the shadows of R’lyeh swirled… but they no longer pulled. I took a step toward the awful little Cultist and felt like I
was walking through water or silk. I was not breathing, but I had not died.

Weightlessness. Expanded sight. Shadow. Shadow—

“Mysterion!” I heard Mosquito shout out toward me. I did not need to turn my head to look at him. I saw him perfectly well through one of the splices in my vision. In addition, I saw someone he himself had not laid eyes on in days—in fact, I had several clear views of the South Park asylum; Bebe, her thin form curled into a ball against the corner of a small, heavily shadowed room, was only one of the unfortunate several I could see.

Even when I was nine years old, Mysterion had been a symbol for the town. Everyone knew that name. Everyone knew that Mysterion was on guard, that Mysterion would keep his eye on the city, that they would know the shape of his shadow on the wall or on the snow beneath the moon at night. I still had my eye on the city. Still did and always would. It was Mysterion’s shadow, and not Cthulhu’s, that the town was still on the lookout for.

Let’s keep it that way.

Please, God, let’s keep it that way.

The little Goth had to cut a word in against my teammate, he just couldn’t let the damn issue go: “Mysterion isn’t a name we’ll be hearing much longer,” he said, spreading one hand out over the necessary pages of his *Necronomicon*. “Behold, Cthulhu, your Shadow awakes and awaits your orders! I have offered you a lifetime of service, Great Dark One; I now offer you your Shadow’s true Immortal name—”

“Hey, kid!” the Coon shouted. “Guess what? You’re pissin’ me off!”

The Goth growled and tried to ignore him. “That name, unspoken for aeons, shall—“

“Hey, piss-rag, I’m talkin’ to you!”

“SHALL BRING WITH IT A NEW ERA OF DARKNESS FOR—“

“Um, Coon—“ Mint-Berry Crunch tried.

“Aye!” the Coon spat. “Marilyn Manson! Shut the fuck up a’edy!”

“Maril—*that does it,*” the Goth growled, snapping the *Necronomicon* closed. Which, I realized with the bit of my mind still alert to my own actions, was exactly what the Coon was trying to get him to do.

*If I make it out of this,* I thought to myself, settling my focus up on my touch-and-go teammate, with whom I’d fought over a multitude of things many times before, *Eric Cartman, I’ll actually fucking owe you one.*

If the Shadow remained unnamed, then Kenneth McCormick would still be the only name ever truly given to me. And therefore I’d still have a chance…

“You wanna know what happens when people piss me off, Marilyn?”

Finally behaving like an actual person—rather than a cryptic know-it-all—the Goth snorted and hollered, “Get down here, you fat weasel; you’ll be good enough for two sacrifices!”

“Uh, no. You know the drill, Cthulhu!” the Coon said. He scowled down at the little Goth
kid, then nudged Cthulhu’s enormous head to provoke him into action. “Get ’im.”

The Goth’s eyes momentarily widened, and the Shadow watched him from several angles. I couldn’t tell if I was pleased with this prospective outcome or not. It was hard to determine any feeling, whether it was something intangible like anger or happiness, or something physical like hot or cold. I could not tell if I was glad or not to see McElroy’s successor fall.

And fall he did.

At the Coon’s command, Cthulhu, Priest to the Old Ones who slumbered in wait for the End Time that was steadily creeping upon us, raised one mammoth, taloned hand, and held it up over the small, cloaked Cultist. Not even years of devotion to this Dark God from a dimension far removed from our own could guarantee the young Goth the chance to help usher in the deity’s miserable reign as writ in Alhazred’s tome. And even faced with his very personal end, the Goth attempted to bargain for his life.

“Great Dark One, surely there are others around who could serve as a—“

His final plea was never completed. It faded into a scream as the skin evaporated from the young man’s body as quickly and easily as dust blows away in the wind. For a moment, nothing but the Goth’s stark white skeleton remained, and then even that was vapor in the air.

The worship, the praise, the thousands of years Cults around the world had devoted to raising the mighty Cthulhu… none of that meant a thing to the Dark God himself. Every human life was insignificant, as insignificant as whatever lay on the ground beneath his feet. Yet at the same time, he had obeyed an order. Whatever the Coon’s connection to Cthulhu was—well, shit, at least it was there.

“YEAH!” the Coon exclaimed. “That sure shut him up!”

“Oh, my GOD!” Mint-Berry Crunch exclaimed, disgusted.

“Oh, assballs.” The Coon whistled at Cthulhu and ticked his head down, and the Dark Priest, his gaze shifting over to me, lowered himself to the ground like a horse preparing his rider for a dismount, but the Coon did not leave Cthulhu’s shoulder. From his perch, he glared at the alien hero and shouted to the rest of us, “Guys, the fuck? The fuck is he doing here? Seriously?”

“Look, I’m getting a little tired of none of you guys saying anything nice!” Mint-Berry Crunch complained, huffing out a breath. “I’m only trying to help. So, get down from there, so that I can teach this evil thing a lesson agai—“

“No,” I said, turning my head to look in his direction. Once again, my every movement felt smooth as placid water. I felt none of my joints moving, just a silken simplicity. Every movement I made seemed to remove me from gravity all the more. “Nobody makes a move against Cthulhu until I say so.”

Mint-Berry Crunch stared at me, terrified. When the Coon glanced over, even he paled and winced. Cthulhu narrowed his venomous yellow eyes at me, and I stared right back. I’d been told I looked like death. Maybe I was dead. Maybe the sheer presence of Cthulhu had killed me, and with nowhere else to go, I was simply stuck in transition between life and death, here in a land where none of that mattered. But I challenged him all the same.

The Coon could use him for now, but Cthulhu was mine to face in the end. The fact still remained that we would probably need Cthulhu to destroy Nyarlathotep and the other Old Ones.
Then it would just be him and me.

The Great Dark One growled in my direction, the tentacles over its mouth rustling about in the gap between us. He was instructing me to do something, that much I could tell. Within the subtones of the animalistic growl, I could faintly make out a string of what clearly were words, in the Old Ones’ tongue.

“That is not dead which can eternal lie,” it translated to in English. “And with strange aeons, even death may die.”

“I’m going to end you,” I promised right back, finding it easy to spit the words out in the language Cthulhu could understand.

Another roar, under which came the meaning, “Die your deaths one last time.”

Before I could attempt to rationalize what that meant, my vision exploded into a burst of black and grey, and I cried out without yet feeling any pain. Suddenly, sight returned to me, but it became narrow and distorted. I felt nothing that could be construed as a physical ‘body,’ but I knew that somehow I was moving. The illogical landscape of R’lyeh bolted around and beneath me as my vision tunneled forward, whisking me up the stairs that lead to Cthulhu’s tomb, and then through the tomb itself, then out and around, darting about until my sight was aimed straight skyward, narrowed and sharpened to the way I was used to seeing the world.

I drew in a shocked breath and blinked.

I was solid again. Lying on my back, gazing skyward. For a moment, my heart rushed with the fear that I would be staring up at the ceiling of my bedroom at my parents’ house, but Cthulhu had seemed quite intent to remove me from that world altogether. No, I simply stared up at the gathering storm clouds that loomed over all of R’lyeh.

All around me were torches flickering with shadows.

From having been essentially amorphous for the moments during which I’d stood in Cthulhu’s presence, it seemed as though my mind had forgotten what being in a solid body was supposed to feel like, so it took me a moment to readjust. I sat up, stiffly and slowly, glad to be able to feel my joints moving again, and glanced around me.

And then, I heard a child cry out. Not just any child, though. Me.

I glanced around, even held a hand to my own throat to see if the sound had possibly come from me now. That wasn’t the case, so I continued searching. As I did, the shadows in the candelabras flickered and built up a wall surrounding me, creating something of a screen, on which I watched, from a shadow’s view, a scene in a room that could only be in Hell’s Pass Hospital, back in South Park.

And there I was… I couldn’t have been more than four years old. But I didn’t remember dying that young. The first death I remembered was when I was eight. The first time I had died, I was eight years old. Grey alien Visitors had come, and—yes, that was the first time I’d died, but…

Right?

Had there been a death before that I couldn’t remember?
“Mom!” little Kenny on the screen cried.

“Doctor, he’s only four years old, isn’t there anything you can do?” my mother’s voice drawled out. There she was—she was younger, prettier, and sounding much, much more concerned with my well-being than I could usually remember her being.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. McCormick, but we just can’t figure out what’s wrong with him,” a man’s voice—the doctor—answered. “It’s like there’s something stuck to the walls of his lungs and trachea, it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“That black stuff in the x-ray?” my father asked. “What is that?”

“As I said, we just don’t know.”

“I don’t want to die!” little Kenny screamed. “I don’t want to die.”

In a sudden, childish fit of fear, I turned away from the shadow screen and held my head in my arms, but the force of my spin had caused me to lose balance, and I fell off of whatever had been acting as my bed and hit the rocky ground. Cautiously, I lowered my arms and lifted my head to examine the thing I’d fallen from, and discovered a large stone bier.

The Shadow’s tomb.

A date then flashed before me. The first day I’d ever died. The only death I had never remembered. The tombstone that time had read, very simply, very sadly, Kenneth ‘Kenny’ McCormick. Four Years Old.

My lungs started burning. I coughed and coughed but nothing came up. Behind me, on the shadow screen, little four year old Kenny was undergoing the same ordeal. I forced myself to watch the scene playing before me, watch as my mother actually went to hold and comfort me, while here in R’lyeh I was alone.

I watched as the shadow screen shifted to a date not long after that hospital visit… watched little four-year-old me cough and wheeze until breath was caught short. And then little Kenny was dead. And thus began the cycle.

I couldn’t remember, I realized, a lot of my early childhood. I remembered bits and pieces from preschool, and I remembered taking care of my little sister after she’d been born, but that one death had been gone completely. Most likely because it had been more of the Shadow than me. The black pith on my lungs back then… that was the Shadow. That was Cthulhu first grabbing hold of me and claiming me cursed.

And then, in a flash, the next date, the next tombstone came, flashing in my mind and on the shadow screen. Kenny McCormick. Eight Years Old.

From there on, it was a whirlwind.

I watched every one of my deaths occur all over again… watched, and felt.


There, at the Shadow’s tomb, I re-visited every single one. Every. Single. One. Within a span of minutes. Nine years old. Then ten. Eleven. Twelve. More and more and more deaths, each
one more painful and memorable than the last. My skin crawled.

“Stop, stop, stop!” I shouted out, at many different levels of pain, stronger the worse they came.

Finally, it did. Having seen and felt again my most recent death, I collapsed beside the bier and could not muster the strength to pick myself up. My body was trembling with the effects of having just died again, in the same several hundred ways I had died before. Tears shot to my eyes and stung. I felt like there were marks crawling over my skin and through my insides, clearly indicating exactly where I’d been cut or shot or gutted before. I’d always been reset after each one, and only when I’d started experimenting with Henrietta on reviving myself and cutting out the step that involved waking up at home had I ever felt lasting pain.

But here was all of it. Years and years worth that I could not escape from.

I knew what the other Immortals were after. They wanted me to give up right there. Wanted me to submit and start playing the game their way. With my solid body refusing to move when I commanded it to, it was seeming like joining the ranks of R’lyeh was my only option.

Taking in a deep breath, I snapped my eyes shut and forced the Shadow’s vision on myself. I checked in with my teammates. Mosquito could lead that half of the team for now; the Coon had a good handle on Cthulhu still; Toolshed and the Human Kite could take charge of the rest. They were all still doing well, they were fighting their hardest, and staying alive. So I shifted the Shadow’s eye to once again check to make sure that my girlfriend and my little sister were still holding up in the dark times that had befallen our town. They were together; they were safe. Karen picked her head up and glanced in the direction of my point of view, but, unsatisfied when all she saw was a shadow, looked away again.

“Ugh,” I groaned, my voice my own, but trembling. “Fine,” I pretended to give in.

I’ll play your game, R’lyeh, I thought. Just long enough. But guess what? Maybe the Coon’s a good straight-faced gambler, but I’ve got a pretty bad bluff. You gonna catch on that I’m cheating you?

I’d play. Bring it. If I couldn’t move my body, I’d let R’lyeh think I wanted to get rid of it for a while. It was the only way up right now: let myself rise up as the Shadow. Work a little with Cthulhu.

But for fuck’s sake keep my head on straight.

“That is not dead,” I recited, making sure to keep up Mysterion’s tone all the while, “which can eternal lie… And with strange aeons… even death may die…”

The pieces of the Shadow that had been dispersed in different locations came shooting back into me, gathering first below me, and then seeping into my very being. I closed my eyes and felt that weightlessness, but did not get lost in it. Cthulhu had done something very stupid by thinking that remembering the pain of all my deaths would want me to rid myself of a cumbersome human existence once and for all.

No, I liked the pain. I’d take it. Because it meant that I’d felt it at all. I was alive. It was sordid, but true. I’d die a thousand more times, too, if it meant that me feeling that temporary hurt could save someone else’s life.

“Hang in there, guys,” I murmured to my team, wondering if they could hear me through the wire.
"I’m coming."

And then I felt myself stand, moving with no taxing physical stress. There was that feeling of being like silk again. I stood and shuddered as I took my place on the bier. The shadows gathered up around me, gripping onto the ends of my signature dark purple cloak, creeping into my eyes, and, finally, giving to me a gift from R’lyeh. A brand new feature.

With only a mild ache before the mortal pain melted away, new appendages burst back out of me from my shoulderblades. I had full, sentient control over them, but upon their birth, they weighted me down. I knealt under their size and span, and could see the world. Of course—I almost laughed. Cthulhu would want his Shadow to have a set of wings that matched his own.

However, this, at last, was where I could clearly draw a line.

I was Cthulhu’s Shadow. He could look down on the world all he wanted.

I’d just keep looking up at it.

However, for the first time in R’lyeh, I felt like I couldn’t make a move. The candelabras flickered to create a different screen, this time allowing me a clear view of Cthulhu himself.

It had started. Nyarlathotep had approached the Priest to battle. Cthulhu was distracted. For now, I would remain a simple shadow. I would come when I was called.

Cthulhu’s Shadow was bound to the bier, awaiting orders.

Butters

I was in a sorry state.

I’d let down my guard; let myself, for a brief passage of time, be swayed by another’s words. This was no time to lose sight of my goal, not when I was so close. So then why, now, did what once seemed to be so clear become so hazy? My eyes were clouded, but I could not tell by what.

Marpesia’s words didn’t leave me, even as I re-embraced the swirling darkness that filled and eased my mind after reading Nyarlathotep back to health. I tried hard to ignore them, but they clung to the walls of my mind like cobwebs that I just could not brush away. Toolshed’s words bothered me as well.

Bothered? No. I couldn’t be bothered. I had something I needed to do. Remove the thing that still somehow held sway over who I once had been. I’d been steadily spiraling down Chaos’s path this entire time; I had to get rid of anything that could bring the others back. Eric Cartman had to go. The Coon had to go.

With simple, pounding beats of its massive dark wings, Nyarlathotep, my gateway to Chaos, carried me across a rocky valley, back toward the tombs Disarray and I had visited once before. There, below me, I saw it all. Cthulhu’s open tomb… and a swirling shadow blocking my view of Kenny McCormick’s bier. Cthulhu himself was awake and active, standing on all fours over a group of four heroes, one of whom I had not seen in years, another I never thought I’d see fighting along
with the League in such a way.

But what mattered was that the Coon was there. And approaching them, from several yards away, were a mass of cloaked Cultists, coming from the direction of the Gate. Good. They could keep the others distracted. I was only after the Coon, for now; what happened to the others was none of my current concern.

Confident that this battle would see me to some kind of closure, I folded my lightning-scarred arms and forced myself to grin. I had to enjoy this. I’d been waiting to win one over this person for a long, long time.

When Nyarlathotep landed, he took on the form again of a faceless sphinx, and lowered its wings so that his back was my stage. I stood high over the valley below the tomb, and glared down at that fragment of the League.

“What’s that thing?” the returned member shouted.

“Nyarlathotep,” Mosquito introduced the Messenger. Cthulhu lifted its yellowy cephalopodic head and burbled out a dull roar in our direction. The bat’s three-lobed eye appeared in the place where one should have been on the sphinx’s blank features, and burned in Cthulhu’s direction. “What is he doing here? Chaos!” the League’s secondary leader shouted up at me. “What’s your plan this time?”

“Nothing that you should bother yourself with,” I scowled down at him. “I’m only here for one thing. Don’t get in my way.”

“Oh, I’ll get in your way all I fucking want!” Mosquito shouted.

“Dude, what are you do—“ Craig tried to stop him.

But Mosquito, angered, moved on his own—he leapt onto Nyarlathotep’s lowered wing, the bolted up onto his back to fight me. I stood back and let him come. He was in too much of a rage to make any of his strikes very accurate. He had every reason to hate me, but lacked an intensity of purpose, like the one Marpesia had shown… like the one I was sure the Coon would fight with. Mosquito didn’t interest me. I didn’t want to fight him.

He threw a punch, which I blocked and countered, but he ducked out of the way and drew the stunner from his left hip. “Don’t waste your time,” I scolded him. “You realize it’s hopeless, don’t you? I could squash you like a bug if I so chose.”

Mosquito rolled his eyes. “Wow, Chaos. Took ya seven years to come up with that one?” he chided, pulling the trigger. The stunner sent a jolt into my neck, but it was nothing I hadn’t felt from the lightning effects before. I dismissively shot a bolt of lightning at him, which he managed to dodge. He rolled out of the way, then, kneeling, shot another two sparks into my right leg. Where I felt nothing.

“It isn’t you I need to fight right now,” I scowled. “I want the Coon.”

“Fucking fight me!” Mosquito hollered, switching out his stunner for one of his loaded .45s. He cocked the gun and stood, aiming at the space between my eyes. “Give her back,” he demanded, “or you die.”

“Join her,” I said. “It’s easier.”

“FUCK YOU!”
Mosquito fired, just as Nyarlathotep bucked. The bullet sailed over my head, and the hero lost his footing. He skidded down the sphinx’s wing again, and tumbled to the ground, where Mint-Berry Crunch and Craig caught him before an impact could deal a harsh blow to his back.

“COON!” I hollered over to the only hero there who interested me. “I’m calling you out! It’s you I need to fight right now!” The clouds rumbled overhead, and I shot out a tower of lightning to show just how Goddamn serious I was that I needed this battle. “THIS IS IT, YOU FUCK! FIGHT ME!”

“Would you shut the fuck up, Chaos?!” I stared down. There he was. The heavyset hero glared up at me. Yes. Lower than me. Right where he belonged. His eyes narrowed behind his mask; cape billowed out behind him. Intent to fight me and give his all, he pointed one taloned index finger up at me and hollered, “I’ve got your battle right here, asshole!”

“What are we supposed to do?” Craig wondered, glancing around at the others.

“What else? We back him up,” Mosquito snarled. Oh, I didn’t think so. This was just between me and him.

“Maybe I can lend a—” Mint-Berry Crunch began.

“NOPE,” snapped the Coon, wanting one-on-one as much as I did.

“Aww.”

The cloaked Cultists I had seen approaching made their entrance at that point, and the three other heroes turned their heads. “Aha!” said Mint-Berry Crunch. “This’ll keep us busy. Stand back, fellow heroes! I’ll handle thi—” He was cut off by Craig firing a bullet right into the chest of the man leading the ranks. “Aw, shoot.”

“I already did,” said Craig, blowing on the barrel of his gun.

Curiously enough, Mosquito laughed a bit. “Nice,” he commented, pounding his fist to Craig’s.

Ugh. I couldn’t take the camaraderie. I turned away from the others, setting my sights on only the Coon again. “You ready to meet your End, Coon?” I hollered down while the three others took up a formation against the Cultists.

“Let’s make this interesting, shall we?” my opponent grinned. He whistled for Cthulhu, and the Dark God allowed the hero to climb up onto his shoulder. Nyarlathotep turned his head to survey Cthulhu again, and the Old Ones’ Priest once again stared at the Messenger with a dismissive sting of a growl. Likewise, the Coon and I stared each other down. Each with his own bit of Immortal leverage, neither of us had any intent to take this battle lightly. “Don’t you pussy out on me this time,” the Coon warned.

“Oh, don’t worry,” I assured him. “I’m here to end this.”

“Then let’s go, motherfucker.”

And with that, Cthulhu took to the sky. Nyarlathotep spread his wings and, keeping the bat’s eye but sphinx’s form, took off after the Dark God. Loyalties between Immortals was an interesting subject. They were all after madness, but it seemed that each one had its own idea of how that madness was supposed to occur. Cthulhu clearly had a plan in mind for what it wanted to do with its Shadow, and it differed with the way Nyarlathotep had been running things.
If the black mass over the bier was any indication, the Shadow wouldn’t be bothering us in this fight. This was just between me and the Coon; Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu.

“HAHA, CHAOS!” I heard the Coon holler back at me through the air. “YOUR STUPID GOD CAN’T CATCH MINE!”

“Oh, shut up,” I grumbled. Even Nyarlathotep took offense, and raised his speed until we were directly behind Cthulhu. Raising an enormous paw, Nyarlathotep swatted Cthulhu down.

The great Cthulhu took the hit and went down, but landed on all fours. As he shook himself off, Nyarlathotep came to a landing and shifted form into the full, enormous bat. He sent a shrill cry skyward, and a mist burst forth from his mouth, but Cthulhu droned out a roar of his own and lifted himself onto his back legs, swiping back with his long left arm and slicing into Nyarlathotep’s body with four sharp, hard claws. The tri-lobed, burning eye glared hell into Cthulhu, and the bat lunged to bite, but Cthulhu stepped back and a sizzling bolt shot from out his hands and into Nyarlathotep’s wings.

The bat cried out; thinking quickly, I took out my flute and trilled the tune that could always summon him to action. Regaining his strength, Nyarlathotep went for another strike, shifting back into sphinx form and bringing his two front legs down on Cthulhu.

“That the best you got?!” the Coon taunted.

“TRY THIS!” I hollered. I slid the flute away and called down a bolt of lightning, which I sent the Coon’s way.

“Aw, bitch!” he shouted, ducking down to avoid the blast. The lightning instead hit the side of Cthulhu’s head, and the Dark God reeled.

Cthulhu shook his tentacled head to ease the discomfort, and swatted a hand across Nyarlathotep’s neck.

The sphinx bucked and tossed me. I managed to right my direction midair, and landed on my feet on the sphinx’s back right leg, which I then slid down until I hit the ground, sparks of lightning shooting down around me as I made my four-point landing. Just as I was standing to get back into the fight, the Coon ran up behind me and dealt a hard punch to my left shoulder.

I yelped and spun, wondering how the hell he had made it to the ground so fast. I pushed his arm back and called down a bolt of lightning with my right hand, which succeeded in singing a bit of his neck. “Aye! Fuck!” he shouted, reeling back and punching me in the face.

I stumbled back, feeling a couple of scratches from his talons appear just above the left corner of my mouth. As an involuntary reaction, I covered my face with my hands to avoid any further damage, but the Coon yanked my forearms down and headbutted me. Which was stupid, since he just hit his forehead on the hardened metal of my helmet—he barked out a cry of pain from that one, and spewed out an arch of expletives, cursing his horrible idea.

Casting a glance above me, I noticed that Nyarlathotep and Cthulhu were still in the thick of their own battle. From Cthulhu’s hands burst forth a pressure that momentarily froze Nyarlathotep, and the Dark God roared, tentacles flaring and sent more destructive bolts into Nyarlathotep’s wings, which began to leak a toxic blood as they were rendered useless.

With my attention distracted, the Coon sprang at me again, swiping alternately up and down, side to side with his destructive taloned finger armor. I dodged some hits and took others; when I
was fed up with being pushed back, I wound up and punched him in the gut, then stood back and kicked him there as well, sending him sprawling onto his back.

I made a run toward Nyarlathotep, but the Coon sprang back up and rushed after me, grabbing and tackling me. “GET OFF!” I shouted, tossing him off of me.

Before I could make another sprint at the Crawling Chaos, though, Cthulhu roared down another pressure wave, which sounded to me like the screams of untold millions. Both the Coon and I stumbled back, unable to withstand the Dark God’s voice, possibly even presence. Cthulhu took a few more swipes at Nyarlathotep, and the Coon tugged me back, provoking me back into battle as well.

For the first time in this fight, I began to feel winded. I fought back and countered, but my head was starting to spin, and my lungs weren’t quite getting enough air. I gasped in several breaths and jabbed back at the Coon when he tried to cut my face again, but he easily threw me aside.

Just as I was finding it hard to keep my feet in this battle, so, too, was Nyarlathotep struggling. His form was rebelling and shifting, amorphous and then a shape, amorphous and then a shape—tentacles, tendrils, talons and teeth, nothing he tried to attack with could deal any kind of damage to Cthulhu.

On his very last legs, Nyarlathotep dissolved his body into a mist, which then slunk away, with Cthulhu on its trail.

“Get back here, you dumb Dark God!” the Coon hollered.

“No,” I growled. “No. You and I are finishing this.” I stood up and caught my breath, ignoring any pain I felt. I thought for a second about the Necronomicon I had fixed to my belt. I could help Nyarlathotep win, still. I could read him back to perfect health…

But, damn it all, Toolshed, the Human Kite and Marpesia had all figured it out: once more reading from that, and I would probably die. I had to save that reading for a true act of desperation. Besides… didn’t matter who brought it. Nyarlathotep or Cthulhu, it didn’t matter. The world would still end. I was hoping to have both of them bring their talents to the End, but Cthulhu would do a fine job all on his own. Plus, there was still the issue of raising the other Old Ones.

No. It wouldn’t matter if Nyarlathotep died. It was one Immortal out of the way, and I was sure I then would have to face the wrath of the Shadow, but I was going to get a seat in this new world. Disarray had seemed so sure of that. I would see the End of everything. So I let the Immortals go, let them do what they cared to do. I just had to get rid of this little stain on the canvas of my perfect new world.

“Fine by me,” the Coon spat.

He lunged. I caught and threw him. He turned and tugged back on my cape, choking me, then brought an elbow down on my sternum. I felt something crack out of alignment, but a quick shift of my shoulders popped my joints back into place just before I hit the ground. The Coon hauled me up and swatted at me with his talons; I knee'd him in the hip and stumbled back.

Even though I was giving it all I had, that stupid Coon just would not go down. Fine. Fine. I could still beat him. I held both hands up to the sky and gathered an enormous bolt of lightning. “How the fuck can you do that?!” the Coon yelped.

“Impressed yet?” I felt myself growling at him. Having gathered a significant amount of
lightning, I shot it out at him, holding my arms out for the best accuracy.

He took one hit in the stomach; his uniform ripped there somewhat, only to reveal—fuck, since when had he started wearing armor? The lightning deflected somewhat off of that, but still sparked up and shocked his upper body. The Coon let out a pained, aggravated cry and stumbled. I sent another blast directly at him, and as soon as I let the bolt loose from my fingertips, the Coon lifted his head, and stared right at me with an actually… horribly… well-intentioned look in his narrowed brown eyes. Then, he closed those eyes and took the full blast.

My entire mind screamed out, but I didn’t know why.

Marpesia’s words shocked my brain: “Did we ever wrong you?”

Of course, he had! He always had! All my life, all that asshole had ever done was berate me, beat me down, make me his fucking punching bag. He had this coming. For once in my life, I had to fucking win. But Goddammit, it wasn’t going to be satisfying if he LET ME! That wasn’t the point, that wasn’t the fucking point. He wasn’t allowed to let me win.

“DON’T THROW THIS FUCKING FIGHT!” I roared at him.

He didn’t answer… he just stayed crumpled over himself, shoulders trembling somewhat from having taken the hit of a full lightning blast.

“You asshole, don’t start acting like that now!” I shouted. I strode up to him and grabbed a fistful of his hair, then yanked his head up. “You know what? I want to watch you writhe, but don’t you fucking throw this!” I hollered into his face. “I’m going to beat you! I’m going to—”

The Coon smirked, and I felt his hand move against my belt as he—oh, fuck my life, he was stealing the Necronomicon. He’d feigned being actually harmed in order to get close enough to steal one of the two tools that could give me some leverage over Nyarlathotep. “Ha-ha!” the Coon spat, swatting my hand away and leaping back. He held up the Necronomicon, victorious. “The day is mine, asshole, I got the book!”

How dare he? How fucking dare he? “ARE YOU MOCKING ME?!” I shouted. “Why won’t you die?! Why won’t you fucking die?!”

I lunged at him and punched him across the face, then dealt an upper-cut to his thick jaw. The Coon fell backwards and hit the ground hard, but didn’t let go of the tome. I kicked the hand that held it, but he still didn’t let go. Outraged, I sent a bolt of lightning down at him, but the Coon held up the Necronomicon to shield his face.

“How dare he? How fucking dare he? “ARE YOU MOCKING ME?!” I shouted. “Why won’t you die?! Why won’t you fucking die?!”

But the book blasted into shreds. I felt a pressure hit me hard in the chest as the ruined pages fluttered away in the wind, and in the distance, I could hear Nyarlathotep’s pained roar as well. Breathing became slightly easier, and somehow my eyesight became a little clearer, but I was still nowhere near ready to let the damn Coon win this fight.

The hero heaved himself up onto his feet, then came at me again, swatting me back. I was still too paralyzed from the loss of the Necronomicon to move quite yet, but I kept my footing. Sparked back into action by a rumble of thunder, I called down another bolt of lightning. Good, at least losing the book hadn’t taken that power away from me.

But the Coon dodged this time, and darted back up to me, clawing me in the neck, then shoving me down to the ground. He then knealed down over me, holding his claws threateningly
close to my left eye, the one that I’d already had replaced once. Desperately, I reached a hand up and grabbed his neck. I took a moment to catch my breath, but found it difficult to focus on exactly what kind of task to execute.

Clutching my hand around his throat, I did all I could to keep my head on the storm clouds in the sky. The metal in my gauntlets would do well enough, but his sharp claws could do just as much damage. My lightning, his brute strength. Staring up at him, glaring, just glaring into his stern brown eyes, we reached that bitter agreement:

One of us was going to die.

“Don’t make me do this,” the Coon growled, his eyes hardening in intensity, yet vaguely clouding the same.

“Don’t you fucking forfeit,” I warned him in return, letting a few sparks fly from my hands.

They singed his neck, and he coughed from the discomfort, but his claws dug in deeper. The left side of my face stung. Just like the others had done… he was going for the same thing, wasn’t he? I was bleeding. I’d allied myself with things beyond mortal comprehension, and yet there I still was as the fucking pawn.

Would I ever, ever win?

“You can’t do it,” the Coon challenged me.

“Still,” I said, digging my fingers in, “you know I could kill you.”

“Go for it, you little bitch. I don’t think you can.”

“Don’t call me that,” I growled through clenched teeth.

“Fuckin’ pussy.”

“Don’t say that to me!” I warned him.

“You can’t kill me, Butters! Cuz—“

Outraged, I roared out my frustration and threw him off. The bolt of lightning came a second too late to end his life. He flew several feet off to the side and hit the ground hard; his clothes ripped and dirtied, and his right arm and shoulder, where he landed, became scuffed and bloody. But he picked himself up. So I kicked him back down. “I’m not your fucking plaything anymore!” I shouted, hitting him hard in the thick stomach with the steel toe of my boot. “I’m not your Goddamn fucking punching bag! I can *end you!* I CAN FUCKING END YOU!”

“So do it, a’edy!” he challenged me, hitting me hard in the knee so that I had no choice but to step back as he scrambled up to his feet. “Don’t pussy out, go ahead, asshole! I’m right here!”

“And you always have been!” I hollered. “You’ve always been in the fucking way! You’ve always been—“

You’ve always been there.

“NO!” I screamed, doubling over myself, about to claw my own eyes out in agony for how fucking useless I’d once again let myself become. For how weak and stupid I could still be. Where the hell was my drive? Why was he still getting to me?
And then, suddenly, I heard Toolshed’s voice in my head: “I’m sure, at one point, there must have been something a lot more important to you than this End of the world crap. If you focus on what that is, you can stop it.”

Only to be echoed by Marpesia’s: “Aren’t you sick of playing this game? Aren’t you tired of hurting yourself so much?”

“Shut up! SHUT UP!”

“I always believed in you.”

Boiling over, I reared back, held my hands out to either side, and shot lightning out in both directions, just having to channel all my anger out somehow. Even now, things were working out for me the same way they always had. Failure, failure, failure. And all of it, once again, my fault.

The Coon dodged the lightning and came at me again, stealing one more item from my belt. “NO!” I roared.

“Fuck you, Butters, I’ve got the flute!”

“No, no, no!” I screamed at him. “No, don’t call me that! You can’t have that! You don’t fucking get to decide! You don’t—you can’t take—you—“

“Face it, asshole, YOU LOSE!” the Coon mocked me.

I glared at him, at the flute in his hand, and became lost in three kinds of control. Id, ego, superego. That’s how it had always been, right? “GIVE THAT BACK!” I hollered at him.

“Why should I?” the Coon scoffed. “So you can just bring that demon monster thing back? I don’t think so.”

“Just give it to me!” I commanded.

“No way. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just break this fuckin’ thing right now.”

My breath caught, and I felt myself hesitate. Why couldn’t he take that flute? I’d already accepted that Nyarlathotep was soon going to die. That I’d be on my own to take my place with the other Immortals. So why would I even have a use for that stupid instrument after Nyarlathotep was gone?

“Because,” I said before I could stop myself; “because—it’s hers!”

Shit.

Fuck.

Really?

That was my defense?

I’d come after the Coon to get fucking rid of her, not try to rely on her again! What the hell was wrong with me?! But now I couldn’t even cry out. I couldn’t—I couldn’t feel anything. I couldn’t stop my head from spinning.

I couldn’t kill him. I couldn’t kill the Coon.

I would never, ever be able to beat Eric Cartman. That’s just the way things were.
“Well, then,” he said with a shrug. He slid the flute into his belt, and stared daggers at me as he added, “If she ever comes back, she can come kick me in the nuts for it, not you.”

God—fucking—damn—it.

He didn’t even honor me with one of his smug little grins. Oh, he was proud of what he’d done, but just to add salt to the wound, he wasn’t rubbing it in, the way he always used to. Instead, the Coon just kept staring at me, then lifted his left arm above his head and snapped his fingers twice to signal for his lift back to the tombs.

The sky grew black with Cthulhu’s reappearance, and when the Dark God landed, he held one massive hand down on the ground for the Coon to climb up onto. Every action the Coon took, no matter what it required of him, he just kept on glaring at me. “Let’s go,” he said, once standing directly in the center of the Great Cthulhu’s leathery palm. To me, then, he added, raising his voice to a shout as the deity raised him further and further skyward. “Just try to come get this back, you little bitch! I dare you!”

That should have been the final straw.

He was mocking me, mocking every aspect of me—who I’d been, who I’d become, and who I was at risk of breaking down into again. The further up in the air Cthulhu carried him, the lower I felt I was sinking. He had it all. Once again, the Goddamn Coon had it all! His world. His way.

I’d made him an offer, that one night, on Earth. An offer to join me, to stand with me at the top of everything I was trying to create in chaos. He had refused. And refused again. Because he didn’t need me, to get whatever he wanted. The Coon had only ever relied on himself… and he got what he wanted, no matter fucking what.

And right now, he’d just taken from me the very piece I’d been wanting to take away. She was gone. He had her. What was left of her.

But I hadn’t managed to eliminate him in the process. Eric Cartman was still standing. The Coon was stronger and better than ever. He still had Cthulhu; he still had his League.

I only had—

…the Tower. That was it. Next course of action, if anything was going to be clear and solid in my head ever again.

Furious with every outcome of every turn I’d taken in R’lyeh, I stormed back toward the large stone structure, my rage bringing down with it bolts of lightning that followed me like a shadow. I could not put up with any more defeat. One more loss, and—and what? I didn’t even want to know. I did not want to imagine what could happen to me if I didn’t get my way.

“Nyarlathotep!” I shouted out into the air as I marched on. Without the flute, could he hear my voice? Would he even still obey me? I didn’t even have the Necronomicon. What did I have? The tower, the lightning… that could keep me connected to the Immortals, right? I could still get my way somehow, right? “Nyarlathotep! Shit excuse for a fucking Messenger, where are you?!”

I heard a low rumbling in the distance, and recognized the deity’s voice.

I stopped walking and dropped my hands to my sides, fists tightly clenched, head tilted back, and I let a barrage of lightning rain down on me. The higher my rage climbed, the less control I seemed to have over its direction. Even my own granted powers, my own chaos—even that was attacking me. “It’s me!” I shouted out, doubting the Messenger was even listening. “Chaos! I AM
CHAOS!” I hollered, attempting to convince myself. “What do you want from me, R’lyeh?!” In another moment of weakness, it came to me: offer myself up.

One of us was going to die, right? Why not here? Why not now? Why not right in the midst of everything? One last push to make me a part of the world I’d always wanted.

Huh. Of course. A perfect world had no room for me in it.

No. No, that was the easy way out. I wanted to witness everything. I wanted to see the world I craved. I wanted to tear down whatever was unnecessary with my own hands. And so, rather than let the lightning destroy me, I drank it in. I let it feed me and fill me, let it shock away any thoughts of my own.

Until its course was interrupted by the hurling of a javelin through the sky.

I watched the arc of it—a long metal piece, thrown precisely a foot over my head, which attracted the lightning like a magnet and distracted its course. With the grace of a comet, it sailed over me and landed several feet away. But, I noticed, as my eyes narrowed on the spot where it had landed, that wasn’t a javelin. It was a quarter-staff.

I sensed the punch coming from behind me the second before my attacker could follow through with the strike, and I whirled around to grab Marpesia’s wrist and throw her to the side. She was quick on her feet and rushed back toward me, her dirtied face pink with rage of her own.

“Chaos!” she shouted as she threw her next strike.

I blocked both of her hands, but the smirk she painted onto her face told me that she’d been planning for that—she jabbed her knee up into my ribs, then grabbed my right shoulder and left arm the second I loosened my grip, and, with a tremendous breath, she flipped me over her back, then came down on me with a kick to my chest. I took it, then gathered a bolt of lightning in my left hand, but was too late to shoot her with it directly, as she saw the attack coming and darted out of the way.

As fast as I could, I scrambled back to my feet. Marpesia was back on me, but I grabbed her around the neck with both hands. She’d bandaged the wound on her temple with her own cloth mask and a sampling of fabric that had probably come from whatever clothing either she or TupperWear had on under their armor. That entire side of her face was streaked with blood, and I could see finger marks where she and her partner had tried to wash some of it away.

“What DO YOU WANT?” I hollered at her.

“I want my friend back,” she snapped.

“JUST SHUT UP!” I shouted. “All of you shut up and leave me the fuck alone!”

As I held her back, something fell like a feather from my belt. Marpesia, out of the corner of her keenly shining, focused eye, noticed, and threw me off with a grunt in order to bend and pick it up. The Tarot card. The Tower. The thing that had been my wakeup call to accept my transformation into nothing but Chaos. The one thing I had left. “What the hell is this?” Marpesia asked me, glaring at the illustration on the card.

“That’s me, Marpesia,” I growled at her. “Chaos. Crisis. Ruin. Explosive transformation. That card was given to me years ago. It’s everything I am.”

“Oh, really?” Marpesia snorted air through her nose like a bull about to charge, marched
right up to me, held the card in front of my face, and ripped it in half.

“Bitch!” I shouted, grabbing for her neck.

But Marpesia dodged—she jumped back, and held the two broken halves out to either side. “This isn’t you,” she argued, making sure I was getting a damn good look at the ruined Tower. “Crisis? Ruin? I never saw that in you. Maybe I saw someone who tried too hard. Maybe I saw someone who was never entirely sure of which path to take. But I saw someone who became a friend, who built things up rather than broke them down. Only you can have control over who you are and what you do. Don’t let a stupid card decide. Don’t let a book written by a madman tell you the answers.”

She sucked in a deep breath, then brought the halves together and tore the card into quarters, then eighths. Just like the Necronomicon, it became reduced to scrap paper. “Listen up,” she said strongly, “I learned something today, and that’s that fate is what you make of it! You call yourself Chaos, but prove it to me! Prove you’re destruction in human form! GO AHEAD, CHAOS! Go on and destroy the world!” Narrowing her eyes, and dropping the ruined remnants of the card to the ground, she challenged, “If you can’t, I’m sure you’ll figure out why.”

“Stop it, stop it, STOP IT!” I shouted. “Just you watch, just you fucking watch!”

Knowing she would not follow me, I spun on my heel and ran at top speed back toward the tower. Now that the card was gone, I had to go back to the physical representation of the tower. My final defense. Chaos’s final stronghold.

Along the way, I passed the ampitheatre. There were no signs of Nyarlathotep anywhere, so I assumed the Messenger was gone. What I did see, however, was another battle. General Disarray, also showing prowess with lightning—fucking hell, could anything just be mine?—was putting up a hell of a fight against Toolshed and the Human Kite. I still had no idea how Disarray had known so much about the Necronomicon, or why and when he had allied himself with the young Goth Cultist, or why he had constantly demanded that I read the passages.

He had never read a single one. I was the one who had translated that book. I was the one who accepted Nyarlathotep’s influence. I was the one in charge of the Crawling Chaos.

So where the fuck did he get off having that awful knowing smirk that I saw?

The answer to all that Chaos could be still lay in the tower. I had to ignore that battle. I had to go. I had to see what kind of explosive transformation that card really had foretold for me.

No more Necronomicon. No more flute. No more card.

Just me. Left on my own. With only words. Words from those I’d once had a mind to trust. Or believe in. Or maybe in some ways even love.

What was strength?

What was chaos?

Who was Chaos?

Explosive transformation… explosive transformation… something had to come to light for me at the tower. Something had to tell me how to get my own fucking way in the world, for once… just once…
The only opponent we'd underestimated was giving us a run for our damn money.

We had no personal history with General Disarray’s counterpart, Dougie. To us, that kid had always been and would always be Disarray. Whereas somewhere in Chaos was still Butters, in Disarray, there had only ever been just that. The longer we fought, the more both the Human Kite and I began to get the sense that this person, a child only in age and size, was the true villain. The one who had never had any reservations.

He didn’t have to be possessed to want us dead.

And shit, did he want us dead.

“KITE!” I shouted across the ampitheatre at my partner.

“On it!” he called back, reading my thought process. As Disarray shot a blast of lightning at him, Kite kicked up into the air just in time for me to hurl my sledgehammer up at him from my distance of about a hundred feet away. He drew the tool toward him, caught it perfectly, and whipped it at a crack in one of the green stone pillars that separated the ampitheatre from the desolate landscape where we’d fought Nyarlathotep.

The pillar crumbled to the ground, perfectly angled from Kite’s swing for most of the shattered stone to rain right down onto General Disarray. Kite came to land on the jagged top of the pillar that had stood beside it, and both of us stood in wait of the outcome.

Disarray had backed us toward the ampitheatre first thing in the fight, and we had already taken out several surrounding pillars trying to bring him down. He was stubborn and persistant, and much too accurate with that lightning; much of our time was spent dodging his blasts. It was awful that we had even known what to expect from Nyarlathotep more than Disarray.

Our diminuitive opponent dug himself out of the rubble heavily scarred. His face was cut up something awful; a chunk of the rock was still lodged in a pretty nasty-looking gash in his forehead, and, as if it were nothing, Disarray felt for it and tore the stone out, then wiped the sweat and blood away from his face and held a hand out toward each of us, sending two accurate blasts. The top of Kite’s pillar exploded, but he leapt for the ground and avoided the blast, while I sprinted around the line of lightning and shot two drill bits at Disarray’s right palm in an attempt to wound his channel for the static power he’d been somehow granted.

Disarray merely shook himself off and glowered at me. I stood my ground and held my drill gun out with a perfect shot at his head. While Disarray prepared a two-handed blast, Kite leapt into action behind him, unraveling a length of emulsified string and grabbing the little villain into a choke hold. Disarray brought his hands up to his neck to prevent himself from choking, but Kite didn’t ease up his hold one bit.

“What the hell’s the point to all this?” Kite snapped at the kid.

“I’m—going to—kill the—world,” Disarray hacked out.
“WHY?”

“World—deserved it.”

“What kind of sick, twisted little kid are you?!” Kite hollered, kneeing Disarray in the back. “Do you have anything to do with why Butters went insane?”

“I only act for the good of my plan,” said General Disarray.

Vague, but I think we both learned all we needed to from that statement.

“Don’t you care that you might get yourself killed?” I spat. “Don’t you have parents, kid? Isn’t there anyone who’s worried about you?”

“My parents are idiots. I made sure Chaos saw them to the asylum early on,” Disarray growled, getting slightly loose from Kite’s grip. “This is the only thing I’ve ever wanted, ever since I learned about the *Necronomicon*.”

“Then what the fuck?!”

“I’m bored of talking to you,” Disarray said darkly.

Even when Kite tightened his grip again, General Disarray shot a bolt of lightning at me. This time, I couldn’t dodge. It hit my armor—made of the same basic stuff as TupperWear’s shield—and therefore luckily didn’t shock my skin, but the blast was strong enough to knock me off my feet and flying back a good several yards; I could just barely hear my partner call out after me. I angled myself at the last second so that I’d land on my side, and held my hands out to protect me from taking a worse hit on the ground. I managed to get myself standing again, but found myself flung far from the center of the amphitheatre.

I didn’t know how long I could keep this up: fight after fight after fight. Primarily because I had no idea how long it was going to go on. While I had the chance, I grabbed a drink of water, then gathered myself and broke into a sprint on my way back to the central fight. Something told me I couldn’t pace myself. And the closer I got, back into the fight, the worse I started to develop an awful feeling in my gut that something just wasn’t right. Very little was right in R’lyeh, but it was something about this particular fight. Something that needed me to get there *immediately*.

Thank God I’d sprinted.

Everything happened so fast. Disarray had broken out of Kite’s choke hold and had erupted into an awful fit of laughter. That kid really was messed up. I couldn’t imagine, but he was bound and determined to get his way. Now, I didn’t want to have a kid’s blood on my hands, so I hoped there was a way we could restrain him without resorting to killing him, but if this was really what he was making of himself, there was no telling what could happen.

I ducked behind a column to ready my drill gun. I was running out of bits already; that wasn’t good…but at least this wasn’t the only thing in my arsenal. Still, it was all I had for a distance shooter. Moving fast, I rounded that column to shoot, but Disarray attacked first.

A bolt of lightning surged skyward from his fingertips, and then Disarray focused all of his power on his target, standing barely twenty feet away from him. The Human Kite had my spare drill gun aimed right at Disarray, and that was the moment before I felt the world stop. Kite fired in rapid succession, just as Disarray shot his next bolt of lightning directly forward. While Disarray held up his right arm to use his gauntlet as a shield against the sharp drill bits, Kite had no defense against the lightning. It concentrated into the drill gun, then sparked out around his hands and wrists, and the
bulk of the blast still hit him right between the collarbones, sending him flying backward into a column, where I swear I could hear the crack of his neck against the hard, unearthly rock the ancient structure had been built out of.

“KYLE!” I cried out, rushing out toward him.

Disarray shook himself off and prepared for another attack, but before he could, I ran forward and wrapped my arms around Kyle, who’d gone completely limp from the blast, falling down to the ground with him just before Disarray’s next lightning bolt could hit us both. While the young villain was busy fuming over not getting a double kill, I loosened my grip somewhat, and, frantically, slid off Kyle’s cap and goggles; I removed my own goggles, as well as my gloves, and gingerly, shakily, touched my right hand to the back of his neck. There was a bad scrape there, a long, jagged patch of roughened skin, and an open cut, which slowly leaked blood, hot and red.

“Kyle…” I tried, my voice hardly above a whisper.

He wasn’t moving, and certainly wasn’t breathing. “Oh, shit…” I choked out, holding my left hand over his mouth to check for breath, then against his neck to check for a heartbeat. Nothing. “Oh, shit…! Shit, shit! Kyle, come on!”

Thinking fast, I un-tucked my shirt and pulled it up to bite a rip into the bottom hem, then tore off a good length of fabric that shortened the long shirt so that it fell at the same spot as the toolbelt round my waist. I grabbed one of my water canteens and wet one end of the improvised bandage, then held the cold cloth to the wound on Kyle’s neck. The blood dabbed away easily, and I ripped the ruined part off so that I could wrap the rest of it gently around his neck, tight enough to seal up the cut as much as it could, but without having the danger of choking him.

I was still afraid that he wasn’t breathing, though. He hadn’t shown one sign of consciousness yet. Shit—shit—shit! “Come on,” I begged, checking for a pulse again. I lay my head down on his chest to listen for… anything. He was still warm, just as always, but he wasn’t breathing, his heart wasn’t beating. “No, no, don’t… don’t do this,” I pleaded, shaking my head against him. “Don’t do this to me, Kyle, we’re not repeating the alley! Not with you!”

I was freezing.

And suddenly, there was the chill again. I was so fucking cold. Kyle’s skin was still warm, but I was freezing.

Irrationality took over, and I bent over him, cradling his head in my hands and touching my forehead to his, just to get closer to that warmth. That was a low blow, R’lyeh, or Death, or whoever my opponent currently was—coaxing me closer to death by offering me such comfort.

“Well, well, look at that,” Disarray remarked. I could hear the crunch of his heavy boots on the scattered rubble as he walked toward us. “From what I heard, Toolshed, you went out so valiantly for him. ‘From what I heard, Toolshed, you went out so valiantly for him. I guess he wanted to return the favor.’”

I wanted to retaliate. I really did. I wanted to shout obscenities at the kid and beat him into next week. But I couldn’t move.

I heard a surge of electricity and closed my eyes.

“You’re my best friend,” little eight-year-old me said to the boy in the hospital bed. “I don’t want you to die until I do.”

I surrendered thought. Squared my shoulders. Took in a deep breath.
“Get up and fight!” Disarray shouted at me. “Come on, Toolshed, you’re too great an opponent to get a mercy kill. Stand up, dammit! Stand up!”

Shit, what was I doing? I ignored him to get a grip on my mind again. Shaking my head, I acted on impulse. Disarray had been aiming to kill this whole time. I had no idea why he thought he’d be fulfilled by bringing the world to an end, but wasn’t this my job as a hero—to stop him? No, I didn’t want to be responsible for anyone’s death, but—

Desperate times…

The vial of blood was still clipped to Kyle’s belt. That’d do. I pulled my gloves back on and unclipped the little vial, then, shaking, removed the lid.

“I want to bring down every single one of you,” Disarray continued, “so I can prove once and for all that—“

“Prove what?” I demanded.

“That everything you stupid heroes do is ridiculous. Save the world? Please. The world doesn’t want to be saved.”

“But it deserves another chance!” I hollered, whipping around to face him. “You honestly expect me to believe you never had anything? There was never anything you liked? That’s basically saying you have no will to live, you little piece of shit! Don’t go killing off the whole world because in your opinion you got dealt a raw deal. Yeah, okay, South Park might be a stupid little hick town overrun by idiots, but they’re good people!”

“They’re damned, all the same!”

“Oh shut up!” I shouted. “That’s just arrogance talking, and if you want to be like that, fine! If you want to sit here in a dimension that apparently even puts Hell to shame, fine! You know what that makes you, Disarray? That makes you a fucking monster.”

“Good.”

“So burn like one!” I snapped, feeling tears sting the edges of my eyes.

Something that was so easy to forget in South Park, with all of the encounters we’d had with aliens, zombies, giant robots, you name it… was that sometimes the worst monsters really were people themselves. No, the world wasn’t wholly good, but it definitely wasn’t wholly terrible. Sure, maybe it had taken some serious follies for anyone in South Park—ourselves included—to learn any kind of life lesson, but it had been worth it. I’d turned out okay, all the same. Everyone in the League had, and plenty of people besides.

So, for the sake of those who valued life, I flung the toxic blood in Disarray’s direction, splashing it in a diagonal across his face.

The young villain screamed and turned away, covering his head with his arms to prevent me from attacking again. I wasn’t about to. I’d proven my point.

I tossed my gloves off again and turned back to Kyle. He still wasn’t breathing.

“YOU PIECE OF SHIT!” Disarray screamed at me, at the top of his lungs. “YOU MISERABLE EXCUSE FOR ANYTHING!” I turned slightly. He was honestly still alive?
Alive and burning. In the diagonal that the blood had splashed him, Disarray’s skin had eaten away at itself, and a fresh red gash had appeared prominently across his face. Blood burned up before it could drip far down the rest of his now-charred skin; his nose had contorted onto the diagonal, and just above his right eye, a hand-sized segment of skin had started to go raw and melt off as well. His voice was strained, now, and that wasn’t just due to the screaming.

“YOUR WHOLE FUCKING LEAGUE IS GOING TO DIE!” he shrieked at me, holding his hands out for another blast.

I did, in that moment, the only thing my instincts wanted me to do. I turned again and threw myself as a shield over Kyle. With luck, the blast would hit my back and deflect off of the armor.

But no blast came.

All due to the footsteps that rushed in and stopped directly behind me.

“Hold it right there.”

I lifted my head at the sound of that voice. The impossible just kept on happening. Still somewhat using my body as a shield, I looked up over my shoulder. That green cape, those silver gauntlets… standing directly over us, cutting short General Disarray’s path, was none other than Professor Chaos. His stance was strong, unwavering. Firmer and more resolute than he had seemed in weeks.

“End of the line, General Disarray,” Chaos said darkly, his eyes fixed forward.

…What?

Hadn’t we just faced him down, too? Hadn’t he just taken Nyarlathotep away? Was this seriously the same—

Or—

“What the hell, Chaos?” Disarray growled in his now-strained, wheezing tone. “Don’t tell me you’re backing out on the plan now. We’re so close. Just one more reading from the Necronomicon, and we’ll have the perfect world we always wanted.”

“Is this really what you wanted?” Chaos asked, gesturing back towards us. I was so fucking confused I stayed mute. “I—“ Chaos fought himself for a second on the right words he wanted to say, and then… out into the air came a tone I had not heard in a very, very long time: “well, I’m not going to let you harm my friends with this madness any more.”

That was the thing that finally shocked me. I couldn’t see his face, but I could still read from his stance his rekindled resolve.

“Butters?!” I yelped, finding my voice.

He didn’t answer, but I assumed that so much must have been going on through his head in that moment, saying something to me in response was probably very low on his list of things to do. Before I had a chance to wonder what was going to be expected of me next, Chaos rushed at General Disarray, and the two were off, Chaos seemingly taking our side in the endeavor. But I could ponder his loyalties later.

Right now, only one thing mattered. I sat up a little and tried to right Kyle’s position. Judging from the scorch marks on the pillar, I knew Disarray’s attack had been a kill shot. I just
didn’t want to accept it. Streaks from the aftermath of the shock lined Kyle’s skin—face, neck, arms—and detailed the burst from the lightning bolt in char across his uniform, which was torn, ruined, stained with splatters of blood.

My eyes welled up, and I bowed my head, choking on the sudden onset of tears.

No.

No, I wasn’t giving up yet.

“Bring him back,” I muttered, clenching my hands into fists on his chest. I wasn’t sure who I was talking to. God? Cthulhu? Everyone in the world? “You fucking bastards, just—no!”

My eyes snapped open. I couldn’t just lose it. I had to try something. Quickly, irrationally, I slid off Kyle’s harness for the glider, then lay him out flat on his back. No bones seemed to have been broken. He was just… he just wasn’t moving. There was one other thing I could try. I’d never attempted resuscitation before, but I’d seen it done plenty of times.

I placed my palms down on his chest, one before the other, and got ready to push. I had to shift to get into a better position for this to hopefully work, so I knealt over Kyle’s body, my knees at his ribs. Taking in a deep breath, I prepared myself for whatever might happen. Of course, the seemingly permanent outcome was that I’d never speak to him again. Everything would end, right here. All of it gone.

“Oh, God,” I choked, trying to gather myself so that I wouldn’t waver in the resuscitation attempt. “Oh, God, please.”

My entire body was shaking. I was losing drive and losing hope and losing focus. But for fuck’s sake, I couldn’t lose Kyle.

There was the possibility he was just still in shock. There was still the possibility that I wasn’t too late. So I got his jaw loose so that his mouth was open, then pressed my hands down hard on his chest before leaning in to pinch his nose closed and force my own breath into him. “Get those lungs open, come on!” I commanded, pumping my hands down on his chest three times. I leaned down again to give him another breath, then sat back to lay my hands, flat and crossed, on his chest. Three more times, I pressed my hands down on his chest.

Heart fluttering with nerves and terror, I leaned in a third time, but just as I did, Kyle’s eyes shot open, and he gasped in an enormous breath. Stunned, I stumbled back, then, as he began to cough, I helped Kyle sit up, instinctively rubbing his back as he regained his breathing. Shaking pretty harshly, he grabbed hold of me, one hand on my left shoulder, one on my upper right arm, and tried to keep himself up.


“That…” Kyle began, then broke off coughing. He gathered his breath again, and said, hoarsely, “That fucking hurt.”

“Oh, God,” I breathed, hugging him close. Kyle returned the embrace with no hesitation. Overjoyed, as if I could just feel my life building back up again, I buried my face in the crook of Kyle’s shoulder, listening to his quick heartbeat as it caught up to speed, thriving in the shaking but steady rise and fall of his chest and shoulders as he breathed. “You’re alive,” I whispered, unable to stop crying. “You’re alive, Kyle, you’re gonna be all right…”
“Y-yeah,” he coughed out, clenching tightly to the back of my shirt. “Stan—Stan, you saved my life. Again.”

I drew back just a little, fixing my eyes on his. Green was very rapidly becoming my favorite color. “What?” I wondered, feeling myself smile a bit. “How?”

“I-I-I don’t know, but you did,” said Kyle. His voice was still raw and cracked, and his words were sometimes cut off by a cough as he wrestled to control his breath. “That drill you gave me. The metal must’ve… I got hit by lightning, and I held that out to shoot… wherever that thing is, it just barely saved my life.”

Thank God. I knew that thing would come in handy for him. We were always a step ahead of each other that way.

We’d always come to each other’s aid. Always. No matter how hard things would ever get, no matter how awful life could ever seem, eventually, inevitably, I’d be there for him, and he’d be there for me. That was just how things were. It’s how things were always going to be. We’d see the rest of this through together; we’d return home together, where we’d go on protecting what was mutually ours. He wasn’t giving up and neither was I.

I smiled for relief, and touched a hand to Kyle’s cheek, trying to smudge off some of the char from the blast as I did. He attempted a smile, then coughed again. Thinking quickly—remembering, rather—I unclipped one of my full canteens of water from my belt, unscrewed the top, and offered it up to him.

Kyle’s hands were shaking so hard, I ended up having to hold it for him, and carefully got him to drink down about half of the canteen right from the first sip. He nodded to let me know he was done, then sighed out and looked down at his hands. They were very visibly trembling. Kyle shook off his gloves and clenched his hands into fists a few times, which helped a little, but not enough. “Looks like I’ve still got aftershocks,” he said, sounding disappointed.

“Can you stand?” I wondered.

“I dunno, dude,” he admitted. “One thing at a time.” He held his hands out and said, “Let me try holding that again.”

“Sure.” I offered him the canteen again, and he grabbed hold with both hands, forcing himself to have a steady grip. It took a few seconds, but he managed to go about the task of tipping the canteen up for another drink of water. “You okay?” I asked when he lowered it again.

Kyle cleared his throat, slowly getting his voice back, then shook his head a little. “Dude, if I’m having trouble even gripping this…” He gave the canteen back to me to hold, and grabbed onto me for support with one hand, to hold the other out over the rubble on the ground. I watched as his eyes narrowed and brow furrowed; he grit his teeth and twitched his shaking fingers somewhat, then actually let out a disappointed whimper from the back of his throat. He tried again with no result. “Shit,” he whispered. “Come on, come on, come on…”

He tried again.

Nothing.

“FUCK!” he yelped, then began coughing. I grabbed him in, and Kyle took hold of me with his other hand as well. “Fuck, Stan, it’s gone!”

“What…?”
“My head’s all, like… clouded and just… I can’t read anything, Stan.” He started to get worked up, and sat back a little to look right at me, terror in his expression. “I can’t read anything, not even—just… nothing! I can’t! I can’t do it, I don’t have it, I lost it…”

“The, uh—the… quirk?” I guessed.

“Gone,” Kyle groaned, lowering his forehead to my shoulder. “It’s gone… God… fucking dammit, it’s gone…”

“M-maybe it’s just from the shock?” I offered.

“Maybe, but what if it can’t come back?” he lamented, tightening his grip on me. His hands were still shaking, and his breath sped up somewhat. “Or what if it doesn’t come back in time?”

“In time for what?” I said. “Kyle, you don’t need it. Remember how you did things before? You’re a fucking amazing fighter, dude, you don’t need the quirk to keep kicking ass.”

Kyle sighed, but I felt him laugh a little. “That’s real flattering, Stan,” he said. “I’ll have to remember that for later.”

“Dude, don’t go sarcastic on me now, I mean it,” I told him, glad he could at least still find a way to stay up despite his very significant setback. “Maybe it’ll come back. Maybe it won’t. But you’ve still go this. I know you do. I’m gonna get you standing, we’ll get you running again, and then, dammit, Kyle, we’re gonna go win this. Okay?”

“Okay,” he mumbled.

“Okay?” I asked again, a little stronger.

Kyle lifted his head again, drew in a deep breath, then said, gathering his resolve, “Okay. Let’s do this. Let’s just go do this.”

“Now we’re talking,” I grinned. “Here we go, step one.”

“Ugh, can we not say ‘step’ till I remember how to walk?” Kyle laughed.

I helped him stand, providing support for a while as he found his footing, and again as I got him walking again. All he had to do was shake the shock off, but it had really dealt him a blow, so it took some time—and a lot of water and reassurance—to bring him back up to speed. Sure enough, though, Kyle was determined not to lag behind in anything, and got himself not only walking but running again a lot faster than any doctor would probably have ever told me he could.

After several minutes of basic running and dodging, I helped him back into the harness and glider, and he did a few test takeoffs from low distances before scaling one of the columns to give himself some real air.

“See?” I grinned, once he told me he felt that he’d successfully gotten over the aftershocks. “You didn’t lose anything.”

“Just being psychic…” said Kyle.

“Are you upset about that?” I wondered as the two of us gathered our gear back up. For the longest time, Kyle had complained that he disliked it, since it made him unnatural. He’d come to embrace it, though, and let it be something he even enjoyed, and something we’d worked on together. If only for that, I did secretly hope he’d be able to reawaken that, even just a little.
“I don’t know, kind of…” Kyle admitted. “I dunno, I just got so used to being able to use it, it’s like… what happens now if I really can’t get it back?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” I assured him, sliding my goggles back on.

“Yeah.” He fixed his cap and goggles back into place, took in a deep breath, and said, “So we ready, dude?”

“If you are, it’s your call.”

“Yeah, I’m good. Let’s go find Mosquito and them…”

“I hope everyone else is okay,” I said, as the two of us started off. “Hey, Red Serge?” I asked into my wire.

“JESUS, guys, there you are!” Red Serge’s voice came through. Once again, my ears registered little to no static. “I was getting really fuckin’ worried! Both you guys’ video feeds went out… it’s on, now, I think you must’ve tripped a switch or something, so keep your wire on now, you got that? Otherwise I’ve got no visual.”

“Sure,” I said. “We’re fine. But you’ve got feed now? Which way are we going?”

We didn’t expand on Kyle’s current situation for his brother quite yet. We thanked him for his work, and he sent us in the direction of the tombs, which weren’t too far off. I ventured to ask about Mysterion, and Red Serge admitted that he’d lost that feed, as well. I shuddered, but pressed on.

“What’s up?” Kite asked me. “I think that lightning blast killed my wire.”

“Red Serge lost Mysterion’s feed,” I told him.

“Oh, fuck…”

“No kidding. Which is just one of the million reasons we’re getting right the hell over there.”

“Yeah, seriously…”

We paced ourselves, but walked quickly as much as we could. Kite complained a couple of times that he couldn’t just kick into the air to see how much farther we had to go, but he let it go just as quickly. As we walked, I did see him testing out his ability again… just in case. His fingers would twitch at his sides, and when nothing moved, he’d dismiss it in a manner I couldn’t quite read. Once or twice, I thought perhaps I saw him succeed, but I really couldn’t trust the slight overturning of a stone as anything unnatural here in R’lyeh. He continued to dismiss minor phenomena, which was enough to get me believing that he hadn’t yet figured it out again.

Soon, we found ourselves approaching another rocky valley, littered with corpses both long dead and fresh… every one of the fresh ones belonging to a member of the Cult of Cthulhu. Four winded figures stood overseeing what looked like the end of a long battle with the cloaks, and two others approached from the side—Marpesia and TupperWear had arrived at the same time we had, while Mosquito and Craig had been the clear primary winners of the last fight. Scratched up pretty badly but steadily recovering was the Coon, and, oddly enough, there too was our long-estranged former teammate, Mint-Berry Crunch.

“Little late to the party, guys,” Craig called over to us as we approached.
“Looks like you handled it, though,” I said, glancing around. “Sorry about that…”

“No, we had it pretty well covered, it’s fine,” said Mosquito. “Question now, though, is where the fuck is Chaos?”

“Little asshole just couldn’t stand losing,” the Coon shrugged. “He’s probably off being pissed somewhere.”

“Actually—” I began.

But I couldn’t complete my thought.

From beyond the tombs, a roar rang out, and a darkness filled the sky. Heavy, ground-shaking footsteps started toward us, and within seconds, there loomed over the valley none other than the Dark God, Cthulhu. In our smaller groups, the eight of us stepped closer together to form one solid unit. Individually, there was probably nothing any one of us could do against Cthulhu, but together, we might be able to stand a chance, at least until Mysterion could take him down for good.

“Hey,” I whispered to Mosquito, “where exactly is Mysterion?”

“Oh, uh… he kind of… disappeared…”

“Disappeared how?”

“Shadow thing,” said Craig, who also stood close by.

“What do you mean by that, shadow thing?” I wondered, starting to panic.

“Cthulhu!” the Coon called up to the Old One. “What now, huh? You gonna kick us all outta the way for the End or somethin’? Like to see you try!”

Cthulhu tilted its head skyward and let out what sounded like a commanding call. The tentacles flared out with the call, and it echoed around us, rising out and around, filling R’lyeh.

“That can’t be good,” I heard Henrietta say into the wire. “You guys want me to send in Iron Maiden for added backup?”

“Might not hurt,” Mosquito admitted.

“Got him on standby, give the word.”

None of us, though, had the drive to speak again quite yet. For at that moment, a rumbling could be heard from above us, from somewhere in the tombs. A darkness shot up like wildfire, over the staircase that towered over us, and it drew closer and closer, until it slowly began to descend the stairs. Cthulhu looked on, seeming as pleased as something unreadable as that thing could seem, and all of us had little choice but to do so as well.

A tidal wave of darkness, of shadow, tumbled down the staircase, slowly beginning to take form. It twisted its way into the shape of that snakelike thing we had seen claim Kenny’s body, that afternoon at the base, and then coiled around itself as it licked skyward. Then, the shadows parted like a curtain at the base of the stairs, revealing at the center of it a human-shaped body, of the same height and stature of our undying friend… but there was so much about this form that just… wasn’t him…

“Oh, shit…” Kite said in a stunned, concerned whisper. “Is that Mysterion…?”
Barely. His usual form could be detected, but it had finally happened: he’d changed. Beneath Mysterion’s hood, one could usually see Kenny’s blue eyes, and the lower half of his face. Now, there was nothing, save a set of eyes that could barely pass as human, and were black as coal; they reflected no light and appeared to stare forward at nothing. His dark purple cape billowed out around him, breaking off into swirling darkness that hovered around him like a vapor. In fact, he seemed to simply have an aura of shadows: they snaked down his arms and hovered over his hands like extra appendages, with the consistency of black smoke. It seemed to be eating at him, swirling around him, ready to lash out at any second.

And behind him, protruding from his shoulderblades, extended a set of terrifying, ominous yet impressive wings. While the shadows directly around his body acted like smoke, those wings appeared to be physical, and looked like a parasite. They were thick and black, murky and oozing as if they’d just been pulled from a pit of tar. The span was incredible and fearsome, and, though made of a sentient shadow, they appeared to be made up of wandering tendrils not unlike the tentacles that hung from Cthulhu’s face. Rather than light and feathery like a bird’s, or of stretched muscle and skin like a bat’s, these wings were designed for something more powerful than any man was meant to ever witness.

That was him, I realized. That was the result of the final summon, this was what we had to break the curse off of. This was what the Cult had been wanting of Kenny all along. Kenny didn’t seem to be in control of the actions ‘he’ took anymore, I could already tell. What we were dealing with now, what we had seen descend upon us with such poise and calm…

…That was the final component in what the Cultists called the End Time.

That person, that being—that was the Shadow.
A mind at war is a terrifying thing.

And let me tell you, there is no feeling quite as terrifying as knowing you’ve been possessed. Without knowing how or why, I became awake to the awfully gnawing sensation of having another will imposed on my own. It fed off of mine so chillingly well, though, it was breaking me apart trying to figure out exactly which thoughts in my head were mine an which were manipulated.

Chaos was supposed to be indestructible. Chaos was supposed to be the be-all, end-all. I was supposed to rise above everything, beat out my weaknesses, and create a world of perfect nothingness. I had created Chaos when I was nine years old, to fill a void, and only now, only too late, did I begin to remember what that original void even was.

Over the years, the reasons for keeping Chaos around had changed. I always felt slightly unfulfilled. I always felt a little empty. I grew up feeling like I could make everything better if only the source of my unhappiness could go away.

What I had lost sight of lately was what I ended up finding in the meantime. Or, rather, what found me. The void felt by little nine-year-old me had been filled a long time ago. By Eric. By Wendy. By Stan and Kyle. By Bebe, who had accepted and encouraged two other sides of me, whose smile made me feel welcomed, once—off to the asylum she’d gone. Even by neurotic little Tweek, who had let me stay long, even busy afternoons in his parents’ shop when my parents had expressed a disliking for my practicing my flute at home—asylum treatment there, as well. And even by Kenny. Kenny McCormick, who’d befriended me, befriended even her, and who had, as Mysterion, tried to give Chaos a chance at redemption.

He’d given me more than enough chances. I had not yet come across Mysterion in R’lyeh. But, I realized, I had no qualms against him. My pulsing, pounding brain had wanted to eradicate only Marpesia and the Coon specifically.

“You said you owed me one.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are, Marpesia?” I’d started growling to myself on my mad dash toward the tower after my second confrontation with her. “Where do you get off, Coon? I’m Chaos. I am Chaos, I’m Chaos, I’m the END.”

So why the hell were they both acting like they’d still give me a chance?

“If she ever comes back...”

Would she?

Where the hell was my mind?

Epiphanies came to me quickly, as did the desire to douse them like flames. Burning my mind. Cutting through a dark shell I had not noticed was encompassing my brain and blurring my
vision. ‘My.’ Whose was ‘my?’

The Necronomicon was gone. The Coon had forced me to destroy it. It was gone. Gone, gone—no more incantations at my fingertips to raise the Messenger, no more means by which my own tongue could summon up the End. So, too, had the Coon taken away the flute. He’d not destroyed that tool, though—no, he was holding it hostage. Dangling a piece of my old life over my head the way he’d once taunt his cat with scraps of his fish dinners. Just out of reach.

Just out of reach.

That life was so close but so far. Too close, and too far.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no,” I complained. I paused in my sprint, coming to an abrupt halt as I attempted to shock away thoughts of the life I had tried to leave behind at my Gate portal. I had built that portal with my own two hands, priding myself in its symbolism, in its promise to take me away, far, far away from everything that had ever made me a worthless crumb of society. It was the world’s fault. It was the world’s fault. It was what I’d been meant to do. It was my fate.

It was—my—fault.

I can never help feeling like I’m responsible for everything.

Everything wrong.

Everything I did was wrong.

It didn’t matter who I tried to be. It didn’t matter. It just did not matter. Because I would never win. I had to accept that. Or—no—wait—why?

Why could I never win? Why could I never, ever win? Never against the Coon, never against the League, never against my parents, never against the world. I couldn’t win because…

A blast from off to my right distracted me. I stalked over in that direction, to satiate the curiosity that rose with the sudden strange activity, and found myself looking out over the amphitheatre I’d crossed through before. General Disarray stood on the stone bier at the center, fighting off both Toolshed and the Human Kite with lightning powers of his own. Which reminded me, yet again, that nothing could ever be wholly mine. I didn’t even have a unique power to claim.

He was giving the two a hard time, but it was still two against one. Yet I did not step in. I needed answers. Answers would be at the tower. So I pressed on.

When I finally reached that landmark and rushed inside, a great electrical storm rose up, striking around my tower at every possible angle. Chaos. Crisis. Ruin. The readings of the card Marpesia had destroyed.

Marpesia and the Coon—Wendy and Eric—were two constants from my old life. Two of the agents of change who constantly affected everything I’d ever done. Everything I’d ever become.

I never played.

I became.

And they had encouraged me. Alone in my tower, alone in that looming symbol of everything Chaos tried to be, my head took a beating. I couldn’t drown myself out. Everything came flooding toward me. Tearing me down. Thinking back to the very moment I had discovered
the potential of the Crawling Chaos, I recalled lying alone in my bed, not asleep but barely awake, 
humming to myself the tune that had come in a dream.

Nyarlathotep had sought me out. Tweek wasn’t the first to fall victim to the madness.

Leopold ‘Butters’ Stotch was.

And when I realized that, I began to scream.

I screamed, cried out, a long loud howl—it echoed and echoed forever and onward, 
bouncing off of the sickly green walls of the tower once meant to symbolize Chaos’s triumph. I 
certainly didn’t feel like I had won.

Why could I never win? Why…?

Because I had never been fully committed. The world wasn’t stopping me. I was stopping 
myself. I was making the problem be with me when it was without; making the problem be the 
world I thought I hated, when really it hadn’t been all that bad… after all, the world had been kind 
足够的 to let me survive for the past seventeen years. It couldn’t hate me all that much.

Where was the problem, then?

One other place I knew I could go for answers: I had to talk to General Disarray. The 
lightning storm outside the tower came to a definitive end, though the sky still rumbled with chaotic 
thunder. Arms bleeding without mercy from the streaks of lightning I’d already loosed from my 
fingertips, I stormed back toward the amphi theatre, where I was sure I would find my so-called partner 
and the two heroes fighting.

Indeed they were—their battle had been ongoing, heated, both forces desperate to win. As I 
watched General Disarray fire bolt after bolt of lightning, I glanced briefly down at my own hands, at 
the scorched pads of my gloves at the fingertips and palms. My capability to destroy was still there. I 
could cut in, give my partner a hand, and end that fight once and for all. Bring them both down, 
two of Mysterion’s finest, and be on our way toward the inevitable rise of the Old Ones.

The only problem was, my arms began to ache. My hands were exhausted, and so was my 
mind. The heroes were right; I’d be knocking at Death’s door soon enough if I continued using 
those powers, given to me by Nyarlathotep.

Nyarlathotep—where was he? Had Cthulhu indeed killed him?

No… no, he was there. I could feel it. His weakened state mirrored the shattering of my 
own confused mind; if the original Messenger did indeed fall, I had no idea how my own life would 
be affected. If I would fall with him, or simply… stop…

Stop…

I looked back at the battle again. Stop… I was pleading out with thoughts from the mind I 
knew I still had in my head somewhere—my thoughts, my words, my actions—whose was ‘my?’ 
Stop…

A kill shot was fired.

The Human Kite took the full brunt of the attack and went down; Toolshed immediately 
rushed to his aid. Stop… stop… This has to stop… What? What did? What—stop? End. End. It 
had to End. The world? No—no—stop—don’t continue—Explosive Transformation—into—?
Nothing made sense. Nothing at all made sense. R’lyeh was mad. I was mad. I was beyond crazy. Right? Oh, yes. Whose was ‘my?’ Beyond crazy. Linked. Stop…

“Please,” I heard General Disarray say. “The world doesn’t want to be saved.”

“But it deserves another chance!” was Toolshed’s retaliation. “You honestly expect me to believe you never had anything? There was never anything you liked?”

I began to move. I kept to the outside of the ampitheatre, curious as to how the fight would play out now. One of the heroes of the Shadow League was dead, wasn’t he? The Human Kite hadn’t moved. There was no breath. I neared the spot where the victor of that fight was sure to be decided, and felt a pang of—regret. Regret for what? I was getting what I wanted, right? The world was slowly dying, and soon the Old Ones would rise to speed the process. Kite’s fate would be everyone’s.

He’d been a strong fighter, and now, more than likely, he was dead. He’d been loyal to the League, loyal to those he cared about—all of that, gone. But he’d had a life before the End. I had had nothing. Just like a hero—he’d had family, a strong set of morals, everything I’d lacked. But… had he deserved to die?

Did any of them deserve to die?

Hadn’t Marpesia been crying?

I had no one—Stop, stop, this has to stop—no family, no… well… I had a few… I hadn’t been entirely…

“If you want to sit here in a dimension that apparently even puts Hell to shame,” Toolshed went on against Disarray, “fine! You know what that makes you, Disarray? That makes you a fucking monster.”

“Good.”

“So burn like one!”

I saw Toolshed splash Disarray across the face with a toxic liquid of sorts. And burn my partner did. I watched as his flesh ate away at itself and contorted his features. My arms looked no better. Hadn’t he said we would be granted a seat at the top of the new world? But there was no new world, was there?

There was no perfect world.

The only thing that accepted everyone was death. And therefore, that was what I had been convinced I wanted. All dead. All gone. This has to stop.

Barely reading my actions, I intervened. Disarray stood screaming and cursing, and prepared to strike down his next victim, but it had to stop. Death wasn’t the thing I had wanted. Death wasn’t the thing I thought I’d been promised. But that was the End. Wasn’t it? Madness into nothingness. Madness so loud, so terrible, those who fell under the weight of it begged for their end.

I didn’t want death. I didn’t want death. I didn’t want death.

“Hold it right there.” This has to stop. “End of the line, General Disarray.” The words came from my mouth, were spoken much more clearly than any other words I felt I had recently said.
Disarray was horror-stricken. If such a person could feel terror at all. “We’re so close,” was his argument. “Just one more reading from the Necronomicon, and we’ll have the perfect world we always wanted.”

“Iss this really what you wanted?” I asked my partner, gesturing back to the one who’d fallen. Marpesia’s words—Wendy’s words: “Tell me you didn’t want this.” Wendy… had destroyed the representation of the Tower… had torn apart my promise of Explosive Transformation… had once helped me become… “I—” “Did we ever wrong you?” No. Had either of those two, fighting so hard to hold back Disarray, fighting so hard to end the madness once and for all—had they ever wronged me, to the point that I wanted them dead? “—well,” and oh, my voice was faltering, “I’m not going to let you harm my friends with this madness anymore!”

And when Toolshed called me by my old name, when an old friend called me by my own name, I knew only one thing. I had to stop Disarray. I had to learn his true motives. I had to learn whatever it was he had known. If he had truly held power over me, if I ever had power over myself, if this was the End I’d always wanted.

So I led my ‘partner’ away, back toward the tower, where he could cause the heroes no further damage. And a bit of my heart beat with the anticipation of seeing if the two came out of it, or how dynamics within the League would change if indeed their duo had been reduced to one.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Disarray screeched at me, aiming to hit me with a bolt of lightning. I dodged out of the way, and it hit the outer wall of the tower. A few pebbles broke off and rattled to the hard, dusty green ground. “One more reading, Chaos!” he shouted as I squared myself against him. I made no move. If he was going to be talkative, I’d rather hear him out. “One more reading, and we’ve won!”

“Won what?” I demanded. “Tell me.”

“What I—what we wanted!” he shouted, furious. He threw another bolt at me, and this time I casually stepped aside. He was letting his fury drive him. That would lead us nowhere but dead too soon.

“And what, pray tell, is that?” I glowered at him.

Disarray’s ruined face smoked and sizzled from the effects of whatever it was Toolshed had attacked him with. In physical disarray, my partner glared daggers at me. His stance was that of a man not ready to accept defeat. That of a child just wanting to get his way. And had things been different, I realized, had I not gone after the Coon and stayed instead to fight Toolshed and Kite… that could have been me. A grotesque representation of everything we had been working toward.

He looked like he was inches from death.

The state of my arms said I wasn’t much better off, and Disarray seemed ready to wish it upon me—wish upon me the fate that appeared to be in store for him. Had he wanted me dead, all along…?

“What the hell?” he snapped at me. “You’re supposed to be with Nyarlathotep! You’re supposed to be under him, waking up the new world!”

Interesting. “Under him,” I repeated. “Under him how?” General Disarray merely laughed. I was sure I wasn’t giving off much of an image of wanting the selfsame things he did. It was the laugh of someone who cared nothing for anyone. The laugh of someone who never had. It was a laugh he’d been holding in, I could tell, for a very, very long time. Boiling over, I hollered, “You tell
His ruined face showed something like a grin, and he cried out triumphantly, “Don’t you get it? You’re the sacrifice. Nyarlathotep needed a human avatar to speak for him, to read the words of the *Necronomicon* and invite his terror to mankind. Somebody had to be the physical portal for the Messenger. Why else do you think I had you reading that book for me?”

He’d demanded readings from me. Yes. He had. *Stop.* Disarray had gone behind my back and spoken to a member of the Cult. Several attacks had been after mentions of his, based on our next steps. It had been he who’d found the *Necronomicon*, and something told me he’d sought out a German text simply because he knew that I would be able to translate it.

General Disarray had calculated every move.

I was a pawn again.

*I was a fucking pawn again.* I had been all along.

My hands clenched into fists. I did not want the League dead. I did not want anyone I once had trusted to die. Disarray, however… Disarray… “Am I to believe, this whole time, Disarray, you were using me?” I growled, choosing my words carefully.”

His smug grin was all I needed to see. But to just make it all sting worse, he said, “And you were just always too distracted to notice.”

I was so stupid.

Id. Ego. Superego. I’d ignored my own conscience. I’d been forced to. Once again, I—every single side of me—had been easily swayed. Manipulated.

It was foolish of me to confuse strength with weakness—Chaos was too easily swayed, too easily hypnotized by power. Weaker, in many ways, from anything else I’d ever been. Disarray had discovered my weakness and exploited it, confusing me into believing that it was the best of me.

So when it came down to it, where had my allegiance lied? Not with those who supported me, not with those who’d ever cared or trusted. No. With the one person who had the guile to wish me that much harm. He was disarray all right, and completely evil. Something I could never be. A true monster, drunk with a power that even Eric Cartman would pass up. Eric had used me before, but I honestly believed that even he would never have made me do something like this.

I didn’t want Eric dead. Nyarlathotep wanted Cthulhu gone, and that, by way of the possession, had translated into my head that I needed the Coon out of the way. Cthulhu and his Shadow were threats to the ages-old Messenger, who, through the incantations Disarray had made me read, had every means to rule the mad world on his own.

I’d thought that everything I had done, as Chaos, had been entirely of my own volition. That those schemes were mine and mine alone. That those motives were mine, that all of that destruction and darkness were all a part of my plan. They’d all stemmed from one thing: thoughts of my own insignificance, of my failures. The thought that I had failed everything and everyone, that I was beyond repentance, that no one would want to ever care about someone as low as me. Yes, I’d been down. Yes, I’d been fucked over. But in the end, in the back of my own insignificant mind, no. I didn’t want to see the world die. Sure, parts of it were horrible, but one segment deserved to be saved.

The world that belonged to the people who cared. Just as Marpesia had said, not everyone
had always been out to get me. From the moment I had opened that *Necronomicon*, I’d been blinded to the fact that anyone still existed out there who could do good for me. Blinded to everything.

Time to open my eyes.

The sky above rumbled, and my entire body ached, as if rebelling against itself. But I took one step forward. And another. And I raised a fist. Closer. Closer. *This has to stop.* Faster, faster, faster, and then I made contact. He was much shorter than I, but my strike did not miss. I cuffed General Disarray across the face, and he went down.

He screamed as dust and pebbles entered the gaping wound across his face, then spun onto his back and blasted up at me with a lightning spark from both of his hands. I held my gauntlets up in front of my face to block the spark, which only got Disarray angrier.

He leapt up on to his feet and came at me, throwing a few strikes, each and every one of which I was able to counter. He got in a few hits directly on the sore parts of my arms, which was enough to get me to back down a bit, but on his next lunge, I caught him by the collar and flung him into the side of the tower. One of the stones looked ready to be jostled loose.

“You fucking idiot,” Disarray snarled, turning slowly back to face me. “What are you trying to prove?! You fucking idiot!”

“Tell me I’m the sacrifice needed for Nyarlathotep to rise?” I roared back. “How the hell do you think I’m going to react?!”

“You’re supposed to accept it!”

Supposed to? Who the fuck was anyone to say what I was supposed to do? Jesus Christ, that’s all I’d ever gotten from my parents. Supposed to do? Fuck that. Fuck anyone saying that, fuck the part of the world that said that. That’s why I’d—that’s… why I’d created her… why I became…

While I was mentally distracted, Disarray came down upon me and struck me to the ground, jumping into the air and bringing both fists down onto my sternum. I choked on my breath and fell onto my back, where Disarray brought a heel down onto my left shoulder. I winced, but refused to show him that I was in pain from the strike.

Scowling down at me, he snarled, “You always said you were all about Chaos and destruction, but you could never get there on your own. That’s why I had to take charge.” He stomped his right foot down on my chest and leaned over, grabbing me up by the chain that attached my cape to my uniform. His ruined face was all too close to mine, to the point that I winced in hopes that his burning blood wouldn’t touch me. With another awful sneer, Disarray added, “Without me, you’d be nothing.”

I shook my head. “This has to stop,” I finally said aloud.

Disarray coughed out his disappointment and shoved me to the ground, then stepped away. I clambered to sit up, propping myself back on my elbows, as Disarray walked a wide circle, arms outstretched. “Your little League friends are getting under your skin,” he fumed. “I can’t have you going soft on me now. A willing sacrifice is the best there is.”

Oh shit—I did almost get to that point where I was just going to go, just let R’lyeh accept me and go. I’d let myself be taken over, but since the *Necronomicon* was destroyed, I’d been feeling much more clearheaded. My mind was mine again.
There was no such thing as a perfect world.

And as far as lives go, I realized... maybe mine wasn’t really all that bad.

“I’m not gonna be your sacrifice,” I said defiantly, standing, and putting every inch of height I had over him to my advantage. I squared my shoulders and raised my head. I stood, for once against him, proud on my own two feet.

Disarray glared at me in disgust. “Shut up and accept it,” he barked. “Someone has to suffer to usher in our new world.”

“Well, you know what, Disarray?” I said. “I don’t think I want that world anymore.”

Well.

That... actually felt very good to say.

“Excuse me?” he snipped.

Oh, yes. One more time. I had to believe it. For once, my head was clearing up. For once, something made sense. I did not want Disarray’s world. I did not want all of that death. That was all Marpesia was trying to tell me. No, the world hadn’t rejected me. All I had to do was figure out how I fit into it, not lash out because I’d failed at fitting in the first time around.

“I SAID I’M DONE WITH YOUR WORLD,” I hollered.

Disarray simply snorted, and glared up at me. “You can’t back out now. You’re Chaos.” Sounded like a challenge. “You wanna see me cause chaos?” I growled. “Watch.”

For what I told myself would be the very last time, I called forth an impressive display of lightning, and hurled it at General Disarray. His eyes widened the second before he took the blast, and then the bolt sent him spiraling back against the outer wall of the tower. Disarray let out an anguished yelp when his body smashed against the stone, and he crumpled to the ground, only to pick himself up a few seconds later, burning up with rage.

He shoved two blasts back at me, but missed.

And then the mist rolled in.

Disarray tilted his head skyward and began to laugh again. I held my ground as the mist slowly took form, and the enormous, burning-eyed bat came into view. It screeched in pain from its fight against Cthulhu, but stumbled forward. The Messenger, the Immortal Crawling Chaos, was losing its long, miserable life. I stared up at it, a piece of my mind faltering, wanting it to just take me away from everything, to make the madness make sense again. I didn’t like feeling trapped in my own mind, but I didn’t like feeling so confused, either. Shock it away—no—this needs to stop—

“This is it!” Disarray cried. “This is the time foretold within the Necronomicon!”

The bat screamed and acknowledged Disarray’s presence, and then that burning eye was on me. It was testing me. To see if I had failed. Had I? The Necronomicon was gone, wasn’t it?

“What are you waiting for, Chaos!!” Disarray shouted. “Do us all a favor for once and just read!”

“It’s gone, Disarray,” I said.
“What?”

“The Necronomicon is gone. It was destroyed.” Recalling the circumstances again, I added, “I destroyed it.”

“Ugh, you’re so fucking useless!” Disarray hollered over his shoulder at me. Then, closing his eyes, he held his arms out to either side, and gazed up at the great beast. “Your sacrifice is ready!” the young human shouted up to the Immortal deity. My heart pulsed. I could see it coming. “Take it! Take the sacrifice I have prepared for you, Nyarlathotep, and then I will be ready!”

Laughing once again, pleased with how he had let things play out in his favor, Disarray screamed to the sky, “I’m ready, Nyarlathotep! Make me one with your chaos!”

The dying bat leaned forward, one ruined wing resting against the tower. “What are you waiting for, you stupid Immortal?!” Disarray shouted. “Take your sacrifice and give me what I’ve been working toward!”

Nyarlathotep, Messenger, Crawling Chaos, bent further to take his sacrifice. He never looked at me again. I braced myself, wondering how the hell I’d fight myself out of Nyarlathotep claiming me for good—

But his gaping mouth closed around Disarray, and with a final scream, my deviant partner was dead.

I choked on breath and bile, and stumbled back. The bat reeled and leaned back, screaming out to all of R’lyeh, and any other dimension that would listen. Its mouth began to sizzle and burn, and as the meal it had made of General Disarray coursed through its body, Nyarlathotep went into a screaming revolt. The Messenger began to smolder from inside, and it cried out, its shape morphing into several indiscernible things, but each and every one of them sizzled and burned the longer Disarray stayed in Nyarlathotep’s system.

Whatever it was Toolshed had thrown on Disarray had been toxic. Toxic even to Immortals. Disarray’s face had been destroyed, and Toolshed’s attack had been eating away at him still, as my fight with my late partner had continued on.

And now that thing was killing Nyarlathotep.

Once again, I realized… that very easily could have been me.

With one final scream, Nyarlathotep’s amorphous body crashed against the tower; beast and structure crumbled to the ground.

And there lay my perfect world. I stood staring in disbelief as the Immortal fell, weakened to near death by the Dark Cthulhu, and done in at last by both poison and man’s own greed. Disarray had gotten what he had always wanted. Nothingness.

I was left standing in the rubble, wondering how the hell I was going to collect the pieces.

I’d shattered my life. Chaos stood alone. The stones of the destroyed tower lay strooned about in disarray; the large, bulging body of the dead Nyarlathotep smoked away in the ashes.

The Necronomicon, the flute, and both representations of the Tower had been taken from me. The storm clouds parted, signaling that the death of Nyarlathotep marked the end of my use of his power. My arms began to burn with the damage I myself had done to them.
What in God’s name had I become?

And what was going to happen to me now?

With little else to do, I took one last look at the destroyed tower, at my crumbled delusion of grandeur, at the death and destruction I had convinced myself I wanted for all the world, and turned my back. I was a wreck myself. My head felt blank, and begged to be filled with something familiar.

Anything.

My entire body cried out to shake off that pain and know where to go next.

Maybe I’d never heal.

Maybe I could never, ever repair all of the damage I had done. But there was no reason I couldn’t try.

All my life, I felt like bad things had followed me. And then I’d become one of those very things I used to have nightmares about.

But maybe… just maybe… there was still a chance to do good. To make up for all the wrong that I had done. All the chaos I had caused. I had dealt enough damage, caused enough pain… there was still a voice inside me wanting to correct that. To heal every wound, to right every misdeed. To clean up the rubble on the surface of everything I had tried to destroy.

--

Kyle

Keep your eyes on the shadows.

Well—it was awfully hard to look away.

Kenny had accepted his Immortal form, and we, the League, stood at the very edge of the End. For a few moments, every last one of us could do nothing but stare, and wonder if the Shadow had any of Kenny’s sentience still in him at all. The form he’d taken on resembled Mysterion enough, but how conscious were his human thoughts?

I’d tried not to give too much thought to the inevitability that we would at some point find ourselves face to face with the Shadow. It was an impressive display, to say the least. Even Cthulhu paused in his presence. The sky above began to shift, and Cthulhu let out a low, satisfied growl.

The beginning of the End.

What the hell could we do?

Cthulhu reached an enormous hand down on us, and just as Mint-Berry Crunch was leaping
in front of all of us to form a pink shield overhead, the Shadow ticked his head up and one oozing black tendril slithered up into the air and cut off Cthulhu’s path to us.

“Dude, is he still on our side?” I heard TupperWear ask under his breath.

“Hope so,” said Mosquito, uncomfortably placing one hand on the .45 resting on his right him.

“Dude, the fuck? Don’t shoot, he’s still Kenny,” I snapped.

Mosquito shook his head. “He told me to, in case he did start attacking us, in case he did side with them,” he told me. I shuddered. “I’m just taking precautions, Kite. Just in case.”

Even still, I doubted that a simple gun could do anything to the Shadow. He looked solid enough, but, like Nyarlathotep’s mist form, this Messenger wouldn’t be very easy to touch. His ‘body’ could be as solid or flat as he wanted. His wings could lift him airborne.

There was absolutely no way the Shadow could die.

None that I could see, anyway.

Mint-Berry Crunch stepped back and asked over his shoulder to the rest of us, “That’s really Mysterion?”

“Yeah,” Toolshed answered. “By the way, what’re you doing here?”

“I-I came to help,” said the usually absent alien hero. “I’m still going to, I just wanna get my facts straight…”

“There’s a lot to catch up on, but long story short, attack anything, just don’t hurt the Shadow,” said Toolshed, to fill him in in the most brief way possible. Mint-Berry Crunch nodded, though his entire posture said that he was confused.

“So… what’s he doing?” the Coon wondered.

The Shadow’s swirling dark aura rose further skyward, and the tendrils that spewed along the ground from the place where, somewhere in the blackness, I was sure his feet were, and slithered up to grab at Cthulhu. The Dark God roared its displeasure, and a whisper hissed forth from the place where the Shadow stood.

Cthulhu backed away, then got down on all fours and opened its enormous mouth, looking ready to dispose of us all. But the Shadow was ready, enveloping us all in a solid black void.

Everything went pitch dark. Around my ankles, I felt something slithering slowly about. Tendrils, like snakes, of the Shadow. My ears registered a faint rustling, and when I reached a hand out blindly, it touched an arm.

“Kite?” Toolshed—thank God.

“Yeah,” I said. “Are we the only ones—“

“I don’t think we moved,” I heard Mosquito say in his distinctly pitched tone.

“That—that was the Shadow,” I ventured, “right?”

“That was the Shadow,” a loud, dark whisper echoed me. Underneath the English words, I
could hear the uneasy tones of R’lyeh’s ancient language. But somewhere in the whisper was something familiar. “It is the Shadow. It always will be the Shadow…”

“But it’s also me.” The voice was clearer now, though still disembodied, as it seemed to be coming from everywhere in the darkness. I could see nothing, still, trapped in the Shadow, but those words convinced me that Kenny was alive and all right. I wanted to think ‘unharmed,’ but the fact that he was speaking to us from within his own Immortal form told me that something might be amiss somewhere.

“Kenny?” I asked out into the chilling void.

“Sorry about this,” I could hear him say. Even now, he was trying to keep his voice set to sound like Mysterion. This was Mysterion’s mission, after all. He was so committed to seeing this through as the hero himself, and as a League all together. “My body’s out of commission for a while, so I had to sink into this. Whatever you see, though, whatever you hear… unless you have every reason to doubt, this is me.”

“Glad you’re okay,” said Toolshed. I nodded my agreement, though it couldn’t be seen. “So… what happens now?”

“Cthulhu is going to pray for the End,” Mysterion told us.

“No way.” TupperWear’s voice. “No way we’re too late.”

“No,” said Mysterion, “we’re not. But only if we can stop the others before They completely rise.”

I thought about my neck, and about how badly it still hurt from the impact during my fight with Disarray. I thought about my quirk, only to be reminded that that same fight had jolted it out of me. I thought about Toolshed and myself, and how we had both nearly died, about the gash on the side of Marpesia’s head, about the Coon’s lost control over Cthulhu, Mosquito’s desperate need to survive, TupperWear’s broken armor, and about those still at home. We were all so drained, and had very limited backup.

It would destroy Kenny if we brought in his sister to help. I certainly didn’t want my own little brother to get hurt, either, but I had to accept that his assistance in the fight would probably help if need be. But if both he and Iron Maiden happened to join us, there’d be nobody left behind to protect Henrietta and our only portal back to Earth.

Shit.

While this very well could be where we could stop the End of the world… it could still mean the end of us. Down with the ship. We’d go out fighting, but it would be terrible if we didn’t even stand a chance. Half of us had been weakened by smaller fights already. And now we were supposed to bring down the Immortal Old Ones before they could rise and destroy everything…?

“How?” I murmured.

The Shadow hissed a rush of air that I knew each of us registered, and then the tendrils at my ankles latched around my lower legs. It felt like nothing else I’d ever known. It wasn’t the constrictive grip I was sure a real snake might have; I did not feel at all threatened. It was more like being wrapped in silk. Like walking through water. It was familiar enough. The Shadow was not against us. No—of course not. He’d never hurt us.

He was our leader.
“I’m going to take a stab at this,” said Mysterion, “so bear with me. I have faith in every one of you. Thank you for everything. I’m going to help you guys out.”

“What’s going on?” I heard Marpesia ask.

“Mysterion,” the Coon added, “what’re you doing?”

The grip on my legs tightened, and I was overcome with a feeling of weightlessness. My bones were lighter. Breath came more easily. For a few seconds, I was afraid that I was dead. A pressure came down over me, and eased my mind. But it wasn’t frightening—more than anything, it was reassuring. My blood seemed to flow with more purpose. My neck didn’t hurt quite as badly. I felt, for the duration of that pressure, like more than I’d ever been. More, even, than human…

“Power of will, guys,” Mysterion said. “R’lyeh can and will work in your favor, but only if you let it. Eyes on the shadows.”

“Can’t go anywhere but,” said Toolshed, defiantly. “We’re the Shadow League, remember?”

“Exactly.” In the back of my mind, I could almost see Kenny grinning when he said that. Same old guy, no matter what happened to him. “That’s what I like to hear. One last push, team.”

“Let’s do this!” Mosquito shouted out.

The Shadow lifted, but I felt one swirling, snaking wisp of it slither up my spine. Power of will, huh? I thought as R’lyeh melted back into view. My eyes adjusted to the pale light again, possibly even better than before. My vision became keen, sharp… better than perfect. Odd. I thought for a second that I might even be able to see great distances, if I stood at a high enough altitude.

Stood at a high enough altitude, sure… or flew.

No. Impossible. Impossible. I’d just lost my abilities. I wasn’t psychic anymore. Right? But the weightlessness hadn’t gone away. My brain felt as sharp as my eyes. I didn’t have to search for a reading on objects to move them anymore; I just—knew that I could.

Cthulhu roared, and I was instantly back in the fight. From his mouth spewed another wave of pressure; when I looked over, I could no longer see the Shadow. Only Cthulhu, looming over us. And that pressure wave was signaling something. That was the alarm clock, huh? Time for those who slept in eternal death to wake up.

I knew that something huge was happening, and not just to the Immortals, but to everything in R’lyeh, when, after that wave of pressure died down, I still felt lighter, but somehow stronger.

Maybe my real quirk had been shocked out of me once and for all, but something else was filling me up. Something else was there. Wait—hadn’t Chaos developed that power here in R’lyeh? Disarray, too. If lightning could surge from their fingertips… who was to say I couldn’t have mental control over anything I fucking wanted to move?

To test the theory out, I thrust my left hand out in front of me. “Kite, what’re you doing?” Toolshed asked, confused.

“Making the best of this while it lasts,” I grinned.

So much for logic. But as long as the opportunity was here, we had to use it.
The entire walk over to the tombs, my brain had felt uncomfortably quiet. No telekinetic headaches, no buzz of activity even from mid-sized rocks we’d passed, let alone pebbles. I wondered if, once we got back home, I’d ever even so much as make lights flicker again… but at least the current situation had given me this. I’d only recently come to really enjoy being able to use my psychic strengths, and was a little sad to see them go, so I was glad to have this opportunity, this one last chance to go all out and use what I’d been given to its full potential.

The large slab of rubble off to the side of the stairs leading to Cthulhu’s tomb, once I’d thrust my left hand out toward it, lifted with ease at the mere thought of it. Weight didn’t matter. Size didn’t matter. It was just something I wanted to lift, so it did. Anything that had mass. I could move anything inanimate with my mind. I was the sun, and everything else in R’lyeh orbited around me. If I wanted to throw off the gravity of anything, it would move, because what my mind wanted would go, and my control would shift accordingly.

I laughed, I was so fucking thrilled to have my skill back. And not just back, but amplified. Power of will. Last push. Shadow League.

Oh my God.

“Holy shit,” I laughed.

“What?” asked Mosquito, clearly seeing nothing different about me being able to move something with my mind.

“Don’t you feel it, dude?” I grinned, looking over at our stand-in leader. “R’lyeh’s fuckin’ alive with energy. We can use this, guys. We’re superheroes.”

“Well, duh,” said the Coon, matter-of-factly.

“No, really,” I said, turning my head to address the others. “We’re superheroes.”

Cthulhu lifted his head to begin the sonorous prayer to wake the Old Ones, but my sharp-witted partner and I were too quick for him. “Oh, nuh-uh…” I heard Toolshed say, dumbfounded. Quickly, I looked over at him, to see that he was taking a second to examine his gloved hands. Then, his head perked up, and he requested, “Kite… give me a lift, would you?”

“You got it,” I said with another satisfied grin. Slab after fallen green slab, I stacked up a staircase of my own, midair, borrowing bits and pieces from the valley around me.

Before I could even give a signal, Toolshed sprinted up the staircase I’d made, faster than I’d ever seen him run, and within seconds, he’d reached the top, where he jumped and landed, with dead accuracy, right onto Cthulhu’s face. He swiftly drew out both screwdrivers, twirled them twice in his hands, and stabbed them down hard between the Dark God’s eyes.

Cthulhu bucked, but Toolshed was ready; he sprang up into the air, switched his screwdrivers for his sledgehammer mid-flip, then came down again to swing the heavy blunt tool into the back of Cthulhu’s fleshy yellow head. The Dark God tripped forward from the impact, and Toolshed leapt down onto Cthulhu’s shoulder, then onto one of the slabs I’d been keeping in midair for just such a purpose. As soon as his feet touched the stone, I lowered the stair, and he jumped off once it was only about ten feet from the ground.

“Oh, fuck yeah!” he exclaimed, striding up to the rest of us.

Rather than lower the rest of the floating slabs to the ground, I hurled them forward at Cthulhu, who took the hits and stumbled two steps backward… right into his own Shadow.
The Shadow rose like black flame behind the Great Cthulhu, then warped and twisted into
the shape of an enormous serpent, which wound itself around Cthulhu until the Priest was engulfed
in a cocoon of darkness.

“Yeah, Kenny!” Toolshed hollered up, cupping his hands over his mouth so the sound would travel. (Lord help me, I fell in love with a bro.)

“Dude,” TupperWear said, astonished, getting both me and Toolshed to give him our
attention. “How the hell’d you do that?”

“Man, I don’t know, I just… can,” said Toolshed. “Dude, I’m not even winded. That felt
awesome.” He held one fist out; he and I crushed our knuckles together for a job well done, then
stepped into something of a circle formation with the others while Mosquito took charge.

“All right, guys,” Mosquito began, “I’ve got a feeling Kite and Toolshed weren’t the only
ones to get amped up. Mysterion wants us going after the Old Ones, which I’m pretty sure means
leave Cthulhu to him.”

“You think we can actually bring the Immortals down?” Marpesia asked.

Her hand was on her weapon… but it wasn’t the last thing I’d remembered seeing her hold
possession of. Marpesia had entered R’lyeh with a quarter staff she and TupperWear had built; it
could double as a small spear. Originally. What I saw her holding now was an impressive weapon,
the likes of which I’d only ever seen while wandering the halls of museums. It was a long, metal
spear, thicker than the quarter staff and twice as long, sporting a threatening, sharpened tip.

“Take a look at your weapon,” I said. “I’d say we’ve got a damn good chance.”

As Marpesia gawked down at her own granted power-up, I glanced around the circle at our
team. We really were the Shadow League. And while Mysterion, the Shadow himself, kept
Cthulhu busy, we had a task to do. Minutes ago, I’d been worried. Now… I couldn’t help feeling
like this was not only a doable mission—

We were going to have some fun.

“Human Kite,” Mosquito said to me, “you and Toolshed pair with Craig and the Coon for
right now. TupperWear, Marpesia, Mint-Berry Crunch, you’re with me. Split up as necessary, but
keep in touch through wires, guys.”

“My wire crapped out,” I told him. “I’ll just make sure I’m always near someone with a
working one.”


The Coon smirked, and his eyes flashed yellow and feral. “Let’s go.”

And with that, we broke off. Leaving the Shadow and Cthulhu to their own struggle, we
rushed in two teams toward the tombs where the countless other Old Ones slept. There was an odd
energy everywhere around us. Cthulhu had called to the land itself to rise up with the powers
needed to wake the Immortals from their slumber, and there was no telling how many would wake,
and how soon.

An enormous shape began to lumber through the tombs, and I recognized it as a beast similar
to the one Toolshed, TupperWear, Marpesia and I had taken down when we’d first arrived in
R’lyeh. Not an Immortal, but something that roamed the land to protect Them. Just as much of a
threat as anything. Behind it was another, and they stalked the valley of the tombs, treading between
great stone slabs and large, looming mausoleums.

The place where the Old Ones lay had no sense of order. It gave every rule of logical
geometry something to ponder over for a good, long time. It was so damn illogical it almost made
my head spin, but I wasn’t there to sort things out. I was there to help stop the End.

“All right,” said the Coon, cracking his knuckles, “these guys’ll be easy.”

“We still shouldn’t underestimate anything,” I warned him.

“Nah, dude, check it out, I’ve got a feelin’ I know what I can do.” And with that, the Coon
crouched, flexed his talons, which extended out in length, and sprinted forward at the first of the two
beasts.

“Or you could just completely ignore orders and go!” I shouted after him. “That’s totally
fine!” Turning back to my two other assigned partners, I fumed, “That asshole’s gonna get himself
killed.”

“Whatever,” Craig commented. And, okay, I know it was Cartman, but I kind of didn’t
want anyone on our team to die.

“Plus, kinda looks like he’s doing okay,” said Toolshed, staring off at the fight in the
distance. “If we keep formation, he’ll be back.”

“Let’s just keep going,” I said. “Which one’s our first—“

The moving of a stone told me that we weren’t going to be wondering much longer. Two
other sub-deities appeared and moved one of the stone slabs from a massive crypt. A great grey mist
of a breath belched out of the crypt’s opening and into the air as the two beasts began to move
forward.

“Well,” said Toolshed, swinging out his sledgehammer, “let’s take care of these guys first,
and then we’ll see what’s going on in that crypt.”

“We’ve gotta take them down before they can fully wake up, though, right?” I remembered.

“So we do this quickly,” Craig noted. “Hey, Henrietta,” he asked into his wire, “d’you know
what it is we’re gonna be goin’ up against?”

I could not hear the Goth’s response, since my wire had gone completely silent after
Disarray’s attack, so Toolshed and I simply moved forward while Craig collected any information he
could. Without either of us seeing any primary communication necessary before the fight, I took to
the air. We both knew exactly how this was going to play out.

Moving the glider was even easier now than it had been in our fight against Nyarlathotep.
Everything was just so much lighter, thanks to the Shadow’s influence. I had complete control;
ground, air, didn’t matter. Not quite as afraid of touching the non-Immortal beasts as I was the actual
Old Ones, I lighted on the amphibious head of the roughly twenty-foot creature Toolshed and I had
gone after first, then drew one spool of emulsified thread. I held it out, hovering in front of me, and
twirled the index finger of my right hand around to coax the spool to unravel.

Toolshed rushed forward and pounded the creature hard in its armored stomach with his
sledgehammer, which caused the beast’s scales to crack. It lifted its enormous head and opened its
mouth to let out a roar of either pain or discomfort—it didn’t matter which. I lassoed its lower jaw
and hurled the string down to Toolshed, who traded off his two screwdrivers for my own weapon. I called the two sharp tools into my hands and, as soon as he pulled, I drove the screwdrivers into the topmost vertebra on the beat’s slimy green back.

As I dug the screwdrivers in deeper to create a gash, Toolshed tied the creature off onto a column, then darted up its back and drew his drill gun. I pried open a hole at the vertebra, and Toolshed fired three bits in, which paralyzed the beast first before annihilating its throat from the angle of the shots. We nodded to each other, recognizing that the creature was about to fall; Toolshed slid down the creature’s back again and came to a landing just as the second beast was advancing.

He switched the drill gun out for his chainsaw, revved it quickly, and hacked the identical beast’s two back legs off before it even had a chance to attack. I shoved my right hand out toward the column that Toolshed had tied the first creature off on, and, while the second came crashing to the ground, I coaxed the thin, green stone column segment by segment into the air, then reassembled it in a crash on top of the beat’s head.

Yeah, I was definitely okay with having my psychic skills back.

I leapt easily down to where Toolshed now stood, collected through the air my still well-stocked spool of thread, and the two of us started back over to Craig. I handed Toolshed back his screwdrivers, and as he slid them away in his belt, he said, “We didn’t do too bad, huh?”

“Dude, video games are never going to be exciting ever again,” I laughed.

He enjoyed that one, but we had to keep serious again once we stood behind our third partner, who stared straight forward at the crypt.

“Any news on what it is?” I asked him.

“Yeah. Word of advice, too. Don’t look at it, guys, I’ve got this,” Craig said, stepping forward. He didn’t even draw his swords. “Watch me if you want, just don’t look at the thing that’s about to come out of there. I’ll try to kill it before it can start to move.”

“What the hell is it,” Toolshed wondered, “and how the hell are you gonna kill it on your own?!?”

“It’s Ghanatothoa,” said Craig dully. “Or however you pronounce it. Henrietta said a bunch of these Old Ones are from other Spaces Between, I guess, but they all have crypts here they can move through, so I don’t even know how many we might see. This guy usually can’t move or something, but I guess Cthulhu wanted it to. So don’t look.”

“Meaning…?” I prompted.

“Henrietta says it’ll petrify anyone who looks it in the eye.”

“Well, great!” I said. “How the hell are you gonna beat it alone?!”

“Just hold on and trust me.”

“Why?”

“Because of Peru.”

Peru? The hell did this have to do with Peru? Toolshed and I cast worried glances at one
another, and I readied myself behind a remnant of a slab for takeoff, while Toolshed prepared his
cainsaw behind another. Peru… Peru… we’d accidentally wound up in Peru in fourth grade once.
Me, Stan, Kenny and Cartman… and Craig.

…Oh…

Curiosity getting the better of me, I took a glance at the foot of the crypt, to see an awful
tentacle creeping out toward the place Craig stood. A minor chord seemed to sound from within the
hollow crypt, and Craig took a step forward, unfazed by a single thing, as usual. The creature
sleeping within began to move out, and though I kept my eyes on Craig and on the ground directly
ahead of him, I could hear the beast hiss out. Craig kept his head down, and I saw his shadow warp
about on the ground. Of course… that’s how we’d be able to bring down the Immortals. Our
powers were gifts from the Shadow, and he himself would be there to help us strike the final blows.

Only Immortals could kill Immortals. But as far as I knew, the Necronomicon had never said
anything about them not needing help doing so.

As soon as the beast had emerged, Craig removed his sunglasses, kept his eyes closed for a
second, then lifted his head and stared directly at the beast we were not supposed to make eye
contact with.

It had been revealed in Peru that Craig was a part of an ancient Incan prophecy. Due to his
connection to that prophecy, he had been able to fight off (bear with me) enormous Peruvian guinea
pigs that had begun terrorizing towns, just with a glance when he stood on a marked stone slab.

His power needed no boost from ancient tablets now, however, and from his eyes shot a laser
that hit the Great Old One Ghanatothoa in its own eyes, those that could allegedly petrify men. The
enormous, amorphous creature shrieked to raise hell, and its tentacles flailed in anguish when Craig
didn’t let up.

There was then a deafening explosion as Ghanatothoa’s head exploded, and the rest of the
Old One’s body crumpled to the ground and began to smolder. Craig, once satisfied, closed his eyes
and slid his sunglasses back on, then cricked his neck to one side, turned his back on the tomb, and
began walking away.

“Dude, holy fuck,” Toolshed commented as he and I caught up with Craig on our continued
journey through the tombs. “Good call wearing those sunglasses, huh?”

“Honestly?” said Craig. “I figured this might happen. That’s why I brought sunglasses.”

“Good to know,” laughed Toolshed.

“Can you, like, see right now, or is it all just… y’know, lasers?” I wondered. Kyle, you are
so fucking stupid, I scolded myself. Of course I wanted to know the logistics behind everyone’s
unique Shadow-amplified power. Hey, the more I understood, the better I could help anyone in a
bind.

“No, I can see,” Craig told me. “It’s just, like, when my eyes register light or something. I
don’t really know.”

“It’s awesome, though,” said Toolshed.

“Yup.”

We continued forward. Every few steps, I would hear a roar from Cthulhu, but had no way
of telling whether or not it was triumphant or dismal. Mysterion—well, the Shadow—certainly was keeping the Priest preoccupied, but it wasn’t long until Cthulhu droned out another prayer to continue raising his brethren from their crypts.

Shit.

We came upon another crypt guarded by four tall, disgusting stone gargoyles not long after Craig’s win over Ghanatothoa. The stone creatures looked eerie, foreboding, and too lifelike for comfort. They all depicted an awful toad-like bat, which Craig, speaking for Henrietta, identified for us:

“Tsa… thog… gua… Jesus Christ, couldn’t these things have easier names to pronounce?” Craig complained. “Tsa-thoggua. Tsathoggua. Don’t yell at me, Henrietta, I can’t pronounce these stupid words like you can.” Turning to look directly at us, Craig shook the Goth’s explanations away and said, “Whatever it is, we’re probably gonna—“

He couldn’t finish. The four stone gargoyles began to move.

“I need a lift,” Toolshed requested, nudging my arm before he stepped forward and grabbed out his awl.

“You got it,” I said. I didn’t need to scour the ground long before I found another bit of rubble that could easily become an elevator. With only my right hand guiding it along, I moved it out in front of Toolshed, who leapt on; I raised the makeshift platform, and he sprung at the first gargoyle, probably somewhere near thirty feet in height, and landed right in the middle of its stone gut, where he jabbed in the awl and whacked it in with his sledgehammer.

He withdrew the awl and forced himself off of the gargoyle as it crumbled into useless rubble, landing accurately on the shoulder of another.

“Hey Craig!” Toolshed hollered down. “Behind you!”

Another of the stone creatures had begun to move

Craig snorted, then pulled off his sunglasses to place on top of his head, keeping his eyes closed. He drew both of his swords, the held them out his arms’ lengths in front of him, then opened his eyes. Lasers shot out at the swords, and the second they hit the metal, Craig angled his swords upward, which caused a shift in the direction the shot from Craig’s eyes fired—up and back, to hit the monster right through the neck. I couldn’t suppress a nervous but excited laugh upon seeing that. Morbid, but kickass.

The gargoyle was reduced to rock from his hit as well, and after Toolshed smashed his second, I buried the fourth beneath the rubble of its companions, crushing it down into dust. But a great roar sounded from within the crypt, and a living version of the ugly toad-like creatures sprang out of the ground. It had a bat’s wings and a thin line of fur, which first had me concerned that it was a slightly smaller form of Nyarlathotep itself, but this Tsathoggua thing that Craig had identified was nothing like the old Messenger. Just as terrifying, yes, but not the same.

It came hissing forward at us, and it was at that point that I realized we were kind of the ones provoking them to attack. These creatures simply wanted to reclaim their reign over Earth, and mankind would just happen to fall beneath them. The Shadow, however, was so rooted to humanity that of course it would provoke the other Old Ones to attack men directly, and thus we were faced with yet another foe.
I wondered, as we held it back, if Cthulhu itself would realize that. Cthulhu had nearly succeeded in creating something of an End several years ago; it didn’t really need any help doing so again. But this End really was supposed to signal the rest to arise… it would just be interesting, I thought, if the Dark Priest would notice that, even when provoked, the Immortals were having trouble fending us off.

Tsathoggua was more trouble than it was worth, though, quick and loud, it darted between the three of us, threw us into columns, held us under its clawed appendages, bucked and screamed when Toolshed or I tried a direct attack, or when Craig went at it with his twin swords. It dodged every laser shot at him, and dug out of the stones I hurled in its path.

But then, just as it lunged at the three of us in one go, I heard the clash of metal on metal, and the beast roared out of anger as it stared back at its foot. Its left rear foot, I was able to see, was being pinned to the ground with a sword… a sword attached to a moving suit of armor… a suit of armor through which I could see two recognizable eyes.

“Iron Maiden?” Toolshed hollered.

“Timmah,” said our primary backup.

“Nice, dude!” I congratulated him. Iron Maiden withdrew the sword and thrust out with another. His concealed weapons would always come from somewhere in that armor, and I never did know how exactly he was able to manipulate them so well.

And then, as yet another sword drove through the awful creature’s skin, another, much smaller form darted forward and dealt a high kick across the beast’s face. Tsathoggua shook its head, confused as the rest of us, but the attacker returned again, dealing a number of swift moves, direct and hard-hitting punches and kicks, to the head of the Great Old One. Craig took that opportunity to move, and stepped forward to remove his sunglasses.

The beast was blinded by the lasers enough for Toolshed and I to rush up on either side of it. Taking hold of one end, I hurled a spool over the creature’s back, and as soon as Toolshed caught it, we both yanked down and brought it to the ground. Iron Maiden shoved another sword into the back, while Craig rushed up to drive his own swords into the thing’s neck. One final blade was shoved in, directly between Tsathoggua’s drooping, terrible eyes, and as Craig, Toolshed and I stepped back to gasp at the newcomers, I felt my heart skip.

“Red Serge?!” I yelped, as the small hero sheathed his sword. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He turned, ticked up the brim of his hat, then grinned and gestured back toward the creature he’d just helped take down. “What’s it look like?” he laughed. “I’m saving your ass.”

“Um… okay…” I said, a little wary. I glanced at the thing he’d just brought down, then said, “Dude, where’d you learn to fight like that?”

“I didn’t,” said Red Serge. When I took a closer look at his eyes, I noticed that they were glowing a pale, whitish blue. Ike had black eyes… not blue… “But Bruce Lee knew a thing or two.”

“Bruce Lee?”

“Did I ever tell you, buddy, I never stopped seeing dead celebrities after I was three?” Red Serge said. Now that I took an even closer look at him, I saw that his black-gloved hands were
When Ike was three years old, he’d come screaming to me with nightmares. A number of recognized celebrities had died in one small span of time when I was nine, and Ike had started seeing their ghosts, and had even been at one point possessed.

“No!” I shouted. “No, you never told me that! Are you okay!!”

“I’m fine,” he shrugged. “I can ignore them now. Except down here, I figured out that they can help.”

“Timmah?” asked Iron Maiden.

“Well, when I met the Shadow, when we first got here,” Red Serge explained, “I started hearing voices. I can ignore them all I want at home, but I figured out when I started fighting here that I can actually ask ’em for help.”

“Bruce Lee?” I repeated, almost laughing.

Red Serge grinned. “Bruce fuckin’ Lee.”

The two were a great addition to our small team. Iron Maiden had developed a way to trap our enemies in enormous iron claws, which would appear in his wake when he made a circle of a diameter of his choosing on the ground. Red Serge opted to often fight with his sword, but then I would see the Shadow shifting around beneath him, and his eyes would glow to give him a little extra help from the dead he was still in communication with after all these years. (Note to self, Kyle, get your brother a therapist after this.)

Craig’s lasers, Toolshed’s amped strength and speed, and my psychic skills carried us further and further onward, but every step we took past Cthulhu’s tomb did make me worry somewhat for Kenny. Because sooner or later, we would re-join the Shadow. Sooner or later, this fight would probably lead us to the Gate. And there was no way we’d be staying this powerful for very long once the time grew closer to us needing to head back home.

So we did everything we could, making our abilities last, and taking down everything in our path, in our desperate mutual hope to stop the End.

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Butters

It was like breathing again, taking in much needed air when you hadn’t realized your supply had been so low, and that, if you’d just inhaled deep enough, your mind would clear. My own mind had been so completely overshadowed that I hadn’t been able to discern my need or know that there was a simple solution to my problem. Well, actually, I hadn’t really understood my problem to begin with. I had given it the wrong name, and thus had taken ineffective measures to try and solve it. My problem hadn’t been that I was alone, but that I couldn’t see what I had. My perception had been clouded and warped so that all I could see was the despair, the negative, the pain. But, in reality, I had had the means to cope with these circumstances all along. Because, in my life, I was glad to say, there was also hope and friendship and compassion. And I promised myself that I would never forget that again.

So I started toward the tombs. My head was still slightly fuzzy, but at least I had focus. At
least I had myself back… or was starting to. The closer I drew, the more pleased I became with the fact that I had woken up, that my head wasn’t hollow anymore. When I arrived on the scene, a great battle was already underway. Every hero of the Shadow League was giving his all. I’d already done my part protecting at least one of them—hopefully two—from General Disarray. How better could I make up, now, for going along with Nyarlathotep’s plan for the End, than to help the rest of them as best I could?

Even if they wouldn’t have me, I’d try.

The only thing that I could do now was try.

Maybe I couldn’t win. Maybe I could never, ever win. Chaos was; chaos is; chaos will be… but I didn’t have to be a part of it. I didn’t have to win, I just had to try.

As I was figuring this out for myself, I stumbled upon a tendril of the Shadow. The great black serpentine form rose above the valley, putting up an impressive fight against Cthulhu. The Shadow himself engulfed a good portion of the ground; it grew larger or shrank smaller as much as it needed to, since shadows were an easily found and easily expendable resource for added power. And one of the tendrils from its massive form found me. It reached out to me, and slithered around my ankles, forcing me to continue walking forward.

I continued walking, beckoned by the tendril of the Shadow, until I reached the tomb valley. Marking one Immortal’s resting place were a series of dilapidated columns, upon one my own shadow cast itself. The snaking Shadow led me closer, as if to force me to watch the portion of the battle taking place among the tombs.

The only person I saw was the Coon.

Of course he’d break off by himself; why wouldn’t he? He was always proving himself, even if no one was around to watch. Right now, he was picking himself up from having just brought down a creature of only about ten feet in height, something hardly as formidable as Cthulhu and his ilk, but I noticed that the ground began to rumble.

Damn it. I honestly did not know if I wanted to burst in and help or not. Besides, help how? My lightning powers were gone. What chance could I stand against any of these things? How was I supposed to hold my own?

And that was precisely when the Shadow grabbed hold of me. I wanted to gasp or even cry out, but I took no breath, I made no sound. The Shadow was testing me. A whisper of words I couldn’t understand rushed through my ears, and I trembled. For the first time in a very, very long time, a chill went down my spine and I was afraid. The only thing I knew, the only mantra that started sounding in my head was:

* I want to fix this. I want to heal this. Don’t let me die until I fix this. Don’t let me die until I at least try to do something good again.

* I want to do something good again.

Maybe I’d be forever rejected. But that didn’t matter now. I needed closure, if this was indeed the End. The end of anything, really. I didn’t quite know if this was the end of Chaos, but it was certainly the end of something. My head still swam. My loyalties had shifted around everywhere.

But part of me really did just want to bring everything back to the way it had been, so that I,
alone, could determine where to go from there. Maybe Chaos would live on forever… after all, I would always have voids I would want to fill. Wouldn’t I? But Chaos had become a creature I almost couldn’t control. The continuation of Chaos might mean the end of the rest of me.

Still.

I just had to try.

The Shadow reached forward from where my own was cast upon the pillar; two tendrils snaked out and took hold of my arms. For a moment, I felt strangely warm. As if something was holding me and telling me, *I do believe in you.* I couldn’t tell whose voice it was, or even if it was a voice at all. Maybe it was mine. Telling myself not to give up yet.

Don’t give up yet.

It’s not over yet.

The Shadow let go, and in the distance, I saw the Coon bring down his foe, only to turn and find himself standing on a moving crypt. The Coon bolted off of that thing, and I took an anticipatory step forward. But, shit… damn, no, I couldn’t attack anymore. I stared down at my ruined arms. Blood everywhere. I couldn’t use lightning anymore, but that last blast had really done some damage. It was like all of my veins had burst. Who knew if I could even throw a punch now?

Who knew where the hell my allegiance even lay?

Well, that was the thing, though: try. I tried working for Nyarlathotep, and that hadn’t worked. Now I just wanted to try to make things better, make things work out in the League’s favor. I just didn’t know how I’d do it as such a ruined scrap of a person. My blood felt hot, and just as I was wishing that there was something I could do about their ruined state, the flow of blood stopped.

My shadow, or the Shadow itself, swished around at my feet and over my arms. Impossible—it was sealing up the wounds. Making me nearly good as new. Faint white scars to remind me of my folly remained on my arms, lining each vein, but I didn’t care. I could put those arms to use again. “Thanks,” I whispered out to whatever being had truly helped me, then took a few more steps closer to the Coon. He needed backup, and fast.

As evidenced by the enormous, nine-headed creature that burst forth from the crypt beneath the ground. The Coon cursed its presence and stumbled backward. He frantically scanned the creature for a weak point; it did not appear to have one.Stubborn fighter that he was, though, he leapt forward all the same.

I knew what that thing was. It was a chthonic creature known to the ancient Greeks as well. The Hydra. How it had weaseled its way into this pantheon—or if it was indeed one of the Old Ones—I did not know, but it threatened the Coon’s existence with each of its long, hissing heads. “Fuckin’ Immortals!” the Coon shouted out at it.

When he leapt onto one of the centermost heads, the Coon wrapped his legs around that particular neck, then held up his hands, extending out his talons into thin, precise blades. They seemed to almost be a part of him, now, those talons… either that, or he just had a kind of control over them the way he had had control over Cthulhu itself for a while. He dug those talons in, and the head was severed clean off.

“Aww, yeah!” he shouted. “Aye, where are you guys? Craig, you asshole, I need you guys
over here now!”

He steadied himself, then jumped to the next head. I immediately recognized this as the wrong thing for him to be doing. He severed that head off as well, and went for the next, but the Hydra snaked two of its heads around and the Coon was spiked like a volleyball down into the ground.

“No!” I heard myself shouting. No more death. I didn’t want to see any more death. That wasn’t the world I wanted. Not a dying world, no, never. Not when the ones who were dying—being ruthlessly killed—were those I’d once called friends. Those a part of me desperately wanted to call friends again.

Maybe I was weak and pathetic, but they were all I’d ever had. And not wanting madness, then… well, maybe I just wanted familiarity.

I rushed out from where I’d been watching, but was too late to drag the Coon to safety from the Hydra’s next attack. Its two headless necks snaked around every which way, and the still sentient ones lashed forward, knocking over a stone tablet that had marked its resting place, and with it an enormous statue that seemed to at one point in time have been in the likeness of Cthulhu, before time destroyed most of it. The pieces came crashing down over the Coon, and still in a rage, the Hydra lashed about, taking itself down under tall stone slabs as well.

“No!” I cried out again, darting forward. I kept my eyes fixed on the place where the Coon had fallen, and dug around in the rubble as the Hydra began to stir again. Its other heads had been severed in the blast, but it was still moving. It could still attack. I knew that it could still attack. So, fast as I could go, I ran to where I thought the Coon might be, and did indeed see him, wedged painfully between two large slabs of stone.

It looked like he’d been crushed, but he was still breathing. Hopefully the arm I couldn’t see was still intact, the leg I couldn’t see, too. He grunted and tried to move to get the stones off of him, but above him was a mound of rubble, set to collapse at any moment and entomb him there forever. “Shit,” I muttered, walking up to where he was trapped. “Hey,” I called out. “Let me—“

“Chaos?” the Coon said. “Oh, fuck no. Get the hell away from me.”

“I’m not here to fight,” I told him, “I’m here to help.”

“Yeah, not believing that.” He coughed. His voice was strained.

The Hydra began to pick itself up, and as it did, rocks began to tumble from the top of the mound that was threatening the Coon’s life. My heart started beating faster, and I just knew, no matter what, I had to get that guy out of there. “This isn’t a good time to be stubborn,” I said. “Now, let me help you out.”

“Aw, hell no, I’ll do it myself!”

“You can’t move, Coon, let me help you!” I shouted.

“I’ve got backup. Shouldn’t you be off—“

“I can get you out of this,” I said firmly. Then, thinking fast, I extended my right hand, giving him the opportunity to take hold of it. “Give me your hand.”

The Coon scowled. “Fuck that!” he spat at me. “I told you, Chaos, I don’t want your world.”
The Hydra, with one head still remaining that I had not seen, began flailing about until the only set of eyes it had left lighted on us. We had to move fast. The Hydra let out a scream of a roar, and more rocks began to fall all around us.

I thought, for a second, about what I could do. The Coon didn’t want Chaos’s world? Well… neither did I.

And who was ‘I’?

This was my chance to find out. And make right.

My hands were trembling only a little when I reached up to take my helmet off. The air touched the guarded parts of my skin again. Glad to be free of that constraint, I tossed the helmet aside, and reached up to unpin my hair, to let it go free. As Chaos, I had always pinned up the longer part of my hair, to still give the impression that I’d never grown it out, but as Butters, I’d become quite proud, actually, of that length of hair I’d achieved—for her, true, but still—even if it was always in a ponytail. I tightened the ponytail and cast off the clip, then held my hand out again, narrowed my eyes at the Coon in stern defiance against his arch enemy, Professor Chaos, and said with resolve:

“Then what about mine?”

He got it immediately. The Coon’s own eyes, yellow though now they were, widened, and for a second, he hesitated. The Hydra lashed out. Choking on the word, the Coon got out, “…Butters?”

Once again, that name was spoken.

My name.

Not Chaos. Not anymore.

“Gimmie your hand, or you’re gonna get crushed!” I shouted.

“The hell?!” the Coon spat out.

Dammit, we were running out of time. “Give me your fucking hand, Eric!” I hollered. “I’m not watching you die today!”

Weakly, tersely, the Coon held out his right hand. I grabbed it in my right, then yanked at his upper arm with my left hand as well. He wasn’t pushing himself out, but I figured he couldn’t. It was all up to me.

Just before the pile of rubble could collapse completely, with one last desperate tug, I hauled the Coon out of the trap. The force from his release sent us both falling backwards, and when I saw the rocks tumbling down, I gathered up every ounce of my strength and yanked him over to the side by the shoulders. We rolled a few feet, but had made a safe getaway from the complete collapse.

The beast went down again as well, one of the sharper rocks rolling down to cut off its ninth and final head. But still, the Hydra’s body twitched. If I remembered anything from the Greek stories I used to read with Wendy, when she had been developing a liking for mythological figures, the Hydra would rise up again with its heads re-grown. We had to get the hell out of there.

I picked myself up and shook my head. It was foreign, to have a clear head again. I couldn’t begin to understand how I was unable to notice the possession ever even taking place. It happened
so methodically. So well. Because it had fed off of everything I was, and everything I’d been afraid to leave behind.

The Coon lay on his stomach, breathing with difficulty. I saw his shoulders tremble as he tried to sit up, but when he didn’t budge, my own breath caught. “Hey,” I prompted, “get up, we gotta get outta here.”

“What’s it look like I’m tryin’ to do?” he spat back at me.

“E-Eric, can you move?” I wondered, starting to panic.

“Call me the fucking Coon, asshole!” he shouted. “And no, not really!”

“Oh Jesus…”

Very, very gingerly, I scooted closer to him and turned him over onto his back. Once he was lying back, the Coon let out an alarmed, painful yelp, then groaned and covered his face with his hands. “Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, no—no!” he shouted.

“What?” I asked frantically.

“No, shit, Goddammit, no!”

“Eri—Coon, what?”

“I can’t move anything lower than my Goddamn arms!” He lowered his hands and glowered up at me, pointing one taloned index finger right in my face. “I hope you’re happy, Butters!” he went on complaining.

“What? I didn’t hurt you, I got you out!” I insisted. Oh, hell, oh, damn, oh, no… What was going to happen now, if he could no longer move…? “You can’t move your legs?”

“I can’t even feel ’em.”

“Y-your spine?”

“Fuckin’ nothin’.”

“Oh, shit!” I sat back with a gasp, covering my mouth with both hands to hide my alarm. “E-Eri—Coon, I’m—I hope I didn’t—I didn’t mean to—“

“The hell’s even your deal, Butters?” he spat up at me.

I shook my head. “We really can’t talk right now, that thing’s going to kill us,” I said. “I… well, I’ll try to carry you, but—“

“Oh, save it,” the Coon snapped, folding his thick arms over his chest. On his belt, I noticed, was still strapped the flute. It hadn’t been crushed. He’d held onto it. Somehow, that lifted me, just a little more. “I’s supposed to die in there all heroic and shit, but you just had to—“

“No!” I insisted. “No, no there’s gotta be a way. You can’t be paralyzed! Y-y-you’re the Coon! You gotta—“

“Uh, Butters?”

The Coon was glancing straight up, and he uncrossed his arms, instead gripping his fingers
right into the ground, in one last attempt to push himself up. I looked up as well, and saw that the headless Hydra was writhing over us, its necks twisting around as new heads began to grow, so that rather than nine would be eighteen. And we would be so royally fucked.

At that very moment, though, I heard Marpesia’s voice ring out, “TupperWear! Give me that blood!”

I whipped my head around behind me. Marpesia and TupperWear stood on a ridge over us, illuminated like the heroes they so truly were by the uncanny green light of R’lyeh, under that looming maroon sky. Their shadows twisted and writhed as if affected by the power of the Shadow himself. TupperWear unhooked a vial from his belt, one of three, and passed it to his partner. Marpesia no longer held a simple quarter staff, but a spear the likes of which the Amazon for whom she’d named herself would have carried. In the manner that a man will chalk a pool cue, Marpesia doused the tip of her spear in the blood contained in TupperWear’s little vial, so that the tip frothed and sizzled like the wound across Disarray’s face.

“Let’s go,” she said firmly.

A nod from her partner, and the two came down the ridge toward and past us. TupperWear stopped and set himself up for a basket toss—Marpesia rushed at him, and he hoisted her into the air. As one of the Hydra’s heads was regenerating, Marpesia stabbed her poisoned spear deep into the neck before it could heal, and the neck fell limp, headless.

It had re-grown six by this point, and while Marpesia busied herself leaping to the next head that needed sealing, TupperWear grabbed a head that came down on him and crushed it into the ground. A second came down at him from above and bit right through his armor. His armor shattered, but he stood in the Hydra’s mouth unharmed. His skin had developed a blue tint to it, and even when the Hydra bit down further, he showed no signs of harm. No punctures, no breaks, no blood. I wasn’t sure how it had happened, but somehow, he had become indestructible. Just as Marpesia had somehow come upon that spear, and was able to leap much higher and farther distances than I’d ever seen her jump before.

“H-heroes…” I got out. I stared back down at the Coon. I almost remembered what it was like to laugh. “You guys’re all heroes. Like, actual heroes. Aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I got powers, too, but now I can’t fuckin’ move!” he snapped at me.

Marpesia and TupperWear had run the Hydra off in the opposite direction, so I figured I could concentrate just on the Coon for now. Plus, this was interesting. Powers… real powers, manifested in R’lyeh, just like the ones I’d received from Nyarlathotep, initially…

“Wait, how’d you get them?” I wondered.

“I dunno, the Shadow did this thing and then—“

“The Shadow?”

“Yes, the Shadow! Butters, if I’m gonna be paralyzed, I really don’t wanna just lie here having to talk to you. You’re all lame now that you’re not Chaos.”

…No, no I wasn’t Chaos, was I? Wasn’t I? I didn’t have Chaos’s power anymore, but hadn’t the Shadow healed my arms? Hadn’t I felt influence from the new Great Messenger as well?

“I’m sorry,” I managed to say. “I really don’t know what to say, here.” I bowed my head, and, trembling, grabbed his shoulders. I took in a deep, deep breath, and starting then, I almost felt
like I could feel his pain. “Eric—I mean, Coon, I honestly don’t know what to do or say or anything. My head’s all messy, and it’s like I just woke up, but I learned that things don’t have to be this dark. You know? I-I think I’m kinda starting to learn that you don’t have to give up.

“So don’t you give up, either!”

“Butters, you are spouting such crap right now, I’m so seriously.”

“Eric, there’s gotta be a way to get you better!” I shouted.

“I don’t think yelling is gonna do it!”

“Oh, Jesus, oh, God, Goddammit, Eric, just sit up,” I pleaded, bowing my head yet again. My hands felt hot on his shoulders, as if submerged in boiling water. “Please be able to sit up. Just get better. Just get better. Goddammit, I wanna mend things, I don’t wanna destroy anymore. I just want everything to go back the way it was!”

With that, my hands cooled down, and Eric writhed under my grip. “Get off, you over-emotional little emo fucker!” he shouted. I rolled off to the side, wondering if for once in my life I would ever get anything right, then hugged my arms to my gut as I leaned over my knees and looked back over at the Coon, who picked himself up and strode over to me to grab me up by the collar. “Butters, I’m gonna kick your ass so bad whe—wait.” He loosened his grip, and stared down at his feet. His yellow eyes went from that, up to my eyes, then back down to his feet again. “Dude,” he commented, letting go of me and taking a couple steps back. “The fuck?”

He cracked his neck to both sides, then stretched his arms up over his head. He stared at me, while all I could do was stare at him. Hadn’t he been unable to move a minute ago? “What are you trying to pull?” he asked me.

“What?”

“Butters, how the fuck did you do that?!”

“Do what?”

“I’m walking,” he said emphatically, pointing down at his legs as if I hadn’t figured that out. “I couldn’t feel my fucking legs and now I’m obviously standing up. What the hell did you do? How’d you do that?!”

“I-I don’t know!” I said. “I just… I wanted you to get better, and then you did, and…”

The Coon stormed back over to me and knealt down hard in front of me, then grabbed my arms and frowned down at the multiple white scars. “Your arms were all fucked up, too,” he said. “You healed—you healed ’em.” His eyes widened again when he let go of my arms, and he sat back in utter disbelief. It takes a lot to get Eric acting like that, and believe me, I was stunned as well. Heal? From destruction to healing? Was that really something I could do now? Well, if the League had extra powers from the Shadow, maybe… when it had reached out and healed my arms…

Maybe I really could heal.

“The fuck?” the Coon repeated.

“I dunno,” I said. “I really am pretty confused, here. So, sure, let’s… let’s go with that. I can… well, maybe I can heal.”
“Goddamn,” was his next comment.

I heard a rumbling from another sector of the tombs, and cast a glance in that direction. Then, determined that I wanted to keep it up with trying to help the others, I grabbed Eric’s hands and pulled him up to standing with me. “You’re good to keep fighting,” I said to him. “So…” He still gave me a weird, skeptical glare. So I looked at our hands, as I held his just a moment longer, then began, “Eric, look, I’m sorry.” I couldn’t even really tell where the words were coming from, but they were at least mine. “I really got screwed up, and did all sorts of stuff to you guys, and I really don’t think any of you guys is ever gonna be able to really, y’know, forgive me or anything, but—“

Blankly, the Coon glared at me and said, “Let go of my hands, Butters.”

I did, primarily since I had no idea how to continue my thought. The Coon glanced around, then his sharp eyes lighted on something not far away. He ticked his head in that direction, and asked, “You gonna go get that?”

I followed his gaze, and saw, there on the ground, Professor Chaos’s helmet. It would probably help, being a bit of extra protection, but looking at it now was like inviting a nightmare. I did not want to put that helmet back on. I’d just saved someone’s life. Check that, I had just saved my friend’s life.

No more helmet.

No more Chaos.

Even so, I hesitated a little, before I finally shook my head. “No, it’s just me,” I answered. “I’m done.”

“Okay, good,” the Coon nodded. He looked me over, then, surprisingly, unhooked a canteen of water from his belt and held it out to me. “Here,” he said.

“What’s this?”

“It’s water, the fuck else would it be?”

“Why’re you giving me this?”

“Because dehydration makes people go crazy and if you go crazy again, I swear to God.”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.” Gratefully, I took the canteen, and when the water passed my lips, I realized just how right he was. I had been in R’lyeh for days, and not had a drop. I’d slept enough, but I hadn’t been staying hydrated, which, yes, probably did contribute to my going off the chaotic deep end. Once satisfied, and not wanting to waste his entire supply, I thanked him and handed the canteen back, feeling a little more refreshed.

“Good,” said the Coon. Now, if you’re done being a lame little pussy, let’s go.”

I hesitated again when the Coon took off. I stared at the helmet, desolate and alone on the uneven grounds of R’lyeh’s tomb valley. It would remain there forever. I would not come back for it. That Chaos was a fading presence in my mind. Maybe I’d reinvent him, maybe not. I couldn’t know until circumstances arose. But that helmet… yes; it would stay there forever.

“Dude, come on, let’s go,” the Coon pressured again.
“You mean it?” I asked, stiffly picking my head up to look over at him.

The Coon rolled his eyes. “Yes, I fuckin’ mean it!” he snapped. “Butters, you can fix things, okay? We could kinda use that, y’know?”

“Wait,” I said, once those words hit my ears. This was what I needed. From anyone, it would have been great to hear. From Eric, it was even better. “Wait. S-say that again.”

“What, let’s fuckin’ go?” he griped.

“No, the other thing. Why you need me.”

“You can fix things,” said the Coon, raising one eyebrow in confusion.

My entire being soared. “One more time!” I requested.

“You can fuckin’ fix things, Butters, would you shut up and come on already?!”

“Y-yes, absolutely!” I grinned.

You can fix things, Butters.

You can fix things.

I just had to try.

Off I sprinted, steps behind the Coon. His pace was different, thanks to whatever power he’d been given in R’lyeh. He could dart about to miss obstacles, and leap over them with a newly developed ease as well. His eyes glowed yellow as they sought out his next opponent, and animal instincts from the very creature he’d modeled himself after were sure to make him a rabid, formidable foe. Good thing I wasn’t going up against him now; he’d probably tear me to shreds.

Not that he figuratively hadn’t before, but that one phrase was enough to keep me going past everything else. Yes, I’d been outcast from much of society. Yes, my parents had raised me to believe that I was worthless. Yes, I had invited madness into my mind and attempted to bring about the end of the world because I was feeling weak and vulnerable, and wanted all the world to be dragged down with me. But.

You can fix things, Butters.

Oh, and fix it I sure would.

Seeking out the next Old One to rise, the Coon led us to a desolate sector of the tombs, where two other mismatched heroes were already in the thick of a battle. Mosquito and Mint-Berry Crunch (huh, honestly, where the heck had he come from?) were teamed against one of the strangest things I had ever seen. It was like an enormous idol, and, while slightly humanoid, resembled as well both an octopus and elephant; a gigantic flat nose protruded forth from the front of its stone-like face.

“Hey, Morticia, the fuck’s that?” the Coon asked.

“Huh?”

“Not you, Butters, the Goth chick. God,” he scoffed, rolling his yellow eyes.

“Oh.”
The Coon paused to listen as the Goth, most likely on her wire, gave him enough information to satisfy him. “The fuck do you say all these things?” he muttered. “Chaugnar Faugn? The fuck is that?” A pause. “I’m goin’,” he said into the wire, “I’m goin’ a’edy. Jeesh.” He then motioned toward the beast. “C’mon, Butters.”

“Well, I can’t fight too well,” I told him. “I’m just—“

“So be medical fuckin’ standby!” the Coon ordered. “You gonna be all annoying again? Don’t make me miss Chaos.”

“Fine,” I said strongly. We continued toward the others, and just to test something out, I prodded the Coon’s arm and added, “But I better start hearing some ‘thank yous’ from you, or else.”

“Thank yous are for pussies, Butters, just do what I tell you when I tell you.”

“No!” I snapped. “I’m so sick of being told what to do all the time! You don’t control me, nobody controls me, you got that?”

“Damn… okay, fine.”

Well, that was easy.

“For now.”

Oh. Figures.

“Now, come on,” he smirked.

The Coon absolutely loved the thrill of a fight. Eric had, I’m quite sure, since he was born. Into the world fighting, and he’d go out fighting, too. Something about the Coon, though, was that he had no intention of going out at all. He was one of those stubborn youths who felt like he’d live forever. While Kenny couldn’t shake being Immortal, Eric acted like he was anyway, and didn’t care much for consequences. He just fought. He wasn’t even the best at it, but dammit, he thought he was.

Which was exactly why he sprinted right up the side of that ugly idol, extended his talons, and dug a chunk out of the creature’s shoulder. The only thing that could distract me from watching in awe at the fight in him, though, was Mosquito. He had, the last time I’d seen him, threatened my life. He’d pulled a gun on me and threatened to take my life.

And just like the insect he’d named himself for, he was out for blood. Against this Chaugnar Faugn creature, he was getting it, too. He held his hands in a saw-like formation; his palms flat out, his fingers, thumbs and all, pressed firmly together so that his hands were like arrowheads. He jabbed them, one at a time, tip of the middle finger first, into the hard flesh of the Old One he stood perched atop, and each time he made a strike, an oozing black blood shot out of a wound he’d just punctured through.

After a few hits, Chaugnar Faugn tossed him, and Mosquito landed on a smaller beast I hadn’t even noticed was approaching. I stared up at him as he wrestled for his posture over the tentacled reptilian semi-deity, but as soon as he went for one of those attacks, as soon as his hand broke the thing’s skin, the blood that came spewing out from the wound hissed and sizzled onto his skin. It ate at the flesh on his neck and singed his shoulder, and as he let out a yelp of pain, he came tumbling to the ground.

Mint-Berry Crunch was able to come to his aid in one respect, destroying the creature in a
mint-leaf cyclone, but Mosquito himself lay ailing while the other two remained distracted with the idol-like monstrosity. Knowing that he couldn’t survive that attack on his own, I darted over to Mosquito and turned him over onto his back.

Falling off of the creature had caused his cap and mask to fly off, so I was faced with not Mosquito, really, but Clyde. Just Clyde Donovan, someone I had severely fucked over by sending his girlfriend to the asylum. I didn’t know what it was like to really be in love. Not the kind Clyde and Bebe had. Not the mutual ‘I love yous,’ not the kind of affection that made you feel like someone important. As a matter of fact, nobody had ever told me they loved me. Which—which was fine, I mean, I didn’t like myself all that much, either. Hence my stupidity for leaving the world for Chaos.

But here I was in an even worse position than I’d been when I saw Disarray take down the Human Kite. I’d watched that, but I hadn’t seen any damage up close. I’d seen the result of Disarray being singed in Toolshed’s attack, but I hadn’t seen the direct aftermath. Well, here it was.

Clyde Donovan was on his death bed. He just plain was. There was no flesh on the entire right side of his neck, it had boiled away with the splash from the creature’s blood. His shirt had dissolved over his right shoulder, which showed muscle and tissue rather than skin. He was having difficulty breathing.

“Fuck you,” he spat up at me when I knealt beside him to help. “You’re sinking really low.” His voice was a strained whisper, as he fought to speak. Painfully, he reached for his gun with his left hand, then cocked it and held it to my head. “You’re dying with me, Chaos. I’m at least going to give her that.”

“I’m not Chaos,” I murmured.

It was the first time I’d said it. At least in R’lyeh, if not ever.

“Bullshit,” Clyde said hoarsely.

“I’m not,” I tried to convince him. My heart was pounding; I had to do something. She had loved Bebe like a sister. Bebe, who’d helped take me in under her wing with Wendy, who defended me sometimes, who would be there if I needed to call on a day I didn’t want to be lonely. Jesus Christ, I’d really fucked up. I had had a nest of people who cared. I honestly, truly had. And, no, Clyde was never one of my real good friends, but he’d always given me the time of day. At least there’d been that. But now, because of what I’d done, he had the barrel of a gun pressed against the side of my head. “Please, Clyde, you gotta believe me, I’m not Chaos anymore. I want to help you.”

“I’m dying, you asshole,” he snapped. “And so are you.”

“NO! NOBODY IS DYING! Okay?! You hear me?! Nobody is dying!” I shouted. I then ducked my head away as a last resort, bowing it so if he pulled the trigger he’d miss, but his arm was already starting to go stiff.

Through my gloves, I couldn’t tell if he was already cold, but I had to do this before his life could drain out completely. I didn’t want anyone to die. Jesus, no, I really didn’t want anyone to die. Motives, whatever, all I knew was that I wasn’t watching death. I’d seen enough. I’d seen more than enough. Maybe Chaos really was gone. I left the helmet. I had left the helmet and I wasn’t going back for it. I couldn’t see myself making a new one, either.

I was not Chaos.
I’d Transformed. And become better.

Thinking fast, I held my hands over Clyde’s two wounded areas, and drew a breath in, just as I’d done with Eric. As long as we had contact, and as long as there was breath in me, he wouldn’t die. I stared at the two troubled spots, and begged for the flesh to return. For everything to be back the way it was supposed to be. For the second time, I just simply… undid the damage.

Clyde started breathing again. He coughed out several times, and sat up with a jolt, covering his mouth with his right hand. There weren’t even scars on his shoulder and neck. I smiled to myself. I’d reversed the process. Nobody was going to die.

Shaking, he stared at me, then scrambled back. He grabbed up his gun and, crouched into a position on one knee, held the gun out to fire, locking onto me with one open eye, the other squinted to give him better accuracy. “I-I wish you wouldn’t kill me,” I ventured to ask him. “I can heal things now.”

“How the fuck did you do that?” Clyde demanded. “And why?”

“I gave up Chaos, and—“

“I don’t buy it,” he snapped. “I do not buy it. You were ready to kill all of us!”

“It was a nightmare, and I woke up.”

“That’s the dumbest excuse I’ve ever heard in my life!”

“I want to fix things!” I shouted back at him. “Clyde, I wanna fix everything I did wrong! I woke up. All the tools that made me crazy are gone. I want—“

“Crazy?” he wondered, lowering his gun a little.

“Yes, crazy!” I confirmed. “My head’s still kinda funny right now, but the only thing I know I wanna do is try to make things better, okay?! Just give me a chance to do that. Give me a chance, and if I don’t, go ahead and shoot me. But you’re not dead, so go kill that Immortal so you guys can stop this stupid End!”

For a few moments, Clyde was speechless. He kept the gun trained on me as he worked through his thoughts. Slowly, he stood, but didn’t take his hand off the gun, or his eyes completely off of me. He walked around me to where his mask had fallen, bent to pick it up, then put the gun in its holster long enough to tie it back into place again. “You watch yourself,” Mosquito warned me. “If I find out you deviated again, you’re going to wish all I did was shoot you.”


And then he was back in the fight. I stood back as Mosquito, the Coon, and Mint-Berry Crunch combined forces to bring Chougnar Fawn down, as the Coon pounded a final blow into the thing’s large face with his impressive talons, as the alien hero dissolved the thing down in a light pink rain. All I could do was watch.

I was not Chaos.

I was not a hero.

But I could heal, and I was not going to let this be the End. And so, when I was beckoned to follow their team back toward Cthulhu, I went. To once again see the Shadow first-hand, to witness
the heroes fighting as a team, and to solidify once more in my head that the world really was worth fighting for.

It wasn’t a perfect world, but nothing could be. I wasn’t a perfect person, but I never could be. My brain was still a mess, and some darkness still threatened, but I pressed on. No longer Chaos, no longer an agent of destruction.

Just me.

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Stan

The things that gave us the worst trouble, as our small team doubled back toward where Cthulhu and the Shadow still fought, were terrifying, horned and bat-winged things that Henrietta identified through the wire as night-gaunts. They moved alarmingly fast, and even though I’d been given a pretty fantastic boost of speed from the Shadow, they were tough to catch. Their skin, ink black and rubbery, was tough to penetrate, but we managed against them.

An entire army of night-gaunts drove our small portion of a team back closer to where Cthulhu and the Shadow still fought, but we were not about to stay on the defensive. The Human Kite boosted both me and Craig skyward on two flat slabs of rock that he mentally hoisted up from the ground, until we made it to the heads. Craig unsheathed his two swords and drove them into the night-gaunt’s skull, while I hacked off the horns from the one I’d landed on with my chainsaw, then started in on a hole in its skull, which, the second I’d put that chainsaw away, I fired two drill bits into. Craig flipped his sunglasses up onto his head and blasted a laser right through his night-gaunt’s skull, and then Kite lowered the two of us down as the beasts fell. There were still several more, though.

Even with Red Serge and Iron Maiden lending a hand, there were dozens of them yet to take down. I wasn’t feeling out of breath at all yet, which was a good thing. I honestly couldn’t get enough of my amped up strength and agility. I had faster reflexes than I could even imagine having prior to that day; my sprint was faster than my top speed, and I’d already been the fastest in the League. I could switch out tools hardly without a thought. Reaction time was so short; I could just simply tell what I needed in order to get a job done. No deliberating, no second-guessing. Whatever I drew, I knew I’d win the fight with that.

Craig’s prophesied power was fucking incredible to watch, too—I couldn’t even count how many things he’d taken down with just a look. Red Serge had his ghostly possessions down to a science, and managed to pick and choose exactly what kind of skills he needed to borrow from beyond to be most successful in a task.

As Craig and I jumped down from the rocks to re-join the Human Kite on the ground, Iron Maiden encircled yet another, and on his signal, iron spikes shot up from the place where he’d made his circle, stabbing up into the loathsome creature.

“Dude,” I said to the Human Kite, “you know what we’ve gotta try now, right?”

“Oh, hell yeah,” he grinned, cracking his knuckles. “Count it.”

“In ten,” I smirked.

“What’re you guys doing?” Craig wondered flatly.

“Taking off,” said the Human Kite. And with that, he gave himself a running start, then kicked himself airborne, extending the gilder out to its full wingspan. Three night-gaunts were heading our way. I gave one over to Red Serge and Iron Maiden, whose individual jobs were to beat it down and trap it, respectively. Kite and I had our eyes on the two others, while Craig kept a deadly lookout for more.

“Eight, seven…”

I darted away, jogging backwards so that I could get a good running start myself. Remembering that Kite’s wire wasn’t working, I hollered out, “Six! Five! Four!”

I sprinted forward, working up quite a run, and dislodged my sledgehammer from my back. “Three! Two! ONE!” I hurled my sledgehammer skyward and immediately drew out my chainsaw when I found myself skidding to a halt in front of a night-gaunt that I hadn’t seen among the first few. I sawed into its legs and brought it to the ground, then stabbed it between the horns with my awl and sprinted back so that I could watch Kite carry out the rest of the ricochet.

He didn’t even touch the tool. He didn’t need to. He called it up toward him, then spun into an impressive backflip; when the midair spin ended, Kite, having gained plenty of airborne momentum, drew his hands back over one shoulder, and the sledgehammer followed his actions just a few inches in front of his chest. He then shoved his hands and arms forward, and the sledgehammer crashed right through the skull of the first night-gaunt—in one side and out the other. Kite noticed that the second probably wouldn’t penetrate that hard, so he caught the sledgehammer in his hands on the other side, landed on the second one’s head, and smashed its head right in with the force of both an aerial and landed attack.

I was just laughing. I was just so fucking pumped on the adrenaline of the situation, I just could not help laughing. Because this felt incredible. “DUDE!” I shouted at Kite when he lighted back down on the ground and handed me back my sledgehammer. “Dude, holy fuck, we kick ass!”

“Yeah, dude, not arguing with you,” he grinned, giving me a congratulatory punch on the shoulder. “We’re all fuckin’ owning this, aren’t we?”

“No kidding. I mean, Craig with the lasers, and… dude, I haven’t even seen what some of the other guys can do…” I was grinning like an idiot and I knew it, but who could blame me? This was the life-or-death situation to end them all, but I couldn’t help but feel like a bit of having amped powers was just a bit fun.

A few ricochets, laser blasts, pummelings and iron entrapments later, we’d done away with the score of night-gaunts, and at that point, I heard Mosquito buzz into the wire, “How’s everyone holding up?”

“We’ve got Red Serge and Iron Maiden helping out,” I reported in. “Don’t know where the Coon is, but the rest of our team’s intact.”

“I’ve got the Coon,” said Mosquito. “Marpesia? TupperWear?”

“Making our way back to Cthulhu now,” came TupperWear’s voice.

“All right,” said Mosquito, “I suggest we all do. Nothing else has risen for a while, that a safe assumption?”

“Yes,” said Marpesia.
“We’re clear,” Craig confirmed.

“Oh, by the way,” Mosquito added, “we’ve also got Butters.”

“Oh, huh, really?” I wondered.

“What’s up?” Kite asked.

“They found Butters.”

“Oh.  Wait.  Wait, not Chaos?  Butters?”

“Yeah, like…” Oh, right, he’d been unconscious when I’d seen Butters last time. It had appeared that he’d switched sides in our favor, but I couldn’t entirely be sure. Oh, well, we’d find out soon enough.

Our team re-grouped several minutes later, once again at the steps of Cthulhu’s tomb. The Priest looked furious, and as soon as we approached, he swatted down the Shadow. It seemed that only Cthulhu could really touch him. The Shadow went from a dark, flickering, flamelike form to his serpentine shape, and darted up at Cthulhu in an attempt to strangle it.

None of us, I can safely say, had ever been so concerned for Kenny as we all were then. He’d been ailing back home; he had been getting progressively sicker, his skin paler, the shadows on his face deeper. I began to worry that we might never see human Kenny again, now that Mysterion and the Shadow were one. He’d even made mention that his body was pretty much out of commission.

And this was the very last stretch of the battle. Just us against Cthulhu. Just Cthulhu against his own Shadow. We had to win. We just had to.

Kenny just plain had to live.

None of us would have been there if Kenny hadn’t managed to get us all together. Nothing would be turning out this way if not for Mysterion. Without the League, I realized, I would have gone crazy a long time ago, and be sitting with the rest in the asylum by now. Instead, here I was, with the rest of the team, ready and willing to do whatever it took to stop that plague of madness once and for all. Ready to stop the End.

“Mysterion’s having a rough time,” Kite noticed, speaking on a low tone that only I could hear.

“No kidding…” I said. “I’m getting worried.

“I’ve got an idea. Bear with me.” Kite beckoned all of us into a huddle, then said, “Okay, guys, listen up, Mysterion needs some help, right?” The group nodded. The Coon; Marpesia and TupperWear; Mosquito and Craig; Iron Maiden and Red Serge; even Mint-Berry Crunch… all of us were in it for the very last go. “So here’s what I’m thinking. We’ve gotta sneak-attack this damn Dark God, or he’ll be too fast for us. Everyone be as silent as possible, but here’s what I’m thinking…”

He divulged to us his plan—which, coming from him, was nothing less than fucking brilliant—and then we broke formation in order to carry it out. At that point, I did notice Butters, standing on the outside of the circle. He was not wearing Chaos’s helmet. But he stood loyally to the side, looking ready to help however he could.
Kite and I were the first to move on the plan, with Mint-Berry Crunch, Craig and Mosquito on immediate second wave. “If I moved a rock right now,” Kite had said in the huddle, “Cthulhu would notice, and we’d be sunk. Toolshed, I’m flying you up there.”

So now, there I stood, bracing myself. Back home, when Kite had first figured out he could fly short distances with his glider, he’d also been able, a few times, to carry Red Serge (being the smallest of us) a short distance as well. I was at least a full foot taller than the kid, though, plus carrying all those tools, I figured trying to hoist me up would give Kite a little trouble, but he was confident. “You ready, dude?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Let’s do this.”

“Kay, I’m just gonna ask you to do one thing, and that’s don’t tense up, got it?”

I let my breath out and made myself stand normally. “Got it.” It’s such an involuntary reaction, when you know you’re going to be picked up, to want to tense your entire body, so this was going against instinct, but I managed to stay relaxed.

“All right,” said Kite, “now just stay relaxed till I tell you I’m dropping you off.”

“Gotch’a.”

And with that, he grabbed me around the waist with his left arm, and placed his right on my shoulder, where he took hold of the material of my shirt. And then my feet were no longer planted on the ground. I could feel wind rushing around me, and as much as I wanted to open my eyes, I didn’t, since I knew I’d tense up if I watched myself leave the ground. The next thing I knew, I was being lowered, and Kite said into my ear, “Okay, dude, you’re good to go.”

I opened my eyes, and the Human Kite lowered me completely to Cthulhu’s back. The Great Old One felt the contact, but by that point, the rest of the plan was already in place. We had this. I drew out my sledgehammer, while Kite kept his altitude several feet back and set his eyes on a couple of stone slabs, where Mosquito and Craig were already in position. Mint-Berry Crunch nodded up toward us, and the Coon darted back behind the Shadow, which twisted and contorted back down to the shape that showed us the outline of Mysterion.

_Hold on, man,_ I thought for our leader. _Almost there…_

I swung the sledgehammer a couple times for better momentum, then smashed it into the back of Cthulhu’s bulbous head. The Dark God let out an agonized roar, so I went ahead and hit it again. It probably didn’t feel like much, but it was enough to disturb him. Cthulhu brought up one hand to try to yank me off, but I was too fast for him; I rushed up to the top of his head, missing the hand by a couple feet, then switched out my sledgehammer for my drill gun; I turned and fired it four times into Cthulhu’s hand. I had one round of drill bits left after that, so I reloaded quickly, hoping that one more cartridge would get me through everything else I may need that gun for.

Kite hauled up the two stone slabs holding the other two. Mosquito leapt off of his and onto Cthulhu’s hand, where he jabbed one hand, fingers pressed flat together into Cthulhu’s wrist. Upon impact, a geyser of Cthulhu’s blood shot out, and Mosquito jumped down to where I was, drawing his .45s. “Craig, now!” Mosquito said into his wire.

Craig drew his swords; the stone slab he was riding upward was just below Cthulhu’s tentacled mouth, and once within range, he crossed the swords over his head and sliced off three of those writhing tendrils. Cthulhu, in pain, crouched down on all fours, which was just to Kite’s plan. Below us, Mint-Berry Crunch created his pink-screened diversion. By holding up a forcefield of
pink light between himself and Cthulhu, the Dark God was thoroughly distracted. It did not notice
Craig join me and Mosquito; it did not notice Kite lighting beside us as well, or Craig passing off his
swords to the Human Kite in favor of drawing guns for himself.

It did not notice the Coon completely disappear behind the Shadow, or Red Serge dart
beneath. With his sword, Red Serge marked an x below each of Cthulhu’s wings. Everything was
in place.

Cthulhu brought down his wounded hand, but below, TupperWear caught hold of it, and, once it was distracted yet again, Marpesia hurled her spear—tipped with one of TupperWear’s
remaining vials of toxic blood—right between Cthulhu’s eyes, which signaled me, Mosquito and
Craig to fire straight down into Cthulhu’s head. Kite leapt down to the Old One’s neck and jabbed
the two swords in. Before Cthulhu could buck or stumble, Red Serge gave Iron Maiden the go, and
he created circles in the ground at the two x marks that the young Canadian knight had made. Iron
spikes shot up from the ground and pierced Cthulhu right through the wings.

The Shadow twisted in shape below us—good, good, we’d bought him plenty of time to
recover. Kite’s plan exactly. The Shadow then built itself up into higher and higher a flickering
darkness. A set of glowing eyes could be seen stalking through the Shadow, but it didn’t take long
for me to figure out that they weren’t Kenny’s. Sharp and yellow, they pierced forward, and a
moment later, the body they belonged to melted into view, and the Coon emerged, focused and feral;
he leapt, and landed on the tip of Marpesia’s spear, lodged between Cthulhu’s eyes. He ran up the
spear, then lifted his hands out to either side. A quick flex of his fingers and the talon armor
extended, and once he had a target, the Coon dug those claws deep down into Cthulhu’s thick,
leathery skin.

“FIRE!” I shouted to Mosquito and Craig again, and once more the three of us shot a few
rounds into Cthulhu’s head. The Dark God howled in pain, and then a cyclone of leaves shot into its
face like an uppercut—Mint-Berry Crunch was doing his part after all.

“Right, I’m heading back,” said Mosquito, reloading his .45s just before he darted down
Cthulhu’s back while the Dark God was still on all fours. As he ran, Mosquito fired down into the
Immortal’s spinal column.

“Craig, here!” the Human Kite called up. He handed the swords to Craig, who sheathed
them right after he’d put away his guns. The Human Kite then leapt forward to yank Marpesia’s
spear from out between Cthulhu’s eyes. After he tossed it back down to her, he shouted, “Toolshed,
the sledgehammer again, now, go! Craig, you know what to do!”

Craig nodded, and, as soon as I’d drawn out my sledgehammer—damn, everything was
going according to Kite’s plan!—he rushed over to climb onto Cthulhu’s right wing, being the
closest to the tomb’s staircase. I swung the sledgehammer over my head, while the Coon clawed his
way back down, digging his talons into Cthulhu’s neck the entire way down. Most of the others—
everyone but myself, Kite, Craig and TupperWear—all rushed into the safety promised by Mint-
Berry Crunch’s forcefield, which gave us enough room to keep moving.

I brought the sledgehammer down as hard as I could on Cthulhu’s skull; and again, and
again. Kite hovered a safe distance just forward from Cthulhu’s face, looking more and more
pleased with the plan as, with each swing, I got Cthulhu to lower its head just a little more. Once I’d
beaten him down to almost ground level, Kite called out, “TupperWear, now!”

TupperWear, indestructible as he had become, darted forward and pulled out the last of his
toxic blood vials. Kite took to the air and landed behind me a safe distance, while TupperWear
stared the large beast down. Craig, meanwhile, was already going forward with the rest of his part—
using his lasers not to destroy Cthulhu itself… but to destroy its tomb. He was blasting away at the rock, piece by piece, until, very soon, the staircase would crumble.

“You’re gonna wanna move!” Kite cautioned me. So I jumped back, and just in time, too, since that was the moment TupperWear removed the lid of the blood sample and hurled the small jar at Cthulhu’s face.

The blood melted into Cthulhu’s skin, and the Dark God roared angrily. Craig had the foresight to leave while he could, but Kite and I were stuck on Cthulhu’s back, and when the Dark God reeled back in pain, I was thrown. Kite was faster than Cthulhu’s shakeoff was strong, though, and he caught me midair. This time I had no room to worry about tensing up or not, I was just so damn glad he’d caught me. The ground rushed by below me, and I heard the wind in my ears again. Shit… there was nothing like flying. As if I hadn’t had any drive before, now, that really made me feel like I could do anything. Just that rush of being midair, but fully controlled—Kite really had a handle on that power, God damn… it was such an incredible feeling, being airborne. And because I’d touched the air, I felt like I could go on doing anything. Cthulhu was a huge, formidable foe, but I honestly felt like we could beat it.

Kite lowered me down so that the two of us landed with the others; TupperWear joined as well, and Craig followed a few steps behind, giving one last good blast to the staircase.

The fixture of the stairs came crumbling down, almost just as soon as Craig had slid his sunglasses back on. “All yours, Mysterion!” Mosquito shouted up to the Shadow.

The weakened Cthulhu lifted its heavy head, and the Shadow blazed skyward. He slithered into serpent form again, and enveloped Cthulhu, swirling from one end to the other. The Shadow then melted away, down into the ground, as Cthulhu’s tomb continued to collapse. The Dark God roared out in anguish again, and the Shadow stabbed skyward with innumerable tendrils, grabbing at the underside of Cthulhu’s body. The Shadow then righted himself, taking human-like form again in front of Cthulhu, with his back turned to the Immortal Priest.

The part of the Shadow that still looked like Mysterion extended his arms, and with the action, his wings outspread. When he splayed his fingers, the wings shot backward, cutting as if they were solid and sharp into Cthulhu’s face, shoulders, and damaged wings. “This—is—not—the —End—” I heard the Shadow whisper out, in what was slightly still Mysterion’s voice. With that, the part of the Shadow still cast on the ground, grabbed Cthulhu’s wrists and ankles and yanked it down to the ground.

Cthulhu shook itself of the iron spikes—which made Iron Maiden a little distraught—and forced itself up. With a dissatisfied howl at the Shadow, Cthulhu began to saunter off toward the Gate.

Shit.

“I don’t think so!” Mysterion shouted after Cthulhu. The Shadow then flared up into serpent form and grabbed Cthulhu momentarily back, but we’d provoked the Dark God long enough. It was done. It just wanted destruction and the End now.

Cthulhu turned on all of us and roared out a pressure wave, which would have killed us all instantly, had the Shadow not covered us in a few solidified tendrils, which smoked somewhat from the impact, but ultimately survived. Cthulhu attacked the League again, but the Shadow wasn’t having that. He protected us again, and then yet a third time—after that, the bored Dark God turned away and stalked back in the direction of the Gate.
“AYE!” the Coon shouted out at the Dark God. “Where the hell’re you going?”

The Shadow gathered himself into a single form, and then, again resembling a flickering black flame, shrank down to Mysterion’s regular height, the dark aura still floating and slithering around him. He stood before the line of us, then lifted his head, still obscured by Mysterion’s purple hood. This time, though, I could see the lower half of Kenny’s face. His skin was bone white, his lips cracked, colorless and dry. Behind the mask, his eyes were barely blue.

“Thanks so much for your help, guys. Cthulhu’s heading for the Gate,” said Mysterion, his oozing black wings reaching out in the direction the Priest had gone, as if to follow along. “Mint-Berry Crunch, I need you to get these guys over there safely. Once you’re there, we’ll see how far along I’ve got Cthulhu, all right? I’m going after him.”

“What about the other Old Ones?” I wondered.

“The summon is over, guys, good work,” Mysterion congratulated us. “He’s not getting any backup. Look, I’ve figured out how to close off R’lyeh for good, send it back where it came from before these things came to Earth in the first place. It’s just us against Cthulhu now, and we’ve got to stop him before he goes through that damn Gate.”

“We’ll see you there?” Kite dared to ask.

“You will,” Mysterion promised. “Just go, I’ve gotta catch up with that thing, all right?”

“You can do it, Mysterion,” I told him. “You’ve got this, dude.”

“We’re all right behind you,” Mosquito added.

“Shadow League’s on it,” said the Coon.

“Thanks, guys. I gotta go.”

Before he could, though, a slight sound came from behind us, and each of us, Mysterion included, turned to acknowledge the person who had made it. It was true. Chaos just… was gone. Without him, Butters seemed to be almost back to normal again, though it seemed like it would take him quite a while to fully regain himself.

“End it, Mysterion,” said Butters, his voice a trembling plea. “Please.”

Mysterion nodded, and then his shape disappeared inside the Shadow, which hurried off to catch up with Cthulhu. Every one of us in the League looked around at each other, each thinking the same thing.

Please let Kenny make it through this.

We were going to stop the End. He deserved the victory more than any of us. Dammit, he was going to live to see it. He was going to live to return to his girlfriend and sister, and to life as one of the rest of us. He was going to. He just had to.

“Okay, guys,” said Mint-Berry Crunch. “Thanks for letting me help.”

“Not exactly the fight you thought you were gonna have, huh?” the Coon scoffed at him.

The alien among us shook his head, but said nothing else. He held his hands out and engulfed us in a large bubble. He’d done that before, several years prior, to save us from R’lyeh
when we were only nine. This time, though, his mode of transportation carried us only as far as the Gate, where Yog-Sothoth still stood guard.

We’d beaten the two Immortals there. I didn’t feel like I’d lost any of the Shadow-influenced power yet, so I drew my sledgehammer, ready to keep fighting. So, too, did Craig draw his swords; Red Serge took hold of his smaller sword, and Marpesia stood at the ready with her spear. Kite, Mosquito, TupperWear and the Coon were more confident hand-to-hand, and stood on their guard as well.

Onto the horizon came Cthulhu’s massive shape. It stalked forward, every once in a while swatting to either side with one hand or the other, and as it came into view, I saw that the Shadow was not letting up against it. No matter how Cthulhu tried to shake him, the Shadow persisted.

And now, here we were at the Gate. The Shadow League. We stood ready to fight one last time, if need be, against the Great Cthulhu, or ready to follow Mysterion through the Gate. Through the Gate and home.

“If you can hear me,” I heard the voice of the Guardian Angel say through the wire at that point, “then please do everything you can.”

“We will, Karen,” I answered in Kenny’s place. Kite cast a glance at me, and understood immediately why I was talking to her. He nodded his agreement.

“Beat Cthulhu, guys. End this.”

“Don’t worry,” said Mosquito. “We’re at the Gate, and this is where it’s gonna stop. Cthulhu’s not coming through.”

“I’m standing by,” the Guardian Angel said, “just in case.”

With that promise in the back of our minds, we stood our ground. Cthulhu and his Shadow approached—one ready to plunge the world into eternal darkness and madness, the other unwilling to accept an End of any kind. The Gate was so close, but none of us, for a second, thought about stepping through. We came here together, and we were going to see this fight through to the end together.

We were the Shadow League.

And here, now, at R’lyeh’s ancient Gate, we were going to bring an end to the End.
Episode 30: With Strange Aeons

Kenny

It’s really strange, being alive but not having a body.

Not a real one, anyway. Not anything physical, not anything familiar. Just shape and mass… but not a body, by any means, no. Just a form. Something to contain a soul. To keep thought in one concentrated area.

I thought I had seen everything, in my close to seventeen full years of life, and especially my several years of death. I had seen Heaven. I knew Hell like the back of my hand. I had seen Purgatory and the Spaces Between. Even on Earth I’d seen crazy shit. I’d been caught up in plenty of hard to believe situations before. I’ve been a ghost. I’ve been next to nothing.

But as the Shadow, I was everything.

I really could see everything. Rather, I could see anything I wanted.

Because I could watch from the shadows. As the Messenger, Nyarlathotep had been able to see any part of Earth he wanted. He could wander anywhere on Earth, and speak any of the planet’s many languages. The Shadow didn’t even have to go far. I had an eye on anything I wanted to see. Simultaneously. There is no place on Earth that does not cast shadow, and therefore nothing was out of the realm of possibility. The whispers I heard now were like instructions, where to go, where to lead Cthulhu, how to encircle the globe with the darkness I could cast, but I ignored them.

When I first stood in Cthulhu’s presence, I felt more than alive. I was omnipresent. I could be anywhere I wanted, I could see anything I wanted. I could destroy anything I wanted. All I had to do was cast the right shadow. Kill or drive mad; I could do anything the other Immortals could.

This was what it felt like to play R’lyeh’s game. To feel Immortal. All my life, I’d felt pain with every single death. Now, I had limitless sight; I didn’t have a body, so I couldn’t feel pain.

When I rose up against Cthulhu, the Dark God was confused at what he viewed as my retaliation. He had cursed me; for all intents and purposes, I was probably supposed to be doing nothing but executing his will. I was the Shadow that could silence the world, after all. Or, well, that was what this whole fucked-up dimension wanted me to be.

Both R’lyeh and the Old Ones had really fucked up by choosing me. As long as I had a conscious thought, dammit, I was Mysterion. I’d play my own damn game, thanks. So I caught on as fast as I could to what moving as the Shadow felt like; how to manipulate mass that wasn’t really a body. And I perfected it. I just made myself learn. If I was going to beat Cthulhu and save the world, I had to know what the hell I was doing.

Everything came to me fairly easily once I realized that I needed only to think of what I was doing in terms of defense. Come to think of it, I’d always been about defense. Protecting my town, whatever that meant at any given time. Protecting everyone close to me, whatever I had to do. Just go on protecting and preserving, Mysterion.

That’s what a hero is meant to do.
“Hello, Cthulhu,” I found enough of a voice to ‘say’ to the Old One when I stood in his presence for the first time. “Are you ready for the end?” I was referring to his own, but the dumb beast couldn’t figure that out.

Nearby, my team had been standing, ready for whatever turn the fight would take now. Cthulhu let out a groan, carrying on it words that only I in my Immortal state could understand: *There are unwanted presences in R’lyeh.*


That had been my first attack. Just as I’d been able to manipulate the shadows to drag Nyarlathotep down to R’lyeh, just as I’d been able to drown that Cultist, McElroy, in shadows, back in South Park, I struck out with that infinite weapon, and when Cthulhu had tried to strike himself, I went back on the defensive completely, in order to protect my team.

In order to give them the means necessary to help me finish things.

I’d taken one hell of a gamble on giving that extra boost to my team, but, just as I’d been hoping, those guys pulled through in spades. I didn’t want the fragments of the Shadow I’d given out to rebel against them. When I became—well, when I accepted—the Shadow, I became instantly aware of the potential R’lyeh had to do itself in. If Cthulhu had cursed me, and had some kind of connection to the Coon, and if, as I had watched from one corner of the shadows, Professor Chaos and General Disarray could both be granted powers from Nyarlathotep, I figured I could find a way to grant my team the abilities needed to take down each and every thing Cthulhu tried to wake. The actual space between rest and awakening was the time during which the Immortals were most vulnerable… so it was taking a huge risk, knowing what kind of potential control the Shadow could have over a human mind, but, dammit, I believed in my team, and they were more than ready to carry a bit of the Shadow with them.

I was able to watch everything. I saw Mosquito, the Coon, and the Human Kite almost fall, taking near-fatal hits for the team and for the good of everything; I saw Iron Maiden and Red Serge arrive on the scene, and the two were quick to take the added boost as well; I saw alarming and incredible attacks and defense all around. The only one who did not accept any extra help was Mint-Berry Crunch, but any more power for him may have been overkill anyway, so I understood why he’d refuse—still, though, dammit, I did kind of have to thank him for showing up. He was the one, after all, who brought my team safely to the Gate.

My influence on them, power-wise, would remain as long as I kept a fragment of my shadow melded into each of theirs. It was that way, too, that I was able to watch their movements while still concentrating my immediate efforts on Cthulhu. They’d all collected injuries, some worse than others, but the ultimate wild card was getting right to the quick on those who needed some pretty serious aid.

To be honest, I had not really expected Butters to make the turnaround that he had, but he’d really surprised me, and pulled through. I’d noticed that he was fighting with himself, right up until Nyarlathotep finally fell, so I took the ultimate chance on him. He seemed to be honestly trying to reform, and we needed all the help we could get.

He hadn’t disappointed. I watched him cast off Chaos’s helmet, and subsequently heal both the Coon and Mosquito; he now had his eyes on the nasty gash the helmet-less Marpesia had incurred on her temple. The team all together, plus Mint-Berry Crunch and the healer himself, Butters rushed straight to Marpesia, whose eyes went wide and mouth fell agape when she noticed the recovering villain coming toward her.
“W-Wendy!” Butters exclaimed, pausing right in front of her. “I mean, I mean—Marpesia. Marpesia, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, let me—“

“Butters?” she queried, confused but hopeful.

“Yeah. Kind of a long story I’m still sorta figurin’ out myself, but oh, God, Wendy, I gotta fix this,” he said. Gingerly, he reached a hand forward. Marpesia shrank back toward TupperWear, who held his ground for her, but when Butters said an unforced, honest, “Please…” the two of them relaxed a bit and allowed him to step closer. He set his left hand lightly over Marpesia’s gash; I saw her shudder, I saw him wince, but I saw, as well, that he did not break concentration for a second. He gently removed her bandage, and, muttering a little good luck to himself, sealed up the wound.

Marpesia stepped back, wide-eyed, and turned to her partner. TupperWear brushed her hair back to examine the spot, his expression immediately becoming one of disbelief: the gash was gone without a scar. “How did you…?” Marpesia began, as Butters showed a wry smile. Marpesia thanked him, and he took it with a gracious nod, then turned to apply his skill next to the back of the Human Kite’s neck, which was scraped and bleeding pretty badly from so much exertion after his fight with General Disarray.

While keeping a slight eye on them, I had my own—kind of metaphorical—hands full with holding back Cthulhu. I’d kind of had a feeling that the very last leg of our battle would bring us directly to the Gate. To the Space that connected R’lyeh to our world.

“Get ready!” I heard Mosquito call out to the entire team, his stance eager and solid. He took out his two pistols and spun them round in his hands, then took aim with one in our direction. Craig took up the place on Mosquito’s left, and Toolshed flanked him on the right. Not far off to the left, Marpesia gathered up her spear, and Red Serge took up his small sword. With Iron Maiden and Mint-Berry Crunch on either side of the Gate, ready to usher the others in at any moment, the Coon stood ready to rush the first attack, and TupperWear prepared himself for ground defense, while the Human Kite crouched, ready to take off at a moment’s notice. Butters, under Iron Maiden’s watchful eye, hung back, his eyes slightly uncertain as he watched the League prepare for action.

God damn, I really had lucked out with that team.

Here we go—they were waiting for me to cue up the start of the fight. Oh, we were gonna do this the right way; no holding back.

Keeping to the large, serpentine form, I coiled one huge mass of solid, sentient shadows around Cthulhu. Once he was caught, I extended the breadth of the shadows beneath him and up from that darkened spot summoned a thicket of tendrils. They wound up around each of his limbs and both of his wings, but that damn Dark God still took a lumbering, stubborn step forward, where Yog-Sothoth was coiled, where my team stood ready.

Cthulhu reached his left hand forward, upon catching sight of the League, but, just as he brought that hand down upon them, TupperWear ran forward, blocking its path from the rest. Cthulhu attempted to pierce the hero’s skin with two sharp talons, but TupperWear just smirked, took one of Cthulhu’s attempted stabs just to prove that his body itself had become his impenetrable armor, and then swiftly snapped Cthulhu’s finger.

The Great Cthulhu howled, mouth tentacles flaring. I gave the serpent a mouth of its own, one with plenty of solidly amassed fangs, and bit down on Cthulhu’s neck. “Never assume your Shadow is on your side,” I hissed at him, my voice in every direction I was pulling shadows from.
“Let’s move!” Mosquito instructed.

Marpesia stabbed her spear right down through Cthulhu’s upturned palm, where TupperWear now held it down. When Cthulhu glared down at the two of them, his face was perfectly angled down at the three-man firing squad as well, and, on Marpesia’s signal, Mosquito, Craig and Toolshed opened fire, directly into Cthulhu’s eyes.

“I’m out,” Craig muttered. He slid his guns into their holsters, then shouted, “Hey, Mysterion, you might wanna move.”

Hint taken. I uncoiled from around Cthulhu’s neck, and created another net of tendrils from the pool of shadows below. Craig, meanwhile, removed his sunglasses, and a long glare from his destructive eyes blinded Cthulhu’s own left eye. In a rage, the Dark God swiped down with his right hand. The Coon caught this one, held it over his head, and extended his talons right through Cthulhu’s sickly yellow skin.

“Yeah, that’s right, bitch!” the Coon grinned as his battle-cry.

Cthulhu growled, and leaned down to glare with his good eye at the person who once had walked with him on the path to world destruction. God, I had hated the Coon for that. Now, though, that very same, though somewhat changed hero smirked, revealing sharper-than-average teeth—one indication of his boosted abilities to match his hero name, I knew—and said, “What gives, Cthulhu? Sorry we didn’t work out, bro, but there’s some stuff on Earth that’s okay. Ya know?”

No, Cthulhu didn’t know, and he roared a destructive pressure wave directly at the Coon. He was petrified, and just as I was stabbing upward at Cthulhu with dark tendrils from the ground, Butters rushed forward and shoved him out of the way before Cthulhu’s attack could hit. He took some of the hit himself—it scorched his skin, and a part of his forearm melted back to the bone, but it began healing again right away. At that point, Mint-Berry Crunch rose up into the air and blasted Cthulhu with a huge, circular pink bolt. Butters shook his head and finished healing himself from the pressure wave’s damage, and then, as he was helping the Coon back up onto his feet, I actually heard Eric Cartman’s voice utter the words, in a completely real human way, “Thanks, Butters. I owe you one.”

Still looking a bit hazy and confused, Butters faintly smiled and said, “Don’t mention it. Or, well, actually, mention it later.”

“Huh?”

“Guys, stand back!” Mint-Berry Crunch instructed, lifting one hand high over his head to bring forth another, more intense attack with his own inherent powers. “If I remember anything from last time, I know where to strike on Cthulhu next. Stand back so you guys don’t get hurt, too!”

“Hey, dude, thanks for coming through for us!” Mosquito called up to him.

Mint-Berry Crunch grinned, proud to have been acknowledged. “No problem. Now,” he said, setting his sights on Cthulhu, “let’s see how you handle this again.”

Cthulhu didn’t seem to want to find out. Just as Mint-Berry Crunch blasted the Great Old One with a cyclone of those pink blasts, Cthulhu, even in the midst of taking some of those hits, swatted out with his right hand and grabbed the alien hero. “Shit!” Mosquito shouted, readying his pistol again and taking aim at Cthulhu’s wrist. Craig reloaded and he and Toolshed locked onto the same spot. But Cthulhu drove the talon of his thumb through Mint-Berry Crunch’s gut, and even I
had to admit, that was a pretty awful thing to have to see. Regardless of how I felt about the guy, nobody really deserved to have to get treatment like that.

He was still seemingly alive, though, when Cthulhu unfurled his palm, but the next thing that happened was Cthulhu tossing the hero through the Gate. “Oh, shit!” yelled the Coon, who, like me, had had extremely mixed feelings about Bradley’s involvement in the team from day one back when we were kids.

The three with guns—of a sort, in Toolshed’s case—opened fire again on Cthulhu’s wrist, and I yanked the Dark God back. With the snake’s head, I drove in another bite on his neck, and held his feet to the ground with as strong a hold as I could manage. “I can finish him,” I spoke to the rest of the League through the shadows. “I need you to blind his other eye.” The more impaired, the easier he’d be to bring down.

“That’s our opening!” I then saw Toolshed call out while Cthulhu shook himself of the attack. “Go for it, Mysterion, me and Kite’ll back ya!”

I reached up from the shadows, and held Cthulhu’s neck, keeping his entire body now anchored to the ground. Toolshed rushed up Cthulhu’s limp left arm; as soon as Kite took off, then, Toolshed hurled his chainsaw skyward, grabbing both screwdrivers for himself. Cthulhu would be much less of a threat if we took away his sight. Midair, Kite disassembled the chainsaw the way he’d done with the camera that night back home, grabbed the chain, and whipped it across Cthulhu’s face, causing him to turn his head toward Toolshed, who yelled, “Surprise!” and shoved his screwdrivers straight into Cthulhu’s pupil.

Kite landed, calling the chainsaw back together, and I lowered the great black snake’s head to his level. “How’re we doing, dude?” he asked, grinning up. Though faceless, I had a perfect view out of the serpent’s head.

“That was just what I needed,” I told him, my voice once again sounding from everywhere. “Thanks.”

“Hey,” Kite shrugged, “we’re your League. We’ll go wherever you need us to.”

“Good deal. Right now,” I decided, “all you guys gather at the Gate. Be prepared to back me again, but I think I know what to do.”

The two rejoined the group, all of whom gathered at the base of the Gate, as I had instructed. There were scattered whispers about what exactly could have happened to Bradley once he’d been thrown through, and Butters caught up to Toolshed, whose arms weren’t in the best shape after a bit of Cthulhu’s blood had singed them when he’d attacked that eye. “That is such a convenient power, dude, damn, thanks,” Toolshed said to him when his arms were healed over.

“Uh… thanks… yeah… i-it kinda is…” Butters fumbled with his words.

Optimistic as he’d always been in the League, Toolshed just grinned. “But that’s a good thing, dude, you’re saving all of us. Thanks again.”

“…I am?”

“Just say you’re welcome.”

“You’re welcome,” Butters mumbled uncertainly.

Cthulhu let out a great bellow, and began to lift his legs out of the shadows. It began to feel
like I was losing a game of tug-of-war; I couldn’t just hold him there forever. I needed a better point of attack. Thinking fast, I coiled completely around the now-blinded beast, until I memorized the shape and mass of Cthulhu’s own form, encasing him like a suit of armor. Then, billowing like smoke, I repurposed the shadows; I repurposed my own mass, and built up a replica in front of Cthulhu like a mirror. Two legs, two long arms, a set of leathery wings, the tentacles—a representation of Cthulhu in the darkness that should have been his own very Shadow from the start.

I could hear the League’s astonished reactions once I now had created a perfect silhouetted duplicate of Cthulhu. The Old One himself, though robbed of his sight, could sense the form I’d recreated, and let drone a satisfied growl. No satisfaction, fucker, sorry. I lifted one shadowed hand, and swept it hard across Cthulhu’s face. He stumbled, and brought his own hand forward to strangle the neck of his own Shadow, in an attempt to put it back in its place.

“Disappointed?” I hissed through the shadows at him, when the attack did nothing.

Cthulhu roared out a pressure wave, and I felt it pass through me. If I had been in my own body, a chill would inevitably have crawled down my spine.

I shoved the Dark God back another several paces, and, still a shadow of his own form, took hold of his cephalopodic head and pushed it down to the ground. Cthulhu let out a grunt of displeasure and picked himself up, grabbing around my representation of a shoulder with that tentacled mouth of his.

Swiftly, I shifted the Shadow’s form to that, again, of a serpent, and coiled around Cthulhu while he still held me in his jaws.

“You know me, Cthulhu,” I whispered to the Great Old One. I gave him my eyes for a moment, and we looked out with a pale filter over the length and breadth of R’lyeh. Everything was nothing. “But I never got to know you.” The Dark God blinked me out of his eyes, only to drone out again for the misery of having no sight left of his own, and I spiraled back; I was silk, I was air, I was water, I was nothing, I was flame, I was everywhere and nowhere. With no body, I was simply a physical idea. And because I was an idea, I could do anything.

“What’s wrong?” I continued, when Cthulhu backed away from the flickering shadows I sent roaring up from the ground. “Am I not acting the way you wanted me to?”

I had been in the process of realizing, all this time, that there was one thing, and one thing only, that I could thank my parents for… and that was keeping me far, far away from the Cult. As far as possible. Had I learned too young that I couldn’t die, maybe I would have thought that it was exciting, and gone with the Cult, to learn about my Immortal powers, and end up no better than the little Goth that Cthulhu had recently destroyed. Mysterion would never have saved me, if I’d gone with them. Mysterion would never have existed.

He would not have been there to help the budding League fight off Cthulhu the first time. He would not have been there to save anyone. Not a friend on the brink of death or insanity, not that beautiful girl now taking charge with her own safehouse, not even Karen. There had been so many different ways my life could have played out.

I’d chosen the path of Mysterion.

I had chosen to do good. To fight off any and every threat to my friends and my town. To take control of my life and be a symbol of all that was right and just.

No matter what happened now, there would always be that. However, I couldn’t deny that
there were simple truths about myself: the truth that the Cult had forced a curse upon me, the fact that
the Immortal me had been written about, centuries ago, in the Necronomicon. Only an Immortal
could kill an Immortal. I knew what had to happen now; I knew I wanted Cthulhu dead—needed
Cthulhu dead, and that I wanted to be rid of that curse.

There had to be a clue in there somewhere—the best way to kill Cthulhu had to be in the
Necronomicon.

Wait. That second couplet. There was a second couplet in that book, wasn’t there?

Henrietta had never told me what it was, just that she knew there was one. I only new those
usual two lines:

*That is not dead which can eternal lie;*

*And with strange aeons, even death may die.*

All that told me was that I could kill Cthulhu. It didn’t tell me how.

But it told me, really, all that I needed to know. As long as I could kill it, then, dammit, I
would. But I wasn’t going to just do it any old way. The Shadow wasn’t going to kill the Dark
Lord Cthulhu.

Mysterion was.

Letting the League in on our fight at the Gate had taken some of the strain off of me, and I
felt, now, recharged enough after suffering so much at my bier to take a stab at getting my body
back. How—how to go about that—let’s see—gather the shadows, eyes on the shadows…

It was a simple matter of remembering what a body was. I dismissed the serpentine form and
gathered the shadows together in a small, concentrated pool in front of the spot where the League
stood, on the Gate’s ledge. I remembered my height, my build, my bones, my skin, and built it all
back. It was a matter of will. Will, and narrowing my vision back to two distinct points.

I opened my eyes, and, just like that, I was breathing again. I could feel again. Skin on
muscle on bones. Heart rushing, blood pulsing through, air through the lungs, everything as it was
supposed to be. Fabric over my skin. Cloth over my eyes. Cloak covering my head, pressing down
my hair.

Mysterion.

“Holy crap, dude,” I heard the Coon comment behind me.

“Damn, Mysterion,” Mosquito added.

“That’s one hell of a trick,” said the Human Kite.

Remembering exactly how to move each joint, I turned to look over my shoulder, and
grinned at the team of them. “Thanks. Nice work, everyone.”

“So what now?” Toolshed wondered.

Everyone was eager and willing to keep on fighting, but there was really only one task left to
do. One that I couldn’t risk them being around to potentially get caught in. Their shadows were
entirely their own again. By dismissing my fully Immortal form, I’d also stripped them of their extra
boosts, which I should have figured would happen. Only an Immortal could kill an Immortal.

“You guys head back,” I said, turning away from them again as the blind Cthulhu slowly picked himself up. “I know what it is I have to do.”

“What?” That was Kite again.

I took in a deep breath, mentally and physically prepared for what had to come. “I have this feeling,” I told my team. “If I can kill Cthulhu while I stand in the Gate, the Gate itself will be destroyed. Guys, I’m going to finish this. Right here.”

“You’re… gonna be right behind us, though, right?” asked Mosquito.

I couldn’t answer that.

Fuck. I could not answer that. I’d already taken much too long of a pause before I said, “Go home, guys. That’s your mission now.”

The League had helped to take down the other slumbering Old Ones before they could wake. Cthulhu was the last thing left to deal with. Him, my curse, and the Gate to R’lyeh. This was a place that humans should not have been. No—the League had to go home. Their place was back home. They had to go home and tie up every loose end left back in South Park. Aid those in the asylums, set everything right again. My place was the Space Between. My job was to make sure that nothing from this dimension could pass through to Earth again.

The Gate told its own secrets. Yog-Sothoth did not care where he guarded the Gate. If he worked with me, we could move that Gate off of Earth for good. And then… no more R’lyeh. Possibly no more me, either, if I got caught, but as long as the rest of the Earth was safe, well… small price. Right?

“Mysterion…?” No… no, no, no, I thought, don’t let them question me. If I faltered now, I wouldn’t be the only one to fall. But still… I just wanted one last look. One last look at that incredible group, at everyone who really believed in me. Right up until the end.

Toolshed, who had spoken, looked a little fearful and lost, as did everyone behind him. “Kenny…” he said warily, “Kenny, what’re you doing?”

“Head on through the Gate, you guys,” I instructed, unable to hide any sadness in my tone. It was so hard saying goodbye. Such an uncertain goodbye, at that. All I wanted, though, was for each and every one of them to keep living. To get through that Gate and live on, and go on doing all the good they were capable of. “I’ve gotta finish this, and I can’t have any of you get caught in the crossfire.”

“You’re gonna be right behind us, though, right?” asked Kite. I bit back a choke and felt my eyes itch with tears, but refused to show them. He noticed anyway. “…Right?” he asked again, more firmly, as if to persuade me against the inevitable.

“I can’t guarantee anything,” I said, shaking my head, “but I’ll try to be. Okay?”

Don’t just try, Kenny, I heard the echo of my sister’s voice in my head, knowing full well her words were echoes of my own that I had spoken to her time and time again, do. I know you can.

Well—it all depended on the Shadow, now. Depended on how my body would hold up once I went through with everything that had to be done. So, sadly, all I could give my team was a maybe and a desperate prayer. Craig, TupperWear, Iron Maiden and Marpesia wished me their
strongest luck and stepped through. Henrietta confirmed through the wire that they’d arrived safely back. Mosquito ushered Butters in, then, and nodded to me, and told me not to give up, that I’d always have his support. Red Serge was the next to go, looking at me the way Karen did. Shit—I kind of had worked into ‘extra older brother’ status with that kid, huh? And not just from being good friends with Kyle, but from just so much as letting Ike on the team in the first place. More confirmations from Henrietta, along with a ‘hurry it up.’

Finally, it was just down to the three I’d always known. Down to Toolshed, the Human Kite, and the Coon. Stan, Kyle, and Cartman. Fucking shit—everything I could ever fucking remember, every single thing, all the best of it, I’d done with them. I was glad that Cartman had come around, and gone above and beyond expectations to really be a hero in this fight. I was glad that Stan and Kyle were the pair I always knew they’d be; both of them like brothers to me, both of them selfless, moral, and, once again, heroes.

“Dude,” Kyle went on, his tremulous voice evoking everyone’s doubt and worry, “we’re not leaving without you.”

I shook my head. “Please, guys, go,” I asked. “Just trust me with this. I need you to go through the Gate right now, understand? This is my only shot.” I bit back another threatening choke of nerves and doubt of my own, and instead made myself smile. “Thanks for everything,” I told them. “You guys really are the best.”

Cartman’s eyes, behind his mask, narrowed, and he hollered, “We better see you later, Kenny!”

“Don’t make us worry more than we have to!” Stan added, his own eyes tellingly moist behind his tinted goggles.

“You can do this, dude,” said Kyle. I could hear his almost childish attempt to put more strength into his tone. “We’re gonna be waiting for you.”

“Thanks you guys,” I said. Once again, I tried so hard not to tear up. This time, I didn’t succeed. “I’ll be seeing you.”

The three of them nodded stiffly, and then, with one last glance, all three disappeared into the void of the Gate. The final passage through.

“They made it, Kenny,” I heard Henrietta say. “Can you still hear me?”

“For now,” I told her, finally letting out that choke. “You still got that book?”

“Opened and ready when you are.”

“Thanks for all your help,” I said. I realized I hadn’t really thanked her lately. She deserved it, though. What had started out as a little revenge plot against her brother had turned into a save-the-world race for Henrietta Biggle. Someone give that Goth girl an award. Seriously.

“Yeah,” she said. “You know.”

“Hey, Yog-Sothoth!” I shouted over at the amorphous mass beside the Gate. The great beast let out a groan and moved slightly. “Got one more request for ya!”

Keep your head, Kenny, I told myself.

This is the moment you’re going to break your own curse.
The thought had come to me during my first battle with Cthulhu, at the tomb. Among my deaths, a sad handful of them had been suicides. I had killed my own human body plenty of times. But if only an Immortal could kill an Immortal…

Those words just plain haunted me. They filled my head and wouldn’t go away. Only an Immortal could kill an Immortal—so, by that logic…

An Immortal could destroy himself.

This was my chance to destroy both Cthulhu and the Shadow at once. If I did it in the Gate… only if I did it in the Gate, I could destroy everything. The End wasn’t coming to Earth. It was staying right here in R’lyeh. The Shadow’s final action had to be performed right there in the Gate, to break it off from the Earth’s crust for good, and banish it back to the Void from whence it had come. No more dimension of Old Ones to threaten us anymore. Take away the Spaces Between. No more paths for the Messenger to follow; no more Messenger to walk the spheres of life and death. It was a sacrifice. It was the sacrifice I didn’t want to make, but knew I had to.

If I was ever going to be rid of that curse, I had to kill the Shadow. Whether or not that meant that I’d live to see the result.

Just as long as I got rid of that fucking Gate. And I could.

What the Messenger says… You know?

In their eagerness to make me one of the Immortals, the Cult had given me a little too much. In that way, they had overestimated the power of their Dark God. Their strange stone idol, Cthulhu, could himself only do so much. I, his Shadow, could end it all. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to be the only Immortal left stalking the Earth, hell no. This was my only chance to break my curse. Even if it meant giving up the rest of my life. It really had come down to this.

So, to begin, as Henrietta read her last plea to Yog-Sothoth, to ask for his willingness to allow R’lyeh to depart once the Shadow gave the command, I closed my eyes and gathered the shadows. My vision narrowed as every piece of my Immortal self’s body rushed from where it had been and into me. There was only one fragment I kept elsewhere, wanting to keep that one there until the very last moment.

Making sure my body had been completely restored to its solid, human state—Kenny McCormick, average build, five-foot-ten, probably in need of a haircut; oh, well—I opened my mouth, and began to lip-sync to Henrietta’s words in the ancient Old Ones’ language. The Shadow’s slithering voice whispered out of me. It grew from a whisper to a loud drone, then finally to a blend of the Shadow’s ancient tongue and my own shout of defiance against the Immortals, against R’lyeh, against the Cult and against my curse.

“Let die the dimension of death!” Henrietta read out. I echoed her a split second after. “Thus shall speak the Shadow, Messenger to R’lyeh and Voice to Pierce the Void!”

“Let die the dimension of death!” I shouted. Cthulhu looked ready to kill.

Perfect timing.

I stretched out my arms, and started to walk backwards into the Gate. R’lyeh’s landscape began to rumble.

“Earthquake!” I heard, of all people, my sister say into the wire. I’d almost forgotten she was still connected. “Kenny? Kenny! What’s going on?”
“Hold on, Karen,” I said in return. “Just keep yourself safe, it’ll be over soon.”

R’lyeh was rebelling; it shook itself hard against Earth’s tectonic plates; I could hear the oceans heave. I could hear the End beginning—only one way to stop it. One more step back, and I was standing inside the Gate. At that very second, I tilted my head back and gave all of my conscious energy to the Shadow. It coiled within me, and then shot skyward out of my mouth, until it was whole, connected to me from all sides. For only a moment, I felt that sensation again, of silk or perfect warm water; it was replaced almost too soon by the aching density of my own skin and bones. It was as if I had never ‘felt’ so real. Every joint ached. Every muscle burned. I was dizzy and desperate, but I had to push on.

“Let die—“ I shouted again, catching my breath while I could still breathe, “the dimension—of death! Let—die—the dimension—of—death!”

From flickering nothingness to gigantic serpentine form, I saw, pitch black on pitch black, the Shadow, for the first time. Connected to me only, now, by the soles of my feet, the great snake turned toward me, faceless, terrifying, calm. I coughed, the way I had when I was four years old and in the hospital, about to die.

“You killed me then,” I asked the Immortal deity on the other side of the Gate, “and you’re killing me now, aren’t you? Sorry, Cthulhu. Your cults aren’t gonna have anything left to worship.”

The serpent slithered around me, whispering that we had to remain attached, that it and I were and would always be, but I ignored it, and felt my blood start to cool. “Silence it,” I commanded the Shadow. “Silence the call of Cthulhu. Today, this Gate closes! From this day on, there will be NO—MORE—R’LYEH!”

The serpentine Shadow coiled around me, then burst up in a blaze. The Gate began to crumble, both above and below me, but I felt myself rise with the motion of the Shadow. With a surprisingly clear view outside of the Gate, I saw Cthulhu lumber forth, so I thrust both arms straight out in front of me, and the coiling Shadow followed. It began to burst out through the Gate, and the moment it did, it felt as though I’d just split my own heart in half. I grit my teeth to bear with the pain, and kept my concentration on Cthulhu.

This was all another gamble.

It was the only one I could take, though. Deep breath, Kenny. You can do this.

I felt as though I was forcing all of my old deaths back upon myself again. Ignore the pain, ignore it this time, it’s nothing, it’s nothing, it’s nothing compared to what the entire world would feel if Cthulhu made it through.

The Gate continued to collapse around me. Yog-Sothoth let out an awful howl as my body began to feel numb. But I had to finish this. Now.

The Shadow drained from my body. I cast part of it out into the Gate; as I felt it slither and writhe around me, it knocked against the Gate’s barriers, smashing and shaking sunken R’lyeh away from the world. Just a little more… a little more… little more power, just a little more confidence and I’d have this…

“Let die the dimension of death,” I repeated. “Send these things right back where they came from. Into the Shadow, and into the Void.”

The Shadow grew larger and larger, and the Gate shivered and shook all around me. Yog-
Sothoth let out a bellow. He’d heard me. The Gate would move. The Shadow twisted and coiled, covering R’lyeh in the dark nothingness that had been prophesied would come instead to Earth. It looped right around the entire dimension, until the head returned to where Cthulhu stood.

When I was in ninth grade, I took a world history class. I hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but during the ancient Norse unit, we had to read a folk tale about a serpent that wrapped itself around the world. Legend said that the snake was so large, it could and did bite its own tail, and that if it ever let go, it would be the end of the world. Way to go, vikings, you guys called it. The end of one world, maybe.

Just not the one I’d grown up in.

This serpent was going to devour and destroy R’lyeh. Even if it had to do so upon my own dying breath.

I closed my eyes, and on the still, silent screen of my mind, I saw a tapestry. Every intricately woven fiber of my life. Everything I’d ever been. Everyone I’d ever known.

Everything I would have to leave behind.

And then, through the blackness, from the tiny sliver of a shadow that I had kept in Red’s safehouse, I saw a tiny little light. My vision was going, fast, but I could see a faint, golden glow. It was warm, familiar, comfortable. The last thing I would probably ever see. I knew that it was in Red’s home somewhere, and I knew that she was nearby. Safe. Protected.

*I love you,* I thought out to her, wishing I could tell her face to face, just one last time. Maybe, just maybe, I’d get a reprieve and have a day as a ghost before moving on. That seemed doubtful, though.

Death really had never felt so final.

I’d never heard words before, though. I had seen innumerable bright lights, beckoning me to a safe place where my soul could rest, even just for a little while, but never, ever had I heard a voice. And this wasn’t just any voice, either.

It was the unmistakable voice of my Guardian Angel.

“…nnny… Kenny… Kenny…?”

“Karen…” I whispered, surprised I could so much as make my lips move, let alone have sound pass through them. “Karen, I’m here. I’m safe.”

“Listen to me, Kenny.”

“I have to go, sis,” I said, still barely on a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

“I have something to tell you,” said my sister. I had a hard time telling if this was a present conversation or a past memory, or even if I was already hearing her speak at my grave. Oh, God—God, I didn’t even want to think about my funeral now. It would crush my sister, to be sure. Would the guys tell her and Red everything that happened? In the notes I’d left in my room, I had asked that Stan and Kyle let the girls know; my closest friends should be the ones to let them know. And I knew they would. Red and Karen would know everything. And hopefully be able to move on.

Jesus, God, please, no, I really didn’t want to die.
“What is it?” I whispered to my sister, unsure of how she could hear me, if she could at all.

Karen’s voice sounded frightened but determined when she answered, “It’s a poem. Or, actually, I think it’s a prayer.”

Something from her school in Salt Lake? I wondered. That was sweet. Comforting to hear on my way into whatever came next.

But what she said was no prayer I ever would have expected. It was a poem all right. A poem that had haunted me forever, because I’d never known the second half.

“That is not dead,” Karen recited, “which can eternal lie—“

Oh, God, did she know about my dying Immortality already…?

“And with strange aeons, even death may die.”

Karen… I tried to say, but no sound came out.

“But call to death,” she continued—wait… wait, she continued?—“with rite to give—“

Impossible. No. No, just… I’d never heard it before. I had never heard the second couplet before. How on Earth did Karen know? Had Henrietta told her? Had she discovered it on her own? She continued speaking:

“Death to the Immortal; the right to live.”

Those weren’t quite the last words I thought I would hear, but I accepted them. I had at least one of my many remaining questions answered. The guys could take it from here.

The rest of the Shadow burst out of the Gate, and the serpent opened its dark, smoky jaw. With a single strike, it devoured Cthulhu, and then its own tail.

I felt it.

I felt Cthulhu meet his end.

Howling, the tentacled, bat-winged monstrosity died a slow death inside its own cursed Shadow. His roar turned to a dull gurgle, and then was silenced forever. He disintegrated completely, molecule by molecule, and as he did, I held my breath. When the body was no longer anywhere to be seen, now or ever again, I drew in another breath.

And for once in my life, for once in the life that felt like it was fated to come very soon to its end, it was my own. It was different than any other breath I had ever drawn. It was free. Mine. Just mine. No Cthulhu. No curse. No Shadow.

Just Kenny.

No more curse.

The serpent let go of its tail.

It was the end of that world. The end of R’lyeh, the end of Cthulhu, the end of the Old Ones.
The end of the Shadow.

My curse was broken. We’d split in two. As soon as that thing had let go, I’d felt it die. And then nothing. No more hold at all.

That didn’t change the fact, though, that now I was just a normal person, mortal as could be, caught in the very last Space Between. Caught in the Gate. Barely having begun to fully live, I was now about to die.

As darkness closed in on me, I let my eyes slide closed, and felt a final chill come over me. At least I was dying with the satisfaction that I had won. The Gate was collapsing. Cthulhu was dead, and so was his Shadow. R’lyeh was no longer a threat to the world. The dimension had aligned again with what Henrietta had called Yuggoth, and the plague of madness here on Earth would stop.

My final selfish thought was the hope that everyone would remember me.

I had written notes to everyone I’d felt the need to, and I hoped they’d receive them and know exactly who had written them, and why. To the guys in the League, I’d written out my heartfelt thanks, to them as teammates and friends, to being such a strong net of support, for never once giving up on me. To my sister, I had written my apologies, and my regret that we had fallen out of touch; I had left her over half of my savings, and all of my familial love.

To Red, I had written out everything. Every truth of my life, from Mysterion to my Immortality. Everything she had deserved to know. Everything down to the final lines. She’d been the one girl I’d fallen in love with. The one girl who was able to teach me that I was capable of so much more. I loved her; I loved her. It was so hard to know I had to let go. She’d rekindled my faith in life.

Everyone I’d surrounded myself with had made me want less and less to accept this Final Death. I didn’t want to leave a single one of them. Which was why it was all I could do to hope that I would be remembered.

With a deafening crash, the Gate split in two. Yog-Sothoth made no more noise, and I was surrounded by nothing but frantic static. There I was, trapped in the Space Between. Until R’lyeh disappeared.

Water rushed around the Gate, which itself felt like it was moving. The seas surrounding Polynesia would no longer lead some ships to the sunken city of a forgotten dimension. I couldn’t feel its pull anymore. Yuggoth had reclaimed everything that had fallen into R’lyeh.

We had won.

My lungs filled with the same awful pith that had killed me for the first time when I was four years old, and the static sounded for a few more seconds in my ears before it ended completely. I was alone in the dark, and in the silence. Barely breathing. My body felt crushed. This was my End.

I coughed only once, and with that, I knew that the Shadow was dead. It was a sacrificial suicide, though Cthulhu had certainly given me a ride before I’d decided to finish the job myself. It wasn’t the first time I’d sacrificed myself, but it was the last. The very last time.

Because R’lyeh was gone, there was no need now for any other Space Between, and so my body became trapped. Somewhere. I could not tell where. Or if, perhaps, it would just disappear.
But at least I could die a little content. I’d had a great life. I hadn’t quite made it to seventeen, but I’d had a good life. There were some things I’d want to change if I could, and others I wouldn’t trade for anything in the world.

I breathed out, certain that I would never inhale again. As I did, I wished the best to everyone I knew.

And thanked them, with all my heart.

That is not dead which can eternal lie,

And with strange aeons, even death may die.

But call to death with rite to give

Death to the Immortal; the right to live.

Stan

The Gate blazed up behind us when the team of us found ourselves once again on the snow-covered ground behind the base. Not long after the final three of us had arrived, the ground beneath our feet began to shake, and we were jostled where we stood. The earthquake came as a surprise to us all, but even without speaking, we knew what it was. The Shadow was fighting back. Kenny was trying to destroy R’lyeh itself.

When the earthquake died down, we’d been knocked to the ground, sprawled in every direction. It took my eyes several seconds to adjust, and my body several more, but I finally registered the fact that I’d made it out intact.

Stiffly, I started to move. I’d never pushed myself so hard. Add on top of everything the ampved powers I’d been granted for the last push in R’lyeh, and I just knew I was going to be sore as hell for days. Small price to pay, though, considering I’d gotten out of the whole thing with no sprains, breaks or fractures, or huge gashes I’d have to explain, or anything like that.

I’d landed on my stomach, and felt someone else’s legs under mine. We were probably all in a knotted, awful heap, now that I thought of it since we’d all been tightly packed when the earthquake hit. Yep, there was someone on my back, too. I groaned and set my hands under my shoulders, then shakily tried to lift myself up. “Who’s on me?” I groaned out.

“Ow,” I heard Clyde say. “Sorry, man, I’m trying to move.”

“Here.” Ike was the next one to speak. Oh, yeah, good call—come to think of it, Ike and Timmy would probably be in better condition than any of the rest of us. “I’m not too big, but I can push you off, guy, ready?”

“Ugh, I feel like I got hit by a truck,” Clyde commented.
Slowly, though, his weight was lifted off of me, and I managed to get myself up onto my hands and knees. Once I sat back, both Clyde and Ike offered me a hand and got me standing up. A dizzy spell came over me once I was back on my feet, but it subsided quickly enough. Taking in a deep breath, I stretched my arms up over my head, then rolled my shoulders back. Goddamn. Yeah, I’d be sore for a while.

“Did we all make it?” I asked Clyde.

“Far as I can tell,” he said, glancing around. He’d untied his mask and set it aside, and was awkwardly touching the right side of his neck. “I still have no clue what happened to Bradley, and I dunno about Mysterion, man…”

“Well,” I said, looking down at the others, “let’s untie the rest of this knot and see what we can find.”

Kyle was the one who’d been right under my legs, and Craig lay not too far off, tangled under both Token and Wendy. Token was the first one up from that group, and he helped Wendy up first, before the two of them helped Craig up onto his feet. Clyde helped Cartman up, then started taking a walk around to check on everyone, avoiding the place where Butters had been spat out—yeah, still no clue what to do about Butters…and he was the only one who didn’t immediately stand.

I fought against my stiff back in order to bend down over my knees to offer Kyle a hand up. He’d already unhooked his glider and slid off his cap and goggles, and he had his gloved hands pressed over his eyes. “Hey,” I said to catch him up to speed, “you okay?”

“Mmph,” he muttered, “been better, but yeah.” He moved his hands back into his tangled, matted hair, which had been tinted something awful by the dust in R’lyeh. None of us looked all that great, though, and some of the team still had some minor injuries to tend to, as well. “Got another pretty bad headache.”

“Yeah, I bet,” I commented, holding out both of my hands. Kyle took them, and I helped haul him up to standing. We both fell into a hug at once, we were so fucking relieved to have made it out. But there was still a huge loose end to tie up; no celebrating yet. We kept hold of each other, at least to stay standing, though, when I called out to Clyde, “Dude, anything?”

Sadly, he shook his head.

“Well, wait,” said Kyle, wincing a little. He set one hand on the side of his head… still reeling from the headache, I guess… and continued, “Where’s Henrietta? She would’ve seen us all come out of the Gate, right?”

“Yeah,” the Goth’s voice sounded from nearby, “I did. Now, uh, you guys should probably take a look.”

“Look at what?” I wondered.

“Guys…” said Craig. His voice had more of a hint of worry than I had ever heard come out of that guy. Ever. Which meant that something was just not right.

“What’s up du—oh, shùt!” Clyde yelped.

“Wha—oh God…” Kyle had been the next one to speak. He and I turned at the same time to look back at the Gate portal, and what we found froze us both. Kyle’s hands flew to his mouth, and I just plain could not move.
There was no portal. There was only a pile of rubble. Just like Chaos’s portal… nothing left. Nothing. The scaffolding hadn’t even held up. The portal was gone, the entrance to R’lyeh was gone. Everything between us and there was…

“No…” Kyle said into his hands, shaking his head furiously, while I still could not say a single damn thing. “No—no—NO!”

“KENNY!” both of us shouted together.

I didn’t care how fucking sore I felt. We were not losing Kenny. Kenny was not stuck in R’lyeh, he was not stuck in the Gate, no, no, no—

“Kenny’s still in there!” Kyle screamed.

“Come on!” I called out for the others to help.

Like children digging for a lost treasure, Kyle and I attacked the rubble pile. He clambered onto it and started hurling down rocks and ruined bits of metal; I took the chainsaw off of my back to relieve some weight, grabbed out my awl, shoved it in between a few pieces of rubble, and smashed my sledgehammer against it. What we were doing was probably stupid, and we probably realized it, but we didn’t care. Our friend had died enough. He wasn’t dying on us this time. He couldn’t.


I’d only driven my sledgehammer in twice by the time Token and Clyde walked up to the pile and started in as well. Token shook his head, like he knew that it was a fruitless mission, but noble enough of a friend to want to give it a try… just in case. Clyde looked… kind of messed up. He’d be leader, without question, if Mysterion died. He looked exhausted, but lost, his mind probably half—if not more—on Bebe, still; that was it… he was feeling even a little guilty for thinking more of her than Kenny, but as soon as he started in, climbing up to help Kyle with the topmost rubble, his loyalties were evenly divided.

When I rushed around to the other side to start chipping away at more, Cartman stepped in to help Token, and eventually, even Craig and Wendy started in. Ike helped Timmy out of his armor, and our wheelchair-bound friend cheered us on as Ike stepped in to help Wendy cart away the smaller bits of rubble that Kyle and Clyde were passing down.

The Gate portal had been fucking huge. We’d been at it a while, and dug down to the ground almost all the way around, with no results. We were beyond exhausted. But we didn’t let up. At least, Kyle and I didn’t. After a while, Craig, Cartman, Wendy and Ike had to step back. Butters, I noticed, was quietly moving a few pieces to the side as well, but now was sitting on a piece of rubble, looking torn and tired. Not long after that, Token fell back as well. And then Clyde.

My arms were fucking burning from how many times I brought down that Goddamn sledgehammer. Kyle was a fucking mess. I probably didn’t look much better. After a couple more swings, I couldn’t hold the sledgehammer anymore. I took a drink from the small supply of water I still had in my canteen, then, tossing off my goggles, dove back at the pile of rubble.

“Stop,” said Craig.

We didn’t. Kyle’s gloves were starting to tear, and I had to wonder how much longer he
could go before his fingers would start bleeding. He let out a long, aggravated groan and punched
one of the stones, then doubled over and held his head. He was trying to move the rubble mentally,
and couldn’t. “Fuck, fucking shit, fuck!” he cried out.

“Guys, stop,” Craig tried again.

“Kenny’s still fucking in there!” I hollered back at him. “Guys, there’s still more ground we
haven’t uncovered!”

“I really doubt he’s in there,” said Henrietta.

“SHUT UP!” Kyle and I shouted back at her.

“Guys, honest to God, stop,” Craig said one last time.

When Kyle and I dove back at the pile, we hadn’t even really started on the next layer before
Craig said, “Just… stop. Guys, he’s gone.”

“No—no,” Kyle repeated.

“He’s Kenny,” I added, “he wouldn’t give up like that!”

“Yeah,” Cartman said, giving us a slight hand with a few pieces of ruined scaffold, “Kenny
can’t die! Well… he shouldn’t.” Saying that was, though, the thing that made him step back yet
again.

Off to the side, Butters stood and began to pace. His hands were shaking, and I saw him start
to knead his knuckles together. He bit his cracked lower lip until it bled.

“Isn’t there anything in that book?” Kyle shouted at Henrietta. “Isn’t there some way you
can read him out?”

The Goth shook her head. “Look, the Shadow’s dead. Once an Immortal is dead, I can’t do
anything.”

“Yeah, the Shadow is dead!” I said. “That doesn’t mean Kenny is!” I still firmly believed
that Kenny and the Shadow were two separate entities. That Kenny could survive without the
Shadow and that the Shadow could survive without Kenny.

So we kept going. All around us, though, heads began to bow. For a few minutes, Cartman
helped with some of the larger pieces of the portal, but eventually, winded, stood down again, and
removed his mask. Ike removed his mask and hat, and the corners of his black eyes stained with
tears. Wendy clung to Token and, as if they were already at the funeral, she pressed her forehead to
his shoulder, and her lips moved with a few whispered words to reflect on the loss. Clyde’s hands
were clenched and trembling.

“Kyle…” Ike began, “buddy, I’m sorry. Please stop.”

“No!” Kyle cried, as he and I lifted off a rock together and set it aside. Kyle’s face, already
dirty with dust from R’lyeh and charred from Disarray’s blast, was raw and tinting red. He doesn’t
hold back when he cries. He never used to cry very often, but lately he’d been pushed so hard, to
desperate extremes. And this was one of the worst of them. It looked like we’d lost Kenny for
good, without even a body to bury for closure. Not that I wanted closure, but if we weren’t even
granted that… “He’s not dead, Ike! He can’t be. He can’t.”
“Jesus, would somebody please keep helping us?!” I tried.

My eyes were so damn misty, I could barely see what I was doing. I just knew that neither Kyle nor I had stopped. The others seemed to have mutually conceded to the fact that Kenny wasn’t coming back.

Kenny McCormick wasn’t coming back.

No familiar orange parka striding through the school halls, no more of his muffled garbage or genius, depending on what he’d speak into his scarf on a freezing cold day, no more of his constant friendship, his unending loyalty, his push to want all the rest of us to succeed.

I thought back to the day right before we’d set off for R’lyeh. When Kyle and I had shared a moment of silence, both of us reflecting on the profound impact Kenny had had on our lives. Not just ours, but everyone’s. Everyone’s in town; even those who didn’t know Kenny had probably had detail work done by him on their building, or else they sure as hell would recognize that green question mark that would show up here and there, letting the town know that Mysterion was still on guard.

That green question mark.

That green question mark that surfaced after Kyle shoved an enormous rock off of the very base of the Gate portal. It had been a large circular portal, with a heavy cement and rock base—we’d been clearing off rubble all around it, but we’d finally made it to the center. And there, crushed right there on the base, was the symbol that had always had its place on Mysterion’s hood.

“Oh, my God!” I shouted, and Kyle let out a surprised cry. “…KENNY!”

Everyone’s heads raised.

“What?” Cartman yelped.

“Dude, we found Kenny!” I shouted.

“Oh, God, oh, God,” Kyle said in shock.

“Holy shit!” Clyde cried out.

“Guys, help us with this, he’s under here!” Kyle said frantically. And everyone sprang right back on, helping us remove the last layer of rubble from around the circular center of the Gate portal.

And eventually…

…there he was.

Kyle and I hoisted off a large metal beam, and underneath it, lying among all of the destruction, was Kenny. We were winded as hell, so the two of us stood back for a second. I stumbled somewhat, finding it hard to keep my feet after all the work we’d been doing, and Kyle grabbed at the side of his head again—poor guy probably had a migraine enough for a year—so we took a minute to just pause, and hold each other up. Seeing Kenny lying there made my once-damaged rib ache a little, so I exaggerated my breaths to remind myself that I was fine, just really sore and winded.

“Oh, shit…” Kyle said, “is he breathing?”
“Could someone check,” I asked, “please? I’d do it, but I need a second…”

The others exchanged a brief glance, and then Cartman stepped forward and knealt down beside Kenny. Kenny was face-down in the dirt, his head cradled on his right arm, his left arm extended over his head; legs splayed, body slightly turned on his right side. Like he’d just fallen asleep in a strange spot and needed someone to come along and wake him up. So, looking very awkward—as I’m pretty sure he had never done anything like this, Cartman rolled Kenny onto his back.

Kenny’s Mysterion hood fell limp behind his head; the question mark had been dislodged from it, somehow, and remained crushed on the rubble just above him. His mask was torn in several places, but remained on. He looked like he’d just sprinted through a battlefield. He really had. More than any of us, if I really thought about it.

“Uh…” Cartman bent down to press his ear to Kenny’s chest to listen for a heartbeat or any breath flow. Having had no prior experience doing that, his hands were also firmly pressed down on either side of his own head. Which, I was sure, was putting more pressure on Kenny’s body than that metal beam had been doing.

…Which was pretty much confirmed by the body himself.

To my, to Kyle’s, to everyone’s surprise, Kenny let out an awful groan, which then became the words: “Get… the fuck… off me…”

“Kenny!” Kyle and I shouted in disbelief together.

“What? Woah!” Cartman said, sitting back with a start.

Kyle tightened his grip on me in anticipation, or maybe because he really was about to trip and fall (I wasn’t doing much better), and as we righted ourselves, so did Kenny. Moving just as stiffly as the rest of us, Kenny groaned again and rolled onto his hands and knees. Before I could even think to say anything else, Kenny then erupted into a coughing fit. He doubled over and just started hacking; it sounded awful. Huge, gasping, barking coughs came out of him until—

He puked up what looked like a flowing but solid mold of tar. It dropped in one lump to the ground, then began to vaporize until it was gone, shooting far up into the air. “Ugh… fuck…” Kenny moaned. His arms started shaking for a moment, but then, slowly, he started to regain his balance.

He picked his head up a little, and we all watched as his skin cleared from that awful bone white it had been in R’lyeh to a pale but natural tone, and then flushed further, until the regular pigment of his skin had been completely restored. Kenny drew in a deep breath, sounding like he was ready to keep coughing, but then sat back with a confused expression when he didn’t.

So of course Kyle and I found enough of our footing to rush right over to him; we knealt on either side, and Kenny looked from Kyle to me, and back, and back, eyes as blue as they were supposed to be and more full of wonder and confusion than any of ours in comparison. “Guys…?” he started to say. “Fucking serious…? I’m here? I made it…?”

“Holy shit,” Kyle commented. “Are you all right?”

“I… I don’t know,” said Kenny, bewildered. “I think so.”

“Dude,” said Clyde, looking on from his standing position in disbelief, “that whole thing collapsed on top of you.”
“How the fuck am I alive?” Kenny whispered. He looked like he wanted to smile, but just wasn’t quite sure of what had happened yet.

“How the fuck am I alive?” Henrietta called over.

“The Shadow…? The Shadow’s… yeah…” said Kenny. He looked down at where he’d coughed up the tar, then up to the stars, where it had disappeared to. “Yeah, it’s gone.” His mouth spread into a grin, and he cupped his hands over his mouth and howled up to the sky, “Have fun in the Void, motherfucker! YEAH!”

Still laughing, Kenny glanced between me and Kyle again, and we got the hint. All three of us helped each other stand, and once he was on his own two feet, Kenny continued, “Yeah, it’s gone! It’s gone. And guess what? Holy shit… so’s Cthulhu.”

“You killed him?” Cartman wondered, standing as well.

“You bet your fat ass I killed him.”

“Aye!”

“So…” said Craig, “mission accomplished?”

Kenny’s grin spread white, just like it always had, just like it was supposed to, and he answered, “Yeah.” He looked around at everyone individually. At Clyde; at Token and Wendy; at Henrietta; at Craig; at Ike and Timmy; at Cartman; at me, and Kyle. Addressing the group, confident as hell and still in full drive as the undisputed leader of the League, Kenny announced:

“Guys… we did it. We did it. We… just… won.”

We all took a moment’s pause. We let the truth sink in.

We had won.

The Shadow League had won.

Every single one of us, there on this mission from the beginning, when we learned the truth about Kenny’s Immortality… every single one of us had seen it through. Kenny had broken his curse, and was going to be able to live to celebrate that fact, and as for the rest of us, well…

Fuck it, dude.

WE WON.

After enough silence had sunk in, Timmy, so damn thrilled to have been a part of it all, thrust a fist up in the air, and triumphantly began the celebration: “TIMMAAAAAHHHHH!”

And that was all the rest of us needed. “YES!” shouted the Coon. “YES! FUCKING YES, DUDE!”

“Way to go, Kenny!” Clyde shouted.

“Not just me, man, all of us, holy fuck!” Kenny cried out.

“We did it, we fucking did it!” Kyle shouted, his head tilted up to the sky.

“Hell, yeah!” Token added in.
“We did it, we did it, oh my God!” Wendy was bouncing on the balls of her feet, she was so damn thrilled.

“Holy shit!” I chimed in, grabbing both Kyle and Kenny in while we three were still connected, my arms around their necks. The three of us came together into a tight group hug. None of us was about to let go.

“Get the fuck over here, fatass,” Kenny said to Cartman. He needed an extra pull, but after a second, there the four of us were. When we’d become friends back in preschool, we could never, ever have predicted that we’d ever see so much through together for so long… but now here we were, celebrating the fact that we were pretty damn sure that every one of us had a damn long life ahead of him.

“ALL YOU FUCKERS, COME ON!” Kenny shouted out to the rest of the League. “Even you, Craig!”

One by one, the circle grew.

No matter what happened now, nothing would ever take away from the rush that night. Clyde, Token, Wendy, Timmy, Ike, Craig, Henrietta, me, Kyle, Cartman and Kenny—solid. Solid as hell. No matter what.

We had won.

After a few minutes of reflection, celebration, and a moment of silence for Bradley, wherever he was, we broke out of the circle, all of us prepared to head inside to clean up and get some all too well-deserved rest. But there was still one thing to take care of.

While the rest of us had been celebrating, Butters still stood off to the side, now very firmly grinding his knuckles together. He looked as though he didn’t know whether to watch us in our revelry or just turn away and leave. As it turned out, he’d stayed, but looked awful. Eyes dark from going probably too many nights without rest, skin cracked from lack of proper nourishment, arms very lightly scarred from his use of lightning.

“Hey,” Kenny called over to him, “dude, what gives, huh? Come here, you on our side, or what?”

“I—” Butters started, his voice cracking as badly as his papery skin, “w-well, I…” He took a few wary steps forward, and stumbled. “Um, I—“

And then he passed out. He just fell flat forward onto his face in the snow.

“Oh, weak,” Cartman snorted.

Kenny exchanged a brief look at Clyde. Neither of the two leader figures seemed to know exactly what to do. “Your call, man,” Clyde finally said.

After giving it a few seconds’ thought, Kenny decided, “Eh, someone just get him inside. We’ll deal with it later. I wanna take a fucking shower.”

“Yeah, dude, you deserve first call,” Clyde almost laughed.

“Can we go alphabetically after that?” asked Ike.

“Dude, lame,” Token and I said almost in unison.
“Uh, hello?” Wendy added, raising up a hand. “I’m W! I get first call. Ladies first. Right, Henrietta?”

“No fuckin’ way, chicks hog showers!” Cartman spat.

“Guys, let’s just shut up!” said Kenny. “First ones out of uniform go, we just play this as civil as we can, got that? Someone grab Butters and let’s get in there. Totally informal meeting once we finish up, ’kay?”

“Sure,” said Token. “Want me to grab him?”

“Nah,” said… Cartman. What the fuck? “I got this.”

“Uh… your call, man,” Token shrugged.

Carefully, Cartman stepped over to where Butters was lying face-down in the snow. He studied the apparently retired villain for a second, then kicked him in the hip. “You suck sometimes, Butters,” he muttered. “I’m so seriously.” But then, after that, he acted like a slightly normal human being and crouched down to pick him up. And not-so-normal-humanly slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Wendy rolled her eyes before she shot him a be nice glare.

I did wonder, for just a second, if Marjorine would ever come back now. I’m sure that was what Wendy was thinking, based on everything she’d come to us about lately.

But all of that could be determined later.

For now… damn, it was going to be really nice to wash R’lyeh off of me. And out of our lives forever.

– – –

I didn’t end up getting one of the last showers. Kenny did grab the first go, but there were two stalls in the building. We all decided to be nice and chivalrous and allowed Wendy to take one of the first as well, and when Cartman made a snide remark about Kyle being a girl because of his need to style his hair, Kyle punched him and made him go in first. Kyle then decided that there was no way in hell he was using the same shower as Cartman, so he and I got in the other line instead. I got in my own shower after Clyde, then offered the bathroom up to Kyle and made my way to my small room.

Fucking crazy, that we were back there. That things would go back to normal. Given some time, yeah, hell yeah, but still. Fuck. I couldn’t get over it. We’d won.

I toweled off my hair, and took my time getting dressed. Mainly because just pulling a shirt on made my body ache like hell. Once dressed, I took a good chunk of time to just stretch, extending my arms up over my head. I had never felt so damn good to have just taken a shower. I felt like I’d just resurfaced or something. The battle was completely behind us. For the rest of the night, we could all just rest, and be ourselves.

To counter some of the stiffness and strain on my body, I walked up to the wall and lunged against it, pressing my hands flat against the wall and pushing hard, so I could stretch my arms and back. Just as I was letting out a slow breath, feeling the comfort of knowing that eventually all that soreness would wash over, I heard a slight laugh coming from my doorway.

“Any luck holding that wall up?”
I turned my head, and smiled immediately when I saw Kyle. He’d cleaned up completely, face and neck washed and showing no more indication of the blasts he’d taken in R’lyeh. His clean red hair was still a little damp from the shower, but the parts that were fully dry had been pressed into waves, while a couple of ringlets along the ends had escaped the iron, at least for that night. Just as I’d chosen to do—as I’m sure everyone did—he’d passed right over any other clothes he had at the base and gone right for pajamas; in his case, grey flannel pants and a hunter green sweatshirt, which draped his frame, un-zipped over an old, loose white shirt. In his hands, he held two bottles of water, and on his face was painted a kind, proud smile.

“Just making sure it’s not going anywhere,” I joked right back to him in response. I pushed off from the wall and stretched my arms out again, then rolled my head around a couple times before taking a few steps over to him.

Kyle held up one of the water bottles and took a few steps in. “Brought you a present,” he said, ticking his head at the water.

“Thanks,” I told him. Once he stood directly in front of me, I, practically involuntarily at this point, patted back his hair with my right hand, then left a light kiss on his forehead, which sent a rush through me. “How’s your head?” I asked, keeping my tone low, just in case he was still mid-migraine.

“Recovering,” he said. “I took some aspirin.”

“That’s good.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Is, um, is Kenny calling that meeting?” I asked, when Kyle seemed to have fallen a little silent.

“Clyde did, we’re still waiting for Kenny, but we should go.”

“Sure.”

Kyle drew his head back, to let his eyes catch mine. Then, in one quick motion, he turned, set down the two bottles of water, turned back, grabbed my face in his hands, and pulled me in. He pressed his lips firmly to mine, and I pulled him close, my hands on his waist; his next action pried my lips apart, and we sank in deeper. I drew in a long, steady breath, and Kyle tightened his grip, one hand moving to the back of my neck, the other down to my shoulder. When Kyle pulled out of the kiss, we remained pressed against each other for a minute, my head resting on his, each of us keeping the other warm and protected, just like we’d promised; just as it was going to be.

Despite the scares, I hadn’t lost him, and I hadn’t gone crazy. We’d made it. We’d won; we were all alive. Now, it was time to discover exactly where everything would go from here.

Kyle reclaimed the two bottles of water, and passed one to me, leaving a kiss on my cheek as he did. I kept my eyes on him, watching his every intricate motion, and then, not caring who did or didn’t see or comment, I took his hand in mine and we walked together back to the meeting room.

Ike was on his computer, with Timmy overseeing whatever it was the kid was doing. Ike was grinning like crazy, though, and Clyde was leaning over him, saying, “Okay, print it, print it. Quick, before Kenny gets here.”

“What’s going on?” I wondered. Everyone else had gathered and was, for the most part, around the table, with the exception of Clyde having stationed himself behind Ike, and Cartman
being off to the side by the corkboard, gathering the free thumbtacks. It was almost weird seeing everyone back in… damn, not even street clothes. Everyone was heading right the hell to bed after this.

“We’re making Kenny a sign,” Ike half-laughed. “Okay, here we go.”

Timmy grabbed out the length of paper, more like a banner, that printed out behind him, and offered it to Clyde. His eyes still a little hollow for want of a reunion with his girlfriend, Clyde walked the banner over to where Cartman stood, and spread it out over the corkboard. As Cartman had pinned it into place, Kyle and I took our seats at the table, keeping our hands clasped underneath.

Clyde and Cartman stepped back, and the latter of the two commented, “Aw, hell yeah.”

The sign read, in enormous purple letters, outlined in green:

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. No kidding.

While Cartman took his seat, Clyde went straight to the whiteboard, uncapped a black dry-erase marker, and wrote out over the top of what was still our list from before we left: Mission Accomplished.

And it was at exactly that point that Kenny walked in.

He was loosely dressed in plaid flannel pants, feet stuffed into black slippers, a large orange hooded sweatshirt pulled over him, one hand in its pouch of a pocket while the other messed with the way his half-dried ash-blonde hair was falling or flying out in odd directions against its cut. He noticed the signs right off, and immediately grinned.

“Hey, guys,” he said, grinning.

We stood simultaneously, as if we’d planned it. And then just started to applaud. Kenny had done it; he was back, he’d made it. He was alive, and he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Oh, stop,” he laughed, walking over to where Clyde stood at the whiteboard. Clyde handed off the marker to him, clapped him once on the shoulder, then made for his own seat at the table. “Sit down, guys, let’s just figure this out and then I promise we can all get some damn rest, ’kay?”

We sat, but the energy in the room stayed up. For several minutes, we discussed what had happened in R’lyeh, reflecting on what a rush that had been, and how at some point every single one of us had been sure we weren’t going to see home ever again. But it was the question of home that was the real subject of the small meeting.

“We did it,” said Kenny, erasing the whiteboard, “but we’ve still got some stuff to do. Let’s just figure that out real quick, and then bed. I’m exhausted, dunno about you.” Oh, no, that was a unanimous agreement.

By the end of what turned out to be an incredibly short meeting, the list on the whiteboard now read:

---Bradley search party? (Henrietta had admitted that she’d seen his body come flying out of the Gate, but that it had sailed further off, and had probably landed somewhere down the next few blocks, or out in the forest.)
Butters WTF (We’d figure him out at some point, but for now, Kenny had had Cartman bring Butters to the extra room we’d always let him use, and Cartman admitted that Butters was out like a light. Just the same, Ike agreed to rig up a security camera on the door to that room, just in case Butters slipped out for any last bit of deviant activity.)

--Parents/family/friends/etc.

--Asylum and hospital

--Mayor and stuff

By the end, Kenny had been getting tired of writing, so his notes were simple, but we all got the gist of what we’d meant by each bullet point. First thing in the morning, we’d check on the well-being of everyone close to us. Token would go to his parents first, since his dad would probably be the first to have any information about the state of the town. Then, we’d have the rest of the town to deal with, to figure out how to empty the asylum and get everyone melding back into society. Then there was the question of whether Token’s dad stayed mayor or not, and, depending on who took political lead of South Park, what we as the League would work out with the government in terms of further steps to take in the wake of the crisis.

We concluded the meeting with the agreement that we’d round up in the morning and head into town together, though whether or not we did it as the League or as ourselves would be depending on whatever Token learned from his dad. Slowly, everyone started dispersing to their rooms, while Henrietta opted to just roll out a comforter on the meeting hall floor and stay there; Craig as well.

“Dude, you’re alive,” I commented to Kenny again as we all began to leave.

“Yeah, no shit, right?” he grinned. “And this is it, dudes, just that list to tackle.”

“Everything’s going to be able to go back to normal again?” Kyle guessed.

“More normal than it’s ever been for me,” Kenny said proudly. “Henrietta,” he called back as she was rolling out her makeshift bed, “can I get an okay on that?”

“You kinda just puked up your curse,” said the Goth, “I’d say you’re good.” Kenny just laughed.

Cartman, Kenny, Kyle and I were the last ones out of the room, and, once we were in the common room at the front of the base, Kenny gave the three of us an extra added heaping of thanks. “I never would’ve been able to get as far as I did without you,” he told us.

Cartman smirked somewhat, then said, “Whatever, pussy, I’m goin’ to bed.” With that, he turned, but as he was walking away, he said, “Good job, man,” and then disappeared down the hall.

“Man,” Kenny laughed. “I am just so glad I get to live.”

“No kidding, dude, right?” I grinned, giving him a slight punch on the shoulder in congratulations. “How’s it feel, huh?”

“Fucking awesome doesn’t even begin to describe it,” said Kenny. “I’ll try to think of something by tomorrow.”

“Don’t strain yourself, dude,” Kyle said. “I’m really glad we didn’t lose you, Kenny.”
“Same here,” I added. Kyle and I each wrapped an arm around him, and Kenny looked ready to cry. Kenny doesn’t really cry, and he didn’t that evening, either, but knowing he came close just proved how relieved, thrilled and proud he was.

“I really thought I was gone,” Kenny admitted. “I honest to God, guys, I thought that last thing I did killed me. I’m so fucking glad I’m alive.”

He hugged me, and then Kyle, then dismissed himself to his room, admitting that he was too tired to keep thinking, but that we had to pick right up and keep talking as soon as we were all awake. Kyle and I gave him further congratulations, and then I walked Kyle to his own room, my arm around his shoulders, and his around my waist.

“On a scale of one to ten,” I asked him, “how exhausted are you?”

“About five hundred,” Kyle answered, attempting to laugh. “You?”

“Maybe three-fifty or something around there,” I said. Kyle plunked down onto his bed, his eyes closing with the relief of hitting a mattress rather than hard ground, and he dug his fingers into the soft fabric of his sheets. “You falling asleep right now?”

“I think so,” he said. When his eyelids lifted, his bright green irises displayed his exhaustion, and he looked at me with a bit of an apology.

“Want me to stay here?” I wondered. “I will if you want.”

“Well um, this is really embarrassing,” said Kyle, “but I didn’t just take aspirin. I also took some NyQuil, so…”

“So…” I prompted. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you take NyQuil.”

“Yeah, I try not to, but my head just hurts so fucking bad—“ I kissed the top of his head, hoping to soothe some of the ache— “that I just wanna sleep.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“But, like, when I take NyQuil, dude, I toss and turn like crazy. Like, bad. Like, I’d probably end up punching you in my sleep or something, and I really don’t want to do that.” He flushed, and bit his lip when he finished saying that.

“Fair enough,” I laughed. “We’re gonna have to find you an alternative or something.”

“Yeah, no kidding, right?” Kyle smiled faintly, then brushed a hand against my cheek. His hand was still a little rough from the fight, and from the gruelling minutes of us trying to unbury Kenny from the portal rubble, but it was warm, and welcome, and comforting and familiar.

“If you need me, though,” I said, “come find me.”

Kyle smiled, then tugged me down for a kiss. “I probably will.”

“Get some sleep, Kyle,” I said, stroking back his hair. I pulled back, and let him lie down. Once he was settled into the mattress, I kissed his forehead, and said, “I love you.”

“You, too,” he said. His eyes were shifting for want of sleep. “Sleep, I mean. But also I love you, too.”

I laughed. “Stop thinking, dude, your brain’s on overdrive,” I grinned.
“Yeah, pretty much.” He smiled almost shyly, as if embarrassed to be passing out on his own, but we all really needed individual rest. Besides, something did tell me that even NyQuil wouldn’t stop Kyle from sleep-walking (or sleep-over-analyzing), and that we’d inevitably wake up in the same bed.

He fell asleep while I was still sitting over him, so I leaned down to brush back his hair, kissed the corner of his eye lightly enough so that he could stay sleeping, then brushed my hand over his shoulder before returning to my own room. I feel asleep only moments after that. I stayed awake just long enough to find my cell phone, still plugged in, and to text my sister, It’s over. See you soon.

It’s over. We made it.
We won.

---

*Kenny*

Prior to the short meeting we’d had that evening, I had taken one of the longest and definitely one of the most soothing showers in my life. My life—my fucking life. The life I was allowed to keep. I was in that shower for a while, head spinning from everyone’s excitement back out on the field.

Then, it hit me all at once:

We’d won.

My curse was gone. No more accident-prone days of being crushed by wrecking balls, driving off cliffs, or getting caught under elevators. No more worrying about how much my friends would remember about me. No more deaths, until the very end. No more constant dying.

I beat you, you bastards.
I’m mortal.

As I stood there in the shower, basking and glowing in that fact, I started laughing. How fucking great was life now?! We had won, we had *fucking won!* We, as a team, had beaten the Old Ones and then I’d closed the Gate to R’lyeh for good. I’d bargained with my soul and come out intact. Now I could seriously just *live*. I could plan for a future. I’d never have to worry about dying on Red before a date. I’d never have to worry about where I’d end up if I died while away at college (because fuck it, I was gonna go to one).

Oh, sure, I’d be watching my step, now, maybe even obnoxiously for a while, since death this time would mean the end, the final, inevitable end. But at least I could grow up now. At least I’d have the same concept of death that everybody else had. Goddammit, this felt amazing.

I took in a deep breath and let it out.
Just because I could.

I stretched my arms over my head and audibly yawned.

Just because I could.

I had not died. I had destroyed the Gate, destroyed Cthulhu with the help of the League, sacrificed the Shadow and therefore broke my own curse, and got to live to talk about it. I wasn’t going to; I really didn’t want to carry too much pride from any of that, since it had all been one big, massive gamble that I was pretty damn sure I wasn’t going to win, and my telling of the story would inevitably turn into me being embarrassed for having so little faith in the small chance that I’d actually survive any of that. Still, though, I had a life ahead of me.

The meeting I had called was such a formality. All I wanted to do was see the guys all together, and all intact. There was a general consensus of feeling sore and tired, but the worst of the wounds inflicted in R’lyeh had already been dealt with. Everyone on my team had come out just fine.


There were still the questions of Bradley (alive or not?) and Butters (on our side or not?) to sort out, but both were things that would come of the new day. Based on what everyone, myself included, had seen, we were quite sure that Bradley Biggle was dead. It was just a question of where his body had turned up, since he’d deserve a proper funeral; even Henrietta had to admit that. As for Butters, he’d healed up the team pretty well with the ability he’d had in R’lyeh, but he had a hell of a lot to atone for, which I knew he himself was more than aware of, and which I was sure Clyde was not about to let him forget.

Still, though… damn. It was just so amazing to see the whole League all gathered together. None of us could have known what exactly we would have been getting ourselves into, but we’d just done something incredible. We still had to check on the status of the town… I really wanted to make sure that everyone in the asylum and those admitted with madness to the hospital would be all right—I had a feeling they would be, but that was not something I just wanted to assume. No, we still had a mission ahead of us.

And, of course, the town had to know that Mysterion was still on watch.

When I returned to my room with the intent of just passing the hell out and waking up after the sun rose, I took several minutes to simply look around. I went to the spot where I kept all of my extra Mysterion gear, and ran my right hand down one of my clean spare uniforms. When I was nine years old, I had created that hero as a way of looking out for the town, and for my little sister who relied on me so much, knowing that I could not die and was therefore ready to take on anything. Mysterion had become so much, especially for me, over the past seven years; almost eight years, now. All those years of learning about the Cult, putting their purposes and aims together piece by piece had brought me here. Allying myself with the League and with Henrietta had brought me here. Finding faith and love in Red had brought me here. Mysterion had been at the center of all of that. All my research, all of my relationships to those around me, every step that I took had allowed me to make something of myself that, at nine years old, I never thought in my wildest dreams that I could be.

And now I could be that person, and just live. I had every right to a normal life. I would grow, and live, and love, and learn, and take everything in; I would be cautious, but I would live. I’d turn that life into something, too. Who knew where I’d be in another eight years? Something told
me, though, no matter what, I’d always have Mysterion. And maybe the guys would move on a little, there was no way of knowing… but if it ever came down to it, oh, hell yeah. We’d always be the League.

I tried not to think too far ahead, though, and focused just on tomorrow. Whether or not we went into town as the League or just as us, we had a huge job to do. I’d be able to see Karen and Red again… that was going to be fucking amazing. I could not fucking wait.

I walked over to the little desk in the corner of the room, where I had left everything, all organized into piles, the night before we had left for R’lyeh. Oh, God. There they were. The letters I had written to everyone, the instructions I had left, with what I wanted to be carried out after my Final Death in R’lyeh.

God, I was so fucking glad I’d gotten to live. The sheer concept of it was wonderful, but terrifying. I had never been able to just plain live before. When I was a little kid, it was different, but after that incident when I was eight, I’d just lived in constant fear of my next death. And they had just kept coming; I’d always wake up there in my bed again.

No more of that. No cause to worry. I’d keep a living will, and amend it a lot, I was sure, but something told me I was going to be able to get a nice life after having gone through all that.

I stacked up the letters and bound them together. I placed Red’s on top, followed by Karen’s, then Stan’s, then Kyle’s, and then so on down the list of the League. I hadn’t written anything to my parents. Fuck. My parents. I had to go to them one last time.

Because there was still something I had not learned. Oh, I’d figured out plenty about the Immortal me, about Cthulhu, about R’lyeh and the Old Ones… but one thing I had not yet learned was how the fuck I had kept on coming back home, all those times. Or if my parents had ever known about my deaths.

I wanted to hear it from them. I had to hear it from them. That was the only way I’d be able to have real peace of mind on that matter, the only way that I’d be able to sculpt out not only my life from now on, but my sister’s as well. I had a feeling Karen wasn’t wanting to go back to Salt Lake City. God, it was going to be so wonderful to see her again. She’d been the one to give me the key to keep living. I still wanted to learn about that, too: how the hell she’d known or heard the second couplet. Her words had allowed me to live. Guardian Angel was such a fitting name for her; she’d kept me alive.

And then there was Red. I thought about calling or texting her, but discovered that I had left my phone unplugged and that its battery was drained. Of course. I found myself too exhausted to try to find another way to contact her, and plugged in my phone, telling myself instead that I’d go to her first thing I could the next day.

The next day.

The first day that I’d be able to wake up and live.

No longer Immortal, I climbed into my bed and sank down into the mattress. I laced my fingers together behind my pillow and nestled my head in, looking up at the ceiling, where the moon shone in from the tiny window over at the top of the far wall. The moonlight cast everything in my room in a pale bluish glow. I wasn’t in total darkness. Not anymore.

Almost without thinking, I lifted my left arm and held it up so that I could see the shadow it cast on the wall. I moved my hand a few times; the shadow moved with it. But that was all. No
additional movement. There were truths that began that night that remain true to this day.

There is no longer a Shadow; no longer a Cthulhu; no longer a threat in the form of a sunken dimension called R’lyeh. I’m not Immortal.

I’m just Kenny.

Well. Not *just*. I’m Mysterion. I’m alive. And I plan to stay that way for a very, very long time.
When I came to, I was staring up at an off-white ceiling, off of which reflected the pale glow of the moon outside. Nothing clouded by mist, nothing shadowed by darkness. Just the white light of a late winter evening, gleaming like a halo, forcing my eyes to hold focus. Proof that the world had not been destroyed. Proof that good, and right, and justice had won out over chaos. Over Chaos.

For the very last time.

My eyes, plastered open now, began to sting with tears. That was a sensation I hadn’t felt in a long time. It took me a while to figure out where, even, they were coming from. What cavern of my mind, what emotion, what side of myself. And I realized they came from all of me. For regret, for remorse, for guilt, for fear, for pain, for love, for trust, for hope and lack thereof.

For everything I had ever destroyed.

Chaos had succeeded in many ways. I’d destroyed so much. Caused so much harm. Done so much wrong. I’d done that. I had fallen that far. Fallen so far I had given over my own free will. Given over my mind and my life and my own spirit… everything that had made up any other part of me. Given up everything on a dark gamble. Passed myself over…

…And for what?

I’d messed up before, but, boy, this sure did win out over everything else. Because I had just plain given up. I’d lost faith in myself and therefore lost faith in the entire human race. Lost faith in my friends, lost faith in everything. I had let myself believe that life really was beyond mending. And maybe, now, it was. My own life, anyway.

I was in shambles. I was a shell. Something for the discard pile. Everyone else in that building was something commendable. Everyone in League Headquarters was a hero. Clyde and Token, and Timmy and Ike, who stuck up for what they knew beyond a doubt was right and gave their all for the good in everyone; Stan and Kyle and Kenny, who’d gladly give their own lives for what mattered most to them; Wendy—Wendy… who never, ever gave up, who knew exactly who she was, who made it her mission to help the people she cared about find and embrace who they were. And Eric. That idiot. That self-centered idiot, who, in the end, put himself aside for the greater good… because even he had enough decency in him to know the truly right thing to do under such duress. He’d won again.

And I was lower than ever.

Not so low as to bring Chaos right back into my life, but pretty darn low. I looked back on everything I had done, over the past several weeks… months, even, and felt sicker and sicker the more I went through the awful acts I’d committed. My parents, well… that, I’d be mulling over for a while, but—poor Tweek… poor Bebe… Bebe, one of my own close friends… oh, Clyde would never, ever talk to me again, I was sure. I’d be surprised if any of the guys did.
I’d ruined everything.

I was responsible for everything wrong.

What was wrong with me? How the hell had I sunk down that far? What had I done? My lips moved to the words, but no sound came out: *What have I done?*

*What have I done?*

My eyes stung so badly, I had to blink, and as soon as I had, as soon as I felt the cold sting of salt tears on my skin, I broke down. A months-repressed cry choked its way out of my throat, and I turned onto my side, cupping my hands over my mouth as I curled up as small as I could get. I snapped my eyes shut and heaved out sobs and gulped in air, messy and low and despicable and horrible.

Is this what the end of Chaos looked like? Is this what it was always meant to come to? The grand, confident, infamous Professor Chaos… deep inside, he was just this, wasn’t he? Just this tired, frightened, confused and troubled young man—no, hardly even that. Just a boy. Just a boy who could never fight his own battles. A boy torn and tattered by family and society. Just another troubled case of unbelonging.

I sure had fucked up, hadn’t I?

“What’ve I done?” I choked out, disgusted at the weakness in my own voice. “What’ve I done? Oh, Jesus… oh, God… oh… shit… what’d I do…? What’d I do, what’d I do, why’d I go and do that…?”

I shook my head and drew in a deep breath. “No more,” I whispered. “No more Chaos.” That had to be louder. I had to believe it. Heavily, I picked myself up, and sat on the edge of the bed, finding myself staring directly into the mirror on the vanity. There had always been a vanity in that room. I never knew why, maybe it was just something Token’s mom had had that she wanted out of the house, and Wendy just hadn’t wanted that room. But it was the room I’d always been allowed to use, and it had been great for… for when I’d been in the right mood.

A mood I hadn’t been in for a very long time. A mood… an entire life, really… that I’d tried to shove into the back of my closet like an old bad dream.

She wasn’t the bad dream. Chaos was.

No more Chaos.

Only one part of me had ever really seemed to get things right. And that was the part I’d tried to brush away. I shook my head and stiffly stood up, then stumbled my way over to the vanity, where I plunked myself down on the little four-legged stool and glared at my awful expression. At my eyes, bright blue again now that the dark mist’s influence had left my body, all puffy and red around the edges from crying and feeling such utter disgust for myself. At my drawn face and cracked lips, and messy, half-loose hair, blonde but dirty from my countless days in R’lyeh. There was ash all through it, and some of the edges were singed from the effects of the lightning.

I was still wearing Chaos’s shirt, also dusty and dirty from R’lyeh; cut up from my fights, especially against the Coon. I stood back up and yanked the shirt off, wishing I could just burn it then and there. Staring back in the mirror, I noticed several scars and scrapes along my arms and neck, and the scorch marks all over my face and shoulders, reminding me of another casualty I had to add to my list.
General Disarray was dead. Dougie had fallen just that much further than I had, and his greed had killed him. One more step over the edge, and that would’ve been me in Nyarlathotep’s jaws. That would’ve been me, so far removed from humanity as to sacrifice myself to the vast nothingness. He was dead. Gone. Dead. And I felt responsible. I’d helped him create General Disarray.

And in return, I had allowed him to turn me into a monster.

Meaning that, in the end—yes. I’d done it to myself. I had invited that darkness onto myself.

You asked for it, Leopold Stotch.

It’s all your fault.

“No…” I muttered, shaking my head. “No, no, no, I can—I can—I don’t have to be—I’m not a… I—I’m not a bad person. I’m not a bad person!” Bending over myself, I let out another soft wail and covered my entire face with my hands, feeling the calluses on my fingertips, some of them so raw and cracked I was sure they’d open at any second and begin to bleed. “I’m not a bad person,” I sobbed, so overcome I felt my knees go weak; I fell and hit the ground hard, and collapsed over myself. Half-naked, once again in transition between everything I was and had been and what now was to come, I let myself cry. Ashamed.

But becoming free.

Free from Chaos.

Yes, I had done all of those bad things, but that wasn’t me anymore.

“That’s not me anymore,” I wept. “That’s not me anymore. I’m not a bad person. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t… I didn’t mean it… I wanna start over… no more Chaos.” I drew in a deep breath and sat back onto my knees; brushing back the untamable flyaways that completely made up my hair at this point, I tilted my head back so that I stared again at the ceiling. Forcing myself to stop crying, I gathered up all the strength I had left, and repeated out into the darkness:

“No more Chaos.”

That was his filth I was covered in. His wrongdoings. His evil. No more.

No more, no more.

Hoping that no one else was awake—and quite confident that they wouldn’t be—I stood and marched right out of that room and down the hall to the bathroom. Without a single echo, I stripped and ran a shower, letting the water clean off every last speck of Chaos’s influence on me. I let that whole side of me, that whole backwards id, just slide on down the drain. There was a nice neutral-scented soap available for anyone’s use, so I lathered that over myself, but went for the shampoo I just knew was Wendy’s… a cute little pink bottle reading that it was sweet pea scented. I let the smell just intoxicate me. I welcomed it back.

I wanted her back. I wanted my confidence back. And not the awful confidence that Chaos had had. The confidence I’d created, my own little brand of girl power. My superego. I missed her. I couldn’t get rid of her… not when she’d done so much for me. I wanted—I needed—to be her again.

With Chaos successfully washed clean away, I stepped out of the shower and wrapped myself in a clean white towel, then silently made my way back down to that tiny room. Now, I’d
stayed there before, and knew that I’d left clothes there at one point. I wasn’t sure to whom—to which side of me—they belonged, but I’d take my chances. And lo and behold… I found her. There in the third drawer down in the tiny chest of drawers beside the vanity.

I snapped the light on and cast a glance at the clock on the wall. Morning already. Well, three o’clock in the morning. Still, not too early to get totally dressed. Besides, I didn’t want any more sleep that night. I had to figure out how I was going to apologize to everyone. And if I’d ever truly forgive myself.

First thing was first. I brushed my wet hair out. Strand by strand, it felt like, with all those awful snarls and tangles… it was quite an undertaking, and there were so many split ends, what with the singeing and all. In the vanity was a little kit I’d once left there… complete with makeup, nail files and clippers, and a small pair of trimming scissors. I took those scissors out of hiding and snipped at my hair once I’d brushed it all out, evening out the split ends and making myself feel all fresh and new.

I toweled off my hair, then went for that third drawer and pulled everything on. Underwear, light blue camisole, comfortable fuzzy white wraparound sweater that I remembered buying one afternoon with Wendy, who said it looked like a little lamb… then a pair of white legwarmers to keep out the cold. And the last piece… a pleated blue skirt, which fell just above my knees.

Couldn’t stop there. I plunked myself back down onto that stool and hauled out the makeup kit I knew was still in there. God, I’d left everything. Even when I’d shoved everything at my house back into the closet, I’d forgotten about everything at the League’s base. They’d accepted her in. Many times. They’d accommodated her when Chaos had been in on some of the old missions. Back before things had gotten so awfully dire.

I dusted foundation all over my face, ran chapstick and then a little color over my moistureless lips. Just like greeting an old friend again, it all came back to me within seconds. Primer flew quick as a breeze onto my eyelids, followed by a silvery-blue shadow, brown liner, brown-black mascara. Brown-black was better for my complexion, Bebe had said.

Oh, Bebe. Bebe, sweetie, I gotta get you well again…

I glanced up, only a little, only enough to see that I still had some pretty bad dark circles under my eyes. Nothing a little concealer couldn’t hide away. Hide it all away like the bad dream it was. I dabbed the liquid concealer onto my repairing right index finger and smoothed the true-match color into my skin, bidding goodbye to the sleepless nights of madness. I felt like I was waking up again after a spell. Like Sleeping Beauty, locked up inside herself after a moment of weakness…

I lay my hands flat on the vanity’s cool surface and let myself look at her. At my reflection. At Marjorine.

Suddenly, seeing her, seeing that I hadn’t lost her after all, I felt like everything might actually be okay. It might take a long time to prepare, but I could make things okay again. I had the potential to make things okay again.

“Smile, won’t you, honey?” I whispered to myself, tugging on a strand of my hair before placing it back behind my ear. “You remember how to do that, don’tcha?”

More easily said than done. I didn’t feel like smiling; I didn’t have all that awful much to be happy about yet. I had so many things I had to make up to so many people. I wanted to talk to Wendy. I wanted to fix things for Clyde; God, I had to help Bebe. I wanted to make sure Kenny
and the rest of the League didn’t totally hate me, even though I wouldn’t blame them if they did. And I wanted Eric to know I wasn’t too sore about the fact that he’d won again. He’d chosen the right side. The Coon had done the right thing. And I had…

Well, I had fucked up.

I didn’t have to stay a fuck-up, though. I really didn’t. You can fix things, Butters. Even if I couldn’t literally heal with a thought anymore, like I could in R’lyeh, I could still fix things. I didn’t have to lash out at the world for handing me bad things. I just had to make myself work around them. I had to make myself better. I had to make it all better.

Try, try, and just keep on trying. That was my job now. Just keep trying until I finally did something good. Something right. No more Chaos. Now, I wanted to think more positively. More about balance and harmony.


Try, now. Make it better.

Finding it hard to smile, I simply nodded at myself in the mirror, and then, parched, left the room again for the kitchen in search of some water. I took my steps very cautiously, and felt myself begin wringing my hands as I nervously looked around to see if there was any chance I was being watched. I started to knead my knuckles together; the base was so big and dark and empty and quiet. I didn’t want quiet, or else I might start thinking about what it was like being all possessed again. So I started humming to myself a little.

But as soon as I bent over and opened the refrigerator door to grab a bottle of water, I heard a voice over me. “Butters.”

“AHHHH!” I let out, snapping up to standing. I was awfully jumpy. Coming down off of being Chaos, all of my insecurities were out in full. Which was why I just couldn’t bear to be Butters that night. I needed every ounce of confidence I could get; hence feeling like I’d stick around as Marjorine for a while before I felt well enough to trust myself to be Butters again without having that black Chaos cloud over me anymore.

Standing straight up, I found myself looking over, on the other side of the refrigerator door, at Eric. He was wearing a big red pullover sweatshirt that showed the wear of being a few years old and a loose pair of pajama pants; his feet were exposed and his toes tapped somewhat against the linoleum. On his face he wore an unimpressed expression. That was absolutely his face. I knew it way too well. But it was kind of nice seeing it. You know, as opposed to his I’ll kill you if you make one wrong move, Chaos face. They weren’t too different, those expressions, but plenty different enough.

“Oh,” he said, his voice rather monotone. “Huh. Totally was not expecting that.”

“What?” I wondered.

“You,” he answered, giving me the up-and-down glare. “Shut the door, Marjorine, you’re makin’ my feet cold.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling my hand shake on the door. “Okay…”

Slowly, I let the door swing closed on its own, then gave it one little push to be sure it was secured. Realizing I’d forgotten the water, I quickly, keeping my eyes on Eric, opened the door,
grabbed a bottle, and shut it again, then straightened up as best I felt I was able, and said, “I was just getting some water, Eric, I wasn’t gonna do anything weird.”

He rolled his eyes. “Everything you do is weird,” he said, not even slightly sarcastically.

“But you can’t seriously think about me?” I wondered. I twisted the water bottle around in my hands and continued staring at Eric. He had some scratches on him, but otherwise, he’d gotten out okay. His long, bulky sleeves wouldn’t allow me to see if there were any bad scrapes or bruises on his arms, and I knew he’d probably shove me away if I tried to check. A pang of something resembling loneliness hit me in the chest, and I stared down at my feet. What if I’d really thrown things off, too much to hope for repair? What if the town knew that Chaos had been me? I’d be cast out worse than ever, no matter how much I tried to make up for what I’d done.

“Dude, I don’t get you,” said Eric. He shoved his hands in his pockets, I noticed when I lifted my head a bit again, and he leaned back against the wall, scrutinizing me. “I mean, what the fuck, okay? Just—the fuck?”

“What?” I wondered.

“Chaos,” he answered. Then, nodding toward me, he continued, “Now you. How’s that the same? I don’t get it.”

I couldn’t blame him. I was a tough case to explain. I had a feeling that some people, probably especially Eric and Clyde, would have a hard time accepting the fact that Nyarlathotep had just plain poisoned me—that that hadn’t all been me, even though I’d fueled it. The truth was, I’d been filled up with more than I could handle. I had made too many horrible choices. Redemption may have been a stupid thing to wish for, but—deep breath, sweetheart. Just try. Just try.

The water bottle started to chill my hands, so I took a quick drink and set the bottle down on the counter beside the fridge. Licking my lips for that last bit of liquid, I tasted the smooth, cool mint of the gloss I’d applied, and ran my tongue over my hard palate in hopes of keeping that sensation in my mouth. Something good; something sweet, something that didn’t sting like the madness had. Something that tasted fresh and familiar. Something that might save me.

Before I knew it, I started speaking.

“I’m not a very happy person, Eric,” I finally said out loud to someone. I’d come close to telling Wendy and Bebe before, but they’d always been there on all my good days; I hadn’t wanted to burden them. And as for Eric, well, he just never seemed all that interested in listening. The difference was—I didn’t care anymore. I didn’t care who thought what. My new mantra: just try. He got a weird look on his face, but I continued.

“I’ve had these different outlets to try to make it all better, but the basic truth is, I’m not real happy. I don’t want Chaos around anymore, because when I was him, I chose to believe I was miserable, and the world was out to get me, and the only thing I could do was fight back and make it worse for everyone else than it was for me. I dunno if I can really be happy, but I’m gonna at least try to make things better. Cuz I screwed up, Eric, and if I don’t fix what I did myself, things’ll just get worse again.”

“Oh,” was all he said, after all that. “Well, okay. So, Chaos is gone, and I see you’re fine…” He took a pause, glanced around, then asked, “How about Butters?”

Eric was one of the few people who blurred my lines a lot, which was nice, but it seemed like he definitely did see a difference between Butters and Marjorine. I had to start rebuilding myself as Marjorine before Butters, though. More confidence. And with the things I figured I had to do,
Well... the more confidence I could give myself the better. I’d dress as Butters again soon, and I mean, I’m always Butters, always have been; just had to figure out when I felt good enough to be called that again.

All the same, I started kneading my knuckles together, finding myself nervous and coming up short for things to say. “Well... well, I dunno, Eric, I mean, well... it’s like...”

He noticed. He noticed the nervous tick. So he just shrugged me off, saying, “Yeah, yeah, whatever.” A small sigh, and then, “Look, just—I can’t hit chicks. You know? You look like a chick. Come talk to me like Butters sometime cuz I gotta fuckin’ smack you.”

Oh, was that the game now? “Well, maybe I’ll just never talk to you as Butters again!” I countered. “Huh? How about that?!?”

Eric threw his hands up in the air and said, “Oh, that’s fine! That’s fine! See if I care!” He paused, then, when I started staring him down, and then he wrinkled his nose up in displeasure and asked, “The fuck is that smell?”

“Oh, uh, I think it’s my shampoo,” I said, when I couldn’t detect anything but. “It’s sweet pea.”

“Why would you wanna smell like pee?” Eric asked in his usual, snide way. Then, his eyes widened, and a grin spread across his face as he started laughing to himself. Oh, jeez. Already back to this. Well, that was fine. “HA!” he exclaimed proudly. “HAH! I can make fun of you again? Yes! Yes! I can make fun of you again!”

I folded my arms. Well if he was gonna be like that, then game on. Maybe he kept on winning, but I hadn’t quite lost yet. “Well,” I said, “I’ll take it, Eric, but—“

“NOPE!” he interrupted. “You said you’d take it! No buts! No goin’ back now!” Pointing one index finger at me, he began to back his way out of the room and toward his own. “NOPE!” he said again, as if warning me before I could start speaking again. “I win.” And with that, he disappeared.

I took that to mean that things would get back to normal, but it was still really weird. Even for Eric. I did manage to laugh a little, though. As I crossed back through the halls, I thought for a minute about checking in with Wendy, just to see how normal things could be for us as friends, now that I had at least some reassurance of my (strange though it was) friendship with Eric, but I figured she’d probably be with Token, and opted to talk to her later.

Rebuild your life, sweetheart. You can still fix things.

Starting now.

—

Stan

About an hour after I’d fallen asleep, I woke to the sound of a light knock on my door, or possibly even to the footsteps leading up to it. Either way, I was almost fully roused by the voice from the doorway, hushed though the tone was: “You awake?”
“Mmmmmkinda,” I said. “C’mon in.”

My door creaked open, then shut again, and I heard Kyle clear his throat. I smiled to myself and sat up a little in bed. I’d called it. It seemed like Kyle always wound up in my room. Back when we were kids, sometimes he’d just stop by, talk for a while, and either leave or end up sleeping on the floor. “Hey,” he said, keeping his voice quiet, “sorry if I woke you up.”

“Mm-m,” I dismissed, shaking my head, “you’re fine. What’s up?”

“Well, uh, I was actually kinda wanting to talk…” he admitted.

I yawned, but told myself to wake up a little. “Yeah?” I wondered.

“Well, well… we don’t have to…” I heard him say. He sounded a lot more awake than he had an hour ago. Good to know sleeping pills only lasted so long; hopefully the tossing and turning would’ve passed, too. “Dude, you sound really tired, so I’ll just—”

“Kyle, c’m’ere,” I asked, beckoning him over with a wave of my left hand. Kyle coughed a few times, and as I settled back down on the mattress I heard the familiar swish of water in a plastic bottle he must have brought in with him as he approached. He paused, then sat down on the edge of my bed. After another second, he turned toward me and lay his right hand on my shoulder, then bent over and kissed me above the ear. Securing my eyes open, I tugged on Kyle’s sleeve and got him lying beside me. He turned away from me to cough a couple times, and that got me much more awake. I pulled the sheets up over him and rubbed his back, asking, “You doing okay?”

“My throat’s just really dry, still,” he said, reaching over the side of the bed to grab his water bottle. He took a quick drink, then lay back down and settled in beside me. “I’ll be okay.”

“All right. Let me know if there’s anything I can do…”

“Sure,” he smiled, “thanks. You, too.”

“Thank you.”

He nestled up against me, pressing his face into the crook of my shoulder as his arms tightened around me. I felt a surge hit my chest and returned the embrace, falling into him. Further and further in love with him. I nudged his ankle with my toes a bit, and Kyle left a gentle kiss on my neck, then lay back with his head on the pillow, and for a while, we just lay there together, both of us mesmerized by the same thing.

The fact that we’d made it.

The crisis was over. R’lyeh was gone. Weird things would inevitably continue to plague our lives, but we’d dodged the greatest challenge we’d known so far. We’d won. And now here we were—and that was exactly Kyle’s next voiced thought.

“So,” he said, barely above a whisper, “here we are.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling myself smile. “Almost surreal, huh?” “Mmm. Do, um… d’you think life’s gonna circle back around to normal pretty soon?” he wondered, running his thumb lightly against my back.

“Hmm? Oh, I’m sure it will,” I said. That was followed by an involuntary yawn, but I continued, “We’ll all make sure it does, anyway.”
“Yeah.” Kyle fell silent after that, lost deep in thought, so I took a moment to rest my eyes. I was exhausted. We all were. I wanted to stay invested in conversation with Kyle, but I really couldn’t help just how drained I was. A few solid hours of sleep, though, and I’d be good to go, for anything. He could sense all that, and was tired himself, but when a thought really burrows into his head, he needs to act on it—he’s always been like that, all through childhood and still to this day. So I wasn’t surprised when, just as I was drifting to sleep, he asked, “Hey, Stan?”

“Hmm?” I wondered, opening my heavy eyes to coax myself functionally awake again.

“Are we—” Kyle chewed his lip, contemplating exactly how to present the question, “like… what are we? I mean, is this gonna…?”

“What,” I guessed, “like, are we gonna stay together?”

Kyle nested further into the pillow. “Yeah.” His eyes were bright and green, intense but innocent, tired but lit with such a spark.

“I, uh, well, I was hoping so,” I admitted. The idea woke me up a little more, if even just to study him. All cleaned up, he barely showed any indication of the battle he’d just helped win. There was the tiny white scar on the back of his neck, but nothing much else; no marks on his face or collarbone from the direct lightning blast, no awful visible contusions. He just looked really… pure. Natural. He always did.

A ghost of a smile appeared on his face, and slowly started to brighten. “Okay,” he said, and he nudged my nose with his a little. “I mean… me, too. I mean, I don’t see why we wouldn’t. Right?”

I grinned. I love when he gets like that. “Right.”

“Oh, come on,” he reprimanded me, laughing nonetheless. “Well, you know, oooohhh,” he teased me right back, “I’m Stan Marsh and I’m all awkward and poetic and pretend like I don’t care about labels even though I totally do…”

“I mean one time, dude.”

“Shut up.” We both let our free laughter speak for us a minute, relieved as all hell that we could even be joking about anything right now. When the bout slowed down, and his glassy green eyes were set on me again, Kyle pressed, “I mean it, though, Stan. I don’t want to give some long-winded, pussy remark every time.”

“Every time what?”

“Every time someone asks us if we’re—“
“Kyle, I love how you talk to yourself in your head before you ever actually say anything,” I grinned at him.

“Well, sometimes you know what I mean, anyway,” he pointed out. True. “Like how I’m serious, dude,” he said, nudging my shoulder, “do we call this anything?”

“All right,” I said, my tone light. “Kyle, what are you doing on Saturday?”

His eyes asked, Are you kidding me? What the hell? “Dude,” he said, “I don’t even know what day of the week today is, or what’s going on anywhere, or—”

“So you’re free?”

“It’s a safe bet, Stan.”

“Have lunch with me,” I asked.

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he said, “but I don’t see what—“

“Well, that’s settled,” I said before he could worry himself into next month.

“What’s settled?”

“We just set up a date,” I said, laughing a little again. “We’re dating. Go to sleep, I’m exhausted.”

“Oh, you—that doesn’t count.”

“Why not?” I yawned.


“Dude, stop thinking,” I said, ruffling his hair. “You’re too tired to think right now. We’ll talk more tomorrow, ’kay?”

“Okay,” he gave in with a winning white smile. “But,” he said, stopping me before I could go in for a kiss, “we are dating?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. Oh shit, I just realized what I’d said—a swell hit me in the chest, and I fucking overflowed. We were official, we were a pair, we were a couple. Bring it on. I bet I was red as hell; hopefully he didn’t notice, in the dark.

Kyle’s smile stayed on. “Okay,” he said in response, “good. I’m glad.” From there, we eased into a sweet, comforting kiss goodnight.

God, comfort is really the only word for it. We were home. We had made it home, and we’d made it together.

He pressed close again, and as we matched each other’s slowing, tired breaths, he admitted, “Gonna be honest, though, Stan… I’m still a little scared.”

“Like, for the town?” I guessed. “Your parents.”

“Yeah, aren’t you? There’s just so much to do, and—“

“Ssh,” I coaxed him, stroking his back a little. “Kyle, please, let’s worry about all that
tomorrow, okay? Please? I know you know you’re exhausted…”

“Mmhmm,” he sighed, half asleep already. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Just… thank you.” A minor pause, and then, “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I told him, drawing him close. “Everything’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Mmhmm. Goodnight, Stan.”

“‘Night, Kyle.”

The following morning, I awoke feeling secure and rested. Kyle was already awake, and had his arms around me; his right thumb ran a simple line along my side as he stroked one little spot. From the one tiny window behind the bed, the sun beat down brightly into the room, and caught into the twists and waves of Kyle’s hair perfectly; his light skin was overcast with a warm glow. Content and comforted to wake and see him there, I settled down into the mattress to just reflect, and just admire him. It was so refreshing to be able to wake up without the fear of everything crumbling around us. That morning, I was able to wake up and just look forward. I had my nerves about my dad, and about Kyle’s parents, and everyone we still had to look out for in hopes that those who’d fallen mad in the crisis would be able to get back to their normal lives, but right then, right there, for that little moment of the morning, I simply basked in the fact that I could take my time waking up, rest a little, still, after such a long push of a battle, and be with the person I’d fallen in love with. Seemed like a pretty good deal to me.

“Hey,” I said in greeting, my voice an indication of my slow process of waking up. I pressed my right hand to his chest, where I touched warmth, and felt his heart beating. With my left hand, I started stroking back his hair; I’ll never, ever get tired of that. It’s been my little game for such a long time, and I know he’s always loved it. “Good morning.”

“Yeah,” Kyle agreed, “it is.” He smiled softly, and coaxed me into a kiss, from which he pulled back just to say a simple, “Hi,” before keeping it going.

I laughed a little as Kyle pressed both hands on my shoulders to roll me onto my back. Then, grinning, he grabbed hold of my shirt and hauled me up to sitting; once we were more or less up, he draped his arms over my shoulders and pressed his forehead to mine, his eyes closed and calm, his breaths light and slow. I gave him a lighthearted little kiss, then drew him in for a tight hug, my arms locked around him, holding onto everything. Neither of us was showing any fear for what the rest of the day might bring… there were no guarantees that everything in town would be okay; as far as we knew, this was the one time of day we would have to be this close together, to just so much as enjoy something moment-to-moment, and not stress over what had happened before or what was to come.

Kyle returned the embrace, and pulled back only when he needed to grab a drink of water from the bottle he’d brought in the night before. When he’d finished, he held his hands out to me, and pulled me up to standing. Once on my feet, I felt that strain and soreness from the fight again, and took a few seconds to stretch out. “You okay?” Kyle wondered, eyeing me a little curiously.

“I’m fine,” I said, “just, like… aren’t you really sore, too? My back’s killing me.”

“Carrying around a sledgehammer and a chainsaw for a while will do that,” he grinned. “My arms kinda hurt from hurling that thing around a couple times, but mostly it’s my head,” he added.
“And my throat, from getting shocked.”

“Yeah, you don’t sound hoarse or anything,” I assured him, taking a step closer and placing my right hand on the back of his neck. My fingers brushed across the little raised scar that had been left over from his fight against Disarray—who, I figured, must have died in R’lyeh… even if he’d lived, he was nowhere around here, as far as I knew. The scar was very faint, but just the fact that it existed was interesting. “You’ve got a scar, though…” I continued.

“Oh,” said Kyle, “yeah. Well.” He placed his right hand over the bullet reminder on my ribcage; after a chill went through me, remembering that, I felt us move closer together. “So do you.” He drew in a slightly shaking breath, and admitted, “Stan, this is gonna sound really stupid, but I’m glad I have it. I mean, I’m glad it’s not huge, it was kinda crazy that Butters was able to do that healing thing in R’lyeh, but I’m glad I have it. It’s kinda like, I wanted it.” Kyle laughed a little, and rolled his eyes at himself. “Stupid, huh? I wanted the fucking scar.”

“It’s not stupid,” I told him, bending in to kiss the side of his neck. “It’s not stupid,” I repeated in a whisper. It was a reminder. Nothing huge, nothing irreparable, just a reminder. Scars tell stories, and shape lives. Ours sure as hell did.

On a like mindset, Kyle said, “Just so we remember…”

“Mmhmm.”

“Hey, Stan?”

“Hmm?” I drew my head back, and caught a whiff of the salon-grade shampoo he’d used the previous night.

“Just for a minute, dude, can we not talk about R’lyeh?” Kyle requested. He was gradually shifting the tone of his voice, I noticed, and he now had his eyes fixed right on mine.

“Yeah, that’s cool,” I said, moving my hand away from that scar. “So, like…?”

“Us…” said Kyle, smooth but straightforward. “I don’t know,” he half-laughed, lowering his head to touch his forehead to my chin; I slid my hands along his shoulders, and he tightened his own grip. “I just kinda want a dose of normal. And um…”

That got me laughing a bit, again, too, and I kissed his hair where the thick sheaves brushed against me. “Are you nervous?” I wondered.

Kyle shook his head. “I think I’m just relieved, in a weird way,” he told me.

“Yeah,” I said, as he looked up at me again… not quite so far as even back in the fall, though; damn, I’d hardly even noticed the bit of extra height he’d tacked on, even in just the past four months. Nice. He was catching up again, just a little. “No, I’m ready for normal again, too.”

“Yeah… and, uh…” Kyle began, slowly working his arms loosely around my waist, “this is, um…”

“This…?” I repeated. ‘This’ had been in the works for a long time; with everything going on, all of the duties we had to fulfill, our relationship had grown and matured, we’d stayed together, protected each other, and still had no intention of letting go. It was going to be interesting, being able to actually slow down and discover exactly how things would develop now, but the long and short of it was that no matter what happened, we were sticking together. With everything that lay behind us, I was getting excited to see exactly what would come next. “This,” I said, as I watched Kyle’s
eyes dart back and forth a little while he was formulating his own thoughts, “is going to be one hell of a ride…”

“Yeah. We’re dating,” he breathed out, just getting the words into the air, to practice saying them.

“Mmhmm,” I grinned, and brushed back a few stray red wisps and waves from his forehead.

“We’re, uh… boyfriends?”

The word was back! I loved hearing it, but I knew I wasn’t able to hide my astonishment with the fact that, once again, he’d brought it up first. “Holy labels, Human Kite,” I laughed. “You sure about that?”

“Oh, dude, don’t even,” he warned.

“Sorry,” I said softly, brushing my fingers now through the full, thick tangles of his hair. Then, pulling him a little closer, I nudged his nose with mine, which got him all red and radiant and grinning. Kyle locked his left arm around my waist, and pressed his right hand into my shoulder, stroking the skin of my neck with his thumb. His eyes closed, and as he nuzzled against me, I asked, “So, um… so is that what we’re going for?”

“Hmm?” Kyle wondered, lifting his eyes to look at me again. “Oh. Yeah, I guess. I mean, why not, right?”

“Yeah…” I said, as my head started spinning with all the implications that label carried along with it. We’d been together, yeah, but now we were gearing up to come out and declare ourselves official. I was in a relationship again. I was ready; ready to give my all and be all I could. For my boyfriend. Holy shit. “Holy shit,” I couldn’t stop myself from laughing under my breath.

“What?” Kyle smirked.

“Just… holy shit,” I laughed again.

“Scoring real high on the romantic scale, there, Stan,” he taunted me.

“You’re my boyfriend,” I grinned, overflowing with the unbelievable novelty of it all. I was kind of a sucker for getting caught up in how damn great a new step like this felt, but I didn’t care. I’d always been kinda ripped on for being too much of a romantic. I’d been real traditional with Wendy, giving her what I knew would be kind and chivalrous, since I had cared about her, I had wanted to be a good boyfriend, even if I hadn’t quite been in love with her. Kyle was in for a ride by inviting the label in. Now that the threat was over, now that there was just the cleanup to worry about in the wake of what had happened… now that we could get back into the swing of normal life, we could have a real relationship. Based on everything we’d established so far, yes, but melding that into the everyday—shit, I was excited. And that probably showed pretty blatantly.

“Uh, yeah, Stan,” Kyle commented, giving me a quirky little look. “I was there when we decided on that, remember?”

“It’s just… it’s nice,” I admitted, stroking his arm a couple times before giving it a light little squeeze, just a small gesture of reassurance.

Kyle’s eyes were the brightest they’d ever been when he started to laugh, just lightly enough so that only I could hear him. “You’re ridiculous,” he said on that laugh, grabbing the front of my shirt and hauling me in just the couple inches he needed to so that he could coax me into a light,
simple kiss.

It was light, but it was a challenge, and one that I took him up on; pressing further into him, I built upon the action, forcing him, in turn, to step up and make his own approach bolder. Which he did; he took complete control, forceful but kind, strong and protective, and then I just melted. I was just so damn happy that this was happening, so proud of what we’d created, so overwhelmingly relieved that the crisis had passed and that life could really start again.

Every time we came together like this, I felt safer than I ever had, stronger than I ever had, and more content than I ever thought possible. It was all about discovery with him; discovery, and security… wanting to make things right and safe for him, and knowing that he’d be there to protect me, too. And the next thing he told me was, “I never would’ve made it through this without you.”

“Same here,” I said in response, once again catching his eyes. “Kyle, swear to God, I could keep going forever about… well, like, everything you’ve…”

“Well,” said Kyle, his tone almost teasingly seductive, “you don’t have to say it all right now. I’ll take it over time.”

“Jeez,” I said, unable to even pretend to hide my broad, elated grin, “what am I getting myself into?”

Practically beside himself, my boyfriend smoothed his hands down along either side of my ribs, then clasped his hands around my waist and, with a slightly put-on smug grin of his own, he answered, “You’re just going to have to find out.”

Well. That started that. And, God, I couldn’t have been happier.

I buried my head in Kyle’s shoulder, and let myself drown for a while in everything I’d found. After a minute or so, though—I couldn’t tell, I was so fucking gone—Kyle tapped me on the outside of my arm and said, “Stan? Your phone’s ringing.”

“Mnhmm,” I said, not paying attention.

“Stan,” he repeated, more firmly. “Your phone. Is ringing.”

“Hmm? OH,” I realized. I let go of Kyle, who laughed again, then ran over to the bureau where I’d left my phone plugged in. I managed to pick it up just in time, before it could go to voicemail, and said a slightly frantic, “Hello?!?”

“Stanley!”

“Mom!” I exclaimed. My heart sped up. Hearing her tone more upbeat and knowing that she wouldn’t just be a voice on the airwaves much longer was further affirmation that we would indeed be able to regain some semblance of what we’d always known to be normal. “Mom, how’re you? What’s going on?”

“Oh, Stan, I got your text last night,” my mother said. Her voice was a little frantic, too, but there was a sense of ease, of calm, that was returning to her after months of nothing but worry. “I wanted to call when I knew you’d be awake. Oh, honey, I’m so relieved it’s over.”

“Yeah.” I sighed for relief. “Yeah, it is. So, like, what’s going on outside of town?”

“Well, your sister and I made contact with the Harrisons, in Salt Lake. Their son Gary was still in town a while, you probably know—“ Yeah, and he’d had a hand in saving our asses. As
Toolshed especially, I owed that guy a lot.

As my mother went on with her explanation of how she and Mrs. Harrison, along with Shelley and the oldest Mormon girl, Jenny, had contacted the Red Cross and sought out a safe passage to South Park with reinforcements, Kyle walked over and touched a hand to my arm to catch my attention for a second. ‘I’m gonna go check on Ike,’ he mouthed to me. I nodded my okay; we exchanged a quick kiss as Kyle swept his hand down my arm, then squeezed my hand before giving me a smile and taking his leave.

Mom continued on to tell me that she, Shelley and the Harrisons had started up a pretty widespread ‘save South Park’ campaign in order to get more official and medical reinforcements into town, and that their primary contacts had been, naturally, Token’s father, and, only slightly to my surprise until I worked out the Salt Lake connection, Karen McCormick. She also mentioned that Jenny and her sister Amanda had been receiving texts from an untraceable number, signed by the Guardian Angel, who gave tips on which roads to avoid and what to expect in town on a supernatural level. Get that girl officially in the League; damn. Karen had been working overtime. She was Kenny’s sister, all right.

I confirmed for my mother that I was still safe at Token’s, that Kyle and Ike were well, but that, no, we hadn’t been into town yet, nor had we heard anything about Dad, or about the Broflovskis. She then said, however, one of the best things any of us could have hoped to hear: “Things are looking up. I’ll see you soon.”

“See you soon, Mom,” I said in return. “Love you. Hi to Shelley, okay?”

“Of course, sweetheart. I really am very proud of you, Stan.”

I thanked her again, and then we hung up with the understanding that it really wouldn’t be long until we talked face to face again. I drew in a deep breath, then stretched my arms out again, and took a glance around the little room. All of my gear, scuffed and still stained a bit from R’lyeh, was set in the proper spot on the back wall. I’d clean those later. For now, there was plenty we had to attend to.

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We were all more than eager to head into town, but before we did, Kenny called a brief meeting. Clyde was nervously drumming his fingers against the table almost the entire time, even though he agreed that we couldn’t just rush into anything. Earlier in the morning Token had gone over to his main house to speak with his parents, and Mr. Black had essentially given us the okay to head into town as ourselves. Token and Wendy were the last to arrive to the meeting, bringing that news with them, and I could almost feel the room itself relax with relief.

The wild card of the morning, though, was seeing Marjorine. Not Butters, but Marjorine. She’d been gone for a long time, so it was good to see her, but a little confusing… mostly just due to how much damage Chaos had caused. She sat at the far end of the table, all the way across from Kenny, who took the head, and kept on nervously wringing her hands and kneading her knuckles together as she began giving a hardly structured but very deep apology.

“So what happened?” Kenny finally asked, after Marjorine had fumbled around with apologies for a while. Wendy, I noticed, kept her eyes on Marjorine the entire time; Wendy was probably the best at being able to read her, too, since the two had come to know each other so well since middle school. More than anything, Wendy looked hopeful. Marjorine cast the occasional glance at her friend as well, but since she had to look past Clyde’s death glare to do so, she kept those glances to a minimum.
“I, uh… got too invested in a book,” was the way Marjorine chose to describe her folly. She glanced down at her lap, bit her lip, then stood. On her lap, she’d been holding a bundle, which she now presented onto the table:

Chaos’s cape, scorched and torn, was wrapped around the gauntlet gloves and armored boots the villain had worn for the past several years. The entire bundle of Chaos’s gear lay there in a neat pile on the table, and then Marjorine glanced around the table at all of us, giving Clyde and Wendy more apologetic looks than anyone, it seemed, then finally said to Kenny specifically, “Here’s what’s left. The helmet’s already gone. I’m done with Chaos. I really, honestly am.”

“How do we know you aren’t going to go that way again?” Kenny asked.

Marjorine rolled up one of her long white sweater sleeves, revealing the thin white scars on her skin. They were scars that would probably fade even more over time, but were, once again, reminders of everything that had recently transpired. “I’d rather be more in control of my life, for one thing,” she answered. “I made bad choices.”

“You think?” Clyde snapped.

“Really bad choices,” said Marjorine. Clyde rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything else. “I’m not going to go on and say I regret all of it, because I was just tryin’ to figure out how to cope. I get that it’ll take a while before you guys wanna talk to me again. That’s fine. I just wanna tell you that you can take this stuff. I don’t want it anymore. You don’t have to worry about Chaos anymore. Anything I can do to keep apologizin’, guys, just let me know.”

“All right,” said Kenny, speaking for everyone. “Noted, thanks.” He crossed the Butters WTF? note off of the whiteboard, then walked around to take the Chaos gear and stuff it into a locked file cabinet off toward the back of the room. Once back there, though, he said, “Oh, fuck.”

“What?” Cartman wondered.

“Dude, guys… shit, what do we do about Bradley?” Kenny was looking at the spot on the wall where we’d kept the Mint-Berry Communicator (or so Bradley had called it when he’d given it to us a few years ago) locked in glass. “Ike?”

“Contact Yates and get a search team on it,” Ike said before Kenny could give the word. The kid started ticking away at his computer, but I saw his hands shaking. Kyle had taken a good chunk of time before the meeting to talk to his brother, primarily asking him about his two traumas: the dead celebrities thing (Kyle was pretty angry that Ike hadn’t been talking to him about it), and the concern for Sheila and Gerald Broflovski. Ike had assured Kyle that seeing the occasional ghost didn’t bother him, and there could have been more annoying curses to have to deal with… as for how he was coping with his parents still being in the asylum, well, Ike’s involuntary shakes spoke enough about that. He was much more mature than any of us had been at his age (being ahead a couple grades helped), but at heart, Ike was a kid with fears just like anyone, and wanted parents to be able to come home to.

“Thanks, little dude,” Kenny said, taking his place at the head of the table again to make a note of Working on it next to Bradley search party?

Which meant that the next things to take care of were Parents/family/friends, etc., and Asylum and hospital. Figuring out the deal with the mayor (whether Token’s dad would keep the position or if Mayor McDaniels would ever even come out of her insanity) could wait until after we saw through all of the work that needed to be done for the people who’d been housed in the asylum, and for the people waiting for them.
“Okay, then,” said Kenny, “this is it, I guess. Token, dude, you sure we’ve got the okay to head in?”

“Dad said things started clearing up last night,” Token confirmed. “Helicopters started coming in this morning, and there’s already a group, mostly from out of town, working on repairing the road Nyarlathotep wiped out.”

“The barricade’s gone?” Clyde guessed.

“Yeah.”

“For what it’s worth,” I put in, “I talked to my mother this morning, too. She and my sister are back in town, and the Harrisons—“

“Who?” Cartman asked.


“Oh, right, them.”

“Yeah.” I glared daggers at him for a second. I couldn’t understand how he could still be a jerk after everything that happened, but that’s just Cartman, I guess. Everyone operates the only way they know how. “Anyway, Mom and the Harrisons got together and there’s a bunch of Red Cross support and stuff coming in. Your sister, too, dude,” I grinned at Kenny.

“Yeah?” he said. “Awesome. Great, well, as long as we’re clear, then, let’s leave League stuff here for right now and just go see our fuckin’ families, huh?”

There was an overwhelming, highly energetic agreement to that from all of us, but even in the rejoicing I could see that Kenny had something else on his mind. From his expression, I knew that Kyle noticed, too. But we’d learn about that later.

When the meeting was over, and I caught Kenny in a discussion about how we’d regroup again once we’d figured things out in town, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Wendy approach Marjorine. The two talked for a few seconds until Wendy, after a second of hesitating, hugged her friend, and welcomed her back.

Kenny noticed as well. “Dude,” he commented. “More I think about it, more I realize I’m not the only one who got out of this with a life intact. Y’know?”

I grinned. “You mean everyone, don’t you?”

“I mean everyone.”

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We left in shifts. Clyde, Token, Wendy, Craig, Cartman and Marjorine were the first group, with Clyde leading so far out front it was obvious that this was just as much about him avoiding Marjorine as it was getting to see Bebe again. Kenny led our group, which included Timmy and Henrietta, both of whom thought about staying back at the base, until it was clear that Timmy did want to check in at home, as well as with the Valmers, and Henrietta conceded to speaking with her mother about Bradley.

We had hardly left the Blacks’ property by the time Henrietta lit up. “God,” she breathed out after a deep inhalation off her quellazaire. “Been long enough.” She offered one to me and one
to Kenny (probably bypassing Kyle and Ike due to the awful glare Kyle gave the cigarette case), but we both refused. I admit to smoking the occasional cigarette, and I knew Kenny was possibly even more regular about them than I was, but I’d honestly not even thought about it in so long (not to mention the fact that I was still catching my breath from R’lyeh) that the thought didn’t settle well.

The closer we got to downtown, the more people we began to see. Out in broad daylight, milling around, more or less living normally. Though… normally, in South Park, also sometimes meant overcrowded and panicked for various reasons. Well, there was reason enough, now, and there was enough authority around to keep things under control. Red Cross vehicles were common on almost every street. Volunteers passed around blankets and water, and a green kiosk, which was set up in the middle of the sidewalk that led from one suburban street onto the main drag, advertised Harbucks coffee; the baristas were dressed for the cold, and were handing out free hot drinks. I saw Kenny grimace when we saw the first cop car, complete with Yates and Murphy leaning against it, watching the crowds.

As we stood in line for coffee, Kenny grumbled, “If I was Mysterion right now, those two idiots would be taking more action.”

“Dude, it’ll be okay,” said Kyle. “We’re gonna make a statement soon, anyway, right?”

“Right,” Kenny sighed.

“You see Red yet?” I asked him, to get his mind off of the lazy police officers. “Is she working here?”

Kenny shook his head; we were now at the front of the line, and allowed Henrietta her coffee first. “She doesn’t work for these guys anymore, dude, remember?” He asked the baristas if they knew of her whereabouts, but it was a newer, younger staff, so none of them really even knew who Red was. Kenny thanked them calmly and stood to the side while Timmy, Kyle and I grabbed caffeine for ourselves (and Kyle allowed Ike a decaf), but Kenny finished the little 8-ounce offering quickly, crumpled the paper cup and threw it away, and said, “Hey, dudes, I gotta move faster’n this, I’m sorry. I’ve got my cell if you need me.”

We bid him good luck, and Kenny left, shoving his way through crowds to find Red and Karen. So of course, that was the very moment I heard a young girl’s voice call out, “Stan? Kyle? Oh, my gosh, yeah, it’s you!” Out from the crowd off to our right darted Karen McCormick, bundled in a black peacoat and a handmade pink scarf, her shoulder-length brown hair wisping around and catching the sun like a halo. It hit me then that we hadn’t officially seen each other in forever… we’d just been the League and the Guardian Angel, respectively. The girl sure had grown up—that and, oh, helped save the town.

Karen hit me with a friendly hug as if I were the most immediate replacement for Kenny she could find; she probably went for me before Kyle due to the fact that Ike, once more letting himself feel that more fittingly childlike fear for his parents, was latched right onto Kyle’s right arm. The brothers were equally concerned, but Kyle was holding his head up for Ike’s sake, and didn’t show any of his anxieties.

“Uh, hey, Karen,” I said.

“You just missed Kenny,” Kyle added when Karen turned to hug him from the side.

“I did?!” she exclaimed. “Oh, shoot. Wait. Wait, Kenny?” Karen stepped back and grabbed my right hand and Kyle’s left. Her bright brown eyes widened and she joyfully cried again, “Kenny?! Really, really, really?! He’s okay?!” She dropped our hands and clapped hers over her
mouth as she squealed in delight. “Oh, God, oh, my God, it worked! *Ahhh!*”

“What worked?” Kyle wondered.

“Thank you thank you thank you,” Karen smiled at Henrietta.

“Yeah,” said the Goth, delicately sipping her coffee.

“Where’d he go?” Karen wondered, opening the question to all of us.

Kyle, Ike and I all pointed her in the right direction. With exuberant thanks and an apologetic hello to Ike and Timmy, Karen sprinted away again, hot on her brother’s trail. I did kind of wish that I could see that reunion take place, but I had a sister of my own to find.

Before the five of us could go much farther, ourselves, I heard a familiar, disenchanted voice coming from the direction Karen had flown to us from: “Where the hell did pink scarf go?”


The crowd parted, and there they were: the other two Goths, the tall one in his usual long black trench coat, leaning against his cane, and the other dressed in something with so many buckles it looked like a black straightjacket, tossing his red-highlighted hair out of his face.

“Jesus,” said Henrietta, stepping forward after she ditched her coffee, “where the hell have you two losers been?”

“Drinking coffee in a basement,” said the taller of the two. Henrietta held out her silver cigarette case for her comrades, who tried to make it look like they weren’t desperate for nicotine. Even their usual blank expressions couldn’t hide their joy for seeing those cigarettes, though.

“*Not* as cool as it sounds,” the other added. Henrietta lit them up, and lit another for herself; the three inhaled together and sighed the smoke out in a collective cloud. “Hey, where’s the kid?”

“Dead,” said Henrietta, roughly.

“What?”

“Cthulhu killed him.”

“Oh? *Luckyyyyy.*”

Henrietta narrowed her eyes at her pink-shoed friend. “You wouldn’t think so if you’d seen it.”

The red-haired Goth gave her an odd glare, then shrugged it off while the taller one said, “Ugh, fine. Don’t go all fairy tale hero on us, though. You’ve been hanging around cape boy too much.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Kyle and I then worked out a deal with Timmy: if he kept an eye on Henrietta and the other Goths, we’d continue keeping our eyes out for his parents and the Valmers, and text him with information. Timmy gave us the thumbs-up to keep things under control, and we continued on, Ike still clinging to his brother’s arm.

“You okay, Ike?” Kyle asked him while I kept an eye out through the crowds.
“Kyle, I'm really worried,” Ike admitted. “What if nobody gets better, what do we do?”

“W-We’ll figure it out. Okay?” I saw the fear wash over Kyle again, though…the fear that had manifested the day his parents were committed. As far as we knew, he was still the legal head of the Broflovski household.

As we drew close to the asylum, the crowds became denser. I looked around desperately for the faces I wanted to see. Men and women in white coats darted around, trying to explain things to the masses. The sooner Mysterion and the League made a statement on the crisis, the better, I realized again. Left to their own devices, the people of South Park were sure to stay in something of a panic for a while. But, all my life, I felt like there was at least one adult who kept her head when the rest of the town got wild… and the moment I saw her again, I breathed in another deep sigh of normality.

My mother was standing in what looked like a well-organized group, mostly consisting of women her age, with several others as well: men of varying ages, younger adults my sister’s age… and my sister herself, mingled in with the Harrison kids. Mark and Jenny were doing their part providing blankets with the Red Cross, while Shelley and Amanda checked names off on a list as people were released. I wanted to call out, but my voice caught—luckily, though, my mother caught sight of us the second we were in view. “Stan…? Stan!” she exclaimed.

“What?!” Shelley yelped, dropping her clipboard into the snow in surprise. Amanda smiled and picked it up, dusted it off, and handed off Shelley’s task to Gary.

“Stan!” Mom cried out again. She dropped whatever she’d been doing and raced toward me. Before I could even react, my mother had me clenched in the tightest hug she’d given me in years. “Hi, Mom,” I said. I could hardly even feel myself speak, but she’d heard me just fine, and tried to restrain herself but cried nonetheless. I hugged her back, telling myself I wouldn’t let go until she did. I could tell from her reactions, too, that that meant the world to her.

“Oh, Stan, honey, oh, my God, let me look at you,” Mom said when she stood back, her hands placed firmly on my shoulders. She looked well. Pretty tired, but put together. Her greying brown hair was clean and in need of a trim, and her eyes were foggy and drowsy, but what really struck me was her smile. The fact that she was smiling at all. It was warm, and consoling. This wasn’t the broken woman who’d left town in November. Nor, I realized once she spoke again, was I the vessel of nerves I’d been during autumn at all. “My God, sweetheart,” Mom said, “you look so grown up. Look at you!” I laughed a little, mostly out of relief that she and Shelley were all right. “Put a hat on, though, Stanley, for God’s sake. It’s freezing.”

“Oh,” I said, “yeah, I guess.” I didn’t have a hat anywhere near me, but I appreciated the thought. Especially when Shelley walked up to me, shivered once against the cold air under her tight beige coat, and forced a knit blue hat into my hands. “Uh, hey, sis,” I said as I graciously accepted the hat. “What’s good?”

Shelley rolled her eyes and glared up at me. “You are such a turd, Stan,” she said, slapping on me the insult she’d been using since we were little. “Why the hell did you stay here? Don’t answer that.” A pause, as Shelley looked down and kicked her boot into the snow at our feet, then she looked up again, gathered herself, and said, “I’m glad you did. Karen said you and your friends helped out a lot. So. That’s cool.”

“Thanks, Shelley,” I grinned. I pulled the hat on (yeah, good idea, it was getting pretty damn cold, but that’s late February for you) and continued, “Good to see you.”
“You, too,” my sister admitted.

As Shelley dismissed herself to keep helping Amanda and Gary (both of whom gave me a bright smile and wave, and to whom I smiled and waved back, though not quite as emphatically), my mother had just locked Kyle into a hug; Ike let go of his arm so he could return it. I actually saw the thought in Kyle’s expression: the exact moment when, just very briefly, he mentally substituted my mother for his—he held onto someone who still had more responsibility than he did, someone who knew more of the ways of the world, someone who was good at providing the comforts of a family home. That was something about my mom, not to mention the long-standing friendships between the Marsh and Broflovski households: Mom just would, without a doubt, if anything happened to Kyle and Ike’s parents, take Ike in as a dependent, and allow Kyle the choice to claim dependency or not. We all knew she would.

“So good to see you, too, Kyle,” Mom was saying to him, clenching him tightly in her grasp. “How are you?”

“I’m… I’m good, Sharon,” he answered. “You?”

“A mess, as you can see,” Mom managed to laugh when she stepped back. “Now, Kyle… Ike… oh, Ike, how are you?” Ike smiled nervously and shrugged an okay. “I understand,” Mom said. “But you boys are in luck. They’re releasing people alphabetically by last name. A through M today, N through Z tomorrow. That was the most organized way they could think of doing it. It has to be a slow process or there’d just be anarchy.”

“Alphabetically?” Kyle repeated. He sounded glad for his own fortune, but he and I glanced at each other and both let out a discouraged, “Ooooohhh….”

“What’s wrong?” Mom wondered, glancing back and forth between us. “Boys, what? Kyle, you’ll get to see your parents, and thank God, Stan, we’ll finally get to see how your father’s really doing—”

“No,” I said, “no, no, not us, um…”

Yeah. We’d both had the same thoughts.

A wheat-haired man in a lab coat took to a podium near the asylum door, at that point, and began an announcement: “People of South Park. I am pleased to inform you, as an attendant of this institution, that those who fell victim to the attacks of November through February, kept safe within these walls, have been making mass recoveries. Due to the overwhelming volume of inmates, however, we are, as earlier stated, going to have to space this process out over the next two days. A through M today by last name, and N through Z tomorrow. We’ve finished with the As now, and will begin with the Bs—”

“THAT’S BULLSHIT!”

The heckling voice was Clyde Donovan’s. “Bullshit, bullshit, fucking bullshit! You can’t do that!”

I looked far up to my diagonal right and saw, of course, at the front of the crowd, Clyde and the group that had left the base before we had. Token held him back by the right arm and Craig by the left; Clyde looked like a bull about to charge, or worse… like he was really about to tackle the man at the podium and rip his arms out. Not far from where their group stood, I saw Bebe Stevens’ mother, looking distraught and broken. Clyde was another story entirely. I saw his face darken, saw every ounce of hope drain from him when he was essentially told that he wouldn’t see his girlfriend
again for at least another twenty-four hours. I understood the asylum staff’s reasoning, but knowing what a blow Clyde had taken, it was pretty unfair.

I noticed that Marjorine ducked away from the crowd while Clyde was simmering down. Probably a good move on her part. A few seconds later, Wendy stood on tiptoe to whisper something to Token, and then followed.

“Stevens,” Kyle sighed. “Poor Clyde, dude, that sucks.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” I agreed.

“The only exception they made,” Mom told us, “was the Tweaks’ boy, because he was the first one admitted.” Well, at least that was good, I decided. Poor kid had already dealt with enough trauma, he’d lose it for good if they made him stay in there one more day. “Other than that, though…” Trying to keep a sunny disposition, Mom smiled at Kyle and Ike, and said, “We should be seeing your parents any minute.”

To Kyle only, Mom then added, “And please, don’t ever hesitate to tell me if there is anything at all I can do to thank you.”

Kyle agreed that he would, thanked her for the sentiment, then grabbed my hand for support as Shelley, Gary and Amanda began to check off names of family members and friends of the B inmates. After another minute, the man at the podium started the roll call.

– – –

Kenny

Sometimes when I came back to life, I’d be annoyed. Other times, I had felt rejuvenated, ready for action; I’d spring right back into whatever I’d been doing before I died. But never once had I felt like this.

I had woken up that morning feeling, for lack of a better word, real.

Because I had a real life (vigilante duties aside). I had a real life in a real town and would eventually go back to sitting in a boring-ass classroom at a real fucking school. I had no idea if I’d ever think of anything as ‘boring’ again, though. ‘Boring’ was part of life, and life was pretty fucking incredible. What a gamble. What a Goddamn, crazy motherfucking gamble. Whatever game R’lyeh had been playing, I’d either just plain won, or it had let me win… but either way, Cthulhu was gone and I was free.

Was it cold that morning? I have no fucking idea. I was just so pissing glad that I wasn’t going to get hit by a truck that day. That I wasn’t going to fall down a manhole, or get disemboweled by a random stampede of running bulls, or get shot, stabbed, blown up or kidnapped for a live organ transplant with rusty needles. Nope. I was going to live through the day, and then fall asleep, and then holy shit I’d wake up and live again through the next one. I’d go to school and take my girlfriend out on dates and make sure my sister was getting good grades and fill out college applications and just live.

Only the good die young, right? Well, from ages eight to sixteen, I’d died more than enough times. Can I be good now and live for a while? Okay? Okay. Sweet. Glad we worked that out.
The crowds were a blur of activity. Men, women and children crowded the South Park streets. This was commonplace before, but hadn’t been in a long time. I walked by stores and already saw the boards coming down from off some of the business doors. Some kids had spray-painted apocalyptic warnings on the walls of offices and storefronts, but those graffiti images were already getting a look over. I even ran into a guy I’d done some paint work for who offered me good compensation if I could give him a few hours that weekend helping to repair signs, shingling and walls of a few buildings, and I took the offer without hesitation, promising to call once I knew I could give him time.

I’d told the guys to contact me on my cell if they needed me, but every time I checked the damn thing, it showed a touchy signal. Maybe Token’s house was the only place with good reception… that or right in the shadows of the asylum or hospital. Nobody around me really seemed to be on a cell, so I took to walking around the crowds, looking for Red and Karen, until I realized I couldn’t really see much from the border and had to squeeze back in.

Fighting my way through the crowds was no easy task. There was an added desperation to everyone’s movements. Life had to pick up where it left off, but for that one day, the entire population of the town could be found in one of three places: the asylum, the hospital, or, quite sadly, the morgue and funeral home. It was on the walk from the hospital to the morgue, actually, that I finally saw who I was looking for.

Huddled up in a Kelly green coat, Red walked with timid steps through the neglected, snow-covered sidewalks. She held her coat to her with her entire left arm, while her right hand firmly held her little pink cell phone to her ear. Her gorgeous red hair caught the sun and gleamed like embers; her bright blue eyes were wide and wet with worry, and her unpainted lips moved just a fraction of an inch above her large black scarf as she spoke to the party on the other end of her phone conversation.

“I checked,” she was saying. “I-I checked the hospital, I asked everywhere. I’m really, really worried, Mom.” My heart jumped. Quickly, I checked the street for cars, then made a dash for it. “I can’t hear you, what? No. What? No! I don’t know…” Red continued, on the verge of harder tears.

“Excuse me,” I got out as I shoved past a tight gathering of people to make it to the other side of the street. “Excuse me, sorry, man, watch out—“

“No, I don’t know what to do,” Red continued on, nervous and afraid.

“Red!” I shouted out to her. I’d almost made it to her side of the street. Just a few more steps…

She picked her head up and started glancing around, her hair falling every which way with each deliberate toss. Good Lord, was that girl just gorgeous. Outside and in. Every bit of her. Another rush of bodies went scurrying past me, but I reached my landmark. As soon as the curtain of the crowd parted, Red turned toward me. And her eyes went wide, and her jaw fell limp, and she shoved her phone down into her pocket and rushed at me with love and disbelief radiating from her tear-streaked, wind-bitten expression.

“KENNY!” she cried, two seconds before she fell into my arms and yanked me close to her. I pulled her in tighter, struck right away with her clean, citrusy scent, warmed throughout by her trembling embrace. She nearly collapsed, and each of her breaths seemed to catch into a sob, but she had beautiful restraint. Even though, man, I didn’t care. She could cry for a week and I’d be fine with it. Because I could honestly promise that I’d always be there.
That was it. That did me in. That got my eyes all stupidly wet, too. Commitment had never been a thing for me before Red. I liked girls, so I flirted. I lusted after girls, so I slept with them. A lot. A lot. A whole fucking lot. But that was trivial, that was nothing, that had passed. Red—Red, I’d actually fallen in love with. Not just because she was gorgeous, and sexy as hell, and knew just what to do to keep me up for hours, but because she’d had a hand in saving me. She’d been someone I could go to when I was in need; hell, I’d been living at her house half the time since I left my parents. She was someone I could just plain talk to, someone who had a lot of faith in me, and who showed more compassion and concern than any of my previous girlfriends had.

I breathed her in again, then let out a breath of hot air on her skin below her ear before I kissed her cheek, and then her eyelids, and then her nose, and then her lips, and her lips again, and again and again and again until I tasted salt as she kept on crying. But it wasn’t bitter, it was beautiful; it was fucking beautiful. And warmer, and warmer and warmer as I explored her mouth, as we fell into each other and kissed as if nobody stood around us.

“Kenny…” she repeated, when neither of us could go any longer for want of breath. She buried her face into the thick fabric of my parka and held on to me tightly; I rubbed her back and smoothed strands of hair out of her face and behind her ears. “When I didn’t hear from you, sweetie—”

“It’s okay…” I said.

“You left three days ago! I got worried!” Oh, shit, we were gone that long? No fucking wonder. There had been absolutely no way to tell, in R’lyeh, and Henrietta hadn’t told us anything.

“I’m sorry, babe, my phone went dead…” I tried. Red picked her head up, and I leaned in to kiss her again. “I didn’t though, see?” I added, attempting humor. Red smiled a little and cuddled up to me. God, don’t ever end. “Red, I’m really sorry I was gone so long. Stuff’s gonna get better, though. I promise.”

“Just don’t do anything that stupid again,” she asked.

“Sure.” I thought again about the nagging idea to tell her about my being Mysterion. I wanted to. I really wanted to. Now was definitely not the time for that, but I’d figure it out. I’d figure it out and tell her, at exactly the right time. “You held up, though, baby…” I complimented my girlfriend, nuzzling my nose into her hair and getting a big, gorgeous whiff of citrus, “a lot of these people’re all right cuz of your safehouse idea.”

“Watch it, Kenny, you’re gonna make me sound like a hero,” Red laughed, despite her voice being close to a whisper.

“Well, what if I think you are?” I grinned. My girlfriend clutched me tighter and kept on cuddling; she nudged my neck a couple times before marking it with a bite and a kiss, then pressed her forehead right against my chest while she tried not to cry. I pulled her in and stroked her back calmly, and said, “I love you. I kept thinking about you the whole time.”

“I love you, too, Kenny,” Red told me. She picked her head up and hauled me down for another deep, breathless kiss.

I hadn’t felt this warm in a long, long time. It felt like ages. Aeons. We’d been gone three days in R’lyeh, apparently, but just that final moment in the Gate had felt like eternity. It had almost completely severed me from everything in the world. I thought about the letter I’d written to my girlfriend, and about the letters I’d written to Karen and to my friends. I really hadn’t had much faith in my survival, and I was sort of feeling guilty about that.
I’d gotten what I’d always wanted. A life. And it just so happened that I got to share it with some pretty fucking amazing people. A group of friends I could count on for anything, a sister who’d literally go to the edge with me, and a girlfriend I could always, no matter what, come home to; talk to; love; live for. My life was mine, and I got to choose who I wanted in it. I hadn’t done too bad.

Red tasted wonderful. Her skin and her hair and just everything felt wonderful. Her hands grabbing onto me and anchoring me reminded me that this was all real. I wasn’t delusional and at the gates of death. Not anymore. Just me, just life.

I couldn’t fucking wait to get it started.

When we pulled back, Red held onto my arm as we started to walk. I wasn’t sure quite where we were going, but I sort of didn’t care. Girls (Red in particular) have this way of doing that to me—letting me just block everything out and enjoy that sweet contact. I loved the way she grabbed onto me. “You really think I’m a hero?” Red laughed as we walked. Her breath appeared in front of her, and her stylish boots crunched into the snow beneath us.

“Good enough for the Shadow League, baby.”

Red laughed and nudged me to tell me that was a pretty lame joke. “Speaking of heroes, sweetie,” she said, “what was it like? I mean, like, what’d you do? Did you guys find Mysterion and them? I mean, I’ve met him before, he’s so…”

“Unreadable?” I tried.

“Charismatic.”

“I’m charismatic.” Waaaaay to drop hints, Kenny.

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” my girlfriend smiled. “There’s just this thing about Mysterion that makes me kinda think—“

“KENNY!”

Red and I stopped, and picked our heads up. From out of the tightly-packed throngs of people darted my little sister, her face red against her pink scarf, flushed from running against the cold air. “Kenny, Kenny, Kenny!” she exclaimed again. Red let go of my arm just in time for Karen to tackle me. I grabbed her around the waist and set her right down onto her feet so that she wouldn’t knock us both over.

“Hey, Karen,” I said. I almost lost it. When I set her down, I stood back, my hands on her shoulders, and just studied her. I looked her up and down to make sure she was okay. Her eyes were nice and clear, but she did kind of show traces of having cried not long before. She was smiling, though, which counted for everything. I wanted Red to be happy, and I wanted Karen to be happy… so far, so good.

Honestly. Thank God I hadn’t died.

“How’ve you been?” I asked her. “You haven’t given Red a hard time too much, have you?”

Karen giggled and glanced over at my girlfriend, who smiled back. “Your girlfriend is really nice, Kenny,” Karen smiled.
“And Karen’s very sweet,” Red complimented her in return. “It’s been nice getting to know her.”

“I’ve been helping, too,” Karen assured me. Hugging me again, she added, “I’m just really glad to see you, Kenny. I heard about, um… what you were doing, and I wanted to help out as much as I could.”

“You helped, Karen,” I told her. “You really, really did.”

“Come on, you guys,” Red then beckoned, taking possession of my arm again. “Kenny, sweetie, are you busy? Can we go to my house for a little bit? I wanna make you lunch, are you hungry?”

“I am now,” I said, smiling as I left a kiss on her cheek.

We made our way through the crowds and back to Red’s home, where her parents were cleaning up around the safehouse area. I gave them my hello; her mother hugged me and her father shook my hand. I’d always be welcome there, any time, they assured me. Karen, too. Just a place to kind of call home.

Thinking of the implications of the word ‘home,’ too, I pulled Karen aside while Red helped her mother put dishes away and as she looked through the pantry to see what she wanted to make for lunch. Out on the sofa in Red’s living room, I sat Karen down and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She sensed the gravity of the conversation we were about to have and clung onto my sweatshirt a little. She knew what was coming.

“Karen,” I said, calmly and evenly, “I am only going to set foot in Mom and Dad’s house one more time in my life.”

“Ever?”

“Ever, kid. I’m never going to live there again, and I don’t want you living there, either.” I was firm with her; resolute. Karen was absolutely not going back to that house. The Mormon education she’d been given had shaped her into a wonderful young woman, and there was no way in hell I was going to let her back in that shabby house full of spousal abuse and drugs. I just wasn’t. “Now, I’m gonna give you a couple options, Karen, I think you’re old enough to make big choices like this,” I said, to be fair. “They both weave into each other. Where you want to live, and where you want to go to school. Do you want to stay in Salt Lake, and keep going to your private school? You still have a scholarship.”

Karen shook her head. “It was a great place, but I missed having actual family around,” she said. “I want to go to school here.”

“You understand that means I’d want to take care of you,” I said. “And that I don’t live at home.”

“So I don’t want to live at home, either.”

“I live at Token’s extra house. Is that okay with you? We both go talk to him and see if you can stay, too.”

Karen nodded. “I’ll do whatever, Kenny.”

“Why?”
“Because I feel better knowing that you’re around to protect me,” she said.

“I’m gonna graduate next year and go away to college.”

“I think by then the Guardian Angel can take care of herself,” Karen whispered. Hugging me from the side, she added, “That’s another reason I want to stay.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I want you to stay, too.”

The Guardian Angel would be inducted into the League. After all, she’d spoken the couplet that had allowed Mysterion to live. That was something that I wanted to talk to Karen about right then and there, too, but knew that I couldn’t. That had to wait until we were within League walls, not in Red’s house, not while her parents were there. I wanted to know how Karen had come to know the couplet, and exactly how much she knew about my Immortality.

And, shit, that was the talk that was coming up. As I’d told Karen, I was going home to the McCormick home one last time, soon. One last time, to confront my parents about my Immortality. I knew that they knew something, and I wasn’t going to be fully satisfied until I knew exactly what. My mother, at least, had an answer for me. Talking to my parents was going to be the very last piece of the puzzle of my life. Once I spoke to them, no matter what they told me, I could move on. I could leave that part of my life behind me and figure out how to move forward with the life I’d been granted. So that I could protect myself and everything important to me.

But for that afternoon…

Red called us into the kitchen to tell us she was taking out her panini press to make sandwiches. Karen gave me a reassuring smile, then bolted up and in there to figure out what kind of cheese she wanted, happily chattering on about how she now knew Red’s mom always had a few different options. Which was exactly what I wanted for my sister: figure out her choices of what to eat… not whether she got to eat or not. I’d take care of her. We were family; we were enough.

My girlfriend drew me up to standing, taking both of my hands in hers. “Your sister is so cute,” she laughed. “She’s kind of like you.”

“Thanks,” I grinned. That was a great compliment to hear. And of course Red didn’t know just how much Karen took after me… oh, that whole hero by night thing… but she’d know soon enough.

But for now, I took Red’s hand in mine as we strode back into the kitchen, where I studied every tick of her head, every sway of her hips, every smile, every laugh, everything. Where I was pretty close to obsessively counting every single breath I took, content in the fact that I knew there would always be another one.

It’s hard to describe; hard to explain. But I felt just so new and so grateful and so… well… alive. I felt like up until now I’d just kind of existed. I’d just been there. Sometimes I’d leave, but then I’d come back. Now it could be about experience. It could be about making mistakes and fixing them, about planning for a future, about living in the present and learning from the past. Some days I’d hate it and some days I’d love it. But in the end, it was all just a part of life.
They’d cut my mother’s hair. Apparently, she’d torn so hard at it, there was no way to repair the damage. It fell, now, in a pronounced wave that bobbed just above her shoulders, and seemed to be greying more rapidly now, after the crisis. To call her shell-shocked would be an understatement, but I had to take my chances talking to her.

Mom and Dad were among the last from the B list to be released. They had an escort, a bearded, bespectacled man in a white uniform, who guided them out of the building and into the light of day.

“Broflovski!” Gary Harrison was the one to call it. His chipper tone didn’t exactly fit the situation, but it was nice to hear all the same. Say it nice and loud and bright, so I could try to forget about how I’d felt when the man on my front step had told me they’d both gone insane.

Out of curiosity, I’d earlier gone up to another orderly and asked about the nature of the insanity. What it was like, and how they knew it was over. He had told me that, while insanity itself had manifested itself differently in everyone committed, the way they were all coming out of it was the same. Shaken and disturbed after a restless night of fits and in some cases heavy seizures. But after a couple of hours of being nothing but shocked and traumatized, everyone had seemed ready to just get up, get out, and get on with their lives.

Before anyone was released, the asylum staff conducted surveys. A woman had come up to me and Ike a few names before ours was called so that I could confirm the night that I’d first gone in to identify them, and sign a waiver saying that I’d resume responsibility if anything should (and they assured me this was highly unlikely) happen to them again in a similar vein. Ike was almost crying, at that point, so as soon as my end of the survey was over, I knealt down and just hugged him. Stan knealt as well and kept a hand on my back, rubbing a light, soothing circle between my shoulderblades as I assured my little brother, “It’s going to be okay. No matter what, Ike, it’ll be okay.”

The other end of the survey was an easier one, so Shelley Marsh told us. She and the Harrisons had been standing by the front door of the asylum as volunteers since early that morning, so they’d overheard just about everything. The things asked of the once-committed were simple questions, like name, birthday, spouse’s name or parents’ names, occupation, and then things more along the lines of ‘what color are your shoes?’

Some were coming out of it better than others. I overheard Gary’s brother David say something about some people needing prescriptions, and I prayed that my parents wouldn’t need any therapy or anything. But when I saw them, I saw hope. Yes, my mother had basically torn her hair to a new length, and both of them had lost some weight, but the thing was… they were my parents.

I didn’t feel the disconnect that I had on the night I’d seen them in straightjackets. When I’d just seen them as bodies but not people. They had their minds back, and I was confident that they would be fine. Especially when my mother was the first of the four of us in the family to speak:

“Kyle!” she exclaimed, as the bearded attendant took his leave. “Ike! Oh, God, boys, you’re all right!”
“Hi, Ma,” I said. I couldn’t even tell how I said it. It wasn’t a question; I knew she was there. It wasn’t a clipped response; I was too glad to see her to want to cut her off for any reason. It was just a statement of fact… yeah, that was her. Not a crazy woman I didn’t know, but someone I was comfortable calling *my mother*. I took a couple of heavy steps through the snow, slowly let go of Ike’s left hand and Stan’s right, broke from the support line I’d just been standing in with the two of them, and hugged my mother before I could give myself any reason to doubt anything surrounding the circumstances.

Fuck logic. Fuck logic if everything was going to be okay. I didn’t have to understand the logistics. They said she was going to be okay? They said Dad was going to be okay? Then I was fine. Fuck it. I had my family back.

“Ma, I’m so sorry,” I found myself saying.

“What for, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Beside us, my dad was cautiously kneeling, and Ike grabbed onto him in a tight, grateful hug of his own. “I yell at you and I get mad and a bunch of shit and—“

“Well, for goodness sake, *bubbe*, it’s your age. I don’t mind. I get short, too.”

“They cut your hair,” I babbled out. I stood back. I was so much taller than my mother, just like Dad was. For a second, it felt weird. For a second I wanted to be Ike’s age and just let it all out, but a moment later, no… I’d become so much stronger lately, I knew how to take charge and fight my own battles, however minor they were. I could talk to her rationally now, no matter what the conversation.

“At least that’s the worst of the damage,” she sighed.

When a female orderly passed by to ask if there was anything my parents needed, my mother admitted that all she wanted was an elastic for her hair. The woman smiled, and took one out of her own braid, then offered it to my mother, who thanked her and gratefully tied her shorter hair back into a small bun.

“Feel better?” I asked her. My mother smiled, and hugged me again. “I mean it, too. I mean, are you seriously all right?”

“Your father and I are just fine, *bubbe,*” she said. “I’m just so happy you boys are okay.”

We parted, then, so that Mom could gush over Ike and I could check in with my dad. I hadn’t had any idea how I would feel when I finally saw my parents again. My head had just been so crowded with the worries about what would happen if they didn’t get better that I hadn’t even for a second assumed that things really might be okay. I’d be cautious about their ability to cope for a little while, I had a feeling, but seeing just how relieved Ike looked, and how well my parents started intermingling already with Sharon and the Harrisons, and the others around us… I was hopeful.

The option was there for us to just plain start walking home at that point, but we didn’t. The asylum began releasing the *Cs* as we were reuniting, then moved on to the *Ds*, and we were still there. We weren’t going anywhere until Randy Marsh was let out, and we all knew it. It was going to take a long time, but we stayed right through.

My parents were given blankets to keep warm, and after a while Ike grabbed one as well. There were some chairs provided by the Red Cross volunteers, and when my parents and Ike took a seat, my brother fell asleep against our mom’s side. It was so damn wonderful I had to look away.
Stan and I thought for a minute about going over to check on Clyde and them, but decided it would probably be a shit-storm. In addition to Bebe being held another day, there was also Craig’s little sister, being a Tucker, that wouldn’t be released till later. Since both of us were getting our family back that day, we decided that nothing we could say would be as comforting as either of them would have liked, and besides, Clyde, Craig and Token were tight the way Stan and I were with Kenny, so they had each other for support, which was good. Cartman had left some time ago, as well, probably to pick up his mother from the hospital.

So to pass time, we called Kenny. He was sounding the most enthusiastic out of anyone that day. When we called, he was with the two he’d been wanting most to see, and the three were on their way back to Red’s home, to clean up the safehouse and keep it tidy as a place to stay in case anyone still didn’t feel quite safe enough in their own homes. He hung up in the interest of keeping his minutes, but told us of a plan to speak with his parents sometime the following day.

“Keep us posted, dude,” I said, while we had my phone on speaker so both Stan and I could hear and talk.

“Yeah, I’m thinking I’ll want a meeting after, anyway. I’ve just gotta talk to them, you know?”

“Good luck, man,” Stan told him. I agreed and said the same.

“Thanks, guys. See ya soon, right?”

“Definitely.”

From there, the two of us went for more coffee, and took orders from the others; just about everyone took us up on that, so we started up a walk back to the Harbucks kiosk we’d seen earlier. Walking from one end of South Park to the other doesn’t take long, especially when you know the shortcuts... and it was getting easier as the crowds began to part. I didn’t let go of my boyfriend’s hand once during our walk. We talked a little, and walked slowly. By the time we got to the kiosk, they’d updated it and were now offering the fancier drinks for a reduced charge from the usual price in addition to the free coffee. Stan found five dollars in his pocket and bought me a cappuccino, knowing my preference for things like that over regular old coffee. Which was so damn sweet and so damn normal; I loved it. While he and one of the baristas loaded up a couple trays with the little cups of free coffee we were going to be bringing back to the volunteers, I kissed his cheek and said, “I don’t deserve you.”

Stan laughed. “I know,” he joked, blushing all the same.

“We’ve gotta work on your modesty,” I laughed. Stan grinned, made sure I knew he was kidding, and kissed me to make up for it, then took up the trays and thanked the baristas as we made our way back, slightly faster this time in the interest of getting actually hot coffee to those who’d asked for it.

When we got back, they were on L already. Stan’s face was washed of color, and I took hold of his arm and helped him steady the trays. We passed the coffee around, then stood together between Stan’s mother and my parents.

Marsh was the first M name called. Stan’s dad was escorted out by the woman who’d given my mother the hair elastic. When we had visited at Christmas, Randy Marsh’s signature moustache had grown into a full beard from lack of care, but someone had trimmed it all back for him, probably to reduce any shock of change. He didn’t look quite as well as my parents did... then again, he’d been in there much longer. When Sharon went to him, he sort of acknowledged her, but wasn’t
entirely himself. I gave Stan a nudge of encouragement before he and Shelley went to their father to
give their own hellos.

Randy Marsh had always been a boisterous member of the community. Stan and I had even
turned his name into a verb around the time we were eleven or twelve due to the stupid things he’d
do. I didn’t see much of that man now, though. I saw the potential for him to come back, but he
came out of the asylum looking disoriented and confused. All the same, though, Sharon held onto
him and promised that things would get better. That she’d make sure of it. Stan promised both of his
parents the same. That he’d assume responsibility as long as he needed to. But for a little while, we
were scared again.

Sharon suggested that both of our families stick together for the night, and after minor debate,
my house was the one we returned to. Shelley fought it a little, but Stan promised he’d take her
around to their house soon enough so that they could get things back in order there. For the night,
though, Sharon, Stan and I all decided, it was best to keep to the safety in numbers mentality of the
past couple months.

Ike helped his father prepare the guest room for Stan’s parents, and Shelley was fine with
staying on the pull-out sofa. Randy Marsh was still being kind of hard to read, so while Ike and
Shelley helped our respective mothers make dinner, Stan and I sat down with my dad and his in the
living room. Stan didn’t want the TV on, though, since his dad had been watching static on TV right
before he’d gone insane, so it was just a talk. My dad was of sound enough mind to talk to Randy
about past events, trying to jostle something, but for the most part, Randy just tried to figure out how
he’d gotten there. Stan told the story a couple different times, but his dad just nodded.

Then, all of a sudden, as if he’d just surfaced from underwater, he drew in a gasp, looked
between the three of us, then called out, “Sha—Sharon?!”

“Randy!” A second later, Sharon tore in from the kitchen, and her husband stood to hug her.

“My God, Sharon, what the hell is going on?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she consoled him. I saw Stan breathe a sigh of relief with his entire
body as his parents continued talking.

Randy got better and better over dinner, so that by the time Stan and I were making coffee for
everyone afterward, things were honestly right back to normal. Everyone in the house had woken
up from whatever nightmare they’d experienced, and life could move on. Conversation over coffee,
which also took place in the living room, moved from the events of the last several months to asking
Shelley how college was going, and asking Ike if he was ready to start high school soon.

Eventually, my mother did bring up, “Kyle, not to press the issue, sweetie, but have you
given any thought to college lately?”

I sighed, grabbed onto Stan’s hand, and said, “Ma, I want to go to a college I choose. Is that
okay?”

“Well, of course it is, bubbe.” What?

“You sure?” I asked. “I just ask cuz you seemed real strong on wanting me to go to a place
you wanted. I don’t want to get mad at you, Ma, I’m just saying.”

“Where is it you want to go?”

I squeezed Stan’s hand tighter, and said, “I don’t know, but I don’t want to commit to a major at first. Maybe... m-maybe CSU or something, I don’t know.”

“Oh.” My parents exchanged a little glance, and then my father continued, “Well, as long as you’re giving it some thought, Kyle. We don’t have to talk about it now. I’m just proud of you for being open to talking about it.”

“And we are very proud of you for being so responsible lately,” Mom added. “You’ve become quite the independent young adult, honey, I can tell.”

“Thank you.” God. That felt good to say and hear. Life really was looking up.

After that, for lack of much else to talk about, we did discuss the crisis again when our moms asked me and Stan to thank Token and his family for letting us stay there for a while.

And, after we’d deliberated between ourselves a little, Stan and I chose to come out to our families, right then and there, while we were with all of them at once. Shelley didn’t look surprised, and honestly, there was no resistance or protest or anything. My parents even admitted to having suspicions while Stan had been staying with us, anyway. Randy made one snide, “Oh, so no hot college girls, then, huh?” joke, but Sharon shot him a glare that got him admitting that he was only joking, and the basic consensus between our parents was just be safe.

Honest to God, though, I’d never been or felt safer in my life.

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Much later that evening, when the others had all turned in, Stan and I put away the air mattress that had deflated itself over the time we’d been gone, and I started going through my old shirt drawer to find him something he could sleep in, since the temperature had dropped below freezing and neither of us had brought our bags from the base with us. I found one of his in there, probably from a past time he’d stayed over and our laundry got mixed, but he just gave me a little coy smirk and said he’d rather wear one of mine. I laughed and dug out a t-shirt that was a little big on me, from some school event or other; Stan pulled it on gratefully, thanked me, and kissed the back of my neck.

Which got me thinking about another reason I liked the scar I had there now. It reminded me of the quirk. The last thing that we’d done in my own house was train it; I involuntarily looked over at my desk, and, on an impulse, walked over. But it hit me a lot harder than I thought it would.

“Oh, God,” I breathed out. The desk was exactly the way we’d left it. I’d kind of forgotten about that. On top of the desk was the Rubick’s cube Ike had given me some time ago, the one I’d solved without physically touching at all. Meaning... I opened the desk’s top drawer, and lying inside it was the ruined calculator Stan had donated to the cause of perfecting my ability. Carefully, as if not to disturb the memory of that night itself, I reached into the drawer and touched my fingertips to the ruined parts. My mind buzzed a little, but didn’t get any further than that.

I could remember exactly how I had taken that little machine apart. It was easy, it was so logical. But I didn’t have the means to repeat the action now, and I wondered if I ever would again.

“What’s up?” Stan wondered, as he walked up behind me.

“Just...” I started, still staring at the drawer.

He caught on immediately. “Oh,” was all he needed to say.
Very sweetly, very gently, my boyfriend wrapped his arms around my waist, and drew me in close to him, so that I was wrapped in the shield of his warmth, in a place where I didn’t have to worry or obsess, I could just be. I set my hands over his, and squeezed them tightly as I leaned back against him. Stan kept a solid, protective hold, and lowered his head to my shoulder.

He graced my neck with a kiss, then followed my gaze down to the open drawer. “Thinking about that, huh?” he deduced.

I nodded a little.

Stan waited a few seconds to ask his next question, but I could almost feel him formulating it. It was the obvious follow-up. I knew what he was going to ask. And I knew what I was going to answer. “D’you miss it?”

I couldn’t help it. I choked. I brought up my left hand to cover my mouth, to keep from gasping or yelping with any kind of dismay over having lost my quirk in R’lyeh, and nodded more vigorously this time. The absence was one I could kind of feel, too—that missing added vibration in my mind, that had told me all about the pressures certain objects exerted, and how to manipulate them in the exact ways I wanted. It had gone from something foreign to something familiar, and not just familiar but useful, if even a little empowering.

“Sorry,” I said.

“You don’t have to be.”

“But I just… for a long time it was… but then… and now I…” I blathered out. I wasn’t making any sense, but I knew Stan could fill in the gaps. “It’s gone,” I then sighed out. “It’s gone. I do, I miss it. Shit…”

“Hey, Kyle?” Stan started, his voice hovering just above my ear.

“Hmmm?”

“You remember how you saved Ike that night, when the mayor went?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was because of my quirk, though, Stan, I’d been training it at that point.”

He shook his head and refuted, “You would’ve saved him anyway.”

I angled my head up to see exactly what kind of expression he wore while making that statement. Wanting more, though, I turned; he still kept his arms around me, and held me in, firm and resolute. “Stan,” I said, “that was something that—“

“No, Kyle, listen,” he interrupted, not unkindly. I let out the rest of my breath and caught his eyes—how honest they were, how unyielding in trying to help him make his point. The corners of Stan’s mouth lifted into a smile, and he repeated, “You would have saved Ike anyway.”

“What’re you trying to say?”

“Kyle, the whole thing was you,” he told me, “okay?” His smile was endlessly reassuring. “I worked on all of it with you; I know. You’ve always been capable of that stuff, dude. The thing that happened in fourth grade probably just boosted it, and the stuff that’s been going on lately’s been a huge need for it. I don’t think you lost anything, you just don’t need it right now.” He kissed my forehead, and finished, “It’ll be there when you need it, dude. I’m really sure it will.”
God, he was amazing with words. With sentiment, with everything. I pulled Stan in for a kiss, beyond grateful for what we’d found, beyond happy with knowing that he was right there for me, and beyond proud to be there for him in return. I loved him; I loved us; I wasn’t going to let go. Neither of us would have made it through the crisis alone. And together, we’d come out of it stronger than ever.

“But for now,” I said as I slowly pulled back, “what...?”

“For now, we just live,” Stan answered, simply and softly.

“Take a page from Kenny, huh?” I smiled.

“Something like that.” Stan paused for a second, his eyes searching a world he was projecting on the wall behind me, and then, cocking one eyebrow up, he asked, looking at me again, “Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” I told him. I pressed up to him, and took in a deep breath.

For now we just live. For now, and on and on until we’d be needed as the League again. Quirk there or not, I wanted to keep up with the League as long as we could; Stan was the same way. We’d stood by Mysterion and helped protect the town for so long, I didn’t want to stop that now. But, yeah, normal was alluring, too.

So we’d just live. We’d go back to school, and plan for our lives. Every single one of us could just step back.

And breathe.

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Butters

Clyde Donovan wanted to beat me up. Maybe even kill me. He was really, really angry. He had every reason to be. But what he wouldn’t listen to was the fact that I wanted Bebe to get better just about as much as he did. She’d been one of my best friends. She and Wendy were like my sisters, I loved her. (Okay maybe even crushed on her a little... I mean, she was really cute and nice.)

So I had to save her.

I had to just go right on fixing things. And Wendy backed me up.

After we’d heard the announcement about the release schedule and Clyde had flipped his shit, I had left to find a way in through the back of the building, figuring nobody would be standing around back there. I fought the crowds and pushed my way through. I had to do this. I had to set things right. If this didn’t work, I had the awful feeling that I’d just be ostracized forever, never, ever having the chance to get on anyone’s good terms ever again. I was doing it for everyone, even myself. But especially... especially for the two of them. For the person I was afraid I’d hurt the most, after Wendy.

After I’d pushed through to where I wanted to be, I saw Wendy herself approaching me from
behind.

“Marjorine?” she said warily. We had hugged, back at the base, which had felt wonderful, because it meant that she still believed in me, but I still owed her a lot, and felt like she might not yet fully trust me again. This was going to be my act to prove it to everyone that I meant it when I said I wanted to apologize and start over. No more chaos. Balance and harmony. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna break in,” I said. That sure didn’t seem to sit well with Wendy; she gave me a skeptical look, and she had her hand on her cell phone, probably so she could call Token or the other guys to come get me, to say I wasn’t actually getting better.

“Why?”

“Because,” I said, “I feel really bad about Bebe, and I really don’t want Clyde to keep glaring at me and hating me forever, and—a lot of reasons. I wanna break Bebe out early. I just gotta try.”

Wendy went from skeptical to stunned. Impressed. Awed. Happy. So happy that she hugged me again. She dashed right up to me and stood on her toes and hugged me again. “I knew you’d get better,” she said softly. “Oh, sweetie, I knew you’d be able to get better.”

“Wendy, you really helped me a lot,” I told her, hugging her back. “That stupid book got my head all gross and jumbled and I just totally went crazy, Wendy, and it was lonely.” Looking back, it was lonely. I hadn’t trusted anyone or cared about anything. All in retaliation for the more miserable parts of my life thus far. Enough with the misery, though. I had to take a stand at some point in my life. No time like now. Just keep on making it better.

“Sweetie, I’m your friend,” Wendy told me. “Talk to me, okay? That’s what I’m here for. And Red, and Heidi and Annie and Nelly… and Token and Kenny and Stan and Kyle… honey, we are all right here, so talk to us, okay? No more going crazy.”

She stepped back, and, mostly out of curiosity, I smoothed back her hair to reveal the spot where her helmet had cut her in R’lyeh. She frowned a little, but let me look. Yeah, just as I thought. There was a scar on her temple.

Clyde didn’t have scars from the Immortal blood burns and neither did Stan… but I had scars from the lightning splitting cracks in my arms, and Kyle and Wendy had scars from the things that had really dug in and cut them. Kyle’s was because of Disarray, and Wendy’s was because of me.

“Why are you still being nice to me?” I asked her. “I really went out to hurt you.”

“No, you didn’t,” said Wendy. “And I’m talking to all of you. Okay?” She made sure I was looking right at her, then said, “You didn’t commit to Chaos because that’s not all you. I figured that much out. Am I right?” I nodded, and let her continue. “But you, honey? All of you? You are a healer. You like things to be okay. And I like having that kind of person for a friend.” She held up a pinkie and laughed. “Promise you’ll get Bebe out safe, now, okay?”

I wanted to cry. I really wanted to cry right then and there, but I promised myself not to cry again until I really, really needed to. And there was still a lot I had to do. A good long cry could be my reward. I’d drained out all my pain and anxieties. I’d cry again when I could breathe again; when it meant everything. So instead I just hooked my pinkie finger with Wendy’s, and agreed to the promise.

Bebe Stevens was getting out of that asylum and she was gonna go home just like the rest of
Wait.

Stotch.

Stephen and Linda Stotch weren’t going to be released until the next day either. Oh, well. I’d figure that out later.

Wendy gave me a boost to the back window, which I noticed was a little open and only a few feet overhead, and while she stood guard, I slipped in.

My feet hit the ground, but I hardly felt it. Once inside, I found myself in a rather empty room, full only of orderlies all in white, milling about until, one by one, they paused to stare over at me.

“Excuse me,” I said, loudly enough to address the entire room, “I’m looking for someone.”

“Oh, jeez,” one of the doctors said, walking up to me. “I’m sorry, young lady, but everyone outside is looking for someone. You’ve got to stand by and wait for the roll call just like everyone else.” Well, it was nice to be called a lady, but I wasn’t really feeling it, the madder I got at the situation (which was my own fault). “Now, whether it’s your parents or your boyfriend or what, you’ve got to wait outside, I’m sorry.”

“No for me,” I protested, holding my ground as I shook my head, “for a friend. Please let me in, you’ve gotta—if I don’t do this, it’d be awful. You’re releasing people way too slow. Just let everyone go!”

“Can’t do that, miss, I’m sorry,” said an orderly a few feet away. “These folks’ve gotta get re-acclimated and all, it’s going to be a slow process.”

“Please, just this one—“

“No.”

I frowned, then glanced around the room until finally I found the door I was looking for. To solitary, the plaque above read. Well, that was a pretty good place to start, I guessed. Just gotta find her, just gotta find her, just gotta find her.

So I made a run for it.

“STOP!” a handful of attendants shouted after me.

I didn’t stop. I had to give this a try. I wasn’t going to give up until I’d given it my best shot. I was sore and tired from over-exerting myself in R’lyeh, but not wearing all that armor and having a clear head made me lighter and faster. Having a goal made me faster still.

I bolted down the halls, the orderlies in hot pursuit. But I wasn’t going to give up. Not one second wasted. No room to make one wrong move. I raced through wing after wing, reading off the names on the still-closed doors. Finally, I found the door I was looking for.

STEVENS, B. the plaque read. Inside, I heard sobbing.

I tore open the door, and when an orderly caught up and grabbed my shoulder, I shoved him back, then kicked him in the gut back toward his partner, causing the two of them to collide. I didn’t care. For the moment, I just did not care. “Bebe!” I called out into the room.
She’d lost weight and sleep, but she still looked pretty as ever. From where she sat on the edge of her bed, I saw that her hair was washed and clean, spilling in those great golden curls down over one shoulder. She had no makeup on, and she was wearing the same cute dress she had been on the night… something really bad had happened to her, and she’d fallen victim to a horrible man who wasn’t going to be active at all anymore. Never again.

Bebe drew in a gasp and dried her eyes when she saw me, and sat nervously back against the wall. “M-Marjorine…?” she asked, looking from me to the open door, and out at where the two orderlies lay in a heap. “What are you doing here? Why did you just beat up those doctors?”

“I didn’t beat them up, I just kicked one of them.”

“What are you doing here?”

I smiled and cautiously walked up to her, saying, “I’m saving the princess.”

The beautiful but traumatized girl laughed nervously, but still didn’t stand up. Getting a closer look… she really had lost weight. Bebe didn’t need to lose any weight; she’d always been model-thin and well proportioned. Her cheekbones showed a little too much, and her collarbone looked a little too pronounced, but I was hopeful that a couple weeks of being home and getting back to her regular life would make her healthy again. But her eyes were big and bright and hoping for a look at something other than her padded walls.

“Do you know what happened?” she asked me, her voice a little airy.

“When, exactly?” I wondered.

“To the town. When I woke up this morning, a woman came in and started telling me. All of a sudden things are just better? How did it happen?”

I grinned and offered her my hand. “I think we’ll all find out soon enough,” I said. Mysterion did have a few things to say to the city, after all. I didn’t want to spoil it. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“I miss my family,” Bebe said hollowly, tearing up again. “I miss Clyde.”

“So let’s get you right on outta here, then, huh?” I smiled as she took my hand.

“Saving the princess, huh?” Bebe said. “You’re so dramatic, Marjorine.”

“Let’s get you down to your getaway carriage.”

Bebe laughed more honestly this time, and I threw my coat (which was the only Butters garment I had on since it was the only thing I’d had at the base—a big blue ski jacket I’d stored there for emergencies when the guys would let me in) over her shoulders, and the two of us began running our escape route. “Head down, sweetie, and just keep running,” I told her.

Once they caught sight of us, other orderlies started running after us. Bebe yelped, attracting more attention, but I could see the exit. So I scooped her up and just kept on running until I was out that back door. Wendy was still there waiting, and her eyes widened in a funny, Are you serious? kind of way when she saw that I was carrying Bebe, but she ran right alongside me as we ducked back several blocks so that nobody could chase us anymore.

“Oh my God, where are we going?!” Bebe exclaimed. When I was sure we were well enough way, I set her down and apologized for running her so far. Bebe smiled nervously, then took
a glance at Wendy and squealed. The girls embraced and I stepped back, pleased. Pleased that
things were looking up, that reunions were happening, and that I could really make things right after
messing it all up so horribly. “You’re my getaway carriage, huh?” Bebe laughed.

“What?”

“Marjorie said she was rescuing the princess.”

“From the top of the Tower,” I added, kind of to myself. But Wendy heard me. I was saving
everything from the Tower.

“Call your boyfriend,” I asked Wendy after she and Bebe had properly reunited. When she
blushed, I corrected, “Wait, he is your boyfriend, right?” She laughed and nodded. “Oh, okay.
Good. That’s really good, I mean it,” I smiled. “Okay, so call him, and tell him to bring Clyde.”

“Where?” Wendy wondered. “I’m guessing this is because you don’t wanna go back to the
front, right?”

“Right.”

“Can we go get something to eat?” Bebe requested.

Which gave me yet another idea to keep getting me redeemed, little by little. It was a long
shot, but the guy was such a businessman I wouldn’t put it past Mr. Tweak to have his shop open
again already. We gave it a shot and walked into town, beelining it to Tweak Bros.’ Coffee. Where
the insanity had started. Which reminded me, I still had to somehow get my flute back from Eric…
except that the idea of playing the flute didn’t settle too awful well with me right now. Maybe I’d
switch to the oboe or something.

We were in luck. The shop was open, and, on top of that, pretty empty. We sought out our
old favorite table, and I sat with Bebe while Wendy (the one who’d had the foresight to bring her
wallet) bought us all tea and a big plate of pastries. Mr. Tweak thanked us for the business, saying
that most people were going to the free kiosks Harbucks had set up, but Wendy just smiled and said,
“Well, we needed a place to sit down just as much as anything, so thank you.”

Bebe started right in on a croissant, and by the time she’d finished one, she was all warmed
up, gave me back my jacket, and started in on another. “Oh, my God,” she said, “this is so good,
this is so, so good. Sorry I’m being rude, guys…”

“Not at all,” I said, as Wendy nudged the plate closer to Bebe. While we waited for Token
and Clyde, I took the opportunity to eat a coffee bun myself, taking it little by little. Bebe wasn’t the
only one who hadn’t eaten in a while, and I hadn’t even realized that until I started to chew. Little by
little, things were building back up again.

Which was exactly why, as my own form of apology for the very start of all of the insanity, I
got up and asked Mr. Tweak for a job application. I was literally going to work this one off. I asked
after Tweek, too, to see how he was doing; apparently he was home getting rest, which was good.
Rest and not coffee for that kid was best I thought. As I was thanking the owner and folding
that sheet of paper into my pocket with the promise I’d bring it back at my earliest convenience, in
walked Clyde and Token to the empty-but-for-us establishment. Clyde noticed me right off and gave
me a blank look. It wasn’t a glare or anything, just I have nothing to say to you.

“Uh, hey, Clyde…” I began as I walked up to them, trying real hard not to let myself waver
or sound too awful weak. Then again, I was filled to the brim with apologies, and seeing Clyde so
cold and wounded hurt me, too. I’d made him that way; I couldn’t step around it. I’d tried so hard, as Chaos, to erase myself, Marjorine—so hard that I’d called the sanity right out of Bebe Stevens. And I felt awful.

He didn’t make eye contact. I didn’t expect him to. He didn’t like looking at me, and he shouldn’t have, by all accounts. He folded his arms and stared at his feet. “What, Marjorine?” he asked emotionlessly.

“Clyde, I, uh—“

“What?” Clyde snapped, raising his eyes just a little.

“Well—“

“Dude,” said Token, nudging Clyde’s shoulder, “check it out.”

“What?”

I stepped back and gestured over to where Wendy and Bebe were sitting. Wendy pointed Bebe over in our direction, and then the two made eye contact. Clyde’s eyes widened, and he pushed past me and Token as if we were still part of the throngs outside, and Bebe stood and took a couple steps just in time to fall into his arms. And then he just held her.

Bebe collapsed into tears against her boyfriend, and he held her up; he smoothed her pretty golden hair back behind her ears and kissed her all over, telling her he loved her and that he’d make sure she never had to go through anything that horrible ever again.

“Clyde, I missed you,” Bebe was saying as she cried. “It got really dark, and sometimes I knew I was lonely…”

“Ssh, honey, it’s over, Bebe, it’s over,” Clyde told her. His kinder tone was back. Clyde had always been a really nice guy; losing Bebe had broken him, but now that she was back with hardly a scratch, he was on the mend. I was glad.

“Know what’s weird, though?”

“Hmm?”

“I remember all my dreams.”

“Really?” As Bebe and Clyde talked, Token and I made our way back over to where Wendy still sat; Token bent to kiss her, and he grinned a thanks at me. We all just kept watching the reunion. None of us could look away.

Bebe nodded. “I kept having this dream that you’d been there when it all went dark, and you were always right there right before I woke up.” After hearing that, Clyde was speechless. His response was a kiss… one that I swear to God just brought all the life right back into both of them.

Wendy and I returned to our tea, and Token bought coffee for himself and Clyde. We stuck around the coffee shop for a little while, Bebe pretty firmly planted on her boyfriend’s lap through the whole thing. Clyde wasn’t glaring at me anymore. He even gave me a little acknowledgement of thanks once it was revealed that I’d been the one to break in and get Bebe out. Maybe we wouldn’t be the best of friends, ever, me and Clyde, but I sure wasn’t on his shit list anymore… or, at least, I was a lot lower. That much was nice. I was just glad to see that he and Bebe were happy, and together again.
Clyde left with Bebe once she’d eaten enough, and once she’d expressed a want to see her parents. She hugged Wendy, and hugged me nice and tight, and then the two made their way out; Clyde had his arm right around Bebe’s slender waist, and she had her eyes fixed, big and blue, on him the entire time. God; that was love, huh? No words needed. It was hard to understand, for me, but it was beautiful to see.

When it came out that I had nowhere to go, Wendy immediately offered me the extra room at her house. I tried to think of a reason to refuse, since that was way too nice, but I couldn’t, and she insisted. Her parents were warm and accepting. They always pretty much had been, to me. Even though I was a guy, they’d always allow me at Wendy’s sleepovers in middle school, and let me stay the night a couple times into high school, too, knowing I wasn’t a boyfriend but that I wasn’t going to try anything funny, either. We were just friends who happened to have opposite chromosomes, that’s all. I liked her guest room… clean, neat, inviting, warm. I could clear my head there.

When Wendy came and found me in the middle of the night, though, with a couple mugs of hot chocolate, we started talking. I was wearing a nightgown and hadn’t washed off my makeup yet, so she kept calling me ‘Marjorine,’ which was fine, but the conversation was mostly about Butters. About what my choices were from here. About the fact that my parents were going to be released from the asylum in less than twenty-four hours. I told her what I’d done to them. She listened, and nodded, and sipped her hot chocolate; she looked a little uncomfortable, but understanding.

“So what’re you going to do?” Wendy wondered when I’d finished.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t really want to live there anymore, but I don’t have much choice till I graduate.”

Wendy sipped her hot chocolate again, licked her cherry lips, then said, “Let me talk to my parents. Maybe you can stay here.”


“I mean, if you, like, pull your weight and stuff… I’m sure they’d let you. My parents are really good like that, believe me.” Oh I knew they were, I just hated to intrude. “Honey, from what you’ve told me, your parents are poison. That’s really not cool. You need to be safe or the Chaos thing could happen again.”

“I know, but—“

“So temporarily, then,” said Wendy. “That better? I’ll start insisting. I don’t want people to have to be miserable, Marj, it’s not fair. If there’s another option available, I want to make safe environments. I think that’s just, like, what I want to do.” God, that girl has got such a life ahead of her. I know she’s going to make trails. “I care about you like I care about all my friends, okay? At least consider it.”

We kept talking for a while, neither of us very tired, and tried to think about normal things by her pulling out a Cosmo and me trying to braid her hair and leave enough bangs to cover the scar on her temple. It wasn’t too-too noticeable, but I knew it was there, and one could definitely see it if they were to really look. But after talking for a while, I conceded.

I was going to move out. This was it. I was going to leave. I was going to get rid of the real problem. Not my friends who cared for me, not the selves I loved and who got me through my day-to-day. No. Chaos had done a little to help me rise up against my parents, but I had to do it until they really got the message. Kenny had done it. I could, too. Just try. Leave the real nightmares all behind.
The following day, the streets were crowded again. The Ns in the asylum started getting released at around noon, and I tagged along with Wendy and Token while they helped out the volunteers. Clyde and Bebe showed up hand in hand (and both smiling, which was wonderful) a little later, mid-R releases, and the whole day I’d been seeing other glimpses of the guys in the League doing their part to help out. Stan’s and Kyle’s whole families were doing a lot of volunteer work, and at one point I actually saw the Goths, too. And I saw a cop bring Henrietta off to the side. Something about Bradley probably. But that girl showed no emotion, ever, so I couldn’t tell what the report was. We’d just have to wait and find out, I guessed.

Eric was poking around a little, too; his mother, who had made a pretty good recovery at the hospital, had kind of dragged him out with her to do some volunteering, which he was doing without complaining much. Any grumbling was probably just for show, actually, since he still wore that proud I’m the Coon and you guys totally don’t know it smirk in broad daylight. I reminded him that he’d told me he owed me one when our paths crossed, to which he said, “You haven’t thought of anything yet, have you?”

“I’ve got something in mind,” I said, which was kind of a lie, I just wanted to feel like I had something over him, “but I’m not gonna tell you what it is yet.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, you suck.”

“I know.” That about did it for my conversation with him that day. I didn’t know how long I’d hold that over him, but as long as I could play cat and mouse and actually be the cat… that was pretty fun to think about. I’d come up with something for him to do for me. I knew, though, no matter what it was… I was going to force him to let me win somehow. I just had to think of something he couldn’t talk his way out of. Now wasn’t the time to think something up, but once that time came, boy, I’d sure bask in it.

Craig was with Henrietta for the most part, but tagged along with us when the S releases started, knowing that his sister would be out soon enough. Gary Harrison and Shelley Marsh were helping check names off of dependents and family and such, but when the announcement came, I didn’t move.

“Stotch? Anyone claiming for Stotch, Stephen and Linda?”

“You gonna go, Marjorine?” Bebe asked me. I shook my head. I couldn’t even think about it. I’d even made sure we were standing far enough away from the door that they wouldn’t see me.

My parents were escorted home by an orderly. As they were taken to a white car, I saw my mother slide a couple of pills down her throat. Of course she’d be one of the ones that didn’t fully come out of it. I figured as much; just my luck.

I didn’t want to have to do it, but if I was ever going to get closure, I had to. I’d talked with Wendy about it the night before, and her parents earlier that morning when I’d insisted on making breakfast. I was all set.

All set to move.

Token had his car that day, and offered to drive me wherever and help me pack and move into Wendy’s. I sat with my friend in the back seat and thanked Token a few times on the drive; he laughed and said it was no problem, he was just glad I was taking strides to repair things.
It happened so fast. One minute I was there on the drive, and the next Wendy was hugging me and telling me good luck. Because I had a condition. I had to go inside alone. I had to go in alone and tell my parents everything I had to in my own words. And then I’d leave, and my friends would be out there waiting for me.

Gathering my courage, hoping that this would mean I could finally start to put together a life of sense for once, I opened the front door to my parents’ house. The living room was still in shambles. The bookcase was all knocked over, and the whole house smelled of the rotten remains of the dinner we’d never finished eating the night I’d sent my parents into fits of madness. I stepped inside and watched the scene over again in my head, watching Chaos take on the Stotch couple in the far corner of the room… turning my head when I knew Disarray was supposed to come onto the scene. But he wouldn’t be around anymore at all.

I had been the one to call in to report that casualty. I’d done it that morning. Just so he wouldn’t be on the missing persons list. Dougie was dead, and Nyarlathotep was a valid cause, so he was added to the list of crisis casualties; I knew there had been other deaths. I just tried not to think about the fact that I was probably the cause for a lot of them. The little Goth kid was on the list, too, even though Cthulhu could be credited for his end. I still didn’t know about Bradley Biggle.

Standing over the wrecked bookshelf was my ever-irate father, hands on his hips, brown hair clipped short as the day I’d left him to his own insanity. He was pacing and furious. He was always pacing and furious. I shivered.

Chaos had been there for me to fill voids. Someday, maybe, I’d understand the family relationships that I felt had been missing, but to me, cutting myself off from an unhealthy environment was just as important as attempting to find a new one. The friend void had been filled a long time ago, as I’d even started discovering in R’lyeh.

If I wanted the balance and harmony I’d started craving a couple nights before, I needed closure here. I had to confront the absolute worst of my demons.

“There you are, Butters!” my father said, snapping me out of my thoughts, as if nothing had even freaking happened to him. On the sofa, my mother looked barely lucid. There were two bottles on the coffee table. One of them a tiny white bottle of prescription medication, and the other a bottle of red wine. I decided right then and there that I would never, ever drink red wine. I frowned at the two things, and then at my loopy mother, and then at my father, and felt my fists clench tighter. “You march your rear end in this house right now, young man, go take off that ridiculous outfit and put on something respectable, and help me clean up this mess!”

Clean up the mess, huh? Clean up the mess? This was the only mess I didn’t want anything to do with anymore. I stared at the fallen bookshelf, at the state of disarray my childhood home was in. At my broken mother and the idiot man she’d married. “Listen to your father, Butters,” my mother said.

“That’s right,” my father went on. “And you’ve got another responsibility right now! You make sure your mother only takes those pills in the afternoon, you understand me?”

Right there, my resolve faltered. Just a little. My father was yelling at me again and that triggered that old fear. I’d never stood up to him before Chaos. That was the one thing Chaos had really, truly done for me. Now that it was just me again, and they didn’t seem to be fazed from the incident, I doubted for a minute my ability to really follow through with what needed to be done.

“W-what are they?” I managed to ask, sticking with the conversation..
“Oh, they keep me happy,” said my mother.

“Well,” I muttered. “Good for you.”

“What was that?” my father snapped.

There it was. No more of this. No running. No running, no submitting, no giving up now. Don’t give up till you try, Butters. I’d been meaning to do this for a long time. If I didn’t do it now, I’d never be happy. Clean up the mess. This was my only chance to take a stand.

“I said, good for you!” I shouted. Well, that felt good. So I kept it up. “If they make you happy, great! I’m real glad you found something that does, cuz I never did!”

Shakily, my mother grabbed the pill bottle off of the table and stood. She took a few steps closer to me and offered it up. “It’s a good prescription,” she slurred. “They make nightmares go away. Don’t you have nightmares, sweetheart?”

“I did,” I said, on the verge of tears. “For a real long time, Mom, I did. You’ve got no idea what a nightmare is.” I pushed past her, and shouted at my dad, “That goes for you too! Neither of you has got any idea what a nightmare is!”

“This wrecked living room is a nightmare, son, I tell you that,” was what Dad came back at me with.

“NO!” I screamed. “No, no, no! You’re the nightmare! YOU’RE the fucking nightmare!” I gripped my bangs and shook my head furiously side to side. “It’s this house, Mom and Dad! It’s this whole Goddamn house! It’s you! It’s always been you!”

“Calm down, you’re getting hysterical,” said my father, admonishing me. “Go take that skirt off, son, so we can talk rationally.”

“Talk rationally,” I spat back at him. “Something respectable.” I grabbed at the hem of my skirt and hollered, “This is rational! This is respectable! You don’t support me and you never have. I love men, okay? And I love women. It took me a long time to figure this out, but dammit, I just love people! People are interesting. People, most people, have lives, and they work hard, and they try, and maybe they’re turning the world into shit a little but there are some kinds of people I do just plain love. But you know what? I don’t love myself, and you know why? Because of you. Because I don’t know what kind of kid you were trying to raise. I don’t know what the fuck you ever wanted from me, I really don’t. This house is a nightmare, and you are both really, really horrible parents. So you know what I’m going to do?”

“Oh, please, sweetie, don’t kill yourself,” my mother pleaded.

Nice, coming from the woman who’d tried to drown me when I was nine. “No, Mom,” I assured her. “But I am leaving.”

“Leave?” Dad laughed. “You can’t leave, Butters, you’re only seventeen. You belong in this house, dammit, and what I say goes. Now you—“

“Stop it,” I said firmly. “Now, listen. I’m going to go upstairs, and I am going to get a few things, and then I am going to leave. I’m only telling you I’m leaving so that you hopefully don’t turn this into another big stupid town media going on a wild goose chase thing. I just want to leave.”

I then walked past both of my parents, and trudged up the stairs one last time. Into my room,
one last time. Packed up a suitcase with clothes and my backpack with school supplies. Unearthed
the suitcase I as Chaos had shoved into the back of my closet. When I pulled that out, I stared at it
for a moment, feeling its weight in my hands, then sank to the ground, hugging it close, like it was
the friend who’d saved me from drowning. “It’s gonna be okay,” I whispered to the suitcase; to
myself. “We’re gonna be just fine.”

With that, I slung the backpack on, grabbed up the two suitcases, and padded down the stairs
one last time. “There you are,” my dad started saying. I did not look at him. “All right, we’ve
thought it over, Butters, and we’re willing to talk about it.”

“Too late,” I said, shaking my head.

“If you walk out that door, you’re grounded!”

“That sure makes sense,” I muttered, without slowing my pace.

I did see enough of my dad out of the corner of my eye, though, to notice that he was yelling
himself red in the face. “Butters, you march right back in here and you clean up this mess!”

I’ll never know if he saw the smile on my face at that point or not. “This is your mess, Dad.
Clean it up yourself.”

And then I walked right out of that house, and left all the nightmares behind.

Token’s car was still parked outside, just as he and Wendy had promised. The two of them
exited the sleek, shining SUV and helped me with my bags. They were all loaded right up through
the back hatch. My parents did not come out of the house to attempt to stop me. Before I knew it,
we were back in the car and leaving. I didn’t turn around to watch the house grow smaller behind
me. I’d already said my goodbye. No looking back. This was a different kind of change for me. A
different kind of explosive transformation. This was, for the first time, discovering life for myself.

I thanked Token a couple more times as we kept on driving, and he said, “Don’t mention it.
Man, you remember… Kenny’s been living at the base so technically my house for a long time. I’m
cool with his sister living there, too. If I know I can help someone, I will.”

“Watch out,” I managed to joke. “If you and Wendy get married, you guys might end up like
Brad and Angelina and just keep on adopting kids, cuz you’re both too darn nice.”

The two of them laughed at that, and we continued making small conversation as we
continued on. But Wendy didn’t live too awful far from my parents (nobody lives too awful far from
anything in our town), so we made good time. And then there we were in Wendy’s driveway. New
life, starting now. I had left. No more nightmare, no more Chaos.

“Ready to go, sweetie?” Wendy asked me. I nodded, unable to speak. When I stared out the
window, Wendy touched her hand to my shoulder, and said, “I’m really excited about having a
sister. Or a brother. Whichever you decide to be.”

“Thanks, Wendy,” I said, barely choking the words out. Fiddling with my hands in my lap, I
cast her a cautious glance, then, and said, “You’re a real angel, Wendy Testaburger. You know
that? I honest to God owe you way too much.”

Wendy let out a light sigh. “You know what you can do for me, Marjorine?” she said,
sounding upbeat and kind as always.

“What’s that?”
“Just be happy,” Wendy smiled. “Please?”

I smiled, and told her that I would definitely try.

We unloaded my things, and Token stuck around for a while, talking to Wendy’s parents, mostly about whatever it was his dad was planning to do now. Wendy and I just dropped off my things in what had once been the guest room and was now, for as long as I wanted, all mine (I told her ‘until I can afford a place,’ and she just grinned), and then I offered to help around the house a little. After Token left for the evening, Wendy’s mom did ask me to help with dinner, and her dad asked, if I was ‘feeling up to it’ (meaning Butters), if I wouldn’t mind helping with some yard work the next day. I was glad; I kept stressing I didn’t just want to live there for free, I really did want to help out… I owed it to them. So I agreed. And things began to look brighter.

I put away my things in the closet and chest of drawers that the room provided at the end of the night. Wendy hugged me, told me that things would just keep getting better, and bid me goodnight, then offered me the shower. The hot water beat my skin red and showed my scars a little too much, but I was confident that they’d fade. But for now, they were a reminder of what I would never, ever do again. Sometimes destruction seems like a great plan until you see it in action. I just plain wasn’t one of those people who could do it. At heart, I just wasn’t.

Washed clean and new again, I returned to the bedroom, pulled on pajamas, and dried my hair on a low setting so I wouldn’t make too much noise. After I put away the dryer, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I tied back my hair, took in a deep breath, and sighed it out. My blue pajama pants were a soft, comforting flannel; my old white t-shirt allowed me to see my scars, but I didn’t mind. I grinned, and echoed Eric one more time to myself: “You can fix things, Butters.”

And I could. Everything would eventually start to fit together again, just as all of my possessions now belonged in this room, Butters’ beside Marjorine’s, everything a part of me and only me, far away from my old family home. Somewhere new, somewhere real. I would see to it that things turned out how they were supposed to be.

Keep trying. And maybe, someday, I can finally say that I won.

———
Before I could call my mission complete, I had to be absolutely certain that I had fit every single piece into place. I had fully accepted that anything my parents could possibly tell me might haunt me for the rest of my life, but I’d rather be haunted by fact and not by regret for not taking the initiative to ever ask.

When I woke up, the morning after the last group of previously insane had been released from the asylum, I stared up at the light blue ceiling of Red’s bedroom and played my day out in front of me. My eyes scanned spots on the ceiling with each detail as I played my own projectionist. No matter what order I put the priorities in, speaking to my parents came first.

I waited for my girlfriend to wake up, almost pushing everything else right out of my head as she did, her hair all tangled and skin glowing, her eyes and smile a fond reflection of the night before. (Man, she had been on.) Red started to glide her soft right hand over my chest, and she cuddled up closer to me to kiss me just above the ear and say a melodic, “Good morning.”

“‘Mornin’,” I grinned, turning to kiss her. Her lips lacked gloss but tasted like peppermint all the same. God, who needs drugs if girls like this exist, am I right?

Red let out a satisfied hum, then twined her fingers between mine. Resting her head in the pocket of my shoulder, her hair splayed out over my skin, she asked, “Plan today?”

“Kinda,” I confessed. “Gotta go see my parents and stuff. Me ‘n’ the guys’ve got some cleanup to do, after that.”

“Aww,” Red mock-groaned. After a beat, she asked me, “Want me to come with you to see your parents?”

I felt a sting in my chest at the mere thought of that. Not only did I not really want Red to meet my parents (since they’d be horribly inappropriate in many different ways), I really didn’t want her to have to hear whatever it was they were going to say, since it’d be about my curse, and therefore nothing she’d yet be able to understand. I wanted to tell her every truth about my life, but it had to be piece by piece. I had to tell her in just the right way, and that was something else I’d been methodically working out in my head over the past couple of days. But at that point, that morning, I had a pretty good idea of how I wanted it to go.

Red wasn’t upset, though, when I told her, “Thanks, baby, but I’d rather do this alone. All I’m doing is telling them what’s up and moving out for good.”

“That’s fine,” my girlfriend said. “I think you’re making the right choice, Kenny. You’re really smart to know what you can and can’t handle, and stuff.”

“Mm. Thanks, Red.”
“Mmhmm! So, I’m totally fine sticking around here, stuff to do for Mom and Dad anyway. Karen’s gonna try to follow you, I bet,” she warned.

“You think?”

“She idolizes you, Kenny,” Red laughed. “I think it’s sweet.”

“You jealous?” I ventured, joking.

“You jealous?” Red laughed. “No. I get you one way, she’s got you for another.” Kissing me again, she added, “Fair trade.”

I confined a laugh myself, rolled Red onto her back, and leaned in—citrus, peppermint, glowing, perfect—to taste her lips again and tell her, “I love you so fucking much.”

“God, Kenny,” my girlfriend said, draping her arms around my neck, “I missed you like crazy when I had no idea where you were. Or, maybe I shouldn’t say ‘like crazy…””

“It’s fine.” In light of recent events, though, she was right. I hadn’t thought of that, but a lot of people would probably be watching how they tossed around that word now.

“You still haven’t told me,” Red went on as I traced her left cheekbone with little kisses, which she’d admitted a fondness for, “what you—mmm—what you did to—mmhh—help Mysterion and the League.”

“You wanna know?” I said, nipping her neck.

“Unless it’s to… or, well… no. No, I do. I’m curious!”

“Well, I’m kinda under this silence contract right now,” I made up on the spot, which got Red pouting, “but,” I added, kissing her till she smiled, “tonight, the League’s gonna make a statement about the crisis. I’ll be around, so I’ll find you after, okay?”

“Okay,” Red conceded with a witty smirk. “So… so, I know you were rallying, but like, you actually worked with the League?” I’d told her I had, the night before, but it was right before we got on with the foreplay so I’d kind of forgotten that I had, and assumed that she’d forgotten, too.

“Yeah.”

“So… Jesus, what’s with Mysterion and all his secrets…?” Red wondered.

“If a guy calls himself ‘Mysterion,’ babe,” I laughed, “I’m sure there’s a reason.”

“Oh, shut up,” Red teased, smacking my shoulder playfully.

We fell into the last deep, deep kiss of the morning, then went on preparing for the day. I allowed her the shower first (we hadn’t showered together yet… probably best to try that out at the base first and just not tell anyone) (sorry, guys), and met her once I’d finished mine down in the kitchen, where Red, Karen, and Red’s mom made me eat a bagel. I hadn’t even realized I was nervous about talking to my parents until I figured out I wasn’t hungry.

I consented to half of the bagel, smothered in cream cheese, then slung back some orange juice before kissing my girlfriend see you later for the day, thanking her parents again, and heading out the door. Where my sister promptly intercepted me. “What’re you doing?” she asked.

“I, uh…” I dug out my cell phone, hoping she wouldn’t follow me to our old house. “I was
about to call Token,” I decided. “I’ve gotta talk to him real quick to get his parents’ okay on you living at the base with me, sis, okay? Go back inside.”

“Eat the rest of your bagel,” Karen insisted. In her hands was the other half of my breakfast, lying on a paper towel. She wouldn’t let it go, and pouted at me until I took the thing, which I gratefully bit into while she smiled, glad she’d done something good.

While Karen was right there, I went ahead and made the call to Token; I spoke briefly to his mother, as well, who was the one to grant me the final okay. I thanked her and promised we’d both do our part with cleaning, or making grocery runs, or whatever they needed done. It was already assumed and agreed that I didn’t need them to feed me, I made enough money to keep getting food for myself (though now with Karen it might be a little harder, but my sister understood our needs, and with this crisis behind us, it was actually a kind of fortunate time for her to be looking for a part-time job… to view the aftermath one way), so that much was taken care of. I’d only be there another year, and besides, I was always welcomed at Red’s. Karen probably would be, too, and I knew she wouldn’t mind a night or two on a pull-out couch now and then.

Once I’d hung up, I told Karen that I was leaving, and asked her to head back inside to see if Red’s family needed more of her help. I should not have used the word ‘family’ right there, because Karen caught on to where exactly I was going the moment I’d made it to the driveway.

“Hold on!” she called after me. “Kenny, I’m coming with you!”

“No, kid, stay here,” I said.

“Kenny, you’re going to see Mom and Dad, aren’t you?” she wondered.

“I…” I couldn’t lie to Karen; “yeah. Yeah, I am, but you shouldn’t come, okay? They’ve gotten worse since you left, it’s really bad at that house, Karen, I don’t want you to have to see—”

Karen refused by grabbing onto my arm, the way she’d done when we were kids. “I’m going,” she protested. “You and me are family, Kenny. If I’m gonna do right as your Guardian Angel, I need to know what you really want to be guarded from.”

“Right, Karen, and that’s what I’m saying about you,” I argued. “I’m older, I know what’s up, I’m fine. I want you to be protected from this crap that—“

“We do this together, Kenny!” Karen insisted. “We are family and we protect each other.”

“You’re not gonna want to move back once you see Mom?” I asked her.

Karen glanced up at me. “Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

Karen’s intensity for wanting to help was admirable, but she was still quite a kid. There were plenty of things I still wanted to protect her from. She was both young and sensitive; I hoped that whatever our parents would have to say wouldn’t hurt her too much. The more I thought about it, as we walked, though, I was kind of grateful she was tagging along. I’d probably be able to have a little more resolve, knowing that I wouldn’t want her to hurt too badly from the truth we were both about to hear.

Of course, that got me wondering exactly how Karen knew the truth in the first place. She
had been the one to speak the second couplet when I was trapped in the Gate, about to die. My sister had been the one to bargain me alive. “Karen,” I started to ask, “how did you know about the couplet?”

We were taking the back way to our old house, and therefore far from wandering ears. Our two sets of boots trod the only visible path through the light dusting of snow we’d gotten the night before, making the walk feel even more final. We were the only ones taking the path there, and we were the only ones who’d walk that line back. But for now, with only the trees as company in the path behind the clean suburban lawns, Karen and I could talk about more than just normal family issues.

“The one in the Necronomicon?” Karen wondered. I nodded, and simultaneously wondered how much longer that word would ever even be spoken, or if we’d still have to worry about cults and Yuggoth. “Your Goth friend read it to me.”

“Heinrietta?” I guessed.

“Yeah, her. Well, so we had those two other Goths staying at the safehouse, right? Somewhere around the last hour of you guys being in R’lyeh,” Karen explained, watching the puffs of her breath evaporate up into the air, “her wire went out. So I got my gear on real fast, because the Goths don’t really talk to me but they talk to the Guardian Angel—“ —I kind of laughed, picturing those two nonconformists figuring out what was up with another hero akin to Mysterion— “and the flippy red-hair guy let me use his cell phone to call her.” Karen paused, then shook her head and said, “He had, like, the weirdest phone wallpaper. Anyway, I called your friend at the base and she asked if I could still get through to you since I was the only one left wearing a wire.”

“Yeah?”

My sister nodded again. “Henrietta, that’s her name right? Henrietta,” she continued once I’d confirmed her question, “said there was more you could explain to me later, but she said you were the only one who could beat Cthulhu and that maybe the only way you could live was through that second couplet.”

“Holy shit,” I breathed out. “Sorry.” If there’s one person I try not to swear around, it’s my little sister. Example setting, you know. But that one instance: no, really. Holy shit. The fact that Karen had handled it all so sweetly and calmly, too, was far more than admirable. She’d really grown into a strong young woman, naïve as she could still sometimes be. Karen didn’t fear much anymore, huh? I’d keep her under my wing all the same. “Karen, that’s amazing,” I complimented her. “What you did is amazing.”

“What you did is better,” she tried to pass it off.

I shook my head. “Sis, you heard some weird stuff about me,” I said. “You just jumped into all this and helped save everything. I am so damn lucky you’re my sister.”

Karen’s face lit up, and we paused for a couple minutes when she turned to hug me. While her face was buried in my parka, Karen muffled out the question I knew she would ask: “So… what are you, Kenny?”

She had to know the whole truth, especially before I confronted my parents about it. So while the two of us stood there—brother and sister, Kenny and Karen, Mysterion and the Guardian Angel—I told her everything. I spoke slowly and confidently so as not to disturb her too much with the details. I told her that the Cult of Cthulhu had cursed me in the womb, and that the curse had bound me to the Dark God, Cthulhu, as his Shadow, an entity written of in the Necronomicon. That
I had been destined to be the Old Ones’ Messenger, but that my refusal of the position had been the first step to letting me destroy Cthulhu, the Gate, and R’lyeh itself. Very calmly, I told Karen about my deaths. I told her about the one that still didn’t seem real, the first one, when I was four, and about my troubles with death from the time when I was eight years old, up until only a few weeks ago. And how I wouldn’t see death again until the very, very end, because I was no longer Immortal.

“You just kept coming back?” Karen asked, astounded.

“Yeah… and that’s the thing,” I admitted. “I don’t know how.”

“But you beat Cthulhu!”

“Right. I just have a feeling that maybe what’s left of the Cult might know and they just never told me. And,” I added, resolute, “I have an even bigger feeling that Mom and Dad know, maybe even more than the Cult would.”

Karen’s eyes widened. “Why Mom and Dad?”

“Because they’ve always seemed like they’ve been hiding something from me,” I said. “Mom sure as hell can’t hide it well anymore. I’m going to get that information out of them today, Karen. That’s why things might get really ugly once we get there.”

Karen grabbed hold of my arm, and we continued walking. “I’m not afraid,” she said, almost under her breath, as our boots began to crunch into messy underbrush below the snow and frost. “You shouldn’t be, either. You’re smarter than them.”

I thanked my sister, gave her a little more added reassurance, then clammed up for the rest of the walk. My heart started drumming arrhythmically against my chest the closer that shack came into view, the closer I came to having the confrontation of my familial life. My last interaction with my parents. I’d better learn what I’d been needing to know; that was the only thing I could focus on.

When Karen and I stood on the front step, I considered calling rather than knocking, just so I wouldn’t even have to touch a single door or wall of that building again, but remembered that my parents probably hadn’t paid the phone bill and that the effort would be pointless. Glancing Karen over to make sure she looked clean and presentable (which she did much more now than she ever had when Mom was dressing her, when we were kids), I took in a deep breath, formulated every question I could think of in my mind, and knocked.

The yelling began.

“You get it!” my mother started shouting. “I’m sick ‘n’ tired of you not doin’ a Goddamn thing ’round here!”

“Don’t tell me what to do, bitch!” my father hollered back. Karen looked disturbed, but did not flinch. She let go of my arm and took a step to the side, allowing me room to be the first to have to say anything. “Get your ass over there!”

“Ain’t nobody gonna tell me what to do!”

A few seconds later, the door opened, revealing my disheveled mother. Her hair looked like it hadn’t been brushed in days. She wore a thin green sweatshirt open over a white tank top, and her skin reflected the fact that her choice in clothing was not the best in this frigid weather. Her flannel pajama pants followed her feet into a pair of Dad’s old boots, laceless and worn. On her face was the most dreary expression I had ever seen. As if something had just sucked the life right out of her.
Her eyes were red, as if she’d been crying for a solid week, and the bags under her eyes seemed to hollow out all of her other features.

I hadn’t known what to expect. Honestly, I was betting on her yelling at me. But Mom was exhausted. Not high, not hungover, just exhausted. The first word out of her mouth was, “Oh.” Followed by, “What’re you doin’ here, Kenny?”

“Came to ask you a couple questions,” I said.

“Like what?” Mom asked. Her voice wasn’t so much cold as it was blank.

“Mind if I step inside?”

“What’re you askin’?” she wanted to know.

“Is that Kenny?” Dad hollered over.

“Yep.”

“Tell him to get his ass in here!”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” I said, raising my tone so my dad could hear as well. “I’m not staying. I’m still outta here, now that I really can move out for good.”

My mother rolled her eyes. “You’re gonna come back, Kenny, I keep tellin’ ya. You keep on runnin’, but—“

“But what?” I spat. “That’s what I want to talk to you about, Mom. Dad, too. Can I come in or not?”

My mother cast up an awfully forlorn stare, then chewed the inside of her cheek and stepped aside. “By the way,” I added as I entered, “you’re not just gonna be answering questions for me.”

“Oh, no?”

“No. I brought Karen, too.”

“Karen?” For a fleeting instant, Mom lit up. A flush of pink came over her weather-blued pallor, and when my sister stepped inside, Mom repeated her name, ecstatic this time: “Karen! Oh, my little daughter, you came home!”

Karen shirked away. She hadn’t seen hide nor hair of Mom or Dad in years. And while she’d greeted me fondly after our long absence, she now saw even more of the wrong that would have befallen her had she remained here in South Park those three years she’d been gone and living comfortably in Utah. “Hi,” Karen said, strongly but evasively. “I’m not here to stay. I’m just here to support Kenny.”

Karen shirked away. She hadn’t seen hide nor hair of Mom or Dad in years. And while she’d greeted me fondly after our long absence, she now saw even more of the wrong that would have befallen her had she remained here in South Park those three years she’d been gone and living comfortably in Utah. “Hi,” Karen said, strongly but evasively. “I’m not here to stay. I’m just here to support Kenny.”

“That Karen?” Our dad, who had been lazily sprawled on the spring-trapped dump treasure of a sofa, stood and, as Mom shut the door, approached us after pounding back the rest of the beer he’d been working on. “Karen, what you been doin’ in Utah? How come you never called, huh?”

“I didn’t want to,” said Karen. Her voice was getting more defensive by the second. “Plus, I forgot if we even had a phone here. Moving there was the best idea of my life, so I want Kenny to be able to move, too.”

“You movin’ to Utah, Kenny?” Mom wondered.
“No, just to a better place.” Take the bait, take the bait, take the bait, you bitch…

She did. Hugging her arms around her, Mom hunched over a little and repeated, “Better place?” She looked me over, cast her eyes heavenward, then chewed the inside of her cheek again as she gave me another scrutinizing look over.

“Yeah,” I said, holding my ground. “Now, what do you think I mean by that?”

“Oh, shit,” said my father, keeping his distance. “See, Carol?” he then spat over at my mom. “I told you this’d be the last one. What with you gettin’ sick and all.”

“You’re sick?” I wondered. Mom sure looked it.

“I was.” She waved it off. “I’m better now. Couple days ago, I just got better.”

“Huh.”

Mom shook her head. “So was it the last one?” she asked me.

“Last what?”

“Oh I bet you know by now. Better place an’ all…”

“Yeah, better place,” I snapped, folding my arms in defiance against them. This was it. No pussyfooting. I was getting answers and I was getting them now. My parents were the last two people on Earth I’d ever want to have small talk with. Talking to them was fucking painful, and not because I felt any attachment. Just because they were so embarrassing, infuriating, and just… difficult. “I found a new house to live in,” I translated. Mom and Dad began taking steps toward each other, until we were locked in a good old staredown. Them against us. “What’d you think I meant?”

They didn’t respond. Only stared.

“You think I mean Heaven?” I guessed, pointing up.

“Well—“

“Well, what?!” I hollered. “You wanna know where I went the last few times I’ve died? Purgatory. Hell. I’ve even been to R’lyeh. I really, really rarely get all the way to Heaven.”

Mom’s tired eyes went wide and bloodshot. That wasn’t a woman; that was a husk. That shell couldn’t house a heavy secret anymore. “Kenny,” she began, slowly, “how do you know about…”

“I know a whole hell of a lot!” I said firmly. I was trying not to shout, since that would just be stooping to their level, but I had to affirm myself. “I know I was cursed, all right? I know that you two went to a Cthulhu Cult meeting right before I was born. And I know exactly how many times I have died! And exactly how many times I’ve woken up right back here. Care to explain?”

“Oh, Jesus, oh, God, it’s happened…” Mom whispered. “You know about it…”

“Who told you?” Dad wondered. He was starting to look worried. “It was that mystery… that Mysterion guy, wasn’t it? That guy’s been stalkin’ around here for years!”

“Yeah, Mysterion told me almost everything I need to know,” I decided on saying. “There’s just one detail I never got.
“So go. Tell me everything,” I demanded, staring my parents down, taking a real stand against them for the first time in my life. “Tell me the truth this time. Why you went to that meeting. Why you never went back. And tell me, right now, Mom, if you remember every single time I died.”

My parents froze, and then exchanged an awful glance. Tears pooled in my mother’s eyes, and my dad, in a rare show of affection, clamped a hand on her shoulder. “We… we went because they were offering free beer,” Dad answered.

“That was your answer before,” I snapped.

Dad sighed. He’d been throwing his weight around earlier, but this wasn’t a subject he seemed to be able to dismiss very easily. “And it still is, Kenny. We wanted to get drunk. Really, really drunk.”

“Why?!” I shouted. “Mom was pregnant with me at the time, why—”

Wait. Oh, fuck, I’d wanted to hear the truth, but I hadn’t wanted to hear this.

My sister drew in a horrified gasp behind me as it dawned on her, too.

“Because,” Mom screamed, finally snapping, “we couldn’t afford the abortion!”

That was it…?

That was the truth I’d been waiting seventeen years to hear?

Fuck.

My parents really were horrible people, if that was their idea of a plausible solution to something. I hadn’t been wanted. I hadn’t been meant to live. I, a child my parents tried in every stupid way possible to kill in the womb, had ended up doomed to a life filled with death. A life none of us could escape from. Not me, not my parents. Not even my deadbeat brother. No wonder he never had anything to say to me. The brother he was never meant to have.

Kenny McCormick. The accident.

Fuck. FUCK.

Nobody should ever hear that kind of shit from their parents. Nobody. But to me it just really hit hard.

Karen took hold of my sleeve and took a step closer, to give me her support; to guard me against them. I glanced back to see that she’d started crying, but she wasn’t carrying on. She was just letting it out quietly. I was sure she’d break down later for having heard the awful truth, but for now, she was showing incredible steadfastness. The touch helped.

At least one member of the family cared. At least I had meant something to someone. At least the accident had grown up to do something right.

But still. I was enraged. Horrified, mortified, terrified. How the fuck could anyone do that, let alone admit to it? Then again… I’d wanted to know…

“We couldn’t even think about havin’ another baby after Kevin,” Mom went on. “So I fig’red if I did enough stupid shit we wouldn’t have to worry… maybe even get away with just a
stillborn."

“You… you tried to kill me?” I found the strength to say. It felt like the entire town had gone silent. My life had been plagued with death, all because my parents were too stupid and too poor to care for a second child. The thought just would not leave. From that night on, it never would. “You fucking bastards, you didn’t want me?!”

“That stupid Cult said they’d take care of everythin’. You were never s’posed to be alive at all!” Mom drawled through her heaving sobs. “We had you, though, and when I saw you I just couldn’t put you up for adoption! We even kept you away from the Cult. They kept invitin’ us to meetings to check up on you. We couldn’t really survive, but we raised you and loved you. But then when you were little, you were taken away.

“I watched you die, and we couldn’t even pay for a good funeral.”

“I tried to tell her it was for the best,” Dad admitted, “but then, a little while later…”

“There you were again,” Mom finished. “Only I never needed nine months after that. Usually just about nine minutes.”

“What?” I prompted.

“You know exactly how many times you woke up back here?” Mom drawled out.

“Yeah…”

“Well, so do I.” Her bloodshot eyes hardened as she made herself stop crying. “Because I brought you back. Every single time.”

“Wait—“ I said, for clarification, “you mean I—“

“You’ve been born just one time more’n every time you’ve died!” My mother grabbed her stomach with both hands, and hollered, “That damn Cult cursed you t’ make you one-a them Immortals, and they cursed my Goddamn womb like a fuckin’ portal or somethin’!”

Mom drew in a shaking breath, and was succeeding in looking remorseful. She wasn’t getting a shred of pity, though, not from me. “That’s how you kept comin’ back, Kenny. I kept bringin’ you back over ‘n’ over ‘n’ over again!”

“That’s how it went,” said Dad. “You just kept dyin’, and you kept on comin’ back.”

“That’s why we tried to save you whenever we could!” Mom shouted, barely able to contain herself. “Just so we wouldn’t actually have to see you die again. It was such a curse…”

“A curse…?” I repeated, my voice coming out much more feebly than I wanted. The Mythos I could take. My parents’ confession, though, was something else. “A… a curse? You put up with the rebirth of the child you never wanted for seventeen years, and you call that a curse?! What about me? What about the kid actually feeling all that pain? You didn’t even want me… was it the curse that I kept coming back?!”

“But we learned to love you, Kenny!”

“You don’t love me!” I shouted. “You obviously don’t, if you never told me this before.”

“Kenny—“
“Just shut up.”

I held my tongue for a few seconds, and just tried to process. And found that I couldn’t. Maybe I’ll never be able to fully wrap my head around it. But I knew the truth. I knew the gritty, horrible truth. Looking at it one way, though, I had never had better reason to abhor my parents.

I’d never been happier to have blonde hair and blue eyes. Two traits neither of my parents had. Even if it was a mark from the curse, I didn’t care. My parents were the fucking curse more than anything. I was the accident to end all accidents. The kid my parents never wanted… the kid they ended up never being able to get rid of.

But that still begged the question:

“If you didn’t want me,” I growled, “then what about Karen?”

“Huh?”

“What about Karen?!” I hollered.

“Kenny, no…” my mother tried.

“The whole truth, Mom,” I snapped. I was so done. I wanted out of there. I wanted to get the hell out of there for good and comfort my sister and smother my girlfriend with the reasons why I loved her and vent out everything to the guys in the League. No more of that twice-cursed shack. Nope. Done. So I just sped right through my questions, and I would not take no for an answer.

“Were you in a better place to have her? Did you figure I was just this pox on your life that you couldn’t get rid of so you figured you’d try again? What?”

“I want to know, too,” Karen sniffed. “All you’ve ever done is hurt Kenny.”

“No, sweetheart, we tried,” Mom drawled out. “You’re my little girl, Karen, we—“

“How come you loved me and never Kenny?!” my sister screamed.

“Oh, for shit’s sake,” Dad muttered, rolling his eyes. “Carol, tell ’em.”

“She’s too young!” Mom fought him.

“Fine, I’ll say it! Karen was a mistake, too.”

“Oh, my GOD!” Karen screamed, covering her ears. “I hate you! I hate you!”

“Karen…” I tried, stroking her back to comfort her.

“You only did after the doctor said it was a girl,” Dad grumbled. “And that was in the fuckin’ delivery room. Right after…” He trailed off.

“What?” I demanded. “After what?”

“Oh, God, oh, Jesus,” Mom started to cry. “Kenny, no… no, you don’t wanna know…”

“YES, I DO!” I shouted, covering Karen’s ears when she winced again. “Karen’s the only family I swear to God I’ve ever really had, so you tell me why the fuck you thought it’d be okay for
you to go on and have another kid after all the shit you went through with ignoring and not wanting me!"

“Kenny—“

“Look, I don’t know if I could possibly hate you two any more than I already do,” I snapped, “but I love my little sister and—“

“Well, for good reason,” Dad said tensely.

“Why’s that?”

“She’s not just your little sister, Kenny,” Mom finally gave in, looking an absolute mess. “She’s kind of your twin.”


My parents both hung their heads, shamed into the truth. Into dealing with their many follies all at once. One last time for me and my sister… but I could only hope that the two of them would really wallow with those crosses they’d made themselves bear forever. “First time you died, you were four years old,” Mom repeated, as if I didn’t know.

“Right. How the fuck does that work out?” I spat.

“Karen’s four years younger’n you.” Swear to God my heart stopped. “First time you came back, Kenny, it was just a couple hours before her due…”

My sister and I backed away together, and I held her tightly. Shit. Fuck. God, this was much, much more than I thought I was going to get. Too much to process. Too much to handle. “Shut up,” I said to my mother. “We’re done. Just one more question.”

“What?”

“Is Karen cursed, too?”

I glared at my mother, who immediately shook her head no. Thank God. “That was about the only time we ever checked in with the Cult. I didn’t want my daughter bearin’ any kinda curse, too, after—“

“Right,” Karen sobbed, “because one cursed kid was enough, and you’d already had it with two mistakes.”

“Karen, sweetheart—“

“Don’t ‘sweetheart’ me!” Karen yelled at our mother. “You two are very, very selfish people. I hope you know that.”

“Come on,” I said to Karen. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

“Kenny, we’re sorry!” Mom tried.

I just glared at her. For all of the lies. For all her years of knowing about my curse and covering it up. For keeping secrets from Karen. For just failing to understand that family meant trust.

I had nothing more to say to Stuart or Carol McCormick. So I didn’t utter a word.
Not even goodbye.

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Once we were out of there, I did the only thing I could think to do: I called a meeting. I texted everyone as Karen and I made our quick, silent way to the base, taking the main roads and leaving every other path behind us.

No more going back there. Ever. No having to deal with that shit.

At least I knew. At least I finally knew. I was a product of hate as well as the product of a disgusting Cult curse. But I had become more than that, and would strive to become more still.

Everyone responded within seconds of my sending out the simple text of: Meeting. Now. I know more about the curse. By the time I got to the base, everyone had already gathered, and I pushed them back into the meeting room. Karen didn’t mind not getting a formal welcome or tour; she probably figured she’d get one eventually, but she shared almost my every feeling about the situation with our parents.

So my first rebirth had been on the same day Karen was born. I couldn’t remember much of my life as a toddler (who does, really?), but after becoming a big brother, things got vivid in my head. I knew I’d always been looking out for her.

Jesus.

Maybe she really was an angel. Or something. Or we were just meant to be that close as siblings. She’d been there when I’d been brought back the first time… and she, not my mother, not anyone in the League or the Cult… she had been the one to read out the couplet that allowed me to live now.

The meeting table was full up within seconds. Clyde took the head only momentarily to ask, “Dude, what’s going on?”

“Yeah, Kenny, what’s up, what happened?” Stan wondered.

“You all right?” asked Kyle.

“I’m—I don’t know, dude, I just—“

“We just talked to our parents,” Karen cut in for me.

There was a little silence after that. Nobody else spoke, not even loud-mouthed Cartman, not even cynical Craig. Nobody. I glanced around the table at my friends who made up the League. Who had sacrificed a lot, in their own ways, to help me.

This was where I belonged. No questions asked. Here, with this team, here, as Mysterion… this was the life I’d made, and the life I was meant to have. I trusted each and every person there. So I began to talk.

I just let it all out. Karen added in a word here and there, but I was the one to mostly spill to the guys every single thing my parents had told me. I didn’t look at anyone’s reactions. I didn’t want to see any pity or anything, so I waited until I’d finished, then surveyed the room again to find—general understanding. Which was exactly what I’d been hoping to find.

“Dude,” said Kyle, echoing his first question in a much different tone, “are you okay?”
“Anything we can do?” Stan added.

“That’s really rough, dude,” said Token, “sorry to hear that…”

“You beat it all anyway, though,” Clyde put in.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s just kind of… lots to think through.”

“Yeah, I’d imagine.”

And then I just couldn’t talk anymore. Retelling everything that had just happened between me, Karen and our parents took too much out of me. So when Clyde asked if there was anything else I wanted to say, or if I maybe wanted to move on with the discussion, I kind of blurted out, “Sorry, guys. I’ve just… woah. I gotta take a breather. I’ll be back. Can we keep this going? Like, this whole conversation can be done, but just… go on what else we’ve gotta cover?”

“Sure, man, your call,” said Clyde. “We can get started if you want, but…”

“Thanks,” I said quickly. Then, with a little nod to my sister, I left the room.

I was just overflowing. Too much all at once. I didn’t know if I was angry, or relieved, or both, or sad, or just—what. It was like everything was just over. And yet opening up for the very first time.

My entire life had been laid out in front of me. Check that. Behind me. I knew about everything. My deaths, my curse, my resurrections. Every fucking thing. Full up, I stormed out into the common room, paced for a minute, then collapsed back onto the sofa and buried my head in my hands.

What was done was done.

I’d been born an accident. I’d been born Immortal, the Shadow of Cthulhu.

And then I’d grown up. Lived. Died. Lived again. Become Mysterion. And beaten everything.

My parents had nothing over me now. I was free. I was fucking free. But for once, I could actually be scared. It was true: everything was new. I could approach life in a whole new way if I wanted to. But fuck, I was scared. This was like nothing that had ever been an option for me before. I was my own person.

Even though what my parents said, just as I had feared, probably would haunt at least one portion of my mind forever. To think that none of this would have happened. That I would never have met anyone. Never taken a single breath. Never existed. That the life I’d almost lost had at one point not meant to ever begin at all.

I didn’t want to thank Cthulhu for anything. Not him, not the Cult. So it sucked to have to kind of admit that they were kind of responsible for my ending up the way I did after all.

Talk about a fucking curse.

I decided then and there that, no matter what happened to me in the future, I wanted kids. I wanted kids so that I could give someone a chance at life, and give them everything my parents never cared to give me. I was going to beat them, Goddammit. I was going to be successful.
As I sat there on the common room sofa, postulating my future, despising my parents, coming to terms with my past, I felt the cushions on either side of me sink down, and then two hands were on my shoulders. Each had their own characteristically reassuring grip, and when I picked my head up, I saw Kyle on my right, Stan on my left. Neither moved; neither spoke. They just sat there, silently giving me all the support they could.

I’m not a guy who cries. I’m not. I never have been. When I was a kid, I never even pulled fake tears very often to get what I wanted, the way some of my friends could. Only a few things recently had yanked tears out of me. The thought of leaving my friends, and Karen, and Red, in those painful moments before leaving for R’lyeh… the thought of never returning from the Gate… and now, I just gave in and let go. For everything else.

For the life I was leaving behind. From the joy of breaking the curse, the prospect of living a normal life. For the pain of the countless deaths I’d undergone, each one more shattering than the one before it. For the anguish of learning the truth from my parents. For my decision to move on, to make my own life, to search for a more fulfilling life.

…For how fucking grateful I was that I’d found a family all the same. Stan and Kyle really were the best friends I could ever have had. The League was the best thing that had ever happened to me to keep me motivated and keep me positive. Red… that perfect girl I’d found, the girl I’d find the second I left the base later on, who I’d hold onto and love just as long as I possibly could.

And who deserved to know the truth.

I knew everything about what I was.

Now, more than anything, I wanted to share at least one secret with the only person outside of the League who truly deserved to know.

I couldn’t let my parents’ big reveal slow me down or stop me that day… or ever, for that matter. Crying it out felt good, I had to admit; knowing that neither Stan nor Kyle would judge me for it, and that I really did have a pretty kickass web of support in the two of them (and my sister, and my girlfriend, and the rest of the League, each in their own ways), would be more than enough to keep me going.

“Thanks, guys,” I said as the three of us made our way back to the meeting room. The two still had their hands on my shoulders, and to be honest, I couldn’t imagine, at that moment, being able to hold myself up without them.

“No prob, dude,” Stan said with a light grin. “That’s what we’re here for, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Kyle agreed, smiling as well. “Don’t let anything like that get you down, Kenny.”

“Thanks,” I said again. “It just kinda… made me feel like I hit a wall or something, you know?”

Once back in the meeting hall, I apologized to the others and expressed my gratitude for their patience with me, plus thanks beyond that for everyone’s hands in the last R’lyeh fight. “Honestly,” I insisted. “I wouldn’t fuckin’ know what to do if I didn’t have all you guys’ help.”

“You feeling better, Kenny?” Karen asked.

“Yeah, it’s all good, sis,” I told her, painting on a smile I didn’t really need to force. “How’re you?”
“Kind of processing,” my sister admitted with a slight shrug. “But I feel like things are going to start to get better.”

That they were.

Which was pretty much what the rest of the meeting needed to consist of: the hows. How we were going to make sure everything could really be all right again. For us, for our families and friends, for South Park, and, hell, everything that lay beyond our little mountain town.

“So fair’s fair, guys,” I said when I finally took my seat. “How’s everyone else holding up? Check-in starts… now.”

Token was the one to start, giving us updates on his dad in regards to his dad’s position as interim mayor. Mr. Black was the one who was directly dealing with the Red Cross volunteers, the higher-ups at the hospital and asylum, and the other services that had been helping since the final days of the crisis. That’s what the town was calling it, and pretty much what it would be called from that day on: just simply, the crisis. Not many people understood it; some people even thought of it as just another wild thing that happened to South Park, others were still convinced it was the end of the world and we still had to watch our backs. There was apparently still a group to keep our eyes out for, made up of some Cultists and some who had not been previously involved, all convinced that the Apocalypse was still nigh and on the watch as a group to possibly try to pull something. Which was kind of fun to hear, we all had to admit. They’d be easy to deal with; there was the general feeling of oh, man, yeah, we’ve totally got this.

Wendy’s check-in involved Butters, who we all agreed should probably be in on the rest of the meeting, and therefore made Cartman text him in order to, as he probably worded it, get his ass over to the base. I wasn’t the only one who’d left home—Butters had left his own parents behind and moved in with Wendy, and had still, Wendy said, been feeling guilty and horrible over the numerous dark Chaos incidents. Something really had just gone wrong in the guy’s brain. The basic agreement from that was to just keep an eye on him, but acknowledge his wish that Chaos be left behind.

Clyde had hardly left his girlfriend’s side since (apparently) Marjorine had snuck in to give her an early release, and besides still sometimes having an erratic sleeping pattern and recovering eating habits, Bebe was more or less back to her old self. “Right down to asking me if her top and sweater combination looks cute enough,” Clyde laughed. Just the fact that the guy was smiling again was awesome. I’d seen the life pretty much just get sucked right out of him the night he had to turn Bebe in. He’d been needing to breathe.

Timmy gave us the okay for his parents, who hadn’t fallen to the insanity, and for his friend Jimmy Valmer and his parents, all of whom had been admitted; Jimmy, a stand-up comedian, was apparently already working on an experience-based new routine. Ike passed off his comments to Kyle, who gave us a good report on their parents. The Marsh and Broflovski families had been staying together for the past few days, but, as Stan co-reported, Mrs. Marsh had (being kind of the matriarch for all) expressed a want to get back into her own house, now that the Broflovskis were more than re-adjusted on their own, and Stan’s dad was showing rapid improvements after the crisis as well.

Craig reported that his sister was doing fine, and also, being a close friend, that one thing the few days after the crisis had done for Tweek was allow the poor guy some well-deserved sleep. He was already back to work at his parents’ shop, and was still tense and jittery, but had seemed to have left the Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep nightmares behind.

For the first few seconds of Cartman’s check-in, he was abnormally silent, then quietly
reported that his mother was herself again, but that he was kind of pulling his weight a little more around the house to help her. None of us teased him for it (he was such a fucking mama’s boy, we all knew he’d eventually shut up the day he finally had to do some real work for her), primarily after he said, “She’s all I’ve got, so I gotta kinda take care of that, y’know?”

“Good for you,” I complimented him. “Really, dude, that’s good she’s doing better.”

“Thanks,” Cartman muttered.

“And, hey,” I added, when it seemed we were all kind of concerned we’d be having a whole new, mopier Cartman on our hands from then on, “I should thank you more specifically for your help in R’lyeh.”

He picked his head up, ready for praise. “Yeah?”

“Dude, you kept Cthulhu under control just long enough, helped subdue Chaos, and hell, we couldn’t’ve finished the whole mission without the Coon, you know?” I grinned. “So thanks for sticking with us.”

“Oh,” he said, smirking and sitting back a little. “Well. You know. It’s what I do.” Yep, okay, he wasn’t going and changing on us too much.

Henrietta had the final check-in. She didn’t want to say much, but said that it would probably be in our best interests to hold onto the Necronomicon she had just a little while longer, until we were good and certain that things had settled back into what we’d always considered to be normal. The report was, though, that, yes, the Gate had shut, and that R’lyeh had been shaken from the Earth for good. As we’d said. Mission accomplished.

Just as Henrietta was letting us in on her family’s involvement in the police search for her brother, Ike perked his head up and said, “Oh, hey, just got a bulletin.” His computer was rigged to Yates’ and Murphy’s feeds at Park County, which allowed us to receive information at the same rate police scanners did, plus the special reports that were rarer, but supplied us with plenty of facts in any given case. At the same time Ike’s bulletin came in, Henrietta reached in her pocket for her cell phone, then stepped aside to take a quick call.

Ike’s expression wasn’t hopeful, and after he’d read through the bulletin, he glanced over at Henrietta, waiting for her before telling us anything. The Goth had a clipped conversation with the person on the other line—I was assuming her mother—and returned silently. We used to have a rule about no cell phone use, but lately, we’d been making exceptions, based on circumstances. That was probably a topic for future discussion, but for now, it was hardly an issue. “What’s the story?” I wondered.

“Bradley’s dead,” said Henrietta. Her voice caught slightly between words, but she showed no emotion. Somewhere deep down, Henrietta probably had some kind of familial attachment to her adopted brother, but not enough to warrant much caring in the event of his passing, especially given her stances on life and death. Plus her stance on the whole Mint-Berry Crunch thing from the beginning; she’d originally started helping me due to a disliking of her brother and his strange alien powers. But a loss was a loss; she couldn’t pass it off entirely.

“The write-up on the cause of death says wild dogs,” Ike told us from his computer.

“Ugh, that’s kind of harsh,” Wendy commented.

“Given what Cthulhu did, I’m not surprised,” Clyde said, his expression and tone both hard
“Yeah,” said Henrietta. “I still had the visual at that point. He got it bad. I figured he was dead.”

“Well,” I said, “moment of silence, guys? He did help out.”

Even I couldn’t deny that. As much as I hadn’t wanted his help, or anything to do with him, he had come through in the end, and died for the cause. He even got the damn hero death—guy just had to go out beating me at one other thing, huh? Not that I’d wanted the big hero death, mind you; it was just kind of ironic. We held a moment of silence, which was only broken by Cartman getting up upon getting the text that signaled that Butters had just arrived for the rest of the meeting.

He was indeed Butters that day, too, dressed in a fleece pullover jacket and jeans, his hair all stuffed up but for the bangs under a knit teal winter hat. He greeted us with a nervous smile, and we allowed him his own check-in, during which he didn’t say much beyond the fact that he was recovering, which, we all pretty much figured, was part of the reason why he hadn’t left his coat in the cloakroom. He still had scars, which he was bound to be sensitive about for a while. “Thanks for invitin’ me, though,” he said. “I’m glad you fellas’re still lettin’ me in on things.”

“I mean,” I shrugged, “the option’s here, dude, if you want to stay in the loop. I mean, Craig is, right?”

“I am?” said Craig, dully.

“Well, aren’t you?”

Craig shrugged. “I guess.” Which was his way of saying he really did want to, he just didn’t want to let on that he was excited about anything he used to be so opposed to.

Conversation returned to what to do about Bradley, during which I crossed off the Bradley search party? part of our to-do list. Only dealings with the mayor remained after this. Still, I added another line: Funerals and services. Bradley was the only one we knew of whose funeral we really wanted and needed to attend, but there was still the issue of Dougie and the little Goth kid.

No bodies to bury, in those cases, but Henrietta had mentioned something about the Goth kid’s family doing some kind of small service to his memory, and Butters had contacted Dougie’s family anonymously to say he’d witnessed a Nyarlathotep-related death; a service was probably in the works, but his parents had been among those in the asylum, so they were still kind of processing what had happened.

Before we could move on to talking about dealings with the mayor and how we’d start to wrap everything up, Cartman, right back to his usual self, complained: “Dude, I’m fuckin’ hungry.”

“Actually,” said Craig, before anyone could just plain tell the fatass to shut up and not complain, “I kinda am, too.”

We all glanced around the table, and arrived at the general consensus that, yeah, we probably should eat something while we kept going. After all, I think we’d all skipped lunch, and I hadn’t had all that much of a breakfast, either, which just reminded me that I was almost on the verge of starving. I asked around for volunteers to grab food and make coffee, since we still had a lot to talk about, and would be going pretty much up until we had to head into town for the assembly or what the hell ever it was Mayor McDaniels was calling it.

“We’ll go,” Stan offered. Oh, really? “I wanna stretch my legs a little anyway.” Do tell.
By ‘we’ I figured he meant him and Kyle, and I was right, so I waved the two out of the room, while Cartman, Craig and Clyde all shouted out things they should look for to bring back. Which I doubted either of them heard due to the nature of the guys’ yelling, but they could try.

So that they wouldn’t have to miss anything, I called for a slight break, which we could all use to just give our minds a rest. Karen admitted to wanting to stretch her legs as well and even take a look around; since now was probably the best time until the following day, I spent my break gladly giving Karen an abbreviated grand tour. Token and Wendy accompanied us out into the living area of the base, since there was now an extra room (we each had one, and there had been a small area for Bradley, just in case he ever did come back) which Karen would be able to occupy now. Wendy hugged Karen a couple of times, saying she was elated to have another girl on the team, and that she’d get to work with Token right away on designing some of that fantastic under-armor for her as well.

Karen took everything in ecstatically, and was especially excited to see everything in the meeting room—Clyde’s file cabinets, Ike’s and Timmy’s computer system, and especially the cork board, with its layers upon layers of photos, documents, and other important tidbits from the crisis still posted up there as if the mission were still a work in progress. At some point in the very near future, we’d be clearing that board off and starting anew.

Cartman announced quite loudly that he was leaving to use the bathroom and not to start until he came back, but Stan and Kyle were still apparently out in the kitchen, which, at the tail end of a ten-minute break, got us all kind of wondering what the hell the holdup was. I handed off the task of still showing Karen around to Clyde and Ike, primarily since Token and Wendy were not being shy about wanting a little couple time off in one corner, and volunteered to head out and steer the other two back in.

While Token and Wendy may have been a couple that didn’t mind others being around while they fully enjoyed the pleasures of one another’s company, that didn’t mean every couple functioned that way.

There is a subtle art to walking in on people making out. Whatever it is, I highly doubt I will ever perfect it. I tend to have a knack for accidentally walking in on people, but I have not yet learned to just leave it alone. Because people interest me. I get this weird pleasure from knowing other people are enjoying themselves (mainly because I know how much I enjoy simple perks… and not-so-simple perks, and I always wish that kind of thing for others, too).

And from what I happened upon in the kitchen, I could already tell that Stan and Kyle were going to be one of those couples that would be just too much fun to provide commentary for, whether they wanted me to or not.

The best part was, they totally hadn’t even forgotten about the whole ‘go get snacks’ issue. The coffee was on and brewed, they had a couple large plates of things all set on the kitchenette table. But. Kyle had Stan backed up against the counter beside the fridge, where Stan’s fingers hurriedly grasped for the edge of the polished wooden countertop; he was leaned back, probably so that he wasn’t so obviously a couple inches taller. Didn’t seem to bother Kyle, whatever way: he had one fist clenched into Stan’s shirt, the other hand up under it and—wow, damn, shit, dude, he was fuckin’ relentless. Never really knew what to expect once it finally happened with them, so I was kind of in awe of the intensity and yet at the same time totally not surprised at all.

Nevertheless, we did kinda have some important stuff to talk about back in the meeting room. I waited for the perfect second to interject, then said, “When I said ‘snacks,’ guys, I meant for
“Oh, fuck,” I kind of heard Stan half-exclaim, half-muffle, just before he let out a quick, “—ow!”

“‘Ow’ what?” Kyle wondered; he seemed like he hadn’t seen or heard me, which was just plain funny to me. “Stan, what? Why ‘ow’?”

Stan, flushed to beat hell, then said, trying to control the level of his voice, “Bit my lip a little, it’s fine.”

“Are you bleeding?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“Kyle, it’s fine. But—“

“What?”

“Kenny,” Stan said, pointing over at me.

“What’s he have to do w—KENNY?!” Kyle yelped, whipping his head over to glare at me. “Dude, what the fuck?!”

“Yo,” I greeted, waving both hands at once. “What’s good?”

“What the fuck?!” Kyle asked again. His face flushed red, and he glanced away, muttering, “Oh, shit, oh, God… dude, what the hell?”

“Dude, you guys’re fine, do whatever you want, but like…” I laughed. “Do you have any idea how long you guys’ve been here?”

“Oh, Jesus… shit…” Stan said hurriedly, pushing off from the counter and brushing his shirt down. “Shit, dude, sorry, we—“

“Got distracted,” Kyle finished.

“I can see that.” I just kept on grinning. This was fucking great.

“Sorry,” Kyle started, still flushed as he went about reaching up into the cabinet over where Stan had been to grab mugs for the coffee. “I’m so sorry, oh, fuck—that was really unprofessional of us and—“

I laughed. “You’re fine,” I said. “I gave the guys a ten-minute break anyway. Just that it’s been nine already, so I wanted to make sure you got that memo and that you didn’t just plain leave to elope.”

“Glad you have so much faith in us,” said Stan, trying to joke around but still looking paranoid as hell over the fact that I’d walked in on them.

“Well, I try.” I glanced between the two of them, trying to figure out the exact dynamic. I doubted they’d ever show too many hints of it, but if I could try to guess, I would.

“Can I help you?” Kyle asked, kind of sarcastically, as he and Stan finished getting things in
order to bring back into the meeting room. “You gonna help us, or are you gonna be totally creepy and just stand in the doorway?”

“Nah, I’ll give you a hand,” I said, laughing again as I walked in to let Stan load me up with a tray. “I’m just trying to figure this out.”

“Figure what out?” Stan wondered.

“Who’s the dude?” I smirked.

“Ohhhhh, my God, we are not having this conversation,” Stan said nervously, passing it off. “See you back in the meeting room, Kenny.”

“Holy shit, it’s Kyle, isn’t it?”

“Bye, Kenny!”

“You guys know I’m messin’ with you, right?” I said, now loaded up with the full array of everything edible to bring back to the rest of the guys, while Stan and Kyle were left with just the cups, plates and coffee. Oh, they did, and they let me know that. If anything, they were both formulating ways to get back at me now. I really had struck gold on friends in my life, seeing as how we could all rip on each other for stupid things one minute and be saving each other’s lives the next.

God, yeah, life was pretty fucking great.

They were only a couple steps behind me on the way back to the others, and the break was extended another five minutes so we could eat and caffeinate. Which made it all the better that Cartman strolled in last from his trip to the bathroom and therefore got last pick. Butters couldn’t quite stifle a laugh because of it, so Cartman punched him on the back, saying, “Told you I owed you that anyway.” Karen was grinning and beaming the entire time, completely excited to be getting to know everyone again—she knew my group of friends from before she’d left, but re-acquainting after three years was fun for her—and about being officially welcomed onto the League.

Once settled back in, though, business picked up as usual. It was nice having a regular old meeting again, even if things were still tied to cleaning up in the Old Ones’ wake. The main topic was, of course, settling things with the mayor, making sure South Park was in capable hands, and, finally, making our statement as a League to the town.

You may think that it’s pretty impossible for a bunch of teenage guys to be in one room and focus on nothing but writing the most important speech (alternate reading: report) of their lives. You would be absolutely right.

Fortunately, we also had an overachieving eleven-year-old and a girl who wanted to be a journalist on our team (plus my stunningly focused sister), so we didn’t do too badly. Plus, this wasn’t just any speech. We had pretty much just saved the world, and freed the people of our town from the Old Ones’ insanity.

Karen, well, the Guardian Angel, having been the hero on the homefront during the final battle, was the one who spoke to both Mayor McDaniels and Mr. Black about the main details surrounding the upcoming evening. This was to be a press conference of sorts, during which McDaniels would be officially sworn back into office (having been given a clean bill of mental health from both the asylum and the top tier doctors at Hell’s Pass Hospital), but she and Token’s dad were already working out between them what needed the most attention in town. The mayor
would take questions, and then an assistant of hers would field things to us, to see if it was anything we could answer. We agreed to take only ten questions; if we would rather not answer one for any particular reason, that still counted as one of the ten.

It was rather quickly agreed that I should be the one to give the speech, but Clyde was voted the one to join me in answering questions. That got Cartman all uppity, but Kyle had already pointed out that Clyde and I were the best at disguising our voices.

Craig agreed to come along, but didn’t want credit for being in the League (primarily because he had no alter ego and didn’t want one; he was fine with just being ‘that guy with the swords’ and not having an official name… yet). Henrietta said the same. So I agreed to acknowledge them as notable community members who had helped in immeasurable ways.

“You gonna mention Red, too?” Stan goaded me on.

“Oh, uh, probably,” I realized. “Especially due to Karen’s connection. The Guardian Angel had her eye on that place the whole time.”

“Sure did,” Karen smiled, sitting up straight to take the compliment. “Speaking of Red, you gonna tell her? Kenny?”

I kind of froze. I’d forgotten to mention that to the team… “Oh,” I said. “Well, I want to.” Turning my attention to the entire team, I explained, “Hey, guys, listen… I have a feeling she’s kinda close to figuring it out on her own, but before she does, I want to tell Red about me.”

“About you being Mysterion, or an Immortal?” Kyle wondered.

“Well,” I said, getting nervous about the notion for the first time, “eventually everything, but just the Mysterion part for now. I won’t reveal you other guys if—“

“Dude,” said Clyde, “she’ll probably piece that part together once she knows about you.” He was giving me an odd kind of way to break your own rule look. I know, I know, but… some rules should be broken. If broken in the right way.

“Too risky,” Cartman warned.

“And,” Clyde went right on, “you get to tell Red, I get to tell Bebe.”

“Well—“ I started.

“Fair’s fair, man. I wanna tell her, too.”

“I kinda think it’s okay,” said Token, which shut up Cartman before he could protest again. “I mean, some of us are dating within the League. If you guys trust your girlfriends outside enough, I think that’s fine.”

“Plus,” Wendy added on her friends’ behalf, “Red and Bebe aren’t the kind of people who’d go passing out the information to everyone.”

“They’re chicks!” Cartman argued. “No fuckin’ way!”

“Ugh, would you stop being such a sexist asshole?!” Wendy bit back at him.

“Girls talk, that’s all I’m sayin’!”

“Cartman, shut the hell up,” Stan groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. Glancing over at
Token and Wendy, he said, “I agree with you guys.”

“If anyone outside us at school knows, I’d say Red and Bebe are a couple of the best to tell,” Kyle shrugged in agreement.

“They’re smart enough to know not to spread anything they shouldn’t,” Wendy finished her thought, still shooting that scathing glare at Cartman, who just rolled his eyes and conceded.

Butters picked his head up at that point, and pulled his hat down a little as he requested, “If you fellas could kinda, well… not tell about Chaos…”

“We wouldn’t,” I assured him. After all, Chaos was one of the topics we were planning on bringing up in the speech that night. He was gone, and therefore nothing to worry about in retrospect. He’d been the cause of the chaos, but he’d also helped see to the end of it. “Right Clyde?” I glanced over; Clyde was looking hesitant. “Right, Clyde?” I repeated.

“Right,” he agreed, giving Butters a slight nod of recognition.

In the end, it was agreed that Clyde and I could let our girlfriends in on the very surface of League secrets, so long as we used discretion. The option was opened to Ike as well, but he admitted that he didn’t trust Flora with the information; as much fun as she was to have as a girlfriend, he said, she was kind of a misinformed gossip.

Plus, I had no idea how long the young pair would last: I was so close to calling the kid out on being kind of obviously infatuated with Karen, based on how he kept eyeing her during the meeting, but I didn’t. I’m all for encouraging relationships, but the main thing was, Karen was super oblivious. With Ike finishing seventh grade and Karen about to transfer to complete eighth in South Park, though, I was sure to start hearing all kinds of new middle school goings on for the rest of the year.

Dude, I fucking love gossip, I’m not even gonna try to deny it. Getting back into the usual swing of things was going to be awesome. And, hey, Mysterion was still a part of my everyday, too, but it’d be nice to have something of a reprieve in that sense, too. Man, not to jinx it or anything, but I started to doubt I’d really consider anything too awful challenging after this. But the city still needed me. Needed us.

It always would.

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I texted Red that I would meet up with her right after the conference, and that Karen would be back with us at the end of the evening as well. She texted me back, giddy about being able to see not only Mysterion but the entire League out in the open that night, and asked if I’d be around in case she got the okay from her parents to attend the conference, since it would be an open address on the outside podium, the way McDaniels usually preferred addressing the town. I came up with the quick lie that I’d be around but in the mayor’s office, and for her to not necessarily feel the need to wait up for me.

It was a damn good thing all of us had backup gear, since R’lyeh had pretty much ruined everything we’d been dressed in when we were there. When it came time to don my uniform, though, for the very first time as a non-Immortal, I chose to wear the same cloak. It had obviously seen better days, but it wasn’t completely ruined. The ends were blackened and frayed, and even after a washing slightly tinted that sickly R’lyeh green along the ends, but I wanted to keep it that way, and wear that particular cloak as long as it would hold up. I affixed a new question mark to the
hood, but I had the broken remains of the one Kyle and Stan had found when they’d unearthed me from the Gate portal. I was thinking about framing it or something.

We all prepared fully, as if we were heading right back out for any given mission. It struck me as beautiful that it just so happened to be a Wednesday. Schools were going to be postponed for another week while the town readjusted (and as a result, we were going to have to make up some time in June, which sucked, but what can you do?), so the whole team of us decided that the following week would be the perfect time to get back into our own routine, with our weekly meetings and private patrols.

Earlier on, we had agreed to take part in the conference under the condition that it be at night, since we preferred not to do business by day if we could get away with it. The mayor was fine with that, and met us gladly half an hour before the whole thing was to begin. She seemed to have her wits well about her, and she had a couple new assistants helping her with her busy affairs. Both of Token’s parents were in attendance, but neither let on that they knew any of us personally. They were both pretty great that way; knowing, but never dropping even the most subtle of hints.

A fair amount of people from town had turned up for the conference, and once again, the lawn outside of the town hall. Craig and Henrietta were out among them, keeping their eyes on Butters, who looked mildly grossed out by the cloud of smoke around Craig, Henrietta, and the other two Goths that stood nearby, probably outside just because Henrietta’s house, even preparing for a funeral, wasn’t quite the place to be.

The team of us waited inside but had simulcasted video feed of everything going on, and when Mosquito asked me how I was feeling in regards to the speech, I admitted to having memorized it. Mysterion does not need cue cards. Everything we had to say was already there, the townsfolk just had to be reassured that things would be fine, and they needed to hear that from us specifically.

The mayor went on for a few minutes, thanking everyone for their services, and Mr. Black especially. She mentioned the known fatalities and held a moment of silence for anyone who had passed in the crisis, and promised to ensure a better quality of life once all repairs to the town were underway. At her ten-minute mark, as we’d been informed of upon our arrival, she then announced, “It is now my pleasure to bring before you the heroes who have kept an eye on our fine town for many years, and who have assured me will do so for many years to come. Without this team, our town and many after it would have fallen into peril, so please help me welcome, to give their own statement on this recent crisis…”

“Ready?” Toolshed asked.

“You know it,” I grinned.

“The Shadow League.”

“Well,” Kite grinned. “Let’s go.”

The second we took the stage, the applause was deafening. There couldn’t have been more than two hundred people gathered on the lawn, but it felt like we’d entered a stadium of thousands. Shouts of thank yous and other expressions of gratitude were sent our way, and I tried not to grin from the sheer joy of hearing it. As the League lined up to either side of me, I thanked Mayor McDaniels and took the podium, and the moment I held one hand up, the town fell silent.

“People of South Park,” I began, as I knew the town loved it when I began an address that way, “we have all just survived a frightening but very real threat, to this town and to the world.
Under our new collective title as the Shadow League, this group and I took it upon ourselves to research, track down, and eliminate the source of the insanity that plagued this town, and the darkness that was meant to follow.

“Two beings—Cthulhu, as you all recall from nearly eight years ago, and another of his ilk called Nyarlathotep—were the source of the madness, which we are proud to tell you has passed.” Slight applause, until I held a hand up again. “They were awakened from a dimension known as R’lyeh, to which we, the League, traveled in order to stop any further damage before it could reach us here.

“The threat is over. In addition, it is my duty to inform you that, in these dark times, two others met their end. You’ll recall General Disarray—‘and cue the town’s disapproval, ‘and Professor Chaos.’” Butters, from his position in the audience, tried not to wince. Not far from where he, Craig, Henrietta and the Goths stood, I saw Red, looking up at where we stood, fully captivated. “Both of these villains met their end in R’lyeh.”

“Professor Chaos and General Disarray are gone?!” I heard someone, clearly a reporter, call out from the lawn.

“They are,” I confirmed. “Their final acts took place in R’lyeh, and you will see neither of them again. However,” I added before the applause could grow too high after that, “I need to mention that the Cult of Cthulhu may still pose somewhat of a threat. Those imprisoned during the crisis are to remain behind bars, and further Cult activities will be investigated and immediately stopped. Though the Dark Gods they worshipped are now dead, it’s sometimes humanity that can do more damage than any supernatural being.

“But it’s also humanity that can do the most good. I hope you all listened when your mayor acknowledged the certain groups that provided aid during the crisis. The Shadow League will always be here, to do what we can for the good of this town, but don’t underestimate the value of the community here.

“In a way,” I finished—and this was a line the team of us had debated, but one that we knew would remain whispered around the town for some time to come—“everyone has the potential to be a hero.”

Once again, we were met with deafening applause. I took a step back to stand in line with the rest of the League, where we stood firm, resolved, and accomplished. The crisis was officially over. We had made our closing statement to the town. Things could now slowly work their way back to normal, and we would keep our eyes on everything. That was our duty.

Out of the ten questions the reporters in attendance were allowed to ask, four of them were, “Who are you?” Which we were pretty glad for, since it meant we got to skip four questions and only answer six. One of them ended up being, “How did Professor Chaos and General Disarray die?”

To answer that, I phrased it, “General Disarray was killed by Nyarlathotep, and Professor Chaos met his end thanks to some of the heroes in the League.” We could not call Chaos ‘dead,’ so finding other ways to talk about his actual ending were a little difficult, but we managed.

One of the questions was hard to answer, which was, “Could the insanity come back?” We had no answer, so Mosquito told everyone to rest assured that we would continue to look into it, but also affirmed that there would be no more immediate threats from R’lyeh, now or ever again. Another reporter asked if we knew of anyone in particular to thank, so I was glad that was eaten up as a question as well, since I was going to thank the people like Craig, Henrietta and Red at the end
of it all anyway. Another asked who had led the Cthulhu Cult and if he posed a threat (McElroy; dead; no; thank God, though I didn’t add that last part), and another if we knew of other members. For that one, the answer we decided on was to have them contact either the mayor or Sergeant Yates in order to get in touch with us if anyone was actually serious about keeping an eye out for Cultist activity.

The final question was, “Why do you call yourselves the Shadow League?”

To which I answered, after conferring with the group, “Keep your eyes on the shadows, and you can decide for yourselves.”

We met again briefly with the mayor afterward, before she had to rush off to another meeting, and I broke off from the group once we’d decided we had done all we needed to do for the evening. The others admitted to wanting to head out and check on the various parts of town, especially after the mentions of keeping our eyes out for further Cult activity, so they broke off into the usual pairs—Toolshed and the Human Kite, TupperWear and Marpesia, Mosquito and the Coon, Iron Maiden and Red Serge, with the Guardian Angel on solo watch—and took to the town.

This was our city, and we were going to continue to do whatever we could to keep it safe. Just as we’d promised, just as we knew we always would, in whatever way we chose.

I fully planned on heading out on my own patrol later as well, but first, there was just one more loose end for me to tie up that evening. I watched from the roof of the town hall as the crowd dispersed, content to see everyone heading home and going about their lives, all of them content now that they had been fully reassured that South Park was, presently, safe from harm, and that the League was still out on watch.

And then, I locked onto her. Red glanced around, probably looking for me or Karen, but, seeing neither of us, she took out her cell phone, sent a fast message, and went on her way back home.

I slipped along behind and beside her, keeping to the darker paths and shortcuts I knew so well. My heart was pounding, and every time I caught sight of her, my breath stalled. I couldn’t go back. I’d made her a promise—I’d made myself a promise—that, dammit, I was going to keep. No matter what happened.

Once within sight of her house, I went along ahead of her, and obscured myself as best I now could in the shadow the roof cast over the front door. Red glanced around as if she’d heard or seen something, then extracted her little pink phone from her thin-strapped purse to check her messages. I saw her type in a quick text as she made her way inside, and heard her call out a hello to her parents. Quietly, I ducked around to the other side of the building, and scaled the drainpipe to her roof, then swung down to land on Red’s bedroom windowsill. I nudged the window open, and slipped inside just as she was entering the room and turning on a small lamp that sat on a bookshelf beside her door, next to which she set her phone after studying it another second.

“Hello, Red,” I said, keeping up Mysterion’s tone.

Red drew in a gasp and promptly dropped her purse, then, without taking her eyes off of me, closed her door and pressed her back up against it. I stepped off of the windowsill, so that I was half-visible in the light from the small lamp, and Red took a moment to study me before finally saying, her gorgeous blue eyes going wide, “Oh, my God. Hello. Um, again. M-Mysterion…?”
In response I said nothing. I had to wait for the right moment. It had to happen. Now. Tonight. To prepare myself, I stood straight back, squaring my shoulders to keep up my courage, and let Red get a good, long look at me. She’d told me before that she’d always found Mysterion fascinating, that she admired the things he did, and that she wished more people would follow his example.

So, hopefully, she could forgive me for all the half-truths I’d been telling her.

“That, um—that was an incredible thing you did,” Red ventured to say. “What the mayor just congratulated you for. You’re amazing. I-I mean, the League is amazing. You saved us. So… thank you.” It was with effort that I suppressed a smile. “But, what are you doing here?” she then wondered. Red glanced around nervously, looking around for signs of danger. “Why are you at my house?”

She tucked her hair behind her ear and stepped away from her door. After a second of hesitation, she turned on the main light of the room, so that I no longer had a shadow to hide within. Which was exactly the way I wanted it. “You totally didn’t have to thank me, though,” she said, flushed with embarrassment and modesty to the point that she stared down at her feet. “I mean, that was really nice and stuff. But, like, really, why’re you here? Sorry I keep talking, I’m just kind of nervous.”

“That’s all right,” I told her. “I’m not here on any official business. I’m just bringing a message. One that should have found its way to you a while ago, but better late than never.”

“What kind of message?” Red wondered. “Why me?”

That was it. That was my moment.

“I have something to tell you,” I said, which got Red to look right at me again. I let her take another good look, wondering if she’d snap to the conclusion on her own. But I didn’t want to stand there and wait for her to figure it out. It was my duty to let her know. It was her right to hear it from me. “Or rather,” I decided on adding, “your boyfriend does.”

Red’s eyebrows knit in confusion, and she dropped her hands to her sides, only to clasp them together and start fidgeting. “Kenny?” she wondered. The confusion told me that she hadn’t made the connection herself; she was wondering what the connection could possibly be.

So I took in a deep breath, and then, with no more room for hesitation, I pulled off my mask and slid back my hood. And, as Red’s expression went from confused to stunned, I answered, back in my normal tone, “Yeah.”

Red’s bewilderment prompted her to blurt right out, “Oh, my God! Kenny!”

And then I was instantly nervous. I could keep calm and cool as Mysterion, I could be suave as I wanted as myself…but so deliberately blurring the line between myself and my alter ego, in front of my girlfriend, made me feel more exposed than I’d anticipated I would. Then again, I couldn’t call her reactions, and I was trying to figure out how she felt about the whole thing.

I did feel bad. I felt awful about lying to her all the time, about dying on her with no explanation—or her recollection—and about keeping my secret identity, uh…secret. So I got nervous; scared, even. I held Red’s gaze, hoping to see something other than shock, and felt only the need to apologize.

Slipping the black mask into my utility belt, I began, “Hey… baby… um…”
The corners of Red’s mouth twitched upward like she wanted to smile, and she took a wary step closer to me. I attempted a little smile myself, basically just praying that this wasn’t the prelude to a breakup. Which I did worry about. I mean, the long and short of it was: I’d lied to her. Or, stretched the truth pretty far. But I’d worked so damn hard to keep Red as my girlfriend, I wasn’t about to lose her now that I wasn’t going to die all the time. So my heart sank when she shirked back, then lifted again right up into my throat when she stepped even closer. Her eyes surveyed me, head to toe and back again. “You’re…?” she started in.

“Yeah,” I answered. Scared of all the possible negative outcomes, I began rambling. “Um… I wanted to tell you, but I just… couldn’t, at least not during the whole crisis. But you do deserve to know, so… that’s… why I’m telling you, right now. Um… please don’t hate me. I just really—”

Before I could go on with whatever inane rant was about to spill from my mouth, Red, her eyes wide and starting to get misty, jumped me. Without a word, she latched her arms around my neck and didn’t let go. Stunned, my hands found her waist and I pulled her in. With a second thought, I yanked my gloves off, chucked them to the floor, and gripped my girlfriend tightly, feeling her heart beat through her whole body, stroking her back to try to help her regulate her staggered, shocked breaths.

And for a while, we just stood there, holding each other, breathing together, wondering what would come next.

“I’m sorry,” I finally heard myself saying to her. I’d been thinking it the whole time, and finally the words manifested. I tightened my grip with my right hand around her waist, and brought my left up to wind into her hair. I combed my fingers through a few times, loving that texture, loving how comforting the action felt. “I did want you to know,” I repeated, pulling back so I could look her again in the eyes. “So, if this… you know, if you have any… um… wow… sorry, this is all sounding a lot lamer than it did in my head earlier. But…”

Red laughed, then unhooked her grip so that she could run her nimble fingers across the durable, sleek fabrics of my uniform. Her expression still one of shock, but now mixed with wonder and even admiration, she played with the folds of my cape, and the way it rested on my shoulders, then ran her right hand down my chest, pausing when she touched upon the symbolic green M. “I’ve been… dating Mysterion…?” she said, looking up at me yet again.

I sucked in a more confident breath, and got myself to grin. So far, this was working out. “Yeah…”

“Oh, my God.” Red was smiling brightly, but she blinked out a couple of nervous tears. She wasn’t really crying, nor did she look at all sad. Just amazed, and beautiful. “You’re Mysterion. Kenny, you’re Mysterion.”

“Are… are you okay with it…?” I wondered. It was seeming likely that she was, but my nerves wouldn’t leave until the last second.

“Okay with it?” Red repeated, as if I’d said something absurd. A cooling breeze rushed in through the window, then, as my girlfriend clung to the front of my uniform with both hands, close to my heart. When the breeze died down, I swept her hair out of her face, then lost myself almost completely when she caught my gaze and said, with no room for doubt or debate, “Kenny, I am so proud of you.”

“You’re what?”

I could not remember anyone having ever told me that before. My parents sure as hell
hadn’t. In the moment, I couldn’t remember if Karen had ever said such a thing, or any of my friends, or what, but this really resonated. “I’m really, really proud of you,” Red repeated, which made me fall in love with her all over again. “Kenny, you just… God, everything Mysterion ever did, that was you. That was you, sweetie, you have given people so much hope, and a name and symbol to rally behind and just… I can’t believe it. Kenny, putting so many people ahead of yourself, doing so much good, I don’t care if it comes from an alter ego or what; it’s you. I am so lucky I have you.”

“You, too,” I told her. I grinned, and bent to kiss the corner of her right eye as I continued, “Look at what you can do. Without the mask, baby. You’re incredible.”

“Oh, don’t make this about me!” she laughed. “You’re Mysterion. Own it.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” I said, smiling as I brushed back her hair again, smoothing it back and taking a good, indulgent look at the girl who’d helped restore my faith in life.

Red looked me over again as well, her shock having been subdued over the last couple minutes, but the admiration there… seemingly permanently. “I’m not saying the things you do aren’t dangerous—“ she said, “I mean, that is some seriously crazy risky business, but what you do, I just, like… I can’t even wrap my head around it. I am so, so proud of you.” Red’s tone softened when she finished, “I’m really glad I didn’t lose you, too.

“Can I just ask you one question?” she asked, downcasting her eyes as she traced her fingers along my uniform again.

“Hmm?”

“I, um… I kept having weird dreams during the crisis, and—okay, so, now I can ask and it won’t be as weird, I think.” She drew in a deep breath, and asked, “Kenny, you’re a superhero, right?”

“I guess.”

“You guess,” Red laughed. “Do you have any, you know, powers?”

I couldn’t lie. “Not anymore,” I told her.

“What do you mean?”

“I used to be like Cthulhu and them,” I admitted. “I couldn’t die.”

“Oh,” said Red. “But you did, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“It still kinda just feels like I dreamed it, but a few times lately I just kept getting the feeling like I’ve lost you before,” my girlfriend said, resting her head on my shoulder. “That’s really sad, Kenny. Sweetie, that must’ve been really lonely. I’m so sorry.”

I hugged her tightly, and said, “I used to die all the time. I can’t believe you remember—“

“I dunno if I remember as much as I just kinda know. Please tell me you’re not gonna die again, though.”

“I’m not,” I told her proudly. “Not for a long, long time.”
Red lifted her head, took hold of my uniform, and pulled me down to match her height. “Good,” she smiled. “This town needs you, Mysterion.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmhmm.” Her smile spread to a broad grin, though, as my girlfriend nuzzled up to me and said, “But now they’ve gotta take you out on loan from me.”

“Oh, is that how it’s going to work?” I said.

“Mmhmm.”

“Fine by me.”

I set my left hand on her waist, cradled her against me, and then, for the first time as Mysterion, kissed my girlfriend, deeply, boldly, full of pride, and gratitude, and sheer relief for knowing that things were falling into better place than I had ever, ever anticipated.

I pulled back after a crackle from my earpiece, and I held up my index finger to ease Red’s confusion while I listened in. “Mysterion?” Toolshed’s voice came over the wire. “You still active? We’ve got a break-in.”

“What?” I wondered, snapping immediately back into Mysterion’s tone. I felt my eyes narrow, as business took precedent. “Where?”

“Town hall,” said Toolshed. “While the mayor was out, some of those Apocalypse wackjobs broke in to loot, and they’ve got a hostage.”

“You’re our best negotiator,” TupperWear added. “We and the police are only doing so much.”

“Toolshed’s gonna break in around the back,” Human Kite cut in, “but—”

“Just get your ass down here,” the Coon finished.

“All right,” I said, “I’m on my way.”

That agreed, I straightened, then looked down at my girlfriend, who had her hands cupped over her mouth in absolute awe, her eyes wide and brilliant and blue as summer. I grinned, grabbed my mask out of my utility belt, and said, “Sorry,” in my normal tone as I tied the black fabric into place.

“What for?” said Red, setting her hands on my chest again. “If you’ve gotta go, then… y’know…”

“I’ll be back, though,” I promised her.

Red just smiled, then bent down, picked up a couple things I’d almost completely forgotten about, then stood again and said, “Don’t forget your gloves.”

Satisfied beyond belief, I grinned and took the gloves from her. I slid them on quickly, then grabbed my girlfriend around the waist, and kissed her one more time, quickly, before stepping back. I took a last look at her, loving the fact that now I had nothing to worry about. No sneaking around with my double life needed. No more lies. No more constant death. Just Red; just me and her.
Slipping back into my affected tone for Mysterion, I said, “See you.”

Red held one hand up in a small wave, still beautiful in her state of awe.

And so, I took a few steps back, threw up my hood to shroud the rest of my face, then turned, tossing my dark cape out around me, and slipped away, out the window and into the shadows.

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*One Month Later*

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The morning of my seventeenth birthday was bright but freezing.

I forced the warm sheets off of me, though, rose, showered, and dressed to find that my sister had already prepared for her day, and was starting up a fresh pot of coffee. Our move to the base had been swift and easy. Red, Wendy, Shelly Marsh and Jenny Harrison had all given Karen sets of their hand-me-downs, which Karen had taken happily as gifts (for which she paid with baked goods). She’d been doing pretty well in school, though every time she came home with test or quiz anxiety I’d remember my own anxieties from calling her school in Salt Lake for transfer grades.

Breakfast was my sister’s favorite time of day, since on the weekends she’d been working brunch shifts (under the table, since she was only thirteen, for a friend of Red’s mom) at a café that was thriving pretty well after the crisis, and here and there she’d pick up tips from the cooks that she’d want to try out at home. I walked in that morning to the mixed aromas of eggs, bacon, toast and coffee, which served much better than alarms ever did in waking me up.

“Hey, sis,” I greeted her. “Smells awesome in here.”

“Kenny!” Karen exclaimed, flying up to me with arms outstretched. “Happy birthday!” She wound her skinny arms around me in a tight, proud hug; I laughed and grabbed her in. This was the first time in years that I’d been with my sister on either of our birthdays.

“Thanks, Karen,” I grinned.

“Got anything fun planned?” she wondered when she pulled back to start serving up the morning spread.

“Not that I know of,” I laughed. “Last year the guys kidnapped me and took me to Hooters.”

“Ugh, that’s gross. Kenny, you and your friends are gross.”

“We’re guys,” I said, pouring a mug of coffee. “When you get a boyfriend, you’ll get us a little more.”

Karen rolled her eyes. “I can’t wait.”

She admitted to having a tiny crush on Gary Harrison’s younger brother, David, once, and I hadn’t let her live it down. Now that the Harrisons were back in town, too, I teased her even more. Having her around was, well, for lack of a better word, vital. It was nice to wake up and have family around.

We’d heard nothing from our parents or brother, and didn’t expect to again. It didn’t bother us; we had our lives. As long as Karen was happy, I was happy, and the same went for her.
Token called over to offer us a ride in the morning, which was always appreciated, even if that brought us to the high school early, since Karen had an earlier schedule in middle school than we did. But I never minded being slightly more than on time, and the ride sure as hell beat walking. I kept telling Karen that one of these days I’d get a car, so that she could have one of her own once I went off to college, but it wasn’t the biggest concern.

Though early, Token and I weren’t alone at school for very long; the crowds started filtering in, and Token was the first of my friends to wish me happy birthday, followed by his girlfriend, Wendy, early in her own right for her school newspaper meeting. The two of them then shared a kiss good morning (the Black-Testaburger couple was one of the most talked about among the girls recently, second only to Bridon Gueremo and his girlfriend Nelly; my own girlfriend and I had long since lost our title of ‘new annoying couple’), congratulated me again, and were on their way after walking with me down to my locker.

The damn thing was getting kind of cluttered again, but I didn’t care. I shoved textbooks I didn’t need out of the way in order to hang my coat, and retrieve my highlighted copy of *The Great Gatsby* for English that day; we were due for a review. By the time I closed my door, the hallways were really filling up, so I began my look around for the usual suspects…

“Hey, yo, Kenny!” I turned just in time to receive a punch on the shoulder from Clyde Donovan, who, dressed to kill in his vote-winning (running for Senior class president already, that guy) green letterman and grinning too broadly for his own good, announced, “One to grow on, dude!”

“Oh,” I feigned. “What happened to the other seventeen?”

“Wanted to make sure I got that one in first,” Clyde said. I managed to laugh, and I appreciated the sentiment behind his seemingly normal statement.

Clyde and I crushed knuckles together. “Thanks, man,” I got out, before he perked his head up and turned upon being summoned by his lovely girlfriend, Bebe Stevens, from down the hall. Bebe cast me a smile as well, and called over a happy birthday, which I nodded a thanks to her for.

“Keep on keepin’ on, Kenny,” Clyde said as he departed. Pointing back at me as he linked arms with Bebe, he added, “See ya tonight.”

“Yeah, see—“ I began, before I realized, tonight?! Dude, again? What gives?”

But Clyde was gone, his girlfriend securely latched to his right arm. Clyde had a habit of melting around her now—the two were no longer autonomous in school or in crowds, but clung to each other like newlyweds; at any given time of day, Bebe could be seen grooming her boyfriend’s hair, or lounging against him in the library as the two pretended to study. Since learning about Clyde’s involvement in the League, Bebe had sparked her own interest in helping out. Also part of the school newspaper, as well as the yearbook (though she had promised nothing League-related would show up there in terms of identity giveaways), she’d taken to passing information along with Wendy or Clyde if she happened to overhear anything. And Bebe Stevens sure had an ear for overhearing just the right thing.

I hadn’t gone two steps down the hall before someone yanked me aside and delivered a harsh noogie to the top of my head, fucking up my already sister-tousled hair even further. “Kenny!” Stan’s exuberant high baritone was unmistakable, and the added bright near-laugh in his tone was becoming more characteristic of him by the day. He drilled his knuckles in further, and commented, “Seventeen, dude! How’s it feel?”
“Painful, now,” I joked at him.

“Oh, my God,” came the only voice I’d expect to follow his. “Stan, you’re turning into a serial hair fetishist, I swear to God. Sorry, Kenny. How’s it going?”

With a firm pull, Kyle dislodged Stan from around me and held his arms forcefully down. Jeez… those two. Stan Marsh: still my locker neighbor, an all-around great guy, and a protective, doting partner to his boyfriend, Kyle Broflovski: still valedictorian even after the insanity, now matched with me in height, and now, I can easily say, one of the most confident guys I know, as well as one of the most selfless. No doubt about it, those two are family to me, and I wouldn’t trade either of them for anything.

“It’s all good,” I laughed, once Stan had been successfully subdued. The two each flashed a grin, and flanked me on either side as I continued down the hall. “So, uh, what the fuck gives on this new secret birthday thing?”

“What secret what thing?” Kyle asked, making it obvious with his tone that something was definitely up.

“Who let you in on the clever plan this time?” Stan asked, as if I’d been led into the interrogation room at Park County. He prodded my arm with the jab of one index finger. “Was it Clyde? It was Clyde.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t say anything.”

“Okay, good,” Kyle laughed.

“What are you planning? I may have had plans with Red, you know.”

“Cancel ’em, this is better,” Stan grinned.

“Can’t be double-booked, dudes, sorry,” I said, shrugging overdramatically.

“Double-booked with what?” Okay, now my morning had started. Standing just outside the room I had to enter for first period was the cutest, brightest, and bravest young woman I have ever had the pleasure to call my girlfriend. Red: sweet, fearless; the girl who knows my secrets, the one who’ll keep them, the one—hey, who knows? Maybe just plain the one.

I grinned and scooped her up into my arms, thus lifting her about five inches off the ground. Red laughed and jokingly kicked at the air, but she couldn’t escape. I planted a kiss on her as I set her back down, leaning in to compensate for our height difference, and said, ‘Mornin’, baby, how’re you?”

“Awake, now,” she teased. She worked her fingers up into my scarf and held me in, saying, “Happy birthday, Kenny.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“Why are you wearing a scarf inside?” she wondered.

“Cold neck,” I shrugged. The truth was, I’d forgotten about it. But I got the result I’d wanted—Red kept holding me down, then nudged down the scarf and nuzzled up against my neck. Her citrus-scented hair brushed right up against my skin to give me an invigorating whiff, and I pulled her up closer. Morning routine had never felt so fucking great.
“Okay, we lost him,” I heard Kyle say, jokingly, from behind me.

“Rendered incapable of intelligent speech by the ways and wiles of the finer sex!” Stan added, overdramatizing.

“You have got to stop reading bad Renaissance poetry,” Kyle scolded him.

“I can’t, it’s homework, and you told me to study more.”

“Oh, God.”

Red started laughing as well, and shot the two of them a look, and said, “Do you mind?” I shifted to grab Red in from the side, and gave the guys my own lighthearted, nothing-doing glare.

“We’re out,” Stan grinned. “Later, dude.”

“We will see you tonight, Kenny,” Kyle added.

“That a threat?” I asked, resting my head on Red’s.

“You decide!” And with that, they were off, leaving me to enjoy the rest of the morning—before the bell, of course—talking about nothing of consequence with my girlfriend.

We selected a spot at the end of a row of lockers to stand locked together, where she mentioned that she had something nice in mind for us that evening, but she wouldn’t tell me what it was. As the day went on, I began to wonder if maybe my girlfriend wasn’t even in on something with the others, but I tried not to think of it.

At the end of the day, Karen called me to ask if I could walk her home before I started in on any plans for the evening. Since I was leaving with Red, my girlfriend offered to, instead, give my sister a ride, as long as she was fine with stopping for gas and a couple of things Red remembered she needed to pick up along the way. Once at the base, Karen pleaded for Red to come inside so she could show her the new things she’d done to her bedroom, and Red agreed, saying that she and I had time to kill before dinner anyway.

So I should have figured: we’d wasted enough time on the drive back for someone else to have driven straight there. And, oh, not just someone. Everyone. Clyde even opened the damn door for us.

“You planned this!” I scolded Red and Karen.

“Oh, just get inside!” Red laughed, pushing me from behind.

The common room was full of life. A couple of side tables had been brought in and stocked up with food, and a large brown envelope lay on the sofa with my name printed on it in my sister’s clever calligraphy. The moment Red had pushed me in, the room erupted into a multi-tonal chorus, all chanting: “Happy birthday, Kenny!”

“You guys suck,” I laughed, glancing around at everyone. “Thanks. This is seriously awesome.”

The entire League was in attendance, which included Craig Tucker, still alter ego-less, but an asset all the same; Marjorine, too, was there, and even Henrietta had been convinced to tag along,
somehow, though the Goth girl still wasn’t exuberant enough to show a black-lipped smile. “Did we outdo ourselves from last year?” Stan just had to ask, as Clyde administered the first of the rest of the seventeen punches he owed me.

“Sine I have a girlfriend, yes,” I said. Even then, though. It didn’t matter where the hell we were, I just loved having any excuse to hang around with these guys. With the team I was proud to lead; the family I was glad I’d discovered.

“Don’t be mad,” said Red, hugging me around the waist and nuzzling up against my shoulder, “but this was my plan for tonight.”

“I had a feeling,” I grinned. I leaned down to kiss her, thank her, and kiss her again, and so the evening had finally started.

We let Henrietta choose the music, since we figured there should be something, even though none of us ever really listened when there was music in the background, so the solution was to keep the Goth happy… or whatever the Goth version of happy is. For a while, it was all just us hanging out, breaking off into groups, as is known to happen at parties, and passing around one flask of vodka that Clyde had managed to procure (though Craig argued he could find better), which was the source of the little joking conversation that got us inevitably talking about League-related things.

I had a tiny buzz when Cartman asked, “Dude, so, like, can you still control shadows, or is that all gone?”

“No, see, the Shadow is gone,” I said, “but I can totally still control shadows. Watch.” I held one hand up with my index and middle fingers extended upward to make a shadow puppet of a rabbit on the wall. “Check it out.” I made another. “You watching?” I ticked just one hand in a thrusting move to make them fuck.

“That is so not funny at all,” Karen scolded me, while Red, in agreement, patted one hand sternly against my back.

“Oh, come on, yes it is. If you can’t look back and laugh…”

“I know, I know.”

But from there, discussion did move into us as a League, for which we formed a large circle on the floor, and which Red, from her position directly next to me, listened to intently. She always got the cutest look on her face whenever I’d have to go off on duty, or whenever she heard me or any of the guys talking about something pertaining to our nightly activities. She respected the separation of my night and day life, though, and never prodded me to see Mysterion or anything, though I could tell she was sometimes thinking it.

There was nothing huge on our plates as of now, but our efforts were focused on seeing all remaining Cult activities stopped, since the crazies that were a part of that group refused to believe that Cthulhu and R’lyeh were gone. There will always be the diehards, but if we could stop them before they could do any damage, then we’d be doing our job right. It had been decided that we’d try to start tracking down artifacts having to do with R’lyeh and the Old Ones; Wendy brought up, at one point, that we should probably check out Arkham and Miskatonic, off in Massachusetts, since that was where the largest collection of artifacts were held, which I remembered well from that eighth grade field trip. We’d start locally, though, and then see what kinds of measures would need to be taken elsewhere.

Karen and Red slipped away to make dinner while the rest of us continued to talk missions
and patrols, and once served, the feast they served up was the only thing that could have possibly taken our minds off of our League work. Marjorine and Wendy had prepared cupcakes ahead of time, too; bourbon and vanilla-frosted, too, they were amazing.

From the small window above the TV in the living room, I could see that the sun had completely disappeared from the sky, and I was just itching to take a walk outside, since being at the base always made me want to skulk out at night, if even just for a quick walk as myself rather than Mysterion. I asked Red if she wanted to head out with me, but I was overheard, and there were a few whispers about whatever was in the envelope.

“Actually,” said my girlfriend, “I think you should open that first.”

“Yeah?” Activity in the room ceased; Kyle picked up the envelope and passed it to Stan, who passed it on to me. “What is it?” I asked him.

“Well…” said Stan, “do whatever you want with it. Henrietta mentioned it, and we all figured you should have it. Anything you want to do with it, dude, but it’s all your choice.”

Inside the large brown envelope was a book. A very dusty old book, bound in leather, written in Latin. The Necronomicon. The one I had stolen from the museum in Denver in eighth grade, the one I had given to Henrietta. The book that had allowed me to discover a path from Purgatory to R'lyeh, which in turn had allowed me to save Stan’s soul and allow him to live as well. The book that had told us about Yog-Sothoth, about the Gate. About Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, and the End Time. About the Shadow, and about the two couplets.

The book that had started everything.

I was glad the guys had given that to me. I hadn’t even really been thinking about it, but now that I had it in my hands, I wanted to give it a proper end. The threats were gone. If we were going to start destroying all of the artifacts having to do with the Old Ones around us… I wanted to start with this one. It had gotten me only as far as I had needed it to. But my Immortality had ended. Cthulhu and his Shadow were long gone.

“I want to burn it,” I decided.

“You sure about that, dude?” Clyde asked. I nodded.

“It could be a collector’s item,” Henrietta warned.

“Which means it could turn into something coveted,” I said. “No. Items placed in the rare category are too tempting for collectors… especially Cultists who are collectors. People will kill for things they want bad enough. I don’t want this thing to exist. My curse doesn’t exist anymore, so neither does this.” Looking around at my friends, all of whom were backing me one hundred per cent, I said, “Let’s do it right now, guys. Let’s get rid of it. You in?”

The others consented that they were, so I suggested we grab our coats and head out to the field to build a proper funeral pyre for the damned thing.

We built the bonfire in the sunken pit that had been left from the pressure of the Gate portal the month before. The stones that could easily have entombed me were set up in a circle around the pit, and when we’d gathered enough wood, Henrietta struck her tinderbox to light the first spark. I fanned the flames with my hands, while the others added kindling in the form of smaller twigs. Craig poked around at the firewood in order to incite a larger blaze, and just as Karen was tossing dead leaves into the mix, the fire flared up.
Everyone stood back, and for several minutes, we all just watched the fire rise. It licked at
the air around us, hissing heat into our faces and melting away the late March mountain snow at our
feet. Quietly, Red stepped up beside me, and took a gentle hold of my right arm, then rested her
head against my shoulder. Karen stood in front of me as if to protect all three of us from what used
to lie beyond that circle of sledgehammer-massacred stones. I took another minute to reflect… on
what lay behind, in the flames, and what lay ahead, right there beside me.

I took a glance around. Red and Marjorine were outliers, but the rest of us: we were the
Shadow League. No more name changes; that one’s here to stay. The Shadow League. We still
had plenty of jobs to do, crises that we would inevitably have to overcome. Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep,
and R’lyeh may no longer have been threats, but there was no telling what could lie on the paths
ahead.

Whatever came, though, we’d be ready. No matter what.

Henrietta handed me the dusty old *Necronomicon*. When I held it in my hands, I recalled the
night I’d stolen it from the museum. This had been one hell of a long journey, but I’d overcome
everything, and made it out alive. Now, I’ve got one death left. But it is going to wait. It’s going to
wait until I’ve done everything I know I can do.

“You sure this is what you want to do with that?” Henrietta asked me, her signature Goth
sass coming out even in such a loaded question.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m sure. We come across any others, guys, we do the same exact thing.
No more of this book. You guys ready?”

I looked back at the guys for full approval. Finally, after a moment, Stan said, “Go for it,
Kenny.”

“Burn it good,” Marjorine added.

I took a deep breath, and stepped up to the bonfire. The book felt heavier than it should
have in my hands; I closed my eyes and felt the heat of the fire on me. As a final sort of internal
séance to really let it all go, I let the words roll out in my mind:

That is not dead which can eternal lie

And with strange aeons, even death may die.

But call to death with rite to give

Death to the Immortal;

“The right to live,” I whispered. “So this is the start.”

I threw the *Necronomicon* onto the bonfire.

The flames danced over it, as its centuries of existence popped and hissed into ashes. Slowly,
its old yellowed pages crumbled and almost seemed to scream in the body of the fire, black blazing
into brilliant red and orange and yellow and then black again, reborn as ash, soot, dust. And then
nothing.

I stepped away from the bonfire.

The flames did not reach for me, or pose any threat. No near-accidents had found me over
the past month. I could breathe easily. The final reminder of my curse was destroyed, and I stood
by, lungs clean and full of fresh air. Fully alive, fully ready to take a step back and discover
everything my life could be.

One by one, my friends, my League, tossed or kicked snow onto the bonfire to help put it
out, then began to head back inside. Token and Wendy—TupperWear and Marpesia, followed by
Ike and Timmy—Red Serge and Iron Maiden. Next to head back in were Craig and Henrietta, and
then, after whispering a little thank you, Marjorine, who had been dropping several hints lately that
she wanted to join the League, if we’d take her. My girlfriend kissed my cheek and walked with my
sister, Karen, the Guardian Angel, back in to keep away from the cold.

Leaving me out there, watching the embers, with the three who’d been there from the
beginning. Cartman, the Coon, who had been proving more loyal, not to mention more in favor of
the ‘Shadow League’ title now than ever. Stan, Toolshed, the first to have remembered my deaths,
the one with whom I’d shared an unplanned but eye-opening trip to R’lyeh. And Kyle, the Human
Kite, whose focus and determination continued to provide our best modes of attack and defense.
More than just League partners, though, those three, I knew, were the ones I could always count on
to have my back, no matter what, no matter where I was in life. And I had theirs in return.

“Glad it’s over, Kenny?” Cartman asked, kicking some snow onto the dead fire.

“Yeah,” I said. I stared at the remains of the bonfire, and watched the final disintegration of
the Necronomicon in my mind’s eye. “That was one hell of a mission, guys. How’re you all
feeling, now it’s over?”

“Eh,” Cartman shrugged. “It was pretty kickass, what we got to do in R’lyeh, but,” he said,
stretching a little, “I’m fuckin’ glad we get to take a damn break.”

uh…” I wiggled my fingers around beside my temple, “you know?”

“Quirk setoffs? Nah, not really,” Kyle answered.

“The lights flickered in Chemistry yesterday,” Stan said encouragingly.

“It was windy,” said Kyle. He could pretend all he wanted, but he did sound hopeful.
“Anyway, I’m glad the whole thing’s over, too. And, dude, Kenny, seriously. Happy birthday. I’m
glad you get to have one.”

“Yeah, dude,” Stan agreed. “Feel like I’ve been saying it for months, but honest to God, you
deserve it.”

“Thanks, guys.” Facing the three of them, I felt myself grin, and I said, “Really. Thanks for
not giving up on me. You guys did some crazy shit for this League. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Kay, dude, don’t have to kiss ass,” said Cartman. “I’mma head back in, I’m still hungry.”

“Go ahead,” I laughed. “I’ll be in, I just want another minute.”

“We’ll head in, too,” Kyle said. “I’m getting kinda cold.”

“Wear thicker jackets,” Stan smirked, rapidly rubbing his hands against Kyle’s upper arms to
create friction. Turning to me, he said, “See you inside, dude. Don’t catch hypothermia or
anything.”
“Not planning on it, especially on my birthday,” I told him. “Thanks again, guys. You’re seriously the best. I’m not gonna stop saying that.”

“Whatever, dude.” All the same, we exchanged a three-way hug. It was just as much our own form of celebration as anything. We had all made it, and none of us were leaving anyone else behind. None of us were leaving that experience or the Shadow League behind.

When the two stepped back, they both said, “Happy birthday, Kenny.” Then we agreed to bring the energy up again once we were all together in the base, and Stan and Kyle made their way, as a unit, back inside.

I, too, was getting cold, but I looked over the bonfire dregs one more time. I glanced up at the stars, to warn whatever other Old Ones, or whatever were left, not to show themselves around us ever again, and then down at the pit that had once been our portal to the Gate of R’lyeh. Shadows surrounded me, but none moved.

It was a fight that had begun when I was nine years old. When I had first decided to don an alter ego, when I had first learned about Cthulhu, the Cult, and my Immortality. Over the years, I had collected information, delved into the world that held every last secret to what I was, and accepted my fate as a cursed Immortal. I had become Cthulhu’s Shadow.

I had come out whole.

The End Time was a threat of the past. So I turned my back on the bonfire, and walked away from the reminder of a life plagued with death, and made my way back into the base. Our base. Where the Shadow League would continue to begin operations whenever we were needed. Into the warmth, the light, my life and livelihood.

Life continues on. Birthdays will come and go. But there is one fact that stands which keeps me out of the mediocre, out of anything fully predictable and routine.

I was Mysterion. I am Mysterion. I will always be Mysterion.

Keep your eyes on the shadows.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

End Notes
This series utilizes four narrators: Kenny, Stan, Kyle and Butters.

Originally written between 2010-2012, with help and collaboration from Rosie Denn, posted here beginning June 2011. I'll try to re-upload it here as fast as I can. Thank you for reading! :3

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