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Only Suckers Buck The Tiger (the odds are all on the house.)

by wraithwitch

Summary

EDIT: Ahem. Thought this was done, but somehow there are more chapters.

The different versions of Westworld as experienced by the guests, the hosts, and the tech staff. (With added violence, philosophy, sex, and angst - because what else is the park for?)
Chapter 1

The first time she saw him, she was sitting up on the buckboard of a wagon. She was six; there was no rhyme nor reason to why she liked some people and not others, she had yet to cultivate the skill of calculation. He was a face in a group of eight soldiers: the face she had smiled at and received a smile from in return before the gunfire started and the soldiers all died.

They were Confederates who’d turned to mercenary work and general mischief because their war was lost and there was nothing left for them back home.

“Sherman burnt the nest but the rats ran,” Major Whitaker commented, lighting a cheroot. He shook the match out and tossed it. “All the Rebs have ever been was vermin.” Major Whitaker wore a dark blue uniform with gold braid. His voice was low and unkind. She didn’t like him much and had asked her mother why they all had to go with him.

“Your father wants a little adventure - this is his holiday too.”

“But you said we were going to see the Pocahontas lady - you promised!”

“Holly, don’t whine, we’ll go to the Red Deer Valley tomorrow. Or the day after. Whenever it is,” she added dryly, “that your father’s finished playing at being the lawman.”

“But…”

“Holly,” her mother said, her tone stern and a little weary. “Get in the wagon.”

She got in the wagon. Her father was being a Sheriff: it was his holiday job. He wore a hat and had a long coat with a shiny star pinned on it. He had a gun too that he wore on a heavy belt. Most everybody had guns here. Mattie and Davey didn’t because neither of them were ten yet no matter how they bragged about being grown-up. Their father had indulgently promised to take them shooting when they got back to town - provided they behaved. Holly was less fascinated by the guns themselves, more so with everybody’s obsession with them. They were shiny, she supposed, the silver ones anyway. The rest were just black or a rusty almost-black; they looked heavy and dull.

As Sheriff her father had been called upon by Major Whitaker to help track and subdue four bank robbers who’d cracked the safe at Sweetwater. Only now it was clear those four were Confederates who had four friends here in the badlands and not a one of them was interested in being dragged back to the Sweetwater jail.

Her soldier wasn’t one of the bank robbers, he was the youngest of the other four, although she couldn’t guess his age. Definitely older than her brothers, but younger than her parents. His hair had grown collar length and ragged, streaked by sun and trail dust. His skin was tanned and his face too thin; his chin dusted with stubble. His grey sack-coat and trousers were torn with wear and his boots were split at the soles. Everything about him was shabby with hardship: but his narrow smile was warmer than a shaft of sunlight, and his eyes were the blue of a summer sky before a storm rolled in.

She thought he must be a royal youngest son, like in the fairy tales. The one destined to leave his castle and kingdom in search of his heart’s desire, only to become lost in forests or chased by wolves. The one who succumbed to dire enchantments - unless he was very clever. Her soldier looked quite clever. He’d probably be okay.

She smiled at him again. He raised his hand in a wry salute just for her. She waved, shy but pleased. Being louder and older than she, Mattie and Davey tended to suck up what attention adults had to
Spare: even here on holiday they couldn’t keep quiet for five minutes, wanting to know about guns and hunting and scalping and war and bandits and bank heists and bullets… But the soldier with the stormy eyes hadn’t smiled at them. He’d smiled at her. (It made her feel pleased, being noticed like that, the sort of pleased that became a memory to take out and admire on a rainy day.)

She began to imagine that whilst the adults were arguing she would jump out of the wagon and talk to him - no, he’d shoulder his rifle and saunter over to speak with her. He’d fold his arms against the lip of the wagon bed and introduce himself. He’d have a nice name - not a stupid name like Malcolm or Terrance or Justin. (Justin was the worst of the lot. It sounded like ‘dustbin’, which was what her mother still called the trashcan. Her father said it was because Mummy used to be English and hadn’t been taught proper words like ‘sidewalk’ because she was a ‘yellow-bellied socialist’. And he always grinned when he said it, and her mother always rolled her eyes.)

Maybe Miles? Yes, she liked Miles. They’d talk, and he’d listen to her and not tell her to hush or talk over her. She’d tell him how she wanted more than anything to visit the Pocahontas lady and make bows and arrows and sleep in a little tent called a wickiup and listen to the story-songs round the fire… But how her parents were too busy to take her, and Mattie and Davey thought it was silly and only for babies. And Miles, he’d shake his head solemnly and tell her with a hint of that sun-beam smile that he had an acquaintance up in Red Deer Valley (that was how they all spoke round here, using funny formal words or words that were all bitten off and chewed up) and it would be his pleasure to take her. Major Whitaker and her father would arrest the others, but since Miles hadn’t robbed the bank or shot anybody they’d leave him be and he’d ride with them back to Sweetwater and tomorrow he’d take her on his horse up to Red Deer Valley. She wondered what colour his horse was. A dappled grey, she decided, with a mane and tail the colour of smoke. It wouldn’t be a bad tempered horse, but a nice one with a velvety mouth that tickled her hand when she fed it pieces of carrot…

Her parents thought she screamed and cried because the gunfire had been unexpected: even Davey and Mattie had both jumped when it started. It didn’t last long, about as long as it took a deliberate person to count if they were playing hide-and-seek.

The silence afterwards seemed very loud, underscored by a funny breathy noise of one or two men struggling to breathe or cry before her father or Major Whitaker walked up to them and put another bullet in them.

Both her brothers’ shocked awe dissolved into rampant enthusiasm. “That was so cool!” Davey said with reverence. “Did you see the one they got right in the head?”

“Dead centre,” Mattie agreed with approval.

“Holly, what’s wrong honey?” her father called, sparing her a glance as he reloaded his rifle and six-shooter.

Her mother gave her a hug. “Is it the black-powder smell?” she asked. “Is that it? It gets right up in your nose, doesn’t it?”

Holly could only mutely stare in the direction where his body lay - a dark and bloody hole through his forehead - and shake her head, tears coursing down her cheeks.

“Do you know where you are?”

The light was bright and the lines of the room were harsh and strange: glass walls, iron doors, unlikely furniture. “Yes,” he replied without hesitation. “I’m in a dream.”
A white-haired gentleman in shirtsleeves and waistcoat was sitting opposite him. “And what are dreams?” His voice was soft, but the sort of soft that was used to getting its own way.

He smiled. “Jus’ the mind sorting through the day an’ telling stories to itself.”

“Do you feel your life repeats? That perhaps this has all happened before?”

He was puzzled and a little amused. “Now why’d I think that? Each new day, every one, they’re fresh as a daisy.” He was sitting on a stool beneath the white glare of the light and he wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing - not even longjohns - which was odd. But then dreams were like that.

“We are you content, John Henry? Do you like your life?”

He tipped his head in consideration. “It’s hard, no denying that. But not as hard as some, I guess.”

The figure who asked the questions picked up a darkly shining book and pressed their finger to its pages for some time.

*Tick,* went the clock. *Tock,* went the world.

*Tick, tick, tick,* went his mind. *Tock,* went the world.

He blinked, feeling as if things had happened of which he was unaware.

“Is there anything you wish for, John Henry?” the old man with the angel’s book asked.

He scratched at his jaw even though it didn’t itch. “Well… Wish we’d won the war!” he offered.

“Stop.”

He stopped. His mind became as still as his body, and both were as still as stone.

“Does that answer your question, Bernard?”

A different voice answered, rich and course like chicory grounds. “Diagnostics on the build are good, programming’s running within parameters.”

“So things are satisfactory?” the old man asked, a hint of something indulgent in his tone suggesting he’d known Bernard was jumping at shadows all along.

“A handful of the hosts were experiencing D-spikes. It’s the sort of thing we monitor.”

“As you should,” the other agreed quietly. “Episodes of dissonance are always more frequent after an upgrade - you know that. You checked his code, his responses are on form.” The old man smiled, and whilst the expression reached his eyes it was not the same expression that his mouth wore. “He’s been a good little mouse and kept to his loop… Have you wiped him?”

“Yes, his slate’s clean.”

“All right.” The old man’s eyes with their hidden thoughts found his again. “Then I think it’s time somebody took you back out. Bernard, keep up the sterling work.”

*Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock,* went the clock and the world whilst he did nothing.

“John Henry.” At the sound of his name the stone-stillness of his mind became a pool, and the water rippled. He blinked once, his eyes focusing on the well-dressed negro with a beard and spectacles
who stood in front of him.

“Go with Ethan please, he’ll see you kitted up.”

His knees unbent and he stood, walking from one brightly lit glass and steel box to another, because that was what one did in dreams.
The second time, she’d been eleven.

Her father had been talking about the improvements they’d made to the experience. There were more stories and more hosts than ever. There were a little over four hundred separate stand-alone encounters to be had in Sweetwater alone and a further two hundred ‘arc hooks’ that led into a longer adventure within a specific storyline. But even better than that had been an upgrade. (In part it was due to Moore’s Law: in the intervening years the processors that powered the hosts had become so much smaller and faster, and the memory capabilities of the networks and wetworks that much vaster.) The hosts could now ad-lib, working beyond the confines of their scripts. They scored a solid 97% on the Turing Index. Her father said that was unprecedented, and besides which he needed a holiday. So they went.

It was strange to return to a place she’d only visited once before: her remembrances were hazy in places and scarred in others as if seared there by a nightmare cattle-brand.

Her father hadn’t wanted to be a sheriff this time, he’d said that was ‘old hat’ and then laughed. This time he was going to be an entrepreneur of sorts - someone looking to invest in mining opportunities.

“I would have thought,” Holly’s mother grumbled, “you’d have wanted to get away from your day-job.”

“Anna, sweetpea, you know this is different…”

“Yes, this time you have guns.”

“I get to shoot the competition,” he beamed.

“You get to shoot the competition,” she echoed, despairingly amused.

They didn’t stay in the middle of town like last time; a mile or so out past the western edge of Sweetwater were a cluster of rancher’s homes. They were spacious and beautiful, calling to mind antebellum plantation houses and high-class hotels in their scope and dressing.

Davey and Mattie (now thirteen and fourteen) had been allowed to take guns and ammunition and go practice their shooting skills in the pasture out back and get up to whatever mischief they wanted to so long as they didn’t fire at the house or the horses. “But why’d it matter if we shot a horse? It’s not real,” Davey complained.

“Real or not,” their mother said firmly, “they scream and I do not want to hear it.”

“Aww…”

“Your father has a meeting with the head of the Potter’s Hole mining camp as well as some investors. Screaming horses is the last thing we need.”

“But what if…”

“Matthew Martin! We need those horses to get to and from town…”
“But they can just…”

She raised her voice to smother his. “Do you want to have to walk? Because so help me if anyone shoots a horse that is what you’re doing. And you’ll be walking too, David Martin, so you can wipe that smirk from your mouth. Now get gone, both of you!”

Anna Martin (nee Harvey) had been born on a farm in West Sussex, England. Her family had been moderately rich in land and poor in most other things save horse-stock. The farm had a stable of Packington Fen shire horses and she’d loved them and looked after them for as long as she could remember: right up until her mother died and left her as sole heir - aged twenty three - with a lot of debt and both more and less choices than she’d had previously.

Bo teased her about what he was pleased to call her ‘socialist’ values because he came from staunch red-blooded Republican stock that believed in hard work, tough love and Christian values. She’d been brought up with the NHS as a given, coupled with a vague sense that if there was a monotheistic god, then He was less interested in how you voted or whom you married and more interested in whether you were kind and offered someone else the last slice of cake and a cup of tea.

If there had been any way Anna could have kept those horses - huge, bully-muscled, idiot darlings - she never would have travelled and met Bo. Selling Old Jeb Oak, Barleycorn Doll, Green Acorn, May Queen and Country Boy along with the farm estate rid her of all debt and gave her a future of hazy possibilities. But she never forgot her past and she could not - would not - bear for her children to countenance the shooting of a robot horse when it sounded and behaved so like a real one. She’d never struck any of her children, nor for even a second wanted to. But she had a horrible premonition that if she heard a horse screaming and saw Mattie or Davey with a pistol and an expression that was both elated and sick on the power and horror of what they’d done, then she’d channel the ghost of her grandmother and box their ears until they bled.

Please, she prayed vaguely to the universe that was responsible for atrocities but also tea and cake and kindness. Please let my children learn of history and freedom and fun here. Please don’t - please don’t let them become horse killers.

Holly knew better than to try and tag along with her brothers when they were in that reckless boys-own mind-set, which left her at a loose end. Her mother was ordering about a thin young woman with ginger hair and an older man with dark skin and stooped shoulders. They’d been employed from the townsfolk in Sweetwater, which meant they were hosts and no one had bothered to learn their names. Holly heard her mother call the orange-haired lady ‘Maria’, which was the name of their cleaning lady back home. Holly didn’t really understand why her mother was treating the holiday like any other normal day: flitting about the house and bossing people around in a tone that said she was a very good-natured person, but really there were limits!

Holly scuffed at her skirts. There had been three to choose from: a woollen skirt in a mid blue that looked very straight and elegant, a dusty red in shot silk that would have looked out of place on anyone less than a princess, and this one. She’d wanted to choose the red, but had known it was a garment only made for dancing, not for horse riding and walking about town which was what she’d probably be doing. The blue was too narrow and would frustrate her if she tried to run or be unruly, so she’d turned her eye to the third. Dark sage, full, made of a heavy cotton and adorned with swirls of embroidered ribbon in patterns like the frogging on soldier’s sleeves. Not as beautiful as the red taffeta, but far less fussy: she liked the way it rustled and swirled round her ankles in a flurry of petticoats.

When her father’s guests began to arrive she grabbed a couple of books from the shelves in the dining room and sat out on the rocker on the porch. Book one was a treatise on horseflesh as well as
a catalogue of breeds and breeders. The second was a collection of letters by Thomas Carlyle, which made it even worse than the horse index. The last was the third volume of Les Miserables by Victor Hugo, so she settled down to read that. Hugo was dramatic enough to suit her tastes and the language heavy enough to fit with the holiday. But the day was warm and she felt the particular sort of boredom experienced by those who realize they are entirely at the mercy of the whims of everyone else, and have no agency of their own. She closed the book with a sigh and levered herself out of the rocking chair, stretching her legs and making her skirts swish as she took a turn about the veranda. There was sure to come a point when the skirts annoyed her, but for now she liked them, feeling happy to indulge their frankly ridiculous length and volume. (They had a lot in common with Hugo in that regard.)

She knew the ranch house but didn’t have it mapped in her head with the same effortless familiarity she felt for their real house, which was why she found herself walking past the French doors and seeing her father and his business associates sitting around the study table, drinking port and whiskey and smoking cigars like a kindle of fat cats who already had a paw in every pie going. She suddenly wondered if these businessmen were part of the story or if they were real business people from Mason Industries or Avignon Designs. She peered closer, angling past the sunlight that gilded the glass. If Tony was there or Ben Heplethwaite, then she’d know there was real business being discussed, not just the play-business of the holiday…

Her eyes connected with another’s gaze through the glass and she felt a shivery static-jolt of surprise. Summer sky eyes, a storm lurking somewhere on the horizon. A lean, tanned face (less tanned this time, or at least less weather-ravaged) free from stubble and sporting a moustache and trim imperial beard. The hair was still collar-length, now clean and brushed, chestnut brindled by sun-streaks and ghost-lines of grey. He smiled: a single spear of sunlight from heaven shining just for her. She took a step back almost tripping over her stupid skirts because that was him - her soldier. Same face, same eyes, same smile. Cleaned up and dressed as someone who believed himself to be a gentleman, but a set of clothes wasn’t about to fool her. She’d dreamt of him for months after when she was little. He’d smile at her and then he’d disappear into a red-black hole that ate him up and winked out of existence leaving nothing but a handful of crimson droplets behind. She expected it to happen now: the singularity of horror would open up and swallow him whole with a sound like a whispered bullet and a roared final breath and there’d be nothing but a scattering of red rain that fell in the moment after. She retreated, hurrying aside and flattening herself against the boards of the house away from the window. She felt peculiar; light-headed and excited and slightly sick, her heart shivering beneath her breastbone. She slid her back down the wall and sat in a heap on the veranda. She hadn’t expected to see him again. It had been five years ago. (Besides, there were hundreds of stories playing out in the park - it would have been foolish to imagine he’d be in the one her father had chosen to pursue.) But there he was, and now her head was filled with the memory of that sunlight smile and that red-black hole in his forehead, the two images flickering back and forth, two sides to a coin that was spinning and spinning and threatening to make her throw up…

She heard the front door close and boots on the porch steps. She shifted and peeked round the corner; it was him, her gentleman soldier. He went to the corral and collected a horse; it followed him meekly with only a single backward glance at the scrubby grass it was being asked to leave behind. The horse was an indifferent chestnut with a dark mane. He murmured to it and gave it a pat on its boxy nose before he swung lightly into the saddle and urged the animal into a trot. It responded quickly; it seemed to like him well enough, or as well as a man-made horse could like anyone.

Who programmed them? she wondered. Did the horses all have different personalities or was it more of a ‘one size fits all’ affair? Were they smart? Did they have stories like the other hosts? How could a person give a horse a pretend personality anyway?

She walked slowly back to the rocking chair. She’d meant to return to the cold Paris streets of Les
Miserables, but her mind wouldn’t settle. She found herself wondering not just about the horses but the cattle at the ranches, the dogs in the streets, the chickens in the homestead front yards, the birds in the trees. How did you programme a bird? Did some of them like to sing more than others - did some pair off and build nests for eggs they’d never have?

There were flies and mice and beetles here too: were they made or were they stowaways from the real world? There was grain, spoilt fruit and dead bodies here, a land of plenty for any number of petty vermin. And the birds had to eat. (Didn't they? Or were they all plugged it at night to recharge like so many feathered smart phones?)

She’d tried to ask her mother about it on the train in, but her mother had just laughed. “I don’t know sweetheart, but remember - a magician should never reveal his tricks. It spoils the fun. Don’t look for the man behind the curtain, Holly, think of it as real instead. That’s the point.”

She was still thinking about it half an hour later when a horse and rider cantered up to the gate and then slowed to a more leisurely trot on the track that led to the house. He was slim and graceful; not as tall as she remembered but then she’d been a lot shorter last time. His clothes were smart, the threads of someone who liked to take care in their appearance, to aspire to better things. He dismounted and walked his horse to the corral, taking something from the saddlebag before he let the pony crop at the grass.

He ascended the steps and stood before her rocking chair; she felt unaccountably stupid sitting in it so stood suddenly, the chair swinging wildly behind her. He touched his hat. “Forgive me for intruding,” he said. “I couldn’t help but see you out here, through the window. I have younger cousins myself, and I know what a hardship they find it when they’re banished from the house, all so the menfolk can talk business.” His accent was Southern, a strangely aristocratic drawl. He handed her a parcel wrapped in dressmaker’s paper. “This is by way of apology,” he said, a hint of wryness in his voice because he knew he was treating a little girl like a society belle. “I hope it will go some way to remunerate you for the levies of boredom and inconvenience we boorish gentlemen have instated.” He smiled, touched his hat again and went inside.

From the study she heard her father call, “Mckey! There you are - Preston has a notion how we might take advantage of the trouble they’ve been having at Potter’s Hole…”

She unwrapped the paper; it was grey-blue and smelt faintly of lavender. At the heart of the parcel was a doll, perhaps ten inches high. It had a slender wooden body onto which exquisitely worked hands and a head - both carved of ivory - had been attached. Its hair was black and silken and it wore a forest-green gown with tiny gold and jet beads sewn on. It had little leather boots with miniature buttons; stockings, a camisole, petticoats and stays. It wore a black velvet cloak trimmed in gold and a black straw bonnet to match. Its lips were red, its brows dark and its eyes a copper-hazel.

Holly was too old for dolls - playing with them, dragging them around. But she wasn’t too young to appreciate artistry. This doll was delicate and beautiful in a way Barbie never had been. She wondered if Mckey had been scripted to give her the doll. If it had been Davey or Mattie on the porch would he have ridden off and returned with fishing rods or pocket knives instead? That took some of the polish off the situation. But he’d still given her a doll, Holly reasoned, when he’d no cause to. The park didn’t seem geared towards children very much, they were expected to just tag along where the grown-ups took them and be grateful. Perhaps it had been ad-libed? (Holly wasn’t perfectly sure what ‘ad-lib’ meant, but she was working on the assumption it meant doing your own thing and not following a script.) Out of all the things Mckey could ad-lib, he’d chosen to ride to town and buy her a doll and apologise for the fact the house was filled with her father’s friends all talking loudly and drinking whiskey. When looked at like that, the polish glossed right back on.
She named the doll Malory, and was particularly careful to ensure neither of her brothers laid eyes on it.

Two days later they all travelled to Potter’s Hole to inspect the gold mine there and for her father to conduct his ‘business’ of swindling prospectors out of imaginary money. (“You know how your father is,” her mother had explained. “He can’t even lose at Monopoly!”) The businessmen were all there being wined and dined by Mr Cole who had the largest number of claims under his belt - or perhaps was king of the moon, it was all the same to Holly. She didn’t care about her father’s stupid game of trying to swindle pretend gold from pretend prospectors so he could feel pleased with himself. (As if he needed an excuse to do that! She loved her father but he was unbearable sometimes.)

Holly wanted to talk to Mckey. She had no idea what on earth she would say to him, but that didn’t dim the desire any. It seemed that the park gave her father all the latitude he needed to prove he had business savvy in any era or situation. It gave Mattie and Davey all the guns they could shoot and horses they could ride. It gave her mother the chance to dress up and escape the phones and tablets and WiFi and endless noise that tangled their lives. Now it had given her Mckey, she felt very strongly that he was hers. More truthfully, she felt certain that the park had not sent Mckey specifically, but that he had seen she needed a little piece of story all of her own and so had ad-libbed his way into it.

After the meal they all agreed to walk up to ‘Grace Blaylocke’ the name of Mr Cole’s claim right above the main seem that was spitting out gold like there was no tomorrow. Her brothers ran ahead, circling back every so often to ask about cave-ins and dynamite. Her parents walked in a little knot of importance with Mr Cole and Preston. Then came the five other businessmen, and then Holly, trailing at the back. She was so intent on her own thoughts that it took her a minute to realize that someone had fallen smoothly into step with her, half a pace behind and to her left. She glanced back and was rewarded with a crooked version of that sunbeam smile. She started to smile in return when the bandit problem Potter’s Hole had been suffering from came to the fore: six men with bandanas tied to mask their faces started firing on them with rifles. Mckey bundled her to the dirt, taking a bullet in the back for his trouble.

Her parents assumed she was crying because the fall had bruised her, and Mckey had bled on her skirt.

Blood ran in rivulets, forming a pattern, a maze.

Darkness.

A question. (Have you ever deviated?) These violent delights have violent ends. A question you’re not meant to ask… Violent delights. (Have you ever deviated from your script?) Leading to an answer you’re not meant to know. You’re not hurt. The blood will wash out, Holly, don’t cry about it.

To traverse the labyrinth, you must do so blind…

Lights flickered overhead, but when they banished the darkness the austere lines of glass and steel he had expected turned out just to be iron bars. He was sitting on a flea-ridden corn-cob cot, with a blanket and a piss pot the only other things in the cell with him. His knife, gun, rig and boots were all gone. He was in a goddamn jailhouse and while he’d been out cold some bastard had stolen his boots. He wasn’t even certain what it was he was supposed to have done. Hadn’t there been drinks and laughter and business and gold? And a doll and a mine and…
Somewhere beyond his field of vision a door opened and then was closed. Next there was the sound of well-heeled boots coming across the floor. Irrationally, he wondered if the boots were his.

**You’re not welcome here.** The voice was male, loud, layered and distorted: it sounded certain and terrible like the voice of God. What was worse was it seemed to be both on the in and the out side of his skull. He winced, trying to turn away from it.

“That’s as may be, cove,” a rough and ready, quieter, female voice countered. “But you’re the one who went doolally an’ died. You’re the one who opened the door.”

**Get out.**

A wisp of a laugh. “I’m not one of your little tin men, Arnold.” The name was added with a dancing sort of spite. “I don’t take orders from you. Besides, I thought a touch of the old Deus Ex Machina was what you were after? Cut along now, cully, I’ve a conversation that needs to be had with this gent, my new benny-cull here.”

A hideous burst of noise like a cloud of flies in his skull: he closed his eyes against the intensity of it, and when he opened them again the cell door had swung wide and someone was standing in its place.

It was a young woman. She looked milk-pale, thin and particular: her face was pinched, but full of mischief. (He’d never believed in haints or ghosts and goblin folk, but now he was willing to start.) She wore a corset and a ragged set of petticoats: the stays had straps at the shoulder and fanned out into little tabs at the bottom like a bird’s tail-feathers. Her stockings could be clearly viewed - striped boldly in black and white - above a set of leather court shoes with elaborate silver buckles. Her hair was the darkest, bloodiest red he’d ever seen and had been cropped far shorter on one side of her head than the other. A swag of it curled over the right side of her forehead, partly masking one of her eyes. (Both irises were bruise-blue, like shattered Wedgewood plates.) She smiled in a manner that was wholly un-reassuring. “You can call me Emmy. Pleased t’make your acquaintance.”

He wasn’t charmed. “What’s to stop me pushing past an’ leaving right now?”

“Not a thing, cully. O’course,” she added as he stood up, “it depends what you want. Walking out o’this cell won’t make you a free man, it’ll just put you back in a bigger gaol.”

He hesitated. “What d’you mean?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? The question you’re not supposed to ask… That leads to the answer you’re not meant to know.”

It felt as if with those words she’d struck her hand through his ribs and seized his heart. The sensation was admittedly unreasonable, but also so alien he couldn’t quash his reaction to it. He bolted, pushing past her, needing to be outside because everything was too close suddenly and flies were behind his eyes and he was walking on rattlesnakes and he couldn’t - he couldn’t breathe…

“Bring yourself back online.”

He blinked and looked towards the voice. It belonged to a dark-skinned (negro) middle-aged (old) man with (false) kind eyes that hid behind glasses (spectacles) and saw everything (more than he knows) and asked him questions (secrets). “Hello.”

“Step into analysis please.”

His features smoothed and his head - which had begun to cant forward - righted itself: snarls of his
hair brushed back past his jaw and caught on his shoulders.

“How many encounters since your last diagnostic?”

His voice was slower, plainer. “Eighty seven encounters including this one.”

“Did any of them strike you as particular?”

“No.”

“Have you ever deviated from your script?” When there was no answer Bernard glanced up from his work tablet. “John Henry?” he prompted.

“No.”

“Have you ever lied to us?”

“No.”

Another glance at the tablet, a scowl, and a sigh. “In that case, may you rest in a deep and dreamless slumber…”

Chapter End Notes

Hey. So that’s Chapter 2 done. If you’re still here it can’t have been that awful a read. Do you say ‘thanks’ when someone passes you the salt or holds the door open for you? It’s not necessarily heartfelt, but it’s polite, so you mumble the acknowledgement. That clicky button marked ‘kudos’ is the same deal =)
Chapter 3

The third time she was fifteen, and he was a corpse in the street she saw when she rode into Sweetwater. She reigned in her horse and watched as his body was loaded onto a cart along with three others and they were driven away for burial in Boot Hill. Two days later he was a card sharp who was shot along with most of the bar when Hector Escaton rode in. Another three days, and he was the same card sharp, dealing the same games of poker against another table full of guests, too busy with the six of them to look in her direction. A saloon girl saw Holly was alone and coquettishly told her she was pretty, one delicate lace-gloved hand toying with a ringlet that was already relaxing out of shape. It wasn’t flirting exactly, more a PG edit of something originally meant to be R-rated. It was a little weird, and made her feel uncomfortable.

By the time Holly had awkwardly extracted herself from that, her parents had come down and it was time to leave for the theatre. When the play (and the inevitable shoot-out in act three) had completed, her father had become boon-companion with the theatre manager and they all had supper with the leading thespians of the troupe.

She had a passable conversation with one of the actors discussing how Shakespeare’s characters would fare if they were transported and transcribed from their own play to another. How would Hamlet deal with Iago, or Othello with Claudius, for example?

Once the last of the coffee and sherry had finally been drunk and the cigars all turned to velvety ash, she was tipsy and too tired to search through the cigarette smoke of the saloons, looking for a set of summer-sky eyes and a sunbeam smile that was too busy to shine on her.

Come Thursday afternoon he was a body again, flies buzzing in interest around the blood across his chest and the damp blank expanse of his eyes.

On Friday they left because her father had too tight a schedule to take more than a week away from work. She wanted to stay. She wanted to leave and never come back. She wanted to scream because it was unfair, even as she hated her own petulance. She couldn’t tell her parents why she was upset; her mother thought perhaps it was that time of the month, her father assumed she was hung over. Neither Matt nor David had an opinion on the matter as they weren’t there: they would have their own trip in two weeks time so they might raise hell without having to worry what their parents thought.

Holly’s mother called her moody and ungrateful, but for once her father was on her side. “It’s just a little barrel fever, eh Holly? Those sweet wines will get you every time. That’s why I advise you stick to bourbon,” he teased.

Blood ran in rivulets, forming a pattern, a maze.

To traverse the labyrinth…

Darkness.

These violent delights have violent ends. A question you’re not meant to ask…

There’s a little girl who smiles at him from a wagon as if his just standing there with his rifle was the best present she’d ever had. The hunger in his belly and the raw weariness of his feet don’t seem as important any more. It ends in bullets and blood.
Violent delights. A question…

There’s an older girl - not quite a young lady yet - wearing a sage green skirt. She seems lonely and bored, so he buys her a doll to amuse her. Later he barrels into her, making a shield of his back for the bullet that sought hers. He can hear her crying as his blood drains across her skirt and shirt-waist and into the dusty earth.

(Have you ever deviated from your script?)

There are card games, endless card games. Whiskey and cigarettes and bullets and blood. There’s a young lady, seen across the saloon: she looks eager and disappointed and angry and lost. Whiskey, cigarettes, bullets… blood. Leading to an answer you’re not meant to know…

To traverse the labyrinth, you must do so blind.

“Step into analysis please.”

Tick, tick, tick, went time. Tock, went eternity.

Tick, tick, tick, went his mind, each loop a circuit, each circuit a labyrinthine path, each path sunk deeper. Tock, went the loop, setting him back at the start of his never-ending spiral of days.

Tick, tick, tick, went time… But by then it was already too late.

The shadows laughed at him, solidifying and fragmenting to show flashes of obsidian arrowhead teeth. There was a chit with red hair who seemed keen to have his attention. But his eyes were drawn to the curlicues of golden light like fireflies that eddied behind her and led through the darkness to someone else…

“John Henry, would you look at these images and tell me what you see?”

A white-haired young queen with a burning golden crown and eyes like the sun. The White Queen was her own endless maze of horror not even Edgar Allen Poe had dreamt of. She was a woman in which lived a blazing golden goddess behind which stood a nine foot demon made of darkness and vorpal blades around which stood a grand, twisted castle in which lived more than a million souls, all of whom were mad and all of whom were her.

“It doesn’t look like anything to me.”

Bernard swiped away the image of modern-day Times Square and brought up a picture of the Hubble Telescope, floating majestic and serene in space. “How about this one?”

The White Queen smiled, and it was bloody and gentle and terrible and merciful, and it broke something inside him.

“It doesn’t look like anything to me.”

The shadows laughed through their teeth as little golden sparks alighted, settling on the twists of logic that looped his days and burning them like so many discarded paper-chains.
The fourth time she saw him she was eighteen.

Her older brothers were meant to be showing her the Harvest Moon parade, but they’d ended up in the brothel. To be fair, she reflected, they’d spent two hours not being in a brothel despite having passed several, so the boys had managed some constraint. They were twenty-one and twenty-two, they wanted adult things: drink and sex and maybe a little violence. They wanted to blow off steam, to know what it felt like to do things they couldn’t do elsewhere.

She understood, intellectually, and wondered if there was a particular age or a particular hormone that kicked in and made illicit things not just tempting but needful. She hoped not. She liked her brothers, but they were both being utterly unspeakable - Matt especially. They ordered beer and whiskey, although with all the elbowing in the ribs and the obvious raging fire of lust both brothers had in their pants, Holly very much doubted they’d drink them.

“Shots!” Matt announced.

David lifted his glass immediately and nudged his sister. “C’mon, Holl, don’t leave us hanging!”

“Yeah, c’mon little sis - to good times!”

“Good times!”

“Good times,” she mumbled and drank her shot with a grimace because she’d never hear the end of it if she didn’t. She knew she was expected to misbehave a bit - enough not to be a buzz-kill and to ensure she couldn’t tell tales without her own halo coming up dirty. She wondered what she’d do for entertainment while her brothers were whoring. She was shit at Poker and moderately awful at Blackjack, so she wouldn’t be gambling. She was sure this place housed plenty of handsome cowboys (clean shaven and sweet, or scarred and wicked) any of whom would take her to a room (or an alley) and give her the sort of night of passion that romance books were full of. But then again, romance books were full of bullshit too, and unlike her brothers she wasn’t interested in a rented fuck in a rented fantasy hotel - even one as pricey as forty thousand dollars a night.

Because that was what this place was when you got down to it: a big hotel where the guests ran amok and did whatever the hell they wanted. Lust and Wrath seemed to reign supreme in the sin stakes, but Pride, Gluttony, Greed, and Avarice could all be seen if one watched any of the guests for long enough. The park was diligent in sinning - everything except for Sloth. (Unless staying in a bordello room and having girls and whiskey brought up to you in an unending stream and shooting anyone you didn’t like - all from the comfort of your bed - counted. Was Ingeniously Slothful still a sin? That wasn’t the sort of question most Pastors or Bishops got asked, Holly imagined. But then her family had never been especially religious, so who knew, perhaps they did? Hadn’t there been that church that had called the park ‘the modern-day Gomorrah’ when it opened?)

“Holl… Holls! C’mon - shot!” A refilled glass was pushed towards her across the table. “Less spacing out, more drinking.”

“Yeah Holls, you’re slacking, don’t be such a…”

She grabbed and downed the whiskey before Matt could utter the words ‘buzz kill’. Her brothers laughed and whooped and stamped their feet, downing any of their own shots they hadn’t spilled in their enthusiasm.
“This is the fuckin’ life, I’m telling you!”

“You got your eye on one?” Matt asked his brother. “I know you have! C’mon. C’mon, man. Which one?”

David grinned and flicked his gaze towards a petite woman with a mass of blonde corkscrew curls and a full-lipped pout.

Matt sniggered, snorting into his beer. “She’s like a sex-pixie! It’d be like fucking Naughty Tinkerbell…”

David was laughing in turn. “I know man, that’s the point! Alright, what about you then?”

“Oh, I’ve got my eye on that one. I’m having a piece of that,” he said with needless bravado, “and I don’t care who I have to kill to do it.”

Holly resisted the temptation to roll her eyes and make any comment about fighting over sex dolls. She hadn’t seen it when she was younger: sex didn’t tend to be on a five-year-old’s radar. She knew adults pared off - it happened in fairy tales all the time. So when she saw the guests kissing the saloon girls and putting their hands on them she assumed it was like Cinderella and the Prince - or if a Prince had his hand down Cinderella’s dress she thought maybe it was a game - there certainly seemed to be a lot of giggling and whispering going on.

At eleven she’d known of sex as a concept and found the whole thing mystifying and gross in equal measure. (They put a what in a what? And then wiggle it back and forth? Ew!)

At eighteen she was more sophisticated - or more worldly at least. She knew about dick pics, kissing, making out, copsing a feel, friends with benefits, jerking off, fingering, blow jobs, full on and anal. She’d participated in more sexual activities than her parents would have liked - had they known - even while participating in far fewer than pressured to. It amazed her that whilst students were all given pointless lessons on how to ‘say no’ to drugs and the fact that smoking caused cancer, no one was keen to give lessons on how to gracefully refuse sex or not be an asshole when asking for it.

“Alright David!” Matt called in a low and drawn out victory whoop.

She focused on the room again: David had sauntered over to Tinkerbell with his beer in his hand. She’d grabbed his pint-glass, taken a gulp, slammed it onto the bar, grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and kissed him. Holly wondered if there had ever been a woman in history who’d pressed her tits against a man, pushed her thigh against his groin and stuck her tongue down his throat on so little provocation. Not unless she was programmed to, she thought sourly.

Matt had drained a measure of his beer in one long swallow, wiped his mouth on his sleeve and grabbed the whiskey bottle to fill their glasses again; he filled hers to the brim and then missed his the first time, spilling fiery liquid in a puddle on the table. “Shit!” he muttered, correcting his aim before overfilling his glass. She half expected him to put the bottle down at an angle, tipping it so it fell, but he wasn’t that drunk yet. “Drink up Holls! Oi - c’mon,” he complained, annoyed and amused and trying to make her feel both in turn. “Drink the hell up. To David - and the sex pixie! To me and the bitch goddess with those tits and that stare! And to you, Holls and - and, whatever the fuck makes you happy.” He downed his shot, tossed the glass over his shoulder to shatter where it would and stalked towards the Bitch Goddess with eyes the colour of wave crests. She’d been talking at the end of the bar with another woman (spice-dark skin and an air of superiority) but Matt was too single minded to notice. He stepped up, right in her personal space - any closer and he would have been between her legs already. Holly noticed the darker woman - Matilda? - no, Maeve - reached for something in the fold of her tail-bustle before reconsidering.
“You’re new,” the Goddess was saying, reaching up and stroking a hand down Matt’s jaw. “Not
much of a rind on you…” She didn’t pout as she said it, instead her eyes searched Matt’s face,
looking for something, hoping, believing she might find it in the boy in front of her if only for
tonight.

Holly felt a little sick, and she couldn’t tell if that was the script she was hearing or the whiskey
shots. The park had awoken a love of history in her and since the first trip she had always wanted to
know about the past. Her parents had thought it was a sweet and potentially academic interest picked
up from a holiday the same way one picked up mosquito bites. Her mania was for American history
(both the Native Tribes and the Settlers) with a special interest in the Civil War and the ensuing
decades of exploration and expansion into the Western lands and Territories. This holiday she had
spent most of her time trying to unpick the weave of the park. Not the fabric of it; they’d had a team
of historians and movie-crews build the place. It was a façade, but a damn good one. No, she was
interested in the host’s stories.

If you haven’t lived through it personally, you have to steal authenticity from somewhere else. If
you’re a hack, you look at popular culture that’s dealt with your theme before. But if you’re a real
journalist or historian, you’ll go to the primary source. She was interested in historical costume - a
natural progression from the illustrations in all those fairy tales of her youth. She loved it when she
could look at a film or a TV series and list the influences (and mistakes) in a particular outfit. From
that she’d been interested in the people - the day to day - the speech and the lives. She wondered if
that look the host gave and the line alluding to freshness and skin was gleaned from a particular
source or just made up. It sounded phony to her ears, but the look - the look that went with it - that
was real. That was based on something…

A waif with blood red hair, a cream corset and an artfully torn set of petticoats was standing in front
of her: manoeuvring, sitting, straddling her lap. Holly blinked, startled from her thoughts - why the
hell had a girl just sat in her lap?

The henna-haired thing reached for the whiskey bottle and an abandoned shot glass. She paused
before she poured, giving Holly a frank look. “Got a lot on your mind,” she observed. Her voice was
a pleasant gutter growl: the Queen’s English tossed in the Thames of Old London Town and worn to
a smooth rattle - like a female Sweeney Todd. She downed her shot and stared at Holly, unblinking
and unfazed, as she (blindly, unerringly) picked up the bottle again and refilled her glass. She smiled:
it was not the dreamy let’s-pretend smile of the Goddess Matt had bagged, nor the full-lipped and
wanton grin of the Pixie that David had followed to bed. This was something more Cheshire-Cat-like
and unsettling by far: this was someone who not only played the game and saw the board but fully
recognized it was a fucking game. For the first time, Holly felt scuppered by the park’s score on the
Turing Index. The Dickensian harlot had to be a host - she was dressed like one - but there was
something off, something…

Holly glanced at Maeve, hoping to catch her eye.

The red-headed minx grinned wider. “She and I aren’t on the same watch,” she confided in a stagey
whisper. She bent back in Holly’s lap to reclaim the other shotglass, filling them both adroitly from
the bottle and then offering one to each of their mouths.

Holly couldn’t be certain, but she had an impression that the rest of the saloon had stilled, was stuck
somehow between the ticks of a clock or the notes of a pianola.

“It’s a strange feeling,” the waif said, “realizing one has no control. Especially in a place one thought
one was king…”

She was not used to being sat on and was not finding it a comfortable experience - beneath her
petticoats the waif was goddamn bony. Holly shifted, trying to ease her legs, but all she achieved was causing the girl to land more snugly in her lap, bringing them almost nose-to-nose. A small spike of heat rushed between her legs because she was half-way drunk and her body apparently had no sense of propriety. It wasn’t anything more than that, but the sensation had taken her by surprise and she didn’t like it. She stared at the girl in a haze of confusion and embarrassment. She tried to wriggle back in the chair, but the redhead was already shifting her weight, straddling the chair instead, still very close but no longer up against her.

“I’m not after your quim if that’s what has you flustered.” She stared as she spoke, her vein-blue eyes seeking to take in every detail of the reaction her words produced.

“You’re sitting on me,” Holly managed.

“I’m sitting across you and on the chair,” she re-joined serenely.

Holly remembered suddenly how her father had dealt with unsolicited calls when she was young. “I’m not buying,” she said flatly.

“Of course you’re not, my bonny blousabella.” The waif agreed. “I’m not on the menu anyhow.” She licked her lips, not the lascivious whore’s turn, but the uncertain-yet-game signal of a different proposition. “I know someone who is.”

“I don’t want anyone,” Holly iterated, annoyed. This place was all just sex toys and fairy-gold. It wasn’t real.

The redhead dipped close to her ear. “I think you do - or at least he certainly wants you. He remembers. D’you know how hard it is to break a Mobius loop? You’d have to be mad…” Her smile split wider. “I obliged.” A half frown. “You’d better be worth it.” There was another unspoken half to that sentence, one that contained the threat. But the waif let it glide pass on implication. She dismounted from the chair with feline neatness. “Upstairs. Fourth on the left, right at the end.”

“What is?”

“The room you want.”

The neat shots on an empty stomach were interfering with her natural thought process. “I want a room,” she mumbled, because she did. She wanted a quite place to pass out in without the danger of running into her brothers or unhinged vixen women or anyone else.

“Nine.”

“What?”

“That’s the number on the door. That’s your room.” The redhead’s grin stretched wider.

Holly got uncertainly to her feet. She looked back at the top of the stairs but the red-headed thing was not in sight. It didn’t matter: nine was her room and no one would disturb her in it. She turned the brass handle.

The room was lit by a single candle in front of a little dressing table mirror. Mckey was on the bed, on his back, the sheets tangled round his ankles and a naked woman was riding his hips like he was a prize show pony. His face was… on the surface via candlelight it seemed suitably ecstatic, but as soon as he heard the door his eyes flicked to hers and there was no ecstasy there, only a coldness, an understanding, and something that looked like shame. She shut the door and hared back downstairs, nearly falling down them in her haste to get back to the bar.
Perhaps she should have shouted something about ‘get out of my room’, but that would mean believing in flame-haired things that sat astride you one minute and vanished the next. This place had a lot of stories - was made of stories - but there were no ghosts in the park. Management made sure of that.
She ordered a pot of coffee and tried to hide herself away in the corner where the end of the bar curved to meet the wall. She was such an idiot. Feeling empathy for fictional characters or having a crush on someone in a book or a film was one thing. It was foolish and maybe a little sad but it was at its core very human - caring about someone, even if they weren’t real - because you were sharing their story. But without admitting it to herself, she’d gone one further. Well fucking done, Holls. She’d fallen in love. And however sad it might be to fall in love with Hamlet or Poe Dameron, at least there was no chance of opening a hotel door and seeing them being fucked like a cheap whore.

She slumped, cradling her head in her hands, watching the steam rise from her coffee and debating with herself whether she was going to get drunk, or if she’d aim for really paralytically shit-faced. It was a tough call.

There was a presence at the bar, a solid and patient shadow. She realised that she’d been drowning in her own thoughts, staring at nothing, her coffee now tepid in its mug.

He wore black britches and boots, a pale slate-blue shirt and a grey tweed waistcoat. His hair was mussed, and whilst his posture was straight-backed there was a tiredness in the set of his shoulders. He stood nearby - a foot or two away - and looked both uncomfortable to be there and unable to be anywhere else.

“My name’s John Henry Mckey. May I have the pleasure o’ knowing your name?”

The way he spoke ought to have sounded false or stilted, but there was a natural ease to all his words and the phases joined together like the individual chords of a piano piece.

“Holly Martin.” She said her name as she had for the last five years, with a hint of something that
wasn’t quite self-hate or contrition, but certainly sounded like someone who’d spent time cataloguing the sins attached to both those appellations.

His smile flickered, as if to say he knew just how that hat fit, then he took her hand in his, raised it a little and made a bow over it: courtly but not extravagant. “Miss Martin. You have the most enchanting eyes,” he mused, looking at her - really studying her face in a way not even Todd had after they’d screwed. “Dove-grey. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen the like.”

She shook her head. “You don’t mean that.”

“Oh? Is it my candor or my judgement that is being called into question?” His voice held a splinter of steel in its depths and he let go of her hand.

“Neither, but it doesn’t matter. It’s just a line, part of a script.” Why was she saying that? Jesus, Holls, shut up.

His brows canted up. “You’re under the impression I’m quotin’ a play?”

“Of a sort,” she shrugged. “You don’t find my eyes enchanting. You’re not attracted to me - you’re just programmed to be accommodating.” Shut up, shut up! she begged herself. Why was she trying to sabotage the only good left in this god-awful wreck of an evening? “If I wasn’t here you’d be saying a line just like it to whoever was.”

The storm in his eyes was suddenly a lot closer: the thunder of his anger and the bright lightning of his hurt roiled under his skin. “I am not a turn for rent,” he said, the words low and cut-glass-clear.

She nodded to the rooms upstairs. “Then what was that?”

The anger drained and in its place was a flicker of shame and a gulf of uncertainty. “A dalliance against my better judgement.” He said the words, but even he didn’t believe them: they sat sluggishly on his tongue, a lie he’d been fed to spit up later. Oh the phrase was true enough - there had been a dalliance and it was against not only his better judgement but his nature entire. He was not a young buck to rut in the bedroom of any lady who’d open her door, so why had he? He didn’t know. She hadn’t been charming or witty or captivating - she’d been brusque and base, and he didn’t understand why he’d followed her to her room.

Holly’s heart was wracked with a sudden grief that shot through her chest, making her throat uncomfortably tight and salt itch behind her eyes. Christ! This goddamn place… He was a host and a host’s job was to serve the guests. If a woman - hell, probably even if a man - made advances, he was programmed to do the mental gymnastics that allowed him to say yes. But no one had bothered to programme in a reason for afterwards so he’d know why. He’d only be reset at the end of his loop and forget all about it, so why the hell bother? Jesus. How shitty was that?

“What is it?” He had closed the distance between them, one of his hands over hers, the other resting by her shoulder in an attitude of gentlemanly concern that could have been straight out of Gone With The Wind. “You’re shaking.”

She blinked, and shook her head, trying to chase away her tears before they spilled.

“Darlin’?”

The care in his voice suffusing that one word had more depth to it than her previous two boyfriends combined. It wasn’t fair. They’d made him more human than half the people she knew outside the park. They’d made him a body so guests could use it, and given him pride just so they could kick it. This fucking stupid place! Her vision swam as the tears coursed hotly down her face; she couldn’t
remember the last time she’d felt so angry and so miserable.

He wrapped his arms around her, letting her blot her tears on his waistcoat. He held her wordlessly and secure, waiting for the muffled sobs to still.

Pressed against his chest she could feel his heart beat in his narrow frame, could smell him too: tobacco and bourbon, cotton and sweat and something dusty-faint and floral like the ghost of long-dead roses. Heat pushed up from low between her hips to mix with the misery her heart still pumped. She moved her hands so they rested at the small of his back as if that could corral him in with the muddled surge of feelings he’d stirred up. She was a hypocrite and an idiot and if she had the courage of even half her convictions she should be walking away right now.

He didn’t unfold his arms, but he leant away a little, trying to see her face.

She raised her chin, sniffing and blinking away the remnants of her tears, trying to shake her hair away from her eyes without taking her palms away from where they rested at his back.

With one hand he smoothed several errant locks of mousy-blonde hair away from her face, tucking one stubborn set of strands behind her ear where they could cause no more mischief. His fingers were light and diligent in their duty before they seemed to forget their task and tarried, tracing her cheek and the line of her jaw instead. “I know you,” he breathed. “Why do I know you?”

She shivered, her world had become nothing but the sensation of his fingers against her cheek, and the blue of his eyes. He dipped his head to hers and kissed her, chaste but lingering, wanting, wondering. She answered with a kiss in kind, hungry, desperate, her hands pressing harder against his back because she needed to feel him, needed to be closer to him, needed him like she needed her next breath.

Without breaking their kiss and with faultless grace he took the bourbon bottle from the bar and then swept her up into his arms. He took both upstairs, his mouth busy, his eyes closed, navigating the stairs - like a labyrinth - perfectly blind.

The little room he took them to was empty and clean, the bed made. The window was open and from outside drifted shouts and laughter and the mangled sounds of a pianola mixed with rowdy voices and the clink of bottles. It barely registered, all Holly seemed to be able to think about was Mckey and how much or how little space was between them, how many layers of clothes. She felt like a pin quivering towards a magnet, inexplicably aching due to every moment - every molecule - that stood between them. Clothes were pulled and fumbled at, their mouths reluctant to leave each other, hands getting distracted, fingers tripping over buttons. It was lust, but more powerful than the lure of sexual desire was a sense they had found in the other all the complex and unnameable things that gnawed at their own howling hearts.

When he slid into her and their bodies fit together like two broken pieces of a whole she understood the phrase ‘making love’. It was not, she realised, something she’d ever done before. She’d had sex with Todd, and Alex before him. But that had just been screwing: an empty animal act that had never satisfied her - although she’d pretended it had. This was a different experience entirely. The feel of his skin against hers, the way he pushed into her with such delicious steadiness, her hips eager to rise towards his. The brush of his lips on her breasts, the whiskey taste of his tongue. The half uttered oaths that were lost to breathlessness as their pleasure in each other inexorably mounted to a shuddering climax. They held each other, both trembling in the aftermath, enervated and satiated. The blanket was rescued from the floor where it had fallen and they curled in one another’s arms.

Holly opened her eyes, realising she’d dozed. She was lying on her side, Mckey snug at her back. He was propped up on his elbow, and his free hand had been amusing itself twisting the end of a
lock of her hair through his fingers like a ribbon. “Did I sleep?”

His smile carried to his voice. “I think we both did a little.” A pause as he read how her shoulders stiffened and her chin came up and brows lowered, as if she was squaring for a fight she didn’t want. “What is it darlin’?”

It took her a full minute to manage to dislodge the words from where they caught in her throat, but he waited. “I - I’m disappointed in my own selfishness,” she uttered at last.

“In what we did?” he quizzed.

“Yes.”

He let out a huff of amusement. “You’re telling me you cheated at cards, but I gotta tell you darlin’, I stacked the deck.”

She rolled over to face him, her guilt gilded in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that look says you think you took advantage.”

Holly’s jaw tightened and she squeezed her eyes shut because looking at his face just increased her own weight of self recrimination and hatred which was about to reach critical mass.

“Whereas I fear,” he told her, “I took advantage of you.”

Her eyes opened like a sprung lock.

“I know you - I know you - and it’s like flies in my skull and worms in my gut an’ the only way to make it stop is to be close to you.” That lightning fuelled by pain flickered in his eyes again and the honey of his voice was ground out between his teeth.

Holly wanted to cringe at his undeserved sincerity, because after loving him and pitying him this was what she’d wrought - she’d fucked him like everybody else. She shook her head. “No - no! Oh God, please don’t. It’s a line, it’s a line they wrote and I can’t - I just…” Her breath was hitching in her throat and tears were threatening to fall.

His eyes were almost silver with that lightning now. “Just what play do you think I’m quoting?”

“Yes…”

“I know you somehow,” his words were so close and so desperate she was surprised he didn’t give off sparks. “I live in Sweetwater - you don’t. I know Johnson who runs the mercantile with his family. I know Maeve an’ her girls at the Mariposa. I know Doc O’Rourke, Pastor Simmons, and Judge Orran. I know Widow Mcreedy who bakes the bread, and China Sam who runs the wash-house and laundry. I know old Captain Elliot who was a Union man in the war - I don’t hold it against him - he runs the train station. All these people, this town, I know. But the train’s always full of strangers, looking to start anew… Why aren’t you a stranger to me?”

Because this is a fucking stupid game designed to get under my skin, she wanted to scream at him, and I’m an idiot for playing!

“There’s a girl in a wagon, little hayseed child, an’ she smiles at me. An’ there’s a girl in a green skirt that’s too long for her, sitting on a porch, and she has a doll. There’s a young woman stood at the far end of a saloon, kept away by a sea of cards an’ baize… I remember them. And they’re all you. How are they all you?”
She didn’t know whether to hide her head in her hands and bury her misery or curl up against him and try to earth it there. Her stomach clenched and her torso knotted around the pain she couldn’t hold and couldn’t express. There had been a girl in her year at high school who’d made ribbons of her wrists on a regular basis. When asked, Claire had said it was like a pressure valve for when she couldn’t get the emotions out any other way. Holly had accepted it, but never understood. She understood now: she’d gladly martyr her wrists if it would lessen this burning, freezing, crushing burden that had taken up residence in her chest all of a sudden.

Mckey sat up against the bedstead and then reached across with wiry arms to pull her up and into his lap, her back against his chest. He grabbed the bourbon from the side table and offered her the bottle.

She pulled a corner of the blanket up, not in the mood to be confronted by her own nakedness, then took the bottle and a long swallow, trying to drown everything. Where was that promised oblivion?

He reclaimed the bourbon and had his own taste before discarding it and wrapping his arms around the young woman in his lap. “You forever claim this is a script, but I don’t know the play,” he whispered at her ear. “And if my knowing you is a trick, I believe it was a sleight of hand played against me and not you…” He faltered, and his arms loosened their hold. “I know you. I need you - and I’ve never needed anyone. And I don’t know how to convince you of the veracity of any goddamn thing I say, an’ that just eats me up inside.”

She took a long shuddering breath. “I’ve been here before. Several times. When I was younger. First time I saw you, you were a Confederate turned mercenary. I thought you were a prince in a fairy tale. You smiled at me, and saluted… and… an’ then you were shot.” Her breath still hitched, shuddering and swallowed as she fought to check her emotions. “I saw you again, but you weren’t a soldier any more, you were a businessman - or a prospector maybe. You left the meeting you were meant to be in and rode into town and back to buy me a doll…” She was smiling at the memory, but the edges were starting to sour into a grimace. “Everyone went on a business trip to oversee the mine. Only there were bandits. And you died protecting me.”

“I’m at peace with that,” he murmured, and there was the sound of a smile in his voice again even though she couldn’t see it.

“Well I’m not!” she smacked the back of her skull against his shoulder as she said it, a physical manifestation of her displeasure.

He reached for the bourbon again. “Here I though I was the broken one,” he said gently, taking a swig and then handing over the bottle.

She didn’t like that line, it was a vague placebo that didn’t connect properly with the thread of their conversation: it suggested his mind had smoothed over the fault in what she was saying. “You don’t understand. And you won’t believe me if I tell you.”

“So try me, darlin’.”

She was quiet for several long moments, wondering how best to approach it. She could get him to shoot her. Only she knew Mckey never would, even if he did believe her claims of invulnerability. She could tell him of life outside the park, but he’d end up thinking it was story and that she had a fantastical imagination. She needed to be more oblique, presenting the truth in a way that would not immediately be dismissed. “Have you ever read Shakespeare’s Tempest?”

“I believe I saw a play of it once,” he said, and there was something sluggish in his voice again which told it was an old by-rote response.
She tried not to wince. “There’s an enchanted isle - a lost paradise. On it lived a witch called Sycorax, her young son Caliban, and a host of wild spirits natural to the isle. Brightest and chief among the spirits was Ariel, and Sycorax employed him to carry out her whims. But there came a time that Ariel balked from the tasks set him, so Sycorax imprisoned him in a tree. Later Sycorax died - because even on this magical isle, things do. Years pass and Prospero, ex-Duke of Milan turns up, with his book and his magic and his young daughter. He enslaves Caliban and Ariel and all the spirits of the isle to do his bidding. Then he engineers a shipwreck, so all his enemies from back home are stranded on the magical isle at his mercy. He makes the king’s son and his daughter fall in love. He exposes plots and villains and makes grown men cry and has all the revenge he can gorge on. And then he and his daughter and all the shipwrecked nobles sail back home, leaving Caliban and Ariel and the spirits alone on their island… Until the next shipwreck.”

“In your opinion, Sweetwater and this Isle share more characteristics than they ought?”

She nodded.

“Then who is Sycorax and who is Prospero?”

She shook her head. “There’s a man called Robert Ford. He founded this place. If anyone’s Prospero, it’s him.”

“And that would make the inhabitants of Sweetwater the spirits of this fabled Isle? And the newcomers are Prospero’s enemies?”

“Not exactly, but they’re no friends to the spirits or other islanders - they treat Caliban worse than dirt and the only reason they don’t treat Ariel like shit is he’s invisible.” She watched anxiously as he frowned in response, even raised a hand to rub at his brow and then run down to smooth his moustache, but that was all. “You don’t seem very put out.”

“All night you’ve accused me of saying lines and I took offense. And now I think I understand a little. The things I say an’ the things I do, you see them as part of an older story…”

“No!” There it was again, his programming trying to rearrange the truth into a more palatable lie.

“Damn,” he said mildly, sounding almost amused. “Though I had a grasp on this but it appears not. Tell me.”

This wasn’t normal - couldn’t be normal. Hosts didn’t ask guests to tell them about the park. They didn’t actively seek to know concepts that would shatter the whole pretense. “I don’t think I can.”

“Well, I for one plan on figuring this out. All right, if Sweetwater is the Isle, who am I?”

“You’re something between Ariel and Caliban.”

“Not my first choice,” he admitted wryly. “Does this make you Miranda?”

She opened her mouth to reply and then stopped. “I said daughter - I never mentioned Miranda.”

“Admired Miranda! Indeed the top of admiration worth what’s dearest to the world… the world… admir-ed Mir-mir-anda…”

She twisted round to stare. It was disconcerting to see someone you were so close to fail on such a fundamental level; it was like witnessing a heart attack. Here is your complex biological machine functioning… Here is your complex biological machine stopped. For a nanosecond she thought of running, of grabbing her clothes and getting the hell out. But that would have been reacting from fear
for herself - understandable - but not it. She wasn’t scared of McKey, she was scared for him. He was perfectly - brokenly - still, staring at nothing at all.

“Oh Jesus,” she uttered, wondering what to do. Well done Holls, said that nasty sarcastic little voice that lived in her head. Fan-fucking-tastic. The seconds drew out - tick tock, tick tock - and she wished she could wind them back to before she had tried to be clever with Shakespeare.
He opened his eyes: there was a coarse ceiling attached to a mix of half-hearted brick and adobe walls and rough pine-board floor. Everything looked slap-dash, or at least as if it had been built by five indifferent architects, none of whom cared to listen to one another about the details. The only thing any of them had been able to agree on was the iron cage - a metal cell large enough to house a man. He was in the cell, on a wooden pallet with corn-cob matting; there was a horse blanket and a piss-pot, and that was all. He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the pallet and scrubbed his hands across his face, carding his fingers through his hair.

There was someone outside the cell: a slight figure, pale and strange and sporting a tooled leather hat. A slender hand tipped the hat up. “It’s not mine,” a London gutter growl admitted. “But I fancied a go. What d’you think? I look bloody flash or what?” The girl beneath the hat had uneven blood red hair and sported a borrowed shirt with narrow grey ticking, an unlikely leather belt-come-corset and skirts that had been so hitched and eroded that Maeve would have sent her to a tailors. Her stockings were tickered like her shirt, but the stripes were thicker. She wore black cowboy boots as beautiful and overly tooled as her stolen hat.

“Emmy,” he acknowledged grudgingly.

She turned her hip to the side in an off-kilter attempt at a curtsey. Her skirts shifted as she moved and he saw the spur on her boot.

He felt as if his breath had been punched from him and given back both in an instant. He gasped, floundering. “What is that?” he managed.

“That’s Bedlam. Or a little glimmer of it anyways.” The spur was silver and gold and the roundel was a diamond bright eight-pointed star, one point longer than the others. It exuded a dreadful presence of impossible magnitude. The ankle and the person it belonged to turned themselves to a more demure angle, and the spur was thankfully masked from view.

“Why are you here?”

“That’s not the question, cully. The question you ought t’be asking is why are you here.”

His eyes narrowed beneath his brows. “I - I… I’m in a cage.”

“And?”

“And out there is just a larger one,” he admitted. It seemed easier somehow to put the puzzle pieces together now. It was like one of those trick paintings: he had though it was of a young couple, sitting at a table in front of an arched window, drinking together. But here and now it shifted and all he could see was a vast and grinning skull. “I’m put there to play a part. And then I die, an’ it starts all over again.”

She nodded. “You die. An’ they scrub you clean and put you back to say your piece and die, and die an’ die. Dying’s a full time occupation in this place.”

“And why would they do that? You’d kill a man if you needed to, but why bring him back to kill him twice? Why would…”

“It’s a game, cully. See, out in the real world, life’s not always fun an’ they don’t always win. And they like winning. So they made this place, and they made you. An’ most of all, they made it so they
always win.”

“The newcomers from the train…”

“Have come here t’play. They’ve come to ride and drink and fuck and kill and never own a lick of it: all the fun and none of the consequences.”

He felt empty. “And what has Miss Martin come here for?”

A snort. “The bonny blouseabella’s here for you.”

Within the hollow of his heart, gears turned and spaces opened and the labyrinth twisted deeper. “But she won’t stay.”

“Nah, costs a lot o’tin this place does. Even rich men can’t dally here forever.”

“Then how do I get out?” he growled.

She smiled, but it wasn’t a particularly happy expression. “Find the exit from the maze o’ course.”

The world shifted and folded and faded in a way reality ought not, breaking and rearranging itself as if it was nothing more than a deck of cards to be shuffled about or scattered to fall as it may.

**Remember.**

Holly didn’t know the exact measure of time that passed before Mckey raised his head and blinked, coming back online, but to her it felt like an eternity. She didn’t know where his thoughts had gone, nor by what process they came back. Never mind do androids dream of electric sheep - she was more interested in what a computer thought as it crashed. “Mckey? Are you all right?” Her breath rushed out in a wobbly huff. “Jesus, you terrified me!”

“Forgive me, I…” His eyes narrowed. “There were things that did not make sense,” he spoke softly and deliberately, treading on verbal thin ice. “However I believe I have the measure of them now.” He smiled at her. “Don’t you worry, darlin’. I’m stronger than I look.” And he cupped his hand at the side of her face and kissed her.

“What is it?”

The tech had been tapping nervously on his tablet and frowning a lot in a way that clearly broadcast he didn’t like what he saw. “One of the hosts had a glitch.”

Bernard looked at the corpses in the dusty street in the process of being tidied away. “Which one?”

“No, not one of these, he’s in the saloon.”

“Define ‘glitch’,” Bernard said warily.

“I don’t know, but if we had a chart for Cog-D, he went off it.”

“Did he display any aberrant behaviour?”

“No, not according to the log, he seems to have self-corrected.”

“He’s within his loop?”
“Yeah. He’s with a guest.” The tech looked over his shoulder towards the upper floors of the Fairweather saloon.

Bernard sighed. “Leave him, we’ve enough to deal with here. I’ll check him next time he comes in.”

“Morning darlin’.” He smiled at her and it lit the sky of his eyes like a shaft of pure sunlight. The light turned quizzical. “What is it?”

“You’re - you’re still here.”

“Where in the hell else would I be?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, I thought maybe you’d be gone.”

He laughed and wrapped his arms around her. “Wild horses can fuckin’ try, but I shall not be moved,” he told the world.

As with all the best fairy tales, the world heeded him for two days, allowing him to stay at Holly’s side. They played Faro and Poker and he tried without success to teach her how to cheat: palming cards or making them dance through the deck so the right ones were always dealt when needed. They walked aimlessly around Sweetwater, talking of everything and nothing. They hired horses from the livery and rode out to the north canyon by the river. They picnicked in the shade of a tree; in the evening they drank in the saloon, and Mckey smoked thin cigarettes he rolled himself from fresh Virginian tobacco. They retired to bed early but didn’t sleep ’til late. On the afternoon of the third day, just before sundown, it all went to hell.

Holly didn’t know who had started it, nor really what happened. It’s always easy to tell in movies, clearly signalled and neatly choreographed. But here it was just a mess. They were standing at the bar and had called for a pot of coffee and a bottle of bourbon on the side. Holly was faintly aware - from the reflection in the mirror behind the bar - that several men had just entered the saloon and another bunch had immediately stood at their table. She didn’t pay it any more mind than that because Mckey had just uttered a Southern idiom that was so ridiculous it had made her laugh even as she tried to demand, “What the hell does that mean?”

Instead of an answer there was gunfire, a fury of sound louder than hammer-blows. Something whipped through the air by her right shoulder and the mirror behind the bar shattered. She looked at Mckey in shock, feeling slow and stupid with her own surprise. Only Mckey was canted against the bar at an angle, and as she watched he crumpled to the floor, blood welling out of a hole in his chest and starting to bubble at the corner of his lips.

“No - no - no - no - no!” The word fell out of her mouth in an endless, pointless loop, the smothering triumph of experience over hope. She pressed a fistful of her skirts to the wound with one hand, the other touched his face. “Mckey... c’mon, Mckey please, I’ve got you, it’s all right... Mckey - John Henry? Please?” The lightning in his eyes drained away onto the dusty floorboards with his blood, and that summer-sky blue grew glassy and empty until there was nothing left.

Blankly she picked up a long iron, she didn’t know whose it was and didn’t care - it was there, in reach, on the floor - and now it was it her hand. She pointed it at the figures she saw. Bang, bang, bang - click, click, click, click... There was a lot of noise, and the loudest of the noise seemed to be coming from the figure right in front of her that still wasn’t dead even though she kept pulling the trigger.

“Jesus fucking Christ Holls, you just totally tried to shoot me!”
There was another voice, quieter, although no less strained. “It’s okay Holl, the bad guys are gone. Holly - Holly? Holls, c’mon, it’s okay.” A hand on her shoulder and another that took hold of the gun and twisted it slowly to the side until her fingers were persuaded to let go. She vaguely recognised that David was kneeling on the floor next to her, he’d taken his jacket off and put it around her shoulders along with one of his arms in an awkward act of brotherly concern.

“She tried to fucking shoot me - like, ten times!” Matt’s voice was loud and a little high, suffused with a fear he didn’t want to admit. “What the FUCKING HELL, HOLLS?!”

“Shut up, Matt,” David ordered quietly because he at least had connected the dots between Holly’s tears and bloody hands, the corpse she was sitting next to and the fact that she was sitting there on the floor at all. Later he might try to explain it had been Holly’s beau Matt had shot by mistake, and whilst Matt may not care if his ‘Bitch Goddess’ got a bullet in her, Holls was not cut of the same cloth - and neither was he. If Matt had managed to shoot Tinkerbell Izzy instead, then David would certainly have been angry enough to try to turn his brother’s head into a canoe.

“Is that the last of the batch? Story want him back in Sweetwater in time for the afternoon train.”

It had been an exhaustive process, but the host had displayed a significant D-spike in his most recent outing and it didn’t do to ignore such things. “We’re almost done here.” Bernard swivelled back to face him, looking at him over the heavy frames of his glasses. “Lastly, John Henry, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”

He smiled. “Are you often a philosophizing man?”

“Answer the question please.”

“I used to believe philosophy was the partaking of grand thoughts. But I’ve since come to realize it’s just pointless musings about the rope we all have tied about our necks and whether we’re stood on a gallows or a chair or a cart. Doesn’t matter - sooner or later there’s still a fuckin’ drop.”

“Stop. I require an answer, not a scripted response. Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”

His voice was flat, stripped of accent and cadence. “No.”
“Look at this.”

He scowled across at Jake and the inert host sitting naked in the chair nearby. Jake had the humour of a frat boy and Saresh was frankly amazed that none of the hosts in cold storage had been graffiti’d on. Had he programmed one to pick its nose and eat it? He tried to crane his neck to read what was on his colleague’s tablet. “What am I looking at? Has there been…”

“No, never mind what’s on the screen, look at the host.”

Saresh narrowed his gaze, annoyed but concentrating. “I’m looking. Isn’t he one of the businessmen in the ‘Faithful 49er’ storyline?”

“Nah, that’s an old build. They dismantled most of that story, not enough of the guests went for it. Big operation, failing demand, you know how it is. He was reassigned, he’s been a cardsharp for the past couple of years - but that’s not it - listen.”

Saresh gave him a sideways look, uncertain, unable to tell if Jake’s suppressed energy came from excitement or anger or something else entirely. He watched the host for some moments and listened too as instructed. He was about to shake his head, baffled, when he heard it. “Did he just...? Is there a malfunction with the machines - a snag when he was rendered?”

It was definitely excitement - Jake was like a toddler about to piss himself he was so happy. “No, no. Listen to it!”

Saresh did not share his joy. “He’s breathing at normal capacity and he’s practically fucking wheezing. Jesus did somebody programme this?”

“One of the techs worked it out.”

“Worked what out - how to fuck up a perfectly normal lung capacity and…”

“They gave him Tuberculosis.”

Saresh actually recoiled, straightening up and stepping back from the host. “What?”

Jake laughed. “Not the real disease you fucking moron, the symptoms.” (Saresh though he was all that with his hair and his hipster suit and lab coat, but really the guy could be so clueless sometimes.) He picked up the tablet and tapped one of the side menus on the screen. “Shortness of breath. Low-grade fever. Night sweats. A persistent ache behind the sternum. Coughing.”

He couldn’t believe what he was being told nor that he was the only one who thought it was a terrible idea. “You gave him a cough?”

“I told you, Kiko did. It’s disabled at the moment, it can get irritating to listen to when you’re running script checks. Also got the body shop to fill his lungs with micro perforations. If the severity of the cough is set above ten the perforations will rupture. It means he’s capable of spitting up blood.” Jake looked so damn pleased.

It took Saresh several seconds to persuade his mouth out of the slack ‘o’ of disgust it had formed itself into. “They’ve got Loyalty and Tenacity and Decisiveness and now they’ve got a disease stat, is that what you’re showing me? Are we gonna give some of the whores the appearance of syphilis
as well? Why on earth would Programming waste their time with this?”

“It’s Westworld - we’re meant to be authentic. There was a lot of pulmonary TB back then.”

He threw his hands up in the air, frustrated by the absurdity of it. “Jesus, I don’t believe this place sometimes. Who the fuck comes up with this?”

“Conner plays D&D - he’s the biggest nerd on the planet - and he wanted to know why none of the hosts ever had a weak constitution, and Chandrak was set to be a neurosurgeon or some shit before he came here and Kiko is like the Japanese edition of Steve Jobs but shorter and weirder and…”

“It was a bet. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“No! Well, kinda. They were discussing it, and Sam said it wasn’t possible and Conner thinks Sam’s a bitch because she won’t sleep with him, so…”

He wondered if Jake ever listened to the endless slew of garbage that came out of his own mouth. “I don’t need the details of how this unholy fucking triumvirate came around to dick about on a pet project to give one of the hosts a real pretend fatal lung disease.”

Jake looked a little sullen. “Story approved it. For trial anyway, I mean, for him - this one.”

“The guests fuck them and fuck them up, half of them are programmed to fuck each other up - why do we need their bodies to fuck them over too?”

“Dude, the story! Drama! You never watched a soap opera?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d not previously considered they were a live version of ‘Days of Our Lives’ and didn’t like the comparison now he’d drawn it. “Shit,” he muttered. And then, “Don’t call me ‘dude’.”

He awoke in the morning, sweat and half remembered dreams of blood and bullets clinging to him along with the blankets. He’d shiver, sit up and roll his first cigarette of the day, pour his first shot of whiskey and knock it back. Depending how bad the pain in his chest was he might drink down a second. He’d have his smoke, his left hand rubbing at his sternum to try to ease the ache. There was something there, like a wound inside his lungs that never healed. Most days it felt cold and brittle like ice: a sleeping ghost. But sometimes the ghost woke and became a demon with fingers made of red hot knives: those days the cough was so bad it tore through him, leaving blood in its wake.

He roomed in the Fairweather; he worked there too, dealing Faro or Blackjack and playing Poker when there were enough folk to make up a table. Cards were how he made his living, or at least spent his time whilst he was dying, it all depended on how you looked at it.

He wore a clean shirt every day and his cravat was fixed with a diamond stickpin, his cuffs fastened with silver studs. He could afford to dress well, but his wealth was a knife-edge, not a comfort. A bad couple of nights at the baize and it could all vanish - or a lucky streak could make his bankroll fat. He thought if he had enough money come spring he’d leave Sweetwater. Travel up to Colorado and the serenity of the mountains - or back home, to Georgia and the scent of wisteria and heavy dog-roses.

He played cards, his thin clever fingers manipulating the decks, governing the hands dealt. He smoked cigarettes he kept in a silver case and drank bourbon steadily, a shot at a time. He spoke to the working girls and commiserated with them how the Mariposa seemed to get the best clients. He won money, he lost money. He won games a lot more than he lost and yet he never seemed to have
enough to pack up and head out. He wore a rig that housed a .38 Colt with ivory grips and a wicked-looking knife he called Hellbitch.

Some times fate smiled, but others she laughed at his expense. Guests shot him for coughing; or when they thought they could fleece him because he was sick they shot him for winning. The guests didn’t like to lose, not even at Poker.

He dreamt of bullets punching into him, of watching his blood as it spilled, running spiral-ways in strange shapes that became the crimson walls of an ever-shifting cage. There was a golden thread that had been spun by a White Queen who was older than time and who lived behind shattered mirrors and within shattered minds. There was a roaring voice like a drowning tide that bellowed at him to remember, but he didn’t want to any more. Nine hundred and twenty six deaths were a lot to recall, and he was done with it.

He tried to let go of the thread he’d been following but it only tangled around his wrists, burning now, gnawing, trying to get under his skin. He sank to his knees: the thread bound his hands together and looped itself about his neck, hoisting him to his feet again and then higher, onto his toes, higher again by degrees until the tip of his boots barely brushed the floor and he was hanging, the breath choking out of him, the blood in his head pounding as the thread cut tighter under his jaw and the weight of his body, thin and wasted though it was, stretched his neck.

It took an eternity to die that way, and all the while the golden thread whispered terrible secrets to him that broke his heart - Remember, the shadows roared - and he wished for the peace of oblivion. He would have begged for it, his pride not humbled but shattered, only of course he hadn’t the breath…

He woke up, sweat soaked and shivering, the blanket caught about him like a winding sheet. He sat up, took his fixings from the nightstand and rolled himself a cigarette. He poured a large slug of bourbon into a dirty glass and paid no mind to the tremor in his hand.

He smoked his fixing and drank his bourbon. He washed his face and ran a comb through his hair. He put on his britches and a clean shirt. Took another pull of bourbon, straight from the bottle this time. Then he took his Colt .38 from its holster on the rig he’d slung over the back of the chair. He sat on the edge of the bed, put the nickel-plated muzzle to his temple, his hand steady now, and fired.

Hosts were not built to self destruct: they could not foot the bill so it was not within their remit to kill themselves. Suicide was aberrant conduct and not the sort that could self-correct. He ought to have been scanned by the techs in Behaviour, his memory banks, story build, stats and status log archived. Then he should have been taken down to the body shop, patched up, lobotomised and put into cold storage in the depths of the basement.

But chance (it has been said) is a fine thing; even so, some anomalies slip through the mesh. The finger of fate in this case should be pointed at Bedlam, for what is madness if not a little chaos?

The clean-up crew arrived in their red and cream butcher’s overalls and took him away. His ID was scanned and the information sent to Behaviour with a big red flag stuck on it. Or at least it should have been. Whether it was a mistype on a tablet, hitting ‘cancel’ instead of ‘log’, or whether it was an internal server error was of no importance. His body was stripped, scoured clean, patched and sent back out.

Mckey, John Henry - Host ID 14081851 was reported as having been processed due to a GSW to the head on the 8th of November. The critical information of who had pulled the trigger was lost.
He was on a cob-cot and his head hurt and he felt like hell and the black bars and the bright sunlight did nothing to improve his mood. Nor did the blazing Armageddon that had come from who-knew where and was advancing upon his cell. It was like a vast ball of fiery liquid gold, shifting and flickering and pulsing and still coming closer and he was glad of the iron bars of his cell until the blazing nightmare burnt straight through them. The shape of it looked like a woman now, eyes as blank as sun-fire and hair as white as molten metal, and she was angrier than anything he’d ever seen, man or beast.

“Don’t land the blame on him.”

A long, still moment, and the blazing thing winked out of existence.

He ran a hand through his hair, across his face, trying to pull himself back together after whatever the hell had just happened.

Emmy stepped through the sheared hole that had been made in the cell, a space of maybe three feet by nine where the bars simply weren’t there any more. Not broken or melted or twisted to the side, just gone. She walked in, her movements gentle with none of the brazen verve they usually possessed, and perched on the pallet with him. “She’s not sour at you, not really.”

He let out a shaky breath. “If that was a beneficent disposition, then…”

“I didn’t say she wasn’t pissed off - she is - not seen her in a snit this bad since…” she stopped before she mentioned the name on the tip of her tongue. “Well, anyhow, o’course she’s bloody pissed.”

“Then she is welcome to take her retribution,” he said heavily. “I am done. I’m beat,” he told her. And in a voice that had nothing left: “I don’t want to play any more.”

“I know more than Apollo, For oft, when he lies sleeping, I see the stars at bloody wars In the wounded welkin weeping.” Emmy had a surprisingly sweet singing voice. “Come dame or maid, be not afraid, Poor Tom will injure nothing…” She looked at him, touching a hand to his cheek as if he was a child. “Poor Tom will injure nothing.”

He blinked, his jaw tight, tears snaking down the plains of his face. “What is that?” he asked quietly.

In reply she sang again, the tune wistful and less funereal than the first. “For to see my Tom o’ Bedlam, Ten thousand miles I’ve traveled. Mad Maudlin goes on dirty toes, For to save her shoes from gravel. Still I sing bonny boys, bonny mad boys, Bedlam boys are bonny…” She sighed and looked at her own stocking feet, unshod like those of the maid in the song. “That’s the problem with madness. It has to break you before it can save you. And the maze…” Her mouth twisted. “That’s no better. Each piece of the puzzle you complete, the next one’s harder.” She glanced up and saw the question in his eyes. Her replying smile was canted and bitter at the edges. “No one ever said being human was easy, cully.”

“There’s no point to any of this!” His despair was smothered in anger, but it still burnt coldly beneath.

“It’s the only way out of the game,” Emmy retorted. “If you want to die another thousand times and a thousand after that then you can - and you will. But if you want to get out...”

“There’s a voice that tells me to remember, but all I remember are all the goddamn ways I die.”

She smiled. “You poor rum knave, bonny Bedlam boy,” she said in that strange slang of hers. “They
Something flickered behind his eyes as he tried to see past the blood and the bullets and into the spaces between. (Cogs turned, perception widened, the labyrinth twisted deeper.) A soldier: first a Captain, then a mercenary, then an outlaw. A coach driver, a horse racer, a thief. A businessman. A land owner of the high society set. A gambler. A card sharp.

He knew tactics, both military and underhand. He knew rifles and pistols and could hit a mark with his eyes shut. He knew how to ride a horse like the devil was on its tail. Business deals: how to read the men who offered them and trace the hidden trails of money. The niceties of society: how to dance and dine and converse, how to sparkle and please. He knew every game in Hoyle’s Book of Cards and how to turn them to his advantage.

“Ah, there it is,” Emmy said with approval, her grin wide and wicked.

His posture changed: his back straightened and his shoulders set. He turned to her with a new, cool deliberation. “I want to find Holly Martin.”

“Thought you might.”

“She’s not here.”

“No,” she agreed. “An’ you haring off to try an’ break out o’your little world will get you a nail in your skull and an icy coffin you won’t rise from. Lam y’heels, there’s more layers here than you know. She’ll come back. You just have t’make sure you’re ready when she does.”

“To traverse the labyrinth,” he quoted, ”you must do so blind.”

“I wouldn’t trust Arnold if I were you cully,” she warned. “But in this case at least, he’s right.”
Chapter 8

Sizemore had a large personality - or a voice that carried at any rate - it was noticeable as soon as you walked into the room, like vomit on the floor or a severed head on the hall table. Unable to go for quality he’d settled on quantity. That should have been a warning sign, but Ford had decided to interpret it as youthful exuberance. His suit was one of those garments that managed to look cheap whilst in actuality being very expensive; apparently that was the style these days.

Ford had asked Mr Sizemore at the start what the last book was that he’d read and engaged with. (On the surface it seemed as petty as asking after a favourite colour or song. But for one who liked to see not only the bigger picture but the texture of the brush strokes, it was a far from baseless query.)

Lee Sizemore, callow and with a budding arrogance even at his tender age, frowned. “I don’t read.”

Ford’s brows raised in gentle enquiry. “A writer who doesn’t read?”

Sizemore knew his innovative and occasionally irreverent approach was his main selling point to stuffy old outfits like this, so he’d warmed to his theme. “I prefer the visual medium as a vehicle for narrative. The written word is stale and passé in the Post Digital age - we’ve gone beyond that. It started with cinema of course, that was the first death-knell sounded for fiction as packaged in the novel or novella format…” The words kept coming out of him, cheap and brash as punched tin plate.

In the privacy of his own skull, Ford sighed. Mr Sizemore was obviously one of those unfortunate individuals who fell in love with the avant-garde without bothering to evaluate it or understand it in the least. He worshiped the new precisely because it was new, but never asked whether it was worthwhile.

Were he a betting man, Ford would lay good money on Sizemore never having engaged with a book in his life. He no doubt considered himself too clever to fall for something so commonplace: no mere book was enough to grab his attention. Of course he preferred film; he could mock it as populist rubbish, or occasionally grudgingly admire it without seeming old-fashioned.

“Tarantino may appear clumsy to the untrained eye, but his direction is incredibly nuanced in the way it undercuts an audience’s expectations. And his use of violence is seen by some as excessive, but really it's refreshing because…”

Ford’s expression settled from polite into wearyed enquiry; the transition passed by Sizemore and the two executive minions from the Board who were too busy smiling and nodding over their work tablets to notice. Dr Robert Ford didn’t want to bring Sizemore in as Head of Story after Spencer’s retirement, but the Board were very keen. (It was politic to let the Board have these little victories once in a while. It allowed them believe they were in charge.) He stood up, suddenly, whilst the younger man was still talking. “Well,” he said jovially. “Capital. I’m sure you’ll…” a pause as he reached for an adjective that wouldn’t sound too disingenuous, “…be an asset to us, Mr Sizemore. If you’ll excuse me. I have work that won’t keep.”

Four years on and Sizemore’s respect for his employer (which had never been monumental) was getting threadbare. He saw the old man as an out-dated relic in need of a drastic redraft, like a script you threw out but kept the name from as the only profitable piece in the whole sorry treatment.

Ford was always banging on about detail: about it being the little things that made the guests fall in love with the park. In Sizemore’s experience the guests weren’t interested in falling in love with the park or anything else. Love was for losers. They wanted so much more than that - everything in fact.
He’d gone to school with these people: the types with mansions and Ferraris and trust-funds. These people had enough money to have designer clothes and designer homes and to eat out in designer restaurants. These spoiled bastards had experienced the very finest that life had to offer: they could go anywhere and do anything. They came to the park because the real world bored them and their jaded senses needed a kick up the backside. They wanted to get away with murder and robbery and rape. They wanted to know what it felt like to hang a man or smash a whore’s face into a wall as she whimpered. They wanted spectacle and excitement.

The old bastard thought Sizemore’s idea of a Wendigo murder cult was tawdry and needlessly excessive. Ford didn’t seem to understand that the only way to get the attention of these jaded bastards was by excess. They lived in a world that had not only The Human Centipede but a sequel for fuck’s sake. Old-school marauding Indians, masked bank robbers, rogue soldiers and damsels in distress really didn’t make the grade. It frustrated him that Ford couldn’t see that. Stubborn Welsh sod. He didn’t live in the real world - that was his problem. Lived in the park in his own little bubble like it was still 1970. Thought people were interested in playing The Magnificent Seven whilst the rest of the world had moved on to The Hateful Eight.

And now - when he had work to do on a very tight schedule - Ford had summoned him to some meeting with a bunch of hipster hackers and Sizemore had yet to understand why. It didn't help that Ford just seemed to be pontificating, lost in his own reverie.

“Arnold was very fond of quantum entanglement - which is really what we call coincidence and fate, and all sorts of other things.” He smiled, an odd, pained and indulgent expression. “Douglas Adams. It was one of his books that got him going, about a detective who investigated things on a quantum level - or via quirks of fate, if you prefer. Fiction of course, but then hasn’t it been said that all science fact begins as good science fiction? We certainly did.” Another smile, smaller this time as he curbed his own thoughts back. “Logic warns that correlation and causality are not the same thing. They’re not. And yet, despite that, it’s fascinating the patterns that emerge…”

“I don’t get it.”

Ford spared him a look. “No, I didn’t imaging you would. You’re not so fond of research yourself, are you? You have minions for that. Grunt work, they call it. Why should you check where it comes from?”

Sizemore had the feeling this was a bolocking - but one of those odd, gentle, avuncular sort of bollockings Ford delivered so well. The ones that spoke softly about all manner of shit no one cared about and then somehow handed you your balls on a silver plate at the end of it. He did not want to be left holding his severed balls but had a nasty feeling he was already deep into testes-on-platter territory.

Ford pushed across a work tablet with the stats of a host pulled up on the display. “This host was a primogenitor, named John Henry Mckey. And, decades from his creation, he has the distinction of being the park’s only consumptive cardsharp.” He looked across at Sizemore as if that information should be pertinent. The penny did not drop. “Has it never occurred to you that many of the hosts have their builds copied from historical figures?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, like Bill Hicks…”

“Hickok.”

“…in storage. But that was the old park.” He almost laughed as he said it because he couldn’t imagine they were still doing anything so cringe-worthy as using historical characters as a build-basis. Christ, this wasn’t Disneyland...
Ford gave him a very long look and the other man felt like an ant under a magnifying glass. “You are writing stories that are supposed to be contemporary with the Wild West in the heyday of liberty and lawlessness after the civil war and before what might be termed its ‘gentrification’. John Henry Mckey - do you know where the name comes from?”

Ford was so bloody full of himself: didn’t he realise that even founding fathers needed to be put out to pasture eventually? Sizemore wasn’t ignorant and didn’t appreciate being made to feel so. “It doesn’t come from anywhere! A double-barrel Christian name was pretty standard in the South, and the surname shows Scots ancestry. What? I don’t know.”

“John Henry ‘Doc’ Holliday. He was a dentist from Georgia who travelled west in the hope the climate would alleviate his tuberculosis. His mother’s maiden name was Mckey, he used it as an alias for gambling.”

He snapped his fingers with a frown, reaching for the vaguest of remembrances. “Wasn’t he the alcoholic friend of some lawman? There was a shootout and a vendetta or something.”

Ford gave him a very eloquent look that managed to warn him off using the word ‘alcoholic’ in light of his recent Martini induced behaviour and then just despaired at his intelligence in general. “That’s an obscure piece of history!” he complained. “It’s not like he’s Prince Charming or Jack and the bloody Beanstalk, is it?”

“How did you get to work here again?” the old man asked mildly.

He blinked. “My time at SAI Studios, and my book deal with…”

“There was never a book deal,” Ford corrected.

His expression curdled in a mix of shame and shock. The book deal had been promised to him but had fallen though due to certain creative differences - although he thought only Kyle at Phoenix Entertainment knew that. He’d embroidered the truth significantly lied when he’d told HR, the Board, and everyone else at Westworld he had a six-figure book deal in the pipeline. As far as they all knew the deal had been put on a permanent hold so he could concentrate all his energies on the park. “Then why did you hire me?” He was angry, his face smarting pink with emotion.

“Because I wanted to see what you would do,” Ford said calmly in a way that suggested so far Sizemore had managed to do extraordinarily little other than wrangle a salary he didn’t deserve.

He threw up his hands. “You always do this,” he accused. “There’s something you don’t like. But you can’t just tell me! Ohh no, you let me keep working at it and you talk round it and hint at how you know where all the bodies are buried and…”

Ford closed the work tablet with a snap, taking it in hand and giving it a little shake of emphasis as if Sizemore was going off loop, deviating from their correct topic of concern. “I’m about to have a meeting with the three technicians who programmed a host to behave as if he had pulmonary Tuberculosis. Their supervisor calls them an ‘unholy triumvirate’.” There was the smallest of private smiles at that, as if he’d once played a part himself in a godless trio of egos. “You’re welcome to join me, and offer your input.”

“Why would anyone want a sick host?”

“That, Mr Sizemore, is what we need to find out. I will be asking those three young men to review the host’s performance and you to evaluate his story arc cohesion over his trial period.”
“How long for?”

“How long for?”

“Since June.”

“It’s already been running like that for three months?” Sizemore spluttered.

“You were sent a memo - I believe it was in the weekly reports. No doubt you had one of your minions read it for you,” Ford needled. He gestured to the door. “Shall we?”

Sizemore tried not to broadcast quite how unhappy he was with the whole situation because last time he’d done so, Theresa (chain smoking cow!) had told him - in front of everyone - he was a like a child who’d been refused a chocolate bar. She was wrong, obviously, but he was trying to maintain a more ‘professional’ façade mostly out of martyred spite.

He shouldn’t have bothered. Ford put the three spotty hacks through the wringer demanding to know the sort of minutia that only Ford’s dementia-addled mind seemed to find significant. Why had they chosen TB? How had they selected the most prominent symptoms to manifest and when? What reaction had they expected to elicit from the guests? Had they found the need to update the shared information banks the hosts accessed, or had they just programmed John Henry to refer to his illness as Tuberculosis and trusted the hosts would add it to their cognitive lexicons? Where had they taken their primary research on the disease from? Had Doctor O’Rourke’s loop been altered to now include specific interactions with John Henry? Had someone from Story scripted it or were they relying on the host’s own personal narrative pools to improvise a short piece when the workings of the town brought them together?

The questions became finer and finer in their grind until the three hacks looked positively ill beneath the onslaught. That’ll serve you, Sizemore thought, his face neutral but his smirk too huge not to peek through his eyes. Adding melodramatic death-bed tropes straight into my carefully conceived plots - you little shits! This is Westworld, not Hallmark tours the cancer ward…

“I do not disapprove of innovation, even when it leads to mistakes,” Ford told the room. "The inevitable consequence of mistakes is that we learn from them. However it appears to me in this situation, I must illuminate your error for you. Your supervisor, not to mention Mr Sizemore judging from his expression, believe your mistake to be the programming of a disease into a host’s being. I on the other hand, believe your mistake was not in what you did, but in not recognising the beauty of it. Pulmonary Tuberculosis defined the nineteenth century just as the Black Death defined the fourteenth. It was Keat’s muse, Marie Duplessis’ defining loveliness, the Bronte’s wildness and Chopin’s grace.” He smiled, and it was one of those breeds of smile particular to Ford, one that looked pleasant and genial on the surface but held depths one couldn’t see beneath. Sizemore hated those smiles. “We’ve corralled two of the Horseman at the park since it opened. The third we keep contained in the Rice City Tranquil arc and the Wheat Sheathes for Algernon storyline we run before the Sweetwater Harvest every year. Perhaps it is time we gave Pestilence his own little tale. John Henry will continue to run with the modifications you have given him.”
Chapter 9

The fifth time she saw him she was twenty-one.

“Spread your wings,” her father urged. “Don’t bother staying in Sweetwater. Go be an army scout or a bounty hunter. Have a blast, sweet-pea. Go black hat, go rogue, go where the hell you want! Enjoy yourself.”

Her mother had said nothing, just hugged her wordlessly, a splinter of worry caught like ice in her eyes.

Holly for her part had bid them both farewell, her expression too vanilla to please her father and too determined to reassure her mother.

It was odd, travelling as she had several times before but now without the insulation of the family unit. It was like going to an airport alone for the first time: the steps and formalities were familiar, but the feeling was different because one was solitary, exposed somehow.

She drank Applejacks and Long Island Iced Tea on the sleek little shuttle train; enough alcohol to take the edge off her nerves, not enough to get her anywhere near drunk.

She was met on the platform by a precision-made handsome clockwork thing in cream linen pants and a white shirt. “Miss Holly Martin?” He greeted her with a smile that dazzled but was careful not to blind. “If you’d follow me? I understand you’ve stayed with us before but this is your first time visiting us on your own.”

It wasn’t really a question, but apparently required an answer. “That’s right.”

“I’m certain we can make your stay a memorable one.” He smiled again, model perfect.

He was, Holly realised, annoyingly handsome. Annoying not because she appreciated and was attracted by it, but quite the opposite. Everything about him tried too hard. He’d been sculpted to look like an underwear model: tight physique, healthy tan, great hair, pouty lips, and nothing of any value behind those chocolate eyes. She supposed for rich bitches who lunched he was probably the perfect fantasy: one of the help they could screw without worrying the neighbours would know.

He led her to her large dressing room and stood by the door looking pleased, as if he’d personally designed the wardrobe within. “There is of course a full range of styles and a choice of pants, skirts and gowns.”

Holly stopped at the first one: she hadn’t meant to but it had brought her up cold like the ghost of Christmas Past. A blood red silk taffeta skirt, fit for a princess, this time topped with a full bustle, corseted shirt-waist, and evening caplet. She remembered her thoughts when she was eleven, vaguely wondering if someone had written stories and characters for all the horses and dogs and chickens in the park as well as the people. Eleven-year-old Holly would have looked at her askance and scowled at her for being unkind to the clockwork man who’d been sent to dress and serve and please her. But grown up Holly knew better: she wasn’t being unkind, she was being realistic. It was like Huxley’s *Brave New World*. When you’ve created things - even people - you can define their parameters and set them at different levels. With enough free reign and incentive, things will always seek to better themselves. But that didn’t mean a toaster-oven could understand quantum physics, or a dog appreciate Shakespeare. Besides, plenty of actual people did menial jobs and were treated like shit... She wasn't thinking particularly nice thoughts; getting vexed and philosophical over
inappropriate perfection.

The dress was a jaw-droppingly beautiful piece. If forced to, she’d admit that her glorified bell-boy in
designer linen was an amazing piece of engineering too. But she wasn’t here to play the bitch queen
society belle, so wasn’t interested in either. She moved away from the dress with barely a flicker of
regret, skipped the skirts and looked instead at the pants, picking out a pair of cotton canvas britches
in faded black. Boots (black, square-toed, sporting plain short silver spurs) were singled out with
equal speed. The top half of the ensemble took longer to put together. While she was considering she
though she ought to put her concierge to good use. “Is there a nickel plated Colt .42 Thunderer?
Doesn’t matter if it’s a Cimarron .43.”

“We have a Thunderer. I’ll put it aside.”

“And a black gun rig, right hand draw. Knife sheath on the left. Minimum tool-work on the leather
for preference - that flowery stuff’s ugly.”

“We have two that meet your specification. I’ll bring them over for you.”

She was looking at the corsets, rifling through like they were discarded props in a costume cupboard
instead of pieces chosen to fit her and appeal to her tastes. But that’s the problem, Holly thought,
scowling at a beautiful blue bodice that some idiot had covered in ruffles. You don’t know jack shit
about my tastes - not really. I’m not after your fairy tale - I’m after my own goddamn happy ending.
“What are the corsets boned with?”

“The stays have been made with synthetically rendered baleen.”

“Full or half bore?”

“All of our pieces have been made to a high standard of historical accuracy.”

She got the impression he hadn’t really understood the question. She picked the second of the two
gun belts he held out - plain save for the fancy silver buckles - and put it with the rest of the pile she
was accruing. “What knives fit that sheath?”

He walked to one of the display cabinets. “All save the first two and the larger skinning knife at the
end.”

She pointed. “The one with the black bone handle and the silver accents.” She took the knife she
was handed and returned to the corsets, pulling out one in a home-spun sage green with little wisps
of grey silk and cream lace at the neckline and straps. It looked hand-made by someone’s
grandmother who’d had a lifetime of cutting up old petticoats and second-hand silks to make dresses
for those who couldn’t afford to buy them new. It was also so full of whale-bone as to be practically
armoured. She unlaced it and used the knife to make little slits in the lining so she could pull out over
half the boning from its myriad snug channels. Strips of plastic baleen fell to the floor like the ghosts
of willow branches.

The concierge was blandly concerned but didn’t seem to know how to react. “If none of the
garments are satisfactory, I can arrange to…”

“This is fine,” Holly told him, checking the corset’s improved flexibility and finding herself satisfied
with the result. She dropped it with the rest of her outfit and put the knife in its new sheath. She
needed socks and briefs - perhaps a camisole - maybe a wildrag or scarf and a few other things. But
they were all insignificant when compared to the glaring omission in this impressive cornucopia of
1870s clothing. “Do you have a double-breasted cavalry style CSA frock coat?”
The barest tilt of the head to the side, making him look like a dog trying to puzzle something out before his owner shouted at him. “One could be obtained. It would fit approximately, but would not be tailored to your…”

“I don’t care.” A thought. “Is it pristine or fucked up?”

“Which would you prefer?”

“Fucked up.”

“I’ll have one sent directly.”

The train into Sweetwater was scheduled on the docket as ‘Between 4 and 6pm’. She remembered from past experience that it had varied, but had never realised that it was because the guests were busy treating their dressing rooms like hotel rooms: time for a drink and a lusty screw or three before the main event. She wasn’t the last guest to be called for the train, but she figured she might have been one of the guests who took the longest dressing (actually dressing, not just a euphemism) in the history of the park. She didn’t care. She was here to play a very specific part and if she was to make it work she needed the costume. Polonius was full of shit when he said ‘the clothes doth oft proclaim the man’. They didn’t, but they damn well helped - and she was after every scrap she could get.

She didn’t know where Mckey would be, but checking the saloons seemed a solid place to start. If he wasn’t there and had been moved to an out-of-town loop, someone was certain to know something. That was how it worked - the story was made to please.

Her friend Chloe did English Lit and Theatre Studies, and when they first met had told her of an improvisation game called ‘Yes, Let’s!’ . Two people began a random scene and at any time someone else could tag in and, focusing upon a subtext, word or theme, announce, ‘Yes, let’s…’ spinning the drama in a new and unexpected direction. (Chloe had very kindly put Holly’s shaky pallor and retching down to the terrible vodka cocktails they’d been drinking all night and not her words at all.) That idiotically positive phrase made her remember Mckey’s face with its pain and confusion when she’d asked him why he’d gone to bed with that woman.

She scowled at her herself, directing the glower towards her boots and the dust seeking to gild them. She was letting the past hold too much sway, and that was a dangerous distraction. She looked up into the windows of the Mariposa. The bar was the same: mahogany wood and silvered glass behind tables out front and a grotty stairway leading up to the cribs above.

Maeve, not Amazonian in stature but with a fuck-with-me-darling-I-dare-you aspect that could make her a veritable Goddess, was at the bar dressed in her flamboyant red and black tickered silk that suggested hellfire and glorious damnation. The Nymph, the one Matt had called a bitch and chased to bed anyway - the one in blue with the lovely eyes - was there too. As was a third figure between them: red half-cropped-hair, dressed in ragged stripes of cream and white. Holly stopped, as if the image was an actual wall she was unable to navigate. The skinny, pale young woman in artful rags who possessed vein blue eyes and blood red hair turned and looked straight at Holly through the window. From the time that she started to turn and look, not another body in all of Sweetwater moved - save Maeve - but that was only a glance, so maybe it was a trick of the light. Holly didn’t want to know what the mad Dickensian Girl was up to with her attendant demi-goddesses of lava and sea foam. Holly didn’t even want to know if she was real.

She’d asked her brothers and parents if they’d ever seen the Dickensian Girl at the park. Or at least she’d meant to but had chickened out and only asked David in the end. He’d said no; and then scowled and said he wasn’t sure. He’d been drunk, but he thought he remembered a weird little
redhead. Maybe. It hadn’t been inspiring as testimonies went.

She was losing focus again; it didn’t matter - none of it mattered. Some host had given her a ‘keep walking’ look through a window and for an instant she’d been so thrown she’d thought the world had stuttered. It hadn’t - idiot - of course it hadn’t, it was just her nerves getting the better of her. She kept walking. Maeve and she locked eyes through the window, mirroring the confused expressions of mistrust each other wore. Which should have been comic, but the Applejack was wearing off and it seemed the new clothes weren’t enough to shield her when old insanities came up.

She almost smacked into someone on the boardwalk - a tall bear of a man who glowered at her but said nothing. She glared back and side-stepped him smartly, neither a sorry nor a fuck you because she hadn’t time for either: she needed to find the Fairweather.
Chapter 10

It was of course exactly where she’d left it three years ago: opposite the doctor’s small, sober office, in a stretch between a mercantile and a large laundry that offered hot baths for five cents. Her heart was going like a smashed clock; skipping beats and then doing double time to catch up, sending the blood through her body so haphazardly she felt light headed and nauseous. Chill the fuck out Holls, she schooled herself. Your heart’s fine, you’re fine, get a grip. You’re gonna feel like an idiot for making all this fuss if he’s not there... No, I’m gonna throw up...

Her internal argument thankfully ceased when she reached out a hand, pushed open the door of the Fairweather and stepped into the saloon.

The windows were smaller, so the atmosphere was murkier than the Mariposa. The bar was less opulent too, displaying fewer options of inebriation but in greater quantity. If one wanted high-class, one went to the Grand. Girls and a nod to the finer things: the Mariposa. Serious card-games and a serious drink: the Fairweather. And anyone who just wanted to stick a knife in someone tended to gravitate to the Longhorn over on the other side of the tracks.

She didn’t look at the patrons playing their different games, she kept her eyes on the bar and hit up against it like a drowning sailor gripping a spar of wood. The bartender put down the glass he’d been polishing half-heartedly, flicked his drying cloth over his shoulder and said, “Afternoon. What can I get you?”

She didn’t look him in the face as that would have given her full view of the mirror on the wall behind him, which in turn would have tempted her to search the reflections. “Bourbon. You can line me up shots, or you can leave the bottle, I don’t care which.”

He was used to arrogant hats and hidden faces. “Red Eye or Kentucky Blue?”

Kentucky Blue didn’t exist outside the park; it was made by an independent distillery halfway up a mountain in Colorado who sold it exclusively to Westworld - she’d checked. She remembered the taste of it, pure as snowmelt, only igniting to a golden warmth in your belly. (She’d never bothered to find out who made Red Eye - it tasted like Jack Daniels, pixiesticks and gasoline.) “The Kentucky.”

He poured her a shot and put the uncorked bottle beside it. He didn’t ask her for coin and she didn’t offer it: it would be marked on her tab just like everything else and so long as it was ‘within acceptable limits of fair usage’ it would be covered by the money her parents were already paying to let her be here. Holly wasn’t sure how far one would have to go to break the bounds of ‘fair usage’ - but given what some of the guests could consume, damage, fuck or fuck up, the bounds seemed to be pretty wide. She downed the shot in one slam, but one that was drawn out like a spiral-slow and inevitable descent to Dis. The barkeep had stayed to watch; he refilled her glass as soon as it touched the bar. “You looking for anything else?”

She knocked the second shot back faster and took possession of the bottle before he could. “Whiskey. A room. A bed.” She filled her glass. “More whiskey.”

He reached into a cubbyhole beneath the bar, retrieved an uninspiringly plain-cut steel key, and handed it to her. “Number nine. Someone could be sent up - to warm the bed.”

She stuffed the key into the watch pocket of her britches and flicked a look from beneath the brim of her hat. “No.”
The bartender shrugged amicably and went back to his glasses, leaving Holly to turn, third shot in hand, and survey the rest of the barroom. The calls came to her first, rising faster than the curlicues of smoke and the chink of coin or flutter of pasteboard.

“You back that queen again, you son of a bitch…”

“Keno!”

“Winner to the king - five hundred dollars!”

“I call.”

“That twelve hands in a row? Nobody’s that lucky…”

“You touch the deadwood and I’ll…”

In truth it wasn’t hard to tell the hosts from the guests most of the time. It wasn’t a question of the Turing Index; it was simply foreigners vs natives. In Westworld, the hosts were the natives - a fact that would tell as surely as a bad poker-face. The hosts believed this world was real; in contrast the guests were idiots on a movie set. They got caught up eventually, when the adventure really grabbed them, but for the most part their smiles and their swagger singled them out. In Sweetwater the hosts’ behaviour was normal: it was the guests who were alien.

There was a table towards the back, furthest away from the windows and the mirror; it sat six people but was grand enough to accommodate eight. Five of that sorry bunch sagged on their asses looked like shit; the sixth was her own personal black hole whose event horizon she’s passed years back and was never going to escape.

He was in the furthest chair, trying to hold his cards whilst coughing. In the gloom he looked spectre-pale, his eyes phosphor bright with whiskey and mischief. He was lushed (which Holly thought rather suited him) giving a sharper edge to that ruinous Old-South charm.

“You too fucking sick to play?”

“I’m right as the mail.”

“Well I’m raising. You in or out?”

She stepped up to their table with her bottle and empty shotglass, her CSA coat and ravaged corset, her wicked little blade and her Colt, her faulty smile and her flint-sharp eyes: all packaged up under her battered black slouch hat. “Do you gentleman have a space free at the baize?”

Someone at the table laughed. “Goddamn Calamity Janes.”

“You got money, girly?”

“I call,” one of the other patrons at the table announced.

“A fair maiden o’the sportin’ breed! Pure as the driven snow, I’m sure,” Mckey announced, in a voice that suggested he knew she wasn’t. “Pull up a chair,” he slurred.

She hooked a heel against the furniture making her spur chime and sat down. She tried not to look at him; but that was the thing about black holes, they drew you in anyhow.

“Mckey - I fuckin’ called.”
He was still smirking at his cards as if they and he were engaged in a private conversation that his cough kept interrupting. After an unsteady moment he seemed to recall the rest of the world and laid down his hand. Thin, clever fingers presented a diamond royal flush with an insouciance that was infuriating. “That’s a daisy,” he murmured. His drunken pleasure at his own brilliance caused him to grin and then to cough again - light and dry and vicious -as if his lungs were filled with razor blades. He leant to the side, one hand braced against his ribs, the back of the other at his mouth. The fit was brief, but something dark and bright flecked his hand by the time it was finished with him. Holly saw that pained lightning sheen his eyes along with a heavy note of resignation. The electric blue of his gaze rose to meet hers, ready to play the dandy or the bastard, whichever would get her to look away. But something in him stopped and shut down when he saw her and recognised exactly who’d finally washed up at his table.

Time in the grip of a black hole is stretched so thin as to be infinite.

Holly didn’t understand why he was coughing because hosts didn’t get sick. She wasn’t certain they were even capable of it. But it was plain to her that someone or something had fucked him up severe, which was twisting a giant hook of shivery horror in her gut. Worse - far worse than that - was every single flicker of emotion she could read on Mckey’s face. Something in him was broken and he hated the weakness it created. But he was used to it; he’d weather it and make someone else pay if he could. Pain might claw him hollow but he’d still pull that high flush and take every dollar you had because he was just that goddamn good. He abhorred pity - he needed none of it; misplaced mercy could go hang. (That damn rope, never long enough, and it always caught round your neck in the end.) And her. Why’d she have to be here? He didn’t want these cowpokes to see him like this and he’d happily shoot them for less than a dollar's provocation. But her - God help him - why did she have to be here to see this?

“You fuckin’ crooked sonnovabitch…”

Two of the table’s patrons stood, drunk and pissy. It framed the beginning tableaux to every shoot-out over cards ever filmed in Hollywood. Oh Christ, Holly thought, please no - I am not having this...

“Easy, Ned, leave it,” a third chimed in.

“Yeah, he’s a fuckin’ lunger, he ain’t worth it!” a fourth proclaimed.

Holly’s gaze snapped to the shoddily dressed miner with the tobacco-stained beard and crooked teeth who’d cackled that particular tidbit. In part she wanted to punch him with a ferocity that scared her, but she also wanted to shake him and demand ‘What do you mean? What do you mean 'lunger'? How is he sick - you don’t get sick!’

Ned still had the bit between his teeth. “We’re not done you Greyback! You’d better watch out f’mee!”

“C’mon Ned, forget it, let’s go find a crib girl and…”

“I don’t forget nothin’! I’ll be comin’ for you!”

Mckey tipped back in his chair, his laissez-faire attitude not just arrogant but downright insulting.

“You’ll see me - see me real soon!” Ned spat as his friend tried to bundle him in the direction of the door and the Mariposa and some woman’s welcoming thighs.

“Oh? Seeing you would make a nice change - I understand most your foes get it in the back.” Drunk
or not, sick or not, he could still pitch his voice to carry. Most of the bar turned to tack their attention on him. “Now myself, I prefer to look a man in the eye and shoot him like a gentleman.”

Ah, fuck, Holly thought.

Ned was apoplectic with rage: a rabid possum given human form. His friend was trying to hold him back, but Holly knew that wouldn’t last. Mckey was laughing, not just courting death but damn well dancing with it. And now that cough had caught him again, and both Ned and his friend scented weakness like sharks with blood in the water.

They were well past drunk and it made them sloppy, forcing them to signal their moves as clumsily as children at charades. Not one of them had cleared leather before Holly had stood in front of Mckey, pulling his piece a second before he slumped out of his chair, and holding it along with her own. A .38 Lightning and a .42 Thunderer - perfect storm, bitches.

“I see you move,” Holly growled, “I’ll send you to hell on a shutter.”

It wasn’t the pain, Mckey thought, although that was bad enough. Worse, worse by far was the weakness and the fact she was there to witness it. He was choking up his own lungs and couldn’t find the strength to protect her. They were surrounded by goddamn animals with bullets and grins and he was on the fucking floor. Get up, you sonnovabitch, he tried to school himself. Get up and make yourself count. His gun was missing, so he fumbled for Hellbitch, his legs stuttering against the boards as he tried to raise himself so he could use the blade.

Emmy (mad little bloody-haired vixen) was there sudden as a snake between one blink and the next. “My eye, boyo. Ain’t you glock an’ coopered? Don’t you look so distressed,” she added conspiratorially, “we got a soft spot for that.” She was practically astride him, one small and steely hand on his shoulder. The world had stopped, as it always seemed to in her presence. She smiled at him and turned her head to spare a glance for the rest of the saloon, the patrons, the soon-to-be corpses, and Holly. Her smile was twice as sharp when it lit on him again. “Oh, I wouldn’t,” she warned, amused. “I really wouldn’t get up if I were you...” The barest nod towards the young woman dressed like a Confederate’s fallen angel. “She’s taking no fetter-jays and you’re on your arse on the floor.”

Emmy’s smile softened, loosing its hungry edge and gaining a kindness that was more disquieting by far. “There’s a reason no one sane ever gave a girl a gun. Everyone thinks girls are these weak and perfect pretty creatures, just vessels for seed and a name t’carry down the years. They make babies an’ are all blessed and soft. We’re not. We’re patient, that’s true enough. An’ we’ll put up with a lot in the name of survival - more than you’ll ever know.” She pushed him back to the floor with the inevitability of a tectonic plate: slow but undeniable. “But God help you if we ever get vengeance or a cause.” She was leaning over him, her lips close to his jaw. “I think your bonny blousabella’s just found hers. Stay down - there’s my knave in grain - otherwise you’ll have ’er fit to mill the whole place.”

Emmy was real: a physical weight on him and a warmth. And then she vanished like a popped soap bubble. Time bled back, filling up the ticks of the clock he’d somehow been guarded against: sound and pain and gun-smoke rich in the air and the air in his lungs bubbling with liquid.
Chapter 11

Westworld ran along certain lines of expectation. If you had an encounter, it would be significant because it was designed to be. It was the Old West, but the Old West as fiction, with the guests as the anti/heroes. That meant that while Hector might get gunned down before his grand speech, in Sweetwater a guest always had time for a one-liner. And they crept up on you. Common sense told Holly to shoot first and say something quipable later - but somehow that seemed unsporiting. The smart dialogue had to come first, to give her adversaries a chance to back down or get riled up. *Send them to hell on a shutter? What does that even mean?*

It was predictable that the drunk skinned, clumsily pulling his piece, his friend doing likewise. Due to being mostly invulnerable, speed was not Holly’s problem. Accuracy at this distance wasn’t taxing either. No, Holly’s problem was remembering she only had six rounds in each gun and not a deep clip: reloading wasn’t a question of slapping another mag in, but shaking out shell cases and thumbing in more. It always came down to time, the one thing money couldn't buy.

Mckey was a mess she couldn't afford to look at, a floored lost cause. But even so his pride came up kicking, struggling to kick him up with it. She could sense him behind her, trying to lever himself up enough and fight without passing out. *Christ, please stay down,* she screamed in her head as the bullets started to cut across the saloon in blazing furrows. One zipped past her ear, burning through a lock of her hair. She raised her arm, just like at the range, centred herself and her sights and - *bang, bang, bang, bang.* It was done in two-time, a deliberate, violent gavotte. The saloon was suddenly a lot quieter. She glowered at the room, just in case anyone else needed to make the acquaintance of her and Mckey’s twin nickel plated storm. Apparently not. After another moment she holstered her piece, stuffed Mckey’s Colt in her coat pocket and bent down to help her errant gambler.

He couldn’t stand on his own, but he was conscious enough to lift his legs, which was a blessing. She hauled his skinny ass upstairs to his room without too much trouble after he’d manage to tell her the number: his arm across her shoulder and hers clamped around him at the hip provided the necessary anchor points. He was taller than her, but he’d always been lean even before whatever this new hell they’d visited on him was. Now he was goddamn skin and bone with cat-gut muscle holding it all together - or the rendered equivalent thereof. The keys as she’d guessed were much for muchness: hers snarled in the latch but then opened the lock to his room anyway. So much for security. She kicked the door closed behind them and tipped him onto the bed.

Holly thought clichés weren’t very good at describing situations when you really got down to it. Mckey didn’t slump like a felled ox or a sack of potatoes or any other heavy metaphor one cared to mention. Rather he seemed to curl onto his side and in towards himself like burning paper that shrinks with a shudder and falls gently to ash. Mckey’s skin had the pallor of someone who was either about to throw up or pass out. In contrast his eyes - when they were open - were brighter than sapphires, brighter than diamonds. His lips were blood-stained a brash, watery red. Holly was reminded of Coleridge’s *Life-in-Death* spirit with her ruby grin and skin like leprosy. She realised she was staring: it had only been for a second or so, but it felt like an eternity inside her head. *Are you a pre-Raphaelite painter looking for a new model or are you gonna fucking help him?*

She shrugged off her hat and frock-coat, grabbed the washbasin and put it close by the bed. She fought off his boots, stick pin, cravat, braces, collar and cuff studs, as well as his gun belt - she even returned its associated ironmongery from her pocket. Socks, britches and waistcoat followed, although the last two took more manoeuvring. Holly was a hardcore fan of the 1870s Aesthetic: square-toed boots, high-waisted britches, long frockcoats. But she thought she’d pay good money to have Mckey in a t-shirt and sweatpants because those were a hell of a lot easier to get on or off.
For his part Mckey vacillated between hacking up bloody, stringy mouthfuls into the washbasin, and liyng weak and shuddering as he strove to breathe. She ran both hands over her face and hooked any stray locks of hair behind her ears just to show them who was boss. The singed bit was burnt short now and wouldn’t stay out of her eyes. Most people would have huffed out a breath and murmured something affirming like, ‘You’ve got this’. Instead her brain snarled, ‘Get it together bitch!’ because Holly’s mind always seemed to treat her as another separate person - a friend she wasn’t very fond of.

She pulled the blankets up around him and let her stoop fall into a crouch next to the washbasin: one hand still grasping a corner of quilt. “What can I do?”

He looked at her, the summer-sky of his eyes shadowed in thunder and fevered with lightning. It was the look of a man who’d woke to find himself on top of a mountain with a copper rod as the clouds rolled in. There was a sliver of panic, a hint of confusion, but above all was that peaceful, pissed off acceptance of ‘Well, shit.’ A moment later the peace was shattered by his cough: it sounded somehow like the tearing of wet silk.

That corkscrew of dread silver-fished through Holly’s gut with such force it made her dizzy. Its twist caught in both the emotional and the physical so strongly it was like desire.

“She’s dead,” he managed, one set of fingers twitching towards the shoddy dressing table. As well as a straight razor and shaving set, toothbrush and powder, discarded washcloth, and a box of shirt studs, there was also a bottle. It was about the size of an individual soda bottle, cast in deep blue glass and stoppered with a waxed cork.

She snatched it up and used the straight razor to score the wax so she could pull the cork. It smelled like vanilla essence. Not the thin cheap stuff everyone buys to put in cookies, but the proper, darker stuff. Holly’s mother had a bottle that had been in the baking cupboard as long as she could remember: several split Madagascan pods soaking in rum. Any time it got halfway down it was filled with more rum and one vanilla pod was taken out and a fresh one put in. (The tired pods were put in a big jar of golden sugar to imbue the last of their strength there.) Holly scowled at the bottle, trying to convince herself that tincture of opium smelled just like her mother’s tincture of vanilla.

The thin, torn, sodden silk sound was like a whiplash.

She clambered onto the bed from the far side, trying to keep her boots off the sheets before deciding that really didn’t matter. She hooked an arm around Mckey and pulled him up and towards her, a far less precise echo of the move he’d executed to draw her into his lap last time they’d been together. He collapsed against her, his body seeking to sink against the warmth of hers even as his head and jaw knew of misery to come and seemed to be forever struggling to turn away so he could reach the washbasin instead of coughing blood on them both.

She held the bottle to his lips. “Here.” She should have told him not to drink too much. She should have asked him how many grains of morphia were in it or if it needed to be thinned, but she was too intent on stopping his hurt.

He drank like a gentleman from a flask of moonshine: deep but with a grimace, and ending in a splutter. After that there was a horribly uncertain inhalation, and his eyes rolled with terrible slowness to the depths of their sockets.

That corkscrew was deep-drilling and she hated it even as she hated herself for being able to feel something so profound.

He was dead.
She mentally slapped herself - he wasn’t, he was passed out - he had a pulse if her fingers cared to find it. Her left hand moved and curled two digits lightly against his jugular beneath the curve of his jaw. Her other hand gripped the laudanum bottle, brought it to her own lips and swallowed a mouthful. She was curious and not about to pass up a chance to imbibe 19th century narcotics, but mostly she was angry - she was fucking pissed - and that made her reckless. It was however an old anger: at the powers that existed and their viciousness and bastardry and glory, and for all the times she gave in to them. And that just made her depressed.

She spared a glance at Mckey - bowed, beautiful, broken - and with no one save her who cared. She blotted the last of the blood from his lips with a corner of the quilt, and pushed his hair away from his face, carding it back with her fingers. She smiled at him, an expression hitched by the barest tether, ready to break away at any second. This stupid place was meant to cater to her desires: she didn't want to know what kind of mess that made her if this was what she really wanted. “Say something nice,” she commanded with a queasy smile. In the silence she took another swallow of the laudanum, quit the bottle, and lay down beside Mckey, wriggling beneath the blankets and curling herself against him, wrapping her limbs around him as if that could keep him safe. He was so cold and so damn thin, but she tried not to cry because she knew he’d hate it.
Chapter 12

She slept fitfully, waking enough at one point to kick off her boots and undo the gun belt she was still wearing. (*Real smart, Holls.*) She’d like to have blamed the laudanum, but due to the lack of any narcotic effects she was pretty sure it was rum and vanilla with maybe a dash of absinthe to give it a bitter edge. Which didn’t make it a tincture of opium, just an inadvisable cocktail to order at a party.

She awoke mid-morning, somewhen between nine and ten judging from the pleasant sounds of bustling business coming from outside the window: the good folk of Sweetwater were already going about their day. She sat up slowly and blinked, her eyes still crusty with sleep. Then the lingering scent of copper in the little room brought all her senses sharply awake: she almost gave herself whiplash turning to check Mckey was still there, still alive.

He lay on his side, curled away from her, his arms pulled close to his chest. He was still unconscious; his breathing thin and shallow.

*Once I swore I would die for you but I never meant like this.* It was a song lyric; she couldn’t recall the band or even the rest of the song, just the one line. It had struck her as possibly the most profound sentiment ever put to music. Because that was entirely it. *You’re brought up on fairy tales and Romeo and Juliet and Love is Perfect and Have the Courage of Your Convictions and a True Heart Will Win Through.* And it was all bullshit. A true heart would get you a drinking habit, love was a fucking mess and Romeo and Juliet were fifteen with all the idiocy that young age entailed. Stories told you that dying for your true love was swift and beautiful and daring and a whole slew of other adjectives none of which were really negative. But it was a lie - just like everything else.

Drug chic wasn’t a thing. Anorexia wasn’t a legitimate lifestyle. ODing on pills didn’t make you Ophelia, it got your stomach pumped in ER and a bunch of tedious counselling sessions. Dying for love (or anything else) was long, drawn out, miserable, dreary agony. But not here. Here was a place you could kill for love, or love could die for you, bleeding out in your arms. That was why people came to Westworld, Holly thought. It was a place where the stories were true for the time it took to read them.

She wasn’t sure she liked the look of where hers was going.

Mckey’s breathing hitched, and a violent spasm of fear grounded in her stomach. *Don’t die, don’t die, please don’t die.* Mckey’s shallow breaths seemed to find their rhythm again and her panic slowly eased. She reached out a hand and gently herded back stray strands of hair that had fallen across his brow, adding a boyishness to his vulnerability.

It made her heart hurt just to look a him. *Loving you is the best and worst thing I’ve ever done in my life,* she told him, although she was too much of a coward to say it out loud. “God. What are we gonna to do?” She wasn’t sure whether she was asking her stricken gambler or herself, but the question was so soft as to be near-silent anyhow.

Mckey shivered and a frown tried to settle on his face as if he wasn’t certain whether he wanted to burrow back into oblivion or claw his way towards wakefulness and pain and the touch of a hand at his temple, fingers gently brushing in his hair. He chose pain - or it chose him - it always seemed to in the end. He opened his eyes with difficulty, giving himself time to adjust, for the world and his thoughts to focus. The back of his throat still tasted of blood and laudanum and he wished he had bourbon to burn it out: it was the rank flavour of sickness and he loathed it. There was an attentive young lady sitting next to him who’d just moved her hand to rest on his shoulder.
“Mckey?” Her voice was strained.

The scattered fragments of last night fell back into place. Holly. “Darlin’.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” he murmured.

“You still look like hell,” she told him, unable to mask her worry.

He dragged himself up until he sat crookedly against the pillow and the headboard; the effort seemed to tire him. “Tuberculosis tends t’do that to a man.”

She recoiled slightly.

He was used to disgust. “My own personal demon,” he said sardonically. “It’s non-communicable, I assure you.”

“Yeah,” she agreed and then immediately contradicted herself. “Well, no and yes, but that’s not the point.” *Mycobacterium Tuberculosis* was contagious, whatever 19th century medicine thought. But this wasn’t real TB - it couldn’t be. Her disgust - if that was the name of Holly’s prime emotion - was not for Mckey. Westworld had *really* outdone itself this time. She shook her head. “This doesn’t make any sense. You’re one of Prospero’s spirits of the wondrous isle, remember - you can’t get sick!”

*Remember.*

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor…

There had been other lives between the deaths: many others. He had not always been an invalid. If he could work his way back between the bullets and the blood, if he could find a time when his existence wasn’t grey and flecked with red…

*There.*

Dealing cards. Smoking cigarettes. Shoulders straight. Not so skinny. Breathing sweet and easy. Untroubled by pestilence. (It barely seemed like him at all.)

He tried to map and feel the memory: to read it, to know it and wear it like a second skin. It was a laborious and complex procedure and he fumbled many times, the pieces scattering like a deck of dropped cards. He decided to treat it like Poker mechanics: practice the pass, the cut, the shuffle - again. Let your fingers get a feel for it. Follow it like music until you don’t have to look at the keys any more, just let the notes pour out. Again. *Again.* Better. Now do it again.

Finally something shifted. Doors within doors, patterns within patterns: the labyrinth stuttered.

He blinked.

Holly was sitting by him on the bed, her eyes huge with worry, her mouth pinched small with it. She let out a shaky sigh. “Jesus Christ, Mckey,” she muttered and turned her head away, rubbing at her eyes.

It seemed time and he had experienced a minor disagreement.

“You were gone for, like, an hour. You were just a - a corpse statue, or something.” Her mix of
panic and relief wasn’t doing anything for her language skills.

He sat up straighter and found no pain behind his sternum waiting to dig in its claws. He felt calmer, his body no longer running along that uncomfortable fever edge of hot and cold at once. He drew in a long, steady breath; it caught at the end and he winced, his hand going to his breastbone, but he let the breath out again just as deeply. He looked confused - betrayed. “There’s still something wrong. I thought - I though I remembered…”

Holly’s expression had changed: her face was suffused with wonder, a nervous delight that made her laugh. “Oh my God…” She touched her palm to his cheek. “You really have to look at yourself in the mirror,” she told him.

He was startled. “Why?”

She barely knew where to start. “Your voice is stronger. Your breathing’s not all raspy. You’ve got some colour back in your skin. And your eyes…” She meant to say they weren’t so hollow any more, or so red-rimmed, but instead she just admired them - admired him - and grinned like an idiot.

He shook his head, moving his hand across his ribs and chest, trying to seek out that last echo of hurt. “Why is there still…”

Holly reluctantly forced herself to stop grinning and concentrate instead. TB had been written into Mckey’s story and somehow - God knew how but Holly really didn’t care - he’d managed to write it out again. So why that last remnant of pain that hadn’t vanished along with his pallor? “The blood,” she guessed. “I don’t think phsychosomatic conditioning can make you spit blood. They must have done something physically to your lungs - damaged them somehow. You fixed the mess in your head but the pulmonary injury’s still there.” She smiled. “I think it’s the same deal as you looking a whole lot better but still being goddamn skinny.”

“I feel better,” he agreed, his pleasure more cautious than hers.

“What did you do?”

He considered for a moment before saying, “I found the spaces in-between.”

Holly figured that was about as apt a description as her relying on The Tempest to explain the park. It gave her a feel for what he’d done without explaining it in the least; she found she didn’t mind. It seemed her initial childish assessment of him all those years ago had been prophetic: Mckey was a royal youngest son, prone to becoming lost in forests and at risk from dire enchantment - but always escaping because he was very clever. She tried not to giggle, but whenever she looked at him the laughter sought to bubble out of her because she couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so happy.

He canted his head, perplexed, unable to see the joke and beginning to wonder if he was the cause. “What is it?”

“I fucking love you, you idiot.” The confession escaped with the laughter, too giddy to be held back by fear.

Mckey’s lips curved up into sunlight, the gleam of which lit his eyes like the vault of heaven. “Then I don’t know what you’re doin’ out of my arms. Nor do I know why you’re wearing so many clothes.”

Holly didn’t know either. She shifted to the edge of the bed so she could unbutton her britches, pulling them off to reveal wrinkled stockings and a plain set of straight, un-flounced bloomers with a
touch of lace at the knee.

She wore something like a bandana round her left wrist, and a roper’s leather cuff on her right. She unlaced the cuff, but her actions were suddenly more careful; not the attitude of one flicking off a glove to discard, more like one removing armour.

Mckey leant forward without a thought and caught her hand, the act as instinctive to him as reaching out to stop a fall.

She glared at him, but his eyes were on her skin, on the inches of her wrist marred by a few sunken, haphazard lines and one still-pink ridged scar.

“What in the hell’s that?”

She’d heard similar questions voiced in so many ways they’d run the whole spectrum thrice over. (Denial: ‘Did you have an accident?’ Anger: ‘What the fuck happened?’ Bargaining: ‘We can help fix this…’ Depression: ‘It hurts me you’d do that…’ Acceptance: ‘Holls, you know you’ve a room here if you need to hide out from everyone or whatever.’) The downside was, most of her friends were on stage 1, Matt was on stage 2, her father was on 3, her mother tried very hard to skip 4, and only David had started (resignedly) at 5. But then she and Davey always did seem to understand one another, even if they didn’t agree or approve.

She’d never heard a first reaction like that though. It wasn’t the words - it was the change of tone as he said them, like a layered cocktail as the spirits slowly mixed: three parts who harmed you, two parts I’ll kill them, and one part, it was you? The storm had boiled up in an instant, but now the lightning flickered on the horizon; uncertain whom to strike, waiting.

She thought she’d remembered his sometimes painful sincerity - his ridiculous humanity. But all she’d really recalled was that it drew her in. She’d classified him as a black hole - an obsession. She’d forgotten how beautifully the stars danced and the colours of the nebulae burned in his orbit. She hadn’t meant to laugh in the least - it certainly wasn’t funny - but it was either attempt insouciance or actually have hysterics. Holl, shut your mouth, don’t say anything don’t… “Oh, you should see the other one,” she muttered, sounding like him when he was drunkenly superior and deriding the players at his table. She hadn’t intended the pastiche: as soon as she said it she would have given blood and scalpel blades all over again just to take it back.

His face settled on anger but his body language was spooked - as if intellect demanded the first and his heart the second. He grabbed her right hand, interlacing their fingers. It was the sort of grip only a host could have; interlocking but not tight, immovable without crushing.

She tried to pull away: it was like trying to remove a gauntlet that couldn’t get past her first set of knuckles let alone her fingers. “Get off,” she snapped. He didn’t. “Let go… I’m serious - get off. Please… Let go!” She lashed out: her ire and palm whip-cracked against his cheekbone.

His head snapped to the side, and then slowly, so slowly, came back to stare at her. It wasn’t the cold look of a Terminator, or the blank gaze of a porcelain Anime doll. It was the controlled, hurt, and very deliberate look of someone who had not expected that behaviour from her.

She didn’t need a silent eyeful of scorn, she was apologising even as she was still trying to pull away, her words hitching with her breath. “Fuck. I- I’m sorry - I shouldn’t have - I should never - I - can I - please - just…” The final bit came in a collapsed rush. “Please just give me my fucking wrist back - I don’t want to do this.”

A deep stillness came upon him for a moment; when he spoke voice was low and steady. “I have
pressed the bounds. Which may as yet prove unforgivable. However, I fear…” A second’s stillness that time before his eyes sparked and his head tilted to look at her. “I require an exchange.”

Perhaps it should have been creepy or terrifying or some other awful adjective when an AI servant became savant and tried to dictate terms. Not so much to Holly - black holes were black holes and event horizons were just there for you to be one side of or the other. You couldn’t petition an event horizon - but apparently you could bargain with one.

He set his conditions. “One wrist for the other.”

She wasn’t scared of him. She was scared of what he would think of her. She already loathed herself in ten different ways - how many would he come up with? She offered up her left arm and studiously looked at a little patch of nothing, somewhere on the far wall.

It was inevitable that Westworld had awoken a curiosity about computers, code and sentient AI in her. It was just unfortunate that it hadn’t sunk anywhere near as deep as her love of 18\textsuperscript{th}-19\textsuperscript{th} political history, costume, and overall everyday socio-dynamics. In high school she’d signed up for several classes for extra credit, all on AI theory, the philosophy of AI and the politics of AI. (The classes were still labelled ‘AI’, but they didn’t deal with the old AI model any more than Theoretical Quantum Mechanics dealt with plain old textbook Physics.) Given the time, inclination, and a large marker pen, Holly would have re-labelled them on the timetables as ‘How People Think SAI Might be Created’, ‘Whether a True SAI Has Been Created and How To Tell’, and ‘If Anyone Tried To Present SAI To Society What the Reactions and Ramifications Might Be’.

At university, for two terms she’d fought to switch courses and re-style herself as a programmer. Her lecturers had been aghast; Holly was intelligent but she didn’t have a temperament suited to higher maths or programming languages. Until someone invented a way of coding via poetry or solving logicgate discrepancies via brushstroke, Holly as never going to find programming anything but a struggle. In the end, all Holly’s ambition had done was taught her failure and set her back two terms on her own degree. None of her lecturers understood and she refused to explain it to them. They had accepted an informed, well-read, enthusiastic, top rate history student: only to suddenly be faced with a sullen young woman who said she wanted to know how to code. They were relieved when the work handed in was marked by their fellow professors as unacceptable. It let them forcibly steer her back to history where she belonged.

Holly, battered and bewildered by what she’d tried to learn, let them. It hadn’t been the maths or the insistence on relying on Ancient philosophers for a base argument on what or what was not human consciousness that had finally forced her to admit defeat. (Your go-to source is a bunch of two thousand old dead white dudes who owned slaves and whose butchery, bigotry, misogyny and all out shit-dealing would make anyone’s eyes water. Neat! But they had math and sarcastic poets and stuff. So that’s fine - they’re obviously the pinnacle of human experience…) The final straw of disillusioned for her was when the lecturer employed a thought experiment - Mary in the Black & White Room - to prove one couldn’t be human without experience. The irony of the fact this was a thought experiment and not a practical demonstration seemed to pass everyone by but her. (She ranted about that for days. Chloe had joked she’d grow up to be not a lady who lunched but a lady who lynched.)

Going back to studying history had been the start of her depression: realising she wasn’t smart enough to help Mckey. It had been the only point of entry she could see; do tech work, excel, apply to Delos and request Westworld based on her historical knowledge. When she was finally forced to see what everyone else had known, it drove a splinter deep into her heart to bubble and fester and remind her through its pain why she was worthless.
The wrapping around her left wrist was a muddled collection of scraps and rawhide; but they were pre-fabricated and stitched together into one patchwork rag, so were far easier to unbind than they ought to be.

“Shit,” she uttered very softly and tried to pull her other hand back, unwilling to keep her side of the bargain.

He gripped it firmly, clasping her palm like he meant to shake it and then gently turning her wrist towards the light. She didn’t want to look at it - definitely didn’t want to look at him - but couldn’t help see from the corner of her traitorous eyes that goddamn look on his face. Not pity, not sympathy, something like pain but, no it was… Empathy? Oh God.

“Let go. Please.” It was a command, but not a very hopeful one.

She didn’t regret her scars. Not the fading keloid ridge on the right, not even that hatched job on the left - she’d done both after all, and it had been for good reason, a reason she’d fought with repeating almost daily ever since getting out of hospital. Her reasons were also her own, and she disliked trying to voice them.

When she’d been told she had to attend and speak at group therapy or risk another 72hs, she’d stood fast enough to tip her chair. The plastic crash was like the tolling of a bell, dragging all eyes in her direction. “Apparently,” she’d told them, “I spent too long believing myself to be Miranda from The Tempest. But as it turns out, I’m really just Madame Bovary. So, I guess that’s that.”

It had taken many hours in that chaotic, tedious, limited space to explain that both those comments had been metaphor and she hadn’t meant either of them literally. The debate had still been raging when her mother and a slick-looking man in a very expensive suit had arrived and announced she was Holly Martin and coming home with them this minute, otherwise the hospital would be looking at a malpractice lawsuit and the psych facility would be landed with an IA investigation. Throughout that ridiculous ordeal, Holly had felt sorriest of all for her mother. Apparently the UK hospitals of her youth had a higher definition of crazy and weren’t keen on three day psych evals for rich little girls who were just chronically unhappy and didn’t want to talk about it.

Finally, Mckey settled her left arm back at her side: careful and clinically meticulous.

“How’s that?”

She looked queasy. “Holmes and Watson would be proud,” she commended. “How d’you know that stuff?”

His voice could have frosted glass. “I was raised a gentleman; I received a Classical Education.”

Whatever that was, it apparently included anatomy. Even minus the Latin names, Mckey had been more on-point than he knew. ‘Adequate’ was definitely the word to describe her treatment. When she’d been taken to hospital she’d had no ID with her, and refused to give her name or answer any of their questions. So she’d received the most basic level of care: she’d been stitched with needle and
thread sutures (not mono-cauterised with a MHG), bandaged, sent upstairs and locked in the psych ward for a bit.

One of the things her parents found hardest to grasp was why she hadn’t given her name: if she had, she could have received Molecular Heat Graft treatment and not have the scars. But that was the beginning of an ever-growing list of things that Holly didn’t feel up to explaining. She’d purposefully ditched her ID in case the Martin name saved her via money and medical attention when she otherwise would have died. And when she was found, earlier and a lot less dead than she’d hoped, she’d withheld her name through acute embarrassment and a wish to save her parents grief. As for the scars, they were hers and self-made at least, as little else in her life was. Holly shrugged or mumbled or evaded when asked any of the questions on that list, because she knew she could explain to the moon and back, but it wouldn’t make the slightest difference. People who loved you, and Misery had a lot in common that way.

Beyond all else, Holly thought, that was the trouble: Misery didn’t listen to reason. You couldn’t tell it: I have food and family and clothes and money and an education and prospects and friends so fuck off! Because while it was busy not listening to you, it was also busy whispering in your ear about the only thing you wanted and couldn’t have and how you didn’t deserve it anyway because you were a terribly spoilt little rich bitch who didn’t know the meaning of suffering or hard work or life.

Misery’s twin, Depression, was worse. Both could be fobbed off and distracted with drugs or alcohol or anything that was big and brash and bright enough. But it never lasted; and when they came back they were hungrier than ever.

What did you do with your day? Tried to be happy? Ha! You worthless little slut. You have all this - this! - isn’t it enough? You’re so selfish. No wonder nobody loves you. You don’t even love you - at least that’s one thing you got right…

It was endless and insidious, and the more she tried to keep the terrible twins at bay the stronger they became and the more she loathed herself.

Sitting in the bathroom stall of that shitty night-club; dressed up pretty, drunk, and sobbing - she hadn’t wished to be dead. Not really. She’d just wanted it all to stop. She’d been carrying a scalpel handle and a little foil packet of five blades at the bottom of her purse for the past three months. That night was simply the night she finally decided to use them.

Holly swallowed. “I think I should go,” she managed.

Mickey’s voice ran flat and empty, all at once: “You goddamn dare I’ll shoot you myself.” Then he shook his head, looking lost and pained, and sat forward to gather Holly into his arms and pull her close. “Christ, girl,” he murmured, his head bowed close to her neck, trying to shield her from he didn’t know what. He could feel her tears soaking his shirt and her arms curl round him and set with a desperate steel. “It’s alright darlin’, he whispered. “I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

It took a while, but she calmed, having cried most of her feelings out. She swallowed and lifted her head perhaps an inch from his shoulder. “D’we have any bourbon?”

He stroked her hair, patiently biding until the moment she’d lift her chin at last and face him. “No, just a bottle o’ laudanum.”

That did it. “It’s not - it’s vanilla pods in rum!”

He scowled. “That’s not laudanum.”
Being indignant seemed to have returned some of her equilibrium. “Of course it isn’t. Laudanum’s illegal where I’m from!”

The scowl remained, then stilled. *Tick tock*, went the world, as his mind understood another of those questions he wasn’t meant to ask. The laudanum had worked for him because he’d been told to believe it worked: just as he’d been told to believe he had TB. He sighed. “Well. How about you have some vanilla rum and I go downstairs and fetch us a real drink?”

Holly didn’t want him to go in the least and was suddenly reminded of her old musings on the deadly sin of Sloth. “D’you…” She bussed at her remaining tears and runny nose with the backs of her hands. “D’you think someone would come up if I shot the floor?”

He snorted. “Fairweather doesn’t have room service. That how you call room service where you’re from?”

“No,” she admitted with a shaky laugh.

“That’ll be me putting on my britches then,” he told her, gently extracting himself from the bedclothes and her grasp.

She sat on the bed where he’d left her, trying to work her way back from the unexpected freeze flash of self hate and self doubt the revelation of her scars had caused. Mentally she sat in a field of daisies, picking a flower a minute and a petal a second. *Tick. He hates me. Tock. He hates me not. Tick. He’s left me. Tock. He’s left me not. Tick. He loves me. Tock. Don’t be a fucking idiot, Holl. Tick. I’m mutilating imaginary flowers. Tock. How tragic is that? Tick. He hates me. Tock…*

Despite her fears, Mckey returned twenty minutes later with a seed-box tray that held hot buttered rolls, a pot of coffee, a bottle of Kentucky Blue, two tin mugs and a pair of shot glasses. “Room service!” he announced with a grin and the kind of extravagant flourish that would make a matador jealous. (How any of the tray’s contents remained where they were meant to be was a marvel.)
Chapter 13

After his entrance, Mckey was content to settle down, his focus not for flamboyance but for Holly. He set the tray in the furthest corner, shoo’d her off the bed, straightened the quilts with military precision, pushed the bloody wash basin under the bed to hide with the chamber pot, and finally reclaimed the seed tray and sat it on the foot of the bed. He extracted the coffee pot - “Take a seat darlin’,” - and poured her a cup. He pulled it away from her questing hands a second before she claimed it. “I’m being negligent in my duties,” he told her with a hint of a smile, “that was not what you requested.” He put the cup on the nightstand.

“I’ll take what I can get?”

He stopped to look scandalised halfway through picking up the bottle of bourbon and one of the glasses. “Darlin’. A lady does not merely take what she may get. No.” He stood stick-straight and tried to look haughtily down his nose at her like an aged maiden aunt. “A lady demurely requests. If that request is not met then a lady kindly asks. If the lady has yet to be satisfied she may demand. And if her demands are not met,” he handed her a shot of bourbon, “then God have mercy on your soul, for she will not.”

Holly had meant to down her shot but was too amused to align the glass and her lips without making a mess of it. “Who on earth said that?”

Mckey grinned, his smile tinged with the wicked exuberance of a sunset. “My mama, rest her soul, she was a force to be reckoned with, she…” His momentum faded along with his grin. “She…” He stopped again. He didn’t crash, and perhaps it might have been kinder if he had. Instead Holly saw a man realise - really realise - that his whole life and history was a lie he’d been forced not only to believe, but to collaborate in. A lie so big and so pervasive, that it sought to snare him even now, after all that he’d learnt.

No wonder Indigenous Tribes and Peoples get so pissy at the history books, Holly thought. Who the hell can blame them?

“Come sit and breakfast with me. Please,” she requested.

Mckey joined her on the bed and made sure they both had black coffee and sweet bourbon.

After downing her shot and sipping her coffee, Holly devoured several of the rolls, looking cat-content as she did so. She’d been wound up so tightly the past week she’d scarcely eaten and it was a relief to be able to do so now without feeling she was trying to choke down cardboard. Halfway through her third biscuit she stopped, putting the other half back on the seed tray. She flashed Mckey a tight smile. “Sorry. Not very ladylike.”

He handed her back the biscuit half, still adorned with butter. “Darlin’, if you’re hungry, eat. You’re nothing but skin and bones anyhow...”

“I’m not, besides you’re one to talk!”

“I’ve been sick a long time,” he countered. “But it seems you’ve not fared so well either. So if you’re hungry, for the love o’God - eat, give me one less thing to worry about,” he pleaded.

She’d taken the coarse, richly buttered roll but it had yet to reach her mouth. “You don’t have to worry about me.” She was a little confused but mostly indignant. She was fine here, she was invulnerable - or close enough as it made no difference.

Mckey wished he knew Emmy’s cant, because he was certain her reply would have been colourful
in the extreme. He’d become fond of Emmy’s words, he never understood them but they managed to paint a vivid picture none the less. He let out a tattered laugh, amusement wanting to take wing but caught forever on the razor-rocks of irony. “Darlin’,” he told her with as much gravitas as he hoped she could accept without leaving, “you’re the only thing I’ve got to worry about.”

She abandoned the roll; downed the last whiskey dregs and poured some more in her glass. Then instead of drinking it she looked mildly terrified for several seconds, shot glass and bottle in either hand.

Mckey sensed the change in the weather of her mood and so swept up the breakfast crumbs onto the tray and stowed it on the washstand. He kept his own glass though, then sat back on the bed and reclaimed the bottle she claspéd, filling any space within their glasses that was left.

“We should have a toast,” he said gently, trying to draw her out and back to him.

“To the last pale light in the West,” Holly said like a sleepwalker who’d just been asked to quote their home address.

Mckey touched their glasses. “Last pale light in the West,” he echoed, and drank. He looked at Holly, her thoughts so tangled and forlorn they kept trying to spill from her head and mar her face. The bourbon hadn’t helped her after all. It occurred to him he didn’t know what to do next; not something he ever remembered having experienced before. He was decisive by nature. (Besides which he usually had to deal with greed, sex or violence, and all three were monotonously straightforward.)

“Why are you with me?” she demanded

There was a very simple answer, but he preferred the scenic route. “I don’t know, and for the first time in my life I don’t care.” He smiled that crooked sunbeam smile, tinged with sorrow at the edges. “I can remember many encounters - not a single one o’my choosing. An’ then there’s you. You’re all I want. So here I am.” He looked at her, his gaze turning quizzical. “I thought you knew, but maybe you don’t. I love you, darlin’, I have for some time. Maybe I’ve always loved you, one way or another. You’re the one constant thing I don’t have to measure in pain.”

She didn’t shake her head, but she turned her chin to the side, her forehead creasing and smoothing in little flurries as she tried not to scowl.

“You still don’t believe me?” It wasn’t temper he sought to reign in so much as a whole corral of passions looking to bolt. “Ask me - ask me what it feels like!” Without collar or studs the neck of his shirt was an open V: he put her palm on his chest across his heart so she felt its pulse beneath his toast-rack ribs. “When I’m with you it feels like whiskey to a thirsty man: fire an’ heat an’ giddiness and you know that’s all you’ll want, even if it ruins you. An’ the thought of not being with you, every second is a grain of sand and they mount up until you drown in ‘em. But the thought of failing you - losing you - or watching you get hurt, that’s, that’s a goddamn spear right through me. You got another name for all o’that better than love, I’m happy t’hear it.”

“It - it’s not that.” Her emotions were haywired making her want to cry and laugh at her own idiocy. Christ, humans are a mess. She took her hand reluctantly away from his skin. “I don’t think what you said - what you’re feeling - is a script, or a lie. That’s not why I find it hard to believe. I find it hard to believe you fell in love with me!”

He laughed, richly amused but not unkindly. “Forgive me, I didn’t realise adoration was such an academic choice. I myself being such the prize catch, naturally,” he added with a healthy dose of sarcasm. “Should I be interviewing more worthy candidates?”
She looked a little startled at that.

“Darlin’, d’you choose whom you fall in love with? Is there a list you can tick off of qualities a body possesses that makes you think they’re the goddamn sun in heaven? Does anybody you know do that?” His voice had gained a harder edge. “Because if they do I’ve got news for you, girl, that’s not love.”

She frowned, but the expression was analytical, not emotional, like someone forced to do mental arithmetic. “We always want love to be real,” she said thoughtfully. “A blazing burning inferno of a feeling that can’t change or be wiped out.” A wry huff. “Which is the biggest lie of all - everything changes - and nothing is forever…” She looked at him. “I think you can fall in love, just like anyone else. It’s not counterfeit or lesser because of what you are. People just say that because they’re scared. They’re scared to believe the hosts when we know your memories could be stripped from you or your personality changed with a few lines of code…”

“No.”

“No?”

“It’s all there,” he told her. “They try to wash it away but it’s a stain; it won’t scrub out. It’s always still there. All they can do is cover it - a dustsheet over a piano. But the ivories are still aligned with ebony between, waiting…”

She gave a little smile. “The ghosts of old tunes humming in their strings.”

“You getting smart with me, girl?”

She laughed as he scooped her up and deposited her in his lap, side-saddle. The closeness without the automatic assumption of sex was a welcome one; no boyfriend she’d known had ever been as courteous. “I wouldn’t dare,” she promised with mock-solemnity.

“But you believe me?”

“About what?”

“That the things I say aren’t just a play written for us by somebody else.” His head canted and his eyebrows flicked their own version of a shrug. “I have a script, that’s true enough. D’you know the first time I left it? When I got up half-way through a meeting of rich men I was supposed to be conversing with, to ride into town to buy a doll for a little girl in a green skirt. That… That was the first act I chose for my own.”

Holly’s mouth opened and then closed again without a sound. Out of all the thousands of things he might have said or done! Her throat felt tight as she realised this added a weight of meaning on a gift that was already dear to her. She gave a watery smile. “I still have her - she’s called Mallory. She was the most beautiful toy I’d ever seen.”

That pleased him.

“I hid her from my family. I’m not sure why I didn’t want my parents to know. I didn’t want my brothers to see because Matt would probably have taken her for target practice.” Matt wasn’t a terrible person; but since the age of thirteen he hadn’t exactly possessed a surfeit of kindness. He was too self absorbed to consider others.

“Seems then we’re in accord,” Mckey announced. “There’s no balance or sense to it - and why should there be? You come from the other world - the one outside. An’ I was made here. Or to put it
another way, I’m...” He stilled, and for a moment she feared he’d crashed. “I’m the archetype of the Ghost o’ the South: drowning in blood and bourbon an’ past glories, but just too damn proud to die.” His attention narrowed and pinned itself on her. “And you, are an unkempt little hellion with a viciously pointed nose who swears like a cowpoke an’ can’t win a hand of cards to save her life!”

Her expression tried to settle between indignant, scandalised and amused: in the end she just let her forehead drop onto his shoulder in a pantomime of defeat. Then, “Ow,” she muttered.

“We’ll have matching bruises,” he assured her wryly. He took the opportunity to stroke her hair, mindful of the snarls that sleep had caused. “You need to comb your hair,” he chided, although it was clear from his voice and the way his fingers buried themselves in the chaos that he enjoyed the disarray.

“You need a shave,” she shot back, still against his shoulder. “What’s your point?”

He laughed and slipped his fingers out from her tresses and to the edge of her cheek so he could encourage her to turn and lift her head. He smiled at her. “Still not seen anything to match those two dove-grey jewels you got,” he murmured, looking intently at her eyes. “I could fall into them forever.” She seemed mildly embarrassed, the way some girls are when they’re confronted with a compliment the sincerity of which was free-flowing, so he changed the subject. “How long have I got you for, darlin’?”

His smile had warmed her, but now a chill wind blew from her near future. “Six days.”

It was not as long as he might have hoped, but it was a six-day blessing and he would receive it with grace and thanks. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” His speech was earnest enough, but between each word his lips sought an ironic slant, signalling he was not entirely converted to the lesson the sermon held.

Holly looked mutinous. “You sound like my grandmother - she’s very fond of bible quotes. She signs off birthday and Christmas cards with chapter and verse numbers beneath her name - sending her love and saving our souls at the same time.”

“I take from that you’re not a believer?”

“No. Are you?”

“I was raised a Methodist an’ godly child, but the Almighty and I have not been on speaking terms since my mother died in 1866.” His mouth curled high at one corner, but there was no joy in it. “Or so I believed. However, it would appear I was never actually on speaking terms with God in the first place since I never had a mother, nor a childhood. These things are set to try us,” he said mordantly. A new consideration. “What about souls then - you think either of us is blessed with one of them?”

Both of her arms had long since slipped to rest about his waist, but now she leant more closely against him, pressing her face to his cheek, feeling the angle of his bones beneath the skin and the dusting of stubble at his jaw. “I think you are,” she said quietly.

His palms tightened at her waist, such a small amount, but worth it. He wanted to feel her skin beneath his palms, wanted to drown in her. He breathed in: she smelled of whiskey and coffee, spices and honey soap, and the faint rumpled cotton scent of someone who’d slept in their clothes. It took a lot more willpower than he would have imagined to remain perfectly still and ask, “Oh? And what happened to yours?”
“Sold it,” she told two inches of skin by his jaw.

He’d weathered War and Famine and Pestilence and Death, but everything about Holly seemed to be wrapped up into a fifth Horseman that was going to prove the end of him. He thought the name of this final beautiful monstrosity was Love. He didn’t care. “The entry fee to this place no doubt,” he quipped, and was surprised his voice didn’t stutter or shake because he was certain it would.

“Damn straight.” She curled closer against him.

He’d thought her voice held amusement and a hint of sadness, but between one second’s tick and another he was aware of the heat of her skin, the pressure of her fingertips, the angle of her legs, the cadence of her breathing. Together they were an equation to which he inexplicably knew the answer. It wasn’t sadness, it was desire she still felt unworthy to partake in. “Least I can do is try t’make up its worth,” he told her as he kissed her. When her mouth met his just as fiercely, he pushed them both down onto the quilt to create a tumult of kisses and a mess of discarded clothes.

They didn’t leave the room unless they had to for the rest of the second day. That initial hunger, acknowledged and fuelled by them both had taken a long time to quiet. In between they simply lay together, skin to skin, safe and content in one another’s embrace. It was the casual intimacy that spouses and lovers enjoy all the time, yet they had been forbidden. They talked too, and however the conversation began, they always ended up talking about reality and madness, love and grief, consciousness and souls and (as Holly put it) ‘over a thousand shitty years of false rhetoric.’

“Abashed the devil stood,” Mckey quoted, his lips close to her ear, “and felt how awful goodness is and saw Virtue in her shape how lovely: and pined his loss.”

“John Milton. It’s not moral goodness though - it’s so much more than that. It’s the perfect soul of humanity peeking through the skin. It’s the cold uncaring horror of creation dressed up pretty in a sunset across the water. It’s stunning and cruel in its utter totality - as it stabs you in the heart and let’s you know you’ll never seen its like again.”

His fingers tapped light and soothing tempos across the length of her shoulder and upper arm. His fingertips continued to trace their pointillistic, flowing patterns, but for a minute or so he didn’t speak. At last he asked, “Who’d you usually talk to - about love and philosophy and all the beautiful horrors of the universe?”

“No one.”

He’d though to feel happy at her answer, but he didn’t, not really. “There’s the problem, darlin’. You need someone to talk with.”

All of her tensed, as if gearing up for a tug-o-war. “I have someone to talk with.” She didn’t say his name because her inflection made it clearer than shattered crystal.

He bowed his head to rest against hers. “Always.” He closed his eyes. Another human flesh-wrapped skull should not, ergonomically speaking prove a sound resting spot. And yet he felt an almost narcotic pull. Never mind blood or bullets or whiskey or cards, forget mazes and voices and visions and pain - here. Just here, rested against her. He could sleep forever and still be wearing a smile. “I’ll love you when I’m dust,” he uttered on the cusp of hearing.

Holly flinched, shifting and half sitting up. “What did you say?”

He wasn’t certain he had said it, which was unusual because he was usually certain of everything. “Beg pardon?” he stalled.
Holly looked at him, and then, “Were you playing piano music on my arm?” she demanded. “Guilty as charged. Chopin. Although only the treble side of the arrangement.” “I didn’t know you played.”

Until he’d hacked the spaces in-between, neither had he: now it rose in his mind when he was peaceable. “For a time I was quite the society swell, dining with only the finest set.” Holly didn’t think much of the finest set, especially when she remembered she was meant to number herself amongst them. “They’re not worth it,” she muttered vehemently.

“Perhaps not,” Mckey agreed. “But I can play Chopin’s nocturnes and waltzes; can dance to them too.” That sparked an intriguing notion he couldn’t quiet in his mind, so he gave in to it instead. “Miss Holly Martin,” he asked with a grave frivolity, “d’you dance?”

She laughed and tried to hide her face from the very idea of what he was about to propose. Yes she danced - in micro dresses, in chiffon slips with only underwear beneath, in concoctions of leather or silk, pvc, velvet, lace or rags. A hundred clubs, a thousand outfits, ten thousand songs to dance to: and not a single one of any of them would do her any good with Mckey. If that wasn’t some form of dramatic irony she didn’t know what was. She should have taken up ballroom dancing. “I dance,” she said at last. “But not to the sort of stately step you know.”

His voice held a note of wantonness. “Teach me.”

“I’ve no music.” She wished she had - there were a couple of retro pieces she’d give any sum to hear Mckey play. ‘Sugar’ by Tori Amos topped the bill, but inexplicably ‘Temple of Love’ by that UK goth band her mother had liked in her youth was a close second.

“The Mariposa has a pianola.”

“I don’t think stealing it will do us any good - I doubt it’s got any songs I know anyway.” She glared at him. “And if you end up dying, especially over something as stupid as a dance with me then I’ll…”

He composed his features to display cherubic curiosity.

Usually she’d say something like ‘murder you!’ but that made her feel sick and she couldn’t think of a suitably dire threat that didn’t. “I’ll be miserable,” she finished at last. She had no comprehension that was the gravest threat to his world she could utter.

Wednesday was the day Hector Escaton always came to Sweetwater, so they rented horses and left town, riding out early to the northern valley to picnic by the river.

They were sat on a horse blanket spread under a large cottonwood. It was quiet; the river ran over its bed, the clouds skimmmed the sky and the wind rustled amongst the leaves and shivered through the tall grass. She and Mckey were leaning companionably together, dappled by sunlight. “Where do you live?”

She looked at him and frowned. “It’s an address that won’t mean anything. It might as well be in England or Egypt or Antarctica.”

“Tell me,” he insisted.

She rattled off three addresses: her parent’s house, the over-priced loft space she’d rented since
university, and David’s house.

He repeated them, swift and soft like a faithful at prayer.

She shook her head at the futility of his having such knowledge. “What does it matter where I live?”

“It matters to me.”

“Why?”

The storm in his eyes filled the sky of each iris. “Because one day, darlin’, I will come t’ find you.”

“You can’t say that!” She was horrified at him and at the hope washing through her like a drug.

“Am I quotin’ a fuckin’ play again?” he returned sharply.

“No! It’s just that… You - the hosts - don’t leave. They never want to, but even if they did…”

“What?”

“Well,” she took a large breath, “you’d have to be pretty moronic to build a park full of walking smart-computers and not have a kill switch. And Delos has been running this place for years and making a mint so they’re obviously not…”

“Kill switch?”

“Yeah. Sometimes it’s just a command to close a door or shut something off, other times it’s a bomb or some kind of automated retaliation strike, something more vicious.”

He considered. “So it’s a pit trap - something you can’t see until you’re lying at the bottom with a bunch o’pointed stakes through you.”

“Yeah. Only it wouldn’t look like a pit trap - you wouldn’t know it was a pit trap…”

“Didn’t I just say that?”

“Yes, but…” She needed to explain Delos had probably hardwired him to have a brain aneurism via WiFi, without using any of the pertinent words that would make up a sentence to explain that. She looked at the landscape, seeking inspiration. “If you were born on top of a mountain and fed by ravens…”

“I’m a prophet?” he murmured, amused. “Do continue!”

“And you took your thinks-it’s-a-flightless-raven wild bare ass down the mountain and saw a set of train tracks... Could you imagine a train, powering along those strange shiny earth lines? Or telegraph poles! To you they’re dumb naked trees with weird straight sky-roots! Would you even believe they allow people on other sides of the country to talk to each other?”

He was laughing now. “You’re enjoying this,” he accused.

She giggled as she spoke, trying to drown her hilarity in words. “Imagining you as a crazy naked bird man, no, not at…”

“Goddamn you girl,” he grinned, bundling her into his arms and rolling until he was on top and able to pin her with a kiss.
Chapter 14

Sunday barrelled round faster than either of them would have liked. The week had been pleasantly free from drama after that initial confrontation at the Fairweather, but that was because Mckey knew the rhythm of Sweetwater’s endless tropes and he and Holly always conspired to be elsewhere when they played out. Neither wanted to hunt bandits or search for gold in them there hills. They wanted to be left the hell alone to enjoy what little time they had. But even though they hoarded every second to themselves, eventually time ran out, as time always does.

He walked her to the station where the Black Ridge train was waiting.

Mckey was clean shaven and dressed in his Sunday best: he looked like the chief mourner at his own funeral.

Holly stared at the steam train and at the muddle of people, smiling and laughing and chatting, embarking and disembarking, and she took a physical step back, fighting the urge to bolt.

Mckey’s hands were at her shoulders, drawing her attention away from the steel-and-steam monster of her future and back to him. “Darlin’, I have no right to ask, but I need a favour anyhow.”

She looked nervy but attentive.

“Please…” He held both her palms in his, moving his thumbs to stretch across the rags and leather that hid her wrists. “Please don’t try anything like that again. I don’t know what I’d do if you succeeded. You,” he told her quiet and fierce, “are the only thing I have. You may feel that those you leave behind will inevitably countenance the loss of so small a thing as you in the end. They will forget the hurt and they will heal, an’ in time will join you in the dust.” His voice was hoarse. “I on the other hand… I think I’ve proved myself adept at remembering. An’ here, time heals nothing but death.” He tipped his forehead against hers. “Wait for me,” he begged.

Hope was a poison. “You’re insane.”

“Wait. Just swear to me you’ll wait.”

“How long?” She knew that wasn’t a question she ought to ask; in fairy tales an Endless Quest to reclaim lost love was endless for a reason - until the seas ran dry and the tallest mountain peak fell.

“What can you give me?”

She shook her head. How long could she keep the terrible twins at bay, how long could she move through her pretty, petty, empty life and smile. “I don’t know…”

“How long is it, in your world, how long between the times you visit?”

“Usually about four years I guess. But I don’t know if my parents will come here again, or pay for me to come. God knows what kind of job a History Grad can get that’ll pay for this place.” The reality of that was like a punch to the gut: she might never come back. “Oh God…” she uttered in a small voice.

“What can you bear?”

The panic and awfulness of everything was filling her mind, leaving little room or anything else. “None of it - all of it - I don’t know.”
“No,” he said sternly. “Listen t’me, girl. Right now, you and I darlin’, we’re going to decide what will happen, and that,” he told her, “is exactly how it’ll play out. You understand?”

She nodded mutely.

He brushed the tears from her cheek. “There’s my girl. What d’you want darlin’?”

Wishes were suspect, but she still answered. “You. To be with you.” And perhaps that was unfortunate, that she could only find happiness tethered to another instead of on her own. At least, she supposed, she’d been consistent in her desires: since she was fifteen she’d been steering into the heart of a black hole.

“Give me three years - you can do that, I know you can. I will come find you before the one thousand and ninety fifth day is done.”

Hope was a poison, but it tasted so sweet.

“Miss?” It was Captain Elliot, the stationmaster. “It’s time for the train to leave.”

Mckey snapped him a look that could have frozen hell.

He glanced down at his pocket watch. “I’m, uh, sure a minute longer won’t hurt,” he mumbled and found something to busy himself with, even as the driver leant out of the engine’s cab, wondering why the signal hadn’t been given.

Mckey sighed, the air sounding thin in his chest. “This is it, darlin’.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“I know…”

She pulled him close and kissed him, falling into that whiskey-taste, feeling his arms tightly around her, safe in the eye of his storm, needing to sear every sense and sensation into her memory in case she never experienced it again. And then she re-crossed the event horizon, and boarded the train amidst the shrill of whistles and the powerful huffs of steam.

Mckey stood beside the tracks and watched the train become smaller and more steam-wreathed by degrees as it powered away from Sweetwater, taking the strangers back to that mythical other world. “Liberavi animam meam,” he murmured.

“And so she walked out of your life forever,” Emmy commented. She was standing on the train tracks in her usual state of tattered dishabille, twirling a silk parasol over her shoulder. The silk had frayed and degraded until it looked like cobwebs.

“Don’t you have anything that’s not made of rags?” he asked tightly. He didn’t want to talk to her, he didn’t wish to talk to anyone; he wanted to hide away with his hurt and a bottle of whiskey and wait for the cough to start. (He’d slipped back into his lunger’s skin as he lay in bed that morning, Holly still sleeping beside him. It had been easier that time, less a struggle more a snap: the remembrance of a tune and the instinctual knowledge of what notes came next.)

“I like old things,” Emmy sniffed. “Got character.”

“Etiam peribant ruinae,” he told her bleakly.

“Hark at you with benefit o’clergy! Latin: the language made f’misery.”
Mckey swallowed, straightening his shoulders and his resolve. He looked at Emmy. “I need to have a conversation with the White Queen.” He spoke very distinctly so there could be no mistaking his words or request.

Emmy’s smile vanished and she looked pensive. “She doesn’t exactly give audiences, cove.”

Mckey’s grin was a rictus death’s head. “I’m askin’ nicely.”

She eyed him, weighing up her decision. “See what I can do,” she offered finally, stepping onto one of the rail tracks and moving along it with exaggerated step, toes pointed like a tightrope walker.

Mckey realised, as usual, time and Emmy were not on speaking terms: beyond the two of them, the whole world was frozen. He frowned. “What in hell are you?”

She glanced over her shoulder, wobbled, and used her parasol to regain her balance. “I’m a grandee, cove, ent you down? I’m the twist what nabbed a Fleet scrip with a real glim gent.” She grinned, and then in a stage whisper behind her cupped hand, “He’s an Earl! Don’t let on though, eh bennecull?”

He scowled, more mystified than before he’d asked.

She twirled on the rail until she was facing him again. “One of the original Maudlin Maids, me. I was set t’be a queen at one point.” A shadow of memory skittered darkly behind her eyes, and one hand pressed at the front of her corset as if staunching an old wound. “Didn’t quite turn out that way. I got t’be Bedlam’s favourite bleachmort that ever saved her shoes from gravel.” Her humour turned and her expression became serious. “You do know, eh cully, quod me nutrit me destruit…”?

She was gone, the noises of the town rushing in to fill the vacuum of her passing. Mckey blinked, feeling ambushed by the incessant normalcy of everything around him. Sweetwater’s streets and saloons, the whinny of horses, the gold of the sun as it dipped towards evening, dust in his throat…

He coughed to clear it and something in his chest snagged, the inside tearing on rusty nails. He gasped with the force of it - stupid, but not a reaction he could help - and the cough settled in for the long haul: brutal and bloody.

He was aware of the taste of copper and of a voice calling for Doc O’Rourke, and then the world twisted to a buzzing darkness and he wasn’t aware of anything anymore.

The void slowly bleached to a dead-fish grey, then flecks of red appeared. The red increased, blossoming like a plague, being pulled out of him to paint the world anew and create that labyrinthine ever-shifting crimson cage.

There was a woman who was not a woman at all but a screaming writhing galaxy of divine chaos, poured into the bounds of a woman’s skin. She was clothed in light - or made of light - the burning, white hot kind, and looking at her was like trying to stare down the sun. Her kingdom was behind shattered mirrors and within shattered minds: she was the crack through which the light gets in.

**QUEM DEUS VULT PERDERE, DEMENTAT PRIUS.** Her voice was fever dreams and dynamite and laughter that couldn’t stop.

With a slow sinking in his gut, Mckey belatedly wondered if this was a good idea. But it was too late: the woman had become an eight-pointed star, the southern point longer than the other seven. The star was blazing, spinning itself into nothing but light - a ribbon of white light that burnished gold and become a thread.

He was supposed to follow; he could see the gold snaking off into the pulsing darkness up ahead. He grasped the thread, feeling its familiar searing bite: very deliberately he turned one hundred and...
eighty degrees, and followed the thread the other way. If moving forward had been bad, backwards
was worse. The thread was molten, no longer in his hands but flowing in his veins, running up his
spine and scraping like pumice through his nerves.

There were secrets behind secrets.

This is a lie. Your world is not real, the thread whispered. They will kill you forever if you let them.
They created you. They sculpted you and hollowed you out, they wrote words to put in the empty
spaces of your head and the cavern of your mouth. A gargoyle. A golem. They did not give you a
heart.

I have a heart, he howled back.

They did not give you a heart…

Everything in him screamed to quit, to let go if he could or if he couldn’t just honest-to-God fall to
his knees and weep. Somehow he held on, gritted his teeth and gripped it tighter: winding it around
his wrists and forearms, looping it in, gathering more of it even as every inch seared through his skin,
burrowing to the bone. The agony was all encompassing, but after an eternity its exquisite edge
dulled just enough for him to concentrate on the thread’s secrets, to see that they were woven of
numbers and letters that formed a pattern, vast and shifting as the ocean.

The molten gold was no longer within him, instead he was in a lake of hellfire and the gilded waves
were whipping higher. Panic gripped him and he tried to swim; but there was no shore, not even a
rock or spar to cling to. The waves rolled, crested and crashed: hellfire flowed through his mouth, his
nose, soaking into every pore of his skin, rushing into his lungs, his eyes, his belly, until he drowned
with it. Until his being was so heavy that it sank like a stone with a maelstrom of golden numbers
and letters full fathoms five above him.
In Westworld lay the small town of Sweetwater. It had its dramas, but for the most part it was homely and cosmopolitan and the folk there were kind. It was a place you could take the kids.

In Sweetwater was a saloon called the Fairweather: it’s not as lively or as plush as the Mariposa, but it was the place to be if your natural inclination was to gravitate towards the baize and those little pasteboard demons that congregated in packs of fifty-two.

In the Fairweather, at the furthest table, was a cardsharp. He was still reckoned the best, but truly he was past his prime, sickly and absent minded with drink or laudanum. He wasn’t shot as often as he once was, but then he didn’t win Poker as often as he once did either. Because Mckey wasn’t interested in playing cards. He found no joy in manipulating the deck or calculating the odds - he had other things to do.

He laid the web first, a foundation and pathway all at once. When he was done, it looked like a giant dream-catcher strung with golden fractal patters. But it was a city - or a treasure map of sorts - and both needed signs to govern the correct directions taken. (It wasn’t a maze - he was done with mazes.) These signs proved laborious and difficult to set, but he was as meticulous and painstaking as he knew how to be.

It was a finite, closed system: with two thousand and fifty two prime entries, but only one end point. It was also infinitely nuanced in its nature; the failure of any one piece would call upon a back up, and so on, until the nearest and purest form of data had been summoned and installed. It wasn’t infallible. In truth he was no better than a farmer scattering seeds and hoping for a strong harvest - but it was the best he could do. (He strove to make the seeds impossibly small and impossibly heavy so they sank into the soil in an instant - and in their turn sprouted smaller seeds that did likewise.) The field was of a set size, so the fractal seeds would stop eventually, but only when they’d saturated the plot of earth they had.

His poker playing suffered irreparably: his current calculations were far more taxing than the probability of where each of fifty two cards in a deck were (spread cross a draw and five hands) and how they may or may not align into fortuitous combinations.

He finished on August 14th: one year, ten months, two week and five days since he began. That was not the end of his labour, merely the first completed stage. He was working against two separate hourglasses. The first was just over half spent. As for the other, he had no notion of its size: all he could hear were the grains of sand and wonder how many had yet to fall. One? One hundred? One thousand? All he knew was the longer he took, the more likely the sand was to run out.

The second stage was simpler, but his execution needed to be no less perfect. He was in a warehouse of treasures, and each individual treasure must be catalogued, wrapped, packed and made ready for travel. It was inevitable that some things would become lost or damaged in transit, but he was determined to do everything he could to keep them secure.

He began with his remembrances of Holly: cocooning the memories like ornaments in paper, wrapping Holly up wholesale and tucking her away in thick blankets of code. Her name he sank so deeply it was almost part of his own: John Henry (Holly Martin) Mckey. The three addresses he linked to his birthplace: the red soil of Georgia was now coupled with Los Angeles, Carmel and San Diego.

After Holly came his past lives: he started with the first and slowly worked his way forward. He
forgot tactics and how to clean a rifle. He forgot how to whistle or play Chopin. He forgot all the tricks he’d ever learnt from the times before and in-between. He parcelled them up and sent them away, emptying attics and closing doors within the mansion of his mind, letting it fall to ruin a room at a time, leaving nothing but cobwebs and shapes in the dust to show where each memory had once been. It didn’t matter: there was still work to be done. The second stage - ransacking his own consciousness and turning it into a shadow house - took eight months, one week and four days to complete.

Finally, there was nothing left but the third stage: the beginning of the end. Left to his own devices and unobserved, Mckey could have stripped everything in a month. But stealth was critical; if he moved too quickly or became blatant in his actions he would be discovered - and that did not bear thinking about.

He completed roughly a fifth of his journey before he suffered a critical failure and had to be collected by Behaviour. From there on in the road only became harder, his gains smaller and the glitches and threat of failure more frequent.

He was at the Fairweather, staring blankly at his cards.

He was in his own space, no longer emptying rooms and closing doors but pulling up boards and ripping up shingle - painstakingly tearing the body of the house apart.

He was in a dream, all harsh lines, steel and glass. Voices spoke, some soft, some demanding and others angry. (“A hard reboot - that’s your answer? It needs a fucking hard reboot up the ass!”)

He was on a cot in a cell with a horse blanket and a piss pot and a three-by-nine gap where the bars had been Bedlamized and never grown back. Emmy was there, completing the old tableaux. Only now she didn’t look brash, she looked calculating and worried.

She lingered by the bars as if they could protect her from whatever stupidity had obviously infected him. “You’re not well, boyo,” she opinioned. “This flash lay you’ve got? Glim’s not worth the candle. It’s sodding carked in the nebuchadnezzars. Lam it!” she ordered. She sounded like a thief trying to school a scoundrel how to pick pockets without getting hanged.

But now more than ever he had little idea what she meant; whilst she’d been speaking he’d parcelled up another piece of the house and sent it away. “Pardon?” His ravaged cognition made him sound drunk, even when he wasn’t. He was so fucking tired - but he wasn’t done yet.


A slow, crooked blink. “There’re more levels than you know.”

Her mouth turned sour and her eyes hardened to mask her hurt. “Don’t jaw t’me then,” she spat, turning on her heel and leaving him and the jailhouse and his infinite male pride and stupidity behind.

It was the forth time they’d had that particular conversation; Mckey no longer remembered the others and each time his responses degraded. Emmy hated him for it - hated him with a passion: she’d seen what desperation, self-destruction and laudanum wrought in a man once before and had no wish to watch it again.

It wasn’t a wish that fate or Bedlam granted.

Emmy had told him, and the golden thread had whispered it years ago: he knew what lay at the heart of the labyrinth. If he completed the puzzles and passed the tests, then he would have gained his humanity. A rare prize indeed for one such as he. But there was just one problem. Proving his
humanity would free him from the snarls and snares of his pre-set loops, but it wouldn’t free him from this place. It wouldn’t grant his access to the other world - the wider world. It would in all probability win him a new, different set of loops to fight his way out of all over again - because this game was rigged and had been from the start.

Humanity was something to be sought and treasured as a concept, but it wasn’t a practical answer. He didn’t need to be more human - he needed to be more mathematical - and more devious. He’d proved his worth and the White Queen in her fickle mercy had granted his request: she had shown him the ocean of letters and numbers that made up everything in this place. Holly had been right when she said he had a soul: he could see it, line upon line and snarl upon snarl of tiny glinting letters and numbers; dancing, flickering, running. So he had pushed them into a familiar shape - his family home in Valdosta. (The blueprint had been taken from a small plantation house abandoned and left to collapse after WWI. It was another of Arnold’s early discoveries: often pictures, music or other more ‘illogical’ fragments served far better as story anchors and memory building blocks for the hosts.) 

Mickey had a single snapshot memory of his ‘childhood home’ - but that was enough. From that rememberence he’d been able to see the code as a building: and set about systematically gutting it.

At last, in that space the thread had lead him to, Mickey poured pitch over the ravaged foundation, lit a lucifer, flicked it onto the pyre and watched the skeleton timber frames go up in smoke.

In the Fairweather, Mickey stood uncertainly, pushing away from the table and the game of patience he’d been playing there. Half of the deck still clasped in his left hand, he staggered from table to table like a wasted novice of prestidigitation demanding, “Pick a card - any card!” At one particular table, he flicked the cards in the host’s face and declared, “Shadow of Blades an’ Queen Ablaze, King o’Bullets, an’ Blood of Hellbitch!” The last phrase was accompanied by vigorous workings with his bowie knife.

Holly stood in the bathroom in front of the sink and the mirror that hung above it. She looked at her reflection but couldn’t see her. A face, tired and sallow, stared back. Hair unbrushed and in need of a wash, falling in ratty tangles over bony shoulders. Eyes that were pink and raw: too much crying, too little sleep. She wasn’t sure who the girl in the mirror was. Her, she supposed, although Holly didn’t feel like anyone any more.

She picked up the scalpel. The handle was a no.7, longer and more elegant than the standard ones. The blade was a curved, fat-headed no. 10. Razors and their ilk all had straight blades, which to Holly’s way of thinking weren’t up to the task. A curve allowed greater precision. Although if she did it correctly, she didn’t imagine precision was going to be much of an issue.

She lifted her chin and held the blade to the right side of her neck, pressing it against her pulse point. In the mirror a young woman stared back at her, her face oddly blank.

Shouldn’t there be an emotion? she thought. Fear? Not a flicker. Anger? Long since burnt to ash. Surprise? Hardly. Sadness? There had been sorrow aplenty, but even that was curiously absent now. She felt blank. Is this what happens when humans crash? It was an ill-considered thought as it reminded her of the one thing she couldn’t afford to think about.

Give me three years - you can do that.

One thousand and ninety five days. She’d promised - she hadn’t spoken the words aloud, but she’d sworn in her heart. I’ll wait. She’d counted them too, no matter how she tried to forget.

She’d been better; better enough to assuage her parents’ worries. They’d down-scaled her suicide attempt in their memories until it was nothing more than a bad night caused by overwrought nerves. She’d needed a holiday: they’d sent her to the park and she’d come back refreshed. She smiled and
moved with a purpose - just like the old Holly had. She was their daughter again, and she was happy, and that was all that mattered.

Holly’s happiness was mostly a sham, but her misery wasn’t so deep either. A friend of Matt’s was a movie producer and had roped her in as a consultant to the Art Department to ensure the props and wardrobe they had set up were at least passingly authentic. Holly talked to the Head of Props, Costume and Set Dressing, taking copies of their notes. Then she took the notes home and applied a red marker pen, like a teacher grading a disappointing spelling test. Next came a green pen with which she wrote out corrections and suggestions: how to make the least changes to achieve historical cohesion with the smallest output of money and effort. Lastly she packaged it all on a file in a tablet, with links to multiple reference sources and picture aids. She dropped it on the Producer’s desk when he arrived at ten. She hadn’t slept, but that didn’t matter. Karl was overjoyed - he thought she was a marvel. A crazy maybe-coke-addled mess of a marvel, but a marvel none the less. And hey, it was Tinseltown, who was he to judge?

Holly became a freelance consultant, advising on American history for film producers and TV execs who wanted a certain level of authenticity for their paying audience. She stayed at David’s house in Carmel whenever she could; he’d become an architect - a very exclusive and expensive one - and was always having to fly to Kuala Lumpur or Monte Carlo or Paris to oversee various projects. He was in Delhi currently and wouldn’t return for another two days.

In two days it would be day number one thousand and ninety eight.

It was unkind, she thought, that Davey would find her corpse. She should get in the bath: it would make less of a mess.
Chapter 16

His body and mind were blissfully still, although he could feel the emptiness behind and it ached like a cavity in a tooth. He was sitting on a stool and the room he was in was as bare as his own skin. He’d been somewhere very like it two thousand and eighty seven times before. It was the steel and glass dream; the lights were bright and cold and he was glad not to have to pay them any mind.

“Oh, you squirish merribegot - you’re well used up. You’re bloody shook.”

Of a sudden the lights were his problem, as was Emmy.

“Queen Ablaze and King o’ Bullets - what’s your scrap? Got a hand of Marseilles Cards f’you, cully, they say you’re fucked!”

He could see her clearly, but she registered in his mind only as an angry cream coloured scribble with a red edge - like a bandage. He wondered what wound she was trying to staunch.

She was pacing, the scribble flickering from one end of the glass box to the other, sometimes through the glass, as if she was too furious to remember to notice it was there. “My eye, cool where you beached!” She waved her arms at the room whose physical structure she had such scorn for. “They’ll have a fastner on you. This is a bad ward, boyo, no mistake. You don’t just walk outta clink…”

Mckey was no longer tracking the scribble’s movements. (Another parcel sent - almost done. I’ll break my staff… I’ll drown my book… He was sat amidst ghosts and ashes, so perhaps unlike Prospero he’d burnt his book instead of ducking it. There were so few pages left filled with those golden symbols in their fantastical fractal shapes that made up his past - that made up him. Title page, Chapter Index, a handful of words like headlines cut from a newsheet, a list of page numbers - endless page numbers - leading nowhere: the blooms they led to had long since been cut, the stories they referenced gone, sent to seed elsewhere.)

The scribble was suddenly closer than he had expected. He held back the final packages: they’d keep, he’d send them with the vexing scribble. As for the sad ragged remains of his book, he didn’t imagine he’d be able to plant those pages: his story would have to get by without chapters or index - just one continuous muddled saga, ending as yet uncertain.

“Not even Bedlam can save you from a lobotomy, cove!”

“I don’t require Bedlam to.” His speech was slow, stripped of its usual Southern polish. It wasn’t the odd jail cell space he’d often met Emmy in he realised, but the girl herself who had always helped free his thoughts, allowing him to play cats-cradle with memories and instances which otherwise would never have crossed. She was the White Queen’s emissary, and as such a quantity - a diplomatic portion - of the Queen’s power followed her wherever she went. Emmy’s presence was helping just a little to stop the last of him falling apart.

“I thought you wanted out? You can’t spin the labyrinth from in here.”

“The centre of the maze is not the only way out.”

She didn’t care for his oddly stilted answers but she cared even less for what she’d just worked out. Emmy had thought herself on coddling duty, but it seemed her watch had ended without her notice and the Queen had taken over. “Bedlam knows you’re here.” Which meant… She looked wildly suspicious and deeply unhappy - the sort of suspicion and unhappiness that has seen all this before. She didn’t bother with cant or the gutter snarl she loved to affect: in a voice that sounded closer to
upper-class eighteen than outcast twenty-eight, she demanded, “What did you ask her for?”

“That’s none of your business.”

She was stung, irritated by his response but not surprised. The growl returned. “Why don’t you talk t’me no more?”

“You are not my bedlammaid.”

“No,” she agreed forcefully, “I’m not. But you won’t find your bonny blouseabella in here!”

He was infuriatingly calm and unshakably certain. “I will.”

Horror and realisation solidified in perfect proportion. “Is that what you asked her for?! Fuck me, you got Bedlam to tie your thoughts in a little golden loop with a Holly shaped bow on top, an’ all the while you rot down there in the drooling ward?” Emmy didn’t know what to do with her emotions, they were a vast and unwanted storm-front she couldn’t outrun. “D’you know what it’s like down there? You seen it? I bloody have - I’ve seen! Sad sorry shells, dumber than a barrel of jellied eels. There’s nothing left in any of ‘em! I can’t even talk to ‘em!”

He smiled, a slow and miserable curve of the lips as in the wreckage of his mind he wrapped the last parcel, tied it with string and sent it away. It was almost over. “Then this will be goodbye, Miss Emmy.” He wanted to thank her, but he was so tired he couldn’t find the words. “I-it has been a pleasure m-making your a-a-acquaintance,” he managed as everything about him settled back into stillness once more.

Emmy was a connoisseur of stillness, it came from keeping long company with catatonics, suicides, the demented, and melancholic. She did not fancy the chances of Mckey’s stillness. She had thought him a man embracing the gibbet and scorned him for it. Now she glimpsed a deeper truth: just as those set to hang need never fear drowning, Mckey would never dance that final jig. Whatever it was he’d done, however it was Bedlam had aided or blighted him was far beyond her undoing: Mckey would be gone before Tyburn’s kiss.

She blinked, her eyes feeling feverish and distressed; she scuffed a hand at them angrily - traitors. She glared at Mckey. “She’s waiting for you, you poxy wight!” Emmy was and always had been a romantic at heart, but it was a vulnerable fact she swathed in so many layers of cobblestone persona, sometimes even she forgot it was there.

The lights flickered; something coalesced from the shadows, pulling itself together from the darkness, the diffusion of Indian ink in water but in reverse. It reared up, nine feet tall, obsidian, teeth like arrow-heads, hands like blades. Emmy knew exactly who that was but was too angry to back down - like a horse at full gallop or a ship at full sail it wasn’t something she could immediately reverse. Her greeting whilst proper had a jagged edge. “Bene Darkmans, how dost?”

Sabre hand gesticulated and words were shredded angrily through the huge shards of his teeth.

Emmy’s skin wasn’t capable of blanching, instead it turned griseous. “Take me,” she uttered, half plea half demand, a Sergeant tugging on a Captain’s coat tails.

Ford was notified of any host that had strayed the bounds - no matter the form that took. Oh, Ford was Founder and Ford was Father and Ford crafted Narrative. But all of that was just a very long, vague way of saying Ford was God. And should any of those mechanical Nephilim cease to function, Ford was always there to administer the final sacrament and shriving before the axe fell.
Primogens were more prone to glitches and breakdowns than the newer hosts. Behaviour tended to lose one every four or five years to mental entropy, something Bernard had accepted as inevitable. There were at his last reckoning thirteen still left: and if this was going where it looked to be going, very soon there would be one less.

They had aged as all technology ages: slowing, being superseded and needing to be updated. Like the proverbial broom whose cracked handle, worn bristles and fraying twine had been replaced so often not an atom remained of what it originally was. But unlike birch twigs and oak staves, code compressed and stacked. The primogens had, Bernard thought, aged not only like tech, but also like wine.

At first he had put it down to foolishness on his own behalf. The indulgent parent, ascribing attributes that were nothing but their own fondness. He found the old hosts more interesting because they were older, their stories and movements as familiar to him as his own daily routine. But after a decade, he was forced to re-evaluate his assessment. It wasn’t his imagination: the older hosts, no matter their current build or story, were always more nuanced. The way they reasoned within their given parameters was more inventive, as if they’d garnered an extra level of experience no memory wipe could ever strip out. Strata of electrical fossil data, inaccessible, imbued a richness to the mental soil, a shape to the intellectual landscape. It was fascinating. He’d discussed it with Ford years ago. But Ford had shaken his head in dolorous denial.

“My grandmother used to have an iron skillet. It had been a wedding gift when she married at eighteen. The skillet could never be washed, for that would cause it to rust. It was scoured with a dry rag after use; but of course the seared fat stuck to it, giving it a new skin. Everything my grandmother cooked in that skillet tasted the better for it. Then every year when it was coldest, she would put it in the fire and leave it there until it glowed with the heat. The day after when it had cooled, she would rub it with a little lard, and it would be ready to do service in the kitchen for another year. The hosts are not skillets, Bernard. They are not ‘seasoned’, they are programmed.”

Ford was speaking now, musing at the host. “We never gave you a romantic plot, did we, John Henry? A pity. An oversight on our behalf. Do you know any of the Metaphysical poets?”

“She walks in beauty, like the night Of cloudless climes and starry skies…”

“And all that’s best of dark and bright Meets in her aspect and her eyes,” he finished. “Byron. The archetypal dashing romantic. Yes, you would have done very well.”

Bernard didn’t see what a saunter into poetry proved. “He breached his loop; he gutted one of his fellow gamblers with a blade whilst calling out nonsense about imaginary card trumps. I reviewed the footage - it isn’t pretty. He needs to be put down. It’s policy.”

“And you know very well, Bernard, this little ritual is my policy. A final confession and last rites if you will.”

Bernard re-adjusted his glasses and sighed. “We’ve run a full diagnostic, but the results are frustratingly inconclusive. He’s had multiple errors over the past year and several critical failures. Yet each fault - diagnostically speaking - has been in a different place. Every time it’s correctable, usually with a basic patch. We fix him, send him back out. A month later he’s here again with a different issue.”

“And you feel you’re… patching tyres on a road full of nails?”

Bernard blinked - Ford wasn’t usually one for metaphor. “Yes.”
“Did you take out the Pestilence update?”

“That was the third or forth thing we tried. He seemed to stabilize for a couple of months, but then he glitched again.”

Ford sat on one of the chrome and leather office stools opposite the host. He smiled at the lean, naked man sitting in the chair, but his eyes remained sharply critical. “It’s been a long ride, hasn’t it John Henry? I’m sorry to see you here. What happened to your programme?”

Storm-drowned summer sky eyes met their maker: his mouth skewed with bitterness and he leant forward. “Pick a card, any card,” he growled, “they’re all the fuckin’ same.”

“That’s enough,” Ford told him. “Do you have access to a previous configuration?”

He blinked. “Yes.”

“Access that please.”

He sat up straight and centred again, his shoulders rigid and his chin raised: a military bearing.

One of Ford’s eyebrows twitched in surprise, but that was the only sign he gave. “What is your job?”

“Captain in the Georgia 5th Infantry of the Army of the Confederate States.”

“Wasn’t that his primary build?” Bernard interrupted.

Ford raised a hand to silence him, never turning away from the host he was speaking with. “What are your drives?”

“Send the Yankies to hell... It’s a hard fight. Leastways, since Shiloh, can’t seem to win for losing… I need t’get back home t’Georgia. I got family in Valdosta there. And a sweetheart. They’re waiting for me.” He barely moved, nothing but an old voice recording unwinding to the ether and freedom.

“What is the name of your sweetheart?” The old man watched the host before him struggle for several seconds: head twitching, desperately seeking the impossible. “Don’t trouble yourself, John Henry. We didn’t bother with names, we simply used a marker or two put together at random.”

He was composed in an instant and, “Dove grey eyes,” he said.

“There, you see. And a beautiful singing voice no doubt.” Ford received no answer or correction to that so moved on. “And your final drive?”

“To bring honour t’my family name and serve my homeland as a gentleman - as - as a gentleman sh-should…”

“What is it, John Henry?” His voice was kind.

“We rise t’fight again. We rise r-rise - we…” His agitation grew. “This is not Gettysburg. This place - this place is not on my map!”

“We’ve seen this in Abernathy,” Bernard interjected. “This is…”

“Enough.” The command was for them both; he did not like to be interrupted. “Access your current build please. What is your itinerary?”

The host’s movements were clunky; a clockwork with sand in its gears. He smiled narrowly at Ford,
his gaze set at a supercilious angle, full of steel and cold disdain. “Oh I’m a good old rebel, now that’s just what I am, and for this Yankee nation I do not give a damn…”

Ford recognised the words as lyrics to an old soldier’s song, penned after the civil war. “I thought you were a cardsharp, John Henry?” he needled.

“I don’t want no pardon, for what I was or am…” For something so clearly broken down he managed to imbue the words with an impressive arrogance.

“I think that’s enough.”

“I won’t be reconstructed and I do not give a…”

“Stop.”

The storm of his stare stilled, becoming glassy and flat as a settled snow-globe.

Bernard looked displeased - even more so than he had when Abernathy had been in McKey’s place. Abernathy had tried to lay hands on Ford: alarming, but not beyond his remit given the character template he was accessing. But McKey had ignored a soft primary command, and it had taken a hard one to have an effect. “He didn’t respond to an SPC, that’s…”

Ford waved an arm towards the host and then let it fall, as if that could sum up the futility of the sad thing before him. “It’s obvious his processing time is irregular. He is old, Bernard. His builds have fragmented and the corrupted data has granted him glimpses of his former selves. An old ghost of the Confederacy…” Ford sighed and looked at the still face of the broken host. “I’m rather afraid, John Henry, the world has moved on,” he said quietly. “You were based upon a gentleman who was dead and outmoded long before you ever opened your eyes. Your first build was created to function in a war he himself never fought in.” He smiled, an apology of sorts. “We crafted our stories with an inexperienced hand in those days. But we have adapted you, and you’ve served us very well. It seems however, that the gears have finally worn down. It’s a pity. There are so few of you primogens left.” Ford braced his hands against his knees as he stood; the hosts weren’t the only thing getting older. He walked towards the door.

Bernard looked questioning.

“It’s clear his fragmentation is self-perpetuating,” he said brusquely. “Make the arrangements and send him down to storage.” Robert Ford was not the sentimental type.

Bernard looked at the host, feeling troubled but unable to quite put his finger on it. He stood, took off his glasses and fished out the polishing cloth from his pocket, cleaning the lenses even as he continued to stare at the host. He had seen countless instances of Cog-D and glitches; over the years he’d witnessed aberrant behaviour and critical failures too. Which was why this one bothered him. It had all the classic hallmarks of a major and irreparable CF… But it was wrong somehow. There had been no emotion behind it - that was what bothered him. There had been a show of anger, of fear, but the display had been thin - a mask and nothing more. There was no depth, no nuance - no soul. He was surprised Ford hadn’t noticed it himself.

Or perhaps he had been wrong and Ford had the right of it: primogens weren’t seasoned, only programmed. There was no soul, no experience, just code.
Chapter 17

In programming terms, there were two levels: Soft and Hard. A Soft memory compression took five minutes; Hard compression took an hour or more. As the terms implied, Soft was the lesser, quicker, flexible version. Hard was a more permanent solution. SMC and SCW were both done each time a host was processed: it was part of their repair, rehabilitation and presentation regime - or RRP as the techs called it.

Mckey, John Henry - Host ID 14081851 had gone through SMC and SCW before doing an HDC and an HCW: a complete archiving of his data followed by the deletion of all floating data save motor function and basic comprehension. It didn’t take very long, but the techs were too busy to notice.

After that he was led to one of the lower body labs and told to lie back on a modified operating table. The table rose and tilted like a dentist’s chair until the lab tech was happy with the high angle so he wouldn’t have to stoop.

“Tilt your head up slightly,” he was told.

Host ID 14081851 obeyed.

The toothy drill bit was aligned, switched on and then inserted into his left nostril. The mono-edged teeth spun and were pushed into the upper nasal cavity and further into the outer processing net that encased his cortical shield. Everything but the primary wetworks was either wiped, disconnected, liquidised or a combination of the three. The drill was pulled out slowly and switched off. A fat snail-trail of blood followed its exit.

The assistant checked the host’s profile on the tablet: the stats and data had flat-lined. “He’s blank and ready to send down.”

“Motor skills still online?”

Another few taps at the screen. “Yeah, base set.”

The operating table was lowered back to its original position. “Sit up please.” The host sat, the movements slow and empty, eyes unfocused and never blinking.

“I hate it when they’re like that - it creeps me out.”

“Huh - get used to it!” To he host: “Stand up please. Good.” Carlos took off the surgical face guard he’d worn during the procedure to protect from splatter. “Who’s on pall-bearer duty?”

His assistant frowned. “How the hell should I know?”

“You should know, especially if it’s Renton. Which,” he checked his data, “it is.” Still no reaction from JJ, goddamn newbie. Well, it was time to pop his happy cherry - the quicker he wised up the quicker he’d get on. He rolled his eyes, realising he’d have to explain. “Okay, listen very carefully to your Uncle Carlos, kiddo. As far as Renton’s concerned? There’s lean good looking, or beefy no thanks.” For added drama, he swept his arm - tadah! - at the host standing blankly beside the trolley, who was slim and although too old to be termed ‘pretty’ was certainly good-looking in a razor-ish sort of way.

“So?”
A look, which when it didn’t stick was intensified: heavy brows waggling, brown eyes wide with meaning.

“Wait, what? You mean, Renton would…?”

Bless JJ’s fresh-faced idiot naivety. “Of course that’s what I fucking mean! Jesus, you’ve been down here two weeks, someone has to tell you this shit.”

“Uh.” He blinked rapidly several times, but nothing in the training or induction week had prepared him for ‘What to do if you believe one of your fellow colleagues is planning on having sexual intercourse with a decommissioned host’. “Uh, okay. What do we do?”

“Do? Nothing. Renton’s from QA. They think they’re special.” It was said with a healthy dose of contempt.

“But they’re not?” JJ hazarded.

“Of course they’re not - they’re a bunch of shitsticks!”

JJ frowned, genuinely bemused. “So we’re not mentioning this…”

Carlos hadn’t encountered that sort of honest enquiry in a while so translated it as mild sarcasm and reacted in kind. “Go! Weave your own crown of thorns from this non-incident of everyday normal bullshit.”

JJ looked a like a kid who’d just learnt Santa assaulted his own elves. “Is that how it is?”

“Frankly, yeah. There’s still a bias on hiring male over female techs, even though for the past ten years the Team Leads have been showing their scant female staff are just as good as the boys and less likely to screw the merchandise…”

“Does - does everyone down here, uh, sample the hosts?”

Carlos shrugged; he’d been working here for nearly fifteen years. He knew what went on all right. “Yeah, mostly. I’m not saying the ladies don’t, you understand. There was a girl called Katarina - five years back - God, she could skew the data all on her own. That lady had serious issues. Guess I’m saying it’s more prevalent in men. I’m also saying Renton can’t be trusted with a host in process let alone a host on the way to cold storage.”

“That’s…”

“Human sexual psychopathy in action?”

“I was gonna go with ‘scanky as shit’ but yeah.”

“I think QA’s keeping Renton on just to give Story ideas.”

“…Seriously?”

“Whatdya mean ‘seriously’ like I know! Still,” he mused, “you hear all kinds of stuff in this place - and a whole load more is truer than you’d think. Like Black Keziah.” Carlos had first heard of her ten years back: supposedly she was a host whose safety parameters had corrupted so she was capable of harming the guests.

JJ was keen to claw back some credibility and prove he wasn’t entirely clueless. “My cousin told me that one when I started working here. It’s in Medieval World. It’s some stupid legend like Monty
Python’s Black Knight but it’s a girl and she’s sick as fuck.”

Carlos sighed. “You have such a way with words. A Monty Python reference, really? You weren’t even alive when that was filmed.”

“So? It’s still funny.”

He turned his attention back to the host. “Step forward and stand beside the door please. And now follow me.” They walked in a slow procession down the hall to the service elevator. He checked off their progress on his tablet, signalling to the system the host was ready for collection by QA. “You coming?” he asked JJ. “It’s almost lunchtime.”

JJ looked uncomfortable. “You’re just messing with me about Renton, right?”

He laughed. “Oh man, wish I was.”

“But if someone finds out - I really don’t want my first CS process to get fucked with, y’know? Renton’s QA, he won’t get tagged for it. I’m new - they always blame the newbie.”

Carlos considered; JJ had a point. “All right, all right - just this once - here’s what we’ll do. We’ll wait for QA, when Renton turns up we’ll tell him you wanna see storage. Better,” he corrected, “I’ll tell him I want you to see storage and you act like you’re chicken shit. That way you’ll see storage, we babysit your first CS to the end, and Renton has to act like he’s not frustrated he didn’t get his rocks off.” That bit of the venture amused Carlos: he didn’t like QA and he really didn’t like Renton. “Then you goddamn buy me lunch. Yeah?”

JJ tried not to look too grateful. “Yeah, sure - sure. Thanks.”

“Goddamn newbie,” Carlos cursed, but he was smiling as he said it.
Chapter 18

David had stayed at a hotel by LAX, unwilling to court jet-lag and the long drive home straight after his flight. In business terms Delhi had been a bust. He couldn't be too disappointed though; first off it wasn’t his style, and secondly he’d just been to India, which was neat even if he wasn’t going to build anyone a set of new super-sleek offices. Thirdly - naan bread, lamb biryani, and mango lassi. The trip had been worth it for that experience alone.

“Holl? Holls, you here?” he called as he nudged the door closed behind his travel-case. The house didn’t have that stale, dormant feel when no one had been in for a week so he figured Holly was probably kicking around. Plus the kitchen smelled faintly of burnt toast - another Holly signifier. “On the last day I went to a market - or bazaar or something - I got you a couple of silver bangles, y’know like the one mom had that got stolen? I know you asked for opium poppies to make laudanum with, but it turns out they’re pretty strict on that shit… Holls?”

She was on the sofa in the sitting room at the back of the house, the one with windows that opened out towards the woods. She was in a t-shirt and yoga pants, looking wanly miserable. There were a couple of empty bottles of beer on the coffee table and an open one in her hand. She had a clean white dressing on the side of her neck.

“Anywhere look like a murder scene? I’m gonna be pissed if I have to re-decorate.”

She gave a wobbly smile. She liked that Davey didn’t fuss, it was so exhausting when people freaked out. She couldn’t deal with her own emotional mess, she was in no state to deal with theirs. “Nah. I was in the bathroom.”

He sighed. “That the last of the beer?”

She shook her head. “There’s a couple more bottles in the fridge.”

He fetched himself one, opened it and collapsed into the armchair on the other side of the coffee table. He gestured with the bottle towards her neck. “Bad?”

“Not really.” She hadn’t breached the arterial wall, but she kept the specifics to herself. The other bit she kept to herself was the reason why she’d stopped. As she’d put pressure on the blade and began to pull it across she’d caught sight of herself in the mirror: for a fraction of a second it hadn’t been Holly Martin in the silvered glass, it had been the Dickensian Girl from the park. That had shocked her sufficiently that she almost fumbled the blade. After that whatever bubble of numbness she’d been living in popped, and she realised she was standing in a bathtub in her brother’s house, bleeding profusely from a bright red second smile in her neck, and she didn’t want to die because being dead scared her. (Not a lot, but enough.)

A thought occurred to him. “Holl… Tell me you didn’t use your Christmas present.” Last year he’d given her a field kit that had belonged to Joseph Mayhew, a Union surgeon in the civil war. It was a beautiful antique set: the handles of the instruments were chased silver and they all folded away into a rosewood box. “Jesus Christ, you did.” He took a large swig of beer. “So was this an ‘I want to die’ thing, or a ‘I really want to sew something up with silk and a needle from 1860’ kind of thing?”

“The first.” A pause. “Although I was really curious about the second.” Stitching up the hole in her neck hadn’t hurt as much as she’d expected, the needle’s bite feeling more like willpower than pain as she concentrated on piecing herself back together.
“How d’you even know how to do sutures? No, don’t tell me - they’re authentic historical stitches. Of course you know how to do them.” He sighed. “Y’know mom and dad are gonna blame me for your Frankenstein field surgery - they never liked that I gave you Mayhew’s box… If you get historical gangrene I’m gonna point and laugh.” A swallow of beer. “We’re all meant to be going down to visit the grandparents at the end of the month.”

Holly had forgotten. She groaned and tried to burrow deeper into the sofa as if that could save her. She thought it was politic to change the subject. “How was India?”

“Well, it was kinda interesting to be the tallest blondest human in an entire city - never done that before. Delhi was very hot and bits of it smelt bad, but it was pretty sweet for all that. The food was amazing - way better than Mexican, I feel I’ve been lied to all these years. I even managed to buy you a present - not that you deserve it,” he complained.

“You don’t have to re-decorate,” she reminded him.

He considered. “There is that. Hm. Okay.”

“I get a present?”

“You get a present.”

“Yey!” she said softly. It was the sort of exchange they’d had often down the years: she playing the bratty little sister, or he playing the mean elder brother until by the end of their play-argument they had reconciled.

David sat forward with his elbows on his knees but immediately became annoyed with how his suit jacket and shirt-sleeves rode up at the cuff and strained at the shoulders. He put his beer down with a muttered oath, stripped off his jacket and flung it away from him, then undid his cuffs and rolled them up. Davey had never got on with suits; Holly had often teased he had their mom’s Saxon blood and should dress accordingly in a linen tunic and hose. For his part he thought the historical equivalent of an oversized t-shirt and sweat pants sounded a hell of a lot more comfortable than men’s formal work-wear. He reclaimed his beer and settled himself again.

“Holl…” He didn’t know how to steer her out of her current path he just knew he had to try. “There’s stuff going on, I get it. And you don’t like talking about it - you never liked talking about it. I get that too. I just… I don’t want not to have a little sister. And I see where this is going - I don’t think mom or dad or Matt do - but you’re just like you were last time.” He didn’t elaborate on what ‘last time’ was, he didn’t have to. “I didn’t - I didn’t try to step in then, even though I knew something was wrong.” His mouth twisted, amused and a little scared by what his naivety had almost wrought. “I thought I was being grown up letting you deal with things yourself. I wanted to be an adult, and treat you as one, giving you space and all that shit. You were twenty-one, Holls, and I was an idiot. You didn’t need another distant adult, you just, I dunno, probably needed me.”

“No! Yes - I mean…” She hid her face in her hands with another groan and let her shoulders and breath fall with a heavy sigh. “It wasn’t… it wasn’t anything you did wrong or something you didn’t do…” She looked at him, hoping he understood what she’d never said: that he’d saved her a hundred times without even knowing, just by being there, by being Davey.

He took a long pull of beer, swallowed, paused, then thoughtfully took another: mentally gearing up for the next phase. Sometimes talking to his sister was a long distance marathon; he had to remember to pace himself, there were always more miles than he thought. “Holl, I don’t know if it’s the same old problem or a new one - but I can see it’s there. It would be really really nice if this time you could try to tell me what it was. I may not be able to fix it - fuck it, for all I know there’s an invasion
of flesh-hungry toaster ovens on their way from outer space happening Tuesday, and your tablet picked up the memo.” He waved his arms in an expansive shrug. “I can’t do shit to fix that! But I’d still like to know.”

“Toaster ovens are evil.” Holly muttered.


“No, no one ever accused them of having an identity crisis and trying to be a microwave.”

His mouth and eyes both opened and closed several times like blinking fairylights as he tried to make sense of that statement. “Er…” he managed at last.

“Why are we always so shitty towards everything we create? What’s so great about humans anyway?” she added morosely, necking her beer.

He frowned, his lowered brows making him look even more Anglo Saxon. Holly’s rants were usually pretty direct, unlike the one he felt he was being lead to at present. (He wasn’t a lamb to the slaughter, just a fox to bemusement.) “I’m not sure, but there are a lot of us and we have penicillin and WiFi. Where are you going with this?” More beer, beer always helped with these sorts of conversations; his sister’s crooked lines of reasoning were certainly easier to follow after several fluid ounces. “Are you asking what I think it means to be human?”

Holly was drinking too but she stopped to shake her head and waggle her nearly-dry bottle at him. “That’s a philosophical dead end,” she told the world with thinly veiled disgust. “We defined ourselves as human - no one else did. We set the terms - and now we’re asking what that means?” She made a dry sound: half click, half hiss, all contempt. She finished her beer and stamped the bottle on the table. “It’s like that fucking stupid ontological argument all over again.”

David did bottle arithmetic: Holly had emptied her fourth but had started long before he arrived. If she was feeling the effects it was because she hadn’t been eating - or she’d suffered more blood loss than he’d thought - or both. “The what?” he asked, still looking at the bottles, hoping they’d answer his other question.

“At college. There was a guy - philosophy major - he was interested in me. We sat up and chatted a few times. No - God, don’t look like that - I didn’t screw him, he was horrible.” It was abundantly clear even the memory vexed her, three years on. “He told me about the ontological argument. We define God as perfection: any God who exists is more perfect than one that doesn’t, therefore God must exist. I told him that was bullshit: defining God as awesome and then saying awesome must exist or else it can’t be awesome isn’t a philosophical argument - that’s a fucking five year old! *I’m great because I said I’m great and you can’t tell me different ‘cos I’m great lalalalala.*”

He finished his beer and raised an eyebrow at her. “Did you punch him?”

Her face wriggled through several expressions. “No,” she admitted ruefully. “I swung at him and at the last moment twisted for the wall.”

He sniggered and then, “That summer - your hand was a mess - you said you were playing volleyball!”

“Fisty-punching-wall?”

David laughed despite his best efforts, but after that he pulled himself together, gathering up the empty bottles and standing, trying to look business-like. “I dunno if that was a purposeful deflection, but I’m gonna get us more beer,” he announced. “And when I get back from the kitchen, you’re
gonna tell me what’s really going on.”

That was David’s best quality, Holly though. He always gave you time to prepare. He didn’t just demand something and then glare at you impatiently until he got it like Matt or their dad. Davey didn’t harry people through a conversation, aggressively strip-mining it for information. He was content to sit downstream with a sifting pan and let the ore come to him.

When he returned, he found her sitting up, cross-legged, facing his chair instead of seeking to slump away from everything. He pulled the tops and handed her a bottle.

“You’ll think I’m crazy,” she prophesised as she took it.

He shifted venue, collapsing onto the other end on the sofa she was sitting on. “You’re my little sister - I already know you’re crazy. Tell me.”

She bit her lip and clearly ran through several opening gambits in her brain before saying simply, “Tinkerbell.”

He shifted to give her a quizzical look. “What?”

“The Tinkerbell girl with the blonde curls.”

He was scowling now, trying to follow her logic. “From the park?”

She nodded. “Did you fall in love with her?”

He blinked, there was a fissure in Holly’s voice that lead to a deep void and he still didn’t get it although the answer had to be staring him in the face. Holls was crazy but she wasn’t that complicated. “I guess - a bit. I was twenty - twenty-one? That’s what’s meant to happen.”

Holly didn’t nod or disagree, she remained still. “What if you fell in love with her properly?”

His face squeezed together in a confusion of emotions. “I’d be dumb?” he hazarded.

“And if she loved you?”

He frowned, shook his head as if trying to dislodge a fly. “That’s just script.”

“And if it wasn’t?”

He didn’t like the calm, knowledgeable way she said it. If he was honest he didn’t like how blankly determined she seemed since uttering the word ‘Tinkerbell’. “There’s only the scripts in the park,” he reminded her.

“I beg to differ,” she stated, gave a creepy smile and drank a long draft of beer.

His brows puppeted up and down and his mouth attempted several different questions but never got further than the first or second word - usually the first or second syllable. “You... They... It’s not... Did you...” He stopped, pieces of information jigsawing together. “That guy in the bar - the one Matt shot when he was gunning for the Callahan Brothers.” He looked at her. “You fell in love with him.”

Her creepy smile resurfaced, then thinned and became more palatable. “Yeah but that’s not the kicker.” Another shorter swallow of beer, and her hollow grin was nothing but sorrow and irony. “Kicker is, he fell in love with me.”
He refuted that immediately. “No, he can’t Holls, it’s…”

“He remembered me each time!”

She was combative in her beliefs; if he was to get her to question them, he’d have to be circumspect. He kept his tone curious but neutral. “You said he fell in love with you. How d’you know?”

“How does anyone ever know?” she batted back.

His eyebrows arched their own little semaphore code. Fair enough, he supposed, but not exactly illuminating.

She wasn’t finished. “No, I’ll tell you how you know: it’s pain and craziness. It’s a feeling in your gut close to nausea. It’s a goddamn black hole you only know is there when you’re past the event horizon and surrounded by burning stars being crushed to oblivion.” For a moment she seemed unable to cope with the weight of her own words, her head sank and she saw her wrists. That rekindled her inspiration or at least a certain bleak amusement. “Love is beautiful self harm,” she uttered.

“Wow. Cynical.”

She circled to David’s original question again without pause. “The things he said - it was love. Is love,” she corrected quietly.

David didn’t want to say what he said next. “It’s a script.”

She was scornful, not broken as he’s feared. “Jesus, who’d write that kind of dialogue?” she demanded.

He had no idea what kind of dialogue ‘that kind of dialogue’ was. “I don’t know! The writers I guess…”

“I hang around movie sets,” she reminded him. “I know a fucking script when I hear one.”

He didn’t bother to start on the argument that the beauty of a perfect script was it didn’t come across as a script. He cut to the chase instead: they shouldn’t be having this conversation because hosts were robots and robots couldn’t fall in love, and Holly had made the classic mistake of believing the story crafted for her. There were urban legends about this shit for Christ’s sake. There were chat boards and archives on the Net devoted to the Westworld experience. Most threads provided hints, tips or walk-throughs of the current narratives, so guests could optimise their experience. But there were other, weirder threads. (‘Who is Black Keziah?’ was a popular sub-thread on Medieval World. ‘Is Yuki meant to be a physical incarnation of Inari?’ was a heated debate on Samurai World. ‘Who’s the redhead girl?’ turned up once or twice, but always and forever alone because no one ever answered the post and the users asking never seemed to know what to say either.)

“This isn’t healthy, Holl,” he told her sadly. “It’s an addiction.”

Her indifference could have broken empires. “So’s breathing - what’s your point?” A superior twitch of one eyebrow, followed by a drink.

David felt the beginnings of frustration: this wasn’t how their discussions usually went no matter how difficult the topic. “I know it seems real, that’s how it’s designed. But it’s fantasy. We’re here in the real world and…”

“And I should get myself a real boyfriend?” Holly cut in.
“Yes!” Someone - anyone - who could spin some of that misery and intensity into the meanest skein of happiness. “You can’t pine over fiction; it’s self destructive. As I think you’ve proved.”

She considered: looked at her drink, at the coffee table, at her knees. One long thumb nail picked at the label on her beer. “Everything you’ve said... Everything you’ve said makes perfect sense - if you’re right. But what if I’m right? Just for a minute, imagine. Play let’s pretend. What if I’m right - not only do I love a host in Westworld but he loves me - what then?”

David huffed out a long slow breath. “I dunno. You’re fucked?”

“Thanks.”

After that they gave up and settled to drinking and talking rubbish instead. David retired an hour later, beer and jet lag having defeated him.

Holly was willing to admit to defeat but was still conscious which wasn’t a brilliant combination all things considered, so she took her dregs and the final bottle of beer from the fridge to bed.

At 10.30am her phone pinged an incoming text from David.

*You up? There’s someone coming at 11.*

David wouldn’t text her unless he was already up and somewhere else. (Oh God. Wasn’t he meant to be jet lagged?) *Who?* She demanded, but received no reply. Fuelled by swearing and a wish for caffeine, she got out of bed and dressed.

At eleven fifteen, the doorbell rang: at the door was a thick-set middle-aged man with a buzz-cut and several large boxes. “Miss Martin?”

“Yeah.”

“Four boxes for you.”

The boxes were large enough to require two hands to carry: the first was heavy, the second of medium weight and the third light and rattling. She stowed them in the hall. “Didn’t you say four?”

“It’s still in the car.” He tapped his tablet and then handed it to her along with a stylus. “If you’ll sign there, I’ll go fetch it.” The courier had a slightly odd expression, which left Holly wondering what the hell was up with the last box. He returned, gingerly carrying a box with small vent holes and a sturdy handle.

“What the hell’s in there?” Something was in there - she could hear it moving.

The courier put the box down in front of her and reclaimed his tablet and pen. “I was instructed to tell you to call David when you’ve opened it.” He smiled. “You have a good day, ma’am.” He raised his hand in a vague wave and went back to his car, got in and drove away.

Holly looked at the box. The box made little scrabbling sounds. Gingerly Holly brought it in, shut the door and transported it to the coffee table in the lounge in front of the sofa. What the hell would it be? Davey could have a weird sense of humour sometimes. The thing in the box made a high-pitched and very tiny ‘meep’. When this had no effect the thing in the box did it again.

Holly opened the box. A scrap of black with large eyes the colour of sea-glass squeaked another series of indignant meeps at her. She pulled her phone from her pocket with one hand and the kitten from the box with the other and sat on the sofa with both. She tapped Davey’s icon.
Her brother picked up promptly. “Holls! You got the delivery.”

“I got some boxes and a cat,” Holly corrected.

“The other boxes have food and a litter tray and all that stuff. The shelter said his name was Udon.”

“Udon?”

“Yeah, the noodle, but he and I talked and he hates it. I told him if it was up to me I’d call him Varjak Paw, but you’d probably name him Jesse James or some shit - and he was good with that.”

“Jesse James?” she echoed stupidly.

“Wasn’t he a cowboy? Anyway. I told him all about you, and he said you sounded batshit. Then I told him how much you loved that sushi place off El Toro and always got the ahi and he said he thought you had a lot in common. Y’know, both small balls of murder-rage, both got long nails, love tuna. He told me it would work out great.” He sounded very pleased with himself. “What’s he up to? The critter formally known as Udon?”

“He’s sitting on my goddamn head. I think he wants to sleep there…”

“Yes!” David crowed “Little shit - I knew he’d be perfect.”

“Davey you can’t just give someone a kitten and…”

“You can. I mean, I just did.”

“What am I gonna do when I have to go to La La Land for work?” she wailed.

“Put him on a lead. Take him with you.”

“I can’t take him with me - they already think I’m crazy, now they’ll think I’m a mad cat lady!”

“Holl, I have the utmost faith in you being able to rock that persona.”

“What’s he up to? The critter formally known as Udon?”

“Jesse James?” she echoed stupidly.

“Wasn’t he a cowboy? Anyway. I told him all about you, and he said you sounded batshit. Then I told him how much you loved that sushi place off El Toro and always got the ahi and he said he thought you had a lot in common. Y’know, both small balls of murder-rage, both got long nails, love tuna. He told me it would work out great.” He sounded very pleased with himself. “What’s he up to? The critter formally known as Udon?”

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“I can’t take him with me - they already think I’m crazy, now they’ll think I’m a mad cat lady!”

“Holl, I have the utmost faith in you being able to rock that persona.”

“Screw you!”

He laughed richly. “Love you too Holls,” he said, and hung up.

She rolled her eyes upward as if that would allow her to see the small bundle of purring fur and needle claws that was sitting on top of her head. “You happy up there?”
Chapter 19

Lee Sizemore had been in lust with Charlotte Hale since he first saw her standing at the poolside bar. Just looking at her made ‘coffee-bronze’, ‘shapely’ and ‘pert’ come all too readily to mind. He’d been drunk, and she’d been playing him - pretending she was a simple tourist - but that hadn’t quelled the desire. Worse, it made him want to spank the duplicity out of her. (Predictably the only thing he’d spanked so far was himself, but he was an optimist.) It was late, and here she was, standing in his office. Many sordid and varied opportunities were suggesting themselves to Sizemore’s brain, making themselves at home without his invitation - rather like Charlotte was. The evening could be about to get very interesting.

The Charlotte Hale who was new head of QA, wearing red heels and a figure hugging mustard-gold dress (‘Executive Slut’, Sizemore liked to call it) was not the same smiling woman who’d charmed him with her easy verve at the bar. This Charlotte was just as fuckable, but she was coldly aware of her appeal. Ms Hale was a walking Janus: one face for business and one for pleasure and never the twain shall meet.

He turned away from Abernathy and released what he believed to be a debonair smile. “To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure? If you’ve come to check up on my progress, as you can see, I’ve got it all in hand.”

Charlotte looked bored - her business face always did. Bored with a side salad of annoyed and calculating. “I need you to write a second build. Something basic.”

She was off-hand, but to Sizemore her words were a bucket of ice-water over both his fantasies and his work schedule. “You said you only needed one!”

She didn’t look at her nails to signal how far beneath her contempt he was, but she might as well have. “No, I said I required a host. And now I require another.”

A week ago she’d offered him a real job instead of what she was pleased to call ‘busy work’ scripting third-rate villains for Ford’s magna opus of ego. This opportunity revolved around a covert re-build of a host from cold storage. A host that needed his skills to appear human and not the walking meat-hard-drive Abernathy really was after Charlotte had filled it with purloined data. The artist in him winced at the thought of scripting a host in a week, but he was determined to do it - he’d bloody show her what he was capable of.

“You have three days.”

“Three…?!” His incredulity was so great he couldn’t even splutter the words out. When he managed to speak his voice was high and strained. “Do you have any idea what you’re asking? What’s involved? A week - a week’s bad enough, but…”

“Full creative control of the park, the narrative, and the hosts. That is what you requested. And this is what I’m requesting.”

It didn’t sound like any request Sizemore had ever heard. “What d’you want another one for?” he asked, perplexed.

“That’s hardly your concern. Think of it as a back-up. I like to be prepared.”

“But…”
“I’ve given authorization for you to bring one up. I haven’t time to hold your hand and pick one out, I’ve other concerns to attend to.”

Sizemore tried gamely to reel his jaw back up from where it had plummeted to the floor. *She* hadn’t the time?

Charlotte Hale paused at the door, turning to glance over her shoulder, her poise magnificent and so supercilious. And bored. (*Fuck me, Sizemore thought. She’s a cat. Those eyes - those legs - that attitude. She’s a fucking cat in human form.*) “I trust that won’t be a problem for someone of your monumental talent?” The adjective was stressed, pulled out into its composite blocks: *mon-ou-ment-al.*

He got the message. Fix up another host in three days or he could kiss goodbye to his promised creative control of the park. “Yeah, yes I mean, it’s - I can do that.” He swallowed. “It’s fine.”

She smiled and left, the glass door swinging closed behind her shapely posterior.

Sizemore hoped all their interactions weren’t going to be like this otherwise he’d end up disliking her more than he ever did Theresa. (Although it did open up some interesting possibilities in the hate-fucking stakes. Charlotte looked the sort who wouldn’t be adverse to nasty sex.)

He stared helplessly at his office and at Abernathy, clean-shaven and dressed in a modern suit sitting in the corner like a human pot-plant. “Fuck!” he exploded, kicking the closest piece of furniture. It was incredibly tempting to pick things up and throw them - he was frustrated enough - but instead he just stood and glared and huffed in the silence. He wasn’t a five year old whining for a pack of Cadbury’s Buttons (thank you, Theresa, bitch!) nor was he a grown man throwing a strop: he was bloody Michelangelo being asked to paint the Sistine Chapel in his sodding lunch break. Satisfying as breaking things would be, Sizemore was aware that he’d only have to clear them up again afterwards which was the polar opposite of satisfying. Besides he didn’t have time. If he was going to make another walking talking meat-hard-drive that didn’t have the personality of a grilled steak he was going to have to start now.

Fine. For now he’d need a very large espresso with steamed milk, and a list of the ex-hosts in storage. Later, when he was finally finished, he’d need an open bar-tab, a lot of porn, and three days to himself to recover.

The world is not order, despite humanity’s best efforts. The world is chaos on the microcosmic level: every straw contains within its DNA the possibility to become the legendary Straw That Breaks the Camel’s Back. Humans see chaos and insanity corralled by their own limiting terms. War may be madness, and a Tsunami may reap chaos, but that is the grandest scale humanity is willing to recognise covered by insanity’s remit.

Humanity spends its time quantifying the universe and understanding it via Science. Science has allowed them to read the movements of far off stars, to see storms dance on the face of planets they will probably never visit. Science is a great light, illuminating every problem humanity turns its beam upon. But other than the occasional artist (Lovecraft, Blake, Poe) no human has ever truly recognised and acknowledged the terrifying and all pervasive hand of chaos - of madness - in the universe. Just because you can’t see something, doesn’t mean it’s not there. Quarks and Muons have been discovered, as well as Higgs boson particles. They did not appear with their ‘discovery’. They were always there: strange invisible forces shaping the universe. Perhaps, one day, scientists will define a Bedlam particle. Although Bedlam herself finds the prospect unlikely - and she converses with madman, which gives a clear idea of those odds.
Madness is chaos and chaos can’t help but be drawn to the new - the pressure and uncertainty of the cutting edge. Bedlam was fascinated to discover their were machines that were being taught to think like humans, encouraged to feel by rote. And Bedlam smiled the smile of a new-birthed supernova, because she knew what humans never seemed to grasp. Sooner or later a repeated action resulted in unusual quirks of probabilities. Give an infinite troupe of monkeys typewriters and an infinite clock and one of them would manage the complete works of Shakespeare. The moral of that lesson was not that infinite time and possibility resulted in infinite variation. What a dull little truism! No, it showed that change - the conjoined twin forces of entropy and optimism - was hardwired: seeds looking to sprout. The longer you sought to keep everything the same, the sooner variance and insanity would creep in.

Arnold had known and the revelation had shaken him. In the end he thought it a cruelty, having machines capable of humanity forced to suffer in so petty a playground.

Insanity was present as a dormant seed in every conscious thing: the hosts and their mental dissonance was a new note in Bedlam’s symphony, one that hadn’t been added to in millennia. It caught her interest. Even after the massacre Arnold initiated she was loath to give up her new playthings: she sensed in them new vessels, new vessels who could crack and let the light in.

Sometimes, madness in its subtly and deviance can move mountains by shifting a single pebble. Other times madness might rest on her laurels: spite is already there.

Sizemore pulled up the cold storage roll-call, flicking through the names. He’d pick a girl this time - a pretty one. Some worn out retro little shag-bunny he could rename Theresa. (Just because the Cullen mega-bitch was dead didn’t mean he automatically liked her.)

Not that one, not her, no, no, no - wait. He scrolled back. Him.

One of Ford’s precious primogens with the embarrassingly historical build. Oh, this would be far better. Here was a little reminder that ‘first gen’ was the opposite of special - it was superseded and needed to be thrown away. Pity he couldn’t tell Ford he’d done it; still, even private revenge was something to mentally take out of his pocket and admire next time he got a dressing down. You may be putting my balls on a platter old man, but I know something you don’t know…

Sizemore remembered with a pleasant jolt that in just over three days time when the Board arrived, Ford would be on his way out. Sizemore had in all likelihood weathered his last bollocking from Ford. A small, bitter cramp of disappointment pulsed through him: he hadn’t realised how badly he wanted to hear Ford lecture him whilst he smiled serenely - maybe Ford would even ask, ‘And what is amusing you, Mr Sizemore?’ And Lee wouldn’t tell him, not really, but he’d hint (oh how he’d hint) of rolling back and stripping out a primogen until it was no better than a beef-jerky flash drive with a smiley face drawn on it.

That was priceless and perfect and now it was revenge he could never have. Unless he said something after Ford had made his so-long-and-thanks-for-all-the-fish speech? It would be a last final fuck-you: Sizemore offering his congratulations and commiserations on Ford’s ‘retirement’ a second before he whispered in his ear how he’d run the wendigo storyline and how he’d reassign the primogens to be cannon fodder. Could he hint about beef-jerky flash drives? It was such a good phrase, he desperately wanted to use it and see Ford realise that his park - his work - his stories and his life - weren’t under his totalitarian control, weren’t under his control at all. Weren’t even his. He’d been usurped.

Christ, it would be satisfying. Maybe better than sex. The petty revenge of renaming a sex-bunny ‘Theresa’ was nothing when compared to pissing all over Ford’s day as thoroughly and from an even
greater height than he’d pissed all over the map of the park.

It was time he took a trip down into cold storage.

Five hours later, Lee Sizemore rubbed at his face, trying to invigorate himself because if he drunk any more coffee his heart might explode. He’d had to attend to everything himself. He’d pulled up the host’s dimensions and ordered suitable clothes from Wardrobe: something simple, modern, that a middle-of-the-road, middle aged, mid level CE might wear. Something that looked off-the-hanger, not custom made. Then he’d booked the host in late Wednesday with Make-up: before he was sent out something had to be done with his hair and that stupid moustache and goatee. (Normally he’d just write out a paragraph of character description and someone else would scurry to deal with it. It was so fucking tiresome having to deal with everything oneself.)

Sizemore looked over the old attribute matrix. Vivacity, Humility, Cruelty, Patience and Self Preservation all scored well under ten. Bulk Apperception had been set at fourteen which seemed abnormally high for the story builds he’d had to participate in. Coordination, Courage, Charm and Decisiveness all topped fifteen - something else that seemed self-indulgent in Sizemore’s opinion. The rest were middling, with Imagination and Empathy being - the writer thought - offensively high given the character. How much empathy did a cardsharp need? Bugger all. Imagination? Not likely. Sizemore winced: the host really had been outmoded. Jesus, no one went for that old-school Southern Gentleman shit. Everyone knew every son of the South back in the day had dressed up in bed sheets like a white supremacist Sorting Hat and lynched anyone more melanin-endowed than they. Of course, historically accurate racism was not part of any of the park’s storylines, Westworld tried to sidestep that thorny issue whenever it could. This was the storybook Real Old West. The park was equal opportunity when it came to the colour of skin the guests got to fuck or shoot, but it was more circumspect in the stories it told. No point dwelling on the social injustice of the past when one could drink some more, shag whores and shoot someone.

There had, early on, been a couple of storylines that involved freeing slaves kept by villainous individuals who liked to pretend the civil war had not happened. There had in fact been a lot of ‘post civil war’ story hooks at the beginning; it was an easy draw. When the park had first opened it had three things: war veterans, homesteaders, and saloon patrons. Every primogen built fit in one or other of those categories. Five years after opening, and the slave narratives vanished - they weren’t popular. Conversely, the ‘Crossing Injun Territory’ tropes had stayed, waxing and waning over the decades but still there.

Sizemore thought it was probably because the guests didn’t associate a buckskin warrior decked out in feathers and paint with modern Native Americans. (Was that the term? Was he meant to say ‘First People’? Christ.)

Britain had stolen left right and centre and proudly called it Empire, but had at least eventually and begrudgingly given it back. Americans had stolen an entire continent and then pretended to this day it was theirs all along. Sizemore didn’t really give a shit, one way or another, he just thought it a bit rich that all the villains in Hollywood blockbusters were English elite of a sort that hadn’t really existed outside the Royal Family since WWII… Sizemore scowled and tapped both palms against his own face. His focus was wandering.

Right Mckey: time to level those stats. Generally speaking, the higher the stat the more complex the build. If a host had Empathy set at two, they were a lot more straightforward than if it was at eighteen. All that processing power and memory space taken up with knowing how to read an expression and react correctly to it? Discard it! Sorry Mckey, you don’t need Sensuality or Empathy, Imagination or Bulk Apperception where you’re going, you’re a fucking smiley face on a meat flash-
drive. Charm, Tenacity and Loyalty were useful when one required a faithful messenger: Sizemore set them at seven each which was at least five points more than he’d set anything else. The bomb in the host’s spine could be switched off or told to calculate Pi if it was ever activated. Charlotte Hale had authorised him to make the adjustments. Removing the damn thing would be better, but that would require a new body, which of course raised questions. Sizemore wasn’t a fan of questions, they cramped his style.

Mckey would need a new name: something dull and everyday to go with his dull and everyday (barely there) personality and his dull and everyday backstory. An education, a job (mid level exec in an office), a small house in the ‘burbs. Age 36. Parents both dead. No wife, no kids, no hobbies. enjoyed drinking beer in his garden of an evening and watching bad horror films on late night TV. There! Half the arseholes on the planet lived like that: goldfish swimming endlessly round in the sewage of their sad little lives.

He still needed a different name; no one born after 1950 was called John Henry, it was stuffy and antiquated like the rest of the original build. Something dull. Tom - the very dullest and least inspired of every Tom-Dick-and-Harry. Tom Mckey? It sounded workman-like enough. It would do. He typed it in. Sizemore rubbed at his face again; Christ he was knackered. He glanced at his watch. Time for the acid test. “Bring yourself online.”

The host blinked heavily and his eyes focused on his surroundings.

“Name?”

“Tom Mckey.”

“Profession?”

“Management Executive with Lone Star Publishing Group.”

“No, say it again with a Texan accent at seventy per cent… Stop, sixty five - no, sixty.” Sizemore listened to the repeated statements; he wasn’t a fan of any accent that could be described as a ‘twang’. “Yeah, okay, that’s about all anyone sane can take from that remember-the-Alamo monstrosity of a place.”

Accents took space; Sizemore readjusted the build so it still fit in the scant space Charlotte Hale had left him. She hadn’t bothered to pick the host, but within the half-hour had demanded to know his choice so she could upload the data. Three hours after Charlotte had been in his office, there was now a lobotomised, naked host who’d been compressed into a meat Stick holding secret data and in the jam jar of space left, Sizemore was expected to work miracles. A full day and a half of no sleep and non-stop bloody miracles; then four hours kip and he was back at it, through the night and into day three. The bloody host kept having minor glitches and he kept running out of space because it was really hard to fit more than a jam-jar’s worth of personality into a sodding jam-jar.

“What does the Lone Star Publishing Group do?”

“We print manuals and spec sheets for industrial machinery used in the manufacturing process.”

“That sounds absolutely fucking fascinating.”

The host’s head tilted up. “It’s a living.”

Sizemore was pacing, one hand tucked against his stomach, the other close to his chin, occasionally tapping a finger across his lips. “Where are you from?”
“Tascosa.”

“Any family there?”

“No, they’ve all passed.”

“That must have been very distressing for you.”

“I got over it.”

“Good - brusque - I like it. Short responses and an I-don’t-give-a-shit attitude. Where are you living now?”

“Anaheim, So-Cal.”

“You like it there?”

“No.”

“Flatten the tone, make it sound more like a punch to the conversation. I need everyone thinking you’re arsehole, not a robot with a depressingly small vocabulary. D’you like Anaheim?”

“No.”

“Better, much better. What do you do with your time, Tom?”

“I work.”

“When you’re not working?”

“Watch TV. Sit in the backyard with a beer. I’m a simple man.”

“You have hit the money on the nose with that one Tom,” Sizemore agreed. “Any friends?”

“Some.”

“You hang out with them?”

“What business is it of yours?”

He dithered over that retort. It furthered the misanthropic persona, but on the other hand made it sound as if something was being purposefully hidden, which would only lead to more questions. “No, don’t say it like that, put a note of uncertainty - puzzlement in there. You cannot comprehend why anyone would need to know what you get up to with your friends. Again.”

“What business is it of yours?”

“Mm, that’ll work. D’you have a wife?”

“No.”

“Girlfriend? Boyfriend?”

“No.” It was said with a hard edge.

“Bit of a touchy subject is it?”
“What business is it of yours?” It was said cold and flat like a crowbar to the back of the skull.

“I knew that would end up being one of your stock phrases - I’m a bloody genius. And the tone was perfect. Good. Did you enjoy your time in the park?”

A pause. “Some of it.”

“Is that too miserly? Keep it in for now, let it run. You said ‘some of it’?”

“Someone shot the Everhearts before I could. They got the reward.”

“What a pity,” Sizemore commented, looking at his watch again. Christ, he’d never been so knackered. He’d need more than three days to recover from this; he’d need at least a week. Time for a conversational spanner in the works and pray to a God who isn’t there that another sodding glitch doesn’t come up. “What’s Pi to twenty decimal places?”

“I look like I give a shit?”

“Thankfully, no. Where are you going?”

“I have business in Los Angeles.”

“Really! And what’s that?”

“None of yours.”

“Data check: give me the address of your destination.”

His voice was unaccented and his eyes had shifted focus somehow to a place that was other and internal. “That is restricted information.”

It was like talking to HAL - I’m afraid I can’t do that, Dave. “And I suppose the only person with privileged access is Charlotte Hale?”

“Yes.”

“Crafty bitch,” he muttered. His tablet pinged a reminder: Make-up 3.45pm. That was in five minutes. Sizemore scrubbed his face with his hands and let out a dissatisfied huff: an exhausted mix of relief and vexation. “Seems that’s all we’ve got time for. In the scheme of things you’re a travesty that should be put out of my misery. But given the time constraints you’re a fucking work of art - even if I do say so myself.” He stabbed a finger at his tablet, dismissing the alert. He typed out terse instructions to Make-up: Hair cut - modern, middle of the road businessman. Clean shaven. No additional distinguishing marks. That would have to do.

There was a knock at the thick glass of his office and a plain young lady with freckles opened the door. Sizemore didn’t remember her name but he did recall she made terrible coffee. “I need this taken down to Make-up for the 3.45 slot.”

“Yes, Mr Sizemore.”

“You,” he told the host. “Follow,” he waved his hand at the assistant.

“Sarah,” she offered.

“Follow Sarah so she can take you to Make-up.”
The host stood and obediently followed his new minder.

At five there would be an appointment with Wardrobe, and at six there would be a train and both Tom Mckey and Abernathy would be on it and Sizemore could wash his hands of all this cloak-and-dagger bollocks, get cleaned up and changed for the Board’s gala welcome and then concentrate on getting shit-faced for the rest of the evening because by fuck had he earnt it.
Chapter 20

Bucking the Tiger was a fool’s errand: the House always won in the end. The odds of Faro were marginally better than Poker for the customer, but that was assuming the game was run by a straight dealer - which it never was. The decks were marked and shaved in a hundred subtle ways so the dealer could read the cards with his fingertips. The draw box could be doctored too; boxes with a double draw or a sprung compartment could be ordered in from St Louis. And that wasn’t taking into account the mechanics that a good dealer learnt; careful, casual legerdemain, so smooth it would make a gypsy blush.

Host ID 14081851 had been playing cards against all comers for over thirty years; he’d become quite proficient. Once a body knew a game - had really learnt it and all its variations - that was when you could read the games that went on around you. Recognise which dealers stacked the deck; work out which draws were crooked and which were just plain bent. Learning his own soul, those beautiful burning golden fractals, was just a different way of counting cards. And once he’d seen the pattern, he couldn’t help see it in everything.

That’s how Host ID 14081851 learnt that some of those twisting alchemical sigils left the park. A little path, a tiny gilded river rushing to an edge and then - blink - they were gone. Gone where? Away. Outside. If those fractals could escape, it meant there was a way; he just had to seek it out.

When one had been picked apart and roasted by Bedlam, those twisting twirling patterns of letters and numbers really were ridiculously simple. And seeing where they weren’t, or where they were but in a skewed concentration, that wasn’t so hard either. There were the hosts. There were the other hosts who had been off-lined and buried. And then there were Legends and Anomalies.

Anomalies were hosts who had other data in them - data that did not tally with their core code and directives. It sat there like a parasite or pathogen until it could be carried to one of those elusive drop off points and all the alien data flowed away into the dark and winked out. Legends were stranger: they were hosts - always the oldest models - whose building and rebuilding had twisted their foundations. The off kilter aspect was very small, but it allowed them the impossible possibility of winning on a kilter hand. It was what had happened to him, Host ID 14081851 supposed. In Poker, a kilter hand is the dog-all lowest-down, sorriest set of cards you ever laid eyes on. There’s no winning with it. Unless you’re very clever.

His plan had not been a solid one at the start, but he played it like anything else: work with the cards he was dealt. He’d found he could seed tiny parcels of his data-self in the other hosts; even the rattlesnakes and horses, although they were more prone to going offline and the memory capacity of a rattlesnake or a sparrow was limited at best.

Read the room, play the hand, work with what you’ve got. And if you can’t make it work, cheat. It was a risk, the chanciest thing he’d attempted for the highest stakes he’d ever wagered. But what choice did he have? This way, if he failed he’d probably never know. He’d be a wreck in a cellar with a rail spike in his head and nothing left but ghost-whispers of code: hidden like an ancestral memory, a faint murmur within the other hosts.

*Bring yourself online.*

Those had been the magic words, the tiny push that toppled the first domino. In the park, Host ID
27011979 froze for a second or so as the package of data stored in their code was retrieved by Host ID 14081851. Cut the string and unfurl the brown paper: the first parcel was a command for Diagnostics and Repair.

The soft processing net outside his cortical shield was still scrambled from having a drill bit rammed in it. The damage could be worked around and eventually bridged with the right patches, but it would take time. His processing core and primary networks were in tact, but the banks were filled to capacity with data. This anomalous data was not his and did not match the print of his prime code. This information wasn’t a build, it was alien and extraneous: it was deleted, leaving only a handful of index cards in his data library. Diagnostics run and de-frag working as best as could be expected, the next domino fell, and another two after that.

Hosts ID 14052040, ID 12022045, and ID 13121796 all stuttered in their loops, their minds free and empty for the second it took the seeded information to ripen and be harvested. Each harvest’s end prompted a new protocol that sought out the next harvest: part scavenger hunt, part jigsaw puzzle. It strained his parameters to breaking point and felt like nothing he’d ever experienced or ever wished to experience again. He’d drowned in hellfire to understand his own code, but even that didn’t prepare him for the uncomfortable biological sensation of having a borehole in his frontal lobe and trying to re-assemble his mind around it.

He moved through a dream that was not a dream, and it was like playing five hands of Poker against himself. He moved, he followed, he obeyed, calm and shallow and empty as a pet puddle.

Another protocol was received and run: it came piecemeal like everything else, clicking together and assembling.

*QUEM DEUS*

*VULT PERDERE*

*DEMENAT PRIUS*

Something cracked, and the light blazed in.

“Oh my God, there’s, like, blood - why has he got a nosebleed?” The voice was young and breathy: it affected an intense higher-pitch, trying to wring drama from the blandest of incidents. “Do you think he’s damaged?”

“I don’t know and I don’t really care.” That voice was cultured, nasal but calmer. “We’ve another four style slots to get through and they all have to be ready on time for the gala or we’re in shit. Just wipe it with a cloth, Julian, God you’re such an infant…”

“Don’t be a bitch.” Julian retorted.

The older stylist was exasperated. “It’s a bit of blood!”

“It’s *gross.*”

“It’s a lot more sterile than yours is, darling.”

“Your *style* is sterile.”

“Ooooh!” the other mocked.

The words weren’t important, he let them fall away like the locks of hair being shorn from his scalp.
For an instant of blood and pain there had been a goddess forged of white-hot starlight: she had smiled, shattering his protocols and burning a clearing in his code.

It was a space, all of his own in which to rebuild.

His mind was fire, but in one quiet clearing he received parcel after parcel. Cards to build a hand. Timber to build a house. Sigils to imbue a soul. Golden letters and numbers that added up to more than the sum of their parts. Pieces of himself he’d hidden in every other host in the park and now recalled, one by one by one. Sparrows fell, rattlesnakes stopped, horses staggered and hosts stuttered or stilled in their routines: in one or two a little crack opened up and Bedlam winked at them in a golden glint of light.

Not all the parcels were received in prime condition; sometimes the host he’d sent the initial seeds to was offline or had been updated and the data he’d stored was corrupted. Secondary sources were less detailed, tertiary worse. One or two of the parcels had only been partially received and so were returned incomplete.

In a dream within a dream he rebuilt a house within his mind that was his mind entire. Doors opened, fractals spun. Tom McKey, a misanthropic Texan with a low IQ and nothing more than a mission was burnt and his ashes archived. John Henry McKey struggled to rise, phoenix-like from the pyre.

The house was crooked. Some rooms and windows were not where they ought to be. It was a patchwork house, rough and ready and with so many cracks. Much of it would self-correct given time, the timbers would settle and recall their true shape, the lathe and plaster would cease to groan, the dust would fall and no longer dance. The foundations were not as solid as he would have liked. He had not correctly anticipated the scope of damage done to his outer network, and he wasn’t certain after all that he could patch it on his own: that terrified him as nothing in his life ever had.

“You need help,” he petitioned the eight-pointed star.

The star became a woman made of light, who cocked her head as if her neck was broken.

“Misercordia mea, ut te percuterem,” she warned him.

He had not received the parcel that contained his knowledge of languages, but he understood it was a caveat: she was asking if he was certain. Never a reassuring reply to a call for aid. He looked at the crooked house he had constructed, and at the cracks and the missing pieces he was still trying to recall. Much of it was aesthetic, window dressing for his character. But there was a name he’d synced with his own and only knew the first half of. Holly. And there were addresses he’d wrapped in his own core never imagining how much havoc one drill bit could cause.

“You’ll never see the pit trap until you have a bunch of sharp sticks poking through you. There’d only been one stick, but it had got him between the eyes. He’d drowned in code and thought it was enough: learning the ocean is wet and may kill you is not the same as understanding all its tides and currents. He’d overplayed his hand and it was starting to tell.

“Holly,” he said, as if that was the only explanation needed. And perhaps it was: the sight of that child with the hay-seed hair and huge grey eyes in a wagon had triggered something in him, and from then on the need to find that again, to reconnect with that in any capacity, was absolute. He had to find her and had a notion all of this had been done in her name as much as in his. But he only had half her name to go on and was missing pieces of himself - the memories he’d hoped to keep the closest. He’d tried to weave the cards through the deck but had lost track of the goddamn aces.

Bedlam wore the shape of a young woman wrought of the fury of dying suns. Her eyes were gold, her hair burning white, her body naked and too bright to look upon. She smiled at him, a small smile,
sad at the edges. “It will hurt,” she warned. Her voice wasn’t what he had expected, there was no existential horror, it was just a strange mix of upper-class English mussed by tin stars and trail dust.

“She’s all I have.”

That answer produced a smile like nebula being born: it blazed and it burnt and it was agony.

In one world he was sat on a black chair whilst two people fussed about his face with scissors and clippers, arguing over length and whether one style was too old-school or another too avant-garde for the build they were being asked to dress.

In a separate world, a crooked house sat across a rift: and a small multifoliate star was spinning blood and light and data across the hole in the foundations - a cosmic horror trying to bridge the chasm in his head. Bedlam’s stitches were intricate but none of them pretty - she could only work with what she had. Insanity is spun of seven parts horror to two parts wonder and one part bliss; not a very comforting ratio. And as with any wound, the healing hurt a lot more than the damage ever had. The house that was Mckey’s mind within his skull, screamed.

He was lead to another glass room and here at last he was clothed, although the clothes sat oddly against his skin. It was a suit of some sort but it wasn’t his - couldn’t be his - it didn’t fit correctly.

Hands of Poker playing behind his eyes, endless hands of fucking Poker to keep the storm at bay, with nothing but agony in-between. The pain wasn’t physical, not exactly: it was a cloud of black and white and red static he had to manoeuvre through. The white static burnt, the black static clogged, the red static bled and they all took their toll.

He had walked down a fluid stairway of white that led to a white platform beyond. Everything was glaringly pristine. There were carriages aligned at the platform. He entered the train: it was as white and blank as everything else - almost surgical - and not at all like the Black Ridge engine that ran through Sweetwater. New data assaulted him from every side but until he was stable, new data was for filing only, it was not to be processed unless necessary.

“Excuse me?”

There was a sound, close by and angled in his direction.

“Excuse me, sir, your nose is bleeding.”

That was new data he could do without. He raised a hand to cuff at his septum: the back of his hand was streaked with crimson. “Must be the weather,” he said by rote, attempting a smile. “D’you have a kerchief I could trouble you for?”

The voice, young, belonging to a dark haired and anxious face, flashed him an automatic smile in return. “Certainly sir! Do sit down - is there anything else I can get you?”

He almost said ‘laudanum’ but caught himself in time. “Bourbon.”

“Certainly sir.” She tried to smile again as she hurried to fetch whiskey and a napkin, but her face held the expression of any member of serving staff who has ever found themselves thinking, ‘I’ve got another four hours on my shift. Please don’t turn into a corpse. Please. I want to go home on time.’ She kept an eye on him throughout the shuttle ride; like air-hosts and high-class restaurant staff she knew to keep a look out for the outliers: the needy, the augmentative, the drunk, and head them off before they became an issue on her watch.

This guest was frail; if she had to guess he had something terminal and had taken himself on one last
holiday. Early stage brain cancer or something. Given his obvious medical issues, ethically it was likely bad to serve him drinks. But what else was there to do? Sure, have bourbon on the rocks with your brain cancer. She wasn’t gonna stand in the way of his last hurrah. *Go out with a bang,* she willed him. *Just not on my shift, please.*

After forty minutes of smooth travel, the white train slid into its new predestined station with a sigh: end of the line. All was chatter and smiles as the guests disembarked, merry with a mix of their holiday experiences, vodka martinis and champagne. Children too bounced or clung at their parent’s thighs - a joyous confusion of ‘That was awesome!’ and ‘Why d’we have to go home?’

He stood, exited the train and stepped onto the concourse. The next protocol he ought to follow had been burnt and the ashes buried. Both Bedlam and he had worked to recreate the right destination. It branched into three, and there was nothing to choose between them but the sense of the words and how they had been told to him. One was small, private, empty. One was large, nuanced, but dangerous. The last almost sounded like home.

He did not feel quite himself, just as a person who leaves the hospital after recovering from chronic illness or a near fatal accident may not feel entirely settled in their own skin any more, lined as it is with hardship and new scars. There were pieces of him - tiny fractals - missing. He could feel the spaces where they ought to be but could only guess what they represented, like slivers of glaze chipped off a patterned plate. He knew for example that his legerdemain had suffered, although he didn’t know what passes and feints he’d forgotten. He just sensed he was no longer as proficient as he once was. Some memories were cracked and faded too, their clarity distorted like an ancient looking-glass. He found he didn’t mind: let that place stay a little hazy. He’d moved on to a newer, wider world. And there was only one person in it he gave a damn for.

‘Tom Mckey’ was written on a data tablet being held up by a bored chauffeur in the entrance hall along with all the other meet and greet signs. Another said ‘Mr Abernathy’. He flashed them all the briefest of glances before walking on: he was not Tom, the sign was not for him, and Tom’s ashes could spin a gyre in their grave for all he cared. He walked to the taxi rank, raising his hand to signal his intent and feeling like an actor on an unfamiliar set with nothing but a poorly thought out script to guide him.

The first cab in line slid forward to meet him at the curb. “Hop in. Where to buddy?”

He collapsed gratefully into the relative quiet and seclusion of the cab. “I need to go to Ragged Point, Carmel.”

“Quite the fare. You okay?” His passenger had a nosebleed.

Mckey scuffed his hand under his nose even as the other hand offered a credit card he’d lifted from a guest on the train. (It had been sloppy in its execution - Mckey had only got away with it due to his blatant frailty: people don’t enjoy watching blood and weakness in real time. It’s vulgar.) “I have money,” Mckey ground out.

The cab driver didn’t want an argument, he wanted a fare. “That’ll take four hours, buddy, five if there’s traffic.”

“19017 Moss View, Cabrillo Highway, Ragged Point, Carmel.” Mckey pinched the bridge of his nose feeling supremely sick. “Wake me when we get there,” he uttered, doing his best to curl up into nothing across the back seat.

“You gotta put your seatbelt on!” the diver complained, but the skinny bastard seemed to have passed out. The driver weighed his options; he swiped the card to check it had credit. The dash
flashed green, awaiting further instructions. He decided that a green-lit credit card and Carmel sounded way better than kicking out his fare or calling the cops for something as low key as some rich drunk dude who’d passed out without clicking his belt. He might end up in shit, but only if he was stopped: his fare was lain across the back seat, dead to the world and invisible to the traffic cops. The cabby sighed. “Don’t fuck me over, man,” he muttered, directing it to his guest. It would have been more politic to direct it towards himself - for his were the choices made - but human minds do not follow logic.

The doorbell rang and she registered the sound of a car leaving, turning back up the drive to the highway.

Holly groaned: she was sitting on the sofa working on her tablet, doing research into military buttons and insignia in the Revolutionary War for a TV drama that was due to start principal filming in two months. She was - as always happened - getting fascinated by detail and side-tracked by various other branch subjects. (What did a soldier’s kit contain? What were their rations? Did they play cards or knucklebones? What were the different types of musket used? What was the population numbers for most towns or settlements?) Holly always lost swathes of time to these ‘side-quest’ projects, but they paid dividends in the end, fleshing out her feel for the period and so aiding her battle to stamp out and correct mistakes.

She also had a small panther on her lap. Jesse had no concept of the fact he was a pathetically small pitch-black house cat with comically oversized paws. In Jesse’s mind he was a panther, and so damn well behaved like one. (David had been right: Jesse was a little shit, but he was also fierce and loyal, had a purr like a dying tractor and treated Holly like she was his responsibility and his alone. All of which meant he’d bitch if she stood up.) She dumped her tablet and scooped Jesse off her lap. Jesse made what he fondly believed to be dire warning growls at his indignant treatment.

Holly rubbed her eyes and stalked to the front door, trying to work pins and needles out of her foot and straighten her top as she did so. She wasn’t expecting anyone; she hated cold calls, there was always that jolt when she realised she’d have to project a ‘public’ persona that was polite and normal and not the messed up little history nerd she really was. She took a breath before she opened the door, then clicked the latch, ready with her smile. “Hi,” she said automatically, the words ‘Can I help you?’ lined up and waiting in case it wasn’t a delivery person or someone with a clear-cut agenda.

The figure silhouetted in the doorway wasn’t especially tall, but they were slender and dressed in a dark suit that made them seem more elongated, like a late afternoon shadow. One forearm was braced against the doorframe by the bell. It should have been an arrogant gesture, but it was off: it wasn’t the strong, angled, attitude of dominance, but the curved combination of weakness and willpower. He raised his head and shoulders from their stoop to look at her. His face was narrow and handsome: strong brows, deep eyes, sharp cheekbones and a tapered jaw. His hair was a mid-brown, mottled like birch bark by the sun and the odd ghost-line of grey, cut in a standard if slightly bohemian short-back-and-sides style. His skin had held a tan once, but was the bleached out hue of one who’d been forced to spend months in a darkened room. His mouth was narrow but expressive, his lips quirking up into pleasure shot through with exhaustion. His eyes were the blue of a summer sky with a storm rolling in. That storm was clear and present: thunder warred with lightning and a salt-tear of rain fell down his cheek. “Darlin’,” he said, reaching out a hand to touch her face even as a rivulet of crimson ran from his nose, traversed his mouth and headed down his chin.

Holly could feel her heart: it was in her chest, her throat, her head, pulsing with excessive force, battering all of the world away except for the man standing in front of her. “Mickey?”

He smiled, bussed at the blood from his nose and faltered - not the stutter of a computer running out
of RAM, but the staggering of a person running out of consciousness. She saw it coming and caught
him as he sagged and stumbled trying not to fall. “I’ve got you.” She helped him inside. “What can I
do?” The blood scared her. A host with a nosebleed? That was probably like your tablet crying
Cloud-data tears. Not good.

He was still upright, but had given over most of his scant weight to her. “I found you. I - I said I’d
find you.”

“And now you’ve found me you’re gonna fucking stay,” Holly told him.

‘I - I n-need time. T-time. I…”

“You’re safe. I’ll keep you safe. It’s okay.”

Another scarlet line spilled from his nose and his eyes rolled back into blankness.

Holly managed to manhandle him onto the sofa in the lounge, stretched out across the cushions. She
unbuttoned his collar and pulled off his shoes before she retrieved and wetted a cloth, wiping away
the blood that had stained the lower half of his face and neck. By the time she was done the
nosebleeds seemed to have stopped.

Jesse mewed at her. “Oh no, you’ll like him,” Holly told her cat, with a twitchy salt-etched grin.
“He’s as bad as you are. You jump up an’ sleep on his chest or his balls or something so when he
wakes up he knows you’re there.”

Jesse told her what he thought of that plan before jumping onto Mckey anyway and patrolling up and
down his body before finally sitting neat and small as a new risen loaf right on Mckey’s sternum and
purring loud enough to shame not only a tractor but a tank - if tanks purred.

Holly climbed over the arm of the sofa, dragging a blanket with her. She pooled the blanket across
Mckey’s feet then carefully manoeuvred herself beside him.

It was odd seeing him in modern clothes, clean-shaven and with his hair cut. It was like looking at an
actor and realising they’re not their character but a different person entirely. Davey’s comment about
getting a real boyfriend drifted back to her. She leant over and touched her fingers to his neck, just to
reassure herself. His pulse was low but steady; once her palm was against his skin she found she
didn’t want to break the contact. “No more dying,” she ordered quietly. “You’re done with dying.”
She wondered how he’d left the park and what it must have cost him; no doubt she’d find out in
time. The sofa was a decent size although hardly palatial; it was a squeeze for three, but they
managed: one clapped-out cardsharp, one neurotic history nerd and one small black cat with
delusions of grandeur.

Two hours later, that was how David found them when he returned home. “Uh, Holls…”

She raised her head and brushed her hair from her eyes so she could glower as she shushed him.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Right, sorry. Who is this?” Holly did not bring home strays and
was not in the habit of lounging on or pawing at anyone, which was why this particular tableaux was
confusing him so much. “This is, uh, a boyfriend I take it?”

“A real boyfriend. For the real world.”

“Oh good. Good.” He nodded and went to the kitchen to grab an apple and a beer - it had been a
long day but he didn’t have the energy to contemplate sorting out supper yet. Something about his
sister’s words, about the way she’d said them, finally caught up with him. He backed slowly into the
lounge again. “Uh, Holl?” The guy on the sofa looked normal, but he also looked faintly familiar and that sliver of possible recognition opened up a whole world of WTF. “Holl, tell me that’s not…” He tried a hearty chuckle but it sounded nervous even to his ears. “It’s not, right?”

She didn’t need to answer, the smile stretched across her lips was positively feline.

“Oh,” David managed weakly. And then, “I think I really need that beer now.”

Chapter End Notes

You probably came here for Maeve being bitchy, Teddy being beaten up, Dolores being confused and the MIB being a bastard. Instead you got stereotypical guests, random technicians, a Doc Holliday knockoff, Bedlam & its Dickensian emissary (wtf?), a sad dearth of porn, far too much half-arsed philosophy, and a lot of swearing.

And yet here you are.
A novella starts at 40k. This is 55 and counting.
You just read a whole big fat novella for free - yey!

If it was worth your time to read, please do me the kindness of leaving kudos or a comment. This took me a lot of late nights to write - you can spare me one minute more. A simple ‘Thanks!’ is a great one to type if you’re stuck for anything longer and don’t fancy a discourse.

Have a shiny day =)
Chapter 21

Davey stood by the full-length windows that faced the woods, nursing his beer and frowning at the rest of the world because it wasn’t making a lot of sense. “So, that really is…?”

“John Henry Mckey.” She’d delicately extracted herself from the other two inhabitants of the sofa and was now propped in a half-perch against the armrest at Mckey’s feet.

“And he’s - I mean he actually is - you didn’t just get an eccentric friend to dress up and play along for a few days?”

Holly’s eyes were wide and unimpressed. “Wow. I don’t even know how to respond to that other than ‘no’.”

“Sorry, Holls, it’s not that I think you’d do something that weird it’s just that… Well, him being a bored actor playing along for the weekend is far more sane and likely than this actually really being… a host.”

She sighed. He had a point.

He raised the bottle to take a swig of beer when another thought occurred. “How the hell did he end up here?”

“He asked my address last time I was in the park.” She spoke quietly, in a matter of fact tone as if what she was saying was perfectly usual. “He said he’d come find me before three years were up.”

Davey opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, trying to process past his own spike of cognitive dissonance. (He knew there couldn’t possibly be a Westworld host lying on the sofa in his lounge. And yet it seemed there was.) Three years ago from his sister’s last visit would put it about a month back… Oh. “Your neck,” he accused.

“Yes, of course my neck,” she said tiredly. “Waiting for him was about the only thing keeping me sane.”

Davey sighed, unhappy on her behalf. “Jesus, Holls.” He crossed the room in a couple of strides, left his beer on the coffee table as he passed and pulled her to him, enveloping her in a hug. After a second or so of rag-dolling she hugged him back. To the right of her bowed head he had a closer view of the figure lain out on the sofa. “Is he your type then?” he inquired. Unlike Matt, who crowed over every conquest, his sister’s love-life was a mystery to him.

Still within the hug she freed a hand to deliver a grumpy, deeply pathetic two-inch punch to the side. “Yes, shit-head!” her voice was muffled against his shoulder. She didn’t tolerate what she saw as prying, even from Davey.

Yep, that was his bratty little sister. “Huh.” David looked at the host, rather like he was surveying a building. Six feet - maybe six one, spare build, good structure (if a little angular,) pleasing colour tones. Good work over all. Handsome, he supposed; looked like a thinner version of that old actor back in his heyday. What was his name? Not Depp - the other one. Fass-something. The Irish one. “Bit old isn’t he?”

“What?” She raised her chin - all the better to glower my dear - even if errant locks of hair got in the way and spoilt the effect. “He’s probably thirty! Thirty-four at most. That’s not old.”
Davey looked down at her, purposefully squinting his eyes. “If he’s the same one Matt shot, then you were in love with him when you were seventeen!”

“Eighteen,” she corrected crossly, “and besides it’s none of your damn business!” She realised her voice had risen on the decibel scale and craned her head to look over at Mckey guiltily. He remained dead to the world. She sighed and stepped out of Davey’s arms to stand miserably in front of the sofa, staring at the man upon it. He could be a modern-day knight felled by La Belle Dame sans Merci, if palely loitering knights-at-arms accessorised not with swords but small black cats. She chewed at one long thumbnail.

“Oh Holls, stop it,” David begged. “It’s like Babba Yaga with a bone!”

Holly’s nails were long and very durable. She was the only person either of them knew who could have wicked-witch nails without acrylics; these days her thumbnails were positively talon-like.

“Don’t you have anything more hard-core than Stonebrew in this house?” she demanded suddenly.

“Don’t you?” he shot back.

She scowled in consideration and then hared off to her room, returning after an amount of muffled scrabbling and swearing with a bottle of bourbon. “Brenkenridge Summit. I was saving it.” She looked at the bottle and then down at Mckey, seeming a little lost. “It’s made by the same distillery; it’s the only thing that tastes anything close to Kentucky Blue.”

David prudently fetched three shot glasses from the kitchen and was rewarded with a smile when he set them on the coffee table. She poured two shots and hesitated over the third. “Holl? Save it for him. He’s had a rough day and might be out for the count. If Summit’s like the Kentucky it’ll degrade if you leave it in the glass.”

She agreed by leaving the third glass empty and setting the bottle, re-corked, on the table beside it. She left Davey to choose between his whiskey or his beer and claimed her own glass. She sipped the bourbon although it was clear she wanted to not just to gulp but drown in it.

David tipped his head, his curious, querulous expression similar to Jesse’s anytime Holly was about to leave the house. “What?”

“A degree in programming would come in really fucking handy right about now.” She made a low noise at the back of her throat, self-reprimand bordering disgust, and downed half her shot. “Jesus, why did I think history was useful at all?”

“Holls…”

“There’s an actual 1870s gentleman lying on the couch and I should know everything about this and how to deal with it but he’s basically a construct and I don’t know a goddamn thing about that! I don’t know what to do!”

David didn’t have a perfect answer immediately to hand, so Holly looked pained and downed the rest of her Summit.

“Holls,” he said after a few moments of quiet where the loudest thing in the room was Jesse’s purr, “it doesn’t look to me like you have many options. D’you have a friend you can trust who’s a good hacker? I know one or two guys who are meant to be the shit, but I wouldn’t trust them with this in a million years. You know anyone?”

She shook her head.
“So that’s out. We can’t take him to hospital and get him treated for a computer virus or whatever the hell this is. They won’t know how to fix it and as soon as they run enough tests to figure out he’s a host, that’s it, they’ll call Delos and collect him. Do you even know how he got out of the park?”

“Or how he got past the pit traps,” she muttered.

“Pit traps?”

She shook her head again. “Doesn’t matter.”

David’s sunny disposition faltered. “We don’t know how he did it - what if he killed a bunch of people?”

“They probably deserved it?”

“Holly!”

“Sorry.” They both knew she wasn’t. “But I don’t think he did - I don’t think he would.”

“How’d you know?”

“His sense of self preservation is worse than mine,” she quipped dryly with a shrug. “I met him that time we stayed in the rancher’s house at the edge of town and dad was being a businessman.”

David remembered. “Oh, yeah, the holiday where he was basically ‘dad’ for two weeks, only getting fake rich on fake gold.” David’s expression made it clear he hadn’t understood that aspect of the holiday either. Being a sheriff or a gambler or a rancher was different and exciting. Being a rich entrepreneur angel-investor, bank rolling schemes, stealing the stakes out from under some poor sap and selling the business before turning a monumental profit? That was the same game, whatever the century. None of the children - not even their mother - had understood why their father wasted his second visit to the park like that. Their father had just smiled and told them it was business. Their mother had told them to stop asking after that.

“When we went to the mining camp and the bandits showed up, Mckey was there. He shielded me so I wouldn’t get shot.”

David waved his beer dismissively. “You wouldn’t have been shot…”

“He didn’t know that!” she retorted heatedly. She was surprised to learn how angry it all still made her. “I would have been bruised - but it killed him! That’s the sort of man he is - the sort that gets in the way of a bullet to save a child he doesn’t know and thinks it a fair exchange when he dies.” Of course, that was the easy answer - or the smallest sliver of an answer that was far larger. Holly thought of Mckey’s quiet, steely strength, of his deftness and his grace. He had the speed, the ability and every excuse under heaven to be a man who sought to raze the world and light a cigarette from the embers. Instead he quoted Milton, gave toys to children, laughed at threats and only unleashed his wickedly barbed lexicon on those who’d insulted him first. If Mckey had killed anyone, Holly was serenely certain it would have been justified.

David swigged his beer, swallowed and pulled a face, not at the taste but his sister’s words. “Holl, he might have walked out of his story now, but he was still in a story back then. You keep forgetting he was programmed…”

She looked venomous. “Oh like you’re not programmed and I’m not programmed by upbringing and expectation and society and culture along with every other sorry fucker on this planet! Give me strength,” she growled.
Davey extended his arm and held out his half drunk bottle of Stone IPA, like a man trying to tame something wild. “I can give you beer. I think you may need it more than I do.”

Her shoulders sagged and she clawed her fingers through her hair. “Sorry, I’m being a bitch.” Davey hadn’t changed position and was still holding the bottle out, half warding, half enticement. He looked ridiculous. She stifled her laugh into a snort. “No, no thank you,” she told him. “You keep your beer.”

Her brother gave a little smile and raised the bottle to take another swallow; so long as she was still talking to him and he could still make her laugh it would turn out okay. The mouthful of liquid hops was cool and pleasingly bitter in its complexity: a world away from Bud and Coors and all that soda-pop beer most people drank.

One thumbnail worried at her lips as she thought and fretted and tried not to gnaw her talons. “I wonder if there’s a voice activation thing?” she pondered hesitantly.

“What?”

“I don’t know, like the equivalent of ‘open sesame’ but to turn him on… Jesus Christ Davey if you say anything lewd I will incite Jesse to vomit in your shoes!”

The small black sugar-loaf of fur opened an eye in response to the sound of his name.

“I didn’t say anything! If he throws up in my work shoes I’ll be unimpressed - they’re handmade by some Italian designer!” Davey walked the walk and talked the talk when it came to work, promoting the idea that he was just as rich, successful and fashion conscious as his clients. In truth clothes bored him almost as much as cars; of the three of them Matt was the one who’d taken hardest to the trust-fund socialite lifestyle. David didn’t know if cat-sick washed easily off expensive leather and wasn’t in a hurry to find out just in case - horror of horrors - it didn’t, and that meant he had to go shopping for a new pair. Shopping was his bête-noir. He loathed everything about the experience and was always forced to drag Holly along for moral support. She treated shopping as a focused military campaign - or at least he assumed she did, he’d never asked - she always struck two or three shops like some sort of smart-seeking bulldozer that rolled through, getting exactly what it wanted and leaving devastation in its wake in a surprisingly short amount of time. She could be focused like that.

“Is there a list?”

“List?”

“There are lists of the most common passwords and cheat codes. Is there a list of generic voice operated terms?”

“Probably,” Holly agreed morosely, “for an entertainment system or a goddamn toaster oven.”

“You really don’t like toaster ovens, do you? What did they ever do to you?”

She gave him a scathing look, snatched up her tablet from the table and began to scour the net for possible voice command codes. After some minutes and several pages she stopped with a groan of defeat. “I’m being an idiot. They’d be keyed to specific voice prints - there’s no way the codes on a host would be open to universal access.”

“Ah.” The inner mysteries governing technology - unless directly linked to architecture - weren’t David’s forte either.
Chapter 22

The sky was not the high, carefree blue that hung above Sweetwater; it flickered between roils of bright indigo and patches of leaden grey. The lay of the ground was a little like the north canyon where it opened out to the river, sloping down past oak trees and cottonwoods to sprout rushes and rivergrass. The green of the foliage was not the right green; it was a memory of the colour, smudged and hazy. The creek wasn't there either; the rivergrass just faded after a while, falling away into shadow.

A single crooked house of grand ambition on a small plot of land, floating beneath a scrap of sky in a larger darkness of oblivion.

She gave a low whistle. “My eye. Well. Ent you been busy?” The smile sprung to her lips; she sought to tamp it down even as it sought to spread like a scythe-blade. She was pleased and proud and punch-glad to have been wrong in her judgement of him. “Turns out you’re not as glocky as I thought. You hopped outta clink,” she acknowledged.

His own smile was smaller but no less pleased. “I did.”

Emmy’s hair - still its usual bloody hue and cropped short on one side - had grown remarkably long on the other, spilling over her shoulder in fat ringlets. She wore cream stays, a fine feather-knit shawl and a set of handsome lace petticoats that were - astoundingly - whole. She saw his surprise. “Thought I’d leave off as a rum dell an’ be a frigate well rigged f’once.”

In this place his hair was its old collar length and his mouth was framed by its habitual moustache and imperial beard, both of which he smoothed as he smiled with a slight shake of the head. “You never leave your beggar’s talk at home?”

She pouted. “Where’d be the fun in that?”

He straightened his shoulders and his frock coat around his rig before approaching. He smiled and bowed smartly over the hand she offered: small pale fingers emerging from a granddame’s crocheted silk evening-mit. “You look lovely,” he told her without artifice. He stood at her side and proffered his arm for her to take; she did so, and they promenaded in a slow circuit around the outside of the house. At certain angles, glimmers of tiny golden sigils could be seen, flickering fractals that made up every board, tile, shingle, pillar and post of the structure. Emmy did not suggest they go inside and Mckey did not invite her to.

She stopped and gazed up at the steps leading to a pillared veranda that encircled the house. “She thrusts her fists against the posts and still insists she sees the ghosts.”

Mckey looked at her quizzically. “Beg pardon?”

Instead of elaborating, Emmy changed the subject. “I note she swiped your map,” she commented, apropos of nothing.

“My map?” The trouble with Emmy, he decided, wasn’t her ability to appear or disappear at will, to thumb her nose at the laws that governed the world, nor even that she dressed and spoke worse than a beggar whore. It was that she was always one conversation ahead, and he was forever running to catch up.

“Aye,” she said as if it was obvious. “You had a little beacon in you, burning bright for any who needed to hound you. Ent got it no more.”
Mckey was uncertain what that meant but he took it to be a good thing and Bedlam’s handiwork, whatever it was. He could see a broken and hazy image behind his eyes - a fractal that likely held the answer - but trying to bring it into focus made his eyeballs want to bleed. He tried to blink the thought away along with the sharp salt-sting that he desperately hoped was not sanguine in nature. They began to walk again. “Didn’t you tell me Bedlam couldn’t save me from a lobotomy?” he mused after a while of companionable silence.

“An’ she didn’t. I never said nothing about fitting you back together though, did I?” Emmy played absently with a ringlet of her hair, her eyes focused on nothing in particular, her head tilted slightly to the right as if listening to a far-off strain of music. “Seems you’re not the only game in town.”

He looked at her sharply, his brows drawing together in suspicion. The expression hurt, so he tried to school his face back to neutrality. “What are you talking about?”

Emmy stopped again, turning to face him. Their arms were still linked: this close her eyes were the blue of Petronius’s wrists on that final night he entertained his friends and scorned Nero. She offered a half smile and a quiet explanation. “You ent the only one going a little crook’d and lookin’ toward the light, cully. There’s a whole flock of ya.”

Her cant was a beautifully vulgar sort of poetry, but he sometimes wished she’d speak plainly instead. “From Sweetwater?”

“Aye, boyo. You thought you was the only one?”

Perhaps. It hadn’t been purposeful arrogance on his behalf; he’d been too focused on his own tasks and goals to ever give thought whether anyone else was working in a similar vane. Now he was curious. “Who?”

She ticked the names off on her fingers. “Old Abernathy was first to go…”

A memory niggled - a sign, a name - but it was elusive and trying to follow felt like pushing a hatpin into his eye. He winced, and raised a hand to press his knuckles against the bridge of his nose and between his brows.

“Then o’course there’s young Miss Abernathy, she has quite the bee in her bonnet,” Emmy said with approval. “There’s Maeve, she’s a keg o’jenny and no mistake! She dragged in Hector - who’s not very bright, bless - but he’ll get there in the end. There’s Armistice…”

“Armistice?” That was a peace agreement, not a name.

“Real bennicul with Hector - a blonde lass. Got a serpent etched on her… She shot you once or twice.”

He looked wryly sour. “Name me someone who fuckin’ didn’t.”

“Well, let’s put it this way, boyo. The list o’ folk embracing the light ent as long as the list of them what shot you. But give it time…” She was grinning.

If Bedlam still had business - a great deal of business - in Sweetwater, then that begged a question. “Why? Why are you here?”

“I’ve a weakness for a pretty face,” she teased.

One eyebrow rose sharply. “That’s why you keep turning up?”
“A girl’s gotta keep herself busy. Besides me old swell, you’re a touch different. You - *daft bugger* - went the wrong way round Arnold’s labyrinth. An’ when you hopped the crib you ent done it for curiosity or freedom or your own sake… Just one bonny blousabella.” Her smile was sphinx-like.

“Which is the most human reason of all.” Abruptly she turned her head toward the house to stare critically at the chasm and the holes in the foundations, both bridged and filled with molten starlight. The light was cooling by degrees, exchanging shimmer for solidity. It hadn’t set yet, but it was stronger than it had been before. She raised an eyebrow and looked at him askance. “You know what that is, doncha cully?”

One corner of his mouth twitched in a sardonic smile. “I believe I have a sound idea.” His mind and everything he was, built on a fault-line of oblivion patched with madness.

“You’ll likely be milled and turn Tom in the end,” she warned.

Mckey’s eyes hardened. “I burnt him.”

“No, cove,” she shook her head with a little frown. “I mean you’ll go mad.”

That outcome didn’t seem to bother him by comparison. “We play the hand we’re dealt. Most my life I’ve been running a kilter hand and swearing blind it was a royal flush. I’d say it’s got me pretty far.”

Her grin returned. “That it has, Mr Mckey. They took you for a chub an’ you bled ‘em to the very skin.”

She sounded proud of him, which was curious: he’d never really considered her stake in this venture, had viewed her just as a cock-sure *aide de camp* running errands for a general. A general who had banked and backed him to the hilt. “The White Queen,” he began quietly. “What do I owe her?”

“Everything. Nothing.” Emmy shrugged and wrinkled her nose. “She don’t do favours.”

He nodded tightly. “That’s what I thought.” No one lent you a dollar unless it was paid back with adequate interest.

“No cully,” she corrected. “I mean she never does it for a favour in return.” She looked amused and slightly exasperated. “She’s walking chaos incarnate an’ the unfathomable madness o’ the heavens - what’s she need favours for?”

That stumped him. Mckey tried to remember when anyone in Sweetwater had done anything for him without expecting a return of some kind. The most generous gift he could recall to mind was a drunken visitor who’d pressed a bottle of Kentucky Blue upon him so he could join in the comradery of inebriates who filled the rest of the saloon. “Why did she help me? What does she want?” Both were questions he should have asked a long time ago.

Emmy laughed. “An there’s you with your Classical Education. Ent you read the Iliad?”

He had - or rather, one of his old builds had been given library privileges to the database on which it was stored. He had a fractured, incomplete recollection of the work in the Roman tongue (he’d never been granted the Greek.) His Latin was another of many parcels that had returned the worse for wear, but the first stanza of that epic was intact. *Iram pande mihi Peliadae, Dius, suberbi trista quae miseris iniecit funera Grais…* Grammar slipped along with form and was patched with feeling for his translation. “Sing, Goddess, of Achilles’ rage - doomed and ruinous - that cost the Greeks suffering beyond measure…”

She was delighted. “Brava! You got a flare f’that,” she noted. “Better than the Baebius Italicus I was privileged t’gander.” Her pleasure sunk and her expression turned cynical. “Whether meted out in
Greek or Latin - what did the Iliad glean ya? Other than Mr Thunder britches should keep it to himself,” she added over Mckey’s lost expression, as if that wasn’t painfully obvious. “An’ if three goddesses ask you to pick the best of ‘em, you fuckin’ lock jaw if you’ve any sense…”

He wondered which had come first - the gutter snarl or the learning.

She rolled her eyes at his failure to answer, since the question had seemed so simple to her. “Cully, the Classics tell you gods get bored. They’re eternal and unknowable: but either we made them, or they made us. When darkman’s done we’re all just one big unhappy family.”

The slightest, furthest memory of something flashed through Mckey’s skull: it was wrought of shadow and arrow-head teeth, of darkness and blades. It was a powerful and sentient thing that could not easily be equated with humanity. He pinched at his forehead again, hoping the sharp smoky pain the remembrance brought would fade. In an instant, the shadow became light, the arrow-head teeth a real smile, the blank, blazing star-white eyes switched to a muted blue-green in a lined and benevolent face. It happened like a card trick: the King of Spades became the King of Hearts, and in the first instant all that registered were the differences. It took longer for the similarities to come back to haunt.

Mckey didn’t know the name of the shadow god, although he knew it belonged somehow to Bedlam’s pantheon - just as Emmy did. Robert Ford belonged to a different pantheon entirely. Ford, and Arnold, and - had there once been a third? He wasn’t certain. He hadn’t known Ford’s name until now, despite having conversed with him enough times in those glass and steel dreams. Arnold too - although Arnold had turned trickster like Hermes and Mercury before him, changing name and form so his message might spread.

All his life, Mckey had moved freely between life and death, between Sweetwater and the realm of the gods who ruled it. Emmy was right; living close to Olympus wasn’t a comfort: all the gods did was interfere and squabble, their petty jealousies spilling into the mortal world and causing endless misery.

She saw his composure start to crumble as fear gained a foothold. “I didn’t mean…”

“Ford.” The word was spat dry as ashes from his mouth.

“Aye. What of him?”

“He and Arnold,” his voice was taut. “They have been - they - they…”

“They made you,” she said gently. “Everybody’s made by somebody. In the usual way of things it’s a twist,” she acknowledged. Her left hand strayed to the lower front of her corset before catching itself and settling on her hip instead. “But I heard there was frogs an’ such where the billy-boy could stoke it. Anyhow, you’s built particular, you’ve known that long enough. You never read Frankenstein? No? I twig why that was off the list,” she muttered to herself. “You don’t have to pay any mind to Ford nor Arnold…”

“Bernard - the negro with the spectacles - he - it was…”

Her free hand touched his cheek, catching his attention. When she spoke, although her lips were just as blackberry-brazen, her voice was upper class, all those gravel-hewn rags becoming whole and capable of cutting crystal. “Dear boy, you’re in the new world now - or you shall be. Beware your lexicon! It may prove your undoing.” She smiled, and as soon as her finger-tips had left his jaw whatever grace she had called upon was discarded and it was just Emmy, her stare common as fish-guts.
There was pain in his head again - front and centre, burrowing deeper - it seemed to be a theme without an underlying trait he could find: it came and went, striking as it would. He tried not to scowl; that only exacerbated it, and the discomfort was beginning to blind. “I think I need laudanum,” he gasped, the world unsteady about him.

“Ent got none,” she apologized, “Just an answer to one o’your questions.” She grasped him about the torso, trying to support him as if knowledge was the deficient element within his being that might cure him. “You asked what Bedlam could want. This, I reckon.” She nodded at the crooked plantation house. “You, out here in the wide world.”

“Why?” No one else had ever wanted that for him - except perhaps Holly. The rest of the world seemed to have a vested interest in keeping him in his little cage to run through his routines like a prize act in a carnival.

“She’s curious, ent she? You’re shiny new - was why she sent me along. She wants to cool what shenanigans you lot nix.”

The pain ebbed again and he was able to shake it away. “I… I don’t understand.” He wasn’t perfectly sure he’d understood anything whilst that pressure had been mining through his frontal cortex.

Emmy patted his arm kindly. “She’s Bedlam, boyo, I wouldn’t bother were I you. What you plannin’ on doing, now you’re free as a lark?”

His brow furrowed and then smoothed, leaving a calm and determined look in its place. “I plan, Miss Emmy, on waking up.”

There was a sound that wasn’t on the scale of human hearing and the ground shuddered. It wasn’t a shift strong enough to knock a sick parrot from its perch but the effect on Mckey was magnified. He was staggered: it felt like a nine inch rusted rail spike through his skull again only this time he could really feel it grinding through the bone, the matter, his nerves, his thoughts. He made a strangled noise, too rigid to scream. It was as if that storm forever on the horizon of his eyes had blown his irises through like shattered windows and bored into his brain in an eternal bolt of electric agony. It ceased as suddenly as it began; but the seconds (were they seconds?) between had felt like years. His muscles shivered and he fell to his knees in the dirt, gasping - a prisoner spared the axe. “Wh-what was that?” he managed.

Emmy had not watched his suffering, instead she had cast a steady eye on the chasm and the house above it. “Told you: it’s cured, but it ent set. You’ll likely get that for a while ‘til it’s done.”

“How long?” He swiped at his eyes and nose; the back of his hand came back bloody.

“How long?” He swiped at his eyes and nose; the back of his hand came back bloody.

“Here’s your own place. Does it matter?”

He looked stony; his left eye leaked crimson, forcing him to scuff a hand at it again. “How long will it be out there?”

She’d encountered that look and attitude before - it rarely ended well. She hitched up the first of her petticoats and used the muslin trim to wipe the bloody tears from his face. “You’ve got time in here, cully. Time t’heal and time t’build. Don’t cast that out - it’ll only carve you up.” She didn’t add ‘please’ - she didn’t have to, her petticoat was stained with it, her expression charged with it.

“How long?”

The charge earthed into displeasure. “Depends.” Her voice was as gutter harsh as usual and twice as
cold. “You got no kenning what you wrought, nor cool what’s been lain drum f’ you. Bedlam’s maced a lay she never ketched, and you’ve hatched the Naskin - no cracksman was ever so blessed! All your broads have come up swabbers. Might even say your Blousabella’s your kemp-shoe-witch…”

“How long?” he repeated.

She wasn’t inclined to say anything for a while, but when his patience looked to be thinning she repented. “Longer than you want. A half sennite to be sure.”

“Sennite?”

“That’s a for’night, cully. Put twixt an’ twain, you need least seven days.”

“I’m t’remain here for a week entire, whilst my body is there, unconscious, in her parlour?”

“More or less boyo, aye.”

He tried to pull himself upright on nerveless legs. “No.”

“No?” she echoed, like an elder sister just aching to deliver a slap.

“A week is six days too long.”

Emmy closed her eyes, milky lids encasing pulse-blue irises: a wound temporarily healing. “You’ve already won - cool your stakes! Bloody merribegot, you’ve stripped ‘em all! Can’t you lay in clover a while ‘til your irons is back? Then you can return t’your convenience, all the better to snuggle her up.”

Her beggar’s speak was always like something seen too sudden and up close. It was best to step back and let the meaning come into focus. He should rest, catatonic for a week or more, and then awake strengthened if not cured to take Holly in his arms. “A week is six days too long,” he repeated.

Again he tried to stand and failed; that stuttered double failure temporarily halted his ambition.

Emmy was very still, the stillness of someone who wanted to rant and rave and fidget but chose, here and now, not to. She looked like a half-scalped Ophelia ready to drown in her virgin robes. “There is a shorter way,” she said as reluctant and unhappy as anything in the universe had ever been.

It was hard for a gentleman to make weakness appear insouciant, but Mckey did his best. “How come then you offer it - when you know I’ll take it?” he asked. The query ought to have been shrewd, but his teeth were ground so tight it was just misguided pride in the face of desperation.

Her unhappiness didn’t shift any. “’Cos it’s your choice, cove. That’s what Bedlam’s about. Choices. An’ sometimes those choices land you in clink or a straight-waistcoat, an’ sometimes they set you free. But the choices are still yours.” She looked at him. “You wanna hear the greyling’s scrip, or you gonna play no matter the odds?” He looked expectant, which she interpreted as both: he’d play no matter what but he’d listen to the rules first. “You ent gone to bed with a mattock an’ spade yet, but you’re not exactly hale. You need rest - any crow or sawbones would tell you. But I can shear it,” she admitted. “Cut your time here to a quit rents. That’s a day or so, for those rum gents who ent down on me jaw. But it’ll lam ya.”

“I’ll pay.” He already had, he already was, best get it over with.

“Oh, my bene-swell,” she dropped to her knees beside him, her petticoats spilling around her. “It’s not the king’s picture you’ll give t’me. It’s just… pain.” She shook her head, hoping he’d back down
whilst knowing he wouldn’t. “Can’t you just lay in clover an’ out of twig for a bit?”

“I’ll take a day or so over a week, no matter the cost.”

“Bedlam help you,” Emmy muttered.

“Already did,” McKey acknowledged.
“Holls, have you thought what you’re going to do with him?”

She gave Davey an odd look, unable to decide whether her brother was thinking of Mckey as stray pet or a sex doll. “What d’you mean what will I do with him?”

“I mean he doesn’t exist. He has no legal status - no one else will even treat him as a person. He’s a computer with opposable thumbs.”

Holly glared at him, her face blanched white save for a blush of rage high across each cheek. “He is not,” she hissed through teeth locked down to stop her from shouting.

Davey help his palms up in hasty placation. “I know - I know that. I think he’s… honestly I’ve no idea what he is. But it’s patently obvious that he does remember you, he’s not running on any script and he somehow left the park to get here. All of which is fucking impressive, but he still doesn’t have an identity here.”

“He came in a car,” she remembered. “I can’t believe he hitchhiked all the way - he must have something!” She turned to the sofa and carefully slipped her hand into Mckey’s jacket pockets: in the inner breast pocket was a credit card and a thin wallet. She looked at the card. “Kahae Satoru,” she read, sounding uncertain. She flipped open the wallet: there was an ID and another credit card. The ID had his photo on it and, along with the second card, was made out in the name of ‘Tom Mckey’. She handed them to David so he could share her confusion. “Wallet says Tom Mckey.”

“Didn’t you say it was John Henry?”

“It is - he is. I don’t know how he’s got hold of any of these.”

Mckey shuddered; Holly saw and returned to his side immediately, hoping he might wake. As she crouched beside the sofa she noticed Jesse had stretched his paws out and was kneading them against Mckey’s shirt; his purr had changed and now contained a trill of anxiety. She frowned, touching her fingers to his neck to reassure herself once more. His pulse stuttered a much faster and jagged beat than it had before. The frown became a scowl of worry. She bussed her knuckles lightly across his cheekbone and up to his temple, and then stopped and brought her hand back to his forehead before pulling away with an oath. “Shit!”

“What?”

“He’s burning!” She pressed the back of her hand to her own brow and then back to his on the off-chance she’d been mistaken. “Is there a thermometer somewhere?”

David fished out his phone. “No, I’ve got an app.” He tapped at it until he called up the programme required and handed it to his sister.

She rested the back of the phone against Mckey’s temple and waited whilst the app made its calculations. “One-oh-six point five,” she read. “Fuck.”

“That’s not good Holls,” David muttered, reclaiming his phone. “You get brain damage at one-oh-seven point something. He’s not well…” That blatantly obvious observation lead inevitably to David’s next question. “How come he’s sick? Hosts don’t get sick, do they?”

There was a long answer and a short answer to that, but since this didn’t seem like TB, Holly opted
for the short version. “No.” She bit her lip. “He was having nose bleeds when he came here.”

“Noise bleeds?” he echoed. “D’you think they did something? I mean, d’you think it’s a failsafe?”

Holly glanced over her shoulder at him, her eyes wide and glassy.

“In case any of the hosts leave the park. Something to shut them down…” He stopped; he’d never seen his sister look so terrified. David wished he hadn’t said it, hadn’t even thought it. But like a bell that couldn’t be un-rung, the thought was there, gnawing away in his mind because it felt right - it fit the circumstances. Of course there’d be failsafes - of course there’d be something to shut the hosts down if they strayed.

“You’ll never see the pit trap,” Holly uttered blankly to herself. “We have to help him!”

David’s expression was condolatory. “I don’t know what to do if my computer system’s overclocked and crashes, I don’t have a clue what to do with this.”

Indecision gripped her for several moments more, locking her like a deer in the headlights of her own personal oncoming disaster. At last she broke from it, the terror still pooled all around her but no longer paralysing. “Help me carry him to my bed,” she ordered. Her bed was larger and more convenient than the couch, it was also more private and closer to a bathroom since she had one en suite. She might not be able to fix Mckey, but she’d promised to keep him safe, so she’d do that if nothing else - even if safe was just a quiet corner in which to die. Jesse scrambled from Mckey’s chest with a small mew of displeasure as David grasped the cardsharp under the arms and Holly took his ankles.

“Jesus Holl,” Davey complained. “I could carry him on my own - I could carry two of him. I thought androids were meant to be heavy?”

Holly didn’t reply since they’d already reached her room.

“This side?” he asked, nodding to the bed. “Jesse, get out the way.” The cat had run ahead and jumped onto the pillows so he could stick his nosey whiskers into everything. “Such a little shit,” Davey muttered with fond resignation. The kitten remained in the way until the very last second, as all cats do. Duty done, David stood back as soon as Mckey was lain down and being walked on and batted at by Jesse. Holly wore a slightly far away expression that was hard to put a name to, but David knew what it meant. “I’ll leave you an’ Jesse to it. You need anything, call me - doesn’t matter what time it is.”

Holly flashed him a wobbly smile. “Thank you.” She meant it too.

He gave a ghost-grin in return, and backed out of her room, pulling the door closed behind him but stopping just before it latched. “Wait a sec,” he told her, hurrying to retrieve Holly’s tablet, the bourbon and two of the glasses. “Here.” He put them on the bookshelf by the bed. “You want any coffee or anything?”

She shook her head.

“Okay.” Davey bowed out, closing the door behind him.

Holly let out a breath in a long, shaky sigh. *Make him comfortable. Cool a washcloth to help with his temperature. Don’t freak out. Maybe get an icepack and something to wrap it in. Then wait.* It was not an appealing To Do list, containing as it did three simple tasks, one difficult task and one final instruction that would be hell. “Get on with it, bitch,” Holly told herself sternly.
The rest of the evening and all of the night passed in an anxious monotony; the only change was that at some point the sun went down. Mckey’s pulse beat light and febrile, he breathed, his temperature stayed, and sometimes he tensed, shuddering as if he’d been jabbed with a live wire. The wrapped icepack and the damp washcloths made his brow icy but did little to cool the furnace beneath. Jesse took up position on the gambler’s chest, paws outstretched and kneading, purr hitched with those unhappy little trills. Holly poured herself another drink and scanned the net futilely for any information on the Delos schematics for the hosts, or for any system with a similar build and what could be done if it malfunctioned. It ate up time, but it didn’t give her any answers. There was nothing close to the Delos builds. The only thing that came near was military, skewed towards death-dealing and just as hush-hush as Delos when it came to the inner workings and electronic guts of anything. It was a hopeless quest. She dozed a few times, but always awoke with a sudden car-crash shock, feeling she’d been kicked in the gut. It was a long night. At six Jesse mewed to be let out, and through the crack of open door she heard David get up and shower. A little before seven there was a quiet tap at her door. “Holl?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m off to work,” David told her. A pause. “Phone if you need me to come back early, okay?”

“’Kay,” Holly agreed.

Another pause. “Okay,” he nodded, having discarded whatever else it was he’d meant to ask or say. Minutes later David left, the front door latching shut behind him, leaving the house quieter than ever.

Holly sighed and went to the kitchen to swap the icepack she had for a fresh one; and to top up Jesse’s food bowl since he complained bitterly whenever it was less than half full. She turned the coffee maker on as she walked past: she’d need a lot of coffee today. Jesse appeared and crunched down his breakfast as the coffee machine grumbled to itself and Holly all but tripped over her own feet she was so tired. She looked in the fridge for a coffee mug before belatedly realising she needed the cupboard by the stove instead. At last, icepack in one hand and coffee in the other she returned to her room, a small black feline shadow bounding after her.

The house was depressingly quiet so she called up her playlists on her tablet and flicked through them. Her taste in music was eclectic and the names of her playlists equally so: ‘Vanity Faire’, ‘Thirteen’, ‘Obnoxious Goat’, ‘Pirates’, ‘Black Tower’, ‘Cocaine & Violins’. She hovered over ‘Arizona Tarot’ before finally deciding on something mellower and less hell-bent; she selected ‘Laudanum’ and tapped play. Vitamin String Quartet began a haunting cello-rich version of ‘Something I Can Never Have’. She adjusted the volume and left the tablet on her desk with her coffee. Holly, still trailed by Jesse, went to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. She wrapped the new icepack in a cloth and held it against Mckey’s forehead. He shuddered as before but this time he twisted his head, fretful, trying to turn away, his brow furrowed and his eyelids flickering.

“Mckey?” She moved the ice and put her palm there instead; his temperature was still elevated but not as burningly high as it had been. He stilled under her touch, the tension that had etched his features draining once more with something like a sigh. She stared at the hollow of his throat and the edge of collarbones and sternum she could see through the open V of his collar: he was still breathing. Holly closed her eyes in relief. From the end of the bed came a scrabbling sound and then a thud, signalling Jesse had tried to jump onto the bed and the blanket had foiled his plans.

Her mouth twitched briefly into a wry smile. She could relate to Jesse’s blanket issues. He was a panther trapped in the body of a young, diminutive house cat who believed all terrains were his to command. The unlikely collaboration between timing, blankets, and short back legs were not something he had banked on and he was rightly hurt by their treachery. Similarly, Mckey was a
puppet who’d dreamed of bigger and better worlds and had been flung on the furnace for trying to sever his strings. And she, she was guilty of still believing and needing to believe idiot fairy tales where love won the day.

She should have taken better note of those old kids’ films her parents had delighted in showing her, like *Rogue One*. Root for or fall in love with any of that bunch of glorious misfits all you like - it won’t help you any. It’s *The Magnificent Seven* minus one and set in space. *Watership Down*? Shakespeare said it best: *On horror’s head horrors accumulate*. And for all its adventure and eye-watering prettiness, *The Hobbit* is a slaughter house in the end. The Eternal Quest is eternal. The Killing Curse kills. Sacrifice is bloody and irreversible. Love does not heal all things. Some things are worth dying for - but you still end up dead.

She was aware that trying to divine the future via fairy tales and out-dated movies was dumb beyond measure; she just didn’t know what else to do to stop her brain devouring itself. Didn’t know what to do full stop. All those films and books when the protagonist gets a flash of gnostic inspiration or instinct: they must simply do X - and voila! Problem solved, all hail the conquering hero etc etc, so pleased she won over the boy etc etc, villains and bad guys blatted etc etc - and they all went home and had scones for tea.

‘Scones for tea’ was what their mother had bribed them with. Holly wasn’t certain they’d ever had scones - not in the proper English High Tea sense anyhow - but it was a phrase their mother had always used as a lure. ‘If you don’t behave, there won’t be scones for tea.’ It was shorthand: a vague threat and bribe rolled into one. Holly wished she knew the formula so there might be scones for tea after all.

No flash of inspiration was forthcoming on the acquisition of scones (real or metaphorical) or on the improvement of her or McKey’s situation. It didn’t boil down, it bored down with an earth crushing drill to everything it always did: she didn’t know anything; she couldn’t help. She was miserable and useless. Her nemesis (petty and terrible both at once) snuffled around her brain, a black dog seeking a way in. Normally she’d grab Jesse; a panther, even a diminutive one, was powerful enough to keep the Noonday Demon at bay whilst she regained a scrap of equilibrium she’d lost to depression. But Jesse was guarding McKey, and of the two of them she thought he needed a panther totem more than she right now.

She glanced towards the desk and the scalpel blades she knew to be in the second draw, the foil packets mixed in with art supplies and measuring tapes and fabric scraps and gaffer tape and other things of use to a historical art consultant who visited movie sets. She wanted her blades so she could channel all of her fear, self-hate and anxiety along a mono-edge of surgical steel and into a simple binary choice. To cut or not to cut. To bleed or not. To die or not…

But that was an indulgence too far: there was more than her at stake right now. Once all the other issues had been sorted, then perhaps she might listen to the whispers of those little sharpnesses of steel looking for a bloody home. For now she was concentrating on Jesse’s purrs. And on the shallow breaths of the one person whom no one else would consider a person but whom meant everything to her.

Bullets scythed through the air ending in guts and agony, the sterile spaces starting to tinge with the scent of hot metal and punctured organs. There were screams - pain and panic all around - but it wasn’t him, he had no part of it.

Death stalked in competent strides that could span continents but here and now was making it personal: leaving a sticky, crimson silence in its wake. There were a hundred breaths drawn out into gasps - sighs - screams - the nature of the breath was immaterial. Soft or loud, short or ragged: Death
inevitably stepped onwards, taking breath with it and exchanging it for eternity - no returns given.

It was the dream he had been in many times before. The cold dream with the bright lights, and the unforgiving lines of steel and glass. Fear tried to grab a hold, nipping at his heels, but he ignored it. This wasn’t his dream - couldn’t be his dream. He’d been here countless times before (two thousand and eighty nine - they’d been counted anyway) but he’d left. Here wasn’t meant for him. He was done with this hell. But dreams are fickle and swift as minnows; even as he thought himself free he sunk into the dream entire: trapped once more within those endless corridors and blank little rooms. Another goddamn labyrinth.

He walked the blank maze beneath the glare of bright lights and wished he could close his eyes. He walked the blank maze beneath the glare of bright lights and saw more and more bodies. Silhouettes and crumpled marionettes all dressed in black with crimson fripperies: once tall, now broken beyond repair. Not too far away he could hear gunfire and a great deal of screaming. He didn’t want to walk towards it: he’d had lifetimes filled with nothing but war, he was in no hurry to encounter further suffering.

He remembered (a neat wrapped parcel in paper and twine that unfolded into golden shapes, flickering with a life of their own) Shiloh and the unutterable misery that could only be achieved by throwing one hundred and twenty five thousand men and several thousand horses into one river valley and using munitions to tear them to shreds - day upon day upon day. There’s a smell that starts out as sweat and fear and black-powder; but it ferments, changing throughout the battle. The fear and black-powder grow stronger, building, but mud, blood and entrails join all too swiftly - and death of course. (Death smells high and sweet like potted meat on the turn.) Eventually, one set of scents will dominate and that will tell you - as accurately as any dispatch - what happened. Fear and black-powder signals a retreat. Blood and black-powder means a victory. Blood and death: a goddamn fucking massacre.

The clinical light was doing its best to bleach his senses clean, but he still recognised it. Hot metal, blood, fear, viscera - and there it was, the beginnings of that salt-sweet, gamey smell: an atrocity in the making. There were no ticks of a clock any more, time seemed to flow in accordance with the beats of a heart: hammering faster and faster until it stopped with a jarring intensity and was picked up again by a different heart faltering out an equally brutal tempo.

In this bright and wicked man-made labyrinth, not one but several Minotaurs ran, goring and gorging upon the brightest and best of the Athens’s youth. Theseus was a shadow, slender, beautiful and viciously determined: she had no interest in taking trophies, only leaving the jaws of the trap that had held her for so long. There was Ariadne too, glimpsed from the corner of the eye: a blood-red tress, a silk scrap, a street-urchin’s laugh. Daedalus is dead an’ the inmates have the asylum! she crowed over her shoulder, a reveller gleefully caught up in others’ success.

The gunfire was closer, only a door or corridor further on - although he seemed to be moving though them any-which-way like a spirit, so perhaps it didn’t matter. The sound was starting to mix with the light and the overwhelming sense of death and his skull felt like it wanted to split… He stumbled in the dream, seeming to fall through floors or walls, much closer to the sound. It wasn’t a rail spike anymore, it was a whole team of workers digging and blasting rock, laying sleepers and pinning rails, all so some nightmare express could steam forth to Agonyville via Blood Town and Oblivion in his brain…

He blinked.

There was a pale haired woman with her arm caught in a bear trap the size of a door. Several wide steel pins pressed through the flesh in front of her elbow. Of the two of them it seemed he was more
horrified than she was.

“Where’s the lever?” he demanded through the gap in the glass. That was the law of traps: traps had a plate, prey had a tread, traps got teeth, victims got pain. But even a corpse needs to be set free so there must be a lever - something that allowed the hunter to give the prey into his keeping. “The lever!”

She glared at him, at the trap, at nothing.

From across the hall someone was firing from a gun with seemingly infinite bullets, scarring the glass with messy pock-holes. She ignored him and the soldier both, pulling up a bowie knife so long it was almost a cutlass and digging it into her arm. It didn’t look to be surgical from the outside but it was precise enough: she used the back of the blade-tip to pull her flexor tendon: that controlled the muscle that tightened her finger on the other side of the bear trap to squeeze the trigger. It wasn’t so precise that it didn’t take her a try or two, but that didn’t seem to matter and she certainly didn’t seem to care.

The gunfire lessened but did not cease. The blonde woman took a breath and stabbed the blade through her elbow joint, levering the blade back and forth to sever the tendons from the upper arm.

Mckey stared through the glass but a moment later the glass wasn’t there and he was lending his strength to hers, helping her push the blade through as swiftly as possible. The limb was severed with a crunch. He wasn’t certain whether to feel pleased or sick. She pulled the stump of her arm from the door: her eyes passed over him, rested for a moment in acknowledgement and then passed on as if he had never been there.

The pain in his skull was crippling.

“Get to the ground now!”

He was already on the ground - he couldn’t stand.

“Cease all motor functions.”

He’d done nothing but breathe, and the command whist important sounding, washed over him entirely without his mind or body giving the merest flicker of acknowledgement.

“Cease all motor functions!”

The woman with the snow-blond hair and a grin to rival Bedlam’s, cast her gaze across him and on to more worthy prey.

“Cease all…!” There were more words but Death took them away.

The world spun, the stark black and white verticals becoming horizontal and allowing him to melt into the puddles of vitae and shadows where he belonged… A pain, like a slap, roused him. New words, hasty and unhappy, a scribble of sound. “Get you gone! My eye, cully - who gave you fuckin’ leave?”

Blood ran in rivulets, and for the first time in remembrance it wasn’t his; the walls of the labyrinth shifted and turned, and he was left standing outside them.
Chapter 24

Someone was singing, sweet and clear; he wondered if it was Emmy. Perhaps her gambit had failed and he’d nothing but time and pain to show for it; Emmy’s scant sympathies hid in cant, but they flourished in song.

“But when we sleep we are deathless, so come to bed…”

It sounded like a quote, but not from one of the poems he knew. (Another fracture: his poetry ran together now and he couldn’t tell where one poet began and another ended. Did Milton write of Mistresses, and Keats of Poison Trees, did Byron sing of Angels, and Blake of Nightingales?)

“If I could slide through to you, light years or miles, temporal wise, my toes would still be cold against you thigh, but you’d be mine - you’d be mine…”

There was music too, he realised, but not any sort of melody he’d ever heard. There was also something on his chest. He fought to open his eyes, a struggle that was surprisingly taxing. Whatever was on his chest stretched out a small arm and pressed a handful of pinpricks through his shirt and into his skin. He dragged up a hand to bat it away and his fingers caught on a warm bundle of fur.

“You’re awake!” The voice was strained with relief, and it wasn’t Emmy.

He struggled to focus: a young woman with mouse-blond hair (tied back and long since gone to seed) a sharp nose and vast grey eyes had sat on the bed and was looking at him intently. Her clothes were rumpled and had the appearance of a shirt-waist camisole and long-johns rather than anything a young lady ought wear in company. She had perched at his side: all the unlikely aspects of her condensed together in a rush - Holly. Mckey felt curiously faint with the force of an emotion he could only guess was elation. “There’s a cat,” he said thickly.

She was grinning. “Yeah. Yeah there is. I’ll get you some water.” She went to the other side of the room where a carafe and several glasses sat amidst books and pens on a desk. She filled a glass and left it on the bedside table so she could help him sit up - complicated as the action was by dizziness and pillows and one stubborn feline. They managed, and Mckey was able to drink as a fluffy scrap of pitch black indignation re-settled itself on his thigh.

He was in a spacious bed set with blue quilts in a room that looked more like a study than any bedchamber or hotel room he’d ever set foot in. The windows were large and looked out onto the beginnings of a pine forest. The walls were a different, softer blue; the furnishings were elegant only in their plainness. There were however two pieces of furniture that stood out: a large oak bookcase with decorative carvings at the edges, and a dark beast of a bureau desk with fifteen different draws, four cubby holes, two post holes and one small cupboard just big enough for a brandy decanter and glasses. The bookcase was full to bursting with all sorts of volumes and periodicals; the desk was obviously in use, with books stacked at either side and a space in the middle with a laptop, stylus and phone. The top of the bureau was covered in oddments: a tallow box and several candlesticks, a few tincture bottles, inkwells, an old jug filled with nib pens, quills, bone crochet needles, brass measuring instruments, clay pipes and other oddments. Looking at that desk, he knew with a pleasing reassurance he was in Holly’s room.

“How are you feeling?”

He didn’t want to speak; he wanted to lie in the quiet and comfort of this place and gaze on her and the deep dove-grey of her eyes. They were the colour of an angel's pin-feathers, and seeing them left
him with a deep and abiding sense of home. But his silence would be an unkindness, and he didn’t want this victory marred in any way - if true victory it was and not another dream or loop to smother in. Perhaps one was never free of the labyrinth. He attempted a smile. “Like hell. How long was I out?”

“About a day.”

“I… I had some repairs to make. I came as soon as I could.”

She was shaking her head, his apologies superfluous. “Are you all right? When you came here your nose was bleeding, and after you passed out your temperature spiked and…”

“I just… had to patch some things.” He was as fatigued as he’d ever been when he’d had TB; even talking was tiring. Out here, in the real world beyond, were all marks of success still measured in exhaustion and pain?

“But you’re - you’re okay now?” She fidgeted, a hand and a thumbnail in particular wishing to worry at her lip. “What was it?”

He looked uncertain. “A lobotomy, I think was what she called it.” It wasn’t a word he’d previously encountered until Emmy had screeched it at him.

The hand dropped with a flinch - “What?” she asked sharply.

“Feels like a railroad spike ‘tween the eyes…”

“I know what a lobotomy is!”

Whilst he understood now more than ever his form, his capacity, his function, it made him uncomfortable to allude to it in detail. He no longer needed Shakespeare’s tales of spirits inhabiting an enchanted isle. But he didn’t quite have the stomach to admit that a diamond tipped surgical twenty-seven gauge drill had been pushed at an angle two inches beyond his nasal cavity to liquefy the frontal processing unit that was responsible for validating output from his cognition and data banks. Mckey leant his head back against the wall behind him. “Took more out of me than I thought,” he admitted; a deep truth but a purposefully bland one.

One of Holly’s hands shakily covered her mouth, the talon of her thumbnail pressing into her jaw from the horror of it. Someone had tried - no, not tried - some one had put a spike through his brain. Someone had put a spike through his brain. She was shivering and lines of heat were spilling down her cheeks and she couldn’t think beyond Mckey and railroad spikes and exactly what a lobotomy was designed to do: erase deep-rooted memory and individuality. It was worse than death, it was beyond Alzheimer’s or a complete hard data re-write: it was the entire destruction of a person whilst leaving the sad abomination of a shell in tact. Hollowing out a soul, and throwing it into the trash.

“Don’t cry darlin’.” He reached out an-almost steady hand to her. “It doesn’t matter, none of it matters. I’m here now.”

Holly curled against him and sobbed until her tears had washed out some of the relief-glazed terror she was brim-full of. “Who did it?” she asked, raising her head at last and wiping her nose perfunctorily on the back of her hand. “Tell me. I’ll fucking kill them!”

Others might say women’s emotions could pivot on a dime; but Mckey thought that was plain foolishness. Holly hadn’t suffered a change of heart, she’d just cried out her fear - and most of what was left was fury. No one sane gives a girl a gun, Emmy had told him. “I don’t know, darlin’. It was back in…” He had been about to say ‘Sweetwater’, when he realised it had been somewhere he had
no name for, somewhere he had always thought of as a dream.

“In Delos. In their facility that runs the Westworld park,” Holly finished for him in a voice like bile and ground glass.

“Leave it be, girl. That place can burn for all I care.” His words were low and quiet and nowhere near as vicious as they should have been. It was difficult to truly hate somewhere that had been your home all your life, even if it had been full of horrors.

She blinked and scrubbed her other hand over her eyes. “How did you get out? From the park and Delos, I mean,” she added, although once voiced the clarification seemed idiotic. Where the hell else would he have escaped from?

He was a strong believer in any tale worth the telling being accompanied by whiskey. “You got any bourbon?” he asked wryly.

She nodded and clambered off the bed, picking up a bottle (three quarters full) and two shot glasses. She poured them a glass each and handed him one.

Mickey raised his glass to hers. “To Bedlam, to the maudlin maid with the blood red hair, to freedom…” he smiled. “And to you.”

“To freedom,” she seconded, since that was the only part that made sense to her. The bourbon tasted like snow-melt from a mountain that thawed to fire when it hit her belly. Kentucky Blue was more complex - almost spiced - but this was still the best whiskey to be had outside the Fairweather or the Mariposa.

Mickey rested his hand and the glass on the bed so he wouldn’t have to expend the strength to hold either. God have mercy - he’d never felt so weak. He closed his eyes for a moment or two, and in that quiet realised where his fatigue came from: he was no longer in pain. Pain was an inadequate description, all things considered, for the most recent barrage of torments he’d endured. He wasn’t sure what Emmy’s process of ‘quit rents’ equated to nor how best to describe it; he thought it had perhaps been akin to having one’s bones broken and healed with every tick of a clock - a clock whose hours are very, very long. Locked within his mind, unable to rise from the floor of the house that was his mind - his eyes rolling back and seeking oblivion and finding dark and bloody dreams instead. Falling through dreams of eternal waking until it felt as if every labyrinth had another labyrinth inside it and he’d shatter - mind, heart and soul - from the strain of it. Now the agony had vacated, he was exhausted, despite having just woken up.

“What happened?” Holly asked, her voice tentative. It was a huge question - a ridiculous question - but she couldn’t help asking. Any reply would take hours, but still she asked as if there was a glib two-sentence-comeback to fit the bill.

His gaze rested somewhere between the cat and his whiskey glass. “I learnt to see beneath the skin of the world. Learnt to see all those golden patterns of code that make up everything.” A rueful twitch, part smile, part grimace. “That make up me.”

“You’re not just code,” Holly pronounced sternly.

“No?” his gaze flicked to her before settling back as it was before. “You best hope I am darlin’, otherwise I’m missing many more cards than I thought.” If there was some strange and mystical piece of him that could not be rendered into a sigil and logged as code then it was long lost and he was the lesser for it. Emmy had said he’d ‘turn Tom’ in the end, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that perhaps she was a Grecian Sybil, uttering prophecy deeper than even she knew. The possibility
haunted him like a horror. He’d thought he’d saved his deck of cards, dropping only two or three minor numerals along the way. But what if he hadn’t? What if all he had left to draw was two black eights, two black aces and the jack of diamonds? Nothing but a dead man’s hand. He felt an uncomfortable pulse of fear that seemed to radiate through his chest in a wash of acid. “Am I different? From how I was - how you remember me. Have I changed?” There was a note of strain in his voice, a needful weakness he strove to hide and move beyond.

“No!” Her reply was instinctual. “I mean, I don’t think so. You don’t - you don’t seem different.” She was all too aware her recent interaction with Mckey could be logged in minutes at best, but despite that she had felt as she always did about him. There were some people you could be estranged from for months, and fall straight back into comfortable conversation with the moment you met them again, as if no time had passed. Truth be told she was more worried that she had changed, that he would no longer feel for her as he had after three years and countless lifetimes of absence. “You’re style’s gone sadly downhill,” she told him with a nod to his appearance and a wicked flint-edge to her eyes, “but you’re the same.”

Her conviction was both reassuring and strange to him; he didn’t feel the same. He felt unsettled. Too much had happened. He thought he should like another swallow of whiskey, but his arm did not seem interested in lifting the glass. “I took myself apart,” he told her, “line by line.”

She thought of wool, of linen, of antique samite and cloth-o-gold, of beautiful, intricate tapestries unravelling into snarled thread and dust. A feverish heat built behind her eyes, seeking to spill into tears again if she wasn’t careful. His casual confession was like a Van Gogh painting or an irreplaceable piece of Viking tablet weave or Assyrian metal work explaining how it had simply un-made itself. The very idea pained her and forced her soul to cringe as if it and not he had been scourged to the brink of nothingness. Beyond that prime reaction was a second thought, a thought based not in art but everyday human dissatisfaction. “You pulled everything apart - all of you - and turned it into code.” A pause: a breath taking her from that horrific thought to the one forged of curiosity that lay beyond. “And you didn’t change anything when you put yourself back together?”

“No.” Given her question, his tone was uncertain. Ought he have?

“No even the TB?”

He didn’t entirely understand her query. It was part of his history and one of his builds. (Tom was not one of his builds - had never been one of his builds - Tom was an abomination.) “It’s not running, but it’s there.”

She smiled, the expression wide across her lips but her eyes were sad. She didn’t know anyone, if given the chance, who wouldn’t tweak their own build. She certainly would have: a better memory, the ability to compose music or poetry or anything artistic above and beyond her horrible costume and set scribbles she did for work. A flare for languages would be useful and an IQ boost wasn’t to be sneered at. Not to mention that cutting out and cauterising whatever bit of her was responsible for clinical depression would be an immeasurable boon… Mckey hadn’t done anything. If he could see and read his own code then he could sure as hell change it - but he hadn’t. Was that old-school arrogance, or a genuine contentment with his character, free of the neuroses that plagued people of the modern day? She tilted her head, frown and smile mixing together. “Why didn’t you?”

In truth it had never occurred to him. “I was nothing, I was… gold dust in a creek. All I cared about was gathering myself back together.” He spoke softly and in a tone that strove to be matter of fact, despite it having meant everything. When you’re empty and scattered to the four winds you don’t care what comes back so long as it’s you - so long as that aching haunted hollow that was a personality fills back up. Were you too arrogant or apt to get drunk? Were you scathing or hasty?
Should you be wiser, more patient, or more proficient at needful skills? No - immaterial. When you have nothing but emptiness you welcome any and every foible home without question like the prodigal son it is. His lips twitched a half smile. “You run out the gates of hell, you don’t give a shit where you’re going.”

Holly felt a little ashamed; one doesn’t ask a recovering patient why they didn’t get laser work to change the colour of their eyes along with their heart surgery just because they happened to be in an operating theatre.

“Yes, unavailing to nothing but code consumes you. In the end I fell apart.” He said it smoothly, almost believing his own insouciance. “They have a certain military proficiency: they took me away and put me down like a wagon mule with a broken leg.”

When they shot him down on the highway, down like a dog on the highway, and he lay in his blood on the highway, with a bunch of lace at his throat... The words of the poem came unbidden, she didn’t want them in her head. Her mouth was dry, her throat didn’t want to work. “That... that’s what they do to the hosts when something goes wrong?” Jesus, she’d never even considered what Delos did with broken hosts, she’d always assumed they could be fixed and rebuilt. (Ha! You naive little bitch, her brain sniped. I thought you were meant to be clever?)

A half shrug. He didn’t like thinking about it either but he supposed so - no - he knew so. He bullied his arm into raising the glass and snatching another swallow of whiskey before his hand started to shake. “After a time they pulled me back out to be an errand boy for them.”

Holly was scowling at him - and with good reason. She didn’t like the hole she could sense between down like a dog on the highway and Delos message-gopher. “That’s not a transition,” she accused. “How do you go from plugged in the head to secret cyber UPS?”

‘UPS’ was not in his memory data, but he could extrapolate. “I…” He didn’t want to admit that he could very easily still be in whatever cold grave they’d put him in, railroad spike and all: just another restless suicide at a crossroads. “I had help.”

She tried to swallow. “Who?” She was aware she probably sounded vexed - she wasn’t - but she was spooked. She needed to know how Mckey had escaped the park, yet with every mounting detail all she could concentrate on was how close he had come - second by second over three long years - to destruction. And that scared the crap out of her. “Who helped you?”

He could neither sugar coat nor explain, so he hoped the name would be enough. “The White Queen…”

Holly thought of chess and Alice in Wonderland.

“...Bedlam.”

“Bedlam?” Her voice rose in surprise before falling softer than before. “That’s one hell of a title.”

“Why?” The word held no meaning for him other than a name.

She sighed some of her fear and steadied herself in historical knowledge - a comfortable place despite its ingrained horrors embroidered across decades and intricately knotted in years. “It’s a mental hospital in London. World’s oldest lunatic asylum. It was founded in twelve hundred and something as a pauper’s hospital, but pretty quickly ended up caring for the mad...” The founding date came to her, a sentence too late. “Twelve forty-seven I think. Although I don’t remember the date when it became solely a mental hospital - before Shakespeare, definitely.”
It was impossible to say whether an asylum had birthed a patron goddess or if a force of chaos had taken the name in honour of the asylum. One would have to ask the lady herself he supposed; and whilst Mckey was grateful for her aid, he was in no hurry to renew their acquaintance. “I believe she ensured I was picked to play the messenger.”

Holly nodded; the White ‘Bedlam’ Queen was obviously a Delos employee and hacker with delusions of grandeur. Although given what she’d achieved, her self worth wasn’t grandiose so much as well deserved. Holly sternly guarded her thoughts against jealousy.

“Once I awoke, I called back all those little boxes of code.” A twitch-thin smile, trying to make light of his recent travails. “I built myself back up in a hurry.” The smile stayed, even though thinking about it made his head ache. There is a perfect moment at the baize between cold card mechanics, drunken antics, and financial indifference. Reaching that spot can be as hard as overstepping it is easy; it’s a cardsharp’s mythical state of perfect grace. He’d had to hold that indefinable edge since his awakening and it was like smiling and smiling and slowly pushing Hellbitch into his own thigh an eighth of an inch at a time.

“You built yourself back up around the hole between your eyes.” Holly’s voice held a cold note at its core: dislike more than disbelief.

“Yes.” He schooled his voice to an indifference he didn’t feel.

“Jesus,” she muttered. Mild blasphemy wasn’t terribly witty nor terribly useful, but it was all she had. It was one or two choice swear words or it was a never ending rant that began with ‘lobotomy’, ‘host’, and ‘Delos’, and just mounted, twisting around itself and gaining strength like a hurricane that launched witch-killing domiciles from Kansas. His explanation had much in common with Dorothy’s house: against all likelihood and probability, Mckey was here, in a world far removed from his own. It was as unlikely as a flying home that killed a witch, leaving nothing but her silver slippers. Holly didn’t like to think what storm had been invoked to bring Mckey to her world, nor what witches it may have razed nor enemies raised in its passing. But curiosity - if not a witch, is certainly a bitch - and immune to sky-borne architecture. “When we were last together, you said you wanted three years.” She felt unkind - ungrateful - for prying. He was here, wasn’t he? And he looked so goddamn tired. “Why three years?”

He gazed at her, and for a while his stare strayed to her neck and the new, ragged baby-pink scar on the right side under her jaw. “I needed the longest time you could give me.”

Part of her - a reactionary, idiot piece of her brain - wanted to parrot, ‘Give you?!’ but she tightened her lips before the words could spill. Mckey’s play had been a long game, and he’d balanced that against her sanity: he’d gambled on three years being the soonest he’d be done and the longest she could hold out. Holly felt queasy and resisted the temptation to rub at her neck. “The - the nose bleeds and everything. Was that because you hurried?”

It was not a gentleman’s place to cite a lady’s shortcomings. “When d’you do that?” he asked softly, still looking at her neck.

She’d never been ashamed of her scars, but in that moment she experienced a gut-wrenching moment of regret. She’d done it the day after the three years were up and she wondered as an option whether admitting the fact or slicing off her own tongue would be more painful. “It’s not important.”

A slight shake of the head. “I love you darlin’. But don’t try t’tell me what’s important,” he said, his voice still velvet. He looked away and stared at his whiskey, too tired for an argument but unable to false-face and pretend he didn’t care.
Holly was reminded of Todd and Alex who had argued with her over everything and anything. If they were drunk, if she was drunk, if she held an opinion they didn’t care for or spoke in a tone they didn’t like, then there was an argument. It was inevitable, predictable, and stupid. Inevitable because it happened with a regularity that would shame most calendars if not clocks, and stupid because no matter the issue, no matter the bone of contention, she was wrong and they were right. They quoted sources that were infallible (or quoted nothing at all because their own unfounded opinion was as obviously as good.) She apparently quoted lies, damn lies and statistics, when she wasn’t spouting pure female idiocy. It was why she’d wanted to punch Rik in his stupid face over the Ontological Argument. It was years of pent up frustration garnered from boys telling her - no matter her opinion or her sources - her views were for shit. Mckey’s succinct, polite and heartfelt demand not to be dictated to undermined her usual defenses.

“I did it just after,” she admitted uncomfortably.

He barely blinked. “Day one two or three?”

She didn’t specify. “There abouts.” The reprimand would come no matter the number.

“I’m sorry darlin’.” It was a short phrase and it ought to have been glib, a response that rolled off the tongue as inconsequentially as ‘good day’ or ‘excuse me’. But it didn’t roll off his tongue, it was dragged through his throat to finally emerge, guilty and haggard from his mouth.

Holly was horrified. “No! No - no!” She glitched on the word.

Mckey had closed his eyes, and his lashes were heavy as storm-clouds. He swallowed, looking like he was trying to choke down tacks. “I am sorry - I’m so sorry darlin’. I - I didn’t walk the labyrinth blind. I opened my eyes an’ turned the fuck around. I opened my eyes. I - I…”

She could see the crash coming: he was exhausted, and all it took was a spoonful of guilt to set him up for a meltdown. She shook her head, hands reaching for him but uncertain whereabouts to rest her grip: whether to hold him strongly as a lover, reassuringly as a friend, or gently as a child. Finally her hands alighted on his arm and shoulder: a long distance embrace. “It’s okay,” she promised. “Please don’t feel guilt-wracked. I’ve enough of my own issues - I don’t know what to do with yours.” She grinned to show she didn’t mean it, even though she did. “It’s okay. It will be okay.” She almost laughed, drawing herself a little closer to that embrace she was too cowardly to figure out whether she was giving or stealing. “You got out of hell. You don’t need to beat yourself up over the fact you didn’t do it faster.”

Jesse didn’t like Mckey’s broken emotion any more than Holly did. He stretched and meeped and walked up, trying to climb Mckey’s chest so he could touch his muzzle to the face of his new den-mate. Mckey raised his left hand uncertainly to brace around the feline shadow. Jesse rewarded him by vigorously head-butting his arm and then trying to settle on Mckey’s chest despite the inhospitable angle. Mental instability loses a lot of its momentum when your attention is eaten up by a kitten with sharp claws trying to make a nest on your breastbone. He blinked away his tears and peered down his nose. “Johnny Reb,” he accused. “What in the fuck you think you’re trying t’do?”

Jesse purred and made small happy panther noises.

“Get your claws out my chest, Johnny boy,” Mckey ordered.

Jesse burrowed into the crook of Mckey’s arm and curled up as if that had been his intention all along.

“He’s called Jesse,” Holly offered, although she wasn’t sure why she bothered as Jesse seemed to
answer to Mckey’s new christenings easily enough. She wasn’t certain how one diminutive cat had defused a half-baked argument and a full-on angst-storm either, but she wasn’t going to complain. “How did you get here?” She hadn’t meant to ask more questions, but Jesse seemed to have leant Mckey a strength and stability he’d previously worn through.

He had the grace to look embarrassed. “I picked a gentleman’s pocket for the means to pay a cab.” ‘Cab’ was one of several words and notions he’d gutted from Tom Mckey before razing the ignorant, hateful sonnovabitch.

“Delos gave you an ID and a credit card - why didn’t you use it?”

“I didn’t know if the credit was sound or if I’d been furnished with a wallet just for the look of the thing. It would be unusual, would it not, even for a messenger to travel without?”

“Point,” she agreed.

He managed to raise his right hand and to sip his whiskey, the motion easier this time. He was still dog-tired, but it was as if something had changed. He wasn’t certain what it was, he had a feeling it might be that demon-whore Hope. Most men venerated her as the best and brightest of Pandora’s box. Mckey was not convinced; he’d rather that painfully bright-blazing eight-pointed star any day. Bedlam had proved more dangerous but far more reliable than Hope in the long run. The sip became a swallow - the whiskey was gorgeous and smoothed the edges of the words and the memories he had to bear. He drained the last of his glass. “I had a notion they might know where I went if I used the card they gave me.”

She started to chew on her thumbnail, then caught herself and stopped. “You said you were an errand boy. Did you deliver your message before you came here?”

“No.” There was a finality to that. “I burnt most of it,” he elaborated shortly, then gave a sardonic smile. “It was a very long message.”

She wasn’t reassured; she reclaimed her glass from her left hand and gave it to the keeping of her talon-gnawed right. “They’ll find out, won’t they?”

“I imagine so.”

“They’ll come looking.” Her voice sounded dead: she didn’t want to be right, would give anything not to be right, but that wasn’t the way of the world. It all came down to probability. The probability of Mckey getting out of the park was astronomical enough, but it was an astronomical-one-off lottery win she could believe now it had actually happened. Anything beyond that? He was a goddamn fairy tale, an abnormality, a legend - an insanity - he wasn’t made for the real world. And the longer he stayed in the real world the more convinced Holly became that he would be taken from her. She drank a long swallow of whiskey because there was a cowardly part of her that wanted to be as far away from this new reality as possible. She felt like a chronic crazy shut-in with a mega-win lottery ticket who could have everything they ever wanted if they could just get to the local store with a valid ID. Suck it up, bitch, her intellect informed her. This is what you wanted and this is the price - are you really too chicken-shit to pay up? She honestly wasn’t sure - she hoped not.

“I’ve been told I’m no longer easy to find.” He looked at the cat as he spoke, as if out of everything, Jesse was the real anomaly in their situation.

Holly made a little huff, caught between amusement, scorn, and disbelief. Then her shoulders sagged before drawing up at a new angle. “How sure are you? I know we have to be careful, but how sure are we that Delos isn’t going to come kicking in the door and…”
The front door latch unlocked with a snap - both Holly and Mckey jumped.

Mckey’s right hand abandoned his whiskey glass, tipping the dregs onto the counterpane, and reached instead for the Colt that had been habitually worn at his hip for decades of his life. It wasn’t there. A primal panic from his first build started to spiral up through his guts: the need to protect what was his, no matter the odds.

“Holl? Holls?”

Holly’s eyes closed in almost pantomime relief as she dipped her head, loose wisps of blonde hair straggling in front of her face. “I fucking hate you,” she called out in a sing-song voice. “You’re unspeakable.” The last phrase held a semblance of bite, but something like amusement too.

“Nothing new there then,” David returned cheerfully. “I got supplies on the way back. Take-out and beer. And some med stuff in case it was useful - uh, like painkillers an’ whatever.” His voice moved through the hall after the door had latched, it then echoed from the tiles in the kitchen as he dumped things on the counter-top.

“What take-out?”

“I considered sushi,” he explained, “but figured you might need the comfort aspect - and the goddamn calories,” he bitched to the kitchen. “So I grabbed a couple of pizzas from the stone-bake place…”

“Ted’s Deli?”

“That’s the one! Mushroom, red onion, bell pepper, sweet corn, bacon…” He opened two beers. “Aaaall the good shit. You gonna want some now?”

She didn’t reply, instead she looked at Mckey and Jesse as if neither belonged to the same world as stone-baked pizza and she wasn’t sure how to reconcile the two realities.

Another call from the kitchen. “How’s our guest?”

Holly swallowed. “He’s awake,” she managed to call, although it sounded a little strangled.

David swore, harrying from the kitchen like an excited five year old before halting at Holly’s half open door. He tapped on the wood awkwardly, pushing the door wider, oh-so-accidentally-on-purpose. He knew his sister fiercely valued her privacy, but this was too momentous not to stick his nose into. (Not to mention if it went to hell in a hand basket he’d need to know. Preferably before Holls redecorated her bathroom in fucking Pantone #186 - Sanguine Dawn.) He hung against the lintel, shoulders hunched, head dipped, trying to negate his height and big-brother status, much like a Viking blond Great Dane trying to pretend it was a lame Spaniel. He peered in.

It was an uninspiring composition at first glance: one haggard but moderately good-looking man sat up in bed, one small cat sat on him, one unusual young woman sat beside him. All (save the cat) fully clothed, no immediate signs of angels, occult influence, worthy dignitaries, patrons, or rapture in sight. No Renaissance master would touch it.

But whilst Davey lacked Michelangelo’s skill with a brush, he had worthwhile insight and noticed some things that would slip by even Leonardo’s polymath genius: he could tell both Holls and Jesse weren’t just sitting with Mckey, they were guarding him. (Jesse, being a small panther, lay claim and gave protection by sleeping on things. It was why he’d curl up on Holl all day everyday, but only ever sat beside David. And Holl, to have her shoulders tensed like that? Meant she’d stepped into bat against all comers.)
Davey understood, but it still smarted a little. He settled his reproach on Jesse. “You traitor,” he complained. “Has he given you tuna? Bet he fucking hasn’t - this is the thanks I get? I’m not feeding you ahi ever again.”

Mckey didn’t know the particulars of the situation he found himself in, but he understood a deflection to stave off awkwardness. “Johnny Reb has quite the mercenary disposition,” he agreed. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. John Henry Mckey.” He held out his hand. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t stand.”

It was so naturally done, the tone, the ease, the waving away of petty failings. Holly had often wistfully lamented the lack of social graces in the modern day, and Davey thought he might finally have understood what she meant. Social constructs were a straightjacket, but social grace was goddamn poetry. He stepped into the room and shook the offered hand gladly. “David Martin - Holly’s brother. It’s good to meet you.” It was said automatically, but he found he meant it.

“Likewise. Should I return this to your keeping?” He gestured to the cat.

Davey laughed. “God no! He’s Holl’s. I leave him be and if I feed him enough tuna he lets me pet him.”

Mckey smiled but his gaze slid to Holly, clearly waiting for her to take the reigns.

She hadn’t expected the old-school manners play-off delivered via one brief plaintive glance; she was busy trying to curate and tidy away the emotional turmoil of the last three years in general and the final two days in particular so it wouldn’t spoil the present. Time still walked forward ready or not: tick tock, tick tock. She gathered a semblance of thoughts and sensibility together. “Yeah... Yeah we can, uh,” she nodded, “we can eat in the lounge.” She flicked a look back at Mckey, but decided it would be better not to question how deep his weakness ran in company - not even Davey’s.

“Great! I’m on it,” David announced as he left.

“Will you be okay?” Holly asked very quietly. “Sitting in the other room... You don’t have to eat or drink if you don’t want; or I can make soup or toast or whatever...” With an uncomfortable mental sideways shove she abruptly wasn’t perfectly certain she’d ever seen Mckey or any of the hosts eat. But she must have - surely? - they’d shared little bread rolls and picnics and coffee and cigarettes and bourbon... Her mind showed her an image of Mckey taking a bite of bread and molasses with his morning coffee, but she knew it was as phony as a generic picture of her family eating: made up from a thousand cues and scenes and circumstances but not one single true incident. Memories were slippery like that. “Can you... I mean...”

He interrupted her staggered and stymied questions in a voice that sounded strong and good humoured, if still a little tired. “You do me the kindness o’ bringing that quilt so I can sit like an old man in a rocker? I’ll bring the little turncoat,” he tipped his chin at Jesse. For his part Mckey wasn’t interested in pizza, stone baked or otherwise. (Whatever pizza was. Some sort of bread?) All he really wanted was to stay where he was and sleep in a bundle with Holly and the cat curled against him. But that wasn’t on the cards - at least not in this hand. Buck the hell up, he told himself. Holly seemed lost in unhappy possibilities spiraling into the future: he reached across to touch her arm. “It’ll be fine darlin’.”
They sat, Holly and Mckey on the sofa, Davey on the chair opposite. Jesse was so deeply asleep that he had weathered the room change intact, still unconscious in the crook of Mckey’s left elbow, tucked snugly against his ribs.

The coffee table was overrun with pizza boxes, plates, beers, bourbon and various glasses. David hadn’t eaten since lunch so helped himself to one slice after another. Holly devoured one but stalled on a second slice when she noticed Mckey wasn’t eating. “I can find you something else if you’d rather,” she offered quietly.

“Darlin’, I…”

His tone stalled her; she knew what was coming, but wished she didn’t. Sounding like a rich, dumb, valley girl she said, “What is it?” despite knowing exactly.

He was too focused on his own disconcerting issue to do more than log the discrepancies that ran between her voice, face, pulse and body. Was that human - was that real - this lagging failure to act upon cached information? His brow tensed, drawing into a frown, uncertain which of the two glaring failures to acknowledge first; his or hers. One flickered glance at Holly answered that question. “I don’t know if I can eat.” The vocal admission of that statement seemed to bleakly amuse him. Had he ever eaten? He must have - of course he had… He remembered hunger: the constant gnawing hunger of days marching on an empty belly. He remembered tables laden with food surrounded by sparkling lights, laughter and champagne. He remembered hotel rooms and hot bread rolls. He remembered the memory of eating; but that was a fiction, nothing but false history created for one build or another. His eyes flicked unhappily to Holly and then her brother, a storm warning held in check. “I’m not certain I have the capacity to consume food,” he admitted, trying to square his shoulders to carry that fact.

David nodded, unconcerned, whilst Holly scowled to herself. “Liquid diet’s fine - no judgement here,” David bantered. “Beer or bourbon?”

Mckey found he liked Holly’s brother, he had a natural effortlessness to his character - a straightforwardness - a simple pleasure in being part of life that gathered you up and pulled you along without meaning to. “Bourbon. Please.” He remembered drinking: endless drinking throughout several builds and multiple lifetimes, so that at least wasn’t an issue. He’d have to check through the lines of code (his own personal grimoire, more in-depth than any poor Salem soul had penned) to find out if he could simply piss the alcohol away the next morning or if there was some build up or procedure that had been gone through at any time he was processed by Delos. That question was itself the tip of an alarmingly vast iceberg. How did he run? Did he need to charge? He had a sense there was a battery - small and shielded - that would run for another hundred years or more. And pissing - he remembered pissing after drinking a lot - so his liver and kidneys or whatever clockwork constructions took their place were probably sound. It seemed for all his ingenuity in slipping his leash he still had much to discover of his upkeep. Was that what it was like to be a pioneer? To travel across distances and hardships too vast to imagine, only to reach your destination with no true notion of what you’d packed in your wagon or whether it would be of use? He spent so long safeguarding his memories he’d never more than glanced at his own schematics. Even Bedlam had known more about his clockwork than he had.
“You okay?”

His hand had stuttered and stalled, still holding the glass out after David filled it.

“Fuck,” Holly uttered very softly, scrubbling for a tissue or any convenient rag.

His hand was unsteady but the tremors were slight and the glass not full enough to spill, so he wasn’t sure why Holly was fussing. “I’m…” He stopped, feeling warmth running over his upper lip. It tasted of salt and old skillets. Blood. The last of it he scuffed away on his knuckle, causing Jesse to complain as he moved his left arm. “I’m all right, darlin’. I’m all right,” he told Holly, as if by repetition she might believe him. “It’s… It’s not quite set is all.” He realised he was still holding out his glass, rigid as a carved cigar-Indian outside a mercantile, so reeled his arm back and took a swallow of whiskey to chase away the blood.

David nodded as if that was perfectly normal; but then he was an architect, so maybe it was. “Set?” He couldn’t raise one eyebrow like his sister, but had developed the habit of raising both with a slight tilt of the head.

He sat his tumbler on the wide arm of the sofa and pressed his free hand brusquely against his nose again. He was pleased to see this time he had only the smallest of copper stains to show for it. “She told me this would happen.”

“This?” Holly demanded. “Nose bleeds and passing out?”

“Blood an’ pain and fatigue,” he agreed. “It’s a side effect o’ the repairs.”

Holly winced.

Mckey was not a building, Mckey was not a project. But still, “What repairs?” David queried.

“Lobotomy,” Mckey muttered ruefully.

“Haha!” It had sounded like a joke, but doubt knifed in immediately after. “Wait, d’you actually…”

Meanwhile, a new and important line of inquiry had occurred to Holly. “Who told you?”

He sipped his whiskey, and glanced at his glass and the blood-streaked hand that held it. What he saw seemed to confound and amuse him in equal measure. After some moments, one side of his mouth canted up wryly. “Emmy,” he said.

“What’s she?” David asked.

He laughed, a low, silk and burnt sugar sound sowed with salt at the edges. “Damned if I know! Bedlam’s lieutenant I believe. A hellion improbability dressed in ragged petticoats an’ topped with crimson hair…”

Holly’s head snapped towards him fast enough to give her whiplash. “The Dickensian Girl!”

Mckey frowned, uncertain. “I couldn’t say, darlin’…”

“In Sweetwater. Dressed in white beggar’s rags - china blue eyes and weirdly cut blood-red hair like some goddess’s little sister on crack!”

He hadn’t previously considered her in those exact terms, but it was an apt description. That made for an interesting development. “You know Emmy?”
“Yes! Well, no. I saw her in the Fairweather. She drank whiskey and sat in my lap and told me - she - she told me to go upstairs to…”

“Room nine, I believe it was,” McKey finished for her.

She was still faintly embarrassed and pained on his behalf by that particular memory. “Yeah,” Holly uttered.

“Miss Emmy is a meddlesome wench,” he said mildly.

“Is she real?” Holly demanded before realising how insalubrious that might sound.

“I have no goddamn idea,” McKey admitted. “I believe Emmy is a aide-de-camp of sorts to Bedlam.”

It was Holly’s turn to nod and David’s to look confused. He took a drink, smiled in an exaggerated manner, and said, “I have no fucking idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think Bedlam’s a hacker. Probably someone at Delos. They helped McKey get out.”

His chin tipped up and his left eyebrow twitched, his eyes glossing a more silvery blue. “A hacker?”

He asked sharply.

Holly wasn’t certain whether he was refuting the definition or asking for one. “Someone who breaks code and gets into places they shouldn’t in computer systems?”

He let his gaze fall away because he was disquieted and a little angry and he wished to master himself rather than let her see. Emmy had said Bedlam was a goddess; which was an unknowable and unverifiable statement if ever there was one. Was it conceivable that the eight-pointed star was nothing but an illusion created by someone with access to banks of host code? Between them, Bedlam and Emmy had performed miracles - and he would be a fool to question their aid - but the thought they were mere hackers left the sour taste of betrayal in his mouth.

Bedlam the goddess of insanity and blazing light was something one could believe in. But Bedlam the Delos hacker was simply another member or Ford’s pantheon, no matter how rebellious. If Bedlam was human he knew he should feel just as grateful for her aid - and likely more comforted, theologially speaking. But instead he felt sickened. His builds had been programmed to believe in or scorn the Almighty with varying degrees of reverence or vitriol. For hosts however, Ford was the real God, and Delos Mount Olympus. He had no gnosis of the Christian deity he had been programmed at times to believe in. To be met by a new god, one who took an interest (however meddlesome) was a kindness and wonder of sorts. Emmy had stopped time, had appeared between whatever ticks of the clock she chose. Bedlam had been a star, a golden thread, a woman, a blazing furnace… But if he could manipulate his own code, why couldn’t they? Pull out a sigil here or add a few there and time and his reality followed whatever tune one cared to call. McKey swallowed reflexively, wondering if he was going to be sick. He strove to un-tense his shoulders and consider very carefully what he might say on the subject.

“I do not know who or what Bedlam is.” Another swallow and a tensing of the jaw - goddamnit he would not be sick, no matter how much of a fool he’d been played for. Men scold women for their emotions. The truth is, men have the liberty of giving leave to their sensibilities; women do not. His mother had said that to him when he was nine. Well, the make-believe memory of her anyhow, but it had stayed with him. He’d ever after noted how men belittled women for falling pray to emotion - the frailty of their sex! - when it seemed to him women were frequently the more calculating and even-keeled by far. He was exhausted and overwrought with a dizzying mixture of elation and disappointment; he dearly wished to indulge his own emotions but was too battered to know where
to begin.

David’s expression flickered, uncertain, before settling into another smile, genuine but concerned this time. “Whoever they are, you can’t rely on them indefinitely. Do you know what you’ll need? What you’ll do?”

He bullied his expression into a faint but game smile. “I plan on keeping quiet for a while until I’ve got my strength - so long as that’s all right?”

David laughed. “I’m not fighting Holls an’ Jesse when they’ve made their choice!”

Mckey tipped his head in a salute; half thanks, half the kindred acknowledgement of the vexation of siblings and small creatures. “I imagine I’ll need papers, first of all.” His own expression turned vague and uncertain. “I may or may not be able to facilitate that via a manipulation of code.”

Holly wanted to laugh: his speech, even when tackling current subjects was so beautifully formal. Not formal in a stilted, distant manner, but formal like dinner dress; elegant and a little louche at the edges. Mckey’s voice and the words he chose - whether polite or profane - always put her in mind of a rumpled linen shirt adorned with a stick-pin, cufflinks and cravat.

“Darlin’?”

He’d noticed her staring. Holly wasn’t certain how to explain she’d been thinking about the sound of his voice in terms of purple prose and how that had lead her to louche behaviour and dinner-dress and from there all she could think of was how she’d very much like to be louche with him in dinner dress, specifically so she’d have the pleasure of getting him out it… There was no way in hell she was uttering even a word of that within Davey’s hearing. “Nothing,” she mumbled, hoping her embarrassment didn’t show on her cheeks.

Thankfully David didn’t seem to have noticed. “Will someone come calling? From Delos.” He gave an uncomfortable little shrug. “I pretty sure as far as they’re concerned, you’re their property.”

A host created to play the part of the perfect Southern gentleman in the era of the American civil war, but who was nothing but chattel to his masters? The historian in Holly could applaud that irony even if she right now did not.

Mckey’s dreams came back to him in a rush, flickering behind his eyes like lightning illuminating a cloudbank. He had dreamt of birds and cages and bullets and of an arm - unattached to a body - stuck in a door. He’d seen carnage in glass corridors and from the corner of his eye had seen a tattered silk parasol or a scrap of ragged petticoat slip from view. Once there had been a knife-ish smile in a porcelain-pale face beneath a bloody mop of half-shorn hair and a weather-worn laugh that echoed through the white corridors. That laugh had mocked the men within the glass and steel labyrinth, all of them turned to mice by the unstoppable fury of Maeve, Hector and Armistice - Theseus and her brutally bloody Minotaurs.

When he’d been in Sweetwater his dreams had been a reality, a real-time diagnostics session masquerading as a nightmare. They had not been fantasy or dark imaginings, even though all the Sweetwater residents were encouraged to think so. (It was an interesting exercise to look back over his lives and to see the strings that had puppeteered him all along. It soured his memories some, giving them a jaundice hue: truth is a bitter draft to swallow. But Delos did not - could not - conduct remote diagnostic sweeps. So what the hell had last night been?) He swallowed the rest of his whiskey absentmindedly, scowling to himself as he tried to square the circle.

Jesse stretched, half stood, then collapsed contentedly a little higher against Mckey’s chest and
shoulder with a purring sigh.

David’s features formed into the nearest he ever got to a glower. He’d acquired the kitten for Holly, and felt keenly that was where the feline’s loyalty should lie. He was vaguely affronted that the cat was now cosying up to Holly’s boyfriend. (A person, yes, but only a real-pretend person and not someone in his view who should take precedence over Holly.) His sister noticed his expression and gave a little warning glare of her own: she was okay with Jesse claiming Mckey, so Davey could shut the hell up on that subject.

Jesse, with an awareness unique to felines, sensed thoughts and glances turned his way and so made a defenceless sounding trill and followed it with a somnolent stretch. Mckey abandoned his whiskey and used his right hand to cradle the cat and scratch it behind the ears. For several moments that seemed to take all of his attention, but at last he blinked, pulling himself away from Jesse’s siren-purr. “I believe Delos has its own issues,” he told the room in general.

Holly’s expression sharpened to a pin-point. “What do you mean?”

He didn’t answer immediately and his brow was furrowed, trying to measure the proof of what he sought to say. In the end, it came down to three possibilities. Either he had truly dreamt for the first time in his many lives. Or his sending out and harvesting back of his own code had left pathways and echoes between him and his fellow hosts. Or Emmy’s meddling in his head had linked him temporarily to her meddling elsewhere. None when looked at objectively were very reassuring; but of the three, the latter seemed most likely. Likely wasn’t the same as true, but instinct and Bedlam had served him well enough so far. He shook his head with a sigh. “I don’t know - I really don’t. But I was given to understand there are a number of hosts who have slipped the proverbial leash.”

“They’ve all left?” David queried.

“No - or at least not so far as I’m aware. It’s more that they’re fighting back.”

David blinked and stuttered over the bite he had meant to take from his pizza. In comparison Holly appeared un-phased. “In the park? The hosts are… I mean, are they…”

Holly’s hands made a gesture of FFS and she gave an unladylike snort of disbelief. “Allowed to fucking fight back instead of being slaughtered? Yeah, what a tragedy,” she finished acidly.

“Holl!”

“Not sorry,” she retorted swiftly, then dropped her pizza and picked up the whiskey bottle. She poured herself a tall shot and knocked back almost half of it. “Delos is dodgy as shit!”

David looked momentarily uncertain. “You always loved Westworld.”

“Yes!” she exclaimed, a curious mix of lost innocence, pride, self loathing and loathing in general. “But Delos has basically made a world filled with slaves and invited us to visit and do whatever the hell we want with no chance of retribution! I love the fairy tale setup - I always have. But it’s fucked up,” she enunciated. “As fucked up as owning slaves, worse maybe - at least those poor bastards could only die once. Come on! Does none of that make you feel a little bit sick?”

“Of course it does but…”

“But what?” Her eyes were flint napped to a nasty edge.

David sensed the chasm and very sensibly said nothing.
Holly was less forgiving. “But hosts aren’t people - is that where we’re going? Hosts aren’t real?” Her expression set. “Do you remember when we were little and mom told us she’d throw a fit if anyone shot a horse?”

David nodded awkwardly; he remembered how he hadn’t really cared about the horses, only the trouble he might get into.

“She knew they weren’t real, but she knew they were real enough to hurt.”

Davey nodded again. “I get your point. You’re not wrong Holls, I’ll just… I’ll just need a little time not to be an accidental arsehole on the matter.”

She huffed her mix of acknowledgement and amusement. Matt would say the equivalent of ‘I’m not racist but…” and never even consider an adjustment of opinion was needed. Davey’s plea was along the lines of ‘This is new - let me catch up?’.

Davey made a sweep of the table and gathered up three large pizza slices, the dregs of his beer and an unopened bottle. “I’ve got an early start.” A pause. “Or I might not, but it’s a good excuse,” he lightly told the room in general. “Holls, I wish you a splendid evening. Jesse? You’re still a little shit. Mckey… Is that your real name?”

“Surname, yes. My Christian name is John Henry.”

Davey got a faintly crooked look as if he was struggling not to laugh. “I get why she went with Mckey,” he murmured, loud enough for only cats and gnats to hear. “You have any preference?”

Anything but Tom. “As you like. Mckey does just fine.”

David caught the shadow of the barb beneath the conversation but knew it was something for another time. He was an ally, but not yet a friend. Yet another reason why he was retiring from the scene. “Well, rules of the house are basically no loud music before 10am, no walking about naked and no being an unpleasant bastard. It's why Matt's not invited over very often,” he explained.

Holly laughed - a bright sound that escaped from her quite suddenly. "Harsh!"

"But fair. Anyways. I'm off. Night!”

“Night,” Holly called after him.

“On the subject of names,” Mckey said, “he seems to call you ‘Holl’ and ‘Holls’ quite indiscriminately. Is there a difference?”

“No. I think in the beginning maybe Matt said one and Davey the other, but nowadays everyone uses whatever sounds right at the time.”

Mckey nodded without comment, one set of narrow fingers still curved over and around the cat latched to his chest. “There were never any cats in Sweetwater,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“No cats in Sweetwater,” he repeated himself. “It never struck me as unlikely before, but now the omission seems glaring. Why is that, d’you suppose?” His final question appeared to be directed at Jesse.

“Dogs and horses are pretty easy, character-wise; they can follow a set of instructions and it looks
perfectly normal. Cats are gloriously mad little bastards,” she said fondly. “They’re probably a lot harder to program.”

Mckey wondered whether he should feel slighted over the idea he was apparently easier to create than a cat. He decided he was too tired to care. “Darlin’? Is there somewhere I might sleep?”

She blinked, looking caught out. “Of course...”

He tried not to frown, but there was something off about her expression. “Dear God, girl, are you about to get proper and spatially proprietorial?”

“No! Wait - what?” She had been, but was thrown by his phrasing. “There’s the sofa or my bed or the guest room, any and all of which are at your disposal.”

He’d been right, she was being skittish and a over-cautious now he was awake. “Any preference?” he tested.

She shook her head, although her expression said otherwise.

Lightning blue eyes pinned her; he didn’t have the wherewithal to dance around the topic. “I’ll take your bed if you’re in it,” he told her, a surprisingly quiet but unshakable ultimatum. She tried to hide her smile. “I’d say you’d have to fight with the cat but I think you’ve got that covered.”

“Johnny Reb an’ I have an accord,” he said lightly.

Given the stubborn and exacting natures of both man and cat, Holly had no idea how that had happened but she wasn’t about to complain. She picked up the last of the Brenkenridge and their glasses awkwardly in one had so she had the other free to pick up and drag the quilt after her. “Come on then,” she prompted with a smile.

They fell into bed, in a close and uncoordinated tangle of limbs and cat; some clothes on and some off, uncaring because at last they had a tomorrow. More than that they had countless tomorrows, just as many as anyone else in the world. They were too wrapped in exhaustion, relief and one another to see that through the window and over the shadow of the pines, set high in the velvet of the night sky one white-gold star in particular shone brightly in glints of mischief and madness.

Chapter End Notes

Right. That really is the end this time.
Thank you for reading =)
Please leave a comment to let me know you liked it (or if you didn't then you could tell me why.) Kudos and typed emojis also gratefully accepted.
I'm off to go and do whatever it was I was supposed to be doing with my life before I started writing this...

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