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DERELICT

By

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Ch. 1

Revelation

The amber bottle flared as he took a pull, backlit by the afternoon sun. He closed his eyes but the glow persisted, now pink through his closed lids, shifting as the liquid inside sloshed about. He held the bottle aloft, stopping the flow with his tongue and holding still until the shifting patterns came to rest as the bottle's contents reached equilibrium. Two more long swallows, and then he lowered his arm, opening his eyes and resting the bottom of the bottle on his right thigh.

The burn was long gone as always. He didn't really know how he felt about that. The warming course down his throat cooled with each repetition, until there was nothing left but a-to-b. The burn wasn't particularly pleasant, but it was a sensation. It was something to land in the expanding void between the back of his eyes, and his thoughts.

Gulls squawked over head as he stared down at the docks. He sat on a stone bench on the border of the gravel lot above the marina, his left foot perched on mooring rope threaded through truncated vertical sections of telephone pole set into the ground every ten feet or so, encircling the parking lot. There were fifty-nine boats occupying the sixty slips, ranging in size from about twenty feet up to fifty or sixty. There were eleven

of the really big ones, all cabin cruisers, shifting almost imperceptibly in the calm water. They were in the slips farthest from the dock gates, where the water was deeper, and the mooring fees probably higher. Most were relatively new, with no oxidation on the fiberglass yet, and the canvas covers still a brilliant blue, or deep black. There were a couple of older wooden craft, but obviously restored. Floating testaments to how life worked out for some, another trophy financed by this merger, that stock split, or the other platinum album sales.

His eyes were always drawn to the outermost row. Eleven of twelve slips that were the symbols of all he hadn't attained. The empty one just seemed like proof. *There's room, but not for you.* He would stare at each vessel in turn, and assign it a success story. Eleven of twelve lucky pricks. If he hadn't spent so much time here in the last month or so, he'd just assume lucky prick number twelve was out enjoying the fruits of his labor, or keyboard strokes, or family money.

Maybe he was. If you could afford a boat that big, you could afford to leave for a month on it. Maybe a boat would suddenly appear there one day soon, big, shiny, and smug. *No room now, especially not for you.*

He always ended up here in what he laughingly referred to himself as his "free time". That was pretty much any time he wasn't at work, or passed out on the musty couch in the garage

he was currently renting. His life had been distilled down to these three component elements, and to continue the analogy, the impurities that formerly filled his "free time" had been distilled out as well. Like his marriage, and his friends. And every other damn thing except this place. It was pure "free time" now. He didn't really know why he kept coming here. Maybe there was no significance to it. Maybe it was just a good place to drink.

He took another drink, mentally calculating the time it would take him to finish the bottle, and walk the few yards to his car to get the second. Each afternoon, it came a few minutes earlier, and each day he explored the math that implied. The great thing about drinking, though, was that even the absolute values that the math returned could be ignored.

Except when they couldn't be, of course. Sometimes, there was no escape, despite what the bottle said.

Current rules dictated less than two bottles before getting back in the car and rolling the dice, always before sunset, to drive the mile and a half back to his un-insulated abode. Drinking math also pointed to a rounding up at some future point, but maybe he could draw a line.

Yeah, like when it had been one bottle. It hadn't always been like this, though. He could remember entire years mostly full of bright and shiny, like the boats out there.

He thought about the snapshot. He always did, in the times he couldn't do otherwise.

He had no idea if every addict had one, but he suspected that they did. When you were sliding along the long down-hill toward the black, how could you not look back over your shoulder, to glimpse the top of the hill? It was that height "back when", populated by other happy and willing participants, where booze had merely been the turbo button on good times, not the ward against everything lost.

He'd stare at that frozen frame in his mind, the embodiment of his halcyon days. It was perfect. It was iconic. Part of him knew that its perfection was as unreliable as everything else inside him influenced by the tidal pull of his addiction, but that part held no power, no influence.

The snapshot was of him and his wife-to-be, several weeks before the wedding. Arms wrapped around each other, full of that bliss that was as infectious to some as it was annoying to others. They stood atop the house-boat, with the deep green versus beige demarcation of the shore-line blurred behind them. He couldn't remember who'd taken it, his friend, or hers.

That was it. That was the apogee. That trip had been the outward and upward boundary of his life. He'd been occasionally tempted in the past to add, "so far", but that was now just another lie he used to want to tell himself.

He would stare at it when it wouldn't be denied, and wish for it back.

No, he wouldn't wish, really. He would plead, and beg, casting his desperation outward. But the plea would inevitably shatter against the monolith of his failings, and disappear like smoke.

Then he would hate it. Hate it enough to set it on fire.

But the snapshot was immune. It always came back.

To get away from it, he focused again on the empty slip. There was always something about it, each day he sat here. Something about it transcended his personal situation. There was some truth about it that belied its unoccupied state. He would always invent twelve stories that made him feel "less than", not eleven. In his stupid, inebriated railing against their owners, there were always twelve boats. Not eleven.

That was ridiculous, because there were always eleven boats. This afternoon was no different.

Except just like that, it wasn't.

Ch. 2

Down to the water-line

He sat forward, eyes widening.

The twelfth slip was no longer empty. The vessel that now occupied it was a behemoth that left scarcely two to three feet of room between the boats ahead of and behind it. It was at once utterly alien and new in its sudden "there-ness", but also familiar, and he got the sense that some part of him had been seeing it ever since he started coming here. He didn't know why he felt that, but life had stopped making sense quite a long time ago, so understanding seemed irrelevant. He could see it now.

It was the oddest looking boat, if that's what it really was. It was a wooden craft, but didn't follow any traditional boat-building plan he'd ever seen. He could tell just by looking at it that it would not fare well if asked to travel over open water. He recalled pictures of the dock communities in Sausalito, CA, where the floating structures moored there were in no way representing themselves as actual navigable craft. They cried "Stationary!" in every sea-faring tongue. This vessel was like that, except that it was really, really old. Not like falling apart old. More like petrified old.

It was a floating rectangle of a hull, truncated curves along its length, with a blunted bow and stern. There were

curved, shell-like constructs that reminded him of the Sydney Opera House at either end, except shingled in the manner of Cape Cod architecture. The curves started a quarter of the way from each end, and swept upward and out, openings facing outward and covered in dark glass. Sandwiched in between was a central structure that looked like it had been done by Frank Lloyd Wright, very geometric. Forming the apex of the structure and running its length was a large quarter-cylinder, maybe ten feet high. The curve arced away so he couldn't see what the vertical face on the opposite side looked like, but this side had the same shingling as the shell ends. It was bizarre and beautiful at the same time.

He realized that now that he could see it, he wasn't really very interested in looking at anything else. Whatever it was, it called out to him. He had absolutely no idea why this should be so. His participation in all things life was minimal, and interests beyond getting through each day were nearing zero. The feeling was...odd. The past six months had been all about what got let go. Adding in seemed very strange, because drinking math tended heavily toward subtraction.

"I need to see what's inside."

He realized that he'd said this aloud, and was further surprised to realize that this was the first verbal articulation he'd made outside of work in at least two days. Earlier this

afternoon at Ollie's, two blocks from here, he'd bought his two bottles without a single word to the cashier. Just a nod, and a swipe of his ATM card. He'd said nothing in response to the cashier's parting "bye".

He abruptly stood, and took the bottle back to the car, unlocking it with the clicker, and stowing the nearly empty bottle in the center console, atop its full successor. He straightened and then locked the car again, deciding to cross the gravel lot to the Port-A-Potty to piss before going any further down this new road. Mid-stream, it occurred to him that he'd never seen a private security car prowl through the lot, nor had he seen a single police cruiser pass by on the road running along the back of it. Must be why he kept coming back. Of course, he was never here after dark, so maybe he'd just missed them.

He zipped up and exited, work boots crunching on the gravel as he crossed toward the dock entrance that led to the harbormaster's office, which was basically a mod building sitting atop the end of this leg of the docks, near the gas pumps. Unlike the other two dock entrances, there was no locked gate here, but the short connector from this leg to the other two was gated as well. It stood opposite the office entrance. He tramped up the ADA ramp to the double glass doors, these flanked by large plate-glass windows giving those inside a clear view of

the entire marina. As he passed in front of the one on the left on his way to the door, he saw the legend, "Sophia Marina", in large vinyl letters. Below it was, "a Harrelson LLC holding" in smaller type. He raised his eyes from these to look inside, but the afternoon sun reflecting off of the water made it impossible to see in.

He made the doors, and pushed through into the office. A long counter ran half the length of the building, teeing into another large window on the right wall. There were several open doors behind it, two opening into what looked like offices, and one into a bathroom. There was a desk occupying the open space at the counter's end, and a number of mismatched waiting room chairs lined the short walls below the windows to his immediate right and left.

At the desk sat a twenty-something-ish girl, and she looked up from a tablet on the desk in front of her as she heard the doors open. She was maybe a little overweight, but cute in a bookish sort of way. Short blond hair in a bob, and rectangular glasses partially masking pale blue eyes, eyebrows raised in question. There was not a ton of warmth in her gaze, though.

"Help ya?" She didn't put much sugar in the question.

"Uh, yeah. I saw a few for sale signs out there, and I was wondering if I could take a look." His voice was rough, even to his own ears, but he didn't hear any slurring.

She raised her eyebrows even further.

"You looking to buy a boat?" She sounded dubious.

"Well, yeah. Gotta spend it somewhere, right?" He tried a half-smile, hoping for charm. It didn't work. She snorted.

"Not to sound judgmental or anything, but you really don't look like you could afford any of those."

He blinked, and then felt a flush of anger, mixed with shame. He put it down without changing his expression. This girl was his only way in here. He waited a beat, then amped up his smile.

"Maybe so, but looks can be deceiving. Maybe I'm a successful artist, hiding behind this everyman persona."

"I'm kinda busy, and I don't let non-members on the docks, unless they're accompanied by members. I can give you the contact info and slip numbers of the ones for sale."

"I was hoping for a closer look before going to the trouble of contacting the owners. Would you buy troubled but rich broker on a bender?"

"Maybe if that was a Beamer up there in the lot, but it isn't. I don't want to be jerk, really, but I have things to do."

He kept his expression static, smile unfazed, but it took a lot.

"How about an under-cover inspector for Harrelson LLC, sent to evaluate employee customer relation skills?"

She snorted again, and some of her dismissiveness seemed to ebb. She looked at him with a bit more humanity in her eyes.

"And what would your report say right now?"

He looked up at the ceiling, drew a short breath between his teeth, and then looked at her.

"Inconclusive without further data."

Her tiny smile got fractionally larger, then disappeared.

"Ok, Captain Morgan, here it is. I *am* Harrelson LLC. I'm this marina, and two liquor stores, all of which have video monitoring, which I out of necessity must occasionally monitor. While you are not a paying customer here, you are at Ollie's, so you are paying for my college education in some form. So, why do you really want onto the docks?"

Somehow, her tone implied no offense, and any anger he may have felt about her squashing his pretense flat-lined before it passed from source to expression. That was the capricious nature of his addiction. Sometimes it deadened. Sometimes it amplified. But these little insights into it always annoyed him.

He sighed, and ran a hand through his lank hair, currently two days removed from a shower.

"I only want to look. Up close. I always wanted one, but it didn't work out. I know you don't know me, but I'm not here to

break, or steal, or tag, or whatever. By the way, my name is Jeff, but the Captain Morgan thing was hilarious, really."

Her expression didn't soften.

"I had lots of choices. Johnnie Walker, Jim Beam, Yukon Jack. I went with nautical. The video resolution isn't that great."

"Fair enough. But you realize that you did make my point."

"And how's that?"

"You don't *look* like a Harrelson LLC."

She frowned, and he could see clouds forming in her eyes. He'd stepped in something, and it was not helping his cause.

She was silent for several moments, and when she spoke, there was intensity in her voice that hadn't been there before.

"First of all, Harrelson LLC isn't actually a LLC. It's just the businesses my uncle owned before he passed away. He preferred grandiose over accurate. Now they are mine, for better or worse. *And*, I have no idea why I bothered to tell you that, but there it is. Second of all, why should I? What difference does up close make? You're not here to buy one, and we both know it."

He thought about it, in the moment. Why indeed? Why was he doing this? This wasn't him. Well, it wasn't the "him" he'd now become, that's for sure.

He was about to let it go, back-pedal, and leave, when something came to him, a thought that didn't seem like one of his. It was an imperative, disguised as a plea.

*Please. You can do this. If you don't, you're finished.
That's it. You're done.*

He didn't really understand what it meant, but he went with it nevertheless.

"Why not? I asked. I didn't try to break in. I'm not strong-arming you. If you say no, I'll go. What can it hurt?"

That seemed to give her pause, and some of the clouds wafted away.

"How long are we talking? Minutes? Hours? Days?"

He shrugged.

"You decide. An hour, maybe?"

She stared at him in appraisal for almost a minute.

"What's your last name?"

"Haight."

"Seriously?"

"If it makes any difference, it's not spelled that way.
Think Summer of Love. San Francisco."

"Ah. Got it. Still."

"And you are?"

"Sophia."

"Mmm. As in, Sophia Marina."

"You are quick."

More mental schooling.

"Well, Sophia, can I?"

She got up and went to a shallow cabinet on the wall behind the counter between the far office and bathroom doors. She opened it, and hooked out a key on a floatation fob. She came to the counter, and offered the key across it to him. As he stepped forward and reached for it, she raised it high, and widened her eyes at him for emphasis.

"Do not make me regret this. If I don't get this back in 90 minutes, I'll call the police. I will make sure that they have footage of your face, and I will press charges if you break, take, or otherwise impact anything on my docks."

"I thought you said the video resolution wasn't very good."

"Smartass isn't helping you right now."

He just waited, not saying anything.

She sighed, and then dangled the key before him.

"Just don't disappoint me. Oh, and as an aside, I and every other resident of these streets between here and wherever you lay your unwashed head do not appreciate your daily roulette attempts to get home. Call a cab, or I'll give the cops your license number the next time you leave here."

It alarmed him the amount of mental effort it took to keep his expression even, and not back-hand this little bitch into

yesterday. Which instantly reminded him of the one time he'd struck his soon-to-be ex-wife, and his rage was gone as fast as it had come. He put a fist to his lips and coughed slightly to cover the pause, then dropped his hand to the counter, palm up.

"Noted."

She held the key for a couple more seconds, then dropped it into his outstretched palm.

"Hope you find what you're looking for, provided it doesn't belong to me or my patrons."

"Yes. We are crystal clear on that point."

He turned and pushed out through the doors, without looking back to see if she was watching him go. He crossed to the dock gate, inserted the key, and pulled it open. Retrieving the key, he passed through, and let it slam shut behind him, his excitement growing as he walked quickly toward where this short connecting ramp met the first main dock leg, dispersing any residual sense of shame left from the girl's more pointed comments. Reaching it, he turned left and headed for the deep-water slips at the end. None of the other vessels held any interest for him now, and he looked neither left nor right as he made his way along.

As he walked, he thought about the fact that he hadn't asked the girl about the empty slip, and that begged the question, was it really empty? Or would he just step off the

dock into the water when he tried to board (which at this point was inevitable as far as he was concerned). Did she see it as empty? Maybe it was just some short-circuit in his head that had played out the way it did. He had no illusions about his state of mind. Well, that wasn't true, he had plenty of illusions about it, but he didn't trust any of them, and that had to count for something.

Then he was there.

The sun was behind it now, and he entered its shadow as he covered the last few yards to stand near the edge of the dock. Up close, the hull appeared to be sheeted with verdigris-covered copper, and for its apparent age and implied sedentary nature, there didn't seem to be a lot of seaweed and algae growth below the waterline. The hull ended and deck began about 6 feet above the level of the dock. There was no gangway, access stairs, or ladder anywhere, and an uninterrupted wooden railing ran the entire length of the craft, curving away out of sight on each side around the bases of the shell constructs toward the other side of the boat. The constructs towered about 25 feet above the deck, with the top of the center structure about 8 feet lower than that. The center structure had two tiers, with the addition of the curved section atop the upper level. The upper level was narrower abeam than the lower, and so was the curved section in relation to the upper, giving a terraced effect. Both levels

were punctuated by several metal hatch-ways along their length. There were strangely no windows or port-holes anywhere, and none of the hatch-ways had glass insets. While the entire structure appeared intact and whole, there was an air of age and abandonment about it, and the wood used in its construction appeared dry and desiccated, as though it would splinter if struck. The whole of the exterior surface was filmed over with dust, salt, and grime. Metal fittings everywhere were darkened with rust.

He was closer to the bow as he took all this in, and decided to move toward the stern. Near the center of the ship on the dock was the power and water connection box, a squat fiberglass cube with hinged clear plastic covers to protect the electrical connections from the elements. He noted that there were no power cables snaking from it up onto the deck, like most of the other craft nearby, ditto for the water connections. Strange, he thought, but what *wasn't* about this.

There was a narrow metal platform running most of the width of the stern several feet below the level of the deck. It was unbounded by any railing, and was probably less than twenty-four inches in width. He couldn't immediately see what its purpose was. It certainly didn't provide easy access. It was high enough, and began far enough from the edge of the dock that a standing jump was out of the question. He could run, jump, and

grab, but provided he could snag the edge with his hands, he'd still end up thigh-deep in the water, and would have to pull himself up by upper body strength alone. Maybe he could do that, but he hadn't tried to do a pull-up in a long time.

The thought of a drink came at him hard, and his interest in this new imperative dimmed. What was he doing here? There was another evening's worth of insulation up there in his car, and he could feel his buzz-meter needle dropping toward the red. That place where the alcoholic breakwater crumbled, and the heavy seas of his discontent rolled triumphantly in. He could breathe, but he drowned just the same.

He really did waver, then. He knew he was in decline, and also knew that objects rolling downhill always picked up speed. The chances of something external arresting this motion were slim. He'd already hit some major ones at speed. If two DUIs and his pending divorce lacked the mass to slow him, let alone stop him, then why was he here wasting valuable drinking time?

Then another of those thoughts that didn't seem to be his surfaced.

This won't come again. You know that, right? You know what's waiting for you if you walk away. Haven't you had enough of the known quantity? Why not see what you can see?

He nodded to himself.

Yeah. Why not? It was only an hour or so. He'd satisfy his curiosity, and then call a cab, unless the girl in the office called the cops. Even then, he'd been there before. He'd just deal with it as it unfolded, hoping for the best, or dealing with the worst. He doubted he'd care either way.

He looked around, and it didn't take long for him to find what he was looking for. On the opposite side of the dock and down several slips, he saw a two-step fiberglass step-stool. It provided access to the jet-ski platform at the rear of a large Sea-Ray cruiser. He trotted over to it, lifted it, and then carried it back to his original position, lining it up with the platform he had now decided he would attain. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, quite possibly his last "*I will do this!*" moment. So exciting.

He backed up to the opposite side of the dock, and without hesitation launched himself forward, sprinting across the intervening distance. He timed his stride at the end so that his weak leg hit the bottom step, and his strong leg the top. He pushed with all his strength as he cleared the top step, and felt a rush of confidence that he'd kicked this little logistical obstacle's ass.

Not really, as it turned out. While he'd gotten the height and distance right, his left foot hadn't quite gotten the elevation it needed, and his work boot snagged the edge of the

platform, as effective as a tow-hook on an aircraft carrier landing. Forward motion instantly translated to downward, and his face descended quickly toward the unyielding metal surface. Despite his dulled reflexes, he was able to get his arms in and hands down before impact, so his nose and mouth impacted his own soft flesh, and not the infinitely more painful other option.

Still, it hurt. But, he did stick the landing, and didn't roll off into the water. He lay prostrate on the platform, cursing, wiggling, and massaging offended skin and cartilage. The waves of pain retreated, and he relaxed to immobility for a moment, facing toward the stern of the craft after a final sigh of disgust.

Directly in his line of sight, just far enough away for him to be able to focus on it, he could see a small coppery-looking disc wedged in the small gap between the copper sheeting of the hull and the metal of the platform, which was obviously anchored deep within the hull behind it. He stared at it for a moment, debating. Time was short.

He reached out with his left hand, and grasped the disc, pulling it free from its resting place. He brought it close, and turned it ninety degrees.

It was a penny. An Indian-head penny, to be exact. He turned it over, and in so doing, saw that it was actually two pennies, stuck together. He pressed the duo between his thumb

and forefinger, sliding them apart. They resisted for a moment, and then slid against each other in opposite directions. He pressed his other hand into service, raising himself onto his elbows as he did so, and separated them into each hand, turning them to alternately view each side. They were *both* Indian head pennies, one from nineteen hundred, and the other from eighteen ninety-four. They didn't appear to be in particularly good shape. They had a dark patina, and the images on each face were worn and indistinct, though recognizable. He briefly wondered what they were worth, and lamented the loss of his smart-phone, so he could check. But, his wife had set up that account, and collateral damage had converted it from information pipeline to paper-weight. He'd tried a pre-pay for a while, but his life had shrunk so much now that he didn't bother carrying it anymore. There wasn't anyone left to call. He grabbed them both in one fist, and shoved them into his right pants pocket. He'd check it later on the stockroom computer at work.

He got to his feet. The dirty glass face of the aft shell construct pulsed with light, reflected by the waning sun upon the water. He had to squint as he eyed the deck rail above him, tracking quickly along it in search of any interruption signifying access to the deck. To his frustration, he found none. The rail continued on unbroken, arcing around the bay side of the stern, and continuing on toward the bow.

"Well, shit."

He moved to the far end of the platform, and sighted down the far side as far as he could see, which was maybe half-way to the bow given the angle, and couldn't see any access point through the deck rail.

Terrific.

As he faced the rail above, he estimated his chances of jumping up, grabbing it, and pulling himself up and over. He felt like he was pretty much facing the same issue as before. Did he have the upper body strength to pull himself up? He looked back across the other end of the platform toward the dock. Getting back onto it would be easy. He could be in his car in less than five minutes.

But then he was suddenly furious. There was no thought in it, he simply leapt upward with all his anger-fueled strength, reaching for the railing.

Two things happened in quick sequence. There was a flare of heat on his right front upper thigh, and then a section of the railing he was currently reaching for disappeared. His right hand grasped the rail it was reaching for, but his left grasped empty air. His right hand grasped and held fast, but because his left wasn't able to, his body yawed in that direction, his left hip crashing into the edge of the deck. Despite the pain, he retained his grip on the railing with his right hand, and

continued to hold himself suspended from it until the pain of impact passed. He looked up to see that there actually was a gap in the railing, and he'd snagged the right side of it. He then reached out to grasp the edge of the deck with his left hand, and was able to pull himself up onto it, although any Olympic judge would've probably given him a negative artistic score, given all the grunting, lurching, and cursing involved.

He rested prone on the deck for a moment, and then got to his feet. He stared at the gap in the railing that hadn't been there ten seconds ago. Then, he looked down at the ancient, rusted metal of the deck, and suddenly grinned in delight.

He was on.

Ch. 3

Who's behind the door

He stood on the deck before the glass wall of the aft shell construct, which continued to glow in shifting patterns from the light off the water, though it was dimming now as the sun neared the horizon. There were no interruptions in its grimy surface. It wasn't made up of individual panes. It was a single, immense pane of dark glass, slightly curved in a convex arc from one side of the shell to the other.

He stepped to its base, cupping his hands around his temples as he pressed his forehead against the glass, trying to peer inside.

He instantly regretted it. His stomach roiled, and his equilibrium pitched as he backed away from the glass face. It had been like trying to look through a kaleidoscope, but an *evil* one, with variable rotation, transparency, and background illumination. There were dim geometric shapes that may have been recognizable behind the glass, but they were frantically cycling in position, clarity, and visibility before he backed away.

He came to rest momentarily several steps away, swaying a bit, and then blew out a breath. His onboard alcohol navigator instantly plotted a return route for him, as it always did. He always saw it as a Google Maps plot, complete with flashing blue

dot, and blue line telemetry to the finish line. It was a very short line. It fit easily on the mental screen, no zooming out necessary, which was sadly also quite typical.

"Mmm." He rasped, and then moved toward the bay-side of the deck, the side not visible from the girl's office. Rounding the edge of the aft shell, he finally got a non-oblique view of this side of the vessel.

This side of the center structure was a mirror of the other side, complete with corresponding hatches. There was one exception. The vertical face of the top-most structure was visible, and it was also solid glass. But it wasn't the same dark glass as the ends. It was plate-glass, dirty and smudged, but he could see the downward curve of the inside structure through it, illuminated by the last of the afternoon sun.

He moved toward the closest hatchway. It appeared to be steel, dulled by oxidation and streaks of rust. It had exterior hinges on one side, which implied that it would open. What it didn't have, however, was any sort of handle.

He stopped before it, looking closely at it. He was not mistaken. No locks, no handles, or markings of any kind on the door opposite the hinge side. He looked to his right, along the lower deck toward the bow. He could see several of these hatches along its length. Even from where he stood, he could see that

they were no different. He turned his attention back to the door in front of him. He could feel time slipping away, as well as his resolve. He really, really wanted a drink.

Once more, anger forced action, and he knew that this lashing out was his last action before going back, his release from this aberration in his routine. He slammed his fist against what should've been the latch side of the hatch.

Bright light traced the outline of the door from initiation to completion at the same point near his fist in the blink of an eye, and a pulse of stale wind was expelled as it canted inward slightly. At the same moment, he was aware of the momentary burning sensation in his pocket again. He reached into his right pocket without taking his eyes off of the door, and drew out the only contents. He looked down at the pennies in his open palm, and then at the open gap between the door and its frame. He got it now, and his excitement once again eclipsed his other ubiquitous desire.

He pushed the door open, and stepped into the dim interior. As he crossed the threshold, he felt something that was gone before he could catalog it, maybe a little arrhythmia or something? He absently shut the door behind him with a backward shoulder push, and it was lost immediately as he surveyed his surroundings.

The walls and ceiling were a dark, polished wood, and the floor looked like concrete, which struck him as an odd choice from a boat building perspective. Every surface was coated with dust. There were no doors in this short section of hall, but it led toward a central chamber, much better lit and open, dark wood walls glowing from light somewhere above, and he could see that there was an opening and a short hall directly across that led to a hatchway just like the one he'd come through. It was obviously an entrance from the other side of the boat. Just to the left of it, there appeared to be a door set into the wood. It wasn't the aged steel like the one he'd just come through. From where he stood, it was matte black and featureless, with no discernable hinges or latch. He started to step forward, and then stopped, rocked by a realization so seismic, so foundational that he listed to the side, and had to put a hand against the cool wood surface to keep himself from falling down.

It was all gone. His buzz, which had been on the ebb anyway because of lack of fuel, was gone. But not in the way it had ever gone before. Normally after buzz came sleep, the blessed darkness that held all demons at bay. Not now. He was wide awake, and he felt good. Holy shit, he felt good. He felt *impossibly* good.

He'd struggled with his addiction all of his adult life. Almost thirty years now, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd chosen to go without, let alone what the reason for doing so might have been. Every choice based on making sure that he got enough degrees of separation each day from the difficulties, obligations, and disappointments to make them bearable. Every step guided by the flashing blue dot and contiguous blue line.

Next drink, t-minus x and counting.

It was all gone. Not just the buzz, not just the desire, but everything else, as if it had never been. It had been subtracted so totally that it brought tears to his eyes.

He did sag to the floor then, hand leaving a trail in the dust accumulation on the wall as he did so. A sob, rough and broken escaped him as he sat, turning so his back was to the wall as more tears rolled down his cheeks, to patter onto the fabric of his jeans and the dust on the concrete floor. He held the pennies in his fist, and brought his fist to his forehead as the tears fell, and he stayed like that for an undetermined amount of time until the emotion dimmed, and he felt he could function again.

He wiped the moisture from his face with his left sleeve, and got to his feet. He had no idea how much time had passed, and didn't really care. There was a deep sense of gratitude and

quiet joy at his core, and he put the pennies back in his pocket as he moved forward. He could feel the smile on his face.

"I will never leave."

He said it aloud as he passed out of the short hall into what turned out to be a long atrium, lit from above by the sun through the glass he'd seen from outside, high above. It was tiered, mirroring the exterior of the central structure of the boat. He looked left and right. The walls of the lower level were polished wood, interrupted by short hallways leading to the exterior hatches, and three of the flat black doors on the far side. He turned around, surveying the side he'd just come out from. Same symmetry, every feature mirrored on the opposite side.

He looked up, to see platforms of the same metal as the one he'd face-planted on at the rear of the boat, though these were wider, jutting out perhaps four feet on either side from the point where the central structure narrowed as it transitioned from bottom level to the next level up. There was about a ten foot gap between them abeam, and they ran the length of the atrium, their ends tied structurally into the shell constructs at each end. He could see that they provided access to the upper level hatches, and six more of the black doors, three on a side, just like below. At each end, starting from near the center of

the shell backbones, much smaller platforms protruded at intervals, stair-stepping upward as they marched away from each other until they reached the platforms above on either side. They were floating staircases, with no railings. He could see that the upper platforms had no railings, either.

Centered between the bottom steps of the opposing stairways at each end, there were sheets of the same dark glass that had nearly put him off his liquid lunch. They were the size of a double door, inset into the constructs about two feet. If they'd been in metal frames, split in the middle, with press-bar handles, he'd have assumed they were double doors. But they weren't, just a single uninterrupted pane like the ones outside, so who knew what they were.

He did a slow three-sixty, trying to get a sense of what this all meant, or was meant for. He saw then that the entire atrium was symmetrical, each side and end a mirror of each other, except for the top level, curved up and out toward the windows facing the bay. This obviously meant that he could've come in any hatchway, and would've wound up in the same place.

Beyond that logistical epiphany, nothing came immediately to mind. He had no clue what purpose this vessel served, but it obviously wasn't meant to be lived in, and certainly wasn't meant for anything that boats were typically used for.

Then something did come to him, but it had nothing to do with any of the strangeness around him. What happened when his time was up, and he didn't come back to drop off the key? He had no idea what the girl had or hadn't seen. It made sense that she'd probably kept an eye on him. Did this boat exist to her? If it did, then how long before she called the cops, and had him hauled off of it? He was well beyond simple trespass. He was in breaking and entering territory.

He examined this for a minute, pausing in the center of the atrium, his wonder on hold as he focused on his dilemma.

He had never been this level of sober. He'd never been this sober even before he'd first started drinking, because you can't really fully know sobriety until you lose it. Having travelled so far into and dwelt so long in the land of his captor, to be delivered out of it in the blink of an eye was unheard of. He'd done a few failed stints at AA. The big book said it. His two sponsors had said it. And every story shared had said it. It never went away. Recovery was a protracted unpacking, dissection, analysis, and prostration before every element of what had led to the need for it, and for those who achieved it, the beast paced back and forth outside, growing and gaining weight, waiting for the door to open again.

Nobody got it this way. Many thresholds were crossed, both uphill and down, and none of them made the problem go away.

Yet here he was. He considered the implications. He was quite sure that he would rather die here of starvation, or more likely dehydration, than pass across that threshold again, if it meant that it all came back. He supposed that maybe there was a chance that it was not a two-way event, and that he could walk out of here with his miracle intact. There was no way in hell he'd take that chance. He couldn't bear the loss.

So he was here until he was taken away, died, or something else happened. He thought about the role of the pennies. It was fairly obvious now that they were keys of some sort. Did she have some? Were the ones he'd accidentally found just reality-bending versions of spares under the door mat?

He didn't think so, but in the end it didn't matter. It would play out the way it would, but he decided he wasn't going quietly, if it came to that.

He shook off his reverie, and moved toward the black door across from where he'd come in, just because he was now closer to it than the one behind him. He stopped in front of it.

It was about six and a half feet high and three wide, and didn't go all the way down to the concrete floor, stopping six inches shy. The corners were rounded, and there was a flat metal

molding three inches wide that ran around its entire perimeter. The metal of the door was utterly non-reflective, a dullness so profound that his eyes had a hard time focusing on it. There was a vertiginous reaction to it, his mind telling him that he was tilting toward it, while his inner ear said he wasn't. It was a very odd feeling.

He looked instead at the molding surrounding the door. It was dull as well, but he could see specular highlights in it, so it was reflecting some light, and it didn't affect his balance to look at it. He followed it all the way around, looking for a seam or some interruption.

He found one, though it didn't really stand out much, and wasn't really a seam. On the right side of the door, at about shoulder height, there was a small circular patch that was slightly shinier than the rest. He reached out and touched it with his index finger. There was no topographical difference at its boundary, but the surface felt slicker within the circle. The circle was only a bit bigger than the tip of his finger.

He dropped his hand. He looked at where the plane of the door met the molding, looking at it in glances rather than a concentrated stare, to minimize the effects of looking directly at the door itself. There was no seam, just a fraction of an

inch protruding as the door transitioned to the molding. He looked back up at the little circle.

Then, within the framework of his new clarity, an intuitive spark arced from ignorance to understanding. He smiled, thinking, *duh*.

He pulled the pennies out of his pocket again. He took one and pressed it against the circle, dated side facing out.

Besides fitting perfectly within the circle, nothing happened.

He turned it over. Nothing continued to happen, and he saw that it was the eighteen ninety-four penny he held in place. A small cloud of doubt began to form, as he switched pennies, pressing the nineteen hundred one into place, date side out.

Heat flared from the copper disc, dispersing the doubt in an instant as he reflexively withdrew his finger from it. The penny remained where it was, and the face of the door began to change rather quickly.

It lost its dullness first, and then black became a rising illumination, as if someone were rotating a rheostatic control. Shapes began to coalesce from diffusion to definition as well, focus tightening as the illumination rapidly increased. Something about it reminded him of looking through the dark glass outside. This was like that, but in the right sequence,

like seeing the little lottery ball numbers drop in order, instead of them whirling about in the dispensing chamber. He found the analogy lacking, but also found he didn't care. He wasn't teaching a creative writing class.

Then the tableau through the doorway reached stasis. He was looking into a vast chamber that did not exist within the physical structure of the boat. That much was obvious. If there was a ceiling, he couldn't see it, and bounding walls were only visible in the distance, where perspective brought them into sight before they passed beyond it. The walls where they were visible seemed to glow with white light, and there was illumination from above, even though he couldn't see its source. The floor was made of what looked like metal lattice or mesh, and a faint mist wafted up from it, making its slow way into the unseen reaches above. The only visible interruptions across the vast plane of the floor were three far-off tower-like structures, which appeared to be equidistant from each other and each wall. However, the intervening mist, and the fact that there was nothing familiar or recognizable to suggest anything like scale or distance made it impossible to determine their size or how far away they were. Besides the slow drift of the mist, nothing moved as far as he could see.

He raised his left hand palm out, and slowly pushed it forward. As it passed across the threshold of the door, there was no apparent resistance, but there was a slight tickle, like a spider's web passing along his skin. His hand was suddenly warmer and damp, and he could see tiny drops of moisture forming on the hairs on the back of it.

A cautionary voice in his head spoke up, wondering whether maybe that wasn't air over there, and maybe that wasn't water vapor, and just maybe his hand was going to start to melt any second now. He drew his hand back. It felt clammy in the cool air on this side of the door, but as the seconds spooled out, nothing happened. He wiped across the back of his hand with his other index finger, and then pressed the tip to his tongue.

Besides a slight mineral taste to it, it tasted like water. He shrugged, and without thinking about it, he stepped through the door.

Ch. 4

Chain lightning

He was instantly soaked through, and it was slightly harder to breathe, but neither of these things concerned him as the full ramifications of what he had just done ripped through him.

He'd just left the boat. Not by a hatchway back into the life he'd known, but having passed through this new door, he was now definitely somewhere else.

He stumbled as panic gripped him, and he fell to one knee. The mesh of the floor was solid and unyielding, and the shock of the impact tore a gasp from him as pain exploded there. He moaned, but the pain was the least of his worries. He waited through it, waiting for it to all come back, to pour back into him like a shot of poison.

But it didn't, and he blew out a breath of relief. His sobriety remained intact. He got to his feet, rubbing his offended knee with one hand to soothe it, thinking to himself that sober didn't exactly equate to smarter.

"That was pretty stupid."

He spoke it aloud as he looked around. From this vantage point, having passed through the door, he could see that the wall on this side was the same as those he'd glimpsed through it, though up close he could see that it resembled white glass

lit from behind, though the illumination was diffuse and uniform, and he didn't think that there were individual bulbs or fluorescent tubes behind it. The wall rose into obscurity, though he could see that there was indeed an illumination source above. It was just too high to make out its source. It also ran sideways into the far distance, but where it met the walls on either side was lost in the mist, as well.

He turned his attention to the door he'd come through. It was an exact mirror of the other side, complete with the small penny-key circle on the left, instead the right.

He placed the other penny with the date side facing out, like he'd done on the other side. It flared with heat as before, and he felt a slight change in air pressure. The mist drifting slowly upward through the floor mesh near the door became agitated, and began flowing quickly through the doorway, into the interior of the boat. He felt a sluggish air flow begin to flow past him from behind, pushing through the now-open portal, accelerating slowly. He felt alarmed at the change in equilibrium, so he reached up and tried to remove the penny from its place. It was hot to the touch, and resisted his efforts to pry it loose with his fingernail, but he was able to break its contact with the metal of the door molding, and the instant he

did, air flow through the doorway ceased. The mist swirled a bit, and then began its slow trek upward again.

He grinned in relief at this and then turned around, again pocketing the penny as he looked toward the three towers that gloomed in the distance. He debated whether to set out toward them, or go back into the atrium. There were other doors, and probably other wonders behind them. Should he explore this menu item, or see what else the menu offered? In the end, his curiosity about what was in front of him made his choice. He started forward, toward the distant structures. He'd gone about thirty feet when he glanced back over his shoulder at the door.

It was gone. The rear wall extended away unbroken in its march to meet its brethren to each side. There was a jolt of panic, but he was far enough into this weirdness now that he merely reversed course, heading back toward the rear wall to see what would happen. As he got within about ten feet of it, the door blinked back into existence. He stopped, and then stepped backward away from the wall. After several steps, the door disappeared. Got it, he thought, and started to turn back toward his goal.

He stopped. He looked left, and then right, noting the distance. If he headed toward the towers, and actually got to them, there was no guarantee he'd be able to travel back to this

exact spot. He supposed he could leave the door open, since he now knew how to do that. But that didn't seem like a good idea for many reasons, not the least of which was he had no clue what he was doing.

He needed some way to mark it, but he had nothing to leave behind. Just the clothes on his back, and his keys, wallet, and....

He felt his rear wallet pocket with his hand. Ah, yes. He smiled as he extracted the broad-tip felt marker he'd slid in alongside his wallet earlier that day at work, cap jutting up above the top of the pocket.

His supervisor at the department store where he'd currently lodged in his vigorous tumble down the professional career slope was an anachronism, having spent much of his formative career time in the grocery business. The man refused to use (or more to the point, refused to let those that he supervised use) the labeling and display software available to them, and instead insisted in hand-drawn tags and displays. While he personally thought it somewhat retarded, he hadn't invested a lot of resentment against it. He'd come from an art background, and had picked up the "approved" script quickly. And, he'd seen others hired to his department end up on the loading dock instead of the floor because they couldn't.

He uncapped the marker, and then pressed it to the wall and slid it sideways. The glass-like surface took the ink perfectly, and he smelled the ink solvent as the tip squeaked against the surface. He briefly recalled his assertion that he was not here to tag, and grinned again.

He quickly outlined three successive chevrons a foot apart on glass of the wall, each about 5 feet high, set on end with the point toward the door. The outlines left empty space within about 6 inches wide. He quickly set about filling them in with hatch marks. He wasn't going to try to fill them in completely, as that would take forever and probably more ink than was still in the pen. He wanted to get going, but he needed something that would still be visible from a distance. He finished his first pass with the hatch marks, and then backed away from the door. As he passed the penny's proximity limit, the door blinked out of existence, but the marks remained. He decided that they were still a little thin, so he returned to them and thickened each outline and doubled up on the hatch marks. He backed to his former vantage point again, and decided they'd do. They appeared much darker and substantial now. He'd done what he could. If he got lost, well, he'd fall off that bridge when he got to it.

He turned and headed out toward the distant towers, his boots echoing dully off of the metal of the floor. He glanced

back from time to time, seeing his little art project dwindle in size as he moved away, until it was just a tiny smudge on the vast canvas of the wall. The tower structures began to grow in size, and details began to resolve, but very slowly. He had stopped wearing a watch a while back, finding it easier to make it through the interminable stretch of his workday if he didn't count down the minutes until his first drink, so he had no idea how long he'd been walking. The next time he looked back, he couldn't see his marks. He'd expected it, but it still made his heart stutter momentarily. He kept walking.

He slowly became aware of something inserting itself into the muffled quietness of this place, something that was less a sound and more a vibration. It rose quickly though, increasing in volume and seismic energy until he had to stop and cover his ears. He felt the hair on his body rise as static electricity seemed to charge the air.

Then, far above him, the atmosphere ignited. Blinding shafts of crooked light broke from the bounding edges of the huge space, twining and writhing in the blink of an eye from the periphery to the center, where they coalesced into three huge globes like small suns. The roar of the initial energy release fell to a deep bass hum which tickled his inner ear and his throat. The globes hung directly above the each of the three

towers, though even with his eyes mostly shut he couldn't look directly at them. A shockwave punched into him then, throwing him backward onto his ass. He picked himself up as quickly as he could, and when he looked at the towers again, there were long filaments of white energy connecting the tip of each tower to the three mini-suns, contributing a thin crackling sound to the hum now filling the world. He could see the towers begin to change color from the tips downward. Black shifted to purple, then red, orange, and finally white. He watched in fascination as the color shift reached the bottoms of the towers, and then he could see the far away floor mesh begin to discolor as well, spreading outward in concentric circles, slowly at first, but even from this distance he could see the perimeters were picking up speed.

Then he felt the first tinges of heat. Conversely, a cold ball of fear formed in his stomach, and he instantly turned and sprinted back the way he'd come.

He'd enjoyed long distance running once upon a time, before his enjoyment of it fell by the wayside, another casualty in his life's diminution. He was certainly in no great shape at this particular moment, but muscle memory took over almost at once. His stride lengthened and his pace slowed slightly. His breathing steadied, syncing with it. The adrenalin released by

his fear buffered him from the protests of unused muscles stretching and slowly loosening. He could feel the heat rising at his back, and he risked a look back.

The individual expanding circles around the towers had joined, and the edges were racing toward the walls at a terrific pace. There was an expanding front in the air just ahead of it, as the moisture in it was flash-heated into steam. And man, was it coming fast.

He turned forward, pushing his pace until it was almost a sprint again. His boots were slowing him, but no choices there. He looked toward the base of the wall in front of him, searching for his marks but not seeing them. He fought down his panic as the heat behind him continued to rise, not far from uncomfortably hot and closing fast. He could hear a hissing sound now, and imagined that was the steam front screaming toward him.

He pushed his pace a little faster and switched to breaths every stride, instead of every other, in an all out sprint now. Still no marks, and his lungs burned with an internal fire unrelated to the expanding furnace behind him.

Then he saw them, far to the left at the edge of his vision. He angled toward them, struggling to keep this pace against the buildup of lactic acid in his traumatized muscles.

His need for air, which was hot now too and getting hotter by the second, increased the burn in his lungs. He could feel a stitch forming in his side, but steeled himself against it. He suddenly really, really wanted to live, which struck him as extraordinary. He hadn't felt that way for what seemed like forever. Of course, he'd never been this close to death, either, as far as he knew.

The hissing was much louder now, but he knew a glance back would interrupt his rhythm. He didn't want to die, but more importantly, he didn't want to die by being cooked alive.

The marks still seemed so far away, as the heat on the back of his neck and the exposed parts of the back of his pumping arms passed beyond uncomfortable and pain took over. His jeans and shirt, though soaked through, still felt hot, and so did the hair on his scalp.

Then the marks seemed to rush at him, growing quickly in size. He realized that at this pace, he would cross the penny boundary so quickly that he'd probably not be able to alter his course at all as the door became visible. If he couldn't correctly judge where the door was in relation to the innermost mark ahead of time, he might slam into the frame, arresting his forward momentum and that was it. Game, set, match.

And what if he got it exactly right? Could he pass through from this side? He remembered the mist passing through the door while the penny was on the frame, and how it had stopped when he removed it.

What did it matter, really? If he couldn't pass through without the penny on the frame, he was dead. If he misjudged where the door was, he was dead. Even if he got it exactly right, and he could get through, he might still be dead, because the skin on the back of his neck and arms felt like it was beginning to blister, and his clothes felt much less damp than even a few seconds ago.

He lined himself up with where he thought the door was, even as the hissing behind him became almost deafening. His whole body burned, and his heart felt like it was frantically trying to escape from the confines of his body. He leaped as soon as the dark shape of the door registered in his brain, while his skin screamed with pain.

He got it mostly right. The outer edge of his left shoulder did catch the frame as he passed through, spinning him in midair as he passed out of the boiling heat into the relative arctic chill of the atrium. He landed awkwardly on his side, and rolled a few times before sliding to a stop near the other side of it. He happened to end up on his side facing the portal through

which he'd just come. The light pouring out of it was almost blinding, shimmery and turbulent, as the immense heat buffeted against the door's invisible barrier, but there was no sound.

He lay there for a while, chest heaving and blood roaring in his ears. He began to shake with the chill, and his exposed skin stung. The stitch in his side worsened for the first few minutes, but then began to ease, as his breathing started to slow.

Ten or fifteen minutes passed as he lay there, unmoving as the shakes receded, feeling his leg muscles stiffen and his breathing and pulse slow. His throat was raw, and the sweat on his skin felt like ice. Agitated light continued to pour through the portal across from him, lighting the atrium and displacing the light from the windows above.

He rolled onto his back, and looked up, frowning. He was lying under the walkway above, so he couldn't see most of the upper section, but he could see that there was still light coming in from the windows.

But that made no sense.

It had been late afternoon when he'd first boarded the boat, the sun already dropping toward the western horizon. He'd had his deliverance moment, and he didn't remember how much time had passed after that. Well, maybe deliverance moment wasn't the

best descriptor for what had happened to him. He remembered the movie, and decided to go with redemptive moment. Yes, much better, and much less disturbing imagery. That decided, he returned to his confusion.

He'd been in that other place for almost an hour, he guessed, which meant that it should be early evening now, at least. But the light above seemed the same as when he'd entered the atrium. What did that mean?

He was distracted from his thoughts by a dimming of the light from the open portal. He looked back at it, and saw that the bright whiteness was receding like a tide, and the floor was cooling down through the spectrum in its wake. The mesh nearest the door was already the same metallic gray it had been when he stepped through onto it, and the purple-gray wave front followed behind the other color bands as they marched away, presumably toward their origin points, the towers.

It was an amazingly fast process, and had an almost time-lapse quality to it. Mist began to drift upward again through the floor, indicating that the ambient temperature on the periphery was returning to its original state, and would follow the cooling trend toward the center. Within another ten minutes, the towers were visible again, and he could see that the mini-suns and their energy tethers were gone. Consumed to generate

the power necessary to heat the grid, he assumed. The towers cooled last, but in almost no time the view through the portal was the same as he'd first seen it.

He looked up again at the light coming in from above. No change that he could see.

Maybe time was suspended here. That would explain it.

Then he coughed out a laugh from sore lungs. Explain it. *Good one*, he thought.

His leg muscles were stiff, and any movement of them was painful. He decided to try to stretch them out, as he was going nowhere until he could get up. He started slow, tilting the toes of his boots upward toward his head, stretching his calf muscles as much as pain would allow. He then tilted them away. He alternated each movement until the pain in his calves lessened. He turned on his side, and brought his heels back toward his butt, one leg at a time, then straightened the leg again. There was more pain, but lessening as he repeated the movements. Another ten minutes of this, and he felt like he could get up.

So he did, and it hurt. He stood there on quivering legs, waiting for equilibrium. He took a few tentative steps, almost fell, and then things steadied a bit. He stretched an arm out before him and looked at it. It was lobster red, and his exposed skin still stung like a bad sunburn. Same deal with his other

arm. He put a hand to the back of his neck, and could feel tiny blisters forming there. It didn't feel life threatening, so he decided to walk from one end of the atrium to the other until walking felt normal again, and the pain of it receded. It was time to put exploration on hold while he thought about this.

He realized that his redemptive moment had colored his subsequent view of everything. In the wake of the miraculous, he'd assigned beneficence to this place and had nearly paid with his life. He knew now that the gift he'd received may have been a personal sea change, but it had been foolish to assume that there'd be no danger when he'd stepped through that doorway. He needed to re-evaluate what it meant to stay here. He'd left the boat. Yes, to another world or place or reality, whatever you wanted to call, but he'd left it and his miracle had held. Maybe he could go outside, back to his life, and maybe it would be the same. He was very thirsty now, and he could feel the beginnings of hunger. His recently renewed will to live was going to come into conflict with his fear of leaving, and possible relapse.

He stopped his trek then, looking toward the harbor side of the atrium, at the closest hall leading to one of the exterior hatches. He considered it for real then, leaving.

He found he couldn't do it. Even with his parched mouth and throat, his burned skin, and new fear of dying. It was all still

too recent, and he felt the loss of sobriety itself, if it occurred, would kill him. If not immediately, then quite soon after. Better to explore some more, he decided, and face it later.

He looked up at the windows above him. The light was the same, and from this angle near the harbor side of the atrium, he could see a sliver of sky through them, beyond the edge of the shingled roofline. There were a few clouds visible, and he focused on them and waited, watching.

They didn't move.

He watched them for what seemed like an hour, and they didn't move at all. Nothing changed up there. No gulls flew past, no shadows cast by low clouds eclipsing the still-afternoon sun appeared, no jet contrails crossed the blue sliver of sky. It was frozen.

He smiled to himself after a while, realizing what it meant beyond the simple wonder of it. While he was in here, no one would be coming to look for him. Not the girl, or anyone she might call. Because no matter how long he stayed, or even if he died here, to her and the rest of that world outside he'd only just left.

That was brilliant.

His gaze dropped, and he looked at the black doors on the upper level. He'd be smarter about the next one, he told himself. Having then committed to looking around some more, the question was whether to be systematic, or just choose another door at random.

He opted for systematic, as it seemed the better choice to underpin his new commitment to personal safety and sober judgment. He returned to the door that had nearly killed him, looking through at the deceptively quiescent scene. The mist rose on its unhurried way toward the vastness above. He was just reaching for the penny on the doorframe, when the cataclysm inside reinitiated.

He threw up his left hand to shield his eyes as the energy leapt from periphery to center again, and the three mini-suns reappeared. After several heartbeats, the tether filaments snaked downward, and connected with the tops of the towers.

He continued to hold his left hand aloft to block the light, and reached up with his right, and removed the penny from its place. The light dimmed quickly, and then disappeared as the door became opaque. The last gleam of reflection left it and it became hard to look at again.

He put the penny in his pocket with the other, and started toward the next door to his right, but then stopped. He turned

back to the door, and reached behind him. He drew out the marker he'd used earlier, and then reached up, scrawling three capital letters on the dark wood next to the penny circle on the door molding, grinning to himself.

"KFC".

Ch. 5

Fear and trepidation

He went to the next black door on his right. Standing in front of it, he looked mostly at the penny lock, to avoid looking directly at the door. He pulled the pennies out of his pocket, and pressed the nineteen hundred into place on the door frame, date out as before. Heat flared under his fingertip.

This time, the door lost its dullness, but no light brightened within the frame. It simply shifted from dull black to a glossy version, though there was some slight movement within it, and the near-field space beyond the doorway wasn't entirely black. More like a deep, dark blue. There were tiny ambient flecks drifting within it, moving across the face of the doorway, their rate of travel consistent with each other. They were whitish up close, but the ones further into the space grayed steadily out until they were lost in the black.

He frowned, because it was sort of familiar. It was like something he'd seen, but he was blanking on it for the moment.

He raised his hand, and put his index finger to the plane of the door, halting a fraction of an inch before transitioning through it. Then he pushed the tip of his finger through.

He snatched it back again as he registered pressure and pain. In the tiny segment between the recognition of pain and

the initiation of his reflex, it felt like someone had pinched his fingertip with all of their strength. He shook his hand from side to side, and then massaged the fingertip against his thumb. He felt moisture on it as he did so, and then touched the tip of his finger to his tongue.

Salty.

Comprehension came then.

Back in the days when he'd had a good marriage, a career, typically only a beer in his hand, and over two hundred television channels to choose from, he'd watched a fair amount of National Geographic. Lots of underwater exploration specials, each searching for this important thing or that historically significant other thing.

So, a doorway to the bottom of some ocean. What was the point of that?

He knew that the human body was made up of mostly water, and that water wasn't compressible. The depth issue mostly had to do with the parts of the body that contained air, which was. He had no clue how much actual air there was in his fingertip.

Still, he was standing here on this side at one atmosphere, and his finger still throbbed from its momentary exposure to the pressure on the other. It must be pretty deep. He'd read some internet threads about human crush depth after watching a diving

documentary, but everybody seemed to argue whether there really was such a thing, if you took air out of the equation.

Well, no exploring through this door. He reached up to remove the penny, when movement out in the black distance caught his eye.

A small gray disc about the size of a baseball hovered, nearly static for a moment as it floated at the edge of visibility. Then it brightened, and began to pendulum from side to side, growing in size. Within seconds, it had tripled in size, and he could see features within it.

A few more seconds, and then it was there, filling the doorway, twitching slightly from left to right, regarding him.

It was an eye, and it was impossibly huge. It was horrible, alien, and *filled* with hunger. The vertical slit of the seemingly depthless pupil ran from near the top of the doorway to the bottom, and the surrounding oval iris was a reflective silver color, streaked with diseased ochre. Only bits of the sclera were visible at its edges, milk-white, and twitching.

His legs grew weak, and his hand scrabbled vainly at the penny, his fear robbing his fingers of the strength to remove it. He stared at the eye, and was suddenly ready to leave, whatever the cost. Better to rejoin his personal declination and its inevitable conclusion than to face these unknown horrors.

For the first time since his redemptive moment, he remembered the cocooned insulation of his drunkenness, and it made sense again. This is what life unfiltered was like. It was confrontive, and paralytic.

The eye suddenly lunged upward, disappearing, a seemingly unending field of grayish flesh following it, until blackness reappeared for a moment.

Then a huge, trunk-like mass slammed across the doorway, all the more terrifying for the lack of sound or vibration. It was pale and filled the doorway from top to bottom, huge circles that looked like suction cups sliding past in a blur.

His revulsion at the clear intent of whatever it was finally galvanized him enough to grasp the penny and rip it clear of its seat.

The horror faded quickly to dullest black.

He stood there for a while, head bowed as his fear and his contemplation of it ran its course. The immediacy of his need to escape waned quickly, and its attractiveness in the face of this last experience ebbed as well.

The idea of giving up his gift, which in the moment had seemed a given, drained away. He gave both his stubble-covered cheeks two light slaps with his palms, and immediately regretted it, as the tender skin flared with pain. He waited until it

subsided, then sighed. Suck it up, he thought. You were never in any real danger this time.

The thought didn't help. He had once thought of himself as a resourceful kind of guy, but his choices and life's circumstances had leached it out of him. Because resourcefulness, he felt, relied heavily on optimism and that particular battery was dead. So dead, in fact, that it wouldn't take a charge now.

He reached for the marker again, and beside the penny lock wrote, "Property of: Davy Jones"

In the interest of his self-pledge to a systematic approach, he walked to the last door on this wall at the other end of the atrium. As he stood before it, his wonder was now tempered by his first two experiences, his thirst, and the stinging pain of his burns. He put the penny into place, and the door clarified.

He was looking at a clearing surrounded by evergreen forest. The trees were immense, like the northern California redwoods. At their feet, green ferns grew in profusion out of the carpet of needles blanketing everything. Deadfalls clogged the random avenues between the giant trunks, and mist hung unmoving in the air, once again making it hard to see very far.

The light above suggested mid-morning or mid-afternoon, but the light was diffuse, so who knew.

The clearing contained a few downed trees, and everything was covered with some sort of ground cover that looked like clover but was bright green, with much larger leaves. However, the single most important feature ran from one end of it to the other, passing into the trees on either side.

A stream flowed from left to right, and at the sight of water his throat constricted with thirst. He resisted leaping through the door. He knew it was a fallacy to assume that because the first two environments behind the doors he'd tried were dangerous, that they all would be. However, the math so far suggested caution.

So what would be a cautious approach here? Sit and watch for a while? What were the odds that whatever the thing waiting over there to kill him would choose to reveal itself if he just stood here being really, really thirsty for ten or fifteen minutes?

Oh, for crying out loud, he thought, and stepped through.

Ch. 6

Mr. Scary

The misty air was damp and cool, and the ground spongy underfoot as he left the door's spider-web demarcation behind. The sound of running water pulled at him, but he stood firm just inside the door. He scanned from left to right quickly, taking in the areas to each side that he'd not been able to see through the doorway. More of the clearing minded its own business on each side, devoid of threat or anything else, for that matter.

The one thing that did catch his attention, though, was the door behind him. Where the door into the first room (oven, power-station, whatever) had been set into the white glass of the wall, this one hung in mid-air. The only thing that defined it was the door molding that surrounded it, and the view of the atrium within it.

He pushed against the molding, to see what would happen.

Nothing happened. The molding didn't move. He pressed harder, and still nothing. He stuck his head around to see what it looked like from the back.

The frame was there, but the view through it wasn't of the atrium, it was of the clearing, as he'd seen it standing in the atrium. He stepped around so that he was facing it, and stepped through it. No spider-webs this time. It was just an empty frame

from this side. He turned around, and there was the atrium on the other side of the doorway.

Pretty cool, he thought.

He thought about a doorway just like this one, floating yet unmoving at the bottom of an ocean somewhere, and pictured leviathans brushing past it as they coursed through the deep. Then he realized that pictures, even mental ones, required light, and the only reason he'd been able to be traumatized by the eye was because the light present in the atrium had illuminated it.

It had maybe *attracted* it.

He started to move toward the stream, but stopped as he realized that the clearing was about a hundred yards wide, and was roughly circular. The door would disappear after he was ten feet away. That meant that he'd have to do some looking around on the way back if he didn't mark it. His precaution had saved his life last time, so he cast around for some way to mark the door's location, given that he had no wall to scrawl on.

He found several branch segments still attached to a nearby fallen tree. He broke off one that had a "y" junction at its end, and then one that he could break in half, yielding two sections roughly the same length as the first one.

He drove the first segment into the soft soil, with the "y" at the apex. He then laid each of the other segments at opposite oblique angles to it, forming an arrowhead several feet in front of the door. Once done, he backed away from the door until he cross the visibility threshold. Marker visible, door not. Job accomplished, he moved quickly toward the stream.

He knelt beside it, and stared into it. It was crystal clear, and the bed was aggregate gravel, with little sediment or underwater plant growth. He dipped a hand in, and brought it up, sniffing.

Smelled like water. He looked upstream, but about twenty feet past where it entered the clearing, the watercourse jogged to the right, out of his sight. He drank what was in his hand.

If water tasted like this all the time, then he would never have started drinking anything else. He didn't bother with his hand this time, he just plunged his face into the current and chugged.

The combination of cool on his skin, and the cancellation of his thirst was a tremendous relief. He made himself stop drinking before he wanted to, having read enough to know that you hit the wall well before you knew that there was one.

He straightened, and then fell onto his back into the groundcover. He stared up into the misty forest canopy, water

sloshing in his stomach, the tyranny of the urgent satisfied. Moisture from the ground began to dampen the back of his shirt and jeans, but he didn't care.

So it wouldn't be dehydration that got him. That was comforting. What to do now? He could look around a bit here. He could follow the stream, either up or downstream safely enough, keep himself from getting lost.

Maybe it would it be better to go back. He could keep cataloging what was behind all the doors. So far, there didn't seem to be any commonality to the places that the doors led to. For all he knew, they were completely random. He hadn't yet tried to reopen a door he'd been through already. Would they lead to the same place? Or would they open to another place entirely? If that were the case, if he went back now, he couldn't guarantee his water supply. Worse, his notes on the wall would be a lot less funny. For someone so recently dedicated to being systematic, he wasn't doing such a great job.

He sat up. He decided that knowing if the doors were static was pretty much the question of the hour, so he got to his feet, wishing he had some container to fill in case he was totally boned and couldn't come back here. One more glance at the rushing water, and then he headed back toward his makeshift

marker. The door blinked dutifully into existence as he neared it.

He stopped just past the marker, looking at the door and all it implied.

Here he was, in a place that promised the fulfillment of his basic needs. Water and the presence of foliage implied a food chain. He could stay here, and make whatever life this place would allow. Certainly there was risk in that, but a basic checkbox was ticked here. He had zero desire to go back to his old life, and passing back through into the atrium might take this opportunity off the table, perhaps permanently. He ran a hand across his stubbled chin, debating.

He might be sober now, he decided, but sobriety didn't negate the reality of his life's downward arc. What it did bring to the table was his ability to see each decision that had led him to where he currently was, unobscured by the veil of his drug. While he really didn't want to examine it all in detail right at the moment (or ever, really), several pivotal episodes swam to the visible surface, and he was forced to see the results without the benefit of any alcoholic justifications.

The inevitable shame and self-hatred that typically accompanied self-introspection was absent. In the end, he was where he was. Though he may have been sucker-punched by life

any number of times, it was quite possible that he may bear a modicum of responsibility for his reactions to each one. The thought was distasteful, and staying here meant a tired old guy assuming the mantle of hunter-gatherer, which as a title implied lots of effort and energy expenditure. Despite his liberation, he didn't think he'd flourish in a man vs. world setting like this.

And it had been the mystery of the boat that had freed him, hadn't it? Why abandon it to one of the avenues it offered, without exploring them all? He had already been on track toward the great gig in the sky. No change there.

He continued on toward the door. As he reached its threshold and was about to step back through into the atrium, he felt a pulse travel up through him, a non-audible vibration that caused his heart to stutter. He felt a brief increase in air pressure, but it faded quickly. He could now hear a very faint buzzing sound all around him, and his surroundings took on a slight blur.

He tried to step through the door, but his knee encountered resistance mere inches from it. He pushed forward with the flat of his hand instead, and met with the same result, and he could feel a slight vibration on his palm and fingertips. He pushed

harder. The barrier gave a little, maybe half an inch and then stopped, and no increase in pressure pushed it any farther.

He pulled his arm back in preparation of striking out at it, but his elbow met the same resistance about twelve inches behind him. He turned around, and pressed outward again. A slight give and then nothing further. It was the same to each side, and when he reached upward, it was more of the same about eighteen inches above his head.

He looked down at his boots. The ground looked unaffected by whatever this was. He knelt down, and dug his fingers into the soil. They met resistance about a half an inch down. He scooped some aside, and it came up easily in a sheet, as it had been neatly severed from the soil below it. He could see that he could probably roll the entire area within the barrier up, like a roll of sod. He let it drop and straightened.

He was trapped, no doubt about it. He waited for panic to set in, but after a few moments, it was pretty clear that he was panicked out. Too many jolts in too short a time, he guessed.

He looked out at the clearing. Nothing had changed outside the trap. He was pretty sure that was what it was. He'd armed it when he'd first come through the door, and had triggered it on his way back. That was the conclusion he drew from the empirical evidence, anyway. The sound of the stream was only slightly

muffled, and there was that vague blur through the barrier, like looking through old glass. The fact that he could hear the burbling water seemed to indicate that the barrier was air permeable, so he didn't think he needed to worry about running out of it. He once again drew out the marker and uncapped it. He tried to draw a line on the barrier, but though the marker tip met resistance there was no mark as he slid it sideways. He capped it and put it back in his pocket.

Well, shit. Now what?

He looked out at the clearing, studying it closely. Traps implied someone or something to set them. The technology at play here was beyond anything he'd heard of, but so was everything else about this adventure he was on. The question was, would whomever or whatever set this particular trap know it had been sprung?

Then he saw it. It was the thing that hadn't been there before.

Under the downed tree near where he'd broken off the branches for his door marker, a small green light pulsed on and off in the shadow of its rotting bulk. He watched it grow and fade, and felt sure now that his captor had received the notification. The question now was, how long would it be until they came to complete the purpose this trap was for. He didn't

think it was food, which was a bit of a relief. The trap was placed too precisely in front of the door to be anything but related to the door's purpose. There had been no footsteps in the dust covering the concrete floor of the atrium, except those he'd made himself, so if something was relying on this trap for food, they obviously didn't need to eat very often. No, it wasn't food. It was meant to trap anyone who entered this world through the door, and then tried to leave again. Beyond that immediate knowledge, he couldn't guess, and didn't bother to.

He investigated making himself comfortable, since he wasn't going anywhere until he was released to whatever fate came next. He found that he could sit with his back to the doorway if he crossed his legs in front of him. The slight give in the barrier made for surprisingly comfortable back support. So he just sat, looking out at the clearing and waiting for what would come next.

He didn't have to wait long. Though when his captor did stride into the clearing from one of the clogged avenues between the trees maybe fifteen minutes later, he wished it had been longer. Oh, yes. He wished it had been infinitely longer. Long enough for him to have passed, his body rotted to dust, and the dust absorbed into the scant topsoil below him. He may have been

low on panic, but there was plenty of fear still available, and he felt like it downloaded into him all at once.

The being moving toward him on the other side of the stream was a horror. It was like enough in form to a human to make all the ways in which it wasn't human that much more brutally terrifying. It was bipedal, with arms and legs, but taller and broader. It had a head, and hands and feet. There were eyes and a mouth. And they were all wrong in a way that delved the depths of the meaning of the word, and found it wanting.

The head and face were saurian, but not in a "hey, look, a lizard" way. The features suggested it, but didn't bear full witness to it. The eyes were a luminous yellow, with vertical irises that brought the leviathan to mind, just as black and depthless. They were oversized, and the nose was more Voldemort than protrusion. The mouth was lipless and wide, a large crescent across the huge jaw, closed for now. Its edges were upturned, as though in a grin.

The body was wrapped in what looked like overlapping strips of reflective cloth, and the close-fit fabric gave testament to the power of the form it contained. Even from where he sat, he could see that it would be half again as tall as he was, were he standing. Its feet were bare and wide, with curved talons at the end of four blunt toes, visible as it leapt easily across the

stream to this side. The movement was graceful and quick, and transitioned smoothly back into the unhurried pace of before.

Its skin was a pale gray, with dark, bruise-like splotches that morphed and moved at random, meandering along its visible surface like thunderheads through a gray sky.

The hands were the most human part of it, the monochromatic lava lamp skin aside. They were oversized, but each had four fingers, a thumb, and regular nails like his. They were empty.

He didn't bother to get up as it drew near, not sure he could even if he tried. Fear oozed out his pores, and he didn't even try to fight it back. The best he could do was school his features, hoping he didn't look as sickly terrified as he felt.

The creature stopped about six feet shy of the barrier against which his knees were pressed. It regarded him with those alien eyes. They were so strange and impossible to read that he could draw no conclusions about its intent. He waited as the moment spun out. Then it spoke, and that was so much worse.

Ch. 7

Hope leaves

"Lost, Man?"

The words were perfectly understandable, but the voice that intonated them brought him as close to being utterly undone as he'd ever come. Faint notes drifting above and below writhed around the words. It reminded him of yet another National Geographic special, this one about Mongolian throat singing, where a singer would be singing multiple notes at intervals simultaneously. The premise had interested him, but the vocal music had freaked him out a little, because it had been so...other. This, however, made that sound like a pop tune. He could feel his hands begin to shake. He was voiceless, and just stared up at the figure before him. Seconds passed.

"Have you nothing to say?"

From his vantage point below, he could see two rows of sharp teeth lined the open mouth, like a shark. All he could think was, *should've left. I had the chance, and I didn't, and now this.* He closed his eyes, and bowed his head, the shaking of his hands worsening as a desolation of fear rolled through him. He hoped that it would be enough to shut him down, to turn off his mind and slide him down into someplace where this could not reach him. But of course, it didn't.

The next words were much nearer, and an instinct of self-preservation snapped his eyes open and his head up. The creature had stepped forward and knelt to one knee, the yellow eyes not far from his own, black pupils narrowed to ebony slits. The terrible movement within its skin had a hypnotic quality to it, again evoking a reptilian association.

"You fear me."

It was a statement without emphasis. He stared at the eyes for an instant without a response, and then nodded once, not breaking eye contact.

There came a broadening of the mouth, and an increase in the upturn at the edges. That was clear enough, human enough. It was a smile. Instead of standing, the creature lowered the other knee, and settled back on its heels, crossing its arms across its chest. The movement was a confusing de-escalation, a softening of posture that didn't follow. He would have expected it to rise to its full height after that sort of statement, to validate its position over him. It considered him for almost a minute before it spoke again in that awful voice.

"You are right to, of course. Your kind and mine have always been at odds, but now..."

It drew in a hitch of a breath, then chuckled deep in its chest. The sound was a guttural articulation not of humor, but animosity. The eyes said so.

"Now, after all this time, here you are."

The chemicals released into his body by his fear were passing maximum effectiveness, and their influence was beginning to lessen. The paralysis he'd felt had begun to loosen, though all his muscles felt flaccid, and palsied. He didn't drop his gaze, though he very much wanted to.

"What are you?" He asked in a voice that was rough with a deepest desire to be anywhere, even back in his own world outside the umbrella of the boat, than here. He didn't even consider content, it's just what came out. To speak at all was a victory.

"That is an irrelevant question. A much better question would be, what now?"

Granted, they weren't far into this conversation, but this assertion sounded different than anything that had come before. The ghostly intervals above and below the main note of the spoken words were slightly different. How they vibrated against the main note was different. It reminded him of something, but it was gone before he could try to grab it. Fine, he thought. He had nothing better.

"What now?"

"Now, Man, you open the door."

The response came unbidden to his lips, complete with thumb raised over his shoulder, pointing backward.

"You mean *this* door?"

"I see no other."

Something was gaining traction deep down inside him, but it was so deep he couldn't yet tell what it was.

"Can't you open it?"

"I would think it apparent, Man, that if that were so, you would still be blissfully ignorant of me." The response was measured, and contained nothing of the previous atonality. In fact, he would have expected some pushback, given the now established hierarchy. He spontaneously decided to explore that.

"And if I refuse?"

"That is not an option available to you."

"Are you sure?"

This did get a pause before the response came, but it when it came, it was even and measured.

"I have contemplated what I know of man for long and long, and an even deeper contemplation was inevitable during my time here. Now, that time is at an end. I do not speak lightly."

He didn't understand. But was there something in the statement? Was there an implication? Because, that thing growing in him had become visible to him now. It was anger tapping on the shoulder of his fear now. He'd escaped one demon, and now here was its replacement. The shaking in his hands lessened.

"You're trapped here, then."

The creature shrugged, and again the humanity of the gesture was at odds with its alien aspect.

"Until now."

"What happens to me if I open the door for you?"

The answer was not what he'd expected, and his anger stepped back as fear stood up again.

"You will see your end, Man. My enmity demanded it even before your predecessor closed that door against me. Now, it is a fire that will lay waste to your world, and any that your kind has strayed into. There can be no other outcome."

He waited for a few seconds before answering, trying not to let the flood pull him under. He hoped he didn't sound as heart-sick as he felt. He had to swallow twice just to be able to speak.

"That's not a lot of incentive."

"This is not a transaction. It is an inevitability. You will serve. I am long familiar with what *motivates* you, Man."

He looked away then, not able to bear the intent of the words or the gaze. He found himself staring at the winking green light off to the left, under the fallen tree trunk. He thought about the way he'd been caught. The light was telling him something important with each pulse. He did what he could to create a small space in his mind not flooded by fear, but it was like trying to remove ambient humidity from the air with just your hands. He needed a catalyst, something cathartic that would clear his head for a moment.

This was familiar to him, though it typically wasn't fear washing through him. Any drunk knows that place where the raft of rational thought ships so low into the waters of inebriation that making a conscious decision is nearly impossible. If the decision is important enough, and that importance can still be recognized, then action must be taken to beat back the tide. This required pain, and adrenalin by proxy.

He put his right index knuckle in his mouth and bit down as hard as he could. He could taste blood as pain seared like lightning up his arm and slammed into his head. A mental gear engaged, and he was able to get what the light was telling him.

I am a tool. Fade. I am a tool. Fade. His tool. Fade.

That was it.

He took his bloodied finger out of his mouth, and looked back into those alien eyes. They seemed wider, and the creature had sat back a little farther, but it was impossible to tell what this signified.

"Why can't you open the door?"

The answer came behind what could have been a slight hesitation, or it could've just been consideration.

"I do not have the key."

Again, he heard that difference in the relationship between the ghost intervals and the words, but it was less evident than last time. Nevertheless, this time the throbbing of his finger gave his higher brain a sliver of opportunity to make the connection that he'd not been able to before.

Long ago, in a galaxy far, far, away, he had been a child of great promise. In grade school, he had impressed his friends and not a few cute girls with his ability to write, or shoot a basketball, or pitch pennies with either hand with equal accuracy. He had particularly impressed two different music teachers spanning both elementary and middle school with his ability to play both right and left handed guitar versions of the same song, once he'd learned it. But the thing that had seemed to impress both of them the most was his ability to play

back any note he heard without error. He was familiar with guitar and piano, as they'd both been around the house his entire childhood, so if he heard any tonal sound, he could sound it on either instrument, though the guitar was easier because he could bend the strings. The piano could only get as close as the closest note. Perfect pitch, they'd called it, saying it was rare.

That's what he was hearing. It was dissonance.

Each time the creature spoke, he could hear the intervals above and below, in harmony or at perfect intervals with the main note of its speech. They coiled and writhed, switching intervals, but they always maintained the correct distance from the center and in doing so complemented and supported it.

Except the times they didn't, which were the times that he could hear them at odds.

You big fat liar, he thought. Several intuitive leaps bookended themselves, and he arrived at a conclusion. *It wouldn't matter if you had one, because you can't use it.*

He fished in his pocket, and brought out the remaining penny. He offered it up.

"Here you go."

The creature regarded him in silence for the longest pause so far in their short relationship. When it did speak, there was no dissonance.

"That is a poor choice, even for you. Your weakness is written all over you. Open the door, Man."

"Nope. You do it."

Its response was instant. The creature made a curt gesture with one of its hands, and he felt the barrier he was currently resting his back against disappear. His head and torso fell backward through the door, the raised door frame jabbing painfully against his lower spine as he fell across it. He had only a moment to smell the dust of the atrium before he felt himself pulled back into the clearing by one ankle, the door frame painfully scraping its way up his back in an eye-blink. Then he was airborne.

He flew in a flat spin across the clearing, the misty sky and treetops circling above. He cleared the stream, but he could only tell this by the sound of rushing water passing by behind, and below him. And then he crashed down into the bright green groundcover and evergreen needles. He tumbled like a ragdoll several times over until coming to rest, once again facing back the way he'd come. Then he got to witness first-hand just how fast his new demon was.

It covered the space from throw to landing, approximately seventy feet, in what seemed an impossibly short time. It was like time-lapse, but with motion blur. It stopped abruptly, with a cessation of motion that seemed to thumb its nose at the idea of inertia. It towered over him, looking down into his upturned face from its full height. There was no indication of exertion in face or chest, and its features were no different than they had been before. He would have expected some visible signs of rage or venomous anger, but its features looked as before, that slight smile at the edges of its impossibly wide mouth below the yellow gaze.

"You and I have already covered this ground. You will open the door."

He coughed, and acted like he was trying to sit up, and then lay back again. He consulted his clenched fists, and the penny was still in his right hand. He raised it and opened his hand, holding the palm with the penny parallel to the ground, offering it up.

"Why not cut out the middleman? I assure you, I'm not very helpful. Just ask my wife."

The creature stared down at him, no visible evidence of internal musing.

"It is obvious you have no fear of death, Man." It said, impassive. "But many things are worse, particularly when death is denied you." It was all harmony and writhing accord. No lies here.

"You can't use it." He said, closing his fist around the penny once more, and lowering his arm to rest on the ground, staring up at that awful face. He relaxed his whole body, willing all tension away, so that when the moment came, there'd be no warning. He waited for the response, as the creature focused more tightly on his stubbled face, the tether point for communication. He wasn't disappointed. The creature leaned in a bit, as if to let its words fall like acid directly onto his resistance.

"You will--."

He exploded into motion. He jerked his head toward the door, which wasn't visible given their distance from it now, and widened his eyes in mock shock.

"What the f--"

The creature obliged, flinching and turning impossibly fast toward the invisible door. He could see it check its movement with the same speed, and reverse motion, gaze tracking back now.

He had thrown up the hand not holding the penny a millisecond after he'd spoken, releasing the handful of soil,

evergreen needles, and undergrowth he'd grasped the instant before into the air above. As he released that payload, he threw himself onto his side, bringing his other hand around toward the creature's nearest ankle. Above, though he couldn't see it, his ruse had worked. Instead of focusing directly back onto him, the expanding debris in the air had caught its attention for the briefest of moments, giving his other arm the time needed to complete its arc. At the last moment, he opened his hand, the penny held into his palm by inertia alone as it slapped against the rock hardness of the creature's lower shin.

The detonation was immense, but silent, all vibration and flash. The energy released should have torn his arm off and hurled him backward, reducing him to bone fragments encased in a human shaped envelope. But all of the energy was directed away from the penny. He felt a deep hum of vibration, but the clench of his arm was enough to keep his hand in place, and he made himself keep his eyes open against a flash of white light.

The creature, however, got all of it.

The blast was an exercise in ragdoll physics. It was localized to the one leg, propelling it up and away. The other followed as its form reached a sort of front-to-back version of the splits, and the torso and head were drawn downward as the legs were blown forcibly upward, the body rotating on its center

axis. It was fortunate that the rotation was skewed, as the force had been applied to one leg, not both. If it had, then the demon's head would have slammed directly down into his midsection, crushing and rupturing it.

But, because of the skew, he watched the alien face pass above his as it spiraled toward the ground. There was a moment as their eyes met, and he saw exactly what he expected, for once. He heaved himself up, and felt a brush across his scalp as the creature's outstretched hand passed above him on its downward arc. He felt the impact as it face-planted into the loam, and he scrambled into motion toward the other side of the clearing, sprinting as soon as he established stride.

He reached the stream, and was through it in three strides, wetting the lower half of his legs. His boots took on water, though, and he knew that would slow him. He thought it was interesting that his new demon had ignored his door marker. Bad choice, he thought as he put everything he had into forward motion. He held the hand with the penny close against his stomach, the other pistoning up and down as he ran, waiting for what he knew was coming.

It came farther from the marker than he'd hoped. He was still five feet from it when he felt a heavy impact against his upper spine mid-stride, driving him toward his knees. He used

his forward leg to counteract the downward motion, pushing upward into a forward leap. As he sailed forward, he passed the marker, and the door blinked into view. He thrust out with the hand holding the penny, and released it. He watched the penny arc through the intervening distance, and then pass through the doorway into the atrium. The door instantly disappeared, and he crashed to the ground yet again, rolling to an eventual stop on his back.

The creature was instantly there on its knees, looming over him. The intent that he'd seen moments before was there as well. He waited, *knowing* he was looking at his end. He found he had a sense of anticipation again. The moment hung there.

Then the alien eyes cleared, and it stood, taking a step back. It looked down at him, and then turned away, and walked off into a corridor between the trees.

The alien voice wafted back to him, no less awful for the growing distance.

"And now *your* deep contemplation begins, Man."

Ch. 8

Through her eyes

She watched him go, pushing out through the office doors, and crossing the short distance to the dock gate. There was no hesitation in him, and he didn't look back as he unlocked the gate and passed through toward the occupied slips beyond.

She was still not sure why she'd broken her rule. Well, not hers, really, but her uncle's. No one allowed on the docks that wasn't supposed to be there. One rule amongst a litany of others which he'd made sure she could recite from age eleven on, whenever prompted to do so, and he'd prompted a lot.

There it was again, flooding into her mind like a caustic spill. The loss poured across every thought, draining away color and etching more emptiness into the spaces between each one. Three months was no distance from it at all. She watched the man turn left at the first junction, heading out toward the larger boats. He dissolved into prismatic fragments as tears came yet again, and she brushed them angrily away in frustration, losing sight of him as she pawed at her eyes.

Life is tough, but so are you was another of his rules, and it was her mantra now. At each brush against his loss, the litany had stood firm, like Uncle Brick had known just the sort of talisman that would shield her from being torn apart by his

passing. Just as he had shielded her from the loss of her parents, dragging her kicking and screaming from the consuming maw of grief into the itemized world order of one Bailey "Brick" Harrelson.

She pushed it away, unwilling to relive it yet again. She mentally recited rules drawn at random from the litany until the pain receded. She focused again on the view in front of her looking out onto the dock, searching for the man again, but he had passed beyond the view the forward-facing windows and doors provided. She would need to get up from the desk, and go behind the counter to the window at the end of the office to see him again. She glanced down at the psych essay she'd been composing on the tablet in front of her before he'd come in, and the last line she'd written leapt out, as though it meant something more than the babble necessary to get a grade.

"Causal chains are precipitated by an event, and each link reflects the event, though each link is a logical migration away from that event."

Blah, blah.

She got up, and walked back along the counter toward the window at the end of it. As she passed the open door to her uncle's office, she heard something. There was a muffled buzzing sound, then silence, and then the buzzing again. One second on,

one second off, coming from inside. It wasn't a sound she had ever heard before, and that confused her, because she had spent a significant portion of her childhood in this building, and this office in particular. She hesitated, her trip to the window forgotten for the moment, and stepped instead into the office.

It was fairly large, taking up the rear corner of the mod, and had two large windows. One looked out toward the edge of the marina and the bay, and the other was on the back wall, giving a view of the gas pumps and utility shed at the end of this leg of the docks. Centered in the room was her uncle's ancient desk, huge and battered but beautifully polished, with a large leather inlay across the top. His old, tired leather executive chair was tucked into the foot well, inside back against the worn edge where uncle Brick had spent so much time. It didn't look right, so tidy, with no stacks of papers and invoices everywhere, but she pushed that away before it got a hold, and focused on the sound.

It was coming from the desk, she could tell that, but it still had a muffled quality to it, as though it was sounding *inside* the desk. She went around to the other side of it, and pulled the chair out of the way.

There were three drawers across the front, with ornate scrollwork above and below. Her eyes were drawn to a circular

section of the design-work above the drawer on the right. The circular section repeated in the design every few inches across the face of the desk, but the one she stared at, which had always appeared to be the same as every other one obviously wasn't. Instead of wood, it must have been dark glass, because a red light shone behind it in concert with the muffled buzzing sound. She sat slowly down in the chair, and stared at it, watching it light and fade. Then she reached out with her index finger, and pressed her fingertip against it.

There was a distinct click, and the scrollwork section above the drawer popped out, pushing her finger back and extending about an inch from its original position, as if it had been spring-loaded. At the same moment, the buzzer cut off mid-buzz, and the glass circle no longer lit. She grasped the section and pulled, and section extended outward. It had the shape and profile of a cutting board, or maybe it had been an additional writing surface, meant to be cleverly stowed out of sight when not in use. However, the center of it had been thinned, or hollowed out, creating a shallow tray. In the tray was an envelope, and a small white satin bag with a drawstring. Her name was scrawled on the envelope in her uncle's spidery script.

This really didn't seem fair. She thought she'd gotten through all the paperwork, the dealing with the legal stuff, the dispersion and dispensation of his personal effects. She'd dutifully gone through the boxes, drawers, and all the other places where things accumulate over a lifetime. She had waded through all those reminders of what was now gone, and this didn't seem fair at all. So she put her head down on her outstretched arm on the desk, and cried for a while.

Eventually, she sat up, and wiped her face on the hem of her shirt. She had given up on makeup except when she went to classes, so the cloth came away damp, but without foundation or eyeliner to make laundry more difficult later. She looked at the envelope for a minute or two longer, and then picked it up, and slid her finger across the top, ripping it open.

There was a single sheet inside, her uncle's words written single-spaced and close together.

"Sophia.

If you are reading this, then I am gone and you are once again alone in the world. I know that sounds trite, but it really is the only way to begin a letter like this. I am sorry to have left you before you were ready to make your own way. I had hoped you would have found some happiness out there, something that drew you away to new dreams and experience. Then

there would be no reason for this letter to remain here, and my care of this place would've passed to someone else, rather than you.

I wish I could have told you about what I ask you to do now. I debated at several points during your teen years about trying to tell you, so you'd at least have been aware of it before now. But, in the end, I only know what little I've been shown, and I had no understanding to give you, and still don't. I am convinced that it is important, though, so I write this.

If you find this, take the bag with the coins to slip fourteen. Stand by the edge of the dock nearest the utility box. You will see then, and see the way on. I ask you to board. You can enter any of the lower deck hatches, just press against them with the bag in your hand. In the atrium, go to the dark glass panel at the bow end. Facing the bay, the bow is to the left. Bow end, NOT the stern. Look up if you lose orientation. The windows above face the bay. Facing the glass panel (best not to look directly at it), there is a small circle on the wall to the right at eye height. Place the half-dollar into it.

I don't know what happens then. I hope something good. Barring that, something not awful. I never had cause to place it there.

I could try to describe what you will see if you choose to do what I've asked, but it didn't help me, and I don't think it will help you. You will work your way through it because you are strong.

I love you, niece. You have been my greatest blessing since your aunt's passing. A large part of me hopes that you will have sold everything and departed after I have gone, and that this falls to someone else. Or perhaps no one else. Sometimes I have been of the opinion that the world should tend to itself.

Brick.

p.s. - The penny will open the black doors, but you can't go through. At least, that's what my predecessor told me. I'd forgotten about that."

Well. Wasn't that just the most bizarre shit ever. Slip fourteen? Slip fourteen was empty, and had been since she'd come to live with her uncle. As far she knew, it had been empty since the marina was built. She had asked him a few times about it, but he'd always just said that one hundred percent occupancy was bad for business. That it discouraged people with its exclusivity. She hadn't cared enough to press him before, and now, well, he wasn't here to press. And his predecessor? What did that mean?

She picked up the bag and felt two coins slide and clink together within the soft fabric, one large and the other smaller.

She loosened the drawstring, and dumped them out into the palm of her hand. There was a penny, and a half-dollar, as described in the letter. Neither was in great shape, and she turned each over in her palm. The half-dollar was tarnished, and was dated eighteen ninety-six, below a guy with leaf hat. The penny was an indian-head, dated nineteen hundred. She shrugged, and put them both back in the bag, and tightened the drawstring. Old coins interested her almost as much as rebuilding transmissions, which itself was not at all.

She stood up with the letter in one hand, and the coin-bag in the other. She was confused, and her confusion was chaffing against her sorrow, creating the warmth of irritation. Why this? Why now? Why were her uncle's now-last words to her so strange and confusing? And what was the deal with the alarm buzzer thingy?

Then she remembered the man. How he'd walked with purpose and intent, and had made the first left turn with no hesitation. How he'd walked straight ahead until he'd passed out of her sight, looking neither right nor left. Just straight ahead.

Toward slip fourteen.

"Dammit."

Ch. 9

Burden

He waited, lying there motionless as bruised areas of flesh and over-stressed or injured muscles made their various complaints. His mind was less consumed by that than the circumstance of the new demon's departure. He had seen his destruction, had known its inevitability, and yet it had simply walked away at the end. For some reason, this caused a sort of creeping paralysis in him, as though it would return if he moved, or stretched, or turned his head. Like he was only avoiding it by playing dead, despite what it had said as it departed.

It made no sense, no sense at all. But he couldn't break it. He lay there for at least half an hour, unmoving, replaying the last hour over and over in his head and unable to move. And then his right calf muscle spasmed, probably for no reason other than having been put to more strenuous use in the past couple of hours than the whole previous year, and the spell was broken. The shakes came then, his whole body wracked with a trembling palsy that didn't subside for several minutes.

Then he was ok. He got to his feet, feeling weak and sore, but his internal crisis had passed. He walked slowly back to the stream, and knelt before it again. This time he scooped water

into his mouth, slowly and carefully, and watched the forest in front of him. There was no movement, and no sounds beyond the muted ambience of mist, tree, and soil.

He went then to the downed log, and knelt there instead, looking into the shadows beneath for the device he'd seen earlier. It sat there in the gloom, a small metal box with a glass aperture on the front, now dark and lifeless with no rat currently in the trap. He reached slowly in toward it. Just a few inches shy, he met resistance that he was now familiar with. It had a barrier of its own, it seemed. *Asshole*, he thought, even though it made perfect sense. He briefly considered going back to the streambed to try to find a large, sharp rock. He could attack the barrier. He could attack the log, tear it apart to get to the device, and hammer it into little alien bits.

But, given the encompassing effectiveness of the trap he'd been in, he knew it was a stupid and, more importantly, wasteful use of his remaining energy. He was sore, tired, getting hungry, and was stuck in a somewhere very far from home, with no way to get back. The whole hunter-gatherer thing he'd considered earlier that had seemed like a lack-luster option even then now seemed like lunacy. It was a lunacy that he may not be able to escape.

He sat, turning his back to the hollow with the device, and using the decomposing wood above it as back support, stretching his tired legs out before him. He knew he needed to figure something out, make some decisions, but he felt like he was so far out of his depth that any choice he made would be a blind one.

He pondered his conclusion about how time didn't pass inside the atrium, at least in relation to his world, anyway. How no one would ever come to investigate where he'd gone, because it would always be as if he had just left.

How long had that thing been here? It had mentioned a long confinement, but *how* long? And what did it mean by "your predecessor"?

That one came without much effort.

It had referred to "your kind", and had said that "your predecessor" had shut the door against it.

So men had been here before. Someone had trapped it here.

Then he'd showed up here. Well *done*, him.

It implied that time did pass in the atrium, as it related to time outside the boat, or he'd have never gotten here. It was just very slow, compared to *his* outside.

So, how dead would he be by the time someone else turned up here? Rotting dead? Skeleton dead? Dust dead, or no trace dead?

He didn't suppose it mattered, at least to him. A minute out there could be ten years here, or much longer than that.

He was so screwed. It had been nothing but downhill since the initial peak of his redemptive moment. He was debating whether it had been worth it, given what he'd now lost against the gain of sobriety, when the door appeared again, and the girl from the office stepped through it, staring directly at him. Her face was flushed with anger, and her body language screamed forward motion.

"*What the--*" She started to yell at him, and began to take a step forward. He screamed at her in instant response, shoving both palms out and forward, as he leaned forward and tried to get his feet under him without lowering his hands.

"*Stop! Don't move!*"

The obvious desperation in his voice stopped her, and her anger was replaced by confusion. He could see that this wasn't a response she had expected.

He dropped one hand to the ground, to help lever himself onto his feet, but didn't lower the other, and the "stay still" implied in his extended palm seemed to work. She returned her raised foot to the ground without stepping forward. He continued on, before she had a chance to say anything.

"You're standing on a trap. If you move, neither of us will be able to get back, and you don't want to meet what's waiting on this side. Please, please, don't move. *Please.*" Even he could hear the plaintive entreaty in his raspy voice.

"But what--"

He waved her off, speaking over her question.

"No time. I'll tell you everything, but please...can you step back through?"

She turned to her left, and extended her arm back through the door with no problem, looking at him and raising her eyebrows, as if it was a stupid question. His heart leapt at the sight, but then he looked back down behind him, remembering the device. No light. But then there was, a green glow rising quickly.

He whirled and sprinted toward her, knowing he was probably too late already. In response to his rush, the girl pulled her arm out of the doorway, fear blossoming on her face as she brought her hands up toward him in a warding gesture. He saw her, the door, and the space in front of it dim and blur as the barrier appeared, but he was in full stride now, and couldn't slow down fast enough. His bid to carry her bodily back through the door met the impenetrable resistance of the barrier, and he bounced backward, the shock knocking the wind out of his lungs

as he heard a muffled yip of fear from the girl. He crashed backwards onto the clearing floor, and his brief hope vanished as he came to rest. What had seemed bad before now became exponentially worse. Now he'd involved someone else. He struggled to regain his breath as he got to his feet again.

His thoughts were a whirlwind, spun by too much input. How and why was she here? How long would it take for the creature to return? What to do when it did? Fear, anger, frustration, and helplessness expanded to critical mass, and as his lungs found enough air again, he clenched his fists and screamed in primal rage at the mist-laden sky.

Strangely enough, it helped. It felt like all the excess emotion that he couldn't contain was carried along with his cry, out of his mouth and into the absorptive surfaces of the forest, where it dispersed with almost no echo. He kept looking up for a moment longer.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Her voice was muffled by the barrier, but understandable. He looked over at her. Her anger was resurfacing, swimming up through her previous fear at his actions. And why not? How could she know? He must seem schizophrenic to her, telling her to stay still, and then charging at her. It didn't matter. He felt time pressing in on

him, and he needed to see how bad the situation was before *it* showed up.

"I'm sorry. I was trying to get us out before the trap was sprung. I failed. Do you have a penny?" His voice was raspier than usual, given his vocal pyrotechnics moments before, but his tone was calm, much calmer than he'd expected.

She stared at him.

"Do I have a *penny*? Do I have a penny. Ok, putting aside the fact that that is a non sequitur of epic proportions, yes, I have a penny. Actually, I have *two pennies*." Her voice was rising in volume and intensity as she spoke. "I brought one, and I found one on the floor in there." She motioned behind her at the door with one hand, and misjudged how much room she had. Her hand banged against the barrier, and her frown deepened to a scowl. She brought her hand back around and cradled it in her other hand, even angrier now.

His heart fell into his stomach as she continued. He put a hand on his forehead, fear rising quickly.

"I also have a half-dollar. So now that we've established how much *spare change* I have, maybe you could tell me *why* you're here, what the *hell* is going on, and *what's* the deal with the invisible boat, because you are sure as shit not here to *BUY IT!*"

The last came out as a tremulous scream, and her eyes were wild. He could see that there was more going on in them that even this parody of a situation called for. But he didn't have time to figure out what. He put out his hands, palms down this time, in the universal "calm down" gesture. It had never worked with his wife, and it didn't work here, either.

"Don't shush me, you shit-head! What *is* all this? Why are you here? God, I was so stupid to let you--." His frustration got the better of him, then. They did not have time for this.

"Enough! *Stop!*" He barked at her, and then continued. "I know you want answers. I don't have any. There is something coming, and it's not about getting your questions answered now, anyway. It's about whether you live or die."

"Wait, *what?*"

He soldiered on, trying to get it all out somehow, trying to at least warn her of what was coming. He felt like his words were tumbling over each other to get out as fast as they could.

"I came here for water. That's all. But there was something already here, waiting." He indicated the barrier around her. "It caught me the same way. Well, almost.

It says it's going to destroy all of us, all of "our kind", it said. I'm telling you, it *believes* that it can."

She just stared at him again, incomprehension evident, but certainly not the only thing going on there. He forged ahead, committed to getting as much out as he could until...well, until the window closed.

"Forget horror movies, this things leaves the scariest ones so far behind they might as well be kid shows on PBS." He pointed behind her again. She didn't bother took look around.

"The penny you picked up in there. That's the one that opens the door. That's why I got *rid* of it. But you brought it *back*. And now it's coming, it's the worst thing I have ever seen, and I don't know how to stop it again."

He knew his fear was a contagion, and he could see that she'd contracted it, now. The transmission was subconscious, and he could see it swallowing her other conflicts whole. There was an almost physical drawing inward, a tidal change in her expression that made him feel even worse.

"What do I do?"

Her voice was plaintive and empty. Everything else in her was gone now, and that was frightening, but somehow familiar. He made the connection without any effort, and certainly no surprise. She was broken, just like him. Not in the same way, he could tell, but it didn't matter. So he decided to do whatever he could do to help her, no matter what. He was so near done

already, and she wouldn't be here now if not for him, so why not?

"Separate the coins you have. Bury them below your feet in different locations. The soil under you lifts up like a floor mat. That's all I--."

"That will help neither of you, Man. I will not be confined any longer."

He turned to face the creature as it walked out of the woods, not surprised, but frustrated he'd not had more time to come up with something, anything. He heard the girl's muffled whisper behind him.

"Ohh. Oh, no. Please, no."

He took several steps forward to meet it, desperately trying to come up with some sort of plan. The only outcome he could see wasn't gain. It was delay. He would sacrifice himself on the point of the oncoming sword, and the girl would get to witness the obliteration of the only thing standing between her and this monstrosity. Then, she would be the only thing.

That made him really, *really* mad.

He broke into a run, and then a sprint, only dimly registering the complaint of appalled leg muscles, consumed by anger and hatred toward this abomination striding toward him, its strides quickening in response to his own forward rush,

carrying with it the potential destruction of this girl, this girl that was only here because he was.

There really wasn't any conscious inventory, no assessment of raw materials that might be pressed into service. His body just seemed to know what needed to be done. He reached behind with both hands as he ran, and he drew out the marker from his wallet pocket, uncapping it with his right hand after passing it to his left. He let the cap fall behind as he and the creature approached their point of intercept. He held the hand with the marker down, payload hidden behind it, and lead with his right as he leapt upward toward its face, hand clawed in a strike toward the demon's left eye.

Its parry was effortless, and effective, brushing aside his attack with minimal effort, and deflecting the impetus of his attack to the outside. But in doing so, it accelerated his concurrent attack with the hand holding the marker as he pivoted inward. He held it tip forward as it whipped in toward the creature's right eye.

It was so close, and it did gain time, but it wasn't the gore-fest he'd hoped for. He saw the marker tip impact the flesh at the edge of the creature's eye-socket, and then disappear as the marker jogged aside into the space between the eyeball and the socket wall. The creature flinched away, and he knew that

he'd dealt some damage, but the demon was blindingly fast, and he felt himself bludgeoned aside as the creature reversed its first parry, catching him along his rib-cage. He felt his ribs flex inward from the blow, but he didn't feel any snap as he flew through the air yet again, having lost track of how many times he'd been airborne already today. This time, he did try to orient his body before impact, and managed to tuck into a roll. Against all odds, he was able to come up out of it after a single revolution, and gained his feet, hoping to turn and attack again.

But of course, the creature was already there behind him as he did so. This time it shoved his back forcefully forward instead of down, and his upper body over-ran his stride. It was his turn to face-plant into the soft earth, arms splayed out to either side. It grabbed his right arm and yanked him up and over, to land on his back as it leaned over him again. There was a star-burst of pain in his right shoulder and he gasped as he was slammed back to the ground, and he felt the creature's hand encircle his throat and begin to squeeze. As the pressure began to build in his head, he could now see the damage to its eye. Sadly, the eyeball was intact, but the entire left side of it was bright red, and the pupil was dilated to a tiny vertical slit. Gray fluid leaked in heavy rivulets from the area where

the pen had penetrated into the socket, and there were hints of black ink both on the eyeball, and the adjacent skin covering the socket. The most disconcerting things though were the migratory black clouds in its skin. Many of them had congregated at the point of impact, and were roiling in agitation, merging and splitting in frantic distress, writhing ebony that darkened nearly half of the creature's face.

But when it spoke, there was no rage, or distress. The over-and-under tones kept perfect distance as they snaked alongside its words. The pressure in his head increased, and he could see black stars at the periphery of his vision.

"You have the markings of one in decline, Man, despite your efforts here. Do you desire release?"

He felt the pressure of its grip increase, and it bared a few of its impressive teeth.

"I am tempted to give you what you seek."

But then it released its grip, and the pressure in his head began to ease. It got easily to its feet, still looking down at him. Then it grinned that horrible grin, and all the teeth gleamed in the gray light.

"No, I think not. I do not give. I take away."

With that, it raised its foot and brought it down hard on his right knee.

He felt the bones fracture, ligaments torn to shreds as his knee imploded under the impact. The pain was like nothing he'd ever known, or dreamed of knowing. It was a supernova event, and the shockwave blasted outward to all his extremities. He screamed, and the scream turned into a retch, and he reflexively turned his head aside in case he vomited.

The creature might have said something to him as it stepped off of the ruin of his leg and turned away toward the girl and the door, but he didn't hear it. Everything was agony, and every nerve he possessed was in flames.

And then a breaker tripped in his head somewhere, and he was plunged ever so mercifully into darkness.

Ch. 10

Movin' on

His return to consciousness was slow, hindered by his desire to not arrive at all. A world of pain waited there, he could feel it even from far under.

But in the end, he couldn't avoid it. He opened his eyes to see the same shitty gray sky, the same towering trees, no door, no girl, and a nest of flaming hornets in his right leg. The pain wasn't the apocalypse that it had been, but it still made him vaguely nauseous with its intensity. It all crashed down on him again, the events and implications dropping on him like lead weights no longer held aloft by a cocoon of false sleep.

There were a few tears then, rolling down each side of his face toward his ears as he lay there. He considered dragging his useless, damaged body to the stream, and just ending this stupidity right here and now. How hard was it to drown oneself? Having never tried, he didn't know. Could he do it? Or would his need for air overpower his desire to escape this bullshit? He supposed he could try.

He looked around, trying to move as little as possible as he did so. He was about mid-way between where the door had been, and the stream. He was struck by the realization that this was a cross-roads moment. Given the situation, choosing to either

investigate the door, or head for the stream both had significant implications. There would be no standing and walking, that much was evident. It would be army-crawl either way. He already dreaded the transition from face up to face down, whatever he chose.

Being done with this was almost overpoweringly attractive. Faced with no possible mediation, he didn't know if he had the will to face a pain with no tangible expiration date. Given time and opportunity, both of which were unlikely in his current situation, he might heal enough to stagger along upright, but walking or running was pretty much off the table. Even if he had access to surgery, he guessed that would've still been a question mark. For the first time since this all started, he knew without a doubt that if he'd had access to a bottle, he would inhale it. Life without anesthesia totally sucked.

He knew which way he would go, but for the girl. If not for her, he would opt out, time's up, pencils down please. He remembered the fear in her voice as she had seen the creature stride out of the woods, and she had had to go through whatever it had done or said to her without any help from him. Passing out suddenly seemed like the most cowardly thing he had ever done. This was all on him. He looked over at the stream, and decided that it was plan B.

He steeled himself, and then tried to turn over, pivoting on his right side to minimize how far that leg would have to travel.

The hornets exploded. All of them, all at once. He committed himself to the movement though, and he passed equilibrium, making it over onto his stomach as the pain detonated, nearly wiping consciousness away again as it did so. He did retch then, a couple of dry heaves on the heels of his screams of pain, but he hadn't had anything to eat since this morning eternities ago, except booze and water. Nothing came up except a little sour spit. He fell still as the consuming tide of pain began to ebb a bit.

Maybe five minutes passed before he felt like he could try some forward motion. New hornets took up occupancy in his knee as the incendiary flare of their predecessors abated. He lined himself up with the door marker, which was still undisturbed despite the previous activity in the clearing. He began to body-crawl slowly toward it, but stopped as he saw something resting in the bright green leaves of the groundcover to his right.

It was the marker. He reached out and grabbed it, bringing it up before his face to inspect it. The business end was covered with a gray mucus residue, but appeared intact, the beveled tip neither crushed nor split. He wiped the mess off of

the tip as best he could with his thumb and forefinger, then brushed his fingers clean on the shoulder of his shirt. He was gratified to see that ink still flowed readily enough, marking his fingertips with black ink. He held it in one hand, and began his trek.

He didn't know how long it took. It hurt in an all-encompassing way, each movement weaving fat threads of pain together, until he was nearly hysterical under a cumulative tapestry of agony.

But then he was there, and he could stop. He buried his face into the bright green groundcover, resting his head while inhaling the mixed smell of evergreen needles, plant growth, and organic decomposition. The pain eased slowly after the cessation of motion, and he rested there a while. Finally he raised his head again, and there was the marker's cap. A dry, wheezing chuckle escaped him as he picked it up, and re-capped the marker and returned it to his back pocket.

He was at the base of where the door had been. Up close like this, he could see the rectangular bifurcation in the soil that marked the footprint of the trap barrier. It came and went along its perimeter, because the soil and groundcover had been pressed flat by activity, but enough of it was left to mark its place. He found the nearest corner, and pulled it up, the soil

bound together by the groundcover root structures. He pulled the loose section up and away, allowing it to flop to one side on its top, exposing the flat plane of the soil underneath.

There was nothing, certainly no coins. Really, who could blame her? Even if she'd had the presence of mind to hide her coins like he'd suggested, he'd given that away to the asshole demon as it arrived in the clearing. It would appear that he was down to plan A.

But the thought of reversing direction, and covering twice the distance before trying to end it all was just too much for him right now. He put his head down again, this time on one cheek to rest again. He was looking across the void in the landscape that he'd created by tossing aside the rectangle of earth that had occupied it, which was now lying upside down next to its former resting place, directly in his line of sight. He could see tiny veins of white roots densely intertwined through the black soil, binding it together in the shape of the trap floor. There were flecks of white and gray throughout, bits of not-soil that had some other purpose that someone more educated in the ways of plant life could explain if they were here. But, they weren't, so the mystery would persist. He stared at it for a time, before realizing that there was something there that didn't belong.

There was a glint of metal in the side facing him. A tiny speck of reflective surface that was nearly invisible in the diffuse light of the clearing. He frowned, and then risked movement to reach out to touch it. Flecks of soil fell away from it, and he could see that it was a tiny silver orb buried almost too deep into the loam to be visible.

He dug at it with his fingernail, and was able to wedge it between nail and fingertip. He drew it out, and saw that it was attached to a narrow silver stem.

An earring stud.

A cold glow of excitement seemed to temporarily damp the fire in his leg, and he wiggled forward a bit despite a flurry of activity in the hornet's nest. He wanted to get a better view of the edge of the earthen doormat he'd flung aside, and focused on the tiny divot he'd drawn the earring out of. Just to its right, he could now see a linear interruption in the white root bundles across its face, about an inch and a quarter long. He dug into it with the same finger after transferring the stud to his other hand. The root-bound soil resisted, but as his finger forced its way into the narrow slit, he felt a thin band of resistance not far within.

He grinned, and the idea of dragging his sorry ass to the stream and ending his life evaporated. He palmed the earring

stud, and used the fingers of both hands to rip the soil apart, liberating the coin contained within.

He drew it out and it flared with warmth, and the door appeared before him, stretching upward before his prostrate form, the atrium visible through it. He stared at it. It was a silver half-dollar, dated 1896. Around him, the ambient mist in the air became agitated, moving sluggishly forward through the doorway. Past experience spoke knowledge.

The door was open.

He had to still himself against the desire to haul himself through. He needed to look first.

He gritted his teeth, and moved forward as he was able. He positioned himself on his stomach still, propped up on his crossed arms, face near the plane of the doorway. This enabled him to look through the door, and see much of the interior of atrium without passing through.

It looked much the same. He could see neither the girl nor the demon, or any movement whatsoever. There were segments of the room at acute angles to the right or left that he couldn't see given his vantage point, but short of sticking his head through their contents would have to remain anonymous.

He could see one thing that was different, though.

The strange glass portal into the shell construct on the right was no longer dark and quiescent. It glowed dimly with a yellow light, and shadows drifted across it, as though forms moved within, backlit by some type of illumination. There was still something there, though, covering the opening. It was like looking through frosted glass into a lit room beyond.

He took a moment to consider, but he found he no longer had any alternatives. The stream behind him made its quiet way along, but the surcease it had seemed to offer before was no longer an option.

He crawled forward over the depression before the door, hauling himself up over the threshold of the door as the pain ignited in his leg again.

The dusty, dry air of the atrium filled his lungs as his head passed through the plane of the doorway, the pain of his devastated leg following behind, both immediate and worlds away at the same time. He focused his attention on the glowing glass portal into the shell construct as he wormed the rest of his body across the demarcation line between the clearing and the atrium, dreading the moment when his ruined knee would scrape across the inflexible threshold of the doorway, and the resulting deflagration of hornets.

Then he got his second miracle.

In the inevitability of sequence, his knee followed the ascent of his thigh across the plane of the door, and as the pain escalated along the line of that jostling movement, he prepared to stop, in order to accommodate the hornet explosion.

But the moment his devastated knee banged across the threshold of the door, the explosion of pain that began winked out of existence before it could be fully felt, as the knee passed beyond the reality of the clearing, and took up occupancy in the reality of the atrium.

The release from pain was beyond any experience he had ever known, including his redemptive moment, eclipsing that by an order of magnitude, and rendering him immobile for several minutes as he lay inert after passing fully into the space in front of the door from the clearing into the atrium.

The pain had been so incessant and enduring that the end of it almost undid him in the same way that its arrival had. But the vacuum left by the pain was instantly displaced by a sense of relief so profound that he was able to do nothing but lie on his side and breathe. Then he sent a command signal to his leg to draw upward, waiting to see if it would obey. It did, and his knee flexed without complaint as he did so. He straightened it again, and drew it up again. Same result.

He got quietly to his feet, not knowing what to do with or how to process what had just happened to him. He'd been a cripple moments before, and now he was standing on a leg that should've never borne his weight again.

Sophia's face came to mind, and her "What do I do?" echoed forlornly in his head. He pushed aside his questions and wonder, deciding that arriving at a conclusion about this was nothing compared to his need to help her. He put the coin and the earring stud into his right front jeans pocket. He started to step quietly toward the glowing glass portal when something subconscious tugged him back. The door to the clearing was still active, mist floating in through the portal. He looked to the right, and saw that his 1900 penny still occupied its place on the door frame. He reached up and pried it loose.

The scene through the doorway remained. He stepped back several paces, and as he did so, the door darkened toward its perspective-bending dull ebony. He looked away before it fully closed, but could see the flow of mist end abruptly as the door closed.

Several empirical experiments occurred to him to clarify the roles of each coin he now possessed, but as he thought about them a bit more, the function of the half-dollar made him nervous. Just based on recent experience, it was some type of

master key. What would happen if he got too close to the door leading to undersea depths? Would it just instantly open? He wondered what that would do to the atrium, as trillions of gallons of water sought to escape all that pressure through the tiny pinhole of the doorway. Playing "Let's see what happens if I..." suddenly seemed like a very bad idea. It seemed dangerous just carrying it around, now. Maybe this place had a fail-safe on this side to protect itself from just such an occurrence, but if someone was going to test that, it wouldn't be him.

Time weighed on him. He needed to do something, not stand around thinking. He felt like he had an inchoate understanding now though. It didn't give him a lot of confidence, but the girl's fear haunted him, so he moved along the wall toward the corner. Once there, he could hug the wall below the ascending staircase as he moved inward toward the portal.

He stopped as he reached it. It was as dim as any portion of the atrium could be with the late afternoon light still streaming in from above. He saw the flaw in his plan immediately. His view of the light streaming out of the door way was blocked in segments by the ascending stair treads jutting out of the wall in front of him. He would have to detour around them as he got close to the door, putting himself in full view of the doorway. They were too close together to crawl between.

So, new plan needed. He wished he had a weapon.

Wait. He *did* have a weapon. He'd proved it in the clearing with the penny. Suddenly, he felt a bit better, but not much. He was old and slow. The asshole demon was not. Well, it was old, actually. It had intimated as much, but it certainly wasn't slow. He'd caught it flat-footed twice by doing something it didn't expect, but he didn't think he'd get away with that again. It wasn't stupid.

Also, he was making an assumption that the creature and the girl were in the shell construct, behind the lit glass or whatever it was. It seemed logical, but what did he know? Maybe the creature had turned on the lights in there, and then taken the girl through any of the other doors he hadn't had a chance to investigate before scoring the horror behind door number three. *We have a winner! Don, tell him what he's won.*

It was clear that the asshole demon had convinced or coerced the girl into opening the door into the atrium. That she had had the presence of mind to hide the silver half-dollar in the way that she did while it stomped the shit out of his knee indicated she could still think under stress. That was a good sign, he guessed. She had her penny, and his eighteen seventy-four that he'd thrown through the door. Was hers a nineteen-

hundred, like the one he'd retrieved from the clearing door frame, giving her access to both sides of the doors?

He shook his head in frustration. He was making more assumptions. Maybe she had hidden her penny in the same block of soil, and he was too jazzed about finding the half-dollar to be thorough and search for it too. Earrings came in pairs. And why assume the dates on the pennies meant anything at all? I mean, they obviously weren't pennies at all, were they?

He realized he was in danger of being frozen by uncertainty and fear of making the wrong choice. He remembered how narrow his life had become before he had come here, and how all his dwindling energy had been expended to keep it that way. He contrasted that with the things he had experienced here in the last few hours. There had been miracles, wonders, brushes with death, pain, and strangeness beyond what his whole previous life had contained.

He suddenly felt alive in way he couldn't remember feeling since he was a kid. His mind was clear, and he could think around things, a mental facility that had long ago atrophied under a constant bombardment of chemical insulation. He felt the constriction of fear ease, and a new plan bubbled to the surface. Well, at least the beginnings of one.

He headed back along the wall toward the other end of the atrium, giving the doors he had already investigated as wide a berth as he could stand, moving quietly and quickly. His scribbling on the wall beside the first two doors he had checked seemed a little puerile now. This was no personal wonderland anymore. He tried not to imagine what Sophia's confrontation with the creature had been like, but the fragments that his imagination fed him caused him to move faster.

He reached the other corner and stopped, trying to decide the best way to do what he had in mind. He glanced down at his feet, and considered his battered work boots, still damp from their immersion in the stream. It would be a lot easier to move quietly if he removed them.

He leaned down and untied each lacing, loosening them in turn until he could slip them off of his feet. He considered leaving them there, but the idea of leaving any resource behind seemed like a poor choice. He might end up someplace where having shoes would make the difference. He decided to knot the laces through a belt loop at his right side. Hopefully, they wouldn't kick him in the crotch or the ass if he had to run. He thought for a second about the physics of it, and then shortened the laces by doubling the knots, the boots much higher on his hip when he finished.

He stepped away from the corner, watching the glowing glass at the other end. He moved toward the center, the stair descending along the wall behind him, all attention forward.

As he passed the lowest tread, he was nearly derailed by a bright illumination behind him, light blossoming forward, casting his movement in shadow ahead. He felt warmth against his leg in the pocket that held the coins and earring stud. He nearly froze in the sudden glare of light, but let his momentum carry him past, stepping quickly onto the first tread of the opposite staircase and passing beyond the portal behind. The light that had briefly illumined the kaleidoscope glass portal behind him winked out, and he continued to ascend as his heart hammered in his chest. He never took his eyes off of the still glowing portal at the other end. He thought that he needed no more confirmation that the half-dollar was indeed a master key.

He paused for a moment as he gained the top of the stairs, stepping onto the platform that ran the length of the atrium on this side, the dark wood punctuated by more black doors, and openings to exterior exits. Shadows continued to swim across the face of the lit portal, but no change came as the moment spun out, so he moved on.

He padded along the platform toward the other end, walking along the edge away from the wall so as not to trigger any doors

as he passed by. He decided that whatever he might be able to do as far as getting the girl out of this, it would probably happen down below, rather than up a flight of stairs, so it really didn't matter what these doors opened to.

He reached the end, and began to descend the stair, watching the light below. He stopped about a third of the way down, and side-stepped to the edge of the tread. He lowered himself off the edge, until he hung from it, and then dropped quietly the last six inches to the concrete floor of the atrium. He backed toward the corner under the stair, watching for any change in front of him. None came.

Now for the risky part.

He moved along the wall below the stairs toward the center, until the tread in front of him was at about at eye level. The light from the windows above cast the rear portion of each descending tread in shadow. He pulled the half-dollar out of his pocket, and placed it on top of the tread where the back of it met the wall, within the shadow from above. It was as hidden as it was going to get.

He stepped back toward the side wall, angling toward the nearest black door while trying to keep an eye on the portal behind him. He felt a bit like the guy in a horror film trying to look in two directions at once.

He felt like he needed to see what the doors on this side opened to, before he could go any further. If he ever got a chance to separate the girl from her captor, he would need some place to take her where he hoped it couldn't follow. His options on the other side were limited. There really was only a return to the clearing. He'd take it if nothing else was available, but the idea of going back repulsed him, even if there was water there. The negative association alone seemed almost insurmountable.

He approached the closest door, reaching into his pocket for the penny he'd recovered from the clearing doorframe. He hesitated before putting it in into place.

The exact mechanics of his plan didn't exist. He only hoped they would show up if and when things started happening. He was fact-finding, and he wondered whether he wanted to know right away if this door was a bust or not. If he had to rule it out for whatever reason, then he was probably looking at drinking from the creek and hoping that the ecosystem there extended beyond plant life. That was *if* he was successful.

Another thought occurred to him then. He remembered his fear of leaving the atrium the way he'd come in, and what might happen if he did. Would it all come back? What if that applied here? He imagined throwing himself back into the clearing, and

feeling his knee disintegrate again. A line from *Apocalypse Now* floated through his head.

Never get out of the boat.

Those were words to live by. He wished he could.

Yet his plan, as nebulous as it was, made a number of assumptions.

The girl and her captor were in the shell construct. He and the girl were most likely screwed if they weren't.

They would exit it together at some point, and he would be present and ready to do...something. He and the girl were most likely screwed if they didn't, or he wasn't.

There was some action he could take to separate them, leaving enough time for he and the girl to escape. If there wasn't, they were screwed. If there was, they were still probably screwed.

Newton's three laws, as well as the speed and strength of his opponent left little room for a long run to the other end of the atrium. He decided to check this door first, and then the next one down, if this one had to be scrubbed. He put the penny into place on the doorframe.

The doorframe pulsed with red light, and a line of unidentifiable symbols flashed across the top of it, and then faded.

That's new, he thought, and probably not good.

It pulsed again, and the symbols appeared again. Each looked like four small, concentric circles, each circle missing segments of varying lengths, and oriented differently than adjacent circles. There were maybe seven or eight of these across the top of the door, and none of them appeared to be the same, although the first and last may have been. He didn't have a chance to study them as the dullness of the door began to dissipate, lit by a glow from behind. It was not a gentle, warm, well-behaved glow either. It was a violent, turbulent glow, like an explosion viewed through a welder's mask, if said welder happened to be currently swimming through it.

He grabbed for the penny, even though part of him knew that anything happening on the opposite side of the door was confined there. The brightness intensified so fast, that he instinctively closed his eyes as he reached for the penny, finding it and removing it by feel alone. Even with his eyes closed, the light hurled through the opening door was blinding, and was increasing still when the penny lost contact with the lock.

The door dimmed to black, but afterimages danced behind his closed lids. He kept his eyes closed until they began to dim, even though this meant he couldn't look behind him at the shell door. He knew that for now, even with his eyes open, he wouldn't

be able to see much anyway. So, what was that, then? Surface of the sun, maybe? Whoever built this place didn't mind visiting some pretty inhospitable places.

This door was out, then. Man, did that suck. He waited a few more seconds as his vision quieted, and then opened his eyes, looking back toward the shell door.

No change. He let out a breath, and then went toward the next door. As he passed the opening between doors that led to an exit hatch, he paused. He wondered why it hadn't occurred to him to try to get her out this way. It was a bit farther, but it was available on both sides and it put the girl right back where they both came from.

He figured that was probably why, right there. Never get out of the boat, right? The fear in Sophia's voice put it on the table, and he went to the next door, casting glances back at the light from where he assumed she was.

He placed the penny without hesitation. The door swam up from vortex black to visible resolution with no warning pulse from the doorframe this time.

He was looking into a hallway that ran perpendicular to the door he was looking through. The opposite wall was cracked plaster and peeling wallpaper in either direction, spotted with ancient blooms of mold and streaks of dust and dirt. The floor

may have been carpeted at some point, but was now so littered with dust and other minute debris that any pattern was hidden under this more recent carpet. A verdigrised brass light fixture was just visible to the left, clinging to the wall despite limited resources. It was canted outward from its junction box, a single wire visible stretched taut, bound in the center by a wire nut. There were shards of glass surrounding the empty bulb socket, the last remains of the shroud. He could see reflective bits of glass among the detritus on the floor below it.

Illumination came from somewhere above, off to the right, its source out of sight. He could also see movement, as ambient dust and less identifiable particulates skirled along from right to left along the floor, as if carried along by a breeze. He pressed forward, as close as he could. Without the second penny, it was like pressing your face up against a window, except the window was temperature neutral, not cold or warm to the touch.

He looked left and right, trying to see as much of what lay to either side as he could. To the right, the wall continued without interruption out of his limited sight, though the illumination grew significantly before it disappeared, as if its source were coming from the ceiling not much further on.

To the left, illumination dimmed, and he could see what may have been a doorway. But if it was, it was recessed, set back

into the opposite wall, and lost in shadow. Could be a hallway, too, he supposed.

Ok, no red pulse, and the view didn't indicate immediate peril. He now had a third option. Not exactly an inviting one, though. His conflict between choosing alternate realities and a return to their own gained no ground either way. He really, really didn't want to go back, but the girl would almost certainly want to, and he owed her that chance, just by getting her into this in the first place.

But what if the creature could follow? You needed a key to get in, but did you need one to get out? He should check, he thought. He could just put down the penny, and push on the hatch. If it opened, then there was his answer, and he could cross it off as an option.

He pulled the penny off the doorframe, and turned back toward the exit hall, eyeing the lit shell door as he moved forward. There was still no change. The shadow patterns moved at the same rate, in random directions. It reminded him of the creature's skin, sort of. He hoped the bastard had one bitch of an eye infection now.

He entered the gloom of the short hall and made his way toward the hatch, pausing midway to fish the penny out of his jeans, and set it on the floor against the wall. He then went to

stand in front of the hatch. He'd not paid attention when he'd come in, but there was a handle on this side of the door. Not a latch, just a "D" shaped ring welded to the metal. Did he really want to know? If the door didn't open, then he was on the hook when the time came. He hesitated for a few more moments, then hissed in irritation at himself, and pulled on the ring.

Nothing. Not a hint of movement. He pulled harder, to no effect.

Well, there it was. He had his answer. He turned his back on the hatch, and returned to the where the penny lay. He picked it up, and returned it to his pocket. Then he went to stand at the end of the hall, to watch the glowing portal. It hadn't occurred to him before, but this was a pretty good hiding place. The only light came from the atrium, and the hatches had no windows. Nice and dim, and out of sight if he stood far enough back from the atrium end.

Now that he had as much information about his sadly limited options as he was likely to get, he should probably grab the half-dollar and try to figure out what to do next. He padded quietly back toward the stair, hugging the wall. As he approached it, he noticed for the first time that the angle of the light above cast the area beneath the stair along the wall in fairly deep shadow. He hadn't registered this before when he

was standing below it. He looked at the opposite stair as he closed the distance with the corner of the atrium. He could see that because the windows above were on this side, the light shining down on the stair treads on the opposite side cast segmented shadows on the floor of the atrium, but illuminated the sections in between. His side, however, was contiguous shadow.

Hmmm. Two hiding options, now.

He gained the corner, and then walked below the stair to the tread where he'd left the half-dollar. It rested there in shadow, waiting for him. He was reaching for it when movement beyond snatched his attention.

The girl stepped through the portal. Her head was down, gaze fixed on the floor in front of her. He could see the drift-mottled arm of the creature resting on her shoulder, and then it stepped through too, drawing them both to a halt just outside the portal. From this angle, he couldn't see if there was any change to the portal itself, but they stood limned in shifting light before it. The creature spoke then, looking down at the girl.

"I've made clear my expectations of you? You will do what I require?"

She made no sound or movement, only looked at the ground in front of her.

"I desire confirmation, Child."

As it spoke, he could see it flex its hand upon her shoulder. Her body twitched, and she reflexively lowered her shoulder under it, pain evident in the movement. She nodded her head twice in quick succession.

"Good. This way."

It gestured with its free hand toward the stair he stood under, his hand inches from the coin.

She turned at the prompting, and began to ascend the stair, the asshole demon a tread behind and below her, hand still on her shoulder.

He watched them ascend in front of him, his panic freezing him in place. The girl stared downward with empty eyes, and the creature seemed focused on the top of her head, mouth turned upward in its lizard grin as it spoke again.

"All you need do is free the artifact, and carry it back. There will be vigorous opposition, so it would be best if you gave it...*all* of your attention."

They were passing upward before his eyes, and he couldn't move. Already he was looking at the girl's midriff as she made

her way up the treads. She was on the outside, and the creature was inches from the wall.

His hand was on the coin now, he realized, having completed the motion he'd begun on its own.

His hand was on the coin.

His stasis broke, as an instant replay filled his head of slapping the penny against the shin of the creature, and the silent explosion against his unaffected palm. The ragdoll physics of an asshole in flight.

The coin. The stair tread.

In the end, it was a simple flick of his index finger.

The girl had already passed above him, and the creature's outside foot was coming down toward the tread, claws preceding toes as it came down toward the stair. He saw it before he did it, the flick of his finger.

The coin slid at an angle away from that impetus across the stair, its motion perfectly arrested between the impact of the alien foot and the stair tread.

The silent explosion came again, but much bigger this time.

The creature pin-wheeled backward through the air, driven upward by the force of the coin. It impacted the other wall of the atrium just below the downward curve of the section opposite the windows.

He was moving the second it was airborne, slapping his palm down over the coin and sliding his hand along the tread toward the edge, where he palmed it as it slid free. He stepped out from the shadow of the stair, and looked up at Sophia. She hadn't moved, or reacted to the forcible removal of her captor. He yelled at her.

"Sophia! Time to get out! You need to move!"

He hoped the stressed keywords would make it to wherever she was.

Her head jerked up, and she looked at him, awareness flooding into her expression.

"Jump!"

He screamed at her, and gestured her forward. Off to the right, he could see their adversary's fall from the upper level. Fortune had the creature inverted as it struck the far wall, but it was so fast and agile that he could see it reverse that in the course of its fall to the platform below, landing on its feet at the top of the opposite stair. It was in motion down the stair with no pause whatsoever.

Sophia moved, leaping off the stair tread she was on, toward him. He braced himself, catching her outstretched arms as she stumbled upon impact with the floor. He transferred her downward motion to forward by brute force, impelling her toward

the wall behind them, following right behind as she found her feet and ran.

"Not the first door!" He yelled, and she corrected her trajectory instantly.

Then it was there. It was the moment.

It was the moment he could have screamed at her back, "The hall! Back outside!". He imagined she would've known what he meant. But he didn't. He opened his mouth, but the words didn't come. She made for the second black door, and he was right behind her. He didn't bother to look behind. They would make it or they wouldn't, and he knew he had just stolen from this girl, the one he'd committed himself to save. He remembered at the last moment the configuration of their landing pad, and shouted the only words that came to mind.

"Wall ahead! Turn!"

She was at the doorway when he said this, so her reaction was impressive on any level. She had been running toward a black doorway that made no change as she approached it. With her last stride before it, she leapt, swinging both fists aside to re-orient her body in mid-air. The door opened an instant before she passed through it sideways instead of head-on as the silver coin flared with heat in his hand. His last footfall in the atrium was spent to alter the orientation of his passing

through, to change the vector of his trajectory as he also turned himself.

The end result was that she slammed into the opposite wall of the hallway sideways moments before he did too, mere inches in front of her, both of them taking the impact on the shoulder rather than face-forward. Dust and plaster exploded outward at the impacts, and the wall itself shifted away slightly as a compromised support structure groaned in complaint. They both bounced off of it, falling onto the mess of the floor. She lay still, but he rolled back, so that he could look back at the door.

The creature was steps away, moving fast. Its face was full of rage, all pretense of calm detachment gone, its fists clenched. There was a deep hatred evident in the way it stared at him now, that made what he'd seen before each time he had confounded it look like a benign antipathy. He was glad to see that it didn't look like the one eye had healed much.

He grinned at it as he pitched the half-dollar away down the hall, and the door went black in an instant.

Ch. 11

Dislocation blues

He turned his attention from the now-blank portal. A cold wind blew through the hallway, and he could see why now. A large section of the ceiling had collapsed about twenty feet away, as well as the roof above it, and he could see a slice of gray sky through the breach. This was the source of illumination he'd seen through the door. The wind smelled of dust and ash, and deep-winter ice. He could also see the glint of the half dollar on the floor just short of the debris field below it. He looked at the girl, who lay on the floor unmoving, but her eyes were on him. Her expression behind her glasses was unreadable.

"You all right?"

Her expression didn't change as she spoke.

"No."

"Are you hurt?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

He sat up and then shifted, putting his back against the wall next to the black portal. Every movement kicked up dust, but it was carried away by the wind. He was already starting to chill, even though his pulse was still rapid from the adrenalin rush.

He untied his boot laces, freeing them from his hip. He pulled them on and laced them quickly, his feet already cold.

He had so many important things to say to her, but all of them contested each other at once, so none of them got to be said. A banal question made its way around the edge of the struggle, and got to be articulated instead.

"Can I help you up?"

"No."

She moved on her own, sitting up as well, putting her back to the opposite wall. They stared at each other in silence for a bit. Her clothes were dusty, like his, but there were no evident wounds or bruises. Finally, something relevant broke loose from the mental fray.

"I'm sorry."

She gave no answer for at least thirty seconds. Then,

"This is bat-shit insanity. I want to go home."

That hit hard. He felt sick.

"Yes. I'm sorry for that, as well."

"How are you even walking? That thing pancaked your knee. I saw it. You should still be where it left you, crying like a girl."

There was acid creeping into her words. He could sense what was going on. She'd hidden somewhere within herself. That was why she'd seemed so empty when he'd seen her step through the shell door, why it had taken his screams to bring her back. Now

she was back, and beginning to stare it all in the face again. Fear and anger could go hand in hand.

"Are you a super-hero? Have I stepped into a graphic novel? Are you that thing's *nemesis*?"

She spat the last vitriolic word as she leaned forward, her face contorted in anger. He just looked at her for a moment.

"Yes. I am...."

He crooked his arms out to the side, placed his fists on his dusty hips, and stuck out his chin.

"Captain Morgan."

Silence. There was no humor in her as she regarded him, but the anger seemed to have leached away, leaving only fear and uncertainty.

"How can I be here?"

He sighed, cut by a question he couldn't answer. He ran his hand through his filthy hair.

"We should get out of this wind. Find better shelter for now. Then try to figure this out."

She seemed on the verge of saying something in response, but she didn't, just nodded. He got to his feet and offered her a hand up, but she got up without taking it.

"Which way?" She asked.

He looked in each direction. The hole in the ceiling was the only illumination. The hallway dwindled into darkness beyond

it, and it was the same in the other direction. He could see the opening he'd seen earlier, door or hall, he still couldn't tell.

"I don't think we should try to climb out. But light becomes a problem any other way."

She reached into the pocket of her jeans, and drew out a slim object. It was a cell phone. She tapped the screen, and it lit up. She slid her finger across it, and then tapped again. The camera flash flared with a bright white light, and she angled it toward him.

"Nice. Could you wait here for a second?"

He turned without waiting for an answer, and walked quickly to where the half dollar lay half buried in dust before the tangle of disintegrated material that had formerly comprised the roof above. He retrieved it, and then looked up through the gap in the ceiling. From this angle, he could see more of the gray sky.

He could also see the tops of other buildings, towering above this one in all directions he could see. They were glass and steel skyscrapers, and all of them were in bad shape. Windows shattered or missing completely, structures warped by time or catastrophic intervention, and coated with dust. The view into their revealed interiors was shadowed by the weak light from the gray clouds above, and gray particulates whipped along between, carried on the strength of the incessant wind. It

was familiar, but only in a fourth wall sort of way, an "I've seen this movie" kind of way.

He backtracked to a point not far from the where she waited, and then stopped.

"I need your help with this."

She raised her eyebrows.

"I need you to back up a bit, down the hall."

She didn't move.

"We will need this, most likely. But I don't want to just walk past with it. Better if we can get it by quickly."

A look of comprehension bloomed in her eyes, and she backed up down the hallway, stopping with a questioning flick of her wrist. He nodded, and then tossed the coin to her. The door didn't appear, though, as the coin crossed the intervening space. He frowned as she caught it neatly with the hand not holding her phone. His assumption had been that the half-dollar operated by proximity to a door. It would appear to be incorrect. He shivered, and thought that it was something to ponder another time.

"Got a signal?" He asked, as he passed the space on the wall where the door had been. She was standing near where the opening in the wall was. He still couldn't tell whether it was a hallway or a door until he'd closed the distance between them.

"Nope."

It was a doorway, recessed from the hall, and had one of those card-readers above the handle. There were brass symbols on its dusty, blistered metal face, but they were unrecognizable, exercises in random geometry that meant nothing to him. He could see this because she had directed the light from her phone toward it as he approached. He could also see that the door was warped in its frame, and the surrounding wall was fractured, gaping cracks radiating outward from the intact trim. He could see the slight gap between the edge of the door and the warped metal of the frame.

He grasped the handle, and pushed. It resisted, but he put a shoulder to it. It slipped free, as long-immobile hinges screamed in protest. Then it halted again with a jolt, only open a few inches. He could see the privacy latch was engaged, illuminated in the dark gap at eye level. He gave the door another shot with his shoulder, and the latch tore loose, the door screeching open at last. The darkness beyond yawned before them, but Sophia pushed ahead of him, entering the room without hesitation, shining her phone around.

It was a hotel room. There was a closed door to the right, presumably a bathroom, and a louvered door to the left, maybe a closet. He followed her in, and then turned to force the door shut, blocking the wind that was stirring up dust at their feet, clouding the small entry. After the scream of hinges ceased, he

heard a sharp intake of breath behind him. He turned back quickly, and was at her shoulder. She held the phone out before her, casting its dim light on the queen bed against the wall to the right. Two forms lay on the ruin of it, sunken part-way into the mattress, surrounded by the dark stains wrought by decomposition of both the bodies, and the surrounding materials. But the process had long ago reached a desiccated end, and dust covered everything now. Each lay on its side, and they faced each other, knees drawn up. It was more sorrowful than horrific, he thought.

"You ok?"

She didn't look back at him, just stared at the bed.

"No. I thought we already established that."

"Alright, then, are you any less ok now, as opposed to before?"

This time she did look back, but she was backlit by the bright glow of her phone, and he couldn't see her expression.

"Yes, I am less ok than before. I don't know if I can stay here."

"I suppose we could try other rooms. Or maybe we could cover them with something."

"Maybe that would help." But she sounded doubtful.

He noticed for the first time that the room wasn't pitch-black, after all.

"Can you shine it that way?" He indicated the far wall. She did.

Heavy curtains still hung, multi-layered, the innermost sheets those light-blocking synthetics that allowed you to sleep through the daylight hours. Around the edges, though, there was a ghost of a gray glow. He stepped around her, and passed between the foot of the bed and an armoire against the wall. There was a desk in the left corner, and an upholstered side chair in the right. The curtains hung against the wall between. He went to them, and grasped the bottom of one of the synthetic sections.

The moment he did so, the cloth layers in front disintegrated, dropping to the floor in a cascade of fragments. The impact kicked up a cloud of dust that billowed outward from the wall. He coughed as he got his first lungful, and Sophia did moments later as the room filled with particulates. He let go of the bottom of the curtain with one hand, and pulled the neck of his shirt up over his nose and mouth, trying to filter the air as he coughed and hacked. The illumination from her phone disappeared, and he heard her coughing behind him as well, but he could now see the edges of the window around the still intact interior curtain, revealed by the failure of the cloth sections.

He let go of his shirt, and grasped the bottom of the remaining curtains with both hands again, and yanked down again.

This time, he was rewarded with the sound of rotten metal parting, and both curtains plunged downward, followed by the liberated curtain rod. They crashed to the dusty floor.

More dust, more coughing, but he was looking up at the revealed window, hand again holding his shirt over his mouth.

It was so coated on its exterior by dust or other particles that it was a dark gray rectangle. There was enough light passing through it, however, that he could see the dense spiderweb of cracks running through the entire panel of glass. It was a single large pane, and was obviously not meant to be opened. But, it was intact, and for now kept what was outside, outside. As dust permeated the room, he noticed movement against the slight illumination provided by mostly obscured window. The ambient particulates in the air were in motion, and were proceeding lazily in the same general direction. He followed the drift, tracking the direction. It all moved from right to left. He looked at the corner of the room in that direction.

The desk to his left didn't actually occupy the corner of the room. It was butted up against a vertical bulkhead that ran from floor to ceiling.

"Sophia."

A fit of coughing, then,

"Yes, Captain Morgan, destroyer of lungs."

"Could you shine your light there?" He said, indicating the bulkhead.

The illumination was diffused by all the particles in the air, but he could see that there was a return-air grille set into the bulkhead about two and a half feet above the floor, and that all the wayward stuff in the air near it was drawn toward it and sucked in, pulling air from farther out to follow.

He went to the corner, and knelt before the grille. There were two thumbscrews at each bottom corner. He backed these out, and then flipped the grille upward. A filter filled the breach, but it was nearly unrecognizable with the amount of sediment clogging its face. He grasped the edges, and pulled it free, setting it aside. He could feel a tangible increase in air flow, and the dust in the air began to move faster, flowing past him into the blackness of the open ducting beyond.

Back in the day when life made sense, and the illusion that his hand on the helm would take him where he desired to go was still intact, he and his wife had owned a house.

This owning of the house had brought with it the necessity of understanding the things that make houses work. He'd never been that guy who could pay some other guy to fix everything. So, he'd learned about the rudiments of plumbing, and electrical. And HVAC, insofar as it applied to him and his house.

This learning told him that these were controlled systems. There were air handlers and dampers that made sure that everything made its way to where it needed to go, and back again, while internalizing and venting air to and from the system as needed.

He was quite sure that this wasn't the case, here. The machinery was long dead. There shouldn't be any significant air movement here. He imagined that somewhere in this network of ducting, there was some interruption, some break in the system. The incessant wind outside was rushing past some exposed opening, creating a vacuum within.

Because the silent cocoon around them was nearly absolute. There was just the muted low whine of the wind passing through the hall outside.

He stood, and walked back to the crumpled curtains on the floor. He bent over, and grasped the curtain rod that still bound the top edges, and hefted it. He pulled it, and the following curtains toward the bed. He dragged it from the bottom of the bed to the top, the curtains flowing over the figures lying within, covering them in a film of white.

He set the rod down at the top of the mattress, smoothing the curtains as he backed away, making sure that the forms below were concealed below their overlap.

He looked at the girl.

"That help at all?"

She looked at the covered bed, then back at him.

"Yes. I think so." A pause. "I'm *really* cold."

"Yeah, me too. I don't suppose you smoke?"

She surprised him by reaching into her jeans pocket again.

She drew out another object, and then tossed it to him.

A lighter.

"Who's the destroyer of lungs, now?"

"My uncle, smartass. It's habit. He never remembered to carry one, so I did."

"You realize that robs me of all my self-righteousness."

"So? That keep you warm?"

He turned away, looking around the room for anything else that might provide what they needed. In his mind's eye, he saw the hallway to the exit hatch slide by in their rush for this door, the door to where they were now. He forced those thoughts away for later. He was really starting to feel the chill now, too, even without the wind. With the curtains down, the room was no longer pitch black. He went to the desk. On it was a phone, a task lamp, and a chrome metal tray, bearing two glasses and an ice bucket. Everything here, like everywhere else, was shrouded in dust. He took the glasses and bucket off of the tray and hefted it. It was thick, solid metal, the edges scalloped upward. He handed it to Sophia.

"Uh, thanks?"

"Just put it on the floor there, please." He indicated the base of the wall below the grille. He unplugged the phone cord, followed it to the wall jack, and unplugged it there, too. He tossed the cord onto the floor near the tray. He went toward the nearest side of the bed.

The bed was flanked by matching wooden side tables, each with two drawers. Upon each sat matching lamps, and squat, ceramic vases. The symmetry was broken only by another phone sitting on the table across the bed from where he stood.

He picked up the vase on this side. It was shaped a bit like an hour-glass, with a wide base and flared collar. It was fairly thick, and had heft to it. He took it around to the other side of the bed, and liberated the vase from the other table as well.

He returned to where Sophia sat, below the window near the vent. She was watching him with open curiosity, now. He slid the tray aside with his boot, inverted one vase, setting it on the floor out from the wall below the vent, and then the other beside it. He took the tray, and set it on top of the vases, like a trestle table. He then used the phone cord to tie up the grille, so that it stuck out above the duct opening at a ninety degree angle to the wall, anchoring the other end of the cord around a thermostat on the wall above.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"I don't know. What do you think it is?"

"A fireplace?"

"Bingo."

"That is so MacGyver." There was appreciation in her voice.

"Will be if it works."

He straightened, and went to the side chair in the corner behind them. He began to tear the upholstery off of it. It offered little resistance, fabric parting quietly, and the foam disintegrated in his hands. When he had it down to the wooden frame, he began to break it apart, stomping on it, reducing it to broken stubs that would rest within the confines of the tray.

The exertion helped, he wasn't quite so cold. But he could tell that Sophia was. She had her arms wrapped around herself, and he could hear her teeth chattering faintly between each crack of separating wood.

He scraped the pile into his arms, depositing it near the bulkhead, and returned to sift through the dust for the splinters.

"Should have something going pretty quick."

She didn't reply, just nodded, and rubbed the outside of her arms with her hands.

He built a small, latticed tower of wood splinters in the center of the tray, then held the lighter to it and struck the

wheel. Flame licked out obediently, and the wood caught quickly, encircling and consuming the small sticks. He handed the lighter back to Sophia, and then fed larger bits onto the fire. It grew quickly. He thought the moisture content in the wood was probably non-existent. He moved aside, toward the desk, making room for her.

"Scoot in. Warm up your hands."

She did, moving to sit cross-legged directly in front of the tray, holding her hands out as the circle of light and warmth from the flames increased.

He watched the smoke from the little fire drift upward. Most of it was drawn into the open duct above. Some passed through the grille and up toward the ceiling, but not much. He fed it until the flames danced almost half the distance to the grille above, and he could feel the heat radiating outward, pushing back the chill a bit. He stared at the makeshift fireplace, and realized he needed something else.

"Can I borrow your phone for a sec? We need another piece. I'll check the bathroom. Maybe we'll get lucky."

She fished it out of her pocket, did the little finger-dance that smart-phone users did so quickly, and the flash winked on. She held it out, and he took it.

"Can you feed it with those small pieces there?" He said, pointing.

"Yeah, I got it."

He stood and crossed to the bathroom door, opening it with the phone held before him.

It was a typical hotel bathroom. Tub with shower, plastic curtain still hanging on the metal rod. Toilet, and sink with counter on either side, fronting a large mirror. The mirror reflected the glow from the phone, brightening the room a little more. He smiled as he saw what he'd hoped to see. Another of the metal trays sat to the right of the sink, holding some glasses, another of the vases, several small plastic bottles, and a deformed little lump that had probably been soap. He cleared the tray of items, and took it and the vase back to where Sophia was feeding the fire. He knelt down beside it. He put his hand to the wall of the bulkhead, behind the fire. It was getting hot, as he thought it would. Need an insulator, he thought.

He went back to the bathroom. He looked past the toilet several times, before focusing in on it. He grabbed the porcelain top off of the tank, and shone the light in. Bone dry. He returned to the fire, carrying the tank cap. He once again inverted the vase, this time against the wall behind the other two. He leaned the top of the toilet tank across it, upright against the wall, and then did the same with the tray in front of it. The area around them brightened a bit more as the chrome face of the tray reflected the light of the fire outward.

"Clever." She said, and fed more fuel onto the fire. He went around behind her, careful not to lean too close as he reached past to feel the wall on the window side of the fire. It was farther away, and while warm, it wasn't hot. Satisfied, he went to sit again near the desk side of the fire. They both stared at the flames, as individual minutes linked arms, chaining outward as neither of them spoke.

He was trying to figure out what to say, or ask, or assert, but couldn't seem to settle on anything. She was right. This was insanity. How did you discuss that, when you were sitting in the middle of it? And she was so...*young*. He could hear the whispered beginnings of all those condemning voices again, murmurs of judgment and self-loathing, when she turned her face from the fire toward his.

"Who are you?" She looked directly into his eyes, and he could see her need for some kind of answer.

He didn't have to think about it. He met her gaze.

"Just a drunk on a down-hill run. But then, this happened." He waved a hand up, in a vague gesture. "Now I don't know what I am."

"But what is this? How did you start this?" She leaned forward, brows furrowed. "Why?"

Once again, it just came. No deliberation or crafting.

"That slip was empty, and then it wasn't. One eye-blink in between. And then I had to see. *Had* to. I didn't start anything. I just responded."

"You've been staring at those boats for months, now. You're telling me that there was no reason for it? Until today?"

He looked back at her, and put all the truth in it he had.

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you. Well, no reason that would explain all this. Before today, it was all poor me, why not me. Even though I knew why. Just like you know why, seeing me out your office window, or on your DVR."

She waited, like she knew he wasn't done. And he wasn't.

"It wasn't there, and then it was. Like a sign. So I followed it to you, and you sent me along, and then I made it on. And then, I made it *in*." He felt the impact of his redemptive moment all over again, and his voice faltered, throat tightening with emotion. He stopped until it eased, and she seemed willing to wait.

"And then I was...I don't know. Delivered. Healed, whatever you want to call it. I passed through that hatch, and it was all gone. All the need to keep life at a minimum safe distance. Instant sobriety."

He paused for a moment, and still she didn't respond, just waited as the fire crackled softly. So he went on.

"It healed my knee when I made it back through the door into the atrium. I don't understand it myself, so why would I expect you to?" He didn't know how to explain it to her. He stopped, and just shrugged.

"So you were a drunk, and then you got inside, and you were sober."

He nodded, though he thought a clarification needed to be made, so he did.

"Probably a drunk still, just a sober one. AA says it never goes away." He paused, conflicted, then shrugged. "I don't know. It's too soon to tell."

She went on, as though he hadn't interrupted.

"And your knee was history, and you crawled back in, and it was fine."

He nodded again.

"That's tough to swallow."

"And what part of this *isn't*? You said it. It's *crazy*. All of it. We're in a sci-fi movie right now. And not one either of us is particularly enjoying. Every time I step outside the atrium, I end up someplace it's dangerous to be."

She looked back at the fire, and fed it some more fuel.

"What happened to you? After I was out of the picture, I mean."

She didn't answer, and he saw her frown deepen again, and she hunched forward a little more, drawing into herself.

He waited for her to answer, but she didn't.

"OK, then, why did you come after me? I hadn't been gone long enough to get into trouble." This was an educated guess.

She looked back at him.

"You set off an alarm."

He blinked.

"What?"

"An alarm. One I didn't know existed, in my uncle's desk. Maybe when you boarded, or maybe when you went inside, I don't know."

"Great. *That's* why you're here?"

She nodded.

"There was a hidden tray. The alarm stopped when I opened it. There was a letter from my uncle, and the coins. The letter was to me, and it made zero sense, at the time. It makes a tiny bit more, now."

"What did it say?"

"The only relevant bit, at least to you, was a plea to go to a slip that has been empty since the first time I saw the marina as a kid. And then, do some more things that sounded ridiculous. At the time."

"He knew about this?"

"Apparently."

He let out a breath.

"He was part of it?"

"Peripherally, I think. He was like a watchman. No, a keyholder, now that I think about it. That's an inference on my part. He didn't spell it out, except to say that he didn't know the whole story."

"Wow. Do you have the letter?"

She looked away again, back to the fire. She shook her head instead of giving answer. He waited to see if she would elaborate, but she seemed to be done with explanation. He pushed a little.

"Why didn't you bring it?"

"There weren't a lot of instructions to remember. I didn't need it."

"Yeah, but..."

"Look, I didn't *want* to bring it, ok? I was mad. We said our good-byes right before he died. Conclusion. Closure. And now, the stupid letter. Now, *it's* the final say. My uncle always made sense. *Always.*" Anger underpinned her final words.

"Sorry."

"Yeah, well." She turned around, putting her back to the fire. Most of her face was hidden in the shadow of her hair.

In the ensuing silence, he watched shadows dance on the wall across from him, not sure where to go from here. His little pile of chair frame remnants was dwindling already. He got up, and went to the closest end table, drawing out the two empty drawers, and broke them up into kindling. He added to his pile, and then went around the other side of the bed and did the same thing there. He was returning with the fragments as he passed the armoire, and halted, struck by a thought that should have occurred to him well before now. He stepped forward, dumped the remains of the drawers on the pile, and returned to the armoire.

He pulled on the handles of the double doors, and they opened with twin squeaks of outrage. Inside, a flat-screen television occupied the upper part. Below, there were drawers to the right, but the thing he was after sat in its own enclosure on the bottom left. A mini-fridge. The light from the fire played across the dusty stainless steel of its door.

He opened it. More disgruntled hinges made protest, but his heart leapt as the firelight illuminated the contents.

There were rows of individual shapes, across an upper and lower shelf, comprised of variously shaped plastic bottles, and reflective glints from the surface of aluminum cans flashing behind them. He took out two of the former and one of the latter from the top shelf, and carried them back, sitting down as

before. He held them up before the fire as Sophia turned her head to see.

The plastic ones were water bottles. At least he assumed so. The shape and the clear liquid moving within were familiar, at least. The label was a clear plastic decal, and had a stylized graphic of a waterfall on it, which was clear enough, but the text above and below it was not just unfamiliar. It was unrecognizable. It didn't resemble any written language he'd ever seen. There were complex symbols that were reminiscent of Chinese hanzi, but more geometric, and they were strung together with a calligraphic through-line that brought Arabic script to mind. Near the bottom of the label, there were some symbols floating un-tethered by the calligraphic connections. One of these looked a lot like one on the door outside. Numbers then, maybe.

The can was less revealing about its contents. It gleamed in the firelight with the familiar shine of aluminum, but the red silk-screened image on the front was just an enlargement of one of the strange characters, and the tiny script on the back was just more of what was on the water bottle.

He rested one of the bottles and the can against his entwined calves, and twisted the top off of the other bottle. He put his nose to the opening and sniffed. He didn't smell like anything. He took a small sip.

Tasted like water. He took a couple of long swallows.

"Should I get my own?"

"Sorry. I wanted to test it. If I keel over dead, you know not to drink it."

"Oh."

He handed her the other bottle, and capped his, setting it near the leg of the desk. He took the can and gently squeezed it. The sides flexed inward easily. Not a good sign. He reached for the pull-tab, and there wasn't one. Well, not exactly. There was a foil-like material bonded to the top of the can over the mouth, attached to a plastic loop. He put his finger through and pulled. The foil resisted at first, and then let go, peeling back and finally separating from the top as it reached its end. If it had ever been carbonated, it sure wasn't now. There wasn't even a hint of air escaping as the seal broke.

He sniffed the opening, and yanked his head away in disgust. He could smell the sugar, but there was also another component that was like garlic and ginger, but somehow neither, and the worse for it.

"Is it bad?"

"Yes. Or maybe it's their version of Mountain Dew."

"Their?"

He pointed toward the bed to clarify, and then toward the bottle she was sipping from.

"You see the label?"

"Yeah. I've never seen writing like that before."

He turned and stretched his torso and arm up, setting the can on the closest corner of the desk without getting up, speaking over his shoulder.

"Neither have I." He turned back to her. "I think we're somewhere that looks like where we come from, but isn't."

"Just because you don't recognize some writing on a water bottle?"

He shrugged.

"Yes, and no. We are in a building that I'm assuming has multiple floors, because of how the ventilation system is laid out. I am also assuming that we are on the top floor of that building, given that we could see the sky through that break in the ceiling down the hall.

When I went to retrieve the coin, I could see other buildings surrounding this one, and some were much taller. So we're in a fairly sizeable modern city. There are a finite number of those where we come from, across a much smaller number of countries and cultures. I'm just saying, I can't remember the last time I saw text that I couldn't fit somewhere in the world I know.

Besides that, how long have flat screens been in hotels? Five years? Six? This place has been empty for a hell of a lot longer than that. Our timelines don't match."

"So, what does that mean? Like, to us?"

He scratched absently at his cheek, as some thoughts that had been at the back of his mind came together.

"In the end, I don't think it matters. I don't think we can stay here. At some point fairly soon, we're going to have to chance going back."

"*What? Why?* You saw its face. That thing wants to rip you apart. Going back is suicide."

He sighed, and reached for his water bottle.

"Staying here is too. The fire and the water gain us a little time to breathe, but we are lacking some pretty basic stuff to try to survive here." He took a drink.

"Maybe some of the other buildings are in better shape."

He shook his head.

"Pick your apocalypse, and add fifty or sixty years. That's what I saw, anyway. I think the fact that the window there is still in one piece is a point off the curve."

He plucked at the front of his dusty t-shirt.

"We'd need winter gear just to leave this room for any length of time. We have no weapons, assuming anything's alive

out there. And, we're going to get pretty hungry in a day or two. No Twinkies in the fridge, sadly."

"Ugh. I hate those."

"Too bad. Supposedly, those are one of only two things that will have survived in a situation like this."

"The cockroaches can have them."

"Ah. I see you read that study."

"Ha."

The slight smile on her face faded quickly though, and was replaced by a troubled frown.

"I can't face that thing again."

"It's the only way to get you out. I just need to figure out how to give you enough time to do it." He tried not to sound as guilty as he felt. *You could've done that already, chicken-shit*, he told himself.

"What about you?"

"Not going back." His tone was flat and resolute.

"Why not?"

"Because, Sophia, I would rather be torn apart than go back to what I was."

"You know for a fact that will happen?"

"No, I don't. But I won't take the chance."

Her eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know how it works. I came through the hatch, and I was different. I could leave the same way. What would happen then? There's every reason to think that I'd be like I was before I came in. I won't go back."

He could see mental wheels turning in her expression, and he felt a sinking feeling in his gut. Her next words confirmed and accentuated it.

"You just said you could leave."

He hesitated, then nodded, and knew he was sunk.

"You realize what's missing in that statement, right?" Her eyes glittered in the firelight behind her glasses, and he could see her features harden as he watched. He said nothing, just looked back at her.

"You already know it can't follow, assuming you're quick enough. Because you *checked*, right?"

He remained silent, waiting for the rest of it.

"You tested it, somehow. And we could be out of this mess, if you had told me at the right time."

He looked at her, watching her anger twist her features again as it blew outwards from realization to articulation like a shockwave. He didn't need to give answer. She already knew.

"You *bastard!* I could be done with this right *now!* How could you possibly be that selfish? What the *hell* is the matter with you?"

Her anger crossed the distance between them, and he absorbed it, drawing it into himself as punishment for his failure. A familiar desolation filled him again.

"I'm sorry." He knew it was pro forma, and wouldn't help, a reflexive statement to bridge the space between her accusation and his inability to give answer.

Her rage played across her face, and he waited for the hurled imprecations, the vitriol of the unfairly wronged.

But they didn't come. He watched as her anger drained away, and tears filled her eyes. It was worse.

She put her hands to her face, and started to sob quietly, shoulders shaking.

He didn't know what to say, so he didn't even try. Anything he had to offer would be insufficient, so he just waited.

She didn't cry long. A few minutes went by, and then she slid her glasses up, and was wiping away the last tears with the palms of her hands, drying them on the front of her jeans. She looked back at him, and all her anger was gone. He couldn't really tell what had replaced it. She removed her glasses, and tried to clean them on her t-shirt, her pale eyes focused on him, not her hands.

"That was a shitty thing to do."

He nodded. She put her glasses back on.

"Why, then? Why didn't you stop and fight it? Like the time before."

"That's what you think I did? *Fight*?"

"Well, what do you call it? You went after it with a pen. That's insane."

"It wasn't a fight. Fight implies some hope of winning. I hoped to make it pay a little."

"That was your blaze of glory, then?"

He didn't respond immediately. So much had happened in such a short time, and this girl had only seen a small part of it. He didn't know her, and the same in return. His desolation waned, displaced by something else, flowing in from an unfamiliar quarter. He was suddenly indignant. He'd not felt it since Rachael had filed her restraining order, and it had been served to him at work, in front of his supervisor and several co-workers. Before that, his own shame had been enough to keep him from going home. She'd made it clear to stay away, and he had. That had evidently not been enough, and he could feel the same sense of outrage now. He had to school himself before he responded.

"No, it was my response to the situation. Zero premeditation. You realize this is all undiscovered country to me, too, right? There was no map or handbook at the door, or letter.

All I can say is, I didn't know what would happen if I chose the hatch over the door. In the moment, all I could see was the chance of getting it back. It was another bad decision in a long line of them. I was *wrong*. That's nothing new for me."

She was looking at him still, but it was with that little drift that happens when someone is both listening to you, and trying to think at the same time. She seemed to come to a conclusion, and snapped back to focus.

"I know this will sound like an accusation, but I'm really just trying to understand. You say you are one thing. But, your actions say different."

He blinked.

"What?"

"You talk like you're just this hapless guy. You imply that you're just floating along, you know, just kicked around by what's happened to you. Like there's not much you can do about it."

He waited, to see if she would really go down this road, to see if he'd get *the Talk* again. From this little girl, who had already pushed enough of his other buttons to now ignite his indignation into rage just at the thought that she would presume to do so. He felt the flames kindle in his gut.

Her next statement extinguished everything.

"But at every turn, every turn I've seen, anyway, you *act*. You tried to save me the first time. And you really did. If you hadn't done what you did, I wouldn't have had the courage to hide the coin. You saved me the second time, too, and you found a way to keep us alive here. Well, for now, anyway. Even the first time I met you. I could tell you were getting pissed that I was hassling you. But you didn't let it get in the way.

It was actually my uncle's rule to never let anyone onto the docks that didn't belong there, and I follow them all, because he also saved me. But I *broke* that rule for you. It shouldn't have mattered what some broken-down old alkie wanted. But it did. It seemed like you needed to go, so I let you."

He could tell by the frustration in her eyes that she felt like she wasn't getting it all across, that the conflicts and resulting actions still weren't clear to her. He decided to disperse both her discomfort and his. Her characterization of him made him uncomfortable, like she'd gotten a press release about him that was misleading. He went with deflection.

"Broken-down old alkie? You wound me, madam."

Her laugh was tentative, but there was enough in it to close the open circuit between where they'd been, and where they were now. She seemed relieved to be free of the burden of trying to make sense of it.

"Sorry. That just popped out."

"Sorry is the last thing you should be."

Her gaze intensified, her pale eyes shifting in the firelight behind her glasses.

"No. We've both made mistakes in this. Let's not dismiss that."

He blew out a breath between expanded cheeks, looking back at her in silence for a minute.

"Ok, then. You realize, we have decisions to make even if we leave semantics aside."

"Such as?"

"Do we go back, or not?"

He saw her resolution surface, and knew the answer. His tension between his own desire not to return and the reality of their situation increased, even before she spoke her choice.

"I can't face that again yet. You've made a place for us here so far. Maybe you can figure out a way for us to stay for a while? Could we explore a bit?"

"So that would be *not*, then."

"I don't want to hold you to *too* high a standard, but you did profess to be a super-hero. I was there, if you remember."

Her expression was a mixture of true and false, apparent even in the shifting light of the fire, and it was evidence that deflection was not his alone. He released his apprehension. If circling the drain had taught him anything, it was how to let go

when necessary. His smile contained all the assurance he didn't feel.

"I can give it a shot."

Ch. 12

Landslide

Before leaving the first time, he broke up one of the end tables, both to get his body heat up, and provide fuel for the fire.

"I don't think I can stay out long. And, I'll need your phone."

She handed it over. He stared at it. The screen was a lot bigger than he remembered them being, and the buttons were in different places.

"A-a-a-nd I'll need you to show me how to make it light up."

She snorted, taking it back. He stood over her shoulder as she quickly activated the screen, and then swiped up another menu. Then, the camera flash lit on the other side of the phone.

"Ok, one more time, but slower, please."

She pressed a button on the side with exaggerated slowness. The main screen returned. She then very slowly moved her finger toward the bottom of the screen.

He sighed.

"Yes, very helpful."

She offered up the phone.

"How's the charge?"

"Eighty-eight percent. Good for a while."

"You good here?"

"Yes. I am firmly established in my gender role. I will tend the cooking fire, while you go hunt and gather."

"I'm fine staying here, if you want to go out."

"No, no. It's a man's world. I know my place."

He sighed again, and left.

He went to the right, away from the hole in the roof, just so he could walk along with the wind, lessening its impact on him. There were more doors at intervals further away, recessed in the same way. More rooms, and as he shone the light from her phone at them, he could see that the doors were intact in their frames, and he didn't think the old heave-ho would work on them. So, lacking a pry-bar or explosives as he was, he moved on.

The hallway made a right turn, and the reach of the dim light from the compromised roof ended as he rounded the corner. He held the phone out in front of him. The hall continued forward about thirty feet, and then turned left. There were more doors on each side, each firmly shut as he checked them. He kept going. He was shivering now, and knew that these trips were going to have to be shorter than he had hoped.

The light from the phone illuminated a shape on the floor at the next turn, an assemblage of white sticks lying in the middle of the hall.

A few more steps then, and no, they were not sticks at all. They were skeletal remains lying face down, one arm outstretched toward the black opening where the hall turned left again, a macabre turn signal. He looked at the last door on the right before the body and the turn, and saw a slit of gray light along the right side of the door. He killed the light on the phone to save the battery, and pocketed it. There was a gap between the door and the frame, and he could immediately see why. The privacy lock jutted out between the two, keeping the door from closing. More wind buffeted its way out from the gap.

The flashback was strong, and it was the first of its kind in a while. His animosity toward his soon-to-be ex had grown substantially since the restraining order incident, and so he had blocked all thoughts of their prior life together. It had been hard at first, but practice makes perfect, and before he knew it, any thought of her not forced on him by external stimuli came as an unwelcome surprise. The booze had helped, or so it had assured him.

It was a romantic weekend away in the city. They'd had a great dinner, and then made love after in the unlit hotel room. Rachael had requested more ice after. He'd shrugged back into his jeans and shirt after a fruitless search for his underwear, not wanting to blind her with the lamp at the side of the bed.

"Where's the key?"

"I don't know. You had it last."

He'd searched his pockets. There was no key, or wallet either.

He'd walked to the door, snagging the ice-bucket off the table on the way, all by feel and what little light shone through from the hall outside under the door. He'd opened the door, and flipped the privacy latch over, preventing the door closer from doing its job.

"Back in a minute."

And end.

His teeth started to chatter as he stood before the door, and a grief that he thought he had permanently banned from himself began to flood through him. His eyes started to tear, but he fought it, anger flaring at its intrusion.

He hit the door with both palms, shoving it harder than necessary to open it. The slap of his cold flesh on colder metal brought a stinging pain. The physical pain and anger together effectively stemmed the tide of grief, and it evaporated as he forced the door wide on screaming hinges and entered the room.

The wind hit him in the face, because the window was gone, and the light-blocking curtains were in two piles on the floor below it. Every surface was drifted with detritus, and the mattress on the bed frame was nothing but a blackened spring-set, and the wall behind and the ceiling above were soot

stained. There'd been a fire then, but not a very hot one, as the drywall in both areas was intact.

There were no remains here. The bathroom door was open, and he could see part of the empty tub from where he stood. He didn't bother with it. He instead opened the closet door, thinking as he did that he hadn't checked the closet in the room they had ended up in. It would appear that Captain Morgan was a bit of a dimwit.

It creaked open, and inside he found two plastic clam-shell suitcases, both wheeled, one larger, one smaller. Some garments hung on hangers, but the cloth looked rotten, and there were no jackets, so he left them untouched as he rolled both cases out.

By now he was shaking with cold, and his hands ached, fingers almost totally numb. He went quickly to the armoire, and liberated all the bottled water from the mini-fridge. There were only four bottles, so he crammed them into his waist-band, cringing at the cold plastic against his skin. Then he left, pulling the cases behind him. He paused in the doorway, though, and flipped the privacy latch out of the way. He wasn't quite sure why he did it. Maybe there'd be less wind in the hall next time out. The closer still had enough tension to force the door shut behind him, hinges wailing. He heard a final click as the door latch found its seat.

He went straight back to the room where the fire waited, not bothering with the phone, since he knew nothing stood in his way having traversed it already. He left the cases near the door as he closed it behind him, and deposited the bottles on the table before sitting down by the fire, shaking and nose running. The room actually felt warm as he entered. He was that cold, he supposed. He couldn't put his hands too close to the fire, and his fingers had that pins-and-needles sting as they warmed. Sophia had watched him as he did all this, but gave him a minute or two to warm himself before she spoke.

"Find anything?"

"Hypothermia, and a couple of suit-cases. I'll check them in a minute."

"I'll do it." She got up and went to the door, and rolled the cases back to where she'd been sitting. Sitting down again, she tipped the larger one onto its side, and ran each zipper tab away from the other, circling three sides and then flipping it open.

He watched her dig through the contents, which was mostly clothing, as his shakes began to ease. The garments in the bag were in better shape than the ones that had been on the hangers. They didn't fall apart as she handled them, but so far most of them appeared to be light apparel.

"You realize that if whatever happened here happened during the summer or spring, we could be seriously out of luck."

In response, she pulled a folded bundle from deeper within the case and held it aloft.

"Sweatshirt!" She said triumphantly, holding it by the shoulders and letting it unfold. It was huge, at least a 2X, gray with a white logogram like the ones on the water bottle label screen printed on the front. She handed it to him.

"No, you wear it."

"Are you kidding? I'll drown in that. Besides, you're the one going out. And maybe there's another one." She continued to rummage through the case. He pulled it over his head. He heard a seam let go a little as he pulled it down over himself, but it held together otherwise, and he was glad for it as it began to warm against his skin. It smelled like dust and ash as did everything else here.

"Thanks."

"Am I not merciful?"

She pulled another folded item out. It was a woman's heavy cable sweater, with a turtle-neck and long sleeves. It was fairly big also, but Sophia sighed happily as she pulled it on.

"It's like a post-apocalyptic Christmas." She said, foregoing her search for the moment as she backed a little

closer to the fire, dragging the case with her. Then she resumed her digging.

He felt sufficiently warmed then to help, his hands having returned to functional capacity. He opened the other case, and examined its contents. Dress shoes, toiletries, beauty equipment, and other accoutrements rendered irrelevant by the cessation of the world to which they had been purposed. There was nothing useful. He closed the lid, and slid the case around, and was pushing it under the desk when he heard twin snapping sounds behind him, and then Sophia said,

"Well, hello."

He looked up.

She was holding a rectangular black plastic case, lid flipped back to reveal an automatic pistol resting within the molded interior. It wasn't big like a .45. It was maybe a 9mm. He didn't know guns, except from movies. Two magazines sat side by side in their seats in the crook formed by the barrel and the grip, the top one butted up against the trigger guard. They were face down, but he could see a glint of brass at the top of each. They were loaded.

"Whoa."

She looked up at him.

"Think it works?"

"Hard to say. It probably does, but the ammo is another matter. It depends on the condition of the primer and the propellant."

"Oh my gosh, you're like Bill Nye, the science guy. How do you know that?"

"National Geographic or the History channel. I come by my genius by the most expeditious route. You know, watching television."

"Do you want to try it? It'd be nice to know."

"Not here, for sure. In the interest of full disclosure, I'm not a gun guy. I fired one a couple times after high school with a buddy who was. What about you?"

She shook her head, putting the open case on the floor, near a stack of folded clothing that she'd sorted out of the suitcase.

"Nope. There are two in my uncle's safe, but he never let me near them until he got sick, and when he did, he made me promise to leave them alone. It was fine with me, because they're not my thing, either."

He nodded at the clothes.

"What else you find?"

"Couple pairs of sweats, and a pair of heavy socks. Not much else."

"Not bad for the first time out. Can I have the socks?"

She grabbed the pair off the top of the stack and handed them to him. They weren't athletic socks. They were a thick, fuzzy synthetic material, striped in lime green and purple, but they were substantial. He unlaced and removed his boots, stripped off the ped socks he was currently wearing, and pulled the other socks on. They creaked a bit, but held together. He put his boots back on and re-laced. Better by far.

"I think I'll try again. Hopefully I'll get a bit farther this time. You ok with being here alone?" He nodded toward the bed.

"Yes. Heat and light make a big difference, and they were well-behaved while you were gone the last time." She looked at him, and for the first time, her gaze behind her glasses was unguarded, no longer filled with anger, mistrust, or dismissal. He found it disconcerting, and looked away. He turned toward the door.

"Wait. Aren't you going to take it?"

He turned back, realizing what she meant and feeling stupid for having to be reminded. He knelt by her, and took the pistol out of the case. There was already a magazine in it. He made sure the safety was on, then pressed what he thought was the release button, and was rewarded by the magazine dropping from its place within the pistol grip into his waiting hand. He removed it all the way, and saw that it was fully loaded as

well. He re-inserted it, slapped it home, and jacked the slide in what he hoped was a manly display of firearm confidence.

His reward was Sophia putting one hand across her mouth, mirth glittering in her eyes. She raised her other arm high, holding that hand up with fore-finger forward and thumb extended at a right angle, held sideways. She jabbed it toward him, and he heard,

"Pkw."

He rolled his eyes.

"Ok, then."

He headed toward the door. He was tempted to tuck the pistol into the waistband of his jeans, but the thought of the cold metal against his skin was more than he could bear. He settled for jamming the barrel into his right front pocket. It was less cool, but less cold.

He went the same direction again, and the sweatshirt, while it did help, wasn't much of a wind-breaker. His feet were definitely warmer, though. He went quickly, needing to go farther afield this time. He waited until he'd made the first turn and had gone what he hoped was about halfway to the next turn before using the light from the phone.

He'd gone farther than he'd thought, and was almost to the room he'd investigated last time out. The skeleton on the floor wasn't far away. He passed the door, and came to its resting

place. Rags of clothing lay strewn beneath the white bones, stained dark with the residue of decomposition. Just beyond the outstretched hand, lying half buried under the sediment carried in by wind and years, was a cell phone. He passed it by, and turned the corner.

The first thing he noticed was light ahead. The hall continued for quite a long way, but he could see that it turned left again far ahead, and that dull, gray light illuminated the corner where it did so. He headed for it.

There were more doors on either side, all intact. There were cracks in the sheetrock, and several places where the wall was buckled slightly, but none of these were close to any particular doorway.

About half-way to the other end, he came upon a branching to the left. He shone the light into it, and saw that it was a large foyer facing a bank of four elevators. There were no windows, and nothing of interest was revealed by the light of the phone. Just more dust, a side table on the right wall with two vases resting upon it, and framed artwork on the wall behind it, so shrouded in dust and shadow that he couldn't make out what it depicted. He kept going.

Each door he passed refused him entry, any secrets behind remaining so. He was almost to the end when he reached another

dark, door-less opening on the left. Light from Sophia's phone illuminated a small enclosure with an ice machine within it.

A tiny bit of his previous flashback ghosted upward from the back of his mind, but he turned away from it by continuing on toward the light ahead.

He turned the corner, and saw that the hallway in front of him ended about fifteen feet ahead. Its terminus wasn't a door, or another turn. Gray sky and ruined buildings were visible through the ragged hole that marked the end of this particular line. There was a door on the right, and it was warped in its frame, the top bent away behind the sagging lintel. Gray light was visible through the gap.

A door further along on the left was just gone, though he couldn't see through it because of where he stood. He debated, and then moved slowly forward. The wind was more turbulent here, pushing him toward the opening ahead with icy vigor.

He passed the door on the right, leaving it for later. As he moved closer, the view through the missing door on the left became visible by degrees, eventually revealing a door to open air. He could see that it had once been the entrance to a hotel room, but the room beyond was gone. A short stub of entry hall, and the beginnings of the bathroom door, and then open space, more ravaged buildings visible beyond. The building directly ahead through the door was leaning tiredly against its neighbor,

no intact glass anywhere across its face. Its steel and concrete supports had been ravaged by some cataclysmic inferno, warped and twisted to the point where there seemed to be no straight lines left, only slight arcs and curves bridging from point to point. He stepped as lightly as gravity would allow, hoping that the support structure under the floor wasn't so compromised that he would end up riding a wave of collapse out into the void ahead. He hoped for a good vantage point to see what the world below looked like, but didn't want that view to be his last.

The floor of the hall held fast with no signs of impending failure to the edge where the hall ended, and he stood there staring out through the break at the world he'd chosen for them.

Something had sheared off this corner of the building, and a look to the left toward the traumatized building he'd seen through the last doorway explained it.

Two-thirds of the way down its face there was a huge impact crater, a monstrous gash spanning most of its width. Below, at street level, he could see the unmistakable outline of the tail section of a passenger jet resting in a crumpled heap at the building's base, and other less identifiable wreckage strewn about it. They were all shrouded in vegetation that had grown up, around, and through them. Evergreens, ivy, and junk scrub filled all the level space between the larger pieces, concealing much of what remained down there.

He stared at the impact point, and then tracked backward, across the missing section in front of him, and up into the gray sky.

It must have come in at a pretty steep angle, clipping the corner of this building before slamming into the one across the street. He looked down.

Below him about twenty feet, at what was now the top of the outer corner of the building, he could see a rectangular opening below, and the mangled remains of a stairway descending into darkness amidst structural debris. This hall had once terminated in a stairwell access then. They weren't getting out of the building on this side, it was pretty clear. He'd need to check the other end of the hallway to see if there was another one available to them.

He took one last look out at the ruined city marching away into the distance along orderly rows of streets and avenues, all now choked with encroaching vegetation. It was certainly a major city, or had been. Tall buildings were visible in all the limited directions he could see, densely packed enough and still present far enough out to prevent him from seeing anything significant beyond them. He turned back.

He stopped at the door he'd passed by earlier, the damaged one. He pushed on it, but it resisted. He pressed harder, and then instantly wished he hadn't.

There was a distinctly metallic report as two formerly wed sections of the door frame suddenly and decisively divorced, and the hinge side of the lintel collapsed downward. The door itself peeled away, hinges letting go as it fell away and outward.

He felt the floor start to give as the door dropped away, revealing empty space behind it. He backpedaled as quickly as he could, but the structural failure happening all around him was wide-spread, and precipitous. He felt the floor disintegrating below him as he whirled around, intent on sprinting back the way he'd come. He could see the hall in front of him beginning to form an incline up toward the right turn ahead, as it dropped down behind him.

As he pivoted, he felt the pistol slide free of his pocket, drawn out by the laws of inertia and centrifugal force.

He had a single instant to decide what to do. He didn't have enough time to turn and visually track the gun. He needed to be in motion right then to escape the collapsing section he was on. But the thought of losing it was agony.

He brought his left hand up, and pushed off with his right leg, the first actions toward an all out sprint. At the same time, he whipped his right arm around and down behind him, in an utterly blind grab for the falling pistol.

He was shocked to feel cold metal as his hand clasped together at the outermost edge of his backward reach. He had it,

but only just, end of the barrel clamped between only his pinkie and ring fingers and the edge of his palm. His launch into forward motion was stressing his already tenuous grasp, and he could feel it starting to slip free. He gritted his teeth, clamped down savagely with the limited strength those fingers had, and brought his arm forward as his stride accelerated.

Still it slipped. He'd lost most of the contact he had with the ring finger, and was pretty much down to pinkie and palm when his arms forward swing passed its lowest point, and began to rise upward in front of him as he ran.

A crack appeared in the ceiling ahead just before the hall turned right toward the center of the building. It ran down both walls, and met itself in the center of the floor. The portion of the building he was currently sprinting across was on its way down, and the incline upward increased. There was a roaring in his ears.

Then he felt the gun finally slip free of his grasp. He spared a glance down. He'd gotten his hand partway up in front of him before it did so, so he saw its trajectory out ahead of him as it left his hand. It tumbled end over end through the air at an oblique angle toward the floor as he followed behind, finally impacting butt downward, and flipping over, barrel then planting its tip into the carpet. Then its momentum bounced it into the air as he drew even with it.

He batted it upward with his right palm even as the roof, walls, and floor tore loose from the section ahead, and started to descend in earnest. It flew through the gap ahead as he leapt, closing the distance between himself and the quickly narrowing space between this falling hallway and the stationary one ahead.

He escaped being torn in half by fractions of a second. Something caught at his boot-heel as his final leap carried him through the gap, the wall ahead stopping his short slide across the dusty carpet, and light flared in as what little building remained above the section he'd just escaped followed the rest downward with a rumble and cloud of dust from below.

He held still, crouched and leaning against the wall, until the rumbling and vibrations died completely. Then he pushed himself to his feet, and looked out over this newest collapse zone, not yet willing to move any closer to the edge than where he was currently standing. Dust billowed from below and was quickly snatched away by the wind, carried off like smoke from a fire, blowing away through the spaces between buildings, and through the broken shells of some of the structures themselves.

He looked down. The gun was midway between the wall where he stood and the edge of this newest end of the hallway. It glinted up at him in the gray light. He stepped to where it was,

picked it up, and shoved it back into the same pocket. But his mind was on other things.

Sophia had to have heard that, or at least felt it. He thought about what that might mean to someone as far from home as she was, with only someone like him to rely on. He'd better move it.

He ran back along the long section of hall, now dimly lit by the new aperture at the end behind him. He soon reached the turn, skirted the skeleton on the floor, and made for the next turn. He was just short of it when he heard a door screech open around the corner. Then he heard her call out his name, and the wild fear in her voice tore at his heart.

He rounded the corner and slowed as he saw her standing there, back-lit by the break in the ceiling behind. He held his hands up in the same gesture that never worked, no matter what he wanted it to communicate.

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm ok. No worries."

She was shaking, but he couldn't see her face. She brought a hand up to her forehead, and as he closed the distance between them, he could hear the hitching in her breathing. He stopped before her, and dropped his hands. He had no idea what to do, though the situation screamed at him to do *something*. He spoke in the calmest voice he could manage.

"I'm sorry. Some things happened, but, ah, I'm fine, and I am so sorry to have frightened you."

She turned her head to the side, and the light behind her glinted off of the wetness on her cheeks. But she wiped it away, as she responded, turning back towards him.

"Ok. Ok, yeah, so, you're ok, then."

In just that short statement, he could hear the strain as she put down her fear, wrestling it down so she could return to herself. And she did. Her next question was almost conversational.

"What happened?"

Something flared hotly within him, and he realized it was admiration. She might be broken, but she was *strong*.

He smiled at her.

"Too cold to tell you out here. Can we go in?"

She nodded, stepping aside to let him back in.

Ch. 13

"Distant early warning"

They sat down in what now seemed like their appointed places, she facing the fire, and he at the side near the desk. There was also now an observance of the warming up period, where they didn't speak while he thawed himself, though he was better off this time than last. It was probably due more to exertion and adrenalin than the extra sweatshirt or socks, though. He found it odd that it would be established so quickly, but it was comforting in a way he didn't know he was hungry for, until it was there. Or until he imagined it was. He knew himself well enough to know he was easily capable of assigning values to constants that really weren't constants. Once again, she spoke first.

"Don't leave me hanging. What happened?"

He gave her an abbreviated version of his trip, minimizing the personal danger, and eliminating the near-loss of the pistol. She already had plenty of evidence to conclude that he was a screw-up. He didn't feel any need to raise her stress level on that score. He described what he'd seen of the city around them, and the condition of the streets below.

"That's not very encouraging."

He felt the untenable nature of their situation settling around them like poured cement. He knew at some point soon it

would harden, and they would have to face the only option truly available to them. Until then, though, he was willing to do whatever she wanted him to do.

"I don't know, Sophia. Maybe we can find something here. I'm happy to try. We might be able to cobble together enough stuff to at least look around down below. You seem to have the gift of finding." He pulled the pistol out of his pocket and held it up as he said this last, and then set it on the floor between them.

He could see the doubt in her face too, though. He continued.

"You read any Stephen King?"

She smiled in response, but the smile was sad, and her statement confirmed that she knew what he meant, even though he had asked something else.

"I get it. This world has moved on."

He stared at her in surprise, having assumed he'd have to explain it. She stared back. She raised her eyebrows.

"What? Yes, I *read*. Books with actual pages, even, not just Facebook posts."

He opened his mouth to reply, then shut it again.

She pointed at him and grinned a little.

"I totally won that, didn't I?"

He just nodded, and smiled in return.

Their smiles faded together as each turned back to the fire, and inward into themselves. Silence filled the space again, save for the muted crackle of flames. He knew what he needed to talk to her about, but she hadn't been willing last time he'd tried, and he wondered if she would be any more so this time. He formed and rejected a number of introductory inquiries, unable to come up with anything that didn't seem to pry at something she seemed not to want to discuss. So he was a little startled when she spoke finally, many interminable minutes later. Not just by its relevance to his own train of thought, but by the content, as well.

"I've seen that thing, that creature before."

"Whoa, what?"

"Well, not seen really, not like literally with my eyes. But I've dreamt of it. Like in nightmares, I guess. And it's not exactly like what I saw there, either." She was frowning as she looked at him, struggling to put something evidently hard to articulate into words. "I've seen something, something that's been in most of my bad dreams ever since I was a kid. And it never looks exactly the same, or acts exactly the same. Sometimes I can't see it at all. You know, how you're scared of something but it's behind you, or just beyond the edge of the light, but you know it's there like you do in dreams?"

He nodded, not knowing how else to respond. He didn't think he slept like most people. He passed out, and then regained consciousness. He did remember a few dreams from childhood, though, so he thought he knew what she meant.

"When I saw it that first time, you know, really saw it walking out of the woods, the nightmare pieces were suddenly all there, assembled into something that was real. There it was, walking towards me. It could see me, and I was awake this time."

A tear dropped down her cheek as she looked at him, and he could sense the tide of her fear washing back toward her. He didn't think about it, he just reached out and enfolded her closest hand in both of his, patting the top of it gently. She let him, though he had no words of comfort to follow the gesture. Another tear, this time down the other cheek, and more waited in her eyes.

"So I just sort of, shut down. It happens, sometimes, since my...." She faltered, but then went on, leaving that statement unfinished. "I remember bits and pieces. I remember hiding the coin while it...hurt you. I remember opening the door for it with the other one, and I remember it telling me how to. And then I remember being in another place." She stopped, shaking visibly, and he sensed it wasn't from the cold. He continued to pat, at a loss for anything else. She breathed deeply for a few breaths, and her shaking passed. She withdrew her hand, but not

abruptly. She gave the barest squeeze before doing so, like a signal to her intention. She wiped her cheeks and sniffed. When she continued, her voice was stronger.

"It was *wrong*. I don't know how else to describe it. I mean, part of me knows exactly what it looked and felt like. But the part of me that...goes away, I guess? That part doesn't have to look at it, if I don't want to.

And I don't. I can't. So all I have is impressions, and feelings. I can't block it *all* out, or I would. It's always been like that. Do I sound crazy?"

He quoted from his vast store of television sound bites, because he had nothing of his own.

"A person's reaction to extreme trauma can be unpredictable." It had sounded so cogent and relevant in his head. Now that he heard himself say it out loud, it sounded moronic.

She didn't exactly point at him and laugh, but she did roll her eyes.

"Good one, Dr. Phil. I was looking for, 'No, Sophia, you don't sound crazy.'."

"So you're saying that a lifetime spent watching TV has been a waste of time?"

She laughed a little, but like before, the humor ebbed quickly away. There was no trace left when she spoke next. She looked into the fire as she did so.

"It was *bad*, the place it took me to. Like, if you looked at anything with more than a passing glance, it would start to twist, to warp and vibrate a little, even though it didn't move. It was hot, and humid, but the worst thing was this sound. Sort of, *behind* everything. Not like on the other side of the wall, or in another room. Like just *beyond* them, but close. The sound of something very *big*, and...*hungry*, and... "

She stopped, and growled in frustration. She looked directly at him then.

"It's locked. I only have the tiny pieces that bleed under the door. I'm too terrified to unlock it. Please don't make me."

He considered it for a moment, even though he knew his response was a foregone conclusion. She'd shown him forbearance. There was nothing in him that would not extend the same to her.

"I wouldn't. I can't."

She seemed relieved, and he thought she was done, but she wasn't.

"There is another thing, and I think it's related, though I couldn't tell you why I think that."

She stopped, looking at him with doubt in her eyes, as though there was a real danger that he would declaim the connection if she verbalized it. He made it easy for her.

"Tell me."

She nodded, as though that was the necessary prompt.

"It's building something. No, not building. Assembling something. It isn't making the parts, it's just putting them together. And I think it's been doing it for a very, very long time."

He remembered the one-sided conversation he'd overheard in the atrium, and the mention of an "artifact".

He waited, but she was done for now.

"Hmm. Well then, this is me not asking you, 'what do you mean?', or 'is there anything else you can tell me?'."

"Thank you."

"Even though I really, really want to."

"I appreciate your willingness to not."

He opened his mouth again, and she threw a pair of sweats at his head. As they flopped into his lap, he looked at her. She was looking back at him with her chin thrust forward. She didn't appear to be angry. The look on her face was...maybe, stubbornness? That's what it looked like. Stubbornness, with fear behind it. He let it go.

"Alright, ok. Then what now?"

"Maybe it'll change, but at least for me, anywhere is better than ending up back there. Even here. You said we could look around. Can we still do that?"

He blew out a breath, and grimaced.

"There're a couple of big ifs. Can we find clothing that will keep us warm without being tied to the fire here? I mean, as cold as it is out there, we're talking cold weather gear, not just some jackets and gloves. What are the odds that I can find something like that nearby? I'm limited in how far I can go before having to come back."

She didn't comment, just waited. So he went on.

"There's plenty of water, probably some in every room. But I need to figure out how to open every door, not just the ones that are damaged enough, or open already. I need a pretty big pry-bar to be able to do that. I can't imagine there are a lot of those just lying around in a hotel."

"You should check housekeeping."

"What?"

"Is this place pretty big?"

He shrugged.

"I don't know. I've only gone in one direction so far, but it seems like it is. There are four elevators. That many would move a fair amount of people."

"Then there's probably a housekeeping station on every floor, if it's big enough. If there's something like that anywhere, it'll be there. Lots of supplies, too. It's where they stock the rooms from."

"How do you know that?"

"My uncle made me start working as soon as I could get a permit. I applied one summer at a hotel downtown. Head of housekeeping's assistant took me around, showed me what I'd be doing."

"End up with the job?"

She snorted.

"No. The guy who took me around was alright, but head of housekeeping was the biggest letch I have ever met. I needed a shower after the first handshake. I felt bad for the girls there who really needed the work. Because *of course* they were all girls."

"Oh. Yuck."

She nodded.

"At least some of the things we need will probably be there. You just need to find it."

A yawn overtook him out of nowhere, and he shivered. But then he picked up the pistol, and got to his feet.

"Only one way left to go, then."

She looked up at him, the light from the fire masking her gaze behind the dancing glare on her glasses. He fished the half dollar out of his pocket, and handed it to her. She accepted it without comment, and set it beside her on the floor. Then she dug in her pocket, and pulled out the two pennies, dropping them next to the half-dollar. She looked back at him. They looked at each other for a few moments longer, and then he nodded, turned, and went back out into the cold again.

Ch. 14

Out in the cold

He walked toward the debris field below the break in the roof as the wind sought to dissuade him, and picked his way over and across, thankful for the boots he wore as it shifted and compressed under the weight of his footfalls. Once past, the hallway dimmed again as he moved away from the light cast through the interruption in the ceiling. The wind was much reduced on this side of the breach, but he still felt colder than before. Maybe he should've spent more time in front of the fire before going out again. He brought out Sophia's phone as it became hard to see. He'd passed several doors on each side, but they were intact and immovable like so many he'd already seen.

He reached a branch in the hallway heading left. He stopped before it and activated the phone's flashlight function, holding it before him as he faced the opening.

It was a short hall, with a door midway along on the left, and a door at the end. Neither of them were recessed, like the hotel room doors he'd seen so far. He entered the hall, and stopped before the first door. The small logograms on the door had the connecting script that he now ventured to guess signified text rather than the stand-alone sequence of symbols he'd seen on the room doors, which were likely numbers. That was probably a good sign. Nevertheless, the door had the same card-

reader lock as every other one he'd seen so far. He was no better off this time out, so what, then?

Only one invasive option, really. Why not try it?

He pulled the pistol out, disengaged the safety, thumbed back the hammer, aimed at where he thought the latch might be behind the card-reader housing, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Great, he thought, and pulled the slide back, ejecting the bad round. He let it go, chambering the next. He aimed again.

Click.

"Well, shit."

Repeat.

The report was louder than he anticipated, and the fact that it occurred at all caused him to flinch. But, as he aimed the phone at the impact site, he could see a neat hole through the door side edge of the card reader.

He pushed on the door.

It resisted, with the same sort of "I'm shut and locked" solidity that a non-wounded door might affect. This angered him for some reason, so he put his shoulder to it with prejudice. There was a shriek as damaged metal parted, and the door jolted open. Darkness lay beyond, but he checked himself, realizing that the sound of the shot would have Sophia on her feet. He held the pistol barrel downward at his side, and headed back

down the short hall. He heard the door down the hall open as he rounded the corner, and he called out to her.

"It's ok. I may have found it. I'll let you know. Give me a few minutes."

He couldn't see her past the light draining in from the gap in the roof, but he heard her response.

"So it obviously works. That's good, right?"

"It's hit and miss. I'll be back as soon as I check it out, ok?"

A few moments passed.

"Aye, aye, captain."

"Always water in that well, evidently."

The good laugh echoed back at him down the hall.

"Yes. Yes there is."

And then he heard the screech of door hinges as she went back to the fire.

He went back to the sprung door, slipping the still-warm barrel of the pistol into his pocket, and pushed it open, holding the phone up to illuminate the space beyond.

It was a fairly large space, so he could only see part of it immediately. There was a desk in the nearest corner to the right, with a task chair tucked neatly into the foot-well. A dusty flat-screen monitor sat atop it, dark and dormant. Posters were push-pinned onto both walls above it, covered with

the strange text, along with stylistic representations of how to correctly lift a heavy object, and the dangers of stacking boxes too high. It was strange how familiar everything was. He wondered briefly if this was what it was like for someone who didn't know how to read. Every object was more or less familiar, except for the unrecognizable symbols that described and defined each one.

Metal racks began along the wall to the left of the desk, and he could see they were loaded with the currency of hotel service. Paper goods, cleaning supplies, stacks of linens and towels lined the deep shelves in orderly rows. He moved a bit further in, and was gratified to see rows of plastic water bottles and aluminum cans, wrapped in plastic and stacked at least ten high. At least he wouldn't have to bring them in by ones and twos on his foraging trips.

Several maid carts sat in the middle of the room, dusty and forgotten like everything else. He made a mental note to clear one, so he could bring back those things of use to them all at once, at least to the break in the roof. It was a short carry to the room from there.

The shelves were interrupted further along the right wall by a long steel counter, with a sink set into it at one end. At the other, there was a large metal rectangle about the size of an oven door, with a similar handle, though located at the

bottom. It was set into the wall above the counter. He went to it and pulled on the handle. It was spring-loaded, because once the bottom edge was about six inches from the wall, it pushed his hand upward as springs twanged and hinges squealed to reveal a large sheet-metal chute beyond, a short decline into a dark vertical shaft beyond. Laundry chute, maybe? He forced the door closed again, and continued on. Past the counter, more shelving loaded with linens and stacks of what looked like folded comforters. The shelves ended at the rear of the room, and two doors punctuated the rear wall, one close to the side near him, and the other equidistant between it and the other wall. They all had simple door-knobs, no card-reader locks. He went to the closest and opened it.

It was a narrow room, maybe twelve feet deep, and six wide, with garment racks lining the right side, and narrow metal shelves on the left. Garments and garment bags hung from the racks, each with a white paper tag affixed. On the shelves, various items sat under the pervasive coating of dust. Handbags, shoes, suitcases, folded clothing, cell-phones, and other personal items lined each shelf, each tagged with the same white paper slip. He guessed he was looking at a lost-and-found. He held the phone out before him, taking a quick inventory of the items on the shelves. Nothing really stood out, except maybe a few of the larger suitcases. He grabbed one, dragged it out into

the main room, and did the same for two more. On the way out with the last case, something on the bottom shelf caught his eye.

A pair of calf-height leather boots sat on the shelf where it met the wall. They looked like that kind with the stupid name, the ones that looked like they were put together by eighth graders, but cost hundreds of dollars. Rachael had owned a pair. But he could see the sheepskin lining at the top, and they looked thick and warm. He pushed the case out the door, and then grabbed them. They were stiff, but there were no signs of deterioration or separation as he flexed them. They had what looked like rubber soles, but they must have been some form of synthetic, because they bent without cracking. He took them out, and placed them on the floor next to the three cases.

He went to the next door, and it was unlocked, as well. The room behind it was wider than the first one. It was an office with a desk, filing cabinets, and rows of shelves to the left, these last filled with binders and thick manuals. Behind the desk was a high-backed executive chair, and in the chair was another casualty of whatever had happened here. The skeleton sat in the ruin of the upholstery, each arm atop the arm of the chair, skull lolled back against the top of the headrest, as if it had just nodded off before the apocalypse and never woken up.

There was nothing of interest on the desk, just scattered papers curled at the edges with age, and another inert flat-screen monitor. He debated looking through the drawers, but thought he'd leave it for another time. He didn't see much need for paper clips, or a highlighter pen. He was starting to shiver in earnest now, so he knew it wouldn't be long before he needed to head back.

On the right wall there were two huge metal cabinets hulking in the far corner, and closer, two clones of the chair he'd smashed for firewood earlier in their room.

Their room. How stupid. Like they'd checked in, or something.

He went to the closest cabinet, and opened it. Office supplies, more binders, thick reference books, stacks of papers, and quite a few cardboard boxes. Since the labels were useless to him, he pulled one part-way out and lifted the press-fit lid off. The cardboard was spongy, and one corner began to rip as he illuminated the contents. More papers. Woo-hoo. He slid the box back in, and closed the doors. He went to the other cabinet, and opened it. The upper section was more of the same, but the lower section contained another cabinet, this one colored red, with white text on the front. He couldn't read it, of course, but the white cross printed on one door was clear enough. He tugged at

the latches, and both doors popped open. He swung them wide, and directed the phone's glow at the contents.

"And Bingo was his name-oh."

There were neat rows of medical supplies, respirators, batteries, mylar blankets and other less identifiable items shrouded in plastic wrap. He leaned the phone against the sidewall of the cabinet on the uppermost shelf, facing inward so that it lit the space. He shifted the contents around, inventorying them before removing anything.

Four of the plastic-wrapped items turned out to be hand-crank flashlights, so he removed two and placed them on the floor next to him. He took two of the blankets as well. There was a hand-crank radio, but he didn't see the point. The rest didn't seem relevant either, so he moved the phone to the lower shelf, and looked through the contents. Lots of foil packets with no illustrations, just more text he couldn't read. He took two anyway. He could open them later.

Shivering had transitioned to shaking without his notice, and his nose ran freely.

Some metal canisters with no obvious purpose, and at least twenty packets of what appeared to be glow-sticks. He threw one of these on the pile at his side. His cheek twitched into a one-sided grin as he found several pairs of insulated leather gloves. Two went into the pile. Part of the lower shelf held

some more binders, maybe instructions for all this stuff, so he was now left with a lower drawer spanning the width of the cabinet. He pulled it open, though it took him several tries to grasp the pull at the center. He held the phone up. His heart leapt as he recognized what it contained.

Tools.

This was a treasure trove, but its crown jewel spanned the width of the drawer, nearly four feet. It was a large steel pry-bar, with a straight bevel at one end, and a dog-leg at the other, terminating in a wide, thin wedge.

"Yesh!"

His voice sounded slightly odd, but his excitement eclipsed everything else.

He now had his key to any room in this or any other building. He grasped it, but his fingers couldn't clasp it hard enough to lift it, and he couldn't feel the cold metal against his fingertips. His shaking had eased, and an alarm bell went off in his head. He didn't feel nearly as cold, and he knew this was a bad sign. He forced himself to his feet, and was unprepared for the effort that it took. His feet were numb, too, so staying upright was a chore. He was tempted to sit back down, but he fought it. He left everything where it was, turning while trying to pocket the cell phone. His unfeeling hand didn't have the necessary dexterity to complete the transaction, and the

phone slid from his grasp, sliding down the right leg of his jeans and then tumbling away as it struck his still-moving boot. It must have ended up face-down at the end of its tumble because the room went dark. He opted not to take the time to look for it, so he made straight for the faint outline of the office door, and then on toward the brighter silhouette of the outer door.

Then he crashed into the maid carts in the center of the room without seeing them before-hand, knocking the nearest one over, and sending the other rolling across the floor toward the door. He tripped over the fallen cart, sprawling over it in a painful tumble that left him lying on his back on the floor beyond it. The pain was the only thing that saved him.

As he came to rest, he could feel a warmth that his bones seemed to have forgotten begin to light his core, but the pain in his back from the fall cleared his mind a little. He knew he needed to get up and get back to the fire, or he was destined to become one more inert object in a washed-up world full of them. He rolled over, struggled to his feet once more, and continued on, bumping the other cart aside as he neared the door.

He passed through, and stumbled down the short hall, a numb hand trailing along the nearest wall for balance. He reached the end, and turned toward the light. He staggered along, and his thoughts became more muddled as he did so. Why was he trying so

hard? He was tired, and the thought of stopping, of sitting down was a siren song that he wasn't sure why he resisted. He came to the pile of rubble, and started to shuffle through it, a hand he couldn't feel still pressed against the wall. Then he caught a toe on something firm within the silt, and he fell headlong, landing on his side in an explosion of dust and ash. He could feel the wind howling in from above, carrying the dust cloud quickly away, but the feeling was distant, like the shifting of a sheet against one's skin at the edge of sleep.

He was finally warm again, after hours of being cold, and all he wanted to do was close his eyes. But a final sliver of obligation remained, and he took the only action he could manage as his higher brain functions began to shut down, as pointless as it seemed. He kicked out weakly, and the toe of his boot impacted the wall. It wasn't very hard, but it was enough to send a vibration outward along its structure.

Farther along the wall near the door to their room, a brass light fixture that had been clinging to the wall for decades by the last few strands of a single copper wire trembled as the vibration passed. These last strands, having survived the end of their world and everything that came after, gave up at that particular prompt, and parted. The fixture crashed to the floor, thumping down onto the shattered remains of its glass shroud on the floor below.

He didn't hear it, but she did.

Ch. 15

Killing time

She was lost in thought when she heard the sound outside. It was a dull thump amid a few dry crackles, and was utterly unidentifiable, but significant in a place where a sound implied an event, and events seemed to be rare.

She'd been thinking about what she couldn't think about, as if an oblique examination would illuminate anything while she denied herself full disclosure. Each time she started leaning toward opening the door on it, she shied away. She didn't think of herself as weak, or cowardly, but there was something there, something so horrific that she couldn't let herself relive it.

But she could see the alternative was a delay, at best. I mean, the guy had proven to be resourceful, no doubt. Well, after screwing her over pretty good first, yeah, but that aside, he was like, intrepid. And he certainly hadn't asked her to come looking for him.

So let it be what it was, a delay. She was ok with that, because she was now ok with being here, as strange as that sounded. She had no friends, never really had. There'd been a few when her parents were alive, but she couldn't remember their names, let alone their faces. A lot had been different, then. Her employees still treated her like Brick's niece, rather than their boss. She had been working on that, but being a hard-ass

took a fair amount of confidence and energy, and she was low on both. She was lonely, and she knew it.

So now the fact that she was where she was, and with whom, and that it was somehow better spoke volumes to the depth of her loneliness. It made no sense, but there was just something about this guy. He was ancient, but there was something. She didn't know what.

She was three years into a four year degree, and had brushed up against a number of the same classmates for all three. There'd been small talk, study sessions, group work, and a few dates, but nothing took. She was on one side, and all the rest of it was on the other.

No real connections at all.

Now there was *this* guy. It was as crazy as the rest of all this.

She put it aside as she got to her feet and went to the door, to see what had made the sound outside. She pulled it open, and poked her head around the frame, as the icy wind ruffled her hair and made her eyes water a bit. She looked toward the way he'd gone, and an ice-pick of fear slammed into her chest as she saw him lying in the pile of debris below the hole in the roof. He was on his side, facing the wall, unmoving. She stood still for a long moment, paralyzed. The specter of loss had materialized in an instant, its pathway within her

annealed by the death of her parents and her uncle into a super-conductive pipeline, able to inject overwhelming panic and dismay into her at a moment's notice.

A recent memory interposed itself between her and her panic. She remembered how he had made sure she got warm first as he built the fire, his concern written in every movement. The memory broke her stasis, and she sprinted down the hall to where he'd fallen. She knelt over him, and began shaking him with both hands.

His lips were blue, and his skin was ashen, and at first there was no response.

So she shook harder, yelled at him, and then slapped his cheek.

"Wake up!"

He stirred a bit, and his brows furrowed, and just that little response was enough to quiet her panic. He wasn't already gone. He was still here. It wasn't about being left behind. It was logistics and management now, things she didn't fear nearly as much. Relief flooded through her and she slapped his cheek again, harder this time, but with a slight smile.

"On your feet, sailor!"

She tugged at his hands as they came up in self-defense, and tried to pull every upward movement farther than he intended to give. He was mumbling as she cajoled him into a sitting

position, his eyes still shut, but only a single phrase was intelligible.

"Dammit, Rachael, let me sleep."

She went with it.

"You can sleep all you want when we get back to the fire. But you need to do your part. On your feet, right now, or we're *done!*"

His eyes came open just a bit at that, and she felt him tense, and he struggled to stand. She moved at the same time, and together they gained the necessary altitude to move forward. He leaned heavily across her back, but he was participating enough to make the journey back to the room doable, and when they collapsed in front of the fire, he was still pliable enough to allow her to switch positions. She kept him in an upright sitting position as she moved around behind him, putting her back against the wall below the window, legs to each side, and then pulled him backwards, wrapping her arms around him as he sagged against her. He was cold, and the fire seemed insufficient at first, but then she could feel him warm against her as the minutes passed. She didn't quite know how she felt about this close contact, but figured there were plenty of things she was not thinking about at the moment, and just added it to the list.

He was unresponsive for almost half an hour, or so she guessed with no way to actually mark the time, but she could feel his breathing, slow and regular. She occasionally added fuel to the fire from the dwindling pile beside her with one arm, the other wrapped tightly around his chest. She'd draped all the extra clothing she'd salvaged over him, at least all the parts she could reach from where she sat. He twitched from time to time, and she would ease her grasp on him, waiting to see if he would wake.

Despite his obvious distance from his last shower, he didn't smell bad. There was dust, ash, sweat, and something else. Not like her uncle, and not like the faded remembrance she had of her father. It was different, but not bad. Good, in fact.

There were two guys, one in her psych class, and another in econ. They were both distractingly beautiful to look at. One in a lost boy vampire sort of way, with dark eyes and hair, and ruby lips. Thin as a whip, with six-pack abs that he would show off under the guise of a sudden and particularly unavoidable itch.

The other was a young viking, with perfect teeth, perfect hair, and a perfect smile. He was assembled like a Norse god, and his voice was basso sunshine.

She'd been paired with each of them this semester for in-class projects, and had initially thought herself lucky. She'd

certainly felt the camaraderie temperature drop among her fellow female classmates. She didn't care. She wasn't much of a team player.

But they'd been exactly the same. Different words, slightly different timelines, but their endgame was ultimately between her legs. But before this became clear to her, she realized that they smelled bad, both of them.

Each wore cologne. It was clear that each showered regularly, incorporating soap, body wash, and/or whatever other intermediary popular advertising demanded come between them and their unwashed state.

But they still carried it with them to every class, to every library session, to each coffee shop meeting. Under all the perfumes, still present after the soaps and surfactants had supposedly done their jobs, there remained an offense to her sense of smell.

That made her rebuffs easy, despite their attempts at charm. She hadn't gotten the grades she'd hoped for, given the inevitable disconnect her non-compliance had led to. It was a small price to pay, really, but it had made her sad. Not because she'd missed out on anything, but because there'd been nothing to miss out on.

But that made this all the more strange. Because, although he didn't smell that great, he did smell *good*. And the weight of

him against her inner thighs and torso pushed the irony into the stratosphere.

She didn't have much of a chance to explore the dichotomy even if she'd wanted to, as he started awake, and tried to sit up. She let him go out of reflex, and was not a little dismayed to find that subsequent emotional data would indicate that this would not have actually been her first choice. She buried it, because it freaked her out a little.

He glanced around wildly, then turned in place to look at her.

"What happened?"

She shrugged.

"Cold got to you, I think. You passed out in the hall. I had to man-handle you a little to get you back in here."

He rubbed his face with his hands, and then looked at her again. In the light of the fire, she could see that his eyes were blood-shot, and tired. But there was still a glint of humor in them.

"Man-handle?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Man-handle. As in, 'to apply the palm of coercion to the cheek of reticence'."

His grin was also tired, and short as well.

"How long was I out?"

"Half hour, maybe. You have my phone, so...."

He sighed and dipped his chin.

"No, I don't actually. But before you man-handle me again, I have some good news that will offset the fact that I left your phone where I did. Maybe. Does the flashlight option turn off by itself, by chance?"

She glowered at him.

"I don't know. I've never just *left* it on before."

He held up his hands to fend her off.

"I found flashlights. We don't need it for that anymore. And I found lots of other stuff. But most importantly, I found a way into any room we need to get into. All we need to find now is gear to un-tether us from that."

He indicated the fire with a gesture.

"I don't think you should go out for a while. Your core temp is still probably low. I imagine that's what got you in trouble this last time out."

He scratched his cheeks, and sighed. His impatience was clear.

"But it's all sitting there, waiting. It isn't that far. There's a cart I can load it all onto to bring back."

"Then let's both go."

He looked tempted by the idea, but then she saw his eyes shift from her to the fire. His lips still had a bluish cast, and he seemed to be shivering slightly.

"Had to put out any stray cinders?"

She saw where he was going with it. She nodded.

"Yes, a few. So that's out."

"If we burn this place down, what happens to the doorway back?"

She hadn't thought much beyond keeping the carpet from catching. That was a sobering idea. As much as she didn't want to go back, she found that she didn't necessarily want to be stranded here forever, either.

"Ok, then. I'll go. Just tell me where it is."

She could tell he wasn't wild about that idea, either, but to his credit, he didn't reject it out of hand. The consideration and dismissal of several objections played across his face as he thought about it. Then he raised the back of his fist against his forehead and rubbed in frustration.

He told her how to get to the housekeeping office without preamble, and described the layout of the room, what he'd found and where he'd left it, and where the phone might be. He didn't sound particularly certain on the last point. Then he told her about the occupant of the office.

"It's going be pitch dark once you're through the door." He paused, thinking.

"Hang on a sec."

He got tiredly to his feet, and shuffled across the room and into the bathroom. She heard him moving a few items around, and then he reemerged, with a small metal waste-can in his hands. It was the same chromed-metal composition as the tray supporting the fire. He sat down again in his spot, and set the can beside him for the moment. He pulled the sweatshirt she'd given him over his head, and then handed it to her. She thought about telling him to put it back on, but knew he'd refuse and make her wear it anyway. And it made sense, so she shrugged into it. The sleeves were too long, but that was good, the cuffs could be like gloves. He pulled the pistol out of his pocket, and handed it to her, butt first.

"Safety is on, but there's one in the chamber." He showed her how to flip the safety on and off, how to both thumb back and ease down the hammer, and also how to clear a bad round.

"I had two duds before a live one. Hope you don't have to rely on it in a pinch."

She nodded, and indicated the waste-can.

"What's that for?"

"I'm hoping that you can take some light with you. Anything to make this trip go faster will make me feel better about it."

She frowned, not understanding, but then he explained what he wanted her to do. She smiled at him.

"You really are MacGyver."

He shrugged.

"I'd rather be Mark Watney."

"Who?"

"Never-mind. You'll need to move fast."

They both stood.

He went to the desk, and pulled open the center drawer and pushed a few of the contents around, searching. He pulled out a small scratch-pad and held it up. It was rippled and swelled with age, but looked dry. He folded it in half, pages inside, chip-board backing facing out. She took it in one hand, after seating the pistol barrel in the right front pocket of her jeans. He then moved to the fire, snagging the waste-can as he did so, and also a long sliver of wood from the firewood pile. He looked at her with eyebrows raised.

"Ready?"

She nodded.

"Everything clear?"

"Careful there, mister."

"Yes, right. Sorry."

She gave him a double outward flip of her free hand, telling him to move it along.

He started to move, then thought of something.

"Wait, give me the coin."

She pointed to where it lay near the wall under the window. He nodded. She pulled one of the sweatshirt cuffs down over her free hand with the few free fingers not holding the scratch-pad.

He moved the can below the lip of the tray supporting the fire, and used the wood splinter to scrape a fair amount of glowing embers at the edge into the can. Sparks flew upward as they thumped into the bottom of the can. The splinter caught fire immediately, but he just tossed it into the can, its duty accomplished. He straightened, and handed the can to her, moving as soon as she grasped the top edge of it with her cocooned hand. He preceded her to the door, opening it quickly so she could pass through without pausing.

She made quickly toward the break in the ceiling, minding his admonishment about tripping hazards as she carefully traversed the broken leavings below the hole above, wind pressing downward on her as she shielded the open top of the waste-can as best she could. She gained the other side, and the wind lessened a bit as she moved beyond it. She reached the short hall on the left not long after, and made her way down it, seeing the black outline of the open door almost at once. Once she reached it, she dropped the scratch-pad into the waste-can.

Flames bloomed within almost at once, and she could feel the heat through the sweatshirt material. She moved through the door into the room, the light from the fire in the waste-can casting a dim, shifting glow before her.

It was enough, though, and she navigated easily around the upright maid cart, as well as the items scattered across the floor in a rough fan away from the fallen one, arriving at the steel counter just as the waste-can became uncomfortably hot to hold. She plonked it down on the counter-top, and immediately moved to the shelves to the right, where he'd said there'd be more fuel. Sure enough, the closest shelf held bags of toilet tissue rolls. She tore the brittle plastic wrap away, and pulled two rolls out. They began to disintegrate at the edges, but the cores held together, and she returned to the counter, and dropped both of them in. The waning flames erupted, casting brighter light into the room. She went back, grabbed more rolls, and set them on the counter near the can. Then she took stock of the room she could now see.

It was as he described, so she went directly to the open door in the center of the back wall. The office that lay behind it was still shrouded in darkness, but the dancing light through the doorway illuminated enough landmarks for her to begin her search. She crawled across the floor toward the far right corner until she found the pile of loot at the base of the big cabinet.

She thought about trying to figure out the flash-lights by feel, but opted against it. She reversed so that she was headed toward the desk, and moved slowly forward, criss-crossing both hands across the carpet in front of her as she did so, thankful that not enough light made it into the office to illumine the poor soul sitting behind it.

She found it wedged up against the closest desk leg, its slide across the floor evidently arrested there by good fortune. She hated to think what it would've been like to have to chase it any farther. She picked it up, and light burst outward. Evidently, it didn't turn itself off. She tapped the button below the screen.

Power was better than she had thought it would be, but the glow of the flash and her position cast light on a pair of shoes and the bones that occupied them, swathed in the tattered remains of clothing, rising upward until hidden from view behind the bottom of the foot-well of the desk. She quickly reversed direction again, and stood, holding the phone in front of her. She set the phone face-down on the floor near the pile of items he had already removed from the open cabinet, and grabbed as many of them as she could carry. She went back out of the office, careful not to look in the direction of the desk.

The light from the burning tissue had already dimmed considerably, so she crossed the room and dumped the things she

carried onto the counter near the waste-can, and dropped a couple more rolls in. The room brightened as they caught, and she retrieved the fallen cart from the middle of the room, righting it, leaving its former occupants where they lay as she rolled it to the counter.

The rest was just busy work. Back into the office, using the glowing phone as a marker, carrying out the items already on the floor, as well as the things from the tool drawer he'd requested she bring back. More tissue into the waste-can after each trip, then loading everything onto the cart, until she'd cleared what they needed from the office. She noticed the three cases near the open door to the right of the office on her last trip out. She added the final items from the office to the cart, added more fuel to the fire, and went to the cases. He hadn't mentioned them, but she figured she could fit at least two of them on the cart. She saw the boots as she drew closer, tucked in the shadow of the case nearest the door.

She smiled slightly, though she felt a little sheepish about it. He might be old, and rough around the edges, but he was thoughtful. Or maybe he just had an over-inflated sense of obligation. It was hard to tell with him. She was shivering herself, now, and her toes were numb. She slipped off the canvas flats she was wearing, and tugged the boots on. They were icy cold at first, but warmed quickly. They were also slightly too

large, but if she could find some thick socks, she'd be set. She picked up her flats and tossed them over by the counter, and moved two of the cases to the cart, stacking them on the lower shelf. She turned toward the counter, picking her shoes up off the floor as she did so. She slipped her hands into them, palms against the soles. She used the soles as insulators as she slid the can down to the sink, and quickly up-ended it, following the flow of glowing ash and embers downward with the can itself, effectively capping the burning material under it. The few burning bits that escaped the trap quickly went out.

Then she pushed the cart out of the room, having retrieved her phone on the last trip into the office, and now using it to navigate around anything in her way.

The trip back to the room was only halted by the debris in the hallway under the hole in the roof. She banged on the wall twice, and within seconds, the door down the hall squealed open and he emerged, relief written all over his face.

"I come bearing gifts."

"And there was much rejoicing."

They made quick work of the transfer from cart to room, trying not to let what little heat there was escape into the relentless wind, but by the time they'd finished and shut the door again her teeth were chattering and she was shaking pretty badly.

"Go sit by the fire."

They'd dumped everything just inside the door, and it left little room to get by. She did what he said, sitting down as close to the fire as she could without burning something. The heat felt wonderful, but her shakes were slow to quiet. She watched as he shook out one of the silver blankets, and then stood holding it before him in front of the fire. After about a minute, he took the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders and back, tucking it over her arms to keep it in place. Then he rose and repeated the process for himself. Then he sat too.

"Thank you."

She meant it. Her shaking had subsided as the temporary heat from the warmed blanket had infused her clothing.

"Went ok?"

She nodded.

"I see you found the boots. Forgot about them until after you left, but I figured you'd work it out. They looked warm."

"They are. Good call."

"Sorry they're so ugly, though."

"Hey!"

"What? Oh. I meant aesthetically impaired. How crass of me."

"Do you know how much these cost?"

"I do, and I resent it. They look like they were designed by Mr. Magoo, and assembled by chimps."

"Pffft. That's hardly an indictment, coming from you."

He shrugged.

"What can I say. I'm a fashionista. I abhor trends."

She laughed, she couldn't help it.

"Ok, so what now?"

"Warm up a little more, then play with our new toys."

"And then?"

He didn't answer right away, and she could see that he was thinking hard, probably composing his response. She suddenly didn't need him to line it all out for her, so she short-circuited it with a question.

"Who's Rachael?"

He started, his whole body flinching the tiniest bit. She instantly knew the answer, not specifically, but generally. She thought about retracting the question, letting him off the hook, but held her tongue in the end and waited.

She watched him mentally switch gears as his surprise waned. He arrived at the end of his mental prep, and he raised his left hand, palm facing inward, thumb pushing his ring finger up above the others. She could see the indentation, and the whiter skin within.

"Wife. Well, for about three more weeks."

She waited for him to go on, and eventually he did.

He ran a hand through his hair, and scratched at the back of his scalp before dropping it into his lap.

"Married about ten years. She just sort of ran out of patience, I guess. Pretty clear why. I don't blame her. She was always runner-up, right out of the gate. Sitting on this side of sober is a special kind of excruciation. I've been trying not to think about it."

"If you could go back, and take that with you, could you save it?"

He shook his head immediately, no doubt on his face.

"Wouldn't matter. I mean, she was never vindictive, or hateful. Well, until the restraining order thing. She was mad a lot when she finally figured out that it didn't matter what she did or didn't do. That was about eight years in. We had some epic fights for about six months, but she never called the cops, or...."

He stopped. He looked utterly miserable, and she did consider diffusing the conversation, but he continued before she could think of any way to do it.

"I hit her once. Just once, but it is by far the worst thing I have ever done. And it sealed the deal. I saw it in that instant. Any possibility died right there, and I saw it happen."

He didn't offer anything more, and she didn't know how to respond. He stared at the fire. Silence reigned for a while. She felt that she should say something. She thought about how she'd treated him after he'd first arrived in her office. She'd been dismissive and rude, talking down to him, treating him like he was just another drunk hiding behind amber glass.

But he wasn't, and she felt ashamed of herself, so she offered up what she could.

"I'm sorry, Jeff."

He looked away from the fire, locking eyes with her. His gaze was haunted, and she could see the pain in it.

"Thanks, but I made this bed." He sighed, dropping his gaze, and then asked,

"Are you sure you don't want to go back?"

She really did examine it then. For his sake, she opened the door a crack, to see if it was really was as bad as it seemed.

It came like sniper bullet to the brain, except without oblivion on the other side of the impact. She convulsed as it blew through her.

She lay on a hard surface as hot, humid air made its resistant, cloying way in and out of her lungs. Her vision was clouded by pain, terror, and that awful, dysfunctional way light interacted with objects here. Things she couldn't see crawled

across her skin. She somehow knew that she was fully clothed, but it didn't matter. Whatever tickling horrors crept this way and that operated below the fabric, unrestricted by cloth or friction. The nightmare monster stood over her, its reptilian eyes and leering smile the only thing she could clearly see. She could feel pressure on her abdomen, but had no motor control, so could not turn her head to see what it was. She couldn't even move her eyes. She was forced to see only what was in her line of sight, and to compound her terrified revulsion, it spoke to her in that faceted voice, with the oily tones writhing above and below.

"Your pain and fear are clear, Child, and while that is sweet milk to me, I offer you a temporary reprieve. Do you wish it?"

Its expression was expectant, as if she could respond. And she did, realizing that the tears welling in her eyes, and then sliding down her temples were the currency of her acquiescence. The alien face moved a bit, and she felt a large, cold hand bracket her face, alien fingers stopping the tears in their tracks, grip painfully firm.

"I can see that you do. I will task you, and you will accomplish. That is how you will remain."

And behind it all was the wet, animal respiration, the billowing breaths of the world-killer that waited behind every surface, and somehow that was the worst of it all.

She slammed the door shut on it finally, cutting the connection. She was hyper-ventilating, and her heart was racing. She clenched inside, to stop herself from peeing her pants as she recaptured ownership of her mind. She opened her eyes, and he was up on his knees, leaning toward her with deep concern and not a little fear.

"Sophia? What's the matter? Are you ok?"

She put an open hand up, and struggled to get her breath under control. A few moments later, she heaved a deep sigh, and then looked directly at him.

"Yes, I'm sure."

Ch. 16

Coming down

The sun went down not too long after that, and the chill increased as the building began to lose what little solar warmth it had absorbed over the course of the day. They stoked the fire as far as they dared, but the tray upon which it sat was finite in size.

The flashlights worked fine, and the extra light helped. Both of them noted the fact that each one had a USB port, but lacking the cord, they couldn't recharge her phone. Assuming, of course, that the USB protocol was the same in this where as the one they came from. But, since the phone had little use now that they had the flashlights, charging it also meant little. To pass the time, they inventoried the rest of what they'd gained from housekeeping. Besides the pry-bar, she'd brought back a fire-ax. The suitcases yielded very little, though they did find some synthetic wool socks in Sophia's size. They were each able to add a few layers of clothing, and with the mylar blankets, they were on the cool side of comfortable. The fire-ax made quick work of the side tables, so they had fuel for the fire for a while.

The foil packets turned out to be freeze-dried food, or so he assumed after examining the contents of one. He was initially a little skeptical. How long was this stuff good for? His

stomach urged that he find out, so he fashioned a holder for one of the water glasses on the desk from a metal hanger from the closet, and heated water from a water bottle in it over the fire. Once it had begun to steam, he divided it into two other glasses, and then split the contents of one of the packets between the two. He used a broken-off piece from the hanger to stir the contents. The smell, while not overwhelmingly appetizing, did inspire a few grumbles from his gut. He looked at her and offered one of the glasses. She looked doubtful, but took it.

"Dinner in a cup. Yum."

He tried it.

It tasted vaguely like a meat and vegetable stew, but there were seasonings in it he couldn't place. Still, it tasted better than it smelled, and it warmed as well as filled his empty stomach.

He finished his. Sophia still held hers in her hands.

"I've had worse. Not hungry?"

"I'm waiting to see if you die first."

"Oh. You must be an econ major. Evaluating the market before investing."

She gave him a quarter-smile, and shook her head.

"I'm just not sure how I feel about eating food this old."

"Old isn't *always* bad."

"You would know."

He responded by setting another cup of water up to heat. By the time it was ready, she'd given in, and her cup was empty. He refilled both cups with contents from the second packet, opting not to rub it in. She accepted her cup back without comment. It turned out to be the same stuff for round two.

They didn't talk much after that. A short agreement about spelling each other during the night, and she stacked some recovered garments as a pillow, rolled over with her back to the fire, and fell asleep. He heard and watched her respiration slow and deepen, and then was left to his own thoughts.

He knew from long experience that they were unreliable. But now he had no barrier, no padding. He didn't know if it was because he had left the umbrella of the boat, or because he was genetically pre-disposed to his own mental sabotage, but his redemption now seemed far away, its miracle diminished by doubt and circumstance. He found himself wondering if any of the containers in the mini-fridge might not contain alcohol. Hours passed, but each brought him closer to checking, because being freed didn't mean he couldn't bind himself again.

Then he really tried to imagine what that would mean, taking that first drink again. What it would mean in the here and now. He could see it happen. His focus and intent on each trip out would shift from survival to escape. And the shift

would probably be precipitous. He looked over at Sophia's sleeping form. He tried to imagine how she would react to it, but it was hard to tell. She hadn't seemed to think much of him when they met, but she didn't treat him like that now. And, she'd saved his life. He let the thoughts go, because he still could, and that made him feel better. He was suddenly very, very tired. He roused her with a gentle nudge on the shoulder.

"Your turn. Wake me up if you get sleepy."

"Wake up. I'm sleepy." Her eyes were nearly closed, still.

"I don't think I can stay awake any longer."

He saw her force herself awake, grabbing her glasses from where she'd put them beside her. She fumbled them onto her face, and he was reminded for the first time how pretty she was. It was a clinical assessment, he told himself. Like a father coming to terms with the fact that his daughter had now passed that demarcation line between the kiddie pool, and the shark pool.

"Ok, ok. I'm awake." And she was, her eyes suddenly clear.

He was too tired to question it. He snagged her makeshift pillow from beside her, and dropped his tired head onto it. His transition into sleep mirrored passing out. He was that tired.

She was there when he awoke, watching him as his eyes opened, and light was there as well, pushing its weak way in through the dusty window.

"You snore."

She was matter-of-fact, no judgment in it. He took a few seconds to swim the last few strokes to full consciousness.

Then,

"Bad?"

She shrugged.

"I've heard worse. But usually I'm in another room."

"Sorry."

She gave him a half-grin.

"Well, I'm sure that now we've had this little talk, you'll never do it again."

"I promise. At least for the next twelve to fourteen hours."

"What's the plan?"

He told her what he had in mind, and after a few clarifying questions, she agreed.

"No time like the present. Not to shoo you out the door, or anything."

The first trip he took a flashlight, the pry-bar, and the ax, leaving the gun behind. He headed back toward house-keeping. He was thankful for the insulated gloves, as handling the metal of the pry-bar without them sucked the heat out of his hands in nothing flat. There was a room door on the right just before the break in the ceiling, but he passed it by, concerned about the damaged structure above it. He passed below the gap, and set his

tools on the maid cart, pushing it ahead of him as he continued on. He came to the first door past it, this one on the left. It was far enough from the break so that he felt a little more comfortable attacking the lock on it. He inserted the tip on the dog-leg end between the card-reader and the door-frame, and levered the other end forward.

It took a little juice, but the stressed metal parted with metallic screech, and the door popped open a few inches. He dropped the pry-bar onto the cart and moved on, leaving the actual investigation of the room for another trip. He wanted to open as many doors as he could, so they could alternate trips out without having to spend any time forcing them. He popped the next one, and that brought him to the hall-way leading to house-keeping. He passed it by, and toggled the switch on the flashlight, orienting it on the front of the cart to act as a headlight as the light from the hole in the roof continued to dim as he moved further along.

He forced three more doors before coming to a right turn in the hall. Around the corner, he found six more room doors before the hall ended in a blank wall. There was no sign of a stairwell at this end. This was a concern, as the one at the other end of the building was inaccessible. He opened each door here in turn, and was about to head back, when he realized something. He sighed heavily, and rolled his eyes at his own stupidity. He

grabbed the flashlight off of the cart, leaning the pry-bar against the wall next to the door he had just forced open. He pushed the door open, and went through.

The room was dark and silent, an indication that the window was intact here as well. He didn't go any further into the room though, just let the door closer do its job as long-dormant hinges protested. He shone the flashlight on the inside of the door, and immediately found what he knew would be there. It was the same thing he'd seen but not seen each time he'd left their room, but it was so familiar that he'd paid no attention.

It was the fire escape diagram. The text was as alien as ever, but the arrows and the architectural schematic were quite clear. There was another stairwell, but it was located at the end of the short hall leading to the house-keeping station. He remembered the second door there. What was strange about the diagram, though, was that the line indicating the location of the stairwell at the other end of the hotel was black, terminating in a simple arrow tip. The line indicating the stairs near house-keeping was bright blue, and ended abruptly, with two blue chevrons just beyond the end. Also indicators, but obviously meaning something different. Guess they'd find out. Still, he felt stupid missing it so many times.

He exited the room.

He placed the flashlight on the cart, and then snagged the pry-bar. He headed back.

He made his way to the door leading into house-keeping, and left the cart next to it. He took the flashlight and then covered the short distance remaining until he stood before the stairwell door at the end of the hall. He opened it, and shone the light into the darkness beyond.

A concrete landing lay beyond. To the right was a short wall containing another door, this one larger and taller, unpainted, with no knob. It had a large metal handle that reminded him of the ones on the inside of the boat's hatches, and to the left of the doorframe at the same level was one of those flat, black, magnetic-access card readers. Must lead up to the roof, he thought. Beyond the short wall, metal stairs descended into darkness. Having established that they actually had a way down, he shut the door again, and retreated to the house-keeping station.

He went in and liberated two cases of bottled water. He found he had to be very careful in handling them, as both the cardboard tray and the shrink-wrap plastic had very little structural integrity left. He placed them gently on top of the cart, and then went back in, moving to the back of the room and the office behind. He grabbed all the foil packets from the

emergency locker and then added them to the cart outside as well. Then he pushed the cart back toward the room.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of activity, as they alternated excursions out to the now open rooms on that side of their floor of the hotel. They would each explore two rooms before returning, doing a quick inventory of the contents, and loading suitcases, duffels, and garment bags, along with other significant items onto the maid cart to transport back to the debris blocking the hall. Then a couple thumps on the wall, and the subsequent unloading. Then the other would head out, while the one left behind would open and sort through the travel cases, and monitor the fire. Most of what they found was irrelevant, so it went back into whatever container it came in, and these they stacked in the bathtub, out of the way.

The yield was slow. Sophia's first outing netted them both knit caps, and a thick synthetic wool scarf, but not much else. He smiled at her as he pulled his down over his head, prior to leaving.

"Finally. Warm thoughts."

She rolled her eyes.

He hit a big bump his second time out, though. The first room past the stairwell hall had existed in his mind before he even entered it, though his version didn't contain an apocalyptic denouement. It was where it all ended, the end of

his personal arc through time and space. To quote his favorite author, it was his "clearing at the end of the path". So when he did enter, the tableau hit him like a fist to the heart.

The window was gone, and the curtains were folded forms on the floor below. Wind jostled its way within, and the film of many years of exposure coated every surface. But the remains of a single form upon the spoiled mattress, the empty bottles standing as dusty sentinels upon the side tables and strewn beside the bed, and the single bottle still trapped between the mattress and the skeletal fingers of one out-stretched hand told the tale of a more personal apocalypse. As tragic and familiar as the scene might be, the thing that got his heart-rate to jack-hammer status was the open suitcase beside the bed. At least half a dozen bottles lay within it, seals intact, and the reflective liquid surface of their contents glinted in the gray light even through the mask of dust and ash.

He found himself moving toward the case with no clear memory of a decision to do so. He got to within several feet of it before he could stop himself. He stood there, staring at the contents of the case. They gleamed with dust-shrouded promise.

He teetered there for several minutes. A near-lifetime's worth of choices cast illumination down a familiar path. A known quantity, and one seductive in its immediacy. Padding. Insulation. Life at arm's length.

He was at the same place as he was last night, but without the search. Here it was. Just had to bend down and grab it.

But again he didn't, because he still could. Not only that, another thought occurred to him, and he did kneel, but only to flip the case lid shut and zip the case closed, picking it up and taking it out to the cart. He went back in, to search the rest of the room.

In the end, the room yielded nothing else, but it made sense to him that it wouldn't. You don't take anything down this path that doesn't serve its purpose. He moved on.

The next room gave up nothing. It appeared to have been unoccupied, and there were no personal items. He returned to the hallway, but didn't push on. He had put the rule in place. Two rooms only. So he went back.

When he returned to the room with only the single case, Sophia looked a little disappointed, but made to leave on her next trip out. He stopped her.

"Wait a sec. I need to show you something. But just, don't freak out, ok?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"With a pitch like that, you really expect me to promise?"

"Ok, that's fair. Just factor in that I'm being up-front about this, and it's not what you think."

"I don't currently think anything, except what the hell are you talking about."

He set the case on the desk, and un-zipped it, flipping it open to reveal the bottles.

She looked at the contents, and then at him. Her eyes were guarded again, and she was frowning. Her voice was chillier than in any recent transaction.

"Ok, I'm thinking something now. Tell me why I shouldn't be."

"We don't know what we will find when we hit the street. This place may be totally dead, but it may not."

"What does that mean? Do we take them in case we find a party?"

He clenched his teeth, and his reply was short.

"No. They're flammable. Weapons."

He saw understanding flicker in her eyes, and her posture eased as well as her expression.

"Oh. I get it. Still, you ok with having it around?"

He sighed.

"So far. I wouldn't be back here if I wasn't."

She nodded, and smiled her half-smile at him.

"Sorry. Was a little bit of a bitch, there."

"No. You're right to be concerned. I am. But I think it's ok, so...."

"Alright, then. I'm off. I can leave you two alone, right?"

He zipped the case closed, and put it under the desk.

"Should be fine. Guess you'll know when you get back."

Her brow furrowed the tiniest bit, but she turned and left without hesitation.

Her return brought more things to go through, and to her credit, she didn't seem interested in the status of the case under the desk. As far as he could tell, she didn't even look at it. He tried to put it out of his mind as well, but was only partially successful. He helped her stack the few cases she'd brought, then left on his next expedition.

And so it went. Each trip brought slightly different versions of the same things. They ate a quick lunch in the early afternoon, which turned out to be more of the same thing they'd eaten the night before.

"Is it all this same stuff?" She asked, grabbing the empty foil packet, and comparing it to several of the other, still-full ones. "Oh, my word. It *is*! Who does that?"

He tossed back the last of his, and then set the cup near the fire.

"Does imply a lack of imagination. Who's turn is it? Must be yours."

"Nice try, but that last load of nothing new was me."

Same went for both of the next trips. That took them into the late afternoon, and there was only one room left to explore down that end of their floor. It happened to be the one he'd entered earlier to check the fire escape placard, and it also turned out to be the jackpot they'd hoped to find.

He entered the room again on his final trip for the day, cold and frustration making him irritable. The rooms at this end of the building had been larger, with two queen beds, and more common space. This last was no exception. However, there was a full complement of casualties here, the most he or Sophia had come across in a single room.

Her initial fear of human remains seemed to have disappeared during her time in the room, co-existing with the two departed souls upon the bed under the curtain shroud. She spoke of them now matter-of-factly if they'd been present in the rooms she'd investigated, describing them with few remarks, if at all.

He passed the closed bathroom door, and shone the light into the room. The inhabitants lay in repose, all three of them. There was one in each bed, and one on the sofa in the corner to the right of the intact window. The curtains were still drawn, and mostly intact, hence the gloom. He backtracked, and opened the bathroom door, casting light within. The last occupant was in the bathtub. The skull was inclined forward, onto the rib-

cage, with one arm draped over the edge. One last soak as the world ended. He shut the door on it.

He opened the louvered door to the closet. Inside, he found multiple duffel bags stacked atop one another. He pulled them out, one by one. They were hefty, and once they were out, he could see something else leaning up against the inside wall. He shone the light directly on it, and his heart skipped as he held still and just stared at it for a few seconds.

It was rectangular duffel, taller and wider than the others, made of some rubberized material. That's not what got his pulse going, though. The front flap was partially unzipped, and folded down. Inside, he could see part of an aluminum-frame back-pack, with both a sleeping bag and inflatable pad lashed to it. He turned back to the duffels, and unzipped the one on top.

It was full of climbing gear. Ropes, an ice ax, pitons, carabiners, all the arcane paraphernalia necessary to gain the summit of Mount Adrenalin. His grin widened as he shone the flashlight beam back into the main room. Two more tall duffels of similar design leaned against the far wall to the left of the window, partially hidden by the desk chair, and a third rested against the side of the armoire.

"Houston, we are a go for launch."

The cart was a little tippy on the way back, because he brought it all, not wanting to make another trip, or have Sophia

do the same. He was making some assumptions about what was in the other bags, and the packs themselves, but he felt pretty confident. Once he reached the gap in the ceiling, under the near-dark of twilight, he banged on the wall.

The door screeched open, and she stuck her head out, squinting against the flashlight's beam.

"Any luck?"

"From a statistical standpoint, pretty much all of it."

"Really?"

"No. Yes, really. Help me out here, I'm freezing."

It was all there, everything they needed, and they spent the evening going through it all. The unfortunate owners of all this equipment were clearly not weekend enthusiasts. The breadth and scope of their gear implied professional mountaineers. A lot of it was a complete mystery, and they weren't really concerned with the actual climbing gear.

What they really needed, they found in the packs.

The gold mine was layered clothing. Thin base layers, insulating layers, padded jackets with insulated hoods, and storm shell outer layers. Between the four packs, they were able to find enough items in sizes that worked to assemble a complete set for both of them. He did his initial changing in the bathroom, to allow her to try items on near the fire. He just did it, and she didn't say anything, nor did she seem too

concerned about it. Once they'd each found base layers that fit, they tried on the rest next to the warmth of the fire.

After that, they re-assembled a pack for each of them, though except for the sorting of clothing, it was all in there. More freeze-dried food, cooking utensils, gloves, single-person tent, and so on. Conversation was mostly limited to decisions about what to take and what to leave behind. They added in what other items they'd accumulated, including several bottles of booze, splitting it between both packs. It was late when they had sorted through and packed everything, but neither of them was very sleepy. They were both amped up about the find, and the ramifications of it. They finally settled in front of the fire again, each in their place, and ate.

He hadn't specifically questioned her since the last time he'd brought up going back. Her reaction had been alarming, and not a little puzzling, but she'd been clear in her decision, and had been very closed-mouth in response to any subsequent conversational gambit on his part that even hinted at it. Now, though, they were at a cross-road, and he felt a tension within himself that hadn't been there before. Up to this point, it had all been an exercise in how to stay in place. The door back was only a dozen yards away, after all.

Now, though, they had the means to leave, to move out into an alternate reality from the one they knew. It was different

enough from their world to shroud the effort in doubt, and the difference did not make it particularly inviting. She didn't seem to share his conflict about it, which made it all the more difficult for him to manage. He struggled with his thoughts in silence for a while, then decided he couldn't just let it go, as much as it was clear she wanted him to.

"At the risk of pissing you--."

"I don't want to go back."

"Why not?"

"I can't risk it."

"We have weapons. The hatch isn't far. I can stay between it and you if it's there, and then you could go home."

She looked at him, and there was something in her eyes that he couldn't place. She didn't answer right away, just looked at him for a minute. Then she looked away.

"What is it? Help me understand, because I don't."

"Pretty clear."

He felt irritation and desperation in equal measure, but before he could respond, she let out a heavy sigh.

"I'm caught, Jeff. I can see your side. I can see why you want to return me to the place you found me. But you can't."

He was tempted to speak, but he forced himself to wait. No way she was done. And he was right. She was looking at him now with an intensity that filled him with dread.

"I'm part of this. I'm part of this in a way you aren't. You stumbled into this, but I *inherited* it. I wish I could say that I'm ready to face it. But I am so, so not."

She put a hand to her forehead, kneading it as her stress defined itself in every aspect of her posture as she closed her eyes. She went on, anguish in her voice.

"I can't help it. I can't stand it. If I face it head on, I will lose myself. That thing will be there, and it will consume me."

Her eyes opened, then, and they implored him. He knew there was nothing in him that could offer any resistance to the plea, however he might feel about it. He was steeped enough in his own failures to identify with the conflict, if not the specifics of it.

"Ok. But I need to ask."

She continued to look at him, and her eyebrows rose in question. He asked the only question left.

"How far in the other direction do we go?"

He could see uncertainty in her eyes as she turned inward, trying to do calculations that were beyond her, both in processing power and personal resources. He saw it on her face when the answer came back an unknown, and decided to let her off the hook entirely.

"Never mind. Outside is a good enough end-game for now. We'll let street-level be tomorrow's goal. Move on from there."

She nodded, and he could see gratitude in her wan smile.

Then they tried to sleep. They ended up trading off several times during the night, as neither of them seemed able to sleep for much more than an hour at a stretch. They let the fire start to die down sometime before dawn, using the last of its heat to warm water for one more meal as first light began to seep into the room. After eating, he insulated his hands with cast-off clothing over gloves, and carried the fire tray to the bathroom, carefully upending the remaining ash and embers into the porcelain sink. He then set the tray across the top, to contain any errant sparks.

They shrugged into their packs, gathered what other items they'd decided would go with them, and made to leave. They both hesitated at the door, looking back into the space they'd occupied for what seemed like both an eternity, and no time at all.

"We should put out the maid service sign." He said, as they stepped out into the chill wind of the hall.

She didn't reply, just smacked him gently on the arm with the outside of her hand as she passed by, heading toward the break in the ceiling, and the stairwell beyond. He followed her, as the door squealed shut behind them.

"Wait."

She stopped and turned.

"What?"

"We need to do that thing with the coin."

"Oh. Right."

She continued down the hall until she reached the debris below the opening in the roof, and then turned around, waiting. He pulled the coin out of his pocket, and then tossed it to her. The door once again refused to appear as the coin passed by, and she caught it again with a one-handed flourish. It clicked, then, as he followed after her, watching the door reappear as he passed by, the pennies she'd given him flaring with heat in his pocket. But it stayed opaque, as he knew it would, and disappeared behind him as he neared where she waited. It was about proximity, but not just the coin to the door. They only worked if they were in proximity to a person, as well as the door. It explained why the door in the clearing wasn't visible and still open, even though the half-dollar was sitting in the soil at the foot of it.

Greetings, hind-sight.

They went past the open house-keeping office to the stairwell door, and through it onto the landing. They passed the big door blocking the roof stairs, and turned right, taking the stairs heading down. As soon as they cleared the corner, the

twin beams of their flashlights illuminated not a landing at the bottom, as he had expected, but a door similar in size to the one they'd just passed. But, this one had a press-bar latch on it, with no card reader. He thought about the diagram, and the blue line with the two chevrons at the end. They reached the bottom of the flight, and pushed through.

Ahead was a long hallway, with no doors on the left, and only two on the right. He checked them as they passed, but they were locked. One of them had the electrical shock hazard symbol on it, with the logograms in the middle. He didn't see the need to open them. They reached the end, and the hall turned right, continuing on for about forty yards, with only a single feature on the right, all the way at the end. The end of the hall looked like a blank wall, except for a horizontal metal bar on the right at about waist level, just past the only opening. As they neared the end, it became clear that the opening wasn't an opening, it was an elevator door. It was smaller than the ones he'd seen earlier, and there were no up or down buttons, just a magnetic reader.

The metal bar on the wall was another press-bar latch, which was odd since there was no door, and the actual latch itself wasn't visible because the end of the press-bar was snug up against where wall met wall, forming the corner of the

hallway. Down below it was a spring-loaded pin with a small flange at the top, set just above the floor.

"What is that for?" Sophia asked from slightly behind him.

"Only one way to find out."

He pressed the bar, and the entire end of the hallway pivoted away, opening on a stair landing with a door to the right, presumably opening onto the rest of this floor, and a flight of stairs leading down. The "door" opened all the way to the outside wall as he pushed on it. It bumped to a halt against a rubber stop behind it. He shone the light down at the pin. It was perfectly aligned with a receiver in the metal floor. He pushed the pin down with the tip of his boot, and it slid into place with a screech and a click, remaining there when he removed his boot, and keeping it from closing. She commented first.

"How odd."

"You're telling me. I'm having trouble seeing the point of this."

"Maybe the top floor is for VIPs."

"As good a guess as any. Never seen a hotel set-up like this before."

"Ever been a VIP?"

"Of course, as far as you know."

She laughed.

"Don't laugh. You're lowering my self-esteem again."

She just went on without him, heading down the stairs. This time, at the bottom was another landing and then a switch-back flight below that, and so on until they reached the bottom. They'd started ten flights up, as it turned out.

Here two large metal doors blocked their path. The one opposite the bottom of the stairs was exactly the same as the one at the top of the stairwell, the one that opened onto stairs to the roof. It had the same handle, and the same magnetic card access reader next to it. He was guessing again, but odds were high that behind it were the basement stairs. The other had a press-bar release like all the ones they'd had to open so far. He depressed the bar, and pushed it open. Like everywhere else here, the hinges resisted and complained, but it swung open, and they could see the lobby beyond. He held it open as she passed through, and then followed her.

The lobby was a large, open space at least two stories tall that had obviously been glass-fronted across its entire exterior face at one time. The supporting pillars were still there, but all the glass was gone now, and the wind swirled within the interior with icy glee. Everything was coated with debris, dust, and ash, hiding the shape and function of much of what remained within the space. Here and there, though, a piece of ruined furniture, a portion of skeletal remains, and other signposts

speaking to the past were visible. Sophia stopped, and pulled out her scarf, wrapping it around the lower part of her head to cover her mouth and nose, and then flipped the insulated hood of her jacket up over her head. He did the same with his hood, and then they made their way toward the open front of the building, and whatever might lie beyond.

Ch. 17

In this place

After only a few steps, they were no longer treading on the marble of the floor. Decades of growth and decomposition had spread soil into lobby from the street, and hardy ground-cover grew from it. Vines twined upward around support columns, climbing up and out the open front of the building, leaves in constant motion at the insistent urging of the wind. Everywhere at street level, vegetation softened and obscured the hard edges and straight lines of civilization's leavings, pushing upward and filling spaces. The rusting, rotted hulks of vehicles were only visible in glimpses through the tangle, although not far to the right the upper third of a city bus stood visible above the undergrowth, its windows missing and paint blistered and oxidized. They stopped at the edge of the shadow cast by the lobby ceiling, surveying more of the avenue in front of them.

To the left and further down the block was the building he'd seen before nearly becoming a permanent resident of the structure above them. The tail section of the jet towered above the foliage, and effectively blocked the wide avenue in that direction. The damage to the impacted building was even more evident when viewed up close. The devastation to the structure seemed to contradict the fact that it still stood at all, and

stress fractures on the facade of the building upon which it leaned were extensive and pervasive.

"Wow. You weren't kidding."

Sophia stared at the wreckage, voice slightly muffled by her scarf.

He nodded.

"Yep. In any disaster film, that would've been a money shot."

She looked at him.

"That seems a little heartless. There were probably a lot of people on that plane, *and* in the building."

He looked at her.

"There were probably a lot of people everywhere. It's a little overwhelming. If I treat it as someone else's story, it's slightly easier to maintain forward motion."

"Ok. I can see that. So which way do we go?"

"I don't know. What does it matter? Except I don't think we want to go anywhere near that." He said, indicating the compromised structures down the street. "That looks like it's only upright out of spite, at this point. So, the first turn is a gimme."

"Right it is, then."

They made their way to the far right edge of the front of the lobby, the ground-cover giving way to taller grass as they

neared the open front section, and stepped fully out onto what used to be the street. They looked to the right, and both stopped immediately.

There was a path. Not much of one, but the high, coarse grass was trampled and bent aside as it passed in front of the building, moving off to both the right and left from where they stood. They both looked at it for a minute. He spoke first.

"I didn't expect that. Maybe I should've, but I didn't."

"So we're not alone, then."

"Guess not."

"Do you think it's people?"

"I have no idea." He pressed his boot into the ground in front of them, then removed it. It left almost no mark. "The ground is hard and looks pretty dry, at least on top. Maybe it's a game trail, but we probably shouldn't assume that."

He had strapped the fire ax and the pry-bar to his pack. He reached over his shoulder and slipped the ax free, gripping the haft near the head to balance the weight as he looked at her.

"You have easy access to it?"

She slipped the pistol partway out of the pocket of her parka, and then returned it, raising her eyebrows.

"Just checking."

"Safety off. If it doesn't fire, clear it as fast as I can and try again. I do listen, you know."

"Well, gold star for you, my young padawan."

"Can we go now?"

He started forward, and she fell in step behind him, the high, coarse grass murmuring a susurrant as their packs passed along it. They reached the end of the building, and had to make their first decision. The path went forward, but also veered off to the right, crossing the street in a slow arc that eventually met with the building across the street and continued away in that direction. There was no visible turning to the left, unless they wanted to make one through the undergrowth.

"Which way Jane choose go?"

She rolled her eyes, but her answer was firm.

"Straight line makes the most sense. It makes back-tracking a lot easier. We don't have to remember anything, just head back till we see the tail-fin."

"Tarzan think Jane smart. Tarzan follow."

"Ok, stop."

"Jane no fun."

So they followed the path ahead. It led them along the same side of the avenue, and the blocks passed by slowly, the wind coming at them almost head-on, funneled by the buildings on either side. The path occasionally split at an intersection, but there didn't seem to be any pattern to it. It went either right or left as it chose, and disappeared from view before traveling

very far. They stayed the straight course for most of the morning. The light brightened as the morning passed, and reached its maximum gray illumination, and still the buildings continued on into the distance. The tailfin of the jet was lost to view long ago.

They crossed yet another intersection and entered the shadow of the next building, this one much taller than the surrounding ones, pushing high into the gray sky. All the glass was missing here, same as everywhere else, and the wind blew within the dark interior spaces, moaning quietly as it explored them. About half-way down the block, the face of the building drew away from the path, creating what might have been a courtyard, or small park. Within it, towering above the grass and shrubs were four immense deciduous trees, each at least sixty feet high. Their branches were bare, stripped of all leaves by the season and the wind, and they moved with an almost hypnotic rhythm, swaying at its insistence. The path in front of them continued on, but a side path moved away at an angle towards the trees from where they stood. It continued straight for only a few paces before winding off to the left, its terminus hidden from view. Farther back, the lobby entrance to the building framing this park or whatever it used to be was shrouded in the deep shadow of the building, the interior hidden in a deeper darkness. This was the first path they'd come upon that wasn't

at an intersection. Sophia drew to a stop, and he slowed as she did. They looked at the path, the trees, and the building.

"Should we check it out?" She was looking up at him, and her glasses were at such an angle that the light cast a glare on them, so he couldn't see her eyes.

"I don't know."

"That's so helpful. Are you saying you don't have an opinion on the matter?"

"I'm forming one, as we speak. Put down the whip, already."

"Don't you think we should look around some, too? Not just walk and walk in one direction?"

She was right. Besides, this wasn't his plan, it was hers. He was just along for the ride. He was content to let her do what she wanted.

"Fine by me."

She adjusted a pack strap as his gaze drifted downward for no particular reason.

There was no reason he should have seen it. The light was low in the shadow of the skyscraper in front of them, and there was very little glass still in place in the building behind them, so there was almost no light reflecting from its surface. But something must have been just right, because he saw the little metallic glint just as she started to step forward. He

grabbed the top of her pack frame and hauled her backward hard enough to topple her, if he hadn't stepped directly behind her.

She squawked, struggling to get herself upright again and to turn around toward him. There was anger on her face.

"What the hell!"

He pointed downward at the ground behind her, where the side path began. She turned back, looking down toward where he'd indicated.

"What? What am I looking at? There's --. Oh."

She looked back at him.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"I think we should find out, because if it is, then we may want to alter our plan. Back up."

They reversed their direction a number of paces back the way they'd come. He took the ax, hefted it several times to try to get the weight and angle correct, and then threw it forward. His arc was perfect, and it thumped down onto the ground at the mouth of the side path.

There was a metallic ping, and then a screech as something exploded out of the high grass on the left side. There was a blur of motion, and then the sound of metal impacting metal, and they got their first look at what had been triggered.

It was a rusty metal pipe, with what looked like short pieces of concrete rebar lashed to it every few inches with

baling wire. All the points faced forward, and had been rudimentarily sharpened, though the tips were as rusty as the rest of the steel sections now. The assembly protruded from the grass, spanning the narrow path at about knee level.

He bent down and retrieved the ax, and used it to part the grass that hid the mechanism.

It was all there. The spring, the pivot, the metal stop, and even the lynch pin in the dirt at the base, still attached to the narrow-gauge trip wire. They both knew what they were looking at. He felt her hand on his arm as they both stared at it, and it trembled slightly.

"Thank you. Sorry for yelling. How did you even see that?"

"Lucky, I guess."

"Why would someone do that?"

"I think a more pressing question is, is that someone nearby? That isn't meant to kill. It's meant to incapacitate. Unless they maybe have a serious Smurf problem around here."

"Smurf? What? Oh. Tracking now. Good one, grandpa."

"We are faced with a decision. We have no idea when this was set. Look at all the rust on the moving parts. It's been here a while. I think we have to assume that who or whatever set it is still around, and knows to step over it. Otherwise, the path would be over-grown. So, do we try to put some distance between here and us, and hope they don't follow, do we try to

find out what this trap was meant to protect, or do we call it quits and head home?"

"You think it's a 'keep out' sign, then?"

"I'd prefer that to the alternative. If it's not 'keep out', then it's there to put whoever trips it down long enough for the one who set it to accomplish whatever purpose they set it for. I can't think of a benign outcome to that, so I think we need to decide pretty damn quick."

"What do you think we should do, then?"

He looked directly into her eyes then.

"You know what I think we should do. But failing that, I don't think it's smart to try get somewhere that someone apparently doesn't want us to go. I think we keep going, if we're not going back."

She looked conflicted, but not for very long. Her expression resolved, and he could see the answer before she articulated it, though there was something off in the tone of her voice. He chalked it up to adrenalin, and dismissed it.

"Ok. Let's, um, keep going."

He sighed inwardly, but kept it off of his face.

And so, they moved again along the path forward. They'd gone several blocks before she spoke again. He was leading now, and her voice behind him brought him out of his own thoughts and back to the present.

"It didn't have anything to do with us. You said it. It was there for a while. I mean, we haven't been here but a couple days. They couldn't know we were here."

"Yeah?"

He wondered if that was true. He thought about the smoke from their little fire, pulled through the ducting until the wind snatched it out, and carried it away. Smoke where there hadn't been any before. He thought it unlikely it would be visible, but who could say. But there had also been that partial collapse he'd triggered. That had to have echoed outward for quite a distance. He decided he couldn't know if they had announced themselves or not, but the trap had certainly predated their arrival. There was no cause and effect going on, here at least. She went on.

"So it doesn't just imply survivors. It implies at least two factions, and conflict."

"Maybe. I've been thinking about it, though. That could've been for game, I suppose, instead of people. Cripple a deer, or something. Easier than chasing one."

"But if it's not, we're walking right through it."

"That's hard to say, given the evidence. We don't have a lot."

It was another half-block before she continued her thought.

"Why do you go along, if you think this is a mistake? Why don't you force me to go back? Why didn't you before now?"

He stopped and faced her.

"Force you? *Really?*"

She stood her ground, eyes intense behind her glasses.

"It's clear you think it's the smartest move. Yet you just go along. I don't get it."

"What is it exactly that you think I should do? Drag you back by your hair and throw you back through?"

"Don't tell me it hasn't occurred to you."

He stared at her, his irritation igniting into anger.

"No. It *hasn't*."

"Bullshit."

Then he zeroed in on what he wasn't seeing until now. Her hands were shaking, and what he'd mistaken for intensity was fear. He was temporarily flummoxed, and the moment elongated as she waited for his response. He imagined that the chemicals released in her brain as the trap had been sprung had run their course, and now her emotions were based on the implications of her thoughts rather than some chemical imperative. He gave her a wry smile.

"Do you want me to take you back?"

A tear dropped from one lower lash, and disappeared into her scarf.

"No, but I don't know how to go forward, either." It was almost a whisper.

He didn't know what to do with it. But her fear demanded a response, and her resistance to going back had been a constant beyond her initial anger. That made this all that much harder. He ended up choosing the unknown over the known, but nothing in him rose up to applaud the decision.

"Do you trust me?"

She didn't hesitate. She nodded.

"We are already on the path. If going back is worse, then we go forward. Don't over-think it. It's not like either path is the safe one. It's not looking like we get one of those."

He saw her process it, and then she nodded again, and once again he saw her put down her fear. He could see that it didn't go down easy. She wrestled it down, pinning it below the plane of the immediate. When her eyes cleared of the conflict, she was steady again.

"Ok."

He knew it was yet another delay. Even as they resumed their trek away from the hotel, everything here screamed at him to leave, and that added to his internal conflict. She took the lead once again, and he found it remarkable how once she got control of her fear, there didn't seem to be any residual uncertainty.

It soon became apparent that neither of them was in a hurry. Their pace was slow and methodical, almost plodding. He didn't know what to attribute that to, for her, as she walked in front, head facing forward, apparently lost in thought but he knew exactly why he didn't want to rush. Every step was one farther from the door. His gaze ranged from left to right, changing elevation, eyes never at rest. He would cast glances backward occasionally, scanning the vegetation and surrounding structures for movement. He had several corner-of-the-eye moments, but each time there was nothing as he focused in.

They'd gone maybe six more blocks when a new sound began to assert itself over the moan of the wind. It began as a whisper, slowly resolving itself into the recognizable sound of rushing water as they continued on. She looked back at him as the sound pushed its way into her reverie. He shrugged at her. She turned back as they crossed another intersection, and could see then that there was a break in the buildings about a block long at the next one, though almost all of that intersection was obscured by a stand of evergreen trees and their distance from it. The sound grew louder as they drew closer, but it never got so loud that either of them would have had to raise their voice to be heard. Not that they were doing much conversing. The stand of trees began near the end of the block, and filled the width of the avenue, with the right-most ones just inches from the

path that skirted by between them and the edge of the building to the right. They passed through the bottle-neck, and emerged into what must have once been a huge plaza, now overgrown and more resembling a wide meadow.

To the left, the plaza rose about four feet in elevation, and at its center was a small, obviously man-made lake maybe thirty feet across and forty long, fed by a stone-lined water-course that emerged from beneath an elevated bridge several blocks away. The side of the lake bordering the avenue ended at a gently curved spillway that arced downward and away, water pouring over the edge at a measured pace.

Directly ahead, the avenue they were following became a bridge across the resulting water-way, the torrent smoothly following the curve of the spillway as it raced below the bridge and emerged on the other side, where it slowed and accumulated at the beginning of a canal set some six feet below the other side of the plaza, flowing lazily along until disappearing again into a large tunnel opening below an avenue parallel to theirs a block away. There were gazebo-like structures throughout the plaza, most intact, but over-grown with vines and grass. Others had collapsed, and were just heaps of stone or concrete covered in foliage. There were things that had probably been long stone tables, and large, stone-lined planting areas that had either run riot, or been over-run, depending on the nature of the

plants within. The lake had no shore, as the plaza had been built to contain it. The inlet stream and all sides of the lake save the spillway were ringed at the edge with wrought-iron railings, which were also mostly over-grown, and missing in some places. The railings were present on each side of the bridge, as well as the top of the outlet canal walls. It was at once impressive, haunting, and utterly cinematic in its metamorphosis.

The path before them angled to the left as it approached the bridge, switching from the right side of the avenue to the left, and as they got closer, they could see why. A large chunk of the right side of the bridge near the center had collapsed, leaving only about a five foot section to pass by on the left.

The most interesting feature though, by far, was also the only thing in motion, if you didn't count the swaying of the vegetation marking the passage of the wind.

Anchored into the spillway itself, just below the lip were three constructs jutting out toward the bridge at an angle defined by the curve of the spillway.

The center was a metal tower about fifty feet high, the top thirty rising at an angle above the bridge. Shreds of cloth still bound to metal grommets flapped in the wind, the remains of some ancient banner twisting around a thin header rod attached to the top of the tower, angled parallel to the roadway

below. The tower's base was ellipsoidal, narrow and sharply formed at the leading and trailing edges to present little resistance as the water rushed past its base, but even from their vantage point it was evident that the tower was compromised.

It had once been anchored by two guy-wires running downward and outward from a connection point near the top, each one terminating at metal loops embedded into the concrete at either side of the spillway. Now, the closest was only visible as a dark line dropping down from its lower anchor, the rest hidden in the rush of water over the spillway, having parted at some point from its upper fixture. The other still spanned the distance between its two anchor-points, but the concrete into which the base loop was anchored was fractured, deep fissures radiating outward on all sides, and the loop itself was canted downward slightly, showing more of itself than its twin on the other side of the spillway.

Two metal booms were affixed to it lower down, parallel to each other, and also angled to match the horizontal plane of the bridge. Attached at corresponding intervals along each of these were what looked like spot-light fixtures, facing outward toward the two shorter constructs to each side of the tower and the booms.

These were the ones in motion. They were large, circular metal frameworks, supported by metal legs rising from the concrete of the spillway on each side, and rotating on a center pin between the supports. He thought they looked a lot like small Ferris-wheels, or really, really big bicycle rims, unable to decide which way he felt like scaling his analogy. At the end of each spoke, jutting out from the outer rim, was a paddle-shaped extension oriented along the hub axis, presenting its face to the rushing water. It was pretty clear what these were for as he watched the wheels spin, the water rolling off of the paddles as they marched up, around and back down again. In between each paddle and the next there were five metal hoops following the outside curve of the wheel, oriented in line with it. He could see that most of them were empty, some were bent out of shape, and a few were missing altogether, but a number of them on each wheel contained fragments of a colored, translucent material. It wasn't apparent whether it was glass, acrylic, or some other plastic, and the colors were random, covering the spectrum. One or two of the hoops on each wheel was fully intact, and it was indicative enough to imagine what the wheels had looked like before...whatever. The colored material seemed out of place in this monochromatic world, and it drew the eye with it as it continually repeated its circular journey.

He saw that the metal booms were set slightly lower than the apex of each wheel, and that the light fixtures were angled up slightly and arranged in more of a fan orientation. He followed the implied trajectory from the light fixtures through the moving hoops, and looked behind him at the buildings. There were wide sections on the buildings flanking the avenue behind that had no windows, just blank sections of fascia that may have been white or some other light, neutral color at one time. Now they were cracked and gray, and some sections had peeled away altogether, but he got it. He smiled.

"Pretty cool."

"Some kind of light show, right?"

"Looks like it. The buildings have blank sections, see that?" He pointed at the buildings across the bridge. They were set up the same as this side. "Like projector screens."

"Must've been pretty at night."

"I imagine."

They made their way toward the bridge, stopping just this side of it to view the damaged section. They could see the debris from the collapse scattered down the spillway, and poking up through the surface of the water at the beginning of the canal below.

"Think it's safe?"

"The path looks the same. Somebody or something is using it. And I think we should cross the word "safe" off our acceptable-use list."

She didn't miss a beat.

"Think its risk-to-reward ratio is low enough for us to cross?"

He laughed out loud.

"Ok. Yes, I do."

They walked along the path out onto the bridge, but stopped before reaching the narrow section without really deciding to. They stood at the rail and looked at the spinning structures, motion in a world that had seemed to have been utterly laid to rest, all save the wind.

A few minutes went by as they were lost to themselves, and their own thoughts. She spoke first.

"Why are they so quiet?"

"What?"

"They aren't even squeaking. Everything squeaks or squeals here when you try to move it. Shouldn't they have frozen up years ago?"

He thought about it, and couldn't really think of a good answer. He gave her the only thing that occurred to him.

"Maybe the center pin and the hub aren't metal. Maybe science went far enough here to create a friction-less material."

"But there's no other sign of stuff like that. Everything is like what we have, except the language. How is it possible that *everything* is the same, except for only one thing?"

"I know. That sort of weirds me out, too. But as far as explanations, I got nothing. We are down the rabbit-hole."

They were silent again for a while, and he stared up at the center tower, seeing for the first time how it was canted slightly to the right, skewed by the lack of support on the opposing side. He looked down at the water flowing past its base, and could see that the water flowing by the left side of the base frothed and rippled, agitated as if by some irregularity in the underlying concrete. He glanced upward at the tower again.

"That baby's days are numbered." He said, half to himself.

Her response was a complete non-sequitur, and he left his own train of thought behind.

"I want to look at the lake."

"What?"

"Let's go look at the lake."

"We are looking at it."

"Oh, jeez. Not from here. Up close."

"Why?"

She frowned, exhaling in frustration at his apparent obtuseness.

"Why not?"

"That takes us off the path. That what you want?"

"Have to sooner or later. But you can go first, if it makes you feel better."

She gave him that half-smile.

They crossed the bridge, and then left the path toward the upper plaza, forcing their way through the vegetation toward what looked like a cleft in the abrupt rise in elevation. Upon reaching the base, they could see that there were probably wide steps below many years of accumulation of soil and root, but now it was more of a ramp that they picked their way up between grass and shrubs. Once on the upper plaza, it was a short hike to the nearest edge of the lake, not far from the end of the spillway. About half-way along the edge of the lake, there was a short stone pier jutting out into the water, so they made for it, eventually passing beyond the edge of the grass onto the debris-strewn stone of the pier, following it to its outer-most point.

They stood behind the vine-draped railing and looked out at the gray water, reflecting the gray sky. Wind rippled and distorted the reflections of sky and ruined architecture, and it

was hard to see into the water's depths, though they could make out the occasional moss-covered rock on the shallow bottom. The constant movement of water through the lake made for moderate algae or under-water plant growth, but before long, Sophia started, and then pointed out some shadowy forms moving among the rocks on the bottom.

"Fish!"

Sure enough, there were quite a few, and they ranged in size from a few inches to ten, or more.

"Huh."

He leaned the ax against the railing next to his left knee, within easy reach, and flexed his hands within his gloves, trying to increase circulation. The mountaineering gear helped immensely, but it was still cold. He reminded himself to get them moving before too long. Standing still didn't generate any body heat. He was about to turn to her and say something to that effect, when a glint in the water near the base of the pier caught his eye. He tried to relocate it, but couldn't. He placed a hand on the mass of vines clinging to the top rail in front of him to steady himself, and leaned out to try to get a better look.

He immediately regretted it as the rotten metal let go under his weight, and he tottered forward, off-balance. He slid his left foot out and to the side in an effort to counter-

balance himself. This failed to help arrest his forward motion much, and he would have pitched forward into the water at that point had Sophia not had the presence of mind to snag the arm of his jacket and jerk him backward. What it did do, however, was inadvertently kick the ax-head outward as his boot connected with it. He grabbed for the descending handle even as she brought him to a halt, but only succeeded in smacking it with the tips of his gloved fingers, accelerating its fall, and providing just enough additional impetus to send the ax skittering under the lower rail, through the dangling foliage, and into the gray water. There was a quiet "bloop" as it dropped below the surface.

He stared at the ripples marching outward.

"I can't believe I just did that."

Sophia was looking at the same place, an amused expression on her face. She was still holding the arm of his jacket. Realizing this, she let go.

"Good thing it's not very deep."

He sighed. This was going to suck.

He pulled off his gloves, shrugged out of his pack, unzipped and removed his jacket, and then knelt down before the railing where the ax had made its unscheduled exodus. He pushed the hanging vines to either side, clearing a section along the lower rail. The wind cut through his base layer t-shirt as if it

wasn't there, and he started to shiver. He lay face down on the dirty stone of the pier, and wiggled himself under the lower rail until he could look directly down into the water next to the pier. He could see the outline of the ax on the bottom, maybe three and a half feet down. As he studied it and began to psych himself up for the shock of the frigid water, he saw the glint again. This time he could see exactly where it was. It was near the center of the ax handle, in the silt between two rocks. He looked up at Sophia.

"Will you hand me a flashlight? And I'll need you to anchor me."

She knelt and tugged a flashlight free from a side pocket of his pack and handed it to him. Then she sat down next to him, and waited until he transferred the light from one hand to the other before clasping his outstretched wrist, digging in her heels as best she could. He nodded at her, and then turned back to the task at hand. He wriggled farther out until he was at the tipping point along the edge of the pier, and then shone the light down into the water.

At first, there was nothing, not even the glint from before. He altered the angle of the beam, and then there was a brief reflection from something on the bottom. He adjusted the angle again, and then a burst of light exploded back at him, so bright that he felt the jolt rip along his optic nerves and slam

into his brain. He nearly dropped the flashlight as he squeezed his eyes shut in defense, but it didn't really matter, because he couldn't have seen anything anyway. He felt Sophia twitch, and suck in a breath, and knew she'd seen it too.

"Whoa!"

"You ok? What was that?"

"I don't know. Here, take this back." He contorted himself enough to pass the flashlight back to her through the mess of vines above him, then lay still, waiting for his vision to clear of the after-images floating within.

"There's something else down there. I'm going to try to snag it, too, just as soon as I can see again."

"You sure you're ok?"

"Think so. Give me minute."

His vision did clear, finally, and he wasted no time. He plunged his arm into the water, stretching as far as he could and pulling on Sophia's arm to get the distance he needed. The water was even colder than he expected, and sucked the heat from his outstretched limb with incredible efficiency. He was just able to get his fingers around the haft of the ax, and retrieve it from its resting place. The temperature of the water was bad enough, but the wind on his soaked arm as he raised the ax to hand it through the vines to Sophia was worse. She took it with her free hand, and set it on the ground next to her.

He almost didn't care enough then to try for the mystery item that had nearly blinded him, but his curiosity won out over his discomfort, and he plunged his arm in again, stretching just a little farther than before to get his fingers down in between the two rocks. The object was partially covered by one of the rocks, so he had to dig into the silt around the rock to tip it out of the way. This released clouds of sediment into the water, and he had to do the rest by feel. The object was round, flat, and smooth, and after the rock was out of the way, took little time to excavate. He drew it up to the surface, barely able to feel and hold onto it with his nearly-frozen claw of a hand.

"Here, before I drop it."

He offered it up to Sophia to take, so desperate to be done with this that he didn't even look at it. All he cared about was to be dry and warm again. As soon as he had handed off the item, he let go of her arm and wriggled out from under the railing, getting to his feet and making only a rudimentary effort to dry his arm on his shirt before grabbing his jacket and pulling it on as fast as he could. He only zipped it up part-way, and thrust his frozen hand within, cradling the numb appendage in his armpit. He shivered and stamped around, trying to jump-start his metabolism.

"Good grief, that's cold!"

Feeling began to return in pins-and-needles fashion, and he finally gave his attention to the item Sophia was turning over in her gloved hands. It was pretty clear what it was, but it didn't offer an immediate explanation for the optical assault.

Sophia looked from the item to him, blue eyes behind her glasses puzzled. She held it out to him.

"It's from one of those wheels. Must've broken loose, or been broken loose. Pitched it all the way over here."

It was one of the metal hoops, with the glass intact. It was uncolored, sort of a whitish silver, and only semi-translucent, like the center of an ice cube. One side was smooth and glossy, but as she turned it over again, he could see the other side was minutely cross-hatched, kind of like the reverse side of a bicycle reflector. He pulled his hand free of his jacket, zipped it the rest of the way, and pulled his gloves on again. Then he took the hoop from her. He also grabbed the flashlight off of the ground where she'd set it. He held it out in front of him with one hand, making sure the beam was perpendicular to his line of sight, and then interposed the hoop into the beam, glossy side facing the flashlight lens, squinting as he did so.

Light passed through the hoop, and he could see the beam translated through the translucence of the material within, the

white light of the beam amplified slightly as it shone through. No blinding pyrotechnics, however. He flipped the hoop over.

Light exploded from the hoop, blasting backward from the cross-hatched face to envelop the flashlight and his forearm, and the entirety of the back half of the lake and the feeder stream were illuminated as though it were high noon in the middle of summer. He could feel heat through his glove and jacket, and the reflection off of the water was nearly blinding, even though he'd had his eyes almost shut to begin with. He heard Sophia yip with alarm, and he jerked the hoop out of the flashlight beam.

The aftermath seemed almost like twilight in comparison, as after-images floated lazily along with each twitch of his eyeballs, and the lake returned to its comparative gloom.

He switched off the flashlight with an almost reflexive afterthought, staring at the hoop in his hand.

"Wow."

"That's not normal, right? I mean, what is that? Some kind of amplifier?"

"I have no idea. I've never seen anything that can do that. The flashlight isn't that bright, and the back-flash was hot, too. I don't get it. And why the hell would it be part of some public works display? Seems like a lawsuit just waiting to happen. Can you imagine if the sun caught that just right? Ka-

boom." He thought of the door in the atrium with the warning symbols. Like that, this made no sense, but here it was. He shoved the hoop into a jacket pocket and zipped it shut, looking at her.

"I guess we just add it to our list of weird. Hopefully there's no exit exam in our future."

She stooped and retrieved the ax, handing it to him. She looked like she was about to say something, but she didn't. She just gave him a "lead on" flourish with her hand, and followed him back across the upper plaza to the avenue.

Ch. 18

Benighted

They'd only been going again for a half-mile or so when the buildings began to diminish in scale fairly quickly, and it became clear that they had finally passed out of the "downtown" section of the city. The avenue they had traveled thus far had been almost ruler-straight, but now began to turn slightly to the right or left as it began to ascend in elevation, and land features became more evident. Foothills were now visible in the distance, and they could see the level of development waned as they became more pronounced. Still, given how far they'd travelled, this was a huge city, and the outskirts were still hours away. The wind faltered for the first time since they'd made it outside, then changed direction entirely and began to gust higher. The dim gray sky began to darken even further, as charcoal masses of clouds pushed in across the skyline behind them. It didn't take long for them to realize that a storm was on its way in, and that they'd better find shelter before it caught them.

They scouted the buildings around them as they passed along, most of them three and four story concrete or brick boxes with commercial space on the bottom floors, and what appeared to be residential apartments above. Most of the storefronts were open to the elements, their plate glass fronts long gone, and

the openings where they used to be choked with encroaching vegetation, or collapsed down upon themselves. They'd gone several more blocks before anything worth investigating presented itself.

It was taller than most of the surrounding structures, and looked like it may have been a boutique hotel, or up-scale apartment building once upon a time. There was a covered vehicle court in front, the remains of several vehicles parked within. The double doors at the back of the circular drive were metal, with intricate iron-work patterns adorning the fronts. The walls to either side were of glass-block, and had fared better than their plate-glass brethren. Many were cracked and broken, but only a few were shattered all the way through, so there were actually very few holes in the walls themselves. Where the glass-block ended, the brick of the structure continued, with a few more glass-block sections that may have been meant as windows, as they were smaller, and set higher up on the front walls of the building that flanked the front doors.

He left the path, forging his way through the stiff grass toward the building, and could hear Sophia following right behind him. They entered the deeper gloom of the vehicle court, and the grass dwindled in height as they neared the double doors. They stepped up onto the concrete apron that fronted the doors, and halted before them. Parts of the iron-work decoration

were latticed loop constructions serving as handles. He grabbed one and pulled.

The door moved less than an eighth of an inch, and then halted. He bent down, and inspected the vertical seam between the two doors at the level of the handles. In the darkness between them, he could just see a slightly darker smudge spanning the narrow gap. The bolt was engaged, and the doors locked. He straightened, and reached over his shoulder, pulling the pry bar free as he handed the ax in his other hand to Sophia. She took it without comment.

He wedged the dog-leg end into the gap just above the bolt, and then levered the bar forward, increasing pressure slowly. The bolt held until he'd almost reached the outside edge of his strength, then gave with the auditory equivalent of a gunshot, one side of the double door popping inward a bit with a rusty squeal as the other moved outward. He staggered forward a step, nearly slamming his fingers against it as the unleashed potential energy in the pry-bar carried it forward. The sound rolled out and away, echoing off of other buildings as it dimmed and then finally died away.

Sophia once again fished one of the flashlights out of his pack, and handed it to him. He pushed the door open, the hinges screaming their obligatory protest as he did so. He switched on the light, and shone it into the interior.

Bit by bit, the beam revealed a darkened lobby, with musty furniture throughout, two elevators at the rear, a concierge's desk to the left, and what looked like an arched entrance to a restaurant to the right, judging by the maitre d' podium just within, and the dim outline of tables and chairs beyond, at the weak edge of the flashlight's beam. He stepped inside, and moved further in, playing the beam around the large room again. On the far left, at the end of the concierge's desk, a hallway led away, the flashlight beam insufficient to illuminate its end, though several of the glass block windows shed dim light on the front section of it. Two doors on the interior wall were visible, and what looked like a low bench just beyond them. He went to the right, to investigate the opening there.

It was a restaurant. It was a fairly small one, maybe twenty tables in all, and had a very cloistered feel to it, lots of dark brick, dark upholstery gone to seed, and very few light fixtures. The only illumination besides his flashlight came from the few glass-block windows along the right wall he'd seen from the outside. He could see that these had blinds on the inside, and he thought that if they still worked, that was all the better. The kitchen was at the back, open to view, and separated from the dining area only by a bar on the left and a section of brick wall in the center, the actual kitchen entrance to the right of it. He could just see the shadowed edge of a range hood

in the kitchen beyond, and he thought that this might do just fine.

"I think this'll work."

"This looks like one of those places from the fifties that had ashtrays built into the ashtrays."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Everybody knows smoking is cool. Don't you watch Mad Men?"

"Yes. That's how I know I'm getting cancer just standing here."

"Well, just hold your breath, then."

"Spoken like a true anachronism."

He moved further into the restaurant. Whatever had killed this world had done so outside business hours, or this place had closed before it happened, because all the chairs were neatly pushed under the tables, and the tables themselves were bare. He played the flashlight beam across the bar, and he could see there were no liquor bottles behind it, just empty shelves along the half-wall partition that separated the back of the bar area from the kitchen. Leave it to him to notice that almost at once.

He put that aside without much thought, and proceeded into the kitchen.

It was what he'd hoped. There were two side-by-side flat grills with large ventilation hoods above them. He followed the ducting above them, and the trunk line exited through the rear

wall of the kitchen. He reached as high as he could within one of them, and could feel a slight pull of air into the canopy. He grinned. They wouldn't have to spend the night fighting the cold.

He turned his attention to the two doors at the left rear corner of the kitchen, one on the rear wall, one on the adjacent interior wall. The one on the rear wall was an exit door, complete with push-bar release, and darkened "exit" sign above it. Though it didn't say "exit", just had another logogram where "exit" would've been. The door on the interior wall looked like the door to a walk-in refrigeration unit. He didn't bother to open either. The exit door had security bolts at the top and bottom, and both were thrown closed. They were pretty well stocked already, and he felt no pressing need to see what the inside of a restaurant reefer looked like after decades of no power. He turned to Sophia, who was standing near the kitchen entrance, watching him do his inspection.

"Looks secure, and also looks like we can have a fire. But I think we should try to blackout those windows. Will you see if those blinds work?"

She nodded, and went to check. He hauled several of the wooden chairs from the nearest table into the kitchen, and went to work with the ax, cannibalizing them for firewood. He piled

the shards on the metal counter next to the grill, calling over his shoulder.

"You have your lighter?"

"Hands full. Can you come get it?"

He left the kitchen, and saw that Sophia had indeed been able to close the blinds, and had also found a roll of aluminum foil somewhere, and was using it to fully blackout the windows by folding sheets of it into the edges of the blinds, bridging the small gap between them and the visible edge of the glass-block. She held the roll in one hand long enough to toss him the lighter, then went back to the task.

"It would appear that you are a detail-oriented person."

She didn't stop or look back at him.

"I don't come by it naturally."

"Oh?"

"My uncle beat it into me. Not physically, or anything, just by repetition. His favorite phrase as I was growing up was, 'Focus, grasshopper'. I heard it a lot. And by a lot, I mean multiple times every single day. Ever really want to piss me off? Just say that. I think I changed just to not hear it anymore."

"Good to know. It's not one of my favorites, but I have been guilty of saying it. "

She didn't reply, and he returned to the kitchen, to make the fire.

He stacked chips and splinters of wood onto the surface of the grill, directly below the middle of the ventilation hood above, and lit them. Once again, the dry wood caught quickly, and soon he had a small blaze going, feeding it as it grew. The smoke from the fire made its unerring way up into the ventilation hood, and was drawn out by the same wind-induced vacuum as before. He continued to add fuel, and the blaze grew, pushing the dark and the cold outward as it did so. He felt Sophia at his side not long after, taking off her gloves and stuffing them into a pocket of her jacket, and then warming her hands before the fire.

"What do you want to do with the door, and the lobby walls?"

"The door shouldn't be too hard to secure. Maybe we can slide the pry-bar between the interior handles. I don't think we need to worry about the walls. We might need to figure out how to mask the entrance to the restaurant, though. Got any more foil?"

She shook her head, eyes closed as she soaked up heat from the fire.

"I have nothing to hang it with even if I did, which I don't. I'm about out."

He looked behind them as they stood before the fire. The grill on which he'd set it was located directly behind the brick section of wall, but the open space behind the bar and the wide walk-through of the kitchen entrance allowed for some light bleed to either side. The entrance to the restaurant was the choke point for the light into the lobby, the walls to either side uninterrupted by any other openings. He chewed his lip in consideration.

"I'll go look for something. Can you deal with dinner?"

She nodded, opening her eyes.

"No problem. I will cast my womanly pheromones at it, and it will be so."

There was a note of bitterness in her voice that didn't seem to have anything to do with any of the conversation preceding it. He frowned.

"Is this a gender role thing?"

She looked at him, then shook her head, a rueful quarter-smile on her face.

"No. That came out bitchier than I meant it to." She looked back into the fire before continuing. "My uncle helped me to become a lot of things that require focus and concentration. I'm a decent accountant. I'm a hard worker. I know how to run a business, all thanks to him. But I know he wanted me to be a good cook, too, because that was what he really loved."

He just waited, figuring there was more.

"I could get all the other stuff. But not that. I was a big disappointment in that regard.

It's not like I didn't try. I did. But I just suck at it. I guess everybody has their Achilles heel, and it was my uncle's poor luck that cooking happened to be mine.

I mean, he would get mad at me, you know? When I screwed stuff up? Before he figured out that I was hopeless when it came to this one thing. I'd been able to get everything else he tried to teach me, and I think it drove him nuts for a while that he couldn't transfer his love for it to me."

She paused again, swiping a tear away under the guise of an itch.

"Sorry. My issues. Probably an over-share."

He was yet again at a loss. Respond? Dismiss? Run away?

"Go. I can heat up water."

He was tempted to try to comfort her, but thought better of it. It seemed risky to try to cast light on the dark waters of the soul when the basics like light, heat, food, and safety were no longer just a matter of flipping a switch, placing an order, or locking a door. Besides, he'd just say the exact wrong thing, anyway. He settled for a low wattage smile, hoping to cast some reassurance, but wondering if you could project something you didn't have.

"I'll check the perimeter while I'm at it."

She nodded absently, and he could see she was still in her head, still partially embroiled in it. He left the kitchen, heading for the lobby, flashlight in hand.

He'd left the pry-bar just inside the still open lobby door. He pushed the partially open door shut, and slid the hefty metal bar inside the interior handles. The metal construction was the same on the interior as the exterior. He pulled the doors inward, and saw that there was more play within the handles than was comfortable, the pry-bar allowing the doors to open enough to expose a three inch gap before binding at the back of the handle loops. He needed some kind of shim to fill the space behind the pry-bar, and added it to his mental list as he continued on, first removing the pry-bar from the doors to take with him, feeling gusts of wind pushing at the doors as he did so. The storm was closer now, and was exerting pressure on all surfaces that stood in its path with insistent prompting. In the distance, thunder rumbled. He thought for a moment, and then pulled the ice ax from where it dangled from a loop on his pack frame. He didn't know how the mixed material construction of the ax measured up to the steel of the pry-bar, but thought that it would do for now. The pry-bar's length made it the equivalent of a universal key now, and there might be doors he needed to open on his perimeter tour. He slid the ax between the door handles

instead, turning it so that the tip of the ax head was lodged against one side of the double doors, the profile of the ax taking up the space between the door and the inside of the handle. Well, mostly. There was still a little play, and he could see that it wasn't the ultimate solution. Good enough until he found something better.

He inspected the area behind the concierge's desk, but there was nothing of value there. He left the lobby down the hall opposite the restaurant entrance, as it was the only other point of egress besides the front doors, and the useless elevators.

Not far down were restrooms, the twin doors he'd seen when they'd first entered, complete with the geometric representation of the sexes on the doors that were so familiar. Sophia's statement on the bridge came back to him. This was exactly their world. Sans people, plus decades, and seen through a gray-scale filter. All except for that one glaring discrepancy. It was like walking through a three-dimensional, interactive encyclopedia of the end of the human race, except that it was for aliens, with their unknown textual descriptors hanging in every space normally reserved for words he knew.

Yet he could see the danger in that analogy. The idea that it was a tour of already chronicled events mandated the outcome.

And they, he, couldn't afford that. To assign a static predetermination to any part of this seemed the height of folly.

He hesitated, evaluating whether he should inventory the restrooms, but decided that he'd catch them on the way back, if he found nothing else. He continued down the hall, the right turn at the end now visible in the flashlight beam. There were two doors farther down on the right, both of which turned out to be unlocked, and to open on a small conference room containing only a central table, conference chairs, and some audio and video equipment.

Then the hall reached the corner of the building and turned right, leading away toward the rear of it. There were several more of the glass-block windows farther down, set into the exterior wall on his left, casting dim, segmented illumination into the hall. He could see what might be set of doors just past them, but they were far enough away to be just suggestions from his current vantage point. There was a door on his right, and beyond it were several floor-to-ceiling windows looking in on the darkened room. He passed the door without opening it, instead shining the flashlight beam through the first window. The room beyond was a workout room, with several aerobic machines, a rack of free weights, and mirrors along most of the interior walls. The windows must've been there to take advantage of the natural light that had probably once streamed brightly

through the glass-block apertures opposite, perhaps to off-set the assumedly unflattering glow from the overhead banks of darkened fluorescents in the room itself.

He'd never understood the whole gym dynamic. Even when he'd been young and active, he had never understood the desire to expend all that concerted effort in such a space. Everything was engineered to contain all that movement, to confine it to such a tiny piece of real estate. You got to exercise while being sedentary at the same time. And all the while, you were confronted with multiple reflections of yourself. Every grimace, every sweat-soaked repetition, all reflected back to illustrate how much imaginary distance was left to go, or how many reps. It made no sense to him. He remembered long-distance running, hiking, climbing, and a dozen other outdoor pursuits, and how they had acted upon his muscles in the same way as the mind-numbing alternatives offered at the gym. But you got to move through the world at the same time, and indoor alternatives had always seemed pointless.

He returned to his present, feeling the extra pounds hanging on him, and realized how far removed from that time he was. Back when he could drink beer all day, and still be in constant motion, slinging a Frisbee, or whatever. Granted with diminishing accuracy, but still. Now he needed a nap just thinking about it.

Nothing in the room jumped out as useful, so he kept going, moving past what turned out to be another locked set of exit doors on the exterior wall to find two more doors on the right side, and one at the end of the hall. The two interior doors were locked, so he passed them by for the moment, and went to the end of the hall. This one was open, and poking his head through after opening it, he saw a stairwell leading up to the right, and another exit door straight ahead. He made sure that exit door was locked, and then returned to the two interior doors. One had an electrical symbol on it above the logogram, and the other was unmarked.

He opted for the unmarked door. The simple lever handle with a built-in privacy lock offered little resistance to the pry-bar, and in moments the door was open.

It was somebody's office, maybe the super's if this was indeed an apartment building. It was fairly small, with the requisite desk, filing cabinets, storage cabinets, and small office furniture you'd expect, plus some personal items tacked to the walls and scattered across the desk top.

What caught his eye first sat in one corner, and wasn't really something you necessarily expected to see in an office. It was another piece of sports equipment. It was a metal stand that supported a speed bag on one side, and a heavy bag on the other, for boxing or kick-boxing training or workouts. He didn't

particularly care for either sport, so it wasn't the apparatus itself that interested him, but the lengths of chain supporting the heavy bag. Front door security solved, he thought. Minutes later, the bag was on the floor, and the chain segments were stowed in the pockets of his jeans.

He poked through some of the cabinets, and didn't find anything of use. Just more leavings robbed of their relevance when this world met its fate, whatever that had happened to be. They hadn't met any zombies yet, nor had they gotten sick and died, either from a chemical agent or radiation. What little evidence they'd seen didn't conclusively point to any particular doomsday scenario. Who knew. Maybe they were still within a gestation period. There was a happy thought. He was about to head back when it occurred to him to check the desk, which turned out to be another dead end so to speak, since they weren't in need of office supplies, writing utensils, sheaves of crumbling and unreadable papers, or connection cords for computer peripherals. Too bad, because there were plenty of each scattered within the various drawers. He was sliding the last drawer shut when one of the cords jogged his memory. He slid it back open. There was a USB cord for a cell-phone twined in the rat's nest of them at the bottom, which he was pretty sure was what Sophia had, and there were USB charging ports on the flashlights. He started to untangle it, and then stopped.

What did it matter? What was the point of even trying to charge her cell phone? They didn't need it anymore for the one thing that they *had* needed it for. And it certainly wasn't likely she'd get a call here. Besides that, it was the same question they'd considered when they'd seen that the flashlights *had* USB ports. What were the chances that the electrical specifications, the communication protocols, or whatever else transferred along that wire between the phone and the charger were the same here as they were where they came from? He was about to let it go, when another part of him spoke up with its own question.

So what? It's just potential. It was clear that he could only guess at what they'd need, or what would work. Maybe he'd brick her phone, but then again maybe he could send her home with a full battery. It was just another service to provide, either way. And that was the ultimate plan, right? He needed to return her to her life. The distance that they'd put between the door and themselves so far stretched out in his mind like one of those desert roads in Arizona, or Nevada, a seemingly astronomical span running to the horizon, punctuated only by heat shimmer and changes in topography. Maybe he needed to fixate on that. Stop playing the accommodating explorer, and leave this obviously dead end behind. That and stop trying to question himself on every decision.

So he teased the cord out of the tangle, and pocketed it as well. He exited the office, and didn't bother with the electrical room, just went back down the hall and didn't stop until he had almost reached the lobby. He stopped at the restrooms, obeying a lifetime's worth of gender rules as he chose the men's room door, and entered. It was exactly as he would have expected it, and at first there seemed to be nothing of value here, either. Besides the obligatory stalls and urinals farther within, there was a double sink vanity just to the right of the entrance. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, only to turn and see that it was him, reflected in the mirrors on the wall behind each sink. Something stirred at the back of his mind where ideas don't know they are ideas until they surface later, and told him to liberate one of the mirrors, as they were only secured to the wall with those clear plastic "L" clamps that were probably patented sometime just after the stone age. He didn't need to expend any more effort than to pry each of the four clamp screws out of the sheet rock with his fingers, freeing the mirror from the wall.

He left the restroom, crossed the lobby, and re-entered the restaurant, finding Sophia standing in front of the fire, carefully feeding it while water in a glass bowl steamed on the grill near the heap of embers. She looked over as he set the mirror down gently onto the tile floor, leaning it up against a

stainless metal cabinet door in the corner. She seemed to have left her musings about the past where they resided.

"What's that for? We going to do some lines?"

"Do you even know what that means?"

"Yes. Well, pretty sure. Coke, right?"

" Anybody your age still do that? Or is that just a movie quote?"

"I don't know. I'm not big into 'experimentation'".

She actually forked her fingers as she said this. He stifled a laugh, just in case she was in earnest. He couldn't tell by her expression.

Lacking any clever response, he went back out into the lobby, to stand before the doors in question. He removed the ax, holding the doors closed against the wind with the toe of his boot. Then, he knotted two of the lengths of chain together, and threaded it through the door handles, looping it several times and pulling it as tight as he could, finally knotting the ends. When he was done, there was so little play in the looped chain that the doors could only open about a half an inch before the handles bound. It was as good as he could hope for.

The wind was really ripping along outside now, and the doors were in constant, if constrained, motion. The air pushing in through the seam was full of moisture and warmer than any they'd experienced in this world so far, and he could smell rain

in it. There'd be lots of rain, if the size of the storm-front was any indication, and it should make for an interesting night. The light coming through the glass-block on either side was much dimmer now than when they had arrived, and the gloom within the lobby was nearing total darkness. He was glad to see that the light from the fire in the kitchen was barely visible through the entrance to the restaurant. Maybe they could just forego trying to mask it. He went back into the restaurant, feeling a little more secure.

There were two bowls of the unidentifiable freeze-dried substance steaming on the metal counter when he re-entered the kitchen, and Sophia was just removing two spoons from a tray on a shelf behind it. She offered him one, gesturing toward the bowls.

"Dinner is served. Spoiler alert, it's the same stuff, yet again."

He took it and dropped it into one of the bowls, as she picked up the other one and moved out of his way.

"Thanks."

He shrugged out of his pack and set it next to hers, leaning against the half-wall that separated the bar from the kitchen. Then he stepped down through the pass-through between the half-wall and the central brick wall into the bar area, where the firelight cast just enough illumination for him to see

that the rest of the bar was as empty as the shelves he'd noticed earlier. He pulled open the few drawers and closed cabinet doors below the bar itself, but aside from a few faded chip-board drink coasters stuck to the bottom of one drawer, there was nothing within except dust and ancient spider webs. The cabinet below the beer taps was empty as well, no kegs or CO2 bottles, and the hoses and fittings were missing too. The dusty taps glinted in the low light, but the pulls had all been removed. It confirmed his impression that this place had been shuttered sometime before the clock had run out here. He stepped back up into the kitchen, where Sophia was pulling a water bottle out of her pack, having set her bowl of food down again next to his. She offered him one, which he took while she secured her pack again.

He then took a bowl and sat down with a sigh on the floor opposite the fire, with his back to the brick wall, which had absorbed some of the heat from the fire by now and radiated it back outward into his tired spine. Sophia took another moment to liberate her bed-roll from her pack for something to sit on, then sat down opposite him, putting her back to the metal cabinet doors below the flat grill currently supporting the fire. He noted that while she could've chosen anywhere in the kitchen to sit down, she'd chosen to sit as close to him as she could. Their legs were nearly touching where they paralleled

each other. He wondered briefly if it was a security thing, or just the warmest place to sit, under the fire like that. He supposed it didn't matter. There was something comforting in the familiarity though. He'd been alone for so long, he'd forgotten what it felt like. Still, probably best not to over-think it. Sophia looked into her bowl as she ate, and seemed drawn into herself, her mind once again elsewhere.

His own thoughts called his attention inward as he absently spooned food into his mouth, and his bones hummed quietly with an exhaustion that was not entirely merited by the exertions of the day. He began to play the day back in his head, as the storm outside heightened, the sound of heavy rain now audible within the kitchen. He got as far as the sprung trap, and his already tenuous sense of security began to ebb. His appetite withered as he considered the implications of the trap again, and suddenly his tour of the surrounding floor of the building seemed cursory and insufficient. He kept seeing in his mind the rusted sections of rebar casting shadows on the trampled grass.

He sighed and got wearily to his feet, stepping over her legs to set the unfinished bowl of food on the counter next to the grill. She looked up, pulled away from whatever she was thinking about.

"What?"

He looked down at her up-turned face, her eyes hidden behind the glare of her glasses again.

"I don't know. It's just a feeling. I don't think I've taken enough precautions."

"You think we were followed. Even if we were, would anyone still be out in this? Wouldn't they have taken cover like us?"

"Maybe. Probably. Like I said, it's just a feeling. Problem is, I can't shake it."

He went to his pack, knelt down with twin popping sounds from his protesting knees, and began to go through it.

"Well. You look like you know what to do, so I won't freak out, even though that's sort of emotionally trending now. You do have an idea, right?"

"I'm looking for inspiration, and you freaking out would indeed be counter-productive."

She remained silent as he went through the contents of his pack. He regarded and rejected a number of items before finding the one that stood out. As a plan bloomed, he knew that it had really been the only option all along. He drew it out, knowing that it would get her attention. He held it in his hand as he stood up and turned around. Her eyes narrowed the tiniest bit, but her voice was neutral as she queried him.

"What's that for?"

"I told you what it's for. It's not exactly a quick-draw weapon. You have to prep it."

"And you're considering using that in here?"

"Consideration is part of planning, and I'm only a half-step past knowing that we need one."

He took it to the metal counter that ran between the sister grill to the one hosting their fire, and a deep sink farther down along the back wall.

Sophia got to her feet and set her bowl next to his on the same counter, and then came to stand next to him, both of them surveying the bottle before them. He looked down towards the sink, and stepped left until he was in front of it.

Above the tile back-splash, and behind the top of the sink's spray assembly was a short shelf. One of the items on it was the unmistakable hour-glass shape of a plastic dish-soap bottle. He reached up and grabbed it, holding it up to the light of the fire. The contents of the bottle had been reduced to a waxy lump in the bottom. He threaded the cap off as he spoke, and set it on the counter in front of him.

"Will you hand me my water bottle?"

She nodded, and did so, fetching it from the floor where he'd set it down while eating. She handed it to him. He uncapped it and poured about half of the remaining water into the dish-soap bottle, then drank the rest. He set the empty container on

the counter, and then re-capped the dish-soap bottle, and set it down, as well.

Sophia began to hum a series of six notes, and it took three repetitions of the sequence before he realized that she was humming the theme to *Bill Nye, the Science Guy*.

"Very funny."

"But you are."

He didn't reply, just reached in front of her, and grabbed the tall bottle. He felt her tense next to him, but to her credit, she didn't say anything.

He cracked the perforated seal on the cap with a twist, and removed it. He inclined the neck of the bottle in her direction.

"Drink?"

"No, thank you." Her tone was flat.

He brought the top of the neck of the bottle to just under his nose, and her tension became palpable, radiating from her in waves. He merely sniffed, and then jerked the bottle away as the fumes bit at his sinuses.

"Whew! Well, thankfully, that's the good stuff."

He picked up the empty water bottle, and poured enough out of the liquor bottle to fill it, then set the liquor bottle down and re-capped the water bottle, setting it aside. Sophia's tension had evaporated, and when she spoke, there was only curiosity in her voice.

"What are you doing?"

"Improvising."

"C'mon. It's not like I can go watch TV. The least you could do is give me a running commentary."

"Fine."

He picked up the dish-soap container, and held it up to the light. The waxy lump had almost entirely re-constituted, and he swished the stratified contents gently around to homogenize them. He then set it next to the liquor bottle, and then put his finger across the open neck of the same.

"This alcohol is clear, which *can* be an indication of purity, and by extension, flammability. Nose test confirms this, so pat on the back for me. According to common wisdom as offered by the internet and not a few zombie apocalypse novels, flammable liquid can be an effective weapon against ambulatory enemies provided you have a suitable delivery system. And that would be this." He said, tapping the top of the open bottle with his finger. "It also says that gasoline or some other petroleum distillate is way better, but here we are."

He continued, as she simply nodded without comment.

"However, class, the issue with most flammable liquids, including the one we have at our disposal here, is that they tend to run off quickly, like water. That limits the ouch factor, and that's bad, so you need to add a thickening agent,

like laundry or dish soap, which will add a "cling" attribute to the burning hell you've just doused them with."

He removed the cap from the dish-soap container, and then upended it, carefully pouring its contents into the liquor bottle. Once empty, he tossed the plastic bottle into the sink, and re-capped the liquor bottle. He shook it gently and then set it back on the counter.

"Why not have the bottle full?"

"A very good question. If memory serves, and I assure you, that is a rather large "if", it's better to have some airspace in the bottle, because that air will be full of fumes. If they ignite, it can actually contribute to an explosion, rather than just the fluid catching fire."

She raised her eyebrows, and let out an extended "Ahhhh", as though he had just shed light onto one of the mysteries of the ages.

"Now, we need a wick. For extra credit and a homework pass, who would like to find one for me? Maybe a strip of t-shirt cotton."

She nodded again, and went over to her pack and began to rummage through it. In the meantime, he picked up one of two metal hangers he'd taken from the closet in their hotel room, and straightened it into a single length of wire. He then started to carefully form it around the metal hoop and lens he'd

pulled from the lake earlier in the day, intent on making a stable cradle for it that he could then extend out, using the remaining length of wire to wrap around one of the flashlight lens housings. Before he'd gotten very far in the process, Sophia was back, handing him a thin strip of white cotton. He set down his current project, and took it from her. He frowned, staring at the shape.

"Is this what I think it is?"

"No comment."

He shrugged, and then picked up the liquor bottle, and spun the cap off. Then he threaded the strip of fabric down into the neck, until just a little remained over the crest. He put the cap back on then, anchoring it. He shook the bottle, and then removed the cap again, pulling the fabric strip out most of the way, allowing the excess moisture to drain back into the bottle before re-capping it, once again anchoring it, but now with most of it draped wetly against the outside of the bottle neck.

"And there you have it. Molotov cocktail. Except that I'll have to re-wet the wick every hour or so. That's going to be a pain in the ass. Any questions?"

She raised her hand above her head.

"Yes, you in the glasses."

She smiled as she lowered her hand.

"So then, what's the deal with the water bottle?"

"Another good question, but the answer will probably disappoint, because it has nothing to do with our little experiment, here. It's just conservation of resources. I figured it was better to save it than pour it down the sink drain."

She tipped her head to the side in a "hmm, interesting" gesture, then brought her fist up.

He clued in just in time, and gave her a bump, smiling himself.

"I have a suggestion about the wick, though."

"And that would be?"

"Can I just show you?"

He huffed dramatically, rolling his eyes.

"If you *must*."

She took her bowl and turned it over, setting it in the bottom of the sink. Then she set their new incendiary device on top of it. It was a tall, narrow bottle, so when she put the water bottle on the counter at the edge of the sink next to it, they were nearly equal in height, and fairly close together. She took the top off of the water bottle, and then fed the wick into it, finally setting the cap atop the water bottle again, assumedly to slow evaporation. Now, only the short section bridging the two bottles would dry out, and maybe not even that, given the wicking action of the cotton. He nodded in appreciation as she looked at him.

"Now you don't have to re-wet it, and you can just grab it if you need it."

"Check out the brain on you."

"I am so smart, s-m-r-t."

He laughed, and thought that when she smiled as she was doing now, she was transformed into a different person. She became the person that might have been, had her personal tragedies not befallen her. Maybe that was true for everyone, though. Maybe any impetus that caused an honest smile was a temporary transcendence of life's reversals.

"So what's next?" She asked, smile dimming, but still there. There was openness in her now that hadn't been there before.

And just like that, he realized that they were now friends. They were no longer just two people who had crashed together and then been forced to share the same experience. The friction of their extended intersection had forged something new, and this last interaction had finally drawn that new thing out of the fire. He could tell that she knew it too, because there was now an ease between them that hadn't been there before either.

It made the rest of the evening seem a bit surreal. They were preparing for a possible intrusion, by a person or persons who intended them harm. That was the assumption, and he didn't think that either of them disagreed with it. Yet this new

connection between them seemed to temporarily banish any fears that should logically follow, given their experience together so far. And so they talked, and planned, and it seemed much more like an interesting academic exercise than desperate self-preservation.

He explained what he wanted to do with the flashlight and the lens, and while he was doing that, he suddenly realized why he had taken the mirror from the bathroom, and told her about that, too. She made a few suggestions, and they were good ones, and they made their preparations, joking and laughing the entire time. The storm raged on outside, and at times thunder shook the building, and the rain seemed as incessant as the wind had been before it, but they took little notice. One of the last things he did was to crank her flashlight, maxing out the cells. He then plugged the cord he'd salvaged from the desk into the USB port, and asked her for her cell phone. She pulled it out of her jeans pocket, and handed it to him.

"Drum roll, please."

He plugged the other end into the phone. Nothing happened for a second.

Then the screen lit, and on it the charging battery icon blinked, underscored by "3 percent charged".

He set the phone down on the counter, next to the flashlight, and then turned to her, holding up his fist this time. She bumped it.

And then, the preparations were done. Sophia fed the fire, and then unrolled her sleeping bag, stepping into it and pulling it up around her, heaving a contented sigh as she sat down again where she'd been sitting earlier when they'd eaten.

"This is officially the warmest I've been since we ended up here."

He sat down opposite her again, and scratched at the lengthening stubble on his cheek. He stifled a yawn as weariness began to displace some of his sense of well-being, but he could tell it would only steal so much. His loneliness had abated, and the glow of that would not fade any time soon. He stretched his arms above his head, and cracked his neck with a sideways tilt of his head.

Sophia raised a single questioning eyebrow.

"Methinks thy joints protest too much. Is that what I have to look forward to?"

"It's a betrayal. And I've treated myself so well over the years, too."

They were both silent for a while, but it was now one of those comfortable silences that didn't require speech or indicate intense self-preoccupation. She broke it.

"What are the odds of us having to use this stuff tonight?"

He thought about it.

"Higher brain says not likely. Id says even."

She sighed, then yawned, not trying to hide it.

"I am so tired. Too tired to worry."

"That's good. You should get some sleep. Your watch isn't that far away."

She didn't say anything, just sort of slid down sideways until she was lying on her side on the floor, head disappearing into the sleeping bag as she curled up. He watched as her breathing slowed, and he thought she had drifted off. Then a muffled whisper rose through the fabric.

"'night, Jeff."

"Good night, Sophia. Sleep well."

"Mmm."

He got up quietly some time later, and checked her phone. The screen lit as he unplugged it, informing him it was "100 percent charged". He clicked the button to switch off the screen, and then stowed the phone, cord, and flashlight in her pack.

He started to turn away, and then got a tickle at the back of his mind. He turned back, looking at the packs, waiting for the tickle to either go away, or become something. It bloomed finally after almost a minute of staring, and he bent down again

and began to redistribute items between the two packs. When he was done, he straightened, stretching his lower back and rubbing his eyes.

He returned to where he'd been sitting, settling down again and thinking that he should wake her soon, his own fatigue now blanketing his thoughts and weighting his eyelids. She wasn't snoring exactly, but a soft, feminine whiffle was barely audible over the sound of the storm outside. He decided to wait a little longer, and re-examine the plan, yet again.

Outside, the rain drummed on.

Ch. 19

Run like hell

He woke with a slight jerk in response to something that was already mostly lost, having already occurred and only fading echoes of it remaining as he came awake. There wasn't enough left for him to be sure, but he thought it might have been a change in air pressure. He knew this was significant, but he also could tell that he hadn't been merely dozing, he'd been fully asleep. The transition back wasn't the same, and it was going to take him a minute fully grasp the significance of it.

The fire had dwindled, but still burned, so he hadn't been asleep that long. It couldn't have been more than half an hour. The last thing he remembered, he'd been going through their plan again, so he had instant access to that. He looked to his right at the mirror in the corner, in almost exactly the same position as he'd placed it when he'd first brought it into the kitchen. They'd only adjusted it a few degrees to get the best view of the restaurant entrance.

They'd argued good-naturedly about using it. She'd made the point that any placement of it where they could see the entry to the restaurant in its reflection would allow anyone advancing into the restaurant to see them as well. "That's how mirrors work." she'd said. He'd agreed, but had had his own point to make.

"True, but I think the difference is in perception. We'll know what we're looking at, because we set it up. But someone else probably wouldn't, at least not right away, and this is all about what happens in the first few moments. Remember that part in *Jurassic Park*, with the raptors in the kitchen with the kids?"

"Ohh! I get it."

The mirror showed the shadowed arch in the diffuse light from the fire. Nothing moved there yet. Any sounds were obscured by the muted snap and pop of the fire, and the sound of the rain pouring down outside. It didn't matter. It was happening, and somehow he knew it. He reached across and put his hand on Sophia's lower leg, squeezing it through the material of her sleeping bag first once, and then twice in quick succession, their signal. He felt her stiffen, and then her head emerged from the bag, her hair mussed in sleep. She looked at him after sliding her glasses on, and he nodded at her.

She didn't hesitate. She wriggled out of the bag, and crawled quietly across the tile floor of the kitchen until she was just below the sink, and stopped, pulling herself up into a crouch facing him. Then she stood up, though not fully, just enough to see what she was doing. The half-wall behind the bar was higher than the counter with the sink, so she was still shielded from view by it. She carefully extracted the wick from

the contents of the water bottle, capped the water bottle quickly, and then took both bottles as she crouched again. It was her turn to nod.

He returned his attention to the mirror, and slid silently sideways toward the kitchen entrance, keeping his back to the brick wall and his attention on the reflection in the mirror. He stopped at the edge of the wall, and slowly reached his hand around the corner behind him, feeling for the switch on the flashlight housing. He found it, and then waited, watching, his finger on it.

Then, there was movement in the shadow of the entrance. A figure stepped through into the dim light of restaurant, and halted, head turning slightly to either side, taking in the room, and he got his first view of the human remnant that remained here.

He was short, and broad, with wild, matted hair and a prodigious beard. What few facial features that were apparent in the low light looked somewhere between Asian and Filipino, but the skin was a dusty gray color, reminding him a bit of the asshole demon. The man moved forward, gesturing with a raised hand in a "follow me" wave without taking his eyes off the room in front of him. More figures entered, all men and similarly short, blocky, and pale, who began to fan out in response to hand signals from what he now assumed was the leader. Their

clothing was predominantly animal skins, though some wore more familiar clothing, most likely reclaimed as he and Sophia had done. Their weapons were metal hatchets and machetes, and the edges were bright, except for the last one through. He held a compound bow, metal-tipped arrow knocked and drawn.

He held his other hand down to the left of his thigh where Sophia could see it, and raised a finger each time another figure passed through the restaurant entrance.

The leader had covered nearly half the distance to the kitchen entrance when he stopped, and closed his fist. The men behind him stopped as well. He could see the leader frown, and then he could see the man's eyes, because they had focused on his own along the geometry of the mirror's reflection.

It was immediately apparent that they had been right to make their preparations. The eyes staring back at him were all wrong. The irises were nearly white, almost indistinguishable from the sclera, and the pupils were large in the low light. He could see cunning, and madness, and hunger in them, and absolutely no quarter. As he watched, a few beads of saliva dripped from the corner of the man's mouth as it drew back in a grin, dancing down his beard before disappearing within, a Pavlovian hint at intent that almost froze him in place.

He convulsively drew his own outstretched fingers into a fist. Sophia moved, duck-walking from the sink to the pass-through into the bar, and then down into the area behind it.

That was the divergent point of their plan. Now they were acting independently, though hopefully still in concert.

It was clear the man saw her move in the mirror's reflection, because he charged forward the instant she did.

He tore his eyes away from the oncoming man, looked away toward the fire, and flipped the switch.

Then the sun opened one eye into the fusty little restaurant, and everything happened fast.

He'd rigged the flashlight with the reflective side of the lens facing the bulb, and oriented it backward so that the kitchen side would get the little, and the dining area would get the lot.

Blinding light blew into the space now occupied by five individuals who were nowhere close to prepared for it. Hands instinctively came up to shield retinas that were already overwhelmed, betrayed by simple response time.

"Now!"

He drew the pistol from his jacket pocket, hoping that looking at the fire would help minimize the difference between the previous low light and this new supernova. He consulted the mirror again, squinting as he did so, and saw that the man had

halted his charge, hands thrown up to shield his eyes and machete jutting backward and up from one of them.

He rolled outward into the kitchen entrance, careful not to bump the flashlight as he brought the gun up, focusing on the light-bleached forms in tableau before him, the leader being the closest. He sighted, and pulled the trigger.

The gun boomed and recoiled, and he saw the man's head twitch backward, a vivid spray of crimson fanning out behind it as the body followed, toppling in the same direction. There was a part of him that knew what he had just done, and was horrified, but he also knew what he had seen in the man's eyes. He didn't hesitate, just sighted again, and pulled the trigger.

As he did so, something passed through the air just above his head, and he heard the mirror implode behind him before he even registered the sound of its passing. Nevertheless, the gun boomed again, seemingly willing to forego its unreliability in favor of their need. Another body dropped, as his second bullet tore through its chest cavity.

Then, an explosion cast new hues into the bright whiteness before him, and showers of orange and yellow splattered across the three still-upright figures within the restaurant.

There was an iron bulkhead that ran across the width of the restaurant ceiling near the center of the room, providing structural support for the space, and they had agreed that it

was the perfect dispersal point for their incendiary. Evidently, they had been right, and Sophia had made the perfect throw after lighting it, because the three remaining individuals within the restaurant were now stumbling around on fire, clawing at their faces. He fumbled outward with his free hand and shut off the flashlight, the switch hot to the touch. As the blaze of light ceased, it cast the space into relative darkness once again, though the light from the spreading fire quickly replaced it. The screams were all too human as furniture within the dining area added fuel to the conflagration, and he could see that weapons were forgotten and agony pre-eminent as the remaining men within sought blindly to escape it, the room quickly becoming an inferno. He got awkwardly to his feet. Sophia appeared at his side, pulling at his elbow. He picked up the flashlight and lens with his free hand, the housing almost too hot to hold, and moved behind the brick wall to escape the growing heat, the howls of the burning men following him.

One of the things that they had discussed in depth during the evening had been what to do if what had just happened actually happened. It was the closest he'd been able to get to the topic of leaving so far without any push-back from her, or her shutting down. They'd tossed scenarios back and forth, both best and worst case. He had seen what the analysis of the possible outcomes had quickly showed her, because the

inevitability of the one choice was glaring when you viewed it head-on. He'd also seen that despite that inevitability being made plain, her fear of returning was still equal to it. He just let the conversation play out, and in the end they agreed on an exit strategy in case they were attacked, which had them going back the way they'd come if they escaped. She had stopped short of committing to go all the way back, and he didn't push it.

The flip side was, though, that she wanted to continue on, if nothing happened.

"If we're in no danger, then I want to see what's outside the city. How many chances do you get to explore another world?"

"Just because they don't come at us tonight doesn't necessarily mean we're in no danger." He said, mildly.

"Don't rain on it. You know what I mean. I agree to turn back when we get half-way through our food and water, ok? C'mon, who gets to do this, outside of books or movies?"

He didn't argue. His disquiet was just an under-current at the time, anyway. Deliverance from loneliness was powerful, and colored everything.

Now as he followed her quickly to where their packs waited next to the exit door and smoke filled the kitchen, the screams of human candles turning to death croaks as the heat from the flames mounted, he found that he didn't really know how to feel about the outcome. He knew that he eventually would, though. He

hoped that day was far off as he helped her with her pack, and then slid into his own, kicking the lower security bolt open with his booted toe while he did so. He had thrown the upper one open earlier that evening, thinking that time would probably be pressing if they had to exit, and he had proven himself right. Both of them were starting to cough as the bottom bolt slid free, and he hammered the press-bar release on the door with both hands. The door squealed violently open at his insistence, and she followed him out into the rain-soaked wind and the dark.

They emerged into a vegetation-choked alley at the side of the building, sheets of rain gusting at them nearly sideways, as the narrow space between this building and the one next to it channeled the force of the storm. The door remained open behind them, bound in place either by rusted hinges or displaced foliage along the base, as light grew brighter from the fire inside and smoke poured out of it. The smoke was snatched instantly away by the wind. He led her toward the rear of the building, moving through the waving high grass, and stopped a few yards shy of where the alley opened onto the street that ran behind it. He handed the pistol to Sophia, and then stowed his flashlight-lens set in his largest jacket pocket, then took the gun back. He didn't like the fact that they were backlit by the light from the open door, and even now tendrils of flame were beginning to dance through at the top of its frame. The

night beyond was nearly pitch-black, and pretty soon this entire place was going to be a blazing beacon within it. They needed to get as far from here as they could, as fast as they could.

Sophia put her head next to his, so she could be heard over the storm without shouting.

"Shouldn't I use my flashlight? I can't see anything out here." Her voice was higher than normal.

He shook his head, turning to speak into her ear.

"One of them had a bow. If they have anyone outside, and they probably do, there might be others that have them, too. Light just makes us a target."

She nodded, and he could see that her eyes behind rain-soaked lenses were too wide, and the darkened flashlight she held in one hand shook slightly. There was nothing for it, though. It was time to move, and hope for the best. He took a moment to pull her jacket hood up over her already drenched head, and then gave her what he hoped was a reassuring pat on one jacketed shoulder. He pulled his scarf out of a jacket pocket, tied one end of it through a belt-loop on the side of his jeans, and handed her the other end.

"We need to move now, and we need to move fast. Whatever happens, just stay behind me, and keep moving. Anything happens, you see *anything*, you yank, ok?"

She nodded, and in that moment, he couldn't believe how young she looked. He was suddenly very glad that they were headed back toward the door. He turned and stepped out into the street, trying to look in every direction at once, turning left along the back of the building. He moved quickly, and felt tension at his hip as Sophia failed to match pace right away. But it eased, and she fell into step behind him.

They jogged along the back of the building, passing a cavernous opening that may have been a loading dock. He couldn't tell, as there wasn't enough light to see into it. His skin crawled as he imagined potential snipers positioned within, tracking their progress across with drawn arrow tips.

But they crossed it without incident, and as they neared the end of the block, he could see the security door he'd found earlier, the one on the exterior wall of the stair-well. It was closed, still. He thought that either they had come through the front doors somehow, which he thought he would've heard asleep or not, or the double doors at the side, near the workout room. He slowed pace as they neared the corner, and put a cautioning hand out behind him to stop Sophia.

He knelt down, until his head was level with the tips of the tall grass, and slowly stuck his head around the corner, looking down the side of the building, pressing his cheek against the wet, cracked masonry.

He'd been right. The side doors were ajar, and two figures stood before them, apparently conversing as they leaned toward each other, much as he and Sophia had done. Their hand gestures were animated, and it had the look of an argument. Farther down, though, he could see flickering light through the glass-block windows there. The fire was spreading quickly. He figured that there were probably others at the front door, but who knew what the front of the building looked like now. He drew back around the corner, and gestured for Sophia to kneel down. He put his face next to hers again.

"Stay low, down in the grass."

She nodded understanding, and he turned and moved in a crouch out across the street in front of them, as quickly as he could with the loaded pack on his back. They threaded their way through the stiff strands, essentially blind at this level as the rain pelted down. The scarf tugged taut a few times as they crossed, but there was no intentionality to it, so he kept moving until they had gained the protection of the building across the street. He gestured behind him with a "come around" wave, Sophia passing by at his back as he pivoted around, and stuck his head back around the corner to see if they had been spotted.

Evidently they had. The two figures had covered half the distance to where they now crouched, charging through the rain

and wet grass with weapons drawn. He felt a lightning strike of fear stagger his heartbeat, but he stood and brought the gun up, thumbing back the hammer as he steadied his grip with his other hand. He sighted, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Distance dwindled as he cursed and cleared the bad round, taking aim again. He felt Sophia at his elbow, fumbling with his jacket, but couldn't spare her any thought as he aimed again and pulled the trigger. There was no time to run, now.

Click.

He ejected the second dead bullet, and felt panic racing toward him like a tsunami. The approaching attackers were less than five yards from them, one slightly behind the other, when Sophia ceased her fussing at his side at the same time he got the gun up again, taking yet another agonizing moment to sight in before pulling the trigger.

The gun roared, and kicked upward in recoil, and the closest of them pitched face first into the grass, even as the other raised his blade high, closing fast.

He heard Sophia's own panic as she screamed a command.

"Cover your eyes!"

Something in her voice made him obey, probably because there was already a part of him that knew what she was doing, even if his fore-brain hadn't received the memo yet.

Blinding light flared just as his free hand clapped over his eyelids, dimmed but not entirely blocked by its mass. He stepped backwards and to the side, hoping that Sophia had the presence of mind to do the same thing, the remaining assailant's trajectory still fresh in his mind's eye, as he heard a strangled cry of surprise. The scarf tied at his hip jerked violently as the sound of the cry lowered in pitch, a doppler-shift notification that the source had passed by at speed, and was now behind him. He heard the sound of a body hitting the ground, as well as what could only be low curses in another language as the light winked out.

He tore his hand away, and saw that Sophia had indeed stepped out of the way, now shifting the darkened flashlight-lens setup from hand to hand in a hot potato alternation, staring down at the figure even now struggling to get to its feet. The man had passed between them, ripping her end of the scarf out of her hand as he did so, and it was clear from the rapid changes in orientation of the man's head that he was temporarily blinded.

He thumbed down the hammer on the pistol and engaged the safety, stepping forward as he reversed it, grabbing it by the still-warm barrel as he raised it. The man was almost to his feet, still looking wildly around in the wrong direction and

raising the machete clutched in one hand, when he brought the gun down with all of his might on the base of the man's skull.

The man dropped like a rock, instantly inert.

They both just stood there, looking down at him, Sophia still distractedly shifting the flashlight from one hand to the other. Moments passed, and then he turned to her, holding out his hand. She finally looked away from the prone form in the grass in front of them, and then handed him the light. They locked eyes in the dark and rain as she did so. She was trembling.

He smiled what he hoped was a confidence inspiring smile.

She stared at him for a moment longer, then raised her glasses and thumbed either rain or tears from each eye, saying nothing. What was there to say, anyway? He stowed the still-hot flashlight assembly in the large pocket again, then handed her end of the scarf to her. She took it, and he turned away, heading down the street before them that paralleled the avenue they'd traveled to get here. He thought it prudent to not return to it until they were at least a few blocks farther away. This time, there were no tugs at his side, meaning she was right behind him. They moved as quickly as he felt they could through the high grass and dark. There wasn't a path here like there had been on the avenue, and so they occasionally had to make their way around obstacles, both man-made and natural.

Visibility began to improve, because of the steadily increasing glow behind them as the fire raced upwards inside the structure, breaking through to the outside wherever it could. He thought that while Sophia's use of the flashlight assembly had saved them in the short term, the piercing glare of it out into the stormy night had most certainly alerted any remaining pursuers that the quarry had left the building, and were now trying to escape. He felt the urgency to move faster, but between the weight of the packs and the terrain, as well as the necessity to watch for enemies, they maxed out at double-time pace. They went three uneventful blocks as the ambient light increased, a quick backwards glance showing that the structure they'd left was now fully involved, flames shooting upwards into the night past the roof-line.

They reached a T-intersection where the street they were on terminated, and they were forced to either head back to the avenue, or in the opposite direction. He didn't hesitate. The risk of getting lost wasn't worth the unquantifiable level of safety another route might offer, so he took them left, back toward the avenue that had led them here. They crossed the street first, angling across behind the empty shell of another bus mired in the overgrowth, this one at an angle to the street. Its nose was wrapped around a utility pole that it had relocated forcefully enough to have snapped it in half, the upper section

crashing down onto the roof, and the lower section now inclined against a damaged store-front, effectively blocking passage on that side of the street. They reached the other side, and moved along it towards the next intersection, the structures to their right skeletal and partially collapsed, having suffered some earlier conflagration. Debris slowed them even further, and his frustration was only outpaced by his fear.

They neared the intersection at last, and again he stopped several yards away, before stepping out into it. He thought furiously, trying to factor too many unknown variables into a formula for a course of action. Only two items seemed to offer any protection, and they were the same ones they'd already used twice. He drew the flashlight and lens out of his pocket again, cranked it, and made a slight adjustment to the angle of the metal hoop lens. Then he handed it to Sophia, who took it with a frown. He untied the scarf from his belt-loop, and wrapped it around his glove several times to further insulate it, and then took the flashlight from her. He oriented it so that it would be facing forward if he held it up like a video camera, using what was left of the scarf's length to lash it in place. He held it toward her, nodding at it. She reached out and tied it off for him. He evaluated his work. Her frown deepened.

He put his head next to hers again.

"I'll probably have to leave it on longer. I'm trying to do my hand a favor."

"I thought you said light made us a target."

"A flashlight makes us a target. This thing is like trying to look at the sun. It's the only rear guard I can think of."

She nodded in understanding. He pulled the pistol from his side pocket with his free hand, and handed it to her.

"Swap out the clip for a full one."

She did, reaching without hesitation into his same pocket to pull out a loaded clip. She dropped the half-full one out of the gun into the same hand, clasping it with her pinky while inserting the loaded one. She slapped it home with her palm, and then returned the partial to his pocket. Then she chambered a round, and offered it back to him. He shook his head once.

"It's your turn. I'm defense, you're offense, now. Turn right, and keep moving unless something happens."

She hesitated, but then nodded. She held it the way he had shown her, turning away and moving forward.

It happened moments after they cleared the end of the building on the corner. He felt something impact the metal frame of his pack, twitching it to the side slightly across his back as the something pinged off into the darkness, clattering against the stone face of the building above them and then falling to the ground not far behind them. The light from the

now-raging inferno several blocks away was more than sufficient to illuminate the fletched metal shaft resting on the flattened grass stalks they had just tramped through.

"Go!"

She headed right at as close to a run as she could manage, and he followed her a second after, taking that moment to glance down the avenue toward the burning building. Several forms were visible down the street, at least two in motion towards them along the path, and one standing still, but that one had a bow, and his pull was also in motion.

He lit out after Sophia, hoping the guy was a bad shot, but fighting previous evidence to the contrary.

He shortly thereafter got confirmation. Something slammed into his pack from behind with a metallic clang, the force of it smashing his left shoulder forward, twisting his torso and knocking his stride off-center. He nearly tripped, but managed get his advancing boot around the other one suddenly in its way, and avoided a full face-plant by the narrowest of margins.

He waited for the pain, and glanced down at his chest, expecting to see the bloodied shaft of an arrow protruding through it.

But it didn't come, and his jacket front was intact. It took him a second or two to puzzle it out as he pushed to close the distance between himself and Sophia, but then he clued in on

the metallic sound at impact. The projectile must've hit a piece of aluminum cookware. It was the only thing in his pack that would've stopped it. He marveled at the idea. It was reminiscent of the stories you'd hear about soldiers taking a bullet in combat, only to find that it had been stopped flat by their zippo, or hip flask, or medal of St. George, or whatever.

His wonder drained out of him as the reality of their situation displaced it, and as he drew within a few yards of her retreating pack, his mind was turning over pedal to the floor.

They were over-burdened and under-prepared, pursued by adversaries who by all appearances carried little except weapons and malicious intent, and who were probably more familiar with the terrain through which they had travelled by an order of magnitude. They had miles to cover, in the dark and through the storm, with no idea of the size of the force that hunted them, either before or behind them.

And the worst part was, that even if they made it, made it all the way back intact, there was still no returning to the beginning of this level of the game. This temporary sanctuary, *insert ironic laugh here, he thought*, was burned. It was back through the door, or whatever the locals had planned, and it was pretty clear they weren't interested in making new friends, unless it included a dinner date.

It was the time for drastic measures. They needed more speed.

"Sophia! Ditch your pack!"

"*What?*"

"Just do it! You need to move faster!"

She continued to run without responding for at least thirty seconds, and he started to think that she wouldn't do it. He got it. Letting go of it meant what it meant. However, keeping it also considerably lowered their already low odds of making it much farther. He was about to scream at her again, when she shrugged out of it, maintaining her stride as she flipped it by one strap around in front of her, and then pitched it to the side out into the grass. She cursed as she did so, but the words were lost in the pounding of the rain and the sounds of their passage. Her pace instantly improved, and she began to move out ahead of him. He gritted his teeth and increased his own speed.

Another arrow hissed by his left bicep close enough to brush the fabric of his jacket, and missed Sophia by only a slightly wider margin as it streaked away into the night ahead of them. He clenched instinctively, even though that particular danger was long gone by the time he registered its passing.

He thought frantically, trying to decide what to do. It seemed foolish to turn and use what they had at their disposal here. That only committed them to a fight against greater

numbers without the benefit of cover, and as the fire behind them continued to grow, the ambient illumination grew with it. The flashlight assembly was much more effective in low or no light. The only thing that made sense was distance. Get distance, and to try to find a choke point, something that would limit the number of pursuers that could come at them at one time. Any building to either side would offer that, but came with way too many additional risks. Exploring new territory on the fly sounded like the quickest way to the end of their journey that he could think of. He mentally tracked back through their exodus, searching. He almost passed it by, its significance masked by his growing panic.

The stand of evergreens.

A fragile hope took shape, ephemeral like a soap-bubble.

The trees on the other side of the plaza were densely packed, and the space between the individual trunks was choked with shrubs and the pervasive high grass. The path was narrow at the closest point between the trees and the last building on the block.

That was it. Whatever they were going to do to push back at those now chasing them, that's where they would need to do it.

So now, they had to pour it on, and hope they reached it with enough time to...*what?* Use the same trick?

Even as he pushed himself to match pace with the fleeing figure in front of him, the extra weight of the pack he was unwilling to cast aside dragging at his already offended muscles, he felt the bubble pop.

They would know all the choke points along the way. Hell, they probably had others already there, behind the trees waiting for them. He would, if he were them. For that matter, they could have anybody anywhere. The empty fronts of the buildings to either side yawned wide, each dark interior staring out into the gauntlet they now ran through.

He risked a glance back, and saw that the two in front had gained only a little ground, and the man with the bow was also running now, but was at least thirty yards behind them. He probably would've felt better about the fact that the bow was held in close to the man's body as he ran rather than held out before him, if not for the weight of all the risk that stretched out before them. Each step spanned a moment, and each moment contained the potential for a fatal interruption.

The familiarity of this bleakness fit. Of course this is how it turns out.

Invest yourself. Try. Attempt. Reach for something else.

This is what you get.

He could feel his willingness to maintain pace begin to ebb, and a lifetime of indulging this particular affinity within

himself bled out of dark corners and began to pool in the now-empty spaces once filled by alcohol and his own self-loathing.

Sophia began to pull ahead, and that was familiar, too. The letting go, the cutting off. It was a continuation of his dissection of himself from the world around him.

For a handful of heartbeats, it seemed that the tide of his miracle was withdrawing, and the anguish he felt seemed unendurable.

Then he got what could only be described as a "moment of clarity". He found the irony to be a little heavy-handed, given that he'd never been this sober.

It wasn't the world. Not this one, or the original.

It was him.

In one sense, it wasn't really a lightning-flash illumination of a previously hidden truth. He'd brushed up against it many times.

Every time, really. Every time he had hit a wall, suffered a reversal, been hurt or been wronged. He wasn't so self-myopic that the thought he carried some portion of the blame each time hadn't occurred to him.

Yet he could see now, in this moment that he had always been able to lay the lion's share at the feet of circumstance. He'd externalized it, fending off internal demands for the assumption of responsibility with alcohol-laced assertions that

he'd done all he could. Which he could now see was complete bullshit, and each time had cascaded into the next, the cumulative result exemplified in his dissociation and decline.

It was him. He was on the hook for this, and now was not the time to let himself *off* it just because this sucked from every conceivable vantage point. It was pretty clear to him that all he had done for her so far had been to either satisfy his desire to acquit himself in his own estimation, or to indulge his own death-wish.

The last was the only thing that really surprised him. Not the realization that he had one, but because he found that he no longer did.

He stepped up his pace as he watched Sophia run through the rain-soaked night ahead. She was now his friend, his first new one since he'd met Rachael.

Rachael had consumed all of him that wasn't actively involved in his addiction, and one-by-one, any previous friends had fallen away across the birth, apogee, and death of their relationship. She hadn't clicked with any of them, and his commitment to them had been displaced by her occupation of the limited space available not already committed to drinking. Together, they had defaulted during the good days and the following equilibrium days to a social economy populated by her

friends and their significant others, but tightly governed by the currency of his sobriety.

Then, to beat the analogy to death, the exchange rate soared as their relationship declined, and then they were all gone, and then finally she was gone.

The girl running ahead of him in the dark had filled the vacuum left by Rachael's departure. Not that it was the same. She was so young, for one thing. But nevertheless they had forged a bond, and he had not been bound to anyone, in any way, for what seemed like an eternity, even though he knew it wasn't. The mind assigned scale to empty spaces as it deemed fit, though, and a friend where there hadn't been one became an imperative, a motivation that crushed semantics under a big, forward-moving boot.

His labored breathing, the weight of his pack, even his own body's utter dismay at what he was requiring of it drew back, and a new resolve took its place.

He closed the distance between them, reaching across his body with his free hand to liberate the ice ax from its elastic loop, and he was now possessed of a surety that was unfamiliar. It was uncolored, uninfluenced by anything. He was all in, undiluted, come-what-may, and didn't give a shit if he failed, because he knew he would really *do* all that he could, not just nod his head at it. So what if they got hit before-hand. So what

if there were already others at the choke point. He'd hit whatever it was with everything he had.

If they didn't triumph, that was ok. Ok in the sense that it wasn't about bowing out, now. Losing wasn't optimum, obviously. He would prefer to win.

She made him want to win.

"Balls to the wall, Sophia. We have to get to the plaza."

He put just enough amplification into the statement so that she'd hear it.

Her reply tore at him, cast backward with only the slightest turn of the head, and delivered through her own labored breath. But he knew as much. It didn't change anything.

"They are. This is all I have."

Ch. 20

Torn to shreds

The first attempt happened at the next intersection, and would have certainly ended her run right there, if not for the fact that he was experiencing a level of hyper-vigilance that bordered on paranoia. He saw movement and acted, his decision to do so unsupported by any evaluation of the stimuli. It was almost as if he was operating in the realm of precognition.

He opened his mouth to scream a warning, bringing the flashlight hand up, and his ax hand back at the same time.

But she had already begun to alter her trajectory. He was astounded by Sophia's response time, and her ability to transition from one type of forward motion to another with no apparent thought. She turned sideways and dropped into a slide, as if trying to beat an outfielder's throw to base, body descending toward the ground.

The machete strike that would have most certainly decapitated her passed above the top of her head. If it had been a dry night, she would have received one hell of a haircut. It was that close. But, her blond hair was plastered to her head by the rain as she passed below the blow.

He toggled the flashlight switch on and off, averting his eyes for that eye-blink moment when light exploded outward like a photo-strobe, and then looked back as his momentum carried him

within striking distance of the now blinded man that had come in from the right. Despite not being able to see, the man was starting to reverse his swing.

He didn't hesitate. He brought the ice ax down and around from behind his shoulder with all his fear-induced adrenalin behind it. It slammed into the man's head just behind and above his ear, buried to the haft in an instant. The man fell, and he let go of the handle as he did so, turning away from the damage he'd just inflicted to find Sophia struggling to her feet. He knew they didn't have time for him to recover the ax. He grabbed her hand and helped her upright, both of them struggling for breath. For an instant their eyes locked, and he gave her a fierce smile.

"That was incredible. Back at it."

She nodded, then turned and accelerated away. He cast a backwards glance, taking in the scene behind them again before following her. The two in pursuit had gained more ground, and the one with the bow was stationary again, letting another arrow fly even as he registered that fact. He was tempted to step aside in an attempt to change the geometry, but knew it was already too late.

He wasn't as lucky this time. He felt a bloom of bright pain as the arrow passed through his jacket, cutting a deep furrow through the soft flesh on the outside of his right bicep

before exiting out into the dark again. He clamped his teeth down on a growl of pain, and turned, breaking into a run again. Sophia was about twenty yards ahead. He lengthened his stride as much as he could, the pack shifting back and forth across his back, maddening in its weight and mass. He pushed aside the idea of casting it aside as Sophia had done. Not until the very last moment, he told himself, as blood seeped downward inside the sleeve of his jacket.

He closed the distance between them again over the course of the next two blocks, until he was right behind her, and could hear her ragged breathing in concert with his own. The light cast by the fire behind them was dimming as they increased their distance from it, the dark closing back in as the rain continued to pound down, but he could see the bridge ahead, only two more blocks away.

He chanced a look back. The two in the lead were less than a hundred yards behind them now, showing no signs of slowing. More alarming, the one with the bow was not far behind them now, head down and legs pumping. Terrific. A post-apocalyptic, zombie-gray Jesse Owens.

If nothing happened, once again an "if" of epic proportions, they would only just make it ahead of their pursuers, leaving them no time to prepare. That was assuming

that there weren't more of these homicidal assholes already there waiting, which brought to mind the rule about assumptions.

They needed something, some kind of delay. He mentally went through the contents of his pack one more time, panic looming over his shoulder and tapping its watch to point out the diminishing span of time available to him to solve this.

There was nothing.

He still had several bottles of alcohol, but they'd be over-run and dead before he'd have a chance to even get them out of the backpack, let alone prep them for use. In retrospect, it probably would have been a good idea to do that at the same time as they'd done the other one, but to quote Austin Powers, that train had sailed. Too bad the suitcase with the gun hadn't also yielded a few flash-bangs.

As they crossed the next intersection onto the final block before the bridge and the plaza, he could tell that Sophia was starting to flag, and he knew that if he didn't come up with something in the next minute or two, they'd have to turn and fight at the bridge. No cover, and even the constriction at the damaged section was wide enough for both pursuers to come at them at once, with the bow-man right behind them for fire support.

The damaged section. *Duh*. Mental face-palm.

Then he had a plan, but even as he ran through it in his mind, the likelihood of it succeeding seemed pretty thin. The logistics that had to be sorted out in the next ninety seconds were daunting, and there'd be yet more assumptions on his part.

He couldn't tell Sophia to do what he wanted, because he couldn't be sure that she'd understand it in time. And he now realized that for this particular stunt, he had effectively tied one hand behind his back, having lashed the flashlight to his right hand. Not only that, it was the wrong hand to have tied up. Still, it was all he had at the moment.

"Sophia. Gun. Baton hand-off." He didn't have a lot of breath to waste, so he hoped she understood. At the initial sound of his voice, she started to slow, but evidently got it, returning to pace after only a few strides, and began to fish in her pocket. She brought out the gun, holding it by the barrel, the grip facing down for an easy hand-off, and stretched her arm out behind her.

He was able to take it easily enough with his left hand, and he thumbed the hammer back, knowing the safety was already off.

"Other side of the bridge. Stop and drop. Out in the grass."

She held up the hand she'd used to pass off the gun, bringing it up over her shoulder, thumb and forefinger in a

circle, other fingers curving upward. The universal "ok" sign, though her breathing was hoarse and strained.

Then they passed beyond the buildings out into the plaza, and he only had a few seconds to take action as they crossed the intersection toward the bridge.

He brought his right hand downward to thigh level, straightening it so that the lens assembly pointed behind them, at the same time he raised the gun with his left. It was awkward as he aimed, left arm held across his body so that he could target toward the right. If he had only chosen the other hand, this would have been a lot easier.

Right before he reached the bridge, he toggled the switch on the flashlight, aimed the pistol as best he could, and then pulled the trigger.

As daylight filled the space behind them, brilliant white banishing the dark between the buildings, the gun kicked upward, and the sound of the shot boomed outward into the night sky. He didn't wait to see if the shot had accomplished what he'd hoped, he just pulled the trigger two more times as he continued to run, nearly to the damaged section now. Sophia was almost all the way across.

There was a second report and recoil, but the third pull hit a dead round, and that was it. Either it had worked, or it hadn't.

There was a grinding sound, and then a sharp ping off to the right as he passed over the damaged section, followed by a wet, fracturing groan. He covered the last few strides to the end of the bridge and then button-hooked around out into the grass on the right, hoping he didn't trip over Sophia, and bringing his hand up to reverse the orientation of the lens now that he was facing back the way he'd come. The brilliant arc traced its way along a deformed parabola as he made the adjustment, and the overall effect was disorienting.

He was dropping to his knees, his own ragged breathing tearing at his chest as he again centered the light again back the way they'd come, when the metal tower crashed down onto the bridge with an enormous metallic clang. There was only the space of a second before a much deeper groan echoed upwards from the bridge.

It was followed by a shudder that he felt in his knees, and in the light-washed space in front of him, he could see the structure of the bridge start to drop. The metal railing at the narrow section buckled first, having been hammered flat a few feet further beyond by the impact of the tower.

Then the entire center section of the bridge disappeared, dropping down onto the spillway below with a sound that was as much physical as it was aural, the metal tower following it down.

He would never know if he had actually hit what he was shooting at, or if the sound of the shots alone had been enough to coax the anchor loop out of its already fragmented seat in the concrete at the edge of the spillway. He supposed it didn't matter. Whatever had accomplished it, the remaining guy-wire had been set free, and he'd been right about the base of the tower being compromised.

He could feel the heat from the flashlight assembly now, through the insulating scarf and his glove as well, and as he squinted to focus on the source of the growing discomfort, he could see the scarf material begin to blacken. He thumbed the switch to the off position, and was turning to call to Sophia as the dark returned when an arrow slammed into his right shoulder at the outside edge of his collar-bone, the impact driving him backward and twisting him around once again.

The pain, while instant and deep, was not immobilizing like when that saurian freak had taken out his knee, at least not yet. It was certainly enough to rip a cry of agony from him, though.

"Guuhhhh! You prick!"

He straightened, and turned back, bringing the gun up, only to realize that the round in the chamber was dead, and his other hand was still tied to the flashlight. No way to clear it. Pain and frustration turned instantly to white hot anger, and he was

an instant away from smashing the flashlight assembly against the ground to free his hand when some last sliver of reason pierced the veil of rage. Instead, he ducked down below the tops of the high grass, teeth clenched and chest still heaving to draw air into a body still starved for it. Just as he did, something hissed through the air above him. This guy was unbelievable.

He imposed calm into a small portion of his seething emotions, using it as a beach-head to access rational thought. Molars grinding together as he did so, he set the gun down on the ground in front of him deliberately, and then went to work on the knot binding the end of the scarf.

He nearly lost it again when he realized that the heat generated by the reflection off of the lens had melted the synthetic material, fusing the knot into a hardened lump. There was no getting it undone. More seconds lost as he again fought the urge to just destroy it.

Then he grabbed the tips of his gloved fingers, and began to tug at each one in turn. After that it was again, and repeat. It would appear that the scarf material had shrunk as well, binding the glove to his skin. At a rate of slowness that brought the movement of glaciers to mind, he extracted his hand from the envelope of a stupid, stupid idea. He was on the verge of a primal scream when his hand finally slid free, and he

quickly set the whole configuration down on the ground next to the gun, snatching it up with his left hand, and clearing the round with his right.

He rose up out of the grass, bringing the gun up, each motion scribing fresh agony along already screaming nerves in his shoulder. He scanned frantically for his bow-wielding adversary, wanting to punch his ticket so bad that he could taste it.

But they were gone, all of them. Unfortunately, he knew exactly what that meant. He groaned out loud, and as his awareness expanded away from his blood-lust, he became aware of the sound of Sophia's labored breathing in the grass across the path. He eased the hammer down, and pocketed the gun. Then he stooped again, and picked up the flashlight. It looked like an entirely different thing now, swathed in blackened material, his empty glove drooping from the bottom where it peeked out from the binding cloth. The lens assembly still clung tenaciously to the housing, probably cemented there, because he could see that what was visible of the casing was distorted and warped, and the plastic lens shielding the bulb was gone entirely.

His anger ran out of him, leaving only pain. He shuffled across the path into the grass on the other side, finding Sophia lying on her side on the ground, chest still heaving. She turned her head up as he approached. He stopped and looked down at her,

and even through the pain he wanted to offer her more time to recover, to rest. But he couldn't.

"C'mon. We have to go."

She gave a small sob, but sat up, still looking up at him.

"Is that an arrow?"

"Yes. I'd offer to help you up, but I can't."

She scrambled to her feet, stepping in front of him and staring at the fletched shaft protruding from his jacketed shoulder. He thought it must have lodged in something, maybe the bone, because there didn't seem to be enough meat where it had hit to hold it in place. He wasn't going to mess with it though. It hurt badly enough already.

"You're shot."

There weren't tears in her voice anymore, but he didn't like what he heard there instead.

"Yes, but it's not going to kill me. We need to go."

She just stared at it, and he knew he needed to break her out of her paralysis. So he turned and fast-walked off down the path. There was nothing for about a count of three, and then he heard her moving behind him, trotting to catch up and then matching pace with him. Another fifteen seconds passed, and then she spoke, still breathing hard.

"Sorry. Sorry about that. I, uh, I didn't know what to do with it. Are you ok?"

"No. Neither of us are ok. Our only chance is to keep moving, because they're not stopping. They're finding a way around right now."

"Shouldn't we run?"

"We can't run the whole way. We gained a few minutes, and I was about done too."

They marched silently along, nearing the edge of the plaza. The gap between the trees and the building ahead loomed in dark. He held the flashlight out behind him.

"Take this. I suck at defense. Hit it if anything moves."

She took it out of his hand, and he pulled the gun again, cocking it, but not slowing down. He stared into the gloom behind the narrow aperture, looking for movement.

There wasn't any. They passed through without event, the darkness even deeper behind the stand of trees. They kept that pace until they reached the end of the next block, and he could hear that her breathing had slowed, as his had.

They crossed the intersection, and he looked back over his shoulder at her.

"We need to step it up again. Two blocks on, one block off, ok?"

"Ok."

Her expression was unreadable in the gloom, but her voice was small, and he could hear the exhaustion in it already. He

felt like he ought to feel bad, but his emotional landscape was obscured by the forest fire raging on the right side of his upper torso.

So he just increased pace to a slow run, and could hear her do the same behind him, and wondered how in the world he had ended up doing this, here in this place. After half a block, though, introspection was gone as well. The only things left were hurt and motion.

They made the two blocks, and slowed pace again to a fast walk, speech impossible until mid-way down the off-block, when respiration slowed enough to allow truncated bits of conversation.

"Shouldn't you. Remove that."

A moment to decipher meaning, then,

"Why. Hurt more. Bleed faster."

Multiple paces of breathing only, then, new thread.

"Think. There are. More of them?"

"Don't know. Thought we'd have. Met some already."

And then it was time to run again.

They made three more blocks without an attack, and he was just beginning to hope that perhaps the chase was over as they covered the last dozen yards of their cool-down block, breathing still ragged despite the reduced pace.

He was in the lead now, gun held in his left hand, and right side throbbing. His pulse pounded in his ears, and his throat was a desert. His earlier preternatural awareness had been over-written by each painful stride, each drop of blood oozing from his wounds, and each increasingly insufficient breath, until these things were now almost the totality of what he could process. He no longer felt the rain, and could hear very little besides their footsteps and labored respiration.

Still, there must have been something, because before reaching the end of the block, he held out a hand behind him to alert Sophia, and then stopped. The face of the building to their immediate left was bare concrete, window-less at street level to its end which marked the beginning of the next intersection. On their right, the rusted shells of three vehicles lined what used to be the curb end-to-end, barely discernible through the enshrouding vegetation. He didn't know what had drawn him up short, but the constriction here was clear. Forward, or back, with no other option.

He waved her backward, stepping backwards himself, and raised the gun. They backtracked to the end of the last vehicle, and he stepped into the grass behind it, off the path, eyes never leaving the small portion of the path through the intersection ahead that was visible. He spoke in a low voice, hoping that she could hear him without turning his head toward

her. She had moved in tandem with him, and was still behind him. He knelt as low as he could without losing sight of the path ahead.

"Pull the rest of the booze out." He wheezed.

There was no reply save her own troubled breathing, but he could feel the pack shift slightly as she undid the fasteners, and began to dig through the contents. The right pack strap slid up against the shaft of the arrow, and a fresh wave of agony star-burst outward. His gun hand tremored, and titter of pain escaped his lips, but he kept focus forward. He only heard one distinct clink as she pulled them out, but it seemed loud in the night.

"Don't forget the wicks."

"Shh. Ahead of you."

He almost flinched, thinking she was warning him of something he didn't see, until he realized that she was telling him that she already had it covered. He heard the muted tearing of fabric behind him, and then the crack of the first seal.

"Pour --."

"Zip it, Bill. Saw that show."

He was encouraged. That meant she still had resources, which was good. Liquid glugged and splashed above the sound of the rain, and then shook within the container as she prepped the wick inside. Then the whole series repeated.

He was starting to wonder if he had imagined whatever it was that made him stop. Nothing moved that he could see. Sitting still suddenly seemed like a poor choice.

But once again, he refused to second guess himself.

"Pull out that aluminum pan set, too."

Once more the pack shifted, but this time to the left, thankfully.

Then she was reaching around the left side of his rib-cage under his gun arm, offering him the small, light-weight cook-pan set. It was one of those short-sided mini-skillets that had the handle hinged on one side. It flipped outward so you could use it to hold the pan out over a heat source, but when stowed it lay across the top of the pan, reducing the profile to just the pan itself, and secured by a clip on the non-hinged side. Nested within it, there was a second smaller pan with the same features. He could see a big dimple in the bottom of it from the other arrow impact. He shook his head.

"Just the small one. Hang onto the other."

She withdrew her arm. There were a few metallic rustlings behind him, and then she reached around him again, offering the single smaller pan. He took it. He held it by the stowed handle, bottom of the pan facing away from his knuckles. Maybe it would work.

He could feel his stress increase as time accumulated past the point where they had stopped moving, the weight of each moment translating to pressure to act as no attack came.

"You still have my water bottle?" He asked, wishing his current intuitive leap had occurred *before* she had partially emptied the two alcohol containers out onto the muddy ground behind him.

"Yes."

He told her what he wanted her to do. She pulled the half-empty magazine out of his coat pocket, then he stepped out on the path again to give her room, and she did the rest of it. It only took her ninety seconds or so, but it seem much longer. Her voice was steady when she spoke.

"Ready."

"Light 'em up."

He could barely hear the rasp of the lighter wheel over the rain, but then dim light bloomed to his right.

"They're burning. Better move."

He moved forward, gun never wavering, its one eye staring at the intersection portion of the path. In his other hand, he held the smaller pan by the closed handle at hip height, blackened base facing out.

"Throw."

He heard a feminine grunt, and one of the bottles sailed above his shoulder, cruising toward the corner of the building, flaming wick trailing behind.

For the second time, she nailed the throw. The bottle impacted the side of the building just inches from the corner, about ten feet above the ground. He heard an expansive "puhhh" amid the sound of fracturing glass, and then glass shards and flaming liquid were expanding outward into the intersection, arcing downward onto the path and the grass on either side. The dark drew back from the flames, and he saw movement at the corner of the building. Just for a second, light glinted off of a machete tip, there and then not. He thought probably a checked swing, begun at the sound of the impact, and pulled when what passed through wasn't what was expected. It didn't matter. It was the tell-tale he was looking for, and he was already in motion.

He sprinted past the corner of the building, leveling his gun arm to the left side as he did, and fired. At the same time he raised the pan up slightly, more of his attention on the right side than the left.

The gun barked and kicked at the same moment that a figure to the right burst up out of the grass, swinging at him two-handed.

If the attacker had tried for his legs instead of a body shot, there would've been nothing he could do about it. As it was, he barely had enough time to intercept the incoming blade with a last-second adjustment to the height of the pan.

The steel blade bit into the aluminum of the pan, as the energy of the strike met his forward movement. The impact drove his hand backward, though he was able to deflect it outward and down to an extent. Nevertheless, he felt the protruding tip of the blade slice through his jacket and through his side somewhere between his ribcage and his hip as he passed by. The pan was yanked from his hand as he and the opposing swing went their separate directions, but not before his already tortured right arm was hyper-extended behind him, a cataclysm of pain detonating in his shoulder as he went down.

On the plus side, the physics of it all re-oriented him, flipping him over as his feet outran his momentarily anchored hand. He landed on his knees, left elbow and forearm keeping him from face-planting onto the still-burning ground of the path, his pack side-slipping across his back before being halted by the straps. Somehow, he kept hold of the gun. The deformation and stress on his shoulder seemed to have dislodged the arrow, though. It was no longer sticking out of his jacket, anyway.

On the minus side, the ground on which he found himself was on fire. The flames were fairly anemic at this point, due to

lack of dry fuel and inundation by rain from above, but fire was fire. Heat licked at his face, and he knew he needed to get up and move, stat.

But his right shoulder was a dislocated ruin, and the pain there was now reminiscent of his previous knee injury, all-encompassing and furious. It was all he could do to hold himself upright as heat mounted along his supporting arm, knees, and shins. He looked up to see the man that had side-swiped him reverse himself, and lunge toward him again, bringing his blade up for another swing. The pan was still lodged near the tip of the blade, but either he wasn't aware of it, or he didn't care. As the blade reached the limit of its back-swing, he could see that the clip holding the pan handle closed had let go, and that the handle stuck out to the side. There was a tiny bit of him that marveled at the comedy of that particular image as he did the only thing he could do to try to save himself from being bludgeoned to death with his own cookware.

He flexed his left wrist upward, and pulled the trigger.

Click.

He didn't even have the chance to curse as the downward swing accelerated, because the sound of the firing-pin on a bad primer still hung in the air when a gunshot rang out into the night behind the man. The effect on his attacker was instant, as the intent in his swing vanished, pan and blade both tracking

around and away as the man reversed himself yet again, the movement both frantic and balletic at the same time.

Before he had even completed the turn, two more shots boomed, one right on top of the other. The man didn't fully complete his turn, just leapt face-first into the grass in a panicked attempt to gain cover. The grass was still shifting where he'd fallen, his momentum not even fully arrested when another report echoed off of the surrounding buildings, and he saw Sophia running forward out of the shadow of the building where she'd hidden after pitching the bottle, fire ax raised above her head. She crossed the distance in a moment, lunging through the grass as she brought the ax down. The ax-head gleamed in a silver arc, and then buried itself into something with a meaty thump.

Then she was there, helping him upright with her forearms under his armpits after casting the bloodied ax onto the ground beside him. His shoulder howled as she got him onto his feet, and she kept her hands to either side of his upper ribs until he steadied. He looked down into her upturned face, and saw a panicked glee there.

The coolest car he had ever owned had been a second-hand BMW M3. He'd purchased it about a year after he and Rachael had married, the benefits of two good incomes paired with the tax shelter of owning a home generating sufficient credit for them

to expand their lifestyle choices. He hadn't even owned it a week, when he found himself behind a gravel truck on the expressway, too much traffic in the fast lane to get over and around unless he wanted to be a total dick and cut somebody off. He had vowed to himself when he bought it that he wasn't going to be *that* guy, despite circumstantial evidence that hinted at an unspoken yet contractually-binding agreement between BMW owners and the manufacturer that demanded it of him.

As a result, he'd picked up a rock chip in his windshield, kicked up by the truck's tire. He'd heard the impact, but it took him a few seconds to locate the break, as it was near the bottom, just above the wiper. Once he found it, he stared at it, *knowing* that this wasn't the end of it. The multiple legs of the starred fracture glowed in the afternoon light, prismatic with outbound potential.

This was Sophia now, eyes and expression full of small cracks glowing with imminent expansion. Her words were frantic and rushed, and her eyes too wide. Her hands were still pressed against either side of his ribs.

"It worked! They were just sitting there on the handle, and the flames started to die out. I didn't think it was going to work, but then, *BAM! BAM, BAM!*"

He couldn't raise his right arm. His left hand held the gun, currently useless, barrel pointed toward the ground. He saw

her face, her eyes behind the rain-beaded lenses, and he saw the cracks start to run, just like the cracks in his windshield. He had to do *something* to short-circuit this, but didn't know what.

"I *totally* thought the alcohol would burn off before the bullets went off, but there must have been just enough in the pan because they all --."

He leaned forward and down, and kissed her full on the mouth. Even his pain receded as the entire universe ground to a sudden halt, and the moment elongated, stretching and expanding. It held for eternity and no time at all, and then their lips parted as he drew back.

Reality snapped back into the vacuum with a whiplash impact, and her eyes, already wide, became almost cartoon caricatures of surprise and something else. The something else was immediately expressed, however, as she drew back her right hand and then slapped him hard across the cheek, hard enough to rock his head to the side. Her anger and outrage was evident, but in contradiction, her other hand remained where it was, steadying him against the force of the blow.

He looked back at her, cheek burning as part of him crumbled. But most of him held firm, and both his expression and voice were neutral as he spoke.

"Welcome back. Would you please clear this, because I can't, and we've got to go."

He held the gun out to her.

She looked down at it for at least two beats, and then back up at him. Between the loss and return of her gaze, he could see that the cracks were gone, as well as the surprise and the anger. Her expression was equal parts appraisal and self-consciousness as she took the gun, cleared it, and handed it back, butt first. She hesitated for a moment, then pressed the gun into his left hand, and then snaked a hand up behind his neck, stepping up on tip-toe to kiss him back.

Again time stretched, and the world shifted, becoming a different place.

"I get why you did it, but I hope you meant it." She said as her heels met the ground again.

All he could manage was a nod, wiggling the pistol tip to indicate that it was time for her to move out.

She went around him, picked up the ax, and broke into a run again, down the path. A single thought echoed along the new fault-line in his head.

If only his windshield had fared as well.

He looked back along the path before turning to follow her, the distant inferno the only movement he could see back that way except the influence of the wind and rain on the surrounding foliage, and a single distant lightning strike. For the first time, he noticed the other body sprawled on the ground next to

the building that defined that corner of the intersection, now to his right as he faced the way they'd come. He'd fired blind, but had accomplished the task anyway. Take luck where you can get it, he guessed. He knew they still weren't done with the psycho with the bow, and didn't like their odds of outrunning him, either. He thought that there was nothing worse than a sniper who was faster on foot than you were.

He was turning then, when the pack shifted slightly, and he became aware of it again. He ground his teeth, berating himself for not realizing it sooner. The pack was a liability, a dead weight now that they'd pressed the booze into service. He hoped Sophia had the other bottle on her. Almost everything left in it was now only relevant to an entirely different outcome, one back on the opposite and inaccessible side of tonight's events. He should have had her help him ditch it before urging her on into the night.

He slid the pistol quickly into his jacket pocket, and then slid his left arm out of its strap, grasping the right side strap before the pack could shift any further toward his useless right shoulder. He lifted the whole pack up and away from his torso, supporting it and trying to thread the strap down his right arm.

Every jostle from it made him want to scream. Once he got it to hip level, he just dropped it, out of patience and time.

The strap grabbed the back knuckle of his thumb before it dropped clear, and he did scream a little, then. It hit the ground, and toppled onto its back. He knelt as quickly as he could, and flipped it over, loosing the flap on a top pocket, and extracting Sophia's cell phone from within. He slid it into his chest pocket and zipped it shut, and then struggled to his feet, finally following after her. She was alarmingly far ahead, and he cursed his belated realization yet again.

Running now was a special kind of torture, though he made better time by far without the bulk of the pack to slow him. His right arm was at the mercy of his forward motion, his control of it disconnected by the ground-zero devastation in his shoulder. It moved as relational physics demanded, and each movement embedded another shard of pain in his mental soft flesh. The accumulation should have driven him mad, or shut him down. His pain receptors reached a consensus on that point within the first half-block.

But his inner terrain had changed. Instead of burying him in a cumulative avalanche, the pain now passed through some new filter, and was clarified. It became fuel, and he increased his pace, now sprinting through the storm, straining to close the distance between himself and her retreating back. He thought that nothing short of his heart folding would keep him from catching up.

Only two blocks passed before he was proven wrong.

He was still about twenty yards behind her when she crossed the intersection to the next block, and he could see an open space to her left. Within it, he could just barely make out four tall shapes against the background of the building that framed it, and he suddenly realized where they were. He was about to call out to her to stop, when she slowed on her own, head turned to the left and inclined upward. She'd seen the trees, too. Instead of stopping, she burst into forward motion, bringing the ax up, and grasping it with both hands. The urgency in her movement told him it was in reaction to something he couldn't see yet, even as he tried to increase his speed to close the distance, but he was topped out. Rather than bringing her hands together for a swing, however, she slid the right along the handle toward the butt end, holding it out horizontally in front of her and locking her elbows as she accelerated forward.

Her attacker finally entered his line of sight, machete up and beginning its down-swing as he came at her out of the grass. But he could see that she had once again made the one kinesthetic choice available to her that would prolong her life. How long was anybody's guess, but her execution was perfect, one more time.

By closing the distance between her and her assailant much faster than he had expected, and by interposing the ax-handle

between them, she forced him to alter his swing, changing angle and pulling his elbows down to even have a chance of connecting. This robbed it of much of its force and accuracy, and the steel blade bit into the fiberglass handle of the ax near her right hand, biting in and lodging there. She powered through the impact, keeping her elbows locked, and maintaining her forward motion.

His momentum met hers, and she forced the handle higher at the last possible second. The ax handle slammed into the man's nose, obliterating it and snapping his head back as she crashed into him. He pitched backwards and she fell on top of him, tucking into a roll as she somersaulted off him when they both hit the ground, disappearing into the tall, wet grass.

A savage burst of pride swept through him as he neared the intersection, watching the downed man writhe in the mud, machete carried away and forgotten, as he held his damaged face with both hands.

Then another figure appeared, stepping out onto the path with bow raised and arrow drawn, facing him. He knew his own reaction time was not what Sophia's was, and that he was dead, even though he held the gun in his left hand. He could actually see the smile on the gray face. His own attempt to level the pistol was late by long and long.

But the night dissolved in that instant, filled with a white brilliance and a deafening explosion that seemed to displace the atmosphere, filling the space where the air used to be with electricity and ozone.

The end effect of the lightning strike on the situation was multi-faceted, and seemed to ratchet outward in a series of segmented echoes.

In the instant, the arrow trajectory that most likely would've cored his Adam's apple and ended his life was diverted by probably no less than a single degree by the blast. At the same time, a significant portion of the moisture in the nearest tree's path-side upper trunk was flash-fried.

In the next, the arrow drew an angry slash across the skin on the outside of his neck as it raced by, punching through the hood of his jacket, and that portion of the tree split along the stricken section as steam from the vaporized water within expanded and was released.

Echo two saw the completion of the arc of his gun hand upward to the equilibrium point indicated by previous visual input, and the ignition of the now super-heated, now-dry wood section commenced, expanding instantly outward toward full conflagration.

Echo three had him pulling the trigger finally, though he was doing it blind again. This time, it wasn't divided

attention. It was overwhelmed optic nerves. Even in the moment as the gun barked and kicked back, he could appreciate the irony.

He slowed to a stop as afterimages consumed his vision, obscuring the result as subsequent echoes beat outward, and he was forced to wait for the ability to bear witness to them. Every second was a chance for reprisal, but it didn't come.

Then he could see again and the fallen figure on the path ahead told the tale. He stared at the body and even through the waves of pain from his injuries, what he mostly was aware of was his sense of disbelief. He was close enough to see the hole below the man's right eye. He remembered how badly he had wanted to kill him at the bridge, but none of that remained now. The likelihood of him having made these last two shots had to equate to a statistical impossibility. What the hell did he think he was doing? They had come this far on dumb luck alone, and how could there be any left after this? He could feel an impending wave of equal parts panic and futility rushing at him, even as he became aware of another form surging out of the grass, illuminated by the burning branches above. He didn't even have a chance to become alarmed before he realized that it was Sophia. The sight of her was enough to mute the impact, and when it broke over him, it was just a swell, not a wave. He moved towards her, still trying to slow his frantic breathing.

She leapt over the man she'd put down, whose movements had escalated to full body spasms. It was clear that the impact had done more than destroy his nose. She was empty-handed as she skirted the dead bow-man, chest heaving. Her hands were trembling, but there was no panic in her face this time. Between breaths, he asked her,

"How do you do that?"

Her brows furrowed.

"Do what?"

"React so fast."

She shrugged

"Tough to explain. It's just something I can do. Sure you want to do this now?"

"No, no. You're right, time to go. Where's the ax?"

"Lost hold of it, and didn't see where it landed. I didn't think I had time to look for it."

He grimaced, feeling the loss but knowing she'd made the right call. They were running out of weapons, though.

"Still got the last bottle?"

She patted her jacket front in confirmation.

He nodded, and then his eyes came to rest on the compound bow still grasped in one of the dead man's hands.

He indicated it with the tip of the gun barrel.

"Ever used one of those?"

She looked over at it, then back at him, shaking her head.

"Nope."

He didn't spend any time on it, just let it go. It was just something else to carry if she couldn't use it, and he certainly couldn't.

She plucked at the front of his jacket as the flaming portion of the struck tree hissed and popped above them, and it was her turn to urge them onward.

"C'mon."

They tried to keep up the same two block run, then walk one method, but neither of them could complete more than one. After that, it was a slow jog for one, then a fast walk for the next. They made several iterations of that, and then it was all they could do to keep moving at all. She was young, but it was clear she was no athlete. Even so, she was faring much better than he.

He was in a world of serious hurt. He'd been going on adrenalin, but that was long, long gone. A consuming fire raged in his damaged shoulder, and the entire interior of his right jacket sleeve was sticky with blood. It dripped steadily from his right hand and the constant movement and jostling of his arm prevented any significant clotting along the cut. He was also losing blood from the arrow wound in his shoulder, and his shirt was soaked with it across the right side of his torso under the jacket. There were dark bands at the edges of his peripheral

vision, and they seemed to encroach a little bit more as each minute passed. There was nothing for it though. He just gritted his teeth and forced himself forward.

An eternity passed as they made their way through the interminable rain and wind, occasional lightning strikes strobing the night, though nothing else close by. They were each as vigilant as pain and exhaustion would allow, but nothing else came at them out of the dark as each block fell away behind them, until Sophia pointed ahead.

"There it is."

He squinted into the darkness, and could see what she meant. The tail fin and rear fuselage of the downed jet was visible, occluding the street ahead. They were three blocks from the hotel. His voice was a croak to his own ears.

"About freaking time."

"You going to make it?"

"Magic eight ball says ask again later."

He expected banter in return, but her tone was intense, and there was no humor in it, just iron intent.

"I'm serious. I'm done with this. Let's go back."

"Good to hear. I'll make it, I think."

"I am sorry for keeping you here. I --."

He preempted her.

"Later. We're not out yet."

In response, she increased her pace, and he did his best to keep up.

Halfway down the last block, he called her name quietly. She stopped, turning back toward him. The path here was snug up against the front of the building towering above them, and they stopped in the deeper shadow it provided. He stopped, and leaned against the cracked slate tiles that made up this portion of its exterior, shaking slightly with fatigue and hurt. She mirrored his volume level.

"What is it?"

He could hear impatience in her voice, but there was a greater portion of concern.

He once again held out the gun to her.

"Will you trade in the last clip? We may be done with these bastards, but it would suck on so many levels to make it this far and be wrong about that, and not be ready for it. You should probably douse that wick, too."

She didn't answer, just did what he asked, rummaging in his jacket pocket for the last full ammunition clip. While she traded it for the one in the gun, and dealt with the last molotov, he closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against the wet coolness of the slate, trying to reach down within himself to tap some hidden reserve for this last push. He didn't find any. What he did find, however, was the realization that he was

absolutely relying on the derelict ship to do what it had done twice before, even though twice does not a pattern make. The miracles seemed so far away, now.

He thought about the men that had pursued them, the ones they'd killed.

Killed. There's a body shot to the psyche for you. Nat Geo doesn't prepare you for that, does it?

Not that there'd been any real choice.

No, no choice. Well, except not coming here at all, of course. There'd been a choice there, hadn't there been?

Before he could be drawn any deeper into mental semantics, he felt a hand on his other cheek, light and gentle. He opened his eyes, and Sophia looked up at him, a wan smile on her lips.

"You're not fading on me are you?"

He teetered. The pain was a rabid dog on a frayed rope, lunging and frothing, and the possibility of having to face what waited beyond the door made him want to flip his own switch to the off position. That is, if they could even get to the door.

But she held his cheek and looked at him, awaiting his response.

"No. But I officially hate this movie."

She patted his cheek, then pressed the gun into his left hand.

"Me too. That's why I get to choose the next one."

"Ok."

He reluctantly separated himself from the stone that supported him, and started toward the intersection again, gun up and sighted on the cavernous opening that led into the pitch-black space of the hotel lobby. They only had an oblique view of it from where they were, but he didn't think it would make any difference if they were standing right in front of it. There could be a squad of these goons waiting inside, but the darkness inside was absolute, and they wouldn't know until it was too late.

There weren't any, as it turned out, and he thought later that the idea that the lobby would be the final ambush was faulty reasoning. The pale-skinned, white-eyed band of butchers most likely hadn't known where they'd come from. They'd probably only become aware of them after the trap had been sprung. It didn't matter, because they'd been waiting in the bus, not the lobby, and in all likelihood only there because they knew the chase had traveled in a straight line. The jet fuselage was the end of that line.

There was a pale ghost of a scream behind him, and he turned to see Sophia stumble forward, a metal-tipped arrow protruding from her jacket, just below her right breast. Her expression was more surprise and confusion than pain, and she

looked at him as if for clarification of what had just happened. He yelled and reached for her with his only good arm.

"No!"

He managed to get his left forearm up and between her right arm and torso as she staggered and nearly fell, raising her left hand instinctively in a grasping attempt to stop herself. He felt the arrow tip dig into his lower ribs as she fell against him, and her questing left hand clamped directly down on his damaged right shoulder. This time, he voiced a scream utterly devoid of articulation as pain the size and shape of a nuclear blast detonated there.

Even as the shock wave blew through him, another arrow hissed through the night, missing her, but taking a chunk out of his left ear as it passed by his head. This time though, he had seen that its point of origin had been the empty shell of the bus that they'd first seen when they'd left the hotel, and that two figures had exited it, and were charging through the foliage towards them.

He would never know why they had waited so long. He and Sophia had been standing still for several minutes, nearer to their position than when the bow-man had actually let fly the first arrow. If he'd done it then, that would've been the end of it.

Tears of pain streamed down his rain-soaked cheeks as he pulled her backwards toward the corner, and he found he couldn't speak through clenched teeth. All he could manage were tiny screams.

She came along with him with stuttering steps, gripping his bad shoulder as if it was a life-line, her head pressed against his chest. He could now see the fletched end of the shaft protruding at an angle from her back even as the metal tip cut its way into his flesh. She was moaning in pain, now, but her moans were little more than reedy gasps, lacking volume. A tiny island of lucidity amid the stormy seas of his horror observed that this was likely due to a punctured lung.

He was no longer capable of higher thought. There was no analysis anymore, no evaluation of incoming information, just a primal need. His muscles seemed to know what to do, and he ducked out from under Sophia's hand, pivoting outward and sliding his good arm across her lower back below the arrow shaft and snaking around her left hip. He turned his wrist inward to bracket her, gun pressed along the left side of her belly, her right arm now up around his neck. She stumbled as she lost the support of him under her left hand, but he moved fast enough to grasp her tight, and hold her upright with all of his waning strength. He carried her bodily for a few strides before she was able to re-time her steps, and then they were both moving and

facing forward again. He heard words, a repeating pattern of them, but was not able to identify the speaker or process their meaning until later. As it turned out, it had been him.

"Almost there. Keep going. Almost there. Keep going."

They had crossed the street, passed beyond the corner of the hotel building, and were nearing the lobby opening when yet another arrow slammed into his right shoulder blade. Part of him was aware of the event. That part felt the violation of tissue and muscle, and felt the bone fracture under the impact, but at this point it was like watching a needle peg into the red on a dial somewhere. He had left his pain threshold so far behind that new input couldn't catch up. He just corrected course after the force of the impact knocked him out of true, and kept going, the sounds of pursuit growing above the sound of the rain, until a lightning flash and its attendant thunder temporarily obscured it.

His awareness must have temporarily shorted out then, and they must have crossed the lobby on auto-pilot in absolute darkness, because he came to himself just as they reached the far side wall. He couldn't see it, but could feel it, in that weird sort of compensatory radar way that you sometimes got in a dark room. He halted their progress just in time to prevent intimate contact with its non-yielding surface, and his ability to reason resurfaced.

Behind them, he could hear movement and whispered bits of speech, unknown words drifting along sibilant trajectories between the two behind. They were not far behind now, but there was a tentative lilt to their speech. They were blind here, too.

The predicament was immediately obvious to him. He had no way to search for the stairwell door handle. His right hand hung at the end of a useless right arm. His left grasped the pistol, as well as made sure that Sophia remained upright. Her respiration was labored, and wet. He could hear the bubbles in it. His time to act was sprinting towards its nadir. He spoke very quietly, but did not whisper.

"Sophia. Please. Find the door handle."

He felt her shift next to him, and he felt her left arm depart its hanging proximity to his. He heard a few scratching sounds immediately in front of them, and then the arm drooped down again.

"Cuh. Can't."

Her voice was tiny, as though she could barely generate enough air to make her vocal cords vibrate. There was not enough internal space available to him to feel anything about it. It was act, or die.

"Step left."

She did almost immediately, and he went with her, supporting her. In the same *sotto voce*, he urged her.

"Try again."

Her arm lifted again, and the scrabbling sounds repeated, though this time they ended quickly, and her arm did not return to rest.

"Open the door, Sophia. Let's go home."

She let out a soft, wet sob, and he felt her muscles tense along her left side.

Then metal squealed as she leaned backward against his arm, pivoting left, and wind rushed by them from behind, pushing into a previously inaccessible space.

"In you go."

She shuffled forward, and he slid his left foot out behind them as she did, leaning as far forward as he could as she transitioned through the doorway, the door closer forcing it shut behind her. It came to rest against his rear foot, and he hop-stepped on his forward foot until she was through, and then followed her through with his rear foot. The door clicked closed behind them, ending the complaint of the screaming hinges.

In the silence, he helped her by feel to the base of the ascending stairwell. He didn't hesitate, just guided her up the first flight. She went willingly enough, but she was moving slower, and she sounded worse, each breath seemingly a labor undertaken below the water-line. They gained the first landing, and he spoke to her again in his softest voice.

"Hold the rail. I need you to stand by yourself for a minute."

She let out another sob of pain, but he felt her comply. He let go of her hip, careful not to touch the arrow shaft. Everything was by feel here, because there was no light at all in the stairwell. He slid the pistol into his jacket pocket, and then eased around her so that they were face to face in the absolute darkness, using his only good hand to feel his way. He traced his hand up the outside of her arm and across her shoulder, locating the zipper on her jacket. He pulled it gently downward about six inches and then stopped. He slid his hand in, feeling for the neck of the last bottle. It was there, in an inside pocket, and he drew it out, again taking care not to move the jacket material any more than necessary.

Then he heard the squeal of the lobby door hinges below, and they were once again out of time.

"You're going to have to light it. I'm sorry."

She made no sound, and for a few agonizing seconds, she didn't move, either. There were footfalls on concrete, and then on the metal treads of the stairs, cautious and slow, but inexorable. He was about to prompt her as his panic grew, but then he heard the rustle of fabric amid a few tiny mewls of pain.

Then light sparked, flashing in the dark.

But didn't catch.

As the after-image hung in the blackness, the tempo of the footfalls on the stairs tripled, and he knew that the last few seconds of their lives were ticking down. He had a single moment in which to explore the finality of it, and how he felt about it.

In that moment, he saw how he felt about it. Rage. A vast sea of it, and he felt himself start to fall into its depths.

Then light sparked again.

This time, the blue-to-white flame leapt upwards, dancing as it pushed back the dark a bit. He didn't hesitate, touching the fabric of the wick to it, and side-stepped Sophia as it whumped alight.

They were two-thirds of the way up, one several steps below the other, and their dusty pale faces were painted with expressions of enduring hunger in the shifting light, blades held in confident hands, edges gleaming as they moved upward at a dead sprint.

He hurled the last bottle downward at a steep angle, leading the closest by several treads.

It exploded against the metal step, and once again glass and flames sheeted outward and down.

The leader took it full in the face, and then most of his upper body was in flames. The man missed the next step, his

advancing foot not quite clearing the next tread. As he witnessed it, he was reminded of his own leap onto the rear platform of the derelict as the man fell headlong. Unlike his own fall, this guy didn't manage get his free hand out ahead of him, most likely because his face and torso were a fiery mess.

The man's face impacted the edge of a metal step, and just...broke. There was a wet crunch, and then he was no longer an object in motion.

His trailing companion proved to be quicker and smarter, with Sophia-level reaction times. When the bottle exploded, he had stepped in directly behind the leading man, and had been spared almost all of the cascading fire. Not only that, when his comrade had tripped and subsequently succumbed to deceleration trauma, he hadn't hesitated either. He used the downed man as a ramp, actually accelerating his pace as he stamped upward along the burning body's spine, leaping off of the dead man's neck with blade raised as he closed the last distance between them.

Only a last-second slip of the attacker's foot off of his grisly launching pad saved them. He'd reached for the gun as soon as the bottle had left his hand, but the hammer caught at the top of the pocket opening, and had taken several tugs to free. Doc Holiday he wasn't, and by the time the gun had actually cleared the pocket, the psycho was already in flight.

The energy that would've brought him flying up onto the landing with weapon raised to strike was partially dumped off by the misstep, and instead he landed on the step below, imposing another stride on him, and costing time.

The man, if he could be called that still, had put everything into it, he had to give him that. But the extra step put him face-to-face with the barrel of the gun, and it was point blank. Only the ancient ammo put the outcome in doubt.

The report was deafening in the concrete confines of the stairwell.

He was able to move aside just enough to prevent a collision, but gravity and inertia brought the blade down inches from his nose as the body transitioned downward towards stasis, impacting and then sliding across the landing and slamming into the rear wall.

Sophia had not moved during the attack, and still held the lighter aloft, though the flame had gone out. Her head was canted forward, her chin nearly on her chest. She was trembling, and the stairwell was filled with the stench of burning flesh. He started toward her, when the scream of disused metal grinding upon itself came from below again.

He diverted, aiming down the stairwell toward the door instead and pulling the trigger twice. Two cosmic dice rolls landed in his favor, and the gun roared two times, with

attendant ricochet whines as each bullet traced its path along impact and deflection as the twin reports filled the confined space, obscuring the sound of the door below shutting again.

He made an assumption at that point that he had temporarily discouraged more pursuers from taking their shot at the fleeing meat. Time would tell.

He pocketed the gun again, turning away toward the body at the back of the landing. He stooped, and pried the machete free of the dead fingers. The flames feeding on the prostrate corpse below were dying, and the light with it. The stench of charred organic tissue was sickening, but as he returned to where Sophia stood, he could see that she hadn't moved. Her trembling had escalated to near-palsy though, and she was clearly on the verge of collapse.

His heart shattered for her at the same moment his rage breached the sea-wall that held it back. The juxtaposition of the two was an entirely different animal than its composite parts. He was overcome by a glacial clarity, and a course of action was flash-frozen into being.

He stepped in front of her again, and he spoke her name, all of his new desire and old regret present.

"Sophia."

She looked up at him then, and he almost faltered, despite the crystalline nature of his new resolve. Her eyes were

tortured, and there was blood on her lips. He could see...oh.
Oh.

If not for the vitality of his epiphany, he would've stopped then. He would have embraced her, and carried her down in that embrace, enfolding her in his arms and settling her damaged body upon his lap, turning her as necessary to not inflict more pain. Then he would have held her until death arrived, swarming up the stairs in pale-faced hunger.

But that was not an option, now. He would happily burst his heart trying to get back through the door, and would also tear out the throat of the asshole demon with his teeth as his heart thumped out its last few beats, as well. He needed to extract her from this, and acted in the only way he knew how.

He smiled at her, with every ache for the future present in it.

"That has to stay here." He said, nodding at her chest.

She frowned first, as though it made no sense, but then the frown resolved to understanding, and her trembling quieted a bit. He could see her focus on the blade in his hand, and he could also track her calculations, and the leftward flick of her eyes.

"Yes." He said.

She knelt then, and pivoted, and the fletched section of the arrow protruding from her back hovered over the lower rail of the stairwell.

"A little lower."

She accommodated, with a gasp of pain as the arrow shaft made contact with the metal rail.

He acted as soon as the shaft came to full rest, slashing downward, the machete blade severing the rear third of the arrow as metal met metal. He tossed it aside, and helped her return to her feet. Tears of agony streamed down her face as she came upright, but she was silent. Maybe she was no longer capable of articulating her pain, but the look in her eyes as she reacquired his was still present, still cognizant. She was still with him.

He knew the next part, and knew that she did too. The idea of it was at once necessary, and horrific. He felt frozen by it, knowing what he needed to do, but also stymied by the knowledge of what it might do to her.

She solved his dilemma with a simple nod. She knew. He knew.

Then, just like that, he was no longer doing this for the wrong reasons. It wasn't about Rachael anymore. It wasn't about righting past wrongs, and paying for past sins. The past became

just that, and he reached forward, grabbed the metal tip of the arrow, and pulled it free of her.

Her reaction was minimal. A wince, and then a re-opening of clamped eye-lids. They stared at each other, and neither of them possessed the ability to fully evaluate the outcome of the action.

Her jacket hid the wound on both sides. They both knew that they didn't have the time to explore it, so movement was the only choice available to them. She nodded again, but then coughed, and dark froth burst from her lips. He put his good arm around her again, and they started up the stairs.

He counted each flight as they labored upward, and they had just reached the top of the flight that he thought put them at the third floor landing, when he heard the distant squeal of the door open again below, and multiple footfalls on the metal treads soon after. They were moving fast, and he knew that the two of them needed more speed if they were to have any chance of getting to the top of the building before they were overtaken.

"Do you think you can hold on if I carry you on my back?"

Moments passed as they started up the next flight, until she was able to breathe out a reply.

"Don't. Nuh. Know."

"We have to try. They're right behind us."

A few more steps before she responded, but there was a little more volume in her voice this time, as though she was marshalling whatever she had left.

"Kay."

He stepped up ahead of her, and then knelt, presenting his hunched back to her. She used both hands to find his orientation in the blackness, and then laid herself across his back, clasping one wrist with the other hand at the base of his neck. His right shoulder screamed at the pressure, but he was beyond that now. He rose, keeping his upper body inclined forward, and hooked his left elbow under the back of her knee. There wasn't any way for him to support her other leg so she shifted slightly to the left as he pushed himself upright, feeling the stress of the extra weight in his knees and thigh muscles. She moaned as gravity pressed her chest against his back, but held on.

Then he went, climbing as fast as he was able.

He counted. The world shrank down to fifteen steps, landing, fifteen steps, floor landing. The floor count seemed to rise with infuriating slowness, as sounds of pursuit grew louder. He was soon dripping with sweat, and his breaths came in rasping gasps. His leg muscles screamed their protestations, but he fed on his wrath, letting the fire of his outrage drive him upward.

At the eighth floor landing, it sounded as if their pursuers were less than a dozen steps behind them.

As he started up the last flight to the ninth floor landing, they were.

He was in hell, and his body felt like it was beginning to shut down. He couldn't get enough air, and everything felt like it was aflame. But his rage increased the closer to door he brought them, and nothing, not a single damned thing in this rotting cadaver of a world would stop him.

As he reached the tenth step, he was only able to gasp out a single word. He hoped she was listening.

"Light."

True to form, her action was nearly instant.

He heard the rasp of the lighter wheel, and light bloomed below his face. He could feel the heat of it on his throat. He veered toward the outside wall of the stairwell, paralleling the hand-rail as he neared the landing.

He knew it was a risk, but there was no choice. If it didn't work, then they'd die a stone's throw from the finish line. That just made him angrier.

As his upper body rose upward past the plane of the landing floor, he let go of Sophia's leg, bringing his good arm across his waist, grasping forward and outward toward the spring-loaded pin holding the wall-door open. He could barely see it in the

dim light cast by the lighter, and Sophia started to slide to the left, a tumble off of his back imminent.

He got the finger-tip of his index finger under the dog-leg at the top of the pin, even as he stepped upward, using the maximum extension of his arm to yank up on it with all he had.

The pin popped loose just as his finger lost contact with it and followed the rest of his arm upward as he gained the top step of the stairs, even as Sophia continued her slide off of his back. He flailed up and out with his hand, grasping her hip in an attempt to prevent her falling off. He was only partially successful.

He was able to slow her slide, even as he ran forward across the landing, the angry grind of door hinges narrating the closing of the wall-door as it swung slowly shut on its closer as they passed by, but he couldn't prevent the inevitable.

Her legs hit the ground to his left, even as she held her grip on his neck. He was pulled off of his center of gravity even as he strained forward, dragging them both across the landing and the doorway threshold into the hallway beyond.

They both crashed down onto the tiled floor of the hallway past the door as it clicked shut behind them, sliding to a stop in the darkness. They hadn't even come to rest before a pounding commenced on the other side, and muted angry voices raged at the denial.

They lay there for a while. He gasped at first like a fish on the shore, trying to put enough air in his lungs to prevent himself from passing out. Sophia lay still, hands still clasped around his neck. Total darkness entombed them as their hunters railed against the intervening barrier.

Sophia didn't make any sound, except the wet bubbling of her respiration. Then she did let go of him, retracting her arms from around his neck.

When he could breathe again, he forced himself to his feet, though stars swam wildly in the darkness before his eyes as he did.

He could tell he was inches away from a deeper darkness. His heart-beat was arrhythmic, loping along like a wounded dog, and there was a lag-time between when he told his body what to do and when it actually initiated the response.

He forced himself to his feet, and nearly toppled over, a sliding step to the side the only thing keeping him upright as he fought for equilibrium. His voice was desiccated and weak.

"Sophia."

No answer.

"Sophia."

"Nnn?"

"Gotta go."

"Nnn."

"Give me your hand."

He reached downward into the dark, hand extended and waiting.

Her fingers brushed his in the blackness, and then her palm returned, clasping his. He gave her a moment to re-orient herself, and he could hear her gasps of pain as she did so, making preparations to be hauled upward onto her feet. Her other hand joined in from the back, and he pulled her up.

She screamed that same non-scream, and he had to continue to hold her hands up as she was momentarily paralyzed by the pain. She made her way through it, and then the tension slackened, and one hand dropped away, then the other let go. He slipped his arm around her by feel as she swayed on her feet, steadying her by grabbing her hip again.

Then they continued forward down the hall, steps slow because that was all that was left, despite the poundings that echoed along behind them. He tried to remember approximately how long this leg of the hallway was before it met the far corner of the building and turned left, but it was a futile exercise with no visual input. He gave it a few minutes, and then breathed out a quiet urging.

"Still have the lighter?"

In response, she raised her free hand and flicked the abrasive wheel. The flame caught, and they could see the turn at

the end, still twenty feet away. Then the flame went out. She tried again, several times, but the little Bic was done, evidently.

"It's ok. Top chest pocket, left side."

He heard the dead lighter hit the floor and skitter away as she tossed it aside, and then her hand was fumbling at his jacket in the dark, her respiration sounding more and more like percolating coffee. She found the zipper, drew it aside, and reached in, a tiny groan of agony escaping her lips. Then she pulled out her cell-phone.

The screen lit under her practiced fingers, and then the camera flash, and they could see again. They continued on to the turn at the end, and once around it they could see the doorway that hid the flight of stairs ahead and the left turn at the landing behind it.

They had just stumbled their way to the door, when far behind them a louder thump and a cracking sound echoed within the confines of the black hallway. Neither of them started or jerked. Whatever juice controlled involuntary reaction had drained out of them both, leaving empty reservoirs. Sophia reached out and slowly pulled the door open, and they went through. Then they started upward, step-by-step, because it was all they could do.

They had only ascended a few steps when they heard a louder thump, and a splintering sound that echoed against the closed door behind them.

They climbed, slowly, interminably.

As they reached the landing and made the turn that put the hall-way door in front of them, they heard a final splintering crash, and then the distant sound of running feet.

Sophia was even slower getting this door open, glowing cell phone held between thumb and forefinger as she used the other three to grasp the door handle. The door opened to the same music as the last time it had closed behind them on this ill-fated foray into a world that was not their own, a world that was evidently intent on ripping them apart, and then consuming them.

But his anger at that was no longer accessible. They were now like a marble circling the roulette wheel, an object set in motion by an intention now holding no sway over the outcome. They would drop out soon, coming to rest in a place of win or loss. Except loss was defined already, and win wasn't.

They stepped through, and the door shut behind them. They made their slow, painful way down the hallway, past the open doorway to house-keeping. The wind made its presence known again, absent since they'd left the lobby. The stamp of pursuing

feet, temporarily muted by the closed doors behind them began to grow louder again.

Then they reached the corner, and turned right. The light from the phone showed the debris field on the floor ahead below the hole in the ceiling, rain sheeting down through it.

The view was jarring in its familiarity. It seemed like a version of home, separated only by a few degrees, but then painted an entirely different color.

They moved down it, and reached the accumulation of detritus below the gap in the ceiling just as a door squealed open somewhere behind them, and shouts in a foreign tongue preceded those that uttered them.

They made their way across, and despite a few shifts below their feet, they crossed without incident as the sound of pounding feet grew louder.

Then they stepped free of it, and continued on, closing the distance to the door. Farther along, he could see the deeper darkness of the recess that hid the door to their room, as light burst into being from the opposite and nearer side of the hall, nearly blinding them.

The door to the atrium waited, late afternoon light from the high windows pouring out of it.

They drew even, and turned to face it, limned in the glow. He thought about what was waiting for them on the other side,

but he was beyond panic or fear now. It was just another last-second hop of the marble before it came to final rest.

They stepped forward together.

Something flayed a line of fire across the back of his neck as they did so, and he heard the twang of a bow-string just before they broke the plane of the door.

Then they were through, and all the pain was gone.

Ch. 21

Into the fire

She drew in a deep gasp of air, her need for it and sudden access to a previously obstructed place to receive it making it an undeniable imperative. Her chest expanded, and the red-hot poker through her chest cavity was gone, the breath coming easy and painless. The release from the pain and constriction, free access to oxygen, and the glow of muscles freed from the accumulated trauma of their flight was nearly orgasmic. She was whole again as he pulled her further into the atrium, beyond the proximity of the door behind, and could momentarily only be led, consumed by the miracle of it. She was barely aware of him letting go of her, fumbling in the pocket of his jeans, and then sliding something into her jacket pocket.

Then she got the prompt, and it was nearly lost in the interior tumult following her restoration.

Only nearly.

She hip-checked him to the side, using the rebound off of him to go the opposite direction as the air at the point of their divergence changed, the floor of the atrium vibrating slightly below her feet. Air puffed at her face, like a single wave of a hand-held fan as a tall, rectangular distortion appeared where they would've been. She knew what it was, and

knew he did too. It was another trap that would have bound them both this time.

They ended up facing each other, staring through the blurred, empty space between them at one another. There was no surprise or wonder on his face this time, just a hint of amused appreciation.

He knew part of the thing that made her different, the thing that only her father, and later her uncle had come to know. The thing she'd hidden away, because no one else she'd known had it, and she didn't want to be any more separate than she already was.

He didn't know the mechanics of it, though. She imagined he thought that she just had improbably quick reflexes. The question now was what would he think when he heard the rest? Because she knew she would tell him at some point. That is, if they didn't run out of time first.

She didn't get any time to explore it, though. She got the prompt again, which was unusual. They didn't typically come so close together. But then again, she'd never been in this kind of danger before in her life. She was already moving as his eyes darted away, tracking beyond where her right shoulder had been, his darkening expression telling her exactly what she needed to know as she side-stepped the disturbance between them and started forward. It disappeared, and she crossed the short

distance between them, once again forcing him to move by colliding with him. She voiced words as they bounced away from each other, modulated not to carry any further than the space between them.

"Move, and keep moving."

The words were still in the air when another dim rectangle snapped into being where they'd been. He nodded, but he wasn't looking at her as he moved away from the new trap, raising the gun in his left hand. She corrected her own course, turning to follow him.

It was there, standing just outside the glowing portal, staring at them with those inscrutable alien eyes. She had known it would be, but still her skin crawled, and her insides turned to water at the sight of it.

Jeff didn't wait. The pistol was up, and she heard the loud click as the firing pin slammed down on an ancient primer, this one too ancient to fulfill its function. He cleared it instantly with a right hand and arm returned from the dead, and re-aimed, all the while walking steadily toward the horror waiting patiently ahead as the bad round bounced off of the concrete floor with a metallic ting.

The horror didn't move, didn't flinch, and didn't advance. It remained where it was as he moved toward it, and she followed. Then he spoke without turning.

"Go, Sophia. Go home. Go now."

She stopped, stunned by the directive. She looked toward the nearest hallway, and the hatch at its end. She made the connection, and reached in her jacket pocket for confirmation. The coin was there. The road back to her life was open. She started to step toward it, an automatic response to his urging.

The gun roared, the sound of it filling the atrium. One shot blended into another, and then three reports traded echoes within the chamber. She turned back, to see three flattened, deformed copper slugs slide one-by-one off of the creature's chest, no interruptions in the reflective strips of its clothing to mark where they had impacted. Its grin grew wider as they each pinged off of the concrete, but still it didn't move.

But Jeff continued implacably forward, step after measured step, raising the gun higher and pulling the trigger again. She watched, pulled in two different directions as the handgun boomed two more times, and two more deformed slugs obeyed gravity's imperative after striking the creature's throat and left cheek.

Still it didn't flinch, and the grin on its face widened even further, lips splitting apart to reveal wicked teeth clenched together.

That was when she knew she would never go back. Not without him. She launched herself toward him, even as her nightmare raised one hand, and clenched it into a fist.

The portal bulged outward, like a frosted soap bubble, expanding outward to envelope first the horrible creature, and then Jeff, who did not pause, or flinch either. He was pulling the trigger again when he passed through the expanding barrier, and the sound of another shot was cut short.

She sprinted toward the glowing, morphing surface even as it started to retract upon itself, flowing back toward its original boundary. As it passed where Jeff had been, he did not reappear.

She closed as it neared its frame, and she threw herself forward, passing through the illuminated membrane just as it snapped flat.

Then she was back in hell.

Ch. 22

Driven to tears

Just before the glowing boundary enveloped his arm, he pulled the trigger again, and the gun kicked, but the report was interrupted in the split second between when the barrier passed beyond the gun and before it reached his body.

Then he was in a different place, and the sound of the gunshot was there again, but it was muffled and nearly without echo, fading quickly. The sound of it was wrong. Everything was wrong.

Not wrong like odd, or incorrect. Wrong like "Dear God, please save me." The asshole demon was gone, which should have been a relief, but there was no room for relief here.

The air was hot, and humid, and each breath was an invasion, like breathing vaporized oil. The light was dim, diffuse, with no discernible source, and he had a difficult time processing what he was seeing, because the shape of everything was only partially recognizable.

The space was vast, like the first one he'd visited, but that was the only parallel he could draw between them. The floor, or ground, or whatever he was standing on was the color of dried blood, and there was movement within it, darker shapes drifting lazily in random trajectories. Very like the creature's skin, but painted in the color of gore.

There were structures, lots of them, fanning out in a jumble before him. Some seemed to tower to skyscraper height, but distance and perspective were skewed, and they were all asymmetrical and warped, and the spaces between them followed no plan or order. It was if some god-sized child had thrown down its toys, and then taken a flame-thrower to them. Portions were visible that could have been concrete, metal, glass, or any number of other familiar materials, but mostly they seemed bound within a non-reflective, diseased-looking red ochre membrane that seemed to vibrate at a high frequency, giving the impression of movement at the periphery of his vision. The effect was disturbing and destabilizing, and put his stomach on a slow churn as he stepped forward into the nightmare landscape.

The worst part was a sound that was more feeling than audiation. It seemed to underlie everything, a cyclical rise and fall that sounded like...breathing. Like the breaths of a vast, dangerous, sleeping animal. It came from no direction, and all directions at once, as if it occupied all the non-visible space behind everything he could actually see. He had nothing to liken it to, though his mind was trying, because association with the known was better than the unknown, however terrifying the known might be.

He stopped after only a few steps, his footfalls barely making it to his own ears in the sound-dampened atmosphere. He

looked down at the pistol in his hand, and felt the heat accumulating against his skin, trapped by the jacket.

He shrugged out of his cold-weather gear, temporarily sliding the pistol barrel into his jeans pocket as he stripped down to his blood-soaked t-shirt. He knelt down beside the cast-aside jacket, and pulled the flashlight assembly out of the big pocket. He stared down at it, turning it over in his hands. The warped housing was cracked, and it would appear that somewhere in their flight up through the hotel the bulb had shattered. The supernova lens was intact, however, though the wire harness holding the metal ring around it had been bent, partially dislodging it. He freed the hoop from the harness, and stared at it. Did he need this anymore, really? He considered tossing it aside as well.

Even in the oppressive atmosphere of this place though, it glittered slightly, as though partially immune to the depth of wrongness here. It didn't seem to dim like everything else at each apocalyptic breath pulsing in and out behind the fabric of the boundaries that defined this hellish landscape. For that reason alone, he slipped it into the rear pocket of his jeans not occupied by his wallet and his attack pen, tossing the damaged remains of the flashlight onto the pile of discards on the strange ground. He also removed Sophia's cell phone from the jacket and slid it into his only remaining empty front pocket,

thinking that he should have remembered to give that to her when he slipped the coin into her pocket.

Thinking of her hit him hard. He was glad that he'd gotten the chance to give her the opportunity to get out, but the hole that was left in him by her departure was a dark cavern, filled with unknown quantities of dismay and loneliness in its unexplored depths.

He wondered then if there was any point in pushing forward, even as he got to his feet, and returned his attention to this perversion of reality waiting in front of him. Did he really need to seek the asshole demon out? What was the point? The gun had proven useless, though it had performed its function with uncharacteristic reliability. Why keep it?

If he chose to just leave, how could he? The portal was nowhere to be seen.

The surety that had filled him in the atrium as he had closed on their enemy bled out of him now like water through cloth, and he felt a black emptiness take its place.

The combination of being in this place and the subtraction of Sophia from his personal chronicle was made more difficult by the very thing he considered a personal miracle. His sobriety meant he got to feel *all* of it. The pain was real and deep, and he realized that his need to *not* feel like this had inserted him into a bottle all of his adult life. That choice was especially

relevant now, as waves of despair washed over him. Because he'd chosen escape over engagement for so long, he'd never exercised the emotional muscles necessary to deal with and to overcome feelings like this. The tools required to beat it back weren't in his tool-bag.

As he teetered on the precipice, that part of him that had always been able to deliver its caustic analysis no matter how drunk he was spoke up.

You might not physically need a drink right now, but you realize that's where this ends up, right? It's not looking good for you, my friend, because it's the only thing you know. How else can you get away from this?

His knees trembled, and he put a hand to his forehead, covering his eyes in a symbolic bid to mask himself from this internal landscape. But there was nowhere to go. The weight of it grew, seeming to triple his personal gravity, and he felt like an internal collapse was imminent and would be indistinguishable from external collapse.

Tears welled and then fell, negative mirrors of those that had fallen at his redemption, and the collapse began.

He held out, though, even knowing that all he could do was delay it. That part of him that rebelled against it was too new, and too weak to resist with no assistance. It was like trying to arrest the fall of a heavy object once it had passed well beyond

its tipping point. As he strained in vain against it, help came again from that unfamiliar place.

The voice was small but firm, like the time he'd almost not bothered to separate the charging cord from the tangle in the desk, and it pegged a spike into the downward pivot of his collapse.

This is not the end. You aren't done.

That was it. No argument this time, just a statement of fact that was barely audible within him.

It shouldn't have been, but it was *just* enough to reduce the weight and immediacy of his internal distress to a level he felt like he could carry. He blew out a breath, and did his best to background this mental conflict, instead focusing on this horror of a place in which he found himself. He really should get out of here if he could.

He turned in place, looking for anything that might signal where the portal was, but knowing that he had no key even if he could find it. Tension grew again within him.

There was nothing, save the diseased topography, the oily humidity, and the breathing. This last was the worst, and he felt increasingly frantic to get away from it.

This newest turmoil was interrupted by a snapping sound behind him, and the sound of her voice.

"Jeff!"

Ch. 23

Cross

The feelings that blew through him at the sight of her ranged across the emotional spectrum. Fear, relief, frustration, hope, and anger all flared together in a cacophony, but the initial dominating emotion that dwarfed the rest and nearly brought a smile to his face was joy. He had restored the choice to her, and she had chosen him. He knew that there were several big reasons why this outcome was not good for either of them, but in that initial moment, he didn't care, the crushing weight of re-imposed loneliness momentarily lifted.

But the moment didn't last, couldn't last. The smile never arrived, because the weight of that world-consuming respiration wicked the joy out of him faster than he could feel it, and there was no room in the emotional maelstrom whirling inside him.

This place evidently did not tolerate anything that might confront or argue it, and he could sense the frown forming on his face as he acknowledged her arrival, only negative emotions within himself accessible.

"Sophia! What are you *doing* here?"

He could see the same transaction occurring within her as she slowed, and the already fading smile on her face winked out. There was hurt there for a moment, but it was swallowed quickly

by fear as he saw her gaze shift from him to something behind him. He knew what it would be before he turned, and had to combat yet another negative flood of futility. Only the echoes of the small voice gave him the strength to draw the gun in what he already knew was a pointless exercise.

It stood there, watching, the edges of the mouth turned up in that ubiquitous expression of amusement. It was not far away, standing on an elevated area between two skewed pillars, and he could see that the eye was fully healed now. Pity. He leveled the pistol, sighting carefully on the now-recovered eye anyway. Why not? He pulled the trigger.

Click.

Irrational anger consumed him. He drew the gun back over his shoulder, then slung it side-arm at the grin with everything he could put into it.

His aim was true, and the asshole demon would have taken it straight in the teeth had it actually arrived at its destination. But it didn't. Of course it didn't. It batted the pistol aside as if it was a Styrofoam prop. Its smile didn't even tremor.

There was a static moment as the pistol clattered dully away, the sounds of its passage quickly lost in the oily atmosphere, and then everything came to rest.

It regarded them, and they it. Then it spoke, alien gaze drifting beyond him to focus on Sophia, and its smile disappeared.

"You chose poorly."

It stepped forward off of the edge, landing lightly on level ground, and strode forward, eyes unwavering. He didn't move, because it seemed pointless to do so, and he heard no movement behind him. It stopped several yards in front of him, but paid him no heed. He considered his attack options, and found that he really didn't have any. His playbook only had the penny page and the pen page, and both were bankrupt from a surprise perspective. He held still and waited.

"You know what waits for you here, and yet, here you are. Not prescient enough in that *particular* moment, were you?"

It turned to look at him.

"And you, Man. You've returned in gallantry and self-sacrifice. What did it get you?"

It looked at him intently, waiting for a response. He just waited until it spoke again. It shook its head, gaze widening to include both of them.

"You think it will *matter*, that you've done what you thought was right."

Anger bloomed in its eyes, the irises darkening, and its mouth drew into a nearly straight line.

"It won't."

It made a gesture with the same hand as before, and he knew that his reactionary twitch to the side would be too late even as he acted.

But the invisible cage didn't materialize, and his side-step was unimpeded. He heard a muffled thud behind him. He whirled around to see Sophia lying on her side on the ground, unmoving. He rushed to her and knelt on the awful ground beside her.

"Sophia!" He put a hand on her cheek.

Her eyes were open, but she didn't react to his presence. She stared in the direction her head was oriented. She blinked, but made no other movement. He felt movement under his fingertips, and focused in on her skin.

Small, black squiggly lines coursed along just below the surface, swimming along like amoebas in a Petri dish. Hundreds of them visible across the skin of her face, and he could feel them moving under his hand as well.

He drew his hand back, stifling a feeling of revulsion as he turned back toward the asshole demon.

"What the hell is that?"

It stared at him with the same enmity. It spread its hands apart, holding them wide.

"Incentive. A timer. The literary device that propels our hero and our narrative toward the climax, were this just a story."

"*What is it?*"

It leaned forward, and it bared those horrible teeth.

"It is an exquisite *agony*, Man. It is decomposition without the salve of death.

They trace paths of fire, damaging tissue and nerve in the smallest of increments. They disable all non-autonomic functions. She cannot respond, she can only suffer. How deep an explanation do you desire?"

He could feel a fundamental panic swelling up in him, threatening his capacity for rational thought. The only thing available to replace it was despair, and it was willing and waiting close by.

"Stop it."

"I will not."

He knew it was pointless, but there was nothing else.

"Please don't do this."

"Is that all you can manage? From gunslinger to mewling child in such a tiny span? Are the bonds you forged with this one out in the cold so fragile?"

That stung, but it kindled the fire of anger in his gut, forcing back the encroaching paralysis. He turned away, and put

his hand back on Sophia's cheek, tracing her cheekbone with his thumb despite the crawling movement beneath it.

"She is far from the end, though she will wish for it soon, I imagine. Tasks remain, and a respite is possible. Are you willing to pick up that burden?"

He didn't look at it, just looked at Sophia's unmoving blue eyes behind her glasses. He responded, finally.

"What tasks?"

It explained the first one. His heart sank.

"If you survive it, and return with the artifact, I may be willing to grant her a small reprieve. Or possibly not. My antipathy toward your kind is a constant influence on all my decisions."

Hatred flowed into him then, and it was all he could do to choke back the vitriol, knowing that to give voice to it would be more harm. He gritted his teeth.

"How do I get back?"

"The door is open when I choose it to be."

He leaned down, and kissed Sophia's forehead, whispering,

"Hold on. I'll be back as soon as I can."

As he did so, he retrieved the half-dollar from her pocket, shielding the movement with his body. He didn't know why he did it, or why he concealed it, sliding the coin into his own pocket before he rose. It would never let him get close enough to use

it now, and even if it did, he'd already proven that there was no lasting damage, just that epic repulsion.

He stood up, turning back to his tormentor.

The look of amusement had returned. It indicated a point behind him with a nod, and he was about to turn and look, but it stopped him.

"One more thing. A parting gift."

He stared back at it, as it brought its hand up, leveling it with index and middle finger pointed at him, with thumb extended upward. Even as he realized what it meant, the thumb dropped down, and he got the shot right between the eyes.

It poured into him in exactly the way he had imagined, coursing through his veins like a familiar poison.

As his gifted sobriety departed, and the beast stalked back in, he had a moment to realize that the asshole demon didn't really care if he succeeded or not. He still had Sophia to accomplish what he needed. He could just turn those things off, and coerce her like before. That was most likely its plan from the moment Sophia had arrived.

Then clarity was gone, and a vacuous form of self-hate overwrote everything.

He stared dully at the author of this, and his body shook with the familiar need. Everything inside was black and dull, like the doors.

It pointed behind him with the same gun-hand.

He turned, and saw the portal before him, only a few feet away.

He looked back at Sophia on the ground, inert except for the skin amoebas, and then back at the alien face. It stared back at him, and then spoke, waving him away.

"Do as you will. Your time is short."

He turned back, and then shuffled through the portal.

Ch. 24

The end

He passed into the cool, dry atmosphere of the atrium, shaking with need and mind full of cotton batting. His thoughts were hindered, each seeming to require circuitous or indirect routes to connect to the next. His mouth was dry, his bones hummed, and hope was gone.

Above everything, his need screamed like a hysterical child. The blue line angled away towards the nearest hallway leading to a dock-side hatchway, and he could see the blue dot on the mental screen, superimposed above his car. It was temporarily the only clarity left to him, precision amid the blur. The events of the past few days were hard to see now, eclipsed by this immediacy.

He moved with the prompting, his feet carrying him across the dusty concrete of the atrium floor toward the hall entrance, dim in the late afternoon fade.

There were still parts of him in conflict though, and this inner opposition disturbed the fog in his mind. He stopped again, just short of the hall way entrance, the metal of the hatchway visible in the shadows. He remembered the clarity of thought he'd had before, even though it wasn't available to him now, and the loss was profound. There was a book he'd read in seventh grade, *Flowers for Algernon*, about a retarded man who'd

been made smart by a medical experiment, but who had subsequently lost it all a bit at a time. This felt like that, a little, except this was all at once.

No miracle this time. The atrium had not saved him.

He found himself trying to fight a crashing wave. He had nothing to fight it with, so he dove into it instead, holding his breath as he wormed his way through it. On the other side, a temporary trough awaited. He took in a breath when he reached it.

So, what to do? Could he do anything but follow the blue line? The idea of turning back from it, and trying to accomplish the task laid out for him seemed ludicrous. It didn't really expect him to do it anyway. He'd been dismissed. He tried to fight the inevitability with no real ability to do so.

Then the next wave hit him.

You can't really do anything until you fill the need, man. You want equilibrium? Get your ass out to that car. Get the bottles. Better yet, drive over to Ollie's. It's still afternoon out there. Get a couple more. Then come back and try this shit again, if you want. If you're going to continue down this ridiculous path, you're going to need reinforcements. But I don't recommend it, because your only real chance is to bury this right now. Walk away, and live to drink another day.

Then he was moving again, with no internal consensus to do so, and before he knew it, he was at the hatch, staring at the oxidized metal handle with his outstretched hand not quite touching it as the wave passed. What remained were bits of what he'd lost.

Sophia dropping the key into his outstretched hand.

The glint of wetness on her cheek when he returned from the building collapse.

Her raising her hand in the restaurant kitchen.

The downward arc of her ax.

The returned kiss.

The hand on his cheek.

He withdrew his hand, but the next wave crashed over him. The weight of it threatened to drive him to the floor with its infected gravitas, but that small, impossible phrase uttered one last try.

This is not the end. You aren't done.

But it was a ghost of its former self, and the despair leapt forward, no longer held at bay by the talismanic phrase.

He felt the shift. There was a tremor of inner alignment, and then all the old filters came online. His addiction may have been a prison, but decades of self-delusion had made the bars a protection, not a confinement, and now the bars spoke of comfort once more.

It made sense. Everything served the need. His movements through the circadian rhythm of his life had been tightly orchestrated, and he'd always known where he'd end up. This had all been an aberration, another big bump on the long down-hill. There was nothing left in him to combat the next wave when it swept over him.

You really have no other choice, man. You can't help her. You are three minutes away from the solution, tops. So? Get walking, shit-head.

He reached for the handle again, and felt the heat in his pocket as the coins obeyed. He pulled the door open, and stepped through, as the blackness descended fully upon him unopposed. The late afternoon glow off of the water did nothing to contradict it.

Ch. 25

Death whispered a lullaby

The next two days could only be accessed as fragmented images once he reached the other side of them, waking on the couch in his rented garage, torn jeans and the center cushion soaked with his own urine. His revulsion was a distant notification, like a smoke signal. He didn't so much come to a decision as react instinctively to external stimuli.

He rolled off the couch onto the cold, oil-stained cement floor, and fumbled with the button fly. It took him almost a minute to navigate all of them, but eventually he slid them off in a series of hunched gyrations. He wasn't wearing a shirt, or underwear, and was still completely wasted. He made no effort to get to his feet, settling instead for hands and knees.

He crawled to the fiberglass shower stall in the corner next to the mud sink, pulling himself upright using the soap dish as a hand-hold. He didn't even bother with the plastic curtain, just twisted the water-flow handle.

The one advantage to being in the garage was that he was so near the hot water heater that hot water was almost instant. The first shock of cold was immediately washed away as steam began to billow out of the open stall. Heat suffused his body, and he was finally able to paw the curtain closed with an unsteady hand.

Memories began to cycle, like a stuttering power-point display. There was still enough alcohol between him and them that they had no possessive power over him yet, but he could sense their weight, like suspended stones.

His journey to his car was lost, but his first drink from the partial bottle retrieved from the console was lit in fire as the sun began to be extinguished by the far horizon. The shadows across the marina were long,

her marina

and he wasn't surprised to see that the slip that had started all of this was empty again. He killed the partial bottle in a few gulps, and started on the second.

There was a semi-fade, and then a few bits of exaggerated look right, left, right, and hitting the turn signal.

The clerk at Ollie's had been the same gum-smacking nerd as the last few times, and had made some comment about a volume discount as he'd dropped a full case on the counter. He remembered not smiling, or responding. He just swiped his card, and then darkness.

There was no record of work in any of the segments, so it was probably safe to say he was unemployed again. His supervisor had been pretty clear out of the gate that attendance counted as the final grade, and that if he couldn't manage it, well, adios.

There was an afternoon bit, probably yesterday. He'd made it back to the marina

her marina

parking lot, and sat on the same bench as always. It was déjà-vu, with a bottle, an empty slip, and a downward sun. He thought that there may have been tears, but there was no way to be sure. The world might be visible, but he was lost in darkness.

There was only one more before coming to, he found. He leaned out of the open driver door of his car, vomiting mostly fluid onto the cracked asphalt of Ollie's side lot. There was a nearly empty bottle between his legs, and several more empties on the passenger side floor-mat. His headlights illuminated the faded paint legend on the cinder-block wall of the store.

"Ollie's"

And below that, "We'll raise your spirits!"

That's all there was left.

you left her there

He willed one eyelid open as hot water sluiced down his insensate body. Steam billowed out into the enclosed garage, adding another layer of moist to a space never meant to contain so much of it, and no way to otherwise escape. His landlord was a grasping prick who was all about the upfront, however, and to him, coming due only ever applied to tenants.

He noticed a rusted utility knife blade, partially visible and caked in soap leavings under the bar of soap in the dish. He frowned at it, even as he reached for the soap bar. It seemed out of place, but relevant at the same time.

Then he remembered an ill-fated attempt to scrape some hard-water deposits off of the fiberglass enclosure, buoyed by alcohol and the transitory idea that he could make this place better by a day spent cleaning.

The memory faded, but the blade took on a light of its own. Lined in a halo, it was suddenly bright and new, the soap and rust translucent now against this inner light. He pried it loose from its alkaline bed, leaving the bar of soap where it was, and rinsed it in the flow from the shower-head. He held it up in the afternoon light from the few dirty windows. It still looked capable of cutting.

skin amoebas. cut them out

He looked from the blade, to the white skin of his wrist below it.

cut them out

He brought the blade to his wrist, forward tip angled downward. His thoughts were an inebriated jumble, and his fine motor skills were non-existent. The tip slid easily into the skin, and blood began to flow before he could halt the motion. The pain was distant, but he didn't continue the cut up his

wrist yet. He just stood there as hot water washed the blood down his arm. He was dimly aware he was crying, but he was still mostly disconnected from the reason why, so the tears were just more drain-bound moisture.

time to go

That made sense. *Finally*, something did. Dear God, it seemed that it had been so long since anything had.

release. be free

But he didn't move, didn't continue the cut. He just watched the water-diluted blood snake down his arm. He had no idea why he waited. It certainly wasn't fear. He was one movement away from freedom. *Not* doing it seemed like madness.

are you not capable of following through in anything, Man?

That was the moment. It didn't matter that he was too drunk still for speech, or that the blade sank a little deeper into his flesh before the mental command to remove it was shakily obeyed. That was when it clicked. It cut through all the haze like laser pointer, allowing him to focus on the two relevant things, the two things that mattered in this here and now.

The first was that his demons had joined forces. Or perhaps they had always been brothers-in-arms, a common cause on different battlefields, and his actions had been the bridge between. It was hard to tell. But it made him furious.

The second thing was worse. He'd abandoned a friend.

The apparent hypocrisy wasn't lost on him, however. He'd abandoned all his friends along the way. Hell, he'd abandoned his *wife* for that matter.

Sophia was different, though. He had forged the bond with her beyond the pale of alcoholism, under extraordinary circumstances no less. Their friendship had been free of the instinctive caveats he'd always secretively written on his heart at the waxing of any relationship arc, to be referred to as law once the arc met its nadir.

This snuffed his anger, eclipsing it completely. His heart broke in a way that was unprecedented, at least for him. As wasted as he still was, he felt the fragmentation with unadulterated vividness. The connection made, the tears were the thing that made sense now, not the completion of the razor cut. He flipped the blade outward, over the curtain rod without a look. It tinged off of something across the room, and passed beyond his knowledge. He pressed a finger over the still-bleeding cut and sobbed aloud. But through all the chemical escape he still swam in, the phrase that had ebbed to nothing now burned with power.

This is not the end. You aren't done.

Ch. 26

Find your way back

He felt strangely empty as he pulled into the gravel lot, the sun now behind the horizon, and the marina on the cusp of twilight. The trip had been mostly uneventful, save two pulse-pounding minutes as a black-and-white police cruiser pulled out of a side street directly behind him, and followed closely for two blocks before turning off again. The adrenalin had gotten his heart rate up, but he was still swimming in the deep end of inebriation. The beast still called the shots.

He'd decided to go back, though. There was no other choice, as everything left in him demanded it. Now, there was only to see what this two-day divergence had cost Sophia.

He parked, and took a hit off of the bottle lying on the passenger seat. Through the dusty windshield, it was no surprise that the slip was still empty. That didn't matter anymore. It was waiting there just the same. He had the key, after all.

The office was dark, even as the marina lights automatically flickered to life in the growing dusk. She must have locked the office when she'd come after him. He briefly wondered what would happen to this place if he couldn't get her back. How long before all the outward ripples of her disappearance flat-lined, and the dictates of bureaucracy were satisfied?

He found he didn't care about that. He got out of the car, steadying himself on the car door. He left the bottle on the seat. He'd thought about bringing it, of course. Until the moment he pulled on the car door handle, he'd assumed he'd bring it.

But, he didn't. He couldn't say why.

He pocketed his car keys, fishing out the marina gate key at the same time as he made his unsteady way across the gravel. The floatation fob bound within the pocket liner, and he nearly tripped as he jerked it free. There were a few stagger steps, and then he regained his tenuous balance.

He'd had to search the garage for the jeans he'd worn prior to his return, finally locating them behind the sofa. They were filthy, reeking of ash and fire smoke, heavily stained with both his and Sophia's blood, but all the things he needed were still in the pockets. He'd extracted all the items and tossed them into a pile onto the end of the couch, and then stared down at the jumble.

His car keys, the marina key, and the coins opened the path back to him, and so were mandatory. He stuffed them into the pocket of another pair of jeans in slightly better shape he'd found in his dirty laundry pile, and was now wearing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd done laundry.

The marker, Sophia's earring, her cell phone, and the supernova lens were left. He'd tried to think of anything else he might have here that would help him, but nothing had come to mind. It was a compelling illustration of what his life had dwindled down to. He stared down at these three remaining items.

The marker had saved his life. It had dealt the only lasting damage to his enemy he'd been able to inflict, as short-lived as that had been. It seemed as if it should carry more weight, more importance. But it didn't. He felt that its relevance had passed.

The earring had also saved his life. But, it seemed tiny and unimportant as well. If he got her back, and she still had the matching one, he'd come back here and get it. It was the same for the cell-phone.

The supernova lens glinted in the same way here as it had in that awful other place. The hatched side lay face up, and the minute pattern across it seemed almost like a schematic, or a map. It had been an unlikely ally, magnifying the ordinary into blasts of the extraordinary.

He'd picked it up, turning it from side to side as he held it aloft, wondering whether it was an irrelevant piece of plastic, a tool that had served its purpose, or a talisman that held more potential than he'd mined from it so far. He didn't debate long.

He'd put it into his rear pocket.

He came out of his reverie, standing in the gravel lot, balance shifting from foot to foot as his inebriation swayed his center from side to side. There was something that had been delivered along with the memory of choosing to take the supernova lens. It was poking at the same part of him that had told him to free the mirror. He swayed to and fro for a moment more, and then turned back to his car, tramping back across the gravel, having to navigate the removal of his car keys again from his pocket while still holding the dock key.

He bypassed the driver door, and went straight to the trunk, making several attempts at inserting the trunk key into the lock before succeeding in the endeavor. He clicked it over, and the trunk lid sprang open. He stared down into it, momentarily at a loss. The reason for this exercise was gone, until he saw the roadside emergency satchel half-buried among other detritus. Then it swam back into view, and he shakily unzipped the satchel, removing the thing he'd come back for. Stowing it in the space beside his wallet that the marker had once occupied, he shut the trunk, and removed his keys, returning them to another pocket with some difficulty.

From there, he made his way to the closest gate, the central one that opened onto the straight shot to the big boats. He fumbled the floatation-fob key into the lock, and turned it.

Then he was through, and walking toward the empty slip at the end. He remembered the urgency in his first trip, his excitement. There was none of that now. Each step was a countdown to the reckoning, the coming due. He knew that payment would be necessary. But the payment wasn't the thing.

He was moving through a contradiction. He was still drunk, and the need was still very much there. Part of him lamented his decision to leave the bottle, and urged him to return for it. But it wasn't the encompassing directive it had always been. The slit in the skin of his wrist still stung, and the edifice of his addiction was no longer seamlessly intact. The promise of protection, of degrees of separation from the pains of life still shone from it, but through tiny cracks he could see glimpses of discord. Hints of all he'd lost along the way, and bits of ugly reminders of the things he'd done in the name of internal "peace".

But the contradiction wasn't the thing, either. He found he didn't know what the thing was.

He reached the final intersection, the left-to-right branching of the last perpendicular section of the docks, where the large gap ahead between floating examples of rich excess seemed to yawn wide in the failing light. He walked past the utility module, and felt the heat in his pocket as the gap disappeared, and the strange vessel loomed over him once again.

The way on was clear, now. An ancient ladder hung from the deck above, beneath a break in the railing, bottom rung just beyond the edge of the dock, to the right of a rubber bumper that flexed quietly with the slow movement of the water.

He didn't stop or hesitate, just stepped forward and made the short climb that put him on the deck again. As soon he was vertical, he moved to the closest hatchway, and pressed his hand against it. At his first touch, it popped open, canting inward slightly as before. He could smell the cool, dusty air from inside. He pushed the door open, and stepped in. As he passed through the doorframe, he felt that little murmur.

He was sober again.

He couldn't help but stop. The release, the clarification of thought, the absence of self-hate demanded it. But it wasn't like the last time. There was a great relief, but it was overshadowed by the fact that he didn't really know how to proceed.

He'd no preconceptions about what would happen when he stepped through the hatch. Two out of the three times he had entered the atrium needing a miracle, he'd gotten what he needed. The last one, though. Nothing. Was that to do with the atrium, or the asshole demon?

Or maybe, it was the door? You needed the coins to use the doors, but it couldn't use the coins. But it didn't need them for *that* door. It had gone through that one just fine. Not only

that, it had been able to expand the portal to suit its purpose. Maybe it had control of that one, and the atrium treated it differently?

He shook his head. Supposition was pointless. His re-established sobriety didn't equate to answers, because he was now back in a reality that had its own list of rules, and he hadn't been given a copy.

He stood in the dark hallway, staring out past the end of it at the twilight of the atrium beyond. He walked to the end of the hall, halted again, surveying the interior.

The portal at the end to the right was dark, now, mirroring the one to the left. It did indicate that something had changed since he'd left, but who knew what it meant. He thought about the time streams involved in this sci-fi movie he'd stumbled into, running at different rates outside, inside, and behind each door, though he couldn't be sure about that last.

He sighed quietly. It might be much easier to think, free of the beast, but for the first time, he could see that decisions were a whole lot simpler to make with its paw pressed firmly against the back of his neck. It was him, but not *really* him making them, and he had the beast's assurance that he would be protected from the consequences, whatever the result. It was all him now, though.

He stepped out into the atrium, for lack of any other action to take. It didn't help. He still didn't know what to do.

Given the squirrely nature of time here, he couldn't help but think he'd missed some segment, length undetermined. And, with no clear way to find out, supposition here too was pointless. He was left only with the need to take some action, whatever that might be, and deal with the chain resulting from it.

He stood near the center of the atrium as the minutes spooled out, under the dim light from the windows above as silence reigned.

He struggled with his thoughts, staring at the three doors and the hatchway hall openings in front of him, non-reflective black pools along the dark wood wall.

Then it hit him.

Doors.

He remembered what Sophia had said about finding the coins with the letter from her uncle. He hadn't thought about it since she'd told him, but it came unbidden now.

She hadn't elaborated on the contents of her uncle's letter when they'd first discussed it, and it hadn't come up again because they'd been consumed with other things. He thought again about how she had said her uncle had been somehow involved, like

a watchman. No, she'd amended that. She'd said she thought he was a key-holder.

The key he now had.

He realized that there was a fairly obvious gap in his understanding of the doors.

Then he put a hand to his forehead, stifling a laugh. *Understanding*. Yeah, right. He shook his head as the moment passed.

He felt like he could assume that the black doors all led to some other somewhere, based on multiple evaluations. The dark glass portal to the right led to the asshole demon's domain, or whatever.

That left the other glass portal.

Was that his, too? Or was it something else? In the absence of another option that held any promise of new information, he turned left and headed directly to the darkened glass at the other end. As he stepped within ten feet of it, it lit with the same illumination as the other one had, complete with shifting shadows drifting randomly across its seamless face. He fished in his pocket, removing the hot-to-the-touch silver coin, looking to the right at shoulder height for no other reason than that's where the lock had been for the black doors.

It was there. There was a round, slightly paler circle in the dark wood beside the glowing glass, illuminated by the light

from its frosted face. He was about to place the coin when the light in the atrium changed, growing brighter as light flared behind him.

He turned his head, hand in mid-reach with the coin between his thumb and forefinger, in time to see the now-lit portal at the other end of the atrium breached by dark form of his enemy, face invisible in the back-light. It was in a full sprint, and was moving with incredible speed. It would cover the distance between them in seconds. There were no protestations in that writhing alien tone. It was only about forward motion.

He forced himself to turn from the oncoming nightmare, and place the coin, despite the terror within him. The portal in front of him flared slightly, but otherwise there was no change. He didn't hesitate, knowing that to turn and look again would cost him his only chance. Yet again, it was do or die.

He stepped forward.

There was a blast of light, but no resistance, not even the spider-web transition of the black doors, and he was somewhere else.

It took him several seconds to fully process what he was seeing, because on the list of unexpected results, it was pretty much at the top, underlined in red and with several exclamation points.

He was back in his rented garage.

His shock never fully matured though, because several elements that didn't belong were immediately apparent, and he realized that it wasn't really *his* garage. It was a near-exact replica though, exact enough to make the differences glaring and grip him with a deep sense of dislocation.

The smell of mold, old gasoline, and dusty wood framing was the same, and the contents were all in the same places. He was standing in front of the side entrance door, facing the couch and the opposite side windows.

The windows were blank. He could see nothing through them, not the now-familiar privacy lattice atop the fence that ran along that side of the garage, not the two utility poles on the other side of the fence, not the roof-lines of the houses across the street. Those things that he'd seen so often that he didn't register them anymore, save now, when they weren't there. There was just a neutral gray, uniform, not dark, not light. Dull like the black doors in the atrium.

The illumination in the room was equivalent to maybe a rainy day, enough light to see, but not bright, the source not apparent.

The view out the windows had been subtracted, but two items had been added in, and he stared at them now. Their addition was at once enigmatic, and ordinary. They wouldn't have been out of place at all, had they not existed in *his* where and when.

In front of the couch was a long, low coffee table. It looked cheaply made, probably plastic veneer over particle-board, corners chipped and several moisture rings from cups left too long atop the compromised surface film. A single item sat atop the table.

A book.

It was also pretty beat up, the binding frayed and split in several places along the spine. It was fairly thick, and the edge gilding was worn and uneven. It looked well used, and old.

Somehow, he knew. He didn't know how, but he was certain.

The book was the thing.

Ch. 27

Turn the page

He went to the table, bent down, and lifted the book. The cover was old, chaffed brown leather, worn and stained dark along the damaged spine from handling. There was no print or embossing on front cover, and as he turned it over, saw that the spine and back cover were also text-less.

He opened the book to the title page, which was empty, and paged past it to what would have been the copyright page, and the table of contents. More empty space, save a dim, partial fingerprint at the bottom of that last, transferred onto the paper in some unknown medium.

The next two pages, however, were not blank.

He frowned as he looked down at them. The one on the left looked like a hand-drawn schematic of a very complicated...something. He couldn't tell if it was an architectural drawing, or a mechanical drawing, because he was neither an architect, nor a mechanical engineer. There was only the sense that he was looking at an un-annotated illustration of some sort of complex system.

His frown wasn't the result of his lack of knowledge of the subject matter, though. Escape U may not provide the ability to interpret the complex articulations of traditional higher learning, but he knew he was far from stupid. It was because the

drawing didn't appear to be anchored to the page in the way drawings are supposed to be.

He'd been aware that his fine motor control had seen some deterioration across the last decade. Whether he could lay that at the foot of his addiction, age, or lack of investment in the betterment of his body, he didn't know. Most likely a cumulative result, he imagined.

But the minute tremors in his hands as they held the book didn't seem to affect the drawing. He could see the open pages make tiny adjustments along x and y axis, but the drawing itself did not follow. It held perfectly still. The effect was optically disconcerting.

He put a finger onto the page atop the center of the grayscale schematic, in an effort to break the illusion, if that's what it was. When his fingertip met the page, a small muscular tic in his elbow slid the book a bit to the side.

The schematic moved within invisible margins, revealing a tiny new slice of the drawing. He held his finger in place, and now the drawing followed the slight movements of the book in his supporting hand. Intuition dictated action, and he slid his finger to the side, letting go as it neared the edge of the page.

The drawing blurred into motion, and then halted suddenly. New convolutions of structure were now visible, but with a

defined edge of the construct now visible on the side opposite the direction of his fingers movement.

A few more manipulations confirmed it. He slid his finger in different directions, keeping his fingertip in contact with the drawing. The drawing revealed new stretches of itself as he did so, dragged into view by his finger, but constrained by the invisible margins of the touch-screen.

Because that's what it was. It was a touch-screen. In a book.

He thought then that he should feel more amazed, but he didn't. It would appear that amazement was currently like a carnival ride that had been roped off due to maintenance issues resulting from excessive use. This was just another thing to add in to the rest of the weirdness.

He turned his attention to the other page.

This was a much simpler assemblage of symbols, but no less strange, because they had the same dissociation with the underlying page. This time, rather than explore the interface, he turned the page.

It was the same.

He flipped through the rest of the book, and it was the same throughout, each left and right open page another iteration of the same schematics until he got to the last page.

The left one was blank, but the inside of the back cover had a single line of text hand-written across the upper quadrant of the slightly yellowed paper liner. It was in pencil, all block letters, all caps, and the message caused an involuntary muscular spasm as he read it.

THIS IS NOT THE END. YOU AREN'T DONE.

He closed the book, and set it back on the table. He stared down at it for a minute or so, and then circled the table, sitting down on the center cushion, eyes fastened on the worn leather cover.

In what he thought was an unnecessary touch of realism, a faint whiff of urine wafted up from the cushion along with a thin cloud of dust.

He just stared at the book for a couple minutes, then leaned forward and picked it up again. He opened it again to the back cover, and regarded the text there, as though additional contemplation might somehow bring illumination and understanding.

Not surprisingly, it didn't. He flipped randomly to the middle, and looked at the two ubiquitous schematics again. He studied the one on the right this time, in the interest of equality. It seemed only fair to be completely mystified by both, rather than just the one.

It was much less complex, and was situated within a bounding box border on the page, like a framed illustration. There was a fair amount of white space visible, and the elements inside it were discrete, though many were the same, but opposed in orientation. They were limited in number, geometric shapes arranged in a simple diagram. But the entirety of it had the same three-dimensional quality as the one on the other page, so he selected one of the elements at random, one of many that looked like a textual end bracket and touched it with his fingertip.

It changed under his touch from a solid line, to the same shape but with the inside missing, like text with a stroke but no fill. He lifted his finger, and it remained the same. He touched it again, and it reverted to its original state. It didn't move, nor did any other element on the display. He swiped his finger to the side. Nothing moved.

He stared at it, frowning, because there was something about it that was familiar, like a pictograph that spoke to an object or concept you *knew* you knew, but didn't take you all the way there. It was like that point in Pictionary when your partner knows they have drawn the absolute best representation of what you need to guess, and just sit there tapping the illustration impatiently with the pencil point while the final grains in the timer drain away.

There were fifteen of the brackets, three of which were a different size than the rest, two slightly larger, and oriented perpendicular to all the others. The last spanned three of the smaller size, and lent the only asymmetry to the diagram. There were six to a side along the long axis, three behind three, with the long bracket along the left inside center. The last two were centered between the rest, the perpendicular ones, one at top and bottom. All the brackets opened outward toward the bounding frame. He did notice one more asymmetrical aspect to the diagram, then. The perpendicular bracket at the bottom was not black, but gray. Gray, as in "grayed-out". He tapped it with his finger, and wasn't surprised when nothing happened.

The sense of familiarity intensified. Comprehension was *right* there, waiting behind the thinnest of veils. There were other symbols present in the diagram, but it was the arrangement of the brackets that screamed at him. He waited for it to break through, but for the moment, the veil held.

Behind each of the twelve smaller brackets was a corresponding series of short hatch marks, densely populated, but confined to the same span as the bracket itself. He touched one of these. The hatch mark in the center changed from black to red. He moved his finger down along the line of lines.

They followed the motion downward, the red line seeming to blink as each new line lit as it took the center spot. He got

it. He tapped the center line again, and it changed to black again.

It was a stylistic representation of a dial, with the center line being the active link when selected.

That was the first domino, and once he got it, the rest of them fell in a brief cascade of understanding.

It was the boat. More specifically, it was the doors on the boat. Not the access doors, though. It was the portal doors.

It had to be.

Then the ones at top and bottom were the kaleidoscope-glass portals, and the grayed-out one must be where the asshole demon hung his hat.

Then what was the long one to one side?

The last word of the question was still echoing around in his head when the answer came. It must be the window up above. He was about to question that, thinking how that didn't really make sense given that it was just a window, but he schooled himself, because sense really didn't enter into things much anymore. Boats weren't really boats, windows weren't really windows, and doors were...well, whatever.

He tapped the window icon, just to see what would happen.

Quite a lot happened, it turned out.

In an instant, additional icons appeared, lines blossomed out from the top bracket to all the others, things flashed red,

and his heart nearly stopped before accelerating past the red-line. He mashed his fingertip against the window icon again. To his relief, all new activity ceased, and the diagram was as before.

He set the open book on his lap, and looked away from it towards the surrounding simulacrum of the garage, while he waited for his heart rate to slow.

As he looked around, something happened within him. Taking in the squalor of where he'd ended up, while still processing the rush of fear at possibly making the wrong choice, something came together with a crushing finality. It was something below the crust of who he had become, like the fusing of tectonic plates. His terror at making the wrong choice had been tempered in the moment by something else. His knee-jerk assessment was that it must be fatalism, the inevitability of his own personal plunge. That assessment fell flat though. He was quite familiar with his fatalistic tendencies, and this wasn't that. Some portion of it was unfamiliar.

A snippet of a longer statement that Sophia had made came to him.

"But at every turn, every turn I've seen, anyway, you *act*."

He tapped the window icon again, and watched the resulting complications of the diagram spool out, feeling tense, but not panicked anymore. Any desire to interpret the shift in his

paradigm was lost to curiosity about what was happening on the screen, or page, or whatever.

The new additions were actually less complex than he'd first thought. Probably because he knew they were coming this time. Lines branched out from the kaleidoscope-glass door icon that wasn't grayed out to all the other icons, including the window icon. The one exception was the grayed-out one, which remained unchanged. He realized that the source icon was a representation of the door he'd come through to get where he was now.

He tapped that icon to see what would happen.

The branch line to the window disappeared, but everything else stayed the same.

Once again, understanding sat just on the other side of the veil. He could feel something pressing against it, a weight that implied knowledge or revelation if it broke through, but for now it was only a bulge in the fabric of what stood in between.

He tapped the anchor again. The branch line re-appeared.

He repeated the sequence with the same result.

He looked away, frustrated, looking up at the open trusses above him. Cob-webs and dust shrouded the pin-points of roofing nails that pierced the roof sheeting, tying the points together with arachnid intent.

He looked back down at the diagram, and the fabric finally let go.

The window was more than a window. It was a portal, too. But what was behind it, and what it would unleash when opened...well, that was it, wasn't it. He thought of the leviathan, and all the water around it. There were the red warning symbols, and then the angry fire, and how they were all connected through these lines on this improbable page in this improbable book.

The window opened onto his world.

It would appear that the means to decide the pay-load was there on the page under his finger, assuming his understanding of the lines was correct.

His gaze shifted to the grayed-out symbol in the diagram. It suddenly lost its irrelevance. Was it grayed-out because it was inaccessible from this page? Or was it grayed-out because access was controlled by his enemy?

Did the asshole demon have something like this?

Sophia's voice sounded in his head.

"It's building something. No, not building. Assembling something. It isn't making the parts, it's just putting them together. And I think it's been doing it for a very, very long time."

Then the voice of his adversary.

"You will see your end, Man. My enmity demanded it even before your predecessor closed that door against me. Now, it is a fire that will lay waste to your world, and any that your kind has strayed into. There can be no other outcome."

Pay-load. Delivery path.

He looked at the schematic on the opposite page. It suddenly looked more sinister, somehow. He couldn't know if his conclusions were correct, but they just felt that way.

As he stared at the schematic, he noticed something not previously apparent. Where the pages met, there was a small portion of ragged paper. As he focused in on it, it became clear that a page had been forcibly removed. He probed at it with his finger.

He flipped then through the pages, looking at the same junction at the spine.

He found several more signs of pages being removed. He stopped flipping pages, and just stared at another example.

He wondered what happened when you did that.

So he tore a page from the book, without premeditation, because that's how things were, now. He held it then before him, wondering what changes might occur to the drawings, but internally expecting none.

He was not disappointed.

The page contained the same schematic as before he had forcibly separated it from the book, which he tossed onto the not-his coffee table. It thumped down onto it with a puff of dust as he stared at the schematic on the page. No change. He slid his finger a bit across it, and it continued to act the same as it had before.

He turned the page over, and saw that the symbol diagram was the same. He tapped it to make sure, and it responded. It was obvious now that the pages were independent of the book, and that meant that he could take it with him.

He folded it in half, and creased it with his thumb and forefinger. He could see the crease lines in the paper, but the symbol diagram was un-marked, which made looking at it folded back on itself a little disconcerting, like an optical illusion. He smoothed out the page again, and saw that both schematic and diagram showed no sign of the manipulation, though the paper surrounding them retained the crease.

So, he folded the page in quarters, and slid it into his back pocket, behind his wallet. Because, as cool as it was, it begged more questions than it answered.

He sat down again to think, this time at one end of the couch.

So how much did this help him? Even if it was a key that controlled all the portals except that of his adversary, it

didn't come with instructions, or even a legend, did it? He could in theory now open hundreds of other worlds, and even connect or unleash them towards his own via the window if he wanted, but beyond the few he'd identified personally, he wouldn't know what he was accessing, and the power to do so was useless to combat the asshole demon, because it was all pointed in the wrong direction.

The thought of taking the page with him back suddenly made him nervous. His map didn't have a legend, but maybe his enemy did. He'd be handing the key to the destruction of everything he knew off to the very entity that had expressed that desire.

He expected panic to set in then, but it was decisively and emphatically absent. It would appear that this latest consolidation within himself had done away with his equivocation. Something else occurred to him on the heels of this revelation.

The focus of the asshole demon had been unerringly focused on its task, or the return to the same. Sophia had said that it was assembling something, and had been for a long time.

That level of focus would imply that the completion of its assembly and subsequent deployment would fulfill the creature's desires, rather than the acquisition of control of the boat.

Maybe the controls had the same repulsion to the asshole demon that the coins did. The more he thought about it, the more

convinced he became that he was correct in that assumption. The rest of the boat had seemed to be diametrically opposed to its desire to put together whatever it was trying to assemble, and indeed the demon itself.

Except for the portal that gave it access to the atrium.

No logical leaps filled that particular void in his reasoning, and he thought that nothing was imminent on that score. He couldn't know, and didn't have enough information to complete the leap.

But he did find the links that he felt he'd made mandated action. It was time to go back. There didn't seem to be anything else here to add, or find. It was time to take the new tool back and try to use it, if he could.

He rose from the couch, and walked unhurriedly to the side entrance of the garage, through which he'd entered this approximation of his old life. He then stood in front of the door for a moment, staring at the mold blooms etched into the dusty paint, wondering how this would all work.

It was only for a moment, though. Hesitation had also seemed to be subtracted from this new paradigm. He pulled the door open, and stepped through the blank gray partition that filled it. His last thought as he did was to wonder where Sophia was at that moment.

Ch. 28

Down in a hole

She scrabbled and dug at the loose sand-stone at the base of the canyon wall in which the battered sliver of metal and glass was entombed, her fingertips already bloody. The Nightmare never let her use tools. It would just take her to these awful places, show her where the part was, and then would either leave, or watch her struggle to extract it. It was always buried or hidden, and she'd lost track of how many it had made her retrieve, all with her bare hands. Quite often it would need to run interference, while she worked. Very few of these worlds were unoccupied, and even fewer had benign occupants. Like this time. It had led away all of the little furry things with the sharp teeth using that pulse thing it had, so she could work. It had names for most of the opposition that they met, but she had long since given up any interest in that, and indeed all the mechanics of its intent.

It always hurt, always cost something. Scars ached, and wounds would re-open, postponing healing in blurs of pain she never let herself fully feel.

But, she didn't care about that, either, because at the end there was always the black flower.

That's all she cared about. It was the thing that she lived for. The Watcher at the back of her mind could hint and suggest

all she wanted. She didn't have to listen to her. The Nightmare could demean and berate, and punish her with the little death when she wasn't fast or strong enough at the task, but at the end, it always gave it to her.

Then she could float away for a while, cocooned in euphoric nothingness.

She could feel the under-current of it even now. It was always there, though the longer it took her to get through the obstacles the Nightmare set before her, the more it seemed to drain away, leaving a vacuum behind, one that begged to be filled.

But, begging never worked. Only results worked. The Nightmare made sure it was so. So she did what it said, to get what she needed. The Watcher was the one who begged. But she didn't listen, because she didn't have to.

Her mind operated now on minimum settings. Part of that was the pain, part was the black flower, but mostly it was her preference. It robbed the Watcher of her power, and the Watcher was dangerous.

The rags of her clothes clung wetly to her rail-thin frame, because even though the twin suns were now passing beyond the horizon and the shadows in the shallow canyon were slowly filling it with twilight, it was still blazing hot. Sweat

dripped down her face as she worked to get the artifact free. Her stomach growled, but it wasn't food that she wanted.

She felt the sliver shift slightly as she tore another chunk of the soft rock away. The ghost of a grin creased her face for a moment. Soon, she thought.

But then there was someone else there. Not the Nightmare, another.

One thing she knew how to do now was move quickly, though the prompt was gone. Part of her knew that she'd lost that to the black flower. But, that part was just another setting, and she'd set that one to "hide", like so many others.

She whirled, taking in the sight of a man standing several yards away even as she burst into motion, intent on sprinting down the dry creek-bed away from the threat.

The Watcher screamed from far back in her mind, and the force of it froze her in place.

The Watcher never screamed. She just suggested things. She just hinted, prodded, and begged. She was usually easy to ignore, but not in *this* moment.

She stared at the man as his eyes widened in shock, as the scream echoed dimly through the wet blanket wrapped carefully around her consciousness. Still, she couldn't move.

The man stepped forward as he spoke, raising a hand toward her, horror and distress in his wide blue eyes.

"Sophia."

Ch. 29

I got you

There was that flash of light, and then he was...not back in the atrium.

He was somewhere else, someplace hot. He felt like he should be more surprised, but he wasn't.

He stood with his back to a canyon wall. More like an arroyo, really. The sides weren't that high, maybe ten feet. A dry creek-bed ran away to either side, turns further out eclipsing sight of where it might be going to or coming from. Oblique sunlight lit the top of the opposite wall, but shadows were gathering together within its confines. This he took in during the moment it took him to realize he wasn't alone.

A figure across from him dug determinedly at the dirt wall opposite, as though it was seeking to create its own path out. Long, matted blonde hair was plastered against thin shoulders clad in filthy cloth rags. The shredded remains of blue jeans hung in tatters from the tiny waist, and the feet were bare.

Barely a beat had passed, when whoever it was whirled with remarkable speed, and seemed on the verge of flight. Then he saw the face, and the glasses, as they hesitated.

Her face. Her glasses, one lens cracked in two places.

He was stunned. Not because it was her, because maybe he should have expected that by now. This whole thing now seemed

less and less random, an intentionality emerging that he certainly couldn't quantify, but his last thought had been of her before ending up here.

And here she was.

But she wasn't her. Not the Sophia he'd so shortly known.

This version was not just thin, but bordered on emaciation. Her hair was longer, and her face held no softness anymore, the angles of her skull visible right behind her dirty skin. Her breasts had dwindled to nearly nothing, and he could see blood at the tips of her skeletal fingers.

All of it was horrific, but the worst were the eyes.

She regarded him with a feral mistrust, and there was no recognition in her wild gaze, but even that wasn't the worst of it. Despite the quick movements, and her obvious sensitivity to her environment, there was a certain dullness in the way she regarded him, as though there was no depth there.

He'd seen that look before, pretty much every day, in the mirror.

She was an addict.

It hit him in his core, and the hit was like nothing he'd ever experienced. There was no lag between the shock of realization, and utter desolation that flooded him. He stepped forward, raising his hand, and speaking her name aloud. He couldn't help it.

"No."

Her voice was hoarse, and low, barely above a whisper, but it was emphatic.

He stopped. He lowered his hand.

She continued to stare at him, and behind the dullness, there seemed to be things going on, but that could also be a trick of the low light, or just another in a long line of misinterpretations on his part. She spoke again.

"Go. Go now."

"Sophia--."

"No. Go. It will come back. It doesn't need you."

"You know me?"

There was a pause while transactions happened on the other side of what he could see in her eyes. Then,

"She remembers. Not me. Go."

He fought the drowning tide of grief, internally bracing himself against it as it poured over his new resolve, threatening to wash it away. A lifetime of capitulation to weakness in adversity loomed over him. But instead of letting go, he plunged his mental hands into the flow, and grasped a thread he found there. He pulled it out, and a ghost of a plan came with it. He slid his boot forward, and then back, drawing a line in the gravel of the creek-bed. Then he started toward her, walking slowly.

"I won't. I can't. I'm not done."

Her brows furrowed and she twitched, as if making ready to bolt, but she didn't.

"Go."

"No."

Her body was trembling, all the potential motion in her barely held by something he couldn't see. Step by step, he closed the gap between them. Her agitation grew with his proximity, and he could see that the break would happen before he closed the distance, so he stopped. He hoped he was close enough, because somehow he knew what would happen next.

Her next words were also ghosts of articulation, and dullness in her eyes solidified, as though that which was behind was finally fully occluded.

"It's here."

He waited for fear to bloom as the oily, alien tones drifted toward him from down the arroyo.

"You are persistent, Man."

But there was no fear, as he turned to face the asshole demon as it approached through the deepening shadows, its alien aspect showing no emotion as it walked silently across the loose gravel of the stream-bed.

He turned to face it, even as he put both hands behind his back, retrieving the item he'd taken from his car trunk from his

back pocket. He didn't hesitate, just popped off the cap with one hand, and inverted it, then pressed it against the tip the cap had covered.

"Fuck you."

"Unlikely."

He shrugged, and decisively scratched the inverted cap against the tip, angling the longer portion away from himself as it burst into flame. Orange light filled the arroyo as he moved, bringing the burning road flare around with every ounce of juice he could put into it, once again slinging it side-arm at his enemy. Even as he released the throw, he was moving toward Sophia, closing the distance in less than two seconds.

His throw was true once again, and the flare made it farther than the pistol had previously. The asshole demon was able to partially deflect it, but a lucky iteration of rotation brought the chemical burn close to the very same eye that he'd damaged with the pen. It flinched away from the heat as the flare bounced aside.

He grabbed Sophia around the waist, and lifted her bodily up over his shoulder. It was much easier than he had anticipated, because she weighed so little. He had her and had reversed direction before two more seconds passed, expecting a violent end to this attempt at any moment. He knew how fast his enemy was. Sophia struggled, but he was all in, and just clamped

down harder as he moved. Her croaking protestations were lost to his determination.

He crossed the creek-bed in a sprint as the pulse of orange light dimmed, and changed angle, as the flare followed its deflected trajectory. It landed at the junction of the arroyo wall and the gravel floor farther along, where it lodged, spewing flame and smoke, but it was no longer relevant. The marble was in motion again.

He saw the mark his boot had left in the gravel in the remaining illumination of the flare, and centered his trajectory on it. If he was wrong about how this worked, this was quite likely the end. He leapt toward the palpable solidity of the arroyo wall above the boot-mark.

Just before he carried them both through the flash of light signifying their passage through the portal, he felt something hard and inflexible impact his side, striking just to the side of Sophia's still wriggling frame draped across his back. He felt ribs break, and he could feel the compaction of internal organs as the force of the blow echoed into his chest cavity. Pain escalated as they tumbled forward into a different place, as he pitched forward, and she tumbled away as he fell.

They came to rest, strewn apart, and the pain threatened to steal consciousness away. He steeled himself against it, instead forcing his eyelids open, letting the pain spark his awareness.

As agony raged within him, he got a glimpse of where they'd ended up.

If he could have managed a laugh, he would have.

They were in the marina office.

Ch. 30

Breath and a scream

But once again, it was immediately apparent to him that it wasn't really. They had sprawled in through the front double-glass doors, though they remained closed, and he'd ended his painful slide looking back at them, as well as the huge windows that ringed the front of the office.

They were all the same neutral gray as his garage, and as pain again threatened to overwhelm his consciousness, the same dislocation actually helped center him this time. He looked away from the gray blankness, instead casting about with the limited movement available to him, trying to locate Sophia. Whispers from behind drew his attention, and he craned his neck backward from where he lay on the carpeted floor.

She had landed against the front face of the desk where she'd been when he'd first entered the marina office, and had drawn herself into a sitting position in the scant seconds after their arrival. She was looking wildly around, and panic ruled her gaunt face. Her mouth moved repetitively, and it took him a second to process what she was saying.

"No. No. No. No."

He thought to get up then, to address her obvious distress, and to make things ok.

But he found movement on that scale was not available to him. He felt an excruciating pressure within himself, and any intentional movement on his part only increased it. There was little room in his lungs for the air required to speak, but he found it was the only way he could act, so he sacrificed some of it.

"Sophia."

"No. No."

"*Sophia!*"

This last caused him to cough, and he could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth, and alarm bells began to ring in earnest as his pulse accelerated in alarm. But his protestation seemed to break some cycle in her.

"No, n--."

Then silence. He couldn't maintain the necessary muscular force required to maintain sight of her, and his chin lolled forward as pain rolled over him like a rogue wave, and her panicked face passed out of view. A few more seconds of silence passed, and then,

"Get out of the way."

There it was. He understood, and responded.

"No."

Not like he could anyway, even if he wanted to, but she evidently didn't know that.

More seconds passed, and he could hear her stirring, her movements vibrating the mod building floor, even as the pain and pressure mounted within him.

From behind him once again, she spoke.

"You left her. So, I can leave you. She has no power, and I can see the way back. You're done."

There was a dichotomy in her tone, though. It was a statement of fact, and also a plea. The tension hung in the air after the words evaporated, and he waited while each beat spooled out with no imminent movement to follow. It was if she was waiting for a reply. Realizing this, he struggled to articulate something, anything that would give the necessary response. But he could feel the darkness encroaching, and he knew that time was short. He opened his mouth, but she spoke first.

"You are done. I have to go back. I need the flower."

She was upright, now, and she stepped over him as she headed for the double doors. He had less than a second to decide what to do, as pain threatened to steal consciousness from him yet again. In the end, it was a reflex.

He snaked out a hand and grabbed her ankle, yanking backwards as he solidified his grip, even as the effort cost him explosive amounts of pain.

She pitched forward, but he could see that she was able to put her arms out in time to soften her impact with the carpeted floor of the office. She crashed down and came to rest. He could feel an imminent reaction brewing in the trembling of the ankle he held, and he knew that he had to voice some negation, some antidote to the poison keeping her from herself.

"Don't be me. Sophia. Don't be me."

The statement cost him nearly all of his reserves, and it was voiced in a hoarse whisper, but the tension against his grip lessened. He held on with the little he had left, thinking that his hold was not the thing keeping her, and he was proven right a second later.

She reversed on him like a snake, clamping his head to the floor as she pivoted backward, bringing her face down as she did so next to his. He briefly wondered if this was it, because her now-angular features were drawn into a rictus of hate. But the words that followed were not ending words. They were an argument.

"She said you would say that. So what? I'm *not* you. So what?"

She was breathing heavily, and each breath was a puff against the side of his face, carrying the scent of something cloying and dark with it.

He had nothing left. Darkness ate away at his peripheral vision. He managed a few more words, less than whispers.

"Yes you are. You're not doing what you want. You're doing what *it* wants. You *know* what I mean. But you know the way out. You choose."

She went berserk then, leaping to her feet and disappearing behind him. He heard muffled thuds and shattering glass, and she screamed aloud, the words equal parts hate and anguish.

"You did this to me! *You!* I hope you *die*, you *bastard!*"

And then his lights went out.

Ch. 31

Resurrection

Her rampage brought her behind the counter, where she swept aside binders, spare copies of *Latitude 38*, even the small register, sending them crashing to the floor. Her thoughts and her rage were black, like the flower she needed so badly right now. The only thing holding her here was the instinctive knowledge that she would have to pay a steep toll before the Nightmare would let her have it. It did not like impediments, and this crazy prick had gotten the better of it one more time.

No, there would be lots of pain. No way around it. There would be more of the little death, for sure. The conflict between need and self-preservation brought her to a halt. She stood behind the counter, breathing heavily. She looked down at the floor in order to both concentrate, and save herself from looking around at this old place where the Watcher had spent so much time.

She was not used to thinking much, so it was hard for her to do so now. She was used to doing what the Nightmare told her to do.

A memory came then, something that had happened not long after the man had gone. The Watcher had been closer then, and more insistent, still occasionally taking over and pushing her to the back.

She had seen a thought that the Watcher had had. It had been a picture of herself, and the caption had been, *This must be what it is to be an animal, all instinct and reaction, without thought. Given the situation, maybe it's for the best.*

That was that last time the Watcher had come forward.

She shook off the memory, as the flower called to her.

She needed to go back, but how to avoid the payment in pain? How could she get straight to the flower?

Then she knew how.

The man would pay the toll for her.

She could feel the Watcher react, but she ignored her.

Yes, this would work.

She felt relief at having come up with a solution, but there was something else she felt, too. She didn't recognize it, but didn't particularly like the sensation. But, not feeling things was one of the things she was good at, now.

Yet this thing nagged in a way she was not used to. It seemed to grow, consuming her relief as it did so. It was alarming, to feel something unfamiliar expanding within her, not knowing what it would lead to. She was beginning to feel the first hint of panic, when a sound intruded.

It was behind her. She turned, and found herself looking into the bathroom, through the open door. It was dark in the low

light in the office. She could make out the shadowy form of the toilet, and the waste-can.

The sound came again, a drip of water.

She was suddenly very, very thirsty. She moved through the doorway, and flipped on the light switch. The fluorescent above the sink came on as she leaned her face down to the faucet, and pulled the cold water tap. The flow started immediately, and was ice-cold. She drank greedily until she'd sated the need, feeling the water gurgle in her belly. She closed the tap and stood, still feeling an impending panic, even though she had no idea what the source was.

She found herself facing the mirror above the sink. She stared at her reflection, at first certain that it was someone else.

Her blonde hair was long and matted, filthy and greasy. Her eyes were sunken behind her damaged glasses, and her face was so...thin. She had only the Watcher's memory of what she looked like, and this was not that face. There were bruises and scars almost everywhere, and her skin had a yellow cast to it. She regarded herself with a fearful anticipation, the strange feeling within her not far from critical mass.

Then the features in the mirror blurred, and expanded slightly.

She was now seeing herself as she had been.

She grasped the leading edge of the sink with both hands as fear joined with the expanding unknown within herself, knuckles instantly white with the force of her grip.

"No."

Then the girl in the mirror spoke.

"I'm sorry for what has happened to you. I wish it hadn't, or that I could have made it easier. But you are the strong one, not me."

"No."

She cast back into herself, searching for the Watcher. But she was gone.

Now she was staring at her in the mirror.

"NO!"

She screamed the word, and drew back her hand, forming a fist in an instant. She let the blow fly, and the mirror shattered, several pieces falling from the frame into the sink.

Now the Watcher stared back at her from multiple shards, and her smile was sad.

"You got us through this. I know it cost you. I will always be grateful.

I can give you what you need. You don't have to go back."

She stared at the reflections of her other self, as the feeling within her crested and broke over her, and the image of the Watcher changed, becoming multiple images of the black

flower. She reached up, and placed her fingertips on one of them, her touch reverent.

As she faded away, she heard the Watcher one more time.

"I'm sorry. It was the only way. Thank you."

Then she was gone into the black.

Sophia drew in a hitching breath as the other departed, staring at the fractured reflection of what she had become in her time away. Tears welled in her eyes, and then coursed down her face. A sob wracked her emaciated frame, but she forced it down before it could gain traction.

She was herself again for the first time in a long time, but she had inherited all the pain and need the other had borne for her along the way, so she was shaky, weak, and sick to her stomach. Just because she'd let the other go, didn't mean she wasn't still hooked.

She thought of him, and was about to leave the restroom to check on him, when she saw the state of the rest of her in the damaged mirror.

He had made her wait so long. He could wait a few minutes.

She left the bathroom, and entered the other office, her office. There was a desk, and several filing cabinets, but she made for the armoire in the corner next to the only window, the view of the gas pumps replaced by the gray. She opened it, and

then shrugged out of the rags hanging on her. She didn't have time to ponder the gray.

She was beginning to feel more nauseous as her shakes began to slowly intensify. Every article of clothing was too big, and she wondered why she'd even bothered after putting on a bra. Navigating the closures and buttons was very difficult, as her fingers wouldn't stop shaking. She wondered whether she was going to throw up as she finished dressing herself. It took her almost thirty seconds to slip her feet into some flats retrieved from the bottom shelf of the armoire, her coordination failing faster by the minute.

Then she did throw up, though there wasn't anything in her other than water. It splashed noisily out onto the carpet, until there was nothing left. Then the heaves quieted after a minute or so, and she made her way out into the main room, passing by her desk, and wiping at her mouth with a trembling sleeve.

He lay facing the door, unmoving.

She went around him, turning and kneeling, and caught sight of his face.

His complexion was ashen, and there was blood on his lips, as well as a spray pattern of it on the carpet in front of his face.

Her heart stuttered, and the changing of her clothes suddenly seemed an unnecessary delay. Still, her time in

purgatory had written inevitable changes within her. Instead of panicking, she went to the double doors, opening one of them onto the gray void beyond it with trembling hands, and spiking it open with a door-stop resting under an adjacent chair.

She went back to his fallen form. He didn't appear to be breathing, but she knew there was only one way to go, now. She grabbed him by both wrists, and dragged him bodily to the doorway. It took everything she could summon to hold on, and to move him. He made no sound, or movement.

She hesitated only for a moment, and then dragged him through, even as her shakes increased. She held a picture of the atrium firmly in her mind as she did.

There was a flash of light, and they were there, in front of the portal door. She could smell the dust, and stale air. Morning light poured in from the window above.

She felt the absence of the need first. The vacuum left behind by the all-encompassing desire was like a glacial lake of clarity, cold, clear, and deep. She let go of his wrists as the sensation of its cessation threatened to consume her. She was only peripherally aware of him sitting bolt upright, and then leaping to his feet.

Then she got the prompt for the first time in a long time, and once again nearly lost it in the afterglow of the atrium's transformation.

But only nearly.

She turned instantly, now-taut muscles reacting far faster than she would've ever been able to do before she'd gone away, and she tackled him, carrying them back through the portal as air pressure increased where they'd just been.

There was the flash of light again, and then they were somewhere else one more time.

Ch. 32

A place where we used to live

He opened his eyes, and he was not in the marina office anymore. He was lying on a hard, cold surface. He registered the missing internal fires at the same time as the smell of dusty concrete, and stale air. Bright light streamed from above, and it all came back to him in a convulsive injection of remembrance. He sat up, galvanized by the input.

She stood next to him, looking away toward the center of the atrium. She wore different clothes. He briefly wondered how much time had passed as he continued the upward motion, surging to his feet. There were too many questions, and he couldn't prioritize them fast enough.

But then she moved. The speed of it was remarkable, and all the unasked questions were sent spinning away. She was facing him in less than a second, and he had only a glimpse of her face as she crashed into him, carrying them both backward.

There was the flash of light again, and her momentum carried them downward as one boot-heel caught the other toe, and he tripped.

She came down on top of him, but he barely felt the impact of her. He again wondered at her diminution as she raised her head to look around, her slight form temporarily inert atop him.

They were somewhere dim, but the smell was very familiar. The smell of smoke, ash, dust, and winter filled the space. Her voice was hoarse as she spoke.

"You have got to be kidding me."

He craned his neck backward to see what she was seeing.

He coughed out a short bark of laughter, because there was no other reaction in him.

The fire burned on the tray in the corner, and the dust that had been kicked up by their impact on the ancient carpet still swirled around them in the flickering light.

She rolled off of him, and got to her feet in what seemed a single motion. Her movements were lithe, and free of hesitation. He got up too, though with a lot more effort, and several joints clicked and popped in complaint.

She moved into the room away from him, ending up at the place near the fire that had been her place. She turned then to face him, her face neutral and her eyes masked by her glasses. He could see that the broken lens was no longer so. The realization was barely a blip as they regarded each other. The seconds pooled and accumulated, as did the intervening silence.

He could see even as shadows shifted across her face that she was not as gaunt as she had been. She was still thin, but not emaciated. Her restoration had taken her at least a little way back toward who she had been before.

Well, at least physically. Who knew where her head was. Nothing for it, though, it was time.

"Forgive me."

He really didn't have anything else, but he was done with inaction, and it needed to be said, however she took it. He knew it felt empty, but it was the beginning of whatever would come.

She was silent for almost another minute.

Then she shrugged, turning toward the fire. She seated herself, putting her hands out toward the flames. Another minute passed. She spoke in that raspy voice.

"You just going to stand there? Sit down, already."

He shuffled forward and sat down, crossing his legs as the familiarity of it all butted up against the gulf between them. The cold pressed in around them, but it didn't seem as intense as it had been in that real place where they'd done this before. The sound of the wind was missing, and there was only the crackle of the fire.

He knew that he would need to speak. To ask inane questions, or make inept statements that might never lead them where they needed to go. But again, he had nothing else. If they were going to get to the other side, if they *could* get to the other side, there was only one place to start.

"How long?"

She took more time before she answered, but she did finally answer. There was bitterness, but less than he expected.

"What does it matter? We're on the other side of that."

"It does matter."

"No, it doesn't. I'm not handing you fuel for the self-pity machine."

Her voice was hard, but not cruel. He took a breath, as he absorbed that assertion, knowing at once that he had earned it, as well as knowing he had passed beyond it. It was obvious to him that they were both different, now.

She asked the next question.

"Why?"

He didn't need to spend any time crafting an answer. It was right there.

"I think you know why. I got it all back. That's not an excuse, it's just what happened.

But I think AA has it right. You have to hit bottom, and I finally did."

She looked at him, as though she could verify his statement by evaluating his face in the moment. What she saw didn't seem to give her anything, so she looked back at the shifting flames, until she asked the next one.

"So, what changed?"

"I left you."

"That's it?"

"Not little it, question mark. Big it, period."

She did the same visual side-check, but still didn't bite, turning away again.

"I don't buy it."

"Not asking you to."

That got her attention, and now he could see some vitriol in her eyes as she regarded him a third time. She almost spat the next question.

"Then what the *hell* are you doing here?"

He smiled sadly at her, because knowing where the anger came from and understanding it didn't make it any easier. But, resolve was bed-rock now, not a reed in the wind.

"Whatever you want, except leave you alone. You are my friend."

She stared at him, and he could see the struggle in her. He had no idea of the specifics of her time away, but the experience had written itself out onto her in a tell-tale but unreadable script, and the path had led her into the land of the beast. He knew better than anyone what remained, even after the atrium's redemption. It didn't give back everything the beast had taken from you, and it couldn't banish it. It only closed the door. The doorknob was still there.

"Everybody leaves."

Her statement contained all the raw potential for loss, as well as the scars of the losses already felt. There were no tears in her eyes behind her glasses yet, but she looked stricken, and he could hear all of her desire for escape from it. She wasn't looking directly at him now. He only had one response, for better or worse.

"I came back."

Her agitation intensified, and now a tear rolled down her cheek. She seemed to vibrate with distress. Her voice was tiny, even in the small space they occupied.

"Everybody leaves."

He reached out, and once again enfolded one of her hands in both of his, patting the top of it gently. Her anguish was his in that moment, and he felt the depth of it.

"No, Sophia. We're not done."

Her gaze centered on him again, and he could see the black seas in it as the storms of her desolation threatened to ship her into the depths. The transaction stretched out, and there wasn't anything left to say. He knew. She'd drown and withdraw, or she'd hear him. Undetermined amounts of time passed, until it broke.

More tears fell then, but they were just residual squalls as the storm withdrew. She did not look away until her eyes were clear.

She leaned toward him, lying down onto the dirty floor, putting her head in his lap as she curled around the make-shift fire in this store-front replica of the place they had spent so little and yet so much time in.

He put a hand on her shoulder, as they both stared at the fire which burned in perpetuity, consuming no fuel. Time passed.

Then she reached out with her right hand, and placed in on his right knee in front of her face, familiarity and comfort evident in her small sigh. Even her voice sounded better.

"Now what?"

It was a simple question, and the gulf between them was gone.

"Whatever you want."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, it's not. We have choices. This place proves it. I wish I'd figured it out before now."

She shifted to on her back, straightening as she removed her hand, but now gazing open-faced up at him, the back of her head resting comfortably on his right thigh. He could see the questions stacked up in her expression. He was content for her to put them out as she saw fit. He just hoped he had an answer for them all.

"Like what?"

He gestured with a thumb over his shoulder.

"We could go back. Even if it can't or won't take us all the way back to where we came from, I'm pretty sure it'll put us right in front of a hatchway door. We just have to both agree. It's a matter of a couple seconds to get through it, and close it. Then we're done."

She was silent for a second, and then,

"There was a trap. That's why we're here. What if the Nightmare covers all the exits?"

He shook his head.

"That thing only ever had one going at a time. That's how you steered us, right? So even if it can predict that we would try for it, we still have a one-in-twelve chance. Plus, I think this place would choose the safe one for us."

He paused for a second, then,

"That's what you call it? The Nightmare?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"What do you call it?"

He thought for a moment, not sure he was particularly proud of his nomenclature.

"Is it important?"

"You thought so. C'mon. What's your name for it?"

He hesitated, but then shrugged.

"Asshole demon."

"Seriously?"

"Yours is so much better?"

She smiled for the first time, this time. She didn't say anything, just looked at him expectantly. He sighed.

"Ok, you're right."

He stared down at her upturned face, and the space between what he wanted for them, and what he had started to think needed to happen widened.

She could see it, evidently, because her smile evaporated, and she sighed heavily, her eyes closing temporarily. She opened them again a few seconds later as she spoke again.

"So you want to go back?"

"I never said that."

"Then why suggest it?"

He took a few moments to compose his response, because he would be referencing the time they'd spent apart. He remembered how reticent she'd been to discuss her time with it when they were together the first time.

"You would know better than I how close it is to finishing the thing it's putting together, as well as what it intends to do with it."

No veil fell this time. She didn't shut down, or withdraw. She just nodded, and waited for him to go on. It threw him off a little, but he caught the thread again.

"Time is different wherever we seem to go. Maybe we could get out, and finish our lives, and maybe we never feel the hammer drop.

But let's face it. There *is* a hammer, right?

But at some time, at some point, somebody got the drop on it, and trapped it. And then, we let it go. No, *I* let it go."

Something occurred to him, and his heart leapt.

"Holy *shit!* Is it *trapped* again, now?"

Her smile was low-wattage, and sad. She shook her head in answer.

"No? Why not? Doesn't it need you to open the door for it? I basically stole you out the window."

She shook her head again.

"It leaves the door open. It has this screen thingy that hides it, but it stays open."

She drew in a breath, and her eyes clouded before she continued.

"I tried one time near the beginning to grab the penny right after I stepped through, but you know how fast it is."

Then, she was in the past, and her eyes were far away. She was re-living it, and it was bad, he could tell. But she continued, not shying from it.

"I paid big-time for that one. It took a while for the bones to heal, so it stayed pissed because we weren't getting anything done. It was not a fun convalescence."

She blew out her breath, and took another before delivering the denouement.

"Then, it gave me the flower, and that, as they say, was that."

His hope fell, but he gave it no consideration, because he knew what lay within the final statement. The Nightmare had loosed the beast. Not that he needed any more evidence of the collusion.

Now he could fully realize the price he'd made her pay. It was awful.

But, in the end, he'd carry it. He'd been tempered, and wouldn't break under the weight. He couldn't avoid the sadness, however.

She could see it on his face. She reached over her left shoulder, and patted his knee a few times, that same small smile on her face.

"C'mon. Like I said, we're beyond that. I was gone most of the time anyway. You were talking about going back." Her tone was reassuring, but her eyes were haunted as she said the words.

He looked away for a second, running a hand along the stubble nearing beard status on his cheek as he shoved it aside in his head, then he turned back.

"Ok, yeah. Well, besides the fact that I have no idea whether I will be the sober or drunk version of Captain Morgan if we go back, I was the one who cut it loose. If I don't even try to put it back in the box, and we go back, we'll have to live with it hanging over our heads until we die or it flips the Armageddon switch. As well as look everyone else in the face, and know they are in the same boat. Pardon the metaphor."

"How are we supposed to do that? It's we now, Jeff. You know that right?"

He debated arguing, but there was nothing. He looked up, as though answers may be floating above his head, but again nothing.

"I really don't know, but who else is there? If I...we...don't try, then this is me right before the hotel room all over again."

She considered that. He could tell that the thought of it was overwhelming.

"Is there a third choice?"

He sucked in breath between his teeth.

"Sure. Find another place to go. Or you go back and let me try this on my own--."

"Not going to happen." She was fierce, now.

"And, if you're thinking of pushing me out and shutting the door, just remember that I'm younger, faster, probably stronger, and I'd know ahead of time. Better put that one on the 'do not attempt' pile."

He looked down at her face, trying to gauge whether more argument would be worth a try. It didn't take long to see that it wouldn't. He wasn't sure what she meant about the knowing ahead of time, but now didn't seem like the time to get clarification.

"Noted. Moving on.

I found something that tells me there are hundreds of other places we could go. I think this place could put us through any door in the atrium. The problem is that we have no way to preview our choice from here. We could step straight into deep space, or the fifth ring of hell. We wouldn't know until we stepped through."

She looked confused.

He leaned forward a bit, and she accommodated the movement by sitting up again. He retrieved the folded page from his rear pocket. He unfolded the sheet, handing it to her with the symbol diagram face up. She looked down at it.

"What am I looking at?"

"A control pad for the atrium."

She looked from it to him, her frown intensifying.

"What?"

He scooted around until they were side by side, and then reached down, and tapped the window icon.

As all the changes wrote themselves out on the page, he heard her sharp intake of breath.

"Jeez."

"I know, right? This is the salvation of libraries everywhere."

She stared down at the diagram, and then flipped the page over in her wonder.

She stiffened as she saw the diagram on the other side.

"Oh no."

He turned from the page to her, seeing the alarm on her face.

"What?"

She didn't respond, just put a tentative fingertip onto the diagram. He watched as the diagram moved within its confines as the paper shifted in her hands. She got it much faster than he had. Then, she manipulated it with practiced fingers, exploring it to its boundaries in a just a few swipes.

"What is it?"

She looked away from it, meeting his eyes with an expression of panic.

"This is the thing it's putting together."

His shock was short-lived. It transitioned to inevitability in less than a second. He looked back at the diagram under her fingertip. He snorted a small chuckle, feeling a ghost of the fatalism that had governed the bulk of his life. He couldn't help but articulate it.

"Of course it is. It's the only other relevant thing. It's like someone is writing this shit somewhere. This is story math."

She'd returned her focus to the diagram, and didn't respond directly to his statement. Instead, she said,

"But the Nightmare doesn't have this part here."

She tapped a segment of the diagram.

They both twitched as the segment disappeared, subtracting itself from the diagram and leaving a blank space defined by the outer boundary of the missing element.

He received a gift, then. There was no concentration or evaluation on his part, resulting in the attainment of a conclusion. It just arrived, and he knew it was part of the intention of the place in which they now found themselves.

"Can you pick out the things that it's still missing?"

She hesitated for a few seconds, but then nodded. She manipulated the image quickly, flipping to sections and tapping elements within, subtracting them from the diagram.

Then she was done, and they both looked down at the portion they could see. There weren't very many empty spaces.

"That last one was the one I was trying to get when you showed up." She said, as she looked back at him.

He was lost in the implications, and didn't immediately answer her. There was something here, but he had no idea what it was. He moved bits around in his mind, but nothing fell together. Maybe more information would help.

"Is this like a top view, or what?"

"Yes. This makes it look like it might be huge, but it's not. It's maybe the size of a really big suitcase."

"You know it pretty well, then?"

She snorted and looked away.

"Uh, yeah. It was big on making me do all the work. I got the sense that though it could handle the parts, and could do the assembly itself, actually touching the parts for it was...well...painful? Like touching the parts caused it serious discomfort.

So it made me do the carry and the assembly when we brought a part back. And it was always hard, you know? Always. It wasn't like LEGOs, just click them together. Everything it had me find was beat to shit, and aligning it was a complete *bitch*."

She seemed to depart from the verbal part of her narrative then. She stopped talking, but emotions continued to play out

across her face as she continued along the now silent through-line of what she was feeling, and he could see on her face that it was a cascade that was larger than any individual part. He watched her expression begin to crumple into anguish, and he leaned toward her, putting a hand to her cheek. He spoke her name out loud, in an attempt to short-circuit the process happening within her.

She looked back up at him in response, as if casting out a last flailing effort to reach safety. Their eyes met again.

Something happened within her, right there in that moment. And it disturbed him, because on the opposite side of it, she was one thing. On this side, she was another.

It was right there for him to see. Not to understand, and that was alarming in itself, but the change itself fell out of visible wavelengths as she caught full hold of herself. It submerged, disallowing measurement or quantification.

She grasped his wrist, and gently pulled his hand away from her face.

"I'm ok. I promise."

She held it for a moment longer than seemed necessary, glancing down at it before letting go. Her eyes returned to his, and she smiled at him. Then, she asked the question he dreaded, one more time.

"Now what?"

Ch. 33

Private investigations

Instead of trying to answer a question that he couldn't answer yet, he stuck with investigation.

"You said that you know the device pretty well."

She nodded.

He thought for a moment. As if on cue, something arrived as if it were drawn in by the vacuum created by his inability to make any connections. It was another gift.

He pointed at the diagram.

"Add in all the parts missing again."

She did, and as she tapped in the final piece, the schematic flashed, and something new appeared. They both twitched in response.

There was now a small, red slice visible in the diagram, sandwiched in between two discrete elements near the edge of the screen. He pointed at it, after recovering from his surprise.

"You know exactly where that is?"

She gave him a look for an answer.

"Ok, obviously you do. About how large is that space, then?"

She thought for a minute, and then held her fingers apart a certain distance, and then narrowed the gap after a few seconds.

"That high, that wide. About, but I'm decent with spatial relationships."

"Did it ever say anything about the piece that goes there?"

"There isn't one."

"What?"

"The pieces missing still are the ones I already tapped out and back in. There aren't any more, at least, none that it told me about."

He pondered that, but quickly let it go, moving on to other things. He indicated the diagram of the device.

"Does it do anything now, or is it wait for the big reveal?"

"Yes. The Nightmare cycles it each time we add a new part. It seems to think that it's rubbing my face in it. Like, here's the author of your demise! Isn't it so clever? Aren't you so afraid?"

Her bitterness was on top, but he could sense the lake of fear that it floated on. He wished he had another road flare, just on the off chance he'd get to shove a lit one up its ass.

"Is it complicated to do that? Do you know how?"

The question brought her back to the now. She nodded.

"Yes. There's a sequence, but it's not complex, or anything."

"Do you know what it's supposed to do? Did it tell you how this thing works when it does what it...does?"

She looked away, back at the fire, but did answer after a small pause.

"Yes. It...spent a lot of time describing what will happen. But, I was..."

She trailed off, and put a hand to her forehead.

He knew. Best just to name it.

"High."

She looked back at him with eyes filled with equal parts shame and anger at being called out. He held up his hands.

"Look, I know that's on me, too. But if we can't even name it, then we have no business even discussing this. If you and I are on different pages, then we should just go back. Now."

It took a couple seconds, but then her defensiveness evaporated, and she was with him once again. She nodded.

"Yes. Ok."

"What do you remember about what it told you?"

"Bits and pieces."

"Can you stitch any of them together?"

"No, but she already did. It didn't mean anything to her, but I get it."

He frowned.

"She?"

She leaned against him suddenly, and he accepted her weight, as negligible as it was. She slipped her left hand into his right, and intertwined her fingers in his. There was a grasping nature to the movement, as if she needed to bolster herself from the outside.

He waited as whatever this was made its way to the place where she could articulate it. She finally did, as her head began to rock forward to back slightly.

"I couldn't handle it, being there again, having to face the Nightmare again. I think it knew what choice you'd make, so it didn't waste any time.

The first place we went was so *bad*..."

She stopped, starting to shake a little. He squeezed her hand gently.

"Even *it* had a hard time keeping the shape-shifters off of me while I was working. It was dark, I could barely see what I was doing. I almost got bit twice, and one of them got a claw past it at some point. The cut got infected, and took weeks to heal all the way.

I couldn't take it. So, I...stepped back."

She stopped again, the shakes intensifying a little. He debated just waiting, but decided to prompt anyway.

"Stepped back?"

"Yeah. It's something I've been...um...able to do, since my parents died. I think I talked a little bit about this?"

He nodded, remembering. She continued, elaborating on what they'd discussed before.

"I can...separate most of me from what's leftover in my head. The parts that feel pain, feel fear, the parts that have to think and feel anything important, I take all that when I step back.

What's left is a shell that can still function, but doesn't process pain or fear in any real way. I'm probably not explaining it very well, am I?"

"You do it, or is it like a breaker?"

"No, I do it. Or maybe I'm just weak, and don't wait for it to trip on its own. I don't know.

I was always in control, before this last time. She couldn't stop me from stepping forward.

I think I was back too long. When she took the flower, well...it was all over after that. She wouldn't let me back. All I could do was watch, and try to influence her. Worked a little at first, but less and less, and then not at all."

She stopped, and this time he let the silence extend itself until she was ready again.

"Then, you showed up. Again."

"How'd you get back?"

She turned to face him, and gripped his hand tighter.

"I think it was seeing you, but I get the sense that even that wouldn't have been enough. I think being brought back to a place where I grew up...well, a version of it, anyway, helped. I think also that she'd gotten used to the routine, if you can call it that, and to be snatched out of it...I don't know. I got stronger, and she didn't, I guess.

She needed to escape, so I helped her."

"Wow."

She released his hand, then ran one hand through her filthy hair, while staring down at the other, her thin fingers extended.

"I need a shower. And a Big Mac. I've never been this thin. It's like being in someone else's body."

He smiled, but he needed to know something before they went any further.

"I really need to know if you forgive me."

She just looked at him for a long, long time. He waited.

She nodded. Just once, and then looked away.

It would have to be enough. It was a minute or two before she spoke again.

"I know I keep asking this, but so far you haven't said. What now?"

He checked the idea account, but he was still currently overdrawn.

"I don't know yet. I'm open to ideas. You said something about her knowing something about the weapon?"

"Yes, right. She didn't do much like, analysis, or anything. But she heard everything, saw everything. There was enough in her for a limited understanding, and I can see what she understood. It's muffled, like everything with the flower was.

It opens a big hole. I can't tell scale because she couldn't, but I think it's massive. But it not like a hole that things fall into. It's like the other side of it, where it would be more like things would fall out of it, instead. "

Her sigh was a sigh of frustration.

"That's not really right, though. They wouldn't *fall* out. I think she meant that there are things on the other side that want out. Not good things, either.

This is tough, you know? It's like trying to interpret a series of illustrations drawn by a toddler. I don't know how much of this is me assigning things, but you remember that sound back when we were both there? The one you felt more than heard?"

He shuddered, nodding.

"Yes. That was some terrifyingly primal shit."

She nodded, and held up one finger, pointing up in the air.

"Whatever *that* is? I think *that's* on the other side of the hole, too. I got the sense from her that the reason it was assembling the machine in that place was that it was so close by. So close you can hear it."

He felt a deeper chill that had nothing to do with the ambient temperature in the fake hotel room.

"That's not good."

His frown deepened, as he made a leap.

"Where does the hole open? Not right there, right? That's his house."

"No. But that part of it, that picture, is the hardest to nail down. It's like Escher, where perspective is everything, but bent back on itself. It's what you call the atrium, and the hole fits, but it doesn't, because it's too big. Like the picture can't contain it. Like nothing can.

That's the best I can do. Sorry."

"No, no. It's fine. I sort of figured that, though I don't think it's the atrium. I think it's the window up above."

She shook her head.

"No, that's way too small."

"I know that's how it looks, but it's not really a window, anyway. Well it *is*, but it's not."

He sighed in frustration as well. He was trying to both explain the unexplainable, as well as think, and was not doing well at either. He took one more stab at it.

"I think it can be whatever it needs to be. You described the issue with perspective. I think the window looks like a window because that's the place where the boat interfaces with our world, but I'm pretty sure it's not bound by any of the rules that we are."

He was processing even as he picked the diagram up off of the floor where it had dropped earlier. He turned it over, and looked down at the atrium map. He stared down at it as bits rearranged themselves inside his head. He tapped the window icon, and watched closely as the changes initiated, and really studied them this time.

He noticed that there was a red circle now visible behind two of the dial center links behind two of the door icons. He checked his orientation, and could see that one was the deep-sea door, and the other was the angry fire door. Even as he watched, another red circle lit, the KFC world this time.

He tapped the center link on the dial behind the deep-sea door.

As it flashed an active red, yet another red light appeared, this one behind the red circle, a symbol which meant nothing to him. But it flashed, rather than stayed lit.

The symbol wasn't familiar, but the sequence was.

It was a confirmation request. He sighed as he tapped the dial link again, deactivating it. The second symbol disappeared.

One small mystery solved, but not one that helped him.

"What are you doing?"

"Um, trying to figure something out, but not having much luck. Give me a minute."

She didn't reply, and he went back to activating the window, watching what happened, and then deactivating it. And repeat. On the fifth try, he caught it.

Just for part of a second, a gray line flashed into being from the window to the grayed-out door. There, and then not, so fast that if you weren't looking in exactly the right place as it happened, you'd never see it. At the end of that sliver of a second, the tiniest of red flashes happened where the line met the door icon.

He did it several more times just to make sure that time hadn't been wishful thinking. Now that he knew where to look, he saw it happen each time.

He looked up from the diagram, still thinking furiously, still very much in his head.

Grayed-out.

Disconnected.

Locked.

Oh, *c'mon!* *It's right THERE!*

But the conclusion just gave him the finger, staying solidly on the other side of comprehension.

He growled out loud.

"Not going well, then?" She was watching him with raised eyebrows.

"It has to do with its door. I *know* it. I just can't get it." He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth in frustration.

"What about it?"

"It's locked."

Her response was quiet, normal, everyday.

"We need a key?"

He flinched as he got it, the pieces falling on him as if from a great height. She must have seen it, or the change in his expression.

"You ok?"

He looked at her, lips curling in a small grin of understanding.

"Yes, and I have the poor, retarded step-child of a plan."

Ch. 34

Slight of hand

They stood in the flickering dimness before the rusted metal of the hotel door, the firelight casting their dancing shadows upon it.

"You ready?"

She huffed in irritation.

"Would you *stop*, please? No. And neither are you. But here we are."

"Ok, then."

And he pulled the door open to the accompaniment of disused hinges. The low light of the inscrutable gray filled the doorway.

They both hesitated for a second, then she stepped through. He was right behind her, a hand on her shoulder.

There was the obligatory flash of light, and then she was moving, gone from under his touch faster than he thought possible. He was still turning his head to follow her as she completed her task, and then reversed motion, leaping away as he stood fast.

She was more than a half a dozen strides away when the trap activated, racing across the atrium floor. He felt the air pressure change in his inner ears, and yawned to compensate as her now-blurred form crossed the remaining distance to one of

the black doors, which flared to life scant seconds before she jumped through. He watched as the dull blackness swarmed back across its face, and she was gone. Then he turned his attention to the opposing kaleidoscope door at the other end of the atrium. The window above let in what could be twilight, or pre-dawn illumination.

It took longer than he had expected, and in the intervening time, he realized that he really, *really* needed to let go of expectation. He was constantly expecting one set of outcomes, and here he'd been served up almost without exception an entirely different set. He adjusted inner dials to the extent that he could, cricked his neck to the right, and settled himself. He knew that this part was going to suck, no matter what he did.

Then the door across from him flared to light, and the unmistakable form of his enemy strode toward him. It was unhurried this time, but back-lit in the same way as before.

It didn't speak as it crossed the entire distance, and then stood before him, its face still shrouded in darkness, because the portal behind him was dormant, yet the one opposed still shone.

It remained silent for a time, regarding him. Finally, it spoke.

"Look at you."

It shook its head slightly from side to side, chin down in a display of disbelief.

"First the swan song. Then the gunslinger. Then? The liberator. Now the sacrificial lamb. How many incarnations of reparation do you require of yourself, Man?"

He remained silent.

The creature stood before him seeming to wait for an answer, but he knew that it could care less. This was all theater, the playing out of a role by a super-human narcissist. After a time,

"Where is the child?"

"Home, I expect."

It waited a moment, evidently evaluating the answer.

"And you did not follow? Surely she spoke of her time with me. Why would you willingly take up her mantle?"

It considered him in his continued silence. It reached a sudden conclusion, raising its dark chin slightly. Its eyes glittered in the peripheral light.

"Ahhh. You seek a chance to be the hero once again. Not just for her, this time, though. For all your brethren. A fool to save a world of them."

It leaned in.

"I would abandon that hope right here, Man. It will go better for you."

He schooled himself, refusing to react. He'd known that simple logic would expose his intent. It was all about whether they held the right cards, and could play them at the right time.

"No? Suit yourself. I'd expect nothing else.

Your kind really is the flaw in the grand design. And yet you flourish."

It placed its hands open-palm against the barrier, and brought its face down until it was level with his. The hate in its alien voice was palpable.

"If only the economy of this reality were different. If I could crush all of you one by one, now that...*that* would be my preference."

He'd had enough. He burst into motion, slapping his own hands against the barrier in a mirror image, leaning in himself until their faces were inches apart.

"I don't *care!* Stop *TALKING!*

You're wasting time. You've got your pair of hands. Can we *skip* all this bullshit?"

It was silent for a long time, its dark, blank face regarding him. Then it shrugged.

The dimness in the air before him clarified as the figure before him made a gesture. Then it turned its back on him and

headed back across the atrium, obviously sure that he would follow.

He did.

Ch. 35

Outside

She halted in the clearing, the door winking out behind her as she passed beyond the coin's influence. It was twilight, and the stream ran along its burbling course in the half-light. The trees towered above, and the smell of evergreen and must filled the damp air.

She noticed none of these things, just counted to three, turned, and made her way back. The door appeared, opened, and through it the light in the atrium seemed unchanged. Her heart beating fast, she crossed the last distance to the doorway. She looked through.

It was empty. Both of the glass panels at either end were dark.

She stepped through, and made her way to the Nightmare's portal without stopping or looking back as the door closed behind her. It lit in advance of her arrival. Her heart-rate accelerated as it did so.

She drew the coin out of her pocket, where she'd stashed it after grabbing it from its seat at the other portal. Heat radiated from it, but she could still hold it without too much discomfort. She started to raise her arm toward the pale, circular blemish in the wood above and to the right of the panel, but hesitated.

They'd played the "what if" game for quite a long time in that other place. He'd shown her the diagram, showed her how that particular line wouldn't link with this portal. He'd put forward the idea that maybe the silver coin would connect it if they could place it where it was meant to go.

"It's just another door, after all."

"Yes, but my Uncle's letter was pretty emphatic about *not* doing that. *And*, you just told me it came after you when you did the very same thing at the other end of the atrium. How can that be a good idea that ends well?"

"Look, I'm flying nearly blind. I never said this was a *good* plan, did I?"

The one thing that *is* clear, though, is that there are *rules*. Strange and baffling to us, but even the a..., the Nightmare is bound by them. It can't use the coins, so it can't open any doors by itself except its own...."

He'd trailed off, thinking, then went on.

"You know what it's like? It's like a, a parasite, or an infection. Right? The host, or carrier's defenses are systemic. *It's* the thing that's not supposed to be here. That's why it hasn't been able to accomplish its purpose so far.

You said it has been doing this for a very long time. If this place was just a place, what would stand in its way?"

He gestured absently, indicating the dim, cold hotel room around them.

"Why would this...I don't know what to call it...sanctuary, maybe? Why would it be what it is? Why would it hand me this?"

He had brandished the page from the book, shaking his head.

"No, there's intention here. That's why we're here. All this hit-and-run stuff we've pulled off so far, no way it's chance.

We've been drafted. We're part of the immune response."

"You're saying that this place is *helping* us?"

She'd been incredulous, the memories of all that pain still very accessible in her head.

He'd shaken his head emphatically.

"No. Helping itself, I think. We're raw material."

But he'd hesitated, then.

"Maybe. I don't know. I just don't think that we are its only opposition, and it's pretty obvious that we're not the first draftees."

"What?"

"I told you. There were other pages torn out of the book, right?"

"So?"

"So, think about all the worlds this place has access to. That's a *lot* of raw material. This place..." He gestured again to indicate the hotel room around them.

"It's whatever it thinks we need when we arrive. It can be anything. And, I'll bet that the book isn't always a book. Maybe it's never *been* a book before, who knows. I think that the missing pages were just there to show us that we're not the only ones. This has been done before. How else could it have gotten the all parts it has so far, if it can't get to them by itself?"

He sighed and scratched his cheek.

"Which, I have to admit, doesn't make this look too good for us, given that it's this close to done. Maybe not many of them did, but I'm willing to bet that each...draftee that made it in *here* got something, you know, some kind of tool like this." He shook the diagram.

"One of them got the drop on it, and they trapped it, *and* maybe that wasn't the first time, either."

In the present, she still held the coin aloft, struggling with the unknown as the drifting shapes traced their random patterns across the glowing face of the portal in front of her. She felt frozen, caught between her fear and her belief in the flawed man that she'd come to know during the strangest days of her life.

She thought about her life, in the intervening moment where her hand was poised to make a connection to the unknown, but the circuit remained to be closed.

There was the loss of her parents. Their subtraction had only been mitigated and underwritten by her uncle's intervention.

Then there was the loss of her uncle. His subtraction was still so fresh, it was hard to think clearly about it. Was this guy here to stand in the gap for her now? He'd already failed her multiple times. Why was she still here?

She saw his face in the moment. Earnest and unsure, but ready to act, nevertheless.

She smiled wanly to herself. She didn't know what he was, but she'd never know unless she chose. He'd said it.

But you know the way out. You choose.

She placed the half-dollar in its place, waiting for what would come after.

The portal before her flared for a second, and the floating shadows within it stopped dead, frozen.

She waited, heart beating wildly, waiting for the retribution. She waited for the Nightmare to return for her.

It didn't come.

Slight movement caught her attention away from the portal. She looked back at the coin. Small blooms of nacreous black were

appearing across its face. They appeared, grew steadily, and finally united as all the silver was eclipsed by a slick black sheen. Her fear intensified, and she didn't know what to do. This couldn't be good.

Then, the coin glowed bright red, dispersing the black in an instant. The red remained for a second or less, then faded through lessening shades of itself, until it was gone. Only the silver now remained. The shadows in the portal resumed their movements.

She stared at it, trying to at once to put an explanation to something that she had none for, and also trying to quell her fear by sheer force of will. Neither effort went well.

Shakily, she pulled the folded page from her pocket, and smoothed it flat on one palm, the atrium diagram facing up. She looked at the portal in front of her. There was a paralytic seizing, then. She felt her muscles draw tight, temporarily inaccessible. Beyond that for a time, she was unable to do anything. Then the cramp passed, and she tapped the window icon.

The connection made itself, strong and solid on the improbable screen, connecting the window with the previously inaccessible door.

No longer gray.

She tapped it again to disconnect.

He was right, at least so far.

She reached up and removed the coin from its seat with some difficulty, because her hands were still quivering a bit. She pocketed it, and then tapped the link again, heart beating faster.

The connection made itself again.

They had a chance.

She turned and sprinted for the other end of the atrium.

Ch. 36

Slave to the grind

He stood hip-deep in the brackish water, boots mired in the soft mud, pulling tiredly at the root bundles in front of him. His head was full of angry bees, and his hands trembled as he worked. He was sweating profusely, but it was only partly due to the heat and humidity.

He'd nearly lost a finger earlier, tearing off a section of the soil-encrusted root to expose a whole nest of the rat-snakes. He'd only just managed to slap the parent's strike aside with his other hand as it lunged out at him. The deflected momentum carried it out and down into the water. He had no interest in its thrashing descent into the depths. It was its own fault that it couldn't swim, or float. He scraped the babies out of the shallow hollow of the nest with the piece of tree root he still held, and they too disappeared into the water in a cascade of tiny shrieks.

The scraping had exposed a glint of metal at the back of the hollow, shining dimly in the low light of early morning. He'd found the artifact.

He was most of the way through the excavation now, though. The Nightmare sat on a decaying pile of dead-fall nearby. It had been atypically silent this outing, and had only had to intervene twice to stop two separate bottom-dwellers from

snapping him in half. Each time it had waited until the last second to move, until the bow wave of the attacker had registered as threat, his blue jeans rippling against his legs, alerting him to movement below the static surface of the water. It always let him feel the fear before stepping in. He had no idea how it knew to do that. It had a number of devices that it used, and seemed to know ahead of time which ones to bring to where they went, like it was a sequence that it was long familiar with.

It had been a long time since the atrium. He had no way to tell how long. Time no longer meant anything beyond marking the passage of torment. Could be weeks, or months, he had no way to tell. There was no beginning and ending to a time span, except accomplishing the task.

Every waking moment was filled with the need for something he was denied. But instead of the inevitable progression of the DTs, he was stuck at step one. The need, and the shakes. The Nightmare had laid it on him as soon as they had passed through the portal to its domain. It had turned, and done the same gun-finger bit. More asshole theater.

"Your leash, Man."

Whatever changes had been wrought in him during this rabbit-hole experience were behind the wall now, inaccessible and distant. It became less and less about the plan, and more

and more about finding a way out. The small part of him that could still think and plan had found a more immediate directive. Either he'd been wrong, or she'd done the math at last, and had chosen the favorable result on the other side of the equal sign. Maybe it was both. He couldn't fault her. He'd done his best, as sad as that was, to get her to do just that.

The Nightmare was up to the task of denial, though. It oversaw everything, the extraction of the artifacts, the installation, and the calibration of the same. It was always there, never more than a few steps away every waking hour.

No leeway. No chance for him to do anything besides what it demanded of him.

The plan slipped away from him bit by bit, chipped away by his own need, the harsh reality of this new existence, and the inaccessibility of any type of hope. He was just a tool now, his antipathy toward his master slowly lost against the inevitability of its intent and his own weakness.

They returned through the atrium. He carried the artifact, panting and sweating with the weight of it. The light above was starlight, and he had to focus himself to make his way to the right place. It was right behind him as the portal flared to life in front of them, and they passed through, returning to the horribly skewed place where life had now dwindled to a nightmare in its own right.

They passed through the abhorrent landscape, arriving finally at the place where the device rested. It was an enclosure at the base of an immense tower, free of the dull membrane so prevalent here. There were just walls of cracked stone, wet with the humidity of the environment, and a muddy stone floor with a dais in the middle, upon which the device sat. But the sound of the world-killer was loud here, and as usual, it divested him of a tiny bit of sanity with every awful breath.

He placed the artifact on the dais, grunting with the effort, and then rubbed the sweat from his brow as a fresh set of shakes took over. He was helpless as they articulated themselves. The Nightmare stood behind him, and its silence was pervasive in a way that was at odds with the twisted normalcy he'd come to expect. He got to the end of the worst of the shakes, when it spoke finally. He could hear the triumph in the oily tones, and his heart, already exploring the depths of despair, dropped into the pit.

"There it is, Man. That is the last."

As if he didn't know. As if he hadn't become very familiar with it now, despite the state he was in.

It waited, and he knew that it was only to let it sink in. It wanted to grind his nose in it.

"You are unique, you know. You fought more than most. Perhaps those are the gyrations that are inevitable at the end of a long contest, though. They are the spasms before the stillness. Nevertheless, you are about to cross the finish line. Say goodbye to your kind. Say goodbye to the Child."

His internal reaction was immediate and intense, which came as a surprise, because all during his time with it, it had played this game with him, baiting him, insulting him. He had to ask himself why this last bit was any different. He knew, though.

Because now it could actually *do* what it had threatened to do from the beginning, and he had helped it get all the way here. He'd been able to do *nothing* to hinder it.

But now, right here in the eleventh hour, it had handed him the tool he needed, without even knowing it had done so.

His hatred suddenly burst into flame again within him. He *hated* it. He hated the smugness of it. He hated it with a *surpassing* hate, one that consumed his ineffectiveness and deflection from purpose with its vastness. It flared alight within him like the light of the sun, burning away his need and want. He hummed inside, vibrating with the depths of his rage. It was all he could do to contain it.

Yet it was unaware. He could tell. It still thought he was broken and hobbled. He could hear it when it spoke. There was

perfect alignment of the under and over-tones. It was the tambre of alien self-satisfaction, of alien *confidence*.

"You know what to do."

He turned around toward it, before complying, and stared at the alien face of his tormentor, become the face of the beast.

It stared back, and then the plan resurfaced, buoyed by his anger, because it was *still* unaware.

All that was missing was her. There wasn't hope in him, as such, but this was the endgame he'd seen dimly. There were only the last pieces to play. Either the thing that had helped them before would bring her here in its own time of need, or it wouldn't. He felt like he'd already died a number of times. If it didn't happen, then they were both just another torn out page in the book, and he'd be too busy being dead to mourn the loss.

He turned back, and looked at the last component. It was the size of a double-toaster, and the last empty space in the device waited for it.

The last one.

He didn't hesitate. He hoisted himself up onto the dais, and grasped it. He slotted it down into the final vacancy. The Nightmare followed, right behind his left shoulder, looming over him.

"Rotate it back."

He did.

"Not so far. Match those two marks, and press down."

There was a metallic ping as something clicked into place. Long dormant lights glowed to life, and a low, oscillating hum began. The device vibrated minutely now.

The Nightmare grasped his shoulder, nearly pulverizing it as it acknowledged the end of its endeavors. There was something in its voice now that could only be its version of excitement.

"No need to waste any more time, Man. It is done, and your plans are in ruin.

I have waited, and labored, and directed a hundred like you, and more hundreds not. My time has finally come. And yours?"

He could hear the glee, the perverse elation.

"Yours has passed, Man.

Cycle it. The idea that it is your own hand that authors this pleases me."

He could refuse, he knew. But, it would make him pay, and he'd still have to do it, so he entered the sequence at the side, having done it many times before. Maybe this was the thing that would provoke a response, or a signal, because the entire premise of the plan was that she'd know when to act.

If she was even there.

The device thrummed deeply then, as if a god had spoken a single syllable, and sent it outward across the omniverse. It

shook the ground, and the structure above groaned. There was silence at the end of it, and into it another voice inserted itself.

“Hello.”

Ch. 37

Black-hole sun

The Nightmare spun in place even as the god spoke again, and everything trembled. The instant its attention was elsewhere, he acted, knowing that she'd given him this last chance. This was the last opportunity for this window to occur, ever.

He reached into his back pocket, and quickly drew out the supernova lens, trying to confine his movements to only what was necessary while trying for all the speed he could muster. It had resided there through all his time here. He'd wondered at first about his enemy's disinterest in what tools he might still hide on his person. His inefficacy against his foe gave him an answer in almost no time at all, yet he never quite achieved a level of brokenness that would cause him to cast it from himself. It remained, and now he brought it to bear.

Yet it now slipped from his fingers, arcing away as gravity demanded. The moment stretched.

No. He *refused* to fail.

He reacquired it with a quick darting catch, heart thudding wildly.

He focused on the junction in the device that he'd stared at each time he was anywhere near it since he'd first arrived back in this hell. He'd burned its location into his memory from

the diagram before even coming here, because it was the red slice on the schematic. He located the small, crenellated line scribed into the metal on one side of the aperture, flipped the hatched side of the supernova lens to match it, and slapped it into place.

The fading thrum of god-speak masked the small click it made, as well as the subsequent metallic rustle as a small metal plate slid across the top of it from one of the adjacent components, apparently locking it in place.

As the shaking stopped, he heard the Nightmare speak.

He turned himself, the next to last piece now in place, staring past the abomination's back at Sophia, who stood with her back to the stone wall of the enclosure. She held the page from the book in her hand.

"Well, now. That is a very good trick, Child. You *must* tell me how--."

"No, I don't think I will."

She glanced past the Nightmare, and locked eyes with him for a second, and then looked down and tapped the page in her hand.

Outside the enclosure, there was an enormous sound. It was akin to the god-speak, but of a different nature. It was like the tearing of continent-sized fabric, and a thousand sonic booms at once. A shockwave of air burst through the enclosure,

and the page fluttered wildly in Sophia's grip until the atmosphere settled.

Now, there were sibilant whispers filling the air outside, and wending their way within the enclosure. The breathing of the world-killer was gone.

No, not gone.

It was rising slowly above the whispers outside.

It wasn't behind anything anymore.

The Nightmare stood fast, looking at Sophia.

"How?"

She bent over, and placed the page carefully at her feet. When she looked up, her grin was vicious.

"You figure it out."

It leapt at her, but she was way ahead of it.

She stepped backwards, and vanished, and its hands closed on empty air.

The Nightmare looked down at the page on the ground, as the whispers and the breathing grew, and grew.

And grew.

Then it turned toward him, and its eyes burned with amber fury. The gray clouds in its skin roiled, and it had balled both hands in fists of rage. It advanced toward him, and its voice was a terrible tri-tone screech.

"What have you done, Man?"

It came at him, grabbing him by the arm and yanking him aloft, off of the dais where he crouched. The god-speak sounded again as his shoulder let go, dislocating once again in explosive amounts of pain. He screamed as it threw him bodily toward the unyielding stone of the wall.

As he impacted the wet concrete and then fell to the dirty floor, he saw the creature leap up onto the dais, and then hunch over the device, tapping frantically at the control pad on the side. Even as the pain of his injuries flooded through him like a tidal wave, he knew it was reversing the sequence, in an attempt to shut the machine down.

The device went dark.

The Nightmare screamed in triumph, turning back towards him with eyes glittering with the promise of more pain for him before the end. It leapt from the dais towards him, landing mere feet away.

Before it could cross the remaining distance, light exploded behind it. On the dais, the machine lit with a blinding flash, and the god-speak boomed outward once more.

But there was something wrong with it, this time. An angry whine laced the divine note as it blew outward to shake the world. The whine continued even as the god-speak faded, rising slowly.

The Nightmare reversed itself, and he was temporarily forgotten as its attention went back to the device, which had begun to glow red. Bright white light seeped from the spaces between the individual components, and the enclosure brightened as this light increased commensurate with the volume of the whine.

The Nightmare stepped uncertainly toward the machine. While its attention was diverted, he looked to his right. He'd landed not far from where Sophia had left the page from the book on the muddy ground. He leaned towards it and grasped it, crumpling it within his good hand. He then extended his index finger, and quickly marked where it had lain, drawing a single arrowhead at the base of the wall in the mud. Then he sat up again, unable to do much more as his shoulder screamed, and the hip that had taken the brunt of the brute force impact against the wall glowed white hot with pain.

His enemy turned away from the device, which was transitioning to orange now as the whine continued to ascend in volume, once again focused on him. When it spoke above the noise, its alien voice was even.

"You did this."

He could only half-shrug in response.

"Turn it off, or you die, too."

"I can't, even if I wanted to, which I don't."

It was only silent for a moment.

"Then see your fate."

It strode to where he sat, grasped him by the hair, and dragged him bodily out of the enclosure. He screamed in pain, but his struggles were weak and ineffectual.

Once outside, it let go of his scalp, only to haul him upright by his damaged arm, and he nearly passed out. If there had been anything in his stomach, he'd have vomited. Holding him aloft, it grasped the back of his neck, pointing his face by brute force at the thing that filled everything beyond them.

The horizon was a black hole with no visible boundaries, which made looking at it hard enough, because there were always boundaries. Perspective demanded them. And they were there, but they weren't. It was mind-bending, and awful, but not the most awful thing.

Streamers of black flowed out of it, carpeting the foreground and reaching outward and upward, starting to consume even the perverse vastness of this place. The whispers were increasing in volume, and the breathing had deepened, now almost sub-sonic groans that caused the diseased ground to tremor.

The worst of it, though, was movement deeper in. It was slow, and vast, the stirring of some ebony colossus.

The Nightmare held him fast, forcing him to watch the encroaching darkness. Some of the pain was lost to the apocalypse unfolding before him, but not much.

"This was meant for *all* of you, but now, there is only you."

It was hard to interpret the alien landscape of its voice, but bitterness was a sure bet. It knew what it was facing.

"My consolation prize."

It suddenly let go, and he crashed to the membranous ground, fresh sears of agony lighting his ruined shoulder. He screamed and mewled, unable to contain it. From above him,

"It will *not* end here for me, Man. There are other ways, and I have nothing if not time."

It strode forward, as if to meet the advancing darkness, the closest black streamers questing toward them through the skewed topography not more than forty yards away. A deep, guttural roar exploded out of the black, the sound of it sending splinter-cracks through the ground underneath them and beyond as it echoed outward. Something larger than this place could contain began to transition out of the blackness.

He watched it walk away from him, and decided now was a good time to get the hell out of Dodge, if he could. He gritted his teeth, and despite the nearly overwhelming pain, he found

enough within him to lever himself to his knees, and then his feet, swaying slightly until equilibrium returned.

The Nightmare was about twenty feet away, now, and it made a gesture with its hand. The portal appeared, glowing brightly as shapes drifted across its face.

He began to shuffle backwards toward the enclosure, unable or unwilling to take his eyes off of what was unfolding before him, but when the portal appeared, his heart sank. It was going to escape. They'd failed. Despite the weight of his pain and despair, he continued slowly backwards, a quick glance behind him letting him know he was almost to the entrance, now.

It moved with confidence toward the portal, until it was only a few feet from it.

Then, it slowed, and tilted its head, as if in uncertainty. It came to a complete stop face to face with the glowing doorway back to the atrium. It made another gesture, but nothing changed. It reached up, and touched the face of the portal.

There was a tremendous spark as its hand was blown backward, extending its entire arm outward and turning it half-way around in an instant from the force of it.

It held still for a moment after it reached stasis, head down.

He could see the implication clearly, and his despair evaporated as part of him crowed with satisfaction. It was locked in.

No escape for you, asshole! He thought triumphantly as the whine from the enclosure behind him turned to a scream, and bright illumination from behind him cast his shadow on the ground before him.

The god-speak sounded again, but it was a weak and segmented articulation now, lacking most of its former power.

Beyond the creature and the portal, something monstrous and yet still indistinct stretched part of its massive bulk through the gigantic rip in the world, and another of those concussive roars drowned out the scream coming from the machine, and shattered more pieces of the landscape. The black streamers were almost to the portal now.

The Nightmare raised its head, and looked at him. Its alien eyes were almost red, and there was a rage in them that seemed as vast as the blackness filling the horizon.

He knew it was over for him, right then, but he turned and broke into a limping excuse of a sprint for the brightness of the enclosure entrance. He heard it speak from behind him, the voice approaching with terrifying speed.

"No, Man. There is no place left to go."

He'd barely made it through the opening to the enclosure before it batted him to the ground, and he slid across the muddy concrete, coming to rest near the middle of the room. It was on him in a second, hauling him up and over once again by his bad arm. Black stars crowded into his peripheral vision as his pain over-rode everything, even the scream of the device on the dais nearby. He was screaming himself, but he couldn't hear it. Light was everywhere as the Nightmare put its face right up to his own, and the red eyes were full of the promise of all the pain there was left to feel.

"There is just enough time left, Man. I can feed you to the black one piece at a time, and paint these walls with your blood. It is poor recompense for my own end, but it is what remains."

Something else flared within those eyes, then.

"Did you really sacrifice yourself, Man? There is no way out?"

He turned his head away, and he could see the device on the dais, as its scream passed beyond his hearing. It glowed bright white, and the structure of it began to soften, hard lines easing as it began to flow together.

There was another gargantuan roar from outside, this one filling everything with sound. More fissures snaked their way up the walls, and across the floor and ceiling. Whatever was coming

through was now here. Black streamers filled the opening to the enclosure. His voice was filled with gravel.

"No exit, you piece of shit."

He drove upward with his good arm and delivered the last piece in a single strike, opening his hand at the last second to slap the crumpled page against the Nightmare's chest.

The repulsion was the same as the coin, and it flew backward as he closed his hand on the crumpled page again, crossing most of the distance to the entrance of the enclosure in a lazy rag-doll arc, arms flailing. Yet it was able to re-orient in the air at the last second, and scrabbled to a halt in the dirt of the enclosure as it landed in a crouch, sliding to a stop just beyond the ebony tendrils at the entrance.

The moment stretched. He could see the completion of its threat against him in the red rage of its gaze, as it gathered itself. He could see the muscles vibrate, and the movement begin. There was no way out for him, now, either. He was too slow.

The questing black fluttered behind it, and out of that, a deeper ebony trunk whipped out of it, grasping the Nightmare around its waist.

Then it was gone.

He had only one more move to make, as the light in the enclosure became unbearable. He struggled to his knees, casting

his eyes to the floor. The single arrow in the mud against the wall was a dim shadow in a world of light and sound. He surged up and forward with the last of his strength, hoping it was enough.

There was no flash of light, because his retinas were beyond that. But, he did find blessed darkness.

Ch. 38

Ending credits

"Wake up."

He opened his eyes, and she was there. He lay with his head in her lap this time.

He was whole, and his need was gone.

Light shone down at the other end of the short hallway, the bright of mid-day casting the atrium in stark relief. The dark wood of the hall dampened it, but it retained enough power to illumine the rusty face of the hatchway door beside them.

"Hello." She said.

He looked up at her.

"Hello."

"So it worked?"

He sat up, turning himself and putting his back against the wall opposite her. He just looked at her for a few seconds. She was such a slight version of the girl he'd first met. He raised his eyebrows as he drew in a deep breath, and let it out.

"I believe so. It was a close thing, though. How long have I been out?"

She shrugged.

"A couple hours, maybe. You never gave me my phone back, so hard to tell. You were in bad shape when you showed up, though. I dragged you back here as soon as you arrived."

"Was it the same place as before? When you went back?"

She shook her head and grinned.

"You'll love this. It was the restaurant."

He heaved a dry chuckle, still looking at her.

She looked so confident, now. Weary and thin, but confident. It occurred to him that this was what had changed in her in the fake hotel room. He'd borne witness to it, but hadn't known what it meant. It made her look older.

Older and beautiful.

She patted the rusty metal of the hatch.

"Shall we go, you and I?"

He hesitated.

"I still don't know. I pretty sure you're fine. You came *in* clean."

She laughed.

"After all this? Are you serious? We just saved the *world*, Captain Morgan! You're still afraid of a *bottle*?"

He smiled, but not all the way.

"You know, especially now, what it means."

She nodded, and sobered, but not all the mirth departed. Her confidence was not just in herself. He could see that it extended to him, and that quieted his fears. She was right. He was not the same. He couldn't be the same, now, no matter what waited outside.

She leaned forward and put her hands on his knees.

"C'mon. Whatever it is, it's you and me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Warp-speed, or one day at a time, easy does it.

However it plays out."

Then she smiled a smile that put all the previous ones to shame.

"Let's go."

So they did.