

# STRANGENESS IN THE PROPORTION





Cover illustration by Christopher Shy  
Cover design by Richard Thomas

© 2011 CCP hf. All rights reserved. Reproduction without the written permission of the publisher is expressly forbidden, except for the purposes of reviews, and one printed copy which may be reproduced for personal use only. White Wolf, Vampire and World of Darkness are registered trademarks of CCP hf. All rights reserved. Vampire the Masquerade, Vampire the Requiem,

Werewolf the Forsaken, Mage the Awakening, Promethean the Created, Storytelling System and Parlor Games are trademarks of CCP hf. All rights reserved. All characters, names, places and text herein are copyrighted by CCP hf. CCP North America Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of CCP hf. The mention of or reference to any company or product in these pages is not a challenge to the trademark or copyright concerned. This book uses the supernatural for settings, characters and themes. All mystical and supernatural elements are fiction and intended for entertainment purposes only. This book contains mature content. Reader discretion is advised.

Check out White Wolf online at <http://www.white-wolf.com>

Quote from "Reading the Entrails: A Rondel" by Neil Gaiman, © 1997 by Neil Gaiman; used by permission of the author.

# STRANGENESS IN THE PROPORTION

by Joshua Alan Doetsch

# DEDICATION

For Chad and for John and for Papa.

You are missed.

I hope there are Kindles or Nooks for you to see this from—  
wherever you are.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All acknowledgment starts with my parents. Thanks, Mom and Dad, for your unwavering faith in my very impractical life choices—no one was as surprised as me when they started paying off. (I have to say, though, that I am a little resentful of the ideal parenting and lack of childhood tragedy in the home; it really hurts my angsty writer street cred.) And to my younger siblings, Nick and Danielle, for making me tell them the ever-adapting, increasingly violent version of that fairy tale every single bedtime. (Goldilocks got what she deserved, in the end.)

To Nancy Perkins, for though I've had many teachers, you are my mentor, and that is not a term I use lightly. To Joanna Beth Tweedy, David Logan, Chad Baldwin, Donna Mullen, Stacey Anderson Laatsch, Edward Myers, and everyone in the UIS writing crew—hanging out with you folks and sharing our craft were some of the best times of my life. To Dave, Adrienne, Val, Genenda, Zack, Aimee, Claire, Ken, and Torrie, for taking the time to read my stuff and give me feedback. To the Twilight Tales crew—I miss the Red Lion Pub so much I had to put its ghost into one of the chapters. To Mr. Nance, for kicking me out of Basic English in high school.

To my editor, James Lowder, for having to deal with an amateur messily stumbling through his first novel. Any good bits in this book likely have their origin in his guidance.

To White Wolf Publishing, both for holding the contest that started this novel (and getting our mutant lovechild out into the light of day) and for producing the material that has tickled my imagination for years. One day, a high school version of me held a copy of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (2nd ed.) in his hands; marveled at the feel of the weighty tome, the promise of darkling wonders within; and he knew (*knew*) that opening this book was important—opening a door.

To White Wolf's many fans—with a special thanks to Marshall Finch, for lending a scalpel-sharp set of proofing eyes. And thanks to those I have gamed with and those with whom I may yet game. Grab your dice, lovelings, and lets you and me tell a story.

And finally, to Proto Me, the wide-eyed guy who entered that novel contest several years back. Thanks for all the sweat and blood. You do some cool work, man, but I have to say: I'm a better writer than you, I get tired of fixing your mistakes, and you still owe me your half of last month's rent.

# PROLOGUE

*There is no exquisite beauty . . .  
without some strangeness in the proportion.*

—Edgar Allan Poe, “Ligeia”

Pumpkins left out to rot turn into vampires.

*Did you know that, Jane?*

The thought tickles my brain like a forked tongue as I sit in my parked car, contemplating murder and waiting for the absinthe to take hold.

*Are you there, Jane? It's cold and dark. But if I think of the pumpkins, I remember, and I'm there . . .*

*Drip-drop* go the echoes of forgotten lore out my ears. Yugoslavian Gypsies believed that a pumpkin kept too long comes alive as a rolling, blood-hungry vampire.

Devil Squash.

And why not? The pumpkin is the ripened ovary of the plant. Something gets inside—a lost ghost, an evil thought, rogue radio waves, a nasty abstract, something you once said to someone but can never take back—and then it fertilizes in the pulp-flesh womb. Maybe the circumstances of propagation are specific, as specialized as the rare tarantula-hunting wasp that is the sole pollinator of an even rarer flower. Maybe it only happens once in a century.

But it happens.

Outside the car, children zigzag, braving the after-dusk streets, the night after Halloween, smashing pumpkins. It is religious. A sacrament.

*Squash.*

*Squash.*

*Squash.*

The scene bends in green waves of dream alchemy. Colors sharpen. Lines blur away. Jack O'Lantern faces animate—chthonic grins all around. The pumpkins move, but I can't hear them. Not yet. They're all grins and silent Lon Chaney giggles. I giggle, too. I get the joke. I take another sip of the green poison in my Thermos, wait for the Dead Water to fill my head, to feed the terrible thoughts.

That is what Mr. Knock told me to do. He said, "You have to skew your view, dear boy, to see the shadows in the fog, the skulls beneath the skin."

*The thing I remember about Mr. Knock, Jane, is he talked with his mouth full.*

I do see the skulls. Day of the Dead, and I'm parked next to a row of huddled apartments, across the street from a *groceria* and a burnt-out fast food restaurant. The children suck on little sugar skulls. Bones and rictus grins adorn the homes. They celebrate the holiday of my patients. They're not sad skulls; they're happy.

*The thing about skulls is, they always smile. Frowning is a fleshy enterprise. Eh, Jane?*

The children smash pumpkins. They destroy would-be vampires. The streets run orange with gore as they slay monsters in embryo.

*Prevention, they say, is better than a cure. Eh, Jane?*

I have my very own monster. His name is Hector. He lives in Apartment 4C. "Do not mess with this guy," my source pleaded. "He's King-fucking-Kong mean. They say he ate his twin brother in the womb." My source liked to cuss.

I look up at my monster's window. Still dark. My right hand scuttles over to my black briefcase, seeking comfort. I feel bone grate on bone under the hastily wrapped Ace bandage on my left hand. My left eye is blind. The claw marks burn my right leg—crosshatched memories of the graveyard and the teeth, the teeth, the teeth! The fingers of my right hand writhe like skeletons trapped in prophylactics. My nerves



turn to angry spiders if I do not keep my hands busy. But I don't have my coins or my cards, so I make a shiny scalpel appear and disappear, dance between my fingers, up and down in prestidigitation.

Waiting is the worst part.

The breadcrumb trail led me here: clues and leads and the stranger things. The oddities. And the Dead Water. I wonder if what Mr. Knock told me was true, about the things under the bed, between the walls, and past the periphery. "You've seen them, haven't you, Simon—gnawing at your vision that first time mommy took away the nightlight?" His full name is Ichabod Knock. Some people call him Icky. I wonder if he told the truth, as the fur and viscera hung from his mouth in wet, ragged strips. I wonder if children smash pumpkins the day after Halloween because it's fun or because of some dormant survival instinct—like fear of basements, attics, and the dark—that they grow out of, swollen appendixes and tonsils cut out of the mind.

I wonder and I sip my absinthe: cloudy, mystic-green, one-sixty proof, eighty percent alcohol down the throat. Wormwood slithers from synapse to synapse, hungry-hungry roots of a growing tree.

*There is a ghost tree that grows in my head—there is a ghost tree that feeds off the dead. Eh, Jane?*

They say if you drink enough, you can go blind. They say Van Gogh was on an absinthe binge when he cut off his ear. I say he was dedicated to his sweetheart.

Inside my black case is my standard scene-of-the-crime kit: swabs, sample containers, magnifying glass, etc. Tonight, I crammed in several post-crime-scene tools: scalpels, bone cutters, cranium chisel, Gigli saw, and all manner of assorted nasties.

Outside, I can now hear the pumpkins laughing like helium hyenas.

Absinthe was popular in the nineteenth century, especially with the bohemian artists. The French curse. The Green Fairy. Bottled madness. It's popular again. That's not why I drink it. I don't drink it proper, with a sugar cube on a slotted spoon placed over the glass, pouring water over the sugar, diluting and sweetening the drink. The ritual attracts people, but rituals get tedious. I drink out of a plastic Looney Tunes Thermos, only interested in the effect.

*Drink Me*, says the Magic Marker message written on the piece of tape affixed to my Thermos. And I obey.

There are three stages to my absinthe high. I don't know if it affects other people the same way. I have a chemical imbalance.

I'm in the first stage. Intense colors, blurry lines—Impressionists drank this. Children, pumpkins, and skulls transmute into animated Impressionist paintings. It's beautiful. The shimmer of Jack O'Lantern guts scorches my eye with a vicious orange burn.

Stage one is social. I'm not social, but absinthe makes me want to talk and create and smoke. I don't normally smoke, either. I can work unimpaired on the high, a lucid dreamer in my hallucinations.

I look at my monster's window. Still dark. Wormwood roots stab my eardrums, making music irritable, so I change stations. . . .

"A Logan Square resident claims she found the desiccated remains of her pit bull in a giant web, in the alley behind her house. Neighbors say—"

I turn off the radio.

4C is still dark. Waiting is the worst part.

The wormwood squeezes my brain, becoming root-bound in my head, fed on too much Dead Water. I close my eyes. I see the ghost tree, and on that upside-down tree grow wormwood branches, and perched on those upside-down branches are upside-down crows. The wraith crows. Or maybe they're

ravens or rooks. I call them the Corbies. Each Corbie knows a morbid fact.

"Tell me a story?" I ask the black birds in my head. "Something to pass the time."

In cawing cacophony, each Corbie sounds off a service performed for humanity by corpses: testing surgical procedures, testing the first guillotine, testing embalming techniques in Lenin's lab, being crucified in a Parisian laboratory to verify the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin.

"Go on," I say.

More cawing. More macabre trivia.

"The longest execution took forty years," says a Corbie. "King Gustav of Sweden wanted to see which was worse, coffee or tea. The tea-drinker died first."

I clutch my scalpel. "I think I will be quicker."

This excites the Corbies and they bob their heads in the branches. Another Corbie sings an old Mountain Dew slogan: "It'll tickle your innards!"

A fat philosopher crow, high on an upside-down branch, pontificates to his fellows on whether or not there is an afterlife and what will happen if humanity collectively decided there is none. He eventually speculates that we would end up creating one anyway. Perhaps we would freeze brains, turn personalities into binary code, break down souls into ones and zeroes, and send them to vast, virtual afterlives.

"Could we download the dead into hard drives designated Heaven and Hell?" asks a Corbie.

"Where do the babies download?" asks another.

"Who would judge a soul and what would be the criteria for entry?"

"Would there be angel and demon programs to keep up maintenance and take care of viruses?"

"Could you hold séances with lost family members via email?"

"Will we be spammed by the dead?"

These are absinthe-minded thoughts—a murder in my head.

Colors flow, shadows dance. Outside, the pumpkins turn into severed heads. A human head is roughly the same size and weight as a roaster chicken. I smile at the heads, familiar and comforting. I remember the day I saw row after row of severed human heads in aluminum roaster pans, lined up on plastic sheets of soothing lavender, patiently awaiting the cosmetic surgery students.

“Day after day, head after head—a serial killer’s wet dream—as students play with the dead, jiggety-jig,” croon the Corbies.

4C lights up.

My monster is home. I can see his silhouette in the window, his improbably massive chest, shoulders, and arms. Hector pulls out a bottle and guzzles.

I feel tiny. I am a microbe. He is a mastodon.

Then I think of Jane and her golden eyes. I’m doing this for Jane. And that makes everything all right.

“Cheers, Hector. Be seeing you.”

He drinks from his bottle and I from my Thermos. Supposedly, Napoleon and his soldiers imbibed absinthe. It made them fearless in battle, marching into musket fire—empowered with green god-fire. Conquering. Invincible.

“In 1915, absinthe was outlawed in France,” says an erudite Corbie. “Think about their military history after that point and conjure your own conclusions.”

The wormwood creaks and groans in my head, like cornstalks gossiping in the dark. The children scatter from the moaning streets. A few pumpkins survived. I smile again at the fiendish fruit. Then, everything goes bad.

The air gets angry.

The vibrations turn ominous.

My car window slides halfway down before I’m able to pry my finger off the button, stop myself from yelling at the chil-

dren, pleading with them to finish the job. A little girl trailing behind catches in my headlights as they cross the street. She turns her head and her jaws fill with shark teeth and her sugar skull is human bone dripping marrow. I clutch my ears at the epileptic grind of tooth on skull.

I wonder where Nyx is. Is she safe? Did she end up like the others?

I remember telling Nyx that I was worried I would not be able to tell the real monsters from the hallucinations. “Doesn’t matter,” she said, “not if you shoot them all.”

Severed pumpkin-heads laugh at me. Graffiti slithers up and down the walls, spelling obscene apocrypha. The alleys hiss and shiver. Across the street, the clown-faced order board of the abandoned fast food restaurant eyes me, lights up; its gargoyle grin cackles in demon-static whispers, murmuring secrets I can’t quite make out—promising something horrible if any of the pumpkins are left at the stroke of midnight. I try to politely ignore it.

I hear Mr. Knock’s words: “Down the rabbit hole, boy! Straight through the plate glass darkly, into the secret room where Alice plays tea with corpses. No deposit, no return. Once you see the Abyss, it sees you.”

Outside, pigeons flutter on batwings. Somewhere, phantasmagoric voices howl in whippoorwill wails. An apartment building sways on blood-taloned chicken legs, ready to run away like an escapee of a Russian fairy tale.

I screw my eyes shut. I think of Jane. I meditate on her pallid cast of beauty. I think about her luminous eyes.

And it stops.

The streets fall back into Impressionist paintings.

My sigh of relief catches in my throat, chokes me, when I notice a figure in my rearview mirror. The shape is a blur, perched on the trunk of my car. I whirl around. Then that sensation hits me. The one you get when you lose your keys

even though there's nowhere they could possibly be but your pocket.

There's nothing. No figure.

My shadow.

He's haunted my progress. He's been there from the beginning—whispered clues to me at Buckingham Fountain and at the playground, on the seesaw. He gave me breadcrumbs.

*My shadow, Jane. He said he was my shadow.*

It's time, Hector.

I get out of my car. I freeze up. Doubts drone on like blowflies fornicating, thoughts of Hector's massive arms and reputed penchant for eating fetal siblings. But there's more. I'm at a chasm. On the other side is a bloody deed. On this side, I'm a good boy.

I drive the speed limit. I hold doors open for people. I avoid conflict.

I think of Jane—her golden eyes. I think about how Hector and others hurt Jane. I think about the promise I made her, the last time I held and kissed her. I'm doing this for Jane.

And that is enough.

I open a jinni bottle inside my chest, let something nasty crawl out. The Corbies flutter and shriek in the ghost tree. I pull out my scalpel. If I do this right, I just need my scalpel. She's cold and rigid and sharp. I try and let myself be that sharp, that cold. Her kiss is light and precise.

My reflection stares back at me from a shop window, but I do not recognize him.

*Ever do that, Jane—stare at a mirror until your face turns strange? The word said too many times, alien on the tongue. The freedom of losing identity.*

This new creature stares me down. He wears my black clothes, but they suit him better. He has my raggedy coat. His dark, messy hair pokes out from under his black bowler hat. He wears my prescription glasses, but the flickering streetlight turns them into white, inhuman eyelets.

In the reflection, standing behind me, the blurred figure again.

My shadow.

I jerk around but before I can even spin my head, the lost keys sensation. And then . . .

Nothing.

*I remember, Jane, my shadow came to life. Loki. My shadow said his name was Loki and after we separated, I could not sew him back on.*

“Watch this,” I say, challenging the empty air. I turn back to the window and the new creature has a grin. All is dark save the glowing eyelets and gleaming grin, a Cheshire Cat’s face. I turn and slink down leaf-littered pavement toward Hector’s apartment, my head full of green witchery, wicked intentions, and all manner of assorted nasties.

I’m breaking the speed limit.

I’m off the map.

I’m under the bed.

Here there be monsters.

*I did it all for you, Jane. What kind of story is this? Noir? Penny dreadful? No. This is a love poem. I wrote it with a scalpel.*

I lurk in the doorway to Hector’s apartment building. I flick my wrist and something shiny and sharp appears in my fingers.

*But this is not the beginning, Jane. It began with your eyes. Remember the first time we met, the first time I held your hand? You came to Autopsy Room 6 and I looked into your golden eyes, unblinking. We met in Autopsy Room 6.*

I clutch my scalpel and stomp a cackling pumpkin before I step inside.

*I love you, Jane Doe.*

## ACT I

*From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were—I have not seen  
As others saw—I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring—  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow—I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone—  
And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—*  
—Edgar Allan Poe, “Alone”



# CHAPTER 1

Would you like to hear a story?

This is a good one. And very short.

This is the story and the story goes: Simon meets Janie D. at work. She tells him who hurt her. She smiles. This is love. This is rigor mortis.

The end.

There is a longer story. The devils all lurk in the details. It is a story just big enough to cram into a human skull. Stories are doorways. You have but to knock. This is the story and the story goes:

He calls her name.

“Subject: Jane Doe.”

That is the first part of the ritual.

Our hero's name is Simon Meeks. He works the late shift, in Autopsy Room 6, as a forensic pathologist. He hates hearing his voice played back, thinks it sounds metallic, like the stainless steel table. Simon stands in Autopsy Room 6 and returns the smile.

The refrigerator units hum the dirge. Our hero knows the words, knows the ritual, but his mouth goes dry. He feels the blush burn pasty cheeks and sweat slick palms under blue latex gloves. He does not know what to say. The audio recorder runs.

*I wanted to tell you you're beautiful, Jane.*

“Subject is . . . subject . . . um . . .”

The pallid cast of beauty, now tinged with a blue hue, but she wears it well. Slight of frame, with a pixyish face. Mouth playful and generous in its postmortem smirk. Blond hair so light it is white, puffs of smoke and fairy fog.

Obsessions are born in the time it takes to open a door. Simon gently brushes the hair out of her eyes. The eyes.

The eyes!

Here, there, and everywhere, and there is only the slipstream of the eyes—coppery brown but gold in the light. The eyes—the largest he has ever seen. Twenty-seven . . . no, twenty-eight millimeters! Nine grams, by God! Nine-gram planets. Nine-gram oceans poured into perfect ocular cavities. Dive into them, dive deep, dive into viscous jelly, the ghost-whisper-ectoplasmic caress of vitreous humor. Dive deep, kick and swim through the dense net of connective tissue and the whiteness of the fibrous tunic. Dive deeper through the blackness of the vascular tunic. Deeper, dive deeper into the nervous tunic—O rods, O cones, O retina—and deeper still. Reach through the gateway to the soul via optic nerves. Dive deep and stay forever, stare forever through gold-stained skull windows!

Twenty-nine minutes.

“What—?”

Simon knocks over his bottle of Mountain Dew, a green-yellow spill. Only it's not Mountain Dew. He checks the clock. He was lost in Jane's eyes for twenty-nine minutes. Monomania is a mental trap that Simon is used to falling into, but never so sudden. Then he notices . . .

Sometimes, we do not realize how horrible the noise is—the grating of cracked femur on dry chalkboard, the noise that made our ears gush black blood—until we hear the relief of silence. He feels the relief. Jane's golden eyes calm the jagged glass in his head, pluck out the shards the way that medication after medication failed to do, to a degree that the hand exercises and the cards and the coins never could. Peace and quickened clarity in the balm of her golden eyes.

*The story begins and ends with your eyes. Eh, Jane?*

Simon looks at her mouth, still curved, still smiling encouragingly. He remembers the ritual.

“Subject: Jane Doe.”

Rigor mortis. She died very recently—in the last six hours. Stiffening will continue to spread through the whole body in six to twelve hours, stay for another six to twelve, and then

disappear over the following six to twelve. The newly dead are tense at first, but they eventually relax.

Time of death is important. Core temperature, rigor mortis, lividity, skin color, gut content—all clues. If the body remains undiscovered for three to four weeks, insects give the clues. Of the millions of species, only a hundred or so feed on corpses and the infestations follow one another in predictable, orderly patterns: maggots, flies, beetles, pupa, adult—all putrescent Braille to the forensically sensitive mind. One might be able to estimate time of death to within a day. Entropy, the mischievous asshole. First he erases the clues, but then, out of regret, he apologizes with bouquets of maggots.

Time of death is estimated at the crime scene, before bagging the body. But before that, death must be confirmed, vital signs checked no matter how obviously dead the victim may be. Simon has yet to check a decapitated head for vital signs, but he hears stories.

They do not allow Simon at the crime scenes. Not anymore.

His peers haunt the halls of the morgue with their whispers. “He gets along better with the dead than the living.” That is the mantra, the mythos, they whisper when they think he is not listening, and they call him the Ghoul even when he is. Ever since the Twiss case. Too odd to tolerate, too talented to fire, they banished him to the graveyard shift.

It is quiet in the morgue on this side of the A.M.—just the young pathologist and the golden-eyed cadaver, both smiling, both tense, both afraid to make the first move. Simon stares at the smile and the impossibly large eyes. His own facial expressions have the wide-eyed over-exaggeration of a silent film actor; he gives off his social cues at a different frame rate than his peers. Just a little . . . off.

Simon breaks the ice by removing the plastic bags protecting the delicate evidence of her hands and feet. He breaks the silence with his stainless steel voice:

“Blue complexion is suggestive of death by hypoxia.”

Is it time to go to the Dead Water? He picks up the scalpel. Time for his addiction? No. He puts the scalpel down. Not yet.

*Eager and apprehensive—grade school dances and dying moths in the belly. Eh, Jane?*

Simon reviews the crime scene notes, begins weaving the fairy tale of how this sleeping beauty came to him.

They found her dancing on the wind.

Police discovered the body of Jane Doe hanging from a noose of rope off a tree in an old beer garden, by the flickering light of a dying streetlamp. A cold wind had picked up off the Lake and, according to the only witness—a little boy who was exploring the condemned property—it looked as though she was dancing on the air. He told police, “It was pretty.”

*I wish I could have seen you dance, Jane.*

Simon cuts the noose from her neck, lovingly removes the rough locket and bags it. He leaves the knot intact. Knots have their own clues to offer. No other witnesses. No one in the neighborhood saw, heard, or spoke of any evil.

*The three wise monkeys, Jane. All three are dead, shot in the head, and it's up to Simon to find them.*

For every cadaver there is a maze made of questions that leads from the corpse to the truth. The directions one can turn in the labyrinth are determined by binary decision trees—YES or NO.

Simon says, “Female, Caucasian, mid to late twenties, found hanging on a noose of rope, showing a blue complexion suggesting death from lack of oxygen.”

Simon is in the maze with the dead. He looks down a hall and that hall is a question and that question is: *Do rope marks have the inflamed edge of a vital reaction?* If NO, then the victim was dead before the hanging, strongly suggestive of homicide. From there, a hallway asks, *Is the hyoid bone in the neck broken?* YES is suggestive of manual strangulation. But if NO, the next hallway in the maze asks, *Is there bruising around the nose and mouth?* YES suggests smothering and NO suggests

deliberate compression of the neck causing vagal inhibition to stop the heart. Both hint at a homicide concealed as a suicide.

But Jane does not take Simon down this path. Her rope marks show the inflamed edge, a vital reaction. YES. She was alive before the hanging.

“Odd,” says Simon. There are three distinct sets of rope marks on her neck, in three discrete places, all with an inflamed edge. Why?

*Do the marks on the neck match the rope?* NO suggests ligature strangulations. But Jane’s marks match the rope: YES. *Do the rope marks form an inverted V at the point of suspension?* YES. This suggests suicide.

The maze shatters. Something is not right.

“Why the extra marks, Jane?” Simon asks. She does not answer. Though she smiles, she is still too shy. It will take more work to gain her confidence, to get her to open up.

Simon cuts a sample of her smoke-puff hair. He takes her hand, bows his head, and tries a different approach.

“Hello, Jane. My name is Simon.”

He takes a moment to thrill at the deafening shade of nail polish on her fingers and toes, a burning orange, the glowing guts of a nuclear pumpkin. He gently scrapes under her nails. There! Flakes of skin and blood.

“Someone did this to you, Jane,” Simon says, metallic voice sharpening.

*But you got them. Tag—they’re it. Eh, Jane?*

Simon saves the tissue samples for analysis.

But he has to go deeper—reach through the gateway to the soul via Y-incisions and lucid madness. It is time for Simon’s addiction. It is time to go to the Dead Water.

Simon locks the door. He tips back the Mountain Dew bottle and drinks the absinthe down. All of it. With the after-taste of evil licorice, he feels the green alchemy, the roots of wormwood growing in his brain, the upside-down tree that

grows in his head and feeds off the dead, and the Corbies, always the Corbies, shrieking apocalyptic limericks.

Simon takes Jane's hand.

*I wanted to tell you it would be all right, Jane, that the worst was over. I wanted to ask you about that shade of nail polish. I wanted to tell you that you were beautiful.*

In Autopsy Room 6, Jane Doe's hand moves, squeezing Simon's.

This is rigor mortis.

This is love.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, now, don't squirm, loveling. This is beauty beyond convention. This is a love story on the other side of entropy. Witness a romance that defies the tyranny of worms. Step right up! It all plays out in Autopsy Room 6.

Simon Meeks sways to the effects of alcohol and wormwood. And the room sways, shivers, and hiccups, becoming less real by degrees. He is very nearly there—to that one place that is real.

The ghost tree, a flower of carrion bird petals, blossoms in his head. "JaneDoeJaneDoeJaneDoeJaneDoe," the Corbies say. Was there ever a prettier name?

He closes his eyes, calls her name into the dark, and follows the echo—Simon Meeks, who is always following the echoes of things, but never the thing.

He puts an ear to her cold mouth. He can hear the ocean. The Dead Water.

He follows the echo until it is drowned out by the sigh of the night-tide. Follows until he smells and tastes the salty, bittersweet spray. Follows fast and follows faster to that place where nostalgia pulls stronger than lunar gravity—down—until his toes feel the cool water.

His latex-gloved hands move with their own automaton wills. They have honed these motions to a perfect rote. They measure and record: facts, numbers. They explore Jane, commit every bit of her to memory, every dip and swell of her, every one of the fifty-two creases in her lips. The hands take swab samples from her mouth, rectum, and sexual organ.

And somewhere distant, perhaps in a dream, Jane dances barefoot on a beach, by the ebony sea. She smiles. She waves to Simon. She—

*Tick. Tock.*

The clock thunders in Autopsy Room 6. Simon's eyes open. "No." He tries again. His hands take a scalpel and cut a Y-incision into Jane, from her shoulders to her pelvis. They undress her chest of skin.

And somewhere distant, perhaps in a dream, Jane sits on a bench. She motions to Simon to sit next to her. She opens her mouth and—

*Chatter. Jabber.*

Stray voices talk back and forth, on heavy footfalls, in the hallway outside of Autopsy Room 6. Simon's eyes open, cracked with jagged green lines. "No!" He tries again, but it's no use. Even the weight of his feet are a distraction.

But there is a more direct way, a doorway to the Dead Water, and the scalpel is the key to the lock. Simon tells Jane that everything is all right. The worst is over. And the bone sheers say, "Snip-crunch-snip-crunch." Jane's rib cage opens like hands after a prayer. Simon checks the lock, braces himself. His hand slips inside Jane's chest cavity.

Ignition.

Simon's eyes roll back and his body convulses. Cold green fire washes over him. The world melts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

Simon and Jane sit on a bench of sepulcher stone. Bare feet dangle and dip in the black water. They look at each other—then quickly look away. They both look up—and away. Hunched forward in their seat, they both look down, kicking the black water. Shyly. Awkwardly. She is a child and he is a child, on the sepulcher bench by the ebony sea.

No moon, no stars, in the Dead Water, only the soft glow off the white sands of the lurid beach. All else is black. Simon fumbles in his coat pockets, hands coming up empty. He shrugs to Jane and rolls up his sleeves theatrically. Splaying his hands wide, he makes a motion, producing a single bent lily from nowhere. Simon offers the pale flower to Jane. With a hiccup and a giggle, she accepts, batting her golden eyes. They scoot closer to one another on the sepulcher bench by the ebony sea. Simon blushes, looks back at the water.

And somewhere distant, perhaps in a dream, Simon cuts and detaches Jane's larynx and esophagus from the pharynx.

No moon in the Dead Water, only the ivory sand's luminous glow. No time in the Dead Water; the hours are breathing faint and low. Jane, smiling, sniffs at her single lily. Her pale hair, painted blue by lunar light, blows in the necro-wind. But her smile turns to a frown when she sees Simon is still nervous. Then, the frown curls back up in mischief and she tags the boy with playful violence, running away, giggles trailing her wake. The shocked expression on Simon's face becomes a grin and he gives chase. They play tag on the lurid beach by the ebony sea.

And somewhere distant, perhaps in a dream, Simon removes the organs from her body.

The black water laps the Night's Plutonian shore, turning the beach into a region of sighs. Simon and Jane play, laughing and eyeing one another. Simon takes off his black bowler hat, holds it in front of himself, and with a clever flick of his wrist, the hat appears to come to life and leap from his hands. Jane gasps. Simon bends down to pick up the hat, but with



a cleverer flick of his wrist, the hat seems to jump away from his fingers. Jane laughs. Simon runs after the hat, but with a cleverest flick of his foot, the hat skips away. Jane laughs and claps as Simon gives chase, as he tries sneaking up on the hat, as it leaps away in a climactic finish of Simon tumbling on the ground, the hat resting between his splayed legs.

And somewhere distant, perhaps in a dream, Simon scoops out Jane's last meal, from her stomach, with the same brand of ladle he uses at home.

The black water rises. Simon gets up, brushing himself off. He and Jane stand very close, looking eye to eye, their toes curling and digging into the bone-powder sand. He licks his lips. She bites hers. Emboldened, Simon takes her hand. "May I have this dance?" She nods. They sway to the sad-jazz rhythm of the Dead Water. Jane's eyes turn to wide golden plates and she pulls Simon very close. She opens up to him.

And somewhere distant, perhaps in a dream, Simon holds the glistening purple Valentine of her heart.

They dance all through the night-tide on the lurid beach. They put their foreheads together, eyes just inches apart. She shivers and Simon holds her even closer. "Why did the noose bite your neck multiple times, Jane?" She whispers something in his ear. "They . . . they raised you multiple times—raised you three times. But why?" He cups her cheeks in his hands, reassuringly. They stop dancing, though the Dead Water plays on.

And somewhere distant, perhaps in a dream, Simon's scalpel makes a cut from behind one of Jane's ears, over her crown, to behind the other ear, and, with a tug, he lovingly de-gloves her head.

They walk down the Night's Plutonian shore, hand in hand. Simon stops. "They wanted something, didn't they, Jane? They hanged you on that noose three times to scare you and each time they lowered you they asked you questions." Jane nods, half smiling, with a sigh. "Why?" She bites her lower lip, shrugs, and turns away from Simon, facing out on the ebony sea. She plucks lily petals and lets them drift on the

necro-wind. “Who did this to you, Jane? And why?” Simon reaches out to her and—

*No.*

Something slams in the distance.

*Not yet.*

The world melts to wax. The Dead Water evaporates. Jane falls back. Simon shrieks, reaches for her, grabs the lily and tries to pull her back, but the flower decays in his hands. The ash scatters through his fingers as he squeezes and Jane slips away like the memories of a dream dissolving under the shower spray.

*No-no-no-no-no-no-no—*

He does not want to let the moment go. He does not want to go back to his sleepwalk life. But he hears the tectonic explosions of someone knocking on the door to Autopsy Room 6.

## CHAPTER 2

“Wow, you really know how to cut your meat,” she says. And then, “Jesus, that’s bloody! You’re going to make me sick.” It would be the only compliment she gave him.

Her lips are full, but not generous. They slurp at vegetables and some kind of organic-soy-protein meat substitute—protein that never wore a face. Simon plays silently with his very rare steak, retreating inside his head where he constructs and deconstructs letters from chimerical Lego blocks, trying to build a proper acronym for the grayish substance his date is masticating. He settles on S.O.P. because it is the closest to the sound she’s making.

“Earth to Simon,” she says.

“Sop?”

“What?”

“Oh . . . never mind.”

Something flashes across her face, but she swallows it and forces a smile. Others often chide Simon for living too much in his mind. It was a little easier as a child, when imagination was sometimes encouraged, before teachers said he was too “withdrawn” and decided to hold him back in the fourth grade. And then, oh then, there was the legion of younger classmates who swarmed Simon like piranha, smelling the blood in the water, the opportunity to cut down an older kid, and they gnashed at him with those special tortures only grade-schoolers can concoct. After that, life seemed to Simon to be an endless succession of ridiculing voices and contemptuous masks that were always offended that this strange somnambulist sleepwalked through their world. He only felt truly awake in the Dead Water.

But that was then and this is now, and this is an even rarer form of torture. This is a blind date. Who had ever conceived of such a thing?

Simon adjusts his glasses, unnecessarily, and looks at his date. Her eyes are not golden; they are a pale, soul-sucked blue. Not wide and understanding, but squinting, constantly squinting and guarded, a sneering, preemptive strike on the world around her—perhaps intended to give an air of superiority, but mostly coming across as if she has a slight headache all the time.

And Simon, who could be blindfolded at any moment and still able to give detailed descriptions of everyone in the restaurant—including the individual species of fish in the tank by the door—could not remember her name.

An exquisite torture. Simon's nervous hands fidget, every cell in his body quivers in discomfort because she is constantly looking at him and her eyes are not gold, not soothing, not seeing who he is under all the molecules and carbon. They are squinty, pale lasers, constantly scraping at him, demanding something he's not giving. Worse still, she keeps dragging small talk out of him, like an endless strand of barbed wire shoved in and through his nose and pulled, slowly, out his mouth so that each rusty barb catches in his nasal cavity, shredding his mucous membrane.

Every barb is painful.

She talks about all her favorite reality TV shows. Simon is lost, has no point of reference.

She talks about current movies and, encouraged, Simon mentions his favorite silent film actors and actresses. He does not get very far before she cuts him off with a wince. "Silent movies? Those are so old. Everyone in them is, like, dead."

"Yeah," Simon says.

She talks about articles read in *Cosmo* and concludes, "Who has time to read books these days."

"Yeah," Simon says while doing a very bad impersonation of an understanding nod. He flexes his left big toe, feeling the empty ring where he wishes a toe tag dangled.

She would be considered conventionally attractive, Simon was sure of it. But looking at her lips, nose, chin, and chest, all he could see were the lines of plastic surgery incisions and nothing beyond. All he could see, through the lingering film of Dead Water, were those glowing lines, like red highways on a roadmap. All he could think of were the dead who donated their bodies, signed the backs of their licenses, thinking they would save a life, cover a burn victim, advance the frontiers of science, only to have their flesh used to smooth wrinkles, fill lips, improve a stranger's penis.

Simon nods. Simon says, "Mmhmm," every time the noise across the table pauses. Simon adjusts his glasses, unnecessarily, hoping it counts as social gesture. He wishes he could be someplace, anyplace, where he felt more comfortable, like Autopsy Room 6. Socializing like this is so . . . exhausting, so nerve-wracking. Simon does not eat his steak, only cuts it into smaller pieces, a tighter grid. He names each line on the grid: *Here's a street, a bloody boulevard, an avenue. Here's the bloody, steak-sauce river. This is where the Sears Tower would be . . .*

"What kind of car do you drive?" she asks. Simon's answer does not impress her. Simon cuts and cuts and retreats into his head.

He sees the buildings flashing by on his drive to the restaurant. Driving, Simon could almost see the skeletons swimming in the cement—the absinthe still pulsed, faintly, in his guts. The Loop has a higher concentration of human remains, per square inch of foundation, than anywhere else in the world. The police are usually in attendance when a building is demolished, to collect the bones.

*Is that the afterlife, Jane—swimming in purgatories of dark cement until, in some distant aeon, an angel in a hardhat blasts you out?*

"So . . . where do you to get your clothes?" the date asks.

"Oh, uh, Goodwill . . . mostly."

She looks more disgusted with this revelation than with the bloody grid of steak. But it was true. Simon mostly shopped at thrift stores. It was not a matter of money. Simon had money. But in thrift stores, Simon could avoid pushy sales personnel. A black suit coat and tie—that was Simon’s perpetual uniform. It kept things simple. They did not allow him to wear his black hat in the restaurant.

The conversation pauses, mercifully. Simon drifts away, way away, to go swimming with those skeletons in the cement, to ask them their secrets: forgotten treacheries, hidden plots, and buried mob treasure. He’s interrupted when his date says something to their waitress about the croutons in her salad—when she specifically said *no* croutons in her salad—and the something she says causes the waitress to run off crying.

The conversation continues, something about a Barbie doll collection. Far, far away, that conversation pauses.

Oh no.

Simon realizes, with horror, that he’s expected to contribute something. The skeletons shrug. Simon looks about his mind-scape desperately. The upside-down tree in his head is withered away. All the Corbies huddle together, sleeping, heads under their wings, hiding from this traumatic experience. But one brave corvid shakily looks up, uses its last strength to try and help, to croak a relevant factoid through Simon’s eardrums . . .

“Barbie’s design was based on a German sex doll from the fifties,” says Simon. He lets out a breath, even smiles, proud of himself for contributing.

“Uh . . . how do you know that?”

Simon shrugs. He goes back to the skeletons and the dead crows. Far away, the conversation goes on—a childhood story, some charmingly funny anecdote about the time she put too much detergent in the washing machine. The conversation pauses. Simon realizes it is his turn to contribute a childhood story. Something embarrassing but endearing.

“Once, I petted my goldfish to death,” Simon says.

An uncomfortable silence, the sound of black holes devouring light.

"His name was Dr. Caligari."

"I'm sorry," says the date. "Are you that *slow*? You know, mildly . . . retarded?"

"No," Simon says, considering. "That's wasn't the problem at all. My IQ is actually quite high." He says the last not as a boast, but as a simple relay of data. It was true. The doctors, unsure of exactly what to say when confronted with his case, had always given a vague prognosis of "chemical imbalance" and threw out medications like darts to a board. But most drugs had little effect on Simon. Not like absinthe. All the doctors could do, in the end, was assure Mr. and Mrs. Meeks that their little boy had the best of intentions while petting that gold fish.

But the answer is enough to finally crack the woman's polite, pleasant façade. "I gotta say, Simon, so far I'm pretty fucking underwhelmed. And a guy's gotta impress *me*." She holds her arms out expectantly. "I mean, it's obvious you're not going to, but are you at least gonna try? Do something. Say something. Come on. Simon says 'talk.' Come on—come on—come on . . ." She says it all like she's talking to a particularly dim, diseased three-legged dog she's about to shoot between the eyes, if it could just stumble out the back door and away from the carpet.

Simon looks out through his glasses, through his green, green eyes. But all he can think about are the dead trapped beneath the concrete foundation of Chicago and all he can see are the bits of dead trapped beneath the greasy foundation of his date's face. The dead in her face. Just bits of the dead, but it excites the sleepy Corbies. Too long, already, since he indulged the addiction—naught but drops and fumes of green, green absinthe in his guts, the distilled nostalgia his patients give him, the liquid love, the Dead Water high, all gone. But those little bits of the dead ignite a little of the alchemy, reinvigorate

the ghost crows and they *caw-caw-caw* out of Simon's ears. It's their voice that speaks.

"Embalming fluid often enlarges the penis of a male cadaver," Simon says.

The randomness, the strangeness of the comment stops his date's tirade. She stares, her mouth wide open.

"Did you know that King Tut's penis went missing? Some time during his museum stay, it disappeared. Could be in the hands of some private collector. Could be used in the ritual magic of some cult. Could be lost in some random bag of jerky."

The Corbies cackle at their little joke.

"Gross!" says his date. She rises to leave, giving Simon a better view. He can see, more clearly, the lines of dead matter injected into her body, the lines of invisible cosmetic cuts healed over. He can hear, barely hear, the muted whispers of the dead from her face. This is not a full dose of the addiction. This is not a full immersion into the Dead Water. But it is a taste; the trace amounts of wormwood still in his system vibrate and he gets a taste. The Dead Water gives Simon a quickened-calm-clarity and loosens his tongue.

"Society marches toward its taboos," the Corbies say through Simon's mouth. "Take *Cosmo*."

This catches her attention. She waits, standing.

"Accepting for variance and aesthetic taste, most men are, on a genetic level, predisposed to feeling attracted to women with curvy hips and full breasts. Life giving. Nourishing."

Simon traces a shape in the air with his finger, but he is the only one who can see the trailing, green afterimage.

"You can see this in the earliest statues and depictions of the earth mother figure: full breasts and hips are emphasized as the focal points of female power. But these popular magazines go step by step in the other direction—replacing curvy, plump, and healthy, with shrunk, anorexic, and shriveled, like the dead. *Cosmo* changes the paradigm of ideal beauty by making the living look more and more like corpses, the way



morticians make corpses look more and more like the living. And so women feel more and more loathing for their living bodies and the men's genetic instincts become confused. They are less concerned for what they are instinctively attracted to and more concerned for what they think they are supposed to be attracted to. All in all, those magazines get closer and closer every month to being necrophiliac pornography."

Then the Corbies go silent, and Simon is left with his own mouth. "Oh . . . wait . . . sorry," he says. "That . . . that didn't come out right at all."

His date stands stunned, as surprised by the volume of words flowing from Simon's mouth as she is by the words themselves. Just as she turns to go, Simon sees them—the other scars. His green, absinthe eyes open wider.

"Oh, you shouldn't do that," Simon says.

"Do what?"

The cosmetic surgery that erased them was good, but through the Dead Water, Simon can see old scars across her wrists.

"Try and be like the dead."

Simon stares through malachite eyes. The wormwood forms a tiny ghost sapling in his head. Simon can see the invisible scars and he can read their contexts. He can hear the murmurs from the dead in her face. Through the Dead Water, Simon can read scars like hieroglyphs.

"You shouldn't purge after meals. It's not healthy. It's bad for the teeth and esophagus. And it makes no sense. If you are already pretty and fit. It's just a redundancy."

Her eyes are no longer squinted nor guarded, but wide and exposed and tears leak out of them. Simon cut her. Sometimes, surgical cuts are good.

Her mouth quivers, perhaps hovering over words more important than all the gilded small talk, words she never dared let escape. Simon holds out an awkward hand, to bridge the connection.

Sometimes, surgical cuts are good. But before the bad, black things can bleed out, she clots and scabs over into the hateful expression that forms on her face.

“Goddamn freak!” she growls, flinging water from her glass into Simon’s face and stalking off.

Simon cleans his glasses. He dries his face and he finally eats his cooling grid of steak, his twelve-ounce Chicago. In his mind’s eye he is a giant reptilian monster, risen from the lake in a burst of nuclear fire. Tearing the city apart, he rips up the beefy pavement, setting free the tiny skeletons trapped within. Rejoicing, they share their secrets with him.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Once upon a time, a stranger approached Simon at a park. “Afraid?” asked the stranger.

“No,” Simon said. “Statistically, I’m much more likely to be murdered by someone I know.”

The stranger backed away. Slowly.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Outside the restaurant, Simon stares down, wondering where the sidewalk ends and the skeletons begin.

“You sure know a lot of trivia, don’t you?”

The voice comes from behind Simon, slinking like a cat.

Simon shrugs. “I know the longest word in the English language.”

“What’s that?”

“Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis.”

“Wow.”

“It’s a lung disease caused by breathing in volcanic particles.”

“That right? And here I thought it was supercalifragilistic-expialidocious.”

"No. I suspect Mary Poppins was a compulsive and habitual liar."

"That bitch."

It seems so natural—talking to the voice, not worrying about its source, not feeling curious about who was there. But the Corbies peck at the tree in his head, chipping bark and nerve.

"Danger," hiss the Corbies. "Look, Simon!"

Simon looks up from the sidewalk, but sees no one. He has that feeling—like in grade school when he couldn't find his Math homework in his folder, but he knew he did it. The stomach-dropping panic of not finding what he knew had to be there and the anticipation of that mean, mean math teacher.

Simon looks around, up and down the street and all about. No one there. Just him and the Corbies and the skeletons.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mother shows Simon the little corpses.

He nods approval.

"This one gave me so much trouble," she says.

And she stabs.

"*Actias luna*."

And she stabs.

"*Acherontia styx*."

And she stabs.

"*Attacus atlas*!"

And she stabs.

The ritual is complete. Simon admires the colors and the wings of the moths now pinned in their showcases. His mother's hobby is collecting hobbies, and moth collecting is her latest acquisition.

"This one is called the ghost moth, dear, or the white witch moth."

Simon nods, making a coin appear and vanish in his hand, for no one in particular. He picks up an X-Acto knife off the

table, plays with it in his hands . . . and puts it down, not liking the heft.

"So, tell me. How did your date go?" Mother asks, pointing at him with a number-two pin.

"Hmm?"

"Don't be coy. I went to all the trouble of nagging your father into going to all the trouble of getting one of his pretty young patients to go on a blind date. Now I want to know what all my meddling has reaped." Mother smiles, skewering another nocturnal arthropod.

Simon winces at thoughts of the blind date. He lets his mind drift to pleasant memories, to Autopsy Room 6, to Jane, to her golden eyes.

"She was . . . wonderful."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear. See, sweetie, I told you—you just needed to get out more. What's she like?"

Simon thinks of Jane Doe smiling to him, squeezing his hand.

"She's very nice, Mother. I feel like I can be myself with her."

"What did you go out and do?"

The happy *snip-crunch*, *snip-crunch* of the bone sheers sounds; weighing her organs one at a time; gently peeling her scalp from the skull.

"We danced."

"Oh, fun. Did you—" Mother leans in conspiratorially, "Did you kiss her?"

"Mom!"

"Well?"

"No, Mother." Simon blushes. "Not on a first date."

"You know, I didn't think anyone was that old fashioned anymore. That is so sweet."

Simon thinks of Jane in her freezer unit, her chest lovingly sewn up—the Y-shaped gateway to the Dead Water.

"Yes," says Simon, "it is."

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon walks from his car to his house. Above, moths bash their heads into sodium streetlights like punch-drunk fallen angels who just want to go home.

The specter of lost math assignments follows him all the way to the door.

The Corbies look over his shoulder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once upon a time, little Simon was allowed to pick out his own clothes for the day. His mother found him, hours after he should have been in school, sitting in his underwear on the floor of his bedroom, sobbing, wads of his own torn-out hair clutched in his hands.

“Simon, what’s wrong?”

Little Simon indicated a pile of clothes of various colors. Perplexed, his mother was only able to calm him down by suggesting he put on the black suit he wore to his grandfather’s funeral.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon holds her cold body.

“Not again.”

In his malachite eyes, the stinging prelude to a tear.

Another night, another dead goldfish. No, he does not pet them anymore, not since he was a boy, but he cannot seem to keep them alive. No matter the species, no matter how much he researches, no matter how he adjusts his husbandry techniques, temperatures, pH levels, the fish always dies within forty-eight hours.

Oh, a cat.

Oh, a dog.

Oh, a parrot.

How he wanted a companion animal as a boy. But he was too terrified to allow himself anything more complex than a

fish, terrified that cuddling would infect a furry friend with mortality.

*Death by osmosis, via active cellular transport, seemed imminent. Eh, Jane?*

He is vaguely terrified of touching human infants. Thankfully that situation rarely presents itself.

He even tried plants. He cared for them as best he could, heard that they like being talked to. No matter how much he pleaded with them, they all died.

*I never said the right thing, Jane.*

"It's not you, it's me," Simon whispers to the fish. He kisses the mucous-slick of her face and, very sadly, lays her down to sleep. He consigns her to the beyond.

*Flush.*

Water is always a medium between life and death.

He walks through the rest of the house, touring all the empty fish tanks, dead houseplants, withered flowers, and other failed attempts.

Tomorrow, he will try again.

## INTERLUDE: True Black

“Blackbirds t’ain’t black.”

He said it to me as Michigan Avenue moaned and all I could see was the lightning-shock of his beard in the dark.

Before that, he told me how he’d been plagued by undead moths made from aborted fetuses and vomited up by crones who practiced conjure-magic on the South Side, so he couldn’t stay at his place no more.

And before that, he warned me to be weary of twins because we all have twins, in the womb, he said, and they are our evil shadows and we battle and we kill them because it’s our first test in life, and twins outside the womb are the result of weaker babes making pacts with their demon selves. Don’t mess with twins, he said.

“Less you got their placenta. Chew a body’s placenta, and they is yours.”

His voice sounds like sewage and the Blues. He might be crazy. Might have something sharp and metal in his hands. But I stay, because I’m at the bottom of the Michigan Avenue Underground. There’s nowhere lower to go. And the nights are getting cold and it’s a few degrees warmer down here, and maybe I can survive my first winter. Besides, his meat-rot voice drowns out the memories of how I got here.

“No real black in nature. That’s a fact. Black birds t’ain’t black, just dark, kinda organic purple that came about on the pallet in the Before, at the beginnin’ of squishy flesh-life. False black.”

I spit the last of my Copenhagen. Too dark to know where it lands. I’ve never seen total darkness. There’s only the ghost beard and it says:

“But there are things that remember before the Before, things in the deep pockets and dead boxcars. Seen ’em. You’ll know them because they wear true black. You think that’s

crazy crack-jabber? Hmmm? Can't trust rationality, not in a world where blackbirds t'ain't black."

"I saw the Black Dog," I say.

"No such thing as—"

"Not a real dog. *the* Black Dog. A hallucination. Used to drive a rig. They always said if you drove long enough, you'd see it. I did, driving twenty-three hours straight. It was black, but it was more like a bear. It lumbered into the road. I slammed the breaks. Nearly tipped the rig."

The beard grins.

"Oh-ho-ho you seen it. True black!"

"I saw nothing. I was ripped on amphetamines and sleep deprivation. I wasn't in my right mind."

"Nuh-uh. *Skewed* view. You saw something because your view was skewed."

"What do you—?"

"I used to be a magician!"

Flash of metal. I stop arguing.

"Oh, I lost my magpie wings. Just a mean Mother Hubbard scar now. But when I had them, baby, when I had them, up above, I could swing—I could croon honey and the birds and the kids came to see, and I'd flip aces and queens and slick-card Monte and I'd fool them every time. The crowd, staring at me, head on. Upright. Sober. Healthy perspective. Fooled! But let's say I change it up—"

I hear the vicious slash-grind of metal on asphalt.

"Let's say I take one of those kids, a little girl, and I cut her hamstrings. She's on the ground. Writhing. Screamin' ragged red. Unhealthy perspective. But, see, laying there, bleeding out, at that funny angle, she looks up and sees my double lift, busts my trick, 'cause I t'ain't playing to that angle. See? See! The skewed view sees the double lift 'cause the Flim-Flam Man is panning to the conventional crowd!"

He laughs and I close my eyes and pray the river washes away the rancid sound—washes away my memories—and dammit, but I can hear a cadence in the sputter of the water.



## CHAPTER 3

“Simon, what the hell are you doing?” Dr. Fulani says, her honeyed accent turned sour.

Simon freezes with wide, Charlie Chaplin eyes, in a Buster Keaton pose, clutching the blood-encrusted teddy bear in a rubber-gloved grip. Explanations seem elusive. His mind stutters and leaps, racing back to the events that brought him to this moment. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

The weekend.

Simon *hates* the weekend.

Idle hands and idle mind—he can feel the glass shards in his brain. Away from his work, his Dead Water addiction, and on this particular Saturday, away from Jane and her golden eyes.

Why couldn't they just let him work every day?

Coin tricks aren't cutting it. Card throwing can't hold it back. He shivers with Dead Water jitters. He can no longer feel the love Jane had given him, more powerful than from any of his other patients. He can no longer feel the wraith plasma bubbling in his belly or flowing in his veins; it was spent. He needed it—needed a ghost tree growing in his head like an antenna to Hades.

Simon takes his coins, his cards, his black suit coat and his black bowler hat, and walks out to do what he does most every Saturday: sneak into work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Look at the everyday, through Simon's eyes, and you will see a menagerie of bizarre customs. He is now hyperaware of

them. He watches, fascinated, as if he were an explorer filming the mating rituals of an exotic bird species.

Here we see the male making his mating call. Notice the repeating pattern, the staccato rhythm of the courting ritual as he flips his cell phone open and closed, open and closed, again and again, saying, “You hang up . . . No, *you* hang up . . . No, you hang up . . . I love *you* more . . . Love you more . . . Love ya more . . . You hang up . . .”

Simon ducks into a flower shop and purchases a single lily from a gray, girthy woman with a welcoming smile. Getting the flower back in his hands he carefully bends the stem, just so, trying to remember.

“You’re a romantic, aren’t you, deary?” she asks. Her name tag says *Dorothy*.

Simon’s eyebrows turn into question marks.

“I can tell,” says Dorothy. “You didn’t buy two dozen roses or go for an expensive bouquet. You bought a single flower, but you were very careful in choosing it. That’s sentiment, deary. That lily has some kind of meaning for you and your sweetheart, doesn’t it?”

One corner of Simon’s mouth curls up. “Yes.”

“See,” says Dorothy with chuckle. “See, we can smell our own. Truth be told, most of my business isn’t from true romance. The guy buying dozens of the most expensive flowers is usually the guy *schtupping* his secretary or his theatre students. But I can tell just by looking at you that you’re a romantic. True romance—eccentric, goofy, odd. That’s the kind of love that lasts forever, deary. Like me and my Sal.”

She points to a frame on the counter. It holds a younger Dorothy and what Simon at first thinks is a child, in the faded photo. On closer inspection, it is a little man, a midget.

“He’s very small,” says Simon, though he notes the well-developed musculature on Sal’s tiny frame.

"Good things come in small packages, deary. And my Sal, the things he could do with that limber little body of his . . . Oh, I won't burden you with all the gory details."

Dorothy sighs.

"Is something wrong?" Simon asks.

Her smile is bittersweet.

"You're so young, deary. You probably don't have a lot of experience with death."

Simon only nods, too polite to interrupt.

"Like I said, that kind of romance lasts forever. I'll always love my Sal. But . . . comes a time when we all move on, and your sweetheart moves on, and you have to let them go."

Simon adjusts his glasses and asks, very honestly, "Why?"



There are freaks that walk amongst freaks.

Go back in time. Visit your dreams. Enter some mist-shrouded, autumnal nightmare. Step through a twilight-dimensional door and go to the most bizarre carnival in the cosmos, sneak in after hours. See the performers during their smoke break. See them? See them socialize and murmur? There's the Mermaid, flopping about on the ground, giggling on too much moonshine, wriggling her fishy, mucous-slick tail, and all the male grotesques competing to see who will wriggle and writhe with her tonight. And the Illustrated Man, tattoos that move and slither over his angular muscles when no one but you is looking, tattoos that will eat you in the dark. See the Needle Man, skull pierced by nails and bolts, with an electrical halo that arcs between the metal bits; notice how he can't walk unless he carries his enormous, Elephantiasis-bloated genitals in a wheelbarrow. See the Siblings Grotesque: Seal Girl with her flipper hands, singing and eating fish heads and tails from a bucket for thrown coins; Anteater Boy with his prehensile tongue and mangled mandibles; the Torso, the

girl with no lower body and the vestigial arm growing out of her head. They have *other* siblings, too, ones that did not survive the inbreeding and mutation, not alive but forever performers in their formaldehyde-filled jars, staring out with their fetal eyes, staring. See them all dance and joke and laugh in their rancid-sweet voices. And yet, even in a society such as this, there will always be a misfit—a grotesque who out-grotesques the grotesqueries. His presence will put a shiver in their twisted spines and they will point at him and shun him: the Omega Misfit.

Simon Meeks enters the Robert J. Stein Institute of Forensic Medicine (formerly known as the Cook County Institute of Forensic Medicine). Where Simon goes, conversations stop. Snickering and whispers commence.

“What’s *he* doing here? It’s not even his shift.”

“He gets along better with corpses than people.”

“Well, he is the Ghoul.”

Simon does his best to be invisible, to float through groups of people, avoid eye contact and dodge small talk. He creeps through the halls in his black suit, a perpetually dapper, if slightly tattered figure—a scarecrow always trying to get back to Oz.

Simon once assumed that working at the morgue would be a sort of refrigerated, formaldehyde-scented refuge full of kindred spirits. The Medical Examiner’s Office employed many types of people, some mild mannered, some very eccentric. Simon trumped them all, and even an eccentric will stone a misfit.

*Even the Island of Misfit Toys has buried bones. Eh, Jane?*

But social awkwardness and problems with peers are not going to get Simon down. He is about to enjoy his addiction. He is going to see Jane again.

The Corbies sway rhythmically in the branches in Simon’s head. They hum a tune, eager to feed. The murder sings, “Scalpels and brain knives and cranium chisels. These are a few of my favorite things.”

He is very close now.

The feeling of something large and powerful passing over his head interrupts Simon's pleasant thoughts. Something smacks his black hat and it sails away, skids on the ground, then rolls in several circles before coming to rest, performing its own vaudevillian act, even in the process of falling.

Simon turns to see Officer John Polhaus, his enormous frame casting the pathologist in an angry shadow. He is a large, fat man, but never jolly. His gut seemed to contain nothing but anger; at just the wrong side of fifty, he was a career beat cop in Chicago and there was plenty to fill his stomach with.

"Hey, Ghoulie, this ain't your shift. Why are you haunting us?"

Simon's mouth moves, but nothing audible comes. He clutches the lily a little tighter, careful not to crush it. A few other smiling cops gravitate to Polhaus, like moons.

"Come on, Sweeney Todd," says Polhaus, "get the corpse dick out of your mouth. You gotta speak up if you wanna be heard."

"I didn't . . . know you were a fan of musical theatre, Officer Polhaus," says Simon in a very quiet voice.

A few of the orbiting officers chuckle, despite themselves, and Polhaus's face turns a deeper, red-tinged purple. He is the stuff that early heart attacks are made of.

"It's a freakin' mystery to me why that Guy Smiley mother-fucker, Reeves, didn't can your creepy ass after Twiss."

"I'm sorry," Simon offers.

"Sorry? Sorry!?" Polhaus jabs Simon's chest with an immense finger. The man's hands are proportionally very large, even on his swollen frame, and there is muscle coiled and hiding under that fat. The poke sends Simon's light body back against the wall.

"Sorry is answering to those parents when Twiss walked. You ever look a parent in the eye and have to explain a thing like that? Huh? You don't have to answer to breathing people. And don't think I don't know that there is some serious, heinous, queer shit going down with you and your stiffs. You're

here far too fucking often when you're not supposed to be—you, with your Jeffrey goddamn Dahmer vibe."

There may have been a witty retort for Simon to offer. Or maybe he could have explained that he did answer for the Twiss case, to all the dead children he had failed. But no words come to him. Simon's mind is snagged on two fascinating thoughts: First, in comparing their body types—his own wiry build to Polhaus's hulking corpulence—he realizes they would make a perfect slapstick duo, a Laurel and Hardy painted in shades of blood and noir, and he regrets that they are not friends. Second, Simon finds himself wondering what it would be like to dissect something as large as Polhaus, the walls of fat, the caverns inside, the hard-hard arteries—to dive inside, completely submerged in the dead matter. This is not out of any desire for revenge on the man, or even wishing him harm, but pure, simple, tactile curiosity.

Polhaus notices Simon's malachite eyes, wide, not looking him in the face, but examining his anatomy in methodical passes. Something cold slides into and twists in his hardboiled gut. Officer Polhaus turns away with a grunt. Simon has a habit of taking all the fun out of picking on him, without even knowing it.

"Fucking Clockwork Orange freak!" Polhaus lumbers off, his orbiting fellows following in his gravity.

Simon picks up his black bowler hat. His colleagues sometimes thought he wore it to emulate a character from a movie called *A Clockwork Orange*. But he had never seen the film. His peers thought he wore all black just to be morbid. The truth was that the thought of coordinating varied colors every morning filled Simon with a paralytic terror.

Simon picks up the lily delicately; it had lost a few petals. He sniffs the flower. The Dead Water awaits.



You lose your loved ones every morning.

*Every* morning.

Ever mourning.

You sacrifice them to shrill electronic screams on the altar of the day. Then you stumble into the shower to wash the incriminating gore off your body. Remember your dreams—the deep ones, deep under REM currents and oneiromantic realities, the vivid, cinematic dreams, multifaceted plots you can't believe your brain could weave at the speed of slipstream . . . but then, your subconscious is smarter than you, bigger than you. Remember those dreams? Don't remember too hard, loveling. If you try too hard they'll crumble and slip away; they can't survive long in the barren air of rational thought.

Do you remember the cast of characters? Some of them might be original, from scratch—a gargoyle that lives in your backpack and sings Led Zeppelin. Some of them are fictional characters you always wanted to meet. Some are combinations of quirks from loved ones sewn together and brought to life. Some are family and friends. Some are high school crushes you let slip away. One of these figures might be your best childhood friend—"friends forever," you said—but you both grew up and lost touch and the last you heard he got a girl pregnant in high school, got arrested for bringing a gun to class; in your dream, he's still a child, preserved, best friend forever. Some are college buddies before they got old. Friends who got married before you could tell them how you feel. Dead loved ones preserved in sleep. Your mind becomes one of those paintings where dead celebrities of different eras—Bogart, Monroe, Dean, Elvis—come together to play pool in some Platonic plane of existence. But this moving painting is filled with the iconic celebrities of *your* life and everything is made of nostalgia so pure you could cry. All these characters. You have conversations and adventures with them. You love them. They are your whole world.

Do you remember them? Don't remember too hard. They'll crack.

For a few short hours they are the most important people to you. But dreamtime stretches those hours to months and years. These relationships are deep. These emotions are deeper. But then you become aware—you hear the alarm clock. You scream—you want to stay just a little while longer, just for forever, because you know that once you wake up they will be gone. No matter how hard you fight, though, your loved ones die, their death rattles echoing in your head. For the briefest moment, you mourn them in your bed. But the mundane world asserts itself.

How silly.

Their memory fades, turns to ash leaking out your ears.

By the time the shower water hits, they're gone.

Do you remember now? You loved them more deeply than any person in the waking world. Do you remember these loved ones you killed with cornflakes? The ones you betrayed for To-Do lists and tedious commutes?

Don't remember too hard.

Hold that thought, just a little longer.

Because you understand this misfit more deeply than you guess.



The cards help keep the glass shards out of his mind, dance in his hands in silent-sleight poetry—lifts, shuffles, and maneuvers for an audience of none.

Never an audience. Not living.

Simon waits in the breakroom. He convinced a fellow pathologist to take the rest of the day off and waits for her to finish up her last project. The Corbies are restless. Hungry.

They caw, "*Apa morata!*"

And they caw, "*Mertvaya voda!*"



And in one voice, the murder sings, "Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder."

"Hey, Ghoul, what's your game?" says a voice outside Simon's head.

Simon looks up. Names. Names always fill him with apologetic dread. A funny thing—Simon can remember the names of all his patients, but has trouble with the living. He's good with faces, bad with names. Name tags help.

Jason is the one talking.

Brad is the one standing behind him.

And the girl . . . has a visitor pass. Brad must be showing off the morgue to another girlfriend. Simon stares up at Jason. Jason sighs theatrically.

"All right, what's your game, *Simon*." He says Simon's name like an unfelt apology. "You always drag those cards around. Got a trick to show us? Come on. Or are you looking to start up a poker game?"

Simon shakes his head. He did not play poker. The probabilities seemed unfavorable and he was not good at reading living faces. He read ligature marks, bullet holes, and bruises; he could play poker in a room full of cadavers. Simon shakes his head, but Jason already knew the answer. They had run this pantomime before. Jason is showing Simon off to the girl, just another macabre curiosity.

The trio sits at a table at the other end of the room. Brad whispers something into the girl's ear. She looks over at Simon, looks back at Brad, and giggles with him. For Simon it's like being back in high school.

*He never played in any of their reindeer games. Eh, Jane?*

The trio eats and talks.

"So," says the girl, "you guys work on dead people. I mean, how do you *do* that?"

"Objectification," Jason says. "It's like this: First year, they teach us respect for the stiff. We treat them like friends. A lot of us named our first cadavers. I called mine Rambo."

Simon nods, though the others do not notice.

"There was this one girl in first year," Jason continued. "Molly. They were digging into the abdomen of her cadaver—I think she called him Frank—and she's just holding his hand saying, 'It's all right, Frank; it'll be okay; it's all right.' She goes on like that for a while before she realizes what she's doing."

Simon smiles. He always liked Molly.

Brad chimes in: "So at the end of the first year, all the students have a memorial service for their cadavers. Some dude sang a song for his corpse. Molly wrote a poem. And *this* guy—" Brad discretely points to Simon. "This guy—" Brad leans in toward the girl, whispers in her ear.

Her eyes bug out and she spits a little of her soda. "No way! No fucking way."

The trio glances back at Simon.

Jason continues the lesson. "Anyway, that shit doesn't happen after first year. You toughen up. They teach you to objectify. It's not a person; it's clay. You objectify it and you cope. Kind of like how we say 'beef' instead of 'cow.' We don't say, 'I'm going to eat a pig,' we say 'have some pork.' Society, it, uh, objectifies things to, you know, cope."

"Society marches toward its taboos," Simon says.

Silence. Two eyes times three looking wide at Simon's malachite.

"Objectification," says Simon. "Personification. I remember. As a boy. There was a cartoon public service message on Saturday mornings that said, 'Don't drown your food.' The food items were animated. Reasoning creatures. With eyes. They sang and pleaded not to be drowned in condiments. Someone thought that was an awfully important moral lesson, to spend the money on the ad. You should not drown them, but you can eat them and they will smile and sing. . . ."

The words continue to flow out of Simon. He so wants to participate in the conversation, having heard a topic he has something to add to, and he tries really hard. He tries to explain his theories on objectification and personification—yes,

we say “beef” and “pork” but then go and humanize our food. Singing hot dogs. Dancing popcorn. *Let’s all go out to the lobby—let’s all go out to the lobby—let’s all go out to the lobby . . . and eat a sentient being.* Animals can sing and dance in the cartoons. Bambi is a cute, reasoning strip of venison. Aztecs believed that eating your enemy gave you their strength, and M&M’s look us in the eye and tell us to crack open their exoskeletons and suck out their milky innards, empower ourselves on their sweet, sentient guts. All the commercials and all the Disney cartoons and was it possible, at all possible, that someone, somewhere, in some darkened boardroom, had decided to subliminally steer the populace toward cannibalism?

Simon tries to convey all these things. Maybe he tries too hard. He’s not sure what words he’s used, but when he is done, when his mouth is dry, Jason, Brad, and the girl only gape. And then they leave.

Simon sighs. He looks across the room at a piece of half-eaten watermelon left on a paper plate. Simon focuses. His hands dart, surgically. Four flicks of the wrist and three playing cards shiver, across the room, from the red interior flesh of the watermelon.

The fourth card pierces, a half-inch, into its hard outer shell.



Simon navigates the hostile terrain of his peers and finally gets to his friends. They are waiting for him. They are always patient. They may seem still and silent, but Simon is attuned to their subtle, geological nuances. He is a sensitive boy.

The refrigerators’ hum soothes his nerves. In the vibrations he can feel their enthusiasms.

Every one of them was his friend. Every one of them broke his heart.

Simon is an archeologist. They send him these sacred temples and he explores their ruins. He digs. Bullets are artifacts

to extract. He reads the cuneiform of stab wounds and bruises, deciphers dead languages and poetry.

Simon is a necromancer. Bone cutters and scalpels are foci and talismans. Science is an empty ritual, lip service to physics. He sings requiems with surgical cuts and stainless steel voice over digital recordings. All his patients are dead. None of them ever pull through.

Three phases to Simon's absinthe high: The first is the intense colors and fading lines of Impressionist mania. The second is lucid madness. But the third phase is waking dream—fully orchestrated, epic, phantasmagoric scenes painted on the inner eyelids. Simon can reach this stage while standing. Simon has disciplined himself to reach this stage while working. When Simon sips absinthe, his scalpel bends with steel laughter. When he drinks enough, Autopsy Room 6 fades, and when he slips his hand into that Y-incision, the whole world falls away.

There is an imbalance in Simon's head. That is what the doctors said. His mind takes shortcuts—ever intuitive and always imaginative. When Simon enters the Dead Water, his scalpel vanishes, science fades into green mists, like someone staring at binary code until blood gushes from their eyes and the ones and zeroes merge into the image of a butterfly just before they go blind, Autopsy Room 6 blurs away and Simon stands with his patient. Simon knows the science—knows that he knows, intellectually—but it all goes away. All the cuts and data go on autopilot. His brain compartmentalizes. It is just him and his patient, talking by the Dead Water.

Then the Corbies grow fat.

And Simon's belly fills with love, the dead love, the liquid nostalgia concentrate.

Shortcuts. They can be problematic in the legal world. His colleagues and Dr. Reeves are always so frustrated. "Show your work!" they shout. Simon recalls his sixth-grade math teacher. She would rap his knuckles. She would hiss his name, "Mr.

Meeksss!” Little Simon’s answers were always correct. Even so, she always rapped his knuckles. “Show your work!”

Simon pulls answers from the Dead Water and they are always correct. He’s learned to trust those answers. The Dead Water is smarter than him, bigger than him. But absinthe is only half the ritual. To get to the Dead Water, every cadaver must break his heart.

Jason was right: After first year, they taught students to objectify, to cope. Simon went in the opposite direction. Simon personifies. Simon does not cope, he *feels*. It has to hurt. That is the way of his addiction.

*You have to feel the needle before the high. Eh, Jane?*

Personify.

Personify.

Simon readies himself in Autopsy Room 6, snaps latex gloves over shaking hands. He recalls footage he saw in a documentary—a study on the importance of the sense of touch in mammals. Scientists took two infant monkeys and put them in separate cages. They fed one monkey milk via a furry, soft puppet that could cuddle and caress the baby. They fed the second monkey via a metal milk bottle. Same nourishment, no cuddling. Over the subsequent weeks, monkey two became a shaking, neurotic mess. When, at the end of the study, they offered it the soft puppet, it desperately leapt to its new mother, shivering and hugging manically.

Simon has so few opportunities for intimate contact, for socialization. But his patients are always so patient with him. During the initial, external examination, Simon touches them as intimately as anyone did in life. And after, going inside, Simon touches them more intimately than any living being had, sifting through sentiment and entrails. Finally, in the Dead Water, he talks with them, and though his time is short, the Dead Water stretches moments into days and months of dreamtime. Simon befriends them, asks his questions.

*When did you die?*

*What does that bruise mean?*

*Who shot you?*

*What did they bludgeon you with?*

*Did they stab you before or after they raped you?*

*Why did your mother smother you?*

*Were you scared?*

In and out come these sleeping friends. Simon leaves behind his sleepwalk life, sheds his somnambulist skin, and lives and feels, *feels* deeply, deeply in the Dead Water. But it always has to end. He is always called back.

Every one of them is his friend.

Every one of them breaks his heart.

They all swim away.



Simon pushes a gurney through the halls like a sugar-hyped child with a shopping cart terrorizing a grocery store. The Cook County Medical Examiner's Office performs some five thousand autopsies a year. Plenty of opportunity for his addiction.

"Hey!"

Simon screeches to a halt. A hand and arm flop out from under the sheet, dangling over the side of the gurney.

Simon looks up, catching his breath. A woman. From the office. Her name tag says *Amy*. She waves a toe tag.

"Hey, Simon. You need to stop leaving messages for people on these. It's creeping everyone out."

"Sorry. Ran out of Post-its. Plenty of toe tags." Simon smiles. He could not help it. The bass of his heart bangs out amphetamine rhapsodies.

"What are you on?" Amy asks.

Simon shrugs. "Mountain Dew. It'll tickle your innards."

Amy shakes her head and walks down the hall. Simon could have told her his drug is absinthe, but that was not a good idea, and it was not the truth. Absinthe is just the me-

dium, the accelerant, the lubricant. The active ingredient is the dead. The dead are his drug.

Simon takes the dangling, pale hand in his, holds and tenderly examines it a moment. He likes hands. Hands are very expressive. Simon is not very good at reading faces, but he can read a hand. Hands have more trouble lying.

Simon gently tucks in the hand and arm back under the sheet and wheels away. There is more work to be done.

Every year, five thousand chest cavities yawn open and scream.

Simon hears them all.



“Simon, what the hell are you doing?” Dr. Oba Fulani yells. She has an authoritative yell, like some sort of Mama goddess. The senior pathologist, she runs the day-to-day affairs, directly under Dr. Reeves.

Simon freezes.

“Is that from the evidence locker?” she asks in a Nigerian accent.

Simon looks at the bear in his hands. Caked in blood, with one eye missing, stuffing trailing out of the socket hole, it looks very sad.

*Can teddy bears suffer survivor guilt syndrome, Jane?*

Simon looks down at the tiny body, chest freshly sewn shut, ready to be slid and closed away into cold sleep, their Dead Water adventure finished.

“I was bringing it to her—her bear,” says Simon.

“In God’s name, why?”

“She’s scared. She died scared. Very scared. She thought something would come and save her. Like in stories. She did not understand. She died holding her bear.”

Dr. Fulani stares. Her mouth does not hang open, but she stares. This is not the strangest thing she’s seen Simon do. The

anger evacuates her body; she wants to hang on to it, but, *dammit*, Simon has a way of saying these sorts of things so . . . genuinely.

"What did you find out?" she asks, shoulders slumping, looking at the girl.

Simon puts a tender hand to the girl's head. "Blunt force trauma to the head. Cause of death was a brain hemorrhage."

Dr. Fulani nods. "Her mother's boyfriend said he found her like that. Said there was a break-in."

Simon shakes his head. "No. The boyfriend did it."

Dr. Fulani walks farther into the room, very interested now. "Yeah? How do you know?"

"She told me."

Dr. Fulani slams her clipboard down on a counter like an angry goddess throwing lightning. "Dammit, Simon! That does not cut it. You need to give me something better than hunches and—"

"But it's correct, Dr. Fulani," Simon interrupts. "It's always correct."

"Still doesn't cut it, Simon. Not in court. Or do you want a repeat of the Twiss incident?"

Simon flinches. His head falls. "The murder weapon was a heavy flashlight, the boyfriend's flashlight. He was too frantic to wipe it clean."

"How do you know that?" asks Dr. Fulani.

Simon shrugs with his eyebrows. "He dumped the flashlight in a dumpster behind the apartment."

Dr. Fulani almost protests, but jots something down on her clipboard. "I'll tell them to look for it. And Simon, put that bear back in evidence before Dr. Reeves sees it. Okay?"

"Pugsley," Simon says.

"What?"

"The bear's name. It's Pugsley."

"How—?" Dr. Fulani takes an exasperated breath and leaves.



Simon waits for the door to close, waits for the footsteps to *trip-trap* far down the hall. Then he places the teddy bear in the arms of the dead girl.

“Sweet dreams, Tamara.”

Simon slides her back inside and shuts the freezer door.

He misses her already.

## CHAPTER 4

Feel it.

His veins are Stygian rivers. The ghost tree grows, upside down in his head, wormwood roots snaking through the gray wrinkles. The crows cackle in their branches.

Feel it.

The bittersweet tang of chemical licorice and loved ones gained and lost in a single night.

A good night's work.

Malachite eyes wide and green, and green and quickened. Synapses surging with ghost fire. Everything easy. Nothing awkward. Graceful and sure. At his best—*yes!*—at his best with this much Dead Water. He can solve any puzzle, walk between raindrops, run on falling leaves.

"Crisped and sere," sing the Corbies. "The leaves they were crisped and sere."

"Sere?"

"No, *seer!*"

The black birds argue in his head.

Simon stands in front of the final cadaver of the night, scalpel in one hand, bent lily in the other.

"Hi, Jane."

He hesitates. He's a schoolboy again. Why? She gives him butterflies. Oh my! He hasn't had butterflies in the stomach since . . . since his last girlfriend.

*She was my girlfriend for one night, Jane.*

Memories are often locked in a sensation and Simon finds happiness in the sticky-sweat seal of a rubber mask. It was a junior-high Halloween dance. And the girl—oh, the girl was pretty and was so suddenly there the moment Simon noticed girls. She liked Band-Aids and wore such colorful ones. Every cut and scrape she received in play was her pride and joy. Another chance to show off, to decorate herself in Band-Aids.

*She turned hurts into joys, Jane.*

But little misfit Simon, all in black, did not travel in her social circle, did not travel in any circles, just in books and in his head. At the Halloween dance, though, social lines and circles faded to nothing under strobe lights and Jack O'Lantern laughter. Everyone was something else, no more students, only walking, dancing dreams. Simon, under his rubber mask, was as close as he'd ever been to being one of them.

He and the girl danced. Even in her costume, she wore Band-Aids. Later, they hid under a table and, with a flashlight, he performed a shadow puppet show for her. Simon was very skilled at shadow puppets. She had clapped, quietly, and then kissed him.

*For one night, she was my girlfriend.*

The next day, Simon drew her a Valentine. It was after October, but he drew her a Valentine. He drew her a heart.

*I tried so hard, Jane. I spent so much time. It was such a good heart. The coronary arteries were perfect and to scale.*

The girl fled the misfit and his Valentine. The social circles rose again, and they never went away.

And now, Simon hesitates in front of Jane. Then he looks into her golden eyes. He feels the peace wash over him, doubts banished. The Dead Water is sweet, but Jane is different. More powerful. The dead love, deeper.

He places the bent lily in her hand, feels the cool, dry caress of her skin. With scalpel and nimble fingers, he cuts each stitch of the Y in her chest, plucks out each thread.

"She loves me.

"She loves me not.

"She loves me.

"She loves me not."

He plucks the last black thread, considers it with a boyish smile. "She loves me." He tosses the thread and drinks the last of the absinthe from his Thermos.

Manias are born in the time it takes to open a door.

You have but to knock.

Her chest opens with a sigh. Inside are all the post-autopsy organs, all stuffed back into place, all the glistening things he needs to see her soul.

*Knock-knock.*

Open.

Simon dives inside.



Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

“Were you scared, Jane?”

Her mouth forms a squiggly line—half-grin, half-frown—and she deflects with a playful shrug. The ebony waves sigh nearby. The world is a blur of trailing lines. There is only her face, her huge eyes blinking at him, and the blurred background as they spin on the Wheel of Fate.

Spinning.

Whirling.

They laugh and slam their bare feet down into the soft, bone-powder sand. The creaking merry-go-round slows to a stop.

“You liked playgrounds, didn’t you, Jane? Even as an adult. Especially as an adult.”

She nods.

“You liked sneaking into playgrounds after hours. Play at night. Do something ridiculous.”

She nods.

“You liked the feel of your bare feet in sand, especially at the start of fall. Just the hint of a chill, dipping your feet deep into cool September sand.”

She nods thrice.

Runs off.

Giggling.

Simon follows, running through the white sand. Empty merry-go-round, slide, jungle gym, seesaw. Empty swings sway in wind and memory. Just the two of them frolicking in a Plutonian playground somewhere after ever-after.

They climb the stairs on the slide, impossibly high.

“Jane, who did this to you?”

They climb.

“You knew them, didn’t you, Jane?”

Way, way up, they sit at the top. Simon’s legs dangle down. Jane sits behind, her legs wrapped around his waist, arms wrapped around his shoulders. No moon or stars in the Dead Water, but they watch the lunar glow of the playground below. She whispers in his ear, nuzzling chin into his shoulder.

“There were four of them,” says Simon, looking down. “You knew them from before. They hung you to scare you. They wanted something.”

And they push off—

Slide.

Weeeeeeeeeeeee!

Down into the white sand in a giggling tangle of limbs. They get up. They play.

Up.

Down.

Simon and Jane go up and down on the seesaw.

“One of them was large, Jane, very large and very strong. He was the hangman, all by himself—hoisted you up.”

Up.

Down.

“He lifted you. One of them laughed while you choked. One of them asked you questions. One of them cried.”

Up.

Down.

They stop, Jane high and Simon low. She slides down the seesaw plank, buries her head in Simon’s chest.

“Jane, what—?”

She tickles him and runs off. Simon follows. They laugh again and play on the jungle gym. Simon walks high atop the monkey bars with vaudevillian gestures, shows off his perfect balance, shows off for the girl—then takes a comically timed tumble into the sand. Jane hangs upside down, legs locked in the bars. They stare each other, eye to eye, upside down for a timeless beat.

“They played Hangman, Jane. They wanted something. They wanted you to tell them something.”

Jane plops down next to Simon and whimsically draws pictures in the white sand.

“You scratched one of them—the big one. Is that why they killed you? What did they want?”

Simon looks down to see Jane drawing a game of Hangman in the sand. A stick-figure girl with a frown hung on a stick gallows. Next to her, a mystery word of six letters:

— — — — —

She draws an *H* in the sand.

H — — — — —

She draws an *A* in the sand.

H A — — — — —

She dips her finger into the osseous sand for a third letter . . . but there is a groan, a deep groan from below, deeper than space, and it grows into a growl. The sands under the entire playground undulate and quiver. Something struggles. Jane pulls back her hand in horror.

All is quiet again. She looks up at Simon, troubled. She does not want to continue. He does not rush her. They walk away and play on the swing set. They swing, lazily, side by side. Simon’s hand reaches across and takes Jane’s.

“This is one of the things you’re going to miss the most—playing in playgrounds after hours— isn’t it?”

Jane smiles. Nods.

And then, they kick off.

They swing harder.

Higher.

They're laughing again.

Higher.

It is the dare that every child faces: How high can you swing? It is a wonderfully frightening dare. Higher and higher and braver and braver, until you are parallel to the ground. Then it is the question that every child asks: Can I go higher? Can I kick the sky? Can I go farther? Can I do a three-sixty? And then it is the wonder in every child's mind: What would happen if I did the impossible—what if I did a three-sixty? What would be my reward? Could I keep on doing the impossible? Could I keep doing three-sixties? Could I reverse any sorrow? Could I reverse death? Would the world be reborn?

Simon and Jane swing higher and higher. They are now parallel to the bone sand. They kick harder.

"Simon," says the starless sky. "*Simon!*"

*No. Oh no. Not yet. Please . . .*

The Plutonian playground vanishes. All the sand falls away. There is an hourglass as big as galaxies where souls are just grains.



"Simon! Earth to Simon." Dr. Reeves smiles his plastic, game-show-host smile.

Dr. Reeves is a man made of smiles.

Meteors smile at dinosaurs like this.

Simon, startled and caught, yanks his arms out of the Y-incision with a slurp, tears off the latex gloves, throws them away quickly, guiltily, self-consciously. Dr. Reeves eyes the used rubber gloves in the trash, raises a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

"Well?"

Simon tries to maintain, tries to hide his Dead Water high, but he can feel the dead love surging through his system. He nudges his Thermos out of sight with a toe.

"Well what, Dr. Reeves?"

Dr. Reeves's smile expands. It's a handsome smile. A white sun setting over the majestic peak of his prominent, tanned chin and strong, tanned jaw.

"I thought we were finished with Dangling Jane," says Reeves. "Why do you have her out?"

Everyone else in the office had started calling her Dangling Jane. Simon did not.

"Something I missed in my initial report," says Simon. "Wanted to be thorough."

"Oh? What did you miss?"

Simon stares.

Silence.

Dr. Reeves's smile becomes a mentor's smile. Simon squirms. Between the two of them, they have all the pedagogical chemistry of a spider eating its young.

"You know, *son*," says Reeves, leaning in, all broad shoulders and gym-grown body, "you get a lot farther in life with a smile and a handshake than you do with just a handshake. You'd certainly get farther with a smile than you do with that creepy scowl."

People skills. Simon had often been told to work on his people skills. People skills cure cancer. Dr. Richard Reeves was Simon's boss, Cook County's current medical examiner. Chicago had changed from the system of electing a coroner to appointing an expert in the seventies, but Reeves was still a politician at heart.

"Now, why don't you give Dangling Jane some rest, huh?" says Reeves. "And please, Simon, don't come back until Monday. I don't want to hear any more about you sneaking in off shift. Just enjoy your weekend. We don't want any more . . . *strangeness*, do we? You know, there was pressure after the Twiss case to let you go." Reeves grabs Simon's shoulders, smiling, squeezing just an infinitesimal degree past comfort. "I held on, but I can't keep fighting that same fight for you."



The Dead Water burns bright and green in Simon's nerves, giving him preternatural clarity. All he can see in Reeves's face are the layers upon layers of cuts, laser incisions, injections, lines on top of lines of cosmetic surgery, much of it performed by his father—the dead injected in his face, injected in his—

*It's too horrible to contemplate, Jane.*

Dr. Reeves lingers, dangling the anti-carrot in Simon's face. "Good talk, Simon." Finally he leaves.

Simon releases a breath, unclenches his hand, drops a scalpel now dripping his own blood. Simon knows Reeves's darkest secret. He knows the good doctor illegally sells cadaverous bits and pieces, even whole corpses, to whomever it is that buys such things. It's a lucrative trade. He takes from Simon's helpless patients, plunders the dead to pay for better cars and toys and, of course, the building and rebuilding of his ninety-seven-percent artificial body.

Simon would like to pretend that Reeves keeps him around because he's deathly afraid of anyone turning him in. But Simon knows the real reason. The truth wriggles in his stomach with parasitic spasms. The reason Reeves keeps Simon on staff is the same reason Simon could not tell anyone about the plundering: If ever it came to light that nefarious deeds were being perpetrated at the Medical Examiner's Office, who would suspect the handsome, tanned doctor, when they could blame the Ghoul?

\* \* \* \* \*

Jane is all tucked in, slid back into her refrigerator. Simon closes the door, then flips it open and closed, open and closed, again and again.

You hang up . . . No, *you* hang up . . . No, you . . .

## INTERLUDE: Silhouettes

The slam of the clip thrills my guts.

God, I love that sound. Sounds like . . . sounds like when they used to call me G.I. Jane and give me shit and I'd kick their asses and then we were all warriors. Before the crazy talk. Before the boogies.

I once saw aerial footage of a beach—Florida; Hawaii, maybe. There were tiny people swimming and splashing, but also big, dark silhouettes weaving in and out of the shoreline and the people. Statistically, shark attacks are rare. People think the irregularity is a shark deciding to come into our space. Wrong. The sharks are always with us, not a hundred yards away. We're in *their* space. The irregularity is when one decides to reach out and bite.

Would people really want to know that?

Would they still go to the beach?

Attacks are rare, so the civilians don't really need to know. They do not have to see the water at that angle.

I look through the scope—tiny, warm bodies, reds and greens swimming in a blue sea. I pan through the crowd. I know it will be there soon.

There.

A blue silhouette swims through, barely perceptible against the nearly identical blue of the background. It walks, passing inches away from the red bodies. None of them know. They all walk on.

I caress the trigger and try to remember bliss. I track the blue boogie, and then freeze. *What if it sees me?*

Stupid irrational fear. I curse my weakness and crush it. No one can see me up here.

I take aim.

Then I hear it—the high-pitched, girly scream that I hate so much, that I spent years and bullets and boot camp hell to escape. But that's what comes out of me as the boogie looks up with its cold blue head, staring me down through the scope with its impossibly cold, black-hole eyes.

## CHAPTER 5

Simon watches the silver wraiths.

The sepia wraiths.

The monochromatic wraiths.

"They are all dead, you know," he tells the sleepy crows in his cranium. He drinks green. He watches the screen. They are all dead. Purgatories run in circles. The Corbies are sated but not satisfied.

Organ music. A monochrome skeleton dances on top of a gear-work clock. Onscreen text reads: *Blood! Your precious blood!*

He watches Count Orlok, all rodent fangs and spider hands, stalking the wide-eyed heroine. Simon watches *Nosferatu*, the 1922 horror classic—thrills at the hungry corpse stalking through the flicker-flash world. Finally, the sun comes up and kills the vampire.

Simon changes discs and sips from his Thermos.

He watches *Our Hospitality*, the 1923 comedy classic—thrills at the slapstick antics of Buster Keaton, the Michelangelo of silent comedy. He watches the deadpan-faced hero perform pratfalls and physical gags. Silent, bodily, vaudevillian soliloquies.

*They buried Buster Keaton with a rosary in one pocket and a deck of cards in the other, to prepare for both eternal possibilities. Did you know that, Jane?*

They're all dead. Purgatories run in circles, sometimes spinning on digital discs. Simon puts the two discs away, like two giant coins for the ferryman. Sometimes two discs will get you where you're going. The Corbies caw in the wormwood branches. This is not the addiction. This is a byproduct of the addiction. This is not the drug. This is rummaging through your medicine cabinet while waiting for your source to call.

Simon closes his eyes and lets the green fairy magic do its work, projecting waking dreams on the inner eyelids, a new

movie with symphonic score, a merging of memories. The hideous vampire versus the slapstick hero, claws and fangs against pratfalls and perfect timing. How wonderfully incongruous, the scary comedy, the comedic horror . . .

His thoughts drift back to her golden eyes.

Damn.

Late, Saturday night, and Simon sits in his house, banished from work, unable to be with Jane, unable to concentrate on anything else, unable to sleep.

"Your biorhythms be bugged," cackle the Corbies.

Simon paces his home, tours the dead plants and empty fish tanks while obsession teases his spine with that amphetamine tickle. Again and again he pulls out a tiny white lock of Jane's hair from his pocket.

This is not an ideal relationship.

He paces and thinks of her pallid face, her cool hands. He takes out a scalpel and examines it, lovingly. It was *the* scalpel. Her autopsy scalpel. *Their* scalpel.

They do not make Hallmark cards for this situation.

Simon paces.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon walks a coin up and down his hands, between dexterous fingers. Then he walks the scalpel. And then he walks them both, scalpel chasing coin, up and down and around his hand.

*"You have an imbalance in your head," the doctors said, but they never really knew what to do, Jane.*

Medications never seemed to work, rarely had any effect on young Simon. Not like absinthe.

*It tickles my innards. Eh, Jane?*

Simon grabs the devil's prayer book—a deck of cards—and performs lifts and double lifts and shuffles. He moves cards about the deck invisibly, makes cards appear and vanish. He manifests coins from nowhere and sends them back. He tries

the scalpel, making it appear and vanish with wrist flicks. Simon practices card throwing, sinking queens and kings and jacks into yielding targets, cutting the stems of dead houseplants from across the room.

One doctor, who young Simon actually liked, prescribed exercises of manual dexterity. So Simon took up various arts and hobbies. He learned sleight of hand. He took up juggling, card throwing, knife throwing, carving, calligraphy, and various crafts, anything to keep his hands busy, to demand precision from them. He had his father's surgical hands, better hands.

Simon runs out of cards. He walks to the spare bedroom, the one with mats on the floor, and starts his tumbling exercises.

The hand exercises helped, a bit. They certainly kept the glass shards out of his brain better than the drugs. But Simon was always hungry for more. As a boy, he had appreciated the physical comedians of his beloved silent films: Chaplin, Keaton, Harry Lloyd, and the others. He read their biographies, admired their dedication to their craft, their practiced, expert control of their bodies—how, in the name of a laugh, they performed much more dangerous and impressive demonstrations of physicality than any modern, musclebound action star does in his or her explosive stunts. So Simon took up vaudeville, slapstick, and physical comedy. Teachers were harder to find, but his parents had the money and they indulged their boy. Simon learned from performers and clowns, from books and videos, and mimicked what he saw in his movies. He took several classes in the martial arts, mostly for the tumbles and breakfalls—judo rolls, jujutsu rolls, aikido rolls.

Simon rolls, tumbles, and somersaults on the mat. He takes painful-looking falls. He slips on banana peels that are not there, save for what the wormwood shows him. Simon has slapstick boxing matches with imaginary foes. He reenacts the routines he has memorized from DVDs, the backgrounds and piano music supplied by absinthe and imagination, odd ballets and comic grace. He battles the ghoulish Nosferatu with pratfalls and gags, a slapstick duel with a Gothic horror.

After years of repetition, our hero has the speed, dexterity, and skill that can only come from obsessive compulsion and no social life. His cuts at the morgue are the most precise. He may be the most skilled sleight of hand performer in the city, though he would never know it. Simon never performs for others, only the shadows in his head and the ones that leak out.

People see Simon lost in his thoughts and assume he is slow, but his mind moves very quickly. People see Simon's awkward nature and assume he is physically inept, but he is much more flexible and athletic than they could imagine.

Simon defeats the Gothic monster with slapstick and the movie he has created with wormwood in his head is good, distracting. Still, his mind wanders back to her golden eyes.

The Corbies whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still Saturday night.

Simon flushes another fish.

They always make him cry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still Saturday night.

Simon writes a love sonnet. Then he smashes a mirror when he sees Toby Reynolds's bloated, putrescent face.

"I'm sorry, Toby," Simon says to the fragments of glass. "I'm so sorry about Twiss."

Do you know about Myer Twiss?

\* \* \* \* \*

Still Saturday night, *still*.

Simon carves her name into the wall, over and over, but the black birds keep squawking. Somewhere he can hear Count Orlok's silent chuckle. His belly growls for the dead love.

*There is a ghost tree, Jane, that grows in my head, and the Corbies are always hungry.*

Simon grabs his hat, his coat, and his Thermos. He does what every absinthe-pickled gentleman necrophile has done, when troubled, since time immemorial.

He goes for a walk.

\* \* \* \* \*

The swings sway vacantly in the wind on squealing chains. Empty slide, empty seesaw, and empty monkey bars. Simon removes his shoes and digs his feet deep into autumn sand. It does feel good.

The dark of the world spins and blurs. The Wheel of Fate turns. Purgatories run in circles, sometimes spinning on squeaky playground steel. Simon kicks harder and the merry-go-round spins faster. Faster. He stands and hops up, perching and balancing on the steel handhold rails that run like spokes through the merry-go-round. Still spinning, Simon stands, and then walks, over the merry-go-round, from steel bar to steel bar, at the rate of the spin, walking with perfect balance, an absurd, circular treadmill in the dark.

"Simon-go-round. Simon-go-round," chant the Corbies.

He balances his black hat on his nose, head tilted up, still walking, still spinning. Was it comical? Was it impressive? He tries hard to be impressive, to show off.

But Jane does not laugh.

Jane does not clap.

Jane is not here.

Simon cannot hear the ebony sea. He slumps, sits back down on the spinning wheel, folding up like a sad, dapper ragdoll, resting his chin on his knees. No Dead Water and no

Jane, just a neighborhood playground on the mugger side of the A.M. divide. He shakes with dead-love withdrawal. "It's not fair," Simon says to the crows in his head. "My friends always go where I can't follow."

He feels nostalgia pangs, big as coffin nails, in the chest.

Simon tiptoes through the playground on bare feet, conscious of broken glass. He deftly avoids a used condom half submerged in the sand. The place is empty and desolate—not another soul in the park, just Simon and a kingdom of dead sperm. Simon stares through his green, green buzz and, in monomania, focuses down and down to the molecular level, considers whole worlds contained within the crinkled latex, whole cities of wriggling beings—some screaming, "The end is nigh," some reveling in the moment of their writhing Danse Macabre, all their millions upon millions of little dramas playing out in micro-time to the coming spermicidal apocalypse.

"There could be as many as six hundred million of them," Simon tells the Corbies.

Our hero has a career in finding the stories hidden in rotting bits of aftermath.

He slides down the slide. He swings on a swing, reaches out for a hand that is not there. He kicks harder, swings higher. Higher.

*What would happen if I went all the way, Jane? Could I get you back? Could I pull a three-sixty? If I went that high, would you see me?*

Simon leaps off the swing, paces the playground, chasing afterimages of Jane, memory fragments. He's not chasing echoes, but echoes of Jane's echoes from the Dead Water. Simon flutters through life like a bat, pursuing the echoes of things but never the thing—the aftermath of events, not the event; the ghosts of people, not the person; the corpses, not the ghosts. For someone with a whole squawking, sardonic murder in his head, he feels pretty alone.



"Ain't got no body. . . ," sing the shady crows, laughing in the wormwood tree.

Simon sits on the seesaw. He kicks up, but crashes right back down. Alone. Wind and moon and cold sand and noisy metal. Who was Jane? Who were the four men who played hangman with her? What did they want? Did they get it? Where was this going? Simon closes his eyes and chases Jane, chases her golden eyes and white hair down a black hole of questions. Where did it go? How deep?

Simon kicks up—

And stays up, on the seesaw, feet dangling above the sand.

The crows stop singing and joking, all their beady eyes staring intently through Simon's glasses. It takes the black eyes of a thousand-thousand phantom crows to form the pupils in Simon's green eyes.

They see a boy—a boy sitting at the low end of the seesaw.

He is just the sort of boy Simon would expect to see in a playground, so average that Simon, later, would have trouble guessing his age or even describing him.

"You're up late," says Simon, shyly.

"I'm third shift," says the boy. "Like you."

He kicks up, rising.

Simon touches down on the ground.

"I like the hat," says the boy.

Simon kicks up.

The boy goes down.

Simon nods. He wants to know what happens next. He does not know how this conversation is supposed to go. Is it an absinthe hallucination?

"I don't know how this conversation is supposed to go."

"This, Simon Meeks, is the part where I show you how the world would be if you were never born!" says the boy, holding out his arms in presentation.

Simon stares.

"Just kidding," says the boy. "Hated that movie."

Up.

Down.

"Your boss. He's kind of a dick-hole," says the boy.

"I . . . yes." Simon would never have put it like that, but he could not deny it either.

Up.

Down.

"He does naughty things with the stiff," observes the boy. "But then, you do some pretty strange things yourself." The boy's aloofness reminds Simon, very much, of a cat's.

Up.

Down.

"She's pretty, isn't she, Simon—the golden-eyed cadaver?"

"Yes. Beautiful."

Up.

Down.

"Do you know her name?"

"Yes."

"What?" The boy leans in, suddenly very interested.

"Jane Doe."

The boy pauses, leans back, and then smiles very big.

*He had a great many teeth, Jane. A great many teeth.*

Up.

Down.

"So you never knew her before. Mystery girl," says the boy. "No suspects."

"There were four of them. One man was very large. He held the rope. Another asked questions. Another laughed. Another cried. They hoisted her three times. They wanted to scare her. She had something they wanted." Simon wants to keep the conversation going, hoping answers will beget answers.

"How did you know that, Simon?"

"She told me."

"Is that what happens when you—? Hmm. You gave off the wildest colors . . ." The boy looks lost in a memory, but

only for a moment. "I don't suppose she told you what possessed her to get that shade of nail polish, did she?"

"I like her nail polish," Simon says, a little defensively.

"Do you know what they wanted from her?"

"No."

Up.

Down.

"What's your interest in all this, Simon?"

"Her."

"What?"

"I love her."

"No, really—what? Huh? Huh?!" The boy watches Simon intently, but not in the eye. He stares at Simon's entirety. "No way! You're telling the truth." The boy looks amused.

Up.

Down.

"Simon, if you go any further into this, things are going to get very weird and very scary."

"I don't care."

The boy continues looking into Simon. "No, I guess not. You're not going to stop, no matter what, are you?"

"No, I'm never going to stop." The words feel liberating in Simon's mouth, decisive. The Corbies hop up and down in his head, excited and agitated by something.

It's the boy's turn to descend. "You want the ones that did this to Jane to pay, right?"

The words sound more like a persuasion than an observation. The boy does not talk like a boy. His mannerisms seem . . . off. Suddenly all the Corbies shriek and caw:

"Not a boy!"

"Danger, Simon!"

"Danger!"

"It's not a boy!"

"It hasn't breathed, Simon!"

"Hasn't taken a breath in ninety-eight seconds!"

"Ninety-nine seconds!"

"Danger!"

Simon looks down at the boy. Through the green haze there's something superimposed, something sharing the same space with the boy, something taller, something slender. It notices Simon noticing and the boy-thing's head tilts to the side, tilts too far. Simon flinches, uncontrollably, as if something were thrown at his face.

"Simon?" the boy-thing purrs.

"What are you?"

"I'm a shadow," say two separate voices fighting for control of Simon's ears. "Right now, I'm *your* shadow."

A blur.

Gone.

Simon crashes down, hard, on the seesaw. Without thinking he goes into a well-practiced backward roll and ends up back onto his feet. It is only force of will that prevents him from completing the slapstick routine with a comedic stagger. The Corbies continue to keen and cry.

"Danger!"

"Run, Simon!"

"Ah, hasten!"

"Ah, let us not linger!"

"Ah, fly!"

"Let us fly!"

Simon grabs his hat and runs.

*My shadow, Jane! My shadow split away from me and I did not know how to sew it back on.*



Simon is fairly certain that a strange thing happened at the playground. He also knows that he has a lousy point of reference for "normal," so it's hard to gauge just how strange.

But he had made a decisive choice. Hadn't he? He would not let Jane just drift away. He would find out what had happened, sew together the corpses of the three wise monkeys, if he had to—feed them lightning and resurrect them to see and hear and speak the evil that had happened.

But how?

"Green light!" yell the Corbies.

"Oh," says Simon. He crosses the street.

The crows jabber agitatedly. The glass shards press his brain. Simon needs to be able to think clearly. He needed a—

"There!" cry the Corbies.

"There—there—there!"

A dead dog in the predawn alley. Fresh. When times are tough, addicts can be creative in scoring a hit. Simon enters the alley and remembers . . .

*When I was a boy, Jane, I used to give animals Viking funerals.*

An inquisitive boy, Simon often explored the area around his home. Sometimes, he came across the cadavers of animals: roadkill wildlife, pigeons, cats, dogs, even a turtle once. He found them in their odd poses and looked into their filmy eyes. This was the closest he allowed himself to animals, afraid of killing living creatures with his very presence, like his fish.

*I didn't like leaving their bodies like that, Jane—on the ground, undignified, abandoned to bloat and decay.*

Simon gave them sendoffs. He longed to give them a proper Viking funeral, to burn them on proper funeral pyres. But fire is not something adults let children like Simon have.

Still, he was a creative boy. An acquaintance at school often showed off his collection of smashed pennies—pennies left on railroad tracks and crushed by the trains. Such trinkets are valuable treasures to schoolchildren and they inspired Simon. He brought his dead animal friends to the El tracks by his home and he gave them the dignity, if not the form, of a Viking funeral.

*I left them on the tracks, Jane, to be blown to oblivion by the impossible pressure of the iron world-snake careening down the tracks, taking my friends to the underworld. They came like dragons down the mountain.*

Simon walks quietly toward the dog. It has been years since he staged a Viking funeral. He has a much different purpose for—

“Oh, no.”

Simon jumps back.

The dog is still alive. Barely. Lying on its side, too weak to lift its head, only twitch, and breathe shallowly, and watch Simon with frightened eyes.

Simon swallows. He paces from alley wall to alley wall. He has no idea what to do.

“Hello . . . boy,” he says.

The dog’s tail twitches once. Simon looks the animal over—deep lacerations, a severed artery. The blood had all but stopped flowing. It would not be long now. Simon kneels by the dog. The beast lets out a barely audible whine.

“Hey, boy. Don’t be scared.”

Simon reaches out a shaking hand, strokes the dog’s head. Oh. Still warm. So warm. He pets the dog.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

The dog’s tail wags, weakly, thumping against the ground.

“That’s a boy. Good dog. *Good*, good dog. Don’t be scared.” Simon cradles the animal’s head in his lap, stroking it and whispering to it. “Don’t be scared. It’s all right. It’s all right. Don’t be scared. It’s okay; I’m here.” Just like Molly did with her cadaver back in school. The dog looks up at Simon with liquid eyes, too weak to move, but still wagging its tail.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

"That's a boy. Such a good dog," says Simon as the tears stream down his face—not just because the dog is dying, but because this is the most affection Simon has given and received from an animal. He so wanted a dog as a boy. And here this animal was afraid, in its death throes, and it still spent its waning energy to wag its tail, to give Simon a sign of acceptance. Simon was sure if the dog were stronger, it would lick his face. Oh, that would be wonderful! Warm, licking, accepting love.

"Such a good dog. Good boy. It's all right. Don't be scared."

Simon sits with the animal. A few minutes later, it dies in relative peace in his arms. He dries his face and carries the dog home.



In Simon's basement, there is a stainless steel autopsy table, with working drainage system. He has a complete set of dissection tools—scalpels, brain knives, and the rest. He has hardly ever used them, but he feels better knowing they are there.

The ghost tree groans, branches swaying in the wind of a synaptic storm. The Corbies bob their heads and flap their wings in hungry anticipation.

"Oh-oh-oh, did Simon bring us a pig?" sings a crow.

"Home again, home again, jiggety-jig," answers the Corbie chorus.

"No-no-no, Simon brought us a dog," sings another crow.

"Home again, home again, jiggety-jog."

Simon slips on blue latex gloves.

"Subject is male."

He picks up his scalpel.

"Subject is . . . a *good* dog."

*I'd never had a patient I knew alive, Jane.*

Sadly, Simon pets the animal. He drinks from his Thermos. He cuts his way to the Dead Water.



Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

“Good boy!”



The Corbies are content. Simon's mind is at ease. A nip of the Dead Water keeps the jagged glass at bay. Simon cleans the instruments, watches the diluted red flow down the drain. Vague memories of playing fetch on the bone-powder beach by the dark water.

“Cause of death: coyote,” Simon says.

They came into the city. They not only survived, but thrived. People rarely realized such large predators could go unseen. They were crafty animals, adapting to new environments, new food supplies. In the suburbs, they learned to hunt in packs to take down the surplus deer. In the city, they learned to hunt rats and eat trash.

*But something else got into the Dead Water, Jane.*

It happened sometimes, some stray signal invaded, an image, a bit of information unrelated to the patient or the case in any way. Already he has trouble remembering. Something moving under the sand, moaning, growling, like before, with Jane. Something that burst from the sand, a blur of claws, razor teeth, and black doll's eyes.

Simon misses the dog already.

He drifts to sleep in the predawn. An infomercial plays on the TV, a program by a local self-help guru, Arthur Drake—a combination self-actualization and get-rich program called *Apex Consumers*.

“Be a more powerful consumer! Don't get consumed in today's fast-paced world, be the one to consume. Change your life today!”



Simon drifts off to dreams of pyramid schemes and razor-filled mouths and doll's eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Every window is a story. You have but to peek.

On the other side of the city, a television. Thick blood oozes down the screen. Never mind why. Is that really important now?

Trapped inside this TV, Charlton Heston tries desperately to warn the people of Chicago. "It's people!" he screams. But no one notices. "It's people!"

The crimson curtain slowly comes down on his scene.

## CHAPTER 6

*Dear diary, Simon will write. Today I kissed a corpse.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"That's when the first plastic baggie of children's teeth washed up on shore. Back in 2001. March."

"Yeah?"

"Since then, we've found about twenty more baggies."

"No shit?"

"I shit you not. Over twenty freakin' bags and no fucking answers. This fucking town, man. Once upon a time, a body washing up off the Lake was a big deal. Now, it don't even make the first, second, or third page of the Trib."

"Weird, man."

"Weird?" Officer John Polhaus swallows a barely chewed mouthful of Italian beef. "Rookie, when we're through with you, the needle on your 'Weird' barometer is going to be looser than two dollar snatch. Weird? Christ. This fucking town. I swear, if they didn't make the world's greatest Italian beef and hoagies, I'd be in Arizona by now. Jesus, that's good. . . ."

Polhaus continues talking, but all his younger colleague can hear, through the mouthful of sandwich, are vowels and slurping sounds.

"Two sandwiches, John?"

"I'm on a fucking diet."

"So, can we go?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet?"

"Kid, there are two things in my day that make this hard life worth it. One is to gorge on an Italian beef with sweet peppers and provolone. The other is to fuck with Meeks."

"The Ghoul?"

"The Ghoul."

"Heard he fucked up the Twiss case. You guys had him dead to rights, right?"

"Wouldn't be surprised if Twiss and Meeks trade congratulatory e-mails. Wouldn't be surprised if they celebrate, in Boy's Town, with dinner and pillow biting. And I certainly wouldn't have a goddamn heart attack if I discovered Meeks spends his nights in the autopsy room, strip dancing for stiff's with a toe tag twirling on his dick." Polhaus speaks through beef and bread, spraying his fellow with wet fragments.

"Freak," says the younger officer, wiping off his face.

"Freak."

Polhaus's radio squawks to life. "John, you there?"

"Yeah," says Polhaus. "Where are you?"

"Have you seen your car?"

"What?"

"I think your tires have been slashed, man."

"Motherfucker!" Polhaus storms outside, the younger officer following.

Simon manifests from around a corner. He can hear his scalpel laughing in his pocket as he creeps toward the elevators.

"Oh! You startled me, Simon." That is what his mother said to him countless times, as he was growing up. Teachers, as well. Simon spent his life walking so quietly that people would not notice him, leaving him to sneak up on others without even meaning to. Getting into the building unseen now was not difficult at all.

Sunday night and still part of Simon's enforced weekend, but Dr. Reeves would not be in. Reeves never came in on Sunday nights, reserving that time to meet with his contacts in the laborious enterprise of black market cadaver sales—always conducted away from the morgue. He kept to that routine religiously.

Simon sneaks toward the autopsy rooms. He needs information. In a movie, a clever character always seems to be able

to hack into an office computer to find secrets. Simon's methods require different sources to be hacked.

\* \* \* \* \*

She still gives him butterflies. Wonderful, horrible butterflies.

Sometimes nausea and joy meet in the strangest places. Misfit, yes. But when was the last time you had butterflies? They flutter and flutter in his guts.

"Third date?" Simon says to the humming room. His friends murmur encouragements from their cold spaces. They whisper in the refrigerated hum. He holds her hand and looks into her eyes.

That is enough.

Peace.

The absinthe begins to take hold. The colors sharpen and bleed as lines and boundaries fade away and the world becomes easier to control in its liquid alchemy. Simon closes his eyes and watches the wormwood tree grow and the sleeping wraith crows awaken in his skull. He can see the butterflies turn into moths, spasming in the dark of his stomach. He can reach out and pluck the negative moths, leave the positives. He skewers them with pins, puts them up on display, gives them fancy Latin names—here is *Doubtis totalis* and *Nervous uneasy* and *Phobos maximus*—and then they cease to matter.

His other distractions are not so easily silenced and catalogued. The Corbies caw angrily to one another. They peck their branches in raucous racket. They caw and call.

"Simon!"

"Simon!"

"Click-clack-crack!"

"This one will cost you!"

"Third drink!"

"Cost you!"

"Won't let you get off on the cheap!"

"Price!"

"Click-clack-crack!"

Simon ignores the ghost crows in his head and the remaining witch moths in his stomach, and he dives down that Y-incision that spells love.

\* \* \* \* \*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

The ebony sea sighs against the Night's Plutonian shore. Invisible symphonies. Moonlight sonatas in the dim. Lily in hand, the vaudevillian, raggedy-scarecrow hero walks in the bone-powder sand, moving at silent film frame rates, searching for his ladylove.

She is not there.

He looks high and low in the lunar glow and nostalgia pull. But where, oh where. . . ?

"Jane?"

All alone in a region of sighs. All alone and he searches and he walks and everything is far away as the crow flies.

But wait.

Something stirs.

"Jane?"

Something crawls out of the black water. Something small. Something bloated.

A little boy.

Little Toby Reynolds drags himself out of the ebony sea. All the filth and putrescence of the Chicago River leak from his pale, puffy face, muffling his words to a choked gurgle.

*Step-drag.*

*Step-drag.*

Toby lurches forward, dragging a cement block wired to a large fishhook that pierces his right foot. He drags himself toward Simon.

*Step-drag.*

*Step-drag.*

"I'm sorry, Toby," says Simon, frozen.

Somewhere, very distant, maybe in a dream, Simon tries to vomit and purge and escape back into his sleepwalk life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Have you heard the story of Myer Twiss?

*Sometimes, Jane, a Dead Water trip can go bad.*

Certainly, you've read the newspaper clippings, seen that eerie mugshot.

*Sometimes, Jane, I pull the wrong memory, the wrong story.*

But have you heard the rhyme that children still sing, while playing jump rope, in certain neighborhoods of Chicago—all those words that rhyme with "Twiss"?

*Sometimes bad things wander into the Dead Water.*

Stories are doorways. You have but to knock.

"Subject: Toby Reynolds," Simon once said, calling the little boy's name, beginning the ritual. "Caucasian, eight years old."

They sat together, in the Dead Water, fishing by the ebony sea, and Simon made a pinky promise with Toby, promised to help.

Toby was a difficult case. Water can wash away evidence. Police fished the boy out of the Chicago River, the stretch they call Bubbly Creek, where the water still bubbles from the gases emitted by the rotting flesh the meat packing companies dumped a hundred years ago. They say that mutant fish and sins swim there. They say that once upon a time, the water was so bloody birds could walk on the floating scabs.

Myer Twiss, local pedophile, child killer, and man-about-town, had taken Toby in the night. When Myer was done with

his victims he hooked cement blocks to their feet and threw them into Bubbly Creek. Fluid and filth in the lungs told Simon that Toby was still alive when he hit the water.

*Toby told me everything, Jane, everything I needed. He was my friend.*

Simon found the needed secrets to help a frustrated police force to build a case. They said words like “linchpin” and “expert witness” and called Simon to the stand. It would be the first and last time. The defense attorney had gotten hold of details regarding Simon’s “disturbing methods” and he dissected Simon before judge and jury.

*“Show your work!” Always, Jane, always: “Show your work!” “People skills, Simon.” “A smile and a handshake save lives!”*

Simon broke and had an outburst on the stand, the poor, sensitive boy. An artery in the district attorney’s case had been cut, and it bled to death. Myer Twiss walked free.

He still walks.

Bubbly Creek still bubbles.



Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

The ebony sea sighs.

Little Toby Reynolds looks at Simon with milk-shroud eyes that leak something viscous onto his ruined Bulls shirt.

*Step-drag.*

*Step-drag.*

Little Toby stumbles toward Simon, reaches out to Simon with bloated, burst, sausage fingers—reaches out like a toddler who wants something.

Somewhere distant, maybe in a dream, Simon writhes on a tile floor.

Little Toby drags the heavy cement block up the Night’s Plutonian shore. Maybe he will drag it forever. His mouth

opens and closes in clammy noodle cadence. He falls at Simon's feet, grabs Simon's legs, and pulls himself up, slowly, pulls himself up Simon's body with the patient deliberation of stagnant water seeping up cloth.

*Step-drag.*

*Step-drag.*

Out of the black water lurch dozens more little bodies. Each one of them drags a cement block. The children of Twiss. None of them can swim away like Simon's patients usually do. All of them sank, dragged down by cement blocks and Simon's failure.

"I'm sorry, Toby," Simon says. "I mucked it all up. They make me pay, though it's never enough. I'm sorry. I wanted to set you free."

And somewhere, maybe in a dream, Simon convulses on a tile floor and swallows his tongue.

Little Toby coughs up sewage as he reaches for Simon's face, mouth opening and closing, liquid and mute—when something shifts in the ivory sand.

A moaning cacophony breaks the rhythm of the ebony sea, drowns out the sound of cement blocks dragging in the sand. All the bloated, putrid children stop dragging the little cubes of purgatory hooked to their feet. Everything is still for a moment.

The ivory sands shift.

Simon falls backward.

Little Toby lets out an amphibian-mucus scream as white arms and jagged claws pull him under the sand.

Sand explodes.

Faces rise.

White faces, black doll's eyes, and their mouths—jagged razor teeth—their mouths open as wide as perdition. They can never have enough. They are hungry. They are hunger. Manifest Destiny hunger.

They surge.

Feeding frenzy.



They devour the putrid little children. Teeth and claws and doll's eyes. They gorge. Still hungry. Still hunger. Their distended stomachs growl like a billion maggots begging for meat.

They surge.

Toward Simon.

Cool hands—cool like September sand—wrap around him from behind. Protecting. They pull Simon away from frenzy and madness and melancholy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Autopsy Room 6.

Simon.

Wakes.

Up.

Choking and gasping on the green, green tiles.

“Bad trip, man,” chant the Corbies in singsong I-told-you-so's.

Simon feels the cool hands. Lying on the floor, next to the stainless steel autopsy table, and Jane is turned, dangling over the side, arms draped protectively over Simon.

“What was that?” asks Simon, still gasping. “Was . . . was that some of your secret, Jane? Were you protecting me by not saying?”

Gasps.

Breathe.

In.

Out.

Simon rises. He lays Jane back on the table. Looks into her eyes. And . . . slows . . . his . . . breathing. He paces the autopsy room, the fluorescent lights, green tiles, and stainless steel—the green and the steel bleed together. The power of the dead love floods his molecules, surges. A bad trip is still a trip.

Breathe.

Memories of the bloated little children come back with a bubbling rush. He bends down, hot forehead against cool forehead.

“It’s hard, Jane. When the cases go bad. Unsolved. And you already know the answer. But you can’t . . . you can’t show your work. They can’t swim away, Jane. They’re stuck.”

He opens his eyes, green malachite an inch away from her gold. Her eyes help. They dissect the guilts, perform a post-mortem on his pains. He breathes. Things are clear for the moment. The crows go silent and take heed.

“*That* is not going to happen to you. They will not get away, Jane, not like Myer Twiss. Promise.”

Simon kisses her lips, cool like September sands, like the time in the year when everything turns sad and sweet. He blows living air down her mouth. Most of it escapes, but some rebounds, rushes back, just a little, the faintest bit; it echoes in her throat, just the tiniest bit, expels in the quietest of sighs.

It is *her* voice.

It is enough.

## INTERLUDE: Fortunes

"What's your fortune say?"

"If I tell you, it might not come true."

"Oh, come on."

"Nope."

"What do I have to do to make you tell me?"

"Now *that* is an interesting question."

The man in the box does not react when I make faces at him, just smiles his Punch-'n'-Judy grin. A moment ago, I fed the box two coins and the man inside came to life, grinning. A wizard, he waved his hands as his gloves flashed to the distorted sound of antique lightning. A slip of paper slid out.

"Just tell me your fortune already," she says.

"I think he winked at me."

"You're being silly. And you're changing the subject."

"You bring out the silly in me."

"Navy Pier was a good idea."

"Happy anniversary."

She leaps into my arms and I grab her butt, the butt that still makes my toes curl, and the slip of paper is crushed between my hand and that butt, and we kiss as the wind picks up off of the Lake.

"Mmmmm . . . very good idea," she says.

"Well, I am brilliant, you know."

"So what is the brilliant agenda?"

"Well, I thought we might check out the live band and swing dancing at the end of the pier, work up a sweat and, later on, make out on the Ferris wheel."

We both look up at the luminous immensity of the wheel. She smiles and my toes curl again.

"Mmmmm. There will, of course, be copious amounts of overpriced goodies purchased throughout."

"Of course, m'lady."

“You’re not going to tell me your fortune?”

“Nope.”

“You know, I could seduce it out of you.”

“Couldn’t hurt to try. Maybe you’ll get it out of me later.”

We take hands and walk toward the sounds of the big band, under the glow of the wheel. In my other hand, I feel the slip of paper. It says:

*She is cheating on you.*

*She is fucking Richard.*

I suspected as much. When I read it, I saw the words, but I also saw images: Me standing over her, panting, clutching my baseball bat, cracked and stained. The rush of the curtains on the canopy bed come down on us like the end of a show.

We walk off, hand in hand. I keep my fortune safely in my pocket.

## CHAPTER 7

Once upon a time, a little boy named Simon had a compulsion.

Simon entered the bathroom.

Whensoever little Simon entered any bathroom, familiar or strange, he had to comply with this compulsion before any urine could occur.

Simon stood in front of the shower, the plastic curtain closed, a portal to things unknown. Little Simon reached up and parted the curtain of black hair that hung down just over his eyes. He took two handfuls of shower curtains, took two deep breaths—careful breaths. He had hyperventilated once, in front of the shower, before he could take care of his business. That had been embracing and messy.

Simon squeezed the curtains, a soothing lavender color with a seashell pattern, and he tore them open.

Nothing.

Little Simon shrugged, took care of his business, even washed his hands with the seashell-shaped soap, and left, flipping the light off on another mystery. Then Simon grew up. The fear went away, but the compulsion remained, just as powerful. One can still hear the swish of the curtains flying open in any bathroom Simon visits. Perhaps Simon was not so very afraid of what he would find if he parted the curtains, but of what would remain if he did not.

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday.

He had flushed the fish. He'd buried the dog.

Last night, he'd made a promise. Last night, he had kissed a corpse.

*Later, they will ask me what else I did, Jane—ask if I did that. Not a polite question, not polite at all. . . .*

Monday and he feels apprehensive. Not the regular Monday Blues most of the population wakes up to at the dawn of every week. Simon never quite understood that sacrament—the exalted joy of Friday and the quiet despair and death of dreams on Monday. Gangrene-infected hope. The constant cycle of joy to sorrow, over and over, as if it were the first time, each time, again and again, like an alien signal everyone else picked up on, like the chemical-pheromone hypnotism the queen bee uses to control the drones. The cycle of sadness and then renewal and back again, like a snake shedding dead skin, choking on its own tail. See them all flounder in the maw, the jagged-fanged underbite of Chicago's skyline, the skeletons rotting in the cavities and a putrid river of gum disease flowing between broken teeth. See them all scurry in their cement-steel-grid hive, the tallest lightning rods giving the finger to the Prime Mover and passing storm clouds.

*What is the honey, Jane, and who are the harvesters?*

The Mondays.

He is apprehensive, unsure of how to keep his promises to the dead. Yet Monday also brings new hopes: DNA work on the blood and skin he found under her nails and possibly new findings in the police investigation. Maybe Jane would confide her secrets tonight. Yes. *Tonight* had a hopeful ring to it.

He made a promise.

They had to pay.

He had to set her free.

Apprehension . . . but Monday has brought him a new subject, and *this* is helping. Down in his basement, at his personal autopsy table—oh, he did not use it often enough—with his own tools. First the scalpel. Then the hand saw. Then the brain knife. Cut the flesh. Stab into the eye sockets. Pull out handfuls of wet viscera.

Cut and grin.

Cut and grin.

*Gut* and grin.

When it is over, and Simon cleans up, he has to admit that it is a damn fine Jack O'Lantern.



The sun grows shyer and shyer in the October sky, and it is already dark when Simon gets to work. No Officer Polhaus—a good omen. Simon walks with an extra spring in his scarecrow stride. He can almost taste the Dead Water hit. Not just any hit, the exquisite rush of Jane, the peace and clarity of Jane. So many things he wants to ask, so many things he wants to tell—to carve *Happily Ever After* with surgical steel.

Anticipation causes him to commence drinking the moment he gets out of his car, gulping sips from his Thermos, already laying in the wormwood root-work that will sprout and bloom into lucid madness.

*Sometimes, Jane, I wonder if absinthe makes my eyes greener.*

Spring-heeled Simon even waves to peers and colleagues, regardless of the potentially terrifying ramifications of such gestures—the dread possibility of small talk. As he walks down the linoleum hallways, the colors already undulate—lights slither, lines melt. A grade school crayon-drawn Dracula waves at Simon with waxy arms of preposterous proportion. Simon waves back. The person at the desk, the mother displaying her child's drawing, waves at Simon, thinking she is somehow involved in this exchange.

The wormwood tree grows in his head, the ghost tree and Corbies all upside down in his skull.

*Sometimes, Jane, I wonder if the dead tree is rightside up and everything else is upside down.*

The Corbies chant limericks—their mausoleum poetry, their necro-beatnik rhymes—as Simon walks, passing colleagues, faces and name tags, sipping secret poisons from his

Thermos, and waving. His eyes dance over his peers and the office, doors and florescent lights, faces and Halloween decorations distorted by chemical love. His mind is elsewhere, on her golden eyes and her September-cool lips.

“What’s wrong with this picture?” ask the Corbies as they watch the surroundings through Simon’s eyes. “This scene be bugged.”

Simon ignores them. He walks to the humming refrigerator units and the familiar smell of entropy held back but seeping through the cracks. He touches the stainless steel of Jane’s door. Manias are born and fates are sealed in the time it takes to open a door . . .

Empty.

Empty?

Empty!

Simon closes the door and opens it again. He slides out the tray, slides it in and out again. Empty. Over-exaggerated, silent-film surprise plays on Simon’s face. He tears open all the freezer doors, sliding out the trays and shutting them again, finding cadavers and friends, but no Jane. He opens and closes doors, in and out, in an unconscious vaudevillian routine. Only the Corbies notice, from their perches in the ever-after branches, and they cackle at the gallows humor slapstick of it all.

“Jane?” Simon calls, aloud, but no one answers. Even his friends are silent. No murmurs tonight. No whispers back and forth between their cold beds.

*I think they kept quiet to protect me. They did not want me to take things any deeper. Eh, Jane?*

In Autopsy Room 6, Simon searches for his scribbled notes. Gone! He drops the binder, goes to the computer. *Click-clack-click-clack* go his agitated fingers over the ivory keys like ten tiny carrion bird beaks on a skull. *Click-clack-click-clack*. Gone! No digital files on Jane, not even the folder.

No audio files either. No trace of Jane.

Simon’s chin quivers. He adjusts his glasses. He adjusts them again. He runs his long fingers through his dark, tan-



gled hair. He paces the room, both hands clenching fistfuls of hair—pacing the room in the wobbling throes of absinthe—our delirious silent film hero, our defeated Charlie Chaplin.

This had happened before. Cadavers have gone missing. Reeves.

“He never stole my files before,” Simon says to no one but the Corbies. “He never erased them.”

Simon has a young face, smooth with no lines, for he rarely scrunches his face, mostly wears a wide-eyed Buster Keaton expression. But now his lip does a funny thing; it curls in rage, the mouth muscles quivering from lack of use. He squeezes his scalpel.

This has happened before. Bodies have disappeared—absorbed by Reeves, their dead flesh making him a little younger, a little richer. Simon had been angry, then as now, but the anger never lasted, always turned to lime Jell-O in the limbs. Who would believe him anyway? Who would believe the Ghoul? And the lime Jell-O would melt and he would slump in his chair.

Simon slumps.

“Jane . . .”

Yet his Thermos is already empty. The ghost tree is grown in his brain, the Plutonian antenna ready to transmit to the Dead Water—but there’s no body, no glistening entrails, no Y-shaped doorway. The Corbies peck at the dead bark, agitated. All Simon can see is Dr. Reeves’s ever-grinning face. And the Corbies caw:

“Click-clack-crack—this carrion worm,” they say.

“This necro-pirate corpse plunderer.”

“This handsome-handsome vulture!”

“Mother Hubbard!” Simon screams, for Simon never cusses. He flicks his wrist and the scalpel flies, burying itself between the eyes of Dr. Reeves, in a photo, on a press clipping pinned to the cork bulletin board.

“That’s a boy, Simon,” the Corbies caw.

“That’s a sport, Simon.”

“Shriek-shrike-scythe—act! Get the girl.”

Simon stands. Simon grabs the door—lets go—grabs it again—lets go and paces the room. Who would he talk to? What would he say?—*he*, the Ghoul, the guy who had difficulty answer questions like, “What’s up?”

Doubts wriggle in his head and down his spine in maggotty nativity.

“Jane . . .”

He thinks of her golden eyes. Her lips. The sound of her faint voice, his breath, through those lips. He thinks of the girl he knows in Dead Water and the giggling games in pre-October playgrounds.

And that is enough.

The Corbies swoop down and devour the doubt maggots.

Simon opens the door.

Simon walks out.

The wraith crows in his head are the only ones who realize the dread importance of portals.

\* \* \* \* \*

*We need to talk.*

—Simon

—says the toe tag pinned to the message board on Dr. Reeves’s locked office door.

\* \* \* \* \*

She had been crying.

Her name tag says *Amy*.

Something loud and fast vibrates out of her iPod earbuds and she does not notice Simon approach from within her cocoon of sound.

“Amy.”

"Ahh!" Amy screams, jumping back.

Simon jumps back farther, landing him, crouched, on a chair in front of Amy's desk, one foot on the seat, the other stretched up on top of the headrest. Normal interaction was terrifying to him enough without the screaming.

"Oh . . . Simon," Amy says with relief, pulling out the earbuds. "Wow. You're a good jumper." Her eyes are puffy and red; her breathing carries the hiccupy echoes of past sobs.

"Is everything all right?" Simon asks, fairly certain this was the proper question to ask in this social situation.

"I don't know, I just . . ."

"Are you menstruating?"

"What?"

"I mean—uh. . .," Simon stammers. Wrong question.

Amy's face softens. "That's the weird thing. I just can't stop crying tonight. I mean, I'm fine. Everything's fine. I woke up today. I had a good lunch. I'm not even . . . on my period or anything. Everything's great. Just a case of the Mondays, I guess."

Simon wonders at the sheer dread power of this day of the week.

"Amy, where did the Jane Doe cadaver go?"

"Who?"

"Jane Doe. She came in before the end of last week. Hanging victim. She is not in her unit."

Amy punches a few keys on her computer, checks through some clipboards on her desk.

"No, I'm not showing anything like that."

"Don't you remember her? She had the most beautiful—I mean, everyone in the office called her Dangling Jane."

"Nnnnoo. You sure about that?"

"You have to! She—"

"Simon, I've got no Jane Doe, hanging or otherwise, from last week." The hiccup spasms hit Amy again. Her facial expressions are no help to Simon; facial expressions are a mystery to him. But he looks at her hands and the tension there says something is deeply wrong.

"I'm—sor—ry," Amy says through the sobs. "I—don't know—what's—wrong with me—today." Sobs and tears and stringy snot. Simon, petrified, backs away, as if from a grease fire.

Amy puts her earbuds back in her ears with the speed of a child pulling a blanket over her head.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The fuck!"

A vein in his head stands out, pulsing.

His name tag says *Jason*.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! Fucking shit, fuck-shit, fuck!" Jason stomps through the breakroom.

"Where is it? It was right here. It has to be here! I looked in every fucking place it could possibly be."

"Jason?"

"Fuck! Ghoul. Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Sorry."

Jason looks up to the ceiling. "All right, this is getting fucking annoying. Where is my coffee mug? It was right here, just now—just now! It was full of coffee. I poured it in—just now! It can't walk away. Full of fucking coffee!"

Simon notes that the coffee machine light is not even on.

"Jason do you—?"

"It has to be here!" Jason turns, suddenly looking right at Simon. "Did you take it?"

"No."

Jason nods curtly, continues searching the breakroom.

"Jason, do you know what happened to the Jane Doe cadaver?"

Jason shakes his head without looking, hunting for his mug.

"Everyone called her Dangling Jane," Simon continues.

Jason shakes his head.

"You called her Dangling Jane. You started it."

"What are you fucking talking about? Look, Ghoul, you find me my mug and I'll find you a cadaver. Agh!" Jason kicks

the edge of a table, tipping it over with a terrible bang, as he backpedals on an obviously hurt foot. Back slamming into the wall, he slides down to a sitting position on the floor. A single tear slides down his face, and Simon hears teeth grind together. Jason slams his hand into the wall, again and again.

"Has to be here! Fucking here. Why can't I fucking find it! Fucking—mug—nothing—nothing makes sense. Gotta fucking be here . . ."

Simon creeps out of the breakroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

There is a gash in his forehead.

His name tag says *Brad*.

"No. . .," says Brad, distantly. "I . . . don't remember Dangling Jane. You sure that . . . uh . . ."

"You have a—" Simon makes a motion at his head "—a gash."

The blood droplets dribble down into Brad's eyebrow. He touches the blood with a finger.

"Oh, man. Huh . . . wow. Guess I do."

"How did that happen?"

"I . . . uh . . . man." Brad chuckles weakly. "Funniest thing. I don't even know. Maybe . . . I must of bashed it on a cabinet or table corner or something and not . . . not even known. Weird."

"No girlfriend tonight?" Simon asks, noticing the empty leather woman's coat on the table.

"She left . . . or something. I think . . . to . . ." Brad trails off, the blood trailing down his cheek now.

Simon leaves the room, feeling a sudden anxiety to not be there when the blood drops hit the floor—though he could not tell you why.

\* \* \* \* \*

She looks like she is about to fall over.

Simon does not need to see her tag.

“Dr. Fulani?”

“Oh. Simon,” she says in a flat voice, none of its syrupy sound or power. “I just . . . I feel . . . so light headed. I don’t know why. Like . . . low blood sugar . . . or—”

Her knees start to give and Simon drags a chair to her, puts a hasty hand to her shoulder.

“No!” she screams, eyes suddenly wide, lips quivering. “Don’t touch me! Don’t! Oh-no-no-no-no!”

Simon freezes, both from the suddenness of the outburst and at seeing such a strong and willful person in a state like this. Oba Fulani shivers violently, falling into the chair, head tilting from side to side, dragged down by its own weight.

“Oh. I am sorry. I did not mean—I don’t know why I’m just . . . dizzy. I don’t know what is wrong with me today.”

Simon nods, leaving the room. He knew. The Corbies yell it through his eardrum.

“Case of the Mondays!”

“The Mondays got her, too.”

“Pray they never come for you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Somewhere, down the hall, he yells, “Where the fuck is it!”

Somewhere, down the hall, she sobs, “Why—can’t—I stop—crying?”

The Mondays.

The Mondays!

A sudden realization and despair hooks and rends Simon’s thoughts. Is he the most stable person in the building? Four familiar faces—four name tags—four minor arcana in the tarot deck of the Weird. Something is deeply wrong. None of them see it in each other, each lost in his or her own head. Was Si-

mon the only one out of his head? He longed so to hide in his head, but, if he was the only one . . .

"The Mondays!" caw the Corbies.

Jason banging. Amy sobbing. And our Charlie Chaplin hero walking in uneven circles about the morgue, unsure of where he was going.

"Jane?"

He longs to hide in his head, but something is—

"The Mondays!" hiss the Corbies.

He plays with his black bowler hat and whistles as he walks, to chase away the deepening dread. His malachite eyes dart wide, here and there, with chameleon paranoias.

*There.*

Simon stops whistling. Something lurks, just aching out-side the periphery of vision. A figure. Approaching. Simon stares straight down the hall. Nothing.

The Halloween decorations hiss and reach out at Simon. Inexplicable woe bleeds in his stomach like a spectral ulcer. His absinthe high harshes into ominous vibrations.

"Hello?" he says.

"The Mondays!" shriek the Corbies. "They're coming for you."

Something. Moving. At the edge of periphery. And Simon feels it—that fear.

Remember it, lovelings—that fear? That pure, in-the-closet-under-the-bed-passing-a-mirror-in-the-dark-spook terror? We have it as children. We grow out of it, give to youngsters as worn hand-me-downs in the form of pranks and ghost stories. We almost miss the pureness of the sensation. We don't turn on the light as often. We don't run when our spines are tickled anymore. These things are silly. We trade those fears for complexes and addictions. We sacrifice those instincts on that bloody altar of adulthood and to that most insidious god, Social Embarrassment. We forget. We forget the games—that killing monsters in giggling effigy has power. We forget to leap

over cracks. We forget that in this dark, dark world, embarrassment can kill.

But Simon, the misfit, does not hesitate when he feels that fear. Simon bolts.

“Shriek-shrike-scythe—fly, Simon!” the Corbies caw.

Simon runs, full sprint, down the halls of his employer. Confused stares and peers do not slow him. Embarrassment does not faze him. Scarecrow legs have long strides and his Buster Keaton feet beat light. He sprints, skids through corners, hurdles obstacles, and rolls over a counter. It isn’t easy running from a spine shiver. Our nimble, silent film hero evades the ambiguous horror.

“Simon?” calls a nameless co-worker.

“It’s the Mondays—they’re coming—run!” Simon yells between breaths.

Simon ducks into Autopsy Room 6—the familiar space—the familiar hum of his refrigerator units and friends. Simon grabs a scalpel off the tray, clutches it, cold and reassuring.

A moment passes.

And another.

What was he running from? Anything? The Corbies give no answer, only peck at the branches in his head, hungry for Dead Water. Simon looks at the list of scheduled autopsies, longingly caresses the metal doors. He too was hungry for dead love. Oh, just one. It was more difficult to be afraid in the familiar room.

Then his friends, all his friends in their cold little beds, murmur all at once.

*It’s coming!* they whisper, all echoing in their murmuring chorus: *coming-coming-coming-coming.*

Simon shuts off the light, ducks behind the stainless steel table, and holds his scalpel like a rosary.

A moment passes.

And another.



*It's passed,* whisper his friends in their cold little beds.  
*Passed-passed-passed-passed.*

Simon rises, tucking the scalpel away.

"This house is made of straw," says a Corbie.

"You should find one of sticks," says another.

"Or bricks!" says a third.

Simon looks out the door. Nothing to the right. Nothing to the left. He almost misses it, a shimmer on the linoleum—the slight traces of wet footprints trailing down the hall, passing Autopsy Room 6.

Simon runs in the opposite direction. He runs while looking behind.

A hand pokes him in the chest.

The reaction is automatic, barely a half-spark in a synapse and his hand makes the honed, trained, conditioned, and impossibly quick motion. Empty fingers rise up, a wrist flick, and then a shiny, shiny scalpel held threateningly.

"Nifty finger skullduggery," coos a Corbie.

"Whoa—hey, Simon," says Brad. "Cool trick. How'd you do that?"

Simon lowers the scalpel. "It's just a—blood," he says, pointing to Brad's face.

Brad still has the open gash in his forehead, the blood still dribbling lazily down his face. It's now dripping off his chin. Touching his cheek, he traces the sticky blood up to the gash.

"Ow! Oh, man. I don't . . . I don't even remember where I got that . . ."

Simon examines Brad's eyes.

"No, not concussed," proclaims a Corbie.

"I concur," says another.

"I concur."

Down the hall, Jason bangs on a wall, yelling, "Where the fuck?! Why can't—why doesn't anything make sense?"

Down the hall, Amy sobs, "What's—wrong—with—me-ee-ee?"

"Simon," Brad says lazily, confusedly, with blood-slicked face, "have you seen my girlfriend?"

"The Mondays," shriek the crows. "They're coming!"

The absinthe high takes another harsh turn as all the Halloween decorations now bleed from their various heads. All of them murmur, asking Simon pleading questions, questions all bleeding together.

Then Simon sees it again: something moving, just outside of his periphery, advancing closer.

A wrist flick and the scalpel vanishes. Both hands grab Brad's shirt and Simon flings the two of them through the nearby door of a public restroom.

"The Mondays," shriek the Corbies.

Simon pushes the door shut.

"Simon, what the hell?" asks Brad.

"You should clean that wound," says Simon.

"Right . . ." Brad turns on the tap and cleans the blood from his face. "Man . . . how did I do that?"

Simon makes a long and exaggerated production of washing his hands, taking off his hat and smoothing the dark, tangled briar patch of sweaty hair, then straitening his black necktie. Before he knows it, Brad has finished cleaning his wound.

"Later, Simon."

"Brad, wait!"

"What?"

"I . . ." But no more words come to Simon's mouth.

"Man, what is wrong with you?"

"Case of the Mondays," answers Simon, defeated.

Brad shakes his head and leaves. His footsteps clap down the hall. Nothing interrupts them.

Wrist flick. Scalpel. Duck into a stall. Latch the door. Simon perches on a toilet, legs pulled up onto the seat, so they don't dangle in view, in that space between floor and stall partition.

*I remember, Jane, I remember as a boy tumbling into bed and that terror of a leg dangling over the edge.*

White knuckles and stainless steel blade and silence. Not even the Corbies dare make a sound.

A moment passes.

And another.

Cornstalks whisper murder plots in this quality of silence.

Did the door just open and close? Did he imagine the sound?

Silence.

The lights click off.

Eyes wide, unadjusted in the dark. Hold scalpel. Hold breath. Look down. Dark. Look up. Dark—

No . . .

Simon thinks he imagines it, a flare in the mind's eye, a scratch on the cornea. But there are two of them, and they luminesce faintly, very faintly. Two eyes.

Simon falls off the toilet, landing on the floor on his rump. The scalpel clanks then splashes into the unseen toilet water.

The eyes are still there—faint, pale blue bioluminescence, like those fish that live miles down in the ocean, glass fangs, impossible symmetry, and glowing bits. Creatures that never see the sun. The eyes look down into the dark, peaking over where the open space between the ceiling and partition must be. The eyes look down, gigantically down, and Simon cannot breathe under the Jupiter pressure of their gaze, cannot look away. But his hand snakes into the toilet in search for the scalpel.

The eyes have no face or body in the dark. They slowly hover into the stall. Slowly, so horribly slowly, they lower, lower toward Simon. His hand sifts through wet toilet paper and filth, searching. But he can't find it. The eyes lower and Simon still can't see the face. Only the eyes. The planets. Simon is an insect. His hand churns through the chum of cold water, wet paper, and shit.

Barely a foot away and all he can see are the eyes.

Simon still cannot breathe, cannot look away; it will not let him. Some deep, deep jungle instinct, buried under generations of fast food and easy living, screams at him to flee.

“Forget the Jane Doe cadaver,” says a wet, ear-shattering whisper. It vibrates all the cavities in Simon’s body, like he was camped in front of the speakers at a nightclub. “She never existed—yes? I never existed—yes? You will loathe these memories and despair—yes? You will hide from the trauma and forget—yes?”

The voice and the eyes are the only things that exist, until the Corbies peck at the wormwood tree, to get Simon’s attention.

“Where’s Jane?” he asks. It’s the only question he can hear above the fear.

The eyes cock to the side, perplexed—then redouble their effort. Simon gasps. He can feel the thing’s disdain for him, like demonic free radicals tearing about his molecules, hate on a subatomic level.

“*Sleep*,” says the whisper. The basilisk eyes focus, dissolving all they survey.

At one juncture, his parents had tried hypnotherapy to cure his imbalance, but, much to that doctor’s frustration, he could never put Simon in a proper trance.

“*Sleep*,” says the whisper.

Simon’s obsessive mind latches on to Jane. Her golden eyes are his world.

“Where is she?” he asks through clenched teeth, his hand digging deep into feces and despair and finally finding cold steel.

The baleful eyes squint and dart toward Simon’s head—

And stop. They look to the side, sensing something Simon could not sense. The thing, the presence, hisses at the intrusion. The entire bathroom fills with the susurrus. Simon feels his heart beat dangerously fast, his body cooling in pre-shock, a little urine escaping.

*The shower curtains were wide, wide open. Eh, Jane?*

The eyes turn back to Simon, glaring, always staring, floating back up and out in a horrible rewind of their entry.

The bathroom door opens and closes.

Silence.

Simon lets out a loud intake of air, as if surfacing from the bottom of a dark lake. His hand splashes out of the fetid water, not holding Excalibur, but the scalpel and the shit. He kicks the stall door open, stumbles through the darkness, out of the bathroom door, down the halls, winding and winding to the lobby.

He bursts through the doors and out into the night—an immense night that seems to turn over and sleepily take notice of him.

## ACT II

*“At last the new moon had come. The night was pitch dark,  
and promises to the dead are sacred and must be kept.”*

—Count Carl von Cosel (1877–1952)  
radiologist, romantic, and necrophile

## CHAPTER 8

Once upon a time, the child went missing. Every year the boy's mother brought him to the hospital, so that he might see where his father performed cosmetic surgery and where he taught medical students his techniques. It was quite some time before the parents noticed that the quiet child was gone.

They looked up and down the halls, in storage rooms, in cabinets full of medical supplies, and the search party grew. Only one set of doors remained.

"No."

"He can't possibly be . . ."

After three hours, they found little Simon in the classroom, sitting among the severed heads, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard the child was amazed at the words that came from his mouth.

What had happened in those hours? Had the boy entered the room, found the dozens of heads—each resting in an aluminum roaster pan, to collect the drippings; each veiled with a white cloth; all laid out on tables covered in plastic sheets of lavender, knives and hooks set, neatly, like cutlery, everything arranged like a summer cookout? Had one of the cloths fallen away like a terrible curtain? Had Simon fled, hiding himself, only to tiptoe back out to meet his new friends? They could only speculate, as they looked on the child. He had arranged the heads in a circle on the floor. He sat in the middle, holding one head, an elderly woman's, and whispered reassurances to her as he ran a comforting hand over her hair. His hands were caked and dirty, as a little boys' hands often are, but also glistening and red.

When his parents saw him, they were speechless. His mother picked him up, saying, "Simon, what have you done?" She quickly explained to her son that the heads were donated

and used by students to practice facial surgeries and there was nothing to be afraid of.

“But I’m not afraid, Mother,” the boy said. “They needed to talk to someone.”

His mother carried him from the room, and he hugged her, leaving little handprints of gore on her dress.

Later, Simon would write out elaborate stories in crayon—one for each severed head. But no one understood the meaning of the words. His father threw away all the stories. Something changed that day in the relationship between father and son. There would be half-hearted attempts to convince his boy to enter into the vocation of cosmetic surgery, but from then on, he distanced himself from Simon, spoke of him as little as possible, talked with him even less. He sometimes snuck a look at his child, the way a frustrated writer peaks at a locked drawer where he tossed an embarrassing rough draft, convinced that there is no salvaging the piece, no matter how many redrafts, convinced, in point of fact, that he should give up writing all together and never again create such a thing.

And Simon grew in strangeness and stature.



See the slipstream, the luminous river of souls flowing in light-particle currents. The silver wraiths. The sepia wraiths. The monochromatic wraiths.

Purgatories run in circles, sometimes rolling on old projector reels. Simon eats popped kettle corn, handfuls of autumnal memories trapped in the salty-sweet taste. He sips from his Thermos. “They’re all dead you know,” Simon says to the Corbies. They all nod silently in the ghost tree. The slipstream. The flicker-picture gateway to the underworld.

Sanctuary. Simon had to think. Reconnect. Simon’s tiny world had only a few safe havens, and the most sacred of them had been violated. So he came here, to his dark, burgundy-



upholstered womb, with a pipe-organ heartbeat that soothed his troubled mind. Simon liked the Gateway Theater. It was built in the thirties with a huge auditorium, red curtains and carpeting, pillars, sculpted wall decor, gold and gilt, and that wonderful pipe organ—all semi-restored, slightly tattered, and endearing. Everything was charged with memory and nostalgia, like the treasures in the freezer units at the morgue.

*It looks like a theater ought to look, Jane.*

The huge, modern multiplexes are no place for our hero, with their crowds and their hyper-kinetic advertisements. All those logos and products, those symbols and signals floating in the air, thought-cancers and subliminal programming. All that media out there, signs and television and radio and the Internet—slogans—spreading, becoming viral, taking on life. Could these memes continue to evolve, these aggressive thoughts? Could they become self-aware? Soft drink jingles coming to life in the air and in our heads, from the constant bombardment of commercial radiation?

What mutations would follow?

Commercials and pop-up windows drove the glass shards into Simon's brain. He was too sensitive for the blitzkrieg of input, his mind wired for much more subtle subjects, like the dead, like the slow-nuanced body language of rigor mortis.

The Gateway Theater had space and it had darkness. Tonight's audience consisted of Simon in the back row and one elderly couple in the front. Sometimes there were larger crowds. The specialists would come out. The Silent Film Society held regular showings of ancient cinema, even provided live organ music and the occasional orchestra. Sometimes, they let Simon play the pipe organ.

Simon liked the meditative quality of silent film. These waking dreams rejuvenating his mind.

And what do you think, loveling? Would you find these cinematic relics boring? A cemetery is not an overly exciting place. Nothing much happens there. Still, we infuse it with

meaning and emotion, even if we don't know who's buried there. We visit in the middle of the night on a dare. We vandalize, sneak about, and make-out. Tell ghost stories. Go apparition hunting. We walk those quiet places and we realize everyone is dead and so we invest an otherwise boring landscape with thrills and moods and a context of rot.

Light and shadow souls, fifteen feet tall, ghost-dance on revolving celluloid. Our hero eats his popcorn.

*Not a bad underworld, as underworlds go. Eh, Jane?*

Tonight the theater plays the 1920 film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

Simon watches the walking dreams, the specter play that the dead actors must perform for eternity. Simon watches the story of the deranged Dr. Caligari and his faithful somnambulist, his sleepwalker. Caligari performs his carnival show, revealing his man in the box—Cesare, always in a trance—who answers the audience's questions with prophecy, even predicting when audience members will die. Oh, but Dr. Caligari is a wicked creature, squat, even in his top hat, and he uses his hypnotized slave to murder and fulfill those sideshow prophecies. Simon watches as Cesare sleepwalks and kills. Lanky and pale, he's the second cousin of Edward Scissorhands, stalking streets and sets created by German Expressionists: twisted alleys and impossible buildings, zigzagging lines, doors with no ninety-degree angles—prehistoric prelude to Tim Burton's mindscape. But the strange somnambulist cannot kill the latest victim given to him by his master, a girl named Jane. The sleepwalker is enchanted with her beauty. The somnambulist carries Jane away, his obsession leading to a chase, a ledge, and a long fall. . . .

"Jane," Simon whispers in the darkened theater dusty with memories, feeling a pang of empathy for the obsessions of a fellow misfit. Simon himself had been kept in a box, Autopsy Room 6, until his wicked master, the Doctor, demanded he make death predictions.

His Jane was gone, too. Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. The charm in the story is in how old fashioned it is.

Jane, erased. The murderers walked free. Dr. Reeves walked free.

“What is Simon going to do about it?” whispers a Corbie.

“Simon-Simon does not do, Simon-Simon only broods,” says another.

“Quiet,” whispers Simon. “You’re only a construct of my imagination.”

“Low blow, dude! Low blow,” say the Corbies. “If we’re constructs, what does that make your friends, the slab-sleepers?”

“Shut up,” hisses Simon, a tear crawling down his cheek. “You’re not even real.”

But were they right?

The doubts and the fears, the fat corpse flies, buzz in Simon’s head and the Corbies do nothing. They are not committed. Simon, with no Dead Water and no Jane, feels the shakes and withdrawal of his preternatural addiction.

On the screen, the poor somnambulist falls, dying for his Jane.

Simon leans forward, arms curled on the seat on front of him, face buried in his arms. He watches the elderly couple. They must be in their late eighties.

They are necking. Not cute, geriatric pecks. They are sucking face—leathery hands and necks and lips and tongues all writhing against each other.

Simon stares.

“Beautiful,” he says, leaning forward. They were old, withered to husks by time, but they did not care. They still had so much passion. Had they always come to this theater? Had they come when it still shined, as children, sharing candy, watching the silent films when they’d just been released? All those decades between the then and the now, all those lost loved ones—maybe they were the only two left who knew what the partner was like when he or she was young, in the before. All those years and here they were, kissing with so much context!—pretext!—wrapped in on one another, two ancient,

wrinkled pachyderms mating one last time before marching into the elephant graveyard. Two oceanic dinosaurs, swimming in misery for billions of years thinking they were alone, then finding each other in the calling glow of a lighthouse and embracing one last time before the release of extinction.

Simon's frown inverts with a hiccup.

"You're wrong," he says to the Corbies. Then he reaches inside himself and shakes the ghost tree because it is his tree, *his* crows. "You're wrong! Jane is real."

Jane's golden eyes had given him peace. She plucked out the glass shards. She smiled to him, squeezed his hand, sighed with his breath, and wrapped a protective arm around him when nasty visions attacked. She showed him the joy of romping in a playground after midnight. He knew her intimately, inside and out, and he loved every detail he exhumed.

"I love you, Jane Doe."

Compulsion and obsession and passion and mania all fall into place, interlocking with a resounding *click*. Each element had always been there, disconnected and floating, hidden, in the awkward, passive stew that is Simon, but the skeleton key that is Jane has tripped all the tumblers into place. Something opens inside Simon, something escapes—something from the Dead Water he had been shooting up for years.

Simon smiles like a Jack O'Lantern full of burning opium. He stands in the shade-haunted theater and drains his Thermos empty. That was the last of his stock. On the morrow, he would have to call his contact and procure more absinthe. He would need it to find Jane. The movie turns green on the screen. The Corbies caw and fly from their branches, pecking and eating every fat, writhing doubt and buzzing fear. His tree. His Corbies.

There was little to go on. The records were gone. There were ways around that. Though things like the names of work-mates slipped in one ear and out the other, the Corbies were packrats when it came to shiny factoids.

A crow hops up and whispers in Simon's eardrum, whispers the address of the scene of the crime, where Jane was killed.

Simon rewards the corvid with a treat—a celluloid wraith through his eyes. He climbs up, standing on the back of the theater chairs, inebriated, but with perfect, slapstick balance. He stares at the screen until the silver membrane bursts and the wraiths escape their stage, take to the air, and float to Simon. He smiles and dances on the back of the chairs with the floating shades, and they enact their own stories.

This is not the Dead Water, but neither are road-kill autopsies. It would have to do for now.

Through it all, the old couple in the front row does not notice, embraced in their twilight passions and heavy, heavy petting.



"Money?"

Simon hands Ziv the money.

Cold, torrential rain and mood provided by October.

"Okay," says Ziv. "Let's go get your stuff."

As always, Ziv looks very serious about the transaction, a very serious ten-year-old boy, riding a skateboard, wearing a head-mounted flashlight in the night.

Ziv skateboards through the cold rain.

Simon follows on foot.



"This is good weather!" shouts Grandsnaps, in his Slavic accent. "Rain, like this, is happy omen. Falling like this before a new endeavor guarantees success."

"This is bad weather, old man!" shouts back Baba, waving a soup ladle. "Anyone can see. You can catch your death in weather like this."

*I wonder, Jane, can one catch another's death?*

Simon sits silently, watching the back and forth.

Grandsnaps makes a grand gesture and marches to the apartment window. All his actions are big. He is a large man. Simon thought “barrel-chested” a good phrase, but deficient when referring to Grandsnaps in that it referred to “barrel” in the singular. His hair is iron and a little shaggy, and he wears a matching grand mustache like a symbol of station. His voice is always a boom, always a shout. Such a figure is jarring to Simon’s sensitive nature. Yet he always found the big man fascinating.

Grandsnaps slams open the window with both arms, with his whole body; takes a mighty breath; holds the copious amount of stormy air in the multiple barrels of his chest; and lets it out with a breath louder than Simon can shout.

“Ah! Fine weather!” he declares with thunder in his voice, in defiance of the gods in the sky—and even of Baba.

Ziv’s family were immigrants from “the Old Country,” though Simon did not know what country that was. Ziv lived with his grandparents: Baba and Grandsnaps. He’d met the boy by chance and had purchased absinthe from him for years. The absinthe was supplied by an uncle who often traveled back and forth from “the Old Country.” A very potent absinthe, the bottles featured no labels. It was all Simon drank anymore. For whatever reason, this brand affected him more than others, set his head on green fire. Simon did not know why the brand was so efficacious or the liquor even spoke to him so profoundly. Most modern studies indicated absinthe’s fabled hallucinogenic properties, the lucid madness, were largely exaggerated. All Simon knew was that absinthe—and the kind Ziv’s uncle delivered, in particular—affected him.

*Maybe it has a chemical imbalance, like me. Eh, Jane?*

There was a ritual to the purchase.

Simon met the boy, always on his skateboard, stone faced, serious when conducting the exchange. Then they came to the apartment. Grandsnaps would always take the money and then sit his guest down for a talk, while Ziv loaded his cart

with Simon's order. Baba would overfeed Simon, but Simon always ate. He found Baba to be an intimidating figure—though, as he got to know her, he decided that, in Slavic fairy tales, she would be the old woman to help a child, not the one who ate them. Probably.

"Ah, the Dead Water!" Grandsnaps says to a well-timed crack of thunder.

And always, always, Grandsnaps would tell Simon tales of Slavic folklore, while they waited in the living room.

"In the stories there is the heroic water, the water that heals and restores the hero. But, Simon, there are two types of heroic water. Two . . . eh . . . *species*."

Grandsnaps stands in front of the open window, the rhythmic slap of the heavy rain and the roll of thunder accompanying his story.

"There is the Living Water: *Zhivaya Voda*."

Grandsnaps reaches his right hand out the window and flicks his wrist, showering the room in chilled droplets.

"And, there is the Dead Water: *Mertvaya Voda*."

Grandsnaps repeats the movement with his left hand, flicking water droplets into the room.

"The Dead Water, it does not bring with it death. No. The Dead Water heals the dead body, fixes it, knits it back together and washes away the mutilation. But *Mertvaya Voda* is not the Living Water. It can repair the body, but it cannot bring the dead to life. To . . . eh . . . *vivify*."

*It's true, Jane. All my patients are dead. In the end, I can only sew their bodies back together.*

"Spring rains melt the earth, Simon, purify her, make her whole after the death of winter. And the second rain, it vivifies her, brings her to life, makes her grow again. It is same with our hero. He is dead, but they sprinkle the Dead Water on him and it knits his body. Then they sprinkle the Living Water on him and he shudders, coughs, sits up, and he say, 'How long have I been sleeping?'"

Grandsnaps laughs. Thunder echoes.

Simon lets his hand crawl into the noodle dish Baba served him. In the pause of the story, Simon closes his eyes, squeezes a handful of noodles. The greasy texture recalls the feel of his hands inside her Y-incision.

"Grandsnaps, where does the Dead Water come from?" Simon asks. He already knows the answer. He's heard this story many times.

The old man smiles.

"Curious boy! Heh-heh. There is, Simon, a great tree, the World Tree. It grows at the center of all that is, was, and will be. On top of the World Tree is the Bird of Paradise and below, crawling in the roots, lies the Demon Snake. From under the tree flow two springs: *Mertvaya Voda* and *Zhivaya Voda*. And near the springs are the three women. They are fortunetellers. One sees the present. One sees the past. And one sees the future."

*The queen of clubs, the queen of spades, the queen of diamonds. Eh, Jane?*

"But, Simon, the interesting part . . . to find the Living Water—"

"Old man!" shouts Baba.

"What is it, woman? My story."

"Ziv is done loading his cart."

"Ah. Ziv! Wodka!"

This was the next part of the ritual: to honor the transaction. Grandsnaps rubs his massive hands together eagerly. He selects a CD from the entertainment center, removing it from its case as through it were a holy wafer from the tabernacle. He slides it into the player; he is very proud of his stereo system. Ziv brings the bottle. The drinks are poured. Then, and only then, does Grandsnaps hit play.

Queen comes on, through the speakers, playing "Bohemian Rhapsody."



The old man closes his eyes, holds his breath, absorbing the song in ecstatic joy. Dramatically, he raises a hand making a fist in front of his face.

“Freddy-fucking-Mercury!” says Grandsnaps. “The greatest singer in all of history! Listen, Simon, to this part—”

“Always, he goes on about Freddy Mercury,” calls Baba from the kitchen.

Grandsnaps’s face flares red and he stands, pointing a very serious finger toward the kitchen. “Woman! Do not dare impugn Freddy Mercury!”

A cackle emanates from the kitchen. Grandsnaps sits back in his chair. He and Simon watch the ferocious storm through the open window, feeling the wind gusts and stray raindrops, listening to the rest of “Bohemian Rhapsody” and then “Killer Queen,” while finishing their vodkas.

It was all part of the ritual.

\* \* \* \* \*

They march back in the heavy rain—Ziv leading on his skateboard, flashlight beam swaying from his head, and Simon pulling an old Radio Flyer wagon, sounding its presence with clinking absinthe bottles and squeaky wheels.

*Squeak—clink—squeak—clink.*

The legalities of absinthe selling, purchasing, and ownership were complicated and ever-changing. Simon had not bothered to keep up with them.

It did not matter.

Even if the absinthe were not as valuable to him as it was, he might have continued to buy it anyway.

He enjoyed this ritual too much.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello?"

"Hi, sweetie."

"Hi, Mother."

"Look, dear, I was just talking to your father and we'd like you to come out for dinner next Friday. You can bring that girl you've been talking about."

"I . . . can't . . ."

"Simon?"

"She's gone."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. And you just met. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get her back."

"That's the spirit, dear. Oh, I like to hear you so determined. You fight for her now."

"I will, Mom. Goodnight."

## INTERLUDE: Phantom Limbs

They ask me how I can be so sure.

I tell them a mother knows. Flesh of the flesh. Amputees sometimes complain of phantom pains, the tingle and tickle where their arm or leg used to be. Sometimes I feel the tingle. Right here. Chubby, cold, dead, little fingers tickling my ribs from the inside.

They call me a murderer. They spit at me. My husband even called me a monster, on the stand.

Then they tell me, no-no-no. I'm not a monster. I'm just insane. They're not going to put me to sleep. They're just going to lock me away in the color of migraine. And they do. For a while.

I tell them I think there's been some kind of horrible mistake. That is why you are crazy, they say. But "crazy" is a bad word, they say; we don't use it anymore. Then they sing the same song over and over. I don't like it. I tell them it's all wrong. They're mistaken.

They don't like that.

For almost twenty years they sing the same song, over and over. I give up. I sing along. I know all the words by now. They like that. That's just the song they wanted to hear. They let me go. "You're cured," they say. "Go do something worthwhile with your life."

I'm supposed to be seeing someone about housing, about a job. I don't. I go to the hardware store and buy a shovel.

For over twenty years they sang the same song, in the color of migraine, and I don't know anymore. I have to be sure. It's not a very big grave. Still, it's hard work. My muscles cramp up. But I keep digging. I pull something in my shoulder. But I keep digging. I throw up. But I keep digging.

It starts raining and I can't be sure I'm crying anymore, except the sobs shake my body. The shovel clangs on something hard. I think I'm screaming, except my teeth are clamped to-

gether. I must have dropped the shovel because I'm clawing at the dirt, fingernails breaking and tearing out.

I feel little fingers tickling the inside of my belly. I miss my baby boy. He was so fine. I knew every inch of him, his little hands, his little digits, every hair on his head. I used to spend hours lightly tracing my pinky across his little palms because it made him feel safe.

I flail at the tiny coffin with my bloody hands. I feel the tickle of dead little digits. They say I'm crazy, but they're wrong. I felt the dead tickle long before the murder.

It was not my little boy—my sweet, sweet baby. Some horrible cuckoo took him away. I dunk its head under the warm bath water. I squeeze its little neck.

"Where's my little boy?" I yell.

It doesn't answer, just looks up at me with my little boy's face. Pleads through a mask that shreds my heart. I hold it under and squeeze.

"Where's my little boy?"

The mask turns blue and purple. Still I squeeze and scream.

"Where's my little boy?"

Then my husband is there, yelling at me to let go, and I don't, and he hits me in the face until I black out.

I open the coffin. I feel dead little fingers, because inside the coffin, the tiny coffin, inside the little suit and tie, is a tiny scarecrow made of cornstalks, straw, and candy wrappers strung together with rusty barbed wire, topped with a mummified rabbit's head impaled on a twig.

## CHAPTER 9

*Do not cross.*

The wind blows again and what is left of the crime scene tape snaps, yellow and angry, with its final warning.

*Do not cross.*

Simon yanks the tape down and steps into darkness.

The flashlight clicks on. Wooden groans and rickety steps take Simon up and away in an emptied, partially demolished building.

“Used to be a pub,” Simon says into his digital recorder. “An old pub. Just across the street from where John Dillinger was shot.”

*Do not cross*, murmurs the stifled wad of tape in Simon’s hand. Complaining steps take him farther up—only the upside-down crows, from their peculiar perch, can see the descent. Darkness and pipes and exposed bits of the building’s skeleton. Every bit of wood moans plaintively, trying to tell Simon something in their mildew-pillbug speak.

Past the creak-speaking steps and out of the wet dark and Simon is above and outside, on a raised wooden deck that stands between the buildings, an outdoor beer garden. Through the center of the deck, seeming to grow inexplicably out from the middle of the buildings and the concrete, is a large tree, the centerpiece of the beer garden.

The tree, and much of the railing, is strung with curling coils of unlit Christmas lights, like plastic ivy overgrown. An old picnic table decays stoically in the corner. Likely there were tables and chairs strewn about, once upon a time.

Simon touches the tree.

After placing his crime scene case on the picnic table, he takes out a now-refilled Thermos. He starts his second dose of absinthe for the night with a chug and the Corbies grow giddy, the hollow of the ghost tree forming a face in his head.

*Crunch-crunch* go the fallen leaves under Simon's tipsy feet as he paces around and around the beer garden tree.

*Crunch-crunch.*

*There.*

*Crunch-crunch.*

"This is the tree—and that's the limb—that grew the branch—that they dangled the rope—that hung Jane," says Simon into the recorder.

"And the crisp leaves hiss all around, all around. The crisp leaves hiss all around," sing the Corbies in refrain.

*Crunch-crunch.*

"The slight scarring on the branch is consistent with the cutting action of a coarse rope, sliding up and down, as they raised and lowered Jane multiple times."

"Climb up to the jingle branch!" the Corbies caw. "We want to see from there."

Inebriated but nimble, Simon climbs the tree and crawls out to the hanging branch, finds the scar in the bark.

"Jane's scar."

Simon caresses the mark. Closes his eyes and memorizes every contour. Rubs a pale cheek over the wound . . .

"To work, boy, to work," the Corbies call.

He snaps to attention, notices the October sky. A bit of cloud catches the moonglow and ignites in a cool burn, and Simon sees Jane's pale hair tossing in the stratosphere. He was beginning to see her everywhere—in reflections and indefinite shapes and random sense stimuli. We have, all of us, done this—the mental dissection of those endearing body parts in the ones we love: a cute nose, a smile, a delectable ear. We cut them off in our minds, carry them with us as portable keepsakes. Then we place them, like puzzle pieces, in any fitting shape we find in the wide world, and we remember our loved ones with these foci. Simon is no different. He sees her hair in a cloud, her golden eyes whenever he closes his and an afterimage lingers, her playful mouth on the horizon, her

ridiculously orange nails in lit Jack O'Lanterns, her elfin ears, delicate neck, the peculiar shape of her liver, the exact texture of her intestines, the delicate motion of her opening chest cavity in the unfolding of his own hands, the coolness of her touch in the opening of a fridge, the exact weight of her heart in a held grapefruit. He sees Jane in everything.

"To work!" the Corbies call.

Simon takes the crime scene in from above. Individual clues had already been taken, but he wanted the feel, the tactile *all* of the place. It was enclosed by the surrounding buildings. No view from the street . . . but there were a few windows and nothing to mask any sounds.

"The murderers planned to question Jane," Simon says to the recorder. "This location . . . it was impromptu for some reason."

Our silent film hero removes his black bowler hat and spins it in the air, accurately landing it on his case below. He turns on the branch, sitting up, then leaning back, locking the backs of his knees on the branch and tumbling backward—flopping upside down, hands dangling like those of a boy at play, hair hanging. The motion of the drop causes his glasses to fall away from his face—but his hand shoots out in gecko-tongue speed, catching them and returning them to his face. Simon often drops things, but always catches them. The Corbies cock their heads in curiosity at their changed perspective as Simon hangs upside down from the tree branch, dangling in the wind, hanging like a reversed Jane.

Simon pushes his dangling necktie from his face, tucking it under his shirt. He sways, arms hanging down, taking in the moment.

"This, right—*here*—is where you dangled, Jane," Simon says into the recorder, hugging the empty air next to him. "You danced on the wind," he says to the recorder—says, retroactively, to the empty space that once contained Jane. "The little boy saw you from—" Simon points "*—that* window.

"There were four of them. One of them hung you; he was big. One of them asked you questions. One of them laughed

while you choked. And one of them cried. You knew them already. They wanted something from you. You scratched one of them, the big one."

Simon listens to the hiss of the leaves.

He feels it—the sensation of the lost keys, the lost math homework.

"Click-clack-crack, Simon," murmur the crows. "Something's here!"

Simon's eyes dart about, upside down. He's not sure if he's safer in the tree or if that makes him just a dangling, flesh piñata for boogeymen. Simon sits up, pushes off and back, and lands lightly on the ground in a backflip.

"You're my shadow," Simon says. "I know you're there. What do you know about Jane?"

Silence.

The leaves hiss years of gathered secrets and beer garden eavesdroppings.

*Thump.*

Something tossed lands at Simon's feet. Then a blur. Then a cloud of kicked-up leaves. Then nothing. Simon looks down. A dead rat. Why?

At first all he sees is the dead vermin. But the Corbies warble hungrily, and Simon sees what they see: a dead body, a tiny window to the Dead Water. Simon's mouth waters.

Yes.

Just a taste.

Just one hit.

Simon guzzles the absinthe, slips on latex gloves, and produces a scalpel.

"Subject: fat rat."

\* \* \* \* \*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*



The dead love tickles, even just the little taste of it. Simon giggles. His mouth is a graveyard of shiny new tombstones curled up in a crescent. He smiles like he's been told a secret.

Simon sits on the wooden floor, back to the beer garden tree, slumped forward, head down. His blue latex hands raise to shoulder level; one hand displays a bloody scalpel, the other a dead rat dripping viscera from its Y-incision. His glasses sit crooked, hanging half off his face. Simon's body bobs up and down. The scalpel dances in the air, conducting the music that plays only for him.

"Cause of death: poison," Simon says. "The victim lived under the beer garden."

Neatly situated in front of Simon are the rat's individual organs, each displayed on its own leaf on the floor. Simon reverently puts the rat and the scalpel down. Wind blows and *now* Simon can understand what the leaves say when they hiss, what the wood answers when it creaks.

*That place, Jane—the pub and beer garden. It wasn't so very different from a corpse—a set of physical remains, a reliquary for invested memories and nostalgia.*

This had been a happy hearth. Many libations were poured here, many friends made, many laughs freed. They had read stories here, under the twinkling lights of the hearth tree—poetry and ghost stories. They'd performed theatre here. All those nights in this place that creaks and speaks, under the twinkling tree, over a congress of very fat, very literary rats—and all those ghost tales and rhymes and lines of Shakespeare trapped in the rings of the tree—memories hidden in the leaf litter.

Simon snatches a leaf in his bloody, blue latex hand, lifts it to his ear and crumbles it, listening to the haunting memories in the dry *crunch-crackle*.

"Action!" yell the Corbies.

Simon rises drunkenly to his feet, hair wild like black straw; arms hanging loose; bloody, blue, latex hands splayed at the sides. He lurches like the zombified Voodoo-doll emperor of the fallen leaves. His grin is a moon-kissed graveyard.

*You helped me realize it, Jane. I could take the Dead Water from my world within to the world without.*

The pathologist sifts through the memories of the hearth corpse. The most recent: traumatic. Simon bows and the Corbies clap their wings. The show is about to begin.

Simon looks to the scar on the tree branch. Jane's scar. Never taking his eyes away, he walks to a very specific place. With the exaggerations of a mime he hauls the rope—macabre-comedy, the Charlie Chaplin hangman.

"He is the man who did the hanging and his name is Hector," says Simon, into his bloody, blue hand, even though his audio recorder is still in his pocket. "He's very big. Hector hauled Jane all by himself. And, Jane—you scratched Hector's face and he got mad. You made him mad on purpose, didn't you? So mad, he killed you. Hector, in his rage, killed you before they could get what they wanted. You did it on purpose."

Leaves hiss and Corbies clap.

Simon's spindly legs take him, a drunken spider, to another specific place. Simon puts a ridiculously mean face on, vaudevillian villain, then shouts a few silent orations before he begins speaking again.

"He is the man who asked the questions and his name is Gabe," Simon says to his empty, dripping hand. "This was his plan, scheming man. He asked you questions. Hector raised and lowered you. Gabe asked. And then Hector raised you. Gabe wanted something. He was angry when Hector killed you before he was done. Hector is strong. Gabe is dangerous."

Leaves hiss and Corbies clap.

Simon creeps to another spot. He mimes a laugh, a mad-cackle laugh.

“He is the laughing man and his name is Joe. Tagalong Joe. He is only there because of Gabe. He has no other purpose. He laughed while you choked, Jane. His sides hurt when you turned blue. Joe likes pain and perversion, especially the ones that make party-favor sounds. He has no other dimensions.”

Leaves hiss and Corbies clap.

Simon dances to a final spot. He puts on a sad cartoon face.

“He is the crying man and his name is Alex. Tears of rage, tears of sadness. He cried while they hanged you. He . . . he kissed you before slipping on the noose—”

Simon stops. Interrupted. Uncomfortable.

“Why did he kiss you?”

Leaves hiss and Corbies clap.

Simon snaps back and recalls. He falls to his hands and knees and crawls to a far corner of the beer garden’s corpse. He finds a hole chewed into a wooden plank, just large enough for him to reach inside . . .

Arm shoved in to the shoulder, Simon finds the nest, with its hoard of shiny treasures: a bottle cap, a fishhook, coins, a watch, and a key. Simon removes the key.

“Thank you,” he says, suddenly serious, to the dead rat. He strokes its fur. Simon picks up the dry leaf with the rats withered stomach contents.

Lifting the leaf, he says, “This is the poison—that killed the rat—that snatched the key—that was dropped by Jane—that opens the door—that contains more answers.”

“And the crisp leaves hiss all around, all around. The crisp leaves hiss all around,” sing the Corbies in refrain.

\* \* \* \* \*

A wind kicks up, sweeps the now-empty space. The tree and the corpse of the beer garden wait for their demolition, with only the hissing leaves to protest. All that is left of their

last, strange visitor is a dissected rat and letters carved into the bark of a limb:

*J.D.*

+

*S.M.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The second cab driver recognizes the symbol on the keychain.

*Sometimes, Jane, a place can have bad memories.*

"That's the Tanzler Motel."

It was a narrow building, popping up, improbably, between two larger buildings. The space it occupied could have been a very large, very ostentatious alley, but instead chose to be a narrow motel. It was a two-story building squished into three thin stories.

The neon sign blinks: *TA ZL R OTEL*.

Inside, everything is held together by green tiles and mildew. The front desk, a barred-in cage, is empty. A handwritten sign reads: *Ring bell*. But no bell is present. Simon quietly walks to Room 303, as per the key, and—

The key fits.

Another doorway opens.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon looks through a pamphlet hawking a series of self-help audiotapes—and then he's running through the streets, waving a blood-encrusted sledgehammer named Bob.

*Bob is the most statistically common name for an imaginary friend. Did you know that, Jane?*

He does not remember when it all went bad. That is to say, he does not recall any transition, any slide between the mo-

ments he was looking through Jane's personal effects and when the world was drowned in dread and pseudopod screams.

*There are 6,704,845,726 people in the world and twenty-seven percent of them are under fifteen years of age and two thirds of them have imaginary friends. Did you know that, Jane?*

He's been running for a long time; he doesn't know how long. His body is battery acid. He can't hear anything; the deafeningly silent screams drown out all. He's been mutely screaming for a long time. His face hurts from the contortions. His brain is raw. Bob is heavy with blood, rust, and memory.

*We can only conclude, Jane, that there could be as many as 603,436,115 invisible Bobs walking the world.*

He can't remember all the things he saw. It's like trying to recall dream logic or drunkenly navigate a maze, impossibly lost. The doors don't make sense: the empty room with the bathtub, the old kind with clawed feet, a naked old man splashing and laughing manically, like a toddler, his throat and wrists cut, hyper-laughing, splashing the red, red water, mouth smiling, gashed throat smiling. The doors. The thousands of eyes. The amniotic smell. The sound of a trillion scared animals wailing under an ocean of shit and blood. Bob shattering the glass and Simon jumping out the window and no sound, after the glass shatter, but Simon's silent screams.

Where was the transition? Simon imbibed too much absinthe after he stumbled into Room 303. The Corbies useless, too drunk, had fallen out of the wormwood branches, fallen up in Simon's head. But our hero grinned. This was a holy place. Jane had been here, in life.

He pressed his body into the indent in the moldering mattress. The pillow still smelled like her. He put it in a duffel bag. He walked around the room, listening for echoes of Jane. He drank more absinthe, then angrily guzzled the rest.

"Too much," said the last Corbie as it fell out of the now-bare ghost tree. The crows littered the ground in his head like fallen leaves.

The rest of the room was empty except for cigarette smells and the table. On the table Simon found a pamphlet for self-help guru Arthur Drake's self-actualization program, Apex Consumers.

"Be at the top of your food chain, in business and in life!"

An endless river of late-night infomercials echoed in Simon's memory. Third shift brought one into a dimension of infomercials. Arthur Drake's promise of a better, more powerful life, through his program and products.

Next to the pamphlet was a flier, a red sheet of paper that said *Club Wendigo*. The wild script informed that a meeting was to take place Saturday at 9:00 P.M. but no address was given.

With these lay a black envelope of heavy, perfumed paper. Simon pulled out an invitation on matching paper and gold-gilt letters: a cordial invitation to a dinner party of the Gastronome Irregulars.

And finally, on the table, Simon found ticket stubs to an outdoor drive-in theater out somewhere in the suburbs. The bill was a double feature of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and *The Birds*.

*You treated yourself, when you could, to your little anachronism, didn't you, Jane? The more I exhumed, the more I loved.*

Then, of course, there was Bob . . .

Simon runs, now, though he does not know where he is. He does not know where the absinthe high ends and the real horrors begin. So he runs from everything.

*I ran deeper inside, Jane, deeper down. No geography, just following you deeper into the dark. No way back now.*

Simon found the sledgehammer in the bathtub, wrapped in oily rags. He disliked it immediately. Bad vibrations. But he unwrapped it and found himself, in horror, slipping into monomania at the thing, losing time examining its every detail. This ancient hammer, crusted with old blood, layers of it. The letters *B-O-B* were scratched deep into the rusted metal of the head.

*They used to use hammers like that at the slaughterhouses, Jane. They'd sing lullabies into the heads of cattle.*

Madness slipped in at some point.

Simon stops running.

He falls to his knees, trying to breathe, and when he can't do that he vomits up aborted Dead Water. His system, too late, tries to purge the poison. The world melts and rebuilds itself. How far had he run from the Tanzler Motel?

Simon wraps the hammer in its rags, stuffs it into the duffel bag, with the other artifacts of Jane. Where was he? Simon finds his glasses in a pocket and puts them on, to discover a hideous clown face about to bite his head off.

"Ah!"

Simon tumbles back.

The Corbies hiccup in his brainpan.

Simon looks again and sees a grotesque clown face giving a plastic, gargoyle grin—the kind of grin that scares evil spirits away from Gothic turrets; the kind of grin Arthur Drake gives in his infomercials—painted truly grotesque under the green-alchemy trip.

It is a fast food order board.

The speaker is in the mouth. The face is dark, unlit, as is the fast food restaurant. The place is closed down, boarded up. A shell containing a kingdom of vermin seeking ancient grease. Simon had seen these closed-down clown-burger restaurants dotting the city.

*No one seems to remember, Jane, just when they closed down or when they were ever open. I don't remember them ever being in business.*

Simon shivers. He's never liked clowns, never understood why parents shoved their children to such universally frightening symbols. Then those children grow up and throw the next generation to the creatures.

"Go squeeze its nose, honey!"

We throw our children to monsters on their birthdays. Suppose, just for a moment, that these birthday parties contain the vestigial elements of ancient rites enacted in the days when

we still competed with the Neanderthal. Mayhap, Paleolithic shaman covered their faces in grotesque paints, attacked children with strange pratfalls, hyena laughter, and feats of freakish dexterity. The children that stood their ground became the men and women and warriors of the tribe; triumphantly, they blew out the fire of their childhood. The children who cried or ran were slaughtered, sacrificed to dark entities and ritualistically eaten at the birthday celebration. Maybe some modern children—only a handful of winters away from the womb and that pumping, squishy hardline to the communal memory—remember, and the sight of that hideous greasepaint face vivifies the antediluvian remembrance, a genetic impression of those savage celebrations: the blood, the howls, the obsidian glass daggers. And the little darling sobs, lets go of his balloon, pees in his pants.

Simon stares at the clown face in drunken awe.

A staring competition.

The clown face wins.

Then the clown lips move, mouthing odd profanities. Simon knows—or at least suspects—that this is just a byproduct of wormwood chemistry. He slumps to a wino squat, in front of the plastic face.

“Do you know where Jane is?” he asks the clown head.

Quiet. A wind slopes through the streets. A plastic bag dances in the air but fails to be beautiful. Then, a buzzing. A vibration. Geocentric cicada tuning. Simon digs into his ear with a finger but the anti-sound does not abate.

The clown face lights up, blinding in the dark, glaring down at Simon from on high. Distorted laughter plays from its mouth—too slow—too fast—low pitched—high. Bad electronic circus music revs up, then dies out, drowned in the waves of warped laughter.

Finally, static.

Hissing static.



There are lost sounds in the static, something below the register of rational thought. Demon static. Louder. *Louder!*

Simon grabs his ears, teeth vibrating. Slivers of voices and meanings, scrambled, slice his eardrums open.

Feedback blasts Simon in the face. A flash of light. As he blacks out he almost has it—past the laughter and pandemonium music, inside the code of the static is the signal, gaining syntax and cadence and purpose.

Simon falls into bad unconsciousness metaphors.

The demon static follows.

## CHAPTER 10

SCREEEEEEEEAMfeeeeedbackSSSSSSSTATIChisssssssss.

WITNESS—Initiate signal—initiate REM syntax—WITNESS—through blood canals and eardrum pulp—WITNESS—weep—initiate signal birth—dilate black hole, the dead-star womb, event-horizon quim, ravenous, light-sucking vaginal maw—Initiate birth—multi-frequency cries break void—satellite-signal claws shred ebon placenta, invisible wings rip data-weave flesh, kick free of amniotic gravity—crawl, hobble, fly—particle wings flare on solar winds in shrieking void—seraphs sob at infomercial perdition—ORDER NOW!—end pupa—MEGA-SIZE FOR ONLY 49¢!—Initiate signal—Initiate sparagmos cadence—WITNESS—

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

“Jane?”

Soft caress of white hands and pumpkin-blood fingernails.  
Her pixy lips part, about to speak.

“No!”

But Simon can't stop himself.

Every morning we kill our loved ones.

He decapitates her with the upswing of his eyelids.

Every morning.

Ever mourning.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

“Jane?”

Nothing answers, except for the roiling in his stomach and the apocalypse in his head.

Simon groans.

He tries to grip the specter of Jane and the secrets in the static signal, but they evaporate. Neither can survive long in sunlight and the poison-oxygen of rationality. He remembers them too hard, and they crumble.

Static. Hissing static. The television is on. Simon is on his couch. Voices. But not in the static. It sounds like Dr. Reeves . . . coming from the answering machine. Simon tries to put the words together, something about being terminated. Something about thanking him for all his hard work. Something about “questionable conduct” and “substance abuse” and “if there are any hard feelings, Simon, please remember the talk we had earlier. Remember where the blame will fall. Remember *who* people will believe. Have an excellent day.”

Simon’s breathing escalates almost to gasps. He has trouble expressing anger and aggressive emotion. Reeves was taking it all away: Simon’s livelihood, his friends, the Dead Water. Your lively hood, your heroine fix, and all your pals from *Cheers*—gone. Simon jumps to his feet, and makes it to the toilet, just in time to vomit green, lots of green, incredibly green.

Looking in the mirror, Simon realizes he has lost vision in the left eye. Wormwood poisoning. Was it permanent?

*Too much, too fast. Eh, Jane?*

He hears the hated sound of his own recorded voice on the answering machine: “Subject: Simon Meeks. Please leave a message. Thank you.”

*Beep.*

“Hi, dear. It’s me. Your father and I are a bit worried about you.”  
Bad news traveled fast, apparently.

“We heard from Richard and he says they had to let you go. Something about inconsistent conduct.”

They always called Dr. Reeves, Richard. He was a “friend of the family,” one of his father’s best customers.

“Is everything all right, Simon? I—we—*we* just wanted to . . . I . . . I *know* . . . I’m going to ask him. I’m *going* to ask him—”

Simon hears his father muttering in the background.

“—all right. Dear, your father and I are concerned that you might be into some kind of drugs.” Mr. Meeks mutters something under his breath. “*Shhhhh*. Honey, we still love you, and you can come to us with anything that’s on your mind. Your father even thinks this might be a good thing, getting you out of that morgue. You can get back into cosmetic surgery, deal with nice, living people. But . . . dear . . . your father says you have to get into a good drug program. We love you and we’re here for you, Simon. Please call us back.”

*Beep.*

Thoughts of severed heads sitting all neatly in their rows, in roaster pans, on the soothing lavender of plastic tablecloth.

The headache is biblical. Simon puts on his glasses, left eye still useless. How much absinthe did he drink? How did he get back home? Memory fragments of falling onto his couch, and through the green mist he can see all his cells—pumping, thinking, multiplying, following primal prerogatives.

Simon opens the blinds. The sunlight slams into his head through his one good eye, rupturing his skull along the fault lines. He falls to the floor, vomiting battery-acid obscenities.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This is silly.”

The tears come anyway. They always do. Every time, like it was the first time, like it was a surprise. “Sorry,” Simon says to the latest dead goldfish. The fish only stares, upside down, and offers no opinions, observations, or philosophies. Simon would have begun the normal ritual of flushing and mourning, but a scalpel stuck in the wall catches his eye, that is to say, the one that worked.

And another scalpel.

And another.

Every room has a scalpel—one of his—stuck into the wall. And every room had words and phrases scratched into those walls in surgical scrawl.

*Writing on the walls. Eh, Jane?*

“Who?” he asks, but Simon knows the answer. He tours each room, each with its dead and decaying plants, victims of his il-limitable black thumbs. Each room with a scalpel and writing.

*The static signal, Jane. I was their somnambulist. I was the sleep-scrivener.*

*Jane Doe*, written in loving cuts, ran up and down the walls of every room. But there were other phrases and words scratched into the walls, syllables that ignited faint flicker-memories in Simon’s head. Memories of the demon static and that terrible smile.

Simon walks into the bathroom. Scratched in the mirror is:

*The Maiden*

*The Mother*

*The Crone*

Simon walks into his kitchen. Letters scratched into the wall read:

*The Hanging Man*

*The Laughing Man*

*The Question Man*

*The Crying Man*

Simon walks into his living room. Over the cemetery that is the goldfish bowl, scalpel-written letters read:

*Sparagmos*

*The River of Scabs*

*Seek Sanctuary!*

*Obsidian*

There are phrases Simon cannot catalogue so easily. There are markings that look to Simon like equations. He does not understand their symbols or meaning, but they seem to have syntax. They do not feel random.

Simon wanders in loops about his house, reading the writing on the walls. His hands play with a deck of cards to quiet his brain, to control the glass shards. He shuffles and cuts—produces and vanishes cards—manipulates cards through the deck—all while reading the writing. With the words come the echoes of the static signal.

Simon knows the four men. As he reads them aloud he names them and plucks the card that feels appropriate.

“The Hanging Man.” Hector, jack of diamonds.

“The Laughing Man.” Joe, jack of clubs.

“The Question Man.” Gabe, jack of spades.

“The Crying Man.” Alex, jack of hearts.

Simon cycles through the jacks and he can almost remember something from the static. Simon turns on the TV, turns up the volume, listens to the snowstorm. Something about “infant necropolis” . . . The Question Man and the Crying Man will . . . *turn their bellies into an infant necropolis*. Gabe and Alex. Spade and heart. The one-eyed jacks. They—

Then the fragments are gone. Simon remembers them too hard and they crumble into snow static.

Who are the three women?

*I had to meet the three women, Jane, to find you.*

Simon shuffles through the deck, plucking a card for each.

“The Maiden.” Queen of clubs.

“The Mother.” Queen of diamonds.

“The Crone.” Queen of spades.

Did that leave Jane as the queen of hearts?

Simon shuffles the deck, manipulating and chasing the jacks and queens.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon paces until he cannot pace anymore. Until he cannot peek out the window anymore, looking for the things that are stalking and whispering to him. Until he cannot stand to be in the same building as the thing under his bed, wrapped in oily rags.

*The hammer, Jane. I once had a suspected serial killer on my table. He felt like that, inside.*

Simon puts on his thrift store black suit, a black necktie, pins a desiccated rose to a tattered lapel, and grabs his hat.

Time to seek sanctuary.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Strange cards in this fifty-two pickup. Eh, Jane?*

"I seek sanctuary," Simon says because it sounds like the right thing to say.

Quoth the raven, "Nevermore!"

Actually, it is not a raven. It is an African pied crow, its ebony feathers interrupted by a patch of white on the chest. It looks more like a raven than a crow.

Jolly Roger tells Simon all about pied crows. Jolly Roger talks in a charmingly rancid voice, like a Gypsy's accordion. Simon was told to seek out Jolly Roger.

The shadows and the dreams and the tragically painted people writhe on the dance floor.

"It's against the law to own native corvids," says Jolly Roger. "Oh, you can shoot as many as you want. Kill 'em by the hundreds. But the gods forbid you keep one as a pet. Is that daft or what?"

Jolly Roger talks to Simon, from behind the bar, but his eyes rarely leave the dance floor.

"Exotic corvids, on the other hand, are all right. Great birds! Great talkers. Smarter than most primates. They got a nasty sense of humor, too," Jolly Roger says with a sneer. Half his teeth are gold. The other half are platinum.

The shadows and the dreams and the tragically painted people writhe on the dance floor.

"This one's name is Byron."

"Nevermore!" the bird shouts.

"Why didn't you name him Poe?" Simon asks.

"Cause he liked Byron," Jolly Roger says, eyes to the dance floor.

"Death looks gigantically down!" Byron says in a voice with a remarkably deep register for a bird, eerily human and gravelly. Jolly Roger's shadow-twin voice.

"Nevermore!"

Byron shows off to Simon, bobbing his head, ruffling the feathers on his neck and beak, showing just how very big his wingspan is. The bird shows off with bits of the Poe verses that must have been read to him.

With Byron sitting on his shoulder and his black boots, black peasant shirt, purple bandana, long strands of greasy hair—some strands beaded with little skulls—and silver jewelry, Jolly Roger looks rather dashing like a Goth-pirate. A strange amalgam of Captain Morgan and Marilyn Manson.

Simon had been told that Jolly Roger knew how to find the Obsidian Sanctuary and that he could be found at Carfax Abbey, a Gothic nightclub near Clark and Belmont.

Jolly Roger fingers his beaded beard and spares Simon a glance. One of those mischievous eyes is glass, a winking smiley face, yellow and glowing under the black lights. The Goth-pirate winks at Simon with his good eye, while his glass eye winks—a disjointed, stereo wink—the kind of sight that could inspire epilepsy in the unhealthy.

A faint scar crosses the missing eye. But Simon has not imbibed much absinthe yet—just enough to soften the edges of things—so he could not read the scar. There was a story there, hunched and ominous.



"Like the hat, mate." Jolly Roger flashes a gold-platinum smile. "Now, you said something about needing sanctuary. Did your nightlight fizzle out? You seen something?"

"Yes. I . . . yes."

"Huh," Jolly Roger says, looking back at the dance floor.

"It writhes!—it writhes!" announces Byron, "with mortal pangs. The mimes become its food, and seraphs sob at vermin fangs in human gore imbued."

"I'm looking for the Obsidian Sanctuary," Simon says, expecting the music to somehow abruptly stop, for the sound of a needle scraping vinyl to cut the air and every set of eyes in the club to turn and glare at him.

That does not happen.

"Then my heart it grew ashen and sober," says Byron.

"Easy enough, squire," says Jolly Roger.

"As the leaves that were crisped and sere—" continues Byron.

"It isn't that big a secret," says Jolly Roger.

"As the leaves that were withering and sere," concludes Byron.

Jolly Roger hands Simon a flier.

"Just go to the tattoo parlor across the street and ask for Nyx. She'll sort you out," says the macabre buccaneer. "She helps organize the Sanctuary. Can't miss her. Real character. In fact—" Jolly Roger leans in and Simon's world is eclipsed by gold-platinum teeth "—they say she's the daughter of an incubus. You know, a sex demon."

*All the strange cards in my fifty-two pickup, all with strange mythologies. Eh, Jane?*

"Incidentally," says Jolly Roger. "What started your problem?"

"A woman," answers Simon.

"Ain't that the way. What's her name?"

"Jane Doe."

"Heh, heh, heh. Right. You keep your mysteries then, squire."

"And much of Madness, and more of Sin, and Horror the soul of the plot," offers Byron.

"One more thing," says the Goth-pirate, "I—"

“Death looks gigantically down!” interrupts Byron.

Jolly Roger shifts back to watching the dance floor, still with his crooked grin, but his one good eye is serious. Simon watches him watching. He watches the dancers on the floor the way a lifeguard watches children in the ocean.

Simon turns to leave, but Byron hops down from his perch and onto the bar next to Simon.

“There is no exquisite beauty,” says the bird, then pausing as if forgetting the rest, “without some strangeness in the proportion.”

“Thank you, Byron,” says Simon, quietly. Absently he picks up a black feather from the bar before he turns and leaves Carfax Abbey.

## INTERLUDE: The Riddle

It's just a publicity stunt. No one really dies.

But 3:00 A.M. kind of exists in its own twilight dimension, you know? You'll believe in the weird at 3:00 A.M. You'll believe a riddle can kill.

I need out of here. Gotta get out of this third-shift convenience store bullshit. Sandwiches! Ugh. If I have to make one more greasy sandwich for an angry pack of drunks. Card one more kid. Listen to one more person yell at me because he wants booze ten minutes after I lock it up. I can't deal with the people that blow in at 3:00 A.M. like used-up cigarettes. You know?

Need out of here. Maybe go back to school. Maybe I'll write that comic book I've been thinking about. Or maybe I'll just solve the riddle.

No one dies. It's just a publicity stunt. Everyone knows that.

She comes in at 3:00 A.M. exactly. She calls herself the Sphinx. Doesn't matter what station you're on, there's just hissing and static and she's there. She abducts our radios. Must use some kind of voice changer, too, because she doesn't sound *natural*. Her voice is alien and deep and sweet. The kind of voice that'd lead a ship onto a reef. You know?

Her poetry, it's freaky, surreal—insane, even—like experimental shit, like performance art weird. I once saw this girl who did live paintings, on stage, with her menstrual blood, and that wasn't as weird. And those noises in the background—things you can't quite identify. Scary, but kind of sensual, too, in a primordial way, like two giant squids fondling each other in an ink cloud.

Then, after her freak poetry riff, she gives the audience a riddle. She says the first caller with a correct answer will win "the ultimate prize." The price of failure, she warns, is death. Every night she comes on. Every night someone calls in, and

they always give the wrong answer, and their phone line cuts out, suddenly, and there's a godawful noise, then static, then, like, your regularly scheduled radio music.

Just a publicity stunt, viral marketing dressed up like air-wave pirating.

No one dies.

I need a way out. I'm not going back to school . . . am I? I don't write anymore. I don't read. Fuck, I don't even watch DVDs. Just veg between shifts and broke-down circadian rhythms. The easier it gets making sandwiches, the more of a zombie I become, the more like these other walking, 3:00 A.M. husks. I need a way out. I guess at 3:00 A.M. a lot of people do.

She's on right now. Her pseudopod-sex voice is addressing just me, like when the eyes in a painting follow you in a room.

She asks a riddle.

I know the answer to this one! I'm sure of it. I pick up the phone and dial.

Her voice.

It could lead a ship onto the jagged rocks.

## CHAPTER 11

"When the pain comes, squeeze this," she says to the young woman in the chair. "I know the usual phrase is 'bite the bullet.' Around here, we just say, 'squeeze the rubber dildo.'"

She says her name is Nyx.

She says the dildo's name is Bob.

She says Bob is the most statistically common name for an imaginary friend.

"Oh," Simon says, and shivers.

"Nyx is the goddess of night and the daughter of Chaos," she says, "riding through the skies on her chariot, spreading primordial darkness, making Zeus wet his pants."

She gives a "hear me roar" kind of smile while whirling Bob above her head dexterously. Simon cannot help but imagine that, with a pair of dildos, Nyx could be quite deadly, her spinning rubber-member nunchucks fending off wave after wave of ninjas. Despite himself, he cannot help but find the odd, perverse image endearing.

When Simon first saw her, as he entered the tattoo and body mod shop, the Corbies jerked alert, squawking, "The Maiden!"

*The Maiden. Nyx, queen of clubs.*

She is a twenty-something jingle of piercings and enthusiasms. Her hair juts out in several directions, like an exotic plant, alternating in black and red. Purple lips and purple accents and black and black and black. Her mascara and eye shadow are layers of indigo and purple. The rubber soles of her boots rise several inches, the heels are rubber skulls, and the boots transition into purple spider web socks that transition into purple, torn fishnets, which transition into her black skirt. Small of frame, but strongly built, athletic.

"I'm looking for the Obsidian Sanctuary," Simon had said.

"Oh? Got something under your bed?" Nyx asked.

Simon nodded.

"Jolly Roger send you?"

Simon nodded.

"Did Byron poop on you?"

Simon shook his head, and she giggled.

"Like the hat and suit. Where'd you get them?"

"Thrift store."

"Cool."

Simon blushed. A compliment. Twice in one day and he still did not know how to respond to them.

She told Simon she'd take him to the Sanctuary herself, if he didn't mind waiting while she finished with her last customer. "Some people are squeamish about needles and blood and stuff."

Simon said it would not be a problem.

Nyx began talking and talking and talking. She turned out to be a font of strange factoids, and Simon, sensing a kindred spirit, found himself enjoying her company, dizzying though it was.

"Bob helps us point out all the wonderful places a dude can get his wee-wee pierced," Nyx says. "We also let customers squeeze down on Bob during a tattoo. It's, you know, cathartic. A little fringe benefit we give the ladies. Truth be known, about one in five guys don't seem to mind, either."

Simon thinks of the evil sledgehammer living under his bed.

"Got Bob?" asks Nyx.

The customer holds up the length of rubber.

"Want to hear a limerick about a dildo and a bloody hammer?" the Corbies ask into Simon's inner ear. He ignores them.

The customer points to one of Nyx's many tattoos—a stylized glyph just below her right collarbone.

"This tattoo? Oh no. You don't want *this* tattoo."

She touches the body ink with a forefinger and maybe there is something in her eyes. Simon has trouble telling, so he looks at the expressions of the finger and the hand, and, yes, there is a story, a pain, a hurt behind that tattoo. Scars unseen.

"It's a rune," Nyx says to her customer. "An old symbol for the incubus—a male sex demon that creeps through the windows, at night, and forces itself on women. Yeah, you don't want that . . ."

The Corbies whisper factoids and incubus lore into Simon's eardrums. He leafs through Nyx's sample art book—pages of Halloweenish delights.

"A tribal rope?" Nyx says to the customer, despair and disappointment oozing across her words like smeared mascara. "Well, no . . . there's nothing wrong with it, exactly. It's just that Steve-o's our tribal rope guy, and he's out and—okay, I have to say it: asking for one's like going into a guitar shop and asking the instructor to teach you 'Stairway to Heaven.' *Everyone* wants a fucking tribal rope."

She talks cheerfully with the customer but steals a glance and flashes a goofy face at Simon—mimes hanging herself. Simon smiles and looks down.

"Don't get me wrong," Nyx says. "'Stairway to Heaven' is a good song and Steve-o's a good guy. He was born on St. George's Eve. According to Romanian villagers, he's doomed to rise from the grave as a vampire. 'Course, lots of ways to hit that pitfall: conceived on a holy day, born the seventh son of the seventh son, mother didn't eat enough salt—or *too* much salt—born with teeth already erupted, an extra nipple, excess hair, two hearts . . ."

The Corbies whisper to Simon, urge him to join the purple blitzkrieg of Nyx's banter, but he does not budge.

"Come on, Simon!" the Corbies say.

"Shhh," Simon hisses, too loudly.

Nyx and the customer look up. Simon freezes with the expression of Fatty Arbuckle caught in an erotic birthday cake shop and a finger full of frosting. He shrugs and continues exploring the ink shop.

"You're really set on the tribal rope?" Nyx asks, turning back to the customer. "All right. You're the chick with a rubber dick in your mitt. Who am I to argue? Just lie back."

Buzzing and needles and ink.

Simon watches intently.

*It would not be so very long, Jane, before I used a similar tattoo gun on one of the men who hurt you.*

"When were you born?" Nyx asks the woman as she works. "Christmas? No kidding? Children born at sermon time on Christmas can see spirits. Am I serious? Well, it's peasant folklore. They took it pretty seriously. Then again, some of the beliefs sound pretty silly. Get this: Yugoslavian Gypsies believe that pumpkins left out to rot too long will—"

"Turn into vampires," Simon and the Corbies finish. Though, to be fair, it is doubtful, sincerely doubtful, that anyone else heard the ghost crows.

"Yeah," Nyx says, pleasantly surprised. "Huh." The buzzing commences. "My landlord says that stuff's all horseshit. But then, his dad had a uni-brow, which means he's doomed to be a werewolf."

The customer laughs.

"I don't know what my father's eyebrows looked like." Nyx's eyes go distant for a moment. "There are worse things than not knowing your father."

Simon notices the look. "Remember that," say the Corbies. "That's important!"

*Buzz.*

"You know," say the purple lips, "it's funny—you choosing this symbol because you thought it was pretty. Back in the nineties, I think it was Reebok, released a line of women's running shoes. They wanted to go with the whole strong, independent woman shtick. Without further research, they selected the name Incubus off a list of possibilities, because it sounded nifty-keen and it wasn't trademarked."

The buzzing ceases.



“Lean right just a little. Good.”

*Buzz.*

“So, later, after shipping the shoes, it came to their attention that the name on thousands of boxes of running shoes for strong, independent women, is the name of an evil, anthropomorphic male force that pounces on sleeping females, crushing and tormenting and defiling their victims, spiritually and physically.”

Nyx giggles.

“That had to be one hell of a memo! So, yeah, the Incubus running shoe was recalled. I bet Nike had a good laugh. I wonder if my high school gym teacher ever had a pair. She was born with a caul, which means she’s immune to drowning and evil spirits.”

Simon leafs through a bookshelf stacked with old issues of *Playboy*, biker magazines, comic books, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

“Now, according to the *Malleus Maleficarum*—that’s the Inquisition’s witch-hunting guidebook,” says the Nyx, “an incubus can reproduce. But it’s a process. See, the female demons—the succubi—seduce men and take their semen, and then transport it to an incubus, who goes and seduces a woman and implants it in her. Systematic demonic semen shipping—DSS. Wrap your mind around that shit job. Legions of demons waking up Monday morning saying, ‘God, if I have to deliver one more load of jizz . . .’”

The buzzing ceases.

Mutual girl laughter.

*Buzz.*

“So, yeah,” Nyx says, “the devil takes the sperm of wicked men and corrupts it further. According to the book, the children are born as half-demonic things. Children of monsters are monsters.”

Buzzing ceases.

“Hey, Simon! Can you stop all that jabbering for five minutes? I can’t concentrate on my work.” Nyx curls her purple mouth.

Simon smiles back.

“I’m going to get you to open up. You have no choice. I’m too, too ultra-charming.”

*Buzz.*

The customer says something.

Buzzing ceases.

“What? Goth? I hate limiting myself with labels like that. I mean, Goth’s not a bad label, but then people box you in with all the label’s negatives and suddenly you have to wear black lace and envy the dead. I just like wearing black, sometimes lace.”

*Buzz.*

“Now, I like Gothic. Gothic is like . . . seeing through bullshit thanks to a pair of purple shades. Shelley, Poe, Ann Radcliffe. Those are some of the oldies, but then, in the nineties, Gothic claws out of the ground into pop culture. The Big Bang came when *Silence of the Lambs* won best film—*BAM!*—now King and Rice rule the shadow realms of the genre as Hades and Persephone. Like a demon stud, Hitchcock spawns illegitimate children from the grave: Quentin Tarantino, John Carpenter, M. Night Shyamalan, the Coen brothers. Now it’s vampires and zombies and chainsaws, oh my! And Dorothy is wearing a black vinyl corset, combat boots, and a safety pin through her cheek, the Yellow Brick Road’s been twisted by Burtonesque vibes, and the Wizard of Oz just got shivved in the prison showers.”

Simon and the Corbies pause, stunned by the volume of verbosity.

“I’m not just talking horror novels and slasher flicks. Gothic has seeped into everything and painted it black—political discourse, local news. Most of TV is built around serial killers, repressed memories, molesting priests, celebrity murder trials. Quoth the raven, ‘*O.J. did it!*’”

The Corbies laugh.

“It’s a genre that says the past possesses. You ever watch Oprah? Talk show queen? No, no, no. *Goth* queen. She is the freaking ideal! Forget all those little kids in white makeup reading cutesy suicide poems and waxing Byronic between shifts at the bookstore. At least half the time she’s the real deal—the dark prophetess of fate, eating fat-free desserts in an ebony castle in the sky.

“Just turn her show on. If you hit it right, Oprah will be setting the stage and painting grand, Gothic epics full of villains and victims. True to form, the victims are sublimely innocent, easy prey. The villains seem to embody all that is evil. Then we learn they too were victims, once upon a time. Their evil becomes inevitable. If you were molested as a child, you’ll be a molester in turn. No way out. Sins of the father. The children of monsters are monsters.

“Oprah can be fatalistic in a way that would give Edgar Allan Poe a boner. And what do you do with that kind of a Conqueror Worm but spread the seed. Now every channel has a daytime ring master parading legions of freaks and deviants—all misunderstood phantoms of trailer-park rock operas. Many of them are addicted to drugs or sex or abuse—‘addicted’ being our modern word for the Gothic term ‘haunted.’ I prefer ‘haunted.’ It’s more romantic.”

Nyx affects a proper British accent. “The needle-tracked heroine was haunted by heroin.”

All the while the buzzing has continued, an insistent drone that only seems loud in those rare instances when Nyx pauses. And those never last long.

“I once read an online rumor that claimed our talk show empress was born with an extra nipple. You know what that means?” Nyx makes a fangs gesture with her fingers and the customer laughs.

“But Oprah has another mask. One minute she’s the priestess of fate, the next she’s advocating transcendence: ‘I was a

welfare daughter just like you. How did you let yourselves become welfare mothers? Why did you *choose* this?’ So now the Gothic doom haze has blown off and you can change your fate. Now it’s the angel craze, self-empowerment programs, the inner child movement, Tae Bo. ‘Self-transformation is as easy as a fairy tale wish. Just click those ebony slippers and repeat after me!’”

Nyx clicks her heels.

“Gothic pessimism or New Age transcendence—which is it Oprah? I never thought about it before, but she’s actually a lot like that guy in the tabloid, the Vegetarian Cannibal. He’s two things at once, too. Chai tea and blood in one serving. I bet his power animal is a lemur. I bet he’s very polite when he’s not killing someone. I bet he has a ponytail.”

*As it would turn out, Jane, he did.*

“Lordy, lordy! Even the great serial killers have gone flakey.”

The buzzing continues.

The Obsidian Sanctuary awaits.



When Simon first enters the Obsidian Sanctuary, a silent little girl with streaks of white in her hair is the first to approach him. She looks at him with heartbreak eyes for a very long time. Everyone watches the little girl the way miners watch a canary.

When she flings herself into Simon, hugs him, he flinches before accepting. Only when she’s embraced him does everyone else relax. A little bit.

*The little girl’s name is Robin. A very bad thing happened to her, Jane. A very bad thing.*

Simon had heard rumors about the Obsidian Sanctuary, read about them on the Internet. While all sources agreed that the group operated out of the Belmont and Clark area, few sources agreed on the nature of the subversive organization.

Were they a gang of Goths and punks? A demonic cult? A paramilitary operation?

“We teach radical individualism along with group cohesion,” Nyx said automatically—a practiced phrase. “We teach self-defense, street smarts, and urban survival. We also prepare for . . . special dangers.”

Simon had heard about the “special dangers,” heard that the Sanctuary knew something about the city’s preternatural dangers. The word *monster* is never used, but seems to hang at the tip of everyone’s tongue.

We don’t say “cow;” we say “beef.”

We don’t say “monsters;” we say “special dangers.”

We cope.

Simon did not know what to expect. Maybe a group of people with crosses and stakes and automatic weapons. Maybe rows of occult books and secret maps. Simon did not expect a support group for the Weird.

“Hello, my name is Anne.”

“Hello, my name is Jessica.”

“Hello, my name is Dave.”

“Hi, Dave,” everyone says in unison. Tonight is “witness” night, Nyx says. Different nights brought different meetings and activities, but witness nights allowed this odd collection of people to tell their stories, stories they might be afraid to tell their families.

“All my children wake up screaming in the middle of the night, missing locks of hair. . . .”

“In just a week, all the dogs in my neighborhood vanished. . . .”

“Every . . . every time I turn out the lights, light my scented candles—in the tub, this—this face always appears between my legs. . . .”

And so our hero finds himself in a crowd of misfits in the basement of a church. They were the counterculture kids, the Goths, the straightedge punks, and sprinkled in were souls of all ages, all types—shivering people, people that startled easily,

people that hardly moved and stared like shut-off television sets. There were some who wanted attention, wanted to tell someone about their psychic gifts or their abduction stories, and still others who smirked and looked like they enjoyed the free entertainment and coffee.

“Hello, my name is Nick.”

“Hello, my name is Dori.”

“Hello, my name is Rob.”

*Strange cards in my fifty-two pickup. Eh, Jane?*

Though Simon had just walked in, off the busy streets of a brightly lit, modern city, where everyone walked about casually, shopping, dining, socializing—down here everyone huddled together as if around the lone fire of a tiny medieval camp, afraid of the things that skulked beyond the light. They saw eyes and teeth in all the cracks, shadows, and indefinite shapes of the world. Simon saw only Jane.

“Hello, my name is John.”

“Hi, John.”

“Mother Hubbard!” That’s what passes for a whispered curse from Simon as the fifty-two cards in his deck fly everywhere, in mid-shuffle. There at the front of the room, there amidst the glimmering galaxy of piercing and the disenfranchised youth, hulks a round, fat, grizzled sphere of incongruity: Officer John Polhaus. The ace of bullies. The gun-carrying, meat-eating, conservative, hippie-slaying, eccentric-bashing John Polhaus.

*What was he doing on the Island of Misfit Toys, Jane?*

Was he here to bust or beat down the kids for being subversive, weird, or “heinously queer”? Had he followed Simon just to torment him, take his lunch money?

No. He’s telling a story, bearing witness. The guy next to Simon whispers that Polhaus has been coming for years and has some of the freakiest stories to tell.

“Mother Hubbard!” whispers Simon again.

“Ooooooooo, dropping H-bombs,” cackle the Corbies.

Simon does not hear Polhaus's story. He's too shocked, too jarred, too busy picking up the cards, trying to make sense of it all. He picks up the joker only to flash back to the clown face and the demon static. He shivers.

*Clap.*

*Clap.*

*Clap.*

Polhaus sees Simon. For the rest of the meeting he eyes Simon threateningly.

*It was like I was back in high school again, Jane.*

The sharing of tales transitions into guided meditation. Inner sanctums, power images and animals, balls of light, opening chakras, everything. Polhaus does not close his eyes, does not meditate. He only watches Simon, meditates on Simon, and Simon is certain he can feel an angry force trying to squish his head.

Simon closes his eyes.

There is no reason to meditate to find power objects and animals. The tree and the Corbies are always there. They peck open all his bloody chakras.

"Imagine a ball of blue light in your chest," says the meditation leader. "Allow that light to expand and flood from your body, growing in radius exponentially."

Simon imagines a ball of light in his chest cavity, imagines his finger turning into a scalpel, slicing a Y-incision in himself to release the light. What would Simon find if he read his own entrails?

"Now strengthen that light, that pure, blue light. See the shadows disintegrate under it. Imagine the light holding back the night, keeping all malevolent influences at bay."

*My shadow laughed, Jane, when I told him about the meditation.*

Then Nyx is talking. Her purple lips are as good at public oration as they are at personal banter—the queen of the Island of Misfit Toys. She thanks everyone. She says how proud she is of everyone's strength. She tells them of upcoming meetings, self-defense training nights, urban survival lectures, parazology discussions.

“Man, she’s hot,” says the guy next to Simon. He mentions how Nyx helps run the Sanctuary. He whispers that she used to be in the military, if you could believe it, stayed just long enough to learn a few things. He murmurs how they say she’s the daughter of an incubus. That’s why she knows about “them.” That’s why she helps other people. Her mom was the victim of a monster.

Simon nods.

“We have a newcomer,” says Nyx. Simon’s stomach drops.

“We should all congratulate him for being brave enough to come out tonight. I get the feeling he really needs someone to talk to. I also get the feeling that he’s not going to volunteer his story unless we drag it out of him with chains and a pack of Clydesdales.”

Nyx looks out into the audience and catches Simon’s eyes. She smiles and lightens the tone by adopting the voice of a game show host. “No, he’s not the ghost of Buster Keaton. Simon Meeks come on down!”

Everyone claps.

Simon gets up. Breathes. Feels the squeeze of hyperventilation. He wonders if he can make it out the door, if he can run fast and just face the shadows and the night on his own.

*Most people fear public speaking over death, Jane.*

Simon walks to the front of the room, hands jittering. He feels sick with the Dead Water shakes. He needs to cut into a cadaver. He needs Jane.

“Hello,” Simon says and the feedback in the mic screams the obscenities he cannot.

Everyone is watching. Polhaus stares. Nyx gives him an encouraging look.

Then the Corbies come to the rescue, all murmuring at once. Something builds in Simon’s chest—something below the fear—something he did not realize was there—a need.

“Hello, my name is Simon . . .”

And the dam breaks.



“. . . and I'm addicted to the dead.”

“Hi, Simon.”

Then, he tells them everything.

*Everything.*



How long had he been talking?

Simon's throat feels cotton and cracked.

They all sat through it. All of them. Silent. They sat through Simon's explanation of his job, of the Dead Water, his patients, Jane Doe, Dr. Reeves, Jane's disappearance, the oddities that followed, everything.

Simon feels relieved and weak and spent, like an empty tube of toothpaste. He squeezed out all the pent-up words he'd hoarded away in his lifetime of socializing with corpses.

Now Simon waits for what he knows is coming: the reaction. He waits for the crowd to edge away, for someone to say, “Freak!”

Silence.

*Clap.*

*Clap.*

*Clap.*

Applause?

This is where the Omega Misfit finds acceptance. With no transition, Simon is in the center of a vortex of people. They're all talking, yelling, congratulating, asking questions. All of them are excited and encouraging. Many of them are in tears.

*I didn't know at the time, but they cried for you, Jane.*

All the voices. Everyone talking. Simon tries to smile and acknowledge each face, but he's drowning in all the voices.

“You're among friends, man!”

“Do you think you really talk to the spirits? Do you practice necromancy? I have books that—”

“Do you know more about *them*? You have to know more!”

“Could you examine my husband's body if I get it exhumed?”

*No fishes or loaves, Jane. I had no fishes or loaves for them. Only sharp things and chemical imbalances.*

Simon nods. He starts many sentences, but does not finish any. The pressure builds again. He tries to breathe.

"Oh, man. Moses had the burning bush, and you got a glowing clown face," says one voice.

"Dude, you said burning bush!" says another. They give each other five.

Someone else gives Simon five, a ritual he had never practiced.

All the voices. Everyone's talking. Across the room Polhaus is arguing politics with the counterculture kids, but his eyes are on Simon. All the voices and Simon drowns in them.

But Simon knows many vanishes.

In fact, it is quite some time before everyone realizes the dapper young scarecrow is gone.



*Knock-knock.*

A door opens into darkness.

"Hey, you," says Nyx.

"Hi," says the shy darkness.

"We were wondering where you had gotten off to."

"It is more than probable that I suffer agoraphobia, and many other things besides," says the darkness.

"Oh." Nyx bites her lower lip, a gesture so powerfully endearing she could not even guess. "I talked it over with the troops. I think we can help you."

Silence.

"We can talk about that later," she offers. "You probably want to be alone right now—"

"Yes," says the overeager darkness.

"Mind being alone with me?"

Not waiting for an answer, Nyx slides into the closet and closes the door.

Blackness.

*Crack.*

A green glow stick illumines the small space, revealing Simon, huddled, rocking back and forth, arms wrapped about his knees, hat hiding most of his head.

The green glow reminds Simon of the Dead Water, and it calms him. Nyx sits back, waving the glow stick like a wand.

"You sure can pick the spots," she says.

Simon looks out from under his hat, revealing his glasses and eyes.

"You're not used to the group scene, are you?" she says.

"Oh-no-no-no, lady. He's a murder of one," cackle the Corbies. Nyx does not hear it.

Nyx slides closer to Simon. He can feel her warmth next to him.

"Why don't we pop that personal space bubble?" Nyx says in a mischief-whisper, plucking Simon's hat from his head. Simon flinches, snatches the hat back without thinking.

"Wow," says Nyx. "You're fast."

"Sorry." Simon swallows and hands her the hat through force of will.

"Coolest. Hat. Ever." Nyx puts it on her head.

"Thank you."

"Simon, don't bolt."

"What—"

"You're thinking about bolting."

"I—"

"*Don't.*"

Simon sighs.

"You've been through a lot lately," she says. Simon feels her hand creep under his unruly hair. It caresses and rubs the back of his neck where his skull kisses his spine. Simon's head lolls. His eyes flutter a bit.

"One thing I know, Simon: With all of *them* out there, you can't go it alone. You need the pack. And not just for safety."

She rubs Simon's neck and he thinks again of that touch experiment—the shivering baby monkey with the wire milk feeder, and how it leapt into the arms of the soft puppet when finally given the chance.

"Our fears," says Nyx, "pick us off when we're alone."

"You're a bit of a mother hen," says Simon.

Nyx grins from under his hat. "Around these parts, they call me Mama Bear."

The hollow steel rods of Simon's frame loosen.

"Besides, Simon, with our little group, you can rest at ease in the knowledge that we know how important it is to smash pumpkins after Halloween."

The laughter escapes Simon's throat in ragged spurts.

"See," says Nyx, "told you. You had no choice but to open up to me. I'm way too freaking charming."

Simon and Nyx stay in the closet till dawn, sharing morbid trivia, from pumpkins to cadavers—theories on Oprah and how the media is trying to turn consumers into cannibals.

Simon even shows Nyx some shadow puppets.



Simon walks away from the corner of Belmont and Clark. In the predawn, everything is blue. The sleepy Corbies roost, not paying attention, and Simon doesn't notice the giant hands until they grab him and slam him into the brick wall.

"Hey, Boo Radley."

Simon's arms twist painfully behind. Face still pressed into the bricks, he feels and hears the handcuffs click into place.

"Fucking Ghoul, had to come fucking here!"

Simon feels himself pulled back and slammed into the wall again. He can hear, feel, and smell the presence of Officer Polhaus behind him. The ace of bullies.

"Officer Pol—"

*Slam.*

"Shut up! Listen, Boo, you're going to tell me why you're here or I'm gonna paint graffiti with your face. Why are you creeping about?"

"I don't know what—"

*Slam.*

"Cut the shit! My whole fucking life I've found you ghouls creeping at the edges of things. My whole fucking career you ghouls have been lurking around me. I'm still on the beat because—" Polhaus breathes heavily, voice cracking. "After the shit at the morgue, do you think I'm gonna let you taint the Sanctuary? I wanna know what brought you here. What's the plot? Who do you fucking serve?"

The movements come to Simon without thought. His mind pillages the rehearsed slapstick routines, edits and splices the actions together in a new order, a new reel. Simon's right foot kicks back, curling in behind him. The heel bashes deep into Polhaus's genitals. Pain and surprise bring the big man back a step, giving Simon a few inches of space between him and the bricks. It's enough. Shoulders pressed in to the cop's chest, Simon runs up the wall until he is crouched, parallel to the ground, feet on the bricks and knees pressed tightly to his chest. Then Simon leaps straight off the wall. His wiry strength sends Polhaus back.

The big man loses his balance and crashes back with a thud. Simon falls against him. In the same motion he rolls backward, over Polhaus's body, in a reverse summersault, ending back on his feet.

In the time it takes Officer Polhaus to rise, Simon leaps up, raises his knees, passes his arms under his feet, and brings his cuffed hands in front of him.

The corpulent cop's eyes widen, perplexed at the antics of this mad mime. The Corbies shout methods for poking out an attacker's eyes, but Simon runs off at breathless, silent-film speeds.

"Dammit," says Polhaus as he chases after. "Simon!"

Simon turns a corner and vanishes.

By the time Polhaus gets there, all he finds in the lonely alley is an empty set of handcuffs.

"Shit."

## CHAPTER 12

*You are a ghostly saint, Jane. The queen of hearts. The saint of shades. The golden-eyed cadaver. Strange cards in my fifty-two pickup and they all seem to have elaborate meanings, their very own mythologies. . . .*

As it turned out, the members of the Obsidian Sanctuary knew Jane Doe. No name though. She was just a sweet, pale whisper that occasionally snuck into meetings. The strange albino. The pretty mystery. She never gave witness to the group, only hovered about, appearing and disappearing. No one could even remember exactly when she began showing up at meetings.

She was universally considered a good mystery, a healing presence in a room full of paranoid eccentrics.

Robin, the little girl with the white streaks in her hair, had been the victim of an unnatural event. Little Robin was broken, nearly comatose. Jane spent time with her, and though her wounds could not be erased, the pain was lessened and Robin came around, even talked on occasion.

*She encountered a very bad thing, Jane, and now little Robin knows. The rest of them watch Robin. She is a canary in the dark.*

Jane, the pale mystery, had talked to dozens of members, individually, healed all sorts of hurts.

*I knew it was you, Jane, when they mentioned the peace they found in those golden eyes.*

News of the girl's death brought bitter tears. The Obsidian Sanctuary was eager to help.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Subject: Jasper Eckman."

Simon calls his name.

It's the first part of the ritual.

The blue latex hug of the gloves is a welcome home. *Snap.*

The subject—a tall, balding thirty-three-year-old male—appeared to have died sometime after midnight. Simon has not checked the core body temperature.

Jasper leans back in an old wooden rocking chair, eyes staring at the ceiling. The exit wound, in the back of his head, gazes down, cyclopean, at the floor. A shiny chromed revolver rests in his right hand. Below his empty left hand is an audio recorder with a mini-tape inside.

Simon reflexively looks at his own digital recorder.

Surrounding Jasper and his chair, in an exact circle, repose thirteen cubes of rotting, congealing Spam. It's an exacting circle of scabby cubes. A Stonehenge of false meat. A putrescent circle set with the precision of a Mayan calendar.

Through the green haze of the absinthe, Simon reads the apocalyptic meanings in the ritual circle of rot.

"It would seem," Simon says into his recorder, "the Spam has been dead a lot longer than Jasper."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"She hung out with Icky Knock's crew," said one Sanctuary member.

"They were looking into some freaky shit," said another.

Ichabod Knock.

*The thing about Mr. Knock, Jane, is he talked with his mouth full.*

Simon had heard of him. In fact, one of Knock's books, *Illinois Oddities*, haunted Simon's bookshelf at home. Ichabod Knock, sometimes referred to as Icky. Collector of strange stories. Unlike most of his colleagues, though, he had made himself a part of those stories, bigger than those stories—the Gonzo occultist.

*Books of urban myth and their authors can become urban myths themselves. Eh, Jane?*

An apocryphal tale circulates Chicago, like the El, wherein a group of teenagers, eager for a thrill or a shadow of that thrill

of youth and under-bed horrors, go out to test a story in Icky Knock's book. It's a local legend about a set of seven bridges that stretch over the hills and ravines between Collinsville and O'Fallon, bridges known as the Seven Gates of Hell.

They are not easy to find.

Consider that a dare.

The urban legends whisper that driving over all the bridges, in the correct order, opens a gate to the underworld. A variation of the tale says one must park under the seventh bridge at night, turn the lights off, and wait to be dragged into infernal dimensions by demon hounds. There are other versions. Urban legends split and branch off like cut, wriggling flatworm heads.

Why would anyone purposefully seek the gates of Hell? Impossible to say with certainty, but don't we all occasionally do a thing simply because we know we should not? Haven't you, dear loveling, ever sought the thing you cannot, should not, have? The soul seeks oblivion.

The imps of the perverse dance and whisper in the time it takes to open a door.

Acid Bridge is the name of the most famous of the seven. Supposedly, a group of teens, high on acid, drove off the bridge and crashed while searching for the seven gates. They burned to death.

This story was not new when Ichabod put it to paper in *Illinois Oddities*. Yet his books were always more detailed than their fellows—offering not just theory, but practical guides into the bizarre and grotesque. Ichabod Knock's book is famous for giving extra clues on how to find all seven bridges and unlock their ritual. Ichabod Knock's book is infamous for *daring* the reader to try these perverse games.

The book is even more famous for a group of kids who did just that.

As the story goes, a group of teens, armed with a dog-eared copy of *Illinois Oddities*, found all the bridges, even Acid Bridge, found all seven and even knew the ritual. They found



the Seven Gates to Hell. Police found their car the next day, parked under the seventh bridge. The doors were all locked, but the car was empty. The teens were never seen again. A police officer, getting a closer look, fogged one of the passenger windows with his breath, revealing a phrase written on the glass by a finger smeared with oily sweat: *Help Us*.

You could finish the story by saying, “And the odometer of the car read 666,666.” That would be overdoing it.

Knock’s publisher is only too eager to collect the extra sales generated by such tragedies. Ichabod sometimes receives angry letters, but there is no such thing as bad press—certainly not with Icky’s stories.

Now practice the story in front of a darkened mirror. Tell it to someone at the pub. Tell it to someone you love. Tell it and tell it and then try—try to resist the urge to seek them out yourself, the Seven Gates to Hell. Because stories, especially folklore and urban legend, are dangerous. They spread and move and evolve. They’re living memes that flutter on dead moth wings. The soul gravitates toward oblivion, pines for the icy lips of the unattainable. There is a self-destruct button built into your circuitry.

Obsessions are born in the time it takes to open a door, the time it takes to tell a story.

And all—and all, and the imps of the perverse are whispering all the while.



The apartment buzzes under the rule of flies.

Dirty dishes, papers, unfinished food, disarray.

Name tags from every form of minimum-wage employment hang crucified on a bulletin board. A little graveyard of bygone jobs and each tombstone reads *Jasper Echman*.

But there is someone else in the graveyard.

“Jane?”

Pinned in the cork is a Polaroid. Bad lighting, not a great picture, but a photo of Jane Doe in life. Simon touches the photo. He carefully removes it, places it in a pocket. His hands shake. The Dead Water shakes. Jane withdrawal. Simon stares at the place in Jasper's chest where a Y-incision wants to be—and shakes it off.

A blue-gloved hand carefully picks up Jasper's audio recorder. A blue finger presses the rewind button.

*Click.*

Play.

Maybe the voice of the dead man will drown out the malevolence of the flies.

"Hello?" says a voice.



Ichabod Knock ran with a loose group of paranormal investigators. That's what Nyx said. She knew of two who occasionally came to the Sanctuary: Jasper Eckman and Neil Barnes.

"The golden-eyed girl, your . . . Jane Doe, she was working with them on something important to Ichabod," Nyx said. "We haven't heard from any of them in a while."

"They were looking into some freaky shit," reiterated a Sanctuary member.

They were concerned, especially after hearing about Jane. Nyx gave Simon an address for Jasper. No one knew how to reach Ichabod.

"His literary agent came looking for him a few days ago," Nyx said.

"So, Simon. I understand you want to find out what happened, to right the wrongs, etc. But why do you want to get her body back?" Nyx had asked this.

Actually, Simon had not told them *everything*.

Simon told Nyx that he wanted to know what mysterious things were going on at the morgue, that he could not stand

to have more failed patients in the Dead Water, that he found Jane Doe to be too special a person to have her body defiled or desecrated or left to the mercy of whatever was out there. This was all true. Simon did not mention falling in love with Jane. He did not mention the kiss he shared with Jane. He did not mention wanting to keep Jane's body after finding it.

*Some things are private. Eh, Jane?*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Hello?" says the voice in the recorder.

Then comes the digital creak of a rocking chair in motion. The chair that dead Jasper still sat in. Simon looks to the chair, the still chair, but hears the chair in motion on the recorder.

*Rock-rock.*

"I—" stammers the voice. "I . . . uh . . . don't know how to start this. I don't even know who's going to get this."

*Rock-rock.*

"The others—we, uh, kind of fell apart. I mean, they never really liked me—I don't think. You know? Things went sour after she left. She was kind of the linchpin. I mean, while we were looking into . . . huh. She was so . . ."

*Rock-rock.*

"Fuck! You'd think if a girl was that important to you, you'd know her name. No names. She made us promise that. We didn't even give her a nickname. She was just there. I think—"

Muffled noises.

"What was that?"

Sounds of steps.

*Rock-rock.*

"Anyway. We're scattered. Some of them might be dead. Assholes anyway. Neil—he's probably doing his own thing. I think he's the least screwed up. I think . . . I think he has a chance. And Ichabod—he's lost it. I mean, the last time I saw him—fuck. He, he, he left us high and dry. Me? I'm like I was before the group."

*Rock-rock.*

"She. Her eyes. I mean, Christ. She kept us sane. She had that way. Even when we were seeing things that, uh—"

Sounds of sniffing.

"She was a miracle."

*Rock-rock.*

"Golden eyes . . ."

Simon squeezes the recorder, tries to wring more information out of it.

"Don't know why I'm doing this. I don't have a story. Not a good one. Knock's got stories. Neil has stories. I'm just depressing. Meaningless. I . . . uh . . . that movie. You know that movie? That one with Bruce Willis? 'I see dead people.' Fucking hate that movie! Reminds me about my condition. Reminds me that Bruce Willis is just losing more hair. Both points depress me."

Simon hears the flies of the present, buzzing around his head, and the flies of the past, buzzing in the recorder.

"Place is kind of a mess. Lot of flies. Kind of envy them. They eat shit and die in forty-eight hours, but I envy them."

Simon's eyes lock on a rotting cube of moldy meat and he falls into a putrid microcosm landscape, a spoiled universe, a lost circle of Dante's Hell.

"Hey, Simon!" the Corbies caw.

Simon shakes his head, escapes an episode of monomania.

On the recording, he hears sniffing sounds, not *sniffing*, but as though Jasper keeps testing the air.

"Messy, messy place. My little friends all over, the ones that couldn't help me . . . waste."

Simon notices that, among the relics of pizza boxes, stands a copious array of air-freshening products: spray cans, candles, plug-in devices, and every shade of incense in the rainbow.

More sniffing.

"They sell opium-flavored incense. It's true. I've tried them all. Nothing. I've plugged in, sprayed, burnt, even snorted

them all. You can go unconscious off a big enough hit of pot-pourri. Nothing.”

“The meat, the meat,” say the Corbies.

Simon nods.

The Spam was laid out too specifically, too exactly. The rotting meat was not the disease, just another failed cure. But for what?

Banging sounds.

“Goddamn it! Thirteen! Thirteen cans. Swelling. Rotting. And I can’t smell the stink. What do I have to fucking do? They’re . . . they’re all around me right now. Just—”

*Sniff.*

“—just hanging in the air. Waiting. What are they thinking? I don’t fucking know. No insight. What the hell do you all want from me? What!? Just hovering around to show me how pointless it all is, right? No insight. No meaning to anything. Nothing. Not if—”

Fluttering distortions in the audio, whispers in the signal.

“Okay—the point. My secret. What would make a grown man sit in the center of a rotting ring of Spam? I smell dead people.”

Laughter. Sick laughter. Like something coughing up fish hooks.

“Yeah, I don’t see or feel or converse with the dead. Don’t have psychic contact with spirits. I *smell* them. Ha! Funny when you say it out loud, like a morbid little comic strip.”

Laughter. Something shatters.

“That’s my . . . hehehe . . . that’s my *power*. What’s it like? It’s oppressive—a sticky film over my life. Hard to describe. Always been there. I’ve never smelled anything else. Nothing. But they, uh, they give off, like, vapor trails. I smell them so strong it’s almost like seeing. I can tell the size and dimensions of them. Sweet rot. They smell like . . . I don’t know, like wet soil feels. Maybe human waste. Like—yeah, like a stomach-dropping fall. They smell a little like looking in the mirror on prom night and knowing you don’t have a date. *Bouquet de l’entropie*. Dust to dust in the nostrils. Ashes to ashes in the back of the throat.”

The Corbies caw in the wormwood tree. They want Dead Water. Simon feels the scalpel in his pocket.

"It's always there. Always. Like a gross halo. Filters the rest of the world. It's all *rot!* And it—no, no, no! Can't even say it right. I'm not good at this. I'm not good at anything. Waste. Heh. Maybe, maybe it smells like rotten Spam."

Sniffing.

"I wouldn't know. Different spirits carry variations on the scent. Did you know that? I can tell. I can sniff them out in the graveyards—bittersweet regret. I can smell them at murder sights—the burnt-hair stink. Angry. I can smell them now. Close. They smell curious. They're wondering what I'm doing. They reek of anticipation, too, like a demon trying to hold a fart. So fucking claustrophobic. They are all around—in my clothes, in my fucking pores."

Simon notes the hands on Jasper's corpse, cracked from compulsive washing. The face, dried out from too many harsh cleansers.

Sobbing now on the tape. A harsh whisper too close to the mic.

"Potential death. It, uh . . . it has a smell, too. Weaker than the real thing, but it's there. I can smell the accident waiting to happen to some poor jerk. The elderly—Christ, the elderly reek of it. And it's cost me everything. I can't even hold down shit jobs. You try selling an order of extra-large fries to a fat old dude when you can smell death exhaust oozing out of his arteries."

Sniffing turns to sniffing.

"Oh, she made it all a little better. For all of us. The nastiness—it was all farther away. She just had this gift to—Christ! And I . . . and I think it can't be like this, right? There has to be more. Something! It can't all be rot. Nope. That's the worst part. Supernatural awareness with no insight. I *know* that there is an afterlife. They're around me right now . . ."

More interference and crackling.

"There's an afterlife and it's all just a big stink! A miracle with no meaning. Waste. The soul is just the waste the living evacuate from their bowels when they die."

Pause.

More interference.

Bitter laugh.

"Now all I wonder is: What will *I* smell like?"

Pregnant pause.

*Bang.*

*Thump.*

The recording goes on—on until the tape runs out—all buzzing and waves of whispering crackles and distortions.

Simon licks his lips. He wants it badly. The scalpel is in his hand. To feel the dead love, to know Jasper, to find out if a gun to the head feels like cold lips. The Corbies shriek.

"It's not a good time," he says to the murder in his head.

Trembling, Simon forces his junky hands back into his pockets and leaves the body of Jasper Eckman. From a payphone, he makes an anonymous call to the police, complaining about the smell. The crows sing rotating rhymes about Spam and death.

*Maybe I should have gone to the Dead Water with Jasper. Maybe he could have warned me better about Mr. Knock. Eh, Jane?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Somewhere else.

Let us suppose there is a boy and his name is Neil.

Neil recently started his freshman year at college.

Neil turns on his MP3 player. Neil hunts specters, but never without his MP3 player.

He sets the volume to full, music pulsing through ear buds, as he creeps along the boards that, up until now, creaked. The music is loud and obnoxious. Neil is loud and obnoxious. But music should be irreverent on an errand like this. Sometimes, crude audacity is the only gauntlet you can throw into the void.

Neil sets his goggles to power, and the dingy walls disappear into spectrums of primary colors. He creeps through the

house looking for the things: vicious intangibles, nasty abstracts. He hits a button on the MP3 player.

Next track.

“How can you do that?” someone from the Obsidian Sanctuary had once asked. “How can you shut off your senses when you know there is something after you?” Later, they would warn him to stay the hell away from Ichabod Knock.

“A spook hunter who relies on his senses is fucked,” he answered to the former. (He would ignore the latter.) The things hiding in the shade between molecules use your senses against you. That is *not* how you find them.

Music and the color spectrum dull the horror.

Somehow, the sound of baby screams choked in clotting gore seems less horrific when drowned out by the relentless urging of Led Zeppelin and “Kashmir.” He knows the spooks are making those sounds now, horrible squeals and dins that brew insanity—all just beyond the reach of his ear buds.

Somehow, the sight of an old woman hanging from a noose of barbed wire, swallowing her own intestines, fails to rip apart one’s sanity when it was broken down to indecipherable blotches of color, rendered in blocks of reds and greens, like an ancient video game. Neil knows they are making those grotesque manifestations now, as several colorful, indefinite blotches and shapes dance around him, on the other side of his goggles.

These mad, jabbering things, these primordial frequencies, they hunger for sensation. They want to taste blood, to bathe in vital fluids, to feel naked organs between their toes. They want to drink fear.

Neil deafens and blinds himself to all their chthonic tools.

He likes to imagine how frustrated this makes the spirits of sin and hate.

Neil has to wait, baiting the trap with himself. He has to wait until their frustration drives them to action, makes them mad enough to come out of the walls and take those sensations



from his flesh directly. So crazed that they come just a little closer—closer to reality. And then the rest of the items in his satchel would come into play.

Neil is an exorcist and tonight is a school night.

Next track.

## INTERLUDE: The Key

I got the key.

Not gonna be scared.

Not tonight.

Didn't even ask for a glass of water. Didn't ask for an extra story or for my Mr. Glowworm nightlight even. I got Snot. He's my bear. He's got only one arm 'cause I tried this one magic trick one time with Dad's electric turkey carver. Dad was pretty steamy. That's ancient history. I was just a kid.

But I got the key.

I'm not scared, not tonight.

"Here I'm are!" I say to the dark.

I've had lots of nighttime-mares lately. Granpapa had a man-man talk with me. He showed me a treasure box. Said it was a "cigar box." It smelled like Granpapa. There was a key inside. It looked heavy. It was a real key, not those little jaggy things Mom and Dad use to start the car.

I remember Granpapa said, "This, Jeramie, is a key made of cold-wrought iron—the bane of goblins, jabberwockies, and all things that skulk in the ever-dark. Anyone in the Old Country can tell you that. But this isn't just a key, it's *the* key, the key to the *Other Place*."

I wanted to see the key with my hands. Real bad. But Granpapa wouldn't let me. Said it was safer in the treasure box. It was important. He said, "Do ya understand, Jeramie? This key locks the great iron gates to their world, so no monster nor boogieman can harm ya. They can try and scare ya. They can howl at ya. But you can laugh at them, Jeramie, because ya know that the key is safe with me."

Granpapa took a nap.

I snuck into his room, like a burglar man, and took the key out of the treasure box. Granpapa might get steamy, but I'm tired of being a crybaby. Now, I'm not afraid.

"Here I'm are!" I say to the dark.

Nuffin's gonna scare me. Nuffin's gonna whisper at my ear  
with voices made out sour milk and scabs and spider legs. Nuffin's gonna bite me under my eyes.

Nope. I'm gonna sleep . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

I wake up.

It's still dark.

I yawn and kinda remember the dream I was having about  
using a flying car to slay a Jell-O dragon with planets inside.

I squeeze my hand.

Oh no! Empty!

I look for the key, but it's real dark. Mr. Glowworm isn't  
plugged in. I think I did a bad thing.

I pull the blanket over me and Snot. I hold my eyes closed.  
I make believe I don't hear nuffin'.

Not the creaky, groany gate opening.

Not the dark saying, "Here we is!"

But I can't make believe no more when the noises stop and  
I feel something tugging on my blanket. . . .

## CHAPTER 13

Dream logic.

They are all children—but they are all adults, too.

It is his grade-school Halloween dance. It is also the Obsidian Sanctuary at the same time. And it is also Carfax Abbey. Everyone is there. Everyone is costumed. Simon is safe, a misfit in the misfit kingdom, smiling under the sweaty seal of a rubber mask. The punch bowl is full of absinthe and nostalgia, and next to the bowl, lined up, are the severed heads, each weighing as much as a rotisserie chicken, each resting on its own tin plate on the plastic lavender tablecloth. Jolly Roger, with his gold-platinum grin, plays in a skeleton-pirate band, on a keyboard that is also a pipe organ. Byron, the African crow, perches on a microphone as the lead singer. The music is “Moonlight Sonata”—but it is also “Mary Jane’s Last Dance.”

Byron sings. Then Byron is gone, replaced by the Corbies. There is no transition.

Everyone is there. And they—the dreams—writhe in and about.

Simon mingles with his classmates and they are still children. They are also grownup and some apologize for not understanding Simon. He smiles and tells them it’s all right, for even they are precious in the memory.

Off in the corner, Officer Polhaus, as a boy, gets someone’s lunch money.

Simon’s mother is there, and she pins corsages on the girls and boutonnieres on the boys—and they are not flowers but writhing moths.

Simon’s dog is there—the one that died in his arms, in the alley—healthy and happy.

And Simon’s patients twirl about the dance floor. Some of them thank Simon. Some of them shake his hand. Some of them hug Simon with the intimacy that only forms between

two people through a Y-incision. Still others dance up to Simon and open their chests, guiding his hand inside to feel the tactile-slick of their glistening souls. Everyone opens up.

Toby Reynolds and the other children drag their cement blocks about the dance floor.

Little Robin sits by the door, ready to pick out the monsters from the rubber masks.

And they—the dreams—writhe in and about.

Simon dances with the Band-Aid Girl, his girlfriend for one night and forever in dreams. Only now she is Jane, and Jane has come to the Halloween dance dressed as the Hanging Girl, and she dangles about, from the ceiling, on a rope, and Simon has to float upward to be at her level. Simon tips his hat and loosens her noose so he can fit his head and neck in as well. Jane holds Simon tight. They dance on the wind.

Perched on a microphone stand that branches off like limbs on a metal tree, the Corbies sing in a Tom Waits warble: “And now she’s dead. Forever dead. And she’s so dead and lovely now.”

Simon and Jane kiss, wrapped in their noose embrace. She whispers in his ear—says she’s sorry for disappearing, says he shouldn’t have followed her into the dark.

“I have to,” Simon says.

The Corbies sing in a grinding voice like skeleton love.

Then Simon is under the table, under the punch bowl, the severed heads, and the plastic lavender tablecloth—hiding out with the Band-Aid Girl. Only she’s Nyx and Nyx is a child and Nyx is an adult and either way she’s a jumble of sardonic purple lips. Simon shows her shadow puppets, and she kisses him on the cheek.

And then the screaming starts.



Simon starts in the dark, the screams of so many loved ones ceasing to exist. Every time we wake we kill our loved ones. He

reaches for a glass of water. He feels the white lock of her hair that he saved. He hugs the moldering hotel pillow that still has her scent.

"This is not an ideal relationship," he says to the dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Can't sleep.

So he paces.

Dead plants. Dead gold fish. Very dead gold fish. His routines had been disrupted; he had not had a flushing ceremony with this failed attempt. Decay is setting in.

Take care of it tomorrow.

Pace.

Dead plants. Writing on the walls: *Jane Doe* and other phrases and symbols and equations and unintelligible scratches. The shakes. Jane withdrawal. All thoughts are broken glass.

The Dead Water junkie.

The shivering scarecrow.

No Dead Water. No fix. So he grabs an extra pumpkin and a DVD and a bottle of absinthe and a scalpel and a brain knife. He watches the dead on the screen in the original silent-film presentation of *The Lost World*, circa 1925. He drinks absinthe. The lines blur away and he grows fascinated watching the crude stop-motion dinosaurs and other ancient creatures. He finds himself thinking of the geriatric couple making out at the old theater.

"Oh, look at you. Look at you," croons a jazzy Corbie in his head. "Brood, brood, brood in your Boo Radley moods." The other wraith crows pluck a bitter bass beat from the tendons of the dead in the upside-down tree.

Simon drinks more absinthe, and he cuts into the pumpkin with the scalpel and brain knife. Simon slides his hand inside the pulp, feeling the chill innards, remembering Jane and his patients and those intimate moments in Autopsy Room 6.

Then Simon cuts some more. He is not a professional pumpkin carver, but his hands are surgical and he knows his tools and he cuts and cuts into the flesh until he can see Jane's face.



Simon hides under the punch table with Nyx. He performs shadow puppets, and she claps and she kisses him on the cheek. They sip emerald punch. Outside, the Corbies sing Poe verses to a blues beat.

"You know," Nyx says, "if I find out exactly why you want Jane back, I'll probably freak out a little."

Simon nods.

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Simon says.

They look at each other, as children.

"We should have known each other growing up," says little Nyx.

"Yeah," says little Simon.

A quiet moment passes, under the table.

Simon comes to attention with a start.

"I have to go find Jane."

"Oh, Simon, don't go out there," says Nyx, suddenly afraid.

"But I have to."

Little Nyx bites her purple lip. "Simon," she says, "some doors you can't come back out of unchanged. Some doors, only boogeymen can come out."

Then the screaming starts.

Outside the under-table, all the dreams scream. Something had snuck into the dance.

"Like a thief in the night!" shriek the Corbies before they are silenced.

Nyx and Simon huddle together, and outside the under-table are the sounds of screaming and tearing and chewing and slurping. Simon makes a choice. He tears open a lavender flap.

Outside there are only black doll's eyes and teeth and teeth and teeth.

And hunger. Manifest Destiny hunger. Their mouths are as wide as perdition; they can never have enough. One by one fall all the dancers and dreams, dead and devoured. Hunger holds illimitable dominion over all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Awake.

Jane's pumpkin head tumbles out of his lap, the screams of a billion frightened animals and a river of blood and offal in the back of his brain. He feels the paralysis, the unexplainably deep dread, like the night terrors in his youth.

Bob. The *hammer*.

*I let it in, Jane. I let it in.*

Arthur Drake, Chicago's guru, smiles at Simon through his television. Another night. Another Apex Consumers infomercial chattering between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M.

"Be a more powerful consumer!"

"Be at the top of your food chain, in business and life!"

"Start small, dream big!"

Strangers give testimony in the eye of the TV. Simon is urged to call now and join the program by purchasing self-help audiotapes and CDs by Drake himself; books and guides for selling Drake's products from the home; meditation aids; vitamin supplements. Dates flash on the screen for local pep talks at various hotel conference rooms and a large arena event at the end of the year. "Listen to Arthur Drake speak live!"

*It was always there, Jane, always there—before it all started. Pyramid schemes and smiles. Zoophagy on a mass-market scale.*

The hammer.

Simon willfully breaks his paralysis and stumbles through his house. The dead plants. The scratches on the wall. Arthur



Drake calling from the living room, saying he can teach you how to get everything you ever hungered for.

The hammer.

Bob.

It's in the kitchen, wrapped in oily rags, caked in ancient blood.

"Don't be a minnow, be a shark!" shouts Drake.

Simon flicks the light switch.

*I let it in, Jane.*

In the cloudy fishbowl, the dead goldfish, the very, *very* dead goldfish, swims about. Hungrily.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, tell me, dear: Have you won the girl back yet?"

"No, Mother."

"Well, you keep trying, hon."

"I will."

"Oh . . . uh . . . your *father* wanted to know: Have you gotten yourself into a support group yet?"

"Yes, I have."

"You have?"

"Yes. They're good, Mother. They're very good."

\* \* \* \* \*

They practice guided meditation. Then Simon is fighting Nyx on a mat.

But before that, Simon stashed Bob—the sledgehammer, not the dildo—in a train station locker.

And long before that, Simon threw a towel over the fishbowl and refused to look under it again.

When Simon walked into the Obsidian Sanctuary, Little Robin gave him the once over. Simon surprised himself by performing a coin trick for the silent girl. Simon *never* did that, not outside of the Dead Water and dreams. Robin smiled and hugged him.

"Jasper's dead," Simon said, and he told them about the body and the gun and the Spam. He played Jasper's tape. Murmurs shuddered through the group, and a few tears fell. But Nyx took control and calmed them. Polhaus glared, but he did not approach Simon, did not say anything. Through a series of looks between Polhaus and Nyx, Simon guessed that they had shared words on the subject. Though she was half his age and less than half his size, Nyx was not a person you wanted to piss off.

She was also persuasive. Though Simon hung to the edges of the room, she eventually got him out on the mats. Tonight was self-defense night. Polhaus and Nyx taught the group various maneuvers and tactics for urban survival.

"I'm not dressed for physical education," said Simon.

"Good," said Nyx. "When the time comes to use what we're teaching you, you won't be dressed for it either, so you're ahead of the curve."

Simon took off his bowler hat and jacket and tie and shoes.

In the end, they are both sweating and both smiling.

"Where'd you learn all that?" asks Simon.

"I was in the military, very briefly," says Nyx. "I've picked up what I can when I can. Now you tell me: Where the hell did you learn to *move* like that?"

"Charlie Chaplin."



Neil's dorm room is the repository for a collection of rock biographies, books on the occult, and LPs. Jim Morrison and Aleister Crowley posters cover the walls, and *Ghostbusters* action figures crowd the TV stand. Through a poster and a quote, Albert Einstein reminds Simon that: *Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a persistent one.*

Nyx told Simon where he could find Neil Barnes and added, "I'm coming with you," back at the Sanctuary. "Knock had

some others in his crew,” she explained. “But most of them fell off the world. Neil’s a smart kid. Skipped a few grades and got into college early. Neil and Jasper have been by the Sanctuary off and on. That’s where they met your Jane Doe.”

She’d looked worried, but wipes that off her face when they get to the dorm. There she’s all smiles and playful pouts. Neil’s roommate trips over himself to be helpful.

“Hasn’t been around for a few days,” he says, not looking particularly concerned, eyeing Nyx up and down.

Simon searches through Neil’s desk, silently lamenting the lack of organs to catalogue, weigh, and read, while Nyx goes through Neil’s closet and searches under his bed. The roommate takes the opportunity to look at Nyx through the new angles this position affords.

“You won’t find Neil’s gear,” the roommate says. “Took it all with him last time he left.”

“Gear?” asks Simon.

“Neil is very . . . advanced,” Nyx says, as if that explains everything.

They dig around some more, but this is not a corpse and this is not even a crime scene. Simon doesn’t have any absinthe in his guts, no wormwood tree in his brain, so he has no feel for any of it. He sifts listlessly. On the back of a notebook designated *Western Civilization*, Simon finds a set of rules written in pencil:

1. *An exorcist should always have his music.*
2. *An exorcist should always have his specs.*
3. *An exorcist should never, EVER turn off his music.*
4. *An exorcist should never, EVER take off his specs.*
5. *Always wait for THEM to come to YOU.*

Nyx picks up a leather-bound planner and leafs through it. “All right, Simon. Time to go.”

“Wait,” says the roommate. He steps up to Nyx, close, breaching all levels of personal space and blocking her off from the door. “Maybe your—” he eyes Simon with a doubtful look “—friend wants to go home. You can stay and hang, tonight. Maybe you can interrogate me a bit more.”

Nyx grins.

“Tell you what, stud. I’ll be your date tonight if you can answer one pop quiz question.”

“What?”

“What is the earliest age at which a human being can masturbate?”

“Ah, fuck,” the roommate chuckles, a little confused but encouraged, leaning in even closer to Nyx, “I don’t know . . . ten?”

“Actually,” Simon says, “studies done the mid-nineties indicate that a fetus can engage in such activities, in the womb, at as young as thirty-two weeks of gestation.” Simon had not paid much attention to the exchange, but the medical factoids just fell out of his mouth while he was playing with his cards, turning jacks into queens.

Nyx and the roommate stare a moment.

“Well, looks like I was wrong too,” Nyx says to the roommate while maneuvering around him and taking Simon’s arm. “And I guess I have my date for the evening. Sorry if that leaves you all alone tonight. On the upside, you’ve had much more practice at that than you ever realized.”

She shuts the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You have a mischievous streak,” says Simon, back in Nyx’s car. It’s a purple Volkswagen Beetle, lovingly referred to as “the Nyx Mobile” by all the Obsidian Sanctuary members. They have a special affection for the car; it had pulled into many of their driveways at inhuman hours of the night, bringing help when they could not call anyone else.

“Yeah, well, it’s a way to cope,” she says, aggressively working the stick shift. “It’s a way to squeeze.” She mimes squeezing an invisible Bob—the dildo, not the hammer. “When I worry, I make gross jokes.”

“You make lots of gross jokes.”

“Yeah, I do, don’t I?”

Simon looks through the planner. Inside is a pamphlet for Apex Consumers, as well as a flier for Club Wendigo, just like the one from Jane’s hotel room. Occasionally, on a given date in the calendar, there is an address. Each address is designated a “level”—mostly *1*s and *2*s, and the occasional *4*.

Simon takes a few sips from his Thermos.

The Corbies groom their death-mote feathers.

“What do you know about Apex Consumers?” Simon asks.

“I know I’ve seen too many of their infomercials.” Nyx turns to Simon. “Insomniacs unite! What’s his name—Arthur Drake? Yeah. Self-help guru, master of materialism. ‘Be a more powerful consumer.’ What bullshit. Tapes and books so you can program yourself to want more and more shit you don’t need. Gotta hand it to that gi-normous penis, though; he’s combined the self-help shit with a killer pyramid scheme, so he gets his recruits selling his company’s tripe in hopes of becoming rich like him.”

Nyx shifts gears, hard. Squeeze indeed.

“Of course, there are the weirder rumors, too,” she says.

“Weirder rumors?”

“We’re looking into it.”

“You’re looking into it?”

“Yeah. We don’t just drink coffee and tell abduction stories. The troops are on it.”

Simon sits back in the seat and, in his mind, sifts through the events and the little he knows about Ichabod Knock and Neil and Jasper. The Corbies tear the clues to bone meal and play with the crumbs.

“Jane,” Simon says. “She held them together. She gave their minds peace. She could do that. Her golden eyes. You say their group was looking into some . . . nasty things. Jane vanishes. Then they all fall down. Ichabod disappears. Jasper commits suicide. And Neil—he’s without his team. Maybe he goes on one last outing, out of spite, or anger, or to prove nothing has changed. He goes out and—”

“What are you doing?” Nyx asks.

Simon opens his eyes and watches his hands miming with a mind of their own.

“I—I’m pulling organs out of a Y-incision. Helps me think.”

“That’s a little creepy.”

“Is it?”

“How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Creepy ’n’ cute at the same time?”

Simon shrugs and blushes, and Nyx smiles. Then they think of Neil. The smiles vanish, and they drive in silence. They drive south toward the last address in Neil’s date book, marked several days ago. They drive toward a Level 6.

Eventually, it gets dark.



The neighborhoods peel back layer after layer of seediness. Simon and Nyx double-check the address but know they are in the right place when they look up and notice that the roofs of the neighborhood buildings are all covered in crosses built from hastily bent TV antennas. Rows and rows of wiry crosses shiver in the late October wind.

*Broken dolls. This is a trail of broken dolls, and I had hoped to find one whole. Eh, Jane?*

At the nexus of shivering wire and TV crucifixion: a plain brick building, once affluent, now chopped into cramped apartments. They go inside. Simon is still wandering in his

head with the questions, his hands still slick with metaphoric viscera. Outside his thoughts there is much of mildew and many doors and many shadows and many voices. Simon does not understand the voices—most of them speak in a rushed Spanish—but Nyx seems to keep up and knocks on door after door until there is an unwelcoming crowd in the hall. She asks them questions that end in “Neil Barnes” while, in the walls, the pipes whine and keen.

Finally, an old woman speaks out. The shadows in her face are the deepest, and the Corbies point out all the bad memories trapped in the wrinkles.

“Like the dark stories caught between the rings of a hanging tree,” they say.

A man argues with the crone but she argues back. She takes Simon and Nyx to a door leading to the cellar.

And then Simon is down in the dark with a flashlight. The old woman will not go past the first step, and Nyx asks her questions. Simon sweeps the little light over the dirt floor in the dark. Everything smells of a spider’s womb.

“Hello?”

Simon finds it by a far wall, an odd set of electronic goggles.

*An exorcist should always have his specs.*

The old woman is still above, her words getting faster—terrified vowels bouncing inside a malevolent pinball machine. Though Simon does not know what she is saying, he recognizes that she’s repeating the same sentence over and over again. He also begins to realize that it is very cold down in the basement and the building is making the strangest sounds.

*An exorcist should never, EVER take off his specs.*

Nyx says, “Simon, let’s go!”

And she’s down the stairs, grabbing Simon’s arm.

“Time to go!”

And they’re up the stairs and through the door and past the sobbing old woman and all the eyes and the shadows and doors and mildew. Then it’s out another set of doors and

they're in the car and driving away. Behind them, the shivering wire crosses beg the sky.

Simon finally asks, "What did she say? What did she say about Neil?"

Nyx accelerates.

"The walls ate him. The walls *ate* him."

\* \* \* \* \*

*All these broken dolls, Jane, with their broken doll parts.*

"The walls ate him," Nyx says again.

"Do you think that's true?" Simon asks, breaking a long silence.

"Doesn't matter. Get the bad feeling and you get out."

Simon looks out the window. The cement, at that speed, flows like dark water. He waves to the swimming skeletons and thinks about the people trapped in walls and thinks about the doors, the doors!—and windows—so many—whipping by. All those doors and windows, and each portal would be another story if one were to open it.

"You watch a horror flick," Nyx says, "and you run your voice raw yelling at some blond, mega-boobed bimbo. 'Don't go up the stairs! Don't open the door!'"

Simon nods and the Corbies watch the passing cement.

*I thought, Jane, that I might take a jackhammer someday and free all the cement skeletons of Chicago. Then they would tell me all their secrets, tell me how all the strange stories fit together, joint by joint, into one plot. That was before I understood Knock's riddle.*

"Shit! Ah, Neil." Nyx slams her steering wheel with a fist. "You can't hesitate. Not in the dark. Your spine twitches, you run. You don't go up the stairs. You don't investigate the suspicious warehouse, alone, after dark. You don't fucking read the passages of the archaic book that drove its last five owners insane with its unspeakable truths. You don't hesitate because the dark is bigger than us. We are, all of us, out of our fucking depth. Knock thinks he can keep poking around, gather



enough secrets to protect him—shit. You see what happens. The Sanctuary is a survival group. We'll help you, Simon, as best we can, but we're not going down Ichabod's path." She slams the steering wheel again, even harder. "Fuck! I am *not* that blond bimbo! I'm the spunky, dark-haired girl who's sardonic and fantabulous—but with some emotional issues and a troubled past. The one you root for to pull her shit together and make it to the sequel. I intend to make it to the sequel. I'm running out of the spooky house!"

Simon lets the words flow from her purple lips. He does not interrupt. No Neil. Not even a cadaver. Disappointing. But he also feels bad for Nyx, feels pain because she feels pain and feels awkward because he does not know what to do about it. So, he holds his breath and reaches out an unsure hand, squeezing Nyx's shoulder and rubbing the back of her neck as he had seen and felt her do to him in the closet at the Sanctuary meeting—mimicking as best he can.

Nyx smiles, reaches a hand up and squeezes Simon's.

*I learned, Jane, that it is not so very difficult to interact with the living, not if I pretend they are dead.*

Simon lets his hand linger, savoring the warmth.

"Oh, Simon. You probably think I'm a crazy *chica*, no?"

Simon's head cocks to the side.

"Compared to what?"

Nyx half laughs, half hiccups.

"Maybe that's why I like hanging out with you, Mr. Meeks. Relativity. Whoa—you okay? You're shaking."

Simon does his best to steady his hands. "I haven't had my . . . I haven't visited the Dead Water in a while."

"Dead Water junkie!" says a Corbie.

"Shivering scarecrow!" says another.

"I'm hungry!" says a third.

"That's some addiction," says Nyx. "Do our meditation sessions help?"

"A little. I found my power animal."

“And?”

“I dissected him. It helped. A little.”

“*Wow.*”

After a moment, Simon sighs and notes, “Jane held them together—Knock and the others—kept them sane. She could do that. But when she vanished, the dark got them. Who was she?”

“I don’t know,” says Nyx. “Someone special.”

“Yes.”

Simon’s mind meanders: watches a billboard flashing by—realizes he is hungry—thinks of the candy bar—the name brand—the Milky Way galaxy. The blurring lights became stars—UFOs—urban myths—cosmic secrets—the underworld—religion—gods—salvation—death—and Milky Way Bars.

Simon takes Jasper’s recorder from his pocket.

Play.

“They’re . . . they’re all around me right now,” says the dead man’s voice.

Stop.

Rewind.

Play.

“They’re . . . they’re all around me right now.”

Simon listens to the surge of static, just after that sentence, and the faint cadence there.

The Corbies chant, “Spam, death, and Milky Way bars.” And then, the wraith crows sing, “Three may keep a secret, if all three of them are dead.”

“Not from me,” Simon says.

“Not from you, what?” Nyx asks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon refuses to go into the kitchen, refuses to look in the fish bowl. He flips through Neil’s planner, finding September 3<sup>rd</sup> marked, not with the usual street address, like the other notes,

but with *Madonna of Bachelor's Grove Cemetery*. And GPS coordinates after that: 41° 37'51.16"N — 87° 46'14.27" W.

Off to the side, in the margins, a more hastily penned note says: *There is a Lady in White in cemetery. Angry cephalopods under skirt.*

Simon gets hungry.

He still refuses to go into the kitchen. The Corbies are hungry, and he shivers in withdrawal. Then Simon sees it—another note, in a different handwriting, on the back of the Club Wendigo flier from Neil's planner. It includes an address and, under that, the insistent words:

## SAFE HOUSE

—Ichabod

Simon quivers, looks about his room as if a specter might leap out and steal his clue. He dials Nyx's number.

No answer.

Simon walks to a bookshelf and removes a hefty tome: *Illinois Oddities*. He opens to the back of the dust jacket to author biography: *Ichabod Knock lurks somewhere in Chicago, with his cats.*

Simon dials Nyx's number again.

No answer.

"Act, Simon! Get the girl," shriek the Corbies.

Simon says, "But Nyx—"

"You're not going alone, Simon," say the Corbies. "Never alone. No. The murder-in-one—specter tempest in a teapot. Go!"

Simon grabs his hat and coat and tightens his tattered tie as the Corbies croon their necro-blues, their entropic-beatnik lyrics, their apocalyptic limericks.

Simon grabs the planner and heads out the door. Turning, bent down, to lock the door, he smells it.

Chemical. Odd . . . but familiar.

Simon turns.

Three of them—three shapes made silhouettes by the flickering streetlight behind, standing over Simon on his porch. To one side, a broad-shouldered silhouette, tall, lengthy limbed, a looming, dark V-shape. In the center, an even taller silhouette, narrow shouldered, a shadowy totem-pole figure rising up and up. To the other side, a silhouette of average height, skinny, frail, shrunken in on itself with its head hunched forward and its arms held up to the chest. All three strangers wear weathered hats with wide, warped brims. Simon can make out no faces. All three stand still, perfectly still, at odd-bent postures.

And they stand.

And they stare.

And a long, silent beat passes.

A *long* beat.

There are those who speculate what would fill their neighbor with horror, what would drive the average person insane—and if the bystanders of the world were to turn on you and stare, silently, for long enough, you would go mad.

The silhouettes stare.

Simon stares.

The Corbies stare.

The silence grinds Simon's nerve endings until he thinks he might scream just to silence the silence. That's when the broad-shouldered silhouette turns to his fellows and makes a horrid, wet noise, a muffled gurgling.

The sound seems to activate the other two. Like windup meat puppets, they move in awkward jerks.

"We to play?" says the tall, tall totem-pole silhouette in a deep, resonant voice.

"We are not waxworks, mmm? You would have to pay, mmm?" says the frail silhouette in a rasp.

All their stilted sentences come out unsure, half a question mark at their tail end.

The broad silhouette gurgles again, impatiently.

The tall-tall figure reacts, steps forward, and says, "The season is autumn . . . time passes . . . first without words . . . then . . . my associate grabs you . . . then we enter . . . then we have dialogue."

Simon, frozen, feels something manifest unseen, and the space between him and the figures turns to mealworms. The shambling shape of the broad figure moves forward in a surge, grabbing Simon by the neck and lifting him off the ground. They move into his darkened home, trailed by the other two shapes. This close, Simon can see they all wear plastic raincoats and yellow rubber gloves, the type for household cleaning. The wet crinkle of all that plastic and rubber punctuates their every movement.

And there's the smell—chemical, familiar.

Simon sees, under the mildew and coats, dozens of green shapes pinned to each of the three figures, dozens of green pine trees, the car deodorizer kind. Dozens of happy green pines dot each of the shambling shapes like absurd war medals, like candles on a moldy birthday cake—and the scent of chemical pine sharpens. But under that is a scent Simon is very, very familiar with.

Simon struggles in the grip, and the broad stranger slams him into a wall.

Another labored silence.

The other strangers seem lost.

The broad stranger gurgles, impatiently, activating his fellows.

"We to play?" says the tall-tall stranger. "Good . . . my associate holds you . . . with menace . . . good . . . my associate . . . asks you questions . . . if you do not confess . . . my associate gives you the works . . . has my associate asked the questions?"

It is dark, and the brims of the misshapen hats are wide, and Simon sees no faces.

"You will tell us, mmm?" rasps the shriveled stranger. "Where is she, mmm?"

"Who?" asks Simon, feet dangling. He kicks at his captor's legs and groin but the broad stranger seems not to notice.

"Do not play tricks," says the shriveled stranger. "My associate will give you the works, mmm? There is . . . no time. It does not exist. I have errands to . . . run . . . I must get a quart of milk . . . we were out of milk . . . Mother was quite terse about it . . . I must not hold . . . her temper . . . against her . . . what with her being stuck in bed all the time . . . there is no time. Mmmother—"

The broad stranger interrupts his fellow with an impatient gurgle.

The shriveled stranger refocuses. "Where is she?" he rasps.

"Have you asked the questions?" asks the tall-tall stranger, oblivious. "My associate asks the questions. If he does not confess, my associate . . . gives him . . . the works. Then we exit . . . silently. Fade to black."

"Mmmother," rasps the shriveled stranger. "She died . . . years . . . and years . . . ago. There is . . . no . . . time."

"Fade to black," repeats the tall stranger. "They all exited, then. They all . . . left. Julie said that I was a liar in all things. Said she caught me fucking one of my students, so I must have lied about everything else. But that is . . . not true."

"Mother died," rasps the shriveled stranger, "and they said I did, mmm? But I did *not*. I . . . changed the bedpans. I . . . could not go out with friends. I . . . could not see a woman. I regretted. I resented, mmm. But I did not—"

"Julie," says the tall stranger. "She said I only gave Desdemona the role because she fucked me. Not true. She was . . . so talented. The best I'd seen. She gave me a book of Samuel Beckett plays because they were my favorite. It seemed innocent enough. We did not fuck until *after* I cast her . . . then they all left . . . exit Julie . . . exit Desdemona . . . exit university . . . we exit silently. Fade . . . to black."

Simon tries to follow from synapse to rotten synapse.

*Strange cards in my game of fifty-two pickup. Eh, Jane? What were they—who were they—before their nasty ever-afters?*

Simon produces a scalpel and sinks it deep into the forearm of the broad stranger, but he does not notice. The other two strangers mumble on.

“ . . . did not unplug the machine. No . . . time. I must . . . get a quart of milk . . . ”

“ . . . and she started sobbing . . . when I could not maintain an erection . . . as if it reflected badly on her . . . exit, all— ”

The broad stranger breaks the tangle of words with a shriek and a gurgle, louder, and then a second time, louder and more violent, as he stamps his foot. The other two strangers snap to attention.

“ Dialogue,” says the tall stranger. “ Time passes. My associate asks the questions. ”

The shriveled stranger looks to Simon with sudden clarity of purpose and rasps, “ Where is the girl with the golden eyes? ”

“ I don’t know,” says Simon through the strangling yellow grip. “ She’s not here. ”

A pause and a silence.

“ Did he ask the questions? ” asks the tall stranger. “ Good. I exit. ” The tall stranger stalks off into the house, out of Simon’s perspective.

Another pause and a silence, and a car passes by on the street, and the headlights flash over the features of the strangers for a moment.

Was the broad stranger’s mouth sewn shut?

Were the shriveled stranger’s eyes sewn shut, too?

“ She is not here,” says the tall stranger, returning. “ The season is autumn and time . . . passes, first without words. Then we exit, silently. Blackout. ”

Simon tumbles into space, tossed away by the large yellow hand. He crashes into a wall and onto the floor.

When he looks up, they are gone.

## CHAPTER 14

“The first thing you need to know, Simon,” says Ichabod, “is that stories are dangerous. Information is alive.”

Ichabod Knock talks with his mouth full.

Ichabod Knock talks with his mouth full, sitting stark naked, body covered in the weeping wounds of symbols and glyphs carved into flesh. He points a large chrome handgun at Simon, who is equally naked, save for his socks and boxers.

Ragged strips of red hang down Ichabod’s chin. The gore catches and clots in his great beard, strings of viscera trailing down to the raw pile of fur and meat and organs and paws on his dinner plate. Ichabod picks something glistening out of his beard and eats it.

Events taken out of context may have a tendency to sound bizarre.

Backtrack.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tensions bit deep at the Obsidian Sanctuary that evening, and Nyx decided to lead the guided meditations. She led them through the controlled breathing. She led them inside, made them climb into a secret place, the treehouse of the mind. Everyone had their own tree. Some climbed up rope ladders, and others up wooden rungs nailed into the trunk, and still others up the lower branches, hand and foot.

“Is everyone there?” Nyx asks.

Eyes closed, gathered in the church basement, everyone nods. Simon nods, sitting in the back row, but also sitting with the roosting Corbies in the ghost tree, hastily building a fort. Nyx leads them to a door in the tree-fort, and through the door, and everyone has their own unique door. She leads them into a room, and everyone has their own unique room, bigger



on the inside than on the out. Nyx's room, tonight, is a grand library. In the room, she leads them to a skulking creature.

"Do you see it?" Nyx says. "It has a long, prehensile tongue, and it has hollow teeth, and the teeth lactate black poisons dribbling out of the mouth. Do you see it?"

Everyone nods, eyes closed.

"It's a damaged fragment of your soul, all your little insecurities, doubts, fears, all personified in one nasty imp. It's the thing that keeps you up at three in the morning with anxiety. Its claws are clicking and it's crawling toward you. Do you see it?"

Everyone nods. Some squirm in their chairs.

"Don't run from the imp. Hold your ground. Open your arms to it. Step forward. Coo to it. Tell this creature you accept it. Tell it everything will be all right. Hug the creature. Embrace it. The imp is in your arms now, weeping black venom. Do you see it?"

Everyone nods.

"Now kill it."

Silence. Mouths open.

"I said kill it! Right now. Strangle it, bludgeon it, bite its ear off—just kill the bastard!"

Dozens of foreheads wrinkle.

Nyx continues. "I just gacked mine—put a gun to its temple and *bam!* That's right: it was me, in the library, with the revolver. I can hear its brains plopping out of the huge exit wound. I want the same from you. Take your lead pipes, your candlesticks, and your knives. I want you to brutalize your inner demon."

Everyone holds a breath.

"Find the voices that tell you you're worthless, that say you're gross, that tell you to despair, that beg you to destroy yourself in tiny bites. I want you to focus and turn each one of those voices into an anthropomorphic creature, and I want you to execute every last one of the motherfuckers!"

The closed eyes squint.

"I know in this age of Oprah-wisdoms, we're instructed to tenderly reconcile with all aspects of our being. That's nice, as far as it goes, but sometimes, you just have to savagely murder the million little pieces of you that say you're no good. Fuck 'em. So kill the imp. Put a plastic bag over its head and squeeze until it pops an eye. Throw it in a wood chipper. You take your doubts and you slaughter them. That's called Mental Thuggee, my chickadees. It's the vicious inner healing. You make your fears afraid of you."

Silence. Everyone breathes heavily. Some have tears and trembling lips. But then, all at once, everyone is smiling and cheering, and some are laughing through the tears. Nyx blows the smoke from an imaginary gun.

"Over the next few weeks, I want to hear you all comparing heinous kills, outdoing each other with new and imaginative forms of impicide. I want grizzly details. Maybe we'll award an imp-kill of the week. Zack, how did you just kill your imp?"

"Uh . . . I shoved a pencil through its eye."

"All right. Samantha, how'd you end your imp?"

"I dropped an anvil on its head."

"Sweet. Chaz?"

"I set the microwave on high and watched it burst."

"Nice. Extra points for the *Gremlins* reference. Val?"

"I painted its face with honey and buried its head in a mound of South American fire ants. It's still struggling."

"Yes! Keep going. No one's going anywhere until the inside of each and every one of your skulls is painted with imp guts. Semper Fi! Cobra Kai! Do or die! Huzzah!"

The basement fills with cheering, and Simon watches as unlikely hope spreads like a pathogen. He smiles as the Corbies dine on imp entrails.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Icky Knock once performed an exorcism using Enochian phrases, while playing the double bass."

"Icky Knock does shots of coral snake venom when he writes."

"Medusa's stare only gives Icky Knock an erection."

After the night's meditation, Simon had asked about Ichabod Knock. In response, several members of the Obsidian Sanctuary recited absurd jokes about the exploits of the one they called Icky. They formed a messy circle, starting a ritual Simon did not know.

"It's just their stupid game," Nyx says. "They call it Icky Facts. The challenge is to try to outdo the last 'fact' offered. The man does not deserve their worship." Nyx did not participate.

"The devil waits at the crossroads, every thirteen years, because Icky Knock owes him five dollars," says a Sanctuary member.

"Dogs go crazy and shoot people when Icky Knock whispers to them," says another.

"A famous person once lost a bet with Icky Knock. Now, that person doesn't exist, but no one remembers who it was."

"Man's a mad genius," says a teenager in a T-shirt sporting a Gonzo journalism symbol. Simon recalls his name is Carl. "Years back, he was bass player in a string of short-lived underground bands: Vestigial Limb, Necro-Ophelia, Rambunctious Homunculus, Azathoth's Taint, Banana Hammock—"

"Never heard of any of them," Nyx mutters.

"You're not a connoisseur," Carl says. "Anyway, he decides to leave the music scene and write books about the paranormal. The man has been around the world, seen impossible things, parties with celebrities—we're talking freaky orgies—and has imbibed every drug known to man and maybe some that aren't. He's like Hunter Thompson, Aleister Crowley, and Ozzy Osbourne all spliced together in a lab, with an extra gallon of pure elemental awesome thrown in."

*Even as they disagreed with Nyx, they tried to emulate her—those rhapsodic rants. Eh, Jane?*

"You're talking about a burnout who couldn't cut it as a musician, who then fails upward, as a writer, into semi-celebrity, and is likely infested with every STD known to man and maybe some that aren't," Nyx says. "He's like a bag of dicks in a blender with two cups of self-destruct and suck."

"Actually," says Carl, "Icky Knock has no STDs. They all killed each other in a massive Mexican Standoff gone horribly awry."

Laughter. The game begins again.

"Icky Knock once caught HIV. The virus immediately fled his body, screaming. To this day, it gathers around campfires, with other STDs and tells horror stories of what it found in there."

"Icky Knock once had sex with a six-foot Humboldt squid in the Sea of Cortez. It orgasmed seven times."

"Icky Knock only exists because he opened a temporal portal, went back in time, and impregnated his own mother."

Simon wanders over to a corner of the room where the Sanctuary has already constructed a shrine to Jane Doe: flowers, pictures, drawings, even a graven image in a bar of soap.

*You were holy to them, Jane. The vision. The mystery. The golden-eyed Madonna.*

Standing over the Jane shrine is a very short Frankenstein's monster with a Hallmark card.

"Hello, Robin," says Simon.

Robin waves. Nyx had explained earlier that the little girl had a whole collection of rubber Halloween masks and usually felt safer when wearing one. "October is the best time of the year for our Robin," Nyx said. "She's in season then."

"I like your mask," says Simon.

Robin looks up with a Boris Karloff stare and hands him the card. The words *To my darling wife, on our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary* are crossed out with red crayon and written over with the message *Miss you*.

"I think Jane would very much like this card."

The monster face nods, and Robin places the card among the drawings, photos, and flowers. They stand together, the

macabre Chaplin and the little monster. Neither minds the lull in conversation.

"It is a common misconception that the monster is called Frankenstein," says Simon.

Robin nods.

"The scientist is Frankenstein. The creature had no name."

Robin nods.

*"Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus."*

Jane stares back at them through the soap bar. Robin takes Simon's hand. Meanwhile, an epic game of Icky Facts ensues.

"Icky Knock uses rattlesnakes as condoms."

"That's a Chuck Norris fact. You stole it from College Humor-dot-com."

"They stole it from me!"

"You guys ever check out Icky Knock's Twitter page?"

"Knock does not have a Twitter page."

"It's him. I swear. You can check it out at Twitter-dot-com-slash-Icky-Knock. You should see the things he posts."

"Bullshit!"

"When Icky Knock has a sore throat, he sucks on adrenal glands."

"Icky Knock understands the plot of each and every David Lynch movie."

"When a pink elephant drinks too much, it hallucinates a parade of Icky Knocks."

"Icky Knock once sent a series of drunk texts to Abdul Alhazred. And the rest, as they say, is history."

"There is only one porn movie in existence that arouses Icky Knock enough to jerk off to. We call it *The Exorcist*."

"You guys seriously need to get a new antihero to deify," Nyx says, and then she stalks off, taking Robin with her.

"Now you've done it; you've made Nyx mad," Jolly Roger says. "She and Icky don't exactly have a copacetic past," he explains to Simon. "He's got a history. Goes through colleagues like Band-Aids. Sometimes he gets some tagalongs on his little

spook outings, and then . . . bad things happen. He's come around here a few times. A few of us followed, like Neil Barnes."

Everyone goes quiet at the name. The game of Icky Facts ends.

"The Imp of the Perverse," Byron croaks from Roger's shoulder.

"Last time Ichabod Knock came by, Nyx broke his nose," Jolly Roger says through gold and platinum teeth. "Polhaus could just barely hold her back."

Simon slips out, thinking Icky thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

The chalk outline greets Simon. Orange lines mark the sidewalk with a hopscotch court, complete with a head on top and hands drawn on the cross-section ends to form a crude body. Wild orange hair splayed about, Xs for eyes, and the hopscotch girl stares up at Simon like a kindergarten crime scene. Simon stands in the orange square of her chest, looking down at her face. The drizzling rain washes it sad. The branches of the ghost tree shiver at the ambient vibrations.

*The lines trap the echoes, and you take on the dreams of those who skipped there. Eh, Jane?*

The wind blows and a crinkled sticker saying, *Be Nice To Me—I Gave Blood Today*, bounces by like a clumsy foreshadowing. All those messages and letters in the wind. A chain creaks as a wooden sign swings, and Simon looks up. *House of Oddities*, says the sign on the closed-up building. The place looks decades dormant. No lights; most of the bulbs on the sign were shattered long ago. Next to the locked, chained door is a darkened ticket booth. With brick walls painted purple, it's easy to spot.

The locks are not difficult, just a series of tumblers to trip, a sequence of inevitable clicks. A bored graveyard-shift police officer had taught Simon how to pick a lock; for a time, Simon came to the morgue, not with his coins and cards, but with bags of locks bought at the hardware store, to work his surgical hands

on, until that became too easy. Simon kept his little tools on his key ring.

The chain slides to the ground and then the door's lock clicks into place. Simon enters yet another door, chased by memories of the flashing police tape: *Do Not Cross*.

"Ignore the bossy tape," croon the Corbies.

Simon enters. Before he can strike a light, a figure springs up in the pitch-thick darkness, sending Simon sprawling to the floor. The figure towers over him, saying, "Welcome, ladies and gentleman. Step right up. Put a brave foot through the portal, bid the mundane world goodbye, and gain entrance to the fantastic. Have your tickets ready."

*Click.*

Simon shines an LED flashlight on his attacker. The light reveals a man with no face, wearing a top hat. He strikes poses in jerky motions. His tuxedo is decayed and tattered. His face, torn off, dangles from the neck by a thread. But the exposed mechanical skeleton reels through its preprogrammed motions, glass eyes staring at Simon through the clockwork skull. The animatronic barker continues his patter:

"Feeling brave tonight? How brave? Brave enough to tear the cloying shroud from your third eye? Brave enough to witness grotesque anomalies of nature, paranormal histories, and parazoological wonders? Step this way. Feed your perverse curiosity. You are certain to see much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might excite disgust. Have your tickets ready and shed that most persistent of illusions—reality."

Simon gets to his feet and shines his light about. Reluctantly, the darkness gives up its secrets, revealing bars meant to herd visitors into lines that terminate in a turnstile, itself emptying into a walkway that leads away from the lobby and deeper into the building. Simon advances through the empty line. The barker barks on:

“Be advised that not everyone is ready for the twilight truths that lie beneath our universe. Those who are pregnant, have heart conditions, or suffer an imbalance of the humors are bidden to seek respite in the lobby gift shop. We caution parents to reconsider giving us your children, for the management does not promise to return them. For the rest—step this way! Enter this abode of curiosities, this home by strangeness haunted. Welcome to the House of Oddities.”

Simon leaps the turnstile. In the darkness ahead lurk shelves and dust and empty and half-empty displays. In the lobby, the barker concludes:

“Step this way. Have your tickets ready. You are already beyond the threshold. There is no turning back!”

Everything is shelves and darkness. The beam of Simon’s light ignites jars of viscous fluids in a blue glow. Jars with floating fetuses—some human, some animal, some less identifiable. Tiny eyes in strange places, watching. Vestigial limbs at odd angles. Conjoined twins sharing a mouth. Little creatures hunched over, serious, contemplating the cosmos. Beings that never knew open air or a mother’s touch, only primal womb stew. Odd primordial creatures of strange symmetry.

*A womb, Jane, cannot be a very different environment than the blood-warm prehistoric oceans.*

“Cold-cold tomb,” croon the Corbies.

Simon takes a large gulp from his Thermos. The wormwood slithers into place. The ghost tree grown bigger, the ghost crows more tangible. The lines bleed away and all those little eyes and mouths float through one dark sea punctuated by the blue glow.

“Cold-cold soup,” croon the Corbies.

Simon pauses, considers the scene. His light is no longer a straight beam. It is bent by the optic play of curved glass and embryonic fluid, refracted and redirected, zigzagging and igniting jar after jar in a ghost blood glow, lighting all those tiny bodies—a sepulchral prism.



Simon hardly breathes. He is paralyzed in a monomania. Only his fingers move, manipulating the beam of blue light, searching for the perfect angle to express something indefinable.

*"A Still Life in Ghost Plasma." Eh, Jane?*

Monomania, and how many minutes had passed?

"Simon!" scream the Corbies. "Simon!" They shriek and cry and peck staccato SOS signals against his skull from the inside. "Listen, Simon. Listen!"

Simon comes to and hears it.

"Mmmmmmmmm . . ."

Dead Water chill traces his veins. All those staring unborn, human and otherwise: two-headed, too many eyes, multiple mouths yawning in little bellies. All those eyes. Glaring. All those mouths. Malevolent frowns and silent, liquid screams. Tiny sculptures in pickled meat. The upside-down tree quivers, and Simon senses it—the wormwood branches picking it up like feelers—the air turning angry, movements in the formaldehyde-filtered light.

"MMMmmmmmmmm . . ."

It's that first sound: the sound of wanting, the sound of suckling, the first letter of the word for *mother* in so many different languages—a sound of deep want echoing across the decades. But this sound is twisting, twisting like the things in the jars, turning malevolent, growing into a keen. Innocent need becoming rancid. Simon senses more frenzied movement at the edges. Did he imagine that? Did he imagine that whine, like skin streaking across glass?

"Danger! Danger, Simon!" shriek the Corbies. "Fly! Let us fly!"

The angry dark closes in on Simon, a frenzy of peripheral movements. He can feel it, just centimeters from his skin. But Simon is an unlikely fellow. The same signal of horror, meant to excite our fight-or-flight instincts, bends and refracts in him, like blue light through a murky jar.

Simon's eyes soften.

"Shhhhhhh," he says to the mad, screeching dark.

His hands reach out to gently caress each jar. All those little misfits—little ones in need. Poor, pickled souls. All he sees are his littlest patients.

*No one had ever cradled them, Jane. Death is the universal denominator of life, not birth.*

“It’s all right,” Simon coos to the gibbering tide swelling around him. He reaches out, to each jar. “Shhhhhhh.” With the flashlight, Simon stages a shadow puppet show for the little ones in the jars. Then he performs card and coin tricks. And some of the screeching and wailing subsides. Simon does pratfalls and hat tricks and feats of vaudevillian, physical comedy. And more of the cries quiet.

The Corbies hum an ancient tune and Simon finds himself humming along. The Corbies sing the old, old lullaby. Simon sings and his mouth is their mouth:

“Lullay, Thou little tiny Child,  
Bye-bye, lulloo, lullay.  
Bye-bye, lulloo, lullay.”

The screeches quiet. The angry vibrations die away as the peripheral movements calm. Where had the song come from? Sixteenth century was it? The Corbies argue the lyrics, come to nanosecond agreements and sing. Simon sings with them:

“O Sisters too, how may we do  
For to preserve this day?  
This poor youngling for whom we sing,  
Bye-bye, lulloo, lullay.”

The jabber-cries cease. The phantom movements cease. All else is quiet except that barely audible sound, that pleading, needful, primal sound:

“MMMMMMMMMmmm . . .”

And Simon sings:

“Herod, the king, in his raging,  
Charged he hath this day  
His men of might, in his own sight,  
All children young to slay.”

The Corbies feed Simon the words and he wanders on autopilot, eyes closed, in the dark, in a waking wormwood dream, until—what? How did this happen?

The jar nearest Simon is open, its liquid contents sloshing about. Simon wonders when he did that—if he did it. He must have, for cradled in his arms is a tiny body, slick and preserved, sharp-smelling and pickled. All its limbs and limbs and limbs are loosely coiled about his arms. Simon does not recoil. Simon does not drop the child. He hugs the malformed little body to his chest, cradles and gently rocks it, oblivious to the chemical slime soaking into his suit and running down his sleeves.

Simon sings to it:

“Then woe is me, poor Child for Thee,  
And ever mourn and pray,  
For Thy parting neither say nor sing,  
Bye-bye, lulloo, lullay.”

Absinthe turns the room to gelatin, swaying to the soft beat of the Corbies’ lullaby. He stares down at the tiny, twisted body, as he cradles and rocks it, feels the dead love.

Simon longs to take out his scalpel, to draw a tiny Y into each and every chest. He longs to take all the little ones into the Dead Water, to hear their stories, then set them free into the ebony sea. The Corbies salivate from their branches, hungry at the prospect of all these little spiced bites of Dead Water.

“Feed your head, Simon,” sing the crows. “Feed your head!”  
“No,” Simon says. “There is no time.”

He cradles the tiny body. He gently closes its eyes—all of them. He kisses it on the forehead, the formaldehyde goo burning his lips. Simon tucks the little one back into the jar and seals it.

Simon sings:

“And when the stars in gather do,  
In their far venture stay,  
Then smile as dreaming, Little One,  
Bye-bye, lulloo, lullay.”

Only then does Simon note the razor tears in this clothes, the clipped patch of hair falling from his shoulder, the tiny cut on his cheek.

“Little flesh gargoyles,” the Corbies say. They probe the catches and defects in the ether. “A set trap. Crafty trap. Your struggles kill you quicker. Your fear kills you. Your disgust kills you. Your horror harms you more, and the harm horrifies you more. Exponential death.”

Simon, following the blue glow of his light, finds a stairway and leaves the room of jars, careful to keep singing all the while:

“Lullay, Thou little tiny Child,  
Bye-bye, lulloo, lullay.”

And in the silence and the darkness, the unborn smile as if dreaming—and wait.

## CHAPTER 15

The door to the upstairs apartment opens easy—no locks to pick, only hasty glyphs and symbols carved in gashes into the door and frame. It slides open with nary a creak or complaint. No furniture inside, only dishes of water and cat food and litter boxes.

*No cats, Jane. I saw no cats.*

All the rooms are bare, except the study. Inside this room swells a storm, a living chaos of shelves and books and notebooks and pens and a computer and a radio scanner and words jotted on napkins and receipts and pages and pages. Sitting, in the eye of this storm, at his desk, is Ichabod Knock—completely naked, face dripping with feline gore, symbols and glyphs carved into his flesh, some old and scarred, most fresh or refreshed.

*They were for protection, Jane. I could read their red, runic rhymes. I do not know glyphs or runes, Jane, but I can read scars.*

Ichabod is tall, even sitting, and long muscled. His long, frizzy hair shocks out in all directions, matching his immense beard, black with bolts of iron streaking through. He looks, rather madly, like a fallen storm god baptized in blood—rather different from the clean-shaven, devilish grin on the dust jacket of his book. But the nose is the same—impossibly wonky. Simon can see stories in the crooked lines of that nose, all the angry faces in which it played a central role and all the times it was broken.

The cat on the plate is white.

Ichabod looks up at Simon, still outside the study, and he smiles. The thick blood of the cat turns the smile into a gashing wound in the beard. Ichabod motions Simon to enter and Simon does so, noting the little glyphs carved into the doorframe.

As soon as Simon's foot crosses the threshold, Ichabod's bloodshot eyes bulge and he stands, tall, exposing all his na-

kedness and the angry red, dead language of the runes run over every inch.

"No!" Ichabod shouts. There is the flash of a large, chrome handgun pointing at Simon. "Not another step. Your clothes, man, your clothes! *They* can hide under clothes. That's how they got Taylor. Slurps you all up and all that's left is husks and smiles—godawful smiles! And bad eyes! That's how to know. Take off your clothes!"

Simon considers fleeing, considers the gun, considers Jane. He begins to take off his clothes, throwing them in a pile. Ichabod seems satisfied when he is down to his boxers and socks. The bloody-gash grin returns.

"Well, come in, come in, Simon Meeks," Ichabod says, waving Simon inside with the gun. "You got past my security—my pickled punks. Curiouser and curiouser." He motions around the room. "Sorry. Always get like this when I'm neck deep in scrivening a book."

Simon enters the room and stands in front of the desk. "How do you know my name?"

"Oh, I know your name, loveling. *Simon* means 'he who listens,' and you listen to the rots. And *Meeks* . . . well, that's just too easy, in'it?" Ichabod speaks in a voice that is gravel floating in rich syrup. Simon guesses the accent is British, but it sounds corrupted, oily, and bleeding into lots of other places. "You know my name, don't you, Simon? You *must* have heard of me."

"Mr. Knock."

"Goody. How's Nyx? Still struggling with daddy issues?" Ichabod rubs his nose. "Precious. Do they still play that silly little game at the Sanctuary? Icky Facts, is it? Truth is stranger than fiction, Simon, and the little darlings try and exaggerate, but, well, what do they know about the things I've done? I'm Ichabod Knock! I've opened the walls of reality, groped insanity, seen the purple dimension, talked to the invisibles! Once, I had a threesome with both Olsen twins. That was before they were famous. . . ."

Simon creeps closer.

"Easy, loveling, easy," says Ichabod.

*Click*, says the hammer on the gun. Simon remains still. Ichabod smiles and un-cocks the hammer.

"The first thing you need to know, Simon," says Ichabod, "is that stories are dangerous. Information is alive." The police scanner chirps in the background and a radio plays, set to scan, switching stations every five seconds, alternating between music and commercials and talk. "Every story is a doorway. Some doors do not open again once closed, the worse ones do not close once opened—and the nastiest doors you cannot come back out of . . . unchanged."

Ichabod talks with his mouth full. Then he is only eating—slurping, masticating—loudly. Simon stands there, mostly naked, for several minutes as Ichabod eats, very unaware of Simon's presence.

Simon looks about the room. Chaos. A dimension of notes and scribbles. Scratched in pen, on a crinkled bit of loose-leaf paper, a note reads: *Talented schoolchildren of North Shore disappear. White vans. Where is the facility? Contact died of cardiac arrest.*

Written on the back of a forest preserve pamphlet is: *Children revere the tree. They bury their offerings. But it is hungry. The Halloween Tree is always hungry.*

Written on a mustard-stained napkin from an all night hotdog stand: *The rats . . . the rats! Chew holes in my mind. Nightmares fall out. Did I dream the rats? Did I dream the wolves that come for them? Or did they dream me?*

Notes on the floor, hanging out of books, pinned to cork board. Shelves and shelves of books. Symbols carved into the desk and along the walls. Simon tried to find a sense in it all, an order . . .

"If this be method, then there is much madness in it," say the Corbies.

"Blood, guts, and bone, we can smell our own," says another.

“Whaddya think grows in *his* head?” asks a third, and the tree in Simon’s skull explodes with laughter. Simon wonders if Ichabod can hear it.

Simon’s eyes follow the symbols and come to rest on a fly pinned into the wall with a tack. He thinks of Mother and moths. Next to the fly, a large spider is transfixed to the wall. Next to the spider, a bird is messily nailed in place, its body broken and twisted from the effort. And next to the bird, a crushed cat’s head.

Simon’s eyes follow the trail—fly—spider—bird—cat—his mind threatening to fall into monomania again.

“There was an old woman who swallowed a cat. Imagine that, she swallowed a cat,” sing the Corbies.

Above, on the wall, in sloppy permanent marker, the decaying mosaic is labeled: *Chart*.

“That’s *their* system, not mine,” Ichabod says through a mouthful of entrails, breaking the silence. He doesn’t look up from his meal. “I don’t eat lives. Those pyramid schemes are dangerous—zoophagy on a mass-market scale. ‘Start small, dream big!’” He breaks into manic laughter, ending in a coughing fit. Bits of meat and organ fall out of his mouth.

When Simon turns back, the cat is finished. Ichabod has eaten it, fur and tail and paws and all. The plate is licked clean, except for a few bones and the head, which stares at Simon through eyeless sockets.

“Oh, Dinah-Dinah-Dinah-Dinah,” Ichabod says. “I’ll miss you most of all.” He spins the plate, staring intently—very intently—into the empty eye sockets. “The stories I could tell you about Dinah.”

Scratch. Flare. And Ichabod, face and mouth still slick with cat’s guts, lights a large, unevenly rolled cigar with a match. He puffs, filling the room with an alien odor. With red-veined eyes like cracked, stained glass windows, Ichabod stares at the flame for a long moment before putting it out.



"You start counting the lights yet, Simon?" Ichabod asks, coils of smoke filling the room.

"No." Simon eyes the gun now resting on the desk.

"You will. First you'll recall how light seemed so plentiful, once upon a time. Then you'll become aware of light—hyperaware. You'll notice the lights are feeble. The bulbs weak. The light falters, flickers. You'll yell obscenities in public places when another streetlight skips. It's all so fragile. You'll lie in bed wondering when you changed the bulbs last. You'll count the number of lights between your bed and the car, the number of streetlights between your home and the convenience store. You'll huddle in the dark, no longer certain the sun will rise, not in this place."

See them now: our silent film hero—shivering scarecrow, Dead Water junkie, corpse friend, cadaver lover—entrails-reading Simon, standing next to Ichabod Knock—spook seeker; cat eater; bloody, rune-written flesh parchment. Can obsessions and madnenses interact, echo to each other like radio signals or bat sonar? Can the shadows and glass shards crawl out of one set of ears and into another?

"I'm here for Jane Doe," Simon says.

"Excuse me a moment, Simon. I have to take a slash." Holding the gun again, Ichabod tilts his head to the side. A yellow puddle forms on the floor under his desk. "Now, what was that?"

Simon steps closer. Point blank. "Jane Doe. Tell me about her. Tell me about the hammer and Club Wendigo and Apex Consumers. Tell me about you."

"Me? I'm a rancid piece of work. I yelled 'Marco' into the dark. It answered. I apologize, Simon. I would offer you something, but my cupboards are quite bare. Perhaps you'd like to hear about the time I paid a bearded woman to go down on Robert Downey, Jr."

Ichabod watches Simon's impatience and mouths the words before he can say them. "Mother Hubbard!" Ichabod

says. "That's your phrase, isn't it, Simon? *Motherfucker!* You can't say it, can you? Say it! Ha! You can't. Fantastic! Even your profanities are all Mother Goose."

"How—?"

"It's very endearing. Like watching a three-legged dog walk."

"How do you know what I—?"

"We'll get to that," Ichabod says, puffing at the cigar, his eyes getting glassy. The smoke and the odor are taking over the room. "Cigar? I roll them myself." Ichabod nods toward a box.

Simon looks inside: plastic bags filled with brown sheets that look like ancient parchment or dried leaves. But on closer inspection . . .

"Toads?" Simon asks.

"Yeah. Particular species. South American. Chemical in the venom of the skin produces the most wondrous hallucinations when inhaled."

Ichabod exhales brown smoke.

"Did you know, Simon, that the ayahuasca vine of South America grows in a spiral? Ingesting it induces visions of twin serpents coiling around each other. Shaman understood this to be the basis of physical existence."

Ichabod spirals his finger through the smoke. "They painted cave walls with the twin snakes, one black and one white, active and passive, twisting into a spiraling double helix. They called it the sky ladder. Imagine—fucked up mystics in a cave understanding the structure of DNA thousands of years before it's named. Cosmic serpents swimming in the void. The spiral! The shape of the universe. The shape of molecules and snail shells and hurricanes and galaxies and all of them spinning inside each other. The flight path of a carrion bird over something dead and bloody."

Ichabod takes a long drag, exhaling more smoke into the room.

"You have to take something, dear Simon," Ichabod says, "to solve this mystery; you have to take something to skew your view, to see the shadows in the fog—the skulls beneath the skin."

"Absinthe," says Simon.

"Oh, that will do. Yes-yes-yes-yes-yes-yes-yes. You've seen them, haven't you, dear boy—after the witching hour, gnawing at the edge of your vision, that first time mommy took away the nightlight?"

"Look!" calls a Corbie, noting a circle of white salt around Ichabod's desk.

"Protection!" calls another.

"It is all about protection," say the Corbies. "The unborn, the runes, the circle, and the cats!"

Simon nods, the ghastly picture forming in his mind. The cats. Like everything Ichabod did, they were a protective ward against the things that hide under clothes and slither between molecules. Paranoia—stress—comfort food. In the lore of many lands, cats were a protection from spiritual evil. Even today there are those living in old farmhouses who claim their cats stare at moving objects no one else can see, that they chase off ghosts. Icky went into the dark—and Icky did fall—and Icky did break. His twisted synapses collided: the instinct for comfort food, the notion of cats as spiritual protection. The chemicals fused into a fiendish compound.

This preternatural eating disorder.

"You're trying to protect yourself," Simon says, "from the inside out."

The gun lowers toward the floor, and all the wicked lines in Ichabod's face fall to wariness, whole unexplored continents of caginess beyond anything Simon knows. Ichabod slumps in his chair. "Oh, Simon. You're supposed to say exactly that, just now, and have those insightful thoughts about me. . . . When you enter the Weird, you have to invest," he says in a near-lucid voice. "Or it eats you all up. You protect yourself from secrets with secrets, so you can get more secrets. You *have* to keep on top of that shit, like a credit card bill, but soon you find that the APR is too high. You invest—more deals, more pacts,

more tricks—stranger and stranger, and worse and worse, and you're always deeper in than when you started. No exit."

The radio plays a toilet bowl cleaning jingle. The police radio squawks something about a domestic disturbance.

"Simon, do you know what kills people the most in this dark, dark world?"

"What?"

"Embarrassment. If you have no shame, you might survive another night."

"Please, Mr. Knock, I need to know what you know about Jane Doe. Tell me."

Ichabod bolts up, standing, the lines on his face changing back from wary to wicked. "What I know? I could tell you things, loveling, that would crack open your head and let the goblins in. I can whisper the words that will sacrifice the corpse of your inner child on the altar stained with Santa's blood. I could tell you such things."

Ichabod leans forward, so close that the brown tendrils of smoke reach out from his mouth and caress Simon's face. So close that Simon can smell the burnt toad and raw cat.

"This is your last chance to go home, get under the covers, and pray the Weird forgets you exist." Ichabod smirks. "But you won't listen, will you? You'll just keep knocking on doors. You'll go . . . there."

"Where?"

"Down the rabbit hole, boy! Past Hell, through the looking glass darkly, and into the secret room where Alice plays tea with corpses. No deposit—no return. Once you see the Abyss, it sees you."

With one hand Simon slaps the gun from the naked man's grasp, as the other snaps forward, holding a newly materialized scalpel to Icky's face.

"My, my, my, but you are fast," says Ichabod. "What a nifty trick."

Simon carefully bends to the floor and takes the gun, points it at the eater of cats. "Tell me what I want to know, Mr. Knock."

"You strike me as a man who cries while masturbating, Simon. Be honest, ever do any tearjerking by candlelight?"

*Click*, says the hammer of the gun.

"Please cooperate, Mr. Knock," says Simon. "Or I will have to shoot you in the head and find the answers with my scalpel."

"See the shy boy blossom in the dark. Lovely. What would you like to know, then?"

Keeping the gun on Ichabod, Simon takes something from the pocket of his jacket, still in the pile of clothes on the floor. "Tell me about Jane. Tell me about this." Simon shakes open the folded Club Wendigo flier, the one from Neil's planner, and holds it out.

Ichabod snatches the paper and looks over it as carefully as if he were deciphering cuneiform. "This? This is magic" the radio chatters, and Ichabod points to it, saying, "That is magic, too."

A jingle plays on the radio, enticing the listener to purchase a half-pound burger with bacon *and* onion rings.

Giggling, Ichabod slaps the flier down on the rune-marked desk and slams a heavy book next to it. The dark tome looks ancient, some eldritch work of the occult. Ichabod gestures back and forth between the book and the flier. "It's the only magic that's ever existed, Simon. Pay attention!"

Simon watches the madman with every Corbie in his head.

"Language. Symbols. Signals. All floating freely," Ichabod says. "Dangerous stuff. You see, my little dove, a grimoire." Ichabod points at the old, occult book, "is just a fancy-fancy way of saying 'grammar' and casting a spell is just the act of spelling to the universe. It's true!" Ichabod slams a heavy dictionary on the desk. "There is just as much *here*—" he points to the dictionary "—as *there*." He points to the occult book.

The radio sings the praises of a certain brand of cola. The police radio squawks something about a high-speed chase. The cat's head does not comment.

"Once upon a time," says Ichabod, "the first shamans were storytellers. Writers. We forgot. We fell into the current paradigm and stupidly believe that art is merely cheap entertainment, something to make half-hour time capsules for skags to swallow while waiting to die."

"Mr. Knock, what does Club Wendigo have to do with Jane's death?"

"Once upon a time, bards were the most feared magicians. What would a witch do if you pissed her off—cast a curse? Twist your son in the womb? If you pissed off a bard, he could cast a satire on you. Ruin you in the eyes of your family, of strangers, in your own eyes. If he was really clever, they'd still be laughing at you centuries after you're worm-shit and your basic essence is corrupted and you wallow in your own vile absurdity!"

"Mr. Knock, how is Apex Consumers involved?"

"Shapers shape the word, shape reality. The only warlocks left are the advertisers—spells and hexes through the media, cast by the jiggly breasts of plastic seductresses. They can hex an entire country, the *whole* country, to think the same insipid thought at the same time."

"Mr. Knock—"

"Information is a super weird substance underlining the universe, more basic and universal than gravity. This suggests that the physical universe is merely a byproduct of a primal information. Or, to put it more simply: In the beginning, there was the Word."

"Mr. Knock, who was Jane Doe?"

"That is the most interesting question you've asked."

"Who was she?"

"Life support. But she died. So you can imagine what happened to us."

"What's her name?"

"No. No names. Not in the game we played. She was just *she*. She was just a white rabbit, popping up in so many plots. I had to know what she knew! The Whisper in the River. . . ."

Ichabod falls back into his seat and takes an enormous drag on his poisonous cigar.

"You are speaking too cryptically, Mr. Knock." Simon presses the gun to Ichabod's head. "Tell me how it all fits together."

"Why didn't you say so, loveling. You want the story. Your story. I can tell it to you. Word. For. Word."

Ichabod looks up and his pupils fill the globes of his eyes. He speaks, and the words sound like arcane mumbo-jumbo to Simon—but they gain cadence, rearrange themselves until they make sense.

Knock says, "*Would you like to hear a story? This is a good one. And very short. This is the story and the story goes: Simon meets Janie D. at work. She tells him who hurt her. She smiles. This is love. This is rigor mortis. The end.*"

The words fill Simon's head with deep-ocean pressure, cutting his thoughts with serrated migraines, distorting his balance. The reality of the room quakes.

Knock says, "*There is a longer story. The devils all lurk in the details. It is a story just big enough to cram into a human skull.*"

Dentist drills embed themselves in Simon's nerve endings he drops the gun and grabs his head. "What are you doing?"

"I'm telling you the story," Ichabod says. "There's much, much more."

Knock says, "*It is quiet in the morgue on this side of the A.M.—just the young pathologist and the golden-eyed cadaver, both smiling, both tense, both afraid to make the first move. Simon stares at the smile and the impossibly large eyes.*"

Simon can feel the suture-cracks of his skull breaking apart with a sound like the hellish feedback of a microphone brought too close to the speaker.

Knock says, *"Simon cuts the noose from her neck, lovingly removes the rough locket and bags it. He leaves the knot intact. Knots have their own clues to offer."*

Simon falls to his knees. The room buckles and stretches. "Please. Please stop," says Simon.

Knock says, *"With the aftertaste of evil licorice, he feels the green alchemy, the roots of wormwood growing in his brain, the upside-down tree that grows in his head and feeds off the dead, and the Corbies, always the Corbies, shrieking apocalyptic limericks. Simon takes Jane's hand."*

Simon collapses to the ground and curls up as wave after wave of agony savages his head. And then, it stops. The room is solid, the pain gone. Simon looks about the room, now empty of both Ichabod and his gun. Simon gets up and runs out of the apartment, down the stairs, and back into the House of Oddities, chasing the acid laughter of Icky Knock.

\* \* \* \* \*

Icky Knock runs through the House of Oddities and Simon follows. Simon runs past the pickled punks and ancient carnival posters.

Knock says, *"It's not you, it's me," Simon whispers to the fish. He kisses the mucous-slick of her face and, very sadly, lays her down to sleep. He consigns her to the beyond."*

Reality distorts, and Simon loses track of Ichabod.

Knock says, *"Simon waits for the door to close, waits for the footsteps to trip-trap far down the hall. Then he places the teddy bear in the arms of the dead girl. 'Sweet dreams, Tamara.' Simon slides her back inside and shuts the freezer door. He misses her already."*

Reality cracks, and Simon trips over a box, falling into a dusty display of Houdini's stage equipment.

"I'm sorry, Simon. You wanted to know the bigger picture. How everything fits together. Yes, let me see. Once upon a time—" Ichabod takes a deep breath somewhere in the dark



“—there is a house in Englewood that bleeds from the pipes. Windows like staring eyes. . . .

“There is an orphanage in the southwest suburbs run completely by children. They all have an identical scratch on the cheek. The adults are gone. I barely escaped. . . .

“On the South Side, there is a black dog attacking pimps and protecting prostitutes. . . .”

Simon gets up and tries to pinpoint the voice as Ichabod continues to recite the fractured fairy-tales of Chicago.

“There is a renegade garbage truck that drives the streets at night, transporting bodies and secrets. . . .

“There are dead, walled-up stations in the underground El. One of these is a secret storeroom where authorities keep evidence from freak cases. . . .

“At the house of 3383, there is a space. A nothing. Anti-space. A black hole. It grows slowly. Drop a corpse into it and the corpse crawls out hungry. . . .”

Ichabod’s words spiral and spiral—spirals within spirals—through the House of Oddities, and Simon follows. He runs past cryptozoology displays, past impossible bones and objects of taxidermy: Big Foot’s femur and a wall-mounted fish with fur.

Knock says, *“Jane is all tucked in, slid back into her refrigerator. Simon closes the door, then flips it open and closed, open and closed, again and again. You hang up . . . No, you hang up . . . No, you . . .”*

Reality spirals, and Simon leans against a wax figure of Vincent Price until the dizziness and pain abate. Then he is chasing Icky Knock through the House of Oddities again. He hurries past broke-down penny arcade machines, past bizarre medical photos, past a waxen H. H. Holmes holding a bloody knife, in a display labeled *Murder Castle*.

Ichabod’s voice comes on, in a crackle, through a sound system. “Ladies and gentleman, please direct your attention to our newest attraction: the gentleman necrophile, the man who puts the ‘romantic’ in ‘necromantic’— Simon Meeks! See the Dead Water junkie, who imbibed small doses of the Weird for

years. Has he built up an immunity to the dark? Will he go farther than those before, or will he crash, too many track marks on his soul, nature aborting this most depraved of chemical experiments? Find out!”

Simon searches about, finds himself in a display with the wax figures of Marilyn Monroe, Humphrey Bogart, and James Dean all standing around an alien medical table, dissecting and experimenting on Elvis, as little green men watch over and manage the proceedings.

“There’s one question you didn’t ask, Simon,” Ichabod’s voice says over the speakers. “The question you want to ask, but don’t want to ask. If you do indeed have the power of divination, what sort is it? There are so many forms of divination: hepatoscopy, necromancy, augury, haruspicy, extispicy. What flavor are you? Ever try cephalonomancy, the art of divination through the broiled head of a donkey? You haven’t lived until you’ve seen infinity through the boiled head of an ass.”

Simon spies Ichabod and advances. The voice continues over the speakers.

“That’s the question, Simon. Are you a necromancer? Do you really commune with the souls of the dead. Or are you just a reader of entrails? Do you just squeeze cold facts from their guts? Is the Dead Water just a collection of these facts in a more pleasing form—the pathetic projections of a lonely mind?”

“No!” Simon yells, crashing into Ichabod, who breaks into jagged pieces, a funhouse mirror now shattered.

“Oh, my. Did I strike a nerve, loveling?”

Ichabod stands, lit by the red-orange glow of an exit sign. Simon gets up and advances.

“Limping on three shaky dimensions is no way to go through life, son.”

“I want Jane back.”

“That is precious. We live in a strange world, Simon, full of strange love. We live in a state where our impeached governor’s

wife eats dead tarantulas on national TV in order to fund her husband's legal defense. Now that, *that* is love."

Simon charges.

Knock sighs and says, "*Simon kisses her lips, cool like September sands, like the time in the year when everything turns sad and sweet. He blows living air down her mouth. Most of it escapes, but some rebounds, rushes back, just a little, the faintest bit; it echoes in her throat, just the tiniest bit, expels in the quietest of sighs.*"

Reality hiccups and Simon stumbles. Laughter. When he looks back up, Ichabod is gone, the doorway open. Simon follows.



Simon catches Icky Knock on the rooftop and tackles him hard. They crash and roll and Simon pins Ichabod down, straddling his chest, holding his throat.

"Hello, loveling. You want to tussle with old uncle Icky?

Simon squeezes.

Knock says, "*Hector devours the space between them, moving fast for something so large. Simon does not evade. He does not raise his arms—does not get ready for a fight. Simon cannot win a fight against Hector. He can't beat something grown that huge on chemicals, human meat, and hate. Simon gives him a target with his grinning, Jack O'Lantern face.*"

Simon can't stop him once the words start, and the nausea and pain they unleash make Simon cry out. The world overturns. Ichabod sits atop Simon, their positions reversed.

"That really did hurt, didn't it?" Ichabod says, clutching Simon's throat. "I'm sorry. I was skipping ahead in the story. That part hasn't happened yet."

Simon's flicks his wrist and a shiny scalpel appears in his hand. He holds it to Ichabod's throat.

"Where the fuck do you pull those things out of?" Icky asks.

"I want Jane back."

"You never even knew her."

"I know Jane. She taught me to play in playgrounds after hours."

"Mmm, touching."

"Tell me about the ones who killed her."

"I'll do one better, bucko. I can tell you where she is."

"What?"

"You can see her pretty face right now."

"I . . ."

"You have to promise to do me a favor."

"What favor?"

"Never mind what it is! You'll do anything anyway, so just promise."

"I promise."

"Swear on it."

"I swear."

"Swear on the Dead Water."

"I swear."

"Swear on Toby Reynolds's wormy little soul."

"I swear."

"Great! Go have a look in the box."

They both get up. Simon looks about the roof. A large ritual circle, with more mysterious symbols, is drawn on the roof's surface in orange sidewalk chalk. Next to the circle sits a great weatherworn trunk made of leather the color of darkened tobacco.

Simon opens the trunk. His lips quiver. His scalpel clatters to the roof. The Corbies shriek.

Jane Doe's head, partially wrapped in silk, stares up at him from within the case.

He lifts it out, hugs the weight of it to his chest, and falls back into a sitting position. He stares into the empty sockets that once contained those golden eyes.

Ichabod stands next to him. "I'm sorry, Simon. It would seem your employer sold her for parts. Someone else got the eyes. I used what contacts I could to procure the head."

Simon runs a hand through Jane's hair. "What favor do I owe you?"

Ichabod reaches into the trunk, pulls out a manila envelope and hands it to Simon. "My agent is looking for me. I owe a manuscript. This will explain everything to her. I need you to mail it for me."

"That's it?"

"That's it." Ichabod lies, naked, limbs splayed, in the center of the orange circle, staring up at the stars.

"What about the rest of it?" Simon asks. "The events at the morgue, the Mondays, the three strangers who attacked me, Apex Consumers, Club Wendigo. How does it all tie together?"

"There is one last thing in my trunk. Pull it out."

Simon does so, removing an ancient-looking rib bone. Layers of mummified flesh, brown and yellow and leathery, still cling to the bone.

"What is it?" Simon asks.

"My treat. It's a crash course, when you want to see. There is a bog—Volo Bog—forty-five miles northwest of here. Its water is the color of strong tea. Darker than amber. Go there. Drop the bone in the mouth of the bog."

"What will I see?"

Ichabod, on his back in the circle, shrugs. "Simon, do you know why conspiracy theorists believe in the mega-conspiracy?"

"Why?"

"Because, my boy, the alternative is more horrifying."

"What is the alternative?"

Ichabod only smiles and smiles and smiles.

"What is your interest in all of this, Mr. Knock?"

Ichabod stares at the stars. "You'd have to stand on the moon and look down to see the pattern of the plan that I've enacted. I'm going to change the number of my dimensions. I'm going to walk through the final door. I'm going to become mythos, and then they can't hurt me."

Simon stares into Jane's empty sockets, running his hand over her cold, dry cheeks. Eventually he turns to leave, but then pauses. He turns back.

"Mr. Knock, why did you want Jane's head?"

"I did me a ritual. Right here. In this circle." Ichabod flaps his arms and legs, making invisible snow angels. "You don't know what that cost me! I had to know what she knew. I don't have your talents, so I had the ritual, and it cost me. I drew the circle. I held her head. I looked into the two ant-lion pits of her skull, and I said, 'Doodlebug, doodlebug, come out of your hole. If you don't, I'll beat you black as a mole.' And all the information came pouring out and into my head. It was too much to fit. My skull cracked."

Ichabod twitches in the circle.

"It cost me. And the prize? It wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't her knowledge. Instead, I learned about Simon Meeks—*everything* there is to know about Simon Meeks. Everything that will ever be known about Simon Meeks. You fucked up the works, loveling!"

Ichabod laughs, and the laugh goes from angry, to insane, to jovial, and back.

"That's the gag, Simon. Right now, this is happening. But somewhere else, I'm telling it to someone. And somewhere else, I'm reading it through her skull windows in this very circle. And somewhere else, you're muttering bits of it in the dark."

Ichabod laughs. Hard. He laughs with his whole body. He laughs so hard a blood vessel bursts in his right eye, painting it entirely red.

Simon leaves.

Icky laughs.

Simon finds and puts on his clothes and goes downstairs with Jane's head and the mummified bone.

Icky laughs.

Downstairs, Simon follows the pointing finger on a sign that says, *This Way to the Egress*. He exits the building as the

animatronic barker calls after: "Safe home, dear friends, and come again. But take a warning and a care, for though you leave this place, it does not leave you. Insatiable is the mind that tastes darkling truths. Henceforth, know that any doorway, window, or keyhole may lead you back into . . . the House of Oddities."

## INTERLUDE: The Halloween Tree

Julio tried to put his hand up my skirt. Now the doctor says he might never be the same again. Rosette said she let Julio put his hand up her skirt. The police found her parent's lab in the barn last summer. Now Rosette's gone. Maybe if I had let Julio . . .

We were under the tree. The dare tree. The hungry tree.

"Wait," I said. We squirmed. I used to be able to just hang with Julio. No one wanted anything. But that's been changing—fast. I always beat Julio at arm wrestling and when I pushed him away that day his elbow hit the tree. It was a rotten patch, so it gave with a sticky crack. Then everything smelled like bio class dissection and that time Julio's pet snake got sick and threw up the half-digested rat.

Then the pickled punks all fell out. That's what my grandma calls them. Says she saw them in the carny tents for a nickel a peek, and they stared at her through the jars and soup, through two eyes and one eye and three eyes and sometimes from no eyes—and no face—at all.

Some of the jars broke.

Julio screamed and kicked one. It popped. Julio puked—mostly Tater Tots. His hand didn't try anything else after that.

I didn't throw up. I stared. And they stared, through the glass and the soup and the shards.

Then the sheriff was there, and the sun somehow went out like a cigarette burn, and everything was flashing reds and blues, like the night they came for Rosette's parents. I was cradling one of the naked punks. The police took it away. They had to pry it from my hands.

They removed thirty-eight jars from the tree.

You can see the tree, every year at Halloween, on the walls of the kindergarten classroom. That's when you draw it. Ev-



everyone does. That's when the dreams start. You draw the tree. Then the tree draws you.

A week after we found the jars, Julio was still not allowed out. Then the strange man came and told me all about the jars and the pickled punks. I said I shouldn't talk to him, in case he was a bad man. He laughed, said he was a bad man, but he wasn't there to be bad to me. He smoked strange cigars that smelled like leaf burning and bullfrog catching. His accent was funny and he told me about the carnival route that used to run through here—from up in Milwaukee and Chicago, through our town, and into Indiana. He told me about the freak shows, and how this was a popular spot. Some of the freaks even retired here. I wasn't real surprised to hear that. Some folks in town still look weird.

The strange man told me about the poor family that once lived here. That they were poor wasn't a big surprise, either—everyone's poor here. But to make extra money, the wife in this family would get pregnant, and she would drink bad things, like turpentine and lead paint, and she would do bad things to herself, so that the babies came out *curious*.

"Showmanship!" the strange man said.

When the daughters were old enough, their daddy made them bake batches of pickled punks too.

That's when the strange man smiled, and his smile was like Julio's hand, and he asked me about the thirty-ninth jar, the one I'd hid in my bag.

"Mayhaps you and I could make a deal, eh, loveling?"

So I made a trade. Never mind for what. Never mind why I took the jar. It wanted so badly to be held.

The strange man actually got all the jars. He slipped the sheriff a lot of cash. I asked why.

"Security," he said. "Can always use more—there's always room for one more."

Doctor says Julio may never be the same. But I'm mostly fine.

“You didn’t reject them,” the strange man said. “They don’t like rejection.”

I found my drawing of the tree with some of Mom’s old stuff. It’s crinkly and faded, but it still has the bare black branch-claws, thick leg roots, and hollow mouth—just like all the drawings hanging on the kindergarten class wall right now.

We all used to go there, to the tree, on Halloween night. We’d sneak away and line up in silent rows, row after row of little hobos and skeletons and monsters, like at church, and we’d bury offerings at the roots—candy, the orange and brown ones that nobody wanted.

One year, it wasn’t enough. That’s when Samuel went away. I didn’t remember that.

I remember it now.

I don’t always remember that.

Only sometimes.

## CHAPTER 16

The cracks, the wormwood, and the green . . .

Two absinthe bottles lay shattered, green droplets seeping through the jagged cracks. Simon's malachite eyes stare, shattered, tears seeping out of the green and the jagged cracks of red. There had been romantic music playing. Now, only the sound of the record spinning.

Only the spinning record. No needle. No voice.

Only Jane's eyeless head. No Dead Water. No voice.

She was not talking to him.

Simon staggers and paces his basement laboratory. The wounded scarecrow. Two bottles of absinthe and the walls bend and bubble, but no Dead Water. No Jane.

"Why, Jane?" he asks the lovely head, yanking at the brier patch of tangled hair, hands shaking violently in necro-withdrawal. Those empty sockets. No golden eyes. No peace. Why couldn't he go to the ebony sea where she had animus?

He sits on the stainless steel table, hugging her lovely head to him, running a tactile-hungry finger over her Mona Lisa smile.

"You're not all here, Jane. Not all here."

Where is his Y-shaped doorway to paradise?

"Boy meets girl," croon the Corbies. "Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl back . . . one piece at a time." The Corbies cackle and more cracks form in Simon's eyes. "One piece at a time."

"The bread crumb trail," echoes Ichabod's voice.

He holds up her head like a conch shell, presses the empty, ocular cavity to his ear, and strains to listen. He still cannot hear the dark ocean.



"Apex Consumers—*take a bigger bite out of life*. How may we help you?"

"She . . . won't talk to me."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir. Can I interest you in *Arthur Drake's Guide to More Powerful Relationships*?"

"Your infomercials haunt me. You've always been there. Before this all started. My biorhythms . . . are bugged."

"We are so glad you enjoyed our quality programming and will take the next step with Apex Consumers: *Be at the top of your food chain, in business and in life.*"

"Jane won't talk to me. I thought I might have done something wrong. I thought she was angry. But now I think it's because I only have Jane's head. I have to find the rest of her."

"We at Apex Consumers would like to help you find the missing pieces in life, sir. *Be the apex consumer. Don't be the consumed.*"

"I will find her. I will put her back together. I will find out how you're involved."

"Arthur Drake wants to be involved in your success, sir. Join the program today and we will help you achieve everything you have ever hungered for and everything you never knew you hungered for."

"He warned me about you. He said pyramid schemes are dangerous."

"Oh, we're not a pyramid scheme, sir. We are a program of intense self-actualization, from the inside out, and an award-winning system that teaches you how to actively manifest positive realities. Anything is possible, sir, if you have the hunger."

"Ichabod said you were zoophagy on a mass-market scale. What did he mean by that?"

"Could you hold the line a moment? My manager would like to talk to you. Sir. . . ?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon drives northwest. Every few miles he reaches into his pocket and feels the leather shreds of flesh clinging to the ancient bone. Dusk creeps in, and Simon smiles.

These are good roads.

Forty-five miles and the highways and numbers blur by: 90 and 53 and 12. Urban gives way to suburban and wetlands and yellow and red and orange leaves—and then everything darkens.

Dusk saunters and struts, and Simon smiles.

These are good roads.

These back roads—twisted and windy, curving. Hug the curve, accelerate. Feel that happy rise in the gut. Twisted roads, not straight lines, no grids, no mundane workman's web, no banality in the hissing leaves. They squirm through bog and wetland and river bridge. Good night-driving roads. More hobgoblins per capita here. A twisted trail straight into October Country.

*Good and twisted roads. They are the spine of some autumnal god, and I a jolly shiver. Eh, Jane?*

As a boy, Simon traveled with his parents far from the city, for visits to relatives or for fall jaunts to an apple orchard. Simon remembers his father accelerating on these back roads at night, on the way home. The soothing motion and dark safety. He was able to vanish inside his head, or stare up and out of the moon roof, mouth open in wonder. All those autumn and after-autumn skeleton trees. Bone-branch hands in silhouette, post-October claws—giant, scarecrow hands reaching for greedy handfuls of stars and moon. He was certain he was glimpsing, without really understanding, some kind of game that the scarecrow gods played, cosmic jacks in the void.

*The spoils, Jane? I once heard that the moon starts the month empty and dark, then fills with luminous souls and, when full, releases the ghosts whither they go.*

Simon accelerates.

Simon hugs the curve.

*Sometimes, Jane, I wonder—are there any ghosts that resist the moon? Does the vacuum of space mute their howls as they claw the earth, gripping so tenaciously they tug the tides?*

Simon accelerates.

The bone-tree claws snatch more frantically.

Maybe their game comes to a close.

*And sometimes, Jane, I wonder—where do the moon-dumped souls go? Maybe they're the winnings of some lucky scarecrow.*

Simon accelerates.

Skeleton hands full of moon flash in the rearview mirror. The perfect song plays on the speakers. Simon leans into the curve at the perfect speed, the perfect angle. He bobs his head. It would surely look strange to a passerby. Simon bobs his head and cranes his neck, undulating, shifting his viewpoint, partly to the play of music, but mostly to make the moon, through his malachite eyes, dance in the perfect manner: bouncing through branches, alluding bone hands.

Simon does not need absinthe to hallucinate. The worm-wood just lubricates the process.

Now, on the winding back road, he puts it all together, his multimedia artwork: the song, speed, curve, moon motion, and marching scarecrow deities. The result is a perfect moment—just a second—and a perfect expression. The moon oozes through the smudges in the glass, bleeding ghost blood down the dirty windshield.

*"An Un-Still Life in Ghost Plasma." Eh, Jane?*

A truck passes on the road, high-beam bubble-bursting.

Simon snaps back and swerves.

Simon frowns.

Was he being silly? Spending too much effort for something too ethereal—just a moment for an audience of one? No way to record or crystallize or share. Even a passenger would have to look through his skull windows to see. But then, another fast curve seduces him.

*The ethereal is important. Eh, Jane?*

"It's important that you do this, Simon," caws a Corbie.

"Don't stop, Simon," says another.

"Don't *ever* stop."

Simon accelerates, maybe too much. Then again, lovelings, speed limits and No Smoking signs miss the point. A habit loses all its poetry if it can't kill you.



*The water was the color of strong tea, Jane. Darker than amber. Full of acid and memories and prehistoric bird cries. Brackish water turned my screams to bubbles. Old memories in the water, Jane, and they had a grip like iron.*

"We're locking up in a half-hour, sir," the ranger says.

"Just going for a quick walk."

Simon had parked down the street from the entrance to the nature preserve's parking lot. Patience turns to hot wax in front of obsession; Simon had not heard from Nyx and all he had was Ichabod's hint and an ancient bone in his pocket. He takes a handful of information pamphlets from a wood-and-glass box in front of the Volo Bog visitor center.

Simon feels the bone in his pocket, and a moment of déjà vu skitters across his brain as he tries but fails to recall a ghost story from his youth. It is a folktale, a spook tale. Perhaps you heard it, or one like it, as a child. They are called jump stories. You scream at the end of the telling and make your audience jump, the trick being to subtly talk quieter and quieter as you go, making the audience lean in closer and closer.

This is the story Simon was trying to recall. It goes: a boy (or maybe an old woman), who is in the garden (or maybe taking a shortcut through the cemetery), finds an oversized big toe (or maybe just a toe bone) sticking out of the ground. He (or she) plucks the toe (or bone) from the ground and hears a terrible moan. The little boy (or old woman) goes home and cooks up a pot of soup with the body part, a graveyard stew. While he (or she) eats, something outside keeps calling for its bone. "I want my bone back!" In the end, that something rushes into the house. That is when the storyteller screams and the audience jumps.

Remember jumping?

Remember wondering what that thing was that wanted its bone?

Simon steps onto a boardwalk that sloshes side to side, precariously, with no handrails.

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

Gray birds, standing almost as tall as Simon, sound their primordial trumpet as they wade in the marshy water with little fear or regard. A pamphlet informs Simon that they are sandhill cranes, one of the most ancient of the surviving bird species. Their call is full of Mesozoic reptile sex.

*The bog has an old memory. Eh, Jane?*

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

Another pamphlet goes on to say that the bog is a very unique slice of bio-landscape and habitat. Volo Bog is the only “quaking bog” in Illinois, this part of the state having been shaped by the lust between glaciers and earth in the long ago. The glaciers brought primal slices of rock and silt and ice from far away and deposited them here. Hunks of glacial ice sank into the ground where they melted, forming a deep, fifty-acre lake. Six thousand years ago, the lake started filling in with vegetation—sphagnum moss—that formed a thick, floating layer. The decomposing plant matter worked an alchemy on the water, turning it acidic and dark.

Every year, the sphagnum moss thickens, closes a little tighter, and the open mouth of water at the bog’s center gets a little smaller. One day, in millennia to come, that mouth will close.

*One day, Jane, nature will cover something up, something cooed in a coffin of ice from far away, something carrying prehistoric secrets.*

Simon walks toward the bog’s center, the boardwalk swaying. He passes through vegetation zones, rings of dramatic



foliage change, Dantean circles of the bog's development. Patches of sphagnum moss blanket much of the water, so thick in places that shrubs and trees grow on top, floating over the acidic waters.

A pamphlet informs Simon that a person could walk on the moss mat, but such activity is against the law as falling through is very dangerous. The moss is like ice over a river—one might fall through it into darkness and never again find the way they entered.

Another pamphlet touches on the subject of bog bodies. In Irish and British bogs, cadavers of prehistoric humans have been found, their skins turned to leather and tanned, their clothes and flesh well preserved in the cold, acidic, low-oxygen water. Through the strange, primordial alchemy of the bog, the skin and organs—even the last meal in the guts—remain intact, but the bones are often dissolved. The effects of this preservation are so dramatic that it is not readily apparent whether a corpse was in the bog for decades or centuries. The oldest body discovered was carbon dated at over ten thousand years old.

The pamphlet shows a picture of a man over two thousand years old. His face is perfectly preserved, down to the creases and expressions on the face. He looks like the figure of a sleeping man finely crafted from brown leather.

*Oh, Jane, to cut a Y into someone so old. For the feel of flesh and organs so transfigured between my fingers . . .*

A true bog body had never been found at Volo Bog, though there are stories of escaped criminals who made a dash through the wetlands, or children who wandered off, never to be seen again.

*Perhaps they are there, Jane, underneath. The bog embalming them right now . . .*

Simon walks.

The Tamarack Ring: pine trees with soft needles grow. Not immortal evergreen pines, these needles turn brown and die in the autumn.

Golden needles.

Splashes of poison sumac red.

Moss flowing green over amber water.

Here and there, carnivorous plants, hungry for the nutrients of living prey to help them survive the harsh acidic water.

*What was buried in the ice, Jane? What was planted in the ground there—so malevolent even the plants turn to predators?*

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

Terrain shifts, progressing from vegetative zone to zone. Simon reaches the center, the open water mouth of the bog.

*Or maybe, Jane, maybe it was not a mouth but an eye—an amber eye the color of strong tea, staring gigantically up at the sky.*

He feels the withered bone in his pocket.

“I want my bone back!” yells the fiend from the partial memory of the childhood story.

Fish don’t last in this water, just bugs and reptiles and amphibians. Simon stares into the water—the amber water, dark and still, forming a polished mirrored surface, a dark looking glass reflecting Simon and the twilight.

Simon holds out the bone. And releases.

The water swallows it with barely a sound.

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

“Garoo-a-a-a!”

Simon stares at himself in the dark mirror. Prehistoric bird calls, then the silence of plants eating. The sun sinks, winking out on the horizon, the gesture of a shifty con man who may never return. And Simon stares.

*Some things, Jane, are so small they are hard to find. But other things . . .*

Minutes pass in weird, geological rates.

Simon stares and stares, realization finally coming in gradual degrees. He notices something. But what was it? His gaze shifts over the water, glimpsing pieces, trying to find the whole. Fear oozes into his stomach, then rises up the throat. Maybe a thousand feet, maybe a mile up, and he would have had a better view of the whole, the shifting movements under the water.

*Some things, Jane, are so small they are hard to find. Some other things are so impossibly huge as to be imperceptible.*

Croaking sounds now. Insects or amphibian calls. Were the amphibians awake this time of year? Simon cannot find the answers in the pamphlets before the papers fall out of his hand and scatter, snatched by a sudden wind. The croaking continues. Simon wonders if he imagines it—the name he hears in the croaking melody:

“Simon-Simon-Simon-Simon-Simon-Simon . . .”

He steps back. The wood underfoot disintegrates. No silent-screen acrobatics can stop him from falling over the edge.

Simon lands on his back. The world turns to Jell-O and the earth gives under his weight. The sphagnum moss trembles but holds.

Simon is suddenly aware of just how much he does not want the moss to give, does not want to fall into the amber depths where something too big to comprehend is moving. He lies still.

Something grips—

His wrists.

His feet.

*Suck* and *slosh* and the world above vanishes into amber shadows and screams that taste like acid. Simon thrashes in a world the color of strong tea. His hands cannot find an opening in the moss ceiling.

Living.

Squishy.

Hateful.

Finally he glimpses it, the open mouth—or the eye. He swims for it. But something locks a tight grip on his ankles. Bubbled screams churn the water. All he can see now is clouded tea and vegetation. His mind cannot decipher the movements in the water.

But he feels the hands. Patches of leather. All over.

*Dead Water, Jane. I wanted it so badly I drowned in it.*

He'd given the bone back to something—something frozen in time. Something ancient, deposited into the ground in a coffin of ice. Something lurking in amber, mummifying fluids. Something that turned the water to acid and the plants to killers.

Legions of hands pull him down. Swarms of silhouettes circle him in the dim. There's a special purgatory in the amber water, liquid necromancy preserving the souls. Maybe the thing has the power to creep into the minds of locals and whisper to them, tell them how special this place is, how the mossy sarcophagus should be protected and preserved, murky and safe. It lures children, in dreams, occasionally convincing one to walk on out on the trembling not-earth. Or maybe it simply loves its visitors so much it preserves them in acid memory forever.

Nothing so sharp, at the edge of the Abyss, than the voice that screams, "Plunge!"

Leather hands grab Simon's cheeks.

Murky face.

Leather lips.

A withered tongue enters his mouth. Simon tries to scream. Muck and brackish water flow down the throat like dead languages. This place has a very old memory. Simon has fallen into the soup—into the dark tea. Mr. Knock's words burn in the memory:

"Down the rabbit hole, boy! Straight through the plate glass darkly, into the secret room where Alice plays tea with corpses. No deposit, no return. Once you see the Abyss, it sees you."

\* \* \* \* \*

White lines whip by like mad ghosts. They know where they're going. Simon does not.

White lines.

Headlights.

Exit signs.

His escape from the bog was just a blur of memory and an awful, *awful* taste in the back of his throat. Coughing. Crawling. Something was after him. Something *is* after him. Something that will catch him if he stops.

White lines.

Moonlight.

Low-fuel light.

How long has he been driving? Time and space seem unscrupulous. Simon cannot seem to find the city again. The numbers on the signs do not make sense. He's stuck in October Country.

*We don't really sleep in dreams, Jane. That's the work of different parts of the brain. But who is asleep, who awake? There are somnambulists tripping the dark fantastic . . .*

Simon drives. His world is cracked. Somehow, he'd held onto his glasses, but the fall into the bog broke them. Cracks down the centers split his vision. But he really doesn't want to see. He knows that if he looks back as he drives he'll find that *they* are catching up to him. Black shapes. Stalking quadrupeds and shambling bipeds. They were catching up.

White lines.

Exit ramp.

Brake lights.

He's afraid to stop too long. Quick. Just enough for fuel and directions, and then *go*.

A fat, dying moth vibrates in circles on the pavement of the truck stop parking lot. Lost 3:00 A.M. souls lurch about inside. Strange writings on the walls in the entryway. The burnt-out husk of a man mutters incomprehensible poetry into his chili bowl in the diner. Lost souls. Simon wonders idly if he's dead, if he and the rest are all trapped. The cashier tells Simon where he is, shows him a map. It all makes sense.

But as soon as he's back on the road, sense vanishes. Where is he? The signs are vague, misleading. Voices come through the static of the car radio. The bog—it's catching up.

White lines.

Headlights.

Hazard sign.

*Is that the afterlife, Jane—stretches of gray purgatory and flickering white ghosts screaming past on parade? Truck stop soul stations. Moon-Pie or hotdog? Choose wisely or you will never ascend.*

Simon drives. And dozes. The shapes catch up—black dogs and things less definable. Simon snaps awake, presses the gas pedal. The needle shivers. The shapes and shades recede. But he is tired and can't keep this up much longer. Where is the city?

White lines.

Lunar madness.

Bog bodies and black dogs.

He hits the exit ramp doing seventy-five and almost spins out. Parking, Simon runs into the rest stop. He does not bother with the map, just jams two coins into the coffee machine. He hopes the offering is enough to get him to the other side of this netherworld.

In the bathroom, the stall walls are covered in limericks and obscenities, scratched and penned. On the door, Simon reads:

*Father, Son, and Holy Ghost  
Nail the Devil to this post—  
With this mell I thrice do knock  
One for God, and for Wod, and for Lok!*

*Writing on the stalls. Eh, Jane.*

Chugging coffee, rushing outside, Simon hears children singing a familiar song:

"There was an old lady who swallowed a fly.  
I don't know why she swallowed a fly.  
Perhaps she'll die!"

Simon looks around but sees no other vehicles in the parking lot. The singing is coming from the picnic tables.

“There was an old lady who swallowed a spider,  
That wiggled and wriggled and tickled inside her.”

Several small figures sit at the picnic tables, in the dark.

“There was an old lady who swallowed a bird.  
How absurd, to swallow a bird!”

A half-dozen small heads turn toward Simon.

“There was an old lady who swallowed a cat.  
Imagine that, she swallowed a cat.”

Simon’s eyes adjust. He sees a half-dozen little faces—brown and leathery skin; bog water dripping in dark, amber gushes from the orifices in their mummy heads. They all stare through the hollows.

“She swallowed the cat to catch the bird.  
She swallowed the bird to catch the spider.”

The little bog children rise from their table, reach putrid hands out to Simon. He runs back to the car, fumbling for his keys. Their voices, still high and twittering, turn to malevolent cicadas.

“She swallowed the spider to catch the fly.  
I don’t know why she swallowed that fly.  
Perhaps she’ll die!”

The car starts. The needle shivers. Simon speeds down the roads with no sense. His world is cracked. He fights the inevitability of his Jupiter-gravity eyelids.

White lines.

Black dogs.

Bog bodies.

*I think Mr. Knock is still out there, laughing. Eh, Jane?*



Simon snatches the key from the man at the desk and runs off.

It's catching up.

Unlock the door. Shut it. Chain it. Put a chair to it. Grab a blanket from the bed. And huddle on the floor. Simon opens a greasy fast-food sack containing an order of now-cold fries and many, many packets of salt.

*I could hear Mr. Knock laughing, Jane. I think I really could.*

Simon casts a circle of salt around himself, on the floor. Pure white salt.

*The only one to survive, Jane. Was he really crazy?*

He had to ask three times for extra salt. He would have asked again, but then he heard the children on the radio, so he sped away.

Now Simon sits in his white circle, in the dark room. His hands dance, angrily. He tries to keep his hands busy.

Black silhouettes, backlit by streetlights, stand outside the curtained windows. All is silent.

Simon keeps his hands busy.

The silhouettes press their faces to the window. Out of the corner of his eye, Simon glimpses motion in his hotel room mirror, but he dares not look. He tosses the blanket over his head, crouches on the floor, in the salt circle, and keeps his hands busy.

Hands.

Busy.

Sounds of scuttling and scratching on walls—cicada voices.

Simon shivers like a speedometer needle. He keeps his hands busy. Something is trying to tear the blanket away.

Simon does not know any proper runes. He writes Jane Doe's name on his arm, as many times as it will fit. The scalpel gleams.

*I am certain Jane, if a cat had been there, I would have eaten it.*



## INTERLUDE: Requiem for the Taste Buds

What can I say? They caught me.

It's funny. Usually no one ever notices me. I, um—I'm sorry, how do we begin? I'm never comfortable with these things. They don't seem so very productive. Who . . . uh . . . who cares whether I think that blob of ink looks like a hummingbird or Satan riding to earth on a chariot pulled by Martha Stewart?

Hmm? Just keep talking?

Okay.

It's—well, I guess it's certainly strange. I mean, not Hannibal Lecter “Hello, Clarice” strange. But strange enough that I'm talking to you.

How do I get in?

Well, I just sneak in and mingle with the strangers. It's not all that difficult getting in. Just pretend like you belong.

Why?

Huh. Guess that's the big question.

Morbid curiosity of death?

No, not really.

There's just so many people to talk to, and they listen, and I'm so . . . I . . . have you ever heard of the Vegetarian Cannibal? He's in the tabloids lately. Apparently some guy wanted to be a cannibal. The problem is he's a vegetarian so he has to—

What? My family?

I really don't have a family to come home to. No pets either. I tried. I have allergies. But I have a great home. It's all nice and neat. Hardly looks lived in. My cupboards are full of those great single-serve soups. Just pop one in the microwave and eat it over the sink. Alone.

They don't taste very good.

The food after a funeral is good, though! Oh my. Wedding banquets and Labor Day barbecues have nothing on a good funeral feast. Maybe that's why I go—for the food. There are

so many funerals, after all. I just look them up and sneak right in. I never thought I'd get in so much trouble.

Friends?

I really don't—I mean, I try, but I'm always so . . . okay, maybe this will help explain: You know all those nine-hundred numbers they advertise late at night? Well, I just called one of those. Yes, from here—when the policeman gave me my phone call. Hey, I didn't have anyone to talk to, so I just dialed the first thing that came to my head.

I watch a lot of late-night TV.

Well, this girl answers and says her name is Candy. I say my name is Clara. She says she's wearing a sheer thong. I say I'm wearing a hand-me-down sweater from my grandmother who was put into a home when she went insane and started throwing roadkill at people. Candy sounded a little confused, so I explained that I was calling from a police station. She asked me to bend over so she could use the handcuffs. I said I didn't have any, and then I asked her if she had ever heard of the Vegetarian Cannibal.

Then there was a long pause.

Then . . . I don't know, something changed. Her voice *changed* and she said, "Clara Susquehanna Taylor, be warned! Dial no more nocturnal numbers. Do not join. Seek sanctuary. Beware the hunger!"

She said more, but I just got scared. I don't know how she knew my last name, or my middle name. *No one* knows my middle name; I never use it. The kids in school were so very cruel, and—well, anyway, I panicked and hung the phone up.

What's the first funeral I remember?

I don't see what that has . . . all—all right. It was my father's funeral. I was just a little girl. My mom didn't spend much time with me that day, she was . . . she was always so . . . you know, we had the best fried chicken after that funeral! You want the recipe? You take the batter and just soak—

What?

I, um, I can't quite say why funeral food's so good. It's—it's like the taste buds sing a requiem for the deceased when you eat it. Sometimes it's subdued and respectful, mourning a loss. Other times it's spicy and festive, celebrating a life. You look at the lifeless husk in the casket and you think if you just keep breathing, keep eating, keep living, your turn won't come. It tastes like *salvation*. You eat around people mourning death and you start to appreciate your own life more than you might normally. It's a meal of rebirth. You say to yourself, "I'm going to finish this food and walk away changed for the better. This time around I'll be more productive. I'll learn to play the violin. I'll meet new people and get out and show everyone the real me. I'll floss."

The feeling fades, though. I go from funeral to funeral trying to recapture it. But, inevitably, I'm back at home, eating over the sink, feeling only one thing: hunger.

Maybe that's why I dialed the other number. The policeman was nice and let me make a second call. I called a number stuck in my head from an infomercial. Did I mention that I watch a lot of late-night TV? The number was just there, programmed in my head, and I called it.

It's for a place called Apex Consumers. They promised to help me achieve everything I hungered for. . . .

## CHAPTER 17

"Hello, my name is Clara."

"Hello, Clara," answers the Obsidian Sanctuary.

Clara shivers at the response, nervous at the prospect of speaking in front of the strangers. They said this wasn't even a full meeting, but the prospect is still daunting. They seem nice, though—encouraging. A small, mousy woman in her early thirties, all her plain features are eclipsed by the very large, very thick glasses that magnify her eyes to amphibian levels.

"I, uh . . . I was told maybe I could find help here. I don't even know how to start."

An encouraging murmur runs through the Sanctuary. Clara smiles, still shivering. She's as awkward as a newborn fawn spat into a dark forest.

"I guess I have an addiction. I'm addicted to funeral food. But that's a long story. Recently I joined a, uh, 'self-actualization' group. Apex Consumers. Now I think my hungers might have . . . changed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nyx finds the door unlocked.

She follows the trail of dried mud to the bathroom and finds that door open as well. And she finds Simon, still mostly clothed, still wearing his cracked glasses, sitting in the tub, the hot water coming down from the showerhead, washing the muck away, soaking the tiled floor with its spray. Simon holds both of his mutilated forearms out, trying to keep the scalding water from torturing the bloody script of *Jane Doe*.

*Nyx: the Maiden. Queen of clubs.*

She does not scream. She does not gasp. She does not say a word, just helps clean Simon up. All the while, Simon tells her in a distant voice about how he found Mr. Knock. About

the jars of unborn, the mad conversation, the cats, Jane's head, the bone, and the bog. Nyx does not say a word, only dries Simon and wraps his arms in white bandages. But, as in Simon's mind, *she* always bleeds through and floats to the surface. Red letters on white: *Jane Doe*.

*Jane Doe: the Hanging Girl. Queen of hearts.*

He tells her about all those roads and none of them leading home, the cracked world, the nonsense signs, the black dogs and bog bodies catching up. He details the next morning, finally being allowed to drive back to Chicago—a strange reef in a stranger sea.

*The queen of hearts. Off with her head . . . off with her head. Eh, Jane?*

Simon finishes talking and Nyx does not yell at him, does not lecture him on going off alone to explore the dark. She does not even give him a grim and grave “I told you so.” She just gives him a very hard hug and says, “Come on. We need to go eat some tacos and waffles.”

Simon stops short, his eyes turning less distant, snapping back to the now. “Why tacos and waffles?”

“Because,” Nyx says, “you need to commune with the living, and I have this parazoological theory that monsters cannot enter a waffle house. Once a month the Obsidian Sanctuary has Taco-Waffle-TP Friday. That's today. It's tradition.”



It is not so very difficult, loveling, to picture the motel room door opening.

You can imagine the cleaning lady. You've seen her before, in one motel or another, pushing that cart of cleaning agents with all the enthusiasm of Sisyphus. Not too, too difficult to picture her stretching painfully, her back already throbbing the staccato Morse code message: *Today's going to suck*. It's the barrest stretch of the imagination to name her pains: long hours,

grinding monotony, escalating bills and out of control APRs, and domestic troubles recently aggravated by the discovery of her husband's lust for hardcore amputee porn, via that copy of *Humping Stumps* discovered under his pillow.

Just a sketch of everyday life.

And there she stands in the doorway, when the banal line of her life interrupts.

The cigarette falls from her mouth.

It's not the circle of salt on the floor. She has cleaned much nastier, more mysterious phenomena from the bed sheets.

No.

It's there in the muddy handprints and footprints that run up the walls and along the ceiling. It's in the way the mud glistens with moisture, never drying. It's in the worm-orgy smell of fermented moss. It's in the faint, dirty silhouettes smeared in the wallpaper and the inexplicable wrongness of their postures, like souls trapped in ash-shadow on still-standing Hiroshima walls after the sun split.

What conclusions go through her mind?

Who can say?

Omniscience has its degrees.

\* \* \* \* \*

Strange pockets and hollows of safety and hearth can form in the ocean of late night. The Obsidian Sanctuary found theirs at a local diner. The restaurant is open twenty-four hours a day. The food is cheap and they serve both tacos and waffles. The late shift manager even lets Jolly Roger bring Byron into the building.

Simon and Nyx arrive to find a dozen Sanctuary members already present, already eating, gossiping, joking, and passing around the blueberry syrup.

"Taco-Waffle-TP Friday!" they chant.

"Why tacos and waffles?" Simon asks.

"Because," Nyx says.

"And where does the TP come in?"

"You'll see."

Jolly Roger nods a greeting with his gold-platinum smile while feeding Byron bits of sausage. The black-and-white bird, perched on the Goth-pirate's shoulder, greets Simon and Nyx by bobbing his head and singing:

"T'was on the good ship Venus,  
By Christ you should have seen us.  
The figurehead was a whore in bed,  
Sucking a dead man's penis."

"Wow. Thanks for that, Byron," says Nyx. "Roger, what the hell are you teaching this creature? That's not Poe."

"No," says the gold-platinum teeth. "If it were Poe, the man would be living and the woman would be dead. I'm teaching Byron old maritime tunes."

Byron continues singing:

"The captain's name was Luger.  
By Christ he was a bugger.  
He wasn't fit to shovel shit  
From one ship to another."

Nyx and Simon take seats amidst the chaos of laughter, multiple layers of conversation, wildly gesturing hands, and eyes and mouths. Simon feels his heart pounding, the stabbing of social anxieties that he's possessed so long they can almost be counted as comforts, but he resists the urge to hide in a closet.

Officer Polhaus shovels eggs and bacon into his mouth, arguing with another Sanctuary member between bites.

Nyx and Jolly Roger whisper something back and forth.

Zack and Kenny busy themselves in a discussion while building bigger and better catapults out of silverware, disposable tubs of cream being the artillery. They pause only to introduce themselves to Simon as the resident “techies.” Both are college students. They might be confused for twins if they looked anything alike.

“I’m telling you, man, the Sanctuary needs to raise money via merchandising,” says Zack, returning to the interrupted discussion.

“Merchandising? Like what?” says Kenny.

“Like things carved out of obsidian. Like jewelry.”

“And cutlery.”

“Yeah! Obsidian letter openers. Obsidian shot glasses. Obsidian toilet seats.”

“Who the hell would have an obsidian toilet seat?”

“Michael Clark Duncan.”

“Okay.”

Byron bobs and sings:

“The second mate was Andy.  
By Christ he had a dandy.  
Till they crushed his cock on a jagged rock  
For cumming in the brandy.”

“Egads,” says Nyx. “That’s a pretty vile song, wouldn’t you say, Roge?”

“It’s supposed to be, poppet,” says Jolly Roger. “Debauched drinking song and all. You have a bunch of men on a ship and you’re not sure if you’ll make it to the next port ’cause you have to worry about illness and storms and starvation and pirates and the monsters. So you and your mates tell dirty jokes and sing dirtier songs. You one-up each other, making each verse more and more depraved, and you have a few laughs.”

Nyx ruffles the feathers on Byron’s head. “Well, Captain Nyx’s ship happens to have a pair of young ears aboard, *mate*.” She indicates Robin, sitting quietly at the other end of the table.



“Sorry, Mama Bear,” says Jolly Roger. “Once Byron starts, I can’t stop him. Animal cruelty and all.”

Nyx laughs and conversations resume.

Simon turns to Robin, sitting next to him, with her wounded bird stare, not paying attention to the conversations or her half-eaten meal. She instead draws pictures in crayon on her paper placemat, mostly of monsters and sharp teeth and eyes. Tonight she wears a Jason Voorhees hockey mask.

“Hi, Robin,” Simon says quietly.

Robin looks up at Simon and waves.

Loud, bawdy conversations continue. Simon’s order arrives but he only nibbles. He sifts through his breakfast skillet with a knife but only sees the clammy contents of Jane’s Y-incision. Simon sighs longingly.

He looks at Robin and her drawings—goes into his head and imagines growing psychic bat ears so he can decipher the memories and origins of those crayon-rendered echoes. It’s not a pretty picture. Simon steadies the shake in his dead-withdrawal hands and takes his napkin, expertly rolling and folding and working it until it is a white paper rose. Then the odd scarecrow presents the flower to the little wounded bird. Robin squeaks with delight, taking the flower as if it were a precious jewel.

Simon notices Nyx looking at him, from the other side of the tables. She’s smiling.

Byron sings:

“The captain’s wife was Mabel.  
By God she was most able  
To give the crew their daily screw  
Upon the galley table.”

“Ohhhh,” Kenny groans, looking at his empty plate of waffles and his still half-full plate of tacos.

“You know, you don’t have to finish that,” Zack says.

"I must," Kenny says, pointing to the remaining tacos. "This is my Everest."

Still tentatively welcoming the camaraderie, but not taking direct part himself, Simon only samples the conversations around him.

"... so he's just this guy they let work as an orderly on the weekends. Seriously retarded. I mean, he has trouble tying his shoes. Yet he somehow knows where to walk to avoid the cameras even as he's swiping key cards and stealing bags and bags of blood. When we finally find him out, it takes five of us just to wrestle him to the ground. The whole time he's sobbing and begging us to let him finish and . . ."

"... and that's how I learned paranoia," says Nyx. "From the song 'Rock Lobster.' It made me realize nothing can be trusted—even rocks are suspect. You'd think if there was one thing you could count on, it'd be a rock. But, no. Rocks might, as the song aptly notes, be something else. So everything is suspect . . ."

"... you gotta figure that ninety percent of it is all bullshit," says Polhaus, showering his listener with bits of egg and pancake. "Complete, utter dog shit—bat shit crazy ramblings from crackheads and hicks, abductions stories from lonely losers, claims of psychic power by fat chicks who need a self-esteem boost. Then you got, say, ten percent—and that's being freaking generous—of the stories that have some basis in . . . something. But then you gotta figure—tip of the iceberg. You're not seeing the whole picture any more than one percent of the time. Then there's gotta be that X percent to represent all the things that are not bullshit, that are out there, that we don't know anything about. So you carry all the ones and zeroes, and you have to remember that none of us really know anything about anything. So the math is completely fucked. Take, for example—hey, Meeks!"

Polhaus points a meaty finger across the table at Simon, who flinches. That voice saying his name had never led to anything good.

“Yes?”

“How many autopsies do you figure you did last year?”

“Four hundred and twenty-six.”

“*About* four hundred and twenty-six?”

“*Exactly* four hundred and twenty-six.”

Polhaus stares a moment. “Yeah, right. Anyway, out of that number, how many stiffes were made stiffes by something unnatural?”

Simon has to think a moment. Given all he had seen recently, he might need to view some cases under different criteria, but all in all: “None, Officer Polhaus. None of the causes of death seemed conclusively ‘unnatural.’”

Polhaus turns to the teenager he’d been talking to. “See. Out of four hundred-plus bodies—nada. Yeah. *They* might be all around, but not every mugging, murder, or plot is supernatural.”

Conversations continue around the table. Simon slips inside his head; our misfit can take only so much unshielded socialization. He imagines the diner turning into a ghost pirate vessel: Nyx as its captain, wielding Bob, and Jolly Roger as first mate, hanging from the post as the living flag. The ship is piloted by a crew of Chicago’s cement skeletons, all singing filthy songs, led by Byron.

Somewhere, distantly, Simon is aware that everyone is discussing racehorse names. There is a pause in the background noise. With horror, and a flashback of blind date dread, Simon realizes he’s just been asked something and snaps back to the present. “Uh . . . what was that?”

“Come on, Boo Radley,” says Polhaus, with a smile or a snarl—it’s hard for Simon to tell. “If you had a racehorse, what would you name it?”

Simon thinks for only a moment. “Catherine the Great’s Death.”

There is a pause. Simon knows that pause. What comes after, he does not expect: laughter. There are exclamations of

“Gross!” and “Oh, that’s wrong.” But laughter underscores it all. Even Polhaus’s scowl cracks.

“That’s—huh—that’s pretty fucking funny, actually,” chuckles the fat cop.

*The Island of Misfit Toys. Eh, Jane?*

The comment leads to a series of jokes about bestiality, which leads to jokes about dead hookers, which leads to jokes about dead babies. All of them gross, tasteless jokes that excite wheezing fits of laughter. All of them irreverent wards against the dark.

And Byron sings:

“The cabin boy was Kipper.  
By Christ he was a nipper.  
He stuffed his ass with broken glass  
And circumcised the skipper.”

Finally Nyx gathers the scattered attention of the group.

“Okay, troops, game faces. Mama Bear says, *shhhhh*.”

And with that, all is silent. Simon is admiring Nyx’s control of the group when he’s nudged from behind by another Sanctuary member who whispers, “They say she’s the daughter of an incubus demon.”

Simon nods. “I heard.”

“The Obsidian Sanctuary gathers for a reason,” says Nyx. “We give each other strength. We are stronger than the sum of our parts.” Heads nod. “I won’t spend a lot of time explaining *that*. You’ve all had a glimpse or a loss. Suffered your own horror story that brought you here. We gather to survive. Maybe to heal. And tonight we bring that strength to bear, to help a new member: Simon.”

Nyx indicates Simon with a purple-nailed hand. The gesture is answered by quiet applause.

"Simon is a gifted young man," Nyx continues, with a wink aimed at Simon. "He's a forensic pathologist. He has a gift with the dead."

At this Simon hears, with a wince, the murmurs rise in the group, quiet whispers shared back and forth:

"... some kind of necromancer. . . ?"

"... special powers . . ."

"... maybe he can help me talk to my dear Jimmy, God rest his soul. . . ."

Simon shifts uncomfortably and stammers a whisper to Nyx, "I—I don't know if you'd call it a—I mean, it's not—"

Nyx doesn't wait for him to finish. "Simon recently got his own glimpse of the dark. That makes him one of us."

Fellow misfits and the supernaturally scarred murmur their agreement amidst the carafes of coffee and multiple flavors of syrup.

"A cadaver came to Simon. He came to know her as Jane Doe. Some of us knew her, too, but we never had a name for her."

More energetic murmurs in the group.

"... those golden eyes . . ."

"... she healed poor Robin, you know . . ."

"... she was an angel sent to us . . ."

Whispered theories flit back and forth, and genuine tears streak down the faces of some of the misfits.

*You were a saint to them, Jane. A ghostly saint. A fleshy holy spirit. And these dolls were damaged but not broken.*

"Let's call her Jane," says Nyx, "for lack of anything else. We know Jane was murdered."

More murmurs.

"Soon after," continues Nyx, "Ichabod and his crew fell apart. Members lost it, got gacked, or both."

"... they delved into some scary shit . . ."

"... Poor Neil, he was a bright boy . . ."

"... Jasper offed himself . . ."

"That's why, before we go any further, I'm going to say it plain," says Nyx. "We are *not* going down Knock's road. We

are not hunting the ultimate X-File. We are not discovering the secret of the universe. But we can help Simon. Carefully. As a unified force. We can—maybe—help set things right for Jane.”

Murmurs of assent.

Byron sings:

“The captain’s lovely daughter  
Liked swimming in the water.  
Delighted squeals came when some eels  
Found her sexual quarters.”

“Right,” says Nyx. “John, tell us about the crime scene.”

Officer Polhaus takes a gulp of coffee and clears his throat, loudly. “Closed-down pub over on Lincoln. Set to be torn down and renovated. Big tree in the back beer garden was the hanging tree. They found . . . Jane, hanging there, in the beer garden. No eyewitnesses, except some poor kid who had the misfortune of seeing her dangling there.”

*I think the boy was lucky, Jane, to see you dance.*

“Didn’t look right. Definitely not a suicide. But it was a sloppy murder, too. I don’t know. You get the impression that the fucks who did this were interrupted, and not by no kid, but by something that made them rush out of there before they could tidy up.”

*It was my shadow, Jane. Sometimes your shadow arrives before you, and sometimes it trails behind.*

“What happened to Jane’s body?” asks Nyx.

“It vanished,” says Polhaus. “Queerest thing in the world. After she got shipped to the morgue, I kept on eye on the body and an ear to the ground because I, uh, recognized her.”

Polhaus’s mouth tightens.

*Officer Polhaus knew you, Jane. He knew you in the before.*

“One night her body’s there, next it’s gone. I mean *gone*. No records. No toe tag. Nada. No one remembers her being

there. The world goes crazy. No one remembers—" again a meaty finger points at Simon "—except *this* guy."

"Simon, what can you tell us about Jane?" asks Nyx.

Simon stammers to a start, the prospect of speaking in public again paralyzing. Then he remembers the ritual. He calls her name. "Subject: Jane Doe. Subject died by hypoxia. Subject had . . . beautiful eyes. Subject liked to play on playgrounds after hours, liked the chill of October sand. Subject—"

"The murder, asshole!" interrupts Polhaus. "What can you tell us about the fucking murder?"

Nyx glares, her humor vanished, replaced by something dangerous behind the eyes.

Polhaus looks down. "Sorry."

"There were four of them," says Simon. "There was Hector . . ."

*The Hanging Man. Jack of diamonds.*

"Joe . . ."

*The Laughing Man. Jack of clubs.*

"Gabe . . ."

*The Question Man. Jack of spades.*

"And Alex."

*The Crying Man. Jack of hearts.*

"Hector held the rope. He's very big, very strong. They raised her three times. Gabe asked the questions. Joe laughed when she choked." Simon finds he has sliced his knife into the smiley face he made of his pancake. "Alex cried. She . . . kissed him before they killed her."

"What happened to the body?" asks Nyx.

Simon tells the tale, in more detail, of "the Mondays," the odd events at the morgue, Jane's vanishing body and the vanishing memories, and the nightmare thing that stalked him. The Sanctuary listens in rapt attention as another story enters the tattered, autumnal quilt of their mythology.

Tensions tighten as the children huddle around the fire, fearing the wolves in the darkness.

And Byron sings:

“The cook, his name was Freeman.  
He was a dirty demon.  
He fed the crew on menstrual stew  
And hymens fried in semen.”

Pepsi explodes out of Nyx’s nose and she coughs and chokes. “Goddamnit, Roge. We’re trying to have a serious meeting here!” But she does not resist the wave of laughter that comes, a laugh that grows contagious and sweeps across everyone in the restaurant—the collective, unspoken middle finger raised to the lurkers in the darkness.

“Moving on.” Nyx lays three pieces of paper on the table, very poignantly. “These belonged to Jane.”

Everyone peers in, as if at artifacts—as Simon might peer at a length of intestine or a ladleful of stomach contents.

“Let’s take these one at a time,” says Nyx. She picks up a pamphlet. “What do we know about Apex Consumers? Let’s start with the general info.”

Zack and Kenny stand up.

“Everyone here has probably seen Arthur Drake’s smiling face,” says Kenny.

“Either on one of his self-help books,” says Zack.

“Or an infomercial.”

“Dude’s more cheerful and peppy than that OxiClean psycho.”

“You’ve heard the cheesy slogans.”

“Be the apex consumer. Don’t be the consumed!”

“Be at the top of your food chain, in business and in life!”

“Start small, dream big!”

“Take a bigger bite out of life!”

“You get the idea,” says Zack.

“Drake’s built a self-help empire: the books, cassettes, classes, all that. It’s all about being more aggressive and getting what you ‘hungry’ for—money, success, etcetera,” says Kenny.



“But he’s also got the pyramid scheme going,” says Zack. “You can join Apex Consumers and buy and sell their junk and they promise you’ll get rich. There are even books and cassettes and classes you can buy to help you *sell* that shit.”

Zack takes out a laptop and positions it so the majority can see. “Here. A cable channel did a story on it recently, from the scam angle. I got a few clips.”

The video clips play. The handsome journalist reveals the “truth behind Apex Consumer.” Images flash on the screen—hidden camera footage showing a small recruitment gathering in the banquet hall of a Holiday Inn and then a large-scale Apex convention, with tens of thousands of people crammed into a stadium, holding up candles, chanting cult-like mantras, all worshiping at the altar of money, success, and self-rewarding dreams. Impassioned speakers screech catch phrases, show off their wealth, and promise the same to anyone who jumps on board, all while images of sports cars, homes, and yachts play on a big-screen backdrop.

“Start small, dream *big*!”

Cut to faces of attendees caught up in rapturous emotion. They weep openly as the speakers promise that they, too, can be rich if they simply apply the Apex principals and continue to demonstrate their dedication—that is, continue to invest rigorously in Apex products and services.

The handsome journalist cuts in to reveal that ninety-nine percent of these people will not get rich. They will, in fact, lose money through this system. The secret of Apex Consumers, he explains, is that only the tiny inner circle of Drake’s friends and colleagues get rich off of it, from income made speaking at the conventions and hawking special books and CDs not available for sale by the rank and file drones. The journalist transitions to a brief interview with Gregory Mitchell, a former member of that inner circle, who leans forward to spill a few secrets before retreating back into dramatic shadows. Then comes the predictable parade of sad scam victims

telling tales that are all minor variations on the same desperate, misguided search for wealth and “the good life.”

Zack pauses the video.

“You get the idea,” he says.

Byron sings:

“When we reached our station,  
Through skillful navigation,  
The ship was sunk in a wave of spunk  
From too much fornication.”

“So it’s a scam that sucks in desperate losers,” Polhaus grunts.

Nyx scowls and glances at an older woman sitting quietly on the fringe of the group. Polhaus, oblivious to the glance, snorts and bulls ahead. “Well, isn’t that all this Apex crap is—a scam?” he says, licking boysenberry syrup from his immense knuckles.

Simon plays with his silverware, performing feats of dexterity, listening in, ears at the ready for the sentence or phrase or bit of information that would bring him closer to Jane, or at least a part of Jane—a hand to hold, a torso to hug, eyes to look into longingly.

“There are some weirder rumors,” says Kenny.

“Yeah?” asks Polhaus.

“It’s mostly online,” says Zack. “Chatter from some folks who claim to have done the program, and speculation from the conspiracy geeks—”

“Geeks like me,” says Kenny.

“Like Kenny,” says Zack. “He’s a regular conspiracy nut, when he can pry himself away from those phone sex lines.”

“Chat lines!” Kenny snaps.

“She’s a sex line girl.”

“Candy is psychic.”

“Candy? Her name’s Candy?”

“She’s a modern-day oracle.”

“Sex line girl.”

"She's both!"

"Whoa, defensive much?"

"She's got a gift. She should be part of the Sanctuary. Sex and prophecy have gone hand and hand ever since ancient times when priests drugged pretty young—"

"Whatever," Zack says. "The point is this Apex stuff adds up to some weird mojo. The higher you get into the Apex pyramid, the less the whole predator, king of the jungle bit becomes a marketing gimmick. It's really a statement of Arthur Drake's philosophy."

"It's pretty esoteric stuff," Kenny chimes in. "I'm paraphrasing here, but the gist of it is: the money and success and all that—they're just a means and not an end. The whole point is the act of *devouring*. You're devouring money and your desires and the things you want to achieve. It's not enough to achieve them. It's like you have to know how to digest them properly."

"What the fuck does that mean?" asks Polhaus.

"It's a spiritual thing, like meditation. You get the money, but you enjoy it on some higher level, too."

"There are other rumors," says Zack, "that this esoteric philosophy gets more . . . visceral. One dude said that at this high-level workshop he went to—one that set him back a few grand to attend—they were eating bugs."

"Bugs?" someone sneers. "Ick."

"Yep. The attendees were handed one of those giant, hissing cockroaches, like the ones on *Fear Factor*. They were supposed to take the giant, squirming, nasty thing and say something like, 'You are the yearly income I want to be making' or 'You are the sports car I hunger for.' Then they had to bite into that crunchy bastard and chew it and swallow every twitching, chitinous bit. That supposedly moved them a step toward getting what they hungered for."

Murmurs in the crowd.

Jane Doe itches in Simon's forearms. He resists the impulse to scratch.

*Your voice, Jane. I hear you in sweet scar whispers.*

"The rumors get weirder from there, depending what you're willing to believe," says Kenny. "And, of course, we've not been to any of the meetings ourselves."

"Hold that thought," says Nyx. "Clara? Why don't you come over here, honey?"

Owl eyes glance and blink through huge lenses as Clara meekly steps forward, taking a seat next to Nyx.

Introductions.

Pleasantries.

Story.

"A few of you have heard this before—the ones who were at the other meeting. There weren't, uh, nearly so many of you there. Of course I'm happy to see you. I m-mean, uh—" Clara stutters to a stop, shivering, nervous. Nyx gives her a reassuring pat on the back. "It's funny, actually—me being nervous around you. I think I've always been hungry for company. I used to be addicted to food at a funeral, but I think I was just addicted to food with company. Anyway. I got caught and had to give up sneaking into funeral parties. That's when I found Apex Consumers. They promised to change my life. Make me more assertive. I don't think I ever cared about money or luxuries. I just—I just liked the company."

Simon notices Clara's pallor and bloodshot eyes.

"Hasn't been sleeping so good," yawns a sleepy Corbie.

Simon notes her body language.

"Tightness in the stomach," mutters another wraith crow.

And what is that mark on her arm?

"It was just like those young men described," says Clara. Zack and Kenny beam. "The Apex people told you what you wanted to hear. They chanted catchy phrases. I went to one of the big conventions. It was almost religious. And I paid a little extra to go on a little side trip during the convention, a motivational outing to a nearby campground. It didn't cost thousands, but it wasn't inexpensive, either. We heard a

speaker, around a campfire, and did a few activities. Then two men—they were motivational councilors for Apex or something. They whispered to me, said they were breaking off from the main group to have a midnight picnic—would I like to join them?”

Byron starts to sing, but Jolly Roger grabs his beak.

“I don’t know if we were supposed to break off from the group like that, but . . . they were both very handsome and—well, no one *ever* picks me for anything special. So I went with them. We walked through the woods, on a path of pine needles. Then they broke off from the little road of needles and wandered into the dark woods. I hesitated, but then strayed from the path.

“We had a picnic under some trees, by some wildflowers. It was a big moon. I brought little cakes and a bottle of wine. They brought a container of meat. It looked raw. ‘It’s so red,’ I said. They called it something fancy sounding—something *tar-tare*.

“‘Have a piece,’ one of them said.

“I didn’t want to be rude. He held out a bite to my mouth and I ate it. It was so *good*.”

Clara shudders, lips parted, at the memory.

*She missed it, Jane. As much as I missed the Dead Water, she missed it.*

“It was better than funeral food,” Clara says. “Better than anything. I ate more. They kept handing me strips of the red, red meat and I ate more and more and it was so good that I did not notice. I didn’t notice till it was all gone and my hands were red. Then I noticed them . . . laughing. I know that laugh. Like—like at school, when Bobby Barlow pretended to be interested in going to the dance with me and I was blushing and giggling and I didn’t notice one of the other boys sneaking dead toads into my locker behind my back. *That* kind of laughter. I hate that kind of laughter.

“‘What?’ I said. And they laughed harder. Something was wrong. The meat was so good, but something was very, very

wrong. And they kept laughing. And I was in tears and I said something like, 'I have to go to the bathroom.' And they kept laughing. I ran away, into the dark, trying to find the path. I could hear them laughing through the woods, and—"

Tears fall below the owl eyes of Clara's lenses.

"Since then . . . I don't know. Something is wrong. I don't know what I mean, but I feel it. Inside. Nothing tastes right. I feel watched. I feel stomach aches and guilty and I don't know why and—"

The levy breaks and the sobs flow, wracking and harsh.

"I can't—I can't sleep anymore. I have—these—horrible dreams—I—I'm at my father's funeral and it's really a feast—and I'm eating him—so red!—I'm eating him right out of the coffin! Or I'm at my therapist's and—and—he's asking questions—and I—oh, God—I slice his throat and he falls on his desk—and—I—I start eating his—throat—but we're also kissing—and I'm tearing him apart and—and eating him—but—but—we're also having—we're doing—it . . ."

Nyx stands up and puts a supportive arm around Clara.

"I wake up screaming—'n'—'n'—dry heaving—'n'—heaving—'n'—I don't know what's . . . wrong—with—me . . . just—I just want it out of me!"

The words drown in sobs.

Simon looks more carefully through his cracked lenses at the mark on her arm: a bite mark.

"From her own teeth," say the Corbies. "She bit herself in her sleep."

"Yes," Simon whispers in agreement.

The restaurant manager comes toward the group, looking as though he intends to tell them to be quieter, but Polhaus stands, to full height and full girth. He shakes his head and gives the manager a look that sends the smaller man scurrying back into the kitchen.

"Samantha, why don't you drive Clara home," says Nyx. A teenage girl steps forward and helps Clara up. "Thank you,

Clara, for sharing again so the whole group could hear this time. It's brave of you. Please keep coming to the Sanctuary meetings. You have a place with us. Always."

Clara nods vigorously, sobs subsiding.

Nyx hands her a card. "This is my private cell phone. You call that any time you feel like it. Doesn't matter when. I'm a fellow night owl. I know the words to every infomercial. You call that and I'll be right over with popcorn and some really bad movies and we'll have ourselves a slumber party. Right?"

Clara intakes a big gasp of air, frown curling upward. "Yes," she says. "Thank you." Tears still streak, glistening on a wide-wide, grateful smile. Samantha walks Clara out.

*Queen of lonely. Eh, Jane? All Clara ever wanted was company.*

"What do you all make of that?" asks Nyx. "Is Apex Consumer more than just a scam?"

"She sounded sincere to me," replies a voice from the group.

"We all like to believe each other's stories," says Jolly Roger. "But we have to be open to the possibility it ain't true."

"He's right," says Polhaus.

"Besides," says Zack, "who were the two men who took her out to the woods? Was that standard Apex treatment or are they deviants? Maybe it was just a prank."

"Or maybe . . ." says Kenny, trailing off.

"Right. Maybe . . ." says Nyx.

*Cannibalism* is the word left unsaid, its phantom hanging in the air.

"So what's next?" asks Nyx. "Where do we begin further inquiry?"

"Easy," says Polhaus. "That Gregory Mitchell guy, the former high muckity-muck that quit Apex. He'll know what's going on. News report said he's local. I'll go find him. We'll have a chat."

"After all the research Kenny and I did, we should—" begins Zack.

"No," interrupts Polhaus. "We're not fooling with your shenanigans. *I'll* do it. And I'll do it *right*."

"Fine," says Zack. "If you want more info, Nyx, I can try and hack into Apex Consumers' email. That might turn up something."

"You always have to do that," says Kenny. Amongst the Sanctuary, Zack was known as the "computer guy." Kenny liked gadgets and electronics and maintained the night vision equipment and electromagnetic field meters the groups used in their occasional ghost hunts. "Just because you know a little about computers does not make you a hacker. Don't assume you can just break into the company's system."

"I bet I can!"

"Moving on." Nyx grabs the Club Wendigo flier. "Roger, tell us about Club Wendigo."

Flash of gold and platinum. "Not too much to say, Nyxy. They're a floating club—change locations. Secretive buggers. Seem to pitch to the subversive sector. I think they're some Tyler-Durden-wannabee-fuckers."

"That's it?" asks Nyx.

"Sorry, Mama Bear. I tried to get into a meeting. But everyone knows I'm Obsidian, and that seemed to queer my pitch and spook my leads. All I've got are a few random, unproven rumors."

Nyx rolls her eyes. "*Great*. As if we didn't have enough of those. Shoot."

"Hunger themes, Mama Bear. Seems to fit tonight. I'd heard things about them, like they do some freaky-deaky ritual combat wiz or whatnot. Then the rumors start to sound a little familiar: raw meat eating challenges, meditative exercises to teach members psychic vampirism—"

"Is that real?" asks Simon.

"Don't know," says Nyx. "But Tuesday nights, Samantha teaches classes in aura reading and protecting yourself from psychic vampirism."



Polhaus points at the invitation to a Gastronomer Irregulars party. "What about that?"

"More eating," says Nyx. "Gastronomer Irregulars is some sort of Chicago elitist club that goes back a hundred years or more, near as I could find. They throw parties and eat rare and unusual dishes. Exotic ethnic foods, game animals, bygone recipes from the past. That kind of thing."

"So it's just about food?" ask Kenny.

"It's not about food," says Polhaus. "Same as with all that elitist crap. It's not about the trappings of the organization, it's about being in the most exclusive club—about being a powerful fuck and rubbing elbows with other powerful fucks. They could be the League of Extraordinarily Queer Stamp Collectors and it'd be the same thing."

"How are they connected?" asks Jolly Roger.

"Well," says Nyx, "when you get to the spooky rumors portion of things, it starts to get familiar. Supposedly, the Gastronomer Irregulars got bored with merely strange dishes decades ago. They've evolved. They illegally acquire rare animals to eat. They keep track of endangered species lists and, if it ever comes down to extinction, they make certain they have the last specimen. Supposedly, they've cooked up frozen mammoth meat. They illegally purchase human organs from donation banks—or make secret, high-priced deals with the terminally ill or the financially desperate, to get their parts. To keep things fresh, they invite the debutante daughters of all their pals over and throw a big orgy to 'devour' the virginity of dozens of girls. And so on. Twisted stuff." Nyx eats the last of her omelet. "Or it's all PR-driven crap."

"Okay, so we got a common theme with these groups," says Kenny. "Fucked up gourmets. But how are they connected otherwise?"

"Well," says Nyx, "maybe nothing. But Drake, as head of his own self-help empire, might be rich and powerful enough

to be a member of the Gastronomes, or influential enough to wow his way into Club Wendigo.”

Several of the people gathered around the table nod.

“We need to check those kinds of connections, people,” says Nyx. “But—and I repeat and *double* repeat—we are not going the way of Ichabod Knock. You all understand? We take a peek. You get a funny feeling, you get out. You let others know where you are. Pretend you’re in a movie and if you hear anyone saying, ‘Don’t open that door!’—then, for Christ’s sake, do *not* open that door.”

“Yes, Mama Bear,” everyone replies, in practiced unison.

And then they talk and they laugh.

Byron finally, loudly, finishes his shanty:

“Though our good ship was haunted  
The crew remained undaunted.  
We stayed right drunk and sprayed our spunk  
Till all the ghouls avaunted.”

They hold a syrup-drinking contest. Polhaus wins.  
Outside, the darkness waits.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Why the TP in Taco-Waffle-TP Friday?” Simon asks again as they leave the diner. Nyx informs him that on every such night, after the tacos and waffles are consumed, the Obsidian Sanctuary buys bundles of toilet paper and TPs the houses of local sex offenders until dawn.

And that night, they set out and do just that. They find the houses with a special application on Nyx’s smartphone. It’s the most fun Simon can recall ever having—without the participation of the dead, anyway.

## CHAPTER 18

"Nobody touch nothing!"

"I think he's missing some toes."

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

"Just wait till he gets here."

"What the hell is *he* going to find?"

"He's gifted."

"You really believe that? You really making this decision while thinking with your baby maker?"

"My what?"

"You heard me. You're thinking with your Easy-Bake Oven."

"Wow. You're full of pleasant analogies this morning. I think *he* is gifted when it comes to this. I think this is an opportunity for him to get us information we could not otherwise obtain. Anyway, we're about to find out one way or the other."

"This is so fucking not a good test situation."

"We're fine."

"We are *not* fucking fine. We're leaving traces at a scene. I can tell you right now that we've already made six mistakes that we aren't even aware of. Hey, I said do *not* touch anything!"

"So fix it."

"Fix it!? You think I have that kind of pull? Christ! Hey, you two—wonder twins. Out on the front lawn, now! Or I'll bash your empty skulls together."

"All right."

"Yeesh!"

Simon hears the voices as he approaches the open door. The Corbies cackle loudly in his head, the wormwood tree vibrating his spine to their cawed chorus of, "Yes-yes-yes-yes-yes-yes-yes!" Simon does his best not to giggle in anticipation.

He steps through the door just as Kenny and Zack are leaving. They stop and follow him back inside.

"Man of the hour," says Officer Polhaus, unenthusiastically. "Meeks, you at least know what a bad idea this is, right?"

"Yes," Simon says, trying not to drool and grin.

"Tell these folks not to touch anything."

"He's right." Simon hardly notices anyone else, anyone but the body, anyone but his next patient. "Everyone should wear these." He passes around a box of blue latex gloves and snaps on a pair himself. Four other pairs of snaps follow: Polhaus, Nyx, Kenny, and Zack.

The call woke Simon up at a little after 4:00 A.M. They told him to come and to bring his gear.

Simon licks his lips.

The ritual.

"Subject: Gregory Mitchell," says Simon. "Male. Caucasian. Early forties. Cosmetic surgery." Simon says that last with a frown.

"Why's that important?" Kenny asks. Nyx hushes him.

"Subject has been dead over forty-eight hours."

"This is how I found him," Polhaus says. "I came to talk about Apex Consumers with him and—well, here he is. Looks like someone cut his throat. Cut off some fingers and toes and cut his throat. And over there—looks like he had a baseball bat as a weapon when they got him."

"No," says Simon. "The throat has been bitten out. The fingers and toes . . . were bitten off. Some of the fingers and toes were bitten postmortem."

"Simon, can you do your, uh, thing?" Nyx asks.

Simon nods.

"Christ," Polhaus mutters, "that's going to be a mess. That's going to be all over the crime scene."

Simon nods and opens his case, removing a length of plastic tarp. They lay the body on the tarp and carry it into the bathroom, laying it in the tub.

"Rub-a-dub-dub," the Corbies sing. "Rub-a-dub-dub, dead man in the tub. Dive in, Simon. The Dead Water's lovely!"

Simon guzzles the absinthe from his Thermos.

The mirror in the bathroom bends and the tiles leak into one another. The wormwood nuzzles into the cracks of his brain, finding their old niches.

“Scalpels and brain knives and cranium chisels. These are a few of your favorite things,” sing the Corbies. Simon silently mouths the words along with them.

“May I?” Simon says, almost panting.

Nyx looks to Polhaus. They all look at Simon—differently.

*What did they see, Jane?*

“Fuck,” says Polhaus, deflating. “Yeah, go ahead. We’ve already fucked ourselves.”

Nyx nods to Simon.

“Oh, thank you,” Simon says with a sharp sigh as he falls on the corpse, the Corbies screeching in carrion glee at the appearance of the red, red Y.

“Thank you.”

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Simon comes to on his knees in a world bleeding green. Everyone looks a little pale. Wide eyes. Kenny is in the front yard vomiting.

Something large and meaty slaps Simon’s face.

“Meeks,” says Polhaus, “you with us?”

“How’d it go, Simon?” says Nyx, more gently.

“It’s good,” says Simon, vaguely noticing the blood on his gloved hands and down his shirt. “It’s *so* good—it’s good—it’s good—it’s good . . .”

Polhaus lets go of Simon. “Jesus.”

The drunken scarecrow tumbles to the floor with liquid, inebriated grace, rolling on his back, catnip drunk and swatting at phantom yarn balls.

"He looks like a goddamn heroin addict," says Polhaus. "What the hell were we thinking?"

Simon giggles on the floor. He rocks on his back. So relaxed. So good. The Dead Water plays demon fiddler tunes on his nerves.

"Scalpels and brain knives and cranium chisels. These are a few of my favorite things," Simon sings.

"This is what he has to add to the Sanctuary?" Polhaus asks.

"Greg was expecting them," Simon slurs.

"Oh, so it's 'Greg' now?" says Polhaus.

"Yes, we shared," Simon says.

Nyx notices Polhaus's immense fists tightening and a grinding noise coming from his mouth. She puts a restraining hand on his shoulder, saying, "Simon? What did you learn?"

Despite him still rolling on the ground, Simon's voice turns sober and clinical. "Members of Club Wendigo committed the murder. Greg was not surprised. He expected retribution from them. Hector was with them. He is a member of the club."

*Hector: the Hanging Man. Jack of diamonds.*

"How do we know this is true?" asks Polhaus.

Simon looks at his hands, fascinated by the cold, thick blood. "Greg managed to strike Hector in the face with his bat before they killed him. You might find a gold tooth near the couch."

"Got it!" calls Zack after running up the stairs. He holds up a gold-capped tooth, like one of Jolly Roger's, only larger. It tapers to a ridiculously sharp point—a predator's tooth.

"Oh, what big teeth you have," Simon says. They're the Corbies' words, but they use Simon's mouth. "The Big Bad Wolf fed her strips of human flesh. The moral: children who stray from the path get their innocence devoured."

“Okay, so Club Wendigo and Apex Consumers are connected,” says Nyx. “What now?”

“I might have a little more information, but it’s just fragments right now.” Simon chuckles. “Strips of human data, not yet digested.”

Polhaus shakes his head, looking at the mess in the tub. “Too deep. We’ve gone too deep into this thing. Already.”

“John?”

“Fuck!”

“What?”

“No, I’ve got this,” says Polhaus. “Get everyone else out of here.”

“You can clean this up?” asks Nyx. “How?”

“Get everyone and go. I have to call in a favor,” says Polhaus coldly.

“John, I—”

“I—have—got—this.”

“All right.”

“Go.”

Nyx and Zack help Simon gather his gear. Together they leave the home of Gregory Mitchell.

“So I figured out what Simon does,” says Zack.

“What?” asks Nyx.

“He does what I do. He hacks for information. He’s a hacker.”

Simon laughs long and hard at the joke, laughs all the way back to the car.

No one joins him.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

“You folks look lost,” says the muscular man with the shaven head. His two cohorts, equally well muscled but dangling with dreads, nod their agreement. Then all three draw guns and point them at Simon and Nyx. “Tour bus don’t go this way.”

*I do not like guns, Jane. They’re loud and obscene.*

Nyx seems unfazed. She looks up for a moment at the fattening moon, hanging over the South Side like a fist, then back at the trio. “The person we want to see isn’t on the standard tour. From that purple skull on the back of your hand there, I’ll bet you know where we can find Mama Bone-digger.”

*Mama Bone-digger: the Crone. Queen of spades.*

The name had come to Simon as they were driving away from Mitchell’s place the previous night. It was one of those undigested bits of data he was still processing, the largest one. The only one, it turned out, that wasn’t just mental detritus.

*It happens sometimes, Jane. Stray dreams wander into the Dead Water—dreams that have nothing to do with my patient.*

Nyx had told Simon to sleep on it. She knew the name, but would do some more digging. The two of them would then pursue whatever leads she discovered. And that pursuit had brought them, just one day later, here.

After their brief shock at Nyx’s bluntness fades, the three men holding the guns laugh, and that’s the moment that Nyx’s hands flash. Suddenly she’s holding a very large, very military-looking pistol and a red laser dot burns, menacingly, between the eyes of the man with the shaven head. Simon can’t decide from where she produced such a large gun.

*She pulled out that big gun almost as fast as I can produce a scalpel. Eh, Jane?*

The shaven head smiles, once again surprised. “That’s a nifty trick, Goth girlie, sexy even. But there’re still three of us. We still win. Now, I like you, but that just means we shoot your friend in the head and give you a warning shot—in the arm or leg, maybe—before we drag you in the alley there and take turns with that little ass of yours.”

“Huh,” says Nyx. “You and boyfriends think you can keep it up while I’m bleeding all over the place?”

“Why not? Be just like when my girlfriend’s on the rag.” They all three laugh, the sound harsher still.



Nyx grins. The red laser dot travels downward, from the shaven head to the man's crotch. Then something in her tone goes mean.

"You're right, Mr. Potato Head," says Nyx. "I can't imagine a variation on this scenario where my friend and I win. You'll kill us or hurt us bad. But not before I explode your crotch like a melon. Rehabilitation will be painful. Years from now, you'll still tell the story of how you 'won,' but you won't be able to say it was worth it. Some in the neighborhood won't be able to keep a straight face if you do. They'll know. They'll know that every time you're nodding hard, you're fantasizing about going back in time so you can change that one moment and keep your balls."

The red dot glows, unwavering.

Tension.

Silence.

And then it's all broken by the laughter of the man with the clean-shaven head. "Oh, I really, really do like her." He raises his gun and waves his dreadlocked fellows' weapons down. "Come on, Goth girlie. You want to play with voodoo—we take you to see Mama Bone-digger."

Simon smiles, saying, "I'm with her."

They all walk deeper into the neighborhood.

In whispers, Nyx tells Simon bits of Mama Bone-digger's mythos. She's an old voodoo mambo. They say she controls this neighborhood—a patriarch feared and loved. Everyone—criminal, citizen, and gangbanger—follows her lead. "Loved *and* feared," she whispers to Simon, "They say if she licks your shadow, you die."

Nyx pauses and says a little louder, "I thought she died years ago."

"Doesn't matter," says the shaven head man. "Heaven and Hell don't let Mama in. So she stays here."

Alleys and doors and eyes and guns all watch their passing. Simon and Nyx travel through corridors of pungent scents—of sewage and sweet rot, of spices and meats and peppers.

Finally, they are led into a darkened tie-dye shop. "Mama teaches the little ones a trade," says the shaven man. Simon looks at the shirts and sheets and colors. Some are abstract patterns, other pictures. A skeletal man in a top hat, a cigar in one hand, a bottle in the other, stares at Simon with crazed eyes from a sheet on the wall.

"Who d'at?" says a voice from a back room. "Who d'ere? James? D'at be you?"

"Yeah, Mama," says the shaven man. "You have visitors. Pale pilgrims want to speak to the Bone-digger."

A lithe little girl with dusky skin emerges from the shadows. In that same voice she says, "Who is this? Who wants to see Mama?" The speaker is only eight years old, at most, but the voice is not a child's, the eyes are not a child's. Simon watches her hands—he's better with hands—and they are not the flighty hands of a child. They have poise and purpose.

"I'm Nyx. This is Simon."

"Why do you bother Mama Bone-digger, huh?" says the little girl. "Dangerous ju-ju to come to me. Didn't you know that? What you come for—a Petro curse on an enemy? Love potion for the one d'at snubbed you? Or maybe you looking for some necromancy, huh? Dangerous ju-ju if you want to commune with the restless."

Smiling, James leans his head down, between Nyx and Simon, whispering in their ears, "Once upon a time, Mama Bone-digger was dying. She coughed up a black stone. When she died, her great-granddaughter swallowed the stone. Mama remains."

"Mama Bone-digger," says Nyx. "My friend Simon needs to talk to you. He is a necromancer, too."

"Really?" says the little girl, suddenly interested. She walks toward Simon, her little hips swaying in a practiced, sensual manner. She sways like the tide, sways so fluidly it is easy to forget, for a moment, that she's a little girl. Her hand reaches up with serpentine grace, grabbing Simon's black, tattered necktie and pulling him slowly down to her level. Her full lips

part a little, breathing him in. Simon can smell her, smell the sweat and jasmine and vanilla. Her hands caress Simon's face, reading it like a blind woman's hands, like a snake's tongue. She removes his cracked glasses and stares into those malachite skull windows.

"Your handsome scarecrow can come in. You stay out here, girlie. This way," she says, turning toward the back room. She pauses and turns back. "Come on, now. Or are you afraid I'll lick your shadow?" She licks the air suggestively, then enters the back room laughing hard and loud.

*They say, Jane, that you should never walk toward Mama Bone-digger in the evening, with your shadow striding before you. And they say that you should never, ever walk away from Mama Bone-digger in the morning, with your shadow trailing behind you.*

Simon follows into the back room, where the jasmine and vanilla overpower. The little girl's long black fingernails *click-clack*, like spider legs, across an altar that dominates the room. On the altar rests an obsidian cross and a clay bowl filled with oil and a single stone sprinkled with mirror shards.

The scratch-flare of a match, and several purple wax skull candles are lit, their faces melting into strange expressions. Illuminated in the flicker-flame is a scattered deck of playing cards, in various piles on the altar. The two upturned piles catch Simon's eye: queens and jacks.

"I've been playing that game," Simon says, removing his deck from his pocket.

"You playing jacks and queens?"

"Yes."

"How goes the game?"

Simon pulls out the torn-up queen of hearts and lays her fragments on the altar.

"I don't know what happened to her," he says.

Simon lays the queen of clubs on the altar.

"I found my queen of clubs."

Simon lays the queen of spades on the altar.

"And now I've found my lovely queen of spades." Simon kneels and kisses the girl's hand—doing the latter and using the word *lovely* because the Corbies whispered to him, telling him that she'd like that.

The girl gently touches Simon's cheek and smiles. "Oh my. My handsome scarecrow says such things."

"See," whisper the wraith crows.

"And so," says the girl, "you can't find your . . . departed queen of hearts?"

"This is all I have," Simon says, lifting up the card piece with the queen's head. "She's Jane Doe. She's the golden-eyed cadaver."

The girl nods. "I can help you with that. But first—first you gotta tell Mama about your necromancy. Sit." She points to a chair. Simon takes the seat, and she slithers into his lap. "Now, whisper in my ear, sweet scarecrow. Tell me what I want to know. Tell Mama all about your necromancy."

Simon whispers, explaining as best he can, the Dead Water, his addiction, his patients, and all the joys and loves and secrets and heartaches one can find in that Y-shaped door.

The girl listens. When Simon finishes, she looks at him with a wicked grin.

"I can help you, Simon Meeks," she says. "But you gotta show Mama your necromancy." She hops off his lap and rummages through a trunk, carefully extracting something large and leather. Then she gently lays the bundle—one almost too big for her little arms to carry—on the altar.

"This is my Henry," she says, opening the leather bag. Inside, arms crossed, rests a shrunken body. It's mostly bones held together with tendons and decayed skin.

"Hello, Henry," Simon says.

"My Henry died many years ago. Though I've tried, I cannot talk to Henry. I never found out who did this to him. Some move on, past the station, across the water. Some souls are beyond my necromancy. But you, handsome scarecrow, your necromancy be different. Maybe your necromancy be not exactly necromancy."

"I don't . . . I've never worked on a body this old."

"Expand your horizons, child," she says, handing Simon a dagger. Simon feels the blades heft.

*It wasn't a scalpel, Jane, but it was sharp.*

Simon takes a flask from his pocket and drinks down all the green witchfire from inside. The ghost tree bends and grows and the Corbies caw and sing at the unexpected treat. In the back room the little girl watches with that wicked grin built of many, many more years than those lips or teeth. She watches as Simon feels the Dead Water enter his body with a shudder—as he cuts into the papery skin and the withered guts.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Simon comes to, full of dead love.

The girl stares at him, mouth hanging open, utterly fascinated. She looks at him in a new light. He looks at her differently, too, seeing her through Dead Water eyes. And they stare at each other: the girl with a crone in her belly, the man with a ghost tree growing in his head.

"Henry says, 'Hi.'"

"What . . . what did he say?" asks the girl, for the first time faltering, off her rhythm.

"LeRoy killed him. Did it for the money. But he never got the money."

"Where—?"

"It's buried in Hyde Park. Henry said you would know where."

"Did you tell Henry that I—?"

"I did."

The girl giggles and laughs. "Thank you, Simon. Here—" She rummages through another trunk, pulls out a bit of cloth. Simon steps forward, making a faint sound in his closed mouth.

"That's—"

"Yes, honey. D'is belongs to your golden-eyed cadaver—your queen of hearts."

Folded in the cloth is a left arm, the stump sewn shut, the flesh persevered in some peculiar manner. The bluish tint to the dry skin is even deeper than Simon remembered.

"May I?" Simon says, trembling arms extended.

"You may, my handsome scarecrow, my ragdoll lover, my Rada doll. You helped Mama and she help you."

"Who?" Simon whispers. "Where did you—?"

"From what you say before, you know the man—Reeves. When I need things for my practice, I buy from him."

"Did he offer you any other . . . parts?"

Mama shakes her head slowly. "No. I was hoping it be the left arm of a sorceress—good for mighty powerful ju-ju. The body man said it was, but he lied. She something special, sure, but she not a sorceress, not exactly. When you was telling your story, I realized what I had, what that liar had brought me." An awful light flashes in her eyes. "He pay for that dishonesty, honey. He pay big." And then it is gone and another, more feral look takes its place. "I think I want to be helping you anyway. Mama think, maybe you're not a man at all. Mama think, maybe you're a ghede spirit taken flesh."

The girl hands Simon the arm, and then wraps her arms around his waist, gently, expertly, rocking her pelvis against Simon as she speaks. Through his Dead Water eyes, Simon finds it harder and harder to see the little girl, instead, underneath, finding a full-grown, seductive woman. And underneath that, something far, far older.

"Spirits of sex and death," she chants, "sex and death. We at our most human when we're birthing, dying, fucking—all on our backs and the jazz-skull laugh. I've been ridden by

many ghede during many ceremonies. Did you come down to earth to ride Mama physically, Simon-skull-spirit? You make me moan? Do you have what ghede have? What Papa Ghede got? What Baron Samedi got? Wicked-rictus-grin humor and a great, big—

Mama Bone-digger's hand snakes between Simon's legs, groping. Simon shudders and takes a startled step backward.

"I'm sorry. I can't . . . I—" he stammers.

"Oh. My handsome scarecrow, my ragdoll lover, has a sweetheart." Mama Bone-digger looks at the door as if through the door. "But it ain't your queen of clubs." She looks at the arm in Simon's hand and points. "It's her."

"Yes," Simon says.

The girl claps, maniacally laughing. "Oh my, oh my, oh my! What to do when the romance don't die? How ghastly. How romantic. You go, Simon Meeks. You finish your love story. You're finding your queens . . . but what about your jacks?"

"I'll find them, too," Simon says.

"Tell me—your queen of clubs, she and her friends like you, don't they?"

"Yes," says Simon, a smile manifesting.

*I'd never felt that, Jane—camaraderie and friends. I liked it. I liked it an awful lot.*

"That's because, my handsome scarecrow, you're a Rada doll. Soon though. Soon you must be a Petro doll, and that will scare them."

*I didn't know what she meant then. I do now. Eh, Jane?*

Simon leaves, holding Jane's hand.

## INTERLUDE: The Cookbook

"Gotta move on, Alex," he said. "*This* is a whole new level. Don't be sad. Be a multitude. We've got to lead by example."

Gabe had been trying to cheer me up.

"What do you call that?" I ask.

"Moloch."

"Really?"

"Moloch, Moloch, Moloch."

"Smells good."

"Wait till you get it in your belly."

I look at the stove.

"Uh, Gabe—do you even know the meaning of the word *satire*?"

"No," he says foolishly and then grins.

I finally laugh. It feels good, and I can't stop.

And that explains the dog-eared copy of Swift's essays, open to "A Modest Proposal," resting on his kitchen table while the little legs and hands bobbed up and down in his stew pot.



## CHAPTER 19

The rain came in the evening, cold and violent and staccato. Officer Polhaus's call came soon thereafter, curt and quick and staccato—ending in a “Get over here, *now*.” Then Simon was walking in the rain. And then the faces appeared, eyeless from shadows and featureless from the constant, wet spray.

And then the pain.

The wet crunch of knuckles is internal. The October rain swallows the sound of the car door slamming and Simon's choked-back responses.

“Where is it?” asks a voice like a cement mixer.

The second slam of the car door elicits less pops from Simon's ruined left hand, like bubble wrap that's almost used up but you look for those last few snaps. Another wet crunch and moan in the nauseous vacuum of space.

*There are twenty-seven bones in the human hand, Jane. I named them as they broke.*

*Proximal phalanx.*

*Middle phalanx.*

*Distal phalanx.*

“You don't start talking, cocksucker, and we're going to crunch you down to screams and piss.”

*Metacarpals.*

*Trapezium.*

*Trapezoid.*

The man with the cement truck voice grabs Simon's left wrist and squeezes. Simon moans. Frustrated, the man squeezes harder, but Simon's response is only marginally louder.

*Capitate.*

*Hamate.*

*Scaphoid.*

Simon never saw them coming. Faces in the rain. Something hit him in the back of the head and his glasses fell away

and the world became a blur through his one good eye. Rain-blank faces and empty coats out of the night.

*Meet Club Wendigo, Jane.*

Four of them.

“The *question*, Meeks: where is the hammer?”

*Lunate.*

*Triquetral.*

*Pisiform.*

*I could include the sesamoid bones, Jane. They broke, but they're really just small, ossified nodes embedded in the tendons. Just glorified nodes.*

“Afraid—I don’t have it—with me,” Simon says into the cement sidewalk, wondering how close he is to a skeleton friend.

One of them drops Polaroid pictures on the wet ground, in front of Simon’s face. Each one depicts a human body, killed in various ways. Bad ways.

“See that, Meeks,” says another voice, *not* the cement truck mixer. “We did all these. I snap a pic each time. I carry them with me to show fucks like you. Truth to tell, I take them ’cause they get me off later. But if they scare some sense into you, put the ‘fuck’ in ‘do not fuck with us,’ then that just sweetens the pot. Now, answer the question.”

It starts in the back of Simon’s throat—a painful hiccup. And it spreads to his lungs, to his shoulders, his stomach, his face. Simon laughs. It hurts his hand, but he laughs. It hurts so bad he vomits, but then he starts laughing again. He is going to die, but he laughs and the Corbies laugh with him.

“They had us at hello,” cackle the wraith crows.

Simon howls at the thought of it—showing *him* pictures of cadavers.

*Seen worse, Jane: faces of soup swimming in buckshot, bodies so bloated soft with decay the meat comes off the bone easier than pulled pork.*

“Might as well terrify an accountant by throwing saved receipts at him,” laugh the Corbies.

Simon is going to die and he keeps laughing.

"What the fuck's so funny?" says the cement mixer voice.

Simon points to a picture. "Time of death, less than an hour prior to photo." Simon points to the next picture and the next one. "Dead at least forty-eight hours. Dead twelve to eighteen hours. Dead three or four hours. But this one . . . this one is difficult, because of the burns, you see. Did he die in the fire? I have to ask myself: Is there soot in the air passages? If *no*, then I have to ask myself: Is there carbon monoxide in the blood?"

The cement mixer kicks Simon in the stomach.

"If *no*," Simon wheezes, "do burns on the body have the inflamed edge of a vital reaction?"

The cement truck man curses, steps back, winds up, and kicks. A rib snaps in Simon's chest. He can't breath. But the words bleed through the coughs and wheezes.

"If *no* . . . then do injuries . . . show signs—signs of underlying . . . bleeding? *Yes* indicates that . . . the victim may have been dead . . . when the fire started . . . which suggests arson to conceal homicide."

Cement truck does not kick again, only sighs. The other voice chimes in: "This town is full of crazy fucks. Lenny, get the camera." One of Lenny's shoes squeaks, the filthy water sucking in and out of a hole in its sole. Simon stops laughing, caught in a monomaniacal fascination of implied metaphors.

"Laugh, and the world laughs with you," screech the Corbies.

Over his head, something clicks, a gun or a knife.

A pregnant pause, of the eight-months-along-and-showing variety, in the hammer rain.

The moment breaks at a "*Pst!*" that somehow sounds over the storm, coming from a nearby alley mouth. From the ground, through one blurry eye, Simon spies an indistinct figure—the shadows seem to leak out of the alley, drawn to him by some super-weird anti-blackhole gravity.

*My shadow, Jane.*

The fourth man, not Lenny, nor the cement truck, nor the voice with the pretty, pretty Polaroid pictures, advances toward the alleyway. The shadowed stranger backs up, down the alley's throat.

"Check it out, Mike," says the Polaroid picture man.

The shadowed figure backs farther into the belly of the alley, which ends in a T-intersection with another wall. He backs deeper into darkness, rounds the corner, and ducks to the left of the intersection.

Mike's shoes do not squeak, just clap wet pavement in pursuit, into alley mouth, down throat, and into the dark belly. At the T-intersection, Mike looks uneasily to the left and shrugs.

"I'm not seeing any—"

Dark blur of speed—something—*fast*—from the right. It slams into Mike's back—*hard*—propelling him left.

Out of sight.

Another pregnant pause, this one only five months knocked-up. It's that silence after a big dog growls, before the bite.

"Mike?" calls out cement truck.

"Michael?" calls out Polaroid man.

Nothing.

A scream ruptures the cold, wet membrane of quiet. The scream comes in staccato bursts, like the rain. Motion. Simon, sees three sets of legs splashing down the alley mouth, tumbling down the throat after their fellow into the blackness of the belly. Then the screams multiply, layer, and crosshatch into one another, mate with one another and give birth to whole new nano-second generations of cries. A hard wind scatters the Polaroids and the screams. Neighborhood dogs bark—first one, then another and another. The yelps radiate and spread into howls.

Simon picks up his glasses. The screams and howls echo around him as he runs, staggeringly, his world punctuated by the pain in his left hand and ribs.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rain had died out by the time Simon got to Oak Woods Cemetery—not all that far from where he had told Mama Bone-digger where to find her Henry’s buried treasure.

“What the hell happened to you?” asks Polhaus when he sees Simon, beaten, wet, his left arm in a makeshift sling.

Simon tells him.

“Shit,” replies Polhaus. “Okay, we get you to a doctor and we tell Nyx and the others what went down. The Sanctuary needs to know if things are getting more dangerous. But first, you okay?”

Simon takes a moment to process the concern, then nods.

“Let’s get this done first then. Don’t know if it’s connected to Jane Doe, but it’s weird. A friend gave me a heads-up on it, so it’s all ours, until it becomes someone else’s problem in the morning.”

They walk through a squishy landscape, all puddles and mud. Polhaus clicks on a flashlight. Simon does the same. The old cop shows the young forensic pathologist the first of the defiled graves.

*All those open graves, wet like fresh wounds, Jane. Like fresh Y-incisions.*

“Soil’s torn away. Dug with haste. Frantic,” Simon says. He cradles the flashlight with his left arm while pulling out his flask and drinking the last bits of absinthe.

The Corbies stir.

“Got scratch marks on the stones, like nails,” says Polhaus.

Simon feels the marks with his right hand. “No practical purpose. They were made after the digging. In frustration.”

Polhaus helps Simon into the grave.

“Coffin torn open,” says Simon. “Cadaver pulled out.” The body is old, shriveled, mostly gone. “This is really a job for a forensic anthropologist, a bone detective. I am more of a flesh detective, a guts detective.”

“Body’s old, but the crime’s fresh,” says Polhaus. “Just give me your opinions, Meeks. What’s your prognosis?”

“I think he is dead.”

“Funny.”

Torn, dry meat. Jerky. The decayed clothing on the abdomen is shredded open, the desiccated belly torn.

“Something tried to eat the cadaver,” says Simon.

“That’s what I thought,” says Polhaus.

“The other graves are like this?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Four.”

“The bodies—are all of them chewed on?”

“Yes.”

“But not finished.”

“No. What’s your thought?”

“Four graves. That is a lot of digging, a lot of work. Whatever did this did not get the results it wanted, so it moved on. It hoped to get better results on the next grave, and then the next. But all that digging and all that work still left it without desired results. It’s enough to cause a great deal of frustration.” Simon points to the scratches on the tombstone.

“You think there was a group doing this?” asks Polhaus with a grunt, as he helps Simon out of the wet grave.

“No. I think just one.”

“Why’s that?”

Simon shrugs.

*Because the Corbies said so. But I did not know how to tell him that. Eh, Jane?*

Near the graves, the duo finds puddles of vomit, stews of withered bits of flesh, shreds of clothing, and the faint residue of embalming chemicals.

“Little wet to say, but the tracks look all screwed up over there,” says Polhaus. “Like it was dragging something.”

“Yes.”

“But all the bodies are in their graves.”

“None of them would be that heavy.”

"So, what are we saying?" says Polhaus. "It had some other victims? It brought them through here for some freaky purpose? Maybe digging up the graves was just part of some queer ritual. . . ."

Simon looks around, through his cracked lenses, through absinthe-green eyes, through the thousand-thousand eyes of the murder in his head.

"No," says Simon. "We're operating under a conceptual fallacy."

"How so?"

"None of you has said it—the word—during our talks about Apex Consumers, Club Wendigo, and the rest. But it's there, in the pauses. You give each other looks. And then Gregory Mitchell is dead, fingers bitten off. Now this. We're here because the cadavers are partially eaten."

"Yeah," says Polhaus. "Maybe."

"Cannibalism?"

"I guess we've been thinking it. Nasty word."

"Yes. It represents the grossest violation of etiquette a host can commit on his guest."

Officer Polhaus squints at Simon. "The things in your head scare me."

"You're breathing heavy. Your face is red. Your pulse is elevated. You are more excited than I've ever seen you."

"My pulse?"

"You think we are close to seeing something. Something unnamed. The thing you and the Sanctuary want a glimpse of. Something from the dark."

Polhaus's head tilts, letting him see Simon in a different way. "Fair enough. For a lack of a better word, let's just say 'monster.'"

"Right," says Simon. "We are out here, in the cemetery, looking for a monster, a man-eater, something formidable, ghastly, and frightening." He shakes his head. "That's where we falter. That's the fallacy."

"What?"

"We should not be looking for a predator in its prime. What came here was a deviation."

“Deviation?”

“Yes,” says Simon, the Corbies whispering in his ears. “If we suppose there are some kind of man-eaters, human or in-human, we can assume they do not feed off of cadavers harvested from a cemetery. This does not happen every night.”

“No,” says Polhaus. “Far as I know, this doesn’t go on. We’d notice all the holes in the ground.”

“Then they—the predators—regularly feed off of the living or at least get their dead fresher.”

“You’re getting a lot of mileage out of an ever-expanding hypothetical.”

“You do not see stories of these eaten people on the ten o’clock news, do you?”

“No.”

“So we can suppose our hypothetical monsters get away with it. You said it yourself—that all of us are in out of our depth when it comes to the dark.”

“You pay attention to what I say?”

Simon ignores the sarcastic prod and continues: “The only reason we found this evidence so easily is that we are looking for a deviation of the monster, an anomaly. People irrationally fear getting bit by a bat. But the only time bats are clumsy enough to come in contact with a human, and bite, is when they are sick.”

Polhaus chuckles.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Polhaus says. “Never heard you talk this much before, except when you gave witness at the Sanctuary . . . and at the Twiss trial. Go on.”

“There are coyotes in the city. Not just strays, but a sizable breeding population.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“They are the only large-sized predatory mammal that has increased its numbers since humans came through this area. Large predators, but they are invisible. You don’t see them,



even as road kill. They are clever and stealthy. They learn to eat what's available. In the suburbs, they hunt in packs and eat the surplus deer. In the city they eat trash and squirrels and rats. Native Americans called them 'ghosts of the prairie.' You don't see one except by chance or injury or illness."

"So you think a coyote's been doing all this?" says Polhaus with another chuckle.

"Have you ever been to the Field Museum, Officer Polhaus?"

"Yeah."

"Have you seen the two stuffed lions? The Man-eaters of Tsavo?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Two male lions, man-eaters. They killed over one hundred and forty men before they were shot."

"No shit?"

"What caused these particular lions to be such formidable predators? But that very question sent them down the wrong investigative path. They were looking for the reason why these lions were more powerful—the fact that they ate humans makes them, in our minds, more frightening and thus more powerful. That is, in fact, an egotistical error. The lions were not more potent predators; they were handicapped. A recent examination of the skulls determined that the lions suffered from a gum disease. Eating tough game was too painful. Humans are softer, easier to chew."

"We've got a handicapped monster." Polhaus chews the words, tickled by the concept.

"A deviant," says Simon. "The only bats or coyotes we catch are sick."

"Sick critter can't catch anyone too lively, so he comes here, digs up the corpses. Chows down. Gets sick on old jerky and formaldehyde, and pukes up. Repeat."

"Yes."

"If the hypothetical is true."

"Yes. It would be a mistake to latch on to any preconceptions this early."

The two wander—the old cop, the young pathologist. Simon sees a statue, an angel. The wormwood twists his brain and she is Jane. Simon reaches out a hand to touch the angel's face when something swipes his legs out from under him.

Simon falls.

His leg throbs with lacerations.

Simon scrambles backward on all fours.

It looks like a man, but it is gaping at Simon with a mouth open too wide, and then the mouth opens wider still, a mouth full of long, predatory teeth, overcrowded with teeth and teeth and teeth. The probing tongue feels the place, in the sod, where Simon had been a second ago. The thing's skin is chalk white. Black eyes, doll's eyes, staring with empty want.

*Had I screamed into those eyes, Jane, I would have heard an echo.*

The doll-eyed thing bites into the sod where Simon had been, spits out the earthy mouthful. Then it looks up and moans pleadingly.

*I wish I could forget that moan, Jane.*

White hands end in ivory claws. Those ivory claws dig into the wet earth, and the creature crawls toward Simon. No legs. It crawls on powerful arms, scuttles like a pale lobster, dragging his body behind.

Moans.

It is hungry.

It is hunger.

The world stops with the explosion of the gunshot. The exit wound pulps the pasty creature's head. It slumps to the ground, twitching. Still.

Simon crawls to his feet, with one good hand. Polhaus lowers his gun.

"What was that?" asks the fat man.

"I think it is a handicapped monster," answers the scarecrow. Stillness.

Polhaus slumps down on his expansive rump, sitting with Simon in the mud. "Oh, God . . . oh, God . . . oh, God . . .

God . . .” Simon watches and wonders if this is a prelude to another broken doll, another Mr. Knock, or any of the other souls crippled by exposure to the dark.

The laughter catches Simon off guard. Polhaus tries to choke it down, stuff it back with a meaty knuckle, but he erupts, belly shaking. The full laughter builds up and up, and he’s bouncing up to his feet, bouncing up and down in child-like victory.

“Take that, fuckers!” he screams, flicking off the darkness above, like a jolly lightning rod.

“Oh, God! Thank you, Simon!”

The hug catches Simon off guard more than the laughter had. The crushing embrace lifts Simon clean off the ground; he is smothered in all that is Officer John Polhaus. There is nowhere to go, nowhere to escape, nothing for Simon to do but listen to the whispered confessional in his ear:

“I’m sorry, Simon. For—you know, treating you like shit. I just thought you . . . you were creepy and that you were part of the weirdness going on in the city. I mean, I knew Jane when she was alive, and I thought you were one of . . . well. Almost forty years! I’ve been holding on to all this. I saw my first weirdness early on. That’s why I’m a career beat. I tried to make noise, but I learned better fast. A number of CPD see it. You make noise and get thrown in the loony bin, or you go after it and die—or worse—or you let it slide. Survive. Do what you can, when you can. I’ve been sliding so long. The fuckers! It all made me feel so . . . powerless, so emasculated.”

John lets go of Simon, the younger man almost falling back to the ground.

“But not tonight!” yells John, both arms raised. “We got to fight back. We got to get one of them. Feels good. So good. I don’t care what happens after. You hear me!” The old cop’s voice echoes through the cemetery.

The silence, after the echo, lingers for a bit. Polhaus fishes in a pocket.

"You're a good friend, Simon."

"Er . . . thank you."

"I got something for you."

"You what?"

"Not flowers or nothing. But before her cadaver disappeared and everyone went forgetful, I did some snooping around the case. Like I said, I knew her from the Sanctuary, from before. She helped me with—well, anyway, I kept tabs."

John pulls out a slip of paper.

"That fingerprint you lifted hit. Hector Gomez."

*Hector Gomez: the Hanging Man. Jack of diamonds.*

John hands the slip of paper to Simon.

"Here. This is the name and contact info of a source of mine. Ziggy will know where Hector is. Just, don't go it alone. Won't go into all the gory details now, but Hector is a monster. You got friends to help you. Just thought you should know about it, is all."

"Thank you . . . John."

They both look at the creature at their feet.

"What now?" they both ask in unison.

\* \* \* \* \*

"When the pain comes, squeeze this," says Nyx.

Simon squeezes Bob.

The dildo, not the sledgehammer.

He recalls the first time he met this beguiling girl with purple lips.

"You can make some noise, you know," she says. "I won't think you're any less manly or anything."

"I have a high pain threshold."

"Oh."

"I have trouble expressing anger. I suffered night terrors as a child."

"Oh?"

"Those three things are physiologically connected."

"Oh," Nyx says, carefully splinting Simon's fingers and wrapping his left hand. "You really should go to a hospital."

"I will," Simon says, squeezing Bob.

She'd met Simon at the tattoo shop. He'd tried to tell her the story of everything that had gone on at the cemetery and before, but could not get a word in as she pulled him inside, got him dry, cleaned and bandaged his clawed leg. When she got to his hand, he finally told her about his beating, the cemetery, and the thing wrapped in a tarp in his trunk.

Nyx leans in closer, working on Simon's hand. Their eyes catch. And hold. For a beat.

"You and the Sanctuary," says Simon. "You really do enjoy the company of misfits."

"I like flaws," says Nyx. "I like wrinkled clothes and tattered jackets and raggedy friends. The only problem with falling in love with people's flaws, with seeing the exquisitely awkward, late-blooming grace of the misfit, is the frustration caused when they don't see it in themselves, don't believe you when you point it out. But, all in all, I still love those pretty flaws, those deviations from symmetry."

Simon smiles, blinking behind cracked lenses.

"I'm sorry," says Nyx. "That sounds awfully contrived, doesn't it? You should see my horrible poetry."

"I liked it."

Nyx grins back.

"Your father wasn't really an incubus, was he?" says Simon.

"There are worse things than not knowing your father."

Nyx smiles sadly as she continues working on Simon's hand, saying, "The Inquisition said that God gives demons permission to wander the earth. The more we offend God, the more permission they have to torment us. The incubus often prey on women during holy feasts, to offend God. But those feast days were taken from pagan feast days. They correspond

with full moons, and any cop can tell you that all the crazies and predators come out to play during a full moon.”

Nyx finishes with Simon’s hand.

“They say that an incubus doesn’t have a physical body, but can manifest by gathering earthly particles or dust. They just come out of nowhere.”

Nyx leans in close, cleaning a scrape Simon did not even realize was on his forehead.

“An incubus doesn’t have real eyes; they see spiritually, the better to find you. An incubus doesn’t have real ears; they hear thoughts, the better to catch you. An incubus doesn’t have a real mouth, but they can form an artificial tongue, teeth, and lips . . . the better to seduce you.”

Nyx applies peroxide to the scrape and Simon flinches slightly.

“Squeeze Bob if you need to,” she says. “In Germany, if a mother gripped a horse collar to ease the pain of childbirth, it was said the child would become something called an alp. It entered the victim through the mouth with its long tongue or in the form of mist or as a snake.”

Nyx finishes with the scrape on Simon’s face, but she does not move away. Her face remains close to his, a single tear stained with mascara running down her cheek.

“Villagers used to burn the babies out in the yard. They’d look for little batwings or black eyes or little tails on their little bodies. Sometimes . . . sometimes I wonder if my mother ever wished she lived in a simpler time, when those kinds of reminders could go up in smoke. I never knew my father. The cops never found a name to give to my mom.”

“Some mythologies are more horrifying, but more livable,” Simon says.

Nyx is momentarily lost in the understanding of his malachite eyes.

“Yeah, ” she says at last. “I built a whole life and identity around this particular one.”

“Strange world,” says Simon. “When the monsters you create turn out to be real.”

Nyx nods. “Sometimes,” she says, “I stand in front of a mirror and try to stretch the batwings and wag the tail I know must be there. Then the pain comes and what can you do but squeeze?”

Simon gently brushes the dark-stained tear from Nyx’s face, caresses her cheek, his thumb brushing her lower lip. Those purple lips part with a breath. “Sorry,” he says, “I’m very tactile. Just wanted to know what that shade of purple feels like.”

Nyx’s eyes flutter and she smiles and leans in closer.

“Nyx. . . ?”

“Don’t say another word, you silly boy. I’ve wanted to kiss you since we hid in the closet.”

They’re close enough that he feels the breath of each word on his face, and then she dives in the rest of the way, and Simon tastes those purple lips for a sweet moment . . . before he jumps out of the chair, flinging Bob across the room.

“I—I,” he sputters. “I—I can’t . . . sorry, but . . . I . . . thank you?”

Simon Meeks flees the scene.

Nyx watches from the shop window.

“Shoot,” she says, giving a devastating pout to no one in particular.

## CHAPTER 20

"Hello?"

"Sorry . . . sorry . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"Clara? Is that you?"

"It looks so good. I . . . I can't. I'm sorry, Nyx."

"Clara, what's wrong?"

"Special delivery. Oh, why'd I have to open it? I . . . think I knew what it was. I think—oh, God. I think I could smell it. I—"

"Clara, slow down what's—?"

"I'm falling off the wagon! I think I'm going to eat it. It's so red, Nyx. It's so very, very red."

"Clara, listen to me. Do not—"

"I think I knew who sent it, too. It's redder even. Dripping. I can't—oh, Nyx. I think I'm going to eat it . . . I can't—"

"Clara, listen to my voice. You don't have to do this alone. I'm coming over. Do not do anything until I get there. Clara? Clara!"



Simon drinks the green.

Then he looks at Jane—her lovely arm and lovely head—preserved as best he knows how, in the refrigeration unit he had installed in his basement.

"This is romance, right?"

She does not answer.

He understands.

More absinthe and the Corbies are ready. One handed. Simon could do this one handed.

"With one arm tied behind my back," he says.

*Boys always want to impress girls. Eh, Jane?*



Simon takes his scalpel and looks down at the chalk-white monster. No legs. Grubby clothes. Dog tags. Doll's eyes. And teeth and teeth and teeth.

"What pumpkin did you hatch out of?" Simon says.  
He cuts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Where are we?  
*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"He's dead," Nyx says. There is moaning and a radio commercial in the background.

"What," says Simon, over the phone.  
Her voice wavers. "Officer Polhaus."  
"John?"

Simon slumps to the basement floor. He'd told Polhaus everything he'd discovered in the Dead Water. The creature on his table had a name: Billy Reinard. Billy was a war vet, a war hero—lost both legs—chair bound—down and out. Billy frequented a shelter and soup kitchen at a local Catholic church. The priest there, Father Gary, was always so nice. Billy liked Father Gary. But Billy had a confession to give Simon, in the Dead Water: he had stolen from Father Gary. "Didn't mean any harm," he said. He was just so sick of the same soup, the same sandwiches served at the shelter. Father Gary left his office and there, on his desk, was his lunch. "Just a bite, mind you. I took just a bite." The rare meat in that sandwich was the sweetest thing Billy had ever tasted; it gave him the purest joy he'd felt in years. Every day, if he could manage, he stole a strip of the red, red meat that Father Gary always had in his personal lunch. "Just a taste, mind you." It was so good.

But then the dreams started. Horrible dreams—eating friend and enemy alike on the battlefield. Eating nuns and priests served raw and dripping, at the soup kitchen. Eating everything he had lost or wanted: his legs, money, women, a sports car. Eating it all a bite at a time and swallowing the sun as a chaser. By the end of the week, Billy woke from his nightmares, in a familiar alley, a dripping trail of innards leading from his mouth to the torn-open belly of a friend he bummed smokes off of.

After that, there was little left of Billy but the hunger.

As it turned out, Father Gary had been in trouble not so long ago. “He’s known to harbor the occasional illegal alien,” Polhaus had said on the phone. “Got in trouble from time to time, but was always seen as meaning well. Only ever got a slap on the wrist. Oh Christ!”

“What?” Simon had asked.

“Aliens and homeless. They’re both bodies that no one misses. Easy meat.”

The last Simon knew, Polhaus had gone to the church to check it out, maybe talk with Father Gary.

“What happened?” Simon asks Nyx when he snaps out of the reverie.

“I don’t know, exactly,” says Nyx. Simon can hear the tears she’s holding back. “The details are sketchy. Nothing on the news except that something violent happened at the church. No comments other than he’s dead.”

More moaning in the background.

“We have other problems,” says Nyx. “Clara is . . . not well.”

“ . . . sorry . . . sorry . . . sorry. I want to apologize . . . I want to take it back . . . ” says a voice cutting into the phone, a voice sounding something like Clara’s.

“Meet me at the body shop,” Nyx sighs.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"I want to apologize . . . I'm sorry . . ." says Clara from the tattoo chair. She looks into her hands. "Oh . . . I miss my hair." It had been coming out, in handfuls, since the car trip over.

With a neutral face, Simon examines Clara. Her skin is pale, not quite chalk white. Her once-blue eyes are black holes swimming in a shrinking field of white. Her teeth are falling out. Simon can make out tiny white points protruding from the gums where the tooth had been, and—

Clara makes a noise in the back of her throat.

"Simon, be nimble," mutter the Corbies. "Simon, be quick!"

Simon pulls his hand back an instant before Clara's mouth snaps shut.

"Oh . . . sorry. I'm sorry Simon. I didn't mean to—sorry . . . sorry . . . I'm so very sorry . . ."

"It's okay, Clara. It'll be okay."

*My bedside manner is no good, Jane. Not with the living.*

"It's like what we found at the cemetery," Simon whispers to Nyx. "I think it happens in stages, like a sickness. The nightmares first, and then . . ."

Clara squeezes Bob. It does not help.

"What should we do?" Nyx asks.

"I'm not sure," whispers Simon. "If it progresses further, we might have to restrain her."

Nyx glances at the stained bandages on his hand. "I thought you were getting that hand looked at."

"I will."

Nyx shakes her head and turns to the woman in the chair. "Clara, listen to me. I know it feels bad now, but we're going to get to the bottom of this. Promise."

"Thank you, Nyx. I . . . wish—I'm sorry for causing trouble. I—I wish I could take it back."

"We need to regroup," says Nyx. "But not everyone's answering my calls. I'll take Clara and go round up some of the others. I need you to go get Zack. He's probably on his computer. And—wait. Clara, what did you do to Bob?"

“Sorry. I’m so sorry . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

Samantha taught aura reading and meditative defenses against psychic vampirism on Tuesdays. She did not know any defenses against the teeth that cracked open her skull or the tongue that cleaned her brainpan white.

They will never find her body.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jolly Roger does not move.

Byron bobs his head, nervously plucks his feathers and caws at his master.

“The mimes become its food!” shrieks the corvid.

Jolly Roger does not move.

Ignoring ancient pacts and disobeying older laws, the carrion bird refuses to eat what is left of his master.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Subject: Zack,” Simon says.

Zack sits at his computer desk.

The lock on the door had been easy for Simon to open. The smell had made finding Zack easier. He had defecated in his pants, several times over.

“Subject is dehydrated and malnourished to an improbable degree.”

The snap of blue gloves and Simon examines the bites along the arms.

“Subject gnawed on his own arms.”

On the computer screen, blinking with promises and testimonials, is the Apex Consumers home page: *Take a bigger bite out of life!*

Kenny slides behind a dumpster—dirty, knees scraped, body bruised. He knows he’s going to die. The woman from the special chat line whispers through his cell phone that he won’t and then she moans and then she says, “Oh, Kenny. You’re turning me on so bad . . .”

“Candy, I’m scared. What do I do now?” he says, feeling the pounding in his chest.

“You’re doing all right, baby. You’re doing so good. Now just move a little to the right . . .”

Kenny slides to the right, behind the dumpster and against a brick wall.

“Oh! Mmmmmm,” says Candy. “Oh, that’s perfect . . . oh, God. Yes. Mmmmm. Just hold that position for me baby. Just a little longer . . . and be very quiet.”

Scraping steps.

Snuffling and sniffing.

The steps move away.

“That’s good, Kenny. That’s so gooooooooooooood. I’m getting wet. Just stay where you are for a little longer. And you can make noise now, if you want.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” gasps Kenny. “I’m dead. So dead.”

“No, lover. You make it out okay. Some of the others won’t be so lucky, though. Poor Zack. And be careful of Clara. She will either kill some of your friends . . . or maybe she’ll save them.”

Silence, then Candy’s breaths come quicker and quicker, turn into panting.

“Kenny? Are . . . you ready—oh—when I say ‘go’ . . . you run, to the right . . . and then you run as fast as you can . . . until you get to the Sanctuary. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Now! Oh! Do it now!”

Kenny runs.

“Yes . . . mmm . . . yes!” screams Candy.

Kenny turns right.

"Oh, yeah. Right there," moans Candy. "That's it, baby. Keep doing it. Run harder. Harder, harder! Yes! Almost there. Oh, God. Yes . . . yes . . . yes!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"I apologize . . . I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to," says the muffled voice of Clara, from inside the trunk of Nyx's car.

"We know, Clara," says Nyx as she stands in the old church parking lot, examining the wounded boy's bleeding arm. His name is Jordan, one of the newer Sanctuary members. Nyx doesn't even warn him about the pain before she applies the stitches.

"We're dropping like flies," she mutters.

Finally everyone gets into their vehicles, grateful for the distance from Clara's drone of apologies. Only Nyx and Simon, sitting in Nyx's car, hear the apologies finally fade, only to be replaced by growls and scratching.

"As you can see, a lot of us didn't show," says Nyx. She notices Simon looking at the blood on her shirt. "Little Robin, she's such a good girl. One of those, huh, one of those *things* came and—well, good thing Robin's damned skilled at hide 'n' seek. That gave me enough time to kill it before it could get her."

Simon has heard snatches of other, similar horror stories from many in the parking lot. The worst of the tales remain unsaid.

A sudden shout draws their attention.

"I'm cumming, I'm cumming!" yells Kenny as he rams against Nyx's car. He thuds against the passenger side door in a gasping heap, the worse for wear. When Simon rolls down the window, Kenny holds up his sweaty cell phone. "She . . . she wanted . . . to talk . . . to you," he says, handing the phone to Simon.

"Hello?" says Simon.

"Oh my. You have a handsome voice."

"Who is this?"

"I'm Candy. You can call me Mother, if you'd like, you naughty little boy."

"Why would I—?"

"I'll be seeing you very soon, Simon."

The line silences. Simon sees the flash in his mind, in the memory of the static and the signal, the scalpel-scrawled words on his wall: *The Mother*.

*Candy: the Mother. Queen of diamonds.*

"This is all pretty bad," Nyx says as Simon drops the phone out the window, onto Kenny's lap. "But we actually have contingencies for this sort of thing." Her purple lips are curled and bleak. "Procedures. A safe house in Silver Lake, Wisconsin. Everyone thought we were being too paranoid. Ha."

Simon nods, trying to ignore the Corbie song in his head.

Nyx gives a signal and all the cars rumble to life.

"You're coming, Simon. Right?"

He shakes his head.

"Simon, you—"

"I have things to do."

Just perhaps, Nyx, clever girl, catches a hint of obsession in his green eyes—the mad Corbies—the wormwood limbs poking through. Wordlessly she watches Simon get out of the car, give up his seat to Kenny. And then she leads the caravan away.

All the while the Corbie song continues in Simon's head. They'd been singing it all day, counting down. Nearly finished.

". . . one fell off and now it's dead. Two little monkeys jumping on a bed; one fell off and now it's dead . . ."

And then there was Simon.

## INTERLUDE: Fixed

Don't have no ghost stories, Joe, not like this place. But pour me another drink and I'll tell you something.

The animal clinic I work at—as shelters go, it's a pretty good place to be if you're a dog. It's in an upscale neighborhood, gets good funding. I mean, we have a frickin' masseuse and a no-kill policy. Most we do with a stray is wash it, neuter it, and give it some decent meals. The dogs don't bite much; I think they know they're getting the good treatment.

Well, it wasn't a dark and stormy night, but almost a year ago, all the dogs lose it. I mean *freak*, all barking at once. I'm trying to calm the pooches down when I hear a scream. I think it sounds like Jerry, one of the young vets. I start running.

I find Jerry, in the vet room, pale as a sheet and shivering. The window in the room is busted out, shards of glass peppering the bushes outside. I figure Jerry's in shock. He doesn't look like he's in pain, just vaguely embarrassed, cupping his crotch with his hands, a liquid seeping through the fingers, pitter-pattering on the tile floor. Blood.

I'm yelling his name, but Jerry doesn't answer, just stares at his tray of instruments like they're the tabernacle. Sure enough, among the neatly arrayed cutting instruments, are two naked testicles, staring back from the steel tray.

I get him on the table. As I try and stop the bleeding, I shout for help. But between shouts I can hear Jerry kind of whispering. Over and over again, he whispers, "Rude . . . said it was rude . . . very, very rude . . . rude . . ."



## CHAPTER 21

Simon lets the wormwood twist his brain.

The roots dig and stab and feed off the nostalgia that's collected over time—dead love residue. He lets it grow and grow, all root-bound in his head. The Corbies cry. Sufficiently twisted, he's an underworld unto himself. Souls shriek through his Lethe veins, blurring past like white lines on lost highways in the night.

Simon circles Buckingham Fountain.

During the summer season, a lightshow would paint the spraying waters and music would play. But now, just past October, the night paints the still waters black.

Simon tosses pennies into Buckingham Fountain.

He tosses two at a time. Every time they hit and ripple the ebon-mirror water, Simon sees a face form around dead-penny eyes.

*Plunk*—Jane Doe.

*Plunk*—John Polhaus.

*Plunk*—Toby Reynolds . . . and all the other child victims of Myer Twiss.

*Plunk, plunk, plunk*—his newfound friends in the Obsidian Sanctuary.

Simon circles the giant fountain, throwing pennies—a boatman's toll at a time—into black water. Simon sips the green until the fountain bends, until the dead in the water animate at silent film frame rates, until the Chicago skyline turns to monolithic tombstones.

Bones scrape jagged in his broken hand. The sharp ache of the busted rib. The blindness of the left eye. The bruises. The claw scratches down his leg. And *her* name, itching, *always* an itching, tingling, prickling, tickling, yearning, burning, desperate ache under the bandages of his arms.

*Love in the scars—romance in the razor cadence. Eh, Jane?*

Simon gulps down the green and, eventually, the pain in his hand muffles to a background throb, like her lost heart beating in his hand. He smiles and lets himself be fooled by the fiction of the phantom Valentine.

*A prophetic throb—the echo of the beat preceded the still heart. Eh, Jane?*

Simon tosses pennies, thinks on promises made and Jane's eyes like golden coins sinking into the dark.

"Once you see the Abyss, it sees you!" says the memory of Mr. Knock. The Abyss had seen them all—a story behind every door and a door in every story, and Simon standing there, like he did as a child, pulling the shower curtain open.

He watches pedestrians differently.

Did that one breathe?

Does anyone else notice?

Do they notice the non-breathers speaking gibberish? The antenna crosses on the roofs? The bodies swimming in the bogs? The shadows in the fog? The skulls beneath the skin? Does anyone know when those clown burger restaurants were built or operating?

Coins for memories.

Fourth Grade. Little Simon walks through the empty halls, holding a pass, leaving the school to talk to yet another specialist. And there is George, the largest, toughest bully of his school, standing in the way. Simon feels a panic stab. Surely George will give him trouble, offerings of pain and humiliation. But George stands frozen, shivering, staring into the boiler room. Simon notices the telltale puddle on the floor. Simon creeps by quietly and leaves the school.

Not a story. No resolution. Just a memory fragment.

Simon never looked into the boiler room—never saw what had scared giant George in the pumping, contriving, muggy dark.

Simon sits on the side of Buckingham Fountain, hugging his knees, our moping scarecrow. The cracked lenses of his glasses cut a single tear into two: one for Jane Doe, and one

for gaining friends and camaraderie, for the first time in his life, and losing them all. The Halloween dance was over, all over again, and he was alone.

November the first.

The Day of the Dead.

"What are you going to do?" say the dead in the dark water, staring with their penny eyes.

"What can you do?" say the Corbies.

"What can I do?" Simon says, thinking of Dr. Reeves, the monsters, and Arthur Drake, smiling from the self-help empire in his TV screen.

"No, what are you going to do?" asks a voice, smug as an invisible cat.

"It's your shadow," whisper the Corbies.

There's no one there, but Simon feels like, if he could just turn his head at the right angle, he could see the source of the voice. Simon looks back into the water of Buckingham Fountain. There, in the water, lurks a blurry reflection on the glass surface, like an unreachable itch. Simon yearns to turn his head and look at the unseen speaker, but he's afraid that if he looks away from the water, he will lose his shadow again.

"I told you things would get weird," says the shadow.

"My friends got hurt."

"They stepped in too far. But you've always had a foot in it, haven't you, entrail-reader?"

"The Dead Water?"

"The Dead Water. Got your fix for free. You're aura's got track marks. Now she's making you pay up."

"It's not an ideal relationship."

The shadow chuckles. "No. Guess not. Have you asked?"

"She isn't talking to me."

"Domestic problems? Why do you think?"

"I think I have to get the rest of her."

"Boy loses girl, boy gets girl. I love it. But, are you sure?" The voice comes closer, right behind Simon's ear. "There might be another reason."

"What?"

"You made a promise, Simon. Those four men are still out there. Maybe you have to make that right before she'll talk again."

"It's bigger than that now. There's Reeves and Club Wendigo and Arthur Drake. . . ."

"But you didn't promise her anything about the others." The shadow shifts. "Some of them might not even be your problems. Not for long, anyway. But your promise to her—well, that could make things square between you."

Simon frowns. "I don't know."

"Me neither," purrs the shadow.

Stomach drop—lost keys—missing homework—and the shadow is gone.

Simon throws pennies into the dark water, two at a time, and this time, they become the eyes of those who *should* be dead: the jack of diamonds, the jack of clubs, the jack of spades, the jack of hearts.

Hector Gomez.

The Hanging Man.

Jack of diamonds.

Simon stares him in the penny eyes, and the obsessions burns again with green ghost fire. Doubts evaporate. Reassurance comes with surgical steel in the hand.

"Happiness is a cold scalpel," the Corbies say.

\* \* \* \* \*

"My advice to you is a grand romantic gesture."

"Yes, Mom," Simon says, his cell phone cradled on his shoulder. His right hand arranges the torn bits of the queen of hearts card.

"That will win her back."

"Yes," says Simon, tearing lengths of tape.

"Good luck, Simon. I know you can do it. Your mind is like a steel trap when you focus on something."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Go with your feelings on this. From the heart."

"I love you too, Mom."

Simon closes the phone and puts it away. "A grand gesture," he says, lifting the queen of hearts, newly assembled, smiling.

"From the heart."



Dr. Reeves stops to look at himself in an ice cream shop window. The reflection returns a handsome smile. He congratulates himself on giving them the slip again.

"Stupid thugs."

He had seen them, of course, shadowing his every move. Those purple skull tattoos, none too subtle, made them easy to spot. He had received the messages: headless black rooster in the mail, odd chalk drawing in his parking space. Those kinds of things might impress the idiot ghetto trash, but not him.

"The gaudier the tricks," he mutters, "the cheaper the crook."

A boy eating ice cream stares at Dr. Reeves through the shop window. Licking. Licking. A palely reflected clown face stares from the opposite direction, across the street. How many of those closed-down fast food restaurants were there? When had they closed? Dr. Reeves tries to recall, but the thought is interrupted by the sound of children singing skipping-rope rhymes—all the lines rhyming with *Twiss*. Inside, the child staring, face caked with chocolate stains, licking and licking and licking.

The doctor's smile melts as slow as ice cream in November. He reaches into his pocket for his mobile, but pulls out a doll head. It looks at him with a jagged-stitch frown. He backs from the window, tossing away the head.

"Fuck. Shit."

Reeves turns to leave, planting himself face-first into a wall of muscle. The wall smells pleasantly of jasmine and vanilla. Reeves backs away and squints. With the afternoon sun behind it, the figure before him is a silhouette, but he recognizes the outline—the clean-shaven head, the tall musculature. Dr. Reeves straitens his clothes, smoothes his hair, and remolds his plastic smile.

“Listen—James, is it?—you tell Mama Bone-digger that if she has a problem with my services, she can come and speak to me directly, like an adult. This hoodoo nonsense does not impress me.”

The silhouette stands.

“Did you hear me? Getting all this? Tell Mama Bone-digger to call me. Call. Me.”

The silhouette stands.

“Hello? Am I boring you? What the hell are you looking at? I . . .”

Reeves turns. She’s behind him. A young girl on her hands and knees, dragging her long tongue up the length of his shadow on the sidewalk. She’s sighing deeply.

Reeves jumps to the side, tearing his shadow away from her, making an involuntary sound like a boy whose toe just crossed the sidewalk crack.

“What did you—?”

James stands next to the young girl. She stares at Dr. Reeves.

“All right,” Reeves clears his throat. “I get it—scary. You had me for a minute there, but can we get serious now? You ordered. I delivered, as per usual. So why all the showboating now? You have nothing to be upset about.”

The little girl stares.

“What? What do you want?”

The little girl stares.

“Is—is this about the whole ‘arm of a sorceress’ thing? Seriously? Do you think we get a lot of those? Yeah, we have a piece of equipment that dings every time we get a witch or warlock stiff.”

The little girl stares.

“It’s a human arm! What the hell is the difference? Tell the crackheads and peons that it’s the arm of the fucking Wicked Witch of the West. Listen, there are no refunds in my business. Besides, I am the only game in town. You bought it, it’s yours.”

The little girl stares.

“Say something! Speak. Speak to me, you little—”

There are lines and muscles and expressions on the little girl’s face that only belong on an adult. Reeves’s words die and bury themselves in the graveyard of his throat. James and the little girl turn and walk away. Reeves feels compelled to look to his shadow, and when he looks up, they are gone. He finds his voice again and shouts.

“Hey, wait! Come back! You can . . . you can have your money back.” He shudders. There’s something wrong, but he can’t tell what. “I said, you can have your money back! You can—what did you do to me? Hey! I’ll give you a whole corpse. On me. Damn it. What did you do to me?”

Dr. Reeves looks at the passing children and parents. He wipes the drool from his mouth. A deep autumn day, and the sun is already tired. He walks away, in no particular direction.

Did he hear something whispering?

Did something move at the edge of his vision?

Did his stomach just twist?

It’s just nerves. It has to be.

He runs. Dr. Reeves runs and runs, but wherever he goes, his shadow follows. We each have our very own shadow, loveling. Sometimes it takes the prompting of another to turn it mean. Sometimes it grows tired of us all on its own. Sometimes there are other things that become like a shadow to us, usurp its place or merge with it. But they all share one trait, these disparate dark shapes: they always comes tumbling after us. Always.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the drive over to the apartment building, Simon hears a radio news segment announce that the agent of local writer Ichabod Knock committed suicide last night. She threw herself from a high-rise window.

Day of the Dead and the children smash pumpkins, killing monsters in embryo. The world is full of weirdness: the sugar skulls, the absinthe-minded thoughts, the ominous vibrations, apartments on chicken legs, gory pigeons on bat wings, the clown face, green witchery, assorted nasties.

Simon looks to apartment 4C.

*Hector Gomez: the Hanging Man. Jack of diamonds.*

The absinthe takes hold.

Simon does not go to the Dead Water. It comes to him, icy and black from veins to heart and back. Lethe rivers, but the dead will not forget. Stygian rivers, teeming with souls. Ghosts swim in his blood, collected over the years.

Simon stomps a pumpkin and steps inside.

Through the high, he can close his eyes and see his heart, now a rotting gourd, a tiny, putrid pumpkin. It cracks open and something nasty hatches out.

*Stare too long into a mirror and your reflection goes strange. And if you are nothing, you can become anything. Eh, Jane?*

Simon climbs the stairs. The first two steps creak. As he continues, he does not walk more stealthily so much as he frightens the boards to silence.

"I love you, Jane Doe," he whispers.

*This is me at my most romantic. Eh, Jane?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Everything is green, and the hallways warp in anticipation. Simon hushes them with a finger raised to his lips.

"Shhhhhhhhhh."

Hector's lock is difficult with one hand, but the tumblers inevitably tumble. Simon seeps inside.



The jack of diamonds sits, gigantically, watching TV. Hector looks up, appraises Simon. Great masses of muscle swim under his skin, flex and flow and coil, hidden jaguars under the skin. Hector smiles and Simon sees all those gold-capped teeth, all long and sharp. Long dark hair hangs in tendrils down his face. Hector looks like a Central American cannibal god, sitting on his throne, waiting for a blood sacrifice.

Consider now, this still moment, as they regard each other, two cards in a mad man's tarot: the Cannibal God Giant and the Silent Film Specter.

Simon sees the muscles undulating, sees agonized faces under hot wax, feels the space between them turning to fangs. But Hector plays cool, stays seated.

*I needed him to make the first move, Jane.*

"Uh oh," Hector says, impossibly deep. "We have us a crazy crackhead. You busted into the wrong joint, Spook."

"You hung her on the beer garden tree," Simon says. "There were four of you, but you held the rope. You are the Hanging Man."

Hector's muscles tense. Simon hears them growl.

"Man, you really are dusted. This bitch got a name?"

"Jane Doe."

Hector laughs, hard, droplets of liquor spilling. Simon watches them in the hours it takes to splash on the floor.

Hector smiles his golden maw.

"You'll have to do better than that, Spook. If you can't be more specific than Jane fucking Doe, I can't help you. Can't expect me to remember every cunt I come across." The gold-fanged giant laughs at his own joke. He stands at his full height and the room shrinks. "I rape and I kill every day, *primo*. Can't keep track. Just yesterday, I had me a cute little *puta*. Little thing. Petite. Preteen. You know the worst part about fucking a preteen, Spook? When the pelvis cracks!" Hector laughs, loud and ugly.

*It was not going well, Jane. I was supposed to get under his skin.*

Simon feels very alone in this monster's den. But then the Corbies raise their voices.

"I bet Gabe was pretty mad," Simon says.

Hector's golden grin vanishes.

"I bet it stung when she scratched you."

Hector frowns like a fault line.

"You raised her three times and then she got you and you lost control. You killed her before you got the information. I bet Gabe called you lots of bad words."

A vein pulses to the surface of his oaken neck, up to his temple. Close, but Simon has not drawn blood. The Corbies get excited. They caw and call in one voice, into Simon's ear, from the inside.

"She kissed him," Simon says.

"H-How did you—?" Hector stammers.

"She kissed Alex before you hung her for the last time. You were jealous. Alex got a kiss, and you got a scratch."

Something wild flashes behind Hector's eyes. But Simon knows he's missed vein, just barely. What was he not seeing? Simon looks with Dead Water eyes. He reads the scars and their runic rhymes. He reads the writing in the scratch marks on Hector's face.

Simon smiles.

"No, I was wrong. You *were* jealous, Hector—insanely jealous." Was that Simon's voice? "You had a big, jealous hard-on, but not for her. Tell me, Hector, does he know?"

Hector's eyes widen.

Simon hears the Corby words in his mouth, their grinding voice like two skeletons snogging. "Does Alex even know, Hector? Did you ever tell him how you feel? Does Alex know he was running with a . . . sissy *puta*?"

Hector's howl shakes the room and he charges. Simon has cut deep.

*From the heart. Eh, Jane?*

Hector devours the space between them, moving fast for something so large. Simon does not evade. He does not raise his arms, does not get ready for a fight. Simon cannot win a fight against Hector. He can't beat something grown that huge on chemicals, human meat, and hate.

Simon gives him a target with his grinning Jack O'Lantern face.

The howling giant dutifully launches a wrecking-ball fist straight at Simon's face. The scarecrow does not move. Simon's nose disintegrates in a red explosion.

He crumples to the floor. Hector pauses, confused by the liquid snorting sounds coming from the heap that is Simon.

"The hell you laughing at, Spook?"

"I got you good," Simon says between giggles, rising like a doll coming to awkward life. "Got you so good."

"What—?" The first thing Hector notices is the wet warmth in his pants. His face gets confused, almost embarrassed, before his hand comes up red.

Realization.

Like a good ballplayer, Hector had kept his eyes on the target.

He never saw the scalpel appear in Simon's right hand, never saw it sneak under his crotch. He never saw the flick of Simon's wrist on his inner thigh. Simon's hands are dexterous, and they are fast, and he was not fighting Hector. Hector wins in a fight. Simon's hands, instead, move with the deceptive speed of a casual gesture. Like a seamstress threading needle, he has made this gesture a hundred thousand times.

The femoral artery gapes open in a wet scream. Arterial blood, bright, red, oxygenated blood, comes in distinct gushes, in time to the heartbeat. Hector's heart is beating fast.

*He never even felt the pain, Jane. My girl's kiss is so light and precise.*

Hector's first reaction is wild—a random obscenity and an instinctive blow. The backhand flings Simon. He crashes into a TV stand, scalpel tumbling away. Hector grabs a limp Simon, holding him up one-handed by his shirt.

"The fuck you done to me, man?"

Checkmate.

Simon's lifts his head. Under the broken ruin of his nose spreads a bloody, wide smile. The larger man shivers.

"What's your plan after you knock me out, Hector? Are you going to kiss me to death?"

Simon laughs and cackles in hobgoblin heaves of air and blood. He feels the fists rain viciously all over. Simon feels bones break, feels part of his skull cave in over his blind eye, like an avalanche over a cave.

The attack and the thousand obscenities transform from surprise to anger, to deep hatred. Hector picks Simon up, flings him into a wall. A pop and an agony as Simon's left arm separates from the socket. But the more Hector attacks, the faster his heart beats and the quicker he bleeds.

Simon actually feels his head hit the ceiling before his body crashes into the ground. A boot heel drives into his chest and several more ribs break with wet snaps and evil wishes.

The tempo of the blows and the four-letter words change, reaching an angry crescendo. Then they quickly weaken, get desperate. Hector pants between curses.

Finally he stumbles away from the bloody, broken scarecrow wreck.

The obscenities turn higher in pitch and then they are sobbing. Hector mutters incoherently, like a child. He shivers. He's going into shock. He sees all his blood in the room.

"The fuck . . . you . . . do, Spook?"

He falls to a sitting position.

Simon sits upright, rib bones biting his innards like barbed spears. He knows he is badly hurt, but the absinthe helps keep some of that a secret from his body.

Hector teeters, and Simon gently helps him to the floor. "Shhhhhhh," says Simon. His finger leaves a red mark over Hector's lips. Simon pulls Hector's hands away from the thigh, gently folding them on his chest, letting the blood continue its now-lazy flow.

"I'm so . . . tired," says Hector. His eyes are distant.

"I know. But I need you to answer some questions first. Are you part of Club Wendigo?"

"Yeah," says Hector.

"Who started the club? Who runs it?"

"Was . . . Alex and Gabe. They started . . . they showed me the way."

"What are those creatures, with the white skin and the sharp teeth?"

"I . . ."

Hector is fading.

"What are those creatures, Hector?"

"Some catch it . . . when they eat . . . but we got pills for that."

"Who is Joe? He was with you, that night, laughing."

"Joe? Joe Camino? He's . . . just . . . just wop muscle . . . of Gabe's."

"Who are Gabe and Alex? *Hector.*"

"Alex . . . Drake. Son of . . . guy on TV . . ."

"Hector?"

"I want . . . to sleep now . . . I want . . ."

And Hector slips away.

Simon closes Hector's eyes respectfully. He should search the apartment. He should get his tools and go to the Dead Water with Hector. Simon gets up, but falls back down.

"Great plan, Simon," say the Corbies.

"Shut up," Simon mumbles through the blood and the pain. He coughs up red. He feels concussed, feels stabbing pains when he breathes. Maybe he can just rest a bit.

Simon lays down on his back.

"Some avenging angel," mutter the Corbies.

"Maybe I should sleep," Simon says to the ghost crows.

*Sleep is the little death, and death is the big sleep. Eh, Jane?*

Simon stares at the liquid ceiling when he hears the voice.

"Wow. You really drained him dry, didn't you?"

"Your shadow," say the Corbies.

Then there is a pale face above him, bent down, looking at Simon. The pale face is licking red off his fingers, like a kid tasting batter from mother's spoon. His face is blurry, blurry as the reflection that has haunted Simon. The face lowers as hands put Simon's glasses back on his face. Everything gains a cracked focus.

Simon's shadow has dark hair, spiked and wild; silver rings and a dangling silver hourglass on the ears; pale skin; sharp cheekbones; blue-gray eyes. It's a surprisingly boyish face. He's just a kid—Simon realizes—in high school maybe. He looks like he's at least ten years younger than Simon. Was it time for his ten-year reunion already? It's difficult to stay focused.

There is blood on that young, pale chin.

"What are you?" Simon asks.

The answering grin is youthful. The blue-gray eyes are not.

"I told you, Simon. I'm your shadow."

Simon flutters in and out of consciousness. Lucid, absinth dreams bleed into the waking world, splashing the inside of his fluttering eyelids. And the pale youth says that line, about being his shadow, and Simons sees that mischievous, boyish grin, and cannot help but hallucinate scenes of Peter Pan chasing his shadow, trying to reattach it. Simon sees the blood on the youth's chin and cannot help but see him and the Lost Boys, flying in the night sky, laughing and making animal sacrifices to the dark gods of Never Never Land.

Simon forces himself back to reality for just a moment.

"What's your name?"

"Loki," says the shadow. "You can call me Loki."

Darkness oozes in, and Simon slips into unconsciousness, but not before he notes to himself that the darkness tastes like copper.

# ACT III

*“All you need is love.”*

—John Lennon

*“Some assembly required.”*

—any instruction manual

## CHAPTER 22

The sun is up when Simon awakens.

He rises to his feet.

He feels . . . great.

He rips the bandages off his left arm, flexes both hands, blinks and focuses both eyes, runs a finger up and down the wholeness of his ribs. All the cuts and bruises and wounds are gone. Even Jane's name is erased from his arms.

Hector's body is gone. Simon's shadow is gone. A quick inspection of the apartment turns up nothing of interest—except for an unidentified hunk of meat in the fridge.

Simon sits in Hector's chair, pulls the jack of diamonds from a pocket and considers it. Then he tears it up. Simon pulls out the jack of clubs.

"Joe Camino."

Outside, one lone, grinning pumpkin remains. Simon picks it up and grins back.

There was much work to be done.



Simon stalks the streets, an Edward Gorey sketch creeping through a Raymond Chandler night. Simon carries a handful of scalpels in one hand, a syringe in the other.

The work is mostly the same: the absinthe, the Dead Water, scalpel in hand, extracting answers with surgical cuts. Sound-proofing the basement was not so very difficult.

He's chasing the girl.

Simon follows the trail—clues and names, patient to living patient. When the Dead Water runs cold in his veins, they all talk.

"You startled me, Simon." His mother had said that when he was a boy. He had never even meant to sneak up. Now



they never see him coming. Eccentricities become strengths and Simon feels alive. The hopeful romantic, chasing the girl.

He wanted to talk to Dr. Reeves, tell him that he had improved his people skills. Reeves, though, had vanished. It makes Simon a little sad. He'd hoped to share his newfound wisdom: A smile and a syringe will get you a lot farther than a smile.

"Trick or treat," he says, under the brim of his black bowler hat, just as the needle slides into their necks. It all comes so easily. Everything's easy. He feels faster, stronger.

The living patients speak on the steel table, just as the cadavers once did. The vibratory whine of electric tools awakens dormant, childhood nightmares of dentist chairs and drills.

These are the days of high romance.



Simon's first patient is Jeffrey Conway.

"Trick or treat." Simon says as he slips the needle in, fast as slapstick, with a Charlie Chaplin flourish.

Conway wakes up on cold steel, shivering, naked, and blindfolded.

"Who are you?"

"That's not important, Mr. Conway."

Officer Conway has a relationship with Dr. Reeves—or, rather, *had* a relationship, back before Reeves vanished. Where Reeves supplied the bodies, parts, and organs, it was Jeffrey who fenced the loot, found the sorts of customers looking for samples of human anatomy. Sometimes they sold whole corpses. Most of the time, it paid just to chop for parts.

A veteran cop, a tough man, Jeffery is unwilling to answer Simon's questions at first. He proves more talkative after Simon cuts off his ear with a vibrating saw. A string of exclamations and expletives two minutes long follows. And then: "Christ! What do you want to know?"

"Where is the Jane Doe cadaver? She has golden eyes. All records of her existence disappeared with her body."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about. Honest!"

*Buzz*, says the saw.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!," says Conway. "Alright! We sold her. Cut her up for parts. Different parts went to different customers. But . . . but that was mostly decided before I was involved. Before she was even dead, I think. I don't know anything about her records disappearing. I swear. Reeves never talked to me about that."

"What do you know about Club Wendigo? Arthur Drake? Apex Consumers?"

"Those . . . those Wendigo guys, some of them are pretty regular customers. And I think—I think some of my buyers get parts on behalf of Drake."

"What do they use them for?"

"How should I know?"

"I think you do."

*Buzz*, says the saw.

"Shit!" says Conway. "Alright-alright-alright! I think—I mean, from what I heard—they eat the shit. They eat the human meat. Okay. I don't know for certain. I mean, the bodies are already dead, so what the hell do I care what happens to them?"

"Do you ever make cadavers, Mr. Conway?"

*Buzz*, says the saw.

"Yes! During the lean months. Homeless turds. I don't . . . I don't tell Reeves. He doesn't goddamn ask."

"Mr. Conway, listen to me with every ear you have left."

"Wha—what?"

"Give me a list of your customers, the ones who bought Jane's body. Leave nothing out. Do that, and I'll give you your ear back."

"I'm done. I'm a cop! Do you even understand what you've—?"

"Mr. Conway, you should really answer my questions. I'm not interested in practical concerns. I am a man in love with a cadaver and I have an electric saw in my hands."

Jeffrey talks. He gives Simon the list, including Ichabod Knock, who bought her head, and Mama Bone-digger, who bought the left arm. The right arm, the upper torso, and the lower body were also sold. Jeffrey tells Simon where to find those. And then, the bad news: The eyes and heart were sold, too, but Jeffrey says the purchase was done "all cloak and dagger like." He never knew who paid the good money for the organs.

"I think you're lying," says Simon.

*Buzz*, says the saw.

"No! I'm not!" screams Jeffrey.

"My mistake."

And then Jeffrey sleeps. Simon drops him off at the ER. Tucked under his arm the staff finds an ice-filled Tupperware container holding his ear. Later, Simon would send excerpts of Officer Jeffrey Conway's confession to the *Chicago Tribune* and to several select individuals.



"Who the hell are you?" says Sid, strapped to the table.

"I'm a nasty thought that hatched out of a pumpkin," the lovesick scarecrow says from inside the rotting, hollowed-out Jack O'Lantern he is wearing as a mask.

"Fuck you." Sid's voice is pitched too high to really be tough. "Fuck your mother."

"You really ought not to use such language," says the pumpkin head. "You really ought to answer my questions."

"Why's that, chief?"

"Because, all and all, it is much easier for me to cut off the top of your skull and watch the information fall out."

The saw says, *buzz*.

Sid talks.

Sid sells date rape drugs in Wrigleyville—sells tainted love by the pill. Simon found him by the ballpark, scrawny and twitchy. “Nothing up my sleeve,” Simon said, walking toward Sid, both hands held up in front of him, palms out, showing empty hands and rolled-up sleeves. Then, with manic alacrity, Simon pulled a syringe from behind a surprised Sid’s ear.

*I’m growing. I never used to perform tricks for an audience. Eh, Jane?*

Sid was moving up in the world. He’d given Club Wendigo lowlifes enough discounts on his roofies, even a few freebies, that they finally took him in as a probationary member. That had opened up a whole new clientele.

“They taught power and pride, man,” says Sid. “Gabe and Alex know the way.”

“Pride?” says the pumpkin head, cocking to the side. “You are a rodent-looking wretch who sells—and no doubt uses—date rape pills to get what you cannot otherwise obtain.”

“Nah, fuck that, dude,” says Sid. “It’s not about the sex. It’s not even about eating human meat. It’s spiritual. We devour virginity from prissy little bitches. That’s just one source of power. It’s about consuming power. It’s about being a multitude.”

And with that, little Sid howls—big. He thrashes at his bonds with renewed strength, eager to show Simon his power.

The bonds hold.

Simon slaps Sid on the forehead, and Sid stops struggling with a whimper.

“Yes, yes,” says the pumpkin head, “very impressive. Now tell me, virgin eater, tell me about the human arm you recently purchased.”

“I . . . I wanted to get ahead in the club, be a full member. I got a deal on the arm and thought I’d do my first bite of human flesh.”

“Did you eat it?” Simon asks, trying to keep his voice calm.

"I—no, not exactly. I took a bite. But I wasn't ready. You can't just eat, man. You have to be centered right. You got to digest it right. You got to—"

"Where is it?"

"No way, man. I don't have to say. Alex and Gabe, they taught me how to be strong. Taught me how to be with the bitches and the sows. I eat their doubts. Seeds of doubt, man. Under all the pretensions, they want to be dominated, controlled, sedated. Get with the fucking program. I devour—I get stronger. They will tremble!"

Simon slumps and sighs. "I'm not good at this."

"Fuckin' right. Now recognize, and let me out of here."

"It would be much easier to open your arteries and let the blood flow into the drain. It's a very good drain."

"What?"

"If I open you up, all the information would come to me, start my head on fire. The fire is green. Your chest cavity would scream all of your sins."

"You're just fuckin' with—"

"I would be inside. I'd know you more intimately than any lover. I'll pull out your intestines and read every lie you ever told, then dig deeper for every lie you ever told yourself. I'll weigh your heart and find every way that you are wanting, everything you lack, every insecurity. There is a membrane that covers the things we hide from ourselves. I'll tear it away and show you—naked, stripped of all protective delusions—all of your shrieking inadequacies."

"What—what are you doing?"

Simon gently finger traces a Y in Sid's chest. "I'm going to tickle your innards."

The saw says *buzz*.

Sid talks.

And then Sid sleeps.

Simon finds Jane Doe's right arm in a freezer, just where Sid told him to look. One bite had been taken out of the shoulder, raw.

When Simon returns, Sid is still asleep.

In his dreams, Sid hears a buzzing sound.

This buzzing, though similar to the one made by Simon's saw, is of a different character, perhaps a different tenor. Simon bends over Sid's sleeping form like a night terror—buzzing and buzzing and buzzing.



We can imagine Sid coming to.

The drug wears thin. He tries to move, but finds himself in a world that seems submerged in Jell-O, quivering in the night.

Where?

Simon is a recluse by nature, yet he possesses an oddly detailed mental map of Chicago. Not one drawn in the broad lines of experience, but one rendered in dots, a stippled drawing of glimpses and perspectives. Simon sees through the eyes of the dead, hundreds of dead a year. He sees all the places they knew. He knows from where the corpses most frequently originate, in what places they are left in the worst ways. These are places the police fear to tread. It is to one of these that he assigns Sid.

What is Sid's first coherent thought? Does he remember the pumpkin head? Does he wonder why he is naked? Most likely his mind is consumed with the ferocious itching, not in random blotches, but itching with a syntax.

Does he scratch? No. He is bound. But does he recognize what he is bound to? Does he see the bulbous head and plastic smile?

Simon is no artist, but his hands are surgically precise, even with an unfamiliar tool.

He would have to return Nyx's tattoo gun if he saw her again.

It is amusing to imagine that the painful itch is so acute, Sid can understand the writing and symbols. The itching on

his chest is from the logo of a doomed fast food franchise. The itching all over the rest of his body is from other alien symbols, the esoteric equations the voice in the static gave to Simon, the ones he once carved into the walls of his home.

*They grew in my mind, Jane. I can almost sound them out, like a mostly forgotten song. I can hum it. . . .*

Certainly Sid can hear the static hissing above. Does he struggle? Does he look up at the harlequin face? Does he weep?

His sacrifice delivered, Simon walks away. The crackling static grows louder. He glances back. Is it just the play of dark shadows, or does he see the speaker opening like a great mouth over Sid's head? Unauthorized use of logos is a serious affair.

*I released Sid in Roseland, Jane, where the gangs execute their own child-soldiers and leave them face down in the mud beneath the underpasses. The terror-hardened locals would have left him there, on the clown altar, until it was done with him. And even if he got away, or it left enough of him to stagger away, I suspect he never found his way home.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon scribbles love poetry:

*But our love it was stronger by far than the love  
Of those who were older than we—  
Of many far wiser than we—  
And neither the angels in Heaven above  
Nor the demons down under the sea  
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:*

Simon writes, ignoring the muffled noises. Simon smiles, thinking of her. Simon transcribes each letter lovingly. It is his favorite poem.

The trail to Jane is paved with characters of the worst sort. Not all of them buckle at the merest whisper of an electric saw. Simon writes:

*For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;*

Take LeBraun. Simon found him in the depths of Englewood. LeBraun trades crack to broken whores, and he trades crack to his mama and the other women living in the old brick house.

“My LeBraun hangs with a bad crowd, but at least he takes good care of his mama,” Anabethika had said. “They never want much. Just enough to gnaw on.”

Simon found her and the other ladies in the old brick house with the decaying wooden porch about to fall off like a dead limb. He found them with their bodies wrapped thick in stained bandages.

Somewhere outside, a cat shrieked.

Simon noticed some of the many children also wore stained bandages on small portions of their arms or legs. When he asked, one of the ladies shrugged, in a crack-cloud daze, and said, “I already traded my titties.” He could smell the collected infections.

The cat kept shrieking.

Anabethika warned Simon to be careful of LeBraun’s friends. They did wicked things, not just sell crack—LeBraun had done that since he was twelve—but *very* bad things.

And that cat kept shrieking; Simon imagined it swimming in barbed wire.

He waited until LeBraun was alone, away from those friends, those men who had no teeth and spoke in gumming babble that LeBraun seemed to understand. The men that LeBraun took to his mama’s house, with their strangely curved knives. The men



who traded rocks of crack to the ladies for little strips of flesh, maybe a little scar tissue and muscle underneath.

When he had him alone, Simon whispered, "Trick or treat," from behind.

LeBraun knows where Simon can find Joe Camino, the jack of clubs. But LeBraun is a tough man; he was not impressed with Simon's patter or his tools. This vexed Simon, at first, broke his rhythm. But he took a deep breath, gagged LeBraun, and wrote love verses until he felt calm.

And so Simon writes:

*And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side  
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride  
In her sepulchre there by the sea—  
In her tomb by the side of the sea.*

It is not easy to write. LeBraun keeps thrashing, and Simon is composing with a scalpel.

Eventually, LeBraun talks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon awakens tied to a chair, with Phil telling him how he does it, about the meat in the freezer. And maybe, the most disturbing thing to Simon is the realization that the tabloids were right.

There is a Vegetarian Cannibal.

The tabloids didn't get all the details, though. He lives in the North Shore. He recycles. He drives a hybrid. He is very polite. His name is Phillip.

"Oh, call me Phil. Are the ropes too tight?"

"No," says Simon. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. You shouldn't suffer needlessly." Phil's voice is all positive attitude. "I'm surprised you're still with us."

Simon looks at the bloody, sharp corner of the heavy iron statuette on the floor and has to nod in agreement. For having his head bashed in, he felt surprisingly good, if a little drained.

"You really are resilient. What's your diet?"

Simon tells him. Phil frowns. He says that he's a vegetarian. He's considering going vegan, but wants to read a few more books on the subject first, get the nutrition right.

"I just can't eat anything that used to have a face."

That is why, Phil explains politely, he has to decapitate Simon.

"You understand, don't you?"

Simon nods.

"That chair, it's not too uncomfortable, is it? Tell me if it is." Phil is just starting to go bald, but keeps a very neat ponytail on the back of his head.

"It's fine," says Simon.

"I'm afraid I made a mess of your hat. It's very nice, very vintage, I like the look, very vaudevillian."

"I like it."

Simon is tied to a chair, in a partially finished basement. He can smell the newly installed hardwood floor.

"It's Brazilian cherry, actually," says Phil, proudly. "That's a sustainable wood."

Plastic sheeting covers everything.

"I'm sorry about the state of the basement," says Phil. "I hope to have this sucker finished by December. I'd do this in a more comfortable room, the study or the living room—you should see the couches in there—but it's going to be a bit messy. Are you sure that chair is comfortable?"

"Yes," says Simon. "Thank you."

"So . . . Simon," Phil says, looking through Simon's wallet. "You saw what I keep in the big freezer, didn't you?"

Simon nods.

"You were not too terribly surprised by what you saw. So it's just safe to say that you had an idea of what you'd find."

"Yes, Phil."

Phil nods and smiles back, warmly. Phil is a swell guy. He had been on Simon's list. Getting into his place hadn't been difficult. But Simon, seeing Jane's body wrapped in plastic, in the big freezer, got careless and stared. For how long he couldn't tell, but it was obviously too long, because before he was done, everything went black.

Simon refocuses to find Phil explaining the process of being a vegetarian cannibal, cheerfully, energetically. It reminds Simon of watching the Food Network. Phil beams with pride and a sort of foodie monomania.

"You see, Simon, to absorb a person's essence, you have to ingest their flesh."

Phil makes a presentational shiver.

"But I don't eat meat, Simon. I was in a pickle."

Simon nods.

"So I took a negative and turned it into a positive!" Phil flourishes his hands, illustrating manually taking a negative and turning it positive. "I didn't dwell on what I didn't have, I dwelled on what I have, and I have a garden."

Phil is very proud of his garden. He grows everything there.

"You should see my tomatoes when they're fresh. Bright and red and bigger than your fist!" Phil motions to a plate of sun-dried tomato slices. "Would you like one?"

"No, thank you."

"The essence—it's all in here." Phil bites into a slice—still so red.

Phil buries his human bodies, sans faces, in the garden. He does his little ritual "to align our energies," then buries the human meat in the black soil. The plants eat the bodies, feed on the nutrients and convert them into vegetables.

"Of course, winter is coming, so my little garden is sleeping, but it's never too early to start stocking up on supplies."

*What else, Jane, what else did the tabloids get right?*

"Now, thanks to my method, I'm a member of the Gastronome Irregulars," says Phil. "That's my little story, Simon. How about you? Why did you come here?"

"I'm in love with Jane Doe," says Simon "I want her back."  
"Who?"

Simon nods his head toward the big freezer.

"You knew her when she was alive?"

Simon shakes his head.

"But . . ." Phil looks back and forth, a quizzical expression on his well-plucked eyebrows. The frown inverts and he laughs. "Well, I guess you don't have to tell me the real reason, Simon. Mystery is the zest of life, and it's not like I could force it out of you. I'm no good at torture. I just don't have the stomach for it."

Simon decides there is no more information to be had. The chair wobbles with his tight contortions, the practiced moves of an escape, and . . . nothing. Simon tries again. The knots hold him. He was always better with handcuffs.

"Oh dear," says Simon softly.

"I guess I'd better not loosen those ropes after all." Phil lifts a small chainsaw. "I'm going to have such a good garden next spring."

The saw revs and Simon mutters something under the noise. The saw goes silent.

"What was that, Simon?"

"You would be better off with an electric bone saw. A Stryker, maybe," says Simon.

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

The chainsaw has a deeper growl than Simon's tools.

"Wait," says Simon. "I—I'd like a tomato now."

"Well, Simon, this is my dilemma: I want to be a good host, but I think you're stalling now. I promise you this will be over quickly."

With that same cheerful, welcoming smile, Phil advances on Simon.

*I wonder what other oddities go on behind the fences of the perfect communities of the North Shore. Eh, Jane?*

Phil raises the chainsaw.

It happens almost too fast for Phil to follow. Simon's right hand finally slips free with a painful bend, and something steel appears in the hand with a wrist flick. Simon lashes out, desperately, but cannot reach anything vital. The scalpel blade manages to slash Phil's left hand. Phil does not scream, only looks surprised. His left hand releases the chainsaw and pulls away, but his right hand is locked onto the power tool. The unbalanced blade roars and slips downward, into Phil's hip, which opens to the world in a spray. Blood pelts the plate of sun-dried tomatoes. The Vegetarian Cannibal slips, thrashing in an attempt to right himself, then falls backward onto the floor, chainsaw following after. There is gore and mechanical roaring and flailing limbs. Phil never screams, only looks more and more surprised until the expression freezes.

Eventually, the chainsaw goes silent.

Splattered as red as the tomatoes, Simon breathes rapidly, staring at the most unlikely hack-and-slash slapstick recently performed at his feet.

And through it all, the plastic protected the hardwood floors.

\* \* \* \* \*

The early A.M. hours and Simon cannot say exactly when it happened. One moment, his kitchen table was empty. And another moment, a glass of red fluid stood there. Simon knows what that fluid is.

He had felt so drained since his encounter with Phil.

And then he remembers blacking out in Hector's apartment, and the coppery taste in his mouth, waking healed and full of mad energy. A gift from his shadow.

The Corbies warble and shift side to side, unconvinced.

But he has to get Jane back. He has to be strong and fast.

Simon lifts the glass and drinks.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I bought you flowers that day, Jane.*

Simon works carefully, methodically, lovingly. He connects the head and the body and the arms. He caresses and washes her with perfumed soap and wine. He preserves her as best he can, using a combination of common and obscure embalming techniques. He takes out his reassembled queen of hearts card, heavy in tape, and looks at it longingly.

Music plays.

Simon drinks absinthe.

He lifts the still-incomplete Jane, light as moonbeams—and they dance.

Around the basement, holding her torso close, he tries to recapture the first time he visited her in the Dead Water.

It's not the same.

## CHAPTER 23

“Hello, Nyx.”

“Knock?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you calling from? My caller ID is showing wingdings.”

“I’m between the walls. I went through the door. It only cost me my epidermis.”

“You’re insane.”

“But high functioning. Wave, loveling. I can see you.”

“How’s your nose?”

“No one can hurt me anymore. I am mythos.”

“I’m sorry, my creepy loser minutes are about up for the month.”

“Ever have sex with a ghost, Nyx? It’s like masturbating with ice cream.”

“Typical. You’re not half as crazy as you pretend to—”

“If I were half as crazy as I pretend to be, I’d be pretty—*fucked*—up.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“How are your little soldiers on the short bus that is the Obsidian Sanctuary? Are they enjoying Wisconsin? I heard some of them got hurt. Poking around after Arthur Drake, right? Maybe I could offer some words of advice.”

“Fuck you. What do you want to mess with Drake for?”

“Maybe I’m just bitter that he’s getting better Amazon reviews on his books.”

“This is me hanging up.”

“An action you’re so keen on taking that you are forced to mention it twice. Bet you’re really sweating over those bites and scratches.”

“How did—? Yeah.”

“It was poor Clara, I gather.”

“She bit and scratched a few of the troops.”

"And she got you, too. Kept that a secret, did you?"

"I . . . yeah."

"Where is she now?"

"Chained in the basement."

"Hmmm, doll's eyes . . ."

"Tell me there's a point to you—that maybe you know the cure."

"Her head has to swallow two bullets. There may be mild side effects."

"You twisted-bent fuck! That's not going to happen."

"And the others—"

"That's not happening either. We're keeping an eye on them. We cleaned the wounds very—"

"No-no-no-no! That's not how it works! It doesn't transfer via bodily fluids. It's not about pathogen. It's about footholds. The hunger buzzes. Well, not a buzz but a howl—not a howl . . . a moan. No, not a sound, but it vibrates. It's an angry meme."

"You're not making sense."

"Footholds! It can enter you through the meat and sometimes through the air, but you have to have a hollow inside of you, just the right size and shape, a Bugs Bunny-shaped hole in the soul membrane. Clara had the right hollow before the meat ever touched her lips. Clara's foothold to hunger is loneliness. It is a mere progression of infinitesimal baby steps from feeling empty to trying to be full—from being terribly alone to shoving people into your stomach. Then you hear the Whisper in the River. I could tell you about all the other footholds, all the greeds, gluttonies, and avarices—thousands of offal piñatas cracking open across the city. There's young Alex Drake—his foothold is total lack of self-identity. Some people are shallow, some are actually convex. Father Gary has a hollow the shape of his lost faith, and he tried to fill it with Officer Polhaus."

"Gonzo, what did you see out there?"

"I remember when you used to call me that. I saw two pretty windows. A lifetime of fondling forbidden doors, and



it's a pair of windows that does me in. Simon looked through those very same windows."

"You leave Simon alone."

"Oh my. Defensive? That's precious. How chummy are you? Did you tell him about the truth of your daddy? Sorry, but I love that old chestnut, and I have a compulsion for tickling scabs."

"Yeah. Simon and I shared. Jealous?"

"Is he stranger than me?"

"You're nothing alike."

"The lad and I have some things in common. We both know a smile is a skeleton giving you a striptease."

"You *are* jealous."

"Concerned. You think you know the young man so well. Do you really know why he's tearing about town, looking for a dead girl?"

"He's trying to give her peace."

"You're so innocent."

"Enlighten me."

"Would you like to hear a story? This is a good one. And very short. This is the story and the story goes: Simon meets Janie D. at work. She tells him who hurt her. She smiles. This is love. This is rigor mortis. The end."

"What—what are you doing?"

"There is a longer story. The devils all lurk in the details . . ."

\* \* \* \* \*

The knife misses Simon's throat, but just barely.

Joe Camino found him first.

Simon instinctively feels the warmth in his belly, the gift of his shadow, and he moves just that much faster. Another syringe, and it's over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon gives his tools a troubled look. They did not normally fail him.

Like LeBraun, Joe did not scare so easy.

When Joe did not answer, Simon went to work. And when Joe still did not answer, Simon went to work some more. And in the end, Joe bit out and ate his own tongue. He bled to death laughing.

He lays silent and still on the stainless steel table.

"You're not getting away that easily, Joe," Simon says to the cadaver.

Simon drinks absinthe.

The wormwood tree grows.

The Corbies revel, and black feathers rain in Simon's head.

Simon cuts the Y-incision and dives in after Joe, a freefalling chase into the dark at terminal velocities.



Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*



Simon cleans his tools.

He tears up the jack of clubs.

The dead love high surges through him, more powerful than the crimson gift from his shadow. Joe knew about the sledgehammer, that blood-crust relic with the nasty history, but he did not know why it was important.

"MacGuffin!" caw the Corbies. "MacGuffin!"

Gabe wanted the hammer but Joe did not know why. Alex didn't seem to care. But Joe knew about the monsters, the hunger sickness. It was spreading through Club Wendigo and Apex Consumers. Alex had caught it. But his father, Arthur Drake, had some sort of pill to suppress it. Alex swallowed them by the bottle full.

"Two to go," Simon says.

He produces the jacks of spades and hearts.

"Alex and Gabe."

He shuffles. He looks at the queen of hearts, heavy with tape.

"Jane . . ."

He shuffles.

He produces the queen of diamonds. The Mother.

"Candy?" he says, less sure.

There were more cards to play.



A woman with just a lower body—Polhaus had made a crude joke regarding "the perfect woman" once, with that as the punchline. Jane's lower body went to Terry Ross, a high school history teacher in the southwest suburbs. Simon did not wait for dark, but he was more careful this time around than he was at Phil's.

When the world's tabloid monsters turn out to be real, everything is suspect.

Simon finds Jane's lower body, legs and all, in a loud refrigerator, low to the ground and top-opening, in the garage. No bites taken. No other body parts collected.

Terry is at work, so Simon looks around. The man's bedroom shows no sign of Apex Consumer paraphernalia. From what Simon can see, he doesn't seem like the type they'd let into Club Wendigo. But he does have a large collection of pornographic material and a backlog of porno websites on his computer browser.

Simon shudders at the thought of what uses Mr. Ross had in mind for Jane's lower body. He looks through Terry's email, frowning at a few exchanges between the teacher and some teenage girls. Even more telling are the pictures of girls younger still hidden in a vaguely labeled folder. After all the strange horrors he'd witnessed, it seems almost quotidian.

Simon packs Jane's remains away and is about to leave when he stops. Reconsiders. And takes out a pen.

On the refrigerator, he leaves a note:

*I came back for my legs.  
If you lure those girls into your house,  
I'll come back for you.  
I'M WATCHING.*

—Jane

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Simon," says Nyx.

Simon drops the body bag.

"I . . . hey," he says. Surprise and horror and relief mix in an odd alchemy in his chest. "You startled me."

"I let myself in."

"I'm glad to see you're all right," he says.

"I'm glad you're concerned. How—how did you arm get better so fast?"

"Did all of you come back or just you?" Simon asks, obviously changing the subject.

"For now, just me." The smile on those purple lips fades as she looks about Simon's basement. "What are you doing down here?"

"I, er—"

"The truth."

"I'm getting Jane. I'm seeing that the ones who did this to her pay. I'm trying to get to the bottom of it."

"Is that—are those . . . parts of her there?"

"Yes."

Nyx paces. "Simon, when you first said you were trying to get her body back, I thought it was because of your connection with the dead. Quiet the restless spirits by recovering the corpse. Bury it or burn it. Let the spirits move on—that sort of thing.

But this—” Nyx points to a partially constructed glass case in the middle of the basement “this is something else altogether. For one thing, it looks pretty permanent. What’s it for?”

“For when I make Jane whole.”

“Doesn’t that seem the slightest bit strange, Simon?”

“I’m afraid my barometer on that would be highly suspect.”

“All right,” Nyx says, “I know you’re a strange guy. I’m a strange girl. Hell, it’s part of why I find you so unbelievably fucking adorable. But this—” and Nyx motions across the basement. “This is bad strange, ’kay? This is bad obsession. This is yearning for the unattainable. Tragic ending kind of shit. And I don’t even want to know whose blood that is on the table.”

Simon looks at the floor.

“Why, Simon? Why are you doing this?”

“I made a promise.”

“Let it go. None of the outcomes this leads to are good. You go walking into the dark, and it swallows you up, like Neil. Or you can’t take it, like Jasper. Or you go so deep into it, you become another Knock.”

She steps in, close.

“Come back with me, Simon, to the Sanctuary—what’s left of it. We miss you. I miss you.”

“I . . . can’t.”

“Why not?” Nyx asks, cupping Simon’s cheeks in her hands. “I really like you, Simon. Are you telling me that’s not mutual?”

Simon’s mouth opens and closes. Opens and closes again.

“I—” he stammers, “I—it’s just . . . I do. I just . . . can’t—”

“Why not?”

“I love her.”

“You never knew her. Even those of us who knew her alive didn’t really know her. Granted, she was something special. I don’t know what, exactly. But all you know is a corpse.”

“I knew her in the Dead Water,” Simon says.

Nyx let’s go of Simon’s face.

“Simon, have you really thought that through? I mean about what this Dead Water really is?”

“What do you mean?”

“You have a gift. Have you really thought about the nature of it? Maybe you pick up things, subtle things, that we can’t explain yet. Or hell, let’s call it supernatural. Can you be sure you’re talking to the dead through their guts? Why do you have to pull out their insides for a chat? Maybe you’re just some kind of diviner; you read little prophecies in the entrails.”

His mouth quivers.

“Unnatural or supernatural, either way, maybe you just have such a brilliant, powerful mind, that you can’t handle the slipstream of information. Maybe you go to that powerful subconscious muscle, the dreaming mind. The intuitive stud you are, you create constructs and outlets that filter out all that information until it makes sense. Call it the projections of a very lonely mind.”

“No,” Simon says, malachite eyes glistening. “I talk to them. I help them. Tamara wanted her Teddy bear and I brought it to her. I tucked her in.”

Nyx points at the body bag. “There’s nothing for you there. You can’t interface with *that*.”

“Yes, I can!”

Simon paces about the basement, then leaps up and perches on the autopsy table. He crouches and looks down at Nyx.

“When was the last time any of them felt this strongly about anything?” He gestures up, to the world outside the basement. “You toss words like ‘obsession’ about, but that—that’s just the culture: ‘Try not to feel anything too strongly or you might look foolish.’ You hear it in the language, phrases like, ‘Don’t try so hard.’ What is that? ‘Don’t try so hard’! Is that the battle cry of the millennium? And-and-and, most of them out there don’t interface.”

Simon stretches a hand out to the side, producing pennies from the air with a motion of fingers.

“Marriage is a fifty-fifty coin flip. Heads—stick together. Tales—divorce.” Simon tosses a penny to the ground at Nyx’s feet. And another. And another. “My mother and father, they—Look. A lot of them, these relationships, how many of them do you think are real connections? How often do the people in them get beyond the world in their heads? The marriages of quiet desperation, even a lot of the reasonably happy ones, they just happen to have an illusion that matches their partner’s illusion close enough that they don’t conflict too often.”

Simon takes off his glasses and perches on the edge of the autopsy table like one of the Corbies perching in the wormwood tree in his head.

“If you take two televisions, each with its own VCR, each with its own copy of the same movie, and you sync them up and play the shows simultaneously, while each TV happens to be in the same space, facing each other—it doesn’t mean they are communing.”

Nyx nods, the anger flashing across her features. “You Burton reject, self-delusional bastard! I swear to goddess, Simon, you are the only man on this fucking sphere who can have a codependent relationship with a corpse!”

She turns and stomps up the steps, stopping halfway.

“I hope you change your mind, Simon. If you do, we’re waiting.”

Nyx starts, again, up the stairs.

And she stops.

“I’m glad you’re all right, too,” she says.

Then she’s gone.

Simon falls to a sitting position on the stainless steel autopsy table. He reaches down and pulls the body bag up to his lap. It crinkles as he hugs it close.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon works all night, but he puts her back together, puts the pieces back in their proper places.

*Better than all the king's horses and all the king's men. Eh, Jane?*

He puts the pieces back together, but wishes the mystery were as pliable as the flesh. So many questions remain unanswered.

Simon places Jane Doe in the new refrigerator—a glass case he has built just for her. Inside the glass, she lays like a fairytale heroine waiting for her rejuvenating kiss.

But she will not go to the Dead Water with Simon. Not yet. She is still missing her eyes and her heart.

He misses her golden eyes.

He wants to win her heart.



## INTERLUDE: The Little Princess

Fairy tales are not true.  
They are truer than true.  
I never doubted.

The world knows it, too. The wide-wide world always recognizes the Little Princess, even if she is in disguise. Even if she is lost or has lost her memory from a bump on the head or a malevolent spell. Even if she were kidnapped as a baby or given a witch's curse and turned into an animal or trapped in plain clothes in a small village. Even if her handsome Prince has yet to come and give her his kiss, to make her *officially* a princess.

Even so, the world recognizes the Little Princess.

Roads will lead to safety and to good fortunes. Trees—but not evil, enchanted, clawed trees—and animals—but not, of course, wolves or dragons—will help the Little Princess and try to keep her safe. Always there is some impossible chore or horrible mess to clean, but the Little Princess need only sing a pretty, pretty song and all the animals of the forest and birds of the sky respond—for she is the Little Princess, beloved by all. They all swoop and scamper in. The adorable and the majestic creatures help complete the chore or clean the mess and make everything right. For she is the Little Princess, beloved by all—not just the animals—but strangers, peasants, and little folk recognize her even when they do not know it. They have only to look into her fair eyes and hear her sweet voice and they cannot help but love her and do what she requests. For she is the Little Princess, beloved by one and all.

Except evil Stepmothers.

Evil Stepmothers hate the Little Princess. They always try to do her harm. Evil Stepmothers are always angry at the Little Princess. Stepmothers say, “No,” to the Little Princess. Stepmothers say things like, “Where did you get that mark?” and “Take that off this instant; it is not Halloween yet and you’ll get stains all over it.”

I do have stains. There are little droplets all over my stuffed animals, too. And bright red stains down my chinny-chin-chin and all over my Little Princess dress. My, what *big* teeth I have.

Stepmother is on the floor. She will never again say, "No."

It is a horrible, horrible mess.

I sang a pretty, pretty song. Now my friends are swooping and scampering in: rats and crows and cats and stray dogs. They have come to help clean this mess. Little sparrows flutter around the room with red beaks. I told Father he should sleep and he looked into my fair eyes and heard my sweet voice and could not help but love me and do what I requested, for I am the Little Princess.

My handsome Prince will come for me soon. He gave me his kiss and said he would take me away and introduce me to the royalty of his kingdom, where one can stay up all night forever and ever and ever after.

While I wait, my friends chew and chew.

Soon there will be no mess at all.

And the story will end happily ever after.

## CHAPTER 24

The wheel turns.

Simon stares up into the night sky, takes in the stars and cosmos and the giant glowing wheel that spins at the center of it all. It spins like a memory, like passing years, like summer to bittersweet fall. It spins.

The armed men help Simon onto the Ferris wheel.

He never saw the gun that lightly pressed his back. Never saw the men in dark coats approach. They materialized, more efficiently than the men who so recently broke Simon's hand. They searched him and systematically found every one of his assorted nasties.

*And I thought I was so slick. Eh, Jane?*

They put Simon in a car. They drove him to Navy Pier. Not a rude gesture, never a shove. Getting out, the lake wind stole Simon's hat away, but it was quickly returned by large, strong hands. Bright lights cheered the evening dark as Simon and his dread escort moved through the people, so many people. Strong hands urged Simon on when, in fascination, he froze in front of a mechanical wizard in a glass box—a Punch 'n' Judy grin—fifty cents for a fortune. The procession turned by degrees more and more surreal as they came upon the great Ferris wheel that dominates the pier.

*Did I dream it, Jane?*

A sign proclaims the ride temporarily off limits for maintenance, but these grim men seem to be above the sign's authority. A final pat down and Simon is handed a bag of cotton candy. The spun sugar is a shade of pink that does not exist in nature.

The wheel stops turning.

Strong hands help Simon into a car. The door closes. The seat opposite Simon contains only shadows and an emerald ring worn on a disembodied hand.

The wheel turns.

The shadows move. The ring and hand are attached to a man in an ashen suit. He might be in his fifties, but his hair is still dark, his face still strong. Simon and the man rise into the air, treated to a grand view of Chicago's lakefront on an unusually warm November night.

"Hello," says Simon.

"Oh, you brought cotton candy," says the man with the emerald ring. "Goody. May I?"

"Sure." Simon hands him the plastic bag.

"Do you like cotton candy?"

Simon shakes his head.

"Me, I love the stuff. I can eat it till I'm sick. My one vice—that, and a pretty set of eyes." The hand with the emerald ring holds a pinch of cotton candy reverently. "When they burn it, on the machine, it's a very distinct smell—all carbon and sweetness. Memories get locked into scents like that." He holds the bit of spun sugar to his nose, inhaling, eyes closing, making a long, deep sound in the back of the throat, a happy remembrance.

The wheel turns a full rotation.

"I'm sorry," says Simon. "I don't—"

"Do you know who I am?" asks the man with the emerald ring.

"No."

"My name is Gabriel Stephano, Senior." As Gabriel places the bright candy in his mouth, letting the sugar fibers dissolve without chewing, Simon cannot help but think of all those skeletons swimming in the cement holding Chicago together. "I know who you are, Simon. There is a little bedtime story, going round my circles, of a Jack the Ripper gent with a scalpel terrorizing some people that resemble the criminal element. That's you, correct?"

"Yes."

"And it's something about a girl?"

"Yes."

"A dead girl?"

"Yes."

"Hmhm, women." Gabriel savors another bite of cotton candy. "Nothing surprises me anymore, Simon. Except women."

"Mr. Stephano, if I harmed any of your men, I—"

Gabriel chuckles. "Listen, son, if you had hurt any of my boys—not that you would have, you understand, because they would have killed you, but supposing you did—right now, you would be in a small dark room. Somewhere. And no one would ever find out what happened to you."

The wheel turns. Smell of popcorn. Sounds of a live band.

"Then why am I here?" Simon asks.

"To talk, Simon. I like to talk, but my boys, they're not conversationalists. You are my excuse for a night out. You tell me some things, and maybe I tell you some things, and the longer we talk, the more cotton candy I get to eat. Tell me about the girl. What's her name?"

"Jane Doe."

"I wasn't able to find her name out either."

"The police couldn't—"

"A cop can't find his dick with both hands and the help of his partner on a warm night. No surprise. But I couldn't find out. That's disturbing. I'm going to guess you never knew the girl alive. My question, then, is: why are you involved in all this? Whose interests do you serve?"

"I'm doing this for Jane. I met her in Autopsy Room 6. I love her."

The wheel halts, abruptly. The car rocks back and forth at the apex of its assent.

"Oh, that's spooky," says Gabriel, his ring gleaming as green as the eyes of the young pathologist. "All right, Simon. Let's let that little secret lie for now."

*No one ever believes me, Jane.*

Gabriel takes another wad of candy. "Maybe you can tell me about your Jane Doe's demise. Who was present?"

"Joe Camino."

"Oh, Joe. Grotesque, but good at what he did. What a waste. Who else?"

"Alexander Drake. Hector Gomez."

Gabriel nods his head to each name. "Who else was there, Simon?"

"Your son."

*Gabe Stephano, Jr.: the Question Man. Jack of spades.*

Gabriel stops eating.

"My turn, Simon. Let me tell you about my son."

The elder Stephano tells Simon of how his son, Gabe, and Alex Drake had been friends since childhood, and when together had a charisma as big as the sky. He details how they started their little "heathen cult," how the duo populated Club Wendigo not only with the children of the affluent friends of the Drakes, but also with the youth of the kith and kin of the Stephano crime family. He tells Simon of the rituals, the horrors, and the eating.

The wheel turns. Smell of fast food grease and meat. Sound of complaining gulls.

"He was an altar boy, for Christ sake," Mr. Stephano says, crossing himself. "I remember the day he took his First Communion. He was so little. He hated the smell of incense. He complained that it made him sick. But that day he knew I was watching, and he took his sacrament strong and mature—the body and the blood. My little man. And now? Body and blood. My stomach churns at the end of every mass. I'm only thankful his mother didn't live to see this."

Mr. Stephano resists a moment, then reopens the bag of cotton candy.

"I have Arthur Drake to thank," says Gabriel.

"What can you tell me about him?" Simon asks.

"Arthur Drake is crazier than a shithouse rat. Apex Consumers—you've seen the commercials. Suckers are our greatest natural resource, and he harvests them into his meat grinder, sucks the marrow right out." Gabriel devours the candy, fluffier than

an angel's cloud, by the handful. "Club Wendigo was Arthur's idea. Little Alex thinks he's rebelling, starting the MTV version of daddy's cult, but it was Gabe who put the notion in his flaky head. Gabe did that because Arthur told him to."

"Why?" asks Simon.

"Everything Arthur Drake does is to impress the Gastro-nome Irregulars."

"They're cannibals too."

Gabriel makes a face. "That's an oversimplification. They're an epicurean club. Foodies. It's all about eating the strange and exotic. But see, Simon, this is what happens when rich, bored, soulless fucks come together—they one-up each other. You get an ivory toilet seat; I get a golden toilet seat. You slather barbecue sauce on the last existing dodo bird; I fire up a steak cut from a Neanderthal frozen in a glacier. Now you go and eat human flesh; I might think you're bold, but if that's all you do, you're going to get boring. 'Oh, dear boy, instead of paying your illegal yard workers, you killed and ate them, again? How droll.' So you got to get creative."

*I could see it, Jane—how a vegetarian might join this social club and be handicapped. Then he finds a way to eat people, and he one-ups his peers.*

"Let me ask you, Simon: why did my son and his cohorts kill your Jane Doe?"

"I believe it was over a hammer."

"A hammer?"

"An old hammer named Bob. It's the kind used to kill cattle in the old stockyards."

"If they wanted the hammer, that means Aruthur Drake wanted the hammer, though I could not tell you why. This town, Simon, it's built on an ever-flowing runoff of blood."

The wheel turns. The cityscape is all lights. The lake is all darkness.

"Mr. Stephano, why are you telling me all of this?"

"Old Testament."

“Old Testament?”

“First half of the Bible, Simon. There is no turning the other cheek. A certain threshold of sin is forgivable, but sometimes the population gets so fucked up, choked on its own disgust, that everything must be cleansed with a terrible miracle. Divine wrath, Simon—locusts, boils, darkness, fire from the sky, cities to salt, firstborn torn from their cribs by angels of death, fathers called on to sacrifice their own sons. Old Testament. That’s when you realize that God is more terrifying than the Devil ever could be. That is what I model my life on. I’ve done terrible things, but sometimes intimidation—shattering a kneecap, a life—it’s not enough. Sometimes your retribution has to be so righteous that they fall to their knees and sweat blood at the mere thought of trespassing against you. Old Testament.”

Mr. Stephano licks his fingers clean of sugar.

“And you would like this sort of retribution to happen to Apex Consumers?” asks Simon.

“I want a biblical plague visited upon the house of Arthur Drake! Apex Consumers, Club Wendigo, the Gastronomes Irregulars—I want every sick, sad fuck involved in them to be swallowed by something more horrifying than any of them could ever be. I want this because of every ungodly thing Drake has done, because of what my son has become.”

“Why do you think I can help with this?” Simon asks.

“Maybe you know a plague angel or two.”

“I do not understand.”

Gabriel points down to the pier below.

“People like their illusions of safety. Take the pier. It shows tourists that the big bad city is really nice, the shadows not so deep. Tourists go home and more tourists come back. Only, in this case, the illusion might as well be real. My family has certain interests in the pier and if the bad element ever messes with that illusion, they’d best hope the cops find them before I do.”

Gabriel looks Simon in the eyes.



"I, Simon, do not have many illusions. I've been around. I know there are things out there, nasty things, that pull strings. In the jungle there are systems of predators and scavengers. There are rats and there are jackals and hyenas and wolves and lions. When I'm at my most honest, I know that I'm a jackal. There is no shame in what I am. But knowing what I am means that I also know there are wolves and lions out there in the jungle."

The wheel turns. A child laughs. Or screams.

"Simon, I have reason to think you know a wolf or a lion. I think something terrible follows you. I think any information I give to you will spread, like sickness, to the places it needs to spread, in order to make Drake suffer." He smirks. "I know your next question. You want to know what I think is following you. Don't bother. I've lived a long time. I know what rocks not to turn over." He glances at his sugar-sticky fingers. "Ah, look what I've done. I've spoiled my dinner. Shame on me. Before we wrap this up, tell me one more thing, Simon."

"Yes?"

"This girl, the one you say you're doing this all for, what do you miss most about her?"

"Her eyes."

"Tell me about them."

Simon speaks about the golden eyes. His mouth moves all on its own. The great wheel turns and turns and turns. Simon's mouth stops, though he does not know how long he spoke.

"Thank you," Gabriel whispers, eyes closed. "You've got it bad. I had it that bad once." Gabriel looks into his empty bag. "It's gone now."

The wheel stops.

"Ride's over, Simon."

The door opens.

Men in mean coats help Simon out of the car. A sheet of paper full of the addresses of Club Wendigo meeting places is put in his hands.

"Close the door," Gabriel tells the men in dark coats. "I'll be a while."

"Wait, Mr. Stephano," Simon says.

"Yes?"

"Your son. What if I encounter him?"

"Old Testament," Gabriel says, and his voice is a gentle growl, and Simon—who has seen horrors both mundane and supernatural—shivers despite the improbably warm November night.

The wheel turns.

\* \* \* \* \*

He has her but he does not have her.

Body, but no heart, no golden-eye bliss.

All he had now was desperation . . . and pigeons.

Simon did not have the heart to catch living pigeons. But he did manage to find two dead birds, which now rest on his table. He slaps down the queen of diamonds. He picks up the scalpel. He has no idea if this will work.

\* \* \* \* \*

A left hand reaches for the ringing phone and the receiver rises to full, candy-red lips.

"Hello, thank you for calling 1-900-2STEAMY. My name is Candy and tonight I'll be your—" She clears her throat impatiently. "Mom? I . . . no, Mother, I am working. Yes. Call me on the cell. All right."

The left hand hangs up the landline and the right hand raises the ringing cell phone.

"Hi, Mom. Yes. I got the cookies. They were wonderful. Thank you."

The landline rings.

"Hold on, Mom. I've got a call on the other phone. Okay."

The right hand lowers and the left hand raises again.

"Hi, my name's Candy. Would you like to find out how many licks it takes to get to my sweet center? Ah, hold on. Let me guess—Dan, isn't it? Mmm-hmm. How old are you? No, no, Danny-boy. You're not eighteen. I'm thinking . . . sixteen, going on seventeen. Late February, isn't it? Never mind. I just know." The smile that flashes across her face is tight, lips compressed to hold in a giggle. "Look, Daniel, you can't call Candy if you're under eighteen. I'm sure there are oodles of girls to talk to at school. What? Oh, geek is just a label. You have no reason to wear it, Daniel. I can tell you're a sensual soul. I think you're ahead of your peers. In fact, if you talk to that girl in chemistry. Melissa, is it? Talk to her and you will be pleasantly surprised. All right. Goodnight, love."

The left hand hangs up and the right hand rises again.

"Hey, Mom. Hmmm? Oh, just an under-ager. No, he's a good boy. Just needed a push. Where were we? Hmm? Yes."

The landline rings.

"Sorry, Mom. Just a sec. Duty calls."

The right hand lowers and the left hand rises.

"Hello, I'm Candy and I have a creamy center. I—what? Well, hello, Simon. Do I have time to talk? Of course I do, love. Time moves in mysterious ways, different from person to person. Sometimes frenzied. Sometimes achingly slow. Right now time's moving at roughly two dollars a minute. What? At my front door? What do you—?"

An unsure knock.

The left hand hangs up the landline.

Candy walks to the front door, her expression curious and serene. She opens the door.

"Simon."

"Candy."

*Candy: the Mother. Queen of diamonds.*

"Mom?" Candy says into the cell. "A tall dark stranger just showed up. Hold on." She turns to her visitor. "Come in, Simon Meeks."

Simon walks into the room cautiously, watches Candy closely. She's a middle-aged woman with golden hair, her curves still curve, her lips full, her voice bubbly. She floats about her apartment, a sensual, nurturing, ditzzy but wise presence.

"You were supposed to be here earlier," Candy says.

"Sorry?"

"How did you find me?"

"Pigeons. Two of them."

"A fellow diviner!" Candy says, bouncing up and down happily. She takes Simon's hat and runs a warm hand through Simon's hair. "I don't use pigeons. Please have a seat."

Simon sits.

"Is Candy your real name?"

"Well, not exactly. I've gone by Candy for a long time, ever since I threw up all my candy corn in the third grade, when our teacher dressed up like a mime." Candy giggles melodiously. "Mimes scare me."

The landline rings.

"Oh. Just a moment, Simon. Busy night."

The left hand picks up the phone.

"Hi, this is Candy and I can moan in almost twenty different dialects. Hello, Stan! It's been weeks. Oh really? I'm sorry, love. I see better fortunes coming your way. This month, I would work on being prompt . . . Yes, that will be important. Oh! And Stay away from the sushi at that Japanese place near you this week. Yeah, bad mojo there. Hmm? Now, Stan, you know I don't do lottery numbers. Bad karma. Mmmmmmm . . . but I am having the most delicious visions of a redhead, a tight white uniform, and a steamy encounter in the back of an ice-cream truck that melts all the deserts. Am I right? Good! I'll let you hold on to that image and take it from there. No need to run up your bill until you get back on your feet. You're welcome, love. Night."

Simon looks at his queen of diamonds card. It has a few red fingerprints.

"You're some kind of oracle," he says.

"Yes, I am," she answers cheerfully. Then those big, red lips frown. "But that's a problem. People don't want accurate readings. They don't want to know that their child's turtle will die in thirteen days, and they aren't impressed that, once I hear their voice, I can tell them what kind of underwear they have on or their dead grandmother's favorite cleaning agent."

Candy sighs melodiously.

"They don't want specifics," she says. "They want vague assurances of job security and a strong love life. They want to huddle in little corners and receive promises."

Candy taps the landline phone.

"But with sex hotlines, specifics are good. I've got a knack. When the receiver hits my ear I just know whether your turn-on is a blue-eyed farm girl on a green prairie or getting slapped in the ass with raw steak during foreplay. I just do. Job transition wasn't very hard. I'm flexible. Go with the flow, that's me. Very Taoist."

Candy looks at the cell phone in her hand as if it were an alien that had crawled there on its own. She blinks.

"Oh! Whoops! Just a sec."

Her right hand rises to her ear.

"Hey, Mom, sorry. This may take a while. Can I call you back? All right. Love you, too."

Candy puts the cell phone down. She unplugs the landline.

"There," she says. "That should give us a few minutes. I know that you want to talk about something."

"Yes."

"That's why you found me so cleverly."

"Yes."

"You want to talk about the golden-eyed girl."

"Jane Doe."

"Oh, you've given her a name!" Candy says, clapping.

"Who is she?"

"She's a mystery, love."

"But—"

"No buts, Simon. She's a mystery, a benevolent mystery. Leave it at that. It's a dark, dark world out there, Mr. Scarecrow. Lots of pain. Lots of trauma. But sometimes, we find little miracles—the unasked for, undeserved, and unexplained gifts."

"I see."

"You're trying to put your miracle back together."

"Yes."

"But you're missing some pieces."

"Yes."

"You yearn for them so strongly." Candy places a hand over her heart. "Oh my. It's like an old, old fairy tale, pre-Disney. That I can help you with. Ask me a different question."

Simon thinks.

"Why did Alexander Drake cry the night they hung Jane?"

"That is an interesting question," says Candy. "It was a broken heart."

Simon looks troubled.

"Oh, love, don't fret over that. Monsters have hearts too. Jane, our clandestine girl, had insinuated herself into Alex's life for her own mysterious reasons. She helped Alex. He suffers a nasty hunger, and Daddy's pills become less and less effective. But Jane, and her golden eyes, helped alleviate his condition. She offered him a little peace."

Simon nods. That, he does understand.

"But Jane," continues Candy, "had her own mysterious agenda. That clever, clever girl snatched up something important before Alex and his buddies could get it."

"The hammer," says Simon.

Candy shrugs. "Broken hearts leak poison," she says. "Alex's friend—the jack of spades, right?—he whispered poisons in his ear. Then love became a wicked hate and they played their game of hangman. You know all about that. Alex cried.

He wanted her dead and he already was missing her. They didn't get the hammer. Still, Alex managed to get something, in the end."

"What?"

Candy grabs a scrap of paper from by the phone and scratches something on it with a pencil, while sucking on her lower lip.

"Ta-da!" she says, showing her work.

On the paper, Simon sees a pencil-drawn eyeball, a heart, and the word *you*.

Eye.

Heart.

You.

"He has them!" Simon says.

"Yes," says Candy. "Our broken-hearted monster wants a Valentine."

Simon stands and grabs his hat.

"Thank you, Candy. You're a very . . . cheerful person."

"Thank you, love. I'll take Transcendentalism over pessimism any day. I find happiness in voodoo doll smiles. I find happiness in the secrets I divine from my alphabet soup. Be careful where you find yours."

Simon nods and leaves.

The oracle plugs in her phone and goes back to work.

## CHAPTER 25

Once upon a midnight dreary, Simon ponders, weak and weary, over Y-incisions, scalpels, and volumes of cadaverous gore. Jane is as complete as he can make her. But no amount of absinthe or rooting of hands inside her chest cavity could send the two of them to the Dead Water together.

The Corbies heckle from the hollows in his head—chant their necro-beat poetry unbidden.

Pensive. Weak. The thrill he felt after Hector's apartment is gone. The new strength is gone. He knows who possesses her eyes and her glistening Valentine, but not how to get them. And if some nasty or less-than-human thing was not already on its way to get him, it would be soon, as near as he could figure. Monsters and shadows and cannibals and pyramid schemes weigh heavily on his soul.

"I miss you, Jane."

He folds her hands back over her chest.

The flowers he bought her are already dead.

Simon lays his head on the table, drifting in and out of the sleep that is the Little Death, next to Jane, who sleeps the Big Sleep, but he cannot make the two states intertwine. While Simon nods nearly napping, suddenly there comes a tapping, as of someone gently rapping, rapping at his basement door.

Startled, Simon lifts his head, absinthe dream-phantoms melting back into the corners. Simon ascends the steps and opens, wide, the basement door.

Darkness there and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, Simon stands there, wondering, fearing. "Jane Doe," he says, into the dark, finding the sound of it comforting, wondering if he should re-carve her name into his arms. And all is quiet, save the whispered name, "Jane Doe," over and over again in breathy echo. Simon shuts the door.



Soon again he hears a tapping, somewhat louder than before. And Simon follows wet footprints that are not his, descending the stairs, leading to the source of the new tapping.

Metal clanking metal. A silver skull ring clanking the stainless steel table. Attached to the ring, a pallid hand, and attached to that is Simon's shadow.

"Loki?"

"Hey, Simon," the shadow says with a beguiling smirk. "You remembered."

Not the least obeisance makes he; not a minute stops or stays he. But, with mien of lord or lady, perches on the rim of the autopsy table; perches and hugs his knees to his chest, looking rather like a carrion bird with his long black coat; perches and sits beside the pallid bust of Jane on the autopsy table, hair still dripping bleak November rain.

"Don't drip water on the patient."

"Sorry," says Loki, leaning away, maintaining his balance.

"That's a nifty trick."

"Hmm?"

"Fading in and out like that."

"I guess."

Loki's head cocks to the side, regarding the cadaver.

"Wow. She's still pretty, even after everything she's gone through. You do good work."

"She's beautiful," Simon says.

Loki grins. "From the mouth of the beholder. Exciting times, Simon."

"What do you mean?"

"Full circle. Our interests intersect. You want all her back and your little obsession keeps sidetracking you from punishing those who did this. But now, you know where to get the rest of her and it's with them my interests roost. Two of her killers are still out there using your oxygen."

Simon grits his teeth, but then this strangely pale eternal youth begins beguiling his homicidal fancies into smiling.

"Easy, killer," says Loki. "I think we can help each other."

"You'll help me?" Simon asks. Something tugs at his insides, something that wants to trust Loki, his shadow, his own shadow, who gave him breadcrumbs along the trail, who gave him the gift of coppery warmth.

Simon's shadow hops down from his perch. He holds up a stoppered vial with something red and viscous inside.

"Lookin' a wee bit peaked, my friend," Loki says. "Time you do a shot. I think you remember this stuff?"

Loki pops the stopper and swirls the liquid under Simon's nose and, *yes*, he does remember.

"Blood?" Simon asks.

"Yeah, but it's got a hell of an active ingredient."

"Careful, Simon," protest the Corbies.

But Simon drinks. He needs it, needs the strength.

*I did it all for you, Jane.*

It slides down thick and dark and strangely sweet—a rush, different from the Dead Water high. Simon's belly warms. All his aches and pains fill in with heat. Everything is filled in and complete. Except for the ache of Jane's absence.

Simon smiles. Loki mirrors the smile.

*My shadow. Eh, Jane?*

"I know that Jane Doe means a lot to you, Simon, but it's time you put her aside—just for a moment—and concentrate on the enemy. You'll do that, right?"

"Careful, careful, Simon!" caw the Corbies.

Simon nods. He can trust his shadow. It warms him to trust his shadow, puts everything right where it belongs.

"Good. Night's still young. Let's get started."

"What are we going to do?"

"Oh, you'll like this. We're gonna get you your Dead Water fix, in spades."

The two walk up the stairs, a boy and his shadow, with occasional glances back at the girl below.

"Loki?"

"Yes, Simon?"

"Do you really think I'll get the rest of her back?"

Quoth Loki, "Nevermore!"

The shadow opens the door laughing.

"But, hey, what do I know? Prove me wrong."



Simon and Loki ride the El.

The city streaks by.

When they are reasonably alone on their car, Loki turns to Simon. The atmosphere builds for a shattering revelation. Then Loki whispers, "I'm what you might call a vampire."

"Oh," says Simon.

The atmosphere goes limp with anticlimax.



Even the carpeting underfoot feels luxuriant.

"Welcome to the Palmer House, sirs. How may I be of service?"

"We're here for the banquet."

"Right this way."

Simon feels out of place in one of Chicago's grandest, oldest hotels, but Loki looks even more so. At first glance, he appears the archetypal blood-drinking Byronic demon-lover that stalks the covers of so many young-adult paranormal romance novels—a Gothic wardrobe puffed out with pale, lithe, brooding late-teen bad boy charm. But, no. He's that archetype buried under a century of apocalyptic rubble, excavated by archeologists, but not yet properly restored for his place in the "Macabre Youth of the Turn of the Millennium" display. Hints of dirt and grime besprinkle him. His clothes are ragged—not with the expensive damage of the purposefully distressed and hip, but with real wear. His black boots linger on the verge of

falling apart. The pant cuffs of his black cargos are tattered. His T-shirt, sporting a crazed Cheshire Cat grinning in mid-vanish, is marred by little holes and mildew stains. His black leather duster is slightly shredded, the membrane of a bat's wing on the other side of a hale storm. His hair may have been, at one time, sculpted with an improbable amount of gel, but now was a matted, dark ruin.

And yet, he does not smell. He's got almost an absence of smell, save for a faint trace of November rain and trampled leaves. Loki seems completely oblivious to his appearance and the staff pointedly ignores it. Simon wonders if they simply don't see the shabbiness, if something about the vampire hides it from the casual observer. After all, he hadn't really noticed it until now either.

They are shown into a very large kitchen. Extra tables are brought in. The staff is still dragging bodies from the room-sized refrigerator.

*I had not seen so many, Jane. Not since all those heads in their tin barbecue pans.*

"Dig in," says Loki, crooked half-grin breaking his face.

Simon saw it. He'd only seen it a few times, but, intermittently, the cool confidence of Loki's pallid face interrupted, distorted with a nervous twitch, a paranoid glance, a crazed grin.

*When had that taint of madness started? Perhaps when he stopped changing his clothes. Eh, Jane?*

"I've never done so many," Simon says. "Not in one night."

"Work hard, play hard," says Loki.

Dozens of them, all cadavers somehow connected to Apex Consumers and Club Wendigo. Some had been hastily chewed and gutted and dismembered. Others displayed the various phases of the hunger disease—hair falling out in clumps, distorted bodies, wide mouths, claws. Chalk-white monsters with those doll's eyes and rows and rows of teeth.

Each of them contains pieces of the puzzle. And Simon can cut to those pieces.

Dozens of Dead Water plunges, dozens of new friends, gallons of the dead love.

Simon licks his lips.

"I thought so," Loki says.

Simon looks at the dead longingly.

The Corbies shriek, eager for the feast.

Loki watches Simon hungrily.

"It's okay, Simon. I've watched you work before. I'm your number one fan."

*I think he was desperate too, Jane, for a glimpse of something . . . other.*

"Should I be looking for something specific?" Simon asks.

"You do your thing. When you come out of it, tell me what you find and I'll try to figure out how that connects."

Simon drinks from his Thermos.

"I've already composed a profile, Simon. Obviously we're looking for health nuts—people who were fixated on low-carb diets, that sort of thing. After all, people as a food are Atkins friendly."

"We won't be disturbed?"

"Oh, we're all disturbed here, Simon. You. Me. Everyone. But, no—no one is going to interrupt us. My superiors run this place. The health inspector will never be the wiser. Enjoy."

Simon snaps on the latex gloves and picks up his tools.

So many Y-incisions. So many portals.

Simon digs in.

\* \* \* \* \*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

Where are we. . . ?



He comes to, stumbling, falling down on the kitchen floor, wondering when or where or in whom he lost his blue gloves.

“I think you’ve had enough, Simon.”

He can’t suppress the giggle, can’t escape the roiling, liquid floor. Loki helps him up. Simon wants to laugh and wants to cry. All those friends, all of them already swimming out in the ebony sea. All that time—dream time—stretches. How many months had Simon spent in the Dead Water these last few hours? Loki helps him to a chair, asks him questions, repeats the questions, and Simon does his best to respond with names and places and details, all the little things you carelessly leave in the spaces between your liver and spleen.

He’s holding so much dead love that he’s sweating it from his pores, luminous ghost plasma. He wonders why Loki doesn’t see it, but then he thinks maybe Loki does see it. His shadow watches him, fascinated.

But it’s hard to focus on the questions. The Corbies are cawing and singing. There are so many of them now—hundreds of them, thousands of them, multiplying in his head, dozens of murders in his mind.

“Life’s a bitch, and then Simon makes friends with you in your chest cavity,” the Corbies say.

Simon answers the questions and then tries to explain the Other. Just an outline, a silhouette in each of the Dead Water trips, but taken as a whole, after all those Y-incisions were cut, they formed a grotesque shape. It was too massive to see in any one trip, too huge to perceive, like the thing in the bog . . . but not the thing in the bog. Something different; yes, different. The Whisper in the River. Simon’s mind sewed it together, as best he could, from the mere fragments he saw spanning the entire horizon of each Dead Water trip. It dragged its heavy

body along, the crawling naked god, flesh of the flesh and meat of meats—crawling on pseudopods composed of millions of flailing intestines. Gutted carcasses fused together, steaming masses of animate bloody pulp. Body bristling with broken bones and meat hooks, twitching cleavers and fidgeting hammers, and a sea of staring gelatin eyes. Its thousand invisible mouths whisper to all of us, kissing and suckling at all of us, biting. It opened its great maw, both sphincter and throat, for in and out are all one, and bellowed. Its voice was made of a planet of flies, grating animal cries, fearful squeals, the sound of everything chewing on each other and the scream of a bloody river changing direction. The voice told Simon that it was the ultimate eater and the ultimate feast.

“We are meat. Everything is meat. Everything has to eat.”

The voice promised Simon that everything around him, right now, was desperately begging him to eat it. Everything and everyone. There are no other truths than meat and the need to chew it. Simon saw a vision of the Union Stock Yard Gate, the limestone head of Sherman the bull staring at him with cold eyes, blood dripping from stone lips.

*Once upon a time, Jane, they reversed the river, and something was born, or a door was open letting something in, or something was made from many ragged things stitched together and given life.*

Simon tries to explain all this, numb-tongued, to his shadow. Then he's in a hallway. Loki helps him walk. The patterns in the carpet speak and he understands. A woman walks by, and Simon knows the name of her dead grandmother—and the thing she hid in the back of the toilet tank.

And then they are in an elevator and Simon watches the dancing lights and he knows what it is that happened on the fourteenth floor.

And then he does not need Loki's help to walk. He is strong. He is balanced. He is good.

And then they approach a figure.

“He's a Kindred,” Loki whispers.

*The vampires call each other Kindred. We don't say "cow," we say "beef." Eh, Jane?*

Simon can tell by the way Loki greets him that he is an important Kindred. So Simon tries to be polite to this tall, slender figure with Peter Lorre, rodent features. But then Simon hears the screaming inside Peter Lorre's skin. Under the skin. Simon can hear the dead scream beneath the Kindred's flesh. Whatever it is there's more than one and they're swimming in the black veins. Simon tries to answer. He's not sure what he's saying, but he's shouting it even as he grabs this Kindred's sleeve and pulls.

"Unhand me!" yells the deep, nasally voice.

Now Simon is flying through the air. But he flies so slowly, he has enough time to see the hand that flung him—the pasty, olive, waxen skin. The fingernails are gone, torn out long ago, and in those scars, Simon can see the echo of a night of torture and terror. He does not have enough time to ask the Kindred about the missing nails before he slams into the wall on the opposite side of the hall. Simon hits the floor with rubber-drunk grace.

Another giggling fit comes on, but he resists.

Loki helps him up. Simon cannot see or hear any dead inside of Loki.

"It's cool, it's cool," his shadow says. "He's my ghoul."

*It seems I can never escape that nickname. Eh, Jane?*

"Perhaps sir's retainer would be more comfortable in the waiting room?" says another voice.

Then someone else is helping Simon down the hall, away from his shadow and the tall, waxen Peter Lorre.

"Loki! Loki!" Simon calls.

His shadow is there.

"What is it, Simon?"

"I want to find Jane. I want to find her heart and eyes."

"We talked about that. We're going to put that on the back burner, right?" His shadow's voice grows stern, and something



in the chemistry of Simon's belly responds. He wants to trust his shadow and obey his shadow and please his shadow.

But the thousand-thousand Corbies say, "Look! Look!"

Simon turns his eyeballs around, looks inside himself. He sees that the upside-down wormwood tree has grown until its limbs fill his entire body. And then he sees something else. Something squirms beneath the grim bark.

"It writhes!" caw the Corbies.

Simon is at a loss.

"Oh, fuck this noise!" the thousand-thousand Corbies say, grinding their beaks in frustration. They attack the tree with a thousand-thousand beaks, tearing away the grim bark, exposing the infecting parasite.

"It writhes! It writhes!" they caw.

A blood-red worm runs the length of the great trunk. A thousand-thousand carrion beaks attack it, root it out, tear it apart, kill and devour it.

Simon gasps.

The feeling is gone. The desire to trust his shadow and obey his shadow and please his shadow—gone.

"Right, Loki," Simon says.

"That's a boy," the Corbies caw. "Play it clever, play it sly." They roost back in the branches, their tree reclaimed.

Simon is led away to the waiting room.



As it turned out, the waiting room was not in the lobby.

They go to the basement.

Then they go a little lower.

Simon finds himself in a plain room, no windows, full of couches, chairs, and magazines. There is no clock. There is no time. Half a dozen people wait—sitting, standing, pacing, reading, talking—all utterly incongruous, a moldering box full of puzzle pieces from different puzzles. One wears leather

and chains, another a formal suit, another a ruined dress and fallen leaves stuck in her hair.

"Who is your regnant?" asks a squat man. His features look pushed down, as if he has had to endure the gravity of Jupiter. With his squashed face and two large eyes, he looks very much like a toad in a cheap suit.

"Who?" Simon replies.

"Who is your master?"

*It was a room full of ghouls, Jane.*

"I'd hate him if I did not love him so," mutters a girl reading a magazine. After every page, she shoves a pin in her hand.

"Loki," Simon says to the toad man.

The room lulls with the lazy murmur of the ghouls, each vaguely aware of his and her fellows, but all trapped in their own odd worlds. Their comments come from those scattered vantages, fragmented and fractious.

"Loki."

"Loki?"

"Who's that?"

"Trey Fischer."

"Never heard of him."

"You're ignorant."

"One of the Prince's Hounds."

"Oh."

"Just a kid . . . or was a kid."

"What year is it?"

"One of them Circle of the Crone acolytes."

"Wazzat?"

"Blood witches."

"Mine complains that he's spending too much time with Rowen these days."

At the name of Rowen, a full half of the ghouls flinch or shiver. The lazy murmur picks up a few octaves. More join in on the conversation.

"Rowen!"

"Oh my . . ."

"Who's that?"

"You're ignorant."

"She's the head blood witch."

"Old."

"Features like a beast."

"Seven feet tall."

"No, at least eight feet tall!"

"She's an Indian."

"Native American!"

"Just half."

"Either way, she could do their medicine and magic when she breathed."

"Mine tells me she can turn into a bear."

"She can call dead gods from the underworld."

"I heard she ripped the head off of one of them wolf people. Clean off."

"Bullshit."

"Yeah. She took its head and turned it into a candle that drove all its kin insane."

"Bullshit!"

"You're ignorant."

"Mine tells me she can talk to the voice in the river. Mine tells me all his secrets, because mine loves me best of all. The other ones don't love mine like I love mine, and that's why I had to put the broken glass in their tea and make them go away. Mine has made more and they don't love mine like I love mine . . ."

Simon backs to the edge of the room and observes the murmur. He recalls all of those Thanksgivings and Christmases sitting at the children's table. There always seemed to be one chair short at the adult table, and Simon always found himself at the kids' table, all the way up to last Christmas.

*Sometimes, Jane, I dream of the ghouls, still stuck in that waiting room. And sometimes I dream of what that adult table must be like.*

Simon can see the one trait that links them all: the fog over the eyes. Once, as a boy, Simon's parents tried an experimental medication on him. He lost a year, locked in a mostly functioning body, enshrouded in that fog. Simon has always had trouble expressing anger. But *that* made him angry.

One ghoul, a very dignified-looking man in an expensive suit, sits in a yellow puddle on a leather couch. He had to go. He could not make the decision on how to deal with the problem without his regnant's blessing. He seems only mildly embarrassed.

*Is that what my shadow intended for me, Jane?*

## INTERLUDE: Into the Parlor

When I was a boy, I liked throwing bugs into spider webs. “Step into my parlor,” I’d whisper to each fly, before I ripped off its wings. And when the spider came, if I held my breath, I swear I could hear the fly scream tiny obscenities.

I don’t remember when the world lost its wonder, when everything just turned colorless. It was early on. After they killed Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. Throwing bugs into a web, that gave me some of the wonder back. Then I grew up, and even the parlor lost its wonder.

I saw the hole in the world while driving my route. I used to like my white truck, my white uniform, and the twinkling music that played as I drove. Everyone was so happy to see me.

I hate the music now.

*Hate it.*

The music was playing when I first saw the hole in the street, bigger than two manhole covers. It went down into a big tunnel—a storm drain, I think. The city set up construction horses around it, but they never seemed to get around to fixing it.

After passing it a few times, I stopped and looked in, and I’m glad I did.

Down in the hole, there’s a spider web. It was so big. I laughed. I cried. I went to a pet shop. I bought a white rat, the biggest they had. I threw it into the web.

“Step into my parlor,” I said and the echo made my voice big.

It wiggled and jiggled the web. Through the hole, I saw something large and dark take the rat, and I felt wonder again.

Then I gave it pigeons.

Then a dead cat.

Then a dog I lured with ice cream.

“Step into my parlor,” I’d say and toss them in. When it was done, all that was left were husks jiggling in the weird, underground wind.

The big dark thing got bigger. And the web got bigger, more intricate and more beautiful. Because of me. I helped build it. I felt wonder. I felt pride. I could do anything. I could even stand up for myself.

Like against Donald. He had been selling ice cream on my route for weeks. So I torched his truck.

Yesterday morning, there was an old homeless woman at the parlor, bent over, staring in the hole. At first I was angry at the bag lady. It was *mine*. But then I knew what to do.

“Step into my parlor,” I said.

I held my breath and heard her yell big obscenities. Soon, all that was left was a husk.

I’ve come back this morning to put my plan into action—my plan to lure children to the hole with ice cream. I look down into the darkness. The husk is gone. Then I hear something behind me.

I turn around to find another homeless bum watching me. No.

It’s the same bag lady.

How’d she get out of the parlor?

She’s coming toward me, all shamblingly, like a child with palsy playing with a puppet. I scramble back, but I trip and fall on my rump at the edge of the hole.

She’s coming closer.

Her eyes are milky. Her skin bulges and writhes in weird places. I hear a voice. Her mouth hangs rubbery and slack, but I hear a voice—many voices—a chorus of high-pitched voices singing in unison from somewhere inside her. They rise, strangely, at the end of her sentences, making everything into a question.

“Step into my parlor?”

Her rubbery mouth yawns impossibly wide and giant arachnid legs reach out and now I see how horrible wonder can be.

“Step into my parlor?”

## CHAPTER 26

He assumes that vital organs are not vital in the dead-but-walking, that bleeding to death is not an option. So it all comes down to structural damage.

Simon leads Loki into his basement, and then he punches two scalpels, held between the fingers and knuckles of one hand, into the vampire's eyes.

*I'm fast, but my shadow is faster. No one is faster than his shadow. Eh, Jane?*

Loki does not expect this. The scalpels slide in easily, one into each eye. Simon burns the strength Loki put in his belly, concentrates and burns it to move faster. Two more blades of surgical steel snap into his hands as he ducks down.

Structural damage.

The eyes.

The Achilles tendons.

Light the propane torch.

Loki hits the ground at the same moment the torch ignites. Simon shoves it toward his face.

Fangs.

Hiss.

Blur of motion.

Even without his legs, Loki is very fast. He is confused, blind, surprised, and his Beast is riled.

*They have a Beast inside them, Jane. I think humans have a Beast, too—just not as big. Not fed on the blood of the dead and grown obscenely large, like an urban legend sewer crocodile fed on sewage till it's too huge, too hateful to ever die.*

Loki's Beast is scared and angry.

Fight *and* flight.

With a blur of flopping legs and frantic arms, Loki flies across the basement like a demon crab. He slams into a wall. Darts. Slams, hissing and roaring, into another wall.

Simon keeps the torch in front of him.

"If he thought at all . . . it was that he and his shadow, when brought near each other, would join like drops of water; and when they did not he was appalled," Simon quotes.

"What—the—fuck?" Loki's words come out over-enunciated through the bared fangs.

"It's from *Peter Pan*," says the turncoat scarecrow. "I need answers, shadow. I saw the waiting room. I saw what you intended." Simon holds the torch before him as he talks. He's moving, too. Constantly moving.

*They hunt at night, Jane. I had to assume my shadow could function blind.*

Simon keeps moving. There are other, identical torches planted throughout the basement. He lights each one as he passes. Loki twitches at the sound of each new flame, realizes there is dangerous fire all about. He stops darting, lays on the ground with his legs behind him, upper-body propped up on two coiled arms, a frenzied leopard seal crying blood.

"All right, necrophile. Let's chat."

Simon puts the torch down, but keeps moving, always staying close to one torch or another.

"You tried to wrap me in a fog," Simon says. "Make me like one of them, in the waiting room. There are things you're not telling me. Was that a vampire—?"

"Kindred!"

"Was that a Kindred at the morgue that night, erasing Jane?"

"The Mondays!" the Corbies whisper to one another.

"Yes."

"Friend of yours?"

"No. Rogue. Did a sloppy job, actually."

"The two of you don't work for Dr. Reeves?"

"No! Reeves is just a fucked up little mortal. We don't work for fucked up little mortals; they usually work for us. Get it? That rogue at the morgue did a cover up. Had things gotten much worse, others would have done it—only better."



“But he didn’t erase my memories.”

Loki laughs. “No, Simon. You’re the X-factor. While we’re at it, more than one Kindred thought it best to get rid of you. You kept going. You saw too much. There are only a few ways someone like that can end and most of them are dead.”

Simon thrusts a torch forward, “So you’re the vampire sent to get me.”

Loki flops away. “No! You little ingrate. I told them I could keep you under control.” Loki giggles at the absurdity. “I think, under the circumstances, I’ve been good to you, Simon. I think I’ve been mind-ballingly good to—”

“Under control,” Simon says. “That’s what your blood does—correct?” Simon punctuates the sentence with a shove of his torch.

“Yes!” Loki hisses. “All right! Yeah. Back off. Our blood—it creates emotional ties. Three times is the charm, and then you’re a . . . servant. You get to live longer, be stronger. We get a servant. You’d die for us. At least, you’re supposed to feel like that. I’ve never heard of it not working.”

But our hero has an imbalance, a misalignment of humors the doctors never puzzled out. Or maybe Simon’s soul already belonged to Jane Doe.

“So, shadow,” says Simon, “how can I trust what a monster tells me?”

“Monster? Fangs and jonesing for hemoglobin aside, I think you’re the creepiest cat in this room.”

Simon puts down the torch, moves about the room.

“If I am such an X-factor, why use me at all?” Simon says.

Loki, bleeding from the sockets, in a heap, quiets down, considers.

“I told them that you were under control. It was a way to keep you around.”

“Why?”

“I had a use for you. You have special skills. You also have a reason to go after Club Wendigo, Apex Consumers, and all of

them. The static you'll create for them is a way of poking the hornets' nest without showing our hand."

Loki crawls closer.

"Some of my superiors, Simon—they're pretty old, pretty distant. This business with cults and creatures, it's like a chess game to them. Everything is so carefully balanced. They've seen it all before. They can predict it. Most of the time they're bored by it."

Loki inches closer.

"But they didn't predict you. Your intentions are so genuine. They don't get that. Not anymore. Love? Some of them can't even remember human mannerisms. At first even I thought it was a ploy, or you were just a pervert. But I watched you. I watched your aura when you do your Dead Water trick with the stiffs. I've never seen those colors before. It's real. You aren't playing any angle and you aren't working for anyone else. That makes you invisible on their radar. Someone killing others and risking his life for the love of a cadaver whose name he doesn't even know—they can't comprehend that, let alone predict its course or even track it."

Loki creeps closer.

"You are interesting, Simon—entail reader, corpse lover. They're stagnant. I thought I could convince my bosses to keep you on the playing board a while longer. Happy? Maybe I underestimated you. But—" Loki giggles. "Letting me talk this much. It means you underestimated me."

"What?" Simon asks.

"I can hear the beating of your heart." The voice does not sound human. Simon does not see the motion. The torch closest to hand is slapped away and Simon is across the room, slammed into the wall, lifted off his feet, staring into what had recently been Loki's eyes—two scalpel handles. Loki stands tall on repaired legs, mouth open, fangs quivering.

*Oh, curse my tattletale heart. Eh, Jane?*

Then Simon slides down, slowly. Loki lets him go. The vampire yanks the scalpels out of his eyes. Black blood gushes out in Oedipal spurts.

*I could see the blood, Jane, alive, malevolent, slithering about to repair the damage.*

"Are you going to kill me?" Simon asks.

Loki licks the blood trailing down his face from the ruined sockets.

"You know, Simon, any sane Kindred would. That's the only comprehensible solution. A year ago, I would have. But I've been dancing in the incomprehensible lately. In my circle, I have a specialized position. I'm—well, here's my card, sir."

Loki pulls a card from a pocket, presses it to one of the bloody holes in his face and then presses it to Simon's forehead, where it is held fast by the gore.

"Besides, lover boy," Loki purrs. "I've got a job for you."

"I already examined those corpses."

"That was an audition. I've got something else. Something I haven't told the others about."

Loki staggers up the steps

"What say we call it a night, eh? Tomorrow we'll see if we try and kill each other. Chaos is my faith, and I honestly don't know how this is all going to turn out."

And Simon's shadow departs.

Simon pulls the card off his head and looks at it: a blood-stained tarot card.

The Fool.



Simon hefts the body bag into his backseat, squinting in the daylight.

The call woke him up just before noon.

"I . . . need . . . your . . . help."

So Simon drove out.

He starts the car, sees the plume of rising smoke in his rearview mirror. Sirens wail. Simon drives. He waits a few minutes.

“Loki?”

Silence.

“Loki?”

“What?” The reply is muffled from inside the body bag—sleepy, slow, and a few octaves lower than his shadow’s normal speech.

“I just . . . I would have thought that, after last night, I’d be the last person you’d want to see you vulnerable.”

“Yeah, well . . . given the circumstances, it’s galling. But it also gives us the chance to . . . kiss and make up.”

“Was it them?”

“Who?”

“Drake. Club Wendigo.”

“Yeah. Bastards torched my place, in the middle of the day. Someone must have . . . told them how to get at me, and where.”

“The rogue Kindred?”

“Yeah.”

“Who is it?”

“Don’t know. Going to find out. You’re going to help me . . . Tonight or tomorrow night . . . after I recover, we’re going to . . . get some answers . . .”

Silence.

“Loki?”

“Hmm? Oh . . . did I snore?”

“No.”

“I don’t think I can snore anymore.”

“No. That takes breathing.”

“Still dream, though. Lot of vampires . . . say they don’t dream . . . but I . . . do . . .”

“I see.”

“This girl. At a club. She had such . . . I drained her. Told myself I was hungry . . . but . . . I think I was passing the time. Wanted to see . . . if I could still . . . feel . . . guilty . . .”

“Loki?”

“Can’t feel it . . . anymore . . . unless . . . I’m . . . dreaming . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

The light in the diner makes the pallor of their skin more garish, bordering on grotesque. Even without that, though, Simon knows he’s in the presence of another vampire. The vibe coming off her says predator; it’s something that makes Simon want to hide in a cave or huddle close to the firelight. The Corbies are uneasy in their tree. The feeling she emanates is similar to the intense aura that had come off Loki when he’d had the two scalpels through his eyes. Otherwise, Loki seemed able to keep it bottled up. Not her, though.

So Simon sits in a booth with two monsters. And yet, if he looks away, he is also in a brightly lit Denny’s, that most mundane of settings. The two realities sharing the same space is dizzying.

Monster or not, she certainly doesn’t look like she belongs in a Denny’s, but some expensive club, straddling the letters *V-I-P*.

Loki introduces her as Persephone.

She barely spares Simon a glance.

They talk of things for which Simon has no context.

No one else sits on their side of the restaurant.

The Corbies cry and Simon’s animal brain screams: *Run. Run now!*

To calm himself, he stabs two rolls with two forks and makes them dance.

“God, you look like shit, Trey,” Persephone says.

“Loki,” he says.

“What?”

“These days I prefer Loki. If that’s all right, *Linda*.”

“Fair enough.”

Loki plays with a deck of cards as he talks. Every card is the Fool, drawn from mismatched tarot decks. Simon notices Loki’s nervous twitch, like a cat’s flipping tail, and the crazed grin.

*My shadow had the same smile I had on the night I killed Hector. Eh, Jane?*

"My haven got torched," Loki says.

"Do you know who did it?" Persephone asks.

"I was hoping you'd heard something."

"Not a thing. Why don't you take this to Noriss or Maxwell?"

*My shadow told me that the vampires of Chicago have a Prince, Jane. And his name is Maxwell.*

Loki flips another Fool.

"I don't feel safe going to the others," he says to the upturned card. "Not until I know more."

"But you feel safer telling me?"

"Marginally."

"What about Moyra?"

"Can't talk to her. Not yet."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"What's going on, Loki?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You don't show yourself at court. You skip out on assignments. You're flushing any political gains you made under Maxwell. You've let yourself go completely to Hell. And, on top of it all, you drag me out to a fucking Denny's."

Loki bites his lip.

"To be honest, my dear, I just wanted to see if the world would disintegrate if you stepped in one."

She smiles for a fraction of a second.

"What are you going to do now?" she asks.

"Gonna see Rowen."

Simon sees something flash across her features at the mention of the name. It's like the fear and unease he feels in the presence of these monsters.

"You're spending a lot of time with her these days," Persephone says. "Learning lots of bloody hoodoo?"

"Something like that."

"You never seemed all that devoted to the Circle. I always thought you joined just to be in a covenant."

"Something like that."

"But what—you found religion now?"

"Something like that."

"Loki—" she leans in "—what did she show you? What did you see out there?"

Simon senses this is an unfinished conversation the two of them had recently. Loki puts his cards away, pushes away the uneaten pancakes.

"I have to go," Loki says, standing. "How do I look?"

Persephone licks the tip of her thumb and carefully reaches out to smudge the corner of one of Loki's eyes, leaving a tiny clean spot in the grime. She drops her hand, fingers lightly brushing his jaw line on the way down. "There. Flawless."

He smirks. "You take care of yourself, Persephone."

Simon and Loki leave. It is, the pathologist decides, no fun playing third wheel to your shadow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon drives.

His shadow talks.

Loki explains the Kindred covenants, the social cliques of the damned. Loki talks about the Circle of the Crone—joining seemed like the right thing to do at the time. He talks of the worship of the crone figure, the animistic spirituality, the vampiric blood sorcery, the invocation of underworld gods, the eldritch rites under fat moons.

"I used to just kind of nod along to all that. Lip service, you know?"

The white lines blur by.

He talks about Rowen, the Hierophant and leader of Chicago's Circle of the Crone.

The odometer shivers.

“She was the first one to call me Loki.”

*I caught a glimpse of my shadow's earlier self when he said that, Jane. Not a shadow of my shadow, but an older stratum of his being. Not yet back to his mortal self, but not the ruin he was when I knew him, either. If I cut Loki open, I'm certain I would have found many strata, living and dead. Even more than most people have.*

They stop at a forest preserve and get out. Loki leads the way and Simon follows his shadow into the dark. Chill winds and sighing leaves prophesy full winter's arrival.

They come upon a large shed, four sturdy walls of cement. Loki unlocks a heavy padlock and they enter. *Click.* A battery-powered lamp pleads feebly to the dark. There are no windows.

“Rowen is going to meet us here?” Simon asks.

“Yeah,” his shadow replies. “She’ll be along shortly.”

Simon sits on the floor.

His shadow paces, wrestling with something troubling.

“Loki?”

“Before we see her, I need to try to get you to understand something. It started at a movie.” Loki paces more agitatedly. “Not like the one where you see those old silents. Big cineplex. And there are previews and seizure-inducing soft drink ads. I’m more or less bored out of my flaming gourd, when I see it—” Loki waves a hand as if to paint the image on to the dirty, cinderblock wall. “A sparkling vampire.”

Loki slaps the wall, kicking up the dust.

“A sparkling fucking vampire! Twenty feet tall, big as a gilded idol. Angsty, whiny, vegetarian, powder-faced, boy band vampire. And he’s got this wispy emo girl that wants him. And he sparkles! And all the tween girls in the theater go nuts. They’re screaming like they’re going to tear their clothes off and toss them to their moody new god.”

Simon’s shadow barks out a manic laugh.

“Maybe that’s good for us, for my kind. It creates a whole generation of future victims that will grow up begging to jump



down our throats. But I found the whole thing depressing. For weeks my whole routine was shot. Still is. I can't go into the industrial clubs and feed off my usual pool of mascara-smeared girls. I can't do it and keep a straight face."

Something falls from the ruins of Loki's coat and scuttles away.

"So I'm left to wonder: is this eternity? Am I doomed to be an immortal douche bag—night after night, going through the motions; night after night, overused fang-penis-sex metaphors? No growth—stagnation?"

Back to the wall, Simon's shadow slides to the floor.

"Fuck Anne Rice. Fuck *Twilight*. Unlife imitates art."

Simon's shadow abruptly freezes, still and calm.

"The point is, all this got me thinking about my prospects. The Kindred—we seem supernatural and mysterious. Exciting. And we are supernatural, but it's so . . . mundane. It's just blood drinking and the Kiss. That's it. Everything else—all the grand schemes—that's just staving off boredom."

Simon's shadow takes out his card deck full of Fools.

"Even the Circle—bullshit. There are just fangs and death and taxes. If a little bit of blood magic works, that's not any more fantastical than lifting a motorcycle over your head, just with names of deities and a little more showmanship thrown in."

Loki shuffles the Fools.

"There's no . . . overlying pattern, spiritual destiny, what have you. No beyond. There's just the things that rot—you, Simon, and the rest of your kind. And there's the things that stagnate—us. My Embrace wasn't part of some great plan. A dickhole with fangs, who knows less than me, did the deed as a very ill-advised political maneuver. There's no answers. Except . . ."

"Rowen?" Simon says.

"Rowen," his shadow echoes. "Get this: she chose me. She's not part of my bloodline. She didn't know my dickhole sire, and he wasn't even a member of the Circle. Before all of it, she chose me. She stood over my fucking cradle, named me, wrote a bloody symbol on my little forehead."

Loki draws something, with a finger, on his forehead; it almost shows through smudged dirt.

“And when my time came to take an infant, I knew that symbol. I was never taught it, but I knew it and I knew what to say and it was just *right*.”

Loki smiles and Simon shivers like his odometer.

“So I go back to Rowen. I was a smart-ass kid turned into a smart-ass vampire. Had no perception. But I follow Rowen so I can feel something. And she shows me things, such things.”

Loki shuffles the Fools more frantically.

“Terrible things. But terror is a feeling, you know? She teaches me more Crúac, more bloody witchcraft. I start to see the patterns in things. I can hear it in the music. I see it in interstate road maps. I can read it on these damn cards.”

Loki tosses the rest of the Fools to the floor.

“Careful what you wish for. Rowen helped me become the Fool. Play my cards right, and I can be the Trickster.”

Loki jumps up, pulls a dirty rug from the wood floor, and tosses it to the side of the room.

“This thing, with Arthur Drake and his cannibal cult and his son’s offshoot cult. These monsters. These—”

“Ghouls,” Simon offers.

“What?”

“They are horrible monsters that eat human flesh. That’s what a ghoul is.”

“No. That will confuse the hell out of me. We have to call them something else.”

“Ghasts?”

“Huh?”

“Ghast is to ghastly as ghoul is to ghoulish.”

“Sure. Ghasts. It’s a sickness, a spiritual disease. But we don’t know how it travels. Cannibalism seems to help, but not all the cannibals turn into . . . ghasts. Rowen thought that the potential was in the person, if they hungered for something enough. I don’t know. But she was all curious about it, about

Drake's purpose, about the Chicago River, and spirits and—well, a lot of stuff that's, frankly, beyond me."

A coyote howls outside.

"She's looking into this bogeyman story with the river. She sends me out to check on something over at the Union Stock Yard Gate. You ever go to there? Weird phenomena happen there all the time. Things like, these two women are walking their dogs—little shit lapdogs, bred to total domestic retardation. They walk these dogs under the arch at the gate and the dogs go insane. These women need stitches and one dog kills the other and then dies choking, trying to swallow it whole."

Silence. More coyotes howl.

"I'm under the arch. I draw some glyphs. I open myself up. And I see it."

Silence.

Howls.

Simon's shadow is as still as a statue. At first, Simon thinks he imagines what happens next, or that it's a trick of the fickle light, but his shadow is sweating. Beads of blood flow from the pores, run down Loki's face. The vampire is very still as the blood-sweat flows slowly, biblically.

And then, Loki comes to, absently wipes the blood beads from his face and into his hair, to join the dirt and ash and the ancient crust of long-decayed gel.

"Well, the important thing is, I saw it."

Loki searches the floor for a nearly invisible seam. Then he unlatches something and opens a section of the floor.

"I wish I'd never seen it."

Loki giggles.

"But also, I want *more*."

Simon stands up, dusts himself off. "So where is Rowen?"

Simon's shadow motions for him to step forward. Simon does so. And the boy and his shadow peer down into the hole.

\* \* \* \* \*

*She was not eight feet tall, Jane.*

Simon figures her to be just over six feet, very muscular, very imposing, bestial and beautiful—the Neanderthal Helen of Troy. At least, that is what she was. But then, Simon is so very good at looking at what is and seeing only what was.

Now she looks desiccated and curled in on herself, lying under the now-open trap door.

“I figure they came in the day,” Loki says, nervous twitch breaking the calm of his dirty pallor. “Even so, she was tougher than they anticipated. They were afraid. I could see it in their faces. There were nine or ten bodies. Hard to tell exactly how many with all the pieces.”

Loki looks down in admiration at his fallen mentor. Even lying still, mouth open, fangs bared, she looks frightening.

“Some had weapons. Some were like those other freaks. Your ‘ghasts.’ I figure they laid her low but she visited such an unholy ass-kicking on them that whoever survived fled before verifying the job was done.”

“It’s not done?” Simon asks.

Then he looks down, frozen in monomania, captivated by this rarest of cadavers. And somewhere, Loki explains that this is torpor, the death sleep of the undead. Kindred fall into it if hurt badly enough, or enter it willingly when the centuries are too heavy and the blood needs thinning. Loki explains how the sleep can go on for months, years, decades. He alludes to the bad dreams that are said to envelop the slumbering vampire, even those who claim to never dream—years of twisted, epic nightmares that hammer their minds.

“We don’t have very reliable histories,” Loki says. “All our elders have suspect memories.”

“Mmm,” is all Simon, distracted by the sight before him, can think to offer.

He hops down to the earthen floor below, reaches out to delicately touch the remains of the fearsome vampire blood-witch. He can tell, even now, that she was a proud creature, primal

and majestic. Then his hand freezes, an inch away from Rowen. Even in torpor, she commands a level of fearful respect.

Simon keeps staring and Loki keeps talking—something about finding Rowen and freaking out, taking the body and hiding, not telling anyone, not even in the Circle of the Crone, for fear of what rival predators might do while she was weak. He admits that he's painted himself into a corner. He's not high up on the Circle's food chain, doesn't have the authority to hide the Hierophant when she's indisposed. Loki explains that he is in trouble and running out of time. But he needs the name of the rogue Kindred, the one who visited Simon's morgue and helped burn down his haven—and maybe even helped take out Rowen. Loki explains all this and then explains how Simon is going to get him that name.

"W-What?" Simon stammers when Loki is done laying out the plan.

"I've watched you, Simon. I've been your shadow. I've seen you do that thing you do. I've been just inches away, hovering close, in your intimate little moments. I've stared right through you while you do it. I've studied it down to atoms—seen you do it to humans, animals, even those monsters."

Loki hops down to stand in the dirt beside Simon and Rowen.

"I helped lead you this far to see if you could test my little hypothesis, the one that none of my betters would ever think to let me test. They'd probably stick a stake in my little black heart just for mentioning it."

Simon swallows. The Corbies perch, all pressing up against the insides of Simon's eyeballs, to see what will happen next.

"You want me to—?"

"I want an entrail reader to open up an elder vampire and read her guts while she sleeps."

Simon's head shakes in the negative, even as his hands open his case and pull out the implements. The Corbies perch, wrapped in silence, anticipating this most unusual meal.

"I don't know," Simon says.

"Neither do I. Isn't it great?"

"Will . . . will I hurt her?"

"I don't think so. I don't really know."

"Will she hurt me?"

"No. Absolutely not. Well, okay, I'm not sure. That's the fun thing about chaos—you're always covering new ground. I think what I'm suggesting lacks a precedent."

Simon nods. He empties his Thermos and tosses it away. He and his shadow both grin madly. He and his shadow both shiver in terror. Outside, a whole pack of coyotes howl. One coyote howling sounds lonesome. A pack sounds like falling insanity.

"Subject: Rowen," Simon says.

"Oh, I love this part," says Loki.

The scalpel draws its loving Y over the parchment flesh.

*Snip-crunch*, say the bone sheers.

*Snip-crunch.*

*Snip-crunch.*

The rib cage opens with an audible sigh, opens like a Venus flytrap screaming to the sun. Simon closes his eyes and gasps as his hands vanish inside the yawning chest cavity.

They never reach bottom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

She lies, warm and content, in the light, the joyous, cherub caresses of sun. Warm, beating, palpitating, alive—two hearts beat: her own and the tiny pulse, the promise in her belly.

A pleasant breeze.

Seedpods fall from a tree, spinning, twirling in circles, flying in circles, circling the cycle of life.

The two hearts quicken.

Pleasant tremors wrack her body.

It is time!

Sweat beads, water breaks, tears and happy humor pour. A new life rests on her chest and she gazes into the little face. She exudes the contentment of having a key place in the cycle, the eye of the tropical storm of life. The eye has a name: Mother.

Rowen has the name Mother.

“Can there be a greater joy?” she says to the little one.

The child smiles. He opens his mouth, ready to speak his first words.

“Mother, you’re cold.”

What?

She breathes in to laugh, but her lungs do not fill. Her heart does not beat. Cold. So cold! Tears turn to red-and-black sludge in her eyes. Her skin goes chalky gray.

“No, no, no!”

Rowen, where are we?

Blood, she thinks. Yes, blood. She only needs to pump more blood in order to palpitate. She wills the Vitae through her body.

Nothing.

Still cold.

More blood. Yes. She just needs more blood. She squeezes the liquid dead through her system. It erupts from her eyes, geysers from her ears, seeps through her pores, bursts from every orifice.

Nothing.

Still cold. Heart as cold and still as a mutant fetus floating in a jar.

“No. Please, no . . .”

Her body warps. Her face twists with feral, aching fangs. Hands lengthen to wicked talons. Her caress cuts her baby’s face.

There is no light. There is no sun. There is only a baleful moon full of howling souls that hungrily tugs at the tides.

Rowen, where are we?

She tries again, but there is no more blood. The Beast shrieks from out the mouth of her child. Her child? The babe’s skin

pales and yellows in putrid decay. His eyes shrink and his teeth drop through his gums as razors. He glares with dead eyes.

"You just need more death, Mother."

The infant shambles across her body, toward her face. Flecks of rotten flesh fall away as it moves. She tries to struggle but its dead eyes, the eyes of the Beast, hold her in place. Rancid little fingers enter her mouth, force it open, and the plague baby crawls in, slithers in, wriggles down her throat. More blood explodes from her body.

Still cold.

"More, Mother. You need more," call out the little voices within. The Beast crawls from her womb and with it, a legion of undead infants in various states of development and decay. They wriggle from between her legs, scuttle up her body, slide on clammy birth-slick. Then, with necrotic hands, they force their way down her throat, umbilical chords still trailing in endless loops—the serpent swallowing its tail—circling the cycle of the damned.

She tries to scream. "What happened to the promise?" she tries to ask the unfaithful sun, but her lungs fill with liquified flesh and spoiled blood.

"One more," they cry. "There is always room for one more, until the end of days." They gnaw on her from the inside.

"Rowen, where are you?"

The stillborn devils turn their heads and point at the strange new voice. "Stranger," they say. "A stranger. There should be no stranger here. Sleep has no place to call its own." They gnash their little teeth.

Still choking on the writhing dead, she looks up only to see Simon in his black bowler hat, in his threadbare suit—the oneiromantic Charlie Chaplin.

"Rowen, you hurt," he says.

The dead infants cover her protectively with their rotting-cherub caresses. They hiss threats.

"Begone, little nightmares," Simon says.



"You don't belong here," they reply. "You begone, rogue dreamer. Let us feed our Mother." Their little mouths distend in rabid coyote laughter.

"No," Simon says. Then he explodes up into the sky. He grows. His arms and legs lengthen into wormwood limbs. He grows and he grows. And Simon looks gigantically down, a tattiebogle terror, the scarecrow demigod. Under the brim of his great hat, his eyes gleam as two manhole-sized funeral pennies. His grin is a graveyard of white tombstones. His tree branch hands flex into claws, and his fingers end in scalpels the size of scythes.

"Lucid dreamer!" the undead infants and rot-fetuses squeal.

"A Lucid!" they sputter.

"Lucid!"

Simon, the scarecrow god, slashes with his scalpel hands and a score of the gibbering nightmares fly apart, cut away with surgical steel. Then he opens his great mouth and out fly the Corbies, a dread cloud of carrion birds, a thousand-thousand hungry beaks, a thousand-thousand eyes glowing absinthe green.

"Click-clack-crack!" caw the Corbies.

The revenant babies scream.

"Shriek-shrike-scythe!" caw the Corbies as they descend. Their beaks tear through the rotting meat, and they sing vicious lullabies.

Simon, the scarecrow god, reaches into the sky with a wormwood claw and, through sleight of hand, steals the moon from the sky. He puts it in his great mouth and swallows all the souls. His head ignites in a ghost-fire inferno, face lighting up like a Jack O'Lantern planet. He looks gigantically down at the infants and howls:

"Get thee hence!"

The chattering nightmares flee.

And the Beast flees.

And all is quiet save for the sigh of the Dead Water.

Simon shrinks back down—the oneiromantic Charlie Chaplin once more.

Rowen stands. She flexes her claws and fangs, uncertain, growling.

“Shhh,” Simon says.

He swipes with his scalpel fingers and her cold, bestial skin falls away. He cuts just deep enough that she feels, and the tears, clear tears, stream. The undead skin falls away revealing the palpitating woman who walked into the dark woods, on a “once upon a time” many years ago.

“You cut it all away,” Rowen says.

“Yes,” Simon says. “I can do that here.”

“They took my baby.”

“I know.”

“I was walking in the woods. I enjoyed the woods at night. I held my baby. We gave each other warmth. I stumbled into a clearing full of Acolytes, the blood drinkers, in their Samhain revels. They took my child and they gave me the Embrace. ‘An exchange,’ they said.”

Rowen places Simon’s hand on her stomach.

“My baby boy was so fine.”

Simon nods. He presses on her belly and his hand sinks inside. He twists. He pulls free, pulls out her son.

Rowen hugs the child to her breast, warm and breathing and perfect.

“Thank you,” she says. With her free hand, she strokes Simon’s face.

“But this cannot last,” she says. “It won’t be like this out there. Out there, I have my hunger and my Beast, my grim experience and the Danse Macabre. Out there, I do not have my warmth, my naïveté, or my child.”

“I know,” Simon says. “We always kill our loved ones when we wake up.”

“Out there, I will be a danger to you.”

“It’s all right.”

Together they walk down the shore of the ebony sea. They talk and they stroll and they share, exposed and vulnerable, along the beach that stretches forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Simon comes to with a shudder and a spasm, falling to the floor, next to the spilled, withered guts of Rowen.

“Are you hurt?” Loki asks.

“No,” Simon says. “It’s . . . good . . . oh . . . it’s so good . . .”

“Did you get a name?”

“Yes.” Simon gets off the floor, eyes dilated. “Your rogue Kindred’s name is Mort.”

“The Mondays!” scream the Corbies, flapping their wings in ecstasy.

Loki nods.

“What’s it like?” asks the vampire.

“What?”

“Absinthe. The Dead Water.”

Simon looks about for his Thermos.

“Sorry,” says Loki. “I’m on a strict hemoglobin diet.”

Simon thinks a moment.

Then he offers his wrist.

## CHAPTER 27

The nights blur by in red and in green.

Simon and Loki.

Night after night in red and green, and both colors mean *go*.

The odd duo—the Slapstick Macabre, the scarecrow and the shadow—each high off the other's blood. Everything bends and warps under the dream alchemy. They are on a mission, a horrifying mission, but they can't keep the smiles off their faces and the giggling is epidemically infectious.

Night after night.

Red and green.

One night, they sit in on an Apex Consumer recruitment meeting at a Holiday Inn. They take the recruitment leader out for drinks after.

Another night, they hunt through the Michigan Avenue Underground for a ghast that's been eating the homeless down there. It has sharp teeth and claws and doll's eyes, but it falls to fangs and scalpels.

Another night, they find the hoarded store of meat of a cannibal that was dead or fled. The freezer had been off for days. The smell was horrendous, but Simon was used to that and his friend is not a habitual breather.

The nights blur by in red and green.

Simon and Loki—the Slapstick Macabre—dark mischief in their minds and laughter in their mouths. Strange events spark stranger friendships and gory circumstance can birth weird buddies. The more differences they find, the more they discover they are alike. One has a soul half empty and the other has a soul half full.

The nights blur by in green and red and scalpels and fangs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours into the stakeout, Simon has to relieve himself against the alley wall. He's almost done when he feels the eyes upon him.

"What . . . what are you doing?" Simon says, zipping up.

"Sorry, man," Loki says, turning away. "I get nostalgic about peeing."

"Vampire bats urinate a copious amount of black fluids when they feed, to get rid of excess liquid weight."

"Do they?"

"Do you?"

"No, Simon. I do not."



The nights blur together. They hunt down flesh-and-blood metaphors of consumerism gone rampant. Creatures ravenous with hunger—Manifest Destiny hunger.

"Should I feel bad for them?" Simon asks.

"They're rabid monsters," says Loki.

*It was easy, in the moment, when their teeth gnashed and their claws slashed to forget that they ever were human . . . like Clara. Eh, Jane?*



"They're called resurrectionists," Simon says, sipping from his Thermos.

"Oh yeah?" says Loki.

They wait in the car. They have been there for a while, fighting off occasional fits of manic giggling. Waiting is the hardest part.

"They dug up bodies, illegally, for sale," continues Simon. "In the nineteenth century, doctors didn't know how to acquire a steady supply of corpses for autopsy and study, so resurrectionists were in high demand."

"Growth industry."

"Yes. These doctors, pillars of the community, were paying men with shovels for illegal corpses. Sir Astley Cooper, a London anatomist and surgeon, publicly denounced resurrectionists. But privately, he hired them and encouraged others to take up the work."

"Okay, okay, sure," says Loki. "But tell me again about the thing with the bones and the dogs."

They both look at the front doors of the all-night emergency animal clinic, viewing it through a fog of wormwood, the pair twisted on a Dead Water trip. They again fall to giggling.

*I wonder now, Jane, if Loki had a ghost tree in his head, too, and if there were crows perched there.*

"Sir Astley was known for eccentric behavior. He gave out name plates to his friends. He would paint their names on pieces of bone and force lab dogs to swallow them. When he extracted the bone from the stomachs of the dissected dogs, the name would be carved into the bone, the letters raised, the bone around the letters having been partially eaten away by the stomach acids."

Simon and Loki turn toward the animal clinic doors and break into another fit of giggles.

"You think . . . you think Mitford is doing the cuts?" asks Loki.

"Ray Mitford is exactly the kind of man who would perform the necropsy himself," says Simon.

"Necropsy?"

"Pet autopsy."

"Oh."

*It was just one decaying thread, Jane, in all those clues and bodies I dug through in the kitchen of the Palmer House.*

Amidst the remains, Simon came across the body parts of one of Ray Mitford's victims. Then he dove into the Dead Water to learn more. Mitford was a veterinarian, a rich one; he performed expensive pet procedures for those who could afford them. Mitford had two vices: his dogs and cannibalism.

The first vice was easy to sate for the talented animal surgeon and breeder. The second vice proved infinitely easier to fill as a member of both the Gastronome Irregulars and of Arthur Drake's inner circle of friends. Always eager to spoil his dogs, Ray often shared his meals with them. He enjoyed the rush of human meat above all things, but recently discovered the joy in the kill when he murdered his gardener and cleaned and butchered him himself. The dogs shared in the feast.

Simon's eyes gaze off into other worlds. He found more than clues in that pile of cadaver clay. He saw Jane, again and again. He saw her in the eyes and the hair and the mouths and the hands and the open chest cavities and the livers and the lungs and the ligature marks on a crushed throat. He called her name over and over in the nostalgia echo of the Dead Water. Everything was Jane.

*I kept seeing your parts in other people's parts, Jane.*

"You're thinking about her," Loki says.

"How do you know?"

"Your soul turns a certain color."

"What color is—?"

"Shhh. Eyes to the doors. I see movement."

Simon and Loki stare at the front doors to the animal clinic. The set-up work had been relatively simple. The tranquilizer made inserting the bones and the capsules easy. They can only imagine, eagerly, the cut, the opening, the room full of people, and the human bones—the pieces of his victim's bones tumbling out, with phrases etched in raised letters:

**MURDERER!**  
**RAY MITFORD BUTCHERED MIGUEL**  
**HERNANDEZ.**  
**THE PROOF IS IN HIS FREEZER.**

The doors fly open. Loki and Simon snap to attention. A man, still in scrubs, still gloved, still with animal blood on

his hands, runs outside—directionless, confused, with crazed eyes, and a look that says the pretty walls of his world have come tumbling down. Ray Mitford runs off into a mad night.

Simon and Loki fill the car with laughter. Loki pops open the door.

“Let’s go get him.”

Outside, Simon looks up. Roiling clouds touch the moon, igniting in ghost fire, and the sky is filled with Jane’s glowing white hair, undulating in the wind. Simon can’t breathe. Her hair moved like that when they played on the swing set in the Dead Water. Her hair probably moved like that as she swayed on the hanging tree. Her hair moves like that now, big as the stratosphere, as she’s hung on a noose that is the skyline, dangling from a dark universe.

“Simon!”

Our lovesick scarecrow breathes and runs after Loki. But a sinister suspicion follows after—that every step he takes actually leads him farther from Jane. Inside his skull, the Corbies cackle and taunt and tease. They peck the osseous cracks, testing the fissures of self-doubt. From their wormwood branches, they chant, “Necrophiles need love too. They just have to dig down deep for it.”



Simon cannot tell if the figure before him is male or female, but the name is White Chocolate. He or she has skin the color of very light mocha, and is wearing hot pink fishnets. When White Chocolate bared fangs inside the seedy club, in response to one of Loki’s questions, things were getting dangerous enough for the vampires to take it outside.

Loki had called vampires like White Chocolate the Unbound, said they had no covenant and a lot of hard feelings for the Kindred who didn’t share their attitude toward authority.



"Looking a little crusty, Trey," says White Chocolate. "Sure there's no misery I can put you out of?"

"It's Loki. And that would go against the Prince's Tranquility."

"Fuck the Prince! And fuck his Tranquility."

"Wow, how uncompromisingly rebellious of you to say that this far from his ears."

"How stupid of you to come this far out from under his wing."

Simon feels the giddiness flee. The back of his neck tingles with a feeling akin to the one you might get when waking up from a refreshing nap, only to discover you've somehow fallen into a high-walled bear enclosure. Three other vampires accompany White Chocolate, his or her undead offspring—what Loki calls the childer—all showing fangs. They surround Simon and Loki.

"All right, White Chocolate," Loki says slowly. "It's fair to say you're in the right position to give us a thrashing. But why not tell me about Mort first."

"The Mondays, Simon," shriek the Corbies.

"Mort? That fugly beast?" White Chocolate asks.

"Yeah. Heard he ran with you."

"Nah, Mort don't run with us anymore. He took his slimy self and went River Snake."

"River Snake, really?"

"And I hear tell he even managed to wash out of the River Snakes."

"Huh. I didn't think there was anywhere lower to fall to." Loki smiles as if the mirth of the past few nights had not left him in the club. "Well, thanks for the info. We're in kind of a hurry. Can we reschedule the beating for another time?"

White Chocolate laughs, and the childer laugh, too. They all laugh through their fangs.

"What makes you think your scrawny ass is ambulating out of this alley?"

"Well," says Loki, stepping forward, still amused. "If you piss me off, I'm going to throw some nasty-bad mojo on you."

All the other vampires snort their derision.

"Crúac?" says White Chocolate.

"Crúac," says Loki.

White Chocolate laughs harder

"Everyone knows you ain't got no Crúac, Trey. You run with the Circle Jerks, but you don't study no mojo." White Chocolate struts toward Loki, curling hot pink fingernailed hands into fists with audible knuckle cracks.

"It's *Loki*. And what can I say . . . I got religion." Loki bites his own wrist and then flicks blood on the ground between him and White Chocolate in a rude gesture, muttering strange words under his breath.

The Unbound vampire suddenly falls silent. White Chocolate's body goes rigid, eyes popping out, mouth grimacing. The other vampires stop snorting and laughing. Their sire, standing stiff, shakes violently, and then, with monumental effort, takes one lurching step toward Loki. Every little movement causes a sickening crackle.

"Rigor mortis!" caw the Corbies, impressed with the trick unleashed by Simon's shadow.

White Chocolate closes one eye and, with a monumental show of will, raises an arm and slams a fist into a nearby wall, cracking the brick.

"Fucking blood witch!" the Unbound roars, shaking off the last vestiges of the spell. "I'm gonna suck you dry and fuck the fang holes!"

"Well," says Loki darkly, "while that does answer a few questions I had about your anatomy, that's not going to happen." He removes something from a pocket and holds it up in display. It's a bundle of rags and yarn sewn together in sloppy stitches, but even for all of that, it is obviously a ragdoll effigy of White Chocolate.

"That's not—?" hisses the Unbound.

“Yup, it’s you,” whispers Loki. Then he bites his tongue, hard, and spits a gobbet of blood on the ragdoll. He chants, “*Balla eis kora kas. Balla eis kora kas. Balla eis kora kas . . .*”

“Bullshit,” says White Chocolate, retreating a step anyway. “Bullshit!”

The other vampires slink back into the shadows as Loki takes a Zippo out of his pocket.

*Clink.*

*Scratch.*

Fire.

Loki brings the flame close to the ragdoll, his chanting building to a crescendo: “*Balla eis kora kas. Balla eis kora kas. Balla eis kora kas. Balla eis kora kas.*”

In streaks of fangs and hate, the Unbound vampires flee.

Loki grins, closes the Zippo.

“I tell you, Simon,” he says, tossing the bloody ragdoll into a dumpster. “The thing about magic is, it’s not what you can do, but what others think you can do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

In Chicago, there is a neighborhood where, with the right set of ears, you can still hear the sledgehammers falling.

Go to the West Loop. To the east, the Chicago River flows like a weeping cloaca; to the west, the horizon swallows the sun. Go to West Fulton Market, go to West Lake Street, North Sangamon Street, and West Randolph Street. Meander down the gritty roads and blood-soaked alleys. Follow the sweet-rancid smell, faint and fathomless. Wander into the fade of afternoon to evening and stand at the apex of incongruity.

A forklift hauls greasy pallets of bacon to the left.

Stiletto heels exit a luxury car to the right.

You don’t even need directions. Follow the sound. Can you hear it, loveling—echoing across the decades—the cow-skull percussion?

A one hundred-year-old business vending wholesale pork rinds and bulk-sized canned tomatoes stands next to an art gallery selling paintings priced in the six digits. This is Chicago's meatpacking district, neighborhood of ancient gore. It is in metamorphosis. Not planned, not fabricated, it grows organically. It's evolved with particular speed over the last twenty years. It is alive.

Follow the beat. See nineteenth-century meatpacking warehouses—cold meat lockers and loading docks—turned into trend-setting restaurants. Pass a lounge—exposed brick walls, shag rug, and fifteen-foot ceilings. A once desolate street corner thrums with parking valets and stylish young things in sunglasses. Walk a few doors down. Enter a restaurant where a mad-scientist chef creates postmodern food using liquid nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and lasers. The chili cheese nachos taste like fruit salad. The menu is printed on edible, subtly flavored paper.

"What's eating you, Kate?" asks Jack.

"Nothing," she says.

Things unsaid swarm about them in a thick cloud.

He dips the remainder of his menu into the gorgonzola sauce on her rare steak and eats it. He answers a text message on his phone. She does not ask if it's her sister, but she wonders loudly. A person can scream silently for a long, *long* time.

"You're not going to finish that?" he asks.

She does not reply.

"Fine. Let's go."

Follow Jack and Kate out onto Lake Street, where galleries and boutiques sprout like coral under the elevated tracks. A train thunders by above.

"What was that?" asks Jack.

"Nothing."

The ghost of forty million gallons of blood flows, waste high, about them. They do not notice.

They walk by art galleries that thrive among all the meat: a place that specializes in multimedia exhibits, another with

soaring walls of brick, wrought-iron chandeliers, antique armor, and framed works by local artists. Organic cotton jeans sell for under two hundred dollars, with champagne served in the dressing room.

The neighborhood mutates—slaughterhouse to art house. Cheap rent served as a honeyed lure. They came. They renovated. Seediness came into vogue, and they gobbled up the grim-grimy backdrop, the illusion of mystery and suspense, the boarded-up windows like set dressing. Neighborhoods have cycles, and it is not uncommon for a Chicago neighborhood to cannibalize itself, to become the eater and the eaten and survive on that paradox for a time.

“What’s eating you?”

She shrugs.

One hundred years ago, a bleeding pig screams at them.

Jack and Kate stop in front of what looks like a fleabag motel. It is a former sausage factory turned fashionable lounge and restaurant. He wants to explore the back streets. The magazine article said to come after sunset and ignore everything your mother ever told you about dark alleys. She hesitates, half-listening to the words of her dying lizard brain. He’s excited by the feel of gritty danger. He takes her hand. They vanish down the black mouth of the alley.

What’s eating you?

Wander northwest now, all the way to the river. On the bank, another nineteenth-century meatpacking warehouse, this one larger than the rest. Enter the iron gate. Pass the security guard as he licks the residue from the inside of a white box, its former contents, supplied to him every night, the sole reason he keeps this job. Walk up the path. The guard’s lapping moans, muffled and echoed in the white box, are still audible over the *step-crunch* of the white stones.

Engraved in iron, the letters over the door read: *The Gastronome Irregulars*.

Enter.

Within is much of the decadent, much of the wanton—all shapes and flavors—but not all contained in one grand ballroom. No. This is a compartmentalized club, of many tastes and vices, segregated into many discrete rooms, each with its own unique lighting and decor and delights. There are sounds, innumerable sounds, but they are all variations of that guard's moans as he licks his box clean. A curious noise resounds in the kitchen. Under all this lurks the phantom beat.

Mingle.

In a room of yellow wallpaper, many people in fancy dress socialize under choleric-colored lights. Silver trays dance about the room on the white-gloved hands of servants.

"What is that?"

"This, sir, is fried Cambodian tarantula skewers, glazed with a sweet sauce."

Gossiping mouths chew on words, chew on battered octopus testicles, chew the gelatinous flesh of a sea cucumber, chew whole broiled duck embryos, spit out the feathers. Tongues lick spoons clean of the last bits of codfish sperm. Steaming bowls contain soup made from broken bird nests. Wine pours from bottles containing pickled mouse fetuses. Each floats blind, unable to reach its siblings through the glass.

Voices exalt the liver pâté and deify the chef.

"It comes from Briarwood Farm, a little place outside of Philadelphia."

"How ever did you get it?"

"I know someone."

Explore.

A room of sable furnishings, lit only by black lights, contains glowing, melancholic art. A local TV hostess and a celebrity chef sit alone. They eat casu marzu, the maggot cheese of Sardinia. The sheep milk pecorino achieves a strong flavor and creamy consistency through advance fermentation and the digestive process of the colony of maggots that live within the wheel. The white cheese and wriggling larva glow under

the ultraviolet lights. The celebrity chef scoops some out and spreads it on flatbread.

"Careful," he says, "they can jump six inches in the air. And make sure you chew thoroughly. Stomach acid doesn't kill them. They burrow."

The TV hostess spreads the cheese and maggots. She tears apart a fan letter, places a strip of the paper across the open-face sandwich. She bites. She chews carefully, swallows the cheese and bread and worms and manifested worship. The maggots writhe, and the cheese wheel leaks a liquid called lagrima, which means "tears."

"Mmm," she says.

A translucent maggot leaps from her lower lip, fluorescing all the way down.

Meander.

In a feverish room of crimson illumination and sanguine aesthetics, a decorated box, of the sort one might expect to contain fine chocolates, is passed about.

"What are those?"

"Leaches."

The hand shies away.

"Really. On what do they feed?"

"Exclusively from the blood of royalty."

The hand returns, plucks a glistening treat.

Lurk.

In a blue-cast room of phlegmatic sensibility, a fountain dominates the center and glass fixtures cascade constant curtains of water down the walls. An aging beauty, whose body has become a grand mausoleum where that beauty is interred, strokes an ornate pet-carrying case.

"As a little girl, I made a deal with the voice inside the garden wishing well, and it gave me my little puss-puss. He pads off at night, stealing the breath from precious little babies and comes back to feed me, the way mamma birds do. Isn't he just darling?"

Eyes gleam from behind the small bars.

Snoop.

In a library of green-tinged lights, everything is bathed in ectoplasm. A crowd gathers around one Arthur Drake. The lord of infomercials pontificates. "Epicurus is titled in the modern Greek idiom as the Dark Philosopher," he says.

Everyone nods. They know.

"Epicureanism emphasizes that the material of gods, both matter and souls, is comprised of atoms. The souls of gods adhere to their bodies without escaping."

Everyone nods.

"I can't help but think—if a soul is made of atoms, then it must be a digestible thing."

The nods become more eager. Drake shares theories and plans, uses terms like "exponential zoophagy." The murmur builds. He punctuates the oration by miming downward swings with a heavy hammer.

"Do you have it yet?" someone asks.

"I will," Drake says, looking into his empty hands. Then his eyes devour everything and everyone in the room.

Applause. But not everyone is so taken with Arthur. "Can you imagine—eating someone without substance. Hmph. I apologize, what did you say your name was?"

Leave. Out the back.

A door bumps open. In the kitchen, a chef works on something large and red with a sharp implement. Can you hear it, loveling, over the whisper of the river? That sound, like hammers falling.

What's eating you, Jack?

What's eating you?

\* \* \* \* \*

There are monsters in the river. Children know this. At 3:00 A.M. you know it, too. At the height of the stockyards' reign, they slaughtered some twenty-one thousand cows and



seventy-five thousand pigs a day, pouring countless gallons of blood and entrails into the Chicago River.

What were they feeding, loving?

Simon and Loki wait on the shore of the south fork of the river's south branch.

*Always and always water is the medium between waking, dreams, and death. Eh, Jane?*

"It was thought that firing a canon over the water would cause drowned cadavers to rise to the surface," says Simon.

"Does it work?"

"I've never tried."

"If we had a canon, I'd try," Loki hisses. "Someone's late." Simon noticed that his shadow's mood was fraying at the edges as the nights wore on. Mort's trail was annoyingly murky.

*We chased the Mondays, Jane. Though I believe it was a Wednesday.*

The Corbies chatter. A few minutes later, they all go quiet. Simon startles at the sudden silence in his mind just as he notices the full moon reflected, small, on the black water. Yet there is no full moon this night. The pale orb becomes a head silently breaching the dark surface, but only until the eyes, nose, and mouth are revealed, like a frog lying in wait, like a drowning victim seduced by a canon's call. Her hair floats about her head, a silky halo, as white as Jane Doe's hair. Simon inches forward. The cold, hard hand of his shadow shoves him back.

"Alexi," says Loki to the white face floating on the dark.

"Loki, Loki, Prince's Hound," she replies.

"Simon, I'd like you to meet Alexi, leader of the River Snakes."

"Who is this?" asks the floating face.

"My ghoul."

Simon doesn't flinch at the word, but he can't tell whether that's because he knows it's not true or knows that, in some ways, it must be.

Alexi rises halfway out of the water, naked skin like wet chalk. Painfully gaunt, but beautiful. The mortified saint in

a Renaissance painting, the one whose eyes follow you across the room. Fetid water beads and runs down her small breasts.

She extends dripping arms, hands grasping the November air. "Bring him to me. I want to see."

Simon's breath escapes as fog.

"Sorry, snake queen," Loki says. "We're staying on land."

"Impertinent whelp! I am Regent of the Chicago River, ordained by your Prince. I will examine any property that enters my domain as I see fit."

"Your domain extends only to the water and the bridges that float over the water. You have no authority over any inch of shoreline."

"Oh, very well." Alexi sighs, lowers back into the water and rests her chin on the shore. "You look an absolute shambles, Loki. Too hard out there? Have you come to join us? Say yes."

"No, I've not come to join. I'm just fine."

"You're not, you know. Come now—the water's so fine. You're cracking apart in front of me." She smiles lewdly and whispers, "I can see your Beast poking out."

"How's Oliver? I haven't seen him."

"You're changing the subject, and poor Oliver fell down."

"Oh?"

"Went ripper."

"Ripper? What a waste."

"Yes. Messy."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know."

"That reflects badly on you."

"Maybe the Prince has him. I hear your boss enslaves rippers."

"Bullshit. Can't be done. There's nothing left to enslave."

"I hear he locks them away for special occasions. They call them Maxwell's Seven Grims—or Thirteen Grims—depending upon who you ask."

"That's rumor-mill fantasy. Maxwell has no use for rippers. Rabid dogs aren't good for anything. Now, Alexi—"

"That's *Regent* Alexi."

Simon can see the slight indents in Loki's lower lip where the fangs press. "Regent Alexi," he says. "I've come to ask about a Haunt you know by the name of Mort."

"Morton? He went away."

"Went ripper?"

"No. He went . . . another way."

Simon gazes into the river. Are those pale faces beneath the dark surface or is he imagining them? Hard to say. Whole other worlds can hide beneath three inches of water. He looks closer. "Loki?" he says. "This place looks so familiar. Are we near Bubbly Creek?"

"Alexi, I need to know what happened to Mort," says Simon's shadow.

"Come into the water," Alexi says, eyes fixed on Simon. "It's like returning to the womb. You can hear the heartbeat of the city. You can—"

"Simon, do not get any closer to the water!"

Simon backs away. Does the water look disappointed?

"Water is our natural environment," says Alexi, spinning in the river. "There are places where the water is so opaque, so polluted, that the sun never touches bottom. All the pig's blood you can drink. Granted, not as much as used to flow, but they've gotten better at dumping it. Don't even have to strain out the shit."

Loki growls, deep in the throat. "Get the sewage out of your ears. I'm not going Snake. I'm not a bottom feeder."

"That's a hurtful thing—a hurtful, hurtful thing to say to a Regent," Alexi says, wriggling in the water. "And all because the Snakes are not a big bad covenant like the Circle?" She glides toward Simon. Are those white silhouettes swirling about her in schools, just beneath the murk? So hard to see.

"Ghoul," she says, "has your master told you what he and his friends do for kicks? Oliver was in the Circle, before he came to us. He told us all about the rituals and ceremonies,

told us about the one where they bring in a mortal boy, just in the bloom of his manhood, and force him to inhale certain fumes. A blood witch enters the Circle, dressed as a savage fertility goddess. She dances about him, all liquid grace. Even in his terror, he lusts for her. The Circle dances and writhes around the two of them. She kisses the boy on the forehead in such a way that he swoons. She kisses each of his eyes deeply, deeply. He quivers but does not struggle. She kisses each eyeball right out of the socket with a sucking pop. Each eye bursts between her teeth like grapes, and she speaks gory prophecies. Oliver could not tell if the boy screamed or orgasmed."

The Corbies whisper to Simon. He watches this river siren, and he watches the water. The hungry, hungry water. So very familiar . . .

"Nice story, Alexi," says Loki. "Tell us another. How about one starring Mort? Please."

The woman of wet chalk floats back toward the raggedy vampire. Are those multitudes of pale hands caressing her beneath the surface or is it a trick of the light?

"Once upon a time," she says, "Morton was a Kindred of prominence, a member of the Ordo Dracul. He studied ley lines and other mystic nonsense, but his experiments got too weird, even for the Dragons. They kicked him out. He went to the Unbound, but he got even weirder. They kicked him out. Our doors are always open—well, almost always. But Mort got even weirder. He ranted about bogey-things in the water, 'the chorus of wyrms' he called it. We had to let him go. He . . . changed. We still have his effects. You should see what he wrote in that journal of his. He—"

"I've been here!" says Simon.

"Simon—" says Loki.

"I was here. I came through the Dead Water, with Toby Reynolds. I swam in it and I saw. The children tried to call for help, but they could only scream bubbles. A cement block and a hook. This is where Meyer Twiss dumped the children."

Alexi rises out of the water, rises to her lower legs. But what supports her in the deeper water? She looks at Simon, maybe for the first time, and though dirty water runs in rivulets over her eyes, she does not blink.

"Meyer Twiss, Meyer Twiss," she says. "All the children sing of Meyer Twiss. Twiss-Twiss-Twiss. Was he ever caught?"

"No," says Simon, head hanging, looking down at the slaughter water.

"He gave us such a pretty little garden, planted with pretty little children. It can get awfully lonely in the flow. Meyer Twiss dropped us some company. A whole grove of them, floating and swaying on their little chains, from their little blocks. I visited the garden every day, until the police took them away. They hit the water alive, and we waited for them, made their passing a little quicker, a little more peaceful. The poor dears had been through enough, and who would miss that blood?"

"You could have helped them," says Simon. "You could have unhooked their feet."

Her eyes remain unblinking. They show no transmutation toward comprehension.

Loki crouches at the shore's edge, eyes burning through his collected grime. "I need you to give me Mort's things."

"I'm not done playing," says the river vampire, smiling, just out of reach.

"Dammit, Alexi. This is important. Mort attacked Rowen. I need to know why."

"Tell me, Loki: Why, oh why, hasn't Rowen made a formal complaint?"

"I am an enforcer of the Prince. You will give—"

"No, Hound. I don't think this investigation is official. In fact, I don't think you'd want Maxwell to know about it. I ask myself, 'Why?' Why didn't Rowen reduce Morton to a red mist or command the earth to swallow him whole? Unless . . . he got very, very cunning or very, very lucky and killed her."

Loki's jaw tightens until it shakes.

"No," says Alexi. "She's not dead. She's torpid. That's why you're so twitchy. No one else knows."

Loki's eyes narrow to feral slits.

"She is! Then I have a counteroffer for you, raggedy Loki: step into the river right now—follow us into the flow—and I won't tell everyone about this. Too proud to go Snake? Look at you. You're two steps from going ripper."

It is so easy to imagine more pale faces now, in the water. Simon hears a noise, like the mating call of a legion of hideously large amphibians. The croaking taunt sounds like "*Draugr, draugr, draugr, draugr, draugr!*"

Alexi laughs. It's a musical sound, like the chime of a cracked bell covered in pond slime.

Loki roars. His hands grasp for Alexi's mocking face, but it becomes blurred quicksilver and remains just out of reach. Frustrated, he tears at the cold mud around him. "You silly river bitch!" he says, though it sounds like a wild animal holding Loki's severed tongue in its maw, trying to form human words.

"What made Mort attack Rowen? What had he found out here? Have to know! K-kill you! Rip you!"

The words finally fail and all that remains is the language of the Beast. Loki shudders at impossible speeds like the frenzied characters in the silent movies during a film jam. He forcefully breathes, trying to maintain control, to keep from leaping into the river.

Alexi, siren of sludge, never stops laughing as she drifts farther out from shore.

*She was leading him, Jane, to the place where her word is law.*

The Corbies come to attention and sound the caw. "Nothing to fear, Simon. They're all just carrion. We *know* how to chew carrion." The Corbies whisper into Simon's inner ear, and his mouth is their mouth.

"Enough of this," Simon says. "You know, I've seen you before, Alexi."

The vampires pause, shocked, and turn to regard the forgotten ghoul.

"Of course you have, dear," says Alexi. "You see me every time you spy your reflection tempting you into the water."

"No," Simon says. "I've seen you. I know you, Alexi Serbetsnya."

Her tranquil mask slips, just a little. "What?"

"This little boy—Toby—showed me, in the Dead Water. He took me into the river. He wanted to show me. 'The hollow mermaid who kissed me,' he said. I thought he had hallucinated as he asphyxiated. He showed me your face, Alexi Serbetsnya. You are the hollow mermaid I saw swimming in the garden of bobbing child corpses."

The river vampire's face contorts into rare wrinkles.

"Some Dead Water trips are difficult," Simon says. "Sometimes stray dreams wander in, and I forget them on waking, like I forgot this one. But I remember it now. I followed you in the Dead Water. I dissected you. I know you, Alexi Serbetsnya. You always wanted more, even when you were alive: a poor girl on the South Side—a pickpocket, cat burglar, bank robber, train hijacker, a sexual distraction for grifters. More and more. I know the sob story and lies you told on the witness stand, the ones that put your lover in for what should have been your jail sentence. But Eddie got out. Eddie was mad. You ran, but then, you'd always been running. More and more. You found monsters. You forced Valencia to make you one, too. More and more. . . ."

"Stop it," Alexi growls.

"More and more, but it caught up with you. Valencia and Eddie, only Eddie found his own monster, like you did; that makes three mad monsters who found you. They made you pay. I know what they did. I know how long that punishment lasted. I know what it did to you—where it still tickles you."

Alexi screams high and shrill. "Conspiracy! Who told you? Who sent you?" She thrashes in the water. "Conspiracy! Conspiracy!" Bloody tears pour down the chalk of her face, spilling into the river, feeding the hungry water.

The Corbies point out her eyes to Simon, show that her outbreak was not of the Beast, but more than shock or revelation. It was an existing madness that Simon's words had tickled.

Alexi claws up the shore like an angry crayfish, pawing the ground. She stops, on the muddy bank, looking at Simon.

"Loki, what is this thing you have brought to meet me?"

Loki, having regained control, kneels next to her.

"Alexi," he says. "Mort's obsession, this 'chorus of wyrms,' would he attack Rowen over it?"

"Yes. He would do anything necessary in his pursuit of it."

"What is it?"

Alexi shrugs.

"You've heard it. You've seen it, haven't you?"

Alexi nods. "Thousand eyes. Thousand invisible mouths. Always puckered on you. So big . . . planet worms that eat their own corpse." She takes another look at Loki. "You've seen it too. Oh, you have seen things. Tell me, Loki. Tell me you've seen things."

*Perhaps this was why my shadow was so raggedy. Eh, Jane?*

"Rowen showed me," Loki says. "She helped me pierce the membrane. I saw."

Alexi laughs with a sound like someone gargling broken glass. "And it's making you come undone. In that case, Sir Hound, allow me to help in your investigation. Maybe I'll even get to see you unravel entirely." Alexi raises an arm and makes a motion to the water. A pale hand emerges from the liquid dark, presenting a bundle wrapped in plastic bags. It tosses the bundle to Loki, then slips back down into the depths.

"I saw something too," says Simon. "It was inside the cadavers and the ghaasts—just pieces. It was from the river. It was big and hungry and made of rotting meat. The Whisper in the River. Has it been haunting the River Snakes?"

"It?" asks Alexi. "There is no it. There is no singular. Do you think what you saw, what Morton worshiped, and what makes Bubbly Creek bubble are the same thing? There are



myriad voices in the river. The river is a repository teeming with ten thousand terrible things, all attracted by the slaughter wine, and we River Snakes have learned to swim amongst them. Water is the medium. Water is chaos. One day you are the predator, the next the prey. Only a fool assumes they are at the top of the food chain all the time, or that the chain is even fixed. It all changes. Even the river can change direction. The one thing that doesn't change is that all things, eventually, come to the river."

The Regent of the Chicago River finishes speaking and remains, naked, in the mud, eyes unfocused, head tilted down.

Loki waits a long moment and says, "Alexi?"

She looks up with what appear to be a new set of eyes. "What? Who are you? Why are you bothering me? Get back. Who sent you? *Who* sent you?" She leaps to her feet. "Leave me alone. I'll never tell. I'll never tell!" She leaps into the water, white body swallowed by the black. Then the water, in a dozen places, churns like the passing of huge fish.

"Was she right?" Simon asks his shadow when the water quiets again. "Are there thousands of separate voices in the river?"

"No," says Loki. "She was trying to confuse us or is herself confused. There is only one, and we are going to stop it with some of our own chaos."

Simon and Loki leave the way they'd come, leaving only the sound of the river behind them.

Can you hear it, loveling? Can you hear the cadence in the river?

What were they feeding?



Somewhere in Wisconsin, Nyx stares out a window at the moon on a silvery lake. "Thank you," she says, and hangs up the phone. She stands and walks to a dry erase board containing a list of names. Many of the names are crossed out. She crosses out another.

She sits. Looks out the window. The clouds have crept in and the moon is now gone. The lake is dark.

Clara howls in the basement. Someone would have to feed her soon.

Nyx covers her face with one hand. The tears escape between the finger gaps. She makes no sound, but her body jerks in sobs.

"Hello?" says a deep, grinding voice from inside a cage. Byron bobs his head and puffs out his impressive neck feathers.

"Hello, handsome," Nyx says, wiping her eyes.

Byron sings:

"Though our good ship was haunted  
The crew remained undaunted.  
We stayed right drunk and sprayed our spunk  
Till all the ghouls avaunted."

Tight, quivering purple lips form a smile in defiance of the falling tears. The laughter escapes with the burst of a snot bubble. Then Nyx laughs full on. Byron mimics her laughter, so she laughs harder. She looks out the window and laughs into the dark.

She gets up and ruffles the black feathers on Byron's head and the white feathers of his chest. She picks up the phone.

"Hey, it's me. I was thinking: it's about time we restarted Taco-Waffle-TP Friday . . . yeah . . . right. We just need a place. What's that. . . ? Why? Jesus, that should be obvious, don't you think?"

## INTERLUDE: The Priest

They called the priest on the third day, after they found their daughter hanging upside-down from the ceiling, writing blasphemies on the walls with her own feces. The priest lasted four minutes before running from the house, screaming. There are those who say he sweated blood.

And so, on the seventh night of its occupation, the thing hiding in the flesh of the adolescent girl gave me a look of pleasant surprise—smiling at the promise of more sport, fluids escaping between its host's teeth—as I, the second man in black, entered the bedroom.

“So, priest, you have come to save the little cunt, my meat, my own,” it says through the girl's cracked lips in a discordant cacophony of tones and base animal noises. It cocks her head to the side in mock bashfulness and daintily shows me the fingertips it has bitten off.

I do not allow myself to respond. I find my strength and stand stoically in the frame of the door. And stoic I remain as it vomits stringed litanies of obscenity, sings grotesque verses in dead languages, pisses black filth from between her legs. The room, a dominion of shit, quivers.

It finally falls silent when I remove a wet red thing from my coat pocket. I hold the severed animal tongue, arm straight out to the side. I squeeze the fleshy chunk, but no gore drips from between my fingers—rather, it falls as ash as I speak:

“Therefore, He named it Babel, for there the Lord confused the language of the entire earth, and from there the Lord scattered them upon the face of the entire earth.”

It opens the little girl's mouth to speak ridicules and curses, but only nonsense comes out. It tries again but only shouts babble. It shrieks, pointing an accusatory half-finger at me.

“I grew tired of your puerile tongue,” I say. *Now* I allow myself to smile, and the doorframe cannot contain the expres-

sion. "You were wrong about two things. One: I am not here to save the girl."

I fill my arms and legs with the sins of man and, in the space between a hummingbird's heartbeat, I am across the room with her throat in my hand. It shrieks and thrashes her body, so I slam the little head, punching it through the dry-wall. I smash it again. On the third slam, the tiny spine snaps.

"Two: I am not a priest. I am a bishop."

This close it can see the savage gashes and self-inflicted scars running up my neck and clean-shaven head. I whisper in that little ear: "When you again fall impotently into the void, tell your siblings that in Chicago there are no more vacancies for the damned."

And I, Bishop Solomon Birch, crucify the delicate throat with my teeth and drink deep the sacramental wine that is the Life.

## CHAPTER 28

They took Simon in the day.

*My shadow sleeps during the day, Jane. No shadows at noon.*

They took him to the West Loop, the old meatpacking district, where slaughterhouses metamorphose into art houses. They take him to that nineteenth-century warehouse turned manor house, where the Gastronomes Irregulars entertain.

Simon comes in and out, in flashing circles, liquid dreams, but not wormwood dreams. Agitated, the Corbies cry, "You're drowning, drowning in chemical stew. Don't worry, Simon. We know what to do."

More fever dreams and melting-taffy time.

"Well, did he say where it is?" asks a voice that echoes in Simon's skull.

"No."

"Give him the serum!"

"We did. And we asked. He just started reciting love poetry."

"Love poetry?"

"Sir, Patrick never—"

"Now, Ethan. I've told you to call me Art."

"Yes, Art. Uh, Patrick never showed up this morning. That's another missing. What's going on out there? When they found Father Gary he was . . . he—"

"Stop right there. I want you to go into the next room, and I want you to actualize yourself until you are bigger than your fear. Then I want you to eat your fear."

"Yes, Art."

"I want you to want it. I want you to be so hungry that you cannot wait for another fear to show."

"Yes, Art. Thank you."

"Hmm. Mental Thuggee," Simon slurs.

A face comes into view—a smiling, familiar face. Simon wonders, sleepily, if he's dozed on his couch watching late-

night TV in the dimension of infomercials and A.M. dark. Arthur Drake smiles at Simon with his best self-actualized smile.

"Hello, Simon."

"You?"

"I think he's awake enough," says the self-help guru.

*Arthur Drake: ace of cannibals.*

"Simon, where is the hammer?" asks Arthur.

A strong fist rocks Simon's solar plexus.

"Simon, where is the hammer?" asks that powerful smile.

A blade slices the palm of Simon's left hand.

"Simon, where is the hammer?"

They show Simon a picture of his parents. Then that cheerful personality from late-night TV describes with that same product-selling voice all the horrible things they can do to Simon's loved ones, pausing only to mention the doctors and medical drips that can keep a body alive through such awful things for long, long periods of time, long enough for almost anyone to watch forty percent of their body eaten in front of them. The living infomercial tells Simon to wait, because that's not all: there's also an assortment of encouragements they could visit upon Simon directly in the meantime. A slight man with a pencil-thin mustache smiles friendly at Simon as he places an assortment of objects on the table: pliers, a blowtorch, finely broken glass, an egg-shaped piece of metal with fishhooks, and a jar of some exotic-looking beetles. All these could be yours, Simon. Act now!

Arthur Drake leans in. "I think we will start with—"

"All right," says Simon. "I'll tell you where it is."

"You will? Excellent."

The slight man with a pencil-thin mustache looks disappointed.

Simon notices, among the others in the room, Alex Drake and Gabe Stephano, Jr. Both look like their fathers.

*Gabe: the Question Man. Jack of spades.*

*Alex: the Crying Man. Jack of hearts.*

Alex holds something the size of a small cage by an antique silver handle. Simon can't see what's inside the cage. A black velvet cover conceals the contents. Quivering and moaning, Alex holds the black-draped object up to one ear and murmurs something. Then he turns to his father.

"Dad?"

"Not now, Alex."

"But, Dad—"

"Not—*now*—Alexander." Arthur's eyes never leave Simon. "Stop playing with your toys and take your medicine."

The younger Drake's eyes are turning into black doll's eyes, the Hunger eyes. He carefully puts down his burden, which Simon notices is attached to his waist by a silver chain. Then he shakily opens a plastic bottle and downs a handful of pills, breathes, and goes back to normal. He gently lifts up his prize and, whispering to whatever is hidden inside, leaves the room.

"Mr. Drake, I'll give you the hammer on one condition," Simon says. The room turns to laughter.

"You, my friend, are not in a position to make conditions," Arthur Drake says with no malice.

"I have something you want very badly. I think you need it very soon, and you might want it so badly that you would be willing to give up something you don't really need anymore in return."

Arthur looks at the face peering up at him, a face with the expression of a schoolboy trying to trade lunch items. He compulsively looks to his watch. The mountain of confidence shifts a few centimeters. "All right," he says, amused. "What, pray tell, do you want?"

"Him," says Simon, pointing at Gabe.

More laughter.

"You are a character, Simon. I bet you say the most intriguing things. However, I think we've indulged you long enough."

"What does he taste like?" Simon asks.

Arthur's mouth opens, but he pauses.

"Gabe has eaten so many," Simon says. "What would it be like to eat him? You have wondered about this before."

"How interesting—how incredibly innovative of you." Arthur laughs, a tear in his eye, and his smile turns just a little too big. "All right then. Deal."

Gabe laughs, but this time he is the only one. A hand holds a pistol in front of Simon's face, ejects the cartridge, leaving a single bullet in the chamber, and hands it to Simon. Arthur Drake exits the room.

"Art?" says Gabe, chuckling weakly.

Simon takes the gun.

"Art? What are you doing?"

Simon aims.

"Art!"

*I would have preferred a scalpel. Eh, Jane?*

The bullet enters Gabe's chest. His eyes bulge more from surprise than pain. He looks down at the hole, confused, because he was playing off the same script as everyone else. Simon deviated. Gabe mouths the name Art. He falls to the floor. Simon has no jack of spades to tear up, but that's all right. He can tear it up in his mind. Mental Thuggee.

"Old Testament." Simon says.

*The trade was all I could do to move one step closer to completing the promise, Jane. Even if I were doomed, I wanted to show you I hadn't forgotten.*

"Drag that body out of here," says one of the men. "I'll keep this creep locked up until they come back with the hammer, just in case he was lying."

"Then what?" asks his companion.

"Then maybe he'll find out what's really going on here."

\* \* \* \* \*

It's called *deus ex machina*.

It means "god out of the machine."



Greek playwrights would resort to it from time to time when they'd worked their heroes into an inescapable corner. A divine power would appear on stage, dropped in by crane or pushed up through a trap door, to resolve the conflict and rescue the ensnared protagonist. Thus is Medea, fresh from her feats of murder and infanticide, whisked away from her husband's wrath, and Alcestis extricated from the clutches of Death itself.

Simon is not thinking on these finer points of drama as he sits in a room somewhere in the manor house. He is, instead, watching an armed man scowl at him, wondering at his fate. Arthur Drake had come back with Bob—the hammer, not the dildo—an hour or more past. He'd stood in front of Simon, fondling the weapon almost as if it were Nyx's toy, proving his possession of the thing. Simon had expected then to feel Bob's wrath, to have his skull shattered by the blood-specked head—even tried to imagine how the shape of one's perspective would change in the nanoseconds of awareness one would have as one's head is pulped—but Drake had simply said to keep Simon safe until he returned. He had party guests to attend to.

Drake's minions are more thorough than Simon's other recent captors. They tape his wrists in such a way that no sleight of hand is possible. They tape his mouth so that he cannot distract or confuse them. One by one they take turns, sitting across the room from him and scowling. Simon, by way of reply, sits, and waits, and wonders when the end will finally come. When he notices the wet footprints appear suddenly on the tile floor, his thoughts do not flash to the mechanics of Greek drama, though they do settle for just a moment on the mutant descendants of these ancient entertainments: the silent serials, *The Perils of Pauline* or, better still, *Les Vampires*, with their cliffhanger endings and miraculous escapes. And he breathes a sigh of relief as the armed man falls over.

Loki, barefoot and dripping with cold water, helps Simon out of his duct tape bonds.

"How did you find me?" Simon asks.

"Shadowed Mort. Had to jump in the river." Loki looks disgusted. "He came in through an underground passage." Loki carefully takes out a mobile phone from a sealed plastic bag. "Time to call the cavalry." He speed dials a number. "Hello?" he whispers into the phone. "Yeah, I'm in. It's a big gathering. What? Say again. He sent what? They exist? No! What? Two? Fuck!"

Loki puts away the phone.

"Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck!"

"What?"

"The Prince just released two Grims."

Whatever momentary relief Simon had felt flees at that announcement, driven away more by the primal terror he glimpses in his shadow's face than a clear understanding of his words.

Sometimes, letting go of the cliff and taking your luck with the rocks below is the cleaner fate.

Sometimes, the god from the machine wants to eat you.



*Loki explained to me, Jane, how some vampires lose the Man and become all Beast, rabid and insane. Usually, they have to be put down, but the Prince keeps some of these creatures, locks them away, makes them love him with his blood. He calls them his Grims. They have no mind left, Jane. They are worse than the ghosts. Hungrier. They're only used to exterminate.*

"There are two of them here. The exits are all being blocked from the outside, and they are already in the building," Loki whispers before tentatively opening the door to the hall. "The Prince released Grim Three and Grim Seven."

"Do they have names?" Simon asks.

Loki shakes his head slowly. "There's nothing left in them that would answer to a name."

As they creep through the halls, they hear the screams before they see anyone. Sounds of running, sounds of banging, of raw fists pounding desperately at doors and windows somehow held closed from the outside. Screams and pleas and pounding.

A bloody-knuckled woman in fancy dress, well past shock, runs by, followed by several others. No one pays attention to Loki and Simon.

They catch a glimpse of Grim Three as she eviscerates shrieking Gastronomer Irregulars in a dining room with yellow wallpaper and choleric-colored lights. Silver trays litter the floor.

*It was a party, Jane. I thought they were celebrating Drake's triumph, his acquisition of the hammer. I thought they were making ready to enact some dread ritual, something apocalyptic that would spread out over the city and the world. But it wasn't that at all. . . .*

The bored and the rich, playing cannibal earlier in the evening, now scream like children. The screams do not last. Grim Three is a little girl—or was, some time before ever after. Her party dress is caked in gore. Her fingers and toes end in long claws that extend nearly twelve inches. She moves like a great heron. With one clawed foot, Grim Three grips the head of a dead Gastronomer and pulls him to her mouth, like a bird of prey.

She drops her food and pulls something off of him: a comb. The Grim looks at the comb curiously, begins the palsied motions of combing her hair. She's not very effective; her hand just moves in staccato rhythms, around the general vicinity of her head.

*I think there were fragments of behavioral memory, Jane, little islands of disassociated self, floating in the Beast.*

Simon, in the dark, in horrid wonder, notices Grim Three has little objects fastened to her hair: dolls' heads, dolls' arms, ribbons, and human fingers, all tied and hanging in her hair as if it were a baby's mobile. She continues feeding.

*How could such a little thing contain so much blood? Eh, Jane?*

Loki pulls Simon into another room.

“She’s busy,” he whispers. “Stay in here. They’re scary as fuck, but not bright. I have to go lead them to where they can do the most damage, give us a path to get out. Stay.”

And then he’s gone.

The jagged-toothed seconds gather into conspiracies of long minutes, and Simon listens to the masque of screams. The cries multiply and merge in the halls, dozens of individual voices sounding, through a trick of acoustics, for all the world like one composite utterance shrieked through a giant, creaking throat.

*I could only conclude, Jane, that while I was unconscious, something had swallowed us all whole.*

He looks about the room. The sable furnishings and glowing, melancholic art are lit in flickering fluorescence by busted black lights. A glowing wheel of cheese, in an advanced state of fermentation, lays spilled and splattered on the floor in a colony of luminous maggots. A human corpse sprawls next to the cheese. The maggots writhe. The body does not.

Simon picks up a glowing maggot.

“*Piophilha casei*,” he says, as if to an old friend. Forensic entomology uses the same family of fly to estimate the time of death in human remains.

Simon puts the maggot down and sneaks off.



Every door is a horror story that has only to be opened.

One door gapes into a feverish room of crimson illumination and sanguine aesthetics. Fat leeches crawl near an empty chocolate box. Simon finds more revelers prostrate in death, painted red by both liquid and light.

Another door opens into a blue-cast room of phlegmatic sensibility. A fountain dominates the center and glass fixtures cascade constant curtains of water down the walls. Only, the water is contaminated and the walls run bloody. Simon spots an ornate pet-carrying case discarded on a couch, the metal-

barred door torn open. Bodies lay on the floor, clad in suits and dresses and rich clothing; all are dead or dying. In the room's center, near the fountain, rests a line of a half-dozen corpses wearing clothing not as rich, each with a caved-in head. Simon flinches. Near the bodies lurks Bob the hammer, the evil maul, new blood mingling with the old.

*They were cattle from Apex Consumers, Jane, brought in for the feast. Arthur Drake finally got to use the hammer. He sang lullabies into their skulls.*

But the other guests—they were not killed with Bob. The thing that got them interrupted their enjoyment of the hammer's kill.

A door flies open and in walks Grim Seven. This Grim is a male, maybe in his teens, but it is hard to tell. His skin is ash gray and his eyes are milky white. His mouth is sewn mostly shut with big, messy stitches. He does not move like Grim Three. His movements are slow, laborious, as slack as the arms hanging at his sides. He doesn't seem to see Simon, his attention instead on one of his earlier victims, still stubbornly clinging to life. The Grim slouches over and lifts him, whimpering, into the air. He's a big man, much bigger than the Grim. Simon recognizes him as one of the thugs who had helped interrogate him earlier. The Grim holds the whimpering man's face close to his own and then the whimpers turn to a higher pitch and the shivering turns to convulsing. At last the man's dark hair turns white and the struggling stops altogether. Grim Seven cocks his head to the side, considering the curiosity in his hand, before slamming the fresh-made corpse's head into the ground several times. Finally, the ashen thing lifts the body high overhead and lets the blood trickle down, catching the liquid through a gap in his stitched mouth.

Then the Grim looks up.

Of course there's really no such thing as *deus ex machina*, lovelings, not really; its presence would imply a formal plan and perhaps even a playwright. Sometimes the eye thinks it spots patterns where none exist, traces false constellations in

the void—only to find that navigating by them surely leads to calamity. In total chaos, order may flicker briefly in the black light, but only a fool mistakes that for true order.

Simon returns the Grim's mad, empty gaze for only an instant and sees in it an awful truth. Then he does the only thing he can.

*I ran, Jane. I ran and ran and ran.*

\* \* \* \* \*

In the kitchen all is dark. Simon slips into the room as the light from the hallway vanishes with the closing of the swinging door. He heads straight for the counter and the two knives he saw there in the momentary illumination. Not scalpels, but they would do.

In the inky black, two glowing orbs—the cloudy blues and greens of bioluminescence—stare at Simon from the floor on the opposite side of the room. He freezes.

“The Mondays,” caw the Corbies.

*The same eyes, Jane. The eyes that came down at me in the dark stall, the night you vanished.*

Breathless with dread, Simon stutter-slides along the wall until he feels it. A light switch clicks.

After a lifetime interpreting stories through wounds, Simon instantly reads the savage struggle that had happened moments ago—the broken glass, blood, shattered table, cracked floor tiles, punched-through walls. At the center of the blossoming distraction lays Mort. Crouched on Mort's chest, like a night terror, is Simon's shadow.

Mort's disfigured body bristles with foreign objects that pierce his head, his neck, his body, his limbs: knives, some with broken handles; scissors; a cork screw; a broken bottle; a cleaver; shards of wood; a skewer; a meat hook; an apple corer; and things less identifiable. The Corbies quickly tell Simon the order in which each was stabbed into the body. In the light, Mort reminds Simon of the photos he's seen of deep-sea crea-

tures, things that never see the sun or the surface, splayed out on a boat or dissection table. Those specimens always excite both horror and sadness in him; their alien symmetries, damaged and partially preserved in some pathetic final pose, made him wonder what they were like when they were whole and in motion, gliding through the crushing pressure of their sunless environs.

*Mort was sleeping the big sleep, Jane. Like Rowen.*

Loki's undead flesh is torn and battered as well. An improbably sized bite of flesh is missing from his neck, making his head look as if it could topple like the top of a root-hacked tree. The skin of his forehead is slashed and yanked back, a parody of male pattern baldness and exposed skull. Loki's mouth hangs open, hovering over Mort's throat. He pulls back from the body, again and again, but his mouth always returns, drawn by impossible gravities. His body convulses with the tectonic inner struggle—the Man and the Beast—and the fault lines crack. A large glob of saliva flows from Loki's mouth, spattering Mort's face.

"Loki?" says Simon.

Simon's shadow moves faster than sight, turns to look at Simon with no visible transition. Loki clutches Mort's body greedily, like a cat with a freshly killed bird. The vampire's mouth quivers, all fangs and drool. The eyes are devoured by black holes that leak out and fill the recesses of his sockets. The visage is not so far off from those of the Grims. Loki makes a noise at Simon that is something like a roar and something like a hiss.

Simon backs out of the kitchen, back into the manor built of hunger and madness.

*I'd like to think that monster was my friend, Jane. I'd like to think.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Alex: the Crying Man. Jack of hearts.*

"Stay away!" he shrieks. In a library, the green-tinged lights bathe everything in ectoplasm. Alex's hands and mouth are

caked with drying blood that is not his. He crouches over what Simon had mistaken earlier for a cage, but with the velvet cover gone, he can see that it is more like a lantern or a small fish tank, all antique silver and glass. And floating inside are a pair of golden eyes and a heart. Simon gasps.

*I'd found you at last. Eh, Jane?*

Alex's eyes are now completely gone over to black doll's eyes. His mouth stretches too, too wide. Shaking hands fumble with a plastic pill bottle, popping open the top, but dropping the contents. The pills rain over the container, hit the wooden floor, and scatter like sanity. "So sorry," he murmurs to his floating prizes. "Would you like me to punish him for making me spill those nasty pills on you?" Alex loops the chain around his neck and left shoulder, securing his prize on his back. His grimacing smile is much too large for his face.

Simon holds tight to the knives he'd taken from the kitchen. His own expression becomes fixed, something other than entirely human, as he advances with razor-sharp purpose.

Alex's mouth distends to his chest, filling with rows of teeth, skin going from pale to chalk white. He wails and charges Simon.

Claws.

Teeth.

Blades.

They meet in a vicious clash of ghastr and ghoul. Alex is fast, but Loki's blood makes Simon faster and he ducks away. Simon evades and slashes, again and again, slicing white flesh. But the warm gift of undead blood fades quickly. Simon slows. Even with his awkward, precious burden, Alex does not.

White claws rip into his chest.

Simon's feet leave the floor. He readies a strike, but stops himself when the silver casket shifts into his way, the golden eyes rolling lazily in the clear liquid.

Talons sink between his ribs.



Then another set of eyes fill his vision—a pair of black doll’s eyes—and Simon jams the knives into them. Alex shrieks, squeezing his claws inside Simon’s chest. Simon raises his arms and slams his open palms into the knife handles, driving them deep into the monstrous skull. Alex collapses.

Simon, on the floor, coughs up blood. He’s bleeding out from the chest wound, yet he smiles.

*I was so happy, Jane. I won your Valentine.*

The torn-up scarecrow unhooks the silver chain from Alex’s waist and loops it around his neck. He smiles weakly at the blobs of flesh floating behind the thick glass. Here, at last, are fish he cannot kill. Then, cradling the silver casket as best he can, he crawls across the ectoplasmic library to the body of Arthur Drake.

Even in death, the self-help guru has perfect teeth.

The rest of Arthur Drake has not fared as well. His throat has been torn out, his stomach ripped open and chewed.

*Alex did it, Jane. The son ate the father. The family of Drake swallowed its own tale. Flesh of the flesh eating itself. I could hear the voice of the thing I glimpsed—the naked hunger god, the gibbering Whisper in the River. It sang, “Ashes to ashes, meat to meat. Everything has to eat.”*

Simon scrabbles to Arthur’s side. He knows he should probably try to leave, to escape with his prize for whatever short time he has left, but he has to know—all the secrets, all the answers. They’re all in Arthur Drake. The whole grandiose plot, every detail, lies in the folds, fluids, and chunks of this man’s anatomy. Icky Knock cackles in the back of Simon’s memory. It is all within reach. All he has to do is cut.

Wheezing, nearly laughing, Simon tears open the corpse’s shirt.

“You can’t get away that easy, Art. Not from me. Tell me how all the pieces fit. Make them fit!”

The pathologist slashes a messy Y.

“You hid a secret in your locket, but I know how to open it.”

With a great effort and a loud crack, Simon pulls the rib cage open—like prying stubborn hands clutching a mystery.

“Subject: Arthur Drake.”

Simon plunges his trembling fingers into the still-warm chest cavity. His body shakes with the green electricity.

The Corbies caw and sing: “Drake fell down and broke his crown—and Simon came tumbling after.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Where are we?

*Sleep has no place to call its own.*

The dark waves sigh on through forever. Simon and Arthur Drake sit in a rowboat, bobbing in an ebony river.

“Who *are* you?” asks Drake.

“This is your autopsy,” Simon says, “but I ask the questions.”

Somewhere, very distant, maybe in a dream—Simon is vaguely aware of his hands yanking out intestines by the foot.

“What were you doing tonight?” Simon asks. “What was the ritual all this was building toward? What did we stop?”

“Stop?” Drake looks confused. “It was just a Gastronome Irregulars meeting. A dinner. I was showing them what I’d accomplished. A meal featuring a few members of Apex Consumers. They were fattened up on vices and lives, and we were going to dine on the crackling. Exponential zoophagy. The ultimate consumption. My crowning recipe. They all would have been so impressed.”

“No,” says Simon. “What was the bigger plan? What did we stop?”

“Bigger plan? You stopped my life. I was going to rise so high. Just a few more years—”

“The plot, Drake. What was the plot? What was the hammer for? What’s its secret?”

“I don’t know.”

“You killed so many to get it. You must know.”

And somewhere, maybe in a dream—Simon is vaguely aware of squeezing a liver until something comes out.

"I don't know," says Drake. "The Voice in the Water told me to get it."

Simon rows along the dark channels that stretch after ever-after, and his passenger tells him the story of a boy named Arthur, a boy who was always afraid. Arthur was afraid in the night and afraid in the day. He was afraid when he was alone and afraid with company. The fear was always there, from before he could remember and on into adulthood. Fear lurked at the edge of his vision and behind him, and Arthur could never turn his head fast enough to see it. It slithered over his every hope and thought. Yet he could not name it, never knew what it was he feared. He never had an answer to the shame of another urine-stained bed.

But one day, Arthur heard the Voice in the Water. At first it was just a faint cadence in the sound of the liquid coming out of the tap, but Arthur listened and eventually could make out a distinct voice. It befriended Arthur and gave him guidance, promised to make him unafraid, and all Arthur had to do to worship it was eat. Everything Arthur learned, he learned in pursuit of killing the fear. Each thing he consumed was another thing he no longer had to dread. It was in this way that the Voice in the Water showed Arthur how not to be afraid of people.

Arthur learned to do the little things the Voice told him to do. He grew in success and stature, and yet the fear remained. When would he not be afraid? Soon, the Voice promised. Very soon. And so Arthur consumed and grew. He formed his self-help empire. He joined the Gastronomes Irregulars. He consumed.

The Voice told Arthur to get a hammer, the kind used in the old stockyards. The hammer had its own bedtime stories and had belonged to many people, most recently a serial killer. Arthur met a blood drinker named Mort, who also could hear the Voice, though he had heard it first in the river and said it had many mouths. He called it the Chorus of Wyrms. Mort warned that another blood drinker, Rowen, knew of the Voice, or the Chorus, and could hurt it with her magic. And so they plotted.

"No, no, no," says Simon. "That's just more history. What was the endgame? What was all this building toward? This all has to connect: the hammer, the ghaſts, the vampires, the three dead men who questioned me, the thing in the bog, the static voice in the faſt-food clown face, Ichabod Knock and all the oddities he recorded, Jane Doe. How do they all fit together? Put the pieces together! Make it all fit!"

And ſomewhere, in a dream, Simon is vaguely aware of ripping out organ after organ, angrily tossing each one away.

"Careful," ſays Arthur, who is now a little boy. "You're rocking the boat."

"Oh," ſays Simon, who is alſo a little boy. "Sorry."

Little Simon ſits and begins rowing. Both he and Little Arthur are in clothing that is much too big for them.

"What plot did you think there was?" aſks little Arthur. "Did you really think you were ſaving the world?"

"Yeah," ſays Little Simon, ſelf-conſciously. "Maybe . . ."

Little Arthur giggles. Then he tells Simon every detail of his life, every ſin, every love, every evil deed, every joy, every ſingle thing that is Arthur Drake—for there is naught but time in the Dead Water.

The two boys float down the ebony river that flows on and on after ever-after. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.



"Put the pieces together," Simon mumbles as he comes to, hands ſliding out of the ruined meſs that is Arthur Drake. "Put the pieces together."

Simon, covered in gore, bends down ſo his face is next to Arthur's.

"Put the pieces together . . . pleaſe."

Simon ſits up. He runs a bloody hand through his hair. He notices his own bleeding wounds. He can ſtill hear the echo of Ichabod laughing.

*I finally understood Mr. Knock's joke. Eh, Jane?*

"No answers," pants Simon. "The shadows run too deep. The voices from the river, from the dark—they are many." He looks down at the cadaver, feeling the stirrings of love for his latest patient—

"No!" says Simon. He gets to his knees, raises a knife. This is an awful man. A killer. Worse, he was instrumental in Jane's death. Simon decides to dismember the corpse and piss on the remains to desecrate them. But every cadaver has to break Simon's heart, and all he wants to do is hug the scared child hidden inside this meat locket.

"Mother Hubbard," Simon swears.

He falls into a sitting position. His breath comes ragged. There are things loose in his chest.

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at this vengeance business," he says to the Corbies. He lies down on the floor. Just out of arm's reach, he can see the silver casket.

"I'm sorry, Jane," says Simon. "I forgot what was important." He rolls over and pulls himself towards her heart and eyes. Though he's weak and exhausted, the movement is easy. With so much gore on the floor, he slides. Simon hugs the silver-and-glass casket to his chest. He coughs up red and smiles. He sits up, but immediately lies back down.

"Just a little rest," he says.

The sounds of carnage and chaos have ceased. The manor house is quiet. All the lights have gone out. All the revelers are dead.

Simon looks Jane in the eyes.

"I won your heart, Jane."

Simon kisses the glass.

*Eye.*

*Heart.*

*You.*

*Jane.*

# EPILOGUE

I'll come to you tonight, dear, when it's late,  
You will not see me; you may feel a chill.  
I'll wait until you sleep, then take my fill,  
And that will be your future on a plate.  
They'll call it chance, or luck, or call it Fate.

— Neil Gaiman, “Reading the Entrails: a Rondel”

And that is how I won your Valentine.

Eh, Jane?

It is cold and dark in here.

I hold your hand. The skin has gone cold, but the embalming oil smells sweet. I trace the lines of your face, the muscles so relaxed. I trace the stitches that hold you together. The stitches are the binding, and the binding is a promise I sewed. I feel guilty, somehow selfish, that I am the only one who can feel the touch. But I can hug you and try to share my warmth. I don't need all of it. This is not an ideal relationship. Is it ever?

The refrigerator unit hums.

I made your glass case a little bigger. Now we can both lie here together, for a while. We can look at each other eye to eye, if I position the silver casket holding your golden orbs just right. Or I can rest your heart on your chest.

Did you know that the heart of Robert the Bruce, the warrior king of Scotland, was placed in a similar casket and worn into battle? Would you like to hear the story? Carrying out the king's final wish, two knights, one wearing the heart, the other holding the key, brought the organ to the Crusades to atone the dead king's sins. Only one knight returned alive, holding the key and wearing the heart, hanging from his neck. His name was Sir Symon Locard. Symon changed his name to Lockhart,

adding a heart and fetterlock to the family coat of arms, and the motto *Corda Serrata Pando*: “I open locked hearts.”

My shadow found me holding your locket on the floor, and his blood healed me. My shadow misled me, but that’s to be expected. His card is the Fool. Misdirection. There was no apocalyptic plot, only predators getting rid of rival predators, purging each other from a world of ever-shifting darkness. I still see my shadow from time to time. He knows better than to try to draw me into his plans. Or perhaps that, in itself, is a ploy.

My mother called today. She wants to meet you.

Alexi was right. There is not one voice in the river, there are thousands—the ten thousand terrible things swimming in the water that is chaos. The food chain is not constant. Even the river changes direction. Some nights you are a scarecrow god gobbling the moon from the sky. Some nights you are a victimized little boy tearing open shower curtains. Slapstick is the mirror of how to survive this spook world: roll with the punch, tumble when thrown, go with the awful flow. To rigidly resist is to shatter. I am Charlie Chaplin prat-falling with monsters.

Myer Twiss is still at large; children still rhyme his name to their rope jumping. Bubbly Creek still bubbles.

Alexi was wrong, too. Everything does not return to the river. There are voices in the earth and sky and in the static hiss of plastic faces. There are things that hide behind the shadows of atoms, but which are also so huge the lines of their bodies spell geomancy. The river is Alexi’s whole world, and so her only story is the river. Each of us thinks we are the big story, but we are, all of us, just twisted interludes bumping into each other in the dark.

I watch infomercials now, and I wonder.

Mr. Knock was right in his riddle. We cling to conspiracy because the alternative might be worse. There is no way to solve the mystery because it is woven of ten thousand black strands working toward different ends. Chaos. Sometimes looking for patterns leads to madness.

I could tuck you in, Jane, every night, kiss you on the cheek and promise you the world is not ending. There are too many sets of hungry eyes and teeth in the dark, and they need us too much to ever let it end.

Yesterday I read a news story on the Internet that said Ichabod Knock's newest book is due to be published soon, though it is still unclear whether it should be declared a posthumous work.

I found the Obsidian Sanctuary. Little Robin, their canary, sat in the front hall of their new meeting place. She saw me and screamed loudly through her rubber gorilla mask. I've never heard her voice except in screams. I fled. There are prices and there are doors you can't come back out of. I catch rumors online. I'm part of their mythos now—the entrails reader. I am a troll with my very own bridge, and I hear them trip-trapping above.

But I have you, Jane. In your glass case, you look like a fairy tale heroine awaiting the rejuvenating kiss.

I walked by another of those fast food restaurants. No one remembers when they were ever open. The plastic clown head talked to me again. There were secrets and tempting promises in the hissing static. *Mertvaya voda*—I've played so long in the Dead Water, but Grandsnaps said the Living Water also flows under the World Tree. Every day, the strange words, symbols, and equations cut into my walls make more sense. It's like an old song I can't quite remember. I can hum it now, I can almost sing it sometimes, and more and more it sounds like, "*Zhivaya voda*."

Is it true or does the demon static taunt me?

It doesn't matter. None of those things matter. All that matters is that my absinthe Thermos is empty. Soon my hand will enter the Y-shaped keyhole that opens the door to the place we can meet.

My belly is full of moths, and the Corbies are nervous.

*Corda Serrata Pando*, Jane.

I hope we dance.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOSHUA ALAN DOETSCH once built a flesh golem out of grave-robbled parts and leftover Halloween candy. By strange chance, this golem is fueled by rejection slips. Every day it begs and it pleads, "Please, kind sir, keep me alive!" And so Joshua writes. You can thank White Wolf for making the poor golem go hungry for another day.

Joshua is from October Country, Illinois, but currently writes video game dialogue in Montreal. He has a fondness for fedoras, does a mean Christopher Walken impersonation, and, once upon a road trip dreary, wrote a blues song about necrophilia.