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Paul stood on a slight ridge, if it was even that, surrounded by endless plains. When he had awakened, the mist had afforded him nothing beyond his hand's reach, but the growing light pushed the fog to the edges of his vision till it receded into pools on a sea of grass.

The others were asleep, a curled-up archipelago dimpling the ridge. Not a bird. Not a cloud. In the dimmest distance, he caught a rim of purple. The sun's beams warmed his shoulder, hints of sage and musky earth tickling his nostrils.

My God. She had done it.

Hearing a rustle in the grass, Paul turned to see his little brother rise up on elbows, only to lie back down and grope at the grass like it was a coverlet. After he yanked just grass onto his head, the cold dew of the blades kissing his face, he blinked his eyelids and stared about him.

"She did it," Paul whispered.

Killian shot up, bleary-eyed, gazing at Paul.

"Killian," said Paul. "*Angelia did it*. We're not at home. We're ... somewhere else."

Killian rubbed his eyes and turned over, scanning the horizon. Finally, he murmured, "Toto, we're not in Texas anymore."

Getting up, Killian wandered over the far side of the mound and took a leak.

Paul stared at him. "Killian, do you have to ruin everything?"

"What?" asked Killian. "I had to go, Paul! It's not like I peed in front of the girls."

Paul stared at him. "Here we are, in Angelia's dream world, and the first thing you do is baptize it with your special brand of

glory?”

Killian scratched his butt. “I get it, Paul! We're here— wherever *here* is. But you know that when I have to go, I have to go! Just because Tolkien didn't tell us Sam's bathroom habits doesn't mean that he didn't inherit from the Gaffer an enlarged prostate like I got from Pap Brave!!”

Paul shook his head.

Killian looked around. “Where the hell are we, anyway?”

“Well,” mumbled Paul, gazing around him. “Dad drove us all through Kansas once. Neither it, nor Nebraska, looked like this. Not even the Texas Panhandle is as flat as this, nor does it grow grass this green. Wherever we are, I don't think it's our world.” He sniffed the breeze. “Did you ever smell any grass like that in our world?”

Killian breathed the morning. “Yeah. It makes my nose tingle. And it makes me hungry.”

“Which brings up another issue,” observed Paul. “Lots of green grass, but no hint of anything edible for us—unless the grass is, but I don't want to try it. A more pressing concern that your little bathroom break underlines—do you spy any water source?”

Killian stared round about him. “Shit.”

“We're shit if we don't find something to drink. We can live a while without food, but we won't last without water.”

Killian sighed. “Takes all the wonder out of being yanked from your own world when you have to think about preserving your life.”

“Something is keeping this grass green,” Paul noted. “No need to panic ourselves until we've explored.”

“Who needs to panic?” came Cesara's voice behind them. She was standing and looking about. “God, Killian—you take loud

pisses even when your piss isn't hammering a porcelain toilet bowl.”

“Will everyone give me a break on having to go to the bathroom?”

“You're not the only one,” said Cesara. “Though this place is brimming with grass, I don't see a toilet-paper dispenser, and I have to go to the ladies. Avert your gazes!” She proceeded down the ridge to as nice and private a place as she could rustle up.

“Oh, for Christ's sake!” muttered Paul. “I need to take a piss now!”

While he walked to the other side of the small rise, Killian gazed down at Angelia, who was still asleep. She looked like her name, her face at peace without her glasses. An angel who had dreamt them to ... where?

“I thought of another issue,” said Paul on his return. “We're all barefoot.”

“Well,” said Cesara, also returning. “It certainly is soft enough, and I have yet to feel a rock. I don't think we'll find any stray branches in this treeless paradise.”

“Not to freak y'all out,” said Paul. “But I had snakes and other venomous creatures in mind.”

“Ugh,” grunted both Ces and Killy.

“Let's hope,” noted Killian, “That that's, like, just your opinion, man.”

“Ah,” nodded Cesara. “Branching out into *The Big Lebowski*, I see. Nicely done.”

“You know,” said Paul. “No fantasy story I've ever read has its characters quote random movie lines on their first foray into a new universe.”

Killian laughed. “Maybe not every fantasy story has characters

like the Braves, who break the fourth wall! See? *Deadpool!* I continue to widen my range!”

“Bing, again!” said Cesara. “On another note, we don't seem to be characters at all. I feel like me and like this is 'real,' as in, '*really happening to us.*'”

“Is it?” asked Paul. “How do we know that any of us is not dreaming all this? And isn't it more likely that, *if* one of us is dreaming this, with dreams being dreams, you all *would* take pusses and quote movie lines?”

“So, we're in *your* dream, Paul?” asked Ces. “How do you know you're not in *my* dream?”

“Maybe we're *all* in each other's dream,” quipped Killian.

Paul slapped his forehead. “Now, how is *that* possible? Networked dreaming?”

“Maybe we're not in *our* dream at all.” Ces offered. “In fact, given all that we talked about last night, we're much more likely to be in *her* dream,” she pointed to Angelia.

“Maybe,” mused Paul. “It's not morning but still night in Texas, and we're being *dreamt by* her!”

All three of them stared at the sleeping form who had been fostered into their lives. The pearl on her choker glowed.

Killian shrugged. “It's not like she didn't warn us.”

“Yeah, but—” Cesara looked to Killian then Paul. “—but isn't she supposed to be active *in* the dream with us? When does she wake up to find her dream is reality?”

“Right, Ces,” noted Paul. “She hadn't said anything about *other* people waking up and noticing their world was different. The demolition kid who's on trial presumably has no clue how he exploded a principal. How do *we* know, when he, or the principal, or the sheriff, have no idea? For them, at least it's the same world.”

“But for us,” mumbled Cesara, “It's a completely different world. Do you think if maybe we went back to sleep, we'd wake up in Angelia's bedroom?”

“Gang,” said Killian, “I don't think *our* sleeping is the issue. In case you haven't noticed, Angelia has yet to wake up.”

All three looked from one to the other to the other.

“What if,” asked Cesara, now not a little panicked, “the principal and demolition boy *were* awake and aware that their world had changed ... until Angelia woke up and snapped them into unawareness that anything had happened.”

“Hell, Ces!” said Paul, raising his hands as if he were trying to keep down a jumping dog. “I think it might be even worse. Thirst isn't our problem. Shoes aren't the issue! ~~She—~~” he pointed at Angelia asleep on the grass, “—is our real problem. What if she wakes up and ... and ...”

“... suddenly, we don't exist,” finished Killian.

The morning sun didn't feel so warm on their shoulders, as a lingering cloak of mist passed in front of its glow.

Killian whispered, “Paul? ... Cesara? ... I don't want to stop being us.”

They stood around Angelia. Making a move to wake her meant rushing to their own uncertain end. To wait till she woke was to belay the inevitable.

“Do you ...” asked Paul, “... do you think it makes a difference—to us and our existence, I mean—if *we* wake her, opposed to her waking on her own?”

“What if she never wakes up?” muttered Cesara.

“Then we're sure to die without water,” said Paul. “Unless it rains—or starve, unless this grass is nourishing.”

“But we at least live ... for *some* time ...” countered Ces.

“What if we just walk away?” whispered Killian. “Maybe she'll never wake. And this will be our world.”

Paul looked at Killian and Ces. “As much as I like adventures—at least in stories—the real version doesn't seem so fun. We've got to get back to our own world.”

“But do we know for sure that this *isn't* our world, Paul?” asked Ces. “She might've relocated us to the Crimea!”

They all looked at each other, knowing this wasn't true. Wherever they were, this girl and that house had combined to send them far beyond the Yellow Brick Road.

“Even if we would just walk away,” observed Killian, “We'd always be dangling on a string, never knowing if or when she'd wake up—”

“—or be awakened by someone or *something* else,” finished Cesara.

“Yeah,” conceded Paul. “We can't just leave her here. We owe her that much. We told her to sleep and to dream, that it was the right thing to do. Besides, we're all going to die one day. If waking her up flashes us out of existence, or just to waking up in her bedroom, I think we'd all feel better if we did it ourselves.”

“*Carp diem!*” smiled Killian.

“But let's *all* do it at the same time,” said Cesara. “We *all* touch her. No shouting her awake. We all touch her at the same time.”

The boys nodded.

“Who starts?” asked Paul.

“We all start,” chimed Ces and Killian together, and the three of them bent over the sleeping Angelia, reaching towards the pearl that gleamed on her throat.