

Chapter 1: The Shut-In

Holden saved another world and felt absolutely nothing.

Immaculately animated cutscenes played out before his vacant stare, affirming his victory over evil. Credits crawled up his computer screen to the swell of triumphant music. Twenty pages scrolled by—writers, programmers, and countless other artists who poured their collective heart into the epic game—and he didn't register a single name.

The magic was gone.

Holden was alive, but he did a poor job of living. It wasn't a rare problem. Life was hard and most people sucked at it. His case was uniquely desperate, however.

He sat there, glazed by the dim glow of his desktop, starved for food and sunlight even though sun was easy to come by in Pasadena. Especially in September. Its beams even crept into his game room through the shuttered blinds, eager to meet him halfway, struggling to remind him there was another world out there offering vitamin D if nothing else.

But he didn't give a shit about vitamin D, the sun, or the world it lit. He couldn't remember the last time he opened the blinds. He had been outside his comfortable Craftsman home for only thirteen minutes since August of last year, the sum total of which had been spent emptying his garbage, alone, at three in the morning. It was an inconvenient necessity, like most of life outside text and code.

Inconvenience demanded its due though. The hunger that tugged him for the past two hours finally gripped him by the guts, pulled him to his feet, and marched him downstairs.

There was nobody in the living room when he walked into the kitchen. Not that he saw. And the house was locked, so why would he bother to look? But when he shut the fridge and turned around, a man in a suit stood waiting.

"Hello, Holden," the stranger said in a pleasant baritone.

Holden dropped his slice of pizza, staggered back, and then bolted for the stairs. His socks slipped on the kitchen tile and worn hardwood of the stairs, causing him to half-trip and bash his knee. The pain didn't slow him, didn't even register in the face of panic. He scrambled up the steps on all fours, sprinted down the short upstairs hallway, and shoulder-checked his bedroom door open.

What do I do? What am I doing? Gun. Get the gun. He lunged for his nightstand. Boyd's old Glock was in the bottom drawer. He snatched it up, fumbling with the safety, and hit the magazine release instead. The mag dropped to the hard, compacted carpet, losing three bullets. *Shit!*

The stairs creaked slowly, as if each step was measured for menace. Holden plugged the mag back into the gun's frame, released the safety, and aimed the barrel through his bedroom doorway from the floor. It didn't occur to him to stand. Fear bleached every lesson from the firing range out of his mind. The man strolled into sight, features shaded save for his eyes, which gleamed despite the dimness.

"S-stop away any closer!" Holden stammered.

His visitor continued to approach. He had pale skin and dark, feathered hair that fell across his brow in jagged tufts. As the light caught his face in full, Holden realized that his eyes

seemed to glow because they were inverted. Pitch sclerae and bone-white pupils, separated by a thin silver ring that looked like metal. His handsome lips were stretched into a rictus, revealing too-perfect teeth. It made Holden quiver to his marrow.

“I can-will shoot!”

“I don’t think you’re going to hit me,” the man observed apologetically.

It was true. Holden’s hands shook so violently that he could barely keep the barrel aimed through the doorframe, even though it was less than five feet away. The man stood roughly five-foot-ten, with a slender build. *Easy target. And he’s nearly half a foot shorter and about fifty pounds lighter than me. I could take him in a fair fight.* But his body urged caution. It cowered, like wolves cowered from fire and unarmed people cowered from wolves. He forced himself to breathe and picked each word carefully.

“Do you really want to take that risk?”

The man smiled again.

“I’m not a gambler, Holden. I know the language of decks and dice. The real question is: what will you do if you manage to kill me? You have no alibi. No witnesses. No friends to defend your character. There are also no signs of forced entry below.”

Holden swallowed. The man took another step into his room and continued to speak. His voice was unnaturally smooth, like every trace of an accent had been filed away and polished to a glassy shine.

“What do you think the police will say when they hear you’ve lived alone for such a long time and find a corpse in your house? Imagine all the uncomfortable questions you’ll have to answer. All the people who will walk through your private spaces, touching all of your things. I wonder. What will they make of these?”

He swept his arm like a showman towards Holden’s collection of PVC figures. Most were statues of superheroes, or anime and video game characters. But one shelf was a plastic harem; a collection of tiny women in poses and outfits that ranged from racy to sexually explicit. The man took a fancy to Hekate, the witch priestess, and dragged his left index finger across her enormous, bared breasts.

“Oh, what judgments shall be passed,” he mused. “And all those violent video games. Tsk-tsk. That sword you stashed in the closet won’t do you any favors, either.”

How does he know what’s in my house? Holden swallowed. The Glock, which was heavy to begin with, seemed to double and then triple in weight. Cold sweat beaded his brow. He stared up from the floor, shaking but otherwise paralyzed.

“I-I can send you money,” he said, finally. “But I don’t have any here.”

“Your currency means nothing to me.”

Holden sputtered in confusion, but the man ignored him, pacing the room slowly.

“You’ve had a sad life, Mr. Lockheed, but the last year has been pathetic. A catalog of serviceable but uninspired websites. Online order forms, and video game chatter, neutered of meaning by anonymity. You do trivial work, subsist on food delivered to your front door, and compulsively copulate with your right hand.”

“What do you want?” Holden asked helplessly.

“I want to know what you live for. Tell me why you bother to draw breath.”

He paused a moment before answering. “I—I don’t understand...”

“You don’t need to understand. Answer.”

“I’m the one holding the gun!” Holden said, but his voice was hoarse.

“Then you have a choice. Shoot me or answer.”

“I... I travel.”

That surprised the stranger. His irises slid outward, despite their stone and metal appearance. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“Out there, I’m trapped. Nothing is... It’s all arbitrary! Nothing happens for a reason...” Holden lost track of himself. *How long has it been since I spoke to somebody in person? How am I supposed to explain my life?* “Wh-why do you care, anyway?”

“Don’t be petulant,” the stranger chided. “This was going somewhere interesting. If not ‘out there,’ then where? Where do you find your ‘reason?’”

“Stories. Games. They... they all follow rules. They make sense. Everything matters.”

“A tourist of other worlds,” the stranger said thoughtfully. “Fascinating interpretation. To my eye, you’re a coward who gave up when life got a little hard.”

The words took Holden by surprise. He squinted at them for a second, before comprehension brought fury. *Who the hell are you to bully me?* The man sneered and opened his mouth to say something else. Holden knew it would be unfair. Knew it would sting. He didn’t want to hear it. *And I don’t have to.* Anger tightened his jaw and steadied his hand.

He squeezed the trigger.

The gun barked, bucked... and vanished with the muzzle flash. Gone. He felt a sharp jolt when it happened, like brushing a live wire, and his hand squirmed with prickling numbness after. There was no gun smoke, but the smell of sulfur burned his nostrils. The man smiled broadly again, utterly unharmed.

“I was so hoping you would do that.”

Holden hit absolute zero. His muscles seized and his mind stalled.

“I—I’m so-sorry. I...Please...”

The man knelt and shushed him, slowly stroking his right cheek, and that was when Holden noticed the stripes. Several thin and impossibly straight veins ran vertically down the length of the man’s pale face and hands, like indigo pinstripes on a flesh-colored suit. The feathered tufts of his hair were actual plumage of some sort—a nest of tiny black wings shaped like locks and bangs. His strange eyes weren’t contacts, either. The irises really were metal rings separating polished black and white stone. From a few feet away, he was quite handsome. Up close, he was inhuman.

“Tell me about your relationship with magic. What role does it play in your life?”

“M-magic? I—I tried to teach myself sleight of hand in May...but I was too clumsy.”

“Don’t be dense. I’m talking about wizardry, not hand-dancing. Real magic.”

Holden spent most of his day-to-day life in fiction saturated with wizardry. He sought out magic in every medium that could express it. But in real life? He hadn’t looked into it since he was a miserable, awkward teenager; a boy desperate for an edge. He had searched for some secret truth that would help him make sense of life’s subtler, more subjective systems. He taught himself tarot, researched herbs and crystals, and read every scrap of arcane, esoteric, and new age literature he could find. All roads ended in impotence. It was all bullshit.

“I-I haven’t looked into it since I was a kid.”

“Why did you give up?” the man pressed.

“Because it didn’t...work! It doesn’t fucking exist!”

“Doesn’t it?”

While he spoke, he stood and lifted his left hand. There was a sucking sensation against Holden’s skin. The sweat beading his brow and temples was whisked from his face, merging with water particles drawn from the room. Together, they coalesced into a murky globe that floated above the Pinstriped Man’s palm. He brought the tips of his fingers to tap the globe’s edge, and it froze solid. Then he blew or whispered some unintelligible half-syllable, igniting it in violet flames that gave off heat, but the water did not melt.

Just a nightmare. Wake up. Holden’s eyes darted toward his bookshelf. The titles on all the spines were perfectly legible. He couldn’t read in dreams. It was his litmus test for reality. The stranger read his expression, or his perhaps his mind, and smiled even more broadly.

“No dream, Holden. You tried to take my life, and forfeited your own in so doing,” he whispered. “But I will make you a deal. I can kill you here and now, or you can accept a gift and make good on your wishes.”

The man’s inverted eyes didn’t blink, and there was a gleeful hunger behind them.

“Wishes? I—I just want to be left alone!”

“No. You had real wishes once. Be the hero. Find the girl. Save the world.”

Holden squinted, opened his mouth and hesitated. *Am I insane? Is he insane?*

“What’s the gift?”

“Ah, ah, ah. The gift is a surprise. You need courage to claim it. We’re done with questions now. My deal is death or destiny. What will it be?”

Holden gaped and shrugged helplessly.

“Destiny.”

Once again, the intruder said something that Holden couldn’t hear. Or maybe he just couldn’t process it. Something brief; barely a sound. *Did he move his lips at all?* He might have spoken in a pictogram, or through some form of magnetism, or with the glint in his hard eyes.

Holden changed.

It felt like a chord being strummed, a lock springing free in his core. Tinnitus built in his ears until it consumed his hearing altogether. He saw spots and went limp. Threads of blood trickled out of his nostrils and onto the aged carpet.

“Explore what I’ve given you at your peril. Neglect it to your doom.”

The Pinstriped Man adjusted his tie—the color of crow feathers in the sun—and then slid his hands into his slacks as he casually levitated. Invisible currents of pressure and suction radiated out from the man, buffeting books and figures of their shelves. He hung in the air, bobbing in rhythm with the currents. Then there was a loud snapping sound and he disappeared.

The room smelled like a fresh-struck match. Holden’s ears popped painfully. The floor seemed to plunge fifty stories beneath him. Head swimming, he fought against a tide of fatigue and drowned.

The house had been enlarged and reimagined as a prison. Holden knew it was his home from the wood: the same unpainted chocolate walls and ceilings of the upstairs hallway, the dark honey floors that had been worn to a shine. But the stairs were gone. The doors were gone. In their place were square windows barred with square slats. The first looked out into a cloudless sky at sunset, filled with fanciful airships. The next revealed a neon-lit cyberpunk metropolis at night.

They were all scenes from games he'd played, books he'd read, or shows he submerged himself in. Rather than renders or screenshots, they looked real. Patches of foreign realities. Living travel posters from his favorite fictional realms. As he walked along the hall, he saw desert planets and frozen ruins. Magical forests and bloody battlegrounds.

He was dimly aware of his encounter with the stranger, the Pinstriped Man, but he didn't question or scrutinize it. A sort of dream logic had taken over. Anything could happen and be taken at face value.

"Hello?" he called.

There was no answer.

The hall of locales dead-ended in front of a picture. It was a wall-sized portrait of a delivery girl. She had brought him groceries a few hours before his encounter.

And what a fucking debacle that was.

He ignored the doorbell the first time it rang, hoping she would just leave the food and forge his signature. All the regular drivers knew he always left a 30% tip and 5-star satisfaction ratings. When she kept ringing, he jogged downstairs and peered out the blinds of the front window. She wore a bored expression, pen hanging from her mouth like a gag cigar. She was in her late teens or early twenties, petite at just under five and a half feet tall. Her hair was sunshine blonde, tied up in a long ponytail, save for a few bangs that framed her face and splashed across her brow. A tight red tank top hugged her shapely breasts, and the delivery company's hideous green and orange windbreaker hung around her well-toned waist.

The nametag on her hip read 'Lark.'

She was new and insisted that he sign and show his ID to confirm delivery. He said he needed to go get his cards, then ran upstairs to change his shirt and put on deodorant. When he returned to let her in, he realized he had completely forgotten about the driver's license and credit card, like an idiot. And when he went back to search his office for them, she walked inside and unloaded the groceries, uninvited and unasked. *Who does that? She's like half my size. How was she not afraid of being raped, or murdered, or whatever?*

She was the first person to enter his home in just over a year. The Pinstriped Man was the second—assuming he was a person at all. Holden was instantly afraid that she knew. That his seclusion coated him like rust, begging judgment and scorn. It gave him a panic attack. He couldn't remember what he'd said, but he knew it had been awkward and stupid.

The portrait before him was even more vibrant than she had been in real life, drawn in the crisp lines of a modern comic book. In it, she ran across a sloped roof at night, dressed in all black with a fierce smile on her face. A streaked background and speed lines conveyed impossible, hyperbolic swiftness.

He stared, awed, and reached out to touch her face.

The portrait enveloped him.

Chapter 2: The Auditor

Lark tried not to laugh. She could hear the guy shouting at her from the sidewalk, moving in the wrong direction to head her off as she ran along the roof. The nice thing about being on top of a long building, other than the pleasure of being somewhere unusual, was that somebody on the ground had almost no way of catching you or figuring out your exit strategy. If the roof was peaked, and you knew how to zigzag in a crouch across it, all the better. It was so easy to break line of sight. But the guy kept shouting. He was at least seventy.

“Hey you! I called the police! They’ll be here any minute!”

Then let them earn their pay. But the whining sirens *were* growing closer. *Time to go.* She paused and stood upright for a moment, looking for the red and blue. Then she ran along the length of the building, dropped down to the ground, and sprinted like hell toward the east end of Sun Valley High. She had enough momentum to let her scramble up the next wall with ease. When she was high enough to grab the ledge of the building, she pulled herself up and rolled onto her back, catching her breath.

Can I wait it out? No. Gramps would point them in my direction. No point in giving them time to close the gap. Her car, an aging Pontiac Firebird, was three blocks north. They would search the campus before patrolling the neighborhood. She got up, continued east on the rooftop, and jumped the chain link fence to the sidewalk along Allegheny. She crossed over to Telfair at the corner, took it down to Wicks, snaking northeast.

She circled back to her Firebird in about ten minutes, where she stripped off her sneaking outfit in the back seat. *Already safe.* Nobody would suspect a young woman dressed in normal clothing of running on the roof of her former high school.

The rush started to fade and it took the last of the day’s energy with her.

Normally these outings gave her more than just adrenaline.

Being where she didn’t belong—*forbidden or forgotten places*—gave her energy. When she tried to explain it to her mother, after the first time she came home in the back of a squad car, she said it was like the feeling you got when you heard the right song at the right time. A deep vibration and sudden warmth. When her mom heard that, she wrote it off as a ‘weird sex thing’ and told her to find another way to get off. But it wasn’t about sex, voyeurism, vandalism, or theft. It wasn’t about any of the reasons you would figure. The thrill of dodging cops was a bonus, but it wasn’t about that.

It was about perspective. Seeing the world in a way that most people didn’t.

But she had used up the high school long ago, and it never gave her much of a charge to begin with. Maybe it was because she was so familiar with it, having lost so much of her life there. It was also a fairly public place, and the more private the place, the stronger the charge. Really, the only reason she kept coming back was that it was a good training course for climbing and sneaking; a cheaper, weirder alternative to a gym membership. And while it had given her a workout, she was starved for something real.

Home was a ten-minute drive. A tiny house on the lip of a dry cul-de-sac. She hated it.

The stucco walls, red shingled roof, and dead little lawn had no character. Just looking at it made her feel like white trash.

Bruce Wayne, her six-month-old black kitten, greeted her at the door with an indignant meow and trotted to the kitchen with his tail held high. No mom yet, which was great. She would smell Lark's sweat or guess what she had been up to based on the hour and chew her out for her reckless hobby. *Not a battle I feel like fighting tonight.* Lark put a handful of kibble in Bruce's food dish and grabbed herself a beer.

As she drank, she considered making a snack, taking a shower, or indulging in 'me time,' but fatigue muffled every other desire. She barely managed to finish her Corona and slip into her makeshift PJs before passing out on her unmade bed.

By seven-fifteen it was too hot to sleep. The blinds were completely closed, but what made it through the slats was hot enough to turn her small bedroom into an oven. *God damn sun. God damn mornings.*

Lark had lived in the same room her entire life, and the complete record of her human career was on display. *Well. Almost.* She had torn down all the Disney princess posters when she realized she hated princesses. But the ballet stuff was still there; two Degas prints and a beat-up pair of toe shoes hanging by their ribbons. Those were her teenage years. The bookshelf belonged to young adulthood; trade paperback collections of superhero comics, sketchbooks, and a couple detective novels.

Sweat had almost completely soaked through her top and shorts. She would rather sleep naked, but her mom always harped on her about wearing something in case of a fire. *Which, I mean, please. Sun Valley is 60% asphalt, 40% concrete and 100% who-gives-a-fuck. It's probably one of the only patches of Southern California that won't immediately burn.* She stripped and dumped her clothes on Bruce, who stretched and groaned in protest.

The shower called and she did not keep it waiting. *What am I doing today?* Work was a thing. She had picked up a shift from Kim and needed to be in Pasadena by one o'clock. Delivering things to strangers was still fresh, but she knew it was a matter of weeks before her temper got the best of her. She had to earn as much good will as she possibly could early on. Not that playing delivery girl was the end goal of her life.

Lark wanted to go to college to figure out where she wanted to go next, but it was a wish that hit her too late. She barely managed to graduate from high school. Her grades were too terrible to make her eligible for any kind of scholarship, and there was no way she could afford it with what she and her mother pulled in. But she wasn't going to let that stop her.

If you can't buy an education, steal one.

She knew she needed a class, but UCLA was off the table. No way to get from Westwood to Pasadena in time for her shift. She might be able to sneak into a room at USC and make it if traffic was on her side. But if she started late, she would end late, and that wasn't an option. That night she was meeting Jenn for drinks in Pasadena. It had been a long time since they caught up.

And after that, La Miniatura.

The Millard House. Frank Lloyd Wright's little laughingstock turned landmark achievement. It had been on sale for years, but it wouldn't stay vacant forever. She knew that it held that uninvited charge. It throbbed at the edge of her mind, tugged her like a magnet ever

since she heard about it in an architecture seminar at UCLA. *But what are you gonna do until then? Chill with mom for five hours?*

Karen Kent worked hard to pay the rent and keep groceries in the fridge, and she loved Lark deeply, but she also had a sharp tongue, a nasty temper, and wrestled with crippling depression. Lark recognized the first two flaws in herself and had no patience for the third. When they spent too much time together, they started sniping, batting flaws back and forth like they were competing in the World Cup of Being a Bitch.

A bad idea came courting: Occidental College. It was in Eagle Rock, right next to Pasadena. Much riskier though. According to their website, the average class-size was under twenty, and she preferred to stick with classes in excess of fifty students. Huge lectures where nobody learned anyone's name. Professors were far less likely to take notice and ask inconvenient questions like "Are you actually a student here?"

What would they do if they caught me? Kick me off campus? Fine me? Call the police? She had no idea, but she could probably lie her way out of it anyway. *With a little confidence and a plausible excuse, you can get away with damn near anything.* Today would almost definitely have to be a one-time thing however, and without a course schedule, she would have to settle for whatever lecture she stumbled upon.

She got dressed; red tank, blue jeans, black sneakers. She grabbed her gray courier bag and stuffed her shitty Zwiift windbreaker inside it. Theoretically she was required to wear it while she was on delivery despite the heat. *But neon orange and lime green? Really?*

Before walking outside, she peeked in her mother's bedroom to find her asleep.

"Bye mom," Lark whispered and slipped out of the house.

Again, she was grateful they didn't have to talk. What she was planning was dumb and a little risky, even by her standards. *Mom would smell it on me.* But Lark had realized that when a bad idea came back to her more than three times, she was going to do it eventually.

No time like the present.

Occidental's campus reminded Lark of a giant garden, especially when weighed against the majority of Eagle Rock, which was still dry and borderline slummy in parts despite a recent hipster-chic revival. There was an abstract metal sculpture-slash-fountain welcoming people to the campus, and beyond it lay a large quad, rich with oak trees and wooden benches. Almost all the buildings were beige, but they had a weird architectural blend going on.

Some looked like missions with enclosed courtyards, while others channeled government buildings with impressive stairs and columns. *Alright. Now where is the cattle-call lecture hall?* Every college she infiltrated had at least one of those buildings. A big-ass auditorium that filed in students like livestock. They were perfect for getting lost in the crowd. But Occidental seemed to be an exception.

Lark checked her smart phone for a directory. Some of the science buildings seemed promising in scale, but she preferred liberal arts. Most sciences were hard to follow. She could usually understand biology, but once they started talking about specific chemical interactions her mind was done. Advanced math courses might as well be in Japanese.

Thorne Hall seemed like the closest thing to what she was looking for. As big college buildings went, it was small. *Regal though.* There were a row of four columns in front, and three black and orange banners with the school crest and tiger mascot.

Several other students were waiting on the steps. Some talked, but most were fixed on their phones. She took a seat on one of the benches out front and began sketching in the margins of her notebook.

Drawing had always been more of a nervous habit than a real hobby, but two years ago, she got into superhero comics in a big way and dedicated more of her time to drawing. Her favorite exercise was to sketch passersby, and create a superhero based on their attire, appearance, and actions. Most of them were terrible and unflattering to their subjects but it was a harmless way to have fun. However, if somebody crossed her Bitch Threshold and the drawing was vicious enough, she would find a way to give it to the subject anonymously, usually by saying "I think you dropped this," and walk away before they could respond.

During the wait, Lark saw an Asian chick lugging a binder that was almost comically large and plastered with anime and Sanrio stickers. Inspired, she created The Binder: a villain who could use magic to transform people into stickers and enslave them by placing their likenesses in her huge Binder of Doom. Next up was the anti-hero White Dread; a pasty guy with hideous dreadlocks that looked like they were close to creating their own ecosystem. *What about a power? Maybe he can turn his dreads into ropes and control them? Or control all hair, like Aquaman with fish?*

Not all of her creations were winners.

About fifteen minutes later, students from the earlier class shuffled outside, and Lark snuck in behind them, grabbing the first seat in the back row. It was important to look confident and speak when spoken to, but you also had to keep a low profile, else the teacher would ask for your name, and look you up. Lark had to leave one of her favorite classes at UCLA because people started remembering her and asked about her absence for a test. The UC system checked student IDs on testing days. Lark said she was just auditing and never showed up to *English 110: Themes in Gothic Literature* ever again.

About five minutes later, a professor emerged. She was a solidly built woman who looked to be about fifty. Thin-rimmed glasses. A brown pants suit over a white blouse. She initially overlooked Lark but nodded at several other students as she walked toward the podium. Lark grimaced. That meant she was more likely to take notice of a newcomer. Sure enough, after the professor had finished setting up her laptop, she caught sight of Lark and started back up the aisle.

I knew this was a mistake. Lark folded her notebook and stood up. She forced herself to smile as she desperately concocted a cover story.

"I don't think I've seen you before," The professor said.

"No, you haven't. I have a free period and I was hoping—"

"You're free to sit in, but if you're going to enroll, Wednesday is the latest I'll sign your slip. You also have some catching up to do. First paper is due Friday and you should have already seen a film."

Jesus Christ. They must start the semester late here. UCLA and USC start up in August. Lark shifted gears and dropped a line every teacher loved to hear:

"I'm willing to do the work."

The professor smiled and extended a hand. Lark took it.

"Alexandra Burke."

"Kate Bishop."

It was the name of a comic book character; the alias of the second Hawkeye in Marvel Comics. Using a fake secret identity to mask her real secret identity amused her. A two-second web search would tell the professor it was a fake name. *I can never come back here anyway.* Burke bowed her head slightly and walked back to the podium. *I hope this class is worth it.*

"Let's get started, shall we?"

She dimmed the lights and turned on the projector. The slide read "Comp. Lit. 210E Episode 3: Devils You Don't Know"

Lark's face lit up. *Sounds promising at least.*

"Last week we addressed heroes which, let's face it, are pretty straightforward. This week we are beginning our much longer project, which is a study of villains. And to start things off, we will be tackling demons, who come in countless flavors, but fall into two main classes.

"Hopefully you've been able watch *The Exorcist* over the weekend. I know the class says 'modern' on it, and the movie was made over forty years ago, but I chose it because it does a good job of representing what I call the 'classical demon.' Anybody want to take a stab at what the defining characteristic of a 'classical demon' is?"

Dead silence.

"Pea soup?" Lark called.

A few people laughed. *Might as well have fun. I'm already made. No point in keeping a low profile if I can't come back.* Burke rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

"Oh, we're off to a swell start."

"Religious evil?" A guy in the front said.

"Bingo. Especially in the context of *The Exorcist*. Unlike most monsters and villains, which, as you will discover, result from the crimes of man, the existence of classical demons' stem from crimes against creation itself. They are mortar, or maybe spackle for belief systems.

"A way to explain where evil comes from, albeit paradoxically. They fulfill the function of explanation, but their motivations... their powers... are all unknowable. Which, from a literary perspective, is kind of a cop out. Where does evil come from? Demons. But why are demons evil? Because they are.

"Again, this is clearly evident in *The Exorcist*. Why is Reagan possessed? Because she didn't have religious education to warn against playing with an instrument of witchcraft?" Burke switched the slide to display a Ouija Board. "Or maybe it's because she did not live life like a good catholic should, without a strong father figure?" She switched the slide to show a 1950's style dad smoking a pipe. "But neither of those things are really her fault. And neither explanation even approaches justifying what she and her mother go through."

The same guy who said religious evil raised his hand again. Burke sat back on her desk and tilted her chin at him.

"But isn't the movie about overcoming that doubt with faith? Father Karras doubts God until the very end, but finding his faith is what helps him beat the devil."

“Does he really beat the devil though? By my count, the devil kills two good men, picks up an asshole on the side, violates a pubescent girl, and traumatizes everyone involved.”

The boy muttered something Lark couldn't hear. Burke smiled.

“No, I'm giving you a hard time. The movie, and the book it was based on, were certainly written with the intention of championing faith, but that's the thing about stories. They talk back to their authors. Take on a life of their own, exceeding or even directly contradicting the original intended meanings.

“To my mind, the film paints a very troubling portrait of god, as this all-powerful entity is content to let a child rape herself and kill people because she didn't go to Sunday school. Full disclosure: this is coming from a survivor of a fanatically religious upbringing, so I may be projecting a little. The bitterest lapsed catholic you've met has nothing on me.”

More chuckles. Burke switched off the projector and started drawing on the whiteboard. She started listing the names of classical demons in different religions and regions, pausing to provide anecdotes or bite-sized bits of folklore. She explained how demons diverged from other villainous archetypes, like witches and constructs, which revolved around human sin. She even touched on aliens, which were comparable to demons in their “unknowability,” though heroes were often encouraged to defeat them through questioning rather than faith.

The lecture broke Lark's heart. She had never fallen in love with a class or teacher so quickly. *God, I wish I was here to hear about heroes last week.*

“As you can see, every culture has developed a concept that is analogous to classical demons. The lore behind them varies wildly across the world, but one of the most common powers associated with the archetype is possession. The ability to directly assume control of a person and deny them their free will.

“But something interesting happens if you keep asking questions about demons. If you insist on an explanation, lore will inevitably lead you to something I refer to as a ‘sympathetic demon,’ or a ‘tempter.’ Sometimes they are known as wish-granters, and they have a lot in common with lore about djinn or faeries. Rather than hijacking choice like a classical demon, they tempt people with opportunities that dangerously *expand* free will.

“Now. Anybody care to guess who Christianity's tempter is?”

In unison, the class mumbled, “Satan,” “Lucifer,” or “the Devil.”

“Very good! You probably know the story too. Lucifer was a prideful angel who led a revolt against God after creation. He failed and fell from heaven along with all the other angels who followed him. That story gives us a little more to go on, though ultimately, the answer of ‘where does evil come from’ boils down to ‘questioning God.’ Which is a nifty way to shut down that line of inquiry. But why did Lucifer rebel?”

“John Milton hints at two answers in *Paradise Lost*. The most commonly cited is pride; Lucifer thought himself mightier than the Father, which is what started the feud. But that's not what keeps him going. No. Lucifer is jealous of his little siblings, Adam and Eve, because they are better loved. Now, that's remarkable.

“Unlike the ‘demons are evil because God says so,’ party-line, that's a very human motivation. Maybe not a reasonable justification, but a human one. Most scholars agree that Milton wanted readers to develop a little sympathy for his devil, but people have been debating whether Lucifer is really a villain or a tragic hero ever since the poem came out in the

seventeenth century. I want to hear what you think. Persuade me with what you've learned about heroes and villains so far.

"Use passages of the poem and scenes from the movie to support your position and tear down opposing arguments. Fair warning, I have memorized every word of Sparknotes' analysis, and if you don't go any deeper than that, I will have you publicly flogged. Plagiarism will be punished with thumbscrews and failing grades. If the thought did not come straight from you, it needs a proper MLA citation. Three pages, double-spaced just to dip our toes in.

"That's it for today. My office hours are at noon."

She turned up the lights and people started to pack up. Lark did not want it to end but started to shuffle out of the class. *What I wouldn't give for tuition. What I wouldn't give for this class to have a crowd I could hide in—*

"Hey Hawkeye!" Burke called.

Lark froze. *Please don't be talking to me.* She turned around to see Burke smirking.

"Are you going to sign up?"

No. Hell no. I should already be gone. Time to bolt. But she nodded.

"See me at noon. Weingart Center. Office 209."

Why the hell am I here? Lark had to be in the Ralph's parking lot in Pasadena at the start of her shift, and she resolved to leave campus forever after grabbing a slice of pizza. *What good could possibly come from meeting with her?* Nevertheless, she found herself waiting outside of Burke's office. There was a Hispanic boy playing a videogame ahead of her, and a thin girl in braids showed up shortly after Lark. Burke arrived at twelve on the dot.

"I wasn't sure I'd see you again Miss Bishop," she said.

"You read Hawkeye?" Lark felt stupid for asking the obvious question.

"I feel like I should be offended. It's quite good. Took Fraction and Aja long enough to finish their run, but it was worth waiting for."

Lark laughed. The title had suffered countless delays, but it ended well.

Burke invited the gamer inside. They chatted for about ten minutes with occasional bursts of laughter. He left with a smile on his face, and she called the next student inside. Lark was next in line, but she insisted on ceding her position to the other girl. Stealing lectures from a college was one thing. Pissing off people who were paying to be there and cared enough to show up for meetings outside of class crossed a line.

Eventually, the skinny girl left and it was Lark's turn.

"What can I help you with, Kate?"

"Uh, here's the thing. I'm not really a student. Here. Or anywhere really."

"Then why did you crash my class this morning? Why are you here now?"

Burke did not seem angry but she was serious.

"I attend classes at colleges I don't go to. I'm a fake auditor."

"Quite a hobby. Why do you do it?"

Lark blinked. *Isn't this the part where you threaten to call campus security?*

"Curiosity, I guess? I barely finished high school. My grades aren't going to win any scholarships. I wanted to see what it was like. Maybe find out what I want to do with my life."

"Why not go to a community college?"

"I took some classes at PCC, but a degree from a junior college won't help me find work, and I won't have the money to transfer to a real school afterwards."

Burke opened her mouth to say something, but then pursed her lips and considered the situation for a several seconds before speaking again.

"Before you gave me a fake name, or rather, before you borrowed a name from a comic book, you said that you were willing to do the work. Is that true or is it part of your cover?"

At the time, it was just part of the cover. Now she wasn't sure.

"I didn't mean it then. But I do now."

Burke tapped the tips of her fingers together. After a moment of consideration, Burke pulled open a desk drawer and handed Lark a stapled packet of papers. It read 'Comparative Literature 210E: Modern Mythos – Course Synopsis.'

"Be here on Wednesday. Have a three-page paper on Milton's Devil written by Friday. I obviously can't give you any kind of course credit and neither of us can tell anyone that I'm doing this. But if you do the work, show up to office hours occasionally, and keep the wisecracks to an amusing minimum, you can sit in on my lectures."

Lark blinked again.

"Are you serious?"

"If you are."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to keep up. I only wrote a couple papers at PCC."

"Doesn't really matter if I give you a bad grade then, does it? That's not an excuse for you to hand me crap but screwing up won't hurt you. Give me your email address and I'll send you a couple PDFs. Lecture notes from last week. Articles that could help you pick apart Paradise Lost. It can be a bastard. But you only need to read the first few books."

"Books?" Lark gaped.

Burke waved her hand dismissively.

"They're really chapters. Milton was invoking a biblical naming tradition."

Lark scribbled down an address that couldn't somehow be traced back to her real name. *Weird that she hasn't asked for it. The whole thing was weird.* Burke took the address and turned back to her email.

"Why are you risking your job for me?" Lark asked.

"Oh, please. I'm tenured. The worst I'd get is a slap on the wrist."

"Why are you risking a wrist slapping for me?"

She paused again before answering.

"Vanity."

Lark raised an eyebrow.

"This is a GE requirement. Most people are here to do the bare minimum work to check a box on their transcript. Others work hard enough to earn their 'A,' but given the option, they would skip it altogether. Truth be told, I am really quite proud of my lectures. Having somebody sneak into my class out of personal interest is flattering. Besides, I already have a similar arrangement with another student."

"Really? Who?"

"Come on now. Would you want me giving away your secret identity?"

"No. I wouldn't. Thank you so much!"

"Uh-huh. See you Wednesday."

Lark said thank you again and ducked out of the room. She felt like she crackled with electricity. *This. This is what I go looking for.* But when she checked her phone, happiness turned to panic. She needed to start her Pasadena shift in seven minutes.

The 134 was clear and Lark managed to pull into the Ralph's parking lot on the western-most edge of Pasadena by twelve after one. She already had an order assigned via the Zwift employee app. Fortunately it was a fairly standard stuff. Paper towels. Detergent. Beef. Rice. Lark acknowledged the order. The delivery was only a few blocks away, just south of Old Town—the shopping and dining sprawl that ran through the core of the city.

She had the order bought and completed in about ten minutes and was back in the car quickly. Pasadena always struck Lark as a sweet city that never really knew how well off it was. It meant well, and lacked Beverly Hills ego, or the active snobbery of Bel Air, but it was home to some of the oldest money on the west coast, and that permeated the city. Even the dodgier, northern edge of the city enjoyed a surfeit of trees and fairly well-kept streets.

The Zwift app led her to an aging apartment building. Lark stepped inside the building and was greeted by a vaguely musty smell. She walked up the stairway and knocked on room number 206. An aging white-haired Asian woman answered the door and smiled at Lark.

"Hi! Do you want me to bring these into the kitchen?"

"Hello, thank you."

She spoke almost shyly with a thick accent. It made the simple courtesy, which a truly gross number of customers ignored, far more meaningful. And Lark got to take a look inside.

The interior of the apartment was small, almost cramped. Once-white walls, and a faded brown carpet greeted her, along with a table laden with family photos; looked like a husband, a daughter and a son. A large, ornate Chinese fan decorated the wall above the couch, while an electric fan blasted the entire living room from the corner. The kitchen was tiny, with appliances that looked like they had been purchased decades ago.

Lark placed her groceries on the counter and presented the woman with a clipboard.

The woman nodded and signed, and then handed two wadded up five-dollar bills to Lark. *You gave me a good tip, you said hello, you get extra help.* Very hastily Lark removed the meat and offered to put it in the fridge, the woman hesitated, then smiled and nodded. In two minutes, everything was put away and Lark was back on the road.

Deliveries like that momentarily made her feel like she was something more than a sorry fuck-up. Maybe bringing food and supplies to people who needed them wasn't as noble as what her mom did, but it was something.

The next delivery was less awesome. It was a nice two-story house with an unjustifiably healthy lawn, and the dick who answered the door was on the phone. He said hello by holding a palm up at Lark's face, telling her to shut up before she'd said a word. *Bitch Threshold: broken.* Lark dropped his Thai food loudly on the front stoop. The man pulled the phone to his shoulder, jaw hanging open beyond belief. Lark smiled and handed him her clipboard.

"Sorry. Hands slipped. I need cards and a signature."

The man wanted to say something nasty but wit failed him. It was just as satisfying as hearing the villain's gun click empty in an action movie. On her way back to the car, she knew she'd regret it. Somebody that rich and self-important would have the time to leave her a nasty review or make a phone call. In each of the shitty jobs she'd worked since high school, you had no dignity by default, and claiming it almost always bit you in the ass.

A string of restaurant runs ensued, and then she got a colossal order. None of the items were particularly unusual, but there were enough of them to supply a small expedition: Twenty cans of chicken noodle soup, two jars of pickles, a loaf of sourdough bread, one packet of salami, two cases of coke, a carton of eggs, bacon, milk, cranberry juice, two packs of Rockstar, ground coffee, green onions, oranges, two chicken breasts, one pork tenderloin, a pound of ground turkey, several cans of beans and a packet of dried shiitake mushrooms. Holden Lockheed's needs fell just two items short of the maximum order.

The shopping took her nearly an hour and forced her to use the collapsible cart they gave her. Naturally, he lived at the opposite end of the city as well, a couple blocks north of the 210 freeway, just south of the closest thing Pasadena had to rough neighborhood. The house was nice though, a brown and dark green two-story. It was a Craftsman, the city's signature style of architecture. The front yard was dead though. Nothing but cracked, bald earth.

Lark walked up and rang the doorbell. The hairs on her neck stood up, like she had strolled into a static field. She knew this feeling. The same feeling she got whenever she walked into a particularly fascinating house, or a space that had been hidden or neglected for a long time. An exclusive place. *What the hell? I haven't even walked inside yet.*

There was sudden movement from inside, near the door. She'd startled whoever was inside. A light bass voice called from inside, just through the right front window that was covered by wooden shades:

"Just leave it on the porch, thanks! I tipped online!"

At first, she figured he was trying to stiff her, but when she checked the receipt, she saw that a gratuity had already been printed on it. *Holy shit. \$35? Rules were rules though.*

"You've got to show your card and confirm the delivery! New policy!"

It wasn't a new policy so much as one that had been largely ignored up until now, and her boss stressed its importance like six times during orientation. Apparently, people had started complaining that their deliveries were never arriving. What was really happening was people weren't home to collect their orders (or provide tips) when the deliveries arrived, so the drivers would fake a signature and leave the bags unattended to get on with their lives. The unattended deliveries were probably stolen, like any non-moron would figure, but the people who weren't there to pick up their shit blamed it on the drivers.

After ten seconds of silence, Lark spoke up.

"Hello?"

Someone moved behind the blinds and she could hear footsteps retreating. There was a hurried apology followed by what may have been "please wait" or "get my wallet." She sighed again. *Can't snap at this guy. If I get written up twice on one shift, I'm finished.* She heard the footsteps returning and put on her best customer service smile.

The door swung open to reveal one of the palest people she'd ever seen. It looked like a flock of sparrows had somehow learned to use scissors, and taken turns dive bombing him,

trimming a lock or two of his brown hair with each pass. He wore a dark blue shirt, and a pair of black jeans. His eyes were an intense shade of blue, so dark they'd be mistaken for black at a distance.

"Hi. You're Holden?" He opened his mouth but ended up nodding. "Great. Sign here, show me your ID and credit card, and we're good to go."

He slowly closed his eyes and clenched his jaw.

"You okay?" Lark asked.

"I, uh, left it upstairs. My wallet."

Lark raised an eyebrow. *Didn't you just go to get it? Is he drunk? Stoned?* It would explain the huge food order. Except his eyes were clear and there was no smoke. He was also way not chilled out. Strung tight as a violin and twitchy as a rabbit, even though he was over six feet tall. *Hell, a stiff drink or a hard blunt would do him some good.*

"I, uh...yeah" he gestured vaguely toward a staircase and fled.

She peered inside his house. It looked normal enough, but that energy was still there. And when she walked in, she felt something warm shudder through her spine and skin, like the melody of a favorite song. Gave her those good chemicals.

To her immediate left, there was a somewhat cramped dining room and a kitchen further back behind it. On the right was a living room with three aging leather couches, and an enormous television set. The blinds were all closed, which was weird, and wasteful, since it was still plenty bright out. The living room was dotted with plants, though Lark noticed they were all coated with dust. *Fakes.*

Lark forced herself to move back to the kitchen and started unloading groceries. When the guy returned, he freaked out and tried to stop her. *Too late.* She hauled the last bag onto the floor. He stared at her intensely.

"Do you always just walk into people's houses? I mean, I could be a creep or something!"

Wow. Not even a creep would say that. They wouldn't have much of a career.

"Are you?" Lark asked him, amused.

"That's not the point. It's dangerous!"

Why do I get the impression that you're more scared by my being here than you are for my safety? Maybe the guy is an...angoraphobe? Something like that. She found his twitchiness to be kind of adorable and smirked at him.

"I can handle myself. Cards?"

He stared at her like she was an alien, and she had to suppress a giggle. He finally remembered to hand over his credit card and driver's license. *He cleans up decent.* His four-year-old license showed a completely different person. Much healthier skin tone, fuller cheeks, a shorter haircut, and a goofy smile. She checked his birthdate. He was twenty-five. Only two years older than her.

How can he afford this place? The house was twice as big as the one she and her mom shared. She looked around again and saw an expensive wall of electronics, as well as a stack of Blu-Rays and video games.

"This is a really nice place. You have roommates?"

"No. It, uh, it was my uncle's."

She continued to look around and was about to ask him what he did for a living, when she noticed that he looked like he was on the verge of a panic attack. Lark's mom had worked in a hospital for over twenty years, and she'd taught Lark how to recognize the symptoms of common conditions. His breathing was shallow, he was visibly sweating. He looked from her to the door. She bobbed her head and started to leave.

"Sorry, thanks for the tip."

He nodded, and gasped as she left. She walked outside and hurried toward her car. The house continued to buzz with energy behind her, begging her to stay, but when she drove away, she was glad to be gone.

The rest of her shift was a snore. Lark didn't even bother trying to sneak into anybody's house, which was practically a symptom of illness for her. Only Jenn and her mom would know to look for it, though. Or at least, they would if she hadn't managed to convince them that sneaking into classes scratched her itch to be where she didn't belong.

They were both fine with her stealing an education from institutions willing to let it be stolen, but neither of them understood the appeal of...*infiltration? Being where you don't belong? No. Fuck it. Trespassing. I trespass. It's what I do. It's my thing. Call it what it is.* The thing was, it seemed so integral and natural to her, but nobody else knew what the hell she was talking about. It actually scared her a little. But fear could only throw Lark like a boomerang. She'd always come back.

In the checkout line for her last delivery, Lark checked her email and downloaded the PDF version of *Paradise Lost* that Burke had emailed her. The first page recalled her attempts at reading a bible, which were both frustrating and extremely short-lived. She only had three days to read this thing, two of which she was supposed to be pulling shifts, and she had to write three pages. The last time she had written anything longer than a Facebook post was twelfth grade English, five years ago. *Maybe I won't be back after all.*

At eight forty, Lark was finally able to knock off and meet Jenn. She parked in an alley, which may or may not have been legal, and walked away. Ugly as they were, delivery hats could do some magical things for a car. She started down Colorado Boulevard trying to think of a list of positives she could bring up about her life. *Well. I now have a professor's blessing to audit a class!* And she had reached the end of her list. She frowned.

Jenn was Lark's best friend, and not that the title had much competition. She was the one who literally slapped some sense into Lark at the end of junior year, the impetus for burning through six graduation requirements that summer and finishing off the rest senior year. Lark knew she always could have done it, but she wouldn't have realized the window was closing or bothered to do something about it if Jenn hadn't told her, flat out, that she expected better and wouldn't accept anything less from a friend.

They'd grown apart slightly since high school. Jenn made it into Cal-State Long Beach with a full ride, while Lark had clawed her way out of high school in a shredded grad robe

soaked in the blood of her enemies, with a torn diploma in her teeth, a tassel in one fist, and a broken beer bottle in the other. *That's how I remember it, anyway.*

After Jenn graduated, she moved back to Pasadena and got a job at a fancy bookstore. After a few weeks of living with her parents, she moved in with her boyfriend, Brandon. He was reasonably handsome, made more attractive by being in great shape and having a steady job. But he was a bit too 'bro' for Lark's tastes. His chief interests consisted of football, MMA and shooting games. He considered himself to be a sophisticated gentleman, but also referred to himself as "Alpha," without irony. *I mean. What the fuck. Who does that?*

Jenn can do better. Hell, I can do better.

But she hadn't. The guys she had seen in high school had all been exciting. If they weren't chiseled and confident, they were smart and brooding. If they weren't beefy or bright, they were at least funny and spontaneous. But every time it ended in explosions. Not fun explosions. Fireworks happened along the way, sure, but by the end it was all shrapnel, screaming, and dismembered feelings. And the social collateral damage was a big reason why Jenn was her only friend.

Oh, come on. That's not true. There's Julie, from the drycleaners! But Lark realized she had not heard from her in nearly a year. What about Gay Shaun from the bar in Silver Lake? Gay Shaun endorsed her status updates with disposable praise ranging from "preach it," to "yaaas queen." They exchanged late night texts where he complained about his non-existent love-life. Okay, yeah. Fuck that guy. I mean, how hard is it for a gay bartender to get laid in Silver Lake? But I'm getting along great with Melissa! Melissa worked at Zswift. They had a fun conversation about superhero shows. Then Lark realized she had seen her two times in her entire life, at the bi-weekly corporate check-ins.

Facebook and frequent texts kept Jenn and Lark in touch. Lark mentioned she would be working Pasadena today, and Jenn insisted on a girls' night out. They were meeting at a bar on Colorado, which was big, loud, bright, and dumb. Entire motorcycles were employed as decorations, sitting in the spaces between booths. License plates plastered the walls, and a modified double-decker bus served as a small section of second story seating. Its menu boasted over seven hundred items, but there were probably six unique flavors between them. Seven counting desserts. Their brown ale was aggressively affordable however, and two appetizers were big enough to make a meal if you were only splitting them two ways.

Lark found Jenn in one of the double-decker booths. She was slumped onto her elbow, staring into her phone with a beer in hand. She was half-Japanese, taller than Lark, and had one of those hateable metabolisms that allowed her to eat damn near anything, and whenever she gained an ounce of fat, it tended to go to her boobs.

Lark always described her as Barbie's Asian Friend Doll.

"Hey Dolly." Lark said playfully.

"Hey Birdy!"

God we're disgusting. They both hated pet names, which naturally translated to them using "doll," "dolly," "birdy," and "bird" as standard greetings. "Hello," with a side of "fuck you." Jenn stood up and they exchanged a hug and a single cheek kiss, since it had been awhile.

"Wow, you look awful," Jenn said.

"Well, I'm not paid as well as a bookslut so I don't have to dress up that pretty."

After much anguish and deliberation, they ordered nachos and Caesar salad. *Now comes the comparing of lives. Better go first and get it over with.*

They traded work stories. Lark recounted the story of the weird shut-in who almost had an asthma attack, and the jackass who couldn't be bothered to put his cellphone down for two seconds. Jenn shared similar gripes about people who wanted to buy books whose title, author, and subject matter they could not remember, and the idiot celebrity groupies who flooded their store every time they hosted a signing.

At the end of it all, Lark relayed her encounter with Burke to Jenn.

"Let me get this straight. You're full-on auditing a class at Occidental and doing all the work for which you will receive zero credit?"

"It's a really cool class! With demons and politics and stuff."

"For which you will receive zero credit," Jenn repeated.

"Demons and politics and stuff," Lark said sulkily.

This was my one thing! Jenn was very good at calling Lark's life choices into question, and they often needed some questioning. She could turn a dangerous idea into one that was merely risky and refine something rough into something cool. The fact that she did not see the same positive road signs here was troubling.

"The beauty of your system is that you get all the wisdom with none of the busy work. Now you're doing the busy work without getting any of the credit. We have a rule remember? If you have to do a job, make sure you get paid for it."

"I can still walk away whenever I want. I just... I dunno. I want to test myself a bit."

"Okay. Then shouldn't you be feverishly reading *Paradise Lost* about now?"

"Yeah, about that... It's like the fucking bible! I need help. Do you know of any of those books that, you know, translate bullshit into plain English?"

Jenn laughed, nearly snorting beer out of her nose.

"What, you mean like *No Fear Shakespeare*? No. But there's probably a site that can help you figure it out. Sparknotes or something right?"

What had Burke said? "You will be publicly flogged?" Time for evasive maneuvers.

"How's Brandon?"

Jenn gave Lark a lingering look, just to let her know she was being obvious.

"Alive and well you'll be sad to hear."

"Jesus, I don't wish he was dead. He just seems like kind of a tool."

"Well yeah, but he's my tool. And he's doing okay. Still a stockroom manager at Dick's but looking into other stuff. He wants to join the police academy, but I'm trying to persuade him to take his friend's offer to get an interview with the Longshoremen's Guild. It'd be one a hell of a commute—we'd probably have to move, actually—but the money is good and people wouldn't try to shoot him on a weekly basis."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. This all sounds very long-term."

Jenn hesitated and then shrugged.

"I guess. I mean, yeah. I'm pretty serious about him. Like, at first, we figured it was just a really long fling, but we've been living together for like eighteen months now and we've done a lot of growing up together. It's just...working out, you know?"

Lark was silent. She didn't know. She had no clue. Her version of 'just working out' meant mortifying mating displays, and a sex life sung to the tune of 'scratch my itch and I'll scratch yours.' There were ugly breakups. More morning after pills than she cared to count.

"We aren't as young as we used to be, Birdy," Jenn said softly.

"Oh please. We've only been able to drink legally for two years."

"The legal age didn't matter when we were sixteen. Why should we care now?"

"If he asks you to marry him are you going to say yes?"

Jenn's eyebrows shot up as if it was unfair question. Maybe it was. The abruptness of it was certainly not cool. Lark looked down after asking, but Jenn tilted her head back and forth in consideration. After a couple seconds, she nodded.

"Yeah, I think I would."

"Wow."

Lark's shock gave way to happiness almost immediately. Whatever reservations she had about Brandon personally meant nothing in the face of her friend's happiness. He paid the better half of the rent, did chores when asked, and seemed faithful as a Labrador. Maybe she could do better, but if she didn't want to, she shouldn't have to. Who was Lark to lecture anybody on ambition?

"Oh my god, Jenn, I'm so happy for you!" She reached across the table and grabbed Jenn by the forearms for lack of a proper hug. "Really, holy shit, I am!"

Jenn looked both embarrassed and relieved.

"You don't think I'm rushing into it?"

"No. But as your Maid of Honor, I veto pink and aqua. Make me wear an ugly color, I will kick you in the snatch."

Jenn laughed. The next hour of conversation was occupied with hypothetical details. Lark didn't really absorb any of the answers, at some level she knew she didn't need to, and it was just fun to ask. What color scheme since pink was off the table? When and where did she want the ceremony to take place? Who would Brandon ask to be best man, and was he attractive enough for a one-night stand?

"Knowing your tastes, probably not. No guys in your life?"

"Yeah. That's why I'm asking about banging Brandon's best man. I don't want to talk about me. Tonight is about you."

"We just covered me! Other than delivering groceries and auditing, what have you been up to lately? You don't still go sneaking around other people's houses at night, do you?"

"No," Lark snorted dismissively and took a pull of beer. Jenn gave her a flat stare until Lark glared at her. *How does she always fucking know? I have a great poker face!*

"You seriously have a problem," Jenn said.

Dolly, you have no idea. Despite the beer and the day's exhaustion, she could hear La Miniatura beckoning. It had to be tonight. She knew she should go back to home to sleep or start on that damn book if she was actually going to complete the paper, but she had wanted to see the house for weeks. And nothing was going to keep her from going. Just a little longer.

"If you really want to see my latest obsession, check this out."

Lark pulled out her sketchbook of would-be superheroes and ran Jenn through her favorite ones. They cracked up and laughed themselves sober, though they hardly looked like it, staggering and tripping out of the bar.

"I'm happy for you, Jenn. I really am."

"He hasn't even asked me yet," Jenn said, laughing.

"But he will. And it will be amazing."

"I hope so. I didn't even know what I'd say before you asked, but now that I do...."

"Well. I'll be there when you say 'yes.'"

Lark felt awful walking back to her car. *I'm happy for her.* But Jenn's bliss was a harsh reminder of everything her own life wasn't. She was like a bland Loveline caller. *No, I have not been molested. Yes, my dad is out of the picture. No, I'm not on drugs. Yes, I screwed a lot of people in high school, and most of them were assholes.* The usual prescription was to look for a guy who broke that pattern.

And she tried that. But every normal, stable guy she'd asked out had bored her, or fallen to the standards of her track record. Maybe good relationships didn't exist, and there were only varying degrees of awfulness. Or maybe she was so far gone that it had become hardwired; jerks were the best she would ever do. *No. I don't fucking believe that.*

But you can only hear so many sob stories similar to yours before they become a cage.

Fortunately, La Miniatura was less than ten minutes away. She turned into a ritzy area of west Pasadena. A suburb full of shady trees and two-story houses with healthy lawns and five to six bedrooms. The address was tricky to find. It was on a street so small that it looked like an alleyway between trees as opposed to a public road.

The house's main entrance, which was actually the back entrance, was unassuming. Tall wooden doors covered a garage, next to an open concrete corridor adorned with Wright's signature textile blocks. The blocks featured tiny, equally armed crosses, giving it a holy, yet strangely un-religious look. The area was totally lightless, and there was no visible entryway.

This is definitely the place. She drove three blocks away and parked. It was a precaution she took in case she got caught. Her second precaution was a set of clothes she kept in a gym bag in her trunk. Old warm-up hoodie, yoga pants, and Capezio dance sneakers, all faded black and needing retirement. She jumped into the backseat and donned her half-assed cat suit.

Putting them on felt like part of the ritual. When she was correctly attired in her black threads that stank mildly of sweat, Lark peered through the windows of the car, looking for potential witnesses and pulled her hood up.

She retraced her drive back to the house and strode into the concrete corridor without pause. Hesitation was contagious and it was the best way to get caught. *Dear god, please give me low fences.* This hobby had taught her a lot about climbing and jumping architecture. Nothing impressive enough to be called parkour, but she was slick enough to evade most security guards. So far, she had not had to break anything either. The police, or the lawyers could still probably pin her for 'breaking and entering' with just the entering, because that's how the justice system seemed to work, but she took pride in leaving a small footprint.

It wasn't about leaving her mark on the place. Ruining a place, pissing on it like a dog on a hydrant probably provided a thrill for some people, but not Lark. She didn't want to spy on anyone either. Again, you can find that on the internet. The game of it was to get in, take in the place, and get out without anybody else knowing. Knowing meant headaches for strangers.

The front gate was actually open, which, despite her rule, warranted caution. When a house was for sale, realtors locked the place up because enterprising bums would look up listings and use them to crash. *Dark windows though. I love to see me some dark windows.*

The house was magical. As soon as she slipped in through the gate, she got a powerful charge. Two, maybe three times what she experienced in the pale guy's place, and that was some fucking good coke. She took a deep shuddering breath. *What is it about this?*

The house looked like a castle that had been broken apart and pieces of it were placed around the property as separate smaller buildings. Most had two stories. And the entire thing was made of perfectly cast concrete blocks. It kind of reminded her of full-scale Legos, or that computer game that nerds played. *MyCraft or something.*

She stalked along the garden path that hooked into the property at a hard left from the front gate. A long, narrow pond ran along the length of it and one of the house's bigger buildings. Even at night, she could tell the water was murky. Eventually she came to a lawn with some very weathered wooden furniture, and she took a seat in the finally-cool evening night.

I could spend eternity here. This moment should last forever.

Then a light flicked on inside the house.

Holden woke up gasping on the floor, gripped with panic. In a split second, his brain exploded with a list of dire physiological alarms. *WhereamI? Whathappenedtome? Cantbreath. Hearttoofast. Muscleshurt. Breastsaregone. Whathappenedtomyvagina?!*

It took him ten full seconds to recognize his room and realize he was not Lark Kent.

Chapter 3: The Suicide King

Holden paced his bedroom. *Maybe I made it all up.* Lark's hobbies were weird. *A girl who trespasses for kicks? Who steals courses from local colleges?* Her mind had been so restless, agitated, and eager for adventure. She was almost too alive to be real. But reliving their exchange through her eyes—feeling how he'd inconvenienced, amused, and worried her...it was too detailed, too vivid to be just a dream.

He put his hand down on the floor to steady himself and pressed down on something metal. One of the bullets that had fallen out of the gun.

The gun. The demon. It all came back in a flood.

That's what the man had been, right? Magic. And that sulfuric smell. Holden had read enough fantasy to novels to know that sulfur was an infernal calling card. *But demons aren't a thing. Magic isn't a thing.*

Maybe I finally cracked.

Before he began his seclusion, he carefully researched its feasibility. The countless articles he read reached no hard consensus. Being alone for long periods of time affected everyone differently. Certain people could only bear it a few days before they would start seeing things. Others had the capacity to become lifelong hermits. *Figured I was the latter.*

There was blood on his nose and the carpet. Several of his collectibles lay in a heap on the floor from when the demon teleported away. *Listen to yourself. Let's not get crazy. A nosebleed and some knocked over stuff could mean I fell and got a concussion.* The bullet seemed impossibly cold beneath his palm. *A concussion wouldn't make me go for Boyd's gun.* He looked around the floor. *Where did it fall? Things don't disappear, so where did it go?*

When he tried to stand again, he fell, dizzy and uncoordinated. His limbs felt too long, and his head rang like somebody had tried to break out of his skull with a war hammer. *Is it because Lark's mind stretched mine? Or is it because I lived an entire second day in the space of...nine hours?* The clock on his nightstand read 3 AM.

He staggered into the bathroom and chased two Advil with a glass of tap water then returned to his bedroom to search for the gun. The box of cartridges was still in the drawer of his nightstand, but there was nothing under the bed, dresser, or shelves. After half an hour of increasingly frantic searching, it was clear that the gun was not in his room. Or in any other obvious place in the house. He checked the locks on the doors and examined all the window frames. Everything was sealed.

"Okay. I'm officially fucking rustled."

Why did this happen to me? What the hell did I do?

Yesterday he woke up a couple minutes after eleven, started with the only real routine to his days. Brushed his teeth. Half an hour on the treadmill in the basement, another half doing push-ups, sit-ups, and pull-ups while he watched shows. Holden wasn't a work-out junky by any means, but he had a vested interest in looking after his health. Problems would mean doctors, and doctors would mean going outside.

After working out, he cooked breakfast and ate as he finished building a website that would purvey 'artisan' dogfood. The client wanted the site's primary colors to be turquoise and

violet—*cause enough for demonic retribution, I guess*—and needed it to have a lot of automated emails, an address database, and integrated PayPal and credit card functionality. Nothing new or unusual. When the work was done, he surfed the web a bit and played some games. It was a normal day, in a normal week, in a normal month.

Well. My normal.

Most people were slaves to their routines. A life within four closed walls was free and full of possibilities. Naps. Binge watching. Meals. Marathon gaming. Masturbation. All of it was on the table all the time, and all of it could be done ethically, without hurting or bothering anyone. Save for the occasional phone call with clients, there were no more awkward pauses in meaningless conversations. No more groping for common ground with people whom he had no real desire to meet. And no more betrayals from supposed friends.

Best of all, it was saturated with a sense of actual purpose. In games, Holden had goals. Tasks, objectives, and clear paths of progression, measured in prowess if nothing else. In fiction, he lived lives with meaning. Liberation. Justice. Revenge. Romance. The pursuit of true love. Things happened for a reason.

As a kid, he had hungered for magic. He knew, in his heart of hearts, that he was meant for it. But as he grew older, he realized that fireballs and floating cities—the whole goddamn Hero's Journey—was just a stand-in for being good at something. He was desperate to find something that would level the playing field between him and the people who just seemed to figure life out.

Computer programming had been his foothold. It wasn't some fated calling. Coding didn't come naturally to him. Nothing did. He had to mine it out of the universe. Save for the nights Claude had dragged him to parties or card game tournaments, he spent his entire first year at UC Irvine submerged in the basement of Langson Library. Neutrally colored, quiet, and stale to the atom, it was the only place on campus that was boring enough for him to focus. Slowly, the syntax started to make sense. The things he built began to work. They brought structure to his distractible head. And then Abi struck up a timid conversation with him. *You should have known how that would end.*

Holden found himself back in his bedroom, pausing in front of his collectibles. Most of them were just comic book, video game, and anime characters in heroic poses, but his eyes lingered on the shelf reserved for out-and-out plastic pornography. He knew he was a pervert. He figured most men—most people in general—were. But people couldn't be honest about it when they were together. Alone he was free to collect and admire what he pleased.

But now the sight of them wrung his guts.

No. It was coming from Lark. As if she were still with him. Inside his head. The revulsion wasn't even a reaction to the explicit lewdness. It was him. He knew how other people would react to the dolls. Disgust. Condemnation. That's why he bought them. They were private little "fuck yous" to the world. And it was that dismissal, that rejection of the outside world, that made her feel sick with anger.

Holden violently swept the entire shelf onto the floor. The tiny bodies fell in a tangle. Snap-off heads and interchangeable limbs rolled; a massacre of resin and PVC. He felt like he had been packed into his house with filthy cotton. *I need a shower.*

The hot water reminded him of yesterday, his glimpse into another entire life. Two different perspectives wrestled in his head. His experience of her was literally beyond intimacy. He remembered being her when she had showered, but because her mind was the mold that cast the memories, they weren't titillating.

Throughout the day, there were lots of little reminders of her sex, looks from men, the weight of her breasts as she moved, and the length of her hair against her neck and forehead, but she was so accustomed to them, they barely made a difference.

When she spoke to Jenn, there had been a poignant flash of yearning and memories. No words, or specific moments, but a haze of naked, attractive bodies. It had been a long time for her. He experienced Lark's loneliness and his own attraction towards her simultaneously. He grabbed himself, stroked, and finished explosively with the memory. It cut through the throb in his head, leaving him tired.

He walked into his bedroom and was out before he could pull up the sheets.

The exhaustion had cleared when he woke the second time, but Holden was still raw from the experience. In some ways his body felt alien, while other parts of it were hyper sensitive. His skin seemed to vibrate against the sheets. To him, skin was just a barrier. He was hardly aware of it. Whereas Lark thought of it as an organ for touch. Now his body ached for input. It needed wind. Sunlight.

What? No. Despair flooded his nerves, did battle with the eager new presence in his mind like it was an infection.

Why risk going outside because of a dream? What the hell do you think you're going to find out there? His breathing shallowed, as it had when Lark entered his home uninvited. Eventually he managed to gulp down air and steady his breathing. When he swallowed, his stomach answered with a savage rumble. *I haven't eaten in eighteen hours.*

He jogged downstairs and munched on cereal as he waited for eggs to boil. The cereal was drier than he remembered, sharper against his gums, and the eggs tasted like rubber, but it was also the first time he remembered consciously tasting his food in ages. Something in him stirred. He pulled out a package of bacon, and a packet of instant ramen, and began to cook. The ramen's spices were intense, like he was eating it for the first time. And the bacon, cooked to a delicious salty crunch, was insane. It lit a lamp in the fog of dread.

I need to get out of here. The thought came again. It was coming from his own mind, but it wasn't his voice. It was Lark. She was still with him. *I'm trapped in you, like you're trapped in this fucking box. Let me out. Just for an hour.*

Again, anxiety answered. *What about the dogfood site? You said you'd be done by today. Besides, this isn't the best neighborhood.* In general, Pasadena was a nice, safe city, but the area above the 210 Freeway was a bit patchy. *I'll probably get mugged a block from home. Actually, at the rate my luck has been going, I'll be jumped by a troll when I reach the bridge. And where would I go?*

You could take the Gold Line to J-Town. Get some real ramen.

That was enough to settle it. He missed ramen.

In ten minutes, he was dressed and out the door. The morning sunlight sobered him, nearly driving Lark's presence back into the recesses of his mind. It took a full minute to adjust to the glare, and he could feel his skin sizzle like his breakfast's bacon. But Lark persisted. *Come on. You got this, and I need this.* He pressed on, starting to jog. Streets were harder than his treadmill. He stumbled for a couple blocks, and nearly sprained himself before finding his rhythm. Then he was pushing hard to outrun his demons.

As he continued toward Lake Avenue, his mind drifted back to yesterday. Lark's day.

The lecture leapt out at him. *She hears about demons and Paradise Lost the day I meet a demon? That can't be a coincidence.* If it had been planned, the Pinstriped Man must have stalked Lark. Or been some kind of clairvoyant. More specifically, he would have had to know what happened to Lark yesterday and know that Holden would see her.

He had reached Lake before he knew it. It was a busy artery that grew richer the further south you traveled. At the southern edge, there were expensive boutiques and big-name department stores, but he was starting from the north, leaving him about six blocks of strip malls, fast food joints, gas stations, and people with lean and hungry looks to traverse.

As with Lark, Holden was wracked by the irrational fear that people could sense his year of absence, that they would somehow know he was out of practice at being a person. He kept his head down, avoided all eye contact.

I'm not the droid you're looking for. Move along, move along.

Nothing seemed to have changed drastically since he went into hiding. Fashion seemed much the same, but he'd never been great at grasping it even when he was in the thick of it. The same buildings stood where he had left them. Car designers were apparently the laziest motherfuckers on the planet. *I had no expectations and yet I'm still disappointed.*

When he reached the last crosswalk leading to the bridge that led to the metro station, a homeless man with a curly mass of black hair and brown skin was standing on the corner, holding up a sign. *Indian? Pakistani? Arab maybe?* The man was remarkably well-dressed for a panhandler; he wore charcoal slacks, a white button up shirt begging for an iron, and a tan blazer slung over his shoulder. With his other hand, he held a cardboard sign that read:

Will Shrink for Food or \$\$\$

What the hell is 'Shrinking?' Isn't a sex thing. The internet had exposed Holden to everything from extreme BDSM to *My Little Pony* smut. If there was some weird new kink out there, he would have stumbled across it.

The man caught him looking and smiled. *Ah shit.* The light turned green. Holden half considered cutting to the left and looping around to the station from the other end of the bridge but decided to cross. The man kept his eyes on him the whole time.

"You look like you need a therapist!" the man called.

The assertion caught him off-guard. He gaped, then glared. The man immediately held up his hands and backed off when he saw he had caused offense. His accent was more British than Indian, posher than Holden would have expected from a panhandler.

"Sorry. I just meant you look like you could use somebody to talk to. I can be that somebody. Professional psychiatrist, with a recently lapsed license. My rate is a hot meal and anything you feel like tipping if my advice seems helpful."

What the fuck? Was this a thing now? He shook his head. *Shoot the com.*

"No thanks."

The man bowed understandingly and turned his attention back to the street. Despite himself, Holden couldn't help but looking over his shoulder at the man. *Lapsed? How could you be a professional psychiatrist if you didn't have a valid license? You can't obviously. That's why he's standing on a street corner.*

The top of Lake's metro station was designed to look craftsman, with a green roof, metal beams painted brown to look like wood, and orange stained glass windows. Pasadena was regarded as an incubator for the Arts and Crafts movement. Craftsman architecture favored natural and hand-crafted materials, like wood, stone, clinker brick, and textile concrete. Green and Green were the movement's two most famous members. Holden's house was the work of one of their students; a genuine Craftsman, but largely beneath the city's notice.

The city's only other claim to fame, so far as Holden knew, was the Tournament of Roses; a New Year's celebration comprised of the Rose Parade and the Rose Bowl. On January first, a procession of floats decorated with nothing but fruit, plants, and flowers would head down Colorado Boulevard. It was broadcast all over the country, accompanied by chatter from various morning show talking heads. Walking Orange Grove Boulevard on New Year's Eve to watch the floats stage themselves had been a tedious Lockheed family tradition. Boyd was too cheap to buy tickets for the actual parade. Holden was less familiar with the Rose Bowl. It was a college football game that occurred in the eponymous stadium following the parade, and it was nicknamed the "Granddaddy of Them All," but he had no idea if that meant it was the first bowl game ever, the first college game, or what. Sports weren't his thing.

He cautiously approached a ticket kiosk, as if he expected it to run away. But it took his credit card and spat out a pass. The train platform was beneath the bridge where the station sat, wedged between the Southbound and Northbound threads of the 210 freeway, and crowded with commuters. He froze on the stairs. His heart seized up at the sight of them. There were too many people. He remembered Lark's assessment of him. His weird hair, and impossibly pale skin. The obvious tension behind all of his movements.

I can't do this. I can't fucking do this.

He dropped the card and broke into a jog, back the way he came. He blew past the weird fake psychiatrist, across the street, even though the light was yellow. People honked. He kept running, half-pacing, half-jogging at every red light, until he finally reached home, broken and breathless.

He buried himself in work for the rest of the afternoon. The mental impression Lark had left on him wasn't gone; it kept begging his body to explore, to leave and do something else. He bludgeoned the impulses with the memory of him bolting from the crowd, face hot with shame.

Dinner was tasteless again. He zoned out to a video game he did not remember playing, paged through a book without retaining a single word. His attempts to silence and exorcise Lark

were silenced by a single question: *Am I going to see her again tonight?* It reached a fever pitch as he lay in bed. He fantasized about her almost reflexively. And having been or, at least having experienced everything she had, his imagination could do some incredibly compelling simulations, not just of how she looked, but what she would feel. After a moment he was nearly gasping, drenched with sweat. Every erogenous zone in his body was standing at attention on high alert.

Fuck. He got up angrily to masturbate once more, walking into his game room. There was no other way he'd be able to sleep. He sat down to his computer and booted his browser. As soon as the clock struck three minutes after midnight, however, he passed out as if he'd been struck dead. His head sagged forward and hit his gaming desk hard enough to leave a bruise. He lay on the floor, breathing deep with sleep, dick in hand.

This time he stood in a forest of living sculptures, trees whose trunks grew in Celtic knots and basket-like weaves that formed cages, columns, bridges, and furniture. As he wandered, he realized the wood was connected at the roots, and branches. They formed a shared, verdant canopy, backlit by a brilliant sun that bathed the ground in emerald light. It wasn't long before he discovered the first portrait. A homeless man painted in a blurry, impressionistic style, with buzzing shades of yellow.

Holden had barely seen the man. Prior to arriving in the forest, he would not have been able to describe him. And the picture was abstract to a degree that the subject was difficult to recognize. Yet Holden knew it was him with certainty and remembered him clearly. He had had bad teeth and copper hair fading to gray, greenish eyes, and sun-beaten skin. Despite the ungodly heat he wore a jeans jacket over a camo shirt and gray pants stuffed into boots on the verge of disintegrating.

And then Holden spied the others. Row upon row of portraits, framed in the fanciful trees. People he had passed while walking on Lake. The crowd standing on the subway platform. The driver who had honked at him, face twisted in a snarl. The pictures' styles varied distinctly from subject to subject. Some were rendered on oil and canvas. Some were realistic, others surreal, and some were so abstract they were rendered in circles triangles and dots, but as Holden laid eyes on each one, he remembered the person they represented.

He came across the street-corner shrink, rendered in the style of an enormous playing card; the kind with the mirrored king. He was thrusting swords in his with their right hands, while their left hands each held half of the cardboard sign:

Will Shrink for Food or \$\$\$

Holden kept walking. He saw a pack of emo teenagers which he recognized from the train stop, their portraits rendered in denim patches, pins, and graffiti like ribbons of paint. Each was moving. Arresting, even. But he had already made up his mind.

Lark must be here.

Except she wasn't. He explored the strange forest for untold hours. It was difficult to track time and the space seemed to loop on him. The only people present were those he had seen that day. *If this is my mind, my gift, I should be able to use it the way I want to.*

Holden closed his eyes and tried to will her into being. He reached inside himself, feeling around for energy, but he couldn't even find his pulse. It was like he was a ghost here. Hanging his head in disappointment, he wandered back through the trees, finding the shrink's portrait. He took a deep breath and placed his hand on the playing card.

Reza's cell phone blared at 5AM. He groped for it without opening his eyes or moving from his pillows. His hands found his pack of cigarettes instead. *Good enough.* The din continued as he rolled over and reached for his lighter. After lighting up, he seriously considered throwing the phone as hard as he could into the parking lot. He was camped out in another Walmart, the preferred drive-in motel of practiced vagrants.

He switched the alarm off and reclined in the trunk of his newly purchased but very used Ford Escape, along with all his earthly possessions. There were three suitcases and two duffel bags full of clothing. He used his two blazers as blackout curtains in case he gave in to temptation and slept in late. Near the hatch were a couple boxes that held a few documents that could be used to pull off safe and simple low-grade forgeries, and several bound volumes of various California legal codes for different industries. In a leather satchel, he had a decent Toshiba laptop and a forged passport. All things he acquired before leaving Idaho.

Reza checked his location on his phone. Apparently, he was in a suburb called Duarte. A quick web search told him it was as close as you could come to the middle of nowhere when you were still surrounded by other suburbs and cities. That meant there was probably a minor drug trade. He could sell a few forged scripts for Adderall or Vicodin and be gone before anybody knew the scripts wouldn't work in California. But he needed to reach Los Angeles as soon as possible. That's where his answers waited, if they existed at all.

Besides, his new hustle was safer, and it actually helped people. It required a more affluent city to work, however. *I should have learned programming instead and gone into finance. Good work with fellow criminals. But no, you wanted to help people. As if sitting in a leather chair listening to first-world problems six hours a day could make up for two and a half decades of dirty deeds in Mumbai and Canada.* Maybe that's what it was all about. Guilt.

About a year ago, his memory began to fail him. Or rather, it began to contradict itself. He remembered growing up in Mumbai all too clearly, being groomed by the Punjabi Mafia, and heading to Canada on their behalf. That was all clear. But he couldn't remember exactly how he got out. There were two versions of the most important story in his life, and he couldn't remember which one was real.

In one version, the version that had seemed real for the past five years, he had negotiated several very lucrative deals on behalf of the mob, and then he used his money, skills and connections to disappear and acquire a forged psychiatric doctorate from India.

He passed the necessary tests and did a brief residency at St. Luke's in Boise to transfer his credentials to the US. The subsequent three years he spent practicing psychiatry in Boise

were also bedrock. But the bridge, the transition from Canada to Idaho began to crumble when he remembered Aasim. Or rather, when he tried to remember Aasim.

Chupa Rustam. Those were the words that brought him back. A Hindi-speaking patient paid him the compliment. It literally translated to ‘hidden warrior,’ but the meaning was closer to ‘unassuming man of great cunning.’ It had been Aasim’s pet name for him.

His dominant memories led him to believe he voluntarily severed ties with his entire team. *But there was no way I could have left Aasim.* They were partners in every sense of the word. *We were in love.* But Reza could scarcely remember him, to the point where he seemed like a dream.

After months of picking at that knot, a different story began. They had completed a lucrative deal in Canada, but after that, things went south and they fled to Los Angeles. The rest was clouded. He was searching for something. Negotiating. Investigating. *But for what? And at whose behest?*

Those questions compelled him to ask his former colleagues at St. Luke’s for details. But their memories were also spotty. Or rather, they also became spotty. And by digging into his own past, he started a chain reaction that led the medical board to discover he was a fraud.

Now he was on the lam for practicing psychiatry illegally for the past three years, and he still had no idea what happened. Part of him wanted to stick around and see how things played out in court. But he knew they would dig deeper into his past, and discover he was a much worse criminal than he appeared. He would face extradition for trafficking. True trouble.

How could I forget Aasim? Dissociative amnesia was the only possibility. *But five years?*

He mulled it over for the thousandth time as he smoked, catching the ashes in his hand. When he was down to the filter, he flung it all outside, and then Googled the nearest Fit World. Their nearest gym was in another suburb of Los Angeles called Pasadena. He lit another cigarette and crawled into the driver’s seat. The name sounded familiar.

Isn’t that the city with the New Year’s flower parade? Charming place, I’m sure.

It was also a rich place, from what Reza saw. He could tell by the cars alone. The gym parking lot hosted a special edition of the modern Camaro, a new Jaguar, two BMWs and a Tesla. And it was only half-past five AM. There could be a score here.

He put on his freshest pair of workout clothes and grabbed his tan blazer, a white dress shirt, and a pair of dark gray pants. His Fit World membership ended up being one of the best investments he ever made. It had yielded the bare requisite of exercise when he lived in Boise, but since he began his exodus, it had also given him free showers everywhere he needed them. It was a *jugaad*—an unorthodox solution to everyday problems.

Reza worked the weights for about half an hour, and then ran sprints for an hour. He didn’t get off on it like some people did. He could barely tolerate it. And he was built as a distance runner rather than a sprinter. But there was a hell of a lot to be said for being able to run for your life. *It isn’t something you have to do terribly often, but when the day comes, you want to be good and ready.* After the cardio, he found a sauna, where he stretched, and then rested in a hot tub. *A vagabond could do much worse.*

After that, he showered, shampooed, and shaved, examining himself in the mirror. His skin was starting to tan again, after five years in a shaded office, and he was trading fat for lean muscle, though he had never been overweight in his life. *Not bad. My hair needs a trim though.* It was a mass of black curls that seemed to defy gravity, floating out from his head in every direction. *Can't be helped today.* He put on his business clothes, which were still suave, wrinkled though they were. The creases would actually help him play his part.

People were not used to well-dressed panhandlers. It was awful advertising that invited an obvious objection: *If you can afford a blazer, why do you need my money?* Other beggars in particular took umbrage. You'd have to be crazy to attempt it.

Or very clever.

A lot of people claimed to be out-of-work professionals, but very few people bothered, or were able, to dress the part. False credentials or not, he was a great psychiatrist, and he intended to put the skills to use. It worked too, especially in the tonier towns where people assumed they would be on a candid camera-type show, or that they had happened onto an elaborate marketing stunt. Instead, he ate a meal they paid for, listened to their problems and gave them advice. Most patients felt better with a platitude. When people actually needed prolonged help, or medication, he explained he was passing through, and told them to seek something more permanent.

He left the gym refreshed and walked the streets until he found a coffee shop. He used his phone to read up on Pasadena while he drank his coffee and ate a stale pastry. When he finished, he spent the next two hours truly meeting the city, walking its streets as it woke up, studying the body language of its denizens. The west end of Colorado Boulevard was filled with a lot of fairly new buildings for a part of California that was supposedly quite old. The people who were up early seemed fatigued and stressed. As the minutes ticked by, raw sunlight burned away the early fog of passive aggression. The brightness made it much harder for Reza to read people. Sunglasses obscured the most crucial parts of a face, and the swelter tended to melt individual personalities into stupid animal logic.

It would have made him nostalgic if he had anything other than contempt for Mumbai.

The street corners on Colorado were not good for begging. Or rather, other buskers and beggars had already staked claims on each of them. *There are rules.* Infractions did not always result in retribution, but having an outsider cut into your territory hurt. Reza hit the west edge of Colorado's commercial stretch and turned back.

He walked until he hit Lake, another main thoroughfare, and then headed north. After crossing a bridge with a metro station, he finally arrived at a promising corner. The light cycle was languid; on one side of the intersection there was an off-ramp, and the other an onramp. The neighborhoods to the north were clearly poorer than the rest of the city, but the street he walked up was lined with expensive retailers and seemed like a major artery for the city. *How has nobody claimed this spot?*

The first three hours were atrocious. It was all atrocious until people were giving you money. A couple people in cars asked him "What will you shrink?" all smirks and sneers. He answered questions for the curious and gave the hecklers indulgent grins. A couple passersby gave him some loose change. He could see the self-satisfaction or pity on their faces. Every

panhandler provided a service to those who cared: Catharsis. They were examples of seemingly worse-case scenarios, reminders that anybody could lose anything.

He began to analyze and diagnose passersby for sport. *Angry woman, murmuring to herself. Dressed up in a conservative skirt, blazer and heels she isn't used to walking in. Oops, caught me looking. Now's she's blushing and even madder. Going in for an interview or an important meeting. Man in his mid-forties in a polo shirt and shorts. Broad shoulders, slight gut, walks with a slight limp. Scar over his right knee. Some kind of sports injury. Probably ACL. Football maybe? Not really looking where he's going now. Stuck in the past. Cheers to good company. Now a young kid. Literal shifty eyes. Nervous as sin. Probably trying to ride the metro without a ticket.* Sure enough the kid jumped the gate when nobody was looking.

A headache began to creep up on him. Reza had been able to read faces since he was born, but he had honed the talent with practice and research. Now it happened automatically unless he made a conscious effort to shut it off. But it still taxed his head, and the constant stream of faces and people were taking a toll. He shrugged off his blazer and slung it over his shoulder. Eventually, he succumbed to telling lame jokes to pedestrians, mostly for his own benefit. Got a few more bucks for the meager stand-up routine.

Bored by scenery and wearied by frustration, his mind began to devour itself.

How could I have pulled a con so thorough that I believed it myself? Hypnosis? You could only do so much. You can help people forget trauma, or even suggest memories... but overwriting existing memories with others? With that fidelity of detail? Maybe. But erasing love? Impossible.

Reza was surprisingly comfortable with leaving the last five years of his life behind. His residency had been tiring, and he never connected with any of his legitimate peers. Even the three years after, where he ran a meager practice, had been lonely. A few buddies who knew his name at the bar. A couple one-night stands and blind dates. But they all felt wrong somehow. His patients felt very close to him, but he had to draw hard lines when they became infatuated, or overly familiar. *I may be a fraud, but I have principles. Had principles.*

Look at me now. A begging manju. A curbside Romeo with a cardboard valentine.

"Hey!"

There was a middle-aged woman leaning out of a bright pink Mazda Miata. Late thirties to early forties. Blonde by dye. Skin that had seen a little too much sun. At least one boob job. Bright pink lip gloss, the same hue as her car, meant for somebody half her age. An honest to god leopard print top, and her face seemed to glow with neurosis. *Good god, she's a human lawn-flamingo; how out of it was I?* Reza smiled and stubbed his cigarette on the overpass wall.

"Hello! Sorry, I'm afraid I lost myself for a moment."

"You're a psychiatrist?"

"Yes! Yes, I am."

The woman laughed nervously.

"How does this work?"

Reza shrugged and smiled.

"We go and sit-down somewhere. Chat for about an hour. You tell me your problems and I tell you what I think. When we're done you pay me what you feel is reasonable."

The woman unlocked her passenger side door.

“Get in.”

They drove to a fast food place called The Hat, further up on Lake. Reza stuffed his face with pastrami and listened to Deborah evade the sad but obvious truth: she had been a sugar momma for the past two years. For the purposes of this conversation, Reza’s name would be Rahul. If you were ethnic in the States, no ethnic name would ever sound fake or made up.

“So he said that we would have our wedding as soon as he finished his masters, and I waited so long now, but he says that he wants to go for his doctorate. That’s another three years at minimum, and I’m just so tired of waiting. If he’s not serious, I mean, I’ll only be able to have kids for another few years...”

Reza took a deep breath and considered how to proceed.

“How long was it after you divorced Gregory before you started dating Todd?”

“A really long time. Like half a year,” she said quickly.

Tiny flash of annoyance there. People had brought this up with her before. No hesitation when she said a long time, but she made up the waiting period. He stared at her with apologetic but focused skepticism and waited for her to come clean or get mad. She caved.

“It may have been faster than that. But I waited long enough. I was ready to move on with my life. Greg left me with almost nothing, and I wasn’t getting any prettier.”

Reza nodded.

“I know. But even though you were the best thing to happen to Todd, and I believe you were, I don’t think he ever expected this would work out. And he still doesn’t.”

Deborah’s mouth made a perfect ‘o’ shape that might have been adorable on an eight-year-old. But the weird thing is, it wasn’t an affected reaction. *This woman is a human cartoon.* Reza pressed on.

“You said he just moved from Iowa and you met him almost three years ago. That means the semester had just started at Cal-tech. Like most grad students, I imagine he was struggling with debt and barely staying afloat with his studies. They try to drown you. Anyway, a night of sex with a more experienced, attractive woman,” Reza wanted to retch but his face betrayed nothing, “was a huge stress reliever and confidence booster. You said yourself, you thought it was a one-night stand.

“But you met again. This time there was more talking. You offered to let him stay over, cooked him breakfast. Things got serious quick. It was the best possible thing for him. You let him move out of the dorms, helped him with a tuition payment. He couldn’t believe his luck.”

Todd Renschler found a lonely west coast mommy who would cook, clean, and pay his tuition out of her enormous divorce settlement for the privilege of sucking his cock. But he is gunning for a PhD in Chemistry and you are just a catalyst for his grand plan. He is playing you like a fiddle. Her face fell to the table and her mouth hung slightly.

“You said that he’s been sweet, but did he ever take you to see his parents? Introduce you to his friends?”

“Oh yes, we went out a lot! I’m very popular with his friends.”

The answer came a little too eagerly, and not because she was trying to defend the integrity of the relationship. There was a strange pride on her face and something suggestive in

her tone. *Oh god, he and a buddy had double-teamed her, or something similar.* This time Reza did falter for half a second, brain gagging on the unwanted mental picture. *She's proud of it too. She has no idea that he was passing her around like a party whore.* Reza suddenly had an incredible desire to find Todd and drive a knee into his groin.

"What about his parents?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever talked to them? Come home for the holidays?"

"No, they don't have enough money to fly him home, or fly out here. I told him I could take us over there, said I wanted to meet them, but he said he didn't want to me to. He was angry, because they had promised to help with tuition, and then cut him loose when he got out here. They've practically disowned each other."

I'm sure that's what he said. This woman liked sign-posts and Reza had to act like he was coming to a difficult conclusion, or she would walk away miserable. That was not the goal. He adopted the most psychiatric pose he could think of, folding his hands together and touching the tips of his pointer fingers to his philtrum.

"Does he have a cellphone?"

"Of course. Do you think I should steal it?"

No. What is wrong with you?

"Err, possibly. But first, can you tell me if you pay for the data plan?"

"No," she shook her head, failing to make a connection.

"Does he pay for it?"

She hesitated, wondering where he was going with this, but stopped and thought a moment. He supposedly had no money but he had a phone and a phone plan. So who was paying for the phone?

"Don't you think it's strange that his parents would keep paying his phone bills if they don't talk anymore?"

"Oh my god," her eyes welled up.

She started to bawl. Other people stared. Reza ignored them and took her hands from across the table. He genuinely felt for her. Yes, she was pretty dumb and had a remarkable lack of wisdom for being forty. But her pain was real, and the worse part was that it would go this way for the rest of her life. The pattern had been established. Somebody could help her if she had a support network, but from what she told him earlier people had tried, and she alienated them when they didn't support her love. Pills and therapy can only do so much.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What, what should I do?"

"I'd take the rest of the day off. Chat with a friend if you can. Maybe look for another psychiatrist with a valid license. But I think you know how this ends. You have to cut him loose. He won't make it easy either. He'll act sweet, and sad, and desperate, because you are very useful to him. But he won't keep the promises he makes. And one day, he'll leave."

"No...He's...He writes me notes! Letters. Nobody writes letters anymore! It's all texts and phone calls and emails and... He fixes things for me. Greg and all the other men I've been with, they were all so... dumb! Todd is ambitious. He is going to change the world!"

"But he doesn't want to change it with you, Debbie. You deserve better."

He'd ignored her requests to use her nickname until now. Knew it was a card he might need to play. More sobbing. Everybody in the tiny, yellow and red-checkered restaurant was looking at them now, or pointedly ignoring them. Reza continued to hold her hand, wanting desperately to walk outside and smoke half a dozen cigarettes.

I think I got through. If I convinced her to ditch this selfish, manipulative little twerp, I've managed to do some good. But he didn't feel like it and she probably wouldn't feel like it, either. She might try to stiff him with the bill instead of giving him any money. *I thought the money didn't matter? Aren't you making the world a better, brighter place?*

He told himself it was about helping people. But alone, at night, he often wondered how many lives he had actually saved or repaired. There were very few epiphanies or moments of clarity, and all of them were like this, miserable and deeply traumatic. Most of his patients in Boise used him as a legal drug dealer, misrepresented their symptoms, or resented him any time he proposed a change in anything other than prescriptions.

After a couple years of lying to powerful men with powerful guns, it was very easy to want stability. In the quiet moments, your deeds always caught up with you, like the realization that the heroin you were moving in Ontario was killing people throughout the country. The families who got addicted and those unlucky enough to get caught in the crossfire between the Punjabi and Hell's Angels. It was hard not to feel like you had something to atone for.

There had been a lot of those awful little epiphanies. But the truth was, doing good meant a lot of hard work every day to accomplish next to nothing. High crime meant a couple weeks or months of planning, a two-to-five-hour performance, and then enough money to live comfortably for the next quarter year... save for the constant threat of incarceration or death, depending on the stakes.

That seemed to be the choice. Futile noble intentions or destructive selfish happiness. *What's really waiting for you in Los Angeles, Reza? Are you prepared to find what you're looking for?* Reza squeezed the sobbing woman's hands and stood up.

"Wh-where...?"

"I'm sorry, but I need to go now."

"B-but, I don't know how to..."

"I know, but we can't figure this out over burgers. And you need some time alone."

She tried to say something else and offered to pay him for twenty more minutes but Reza waived it off and walked out of the restaurant. He lit up a cigarette and continued on in a trance. Moments of clarity weren't always traumatic. Sometimes they were just tragic, and Reza had finally found his. He was dead the moment he left Boise. Maybe before that. If Los Angeles held more of the same it wasn't worth it.

I could barely even remember their faces. Gupta. And Dimitri. Aasim's face was still clear, but it made him flinch to conjure it. What happened to you, my love? What happened to me?

When he reached Colorado Boulevard again, he had run out of cigarettes. *I thought I had at least four left. My memory must be getting worse.* He found a bodega further up Lake, bought two packs, heedless of his normally meticulous budget, and started smoking hungrily, walking south in a daze.

He walked half the length of Lake before he realized he had lost his sign. Cardboard wasn't hard to come by, but it was annoying. His feet were starting to get sore. He looked up a park where he could think, and on the way there, he Googled himself.

Dr. Reza Khan was still a wanted man. If the authorities had discovered that he was a former drug dealer for the Punjabi Mafia, it was not a fact that had found its way to the news yet. The police considered him to be dangerous though, which was a telling detail. *They know more than they are letting on. Meanwhile, I know nothing. What caused all this?*

About twenty minutes later he reached Memorial Park, a precious little knoll with an amphitheater on top. He lay down on the grass, smoking as he stared at the sky. Then something snapped. Like a rubber band breaking free inside his head. The whiplash was excruciating, but it came with a memory.

He was back in Toronto, in the trendy brick and glass apartment that served as their safe house. Deepak Gupta had showed him, Dimitri, and Aasim an email. It was the way out. Working with a Firm. The word had a strange emphasis in his head, Firm with a capital "F" as opposed to a normal collective of lawyers. The pain in his head intensified until he passed out.

When he woke, Reza could not remember passing out, the pain, or the memory, but he had a headache and an inescapable sense of defeat. The sun was setting on him. Figuratively and literally. *I want to die.* Or rather, he wanted to admit that death had already happened.

It was hard to tell when he stopped living. Maybe he was effectively stillborn, and it had happened all the way back in the mills, when he had to sell out other kids to survive. Perhaps the mafia beat it out of him. But he had never become the good person he hoped to be. When all was said and done, he was still just a swindler working for his own self-interest.

His stomach was trying to eat him from the inside. *A last supper is in order. Booze. That is the best possible idea right now. You're looking to kill yourself, yeah? Nothing like some fatty food and a gallon of depressants to grease the proceedings.*

As the orange glow on the horizon faded, he stumbled back to Colorado, and walked into the first bar he found. It struck him as big, loud, bright, and dumb. There were a couple motorcycles—*choppers!*—and what looked like half a British double-decker bus on one wall. *A fitting purgatory. Too strange for heaven. Too benign for hell.*

He was seated by a skinny Latina and handed an enormous menu. He ordered a Jack and Coke, followed by a bowl of soup and a steak. Then he tried to see how many beers he could order in a row. The cocktail had more soda than it ought to for the price, the steak was tough, but the beer was beer—Reza was not a connoisseur. Before the waitress could get suspicious, Reza said that a friend would be joining him, and ordered a pitcher and a quesadilla. When he tried to order a second, the cute Latin girl smirked and shook her head.

"I think you've had enough until your friend gets here."

Reza laughed. He was drunk as hell.

"Rosaline, I'm afraid she cancelled on me. Trying to drink away the disappointment."

"Aww, that's never a good idea."

“Rosaline, you are absolutely right.”

She laughed in a way that made him nervous. *Shit. Her name is Rosaline, right?* His mind usually took in details like that automatically. He glanced at her nametag with far less subtlety than usual. It was Rosaline. *Well thank god for that. This almost got awkward.*

“Did you drive here? Do you need a cab?”

“Rosaline, I am a professional pedestrian.”

She laughed again and patted him on the shoulder. Five minutes later she set down the check. He put down enough cash to cover his meal and a two-hundred percent tip. The waitress earned it twice over for having a sense of humor and minding her own business. Rare qualities that deserved rewards.

Colorado Boulevard was warm and he was pleasantly numb. There were lots of people having fun. The shopping and dining sprawl gave way to a luxury car dealership and a supermarket. So far as he could tell, Pasadena was a classy, fun little city. A spoiled but happy teenager of a town relative to the rest of the world.

He took a deep breath to compose himself, summoned all of his acting ability and walked into the store casually. He grabbed a bottle of Johnny Walker Black and another carton of Camels. He proceeded to the register, placed it on the belt and fished out his wallet. The checker, a young man with a thick tendril of black hair covering one eye, either didn't notice his insobriety or didn't care.

The plastic seal was off the bottle before Reza stepped out of the market, and he took a long pull in the parking lot. He crossed the street and peered in the car dealership's showroom, staring at the hard-candy sheen of beautiful, hopelessly impractical machines he would never own. Then he continued west, up a hill.

An oxidized hunk of bronze in the shape of a nude man, deep in thought, was planted in the garden of a museum. *Is this a sign?* It was a famous statue, but not quite famous enough for him to remember the name. He stood there for a couple minutes, getting steadily drunker, trying to decide if God-ordained signs existed. *If this is a sign, the divine must be relying on some form of machine-translation that understands human perspectives very poorly. Who am I kidding?* The Hindu-Muslim riots of '92 and '93 were enough to put Reza off religion forever. He saw people trampled, tear gassed, and set on fire by Molotovs. *God does not play dice with the universe, but that's because there are no gods. Only dice and debtors.*

He met an intersection. There was an ornate war memorial-slash-flagpole and a bridge off to his right, catty-corner across the street there was a tiny shaded park, and he walked over there instead. Past a second memorial, across a lawn, and a tunnel of greenery, Reza found himself at the foot of a large regal bridge.

It was beautiful. A structure from a bygone era, built on a scale that was still impressive today. A curving lane of lamps—white clusters of globes glowing over an empty groove of darkness. *Not quite a canyon, but definitely a deep channel. And no roads beneath it.*

Intrigued, Reza opened up his phone and looked up the location. A couple links showed him he was standing on the Colorado Street Bridge, colloquially known as the Suicide Bridge. *Gods or not, signs exist, and if this isn't a sign, I don't know what is.* Reza did a quick heel kick, tipped an invisible bowler with his free hand, and started to stroll down the sidewalk.

The bridge had alcoves along the edge with concrete benches, flanked by pairs of lamps. A high, spiked fence lined the entire length of the bridge. *What the hell are the spikes for? If you're going to jump, they won't make you any less dead. It will just take longer and hurt more. The spikes are just encouragement to get it right on the first try.*

When Reza reached the middle of the bridge, he peered through the bars and into the darkness below. After a moment of squinting, he could tell that there was a concrete channel running through a park, or a small nature preserve. The channel was almost completely dry; not a water supply, small risk of contamination. Aiming for the preserve would probably be more considerate to the police, but if the earth was muddy down there, it was conceivable that he could survive and end up in a vegetative state. *Better aim for the channel then.*

He sank onto the hard bench and took a long drink. It was quiet. Weirdly, this was a far more peaceful fate than he would have guessed for himself. He always wondered what it would be like to fly, if only for a few seconds.

There were worse ways to go than dying with a wish granted.