### Ars Moriendi

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### Summary

On the Tribunal's analysis, Charles Foster Offdensen is a sinister and secretive cult leader hidden behind the face of Dethklok. On the surface there seems to be no trace left of his former self, having been systematically erased - but something must have come before.

Long-form in two timelines that run parallel, as Offdensen, entrenched in a very dark period of his life and marked by loss, takes on a frivolous and unwinnable copyright case for the emotionally constipated Dethklok, and three years later as Dethklok first starts to realise its real power upon moving into Mordhaus - and with it, its enemies.

**Chapter 27: Cui Prodest Scelus Is Fecit - For Whom The Crime Advances, He Has Done It** (The Gears / Magnus' Evidence Part 2)

### Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#).
Exordium

From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back.  
That is the point that must be reached.

- FRANZ KAFKA

* * * * *

YEAR NINE

In the dim chambers of the Tribunal, the vast presentation screens lit up one by one, cutting out the senator’s silhouette against the light. He raised his placid gaze on the gathered men as the screen assembled behind him.

“A matter at hand, gentlemen: Charles Foster Offdensen, Dethklok’s manager, has increasingly withdrawn from the public over the last twelve months,” he explained as the screens danced behind him with a plummeting Mordhaus, the vast pyre of their downed man. “This has been the cause of some concern within the project - as we’ve observed previously, this man acts as something of a barometer for the state of Dethklok overall. Here to explain more is Professor Periya Malaippāmpu of Pāmpukaḷāl Uyar Kalvi Palkalaikkaḷakam, expert on cult activities and malignant career psychopathy.”

The senator stepped aside to allow the professor to take the stage, an angular, wizened dark-skinned man with a shock of white beard, his accent shadowed by the gravity of his words as he spoke quickly, urgently, to the patient Tribunal. The screen behind him was shadowed by an image of the band on stage, frozen in time for examination.

“Gentlemen, behind every great band is a great manager, and for Dethklok that is Charles Foster Offdensen, renowned businessman and law scholar. If the band themselves represent the worshipped face, the time ticking down to doomsday, then Offdensen is the mechanism: the helm of an incredibly complex system of machinations that keep the vast cult of Dethklok running.”

The professor’s face creased with the seriousness of his speech as the image behind him shifted, a dark colossus of Offdensen’s visage looming over the band, his hands held in a protective, possessive frame around them. “Now, I don’t use that term lightly, gentlemen. While certainly Dethklok represent the figureheads to this perverse institution, Offdensen fits the direct profile for a cult leader.”

The screens behind him flashed with examples: the bloody last supper of Joseph Di Mambro, the stargazing suicide lead by Marshall Applewhite, the mass arrests and terrorism in the hands of Asahara Shōkō, and the damning cold gaze and immolation of David Koresh.

“Placing himself at the top of the hierarchy by taking on every higher role that presents itself, spreading misinformation and propaganda to recruit more innocents to his empire, he represents the sinister intersection between corporate sociopathy and a cult of personality. Having fallen early to the seduction of Dethklok, we see here a micromanaging and exploitive megalomaniac
possessed of a profound absence of conscience and a greed for power that leads him to deliriously fold to the bloodthirsty desires of Dethklok.”

Slowly the screens changed – from these cults to the Tribunal’s intel on Dethklok from shots of dead Klokateers to mass deaths at Dethklok concerts, the crime scenes of illegal downloaders to Dethklok’s public intoxication, nudity and chaos. Malaippāmpu’s tone increased in intensity, forced into the cold silence of the Tribunal.

“Through ruthless business practice and exploitation of the international legal system, Offdensen has grown the company into a violent blood cult, untouchable by the law, by government, by religion itself. By puppeteering the mythos of Dethklok, he preys upon the weak and questioning, those seeking something, anything to guide them through the moral ambiguity of reality, and instead lures them deeper into the organisation until they would gladly sacrifice their very lives for the band. This is not coincidental. Personal details of Mr Offdensen are hard to come by - like most of these dangerous psychopaths, he has obscured his path through the tall grasses. But nothing is impossible to find for those with the relevant knowledge, gentlemen.”

The screens raced now with images, documents, degrees, awards, year book and club photos – a polo team, a fencing team, a competitive chess team – a torn business card for a shared law firm, a prescription slip for sleeping pills. The desperation behind the paper trail was opaque: every scrap, every shred had been hunted down and archived for all to see.

“Upon investigating, we see this behaviour mirrors Offdensen’s own experience: with a background in human rights and contract law, an exemplary Harvard education, formerly respected among his peers, what brings a man to surrender that moral wealth to the corruption of Dethklok? Something grave must have happened but... what? He has eliminated it. All we have is... is trash!”

The professor gnashed with frustration as the general Crozier spoke up across the cold expanse between them.

“If this is the case, we have men on the inside, gentlemen. Men of considerable psychological training. Perhaps if we strike up communication with him it’s possible to remind him - - - ” he began, a hesitant and artificial warmth in his words, but Malaippāmpu cut him off sharply.

“Unlikely. Just as he has erased himself from collective knowledge, I would suggest he’s not keen to linger on the memory himself. As involvement in a cult organisation increases, it becomes self-sufficient. Development freezes. Offdensen is completely reliant upon Dethklok. He has become no more self-aware than a snake, interested only in ever increasing size through the consumption of others.”

The spitting insanity of the professor was not enough to discourage the general, however.

“Sure,” he mumbled, “But it must be a lonely job. Perhaps a secretary - you know, the application of feminine wiles...?”

“We’ve tried that, no cigar,” said the senator, nonplussed. “Ended up having to terminate the operative... poor girl went too deep.”

But Malaippāmpu had not finished. “One imagines he likes it like that, General. What you have to remember, gentlemen, is that Offdensen is a leader, not a follower.”

“The general wouldn’t know much about that,” interrupted Vater Orlaag snidely, to a grumble from the general.
“What we see here is the self-poisoning of the mind,” continued the professor. “It survives in hibernation, shuts out external sources lest they trigger an excruciating identity crisis - expressed in typical Lacanian brevity: I can't bear the thought of being freed by anyone other than myself.”

A silence fell over the Tribunal, considering the information before them as Malaippāmpu lowered his head and the screen faded to black.

“His past must seem like a dream.”

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

Magnus Hammersmith didn’t have much to do with the nice part of the city. He felt distinctly out of place in it, like a feral cat – all bones and scraps against the plush and the clean, but at least he’d buttoned his shirt. The waiting room he found himself in was just another identical to all in the district: a pleasing moss green wall paper, overstuffed couches, lush pot plants, Time Magazine and National Geographic and Reel Fisher on the side table. It could have easily been a psychologist’s office but fuck, no, he wasn’t here for anything nearly as fun as mind games.

He picked at a hole in his jeans leg idly, aware of the secretary’s gaze on him. Every time he looked up, she looked away. A shame – he’d have chatted to her if he’d had the chance, but she seemed so avoidant he wasn’t sure he could be bothered. Besides, he needed all his wits about him to deal with the lawyer.

The word crawled over his tongue like a cockroach. *The lawyer.* It shouldn’t have come to this. It didn’t have to come to this. They could have dealt with this themselves if it weren’t for fucking Pickles, all you-can’t-just-go-after-them-I’ve-tried-it-turns-out-bad-for-everyone, all if-you-want-the-record-hotshots-to-give-you-the-time-of-day-you-can’t-just-stab-these-guys-seriously, all fucking we-need-a-lawyer. Always trying to take the reins, Pickles. And then if it weren’t for Nathan always agreeing, big dumb Nathan always doping along after the little shit. It was only because Pickles was famous. Magnus had more talent and experience in every bone of his body - -

But the biter was when he’d asked if they knew any lawyers, and between all five of them they’d come up with... none. Or none they could trust, anyway, Pickles having rotted away at every legal tie he’d had with re-offences, idiocy, and midnight phone calls. Murderface had offered, too, saying he was studying law at community college or some rubbish, but that was barely an option.

But Magnus... Magnus knew a lawyer.

So now Magnus had to speak to him. To be truthful, he’d never met him in person, only heard from a friend that this guy could be trusted – so much as any lawyer could be trusted. That friend, a guitarist and an immigrant from Chile, had been saved from deportation by the skin of his teeth by this lawyer some years ago, assigned to him by a charitable organisation owing to him being a musician and, well, broke. The lawyer had swooped in with discovery, documents, statutes, and the next thing he knew he had a visa. The friend said he’d blinded the jury, but Magnus had a cursory understanding of the courts, having fronted up before them once or twice in his time. There had to be something behind it.
He sighed and stood up, sauntering to the secretary’s tall desk as she aggressively ignored him, and took a business card out of the holder on the desktop. Magnus flipped it between his fingers, reading the front and the back.

PHOEBE SOUKOULIS

Human Rights | Immigration

The S in S&O. He’d spoken to her on the phone. She sounded pretty hot, actually.

CHARLES F. OFFDENSEN

Human Rights

Commercial & Contract

Civil & Criminal

And the O.

He wouldn’t have bothered if the friend hadn’t had the card with “Commercial & Contract” on it. That’s what they needed. The guitarist sunk his hand into his pocket, turned around the demo tape at the center of the whole issue hidden in its bottom between his fingers thoughtfully. God help the sorry fuckers who’d incurred the wrath of Dethklok if this Offdensen character couldn’t help them. Magnus would deal with them on his own terms – he’d been sharpening his hunting knife for the very occasion.

A daunted man emerged from the office door, clutching a handful of papers and looking bleached, like the shit had been scared right out of his colon, and shuffled to the desk, Magnus stepping aside to give him access. He hid an instinctive wince as he heard the price the secretary put on the lawyer’s services, but the band fund weighed heavy in his jacket pocket. He always forgot just how much was in it these days. In fact, he suspected that Nathan and Pickles had been hiding the full amount from him. Things were getting... shitty... as their assets grew. But fuck, it was everything to him. He wouldn’t give it up, not for any skinny payout.

“Mr Offdensen will see you now,” said the secretary, and Magnus looked up abruptly. That was all he was getting though – he glanced at the lawyer’s office door, the frosted glass window set in it, and the secretary’s eyes were on him. When he looked back at her, he could have sworn she was fighting a sneer.

“He doesn’t bite. He’s... not in the best mood today, though,” she advised, and Magnus shook the shiver that prickled over his shoulders off again and went for the door. Inside, another plush office smelling like air freshener, a vast desk, a wall of diplomas and awards, and an empty shell masquerading as a human made miniature by the size of the rich wooden desk, though Magnus was sure it was just an illusion. Could you imagine this man before the Federal Court? He was just a little mouse, with his boxy glasses and ill-tailored suit, making final adjustments to a piece of paperwork.

Just a little mouse with a law degree.

Flushed with rekindled confidence, Magnus shut the door and approached the desk. The paperwork was his, something Soukoulis had asked him to send through about their issue. Offdensen only now looked up at him, yes – yes. A little mouse in the shadow of the sinewy feral cat that darkened his office now.
“Please take a seat, Mr Hammersmith,” said the lawyer, and his voice was shrill and lilted with expensive diction. Fuck, every word was perfectly formed, like a marble plinth. It pissed Magnus off, but he put it aside for now and sat, spilling on the small leather chair and regarding Offdensen curiously.

He must have been a handsome man in his youth, but he was easily in his forties, late thirties if Magnus was really kind; older than Magnus anyway. Going bald at the temples, scrawny too. A little white mouse – Magnus wondered just how bad this mood could be. So, let the game begin:

“Mr Hammersmith - -” said the lawyer, only for Magnus to immediately cut him off.

“Call me Magnus.”

“... Magnus.” For the first time Offdensen met his gaze, and Magnus noticed his hands had always been visible to him, on the desk, clear and open in posture. Offdensen shuffled the papers in front of him awkwardly. “I should, ah, let you know, Mister - - ... Magnus. With respect - - I think you are, ah, wasting your time here.”

“Wasting my time?” repeated Magnus, tilting his head idly, but Offdensen had broken eye contact to interrogate the papers.

“Yes, wasting your time. This claim is impossible.”

“Ah...” Magnus rolled a lazy smile across his broad lips. “You mean, wasting your time.”

He watched the lawyer closely for a reaction, but he barely looked up at him. Still there it was, a flirting, frenetic glance that ran down his body like a man checking for guns and knives; well, Magnus wouldn’t disappoint there.

“That could be, ah, inferred, yes.” Jesus, he sounded so disgusted to even suggest Magnus was out of his depth. The whole act just made Magnus’ smile curl tighter. “Mr - - Magnus.”

“It’s not impossible,” purred Magnus, slung over his chair. If he’d known this would be as entertaining as it was, he would have suggested it in the first place. “My friend Fabian, he says you got him off the hook, and that was ‘impossible’.”

The lawyer narrowed his eyes. “Your claim is a copyright one, it doesn’t belong here. Your friend’s was an immigration claim, it’s our specialty.”

“But not your degree.”

Magnus glanced up at the wall that loomed over them, jutting his chin towards one of the framed diplomas, and the lawyer stared straight through him.

“It’s pretty high up there,” drawled the guitarist, “Hard to read. But I think that says... copy and patent law...?”

“Ah,” said Offdensen. “Yes. So it does.”

“So it does...”

Magnus watched the scrawny man as he squirmed inwardly. Sometimes it was so easy to find someone’s buttons, just too easy – there was so much under that one, he could just keep pushing, but – for later, maybe. He didn’t want to get chucked out of the office just yet.
“I don’t take those any more, Magnus,” he said, and Magnus smirked at him.

“What happened, did one of them fuck your sister or something?”

He’d meant it as a joke, a playful little jab to lighten things up with its sheer absurdity, but the colour drained out of the lawyer in front of his eyes to something cold and dead fish in his stare. Yes, sometimes buttons were just a little too easy. He’d fucked up. Gone too far. Cogs were turning.

“Look,” said Offdensen coldly, stiffening all over like the rigamortis was already setting in. “Your claim is impossible; it would require establishing a, uh, an information distribution standard in the Federal Court that just has no precedent.”

“So? That’s why we need a good lawyer. And you’re a good lawyer.” Magnus scanned the wall again, switching tact. “Some would say among the best.”

Offdensen only bristled.

“You don’t belong here, Magnus,” he said, and Magnus raised his eyebrows at him. Now there was an interesting little shred of bigotry.

“We can pay you. We have money,” the guitarist replied as he reached into his coat, tossing the envelope bulging with notes in front of Offdensen. The lawyer only went colder, pushing the envelope back towards Magnus with the tip of his pen.

“I am not a copyright lawyer. I am a human rights lawyer, and I find the insinuation that I should waste my valuable time on this frivolous claim for a - a heavy metal band in exchange for money frankly insulting.”

“It’s death metal,” said Magnus, and Offdensen blinked.

“Pardon?”

“It’s death metal, not heavy metal – eh. Look, you take it or you don’t, whatever, man. I agree, it’s impossible. Just Fabian told me to try you and like... I actually called after your wife, you know, but she told me to ask you. You know?”

“Ms Soukoulis is not my wife,” said Offdensen, as if it wasn’t fucking obvious that he wasn’t getting laid on the regular.

“Your partner. Whatever. She said you could use something to take your mind off all this... shit.”

“She said that, huh.” The lawyer looked at the paperwork again, clicking his pen. So much tension in this guy, it was exhausting to even be around. After a long time, too long, he spoke again. “Magnus – we don’t have a contact number for you here.”

“Oh, uh, no. It’s - - ” The guitarist felt over his pockets for the mobile phone but only found his burner and a shitty old demo tape. “Uh, fuck it. Just have this.”

He chucked the tape onto the desk, and Offdensen regarded the poorly copied photo of the band on its cover as though it might bite and infect him. “It has my number in the cover, under ‘Contact’. That’s the one they nicked, you know. Hell, maybe you can learn what death metal is while you’re at it.”

“Uh huh,” said the lawyer, fully intending to ignore it. After slightly too long examining the tape
without ever touching it, he rose and extended his hand across the desk to Magnus as he stood opposite him. “Thank you for your time, Mr Hammer- - Magnus. I’ll be in touch.”

Magnus took his hand and shook. For such a weedy man he had an imposing grip on him. The way he looked at Magnus now confused him too, such a knot of contradictions – looked curious, studying him, and flicked his gaze back to the tape. As though something drew him to it.

Magnus put it out of his mind.
As soon as Offdensen laid foot in the new office, he knew he would be happily spending quite some time there. Some things just felt, well, right.

Wasn’t that the take-home message? Some things just felt right. No hindsight, no clear vision, just this feeling telling you it was right, to take this insane opportunity. Nights spent awake doubting yourself and then somehow it all wrapped itself up into this perfect thing, this perfect deal, this perfect album, this perfect office. It was perfect. God! It was a perfect office.

He might have been biased; this was the first permanent office he’d had in years having been on the road with the band for the majority of time, set up in studios, hotel rooms, hot desks. The decision to move to Mordland along with the band had been a hard one and an easy one all at the same time, another of those gut feeling ones. Because what did he have to lose, really? The idea of things, shreds of memories he was still scraping off the hide – the idea that he might want to share his life still, the idea that he might want to step away from the burden before it crushed him. And then the gut boiling beneath, the marrow-deep truth, impossible to truly acknowledge, that he had no real desire for any of that.

But of course, he only thought it. He didn’t know it. Offdensen had long held the fruit of knowledge and declined to try it; once you knew something, truly, in body and soul, there was no going back.

The office made it very tempting, however.

He casually made his way over to the desk, glancing around the stone room. Good fireplace, very Viking hall. Good rug. Very good window, beautiful mountain view. Very, very good desk. Upon inspection, the drawers were fully stocked with fine stationary. Good. Very good. Nice plant, like a palm kind of thing. Nice to see they had folded to his request for greenery somewhere in the building. Nice, uh, stag’s head, over the fireplace there, staring at him across the room. An interesting choice on behalf of the interior designers. Offdensen took his seat at the desk – adequate chair, might have to be replaced - and looked up.

*Nice* chandelier. My god. Never had he thought he might have an office with a chandelier in it. Talk about perks.

He tapped his fingers on the desk curtly, containing his excitement, then inspected the phone, picking up the receiver. If they’d followed his instructions then button one should connect him to - - and sure enough, there she was, his absent secretary, a lilt on her voice this morning, asking him if he’d had a good flight.

“Yes. Yes, uh, very good, Amanda. Thank you for asking,” he told her, surprised at the way his voice reverberated in the vast room. “Yes, uh, everything’s in order. I do like it. It’s a very nice plant. Thank you.”

It was difficult to express the gratitude, really. He knew he’d earned it, knew he’d paid with his
own money, but the sheer figures had grown so large that they were little more than maths to him anymore. It was his – and it was because of Dethklok.

Amanda asked about the resumes.

“I – yes. Well, no sense dallying, is there? Send them up with the mail,” he told her, and let her get to it.

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

He stood in the doorway while Phoebe got ready, book in his hands, reading the tight text under the splinter of yellow bathroom light that fell on the open page.

_He felt as if he were seasick, as if he were on a ship in a heavy sea. It was as if the water were crashing against the wooden walls, as if a rushing sound came from the far end of the corridor, like water pouring over, as if the corridor were rocking to and fro and as if the people sitting on either side were going up and down. It made the calm of the young woman and the man who were helping him to the exit all the more incomprehensible._

Charles turned the page. Phoebe was using the hairdryer. For some reason, with this horrible sound that spilled the space between them, this was the point she decided she ought to commence talking to him.

“What happened today, Charles?” she said, raising her voice above the hairdryer. He could see her gaze on him in her reflection out of the corner of his eye, the towel around her shoulders over her cocktail dress. This was not a general question; he knew exactly what she was referring to. A dozen passive pages and phone calls had made him very, very aware of his mistake. Although mistake was generous. Suffice to say it had not been intentional.

“Hmm?” he said instead, not taking his eyes off the book. He didn’t feel the need to answer to her. Of course she was concerned, she had every right to be concerned, he was – no, well, concerned wasn’t the word for what he was. He was a dry knot tied up in the front of his head, straining tighter and tighter, he was an unrosined bow across his nerves in staccato. He was – he was avoiding seasickness. Not on purpose. It hadn’t been on purpose.

“I said, what happened today, Charles?” she said again, but of course he had heard her, so “Hmm,” he hummed, this time in acknowledgement of her concern.

“Mhairi told me she received an email from Berman’s associate today.” To punctuate her sentence, at last Phoebe turned off the hairdryer. In return, Charles looked up from his book.

“Concerning your absence in court at noon.”

“It was a preliminary, Phoebe, and Berman gave Matthew leave anyway. It doesn’t matter. I’ll pick up the transcript later.” He looked back at the page to avoid the look she gave him over her shoulder. God, she looked beautiful. Slowly she started to comb and divide her long dark hair, to braid it and pin it up over her crown. Funny how she always looked more beautiful when he was afraid of losing her. Funny how beautiful someone could look when you had hurt them.
Funny how like him she was in so many ways.

“You know why I’m asking,” she said, but he erred on faking naiveté - “No - no idea.” – and turned a page. He’d read this book a number of times but now the text seemed unfamiliar to him. Like the last page hadn’t even sunk in. Unsettling. And Phoebe was glaring over her shoulder at him. When she turned back to pinning her hair, she moved so slowly that it was like a knife drawn over the skin of his neck.

“This is the second hearing you’ve missed this month,” she said, coldly.

“I’m, uh, aware,” he said.

“Not to mention the pre-trial conference last week. But moreover, this is the second hearing you have missed in your life, as far as I know.”

“Oh?” Charles turned a page.

“Or at least in the eight years we’ve been together, and in university.”

“Mm...”

“Mm indeed, Charles. What are you reading?”

“Oh, nothing - -” But suddenly she was in front of him and taking the book out of his hands, and there was such a cut behind her eyes for him he let her take it. Her hair was done. He’d been so busy avoiding her questions that he hadn’t even noticed.

“Kafka? Again? Jesus, Charlie,” said Phoebe, her voice just on the edge of a snap. Charles tried to shy away from her but his back was already against the doorway. He could feel his heart seizing up inside him, something else new in the last few months. Gently, slowly, he took the book back from her.

“He’s the, uh, the quintessential Jewish novelist, Phoebe - - ”

“Oh, spare me, Charles!” But she let him take it back as she turned away, back to the mirror to put on her makeup. “If you could see yourself right now.”

Charles Offdensen took a step into their shared bathroom, standing behind her in the blistering white room, and looked at himself in the mirror, his tired face gazing languished back at him over Phoebe’s slender, perfect shoulder, floating over the dark navy angles of his dinner suit. It’d be easy to say that he didn’t recognise himself, that he saw a stranger staring back at him, but it was far from the truth. He was too familiar with that expression, it was just... daunting to see it on his own face, with an impression like he’d caught it off of Elizabeth, some slow-killing disease. He’d always thought he was stronger than it. Funny, very funny.

“I just think you should have given it one more month,” said Phoebe, and caught his eye in her reflection. “You can’t just send in an intern every time you have an appearance. It’s not too late, Charles. I can take them off your hands.”

“I - - ” But what he struggled with the most was the looks she kept giving him. Like what he was doing – whatever he was doing, whatever was happening to him – was hurting her. Five months was plenty, he couldn’t afford to take any more leave. He pinched his brow without thinking, to starve it off perhaps. “I’m fine, Phoebe.”

But it never starved, just kept eating at him instead.
“I’m just worried about you, that’s all.” Phoebe changed the topic, thank god. “Did that Hammer gentleman come in today? Magnus?”

“Oh, um, yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, he did.” Charles caught her gaze again as she was running a large brush over her fine features, some powder thing. Cosmetics largely remained a mystery to him. “Why, may I ask, did you advise him he ought to? His claim is laughable.”

Damn her, Phoebe smiled, just a tug of her lips but it was excruciating to him. She gave a little shrug as she uncapped her mascara, pretending it was nothing. “I thought you could use something, um... what’s the word...” and she faked searching her mind for it, humming to herself, “Irrelevant? Flippant? Something... superficial. Just to ease yourself back in.”

“Vacuous, more like,” grumbled Charles, his face flat in the mirror behind her. “A choice idiot, Phoebe. All, uh, power games and provocating. There was a reason I stopped taking criminal.”

Phoebe found something very amusing about it, however, smiling fully now at his plight. “Mm! What was the band called again? Dark Clock?”

“Dethklok, you’ll find. D-E-T-H, two ‘K’s.” He couldn’t resist smiling back at her as she laughed, and he remembered the tape, settled in his pocket. He’d slipped it from one jacket to another automatically. How — how... silly. Never mind; he fished it out and held it out to her, and Phoebe gave a trill of mocking glee upon seeing the cover.

“He gave you a present! How sweet,” she shrilled, turning the tape over in her hands. “Let’s see. Dethdemo. Cute. We are: Skwisgaar Skwigelf – Lead Guitar. Is that Swedish? Ah yes, Magnus Hammersmith – Rhythm Guitar.”

But as she continued to read, her voice curled up in derisive delight with every name. “William Murderface. Murderface, honey! He’s on bass. Oh dear: Pickles the Drummer. And Nathan Explosion. All caps. They don’t say what he does, I presume he sings.”

“Mm,” said Charles. Formerly he would have joined her in sticking them in the pillory, but something felt off about it this time. He had, after all, taken the case.

“Have you listened to it yet?” she asked, and Charles barely curled his lip.

“I’m, uh, okay without, I think…” he tried but Phoebe was having none of it, hanging up the towel from her shoulders as she brushed past him, leaving him standing in the bathroom, the cassette clutched threateningly in her dainty hand.

“Oh, come on. You have to.”

He followed her reluctantly around the corner to find her crouched before their lounge stereo system and loading the tape. “Should I turn it all the way up?” she joked, winding up the dial like a maverick, and Charles just frowned.

“Uh, I’m not sure that’s the best - -” But she had already hit play, a sound from the bowels of hell spewed forth from the stereo like a portal opening beneath their feet. Charles clutched his head against the splintering pain before thinking better of it and jamming his hands over his ears as Phoebe reached to turn it down, cackling at his reaction, and the room lurched with - - with sea sickness.

“Well, it’s no Aja, is it,” he said through gritted teeth, and Phoebe laughed again.

“It’s got a special something... a certain pizzazz,” she said, rising and approaching him. Standing
close, she took his lapels in her slender hands and pulled him to her, straightening his jacket on him and then gazing up at him. “But I’m proud of you – challenging yourself.”

“Mm,” he said, putting his arms around her, the book half-closed around his fingers. Even though she surely knew it was only because she asked him to. She looked so perfect - -

* * * * *

As the years drew by, Offdensen’s friends had become fewer and fewer. Not that he’d ever been an unpopular person, but things had gotten in the way of maintaining the friendships which had, in a way, been thrust upon him in high school and college, by way of sporting clubs and the parasitic ambition of others, and as he’d become increasingly involved in his job and familial responsibilities - and, to a certain extent, Phoebe; the firm being a massive time sink let alone trying to balance co-running a household and considerations of a life-partner - they’d slowly lost interest in maintaining that connection and peeled away from him like glutted ticks. For the most part Charles was happy with that state of affairs. He didn’t have a need for many people in his life - or he wouldn’t have, if it weren’t for his distinct repulsion with who remained.

For example, sitting opposite him tonight in a schmaltzy downtown wine bar, Herbert Vernon and his wife, Alison. To be fair on the poor girl, Alison was perfectly lovely and besides, a friend of Phoebe’s from college, both women being younger than the men they had ended up with, Alison particularly at even a few years Phoebe’s junior. They knew each other through a dressage club, god help them all.

By contrast, Charles and Herbert Vernon had attended the same high school and further, their fathers had been professional acquaintances. Charles had no solid memories of Herbie before the passing of his father in their junior year and, hindsight being twenty-twenty and all, now highly suspected the boy’s old man as putting him up to befriending Charles in his hour of vulnerability, anticipating the likelihood of Charles following in his father’s footsteps through an elite college and walking into a sound fortune and thus ensuring Vernon had an ally of considerable influence.

Which would be all well and good if Herbert was a remotely adequate addition to his support structure. Rather he was, had always been, just sort of there. They had both subsequently attended Harvard in parallel specialities, copy and contract, and were even on the same polo team, but Charles couldn’t have told you anything actually personal or revealing about Herbie and, he suspected, nor he Charles. In fact, when he turned his mind to it he couldn’t think of anything he and Vernon had in common besides their fathers’ acquaintance, shared field of study and geological location.

The question therefore remained as to why, when - following the passing of Charles’ mother some three months prior, something of a given considering her declining health for a number of years now - he had found himself suddenly absent anyone he could call upon to express his grief, Vernon was still there. Charles suspected an unpleasant answer that discouraged him from dwelling upon it; you see, as they had aged, Vernon had not only begun to look like his father - his gaunt face
jowled and balding, watery-eyed and lispy - but similarly turned in character, devious and jealous.

Charles had been under a lot of pressure to succeed in his studies; the death of his father had only increased it, forcing him to fill a role as Offdensen patriarch he ultimately found reprehensible.

But he was a bright kid, excelled with ease, with a habit of turning away from his negative feelings and into study and sports, a crutch encouraged by everyone around him. Magnus’ observation had been correct: a large amount of Offdensen’s scholarship had been in copy and contracts and he had excelled in the fields. Within the first few years of his legal practice he’d made a formidable reputation for himself, but his older peers’ tendency to deflect his talent to his father’s - of course he excelled in copy, he was an Offdensen - and increasing disillusionment had led to him pursuing other fields. After some unfortunate details had come to light about his father through his ailing mother, he’d abandoned the field entirely.

Vernon, on the other hand, was only an adequate lawyer (by comparison, you must understand - they had both attended Harvard) and cowered in Offdensen’s shadow. Even cowered against his intellect, his confidence, the strength of his conviction. Perhaps this was why they’d never grown close - Vernon always on the defensive, Charles always not caring to stoop to his sycophancy. But in recent years he’d had the privilege of watching his once-excelling peer drop out of the field they had competed in with a curl of disgust inherent in the action, and while it couldn’t in the least be said Charles hadn’t succeeded in human rights and civil, recent events - those ambiguous family issues - had put blinkers on him, invisibly stretched him beyond his limits, and now - to Vernon's great sadistic delight - he appeared to be having panic attacks in the courtroom.

Oh - that was plainly obvious to everyone except Charles himself. Gallant Charles shutting down at the Bar, courageous Chuck being snapped out of his haze by the judge, old Charlie-boy awkwardly uttering that tell-tale phrase into the bench mics, “Sorry, your Honour, I didn’t catch that.” Handsome Charles handing in his work late, the passively-accusatory statements in the transcripts from opposing counsel, “My learned friend here” through clenched teeth and concerned glances flicked across the court. Like a horse that had been pushed too hard on the track, something had gone wrong with Charles Foster Offdensen. There was only so many falls he could afford before they took him out to the back paddock and shot him.

So here they were at dinner, and Charles had the distinct feeling of being circled below the water, like the piranhas were going to loom out of the fish tank set into the booth beside them and devour him at any moment. Vernon’s hungry gaze on him was that particular glassy, that predatory – there was no way he could deny, right at that moment, that the guy was gloating over his fall. It came like a nail into his hand, fixing him to the table, as Phoebe joked about him taking on the band. His smile could not have been more like a flinch as Vernon jeered back.

“Oh, that name rings a bell! Where have I heard it?” he asked, his eyes looking particularly watery next to the fish tank and Charles struggled not to feel disgust. Instead he reached for his martini – Vernon had insisted.

“I don’t think you’d know them, Herbie,” he advised, but Vernon would not give it up.

“No, no! I have. Ah...” His eyes strayed left as he considered it, then snapped his fingers in Charles’ face as he realised. “Yes! They were in Faces Rocks – well, not them – that young guy, what’s his name? The one from, um - - ah! Snakes N’ Barrels!”

“Oh.” Charles was genuinely surprised. He liked Snakes N’ Barrels. Well, he owned their last album anyway. He could see the lead singer in his mind’s eye, bent over a white piano covered in snakes, clipped from an MTV video he’d seen maybe late at night on their television or in a shop window, or in a café perhaps. That chap with the necklaces was a good guitarist, really made the
“Didn’t they break up?” asked Alison, and although Phoebe nodded, Vernon just had to say it.

“Yes. I believe the article related to that young gherkin fellow being in some new band, and now you mention it I think it may just have been Death Clock.”

Gherkin fellow? Charles frowned at Vernon, he was sure that wasn’t right. Wait -- the cassette swam in his mind’s eye.

“Oh, Pickles,” he said with a blink of clarity, and Vernon said, “What?”

“That’s his name – Pickles. It said in the tape they gave me, ah – Pickles the drummer.”

Vernon curled his lip. “Drummer? Bit of a step backwards, don’t you think?”

Charles just shrugged and took a sip of his martini, staring into the fish tank as Phoebe said something about not if he enjoyed it or whatever makes him happy or - - but he was gone.

It was raining outside when they left, Offdensen sheltering Phoebe close against him beneath his umbrella as they rushed for the taxi. Funny, it had been raining more recently – spring storms, he’d say, but it seemed out of the pattern.

Back at their apartment, he lay with his eyes closed beside Phoebe for two hours, then slipped out and walked bare-footed to the lounge, just catching her sigh of disappointment as she rolled over, her eyes covered by a facemask. There was no sleeping tonight. In the dim yellow light of the lounge’s standing lamp, he stooped to reach the oldest books on his bookcase, long neglected. He came back up with one of the more exciting volumes in his collection and sat on their lounge, staring at it a moment as he wondered what on earth he was actually doing. But it felt right. That was all it had to be, wasn’t it?

So it was with resignation at three in the morning, the storm crashing outside, that Offdensen opened Intellectual Property: Law & the Information Society, and got re-acquainted.

* * * *

YEAR THREE

It was two in the morning and Offdensen was standing before his new fireplace, stoked by some invisible caretaker, staring into the gated flames and trying to ignore the awful feeling that churned within him. He’d come too far to feel like this again. He had everything he wanted. So why was it so hard to sleep?

He’d already come and gone from his room, the dark seeming too empty, too bleak, for him to relax. Like something was watching him from the shadows. He knew he’d get used to it but... night one was just a bit much.

He tried reading for about five minutes, then gave up and ventured outside, book still in hand as he made his way through the unfamiliar corridors. As he wove deeper into Mordhaus he could hear the distant revelry of the band, first a bottle breaking and then their voices, crowing and hooting in celebration. It was night one for them, too. They’d been so excited they’d barely noticed him in
the last few months – not that he minded. It wasn’t like him to crash their party either; he had promised himself he would never do that again. It just warmed him, brought a hint of the familiar, to hear them happy.

He stopped just close enough to be able to hear the pinball machines under their blaring music and catch snatches of conversation, finding himself in a conference room he’d been taken through earlier that day on the official tour. That’d do – he took a seat at the vast table and opened his book, content now that they were in earshot.

*YOU KEEP TALKIN ABOUT IT WHY DON'T YOU GET IT OUT MURDERFACE? WHY DON'T YOU SHOW US?*

*I SHOULD - - -

*MURDERFACE, NOO!*

So perhaps he wouldn’t get any sleep. There was nothing unusually important he had to do tomorrow. This was fine, for the time being.

Chapter End Notes

holy shit I'm in deep
It always took a minimum of an hour to get all the guys herded together for a conference, prior notice be damned, but now that he could rely on them being in the same building for once it seemed a little easier than it had been in the past. In fact, the only thing that had gone wrong so far this afternoon was a minor plumbing issue in the second basement and one of the Klokateers calling him ‘sire’, something Offdensen had quickly pulled him up about.

“You mean, ‘sir’.”

The man, shifting the new and improved design executioner’s hood over his scalp awkwardly, aimed his eyes away in a flash of dark skin through the eyeholes.

“Uh, yes, sir. Sorry.” That would have been enough but they always did get lippy, didn’t they? “It’s just – the other masters asked us to call them ‘sire’, so I just – g-got confused - -”

“I’m not one of them.” Offdensen was a little disturbed by ‘masters’ as well, but whatever; if the guys wanted to play Viking Hall they could play Viking Hall for all he cared. “I’m one of you, an employee.”

As he said it he was already aware of the hypocrisy. While many of the Klokateers had been fans of the band since before Offdensen was employed, he was nonetheless the first of them to be formally employed and the highest ranking. To say he was ‘one of them’ and then refuse to wear a uniform was hypocritical and yet – he was one of them, but not one of them at the same time. Trying to explain it would be a waste of time, however; he brushed it off and turned away. “‘Sir’ will do.”

The purpose of the meeting was just finances and mail. It had been a challenge in and of itself to get the mail delivered to Mordland but, hey, with enough money one would do anything. He’d been given the too-hard-basket job of budgeting after this had occurred to the band, screening purchases in such meetings, but even then their affluence allowed him to be very generous. And it felt good to be generous.

Likewise, he’d put out an international job call to flesh out their skeleton staff because... well, he could. It felt bizarre to be entrusted with this much power, but here he was – he could hire anyone who was right for the job. Anyone. Anywhere. Bring them here. Give them a visa. Some might call that an abuse of power but, well, it was for the right reason and so long as Dethklok didn’t look too closely, it didn’t really matter, did it...?

It had had some unfortunate side effects, however. Sometimes Offdensen underestimated their fame.

“Okay, well, I hope you all had a good time last night. Your first, ah, Mordhaus mail’s here, from the unofficial Mordland postal service, uh, I believe his name’s Gunter, from just across the border.
"Exciting, huh?" he said chirpily, regarding the band slumped over the conference table before him. It was 2 PM, the earliest he was allowed to hold a meeting, and still most of them were face-down. Probably sore from accidentally exercising as they ran riot around their new dwellings last night. He’d heard them stomping up and down the corridors close by the second time he’d attempted sleep; kinda unsettling. But okay. He’d had locks installed for a reason.

“And, ah, just need to check if you guys noticed anything was missing last night and I’ll order that in for you.” He waited, studying their sagging faces and red eyes, and finally Nathan spoke up.

“Uhhh, yeah. Uh, I need... I need another fridge... TP...” he growled, rolling his eyes up at Offdensen from the desk, “And I broke my glasses. So more of those, too.”

“Yeah, I wanna – another fridge, too,” chimed in Pickles, his voice cracked and phlegmy, but the manager just nodded.

“Okay, two fridges.” He could see Skwisgaar and Toki making eyes at each other over the table and raised his eyebrow at them; when those two conspired they were a recipe for mayhem. “Toki, Skwisgaar, you have something to say?”

“Uhh,” Skwisgaar frowned at his bandmate, clearly nervous. “Ja, Toki, you wants to tells him or...?”

“It was yours idea, Skwisgaar. You tells him.” Toki was sat on his hands himself, a good indicator that he, too, was nervous. Nervous of what, exactly? What could Offdensen even do to them? He ignored the fact and just waited for them to have a change of heart. Eventually, Skwisgaar stopped chewing on his lip and spoke up.

“Ja, um. We needs wolfs.”

“Wolves,” repeated Offdensen.

“Ja...” Skwisgaar didn’t seem to pick up the dryness with which his manager had spoken, ploughing straight on ahead. “Toki and mes, we ams goings out for walk last nights to see what it’s like. And it ams pretty good! You did, uh, good, but, uhh, it need wolfs.”

“Yeah, it’s prettys borings forest without wolfs,” chipped in Toki, brighter than the others for his youth. “Just kinda dulls, you know. Forest gotta be... like, bleak... cold... thems Norwegian blackened metals, um, keywords. You gots to has wolfs.”

“You mean we have a whole forest and it ain’t got wolves?” growled Nathan, raising his head to look Offdensen in the eyes. “Is that true?”

“Ah, I – I guess I just assumed it came with... wolves,” he replied. “It’s a forest. Like, a natural forest, wilderness, kind of thing.”

“We needs wolfs,” repeated Skwisgaar, staring at him. So Offdensen caved. He no longer had the balance, the energy to lack of cash ratio, to resist these demands.

“Okay. Well, I can make some calls, but, ah, this really comes under that thing about pets we talked about, okay. If I’m going to get you wolves they have to be your wolves. I’m not looking after them for you,” he said, to miscellaneous grunts of agreement. “Okay. I’ll get you some wolves. How, ah, many?”

They considered it for a minute, then Pickles said, “Ohhh... six?”
“Six.”

“Yeah, that feels like a good round number, y’know.”

“Six wolves. Got it. Okay.” Offdensen looked down at the conference table, littered with letters in five collapsed piles. “Ah, and here’s your mail. I took the liberty of redirecting it. It’s mostly fan mail, not sure if we should, ah, separate that or...”

“It’s fine.” Pickles, sat closest to the manager, reached over the table for one of the piles; Charles helpfully nudged the one that was his in the drummer’s direction and Pickles scooped it towards himself and started to leaf through. “Shit, there is a *lot* of fan mail... uhh, and court orders. I think you’ve found stalkers I didn’t even know I had.”

“Yeah... I’ll get it separated.” Charles frowned at Pickles’ increasing concern as he flipped aside the letters one by one, and then handed around the stacks of letters. The smallest belonged to Murderface, a grand total of three letters, but the bassist just scoffed.

“Okay. Sure. Two for William, and a catalogue, man...! And I guess those are your fan letters, Charlie?” he mocked, and gestured to the massive, unsteady pile looming behind the manager, thus far unacknowledged, towering above his head and filling most of the corner of the room. Slowly, Charles turned to look up at it.

“Oh, that. That’s, ah. They’re all resumes. For the Klokateer positions,” he explained, frowning up at it. “They just... keep coming. I haven’t started going through them yet but, ah, I’ll keep you updated.”

Just as he said it, a Klokateer entered the room, dragging another sack of letters in and emptying it onto the pile. “More resumes from Gunter on the border, sire.”

Charles just narrowed his eyes. “Sir, please.”

“Sorry. Sir.”

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

It was Wednesday before he needed to interact with the band again, but as early as Monday, sitting over a newspaper first thing in the morning in the downtown café of his preference, Offdensen was already being harassed.

A gaunt young man with very long brown hair, scooped back into a greasy ponytail, and chewed back nails had emerged from behind the coffee machine, awkwardly looming over him while holding his long black until Charles had noticed and made eye contact. The young man placed his coffee down in front of him with a trembling hand, his smile lop-sided and weird. “Yes?” asked Offdensen.

“Um, you’re the lawyer working with Dethklok, right?” squeaked the youth, and Offdensen straightened his newspaper and cleared his throat, very uncomfortable about this state of affairs.

“That’s, ah, confidential,” he said at last, and the young man’s face lit up in front of him.
“Oh my god, you are! That’s totally amazing! Dethklok are like, the best band in the world, you’re hell lucky man! I can’t believe you like, totally come to my café!”

“Yes,” replied Offdensen shortly, and frowned at the man until he backed off again, uttering a quick, “Go get ‘em!” in parting.

This experience raised a lot of questions, frankly. Assuming the youth was a friend of the band’s, as such ‘fans’ had to be for low profile acts, then why the hell did they have a picture of him? Still, taking Phoebe’s advice for once, he decided to put it aside and not dwell on the experience. There would be an explanation forthcoming.

Wednesday afternoon was his appointment with Dethklok, summoned to a scungy unit in the middle of a low-class industrial area of the city no earlier than 2 PM, they’d been strict about that. He’d have had trouble finding it if he hadn’t had so many clients down here in his early criminal law days, working pro bono, but times had changed and he felt quite insecure about parking the Buick unattended outside the unit.

He climbed the stained concrete stairs, knocked on the unit door and waited, glancing nervously back at the Buick once or twice in the time they gave him. Perhaps Hammersmith had left his secretary with the wrong address? But the pentagram spray painted on the wall beside his head suggested otherwise. Writing beside it in an aggressive hand read: MORDHAUS 666. Murder House. Ah, well then. Yes. Probably this was the one.

He wondered idly which one of them spoke German.

The door opened at last to Magnus’ thin face and the sound of metal on a stereo somewhere deep inside the unit. It looked dark and smelt like black mould and off beer. Offdensen looked up at Magnus, aware that his misgivings were showing in his face and trying to gently push them beneath the surface again; Magnus was taller than him, younger, and had neglected to wear a shirt, showing up at the door with cheap beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, ash on his chest hair and a weird smirk on his face.

“Charlie, hey. Welcome to Mordhaus. Glad you could make it,” he said, and Charles realised in one fell whiff of skunk that it wasn’t just a cigarette.

“Magnus,” said Charles, and neatly shook his head when Magnus offered the joint. At least being relaxed about the drugs was a good start; Charles was no squealer on such minimal grounds and he couldn’t stand his clients skulking around pretending like it wasn’t happening when it clearly was. It was the pretence that got up his nose.

“Come on in. We’ve been waiting for you.” Magnus stood aside to allow him through, into a dank corridor barely lit by the afternoon light that filtered through the door, glancing off motes of dust in the stale air lifted by their movement. The guitarist followed him, stuck close like a stalker and gently ushering him down the corridor with the discomfort of the close presence, shutting the door behind and plunging them into almost total darkness. Charles considered they could kill him, if they wanted to, and no one would stop them in the moment. He made a mental note to carry his pistol next time. He had guessed at something gang affiliated as soon as the heavy metal element had been mentioned, but this was something… else.

Something not very nice at all.

Magnus ushered him past garbage bags, stacked pizza boxes and avalanches of beer cans towards the angry buzz of the stereo somewhere deep in the unit. It appeared to be coming from a doorway down the corridor which spilt a sinister red light onto the matted carpet, the only source of light
now and Charles could already feel his dormant migraine start to pound as he approached.

There was a fridge in the corridor, humming loudly with several half-empty tins of dog food wobbling on top (Was that a spoon in that one? Was there a dog here somewhere?), which Magnus opened as Charles hesitated near it, just before the red light. Standing here he could hear, yes, the stereo screaming and thrashing, but just below it voices, too, chatting idly in Magnus’ absence. Two voices, both male, one lisping and adolescent:

*Well I still don't see why we need a lawyer. I can do it, I've almost finished my class - -*

And one with an excruciating midwest accent and aggressive twang that dragged across Charles’ nerves like he’d bitten down on tinfoil:

*For the last time no, Murderface. He says it's federal. You are not qualified to stand in a federal court, seriously. You ever even seen Law & Order?*

*That’s bullshit, he’s just saying that so we’ll pay him more. We don’t even need a lawyer and this one’s ripping us off! Fuckin lawyers, fuckin - - they’re blood suckers!*

*Murderface, he can probably hear you, y’know.*

Magnus was lurking again, looking from the doorway to Charles expectantly and holding a cold six-pack of beer with his fingers looped through the plastic rings, one can removed and replacing the empty can in his other hand. He huffed smoke as he spoke around the joint: “Beer?” and this time Charles thought it too ungrateful to decline.

“Thanks.” As soon as he said it, Magnus pulling another can from the rings and passing it to him, he heard the voices in the next room fall quiet - though not without a rushed *Shhhh!* from one of the speakers. Magnus squeezed past him to the doorway then, taking the beers as peace offering in kind, enough to shut them up, and smiling crookedly at his peers.

“Ladies and gents: Charles Foster Offdensen, Attorney-At-Law,” he announced as Charles took the step around the corner, wrinkling his nose in disapproval.

“Solicitor, technically,” he murmured, put-upon, though this was clearly very exciting for the gathered four young men and he didn’t wish to burst their bubble. “Afternoon, gentlemen.” The red light drilled at his brain along with a persistent hum of electronics - the fridge? No, more than that; he slowly realised that it was emitting from the amps some of the band were sitting on, particularly an obscenely tall, obscenely blonde young man with an all-white outfit lit up crimson with their harsh lighting choice, cradling an expensive Gibson guitar close to his body; while his amp was on standby, his fingers still raced dully over the frets. That was obviously Skwisgaar Skwigelf, lead guitar, confirmed by Magnus a second later as the others were cracking open their beer cans: “Uh, this is Skwisgaar Skwigelf, lead guitar.”

Skwisgaar did not offer his hand, just stared Charles in the eye for a second and then looked away, turning his attention to the guitar instead. Sensing Charles’ discomfort, another of the men - this one bearing dreads and a young, effeminate face, jumped in to put him at ease: “It’s not you, don’t worry. He’s just like that, ya know, he’s Swedish.”

To which the underscore, Charles knew, was that it absolutely was him.

He decided then to engage in a little game he’d specialised to finesse in his pro bono criminal days, weighing up the power dynamic in the room just to see what he could read. He was prompted by the way it hung thick in the air about him, as Charles had always been sensitive to power, to
unspoken words and the spaces between people, and there were gulfs between these young men.
Then again, if you chose to immerse yourself in such a hostile environment - clearly they had stuff
going on, to put it lightly.

Skwisgaar, for instance, was powerless. Someone else spoke for him; he opted out of speaking
with an authority figure and turned away. Inherently passive, inherently defensive, at odds with
the outfit which screamed for attention in a room full of black. But not the attention of the
authority - being Charles - rather of those lesser than him, the easily impressed. A bully in other
words. Mind you, they were fine when they were quiet like this, provided they didn’t get their
claw in anyone too impressionable. For all his rudeness, Charles had nothing to fear from the
Swede.

Magnus, still lurking by his shoulder, was a blueprint diplomat. Frequently thought they had
control over the situation, rarely did, but filled a vital role nonetheless. Warm, friendly but not
kind, cunning, just trusted enough to do what everyone else didn’t want to and venture into the
outside, a connection, a drug runner, a negotiator, a networker. A smooth talker. By aid of his
own desperation for control took on more work than anyone else, making him stressed and erratic.
For the others’ part, they gleefully gave him this superficial power and silently withheld the
unspoken forces. Fond of power games but frequently folded under his own bluffs. Here he went
again - and there was a clear order to his introduction, echoing Phoebe reading from the tape;
Charles absently wondered if they’d pre-decided it.

“Um, William Murderface,” Magnus said, and gestured towards a young man of particularly
unfortunate features; squinted eyes, pug nose, a scar from a cleft lip. Murderface indeed! Would
that be Mordgesicht? Murderface, a doubter, a petulant child, someone for them to take care of, a
well-needed dissenting view at times, a troublemaker, an excuse to hurt someone. From the look
of the livid red scars that criss-crossed his exposed arms, an excuse to hurt himself too - Charles
didn't know whether to pity or deride him.

Give it to the boy, though; he shook Charles’ hand, his palm clammy, and said politely, “Charles.”

“William.”

“Pickles,” said Magnus, and gestured to the guy with the dreads, sat on a milk crate, and Pickles
eagerly put his hand out.

“Hey man! Heard so much about you. You know ol’ Lancelot Howard used to sing your praises,
dude. I didn’t put two and two together until just the other day either, but it’s you all right,” he
gushed, and shook Charles’ hand with a little too much enthusiasm.

“Oh, right – Edward L Howard? The entertainment attorney?” he asked, trying to focus on the
distant memory at the same time as picking Pickles’ game. “We were at Harvard together. I don’t
have much to do with him these days.” What was with this desperation to impress? Now that
Magnus had said the name, Charles knew exactly who he was and was sufficiently impressed
without the boot-kissing, but then it dawned on him, noticing the man next to Pickles, seated on a
corner armchair, stir – a big guy, long black hair, elbow propped on his knee and flexing his hand,
a bad and inflamed graze across his knuckles, the idle movement bulging his huge arm muscles
dangerously. His intense dark gaze was fixed on Pickles as he spoke to Charles, and it was only as
he had looked away from him that Charles had noticed he’d been being stared at before. God, it
looked like the fellow had punched a wall, the scabs all crusted across his hand in a dark speckle.

“Harvard!” Pickles affected the appropriate accent, delicately balancing his cucumber sandwich
posh and American Jewish, all mashed up in a bloody mess with his own Wisconsin slur, “Albeit
thEEEey possess the might, noon-the-less, we have the will!”
Charles couldn’t help himself, he chuckled. God, it was awful. “Quite,” he said, and left him to think he’d won. The show wasn’t for him, anyway; it was transparently for this huge gentleman by his elbow. He was desperate to be liked by the band, ergo, he felt his place was threatened. The ingratiating affability was slightly irritating and – oh, damn it, it was quite charming actually.

“And Nathan.” The big guy looked straight at him now, dead into his eyes. Offdensen didn’t even flinch, but seeing none was forthcoming, didn’t attempt to shake his hand either.

Nathan glowered through him, his unscathed hand crushed against his face glumly, and then said, “Hey,” in a voice scooped up from the gravel at the bottom of an underground lake.

“Hey,” said Charles.

“You’re short,” said Nathan, and then thought better of it, if the shifting of the tectonic plates within his brain could really be called thinking, “... I mean, for a lawyer.”

“I am aware.” Nathan looked up at him again and then quickly away, hiding his scalded emotion though Charles had caught just a scratch of it, the boyish vulnerability, and at that moment he knew, sizing up the massive man before him. You. It’s you. You’re in control. And suddenly he was quite looking forward to hearing more from them.

Magnus indicated he should take a seat on another scungy couch, circled by the band – Magnus sitting on the arm of the couch, not really with him but still possessive. There was that thing again; Charles realised he wasn’t the authority so much as he was Magnus’ toy, something the cat had brought in from outside which now must squeal enough to summon mercy or be put out of its misery. Frankly he didn’t care either way. Less work was less work. Magnus offered him another joint.

“No, thanks. Let’s just get this over with.” Charles finally opened the beer he’d been given, feeling all their eyes on him. “I think you’d best just tell me how it happened. I don’t think there’s much I can do, mind you; a claim of this nature has never been, ah, successfully brought to court. But Magnus assures my, ah, legal partner, Ms Soukoulis, that Dethklok is... ah...” and the derision dripped off his words, “Different. And I am willing to take the chance if you are.”

If Phoebe is.

“So you’d better just tell me.” He took a sip of the beer and found it utterly flavourless. Oh, he hadn’t missed being a student.

“It’s not our fault,” grunted Nathan, hunched over in rage, and Charles lowered his head.

“Well, yes, I had hoped so.”

The drummer, the glamour of a dozen MTV videos still dancing over his animated face and voice as he spoke, leaned in to speak on Nathan’s behalf. “Um, so – no one? Okay. So it’s like this. We’ve been doin well and all, all on our own, and we made this demo tape, right, at this little studio off Broadway. We paid for it all ourselves, we got some big offers on hold, ya know, just waitin, but this was all off our own backs. Wanted to go independent this time.”

He looked down at his sneakers, grinding a joint roach into the carpet anxiously. “So we get it all done, right, and we made a coupla copies and we left it on the multitrack overnight while we went out. When we get back the next day – bam! Someone broke into the studio and, dude, it’s all gone!”

To his right, Skwisgaar’s noodling grew frantic.
“They deleted the tracks, just left us with the lousy copies, and – get this – two weeks later, guess where it turns up? Motherfuckin Limewire! Linked offa Myspace! They couldn’t even use Napster?! It just... it feels bad, man.”

“Uh huh,” said Charles, wondering what the hell Limewire was.

“You see, they stole our demo,” explained Magnus laxly. “Then they put it on the Internet and the next thing you know, everyone’s got a free copy. We’re hearing about the ‘secret release’ of our own debut first hand and we don’t see a cent. To add insult to injury, it was obviously done out of spite – otherwise why delete it? All our hard work down the drain.”

“All right,” said Charles, “And who do you say is responsible?”

The band exchanged glances until Murderface finally spoke: “Her name is Em Haevnen.”

“Emma,” corrected Magnus quickly. “Emma Haevnen.”

“She’s the girlfriend of our manager,” growled Nathan, scowling at Pickles’ shoes. “She’s a total bitch.”

“That’s not... um, evidence in and of itself, you realise that right,” said Charles, and ten dim eyes looked up at him.

“It was on her blog,” offered Magnus, with Pickles chipping in:

“She is a total bitch though.”

“Okay. Well, in theory, that shouldn’t be too complicated, just a, ah... a bit of a long-haul, I suppose. Ultimately, it’s just a matter of getting the authorities to take your claim seriously, and flawed though the Thirteenth Circuit be... they do like a challenge. You’ll need to find people who can provide in-person evidence or witness statements, okay? You guys will do for a start, but anyone else who’s involved. Maybe your manager?” Charles frowned as he saw the men look at one another with concern. “Okay... well, anyone. And give me print-outs of all the Internet addresses these files were shared through; we’ll have to contact the companies that own them. And in the meantime, you can come down and file with the court. Okay? Magnus? Nathan?”

Nathan looked alarmed at being singled out, but he gave a stern nod. “Yeah.”

“For now, I just want you to go into as much detail as you can about what happened. I’m going to make some notes, okay. Any questions before we start?”

"Is it really - -" started Pickles, and Charles looked him dead in the eye.

"Yes. Exactly like Law & Order."

"That’s all." Pickles grinned at him, and Charles pulled his diary notepad out of his jacket pocket.

"All right. This should prove fairly straight forward, all things providing."

Famous last words, naturally.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter retrospectively edited for whole-work consistency 24.03.17.
“More Kafka, Charles?”

Charles lowered the book to look at Phoebe, and immediately noticed she was wearing a specific, high-skirted nightgown in contrast to her usual bed attire. One in the morning, a long, agonising day at work pouring over the books, and she came to bed looking like this, like a distant ship trying to flag him through the night. The intention was obviously titillation and he had luckily picked up on that though he had long since noted that he had ceased to feel titillated - or never had, more accurately, had never been remotely titilled in his entire life. Or he was pretty sure, anyway.

Phoebe felt titillated, and - looking over his glasses at her - he slowly realised he had probably invited this by neglecting to wear a top to bed. He hadn’t intended to, exactly, just been too stressed to remember to take one to the bathroom with him to shower. Of course that was embarrassing. He’d never had a problem with memory before - and the very thought sent a cold bolt through to his heart, shaking him deeply.

“It’s a long book, Phoebe. I don’t get much time for recreational reading,” he said, watching her placidly as she slipped onto the bed beside him. And yet - spook aside - he felt positive about the copyright matter and its quick procession towards hearing, he had the other matters at hand under thumb, and it had been a very long time since he’d truly had a moment of intimacy with his partner. In the… you know… sense. The Biblical sense. Everything had just been too - - too intense; all funerals and... all, let alone that he could hardly read the eulogy for his mother for the way the words caught in his throat like little bits of hot lead.

And just like that, sex had fallen to the wayside.

Phoebe kissed him on the cheekbone, her hand flattening on his open book and pushing it out of his hands. “Okay,” he said, reluctantly moving the book to the bedside table, “All right. I see how it is.”

“You’re smiling,” she said, and damn it, he was.

She was straddling his lap, that nightgown riding up quite pleasingly with his fingers teasing the lace edges as she lifted the glasses from his face and placed them gently aside on the bedside table, when their phone - inches from her dainty hand - started to ring. An arrogant noise - Charles reached for the receiver and Phoebe stopped him abruptly.

“Ignore it.”

He looked up at her, and Phoebe stared murderously through his skull.

“No. Ignore it.”
“It could be important,” he mumbled, and picked up the receiver, gently sliding out from under her.

“Important? Who in your life is so disrespectful to call at 1:30 in the morning, Charles?”

Charles held the receiver to his chest and picked up the phone, dragging the cord out from behind the bedside table as he crossed to the doorway of their ensuite, leaning his shoulder against it.

“Offdensen. Who is this?”

“Charles?” Phoebe repeated, a delicate simmer of furious and pleading, but he continued to ignore her as the other side spoke, a bad connection crackling down the line.

Charles, hey.

“Magnus?” Charles looked up at Phoebe, glaring daggers at him from the bed, and casually closed the bathroom door on her. He wasn’t sure whose voice he’d expected to hear at this time of night. No one needed his help anymore, no more calls from hospital. But Magnus? He’d given the musician the home number since he was only spending a few days a week in the office presently - but this was quite unacceptable.

Surprised you’re awake, man.

“Oh, you know. It’s a 24 hour job,” he grumbled, waiting to see where this went. He could hear a shrill voice in the background, then:

Uh, yeah. Yeah. Pickles asks who the lady was?

“Tell him it’s none of his business. Why are you calling me at this hour?” Charles sat down on the toilet lid, holding the phone on his knees, bared by his night shorts, as he waited for a good damn answer.

I wanted some legal advice. Charles heard a car start up in the background, a peel of manic laughter. You told us we need evidence, right.

Charles pressed the receiver closer to his ear, listening closer. He could hear Pickles laughing and yelling over the revving of the engine, but the connection was too bad to work out what he was carrying on about. After a long time, he said, “Yes,” his stomach plummeting.

What did you have in mind? Like, exactly?

“Well... well, you’ll need evidence of your music being uploaded, uh, the unique identifier of the computer that did it. You’ll need evidence that it was Ms Haeven’s computer that it originated from – and that Ms Haeven was the one who stole it from your studio.”

Uh huh, such as?

“I don’t know... CCTV? Look, can this wait? I was... kinda in the middle of something.” Charles rubbed his forehead, his migraine swimming back as the car revved into his ear.

Ah, yeah, it’s okay, we geddit, Charlie. He heard dumb shared laughter, sniggers, and felt ill. We’re on a... reconnaissance mission. Gonna scope out Ms Haeven, do a bit of... detective work.

The blood went cold in Charles’ veins as he stared into the bathroom door. “Magnus - - I - - tell me you’re joking.”

Magnus’ sick laugh purred out from the phone. Yeah, Charlie, I’m kiddin. Seriously.
“Look... it’s past midnight. Phoebe wants my head.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, blinking back the pain. “Please don’t call me at home after hours again.”

A long pause, and then: Phoebe?

Wait, wait... Phoebe? As in...

Yeah... Phoebe? Are you boning Ms Soukoulis, Mr Offdensen? He could hear Magnus’ grin, stretched wide as he lolled out the side window of the hot-wired car of Charles’ nightmares.

“My private life is not of your concern, Mr Hammersmith,” he mumbled tiredly, raking a hand through his hair, only to hear Pickles yap out: Slut! I knew it! I knew it from her picture dude, I fuckin knew it! What a slut!

Aw, give her a good stiff one for us, Charlie.

“Right. Goodnight, Magnus.”

Charles hung up, remaining sat with the phone in his lap for a moment as he held his head tight. Christ, why just now? Why right now? His brain pounded under the white bathroom lights; he had never been good with bright lights, lighting was such a delicate thing and Christ. They were absolutely going to sabotage the whole case, just after filing. Slowly he rose, taking a few aspirin capsules from the medicine cabinet with tap water before dragging the phone with him back to bed and giving Phoebe a hollow look. She crooked an eyebrow up at him, had definitely heard him take the aspirin. She’d been reading his Kafka novel.

“Sorry, Phoebe. Not tonight,” he muttered, and she just sighed as he slid in next to her and switched off the light.

“That’s okay. Goodnight, Charlie.”

* * * * *

He slept fitfully, poorly, before his call the next morning. Usually he and Phoebe would carpool, but a very early conference overseeing a client had called him out otherwise, leaving the Buick to avoid the ugly traffic and taking the train into the city for court. All the better; Phoebe was still angry at him despite her better nature and his migraine still ground at the whetstone of his brain like a blunt axe. But it quickly proved not as wise as it had first appeared.

Sitting on the packed train with his head in his hands, he was aware of someone watching him, big eyes – but when he looked up, the only person who looked remotely interested in anything besides a novel, phone, pager or newspaper was a group of teenage punk girls down the train from him, gossiping amongst themselves and still clearly in the previous night’s attire. He wouldn’t have thought they’d have anything to do with an old fogy like himself, but when he looked up, they made a very unconvincing show of not looking in his direction and whispering loudly.

What in the hell...?

This repeated itself twice before his stop came up, Charles standing uneasily on the moving train and hefting his briefcase as he moved early for the doors. In the glass panes of the doors, darkened by the tunnel, he could see his reflection, weathered, broken. And then broken, by a short, black-
haired, crop-topped and heavily pierced shadow.

Charles looked down at the girl’s layered face, and saw that she was clearly insane.

“Hey, you’re that lawyer, right?” she chirped, beaming at him. “Like, OMG, WTF. We were, like, totally just reading about you! That’s sooo, ah, brutal. Um, like, I know it’s, like, a big ask but... can you introduce us to Nathan?”

“Oh, I know, I know, that’s like, totally not cool.” She rolled her eyes, then leaned in to him. “But like, I can make it worth your time, if you give us his number?”

“I, uh, don’t - - ” His tongue was trying to crawl back down his throat away from her as the train screeched to a stop. Everyone in the carriage stared at them from behind their devices and reading material.

“I’m, like, totally serious. Wanna see my tits?”

“Uh,” said Charles, too late. She’d already lifted her top, just as the train doors opened on the scene and he stared back at two dozen faces in rush hour. He pushed past her abruptly, his heart pounding in terror as he made a quick escape into the crowd. In the split second of full frontal he’d been subjected to, he was sure he’d seen DETHKLOK emblazoned across her shirt front...

The barista made eyes at him over his coffee again following an otherwise unspectacular conference - to go, this time, considering his time constraints, unfortunately necessitating direct contact and innuendo from the young man. “There you are, Mr O, black, just like your metal,” indeed.

His boiling silence as he entered the firm was enough to shut Mhairi, their secretary, up tight. Not even a ‘Good morning Mr Offdensen,’ nothing. The girl was a quick one, cottoned on fast to people’s moods; one of the reasons he liked having her there despite her sharp tongue. Charles spent a good half hour seething in his office, pouring over evidence tampering in copyright violation decisions and hearing Phoebe laugh and chat with a visitor through the adjacent wall, before anyone dared interrupted him. Phoebe, poking her head in at his office door, instinctively aware of his foul mood with a shy, tired smile on her face.

“Charles? Herbie’s here. He’s, um- - got something you should see, I think.”

… what the hell did that mean.

Charles raised a questing eyebrow at her and then turned back to his paperwork. “Show him in then, I suppose.”

She must have heard his exhaustion as she let Vernon in without another word. Vernon, a choice idiot with a very low EQ, was in an exemplary mood as always.

“Charlie old boy! Good morning!”

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed,” muttered Charles, but slowly eased his people-person switch over to the bright, sunny and completely shut off setting Vernon was used to as he stood and shook the clammy fellow’s hand over his desk. As Vernon remained standing, puffed up like a lice infested subway cock pigeon, so Charles was inclined to also, although looking him in the watery eyes made him feel particularly damp and vile.
“Always a joker, Chuck. Seems like your little music dalliance is rather a big deal on the underground, did you know?” Vernon bubbled, and Charles noticed something clutched, a heavy print document furled up, in his left hand.

“I’m beginning to get that impression,” he replied amicably, not exactly smiling but not exactly not either, his headache - previously dulled by aspirin and coffee and good lighting - stirring in the back of his skull again. “Phoebe said you have something to show me, Herbie.”

“Indeed!” Sure enough, he unfurled the document - some sort of leaflet with a black cover, quite small, a home printing job by the looks of it. “My nephew dropped in on the weekend, presented me with this little number - - he’s wrapped up in that ‘emo’ stuff the kids are all into these days, you know, jean trousers too tight, big boxy glasses, filling their faces with metal in the ugliest fashion? He recalled you from that New Years function we had - remember?”

Charles did not recall, but he supposed they would have been introduced and nodded anyway. The New Years function had been excruciating; all of Vernon’s family members were infuriating down to a one. The night had passed in a blur until he’d left before countdown and went to his sister’s single apartment to sit opposite her under a bleak kitchen light, jazz on the radio, playing Crazy Eights and drinking straight gin, but god, he’d enjoyed that so much more than Vernon’s damn gene pool.

“Anyway, it seems you’re famous among the cool kids, Chuck.” Vernon laid the leaflet on the desk before him, opened to a poorly photocopied page, and Charles saw himself staring back from the ink. A photo from the firm’s promotional material. He sunk back into his seat, closing the leaflet briefly to read the title, then opening again to the short article that accompanied his copied photograph.

A word caught his eye. Then another. Slowly he rolled his eyes up to Vernon, leering down over him like a Cheshire. “You’ll have to forgive me, Herbie. I think I have to make a call.”

“Ah - - I thought that might be the case,” purred Vernon, retreating only once Charles got to his feet and delicately pressured him out with an uncharacteristic hand on his shoulder. “Still on for drinks on Thursday...?”

“Of course. Every Thursday, like clockwork. You know us. Good day, Herbie.”

Once the door was shut tight, Offdensen finally exhaled.

The receiver burned in his hand as dialled Magnus’ number, his fingers light on the buttons, sinking into his chair. With the anger boiling away in his head like mercury, he pinched the bridge of his nose as he waited entirely too long for the man to answer.

Finally it picked up with a spattering cough, and then a smashed slur:

_Uh, yello? This is, uhh, Magnus’ phone. Yeah._

Charles glared at the detail on his wallpaper in fury. “And yet, this is not Magnus,” he snarled through gritted teeth.

_Uh, oh. Hi, Charlie. No, this is Pickles._

“Mr Pickles, is Magnus there with you?”

_Uhhh... kinda - -_
“May I have a word with him, Mr Pickles?”

Pickles’ voice hesitated on the other side.  *Um, I’ll come clean with ya, Mr Charlie, he’s not really in a state to answer any questions… right now. Um… heh heh, big night, ya know.*

“Please. Mr Offdensen. Charles, if you must,” he hissed, “But I don’t suppose it matters, Mr Pickles - - ”

*Just Pickles, Charles.*

“Pickles.”

*I think I’ve made my point.*

“Quite.” Charles took a deep breath, cooling himself mentally.  “I don’t suppose it matters whom I speak to, Pickles. I submit to you - - ”

*Heh.* Offdensen seethed silently, his fingers twisting the corner of the booklet’s cover in destructive impulse.  *No, go on.*

“I suggest to you, Pickles, that I will not presume to enquire what you’re doing with Mr Hammersmith’s phone very clearly hungover and having just woken up, informing me that he is somewhere in your vicinity and in ‘no state’ to speak to his attorney, if you can answer some questions I have about a document which has arrived before me this morning?”

*Okay, sure. I can live with that. Thank you for extending such a, uh, charity to lil ol me… Mr Offdensen.*

“Please. I am in no mood to play games this morning, if you’d be so kind, for reasons which will soon become readily apparent. Quite aside from the fanatical of yours on the train who exposed herself to me this morning - - ”

*Exposed herself to you? Woah, du-ude - - !*

“ - - to add to that, a peer of mine and old friend, Mr Herbert Vernon, just dropped by my office with a periodical I’m hoping you are familiar with - - ”

*A - a what? Ew…?*

Offdensen could have slammed the phone down that instant. Instead, his knuckles whitened on the receiver.  “A periodical, Pickles. A document, a booklet, a small amateurly produced magazine or newsletter, appears to be produced via a lithograph machine or similar, black and white, half-letter size, about ten pages long, bearing the title *The Dethklok Minute*, are you familiar with this document?”

*Oh. It’s a fanzine, dude.*

“Charles.”

They’re everywhere. *You pay a little subscription for ‘em and they send them direct. We get ‘em but we don’t usually read ‘em, we ain’t that vain… yet.*

“Well… be that as it may, via Mr Vernon this so-called ‘fanzine’ has arrived on my desk and I see it has been in circulation for the past few weeks, publication date - - ” He opened the zine to check.  “ - - last Tuesday. And within there is a poorly typed article by some anonymous
journalist, and I use the word broadly and kindly, which - beyond being a massive breach of confidentiality and privacy, not just mine but yours also, you understand - asserts that I have connections to the National Socialist Movement, that is, in fact, that I may be a literal Nazi.”

Silence from the other side.

“So you understand that an otherwise lovely morning has been quite soured for me by your association, and I request that one of you, whoever is presently most conscious and reasonable, come down to my office immediately to resolve the issue.”

There was a long pause from Pickles, then finally a mumbled, Oh, shit.

“Oh shit indeed.”

Okay. Okay, yeah, fuck. I’ll be right in, um. I just gotta pull on some clothes and give Nathan a call okay, then we’ll be down. Fuck.

He hung up.

Half an hour later, the diminutive rockstar fronted up to his office, his face covered by large dark glasses and a backwards baseball cap, looking a damn fool in VENOM t-shirt, skinny jeans and sneakers, reeking of stale sweat and weed, and was that Magnus’ jacket hanging off his shoulders like a dead thing? He was hung over the front desk, flirting with Mhairi, until she sent him through, instantly sweeping his hat off as he came in the door and dropping into the guest chair with a thump and groan at the sheer effort it had taken him to get here. Charles was occupied looking out his window at the people passing below, didn’t acknowledge him at first, but gradually turned that cold burn onto him.

“No Nathan, huh,” he observed in chilling, quiet tones, and Pickles shrugged uselessly.

“He was busy.” It occurred only now to Charles, with the glasses and hat, that the beard had gone because of Pickles’ fame; together with the disguise, as lazy as it was, he was barely recognisable. As soon as he lowered the dark glasses, though, green eyes peering over them at the lawyer, there was another damn MTV close-up forcing its way into the edge of his mind.

“Uhhh... yeah, well... no...” Pickles clenched his hat in his lap as the lawyer towered over him, severely disquieted by the way the responsibility was being tied around his waist like the ropes before a keelhaul. “Nathan, he ain’t, um, got a job. None of us have jobs... ‘cept for Magnus and Murderface.”

“Magnus has a night job,” said Charles, staring steely down at the drummer. It could have been a question; it was a guess. Better with someone like Pickles that he didn’t know; more likely to gush information if he thought it was an open conversation. “Was that his house I attended last week?”

“Uhh, yeah, he does. Uh, no, that’s Mordhaus, that’s, uh, me and Nathan and Murderface mostly,
sometimes Skwisgaar. Like Magnus stays a lot, and like, he pays some of the rent cos, like, that’s our practice space, ya know...”

“And none of you have jobs.”

“The band is... is a job.” Pickles cowered beneath him, big eyes rolled up like some doll or toy, brightly coloured, ridiculous caricature of a human. Charles sniffed derisively; of course this man could say a band was a job. At least until he got hit by a car or overdosed or something, then they could see how far a heavy metal band went to covering the hospital charges.

Death metal. Whatever.

Pickles wiggled in his seat, pulling at his jeans legs like they were too tight on him. “Magnus takes the band, like... very seriously. I mean... it is serious. I been in a big band, ya know, you can tell when somethin’s gonna be serious and Dethklok’s gon be serious. Hell, it’s already pretty serious, but, like... Magnus really helps out. He really... wants it. You know. So if he wants to chuck money at it, that’s on him, I guess.”

Offdensen took the heat off him early, standing aside and picking up the fanzine. He opened it to the page in question, passing it to the man slumped awkwardly in his guest chair. “Here.”

Pickles only scanned it before looking up again at Charles retreating behind his desk, meeting his eye once the lawyer had sat down. A long silence stretched between them like sticky toffee before Pickles finally spoke, peering over his big glasses: “Uhh... well... are you a Nazi?”

But Offdensen just stared at him, his eyes like slits.

“I’ll go ahead and take that as a ‘no’ - - ” started Pickles, but Charles immediately jumped in with a curt “No.” of confirmation.

“Okay. So my question to you then, is, how someone gets this kinda idea about you... right...?” Pickles deposited the fanzine back on the edge of Charles’ desk, crossing his legs lazily in front of him. “These guys are hacks and super creepy, yeah, fuckin... go through our garbage bullshit. I dunno, we attract that kinda person I guess. But this stuff don’t come outta nowhere, ya know?”

Charles didn’t so much as blink, gaze levelled coolly on the rockstar as he squirmed and rubbed his head against his hangover in the chair before him. With no answer forthcoming, Pickles reluctantly met his gaze again. “I mean, I’m happy to call ‘em and tell ‘em to print a correction or something. Or we can call off the whole thing. I’m sure that’d be what Magnus would say. But ya see, that’d be like a free pass for him to go all stab happy on some poor fucker’s car or, or worse, and I mean, he says it’s a different person who stole our shit depending on the day of the week. I’m – like, I’m the one who wanted a lawyer. We need a lawyer, to deal with this. And I checked and they do say you’re the big hitter, uh, like you’re fuckin amazing, dude.”

“Charles.”

“... Charles. But see...” Pickles’ expression dropped to seriousness as he steepled his hands, touching his lips with his fingers cautiously. “I dunno... if I want a Nazi lawyer. All things considered.”

Offdensen stayed dead still, like an adder in wait, eyeing him.

“I told you all our stuff... so fess up, tough guy.” Pickles folded his arms definitively, the lawyer bristling before him. That ought to do it. For Offdensen’s side, he felt his brain in a vice; true, it served him right for getting personal before, but he didn’t need any of this bullshit in his life.
“You guys mentioned a manager the other day – any chance of speaking to him?” he asked eventually, and Pickles smirked, slimy with guilt.

“Good fuckin luck. He hates our guts.”

“I wonder why,” said Offdensen coolly, leaning back in his chair.

“Ehhh, it’s complicated. Me and Magnus do everything now. So come on.” He clapped his hands together sharply, sitting up and leaning towards Charles over the desk. “Spill. Promise I won’t tell.”

There was something about Pickles’ gaze, lucid and tired and eager for the throat, that got its hooks deep into Charles as he stared into him, waiting, hanging over his desk. He was trapped – carefully so, delicately – and this would have been the perfect opportunity to ditch these terrible people and get back to his normal clients, if it hadn’t been for the god damn Nazi accusations. If he dropped them now, he’d have to carry that, clear the air to even more people. Pickles held a screw in the middle of his spine and he hadn’t even tried.

Son of a bitch.

Charles straightened stiffly in his seat, his stare drilling dead into those big desperate idiot eyes. That pulled out longing, helplessness, like he was burning up the air around him. For such a thing, for blackmail, to fall straight into your lap – what kind of person had that just happen to them?

“My grandfather was, uh, associated with the National Socialists. He passed away when I was a kid but when I graduated, I felt obligated to help out some of his old business partners. I only found out the connection over the course of the case. This is going back nearly fifteen years now, but I guess that kind of thing sticks; I cut ties with them after I finished the job.” He could see Pickles rising in his seat, fascinated and hanging on his words. Charles grew even steelier in response. “I suppose being called ‘the Jew lawyer’ at every turn started to get to me, you know?”

Pickles’ eyes widened at him. “Ohhh... are you a Jew?” he asked, drawing out the vowel in the most excruciating way.

“Not in so many words, no.”

“... But...” Pickles ticked over on it visibly, leaning forwards. “I mean, it’s only one word, actually. You are or you aren’t, right - - ”

“I only agreed to answer one question.” Charles folded his hands on the desk conclusively, but Pickles just leaned forward further.

“I’ll tell you somethin else if you tell me if you’re a Jew.”

“No.”

“Oh! Magnus and I totally went to an orgy last night, that’s why - -”

“No.”

“Uhh, Murderface, ah, totally cuts himself. Really goes to town, I’ve seen him, it’s fuckin... intense. Cool, right?”

“Still no.”
“Oh, oh - I – I – my name’s... not really Pickles. Hey? Did you know that?”

“I knew. No. Just change the article, okay? And I’m happy.”

Pickles raised a sharp eyebrow and crossed his arms definitively. “Are you sure you know what that word means? Happy - -” he started, only to be cut off by a knock on the office door. In usual fashion Phoebe didn’t even wait for Charles to give her the go ahead, poking her head in anyway.

“Charles? Mhairi has that transcript copy, okay? I picked it up on the way back from the registry for you.”

Offdensen sighed, very aware at the way Pickles stared over the back of his chair at Phoebe’s pencil skirt with bare lust. “Okay. Thank you, Phoebe. We’ll be finished here in just a second.”

She nodded, giving a little grin of concern, and then smiled apologetically at Pickles. “Sorry for interrupting. I’ll leave you to it.”

As soon as the door shut, Pickles had affected that shit eating grin again, his eyebrows working overtime in Charles’ direction. “Gee. What a fox,” he sighed, and then leaned towards the lawyer again. “Ey? Eyy?”

“I’m not sure what you’re, uh, implying, Pickles,” said Charles, fully aware of what he was implying. “Ms Soukoulis is my business partner.”

He saw Pickles’ eyes scan across his hands quickly, a sick little smile tugging across his lips as he picked up the plain silver band on Offdensen’s finger. “Oh, I see. I won’t tell anyone,” he purred, and Charles arched an eyebrow.

“I don’t think there’s anything much for you to see, Pickles.”

“No.” Pickles slumped back in his seat, smiling. “I mean, sure would be a pity if The Dethklok Minute found out that you’re, like, married and - -”

“I’m not married. This is an engagement ring - -” He spoke quickly, but Pickles just rolled his eyes.

“Same difference. It’s still an affair.”

“I’m engaged to Ms Soukoulis, Pickles.” He watched placidly as the drummer’s face dropped.

Pickles turned in his seat, looking at the door again then back to Offdensen.

“Oh...” He paused, did the double take again. “Um...”

“I suggest you leave, Pickles. Sort out this article for me and there’ll be no trouble. I’m glad we could speak candidly about this, but now I have work to do.” Charles rose from his desk, moving to pressure Pickles out again, the drummer sprawled on his guest chair looking up at him, pleading.

“Um... no... uh...” he whinged, still glancing at the door, and then looked up at Charles. “Look. One dude to another, right? I’d be kickin myself if I didn’t tell you, like, I’m not that kinda person, okay. But...”

“What?” snapped Offdensen, standing over him, and Pickles wiggled guiltily below him. “Spit it out.”

“You know she’s fuckin someone else, right?” he managed, and Charles narrowed his eyes. “Um,
I don’t think it’s news that I’ve been round the block a bit, ya know... I can tell. Ya know? When a chick... it’d be different if you were just screwin her but... shit, I feel bad, man.”

“Get out of my office.”

Pickles got up quickly, swiping up his hat and the fanzine as he hopped to his feet. “I’m leavin. Okay. Sorry. See you next week?”

“Yes. Fine. Out.”

The door slammed behind him, and Charles held his head in pain. God damn these... infuriating - - the sooner he was rid of them, the better.

Chapter End Notes

long conversations: the fanfic

Brinepools, on request, illustrated Pickles' outfit in this chapter and did a fantastic job - a sneaky little git.
Offdensen glared over another resume at the awkward Klokateer before him. “You’re sure? You’ve checked the ensuite? Under the bedframe? Any, ah, misc piles of bedding…?”

“I’ve looked everywhere; he’s not in his room, sire. Sir. F--flip.”

Charles rose from his desk slowly, leaving the resume laid daintily between two teetering piles of the same - the read and the to-read, part one of six hundred. They were enlightening, to say the least. The current Klokateers, mostly old hardcore fans, were incompetent at best; by contrast, the sheer volume of resumes ensured a degree of talent amongst them - though to imply that Charles didn’t feel daunted by the task of deciding was grossly inaccurate. He had Amanda reading them too, constantly on the line with summaries of more promising candidates. Quietly, they had been bickering, with no severity, as the qualifications on the papers before them increased through law degrees, computer science, experience in the military - with Offdensen sneering down the line, “Amanda, could you bring up #2047 on your end? That can’t be right, can it? Don’t these people have better things to do than mop floors for a silly little band?”

But then he’d never really understood the fan obsession. Not really.

The Klokateer cowered as he crossed the room, muttering something like “Sorry, sir, I just - just did what you said - - ” but Offdensen had no discipline in mind nor - he thought about it, as he always did in these situations which seemed to be cropping up pretty constantly since moving to Mordland - had he ever, couldn’t recall ever doing anything worse than a minor demotion and a stern word.

“Uh, I’m just going to fetch him myself. Don’t worry about it. Do some filing or something, I don’t know,” he said in a way he thought reassuring, but it did little to put the Klokateer at ease. He had no intention to unsettle her; she was a good worker and he liked her - or he was fairly sure he did. They were all starting to blur into one now that the hoods were looser rather than the skull-tight balaclavas they used to wear. It was strange to admit he remembered his employees based on the contour of their skulls but - well, it was a strange industry.

“Ah, Sophie, isn’t it?” he tried in parting, and the Klokateer shrugged.

“Claire.”

“Right. Sorry.” So maybe he didn’t like her. He couldn’t even remember hiring a Claire.

It didn’t take him long to find Pickles once he was downstairs; sure enough he wasn’t in his room but Charles quickly noticed a change in furnishings, in fact a curtain twisted around itself in the hall on the way back up, a dark maroon fabric cocoon which - as he yanked it aside with all his strength given the knot’s considerable weight - yielded the drummer’s semi-conscious body. The drunkard hadn’t even made it to the bedroom, just curled up in the manchester against the encroaching cold
of the halls in the dead of night. How embarrassing.

“Pickle.” Offdensen nudged him in the side with the polished toe of his shoe, eliciting a mumble and a squirm. “Get up. You’re late.”

“Late? Ferrrrrrwhat?” mewed Pickles into the carpet. God damn it, it was that infantile voice again, a key stage on the Pickles Rational to Loaded Continuum. “I’m frenow… nojab, nomor, ‘m... rockstaah.”

“For a meeting you organised with me, Pickles.”

The drummer flopped onto his back, unsteadily focusing his eyes on his manager. “But you’re here,” he observed with a dumb smile.

“I am.”

“So… we’re meetin.”

The manager glared down at him and then simply turned away, heading back towards his office. “You either come to my office now or I’ll send someone down to move you there bodily, all right?”

There was a gurgle from floor level behind him, quickly rising as Pickles dragged himself to his feet with a moaned “All right! Fuck, whatever,” and staggered and swooned at Offdensen’s elbow as though towed by hooks, his head cradled in his hands. The manager dropped his pace to walk with him, shooting out a steadying hand to catch the drummer’s arm as he nearly collapsed again on the way through the recreation room, Pickles clutching the back of the couch as he righted himself from nausea.

His brain swimming in bile and alcoholic swill, Pickles raised his eyes to a television, mounted on chains and hanging from the ceiling. A small gaggle of klokateers gathered beneath it, channel surfing as another, clinging to the monitor itself, attempted to find the right plug for a new connection. He could feel Offdensen by his side, his calm hand on his shoulder, urging him away as the images flashed across his mind, but one caught his eye in particular to a dopey smile:

“Ohh… they lost her again. Whadda smarty-pants.”

“Ah, who?” Charles was humouring him with conversation, urging him up with only a brief desperate rush of clammy hands clutching at his suit sleeve as Pickles got his balance. When the manager cast a glance at the television, he saw a news program, broadcasting a photo of an androgynous woman’s face with the headline INFORMATION TRAITOR AT LARGE. “Huh.”

“This dude… usea work for the army, put all this stuff online ‘bout secret databases, y’know, fuckin… FBI stuff. They try to pull him in and he totally pops off the planet. Comes back, drops more data bombs, and get this, turns out he’s a total tranny too. She. Whatever. And she’s gone again, just like that.” Pickles tried to snap his fingers, but they just slipped across one another on his sweat.

“Oh. I’m afraid I’ve fallen out of the loop on current events, what with the big move and all.” Offdensen made a mental note to catch up with that. It felt important to him now to keep abreast of what was happening on the world stage, in a way that had not occurred to him in the past.

“That’s ooookay,” moaned Pickles, dizzy and uncalled for, and Offdensen gently nudged him along with a push to his shoulder.

When they reached the office, Pickles immediately collapsed in the guest chair, curling up on his
queasy stomach as the manager stalked around him to his rightful place behind the desk, framed between the piles of resumes, the greater, unsorted stack sleeted off the desk and onto the floor at least four foot high. “Oohhhh… don’t feel so good,” Pickles groaned, and Offdensen felt concerned for his new upholstery.

Pickles hiccuped.

“You had something to ask me in private, Pickles,” said Charles, a gentle nudge as to their purpose. The drummer rolled his head queasily, his uncentered gaze somewhere around Charles’ left ear.

“I did? Oh…”

“Something about your mail?” he prodded, and realisation seemed to dawn over the vast horizon of Pickles’ growing bald spot.

“Ohh! Ooh, yeah, I did! I do. Um.” His eyes unfocused, Offdensen folding his hands together with saintly patience. “Those letters… some of those letters, yeah. They were… a bit too creepy, ya know?” And he laughed, weirdly, unconvincingly.

“Mm, how so?” It was important to use open questions with Pickles. Allow him to incriminate himself. The drummer may have been sluggish on the reply but he’d gamely fill in the gaps for you, given enough time, and Offdensen had nothing if not time.

“Well, like…” Pickles gestured lamely with a limp hand. “They know something… they, like, write about things… they shouldn’t know. You know? About me. Stuff they shouldn’t know, about me.”

“For example?” probed the manager, gazing coolly at Pickles. If you kept that up long enough he eventually started to squirm, the snakes in his gut moving over each other wherever reactions weren’t emotional towards him - Pickles could navigate angry, he couldn’t deal with nothing. Sure enough, he shifted in the chair before Offdensen, shooting a paranoid glance at him in return before he went back to staring at his shoes like a scolded schoolkid.

“Like, say… my name?” said Pickles into his own chin, and Charles barely flinched, only narrowed his eyes.

“Your previous name, I’m assuming.”

“Yeah, my… my legal name. Whatever.” Pickles looked like he was going to vomit, swallowing his muttered words quietly. Charles looked over his charge and cleared his throat, moving a piece of paper in front of him over the desk to take notes. The new letterheads were looking nice.

“You know, ah, Pickles is your legal name, right?” he levelled at the drummer, an anxious, guilty look cast back over the guy’s pale and sweaty arm at him. “That’s all... that’s all official. Birth certificate and everything.”

“Oh, yeah.” Pickles curled in his seat, putting his arms around his knees awkwardly, his face pressed against his clammy skin as he thought. “Then... how...? Fuck, it’s too early for this shit.”

The drummer lolled his head into his arms as Charles frowned at him, pen poised over the paper. “You’re telling me someone is stalking you and they’ve used your former name for some purpose.”

“Yeah. And my brother’s. As a threat. They’re comin for me, dude...”
Offdensen put down the pen, deciding that while it made him feel very productive, it wasn’t actually particularly useful right now. Pickles stared haunted into the middle distance – now, it was **highly** unlikely that someone was actually coming for him, but someone clearly was rooting around in his closets, if you would. “I’m not sure what you want me to do,” confessed Charles, “We have security - - we have a whole country.”

“What if it’s not enough?” wheezed Pickles, and Charles just sighed at him.

“It’s a matter of the public record, Pickles.”

Pickles popped his face up over his arm again, glaring daggers this time. God damn, it wasn’t that early, but the voice which was definitely about to come out of the drummer was certainly too much to start his afternoon with.

“Then, like, make it not! Make it unpublic! You’re a lawyer, you can do that!” spat Pickles, then, bugging his eyes at the manager like a Pomeranian lapdog, “Don’t roll your eyes at me, I’ll fuckin fire you! That’s something I can do, I can - I can fire you! I own a country, I’m like a friggin king!”

“I, ah, was not rolling my eyes. Please do not fire me. That would be, ah... unwise.” Offdensen folded his hands before him again. He tried to make sure the band could see them at all times, lest he set off their various anxieties, but it didn’t always go according to plan. “Look, I’ll – I’ll see what I can do. You might own a country but it’s not the United States, it’s a... complicated process, you can’t even imagine how deep that rabbit hole goes.”

“And you’d know, would you?” said Pickles darkly, and his manager instantly cooled off to glacial silence.

“I said I’ll see what I can do, Pickles,” he said quietly, and Pickles slid off the chair, cradling his head as he struggled to his feet. That was as good as he was going to get and he knew it. "I'll see what I can do" was practically a yes, anyway, when it came to their manager. He had a way with people, with luck. You just had to convince him to ask.

"Magnus, do you think?” said Charles, quietly sympathetic, and Pickles shrugged, gazing off around the room in a daze.

"Magnus, Evelyn, who fucking knows? Could even be my brother or hell, just any random, I got a lot of enemies. You know that. This is a nice room. Did we decorate this?” the drummer asked as he drifted off, and Charles felt the pressure lift like a tourniquet off a bleed as the man dropped the topic and shuffled around the room, running his sweaty hands over Charles’ things.

"Some of it, yes. I’m still waiting on the last of the furniture to get shipped over, from the, ah. From storage.” Charles watched as Pickles opened a packing box completely uninvited, tearing through the masking tape in a way that was probably cathartic for him. It was full of records; no record player yet. That was still on its way from – from. From, not-home. From a storage container in another city. Mord... Mordland, was home now. Mordland. Murderland. He was trying to teach himself not to feel the little twang of contempt when he thought of it. Murderland. Sounded like a god damn Banksy installation - - ah, this was not working, so far.

Pickles went through his records in a very obvious way, pulling them out and tutting over them. “What’s all this prog shit, man? Fragile? Yes? Rush? It’s not even the good Rush, dude.”

Offdensen put up with this, just relieved none of them had discovered he owned a guitar yet, that none of them were curious or interested enough to find it. That could end only in being forced to
show them what he could play, and – though he was certainly nothing on Skwisgaar – could only end in high emotions, paranoia, weirdness. He liked them thinking he had no idea about music. Besides, he was no songwriter, could just verbatim copy riffs, which would inevitably end in ripping out some Robert Fripp rubbish and he’d never live it down.


Says the man who woke up inside a curtain this morning.

“Jazz, Coleman, Jesus. This shit is so old, dude, don’t you listen to anything new?” mocked Pickles, hefting The Turn Of A Friendly Card. Charles just huffed at him, outwardly fed up, inwardly chuffed at the attention.

“I, ah, I don’t have any time for new music, ah... you guys keep me busy enough.”

“Ha ha. Whatever,” said Pickles, digging further as he squatted beside the box, leaving a pile of records cascaded onto the flagstones. “It’s all old and shitty, should get ya some Wu Tang. Not a good record in here.”

Charles pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. “Mm. Well, I wouldn’t speak too soon - - ”

The words had barely left his mouth when Pickles unearthed No Time For Antivenom, the one Snakes ‘N’ Barrels album in Charles’ collection, and went ashen, quickly replacing it. He caught Charles looking at him from the desk, that yellow, hunting gaze like a sheep-killing dog, and cowered guiltily. “Let’s not, ehh, start on that, okay?”

“Very well.”

Pickles drew to his feet, leaving Offdensen’s records over the floor as he shuffled towards the door, his face drawn long and his arms around his shoulders. “Just fix it, or whatever,” he mumbled, his tongue lazy in his mouth, “I’m gonna go pass out in a pool of puke somewhere.”

“Uh huh, try to make it your own.” Charles flinched slightly as the door slammed, the acrid smell of Pickles’ sweat still hanging in the air wherever he’d passed. He waited approximately six seconds, and then called the secretary.


* * * *

YEAR ZERO

The phone rang.

Charles stared up at their bedroom ceiling, aware of Phoebe turning over to bury her face in her pillow next to him, of her dull scream of frustration smothered. But he hadn’t been asleep anyway.

He let it ring out, closing his eyes again as he lay perfectly still, feeling Phoebe’s movements through the mattress. The snap of the receiver as she snatched it up and slapped it onto his chest,
the plastic a pressure through his nightshirt on his tightening ribcage. He had planned to just lay there, playing corpse, but in the dark and silence, Phoebe curled up with her pillow around her head beside him, he could hear a voice coming tinny through the earpiece.

Shrill, like a mosquito. He stirred, taking the receiver into a stiff hand, and raised it to his ear, in case it was Pickles, he supposed, because who else. Who else. There had been a note on the firm door in the morning, in a childish hand, in biro on the back of a gentlemen’s club flyer, sOrrY aBOUt THe JEW thiNG. Pinned into the fine wood with a notice board tack and a twenty dollar note. Like he could just be paid out like that. Like it was all okay, just like that.

Ignoring how... how not okay it was.

It wasn’t Pickles, though. Someone screaming, a woman screaming; Charles sat up as he tried to hear what she was saying, putting aside how unsettling that sound was, a woman screaming. She wasn’t being hurt but she was in pain. There was a difference, this pain – like hearing Beth in the bathroom, screaming – not at him – like a recording he’d heard in court, listened to over and over in his office, closing himself off to it so that when they played it, the woman shaking in the witness box, he’d just stared at the Bar table, not even thinking.

YOU SON OF A BITCH, YOU FUCKING SON OF A FUCKING BITCH, WHY the FUCK are you DOING THIS to me? This has NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU - -

Charles pinched the bridge of his nose. Ah, right. So Ms Haeven had gotten her paperwork.

FUckING COWARD GOT A FUCKING LAWYER INVOLVED? FUCKING, FUCK! YOU COCK-SUCKING, MOTHERFUCKING, INHUMAN - - - INSECT.

“Ms Haeven,” he mumbled, but she wasn’t listening. Of course not. This was the exact reason he’d given up on anything except industrial cases. This and – and literally everything else about this damn case.

YOU WANT THE TRUTH? YOU WANT EVIDENCE? I CAN GIVE YOU EVIDENCE, MAN! The woman paused, her breathing heavy, and Charles finally got a word in edgewise.

“This is a private number. I have to ask you not to call it again.” He could feel Phoebe looking at him and glanced over his shoulder at her, the way she glared up at him from the sheets, mouthing, It’s not them? at him angrily. He held the receiver to his neck as he answered her: “Ah, it’s... related.”

Phoebe put the pillow over her head and turned away dramatically.

PRIVATE NUMBER? PRIVATE NUMBER?? LISTEN HERE, YOU FUCKING - - SUIT FAGGOT, YOU CAN’T TRUST HIM. HE’S RUINING MY GOD DAMN LIFE AND, I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHY THE FUCK HE CARES. YOU CAN’T TRUST HIM, GOD FUCKING HELL! Maybe he won’t pay you or just JESUS! I DON’T DESERVE THIS!!

Panting down the line. Charles did what he always did: waited it out.

But I don’t suppose you care, god damn... lawyers, god damn, GOD DAMN. You’re all the same, self-interested, fucking, bottom-feeders, I hope you die sad and alone in the middle of a messy divorce, you piece of shit. Hang yourself from your fucking cubicle wall.

He gave a huff, a created memory of the bright 70s neon lights in his father’s office blazing briefly inside him like a struck match.
“Please do not call this number again, ma'am,” he said again, hoarse, and *yeah, fuck you*, said Ms Haeven, and he hung up on her.

Charles felt Phoebe’s hand touch his arm, just lightly, as if she’d heard what was said, but he was already rising from bed, ignoring her, drifting like a sleepwalker into the lounge. There was no point in going out to him. She’d tried in the past, knew exactly how she’d find him if she bothered, standing like a dead tree or bent over in the armchair, his hands over his head and unresponsive.

**Chapter End Notes**

Chapter edited for whole work consistency 24.03.17.
It was, of course, in the minutiae that the real difficulty with dealing with the band came. Like shards of fiberglass or asbestos; the boldfaced insults, abuse, didn’t bother Charles much. If it weren’t for their poor timing, even the home calls wouldn’t have bothered him - no, even - he was quite happy to be woken at obscene hours for advice or a slurred conversation or even to be yelled at by hysterical defendants and how did she get his home number anyway? But it upset Phoebe, and that was the detail, and that was what he couldn’t stand.

Likewise - using these slurs against him, he’d heard them all and from scarier people, gotten a thick hide against them. But offering him money to ignore it was deeply insulting (he’d ended up giving the twenty to a youth begging on the street on his way home). Magnus’ throwaway comment about his sister, Ms Haeven’s about his father, and all with Vernon breathing down his neck, quick to mention his father and what a good man he was, what a good lawyer, despite having never known him beyond the paperwork. Hell, Charles had hardly known him. Perhaps it was - no, it was definitely part of the conspiracy to make him suffer as much as possible, comparing him to that man at every opportunity. Vernon didn’t know what he was doing, what nerves he was touching, just trying to quietly shame him. There were other factors at play.

Another point: it was really outside of standard practice to meet a client at their place of residence rather than his office, but attempts to gather the band anywhere except for Mordhaus had proved as easy as holding cockroaches in one’s fist and just as unhygienic. He was forced to venture into the heart of the warehouse district again, though not without a call ahead to arrange with Magnus to leave a space in the garage for the Buick this time. When he arrived, the band’s respective cars moved out into the street parking, the guitarist had been waiting there, draped like a scarecrow, to guide his parking attempts into the cramped spot, the garage otherwise filled with horded trash.

Magnus tapped on the car window and Charles obediently wound it down for him, that gaunt, haunted face inches from his own. He couldn’t help feeling eyed, like a mouse peering out of a hole in the skirting board at the yellow eyes of the housecat. Magnus had been nothing but respectful thus far - only rarely and by accident offending him - so why did he get such a bad feeling from the guy? But Offdensen was a lawyer; he knew when to trust his instincts, and trust them he did. He remained wary of Magnus, the diplomat.

But all Magnus said was, “Sorry about the mess,” with a weird smile. “We all just leave our shit in here between apartments, you know?”
Charles wound the window back up and managed to disembark, squeezing through the narrow gap allowed as the car door flattened against an upturned couch. “That’s fine - ah. That’s fine,” he mumbled, and shook Magnus’ hand awkwardly, his suit sleeve catching the window of the Buick. “Thanks for accommodating the, ah, ol’ gas guzzler, anyway.” Much as he loved that damn car, perhaps it was about time to downsize to a little Toyota or something. Phoebe was always going on about hybrids, after all.

“Least we can do.” Quite. Charles let Magnus usher him out, pulling the garage roller door closed on his beloved car with flakes of spray paint from graffitied slurs peeling from the metal and falling at their feet in colourful specks, then lead him upstairs to the unit. Back through the dank corridor - the beer had improved in quality this time by about a rung, a chilled bottleneck cooling his free hand as the other curled anxiously around his briefcase handle, as if they could read his mind - and in the red lit room again, occupied by the band in various states of consciousness and draped over the furniture.

“Charles.” This was Pickles, appearing by his elbow in an ambush and holding out another - what had he called it? Ah - fanzine, a new edition. “Present for you. I had a chat to them. Nice enough kids; anyway, it’s all fixed.”

Intrigued, Charles reached for the booklet, getting as far as, “Oh, ah. Thank - thank you, ah, Pickles, for th - - ” before he felt a cold edge of steel touch his throat. He stopped dead, freezing his body mid-reach, as he felt his adam’s apple move against the long blade of a knife that rested on his sharp collar, subtly curved against his jugular.

“For that,” he finished quietly, and did a quick headcount, then murmured, “Magnus,” the blood rushing to his brain and throbbing the vein against the knife. “Kindly remove, ah, your knife, from my neck, please.”

He couldn’t see the man, stuck as he was looking at Pickles, a fiendish grin at his expense splitting the drummer’s girlish face as he cast aside the fanzine, but Charles could feel Magnus standing right over his shoulder, heard his voice in a hoarse purr by his ear. “Your pistol, Mr Offdensen.”

“Oh,” said the lawyer, tensing as Magnus’ fingers curled around his collar, pulling him close. He heard Nathan, looming in the corner, make a strange rumbling sound, but the others remained silent, the tinny shrieks of black metal on a cheap stereo the only thing breaking the oppressive, animal heat silence. The young man called William glared at him like he’d been personally hurt, but had a knife in hand as well; the Swedish mute’s eyes were wide on him across the room, looking like an eagle, half-turned away to avoid the confrontation. And Pickles smirking. Like they’d planned it. And they had planned it, foreseen it, put something in both his fists to prevent him reaching himself. Damn it, he’d been such a fool.

“Pickles,” growled Magnus, and Charles held his breath as the younger man obeyed, clutching a handful of his jacket as though to drag it off his shoulder and then snaking his hand down one side of his body - to no reward and Charles’ intense discomfort - and then the other to the pistol, resting flat against his side in its holster. As soon as Pickles’ clammy hand had fished it out, Magnus dropped his grip on his collar and lowered the knife, allowing Charles to drop his freeze. Only barely. He ran his fingers around his collar, straightening it on his neck, the cold cap of the beer bottle in his palm nudging his skin.

“Aw, cuz I put away the shotgun, borrow me a Glock. Self-defence turns to the offence! Loaded, too,” cooed Pickles, sing-song, playing with the sleek black pistol, turning it over in his hands and pulling back the slide. He aimed it experimentally at Charles, not getting so much as a flinch for his troubles, and then waggled the muzzle at the lawyer. “You don’t do nothin by halves, do ya,
“Not if I can avoid it, no,” said Charles quietly, keeping a still, watchful eye on his gun as Pickles passed it on to Nathan, who felt for its weight, tiny in his hands like a cereal box toy, then Nathan to Skwisgaar, and then Skwisgaar with unmatched ambivalence to its final resting place in Murderface’s sweaty palms. As with Pickles, Charles could tell as soon as the bassist got his hands on the weapon that he was a firearm enthusiast, inspecting it closely for its marks and form.

“William,” said Magnus, and Charles got the weird feeling that he was in a court in kind, that same seasick feeling turning deep within him. That had been Magnus, presiding like judge and executioner with a wicked hunting knife in hand, granting William permission to speak. But Nathan’s presence still radiated a dark power from the corner of the room, an unspoken understanding that he was in charge - so who gave Magnus the right?

He just couldn’t work out these boys…

Ah… men, that was. Young men.

“He’s not messing around,” relayed Murderface, and a little part of Charles dropped the last hope he’d had as the bassist pulled the ammo out of the firearm. “This is a fuckin... gangster gun. Motherfucker.”

Magnus was looking at him now, dog-eyed, for explanation, and a Bar table nausea ran over the lawyer. Now that he had the chance to properly take in that hunting knife, a gutting notch in the top of its blade, he felt his head spin slightly at how close it had been to his throat.

“I’ve had dealings in the past, in my career, with some, ah, dangerous characters, gentlemen,” he said gently, and Pickles made a weird, high pitched noise at him.

“El Blanco ring a bell?” he said cockily, raising an eyebrow, and Offdensen levelled a cool stare at him.

“Right, and why do you ask that?”

Pickles groped for his beer and Charles reluctantly handed it over, but the drummer only popped it open using a drum key from his pocket and returned it, smiling sheepishly up at Charles and tapping the side of his nose. “I useta buy coke off that bastard. We’d have a chat while I was checkin it. Don’t tell anyone.”

“And in these chats, he mentioned his lawyer,” said Charles, suspicious, and he realised he wasn’t the only one on that side of the fence as Magnus betrayed a strange twitch, twisting his lips to the lawyer’s right hand side. He hadn’t been told this information – he’d worked out the gun on his own. Jesus, they’d function better together if they weren’t all trying to hoodwink the others.

“Ah-h! You just admitted it,” sneered Pickles eagerly, and Charles stared them down, meeting one set of watchful eyes then another as he looked around the room.

“I don’t have anything to hide, gentlemen.”

“Shoulda put the Glock down, now they got me in lockdown,” teased Pickles, padding around the room to his kit, and Charles met Magnus’ accusing gaze.

“You told me you were a human rights lawyer,” growled the guitarist, Nathan sluggishly crossing his arms beside him. In the background, Pickles was rooting around for something in the belly of his kit.
“I am a human rights lawyer,” said Charles, robotically.

“And you work with Nazis,” asked Magnus, arching an eyebrow in a nasty curl, “And... Mexican drug lords.”

“I am a very good human rights lawyer,” said Charles. Pickles had emerged with a very large bong and a stash case, which he kindly turned a blind eye to. Assumedly, that was the point. “But in point of fact, those were both in my, ah, district attorney days, before my post-graduate studies, which account for the human rights specialty.”

“Right,” wheezed Magnus, and William was pointing the gun at him again. God, did he have to? “Whatever. You had something for us, Offdensen.”

He’d started on surname terms. Charles wasn’t trusted. That... wasn’t good. “Paperwork. A briefing,” he replied shortly, hefting the briefcase, “On your case, as it stands. Where we go from here. And what I need from you.”

Magnus indicated that he should sit on the lounge between Murderface and Pickles. "This is gonna take a while, ain't it?" asked Pickles, and Charles didn't deny it. The drummer shrugged it off, unzipping the case beside him as he began to get comfortable. "Oh. Figured. You want - no? No problem. I just don't wanna be sober for this."

He was sandwiched neatly now between the muzzle of his Glock and the gargling of the bong. Oh... his suit was going to reek. This was every reason he'd given up criminal, right here on these sunken couch cushions. Magnus and Skwisgaar sat opposite on the amps, with Nathan exiled to his arm chair again, and Charles couldn't shake the feeling he was being mobbed.

“Ah,” he started, popping open the briefcase on his lap, “Well. What you have to know is that the paperwork I walked you through last time, Nathan, Magnus, is for a matter before the District Court. I attended the first directions hearing and they want to push it ahead quickly, which is good for us. Ideally we'd follow that with a proceeding in the Supreme Court, but that relies heavily on the court's decision in this matter – but some, ah, matters of significance have come to my attention in the meantime.”

He pulled out a number of stapled documents, feeling William push the gun harder into his side as the younger man peered closer at them, pig-eyed. He'd stirred at the mention of the hearing, ready to attack Charles for not inviting them. As if he hadn't. They just ignored his emails and calls, except when they were at two in the morning, apparently. “Ah, these are some of the relevant authorities in this matter – that is, cases that have gone before and established the legislation. For example, Metallica v Napster... you've probably heard of that one.”

Charles lowered the lid of his case to spread the documents on it, a makeshift desk. “In all the other cases, ah, A&M v Napster, MGM v Grokster, Betamax – really, they're giants suing giants. A small entity like Dethklok doesn't have a hope in hell, if you'll, ah... excuse my French. But more relevantly, it's been brought to my attention that Lime Inc – that's the people behind the dispersion of your demo, gents – are currently the subject of a lawsuit brought by Crystal Mountain Records. I don't know if you've heard of them, but they, ah... they're a big deal.”

“We've heard of them,” said Magnus, playing with his knife in a guarded manner, twisting the tip of the blade against his thumb as he listened. He did not elaborate, no matter how Charles cocked his eyebrow.

“I propose we contact Crystal Mountain and attach our claim to theirs,” he said, meeting Magnus’ steady gaze, but Magnus said nothing.
“All right. Well. In matters similar to this, the perpetrators have wound up looking at hefty fines, compensation, and up to two years, ah, imprisonment. In order to reach that, there are a few things you need to establish for the court. First, that you had anything to lose – that is, that there was anything to steal in the first place. I need evidence that you created these files and that Ms Haeven and, I notice you added your manager’s name on there, so... you have to prove that they were the ones who stole them.”

“Simple,” said Magnus with a shrug, and Pickles blew a huge cloud of smoke across the top of the briefcase mockingly, drawing Offdensen’s cool gaze.

“Yeah, we been workin on that.” Pickles sunk into the couch beside him lazily, bogarting the bong until Skwisgaar suddenly reached forward, like a snake strike, and attempted to pry it out of his hands. Charles ignored them.

“Right. Well, you had better gather what you’ve got and bring it down to my office as soon as possible, okay? We’ll need to prepare witness statements... proposed exhibits. Et cetera.” Beside him, William had helped himself to the authorities, reading them closely. At least the gun had been removed from his side. “Um. Secondly, you need to prove that you can be compensated... so to speak. I mean, you need to prove that you lost money by having these files uploaded. And as far as I can tell, Dethklok, while an agreed entity between you, isn’t a registered company. You haven’t paid any taxes, you haven’t got, ah, anything. Frankly. You really should do that.”

Charles shot Nathan a meaningful look, figuring he’d get further with him than with Magnus, and the hulking frontman looked away stiffly.

“But for our purposes, ah, I need anything you have relating to your income as a band. Merchandise sales, ah, distributor deals, venue payments, promoter contacts, receipts, anything.” He opened the briefcase again as William passed back the authorities, glanced around at them, and Pickles, having lost his bong to the Swede, pouted back beside him.

“That’s gonna be... a lotta work. You want us to hire an accountant?” he asked, big cartoonish eyes up at him, and Charles made a soft, nasal sound.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Huh?”

“I, ah - I am a certified accountant.” No sooner had the words left his mouth than Pickles had slapped his hand hard on the lawyer’s back, patting him proudly.

“Fuckin – ain’t no one trick pony, are ya, Charlie? Shit, it’s like twenty-six for the price of one!” he hooted, and Charles just narrowed his eyes, letting the idiot flap his hand around on his shoulder and then go back to bickering with Skwisgaar. Nathan was watching him again, so patient and brooding; every time he met the big guy’s gaze it seemed to pull him in, and then Nathan would break it, glancing away again. And it felt... wrong. Weird. Like a magnet. Drawing him in, sedating something deep within his soul. He questioned briefly if he’d been secretly gay this whole time, but quickly realised that wasn’t what this was at all. No... something much stranger.

“You should get those documents, anyway. I can wait,” he said, shaking it off. He’d expected Pickles to scamper off after them, so much a runner boy as he seemed, but the man had fallen quiet by his side and when Charles cast a glance towards him to check, found the drummer staring back resentfully at him, the bong cradled in his lap again.
“You sure you can wait? It’s nearly five. Won’t Phoebe be waitin for you?” asked Pickles, his voice lilted annoyingly, and Charles shut the case abruptly.

“No, she’s - ah, out with friends, this evening,” he said, and he felt something brush his hair behind his head. His hand raced up automatically to check, but found nothing – beside him, Pickles snickered, the rest of the band smirking back at him. What - - but the lawyer met Magnus’ steady gaze, unmarred by smirk, as the man silently raised his hands in the shape of the horns to Charles.


It was Magnus who stood, too, like an unfolding ironing board, and staggered out, hooking his hand on the doorframe as he left. “I’ll just be a second. Gonna fetch that mail we got. Don’t give him his gun back.”

It was going to be a long evening.

* * * * *

YEAR THREE

“Is this, ah... really the best you could do?”

Offdensen regarded the milling ranks of the new Klokateers from the side of the stage. He did not like what he saw, which was evenly divided into security guards and nerds, as far as he could tell. He knew that was rich coming from himself but, well – god, they were a sorry bunch, weren’t they?

The hooded assistant to his left – Claire? – just shrugged, too cowardly to speak back to him, and he brushed it off to mount the podium. It took a couple of coughs into the microphone to get their attention. “Excuse me. Excuse me? We’ll begin now.”

Three or four dozen dim eyes alighted on him. He was getting used to that now, but the sooner he could get hoods over these faces the better - - wait. No. He didn’t think that. It was good to be interacting with so many bright young people, people who could teach him things too, move the company up and onwards. That’s why he’d selected them. He didn’t want to just cover their faces up, turn them into numbers...

“Well. Um. So, ah, thank you all for coming. It’s, ah, really a privilege to get to work with some of you,” he began, kicking himself immediately for the some-of-you bit. “All of you, really. I understand many of you are wondering what’s really, ah, happening here, I mean, you all applied of course... but, ah, whisked off to a, ah, spooky castle in some obscure new country, I understand that may be overwhelming. But I assure you this is all part of the greater, ah, conception for Dethklok’s future, as a band and, well... as a lifestyle, for so many people, including many of you in this room today."

He cleared his throat again, awkwardly. God, they were just staring. “You’ve been selected out of the many thousands of applicants because your qualifications, on paper, were exemplary. This is an unmatchable opportunity, to live within a new economic structure, to ensure your own and your family’s wellbeing, and to work a career that’s both fulfilling and rewarding, for an organisation that most of you admire. We – we’ve gone above and beyond to provide you with what you’ll need
to be comfortable here in Mordland. And I know – I know it’s weird. But, ah, if you can put your trust in me, in us, we won’t let you down. Okay.”

Charles moved aside a sheet of notes, frowning down at it to avoid having to make eye contact with all those pointless faces. No, there was a point. Damn it. “Now, I don’t believe in nepotism, and so you’ve been chosen on the basis of your experience alone, and, ah – don’t make me regret that. Hmm. But, well, in order to establish, ah, which of you were, ah, embellishing the truth and which of you were honest, ah, we have prepared a series of tasks relevant to your proposed experience. Once these tasks are completed, you will enter our ranks as Klokateers. The next few weeks will be some of the most trying of your lives. But keep your eyes on the reward, and, ah... I’m sure you’ll make it, anyway. All right. Clara here will divide you into groups and I’ll, ah, be around to give you guidance shortly. Right. That’s all. Thanks.”

And applause. Dull, weak applause from weak, floppy hands, or like hams slung together from the more militant individuals. He’d made a mistake. Should have just hired four dozen lawyers like he wanted to, deep down. But no. There was a point. There was a plan. This was what he’d been asked to do: keep them safe.

The assistant Klokateer leaned towards him as he stepped down from the podium, and he fancied she wore a frown beneath her hood: “Um, by the way, sire, it’s Claire.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” Christ.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later and he was in the control room, escorted in by Clara – um, Claire – with his hands unconsciously held behind his back as he watched the dark screens come to life in sinister red under the hands of five of the applicants, the first five he had selected.

#2487, claiming to be an infamous system hacker, in reality a weedy, spotty young man with a green dyed fringe and an under bite. #3336, a systems entrepreneur fallen upon bankruptcy following a series of lawsuits against his technology not unlike the ones Dethklok themselves had pursued. #221, only a teenager, a Mexican girl fluent in every programming language who claimed to dream in code. #688, an online bank, ah, liberator who had turned out to be Danish in the end. And #3491, a pasty young person of indeterminate gender, a code cracker, a programming architect, broke into the secure systems of the globe’s governments for fun. And all of them had submitted themselves, their crimes, to the mercy of Dethklok just like that. It was almost suffocating.

He didn’t even bother with the introduction. No point in the niceties at this stage.

“Bring up Chantelle Hillam,” he ordered #3336, and the young man obliged, lighting up the screens with that same image he’d seen on television before. INFORMATION TRAITOR AT LARGE. He let her linger a moment, in her very specific beauty, dewy eyes, nervousness, anonymity.

“Your task is to find her and bring her here. We will provide you with everything you need, but I’ll be supervising you at this stage. Once you’ve completed your mission, you’ll be inducted as Klokateers.” Charles’ voice filled up the cramped room, made him larger than himself in that moment, unused to that kind of military authority. “That will be all. Thank you. You may
commence.”

So it began.

Chapter End Notes

fanfictions are not good places to get legal advice, for the record. the author is but a hobbyist.
The phone rang.

It wasn’t quite so late tonight, but Charles was already in bed, side light off and with a pillow half over his head, when the call came. His migraine had resurged particularly savage that day, another preliminary hearing - this one jurisdictional, with a dozy Magnus sitting up the back of court - stretching him weak with its bright phosphorescent lights and the feedback of Bar mics, the tinny edge to the voice of the judge and defence counsel, a law clerk he swore he recognised but couldn’t put a name to. An overconfident young man representing for another firm on permission from his instructors, but the fuzz in Charles’ head had been too hysterical for him to catch who. God, what was happening to him? Nothing was as it should have been.

He’d gotten back to the apartment and attempted to work on the band’s accounts in his home office, lazily presented to him in the form of garbage bags and sneaker boxes full of unopened letters, receipts they’d managed to come up with, and an envelope with the names of every distributor they could remember giving their merch to. He’d even been given the band’s email password, a perhaps inappropriate display of trust, but as soon as he’d tried to access it that evening he’d come face to face with nigh on a thousand unread emails and his head had just swum with the effort, the migraine stretching its tendrils over his consciousness like a black dog, its teeth sunk like needles into the stem of his brain.

So he’d called an accountant colleague and promised to outsource it once he’d done the groundwork, the assembly of the terrifying corpse of Dethklok’s accounts. He’d need the expert witness for the hearing anyway. By this point Phoebe had returned home, coming into his office with her keys chiming around her fingers and catching him with his face in one hand, glasses in the other, massaging his temple with his paper-dry fingers, and she’d kissed him on the cheekbone and rubbed his shoulders and told him to finish early. They’d had a glass of wine together and he’d attempted to finish his Kafka, but the headache split into him so badly he’d retired with a dozen aspirins and a shower with the lights off. Phoebe had soon joined him in bed. Maybe she’d wanted to make love - he’d noted her perfume earlier, humid on her wrists and collar, her tender touches - but there was no way to move his focus on beyond the screwing ache in his brain and he lay in the dark, kept awake by the pain and her reading light on the other side of their shared bed.

And now the phone rang.

For once in his life, Charles stilled every protesting fibre of his being and ignored it, the sound
ripping through his headache like a box cutter. Their phone rang seven times before it went to the machine - he had counted, trying to determine how fast he needed to catch it - and it had gotten to six painful, awful cries for attention before Charles felt Phoebe move over him, saw her slender hand pick up the receiver, her voice distant, soothing, in his head as she answered for him, “Hello?” Unlike Charles, Phoebe never gave her name first outside of office hours.

Their receiver was loud - and Charles no idiot, retreating to the bathroom traditionally when he got night calls, aware that Phoebe could hear the other side if she listened closely - and he fought the fog of his migraine to eavesdrop on her conversation. But this proved challenging; the other speaker had a deep voice he could barely hear, only just making out Offdensen carried still from the receiver.

“Yes, he’s not available right now. Can I take a message for you?” asked Phoebe, and Charles felt her run her fingers idly through his hair at the nape of his neck, exposed below the pillow. This time another voice, one woefully recognisable in lisp and liquidity, sounded out clearer over the first. Huh… had they called him on conference?

Not available?? How can he be not available?? It’s Wednesday night! Who are we speaking to?

“I could ask the same,” replied Phoebe snippily, and the dark voice spoke again, lost in the transmission: Uh, … Nathan Ex… … … Dethklok … …

And William. I’m here too, and I’m in Dethklok too.

… … … Offdensen … lawyer … … … uh, clients. … … … speaking to?

Charles pulled the pillow a little further over his head, and Phoebe’s manicured nails stroked through his hair as if to calm him though he felt only further woken for the touch. “Okay. You’re speaking to Phoebe Soukoulis; I’m Mr Offdensen’s partner and fiancée. It’s half an hour to midnight on a Wednesday and you’ve called Charles at home; did it not occur to you this might not be the optimal time to disturb him?”

He said, I believe it was, ahem, a direct quote, ‘Lawyers never stop working,’ said William, his voice like a rusty knife through the poor connection.

“It’s a figure of speech,” replied Phoebe, pissily. “He has to sleep sometime.”

Uh, Ms Soukoulis… … Phoebe … … cos … … … having a party and … … …

“On a Wednesday night?”

Charles turned over onto his back at this, looking up at Phoebe’s scowl as she spoke to the musicians. Who on this great and unforgiving earth invited their lawyer to a party? He’d been under the impression that the band had lots of friends - Jesus Christ, at least that they knew people their own age, fans or what have you. He’d been invited to his share in his youth, his district attorney days, being young and single, wealthy and handsome, but those were long, long gone. The best he could hope for now that wasn’t fellow senior lawyers and accountants (and mind you, he’d alienated plenty of them as well) was dinner with the police commissioner and his wife twice a year.

And since his mother’s passing, even those lawyer parties had been few and far between…

Ahhh, it’s a TV party, it’s different, we got Skwisgaar to bring his big TV up and we got some horror flicks and booze and some chicks so it’s a party!
Phoebe paused to compose herself, aware of Charles’ gaze on her now. Silently, she reached down to take his hand, resting on the covers, holding it gently as she proceeded. “With respect, Mr Murderface, he is your lawyer, not your friend. I suggest you learn the difference.”

… … … … ask him?

Phoebe smirked, tilting her head against the receiver. “I don’t think there’s much point, Mr Explosion.”

… … … the fuck, ask him? If he’s … … … why… … ask him? Who … … fuck are you … … keep shit from him?

Nathan’s speech was more pressed, easier to hear now. Laying silently, Charles squeezed Phoebe’s hand. She had had a very conservative upbringing and while she’d managed to break that mould in many ways, some standards of professionalism still existed for Phoebe. It was not wise to curse at her.

“I am one of the directors of the law firm overseeing your claim, Mr Explosion, and more importantly I am his fiancée,” she snapped, “This is entirely inappropriate. He’s told you before not to call here after hours and you blatantly ignore his requests; you drag him out of the office for conferences and he comes back reeking of cannabis, and now you call him just off midnight offering alcohol and women, and you speak to me, his fiancée, you tell me this, and you speak to me using this language - do you have any idea the impression you’re sending?”

It seemed to Charles that she was regretting encouraging him to take a frivolous case, to say the least.

An animal snarl belched up the line, a death metal growl straight from the bowels: Should have known some frigid bitch like you would be twisting his balls.

“How dare you speak to - - !” snapped Phoebe, but Charles hushed her, took her hand in his own as he sat up on his elbow, trying to calm her. She moved aside the receiver to speak to him: “It’s not appropriate!”

“I know. I know.” His voice sounded hoarse, dead in his throat, not how he’d expected.

Yeah, maybe he’d be less of a fucking sad sack if he was getting laid sometimes, came Murderface’s voice, nails down a chalkboard, and dragged Phoebe’s attention back to the phone, her nails jagging into Charles’ hand with fury where he held it.

“It’s not like I don’t - it’s not that easy, you know,” she hissed in nearly a whisper. “This is completely inappropriate. Leave us alone.”

… … … … alone …

Charles looked up at Phoebe’s face in the quiet that followed, some sort of conferring happening on the other side of the phone. She was about to cry - no, she was crying, silent tears on her cheeks like they’d reminded her of something, like he couldn’t bear to touch her or - - but it wasn’t like that at all.

He watched her wipe one away with the back of her hand and gave a soft sigh. “It’s okay,” she said, and saw that he was about to speak - - “No. It’s okay, Charles. I’m okay.”

… … Huh huh, mumbled the receiver, then a screeching:
Well, whatever. I didn’t want him at the party anyway, he’s such a fucking downer.

... ... ... yeah and, and by the way. Don’t think he doesn’t know what you’re doing. You stupid slut.

“And what am I doing?” breathed Phoebe, her voice broken. Her hand lifted from his. Charles looked up at her, a faint frown coming to his face as he tried to read her.

*Jesus! He knows you’re cheating on him!* Dumb whore!

*Yeah. He fucking knows. Uh, fuck this, whatever.*

They hung up, leaving Phoebe shot-eyed, open-mouthed, holding the receiver. The cord was tense against his side in its pulled curls. Too long passed. Much too long. Charles closed his eyes.

“Phoebe.”

She stared down at him, the tears on her cheeks, her hand shaking with the receiver. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, and her voice was delicate and refined, the voice of the young woman he’d met in university, “I didn’t mean to...”

“Phoebe.”

“... hurt you.”

And there it was.

He sat up abruptly, as if from the grave, lifting the stretched cord over his head as he slunk off the bed. Staring at the dark wall of the room, her shadow cast stark upon it by her lamplight, he felt nothing but his static headache and a sense like the floor was moving beneath him on a hidden sea. He knew it was happening but it didn’t feel like it was. Didn’t feel like he’d heard it. He’d expected to feel rage when this happened, impotence, the blood boiling through him, but he felt as blank and empty as the wall before him. It didn’t feel real.

He touched his brow with his thumb, gently covering his face. Lord, if only it felt *real.*

“Charlie,” pleaded Phoebe, “I’m sorry.” He heard her put the receiver back with a click, and he couldn’t find the energy to look at her.

“I, ah. Phoebe. I don’t want... I don’t want to do this right now,” he said eventually, and his tongue was like lead inside his skull. “I’m going to... ah. Spend the night somewhere else, I think.”

“Where are you going to go?” she asked, pulling the covers up to her collarbones where she sat in bed, and it was a very good question. He couldn’t go to his sister, couldn’t go to any family. And no one he knew had been there for him when his mother had... died, why would they be there for him now? No, he didn’t have difficulty thinking it. She’d died, it was her time. She’d... died. It was. The other things. So many other things. That were... difficult.

“Oh, I don’t know. A motel or something.” He opened their dresser, dragged on a jumper over his nightshirt, trousers. Sat on the edge of their bed pulling on his socks, then stopped dead as something occurred to him, a thought crystallising over the formless emotions that moved unseen behind. “Phoebe. Why did you ask me to take this claim?”

He looked back at her over his shoulder, and she shrunk back like a closing flower, her eyes large
and headlight doe like. “I just wanted you to get out of the house,” she said, and the tears were still coming, glassy down her cheeks. Charles looked away.

“Hmm. So, here, right,” he echoed, mostly to himself, “In our house. In, ah... in our bed...?” What a rotten joke.

“Honey, no - - ” Phoebe said, and as he looked at her he saw her put out her hand to him, a strange screw in his head.

“You never call me honey.”

Phoebe stared back at him as though she’d been shot. And there was the anger, finally opening like an unfurling rose; Charles stood up and snatched up the phone, dragging the cord out from behind the bedside table and hauling it after him to the bathroom, ignoring Phoebe’s wail and her sobbing as he closed the door. He stood stock still, receiver in his palm, and dialled.

“Herbie, hi. Sorry for disturbing you so late. I need a place to stay, ah... just tonight. Yes. It’s an emergency. Okay. Thanks. See you soon.”

It really was a damn rotten joke.

* * * * *

Charles wasn’t sure why he hadn’t taken the Buick. Perhaps he was worried, being in an emotional state, that he might lose control and crash it - though for the life of him he could not put his finger on those emotions, whether they were simply so large and unknowable to become indistinct to him or whether they existed at all. He had totally disconnected, hung up the phone, and couldn’t even remember going outside and hailing a taxi. But there he was with an overcoat on and the distant voice of the radio, and the taxi driver was attempting idle chat, to which he responded with, “Mm,” without really listening to what was asked.

The radio started playing a song, some old cock rock thing that sounded like a memory to him, standing in front of a shopfront full of televisions in ‘92. It had looked like it was going to rain then as well; he recalled the hot pavement, grubby with spit and blackened gum, and the smell of the concrete like piss and fuel as the heavens had opened and speckled it dark with rain. Tonight the sky just hung low, oppressive; made him feel like he was dreaming. There was a band on the televisions. A wedding. Feinting after the furthest reaches of his memory, Charles recalled a face, lightly made up, hung over a white piano, snakes on the keyboard, red hair an umber in the blue lighting of the video and splashed across twelve TV screens that he, a younger man, looked up at, and then he realised who it was. Dashed the thought from his mind.

“Could you, ah, turn the radio off, please? I can’t deal with Snakes N’ Barrels tonight,” he mumbled, leaning against the window glumly, and the driver chuckled and turned it down. Not off. Now it was just bothering his subconscious.

“You don’t like them?” asked the driver, and Charles barely looked up.

“Just not in the mood.” He gazed out the window at the passing city, turning his mobile around in his palm with unconscious anxiety.

Likewise, though he recalled stepping out of the taxi and the low clouds, the strange tension in the
atmosphere, the pavement yellow under the streetlight, and he recalled pressing the call button on Vernon’s security system and the gate opening remotely, the awkward trapse up the side stairs with his travel case dangling from his fingers, too light, he had very little recollection of speaking to Vernon once he’d been greeted. Alison had made him tea in their kitchen, they’d tried to get him to talk but Charles would have none of it. He gently brushed off Alison’s probing questions with admirable gentility, a humble smile – “How’s Phoebe?” “Oh, she’s just fine.” – and eventually they’d set him up in their spare room where at last he surfaced out of his disconnect, the tape of his mind recording once again.

Unsettling how it just blanked like that. By his calculations he had another twenty, thirty years before his faculties left him, assuming he’d inherited it from his mother. That used to terrify him, the idea that he had twenty years, twenty years of the same as it had been so the same since he’d finished his masters. And now everything was changing. Still, these little blips came much too close for comfort.

He hadn’t the heart to pull back the perfect bedding on the Vernons’ spare bed, intruding as he was, and instead just lay on it in the dark, the soft blue of the moonlight mottled by a tree in the Vernons’ yard cast over him from a large window. Their house was so beautiful – Herbert must have been doing well for himself. Was it weird that Charles couldn’t recall such a basic fact about his friend? He and Phoebe had been planning to invest just prior to the wedding date, that they might have a proper home to return to from their honeymoon. It all felt so distant, suddenly. Charles knew, consciously, that it didn’t have to be the end. But it felt so, so far away, like a cold blue planet barely touched by the sun.

It became slowly apparent that he was not going to sleep and he sat back up on the edge of the bed, nursing the dull throb of his migraine in the low light. There was a great temptation to just sit here and mull over the night’s events, turn it around and around on his tongue in all its ugliness, know it intimately, but as he tried to focus on it he found himself unable to grip even one aspect of it. His thoughts sleeted over his swollen brain like wet snow. As if the drummer had been able to tell by the skirts she wore, or her perfume - as if that was something that could be done. He tried to imagine with whom she had slept, came up with no answer. Someone from the Registry? Someone from gym? The husband of one of her friends? But not someone he knew, because… because he knew no one, any more.

So he tried to hate her. Tried to seeth and stew and boil up with rage, turned his ring around on his finger and thought of Pickles or Herbert fucking her but the image was just too cartoonish, too comical and unreal to upset him. He tried to think of his mother’s disappointment upon hearing the wedding was cancelled - should he choose that path, you know - but the reality was she was dead now and inconsequential and had never cared much for Phoebe anyway, since Charles was getting older and Phoebe could not have children. Imagined his sister, Elizabeth, tutting over her kitchen table at him. Oh, Charlie, you’re much too forgiving. And it had been so long since she’d first warned him. I told you, didn’t I? I always tell you. Jeremiah 13:23: you should have gotten rid of her when you had the chance. But there was no way of reaching her, no way of being chided and put in line and forced to feel something, anything, as even shame was better than this… this nothing.

He felt compelled to be scolded or to create the illusion of productivity, workaholism rather than insomnia, and unzipped his travel bag for the heavy block of his laptop computer, resting it on his knees in the gloom with its blue screen light colouring his face and hurting his head with startup. If he went far enough through his archived emails in Outlook, he might have saved the ones Beth sent him from the last time this happened, a decent six years ago now - long enough to have put the issue to bed. Advice, you know. He’d always gone to her to be told what to do. Somehow, she always had an answer.
But his head was all over the place, aching as he tried to focus on the screen, the fragile text flickering there. He was too tired, too automatic; didn’t think to search for Beth’s email address, too cut up to even recall it. Instead he just robotically clicked through months of history until he found it again, and that was a mistake.

The last email Beth had sent him was **RE: NUMBER THREE** and it didn’t register with Charles at first what it was. That day too had been a big nothing, just a distant sense of urgency, a tightness in his chest. Rapping his knuckles on Mhairi’s desk in the office reception as he left, mobile already at his ear to the department. *Cancel this morning’s appointments. Ah, family emergency. I’ll be out.*

And he remembered taking the fire exit stairs as he couldn’t wait for the lifts, so constricted was his chest, full of snakes, and he remembered the hall to Elizabeth’s apartment and speaking to the police who had arrived before him. But he did not remember the email, not as more than a fact; that there had been an email. And so, pausing to rub his forehead against the pain, hunched over in the cold room with his night shirt lit white in the screen’s glow, he opened it again.

*Dearest Charlie,*

*This email is to inform you that I have*

He stopped reading and stared at the opposite wall, the thrown shadow of the leaves on cream washed to eggshell blue in the night. There were framed photographs on the wall, exiled here from the rest of Vernon’s house: high school and university sports teams, Alison with her dressage pony. The top and rightmost one looked frightfully familiar, and Charles slowly realised it was the same Harvard-issued photo of their polo team and their mounts he had on his office wall, with his young, dumb face bolted with a grin, and his floppy 80s haircut, and the soulful, understanding stare of the thoroughbred Moses, long dead now, over his shoulder. Eerie to think Vernon had photos of him - eerie to think anyone had photos of him, and he realised all at once how weird it was to find such a normal part of life uncomfortable, and looked away.

*to inform you that I have*

*Jesus.*

*I know this will be perceived as cowardly but it’s for the better. I am sick of bringing only pain and sadness to the lives around me. Please apologise to Mom. I’m sorry I could not be a better sister, nor daughter, to the both of you.*

*Regards, Elizabeth*

Trust an Offdensen to sign off on a personal letter with ‘Regards’. Beth had always been a lot better at articulating, expressing her emotions than Charles; in fact it was one of the things he had admired her for. That even she, when the sword was finally over her throat, resorted to ‘regards’ boded quite badly for himself.

*to inform you that I have*

No. He couldn’t do it.

Charles abruptly shut the laptop, pulling the room back into darkness. He stared at his dead horse in the photograph, his own dumb spunky smile. He remembered that he’d faked it, remembered that day. An artificial smile designed for young women, female lecturers, and to butter up the Dean (probably a queer). Just thinking about it now made his face stiff with pity for that idiot
version of himself. He’d had no idea what was waiting for him. A naive fantasy of glossy success. Depressing. Success, he’d learned, was never clean nor easy.

And now everything was changing. And he was totally alone.

It hit him like a brick, like a cinder-block tied to his heart and dragging it down into the harbour. What the hell was he doing here? Looking for support of some kind, a shoulder to cry on? To Vernon, that muppet-headed dope in the polo club photo was Charles. Chuck. Jesus Christ. All this death and failure and disenchantment was inconsequential, and by turning up at his house all Charles had done was give him another thing to gloat over. And Phoebe, the only other person left in his sorry life, was cheating on him, replacing him in kind, as punishment for his grief and detachment or - or something equally depressing. And cheating on him again, too. As so naive had he been to assume that was a fluke, six years ago. Something else he had learned: people did not just fluke.

And he was totally, utterly, alone.

With nowhere to go, no one to turn to, Charles looked up at the window, the low autumn clouds backlit by the moonlight streaming like a projector into the room. He briefly considered just vanishing then, as if anyone would miss him - catch a plane to Mexico or Turkey or Morocco, disappear into someone else’s life. It wouldn’t be hard. If he was caught he could blame it on a grief-induced fugue state or - or something. No. Forget it. Don’t make any big decisions, the grief counsellor had told him at the Coroner’s, until at least 12 months after the death of a loved one. It was just an impulse, to ruin, to screw up his life in his hand like a piece of loose-leaf, to throw it into the street and forget it and all the vague, unknowable pain, the lumps in his throat, the migraines that had become a fixture for him more constant than his own damn eight year relationship, or a twenty-five year friendship with this eel of a copyright lawyer slithering through his fingers now.

Thus, within twenty minutes the room was empty, untouched save for the polo team picture face down on the end of the bed and a scrap of paper reading curtly, thank you, and Charles had vanished, the Vernons none the wiser til morning.

Chapter End Notes

you have to be a pretty fucking strange parent to call your kids charles and elizabeth, but there it is
YEAR THREE

The mountains were brutal in Russia.

#889 and #267, separated from their squad, huddled together in their makeshift shelter, their hoods doing little against the blistering cold. Where the rest of the troupe had perished, they’d survived; on rabbit flesh and eaten snow, cowering in hollowed trees and the crevices of the mountain. They lived like animals, so the others had died like animals, desperate and trapped or swallowed by the wilderness. They’d thought they were prepared for this, for the glory of serving their favourite band, a band that had spurred them through their deployments in the US forces, had been the soundtrack to their tanks and machine guns.

But nothing could have prepared them for this.

Silently, trembling where he was squatted in the shelter of the rocks beside his fellow, #889 reached into his pouch and withdrew the mission brief, the paper shaking in his red and swollen fingers. #267, thinner than he, looked up at him hopelessly. There was no point reading it again. Nothing had changed.

But #889 had to. Had to confirm. This wasn’t a nightmare.

MISSION OBJECTIVE: RETRIEVE SIX (6) WOLF CUBS (C. LUPUS LUPUS / C. LUPUS ALBUS) FROM LOCATION OF DEPLOY.

No. This was real life.

YEAR ZERO

It was about two in the morning when Pickles answered the door to Mordhaus, wondering to himself who the hell knocked like that on their door, with the knuckles, you know, three short raps like a fucking nevermore thing. Once he opened the door to their lawyer’s haunted, hollow face, his short hair plastered to his scalp by the torrential rain and a petrified rage lying shallow under his skin, the drummer half expected to hear an organ chord carried on the wind or a flurry of blackbirds to scatter in his wake. Instead all he got was a clap of thunder from the storm outside. Man, this dramatic son of a bitch. What a great dude.

“Uh, Charlie. Shit, come in,” he, well, greeted, stepping aside to let the dripping lawyer into the apartment’s dank warmth and cover. “You’re soaked.”

“Mm, ah, I - ah, left in a hurry, neglected to, ah, grab an umbrella, left my - my overcoat,” Offdensen was muttering, standing uselessly in the corridor as Pickles locked the door behind him.
“Right. Sorry we left ya standin. Weren’t expectin no-one, ya know…” said Pickles cautiously. He looked the lawyer up and down - weird to see him in civilian clothes, a zip-up black cardigan, looked like a white singlet beneath; but he hadn’t been able to escape, it seemed, living up to his ultimatum, *lawyers never stop working*: still wearing slacks, polished Balmorals, an expensive watch hiding in his sleeve that Pickles eyed greedily. Like a man half-assembled, half at rest.

“You, uh… you got bad news?” he hazarded, and the lawyer looked at him like a lost dog.

“Huh?”

Pickles chuckled nervously, holding his beer close to his chest as he scratched his dreads behind his head. He could smell Offdensen in the close quarters, over the trash and mouldy pizza boxes, smell his damp clothes and body heat. Weird, that he was human, so human, not smothered this time by cologne or dry cleaning. “Uh, bad news. I mean, it’s two in the mornin, you gotta be - - ”

“Oh. No. No news.” They stood staring at each other a beat, each trying to puzzle out the other’s purpose, until Charles finally ventured: “I was, ah - invited. To a - a party. A TV party, if I recall. Um, Nathan and, ah, William called earlier but I - I couldn’t get away. Until now. Now… I am here.”

Pickles let out a sigh of relief, catching a weird giggle on the way. “Those bastards. I swear. You’ve put something in Nathan’s beer when you were here, right?” The lawyer looked at him, bewildered, rain speckling the lenses of his glasses. “He’s gone real gooey over you, dude, like a labrador that’s got dropped on its head.”

“I, ah…” Offdensen stared at him, confronted and confused, and Pickles waved it off.

“Fuck it, never mind. I guess you gotta see it to understand. Point is, he didn’t tell any of us he invited you. Or he didn't tell me. Um, it’s a good thing. Probably.” Pickles lead down the corridor, opening the beer fridge for one of Offdensen’s beers. The special beers for Offdensen. By some miracle there were still a few there from the half dozen he and Nathan had picked up, due to Nathan being fucking insane.

Cue flashback. After Offdensen had left the first time. Nathan staring at his shoes, eyes wide, frozen in time. Pickles patting him on the shoulder, like he could still feel Nathan’s warm skin under his palm; the guy ran hot. “Dude, something wrong?”

Nathan with his hands over his face. “Did you see the look on his face? He hates us. He *hates* us.”

“Um, he’s a lawyer, Nathan. They don’t like anything,” Pickles had tried, but this only made Nathan more stressed; “I mean, it was probably just the crappy beer. He’s a big shot, rich fucker, you know, probly used to... champagne and coke and shit.” That’s what Lancelot had been into, anyway. Why would Charles be any different? But somehow it had stuck with Nathan.

Scene cut. Pickles and Nathan in the bottleshop. Nathan with a carton in his arms, staring, besotted, at the local breweries fridge. Pickles trying to walk past him. “Nate’n, come on. What are you so hung up on?” and that crazy look in Nathan’s eyes again, crazy and possessive and stressed and just totally fucking, crazy. Crazy girlfriend crazy. If Nathan was a woman, Pickles would have run.

“The beer... for Charles. We need to,” he’d growled weirdly, nearly pressing his face against the
fridge window, and Pickles curled his lip in disgust.

“Seriously?” But Nathan’s expression said that yes, one hundred thousand percent yes, yes, seriously. So seriously. Fucking, starcrossed seriously. “Okay whatever, just get some Sierra Nevada bullshit or something. *Do not spend too much.* Jesus Christ.”

Pickles held out the bottle to the sodden lawyer now, was even slightly offended when he didn’t take it. Stared at him. Then, weirdly again, like he was surrounded by fucking weirdos, “Ah... do you mind if I...?” and pointing to his jumper.

“I don’t give a fuck,” said Pickles, not understanding. He was slightly taken aback by Charles stripping it over his head, the wet garment hanging from his fingers like a dead animal then draped over the top of his travel case, parked neatly in the corridor. That... smell, animal smell, male body smell, increased as he was transparently just wearing a singlet and slacks, slightly damp where the rain had come through his jumper, the oily smell of his wet hair – freaked Pickles out. He wished dearly to be a lot drunker as the lawyer took the beer from his hand, firmly but with a care not to frighten him; but Pickles was keen eyed on how fit Charles was for a man older than him, nudging at middle age, as though those bi-weekly visits to the gym had worked, as though he could handle any opponent at any angle, at body angle, at mental angle, at money angle, at legal angle, it just... overwhelmed him, just a little bit, made him feel weak. That Phoebe bitch didn’t know what she was squandering. If Pickles was a woman and had his hooks in Charles, he would have been much more careful about his affairs.

“C’mon then,” he said finally, uselessly, “We just busted out a porno. Still got some chips left.” The lawyer just stared at him, then glanced at the doorway to the lounge, the flashing light of the television screen flickering pale into the corridor. Thunder thudded again outside, and quoth the drummer, invitingly, “Skwisgaar’s in it.”

Charles looked at him, strained, as if he couldn’t focus his mind. “Is... ah... is that meant to make me, ah, want to join you, or...?”

But Pickles had given him a light shove on the back, ushering him towards the lounge. “Seriously. The kid’s a machine. He’s got this camera in his apartment, right, in this fuckin... skull, plastic, Halloween thingy, right? And he makes a video of every chick he takes home. They don’t even know!” The drummer could barely contain the giggles bubbling over his words. “It's like a phase he's goin through. It’s - I mean, you gotta see it to believe.”

Charles followed slowly at Pickles’ heels, and the drummer felt that the way the man acted was always like some kind of reptile or large fish, emotionless, or perhaps a sleepwalker in the way he drifted behind. It must have been a peaceful sleep, for him to be so secure and stable - like nothing troubled him at all.

It almost made Pickles want to break him. Just to see him snap...

In the main room of the apartment, the band had shoved back Pickles’ kit and laid down a mattress on the floor between the television - widescreen, propped up on an amp - and the grungy couch. On the TV was a medium shot of Skwisgaar nailing some poor girl hard in a white room so pristine and bland it could have been a hotel. The band were draped in various stages of intoxication around the lounge: Murderface curled on the mattress, holding a whipped cream container to his chest, snoring lightly and drooling, Skwisgaar perched on the couch with a busty girl half on his lap, watching himself fucking on TV with a hand up her skirt and the other on a bottle of the Special Beer For Offdensen, Nathan in his chair brooding and ploughing his way through chips with an anxious stare between the TV and the lawyer as he entered, and Magnus on the mattress, sitting up against the couch, fucking wired as usual and picking the skin away from
his nails as he totally ignored a dark haired woman leaning against his side, her head resting against his chest. Another girl, petite, was curled in the corner of the lounge with a whisky bottle in her lap; she visibly perked up when Pickles entered while the others just looked at the lawyer with muted interest.

“Uh, ladies, this is our lawyer, Charlie. Someone invited him,” said Pickles pointedly, levelling a stare at Nathan who immediately looked away.

“Charlie, uh…” The drummer pointed at the girls one by one, making an effort at least. “Don’t know, uh, don’t know - I think she might be Delilah though? Magnus?” But Magnus was no help, just looking up with wild eyes and an alarmed, *Uh??* “And, uh, Ginger.”

The girl with the whisky bottle, Ginger, who was ginger, gave Charles a wide grin. “Hi!”

“Ginger’s a slut. She’ll totally fuck you your brains out if you want.” The lawyer sipped his beer silently upon receiving this news, regarding the girl as she slung herself over the arm of the couch towards him.

“I totally will,” she purred, sticking her chest forward, “A hot lawyer… I could use a sugar daddy,” and did Pickles see the faintest smile on Charles’ face, or did he just imagine it there?

“Thanks, but, ah. I’m marrying in five months. That’d be, ah, disingenuous. Don’t you think.” Pickles tilted his head as he watched the lawyer drift to the couch, sitting awkwardly between Ginger and Skwisgaar and his girl, his eyes fixed on the screen in silent horror, or fascination, or boredom, or - well. The guy was hard to read.

Ginger was still checking him out though. Pickles grinned at her and squished her across so that he could take his former position in the corner of the couch, sandwiching her between himself and Charles as he pinched her thigh playfully and gave her a knowing snicker. Ginger was incredibly easy, incredibly big appetite, just the most damn fun. If she could bed Charles he’d fucking high-five her, sneak her an extra line. Show the old son of a bitch what a real good time was.

But Pickles noted the five months and the ring still on his finger. He had a feeling that wouldn’t last much longer. Not when you turn up at your client’s house at two in the morning. Pickles imagined Charles getting married to Phoebe, and it was unpleasantly vivid in his head, with like champagne and black tie and their parents smiling and rose petals and plastic lawn chairs and shit. He supposed that another equally dull lawyer would be his best man but for some reason in his mind’s eye it was Nathan. Very disturbing.

Looking sideways at the lawyer - still staring blankly ahead with Skwisgaar’s fucking reflected in his glasses - he imagined the inevitable wedding night, though, hell, Offdensen must have been, what, 43? Ish? So it must have come before. And it was just inhuman to imagine two lawyers in coitus, like snakes intertwined and wiggling together. Pickles had heard once that corn snakes would form mating balls of hundreds of males around one female, and thought he’d been at, and rapidly excused himself from, orgies along those lines. Um, anyway. He imagined Ginger fucking Charles instead, Ginger on top, and found the thought much more rewarding, filling him with a warm buzz of arousal and familiarity…

Or was that just the sex tape and the whiskey…

The silence was comfortable for Pickles, but Charles obviously found it otherwise, broken only by Murderface’s snores, Nathan crunching chips and Skwisgaar’s misc sex noises from the television. Pickles liked to watch Skwisgaar’s sex tapes; they were endlessly entertaining with a lot of bouncing and mashed English thrown in like *huuueeeh* and *ams coming!* and *babies, I ams lost in*
you two eyes, and in yous... pussys. Watching the women try not to laugh when he butchered a sentence balls deep in their throat. He knew Skwisgaar would soon tire of recording them too, so, hell, make the most of it and wind up Ginger or whatever girl of the week while he was there and get a good solid fucking himself at the end of it.

But Charles turned his head to Skwisgaar, not appearing to register just how deep the Swede’s fingers were in the girl as he addressed him: “I, ah, thought you couldn’t speak English.”

“Nej,” said Skwisgaar simply, and the girl gave a quiet ha of amusement.

“He’s, uh, selective-American. He can only speak American in specific situations,” explained Pickles, “Like when his dick’s wet.”

“I, ah, imagine that will make giving evidence quite, ah, hard,” said Offdensen, looking back at the TV, and obviously immediately regretted it as the four conscious men snickered around him over the rest of his muttered quip: “Coitu voce, as it, ah, were…”

“Huhh, hard,” snorted Nathan, giving Charles the first smile he’d ever pulled around the guy and spilling chip shrapnel down his chest.

Charles tried very, very hard to smile back. “Ha ha.”

Pickles watched with a proud smirk as the two shared a moment of healthy male bonding. It was so good to see Nathan making new friends. He was stillcrippingly shy – so good that Charles liked him, too. You see, Pickles could tell. Pickles was clever like that. And it was a kind of clever, it was. He leaned over to Ginger’s ear, his arm around her middle as he lifted the whisky out of her hands, and whispered: “If you get him to fuck you, I'll give you fifty bucks. For real.”

But she just giggled.

Skwisgaar stood without a word and just walked out, dragging the girl after him. Front door slammed a moment later. Couldn’t blame him really, why watch it when you could be living it. Charles moved across, checking the seat for a damp patch first, and was mildly surprised when Ginger followed him – not content to stay with Pickles, leaning against his side instead. Pickles watched them eagerly down the couch, stretching out in the room she gave him, and while Charles gave him a sideways glance he nonetheless put his arm around her. Much to Pickles’ delight. She had a chance yet.

Nathan was staring at Charles, or trying really hard not to, and Magnus had started muttering with his girl by Pickles’ side – he tried to listen in but couldn’t catch it. “Do you guys do this, ah, every night?” asked Charles, and Pickles just shrugged.

“Most of ‘em.”

“Right.”

Magnus and the girl were getting very distracting now. He’d grabbed her necklace, pulling it taut on her neck. Give that back. Give it back! Magnus! And she’d shoved him. Magnus just kind of stopping there, shoved. Dimly entertained and not drunk enough, Pickles poked Magnus in the back with his socked foot. “Hey. Tweakers. If you gonna fight, take it outside.”

Magnus stayed budged forward, then looked to be getting angry, hissing a “Fuck you, Pickles,” before Nathan rose slightly from his seat, tossing an empty beer can at the guitarist. Gentler than he needed to. Magnus grabbed his girl at this, half around the middle, half around her breast, snarling at Nathan, “Tryna - - okay! We’ll fucking - get going! Fuck you!” He lashed out at the
can where it had fallen, missed it, and then just drew up to his feet as though on pins, dragging the
girl up after him, her top nearly falling off her as he clawed at it.

"Get the fuck out of our house! Jeez!" sneered the drummer, half rising from his seat but frankly
too lazy to bother.

"Fuck you. *F*uck you." Magnus made for the door and tripped on his high, staggering against the
girl as she tried to catch him. Nathan got to his feet then, gently pushing the two of them to the
door. Pickles just sank back into the couch, poured whisky down his throat, noted Charles
watching the whole thing. With only a bit more cursing and some mumbled apologies, Nathan
managed to get Magnus out the front door with muttered *Yeah, yeah*, slam it on them, and drag
himself back.

"Gonna bed. Later," he grunted, and Pickles raised his bottle to him.

"G’nite Nathan. Sleep tight." And gone. Pickles looked straight at Charles, just sitting there and
staring at the television, his arm around the girl and firmly ignoring Pickles.

"Sorry you caught us windin down," he ventured after a while, trying to break the difficult space
between Charles’ glacial, something-bad-has-obviously-happened silence and the sound of
Skwisgaar’s orgasm through the shitty TV speakers, “You gonna sleep here tonight?"

"If you don’t... ah, if you don’t mind.” He hated to ask. Just hated it. Wouldn’t even look at him.
Pickles smiled cockily, poking Ginger’s thigh with his foot and getting a flirty smirk off her for his
troubles.

"No, that’s cool. You can crash on the couch, dude.” He watched the two of them for a little
more, watched Ginger get Charles’ attention by touching his cheek and then try to kiss him when
he turned around, watched him shift and shrug her away uncomfortably. Oh, nice try, but strike
one all the same. Pickles made eye contact with her, raised his eyebrows. She still had a move or
two up her sleeves. Um, not that she had any sleeves on *that* top...

"What is a ‘tweaker’?” asked Charles, stiffening his body beside Ginger as she pawed at his chest.
Pickles chuckled hoarsely at him, then realised he was serious and washed down his cough with a
swig of whisky.

“A ‘tweaker’ is someone who’s addicted to amphetamines, Charlie,” he cooed patiently, and the
lawyer made a soft noise of comprehension, ignoring Ginger’s hand run up and down his chest
now. She turned to Pickles, mouthed, *Abs!* and Pickles mouthed back to her, *Go for it!*

“And is – ah. Is Magnus, ah, an addict?” asked Charles, not really wanting the answer. When he
looked at Pickles, the drummer just nodded, shrugged, a vague non-committal gesture.

“As much as any of us are.” He grinned at Charles, then before he could ask another question
went straight for: “Are you a Jew, Charlie?”

The look he received could have cut steel.

“Okay, okay. I just mean, since we’re playin twenty questions again, I’m entitled to two, right?
How ‘bout. Are you in the doghouse, Charlie?” he pushed, and Charles looked away abruptly to a
coo from Ginger. There was a different woman on the TV now, same room, same angle.
Considerably older than the last one.

“No,” he said quietly, and Pickles continued to push:
“Was she cheatin on you, Charlie?”

No reply. At this point he was just hanging around to see if he could make Charles snap at him, or else for Ginger to touch his dick, her winning move. He lolled back on the couch, checking out the girl Skwisgaar was fucking on the screen, and then smiled lazily, blissfully, at the lawyer.

“It’s okay, dude. It can still work. You know I was married once,” he said, eyeing Ginger, willing her to just go for it. Charles looked at him, his eyes hidden behind the square reflection of the TV in his glasses, and Pickles realised – for the first time, without having another agenda or needing to be paid – the lawyer was genuinely listening to him. Felt kinda nice, actually. This was quite nice, actually. Just sitting here... hanging out with Charles and Ging... peaceful, real nice, if only he was a little more stoned.

“To that chick in the Liquid Sunshine video. Yeah,” he elaborated, and Charles raised an eyebrow just a touch.

“She’s, ah, beautiful.”

“Yeah.” Pickles twisted the bottle in his hand idly, watching the last of the whisky swirl bronze against the TV light. “Crazy, crazy bitch. In-sane. You act something out enough, you start fuckin believin it. Got hitched in Vegas a week later. Probly with her like, a month then I was tearin my hair out just bein around that insane cow.”

Charles’ gaze flicked from Pickles’ worn face to his balding scalp and back again without a word.

“But you know. Ya gotta wait it out before you can get it annulled. Thank fuck I didn’t sign no prenup. But hell. It was a coupla good nights. Coupla... fuckin awesome nights. Vegas, man.”

He grinned drunkenly at Charles, rolled his eyes. “What a city. The mind - - recoils in horror, my friend.”

Charles considered it a while, regarding Pickles - funny how he could look so mature and yet so naive at the same time. Like he didn't really understand - there was some wonder in him yet, some unreachable world of tweakers and bright lights and binging. Pickles grew bored, though, and stretched himself out with a huge yawn. “I’m gonna crash. You... still be here in the mornin... and I’ll make ya breakfast,” he threatened, and dragged himself to his feet, finishing the whisky in one swig and staggering to the bathroom to piss.

Nothing transpired, he assumed, though he could hear Ginger and Charles speaking softly in the next room; but just as he was staggering into his room, he definitely heard the lawyer snap; or rather heard his hand come down on Ginger’s wrist like a snake as she went for his dick, a muffled and short scolding and Ginger’s lame, whingey excuses.

He gave it twenty minutes, then padded soft-footed back out, finding the two asleep on the couch, lit by the dimmed screen of the TV, show over; or, well, since she opened her big eyes when he cooed, “Ginger...” after her, Ginger at least was only pretending to sleep curled against Charles’ side. For his part, he looked to be well out of the count. And Pickles was good. Only moved the lawyer’s glasses to the opposite arm of the couch than the one he’d left it on.

With her back in his room and her favourite, Cinnamon Girl, on his record player, Pickles didn’t even hear the front door open and a shadow admit itself to pass out, face first, on the mattress in the living room.
Quaestionem In Aliquem Ferre

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

Charles opened his eyes to faded sunlight and a huge, firm hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake roughly but not without some care and duty. As he stirred, trying to focus his vision beyond the red blur and migraine, he dimly realised the shadow before him was Nathan - standing over him, arms dangling by his sides, and dimly concerned, dimly fed up with having the lawyer still in his space.

“You fell asleep,” Nathan informed him, like his voice was a corpse dragged over the road, as Charles sat up and pinched the bridge of his nose against the encroaching headache. “So we left you there. Pickles is getting food now with Magnus. Or you can leave. Whatever, I don’t care.”

He crossed his arms and looked away like a pouting child, and Charles clutched his head and croaked, “What time is it?” His voice sounded shocking, cracked and dry, his head swimming in a dull static pain. He reached for his glasses, but they weren’t where he left them. Strange.

Nathan made a guttural sound that could have been I don’t know, watched Charles make for his wrist; start when his watch was found absent, riling ever so slightly, then pat down his slacks after his phone for its internal clock. He was fumbling with the mobile when Nathan gave up, stalking off to the kitchenette: “Watch out for Magnus this morning. He always gets like this.”

Charles squinted at Nathan across the room. What the hell did that mean?

His phone said it was just before noon. He had overslept something shocking, felt like he hadn’t slept so solidly in years. Certainly he hadn’t slept past seven in years. Not a sound sleep though, no - he wasn’t prone to dreams, and so it disquieted him considerably that he had dreamed and been woken in the early hours by it, and of something other than an open grave as well. In Charles’ dream he had been sitting on the couch in the dark, watching the sex tape with Pickles, who had been silent but a presence nonetheless, and on the television instead of just anonymous women it was Phoebe, with Skwisgaar’s slender hands on her shoulders or in her mussed hair as he fucked her, supplemented by Charles’ memory of how she sounded, how she acted, in love making - and then it had been the girl, Ginger, instead - and then he’d woken abruptly, unable to tell the time and minus Ginger, who had been by his side, and he had felt a strange, dislocated sadness in his half-dreaming haze to have lost the charming girl, and then fallen straight to sleep again.

So deeply, in fact, that he’d slept through two missed calls from Phoebe, something he instantly regretted but also thanked his stars for. It was a genuine mistake and one that made him seem quite irresponsible, but at least he didn’t have to deal with her right now. Another missed call from the office phone, and an additional text message from Phoebe, clearly seeing no other way to reach him.

Charles, I’m staying with my mother.
You can use the home office for work
until we sort this out, thought you’d prefer.
Let’s meet up soon and talk about it.
I’m sorry. Love, Phoebe xoxo
And he closed his eyes and shut the phone. He’d been working from the home office before, as he was coming off of bereavement leave; everything was set up. But he found the idea of welcoming Dethklok into his home frankly chilling, necessary or not.

But then, here he was, intruding in theirs.

The lock rattled in the front door before it slammed open in the corridor, kicked by Pickles and bouncing on its hinges into the thin plaster wall. It was Pickles, because Charles could hear him; his excruciating accent as he chewed off Magnus’ ear about something, the other man responding with dim grunts. As they entered, flimsy white shopping bags dangling from their dopey limbs, and the drummer saw Charles was up although worse for wear, Pickles perked up even further, hitting some internal bell: “Well good mornin. Nice of you to join us. You ready for some real death metal horse brutality?”

“Horse brutality?” echoed Charles, stepping around Murderface’s still unconscious body, but got it as soon as the words travelled over his tongue. “Oh. Do you guys know where my, ah, glasses are, ah, Pickles...?”

The drummer left Magnus to carry the bags into the grungy kitchenette, the smell of Nathan’s instant coffee overwhelming the small room, and came over to Charles, reaching past him for his glasses – on the other side of the couch – and handing them to him. “Here ya go, old man. That Alzheimer’s catchin up to you, hey?”

Charles took them demurely, trying to brush it off. It wasn’t Pickles’ fault, he didn’t know, and still it cut. They seemed oblivious, although Magnus, leaning over the counter of the kitchenette – suddenly too crowded, between the three of them – watched him closely. Red eyes, dragged face, the guitarist looked like a risen corpse; watching him placidly, taking notes. It occurred to Charles that he had never gotten his gun back off the guy. That might have to be the mission this morning.

“We got eggs! How’d you like your eggs Charlie?” Pickles held up two eggs in front of his eyes from three cartons on the counter as Charles approached across the room.

“Eggs? You need, ah... that many?” he asked, Magnus looking up at him from the counter like a beaten dog.

“Nathan eats like, twelve eggs a day. Protein, muscle gains,” explained Pickles, even as Nathan reached across him to pinch three of them from the open carton, turning away to crack them methodically into a mug. Charles was aware he looked impressed for about a second, watching the huge guy upturn the raw eggs straight down his throat, but Pickles quickly put him straight: “Yeah, you try sharin a house with him.”

Nathan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and gave a soft grunt, then slipped out of the kitchen with his coffee, slamming the door on the bathroom a second later. The shower started, Charles was not jealous of how little privacy the boys had in this place, and Pickles repeated: “How do ya like your eggs, Charlie?”

“Ah, poached?” he said, and Pickles pulled a face.

“Uhh, reckon you’re pushin your luck there...”

“Right. Just... you, ah... do what you can do, Pickles, I’m, ah, indebted besides.”

“Indebted!” Pickles turned away to pull open a cabinet, surface with a plate. Charles watched him with muted curiosity as he cracked the eggs onto the chipped plate, opened the microwave – a stale
food smell, caked onto the inside – and set the plate, door slammed shut, to fry on high. As Pickles stared into the microwave at close range, Magnus just stared, blitzed, until finally Charles made eye contact.

“Something the matter?”

Magnus tilted his head, narrowed his eyes. “You look... real... that Mockingbird, motherfucker. That old movie.”

It took Charles a moment, but he reached it nonetheless: “Atticus Finch?” he chirped, looking down at Magnus properly, quietly flattered.

“It’s the glasses.” Magnus gave a shrug. He was really quite charming, given the chance. Charles wasn’t sure what Nathan was going on about.

Magnus straightened lazily before him, rolling his shoulders with a spinal click. “You a Jew, Charlie?” he asked, and Charles took barely an instant to take in his dark features, the unlikelihood of his name actually being Hammersmith despite what he’d written on the paperwork, and gave a short hum of acknowledgement.

“My mother was. So.”

The guitarist had shrugged, begun to reply, “Well, okay. Just, I read in - - ” but was cut off by Pickles slamming his palm down on the counter, swearing loudly as he turned on them: “Motherfucker!”

They both looked up at him, and it did not escape Charles - himself a picture of apathy - that Magnus was smirking. “I’ve been askin you that for weeks! Why the frick you go and just tell him - - ”

But his patience had run out.

“And I answered you. Not in so many words,” said Charles tersely, cutting him off, and Pickles turned away.

“Son of a bitch.” The drummer manhandled the kettle to the faucet to refill it, giving Charles a solid eyeballing even as the lawyer turned his attention away and uncomfortably ran his fingers over the absence of watch on his left wrist.

“I don’t see it’s of any consequence to you, Pickles,” he remarked, a cool confidence in his usually unsteady voice now that he drew the line between them, and though Pickles opened his mouth to the tune of wait so your granddad’s a nazi and your mom’s Charles forged straight on ahead, speaking over him: “And any use you could have for it doesn’t reflect too highly on your character.”

And that neatly shut him up. “So I had dismissed it,” Charles concluded, and Pickles wrinkled his nose at him.

“Sure. Fine. Whatever.” He slammed the kettle on its holder and switched it to boil, sulking hotly, turned away from the lawyer. But Charles had not finished, speaking with an eye on Magnus’ widening smirk, watching the exchange like a cat over a bird feeder.

“I’d remind you that I am your employee, not your friend,” he said, but faltered there at the look Pickles cast back at him, red-faced and visibly holding in an eruption, “Ah... for tax purposes, anyway. So, ah. Just keep that in mind. Okay?”
“You’re our employee?” asked Magnus slowly, as though tasting the word, rolling it over his tongue, and Charles gave a short nod, nothing more. “We’ve never had an, uh… employee.”

“We have the roadies,” suggested Pickles, leaning back on the bench now, still flushed with subdued anger, but Magnus shook his head. “We don’t pay them.”

“Volunteers,” said Charles for them, a hint of curiosity to him. He still had no idea how this group was existing, where all these fans were hiding. This manager, these shows, supposedly, no posters for which he had seen, nothing in the Times entertainment pages.

Pickles fixed him with a look, a twinkle of an in-joke in his eye. “Klokateers,” he said with a smirk, and Magnus grinned along with him, shooting back: “Klokdenseen.”

“Klo… ployee.”

“Dethlawyer.”

“Ooh, shit. That’s a good one.” Pickles had surfaced from his rage with the jokes, as though a light had gone on in his face, and he pointed straight at Charles. “Dethlawyer.”

“Ah…” Charles frowned at them, watching placidly as Pickles pointed to the kettle.


He pointed at the door to Nathan’s room. “Fortress of solitude.” And then to his own: “Valley of the Dolls!” Past the door ajar, Charles could see posters, and also Ginger, sprawled out on the drummer's bed naked and completely out for the count. He must have given her a run for her money, at least.

“Death, ah, flat?” Charles tried to join in, lamely, missing the obvious.

Pickles beamed at him, spreading his arms wide and almost striking Magnus in the face as the other man moved over to make the coffee: “Mordhaus!”

Ah, of course. It really was quite cute. Funny how he could say Mordhaus fine, but regular house still came out hooahse.

“Dethklok,” purred Magnus, standing back with a mug of coffee in each hand, and Pickles grinned maniacally at him.

“Dethklok! Dethklok!” Pickles drummed his hands on the counter, ignoring the microwave pinging at him. “Skwisgaar Skwigelf, taller than uh tree!” – and then, pointing aggressively at his bandmate, “Magnus, Hepatitis C!”†

“Yeah, I thought we agreed on the one with, uh, speed - - ” muttered the guitarist, but Pickles had moved on, accompanying his hooting jeers with breakneck rolls over the countertop and beaten appliances.

“William Murderface Murderface Murderface! Pickles the Drummer, doodily doo, ding dong doodily doodily doo!” And just as Nathan stepped out of the bathroom into the corridor, the steam spewing around him and off his bare shoulders as he stood uselessly in his towel, “Nathan
Explosion!”

Nathan grunted, and then just smirked at Pickles as the drummer collapsed behind the kitchenette counter in cracked, hysterical giggles. He liked this game too, although preferably when he was less hungover. Disappeared into his room again, another slammed door.

Magnus, picking his way over through the abandoned cans and bottles and cigarette butts that littered the carpet, came close to Charles, pressing the coffee mug into his hands and muttering into his ear in a husky, weird voice: “This is your life now.”

And what the hell did that mean. The coffee was incredibly cheap and flavourless. Lord above, had he ever lived like this?

In the microwave, the fried eggs on the plate, their surfaces unbroken, began to explode. Pickles groaned from the floor, ohh... noooo. His hand slapping down on the counter as he tried to haul himself up again. “The eggs! I fucked ‘em up! Oh...!”

The drummer brought his fists down on the microwave with a despairing thud, “Fuck!” about to swing the other way again into spiralling depression as the machine demandingly beeped at him when he felt a presence behind him, like Nathan’s looming and yet not the same. Not at all.

Having reached around him, Charles turned off the microwave, the door popping against Pickles’ chest gently as the lawyer stepped away.

“Don’t, ah, don’t worry about it. I’ll get something on the way to – to work,” he said, chewing over the words internally once he’d said them, on the way to work but on the way home, actually. He stood back, placing the barely touched coffee on the counter beside the egg cartons, and then drew away. “Magnus. May I have my, ah, gun back, please?”

The guitarist was quiet a moment, and then stepped over to the couch, digging down the back of the seat cushions and surfacing again with the Glock. When Charles moved to take it Magnus held it out of the way, frowning at him in the strange quiet that had come over them – Pickles had fallen completely silent with Charles’ weird intimacy, not even touched but so uncomfortable in the bright light of morning, the whisky burnt out of his system. Just stood there at the microwave, nudging the door with his finger, Murderface’s loud snores the only other sound in the apartment.

“Show me you’re leaving, and it’s yours,” said Magnus, and Charles gave him a short sniff of displeasure, but was content enough to let the guy stalk him to the door. His jumper was still soaked wet.

“And my watch,” said the lawyer, and reluctantly Magnus drew it out of his pocket, a lucky guess on Charles’ part. He put out his hands and Magnus respectfully returned his property, laying the gun and gold watch in Charles’ open palms with muted reverence.

“It’s a woman’s watch, anyway,” he remarked, and Charles just shrugged as he fixed it back around his wrist.

“Ah, it belonged to my, ah. My sister.” When Charles looked up at the guitarist again it was to a strange expression, like a dog that has just realised you’re not actually throwing the ball for it, merely gesturing – head cocked. Putting one and one and one together, and one, and one, and one... more dangerous for it.

“Ah,” said Magnus, realising, and Charles pocketed the gun, took hold of his case, and left.

It was a beautiful, sunny day. Wouldn’t it be nice, if you weren’t dead, Elizabeth, to have shared
this day, and her sitting opposite on the bench at the back of the hospital gardens where the ivy grew and feeding pigeons on shortcake crumbs from the plastic packages they gave out in the tea room, and knowing that he was going to leave Phoebe, whom she hated. And knowing that it would be easier now that their mother had passed.

But no. Instead, he was alone.

Instead, it was only his.

* * * * *

YEAR THREE

When they’d come for Chantelle Hillam, she was sure they’d come for her for good. The executioner’s hoods, the black, the guns; that they’d even found her in her hiding place, in the basement of a contact in Russia, hidden away in the water pipes and rotting blankets. Booted footsteps down the stairs that only Dima was meant to come down and the muzzle of a rifle at her head where she had hidden under the bedding. It was death. It had to be death. And yet, here she was – still alive.

Wherever here was.

They’d kept her in the dark for the most part, held her head down and covered her face with one of their hoods. At first it had just been a blindfold, tied askew, but once they had left Russia with her bundled in the back of a rusty old lorry she’d been allowed more freedom: still had to wear it, but turned so she could see, appearing just one of their gang rather than a captive.

They were reluctant to explain why she wasn’t dead, hesitant and confused about their orders. Most of them sounded American. They were taking her somewhere on the continent, but couldn’t say where. They were at lengths to regale her about a metal band, Dethklok, that yes, she was familiar with, but she’d rarely been round so many people so obsessed with them. Every casual conversation they had around her was about this stupid band.

They revealed: they had been sent to collect her for a mission. By the band. Okay. So a cult of insane fanboys. This was gonna be - -

By the suit, one of them jumped in with. He’s not the band, he’s just a pen pusher.

Yeah, but he’s still the boss.

Yeah, whatever.

Chantelle stayed quiet, and picked up whatever she could.

A few days passed, and she could see forest through the front window of the van before they held her head down, covered her sight. Voices, American voices, but she hadn’t left Europe. Chantelle knew, in her heart of hearts, that something terrible was going on here – something secret, sinister and importantly, something huge.
He says just put her in some quarters. Yeah. I dunno why. Don’t care. And she was being guided
down stone corridors, like a dungeon, shoved into a small room with a single bed and amenities
attached, and a blank screen in the wall, but otherwise just bare stone.

Quiet, too. Further investigation revealed a shower in the bathroom and a towel, which – after
checking for cameras – she gladly used, the grime of months in hiding washed off her oily skin.
When she re-emerged, there were clean clothes, albeit all black, uniform-like but comfortable,
modest. But that meant there had to be a camera in here somewhere, something to sense that she
had left. Most likely behind that screen. She was investigating it, peering up close at its joins and
fissures (and it was a beautiful device, cutting edge) when it sprung to life right before her with a
sharp picture, perhaps too sharp, and she expected a hood – instead she was faced with the image
of a fine-featured man in spectacles and a suit – ah, a suit...

She even thought he was kind of hot, in an older-man way, and was embarrassed to meet him with
her hair all dank over her shoulders and no makeup, until he opened his mouth.

Ms Hillam. Good evening. I, ah, must apologise for the, ah, standard of your welcome, I
understand it’s been – ah, it’s been undignified and, well, I’m sorry for that. Yikes. Did he speak
entirely through his nose? Did that get tiring?

“Um, hello,” she said to the screen, and felt idiotic at the sound of her voice in the empty room.

Yes. Hello. I’m, ah... never mind for now. The point is, you’re safe. I know this is, ah, a sudden
and unannounced move on our part but I just want you to know we, ah, we mean you no harm. As
a matter of fact I have a job for you. That’s why you’re here.

“A job?” Chantelle squinted at him, the way his eyes weren’t quite on her due to the hidden
camera’s alignment. His affect was so dead, but not in a psychopathic way; in her years in the
military Chantelle had meet many psychopaths and knew how to spot them. This, instead, was
something PTSD or otherwise, and she wondered briefly if he was a veteran too.

Yes. Mm hmm. Ah, suffice to say you’re qualified. You will be paid. We’ll provide for everything,
your, ah, transition. You have a place to live. And I believe you stand to benefit a great deal from
a specialist occupation in a, ah, ahh... a working environment where you remain, ah, completely
anonymous. But, ah, look, I’ll explain later, okay? It’s more important that you rest now. I, ah,
imagine it’s been a long day for you.

“More like a long lifetime,” she replied drolly, curling her lip. Though she snapped out of it when
she heard a strange whine come from the screen – and hopefully not from the guy. He was looking
down, away from her, at something else in the room now. “Uh, was that a dog...?”


And that was the most explanation she was going to get. All right. Guess sometimes, life just went
a little against the plan, and sometimes, some old suit queen kidnapped you in order to give you a
secret job for a fucking metal band. Also, there were wolves. There were some people who just
should not be given too much money in this world.

* * * * *

† ... really?
Chantelle had rested heavily, if ill at ease, in the time she was allowed. She had never taken well to change but the hoods had given her a generous welcome, replete with full meals, books and newspapers, even an escorted visit to a particularly neurotic but helpful doctor on premises. In its labyrinthine corridors and clandestine aesthetics, a mash of the pre-medieval and the cutting edge, the experience was something like a dream to her: its suddenness, the promise of security, the unspoken understandings, the anonymity of her captors - these hoods she had come to know as “Klokateers” after toying with calling them “Hoodlums”. She felt this was not, by any degree, a better name than the one she’d made up for them. Klok-volunteers. Did that mean they weren’t paid…?

She dwelt on it significantly, free to do so with her connection to the online world revoked - again, like a dream. What of, for instance, the suit, elusive and encountered mostly as a voice through wall speakers and two-way radios; it had not escaped Chantelle the way the Klokateers would mutter about him once their signal had cut, the suit, the lawyer, the manager.

Though he was clearly in charge and in an executive position she could not quite make heads or tails of his actual authority, whether he answered to someone else, though she quietly suspected he did. He spoke like a man acting underneath someone, pressured and stressed and never quite confident in his orders, his voice hesitating and wavering over a hood’s radio before her, and then the muttered responses behind his back, like they disapproved of something he was doing, deciding for them. Yes, it should come from the band, no others. Like he was trying to steal their power. Like a band could have power.

But again, he didn’t speak like a man arming a coup - more like her junior high geography teacher. And thus far she had seen him one (1) time outside of a screen, when she was being escorted by some heavy hoods - they all looked like veterans to her, ex-military or security services, built and tattooed and frightening save for their comically covered faces, which put her at a strange ease - to a private dinner in a mess hall, abandoned save for her guards at that time. What time? No idea, it had all been washed away from her in the artificial lighting and secrecy. But there he was, coming out of a stone doorway with a gaggle of Klokateers and looking flustered as she was hurried past. Shorter than she’d expected, shorter than her, started at the sight of her and said, “Ah, uh, Ms Hillam - - ”, enough to make her guards stop for him to address her when he was cut off by another voice from the room behind him.

“Ms? You bring a chick home, Charles?” - a voice like the bottom of the ocean barked out from behind him, then:

“Aw, you got that rovin eye again, Charlie??” A broad and excruciating mid-west accent she faintly recognised. Chantelle caught the suit’s gaze, disquietingly intense, as he aggressively ignored the speakers.
“As you were,” he instructed her coldly, turning back to where he came with a hand on the vast stone doorway to put these quips straight, and the Klokateers moved her on. Charlie suited him. Inoffensive and awkward. He had no idea how to handle the people that he’d been put in charge of and, again much like her junior high geography teacher, was a prime target for mutiny in the near future. People grew restless under a weak leader. It didn’t take hacking for the Bush administration to know that much.

And he was below someone. A leviathan and a speed freak hillbilly, by the sound of it. Poor bastard.

But finally she was given a chance to see the workings of the machine, summoned and escorted to an inner sanctum for her so-called job. She judged it as deep within the belly of the structure, sensing pressure around her, and the further they ventured, the more current the decor became - sticking with the dark reds and blacks of the colour scheme, but suddenly floor tiles underfoot, fluorescent lighting, automatic doors, like the circle of hell reserved for accounts auditors.

The room they arrived at was particularly dark, surrounded by screens over a control booth that took up half of the circular wall and manned by several scrawnier Klokateers. Charles was standing towards the back and centre of the room in front of a large black chair and two burly hoods, the door opening adjacent to him, his half raised a step from where the controls sunk before him, and he looked to her as she was escorted in, the screens of code reflected in his glasses. His suit appeared black in the dim light though she knew him already to default to a Payne’s grey number, gentle on the eye and suggesting, like its namesake, that he was easier to mix with, allowing, accessible. A very strategic choice, she thought, but it did make him stand out amongst the gaggles of black that otherwise patrolled the compound.

“Ms Hillam. If, ah, you’d like to take a seat at the console.” Sure enough, there was a vacant chair waiting for her before the screens. “You’ll - ah, you’ll find the operating system - well, it’s a custom, ah, number our programmers have put together but, ah, it’s very user-friendly; with your qualifications you’ll pick it up straightaway.”

There was a large cardboard box beside his feet at the foot of the chair. As Chantelle crossed to the controls, she thought she heard it whine and met his gaze a second before he pulled it away, back to the screens.

“Wolves?” she quipped as she passed him, shooting a look at the box, and Charles just tightened his lips.

“I, ah, they’re a bit young to leave alone yet, and I…” he trailed off, looking down at the box himself. “Not what I expected. But I guess you can’t complain. You, ah, you ask the impossible, you get the impossible, you know?”

“Uh huh,” said Chantelle, though she didn’t. What a cryptic bastard.

“Can I… see?” she hazarded once she’d taken her seat, spinning on the ergonomic programmer’s chair to face him. He looked conflicted a moment, pursing his lips, but leaned over to lift a flap on the box anyway, reaching in and feeling around and eventually drawing out a very small animal held securely by the scruff of its neck. Part of Chantelle’s soft heart was instantly squashed. Oh god, oh god. It was just a baby. Oh, my god. Those tiny, tiny ears - -

“There’s, ah, six of them.” He brought it close to his chest, cradled on his arm like a floppy grey beanbag as he stepped closer to let her see, and oh, god, its tiny perfect paws, tiny, tiny perfect - - “They’re a, ah, I guess they’re a surprise for the guys, and part of a conservation program to repopulate the native forest around here but, ah, they’re - they’re too young to do anything with
and, I - you can’t leave dogs on their own at this age, they get, ah... weird. Anxiety and, ah, that type of thing."

Dogs. He called them dogs. “Don’t you have people to handle that, though?” she asked, and she could have sworn she saw him smile.

“Oh. You know how it is, with executive roles, growing corporations and all. Ah, you end up, ah, taking on all sorts beyond the initial position description.”

“And that position is? On paper?”

“Chief Financial Officer.” That seemed very unlikely to her.

“And there are... other executives?” she prodded, but Charles had closed off again.

“Only in a manner of speaking.” He idly gave his attention to the pup against his chest as he carried it back to the box, returning it to its fellows in the dark. Good lord, it was barely bigger than his two hands. Chantelle could feel her dumb heart crushing on him, on the stupid fatherhood of it all, and turned to her console, intent on ignoring the whole thing. She’d had her will broken too many times by men. She would not chance it this time, especially in the workplace.

“So,” she said, her hands over the specialised keyboard. He came to her shoulder, watched her, made her nervous. What happened if she wasn’t what he expected? Back into hiding in Russia? Or... as if she could feel the gaze through those hoods, gathered like statues at the back of the room, watching her. Watching him.

“So. You have all the connections, the proxies, ah, the, ah, editing software - again it’s a custom program but I think you’ll find it suitable. These, ah, fine young people have been, ah, talking me through it.” As he referred to them, the hoods at their various consoles looked up at Chantelle and the CFO, and she read their gaze as judging - like they were testing him for the knowledge they’d imparted. He didn’t sound like a full ignoramus yet, though, unlike most executives she’d met. “There’s, ah, it’s - it’s complicated, and I’m sure you’ll pick it up, but suffice to say I wouldn’t request this work if your activity could be traced. We’ve, ah, tested it, it’s sound as far as we can tell and... anyway.”

He leaned his hand on the back of her chair, setting her on edge. “I just want you to do, ah... what you, ah, do. Did. Access the internal records of, broadly, the States, more specifically its branches, state records, congress, the courts, police, military, hospitals, secret services, ah... et cetera. I understand you can do that - albeit an arduous task, with segmented record keeping - and we should, with this program, be able to compile them and, ah, manage them as a single record - - ” He pointed to part of her screen, a program that had been booted externally by one of the Klokateers at the consoles. “You see.”

She inspected it intently. Jesus. The CIA had something to learn off these freaks.

“This is your mission. If you complete it successfully, you’ll join our ranks as a Klokateer. It seems to me you stand a lot to gain from that kind of anonymity, security, Ms Hillam. We are not afraid of your past.” Funny how his voice grew a spine here, straightened itself out. Lowering her head, Chantelle made a soft sound of agreement.

“Is there any record in particular to start with?” she asked, already navigating the program, connecting, and the CFO nodded over her shoulder and then told her the name and birth date, spelt it out for her. Unspectacular. Western. Very middle-class America. Late 30s by now.
“And walk me through what you’re doing. And I, ah, need you to explain everything - ah, everything, every step, and slowly. Okay? I’m, ah, an old man, never had much truck with computers.” She realised eventually that this was a joke; yes, he was smiling, leaning on her chair, a box full of fucking wolves by his seat like it was nothing. Standing here telling her about proxies and darknet connections and in the same breath, never had much truck with computers. It did not do wonders for her burgeoning crush.

“You’re not that old,” she muttered, and he merely hummed to himself.

“Older than you, Ms Hillam.”

Point taken. So began the task of guiding him, step by step, through the access codes and firewalls as he watched over her shoulder, moving occasionally to another console to lean over the Klokateer stationed there and type on his behalf. Copying her. Once one knew the way it was surprisingly simple, these things always were, and Charles made halting but kind banter with her as both of them relaxed, more inclined to charming smiles flashed in the washed out screen light and superficial, bubbling laughter:

So, ah, where are you from, Ms Hillam? Oh, I went to school not far from there. Yeah, the all-boy’s academy. Oh, you know. It was fine. Did, ah, did hockey, we got into the nationals.

And the hours passed easily. Once the final search was complete, the records collected and compiled, Chantelle leaned back in her chair. “Okay. That’s it. What do you want to do now?”

Charles checked his screen over the Klokateer’s shoulder, comparing it quickly to hers to ensure he’d gotten everything right. He’d followed her instructions precisely, only stopping her to explain some details once or twice in the process. He appeared content that the two matched up, and then said, blankly: “Right, okay. Now delete them.”

Chantelle looked up at him, her fingers paused on the keys. “Um. You, uh, realise that’ll, like... effectively erase them from, like... everything. History. Right?” she asked, and he didn’t even look up at her.

“I think you heard what I said.”

Chantelle looked back at her screen, scanning the information before her. Late 30s, Tomahawk, Wisconsin. Only once she’d taken solid note did she run the delete program. Charles had leaned over the Klokateer, inputting the same to the record he had up, then addressed them shortly: “Run a check on those, make sure they’re fully erased.”

And then she realised that they hadn’t just been copying her, but expanding on the process, sending tendrils further into the system she’d penetrated without her knowledge. Disturbing – she wondered, too, who Charles had been deleting.

“Both records are terminated, sire. Sir. Fuck,” said a weedy Klokateer, and Charles nodded to them.

“Um, good. Thanks. Ah, you’ve all done good work here today, it’s – it’s really a step forward for us and you’ll, ah, you’ll be rewarded in kind. But, ah, I think we could all use a comfort break now, so, ah, back here in five, okay?” She could almost feel the other Klokateers relaxing at his praise, weird and detached. No I’m proud of you, always from outside. But she jerked her head up again when he spoke to her directly, even as he drifted back to his chair. “Ms Hillam? That includes you.”
“Oh... thanks.” She rose slowly, combing her long blonde hair behind her ear as she watched him check the wolves and indicate mutely to some of the hoods. One immediately approached and lifted the box for him with great care, hovering by his elbow.

“#3491 has a document for you, ah, a file, with the records we’re seeking to eliminate. Just employee records, you know, all with consent. It’s, ah, quite dense, though, and I just wanted you to know you can take your time with it, over the next few days, and, ah, obviously the others will assist you. I have other things to work on, I’m afraid, so I’ll have to – have to leave you to it.”

Chantelle just nodded as he moved away, pausing at the door to hear her start, “Okay – see you later, um, sir - -”

But it had already closed by the time the last word dropped from her mouth.

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

The barista had been staring at him again. Charles had just wanted to enjoy his breakfast and coffee in peace, and this place made a phenomenal bagel, but it was quickly becoming obvious he’d have to choose a new place to stop by in the mornings. Of course, his attire probably didn’t help – and conscious of how dishevelled he looked, Charles had rushed home after breakfast to dress and groom appropriately before heading to the office. After all, if Phoebe saw him in the disarray he’d been the night before... god, he’d just die. Drop clean dead on the spot like a fly. It didn’t bear thinking.

Of course, he knew her appointments for the week already, knew when she was due in conferences and meetings and court, and wasn’t so dumb as to time it to run into her. He had in fact aimed for near no one, even taking the stairs to avoid other people in the building (like he was ashamed, like he was guilty) but it was all for naught; one of the interns started coming up behind him, barking his name up the stairs - “Sir! Mr Offdensen!” – like a damned lapdog until he let the kid catch up to him.

“Matthew,” he greeted coldly, dreading every stair he took up to the office. The younger man fell into step with him, smiling broadly. He was a lot like a spaniel, Matthew. Quite annoying and far from diligent, but Charles had liked his enthusiasm.

“Sir, good morning! Well – oh, no – it’s already gone noon, haha!”

Yet, he was just not in the mood today.

“Yes,” Charles said, uselessly, and kept climbing with Matthew hounding by his side.

“I finished those research notes you asked for! They’re waiting for you in your office. It’s pretty interesting, really - -!” he gushed, almost pushing past Charles as he opened the door to the office, and Charles gave him a stern look.

“Um. And Mhairi says you’ve been getting lots... of, uh, calls... about it...” Matthew withered in the doorway until Charles looked at the secretary, staring at him from behind her desk. Trapped there between them in the foyer, a client sitting in a chair waiting, the pot plants, the green carpet;
Mhairi cast a long and telling look at Phoebe’s closed office door, then at Charles standing there pointlessly with his briefcase in hand, turning up at work past noon.

“Phone calls, Mhairi?” inquired Charles, frowning at the poor girl, and she gave him a grimace.

“Yeah... about the band case.”

“What the hell do they want?” He crossed the room to silent stares, Mhairi reaching for her notes and holding the page out to him as he came near. Charles snatched it, though lightly – covered in numbers and names, bizarre words in brackets like *Metal Hell, THE HAMMER, Kerrang!* and *Faces Rocks* – oh.

“Interviews, mostly. Or, well, you know – ‘a few words’... I guess it’s hit the news,” explained the secretary, and Charles huffed to himself, pocketing the note.

“Tell them it’s confidential.” Offdensen strode on to his office, opening the door with more force than was exactly necessary, the hinges squeaking under his heavy hand, “You know my policy on this stuff. And divert my calls to the home phone, I, ah, I won’t be in for a few days.”

“Sir?” But he was already in and slapping his briefcase on the desk, snapping the locks on it open to start shovelling in the necessary paperwork. Sure enough, Matthew’s research was on the desk waiting for him - Charles quickly buried it in his briefcase without checking it. Good kid, Matthew. He’d have to get him in court with him at this hearing, give him one last chance before everything went pear shaped.

Emptying his in-tray into the case, Charles noticed something in the Dethklok paperwork that made him very unhappy indeed. The draft submissions from the opposing counsel on this particular matter had a very familiar letterhead, one that made Charles’ bile rise hot around his organs. Vernon & Vernon Esquires. That son of a bitch. He was being taunted. The whole damn world was laughing at him, come to a head in the last 48 hours. God, it made him feel sick.

Offdensen was clutching his head to fend off his incoming migraine when Matthew poked his head around the door frame, a kicked dog look on his face. “Mr Offdensen, is everything okay?”

“Ah… yes, Matthew. Fine. Just, ah… cheesed off, is all.” He glanced up at Matthew, trying hard to ignore the concern written bold across the poor boy’s features. “How long have we known Vernon was on this case? I’m just, ah… afraid I might have overlooked it - - ”

“Couple of weeks, sir.”

“Oh.” Shit. He’d been so entrenched in his own issues he hadn’t even noticed. No wonder that clerk looked familiar; he was one of Vernon’s interns and had probably been dragged to after work drinks with Charles in the past. Squinting through his swimming headache, Charles raised the document to skim through the submissions - -

“A personality disorder?” he sneered incredulously, involuntarily, flicking through the pages experimentally. “Stalking? Harassment? Give me a god damn *break.*” He realised then, looking up at Matthew’s wide eyes as the intern shrank behind the doorframe, that the young man had never seen him snap like this, never been privy to this amount of stress and harsh language from his senior. “Matthew. Ah, I’m sorry. This is just - - it’s utterly unprofessional, it has nothing to do with the claim, it’s just… laughable, I swear to god.”

He dropped the document dismissively back in the case before boxing the briefcase closed over it with a snap, fastening it aggressively. “I’ll have to call Mr Hammersmith. I’ll have to - - god.” He
pinched the bridge of his nose above his glasses, held it for a moment, and then rubbed it in a sorry way, “It’s just a lot to take in at once, Matthew. Don’t worry about it.”

As Offdensen picked up the briefcase and made to get past him, Matthew retreated shyly. “Are you unwell, sir?” he hazarded, and Charles just looked at him blankly.

“What?”

“You’re, uh… taking time off…”

Charles let out a shallow breath, glancing into the foyer and then putting his hand on the intern’s shoulder as he spoke gently to him: “Matthew, I don’t mean to be ominous, but I’d suggest you start applying for summer clerk positions when you get home, okay?”

The poor boy stared at him weakly, his brow furrowed in panic. “Sir - - ”

“I’ll see you at the hearing. Ah. Good day.” Charles released his shoulder, already regretting making the move but had he not made the young man aware of the situation he - - well, he would have - - well, it was just wrong, you know.

And probably they wanted to interrogate him further, but Charles had blinkers on from the moment he stepped out of the office to his first foot in the door at home, one taxi later, throwing his overcoat on its hook and passing to his home office like the eye of a storm, concentrated and intense in his static calm and thudding migraine.

He sat in his office chair, jacket over the back, his ankle propped on his opposite knee and clicking a pen hostilely in his hand as he regarded the paperwork that littered his desk. Dethklok’s accounts, a circle of hell all to themselves. After a while of staring at it like it might burst into flames under his fierce gaze, Offdensen retrieved his laptop, swallowed some aspirin, ruled up a blank balance pad, opened one of the shoe boxes, and started to sort.

Passive-aggressive little piles of invoices and receipts began to stack around him, vaguely in month order. Once he was satisfied there were no scraps left in the flimsy plastic bags or cardboard boxes, he rang Magnus but reached a machine, a bunch of girls yelling over the guitarist’s voice on the recording as he gave slurred directions to leave a message. Offdensen did so, and then started to write up the receipt hell in front of him.

The hours ticked by on the old clock above his desk, on the dainty gold hands of Elizabeth’s watch on his wrist, as though Magnus’ lying, light fingers on his sister’s watch could corrode it, hot on his wrist. The figures were confused, muddled; things that could be claimed, things that could be taxed, fees for tape production and studio hire. One or two tiny plastic ziplock bags that certainly had held drugs scattered in with the curled and yellowed papers. Charles opened the window, seeing the sky grey outside; though it was past office hours now, he realised that the people on the list of retail contacts the band had given him likely worked day jobs themselves. Perhaps now was the time. With no further hesitance, he called the first one.

Each conversation following went something like this:

_Uh, hi? Who is this…?_

“Hi there. This is Charles Foster Offdensen Esquire†, representing, ah, Dethklok; I’m just chasing up some figures relating to the band’s, ah, [wages/ticket sales/merch/recordings/online traffic/copyright] that I believe you could help me out on?”
And a beat would pass, and then, *Oh, shit.*

Oh shit indeed.

After the first five he had a regal figure shaping up before him in the balance sheet, enough to make him quirk his eyebrow in surprise as he regarded the remaining names on the list. As there were quite a few more. This was enough to cover their recorded expenses already, and this was just a couple of t-shirts and - Charles was learning a lot this afternoon - something called a ‘split’ which appeared to be a record done half and half with another local band, the esteemed Mammoth Fister. He didn’t like to imagine.

Another unsuccessful phonecall to Magnus and Offdensen pushed on regardless. The thing was, he knew that these people were underselling him. Once you got into these figures with retail they were bound to, it was just part of the natural order that an entity as chaotic and disorganised as Dethklok would be ripped off, like ticks collecting on large mammals. But the more people he rang and pressured, the larger that mammal grew, and even with the parasite infestation he began to understand just how much of a… a thing this was. No local band should be collecting these figures; and there was no way their audience was exclusively in this city either.

Another ten calls and the figure was swollen, bloated on the page, fat with zeroes at the bottom of his columns. Offdensen cast a look over the band’s email account experimentally, saw even more of the same. Invoices. Sales. Requests for interviews. Record companies contacting them, offering them tooth-rottingly sweet contracts for recording. One name in particular caught his eye and his essential disbelief, dating back several months. Around the same time he was burying Elizabeth, in fact. And Crystal Mountain Records… had made the first move…

He leaned back in his chair, faced away from the desk and looking out the window as he called Magnus one last time. The sky was growing dark outside, threatening rain, and he heard a peal of thunder rip through the dry atmosphere outside. Such weird weather for the time of year. Maybe this global warming thing had some bite to it after all…

*Charlie, what?* snapped Magnus down the phone, and Charles brushed it delicately off his ego like so little lint.

“Magnus. I need to speak to you, ah, preferably in person. It’s pressing. Regarding the hearing, ah… and finances.”

*Fuck, man. Why the hell would you ring so late?* Charles silently revelled in the irony. *I’m just heading in to work, I can’t - it’s urgent?*

“Considerably so, ah… yes. It’s - I don’t think you’re going to, ah, like it, per se.”

*Jesus. Fuck. Whatever. If you’re up for a drive, I can talk to you on my break, okay?* And he gave Charles an address, out on the edge of the city, beyond the industrial district and into the very sticks. *Just be there on time. Christ. Fuck.*

“I’ll be there, Magnus,” he said, reassuringly, and Magnus sneered back at him.

*You’re such a little bitch, Offdensen. See you then.* And hung up. Charles sank back into his chair again, clicking his pen and considering the matter at hand. The numbers… those numbers. And he resolved to call the accountant friend in the morning, and a business economist as well before moving onwards. Outside, the waiting heat finally broke as the rain began to pound overhead, and every nerve inside Charles pricked with static, and he rubbed the back of his neck to calm the hairs stood on end. Strange phenomena. Very strange indeed.
† It was incredibly important to drop in the “Esquire” in matters like these. What was the point of law academia if you couldn’t threaten people with it occasionally…?

Chapter End Notes

poor matty.
And so it was that at half to midnight, the storm raging over the city and the Buick’s wipers bolting 
frantically through the heavy rain, that Charles Offdensen pulled into possibly the bleakest parking 
lot he’d ever entered - and he’d attended numerous state prisons, and in the 80s and 90s too, so the 
standard of grim he was considering as he turned in to the factory lot was a low bar to begin with. 
Very damn grim.

Not that he could see much through the pouring rain; just enough to make out the flat grey building 
amongst other flat grey buildings, the halo of light that surrounded and dripped from the parking 
lot lamps overhead like molten metal, the cattle truck parked nearby and - through the curtains of 
rain - another vehicle, one he recognised, a beat up black pickup with the windows fogged up 
beyond a soft, yellow dash light, smothered by the smoke inside.

Magnus was waiting for him.

Charles only quickly checked his watch once he’d pulled up beside the truck. He was on time - 
Magnus was pushing out his break to hotbox his car. Typical dopefiend. Upon stepping out into 
the heavy rain, his briefcase held above his head pathetically for shelter, Charles knocked on the 
driver’s window and was rewarded with a plume of skunk-stench smoke as the guitarist wound it 
down to address him.

“Ah, Magnus, hi - - ” Cowering under his briefcase. Magnus’ narrow, blazed pink eyes gazed up at 
him.

“Jesus, Charlie. Get in. Even dogs know to come in out of the rain.” Charles didn’t give him the 
pleasure of a response, just rounded the car as Magnus unlocked the passenger side for him and 
pushed open the door so the lawyer could slide in beside him, the sodden wool of his overcoat 
joining the cannabis stench, the door slammed after him. It was warm inside, the fading yellow 
overhead light making Magnus’ skin look waxy, the air thick with his body heat and joint smoke 
and a heavy metal tape blaring tinny from the ancient stereo. Charles didn’t ask before reaching 
over and turning the infernal thing down. The smoke was already kickstarting his headache, let 
alone the screaming static of low fidelity electric guitars and some guy, just as foul, just as 
annoying, howling about - what had it been, in the snippet he’d caught? Sacrificing children to the 
Dark Lord Satan? It didn’t bear thinking about.

Magnus offered him the joint, and Charles stiffly declined. The guitarist was dressed in an all-
white outfit, something like a boilersuit, unbuttoned to his waist and exposing his bare chest,
tucked into huge boots. A strange smell came off of him beyond the smoke, something sterile and repugnant that Charles could not put his finger on, but which somehow reminded him of a morgue.

“Whaddaya think?” Magnus asked, gesturing to the stereo, and then let out a hoarse cackle at the blank stare Charles gave back. “Quothorn. Hell of a dude. It’s a classic, man. A classic.”

He sucked at the joint expectantly, smirking around his tight lips as Charles glanced at the stereo and then back at him without a word, then blew the smoke out through his nose like a waiting dragon, presiding over the empire of crumpled cigarette butts, tobacco packets and crushed beer cans that filled the dash, the console, and space beneath Charles’ shoes. “You can’t be death metal if you don’t like Bathory, man,” he commented snidely, and Charles gave a short huff of muted amusement.

“I, ah, don’t think I’ve ever been described in, ah, that fashion, Magnus - -” he started but Magnus’ dark eyes had wandered pointedly, directing Charles’ gaze to a magazine on the dash, glossy although littered with butts. The lawyer frowned at him, shifted the wet briefcase to his lap and reached for it, intrigued by the bright cover in its shiny reds and blacks, the page auspiciously dog-earred inside. A news column, if it could be called news, about signings, arrests, album releases in the world of metal music. What really went down this week in Hell. Right. There was a skull image there, like a logo, with DETHKLOK written underneath - -

Magnus, impatient, pulled it out of his hands, straightening it to read aloud to Charles: “We got the longest bit, see? Ahem. The copyright case involving Floridan death metallers DETHKLOK goes to court next week, with word on the street that if this trial is successful, the band may join with CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN RECORDS to sue music sharing service LIMEWIRE for leaking their demo - so if you haven’t already nabbed a copy, GET ON IT for your days are numbered... The band will be appearing in the local... District Court next Monday following a rumoured gu- uh, gue...gig at THE CHURCH DIY venue on the Sunday, under the guidance of ace attorney Charles Foster Offdensen, best known for - and I quote - his, uh, ‘good work’,” Magnus twitched his long fingers in airborne quotation marks, “In the Supreme Court taking out a re - - a repeal that would have afforded celebrities’ private lives protection from the media under the Human Rights Act. If that’s too much jargon for you, dear reader, hear this: Mr Offdensen has been reported frater... fraternising with the Dethklok boys – even our top attorneys aren’t safe from death metal! It promises to be an explosive case... so that makes a lucky two Dethklok shows in one weekend...”!

Magnus lowered the magazine to Charles’ dead stare. “You made Metal Hammer, buddy. Well done,” he purred, passing back the magazine. Charles refused to take it, his silent, frozen rage forcing Magnus to take it back, rolling it into a tube in his fist idly. “Sounds like some case, that celebrity thing - -”

“And so it was,” said Charles, tight-lipped. Magnus leaned back in his seat, puffing with amusement.

“Sounds like the kinda thing that could make you a lot of powerful enemies.” When Charles said nothing, Magnus continued, dopey-eyed: “Wouldn’t be easy to find a lawyer with the balls to stand in a case like that.”

“Not easy, no,” echoed Charles coolly, and Magnus broke his composure with a hacking laugh, striking Charles on the shoulder with the rolled magazine to a stiff wince from the lawyer. It hadn’t hurt. Just playing with him. Fine. It was fine. But fraternizing... god.

“You’re something, buddy. A real doozy. Full of tricks. Man, you know, I respect that. Never have all your cards in play, I say.” Charles eyed the guitarist as he abandoned the magazine on the dash, leaning back with his feet up beside the steering wheel. It was nonsense - never have all
your cards in play, honestly - but of course Magnus held by it. Typical diplomat, slimy character, flattering and sabotaging all at the same time. Burning his bridges as he crossed them. Charles wondered what part of his hand Magnus was keeping from him, and the Vernons’ submissions statement weighed heavy on his lap within the briefcase, as though he could feel it resting there.

“So what have you got for me that’s so god damn urgent, Charlie?” asked Magnus sweetly, and Charles was painfully aware that he’d gone back to first name terms. Like he’d decided he liked him again. Carefully, the lawyer unclasped his briefcase and drew a copy of the band’s predicted balances from within, holding the sheet out to Magnus.

“Numbers,” said the guitarist, somewhat humbled. He turned the paper around in his hands, as though looking from a different angle could give him some insight. “Uh. You gotta walk me through this, Charlie. I’m, uh - when it comes to numbers, I ain’t so…”

The helplessness was clear on Magnus’ face. Charles frowned gently, a little show of concern, for him. “Not so sharp?”

“Practically dyslexic,” admitted Magnus, giving him a screwed up little smile. “Are we outta money? I, uh, always intended to pay you, I mean, we got the cash, I - - ”

“Magnus.” The guitarist shut up, hearing Charles’ measured, gentle tone. “It’s okay. I’m not here to, ah - to persecute you. You don’t have a money problem. Quite the opposite.”

Tilting his dopey head, his curls bunching on his shoulder, Magnus looked at the paper again as Charles attempted to explain it to him, leaning over the center console to point at the figures for him.

“Okay, we’ll, ah, just take it bit by bit, shall we? This is a simplified version. On the left are the sources of debits and credits, all right? The names. Yes? On the right, in these two columns, are the amounts - the column on the right is a number that’s a credit, that’s money that you lost. On the left is the money you made. I put the credits in red. You see?”

“I see.” And Magnus did.

“Okay. So, ah, I rang a lot of people and added them all up and, ah, at the bottom with these double lines, right, this is how much you have, now.” The number shut Magnus up immediately, Charles retreating back to the passenger seat. “So I guess, ah, I just wanted to check that you, ah, knew that. How much it was. ‘Cause, ah, it came as a surprise to me, frankly, and I’m a little concerned that you don’t know how much you’re worth. How much this is worth. Dethklok.”

Magnus stared blankly at the number at the bottom of the page, Charles searching his face for any sign of comprehension.

“What I’m saying is - - ah, Magnus?” - and the guitarist looked up at him, a kind of hopelessness in his big eyes - “I don’t think - I mean. I don’t think you guys, ah, realised just… ah, just what you were getting into in terms of legal fees when you, ah. When you employed me. And I had resigned myself to cutting those down for you, as…”

Magnus tilted his head back, watching Charles closely as the lawyer turned away, gazing out the hazy window at the rain that fell hard through the darkness outside. “As I only took it because I was coming off extended, ah. Extended bereavement leave. And I - - mm. It doesn’t matter.”

Charles was very aware, then, that Magnus was looking at his watch. He turned back abruptly, looking the musician in the eye. “But the point is, that number there, Magnus, under your thumb,
means that you could pay me in full. You could pay me in full, several times over. Do you understand? And you made that this year. Off-off merch, t-shirts and, and tickets and radio station royalties. You know they’re selling your shirts in Japan? In Sweden? You’re an online phenomenon. According to my intern’s research with the people who know these things, that demo was downloaded over 300,000 times.”

He tapped on the dash with a finger to the beat of his words as he repeated it. “Three. Hundred. Thousand. Magnus. How much were you going to sell that demo for?”


“Magnus, if you had sold 300,000 copies of that demo, you would have made over two million dollars.” Honestly, Charles felt pity for him. The way Magnus was staring at him suggested he’d taken a bullet to the brainstem rather than been informed of his future financial security. “I mean, you wouldn’t have, but - - minus production costs, divided by five, that’s about three hundred grand each. I mean, that Supreme Court case, I was making almost a grand an hour. You could do that. You could do that nine times, Magnus. You could hire me, in front of the Supreme Court, nine times over, and still have cash to spare.”

“We’re rich,” croaked Magnus, and Charles frowned at him, gave a little shrug.

“Ah, well. You could have been. I mean, the point is, you, ah. You have a case. And you need to release an album, as soon as possible, if you don’t want to throw all this away.” He let out a soft breath, opened the case again, handing Magnus a printed email from within. “This afternoon, I got in contact with Crystal Mountain Records on your behalf. I realise this was taking a liberty I possibly shouldn’t have but...”

Magnus had arched an eyebrow, suspicious of the lawyer crammed in with him. In the flickering dashboard light, Charles could see the man’s crooked fingers were hooked into the pocket of his boilersuit and wrung with tension. Perhaps all this news hadn’t been as welcome as he’d thought.

“Ah... they offered you two hundred grand about seven months ago, to record with. I, ah. I...” Charles toyed with the idea, turning it over in his head. “With respect... I would have taken that then, but in light of all this you could be worth considerably more money to them. They were quite surprised to hear from me. I mean, you call that late in the day... you don’t expect to be put through. But here we are. I’ve, ah, spoken to some people and, well. Let’s say we’re in negotiations.”

Magnus leaned forward, stubbing out his blunt in the overflowing dash ashtray. “How much?” he asked, his voice quiet and hoarse. Charles watched him placidly, his hands resting on the wet top of his briefcase. The sound of rain, muted death metal, filling the car.

“Two point five million,” he said eventually.

Magnus choked.

“I mean, if I can talk them around to it. They’re, ah... very optimistic about this, ah, Federal case as a promotional tool. If we can make it through that, you’re... well. You’re set for life.” Charles looked out the window again, at the bleak warehouse dimly, artificially lit in the distance. He’d never had a normal job in his life. Sure, once he’d been like Matthew, doing paralegal, summer clerk bullshit for his father’s acquaintances. But never a job that needed his hands. Never a job that needed a uniform, left him smelling bad. How much did Magnus make an hour here? How much of it did he put into Dethklok? Wasn’t that... fair, then? That it should pay off, at some
“And you?” Magnus croaked, his face full of crooked emotions, and Charles glanced back at him in confusion.

“Me? I’m a lawyer, you’ll pay me.”

Magnus looked at his boots, thinking this over. “You didn’t have to do this,” he said eventually, humbled and hurt. “You could have just left us to it. You know, I didn’t... know. Maybe Pickles and Nathan... know... but I didn’t know. You could have just... left us to rot and die in obscurity, like, not... with the record company and, stuff.”

Charles pulled another tight shrug.

“I, ah. My attorney’s oath requires that I look out for the oppressed; you were - - they were taking advantage of you. Ah...” He paused, running his thumbs over the clasps of the case. In the car windshield, his reflection stared back, hollow and gaunt and exactly like his sister’s. “I take my job very seriously,” he said, and yet here he was, flushing it down the drain for a mere woman.

Morocco was sounding very promising again.

Magnus had lowered his head, studying Charles with sympathy. He felt read, uncomfortable, especially in light of the metaphysically heavy document in his briefcase; too heavy to ignore any longer.

“Another thing, Magnus...” Daintily, Charles retrieved it, going to hold it out to Magnus and then withdrawing it with a second thought as Magnus tried to reach for it. The guitarist quirked an eyebrow at him.

“What?”

“Ah... before I give this to you, perhaps you can put my mind at ease first?” Magnus’ eyebrow curved higher, a strange darkness coming across his face like fear or paranoia. Charles skimmed the numbered paragraphs again, the formal submissions this time, that letterhead taunting him in its keen, bare typeset.

“Do you know Ms Haeven, Magnus?” He looked at the guitarist over the submissions, the man looking like a spider sitting in its web, all limbs and animal fear.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his voice guarded, and Charles cleared his throat.

“Let me put that a different way. Ah... I don’t mean to pry, but - - ah.” God damn. He’d never been good at talking about feelings. And then suddenly you had to ask, for a case. You had to ask. “Were you intimate with Ms Haeven, Magnus?”

“That’s none of your goddamn business,” growled Magnus, like a dog in a cage, and Charles turned the first page of the document without the flutter of an eyelid.

“Magnus, this is a witness statement from Ms Haeven. If I may?” He quirked an eyebrow at Magnus, who recoiled, a mad, kicked animal. Taking it. “Okay. She says:

1. On 27 October 1997, I met Magnus Hammersmith at a gig held at Candyapple Bar, where his band, Dethklok, were playing on the same night as mine. I had known him for several years prior as an acquaintance but this was the first time we had spoken properly. He brought me several drinks and then - -”
“Stop. Stop.” Charles looked up at Magnus, the hurt bare on his face. “I know this bit, okay. Okay. Yes. We, uh, we dated, or - - something...”

“Or something,” echoed Charles, turning a page curiously. When he read, he spoke clearly, a pressure in the clarity: "13. Following this, I started receiving text messages from Magnus that would threaten me and my property, call me slurs, e.g. a ‘lying whore’ - -" 

He spared a look up at Magnus, who hadn’t moved. Staring blankly into the ashtray.

“I would receive these several times a day, often in quick succession and usually in the evenings and very early mornings. She’s attached, ah, copies, extracted from her phone.” He thought he heard Magnus say fuck, very quietly, barely leaving his mouth. “She says you, ah, let down the tyres on her car, Magnus.”

“She can’t prove that.”

“Mm, you’re not helping yourself there,” Charles observed coolly. “Ah, let’s see. She says, ah, death threats, threats of violence, evidence of stalking, she says you, ah, told other men she was a prostitute, ah, and that she had a sexually transmitted infection. And that she’s a lesbian. Says you threatened her new boyfriend, your, ah. Your manager.” He made eye contact then, crooking an eyebrow. “With a knife. You held a knife to his throat in the studio on Broadway, yes. And ah, threatened to kill him and her. With the knife. She says, ah, you went into quite a bit of detail. I assume that was the point of his resignation?”

“Uhh.” Magnus blinked and brushed his nose with his fist, cautious at the questioning. “He never actually like, uh, quit.”

“Okay. And she says overall, she finds these, ah, just that she finds this behaviour quite extreme considering you were never actually in a relationship.” Charles lowered the document, looking Magnus in the eye. “She says, in fact, that the duration of your affair was maybe two weeks - -”

Magnus made a weird sound, rolling his eyes. “Well, more like, three - -”

“Uh huh. The point is, ah... they intend to undermine your credibility by highlighting your, ah, skewed investment in suing her over the leak. They’re accusing you of stalking, harassment, obsessive behaviour, borderline personality disorder - - this is a character assassination, Magnus.”

“Borderline...?” asked Magnus, his brow knotting, and Charles returned the papers to his case.

“She says you’re crazy, Magnus.” And honestly, he suspected she had a point. He wasn’t going to tell Magnus that, though.

The guitarist’s eyes widened with bile. “I’m not crazy,” he snarled, and Charles clicked his tongue idly, riling him further: “She’s a lying bitch! Don’t you believe me?”

“Oh, I believe you.” Charles fastened the clasps on his briefcase. “But a court won’t. I don’t intend to give it any ground because, ah, a crime is a crime whether you’re crazy or not.”

“I’m not crazy,” choked Magnus again, and Charles ignored him.

“You need to go to a psychologist and get an assessment.” He could feel Magnus’ blood clotting as he said the words. Just stopping dead inside him. “It’ll take an hour and a half, max. Just a write-up, show you’re aware and proactive in changing. Look, here.”

He produced a business card from his pocket, another old friend of a friend from college. “She’s
good, you’ll like her.”

Magnus plucked the card from his fingers, his distaste seething under his skin like boiling oil. He said nothing, just scowled.

“I’m serious. I’ll go with you, if you like. We’ll do a witness statement, you won’t even have to give evidence in the box. And maybe, ahh...” Charles looked at the trash at his feet, nudging a broken glass pipe amongst the cans and cigarette lighters with his wingtip. “Take it easy on the chemicals in the meantime, okay?”

It was the perfect storm, really, wasn’t it? In many ways, Charles saw himself reflected in Magnus. A neurotic son of immigrants, charismatic, hung up on success; but instead of sports and money and education, Magnus had fallen into the comfortable hands of drugs, abuse and ill-advised sex, dragging his nails down the wall as he’d slipped. You got strung out on emotions, attached too easily to a woman or a band or a concept and then it screwed you over, inevitably screwed you over, and you medicated, and then you got worse and worse, you ruined your own relationships, you medicated to smother the pain, you sank deeper into the swamp.

Looking for the hurt and anger in Magnus’ face, the disbelief, Charles asked in his thoughts alone: *But how deep is that water, Magnus?* How quiet is the bar after your last friend has left? Charles thought he had a notion. Now here was a hand, extended to Magnus, one that had been there, that knew, offering to drag him out of this mess. If only he could leave his pride behind and take it.

Magnus put the card in his pocket, said hoarsely, “Okay.” Charles almost smiled. Almost.

“Oh. And, ah, good luck with rehearsal, for your gig.”

“Okay.” Magnus sat up suddenly, as though snapped out of a dream. “At the Church. Right.”

Charles was opening the door of the car already when Magnus put a stopping hand on his briefcase, giving him pause. “Charles. Wait. Uhh, I wanna... I got ‘em here somewhere, hold on.”

The lawyer waited, the door ajar and the rain streaming outside, as Magnus cracked open the glovebox. A small cascade of black... things... small and oddly shaped, came out, with Magnus attempting to catch as many of them as possible and then plunging into the trash in the passenger seat to retrieve them. “Um, fuck. Shit. These...” He surfaced with a handful of them, little black objects in his palm, “Um, Charlie, I want you to, uh. I want you to see us play. Okay? Cuz I don’t think you understand, man.”

He held out one of the objects, and Charles put his hand out curiously, furrowing his brow as Magnus placed it carefully into his palm. “These are the, uh, tickets for the Church, okay? I was meant to sell ‘em but, uh. I’ve been too busy.”

It was a bone. An animal bone. Something from a cow, thought Charles, turning it over in his fingers, painted black, with its coarse dry surface, like part of a spine perhaps.

“Oh.” Magnus felt in the mass in his hand for another, smaller bone, this one a molar, and neatly placed it in Charles’ palm beside the other. “And one for the lady.”

Charles regarded it dryly. “Uh, thanks.”

“That’s worth, like, twenty-five bucks. So don’t fucking be late.” Charles wasn’t sure where he was supposed to get the address of this place from, but he was sure it was possible.

He was about to close the door on the guy when something occurred to him. Cow bones... that
smell... “Magnus. What exactly is this place?” he asked as the guy scrambled to put away the bones, and Magnus looked up at him.

“Uh, it’s a meat processing plant, Charlie.”

“And what do you...do here?”

“Process meat,” Magnus quipped, and then leaned on the passenger seat, flashing a disconcerting grin. “I’m a cattle deboner. Exactly what it sounds like. That cool two million’s sure sounding better than $11.50 an hour to get up to my shoulders in a dead cow right about now, let me tell you.”

“Right.” So the smell was gore, cattle gore. $11.50 an hour did not sound positive to Charles. But he wasn’t being paid what he was being paid to stand in the rain. “Later, then, Magnus. I'll be in touch.” And Charles slammed the door on the guy's *later, buddy*, and left it at that.
English lessons.

So it was contrived. Offdensen had had enough of reading the garbled, fallen Babylon of Toki’s interviews and was willing to make a certain concession, sacrifice his time, even if Toki wasn’t so willing. Charles had long since given up on the *ams* and the seemingly random plural forms, as Skwisgaar’s influence was too strong over the boy, and professional lessons had fallen flat with teacher after teacher quitting in frustration. So this was what was left. Honestly, forced though it may have been, he found it quite pleasant.

While Offdensen was insistent that the wolves were wild animals first and foremost and therefore not pets, he was not below using them to lure Toki into the office and bribe him with puppy-time provided he chatted to Charles while he did so, jumped through the hoops and got some enunciation and vocabulary practice. Better than the alternative, following Skwisgaar around and picking up whatever rubbish the guy chose to spout. It wasn’t that Charles disliked the Swede or even thought he was a particularly bad person, just... he was not his best self around Toki.

The boy was stretched out on the rug near the fireplace, only barely visible to Charles around the lounges, teasing one of the pups with a pet toy of colourful feathers attached to a short, flexible pole, like a cardinal bird or a wren, thought Charles, while the other dogs either wandered idly around or slept, the manager not being especially concerned what property they ate through at this point. He was particularly aware of two asleep together beneath his desk just beside his feet, a small pool of warm fur that he found himself feeling fondly towards despite his better intentions. They were wild animals, you see? There was no good to be had in spoiling them.

He could hear Toki speaking quietly to the wolf from behind the lounge, amongst the playful growls: “Oh, looks at yous guy, yous a super cool guy. I names you… Vígi. No. Hati. That’s good name…”

“Toki.” Charles saw the top of the Norwegian’s face pop up from behind the lounge as he addressed him, wide-eyed and guilty. “What did I tell you about naming them?”

“Ahh, um, we don’ts name them cuz theys wild guys and not friends for us…” The sadness obvious in his voice. “But he ams real cool, Charles - - !”

Charles let it go as Toki disappeared again, diving in pursuit of the puppy with only a faint bang as his head struck the coffee table.

“Toki, you, ah, you left me hanging. You were talking about Norway?” the manager prompted, pulling another waiver draft towards him over the desk. They were refinements for the China tour, some of the legal language needing modification for Chinese law and a different twist or subtlety for the translation, and he’d been idly puzzling over the books while they chatted - something to keep his mind occupied. Toki groaned from the flagstones.

“Nah, I don’ts want to go talking about that no more.”

“Okay, well…” He’d gotten as far as having friends there, given some forenames that Charles had diligently noted on a scrap of paper beside his computer. Worth investigating later - perhaps if he
could wheedle just a little more information from Toki. But for now, the teenager’s patience had run out.

“I wanna plays some other game.”

Charles sat up in his seat to see Toki, baiting the wolf’s needle-lined maw with the feathers again back and forth around one corner of the coffee table, his bent back visible over the top of the couch. The kid had gotten so damn tall in the last couple of years. It shocked Charles every time he stopped to consider it - he vaguely remembered his own teenage growth spurt from bandy-legged, weedy child to just plain old short, but otherwise the whole phenomenon was next to alien to him. Seeing Toki rise from looking down at the boy to looking up at the boy in three short years was just unsettling. Now, at nineteen years - give or take - the kid was looking more like a man with the passing days, tall and leanly muscled, and yet as foolish and ignorant as any of them wished to keep him - -

And sometimes the potential to abuse that was giddying. But Charles was a protective soul. Did his best to keep the kid educated and safe, even when that danger came from within Mordhaus itself.

“A, ah - a new game, huh? How about, ah, give me…” He shuffled the papers, pulling another document to the top to work with. “Ah, animals beginning with a B.”

Toki groaned loudly in annoyance.

“Ah, well, you asked, Toki. I’m not sure what you expect; I’m a financial officer, not a, ah. Games master or - or something…”

“Like what?” Charles caught a sharp growl from the wolf as its teeth came down on empty space, the pink and yellow feathers of the toy flashing bright in the air where Toki thrashed it at the animal.

“Ahh, well, e.g…”

“Who is Eegee?” The pup had pursued the feathers over the edge of the coffee table, leaping up, and Toki pushed it back down to a soft whine and snarl of frustration.

“Ah, for example.”

“Oh…”

“It’s, ah, it’s Latin.”

“Ohh, I sees…EG....”

“Exempli - - ”

“Eg-sample.”

“ - - grati - - ah. Fine.” Toki had looked up at him here, all big blue eyes, but Charles did not have the mental energy to explain it to him. “No, ah, that’s fine, Toki. Yes.”

“E.g…?”

“Ah, e.g., a, ah... bat.”

“Bat.” Toki sat down on one of the armchairs, sideways to Charles and looking at the manager, the arm of the toy bouncing in his hand as he idly teased the pup at his knee. “Yeah, I knows him.”
“Oh, you do. So who, ah…. is he, then, tell me?”

“Him ams…” Charles hid his cringe. “Flap, rat that ams hasing wings, he, um, flies down from the castle and he suck the blood from the villager.”

“Ah, yeah. A vampire bat,” said Charles, careful to enunciate it perfectly as he scanned another page of copied Chinese law definitions.

“Vampire bat. Yeah. But even regular bat, err, him ams as a spys for Satan, raising hims dark flag… descretion… come from the land beyond the forest… multifarious wing-ed black creatures, slay these angels. Yehova’s.”

Charles spared a moment to look at the boy over his paperwork. Toki had zoned out somewhat, jumping the feathers over the edge of his coffee table with the dog snapping at its edge. “Okay,” said the manager, slightly daunted.

“Flaggermus, in Norway.” The boy smirked dirtily to himself, not unnoticed by Charles.

“Uh huh. That’s - that’s not a nice word in Norwegian, is it,” he guessed, and Toki made a cheeky sound, batting the pup around its ears. Charles turned back to his work. “Do I want to know?”

“Ah, yous good man Charlie, I think you gots to has good taste in wimmens, don’ts need that word,” said the boy, and Charles crooked an eyebrow.

“Like that, is it? Okay. Your turn, anyway. Animals beginning with a B.”

Toki thought for a while, gazing at the wolf as he let it lick his fingers, something Charles disapproved of but couldn’t be bothered correcting. “Bear,” he said eventually, and Charles nodded over his work.

“Mm hmm.”

“Bear. He ams B too in Norske. Bjørn. B-jørn… uh, there ams Goldy and she three bear. And they poricks too hots for her, cuz she ams pussy, and then they eats her. Cuz she ams not too hot. That’s meaning… Goldy, ams ugly slut, probly.”

Charles frowned at Toki over the desk, but the boy had barely noticed. “You turn, Charles,” he chirped, looking up expectantly, and Charles somewhat regretted letting him spend so much time around Skwisgaar.

“Ah, okay. An animal beginning with a B. Ah… bird.”

“Bird? Huhh, B ams for Borings! Come on, you cans dos better!”

“All right. All right. Ah… B… bah…” He rolled the sound around his mouth, searching for something, anything. This kind of imagination wasn’t Charles’ strongpoint, but eventually he landed on something, saying it quickly: “Bagworm.”

“Bagworm? What is bagworm?” Toki had risen again, wandering idly towards Charles’ desk. Charles looked up at him, unfocused, his attention split between the young man and the finer points of the Sino-Russian Treaty.

“Ah, it’s a worm, like a moth, caterpillar, lives in a bag. Makes a bag, out of twigs and things. And ah, silk, I imagine.” He trailed off, trying to excuse his lack of knowledge behind seeming absorbed in his work, “They used to eat our juniper bushes… real nuisance.”
“We have… juniper bush?” enquired Toki, and he glanced out the vast windows behind Charles’ desk at the forest below, the dark mountains in the distance. Charles lowered the papers at last, acknowledging the little self he was letting out.

“No, ah… my, ah. Mother’s garden.” Toki looked at him like he was the moon, wide-eyed, unable to fathom that harsh fact that maybe Charles had been 19 once too, or had been anything other than a businessman behind a desk and scolding him.

“Ohh. Nice garden?” he asked, imagination working overtime to recreate a young Offdensen, failing miserably. Toki had not come across many other children in his time. He dropped into the guest chair in front of Charles, spinning it idly.

“Uhh, nice enough, I guess.” Honestly Offdensen’s childhood was something of a blur to him. There were moments, sure. Everyone had their moments. But everything so distant now, so departed from his current life, like the faded film locked away in the storage unit in Florida it was recorded on. “The upkeep was hell before we sold the place, getting it up to scratch. But, ah. Got a good price. For ‘97, anyway.”

Toki phased out for a moment, lulled comatose by Charles’ immediate association between his childhood and the late 90s housing market. A pup soon pulled him out of his boredom with a lick to his hand, and he pulled it up onto his lap, rubbing its ears roughly in his hands as he watched Charles over the desk.

“Your mother, what’s she like?” he quested, and Charles - who knew nothing about Toki’s family, hadn’t been able to get a word out of him in all this time - wondered if he was looking for something to attack or something to project onto. Here was an opportunity to plumb those depths, make Toki easier to handle; but the cost was being mined himself. And he had no particular desire to look back.

“Well, she’s, ah, four years gone now, Toki.” He looked up, over his glasses, at the boy’s empty face, and then back down at his work. “Watch your tenses.”

Toki rolled his eyes dramatically. “What was she ams likes then.”

Which was atrocious, frankly, but close enough.

“Mm. Well... okay, I guess. I mean, I, ah, turned out all right,” he tried, dismissively, and Toki just stared at him. So that was up for debate, was it? The cheeky little bastard. He tried a different tact. “What about your mother, Toki?”

“Ugh, no. She’s... what you say...” The darkness that had momentarily crossed Toki’s face lifted for teenage cheekiness again, a dorky grin: “Animal beginning with an B.”

“Ah. You mean a, ah... a female dog,” - Charles gathered some of the documents together - “To put it, ah… delicately.”

“Bikkja. See, them’s another, double-B. Yeah, don’ts want to talk abouts her, there’s nutting to says.” The boy held the puppy in his lap close, wrapping his arms around it. After a solid silence of just Charles shuffling papers, Toki spoke again, curiously: “Where’s your moms go then?”

“Huh?” Charles looked up again, mid-reach for his stapler.

“You say she gos, where’s she go, you mom.”

“Oh.” The manager punctuated the word with the snap of his stapler through the documents, heavy
handed. “It’s a, ah. A euphemism. That’s a, ah, a nice way of saying something - - she’s dead, Toki.”

“Oh, cool.” Charles cocked an eyebrow, watching the teenager as he nuzzled the puppy in his arms and heaved a sigh. “Wish my mom was dead.”

“Toki...” said the manager warningly, frowning at him, and Toki just sniffed and met his gaze again.

“How’s she die? Was it cool?”

“Uh, Toki.”

The boy released the dog, uh, wolf, to sit forward on the chair with interest. “Murderface’s mom and dads die, Skwisgaar tells me, and it ams real cool, like a murder-suicide, wow!”

“I, ah... no, Toki, just... she got old, demented.” He dearly wanted to be out of this conversation, couldn’t think of a way without crushing the poor kid’s trust in his honesty. But he hadn’t had to describe it to anyone. Now those big blue eyes up at him, trusting him – “And then she died, in pain, in a hospital. Decidedly, ah... not cool. Just very... painful and – and sad.”

And he’d expected it to burn, but he didn’t feel anything much. Perhaps it had been long enough. Before him, Toki’s face lifted, daunted, and he just said, quietly: “Brutal.”

Charles was about to agree when his intercom buzzed hysterically, the light for his secretary flashing, and he snatched up the headset quickly to speak to her, ignoring the way Toki’s face dropped in guilt.

“Mm?” he prompted the secretary, and she told him there was an issue in the control room. That they were coming up to speak to him, immediately. He looked up as his office door opened, remotely triggered by the secretary, Toki too raising his head to take in the three klokateers in the doorway, one scrawny and small and the other two towering hulks of men. The skinny one, who Offdensen thought could have been #2487, or #3491, or maybe even #688, damn it, looked like they were about to speak, but one of the muscles rumbled up first: “Sire. There’s a security threat. Ms Hillam is refusing to cooperate.”

“What?” Charles rose from his seat, his brow knotting as Toki looked from klokateers to manager and back again in confusion. “She can’t refuse.”

“Perhaps you should tell her that, sire.”

Charles stood perfectly still a beat, leaning over his desk, then quickly shuffled his work back into order. “Toki, I’m going to have to cut this short. Pressing matters at hand.”

“Who ams Ms Hilm?” gulped Toki, turning in his chair to follow Charles as he left his desk and stalked towards the klokateers.

“No one, it doesn’t matter, Toki.” The manager stuck out his foot to stop a wolf tottering out the open door. “Ah-ah, don’t let them out. What did I tell you about open doors?” he sneered up at one of the towering klokateers, and the hood shrugged at him.

“Sorry, sire.”

“And it’s sir. Sir. For the last time.”
As he left with the smaller Klokateer, the heavies turning to follow them, he thought he heard Toki, sticking his head out of the doorway to watch them go, call after him suggestively: “Okay, Charles... treats her nicely...”

Jesus.

The passages to the control room were shrouded, draped in their sinister red lights and black tiles. This darkness, departed from the sunlight of his office; Charles felt a – how to explain it? – a mode shift within him, a gear, a machination, as he stepped into the room with Hillam, eyeing her as she watched him enter from the console. He felt like a locked door, suddenly, an obelisk, and regarded her coolly.

She had placed the terrifying file, a register of names to be deleted, on his chair. It stood almost a foot thick, and – seeing her gaze point him to it – Charles opened it at a random page to find the names drawn through as she had marked her progress. He let the pages fall over his fingers, all ruled through, and then raised his head to look at her again.

“They told me you’re, ah, resisting,” he said, and Hillam’s liquid gaze, dark in the dim lights, flashed up to the klokateers that lingered at his heels. Charles raised his eyebrow just a touch but took the hint, standing straight to address them: “Wait outside for me, will you? I want to speak to Ms Hillam in private.”

Though they clearly did not approve, the klokateers obeyed. Once the last of them had filed out and the door closed with a pneumatic hiss behind them, Charles hefted the file from his chair to take a seat, leaving it on the floor by his feet like so little rubbish. His leg crossed on his knee and leaning on the armrest, he shot the woman a cocky quirk of his eyebrow, waiting for her. “Go on, then.”

Hillam took a deep breath, puffing up before him. Seemed like there was a lot on her chest. Charles narrowed his eyes.

“I liked you,” she announced suddenly, and he felt about ready to perform his own lobotomy.

“Oh. And evidently, that’s, ah, changed.”

“Mm hmm!” Hillam nodded emphatically, then gave a little eye roll – at him or herself, Charles couldn’t tell. “God, I’m so stupid!”

“Was there something in particular you wanted to speak about, Ms Hillam?” he prompted, a little alarmed at the whole situation. Hillam held her head a moment, her blonde hair falling forward over her face, and then raised it again to speak to him.

“Yes. Yes, there is. Actually. See that file?” Charles looked down at it on cue. “I did your stupid job, sir, it’s all there for you, or rather, it’s gone, you know. Poof, gone, into the ether.”

“I see that.” He hefted the file onto his lap, predicting what was coming next.

Sure enough: “Except - - !”

“Ah.”

There was the resistance. Ms Hillam shook her hair over her shoulders, sat straight in her chair and squaring up to him from across the room.

“You told me they were all by consent,” she said, a snarl in her voice, and Charles tilted his head.
“They, ah, are all... by consent, Ms Hillam.”

“I mean, most of it checks out. Yeah, almost all of them. Just some - - I don’t know, I noticed some... weird trends? Decided to check them out...” What the hell kind of game was she playing with him now? Charles narrowed his eyes at her.

“That puts your position under threat,” he told her coldly, opening the file again and flicking through it. “You were given a task, you were to stick to it.”

Hillam just rolled her eyes again. “If I lied to the government, what made you think I wouldn’t lie to you?”

“Good point. Granted. Tell me about your ‘trends’. ” He had yet to find a single one not crossed out, and then something jumped in his heart, a little blink of realisation. Consent... trends... and Charles had already turned to the appropriate page by the time she spoke again, the soft curl of shame crawling up inside him like roaches across his innards.

“You grew up near me. Did you ever hear of a local poet, Elizabeth O?” she asked, and Charles followed the line of data with his finger. Sure enough, not ruled through.

“Obviously you have, since she works for you – oh, but wait...” He could feel Hillam’s pained smirk across the room without looking up at her, his head bent morosely over the book in shame. “How can she work for you? I mean, it’s hard enough to hold down a job when you’re alive... must be hard as hell, dead.”

Charles let out a soft sigh, letting the pages fall closed over his fingers.

“Did you know her?” he asked quietly, hoarsely, and could not look at her.

“No. Did you?” she asked, and Charles remained silent. “She’s very important, though, you know, important. Or maybe you wouldn’t. Men sure like to ignore women. Men sure like to ignore queers.”

“That, ah, wasn’t my intention - - but I suppose,” murmured Charles, his chin in his hand, but too quiet - Hillam didn’t hear.

“Typical, hypermasculine bullshit. Here’s another weird thing – all the other dead people you’re wanting erased there, they’re all fucking related to her.”

Charles stared into the space just past her head, as if he’d short-circuited. So she was right. He had been... brash, assuming she wouldn’t care to pick it up. Maybe if he’d known she was a local, he’d have chosen otherwise – but probably not. Just a moment of idiocy for him, a lapse of reason under pressure, pushed into action by Pickles’ anxiety; but it was nothing he couldn’t talk his way out of, surely.

And now the fucks had joined the party, too. It had all been so civil before. What a shame.

“All of them. Fucking all of them, they’re all – and they’re all dead. If you read any of her stuff, you’d know how important it was; but you’d know also that there’s an omission here. Can you see?” Hillam cocked her head weirdly, mockingly. “I read her stuff before I even came out, you know? When I was still searching for myself, after she’d just died. And if you knew her, and I think you do or else - - you’d know she had a brother. Wrote about him.”

A gutless silence filled the space between them as Charles wondered how the hell that one had gotten out. He’d been sure he’d got them all.
“An attorney in Florida. Unless something terrible’s happened in the last four years, he should be her only living relative.” Hillam touched her lip with put on ignorance, pantomiming realising it for the first time. “Oh – but hang on! He’s not in there!”

Charles stared through her blankly, feeling nothing but the burn of the watch on his wrist.

“As a matter of fact,” she said, her face lit up cruelly in the screen lights as she turned to her console and typed rapidly, bringing up streams of empty text, empty data, running through broken searches, “He’s not anywhere. It’s almost like he’s been deleted. How weird is that?”

Charles looked up at the screens, his hand resting on his chin gently. Still he said nothing, even as Hillam stopped the feed and instead brought up two dozen of the same, stern photo of his sister, a cheap intimidation tactic with her flat, detached countenance in some stoic author’s portrait staring down at him. They lit his face up brightly with a white light, reflected in his glasses – eerie to see her after so long, how similar their faces were.

Across the room, Hillam breathed out, a frightened sound, as Charles just looked around at the cold, familiar faces surrounding him. Then looked at her, straight at her, with all the emotion of a snake.

“If you don’t complete the task, your privileges will be revoked,” he informed her, and Hillam sniffed, raising her chin to him.

“I refuse. It’s too important. Too - - toofucked up. I mean, that’s art – and then the rights of the dead. And then - - ”

“I’ve, ah. I’ve already said my piece.” Charles put the file aside, rising from his seat. “If you’re not prepared to help us, then you’ll be escorted from the premises.” He crossed to the console, standing at another station as he silently accessed and overrode Hillam’s control, the woman watching him from her chair. The screens fell black again, a relief - that stare had been starting to make his skin crawl.

“This is a selfish and evil thing you’re doing,” she remarked, and Charles thought she sounded hurt. He glanced sideways at her without emotion, his hands still resting on the keyboard.

“Hmm. I, ah - ‘Evil’ is going a bit far, don’t you think,” he said, a little fussed by the accusation, “You’re, ah, sure you want to make this complaint?” And Hillam nodded, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Well, all right.” Charles hit delete with a definitive keystroke. “It was nice, ah… meeting you, you know. And all that. Working with you.”

A short pause followed as he deleted the remaining records and messaged the klokateers outside from the console, Hillam slowly dropping her aggressive stance to look at him, childlike, searching. “That’s it? That’s all?” she said eventually, and Charles just shrugged.

“Well, you know,” he said dismissively, straightening as the klokateers re-entered. “Sorry. Did we, ah - I didn’t mean to frighten you, or…”

“Oh, no, it’s just… this whole supervillain thing you’ve got going here…” She indicated awkwardly to the klokateers, pointing a wheedling finger to them as she stood, “I thought - - ”

“Ah, well. I mean, the consequences of giving up secure employment are still fairly dire in your situation…” Charles pointed out, frowning at her. Hillam still couldn’t believe it.
“But what if I, uh, you know… leak… what’s going on here…?”

“Oh, why would you? They’re just a band, you know…”

Chantelle Hillam looked from the manager to the control booths to the register file to the hooded goons standing over her shoulders. “Uh huh,” she said, and Charles looked to the klokateers that gathered around them now.

“That’s it, we’re finished here. Ms Hillam has, ah, decided to leave us early. If you could show her off the premises…”

One of the burly klokateers grabbed the woman by the arm, copping a stern frown from Charles, and gradually released to a more gentle hold as he led her to the exit. The remaining heavy loomed over him as he gathered up the register file, waiting for further instruction.

“Sire, should we -- ”

“Should you…?” Charles looked up at him, and held out the file, dropping it into the man’s huge hands as he offered them. “Destroy this, would you?”

“Sire, if we - - ”

“Oh, whatever. I’m sure you can work out somewhere to put her. Just don’t make it, ah, messy, you know.”

The klokateer hefted the file, tilting his head slightly at the diminutive man before him, and then took his leave, getting almost to the door before he stopped at looked back at Charles, as if searching for direction. The manager was just looking at the console screens, running a backup search for any of the deleted records with a contemplative peace. Eventually, he felt the goon’s gaze on him and looked up again.

“Go on. I’m sure you can figure it out for yourself,” he said sharply, sick of this, and that seemed to do the trick. The klokateer exited, leaving him alone in the dark control room. But looking at the dimmed screens, he realised, knew, that it was over - and a great weight, like wings, lifted from his shoulders.
Offdensen wasn’t what you’d call a superstitious person. Raised atheist by a Libertarian father and long having lapsed mother, he did not believe in signs or omens or phantoms or even anything so trite as an afterlife. He knew his sister’s face in the mirror to be his own grief, haunting him, and he knew the dreams - rare for him, usually sleeping like the dead, undisturbed by images or cryptic messages - to be that same heartache, depression, his unconscious projecting his basic fears past his sceptical mind in the form of an open grave or an empty beach, a baseless and fathomless terror he felt powerless to push away from.

And yet, on Friday night, he dreamt. Lucidly, with complexity, in color. And that was how he knew things had gotten very bad indeed.

A long day spent phoning between Magnus at home and the psychologist, a patient woman who opened her offices on a weekend, trying to organise an appointment around work and rehearsal and miscellaneous ‘prior engagements’ Magnus insisted he had, then on the books again and emailing Matthew ahead of the hearing, and then a call from Phoebe that he boldly answered - agreed to meet with her in the following week. By the tone of her voice he knew she was aware she’d lost him, but he could not tell the coldness of his own. By nightfall his brain hummed with migraine and no amount of painkillers and red wine would shut it up. Ultimately he lay in the dark and starved it off until, at last, he succumbed, and was brought fitfully into the dream.

He was in a forest, cool and dark, the twisted grey trees forming a canopy overhead of tangled branches, needles underfoot. A mossy scent of decaying pine. To his left and his right were two passages through the trees, tracks worn by a thousand passing through along its history. The color, while there, was washed out, greyed, a mist that shrouded the distance and spoke to him of winter, the early dawn, and of death.

Not too cold though, that absence of sensation one found in dreams, a weighted atmosphere like a storm was on the edge of breaking. He was wearing his suit, immaculate. In his hand was the polished wood of a polo mallet, heavy against his palm as he hefted it and paired with his crop; that familiar weight, his mallet, smoothed down by his hands over a hundred strikes. A crow cried out in the woods beyond. Stinking of death, this place. Like an afterlife itself.

On the grey, rotting pine needles before him was a white ball. It peeked from among many other white objects, protruding from the earth, which he dimly recognised were bones, but Charles did not for a second mistake the ball for the kneecaps and femurs. It was so clear in his mind, looking at it sitting there, that it was a polo ball. Left here for him.
Was he expected to play polo in full business suit? Balls to that. Idly he slid his fingers through the knot of his tie, pulling it loose and winding it around his hand like a silken spool with the mallet leaning against his leg. If he was to play polo, with the exception of the inappropriate attire, there was one important thing absent from this picture. And though he would have liked to throw his arms around the old boy’s neck and weep into his warm hide like the young man that had grieved so badly upon his passing, Charles only put his hand back to his shoulder, expecting it, his heart breaking as the long-dead polo pony Moses placed his large, velvet muzzle in his hand.

He didn’t even say his name, just turned to the horse, his head cradled against Charles’ shoulder, and ran his hands over the powerful neck, the braids of his mane, the bridle and bit. Moses, named for the philosopher Maimonides in an obscure and pretentious move typical of the adolescent Charles, an elite and powerful thoroughbred prolifically decorated by awards and trophies but taken too soon by freak heart problems. A handsome horse, with his bay hide unmarked and shining, but ultimately a boy’s horse, not a sire, not a double-barrelled investment animal; a present, an indulgence. But his horse. A relationship beyond even boy and dog. No one who had not grown up with one of the creatures could be expected to understand.

Charles dropped the tie to the needles in a careless pool of blue silk, happy to see it trampled for a minute with his dead horse; and with Ivy League haughtiness as unshakable as the Boston twang that touched his words, Offdensen slid off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder, bringing Moses to follow him with a calm hand on his bridle as he stepped backwards into the clearing. He had mellowed profoundly since his college days, but Moses was frozen in time, a boisterous young animal that brought up the blood in him. And a handsome creature! Such a handsome creature. Charles nearly smiled when the horse jerked on the reigns, snagging them with his other hand and barely catching his jacket under the crook of his arm as it fell from his shoulder.

All right! All right, he cautioned, and abandoned the jacket to the forest floor to give Moses all of his attention. If they were going to play, then they were going to play; no half-hearting it.

He rolled up his shirt sleeves, fetched the mallet and crop from the ground and took hold of Moses’ saddle, collecting himself a moment as he placed his wingtipped foot in the stirrup before swinging up onto the saddle. His heart flooded still with grief, like the forest came in over them, but he held tight to Moses’ bridle wrapped around his fist and nudged him forward with a click of his tongue to stand over the ball.

Charles let the mallet dangle from his fingers, lining up with the ball as he idly wondered where the goal might be. Or where the other team was. Or where his team was, for that matter. And with a gentle swing, he struck the ball from its nest amongst the bones, letting it roll backwards into the clearing with an empty click.

Coaxing Moses into a gentle approach, Charles smashed the ball as hard as he dared in the small clearing down the left path, watching as it skipped away across the rough ground. He cocked the mallet onto his shoulder – still got it – and then nudged the pony down the trail after it, sitting low in the saddle and raising the mallet to strike as he passed with full momentum, sending the ball soaring further down the track, Moses trotting obediently behind it, chuffing. Ahead, in another clearing, Charles saw the ball roll to a stop – and then immediately struck away by a flash of dappled grey and polo effect, the sound of pounding hooves on soft soil. He recognised that hide,
the hollow clunk of mallet on white ball, and the blood rose within him. Couldn’t even escape in a
dream; well, of course he couldn’t. There was no escaping your own mind.

Charles tapped Moses with his legs but his *hup* to speed up was barely needed; sensing the urgency
and his master’s disquiet, the horse had immediately broken into a canter, bursting into the clearing
with a sharp turn on the soft dirt, his hooves clipping bone and fir needle beneath as he wheeled
towards the receding rump of their opponent, a white horse with a black clothed rider vanishing
down an adjacent path through the trees. Charles pushed him faster to a gallop, closing in on the
other rider even as the smack of the polo mallet echoed through the tall trees. The wind felt divine
on his face, whipped in his white cotton shirt, and the thud of Moses’ gallop under him felt like an
extension of his own body, a rider, something as old as man.

He sat upright on the horse, untroubled by the buffet of wind and saddle, and raised his voice to
shout at the other rider, his black coat snapped by the breeze as he rolled his shoulder into another
blow against the ball and skipped it ahead of them into the trees: *Herbie!*

And when Herbie looked back at him, it was clear to Charles that he was dead.

Like Moses was dead beneath him, like the bones that shattered beneath their heavy hoof falls, like
his grey dappled pony Caligula, glassy eyed as Charles passed them. As old as he with his balding,
insipid appearance but surely dead, his skin pallid and lifeless, his smile vacant and violent, his
business suit dusty and moth-eaten on his gamey limbs. Whereas – riding flank to flank at full
gallop after the ball, mallet at Moses’ side – Charles felt himself full of life, full of blood, the only
creature blooded here in this infernal boneyard.

*Herbie*, he snapped again, just missing the ball to the other man’s mallet and narrowly avoiding
their two clubs tangled. God damn it Herbie, don’t make this into something Freudian. Yet the
swing of Herbie’s mallet was disjointed, like his bones weren’t quite in place right. Charles pulled
himself up, raising his mallet high as though he was going to strike it ahead, but Moses beneath
him could feel the shift of his weight ahead of bringing the club down in reverse, striking the ball
back behind them with a crack of wood against hard plastic.

Moses, the wild young thing he was, took the cue to dart off the path into the trees in an attempt to
turn fast and follow it, Charles clutching on for dear life and not a wit in him to yell whoa as the
horse careened through the tight packed trees. He tried to steer Moses back to the path but the
horse was having none of it, forcing him to duck and weave around the low branches even as they
snapped past against his arms, catching and tearing his shirt. *Moses*, he yelped, brushing the crop
threateningly to the horse’s flank, and the pony wove daringly around a broad trunk to spring out
onto the path again, giving Charles barely a second to process before he was raising the mallet
again to strike the ball ahead.

Caligula and Herbert were gaining on the path behind them, the dead and lopped eyes of that horse
sending the fear through Charles as he stole a glance backwards. He swore to himself then that
forward was the only way to look, Moses practically bouncing beneath him with the thrill of the
chase after so many years beneath the ground. *Moses*, he sneered through clenched teeth, but
could see the ball ahead, a fallen log across the path further, and took Moses’ bolting pace – not
even considering stopping – for the cue it was, lining up for a royal swing which kicked the ball
into the air and over the log. And Moses seemed to leap for joy, barely needing Charles’
encouraging clucking to throw himself over the obstacle and back into full mad gallop, as Charles
caught his balance and almost, almost smiled, gulping *Good boy* out for the brilliant beast.

Pounding ahead, he heard Caligula clear the log and land behind him, gaining rapidly. Charles had
stooped on the horse to strike the ball ahead again, feeling the presence of the other creature right
at his side, but as the triumphant clack sounded and the ball soared ahead of him, so he felt the cut in the air of the mallet swinging right past his head, Moses swerving in alarm and carrying him onwards at a bolt. He just raised his head in time to see Caligula reeling under Herbert’s misplaced gravity, having aimed for Charles’ head with the mallet and missed him by a hair. *Hup!* Charles snapped, uselessly, and Moses burst off in pursuit of the ball, the rival horseman dead on his heels.

A strike from the mallet would have knocked Charles into concussion, and possibly from his horse; it was a dangerous sport for both pony and rider, but this was something else. Offered a clear strike ahead of him, Charles smacked the ball fast ahead, the forest growing thinner around their path, brighter although the sky was grey overhead, the first stirrings of a storm. He could hear running water, a stream ahead, and bet his luck on it as Moses pounded on with the courage and energy only the dead could spare. He rolled his body into his next strike, seeing the ball rolling white ahead him to lift it up and over the lip of the stream with Moses coaxed behind it to clear the water in a mighty leap, throwing himself over the racing water below.

Charles made the mistake of looking down as they cleared it, seeing the rotting corpse washed against the stones as he passed over it. Behind him, Caligula hesitated; always a timid mare a step away from the brash, idiot courage of Moses. They worked well together, but opposed – Caligula landed on the bank, struggling with high steps to climb back up the incline Moses had easily alighted. Charles didn’t linger long, pushing Moses back after the ball as he struck it along the stream bank, headed upstream.

The stench of the bodies in the stream and the clarity of the meltwater touched his senses as he listened for Caligula regaining her gallop behind, his heart in his throat as he dared for a risky move; seeing the clear bank widening against the trees, Charles struck the ball back behind, knowing Moses could turn faster than the mare at his flanks. But Herbert had other ideas – once more the mallet grazed through the air by Charles’ shoulder, barely missing his head as he struck the ball and turned Moses as though on a coin. The horse could feel his fear, his weight shift, and let out a whinny of panic as he stepped around Caligula’s sprawled feet and then bounced below Charles as he shot out a kick at the mare, his master dragging on the reins.

*Moses!* But Moses was having none of it. As the mallet swung around for Charles again, catching the smirk on Herbert’s slimy face as he narrowly missed the blow for a third time, Moses decided that was the last he watched his master threatened and took off into the forest. Charles barely had time to pull himself upright as he almost hit a tree trunk, Moses prancing and leaping between the trees as he hurtled forwards. Clinging on with his legs, Charles tried to bring him in check, whipped and struck by the tight branches as Moses threw himself through spaces he fit and Charles barely could. He pulled him around, heard a crunch as Moses’ hoof cracked a skullcap in two on the forest floor beneath them and sprung up to bolt faster as though he rode straight into the mouth of Hell.

A branch snapped over Charles’ face, cutting his cheek, and he raised his arm to guard himself as Moses threw himself deeper into the woods; then, bucked in his saddle, the blow of another branch sharp across his neck and Charles felt the telltale damp of blood as Moses swerved out, breaking onto a path again and into full gallop. He lowered his hand to see the shot of bright red down his shirt front, spilling from a deep cut on his neck, his heart pounding and his hands red as he kicked Moses along the path, hearing the encroaching hoofbeats of Caligula behind. The polo ball burst past them, skipping along the path, and Charles knew there was only one thing for it.

Caligula was at their flank now, the hot breath panted close and Moses giving a lurch in his gait as the other pony nipped his hind. Charles kept him galloping, urging him on even as Herbert started to overtake, the other man fixated on the ball with his tie whipped over his shoulder. A mad pursuit, but apart from the blood down his chest, warm and thick, Charles felt cold inside,
disinterested in the ball and the plights of the dead ponies, the dead man that rode so close to him, the pride to Vernon’s stride as he passed him after the ball, raising his mallet. Charles raised his too, fixing his sharp gaze on the balding dome of Herbert’s head. Unlike his peer, Charles was not inclined to miss.

The head of his mallet came down on Herbert’s skull just as the clear crack of the other club on the polo ball rang out through the woods, Charles’ arm shaking from the impact as Herbert disappeared off the side of his horse. Charles pushed Moses on, turning a deaf ear to the sound of Caligula’s hooves soft on Herbert’s fallen body, his blood cool on his chest where the wind touched it, and smattered on the end of his mallet. It had passed his mind before how easily it could be a killing tool before, but never with any intent. But don’t look back. You could never, ever look back.

The forest changed again, growing thinner as Charles lost interest in the game and Moses slowed, first to a cautioned canter then down to a walk as he realised his pursuers had relented. He heard the crow call again, and a peal of thunder broke the thick atmosphere around him; not rain, just a dry crack, and looking up at the grey sky overhead Charles could see a shadow towering before him, lost in the fog. They approached it slowly, the electricity in the air tight over his skin and the blood a clean iron smell where it soaked his shirt, and he began to see it for what it was – the forest opened to a clearing, and an enormous tree rose above, its massive, gnarled roots twisted around the clearing and upturning the earth, the grey bodies of the dead clenched in its tangles. Its canopy fanned over the forest, the lowest branches twisted nearly to ground level and smoothed by moss and lichen and hanging ferns, and Charles found himself hypnotised, Moses treading softly on approach.

He saw that there was a long rope fastened to a low branch, still seeming to be dozens of feet above them, hung taut down before the tree. At its end dangled a dark form, hanged, its boots barely a foot over the ground. Charles held Moses and dismounted, sliding to his feet and asking the horse to stay as he slowly walked closer, his heart in his throat. In the darkness of the tree’s canopy, it was hard to make out the figure’s features at first – Moses chuffing behind him, the figure’s face draped in long dark curls and his hand twisted around a knife that he held embedded in his chest. But it hit Charles, a few feet from the hanged man and within distance of the rotten blood that emanated from him, that he was looking at the haunted and decaying guise of Magnus Hammersmith, hanged from the tree with snapped neck and knife lodged in his chest, the black blood clotted and rotten down his bare skin to his jeans.

The thunder cracked again, and the words died in Charles’ throat as Magnus slowly raised his head, his eyes a glassy white of the dead and fixed on Charles as a gory, throaty voice bubbled from his strangled throat. A deep and terrible fear came up through the lawyer as he heard it echoed, spilt in Magnus’ voice and then in his sister’s, his father’s, echoed beneath in the clearing as the crows cried out beyond:

ONLY TRAITORS HANG.

And Charles awoke in the dawn with a cold sweat clammy on his face and chest as his lungs heaved, dragging desperately for air in his still, empty room, his empty bed, his empty flat, alone and only dreaming. And things had gotten very bad indeed.

* * * *

YEAR THREE
In the last week Charles had hired another hundred klokateers and they were still making too much money. Still more going through the recruitment process and the cash came in exponentially. He could not, physically, hire people fast enough; couldn’t find things for them to do. Security was covered, even the borders were adequately defended for the tiny, comfortable kingdom that they were, their neighbours turning a blind eye to Mordland’s existence in exchange for trade outsourcing. He had klokateers renovating, finishing the distant reaches of Mordhaus; klokateers programming, klokateers on industrial research. But if he didn’t expand then their taxes threatened to become truly frightening, and he had so much money. And there were so many people who needed money. Surely they were useful but he couldn’t figure out just how to make them useful – after all, there was no such thing as a free lunch. Hire another fifty roadies, these ones fluent in English and Chinese, for the upcoming tour. Hire people to expand the klokateer quarters for all the people he’d hired. He felt like Sisyphus; hired people to manage the people he’d hired, then people to manage them, and the resumes kept coming in, unending. God, it was maddening.

And in all the panic, he’d pretty much forgotten Hillam, his programming team now brilliantly efficient in eliminating records as quickly as he could hire the people involved. Pickles had ceased receiving letters; he had cooled off, come in and had a cigar with Charles in his office one night, back to his joking, pleasant self and tapping ash on the resumes scattered on Charles’ desk. Talked about buying a helicopter. Well, maybe. Maybe a helicopter could be, ah... nice.

Hence his surprise, trying to talk to or well, lecture them over the back of the couch in the rec room about border security and competing with Nathan’s channel surfing, when Pickles piped up sharply: “Hey! It’s your girlfriend, Charlie!”

He kicked Nathan’s foot off of the remote pedals, sparking a squabble as Nathan tried to catch the drummer’s flailing arm and reclaim his surfing that lasted just long enough for Charles to get a look at the headline. TECH TRAITOR FOUND DEAD.

In other news, tech traitor Chantelle Hillam has been found dead in Bavaria under suspicious circumstances, a female commentator was saying. Charles looked blankly into that old photo of Chantelle Hillam, still circulating, before it switched abruptly to a gory photo of her corpse, frozen neck snapped, eyes cold, her fingers twisted and held up before her in self-defence for a split second before Nathan succeeded in navigating away. And just as well. He was sure he’d read, just below the headline: Dethklok’s Anonymous Army Linked To Alps Murder.

“We’ll, ah, finish this conversation later, guys,” he said shortly, and left them to it, too short on attention span to realise how suddenly he’d withdrawn. But there was nothing to say, nothing to think. The woman was dead, and that was the end of it.

When Pickles tried to resume their cigars and brandy later that evening he was warned off disturbing him by klokateers claiming he was ‘too busy’. He pushed on anyway unassuaged, climbing laxly up to the manager’s quarters with a new bottle dangling from his fingers. But he found the door to Offdensen’s chambers locked, and no amount of whinging Charlieeee seemed to bring him out.
Sitting under the dash light of the Buick, Offdensen rolled the painted molar bone over his fingers with a muted anxiety as he scanned the newest edition of *The Dethklok Minute*, a very special gift especially specially for him. Even though he’d sort of bought it, in kind. Turned up at the café that morning at a late hour en route to the psychologist’s to pick up Magnus’ paperwork, keen for a coffee to scare off the phantoms of the night before, only to be faced with the dopey, pockmarked face of the barista.

“Oh, Jesus, why you?” he had groaned impulsively before he’d noticed his rudeness, “Ah. I mean. Why are you on the tills this morning?” and he peered through his pre-caffeine haze at the young man’s name badge for the first time, “Ah, Harry?”

“Good morning Mr O! Long black? Uhhh, and like, someone like, called in sick this morning, y’know? So,” explained Harry in his idiot drawl, punching at the till.

“Right, right. Of course.” Charles had gone to fish in his pocket for change to pay him, only for his finger to brush the bones Magnus had given him. He looked up at the blank eyes of the barista, and then gave a short sniff as he remembered Magnus’ callous comment about a second token for his fiancée. Well, he sure as shit wasn’t taking Phoebe with him now. Better not let it go to waste.

“Harry,” he said, catching the barista’s attention as he turned back from the coffee machine. The shop was next to dead this time of the morning, and their exchange uncomfortably intimate. “You, ah... like Dethklok, right?”

With a sharp, breathy inhale, the young guy had drawn up to the till, eyes wide, desperate. “More than anything,” he gasped, and Charles leaned back a little.

“Oh... the boys gave me an extra, ah, token to their gig tonight, and I... ah...” He drew one of the bones out of his pocket, holding it up for the barista. The young man’s eyes gleamed with lust as he took it in.

“I thought, you, ah, you’ve been such a good... barista... to me, over the years...” God, it hurt to even say. “... that maybe you’d like to go, ah... on me. Since I know you’re a fan.” And he held it out to Harry, letting the young man snatch it and nurse it in his clammy hands.

“Oh my god! Oh, oh my god! You can’t get these anywhere!” he breathed, and Charles frowned as he thought of the stash overflowing from Magnus’ glovebox. “Eugene won’t even let me in to...
this one! Oh, holy fuck, oh my god! You’re, oh my god!”

He held the bone to his chest and looked up at Charles like an apostle. “Thank you!”

“Ah. No need, it’s... it’s fine.” Charles tried to smile. He really did. But boy, it was excruciating just to watch.

Harry thought of something, dawned brightly on his face, and he made some misc chirping and grunting sounds of urgency as he vanished in front of Charles and flailed around under the counter. Charles stood taller to try and crane to see what he was retrieving only to be almost struck in the nose as Harry righted himself, waving a photocopied black booklet in his face.

“Here! Here, you should have this! Some of my friends print them, you – you’re in it!” he gushed and Charles carefully plucked it from his hand, recognising the cover.

“Oh, joy.”

“I’ll see you tonight!” Harry beamed at him as one of his coworkers held Offdensen’s coffee out around him, and Charles had beat a quick retreat.

So now he was looking at an article that said he couldn’t be a Nazi because he was definitely, absolutely, a Jew, and racial epithet after racial epithet, and for christ’s sake, he couldn’t be bothered any more. It was better than it had been and that was all he could wish for at this point.

His meeting with the psychologist had gone strangely. Charles liked the psychologist, but not enough to go to her himself; Dr Benway had a knack for encouraging ongoing therapy but writing up clean reports, and she had done just the same upon consultation of Magnus. Charles had called the guitarist afterwards to see how it went, and even Benway said the man had been ‘confrontational’, but she could see the good in anyone and likewise had suggested that Magnus try an experimental form of talk therapy known as schema that she said would be good for his specific issues.

_But man, when I asked her what was the deal, she was like, ‘Oh, there’s nothing wrong with you’, you know? She just said... you know... before you diagnose yourself with a mental disorder, like, check that everyone around you don’t frigging suck first... Magnus had sounded contemplative. Gave me a lot to think about, actually..._

Right. But he’d gotten what he wanted, and that was a clean report, so what did Magnus’ relative sanity even matter?

As he thought it, turning the bone over his knuckles, Charles saw headlights and heard a familiar engine pull up beside his car. He’d parked a few houses away from the one designated for the gig, this so called Church, the address of which he’d found out from some careful sleuthing calling after the authors of _The Dethklok Minute_ was a residential one in city suburbs. Sandwiched between a vacant lot and a strip of shops, the metalheads who leased it had managed only to get shut down a couple of times for their regular illicit gigs.

Charles emerged to see Magnus in the twilight, dragging a guitar case out of the back of his truck and slinging it over his shoulder. He looked up when Charles slammed the door of the Buick, a wide and hungry grin splitting his face. “Charlie! You made it!”

Charles just nodded, pulling his overcoat across his shoulders and wandering towards the guitarist. In the distance, he could hear the chugging of metal music carried on the breeze. That would be the Church.
“But not your lady? Damn it.” Magnus gave the air a faux upset punch as he approached, pouting at him. “Pickles and me had a bet on who could get a hand in her first, y’know.”

He said it like a joke, but... what? Had he actually said, ah... *in her?* Surely he had misheard. Charles just squinted at him, and reached his side as a girl emerged from the other side of the truck to join him. She immediately hung herself off Magnus’ arm, and Charles dimly recognised her from the other night, a dark-haired woman with pallid complexion but better presented tonight in a plunging, cherry-red top and skin tight black leather mini-skirt, knee-high boots and fishnets, a velvet choker, the red lipstick nearly dripping off her full lips and the mauve eyeshadow piled on under her violently sharp eyebrows.

Actually, Charles thought she looked like a damn cheap harlot, but he wasn’t about to say that to her face.

“Hi, I’m Cotton,” she purred, looking him up and down, and Charles gave Magnus a questioning look.

“Hi. Ah... Charles.”

“Oh,* I know.*” She damn near licked her lips, and Charles had had enough, turning sharply on his heel.

They set off in the right direction together, following the sound of clamouring voices and distant metal. Magnus sauntered, dragging Cotton behind him; he glanced out of the corner of his eye at Charles, smirking. “Are you wearing a suit?”

“Ah... yeah.” Well, of course. He was practically here on business, wasn’t he?

“To a gig? Man, you’re a trip, Charlie.” Magnus laughed, and Charles heard a bottle break somewhere ahead of them. The music had stopped, and the yelling had started; voices, fans, snapping at each other as they poured out of the house into the vacant block. Charles expected maybe thirty of them, give or take, hardcore local fans since he understood the band didn’t have many, and he could already see some young metalheads in the street ahead of them, slugging from bottles in paper bags with their studs and chains shining in the lighting streetlights. But the street was packed with cars along the sidewalk, and something dimly dawning on him as more kids spilt onto the street.

Magnus had perked up as the music stopped, remarking, “That’s my cue, then, fuck!” and taking off at a jog, Cotton struggling to keep up with him in her heels. “Good luck, Charlie!” They rounded the last house into the block, and Charles could see even more kids flooding the street. Good luck? And it came to him. There had to be hundreds of them, yelling and slurring and slugging and smoking. When he rounded the corner, he saw the vacant lot was full of them – completely, jammed in the spaces around cars parked bumper to bumper into the sand lot, sitting on top of them, jumping on the bonnets, blasting music from the cabs.

Charles frowned severely. He could just make out the back door to the house, the ‘venue’, on the other side of the lot through the buzzing crowd. On the corner, the group of kids closest to him, sitting on an old red jalopy and drinking, looked up at him with wide eyes.

He was going to have to push. He didn’t *want* to push. In fact, Charles was none too fond of crowds at all. He thought he heard one of the kids say, *Hey. Isn’t that the Jew lawyer?* and he fought to keep his head down and not glare straight through her. He took a deep breath, and stepped towards the crowd as it looked up at him, bracing himself for the shove – only for a miracle to fall upon them.
The shove never came. With every step Charles took, so the crowd parted in front of him. He moved in slow, strange steps as he watched it draw back from him, giving him a distance, like an aura, scattering and closing behind him like the wake of a shark through a school of fish. Whispers of the lawyer, Offdensen, Dethklok, whirred around him like insects through a silence that settled in the crowd where he passed, wide young eyes turned up to him from every angle.

Enveloped and carried by the weird, unsettling magic of the moment, Charles found himself at the back door in no time, already open for him with more lined young eyes peering from the grimy corridor inside. Just inside the doorway, broken glass crunching under his wingtips against the linoleum as he entered what was probably usually the kitchen, someone had set up a makeshift shopfront for a record distro with t-shirts, records, and – yes, there was the kitchen sink just behind, a cat that was almost certainly deaf drinking from the dripping tap. A familiar face jeered at him over the folding table, the barista – his long hair down in curtains, bearing Dethklok t-shirt and tight black jeans instead of his uniform and puffing a cigarette, reaching out for Charles with his other hand. He felt obliged to shake it, although he resented it for its clammy, vile slick of sweat.

“Mr O! Hey, man, check it out! You gotta meet Eugene, he does the fanzine!” gushed Harry, and he gestured at an apathetic young man sitting in a plastic chair beside him behind the table. “Eugene, Mr O is the lawyer, you know, the Jew!”

Charles ignored it. Eugene had a box of bones on the table in front of him, but didn’t seem to even care to take Charles’. There definitely were more people here than bones in the box. Fine. Whatever. But if Charles was doing it, he’d definitely have been charging every single one of these kids.

“Where’s the band?” he asked instead, and Eugene pointed to the next doorway, jammed with black-clad metallers all facing towards the far wall. As Charles glanced over, he heard a PA screech with microphone feedback and winced slightly. As he considered pushing again, the likelihood of another miracle, he heard another bottle smash, someone yell: “You guys fucking suck!” and a booming voice over the cheap PA.

“Hey, hey, fuck you! You, specifically. We’ll take our fucking time if we want, we’re motherfucking Dethklok!” Nathan. As the singer grunted insults back at the crowd, the jeering growing inside as the crunch of a seedy guitar lick shredded hysterical over their voices, people from outside started to flood back into the kitchen. “This is our fucking show. You say we suck, you fucking paid to see us! We’re getting paid to do this! Now who fucking sucks?”

A grunting bass riff joined the noise, a howl of a guitar amp feeding back against the PA, a floor tom pounding. Charles had been standing hypnotised, but the crowd had ceased flowing around him, too many people now trying to get through the tiny doorway into what usually was the lounge. Instead, the volume was so great they simply shoved him, carrying him with the frenzied mass into the room ahead.

Charles smelt weed and leather and beer, crammed up against a hundred adolescent bodies, felt carpet under his feet as he tried to snap his footing back again. It was dark here save for a faint warm light spilling up a corner, the walls plastered with metal band posters, the air hot with bodies and massacred with voices, screams, gossiping, laughter. Behind him people stood higher, perched on the seats and back of a couch; at the far side of the room, they lined a staircase, the rungs kicked out in places as adolescents leaned over the railings with their beers and chains and long hair. Charles could see the big, idiot eyes of Pickles’ groupie, Ginger, where she hung over the railings to watch, guys behind her vying to get a good feel of her ass in her short skirt. Actually, now he looked, there were quite a few girls here. Far more than he’d imagined, you know...
considering. But Cotton, for another, had been totally lost to the sea of dyed black hair.

Over the heads ahead of him, he could see the stacks of speakers that made up the PA, and the hulking form of Nathan, lit from behind by a lamp that had been positioned behind Pickles’ drumkit – or he assumed, from the sound of it as they warmed up. Skwisgaar’s blonde crown could be seen easily too, and Magnus, but both drummer and bassist were lost to him in all but sound. Around Charles, the jeering grew louder. You suck! You suck! You suck! He heard a woman scream Pickles!, idiot booing, Nathan snorting into the microphone held too close to his face, and Charles dearly wished he’d brought earplugs as Magnus’ sloppy guitar riffs tore through the air around him.

“Fuck you, we don’t have to play, we get paid anyway! So who’s the real suckers here?” But Pickles had started a lethargic beat with the cymbals behind Nathan, peppered with floor tom smacks and trills, angling towards a song. Charles was quietly impressed, even as the crowd jostled him back and forth, nearly lifting him from his feet with every surge. Magnus’ guitar soon joined the drummer, and Murderface’s bass too, ripping long wails along the beat. Slowly, Magnus’ chords turned to a riff, shredded by the high scream of Skwisgaar’s, and Charles’ heart seemed to realign itself to the beat that pounded like a metronome inside him.

Abruptly, it dropped off – as though he was growing deaf, nothing but the pounding that came up through the floor, through the air, through the bodies around him – and then Nathan let loose a blood-curdling guttural roar that absolutely eclipsed Charles’ mind as they launched into the song.

Unconsciously, he found himself clutching at the bodies around him to keep his balance as they surged and thrashed, his fingers curled into a leather jacket, denim, skin. It took him a moment of blitzed, shattered mind-death to find himself and realise what he was hearing, since something sounded so familiar about it, the crowd throbbing like the tide around him in time to Nathan’s hoarse chanting. He recognised that tom roll. He recognised... the voices around him... all chanting... hundreds of them, from out of town, from out of the country...

Doodily ding dong tick tock! Doodily ding dong tick tock! Doodily ding dong tick tock! Doodily ding dong tick tock! Doodily ding dong tick tock! DETHKLOK DETHKLOK DETHKLOK!

Charles gasped at the hot air for breath, crushed between the juvenile, headbanging masses around him. Ginger screamed from above, her piercing shriek cutting through the assaulting music. Jesus Christ, people paid for this?

Skwisgaar Skwigelf, taller than a tree! Magnus, Hepatitis C!

He heard Magnus fuck up the lick on purpose, but otherwise they barrelled on.

William Murderface Murderface Murderface! Pickles the drummer, ding dong doodily, ding dong doodily doo!

NAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAATAAAAAN EXPLOOOOOOOOOOOSIOOOOOOOOOON!

The crowd screamed in crazed ecstasy around him, Charles wincing as a fall of warm beer splashed his face from a thrown bottle that smashed against the wallpaper over Pickles’ head, drenching an enshrined picture of Mike Muir on the wall. Over them, the drummer’s silhouette cast against the ceiling as he launched madly into the next song, the crowd surging along with it. With every triumphant word of Nathan’s, the crowd barked it back with him.

Fear! Charles could feel himself sweating in his overcoat, the stench of beer as it dried on his hot
cheek smothering him.

*Burns!* The crowd surged to the side, screaming and yelling complaints as a tall, angular youth elbowed his way as far into the crowd as he could manage. He only got as far as Charles, the lawyer having planted his feet on the carpet as hard as he could, and it was only after the kid hollered out at the band from beside him that he realised it was Harry. Of course it was. The idiot.

He could hear Magnus howling into the microphone over Nathan, a feral sound like a dog being put to death with a power drill. *Fuck Fate!* And the stairs were creaking under the weight of thrashing bodies on top of them, Ginger’s shrill screeching piercing over the guitar wizardry vaguely attributable to Skwisgaar, and when Charles glanced up, he saw she had ripped her top from her body, her breasts bare and glistening with sweat as she screamed and threw herself over the bannister.

There was something truly chilling about being among so many people yelling for murder and death all at once. Charles tried to let it take him away too, but beyond the first rush of impossible, brain-clouding bloodlust, he couldn’t find it in himself to succumb the way the rest of the crowd did. Trapped, hot and uncomfortable, he let the crowd jostle him randomly along with the music and focused on just appreciating it for what it was. And it was good. In the third song now, and Magnus and Skwisgaar were trying to sync up for a dual melody. But Magnus was lagging – and there appeared to be a problem.

“You fucking fuck!”

Charles felt the crowd push back as Magnus kicked his harasser in the stomach, the lead of his guitar clipping over the PA as it pulled out of its socket and howling atonally as he shoved it back in again. But the crowd had gotten their hands on it now, Nathan stopping singing to eyeball the guitarist as he fought the insane hoard for his cable, wound tight around his hand.

“C’mon! Fuck!”

Charles saw the guitarist’s crown bob before he climbed on top of one of the PA units, standing above the crowd and plugging his guitar back in triumphantly as he tried to restart the duet, Skwisgaar joining in again where he’d dropped off. Now Magnus was out of tune, but he clearly didn’t care, his shadow cast long and threatening over the room as hands grabbed for his jeans and the sweat rolled down his bare chest, his hair falling in messy tresses as he headbanged to the beat.

They finished the melody together, the riffs handed then to Skwisgaar and Murderface as Magnus laughed from atop his claimed ground and spindly hands reached from the crowd to snag his guitar strap and drag on his jacket. This only accomplished pulling the strap from the guitar, the instrument dropping into Magnus’ left hand as he howled wildly back at the crowd.

“How’d ya like that? You fucking love it, you sick little freaks!” he screamed, his eyes wild as he ripped off his jacket, clutching his guitar in his fist. “Retards! Whores! You fucking, scumbag, pieces of shit!”

The guitarist stabbed his instrument into the crowd, forcing them to duck and weave from his assault as he aimed a kick or two down at their heads. The band played on, Magnus getting down to his knee to cradle his guitar and play along with them as another figure rose up onto one of the floor PAs. William Murderface, springing up with his bass, a body of the crowd booing even his alighting the makeshift stage as the rest of the crowd roared on.

A bass solo, thought Charles, but Murderface was reaching for the crowd, his bass mostly abandoned around his neck – he grabbed and flailed back at them, screaming at them as he’d seen
Magnus do, yelping in his nasal, hoggish voice: “Hey! Hey, sluts, I see you, in the front row! Get it off!”

He had snagged someone’s top when a fist clipped him around the jaw, some anonymous knight in the audience coming to the female fan’s rescue. “Don’t touch her, you faggot!” Magnus was giggling from where he knelt, struggling to keep up with his Swedish lead competing with Murderface’s antics for his attention.

“You’re so fucking boring! Boring, fucking shit, audience! Why don’t you go fucking kill yourselves!” squealed Murderface, rubbing his face as he squatted on the speaker, and Charles could hear Nathan’s disembodied voice speaking to him now over the PA.

Murderface. Murderface. Shit, don’t like, just don’t give ‘em any attention and they’ll stop.

But the crowd was chanting back at the bassist. Kill your-self. Kill your-self. And for all his machismo, Murderface was clearly affected. Opposite him, Magnus stood up like a crane. “Hey, dickwads! We can’t fucking hear you!” he howled, and the chanting just grew.

“Maybe I will! Maybe I will fucking kill myself, see how you fucking feel then, huh? Then we’ll be famous! Then no one will fucking ever ignore Dethklok, if I just fucking die!” screamed Murderface, the speaker wobbling beneath him. Charles craned to see, even as the rest of the band tried to push on with the song. He thought Murderface was just gesturing madly at the crowd against the chanting as it grew frenzied, but a flash of light against a blade like a spark in the gloom changed his mind abruptly. Wait – those scars – oh, no - - -

The lawyer watched in horror as Murderface shoved the knife into his arm, the sting scent of blood sharp in the air, and the crowd swelled with cheers. Opposite him, Magnus was laughing hysterically, an insane, violent thing as he wielded his guitar like an axe at the crowd. “You fucking idiots! Look what you’ve done! Ha-ha! Fuck! Look what you’ve done! I’ll fucking kill all of you for this, you motherfucking mice!”

Another bottle sailed over his head and smashed against the wall over Pickles’ head, showering the drummer with broken glass to bitter swearing as he struggled to pound on. The light behind him, struck by beer and shards of bottle, started to splutter, strobing weirdly behind the band as it threw their shadows into the crowd.

Magnus...! came Nathan’s warning from around the room, the guy stepping back nearly onto Skwisgaar as Magnus swung the guitar down into the crowd, and there was a dull thud and a yell as he clubbed one of the fans around the face with the body.

His eyes widened suddenly as Nathan yanked him down from the speaker by the back of his jeans, chucking him back into the kit with a crash. Pickles, until this moment having been angrily driving on and trying hard to pay them no mind, stopped abruptly as his kit crumpled under Magnus’ naked torso and gave a scream of frustration. Murderface whirled around, one with the crowd, the knife still sticking out of the gash in his arm and splattering blood on the wallpaper and fans, as Pickles wrenched a cymbal off his hi-hat. A vein stuck out in angry heat from his forehead.

“That’s it! That’s it, you motherfuckers, you fucking, this was a big one, this was a fucking big one and you fucked it up, you fucking, douchebags, you douchebags,” he shrieked, and raised the cymbal in a shaking hand, “I’m gonna fuckin murder you, you motherfucking son of a bitch!”

With that, Pickles ditched the cymbal at Magnus as the guitarist scrambled up from the floor. With the force of it, it could have almost sliced him in half; but Magnus thought fast and raised his guitar to deflect the metal disc, causing it to spin off across the room. The crowd turned their heads as
one to watch it strike the overhead gilt light fitting, sparking as it bounced off, and then came down at top speed into the crowd itself, lodging straight into Harry’s throat with a slick, meaty slice.

Charles watched in silent wonder and eternal fear as the sharp circle of metal chopped through Harry’s neck, stopping when it hit his spine, the youth’s screams bubbling as the blood started to spurt from his open wound. The crowd took an abrupt step back, as if they knew what was coming next, but Charles – not so experienced with gig deaths – just stared as a jet of hot blood squirted out of the barista and sprayed over his face and body.

The barista dropped to the carpet, the blood pumping from his severed artery and drenching the carpet, and Charles, covered head to toe in an impressive stripe, took a delicate step back from the expanding red pool.

“Oh,” he said, and immediately reached for his handkerchief to clean his glasses.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

Charles was sat on the back step, polishing the last of the blood off his wingtips with his handkerchief and trying to ignore the milling youths outside the vague disconnect that had bloomed in his head, when he became aware someone else had come to stand in the doorway, lingering by his shoulder. A quick glance aside revealed sneakers and Charles knew Pickles was the only guy not wearing boots in the place. He drew a sigh and returned to buffing the leather with the bloody rag.

After too long to be courteous, the smell of weed and tobacco settling upon him like a crown from the drummer’s spliff, “You okay?” asked Pickles and Charles sat back slightly, winding the handkerchief around his knuckles.

“Yeah,” he replied eventually, though his head felt split by his migraine, “It mostly got on my overcoat, so - - ah. I think Magnus took it... I mean, I’m fine, Pickles.”

To be honest, he wasn’t sure if he was. But he wasn’t sure he was not okay, either, so that was as good as fine to Charles.

“Did you know him?” said Pickles, puffing away, and Charles looked up at him. Guy looked sharp in the back light, his feminine features lit harsh and pointed, and he noticed it wasn’t a spliff so much as a cigarette that had been cut open and restuffed, the poor man’s tobacco.

“Sort of. He was my, ah... my barista.” Charles gave a short sniff of dissatisfaction, feeling the drummer gloating down at him as he tried to blow a smoke ring over Charles.

“Ohhhhh. I’m sorry. We’re all sorry. Charlie...” There was a speech coming on. Any second now. “No one means for these kinda things to happen, y’know - - ”

“Pickles,” Charles cut him off, looking up abruptly. “I didn’t know him. I knew of him, it’s, ah... different. We probably only had one conversation, that entire... working relationship, you know...”

“Oh. Still... I’m sorry.”

Charles looked at his shoes again. Most of Harry’s blood was gone now. “It’s okay. He died doing what he loved,” he concluded quietly, more to himself than the drummer by his shoulder, “Ah, you know... not giving me the correct change.”

Meant to be a joke. You know, a bit of dark humour, lift the mood, that was Dethklok’s jive right? But it sailed right over Pickles’ balding head, too wry for the drummer, and he regarded their lawyer with increasing concern. “Okay. You want a smoke?” he tried, and Charles blinked up at him again, his glasses still slightly murky from smudged blood.

“Ah, I quit, actually. Thanks, though.”
Pickles shook his head, looking over the milling crowds of teenagers instead. “Kudos,” he said, resignedly, “I quit once myself, but it didn’t stick. Got withdrawals like a bitch. The full-on shakes, fuckin ulcers in my mouth and everything, fucked up dreams, the whole ka-blooeey. Fuckin bad medicine for something so small and innocent as a smoke, y’know...”

“Ah, yeah. It’ll do that.” Charles tried not to betray how weak he judged Pickles’ strength of will, perhaps second only to Magnus’ dire impulse control situation, and focused instead on the dull, lead-like weight that had settled on his heart, some kind of misplaced guilt for the dead boy. And he was dead, had died within seconds of hitting the ground from the blood flooding from his neck; someone, maybe Magnus, had grabbed Charles’ arm and towed him to the step saying something about fresh air, but he had been in such a state of disconnect he couldn’t clearly recall save for someone shoving him down by the shoulder and saying, Stay here, Charlie. And he had. Someone was taking care of it. Now, in the distance, he could hear sirens, and knew that for sure.

Pickles heard them too, perking up like a small dog to listen. He looked down at Charles, tilting his head to place the sound. “Think that’s the cops?” he asked quietly, and Charles strained his ears over the thrum of the crowd’s conversation, but he couldn’t tell. “No, that’s the ambulance,” resolved Pickles, straightening again. Of course, Pickles had more experience with this side of law enforcement, even if he didn’t know how to spell ‘subpoena’, for instance.

“Charlie.” The drummer put his hand on Charles’ shoulder, carefully avoiding the specks of blood soaked into his jacket. “Wanna come in the back room with us? You don’t wanna haveta see all the doctors and cops and shit.”

He had a point. Slowly, carefully, his motor skills a bit scrambled by the shock, Charles rose to his feet and a grateful smile spread across Pickles’ face. Weird, that. “S where you belong, anyway, bein our lawyer and everything,” he said and Charles frowned at him, but Pickles did not explain further, just moving back into the house with Charles drifting at his heels like a sleepwalker.

Harry’s corpse was still in the lounge, slumped in a pool of his own blood where it had soaked into the carpet, the smell heady and vile. Charles moved to hold his handkerchief over his face, but that too reeked of blood and span his head. It was surreal, really, like a movie – he replayed the blood spurting like a geyser from Harry’s slit neck again and again in his mind, unable to fit his mind around such violence. Sure, he’d seen someone die before; his mother had died holding his hand and he’d felt the life leave her, and yet for all its peace somehow this wasn’t even a touch on that. This, this gross, ridiculous, melodramatic death; it was a childish death, a teenage death, screaming and vomiting blood. There was an art to death. Call him a stiff, but you had to go out with some dignity.

A couple of kids stood around, looking at the corpse, taking photos of themselves with it using the cameras on their flip phones, shoving it with the toes of their sneakers. More metal blared tinny over the PA, quieter than the band had been, providing a distorted background buzz that blurred conversations into so much garbled babble around him. Pickles lead him around the pool of blood, weaving through the milling crowd with one or two of the kids trying to grab the drummer’s denim jacket and yelling at him only to be viciously elbowed off. When the kids looked at Charles, however, they just fell back in fearful silence and let him pass.

Their destination was the top of the stairs, where a door had been opened now that the music had stopped. Nathan stood in the doorway with his arms crossed across his chest, hulking and watchful; regal in his way. Charles followed Pickles to the top of the creaking stairs, carefully placing his shoes around bottlecaps discarded on the steps lest he slip. As he neared, he could see the rest of the band gathered just inside the doorway along with a spindly young man with dank blonde hair and acne. They looked up collectively as Charles and Pickles reached the top of the
stairs, but the drummer just pushed through them. Charles was about to do likewise when he heard Nathan grunt by his shoulder, giving him pause: “You okay?”

“Ah, yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. No harm done.” One young man dead. Charles looked up at Nathan, trying one last ditch attempt at the gallows humour. “Overcoat’s, ah, pretty – ah, gruesome, not looking forward to explaining that to the dry cleaners, ha ha.”

Nathan looked at him blankly, even wrinkled his nose a little in confusion and disgust. Again, it had fallen on deaf ears, like either – either this was so much reality to them they didn’t find the sheer absurdity of the situation funny, or else – or else what? Like they didn’t find self-deprecation funny, the idea of Charles trying to explain the blood stains on his jacket to the ever-tolerant couple at the dry cleaners, the sheer ridiculousness of Charles Foster Offdensen explaining yes, I was at this heavy metal concert, yes, a young man died, you might have seen it on the news, and blood squirted all over me, yes, that is unusual for me... but my fiancée is cheating on me and my work is going down the god damn drain, Gladys, please, I can’t understand a word you’re saying...

“Cool it, Patrick Bateman,” said Pickles and grabbed his sleeve, pulling him into the room beyond. “You’re freakin out man. Nate, ignore him, he’s in shock.” Charles just let it happen, dragged past the cold stare of Skwisgaar as the younger blond man lectured him about riff composition. The room was a bedroom, with posters of musicians and grotesque Japanese animation girls stuck sparsely over the plaster walls, a weird smell to it. Pickles pointed to the unmade bed. “Sit there. Stay. I’ll get ya some water or something.”

Charles briefly muttered, “I’m, ah, not in shock,” but Pickles ignored him and he sat on the bed anyway. Leopard print duvet, very stylish, right. He drew his hands over his face, taking a deep breath to calm himself and push back his migraine, then looked up at the band. Skwisgaar was fingering the strings of his guitar as the young man droned about thirds and harmonics. Magnus, standing over Cotton and Murderface in the corner of the room by a pile of crates full of records, smoked placidly and watched them; one of the crates had been emptied onto the floor and upturned for Murderface to sit on as Cotton strapped a bandage around his arm, the bleeding quelled by the pressure although Charles knew that the bassist should be in hospital.

And Pickles had not yet left to go downstairs, locked in conversation with Nathan instead and with Ginger, now wearing a Dethklok shirt since her top was destroyed, hanging off his arm. A few other girls around too, now he looked clearly, angling to go home with someone. Charles had a second thought and spoke up to Pickles and Nathan mutedly, “Ah, if you’re going downstairs, could you get me some asprin - - ”

Pickles didn’t even look up, breaking off mid-sentence with Nathan to wave a hand towards Charles, “Murderface already downed the whole packet, dude. All we got left is that stuff.”

What stuff? “Right. We need to take him to hospital, you know - - ”

“Whatever, man.”

Charles huffed at being dismissed, tuning out Pickles’ continued conversation with the lead singer as he looked around the room. Sure enough, there was a scratched up CD case on the mattress beside him with six thick rails of white powder lined up on it. Jesus Christ. The boys had a party lined up - Charles hadn’t seen that much illegal material since dealing with El Blanco. But his migraine was heaping, crushing in on his mind, and cocaine was a pain killer, right?

As he found his wallet and withdrew the first note his fingers alighted on, it seemed to Charles that his life flashed before his eyes. Starting with Vernon’s jeering, and Phoebe’s callous, broken voice
on the phone, the inevitable accusations of a midlife crisis; but in actuality this idea of Charles Foster Offdensen as a clean living, honest man was depressingly recent. Not far from the truth, he’d always been a good boy, his mother’s son, but the reputation hadn’t followed him. Discarding the derision, he bitterly mused as he rolled the note tight in his fingers that he preferred the sinister, secretive character he’d been awarded towards the close of his criminal days, one of power and privacy and after all, El Blanco (real name: Santiago Espinoza Beas) had been easy to talk to.

His mind wandered back to Santiago’s New Years party, Hollywood, 1989. Almost a decade ago now. Santiago himself greeting Charles with a warm hug on the stairs in the entry hall of the massive mansion, inviting him upstairs past celebrity eyes and murmurs. He’d taken the job because – because even criminals deserved justice, and he honestly (wide-eyed, naive) had believed that Santiago was innocent of this particular murder. And cash and gifts and love had rained on him from the man’s vast and thankful family. He remembered Santiago’s broad hand on his suit jacket sleeve and laughter, and the buzzing crowds, and now he wondered if Pickles had been there in the throngs, staring bewildered at the face they didn’t recognise. ¡Guarda las cámaras! Here, Charlie, special for you. ¡Caballeros! Lo digo en serio...

And it had been one line then that he daren’t refuse. And Santiago wouldn’t have given him anything but the best. It had been perfect, too, sharpened him up just right and Christ, some things were so tempting in life.

Then there had been London, seven years prior, still during his studies, and there’d been a beautiful girl involved and a penthouse apartment, and a Bowie concert he’d meant to take her to but had never actually reached. Once the others had left they’d just danced to the record in the apartment. And what a record! It was as though, bringing the case close to his face to snort the line, he could see the face of that dumb young man reflected back at him in the plastic. All this as it was, dumb as that kid was, he had been onto something. Brutally handsome, rich, brilliant. How did he end up with a silly apartment in Florida and a woman who thought she was better than him, a two-person firm, on a case with some drop kick band, one of whom had just murdered err, manslaughted someone right in front of him, and who hadn’t even paid him yet? Well, he’d just take his worth by the nose, then.

Offdensen steeled himself, and snorted.

Fffffff------------------------------------------Far out!

He let his head drop back to stare at the mould spots on the ceiling as the drip burned down the back of his throat, sniffing back the chemical scald in his nose, and once his ears popped again he was aware of laughing and whooping and Pickles hooting at him: “Right on, Charlie! Goddamn! I said, goddamn!”

Charles pinched his nostrils and looked sideways at them, at Magnus’ violent grin and even Skwisgaar twitching a smile. “I know that wasn’t meant for me,” he remarked, his voice strangled by the bitter taste of the drug, “But you owe me, for tonight.” He swallowed again.

Pickles had danced over to him, taking the case and the note from his hands and shaking from the giggles. “All right, Charlie! You’re in for a party tonight!”

“Huh?” Charles sniffled, rubbing his nose impulsively.

“You buy the ticket, you take the ride, dude!” Pickles did not hesitate in snorting three quarters of the fattest, longest line on the case and swallowing it back with a smack of his lips. “Fuck. Yeehaw. Gonna be a great night with you, man, damn, I’m pumped actually!”
“Whatever.” Charles watched on, scrubbing at his nose again as Pickles passed the case on to Ginger, the girl finishing his line before passing it on. The dampish blonde kid looked broken hearted, so he assumed the other line had been for him; couldn’t seem to care. That was the nice thing about cocaine... “We need to get William to the hospital. William?”

He caught Murderface nose-deep in another line, grunting mid-snort just as Charles was about to tell him not to take it. Cocaine thinned the blood... the idiot. “Ah... I’ll drive you, okay? And at least one of you come with me.”

“I’ll come. Gonna be a while before it hits, anyway,” said Pickles, and Nathan grunted in agreement. “And anyway, we don’t wanna be here when the police arrive, hey...” He looked sideways at Ginger and found only agreement, only ever agreement.

“No kidding.” Charles stood up sharply, gesturing to Murderface as he moved towards the door. “Come on then, you need some stitches in that immediately,” he commanded, and the rhythm section fell obediently in step with Nathan and Ginger trailing behind.

He only barely caught Pickles mewling, “Gawsh, Charlie, you’re so strong and protective...” and Ginger’s giggles under Magnus’ declaration, “We’ll catch up with ya at the party, yeah?”

“All right.” He was sure Pickles knew the way, after all.

And so out through the groping throngs again, past the paramedics speaking on their handheld radios, across the vacant lot, and they all piled into the Buick, William in the front and the other three in the back. Just as Charles started the engine, the windows lit up blue and red as the police car screeched past them to the scene. Charles paused only a moment to catch Pickles’ expectant look in the rear vision mirror.

“So?” chirped the drummer, balling his fist. “This is an emergency. Hit it, Chuck,” and Charles released a slow breath.

“Don’t ever call me Chuck.”

And he floored it.

(Because it was an emergency, damn it. That’s exactly why. Nothing about the cocaine and murder.)

He was dimly aware of Pickles and Ginger squealing in the back seat with every abrupt corner as they sped through the suburbs, but his attention was on William brooding in the seat beside him. The kid looked sulky, hurt even. Maybe he was embarrassed – Charles could see that. It was a stupid, embarrassing thing he’d done.

“Hey. You feeling okay?” he asked uselessly, casting a glance aside, and Murderface flinched away. Nothing. Feeling bad. Well, probably shouldn’t have had coke on top of grievous self-harm, huh, kid? As he pulled up to the hazy red glow of a traffic light, he could see Nathan’s face in the rearvision mirror grinning hungrily at him.

“It’s, ah... gonna be okay, Will,” he tried instead, and Murderface gave a quiet, sob-like sigh.

“Yeah. Thanks, I guess.”

He had only taken off maybe a street further, just a few blocks from the hospital, when Pickles piped up in the back. “Hey, dude, can we stop for takeout?”
“Excuse me?” asked Charles, not believing his ears.

“Take out. I could murder a whopper,” said Pickles, oblivious to the irony.

“Okay. Ah... after we get to the hospital, sure.”

“Hell no, there’s gonna be a line and shit... there’s a Burger King on the way, just pull in the drive-through.”

Charles gazed out the window and let out a slow breath. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nah, seriously. Nathan wants to too.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Moooiderface?”

Charles spared a look out of the corner of his eye at the bassist, only to see William had perked up with the suggestion. “Yeeeeah, y’know, a whopper sounds real good right now.”

They were kidding. They had to be kidding. No. No, this was just part of that vast, cosmic joke that was being pulled on him, the yanking back of the veil of his life. Somewhere, somehow, every night, there were people – these people – these people who loved destroying their ears with shit music and beating each other and almost murdering their friends and actually murdering innocent strangers, strangers who loved them, snorting drugs and cutting themselves and choosing Burger King over the hospital. Thursday nights at the smaltzy fishtank bar had been so much easier to believe than this bullshit and yet Charles knew, he knew, that this went on every damn weekend. And yet, he couldn’t seem to care... oh, she don’t lie, cocaine.

At the drive-through, it transpired that neither Pickles nor Nathan nor Ginger nor William had brought cash, and Charles paid for their order at the window, deciding to just join in with the cosmic laughter levelled at him – and the girl who served them had been beautiful, whistled at by Pickles, a stunning blonde surely no older than 17 and innocent, shy, and in her way she reminded Charles of other worlds he had ignored too long. He drove on to the emergency to a chorus of satisfied munching and with Pickles trying to shove fries in his mouth from around the seat, and he knew that somewhere down there a real pickle had been dropped onto his flawless upholstery and squashed into it, and despaired only vaguely. When he reached the hospital, he had had enough, and walked William only so far as to check him in with the nurse at the ER window before promptly abandoning him and returning to the car with a lightness in his heart.

The rest of them were waiting for him, leaning on the car and sucking on milkshakes. In the lights of the hospital, the two redheads’ hair looked like fire, the red and yellow emblems on their drinks blazing and the car gleaming so beautifully, its shell like a black beetle. And what a car! God! Phoebe had never understood his need for a classic car. Charles let out a sigh of appreciation, and was surprised by how loud it seemed in his ears, how fast in his chest. Haha, she don’t lie, right?

“Come on, boys! – and, ah, girl – we have a party to hit!” he declared, and Pickles punched the air.

“Char-lie! Let’s go!” But when Charles stepped over the curb he abruptly tripped on his own feet, catching himself against the side of the car, and his head lurched and seemed to fall straight off and onto the shiny black paintwork.

He pulled himself up, shaking, and leaned his back against the car. Somewhere beside him, Pickles was laughing. Ginger too... oh, to hear a pretty girl laughing. Like rain in the desert. Like desert flowers. His breath heavy and fast again. Charles looked up at the hospital lights, ripping
through the night ahead of them, and his gaze carried him up to the sky, the stars, those gleaming eyes, and then Pickles had taken his hand, his skin so soft.

“Charlie?” His breath rushing out again as he dropped his head to look at the drummer, his effete face, the eyes like deep cut jade. His freckles, and it was – the gloss of MTV, gold and blue and the desert. And he was right up in Charles’ face too, putting his shake on top of the Buick to handle him. God, no wonder a generation of women had fallen in love with him. There was so much mad fire in those green eyes, and his thick, chafed lips, his fingers soft and warm and firm around Charles’ shaking hand. His laugh like a girl’s. “Charlie...? Ohhhh boy.”

Nathan echoed, “Charlie,” deep and dark behind them. Ginger’s giggling, god, music! Her hands on his other palm, colder than Pickles’.

“Pickles,” he finally managed, sounding loud to him. “That, ah... cocaine...”

“Coke and molly, dude. Ya know, crushed up... thought you knew.” Pickles’ smirk twisted tighter, and he released Charles’ hand to straighten the lawyer’s suit instead. “Oh, Charlie. Ohhhh, I’m so sorry. It takes a while to kick in. Are you okay?”

Charles swallowed heavily, and was only then aware that he’d been clenching his jaw. “Don’t think I can drive,” he mumbled, and Pickles nodded.

“Okay. Okay, well, that’s fine, I’ll drive.” And though he knew normally he’d stop the guy, this time, Charles just agreed. “It don’t hit me so bad, ya know, I’m used to it. Uhh... you ever had molly before, dude?”

Charles gave a stupid little laugh. “Have I ever had molly?” he asked, tipping his head back, and Pickles took his face in his hands, bringing him back to eye contact. And good for it, he’d almost got lost again. One sharp, pierced eyebrow quirked before him still, and Charles could barely keep from giggling.

“No. No, I have not,” he snickered, and Pickles raised both eyebrows.

“How do you feel?”

“Ahhhh... like I’m in a Rush song. Xanadu, 1977. When it, ah... you know... when it hits the two minute mark. You know, real... groovy.” Charles let out a loud breath again, grinning inanely, and all the lights shone in his eyes. Hell, even the blood smatters on his suit smelt sharp, divine.

Pickles rolled his eyes in beautiful arcs and patted Charles on the cheek as the lawyer giggled at him. “So still the same big ol’ geek deep down. Drink lots of water, you’ll be fine. Fuck, you’ll be better than fine! Now get in the car. We’re going to the party. Ginger’ll... take care of you. Yeah.”

Charles was barely aware of his keys changing hands, and he was pushed into the car by the little girl and sandwiched between her and the great, powerful stillness of Nathan’s body. The leather! God, the leather seats, they smelt so sweet, and Ginger’s shirt tied up beneath her breasts to expose her lithe middle, his hand around it, her skin so, so soft. Pickles was going through his dash for tapes and providing a running commentary, but Charles couldn’t even focus on it for Nathan’s breathing like a panther beside him and the dark and the leather.

“Seriously, what’s all this fresh shit, dude? Ehhhh.... oh, you got some Stones, that’ll do us.” The click of the tape, the whir of the deck. When the first piano chords of *Beggar’s Banquet* poured syrupy over them, Charles melted into the leather, and Pickles, revving the engine and moving the
black car around them, was the Devil himself. But he couldn’t care. God. It was just... too much...

Chapter End Notes

devoting a few chapters to covering Charles' First And Last Party With Dethklok before we dance back and forth again; likewise there'll be a few only for second part chapters later.

also; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5jKOpsqxjc
In an ideal world - you know, in the idle fantasies Charles had entertained of returning to Europe in leisure rather than scholarship, of seeing a different side to those storied cities than their storied bars and clubs or lecture theatres - a trip to Lyons in a private helicopter would have been part of Charles’ wildest aspirations. Art galleries, museums, gastronomy, god! And the opera! Imagine that. A super-star lawyer, a private helicopter, and all of this at his fingertips…!

Being investigated by INTERPOL hadn’t really been part of that fantasy, if he was brutally honest. Nor had being so gosh darn busy trying to organise the China tour that he was left no time to venture out into the city, necessitating the helicopter - although the fact that he could just buy a helicopter, just like that, snap his fingers and go, “Damn it, just buy it,” was quite nice. Give me convenience or give me death, huh, boys…?

The conference - questioning, conference, it had felt like a conference - had been long and drawn out, but at least one of the lead investigators, with her charming Swedish accent, had been pleasant to listen to, though her Japanese colleague had appeared to struggle somewhat with her words even though his own diction was perfect.

What should have been gruelling instead skimmed by him in the empty room, sitting placidly opposite the two investigators with a vast polished conference table between them, flipping a pen between his fingers from the third hour onwards. Because the questions were grossly superficial. On figures and taxes and Mordland’s interactions with the European Union, not the weapon manufacturing, armament and murder he was suspected of.

On either side of Charles had been a Klokateer, new employees - he was pretty sure - for the established International Relations team. But they didn’t have much to answer that Charles couldn’t offer himself, and for it all the most probing question that was asked was about them. It was frightening to Charles, too, how fast his Intelligence team had acquired copies of his interview from INTERPOL’s database. As he was flying back, in fact. Another suited hood approaching his seat in the sleek black helicopter to offer him the thick document, and bringing with him the aspirin and glass of water Charles had requested too.

INSPECTOR SAGAWA: And these are also Klokateers?
MR OFDENSEN: That’s correct.
INSPECTOR SAGAWA: But more employed in a diplomatic capacity? Do they have ranks?
MR OFDENSEN: No ranks exactly. We try to be democratic about it.
INSPECTOR VON SYDOW: Why must they wear hoods?
MR OFDENSEN: Long story. But it’s more of a cultural artifact now than a - you know - corporate cultures and such. Fosters a sense of belonging to the organisation. You know - team building - relationship building.
He noted with some amusement and some shred of hope for international affairs decaying inside him that they had omitted his brief closing conversation with Von Sydow, relating to the virtuosity and eligibility of her countryman Skwisgaar Skwigelf. Charles had even been surprised by Inspector Sagawa’s bright smile of recognition as he turned off the recorder. “Ah, Skwisgaar Skwigelf, taller than a tree!”

“He is rather tall, yes. Indeed.” And not a question about the murder. Standing there clutching his file, neatly suited, cold-eyed, his hands covered in metaphorical blood, and they didn’t even care to ask.

It occurred to Offdensen, leaning back in his seat, having swapped his brandy for the glass of water and turning the aspirin capsule between the fingers of his other hand, that it was incredibly easy to be corrupt when those around you were corrupt. He already knew this, of course, from his criminal law days but - well - things hadn’t just fallen into his lap there. He had not intended Hillam’s death - it was just a miscommunication. But it happened, it was an offence, and now he was being let off the hook without even the consideration that he might have been responsible. Like every death that occurred around Dethklok, people stepping up to take jail sentences for the band, taking the responsibility for manslaughter, refusing to press charges on grievous matters, throwing themselves under the tyres for the tour bus.

Like everything, Hillam’s death was convenient and now it was brushed off his record without a blink. And it didn’t feel like he was doing anything to cause it, not some brilliant conspiracy, it just happened. Sometimes, in his sleepless nights, pacing the length of hotel rooms addled by the gin in the minibar or more recently his chambers by the soft firelight, Offdensen recalled the harrowed face of the band’s former manager across the district court, entertained the scenario where he had continued to manage the band. Apart from the havoc that Magnus would have caused, it disturbed Charles, essentially, that the band - his band - might have fallen into less organised hands. The chaos, the corruption, that existed in potential wherever they were. He may not have been the Machiavellian puppet master the media sometimes made him out to be, but there was an art to running Dethklok. A certain grace. They would have been a world power regardless, but he liked to think that without his management, the death toll would have been significantly higher.

You know, at least. So it was a net gain, correct? Less people dead, and with the band out of jail, everyone was happy and employed and everyone made money. It didn’t matter if INTERPOL were corrupt, this time. Everyone came out better.

He stared out the window at the dark continent for a moment, contemplating Hillam’s lonely death, her neck snapped by goons in the freezing woods, and then bolted back the aspirin with the water. He rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses, then passed the water back to the hovering Klokateer in exchange for his brandy again. “Thanks,” he murmured, gazing out the window again just long enough for the Klokateer to say.

“Welcome, sir.”

Sir. Charles tapped his fingers on the seat arm, and then turned to stop the Klokateer before he left, on a whim, a faint recollection, a twinge of disbelief. “Matthew?” he asked, but no matter how he strained, he could not distinguish the young man from any other hood.

“Sir?” Bingo. Look at that. That was a damn miracle, that. Flooded with relief, he considered asking the young man to remove his hood and sit with him to chat, but a guarded part of him stepped silently in to prevent him showing such favouritism. It wasn’t worth it. Just because he was… lonely or something… god, was he lonely? No. Just… restless.
“Were you present for this?” he asked instead, gesturing to the transcript on his knees, and Matthew shook his head.

“I’m just on the paralegal team, remember, sir. I, uh...”

“That’s right. You didn’t finish your admission. Golly, I’m sorry, Matt. Long evening.” The intern shrugged, seemed - maybe only in his imagination - to give that sheepish smile he had.

“That’s okay, sir.” Of course it was okay. He was no doubt aware and comfortable with the fact that his employer had forgotten he existed for months at a time. Or couldn’t tell him apart from any other member of staff. Was that anonymity liberating? Charles idly ran a hand over the thick document on his lap, recalling the lines of empty code Hillam had brought up in the control room.

“We’ll have to do something about that. Ah... as you were, Matthew.” The young man nodded at being dismissed and turned away, but Charles lasted barely a minute gazing out at the nighttime countryside below, the other five seats around him totally empty, before he was up and letting himself into the cockpit again.

Oh, well, it’s a beautiful instrument really. Yeah. Show me the, ah, radar there? And you say a visual projection? I see, the pane there - perspex? Should try it, don’t you think? Ah - well, we’ll get the equipment then. Great.

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

They’d done it again.

Of course they’d fucking done it again. Jesus, this was why he didn’t go to fucking hospital - that and the nurses, looking down their noses at him, roasting him just for a couple of little cuts. If it weren’t for that slimy fucking piece of work lawyer, getting in wherever he could, interfering with their thing, William would never have touched the hospital grounds - and now they’d gone and forgotten him again.

Just like everyone else. Shouldn’t have trusted a lawyer, he knew better than to trust some skeezy dick in a suit but fuck, it was hard to even talk after that gig. He’d been punched in the face, for one, and fucking... blood loss, and while he’d absolutely resent not being taken to the party (and ABSOLUTELY WAS, RIGHT NOW), all he wanted to do was go home and watch shitty cartoon reruns. None of this.... shit... Pickles shrieking and grinding on the lawyer like a fucking homo… nurses pulling the stitches too tight and saying he was wasting his life… might as well do it properly - - FUCK! As if he didn’t know.

Murderface sat on the curb outside the hospital, staring at his boots, nursing bandages and a black eye, sewn up and abandoned. They always did this. And he knew he’d be so much more upset right now if he hadn’t snorted the ecstasy, but instead just knowing he should be angry and being unable to properly feel it was a new, shrieking pain in his ass. Occasionally, his mobile vibrated on his crotch where it rested, marking texts as Magnus made his way across the city to get him. And like, fuck Magnus. But at least he came to help once you screamed at him a bit.

Murderface looked hazily at the dim blue screen lighting up at him, aware that it was the drug
making it glow warmly like a lightning bug. Wasting this fucking high on texts from Magnus, but sent by Cottontail. Murderface was incredibly jealous of Magnus’ love life. In fact all of them seemed to do better than he did, especially Skwisgaar, but Magnus - he always seemed to have a hot girlfriend, not just chicks, some alt babe, hanging off his arm and all googly-eyed over him, like she would do anything for him. Heck, even Emma Haeven had been hot, and she was a dyke.

MAGNUS  23:40
DW BABE

MAGNUS 23:41
WE ALMOST THER

With Cotton messaging affections at him, it looked like Magnus was hitting on him, calling him babe. Fuckin’ gross. It was the kinda thing Magnus would do, too, just the rile him up. That was his kinda humour, you know? Kinda like a Ren and Stimpy kinda thing, like… pushing it too far, into the just plain gross. Took a real long time to get used to it, couldn’t say he ever had really, but it was fuckin’ funny watching the others cringe away from the dude when he got full on, you know, macking on a chick or screaming at them and breaking shit or talking about choking back dicks or piercing his nipples or whatever kinky crap and yeah, sure, it still scared William too. But mostly it was just funny. Magnus was a fucking hilarious guy. And maybe he was a little fucked up. So was Murderface. So fucking what.

He looked up dimly at the sound of screeching tyres, and his heart stopped within him as the black pickup came to a screaming halt mere feet from his face. The smell of burned rubber steamed up from the asphalt as Magnus stumbled out of the vehicle like an astronaut abandoning his crashed spacecraft. William could hear Cotton’s ecstatic praise from the passenger seat, oh my gaad! Oh my gaad Magnus!, her window wound down as she held a lit cigarette out of it, as Magnus staggered the few feet to him and stood, wobbling, a slack-jawed grin plastered across his face, before him.

“C’mon, Willy. You’re late for the party,” he purred, hands hooked in his belt like a gunslinger, and Murderface hopped to his feet.

“T0ok your fucking time, dickweed!” he whined, sneering into Magnus’ cocky mug, and made for the passenger seat, tearing open the door to Cotton loping dumbly, skirt ridden up, heels on the dashboard and smoking.

“Yeah, yeah. Fuck you. I’ll be fuckin’ glad when you kill yourself properly, then I won’t have to babysit your ass.” Magnus, such a funny guy! HA HA HA HA HA.

“Get out of my way, cow,” he snivelled gleefully at Cotton, and Magnus shoved him roughly in the arm as he circled to the driver’s seat.

“Give it a break, Will. Shotgun goes to whoever I’m fucking. Unless you’re making an offer?” Dark eyes drilled into him from across the car roof as Cotton giggled innately, and Murderface’s heart curled up inside him like a pill bug. Magnus grinned, as he could read Will’s expression in 50 foot neon. “Okay then, you’ll haveta sit on the console.”

Murderface awkwardly climbed into the car and over Cotton, the girl squirming from her giggling as he plopped his ass down on the centre console between the seats, his boots on either side of the gear box. Magnus crawled in beside him, slamming the door and shaking the car, then starting her up. Such a fucking cool car man! Even if it smelt a bit like rotten meat. The weed stank mostly covered that up. For all his rage, Murderface’s spirit lifted with each rev of the pickup, and Magnus loved to rev that filthy thing.
They sped out in reverse, Murderface clutching the console beneath him for dear life, and then Magnus gleefully switched into gear and hooned off into the dark streets. Music blasted from the stereo with face-melting distortion, and Murderface instantly recognised Slayer. Fucking good. Slayer was good. Magnus was good. The only one who liked him. Fuck.

“One of the Church dudes, that Genie freak, got a video of you getting stabby back there,” Magnus said, raising his voice over the stereo. “Fuckin brutal man. Just pissing blood.”

“Awesome.” Murderface nestled contentedly between the seats, smirking to himself. Despite the snide remarks, Magnus was impressed by his bloodshed. Well, he should have known that from the guy’s hysteria at the show, but, like, he was hard to read, and Murderface was too busy getting this shiner to think about it.

“He’s gonna put it on the Church blog. It’s fuckin great dude, you’re just sawing that shit in there.”

Murderface glowed in the attention. Another successful show - and only one person had died this time, and with all that cool blood too! Hopefully someone got that on video. At the Mammothfister launch a month ago they’d had several casualties after a light rig had collapsed onto the audience, and the front of the bar stage had been smattered with gore. Some people had said the band was cursed, but Murderface didn’t believe it more than he believed he himself was cursed (which was to say, only in the very early hours of the morning, weeping over a toilet bowl speckled with vomit). It was making it increasingly hard to get shows though - and he was the first to admit that their roadies, largely their biggest fans, resorting to balaclavas to hide their identities from the band’s reputation was a little fucked up.

“Pickles fucking got that guy, huh, man! It went like six inches in his neck, I saw ‘em pull the cymbal out! Looks awesome, all the blood sprayed on it like a water gun!” he yelled over the stereo, with Cotton’s giggled agreement bubbling up beside him so lovely. Murderface didn’t try to stop himself ogling her breasts, bouncing with every sharp corner and pothole Magnus hit.

“Yeah, what’s got into him lately, man? Jeez!” Pickles had been very mood-swingy lately. It was probably that Ginger bitch; he always got weird when they got clingy. It was beyond Murderface’s wildest dreams to have not just a girlfriend but a hot, sex-crazy girlfriend, and so Pickles’ behaviour was unfathomable to him. But a dumping was on the horizon, or whatever it was called when you weren’t really dating and just fucking or… whatever. Magnus called it ditching, but Magnus’ ditching always involved following them home a week later. Whatever it was, it meant it would soon be time for Murderface to attempt to move in on her.

“He was really gonna kill you!” he said gleefully, remembering the bloodlust in his bandmate’s eyes, and a shadow passed over Magnus as he pressed in the cigarette lighter.

“Yeah. He was.”

Fuck. Was he joking or not? Murderface could never fucking tell…!

“I dunno what his deal is, man. That gig went great. ‘Ruining it’, jeez...” Magnus growled, Cotton agreeing with him on Murderface’s other side. “Fuckin, cock rock lunatic. He’s crazy, man. Thinks just cuz he was famous in the 80s he knows what’s what. But shit’s changed. And Dethklok ain’t some shitty rock band, it’s metal.”

“He is crazy,” said Murderface, his attention torn between Cotton’s breasts and reading Magnus’ intentions, and Cotton breathed out a lungful of smoke in the hottest way from where she was slumped to speak up.
"I read in Spin that he’s schizo,” she purred coolly, gazing at the men, “Or bipolar or something. A real psycho.”

When neither interrupted her, just listening (ogling) with Magnus lighting his cigarette, she continued in her languid, dark honey tone: “His ex was in it, y’know, talking about how he had a gun and he came to her house in the middle of the night saying he was gonna kill himself if she didn’t marry him, y’know. Used to smash her stuff, pull the phone out of the wall when she was talking, used to get out of his fucking head on smack and lock himself in the closet for like, days. Insane shit.”

“I can believe that,” growled Magnus, although Murderface was more sceptical. He had a hard time imagining Pickles being married, for a start, and his interactions with the guy – well, they hadn’t been great but they hadn’t been that bad. And he was a great drummer, too. When Nathan and Skwisgaar had brought him in off the back of Skwisgaar’s ja, I know this guy, he ams... how does you ams says in America... crazy like he ams livings ins the forest, heh! But goods drummer...

Skwisgaar had a strange introduction to the US which made him assume everyone was as famous as Pickles was, that everyone was like that in this country. But Nathan had hit it off with Pickles immediately and Pickles had bonded with the music and the rest was history. Magnus had been optimistic too, like Pickles’ best bud, hanging over him like a bad smell, at his beck and call. Pickles liked Nathan better, even Murderface could tell that; he wasn’t as crazy as Magnus, found the guy hard to read and intimidating in his vicious ons and offs, your best pal one night and your worst enemy the next. When Murderface had first met Magnus, at a house party where Magnus had spilt his drink on Murderface sulking in the corridor and the younger man had snapped out at him, Magnus had backed him up against a wall with a knife against his stomach, spitting in his face. Who the FUCK do you think you are? Who the FUCK... look at you. You fucking, disgusting... dog-faced... PRICK...! And a mere two hours later came back and apologised with a beer and an actual, real... hey, sorry about that, man..., something Murderface felt like he'd never heard. They’d talked, yeah, about Slayer, and how chicks these days were all lying, cheating whores, and Murderface had made his first friend outside of the highschool pals that had brought him to the city in the first place.

The point was, Magnus was hard to get on with. Maybe it was rich, him saying Pickles was crazy. But maybe it was Pickles’ problem for not getting Magnus, you know? That’s what Murderface thought.

“Hey, William. Have they told you anything about this record deal?” asked Magnus, and Murderface pulled his eyes away from Cotton’s breasts to look at him. ‘They’ were Nathan and Pickles. The record deal was a prevalent rumour in the band, something they were going to get and yet never happened. Well, it didn’t matter to Murderface. He just played bass. None of his business.

“No?” he asked innocently, hoping Magnus would tell him anyway.

“Huh. The lawyer said we got an offer, but they didn’t tell me shit about it. Says there’s some money in it too.” Magnus sniffed, dissatisfied. “That little bastard’s fucking with me, y’know. Playing me for a fucking idiot, well, I ain’t no idiot...”

Who the fuck was he talking about? Wait. “Pickles?” tried Murderface.

“Who do ya think.”

Murderface looked at his boots, uneasy with the way Magnus kinda sorta reached for his crotch...
every time he switched gears. “I guess. I dunno. I don’t think Pickles knows shit, really.”

“Damn fucking right.”

“If anyone’s keeping shit from us, it’s that fucking lawyer.” Murderface was eager to pass on the blame to an external agent. Besides, he didn’t like that dickhead’s holier than thou attitude. They were slowing now, almost at the party, and William could see it ahead. “Thinks he’s so good. He’s a fucking suit. Who does he think he is? Our manager?”

“Ha!” Magnus chuckled in agreement, slowing past the house party and the Buick parked on the street – and then driving straight past. “Hey, Willy. You wanna put him in his place?” he said, out of nowhere, and Murderface nodded, wrinkling his nose like a pig. Magnus turned a corner, then another, sharply, gaining speed. One more, driving the block.

“Hold tight. This ain’t gonna be pretty.” Magnus revved the engine as Murderface grabbed the console and Cotton brought her legs down from the dashboard. With a haughty cock of his chin, the guitarist put out his cigarette, turned the stereo up, and then slammed the accelerator to the floor to a chorus of their screams, careening head first towards the back of the Buick. Murderface was sure he was going to die, the fancy car looming in the bright lights of the pickup, but no such luck.

With a horrific crash they collided, and Magnus went face-first into the steering wheel with a sharp honk, but the other two passengers were unharmed. Murderface opened his eyes to Cotton’s shrieking laughter and Magnus beaming as he reversed out of the back of the Buick, blood streaming from his nose. In the pickup’s lights, Murderface could see the lawyer’s car crushed like a can before them.

“Fucking awesome!” He left Magnus giggling madly as he clambered over the guitarist and out the car door to look properly, thrilling with the crash. He’d totally smashed it! Red plastic from the reverse lights scattered over the night road by his boots and the twist of metal and everything! And Magnus’ car was barely dented. Fucking Magnus, what a maniac! What a fucking beast!

Magnus closed the door again, leaning out of the window after Murderface. “You go in Willy, we’ll join you in a bit,” he said around a mouthful of blood oozing from his face, and William was going to ask but then saw Cotton, her hand covered in Magnus’ blood, slipping her finger into her mouth seductively. Uh, ew? The bassist just nodded, disgusted and jealous, and backed away as Cotton dragged Magnus towards her across the car, licking the blood from his face. Fucking, did not want to be there for whatever that was.

And damned if they were going to leave him out of the party, anyway...!
The party was fuckin *dope*.

Murderface was still not as widely welcomed as the rest of the band, but as the bassist of Dethklok part of the shine would dimly reflect onto him too, and fans - packed into the corridors of the suburban home, having come straight from the Church - moved aside for him and yelped out *hey, Willy!* at him as he drew past. In the warmth of this new party, the ecstasy he’d snorted finally had a chance to come into its own, and Murderface, a half-finished bottle of gin pushed into his hand by a reveller, was feeling more welcome than ever.

He drifted, starry-eyed, through the party, chatting with guests - mostly girls. Doeish women all sitting at about a 7/10 on the attractiveness scale, as Murderface was well aware he couldn’t go for anything over that though his real limitations yet escaped him, and about a 6 on the Freak To Bimbo Continuum, a concept something like this:

```
      0
       +
     o MURDERFACE ACTUAL   |
          |                 |
          |                 |
          |                 |
          |                 |
          |                 |
    FREAK +--------------------------------------+ BIMBO
     | o MURDERFACE PERCEIVED
     |                  |
     |                  |
  o MAGNUS   | o NATHAN
     |            o SKWISGAAR  o PICKLES
     +
       10
```
The repercussions being that, of course, any girl who spoke back to Murderface was doing it out of her own amusement rather than sexual interest. And yes, they still talked and flirted and laughed at him. He was older than Nathan or Skwisgaar but still cute, still had that stubborn, chubby childishness about him that this particular rung of girl found funny. And funny could get you a long way, as could the pity and fuss associated with his wounds oozing blood through the bandages, if not as far as Murderface would have liked. Ultimately, another man would interrupt, tell Murderface to push off and eyeing the blossoming red patches in mild horror. Well, fuck ‘em! Just jealous of all the attention he was getting. On the Church blog - awesome…!

Murderface wandered from girl to girl for a while, downing gin without a flinch and basking in his mild fame. He was swimming, faintly, his body warm, through the house which looked to belong to someone’s rich parents, some trust-fund metalhead; helping himself to the livingroom bar when the gin ran out and hanging out happily by the expensive stereo demanding Slayer over the metal blaring from whomever would listen. Ultimately he even got it. Fuck yes! What a good night for William. On the Church blog, a great party, all these girls fawning over him, coke and ecstasy and gin and whatever this blue stuff was, and two lots of Slayer - and they’d totalled the lawyer’s fancy-pants car - who the fuck even cared that someone had died? No fucking cops here!

In the kitchen he ran into Ginger as she came in seeking drinks, staring into her boobs as she spoke to him. “Hey, Willy! You finally made it!”

“Uhhhh, yeah I did!” Think about it. She wasn’t wearing a bra under there. He knew that. He’d seen that, spent most of his time at the gig torn between her bouncing bare breasts and the cleavage of a girl teasing him from the front row, like she was oblivious to her boyfriend’s arm around her shoulders - Murderface still held that she’d been horny for him. It was all just… bullshit, giving him a shiner and all.

Ginger was still talking. The Dethklok shirt she was wearing looked wet, the fabric clinging to the curves of her large breasts. The pattern, a horned skull with gorey eyes hatchily done by a local artist, swam before his addled mind and warped over her cleavage, making his head spin. Murderface could barely make out the perk of her cold nipples, let alone her words as she was laughing, saying: “- Mr Offdensen! He’s totally loaded!”

“Aw man, we totally smashed his car!” squealed Murderface, feeling an awful sickness rise in his gut as the shapes shifted over Ginger’s shirt.

“Oh my god, really? Did he let you drive again?” Ginger heaved a sigh, and Murderface’s stomach lurched as her breasts hefted. “Magnus! He’s such a fucking psycho. You know what he said to me? I was just talking to Cotton and - - ” Blah blah blah blah…

“Oh, you’re all wet!” lisped Murderface, more out of impulse than anything, his eyes like saucers, and Ginger stopped mid-sentence recounting Magnus yelling at her for apparently being a slut lesbian or something to laugh.

“Oh yeah! This place has a hot tub…!” She graced him with a little dance of celebration, particularly strange with the backing track of Slayer’s Necrophobic. “Hot tub party with all of Dethklok…! Well, almost. And the rich damn lawyer - that GQ motherfucker’s checking me out Willy! I’m gonna get that fiddy off Pickles and then I’m gonna get me a hot, cashed-up sugar daddy, hells yeah…!”

God, when she danced, they jiggled.
“Come on, Willy! Join us!” she declared, snatching the bottle out of his hands – what she’d come for – and dragging him into the back courtyard. The hot tub was almost directly outside, sheltered from the neighbours by the tall fence, the bubble of voices over the distant stereo and over the – well, the bubble of bubbles, and William was met with a bizarre scene under the warm porch light. Pickles, Nathan, Skwisgaar, and a handful of girls were all squeezed into the tub, on top of each other to greater or lesser extents and attempting not to spill their drinks or put out their cigarettes in the foam. Pickles in particular was struggling to stop his wine glass of parent’s liquor cabinet choice brandy pouring onto the lawyer’s crotch; Offdensen was sitting on the edge of the tub, knees up, his trousers rolled up over his calves with his bare feet in the water, and Pickles had slung his arm lazily on one of his knees as they chatted. The others had stripped to their underwear, all something Murderface had seen before.

Ginger stripped her shirt over her head and streaked past him to the tub, plummeting straight in and draping herself over the lawyer to an inane giggle from the older man. Murderface wasn’t about to get left out. He only just had time to hear Pickles say, “Hey, Murderface. Did you put this shit on the stereo cos like - - ” before he was dragging off his own shirt and abandoning it onto the wet bricks underfoot, trying to yank his shorts over his snagging boots mid-lurch for the tub.

He stood triumphantly in his underpants, one boot up on the edge of the tub as he tried to unbuckle it through his drunken, rolling haze. Pickles’ eyes bolted wide with panic.

“MURDERFACE, NO!”

Murderface had gotten through half of the buckles hotly ignoring him when Nathan lurched forward in the tub, grabbing his hand with a wet, slippery fist. “Murderface. Your feet fucking stink, you’ll freak the girls out, don’t fucking - - ” he grunted, and Murderface squirmed out of his grip.

“Fuck you!” he sneered, but lurched, his boot slipping on the plastic edge of the tub and straight into the hot water. With a squeal of disgust, he tried to pull it out only to tumble backwards onto the bricks like a helpless beetle. He could hear the lawyer laughing as Skwisgaar’s face popped over the edge of the tub, looking down at him.

“Jesus... just get it overs with quicks then, get yous boot off and get in,” said the Swede, holding out a slender hand to Murderface, and he was too high to even feel jealous of Skwisgaar’s beautiful fingers as he helped the bassist to his feet. Murderface got his boots off, Pickles and Nathan complaining the whole time, and drove straight into the water.

“I says, ja? Him get foots unders the waters, ams uns-smellsable,” explained Skwisgaar as Murderface settled into the water, thinking too late to hold his bandages out and pulling his drenched and dripping arms out quickly. He slung them over the back of the tub to lean on and let his head spin, watching Ginger get keen on the lawyer, her breasts crushed against his trouser leg. Finally things were going William’s way.

He was watching Offdensen flush red behind his glasses, fogged from the steam, as Ginger – ‘reading his palm’ – put his ring finger still bearing the silver engagement band into her lips and sucked to a drawn out, uncertain and definitely disapproving, “Uh.......” from the lawyer when he heard a door slam somewhere in the house. Murderface looked up, following the commotion as it moved through the crowd inside with yells and complaints and the distant sound of Cottontail yelling, “Magnus! Don’t!” until the back door burst open on the guitarist’s gurning, blood-smeared visage.

“Hey Magnus. Your fly’s undone - hooooly fuck - -!” came Pickles’ squeak, but Magnus could hear nothing through his berserker rage. He crossed the feet between the door and the hot tub in
just a few scarecrow strides, his teeth clenched into a violent grimace as he hung over Murderface with death in his stare. Before he could even think to react, Murderface felt those bony hands hook under his arms, dragging him backwards out of the tub.

“Did ya think I wouldn’t be back to deal with you, ya little asshole?” he snarled, struggling with Murderface as the younger man squirmed, getting one arm free and twisting in Magnus’ arms to face him.

“I didn’t do nothing!”

In retaliation, Magnus dragged his tight fist down over the arm he still held, his bony fingers crushing into Murderface’s cut muscles and pulling on his stitches. “You fat little fuck, look at you. She’s mine, okay? Keep your eyes to yourself!” Murderface saw the blade flash and screamed, thrashing out of Magnus’ grip even as the others mobilised to intervene.

“Fucking Magnus!” Pickles grabbed Murderface in a headlock, pulling him further into the tub as the young man flailed and thrashed in his hands like a python on a warthog. Nathan, too, had abandoned his drink to a girl, jumped out of the tub and rounded behind Magnus, grabbing the guy’s arms and pulling them behind him just in time before Magnus’ could plunge the knife into Murderface’s soft middle. With both parties restrained, the yelling began.

“Get the fuck off me, Nathan! Let me at him! Little shit, always slathering over my girls! I’ll fucking skin him!” But Nathan held Magnus tight, barely flinching as the man flailed in his arms like a spider caught in its own web.

In the hot tub, Pickles tried desperately to hold on to Murderface as the bassist slithered in his hands and then made a sound threatening vomit, shaken up in their fight. “Don’t you dare puke on me, dude,” he snarled, then caught a vicious elbow to the nose as Murderface struggled free from his grip, a pig in soap, and Ginger squeaked in concern and clutched at the lawyer, his glasses falling off into the water with a disheartening plop and a murmured, “Oh, dang.”

“Calm down. You don’t have to be jealous of Murderface. He’s got the pulling power of hamburger meat,” grunted Nathan, holding Magnus like a hard enough grip would eventually put him to sleep like a gator or something. Murderface knew that to be true – given enough time, Magnus would calm down. In the meantime, it was his cue to get the fuck out of there.

“Fuck all of you!” he squealed and split, clambering out of the tub and slipping on the bricks as he bolted from the scene. The crowds inside gasped and jumped out of his way as Murderface lurched past them half naked and dripping, his stomach churning with the fight and fast ascent, stopping only to punch a hole in the corridor wall and then lean on his fist to steady himself.

Magnus hadn’t followed, but someone had changed the Slayer to fucking pussy ass metal Type O Negative. Fucking - - ! It made him sick! Fuck... literally!

He was vomiting down the plaster when a dark, sexy figure approached him, blurring in his sunken vision. Cotton, her pale face smeared with Magnus’ dry blood. “Shit, Willy. I’m so sorry,” came her beautiful voice, as if the vomit was Magnus’ fault, and William brought up another wet heave.

He felt her grab his arm, and just followed her when she pulled him down the corridor and into the cold night outside, leaving him to swoon and sink down on the front step.

“Hold on. I’ll get you something to wear.” And she was gone, returning only to drape a large, expensive overcoat reeking of blood across his wet shoulders and kiss him on the cheek before she disappeared into the night again. God damn it. He’d totally missed the opportunity to turn his
face and kiss her properly, and all because of a little puke gurgling over his lips! Abandoned on
the front step, Murderface sat dejectedly, hunched over and vomited some more.

Soon, deep in the party, he could hear people chanting, *Make out! Make out!* Magnus’ voice
among them. Which probably meant Cotton and Ginger in the hot tub getting heavy. His stomach
twisted again with jealousy, and he trembled with the awfulness of it all, struggling not to cry.
Why was it so unfair? All he wanted was be part of the gang, you know, part of the party? Why
was he the butt of every damn joke! And the roll had worn off. And then he was crying, tears
mingling with the vomit on his face, and pulling the overcoat tight around his shoulders.

Too long passed, paralysed and weeping, and he heard a door slam behind him. He was almost
shocked when the person sat down on the step next to him, cradling their head in their hand and
letting out a long, shaking sigh. The lawyer, his trousers still rolled up and his whole suit damp
from fishing for his glasses. Murderface sniffled pathetically.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?” he squeaked, glaring blearily through the tears, and Offdensen
looked up at him, his head propped comically on his hand with a weak grin like the straight man in
a comedy finally snapped.

“She’s seventeen. Seventeen!” breathed the lawyer, stifling a giggle at his own cosmic
misfortune. Murderface wrinkled up his nose unhappily.

“Oh, shit, I guess,” he said, bewildered at the lawyer’s unhappiness. So... what? Seventeen was
old enough... right? Half your age plus five. Right? That was what was okay. And that was...
almost seventeen. Wait, the lawyer was probably like 50 right. So maybe that wasn’t... so great.
And now he thought about it, Pickles, too, was like... older than would make that okay. Hum.

"She asked me to help her with her accounts homework,” said Offdensen glumly, which raised
more questions than it answered, but William had woken up in the lounge to Pickles helping the
girl practice her French quietly in the dead of night, watching music videos on their tiny box TV.

"Did you fuck her?” Murderface sniffled, and the lawyer gave a sigh.

“No. No. I, ah... well, I don't think so. It's a bit hard to... a bit hard to think. Oh boy."

Murderface decided to get a kick in while the guy was down. “*Laurie McQueen, she’s only
fooooorteen.... gonna suck it all night, she’s a sweet suckin’ queen*,” he sang off-key and off-kilter,
and then vomited onto his bare feet again. The lawyer frowned at him, and then gave a sad giggle.

“Are you vomiting? Jesus – Jesus Christ, William,” he chuckled, peering over his glasses, “I think
I better, ah, take you home, huh?” Murderface didn’t move, just watched dimly as the lawyer got
to his feet, digging in his pocket for his car keys.

“That’s gay.”

But Offdensen wasn’t listening. He made it three leaden steps across the front lawn before he saw
the back of his car, crushed in under the bright streetlight, and froze in his step, eyes wide open, the
car key clutched in his hand as his knuckles went rapidly white. There was supreme, celestial
wonder in his shaking voice when he spoke again:

“*My car!*”

Murderface watched with bitter pleasure as the lawyer crumbled, falling to his knees on the dewy
grass and shaking all over. There was a painful silence, and then Offdensen started to laugh, a sad
and pathetic thing as he collapsed forward onto the lawn, trembling and weeping uncontrollably
with his ass up in the air and his hands over his head in genuflection to his own misfortune.

Murderface just basked in the scene, the pool of vomit warm at his feet, and just inside the doorway behind him he could hear another conversation.

*On that note, babe. Uh, we need to talk.*

*Christ, Pickles! What about?*

*I, uh... don’t think we should see each other any more. Um, I’m sorry - -*

And then just a shriek. On cue, to Murderface’s delight, Ginger stalked out in her heels and smashed the empty liquor bottle on the step. Pickles didn’t even bother to follow her. This was his chance. While the breakup was fresh.

Murderface looked up at her and said, “Hey, uh... sugar tits.”

The look of lipstick-smeared, hysterical, tear-streaked madness he got back shut him up without even a word from her, but she couldn’t resist, squealing, “Get fucked, jerk-ass!” at him and went to parade haughtily over the lawn past the lawyer. But her spike heels started to sink into the turf as she went, giving a shriek of frustration as she wobbled over the grass.

God. This was actually so amazing. You couldn’t just buy drama like this; this was that limited-edition, artisan, lovingly-crafted shit. William felt thankful just to be here to witness it, resting his pukey chin on his hand.

Eventually, Ginger stripped off her heels, heard Offdensen give a weak giggling cry from the bottom of his tortured soul and ditched one of the shoes at him, hitting him in the back of the head with a clonk and a pathetic, nasal, *ow...!* before she marched off into the night, leaving him weeping on the grass.

Jesus fuck. What a great night.
YEAR ZERO

The first thing Offdensen was aware of upon opening his eyes was the pain. A shattering throb that split down from the back of his brain to the root of his spine, as though his nerves were made of glass and had broken in a jagged line, with the hard, clean edges splintering against each other with every thought or movement. Without knowledge, without a damn instinct in him, he clutched his head in his hand and scrunched his eyes shut tight against the light, pressing his face into the faded and coarse fabric beneath him which smelt of stale beer, vomit and sweat.

And perhaps he even swore. Perhaps he even let slip a very bad word in a ragged whisper that he was generally in the practice of keeping from his mouth, so common and uncouth it was, regardless of how casually his clientele flung the thing around. Perhaps the pain was just that damning, blistering over his nerves with the very knowledge of prolonged existence.

The second thing he was aware of was his mobile chirping at him, muffled in his jacket pocket, usually so benign now a shrill and foreboding sound like the finger cymbals of the thousand demons that dogged his sorry life. Fumbling for the awful thing down his rumpled suit, he became aware of two more things: one, that he was laid on his side on the band’s couch in the Mordhaus apartment, and two, that he had slept in his glasses, if it could be called sleep, and the side of his face had gone numb where the arm had dug into his temple.

Flipping open the mobile with his thumb and crushing the keypad haphazardly in the hopes it would turn off, Charles was assuaged by a terrible memory of the night before. In it, he was being carried, something that hadn’t happened to him since he was a child or at least benders in Ibiza in his third year of university (better off forgotten). That was all it was, the memory of being carried, as an adult, good lord. Utter humiliation swamped over him; he had become so intoxicated that someone had to carry him from the premises. He could not remember where that had been, nor who had carried him, but the very thought rotted down through him with shame.

Charles took stock briefly. Now it was morning. Monday - yes? The digits on his phone screen said it was 10:02 am. He had accidentally succeeded in answering it, much to his disgrace, and so pressed it to his upwards ear, his other cheek still pressed into the couch despondently. “Hello?” he said, and was horrified by the raspy hollow of his voice.

Oh, Mr Offdensen! Thank god I got through to you!

It was the intern, Matthew. Charles stared straight ahead into the dim black box of Dethklok’s tiny TV set. Monday, 10:00 am. Last night had been Sunday. The trial was at 10:30 am, Monday. In less than half an hour. Oh………. boy.

May I inquire as to your movements, um, Mr Offdensen? asked Matthew, struggling not to sound hysterical, as he clearly was.
“En route,” murmured Charles, “With the band. Yours, Matthew? Why didn’t you call when I didn’t attend this morning’s briefing…?”

Um, I’m at the hearing room. The, uh, the Swiss one is here, um, Squidjelf. So is Mr Vernon. Um, ah… well, I know you haven’t been well, Mr Offdensen. And it, ah, it wouldn’t be the first time, sir - -

“Okay. Okay, yes. I, ah - I appreciate that,” he said, cutting the intern off. Matthew was a good litigator and had an honest soul, but Charles had definitely had brighter interns. Slowly, suppressing a groan at the cry of outrage that came from his aching body and the stab of the late morning light into his eyes, Charles sat up. “Well, I - ah. I apologise, Matthew, for putting you to the trouble once again but if you could…”

Matthew carried a sigh in his voice as he said, Apply for leave, sir?

“If I don’t make it in time. You know Berman will give it to you.”

Although he resented discussing it with other lawyers, Charles had a particular friendship with Judge Berman. Unlike so many other judicial officers, Berman had not only been a colleague of his father’s in their counsel days, but also known his mother. To Berman, Charles was the optimal conclusion of both his parents - the cold, calculating Machiavellian that his father had been, with all the fire and spite and strange intelligence of his mother before her illness. Although he felt looked down upon before the Judge’s paternal presence, Charles was always aware (in that preternatural, unconscious way that he was aware, of power and honesty and such) of Berman’s amusement with him, his guidance and tolerance and willingness to hear the junior Offdensen out. Before Berman, he felt like a child - like he was being tested and analysed, but in that very act, a great deal of leeway was being granted to him, especially if he performed in a pleasing manner.

Similar to how he felt about Matthew, and he knew the Judge could tell that, watching them panic over the papers from on high. Not that Berman went easy on him at all; when Charles presented a poor argument, uncommon these days, the Judge gleefully tore them down around him and admonished him, pointing out every flaw with the ambition of improving the lawyer. He had a cruel sense of humour like that, springing pop Latin quizzes on counsel at the Bar and tearing into police witnesses, but knowing Charles personally he was particularly easy and particularly harsh all in one go. And so Charles had dreaded this trial. He knew he wasn’t prepared. He knew his witnesses were imbeciles. Not to mention the whole… sea sickness… office air… thing. Berman was going to execute him.

Wincing back the pain, Charles surveyed the situation. William was curled up at his feet, wrapped around a pillow, a blanket thrown haphazardly over his small body. Charles observed his own bare feet reflectively and picked off a bit of grass. Where were his shoes? That could be… you know, difficult.

Mr Offdensen, said Matthew on the phone, um, there’s quite a lot of people here…

“Uh huh. It’ll be fine. I trust you to handle it, Matt, and we’ll be there in no time,” Charles replied skeptically, and leaned down to poke the sleeping bassist in the rib with his knuckle to an ugly grunt.

Uh, Mr Offdensen - -

“I know you’ve got this under control,” said Offdensen quickly, “Okay, there soon, Matt,” and hung up on the intern. Murderface had succumbed again, so the lawyer gave him a rude jab in the belly with his foot. “Wake up, William.”
“Fuck!” The bassist’s small eyes sprang open, squirming pathetically at Charles’ feet. “Aw, damn it, man, right on my new tatt!” And he boxed Charles about the leg with the pillow from here he lay, Charles just regarding him placidly and wondering what on earth he had tattooed on his belly. Vague memories of a hot tub washed over him, of the young man’s pudgy bare chest and the still-swollen script. It had said… Nobody’s Perfect… but something was wrong… Nobodies’ Perfect. That had to be right. God. Just… god.

“Get dressed, you have to be at court in thirty,” he said, getting to his feet. William squirmed on the floor.

“I am dressed!”

“I mean properly. In a suit or something - - something even **passably** formal.” Was that smell coming from the bassist? Like… stale vomit. In fact, was that - - on his chin - -

“And for god’s sake, wash your face,” snapped the lawyer, “Where are the others?” The lounge was empty apart from William rolling on the floor, making an ambiguous grunting noise in answer and flailing with the pillow, and the two dozen empty beer cans he waded through now, picking his way over Pickles’ dissembled drum kit abandoned on the floor, guitar cases, power leads. A whipped cream canister stabbed into his sole as he trod on it accidentally, and the migraine stabbed through his mortal soul in response. Cigarette butts crushed under his bare feet to a cringe and a shudder. He reached what he knew to be Nathan’s door and pounded on it with his fist, ignoring Murderface sitting up with a small fart in the background.

“Mr Explosion! Court!” he yapped, and after a few seconds that he stole to straighten his suit, the door opened on Nathan’s massive body, half-dressed and peering down at Charles through squinted eyes. All at once, Charles realised who had scooped him giggling and useless off the lawn and carried him to the car, whose broad chest he’d been cradled against as he was being ferried up the stairs in the only arms strong enough to carry him. Him, a grown man, having to be **carried** by a boy half his age. God, **God**…

He had an intrusive flash of the man’s glare down at him, cold and deep and black in the dark. **Stop that.** And his hand falling weakly over his chest, drawn through glossy black tresses hypnotising in his intoxication. Now Charles looked up at him, his breath still, migraine thumping, and knew Nathan would not want him to mention it, even to apologise.

“Get dressed,” he croaked instead, quieter this time as Nathan stared through him. “We have to be at court in twenty.”

Nathan, appeased, gave a soft grunt of acknowledgement and turned away, and Charles looked around him into the Fortress of Solitude, as Pickles called it, his room. Very dark, most of it taken up by a large single bed. Next to nothing on the walls save a fake morning star - or he presumed it was fake - mounted over the bed. Nathan milled around, picking clothes off the floor to wear, and in the gloom Charles thought he could make out a figure on his bed, female and draped across the foot of the mattress. **Wait… no.** Not just a lady face-down, only in night shorts. Those dreads were hard to mistake.

“You too, Pickles,” he said, the drummer stirring in the dark to glare, bleary-eyed, at him over the end of the bed. Funny he should have finished his night in Nathan’s room when Pickles had his own in the house. Charles wasn’t one to ask, of course, but - -

Suddenly, Pickles was right in front of him, staring up his nose with a violent, bloodshot rage. “My room was occupied,” he squealed, and Charles raised his eyebrows.
“Ah. Do you have a tie I can borrow, Pickles?” he asked faintly, pulling the loose knot out of his own as Pickles’ rage dropped away into the void of the question.

“Uh, yeah, sure, I think so…”

The drummer was humbled by being taken seriously, stepping past Charles to his room and banging on the door. When no one answered, he cast a glance back at Charles over his bare shoulder, questioning.

“Most important part of a man’s wardrobe,” explained the lawyer, and Pickles turned away with a nod.

“If you say so, dude.” He hammered on the bedroom door again, and then, with a grunt of distaste and remarking, “I didn’t want to haveta do this,” to Charles, he kicked the door open. Charles braced himself for the yelling, his shoulders tensed in dread.

“GET UP, MOTHERFUCKERS. WE’RE MEANT TO BE IN COURT!”

“Pickles? Jesus, what kinda time do ya call this - -”

Magnus. Pickles snapped on the light and Charles barely had time to pop his head over the drummer’s shoulder, see bare flesh and step abruptly back when the real screaming started.

“It’s 10 AM, the world’s already awake, douchebags!”

“Don’t look! Don’t fucking look! Where’s my top! Where’s my fucking top!”

Pickles had started picking up his discarded dirty clothes from the floor and ditching them at the three on his bed, Magnus futilely struggling with the filthy red sheets to cover up the two girls on either side of him as Charles quickly raised his hand to cover his eyes. He’d love to think he was too old for a blush, but his ears burned with embarrassment as he stepped back from the chaos.

“Sorry, sorry!”

“Jesus, 10 AM!”

“You perv! Get out!”

“Magnus, you’re lying on it!”

“And you, why the fuck are you here? I ditched you!”

And the girl called Ginger squealed.

“Here’s ya tie, Charlie.” Through the screaming and girls running back and forth in the room now, gathering up their clothes, Pickles tossed a rolled up tie from his chest of drawers at Charles, the silk unscrolling as it hit him in the face. He caught it in his outstretched hands uncertainly, even as Pickles popped up in front of him with a broad grin.

“Good as new, only wore it once, for the lawsuit from that bitch I clocked over the head with a bottle!” he said enthusiastically, and Charles regarded it. It was red silk with an incredibly loud dark red paisley pattern that shone in the light. He much preferred plain himself.

“You hit someone with a bottle,” he repeated, daunted, and the drummer shrugged.

“She was my neighbour in LA, and you know, with all the divorce stuff - anyway, just a crazy fan
or whatever and she came over screamin that we were breaking the peace or something… so I was like, ‘Get lost! Go to sleep!’ and she just came at me, dude. So I clonked her with the wine bottle. Just a tap. Anyway, we settled out of court so, it’s ancient history, man. Prehistoric.”

“Right. And some shoes, if you could. I think we're about the same size…”

The girls were mostly dressed now, Magnus squeezing into his tight jeans under the sheets with difficulty, and Charles stiffened uncomfortably as Pickles ceased his shoe quest to pull Ginger aside.

“What the hell is wrong with you, girl? Messing with Magnus? You know he’s bad news, you know that,” Pickles was warning her, his hand on her slim shoulder, and Charles just heard Magnus pipe up, *Hey, I can hear you, you know.*

“Magnus gave me a lift,” said the girl with a stubborn pout, and Pickles released her, shaking his head.

“Naw, you just doin it to make me mad. Jeez, and you’re doin a pretty good job, fuckin my pal, in my goddamn bed. If I weren’t so hungover I’d clock you one.” But Charles could tell by his tired tone that Pickles had no such intention. He wasn’t mad at her at all - just wanted her satisfied and out of there.

He turned away from her to fetch various items of clothes from the floor, piecing them into a decent outfit while Cotton and Magnus raided the rest of his closet without protest, and Ginger turned her nose up at them with a huff. When she passed by Charles in the doorway, she took care to walk very close to him, and he did not like being power played by a seventeen year old girl.

“You should be at school, young lady,” he said quietly as she passed him, and she shot up a vicious glare at him with a whip of her hair.

“Who do you think you are? My dad?” she sneered, and Charles’ expression turned cold towards her. Standing up on her toes, she looked him straight in the eye. “You’re fucking broken, old man. Can’t get it up for a good thing when it’s handed to you.”

And she turned on her toe and stepped away, Pickles giving an appreciative whistle from inside the room as Charles just pushed his glasses back up onto his face. He gave her enough time to swear at the kettle in the kitchenette, then turned to look at Pickles as he looped the new tie around his neck, the drummer mostly dressed now with some ridiculous trench coat and hat and pushing ridiculous over-brogued wingtips in his direction. “Ah, she’s not coming with us.”

“Fine with me.” Pickles passed over the shoes and retrieved his sunglasses from the cupboard with a cocky grin. “She ain’t my responsibility, I dumped her.”

“Can Cotton come? Cotton wants to know if she can come,” piped up Magnus, squeezed into one of Pickles’ rare collared shirts (a revolting lilac satin) with his girlfriend forcing the buttons closed over his scrawny chest. Charles just shrugged.

“I, ah - yeah, that’s fine. Good, even.”

“Good?” Magnus cocked an eyebrow back at him, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Yeah, ah. Just throw a jacket on her or something, okay? Berman is a - he’s a good man but he likes to keep things formal, all right?” said the lawyer, and Magnus shrugged, diving into Pickles’ closet for an acceptably feminine jacket for his scantily clad partner.
“Berman?” Pickles had appeared by him with a hairbrush, which Charles gratefully took until he noticed the matted red hair tangled around its tines with a certain disgust. He wisely neglected to comment.

“Oh, District Judge Berman. He’s presiding over the case, so - - ah, try to remember it’s ‘your Honour’, et cetera. Ms Haeven, Mr Feranno, and so forth.”

“Who?”

Charles became aware of all the band looking at him, the stilling eyes of Nathan, now dressed, in the lounge behind him joined by William, and the three in the room as well. “Ah… Mr Frank Feranno, your manager,” he said, glancing around at them.

“Oh, Frankie!”

“Good old Freaky Frank. What a guy.”

He hummed at them and left them to gossip as he straightened his hair in the mirror perched on top of Pickles’ drawers, smashed in its frame. Amongst the chatter he caught a chuckle or two from the drummer and Magnus, seemingly aimed at him, but discounted it as his imagination. Did they think him vain? Appearance was important in this career. This dwindling, fading career, blinking out of his reach - -

He should not stare at his broken reflection, perhaps.

“We’re leaving now, okay,” he declared, standing straight, and the band stopped chatting to listen to him, the silence abrupt and strange. They were listening to him. Actually doing what they were told…

And to his horror, Pickles held up his keys, fished out from a deep pocket with a sneaky grin.

“She’s all yours, boss.”

Frightening times.

* * * * *

YEAR THREE

A walk in the forest made a pleasant change from the blur of European offices for Offdensen, even if it was escorted by a troupe of armed Klokateers. He tried not to think about it too much. So long as he overcompensated for the actual threats around them, his mind could rest.

And overcompensating it was, machine guns for a walk on their own property, but they’d had an increase in threatening mail and, well, the boys liked the big guns. Charles was particularly nervous at leaving Mordhaus with all of them in tow, feeling something of a sitting duck - easily annihilated in one strike through the night - but his concern was more rightly paranoia and all of the boys had wanted to be there to say goodbye to the wolves.

They were old enough now to fend for themselves, and Charles had lost enough pairs of balmorals to them to realise when it was time. They’d still return to be fed for a while yet, and he had Klokateers supervising them until that point, but for now it was important to get them out of the
Before Toki named all six of them, anyway. Now, on this beautiful, clear full moon, seemed the opportune time to make the transition.

The wolves, lanky, teenage looking beasts with their blue eyes yellowing to gold, snarled and turned in tight circles inside large cages carried by Klokateers as the band followed their manager to the release site. It was close to Mordhaus, towards the back but secreted in the thick forest. He felt some regret there were no other wolves to teach them to hunt, but short of nailing a tail to a Klokateer, what could he do?

Charles met the gaze of a Klokateer, flinching as if the masked man could read his thoughts, but he shook it off quickly. “Right, this is the place. You can set them down here.”

The Klokateers lowered the cages carefully, Toki leaping around the squat boxes and peering in the cage doors one after the other, wiggling his fingers between the bars and only just yanking them out before the creatures inside shredded his skin from the bone with gnashing teeth. “Farvel Hati! Farvel Vígi! Farvel Danzig, Harald, Powerulv!”

The rest of the band stood aside. They had not been nearly as taken by the creatures, regarding them as a shadow of their potential majesty rather than the pets they always desired. Disappointing, to have the beast of your soul try to lick your face, or whining helpless in your manager’s lap. Beneath Toki’s yapping and the wolves’ snarls, Charles could hear Skwisgaar scolding him: Toki, please coulds you beings more carefuls… you ams needings yous fingers for the tour… but Toki wasn’t about to listen.

“Goodsbyes to all of yous goods boy, you ams gonna be best ands most horrors wolfs pack in the whole forest! Oh, I’m gonna miss you but! You ams gonna be the Dethklok of wolfs packs, you gonna be, Holy Roman Empire of wolfs!”

Nathan grunted in the dark, his green eyes lit up by the moon as he put out a foot to boot one of the cages. The wolf inside frothed and bayed in reply. “Yeah. Whatever. I guess I am gonna miss having the furballs round the place,” he conceded eventually, and the other men mumbled their agreement.

“They’ll still be around,” said Charles, a paltry attempt at putting them at ease, but the band just shuffled and tried to ignore Toki’s rising emotions as the teenager threw his arms around one of the cages, blubbering as the wolf inside tried in turns to bite and lick him through the bars.

“Don’t lie to us,” came Murderface’s wheeze through the dark, and Charles noted the slight snifflle to it. “This is where they belong… they’re wild animals, damn it! Hunting and fucking…”

A sigh from the Swede. “They grows up so fast.”

“Yeah.” Nathan looked at his feet, the emotion getting to him too. “Yeah, Toki, get off of there, we gotta let them out now.”

The only person Toki truly listened to was Nathan, and once he’d been ordered to he slowly drew away from the cages, stroking his hand across the industrial plastic carriers as he walked past them. “I never forgets you,” he whispered, and Charles directed the group behind the cages, the Klokateers standing between them with the guns pointed at the cage entrances, just in case.

Toki watched with big eyes as handler hoods started unfastening latches and chains. “What happens if they turns around?” he asked quietly, and no one looked at him, the manager just giving a quiet cough to dismiss the unpleasant thought.
After too long, he said, softly, “They won’t turn around.” And hoped fiercely it would be true.

The handlers got the cages open, and the group held its breath as the wolf Toki had named Hati - a black-pelted one - took its first tentative steps onto forest floor. Soon it was all the way out, standing in the clearing with its black fur shining under the full moon, and its littermates followed suit, treading carefully in its wake with short snaps and snarls establishing their uneasy dominance.

Charles heard Toki draw a particularly awed breath as the leader turned its lanky head to look at them, searing straight into the teen’s eyes, and then the whole group vanished into the forest like a shot, pouring off between the trees and gone. In the space they left behind, the group breathed out, realising they had born witness to an incredible thing.

Under his breath, Charles remarked to one of the handlers, standing awkwardly back now, “And you have everything you need to keep them fed?” The man nodded mutely. “All right. Good work tonight, gentlemen. Let’s leave them to it.”

He could hear the muted sniffs of Murderface and Toki as they turned to retrace their steps back to Mordhaus, but could only think of getting the dog smell out of his suits himself. That and the splitting pain of his communicator going off right in his ear. Had to get those fixed down a tone…

Hanging back behind the group as they followed the narrow track back, Offdensen answered the communicator with a hand to his ear, keeping his voice low. “Mm hmm?”

*Sire, we’ve had a breach at the border.*

He barely had time to look up at their guards, receiving the same transmission and tightening their grip on their weapons. “Get the band back inside, now. We’re going into lockdown.”

*Sire? If you can get here quickly... I think you better have a look at this.*

Jesus. Why did his worst fears always have to come true?

**Chapter End Notes**

as much as I'm frightened for my own indulgence in the long form, we're a bit past half-way now.
At the border there was a dead klokateer, hoisted up onto a broken fence, and Offdensen stood back with the brisk wind whipping through the cleared pines and around the hem of his overcoat, loosing strands of his hair, to regard the poor boy’s corpse. A young man, fit, strung up by the back of his jersey to the fence where it had been cut away as if he’d stumbled upon the trespass and been unable to prevent it. A gun he’d been given for that purpose had been fired twice, but was found abandoned on the pine needles nearby, wrested from his hands.

Tragic, to see a young life wasted like that. Offdensen wordlessly put his gloved hands into his pockets and watched as the gathered klokateers cut the boy down. The corpse fell onto the cold ground with a sickening thud, and the other hooded men moved forward with their manager to examine the scene.

“Sire, the neck.” Offdensen gave the klokateer squatting beside the corpse a short nod of permission and he pulled up the dead man’s hood, stopped by the manager’s “Ah - - ” of hesitation just short of the young man’s eyes. The face below was blue-lipped, asphyxiated; his neck blooming with dark bruises in the shape of a huge hand and flushed with pools of blood beneath the skin in gruesome reds and purples.

“Broken, sire,” said the examining klokateer, and Charles frowned at him. Who the hell did that with their bare hands? Who could do that? Strangle someone so hard their neck fractured. And yet it was clearly so done.

“Do we know who he, ah… was?” he asked quietly, and the lead klokateer gave a shrug.

“We deleted all the records, sire.”

"Ah." Offdensen stared through the chainlink fence into the pine woods beyond the border, focusing on nothing. “That was silly of us, wasn’t it,” he murmured, humbled. The klokateer wisely neglected to remark in return.

Charles stepped over the body to the fence, running his gloved index finger over the cut wire, the leather untouched by the sharp edge. He thought himself distinctly uncomfortable by the number of corpses that were starting to stack up under his watch, but at the same time could not seem to feel any real grief for the young man. Oh, sure, it was sad. The kid probably had a family, somewhere. Given enough time, they’d probably be able to find the boy’s records and remunerate the bereaved in some form or another. But that was all his mind turned to - the practicality of the
death, rather than its emotional implications, and he felt cold and barren to be so lacking.

Perhaps he should see a therapist. God. Didn’t bear thinking, really.

He cleared his throat to get the lead klokateer’s attention, as he’d forgotten the man’s formal number and hadn’t kept up with their names in quite a few months now. But duly, the hood looked up at him. “Ah, I realise that none of us are really trained in this field, you know, forensics,” said Charles, fingering the cut wire thoughtfully where he stood at the border fence, “But, ah, if this was cut from the outside, coming in, shouldn’t it be angled the other way?”

The klokateer stood up from the corpse and joined him at the fence, inspecting the cut wires. After a cold, unpleasant pause, he said, “You have a point there, sire.”

Charles hummed with dissatisfaction.

“You’re suggesting it was an inside job,” said the klokateer, folding his arms by Charles’ shoulder as the others milled around, poorly bagging the evidence - not that they had police in Mordland. At least they all wore gloves.

“I’m, ah, suggesting that I hired an idiot,” remarked Charles wryly, but his hand leapt up to his communicator before he could explain, the pain in his head preceding the actual tone. Had to get that fixed. “Hang on.”

On the communicator was the secretary, Amanda. She asked if he had a moment, and, standing still like a dog scenting blood, Charles noticed there was something off about her voice - like a quaver, a nervousness. He could hear a raven crowing in this distance, disturbed somewhere in the dark woods.

“Sure,” he said, aware that everyone was looking at him. The klokateers at the body had uncovered a series of lesions on its arm, turning its hand over with its blue fingernails, the gory lines partly scarred. Charles was distracted, followed the lesions with his eyes as Amanda swallowed heavily and told him she just wanted him to know that she really admired his, um, commitment to the, um, um, job, you know. Charles frowned.

“Ah, thank you, Amanda, but - - this is, ah, kind of an emergency situation. Lockdown and all,” he said, suspicious, and Amanda said she knew. He met the eyes - well, the eye-holes - of the lead klokateer. The secretary sounded like she’d been crying. Wordlessly, Charles indicated back towards Mordhaus, but the klokateer did not understand.

“All right, well…” he said, and Amanda said, well, okay, she’d just wanted to tell him. Um, um. Okay. Well, she guessed that was it then. It was a nice working with him. He was, um, a really nice guy and all. Um, um. Well, goodbye.

“Okay. Ah, goodbye, Amanda,” said Charles, non-plussed, and then swore and doubled over as the gunshot bolted through his communicator, punching against his eardrum.

The klokateers surrounded him in panic as he tore off the earpiece, standing again. “Sire! What happened?” The lead one put out his hand to Charles’ arm, but the manager quickly stepped away.

“I, ah. Think my secretary’s dead,” he said, and turned to look up towards Mordhaus, towering over the forest through the fog and eclipsing the full moon above. “Golly.”

* * * * *
They arrived at the courtroom at 10:45, through some miracle, although Charles was sure he’d lost at least one of his rear brake lights at the intersection on North Florida and Scott in getting there. The band were, to a member, rowdy and in disarray for the entire drive, made boisterous by a sudden downpour at 10:30, and the lawyer could feel his head quietly imploding as they boxed around his car radio and gossiped and reached over him and demanded drive-through coffee (which, duly, they got, because there was nothing the combined agony of his ritual migraines, building nausea and the ecstasy and coke comedown could do in defense of his wallet this morning).

But as soon as they were parked and through the rain and in the District Court building, a change came over them - another miracle. Perhaps he’d just never caught them outside of their comfort zone, but each and every one of them fell instantly silent and into step behind him as he lead them through the tall, flush corridors. Were they defecting to his authority? Or just nervous? He felt like a mother goose with five ugly ducklings towed in a line behind him. No chance of them getting any less ugly as time went on, more’s the pity.

They almost concertinaed into his back when he stopped at the courtroom’s door, and Pickles poked his head around Offdensen’s side all stupid ugly leather fedora specked with rain and scratched Ray Bans, about to open his mouth for a smart remark. But “Quiet, just - stay here,” warned the lawyer, and Pickles swallowed his quip, and Charles went in alone.

The hearing had already started without him, and as he made his lonely way to the plaintiffs’ attorney table, the cushy carpet vile beneath the stiff soles of Pickles’ brogues and the closing door behind him staggering unsubtle although his touch was light. There was a lot of people in the room, far more than the requested jury, and he felt the sides of the courtroom sucking away past their faces as he focused on the table at the front of the room. Just focus. It would go away of its own accord.

Matthew was standing at the table, speaking into the microphone a little too close as he had a tendency to do with his words tinny and too loud. The Swede stood beside him in an immaculate white semi-formal suit, looking stunningly handsome, like a beacon light. When the door shut, Skwisgaar looked up at Charles, and the intern shortly followed mid-sentence to the Judge, gulping back with his glance from his instructor to the Judge full of terror: “- - assures me they are en route and - - uhhhh-if-I-c-cou-request-ah-a-adjournmentotakeinstructionplease-yhonour - - "

Judge Berman looked up placidly at Charles from his seat as the lawyer took his place beside the stammering intern. “Morning, Mr Offdensen. Yes, of course, Mr Wyatt. We’re adjourned pro tem while the plaintiffs sort themselves out. Five minutes.”

And the courtroom bustled with impatient voices. Beside him, Matthew looked like he was having a stroke, and the Swede leaned around him to speak to Charles - none too secure himself. “Ja, morgon. Where ams the other guys...?”

“Coming. Matthew, a word outside?” The intern moved behind him as though pulled on a string like a wooden toy as he led him back out of the courtroom, ignoring Vernon’s liquid sideways look at him but stealing a two-second glance at the defendants. With a violently black-lined glare shot under bleached fringe across the courtroom, Charles realised why the word ‘dyke’ kept getting thrown around between his clients. God, she - this Emma, sitting beside Vernon with her tattooed
arms crossed in front of her - was a beautiful woman. Doubtless a troubled one. And the manager, Frank - just a burly, mulleted, goateed hunk of meat standing over her.

They got outside the courtroom, the black-clad crowds milling past them into the hall, and Matthew grabbed Charles’ sleeve with a hand quivering in terror. “Thank god you’re here! Berman is being so weird, he was asking - - ”

“I told you to waive the jury,” interrupted Charles stiffly, and the intern turned his big dumb blue eyes up at him in helpless fear.

“I - I know, Mr Vernon requested them!” This is what you got when you didn’t present at your own pre-trial hearings, thought Charles bitterly. He was vaguely aware of the band’s eyes on him, with the most curious also the most likely to have been in front of a jury before - Pickles watching him over his shades, Magnus standing silently against the wall with his arm around his girlfriend, and Murderface’s piggy eyes on them, his ears perked and transparently listening closely to their every word.

Charles moved in front of Matthew, standing between the intern and Magnus so that he could see the guitarist over his instructor’s shoulder, now gazing vacantly at the courthouse’s edgings as if they were really something. “Take one look at that man and tell me you’d find him innocent,” he murmured to the intern, and Matthew looked obviously at Magnus, attracting the guy’s attention to a crooked eyebrow.

“Oh, forgive me, Matthew. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so… ah… sharp. I, ah…”

Matthew smiled dopily at him. “It’s, uh, okay, sir,” he said, but Charles couldn’t help but see it as a smirk. Did the boy know about his, ah, fraternizing? Good lord. He removed his glasses a moment and rubbed his temple as the crowds seemed to stream around them.

“I consumed rather a large amount of MDMA last night, ah… not on purpose. As did, ah, all of our clients - to, ah, greater and lesser degrees of intent, and we’re all due for a comedown that I suspect is going to make this hearing just, catastrophic… so I’m going to need you to have your wits about you, okay?” he said, and the intern’s dopey smile slowly curled downwards.

“Uh, how does one accidentally, uh, uh, imbue methyl - -” Charles watched the young man struggle. He was trying so hard. “ - - uh, dioximethamphetamine - -”

“Imbibe, Matthew. Nice try. I, ah - look, Matt. I’ve tried to be candid with you for all of your clerkship. You know that. But some things, you just don’t want the answers to, okay?” Matthew stared at him in horror, mouth hanging slightly open. Charles decided to push on unhindered. “If Berman has already granted you leave - -” Matthew nodded faintly, which meant he had been, “- - then you can cover a witness or two, okay? Maybe Mr Skwigelf since you two are pals now.” Also, Skwigelf was an idiot and Charles was confident he had nothing important to say. Finally, Charles smiled at the intern, put his glasses back on and then patted the young man pointlessly, unfeelingly, on the shoulder twice. “All right. Then let’s go.”

He looked up at his clients, the band standing around him in their watchful, dutiful quiet. “Let’s get ‘em, boys,” he announced with an excruciating grin, and gestured with a dull punch to the air that made the pain shriek through his head without mercy or humanity. It was going to be a damn
long morning.

* * * * *

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
MIDDLE DISTRICT OF FLORIDA

BEFORE THE HONOURABLE LEONARD K. BERMAN, CHIEF JUDGE

MONDAY, [REDACTED], 1998

TAMPA, FLORIDA

REPORTER’S TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

APPEARANCES:

FOR “DETHKLOK”:

S & O LEGAL

201 E KENNEDY BLVD #2323

TAMPA, FLORIDA 33602

BY: CHARLES F. OFFDENSEN, ESQUIRE

MATTHEW W. WYATT, BY LEAVE

FOR THE DEFENDANTS:

VERNON & VERNON ESQUIRES

100 ASHLEY DRV S SUITE 560

TAMPA, FLORIDA 33602

BY: HERBERT H. VERNON, ESQUIRE
Judge Berman looked particularly squat and surly this morning, sitting up there in his box. Fair, Charles had always respected him. But he’d never liked how much the old man looked like his father.

“All righty then. Mr Offdensen for the plaintiffs. Nice of you to join us,” the Judge remarked snidely, shuffling papers before him, “I presume you have a good excuse as to your lateness this time? Car trouble again?”

“Ah, partly, your Honor. Ah… sure. But moreso, the, ah - assembling the plaintiffs has been an endeavor of over twelve hours prior to my arrival. I, ah, underestimated the difficulty that may be had working with musicians.” The sides of the courtroom were sucking away from Charles again as he spoke into the microphone jutting from their table, but he did his best to ignore it. That and the band assembled to his right, and the sound of Pickles loudly chewing his gum. “Challenging clients, you know, ah, your Honor.”

“You’ve had worse,” said the Judge, blase, and then craned down from the box to look at Charles over his small glasses. “With respect, of course. And so which is which and who are witnesses?”

The band stared up at him dumbly, slung over their chairs.

“Stand up, come on. Introduce yourselves.” Berman gestured them up, and they looked from one another as Offdensen was already reeling off the list in his head, the Swede rising to his feet.

“Eurhh… Skwisgaar Skwigelf, lead guitor,” he said, awkwardly, and the Judge looked him up and down.

“All right. What else do you do, Mr Skwigelf?”


“For Death Clock, was it?”

“Ja, Dethklok… and, euh, Pestilential Mass, Obscene Serpent, Sausage Assassin, Necrodelirium, uhhh…” He looked sideways at Charles, seeking approval. “Ams I allowed to says… you know, bad word…”

Charles shrugged, and the guitarist went straight ahead, counting on his fingers. “Eur, Fuck Face Academy. Sodomizogram. Sexträsk. Financially Raped. I think that’m s it, rights now.”

“Ah, I think Mr Offdensen here is familiar with that last one,” observed Berman, and Charles glared at him. “So you’re a career guitarist, is what you’re saying, Mr Skwigelf?”

“Ja , well… that’s like, gig a night, you know… two on Saturdays. Dethklok, I get like, a hundreds plus per gig and similar for a couple of the other. So it works out.”

“Your lawyer told me you don’t speak English,” said the Judge, and Charles did not meet his gaze. “But you sound perfectly capable to me, Mr Skwigelf. Will you be giving evidence today?”
“Ja, euh… yous Honor. And maybe I does not ams wanting to, like… speakings English, just to Mr Orfdensson.”

“Ah, well. I can understand that. Please be seated, Mr Skwigelf.” Skwisgaar heaved a sigh of relief and sat, replaced by Magnus awkwardly rising to his feet and teetering like a tower of cards.

“Magnus Hammersmith, your Honor,” drawled Magnus, and Charles tried not to betray the hepatitis C repeating in his head. The guitarist’s back clicked as he stretched backwards laxly, and Berman peered at him over his notes. At the other side of the courtroom, Haeven gave a huff and diverted her eyes in disgust.

“Uh huh. You’ll obviously be giving evidence. Occupation?”

Magnus shifted from pointy boot to pointy boot, Pickles’ lilac shirt rippling in the harsh court lights where it was stretched across his clothes rack body. “Cattle deboner,” he admitted, and Berman nodded.

“Good. Be seated. And…?”

Murderface practically leapt to his feet. Practically raised on Court TV, he was pants-pissingly excited to appear himself, even if it wasn't a mass-murder trial. “William Murderface, bass guitar. I’ll be giving evidence!” he yelped, and the Judge paused in his notes.

“Pardon?”

“William Murderface, bass guitar!”

The Judge stared at William a moment, and then turned to glance around the courtroom. “Can anyone make out what he’s saying?” he asked to murmured confessions that no one, in fact, could.

“Oh, seriously?” said Murderface in disbelief, and Charles cleared his throat.

“Ah, I have some idea, your Honor.”

“Yes, well, you’ve always been fluent in moron, Chuck. For the rest of us, you might just have to translate,” replied Berman cruelly, and Murderface looked shot in at the desk. Slowly, he sat back down, his pride bearing a gaping wound from the Judge’s words.

Charles leaned down to him and murmured, “It’s just how he is, William. Don’t take it personally.” But the young man was too shocked to respond. Straightening to the mic, Charles explained: “His name is William Murderface.”

“Murderface,” repeated the Judge, disbelieving, looking at Charles over the bridge of his glasses.

“Murderface. He plays the bass. He’ll be giving evidence. He has some sort of additional income but it’s not exactly clear to me what it is yet, your Honor.”

“Okay, fine. I’m sure he’ll… tell us in the box, or… whatever. Next?”

The Judge gestured, and Pickles popped up like a snake in a can. “Pickles, the drummer,” he said, and the Judge opened his mouth to say something before the tiny man jumped in further, “Nuh-uh, your Honor, I’m goin by a pseudonym. If you’d like to look at document 6 attached to my outline of evidence, you’ll see a statement establishin irreparable harm prepared by my former attorney, a Mr Lancelot Howard, as in the LA Superior Court, uhhh, with, uh, supporting medical certificates in the addendum. Uh, it’s sealed for privacy reasons, maybe you missed it.”
The Judge shuffled through his documents, bringing one to the top. Beside Charles, Nathan was making a strange rumbling sound. *Uhh, Pickles…?*

“Forget it, Nate, it’s cool.” And since Pickles said it was, it was.

“Here it is. No, I remember this. My apologies, Mr - uh, Mr Pickles. I go through a lot of cases every week, it’s easy to forget something like this - then it all comes rushing back, you know.” The Judge and Pickles chuckled together, the drummer pulling a bashful shrug, and then the color drained out of his face as the Judge said: “And you’ve been arrested over 20 times. Most of them convictions. Public intoxication, battery…”

Pickles gave a weird giggle. “Aw, yeah, that’s all in the past, dude - I mean, your Honor.”

“Uh huh.” Berman returned the sealed documents to the bottom of his pile.

“For real,” said Pickles, looking earnest over his glasses, and Berman leaned towards him in his box.

“And you’re living off your fortune,” he said, leaning his jowls on his hand thoughtfully, and Pickles shook his head.

“Nope, I’m a drummer. Ain’t none of that left, your Honor.”

“Is that so?” More weird giggling from the drummer. Charles privately wondered if he wasn’t currently intoxicated, and dearly wished to swap places with him. “I wonder what happened to it all, Mr Pickles?”

“I shot it up, probly,” said Pickles with a grin, and Charles wondered how flexible he’d have to be to get his foot further down his throat. “But like I said, that’s over, I been off it, off the dope for five years now. I’m a good, law abiding citizen, your Honour. Totally reformed. This nice gentleman in the beige digs will be making sure of that,” he said, and indicated to the bailiff standing behind them. “And I *will* be giving evidence.”

Berman accepted this with a grunt, shuffling the papers, and released Pickles with a grumbled, “Right. Hats off in Court, Mr Pickles,” and Pickles swept it off graciously as he too his seat. Charles mentally counted the potential counts against Pickles in the last week. Obscene performance, possession of controlled substances (marijuana, cocaine), sexual intercourse with a minor, providing controlled substances to a minor, providing alcohol to a minor, driving while intoxicated, drugging Charles and, lest he forget, god damn second degree murder - -

But Nathan was standing now. “Uhhhhhhhh, Nathan Explosion. I’m, uh. Un… unemployed,” he mumbled, his voice booming as he spoke too close to the microphone, and the lights above them flickered. “I mean, I’m the singer for Dethklok but… yeah. Uh. And I’ll be giving evidence, um, yeah. Sir.”

“And Nathan Explosion.” The Judge crossed something off the paper in front of him. Though the rest of the court looked around at the guttering lights, Berman neatly ignored it. “All right, and Mr Wyatt by leave. Mr Vernon for the defendants?”

Vernon stood, looking like a moth-eaten coat. “If it please the Court,” he wheezed, and the Judge was indeed pleased.

“With your usual team? Ms Vernon, a pleasure as always.” Alison nodded from her seat. God, she looked perfect in her suit, her straight black hair. Charles had a moment of wondering why he didn’t really miss Phoebe, looking perfect, instructing him in kind. “And Mr Keane, your clerkship
must be almost over. And the defendants are?"

Haeven was first to stand, with that saunter to her as she held her hands clenched behind her back. Charles noted that they were white-knuckled, held tight in rage. “Emma Haeven. Promoter for Ipes Recordings, and I sing for, uh, Lecher Bitch.”

The Judge hummed and herred a moment. “That’s another of these death metal things, isn’t it?” he asked, and Em smiled, embarrassed.

“What can I say. I’m a screamer, sir - - I mean, your Honor.”

The Judge gave an unamused snort. “Very funny, Ms Haeven. You can be seated. And with you, Mr Feranno?”

The burly manager - ex-manager - rose slowly. “Frank. I’m a promoter too, your Honor.”

“Good. Thank you. And you’ve brought with you an audience.” The Judge looked around the crowded benches as Frank sat, filled with most of the Tampa metal community and more facial piercings than a cosmetic surgery. “Mr Offdensen, do you have some explanation for this?”

And Charles knew, with that, that he was going to be picked on. He stood again, anxious but - not that he’d ever admit as much. “Ah, my clients - it’s become a high-profile case, within their, ah, ‘scene’,” - he pulled quotation marks in the air - “So to speak, your Honor.”

There was an offended murmur through the crowd. Yes yes, thought Charles, gosh darn suits. Get it out of your systems.

“Which would explain why you’re standing in front of me again, I suppose,” sighed the Judge, and the lights flickered above them again. He peered up at them this time, holding up his glasses to focus. “What is causing that, do you think?”

There was silence in the court, even the stenographer’s key tapping falling silent as they waited. A peel of thunder rolled in the distance. Since Vernon was still seated and hadn’t been addressed, Charles gathered he was expected to answer.

“Ah, could that be lightning, maybe, your Honor?” he tried, cluelessly. The lights flickered again as the Judge looked down at him, and the court reporter swore quietly over his pad. “Lightning, um… striking the building.”

“Lightning striking the building,” repeated Berman, deadpan.

“Oh, yes. Lighting… striking the building.” Charles frowned, the grey darkness smattering over his face as the fluorescents flashed overhead. “Your Honor, with respect, I am a lawyer, not a meteorologist.”

“Point taken. The mysteries of the universe, I suppose. We’ll get maintenance to look at it during the adjournment. For now…” Berman shuffled his papers again, only mildly perturbed by the flashing lights, “This is a civil trial for an amount less than, or equal to, $25,000. That gives you the right to a civil jury, a right which the defendants have requested be upheld. Therefore, unless there is anything else to add, we’ll move on to empanelment.”

And Charles finally sat down, his head throbbing as the lights flickered overhead, his body aching as he slid down into his seat and clutched his temple. Matthew leaned across from his left, murmuring to him under his voice, “You’re okay, sir?”
“Fine, fine. I’ll be fine. Just.... going to be a long day, Matthew.”

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN
Chapter Notes

tw, extreme gore in the start of this chapter, extreme COURT in the second half.

* * * * *

YEAR THREE

As Charles watched the klokateers try to open the locked administration office and reach their fallen colleague, he was silently daunted by several facts coming quickly to light like bodies under hotel mattresses.

The first, and perhaps the most absurd of them all, was that he had no idea how big Mordhaus actually was. He’d given a pretty free reign to the boys and the architects, considering the bloated accounts they were working with, and just pressed them to make sure that every necessary area was covered aside from the band’s request like administration, a small hospital clinic, bathrooms, cleaning facilities - - wait, the band. Did he just think “the boys”? The band. He meant the band. God. Just… God.

The point being he hadn’t been actually aware that Amanda had an office in the same building as he did, although he guessed she must have. It was a moot point now, of course, and he’d thought it inconsequential whether she was in Florida or Mordland at the time and been too busy to investigate it. It was being handled and that was all that mattered. Which brought him to another fact, which was what the hell were they going to do with the body? Now he had yet another corpse to bury, he, uh. Guessed they’d send it back to Florida. Or, well. They could bury it in Mordland. Europe was built on skeletons, so it couldn’t hurt to add some more --

This was an incredibly rash and irresponsible chain of thought. Of course they’d send her back to Florida and her family, and the doubt was just his mind defending him against the inevitable further investigations once they started sending murder victims back to the USA from their new country. It flipped his stomach, frankly. Charles had no intention of getting to know Ms Von Sydow any better than he already did.

As it turned out, Amanda’s office was in a wing not quite adjacent to his own office. Charles noted with silent chagrin that these wings were far from complete, unlike the furnishings of his own chambers. In a moment of inspired but ill-conceived interior design, the decorators had tried to take cues from his personal effects in furnishing these wings while sticking consistent to the, you know, axes and war hammers motif that was going on downstairs.

The labyrinthine corridors - dark and moted with stone dust, artificially edged towards that medieval feel - therefore bore fencing swords and shields, heraldic bearings. Charles had occupied himself in the early, idle nights picking them out. Yale, Oxford, Harvard. Did they even know which ones he attended? Could anyone even find out, now they had reached in and forcibly edited the historical record, omitting him from Harvard’s digital archives? Some of the coats of arms looked like families; were they of the bo--- band? Of his academic forerunners? Or had they
plumbed where he couldn’t bear for the shame - that is, was he face to face on a daily basis with the heraldry of his god damn fascist sycophant Dutch ancestors? Christ, it didn’t bear thinking about!

He should get them all stripped blank and save everyone the damn grief.

Anyway, the further into the wings of Mordhaus they ventured, the more stripped the bearings became, just holdings with no shields. In another wing they’d passed through there were guns crossed on the walls, as if that was something he endorsed. Hunting rifles. Surely more of a Pickles thing. He dearly hoped they weren’t loaded, would check that later.

In the corridor immediately outside of the secretary’s office there were no weapons at all, just large holes drilled into the stone walls waiting their fittings and sealed cardboard boxes containing them. Charles ran his gloved fingers over the cut stone edge as he regarded the Klokatiers, saw them spring back from the door as a group and then flinched when one of their number blew through the lock with a gun. He was still shaken from the gunshot right in his ear earlier. Why they needed so many guns on the premises was a real mystery to him suddenly, and the second mattress corpse by way of metaphor. Clearly it had been a mistake.

Inside Amanda’s office was the smell of fresh death, and Charles moved for his handkerchief as was becoming automatic for him as the years went by, to the extent that he’d started ordering thicker handkerchiefs (from a German boutique - the absurdity!) to deal with the frequent assaults on his fragile senses. It had a very particular smell, fresh death, almost chemical; heady with iron from the blood, the toxins rising from the body before they began to stew away and create those noxious odors even he couldn’t stomach, that he’d evolved to revile: rotting death, bloat death, maggot death.

Beyond that in the secretary’s office was also the specific smell of lacerated brain, one that Charles was becoming more familiar with than he really liked. Brain smelt like chlorine, but strangely organic in a way he couldn’t articulate; soft, rounded off, perhaps like a moss or lichen. It had to be some fluid in there, what was it? Cerebrospinal... He’d attended a series of gun suicide scenes in his second year working for the band, fans who had committed reportedly due to over-the-line harassment from Charles’ legal team in relation to illegal uploading of their second album, Black Fire Upon Us, or so the lawsuit went. And the smell had been there, Charles feeling like a dog having its nose pressed into the soiled carpet after he’d been dragged out of his hotel room to witness the third death fresh by the Pensacola Police Chief, and then like a surgeon on the fourth, and like a psychopath on the fifth. But he soon retrieved his empathy, or more rightly his grief, and they settled out of court.

Amanda was not a suicide. Seeing her body slumped forward in her chair, facing the door as he lead in with the Klokatiers in a gaggle at his back, Charles was sure of that. She’d fallen too nicely to be a suicide - as suicides were always disgusting. Amanda, by contrast, had been arranged. From what he could see in the bronzed light of her office, the window overlooking the forest outside - lower than his, and on the other side of the building - Amanda’s head had been blown right across her desk, the pink chunks of gore and brain and fragments of freshly dead skull splattered over her paperwork and laptop keyboard, flecks of blood lit up bright on the screen and distorting the pixels below. Her body had been turned away from her work in the revolving chair and was slouched forward, her long brown hair covering her face and surely the killing shot as he could see where the open wound soaked her hair black and stuck it over her scalp, the blood having dripped down the wet strands and into a pool at her feet. The communicator receiver hung abandoned on its spiral cord over her knee, spinning gently in the air by her calf, connected to the machine still on the desk.
Charles stood over her body morosely, trying to remember the last time he’d seen her. It had to be years ago. Grim, reflected badly upon him. She hadn’t changed much, but looking at her head hanging there, her honey brown tresses - *such* a beautiful girl, as if he didn’t have a weakness for them - plastered to her scalp by her blood, her tights flecked with the blackening liquid, Charles had a deep desire to see her face once more. She had brown eyes - big brown eyes - and although he had not touched any of the corpses he’d attended so far, this time when he felt the urge he acted upon it, a breach, a first, a virginity, and he didn’t even signal it to those around him as he took hold of her hanging head in his gloved hand and raised it.

Brown eyes. She had - she had - one eye, which was full of blood and shot. And the other, just a hole. And stewing, coagulating, hot blood. And brain. Fragments of skull. Charles abruptly dropped her head once more, saying not a word.

One of the klokateers chirped, “Mr Offdensen!” then, and he became aware of two things:

1. It was Matthew. Nice to have him around, though what the hell crime scene investigation had to do with the legal team - wait, never mind.
2. There was another corpse in the room, behind them, and this one *was* a suicide.

Charles turned to look at the dead klokateer, his body crumpled at the base of the wall with his brains blown up it. It was utterly ghastly. Of course, two rounds in a shotgun. He held his handkerchief back up to his face briefly in a mime of shock, and then breathed a soft sigh.

“I guess we ought to, ah, hire someone to clean this up,” the manager remarked, watching as his employees moved around the scene, taking pictures or turning over the klokateer’s corpse for identification’s sake. “And, ah - - ” he looked to the leader, distracted, “Look in the forest for another corpse, okay? I’ve got a hunch whoever’s behind this isn’t about to face up to the responsibility.”

“Sire.”

Charles frowned at the klokateer as he started his communicator to relay the order on to his peers. “And you. Ah… you’re a captain now,” he said quickly, and the captain looked up at him with shock.

“Uh! Thank you, sire!”

“It’s, ah, nothing. Just don’t let it go to your head.” Privately, he’d just wanted some way to tell them apart.

Offdensen looked out the window at the forest, the full moon climbing high outside. He wished he was mourning or something, but instead he thought of the money it would cost to institute a carcass removal team, and a forensics team. Probably should look into dividing out some more specialized bodyguards while he was at it. Designate an area for the bodies of the two dead klokateers, three maybe. Well, you know. Klokateers died. That was just a thing they did. Everyone died eventually.

“Mr Offdensen.”

Charles didn’t quite jump, but he did flinch just slightly at Matthew right by his arm. He almost said it, almost said, *Matthew*, but quickly thought better of it. “Mm hmm, that’s me,” he said instead, useless, then, “What’s your number, man?”

“Uh, 23,” said Matthew, and Charles looked him up and down. He hadn’t seen Matthew since the
helicopter and regretted it; the boy looked worse for wear, as much as you could tell with the hood. Now, inside him, a mechanism was ticking.

“Legal team sent you down?” he said sharply, and Matthew nodded meekly, taking his cue.

“Uhh, yes, my… my lord.”

“Right.” Charles looked back out the window, catching their reflection in the yellow light reflected inside the glass as he straightened his tie. “You’re my PA now, #23. You can have this office once they’ve fixed it up for you. Otherwise, I want you around at all times.”

Matthew looked at him for a beat, mystified by his intentions, then lowered his head in deference. “My lord.” Hmm, the boys were right. It gave you a certain sense of the dramatic. Band. God damn. The band.

“Did you have something to say, #23?” he asked, his voice a little more gentle now that business was taken care of, and he almost didn’t hear the thud of the dead klokateer being flipped over by the other hoods in the background.

“Just wondered if you were all right. I mean…”

Offdensen looked sharply back out the window. “Fine.”

But Matthew hadn’t finished. “I mean … it, uh… it just looks real… off, my - my lord.”

“Mm hmm, so it does.”

Matthew looked at the moon as well, but then, following Charles’ gaze, was looking too at his reflection. “Why would anyone want to murder your secretary?” the boy asked, his voice sounding small and empty, and Charles did not reply.

Why would anyone want to kill his secretary. Why would anyone - no, someone within the organization, go out of their way to distract, to orchestrate the murder of someone totally inconsequential to the structure except in how she related to his function? Gosh, Matthew, it was almost as if someone specifically wanted to grieve Charles himself! But surely that was ridiculous, wasn’t it, Matthew? Getting ahead of ourselves, don’t you think? But why else? Why else, Matthew?

There was no other reason. This was a conspiracy, and Charles was the target. Was he going to die? Like this, alone in his office, shotgun to the head? Casting a glance back at Amanda’s corpse, Charles let out a quiet huff of disgust. Not if he had anything to do with it. Offdensens didn’t die by mistake.

“Sire!”

Charles surfaced out of his thoughts abruptly at the captain’s voice, his expression dropping its steel to acknowledge him. The klokateer was holding his deceased colleague’s arm out, the bare skin lacerated with deliberate, scabbed cuts in a shape that looked identical to their dead peer at the gate’s wounds. Like. Like a sun. Or like…

Charles frowned.

“A gear.”
Nathan Explosion was vaguely aware that he was to be called first. He wasn’t sure why. Actually, everything was a bit beyond him, a stupefying dance of long words and files as random members of the public were called on, the lawyer on his feet and speaking with the Judge as they sorted through them. To his left, and between Nathan and the lawyer, Pickles tried to explain in his best attempt at a hushed voice what was going on.

“Y’see. If any of ‘em can’t stick around for the trial, which is, what is it, Charlie? Three days? Then they gotta tell the judge now. And if ol’ Charlie boy or our ‘learned friend’ on the other side of the room takes offense to them, that is, they get a bad feelin about ‘em or whatever, they can object and get ‘em sent away.”

Nathan watched curiously as the prospective jurors stood and addressed the Judge, peering up at Charles with every new voice to see if he’d object. But the lawyer just stood there, smiling vaguely pleasantly but somehow without feeling, as if there was nothing behind his eyes.

“It’s called voir dior,” whispered Pickles to him, having just remembered, and only then did Charles move, glancing down at the two of them with a weird frown hooked into his face.

“Voir dire,” he hissed at Pickles, “To see.”

And Pickles rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say, Chief.”

Obviously this wasn’t as objectionable as ‘Chuck’, because Charles just straightened and went back to his remote, concerned smile. Nathan concentrated on the jurors. They were all so normal, mind-splittingly normal, as if he were about to be judged by twelve copies of his mother and father right here at the bench. Largely retirees, one or two professionals. Nathan wondered if Charles would give him a chance to explain death metal, but then - his parents hadn’t really understood that when he’d tried, any of the many times.

In the end Charles only rejected one of them, a young man who admitted, when pressed by the lawyer, that he had an interest in the Tampa metal scene. The opposing lawyer, who Nathan was fairly sure was called Humbert Vernon, rejected two ‘on a hunch’, and a few were dismissed purely on their responsibilities. The rest were held.

Pickles cracked out another stick of gum while the judge instructed the jury. Nathan knew it was because he couldn’t smoke, but he was trying to understand what was said and god damn, Pickles. He couldn’t imagine how fucking frustrating it had to be for Charles, seated again with his head bowed, looking at the paperwork. On Charles’ other side, his clerk, whose name Nathan had missed, sat upright like a chicken, terrified of the Judge. All of them - Pickles, Charles and the clerk, and Magnus on Nathan’s other side - had been in court before so didn’t give a fuck, except for Skwisgaar who just generally didn’t give a fuck. But Nathan fixated. He wanted to absorb it all.

Finally, the Judge settled his portly form inside his robes and said: “Right. Mr Offdensen, do you care to make an opening statement?” which sent the clerk and lawyer scrambling as the clerk tapped Charles on the shoulder to bring him back to reality and to his feet. Charles had only just managed to rebutton his jacket and open his mouth, however, when Vernon, up as well, spoke instead.
“Your Honour, before we begin - just a spot of housekeeping?” he wheezed, and by Nathan’s side, Pickles murmured, “He’s not from Boston,” toying with a pen and raising his eyes with the lawyer’s weird accent.

The judge glared down at Vernon.

“You couldn’t do this before? All right, go on.”

“It’s with respect to the witnesses, your Honour. Due to the sensitive nature of the trial, we supplied the plaintiffs’ attorneys with witness statements outlining the evidence we’d be leading. Now, we haven’t received any back…” he said and left it hanging, and Charles had sat again and was staring just past the judge’s left shoulder very intently. The judge just rearranged his papers, a masquerade of busyness.

“Because Offdensen is having a midlife crisis,” Berman said, and Nathan watched as Charles, still staring blankly, died a little behind his eyes. “We’ve all heard the watercooler chat, Vernon. It’s irrelevant. I didn’t order statements, ergo, it doesn’t count for bull. There’ll be no witness statements.”

“But, your Honour -- ”

“Don’t like them anyway. Loses all the subtlety, Herb, on paper. All the tics. Testimony should be delivered in person or nothing.”

Vernon aimed his big, watery eyes up at the Judge, puppeting decency. “Your Honour, I merely rose to request, considering the potential length of the trial, that we could rely on our witness statements -- ”

“What part of what I just said did you not understand?” asked Berman brashly, peering over his half-moon spectacles at the lawyer and then turning to Charles, the man scrambling to his feet again. “Chuck, any witness statements from you?”

“Ahh, the plaintiffs are content to, ah, give our witness evidence in oral form,” he said, and Pickles gave an amused mewl by his side, spinning the pen in his fingers and rocking on the chair’s back legs.

“Ohhh Charlie. If you were into that you coulda just asked -- ”

And Nathan watched Charles freeze in horror and then turn on Pickles with a hateful, snapping hiss: “Please, shut up! Or you can just sit outside until after evidence.”

The band all stared at him as one, barely catching the Judge’s chuckle from on high, and the gum almost fell out of Pickles’ mouth. Who was this? Not the meek nerd they’d dragged off the lawn mere hours before. Jesus christ, he hated them. Nathan put his hands on his head, humiliated and hung over, and shrunk back as much as a man composed of mostly gristle and bicep could.

Pickles slowly composed himself, rocking back onto all four of his chair’s legs with a clunk. “Ooookay. When you put it like that…” But the lawyer just straightened his suit and stood up to the microphone again.

“Challenging clients, your Honour,” he said with a charming smile, and the judge chuckled at him.

“So I see. No witness statements, that’s a ruling. Your opening, Chuck.”

“Ah, thank you, your Honour.”
And the lights flickered overhead, washing out Charles’ already sleepless countenance.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to, ah, sunny Tampa Bay - unfortunately, it, ah, appears our weather’s taken a bit of a rain check,” started the lawyer, and Nathan looked dimly around the courtroom as the people, mostly the jurors, actually laughed. At that. That wasn’t funny. That was just… shit, so bleak. The lights flickering. Lightning. Do you think that was really it? Nathan looked up at them mutely, resting his chin in his broad mitts, his elbows propped on the table.

“Course, a number of you are locals and you’d be familiar with our, ah, fair city and usually stunning weather. But something you may not be familiar with is Tampa’s metal scene, specifically its death metal scene, and I suggest, if you want to get acquainted, you need only take a glance around the courtroom as we’re, ah, gathered here today, since most of its adherents have turned out for the show.”

Six dozen black-ringed eyes stared out of pierced faces around the courtroom at Offdensen. In any other arena, the death metallers of Tampa felt like the freakshow of the city, but suddenly, by virtue of their sheer numbers, the tables had turned. The lawyers, the normies, the height of prep and complacency, were the freaks on parade today.

“So you might be familiar with heavy metal, ah… Iron Maiden, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple. Well, death metal is its, ah, creepy little brother.” Charles gave an awkward smirk at the thought, trying his best to shepherd the jury past his clients’ immediate appearances. “We all know that kid. Picks the wings off flies. Names the family cat, ‘Killer’ - or, as, ah, the case may be, ah… ‘Corpsegrinder’. Well, most every one of those kids grows up to be a normal, well-adjusted person, even if their interest in the darker sides of our world doesn’t leave them. And sometimes… well, maybe it would do us all good to be more friendly with that side of ourselves. These people are just like you and I, but they look that which confronts us all in our darkest times - addiction, anger, even death - right between the eyes and, ah, say, ‘I do not fear you’.”

Offdensen held his pen before him as he spoke, almost conducting his words, miming them. Nathan watched the pen bob with fascination. Man, right now… this guy got him, you know. Looked straight through him. He’d always written off lawyers as useless but Offdensen… Offdensen got it. His instincts had not been wrong. But a lawyer who could see through Nathan, and who didn’t really like them - man. That was scary shit.

“I lay this out for you, ladies and gentlemen, to reassure you against some of the things you’ll hear over the next few days. Death metal is, in its way, comparable to opera; that is, it, ah, thrives on the dramatism of the very highest and very lowest points in a person’s life, and it’s not afraid to venture where many artists would shy away. Hence, you’ll hear some words and names in this trial intended to cause shock in their audiences - a kind of, ah, Alice Cooper thing, if you will. And like that performer, many of the figures in the scene have alter egos and pseudonyms, characters they’ve created to tell the stories within their music. Outside of that, by its, ah, very nature it attracts a wilder personality, and - as you’ve already seen with both of our clients - these people can be quite, ah, daunting to confront for the layperson.”

“Nonetheless.” Offdensen looked them in the eyes, his pen raised. All of them. The entire jury. Nathan gazed up at him in wonder. “They are just people, like you and I, and you must not lose sight of that. Ladies and gentlemen, I am Charles Foster Offdensen Esquire, and today I represent the plaintiffs, the death metal band Dethklok. I assure you I am not very ‘brutal’ at all. And yet here we are. I urge you, too, to drop your preconceived ideas about these people, be they stranger or celebrity. In the pursuit of justice, we present together before you.”
“United by cashhhhhh,” murmured Pickles, rocking on his seat again, and Nathan just frowned at him.

“Now,” continued Charles, “People have problems, and, ah, neither the plaintiffs nor the defendants are close to having a clean slate. The oblique nature of these troubled relationships will raise questions around motif and cogency, but again, I stress, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you must not lose sight of the case. For this case turns on a very simple premise; that is, that what was created by an artist, the product of their blood, sweat and tears, has been stolen from them, and through its illegal distribution via new media, their hard-earned reward stolen from them. Now, here are the facts, ladies and gentlemen, as have been agreed by the parties, and what we say is the truth of the matter, and why we bring this case before you today.”

Had they agreed? Nathan hadn’t agreed. Lawyers, man.

“Number one: the plaintiffs, Dethklok, recorded and produced the demo tape entitled Dethdemo at the Broadway Studios on East Seventh Avenue, here in Tampa. This is their first recording and was produced at their own expense - $800 out of their own pockets. For many of you, that won’t seem like much; but for artists working to support their band as well as themselves, their families, their partners, it all adds up. $800 is quite dear. One assumes they wanted to do it well.”

“Number two: the plaintiffs’ had hired a manager, Mr Frank Feranno, and worked with him on the recording. However, as the recording drew to a close, the band ended their engagement of Mr Feranno due to a conflict of interest concerning his relationship with a Ms Emma Haeven, a former, ah, romantic partner of band member Magnus Hammersmith.”

As he was introduced, the lawyer indicating to him with his pen, Magnus lowered his head, his curls falling over his face.

“Now the nature of this relationship is disputed but I will let my learned friend outline that for you. What isn’t in dispute is that Haeven and Hammersmith were involved, and that they ultimately parted ways. Of course, I reiterate, people have problems. Neither Hammersmith nor Ms Haeven are excluded from this, as the evidence will show. The bad blood between them affected the band in turn. But we are here to determine justice, and bad blood with one’s ex does not excuse, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, maiming the career of a fledgeling artistic group just as they piqued international attention to, ah, our humble Tampa ‘scene’.”

“Despite no longer keeping him as their manager, Feranno still attended the studio as the band were completing their recording. He had, as is the nature of these, ah, again, ‘scenes’, been their friend for the entirety of their artistic careers, and celebrated by their side, ill feelings discarded, as they locked up the studio for the night, the finished recording Dethdemo loaded on the analogue tapes within save for a limited number of high fidelity tape copies made to send to record companies and perhaps prove the breakthrough Dethklok had been waiting for. Feranno brought with him his new girlfriend, Ms Haeven, and together, they set out for the bar.”

“The band celebrated. They, ah, had a few drinks. Had a good time. The next morning, once they, ah, slept off their hangovers…” This got a few bewildering laughs again, the band glancing around the room in confusion. “... the band returned to the studio, only to find the lock bust, the equipment damaged, and the record gone. Deleted from the recording equipment. A few copies of the tape stolen as well. Someone had swooped in overnight and sabotaged their work. Months of songwriting, rehearsal, recording, gone in an instant.”

Offdensen paused for effect, checking his notes. Nathan was replaying these things in his head again, his hands held over his temples, and jumped when he felt someone tap him on the right shoulder. He immediately looked to Pickles, who sometimes liked to reach across and trick him by
tapping on the opposite side to the one he stood on like the bitch he was, but Pickles was just rocking on his chair and sucking his pen, his big eyes fixed on the lawyer. Nathan looked to the right, and Magnus craned around Skwisgaar, leaning back in his chair to whisper to Nathan.

“You all right, man?”

The question surprised Nathan. Not that Magnus didn’t care; he obviously did, but all morning the guitarist had been in his watchful, quiet mode he got into when he was nervous. Not a good sign, but not a bad sign - just a sign. Magnus felt it was important to keep an eye on what was happening, and so Nathan followed his lead. Now he was checking on his friend - clearly thought something was up. Nathan just grunted, gave a shrug.

“I think they let you out if you wanna, for like, a whizz or whatever. You just gotta ask,” said Magnus, a worried tilt in his dark eyes, and then he went back to draping over his chair and occasionally angling his head to look at Cotton, sat on his other side, or to eye off Murderface, another seat along and visibly checking out the woman between them. As Nathan looked back towards the proceedings, he caught Skwisgaar’s icy glare from beside him, directly into his eyes. But how much of all this did the Swede even understand? Nathan barely comprehended these words like ‘cogenty’ and ‘fiddlety’. How did Skwisgaar have a chance in hell?

“The band were understandably devastated. A blow like that to one’s morale at the exact conclusion of one’s work would set anyone back. Being, ah, musicians as they are - and essentially a private type of person as the genre attracts, they, ah, retreated for a period to recoup. Time passes.” At the mic, Offdensen laced his hands together, speaking gently to the jury before the pen made an impassioned return.

“Fast forward two weeks. Now, at the core of this matter is what I’ll call ‘new media’, that is, the World Wide Web, Internet connections, weblogs or ‘blogs’ as they are known, and this technical side of the case at hand can be difficult for the layperson but we will endeavor to make the basic principles clear to you. Shortly you will hear from the members of Dethklok of how they were made aware through friends, connections in the ‘scene’, that Dethklok’s stolen recording, assumed destroyed, had in fact been made available via the filesharing website, Limewire. This site allowed anyone to download the recording free of charge, and therefore free of royalty - the band was to see not a cent for their investment.”

“Further,” - and a charismatic sweep of his pen, held daintily in the tips of his fingers. Nathan gleaned a great deal of satisfaction watching Offdensen shame their enemies in front of a captive audience; he sat now with his chin in his hands, anticipating the next part of the speech with sick pleasure. “The download was linked via the personal blog of Ms Emma Haeven and shared on a Florida death metal forum via the user account of the defendant’s business entity, Ipes Recordings. Coupled with numerous defamatory remarks relating to Dethklok, which will be presented in due course, we ask merely that you see the obvious: that Ms Haeven and Mr Feranno, motivated by scorn, jealousy and a particular vicious streak, sought to damage the band in revenge for perceived, ah, crimes carried against them by the guitarist, Magnus Hammersmith.”

Charles cleared his throat, ignoring the way the shame and crazy nearly stank off of Magnus to his right. “Not only is there no hard evidence for these allegations, but they are also of, ah, no consequence to the matter at hand. A crime is a crime and theft is theft. Dethklok are an act on the cusp of international success, and once their recording reached the new media it found its own triumph. The file was downloaded over 600,000 times, ladies and gentlemen. In industry terms, for a demo tape - not even a completed album - that is a phenomenon, not just a success.”

Damn right it was. It might not have been their best work, but even at their worst they were still
better than most. Fuck, Nathan could almost blush.

“Now, if the band had sold 600,000 units at their prospective sale cost, which was $7, they would have netted 4.2 million dollars. This is highly unlikely, ladies and gentlemen, due to the nature of the scene; it is easier to idly download something for free than it is to purchase from a company. Nonetheless, the profits could be assumed to have been, ah, substantial - enough to independently record an album, perhaps, or get the attention of a major label. Here in Tampa Bay, our arts scene is flourishing - ripe for this kind of worldwide success. By undercutting the band thusly, the defendants have done a disservice not only to Dethklok, who see their artistic careers set back significantly, but to the whole community.”

Charles paused, checked his papers, and cleared his throat. “Therefore, we, ah, are suing for damages of $25,000 against the defendants. Okay. Yes. Ah, thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you, your Honour.”

And Charles abruptly took his seat again. Nathan felt like he’d just witnessed a premature ejaculation, right there at the Bar. What the hell, man. Charles was just staring at his shoe, turning the pen over in his fingers, as though he would glare a hole through it.

“All right. Thank you for that, Mr Offdensen,” came from on high, and the band looked up at the Judge again as he gestured to their opponents. “Mr Vernon, your opening?”

“Thank you, your Honour.” The wettish gentleman rose to his feet, clearing his throat with a damp cough. In Nathan’s imagination, Mr Vernon was some kind of evil lake monster, a mer-creature with sharp teeth and perpetually open, watery eyes, his lungs ill-adapted to life on land. With the benefit of over fifteen years of friendship, Charles would have still told him he wasn’t far off.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, let us first dispense of the formalities. My name is Herbert Vernon, I address you as attorney and barrister for the defendants, Ms Emma Haeven and Mr Frank Feranno of Ipes Recordings. You have heard the outline of the case from my learned friend, Mr Offdensen, just now and I must remark it is a pleasure to be so addressed.” Vernon smiled like a piranha, his damp voice lisping over his consonants like a parasitic hagfish. Charles did not look at him, but gave a curt nod of acknowledgement where he sat, studying the paperwork intensely.

“For Mr Offdensen, ladies and gentlemen, is a lawyer of some renown. He’s appeared before the Supreme Court in matters of international importance. Matters that form the law as we know it. Prior to that career he lead another life as a defense attorney and state prosecutor, in which he was also incredibly successful. What was your record, Chuck?”

He shot a glance at Charles, and the lawyer automatically mumbled, “Two hundred and twenty six,” before his clerk jabbed him with his elbow.

“Mr Offdensen!”

“Oh… ah, god.” Charles pinched the bridge of his nose, stressed.

But it was too late. “Pardon?” said Berman from above them, and the clerk stood, leaning over Charles to the microphone.

“He said, two hundred and twenty six, your Honour.”

And Vernon gave a flourishing gesture. “Two hundred and twenty six,” he said proudly, “Two hundred and twenty six successful cases in the district court. Takes after his old man, may God rest his soul.”
“What has this got to do with anything, Vernon,” asked the Judge drolly, leaning on his fist, and the lawyer floundered and grovelled a second at the stand.

“Ah, er, well, your Honour. I introduce as a bit of a, err, preamble, so to speak. I hope the ladies and gentlemen of the jury can recognize something I recognized taking this case on, that is - you see. In my most knowlegeable friend’s opening, right at the beginning he identified to you that the plaintiffs were flat broke, as artists so often are. And I ask you why, then, seek out the best and, it follows, most expensive lawyer in Florida for a silly little copyright case!”

Vernon’s cheesy laugh was sick. The band as one glared from across the room, only to see Emma and Frank similarly horrified, staring up at their attorney in deep discomfort. The lawyer drew a wheezy breath, and then proceeded.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, let me tell you a little story about a ‘band’ called Dethklok. They’ve already been introduced to you, so I’ll spare you that. But here we have a gaggle of the most petty, selfish men you could hope to gather in a room together. Barely even adequate musicians, they are banned from venue after venue as their atrocious lack of consideration for the safety of their fans injures and maims, leaving in their wake a trail of violence and broken equipment.”

“Even with songs like Jackhammer Rape, Skull - excuse me - Skull-F-er and I Ejaculate Fire - I source these, ladies and gentlemen, from the demo in question and also a 7” vinyl release with a band called Mammothfister, whatever that means - the band continue to lie and deceive their way through the Tampa Bay scene, cheating health and safety policies, abusing drugs and alcohol, and spreading disease, something of a human wrecking ball.”

Damn. Mr Vernon made that sound way better than Nathan’s mother did. Sounded pretty awesome, if you asked him.

“People have problems,” he said, copying his opponent, and seemed to turn the words over in his mouth languidly, giving a little snort once he’d tasted every consonant. “People have problems. Ha. Dethklok have problems. Drug problems. Alcohol problems. Anger problems. Problems which would lead to the guitarist, Magnus Hammersmith, stalking and assaulting my clients in the weeks surrounding the events at hand. And whilst we do not deny that the events happened in the sequence my learned friend described to you, we do reject the accusation that they were acted out by Mr Feranno and Ms Haeven. In fact, we’d suggest that they had nothing to do with them at all.”

Vernon looked up at the jury, his voice taking on a sweet cadence: “I am suggesting to you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that Mr Frank Feranno and Ms Emma Haeven have been framed.”

Nathan looked at Charles, but the lawyer hadn’t even flinched. He looked at Pickles, and Pickles was just staring in utter shock. Then he looked at Magnus, and the guitarist was staring at the ceiling, his arm around his girlfriend, trying his best to ignore the defendants’ submissions.

This was the first Nathan was hearing of this, though. What the fuck. He hadn’t framed anyone!

“Now, why would a band attempt to frame innocent members of their community for such a strange crime? To determine this, you will need to focus on those… problems. People problems. You will hear that on the night of the studio incident, one drank into oblivion by the members of Dethklok, Frank was by their side. By contrast, Emma here - ” and he gestured to her politely, the woman glaring past him straight at Nathan - like, what had he done! Jesus! “ - deeply uncomfortable around her ex whom she, aheh, suspects may be stalking her, becomes dragged into the maelstrom that is Dethklok as she witnesses conflict between the members. And there has always been conflict - they fight, constantly. In fact, Emma herself and her partner, Frank, are
threatened just a week beforehand by guitarist Magnus Hammersmith in the studio, *with a knife* no less.”

Nathan remembered that, but like… he was pretty sure he was the only guy Magnus *hadn’t* threatened with a knife. And the threats were totally hollow anyway. They just didn’t *get* Magnus. No wonder it hadn’t worked out with Em.

At the other end of the table, Magnus had his head bowed, silent.

“You will hear from Emma herself what happened that night. I don’t know about you, your Honour, but I prefer a bit of a show. All these kind folks in black have joined us for a show,” said Vernon with a grin, sweeping an arm around at the gathered metallers, and Berman chuckled at him.

“As you like it, Mr Vernon.”

“Thanks muchly, your Honour.”

To Nathan’s left, Charles suddenly stabbed the pen into his papers, leaving a tiny black hole as he pulled it back out. He glared murderously into the floor, but seemed to feel Nathan’s gaze on him and looked up to meet it, the violence falling from his face as he leaned over Pickles to whisper to him. “*Everything okay, Nathan?*”

“Oh, uh… yeah. *You* okay?”

Pickles looked between them from where he was rocked back on his chair, tweaking an eyebrow curiously and chewing his nicotine gum in Nathan’s ear. In the background, Vernon smirked at the exchange, said, “Rude,” and continued: “And perhaps, Dethklok has a lot to gain by rewriting the legislation on digital downloads. Perhaps there is a lot of money involved… a record company. But Chuck here can tell you all about that, mm hmm… so what better opportunity, to get back at the woman who scorned you and her newest lover, and make a profit at the same time? I ask you…”

“It’s just gotten, ah… a *lot* worse around here, that’s all,” murmured Charles, sitting back, and Nathan frowned at him.

“Worse?”

Charles quirked an eyebrow at him, pulled between Vernon’s theatrical opening and Nathan’s sincere curiosity, and then abruptly looked away, taking in what Vernon said, that Emma was responsible for nothing at all. Framed. Framed. Nathan repeated it bitterly in his head, ignored by their lawyer. Framed.

“Which raises the question, who did it? Well, ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know. Maybe you’ll have a hunch?” said Vernon, smirking at their audience more than the jurors, and Nathan’s frown deepened. He wanted to stand up and just straight out ask, what was he trying to say? But Charles was relying on him to behave.

As he thought it, Charles leaned around Pickles again, passing Nathan a folded scrap of paper. He took it, puzzled, and Charles returned to listening to the opposition, ignoring Nathan again. With Pickles’ curious gaze on him, Nathan opened it to read the lawyer’s message.

There, in perfect cursive:
Nathan looked up at the lawyer, but he was paying no attention to the band. What did that mean? Well, he knew what it meant but what did that mean, for them? Vernon was finishing up now, his smirk a mile wide: “And people have problems. We shall see just how far those problems go. Thank you, your Honour.”

Nathan could have sworn he bowed as he took his seat again. The hulking singer looked to Charles for further instruction as the court stirred around them, and the lawyer got to his feet, murmuring to Nathan and Pickles as he rose, “I hope you like the circus, boys.”

“Charles Foster Offdensen, your first witness,” said the Judge, and the lights flickered overhead.

“Your Honour, I call Nathan Explosion to the stand.”
As Nathan made his way to the box, stalking across the courtroom, he heard someone in their audience give a woop and a “Yeah, Nathan!” and after that, the Judge remembered something and curtly ordered witnesses out of court, and then suddenly he was alone, the rest of the band ushered out to wait in the courthouse’s corridors and foyer. And standing at the box with his hangover and anxiety pressing in on him like a vice, Nathan had never wished more that Pickles had been sitting opposite him at the table beside the lawyer, or even Magnus in a pinch. Someone older who knew what the fuck they were doing. Because god. He so didn’t.

The court officer, a stocky woman with a dyed black bob, was in front of him and droned at him, “Please remain standing if you believe in God you swear on the Bible if you don’t believe in God you - - ”

“Fuck God,” Nathan growled, eyeballing her, and the court officer stopped short.

“Oh, okay. Affirmation then. Do you affirm that the evidence you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay.” And so he was sworn - affirmed.

Nathan’s chest tightened in panic, and he froze there until the Judge said, “Take a seat, Mr Explosion,” and even then snapped out of it only long enough to sit down in the witness box, hunched over himself. There was a little microphone, a pen. Everyone was looking at him. There was someone with a camera in the audience, which he hadn’t noticed before, next to that blonde kid from the fanzine with his pen and pad. Fuck, were they on TV? What if he didn’t tell the truth? He was going to be on TV and also a liar and, you know, he was gonna tell the truth but what if he fucked up and he didn’t? Could they send him to jail? What if his mom watched it? She was definitely watching it. What would she think?? Oh helllllll - -

“Yes, Mr Offdensen,” said the Judge, and Charles was at the attorney stand, looking straight at Nathan.

“Thank you, your Honor. Good morning, ah, Mr Explosion.”

In fact, he was - he was smiling. At Nathan. Well. Not exactly smiling, but - you know, not with the teeth. But smiling, benevolently, kindly, with his eyes. Nathan stared back in terror.

“First things first, Nathan. You have a very quiet voice. If you can see the, ah, microphone before you now - just take care to speak into it, okay?” Charles said gently, and Nathan stared at him, then down at the microphone. He took it in hand and tried to move it, the connection giving an alarming crackle and buzz, and then leaned forward to speak directly into it, his voice booming:

“Yeah. Sorry.” That wasn’t a lie. He was doing fine. Damn it.
“No - no problem. That’s great. Thanks, ah, for that, Nathan.” Fuck. Charles was… so nice… fuck. Oh, fuck. It was happening. Oh fuck.

- - - - -

NATHAN EXPLOSION: AFFIRMED

EXAMINATION IN-CHIEF BY MR. OFFDENSEN:

Q. First of all, I’ll just get you to state your name, age and occupation again for the record, okay?


Q. Could you spell that for the stenographer?


Q. Great, thanks for that. Now, how are you involved in, ah, Dethklok?

A. Involved? Um, I’m, uh - I sing, I guess.

Q. Uh huh, and how long have you been involved with it?

A. Shit. Uh. Two years now. Um, three years? We were Galactikon for a while - I know, huh, lame. Then like… Death Clock. With a C.

Q. Uh huh. And, ah, where was the band’s career when you joined?

A. Huh?

Q. Ah - let’s try, who was in the band when you joined Dethklok?

A. Uh, no one. I mean… I started, um, it.

Q. Okay, and then the others joined?

A. Uh, yeah.

Q. Is it fair to say, then, as frontman and founder, you have a certain degree of, ah, authority in the band?

A. Uh, no?

Q. No?

A. No. Um, we all decide shit, like… together. Oh, fuck. Am I allowed to, uh… say, uh, cuss words - -

THE COURT: It doesn’t really matter, Mr Explosion.

A. Oh. Okay. Yeah.
Nathan looked up, irked, as the clerk for the defendants got to his feet. What was this? Wait - it was an objection! Oh! That was so… oh boy! Charles was getting objected!

The clerk looked young, not much older than him, with sharp, mousey features and jet black hair cropped short in stark contrast with his dark grey suit - and very full of himself, chock up to the collar with pure bullshit.

“Your Honour, I just rise to remark on Mr Offdensen’s attire. It’s, uh, wasn’t immediately obvious to us from the Bar but there’s, uh, obscene language on the back of Mr Offdensen’s jacket, in, uh…” The clerk pointed, awkwardly, at Charles, who had frozen up in silent rage. “Marked up in Sharpie… I know this is a more casual hearing but, uh, your Honour, there is a limit.”

The audience all around them laughed and craned to see, Offdensen’s clerk too rising to try and read the letters on the back of Charles’ suit. When he did, the young man drew a brief gasp and fumbled in alarm with his own jacket, tearing it from his shoulders and then lurching over the table to offer it to his instructor.

“Mr Offdensen! Take mine!”

Charles slowly removed his grey jacket, shrugging it off his shoulders, and then replaced it with the clerk’s brown one, too narrow for him and ill-matching with his trousers. Nathan thought he looked fine though. “What does it say?” he rumbled into the microphone, grinning at Charles as the lawyer turned it around in his hands to read the words.

The lawyer smirked grimly.

“You’re right, Mr Keane. That is a little more, ah, blue than appropriate,” he muttered to the opposition’s clerk, and then looked up at Nathan’s question, quirking an eyebrow. “I dare say you know.”

Nathan straightened in the witness box, trying to see onto the lawyer’s desk. “I dunno, I don’t remember anything from last night except dragging your wasted ass home - - ” he said around his grin, and Charles made an unhappy nasal sound at him until the Judge cut them both off.

“Irrelevant. Offdensen, put us all out of our curiosity in some way or another and then we’ll put whatever misadventures you’ve been having to bed, okay?” he said, weighing the gavel in his hand in a bored fashion, and the lawyer diverted his gaze, smirked, and then looked right back up at him.

“It is a pun, or play on words, your Honour, relating the Latin honors conferred with my Juris Doctor to, I’m guessing, a perceived, ah, superiority, to the extent even of bestowing a title, in the field of, ah. Of gamete production,” he explained, the last words through his teeth, and Nathan didn’t get it. So, he guessed, it hadn’t been him at least.

“Quaint. I haven’t heard that one since Wolf’s Head,” said the Judge, leaning on his hand. “Shame Ms Soukoulis isn’t in to give instruction on the matter,” he remarked idly, and Charles
scowled at him.

“I’m kidding, Chuck. Carry on.”

“Indeed,” sniffed Charles, and passed his desecrated jacket to the clerk. “My apologies to the respondents and the Court at large. It seems I was, ah, defaced unawares last night.” And Nathan faintly heard his clerk mutter something about MDMA in a pissy voice, and grinned at the lawyer’s sideways look at the kid. This was already great. Nathan did like the circus. Man, he should have been a lawyer…

Q. Now, ah, Dethdemo - that’s your first recording, correct?
A. Yeah. Oh - uh, no. I did another, with my old band, Eaten… Eaten Yourself.

Q. So you’re familiar with the process?
A. Not, uh… like, really. I mean, Pickles did most of this one for us. Like, he knows better.

Q. Okay. We’ll ask him then. You know how much it cost you, all up?
A. Uh, I think it was like $800, all up. Like, studio rental and stuff.

Q. Is that how much it usually costs?
A. I dunno. Eaten was less cos it was just three songs, y’know. Um, and we did that split too. So yeah. I mean they said it’d be like, $1500, but cos Pickles did it instead of hiring someone...

Q. Gotcha. Lucky you had him round then. You, ah, finished recording that on 24 February?
A. Uh, yeah.

Q. Could you, ah… just describe what happened on that day, once you’d finished recording?
A. Describe?

Q. Just tell us. Like, ah, tell us the story of what happened. You’ve watched Law & Order, I’m sure.
A. Um, okay…

Nathan looked down at the desk before him, and concentrated very hard. Visual memory wasn’t his strong point, so much as intrusive images, but he could try. With Offdensen looking at him so expectantly, with so much hope - he could try.
So. They had locked the studio and then started to walk away as a group, most of them already drunk from sinking beers all day around the studio while Nathan, Pickles and Magnus squabbled over the final tracks, Skwisgaar rarely jumping in to make a biting observation and undercut all their work so far. Hence it was Murderface who was the furthest gone, having chosen to drink rather than critique - he only took part when Magnus forced him to, poking up with a “What do you think, Willy?” and getting whingey “Iunno!”’s in return.

They were headed to the Masquerade to see a band, get hammered, maybe punch someone in a mosh pit. That could work off some tension, and there was a lot of that right at that moment. Magnus was getting on Nathan’s nerves and had been doing so all day, undercutting every decision he made with the demo. Not that Nathan had been much help, chronically silent under pressure and unable to articulate what was wrong with the mix. Pickles had just about lost it, sitting at the console, chatting and joking and slugging his beer and occasionally snapping as he shorted his patience with the two other men. “Dudes, seriously! I can’t do it if ya don’t tell me what you friggin want!”

But Nathan was not sure what he wanted. Not really. Only that it wasn’t this.

Then, dragging his feet down the pavement ahead of the rest of the band, chatting and wandering behind him in the dusk and flickering streetlights, Nathan had been pulled out of his haze by the drummer popping up before him like a sock puppet. “Hey, Nate. You all right there, dude?”

Nathan blinked down at him, slowing in his tracks before moving on with Pickles by his side. “Yeah.”

“That’s a lie. Oohh, Nathan.” Pickles sighed. Nathan hated it when he did that, when he wore his concern on his sleeves, pinned to his lapels, advertised it. He supposed you didn’t care so much when you were a junkie - Magnus was similar. And he respected both of them for it, but fuck, it was just so… annoying, manipulative, intrusive. Nathan hated when girls did it and he hated it even more when Pickles did it. As if a dude he’d only met two years ago could know him like that.

“Look, dude,” said Pickles, his hands hooked into his jeans pockets, and he looked so small and girlish in the dusk. “It doesn’t matter, okay? The important thing is getting shit out. It don’t matter that it’s not perfect. Take it from me. You just gotta get it out there, trust me.”

Nathan gave a huff.

“I’m serious. You just gotta… let it go, ya know? No one can be perfect.”

“It’s not about that,” snarled Nathan suddenly, turning on the drummer, then caught himself as Pickles recoiled in shock. He drew away, his arms crossed over his chest as he heard Magnus squeak, scold, squeak, Nathan? from behind them, pulled out of his own conversation, and the burly singer ignored it, choosing instead to slow as Pickles was separated from them by a crowd of people outside a bar on the footpath, danced his way through them, and then came up by his side again.

“Um, yeah… yeah, I know,” conceded Pickles meekly, quick walking to keep up with Nathan’s huge stride, “I just don’t get it, is what.”

“It’s fine,” rumbled Nathan, and willed him to drop it, and sure enough, he did. That was the good thing about Pickles. He could read that shit.

They crossed the city and arrived at the Masquerade, and Pickles splashed royalties money on beers, and the tension had dissipated as they all drank away the difficulty of the day. Frank had
been there. They’d laughed, Frank slapped Nathan on the back and congratulated him. For two seconds, Nathan felt good about the recording. Sure, shit had gone down with Frank and Magnus last week but Frank got Magnus and now they were both there laughing and slagging off the band on stage, a bunch of shitty kids playing shitty hardcore. The Masquerade had gone downhill.

And then he didn’t remember much else. Err, well, he remembered ending up at The Castle somehow and Pickles buying cheap shots. And some goth giving them weed and congratulating them on the Mammothfister split, and smoking it with them in the back alley. In his mind’s eye, Nathan could see Pickles with a lime chunk in his mouth, held between his teeth as though the bright green rind was his natural smile, the heavy industrial doof of the Castle’s regular patrons booming around them, lasers, goth chicks undulating beneath the strobe lights.

And then just nothing until the next morning, waking up in his own bed, surprised - considering the goth chicks - to find himself alone, save for Pickles curled up at the end of the mattress, as was his habit, like some kind of weird skin dog, breathing heavily, sweating out tequila, his narrow chest heaving, his legs propped up against the wall above them. Actually, it kind of weirded Nathan out how cool Pickles was with just kicking Nathan’s door open, stripping down to his underpants and collapsing on his bed, but, you know… junkies, whatever…

Charles interrupted him here. “Ah, sorry, Nathan, can I - - we didn’t catch that. You’ve, ah, dropped to a mumble. Could you repeat what you just said?”

“Uhhh, it’s - nothing, fuck.”

“All right… just keep your voice up, okay?” And Nathan nodded.

Eventually he had roused, holding his head, just sitting in bed and pitying himself. Pickles had squirmed and woken, complained a lot about getting kicked out of his own room by two girls who ended up more interested in each other than him, and then vomited stomach acid into a stained coffee mug that was next to Nathan’s bed. Once he’d spat the bile and orange chunks of stomach lining out into the mug, he’d turned and looked at Nathan, and his eyes had pin-pointed in dread.

“Fuck, Nathan; you look like a frigging horror!”

As all the skin on the back of Nathan’s right knuckles was scraped off in a gory graze, his hand red and inflamed with a massive lump and stained with his blood, flecked with little wounds. Nathan knew this injury well; this injury came from punching a brick wall. But he couldn’t remember doing so at all.

Charles looked at him across the courtroom, mild concern etched on his neat features. Though Nathan felt for him, having gotten little from Nathan’s brief and poorly articulated testimony, the singer rubbing his fist nervously as he grunted into the microphone, it was almost as good with Charles fretting at him as when he was smiling. The absolute sucker.

“Thank you, Nathan,” said the lawyer, bowing his head slightly in contemplation and then checking his notes. “Ah, for that. What happened immediately after that?”

And Nathan stared at him. Shrugged. Didn’t Charles know? He must have been told by the band a dozen times now. “Uh… it got leaked.”

“Was that, ah, immediately after that?”

“No, like… a week or two, whatever. I wasn’t really, uh, keeping track…”
Q. So a week or two later, the record was leaked?

A. Yeah. No. Wait. It woulda been leaked a week after, but it was two weeks before we found out. Pickles and me don’t have a computer, you know. Too expensive.

Q. How did you find out, then?

A. Uh, we went to the Castle again and these chicks came up and said they liked the demo and… yeah.

Q. And ‘we’ is?

A. Me and Pickles, and Skwisgaar. He hadn’t been cos he bailed early before and like… goth girls.

Q. Goth girls. Okay. And the ‘goth girls’ told you?

A. That they heard our demo and they thought it was, uh, wicked.

Q. And what happened next?

A. I said that was fucked up, cos we didn’t release a demo.

Q. But they had it.

A. They said they downloaded it. Read about it in Thrust, checked the forums and, yeah.

Q. And what was your reaction to that?

A. Uh like… “What forums?”

Q. And then what?

A. Then… they laughed at us, I guess, and we went home with them and they showed us on their laptop. S. Laptops.

Q. Your Honor, I’d like to show the witness a document, if I may.

THE COURT: Of course, Mr Offdensen.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXHIBIT 1</th>
<th>Plaintiffs</th>
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There was much bustling around between Offdensen politely going “Thank you” and “Thank you very much”, his intern passing him something and then on to the court officer, before she made her way over to Nathan and handed him the magazine.

Morbid Angel were on the cover, as well they deserved to be. Nathan grunted, “Uh, Morbid
Angel!” with pleasure and flipped to the relevant article while the rest of the court bustled around him. “Formulas. Good album. Real heavy. Skwisgaar auditioned for them, for studio stuff, y’know.”

“They didn’t take him on?” said Charles idly, other copies of the magazine distributed, and Nathan looked up at him.

“Nuh. Think he turned them down. Said it wasn’t enough of a challenge, or something...” Nathan was absorbed in slowly reading the article on Morbid Angel. Man, they looked so cool. Their new angle was great too, all this Old Gods stuff, he liked it way more than the Satanic bullshit Magnus had been pushing. That was a direction he wanted to pursue, you know? No more fucking God Almighty, even by association.

“This is the magazine?” asked Offdensen, and Nathan nodded.

“Uh, yeah. Guess so.”

“Could you turn to page, ah, 8 for me, Nathan?” Nathan did so. “In the black column on the left, the third item down - could you read that out for the Court?” asked Offdensen, and Nathan stared at it, a deep frown splitting his face, and then at the lawyer.

“Uh, I don’t have my, uh, glasses…” he said, and Charles tapped his pen on the attorney stand.

“Just give it a shot anyway.”

“Okay. Uh.” Nathan proceeded at glacial speed. “Dethklok… the Tampa Bay… death metal… wunder… kind… were set… to release… they - their… first… record. This… month, but through…” - he squinted closer, holding the glossy page millimetres from his face - “... the Florida death metal forum… NuclearDeathNow - um, mark, thingy. Uhhhm a poster with the username… lecherbitch… has… shared a link… to file-sharing… website… Limewire… with a full file… download… available puppeting…”

“Purport. Purporting,” interrupted Charles with a frown. “Claiming to be.”

“Right. Purporting to be the band’s… full demo… you can download it… here. And it says. It says the address.” Nathan pointed to the page, although they couldn’t see it.

“Right, and so you confirm that is the magazine the girls read about the leak in?”

“Gotta be.” Nathan turned back to Morbid Angel’s interview, leaning on his hand to read it as the Judge, overhead, confirmed that would be Exhibit 1. He was disturbed shortly by the court officer taking the magazine away from him, getting a grunted, “Hey, I didn’t finish...” for her trouble, but she quickly replaced it with a stapled bundle of documents.

EXHIBIT 2                        Plaintiffs               DATE          08/06/1998

Bundle of documents showing pages from the forum website NuclearDeathNow!, retrieved 8 June 1998.

“And the document the court officer has just given you, ah, do you recognise that?” asked Offdensen patiently as Nathan leafed through it, perturbed, and the singer ultimately nodded.
“Yeah, that’s it.”

“And what do you think of that?” Tap, tap, tap went Charles’ pen on the side of the attorney stand.

“I think it’s bullcrap.” Nathan let the printouts drop closed, sitting back from the desk with his arms folded threateningly as he looked past Offdensen and glared around at the gathered Tampa crowds. “Just a bunch of assholes dribbling their shit on other bands. They all go online where they feel safe and bitch about each other but none of them would say shit to your fucking face. God damn cowards.”

It was obvious from Offdensen’s suddenly bright, sharpened gaze and cut-glass focus that he was very pleased with this response, and Nathan watched him from behind the curtain of his hair with great curiosity. He hadn’t pegged the guy as one to get excited over violence, but this, this focus, was the same as Pickles or Magnus got once the knives came out, albeit minus the grins they wore beneath.

His tone remained that placid nasal, though. Nathan thought it must be because he was so small, same as Pickles. Smaller frets made higher notes. Common knowledge. Small frets, too small for his fingers, but nonetheless. “You, ah, recognise any of those names?” asked the lawyer, and Nathan leafed through once more.

“Ipes.” He pointed again, uselessly. “That’s Frank. Or it was then. Now, it’s both of ‘em.”

“And what is Frank saying there? Um.” Charles paused, looking over his copy of the document, and then catching Nathan’s desperate, please-don’t-make-me-read-again look across the courtroom. “Your Honor, perhaps if I read and confirm --”

“The floor is yours, Charles,” said the Judge, and Charles cleared his throat with a soft hem.

“Good riddance. Really these losers deserve to have their whole bloated empire fall down around their fake bullshit crowns,” he read tersely, and as much as it pissed off Nathan to hear the words, it gave him great pleasure to hear Offdensen swear. “Maybe now everyone will see them for the wankfest they are. I hope it spreads like wildfire just so the whole Florida scene can hear how shit Dethklok really are rather than getting away with only playing two songs at a show so no one can tell. It’s all hype. Download and listen to this crap, seriously. Shit fret wankery over boring chords, a washed out junkie on drums, and the vocals are just plain gay.”

With the last word he looked straight at Nathan, who gave a stabbing nod in return. “Yeah, I’ve read it.”

“If I may?” queried Offdensen, turning the page. “There’s more along these lines. Pages of it. Assholes, a bunch of drugged up assholes. That flaming douchenozzle Magnus Hammersmith. Rip off Cannibal Corpse bullcrap, think they’re gods of comedy but all they do is swear at the audience and cut themselves. Fun if you’re drunk but so is putting on your girlfriend’s bra and taking photos...”

“Man, you are so lucky Pickles isn’t here to give you shit for that one,” said Nathan, grinning, and Charles turned a page.

“Mm hmm, I’m aware.” He rearranged the document and straightened his glasses primly. “My treatment doesn’t really, ah, do the spelling and grammar justice, I’m afraid. You were aware of the way the community feels about you?”

Nathan looked at the document helplessly, shrugged. “Yeah? I mean... they come to our shows
and yell at us, all kindsa shit but, like… they still come.” He leaned back in the tiny chair, thoughtful. “So I guess it doesn’t matter if they really like us, cos they pay to see us anyway.”

“Could you elaborate on that?” asked Offdensen, and Nathan looked at the ceiling, thinking hard.

“Even if they hate us… it’s still entertainment. For them. They pay to see what fuckups we are… so what? We’re still doing a service. Doing the service… of being fuckups, on stage or whatever. We deserve what we worked for, man, even if it’s a shitty record.”

“And how much do you think you lost?” asked the lawyer, and he sounded fragile, thought Nathan, moved, meeting his gaze.

“No idea. Maybe a lot. Yeah. Like, a real lot, from what Magnus says.”

“One moment, your Honor.” Charles looked over his notes, and then looked up at the Judge again, as if Nathan didn’t even exist. “That’s all I have for chief. Thanks.”

“Thank you, Mr Offdensen.”

And then he sat down, without even saying thanks to Nathan. Fucking rude!

“Mr Vernon? Your witness.”

* * * *

YEAR THREE

Once, travel had been an exciting thing for Offdensen - a new city, a new country, faces and languages and art and the alien sensations of flight, of strangeness, of isolation. But since the band had really hiked up the power, it felt more like a commute, the world blurred past in private jets and then the steel steps to the airstrip and the waiting car, then at his destination with barely a word between. A degree of secrecy was necessary, lest he be mobbed by press, but it did give him a certain vertigo he wasn’t so clear on as yet.

But that had been the way his career was going before Dethklok, anyway, or at least before Beth’s passing; flying to other states for conferences and hearings, and in hindsight perhaps that absenteeism on his part had been the beginning of it all. Now, with the years behind him, he thought that freedom to come and go without the world knowing, that blur untethered, was a serene and blissful thing, but a privilege that equally found him detached from that world he turned his shoulder to in such spiteful defence.

And now, back in Florida. With masked, suited men and a casket. Well, that had been sent ahead of them, but Charles felt it apt he put in an appearance at the funeral anyway. Another black limo rolling up outside the beautiful Greenwood Cemetery was barely worth raising one’s head for, and Charles huffed lightly as he waited for the klokateers to put up an umbrella against the heavy rain for him and open his door, uncomfortable with being doted on. It had been a long while since he’d had to deal with the rain in Florida, say a year and a half. He even realised he missed it, in a strange way. When it rained, the earth seemed to wait. Like something was changing, moving. Still, how trite, rain at a funeral…

The klokateers knew the way, as they tended to. These ones had guns, special defence, hired
external from the forces he’d had before the murders. Guns at a funeral, thought Charles bitterly, guns at a gun funeral, and followed the circle of shelter they carried for him with the large black umbrella. There was the group of people in black, huddled under umbrellas, moving across from the hall to the grave site. Many young women; his heart hurt for that. The klokateers and Offdensen joined the throng at a distance, with them but away from them as they deserved to be, to all intents her killers.

A coffin with a girl inside. Charles listened to the priest drone on, the distant bird calls in the lush wooded cemetery, the rain coming down on the skin of the umbrella, and tried not to check his watch. In a certain way he’d already paid his respects, by delivering her home and paying for the plot and ceremony, atoned by way of cash and compensation to her family. He could hear the young women crying around him as the men lowered the coffin into the damp earth, the rain pooling and running over the lid, and he thought only: at least Beth had been buried on a sunny day. His suit sticking hot to his skin as the sun jeered cruelly down at the few mourners who had turned out for his sister’s funeral; himself, an ex lover or two, and Walt, another mad poet who had read a eulogy and spared Charles from having to do so himself. Instead Amanda had her parents, rain, psalms, and weeping women. God, could they not for one second shut up…?

Offdensen caught himself shortly, bowing his head to listening to the priest.


\[
\text{Behold, he who hath been in labour with injustice;} \\
\text{he who hath conceived sorrow, and brought forth iniquity.} \\
\text{He hath open a pit and dug it; and he is fallen into the hole he made.} \\
\text{His sorrow shall be turned on his own head:} \\
\text{and his iniquity shall come down upon his crown.} \\
\text{I will give glory to the Lord according to his justice:} \\
\text{and will sing praise to the name of the Lord most high.}
\]

So they were aware of his attendance. Again, trite. He’d never been fond of the Psalms, anyway.

Once the Amen was said, after some more sobby verses, Charles took care to excuse himself before the party could dissipate enough to approach them. They’d gotten their dagger in already, and besides, he had business elsewhere. With INTERPOL, god. He’d almost lost his heart through the floor when Matthew had informed him of Von Sydow’s email, but caught it and immediately returned it to its armoured cabinet with the information that he’d been invited to supper. With Mr Von Sydow as well! What a nightmare! What an absolute joke!

Back in the limo, flanked by black suits and staring out the window at the rainy city as they headed for the airport, Charles decided to call his newly promoted personal assistant to check on the status of his evening appointment. There were more pressing matters to the forefront of his mind than this girl’s funeral, such as what wine did Swedish diplomats prefer when they dined with murderers? He bitterly looked at his shoes as the call went through, but Matthew didn’t pick up.

Weird. That was his job description, wasn’t it? One of the guards, sitting to Charles’ side, said quietly, “Are you mourning, my lord?” and Charles didn’t lift his head.
“What if I am,” he murmured, and the man bowed his hood.

“Then it would be understandable.”

Was he mourning? Perhaps, but not for Amanda. Perhaps he just hadn’t stopped mourning, since his mother’s passing – or since Beth’s body on a gurney, pinching the bridge of his nose in the hospital morgue. Or since his horse, the handsome young beast dead in his stable, the body cleared out before Charles even got the news. Or his father’s suicide, in many ways the same – nobody, just words and empty spaces. Or maybe just himself, no living Charles to speak of. He’d given it all away. A dead man at a funeral. Trite.

The phone rang out again. Charles sat up, hanging up the line and nursing the mobile in his lap with vague concern. “I’m not mourning,” he said, coldly, and the hoods were silent once more.
Nathan squinted up at the defendants’ lawyer as he took the stand, the anxious coughs and rustles of the courtroom dragging his attention back and forth over the gathered crowds – the fucking nerve, all the scenesters he knew coming down to gawk at them, particularly when it would be on local TV anyway by the looks of things – but always zeroing back to Vernon, teetering in his ill-fitting dark navy suit with his smile scrawled across his face all lopsided, or to their own lawyer for reassurance.

There was little comfort there, though – Offdensen was sat aside with his head bowed, not looking at the paperwork but not looking at anything else either, staring past the end of his intern’s pen as the young man readied pad and paper for note-taking. Nathan narrowed his eyes and attempted to drill his glare through Charles’ skull and get his attention, something that usually worked on, say, Pickles or Magnus, but to which Charles was apparently immune. Just staring into low space.

The defendants’ lawyer cleared his throat, and Nathan looked up again irately. Oh, yeah, right. Cross-examination. Breaths held around the room in anticipation of Nathan’s obliteration, inevitable considering how thick the guy was. Nathan had been proofed in the car by Offdensen over spilling coffees on the lawyer, but had been so impenetrable that ‘proofing’ consisted more of explaining the process than outlining arguments and mopping espresso off his trouser leg with a napkin, biting back curses.

“Mr Explosion, pleased to meet you – I am Mr Herbert Vernon Esquire, counsel for the defendants,” wheezed Vernon, and just when Nathan thought he couldn’t like him less, he smiled. “I have a few questions for you, if you’d be so kind to humor me.”

Nathan stared at him from beneath his heavy brow, wondering why he was being asked that like a question. Charles had given him the distinct impression that there was no choice in cross-examination. You had to go and you had to tell the truth, or you went to jail and your mother was very, very disappointed. The only difference was that in cross-examination, lawyers could ask you trick questions and try to get you to say things that might not be what you meant to say. *So just like everyone,* figured Nathan, in hate with the world, and Charles had just shrugged, pressing the sopping napkin to his lap. *Just watch what you’re saying, okay?* So:

“Okay,” he mumbled into the mic, and that pleased Vernon greatly, leaning forward into his nod. A man who spoke with his body and his long, reptilian grin. Nathan could not relate.

**Q. So my first question, Mr Explosion – you’re a local?**

A. Uh... what do you mean? Yeah?

**Q. You’re from Florida?**

A. Yeah, I - -
Nathan looked up in panic as Charles spoke, but the lawyer hadn’t even looked at him, rising only to look at the judge – no, not at the judge, just past the judge – when invited to. Jesus Christ, what had Nathan done wrong? He’d only said yeah! Even Offdensen’s clerk was staring at his instructor, his pen paused on the very first line of shorthand on his pad.

The judge looked put upon just acknowledging Charles, but Nathan would not understand why for another six objections or so.

“'Yes, Offdensen?’”

“Irrelevant, your Honor.”

The judge, utterly non-plussed, looked down his nose at Charles over his half-moon glasses. “It’s just banter, Mr Offdensen. Proceed.”

Nathan watched curiously as Charles wavered, adjusted his glasses, and then resumed his seat with increased intensity, glaring at the end of his clerk’s pen.

“First question and my friend is already on his feet!” gushed Vernon with a grin in Charles’ direction, but he didn’t even look up to acknowledge it. Vernon turned back to the judge, his smile crawling wider on his face. “That has to be a record, your Honor.”

“Yes, well. Your friend is just a bit excitable, Herbert. You know he likes the chase,” said the judge, then waved the lawyer on to the next topic, Charles glaring violently at the end of the clerk’s waiting pen and blinkered from the rest of the courtroom.

“Quite. Mr Explosion –” – Nathan looked up at the mention of his name, brushing his dark hair aside as he cautiously sized up the lawyer again – “– your band, Dethklok. Is it a sort of – say – a business to you?”

Vernon laced his hands together as Nathan internally panicked. What... did... that... mean...?

A. Uh... like... what do you mean?

Q. A business. So, say, like... do you consider that Dethklok is your job, for instance?

A. Hmm. Like... no? But yeah. My mom says it ain’t a job.

Q. Well, you told us earlier you’re unemployed – where do you see yourself, Dethklok, in the next few years?

A. Uh... I guess... shit. Like, I guess, like... in that magazine, I guess.

Q. Exhibit 1? Mr Explosion, you are already in that magazine. That indicates a certain degree of success?

A. Yeah, but... on the front cover. Like Morbid Angel, y’know. That’d be... yeah. That’d be great, pretty much...
MR OFFDENSEN: Objection.

THE COURT: Overruled; we know, Mr Offdensen. Move on, Vernon.

Mr Vernon smiled at Nathan, broad and unpleasantly lizardlike. “The record you recorded – you were happy with it?”

Nathan stared at the lawyer for a moment. Watery big grey eyes on this guy, kinda like a corpse, like there wasn’t much behind them. On his balding scalp, liver spots, his thin dark hair shocked with greys brushed pointlessly over his head. “Uh,” he said, and looked down at his hand, picking self-consciously at the remaining flecks of scabs over his knuckles. “Yeah, I guess. Mm. Yeah.”

“You guess?” asked Mr Vernon, leaning towards Nathan over the stand, and the frontman hunched over behind his hair.

“Uh... yeah. I mean, it’s fine but... like... they’re old songs and shit, we can... we can do better than that. Whatever, it’s out now,” he mumbled into the mic, and Vernon quirked his eyebrow.

“You sound ambivalent, Mr Explosion,” he said, and Mr Explosion didn’t know what that meant, blatant in the knotting of his brow.

“Uh, I... I guess, uh, I mean. I haven’t, uh, honestly, listened to it, since, like, the studio, y’know,” he was saying, and his eyes peeled away from the lawyer as Offdensen rose from his seat for the third time in five minutes.

“Objection, your Honor - the witness clearly doesn’t understand the question.”

The judge looked between the two lawyers, his head leaning on his fist, and waved a hand at them. “Withheld. Mr Vernon, the plaintiff is an idiot. Make yourself clearer,” he said, and Nathan jerked his head up quickly as the courtroom snickered around him.

“Hey...”

“It’s fine, your Honor. I’ll move on.” Vernon composed himself, and smiled broadly at Nathan. “Mr Explosion – you’re of legal drinking age, correct? Do you drink much?”

And Nathan, uncomfortable, leaned back in his seat and blankly replied, “… Yeah?”

-- -- --

Q. Do you drink much, Mr Explosion?

A. Uh... uh, I don’t think so.

Q. Mm, well, Mr Offdensen thinks I ought to be more specific, so --

A. Yeah that was --

Q. - - on average --

A. - - pretty screwed up.

Q. - - how many drinks would you consume on a - -
A. I mean, I’m not, like, uh, dumb. Am I? What?

Q. - - typical weeknight?

A. Uh, what?

Q. How many drinks would you have on a typical weeknight, Mr Explosion?

A. A weeknight?

Q. A weeknight.

A. Uh, like. You know. It’s a weeknight, so.

Q. A weeknight, yes.

A. Like, beers, or?

Q. Sure, yes. Beers.

A. F - - five?

Q. Five beers.

A. On a weeknight?

Q. Yes, Mr Explosion.

A. Yeah, five. Maybe... seven. I dunno, me and Pickles usually just get a block and, uh, like, halve it. On a Thursday, yeah. I mean, that’ll, like, throw the, uh, that out, right. The number. How many is that?

Q. A ‘block’?

A. Yeah. Thursdays, movie night. You know. How many beers are in a block? Like, one of those...

MR KEANE: It’s thirty.

MR VERNON: It’s thirty?

Mr Keane informs me it’s thirty, Mr Explosion.

MR EXPLOSION: Right. So half of that is, uh. Fifteen, right?

Q. Correct.

A. Divided by... six. Two.

Q. Divided by five. There are five weekdays.

A. Whatever, I don’t have a goddamn job...

Q. Mr Keane informs me that’s just over six beers a night.

A. Yeah. So, that, plus the block on Monday - -
Q. Another block on Monday.
A. Yeah, that’s, uh, we split that. That’s cos, we get through them all with the game on Saturday. So that’s, another fifteen...

Q. You were drunk on the night in question, correct, Mr Explosion?
A. Uh... yeah.

Q. Is it safe to assume you drank a lot, Mr Explosion?
A. ... I guess.

Q. What are you like, when you’re drunk, Mr Explosion?
A. I dunno. Fuck. What are you saying. Fuck you, I’m fine.

THE COURT: Please refrain from cussing at counsel, Mr Explosion.

MR EXPLOSION: Huh? R - -

THE COURT: Do not do it.

MR EXPLOSION: ... yeah. Okay.

MR VERNON: What is the first thing you remember after blacking out that night, Mr Explosion?
A. Probably... uh... waking up next to Pickles, you know.

Q. Yes. Thank you, Mr Explosion. You two seem to have a very close friendship, it's heartening, honestly. Last question: how do you know Mr Hammersmith?

Nathan recoiled, his frown harsh as he scanned the courtroom for Magnus. But the guitarist, like everyone else, had been directed outside – was probably happier out there, thought Nathan, smoking and macking on his girl. God, Nathan could kill for a cigarette right now. Just murder this suited skeezeball straight up, nails into his throat, just rip it out with a spray from the jugular, splatter the American flags on either side of the judge. That would be fucking metal. Yeah.

He remembered Magnus, at shows – back in the days of Eaten Yourself, and then before, when he’d first left New Port Richey for the big city, the first shows he’d stood at the back off with his loser friends and stared a hole through, hating their music. Magnus’ old band, Fuck Off And Die (F.O.A.D), had been fixtures in the scene at the time with a lifespan of four whole years, eons in comparison to most metal bands, and Nathan had vivid memories of watching those weird old dudes howling over that stupid, classic black metal, Venom-type bullshit about sex crimes and bestiality and no matter how deeply offensive it was, Nathan just couldn’t bring himself to like it. But whatever, you had to respect anyone who had battled tooth and claw past twenty-five with an ice addiction, and Magnus, shrieking backup vocals for this skinhead bastard on lead and assaulting his guitar in a way it wouldn’t soon recover from, made an impressive sight for the seventeen-year-old Nathan.

F.O.A.D. had broken up a year later, Magnus crawling out of the burning wreckage of infighting, drug psychosis and a bassist getting a glass smashed in his face badly scarred but intact, lurking at...
the back of shows with a vicious scowl and his arms crossed over his chest. When Eaten Yourself had announced their last show, Nathan mumbling it into the mic at their penultimate after Kenny had told them he was moving to New York and Stuart’s mom had gotten sick, Magnus had approached him while he was gathering up guitar leads, standing at the foot of the stage as Nathan stooped and curled the cord around his fist pensively.

“You’re Nathan,” had come an abrasive snarl, and Nathan had looked down at the older man glaring up at him, arms crossed defensively.

“Yeah.”

“Mm. You said before.” He had. It was true. Nathan already knew Magnus’ name; it was hard to avoid. Guy had connections – guy had freaking mythology, from mad nights tearing down the lampshade off a ceiling light at a house show, from crashing his car into the front wall of 430 Chaos and still playing a whole show afterwards with a broken ankle, sitting on top of his amp with the feedback squealing and his boot twisted sickly beneath him, from blowing half a nostril out at the Mug and streaming blood and laughing through his set, joking about never snorting heroin again and Nathan was... pretty sure... in hindsight that Magnus had never snorted heroin. But that was hindsight, you know. At the time, it was all he knew.

“Band’s over, huh?” said Magnus, his arms still crossed, eyeing Nathan like a mad possum in a trash can. Nathan had just grunted, nodded.

“Shame. You guys were good.” And the very admission was bizarre. Magnus hated all other bands, had since F.O.A.D. had ended. He came to every gig but was vocal about his disgust, leaning on the bar with his hand gripped white around a bottle of beer and glaring over his shoulder at those who dared interrupt his night out with shit metal. Then again, he still came to the shows. Paid entry and all. Nathan wouldn’t understand it until after Dethklok had played their third show and Magnus, who had fallen off his amp and onto a beer bottle to shards buried all down his arm, vanished before they’d even started loadout. Nathan found him eventually, drunk and bleeding hunched over on the back step of DoH, weeping into his lap with some girl sitting next to him and patting his back helplessly. Magnus had been incapable of speech at that point, but had already told the girl something he’d never admit to another man, and she told Nathan bluntly while Magnus was sobbing silently into his arms. Poor guy missed his old band. Simple as that. They’d been his best pals before everything had just fallen apart. His only shot at the big time. Seeing it slip away – it cut deep, deeper than shards of bottle.

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“Whatever, I’ll make a new band,” Nathan had grunted at Magnus from the stage that fateful night, and Magnus had regarded him watchfully, his tufted chin pulled close to him. A long silence, Nathan pulling up the jack on the lead to wind into the coil he’d gathered, clicking against the wood of the stage. And then Magnus had said:

“Lemme know if you need a guitarist.”

And that was history.

To Vernon, Nathan said, “Through the scene, I guess,” and shrugged, which was enough for him.

“And what do you think of Mr Hammersmith?” asked the lawyer, holding out his hand to Nathan, and Nathan stared at it in confusion. But before he could ask what that was all about, Offdensen was up on his feet again, spitting:

“Objection. Clarify.”
Nathan thought he saw Vernon roll his eyes, and frowned at their exchange.

“I’ll move on. Mr Explosion, has Mr Hammersmith ever lied to you?” Vernon asked, and Nathan huffed softly.

“No. Fuck. He’d never lie to me.” Which was a Fact. Magnus wouldn’t dare.

“One more. Do you handle the accounts of Dethklok?

Nathan scoffed to himself. “Nuh. Magnus and Pickles do that. Frank when we had him.” He inclined his head slightly towards the place their old manager had been sitting, and Vernon smiled at him sweetly.

“That’s all the questions I had, Mr Explosion. Thank you.” And then, upwards to the judge, “Thank you, your Honor.” And he slunk back to his seat to whisper argumentatively with his clerk, the so-called Mr Keane.

“Re-examination, Mr Offdensen?” asked the judge lazily, and Charles got to his feet, straightening his mismatched suit when he got to the stand.

“Thank you, your Honour. I’ll be brief,” he said, and then looked Nathan straight in the eyes. The singer flinched, letting his hair fall across his face to hide behind. Nothing twisted up his little mind as much as being looked in the eye, like he was cattle or something - the way Offdensen drilled him now, he wondered if the lawyer knew that. He probably did. Lawyers were clever. And Charles was a good lawyer.

The best, said Magnus.

**RE-EXAMINATION BY MR OFFDENSEN:**

“Nathan, we’ll keep this quick. I don’t have much to ask you,” said Charles. Hadn’t even brought notes up with him. “It's unconventional to lead in re-examination, but with his Honour's permission it may help us get through the large amount of witnesses.”

He paused just long enough for Berman to nod, and then met Nathan's gaze. "Yes or no, if you would?"

“Uh.... okay.” Nathan’s voice boomed in the microphone, louder than Charles himself, and the lawyer never once dropped his gaze.

“Has Magnus Hammersmith ever disagreed with you?”

Nathan kept his gaze for a moment, wondering what he was playing at, then remembered the one-word caveat. “Yes,” he said, simply.

“Has Magnus Hammersmith ever raised his voice to you?”

“Yes.”

Charles leaned slightly on the stand. “Has Magnus Hammersmith ever threatened you?” he asked and Nathan watched him carefully, so Charles added: “Regardless of the context.”
“... Yes,” Nathan grunted, dying to explain more.

“Has Magnus Hammersmith ever physically assaulted you?” Nathan was suspicious of the line of questioning, hunching over the little desk as he kept an eye on the lawyer. Magnus remained outside the courtroom. He knew he could say anything - uh, so long as it was the truth. And so long as it was yes or no.

“Nuh,” he said, and Charles bowed his head.

“And has Magnus Hammersmith ever caused harm to you in any other way?”

Nathan stared under his brow at Charles. “What... do you mean?” he growled, and Charles gestured vaguely.

“Anything. Sabotage, theft, ah, destruction of property, spreading rumours, or lies, or, ah...” Charles seemed to notice Nathan’s non-comprehension - “Stories he’s made up.”

Nathan leaned forward over the mic, glancing around quickly in case Magnus had slunk in the gaps before he spoke about him and then, in a low, conspiratorial voice, “Look. Magnus is a real weird dude, it’s true. Fuckin’... messed up. But he’s just a dude, y’know.”

Offdensen was looking at him like he didn’t, one eyebrow cocked over his glasses, so Nathan elaborated, leaning on his elbow to gesture blankly, “Uh, y’know? Like, he’s a fucked up dude and he’s got, like, girl problems - who doesn’t, huh. And he mouths the fuck off when he gets uptight. I ain’t sayin’ he doesn’t, like. But, you know... he’s all hammer, no fucking nail.”

Nathan sighed, retreating back in his seat again as he half-mumbled into the mic. “That’s what you gotta understand about Magnus, you know. He’s got a fucking, green-eyed monster, whatever, you know. Sure. Gets worked up, blows his fuckin’ top out. But all steam. All steam. I ain’t ever seen him hurt a soul. He’s a fuckin’ vegetarian, for fuck’s sake.”

When he looked back at Charles, he could have sworn he was smiling, in that way he did – without moving his face at all.

“One last thing, Nathan. What does Magnus contribute to the band?” he asked, and Nathan sniffed.

“Everything. Fuck. Everything. Without Magnus, we’d fucking suck.” Nathan hated to admit it, but it was a fact as far as he was concerned. Another hard Fact. Without a rhythm guitarist, Dethklok would suck.

“I think...” he added slowly, meeting Offdensen’s gaze and feeling that same unpleasant still through him, “That Magnus... would probably, like, die. If it helped out Dethklok. I dunno man. He’s hardcore about it, y’know... what I mean. Yeah. Bleed out and just fuckin’ die. Whatever, man.”

The court lights guttered above them.

“That’s all I had, your Honor,” said Charles, bearing that smileless smile once again, and then, with a slight nod to Nathan, “Thank you, Mr Explosion.”

Nathan had done good.

“That completes your evidence, Mr Explosion. You are released and may come and go as you please. We’ll break now for a short adjournment before the next witness – who is Mr ‘Pickle’, I believe? Pickles. All right. Back in fifteen, we’re adjourned pro tem.”
He’d done so good.

***

YEAR THREE

For Charles, there was a certain brutality in having experienced his father’s minor celebrity second-hand, a sobering effect of knowing how much law was paperwork and the audacity to trade backbreaking labor for the good of thankless clients. Even when he had been a lowly law student, he hadn’t entertained fantasies of the superstar lifestyle – Pickles could scoff ‘Patrick Bateman’ at him as much as he liked, but Charles had always known that the law was a debt, a price, knowing that in exchange for a comfortable life in the land of the free, it was his duty to serve his country at the highest level he could, the most efficient, to give the best part of himself. That attitude had seen him to Harvard and summa cum laudes, and a heavy investment portfolio had loomed up behind him that he preferred to leave in more capable and fiscally conservative hands and ignore for the most part. Again, it was the duty he worked for, to serve, and a small apartment was all he had ever needed.

The Von Sydows had no such reservations. Their home a palace, a great and cold hall in the Swedish capital that struck him as especially Wagner (that is, beautiful and yet somehow chillingly fascist, as much as architecture could be) and prompted an extended conversation about Der Ring des Nibelungen over supper which was fine, exquisite, Wagyu and marbled basashi sashimi with ginger prepared by Mr Von Sydow, a skilled amateur chef enthusiastic about world cuisine, and served with a plum wine that rendered Offdensen’s gift of Clos Apalta useless except as a token. They spoke of a conceptual opera, and yes, Skwisgaar did perhaps recall Siegfried to the romantic, but think. Repurpose the holographic technologies of the helicopter, install a series of great Perspex pillars and project the monsters and phenomena across the clear plastic, and the players could stray between them – Offdensen smiled and ventured that that would be fabulous, posting the thought away for himself.

So he sat down the far end of a huge stone table with the meat in front of him, plum wine in a porcelain glass, and smiled and laughed back at the Von Sydows still silently cautious of any raw meat they placed in front of him - with a name like that. For one thing, Charles had never tasted horse meat before. How would he tell it from any other, if he had to, as he had to now? But it was a delicate flavour, and he’d be a fool to pass up their hospitality...

Horse brutality, Charles thought, first in his own voice and then in Pickles’ sneer, and he laughed internally: Ha, ha. It didn’t strike him until he was out of the house again, thanks and farewells over, and crossing the great courtyard escorted by a klokateer bodyguard in the silent autumn night, his head bowed and his jacket collar turned up against the cold, when it struck him sharply – that he had never heard one of the boys’, band’s, voices so acutely in his head like that before. Spooky. He clearly had to get out more. The Von Sydows weren’t exactly a step in the right direction so much as they were a step sideways, but company was company however it came.

He sat in the back of the limo and stared into middle-space as they took off. Surprised at himself still. It was all very well to justify these things and conjure solutions, as if that would dispel them instantly as they dispelled grief and worry, but this was proving harder to shake. To shake. Charles thought: it was not an issue that he had forfeited his duty to the law, as he upheld it in greater stakes – which Dethklok was. A greater thing, a power exchange wherein, at the price of
minor destruction, he could observe the globe strengthening, uniting around them. Think of the klokateers. That was a good deed, the microeconomy of Mordland. Power to the post-Soviet states that bordered them. Think of a Dethklok show in the People’s Republic of China. Charles’ father had dabbled in Communism, but he himself saw no practicality in it beside a well-governed democracy. And wasn’t he proved correct? Wasn’t he...

Doing a good thing.

Charles hit the communicator through to his PA, since the new secretary, Heather or something, was still going through initiation regimes. “Matthew,” he had said before he remembered himself, then straightened his tie self-consciously in the darkened limo windows, “#23, I mean. We’re on our way to the airstrip, E.T.A. 0300 hours. I need a meeting with the China Board ASAP tomorrow morning. You got all that?”

Yes, sir, came Matthew’s weak voice – the first Charles had heard of it since before the funeral, and the manager noted this. Late night for you, sir - sire.

“Mm, they all are, Matthew. Where were you this afternoon?” he asked tersely, and the PA was quiet a while before answering.

I wanted to speak to you about that if I may, sire. In private, if possible, when you return.

“Uh huh,” said Charles, suspicious, and he studied his reflection closely. Released of the faked laughter of the night, he looked sharp, viciously so, and like his mother. Deeply unsettling.

IT Recon completed the search you requested, and I have... additional information. But I am, uh, concerned, Mr Offdensen, that transmitting it here will put us both in danger.

“... Uh huh,” said Charles again, slower, casting his eyes sideways towards the voice in his ear. “I’ll see you immediately upon return, Matthew.”

#23, my lord.

“Right. #23. See you then.” And he disconnected, sitting back, perturbed, and didn’t speak again for the journey home.
Thus. 0400 hours. Seated in his office with the cold grey dawn rising at his back, the sun still held beneath the mountains on the horizon, Offdensen regarded the suited klokateer before him, leaning forward on the desk with his arms propped up on his elbows, his hands laced in front of his lips.

Matthew had introduced himself with, “Mr Offdensen, I did something for you,” and then choked on his words. “Something that was not easy. Not easy.”

Charles had leaned forward, eyeing the younger man through his glasses.

“Right, what do you want? A medal?” he remarked, another sleepless night making him sharp, nasty. Whatever Matthew had to tell him, it had better be good. He’d turned off the surveillance systems for this.

Matthew’s hood tilted, his shy smile hidden beneath the black cloth though Charles could hear it in his voice. “Don’t joke about that, sir.” The klokateer checked the door – guards beyond it, though they couldn’t hear the meeting through the hardwood and limestone – and glanced around the rest of the room in a darting movement, and then reached for the inside of his jacket. Charles knew immediately, on his feet as soon as his gut began to sink; by the time he had the revolver drawn, the manager had his own pistol pointed at Matthew’s head, but something made him stay his hand. Sure enough, Matthew held up his other hand awkwardly to signal no ill intent and placed the gun on the desk.

“Sorry,” he gulped, and Charles lowered the gun slightly, pointed towards the young man’s chest instead.

Gun surrendered, the PA shrugged off his jacket, dropping it on the floor in his urgency. Charles picked up the revolver, never taking his eyes nor the pistol’s sight off Matthew, and stowed it in the holster at his side and out of the other man’s reach. Matthew had unbuttoned his sleeve cuff and pulled the white sleeve up to his shoulder as Charles watched, the blank eyes of his hood angled up at the manager as the cotton peeled sticky off of fresh wounds. “You don’t have to kill me yourself, sir. Someone will do it for you when I walk out of here.”

Charles sniffed sharply at him. “I had no part in Ms Hillam’s - - ” he started, but Matthew had already sat down in the guest seat, away from the desk, shadowed in the grey dawn light from the window.

“No, I – sir. I already know what happened. You don’t need to lie to me. I said I’d follow you to the ends of the earth, so. Here I am.” Matthew gave a weak, frightened laugh and gestured to the surrendered gun, his other hand held stiffly in his lap with the sleeve rolled up. “What I’m telling you is, they’ll do it anyway. Okay? Regardless of what you say. I did something for you, I tried to play a game... for you. But I – it’s stupid, to think you can play a... a game, when you know well enough you’re a pawn.”

Charles lowered the gun further, his face darkened by the dawn on his back. “What did you do?” he asked quietly. If Matthew was so un-fond of games, he could do better than play them with Offdensen. But then fear of death made everyone poetic.
“I, uh. I surrendered,” said Matthew, and Offdensen could hear his desperate smile beneath the hood. “You know. I worked it out, why they wanted your secretary. Or, uh... it came to me pretty quickly, after they were pointing the gun at me.”

Charles was listening; he lowered the weapon and rounded the desk slowly, seeing the hood turn to follow him, the gun never too low at his side. “Who?” he asked quietly, and Matthew rubbed his bare arm beneath the wound shyly.

“We all have masks, sir. I couldn’t tell you.”

Charles lowered his head in acknowledgement and came to stand in front of the desk, only then raising his gaze to watch the young man.

“Go on.”

“They... ah... as far as I can tell, the aim is to destroy the things you, uh, show you value, sir, small as...” Matthew looked conflicted, loathe to admit some loyalty, some feeling, for his boss despite having followed him over land and sea, as though it might highlight some weakness in Charles. “As small as that gesture may be,” he resigned to eventually, before continuing quietly, “Demoralisation. I can’t say it was supposed to be an execution, exactly, more they, err, misjudged my character, maybe. Honestly, Mr Offdensen, you’re the only person who’s really had any faith in me, in that... sense.”

“They thought you could be influenced,” said Charles, tilting his head in understanding.

Matthew nodded, and then said with a laugh, “And, well, I was! Wasn’t I? It wasn’t pretty!” and held out his arm. The manager craned forward, peering in the gloom to see the sticky wound, just a few hours old – just long enough to lead a coup, thought Charles, and felt the gun heavy at his side.

The wound, on the inside of Matthew’s arm and carved into the soft white flesh above his elbow, resembled the one on the two dead klokateers so far – a sun, a radiance, a gear. It had been left untreated, flared red around the cut, and Charles gave Matthew a gentle frown for it. Infections were nasty, especially on the joint.

“While you were at the funeral – took advantage of you being away and, uh, cornered me and, uh, and, uh, they said a lot of stuff... about the band, and stuff, and, uh, had the gun on me until I swore I was in it for the band. Then this, this...” Matthew proffered the arm again, and then looked at the gun at Charles’ side. “The idea wasn’t to kill you, it was just supposed... to cause pain, you know. They can’t kill you, people would know. They just want to, uh... flush you out.”

“You, ah, betrayed them,” said Charles coolly, and the PA let his arm fall into his lap, sitting like a child.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“They’ll kill you.”

Matthew shrugged, looking at his feet. “I guess they figured you’d do that anyway,” he said, and then gave a dejected sniff behind his hood. “They talk like you’re a murderer – about the Hillam thing, anyway. I think they had intended that I wouldn’t be coming out of here alive, whoever’s hand was on the trigger.”

Charles raised his head cockily, thinking over the scenario as he regarded the resigned PA. It was a tricky one – with no clear distinction of who in their ranks was against him, there was no way he
could get Matthew out of Mordland in safety. Or even out of this room, he thought – how easy it would be to declare that Matthew had been found to be a safety threat and shoot him immediately upon that door opening, to even barge in here now. And how powerless Offdensen would be to argue it.

“I, ah,” he said eventually, hesitating in his words, “Don’t want you to, ah, die because of me, Matthew.”

The klokateer shrugged. “Oh, well. I thought it was kind of a given, you know.”

This troubled the manager and his brow creased with incomprehension, unable to understand the fealty the young man had shown him if he’d known he was going to die from the time he ditched the law degree to join Charles and the band. And also – that really shouldn’t have been the obvious conclusion of the klokateers, as an organisation. The idea was to be the betterment of people, not the death of them. They’d even taken it out of the title, for godsakes. A clock was a better thing, a unit, than a murder.

“Maybe there’s something we can do.” Charles drew the revolver and swapped it for the pistol in his hand, inspecting the other weapon, and then looked to the door. They couldn’t hear the conversation, but perhaps they could hear something else – his gaze drawn to the young man before him, and then back down to the gun, pulling off the safety.

“You’ll be arrested, Matt,” he said, not looking at the young man, “For attempted assassination and, ah, all that, ah, messy business. Shouldn’t miss you, now that we’ve got the new girl.”

“Heather, yeah.” Matthew looked up, his mask straight down his face. “Some medal, huh,” he said, watching Charles cock the gun, and the manager gave a slight, unamused smirk.

“It’s not a bullet,” he said, and raised an eyebrow. “Stand up. We need to make them think you put up a fight.”

“Huh?” said Matthew, but he stood obediently anyway. Charles put his arm out to the desk, indicating that Matthew should mirror him, and locked his elbow and shoulder straight; the younger man did so, holding his arm stiff as Charles moved to pin his wrist beneath his palm and steady himself with his other hand on Matthew’s shoulder.

“This is gonna, ah - gonna hurt,” he said, looking over his shoulder into Matthew’s eyes through the mask and bringing his knee up, and the young man swallowed then nodded.

“Okay.”

“One... two...” Charles held his shin against Matthew’s arm as the klokateer braced himself, steeled his footing, and then said quickly, “Three,” before bringing his weight down hard on the braced joint. There was a barely audible bone-damp crack, and then Matthew yelled out at the burst of pain and dropped to the floor, Charles catching himself to stand over the young man and fire two rounds out of the revolver into the window behind him.

He dropped the gun onto the boy at his feet, and it bounced off of him and onto the flagstones with a clatter, and Charles looked down at him once more. “Ah, sorry about this,” he said, with genuine remorse, and then kicked Matthew in the jaw with the heel of his shoe, the coarse fabric of the hood grazing the skin beneath to another scream. He could have gone for the gut, but he couldn’t have risked winding him. The idea was to cause pain, as the kid himself had said. Charles was not a heartless man. But he knew how to do what must be done.
The guards burst in a moment later to Charles standing over the stricken klokateer, his pistol pointed at his head, and the manager looked up at them coolly. “An attempt has been made on my life,” he announced, standing strong over Matthew’s twitching form, the cold mountain air rushing through the broken window to move a strand of his hair loosened in the aggression. “Arrest this man, then take him to the hospital wing. And then find somewhere secure to put him. He may have information.”

He only barely made eye contact with Matthew as he stepped away, surrendering him to the guards. He would understand. There was nothing an intern understood better than putting the company first.

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

Silence in the court! All rise.

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO

Silence in the court! All rise.

- ‘PICKLES”: AFFIRMED

EXAMINATION-IN-CHIEF BY MR. OFFDENSEN:

Pickles was a good witness. He knew that to be true. Good ol’ Lancelot Howard, Howie, had told him that, and Howie was a tricky lawyer who preferred artifice to honesty, and therefore it had to be true. Still lost all Pickles’ money to those douches though. Eh. Ancient history, you know...

He was a good witness. He could see it in Offdensen’s face, his calmness as he ran through basic questions about how much the record had cost to produce, the role Pickles played in the band. He could see it in Nathan’s face, staring at him wide eyed from beside the lawyer and his intern, the kid’s pen going crazy as he kept up with Pickles’ answers. Evidently, Nathan’s testimony had not gone nearly as well as Pickles’ was going to go. And he knew that to be true, because Nathan was a dunce, and Pickles was a good witness.

That was harsh. Nathan was a good kid. Pickles was pretty fond of him, counted him among his best friends – nay, his best friend, a hard earned title indeed. Pickles found it hard to trust people. He was well aware of it. You see the thing was, people were fucking dogs, and that was just a fact of life. Cowardly, ass-licking shit eating dogs. Nathan, Nathan was an idiot, but he wasn’t a dog, and that was very important. Within this very qualifier was the expectation that he had said something too simple, something too honest under cross-examination. Pickles had no such intentions.

The trick to being a good witness was knowing when to stop. Pickles smiled at Offdensen, sitting back in the witness box and playing with the pen and paper he’d been provided idly, even doing a quickly scribbled calculation when the lawyer quizzed him about production costs. Yepperoonie, Mr Offdensen, that came to about $800 all up for studio hire and production. Yep, Pickles was experienced with these things, had had a leading role in the recording of several of Snakes N’ Barrels’ albums. Not mastering, they were meant to send the demo off to mastering but hadn’t gotten the chance. It had really broken their hearts. Yes, Mr Offdensen. Really put a nail in their
tyres, so to speak.

If you could recount the night of the event, Pickles? Mm hmm, Pickles liked the way that Charlie didn’t call him Mr Pickles like everyone else in this godforsaken courtroom. He was quite fond of Charlie indeed... scribbling on the paper in front of him as he began to speak, his eyes downturned, not really looking at what he was drawing. The night in question. The studio all day, three cases of beer. A fight between Magnus and Nathan, or as close as they ever got, which was Magnus whinging and Nathan crossing his arms and staring at the wall while Pickles tried to quip back. He didn’t tell Charles this, as Charles did not ask. And that was how you dealt with lawyers. That was how they liked to be dealt with.

Then the Masquerade and beer, and where Frank had been. Pickles had spoken to him. Nathan had been in a funk. Then the Castle, tequila shots. Pickles counted the venues off on his fingers. He and Nathan had been approached by a goth impressed with the band, and had managed to find Murderface and Magnus before they’d ‘spoken to him’ out the back, his expression changing ever so slightly to hint to Offdensen that he should not chase that. They’d smoked a blunt with him, duh. Skwisgaar was long gone as he tended to be outside of band duties. Nathan had dissolved into a tequila-fed nightmare of goth girl gyration on the dance floor and, as fucking... bad as that was for him Pickles had left him to it because Nathan really needed to get laid.

Another warning look as the words out of his mouth were, could really use some company lately. Fortunately Nathan’s testimony was already over. The frontman glared at him from the Bar table, arms folded in front of him. Here it came. It was coming, burping up out of him in frustration, Idiot Nathan, Florida’s underwhelming answer to the Hulk, half as articulate and twice as destructive. Here it fucking came.

“Fuck you, I do not need company - - “

Pickles rolled his eyes in the witness box, about to open his mouth in retaliation when Offdensen cleared his throat into the attorney mic pointedly. “You were saying, Pickles?”

Right. As he was saying.

Pickles had retired to the bathroom wherein he had discovered Magnus, pinning a goth girl – not his girlfriend, though Pickles neglected to mention the fact - to a toilet stall and bribing him to leave them alone almost immediately. The bribe was unmentionable in a courtroom (cocaine – had he had it in his pocket all this time, all through recording, and not thought to share? The asshole!) and Pickles had insisted upon partaking right there in front of the couple with Magnus glaring daggers at him and then mumbling to the girl that they should go back to his car, which – mind you – Pickles was fairly sure was still parked halfway across the city. They’d slunk out and so Pickles had gotten to powder his nose and piss in peace so, aces wild, y’know?

When he’d come out there was no sign of Magnus or the girl, or Nathan, who was usually pretty easy to spot across a dancefloor. Pickles could find no sign of him and concluded that he’d managed to shepherd some goth girls to a taxi, and, hey, Pickles would meet them back at Mordhaus and even if he didn’t pull tonight, there might be some sloppy seconds for him at the end of it – although girls who were interested in Nathan were rarely interested in Pickles. He had spotted Murderface being loudly rejected across the club, felt that everything was right in the world, and ultimately relaxed into the game of it, you know, hanging around the bar and introducing himself and his oral curriculum vitae to any ladies that caught his eye as they came up for a drink (“Ya know that song, Liquid Sunshine, yeah! You know it. You like that, you like that song? Well, I made that.”).

It hadn’t worked, like maybe he was looking particularly wrecked that night but it was getting less
and less of a sure thing for Pickles as the years passed. He tried not to think about it, since he knew what it was—premature balding, the tug on his face from decades of drug abuse, waning fame and most importantly of all, empty pockets—so there were no answers to look for, nothing to muse on, just panic to plump up inside himself and that cold, nauseating feeling that settled deep in the chest. This night was unlucky, and he’d just chalk it up to that, unlucky; it wasn’t like he’d been rejected, not straight up, just seen them throw that casual laugh over their slender shoulders and pulled his own helpless grin back, turned to the barman for another tequila and lime.

Something cathartic about the ritual of throwing that shit back, but by the end of the night he could feel the sweat coming over him, the horror, and he decided it was time to give in. If he ran into a streetwalker on the way home, maybe that was an option—oh, no, cos he was down to his last few dollars until royalty day again thanks to the tequila. Couldn’t even get a taxi. Pickles found Murderface, vomiting on the street outside after he’d been thrown out of the club, and tried to convince him to call Magnus for a ride but no dice, Pickles could barely articulate himself beyond vowels and Murderface had witnessed something sinister within himself that night, or possibly just within the goth chicks, judging by his expression.

They’d walked home together, and by the time they’d struggled their way to the top of the apartment stairs, Murderface was leaning on the brickwork and looking like he was about to cry or vomit or turn inside out or something. He did vomit, in the end, as Pickles was trying to coax him inside, and Pickles had taken pity on the kid, volunteering his bed for the night—Pickles would sleep on the floor—which was a great idea until Murderface vomited on his mattress, and Pickles had just stood there, staring at the mess, and let out a shuddering sigh.

Murderface was placed in the living room.

Since it was now the early hours of the morning and he had no bed and even less will to clean up puke, Pickles had decided to try his luck with those sloppy seconds, so to speak, and had cracked the door to Nathan’s room open, covertly removing his clothes as he loudly whispered, Hey... or as close to that as he got when he was fucked, which was, uh, not really like that at all, but the intent was there. Nathan would understand—did understand, stirring in the dark and shooting Pickles a shattered glare but not protesting his presence. Pickles clocked that Nathan was alone, something he’d guessed upon entering the room to the strong, sour scent of alcoholic sweat and not stale sex, and stood for a moment with his jeans in his hand considering his options. And the only real one was shove Nathan’s massive feet aside and sleep at the end of his bed.

In the box, of course, Pickles held his tongue and waited for Charles to ask for details, following his expression for when to stop, when to expand, and Charles was happy with his testimony. Pickles could see it in his face, his calm in the face of the shitstorm, his eyes lowered to the papers before him on the stand as Pickles span the pen around his fingers idly. And wasn’t that nice. It gave Pickles great satisfaction to see Charles content, and he felt they played each other perfectly, you know, shared a vibe. Knew each other’s notes, if you would. And you would, wouldn’t you? If Pickles was looking at you like that, with that smug smile, leaning back in his chair, casting it across the jury, so pleased with himself. He was sure. Fuck the Californian courts, whatever bad luck he’d had there. Florida was the answer.

“And, ah, do you recall much of the following morning?” asked Charles, which was a way of subtly asking Pickles not to. The drummer shook his head obediently.

“Er, it takes a lot for me to black out these days, ya know, but the hangovers... they only get worse for each year you’re alive, dude. All I remember’s the migraine, right?” Pickles sniffed, diverting his eyes to the random circles and lines he’d drawn around the edge of the sheet of paper in front of him, then looked back at the lawyer with a smirk. “To be frank with ya, Charlie, I don’t know how
I managed to remember half of what I have, man, y’know. My cheese is fulla holes.”

“Mm hmm. Swiss, would that be,” remarked Charles absently as he re-read his notes, and Pickles grinned at him, oblivious to the eyes ping-ponging between them from around the court.

“More room for the hot air, ya know, Chuck,” he said, and Charles looked up at him under his brow in a way that clearly articulated don’t call me Chuck without a word on his behalf. Pickles dropped his head as he waited for the lawyer to sort himself out, mulling on it. Well, most of the people in this courtroom were calling him Chuck, how was he to know it wasn’t okay for him? For that matter, how was Charlie fine but Chuck not? Fuckin’, same thing, weren’t they? Jesus.

Charles pushed ahead, and Pickles obediently confirmed what he said. Yes, sir, two girls at the Castle. No, sir, they hadn’t released a demo. Three bags full, sir. He took the pages of Exhibit 2, glad for once it wasn’t his lyrics or tax returns, flicked through it raising his eyebrow and smirking at the bile spewed by the forum posters. Man, it did feel good to make people react.

“Do you recognise this document, Pickles?” asked Charles coolly, and Pickles met his still gaze innocently.

“Not a clue, dude. This is a world wide web, double-u-double-u thing, ain’t it? Eh, I don’t even have an Internet,” he said, and suddenly everyone in the courtroom was looking at him. “Err, huh?”

“Ah, Pickles,” said Charles gently, tapping his pen on the side of the stand, “You’re aware that, ah, the Internet – it’s not a thing you have, aren’t you...? It’s, ah... you have an Internet connection, on a personal computer or a, ah, laptop...”

Pickles glared back at him, humiliated. “Whatever, no one gives a shit,” he said after a time, feeling small, and Charles cleared his throat.

“Right, moving on.”

Pickles jumped through his hoops until Charles was left at the end of his questions, nodding to himself and then looking up at the Judge. “That’s all I had, your Honor,” he said and took his seat, and Pickles looked up at the man presiding over him.

“Oh, already over?” he asked, and Berman peered down at him over his half-moon glasses. “Disappointed?”

“No, no, it’s fine. Dandy even. Just, eh... usually takes longer, ya know...” Pickles directed his gaze away, and while the lawyers swapped places, popped another stick of nicotine gum into his mouth, ignoring Nathan’s loud groan from the Bar.

CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. VERNON:

And J.C. Fucking God, he was glad he managed to squeeze it in by the look of this fucking creep. Pickles winced as Vernon sized up to the stand, his smile straining through his tight lips and the tingle of the gum on the back of his tongue.

“Good afternoon, Mr Pickles. I am Herbert Vernon, attorney for the defendants. I just have a few questions, if you could humor me?”

“I used to be quite a fan of yours, Mr Pickles,” the lawyer informed him as he turned to the right page of notes, and Pickles nodded vacantly, putting pen to paper again.

“Pickles, thanks. That’s cool, y’know. You’re welcome.”

Q. Most of us here would recognise you, although it must be said you have laid low for a while. You were in the band called Snakes N’ Barrels, yes?

A. Yeah, that’s the one. Mm hmm.

Q. Yes. And you must have made quite a bit of money from that success, yes?

A. Uh, enough, yeah, sure, I’d say so.

Q. You didn’t hold on to any of that to fund your next musical endeavour, Mr Pickles?

A. Mm, it’s just Pickles. To be honest with you, Herbie, didn’t think there would be another one, y’know? I had, uh... other things on my mind, you dig?

Q. What would those things be, Mr Pickles?

Pickles didn’t immediately respond, scratching at the paper with the ballpoint pen in front of him. “Drugs,” he said eventually, glancing up at the lawyer. “Is your next question gonna be where’d all the money go? Cuz the answer’s the same. I mean, I already told all of you it’s drugs. Drugs and alimony.”

He looked down at his idle sketch, feeling bleak. “Good song title, huh,” he said, looking back up at the lawyer, and Vernon smiled at him like a rattlesnake.

“Do you use drugs, Mr Pickles? I see my friend rising, so let me rephrase that.”

Charles, who was indeed buttoning his jacket in anticipation of rising from his seat, scowled at Vernon and sank back down.

“Did you, at the time in question, the 24th of February 1998, have a drug habit, Mr Pickles?”

Pickles cast a glance at Charles, but seeing he had not moved again looked back up at Vernon with a curious cock of his head. “Yes,” he said, and rolled the nicotine gum over his back molars lazily.

“Yes. And what substances did this habit consist of?”

Pickles could see Charles getting antsy at this, could pick up on it, you know, with their connection. Something about the way he sat. Beside him, Nathan was gazing at Pickles curiously as well, a calming presence, and by the lawyer's silence he assumed the same questioning had been put to the singer.

“I mean, what constitutes a habit?” said Pickles, shrugging, “I mean. I wouldn't say -- “

“In an average week, what intoxicating substances were you consuming, Mr Pickles?” asked the lawyer patiently, and Pickles smirked at him.

“Okay. On a weekly basis, at that time, February, uh huh, then it woulda been, well, I was
smokin'. Tobaccy, standard and wacky varieties. But, y'know, you can't exactly be a cannabis addict. It's just not possible.”

“I see. And?” asked Vernon, and Pickles thought about it a moment.

“And nothin'. As far as a habit goes. Everything else was strictly, y'know... on, eh, a when you can get it basis.” Which, for Pickles, was often. But you know.

“In his earlier testimony, your friend Mr Explosion implied that together you consumed a substantial amount of liquor in a week, Mr Pickles,” said Vernon with a smirk, and then leaned back to receive brief advice from his sharp-dressed intern - “A minimum of forty-five standard cans a week by Mr Keane's reckoning, I am informed.”

Pickles thought about it, running through the mental maths with ease. “Oh. But, eh, a bit more than that? Yeah. Cuz the ones we get on Sunday are Headwrecker, and they come in 16 oz cans, y'know? A six of 16 ouncers.” And he gestured the size with his hands. “No one does it bigger, heh.”

Vernon swayed slightly at the podium. “Sunday as well. Perhaps you could elaborate on what 'Headwrecker' is, Mr Pickles?” he asked, blinking back his curiosity like a frog pushing its catch down its throat with the backs of its eyeballs, “I am not familiar.”


The court stirred suddenly, all as one with a rustling like birds disturbed, as Nathan raised his voice over the courtroom. “See Pickles I told you they were better than that shit. Lawyers. They’re posh. Y'know.”

“Yeah, well, I still say, if they're good enough for Biggie they're good enough for Charles. I mean, he's a gangster, right?”

Pickles indicated to Charles, who was staring, his eyes wide with anger, at the end of his intern's pen, the intern himself gaping at the exchange. He heard Nathan say, “What?” in response to something Charles had snapped to him, and then, “No. Uh, I can talk when I want.”

Another scolding from Charles, and Vernon, watching this smug-faced from the podium, leaned into the mic to remark, “Fraternizing, Chuck?”

Pickles smiled as the lawyer popped up at the Bar table, glowering. “That is entirely inappropriate, Herb, and irrelevant -- “

“See, gangster,” said Pickles smugly into his own mic, and Nathan laughed from the Bar, at least until the Judge brought down his gavel with a sharp smack that silenced the court like a ruler snapped over a schoolboy’s palms.

“Order, please,” barked Berman, and the court cowered, ashamed. “Chuck, come on. You're better than this. We're not even at the break yet.” But Offdensen was already seated again, staring at the intern's pen, seething in place.

”Mr Explosion, you may not have been informed, but you are not permitted to speak from the Bar. If you have something to say you can advise your lawyer and he will raise the objection if it's relevant. But only Mr Offdensen is permitted to speak for your party, understand?”
Nathan stared up at the Judge. Berman leaned forward from his box, peering over his half-moon glasses at Nathan. “Do you understand, Mr Explosion?” he asked, slower, and Nathan sat silently until Charles got his attention with a hand waved curtly in his field of view.

Pickles heard him hiss, “Nathan, you must respond if spoken to,” and Nathan grunted back at the lawyer then turned his attention to the Judge.

“Uh, you said not to talk.”

“Just listen to your counsel, Mr Explosion. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Pickles smiled pleasantly at the exchange and dug his gum from his back molar, pressing it under the brim of the witness box's desk. He was a good kid, Nathan. Pickles’ gaze moved placidly between the parties as he felt down his jacket for his carefully secreted flask, weighing heavily in his inside pocket and eyeing off the opportunity to steal a sip. Alcoholism was a bitch, hey...? But he wasn’t gonna sit through cross-examination with fucking termites running under his skin.

“All right, thank you. Mr Offdensen, I'll hear you now if you have something to say in reply to accusations of fraternization?” asked the Judge, shuffling his papers, and Offdensen rose quickly without even buttoning his jacket, without even looking at the Judge.

“No, thank you, your Honor.”

And then seated himself again immediately. The Judge peered at him from on high, curious. “Very well,” he announced, “Let the record show that as of 12:30 pm on Monday, the 5th of October 1998, Charles Foster Offdensen Esquire has gone native.”

Charles was already on his feet, complaining, “Your Honor -- “ but the Judge merely glanced at him dismissively over his papers.

“Publica fama non semper vana, as they say, Charles. We ought refresh your Latin lest you have neglected it in your Supreme Court business. Proceed, Mr Vernon.”

Charles sat down again and gave an unhappy snort, his arms folded in front of him in a vicious mood, and Pickles was forced to return his flask to the pocket in his jacket lining without taking a sip. The steel burned under his fingers as he drew them away and smiled bright at the opposition's lawyer, but he noted, from his own side, Offdensen's second, more demure snort, not this time of contempt but rather chemical burn, crystal laceration, and Pickles would know, wouldn't he?

“Would you say that you have a drinking problem, Mr Pickles?” asked Vernon smugly, and Pickles wrinkled his nose at him, his arms crossed before him mirroring his lawyer and Nathan at the Bar.

“'Scuse me?”

“Ah-huh, forgive me. As at the 24th of February, 1998, would you say you had a drinking problem?”

“I appreciate it. No. No more than any other American, dude. I mean...” Pickles cleared his throat. Funny, now he'd noticed Charles suffering, his nose and throat was beginning to prickle as well. “I mean. As at the 24th of February, 1998, I could quit whenever I wanted to, y'know. Whatever.”
Q. Thank you. Now, you mentioned the recreational drug cannabis?

A. I did.

Q. In the weeks leading up to the night in question, did you consume cannabis with Magnus Hammersmith?

A. Mm. Yes. I did.

Q. A lot? A little?

A. A little.

Q. By your standards or by my standards, Mr Pickles?

A. I dunno, dude, how much do you toke? I mean, your name is Herb --

Q. None, Mr Pickles.

A. Oh. I geddit. Sure. None. Okay, well then, a lot.

Q. Did you witness Mr Hammersmith consuming any other intoxicating substances in the weeks leading up to this event?

A. Oh, hmm. Mm hmm. Well, I mean. As an observer, right, how can you say? I mean, you see someone with a pipe, how can you say like, that's tobacco or that's crack, you know what I'm saying?

Q. All right, so did you witness anything that would suggest to you that Mr Hammersmith was smoking crack cocaine?

A. Oh, hmm. Tough one. I ain’t really familiar with the stuff, but I gotta say, not really his style, dude.

Q. Any paraphernalia, Mr Pickles? You mentioned pipes?

- - -

Pickles sat up abruptly, his pierced eyebrows raised as he let the question glide off him. “Y'know, Mr Vernon, I'm havin', like, a real vivid experience of déjà vu just now, like hella, dude,” he pointed out, giving a theatrical shiver, “Like someone walked over my grave, man. It's almost like I've heard all these questions before. Y'know what I'm sayin'?"

Vernon smirked at him. “Yes, yes,” he said, and lowered his head slightly, “For certain, yes. We all – all watched that case before the LA circuit, it - well, everyone turns out for a rockstar case, as you can clearly see today.”

“Mm hmm,” said Pickles, and brushed a hair off the sleeve of his jacket, “I miss that blue suit man. That was a fuckin dope suit.”

“It had a certain something, yes.”

“Don't fit me no more, too damn loose round the waist and shit. Life's hard down here on the East Coast, Herb... ain’t no time to fuckin' work out no more. I’m wastin away, dude.”
“Well, my apologies if my questions mirror those that have come before. But they are relevant to the matter at hand - - ” started Vernon, but Pickles beamed to see Offdensen rising from his seat once again like a marionette pulled up by the shoulders, rubbing his nose with the back of his hand abruptly as he rose.

“Sorry, your Honor, ah, Mr Vernon, I must rise to refute here. I, ah, do not believe it's relevant. Petty - ah. Petty discrediting tactics, your Honor, witness impeachment - it's, ah, transparent the direction this questioning is headed and it's ultimately irrelevant to the case at hand.”

The Judge considered this, stroking his short white beard thoughtfully. Too long seemed to pass, the hole between them filled only by coughs from the audience and the space left by the cessation of the stenographer's key tapping widening the silence. Pickles itched after his flask. Then Berman said, “Change the topic, Vernon,” and the entire room breathed out in relief.

“May it please the Court.” Vernon looked down as he shuffled through his notes, picking another page before he looked up at Pickles and smirked. Man, that flask was getting heavy in his pocket.

Judge Berman looked at his watch mutely, as if counting the seconds as they passed, and said, “Are you going to be much longer on this witness, Herb?”

Vernon gazed up at him with glassy eyes, his fingers run down the edge of his papers. “I confess a while, your Honor,” he said eventually, and pursed his lips, “I do not think this witness is going to give in easily.”

Pickles smirked.

“Very well. Just starting to infringe upon our luncheon break, you know – I may need to stop you soon.” The Judge tapped impatiently on the face of his watch, but waved Vernon on anyway.

“Mr Pickles, if I can take you back, now,” Vernon started, and Pickles nodded eagerly, anxious to get this over with and choke down the contents of his flask. “To the night of Tuesday, the 18th of August this year.”

And Pickles’ happy face suddenly dropped to a disgusting, sheepish grin. “Ah, uh oh!” he said gleefully, holding on to the desk in front of him, his eyes wide, and Vernon grinned back at him.

“Quite. What were you doing that night, Mr Pickles?”

Pickles sweated in his seat, his smile long and weird as he looked up under his brows at Vernon. “Ahhh huh, yeah! Right, cool, uh. You sure you wanna know? Cuz like, I gotta hunch you ain’t gonna like this.”

“Just answer my question, Mr Pickles. This is a court of law.” Vernon smiled at him with a viciousness that disguised an uncertainty Pickles saw easily, and the drummer giggled strangely from the witness box.

“Okay, you asked for it! Sorry or whatever!”

There was this place called the Odeon, downtown Tampa. An ancient cinema, a real theatre kind of place with the red upholstery and drapery, the flaking gold, the splintering wood. It had been on the circuit since the 40s at least, but had long fallen through the floor through double features, Hammer Horrors, and then grindhouse trash and skin flicks, the seats stained and the carpet matted, the stale smell in the air. Pickles felt a kinship with the place, had since Magnus had first dragged him there to see some cannibal alien splatterflicks on a Sunday afternoon.
Now Pickles hadn’t been a stranger to porno when he’d come to Florida, and he hadn’t been a stranger to casual sex or orgies either – which was the direction this story was heading in, and he kneaded the denim of his jeans on his knees as he explained sheepishly, the corner of his eye on Offdensen’s growing stare of horror down at the Bar table and Nathan’s confused grimace. What he had been a stranger to was acquiring group sex when you weren’t a rock star. Every orgy than Snakes N’ Barrels had been part of was a Snakes N’ Barrels orgy, y’know, just like twenty girls and them. They didn’t even have to try. And when it all fell through... there wasn’t shit, anymore. No good drugs, no adoring fans, and most of all, no orgies.

Pickles had gotten so used to fucking multiples that going back to just one started to feel alien to him, too intense or he’d get distracted half way through, or – or bored – or – fuck, anyway. Sitting two seats across from him in the Odeon and pushing on the seat back in front of him with his Cuban heels, the chair squeaking beneath the screaming of a young blonde woman on the screen as an alien sawed into her chest with its proboscis, Magnus said, “Y’know, they have a swingers’ night here on Tuesdays,” and all at once, Pickles had realised what had been missing from his life.

The problem with swingers’ night was that you had to be in a couple to get in. Pickles wasn’t dating anyone, see, he was extremely against the idea in light of his alimony, as previously noted. Any individual girl barely survived two weeks by his side before they were chucked to the dogs, here meaning the rest of the band or at least those beneath Pickles in the pecking order – so Murderface and Magnus, basically, and sometimes Skwisgaar if he wasn’t feeling picky, and so he and Magnus (deeply amused by his interest in infiltrating Florida’s swinging scene) had hatched a plan to get in. They would pretend to be a couple, a gay couple, and then bang all the hot wives they wanted. It was super genius, man. And worst of all, it totally worked.

Pickles didn’t tell the court all of this, skimming over the gnarly details, but he was sure it was implied, y’know? From the stares of utter dismay and dread he was getting he guessed it was. So that was where Pickles was on the night of Tuesday the 18th of August, 1998, the same place he was every fucking Tuesday night, which was standing very close to Magnus at the door of the Odeon and grinning wide beneath his aviators at the security thug they had watch the entrance down there to disguise his hard gurn. And then he’d been fucking everyone he could get his hands on for a solid five hours while skin film after skin film rolled in the background, until he was spent, until he could barely move from it, and then...

“Hold on,” said Vernon quickly, cutting off Pickles as he leaned over the podium, “Clarify something for me, Mr Pickles?”

“Yeah.” Pickles leaned back in his seat, gave a soft sniff and rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. They were onto him. At the edge of his vision, he could see Charles leaning on his elbows over the Bar table, a white handkerchief pressed to his brow and covering his face in humiliation. Nathan was torn, couldn’t decide whether he was horrified Pickles was a queer or sore at missing out. But the guy was still just a kid. He was barely legal to drink. Pickles couldn’t exactly sneak him in there, could he? He respected Nathan more that expose him to that sordid underbelly.

“Are you saying that Mr Hammersmith is a queer?” Vernon’s eyes had a fox-like sharpness to them as he asked, holding a pen up to Pickles, and Pickles jerked back in confusion.

“What? No – ” he’d started to yap back defensively, but a guardian angel was rising to his aid, pocketing the white handkerchief as he stood.

“Objection,” said Charles, and the Judge merely waited for him to shove the handkerchief back in his pocket properly. “Your Honor, I cannot listen to this any longer. Again, ah, my friend defaults to the character attacks and although I concede that this matter does rely, ah, heavily on witness
credibility, there is a limit, your Honor. My clients’ sexualities have nil bearing on the case at hand and such accusations constitute an *ad hominem* argument which is, frankly – which is just *puerile*.”

There was silence, pen tapping. “*Ad hominem*, Chuck,” said Berman slowly, looking over his notes, and Pickles shifted in his seat as he watched his lawyer blanch at the Bar.

“... yes, your Honor.”

“Or an appeal to motive, Chuck?”

Charles had gone a nice shade of pale green, the tip of his nose a tell-tale pink, and Pickles grinned woozily at him from his box. If they kept this up, he might even get a chance to drink, his fingers running over the smooth edges of his flask inside his jacket thoughtfully.

“Ah,” said Charles, hiding his stagger as he locked himself in place for the argument, “Same – they’re the same, your Honor.”

The Judge leaned back in his box, resting his hands on his paunch with a casual confidence. “Though not really, are they, Chuck?” he asked, and Charles steeled his face, ignoring Vernon’s cheesy smile from the podium where he leaned on his arms, fingers laced before him with delight.

“Ah, well, not all, ah, birds are ducks but all ducks *are* birds, your Honor. In this fashion –”

“But nonetheless they sit, correct, Mr Offdensen? What do you think, *argumentum ad odium* instead?”

Charles gaped up at the Judge uselessly, and Pickles slowly drew out his flask, keeping a careful eye on the bailiff as he snuck it out.

“Quickly, Offdensen,” said Berman, and he gave a short clap against his palm with the pen still held in his fingers and leaned forward in his box, “You’ve gone soft with the big wigs, boy. *Argumentum ad odium*, appeal to – ?”

Charles baulked, but gathered himself quickly. “*Ad odium*, ah, that’s – *odium*, hatred. Appeal to spite. But it’s, ah, not relevant in these circumstances; relating to – to the vilification of an argument not of an individual – so *ad hominem* –”

“Nice work,” said the Judge, chuffed, and smiled down at him. “Think fast – *ne exeat*.”

“Oh,” said Charles, realising what was happening, and his shoulders dropped slightly. Pickles eyed the Court curiously, slowly turning the top of his flask and wondered what the hell he was watching. “*Ne exeat, ne exeat republica*, no exit – prevent – preventing exit, a restraining writ, your Honor.”

“Beautiful. *Publica fama non semper vana*, to bring back an old friend from earlier this morning?” asked the Judge, and Pickles grinned as he pretended to drop his pen beneath the desk in the witness box, ducking to retrieve it as he pulled out the flask. As much as he’d love to see Charles get roasted, there were more important matters at hand.

“Rumours are not always false,” replied Charles, though he drew his chin in slightly in deference. Pickles, below the desk, chugged back the booze and only spilt a little down his beard.

“Good man! Not so bad now, are we!” said the Judge with a hearty chuckle, and Pickles raised his head to his booming voice again as the spirits still burned in his mouth, “*Magna di curant, parva*
Charles, like a scolded school child, stood stock still at the Bar. “Cicero. The gods watch over great things, but they neglect the small ones,” he bleated obediently, staring into space, and Pickles, sitting back in his chair and pocketing the flask subtly, could see the contempt seething under his skin as Vernon leaned towards him from the podium.

“What about, _divide et impera_, Chuck?” he sneered towards Charles, and the lawyer glared sharply back at him.

“Divide and conquer, Vernon. Now, if you’re, ah, quite finished?” Charles gave a short sniff, withdrawing his handkerchief once again. “With all due respect, I raised an objection and I require a verdict, your Honor.”

The Judge chuffed at his assertion, a pride held in him, and then held up his watch to squint at it again. “Well, Chuck, I was going to but it occurs to me that we’re substantially into the luncheon adjournment now. Would you mind waiting? Gives me time to consider – and you to take instructions.”

Like they needed to be taken. Pickles leaned back in his high chair, resting his sole against the desk and rocking bored. He’d as happily have a cigarette as give Charles instructions, and he thought Charles knew this, the way he battled not to roll his eyes or betray a twitch of his frustration beyond the cool rage that boiled off him. “Thank you, your Honor,” said the lawyer, and took his seat again, touching Nathan on the arm on the way down. That was that.

“Vernon, all fine with you?” asked the Judge, shuffling his papers together as the Court moved as one to pack.

“May it please,” Vernon replied, and, leaning on the podium towards him, he smiled lizard-like at Pickles as the drummer scraped his gum back off the desk and popped it into his mouth again. “My apologies, Mr Pickles, for the derailment there. You wouldn’t mind picking up this topic when we return?”

And Pickles had been waiting for this moment for the entire conversation, stretching a smirk as he leaned back in the seat and chewed the stiff gum back to life, and slurred, “_Vade ante, faciat mea die._”

He heard the Judge give a snort from on high. “Very good. You’ll remain under affirmation, Mr Pickles. Don’t talk to anyone about subjects related to your testimony while you’re at lunch, including and especially those not present. And don’t drink in my Court.”

Pickles cowered in his seat with a sheepish smile, rocking back onto all four chair legs again. Dang.

“Thank you, we’re adjourned until two. I’ll rise.”

_Court stands adjourned._

_(LUNCHEON ADJOURNMENT)_
YEAR ZERO

They had sat in the waiting room all day, Skwisgaar pinned to the wall and staring into space, Murderface reading the provided magazines and occasionally providing commentary, and Magnus in embrace with his girlfriend, glued to one another in adjacent chairs, whispering to one another as they moved anxiously together. It had been easier when Pickles was there, someone for Murderface to banter with, but as soon as he left there was nothing but the ticking clock.

Murderface tried to speak to Magnus too, usually one to at least bait him. But the man was silent, staring occasionally at him under his brow and then turning back to the girl. This was not good. When Magnus was silent, you knew something was going on. Skwisgaar could not say what it was, but sometimes that ticking felt like it was coming from the man himself instead of the clockface.

They all spilled out at lunch, Pickles, Murderface, Magnus and his girl immediately exiting the building to have a cigarette in the parking lot. Skwisgaar remained, watching their lawyer pace and fret, rubbing at his nose with a handkerchief as he spoke on the phone to some third party, and Nathan, lurking, also with a mobile pressed to his luggish head.

Skwisgaar huffed to himself and took pity on the lawyer, who had sat in one of the uncomfortable chairs and was talking with anxious pressure into the mobile, stalking to the watercooler and retrieving him a flimsy plastic cup of cold water. When he offered it, glaring at Offdensen, the lawyer looked up at him in surprise and even said, “Thank you, Skwisgaar,” quietly between negotiations as he took it daintily from him.

Skwisgaar was not overly fond of the lawyer yet. He did not like lawyers on principle - shady characters, polecats, looking for a soft throat to bite onto and hold until death claimed whatever entity they chose to latch onto. He had worked in a legal firm office as a teenager, briefly - just administrative, a role he had walked into through charming an older woman, a friend of his mother, who also ran the office.

Strange gig. In the end he’d been fired for destroying paperwork, and forced to summon himself to court - although the case had ultimately been settled outside. How was he supposed to know what was en stämning? Sounded like rubbish to him! And the paper was so thin, you know - you just tear a few inches thick off the bottom - perfect to roll - and the business cards as a roach…

Lawyers, eh… and now he had to sit in this stupid room with Murderface’s pissing in the pot plant and Magnus and his girlfriend mumbling all lovey-dovey to each other… it made him stir crazy! It wasn’t even a real pot plant! He caught snatches of the whispering occasionally too,
eavesdropping out of boredom. *Babe, it’s all going to be okay.* Of course it was all going to be okay. It *always was.* Dildos.

Pickles and the couple returned shortly, Pickles looked harrowed and immediately sitting next to the lawyer, all three of them stinking of tobacco from standing under the courthouse eaves in close quarters against the pouring rain. Charles lowered the phone, muttering to the person on the line, “Two secs -- ” and beckoning Magnus over. “It’s very unlikely we’ll get to your evidence today, ah, Magnus. You can go home if you’d like.”

“Huh, cool,” said Magnus in his subdued, paranoid tone, a watcher. It was easy for Skwisgaar to read by now, in tune with his other half in the melodic section. Magnus was not happy about it. But then an order was an order. “What about Will - and, uh, Skwisgaar?”

“William too. Skwisgaar -- ” Charles looked up at him, dull-eyed - always dull-eyed. “If you could stay? We might get to you.”

Damn it. Skwisgaar heaved a sigh. Alone in the waiting room then. Somehow that was even worse. Maybe he could go jack off in the bathrooms or something.

“Oh, yes. Thank you for --” Charles was turning back to his phone when Magnus indicated for his attention again with a slightly raised hand. “Sorry, ah, one more moment. Yes?”

Who are you speaking to?” asked Magnus, slow and careful, and Charles frowned at him, a strange expression that betrayed a hint of pride. Just barely. Skwisgaar watched intently.

“Ah, a Mr Chuck Schuldiner of CMR.”

“CMR…?”

“Ah, Crystal Mountain. This is an important call, for you. If you’d let me get back to it --”

But Magnus’ expression had taken on something sharp and predatory; he stood straighter, regarded Charles with respect. “Are they gonna sign us?”

“Ah. They want to see you play first.” Charles was very careful with his words, studying Magnus back. The guitarist held his girlfriend’s hand, the woman sticking close to his side.

“And the Supreme Court? They’re in?”

Charles sniffed softly, lowering the phone and putting his hand over the receiver. “You have to get there first, Magnus. And as your lawyer, let me advise you - it’s not looking too good for you right now.”

As our lawyer.” Magnus tilted his head slightly, but didn’t argue the point. “I have confidence in your abilities, Chuck. You are a lucky man…”

He looked pointedly at Charles’ engagement ring, and Charles looked at it too, and turned it around on his finger cautiously. “Yes.”

“... and I believe that this is the right decision. Just a feeling I got, y’know. I think we all feel it.” Magnus looked around at the rest of the gathered band, and there was muted agreement - Skwisgaar and Murderface dropping their heads in deference, Pickles’ anxious nod, and Nathan just looking over as he grunted on to his mother, squashed into a tiny chair beside the lawyer.

Charles looked uncomfortable with the assertion, but then - knowing Magnus - that had probably
been the point. Above them, the fluorescent lights flickered again - lightning striking the building. Or supposedly so. Skwisgaar looked up at them curiously. The staff really ought to get those fixed.

“Right. I am… not a superstitious man myself. But I’ll do my, ah, mortal best,” said Charles weirdly, and fixed Magnus with a harsh gaze. “Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, Magnus.”

“Right.” Magnus turned to Skwisgaar then, letting the lawyer pick up his conversation again. “Rehearsal tonight, Skwisgaar?”

Skwisgaar looked at him blankly. It was Monday. Dethklok rehearsals were Wednesday. “Uh -- ”

“They’ll want to see us play. Are you free for rehearsal tonight?” Magnus stared straight into his eyes. Skwisgaar fucking hated that.

“Ja, I guess, whatever,” he admitted, and Magnus turned to the others.

“Rehearsal?”

“Working.” Murderface squeaked, picking at his sticky bandages and refusing to look at Magnus. Pickles likewise shook his head.

“Gotta, uh, date…”

“Jesus, you move fast,” remarked Magnus, quirking a grin at him. “Slut.”

“I’che, yeah…” The side of Pickles’ mouth tugged into a smirk, but the smile never reached his eyes. “Whatever. Alicia. She’s a nice chick, a real babe. Real clever, real sweet, tits, ass. The whole package. Think you met her.”

“Is this fuckin’… that enormous chick from Tracks on Thursday? Xena? The one that’s like eight feet tall? With the fucking... hands?” asked Magnus, stretching out his hand with a crude smile, and Skwisgaar snorted. Pickles smiled and looked at his sneakers.

“Well, yeah? She’s got huge cans, man. Each one is like… bigger than my head, dude…”

“They are definitely fake, Pickles,” said Magnus, regarding him snidely as Pickles mimed the size of this woman’s breasts.

“Who gives a fuck? Tits are tits, I don’t give a shit -- ”

“Pickles, buddy. It’s Tracks. I dunno if you’ve clued in but she’s obviously a -- ”

Pickles cut him off abruptly before he could slur the woman. “Ah, yeah, well - you’re fuckin’ a seventeen year old and a crackhead so. I’unno!” He shrugged dramatically. “Maybe it do, maybe it don’t, mean shit, dude!”

Cotton glared at him like she had seen the devil reflected in his eyes.

“Oh, don’t hold that one over me, you only just broke up with the chick fuckin’, last night, buddy! Less than 24 hours ago! C’mon!”

“Well at least she ain’t a crackhead!”

“Gentlemen.” Charles’ sharp voice cut through their argument, silencing them immediately as he
put his hand over the mobile’s receiver. “Please. Magnus, just go home. You don’t need to be here.”

Magnus glared haughtily at him, his feelings hurt, and sniffed. “Right. Last thing - Nathan?” he snapped, and Nathan looked up at him from his phonecall.

“Yeah. Yeah Mom. Yeah just -- Yeah, whatever,” he grunted, glaring at Magnus, and that seemed to be enough.

“Good. I’ll see you two later then, the rest of you tomorrow I s’pose. Bye, Charles…” said Magnus, and he slunk out, his girlfriend giving them a wave and Pickles a venomous glare as he lead her out. Skwisgaar heard him muttering, cheekily, as he passed him, giving Skwisgaar a pat on the shoulder: “How much Shit Would Two Chucks Swallow if Two Chucks Could Swallow Shit?”

Skwisgaar just stared up him in bemusement until he gave up and left down the hall, his arm around the girl’s waist. What a strange guy. Skwisgaar would never fathom him.

Charles had returned to his call, Skwisgaar listening closely for any hint of Dethklok’s future. A deal with CMR was… something else. None of his other bands had a deal like that. Even he had to admit that was really something. But the lawyer just chatted and laughed politely, negotiating, a full facade beside the terseness with which he’d spoken to the band earlier.

Finally he held the phone to his chest definitively, and looked first to Nathan - who was still grunting at his mother docilely, trying to explain why his shirt wasn’t tucked in and on television too - and then directly at Pickles, the drummer wringing the hem of his shirt anxiously in the seat next to him. “Pickles,” he said, and the guy looked up in alarm. “You’d be ready to play a, ah-like a complete set by Friday, won’t you? You’re already rehearsed, right?”

“Friday?” asked Pickles in disbelief, and then he wrinkled his nose. “What, like a headliner?”

“Ah, yes. Yes. A, ah - a special show. For the label guys. It’s a, ah, formality but they say if you can organise a show for the end of the week they’ll send someone down from New York and, ah, then it’s practically a done deal. So.”

“Um!” Pickles gawked at him. “Yeah, I mean, sure, we’re ready any time, but, uh - there’s nowhere to play! We been banned from just about all the big venues, err, the Mug won’t have us, 430 won’t let Magnus in because of that shit with the truck -- ”

“Well. I’m sure I can work something out,” said Charles demurely, and he raised the phone again. “Yes, yes. They say yes. Friday, yes. Wonderful.”

Pickles looked past the lawyer between them at Nathan, who had finally hung up on his mother. Nathan looked at Pickles. Pickles raised his eyebrows pointedly. Nathan stared at him cluelessly. Pickles widened his eyes again, darting a look at Charles chatting away to the label guy and then back to Nathan.

Nathan, his shoulders hunched defensive, on the spot, suddenly said, “Oh. Huh.”

“I mean -- ” said Pickles through his teeth, and then Charles looked up at him.

“Something, ah, wrong?”

Pickles immediately looked away. “Yep, yep – no. Fine. It’s almost time, ain’t it? Fuck. I didn’t even get in a drink,” he said, looking at the clock, and Charles eyed him suspiciously.
“Yes, we’d better get back in.” He raised the receiver one last time. “Thanks for that, Chuck. We have to head back now but - yes. I’m sure you’ll be watching. Thank you. Ha ha, yes. I’ll let them know.”

And then Pickles looked straight into Skwisgaar’s eyes, a smugness to him. Skwisgaar had never been able to understand that guy either. A band full of puzzles for him. But who needed to understand anything but their music, huh?

And then they left him to the ticking clock, alone, and at 3 pm, he left of his own accord, uncalled.

* * * * *

Silence in the court! All rise.

Court now resumes.

“PICKLES”: RECALLED ON FORMER AFFIRMATION

CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR. VERNON:

“I’m going to allow it, Chuck,” was the very first thing out of the Judge’s mouth, giving a dismissive wave, and Charles’ shoulders fell even as he took his seat again. Pickles swung his feet beneath him where he sat on the high chair of the witness box, now comfortably hammered. “Mr Vernon, your witness.”

“Thank you, your Honor.” The lawyer leaned against the podium, smiling at Pickles. The hangover was catching up with him. He clawed at the chair below him and chewed his nicotine gum compulsively.

“Where were we, Mr Pickles?” asked Vernon, and Pickles smiled sweetly back at him.

“Why, Mr Vernon, sir, I believe you were askin’ me if I ever saw Magnus Hammersmith fuck another dude. And I was about to say, it’s complicated, as these things so often are,” he purred, narrowing his eyes, “Who don’t enjoy a romp at the Engine Room, or at Tracks on a Tuesday? Or, per chance, a swingers’ night at the Odeon? We are all but human, my dude... let many blossoms bloom!”

“Point taken,” said Vernon, irate. “If you could pick up where you left off, then, Mr Pickles? On the night of Tuesday, the 18th of August, you were at the Odeon with Mr Hammersmith, and then?”

Pickles blinked and sat up in his seat. “Yeah, so, we were at the Odeon, and then...”

... and then...

... that was it.

Sure.
But “And then what happened, Mr Pickles?” pressed Vernon. And although Pickles was often a liar, and right now by omission, he eyed the unused Bible, and questioned his immortal soul. Well, and then....

It was past midnight. Everyone was just lying around on the seats naked whispering to each other or, in Pickles’ case, just fucking recovering, sprawled there, desperate for a cigarette and coming off his high. Magnus had gotten dressed again, his lanky shape silhouetted against the movie screen somewhere in the middle rows, and then had sauntered row to row until he’d found where Pickles was slumped and poked him with a boot to get up and dressed so they could leave again. Pickles would always be in awe of how many rounds that guy could get in and still bounce back up ready for anything. Once Pickles had come he was pretty much a wreck for the next hour or two, yet here was Magnus, giving him a swift shove off the chair with his boot.

“Shit, you are getting fat.”

Pickles had rolled his eyes back and slithered down onto the floor, then somehow, somehow, managed to dress himself again. “What the fuck’s got you in such a fuckin’ rush,” he’d whinged, staggering after Magnus through the cinema, “Had to skip out on a hoooot date to-night, huh?”

Not that it would have fucking mattered. But Magnus had grinned through the dark at him, a bright and cruel thing like a half moon.

“Well, and then....

“Could say that,” he’d said, he’d barked, and grabbed Pickles by the denim jacket he’d been wearing and half hurried, half dragged him out to the truck. Once they’d got there, he’d picked Pickles up by the lapels and pushed him against the truck, beaming into his face as Pickles choked on his own sudden fear.

“Are you good to drive?” he purred strangely, an inch from Pickles’ face, and Pickles had nodded so that Magnus would drop him. And he did, pushing him towards the driver’s door and chucking the keys at him over the top of the car. Pickles barely caught them, snagging them with the tip of his finger, and climbed in and Magnus, who was not good to drive, sat beside him with his boots on the dash, his body held taut and alert like a cat at three in the morning, ready to bolt down the corridor screaming. His eyes wide and jeering, thumbs racing on his mobile phone. As Pickles had fumbled with the ignition, Magnus got a call through, shaking his curls over his shoulder as he greeted their lawyer over the phone.

Pickles had heard a woman’s voice, he’d asked who it was. The engine started, it purred under his sneaker heel, and god did he miss having a car as he revved it, a soul deep craving. He knew Magnus was manic, knew as the engine roared beneath him that he was minutes away from tipping over that edge himself. He did not tell Vernon this, but knew, on some uncanny level, that Charles – covering his face with the handkerchief now – knew exactly what he meant, through and beyond his own involvement on the night.

They’d pulled out with Pickles’ driving erratic and swerving, speeding down the night streets with the windows down and Magnus pointing which corners to take as he shouted down the line to Charles. Pickles’ ears and fingers had pricked to hear Magnus boast about reconnaissance, knowing they were up to mischief. He had glowed from the sex and the sparking psychedelics still snapping at his consciousness, and been so pleased for Charles, getting to bone his hot co-worker; Pickles could just imagine the kinky office shit they got up to. S&O, more like S&M right?? And he gushed to Magnus about it, about what a hot bitch she was, and about all the shit they’d do to her if they had her for just ten minutes.

But Charles was a better man than either of them by far. A classy woman like that... they had no chance. Magnus thought differently, but didn’t elaborate – just turned up the stereo (that Possessed
bullshit he was so fond of, that Pickles was so tired of, about burning churches and the daughters of
the devil, this obsession with God and his denial) and spurred him on until suddenly snipping,
“Stop,” and grabbing his shoulder with his blunt nails biting Pickles’ bare skin, forcing him to slam
on the brakes. The truck screeched to a halt, and Magnus was immediately out and away into the
night, winding up a set of stairs into an apartment block ahead of Pickles as he was struggling to
get out of the truck and still land on his feet.

Pickles had followed but not far, getting to the bottom of the stairs before they snaked away before
him, wiggling under the first foot he placed on them. He could hear Magnus yelling somewhere in
the block, the bang of his boot hitting a door, and then his huge, broad shouldered silhouette
stalked down the stairs towards him again. “Bitch ain’t home!” he barked, and pushed Pickles
aside from where he was clinging to the stair rails as he returned to the car and pulled back a corner
of the tray’s cover. Pickles managed to turn around, saw Magnus surface with a claw hammer, and
immediately braced himself at the mouth of the stairs, his arms locked on the rails, seeing exactly
where this was going.

“Naw, Magnus. Hell no,” he warned, looking up at the man as he approached. Magnus weighed
the hammer in his hands and smiled charmingly at Pickles, stopping before him. Once upon a year
or two ago, he would have fallen for that shit. Once.

“C’mon, buddy, it’s not like I’m gonna hurt anyone,” Magnus said sweetly, holding out his other
hand harmlessly towards Pickles, and Pickles just kept staring up at him.

“Right,” he gulped, and Magnus shook his head, grinning as if the whole thing was some big joke.
Sure, it had been a couple of months since he’d tried to take shit into his own hands, or Pickles
thought it had been anyway. He giggled anxiously at Magnus, clinging to the rail, and plunged his
hand into his pocket.

“Oh, well, lemme just check, uh, how many chances I got that we can – that I’m gonna take
tonight! Huh!” he squeaked, and drew his hand out, holding it empty, defeated, to Magnus. “Oh
hey there’s none, oh, shit I guess we better gooo! C’mon Magnus! Let’s gooo home!”

And he reached for the hammer, but Magnus just smiled and peeled his hand off it slowly. Pickles
laughed, his giggle sounding giddy and weird in the still night.

“Aha, let’s goooo... c’mon dude... let’s just... drop it, leave it, go on our merry way, ahaha! Wow!”
he looked up into Magnus’ still, smug gaze, his hand floating uselessly in the air separated from
the weapon that Magnus now brought down rhythmically into his own palm, glancing past Pickles
and up the stairs. “Ahhh who is this one anyway! This Alice? Morgan? Luca...?”

“Emma,” said Magnus, and pushed Pickles aside suddenly, as effortless as rice paper. He stalked
past him up the stairs, Pickles hot on his heels.

“Oh, Emma! The Emma we’re suing, right? You know I know you said recon and all but! Don’t
you think it’s a li’l extreme to break into her house??”

Magnus stopped a second, looking back at him and blocking the stairs with one foot on the first
landing. “He said he wanted evidence from Em’s laptop. I intend to get it,” he explained with a
flourish of the hammer, and Pickles giggled at him again, bearing his teeth in terror.

“Oh, that does not sound like a good idea, no way...! Dude....!” Pickles searched desperately for
some way to dissuade him. “Uh! Maybe you ain’t thought this through! I mean she’ll have like,
uh, a code to get in, right, even if you get it that is – ”
“I know her passwords,” said Magnus coolly, and turned the corner up the next flight of stairs.

“Oh! You do. That’s not fucked up at all, dude!” Pickles lunged up the last few steps towards him, grabbing Magnus’ arm and pulling him back – but the guy barely even staggered on the landing, shaking Pickles off easily. “Dude, don’t fuckin’ do it! Dude! Pay attention to me!” snapped Pickles, trying to keep his voice down against the closed walls of apartments around them, but Magnus, lunatic, was deaf to him.

He squared himself before one of the doors, and for a moment Pickles – standing in the stairway – saw him silhouetted against the low night clouds, the sliver of the moon cut around his face and the breeze lifting his curls, and then the hammer swung against the doorknob with a sound like a nail knocked into the lid of Pickles’ coffin, and it echoed through the complex, Magnus immediately raising the hammer again, this time claw first.

“Magnus! You douchebag!” hollered Pickles, and the hammer came down, hooking into the butt of the knob as Magnus wrenched it out of the wood with a dampened splintering, his grin as savage as that waning moon.

There was nothing for it. This was going to come to fists. Pickles didn’t care what Magnus did to his girlfriends, he didn’t give a flying fuck. But he did care what he did to their case – to their money, to his future. If that meant intercepting physically, then he was going to.

Pickles ran straight at Magnus, wrenching the hammer from the lock, and threw himself at the weapon, grabbing it in both hands as he swung his weight off it and pulled it down to the landing, Magnus following with his grip tight on the handle. “Pickles!” he snarled, hauling back on the hammer, and Pickles slid across the ground on the seat of his pants, his hands wrapped around the head and claw. “Let go! You fucking parasite!”

“Lay off her! You’re fuckin’ sabotagin’ the whole fuckin’ thing!” snapped Pickles, and he shot out a kick for Magnus’ shin, causing the guy to yelp and stagger as he tried to wrestle the weapon from Pickles’ stubby hands. “You always do this! You always do this! Why do you always do this!”

Magnus swung him, sweeping Pickles’ slight body over the concrete floor with the sheer gravity of his swing, Pickles only just releasing the hammer before it smashed into the half-wall of the landing, nearly smashing his fingers. He sat there dumb a second, and then sprung to his feet, just as Magnus swung at his head.

“Woah! Woah, dude!” yelped Pickles, holding up his hands in surrender. “What the fuck, don’t swing at me!” and the fear was exhilarating, mixing with the tails of the ecstasy in his system. He stared, wild-eyed, as Magnus raised the hammer again.

“Sabotage? You fucking... tape worm!” hissed the guitarist, lunging towards him, “I know treachery when I see it, Pickles, and I see it in a fucking Wisconsin leprechaun who undercuts every damn thing I do! I’m doing this for you, for her - for all of you! Can’t you fucking see that?”

The hammer swished through the air by Pickles’ head, and he squeaked with fear. “Dude! I ain’t done nothin’ to ya! You’re fuckin’ crazy!” he squealed, and danced away from Magnus. But with every step the guitarist followed, the further from the door they got. He pushed his empty hands at Magnus, begging him. “Please! Drop the hammer, dude. Leave her alone. We’ll do it with lawyers, dude, it’ll ruin her life!”

And Magnus stopped. Pickles took a deep breath. “It ruined mine,” he said, and Magnus lowered the hammer.
The guy regarded Pickles down his nose, the hammer hefted in his palm. “And there you go again, flip flopping,” he said quietly, eyeing Pickles, “Switching sides. You don’t give a shit who’s in control, do you, Pickles? So long as it suits you, keeps your lily ass safe.”

Pickles eyed him straight back, putting a hand out to the wall to steady himself. “So what,” he replied, raising his chin defiantly, “It suits you too, don’t it?”

Magnus curled a lip at him, but lowered the hammer.

“Maybe she’ll even go to jail,” said Pickles gently, raising his eyebrow as he waited for a sign that Magnus was truly compelled. The man fixed him with a sharp stare, and then held out the hammer and opened his hand. It hit the concrete landing between them and bounced with a clang. Surrendered.

Dramatic bastard. Pickles approached tentatively, his gaze locked on Magnus in case this was a trap, but Magnus did nothing as Pickles stooped to pick up the hammer and then pass him, gesturing that he should follow. “Let’s go home,” he said quietly, Magnus following like a shadow, watchful and silent again. Pickles never comfortable taking his eye off the guy when he got like this. Jesus, it sent chills down his spine.

“I’ll drive. You ain’t in no state,” he said, and Magnus merely nodded, his eyes still wild and sharp. And he did – they returned to Magnus’ apartment, smoked a blunt, laughed about it, curled up and went to sleep.

And in the morning, Pickles answered Magnus’ phone and the rest was history, and ring burning on Offdensen’s finger. But all Pickles said was that they had broken the lock, that it was an attack on the woman but not a real one, y’know, and nothing of their fight. Nathan scowled at him from their table, his arms crossed, truly more aimed at Magnus than at Pickles. He hadn’t known. Pickles hadn’t told him. Well, it wasn’t necessary, was it? Pickles was far too lazy to be fucked keeping the guys informed on these things.

Looking across the court at their lawyer for approval, Pickles saw that he had removed the handkerchief from his forehead and attempted to blow his nose, and in the process blown out the entire inside of his nostrils in a spurt of blood, and was staring in blanched horror at the bright red stain on the white cotton. Ha, Pickles knew how that felt. He was surprised he could smell anything these days! Actually... could he, even?

“Thank you, Mr Pickles,” said Vernon coolly, and he looked up at the Judge. “I believe that’s all I have for this witness, your Honour.”

Judge Berman nodded as the lawyer returned to the Bar, and indicated loosely to Charles, frantically mopping his face and burying his handkerchief on the other side of courtroom. “Your witness, Chuck.”

Perfect. Pickles had done great. And with the itch coming on too.

RE-EXAMINATION BY MR. OFFDENSEN:

“Pickles,” sniffed Charles, trying not to look concerned as he swallowed back blood from his nose, “Ah. I have my eye on the time, so we’ll keep this short. Yes or no, if you will?”
Pickles crooked an eyebrow at him, his fingers sliding over the flask in his jacket again. This was not conventional, nay, it was a very slippery tactic Charles was pulling and he was surprised they let him get away with it, but then again – those dang marsupials, hey, Charlie? And he wanted to get home to his wife and alcoholism as much as the next man. So be it.

(He supposed in this scenario, that would make Nathan his wife. Scary shit!)

“What you have just told us answers a few of my questions – for instance, has Mr Hammersmith ever disagreed with you?” asked Charles, and Pickles nodded.

“Yeah, yeah. We, uh – it’s a combative relationship,” he said around a snide grin, “To sell it short, if you take my meanin’. But a band’s gotta have energy, y’know. Or it just falls apart. You gotta bitch this shit out.”

“I see. And he’s raised his voice to you, clearly?”

“Yep, cussed me every color of the rainbow, Mr Offdensen.” Pickles sat there like a schoolkid and swang his legs under the tall chair, watching as Charles dabbed at his bloody nose with the handkerchief with second-hand glee.

“And has he ever threatened you, Pickles?”

This time Pickles thought about it. Well, that was a question that required quite a few words to explain. Unlike Nathan, Pickles was easy pickings, quick to rile, fun to play with. He liked a bit of sport himself, and he wasn’t defenceless, but Magnus was taller even than Nathan (most of the time – both of the men stooped) and sometimes it did not feel as though those threats were hollow. Not once a man has swung a hammer at your head, manic or not.

“Yeah,” was all he said, however, chewing the dead skin from his lip.

“Has Mr Hammersmith ever physically assaulted you?” asked Charles, clearly reading off his notes, and Pickles noticed his body was locked rigid. Strange. Nathan was watching him too, judging, taking everything in.

Pickles looked at the camera on him, feeling his heart lock up with the fear of it. Shove up a wall between them. He smiled at it and winked. “Could say that.”

“You came to blows?”

“Yeah.”

“Over something...?”

Pickles winced, closing his eyes on the court. “A chick,” he admitted, and straightened his jacket. “But it’s okay. We were both pretty hot over it, y’know. Got it outta our systems.”

“Okay.” Charles watched him carefully, reading him like his pages were just open before him – Pickles hated that, the way he could just do that, and now when he was supposed to be serving them too. It was just disrespectful. “And is there anything else we should know about your relationship with Mr Hammersmith, Pickles?” he asked, and Pickles couldn’t hide the glance of a scowl before he reclaimed it, smiled charmingly at the court.

“Naw. Nothin’ to add today,” he said sweetly. “We all got demons. Maybe Magnus is just a li’l friendlier with his, I unno. Y’know what they say, with great genius comes great fucked-up-ness. I sure ain’t no angel.”
“You’d use that word? _Genius?_” asked Charles, sceptical, and Pickles shrugged.

“Well. Maybe that’s generous. But hell, we wouldn’t have the band without him, right? You need that shit. Like I said, every great band’s got its... bleedin’ heart, you get me? And maybe ours is Magnus. And maybe it ain’t. But he writes the lyrics anyway, so...” He shrugged again, higher, non-committal. Charles just frowned at him.

“Thank you, Pickles. That was all I had,” he said, and Pickles looked up at the Judge on cue, the courtroom rustling around him in prediction of what would come next.

“That completes your evidence. You are free to go, Pickles. Court adjourns now, we resume tomorrow at ten – _on time_ this time, _please_. All right. We’re adjourned.”

“Thanks, your Honor,” said Pickles obediently, and he slipped out from the box to join Nathan and the lawyer again, and try to bum a lift home in the Buick. He’d have to have a drink in the old coot’s honor. He’d have to have a drink.

_Jesus._ Thank god that was over.

**AT 4.30 PM THE MATTER WAS ADJOURNED**

**UNTIL TUESDAY, 6 OCTOBER 1998, AT 10 AM.**

Chapter End Notes

A little bird told me you were waiting for this. Never knew Toki himself was reading this fic!
“I ams just not so sures aboutks this,” said Skwisgaar Skwigelf as he stood to the side of the garage, holding the flashlight up to spotlight the lock bolting the garage door closed. “De last times I knows of someones gettingks t’reat over dis, re-cords release? De guitarists gettingks stab like, 23 time in de abdominals... areas, y’know.”

Magnus looked up at him from where he was squatted at the base of the door, his face looking gaunt and hollow in the flashlight as he hefted the claw hammer in his palm.

“Oh yeah. I heard about that. Those Norwegian guys a coupla years back, right? Real brutal, huh.”

“Ja. I tink Snogge is gettingks outs of de, uhhh, bigs house… but de ot’ers guy, Grishnackh… huh. Magne, please don’ts be gettingks put in de prisons house. We have, eugh, albums to record, y’know....”

Magnus rolled his eyes at Skwisgaar, and then shook his curls over his shoulders as he looked up at Nathan, looming over them in the darkness and shielding them from the backstreet. “Can you believe this guy?” he asked, barely even getting a grunt in response, and he smiled sweetly up at Skwisgaar. “Chill out, Skwisgaar, man. This is Florida. You heard the lawyer, nothing’s gonna happen to us,” he said, and then repositioned the lock on the concrete in the flashlight’s beam.

“Ja. I still don’ts likes it, I just... wanna puts dat out dere. Onto de tables.” Skwisgaar pursed his lips as he looked around the street anxiously, nothing but the purple Florida night lying low and smoggy over them and Magnus’ truck parked down the street. It smelt like it could rain at any moment, but the humid heat weighed oppressively on them. That they were ever supposed to rehearse was a laughable prospect, obviously an excuse from the moment Magnus suggested it – Dethklok never rehearsed without all its members, and with Pickles and Murderface absent, Magnus had to be planning something else.

He’d sat them down in the main room of Mordhaus to explain it, his gestures grand and theatrical in the harsh red light thrown from above. It wasn’t that he wanted to interfere, he’d explained for what seemed to be Skwisgaar’s benefit only as Nathan stood stoically in the corner like a Roman column, but it was important that Emma realised the consequences of testifying about certain things that had happened, or her version of them anyway, telling lies to the court. And, Skwisgaar, the court is gullible. You know that, you’ve seen that already – fucking Pickles. We need to ensure she is not telling lies... ain’t that right, Nathan?

And Nathan had lowed his head slightly, and frowned.

So... Magnus had a solution. He was going to communicate the severity to Emma, and Nathan, the muscle, was going to make sure he stayed safe while he did this. Right, Nathan? And Nathan had not met his gaze. Right. Skwisgaar was going to come along and keep watch in case someone heard. If he noticed someone coming, he just had to yell out and they’d get out of there toot sweet, Skwisgaar. So. No problem. You in?
And Skwisgaar supposed he had no choice. Now here he was, holding a flashlight as they attempted to break into her parking garage. Magnus chuckled at him from the ground.

“Seriously, it ain’t like I’m askin’ you to coup de grâce the cow, man. You’re just a fucking lookout, ain’t a smear on your fancy damn hands, Skwisgaar.” He raised the hammer, steadying it as he took aim, and then said, “Chill out,” again and hit the lock with the hammer.

There was a godawful clang that jumped Skwisgaar in his skin, and the beam of the flashlight danced as he steadied himself again. They stayed perfectly still as they waited to see if anyone had heard. A dog started barking somewhere. Nothing else. Magnus hit the lock again and this time it broke, the halves jumping across the concrete.

“Yes,” hissed Magnus, and he snared the handle on the roller shutter, hauling it up as he stood. On high alert they crept into the dark garage, silencing their footsteps, Magnus clutching the hammer as he peered into the darkness. “Over there,” he whispered to Skwisgaar, and pointed.

Skwisgaar cast the flashlight beam erratically ahead of them, illuminating the parked cars of the units’ residents. He recognised the one Magnus pointed out, a boxy red Volkswagen, from around the studio while they had been recording the demo – Emma often attended to see their manager, although she never hung around long. Something about Magnus, an aura he gave off.

Skwisgaar wasn’t certain what had happened between them – he hadn’t even noticed her around in the first place – and nor did he care. If Magnus had spoken about her he hadn’t been paying attention. He hadn’t been there for the knife incident either, and privately – secretly – Skwisgaar did not believe it was as bad as everyone made out. Magnus carried that knife around like it was a comfort blanket, and he waved it around like an orchestral baton; they’d probably just gotten scared of him rather than there being a sincere threat on the table. Magnus was like that, he used his size and decorated himself with prose and accessories to create fear, but personally he was pretty harmless. Certainly he had never harmed Skwisgaar. And that was all that mattered, right?

But as he watched Magnus cross the dark garage with confident, long strides and gouge the claw of the hammer into the car’s shiny red shell, he couldn’t help but waver.

“Err,” said Skwisgaar, and he glanced at Nathan. They were all wearing black tonight, even the ever-glittering Skwisgaar with a hoodie over his top (although no amount of danger could convince him to cover his beautiful blonde locks, and his white jeans looking lavender in the darkness), and Nathan blended into the gloom beyond apart from the grey streaks of his pale arms, his hair obscuring his face in the dark. But Nathan said nothing, did nothing, merely watched as Magnus dragged the hammer’s claws down the side of the car, leaving silver gashes in the paint where Skwisgaar’s flashlight caught it.

Okay, so just – bear with him here a moment. Maybe the law was different in Florida. But Skwisgaar was... pretty sure... that destroying someone’s car was illegal. And the thing was... doing something illegal, while they were in court. Well. It was just that that could have some repercussions. Like, Skwisgaar wasn’t sure if you could bring up this shit in a court case about stuff that happened six months ago but... okay... what if they could? Because if they could, then they were in deep shit.

“Magne,” he called over the godawful screech of Magnus vandalising Emma’s car, and the man turned aggressively to him, his curls spilt over his face as he hunched in the torchlight. There was an exhilarated madness there, pin-pricked eyes, that made Skwisgaar pull back, even taking a step backwards towards the open roller.

“What?” snapped Magnus, and Skwisgaar drew back further.
“Uhhhh! I just wonderinks, how you says, y’know,” said Skwisgaar, glancing around the garage as he mustered his courage, “Communicatinks... de, uh, severities... how dis ams s’posed to... does dat. Uhhhh. It looks like you ams just... smashinks her cars.”

“I am not smashing it. It’s just body damage, take it down to a panel beater’s... she’ll be peachy.” The hammer screeched down the paintwork as Magnus dragged it, his boots slipping on the worn concrete as he leaned his weight into it. Skwisgaar glanced to Nathan, who had not moved – Skwisgaar could see him looming outside of the flashlight’s beam, arms folded, as his eyes accustomed to the low light – and then raced back to Magnus, grinning manically ear to ear as he scraped back the red paint from the car’s steely underwork in silver clawmarks.

Magnus cast a glance at Skwisgaar, sharp-edged, and flourished the hammer. “She knows what she’s done, Skwisgaar. She knew what she was involved with. If we don’t make an example of her...” With this, Magnus grabbed the side mirror of the car and twisted it, the plastic joins crackling under his hand as he got his back behind it, until it snapped off in his hand. “... then any fucking half-cocked poser in the scene will think he can fuck with Dethklok. Is that what you want?”

Skwisgaar huffed softly. “No,” he admitted, reluctant, and did not take the side mirror when Magnus offered it to him, squinting at it instead.

“This is where it ends,” snarled Magnus through his grin, “This is where it dies. I’ve been so fucking patient with these fuckin’ people, now is the final bell!”

With a flourish, he slammed the hammer against the side of the car, the steel shell ringing out in the dark garage. Skwisgaar winced and looked to Nathan, but the hulking frontman had not moved.

“Dong,” said Magnus, grinning inanely. “A bell tower. A Death-Clock!”

Magnus turned on his heel to Nathan, gesturing operatically. “Nathan, dude, I love it! Deth-klok. What a concept, I fuckin’ love it! We are on - the same - page, you and I, Nathan! Dude!”

Nathan lowered his head in the darkness and grunted, his hair falling over his face as Magnus pointed to him, and then to himself demonstratively. Magnus always got poetic when he was ranting, going a million miles an hour. Skwisgaar leaned back into the gloom, thinking geez. Meth was one hell of a drug, huh.

“I know – that – you didn’t plan it, I know that you do not possess... like... that, uhh, depth of faculty, but somehow... yeah, damn it, buddy.” Magnus glided around to the other side of the car, dropping the mirror to the floor with a loud smash as the glass broke inside it. “We - we? Are aligned. I am the brains, and you, the power. I got it all worked out. Through this, this case, the Thirteenth Circuit, the Federal Court – the legacy of Dethklok will be - ensured.”

Magnus had just rapped on the boot of the car with his knuckle joyously when Skwisgaar jerked his head up, hearing a sound somewhere in the complex – unmistakably a heavy, secured door opening above them. Magnus looked up too, then Nathan, and they stood there in complete silence a moment, staring panicked around the garage for any sign of change until, “What?” said Magnus, and then the light went on.

Blazing, artificial white. At the foot of a concrete stairwell in front of the cars, backed against the concrete wall with one tattooed hand on the light switch and the other white knuckled – METAL spelt across them – around a crowbar, stood Emma Haevnen, alone, petrified. “Holy fucking shit,” she rasped, raising the crowbar, her eyes fixed wide on Magnus, “What the fuck are you doing.”
All three of them just uselessly stared back at her, long enough for her to add, “Get the fuck out of my house!” in a shrill yell, and Skwisgaar decided that was the line, right here, he was going to fucking run, just watch him. He took one step backwards, then another, and then one more, straight into Nathan’s chest.

Nathan’s huge hand came down on his shoulder, securing him on the spot. Skwisgaar stood up straight as he tried to think of a way out, but Magnus was already loping towards Emma, open and inviting like a dog sighting its owner after a tour of duty. “If you leave me alone with them,” snarled Nathan into Skwisgaar’s ear, “I will actually murder you, Skwisgaar.” Oh. Understandable. Skwisgaar just gulped and nodded, turning off the torch.

“Babe, babe. Hey, look. It’s okay,” cooed Magnus, crossing to Emma, and she backed up against the wall, both hands tight on the crowbar now. The other knuckles read BITCH in scratched capitals, and Skwisgaar did have to take a moment to wonder if the other guys had a point. He barely remembered Em, save as a girl Magnus had pointed out while clutching him by the V-neck, hissing beerily into his face, she’s off limits, got it, Skwigelf? And give him the credit, he’d even respected that. So he’d had nothing to say to her, you know. He had nothing to say to most people, as a matter of fact.

“Do not call me that. What the fuck. What the fuck. It is not fucking okay, what the actual fuck, Magnus!” Emma widened her stance, her tattooed biceps bulging, ready to hit him if he came any closer. Magnus stopped about three feet from her, the hammer still hanging from his fingers.

“Hey, what? It’s totally okay, babe. Chill out, okay, it’s fine, it’s under control,” he said, holding out a surrendering hand to her and smiling, and Emma bugged her eyes at him.

“Get out of my garage!”

“Baby! Please, chill, c’mon! Don’t yell! Do you want the cops to come, I mean – ?”

“Kinda, yeah! Yeah, I really do!” Emma nodded frantically, her eyes wide on Magnus and then past him to her car as he dramatically covered his ear with a hand and rolled his eyes. Skwisgaar heard her gasp, appalled.

“What the fuck have you done to my car.”

“Babe,” said Magnus again, stepping towards her, and this time he reached for the crowbar. His hand clamped around it even as Emma moved it away, and oh, wow, yep, Skwisgaar was so out of here –

-- or he would be, if Nathan wasn’t holding him in place, his weight heavy on his shoulder. His rumble was enough to remind Skwisgaar that he was serious about what he’d said earlier. Leaving Magnus alone was basically an invite for him to stray off the rails, and the more eyes that were on him, the safer this situation was. Skwisgaar knew that – he hadn’t been there at the knife-throat-death-threat incident, most of them hadn’t, just Magnus and the happy couple, with Pickles walking in on them later. If they had been there, maybe things would not have escalated – a judging audience, since Magnus was essentially insecure, a people-pleaser, if in a different way to, say, Pickles and his class-clown personality. It was important to stay, even if it got them in deeper.

But then that was the deal off, wasn’t it? Either they all got in deeper, or Skwisgaar and Nathan fucked off now and Emma or Magnus got hurt and one of them, maybe even both of them, went to jail. There was no doubt in Skwisgaar’s mind that that was the outcome here. He thought that maybe that was a risk he was prepared to take. He had never cared terribly for Magnus, and less since the guy started demanding he restructure solos around different chords mid-rehearsal. But
Nathan made a compelling argument, digging his flat black nails into Skwisgaar’s shoulder.

“You’re insane,” snarled Emma, her blonde bangs falling over her face as she tried to pull the crowbar from Magnus’ grip. Magnus loomed over her, turning with her as he held on tight, and laughed as though embarrassed, the weird sound echoing off the concrete.

“I’m not insane. I’m just – ” he grunted as Emma wrenched on the crowbar, but kept a firm hold of it, pushing back against her. Em was a strong woman, hard to shock and hard to take down with impressive physical fitness and a personality common in the metal scene, wired for darkness and capable of tackling most things. Capable of tackling Magnus’ neuroses for an entire fortnight, in the outset, and Skwisgaar knew if it came to a fight she could have decked his frail ass. But Magnus was a big man, with the desperate power of a drug-fuelled manic episode, and pushed hard against the crowbar. Slowly, Emma was being driven back.

“I’m just angry. It’s not the same, babe, you oughta know that.”

“With you it is,” she snarled up at him, but Magnus shoved her against the wall by pushing roughly on the crowbar, held horizontal across her chest in her two hands. Emma looked up at him, more furious than frightened. “Jesus, Magnus! Don’t make me hurt you.”

“I’d like to see you try, bitch.” Magnus continued pushing, leaning his weight against her. “Why do you even gotta to be like this? Man, you were so down with it when I met you! What the fuck happened!”

And this was wrong, to keep pushing like that – he could see that eventually, Magnus would win. Wrong wrong wrong, the balance was out, it was wrong to use your power like that, to push someone. Skwisgaar thought about just striding up there and hitting Magnus with the torch. He couldn’t win in a fight against Magnus, and he was definitely pulp against Magnus with a hammer, but maybe the shock – but as soon as he made a lurch towards the two, Nathan tightened his grip and pulled him back. “Don’t,” he grunted, and Skwisgaar looked up at him helplessly.

“Nathan. Why?” he hissed, and Nathan just stared down at him with all the dark silence of the oppressive night outside.

“Just...”

Just what? Just let it happen? Just stand here and watch it happen? What the fuck, what the fuck. He’d been wrong, this was slowly dawning on Skwisgaar as he watched it unfold before him – watched Magnus keep pushing. It was clear that Magnus was completely insane. Not just insane. Terrifying. Evil. And Nathan just wanted to stand here and watch? Nathan could have taken him! What the fuck! Why couldn’t he see what Skwisgaar was seeing? Why couldn’t he do something?

“You happened, Magnus!” Emma snapped, pushing back against Magnus with both strong arms straining against the crowbar, “You fucking happened. You think everyone’s fucking out to get you, like there’s a whole damn conspiracy! But the only thing out to get you is your own fucking asshattery!”

Magnus leered at her, and then wordlessly shoved harder on the bar, stealing distance from her with her surprise. The bar rode up her chest, her hands crushed against her collarbone as she gave a yelp of fright, but Emma was not weak; she composed herself, glowering at him through the sweat on her brow, and pushed back, holding him off of her.

“I can’t believe I swallowed your bullshit for a single second. The scene didn’t take anything from you, no one did, and I didn’t do shit! This is insane, Magnus. Do you have any idea how much
this shit is costing us? Do you have any idea? You’re driving me broke, all for a stupid, shitty demo and your fuck ass ego, are you fucking satisfied?” she screamed up at him, and Magnus gritted his teeth, pushing back on the crowbar. Slowly, he moved his other hand so that the butt of his palm was held against the crowbar beneath the hammer, putting his entire weight behind it – and then he was winning, shoving it quickly back and up, until it hooked beneath her chin and against her throat.

Hearing her choke was the last straw, bullshit too close to home, too domestic, of sounds in adjacent rooms and bad men, although quickly dispensed of by his mother, still flickering across his life in guttered shadows. If Skwisgaar had thought he could do anything to save her, now would have been the time to act – but he lurched back against Nathan, shocked at Magnus, until suddenly he was pushed aside by a hammy palm.

“Magnus,” said Nathan, his rough voice booming in the garage.

Magnus did not look up, kept pushing just enough to keep Emma in place as she squirmed and fought against the wall. “What?” he croaked, and Nathan loomed closer.

“What the fuck.”

A strained smile split Magnus’ frown, all teeth and fear. “Stay out of this, Nathan. You’re too stupid to understand what I’m doing here. Need I remind you what happens when you stick your fat fucking face in shit you don’t understand? If it weren’t for your bullshit, we wouldn’t even be in this situation in the first place! So shut your big damn mouth. You know your place, and I know mine,” he sneered, his eyes fixed on Emma, and Skwisgaar coughed awkwardly.

“Looks to me like yous... just, uh, trysa hurts dat ladies dere... I mean dats what it looks like,” he said, trying to fan his courage into a flame, and this time Magnus snapped his face around, his weight easing on Emma. Skwisgaar swallowed, terrified, but let his ego lead as best he could. “Don’t looks very smarts... to me... just sayin’s...”

“Jesus fuck, Skwisgaar. Why the fuck are you siding with her now? All you think about is pussy, don’t you, you fucking retar – ” Magnus started to say when Emma’s sneaker squeaked on the concrete floor and her knee rammed straight into his balls. The slur was cut off by a yelp almost but not quite exactly like a trap closing on a coyote’s leg, and as Skwisgaar realised the wrath he had certainly brought down upon himself, so did Emma push Magnus off of herself, freeing the crowbar and preparing to bash his fucking brains out with it as he was bent double before her.

“Magne!” shouted Skwisgaar, but Nathan was ahead of him, lunging forward to catch the crowbar in the air and barking with pain himself as it hit his hand. But he’d caught it, and pulled it and with it Emma’s hands upwards as Magnus awkwardly leapt into action again, hammer in fist and hand on his crotch. All eyes snapped to him in dawning dread, and Emma instantly let go of the crowbar, dropping to her feet and bolting for the stairs.

“Skwisgaar! Get her!” screamed Magnus, pointing to the stairwell, and Skwisgaar had no time to think before he was after her, easily crossing the distance and snaring her with his arms around her shoulders. He was not prepared for how much she fought, how much strength she had, lunging in his arms and forcing every ounce of strength he had just to hold on to her. If it weren’t for his weight and sheer luck, he’d be on the ground already.

“Fuck! Yes! Skwisgaar!” Magnus pumped a fist in triumph and prowled towards them with the hammer, and Skwisgaar crumpled, dragging Emma to the concrete with him as he folded. He wanted to fold over her entirely, protect her from what he saw in his mind – Magnus bringing the hammer down on his head and splitting it open, the blood and brain like strawberry jam over his
arms as he wept over her.

“Oh, by de names of Odins,” breathed Skwisgaar, looking up at Magnus. The woman stilled in his arms, both cowering on the concrete, Emma staring up at Magnus as well. Looming, ghast-faced, the hammer clutched loosely in his fist, the light so bright and artificial it washed his skin out like a corpse. Right at that moment, there was nothing more frightening that walked the earth than Magnus Hammersmith.

“Good job,” said Magnus, frowning down at them. “I knew you’d come around.” He fingered the head of the hammer thoughtfully, and Skwisgaar’s breath trembled with fear, seeing Nathan come to Magnus’ shoulder as well, his face locked in a glower.

“Magne, whoa... whoa there...” Skwisgaar pulled the woman towards him to a muted complaint, and Magnus tilted his head, listening. “You ams actin’ pretty scaries there... please don’t hurts her, she ain’ts done nothingks so bad as alls you acts like -- she ams only -- whoa...!”

To his surprise, Magnus looked straight at him a beat, seemed puzzled, and then simply dropped the hammer to the concrete. It hit with a deafening ring, and then in the silence that followed, Magnus held out his hands, empty. Nathan, too, leaned back and placed the crowbar on the ground, behind his ankle, following Magnus’ lead.

Silence. Magnus let his hands drop back. “What did you think I was gonna do?” he asked softly, tilting his head again. “I mean, I ain’t great but I ain’t that terrible, geez. I got enough problems to deal with without adding deadly assault, thanks.”

He slid his hands into his pockets, leaning back from them thoughtfully. The calm was almost more frightening than the chaos, backed by Nathan’s looming silence. “Emma, babe. Look. This has all been... a big night, yeah. And I’m sorry I broke your car mirror. But I ain’t – I just need your cooperation, okay? It’s nothing full on, I swear.”

“Right,” she said sceptically, shrugging Skwisgaar off her shoulders awkwardly. Despite her agreement, he could feel her fear.

“You know what this means to me, with the scene and all – I mean, in the Thirteenth Circuit – that doesn’t even matter, fuck! We’ll reimburse you. If we win in the Federal... babe, that’s history. You gotta understand where I’m coming from here. If we win in the Federal Court, we set a standard. I talked to the lawyer, y’know, I’ve been readin’ his papers, authorities – we got a thing going, yeah an understanding. And I realised, right? This could really be something. With Crystal Mountain, and the Federal Court – we could be bigger than Metallica. You know what I’m saying?”

Emma and Skwisgaar looked up at Magnus, bug eyed, save for Emma’s occasional flicked glances to the hammer. Skwisgaar did not understand what was happening. Did Magnus just promise to repay Emma for what she lost in this case? Didn’t that defeat the whole point of it? And what about the scene? What the heck was wrong with the scene? Skwisgaar alone was half the scene and he didn’t see anything wrong with the rest of them.

“You’re crazy,” said Emma flatly, and Skwisgaar prepared to get his face hammer smashed. But Magnus just sighed, annoyed, his shoulders jacking up in learned self-defence.

“Jesus, just drop it! It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand, I mean, whatever.” He looked her in the eye, holding his hand out as if to conduct her thoughts. “I just – need you – to... change it up, in the witness box tomorrow.”
Magnus moved his hands around one another, weaving an invisible cats cradle, and Emma cocked an eyebrow where she was knelt in Skwisgaar’s arms. “You want me to lie to the court,” she said, and Magnus frowned, annoyed.

“Well! Not lie. Just, like, omit some shit, clean it up, y’know...” Magnus changed his cats cradle to a spool, pulling the wool back in, but Emma could not be moved.

“You smashed my car so that I’d lie for you.”

“Oh, c’mon...”

“Yeah,” came Nathan’s grunt suddenly, standing over them with his bulging arms crossed and his dank locks shrouding his face, “Yeah. He – he... did that. And he’s right. You gotta lie, ma’am, y’know... you just gotta.”

Nathan dropped his power stance, flexing his fist in front of him self-consciously and ignoring Emma’s squeak of ma’am? Jesus Christ, Nate.

“The stuff that happened at the studio, like... I’m... I’m sorry, you know, I can say that now – I’m sorry! I was drunk. I don’t even know what I did, and I – I didn’t mean it to go this far.” Outside the garage, the oppressive clouds over the city finally broke, with a flash of lightning crackling through the dry air and the light flashing beneath the opening they’d made to enter. The other three looked up for it, but Nathan was somewhere else mentally, mired in it, and continued as the thunder boomed through the concrete around them.

“But now we’re here... and Magnus is right. With Crystal Mountain involved and everything, this is, like, our big chance. And we will, we’ll pay you out! We got the money. Just... if we don’t win this... we’re fucked. You gotta lie for us. You just gotta.”

“Nathan... what ams you saying...” asked Skwisgaar quietly, but Nathan didn’t seem to hear, the thunder shaking through the garage around them in the silence that followed. Magnus had been told he was right, and stood gaunt and proud in the garage light.

“It’s Skwisgaar in the box tomorrow, then me,” explained Magnus, leaning down to retrieve his hammer. Emma flinched at it, but as Skwisgaar dropped his arms from her, realising they were finishing up here, she glanced at him and then lowered her shoulders.

“Follow my lead,” instructed Magnus, “You know what we want you to omit. You don’t have to twist the whole truth. You know... and I know... that I haven’t been a saint in all this. And I’ll wear that. We just need you to take the blame this time, and we’ll make it up to you. You know I’m a man of my word, Em – ”

A strained tch of disbelief from her as she got to her feet, but Magnus ignored it beyond a twitch of anger.

“ – and I’ll... overlook... everything else that’s gone between us. You know... you should be on my side. You understand. This way, everyone is happy. You get what you want, and the publicity – the band stays together, and if make it big – then Dethklok gets out of the scene. And that’s what we all want. So just help us out this one time, okay?”

He waited on her expectantly, Skwisgaar rising and taking a leading step away towards the open garage roller. Emma stared Magnus down, but finally crossed her arms and looked away from him. “Okay, fine. Whatever,” she said, and when Magnus crooked his eyebrow at her, huffed sharply at him. “Cross my heart and hope to die, Magnus. God. I know you’ll give me hell if I
don’t. But if you don’t pay me back, I’m gonna sue your ass inside out.”

Her eyes flicked quickly to Nathan and Skwisgaar, sharp and clear in the abrasive garage light. “I have witnesses. I was threatened. That’s a felony. I’m learning a lot about the law recently. Funny, huh,” she said sharply, stabbing her chin at him, but Magnus turned away slowly, stalking towards Skwisgaar and the exit with Nathan in tow.

“Me too, Emma. Me too. Don’t discount that, darling. See you in court.”

Skwisgaar ducked out of the garage door before he could hear any more, hurrying to the truck to flee the scene with his bandmates. He didn’t know what the fuck he’d just witnessed, but he was sure didn’t want to see any more.

And the following morning, dark circles under his eyes and sitting in the witness box, he was nothing but relieved that the lawyers had barely anything to ask of him, his staggering, fatigued English mish-mash convincing them to give in early and go to morning recess. After all, Magnus was sure to be a few hours of problems in a best case scenario.

* * * * *

YEAR THREE

When Charles had signed off on the plans for the dungeons over two years ago, mid-tour and exhausted and living out of hotel suites and both so wealthy and so used to the band’s impractical demands that the great expense hadn’t even made him blink, it had never even crossed his mind that one day they might use them. Or, well, perhaps it had crossed his mind that the band might use them for some obscene purpose he’d rather not know the details of, asked for some of the edges filed down for that reason, but not like this. He was a glorified accountant, not a politarch. And yet - and yet!

They had someone in a cell, in a dungeon. And not even the people he’d like to have down there. His intern. His goddamn intern. With a broken arm and an infected wound and a promise of swift death if he dared to leave. That was better imprisonment than any cell they could have put him in, but golly, Charles had known the kid fresh out of law school. He didn’t need to be imprisoned. He needed to be in a damn hospital, firstly, and then as far away from all this coup business as Charles could get him.

About the coup. There had been a meeting. As usual it was impossible to hold the band’s attention until he’d gotten to the pointy end of the matter, there may be, potentially, ah, coup, I suppose, in progress, ah, in your organisation. That had made them sit up straight.

“Like, they’re tryna coup us?” had come the predictable wheeze of alarm from Pickles, and then general panic, until Charles had had to correct them.

“No, ah - me. I believe - I have reason to believe that the target of their coup is -- ”

“You? They’re tryna coup you?”

He suffered to admit it, but - dropping his hands to the desk in the silence that followed, the five pairs of eyes burning on him - demurely, he had to. “Yes.”
“Fuck, that’s brutal,” Nathan had said, leaning back in his chair. “Why would anyone want to coup you?”

“Yes! You’s such a cool guy Charles!” Toki’s admission was - well – heart-warming, but of course that was not the point.

“I, ah… I’m trying to find that out. I just don’t want you to be alarmed by the increase in security or - it’s just, ah, in case, you know. Just in case.”

But it had quickly become apparent that they were not terribly concerned about the idea of an internal uprise that lead to his untimely death. In fact they were fascinated, drilled him for information - only some of which he reluctantly let slip - and cooed over how awesome it was, how brutal, that he might die for Dethklok.

No. It probably hadn’t even crossed their minds, that he might die because of this. As far as Dethklok was concerned, he was kind of… one of them… you know, immune to such pesky considerations as mortality or marriage or illness. Charles was loathe to even think that, one of them, but… the fact held. To them, he was.

So when he had deigned to visit Matthew in the dungeons, Nathan and Toki had invited themselves along, Nathan claiming he wanted inspiration for the new album, Toki just bored and eager to meet any outsider. If they remembered his intern from their pre-fame lives at all, they didn’t let it show. Not a glimmer of recognition, even when he fronted up to the bars before them. Charles was humiliated.

The cell itself was bleak and small but not uncomfortable, save mainly for the stonework which radiated the dank cold from the earth outside. Again, its intention had originally been more… as an accessory to intimate activities, or maybe a backdrop in a music video, not as a real prison. But it was iron and stone. The locks were real, if overridable by a master key that Charles held. Regardless of its original intention, it was still more than capable of keeping a weedy intern in captivity.

He had a bed, a Spartan cot. An attached restroom which had had the door hastily removed, someone realising that a prisoner and privacy don’t go well together. The hood was gone, much to Charles’ ire - without it, Matthew looked haunted, the puppy fat and fluff of his early twenties shed as the years had passed, unseen. In fact, Charles noted unhappily, now he looked more like a Dethklok fan than he’d ever looked a lawyer - that wasted, hollow-cheeked look they got, and the desperate eagerness to the sleepless eyes. He’d long ago given up maintaining his floppy blonde hair beneath the hood - as he saw no one without it, Charles presumed - and shaved it to a short crop. Charles supposed he couldn’t blame the boys for their lack of reaction. Matthew was nearly unrecognisable.

He had stood up from the bed to greet them when they appeared, no longer awed by the band – never really had been – and Charles was about to open his mouth when Toki suddenly lunged past him, grabbing the bars inches from Matthew’s face and shaking them violently. “Why you’s try to, go does a coups on ours – our boss?” he shrieked, and Matthew stagged back from him across the cell as the other two stared in horror.

“I’m not your boss,” said Charles quickly, at about the same time Nathan said, “He’s, uh, not our boss...” but Toki was completely deaf to them.

“WHHY? He ams a good guys to all of yous as well! You just, shellfish -- !”

“Toki, please!” Charles could no longer stand it, intervened by gently poking his hand between
Toki’s frothing face and the bars until the teenager drew back abruptly, staring at him in confusion. “Matthew is – I mean, #23... is just – he’s just a pawn, Toki. Please, ah... save it, okay?”

“Yeah,” rumbled Nathan behind them, and Charles could have sighed with relief if it weren’t for the cringe he immediately had to pull instead, “Save it for some fucker’s neck when Offdensen catches them.”

But it was what Toki wanted to hear. He perked up immediately, releasing the bars to fall back with his bandmate. “Oh! We throws them to the wolfs...”

“Yeah. That’s good. Eaten by wolves. Good and brutal.”

Charles tried to ignore them as they spiralled into a conversation on how to deal with the mutineers, and instead attempted to talk to his intern again, standing close to the bars as the boy looked nervously between them. “Your hood, Matthew,” said the manager, frowning at him through his glasses, “I thought it’s in your contract that you’re not to, ah... take it off.”

Really he was just bothered to see the toll this was having on him – to have such a vivid reminder of how much had changed, the life he’d left behind him. Sometimes the watch on his wrist ticked a little too loudly; sometimes the past inserted itself into your life like that. He didn’t need that. He was moving on. The furthest wings were almost complete. Just quash this little hiccup and it would be... sorted... if it wasn’t for Matthew... he’d just have to be sent home. For his own safety, you realise.

Exactly that.

“Oh, they took it off me,” explained Matthew meekly, his pale hand resting on the sling his casted arm hung from his shoulder in, “Say I failed, so I’m not worthy of... the hood, you know...”

Charles hummed unhappily as he scanned the young man in front of him. “Hangs ‘em by the feets and tickle unto theys death!” declared Toki behind him, and Nathan half-rumbled his disapproval before he turned to the conversation beside him, looming over the manager and former PA.

“They took your hood off you?” he grunted, and Matthew looked up at him, always slightly intimidated by the massive frontman despite himself.

“Uh, yes, sire, and they cut – ”

“That’s real, y’know, petty. You could have died and that’s the thanks you get?” said Nathan, and Matthew’s eyebrows jacked up in surprise as the frontman folded his arms in front of him. “Offdensen could have killed you and you fucking know it. And they do too. Damn. It just pisses me off, you know...”

“Sorry,” jumped in Charles then, leaning forward, “They cut, did you say? They cut what?”

Matthew looked from Nathan to the manager and then back at his left arm, the wound bandaged at the elbow, and Charles’ face hardened as he saw the glance. “Give me your arm,” he ordered, putting out a hand for it, and Matthew shrank back from him inside the cell.

They stared at each other a moment before Charles realised what had been lost between them. “I promise I will not break your other arm,” he said, shutting his eyes as he swallowed his own idiocy, “With Nathan and Toki as my – my witnesses. Give me your arm.”

Reluctantly, Matthew stuck his arm through the bars for Charles, the manager making quick work
of the fastenings on the bandage at his elbow and unwinding it around his own hand as the others watched. “I’m guessing they, ah, cut off your... your gear,” he muttered as he wound it back, and Matthew dropped his brown eyes placidly to watch.

“Oh. You worked it out,” he said quietly, and Charles looked up at him sharply, uncomfortable standing so close to another person. Beneath the bandage, the mark that had been sliced into Matthew’s arm was completely mutilated, the smell of wound cleaning products and fresh injury sawing into the air between them.

“Pardon?” said Charles, and when Matthew only stewed on it he ordered instead, “Repeat that.”

“You worked it out,” repeated Matthew timidly as the manager set about his wound again.

“Uh huh, worked what out?”

“The gears,” admitted Matthew, and he lowered his head and watched as Charles fastened the bandage again, tighter than before.

“The gears,” he said, burying the anger inside himself, and Matthew paled before him.

“Like a clock,” said the younger man, and Charles was silent. He had known. Known and not told him. Not such an obedient servant then. But before he could admonish him, Nathan – looming beside them with his fist wrapped around the bars above their heads – forced his way back into the conversation.

“The gears,” he echoed in his rough, ocean floor gravel, and gave a short snort, tossing his head with a flick of his long hair. “Fuck, that’s good. Why didn’t we think of that? Instead of lame ass... klokateers...”

“There’s nothing wrong with ‘klokateers’,” said Charles defensively, taking a step back from the cell and looking up at his charge. “It’s, ah... fine.” They’d made it up themselves, after all.

“Nah, but gears is so much better! Clocks are full of gears!” insisted Nathan, as though Charles couldn’t grasp the concept, “Unless they’re digital, I guess. And we are kinda digital...”

“I don’t gets it,” said Toki in the dank background, “Det er ingen gir i en digital klokke?” and Charles could no longer take it, his hand pressing to his temple before he could even think to stop himself.

“That’s enough. You guys better get back out of here,” he said quickly, and searched the walls of the dungeon for an excuse as to why as the men eyeballed him in defiance, “There’s, ah, black mold down here, see there... Nathan, you have to, ah, preserve your voice, you know, so better get back upstairs.” Though Nathan was clearly angry at being told what to do, he noted the mold, huffed, and turned his back on the cell.

“You,” said Charles bitterly to Matthew, “I’ll be back to deal with you later.” And Matthew just nodded, nervously, stepping back into his cell as the others drew away. As they left up into Mordhaus again, their voices echoed against the stone, carried far like their footsteps:

“You gons torture him?”

“No – Toki. I’m a financial controller, not a, ah - a Torquemada, err...”

“Hvem? Talk-mada...?”
“Ah, never mind...”
Silence in the court! All rise.

THE COURT: Yes, good morning. Appearances are the same.

Your witness, Chuck.

MR OFFDENSEN: Thank you, your Honor.

I call William Murderface to the witness box.

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And so it was his moment. His big moment in court. Murderface was grinning ear to ear as he was guided to the witness box, just fucking beaming at anyone who’d give his gap teeth the attention. There was a camera and everything! He was gonna be on fuckin’ TV! Damn! All the shits from highschool were gonna see him here, William Murderface, bassist of famous Florida death metal band Dethklok. He could imagine the lil’ bar beneath his picture right now, William Murderface, bassist. Fuck yeah.

Murderface knew the stakes riding on this, he’d been in the foyer that morning eavesdropping as Offdensen had briefed Magnus on the phone against the flocks of black-clad metellers and punks flowing past them to the stalls: I need you to understand - fully comprehend, Magnus - that this is, ah, not the home crowd. Or rather it is and that’s your whole problem. Yes. Aha, yes, well - a den of resentment and jealousy, if you want me to be frank. Yes. You cannot let them, ah, grind you down.

Murderface’s grandparents watched court TV chronically. They were gonna see it and they’d see he really made something of himself in Florida, y’know, they’d always shit talk him and tell him what a terrible kid he was for abandoning them or whatever but here he was - he’d show them. He was a witness. On TV. He’d probably be in the papers too, he could just see it: Death Metal Reigns - Case Turns On Bassist’s Evidence and a picture of his face beside it, looking fucking brutal, scowling --

Or he would be, if he could just stop smiling.

Murderface slapped his hand down on the Bible when it was offered to him, beaming at the stocky court officer. He was reciting the oath before she could even open her mouth: “I solemnly swear and affirm by almighty God --”

“You have to choose one,” said the court officer, rudely, grimacing at him. Met with Murderface’s gawk, she explained very slowly, just in case: “If you believe in God, you swear on the Bible. If you don’t believe in God you affirm.”

Murderface screwed up his face at her. “Uh, fuck God!” he sneered, and smacked the Bible from her hands. The court officer deftly caught it, closing her eyes for only a moment as she centred herself for the task at hand.
“All right. Do you affirm, then, that the evidence you’re about to give will be -- ”

“The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Yes. I affirm,” said Murderface, his hand raised obediently, and the woman frowned at him again.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she said, and so it began.

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WILLIAM MURDERFACE: AFFIRMED

EXAMINATION IN-CHIEF BY MR. OFFDENSEN:

Q. All right, William, if you could state your name, occupation and age for the court, thanks?


Q. Thanks for that, William --

THE COURT: Sorry, Chuck, I didn’t catch that.

Could you give your occupation again, Mr Murderface?

A. (Indistinct).

THE COURT: Sorry?

A (Indistinct).

THE COURT: Okay. Look, let’s just move on. I’m sure the stenographer has it sorted out.

Chuck?

MR OFFDENSEN: William - Mr Murderface, do you see that, ah, microphone in front of you? Just take care to speak into that, please.

How are you involved in Dethklok, Mr Murderface?

A. I am the (indistinct).

THE COURT: Okay, again?

A. The (indistinct).

THE COURT: Charles --

MR OFFDENSEN: Sorry, Mr Murderface, you’re a touch, ah, too close to the microphone there. You just need to speak towards it, you don’t need to - right.

A. (Indistinct).

Q. You are the bassist of Dethklok, correct?

A Yes(?).
Q. Right, thank you.

MR VERNON: Objection. Your Honor, if my learned friend could refrain from leading the witness in examination in-chief?

THE COURT: Easier said than done, Vernon.

Look, I’ll refrain from comment. Mr Murderface, please attempt to annunciate - just… attempt.

Mr Offdensen, please try harder.

MR OFFDENSEN: Apologies, your Honor. I was merely attempting to, ah, clarify --

THE COURT: You were merely attempting to translate from your native moron, but that’s against the point. Push on.

MR OFFDENSEN: Mr Murderface --

Actually, your Honor, I respectfully ask that you withdraw that remark. I, ah, understand the pressures of your Honor’s position but it has gone a bit far, by way of obiter dictum --

THE COURT: Mm, it’s gone a bit far by way of wasting the court’s time too, Chuck. Push on.

MR OFFDENSEN: Noted.

A (Indistinct).

Q. Ah, pardon?

A (Indistinct) around, y’know? (Indistinct) Judge (indistinct).

Q. Excuse me, your Honor, I believe Mr Murderface is attempting to, ah, give instruction from the witness box --

THE COURT: Tell him not to, then. Strictly a no-instruction zone. You know that.

MR OFFDENSEN: Yes, I know, but --

THE COURT: Mr Murderface, the witness box is a strictly no-instruction zone. Do you understand me? Yes? No? Do you understand what I’m saying? You are not allowed to talk to your lawyer from inside this box.

A. (Indistinct).

THE COURT: This box? This box is a magic box. When you are inside the box, you are not allowed - illegal, no - n-o - to talk - to say words - speaking - to your lawyer. This gentleman here. Because you are being questioned for examination in-chief. Because he is asking you questions, Mr Murderface. Special questions --

A. (Indistinct).
THE COURT: It’s useless.

MR OFFDENSEN: Ah, your Honor --

A. (Indistinct).

MR OFFDENSEN: Ah, Mr - Mr Murderface, please refrain from, ah, referring to the Judge in, ah --

THE COURT: Oh, was that a curse? Was it? I can’t tell.

MR OFFDENSEN: Er, your Honor --

A (Indistinct) Judge (indistinct) --

Q. Well, that was, ah - that certainly was a curse.

THE COURT: Still nothing - I caught nothing, Charles.

MR OFFDENSEN: Mr Murderface --

A. (Indistinct) get up and fucking leave then(?).

THE COURT: Charles, what did the witness say?

MR OFFDENSEN: He, ah, suggested that if your Honor is struggling to, ah, to hear what he is saying then perhaps he should just retire from the witness box - in more colorful terms, but, ah --

THE COURT: Well - to be honest with you, Chuck, I’m starting to think the young man has a point. We’re getting nowhere like this. It’s been - how long? And we haven’t even gotten his damn job out without leading.

A. (Indistinct).

THE COURT: Case in point. It’s futile.

Charles, does this witness really have anything to tell us? Anything groundbreaking? There’s five of the little bastards in the band, I can’t see how it could be of real consequence.

A. (Indistinct).

MR OFFDENSEN: Point taken, your Honor. Let me take instruction briefly.

I am content to retract this witness if the respondents consent.

THE COURT: Mr Vernon? Please, spare us all.

MR VERNON: I’m relaxed, your Honor.

THE COURT: Very well.

Mr Murderface, you’re dismissed.
THE COURT: You’re released from your summons and can either return to the Bar table with your lawyer or you can go about your business, whatever that is. I don’t care which, just - go on.

A. (Indistinct).

THE COURT: Magic box is over. Go back to your friends. At the table. Go.

A. (Indistinct).

WITNESS WITHDREW

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So Murderface, spurned, stomped back to the Bar table to join the others. He had barely pulled at the pleats of his formal shorts and sat himself down, scowling down the table at Pickles’ smirk and the vacant stares of the others, when the lawyer gestured at him again.

“Murderface - do you know where Magnus is?” hissed Offdensen, and Murderface just glared up at him.

“What do you think I am, his fucking keeper?” he sneered, but was met with a blank gaze from the lawyer. A beat. And then:

“I’m, ah, really sorry, William, but I didn’t catch that, ah -- ”

“Fuck!” Murderface threw himself back on the chair, scraping it across the court floor with an unholy ripping sound as it tore over the carpet. He slapped his hands down on the Bar table as he sprang to his feet, the lawyer flinching at the bang - good! - and Murderface stuck up his middle finger at him.

“Fuck you! Fucking, lawyer,” he snapped, the worst insult he could come up with on the spot, and then stormed out to look for fucking Magnus.

Because he was, at core, a good dude or whatever. He really was. But god! The indignity!

---

Silence in the court. All rise!

THE COURT: All right, we return. Did you locate your witness, Mr Offdensen?

MR OFFDENSEN: Ah, yes, your Honor. He was fortunately already in the parking lot as we reached it - - -

THE COURT: I don’t need to hear more, Chuck. You’ve wasted enough time. Go on, call him.

MR OFFDENSEN: Yes, your Honor.

I call Mgrdoum Kevorkian to the witness box.

WITNESS CALLED: KEVORKIAN, MGRDOUM
But as he said it, already taking the appropriate bundle of documents from Matthew’s hand to move to the podium, four sets of incredulous eyes locked on Charles from along the Bar beside him. Clearly something was wrong.

“Who the fuck - - ” snarled Nathan accusingly, keeping his voice low after being scolded so many times, and glared straight into Charles’ eyes with his shoulders raised in defence. If Charles had cared to arrange his thoughts under all this stress and tunnel-vision, he would have immediately recognised that the band did not trust him, in fact that even those numbered in their ranks would cuss him out behind his back and sew discontent - *the lawyer is lying to us, he’s only out for money* - and that this was only to be expected.

Nathan’s defence, sighting what he presumed an obvious lie, but so, so unfathomably stupid that Charles could not understand his anger. Because there was no lie. Wasn’t the truth obvious?

The Usher passed them as Charles was still staring at Nathan, his hand around the documents with Matthew poised to release them but not prepared to until his instructor actually took them, lest he cause a catastrophe of internship-sacrificing proportions right in front of the Judge. With all of the band still staring at him, Charles blinked through his glasses and stuttered towards the Bar microphone: “Also known by his - his stage name, Magnus Hammersmith.”

“What?” demanded the whole band in unison, and Charles pushed the mic away to speak to them in a hushed whisper.

“You didn’t really think his name was *Hammersmith?* It’s a - it’s a district in London with a big theatre in it - Queen had a concert there - *it’s not a real name,” he explained, finally snatching the papers and relieving poor Matthew, “It would be like being called *Magnus Essex… or, I don’t know, ah, Magnus Greenwich* - no one’s called *Hammersmith*. It’s a fake name.”

Yo,” said Pickles gamely, and elbowed Nathan from down the Bar, “Like the Motorhead album… got that song he really likes on it too, heh - you think he pulled it from -- ”

But he was silenced by Nathan’s shoulder. “*It’s fake?*” he growled, determined to get to the root of this. “He’s lying to us?”

“It’s just a pseudonym, Nathan.” Charles tried to be earnest despite his frustration. “Like ‘Pickles’, or ‘Explosion’ - his name is, ah, hard to pronounce for Anglophones so - I don’t even know if I -- ”

“Explosion is my real name.”

This was the last thing Charles expected to hear, and he stood dumb, looking helplessly down at Nathan. But there was no hint of jest in the frontman’s eyes.

“Do you think I’m lying to you?” growled Nathan, staring into his eyes, “Do you think I’d lie to a fucking lawyer? Explosion is my real-life name, you fuck -- ”

And before Nathan could stand up before him, Pickles had tugged him back down, murmuring, “Nathan…”

“It’s my fucking name!”

The Judge finally intervened, looking over his glasses at Charles. “Something the matter with your
clients, Chuck?” he asked, and Charles immediately wilted, pulling the mic back.

“No, ah, your Honor, just, ah, taking instructions. One moment,” he said, and pushed it away to whisper to Nathan, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insult your, ah - your name - I’m sure it means a lot to you, I - I am sorry. I just assumed you’d changed it, or…”

“Your name is pretty stupid, dude, be real,” he heard Pickles say softly, patting Nathan’s arm to calm him, and then looked past him to the rest of the band, who stared back at him in disbelief.

“Ah,” said Charles, frowning at them, “What… you - I just assumed -- ”

“He never told us,” piped up Murderface from the end, still bitter from being jumped in the parking lot by Magnus and his girlfriend earlier while trying to take a piss on the courthouse wall, and he frowned with his gap teeth bared, “He always does this, y’know. I mean, our names are real, so.”

Charles screwed up his face a little with this. “What, ‘William Murderface’?” he asked, and Murderface nodded his head seriously.

“Murderface.”

“Murderface,” repeated Charles, reeling, “Really, that’s the name you were born with?”

“Yes, really.”

His eyes met Skwisgaar’s. “Skwisgaar Skwigelf?” he asked, incredulous, and the Swede stared back with blue-eyed innocence for a moment, arms folded, and then shrugged a shoulder in admission at the ridiculousness of the whole thing.

“Ja, well… mine moms ams, how’d you say, a frees spirit… and also… ams not winningks any, err, spellings contest…” But the lawyer kept staring, helplessly. “She ams practicklies illiterat, is what I’m saying. But you mom's spellsingk - eugh, it'd just be disrespectfuls to change it, y'know?”

Charles’ eyes met Pickles’, and the drummer smirked at him, jumping in as Charles was opening his mouth. “Nope, changed it when I was like, heh, just a tiny lil’ fuck. Reckon legal in 1987 -- ”

But before he could finish, the court erupted in voices around them, rising like a bees nest in murmurs and shuffling. Charles was vaguely aware that the door had opened again, and that meant - yes, as he cast an eye over his shoulder, Magnus Hammersmith had entered the room.

Apart from his hand clutching his girlfriend’s as though his life depended upon it, he may as well have been in handcuffs from the way the Usher walked him back down the aisle. Like a sick wedding, thought Charles as he crossed quickly to the podium, Magnus towing the woman along and leaning in to her until she apparently said something into his ear and he drew up to full height, raising his chin, and resumed proudly through the full benches on either side of him. Full, indeed, of daggers - as every punk in Tampa had turned out to see the humiliation of Magnus Hammersmith, every bitter metalhead wittolled by the guitarist, every opening band unpaid, every scorned and betrayed woman lined up to savour the moment.

In the face of what was obviously a widely-advertised session in the stocks, Charles thought Magnus kept his pride surprisingly intact even with his hands locked into the pillory. He had brushed up well with Cotton’s help, this time in his own clothes in black collared shirt (thankfully buttoned) and even a kind of suit jacket, if in a dated style that, if Charles had to guess, had likely been very stylish in a certain alternative crowd in the early 90s. There was a tie, narrow, black
again - in fact the whole ensemble, down to the ever-present faded jeans and cuban heels, was all various shades and textures of black, standing like a rook over the courtroom as if he presided over his own wake. A shower had been forced upon him, likely by Cotton again, and this was maybe the only embarrassing thing of the whole presentation, as it had made his hair, freed from its ever-present protective layer of grease and cigarette residue, spring up in a huge plume of curls more akin to an Afro than their usual complacent state of rest about his shoulders.

At the front of the court, close to the podium, Cotton left Magnus with some whispered words and a kiss on his cheek, having to draw away with care as he clung to her hand until the last minute, letting her fingers slip from his only with great reluctance and the eyes of the Usher upon him. As Magnus met Charles’ gaze the lawyer nodded sternly in return, and then someone decided to yell out above the murmuring: “Son of a bitch!”

Undoubtedly entitled to the opinion. Magnus flinched but did not say anything, and moved to the witness box without rebuking. But the first stone having been flung, now the others queued up to have their say.

“Liar! Liar!”

“Cheater!”

“Creep!”

Magnus seemed to shrug them off, unmoved, and spoke quietly to the burly court officer.

“You should be ashamed of yourself!” yelled someone, and Charles pinched the bridge of his nose, seeing Magnus look up sharply.

“Yeah! You should be ashamed!”

And then it was a party. Everyone in the damn courtroom raising their voices to snap back at him the one thing that had gotten through his skin. Magnus narrowed his eyes at them before turning back to the court officer and the Bible she offered him, and finally the Judge, bored, brought down his gavell.

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THE COURT: Order, please.

Officer, just do it.

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And so it began, not with a whimper, but a bang.

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MGRDOUM KEVORKIAN: SWORN

EXAMINATION IN-CHIEF BY MR. OFFDENSEN:

Q. Mr Kevorkian, there has been some, ah, conversation so I’ll just get you to confirm that your legal name is Mgrdoum --

A. Kevorkian. Yes, it is, Mr Offdensen.
Q. Did I, ah, say that right?
A. Close enough. The Kevorkian is like Dr Death. No relation. It's like the "Smith" of Armenia.

Q. And your preferred name is --
A. That would be Magnus. The other one is a mouthful.

Q. I understand. Could you confirm your age and occupation as well, ah, Magnus?
A. 27, and I believe the official title is Processing Technician for Smithfield up at Plant City… used to be Lykes, y’know - it’s the deboning line. Beef carcasses.

Q. Right. Thank you. Now, the jury has heard a lot already, but we’re going to take this step by step, Mr Kevorkian, so bear with me, all right?
A. Go right ahead, Mr Offdensen.

Q. How many years have you been involved with Dethklok?
A. Uh, three years.

Q. And at what stage in the band’s career did you join?
A. Uh, I am a, uh, founding member, along with Nathan - Explosion, over there. So I was there from the start. We, uh, made this band, like, it’s our, uh, brainchild, y’know.

Q. In that case could I ask you to briefly explain for the court, in your own words, your musical career? No need for detail, Mr Kevorkian.
A. Uh, you can call me Magnus, okay? Mr Kevorkian is my - heh, estranged - father. Make of that what you will...

Right. Uh, I started playing guitar at my father’s request in middle school. To “Keep me out of trouble”, y’know… classical. We had a local guitar teacher, friend of the family, so… little bit later, I discovered 45 Grave through a friend and, uh… then it was party time… had my first band in sophomore but I refused to play guitar, so mostly just yelling - called, uh, Party Time, yeah. Didn’t last long - teenagers, y’know. And my folks were divorcing so…

Then, on October 7 in 1986, Slayer released *Reign in Blood* on Def Jam… and what can I say, from that first thunder crack - I was a convert, y’know. I realised I could do that - that, *magic*, y’know - bought an electric guitar, against my mother’s wishes. It was a black B.C. Rich Mockingbird, for the record… looks like a bat’s wing. Very cool. Too cool for a sixteen year old. Anyway. Skopsetic Rot! That’s number two. Never really took off in Fresno but, y’know.

So that went on until ‘88, we all moved to L.A. in ‘88 but broke up right after, so then you’ve got Concubinocide, which was a mouthful so - Das Tirdrama? Also too - “Eh” for L.A. Never took off. Blue Equinox, different genre, y’know, that was towards the No Wave stuff, did okay until the Sub Pop crowd came crawling over the border - inevitable - had a few albums, we even had SST sniffing round - so then it was Fuck For Peace - stupid. Tuxedomoon rip-off. Only an EP. Got tired of the whole stupid, ass-licking scene, had to get back to my roots. So. Tampa it was - 1992.

One, Godmerge. Still weak-ass stuff, not worth remembering. Yeah, I see you eyeballing me, I’m cutting myself off, okay. Give me my dang fifteen minutes, Chuck. Two, Eater of Shapes. Three,
Ammut. Four, Sex Feast. And all through those, Fuck Off And Die - lasted until, like, ‘95 - then - and now - Dethklok.

Next up, world domination.

**Q. That is how many releases, Mr - Magnus?**

A. That is, uh… four albums and 11 EPs.

**Q. So it would be a safe assumption that you know your way around a studio.**

A. 15 records in 14 years, yeah? I’d say so.

**Q. And did you produce any recordings with Dethklok?**

A. Correct. There was a split-single with another band, Mammoth Fister. And then, as we were courting labels, the *Dethdemo*.

**Q. Tell us about that.**

A. Well, a demo is like… so there are two ways a band can be signed to a record label, right? One is by the label approaching the band, and the other the band approaching the label. When you approach a label you’re sending them a letter and an example of the music you’ve got, right? Saying, “Hey, give us money” - like, a forward-payment - “To record this properly, put it out into the world, and we’ll let you take a cut of our profits.”

So then your example is a demo tape - demo, demonstration - yeah? Really your music should speak for itself before engineering, mixing, mastering, so usually you just herd everyone into a studio for a weekend and you record it on the cheap, make a bunch of copies, and then you post them to the labels. So last year about… when we started selling out venues, we turned our minds to labels and resolved to pool our resources and record a demo.

**Q. So 1997 you decided?**

A. Correct.

**Q. And when did you head to the studio?**

A. We started on the 13th. Friday the 13th… cute, huh? And then it was a week and a bit, and we finished on the 24th.

**Q. And the studio?**

A. Broadway. Downtown. I know a guy there, Daron, so - negotiated a discount.

**Q. And how much did it cost you all up?**

A. Woah, okay… so $800 all up. Not including catering.

**Q. Catering?**

A. Drinks. Takeout. A joke, Mr Offdensen. I can take you to the dictionary citation if you want.

**THE COURT:** Mr Offdensen is unlikely to take it on board anyway, Mr Kevorkian. He’s never been troubled by them prior.
A. Noted, your Honor.

MR OFFDENSEN: Thank you, your Honor.

Mr - and, Magnus, did you, ah, need to hire the services of anyone else?

A. No. Pickles and I got enough experience between us to record and mix a demo. We had a manager at the beginning, but we, uh, parted ways within a day or two.

Q. And who was your manager?

A. A Mr Frank Feranno.

Q. The second respondent?

A. Correct.

Q. And on what terms did you part ways?

A. Fine. Or I thought. Frank and I were buds prior to, er, employing him so when it, uh, became apparent it wasn’t working out, we just hashed it out over a beer in the studio and that was it.

Q. All right. I invite you now, ah, to describe then the events of the night in question, 24 February 1998, when you had finished up at the studio.

A. If you insist, Mr Offdensen.

At the Bar table, Murderface sulked, head on his fist, and stared wetly at Magnus as he recounted their night out - the one Murderface had been so rudely precluded from sharing, even though his night out was just as exciting as Magnus’ any night of the week. After all, what was more rock ‘n’ roll than getting drunk in the studio, going out to a gig with your buddies and getting fucking wasted, and then scamming on some goth chicks at the castle? Um, nothing? And the more Magnus talked, the less Murderface was even sold he’d had a good night.

Go to the Masquerade with the rest of them. Meet up with Frank. See a shit band. The woman had been there too, Emma, Murderface remembered that. She hadn’t looked impressed. Magnus had been pretending everything was okay and acting like she wasn’t there, which was probably the best way to handle that situation, y’know, having your chick stolen like that. Anyway, figured Murderface, it wasn’t like Magnus had suffered afterwards. The guy had a way with women and he’d already gotten it on with several after Emma, even had the foxy goth slut, Cotton, though Murderface thought that couldn’t be hard exactly if she hadn’t decided to, y’know, hang her coat on his rack now.

Speaking of racks. She was sitting beside Murderface at the Bar table, they otherwise being ordered so that he could go speak first, with Skwisgaar on his other side staring intently at Magnus in the box as the dude eloquently described the atmosphere at the Castle, providing all the alibis necessary so faultlessly that if Murderface hadn’t been there with him on the night, he would have thought it pretty suspicious. He was not listening with any particular scrutiny, however, because although Cotton was mostly dressed like an extra in some melodramatic funeral scene in a music video, her bustier was full extra in The Crow, just spilling those puppies out beside him with every breath she drew making each pale breast quiver proudly where they were cradled in her corset.
Jeepers. For all her lustful trembling, though, Murderface thought she didn’t look particularly happy. She was sat up tall beside him with her hands on her purse in her lap, her chin raised high, and listening closely to Magnus’ tale of gothic intrigue. Murderface guessed this was understandable - she was sandwiched between her boyfriend being picked apart by the legal system and an entire courtroom of people out for her blood. They couldn’t have thought highly of her, either. But her sour face was uncalled for; after all, she was sat next to the handsomest guy in the courtroom, hey? Hey? Or at least, uh, the least-worst member of Dethklok, if it came to it, right…?

As Murderface eyeballed her tits, Cotton grimaced at her boyfriend’s words and suddenly became invested in digging through her purse for her cigarettes. She took a long time to find them, which told Murderface that she was an idiot, because he could plainly see them in her purse and taking up most of the space therein, and she was looking right at them, but she rifled around them anyway. She gave a soft huff eventually, listening to what Magnus was saying but no longer watching him explain it, her face downcast with her fringe hanging forward from her forehead, and rocked her cigarette lighter within her purse with her fingertips for a moment. And then, oh wondrous thing! - she was whispering straight into Murderface’s ear, her husky voice playing games with his heart as she murmured to him: “I’m gonna step out for a smoke. Do you have a lighter?”

Murderface was about to point out that one, no, he didn’t, and two, she had a lighter right there, but she was already on her feet and beckoning him to come up. Murderface gaped at her and then pushed his chair out with a honk as it scraped across the carpet, and everyone looked at him - especially Magnus, which couldn’t have been good - but quickly turned back to the examination, or in Nathan and Pickles’ case a hushed conversation about how stupid the name ”Party Time" was for a band, as he hightailed it out of there after the woman. Seeing her skirt disappear down the quiet court corridor outside was like a fucking hallucination. Because like, correct him if he was wrong. But she was totally flirting with him back there, right?

Correct. Cotton, the slut, was totally gonna bang Murderface while her boyfriend was on trial. This was metal as fuck. Murderface could barely contain himself.

He caught up to her outside the courthouse, standing under the wide eaves at the top of the stairs that led into the building, sheltered just behind one of the mighty white columns and cringing back from the cold. The rain still pounded down outside - it had been hitting on and off seemingly at random since yesterday, and no one was happy about it besides, he guessed, ducks, but definitely not Murderface. This kinda humidity was just brutal. Cotton didn’t look too impressed either, huddled under the eaves; she’d already lit a cigarette and held out another one to Murderface as he approached her, timidly, and he took it, and then made a huge show of patting down his shorts for an imagined lighter that he absolutely didn’t have to begin with.

Eventually she held out the lighter too, and although Murderface closed his eyes and jutted forward his chin with the cigarette between his scarred lips for lighting, he soon had to bend to the reality of her shoving the lighter into his stubborn, calloused little fist. He lit it himself, glaring at her from under his brow. But whatever. If she liked Magnus, it made sense that she liked a man to take charge, y’know?

“Did you hear what he said?” were the first words out of her mouth once she’d taken the lighter back and exhaled smoke into the cold air, looking not at Murderface but rather out at the palms at the front of the courthouse being buffeted by the rain. Murderface could not remember much of what Magnus had been saying. He’d had better things to breast about. Uh. Think about.

So he said: “No? What did he say? What do you mean what he said, which part?” which he figured covered all of his bases.
Cotton cast and unhappy look at him sideways and then turned back to the trees, smoking in a manner that Murderface could only describe as *bitchy*, with her hip cocked and one arm folded over her middle, the other holding the cigarette out to her side. “About the bathroom,” she explained, and when Murderface just babbled uselessly, she elaborated, “In the Castle. With that other chick. Did he say her name was Fion? *Fion*…” Cotton spat the name with venom, glaring at the palm trees as if she could set them on fire with the power of her mind alone. Murderface was unsettled, but he couldn’t let her know that, trying his best to look like a cool dude by leaning on the pillar in front of her, his legs outstretched, and smoking in exaggerated sucks and puffs.

“Yeah, well,” he said, pointlessly, and Cotton ignored him, ashing her cigarette to the side.

“We were together then. I’m sure we were together then,” she said, staring out at the weather howling down around them, flooding the court’s grounds beneath the steps with deep puddles broken to pin points by the hammering rain. Beneath the grey sky, her made-up face looked pale and ashen. “I know we were. But he said to the lawyer… you heard that, right?”

“What?” asked Murderface, and Cotton frowned at him, actually making eye contact for once.

“He said he hadn’t started seeing me at that point. But I know we were together. God. He made me talk to his mother on the fucking phone just, like, the day before. That’s about as together as you get, right? But…” She frowned again, this time at her shoes, thinking it over. “I’m sure we were…”

Murderface puffed his cigarette and tried to look as cool as possible, slipping down on the pillar, and then Cotton looked up at him suddenly, her grey-green, blacked up eyes snapping up with the realisation. “Is he cheating on me, Will?”

“Is he what?” asked Murderface, who didn’t want to have this conversation but had picked the wrong thing completely to forget the meaning of, and Cotton just repeated herself, more defiantly: “Is Magnus cheating on me?”

“Err!” Murderface had slipped too far down the pillar, and now scrambled to push himself back up again, his boots slipping on the wet pavement. “No - yes? So what? You let him fuck that ginger chick and you didn’t give a fuck!” he tried, gesturing at her with the cigarette, and Cotton glared at him.

“That’s different, we decided to pick her up together. She’s cute, I’m bi. It’s totally different.” Murderface couldn’t see how it was, except, like, wow, was he jealous of Magnus right now. But Cotton was going straight on ahead. “I didn’t know anything about this and I’m sure we were together and he’s just - saying that - I’m sure we were. There’s something wrong. Why can’t he just tell the truth?”

Cotton stomped her heel defiantly, and then glared at Murderface under her fringe again. “Did you see him with that bitch?” she snapped, and Murderface abruptly shook his head. In fact he had totally lost track of Magnus after they’d smoked that joint with the goth out the back of the Castle. He had a way of disappearing into thin air, that guy, just shuffling out of existence when it suited him and you didn’t even notice until hours later. “Whatever,” snarled Cotton, and she shook her head glumly. “God, Will. I can’t say anything or I’ll fuck everything up. If he’ll lie to the lawyer he’ll totally lie to me. What the fuck am I gonna do?”

“Cheat on him?” said Murderface hopefully, and Cotton quirked a smile at him.

“For a dead head, Willy, you have your moments,” she said, definitely flirting with him, but before
he could say a word a bolt of lightning split the purple sky, jerking both their gazes up at the sound.

And instead of saying something sexy, Murderface just rubbed his stitches and pouted up at the sky. “Freaky,” he murmured, and Cotton stubbed out her cigarette on the stairs, nodding with him.

“Uh-huh.”

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**THE COURT:** Those lights still playing up? I thought they fixed them.

Don’t say it, Chuck. I know. “Lightning striking the building”, indeed.

*Put the exhibit in the hands of the witness then.*

**MR OFFDENSEN:** Do you recognise the document before you, Magnus?

A. This is a, uh, bunch of pages from a website called NuclearDeathNow!. It loses something in printing, huh? But it’s NDN all right.

Q. **NDN.** Okay. Thank you. You’re familiar with the website?

A. I am. I am what you would call an active user of NDN. Or not-so-active. The, ah, popularity gets, uh, trying - boring. Boring. But yeah, I have an account.

Q. **Indeed.** I direct your attention to page 12, the third box down.

A. Mm hm.

Q. You recognize that?

A. I do.

Q. And it is? For the stenographer, the user handle is M-j-o-l-l-n-i-r - I apologize, I can’t pronounce it.

A. It’s Norse. "Mjollnir“. And it is my handle on NDN, yeah.

Q. And had you posted in the thread before this instance?

A. I had not.

Q. And if you could read that message for the court?

A. Ha, I mean, sure, if you insist:

“The one time I go to check this thread, it mentions me getting fucked by a dude.”

Q. **And?**

A. And, linebreak - a line down:

“Awesome.”

**PICKLES:** But we ain’t to conjecture on the implications, hey, Offdensen?
MR OFFDENSEN: Indeed, as my instructors advise from the Bar. I am informed this humor, being contrarian, ah, weisenheiming, is common in the culture of the world wide web.

A If you say so. Anyway, it just means I haven’t posted until then, which is self-evident. I was ignoring it for a solid week. Don’t need that shit in my life, you know.

Q. Of course, Magnus. But you became aware.
Cui Prodest Scelus Is Fecit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * * * *

YEAR THREE

By the time Charles found the time to see to his former intern, the wound was infected. There was a rash of klokateers not obeying his orders recently, not directly but in a sick game of telephone: he’d tell someone to do something, then they’d pass it on, and by the fourth person it would simply be dropped completely and nothing was done. So Matthew had been neglected, and when Charles finally sat down to talk the truth out of him, perched on an uncomfortable chair just outside the bars and surrounded by guards, the wound had gone septic and Charles was forced to deal with it himself.

Well, if you wanted something done well. He held the young man’s arm through the bars, his soiled bandages pulled off and slung over Charles’ knee for the time being, and picked at the dead tissue with tweezers clutched in his gloved fingers, his patience truly worn out. “Sorry,” Matthew said over and over again, with his wasted face – it had developed that he’d missed meals as well, orders neglected as they descended through the ranks – and Charles didn’t even bother to soothe him. He was too tired to be kind. It was hard enough concentrating on the wound.

Instead, he questioned. How long had he known? Where did this come from? But Matthew’s answers were limited, punctuated by flinches when Charles overstepped with the tweezers – not on purpose. It was never on purpose. Charles just narrowed his eyes and concentrated harder, swabbing on the antiseptic liquid from a container at his heel with care. On his back were the masked eyes of the guards, all of which he trusted but none of which he could trust anymore. Sleep came uneasily and only behind locked doors. If it wasn’t Matthew, then it could be anyone. If it wasn’t that morning, then it could be any second. And here he was turning his back to them – it could be right now. They always knew where he was.

Matthew didn’t know how it had started. And he didn’t know when it had turned, into these murders and threats and sending someone to pick pieces of his secretary’s skull out of the office desk. Clearly it was organised, but Matthew didn’t know by whom. As he explained: they all wore masks, after all. No one knew who anyone was – except for Charles, the klokateer who had never been masked, who demanded to be known, and in that way, demanded to be different.

He did, however, point Charles to some interesting… phenomena. Matthew had first encountered the gears concept – capitalize it, since they were clearly a group – the “Gears” concept, online. Charles was not a fan of the internet, so to speak. Not the superficial, normal person internet. The grander connections, well, those were interesting; the ones he’d hooked into with Ms Hillam’s assistance (may her memory be – well, appropriately enlightening to whoever needed it, he guessed). The world wide web, that was trivial, this trash network of small minds fighting, constantly. It was hard to work with people unwilling to reduce themselves to statistics, to play nice. Charles had only utilized it as much as to ensure Crystal Mountain had a team running the band’s page, and Mordland itself had a team cracking down on the illegal music uploads, much easier since the United States had followed through with the VPN reporting legislation last year. He was aware there was a forum for fans, as well, an official one, but had little to do with it.
What Matthew told him was something of a revelation. The official forum had naturally turned
into a cesspit of in-fighting and self-policing amongst the moderators. The most hardcore fans
went elsewhere, to one of the thousands of unauthorized fan forums that dotted the web. That was
fine; all publicity was good publicity, and Charles had long ago ceased trying to control the explicit
fan art or *Dicks Out For Dethklok* photo threads. It was better to just… not know. Records still got
sold. More than ever. That was all that mattered.

But left unchecked, there had been a turn in the forums. Most of the klokateers used them – they’d
used them as civilians, and now was no different. Matthew had been introduced to them long after
he’d joined their ranks; as a trainee lawyer he had been cautioned early not to engage too much with
the internet. Good advice. But immersed in the ranks in Mordland, there was no choice but to
keep up with them. People talked in coded ways and if he failed to stay on top of them, he was left
behind by them, and susceptible to manipulation.

That was how he’d discovered *Die For Dethklok*, this other sentiment pedaled in the deeper,
locked sections of forums. It wasn’t so much a call to action as a code, something put in forum
signatures or signed off in private messages, whispered at the back of halls, on secret missions.
Like the black metal principle of *true cult*, real *brutal* Dethklok fans were prepared to die for the
band, and they held their compatriots to the same high bar. If you weren’t *brutal*, then you were a
poser, and you were treated to exclusion and punishment within the ranks they controlled.

Originally they hadn’t been much of a faction. But Charles’ intake of new klokateers had incensed
them; mere *employees* and not real followers. They worked on these inductees, found those
susceptible within their ranks. It hadn’t been planned. It had no ringleaders that Matthew knew, or
rather, those that fancied themselves ringleaders weren’t really at its helm. It spread like a virus
through outside fans and klokateers alike. The more klokateers were recruited, the harder it
became to keep track of just who was behind the hood, and whether the spidery hands had grasped
them yet. And now Matthew was a traitor, just as Charles was – a man who had placed himself at
the top of the chain, but who was clearly not *brutal*. Every hood could disguise the end of his life.
Every second could be his last.

In the control room, Charles stood stoic guard as the screens filled with forums, the information
scrolling past his cold eyes in lines upon lines of text as the team dove deep into the web. It was as
crass and morbid as it had been at the band’s conception, the same message board rumors and
chain letters. But the tone had changed. Now that Dethklok had conquered the world, brutality
was the currency, and the further they went, the worse the omens appeared reflected in Charles’
spectacles. The band hadn’t been active in months, recording was delayed by the move and the
studio was still not up to scratch. Headlines repeated in his head. *Dethklok’s Anonymous Army
Linked To Alps Murder.* They’d seen that. The world had seen that. They must have speculated.
They had to know.

They had to *act*. And cloistered inside Mordland, Charles hadn’t even noticed.

And so, when he received the summons to the Congressional hearing, Charles was not surprised. It
had been coming. He would be blind no longer.

* * * * *

YEAR ZERO
Skwisgaar sat hunched at the Bar table, the only band member left fully conscious during Magnus’ cross-examination. It was predictably brutal and the others had largely tapped out – to his left, Charles was glaring into space with his chin resting on his fist like Rodin’s *Thinker*, the intern scrawled in his notepad with a haste like his boss would stab him with the pen if he failed to get down every single utterance, Nathan was doing his sleep-with-your-eyes-open thing, totally checked out of reality, and Pickles was actually asleep, slumped in his chair and snoring softly.

On the table in front of the drummer was a piece of paper with a terrible drawing of Charles on it, from the end of examination in-chief, with his spidery writing next to it: *SELF DEFENSE TURNS TO THE OFFENSE.* Skwisgaar wasn’t sure what that meant but the drawing was awful, very cubist and heavy-handed. He hoped Charles hadn’t looked at it, and given how intensely Charles was staring at the space next to Magnus’ left ear Skwisgaar figured he probably hadn’t even noticed he was being drawn.

Murderface had been present and then vanished. All the better, he’d just hunched there next to Skwisgaar and muttered *this is bumming me out*... under his breath the whole time. Something about the girl, Cotton, was upsetting him, and she’d vanished too. Skwisgaar had noted their drama, and he didn’t think it was below Cotton to fuck someone to get revenge on Magnus right there in the courthouse, but surely Murderface was below her. From his reaction, yeah, totally, he’d been rejected somewhere along the way. Trust Murderface to get horny even in fucking court.

Skwisgaar would be after her himself, but something else was bothering him.

The scene from the night before still pounded in his skull, the knees of his white jeans bearing the marks of the garage floor and his head aching from the late, late night. That blazing light, the screech of the hammer on the car’s shell, Magnus’ flashing leer. Emma was sat just across from them; Skwisgaar couldn’t help looking at her as Magnus gave evidence, hiding behind his blonde hair when she looked back at him. This evidence, which she was supposed to follow; Magnus gave away nothing, weaving this story between all their truths. Skwisgaar’s truth was that, after they’d ended up at the Castle, he’d gone upstairs with one of the managers, an elder goth in corset and metal-heeled pumps who he’d fucked on the office table away from the pounding Depeche Mode in the bar. She’d taken him home after and they’d had quite a pleasant romp, with cognac imported from France and a double bed dressed in black furs and kretek cigarettes. Old chicks had all the money, that was just a fact, and all the moves. It was always a good night.

When he’d returned to the studio in the morning, it was trashed. Nathan was injured. Murderface and Pickles were hungover as fuck. And Magnus was raving about legal action. Conspiracy. Enemies.

In the witness box, his hands laced together in front of him and looking placidly at the defense attorney, Magnus Hammersmith said, “Yes, I can identify that as my writing, on Nuclear Death Now.”

“Mm hmm,” said Vernon, turning a page in the file he had open to another mess of vitriol, all caps. “And did you therein use the phrase, *homosexual-looking singer*?”

Magnus had to check.

“Correct, it appears I have.”

“Referring to the band Carpathian Martyr?”

“Mm, yes, correct.” Magnus seemed unperturbed that the band in question sat merely feet away...
from him, hissing at him under their breath from the cheap seats.

“He can just come down here and suck my dick whenever he’s effing ready. And you have here referred to their fans as stupid brain-dead idiots?”

“Correct. Redundant, I know. The heat of the moment.”

“It sounds like he’s got one of those Arizona 23oz cans stuck up his ass that he's trying to force out. And their guitar tone is just disgusting.”

Magnus listened intently to this and touched his lip with a finger, thoughtfully. “Correct,” he said with an air of grace. “Was I wrong?”

“I cannot say I’ve listened to them, Mr Hammersmith…”

Skwisgaar leaned his face on his fist in boredom. He wasn’t exactly sure what the lawyer was trying to do, except run Magnus through every nasty thing he’d ever typed on the forum. And there was a lot. Threats to smash up cars. Threats to expose dirty secrets. Threats to kick in people’s doors in the night and gut them and use their guts to restring their guitars and that would result in a better fucking tone. It was all empty, of course. But putting it in front of a jury, that had to be a strategy.

Skwisgaar looked down the Bar at his fellows. Pickles had stopped snoring, snoozing peacefully with his head on his chest now. Nathan was staring straight at Magnus and rubbed the knuckles of his injured hand with his other pensively. The crowbar had bruised his palm, and today the big guy was feeling quite sorry for himself. But even for all that, he was unusually guarded. Hadn’t even called his mother today. That was odd for Nathan.

“And that comment at the bottom, Mr Hammersmith?”

Magnus squinted at the page and cleared his throat before reading it, his voice still and regal: “EDIT: You are gay.”

“Thank you.”

Hold on.

Skwisgaar locked on Magnus’ face, so cool, so blank, so collected. That his face could just split open into that terrible grin – it felt like a dream, something seen in a night terror and not something real. Magnus had never hurt Skwisgaar. And he’d never threatened his life, not seriously. But seeing him so composed now, the perfect witness, Skwisgaar realised. Maybe what he had seen wasn’t the whole picture. Maybe what he had seen was instead merely what he’d been shown.

He looked quickly over at Nathan, still fixed on Magnus and rubbing his fist. What had Magnus meant, last night, I know that you didn’t plan it…? What did that mean, if it weren’t for your bullshit…? When Nathan should have stepped in, Magnus held some kind of sword over him, some kind of leash. Something that only they knew, Magnus and Nathan. But it wasn’t like the two hung out much.

The stuff that happened at the studio, like... I’m... I’m sorry, you know, I can say that now – I was drunk. I don’t even know what I did, and I – I didn’t mean it to go this far…

That night, Skwisgaar had been in the head office railing an OG (original goth) over the desk. He knew Murderface and Pickles walked home together, because they told him later and he had no reason not to believe them. That meant that Magnus and Nathan had been alone.
That meant that Magnus and Nathan had been alone, that night, when the studio was trashed. When Nathan’s hand was injured. Skwisgaar’s eyes widened.

He looked across the room at Emma, focused acutely on Magnus as he spoke.

Then to Nathan, flexing his hand and rumbling softly at Magnus’ words, about how everything he said was bullshit, whatever. Between them, Pickles slowly blinked out of his sleep and looked over at Nathan too. The front man hunched his shoulders, not even looking back. *Oh god, this sucks...* he grumbled, fixated on Magnus and the lawyer. Pickles cocked an eyebrow and said, *Nate...* very softly, but got nothing in return. Pickles rubbed the bags under his eyes, exhausted, and then Skwisgaar could hold it in no longer.

“Pickle,” he said softly, and Pickles took a moment but then peered at him from between his fingers, one bloodshot green eye fixed on him. Nathan did not seem to hear.

“Yeah, Skwisgaar.”

“I think I gots somethingk you should know...”

Pickles’ eye narrowed, and then he dropped his hands, looking closer at Skwisgaar’s worried face. Skwisgaar knew that wasn’t normal. He was hard to shake. Pickles could see it. “You wanna go outside for...” Pickles paused, frowning at Skwisgaar, and then said, “A smoooke...?”, his voice jumping up the octave as he remembered that Skwisgaar definitely didn’t smoke.

His weird tone was enough to get Offdensen’s attention, and Skwisgaar panicked as he saw the attorney turn. “Ja,” he said quickly, standing and flicking his hair over his shoulder as he made eye contact with the lawyer. “We ams just...” He pointed to the exit and Offdensen shrugged him off. Sure, he didn’t care. He was free.

Skwisgaar only checked behind him to make sure Pickles was following, and the last he heard of Magnus was, “Yeah, I recognize it. It’s the bullshit posted about us on that blog or whatever.”

And then standing out on the street, under the fire exit around the back of the building, Pickles lighting up with his brow furrowed deep, Skwisgaar told him everything.

Chapter End Notes

short one. well, brevity is the soul of wit. let's see if we can get this moving again. comments always appreciated, on this and previous chapters.

do YOU know what happened?

End Notes

comments appreciated, nay, thirsted for
Works inspired by this one: Dead Of Winter by PaxVobis

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