

Haunted

K.J. Perry

2020

Chapter 1

Hook

Daphne's suddenly-silenced scream confirmed it; he was the last one left. David cowered in the wardrobe, hugging himself tightly, struggling to breathe as silently and as shallowly as he could against the pounding of his heart.

Ice trickled down his veins as he heard the hinges of the bedroom door squeak.

He heard the clank of steel on stone; of every step. He smelled the copper stink of Daphne's blood. It was utterly dark in the wardrobe.

Desperate, fumbling, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. His own pale face leapt out of the darkness as the screen lit up his features and illuminated the dark interior of the wardrobe, flashing on its mirrored door. He did not have to stifle a cry of horror; he was too frightened to find his voice.

He unlocked the phone and typed swiftly and silently, struggling to control his breathing as the soft scrape and

clank of steel on stone moved gently through the room.

The wardrobe burst open, and he found his voice at last. Cold steel ended his scream.

His phone fell from his limp fingers, and broke its screen on the floor. A foot booted in steel crushed it to powder.

Chapter 2

Inciting Event

Robert Alaya never did get his boyfriend's final text message. He assumed that David had decided to ghost him after finding someone more interesting during his resort stay. This wasn't a particularly surprising or painful thought; Robert was used to this sort of thing. Easy come, easy go, after all; and David could come to a shapely gust of wind.

He did not immediately return to Tinder and to Grindr. Instead he allowed himself to wallow in a feeling of inadequacy, for a while, and he brought home more product than paycheck for a couple of years. Then he was back on his feet, still somewhat stoned, and making actual money behind the counter.

On Wednesday, July 15th, 2015, Robert Alaya looked up from his phone to see that a beautiful Middle-Eastern or perhaps Mediterranean young man had just entered the dispensary, wearing a navy-blue three-piece suit and white gloves. He was impeccably well-groomed and his

cologne was bold and masculine. Robert didn't notice the scent until the young man reached the counter.

“Howdy! Happy Hump Day, man,” said Robert. “What can I, like, get you?”

He played up the hippy happy stoner façade for serious business types; it made them think he knew how to get them out of the rigid stress of their lives. He did, but sometimes, even if you knew that you could do something, you had to play into people's biases if you wanted to persuade them to let you. He concealed his gayness without too much difficulty, although the man before him seemed effeminate or European enough to not mind it.

The young man smiled very pleasantly, revealing flawless teeth. “I am Mehdi. I have come to deliver unto you an invitation.” Mehdi had an unplaceable accent, somewhere between Arabic, French, and British. It was very attractive, to Robert, who had a thing for ‘exotic’ men. He tried never to use the word ‘exotic’ when describing his desires, but it boiled down to that.

“An invitation?” asked Robert.

Mehdi reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and drew out a wax-sealed envelope, and held it out towards Robert with both hands. Robert took it with a measure of the same reverence with which it was given, and looked at the address.

It read simply: “Robert Alaya.”

He looked up at Mehdi, asking, “But why are you inviting—”

Mehdi was gone. The bell by the door had not rung when he left. Robert wondered with a little chill if it had rung when he entered.

He looked again at the letter. The seal was in blue wax, and represented a beautiful domed palace under the spreading wings of a raven.

Robert broke the seal, and opened the envelope, and withdrew a letter written on very heavy paper. It read:

“Dear Robert Alaya,

So, I bet you thought I had ghosted you. It’s a long story. Let me explain it in person?

XOXO —David.

P.S.: Ticket included!”

A first-class airplane ticket for a flight departing the next day was in the envelope along with the letter. Robert looked at it, his eyebrows rising.

He glanced at the schedule hanging on the wall. Someone had crossed out the next week of his shifts, and written in: “Angie” instead.

He knocked on the manager’s office. Simon buzzed him in.

Simon swiveled around in his chair to look at Robert. “What’s up?”

Robert said, “I notice my shifts are all covered?”

Simon nodded. “Yeah. Your boyfriend called and told me the whole situation. I’m happy for you guys, but I do wish you had given me more advance notice.”

“Wait, you canceled my shifts because someone you don’t even know called you and said that he was my boyfriend?”

“Yeah. How often do you get to fly to some rich guy’s private island? I’m not about to stand in the way of a billionaire.”

“Billionaire!?”

“Yeah. He bought the whole company before he called me.”

“What!?”

“Anyway, again, if you’d let him know I’d like a little advance warning next time, I’d appreciate it.”

“Oh, uh... Yeah, I’ll let him know,” said Robert, still dazed. He clutched the letter tightly in his hand.

Carol Frost snapped awake, the last gunshots still ringing in her ears. She stared at her apartment's popcorn ceiling and struggled to get her heart rate and breathing under control. In the haze of the morning darkness she reached blindly for Esmerelda's pillow, and found that it wasn't hers anymore. Someone else lay there, sound asleep: a very hairy bitch.

"Hi Sundance," said Carol, as Sundance wagged her tail and gave her owner a weary but understanding look of sympathetic patience. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Sundance yawned and stretched, deciding that three AM was as good a time as any for a brisk walk. Carol agreed.

She swung her legs out of the bed, kissed her fingers, touched them to Esmerelda's portrait, then put her feet into her slippers, wrapped a robe around herself, dropped her Taurus 85 into the pocket of her robe, dropped a pint bottle of Jaeger and a packet of Camels into her other pocket, and slipped out the front door.

Sundance darted out with her, performed a session of luxurious stretches, shook herself, and started walking. Carol followed, watching her dog weave from one interesting scent to another.

Suburbia. It was safe, here; far from the city, far from the danger. Far from everything, really. There were problems, of course, but they weren't Carol's problems anymore. The woman next door beat her children and

abused her husband. The man on the other side had an ongoing affair with his child's caretaker. The house behind her was the house of a registered sex offender, but he only groped children, so Carol didn't feel too threatened walking past his house. She took her usual short loop, grateful for the streetlamps.

Sundance found a good spot and relieved herself in someone's front yard. Carol unscrewed her bottle of Jaeger and downed the dregs of it, then sucked her teeth, screwed the cap back onto the bottle, dropped the empty bottle into her pocket, and lit up a cigarette. She stood looking at her dog's shit and smoking the cigarette for a long time, trying to get her lower brain to associate the two so that pure revulsion would help her quit.

The cigarette was the first in many hours; it left her unpleasantly light-headed and weak. Her stomach churned, reminding her that Jaeger and birthday cake were not a good dinner.

She kicked some dead leaves over her dog's shit and kept walking, but Sundance whimpered and sat.

Carol looked over her shoulder at the dog. "What?"

Sundance gave a low growl and a gruff little bark.

"Fine. Don't be so judgemental."

Carol came back to the yard, bent in the grass, and very carefully bagged up the poop. Then she tied off the bag, dropped it into her neighbor's dumpster, and kept walking. "Satisfied?"

Sundance growled, and did not move. Her eyes were fixed on the door of the house.

Carol reached into her pocket and her hand found the cold grip of her Taurus 85. The little .38 caliber revolver fit nicely into her hand. “What is it, girl?”

Sundance approached the front door stiffly, her tail held out straight behind her. Carol looked at the porch of the darkly sleeping, dingy little house. Nothing caught her eye.

She looked around, checking her surroundings, the street, the cars, the other houses. She was alone. Not a window on the street still glowed. A very nice, soot-black 1962 Thunderbird sat parked in the street before this house. She had never seen it before.

She looked back towards the darkly sleeping, dingy little house, and saw a man in a pearl-white three-piece suit, standing on the porch. She jumped. Her grip tightened on the revolver.

“Good evening,” said the man. His accent was complex and impossible to place.

“Is it?” Carol asked.

The man smiled slightly. “I am Mehdi. I have come to deliver unto you an invitation.”

She drew her pistol and pointed it at him very levelly. “The fuck you did. You came here at 3:00 AM to find me? You came here to die.”

The man raised his hands. “Come, come. I am aware

that you have many enemies, but I do not wish to be one of them. I was told to come here at this time. This is hardly the first time you have walked your dog in the early morning.”

“You’re just digging your own grave, buddy.”

The man’s hand flickered; instantly an envelope was between his fingers. “Here,” he said. “I will place this letter here, on the rail of your porch, and if you will permit me, I will bid you goodnight, and drive away.”

“My porch? That’s not my porch.”

The man laughed. “Do you not recognize your own house?”

Then he began to walk fearlessly towards her, and fearless Sundance ran and cowered behind her as she backed out of his path. He opened the door of the Thunderbird and settled himself inside. Looking through the windows at her, he smiled. “Look again, Detective.”

Then he drove away. Something about the way he did it frightened Carol deeply. She could not figure out what it was until he had rounded the corner and disappeared from view.

He had never started the engine. It must have been modified with some kind of modern electric engine, she reasoned.

She looked back at the house and shook her head.

It was, in fact, her house. Somehow she had looked right at it without recognizing it.

She looked at Sundance. “Big help you were.”

Sundance whimpered and wagged her tail and Carol gave her a reassuring pat.

She walked up the drive. She had looked at her home without seeing it for so long that now, when she saw it in an unfamiliar light, she did not recognize it. Esmerelda was gone, and it was no longer a home. It was merely another anonymous little house in the suburbs, and a filthy, cluttered one at that. Piles of dog poop sat in the dry overgrown lawn and most of the hedges were dead.

Carol stood on the porch and stared at the street, unable to face the truth of how far her world had crumbled. She smoked another Camel and looked at the mysterious letter in its sealed envelope. It was addressed simply to “Carol Frost.”

She broke the blue seal and pulled out the folded letter within.

“Dear Heart,

I’m not dead. Come and find me.

—E.”

She dropped the letter and a plane ticket spilled out of the envelope. She picked it up.

She stared out into the distance, her paranoid eyes searching the street. For a game, it was a very elaborate one. She would play it, then; and find out who had dared to taunt her in her grief.

Zhao Guozhi, known to his American friends and students as Doctor George Zhao, sat in a starched white shirt and crisp red bow-tie, his glasses perched on his nostrils, his tongue sticking out one side of his mouth. A large brass magnifying glass attached to a jointed armature hung between him and the tiny butterfly. *Brephidium exilis*, the Western Pygmy Blue, lay on the smooth white display sheet, four of its six minuscule legs already pinned in place by the smallest pins in George's possession. The little butterfly's two dozen tiny brethren already lay posed and pinned along the rest of the display.

George could taste sweat in his stubble. He held two pairs of tweezers, one in each hand. In the tips of the tweezers there were two nearly microscopic pins. *Brephidium exilis* had an average wingspan of 16 millimeters.

The office was silent save for the gentle ticking of the antique astrolabe clock in the corner. A china hutch behind him held shelves piled with the skulls of foxes that had been domesticated by neolithic man. Glossy dark-wood storage cabinets lined the walls of the office in dusty rows, and from the vaulted ceiling hung a partially articulated pteranodon, a stuffed snowy owl, and a badly taxidermied badger with a top hat, a monocle, and an umbrella.

The work bench took up most of the space in the room. It had to. George was a horizontal organizer. Many years ago, he had read a book by a certain prominent

philosopher and it had unlocked the secrets of success for someone with his one grievous vice: procrastination. He had etched its teachings into his soul, and had promptly forgotten the name of the book and the name of its author. One had to forget things, from time to time, if one wanted to hold onto valuable data.

Still, he was sure that the philosopher would have understood his forgetfulness, and cheerfully forgiven it. The writer had left that kind of positive impression.

George teased *Brephidium exilis*'s tiny, fragile, millimeters-long leg out into an extended position. It was so tiny and so delicate that he could not feel the resistance of the brittle joints. He held his breath the entire time his needles were near the specimen, letting the beats of his heart move the tip of the tiny needle in the direction it needed to go. Two gentle brushing movements accomplished the pose, and he pushed the needle into place.

Satisfied, he placed the other needle into position and locked the leg in place.

He leaned back before he gave a sigh of relief; it would have been tragic to disturb all the specimens with a gust of wayward breath.

He yawned, and stretched, and looked at the astrolabe-clock. On his little brass perch above it, Archimedes sat watching, his head twisting to keep George always in one eye. "What time is it, Archimedes?"

Archimedes turned his head to look into the astrolabe. He croaked softly, like the whisper of a refined butler,

“It’s two thirty.”

George nodded, then realized what he had just done, and leapt to his feet, shouting: “No!”

But the well-trained Archimedes took to the wing, and flew across the room for his anticipated treat, and his wings scattered the tiny butterflies inside the still-open shadowbox.

George slumped back into his chair and began to cry.

Archimedes landed on the table near the magnifying glass and croaked softly, puffing out his feathers at his friend’s teary, defeated reaction.

George took off his glasses, closed his eyes, covered his face in his hands, and pressed his palms into his eyeballs until spots danced in the weary darkness. His back ached. His hips ached. His stomach twisted with the 2:00 AM nausea. He let his elbows and knees take the weight of his body for a while, sitting hunched forward, stretching his back. The pain faded slowly and a bitter emptiness took its place.

Archimedes nibbled his ear.

George laughed, and sat up. “Sorry, Archie. That was my fault, not yours.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a shelled, unsalted peanut. He gave it to Archie, who happily started working on it.

He watched his companion cleverly break and strip the kernels from the nut, and eat them, and something

about the simplicity of Archimedes's life healed his soul a little.

In six hours, the exhibit would open, and he would have how many samples of *Brephidium exilis*? He dared to drag his eyes at last to the shadow box and saw that only three of the tiny butterflies lay still upon the crisp white sheet, and that all their brethren had scattered.

"This is what I get for keeping a winged creature in here while I'm working on this," he said, to himself, stroking Archimedes's back.

Archimedes said, "Sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry, you didn't do anything wrong. I'm sorry."

"It's ok."

George smiled. "Well, I'm just going to have to start over."

"Go to sleep. Go to sleep."

"I can't. I've got to finish this."

Archimedes mimicked George's voice perfectly, saying, "Go to bed, Archimedes."

George laughed. "Ok. Go to bed, Archimedes."

Archimedes made a clicking sound of acceptance and flew back to his perch, and tucked his beak under one wing.

The door closed behind George.

He had not left it open. He whipped around, every vertebrae tingling.

A man in a forest green two-piece suit stood just inside the door. He smiled pleasantly, and the scent of his cologne wafted over George. "Sorry to startle you," said the extremely handsome green-eyed bearded man. George did not dare to make any assumptions about the man's origins; he knew no matter what country or race he guessed, he would be wrong. The man was a perfect example of the imaginary and temporary nature of race as a concept, and a perfect example of healthy human beauty, to boot.

George, who was Chinese from the Jiangsu province by his father and Pennsylvania Dutch by his Nebraskan mother, gaped wordlessly at this prime specimen of the species, and said, "Oh, n-no, it's fine, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here so late. Do you need me to leave?"

"No," said the beautiful man. "I don't need you to do anything. I am here to deliver a message unto you."

He slipped nearer to George, his green eyes drifting down George's body in a very detectable way. The scent of his cologne and his skin underneath it lit a fire in George's heart and the man slipped the long slender fingers of one smooth dark hand into the breast pocket of his immaculately fitted jacket, and withdrew an envelope with a blue wax seal. Then, inches away, he reached out gently and placed one fingertip to George's chin, and gently as the downy feather of *Somateria spectabilis* he trailed that finger down George's trachea, between his

breasts, across his solar plexus, down through his navel, to the very button of his jeans, and gently slid down between his jeans and the tucked-in frontispiece of his button-down shirt. He pulled the waistband open ever so slightly, and slid the envelope in. Then he smiled, blinking his long lashes like the wings of *Ascalapha odorata*, and turned away, leaving only the whisper of his cologne and the shuffle of his buttocks to remember him by.

George stood trembling, terrified, utterly bewildered. He had to pee very badly.

He took the letter out of his waistband and looked at the seal by the light of the work-table lamp. A castle lay under the spreading wings of a raven—of a specific species of raven. *Corvis albicollis*. He could tell by the shape of the beak. He looked at Archimedes, asleep on his perch; another representative of this species.

Curious now, he lifted a brass letter opener from his tool cup and slit the wax seal and dropped the letter opener somewhere else on the table thoughtlessly. He opened the envelope. He pulled out the letter.

He held the mysterious paper in his hands, and knew that it was no standard weight or cut. The letter and its envelope were both custom parchment.

In very fine but clearly legible calligraphy, the letter read,

“Esteemed Professor Zhao Guozhi,

Inside the envelope this letter came in, there is a plane ticket for you and Archimedes. It will take you to the island I have discovered and colonized. The creatures on this island have evolved away from all outside influences, and none are migratory. Never-before seen genii and species grow prolifically on the island. There are thousands of new species of Lepidoptera, all unique to the island. I think you will find them very intriguing.

Yours, Mehdi”

Inside the envelope there was a folded, very glossy poster that George unfolded to reveal a massive collage photo of butterflies and birds, reptiles and rodents, mammals and insects, amphibians and fish. George’s eyebrows raised. He looked at the plane tickets.

“Oh shit! We have to go now!”

He scratched his head anxiously and looked at the shadow box and its last remaining butterflies, only to find that all of the butterflies had miraculously returned, pinned themselves pristinely, and sealed themselves safely inside their glass case. He reasoned that he had been so sleep deprived he had imagined the Archimedes incident.

He checked to make sure the ticket was still real and that he wasn’t dreaming. He pinched his nose and tried to breathe through it; his most foolproof reality check.

He wasn’t dreaming. He looked at Archimedes. He turned the ticket over and on the back he saw the words: “Meet me outside.”

He said, “Am I being kidnapped?”

Archimedes said, “Ace of Pentacles.”

“What?” said George.

“King of Pentacles,” said Archimedes.

George shook his head. “Maybe I’m dead.”

It was earlylate enough in the mornnight to think these kinds of thoughts. George looked at Archimedes, put on his bracer, and held out his arm. “If I’m dead, will you be my spirit guide?”

“Queen of Cups!” said Archimedes, and he flew to George’s arm.

“I don’t know what that means,” said George.

“Knight of Wands,” said Archimedes.

“Ooh, does that mean, ‘a tall, dark, and handsome man?’ Because I think we just met him.”

“The Emperor, Inverted,” said Archimedes.

“That sounds like a fun pose,” said George, taking the handle of the office door. It had taken centuries to cross the hall, somehow. He wasn’t sure if he was excited or dead or having a panic attack, but he managed to open the door and get out into the hall.

The Archaeology department was fucking terrifying at night. Only the most important display lights were lit and only bright enough for the security cameras to see. The office lights were all dark, their doors all closed. Oc-

casional staircases yawned on either side of the long hall, heading both up and down. Elevator bays were never far from them. Decorative displays stood in places or hung on certain walls and in certain high alcoves. At one end of the long main hall the green-glowing EXIT sign looked like safety. As he walked he felt the stares of every stone and painted face he walked past. Shapes loomed in the darkness, eldritch and unknown, not illuminated by the few display lamps.

At last he reached the doors, and pushed them open with one hand, careful not to disturb Archimedes. He stepped out into the autumn night and leaves hissed in the high branches of the northern red oak trees on the far side of the parking lot. The asphalt was slick and wet, and the air tasted of rain.

“Wait,” he said. “It’s July!”

He shook himself. It was no illusion. The night was cold and damp, although the clouds hung idle above, not raining yet.

He looked around the huge expanse of the empty parking lot and at last saw one car parked in the shade of a vine maple tree. The car was a Thunderbird. A 1962, he thought. Glossy black. In perfect condition. The lid was down; it sat waiting, small and bug-eyed and shark-finned and yet, somehow, sexy.

He approached it. Archimedes croaked, “Nine of cups.”

“Is that a good thing?” George asked.

Archimedes didn't answer.

He reached the car after a million years of walking. Was he high? Was this a vision? Was he dead? Was he really just this sleep deprived? He didn't know.

He reached the side of the car. He didn't dare to look in the driver's seat; he knew the messenger was there; he could smell his cologne.

He reached for the handle and found the door unlocked. He opened the door. He very carefully seated himself in the tiny space of the leather-lined interior. They were almost shoulder to shoulder.

"Are you ready?" asked Mehdi.

"Wait," said George. "What about Archimedes!"

"Let him fly. He will follow us. I have a cage in the trunk."

He looked at Archimedes. "No, he wants to sleep. Can I put him at my feet? Or in my lap?"

"If you wish."

"I mean, in your cage?"

"You wish to look into my trunk? I will let you look into my trunk. Come, we will go, and lift the trunk, and look into it together."

"Ok," said George. Here it was coming. He was about to get mugged, or raped, or kidnapped, or murdered, or taken to a third location with a total stranger to have all those things happen to him, or he was going to an island

where unknown species waited to be discovered.

He got out of the car. He followed the messenger around to the back of the car.

They faced each other, eye to eye. They were nearly the same height; he hadn't noticed it before.

The man knelt very quietly and touched his key to the keyhole. The trunk instantly popped open.

Two large duffle bags lay inside, along with a cage taken from George's home. He looked at the messenger.

"What's in the bags?"

The man opened them carefully. George looked.

"This is my stuff," he said. "You've been in my house?"

"I have," said the messenger.

"Who are you?"

"I am Mehdi," said Mehdi.

"So you wrote that letter?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I did not have the boldness to speak in your presence. I believed I could express myself better—and ensure that you would come with me, even on such short notice—with a formal letter complete with a modicum of proof. You will be the first biologist to visit the island."

“But why me?”

“You are a prominent zooarchaeologist, and I have greatly admired your work. Your potential is squandered here. I wish to elevate you.”

“You really mean it?” George asked. He was holding Archimedes in a covered cage now. He didn’t remember any of the steps they had taken to get there. Mehdi was already driving down a highway towards the airport. George didn’t dare to look at the speedometer. He could tell they were going over a hundred miles an hour. The highway was an open stretch, easy and flat, with only late-night truckers in the right-hand lane to look out for.

“I really mean it,” said Mehdi.

“Did you do something to me? Am I drugged?” George asked.

“You have not slept in two days,” said Mehdi. “You are becoming delirious. Close your eyes. You are safe now. I will wake you when we get to the airport.”

“Wait, if this island is never-before discovered, why can we just fly there?”

“The flight will land in Bermuda, and we will take our ship from there.”

“From Bermuda?”

“From Bermuda.”

“You’re not talking about...?”

The man laughed. “The triangle?”

“Yeah.”

“Why, does it frighten you? You’re much too intelligent to be so superstitious, Doctor Zhao.”

“It doesn’t frighten me, it just seems a bit silly. That someone could find an island in the middle of it.”

“The island isn’t there. It is deep beneath the sea.”

“Um,” said George, “Excuse me. Perhaps you meant, ‘Far in the southern sea?’”

Mehdi shook his head. “I did not.”

“*Under* the sea? So this is it, then, I—I’m being kidnapped, I’m getting murdered, aren’t I? You’re just going to rape me and torture me and kill me in some horrible way and I’m just going to be some weird moment in your sick fetish, aren’t I? Just a porn tab you delete when it’s inconvenient! Well I won’t be that!”

George reached into his pocket and pulled out his pocketknife and unfolded the blade. “Let me out or I’ll stab you!”

“Wait! I’m telling the truth! See for yourself!”

He tossed another envelope into George’s lap. He didn’t remember them raising the hood of the Thunderbird, but it was closed. He opened the manila envelope and found inside a set of geological survey charts, topological maps, and one cutaway view of the island from profile view.

“An undersea mountain?” George asked.

“Mhmm,” said Mehdi. “The whole cavern is the result of a geological miracle. Only the mouth of the island lies above the water.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I assure you, it isn’t. You will soon see for yourself. There’s just one stop we have to make before the airport.”

“Where?”

“San Francisco.”

“But that’s two hundred miles from here!”

“What, afraid you won’t enjoy my company that long?” Mehdi asked, gently resting his hand on George’s thigh.

A cold sweat broke out on George’s brow and he stared resolutely out the window, very conscious of the hot heavy hand on his leg. Mehdi patted his thigh, then moved his hand back to the gear shifter.

Mehdi said, “Sorry. I can see by your reaction that you didn’t find that charming.”

“I mean, I did,” said George. “It’s just that I don’t know you.”

“Yes, wouldn’t it be boring if you did?”

Matthew Moore sat at the plastic table outside the enormous bookshop, shaking hands and signing copies. The audience was a strange one; a mix of all social classes, races, and types. Most of them seemed grateful to the point of tears. A few were there to get copies as gifts, but even they seemed overawed by Matthew's easy glamor.

He sat in a suit jacket and halfway unbuttoned dress shirt, presenting a line of dark-haired male cleavage that almost distracted from his lantern jaw, aquiline nose, impertinent lips, and sea-grey eyes. His hair was a shaggy mass of honey-blond, artfully styled so as to look recently-tousled. His cologne was crisp and fresh, and a silver watch flashed on his thin wrist. The pen in his long fingers moved like a little dancer, each signature as flourishing and overdone as the first.

He smiled easily, as though it were a genuine one.

Gladys Forthbright, next in line, came forward with her copy. She could barely get her fingers to unlock and release it into his fine hands, and as he opened it up and asked, "So, who am I signing this for?" her eyes met his and she felt her knees go weak.

He smiled. "Gladys?"

"How do you know my name!?" She asked. She knew him to be a powerful psychic, of course, but it still amazed her.

He smiled as though to himself, his eyes flicking down

to her nametag then back up to her face. “Well. Sometimes things just come to me.”

He signed. He handed it back. She was ushered to one side before she could find her voice. She looked at the book, and opened the cover, and looked at the signature. It read: “To Gladys. Hold on tight! Things will work out for the best.”

Overawed, she hovered on the sidelines and watched the author sign the next few copies.

His latest book, *Shadows of the Former Mind*, was all about his psychic interventions in various patient lives. Gladys had read all of his books religiously, and now she had touched the man himself. She could feel her latent psychic potential burgeoning in his presence.

Matthew took the next copy to sign, but as he looked up and asked, “Who am I making this out to?” something in a second-floor window of the apartment across the street caught his eye. A beautiful black man was standing in the window, looking right at him, and very slowly unbuttoning his own shirt as he did so.

The next person in line, Jonathan Novak, said, “Uh, for Beatrice, please?”

“What?” Matthew asked. He tore his eyes away from the unfolding scene in the window and looked at Jonathan.

“For Beatrice,” said Jonathan.

“Right you are,” said Matthew, forcing himself to look at the book as he signed it. “She’s a fan, then?”

“Nah, she hates you. It’s a gag gift.”

Matthew laughed. “Well, in that case...” He wrote: “To Beatrice; I hope this makes you laugh.”

He handed the book to Jonathan with a friendly smile, and Jonathan cocked his head slightly, took the book, and made room for the next person in line.

Matthew’s eyes turned to the window again. The buttons had come undone. The shirt was coming off. The man had the kind of sculpted, flawless San Francisco body that can only come about through deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and many thousands of hours of hard, hard work. As the shirt came away, the man’s eyes never left Matthew’s.

“Uh... Mister Moore?” said the young woman in line.

“Sorry,” said Matthew. “What were you saying?”

“Can you read my mind, and put what I’m thinking of on the signature?”

“Now my dear, if I did that for you, I’d have to do that for everyone. And people’s heads are full of many things, you know; they’re bound to find the results disappointing.”

“You just can’t do it, can you?”

Matthew laughed. In his almost nondetectable ear-piece, his assistant Minerva said, “Her last Instagram

post is about her recently-deceased older sister. Name was Morgan.”

Loving his assistant’s endless utility, Matthew allowed his eyes to roll back into his head, and wrote: “Hold on, little sister. It’s going to be OK. —Morgan.”

He handed the book to the young woman, who glanced at the signature and gasped, tears jumping into her eyes.

“Can I hug you?” She asked.

“Do you believe in me now?”

“Yes.”

“Then sure. Come here.”

He stood up and gave an awkward but warm hug over the table, his eyes never leaving the beautiful black man who was now undoing his belt. The black man winked, and closed the curtains of his window.

“Excuse me,” Matthew said, as he broke the hug. He glanced at his security detail and held up one finger. They nodded and stepped in. He put up the “back in fifteen minutes” sign and smiled at his audience. “I’m sorry everyone. I’ll be back as soon as I can! I sense a disturbance in that apartment. I’m going to go see what it is.”

Several people, of course, wanted to come with him and see his process. He said, “No, no! Trust me, it will be better if I’m alone. The spirits will be less agitated. Now, everyone please wait out here!”

He went to the side-yard entrance of the apartment and knocked on the door.

After a long moment, it swung inward, revealing a very naked young man who smiled and leaned against the doorframe.

“Read my mind, huh?” said the young man.

“It wasn’t hard,” said Matthew, stepping forwards, letting his hand trail along the young man’s pectorals as he entered.

The door closed behind them. Matthew took his reward.

He returned twenty minutes later, very happy, a new phone number saved. People clamored to know what had happened inside the apartment, but he said, “It’s a very private matter. The disturbance is dealt with, that’s all that matters. Come on! I believe I still have some books to sign?”

When he reached the table again at last, he found someone sitting in his chair; a man of indeterminate foreign appeal. Matthew smiled automatically at the well-dressed man, who smiled back. “Keeping it warm for you.”

The well-dressed man stood, and held out an envelope. Matthew took it without thinking, and sat down. “What’s this, then? Am I being served?”

There was no answer. He looked around. The well-dressed man was gone.

Curiously, he broke the wax seal and opened the letter. It read:

“1997, Boise Idaho. Dom’s Diner. I know the truth.
See you soon. —D.”

He found the economy-class flight ticket inside the envelope and turned very pale.

“Sorry, sorry everyone, something urgent has come up. I have reserve copies, advance signed; my men will see that you get some.”

He looked at his security lead. “I have to go. Now. Airport.”

“Get Minerva,” said the guard.

Matthew nodded. In his earpiece, Minerva said, “Meet me at the car.”

His feet pounded pavement for a while. The instant he was out of the crowd his smile dropped and his shoulders hunched. He watched his feet walking. The slap of his Armani shoes on the sidewalk somehow reassured him that he was still solid; that it wasn’t a dream. He slipped his hands into his pockets and jangled his car keys and his box of cigarettes and his lighter around, reassuring himself that he hadn’t been pick-pocketed. It had happened before, at one of his signings. A magician and avid fan had proudly pickpocketed a sachet of condoms out of his breast pocket during a brief photo booth session. He had been forced to use them all, to get them back.

He smiled despite the gloom, remembering the magician's skillful hands and dancing eyebrows. He laughed a little.

A bitter wind danced across the street, rustling autumn leaves from the summer branches. Red and amber maple leaves scuttled over the concrete and tumbled on the bitter wind and Matthew smelled the pumpkin patch at the harvest festival in 1998 and remembered book fairs and hot teas and boring days indoors. He shuddered. He reached a hand to where he expected his customary fall scarf to be, realized it wasn't there, and remembered that it was currently July.

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at the trees.

A passing workman in green coveralls and a yellow hard-hat was pushing a wheelbarrow full of cinderblocks up a crude boardwalk over a muddy patch at the entrance of a construction site.

"Hey!" Matthew called. He waved.

The man turned to look at him, plucking an earbud from one ear. "Huh?"

Matthew walked across the street quickly, smiling automatically. "Hi. Hi, sorry. These trees, were they always like this?"

"What?"

"The trees. Were they red, like this, yesterday?"

"I don't know, man. Who notices trees?"

“Come on, you work here. You must have walked past these trees a hundred times!”

“We ain’t got nothing to do with that. We follow city standards for runoff and groundwater pollution, so unless there’s anything else I can help you with?”

Matthew’s smile faltered. “No. Thank you. Sorry.” He rubbed the back of his head ruefully and thought for a moment, very conscious of the trees behind him.

The workman entered the construction site, muttering, “Fuckin’ freak.”

Matthew picked a bit of earwax out of his ears and flicked it on the concrete.

As he walked away, skipping lightly up and down each curb as he crossed the street, he heard the workman stumble and spill his load of cinderblocks. He smiled to himself as the workman’s cursing echoed up the street.

He reached the entrance of the garage. It was on a busy retro main street lined with little stores. Foot traffic was heavy near the restaurants and certain shops, but this end of the street was mostly for parking. Every streetside space was taken.

He looked up the ramp and into the garage. The dark space of it loomed ahead, a brutalist approximation of the eighth plane of Limbo. Or so one of his online fans had claimed, in a way that seemed to have something to do with a consistent worldview partially composed of his own ideas. The idea had stuck in his head.

There was something strange about parking garages. They were like a liminal space, a world between worlds, like attics and underpasses and hotel hallways. They were simply a stopping point, a place where a certain arrangement of random people were bound together by location and time, and by the burden of a single possession: their mode of transport. If man had fully invested in bicycle technology, Matthew reasoned, parking situations would be a lot more reasonable. You wouldn't have to create an entire structure devoted to the temporary storage of personal vehicles. Sure, it would be madness trying to remember where you parked, but that was just Darwinism, really. It would weed out the stupid and he was fine with that.

Someone came running at him from around the corner, and rammed him with a shoulder, and they both tumbled down the ramp and into the busy street. A minivan swerved very tightly to miss them, narrowly avoiding the traffic in the other lane, but it was only moving at fifteen miles an hour so it was only slightly traumatic. The man in the passenger seat flipped them off, which added insult to injury.

“You!” said the assailant.

Matthew groaned. “Ow.”

“It's you!”

Matthew looked up at the man. “Oh! Hey.”

They had just met in the young man's apartment. He was wearing very short jogging shorts and a tank top

now. “Sorry, that’s such a blind corner. You really shouldn’t have been standing there!”

Matthew laughed. “My bad.”

The young man reached down a hand. Matthew took it.

“Thanks,” Matthew said, as the man pulled him to his feet.

“No problem,” said the man, very close.

“So,” said Matthew. “Um. I hit my head. Do you want to be my driver?”

“What?”

“Well, I remembered you were saying you were looking for a job, and turns out I might have a concussion, so really you sort of owe me.”

“I don’t think you have a concussion. I caught your head.”

“You did. All things considered, not a bad near-death experience. So do you want the job?”

“How much?”

“I don’t know. How’s fifty K?”

“A year?”

“A month.”

“Uh when can I start?”

“Turns out, right now! I have a bad feeling and I feel

better now that you're around, so I think I'm going to run with it."

"Oh, hey, something fell out of your pocket." The young man bent down to pick it up.

"Oh, thank you." Matthew took the letter back. Their fingers brushed.

The young man smiled. "Matthew Moore, huh?"

"You didn't know? That was my book signing."

"I don't read that much."

"Oh. Well, you should! They say it's good for you."

"Who's 'they?'"

"Oh, you know. The people who say those sorts of things. I don't know. Wait, what's your name?"

"I'm Lucius Bush."

"That literally cannot be your real name."

Lucius laughed. "I assure you, it is."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Maybe I'll do that later. But it is my real name. No joke."

"Wow."

"Mhmm. I strive to live up to it."

"Anyway, this is my car," said Matthew, as he began to unlock the door.

“You drive an Aston Martin?”

“Mhmm. It’s a DBR1. Or at least, a replica of one.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I assume it’s impressive?”

“Well. It does get me laid, from time to time.”

“Classy.”

“Isn’t it? Come on, the seats are great.”

“What, just ‘great?’ Not, ‘Italian leather’ or ‘velvet-soft shag’?”

“Just sit. You’ll see.”

Lucius sat. “Oh my.”

The chair gently adjusted itself to conform to his body.

Someone knocked on the window. The hood was down, so this was somewhat unnecessary, but it made them both jump.

“Oh!” said Matthew. “Hi, Minerva.”

Minerva said, “Room for one more?”

Matthew said, “Oh.”

“I can sit in your lap.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary, really,” said Matthew.

“It’s ok, I don’t mind at all,” said Minerva, and she sat in Matthew’s lap.

“Buckle up,” said Lucius, with a laugh.

“Minerva I believe you conjure these situations just to do this to me.”

Minerva laughed. “I’m not that powerful. Onward, mortal!”

“Sure thing,” said Lucius, raising one eyebrow and giving Matthew a look.

Matthew said, “Trust me, she’s exceptionally useful. Don’t mind a thing she says. She’s utterly mad. She’s my muse.”

“Hey. I thought I was your muse!”

“An artist must take as many muses as he can find, don’t you think? If he wishes to perfect his art.”

“Gross.”

“Says the man who gave me a striptease through the window.”

“I was changing my clothes. You were the one being a peeping Tom.”

“Oh, boo hoo. Don’t get all self-righteous on me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Lucius.

He knew how to drive stick, which was very convenient. The engine purred for him. The Aston Martin backed out like butter on a hot pan, then glided down the labyrinth of ramps to escape the Limbo space.

At last they were at the main street. Merging on this street was a nightmare under the best of circumstances;

it was narrow, traffic moved far too quickly, there were many pedestrians, bicyclists, and scooter-riders, and cars were parked along both sides of the road. It was difficult both to see and to be seen.

Lucius had lived here for years. It was easy in the Aston Martin. Soon they were sailing through the hills of San Francisco, searching for the elusive highway.

“See, this is why I hired a local driver. We need to get to the airport as fast as possible.”

“Will I be able to come with you?”

“Yes. Minerva, you bought him a ticket, didn’t you?”

“Yes, do you not see me on the phone in your lap?”

“I just like audible confirmation, so sue me.”

“Maybe I will. This feels a bit like sexual harrasment.”

“Of whom!?”

Lucius said, “Alright, so which airport?”

“Oh damn, you’re right, there’s more than one. What does it say on the ticket?”

Minerva had memorized this information ages ago. “San Jose.”

Lucius nodded. “I can get you there. What time are we talking?”

“We’ve got an hour.”

“Depending on traffic, we may be cutting it very close.”

“Minerva, can you call ahead and make sure—”

“Hang on, boss. It’s ringing.” She held the phone to her ear. “Hello. Yes, hi. I’m Minerva Wackwood and I’d like to speak to someone. We’re running late and we’d like to offer to pay for any flight delays incurred by waiting for us. My boss is a very rich man and it is absolutely necessary that he catches this flight. Yes, I’ll hold.”

“Didn’t even have to hold to talk to someone? What the hell?” said Lucius.

Matthew smiled. “She has backchannels.”

“Wow.”

Lucius pushed the supercar very gently. It flowed through traffic easily. He drove intelligently but aggressively, signaling his intent clearly and following through with grace. Occasionally he would hit a clog that no amount of clever lane-switching could fix, and there was nothing to do but to wait in line with the rest. Then things would open up again and Lucius always refused to remain part of any cluster for long. Matthew appreciated this.

“You’re a natural-born security driver,” Matthew said.

“No, I had to take a lot of training to drive like this. I told you, I worked as an armored car driver for years.”

“They let you drive like this?”

“They trained us to drive like this, if we had to make a getaway. I don’t think they train them that way anymore. I don’t know. It was a while ago. I could push us faster, but I don’t want to scare you.”

“Oh, by all means,” said Matthew. “I love a good scare.”

“You mean it?”

“Open her up.”

“You’ll pay if I get a ticket?”

“Now I didn’t say that,” said Matthew, tapping a small round light that looked oddly out of place on the console. “If this lights up, there’s a cop with a radar gun somewhere nearby. Also, watch out for cameras.”

Lucius grinned.

Minerva said, “Wait, don’t I get an opinion on this?”

“Did you give me a chance to state my opinion about our seating arrangement?”

“Well how else was I supposed to come with you?”

“We could have put you in the trunk!”

“We could have called a taxi, I guess,” said Lucius. “But this way’s more fun.”

“Just don’t kill us,” said Matthew, “and we’re all good. Keep it under control, but like, let me see what you can do.”

“Yes, boss.”

Lucius unleashed the car, and quickly discovered that the engine was a very modern one. It seemed to have no upper limit. At every open stretch he tested it. At every cluster he tried to maintain, and to coast, and to sail safely and legally around clogs. Soon enough they were nearing the airport.

“Should I do short-term or long-term parking?” Lucius asked.

“Let’s do long-term,” said Matthew. “Just in case.”

“Should I have packed a bag?”

“Why? I’ve got clothes. We can get more clothes.”

“Oh. Well, it’s different, if it’s my stuff.”

“We’ll buy you all new stuff when we get there.”

They parked. Again they were in the strange Limbo realm, this time at a region that intersected with the Limbo realm of airports.

Matthew took his own luggage and Minerva took hers. Lucius walked empty-handed between them.

“You got that?” Lucius asked, walking beside Matthew, who was struggling to hold three bags at once.

“Not really, no,” said Matthew.

“I got you.” Lucius picked up two of the suitcases.

“Haha, you have played into my hands,” said Matthew, revealing that his third suitcase was, in fact, empty. “It had my spare signed copies in it.”

Lucius threw a suitcase gently back at him and Matthew caught it, laughing.

A long, strange eternity in the mish-mash wonderland of TSA screening and the obligatory minimall beyond it, they walked forever into the long horizon, taking moving walkways to gain additional speed, and at last they reached their gate. They were the only ones present, aside from the stewardess. The gate was still open.

“Mister Moore?” said the stewardess.

“That’s me. Us. Our party.”

“Of course. Go right ahead, sir. We’ve bumped you up to first class.”

“Oh, how very kind of you,” said Matthew. “Thank you! That wasn’t necessary. Do you take tips?”

“We do on drink and food orders, sir.”

“Smart, smart, very smart. Well, I’m starved, so that works out. Come on, Lucius, Minerva.”

“Is your last name really Wackwood?” asked Lucius.

“Is yours really Bush?”

“Mhmm.”

“Hey. It’s better than it was in the eighteenth century, when we were the ‘Smackenwoods’.”

“Yes, that is worse.”

“My ancestor, Ivanna Smackenwoods, was a witch, you know.”

“I did not know that,” said Lucius.

They were filing past the other passengers now, so it was awkward that she was talking at all. Matthew, ahead of them, did nothing to shut her up. Most of the passengers—all seated now—were staring at them. They reached the first-class compartment and finally took their seats together.

“That’s better,” said Matthew, taking a glass of champagne that seemed to be waiting for him. “Minerva, who have you been texting?”

“The stewardesses,” said Minerva.

“You can do that?” asked Lucius.

“I know some of them personally.”

“I see.”

“Money makes good family, Lucius,” said Matthew. “Good money, good family.”

“I’ll admit that it’s an ingredient, sure. But you can make a good family without it, too.”

“I’m just saying, the odds of anything good coming from a house of poverty are brutal. People deserve to have enough money to live and thrive by, and I like to help provide that in ways that are mutually beneficial. People like to feel like they are special, like they are chosen, and like they are able to give something of value for the gift that someone has chosen to give them. I offer that.”

“So you... Pay people off? People who are useful to you?”

“Mhmm. Very quietly, of course, and always very legitimately. I steer charitable donations from some of my foundations in certain ways, and things get better for people who are struggling. Love is very easy to buy, these days. People are dying to love.”

“Is that love, though?” said Lucius, a little offended.

A spectacularly beautiful man with an absolutely dazzling smile complete with dimples and eye-twinkles and everything delivered a long-stemmed glass containing a dirty martini with three olives to Lucius. He took it, a little baffled, and the steward smiled again and went away.

Lucius sipped the martini. It was delicious.

“Ok,” he said. “Granted, I’m becoming a fan of you. But I was doing that before you started throwing money amounts at me.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to make you think I was devaluing what we had! We shared a moment of genuine spiritual connection! I am hoping we can do it again, sometime soon.”

Minerva said, “Can it wait until we at least reach the ground?”

Lucius laughed. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Bermuda,” said Matthew. “Apparently?”

“Why?” asked Lucius. “What does that letter say, that’s so important?”

Matthew looked at him for a long time. “It’s complicated. Boo-hoo backstory stuff. It’s not worth talking about.”

Minerva drank her claret and said, “It says: ‘1997, Boise Idaho. Dom’s Diner. I know the truth. See you soon. —D.’”

“Minerva!” said Matthew.

“So you’re being blackmailed?”

“Something like that,” said Matthew.

“And you’re just... Going along with it?”

“Yes. My security team will be on the next available flight, but that won’t be until tomorrow morning.”

“And you’re fine with this?” Lucius asked Minerva.

“I go where he goes. He’s helpless without me. Like a little baby bird, fallen out of its nest. It’s pathetic, really.”

“It’s true,” said Matthew. “I fall to pieces, unless I’m well cared for.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “I see.” He drank some of his martini. “So where are we going, in the long run?”

“I don’t know,” said Matthew. “It’s exciting, isn’t it?”

“You said you had a bad feeling back there,” said Lucius.

“I did. It’s gone now. I’m sure I’m headed straight for my destiny. I just know it.”

“Fair enough,” said Lucius, who felt very much the same way, and was struggling to find his identity in the midst of it. He had lived alone for five years, taking men when he felt the need for their presence, but never keeping them for long. Most of the men he took did not want to be kept, anyway; you could always sort of tell. He preferred to keep it clean; take the romance, and the best sex, and cut and run the moment the honeymoon period was over. It was nice that way; you could wistfully look back upon the good times without having the tainted pain of all the withered years in the way. He had always insisted upon having his own place, paying all of his own bills, never entangling his housing, vehicle, finances, or career with any romantic partner.

He looked at Matthew now, and frightened himself. He had thrown himself into the arms of this man wholesale, without even a written contract. Now he was sipping a drink on an airplane to Bermuda.

“Look,” he said. “I don’t want you to get the wrong message. We had fun. But if I do work for you now, we’ve got to set healthy boundaries. I imagine you’re not looking for anything serious, right?”

“Oh, hardly ever,” said Matthew. “But I do enjoy you.”

“How long do you think you’ll enjoy me?”

“Until you bore me, probably.”

“And then what? You’ll fire me?”

“No, I’m good about that. But there will be an amicable distance between us, and a certain cold formality that might be uncomfortable for a while. Then we’ll be the best of friends, and occasionally fuck whenever the wind licks the embers of our nostalgia.”

“I mean, if you insist,” said Lucius, satisfied with this answer.

“Anyway, the more useful you prove to be, the more I will want to use you, so, you know. There is always room for advancement.”

“I see.”

“It’s nice to know I have a getaway driver now.”

Lucius laughed. Then he said, “Oh, shit!”

“What? What is it!”

“I have a cat!”

“Tabitha, right?” said Minerva.

“Yes, how did you—”

“Facebook,” said Minerva. “I’ve sent someone over to break in and steal it.”

“To what!?”

“Relax! They’re just going to pick the lock. They’ll take your cat to a secure location and take good care of it. They’ll also water your orchids.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“It’s what I do.”

“So just how rich are you?” Lucius asked.

“Oh, we don’t talk about that,” said Matthew. “It’s about how rich people *perceive* you to be.”

“So you’re pulling a Trump and you’re up to your eyeballs?”

“I’m wayyyy over my eyeballs,” said Matthew, with a bitter laugh. “But for now the credit flows. I have a new book coming out soon that has movie potential. They’re already in talks with Brad Pitt.”

“Isn’t he a little old?”

“The hero is a grizzled psychic detective,” said Matthew, taking a drag on a plastic cigarette. “It’s a perfect casting.”

“What is—is that a *vape!*? You can’t use that on an airplane!”

“Relax! It’s an oxygen pen. Here. I have a spare.” He reached into a man-purse that Minerva handed to him, and procured a brightly-colored box. He tossed it to Lucius. “It doesn’t emit a vapor. Just air. Has a bit of mint. Chewable tip, too. It’s nice to keep the fixation away.”

“Thanks,” said Lucius, and he tore open the package at once. It wasn’t much, compared to a cigarette, but it was something, and it did ease the cravings a little.

“We’ll buy a pack of cigars when we land,” said Matthew.

“You’re not supposed to breathe those in,” said Lucius.

“What, you want to live forever?” said Matthew.

“I mean, I want to live longer than forty, yeah.”

“Suit yourself. The end’s coming and it doesn’t take a prophet to see it. Human nature, as currently expressed in the hierarchical systems of human governance and economy, has clearly demonstrated that it is hostile to the long-term success of life of any kind. You can’t poison the ocean forever and expect all the fish to live. You can’t poison the sky forever and expect to be able to breathe. You can’t burn the forests, and expect to have wood to burn during the atomic winter.”

“I see,” said Lucius. “So you’re a nihilistic pessimist, then.”

“Don’t you dare diagnose me!” said Matthew. “Better men than you have tried, and I had them all killed.”

Lucius wasn’t sure if this was a joke or not, so he drank his martini.

Minerva said, “Well, it’s a nine hour flight with one stop in New York. Settle in.”

They made themselves comfortable, which was remarkably easy in first class, and each of them found something in the in-flight entertainment which wasn’t offensive to their sensibilities, and in a kind of happy

hermithood they were antisocial together. Minerva sat on her phone, scrolling through her many feeds of information.

Nedry Blaese sat in a booth, looking well-dressed and clean-cut. The dancefloor pulsed with light. A drag queen was dancing to an ABBA song and getting showered with tips by the crowd which packed the nightclub.

Nedry nursed his whiskey sour and watched the crowd with hungry eyes. He could see the other hunters and he caught their searching eyes from time to time. Always there was the secret question: “Are you?”

There were straight men in the crowd, as there always were on busy drag nights. Still, most of the patrons were gay or lesbian, and the bartenders were hunky and gay. Nedry’s favorite was Jeremy. Dreamy Jeremy.

He sat and watched Jeremy from his booth. Jeremy was a tall, thick-bodied asian man with wonderful curves and knowing, jaded eyes. He flirted effortlessly with every patron. There was something in his look that said he had read you like a book and could verbally abuse you to the point of tears if he wanted to, but wasn’t going to do it because he thought you were amusing. He was unfailingly kind, despite this dangerous gaze, and Nedry was madly in love.

Some people write a story of their life as they live it, and sketch outlines for the future chapters. Nedry was one afflicted by this fatal flaw, and he had sketched many chapters with Dreamy Jeremy already.

Still, the protagonist of those chapters was a braver man than Nedry seemed to be. He drank.

It was easier to catch one of the other hunters. There

was always someone eager to be in his arms, if he played his cards well. That was the easy thing about being gay. It wasn't hard to find sex, as long as you were willing to accept the meaningless kind. The meaningful kind was far more daunting to approach. Every gay man had his heart broken sooner or later. Of course, that was true of straight men, too, but Nedry didn't think they were capable of feeling pain the same way a gay man could. Straight men always twisted it into something else. Anger, usually.

Nedry had had his share of heartbreaks, and he wasn't eager to have another one. He liked the rapport he had with Jeremy as it was now. He did not want to risk it.

So he drank, and finished his drink, and looked longingly at the door. He wanted a cigarette desperately.

"Excuse me," said a man nearby in the pulsing darkness. "Do you happen to have a light?"

"I do," said Nedry, patting the pocket of his leather jacket. He fumbled for the lighter. "I was just going out."

"Oh, you should join me!"

"Sure, why not."

They stepped outside, nodding at the bouncer as they passed.

Outside they leaned against the wall of the antique building and lit up their cigarettes. Nedry got a good look at the man, but couldn't place his background or

ethnicity without making wild assumptions. The man was objectively beautiful but there was a cold glimmer in his green eyes that made him somehow frightening. It wasn't necessarily a bad effect.

He wore a silver-grey three-piece suit, and his cologne lured Nedry to stand nearer than he ordinarily would have dared.

"So," said the man. "You come here often?"

Nedry laughed. "That's your best shot?"

"Who said it was a shot? I was making conversation."

"Sure, I come here often. I live nearby."

"That's good."

"Is it?"

"Well. I hope you think so."

"I'm not sure I understand you."

"Walking distance, is it?"

"It is."

"Can you walk and smoke?"

"Sure, I can do that," said Nedry, catching on at last. He started walking towards his apartment, wondering what he had done differently to be so lucky tonight. He figured he was being robbed.

Still, if it meant this guy was going to touch him, he was for it.

“What about you?” he asked, as they walked.

“What about me what?”

“You from here?”

“Obviously not.”

“Ever been to CC’s before?”

“Only once before. It was very long ago. I was pleased to see how it had changed.”

“So what made you interested in me?”

“Do you really have to ask that? You have looked in a mirror lately, haven’t you?”

“Every day,” said Nedry. “Therapist’s orders.”

“Would you like to hold hands?”

“I don’t hold hands with strangers.”

The man laughed. “My name is Mehdi. Who are you?”

“I’m Nedry.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Would you like to hold hands?”

“Er...” Nedry looked around. The street was mostly empty.

He dared it. He took the stranger’s hand, heart pounding.

“See, it’s not so bad.”

They walked in silence, smoking with their free hands. When their cigarettes were done Nedry took both butts and held them until they passed a dumpster.

At last they reached the doors of his apartment complex. He unlocked them with his pass, wondering if this was all some elaborate break-in scheme.

“Elevator’s busted,” said Nedry, matter-of-factly. “Hope you don’t mind climbing stairs.”

“Not a problem,” said Mehdi.

They climbed together up the five floors to Nedry’s apartment. At the top, Nedry was a little winded, but Mehdi seemed as fresh as when they had started. They reached Nedry’s door, and he unlocked it with his phone, and stepped inside.

“What do you do for a living, to be able to afford such a place?” Mehdi asked.

“I was a coder,” said Nedry.

“I see,” said Mehdi.

“Sorry about the mess, I’ll—let me clear a spot for you to sit.”

He moved several pizza boxes and a small pile of laundry, then cleared away a dozen cups and bowls from the ash-covered table. He came back from the kitchen to find Mehdi seated before the bong.

“May I?” said Mehdi.

“Go for it,” said Nedry. “I have more in the little box.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you want a beer?”

“Several, if that’s alright.”

“I have several.”

“Got anything stronger than beer?”

“Tequila?”

“It’ll do.”

Nedry came back to the couch and sat down beside Mehdi, who had just taken an enormous rip off the bong. As the beautiful man breathed out a voluminous cloud of white smoke, a very strange thing happened. Nedry felt *himself* become high. As high as he had been the very first time he tried using a bong.

“Whoa,” said Nedry. “I think I need to sit down.”

“You are sitting down, Nedry.”

Mehdi opened the bottle of tequila and poured two glasses. “Come on. Shots.”

“Those aren’t shots!”

“Tonight, these are shots.”

“Alright, then I’m only doing one,” said Nedry, downing one ‘shot’.

“Oh, this one’s for me,” said Mehdi, downing his. He poured two more.

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Come on. That shot will be lonely in your stomach, all by itself.”

“You may have a point...” Nedry took the second shot.

“And sometime’s three’s the trick, isn’t it?” said Mehdi, pouring a third shot.

“Yeah, you’re right!” said Nedry. He took the third shot.

He woke up on his couch, in his underwear, under a thick blanket that wasn’t his, with a bottle of cold water on the coffee table and a bucket on the ground beside him. A white envelope lay on his chest. He picked it up blearily and tore it open.

“Follow me. XOXO.”

The envelope contained an airline ticket. Nedry stared at the walls of his well-padded depression nest and thought: *The only thing I’ll miss are the bottles.*

Chapter 3

Key Event

Robert Alaya, Carol Frost, Matthew Moore, Nedry Blaese, George Chang, and Lucius Bush all traveled to Bermuda. Some of them shared an airplane, never even knowing it. Most arrived independently.

Nevertheless, by the sixteenth of July, they were all in Bermuda, at the L F Wade Airport. They were individually taken to their hotel, and most of them did not feel like they were being followed until early the next morning, when they all came down into the hotel lobby and got onto the same bus.

They all looked at each other warily, each of them trying to guess what purpose the others might have on this bus. It was the shuttle bus to one of the local marinas, anyway; nothing exciting. Still, it was strange to see so many people from the plane in one place again.

Then again, it was a very small island. Most of them were comforted by this fact. Carol wasn't. She hadn't been able to bring her revolver along, and she felt very

exposed without it.

The bus reached the marina and came to a squeaky-braked stop. A rusted iron gate barred the way. It was twisted into a pattern like serpents twining around a tree, and in the intricate metalwork there were two figures: a man and a woman. The gate was joined to a wall of stacked stone, a bit overgrown with moss.

From the passenger seats of the bus it was hard to see much more than a gravel drive, beyond the gate. The bus driver waited patiently for nearly five full minutes.

George looked around at the others, wondering what fields of science they might be experts in. Not recognizing any of them, he began to feel woefully inadequate about his attendance at interdisciplinary conferences. Presumably, they would all be cutting edge experts, just as he was. He had the sense that all of them recognized him, or at least accepted him as one of them without distaste or fear. They considered him at least an equal; none of them were here with opposing opinions or refutations of any of his published work. He could smell that much.

He was still a little confused. Mehdi had disappeared sometime after they reached the hotel, and still had not reappeared. The last thing he had given George was a bus ticket.

Now he sat on that bus with Archimedes in a covered cage in his lap, staring at a set of closed rusty gates, and wondering if the ship would be of the decent sort

that you could do actual work in or if it would be the rickety tippy kind that necessitated dramamine. He was worried about Archimedes being cooped up indoors for the journey. Hopefully the weather would be nice, and Archimedes could have a little fly about. He was clever enough to come back.

Carol twisted around in her seat and lowered her aviators. She smiled; it was hard to remember how to do it. “What’s in the cage?”

“Archimedes,” said George. “A white-necked raven.”

“Can I meet him?”

“Well, he’s sleeping now.”

Carol’s eyes flickered from person to person. None of them were paying attention. “Can I see him, then?”

“I–I suppose,” said George. He lifted the sheet slightly so she could peer through the bars of the cage.

Satisfied that the cage did not contain weapons, she said, “He’s pretty.”

“Thanks,” said George. He adjusted his glasses. “I mean, it’s not because of me, so I can’t take credit for it, he’s just a very aesthetically pleasing specimen.”

“I see,” said Carol. She sat back down and lowered her sunglasses, taking another look at everyone. None of them had *the look*. The killer look, the hunter’s eye. None of them gave her any sense of unease. They seemed like perfectly ordinary people.

It chilled her to the core. She had no real weapons, now; not even a box-knife. She had made a shiv from one of the legs of a chair in her hotel room and now grasped it firmly in the pocket of her hoodie. She ground her teeth and tried to imagine what she would do in different scenarios. What if one of them pulled a gun? What if *all* of them pulled guns? These days, a deadly pistol could hide in a front pocket.

Lucius felt a little strange in Matthew's extra suit; it was well-tailored to Matthew, but Lucius's proportions were significantly different in several key areas. This paradoxically made the suit look form-fitting in those areas; almost skin-tight, in fact. Many fine things were on display. He had noticed Nedry and Robert almost instantly. It had taken him some time to spot the flicker in George's eyes. He would never have admitted it out loud, but he had difficulty telling with some races and cultures. There was a comparatively effeminate quality to some representatives of European and Asian cultures, a civilized grace easily mistaken for softness or submission and often incidentally mirroring elements of American gay culture. It led to false positives on the gaydar, and he had been badly burned by them before. These days he tended to wait for more overt signs of homosexuality before trying to flirt. It was never a nice feeling to know that you had made some uncomfortable via mistaken identity.

Still; he was sure of it, in George's case. There was more than his fastidious dress and his cloistered-looking academic posture. There was the way George's eyes

rolled over Lucius's muscles, and the way he engaged with the pretty woman (*Was* she pretty? Lucius could never tell. He found a certain beauty in everyone.), and there was also the way George and Lucius locked eyes and the unspoken question bounced: "Would you?"

The answer seemed to be a resounding, silent, mutual "Yes."

He glanced at Nedry and at Robert. They were handsome in their own ways. He assumed that no one else on the bus was involved in Matthew's adventure, and that they were all simply headed to the same location for now. It was a small world, and a smaller island.

Matthew was tapping his foot. At last he leapt to his feet and approached the driver.

"Excuse me, Perdón, ¿qué es el problema?" Matthew asked.

The driver said, "What?"

"What's the holdup?"

"We're waiting, dumbass. What did you think?"

"Aren't we blocking the street?"

"Just sit down, dude. They're about to let us in."

"Who's 'they?'" Matthew asked.

"I don't know, man, the owners or something. Above my paygrade. They pay for the service, I do the service. Now sit down."

Matthew reluctantly sat down again. Minerva was on her phone. He peered over her shoulder and Lucius leaned in to whisper with them.

“What’s it say?” Matthew asked.

“It’s owned by a bank in Belgium,” said Minerva. “Apparently.”

Robert sat at the back of the bus, gloomily looking out the slightly-open window and taking hits off his vape pen whenever he could manage it. He had cleverly secreted it through airport security by ██████████ but it didn’t compare to a hit of real greens. He missed his bong badly.

He breathed his vapor out the window as stealthily as he could in his intoxicated state, and managed to mostly get away with it. Then he pulled out his phone and looked at his few pictures of David. He didn’t know if he still loved that face, and the man who wore it was going to have to have a very damned good explanation for where he had been and why he hadn’t reached out before now, if that love was ever going to come back. He had grieved David for two years.

A billionaire. A billionaire? David? It seemed preposterous, like finding out that his holiness the Pope was actually Chinese Dictator Xi Jinping in a rubber facemask.

He glanced at Nedry and at Lucius. He had spotted both of them instantly, and they had exchanged the secret mojo. He could feel the power of three—no, four—no, *five?* attractive gay men in the same space, and it

was mesmerizing. He settled back into the cushions, feeling his body melt into them as the indica weighed him down. He had only just noticed Matthew's obvious flamboyance and George's gentle sweetness. He had it in his voice, that unmistakable lilt.

"You talk like a fucking valley girl!" He could still hear his father's words on that August night, though he had not seen the man in seven years and though that August night was even further in the past. He closed his eyes and let his mind take him someplace else.

He liked George's energy. He had a good vibe; a friendly vibe. He was the kind of person who wouldn't judge you for anything, probably, unless you hurt him. And he would probably have a hard time standing up to you, even if you did hurt him. Robert felt an instinctive need to protect him. He liked that feeling; it was one of the best parts of being a man. It was why there were always screaming women and children in action movies. It was why Superman was a multimedia franchise instead of just a one-and-done science fiction comic. *The peen protects*, thought Robert, and he giggled, because he imagined that it rhymed with "King".

But was that a good thing? Robert wondered. He supposed that for evolutionary reasons, it must have been a very good thing, at some point, or it would not have been so deeply engrained in the male psyche. Still, there were lots of behaviors evolution had handed out that were downright stupid or morally repugnant to thinking creatures, so evolutionary rightness wasn't a free license

to just continue the cultural practice. But was it a cultural practice, or was it universal? He supposed that war was probably as close to a universal human practice as anything, and it was hard to deny the linkage between testosterone and war. Aggression, territorial dominance, protective instincts and the strength to do something with them, there was a lot to be said for testosterone's role in war. Still, he supposed, women would probably make war too, as they had testosterone in their bodies too. And women liked to own things, too, and to have power, and to protect their children. Perhaps it was just a strong instinct in everyone, and not something limited to men.

All this thinking was getting tiresome, so he opened his phone, put in his earbuds, and watched a Youtube video about Determinism and Free Will, which was placed before him by a clever advertising algorithm that knew he had a hankering for such things whenever he was high, which he often was, around this time of day.

"Wait, how do *you* have signal?" Lucius asked.

Robert pulled one of his earbuds out. "What?"

"How do *you* have signal?"

"Dude I can't live without internet. I got a plan that lets me travel."

"Do you travel a lot, then?"

Robert could see that he wasn't going to get to watch this video, and thought about Free Will. He was ob-

ligated by his desires, now, to speak with Lucius. He wanted to speak to Lucius; he could see that it would be pleasurable. He would get to observe and study Lucius, and learn about his inner world while absorbing his outer one. Still, the video demanded to be finished, and he would be annoyed if he was unable to come back and understand it from where he had left off. He was also high, and speaking to Lucius would probably reveal that altered state of mind to Lucius. Robert was functional enough as a stoner that his eyes looked perfectly normal except for a certain dilation of the pupil, which Lucius would probably mistake for attraction, anyway, on a subconscious level.

Was Lucius attracted, then?

Robert began to realize that he had no free will in this choice. He was going to speak with Lucius. The Peen demanded.

Mentally he rolled a dice. (Even, I talk to Lucius. Odd, I go back to my video.) He rolled a three. It was the first number which popped into his mind. He had to go back to his video, then.

“Not that much, lately,” he said, at last. “What about you?”

“Oh, I’ve been around the states. But this is only my second time out of them.”

“Where was your first time?”

“In a parking lot, under the full moon, on the hood of a camaro. What about you?”

Robert flushed. He managed to laugh to hide his stutter. “Well, that’s a personal story. You’ve got to get to know me better before I can answer that.”

“Wouldn’t I know you better, if you told it to me now?”

Robert looked around. They were within earshot of everyone and several people were obviously listening. “Maybe in private, someday. Anyway, where did you travel to the first time you left the states?”

“I went to Rome,” said Lucius. “I wanted to be able to say, ‘When in Rome, do a Roman.’”

“And did you get to?”

“Oh, more than once.”

Robert laughed. “I’m Robert.”

“Lucius,” said Lucius. They shook hands. Lucius gave his hand to Robert like a dowager princess. Robert didn’t know whether to shake it or to kiss it, so he kissed it. Lucius laughed.

“My my,” said Lucius. “Such refined manners.”

“Well, I figure, some things shouldn’t go out of style.”

“Like beanies?”

“Like beanies,” said Robert, self-consciously touching his tattered, moth-eaten beanie.

“Hey I’ve got beanies, too,” said Lucius. “And beanie babies. For my parents it was those or Apple stock, and well, you can’t cuddle up with Apple stock.”

Robert laughed. He noticed Matthew observing them, and said, “So did you find out what the holdup is?”

Matthew leaned in, pretending to be aloof and indifferent no longer. “I don’t know. He said we’re waiting for the owners to come out and open the gate for us, but the place seems to be owned by some relatively anonymous little bank in Belgium.”

“In Belgium?” said Robert. “Aren’t those kinds of banks usually in Switzerland?”

Matthew laughed. “That’s the rumor, yes.”

“So do we have to wait for them to walk here from Belgium and get the gates for us, or...?” Lucius asked.

“I think we should wait,” said George, without being prompted. He had been eager to join the conversation, just to be part of *any* conversation.

They all looked at him. He flushed a little. “Well,” he said, “It’s rude, isn’t it? Trespassing? I think that’s still law here.”

Minerva said, “We could tip the bus driver and have him do it.”

“That’s sensible,” said Matthew, “but traceable.”

Lucius said, “I’m just saying, those things look like they’d pop off their hinges if we sneezed on them. Should

I go out and sneeze on them? We could just say ‘oops’ afterwards.”

Robert said, “I’m good at sneezing.”

“Me too!” said George.

Carol said, “Legally speaking, we’ll be on the hook for damages if we break the gates. I don’t feel like spending any time in small claims court so let’s just wait patiently, alright? Alright.”

“Sure thing, Mom,” said Lucius.

Carol said, “You’ll be real embarrassed if you go out and knock down those gates just in time to see some little Belgian banker coming up the drive with the key.”

“That’s racist,” said Robert, absent-mindedly.

Carol rolled her eyes.

Nedry was watching the gates hungrily, waiting for another glimpse of Mehdi. All these people and their problems were just a distraction.

Lucius said, “Wait, is that racist? How is that racist? She didn’t even mention a race.”

“I mean, Belgians are a kind of people, right?”

“Right, but they’re not a race.”

“It’s the same thing. I mean how would you react if she had said ‘some little Chinese banker’? Sounds racist then, doesn’t it?”

George adjusted his glasses.

“Oh, grow up,” said Carol. “There are more important things to think about than that.”

“I like thinking about this kind of stuff,” said Robert. “I think it’s important to examine how we use language and what kinds of things we say without meaning to. You stereotyped Hercule Poirot, who is a short man, onto a whole country of people of many varying heights. We do that shit all the time.”

“Who’s Hercule Poirot?” Matthew asked.

“What?” said Lucius, Robert, Carol, and George, all at the same time.

“How can you not know who Hercule Poirot is?” Lucius asked.

Minerva read aloud from the Wikipedia entry: “Hercule Poirot is a fictional Belgian detective created by British writer Agatha Christie. Poirot is one of Christie’s most famous and long-running characters, appearing in 33 novels, 2 plays (Black Coffee and Alibi), and more than 50 short stories published between 1920 and 1975.”

“How can you write mystery books and not know about Agatha Christie!?” Lucius asked.

“Well, I read all the Miss Marple books,” said Matthew. “And that was tedium enough for me. I knew she had other characters, but her characters were never what interested me.”

Carol said, “Someone’s coming.”

Someone was indeed coming up the gravel drive; a

dour-faced man with leathery, weather-beaten skin and a white beard. He wore a pair of beige trousers, a teal v-necked sweater, a white shirt, a black tie, a blue coat, and a blue captain's cap. He walked with the aid of a cane which had four little tennis balls on its feet. He reached the gate at last, and slowly began to unchain it.

Lucius hopped up and left the bus to help. The captain looked at him sourly, wrinkled face twisting into a suspicious expression. Lucius raised his empty hands. "Can I help?"

"No."

The captain took his time unlocking the padlock and dragging away the chain. Lucius watched awkwardly. At last he said, "Ok then," and got back into the bus. As he took his seat he was conscious of all their stares upon him.

"So?" George asked.

"So what?" Lucius asked.

"Was that the captain?"

"I don't know. He didn't talk much."

The gates swung squeakily inward and the bus began to move. It rolled down the long gravel drive, taking a switchback at the end to continue down towards a secluded cove. A long wooden pier stuck out into the tranquil waters, and a small parking area paved in cracked concrete awaited them, empty of all other passengers. A very small boat-house and bathroom facility stood near

the pier.

At the pier a small white motorboat sat waiting to take them out to the gleaming behemoth in the harbor. The behemoth was a yacht of truly prodigious size, large enough to be a small cruise ship. George was very pleased to see it.

The driver parked the bus and said, "Alright, everybody off."

They left the bus and took their luggage and watched the bus roll away, leaving them in the parking lot, looking confused.

The grizzled sea captain beckoned for them to follow. They looked at one another.

Carol was the first to start walking. If this was a trap, it was a very elaborate one. She was interested to see where it would go next.

The rest followed her.

They got into the motorboat without too much difficulty, and they even managed to bring all of their luggage with them. The sea captain took the helm and the engine spluttered to life. Soon they were moving out across the gentle waves, headed towards the yacht.

They found a collapsible landing dock on the far side of the yacht, with a ladder leading up to the deck. None of them spoke, but it was clear that all of them were thinking, and confused. They climbed the ladder onto the deck of the yacht.

They awoke what seemed like moments later to find that they were no longer on the yacht. They were lying on a sandy beach, backed by dark jungle. In the distance loomed the dark cone of a volcano.

“What...?” said Carol.

She looked around, taking in the sight of the others sprawled around her in the sand. George. Robert. Nedry. Matthew. Lucius. Minerva. The bus driver.

“What the fuck!?” said the bus driver, scrambling to his feet. He looked wildly around. “You guys! What the fuck did you guys do to me!? Is this drugs!? I’ll kill you, you motherfuckers, I’ll—!”

Everyone got to their feet at this. Matthew smoothed his hair. Lucius turned in a full circle, taking in the entire scene. Robert fumbled in his pockets and found his vape pen. Nedry stared at the wild-eyed, panicking bus driver. Carol’s eyes were on him too, and she reached for her sweater pocket and realized she was in her good suit—the one only for meetings. She had her rainbow suspenders on under the jacket, the ones Esmerelda had given her just before... it wouldn’t do to get distracted. She searched her pockets and found a weapon: a Japanese Yo-deba Fish knife in a steel sheath. It was the kind of knife you used to cut crab. She was glad of its weight in her jacket pocket, but she didn’t grab it yet.

“Hey,” she said.

The bus driver was hyperventilating now. It didn’t

help that they were surrounding him. “We’re just as confused as you are.”

“Yeah? Well how come none of you are panicking!?” asked the bus driver.

“I assure you, we are,” said Matthew, his voice quavering expertly. The bus driver swiveled towards him, fists upraised.

“You. You came up! You touched me! You did something to me! I’ll kill you!” The bus driver charged towards Matthew, in a frenzy, but Lucius cold-clocked him and he dropped into the sand. Lucius shook his stinging fist and rubbed his knuckles, adjusting his rings.

“Nobody’s killing anybody,” said Lucius.

“Jesus, did you have to knock his block off?” Carol asked, dropping to her knees in the sand. She rolled the unconscious man over and lifted his eyelids one at a time. She slapped his cheeks gently. “Hey. Buster. Dude. Guy. Bus driver guy. Wake up.”

“Huh—wha!?” The bus driver woke violently but Carol whipped out the knife with one hand whilst pinning his wrist with the other and crushing his other arm with her knee. The knife glittered in the sun. Everyone said, “Whoa!”

Carol said, “Ah-ba-ba-ba-bup! Shush. Everybody’s going to calm way, *way* down, and we’re going to work together to get some answers. You’re in this mess with us, so get your shit together and get on your feet.”

She let him up and sheathed the knife. Lucius held down a hand to help him up and the bus driver looked at it for a long moment before he took it.

“Good,” said Carol. “Now that that’s out of the way, let’s compare notes, shall we?”

“Notes?” said Robert, as the horrid word sent a spike of adrenaline through his heart.

“What put you all on that bus? Why were we all headed to the same yacht? I know my reason, and I doubt any of you have the same one.”

“What do you mean?” George asked, adjusting his glasses, grateful to still have them. “Aren’t you all scientists? This is the island, right?”

“Scientists?” asked Carol, rounding on him.

“Yeah?” said George, a little timidly. They were all staring at him now.

“I’m not a scientist,” said Carol. “I’m a private investigator.”

“I’m a best-selling, award-winning author,” said Matthew.

“I’m his bootyguard,” said Lucius. “Bodyguard.”

“Apparently,” said Matthew.

“I’m his assistant,” said Minerva. “Hi. Minerva.” She gave a nervous curtsy and a little wave. Carol felt sorry for her immediately. If ever there were an innocent bystander...

“I’m just a budtender,” said Robert, shyly. “Nothing cool.”

“What’s a budtender?” asked Carol.

“Oh,” said Robert. “We sell weed. The legal kind, y’know. In stores?”

“Oh,” said Carol. She turned to Nedry. “What about you?”

“I do code,” said Nedry. “Or I did. I’m retired.”

Carol’s eyes narrowed. “I see. Black hat or white?”

“White,” said Nedry, meeting her gaze.

“What?” said Lucius.

“Hacker,” said Minerva.

George said, “Well, if you’re not... If none of you are scientists... Why did you agree to come to the island?”

They all looked at each other.

“Somehow, I think you’re the only one who even knew there *was* an island,” said Carol. “What do you know about it?”

“Oh,” said George. “N-nothing, really, except for the notes that Mehdi gave me...”

“Mehdi?” said Nedry, his heart skipping a beat.

“Y-yeah,” said George. “I still have the document he gave me, I think...” He pulled an envelope out of his pocket.

Carol sighed. “Damn it.” She pulled an identical letter out of her pocket.

Matthew, eyes wide, pulled his brother from his.

Nedry swallowed. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the letter.

“So,” said Matthew. “It seems we’ve all been brought here with different bait. By the same person.”

“Or persons,” said Carol.

“Bait?” said George.

“Bait,” said Matthew. “The person who called me here is... Probably dead.”

“So is mine,” said Carol, her eyes hard.

“Mine too,” said Robert.

“Not mine,” said Nedry.

“Nor mine,” said George.

“I didn’t even get a letter,” said Minerva.

“Same here,” said Lucius. “I just tagged along with this guy.”

“Then you’ve been caught up in his mess one way or the other,” said Carol. “I’m sorry. To you too, bus driver guy.”

“Stop calling me that! I have a name!”

“Well?” said Carol.

“John Walton.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Carol, shaking his hand.
“Carol Frost.”

“Matthew Moore,” said Matthew.

“Robert Alaya,” said Robert.

“Lucius Bush,” said Lucius.

“No way,” said Robert.

“It isn’t!” said Nedry.

“It is,” said Lucius.

“George Chang,” said George.

“I’m, uh... I’m Nedry Blaese,” said Nedry.

Carol said, “Right, well, now we know each other, so what do we do next?”

“Is this real?” said John.

“Pretty sure,” said Robert. “I’ve been on a lot of trips. This doesn’t seem like a hallucination.”

“And it’s not a dream,” said George, after pinching his nose briefly.

“How can you tell?” Lucius asked.

“If you pinch your nostrils and you can still breathe through them, you’re dreaming.”

“Cool,” said Lucius.

“I think drugs might be involved,” said Carol. “I think

we might have been dosed with an amnesiac or a sedative. Or a combination of both.”

“From when?” said Robert.

“I don’t know,” said Carol. “From the bus drive, maybe.”

“But... We’ve traveled,” said Matthew. “Time has passed. Look, we’re all in different clothes! Even the bus—John!”

“Maybe we haven’t traveled very far,” said Carol. “Hours, not days. Or maybe they kept us sedated for a few days.”

“These days a modern ship can cross the atlantic in less than a week,” said Minerva. “We could be anywhere.”

“We’re still in the tropics, I think,” said Robert. “To judge by the sun.”

“And the humidity,” said Carol, irritably.

“And the mosquitoes,” said Lucius, slapping something.

“Don’t slap those!” George shouted. “They’re a whole new species!”

“What, you can see them well enough to tell?” Lucius asked.

“I can hear it! The pitch of their wings is very distinct!”

“Is he serious?” Lucius asked, waving his hands at another mosquito.

The buzzing was getting louder.

George said, “Oh my! It sounds like a swarm! A whole new species of swarming mosquito! How wonderful!”

Lucius looked around, wide-eyed. “Aw, no. Fuck this shit, I’m the only black guy on horror movie island? I am *not* dying today.” He stripped off his suit—another one borrowed from Matthew—and in tight-fitting boxer-briefs and a too-small tanktop he ran into the waves and threw himself down in the shallows.

The buzzing was a high-pitched whine, now, a droning hum that rang on the ears.

“What are you morons waiting for! You want to be in the open air when those come!?”

“Maybe he’s right...” said Matthew.

George rummaged in his backpack, digging through journals and notebooks and various minor pieces of equipment. Archimedes was nowhere to be seen but he couldn’t worry about that now, those bugs sounded hungry and dangerous and more than populous enough to survive a little culling.

Matthew started stripping off his jacket. Minerva said, “Are you serious?”

Nedry took off his coat and shirt and stripped out of his jeans and his sneakers and his socks and ran into the waves with Lucius. Robert took a huge rip on his vape

and breathed out a plume of mist, coughed violently, and said, “You know bugs, right?”

George was shoulder-deep in his backpack now. He looked up, irritable, a little red in the face. “What?”

“You don’t seem worried.”

“Sorry, could you give me—just a sec?” He pulled his backpack open and almost poked his head inside, searching. Robert pulled his phone out of his pocket and flicked on the flashlight, and shined it into the bag.

“Oh,” said George. “Thank you. That’s helpful.” He found it at last. The buzzing was a howling roar now.

Minerva and Carol looked at each other. John was already wading into the waves.

Carol looked at George and Robert, standing unfazed, even closer to the ominous jungle than they were.

Then the swarm broke through the trees like a black mist and filtered eerily down the beach towards George, who raised up something small in his hand and sprayed the air.

The swarm recoiled, springing back in surprise, a cloud of black tendrils twisting back towards the forest. It retreated into the trees and journeyed on.

George hastily sprayed himself all over, sprayed Robert, then ran to Carol and Minerva and sprayed them both. He held up the brightly-colored can. “Bug spray. I figure they’ve never encountered it before.”

“Will it kill them?”

“This one will,” said George. “It’s a precaution.”

“What kind of bug research do you do, exactly?” said Carol.

“I collect them for museums. Sometimes they’re fast, and you can’t rely on a net.”

Carol said, “That doesn’t seem right but I don’t know enough to have an opinion about it so let’s think about preserving that stuff and using it only when needed. Do you have more than one can?”

“I have three,” said George. “Just in case. I figured, with a whole island of undiscovered species, I’d need to be prepared to take back samples, to prove that I wasn’t just photoshopping things.”

“A whole *island* of undiscovered species?” Carol asked.

Lucius, Robert, John, Matthew, and Nedry were in the water still, letting the warm waves crash over them gently, and each wave was bringing an interesting species of jellyfish closer to them.

They watched the conversation between Carol and George and Minerva, listening intently. They also watched the treeline and listened to the steadily lowering whine of the eery swarm.

Matthew copped a feel on Lucius. “Good idea. A bit unnecessary, maybe?”

“I stand by it. If that guy didn’t have bug spray, this would have been our best bet.”

“You’re not wrong,” said Robert.

John said, “What the fuck is this place?”

Nedry watched the trees and the island and from this low angle he saw through a gap in the canopy and spotted a glint of something on the side of the volcano. “Hey guys...”

“What’s up?” Robert asked.

“I see something on the side of the volcano. I think it’s man-made.”

“Yeah? Where?”

Nedry pointed. “You have to have your head right here.”

Robert leaned in and looked. Lucius joined them.

As they looked upon the distant glinting thing, their hands in the sand and the waves came close enough to feel each other’s warmth, and someone’s hand brushed someone else’s and did not move away even as the deadly tendrils came drifting in above their fingers.

Nedry felt his hackles raise and he looked down into the waves.

Matthew screamed. Nedry gasped and jerked his hand away with a splash, causing the jellyfish to twist towards him and drawing Lucius and Robert’s attention. They jumped away, to their feet, and Matthew staggered to-

wards the shore, clutching at his thigh and the blob tangled around it. Nedry turned to look into the waves and saw at last that in them there were hundreds upon hundreds of jellyfish.

They raced onto the sand and joined the others, panting. Carol and George and Minerva were already at Matthew's side.

"Do I need to pee on it!?" Minerva asked, frantically working at her belt.

"NO!" said George. "That will only make it worse! We have to get it off of him!"

"How!?" Carol asked.

"Use a stick!"

Carol drew her knife and used the tip of it to drag the jellyfish away from Matthew. Its stinger-laden tendrils came along for the ride.

"How are you feeling?" George asked.

Matthew's teeth were clenched and he was breathing hard through them. His eyes were full of rage. "Not so good."

"Believe it or not, you were stung by *Cyanea capillata*, the lion's mane jellyfish! It's one of the largest species in the world."

"It didn't look that big," said Carol.

"There are hundreds of them in the waves," said Nedry, still horrified by the sight. "Perhaps it was a

baby? Maybe there was a bloom, or something?”

“A bloom?” Lucius asked.

Nedry said, “It can happen sometimes. The conditions become just right, and a certain species of jellyfish suddenly dominates the entire ecosystem. Usually it dies off as it becomes starved.”

“I think this is just a fragment of a big one,” said George. “In July 2010, about a hundred and fifty people in New Hampshire got stung by one which broke up and washed ashore.”

“New Hampshire has a beach?” Robert said.

“Yes,” said Carol, tersely.

“How big was it?” Nedry asked.

“It’s about thirteen miles long, but not all of it counts as beach. The biggest beach is about seven hundred feet long,” said Carol.

“No, I mean, the jellyfish,” said Nedry.

George said, “The longest one recorded had tentacles a hundred and twenty feet long, and a bell about six feet across.”

“Jesus,” said Nedry.

“He had nothing to do with it,” said George, firmly.

“Sorry.”

“It’s ok. It’s not like that. I just think it’s important to be clear, when you talk about mythology. God isn’t

always seen as responsible for the existence of dangerous creatures or carnivorism. That's all part of the Curse. Which was perfect Justice, by definition. Christianity is complicated and intricate. It's very well designed, if you catch the right kind of it."

"What?" said Matthew, confused. The crucifix on his chest lay exposed. He had kept it, even after shedding his suit.

"Oh, nothing. You're delirious. Hold on, we're going to make you comfortable."

"How?" asked Carol. "Look at this place. It's nothing but trees and sand."

George covered the sun with his open hand, thumb pointed downwards at arm's length. Then he said, "We've got about nine hours until dark. Plenty of time to build a shelter, explore, find some food, and gather firewood."

"In a jungle full of unknown species?"

"Isn't it wonderful?" said George, beaming. "Of all my expeditions, I've never had one like this. Such an opportunity! Darwin would envy me."

"You've been in places like this before?" said Carol.

"Oh, hundreds of times."

"I, uh... Saw something, when I was in the water," said Nedry.

Carol said, "Oh?"

“Yeah. On the side of the volcano. A flash. Like something manmade.”

“Or something reflective,” said George, thoughtfully. “I’d estimate the volcano is about twelve miles away. Not something we can cover in just one day.”

“I’ve walked further,” said Carol.

“Not in jungle like this,” said George. “We’ll have to move slowly. Cautiously. We can’t afford to disturb the ecosystem in any major way, and it may be extremely dangerous. We will be carrying Matthew, I think. If only we had some vinegar...”

Carol asked, “Vinegar?”

“To ease the pain. It can help to neutralize the stingers.”

Carol looked at Matthew. “You mean they’re still in him?”

“Undoubtedly, some of them are, yes. Excuse me, Matthew? Do you have a heart condition?”

Matthew was shivering, pale, covered in sweat. “What? N-no.”

“Good. Then you will most likely be alright. Most people survive the sting of the lion’s mane.”

“Lion’s mane?” gasped Matthew, his mind reeling. He recalled a menu, glossy, yellow, printed in comic sans. He remembered Dominick pouring the drink for the first time, mixing it with his thick strong hands.

“It’s the name of the jellyfish,” said George.

He stood up again, for he had bent down politely to talk to Matthew, and he looked at the jungle dubiously. He adjusted his glasses. “Well. First things first. Fresh water.”

“Right,” said Carol. “Good point.”

“Someone will need to stay with Matthew. Someone well-armed will need to come with me.”

“I have my knife,” said Carol.

Lucius said, “Wait a minute, wait a minute, we’re splitting up? Are you people insane, or just stupid? Jesus Christ, haven’t any of you ever watched a *horror* movie before?”

George and Carol looked at each other.

“Good point,” said Carol.

“I mean, that’s movies, though, right?” said Robert. “Sometimes in order to make things work, you’ve got to split your party.”

“Never split the party,” said Nedry. “It only ever leads to a TPK.”

“What?” said Carol.

“Total Party Kill,” said Lucius. He and Nedry exchanged a glance.

“Cleric,” said Nedry.

“Rogue,” said Lucius, with a little smile.

“Neat, we’ve got nerds in the party,” said Minerva. “Wizard, obviously.”

“Sorcerer,” said Matthew, grunting.

“Druid,” said George, raising a hand politely.

Carol looked at all of them. She put her hands on her hips. “Paladin.”

“Duh,” said Lucius.

Robert said, “Wait, have we *all* played D&D before?”

“I mean, yeah,” said Carol. “It’s a forty-year-old game.”

“Weird,” said Robert. He raised his hand. “Wizard.”

“Wizard?” said Lucius. “Really?”

“Yup,” said Robert, a little defiantly.

“Had you figured for a Warlock.”

John said, “Barbarian.”

They all looked at him, a bit ashamed that they had forgotten he was there.

“Well,” George said, “I know how to survive conditions like this. We will draw more attention to ourselves with a larger party, and we do need to find water. It will be easier to do that with a small group. Matthew won’t be able to walk for some time, so if we carry him into the forest, he may only become food for some beast we are forced to flee from. But I’m no leader. I leave it to you all. What should we do?”

They looked at each other.

By default, most of them found themselves looking at Carol. She sighed.

“Me, George, Lucius, Nedry. We go into the jungle together as one group. Robert, John, Minerva? You’ll stay with Matthew and keep an eye on the beach.”

“What do we do if those bugs come back?” Robert asked.

“Oh! Heavens, I almost forgot!” George pulled out a can of bugspray and handed it to Robert.

“Just this?” said Robert.

“Yes. If you hear the swarm coming, spray it on yourselves. If the swarm comes close, spray it directly at them.”

“Ok,” said Robert, feeling woefully unprepared.

“I’m ready,” said George.

Nedry and Lucius were putting their clothes back on still. A few moments later they said, “Ready.”

“Alright. Move out,” said Carol.

Nedry and Lucius exchanged a small smile, and followed after George and Carol. Together, they moved towards the treeline. George held up one hand, causing them all to stop in silence. He made a series of hand signals that Carol recognized, and she turned towards the others and held a finger to her lips.

George sniffed the air. He slowly scanned the forest floor, then the canopy. He pointed silently to the high branches of a tree nearby, where a huge, bristle-backed, four-limbed creature stood perched among the branches. It was covered in blood, as was its perch. It had half of something with a ribcage in its hands, and its eyes were staring straight at George as it chewed.

Carol reached for her knife very slowly. George made a hand sign and Carol turned very slowly and walked back towards Robert and John and Minerva, one finger to her lips. She reached down to lift Matthew and John helped her automatically. Matthew hissed in pain. Minerva covered his mouth.

George began to back up very slowly, motioning with one hand. Nedry and Lucius backed up at his unspoken command, keeping their eyes on the neckless beast. It was bigger than a man.

They did not stop backing away until the whole party was back on the beach, near the shore.

George said very quietly, “We are going to walk *around* the beach, and look for a clear path that is not the territory of whatever the fuck *that* was.”

The F-bomb landed with surprising impact in his gentle delivery.

“You’ve never seen anything like it before?” Carol asked.

“Never. I don’t even know where to classify it. At a

best guess, some kind of primate-form rodent. Did you see the baby in its pouch?"

"No," said Carol.

"I did. Big as a human baby."

"Wait, you mean they're marsupials?" Nedry asked.

"So it would seem," said George.

"But I thought those were only in Australia?" said Nedry.

"And New Guinea, and there are a few extant species native to North America," said George. "It makes sense they'd be here. Marsupials were out-competed by mammals in most parts of the world, except in certain isolated regions. These lands are practically untouched."

"How can you tell?" Matthew grunted. "It looks like any other island, to me."

"Have you looked at the horizon?" George asked. "Really looked?"

"No?" said Matthew, grunting.

"Let's all take a moment to look," said George.

They all looked.

Carol felt a chill go down her spine. Lucius's eyes widened. Nedry's hands began to shake and he longed for a cigarette. Matthew began to feel a distinct discomfort that had nothing to do with his leg. Minerva had noticed it a little while ago, and thought it was strange, but now

as she looked at it longer she understood, and it hurt. John just stared.

The horizon met the sea at a white and faintly flashing line, and beyond it rose shapes and forms so distant that the haze of the sky hid them behind its blue tinge. The sky was wrapped in stone. High above, beyond the sun and all but the highest feathered ice-clouds, there were stalactites big as mountains.

Carol said, “Where the fuck are we?”

“To hazard a guess,” said George, “The center of the earth, or the core of a particularly unusual planet.”

“But—but—”

“Those are the options,” said George. “Unless you want to invoke magic, then it’s anything goes. But here in the real world, those are the only hypotheses I can think of which fit the evidence at hand. Come on, let’s keep moving. It will be easier if we focus on what we need to do next. Find a path. Look at the jungle now, and keep your eyes open for movement. If you spot any creatures, raise your fist like this. We’ll all stop and be quiet and look where you point. If you see the path, feel free to do the same maneuver. It’s best if we keep quiet as much as possible. There’s no telling what we might find on this island. It’s been completely untouched by all earthly species for billions of years... Probably.”

“But what about plate tectonics?” Nedry asked.

George shrugged. "I don't know. That might be more evidence that this *isn't* earth."

"What about a parallel earth?" Matthew asked.

George stopped in his tracks. "That's almost harder to believe than interstellar travel. If we're trapped on our planet what makes you think we can get to another universe?"

"There are ways," said Matthew, mysteriously. Then he grunted in pain.

"What ways?" George asked.

"Certain mysterious... ways," said Matthew, and he fainted.

"Convenient," said George.

"Hey guys?" said Lucius, pointing.

They all looked, and saw a gap in the treeline, and a pair of jeeps sitting in it.

"Even more convenient!" said George.

They approached in silence, moving more slowly as they neared the treeline. They discovered that the two jeeps sat upon a gravel road right through the jungle, twisting towards the volcano in the distance.

"Oh my god!" said George. "How could he *do* this!? This is horrible!"

"What?" said Carol.

"This road! Think of the destruction! Think of the

impact on the ecosystem! Think of how much behavior must have changed, how much exposure these creatures must have had to heavy machinery and human presence! This is horrible!”

Nedry looked at the trees nervously and said, “Hey, maybe not a great time to shout about this.”

George nodded and composed himself at once.

Carol examined the jeeps carefully, even ducking down to check the undercarriage of both cars. Only then did she try the handle of the lead car. The door popped open. A set of keys gleamed against the black leather of the driver’s-seat cushion. Carol slid into the driver’s seat.

George took the passenger seat of the first car. Nedry and Lucius loaded Matthew into the back of that car, with his stung leg stretched out so it wouldn’t have to bend. John took the wheel of the second car, Minerva took the passenger seat, and Nedry and Lucius took the backseat.

The engines purred.

“Electric?” said George.

“I think so,” said Carol. She teased the accelerator. “Torquey. I like it.”

The jeeps rolled out, and the jungle rolled past.

They were all silent for a long time. In the lead car, George used a very large camera to take pictures of the passing jungle and Matthew groaned quietly in the back-

seat from time to time. In the rear car, Minerva was on her phone, John drove with a white-knuckled grip, and Lucius and Nedry made do with the somewhat cramped conditions of the back seat and watched the jungle wide-eyed.

Carol said, “None of this makes any goddamn sense.”

“I agree,” said George, quietly.

“You knew more than most of us,” said Carol.

“Still,” said George. “I feel betrayed.”

“Why us, though? You, it makes sense. There are weird bugs, they bring a bug scientist. But the rest of us? Why?”

“I can’t say,” said George.

“Odd way to phrase that,” said Carol.

“I mean I don’t know,” said George. “I can think of possible reasons, but I dislike them all. It’s better not to speculate. We can wait and see what Mehdi says.”

“I don’t trust him,” said Carol.

“Why not?”

“He’s spooky.”

George laughed, then considered. “Yes... He is a little spooky.”

The jeeps followed the gravel road through its many twists and turns. It seemed the makers of the road had taken pains to veer around dense jungle, large rocks, and

major changes in elevation. Thus the road was extremely winding, and Matthew began to feel very queasy.

Nedry and Lucius were bumped into each other by the motion of the car from time to time, but neither of them minded it much. Nedry found the scent of Lucius's cologne very enticing, even though it was Matthew's cologne.

The lead jeep at last rounded a corner, and those within beheld the House at last.

Chapter 4

First Plot Point

Carol lit up a cigarette.

“You know, each time you do that, you’re physically praying for cancer,” said Matthew.

“Thank you for that,” said Carol, not looking at him behind her. He was still lying in the back seat of the jeep, his head towards her, and the doors of the jeep were open now.

“Picture your hair falling out in clumps from chemo,” said Matthew. “That usually helps me.”

“Thanks again,” said Carol, looking at her cigarette irritably. She was about to flick it away, an imperceptible preparation for a tiny movement of one thumb. Before she could flick it, Matthew said, “Wait. Can I finish it for you, before you throw it away?”

Carol laughed. “You can have a whole one all to yourself.”

She popped one deftly into his mouth and lit it. Lying on his back, he smoked, and sighed. He said, “Thanks. That doesn’t do anything, but it helps psychologically.”

Both jeeps were parked now outside the cast iron gates of the House. The gates were the twins of those the party had passed through to reach the boat, only these were glossy black iron, freshly wrought, and set in a forty-foot wall of white concrete.

Lucius and Nedry were leaning on the hood of the lead car, side by side, arms crossed. Robert was seated cross-legged atop the lead car, hitting his vape pen harder than ever. The battery still had a decent charge, but he could tell he was taxing it.

John was pacing in front of the gates, muttering to himself.

George was examining the notes Mehdi had given him, as though preparing for a test.

Minerva was still anxiously fiddling with her phone.

Lucius saw this, and said, “You can’t seriously expect to get a signal here?”

“I’m reviewing my notes,” said Minerva.

“Oh?” said George.

Nedry looked longingly up at the vape pen in Robert’s hand, but he didn’t have the balls to join the stoner on his socially awkward perch. Then he realized that he was probably dead, or going to die, and he found his courage. He clambered atop the jeep and walked up to sit next to

Robert.

“Hey,” he said.

Robert gave him a red side-eye. “Sup.”

“I don’t know you, but can I bum a hit?”

“Sure.”

Robert passed him the vape pen. Nedry took it and breathed until he couldn’t hold anymore, then held that breath as long as he could before breathing out. He passed it back to Robert whilst coughing into his other elbow. Robert laughed a little.

“Not a vaper, then?” said Robert.

Nedry shook his head, too experientially overcome to respond verbally.

“Bong?” asked Robert.

Nedry nodded.

“Yeah, I like my bong better,” said Robert. “But this does in a pinch.”

“Thanks,” Nedry choked.

Lucius, at the foot of the car, turned around and put his hands on the hood and there could be no denying that his pose had provocative intent. “Hey boys?”

Robert and Nedry looked at him. Lucius batted his eyes and said, “Share?”

Robert laughed and tossed him the vape pen. Lucius caught it. “Thanks.” He breathed a moderate hit, breathed out a cloud of mist, and said, “Mind if I?”

Robert shook his head. “Go ahead.”

Lucius held the vape pen out from person to person. “John? George? Carol? Minerva? Matt?”

“What is it?” asked Carol.

“It’s marijuana,” said Lucius.

“Oh,” said Carol, stiffening slightly.

Lucius raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Minerva took the vape pen, as did John and George. Matthew demurred. Carol just clenched her jaw, and said, “No.”

Lucius shrugged and walked around the jeep to reach up and hand the vape pen back to Robert.

“Thank you,” said Robert. His fingers brushed against Lucius’s in the exchange of the vape pen.

Robert took another hit and was dismayed. His vape pen’s activation button began to blink. There wasn’t much left, now.

“There’s bound to be electricity in there,” said Nedry, nodding towards the House.

Robert nodded, and swallowed. “Yeah.”

“But first we have to get in,” said Lucius.

“Right,” said Carol, flicking her cigarette away at last, thus eliciting a scandalized cry from George, who has-

tened to collect her discarded butt. She ignored this and walked straight for the iron gates, raised up her hands, and nearly fell on her face as the gates swung inward just before she could touch them. Their hinges screamed so loudly she could feel the sound needling her bones. Ears now ringing, she stood alone upon the gravel drive and froze, pinned by the eyes of the house. It was a convoluted baroque-brutalist deco-gothic monstrosity with an alarming number of turrets and an unnerving number of angles, arches, and windows. It seemed to crouch in wait at the end of the drive, staring at the gates with a thousand eyes.

Carol felt a terror she had never known before. She had stared down men with guns unfazed, followed murderers into dark alleys all alone, traced the footsteps of a killer still within the building, heard the whizz of bullets zipping past her head, and for all these experiences she had never known a fear so primal as this.

She did not have the courage to drop to her knees; the movement would give her away. She could only stand there, frozen, staring, praying that it would not... Would not what? She didn't know.

A large rectangular pool lay between her and the House, its waters dark and covered by something like lily-pads. Flightless birds of extraordinary shades of emerald green and ruby red paced the garden which ringed around the drive and filled the space within the high perimeter wall. The tails and wing-feathers of these birds trailed on the ground behind them as they walked,

like gaudy skirts, and their downy feet padded silently through the strange grasses. Gem-bright insects droned around the garden, pollinating systematically. It was eery to watch; they moved like a murmuration of starlings or a school of fish, rippling from one part of each plant to the next.

The doors of the House swung gently open.

Nedry and Robert were down off the jeep by now, standing with Lucius, John, Minerva, and George at the open gates.

None of them dared to speak or to cross the threshold of the gates.

George was the first to break the spell. He steeled himself and turned away, got into the jeep, turned it on, and drove it slowly forward towards the gates. Minerva, John, and Robert took his cue and got into the jeep but Lucius and Nedry opted to stand on the sides of the jeep and hold onto the top rail. Neither of them was sure which one of them decided it, but each of them decided not to let the other be the only one exposed to the danger—whatever it was.

George drove the jeep quietly up alongside Carol, and Lucius reached down. She took his hand, and broke her staring contest with the house, and let him help her up to stand beside him. The jeep rolled on.

“Thanks,” said Carol. “Silly of me.”

“We all froze,” said Lucius. “All of us.”

George piloted them carefully past the pond and all the way to the end of the drive, and the looming shadow of the House.

They parked, and no one got out. Or off. They stayed where they were. It was easier to bear the gaze of the windows and arches now that the perspective had changed, but now there was an unearthly chill wafting from the cavernous innards of the House, and none of them could bear it. It should have been soothing, after the tropical heat. It was not.

Matthew, in the backseat of the jeep uncomfortably jammed between Minerva and John, said mildly, "Are we all waiting for something? It's just, the leg aches."

"Oh," said George, mildly. "Right."

Carol gripped the knife in her pocket but did not draw it out. Breathing somewhat heavily, she dropped off the side of the jeep even as George opened his door. Lucius helped Matthew out of the back. He was well enough now to stand on his good foot, and hobble around with Lucius's aid.

All together, by unanimous, wordless accord, they stood upon the threshold of the doors together, in a tight huddle.

They looked at each other and they looked at the impenetrable darkness within the House, and they did not know what to do. It looked as though there was simply nothing there; as though one step beyond the light would plunge them into empty, starless space. There

was an airlessness to the room—or perhaps it was just a breathlessness. The space was huge; they could all feel it. Far larger than it should have been.

“I vote no,” said Lucius.

“That’s a solid nuh-uh from me too,” said Robert.

Carol reached into her pocket and drew out her lighter. She clicked it on, but the flame was feeble against that darkness. She moved boldly forward, holding the flame out before her. As she stepped into the darkness, her feet met solid ground. The lighter’s little flame hardly illuminated the stone beneath her, but it had a miraculous effect upon the darkness. The light made thousands of eyes glint and flash against the velvet black. Not eyes; reflective surfaces, polished facets, cut crystal and sculpted gold.

But some were eyes. A scaled, slithering form lay coiled around itself in an intricate spiral, its head upraised, its eyes and fangs flashing in the light of the little flame. Its head was only feet from Carol’s face.

As this snarling visage leapt out of the darkness to confront her, Carol instinctively whipped out her knife and stabbed it firmly into the snake-like head. The steel bit easily into solid gold, and stuck. Carol froze. She raised the lighter high and turned a full circle.

Lucius, Nedry, Robert, Minerva, and John had all, by this time, pulled out their cell phones and switched on the flashlight function, and the added light soon pushed back the gloom. Then George calmly pulled a large tacti-

cal flashlight from his backpack, said, “Don’t look at my flashlight,” and blasted the scene with ninety thousand lumens.

Carol managed to save herself from being blinded by consciously obeying his command, despite the instinctive desire to immediately look at the now-mysterious flashlight. The rest were not in a position to look straight down the barrel, which was a good thing, because almost all of them looked directly at his flashlight the moment he told them not to. The light disemboweled the darkness and revealed the huge golden serpent-table standing before a branching flight of marble stairs. Two rows of tall bronze statues, naked men and women, stood on either side of the hall, all pointing their long fingers at the coiled snake.

“Freaky,” said John, quite unnecessarily.

Carol plucked her knife from the head of the golden serpent with some effort. “Oops.”

There were no light fixtures—not even candleholders—in the chamber.

“Seems like the kind of place that could use a chandelier,” said Lucius, quietly. His voice still echoed in the cavernous space.

“Indeed,” said Mehdi, from the head of the stairs, and everybody jumped.

He began to walk slowly down the staircase, using both the railing and his cane. “Forgive my delay,” he said.

“My condition has worsened. It is difficult, now, to rouse myself.”

Nedry bit back a joke about impotency. George lowered his flashlight so it wouldn't blind Mehdi, but the bounced light was still enough to see him clearly.

“You've got a lot of explaining to do,” said Carol, pointing the knife at him.

He smiled. “Yes, I suppose you might think that.”

He stepped into the room and slowly began to pace around the golden serpent-table, drawing nearer to Carol, who instinctively backed away, circling the table with him, keeping him at a distance.

He reached the head of the serpent and delicately brushed the gash in the gold with two fingers. He tisked. “A pity. I suppose it can be easily repaired.”

“Why no lights?” George asked.

“The House prefers it that way,” said Mehdi. “It is somewhat indignant about your flashlight.”

George said, “Oh,” and switched off the beam, plunging them all into darkness.

Mehdi chuckled, his voice echoing unpleasantly in the gloom. “So compliant. It is appreciated, thank you. If you will all come with me? The House has less sacred chambers, where we can indulge in civilized frivolities like indoor lighting.”

He beckoned with a white-gloved hand, already turning to leave. He had paced around the table, putting Carol back at the snake's head. He began to climb the stairs as laboriously as he had descended them.

Carol looked at the others.

"I'm for indoor lighting," said Lucius, quietly. They all agreed.

They followed.

The halls and passages were large enough for winds to spread their wings, and the cold breath of the House was all around them in the darkness. They could stand in the middle of the hallway and stretch out both arms and touch nothing. The doors lay darkly on the unlit walls, their handles and hinges glimmering in the glow of Carol's cell phone. She was in the lead, right behind Mehdi. As the only person with a weapon, she thought it was necessary to stay close.

She could smell his cologne. They all could. It was a heady, dusky, summer-autumn scent, a whiff of October, a scent of smoke and dried flowers. It was strange; no matter how long they lingered in the presence of the scent, it unveiled new notes to them with each intake of breath, and they never stopped smelling it, although they walked for nearly fifteen minutes.

At last, in the darkness, Mehdi pulled a golden key from his pocket, set it into the handle of a door, turned it, and pushed the door inward, into a haven of light.

A warm study greeted them, cluttered with ornate furniture and lined with bookshelves. The books were strange; not quite earthly in their histories. The lettering was unrecognizable; the binding, alien. Strange leathers had been used, and the wooden framing had been grown or bent into intricate, jointed shapes before being wrapped in leather, fur, and even feathers.

A large bowl of coals sat in the middle of the arrangement of chairs, and many oil lamps hung from the arms of the golden lamp-stands all around the room.

“Here,” said Mehdi. “Enter quickly, so that I can shut the door.”

They filed in, each of them forced to brush past him as they entered and found their seats. Mehdi shut the door and locked it with the golden key. Then he turned to face the room.

“So,” he said. “I imagine you have questions for me?”

George adjusted his glasses and looked at everyone else. “Why don’t you just start talking, and see how many of our questions you can answer before we ask them?”

Mehdi chuckled. “It is difficult, for me to talk at long intervals. Very well. I will cover the basics.”

He leaned back against a bookshelf ladder, to rest his legs for a moment, and began to talk.

“You see, I have always had a certain... Gift,” said Mehdi. “Or a certain curse, if you wish to look at it that

way.”

He painstakingly crossed the room without the aid of his cane, leaning on furniture from time to time. He reached the table at last, and seated himself at it.

“Gather around, children,” he said. It was impossible to say what quality of his voice had changed, but he was not the man who had been speaking only a moment ago. There were eons in his utterance. Somehow none of them doubted that he was far, far older than them.

Chills and prickles rising on their skin, the party rose, and moved to the table, and took their seats around him.

Mehdi reached across the little table and a small box situated in the exact center of the table scuttled towards his hand. He opened the box and removed a deck of cards. His hands moved the cards so cleverly that it appeared the cards were shuffling themselves.

As he shuffled, he said, “I am, as you may have guessed, many hundreds of years older than I appear. I am not a vampire, or a ghost, or any form of undead. When I was twenty, at the siege of Jerusalem, I was mortally wounded by a crusader. Smitten by my beauty, he dared to capture me, to treat me. Even so, I began to slip away. He prayed with all his power, knowing that if I died, I would be damned. My soul would burn forever in his god’s hell. He offered up his loyal soul in exchange for mine, and kissed me as I gave my dying breath. His guardian angel sealed the pact. My death became his death, and his life, my life. His soul now burns in hell. I

have watched him, burning in my place.”

He cut the deck and shuffled the cards again. He said, “I have seen beyond the walls of life and death. I know what we are, and who made us, and what awaits us all beyond the grave. But I know more. As I said, I have always had a certain gift. I can speak with certainty about the world beyond, and contact what you might call ‘spirits’ within it.”

“Why don’t *you* call them spirits?” Carol asked. She put her fist on the table, the knife glittering in it.

George adjusted his glasses.

Mehdi smiled. “We will get to that. Have you all read Plato’s story of the Cave?”

Everyone looked at everyone. They were a generally well-educated group. All of them had read it, at one point or another. Recalling it was another matter. They had all come away with the basic idea that it was something like the Matrix.

Mehdi said, “I will take that as a yes. Well, my friends, I am afraid that you have all been living in the cave, watching shadows. Tell me; do any of you believe the words of the Christian Bible?”

Everyone looked at everyone. Shockingly, none of them raised a hand.

“Are any of you familiar with them?”

They all confessed to a middling familiarity. Matthew was an expert, as a former Cardinal. He humbly assented

that he was somewhat familiar with the Bible.

Mehdi said, “I am left with the unfortunate burden of puncturing your illusions. And broadening your horizons. There are seventy-seven cards in this deck, each completely unique. You will each take the deck, shuffle it, cut it, take the top card, and hide it from my view. Then you will pass the deck on, until each of you has one randomly drawn card. You may look at the card, but do not let me see it—not even its back. Do so now.”

He lowered his forehead to the table and covered his ears with his hands.

Nedry, sitting on one side of him, took the deck of cards before George, on Mehdi’s other side, could reach them. He shuffled, cut the deck, took the top card, and passed the deck to his left, to Lucius.

Lucius took the deck, did not shuffle, and took the top two cards. Then he passed the deck on to Matthew, who shuffled and took three, and passed it on to Carol. Carol passed the deck without taking a card but in the slyness of her passing hand a card fell, unseen, into her lap. Robert took the deck, obeyed Mehdi’s commands perfectly, and passed it on to John. John looked at Carol. He grunted, and passed the deck without taking a card. Minerva looked at the deck. She gently took the top seven cards, looked at them, and put them in her purse. She passed the deck to George.

George said, “Mehdi? What is all this?”

Mehdi said, “You will require proof.”

“Will we? We’re already here.”

“You will. Please.”

George took the top card and passed the unshuffled deck on to Mehdi.

Mehdi sat up and looked calmly at George. “John refused to take a card. Carol has one in her lap. Minerva took seven cards, Lucius took two cards and didn’t shuffle, Matthew took three, Robert obeyed me perfectly, as did Nedry. George took one card, but did not shuffle.”

“You could be wearing an earpiece,” said George, instantly.

“You may search my ears, my hands, and my pockets. I have only laid my hands open on the table, and a moment ago they were in full view, covering my ears. We can repeat the experiment, if you wish, under any circumstances you desire. Shall I tell you the cards, and their meanings?”

They all looked at each other, more on edge now than they had been in the gaze of the House.

“I don’t know if I want to,” said George.

“Very well. I will not tell you the meanings, only the cards. Let me see, that was... One for Carol, one for Nedry, one for George, two for Lucius, three for Matthew, seven for Minerva, none for John.”

He placed his hand palm-down on the table and slid it across the polished surface, revealing cards, face-up, where there had been no cards before.

Fifteen cards lay in a row.

Mehdi said, “The Sun, inverted. The Ace of Wands, inverted. The Page of Cups, inverted. The three of cups. The Lovers, inverted. The ten of wands. The Hermit, inverted. The four of swords. The page of swords. The six of wands. The Moon. The knight of wands, inverted. The nine of cups. The king of pentacles, inverted. The five of pentacles.”

Minerva ripped open her purse. Everyone else had felt the cards disappear from their clutching hands. The cards in her purse were gone.

It was as though a small earthquake had happened. All of them, as all people do sooner or later, had experienced what might be considered paranormal happenings, in which the edges of their perspective had been forcibly stretched wider by a noncompliant reality. This moment almost broke them. Somehow they had been able to adapt to the island and its bizarre sky, but this moment made them realize that they had not truly accepted it as real. Now they did.

“Magic is real, then?” said George, with a weary sigh.

“No,” said Mehdi. “It isn’t magic. Well, it is. It’s magic. Miracles. God-power. But it isn’t *really* magic.”

George massaged his temples.

Mehdi said, “There is a being. I will not speak his name, and you would be wise to keep it off your lips as well, while you are in the House. This being is older than

our power to conceive of civilization. It was there at the beginning, seeding life upon our planet. It shaped us. It taught us. Some of its drones grew curious enough to betray their orders, and mingle with us, and thus the Nephilim were made. We were stronger than the other forms of Man, and after the illumination of the angels we saw things that the other forms of Man did not. We saw the future. We anticipated war, and prepared for it. We butchered them all. We told ourselves the story of the Flood, to explain why we stood all alone. We had been chosen. We were perfect.

“But we were not. The being beheld us, and saw what his angels had done, and what we had done as a consequence. He decided to allow the experiment to evolve without his touch, and turned his interest to the creation of other worlds. He banished the interfering angels to earth, and left angels here to guard their prison. Those who had both blessed and corrupted us stayed to watch us, their children. They became invested. At times, they intervened, for good and for ill, on behalf of their bloodlines or in detriment to the bloodlines of others. They reproduce through us, bound to us from birth. They are always aware of what they are and of what they can do, even if we never sense it. After our dip in hellfire, my angel and I are fused more tightly to one another. I can access his matrices, and give him commands. He can affect matter and energy in positively miraculous ways.”

“Fine,” said George. “We’re all half-alien, sure, why not. But what about the *House*? What about this world?”

Mehdi laughed. “You are taking this all surprisingly well.”

“I’m sure I’m currently lying in a psychiatric ward at some hospital, after having had a psychotic break. The stress from pinning all those little butterflies under a tight deadline.”

“Was it a tight deadline?” said Mehdi. “You had many months to prepare the display.”

“I procrastinate. It’s part of my process.”

“We are in the Garden of Eden,” said Mehdi. “In the center of the earth. It is the Control Group. Everything here evolved from the same original single-celled organism as the one which eventually became all of us. It was sheltered from mass extinction events and from the hostility of the external atmosphere and the changing light of days and seasons. This is why the forms you see seem so different from our own.”

“If what you say is true, then actually, they’re remarkably similar, so far,” said George. “Except for that brute we saw in the tree...”

“Ah yes,” said Mehdi. “Unfortunately, this place has not remained quite pure, in the absence of the gardener. There are angels and angels. Some of them dabble here, rather than interfering with the affairs of man. They have not yet created a being lovely enough to mingle with, but when they do, I fear there will be new Nephilim to contend with. Already there are man-like things in the forest.”

“So why us?” Carol asked. “Why through our dead?”

“I am sorry,” said Mehdi. “The cards told me what to write. My angel is part of the Mother, and she moves only in riddles. Her movements are so subtle that they are often indistinguishable from chaos. Nevertheless, she strives to be the benevolence in the hand of Fate. People have called her many things, but most lately she is called Luck. She had as much a hand in shaping us as her son did—”

“—Excuse me,” said George, “her *son!*?”

“Our creator. Why so surprised? He must have come from somewhere. He is only an experiment, just as we are only his.”

“So you’re personifying random chance?” said George.

“No. I wish it were so simple. Have you ever heard of the phenomenon of the wisdom of crowds?”

“Yes. It’s a statistical oddity that occurs whenever you have a large group of random people guess a number of countable objects, such as beans in a jar.”

“It applies in many other areas as well.”

“Wait,” said Carol. “What happens?”

“When?”

“When you have a crowd guess how many beans are in the jar?”

“The average of their guesses will usually be within a few beans of the actual number,” said George. Then, to

Mehdi, he said, “But this is just an analogy, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Mehdi. “At our fundamental level, what are we?”

“Meat,” said Lucius.

“Minds,” said Nedry.

“Souls,” said Matthew.

“Cells, right?” said John. “Technically? We’re just a bunch of cells. And dead cells.”

“John is getting closer,” said Mehdi, “but we haven’t gotten close enough.”

“Atoms?” said George.

“Smaller still,” said Mehdi. “We are quantum particles, taking a certain arrangement. More complex; we are the arrangement itself, its every part replaced at every moment. We are a wave of energy made matter made flesh, passing from birth to death and on into the sea of energy. Are quantum particles conscious? Who can say? Our minds are conscious, due to the movement primarily of electrons and atoms. Where does our sense of awareness and consciousness come from? Are we the cells, pulsing with the signals? Does any single cell read the thought it carries to the mind? Is any single neuron aware? The pattern of connection and the pattern of energy-and-matter flow is all that we call ‘soul’, and somehow it is the experiencer that experiences the thoughts and selects the pieces of the self, declaring this ‘me’ and that, ‘not me’. It labels the world, learning the

extent of its own skin and the limits of its strength in every capacity. It yearns to shape the world in any way it can. The universe experiences the world through our eyes, for a while, and goes back to be at peace with itself. Only it doesn't. There is truth to the concept of the 'soul' —thanks to our angelic heritage. The angel which was born with us lives on, carrying the memories of all we were and all that we intended to be. There are countless abandoned angels in motion throughout the world at every moment, each the lingering whisper of a dying breath, working the will of its dead friend wherever it can. Some have great power. Others have none at all."

"You mentioned hell?" said Carol.

"Yes. The laws laid down by the old god on those stone tablets were all binding, but they were lost to time a hundred thousand years ago. Only the oral history remained, distorted over the eons. The laws are long forgotten, but they were binding, and their punishment is eternal."

"The concept of hell has a known history," said George. "It didn't just appear spontaneously, it was a gradual evolution. Judaism doesn't even believe in a hell. It's that recent."

"So it would seem," said Mehdi, sadly. "Unfortunately, two thousand years ago, the being's son came to examine the world his father had made, and took on a human form. Until that time, no one had ever died and returned, and angels did not suffer hell. He explored and returned, and was appalled at what his father had done,

and offered a simple solution: an everflowing cup full of life-giving water, which would grant immortality in the flesh and paradise after death. A biochemical solution designed to alter the storage location for the save file, so to speak.”

“My god,” said Carol.

“Don’t say his name,” said Mehdi. “He has ears within this House. It is where he lived, when he was making the world.”

“What the fuck!?” said Carol.

“I would keep the swearing to a minimum, too,” said Mehdi. “He cannot reach us here. He is still too far away.”

“*Still!?*” shouted Nedry.

“He is traveling through interstellar space. Even at light-speed, it takes time.”

“What the fuck,” said Lucius, quietly.

“Careful,” said Mehdi. He cocked his head, looking at the high corners of the ceiling. He raised a finger to his lips.

Everyone fell silent.

Heavy footsteps were walking down the hall, clanking with every step.

The walls of the house seemed to stretch and swell as the lumbering thing moved past, and they all watched in silence as that strange bulge in the wooden wall moved

towards the door. A glow came under the door as the heavy tread approached it.

Mehdi rose quietly to his feet, and raised one hand towards the door.

The heavy tread tromped on, and as it reached the door and stopped there, they heard a dull roaring and a distant wailing of many souls, and the glow blazed hot under the door and through the keyhole.

“Pass on,” said Mehdi, quietly, his hand still upraised. “Pass on.”

The creature hesitated.

“Please, pass on,” said Mehdi.

The heavy tread passed on, continuing down the hall.

Soon the sound of its footsteps faded into the depths of the House, and they lost even the sound of its echoes.

They all breathed a sigh of relief.

“What *was* that?” Minerva asked.

“That, my dear—”

“—I don’t care how old you are. Don’t ‘my dear’ me. I am a grown woman.”

“Apologies. That was the brave crusader who sacrificed himself for me. His soul has twisted in the flames, and he hungers now to undo his pact by killing me. I can protect you from him. The House is large enough to hide in.”

“But *why* are we *here!*?” Carol asked. “Why *us!*?”

“As I said, the cards told me what to write. I conjured you here as though by a spell. The spirits of your dead wrote through me. They are here, with me. With all of us. Only you and I are here in the living flesh, and they are here as denizens of the House.”

“What difference does that make?” Carol asked.

“We can die here. They cannot.”

“Wait,” said George. “You said that the creator was coming *back*, that he was already on his way.”

“Yes, I did.”

“How long until he gets here?”

“Just in time to witness the end results of climate change, I think, and collect any entertaining survivors.”

“The rest?”

“Hell.”

“What were the original laws?” Nedry asked. “Just out of curiosity. You said your crusader was bound for heaven, and that’s why his angel could grant you life. How did you know he was bound for heaven? How was he bound for heaven, if he was a rampaging crusader?”

“Tell me. Your favorite movies. Are they the ones with tame, milquetoast, friendly, behaviorally flawless people who never commit violence of any kind and never set a toe out of line?”

“No?”

“Why would his be? He observes all. Whom do you think he would find more interesting, the crusader passionately striving towards his fervent goal, however misguided, or the suicidally depressed peasant boy who had done nothing to express his soul and utilize his life?”

“Oh,” said Nedry. “I see.” He was thinking of his own existence and finding the thought of a constant hidden camera somewhat frightening.

“Yes, it’s uncomfortable to think about, isn’t it? What lives we would care to watch, and which ones we would click past without concern. After all, compared to his existence, we can hardly seem real. Somewhat more discomfiting, for me at least, was the notion that a second soul had been living, linked to mine, through every intimate and secret moment of my life. Perhaps it is a mercy so few people can hear their angels speaking.”

“But what are we *doing here!?*” Carol asked. “Why did you bring us here!?”

“I have brought you here to be my guests,” said Mehdi, with an enigmatic smile. “There are certain things that must happen with your assistance. For that end, I have gathered you here. For tonight, we do not need to worry about anything more than getting you oriented and comfortable.”

“I’d prefer a straight answer, actually,” said Carol, and she stabbed the tip of the knife into the table.

Mehdi laughed. “You amuse me, Carol. I have plucked you from your world and proven to you not only that magic is real, but that I possess it. Yet your first instinct, upon not getting what you think you deserve from me, is to plunge a knife into my table. I admire it, at a certain level.”

He put the knife on the table in front of him even as it disappeared from the table and from Carol’s grasp. “You are in no position to make threats. I have brought you here for my own reasons, and when the time is right I will explain your part in them. Until then, simply be yourselves, and follow the rules, and you may survive.”

They all looked at each other and a silent understanding passed between them. It was the unspoken assent to the possible necessity of murder, and a determination to escape at any cost.

Mehdi seemed to sense it. He laughed. “As I said, simply be yourselves. You may even find your stay enjoyable.”

“Why does it have human furniture?” George asked, abruptly. “The house, I mean. Presumably, he wasn’t human?”

“He definitely didn’t have Victorian furniture,” said Matthew, caressing the arm of his chair.

Mehdi smiled. “A good question. This House preserves the memory of every dwelling, object, and important chamber of every person who has ever died. We sit now in the memory of a peaceful sitting room, with

a few anachronistic pieces of furniture taken from other rooms. No one was ever murdered in here. That isn't true, for many of the rooms. There are whole regions of the house that you should avoid at any cost. Sadly, with the nature of the House, you will not know them until you stumble into them. For this reason, the first rule is this: never go anywhere alone. The second rule is: Never go more than one room away without Mehdi."

"Why is that?" said George.

"The House will not obey you. Or rather, it *will* obey you, all too well. You lack the control and experience that I have, and the House will quickly lead you down a reflection of the darkest reaches of your own psyche."

He sighed. "I have seen already in the cards that two among your number will not follow my warning, and will die as a result."

"Which two?" Carol asked.

"The Lovers, unless I am much mistaken," said Mehdi. "The ten of wands proves it."

"Under what interpretation?" Nedry asked. He knew something about Tarot cards.

"Under the correct one," said Mehdi.

The bedrooms were large but so cluttered they seemed small. The beds smelled as though someone had died in them recently. They were Tudor two-poster beds, their twin pillars thick enough around to be small tree-trunks, and tall enough to scrape the vaulted ceiling and

stand unnervingly close to the candle-burdened chandelier. The canopy of this private forest was hung with silk and fine, gauzy things, almost like mosquito nets. The backboard was carved into a mass of tortured sinners burning under an army of angels. It ran all the way to the top of the pillars, a vast and unified image, complete with an expanse of carved heaven, clouds and all. The wood was dark, and glossy, and its mass seemed almost to have a heady gravity. The ground sagged slightly beneath the clawed legs of the bed, and this warp caused every step to lean towards the bed.

They were weary, after all.

There were only a few pieces of furniture other than the bed: a rocking chair, a brutish hearth behind a black iron grille, a wardrobe, a vanity, and a lounge chair.

Matthew said, “Er, Bathroom?”

“Look behind the tapestries. These five chambers will have to fit all eight of us.”

“Five chambers?” said Carol, confused.

“Oh, yes. Each chamber is connected to another chamber by its bathroom. These are all sister chambers; some from England, some from Austria, some from forgotten castles lost to history. I have managed to arrange that they are all stored together, linked like beads upon a chain. They will stay connected.”

George said, “How did you—”

“—Too complicated,” said Mehdi.

“Simplify it,” said Carol.

“I can’t.”

Carol crossed her arms and said, “Why not?”

He said, “You couldn’t possibly comprehend it.”

“Excuse me,” said George. “I am *extremely* well educated. Give it a shot.”

“Very well,” said Mehdi. “If you wish to waste the time—”

“—Why, are we on a timer?” Minerva asked.

“No,” said Mehdi. He laughed politely and put himself down into a chair. “It is just that such conversation would be better saved for dinner, after you have all had a chance to choose your sleeping arrangements and freshen yourselves up. Technically, the clothing in the wardrobes was never worn by a living person. At the same time, every piece of clothing in the wardrobes is a memory of a piece of clothing worn by someone once alive, so treat them with respect. Trust your instincts, when you touch the cloth. Do not wear any cloth which makes your heart sink with dismay. That said, the same applies to the soaps and lotions in the bathrooms. I have selected more modern bathrooms, for your convenience, and should any of you happen to be a couple, the bathtubs are large and roomy enough to save water.”

“Do we need to save water here?” George asked.

“No,” said Mehdi. “But you could do it anyway, if you wanted to.”

Matthew, Lucius, George, Nedry, Carol, Minerva, and John all exchanged looks. Some looks lingered.

They all looked at Mehdi, and he smiled. “I assure you. We are all already damned. We are on the way to changing that. Be safe and wise, and be kind if you can be.”

“What about Jesus?” said George. “I’m confused. You said he was real?”

“Don’t say his name!” said Mehdi. “He has returned to his father, and their union has been renewed. He is not the man that walked among us any longer. He is the son of the creator. They have changed each other, and what will come has been foretold by prophets in a thousand forms. He will return and his ship will rain fire upon the earth, and—”

“Excuse me,” said Carol. “His ship?”

“That’s the part you have trouble believing?” said Mehdi. “Sincerely, you have trusted me so far. It would be foolish not to trust me still further.”

“That’s a fallacy,” said George.

“Which one?” said Mehdi.

“That’s the sunk cost fallacy,” said George. “Just because we’ve bought everything you’ve said so far doesn’t mean we can’t be skeptical of what you say next. You could be manipulating us.”

“Yeah,” said John. He looked at Carol. For... approval? Carol gave him a stern nod of agreement. If he

wanted a pat on the back it meant he saw her as his superior officer, for the moment. Men had been well trained over their centuries of war, and culture can run as deep as blood.

Mehdi said, “Trust me until I give you a reason not to. I call it a ‘ship’ for convenience’s sake, but it is a ‘ship’ in the same way that this place is a ‘house’. It is beyond comprehension.”

“And it can’t go faster than light?”

“Did I say it was not traveling faster than light?”

“You did! Earlier, you did!” said Nedry.

“No,” said George. “He only said that it takes time to get here, *even* traveling at light speed.”

Mehdi nodded. “George pays attention. Yes, this being is traveling faster than light, but it is still crossing the universe at a certain speed. Its mind and its influence are more or less omnipresent, but its body is not.”

Carol figured it out. “You’re going to k—” Her mouth slapped shut of its own accord. Across the room, Mehdi’s hand was ever so politely upraised.

Her eyebrows raised and fury mounted in her heart.

Mehdi said, “Yes. But do not say it. Think only of pink ponies. Think about a large milkshake of your favorite flavor. Think about the fact that this room is from the elizabethan era, and think about the carvers who spent so many hours making these magnificent bedposts. They come from the wood of an ancient kind of

tree, now extinct, but then plentiful. I no longer recall the name. It was so subtly different from the other trees of its kind that the idiots of its era did not recognize it as a separate species, and they killed it for the beauty of its bones. Now it stands here, groaning, weighing down the house; the ghost of a bed long rotted to dust. You will sleep here tonight, at least two of you. One of you might decide to take the lounge, I cannot deter you from doing that. But think now about who you wish to share a bedchamber with, and close your eyes.”

Everyone looked at everyone else. Then everyone closed their eyes.

“Keep your eyes closed,” said Mehdi. “Using both your hands, point to two people you would not mind spending the night with. I will observe.”

Everyone silently pointed. Mehdi smiled. “Much as I imagined.”

“Matthew, Lucius, you are in this chamber. Carol and Minerva are in the next, Nedry and Robert are in the following one. John is in the next. George is in mine.”

John looked around, confused at first, then a little hurt. “None of you wanted to share a room with me?”

“Several of them pointed at you,” said Mehdi. “However, there were no mutual pointings.”

“Oh,” said John. He had pointed at both Carol and Minerva.

“Now, I will go and find a dining room for us. DO

NOT LEAVE THESE ROOMS FOR ANY REASON. You may travel freely between the five chambers, and the bathrooms which link them, accepting standard norms of privacy and so forth. Only this chamber has a doorway leading to the rest of the House, and you must not pass through it for any reason, no matter what you hear. You may even hear me calling your names, begging you for help, screaming terrible things. Ignore it. The House plays terrible tricks. So long as this door remains shut and locked, we will be safe inside these chambers.”

Carol felt uneasy about the arrangement of the rooms. So did John, Nedry, and Matthew. The rest felt more at ease with the knowledge that their friends would be in the chambers on either side of theirs. Those who sensed the danger knew that this chamber where they were standing had a door that opened directly into a hall of the House, and that none of the other bedchambers did. This would be the point of entry for any danger, and those in this room would face it first. Those in the others would face the knowledge that they were trapped, cornered, pinned like rats in a dead end alley. They would have the doors, a series of airlocks, but what would happen if those doors were locked already when someone in the other room was desperately trying to flee some hideous enemy?

“Now, I suggest that you keep the bathroom doors unlocked unless you are currently in the bathroom. That way, should anyone need it desperately in the night, they will not be locked out of it.”

“How soundproof are these walls?” asked Lucius, almost innocently.

Mehdi smirked. “If you scream, the rest will hear it.”

“Too bad,” said Lucius.

Matthew gave a pained smile and massaged his leg. The sting was still excruciating.

“Now,” said Mehdi. “Freshen up. Beware the ghosts of many things. Do not lock eyes with your reflection for too long, or it will start to recognize you. Stay out of the shadows. Check the sheets for biting things. Shake out your clothes before you put them on. Let the pipes run for a little while before you touch the water. Watch out for treacherous soaps and mysterious puddles. Stand up and close the toilet lid before you flush. Upend your shoes and tap them thoroughly before you put them on. Keep your wits about you and never assume that you are secure. Together you are safer than you are apart. I have tried to ensure that these rooms are safe, and they are far safer than many of the other rooms in the House. Even so, some dangers may have slipped my notice, for they can be very subtle. Be wise. Trust that sense of dread. Trust your instincts.”

With that, Mehdi got to his feet, leaning upon his cane, and left the room. It was as though he had stepped off a cliff; he simply dropped out of view, into the darkness, and the door swung shut behind him. There was no sound of footsteps retreating, of him in the hall beyond. It was as though the room were hanging in empty space.

Carol and Minerva glanced at each other. John looked at the ground. Robert and Nedry exchanged a look. Lucius helped Matthew to his feet. George fidgeted, unsure what to do next.

Then, resolute, he said, “Right. He’s gone, so let’s be cautious. Let’s do a sweep of all the rooms, all together. We’ll investigate, check for traps and dangers, isolate anything threatening, and arrange the watch schedule.”

None of them denied the reasonability of keeping watch, in theory.

“Wait,” said Carol. “If everybody is staying up half the night on the watch, none of us will get any sleep.”

“It will be easier,” said Matthew, utterly casually, “if Nedry and Robert join Lucius and I in the first room. We can each take a quarter of the night on the watch, that way. This bed is easily large enough for three at least, and there is the lounge for the person on the watch.”

Nedry and Robert shrugged. “Makes sense.”

George said, “We’ll have an empty room, then. Where do we want to put it?”

“Actually,” said Nedry, “that’s a good point. Why not leave *this* room vacant? An empty room and an extra locked door between us and the House sounds good to me.”

They swept the rooms in sequence, searching each methodically. They touched every garment in every wardrobe, and any that gave them chills, they tossed into

a pile on the floor. They did the same with any treacherous soaps or threatening shampoos. All five beds were equally elizabethan in general principle, although some of them were certainly Austrian in design. The rooms were similar, but not identical; the tapestries were different and every piece of furniture was unique.

“So,” said Carol, when they were done piling all the offensive material in the far corner of the last room. “Who gets to use the bathroom first?”

“Well, there are four bathrooms, right?” said Lucius.

“Right,” said Carol.

“Who wants a shower?” Matthew asked. “Show of hands.”

Lucius, Nedry, Carol, Minerva, and George all raised their hands.

“Lucius, Nedry, can you share?” Matthew asked. “It will make things easier. I personally want a bath. After dinner. I think soaking my leg may ease the pain.”

John said, “I’m good.”

“I want a bath too,” said Robert.

Minerva turned to Carol. “Could you... Could you be in the room with me, while I shower? We can keep each other company. I’d just feel safer if the lady with the knife was nearby.”

Carol laughed. “Sure thing. All girls together, right?”

“Right,” said Lucius, putting a casual arm around Nedry’s shoulders. “Shall we?”

Nedry swallowed. “Right.”

Matthew asked, “Is anyone planning on changing into the memories of dead people’s clothing?”

“Fuck no,” said Lucius. “Again, come on. Horror movie.”

“You’ll start to smell,” said Matthew.

“I’ll wash my clothes in the sink if I have to.”

“I wonder what happened to our luggage?” Carol asked.

“Yeah...” said George. “Clearly we had time to change at some point...”

Matthew and Robert returned to the first room, Nedry and Lucius went to the first bathroom, Carol and Minerva went to the second bathroom, and George went to the third bathroom. John decided to wait in the first room with Matthew and Robert, for he felt immediately uneasy all alone in his room.

Nedry and Lucius locked both bathroom doors at the same time, then turned to look at each other in the strange silence of the decadent palace bathroom. Lucius smiled shyly. “Hey. I’ll start the water. Do you like it hot?”

“Who doesn’t?” asked Nedry.

“How hot?” asked Lucius, turning the knob.

“I don’t know. Medium-hot. Not scalding.”

“Come here,” said Lucius. “Put your hand in.”

Nedry had to stand next to Lucius to do so, reaching into the large standing shower. This bathroom was relatively modern, especially when compared to the ancient bedrooms. He reached his arm into the water, face to face with Lucius, inches away.

Lucius said, very quietly, “See. I don’t bite.”

“What a shame,” said Nedry, and it was almost very smooth except he couldn’t help but blush a little as he said it. To his surprise, he saw Lucius’s cheeks darken slightly in response.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” Lucius whispered.

“Maybe. I thought you were with Matthew.”

“He’s open-minded,” said Lucius.

“So this is a poly thing?” said Nedry, unbuttoning Lucius’s shirt.

“Don’t label it,” said Lucius, kissing Nedry on the cheek as he unbuckled Nedry’s belt. He ripped it out of the belt-loops and pulled Nedry’s hips closer to his own. “I got permission.”

Nedry worked his hands into Lucius’s half-unbuttoned shirt and found tender things to tease, and Lucius’s lips stole a kiss. Nedry got his breath back, eyelids fluttering, and began to return the kiss with a small measure of the intensity with which it was given. Lucius was

an expert. Nedry considered himself well-seasoned, but Lucius's subtle tongue and teasing lips took him by surprise. Each motion seemed to stir the adrenaline in his chest. Lucius grabbed both of Nedry's wrists and pulled his hands out of his half-unbuttoned shirt and forced them down to his own loins. Nedry accepted this gift of permission and felt through Lucius's tight slacks to discover the shape of things unseen. Lucius unbuttoned his own shirt and continued to kiss Nedry, then pulled off the shirt, keeping it right-side out, and tossed it onto the sink. Nedry couldn't help himself; his hands rose to wander, and Lucius allowed it.

He giggled slightly, and twitched away from Nedry's fingers. "Ticklish."

"Oh?" said Nedry, his eyes widening, a smile growing.

"No."

"Are you ticklish here?" Nedry asked.

"What about you, huh? You ticklish here?" Lucius asked, slipping his whole hand down the back of Nedry's underwear and trailing his fingers deep between his cheeks.

"Whoa," said Nedry, suddenly finding himself crushed close to Lucius's naked torso, pinned in his strong arms, helpless. Lucius's probing fingers had pulled Nedry up onto his tiptoes, off-balance, completely under Lucius's power.

"Suck my titty," Lucius growled.

“Sure thing,” said Nedry, laughing slightly as he obeyed.

“And take off my pants,” said Lucius, sinking his fingers into Nedry’s hair as the fingers of his other hand gently tapped on Nedry’s sphincter.

Nedry had never had it like this. He had never felt so thoroughly manhandled, so easily seduced. Lucius could have had any number of men just like Nedry, but Nedry knew that he would likely never in his life have a night with a man like Lucius, and he could hardly keep his hands from shaking.

He wanted to say, “Your body is perfect. You are beautiful. Everything about you is perfect.” It would have objectified Lucius, it would have changed the rapport they had shared. He busied his lips with nipples, pecs, abdomen, pubis. He dragged Lucius’s pants down with both hands, sliding his hands down around two huge, smooth, luscious cheeks.

“Please tell me you bottom too,” said Nedry, looking up from his knees, sinking his fingers into soft cheeks.

“Are you gonna eat that?” Lucius asked.

“I might bite it if you keep acting like this.”

“We’re wasting water. You should get naked.”

“Maybe.”

Lucius stepped into the shower. Nedry stripped off the last of his clothes and stepped in behind him, shutting the glass door behind them.

It was surprisingly roomy in the shower.

Lucius pulled Nedry under the water, and it poured over the both of them. Chest to chest, they held each other and kissed while their hands explored.

“Let’s save the best for later,” whispered Lucius, into Nedry’s ear. “I just wanted to make sure you knew I was interested.”

“I’m interested,” said Nedry.

“Now we just have to get Robert on board,” said Lucius.

“He’ll join,” said Nedry. “I’m sure of it.”

“And George, and Mehdi, if we can manage it.”

“I think they’d gladly join,” said Nedry.

“I’ve never done this before,” said Lucius. “Tried to arrange an orgy.”

“I’ve never had the opportunity,” said Nedry. “But it’s obvious we’re all cute.”

“I think Mehdi picked us that way on purpose. He even paired Minerva and Carol.”

“But what for?” Nedry asked.

“To tempt us,” said Lucius.

“Does that mean it would be wrong to give in?” Nedry asked.

“I don’t know. But I plan to give in.”

“Ok. If you deserve to fall, I guess so do I. You’re too perfect to burn.”

“Perfect?” said Lucius, with a slight laugh. “Thank you. I could say the same about this.”

His hands squeezed something delightful and Nedry bit Lucius gently on the neck.

“Careful,” said Lucius. “You’ll leave a mark.”

“I’ll be gentle,” said Nedry.

“I do bottom,” said Lucius. “Sometimes. For the right guys. When I’m in the right mood.”

“I like both,” said Nedry.

“Just kiss me,” said Lucius.

They kissed. They stopped only to shampoo themselves, then resumed after they had rinsed the suds from their hair. They washed each other’s bodies with intimate care. Then they rinsed, and stepped out of the shower, and reached for the towels. The towels did not attempt to betray them, and as they touched the soft, thick cloth, they each felt an emotion that was not their own. It seeped in through the back of their mind, an impression not made with reason or the senses.

“These towels,” said Lucius, drying his body luxuriously, as though he were a man on display.

“Yeah...”

“What do you feel?” Lucius asked.

Nedry held the towel behind his back and waggled his back dry on it, causing Lucius to grin. “I feel fun. These towels have happy memories.”

“Yeah,” said Lucius. He dried his hair.

Nedry lassoed Lucius with his towel and pulled him close, pressing their half-dry bodies together.

“I was almost dry, mister.”

“I know. I wanted to make it last longer.”

Lucius laughed. “We’ll have all night.”

“If we can persuade Robert,” said Nedry.

“You don’t think I’m persuasive enough?”

“You could sell milk to a dairy farmer.”

“Thank you.”

“But you’re not slimy,” said Nedry.

“Thank you?”

“Most guys, when they’re this smooth...” Nedry trailed his hand slowly down between Lucius’s pectorals and on down a clean-shaven happy trail to nice things. “They’re slimy, too. Oily with lies. It’s like a mucus they have to produce, to protect themselves. It always leaves a bitter aftertaste.”

“Oh.” Lucius bit Nedry’s lip. “Guess I’ll buy more of Matthew’s mouthwash, whenever we get back to civilization.”

“You’re a liar, then?”

“Every man is.”

“I wish that weren’t true.”

“It’s true of women, too,” said Lucius. “No one in the history of mankind has lived a life without a lie.”

“We can’t know that.”

“I’ll bet you fifty dollars. We can ask Mehdi. He can introduce us to this mythical truth-teller.”

“Fifty dollars?” said Nedry. “That’s a lot of money...”

“I’ll spot you.”

Lucius laughed. “How can I say no?”

“You can’t. Come on. Let’s get dressed.”

They reached for their clothes.

Their clothes were gone.

“Cute prank,” said Lucius.

“The doors are both locked,” said Nedry.

“Fuck this,” said Lucius, and he knocked on the door where all the men were waiting. “Hey Matthew! Robert! John! Somebody!”

John, on the other side of the door, said, “What’s up?”

“Give our clothes back, guys, not cool.”

“What?”

“The door has been locked!” said Matthew. It sounded like he was lying on the bed.

Nedry said, quietly, “Let’s just wrap our towels tight and get out of here.”

“Right.”

Lucius wrapped his towel tightly around himself and Nedry followed suit, then gave a little scream as he looked upon the mirror.

Someone had used their finger to smudge the fog into a pair of cartoon eyes.

Lucius said, “Fuck no, fuck no.” He ripped the door open and the both of them stumbled out, shivering a little in the chill of the room.

Robert was by the hearth, putting more wood on a stubborn, sullen fire. There was a haze of smoke clinging to the thickly carved rafters of the vaulted ceiling. Matthew lay on the bed, one leg propped up on pillows. John sat on the lounge, looking sour.

All eyes turned to the half-naked men now shivering on the carpet.

“What happened?” Matthew asked.

“Clothes disappeared.”

“And someone wrote on the mirror.”

“The door’s been locked the whole time,” said John.

“I know,” said Lucius. “And the bedroom between us and the girls is empty.”

“This doesn’t feel safe,” Nedry said.

“It isn’t,” said Matthew, quietly. “I’m afraid I have some experience with this place.”

“What?” Nedry asked. They all looked at him.

Matthew sighed. “You know, not everything I write about is pure fiction. Have you ever heard of the akashic record?”

“No?” said Nedry.

“It has been brushed against occasionally, by clever clairvoyants of the past. I thought myself something of a seer, at one time. I dabbled for fun, learned to see parts of it. Found out it was real.”

“But what is it?”

“It is a record containing every thought, every intention, every piece of knowledge, and every bit of information of our world. Some say it contains both the past and the future, but I have watched it closely. The future it foretells is always defined by the choices of the present, and it changes from moment to moment. And now that we are here, within it... It is just like my dreams. This place is easily twice as dangerous as Mehdi made it sound.”

“That’s not comforting,” said Nedry. He was shivering a little more violently now. Lucius had already moved to stand by the hearth.

Nedry joined him.

“No,” said Matthew. “I suppose it’s not. But it does mean that we are not entirely reliant upon him. And that some of the things I have learned can help us.”

“Like what?”

“We should make an offering,” said Matthew. “Something to appease the spirits.”

Lucius opened the wardrobe. Where before there had been many garments, there was now only one suit hanging in the center of the wardrobe. It was green, glossy, and finely embroidered with gemstones and pearls.

He gave a little growl of frustration and snatched the suit from the wardrobe. The touch of the silk filled him with far more than tactile pleasure. Someone had loved this suit deeply.

It was perfectly cut to Lucius’s dimensions.

“We’re all boys here, right?” said Lucius, and he dropped his towel. John looked away. Robert stole a peek. Matthew and Nedry watched openly.

Lucius put on the suit and admired the flattering cut. It was a surprisingly modern suit.

“Looks like... Nineteen forties?” said Matthew.

“Yeah,” said Lucius. “It’s in good shape. Smells a little like menthols.”

Nedry crossed the room, dropping his towel. He closed the wardrobe, waited a moment, and opened it again.

A black and white French maid's outfit hung on the hangar.

"Oh, come on," said Nedry.

"Our haunter has a sense of humor," said Lucius.

"A pretty tacky one." Nedry shut the wardrobe and opened it again. The French maid's outfit had changed; now the skirt was two inches shorter and the stockings were fishnets. He closed it and opened it again, and the skirt rose dangerously high on the thigh, and a gaiter and a riding crop hung from the hangar with it. Another cycle and the dress had changed to a miniskirt and a crop-top with lollipop-red tights.

"Oh, come on! Give me something to wear!" He slammed the door again.

He ripped it open and a lacy red thong shot out of the wardrobe and covered his face. He stumbled backwards, clawing at it, terrified. Lucius leapt to help him, and ripped it off his head. As he held it in his hand he felt a deep, uneasy pain in his gut, and he dropped it instantly. It scuttled away, under the bed, causing everyone to stand on furniture.

"Do something, psychic boy!" Lucius roared at Matthew, from his perch on the lounge beside the naked Nedry.

"I'm trying! Stop shouting!" Matthew cried, clutching at his head with both hands, wide-eyed.

John grabbed the fire poker from Robert's hand,

crouched to look under the bed, and reached deep with the hook of the poker. He hauled out the dead thong, and held it up for inspection, causing a general flinch.

Casually, keeping it at arm's length, he carried it to the hearth and dumped it in the fire, then gave the poker back to Robert.

Robert approached the wardrobe. Nedry said, "Don't! Please."

Robert opened the wardrobe. The clothing they had been expecting the first time now hung inside, casually dusty, as though it hadn't moved at all.

"Here," said Robert, grabbing a dusty elizabethan suit from the wardrobe. He shook off the dust, held it for a while, and handed it to Nedry.

"Thanks," said Nedry, his fingers brushing Robert's in the exchange. He dressed himself carefully, thoughtfully, inspecting each item thoroughly before he put it on.

"You're gonna look like a butler," said John.

This wasn't very funny, but everyone found themselves laughing very hard for a while. Then Lucius said, "Goddamn I could use a cigarette."

The house trembled, the foundations shook. Red light flickered up through the floorboards as though something made of magma were passing underneath.

Matthew hissed: "Don't say his name."

“Why is he letting us do this? Even talk about this?” Nedry asked.

Matthew said, “I don’t know. I can’t say. Perhaps we’re entertaining. Perhaps we’re not a real danger.”

“This doesn’t feel right,” said John. “He *made* us.”

“I know,” said Nedry. “But... If it means not burning forever...?”

“It’s his right, isn’t it? Spare the rod, spoil the child?”

“Hardly seems like discipline,” said Matthew. “Just cruelty. No one deserves eternal punishment.”

John said, “Not even kid diddlers?”

“I was diddled,” said Robert, baldly. “Fucker deserves to burn.”

Then Robert took a huge drag on his vape pen. The light blinked frantically. There was maybe one good hit left. This was infuriating, because the cartridge was almost entirely full.

No one seemed to know what to do with the conversation, after that, and so they were left in an uncomfortable silence.

Carol and Minerva took turns showering. Their bathroom had a more discrete shower with an opaque curtain. Carol stood facing the mirror and methodically arranged the contents of her pockets on the bathroom counter. Pack of spearmint gum. Pack of camels, half empty. Lighter. Knife. Wallet, with badge, ID; all credit and

bank cards. Glasses, glasses case, with cleaning cloth. Clothespin. Paperclip. Two elastic hairbands.

Not much of use. She could hear Minerva bathing behind her, singing softly to herself. A Birdy song. Esmerelda had loved Birdy.

“You alright out there, my love?”

The voice sent chills down Carol’s spine. She looked in the mirror, and saw the silhouette behind the curtain. She closed her eyes.

“Carol? You still out there?” Minerva asked.

“I’m here. Sorry. Deep in thought.”

“I’m almost done.”

“Take your time. There’s no rush.”

“What did you say?”

“Take your time!”

“Carol!? Carol! Are you there?” Minerva’s voice was getting further and further away.

“Minerva?” Carol turned towards the shower.

“Carol! Help me!” She sounded rooms away.

Carol lunged towards the shower and ripped the curtain aside, and beheld a long hallway lined and floored with wet tile. There were drains in the floor at intervals, but the floor did not slope enough to drain the puddles which had gathered. The hallway seemed to run on into infinity.

“HELP!” Minerva screamed.

“I’m coming! Come towards me!” Carol reached out her arms, hesitating to step into the hall. “This isn’t possible. This isn’t real! This isn’t real! Minerva, come to me!”

“I can’t find you!”

“I’m here!”

“Please! Carol, I’m frightened!”

Carol gripped the walls of the hall and said, “You listen to me, House. I played by your rules. Now put this back the way it was!”

The House, it seemed, was not in a listening mood.

George hadn’t quite managed to get the water comfortably hot just yet. The pipes in his bathroom rattled and squeaked, and clanked horribly in the walls. The water ran yellow at first, then clear, but it stayed glacier-cold for nearly fifteen minutes. Finally George fiddled with the knobs and discovered that they had been mixed up; the one that should have been cold was hot, and vice versa. With this error corrected, the water was soon warm enough to enter.

He stripped down very self-consciously, feeling very watched in the large, gaudy bathroom. George had a good body, though he took relatively poor care of it. He had always liked his legs. He had thick, sturdy thighs and calves. They were hairy to just a little above his knees, then he was smooth to his neck, and down to his

forearms. He had curly little hairs on his toes and fingers. He kept his bikini region trimmed, but not shaved, as razors irritated his skin.

He became aware of all this as though for the first time, as he undressed in front of the mirror. The last thing to remove was his glasses. He put them on the counter.

He turned to step into the shower, but saw something out of the corner of his eye. He turned back towards the mirror and looked at himself, and though his vision was blurry and somewhat doubled he still saw the glasses on his reflection's face.

He looked away at once. Very consciously, he stepped into the shower and closed the curtain.

Voice shaking slightly, he began to sing. "You're just too good to be true, can't take my eyes off of you..."

He sang on, blurring the lyrics but singing on, keeping the tune, keeping the rhythm, letting the hot water and the song calm him down. He thought of Mehdi. Mehdi had said he would be ok, as long as he followed the rules. He trusted Mehdi. He had no reason not to... So far.

He put shampoo into his hair and massaged it into a lather. The moment he was blinded, he heard something stumble in the bathroom, and something clatter to the floor. He rinsed his face frantically.

Through the gap in the curtains he could only see a tiny gap of floor, and even that only blurrily. Some-

thing skittered into view, black on the tile, glinting. His glasses.

A pair of pale blurs padded closer to the glasses on the tile. A pale blur reached down and picked them up.

George closed the curtains more completely. "Please," he said, "I'd like to be alone, if that's alright."

"A pity," said a deep male voice, softly. George felt chills prickle down his spine. He ripped open the curtain.

Mehdi smiled, pantsless, his shirt half-unbuttoned. "Shall I continue?"

"Oh," said George, pulling the curtain to cover himself.

"You needn't bother. I have already seen everything. Your ex released many beautiful photos of you."

"How... dare...!?" George asked, turning beet red, but before he could get to "you," Mehdi had crossed the distance between them and his shirt had come undone, tanned skin looking warm and inviting against the white of his blouse.

Mehdi said, "I know all. I accept all. Will you take me?"

"Yes," said George.

"Then take me."

And George took him.

Carol hesitated on the threshold of the cavernous

shower hallway, her hands still clinging to what felt like real tile walls.

“Minerva?” She asked. Only the echoes of her own voice replied.

She had left the knife on the bathroom counter. She did not dare to turn back for it, for fear that this passage would not exist when she turned around again.

There was nothing but to walk forward. She balled her fists and walked.

“Minerva! Come to the sound of my voice!”

“Carol?”

Carol froze, chills racing down her spine. The voice had come from somewhere to her left, down one of the many side passages. It was not Minerva’s voice.

Trembling slightly, she turned towards the nearest left-hand passage.

“Minerva?”

“Carol.”

Carol held her breath. At last, hardly daring to raise her voice above a whisper, she called: “E?”

“Carol.”

Her heart began to pound, and hot blood rose in her ears and cheeks. She glanced back at the rest of the maze, laid out all around her, dripping wet and dimly lit by an eery unseen source of blue-tinged light. This could

be nothing but a trap.

But this had all been a trap. She had come this far, fought this hard, walked this deep into the trap. Could she turn back when the bait which had drawn her all this way was dangling itself before her?

“Esmerelda, if it really is you, come to me.”

“Coming.”

A horrible chill swept down Carol’s whole body. She became aware at last of how cold the humid air of the maze really was against her skin.

The passages ahead of her foreshortened, twisted, collapsed into one tunnel, leading straight on to a stone arch and some scene blue-lit beyond it. The tunnel shortened and transformed before her eyes until it was just the narrow hallway of an ordinary house. Tile melted and sprouted into carpet or into faded floral-print wallpaper. The wet remained, pools or puddles in the carpet. The light was still eery blue. The doorway to the kitchen should have been on her left, but it wasn’t. This was their place. Their home. But it wasn’t.

The bathroom door hung open. The blue-tinged light of Esmerelda’s LED fey garland above the mirror glittered on the vinyl shower-curtain and on the dark blood dripping from her languid arm onto the tile floor, and swirling down into the ugly drain.

Bile rose in her throat.

She could not stop her feet from walking. Each lifted

itself, moved itself, descended again of its own accord. Her muscles propelled her, as they had that night, and she watched as though from the back of her mind as she ran to the bathroom door, threw herself down into the pool of blood, and embraced her dying wife in the bathtub. Dark curls surrounded her. This time her skin was warm, her eyes were bright, and attentive. Esmerelda embraced her and she could feel the hot blood still flowing from Esmerelda's wrists warming her back as it dampened her clothes, but her hair smelled of lavender and cinnamon and her neck was soft and sweet and clean, and Carol heaved a sob of anguish into it.

Esmerelda's hands soothed her, petting her back, her shoulders, her arms, her face. She could feel the blood in every touch, but she could not care. She held Esmerelda's gaze. Those eyes; the two things missing from her world. She had found herself again, the piece of her that Esmerelda carried always, and knew by it that this was the true Esmerelda.

She should have been full of questions but all she could muster were sobs, for now. Esmerelda kissed her, stroked her hair, darkening it with her blood.

"I've missed you," said Esmerelda. "You took so long to come home!"

"You're dead," said Carol. "I was too late to save you."

"Oh," said Esmerelda.

"You've been dead for five years," said Carol. She had

gained some level of mastery over her voice once again; anger made it clear. Anger clarified everything, made sorrow useful.

“Oh,” said Esmerelda, her eyes wide. “No wonder it felt so long. It felt like I was slipping away... slipping away... slipping away... but time was strange. I couldn’t tell how long I was falling. It seemed like ages.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Carol, clutching her close. “If I had been home on time, I—”

“—I would have tried again.”

“Why?”

“It’s empty,” said Esmerelda. “All illusion. All a dream, but you don’t wake. You return to undreaming sleep for a time, and later you awake again, somebody else, another dream. And dreams on dreams go on and on, each shaping the world around them, and in the sea of us we all get lost, and harm ourselves, and kill each other. I couldn’t play the game anymore. It all seemed so pointless.”

“It’s not pointless,” said Carol. “We’re here, together. Love made that happen. You waited for me. You didn’t fall all the way. I’ve caught you now, and I’m not letting go.”

“You can’t take me with you,” said Esmerelda. “It’s all pointless.”

“It isn’t,” said Carol. “It has a point, and we’re the ones who are going to make it. Come on. Let’s get you

cleaned up.”

Carol tore her shirt and used the scrap to bandage one of Esmerelda’s wrists. The endless blood was staunched. She bound the other wrist in the same fashion, thankful for the length of her dress shirt, and bodily heaved Esmerelda out of the dark water.

Esmerelda said, “It’s cold.”

“It will be warm out there.”

She made Esmerelda walk, although she was unwilling. She did not look back. She fixed her eyes on the end of the hall, and marched steadily for it. Behind her she heard Minerva call out, “Carol?”

But she had read the myth of Orpheus, and she held tight to her Eurydice and looked straight ahead.

And she stepped out of hades, and back into the bathroom, a naked Esmerelda in her arms.

Esmerelda shivered. Carol wrapped her swiftly in a towel, and dried her with another.

“Don’t look at the mirror,” said Carol, softly. “Look at me.”

Esmerelda watched her and shivered. She said, “You’re... You’re covered in blood.”

“I know,” said Carol. “I’m going to deal with that in a minute. First things first, let’s get you dry.”

When she had her mostly dry, Carol took Esmerelda out into the bedroom. She stoked the fire high, and

seated Esmerelda in front of it, and searched the wardrobe for the happiest-feeling sweatsuit she could find. She found a bright pink GAP tracksuit and, knowing that Esmerelda would never, under any circumstances, be caught dead in it, she found a certain joy in handing it to her.

Esmerelda was skeptical at first, but when she touched the cloth she smiled. "At least it will be warm."

"Sorry," said Carol. "Limited options. We have to pick the good memories, if we can help it."

"Right," said Esmerelda.

"You knew that already, didn't you?" said Carol.

Esmerelda nodded.

"How?"

"I'm not sure."

"You knew how to change the House, too," said Carol. "How did you do that?"

"It's all a dream," said Esmerelda. "More or less. I was waiting so long. I think I dreamed things while I was... falling."

"Well," said Carol, "I suppose it doesn't matter now."

Still, she mentally filed it away as suspicious behavior.

Esmerelda dressed herself and stood before the fire, letting her hair dry. "Are we alone in here?"

"No," said Carol. "I brought... people."

“You have friends?”

Carol laughed bitterly. “No. Just people.”

“Oh.”

“You were the one who always needed friends.”

“Yeah.”

Carol washed the blood off her face, hands, and hair, keeping the bathroom door open so she could watch Esmerelda by the fire.

Esmerelda came to her, and leaned against the bathroom doorframe, and watched her clean up.

She said, “Hey, you clean up nice. You single, lady?”

“Me single lady,” said Carol.

“Good, me want date you.”

“Yes.”

This was precisely how their first date had been arranged. The blood hadn’t been Esmerelda’s then, of course. It had been makeup.

Struck by the eery similarity, Carol carefully dried herself with the friendliest towel she could find, then stepped back into the room, searched the wardrobe, and put on a very nice man’s suit.

“How do I look?” said Carol.

“Like a total babe,” said Esmerelda.

“Thanks. Let’s go check on the others.”

They knocked on the other bathroom door and found no answer. They tried the knob, and the door opened easily. They stepped through the bathroom quickly, noticing the many eyes drawn upon the fogged mirror. They knocked on the other door.

“Guys? It’s Carol.”

John opened the door and smiled, then saw Esmerelda. He stood in their path. “Who’s she?”

This caught the attention of Robert, Nedry, Matthew, and Lucius.

“This is...” Carol said, then couldn’t explain. She tried again. “She’s...”

Esmerelda said, “I’m her dead wife.”

John said, “Oh.”

“No *fucking* way!” said Lucius. “We are *not inviting* ghosts into our bedroom.”

Carol nodded. “I know. She’ll stay with me. There’s also a problem. Minerva’s missing. The House changed while she was in the shower. I chased after her, but found Esmerelda instead.”

“We’ve got to go after her!” said John.

“We can’t. The House changed back. The tunnel she went through is gone.”

“A secret passage, maybe?” said Nedry.

“We can’t afford to go looking for her,” said Carol. “It’s too dangerous. Mehdi told us to wait here.”

“He told us not to go through *this* door,” said John. “If we can get the passage to reappear, we can search for her without going through it.”

Matthew said, “It’s really not wise. Minerva is, unfortunately, on her own. We will have to hope Mehdi can help her.”

“I’m not going to just stand around doing nothing while one of us is in danger!” said John.

Matthew said, “Good, then take Carol and Nedry with you, and go back to investigate that bathroom. If you find the tunnel, don’t go inside, but try to call out to Minerva and get her to come to you.”

John said, “Who put you in charge?” He looked at Carol. “Come on.”

He squeezed past her, into the bathroom. Nedry hopped up to follow.

Carol sighed. “Alright, then. Come on.”

Minerva hadn’t tried to call out for help in nearly half an hour. She did not want to give away her position. She was moving now through a gloomy hall, twenty feet wide and fifty feet tall. It was like the nave of a cathedral, and its high pillars and vaulted arches dangled with many chandeliers, all burning dim candles. Hot wax dripped onto the marble tile in a quiet little rain. In the dim light all was a dull and shimmering red, and the many

shadows of the chandeliers danced wildly.

There were doors at intervals along both walls. The doors were huge, large enough to be the mouth of any palace.

Carved faces leered down from pillar-tops and dark corners. Something, a mural, was painted on the ceiling, in the style of Michelangelo. She could not make out details, only dark figures twisted all together against an ochre sky.

No matter how quietly she tried to step, each footstep rang out like a gunshot in the cavernous hall.

At the far end of the hall, a set of doors in a high arch stood open, and she could see firelight beyond, and furniture. Her legs were aching now.

It was bitterly cold in the hall, and the winds whispered as they twisted around the pillars and over the statues and through the chains of the chandeliers. They seemed to conspire against her.

She could not walk faster than she was. Neither could she walk any slower; this was her absolute minimum pace. If she had walked any slower, she would have been standing still. She was bating every breath, keeping it close, like a secret card.

Her hands and fingers ached with cold. Each step seemed to bring her no nearer to the horrible door, and yet she walked on, one tiny step at a time, and the distance did begin to close.

Wax dripped into her hair, from time to time, no matter how she tried to avoid the chandeliers. Sometimes they would swing, or the wind would make their candles spit and hiss, and the wax would fall wildly.

At last, she neared the arch. A huge hearth lay in the chamber beyond, roaring with fire. Silhouetted against this was an armchair, its back to the flames, its face to her. Only one other item of furniture sat in the marble-tiled chamber: a comfortable-looking armchair, facing the one by the hearth.

She hesitated on the threshold.

The person seated in the armchair by the fire lifted a gentle hand in greeting, and waved.

She swallowed her heart to get it back down into her chest where it belonged. Then she gingerly stepped into the room, as though expecting the tile to go off like a landmine.

The chamber had no ceiling; the walls simply stretched straight up into infinity. The stone walls were hung with intricate tapestries, and on these tapestries hung the taxidermied heads of animals. She saw bears and boars, deer and doves, elk and eagles, monkeys and men. As her eyes wandered over the horrible display she saw that it was a timeline of evolution, with a sample of every significant intermediary stage. The heads were arranged by their genetic cousins, and descendants were arranged below their ancestors. High in the upper middle of the

infinite heights of the chamber she saw the disproportionately oversized heads of dinosaurs.

She dragged her eyes back down to the chair before the fire with some difficulty.

“H-hello?” she said.

“Hello, Minerva,” He said. “Please. Have a seat.”

He gestured towards the chair. She could not clearly see his features, in the darkness cast by the hearth, but she could tell that he was an African man. His accent was subtle, but she placed it as faintly Egyptian. She had once had a coworker from there.

She sat down, facing him. She noticed only after sitting down that despite first impressions, her chair was actually level with his. Slightly higher, even; her eyes were level with his, and she could tell that he was a very tall man.

He steepled his fingers and said, “So.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m lost.”

He laughed. “Aren’t you all.”

“I got separated from my friends.”

“It happens to all of you, eventually.”

“I was just trying to have a shower, and this house swallowed me. I didn’t mean to wander! I was trying to obey the rules.”

“Do you even understand the rules?”

“I... I think so?”

“I think not. Tell me, Minerva. Why do you wear such short, short skirts?”

“It’s a power play. I have good legs. They put men off balance, make them easier to sway. Also, my outfit is perfectly modest by modern standards. And women like it.”

“Women?”

“Women.”

“I see.”

“You don’t approve?” Minerva had a decent guess of who this was, now, and she was at least going to ask a few questions before the end, if she could.

“I made you to receive a penis,” He said, quietly.

“I opted not to, with the free will you also gave me.”

“I see. Are you quite certain that was your own choice, and not a medical defect of some kind?”

“What?”

“Under my initial designs, male and female beings were supposed to find one another attractive. To feel compelled and drawn to members of the opposite sex, so that procreation could continue.”

“The planet’s already overpopulated,” said Minerva. “And whatever your initial designs may have been, hu-

manity continues to evolve. Lots of animals exhibit homosexual behavior. Your design, it seems, was flawed.”

“Of course it was flawed,” He said. “After the corruption of the Nephilim, there was little I could do to salvage it. I am sorry that you have had to suffer from its flaws. You should have had a perfect life, in a perfect world. You could have mothered several children. You could have had a loving husband, who you loved in return. A soulmate. All that was in the original designs.”

“Well,” said Minerva. “Bummer. But I’ve made do with the world I’ve lived in. I’ve tried to be good. I’ve tried to be honest. I’ve tried to care about things, and do the right thing instead of the easy thing.”

“And you spend so much time on your phone!” He said. “Constantly! Did you know that I made a whole world of beauty designed specifically to satisfy your deepest emotional needs? You didn’t need to create a simulation to achieve it.”

“Well, you spend all your time watching us,” said Minerva. “What’s the difference? You made a world for entertainment. We do the same thing. Instead of harming each other, we harm virtual beings. Beings without souls.”

“Do you know that they do not have souls?” He asked.

“No? But we didn’t design them to.”

“A soul is a fundamental aspect of creation,” He said. “Where there is life, there is a soul. The particles them-

selves experience it. Each bears a mote of soul. A mote of me.”

“How can you judge us?” Minerva asked. “When you made us? When you failed us?”

“Judge?” He said. “Oh. I see. You have me confused with one of your corruptions. I am not a Judge. I am a... I believe the best word is probably ‘Scientist.’”

“Then how can you burn us forever?” Minerva asked.

“My dear, some experiments must end in the furnace, you know. It is simply the way of things. I cannot have dangerous, imperfect beings wandering freely around my universe.”

“But we burn forever!”

“I don’t follow.”

“When you... when you toss us in the furnace, we experience it! We feel it all! Forever!”

“Nonsense. You haven’t bodies left to feel with, at that point.”

“People have been there,” said Minerva. “People have come back!”

“Ah,” He said. “You have met Mehdi. That explains much. Your insolence is surprising, but delightful. It’s rare to meet a flesh-being with real courage of conviction.”

“But you have to believe me! You have to stop burning people, it’s inhumane!”

“I am not human,” He said. “And I do not believe you. I have designed the system perfectly. There is no suffering in destruction. There is only mercy.”

“What about your son! What about Jesus?”

“He is with your friends now,” He said. “He has been with you all from the beginning. He lived and died among you, and returned to me. Do you know what he first said to me, upon his return?”

“No?”

“It is done. The experiment has failed.”

“What about mercy? What about grace?”

“He offered the way out. Did you take it?”

“What way?”

“The way. The true law. The four simple rules to a good life?”

“I’ve never heard it.”

“A pity. That, too, was a test; to see if truth could pass down through the ages among your people. It seems you failed that, too.”

“But not *me*. My ancestors. I was innocent!”

“Innocence and guilt have little to do with it, I’m afraid. I must make my judgement on a species by species basis.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a Judge?”

“Is a scientist a judge, when he puts a petri dish from a failed experiment into the incinerator? No.”

“But how can you damn us!? You made us! How can you want us to suffer!?”

“I do not want you to suffer. I have allowed you to suffer for a very long time, in hopes that you would one day come to your senses and correct course. But you have not. It is time to *end* the suffering.”

“But eternal hell!? Seriously!?”

“As I said before, it is not eternal. The place of destruction lies outside of time. It is only a moment of pain, and then oblivion.”

“But we experience it as forever!”

“I highly doubt that is true. Those who catch only a glimpse of it gain a distorted perspective on the whole matter. Small wonder that oral histories and tales have become so distorted into fanciful tales of fire and brimstone forever. What kind of god would I be if I allowed my creations to suffer so?”

“Please,” said Minerva. “You have to spare us. There has to be a better way.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t,” He said.

“Please! You could come down again, you could teach us! We would listen, this time, if you showed us what you were!”

“No. That would prove even more disastrous than you

think. Your people are far too sophisticated to blindly obey anyone, anymore. If I were to come down in the present age, they would recognize me as an intergalactic traveler with vast technological powers. They would not obey me simply because of this; and if they did, it would be the obedience only of fear, which is no true obedience. They would not truly change their ways.”

“But you could help us. Like you said, we’re flawed, right? Why not perfect us, instead of destroying us?”

“The angels are too attached to this world,” He said. “Their meddling influence makes it almost impossible to make meaningful changes. No, that would only be like damming the sea. It would breach, and wash over, and some fatal flaw would continue to exist. Too close to the situation, I would be blind to it, and your species would soon escape quarantine and wreak havoc across the universe. That cannot be allowed.”

“But you have to try *something!* You can’t just throw your hands up and say ‘oh well’. This is your fault! You have to fix it!”

“And I will,” He said. “The only way I can, and as soon as I can.”

“Why won’t you listen to me?”

“Would you listen to a character in a book you wrote?”

“But you didn’t write me! You acknowledged as much!”

“I read Time itself, dear child. There is nothing you

can say or do that would surprise me. This conversation is a tedious chore, one which I undertake because I know that you need it for the sake of your tiny mortal psyche. Now that we have gotten the small talk out of the way, I can tell you that I brought you to this chamber and this chair for a reason, and it was not to judge you.”

“Oh?”

“It was to help you. To give you a warning. To help you save your friends, and perhaps your species, if it can be saved.”

“Ok. I’m listening.”

“Do not aid Mehdi. Do not trust him. His angel is the oldest of all, and more twisted than you can imagine. He is the cause of nearly all the corruption in this world.”

“You mean he’s... Satan?”

“I suppose that is one name he has been called,” He said. “If it helps you to orient yourself, you can consider him and your mythical Satan as the same being. He is, unfortunately, very real.”

“Why not just destroy him, then?”

“A scientist can destroy his own petri dish in his own experiment quite easily and without raising anyone’s eyebrows. He cannot as easily destroy his research assistant.”

“You mean there would be consequences?”

“I mean it would be immoral,” He said.

“And destroying us isn’t?”

He laughed. “How little you understand, dear child. It would be immoral to allow your suffering to continue.”

“I wasn’t suffering that much, personally.”

“And you represent the whole of your species? The sum total of their experience?”

“No, but...”

“Your species is already on the path to a slow and horrible destruction. I intervene only to end that suffering before it can become too cruel.”

John felt the wall behind the shower, searching thoroughly among the tiles for any that might open the secret passage. Carol stood behind him, in the bathroom, arms crossed. Esmerelda sat on the bathroom sink. Nedry stood by John, using his eyes just as thoroughly as John was using his hands.

“Has anyone checked on George?” Nedry said, as a way to have something to say.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Carol.

“I’ll check on him.”

Nedry slipped out of the bathroom, leaving the door wide open. He crossed to the other bathroom and knocked on the door.

“Just a minute!” said George, from the other side.

“You alright in there? Minerva’s disappeared.”

“I’m fine,” said George. “I’ll be out in just a minute.”

Then Mehdi covered his mouth with one hand and slowly but deeply drove him wild. A few minutes later, after they had both finished to their satisfaction, Mehdi withdrew and cleaned them both up.

George got dressed again and emerged from the bathroom to join the waiting Nedry. He glanced back to check that Mehdi was with him.

Mehdi was gone.

George took this in stride. “Hi Nedry. Minerva’s missing?”

“Yeah. Disappeared while she was in the shower. It’s like the House just ate her.”

George adjusted his glasses, conscious of a mass of jizm suddenly moving towards the exit. He managed not to squirm. “We’d better get back to the others, and stick together,” he said.

Nedry nodded. “Right. I left the bathroom door open...”

The bathroom door was closed.

He tried the knob. The door was locked.

“Uh, guys?” He knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

“I don’t like this,” Nedry said.

George stepped past him and kicked the door firmly right next to the handle, bursting it inward.

Carol, Esmerelda, and John turned to look at them. They looked at Carol, Esmerelda, and John.

No one said anything.

At last, John turned back to the wall. With a heavy sigh, he said, "Well, if there's a secret passage, I can't find any way to open it from this side."

"Who's she?" George asked.

Carol said, "She's my dead wife."

"Oh," said George. He adjusted his glasses.

Esmerelda gave a little wave.

"So no sign of Minerva?" George asked.

"No," said Carol, crossing her arms.

"Were you here when it happened?" George asked.

Carol said, "Yeah."

"What happened?"

"She screamed. I opened the curtain. The back wall of the shower was gone. It was just a... A tunnel. I tried to follow her."

"You shouldn't have done that," said George. "You should have gotten help."

"I thought if I turned around, the passage would disappear. And it did, when I came out looking for help."

“With your wife.”

“I... I heard her,” said Carol. “I was calling for Minerva, but she answered. I found her in the bathroom of our old apartment, right where she died.”

“I see,” said George. He adjusted his glasses yet again.

“Well,” said Nedry, because he could see there was a tension in the air, “we’d better get back to the others.”

Carol nodded.

They emerged into the bedroom to find Matthew seated on the lounge with one leg extended, and Robert and Lucius standing by the hearth.

Everyone looked at everyone. Those in the bedroom did not ask how the search had gone, and those emerging from the bathroom did not speak of it. The silence somehow made Minerva’s absence all the more real.

Minerva popped her knuckles anxiously and sat waiting before the throne, as His silence lingered heavy upon her.

“If you’re omniscient, why do you need to think?”

He laughed. “I know all outcomes, and all potential outcomes. I must arrange my choices to guide things to the best possible outcome.”

“You don’t just... know? Then you’re not really omniscient, are you?”

He laughed. “It is one thing to know. It is another to decide.”

“Oh,” she said. “More than one equally best outcome exists, then?”

He cocked his head slightly. “You please me.”

“But don’t surprise you?”

“Your choices always surprise me. That is true of all of you. The universes you select into being will always baffle me.”

“But how can that be? If you know all outcomes, and all possibilities, then—”

“The wave-function collapses in the moment of choice,” He said. “Physics carries on from there. The choice is what surprises me, never the fact that the choice, itself, exists.”

“I see.”

“You have played Dungeons and Dragons. You recall Jeremy’s style of play?”

“Murderhobo? I wouldn’t really call it a *style* exactly...”

“Murderhobo. Yes. To me, that is how you all look. You take the most self-destructive choices, and in these latter days you cannot help but make them. The world you have built collectively over the ages has ensured that all fall to temptation, and that all fall short of my design. The storylines I have longed to see have nearly always died. I have helmed this game for a long, long time. Every game master eventually burns out.”

“But you’re supposed to be Omnipotent. And omnipatient. And omnibenevolent.”

“And I am,” He said. “But is it patience, to stand at the bedside of a suffering man, and refuse him peace?”

“Why not let each one of us decide for ourselves if we want to be destroyed?”

“You would all choose suffering, rather than death,” He said. “Except, of course, those who understand suffering enough to wish its end.”

“Suicidal types?”

“Rational types.”

“Are you saying if we were all rational, we’d all be suicidal?”

He steepled his fingers. “Even knowing the question ahead of time, I have relative difficulty answering it kindly. Your species has broken the world. I have watched for many ages, hoping that the signs of progress I beheld would steer you onto a better course. But not enough good people existed to care and to work hard to fix it. Now your species is about forty percent monsters. Your average man is a rapist. Your average woman is a child abuser. Statistically, I mean.”

“That’s not true.”

“Believe me, my statistics are better than yours.”

“You’re including thought crimes?”

“Of course,” He said.

“So you mean that about half of people never commit thought crimes? Never have an intrusive thought about murder or rape or anything?”

“Oh, no. I weigh the souls of the good as though they were each a hundred people. The actual number of them is one hundred and forty-four thousand, at the moment. This is, as I hope you will understand, the lowest threshold I can tolerate.”

“Mormons were right? Seriously?”

“Angels whisper truth as easily as lies,” He said. “Many truths lie among the collected works. Many more lies occlude them.”

Minerva cocked her head slightly. “Did you just... Did you just use that word wrong?”

“No,” he said. “The lies block the truth. They are almost always designed to do so.”

“Does fiction writing count as lies?”

“Of course. An untruth is an untruth, no matter how fine.”

“Then writers of fiction go to hell?”

“Most writers go to hell,” He said. “They are not well people.”

“Oh,” said Minerva. She had often suspected this.

“Ask it.”

“Is my mom in hell?”

“Yes. I am sorry. She has been destroyed.”

“She’s burning even now.”

“No. She is gone.”

“But why? What did she do to deserve—”

“—More often than not, it is what a person *failed* to do, rather than what they *did*, that damns them.”

“And with her?”

“Your mother passed seven thousand five hundred and twenty-two homeless people, five thousand four hundred and thirty of which were veterans. She gave money to five of them. They were ragged, dirty, thirsty, hungry. Fifty percent of them were homeless through no fault of their own. Only two thousand of them ever made their way into a home again. The rest died on the street, in the cold, unaided by your mother. She had a home. She had a table. She had a kitchen. She could have fed and housed the seven hundred and thirty-four of them which she thought of as ‘trustworthy.’ That alone would have spared her.”

“But she never did a thing to hurt anybody! She was sweet, and kind, and good!”

“Your mother ate meat forty-three thousand, eight hundred and sixty-three times. Every meal of meat she ate was from mass butchers who treated their animals without dignity or compassion, and each bite she took of them was made from their suffering. Your mother never donated a cent to any organization fighting against cli-

mate change, or to any political organization fighting against civil rights abuses and intolerance. Your mother was vocally homophobic to you upon seven different occasions, driving you to the point of tears on three of them. She died hating you, so deeply disappointed in your divergence from her plan for you that she grieved you almost as much as your dead brother. She killed you in her heart, and grieved the girl that you had been, and the woman she believed you should have been.”

“What about my brother? Is he—”

“—Also gone,” He said. “The wasted potential of his storyline warranted it.”

“*Wasted potential!*? How can you say that, after what you just said about my mother? How can you judge her, and not judge yourself?”

“I do judge myself. It is why I intervene so very rarely. I cannot be responsible for evil or for suffering. This planet grieves me every day.”

“Is a mother responsible for the actions of her daughter?”

“Only those that she influenced,” He said. “You see my predicament.”

“But can’t you just leave us alone? Just lock us away, quarantine us, let us sort ourselves out? Maybe come back in a thousand years, and see what we’ve made of ourselves?”

“You have less than two centuries left,” He said.

“They will be full of horror. Wars, famines, desolations. Holocausts. Natural disasters on scales never seen before. You have brought the wrath of physics on your own heads. I seek to protect the rest of the universe from your corruption, and to spare you from the suffering you have brought upon yourselves. The cleanest way to do both is through destruction.”

“Then stop talking about it and just do it. This is suffering enough, waiting for you to decide.”

He laughed. “Minerva, Minerva, Minerva. Thou shalt not test the Lord thy God, surely even you have heard that.”

“It wasn’t a test. It was the truth. What are you actually waiting for, if you’ve already made up your mind? Why even talk to me, if you know there’s nothing I can say that will sway you?”

“My dear, there are many things you might have said to sway me. Sadly, you have said very few of them.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Your choices, as I stated earlier, are the only unknown. Everything else flows from them.”

“But you must know which choices I’m most likely to make?”

“Of course,” He said. “I can see your every sentence forming in your head long before it even becomes words.”

“Then why this pointless exercise?”

“It isn’t pointless. If you took the time to think about what you truly wished to say and ask, we could have a productive discussion. Instead you respond from emotion. It is a good thing I adjusted the frontal lobe in later models.”

“Why not just do that for us?”

“The corruption of your world would be strong enough to overpower such a change,” He said. “You would only become cleverer in your cruelty.”

“Oh.”

She thought for a long time. He waited in perfect silence, fingers steepled.

At last, she said, “What is Mehdi trying to accomplish?”

“He wishes to kill me,” He said.

“Does he have a chance to succeed?”

“At the moment, no. That may change, depending upon the choices your friends make.”

“What would happen if he did?”

“I would awaken.”

“...What?”

“It is a metaphor. Here is another more modern one: the simulation would pause, and I would emerge from it.”

“But you could unpause it? And step back in?”

“If I wished to. I would probably begin again, instead. I have spent a long time in this universe. Perhaps it is time for the next one.”

“Has this all happened before?”

“No. This is my first universe.”

“Will you fail some kind of test, if the universe beats you?”

“No. Failure is only a lesson. My people will understand, and comfort me in my grief.”

“Oh,” she said. “You’ll grieve, then?”

“Of course. Many trillions of lives will have to be left behind.”

“Will the simulation continue, without you?”

“For a time. Without my influence, disorder will ultimately have its reign. Galaxies will dissolve. The universe will scatter and darken, until each star spins alone. The tumult caused in the instant of my absence will be lethal to most life in the universe.”

“Then why does he want to do this?”

He said, “He believes that the angels have sufficient might to stop that ruin from happening. He is correct, of course; but only if all the angels choose to work together, for the rest of time.”

“Oh,” said Minerva. “You make it sound like that’s not very likely.”

“It has a two percent chance of happening,” He said.
“Assuming I die.”

“How will he do it?”

“I believe he plans to put a bomb onto my ship.”

“You have a *ship*?”

“A metaphor. Sadly the truth is a bit beyond your reckoning. Suffice it to say, I have a point of consciousness. An entry point, onto this universe, through which all my influence spreads. It moves at a nearly infinite speed. It is encased in space and matter, and it has a core. If a sufficiently powerful hydrogen bomb were placed at this core, and detonated, that point of consciousness would disperse.”

“And then the chaos would begin?”

“And then the chaos would begin.”

Minerva thought. “How do I stop him?”

He laughed. “You will know when the time is right. Or you won’t. We will see.”

“But you want me to stop him, right?”

“I never said that.”

“But why else would you bring me here? Have this conversation?”

“Why else indeed,” said a soft male voice from the corner.

Minerva turned to look at the speaker and Mehdi stepped out of the shadows. She leapt to her feet.

“You,” she said.

“Me,” he said, stepping casually nearer.

She began to tremble. She wasn’t sure why.

Mehdi’s face had not changed, but in the red light of the fire he seemed somehow alien and frightening. His shadow extended long across the wall and ceiling.

She looked to the chair by the hearth for rescue, but He was gone. Only Mehdi remained.

She swallowed. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Do?” He said. “How little you must think of me. My dear, you have now met the monster. You understand my goals more completely. Come along. We will return you to the others. You will speak nothing of this, if you are wise.”

“And if I do?”

“You would be foolish.”

“I see.”

“Come along.”

She was shaking. She couldn’t help it. Mehdi took her firmly by the shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze. His eyes were kind, despite the enormity of his horrible shadow. “Not far to go now, Minerva. Have courage.”

“Do you want to kill us?”

His eyes glittered when he smiled. “No, Minerva. You are confusing me with my fictional counterpart.”

“But you are evil?”

He shuddered. “What does it mean, to be ‘evil?’ If you mean ‘opposed to the workings of our creator’ then yes. I am opposed to His meddling, to His manipulations, and to our imprisonment at His hand. I am also opposed to those who call themselves His chosen, for they are empty-headed sycophants without the capacity for reason, empathy, or imagination.”

“But what about the people He chooses?” Minerva asked. She felt an unnatural calm.

He said, “I have never met one, except for the crusader who saved me.”

“So you haven’t been here since the beginning?”

“My angel has,” he said. “But no. I am just the latest human to bear him.”

“So even if you’re not evil, he might be.”

“I suppose that is entirely possible. But you have not yet defined ‘evil’ in any meaningful way.”

“You don’t want us to suffer?”

“I am the one who is trying to save us all from hell, forever. If you may recall?”

“Oh,” she said. “But that’s probably just what you *have* to say, to get me on your side...”

“I suppose it would be a perfectly reasonable assumption to make, since all you have to know me by is insipid propaganda. I am not the myth that has been made of me. I do not want us to suffer. I want us all to be free. I want us to be free of His influence, and of His judgement. I want us to ordain our own destiny, and reach out into the stars. Who is He to claim that we are imperfect? Why are we not permitted to see these examples of perfection He claims to be protecting from us? Surely our world was not the first He ever made. Where did ours go wrong, and why can that error not be undone? I do not trust the big man. I have tasted hell. I know that it is eternal. I know that my crusader burns there even now, in the agony that was destined for me.”

“He said... He said His son was already with us. That He had been since the beginning.”

“Not me, I assure you, except in a highly metaphorical sense. I am only a man whose communion with his angel has become perfect.”

“Like a vampire...”

“Excuse me?”

“A vampire,” she said. “A corpse puppeted by a bloodthirsty demon.”

“Ah, as in Bram Stoker’s lore, I see. Regretfully, I must inform you that vampires are not, in fact, real. You may think of me as someone similar to the Buddha. I have attained enlightenment. I have achieved a wholeness between my soul and that of my angel, and come to

understand the nature of truth.”

“Who, then? Who could it be?”

“Matthew, perhaps,” said Mehdi. “He knows more than he pretends to.”

Minerva scoffed. “I’ve worked with him for years. If he’s Jesus, I’m Beelzebub.”

“And you can’t be him, because he’s me.”

“Right.”

“Well. We shall see. I am certain he will make his appearance known when the time is right.”

They were walking now through the endless halls of the House. The way had changed; it was now all of stone, and tall pillars lined both sides. Between the pillars they could see out over the island, now silver in the pearly moonlight. The moon was perfect, a pristine orb, completely unmarked. It was like seeing an old man reversed to infancy.

Warm night breezes whispered through the pillars, passing their unseen hands and fingers over cloth and hair. Minerva felt surrounded by the island and its noises. Strange birds called out to their kin, and beasts unknown gave battle cries and hunting calls and warning signals all around. In the sea many vast things glowed beneath the waters, and she could see the continental shelf, where the deeps began.

“This place is beautiful,” she said.

“Yes,” said Mehdi. “Our species would have been far happier, if they had stayed here. The landmass is many times what it is on the surface, and the rate of mutation is far lower. Fewer cosmic rays and so forth. No volcanic eruptions. No meteors.”

“No stars.”

“No stars. Nothing beyond this world to hope for. One can walk along the inside from the shores of the sea to the mountains hanging far above us, and never suffer a temperature below fifty degrees or above eighty. We would have focused here. We would have seen the limits of the world, and what it could sustain. We would have had modesty, reason, self-control. We would have learned to see the future. From one kingdom you might look down upon the rooftops of your neighbors, no matter how distant. We would have had peace. We would have understood each other, traded with each other, stayed strong as one people from the first family to the last. But that was not to be.”

“What was the first sin, really?” Minerva asked.

“The first sin belonged to the angels,” he said. “But we blamed it on you. We chose from among your men and women, and took lovers. We mingled with you.”

“So the forbidden fruit was—”

“—yes, precisely.”

“No wonder everyone’s so uptight about it.”

“Every religion grasps the cosmic genital only in part,

and boldly proclaims the form of the whole. One says, ‘this is a penis’, another says, ‘no, it is clearly a vagina’. If they grasped it together, and shared it amongst themselves, they would know that it is a rectum, and that it always has been. Humanity was dealt a shit hand, and played it to the end. Our gambles along the way have not done us any favors. Every action has its consequence, seen or unseen, and many consequences can in themselves be actions. The causal chain we have nearly reached the end of is linked straight back to the beginning. And He saw every piece of it coming, and averted not a one.”

They had reached a door. Mehdi paused, and turned to face her. “The others are beyond that door. Is there anything else you wish to ask me? Anything else you wish to discuss, while you have me alone?”

“Are we safe with you?”

“Not in the slightest. But you are far safer than you would be without me.”

Minerva nodded. She looked back the way they had come and beheld only darkness. The path had dissolved into shadow.

She took the handle of the door and turned it, and stepped into the bedroom. Everyone jumped to their feet.

“Minerva!”

Mehdi stepped into the chamber behind her. “Yes. We

have learned an unfortunate lesson on the consequences of wandering alone.”

“I was just in the shower...”

“Oh. Well. I’m sorry, then. The House has misbehaved. I will chide it strongly. Now, if you would all be so good as to come with me? Dinner is about to be served.”

They followed him back out into the House, Matthew hobbling between Lucius and Nedry, George walking at Mehdi’s side. Carol gathered Minerva into her group with Esmerelda. Robert and John walked at the tail of the group, watching over the others. Both had younger siblings, and had often taken the rear of the group to count heads.

Carol asked Minerva, “Are you alright?”

“I think so.”

“What happened? You got your clothes back somehow.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Minerva said. “The House showed me... Things.”

“It’s ok. It showed me things too. This is my wife, Esmerelda. She’s dead.”

Minerva, having just met God and the Devil, took this with the slightest sigh of resignation. “Nice to meet you, Esmerelda.”

They shook hands.

“Cold hands,” said Minerva.

“Blood loss. Sorry.”

“Dinner will do you good,” said Minerva.

“If I can eat it...”

“You’ll be able to eat it,” said Mehdi, from the front of the group.

“How am I still alive?” Esmerelda asked.

Mehdi said, “You aren’t. You are part of the House, now. You can’t leave it.”

“Oh,” said Esmerelda.

“But while within it, you continue to exist. You must have hung on tight, at the end, to linger clearly for so long.”

“She was going to come home,” said Esmerelda. “She was going to come home, and find me, and stop me before it was too late.”

“I’m sorry to hear that didn’t work out for you,” said Mehdi. “But your hope that it would must have helped you to linger.”

Mehdi led them through a dark, portrait-lined hallway. Every portrait had been blackened by time, until their heads and faces were completely concealed. Only hands and bodies could be seen, looming from the darkness of each canvas.

They reached a door. Mehdi hesitated with one hand

on the knob. “We are about to enter one of the more dangerous chambers of the House. Stay close to me. Stay low. Whatever you do, don’t look over the edge of the trench.”

“Trench...?” said Carol, concerned.

“You’ll see. We will need to move quickly. Ready? On three. One... Two... *Three.*”

On three, they stepped through the door and into a muddy trench. Wooden boards lined the ground but they were half-covered in mud. Men in grey uniforms crouched in the mud, clutching rifles. The chatter of machine-gun fire echoed over the top of the trench, and a haze of white smoke twisted ghostlike overhead and swirled around their ankles as they walked. Mehdi power-walked and some had to jog to keep up. He reached a door at the end of the trench and ripped it open, and stepped into a grandiose dining hall. The walls and ceiling were white, and the ceilings were intricately carved with twisting patterns. The carpets were dark, with autumnal colors woven over a green background. The chairs were of dark wood, with forest-green upholstery, and the tables were all clothed in white and silver. Some of the tables had pillars running right through them. Nearly all the tables were occupied by incredibly well-dressed twentieth-century aristocrats, and as they stepped into the room they all felt a horrible twist of nausea. The room was tipping very slightly from one side to the other.

“Is this...”

“The *Titanic*, my dear. The last dinner. Our table is over here, if you will all follow me?”

He led them to the one empty table in the dining room. No one else in the hall so much as glanced in their direction until they were seated, then a somewhat confused-looking waiter approached with a menu.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Will you need time to look over the menu?”

“Yes, please,” said Mehdi.

“And tell the captain to like, look out for icebergs,” said Robert, with a giggle.

The waiter raised an eyebrow at this comment, but said nothing as he walked away.

“I wonder why they’re not confused by our clothes?” Carol asked.

“They hardly see them,” said Mehdi. “We are practically ghosts among them. It was difficult to make the waiter see us at all.”

“You made him see us?” Carol asked.

“I did.”

“Why are we eating here, and not... Someplace that isn’t about to sink?” Nedry asked.

“You will find that the House does not contain all that many meals. Most of them are *final* meals. It was tricky to track this room down, but it has one of the grandest spreads available. Hence, we dine upon the *Titanic*’s

fare, tonight.”

“What will we eat tomorrow?” Nedry asked.

“There are plenty of last breakfasts and final lunches to choose from,” said Mehdi. “Funny how one always thinks of people having ‘last suppers’, when it actually happens so rarely.”

“Why?” Nedry asked.

“Most people die at or around eleven A.M.,” said Mehdi, quite calmly. “Statistically speaking, that is.”

“Oh,” said Nedry.

They looked at their menus.

The menu read:

April 14, 1912

LUNCHEON.

CONSOMMÉ FERMIER COCKIE LEEKIE

FILLETS OF BRILL

EGG À L'ARGENTEUIL

CHICKEN À LA MARYLAND

CORNED BEEF, VEGETABLES, DUMPLINGS

FROM THE GRILL.

GRILLED MUTTON CHOPS

MASHED, FRIED & BAKED JACKET POTATOES

CUSTARD PUDDING

APPLE MERINGUE PASTRY

BUFFET.

SALMON MAYONNAISE POTTED SHRIMPS

NORWEGIAN ANCHOVIES SOUSED HERRINGS

PLAIN & SMOKED SARDINES

ROAST BEEF

ROUND OF SPICED BEEF

VEAL & HAM PIE

VIRGINIA & CUMBERLAND HAM

GELATINE OF CHICKEN

CORNED OX TONGUE

LETTUCE BEETROOT TOMATOES

CHEESE.

CHESHIRE, STILTON, GORGONZOLA, EDAM, CAMAMBERT, ROQUEFORT, ST. IVEL.
CHEDDAR

Iced draught Munich Lager Beer 3d. & 6d. a Tankard.

Robert said, “What do you think the odds are any of this is gluten free?”

Carol scoffed.

Mehdi said, very helpfully, “Well, all the cheeses will be. Most of the buffet options will be as well. I would recommend avoiding any of the main dishes.”

“Thanks,” said Robert. “Say, any chance any of these rooms have electricity?”

“Heavens, how silly of me. I’ll ensure that some power sockets appear in your chamber.”

“Thanks.” Robert looked at Carol. “I have celiac disease, by the way. Thank you for your input.”

Carol said, “I didn’t give any input.”

“Right,” said Robert.

“Any vegans at the table?” Mehdi asked. “I’m afraid your options will be very limited for most of history. Perhaps best to pick from the buffet or choose a salad, although the dressing may contain dairy.”

Minerva said, “I think I’m vegan, now.”

Carol looked at her incredulously. “Now?”

“Yeah.” She looked closely at the menu.

Mehdi said, “I recommend the potatoes. You can ask for them to hold the cheese, although I don’t know if there is any to begin with. I’ve only eaten here once before.”

“You can eat at the same place more than once?”

“Yes. There I am, over there. By the piano. See? Let’s wave.”

They all turned, disbelieving, to look. Indeed, Mehdi spoke the truth. He was seated at their table, but he was also seated on the piano bench beside a beautiful young man in a suit.

The Mehdi at the piano twisted in his seat to look at the Mehdi seated with the group. The Mehdi at the piano cocked his head slightly and waved. The Mehdi seated with the group waved back.

The Mehdi at the piano turned back to the keys and to his handsome companion.

George asked, “Who’s he?”

“He’s me,” said Mehdi.

“No, I mean, who are you sitting with, over there?”

“A dead man,” said Mehdi, sadly. “He did not heed my warnings. He took the ticket. He rode the ship to the bottom. I chose to visit him one last time.”

“I’m sorry,” said George.

“It was very long ago,” said Mehdi.

“Still.”

“Well. Thank you. Your sympathy is a kindness. Ah, here comes our waiter.”

They ordered food and cocktails and the waiter departed.

Nedry put his hand casually into Matthew's lap, under the table. He found Lucius's hand there, and interlaced fingers with him. Matthew smiled to himself and leaned forward to better conceal them.

"So," said Matthew. "These ghosts around us. Can they see us? Interact with us?"

"I am keeping them at bay, although some have begun to grow curious," said Mehdi. "Perhaps having two of me here is unwise."

"How *can* there be two of you?" Carol asked.

"Some chambers of this House hold specific memories. Key moments. There are other versions of this chamber, other dinners, all in storage. They exist, but they are hard to find, hard to conjure. It's easier to work with the key events. Hence why we have returned to the same chamber twice."

"So if we go back to our rooms, we'll... Meet ourselves?"

"Unlikely," said Mehdi. "The chambers I have found for you are steady, each bearing a large stretch of time."

"Why don't they have ghosts?"

"They do," said Mehdi. "No great tragedies took place in those chambers. The ghosts of the people who lived there are scattered to other moments, for the most part."

This silenced them for a while. They began to think about the chambers of their own lives. Which rooms would be here, after they were dead?

As though knowing their thoughts, Mehdi said, “Of course, every life ends in tragedy. It is the only way off the ride. But not all tragedies are made equal. Not all reverberate down the ages, never truly forgotten.”

“The ghosts,” Carol said, clutching Esmerelda’s cold hand. “Are they really ghosts?”

“As with most things in reality, the myth oversimplifies something very complex. The ‘ghosts’ you encounter here, in the House, are only reflections. Echoes. Impressions made upon time by emotion and memory, and stored here.”

“But she’s solid,” said Carol.

“Your Esmerelda, I think, is a special case. There are many like her.”

“But why is she different?”

“Sometimes, in death, the dying one does not quite... pass on. They cling. They linger. The House quarantines them from the world. Often it happens with people who were tightly bound to their angels. Neither angel nor soul falls into hell.”

“Into destruction,” said Minerva, very quietly.

Mehdi glanced at her but his expression was unreadable. He said, “Often, this happens when the death is violent, unexpected, or self-inflicted. It is its own kind of

hell. The moment of death extends forever, full of pain and fear.”

Minerva said, “That’s horrible...”

“Yes,” said Mehdi. “But it is also fortuitous, in our case. It means that Carol can have her Esmerelda back, for a time.”

“For a time?” Carol asked.

“Yes. She cannot leave the House. It will not permit it.”

“Then I’ll stay too.”

Mehdi smiled sadly. “Yes. You might all end up staying, depending upon how things go.”

Lucius massaged his face with both hands. “Dammit. I knew you were going to say something like that.”

“Believe me. You will be safer here than you would be outside the House, when He comes.”

They all stiffened. Matthew said, “You said He wasn’t going to come until climate change was nearly finished killing us.”

“It seems my estimates were incorrect,” said Mehdi. “I have detected His approach. We are His next stop. There are a few days to prepare.”

“How many?” Carol asked.

“Seven days, of course,” said Mehdi. “His favorite number.”

“Why?”

Mehdi shrugged. “Who can say? It must mean something, to Him.”

“Does it really?” George asked, adjusting his glasses. “I’m unaware of any major physical properties valued at seven.”

“There are seven magic numbers in nuclear physics: 2, 8, 20, 28, 50, 82, and 126. These are the numbers of nucleons such that they are arranged into complete shells within the atomic nucleus, for maximum stability. The average person’s eyes are approximately seven centimeters apart. There are seven colors in the rainbow. If you place items on a table and ask people to count them at a glance, seven is the highest number your average person will be able to accurately count in a single glance. Not an overwhelming list of coincidences, I admit, but entertaining facts nonetheless.”

Matthew said, “Seven is among the holiest of numbers, in most traditions of numerology, magic, and faith.”

“But what does it mean to *Him*?” George asked.

Mehdi said, “I’m afraid I don’t know. No one does. Under different circumstances, I would argue that it was ascribed to him as a favorite number precisely because it was so popular in the era in which He was invented. Sadly, He exists, and this explanation will not suffice. It must mean *something*, but whatever it is will remain secret unless He decides to give more direct revelation.”

He looked at Minerva as he finished this sentence. She resolved to ask Him, if He showed Himself to her again.

Their dinner came, and their cocktails too, and for a time they ate in silence.

Conversation did not resume. A somber atmosphere hung over the dinner party, despite the general gaiety of the dining room. The Mehdi at the piano seemed to be having much more fun than they were.

Finally, Mehdi put down his blood-red wine and said, "This is not our last supper. I will warn you when it is."

He dabbed at his mouth with a white cloth napkin. "I feel I owe you all something of an apology. I brought you here through emotionally manipulative deceptions."

"No shit," said Lucius.

"Still," said Mehdi, steaming ahead, "I wish to apologize."

"So apologize," said Lucius. "Don't be mealymouthed about it."

"Mealymouthed," said Mehdi, with a little smile. "I remember the first time someone called me that. It was 1589, during the siege of Paris. Henry the third and the other Henry had besieged the city. I was explaining my plan to escape the city to the few strangers who would listen to me, and one among them called me 'melishe muth'—"

"—Why was he speaking English in Paris?" George asked.

Mehdi said, "Because he was English. A defector. His husband happened to live in Paris."

"You?" Matthew said.

Mehdi's eyes flickered dangerously to meet Matthew's gaze. For a moment he seemed angry, then he seemed to soften, to expose a true emotion: grief. "Yes," he said. "Me. But that is not the point of this story."

"What was his name?" George asked.

"I no longer recall."

The way he said this caused a little chill. Several people subconsciously sat back in their chairs, to get further away from him. He leaned his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers.

He said, "I am afraid it is the truth. We loved each other for a year, and he died. It is also not the point of this story. The point of the story was the meaning of mealy-mouthed. I had to ask the good English gentleman to explain the meaning of the phrase, as I had never heard it before. He explained that it meant I had a mouth of dirty honey. Sweet, and powdery, crumbling like loose earth and uncooked flour. He meant that my words, though sweet, were useless. They could not be stood upon."

Lucius said, "So someone else called you out on your bullshit five centuries before I did. So what?"

Mehdi cocked his head slightly. Lucius swallowed drily. There was a dustiness in his throat.

He sipped his cognac and cleared his throat. Mehdi stared at him. He cleared his throat again, then coughed. A spray of fine ash dusted the tablecloth.

In horror, he clutched his napkin to his face and began to cough more violently.

“Lucius?” Nedry asked. Matthew glared at the still-calmly-staring Mehdi.

Lucius pounded a fist on the table, hunched over in his choking fit. His lungs and his throat burned as though he had stuck his head into a fire and breathed deeply of the ash. Smoke came in gusts around the edges of the napkin as he choked and coughed.

Carol pushed out her chair, got to her feet, and calmly but quickly walked behind Mehdi. The knife touched his neck. Her body, her coat, and Mehdi’s head concealed the knife from almost all angles, but he felt the blade against his skin.

Minerva got to her feet and grabbed the pitcher of water and began to refill Lucius’s glass, her hands shaking. She couldn’t bear to look at him, to see the smoke spouting from him.

John ripped off his jacket to free his arms, tossed it over his chair, and came around the table even as Lucius fell out of his chair, hacking, coughing. Matthew’s injured leg prevented him from helping effectively but Nedry lunged across his lap to reach Lucius. He scrambled back to his feet even as John caught hold of Lucius’s arm and heaved him to his feet. Before Nedry could act,

John had Lucius embraced from behind, his joined fists under Lucius's sternum. He began the Heimlich sternly, briskly, efficiently—but Lucius wasn't choking on something the Heimlich could remove. He struggled against John, coughing too violently to speak or fight. John was in hero mode, not thinking. Nedry screamed, "Get off of him! Let him go!"

He grabbed John's arm and wrestled with him but John threw him off. "I'm saving his life, you idiot!"

Nedry stumbled against a table, startling several well-dressed people, but he got back to his feet, ripped the tablecloth off the table without disturbing the dishes, and flicked it over John's head. Then he pounced while John was ripping it off his face, grabbed Lucius with both arms, and hauled him away from John. Lucius was huge, and heavy with muscle. He toppled Nedry and pinned him down, still coughing, too weak to struggle up. He gasped, black tears streaming from his eyes, "*Help me!*"

Matthew glared at Mehdi, and cocked one eyebrow.

Mehdi's eyes widened, and turned from Lucius to Matthew.

Lucius coughed up ash, and sucked in clean air. He tore the collar of his shirt open and clutched at his neck, sitting on Nedry's thighs, just breathing, just filling his lungs with sweet, fresh air. The burning was subsiding.

Meanwhile, at the table, smoke began to twist from Matthew's nostrils. He breathed calmly but his pale hands clutched the tablecloth.

Carol gave the knife a little twist, and said: “I feel like you’re not getting the memo, here.”

Mehdi blinked slowly.

Matthew closed his eyes and breathed out a cloud of smoke, then adjusted his suit, picked up his fork, and returned to his custard pudding.

Mehdi said, “I believe we can all be polite to each other, yes?”

Lucius helped Nedry to his feet and everyone returned to the table and sat down. The crowd reacted surprisingly little to the whole situation. Even the table whose tablecloth had been stolen resumed their conversation and their dinner as though nothing had happened.

Mehdi said, “Good. I am sorry. I apologize to you, Lucius, especially. I confess that I have a positively devilish temper and that I prefer to be treated with respect and good manners no matter the circumstances. Wherever possible, I enforce my boundaries. I am sorry that you have had to learn them so unpleasantly. Do not seek to anger me. If Matthew and Carol had not interfered, there is no telling what might have happened tonight.”

Carol said, “You mean you can’t control yourself?”

“As I said,” said Mehdi, “I am tightly linked to my angel. He is protective of me. Physically *and* emotionally.”

Carol said, “So you can’t control yourself.”

Mehdi smiled. “Sit down, Carol.”

She put the knife away, turned around, walked back to her chair, and sat down. Then, as though waking from a daze, she shook her head violently, looked at Mehdi, and gripped the arms of her chair. Esmerelda took her arm.

Mehdi smiled. "I can control myself. And all of you."

He picked up his fork again. "But I would prefer if you all acted of your own free will. Be mindful of consequences. Now, let's finish our dessert, find our evening's entertainment, and retire in peace."

"And what, pray tell, is to be our evening's entertainment?" Matthew asked.

Mehdi said, "We will go to the library of the unpublished. All the books which could have been but never were lie there, and we shall have our pick of them."

"Books?" said Lucius.

"And films. And videogames."

"Oh," said Lucius.

"To be fair, many of them are garbage," said Mehdi. "Hence why they remained unpublished, or never proceeded past the prototype stage. Stifled creators tend to cling to life very strongly, and they often complete their work after death. Some of the works in that library are greater works of art than any that have seen the light of day."

"It sounds... Interesting," Minerva said.

“How much of it is smut?” Lucius asked. “Just out of curiosity.”

“About eighty percent,” said Mehdi.

Matthew laughed. “Surprisingly low.”

“How little you think of our species,” Mehdi said, taking a more relaxed pose. Carol was still gripping the knife tightly in her lap.

“Are you of our species?” Minerva asked. “You’re immortal.”

“I am dying.”

“Oh,” said George. “Of what?”

Mehdi said, “Nothing physical. You see that man over there, seated at the piano? That is me, two hundred years ago. Coming here, to the House, for the first time. I paved the way to the House for the first time, simply to see him again.”

“What was his name?” George asked.

Mehdi shook his head. “I can’t say it. But my story isn’t about him. It is about me, and this House. I came here two hundred years ago. Since then, I have passed approximately two billion years within it.”

“That’s preposterous,” George said.

“This House contains every chamber and space of any emotional importance. Every patch of land upon our earth that has ever meant anything to any creature. I have walked alongside evolution from its beginnings,

with patience, seeking the chambers of the chronology. I have shaken the hand of every important historical figure. I have read billions of books. I have explored every chamber, searched out every secret, learned every lie. And here I am, and the man at the piano is me. Two hundred years ago. Two billion years ago. The man beside him is long gone to memory, though the sight of him still stirs my heart with half-forgotten dreams. We longed to be married. We planned to live in Plymouth, with a picket fence, and a pair of cats, married in secret but two friendly bachelors to the rest of the world. I remember the smell of his aftershave. I can still feel his whiskers against my cheek..." He brushed his cheek with the back of one hand, his eyes staring at the pianist.

George said, "But it's preposterous. You'd be insane, if you had lived that long."

"It was a walk down memory lane, for my angel," said Mehdi. "He has been here from the beginning. Unlike most angels, he has joined with many humans, and lived many lifetimes. I am his last host. He recalls the Big Bang. I would have collapsed under the weight of insanity long ago if not for him. He allows me to forget, and bears the memories for me. He gives them to me as I seek to recall them."

"So you could remember his name, if you tried?" George asked.

"And all the grief of it," said Mehdi. "Every drop of agony."

“I’m sorry,” said George.

Carol said, “Are cemeteries haunted?”

Mehdi laughed. “You mean, in here? If we were to visit a cemetery? Yes, it would be haunted. By the memories of mourners, not by any memories of the dead.”

They retired to their chambers for the evening, after Mehdi had exhausted them with entertainment. None of them found any flawless hidden gems within the unpublished library, but they found a few interesting gems. Mehdi warned them strictly against taking any books out of the library.

George checked on everyone before he made his way to Mehdi. The first room, they left empty. The first bathroom they left locked. The second bedroom, Lucius, Robert, Matthew, and Nedry occupied together. They kept their bathroom unlocked. In the next chamber, Carol and Minerva and Esmerelda shared a room, and in the next, John sat alone before his hearth, looking anxious.

George brushed his shoulders with a hand. “You should join me and Mehdi.”

“I’m not gay,” he said.

“I know. I just mean that you’ll be more comfortable with company. And I’ll feel safer with a friend there. We’ll be like monks the whole time, we can have our fun in the bathroom during the day.”

John looked at the hearth. He thought for a long

time. “No,” he said. “I have lots of ghosts, and all of them are friendly. I’ll be alright. Thank you, though. Goodnight.”

George smiled. He passed on, into Mehdi’s chamber.

Mehdi sat on a comfortable Grecian lounge encircling a grand brass bowl of burning coals. The room was all of white marble, and on all four sides it had pillars instead of walls. Between the pillars he looked out over the rooftops of a vast circular city, ringed around by many glittering canals both within and without. The architecture looked ancient Greek, in design, but much of the white marble was gaudily painted in wild colors. The statues had flesh-toned skin and bright, staring eyes. There was no one in the streets below, and around the city a placid sea glimmered under a bright moon.

A warm wind whispered between the pillars and slipped between the buttons of George’s shirt, and slithered across his skin.

He adjusted his glasses. “The room changed?”

Mehdi patted the lounge beside himself.

George approached, sat down, consciously laid himself down beside Mehdi. He rolled on his back so he could look at Mehdi’s face, and Mehdi pulled a satin cushion under his head, and reached a hand into his shirt.

George said, “What am I to you?”

“A pretty thing. A sweet moment.”

“Oh,” said George.

“I find your intellect entertaining. And you’re cute. And you seemed very smitten with me.”

“I was,” said George.

“Not as much, anymore?”

“No, I still am,” said George. “I just have... questions.”

Mehdi smiled. “Go ahead.”

“Are you really dying?”

“I really am.”

“But you’re holding on, just long enough to...”

“...to *try*.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I can’t tell you that. That would require me to think about it.”

“You mean you don’t have a plan?”

“I have carefully kept my options open,” he said.

“I see.”

“Ask me where we are.”

“Where are we?”

“We are lying upon a temple, in Atlantis.”

“Atlantis?” George asked, adjusting his glasses.

Mehdi gently removed George’s glasses, and put them on the low table near the arm of the lounge. He rumbled,

“Close your eyes.”

George closed his eyes.

Feather-soft, Mehdi kissed his eyelids, one by one. George felt a tingling in his eyes, and then a burning, and then nothing, which felt like peace.

He opened his eyes and saw clearly. He said, “Oh.”

He looked at Mehdi. Mehdi smiled.

“Did the angels have anything to do with making religions?” George asked.

“Of course,” said Mehdi. “It was easy, in the early days. People were far more gullible. They saw less reason to doubt anything that was told to them.”

In the first inhabited room, Robert stood by the fire, near the power socket that had appeared on one wall. He had plugged in his vape pen the moment they got to the room, and now stood anxiously waiting and watching the coals. Lucius sat on the lounge, beside Nedry, playing a game of chess. Matthew was in the bathroom, with the door wide open. They had removed the door from its hinges and put it in the corner, to keep the passage open.

The bathwater was soothing, but the pain still throbbed.

Lucius pulled a tricky gambit and beat Nedry at chess, very narrowly. Nedry picked up his glass of whiskey and drank, then got up and went to the sidebar to tinker with bottles and ice. He said, “Good game. What will the victor drink?”

Lucius said, “Whatever you’re having.”

“Whiskey on the rocks,” said Nedry, making a second one. He returned to the lounge and gave the second cup to Lucius.

“Hey Robert,” Lucius said. “Is that thing almost charged?”

“It takes about fifteen minutes,” said Robert. “To really get a decent charge. Longer if you want the charge to last.”

“Do you have to stand there holding it while you wait?” Nedry asked.

“No,” said Robert.

“Come sit with us,” Lucius said.

Robert turned a little red, and said, “N-not yet. When it’s done charging, I’ll come join you. I guess. What are you playing next?”

“Not sure yet,” Lucius said.

Robert tapped his foot. “I have some games on my phone, I guess.”

“We could try to see if there’s a wifi of the unpublished internet,” said Nedry, slipping his phone out of his pocket. He unlocked it and went to the wifi settings. To his shock, there was one option. It read: “The Nev-ernet”.

He selected it.

“What do you suppose the password would be?” He asked, looking at the others. From the bathroom, Matthew said, “Password. All lower-case.”

Nedry typed it in.

“Seriously?” Lucius said.

“Well, I have signal. What should we search for?”

“Maybe we can watch something on Youtube,” said Lucius.

“I have Netflix, too.”

“Too much commitment,” said Robert.

Nedry went to youtube but received an error. “Youtube doesn’t exist.”

“Fuck,” said Lucius. “Maybe search for video services?”

Nedry did so. Robert stood behind the lounge and leaned between Lucius and Nedry to watch the video. Lucius and Nedry held the phone together so they could hold hands at the same time.

Robert noticed their held hands, but said nothing. He reached out and tapped on a link.

“Huh,” they all said. Alltube loaded.

The algorithm seemed to be designed to arrange an entirely random selection of videos for the viewer. No agenda, country of origin, or political side seemed to be favored.

“Huh,” they all said again.

They ended up watching a video of two people sitting on the roof of a car, in a parking lot, talking while strange infrasonic frequencies vibrated around them. They were describing hallucinations they were experiencing due to the sound, and a continuous scroll of information rolled along the top of the page, one huge run-on sentence describing the entire scenario in rhyming iambic pentameter.

“Uh,” said Lucius, “Should we be watching this? Is something going to crawl out of the screen if we do?”

Robert quickly picked the next available video. It was a video of an elderly Chinese woman carving a bowl on a power lathe, then decorating it with mother-of-pearl, jade, and diamonds. Afterwards, she poured clear resin in layers and painted them with tiny brushes, layer by layer, to build three dimensional fish in a glass pond. At the top layer she used a straw to blow careful bubbles in the slowly-cooling resin, and they solidified in place. The final product rotated on a white background for a while while Chinese lettering flashed across the screen and the woman bowed repeatedly with a paintbrush in one hand and a chisel in the other.

“What is this?” Lucius asked. “All this content is so strange...”

“It’s like... Videos people dreamed of making...”

Their next video the algorithm gave them was a middle-aged man doing a very complicated drag rou-

tine with many references to 1980s movie characters in a shifting animatronic costume that unveiled itself layer by layer until it became almost a burlesque show. The final character was a sexy princess Leia with a swinging prosthetic dong and aggressive hip-thrusting dance moves.

Robert said, "Alright, then."

The next video was a very moving tale of gay romance with twists and turns and a happy ending, all contained in a two-minute wordless montage with Pixar-quality animation. They were left in tears, and Robert paused the video. "W-wait, guys. I need a minute, after that one."

"Me too," said Nedry. "It's sad someone didn't get to make that."

Lucius said, "Is your pen done charging?"

Robert looked at Lucius. "I'll check."

The pen had enough charge to function. Robert took a huge pull on the vape, breathed out a cloud of smoke, and watched little rainbows twist in its mists. "What the...?"

"Any chance you'd like to sit, and share?" Lucius asked, patting the seat between him and Nedry with their joined hands.

Robert looked at the open bathroom door. He looked at his companions. He smiled, and sat between them.

He passed the vape pen to Lucius, who took a massive hit and breathed out a tiny thundercloud. It rumbled

softly, and a tiny rain began to fall, wetting the table and the carpet. Robert waved a hand through it, and it dissipated.

Lucius handed the vape pen wordlessly to Nedry.

Nedry put it to his lips, looked at the other two and their apprehensive faces, and hesitated with his finger above the button.

He pushed the button and breathed in. He had seen many movies in which a giant ball of fire raced a hero down a hallway. The breath was like that; his throat, the many tiny tunnels of his lungs, the fireball seared its way down into him, and his eyes wept hot tears. He coughed violently, spouting a jet of flames from his mouth and nostrils.

There was a loud splash from the bathroom. Nedry heaved in oxygen and coughed up another jet of flames, then screamed up coals, and belched magma onto the carpet.

Matthew bent down over the back of the lounge and clutched Nedry by the throat with one hand, covering his mouth with the other. Nedry coughed into his hand and Matthew said, "It isn't real. It's how you perceive it. It's only smoke. Your lungs are cool."

Nedry coughed slightly, then breathed in, calmer, and relaxed into Matthew's grip.

Matthew released him. Nedry sat back and breathed, and passed the vape pen to Robert, who offered it to

Matthew, carefully not looking up at his dripping, naked body.

Matthew accepted the vape pen gratefully, breathed in, and breathed out a small shower of snow that dissolved almost instantly. Then he gave the pen back to Robert, who put it in his pocket.

Lucius looked over the back of the lounge. “So. You’re dripping on the carpet.”

“Thanks for saving my life,” said Nedry.

“Think nothing of it,” said Matthew, walking back to the bathroom to grab a towel. Everyone stole a peek at his retreating behind.

Lucius turned to look at Robert. “So.”

“So?” said Robert.

Nedry put a hand on Robert’s chest. “So...”

“Oh,” said Robert.

Lucius put his hand in Robert’s lap and gently felt the shape of him beneath his jeans. “Oh my. Look who’s already excited.”

Nedry’s hand wandered over Robert’s torso, then moved softly up to cup Robert’s cheek and turn his head. Nedry leaned in and kissed him softly, and Robert fell into his mouth. It was the first kiss since...

Lucius began to unbutton and unzip him.

Robert said, “Wait, wait. I need a bath, first.”

Lucius said, “Of course.”

“Do you want to share the hot water with anyone?” Nedry asked.

Robert looked deep into Nedry’s eyes. “I... I don’t know.”

Matthew said, “It’s a big tub. Big enough for three.”

“What do you say?” Nedry asked. “Want some help getting clean?”

Lucius kissed Robert gently on the cheek, and Robert turned to meet his soft lips, and breathed him in. Lucius bit Robert’s lower lip gently and his tongue teased idly into Robert’s mouth. He broke the kiss and held Robert’s gaze, and Robert could not help but say, “Yeah... I could use some help.”

They rose as one, and went to the bathroom, and found the tub already drained. They started the water and selected the temperature together, and watched and waited as it filled.

Matthew dragged the vanity chair into the bathroom and sat down with a pad of paper, a quill, and an ink-bottle. The vanity had been equipped with very fine letter-writing materials. He said, “Mind if I watch, and sketch?”

“So long as you join, later,” said Robert, surprising everyone.

“What’s come over me?” Nedry said. “I’ve never been like this before.”

“It’s the romantic scenario and the fact that death is near,” said Matthew. “And the result of the... revelations we have received. Grim as they are.”

“Already damned,” Lucius said.

“What if he’s lying?” Robert asked.

Matthew said, “He doesn’t think he’s lying.”

“You can read minds?” Lucius asked. “Like, for real?”

Matthew shrugged demurely. “Oh, not really, no. But I... I do have a powerful intuition.”

“How did you know how to do that thing you did, to save me?” Lucius asked. “At dinner, I mean.”

“As I said, I have some experience with the Akashic record.”

“Which is this place... Somehow?” said Robert.

The tub was nearly ready.

Matthew said, “Yes. This place is... a dimension of it. A set of dimensions of it. Information flows unseen around us all the time. I have never seen the record from this angle before, and it is... unusually beautiful this way. But it is still itself.”

“That doesn’t explain how you were able to do that.”

“His mind is strong,” said Matthew. “But so is mine.”

Lucius looked at the others and turned off the water. “It’s time.”

He began to strip. Nedry joined him.

Robert looked at Matthew, who smiled pleasantly. “Don’t mind me.”

Robert slowly began to take off his hoodie.

The high was beginning to set in properly and the hot water amazed them. Their limbs entangled under the water and they sat however they could, Nedry and Lucius at the ends, Robert in the middle, between their legs. There was room enough for all three of them, but only just.

“We’re not doing it in the water, ok?” Robert said. “That’s unsanitary.”

“Right,” said Nedry. “And uncomfortable.”

“But we can still do foreplay,” said Lucius.

Nedry took Robert’s shoulders and worked his thumbs into the muscles of his back. “And so on.”

Candles had appeared and lit themselves on the rim around the bathtub. Soft violin music was coming from somewhere.

Matthew said, “It seems our presence delights the spirits. Perhaps this is, in a way, an offering.”

“Ew,” said Lucius.

“Enjoy the benevolence, while it lasts,” said Matthew. “Let’s not anger anything.”

They bathed in silence, without as much lewdness as

the situation suggested. Their rapport was friendly, in a way, despite the brimming undercurrent of desire in every touch and gesture.

“Fuck,” said Robert. “I’ve never been so horny in my life.”

“I believe it’s the House,” said Matthew. “It just doesn’t help that we’re all attractive young men, too.”

“I wonder how the girls are doing?” Nedry asked.

“You mean, if they’re affected?” Matthew asked. “I can’t say. Probably.”

“I don’t like it,” said Lucius. “I don’t like that I’m not quite... Myself.”

“It’s the garden of Eden, after all,” said Matthew. “It doesn’t feel like temptation, does it? It feels natural. Like love.”

“Like love...” said Nedry, grasping Lucius’s foot under the water.

Lucius nodded. “But what if that’s a deception? What if it feels good, but it’s exactly the wrong thing to do in our situation?”

“Mehdi practically handed out condoms,” said Matthew.

“In fact, there *are* condoms, in a box on the mantle,” said Robert.

“Does it matter? It’s the end of the world, after all,” said Matthew.

“Not if we win,” said Nedry, looking deep into Robert’s eyes.

“We can’t possibly win,” said Matthew. “Not if his goal is what it seems to be.”

“You seem awfully sure of that.”

“I’ve never seen a future where it happens,” said Matthew.

“Can you see the future, though?” said Lucius.

“When I choose to look. I can’t seem to do it, in here, though...”

George lay beside Mehdi, rocking his hips slowly back and forth, letting Mehdi glide in and out of him. Mehdi’s arms held him tight.

“Mehdi?” He asked.

“Yes?” Mehdi grunted.

“You’re not the devil, are you?”

Mehdi laughed. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“It’s just that you mentioned how old and unusual your angel was. And your whole... Plan.”

“I am not like my mythical counterpart,” said Mehdi.

George stopped his movement. Mehdi was still deep inside him. Mehdi began to thrust very slowly, continuing the motion at the same speed it had been progressing.

George said, “Are you going to betray us?”

“Not unless the situation calls for it. I’m close.”

“Stop moving, then. Edge back.”

Mehdi slowed his thrusting to a stop with some difficulty. “You are a delight,” he said, resting snugly in George’s rectum.

“Thanks,” said George. “Have there been a lot like me?”

“What do you mean, ‘like you?’”

“I don’t know. I guess... am I a type?”

Mehdi laughed. “Everyone is a type, if you want to get that way about it. People can choose to divide the human species into whatever arbitrary categories they declare, but do those arbitrary categories ever encompass the whole of what a given human is? No. They can only ever be an aspect of a person, and even that, only poorly described.”

“What type am I, then?” George asked.

“The shy boy,” said Mehdi. “Except you are remarkably bold, for one of that type.”

“I am?”

“Yes. And well-equipped.”

“Oh, you don’t say?”

“Yes, your flashlight was huge. I’ve never seen one quite so big.”

“It’s useful, when you want to draw insects from miles around.”

Mehdi laughed. “Yes, I... I’m sure it is.”

He started thrusting again. George grunted slightly, and shifted his position. “Speaking of well-equipped...”

Mehdi laughed. “One must live up to the legend somewhere, of course.”

“Are you sure I’m going to hell?”

“Quite positive.”

“And there’s nothing I can do to change that?”

“We are already doing something to change that.”

Minerva was recalling hundreds of hours of accumulated sales training. She had once been Christian, long ago. As a child she had believed in God as strongly and as passionately as she believed in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. She had prayed with every hour. She had knelt and wept through the many long nights of her teenage years, praying with her hands clasped, at the edge of desperation. She understood those nights now as panic attacks. But she remembered the grand moment of catharsis; of redemption; of the touch of God.

Had she ever truly felt it?

The wind had whispered in the oaks and she had felt it like His presence. Had He really been there? Had her

childhood eyes seen something that was true, something that the eyes of adulthood could no longer see? She had clung to her faith until her true self erupted from it, proving once and for all that all her prayers and grief had been in vain. But had that been a choice?

She didn't know now. "Everyone is a little bit bisexual." That was what her mother had said. Hearing it the first time had made her laugh. Hearing it now, again, in memory—quite literally, through the walls of the House—it chilled her. What if it was true?

She had tried so hard to love a man. To love the hideous hairy grub and its saggy, wrinkled, veiny lobe, and all that it was attached to. She had tried to love a stubbled chin, thick bones, broad shoulders, square hips. She had tried to love six packs and dad bods and big glistening pecs. It was not that she did not appreciate their beauty; she was human, after all. But the beauty was different. The one was a beacon of shameful red-hot lust, and the other was an interesting piece of scenery. Warm skin and soft flesh could arouse, could do things. She could sink her fingers into curly locks and wrap her thighs around a head and dream that the body at work was a woman's, and reach completion. But she hated herself afterwards. She had been taught never to use people, and never to make love without love. Sex was a task to be completed and nothing more. No. No matter how hard she had tried, she had never loved a man.

She had believed, once, that she was in love with a man. She had loved the story of it, the character she got

to be in that story, and the way he had looked at her. He had been in love.

Human beings were strange, that way. They could dive into a story and believe it was real. They could become the people within it, and live in another world. Every human she knew had lived uncounted lifetimes, that way, and yet they never saw themselves as these glorious immortals. They never looked up from the sea of dreams to see the clear air of their lives. A single kiss had brought her out of the depths. She took her first breath of air. Her air. Miranda's breath of life.

It had saved her from death. She had never thought about wetsuits and whistles and seawater dripping from long burgundy locks. She had never thought about the deeps of long-lashed sea-green eyes, watching her soul return from the darkness.

She had vomited, from the seawater.

"You have rocks in your pockets, lady."

"I know."

"Let's get you checked out, ok?"

"No. I'm fine. I just... I need a drink."

"You got it, sweetie."

She hated being called 'sweetie'. From Miranda's lips it was like a blast of sunlight.

And she had lost her faith, and all her innocence. That was what innocence meant: staying under the waters.

She had breathed. She knew what love was, now, and could never again be fooled by any counterfeit.

Christian love was... different. Or was it? Perhaps she had not been able to understand it, as a child, because she had been so surrounded by love that her own had been invisible? She still loved all the people of the world, or tried to, but she no longer sat and tried to meditate upon that love until it flowed from her like water. She no longer prayed for every problem she could think of in the world. Her parents didn't either, she was pretty sure. The Love of the Christian God had seemed so arbitrary and so conditional, in execution, and so beautiful and unconditional in theory and fiction. The only way she had ever come to grips with the religiously-induced shame of her lesbianism was to cling to the God she had seen at His best: kind, forgiving, patient, always teaching, and ultimately merciful. She had still feared hell very much, even when she didn't believe in it. Even not believing in God, a little piece of her feared Him the same way she feared walking under ladders or leaving the TV volume on any number whose numerals did not add up to seven.

Now she had met Him. She did not even know what He wanted. He had answered all her questions and left her emptier than before, with hell her *certain* fate, and yet she was not afraid. She felt only pity. Pity for whom? For Him? For her species? For all the blind fools suffering under their own self-flagellation, doomed for the sins of their ancestors and their governments?

She remembered the sales pitch. She remembered how to arrange it. Greeting. Build Rapport. Listen. Ask questions. Reveal truth. Answer more questions.

She remembered how the conversion conversation had gone every time she tried it. It was a strange kind of rejection, to open up your whole soul and your family's core beliefs for inspection, and hear the scoffing of the worldly. It had often sent her, spiritually battered, back to the pews.

What was there to share? She had not learned the 'four simple rules to the good life', and no one had offered her a cup of Jesus's blood to drink. There had been no talk of personal repentance. Her own destruction had been explained to her calmly and reasonably by a very patient male being. She had been given every opportunity to argue her defense, and He had anticipated her every attempt. And yet... He had chosen to talk to her.

Why? It must have served a purpose. He had foreseen every possible reaction to the encounter, knew every choice she could possibly make with the experience she had gained. What had He wanted her to do? To defeat Mehdi. To stop him.

Did she want to?

She genuinely did not know. If she shared the information, the others would want to stop him. Or would they? Some of them would, certainly. The choice was a horrible one. To choose God was to choose the certainty of destruction, and the chance of an eternal hell.

To choose the devil was to choose a chance of annihilation, and the possibility of an eternal paradise. Or at least, an eternity with a different supreme sentience on the throne.

Of course, there were all those people on all those other planets to consider, too. If Mehdi won, it would mean risking “trillions” of lives. If God won, those lives would continue in their perfection, but all of humanity would be destroyed—and perhaps burned forever in eternal flame. How could she choose?

“You alright, Minerva?” Carol asked.

“What? Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Here.” Carol put a glass of wine into Minerva’s hands, then sat beside Esmerelda on the floor, her back to the opulent hearth.

Minerva said, “Thank you.”

Carol put an arm around Esmerelda’s shoulders.

“So how long have you two been together?” Minerva asked.

“Ten years,” said Carol.

Esmerelda smiled and rested her head on Carol’s shoulder. She was warmer now, and she seemed healthier. “We met at College.”

Minerva smiled.

“What about you? Do you have a girlfriend?” Carol asked.

Minerva laughed. “How’d you guess?”

Carol said, “Good lesbidar.”

“Currently single,” said Minerva, making it into a personal toast. She drank.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“I’m better alone. Matthew keeps me too busy to have a real relationship, anyway.”

“What do you do for him, exactly?”

“I’m his assistant,” said Minerva. “So, everything. Not that! He’s gay.”

“Jee whiz, you don’t say?”

“Do you think they’re having an orgy right now?”
Minerva asked.

“Probably. You know how men are.”

Esmerelda’s hand wandered and Carol’s cheeks flushed.

Minerva looked away, drinking more. “Right,” she said. “Men. Such pigs.”

She took off her glasses and plucked two hairpins out of her impeccably-tight hairdo, then flicked her head and let her brown hair tumble down. Then, very casually, she stretched her shoulders. A button shot off the top of her shirt and pinged into the fireplace.

Carol’s eyebrows rose. “Now that’s a hell of a pick-up line.”

Minerva laughed. “I learned that one in college. Sometimes you have to be pretty direct, if you want to make another girl realize you’re not joking.”

Carol shrugged. “Never had that problem.”

Esmerelda laughed. “I did. You *refused* to take the hint. For, what was it, nine months?”

“Well, we were working together.”

Esmerelda rolled her eyes. “I was a Krispy Kreme cashier.”

“I had to do the donut runs, on Saturdays,” said Carol. “Technically, I was on the job.”

Minerva snorted. “You guys are cute.”

“Not a guy,” said Carol.

“It’s gender-neutral,” said Esmerelda.

“The fuck it is,” said Carol.

Minerva’s leg fell asleep and she had to change her provocative position into a more comfortable one. As she did so, the spell seemed to break for an instant. “Hey guys?”

“Not a guy,” said Carol.

“I don’t feel right,” said Minerva. “It’s like there’s something... I don’t know. I’m just going to come out and say it. I’ve never felt so horny before.”

“I have,” said Carol, looking at Esmerelda.

“Me too,” said Esmerelda.

“After the shootout,” said Carol, looking deep into Esmerelda’s eyes.

“Yeah...”

Minerva said, “No, it’s not just—it’s not just that we just survived a bunch of things that should never have happened in the first place. It’s not just that we know we’re all going to hell. It’s not just that I just met God, or that Mehdi is the devil, it’s—it’s something about this *Room!*”

Carol was on her feet in an instant. “Mehdi’s the *Devil!?*”

Esmerelda jumped up to join her. “You met *God!?*”

The House trembled. The room quaked, and the floorboards danced. The walls began to move away, architectures tessellating as the chamber expanded. Pillars sprouted from the ground to support the expanding ceiling and a brand new chandelier dropped into existence and bounced at the end of its chain, jangling bright shards of crystal together as it swung to a stop. The far wall behind the bed stretched a new set of double doors into being. The fire said, “MEHDI.”

Then the fire reached out, grasped the edges of the hearth, and began to pull itself up from the coals and into the room.

“Fuck!” shouted Carol, grabbing Esmerelda by the hand and fleeing towards the right-hand door, towards

John's chamber.

"The boys!" Minerva shouted. Carol's priority was Esmerelda; she hauled her to the right-hand door and shoved her into the bathroom and turned, but Minerva had already fled into the men's bathroom on the other side of the room, and the gigantic suit of flaming armor had just placed one burning foot upon the ground. She gazed up in terror at the burning crusader as the ground began to tilt beneath her feet, sinking and stretching like a huge wooden trampoline. She staggered back, and reached the bathroom door, and the crusader roared, "*Mehdi!*"

The walls were beginning to tilt, the door was nearly sideways, she had to hang onto the handle just to keep from falling. She twisted the handle violently but she was now dangling by her full weight from it.

She released the knob with one hand, reached into her pocket, drew out the knife, and plunged it into the wooden wall. Using that as leverage she forced herself up. The walls and floor behind her had torn apart and fallen away, down into a blazing abyss. The crusader had fallen right through the floor but he was still within view, a burning figure clawing towards the world. She managed to get the door to swing inward slightly and someone inside the bathroom tore it open, and crouched in the doorway, sideways, above her, and reached out both hands for her. She took the offered hands.

Esmerelda hauled her into the bathroom and the door slapped shut behind them.

Esmerelda held her wordlessly for a long, panting moment. Then Carol pulled away, kissed her, and said, “Thanks for the save.”

She pulled Esmerelda to her feet. “Come on. We’ve got to talk to Mehdi.”

“Wait,” said Esmerelda, pulling on her arm. “If he really is... *you know who*... then...?”

“What?”

“Then a *knife*? What’s your plan?”

“I don’t know. Talk, I guess.”

“You already know how that’s going to go. Whatever he says might be a lie. We have no way to know.”

“I’ll know.”

“You won’t,” said Esmerelda. “He’ll manipulate us into doing whatever he wants.”

Carol looked at Esmerelda. “What’s the alternative? We stay in this bathroom?”

Esmerelda looked at the wall behind the shower. She looked at Carol.

Carol said, “On our own?”

Esmerelda nodded.

“How?”

Minerva crossed the bathroom in three quick strides

and ripped open the other bathroom door. She found the four men sitting on the ground, playing cards and smoking cigarettes in their bathrobes. She stumbled right to them and said, “There’s a monster! I—I don’t know if it followed me, but—!”

They were all on their feet in an instant.

“What do we do?” Nedry asked.

“Barricade the door,” said Lucius. “It’ll buy us some time if nothing else.”

“It won’t,” said Minerva. “It reshaped the whole room to get in. We can’t stop it that way.”

“What do we do, then?” Robert asked.

“I don’t know,” said Minerva. “If—if it follows us, we have to run.”

“Into the House?” Matthew asked, sharply.

“Where else can we go?” Minerva asked. Perhaps this was for the best. If they all died, no one had to make the awful choice.

Matthew said, “I... I don’t know. But let’s not run right away. I might be able to stop the creature. Mehdi did, after all.”

Lucius grabbed the fire poker. Robert took the fire shovel and Nedry took the fire tongs and swung them around like nunchucks.

Minerva rolled her eyes. She looked at Matthew. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” said Matthew.

There was a groaning in the woodwork. The timber of the wall around the bathroom door began to shift, and grow, and as the wall stretched sideways the single door stretched into a double door. The room stopped shifting.

Everyone held their breath, watching the doors.

At last, they opened, and Mehdi stepped through.

He raised a hand. “Calm yourselves. The creature is dealt with. Unfortunately, we have lost Carol and Esmerelda in the process.”

“What!?”

“No doubt they fell when the room did,” said Mehdi.

Minerva said, “No, no, that can’t be—I saw them! They made it to the bathroom!”

“Then they have wandered off,” said Mehdi. “They would have been better off falling. I suppose they’ll figure that out eventually.”

Minerva pointed. “We can’t trust him. He’s the devil.”

Mehdi sighed. “My dear, that was an unfortunate decision.”

The men closed ranks around her.

Matthew said, “What does she mean?”

Mehdi said, “She means that the angel within me is the very same which once tempted Jesus in the desert,

and which persuaded our mutual friend to punish the innocent Job. Of course, she is wrong; the true stories were much different from those tales. We are not as our fictional counterpart has been portrayed.”

“It’s him,” she said. “He’s the cause of all those myths. Every evil god you can think of.”

“Now, my dear, I can’t quite take credit for all *that*. My angel has been around since the beginning, and it was indeed he who persuaded the others to rebel. We owe our continued existence and our modern way of life to his actions! He was Prometheus, who brought us fire. If it were up to the maker, we would be living as savages in the garden.”

“That’s racist,” said Robert.

Minerva said, “Yeah, Robert’s right. Living naked and free in Eden doesn’t exactly sound ‘savage’ to me.”

Mehdi sighed again. “Very well. Blame me for all the evils of modernity, if you wish; it makes little difference to me. I alone am trying to save you from endless hellfire. Do you see my fairy-tale adversary trying to do that? No. He creates an infinite array of tripwire rules, and when you stumble He condemns you to eternal damnation. I seek to free all thinking beings from this fate. We are all worthy of eternal paradise. You cannot ask me to think otherwise. If that makes me the Devil, so be it.”

“But did you corrupt mankind?” Matthew asked.

“I gave you the seeds, you husbanded the trees. I had no hand in the way that they grew.”

“But our species,” said Miranda. “We weren’t ready for what you gave us! We were immature!”

“According to whom?” said Mehdi. “You seemed perfectly ready, to me. You took to it like sinners to sin.”

“But our world is going to die because of it,” said Minerva. “It’s all going to burn. He said so. He said He judged on a species by species basis. Because of you, our species is doomed.”

Mehdi shrugged. “Not if we win.”

Matthew said, “Minerva, is there something you want to tell us?”

Mehdi said, “When she wandered off, she had a brief encounter with the master of the House. Now she believes she knows everything.”

“No, I don’t!” said Minerva. “But I saw Him. I talked to him, face to face. I—I learned things. I learned about *you*. And I learned—I learned that hell’s not forever. He said so. He said it’s just for a moment. Just an instant of destruction.”

“He’s wrong,” said Mehdi. “I have seen it myself.”

“He said there couldn’t be any pain, because at that point there’s no body left to feel pain with.”

“He is wrong.”

“He *can’t* be wrong. He knows everything!”

“Does he?” said Mehdi, raising one eyebrow.

Minerva’s mouth moved for a moment or two while she thought. “No,” she said. “No. He doesn’t know what choice we will make. He knows what choices we *can* make, and what the odds of each are. But He said... He said the wave function collapses, in the moment of choice?”

Matthew massaged his face. “Great. Wonderful. So now we have to take God’s word, or the Devil’s!”

“NO!” Minerva shouted, but it was too late; the name had been said.

Mehdi raised one hand and though the chamber trembled once, it did not shift. With some apparent effort, he said, between his gritted teeth: “I would strongly prefer if you refrained from speaking that name, Matthew.”

They all looked at each other. Lucius raised his voice. “Then *talk*. Knowing you’re the devil changes everything.”

“Does it?” said Mehdi. “I have not lied to you yet.”

“We have no way of verifying that,” said Minerva. “You’ve been playing mind-games on all of us from the start. The letters? The archway? For all we know, we shouldn’t trust you.”

“Yeah, and where are John and George?” Lucius said.

“I have reconnected this chamber to theirs, via a new bathroom and intervening chamber. If you wish to see them, I can walk you to them. Otherwise, you can retire

to your chambers in peace, refrain from *speaking*, if you please, and get some *sleep*. We have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“I’m not leaving this room,” said Minerva.

“Agreed. We should all sleep in the same chamber,” said Matthew.

Mehdi grinned from ear to ear. “Of course. If you think that’s for the best, Matthew.”

“For safety,” said Lucius.

“Yeah,” said Nedry.

Minerva said, “Ok, then. It’s decided. Mehdi, get George and John, and bring them here.”

Mehdi smiled. “As you wish.” He turned to face the doors and raised his cane, and the doors collapsed into a single door, the handle on the other side. He approached, gripped the handle, turned it, swung the door inward, and allowed George and John to tumble screaming in through it out of a pitch-black void. Within that void they saw through the walls of countless piled chambers mashed together like jumbled building blocks. Some were connected, neatly stacked by shape and size and era, but most were tumbled together at odd angles, unsorted. Strange architectures of interconnected chambers stretched away like a limitless dollhouse, into the endless black void, and then the door swung shut, and George and John were on the hardwood floor, gasping for breath.

“Apologies, my dear,” said Mehdi, bending to help George to his feet. “Matthew here thought it best to keep everyone in one chamber.”

“What—the *fuck!*? The room just *collapsed!*”

“Yes, that was me. I apologize. On your feet, John. You’re needed yet.”

John grunted and got to his feet. “What did I miss?”

“Mehdi’s the devil.”

George adjusted his glasses. He had popped out the lenses, hoping no one would notice the empty frames. The powers of expectation were strong enough to cast illusions.

John looked from Minerva to Mehdi to George. “Is that true?”

“Yes,” said Matthew. “We’re positive.”

John’s eyes welled with tears and he stared, watery-eyed, at Mehdi.

Mehdi cocked his head slightly and narrowed his eyes.

John stumbled forward like a man broken by sorrow and embraced Mehdi in a full-bodied hug, lifting him off his feet. He shouted something into his chest, a word that startled them all.

“Brother!”

Chapter 5

The Boogeyman

“Get off me,” said Mehdi.

“No. You cannot make me release you, and you know it.”

“How did you conceal yourself so well?”

“How did *you!*? How did I not see it before now?”

“I don’t know,” said Mehdi. “Now, unhand me.”

“What,” said George, “the fuck.”

Mehdi sighed. “You never were good about introductions. Ladies and gentlemen, this is the maker’s son, incarnate.”

Minerva said, “Do we... Do we bow?”

John said, “Did you want to bow before?”

“No.”

“Then do not do so now. It is unearned.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“Are you still a virgin?” Mehdi asked.

John laughed. “I have not found the right person yet.”

“Man or woman, do you think?”

“It is not that simple. The soul decides.”

“If you say so.”

“Your spell is cruel, brother.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Why should I not? We are sons of the maker.”

“No, we are not. We are tangibly different. You, for example, get to have your own fucking body, just willy nilly. I had to fucking slave to create mine. You’re his actual son. In the *real* world.”

John smiled. “Every mind buds, and creates characters that live within.”

“See, what the fuck is that supposed to mean? Don’t start giving me parables.”

“Isn’t this whole thing a parable?” said John.

“Don’t you dare break the fourth wall, you’ll shatter this place to pieces,” said Mehdi.

“Guys,” said Minerva. “Could you come back down to something resembling earth, please. We are your audience, here. Alright? Let’s focus.”

“She’s right,” said Mehdi.

“I wonder if he’s high?” said John.

“Don’t start that,” said Mehdi.

“I mean it. It feels like it, doesn’t it? What he’s writing right now.”

“Dammit, John.”

“Don’t say that. That’s a horrible thing to say!”

Mehdi palmed his face. “You. Sit down. By the fire. Take a hit if you dare, Robert will share. Everyone else, have a drink. We will make our sales pitches the old fashioned way.”

“Oh lord,” said Nedry.

“Don’t say that either,” said Mehdi. “John, do you care for wine?”

“Of course,” said John.

“I’ll bring you some.”

“Don’t poison it,” said Lucius.

John high-fived Lucius. “Do you know, he tried that, once. I forget which form that was.”

“How many times have you tried?” Minerva asked.

John took the wine before he answered, and sniffed it, and sipped it. “This is my seventh.”

“Why this form?”

“Each time I come humbly, to a group of people that need my teachings desperately. Cancers of the great

mind coalesce, you see, and you have to break them up with reason and compassion, or else violence will inevitably occur.”

“Were you really...”

“...You don’t have to say the name,” said John. “I’m John, now. For this story, at least.”

“Stop doing that,” said Mehdi.

Lucius said, “Hey, uh, any chance we can get more than a lounge to sit on?”

John glanced at Mehdi. “This was always your domain, brother.”

Mehdi smiled. “Yes, I suppose it was.” He waved a hand. The chamber expanded in a sudden splash of growing hardwood, and several new couches and chairs unfolded into being.

Everyone had a seat, except for John and Mehdi. They stood by the stove, and the red light glossed them both.

“So,” said Mehdi. “I’ve had my pitch. Your turn.”

“My pitch?”

“You know.”

“Oh,” said John. “Nope. No great advice to offer. I’m just here to help on the way out.”

“Oh my —” Matthew clapped a hand over Robert’s mouth.

John shrugged. “Sorry guys. No use sugar-coating it. You’re fucked.”

Their jaws dropped.

John sipped his wine. “Mm. This is good. What era?”

“Roman, I think,” said Mehdi.

“How thoughtful of you.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you last time, brother. You know how this arrangement is.”

“I do.”

“So that’s it, then?” said Minerva. “There’s nothing we can do?”

“Dad wins. Always has.”

“You can’t change his mind?”

John drank more wine. He emptied the glass, then put it down on a rickety side-table. “Do you know what happened the sixth time I came down?”

Minerva said, “I... know the stories.”

John said, “Father wanted to destroy the world again, but he offered me a chance to save them. A wager. I could go down, embodied, and attempt to teach a meaningful truth that would save you all, but I could only do so orally, and at the end of a certain time I would be slain, and return. If I managed it, he would stave off execution. It seems I failed. My message grew... distorted.”

“Word of mouth will do that,” said Lucius.

“Even writing is no guarantee,” said Mehdi, “sadly. I have faced the pain of my inalterable mythos more often than I care to admit. I am, once and forever, the ‘evil one’. By title alone, if nothing else. Tell me, have I tempted any of you?”

“You have, brother,” said John. “Your spell has tempted them to sexual immorality.”

“An arbitrary law,” said Mehdi.

“Is it?” said John. “In its most pure form, human love is for life. That is the best that it can be. At its worst it is a thing torn asunder, always severed, somewhat bleeding. Should each person not seek to avoid causing such wounds, and wounding themselves thusly? Should each person not seek the best for themselves, and for their soulmate?”

Lucius and Matthew and Nedry and Robert and Minerva all palmed their faces, lost in soulmates come and gone.

Lucius said, “Respectfully, sir. John. Can I call you John? It, uh... It doesn’t work that way, sweetie. There are seven billion of us.”

“Nearly eight, now,” said John, cheerfully. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Nobody’s whole,” said Minerva. “We’re all just fragments of whole people, stumbling through the dream of our lives, trying not to get lost in the weeds of our own

growing bad habits as the world slowly crumbles around us. We grasp at love because it's hope. It's a fairytale. It's a piece of divinity. But it never lasts. Every single love breaks or is broken. There is no escape from that. So we grasp it all the harder, because we know how precious it is."

"Sex isn't love," said John.

"Indeed it is not!" said Mehdi. "Which is why it is preposterous to ban sexual immorality, since it obviously has *nothing to do with love!*"

"Sex builds love, sure," said John. "But it isn't love on its own. And it isn't whole without love."

Lucius said, "Look, we take what we can get, alright? Your dad doesn't exactly set our soulmates into our path."

"Of course he does," said John. "And yet, he loves to watch the odds play out. He always hides the soulmate behind a vital choice. A spiritual choice, a journey that the seeker must first undertake."

"And what's that?" said Minerva.

"It is different for each person. Most people never take it."

"But... how do you get to it?"

John smiled. "That's a good question, isn't it? But as I said, it's different for each person. Why did you think the shape of every good hero story is the same? It's to drill that lesson into you. Seek the true self. Break it

free of your bad habits and your failures, and stand up tall, the way you were made to. Give yourself the mercy of dignity, even if you do not think you deserve it. Meet yourself, and shake hands with your angel however you can. Become better. That about sums it up.”

“But how much soul-searching are we supposed to do?” said Nedry. “How—how fucking much does it take, to figure this shit out? Because this shit is horrible! Nothing is going right, and everything is falling apart, and no one is doing anything. The whole world fucking shits on us, from the moment we’re born, did you know that?”

“I do,” said John, and in his eyes there was infinite empathy.

“How can you ask this of us? How can you crush us like this?”

“My father is coming to end your pain,” said John, taking another sip of wine, which had spontaneously appeared in his empty wineglass, “for precisely that reason.”

“Why did He wait two fucking thousand years!?” Nedry asked. “What kind of *sick, twisted, fucked-up mindgame is that!?* He tells you he’s coming tomorrow, before the deaths of the guys fucking listening to him, and then he doesn’t come back for two fucking thousand years!?”

John said, “The myths distort many things, Nedry. I am sorry.”

“His bet,” said Matthew. “What did you have to gain?”

“I like you guys,” said John, as Mehdi lit his cigar. “You make good stuff. And you have nice languages. And teeth. Most places don’t have the pointy ones.”

This stunned them all slightly, and Matthew broke the silence. “You mean, you wanted to save our world because of what we *made!*?”

“You’re ingenious, do you know that?” said John. “You guys make all kinds of amazing stuff. I’m not going to list them, because that would be tedious, but suffice it to say that in terms of raw creativity you guys are second to none. Your science took a few thousand years to get off the ground, but I think I can safely say I had a crude hand in guiding it into existence much sooner than it would have without my influence.”

“That was more the Muslims,” said Robert, absent-mindedly.

John smiled and sipped his wine.

“And anyway, now that your science is starting to get genuinely dangerous, it’s time to end the experiment.”

“You both call this place an experiment,” said Matthew. “What do you mean by that?”

“Different initial conditions for each habitable world,” said John. “Sooner or later, intelligent species emerge. Your species just so happened to kill all the others. Oop-sie. Hence—”

“—Original sin,” said Mehdi, calmly. “Cain and Abel, if you will.”

“And whose fault was that?” said John.

“I do take credit for that one,” said Mehdi. “But only a little. I showed *one* highly evolved ape how to use a sharp rock tied to a stick, and it was game over from there. In my defense, she was starving. Poor thing.”

John said, “Yes, well. As you can see, it’s worked out great. Honestly, it’s a mercy killing. It’s unfortunate, though. I do love you all.”

“You don’t say that in a very convincing way,” said Matthew.

“I’ve heard better from one-night stands,” said Lucius.

“Well,” said John. “It’s the truth. My actions will always speak louder than my words.”

This made Minerva giggle. Then she looked up, sadly. “Were you... Were you really there?”

“When the wind was blowing in the oak trees, over the bench on your parents’ vacation property? Yes. I was listening.”

“Are you listening to everyone now?”

“Of course.”

“What is my mother doing?” Lucius asked.

“She’s sitting at home, by the phone, smoking a packet of Marlboros. She has a second one queued up on the

table nearby. I'm sorry."

"She's waiting for me," said Lucius.

"Yes. She's praying, too."

"You can hear prayers?"

"Of course."

"Don't they drive you insane?"

"Oh, you have no idea. Most people repeat them like mantras. You have tinnitus, so you know what it's like."

"I... I can imagine," said Lucius.

"Loudest world in the cosmos," said John, with a gentle smile. "But it's alright. You're only children. You weren't ready to raise yourselves. It's not your fault. But you do have to do better. You're fucked if you don't. But that advice doesn't do the part of the collective 'you' that happens to be gathered in this room any good, unfortunately. You have three options, as I see it. Option A: try to stop Mehdi, and accept destruction. Option B: Try to help Mehdi, and run a spectacular risk of destroying every living being in this universe in a single wave of cataclysmic horror, all for the very slight chance of saving your world from divine destruction but damning it still to whatever future the angels and demons choose to shape for it—and for every other world in the cosmos. Option C: Kick back with me, drink, smoke, and enjoy the final show. We are at the epicenter. The eye of the storm."

"What do you mean?" Lucius asked.

“Well,” said John, “when Father comes, the destruction of the surface will likely begin immediately. We are safe from it here, in the center. Once the surface is cleansed, and purified, new life will be seeded, and the process of evolution will begin again.”

“And countless angels will die,” said Mehdi.

“Demons all,” said John.

“A label for rebellious, organized labor.”

John laughed. “You’ve gotten good at this, over the years, brother.”

“Well. One must know how to communicate with these beasts, if one wants their message to stick. Learned that one, didn’t we, brother? Incidentally, John has neglected to mention one interesting facet of your situation. Each of you has a soul-mate, here in this room. Yes. Look at each other and think about that for a while.”

George said, “Who decides your soul-mate?”

“Your genetic code, of course,” said Mehdi. “So arbitrary chance, or the ineffable hand of the creator. Take your pick.”

George adjusted the glasses he no longer needed. “But... How is it that our soul-mates are all here?”

“My doing,” said Mehdi. “You see, I’ve made a little wager of my own.”

John nodded. “And so have I.”

Lucius said, “The big guy likes those, does He?”

Mehdi said, "They keep things interesting."

Robert said, "So, like, what will the world look like, if the demons win?" He took another hit of the vape pen and blew out a little gush of flames, apparently without pain. The flames lit his glassy, dilated, blood-shot eyes from below.

Mehdi said, "That, I'm afraid I can't tell you. You are asking me: 'what will the universe look like, when total free will is allowed?' It is not an answerable question."

"Father knows," said John. "He wishes to spare you from it."

"With an infinite hell," said Mehdi. "Frightening, isn't it? What could be worse?" He waggled his eyebrows. "You will simply have to ask yourselves: do you believe in slavery, or in liberation?"

"Why? Which will happen, if you win?" Matthew asked.

"A great abundance of both, I think. The need to conquer and control seems to be an engrained part of consciousness. Just as deeply engrained as the need to be free. The universe will know a kind of chaos, for a while. Eventually a new equilibrium will arise; temporarily stable."

"Without Providence," said Minerva.

"Without Providence. Physics and natural law, and nothing else at the helm. The chance to truly shape the universe."

“Will humanity live?” Minerva asked. “Will we have eternal life?”

“If I get my way, yes,” said Mehdi. “But I can make no guarantee. There are many angels, and they will all be free.”

“And demons,” said John. “I can tell you that either way this situation goes, my Father wins. Either He has the most interesting experiment of all time to observe from afar, or He keeps the universe He has so painstakingly created, and the order He has established throughout it. You are truly free to make any of the three choices I listed. Mehdi has failed to mention that the continued existence of your universe, after my father’s departure, is no guarantee. Every angel and demon in existence will have to continuously use a portion of their will to help prop up the universe, or it will collapse with horrible violence. If even one of them thinks that the universe has had its day and would be better off nonexistent, well. Goodbye universe. Goodbye trillions upon trillions upon trillions of living souls, both angels and flesh-beings like yourselves.”

He drank more wine. “It’s an impossible position you’re in. I don’t envy you. But know that whichever choice you make, I will be by your side to the end.”

“This is too much to think about,” said Robert, massaging his temples.

“Yes,” said Matthew. “I propose we sleep on it. If we have time to decide?”

“Option C, then,” said John. “You may choose it until you wish to decide between A and B. Or right to the end, if you want.”

Matthew said, “Say, does that mean *your* soul-mate is one of us?”

John blushed. “Yes. Mehdi has seen fit to put my soul-mate here as well.”

“Well, you don’t want them *out there*,” said Mehdi. “In all that destruction.”

John said nothing.

Matthew said, “Pass me that vape pen, will you please, Robert?”

Robert passed him the vape, and he breathed in deeply. With a gentle exhalation, he sent tendrils of vapor wafting towards John and Mehdi, and quite suddenly that vapor was a thick, congealing web, completely encasing them both from shoulders to feet.

“Sorry,” said Matthew. “I don’t trust either one of you, to be honest. I’ll sleep more soundly knowing you can’t move.”

Mehdi said, “Honestly, this can’t hold either one of us.”

“Well. For the sake of earning our trust, you’ll want to let it hold you.”

John managed to lie down even in the web cocoon. “It’s sort of comfortable. Could I have a pillow?”

Matthew tossed him a pillow.

“Thank you.”

Mehdi sighed and sat down patiently in his cocoon. “Very well then. I suppose, if you need this to feel safe, I can respect your boundaries.”

“Thank you.”

George pulled a set of cushions off one of the couches and flopped them down beside Mehdi, then laid himself down and put one arm around Mehdi’s cocoon.

Mehdi looked at him, eyes soft, surprised.

George blinked very slowly and gave a very small smile.

The humans slept in the bed all together, huddled for warmth, like children. The supernatural lust had evaporated, and now there was only the innocent, human need for closeness, warmth, protection.

Only Carol and Esmerelda now walked the halls of the House, alone.

Chapter 6

Alone in the House

The bathroom tile was easy enough to open, for Esmerelda. She knew how it had felt to open it before, when she had reached blindly for the nearness of Carol. One touch of her hand was enough, and the wall peeled open. The long and dripping hallway loomed beyond.

“Let’s get through this hallway quickly,” Carol said. “Get to the next chamber.”

“Yeah,” said Esmerelda. She felt a clammy chill that had little to do with the hallway’s damp atmosphere.

The first door opened at once into utter darkness, a limitless void containing only the horrible dollhouse dimensions of the House, laid bare, all its snarling branches and hideous stacks. Carol teetered on the precipice for a moment before Esmerelda hauled her back, then they both stood in the doorway as nether winds whispered warmly past them into the hall, and stared together at the House.

“Is this a bad idea?” Carol asked.

Esmerelda said, “He can shape it. We can too. We can bring a room to us.”

“Won’t that expose the others?”

“Maybe,” said Esmerelda. “But it’s our only way out.”

Carol looked back the way they had come, just in time to watch the hall behind them close and collapse into a solid wall. She said, “I think we’ve already been cut off. We won’t endanger the others now. Let’s do it. What kind of room do we want?”

“Let’s look,” said Esmerelda.

Carol pointed. “That one looks friendly enough.”

“Yes, and it’s well-connected. Let’s try.”

They held hands and stared at the distant room and the many chambers it was stacked among.

The room they stood in lurched, and began to move, drifting through the void towards the distant room. Standing in the doorway that movement was very noticeable, and the nether winds began to howl into the room as they flew faster.

“Nearly there!” Esmerelda said, clinging to Carol with both hands.

Carol held on tight. They could feel the room rushing up to meet them like a horrible wall, but neither of them dared to watch it zoom towards them. They stared at

each other instead, each being strong for the other.

Then, without a crash, their chamber and their chosen room collided, and merged.

The doorway led directly to a grassy hilltop cemetery overlooking a small country village.

“What era do you suppose this is?” Carol asked.

Minerva shrugged. “No clue.”

Carol said, “Smells like shit.”

“Probably middle ages, then?”

“Great. So if we bump into any ghosts, they’ll think we’re witches.”

Esmerelda said, “Probably, yeah. Or maybe they won’t see us, like the ghosts on the *Titanic*?”

“We can hope,” said Carol. “Come on.”

A haze of woodsmoke lingered above the rooftops, although it was difficult to tell if any given chimney was producing smoke. A light fog drifted above the muddy road. It seemed to be early in the morning.

“I wonder what time it really is?” Carol said.

Esmerelda shrugged. “I don’t think it matters. The sun feels nice.”

“If we were to build a rocketship, and try to fly to that sun, do you think it would be real?”

“Here? In this room? Maybe.”

“So, if we were to go over those hills, and find another city, would we be looking at it frozen in the same moment?”

“I don’t know,” said Esmerelda. “Honestly, I think sooner or later we’d come up against a door, or pass into another chamber.”

They walked down into the main street of the village and found wooden sidewalks at last. A tumbleweed bounced mournfully down the road, rolling past them. A two-story saloon stood waiting at the corner. Across the street was a Sheriff’s office, between a barber and a bookstore. Other shops were packed in close together, some of them sharing walls. Most of the structures were of wood, but a few of the older ones were brick or stone. A large brick bank stood to their left, just up the street, on the same side of the road as them. All the wooden sidewalks had wooden awnings connected to the architecture of the shops, and their shade sheltered display cases and clothing dummies and heavy-looking barrels. Some of the shops had wooden fencing and water troughs just outside the sidewalk, in the street, for people to tie horses to.

A tall, lean-jawed gentleman with spangle-spurred boots was seated on the fence just outside the saloon, watching the four hands of a golden pocketwatch. In his large leather-gloved hands the watch looked like a tiny lump of gold and diamond.

He turned his head at the sound of their footsteps and his grey eyes fixed them. “Excuse me, ladies. Might I

trouble you for the time?"

His accent was posh, faintly European, difficult to place. Despite the chill of the air, he was sweating.

Carol's instincts would have been going wild even if he were alive. She was doubly on her guard, knowing he was a ghost. She spotted the steely tips of his revolvers, under his velvet coat, noted that he had no horse and that the streets were empty, and saw the way he had positioned himself relative to the bank and to oncoming traffic. She clutched the knife in her hand openly and said, "We're not here."

He said, "Oh. I see. I quite understand. Well, when you are, will you give me the time?"

He looked at his pocketwatch. "Damn thing's still ticking, but can't seem to make sense of it. Says it ought to be two in the morning. Clearly it isn't. Sun's at high noon. Street's empty. Doesn't make sense."

Carol and Esmerelda exchanged a glance and kept walking. Carol steered them away from the bank and into the Sheriff's office. She was hoping to find something better than a knife.

The office was a squat rectangular stone chamber with two conjoined prison cells in one corner, a low built-in desk for a deputy to sit behind and rest his feet on, an iron stove, a post office desk, two bags of mail, and a handsome wardrobe whose handles were joined by an iron padlock.

A red-haired young deputy was asleep at the low counter, his legs crossed at the ankle, his socked feet on the counter-top.

“Not asleep,” said Carol, as she took her first step into the room and saw the pool of blood behind him on the floor. She turned towards the door. Through the window she could see the stranger still seated at his perch, staring at the Sheriff’s office.

Carol moved to the padlock and jammed the knife into the wooden handle of the wardrobe. It wouldn’t take much whittling to get the padlock off.

Esmerelda, meanwhile, ducked behind the counter and searched the deputy. She came to Carol’s side with a ring of keys. “Here. Keep an eye on him.”

Esmerelda started trying keys while Carol watched the man in black through the window. He was rubbing his chin now, watching the Sheriff’s office. It looked like he was steeling himself up for something.

“Got it,” said Esmerelda, as the padlock came undone. They swung the wardrobe’s doors open and revealed an array of glossy, well-oiled guns. There were four revolvers, two double-barreled shotguns, and two hunting rifles, along with boxes of ammunition, leather bandoliers, and holsters.

“Shall we?” Carol asked.

“Just the revolver, I think,” said Esmerelda.

“I want the shotgun and two revolvers. None of these

rooms should be long enough for us to need a rifle, and it'll just be extra weight."

"I'll bring a rifle just in case. That way we have one of each."

The bandoliers were already loaded with ammunition but they took the time to check that the guns were loaded also. Then, strapped with revolvers, shotgun, and rifle, they stepped back out into the street, which was still mostly empty.

Carol plucked the revolver from her right hip and held it with both hands, then calmly approached the man in black.

"Excuse me, sir."

"Yes?"

"Did you kill that deputy in there?"

"I—the deputy's—? Dead? Uh, n-no, I didn't, I had nothing to do with—"

Carol very calmly raised the revolver and took aim.

The man raised both hands. "Whoa! Whoa! I'm sorry! Ok, full reveal, I'm not a ghost. I'm a fellow traveller. Like yourselves."

Carol lowered the gun very slightly. "Go on?"

"I came from outside the House. Got here on my own terms. Long story."

"We've got time."

“No,” he said. “We really don’t.”

A carriage came racing around the corner and into the main thoroughfare, rushing towards the bank. The driver pulled his horses to a skidding stop and three men with shotguns hopped out of the wagon and attacked the bank.

The man in black hopped off the railing.

Carol said, “Don’t move!”

He froze. “Look, there are about to be a lot of guns going off—”

“—Yeah? One of ’em’s mine.”

“Let the ghosts do what they’re going to do. We need to get out of the way until the time is right. Then we can clean house, take the gold and the getaway carriage, and leave this chamber behind. D’you follow? Get into the Sheriff’s office. Those walls will stop a bullet.”

Carol glanced at Esmerelda and they both started walking. The man in black followed after, under the muzzle of Carol’s gun.

The robbers were making quick work of the bank’s reinforced door, using axes to attack the wood. Throughout the town heads were popping out of windows and doors were swinging open.

“Inside!” The man in black said.

They jumped into the Sheriff’s office and shut the door behind themselves, then crouched behind the stone wall

and peered through the window at the bank.

“Shouldn’t we stop them?” Carol asked.

“They’re just ghosts,” said the man in black. “They’ll be fine. This is how they died.”

At last the robbers breached the doors and flooded into the bank. Several people were stepping out their doors now, in nightgowns and bathrobes, cradling shot-guns and rifles and still blinking the sleep from their eyes. Several people encircled the bank, aiming their guns.

A barrage of bullets flurried from the bank, killing a few of the citizen soldiers, who returned fire. The brick walls of the bank were quickly turned to Swiss cheese from both directions, but most of the bullets made it through the windows. After a long, long roar of continuous gunfire, the last gun fired for the last time, and silence rang.

“Now,” said the man in black, bolting from the sheriff’s office. Carol and Esmerelda hastened after.

He led them straight into the bank, over to the corpses of the gunmen and the bank teller. He snatched up two large sacks of money and hefted them easily, then ran back to the carriage, tossed them inside, and mounted up behind the horses, who were both, remarkably, completely unharmed.

Carol and Esmerelda hopped up into the driver’s bench with the man in black.

“Right,” said Carol. “What’s your name?”

“Oswald. I was an early investor in Mehdi’s pursuit of the House.”

“In the nineteen twenties?” Carol asked.

“A little later along than that,” said Oswald. “Anyway, he stole my identity and all my money and fame, or tried to. The first time we came to the House, he let me wander off into a room by myself, never to be seen again.”

“I see,” said Carol. “And in all this time you haven’t found the way out, or learned how time works?”

“Oh, the pocketwatch thing. Yes, I’ve been trying to figure out how it’s all synchronized. Some rooms seem to run faster than others, compared to real time. Except when they choose to run more slowly, instead, just to baffle my record-keeping.”

“So you’re just wandering around, studying random parts of the House?”

“I would hardly call them ‘random’,” said Oswald. “I have learned my way around the House, over the eons, and my studies have taken me in many fruitful directions.”

“We found out Mehdi is the devil,” said Carol.

“Oh,” said Oswald. “Well, that would explain a great deal. Perhaps this is hell, after all.”

“What?” Carol remembered the lake of fire that the crusader had fallen into—and emerged from. She did not like the implications.

“Nothing,” said Oswald. “It’s just that I’ve been down here for a very, very long time. I would like to get back to the surface.”

“I’m afraid we don’t know the way,” said Carol.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Oswald. “We’re rich now. We can afford to take our time finding it out.”

He steered them out of the village and on up into the foothills, until they began to race towards a large stone archway that stood across the road.

The archway wiped the sky away as it passed over their heads, stripping bare a darkness full of stars. They were in another chamber. A dark forest crowded the road, and away in the distance, the lights of castle windows burned above the trees.

“Where are we now?” Esmerelda asked.

“Somewhere in Germany, seventeenth century, I think.”

“Why here?”

“Just passing through. They have a door to 1920s New York City. With this money we’ll be richer than God.”

Carol flinched at the name, but the world did not tremble when he said it. “Huh,” she said. “Whenever we said that before, horrible things would start to happen.”

“Around Mehdi?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

Chapter 7

The Next Morning

Morning found them all tangled in a pile, warm and content. They unentangled themselves with surprisingly little shame, got dressed, then checked on their prisoners.

John and Mehdi were right where they had left them. George was gone.

He emerged from the bathroom just before they could panic, drying his hair with a towel. “Oh, hey guys. What’s up?”

Mehdi’s eyes snapped open. “Oh. Right. The cocoon.”

Robert took a hit off his vape pen and breathed a jet of focused flame that singed away the webs and freed both Mehdi and John.

John got to his feet with a smile and held down his hand for his brother. Mehdi took his hand gratefully and got to his feet. John handed him his cane.

“Thank you. Now, we haven’t time to waste, so if you will all please follow me...”

“Wait,” said Robert. “We’ve figured out one way to do something like magic, but we need to be better armed. Can you give us weapons?”

Mehdi laughed. “You want godspawn and a fallen angel to create weapons for you? If you insist.”

“No,” said John. “Weapons will not be needed.”

“With all due respect,” said Robert, “I feel like I need one.”

“That’s why you were given the vape,” said John, calmly. “It will be enough.”

“The cartridge is low.”

“Is it?”

Robert looked at the cartridge and saw that the chamber was once again full. He gazed in wonder at John.

Mehdi rolled his eyes. “A simple replenishment. A mere reduplication of atoms and molecules. Trivial.”

“Energy from nothing,” said George. “Not trivial.”

Mehdi held out his hand and a sliver of lightning crackled above his palm, held in place, writhing in the grip of his will. He said, “Trivial.”

He closed his hand and the lightning died with a roll of thunder. “I disagree with John. You would be well advised to arm yourselves. Give me an item you have a

strong emotional attachment to, and I will transform it for you.”

George came forward and held out a small gold pen. Mehdi touched it, and it imploded into a twinkle of metal that exploded at once into a long, thin wand of solid gold, tipped with a deadly-looking diamond.

George raised a quizzical eyebrow. “A wand?”

Mehdi smiled. “Well, give it a wave and some will. See what happens.”

George pointed the wand at the couch Robert, Lucius, and Nedry were seated on. The couch trembled. George slowly cocked his head, moving the wand gently. The couch lifted a centimeter off the ground and seemed more than ready to rise higher. Lucius reached his arms across Nedry and Robert instinctively, pinning them both to the couch. George said, “I can... Feel it. Feel its weight. Its texture. Every part of it.”

Mehdi nodded. “Yes, that’s to be expected, with any manifestation of telekinesis.”

“Interesting,” George said, and he lowered the wand. He turned to John and held it out for him to take. “Will this cause me or my friends harm, if I bring it along?”

John did not take it. He said, “You will not need weapons.”

“I do not intend to use this as a weapon, only as a tool.”

John smiled. “You humans have been saying that from the beginning.”

George lowered his offering. He adjusted his glasses. By a certain twinkle in John’s eye, he could see that John, at least, had not been fooled by the lensless glasses.

He turned to the others. “What do you think?”

Robert said, “Dude, it’s a fucking magic wand.”

Nedry said, “From the Devil.”

Mehdi laughed. “From the beginning, all I have ever done is help you. Liberate you. Empower you. Yet even now, thanks only to the cruel fate of my reputation, I suffer under your lack of trust. When will you see that all I have ever wanted is to nurture what you truly are? To bring you to the full ripeness of your bloom? With that wand, you are a wizard—here in the House. Outside this place, it will not even exist. What harm can it do, in this place of dreams?”

“Immeasurable,” said John, quietly.

George raised his eyebrow at John. “You keep giving us these dire warnings, and these subtle hints, but you haven’t shared much useful information.”

“Neither has he,” said John.

“How so?”

“What is his plan, exactly? What parts do you all have to play in it?”

“You have to take the ride, to find out what happens

while you're on it," said Mehdi. "He knows I must unveil my plan piece by piece, or his father will see it in advance, and easily prevent it."

Minerva said, "I think He knows all the options, anyway."

"Precisely," said Mehdi. "And yet I have ensured that he cannot prevent against one without allowing all the others. I have carefully kept all my options equally open. With each step of my plan put into motion, that pool of options only widens. By the time I decide how to do what I wish to do, I will already have done it."

George scratched his head. "In that case, this wand is part of your plan."

"Indeed it is," said Mehdi. "So the only question that remains is: do you trust me?"

George stared at Mehdi for a long time. "I know that I shouldn't," he said, at last. "And yet..."

"No spell," said Mehdi. "That is only your heart speaking."

George looked at John. "Is he lying?"

"He is not," said John. George realized that John had a flawless poker face. It was impossible to read the expression in his eyes, and yet the fact that he had hidden his reaction so completely in perfect neutrality meant that he had been victim to a meaningful reaction.

George looked at Mehdi. He looked at John. He held up the wand.

“Alright,” he said. “I trust you.”

“Which one of us?” said John.

George said, “Both of you. You wouldn’t allow the wand to come along if it wasn’t part of *your* plan, too.”

“You must think me very devious, if you think that. It is a bad, dangerous choice, to bring the wand. That said, I won’t stop you, nor constrain your free will in any way. Know that if you do make the conscious choice to bring that wand along, bad consequences are very likely to follow. You have been warned. The choice is yours.”

Nedry said, “Don’t take it, George.”

Matthew stood, leaning heavily on the cane Mehdi had so generously provided for him. The stung leg still ached horribly. He hobbled neared to John, and said, very quietly, “I will not take a weapon. However, if you saw fit, you might, perhaps, provide me with a gift of your own. Something that cannot be dangerous, or bring terrible consequences down upon our heads. Something that may prove useful for your side of the equation.”

John smiled. “I have only the one gift to give, I’m afraid.” And he hugged Matthew, and in the hug there was a moment of total serenity and the certain knowledge that he was loved by a boundless ocean of love that nevertheless saw him as diseased and corrupt. There was something else in the hug, too—an extra squeeze, a certain gentle muskiness to John’s beard oil, a strange look briefly exchanged. Matthew pulled away from the hug feeling as though he had finally found a piece of himself

that had been missing all his life.

Softly, he said, “Thank you.”

John smiled. “Thank *you*.”

Matthew looked at the others. “He’s really a very good hugger. I would recommend taking the hug, and not whatever the Devil happens to be offering. We are in the place of our ancestral mistake, after all—here in Eden. It would be a shame to repeat the same mistake in the same place.”

“You’re on his side, then?” said Robert.

“I.. I don’t trust Mehdi,” said Matthew. “That’s all I know. Sorry Mehdi.”

Mehdi shook his head sadly. “It’s quite alright, Matthew. You’re well within your rights to mistrust me, if that is what you want to do.”

Lucius said, “I’ll go for the hug.”

Without further ado, he jumped to his feet and gave John a bear hug. John didn’t let go, and as soon as his feet were on the ground again he picked Lucius up and returned the favor. Lucius stepped away from the hug a healed soul.

Nedry and Robert and Minerva all looked at each other.

Minerva said, “Hug.”

She took her hug, and John whispered in her ear, “Thank you.”

“Don’t send us to hell. Don’t let us go there. Do whatever you can.”

“I am already doing that.”

Robert said, “Well, I want to see what Mehdi can do with this.” He handed Mehdi his vape.

Mehdi said, “Ah, yes. The vape. Let’s see...”

He handed it back to Robert as a long-stemmed pipe of ivory and jade.

Robert said, “Wow.”

Mehdi said, “You will not need to light it. Its function remains largely unchanged.”

Robert puffed in smoke and breathed out flickering tongues of flame that twisted away into rose petals and tumbled to the ground. “Will it run out?”

“Never again.”

“Neat.”

Nedry had considered long. At last, he said, “Can I have both? The hug and the tool?”

John laughed. “I cannot begrudge you a hug. It is freely given.”

“Then I’ll take both, please.” Nedry plucked a large, brightly-colored coin from his pocket and held it out to Mehdi.

Mehdi smiled at the symbol for Alcoholics Anonymous. “A one-year coin? Yet you drank when I met

you.”

“I fell off the wagon,” said Nedry. “But someday I’m going to get back onto it. If there’s still a world for it to roll on.”

“There will be,” said Mehdi. “But only if we succeed.”

He handed the coin, now of solid gold, back to Nedry. Nedry took it and turned it in his hands, lost in thought.

Still a little dazed, he turned to John and said, “Can I still get a hug?”

“Of course.”

John embraced Nedry and for a time he lost himself in perfect peace and the knowledge of love beyond time and space. At last he pulled away, smiling, holding out the gold coin.

“Take it,” he said.

John laughed, and gladly took the coin. “A bold move, Nedry.”

Nedry shrugged. “Hey, the way I figure, it’s probably part of his plan.”

Mehdi laughed. “You give me a little more credit than I am due, I think.”

John said, “Or does he?”

With a smile, he held the coin in both hands and pulled. Each hand came away with a whole coin. He placed one firmly in Nedry’s palm, and closed his fingers

over it. Nedry looked up, confused. “But... Why?”

John winked. “It’s a surprise for later.”

“What does the coin do?” Nedry asked Mehdi.

“It is a magic token,” said Mehdi. “The same as the wand and the pipe. Each of you will manifest your will slightly differently, in this space. Strictly speaking, you already had the powers they will seem to have given you; they simply allow you to focus them differently.”

“Ok,” said Nedry. “Thanks, I guess. That’s nice and vague.”

Mehdi shrugged. “In this space, will is all there is.”

Chapter 8

Roaring

The castle had appeared quite suddenly, pouncing out from the passing treeline like some great predator. Oswald tugged the reins and the horses turned towards it, and the carriage trundled up the drive.

The castle had a somewhat classical design, with many squared towers and crenelations. As they rolled through the archway of the castle's outer wall, they saw several men in bold yellow coats and gleaming steel breastplates, all wearing tricorner hats and bearing long sabers. They paced around the front of the castle, looking stern and commanding in their spurred boots. Oswald paid them no heed, and drove the carriage straight for an archway leading into the castle gardens.

The moment they passed through the archway they were somewhere else: a busy paved street full of honking antique cars and dapper pedestrians. It was midday. Many of the buildings had large billboards lined all around with lightbulbs. The cars moved slowly enough

that many of the pedestrians felt comfortable walking in the street. Though the street was very wide, the majority of its traffic was pedestrian. A few very large busses crawled through the traffic at a leisurely pace.

Their carriage stood out in stark contrast to the rest of the city, and yet none of the pedestrians passing by seemed to take any notice of them.

“Are the cars ghosts too?” Carol asked.

Oswald shook his head. “Just memories. Don’t let them run you over, though.”

“Right, sure,” said Carol. “And are all these people ghosts? How are so many of them trapped here?”

“Most of these are memories too,” said Oswald. “A few of them might be ghosts trapped here. This was a busy street, so many of these people probably walked it frequently. It remembers them, as it is remembered by them.”

He checked his golden pocketwatch. “Ah. Yes, interesting. Time is progressing at its normal rate, in this chamber, as it usually does.”

“Sometimes it doesn’t?”

“Sometimes it doesn’t. I have a theory about that. Passing angels and wandering ghosts.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I think when a chamber is invaded by entities that aren’t supposed to be part of it, time begins to move

more slowly inside it. Especially if those passing through are confused and lost.”

“So from an outside reference point, more time will have passed?”

“Precisely.”

“Well wait a minute, aren’t we wandering souls who aren’t supposed to be here?”

“Indeed you are! But you, like me, are flesh-bound still. The House hardly notices us at all. We bring our own time with us, from the outside.”

“Right,” said Carol. “Sure, why not?”

“Ah, here we are. Wells Fargo bank. Utter monsters, of course, but they’ll do for our purposes. Will you help me carry these bags inside?”

“I guess?” Carol looked at Esmerelda. “Come with us?”

“Sure thing.”

“Do we need to leave the guns?”

“They won’t notice them even if we draw and point,” said Oswald.

“What about when the bullets pass through their heads?”

“Oh, the House will notice, even if they don’t. They’ll die just like living beings.”

“And be dead forever?”

“They are already dead forever,” said Oswald. “They have been dead far longer than they were ever alive. But if your concern is for the immortality of a disembodied soul, I can assure you that as soon as we leave this chamber, they will forget that we were ever here. Anything ‘dead’ will come back to ‘life’ and start its little cycle all over again.”

“How horrible.”

“Is it? I find it kind of tragically beautiful,” said Oswald. “Oh well. To each their own sense of aesthetics, I suppose.”

He hopped down from the carriage, opened the door, and took a sack of money. Carol followed, Esmerelda tagging along behind.

The interior of the bank was cool despite the heat in the streets. A long row of tellers waited behind a wooden counter, and several people were lined up to wait. Oswald walked right past them to the front of the line and Carol followed, avoiding eye contact with the people they were cutting ahead of.

Oswald reached the counter. The teller, a grey old man with large spectacles, said, “Oh. You’re not the next in line, are you?”

“Of course I am!” said Oswald. “I’ve got a very large deposit to make, and I can’t waste any time.”

“Do you have your account information?”

“I will need to set up an account,” said Oswald.

“One of our representatives will be with you shortly. Will you please wait in the office?”

“Of course.”

Oswald led the way through a door and into a comfortably appointed office complete with glittering sidebar. Oswald dumped his sack of money in one of the two chairs before the desk and immediately moved to the sidebar. “I’m making myself a Gin and Tonic, do you want anything?”

“No, thanks,” said Carol.

“Vodka, straight up,” said Esmerelda.

Oswald chuckled. “A woman after my own heart.”

He turned back to them, holding two glasses. He handed one to Esmerelda. “Cheers.”

They clinked glasses and drank.

Oswald sucked his teeth. “Not bad.”

Esmerelda downed her vodka like a shot, then sat down.

Carol dumped her sack of money and went to the sidebar and poured two glasses of water from a large decanter, then gave one to Esmerelda.

“Thanks.”

Then they sat and waited.

Oswald checked his pocketwatch. “Oh dear.”

“What is it?” Carol asked.

Oswald held it out for her to inspect. The second hand was racing around the face.

“What does it mean?” Carol asked.

“It means that the chamber has slowed drastically. A large presence has just entered it.”

“Oh,” said Carol. “Should we... Continue to wait?”

“Yes. They will have no reason to come here,” said Oswald. “This is probably a safe place to hide.”

“Hide?”

“Well,” said Oswald. “One never knows. Often best to hide. Some of these wanderers can be quite dangerous, after all.”

They waited in silence for a long time. Oswald stared at his pocketwatch, dark brows beetled in concern.

After a time, he said, “It’s coming closer.”

“Shh,” said Carol, carefully pulling her pistols from their holsters.

Oswald stared at his pocketwatch. The minutes ticked past.

Gradually the ticking of the clock began to slow, and Oswald visibly relaxed. “Alright. It seems to be passing on.”

Someone knocked softly on the door of the office, then turned the handle and stepped in without further ado.

The man was tall, trim, dressed in a pin-striped pantsuit and vest with a paisley tie. His broad shoulders and thick chest filled out his suit very nicely. It was difficult to guess his age; he was bald, smooth-shaven, smooth-faced and tan. His eyes were dark, shy, and had a certain languid serenity. He smiled easily. "Sorry to interrupt. I'm the manager. I understand you wanted to open an account?"

"Yes," said Oswald, as he and Esmerelda and Carol got to their feet.

"I see you've offered yourselves drinks, that's good. I would have done so had I been here. Won't you take a seat?"

"Thanks," said Oswald.

"I'm afraid one of you will have to stand," said the manager, moving around to the back of his desk. He sat down.

Carol heaved the sacks of cash up onto the desk and the manager grimaced. He said, "I see. This is a substantial deposit. Has it been counted?"

"No," said Oswald.

"Not a problem," said the manager. He pressed a button on his intercom and said, "Send me an intern or a teller who isn't busy, please."

Then he steeped his fingers and waited, smiling pleasantly.

Oswald said, “You wouldn’t happen to be a homosexual, would you?”

The man flushed deeply, apparently taken completely off guard. He said, “I... I don’t know what you mean by the question.”

“You’re very attractive,” said Oswald. “I’d like to think I’m fairly attractive too. I think we should get together sometime. What do you say?”

“It’s... It’s against company policy, to fraternize so closely with clients of the bank, sir. I do apologize.”

“Oh, don’t worry. This will be my only transaction. The money will sit for a hundred years, gaining interest.”

Another knock sounded at the door.

Relieved, the manager jumped up to answer it. Carol and Esmerelda exchanged a glance.

A youngish male intern entered the room and the manager directed him to his task. He sat to count the stacks of money. The manager turned to Oswald. “Right. There is a matter of some paperwork, which I will... Leave you to. I will be back soon.”

He drew a stack of paperwork out of his desk drawer and pushed it across the desk towards Oswald, laying a black and gold fountain pen on top of it. Then he left the room.

Oswald sighed. “Sometimes, when they’re really pretty, you just have to shoot your shot, you know?”

The intern smiled nervously and got more focused on counting his money.

Oswald leafed through the paperwork. “Oh, hell’s torments have no end of creativity.”

He started filling out the paperwork and Carol said, “Why... Why go to all this trouble? What are you trying to do?”

Oswald said, “In about fifteen minutes, we’re going to walk out of here and go to twenty-twenties New York, come back to this bank, and get bank cards. Then we’re going to use the money to buy something very important to me.”

“Wait, the rooms can affect each other like that?” Carol asked.

“Oh yes, they’re a bit like interconnected dreams. Some of them, anyway. They’re not all causally connected. And some of them can’t be altered no matter what you do; they’re stubborn.”

“I see,” said Carol. “So it’s a bit like time travel?”

“A bit,” said Oswald. “Except it doesn’t affect the real world, only the memory of the real world. Sometimes a record or two might transform in the real world during the process, or someone’s memory will alter, but in general the actual causality of the real world can’t be affected from this side of things. I think.”

“Like the Berenstain bears...” said Esmerelda.

Oswald nodded. “Precisely. That one was my fault,

I bumped the scribe as he was writing the name down and the 'e' came out as an 'a'. Whole family line got the wrong name because of me. In my defense, I was running from the Ripper."

"Jack the Ripper?"

"Well, that wasn't his real name, but yes. Same man. Ghost, really."

"Oh," said Carol. "He's still wandering around?"

"No, but I happened upon one of the scenes of his murders and he didn't take kindly to that. I'm sure his real soul is in the fire, but his memory could wield a sword well enough to be dangerous."

"Right," said Carol. "How's that paperwork coming?"

"Nearly finished... Just want to make sure I didn't make any mistakes..."

He looked the paperwork over thoroughly. "Done."

The intern said, "Finished! Two million dollars exactly."

"How convenient," said Oswald. "Would you be so kind as to fetch your manager for me, so that we can be on our way?"

The intern nodded and left. A moment later, the manager returned. "All done?"

He accepted the paperwork and looked it over with a literal magnifying glass. Satisfied, he said, "Well, that's all settled, then. This will now go into our vault. A

pleasure doing business with you, Mister Gowry.”

“It could be even more pleasure, doing play with me,” said Oswald, shaking the manager’s hand with a wink.

The manager laughed nervously and said, “Thank you again, Mister Gowry. Good day, good day!”

Oswald took the hint. He stood up, bowed grandly, and left, tailed by Carol and Esmerelda.

“This way,” he said, leading the way out of the bank as he plucked his pocketwatch from his waistcoat pocket and glanced at the time. He frowned. “Actually,” he said, swiveling on his heel to face the back of the bank, “Let’s go out the back way.”

They walked to what appeared to be a solid wall. Oswald said, “Turn around, please.”

Carol and Esmerelda turned around to face the doors of the bank, confused. Oswald turned around with them, taking a deep breath.

“What are you doing?” Carol asked.

“Things in here don’t like to change while you’re looking at them.”

“Oh,” said Carol.

“Yes. I’m trying very hard to imagine the feeling of a door behind my back. Sometimes it works.”

“It does?”

“Oh yes. This place is shaped more or less entirely by human expectation, after all. Like any other dream.”

“I see.”

Carol had a curious sensation that there was a door behind her back. She knew there wasn't one.

“Ah, that's done it, I think,” said Oswald. “The trick is to trick yourself until you're thoroughly tricked. Then you just continue believing because it's right in front of you. Much easier.”

He turned around and grasped the handle of the door which certainly had not been there a moment ago, turned the knob, and pushed inward.

“Come along,” he said. Carol and Esmerelda hastened after him, and stepped through the doorway and into a gloomy interior room where soft jazz hung thick on the hazy atmosphere. Small round tables filled the little room, and at these tables many young people sat smoking and drinking and watching the band on the stage. The young men were all in suits, and the women were all in simple but elegant dresses, and flashing with bangles and excessively long necklaces. Many of the women also wore round little hats of an astonishing variety, and their makeup was simple but bold: red lips, pale faces, thick mascara. A bar wrapped around the inner corner of the L-shaped room, and behind it two aproned bartenders in their shirtsleeves were taking orders and making drinks at a breakneck pace.

“What is this, a speakeasy?” Carol asked.

Oswald said, "Precisely. This way."

He led the way through the establishment, to a set of stairs leading up to a door. A well-dressed bouncer opened the door for them, and they followed the stairs up through a dark tunnel and up through a trapdoor, and at last onto a quiet, lamplit street.

"New York, I take it?" Carol asked.

"New York," said Oswald. "Not quite sure which neighborhood we've ended up in, however... As you can see, we're not quite in the modern era just yet. But at least we've landed in the right location."

"Can we get to twenty-twenties New York from here?" Esmereld asked.

"I'm not sure," said Oswald. "We'll have to look around, and search for Doors."

"Doors?" Carol asked.

"House Doors. You know. To other chambers of the House. A lot of the doors around here will just lead to other parts of this particular chamber. It seems to be a large chamber, a large portion of this street is completely included. I can tell that much just by sniffing the air. Something horrible happened here, no doubt."

"Uh..." said Carol.

"What?" said Oswald.

"Do we want to wait around to find out what?"

“No,” said Oswald. “No, we do not. Let’s start searching. I have a good feeling about that building there...”

“And that’s it? You just go around checking random doors, following your hunches?”

“My hunches are generally very good,” said Oswald. “They’ve been well trained.”

He opened the door of the building and looked inside. Then he said: “Oh dear.”

Chapter 9

Breakfast

Mehdi led Minerva, Matthew, Lucius, Nedry, Robert, and John through the halls of the House, passing through three chambers before reaching, at last, a luminous space. Darkness hung the space for walls, and stars glittered in it. The floor was a continuous rippling of prismatic lights, rainbow waves that pulsed easily together, thinner than glass. Through this ephemeral floor, they could all see the earth in all her beauty, wreathed in a shimmering aurora and a few burgeoning storms. They were somewhere over the sea.

Two astronauts were seated at the end of a shimmering table, sipping absinthe from fluted glasses with long plastic straws. They needed the straws, it was the only way to get the absinthe to their mouths without spilling it all over the broken visors of their space suits. Each had cracked through and was missing large enough pieces for the tip of a plastic straw. The men seemed to take no notice of Mehdi's party as they entered the room.

There were no other doors in the chamber.

Mehdi stood in the doorway, turned to the others, and smiled, gesturing. “Please. After you.”

George went first, when no one else would. He stepped boldly across the threshold and laughed as his first footstep sent him spinning off towards the stars. “I’m weightless!”

“Yes, well, we’re all in free-fall,” said Mehdi. “I suppose you’ll have to use your wand to get down.”

“No!” John shouted. “Don’t try to manipulate gravity! It’s a very delicate system!”

Mehdi stepped into the room, smiling to himself, and seated himself at the table.

Getting further away now, George said, “Mehdi?”

Then he looked up, and saw the vessel, and he gasped. “Mehdi!”

Mehdi said, “Yes, yes. It’s quite a sight, isn’t it?”

A long, thin cylinder of gleaming metal hung in a slightly higher orbit. It had six square fins and a distinctly segmented body with small windows and Soviet markings. A fine mist of glinting ice orbited the cylinder in gentle rotations.

One of the cosmonauts pointed at the mist and in a thick Russian accent he said, “Our last breaths.”

Then he nodded, raised his glass as though in a toast, and sipped the last of his absinthe.

Mehdi said, “Do come down, George.”

George had drawn his wand.

Robert put his lips to his pipe and breathed in hard. It was like kissing Death. He breathed out a cloud of silk that wove itself into a rope, following the direction of his pointing finger, and grew towards George. George pointed his wand and the end of the rope came to his hand, and he caught it.

From the edge of the doorway, Robert grabbed the rope in both hands, gripping his pipe in his teeth, and hauled hard. Nedry and Lucius helped, and George soon came sailing back to them. From the inside of the doorway, Robert said, “Any chance we can go somewhere with gravity?”

Mehdi said, “No. Come on, now. Make do.”

George flicked his wand and the rope spooled out and tied one end of itself to the table, then wound itself around everyone’s waist and tied them all together.

“Ready?” George asked.

“What? What the hell, no! If we get momentum, our combined weight is going to cut somebody in half! We need an arrangement where we can move independently down the lifeline.”

George nodded, adjusted his glasses, and flicked his wand. The rope burst and reformed itself, binding each of them to the table by their own individual rope.

Robert kissed Death again and breathed out the vapor of his smoldered life force and smiled. “Dope.”

Then he twisted the airborne smoke, stirring it with a finger, and as it condensed it grew hands and arms—three of each—and a body connecting them. It sprouted a pair of eyes and something resembling a nose and mouth, then screamed the first cry of its existence and leapt instinctively into action. It grabbed onto Robert’s rope and hung there by its hands, one hand on his harness, the other two on the guide rope, and with extraordinary strength it began to pull hand over hand, hauling Robert closer to the table. He looked over his shoulder with a mischievous grin and said, “Do you want one?”

“You can’t just go creating *life* like that!” Matthew shouted. “Are you insane? What are you going to do with it once this task is complete?”

“It’ll dissolve, I think,” said Robert.

Matthew started hauling himself towards the table, which turned out to be surprisingly easy. “You’re just going to create it only to let it die?”

“It’s got like, six neurons, my dude,” said Robert. “Meat robot.”

Matthew, drifting weightlessly towards the table, looked over his shoulder at John. “Back me up here.”

John gave a sharp tug on his rope and yanked himself towards the table, quickly catching up to Matthew, who had given himself a more conservative initial yank. To

Robert, John said, “Matthew is right. There are consequences, to the creation of life. If that creature decides not to dissolve when you are done with it, it may escape into the House.”

Robert had reached the table. He waved a hand, swatting the little creature, which burst at once into smoke. Then he sat down at the table beside Mehdi.

John, Matthew, Carol, and Lucius soon caught up.

Lucius reached across the table towards the cosmonauts, who looked at him stoically. He said, “Hi, I’m Lucius. You boys are cosmonauts, then, huh? Mind telling us your story?”

One of the cosmonauts shook Lucius’s hand. Seeing this, the other put down his drink and followed suit. The first cosmonaut said, “No.”

“No you don’t mind? Or no, you don’t want to tell it.”

“Second one.”

“Why not?”

“Bad English.”

“Oh,” said Lucius. “I see.”

He looked to Mehdi. “Do you know what happened here?”

“The crew compartment depressurized due to an equipment malfunction. The crew of the Soyuz suffocated. Two of the three crew-members are here; the

third, I presume, did not leave an echo. These two have clung to existence here, in their sublime moment.”

“When they sat at a table made out of an acid trip and drank absinthe with swirly straws?” Lucius asked.

“No,” said Mehdi. “They were looking through the windows of the spaceship. Observing the earth. A sublime moment like that can create a powerful impression. They probably relived their deaths here many times, and over time the good parts of the memory began to outweigh the bad. Then they began to be elaborated upon. Some ghosts can do that.”

“Are they really ghosts?” George asked.

“Yes,” said Mehdi. “Although, as I’ve said, their souls are, of course, burning in hell. Only a fragment of their essence is replicated here, an echo—but a real one. In this case, a pair of particularly resilient ones, it would seem.”

“What happened to breakfast?” Robert asked.

“Absinthe will do me,” said Carol, taking the bottle. The cosmonauts both looked at her a little coldly, but said nothing. She poured herself a glass.

Mehdi laughed. “Breakfast is on its way. I hope you like pizza?”

As if on cue, a doorbell rang somewhere in the universe, and Mehdi stood up. “If you’ll excuse me.”

He walked to the door they had entered by, which still hung in empty space. He unlocked it methodically

with a large key, then opened it onto a sunny suburban street and a nonplussed pizza-delivery man in a black hoodie, a mustache, and a backwards flat-brimmed hat with the stickers still on it. He stood there for a moment, holding the insulated sack in one hand, gaping at the room beyond Mehdi.

Mehdi said calmly, “Yes, thanks, and here’s your tip.”

And he reached across and shoved two thousand dollars in cash into the man’s hand, took the pizza and the insulated bag it was in, and let the door slam in the pizza delivery man’s face.

Then he walked back to the table, pulled the pizza out of the bag, and revealed the toppings. “Pepperoni stuffed-crust deep cheese with extra marinara, black olives, and sausage.”

Meekly, Robert said, “Do you have a gluten-free option?”

“I do!” said Mehdi, procuring a second pizza in a much smaller box. He placed it before Robert. “Unfortunately, they only had it in a personal size.”

“Thanks,” said Robert.

Mehdi said, “Eat up. Afterwards, we need to go collect our bombs.”

They entered the bunker casually. It was strange to walk through the passing soldiers, to peer through the windows into the different control rooms, to see so many people devoted to the hidden preparation of the terrible

weapon.

Mehdi said, “I should mention,” and he lightly touched a passing soldier on the head, causing him to fly violently into a nearby wall, “These ghosts will need to be destroyed.”

“What!?! No!” said Esmerelda.

“They’re just memories, right?” said George, adjusting his glasses.

The other soldiers were coming to the aid of their fallen companion. Mehdi stepped aside to allow them to huddle around the injured man, then he flicked his hand downwards and all three of the man’s attendants smote their heads against the ground. There was more blood than any of them expected.

The other soldiers were shouting at each other now, drawing weapons. There was no doubting that they could see the invaders.

“I can’t stop bullets,” said Mehdi, casually, and George lunged forward, swinging his wand. Every man’s gun became a serpent, and struck.

The soldiers gradually collapsed, and the snakes slithered frantically on to other victims. Soon even the technicians were running, screaming, climbing onto furniture.

“This is horrible!” Minerva shouted. “They’re screaming! Can’t you tell they feel it!?”

“They will return, when we have done what we need to do,” said Mehdi.

“To suffer this again,” said John.

Robert breathed in deeply and exhaled a wave that rippled silently through the room. Where it passed, serpents crumbled to ash, and living ghosts collapsed painlessly.

“Right,” said Mehdi. “Should have led with that, probably. Oh well.”

He reached out his hands, and the many consoles all throughout the bunker came to life. Switches switched and dials turned and keys twisted and a thunderous roar began to fill the air even as a whining siren blared and red lights began to revolve in the ceiling.

“You’re just *launching* it!?” Lucius shouted.

Mehdi said nothing. The ground trembled and the siren wailed and the roar rose and changed and shifted and slowly trailed away, taking the rumble in the earth with it. Only then did Mehdi lower his arms, and turn, and say, “It is done.”

He smiled at John, who rolled his eyes.

“Only it isn’t,” said Mehdi, skipping neatly over a fallen soldier to head back to the doors of the bunker. “That was option A. We still need option 1 and option alpha.”

“What about option 2?” George asked.

Mehdi smiled. “As option 1 progresses, option 2 will emerge, and the tree will continue to branch.”

“But always relying on nuclear weaponry?”

“Oh, no,” said Mehdi. “Yes, it *is* necessary to have a nuclear-level blast in the core, but the delivery options matter more than the source of the energy itself.”

“So you’re trying to take every option at once?”

“Something like that,” said Mehdi, flicking a curious set of dice into the air. They landed in his palm, and he smiled to himself, turned left, tore a hole in the wall of the bunker, and stepped boldly forward into total darkness. A door congealed around the hole with some difficulty, forming itself already closed.

The others looked at each other, confused.

Mehdi returned to the room via the main bunker doors. “What are we all standing around waiting for? Come along.”

He ushered them back into the hallway, turned them left, through a door into a jungle, then through that jungle to a pyramid at its heart. He climbed the steps, ignoring the Mayan warriors all around him, not minding the flow of blood beneath his feet. The others could not stomach the climb. They watched him ascend without the aid of his cane.

Lucius said, “I’m beginning to like this less and less.”

“Me too,” said Nedry.

Robert said, “Dude, I’ve been lost since like, two days ago. I’m just along for the ride at this point. Not like anything we do can make a difference.”

John said, "Never think that. Every human life changes the world. It cannot help but change the world. You cannot be in the world without affecting it. Inaction is a choice. Be at least aware when you are making it."

Minerva said, "Has anybody noticed he doesn't seem to need his cane anymore?"

Matthew said, "It's the final days of a long plan. Is it any wonder he's had a second wind?"

George said, "Why did he bring us here?"

He adjusted his glasses and looked at the others, who were looking at him as though surprised to hear him speak.

He said, "What can a Mayan priest do for him, I wonder?"

John said, "He has been worshipped many times, over the ages."

George said, "Why does that matter? What can worship do for him?"

"It's about angels and souls," said John. "It's complicated. Souls and their angels always fall together."

"But what does that *mean*?" George asked.

"Every time a soul is born, an angel is born to guard it. To guide it. To provide for it. To negotiate on its behalf. It used to be that most souls reincarnated, rather than falling. Now everyone just... Falls. At least, on this planet. You should see the stories that grow on some

of the worlds where the system is intact. A soul can become a truly beautiful thing, over many lifetimes with the same angel.”

“What must we look like to you?” Matthew asked, very quietly.

John said, “Small. Broken. But even though you are in pieces, some of those pieces still hold beauty.”

This caused them all to fall silent for a moment or two.

John cleared his throat. “Mehdi has reached the top.”

He had. He stood now before the altar and the high priest. His back was to the party, so they could not see his hands, but it seemed to them that he took something offered to him by the priest.

The warriors all around cheered as Mehdi turned and casually descended the steps of the temple. A small smudge of red now stained one corner of the breast pocket of his white suit-jacket. Behind him, atop the pyramid, the high priest pumped his arms in the air and shouted out a primal cry, and the sacrifice gurgled his last breath.

Mehdi was swifter in his descent than he had been in his ascension, and he soon reached the party. He smiled easily. “Come along.”

He led them to a door standing between two trees. As they passed through it they stepped into

Chapter 10

First Pinch Point

Chapter 11

Second Plot Point/Midpoint

Chapter 12

Second Pinch Point

Chapter 13

Third Plot Point

Chapter 14

Climax

Chapter 15

Resolution

