

BENEATH  
THE VEIL

BOOK ONE: THE VALOR OF VALHALLA

MARTIN  
KEARNS



NEW YORK, USA

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## DEDICATION

*Dedicated to my wife Kimberly, the light of my world,  
and my two sons Daniel and Charles, without whom  
the spirit of this story would have been lost.*

## EPIGRAPH

Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable  
Doing or suffering: but of this be sure,  
To do ought good never will be our task  
— PARADISE LOST, BOOK I

PART ONE  
THE VALKYRIE

# Chapter One

## Crossing the Span

David lurched awake to find icy tendrils groping his legs.

Water crept in through the closed doors of his sedan and the eerie sensation pulled his mind from a fog. Time moved slowly for the young man as he gained his bearings and the moment of solace allowed him space to appreciate the beauty of the river water at night before his thoughts came into focus and panic pushed away all but his baser instincts for survival.

His hand crept to the center console for his cell phone, only to find it soaked through to the circuits. Not the first casualty of the seasonably cold water, either, he'd bet. David's rapid heartbeat reverberated in his ears as the weight of the engine pulled the front end of his sedan down further into the depths. As the water left any pretense of cordiality behind and began to maraud around him, he reached for the door handle and found it stuck.

*I can get through that*, David thought, sizing up the window. Pulling his knees up to the wheel in an awkward motion, he propped his feet on the

seat and thanked his mother for his skinny ass as he pushed himself into the frigid liquid.

David strained and arched his back as he contorted through the window to freedom. The water beneath should have been black as the night outside of a well-lit window, but instead, the horrors normally hidden by the veiled depths were illuminated by headlights. Scores of cars were in the water. The whole damned section of bridge he'd been on, every soul that had been around him, was sinking to the riverbed.

His young legs managed to kick him free of the car, but he had already been pulled down to a depth of thirty feet or more. Pressure compressed his inner ears to an ache as he swam toward the kind light of a waxing moon.

A dark outline nearby in the abyss stole David's attention. It was a hatchback. It was *the* hatchback. A memory returned to David. *A cigarette jettisoned from ahead and erupted into an elegant ballet of carcinogens, jarring him from a daze. Light beamed off from a reflective green sign reading Bridge 1 Mile.*

*Excitable waving coming from the backseat of a baby-blue hatchback caught David's eye, and he waved back to the reward of a mischievous grin reserved for young boys lost in adventure, however small.*

*Some time passed as he sat in queue, and David was happy to see the crossover was again beside him. The boy had black hair contrasted by spectral ivory skin. As he flared his nose, his top lip curled to transform him into a*

*little glowing goblin. David flipped his eyelids back and touched his tongue to the tip of his nose in reply.*

*Slides of memories turned to times when he'd enjoyed playing with little cousins at the smattering of gatherings his family had had over the years. He'd take the role of some load-bearing beast as various tikes took turns using his lumbar as a trampoline. His love, Rose, would watch on with her wry smile, and his mother would tell him to stay young forever. He wished he could. He was thinking all of this, lost in a cloud of pleasant memory, when the bridge let out its first groan.*

Conscious thought played no role in acting to save the kid. The boy might not be alive, but David was destined to try. He swam to the right of where his car had been swallowed by the inky depths and reached the hatchback, trying the door closest to the unconscious boy. Luck had flashed its brilliance once already in allowing David to free himself, but it was absent here. The door was jammed.

Time was not on David's side. Even for a guy who had never smoked and ran as often as he could, he still needed air. His view of the boy was blocked by the hatchback as the car sank deeper. *The hatch!* David swam to the rear door, pulled on the handle, and the door yawned open. A push helped it along, and he squeezed his torso inside. The boy's arms floated above his head in an unnerving imitation of an unstrung puppet.

David wrapped his arms under the boy's and used his knees for leverage as he pulled the kid in

close. He felt some resistance, then a sudden lurch, and they were free from the tether.

He was thankful to see the escape hadn't caused them to sink much further, and he used the roof to propel himself and his precious cargo to the surface.

His fevered lungs ached, but he resisted the urge to empty spent oxygen in anticipation of fresh air. Eyes pressed tightly together, he pulled the kid close to his chest to reduce drag and kicked. Lights danced against the backs of his eyelids, beckoning him to explore their nature. They were bright, yet soft. Unlike anything he had ever seen before. He thought he knew their purpose as they attempted to steal him away to a place where lungs didn't burn. Where the horrors of being crushed by crags of metal weren't a factor. Where little boys weren't separated from their families by cruel twists of fate.

David looked at the lights as though with wide-open eyes. He bore them no ill will, these jesters ushering him to the unconscious void, but he made his intentions known to them somehow.

*I'm not ready.*

The surface of the river fragmented into shards of moonlight, and David inhaled a lungful of air rivaling the first he'd taken entering this world. The wind stung as his chest billowed the sputtering flame within him.

He leaned back to pull the kid atop his own chest after the primal urge to fill his cells with oxygen had ceased and began to administer CPR, by

pulling in and up on the small diaphragm. *Kind of like a modified Heimlich*, he thought. Fingers danced about and explored for a moment as he adjusted his grip on the boy and hoisted him until his arms were around the small ribcage. He was gentle at first, careful to avoid causing more harm than preventing, but David had no luck. The piston motion was awkward, and David felt how absurd his actions were with no leverage; he began to compress the small ribs to the breaking point.

The boy gasped as his head listed forward and to the side allowing him to expel river water. David wished he could aid him, but keeping them afloat was all he could manage. The boy's raspy breaths pervaded the evening as the sounds of chaos at the bridge slowly ceased.

Ω

Two hundred feet above the murky surface of the Hudson River, an ethereal presence stirred. Asmodeus flexed against the cool night atop his perch on the bridge's cantilever. Beside him, little Nirah slithered between steel columns. The serpent stared unblinking at the witless victims who moved below as Asmodeus thought over his clear directive. *The boy must die*. Though, the act of focusing on one soul lacked something he craved.

"You will draw eyes by extinguishing so many," Nirah said.

"I hadn't considered that you might deliver an opinion." Ruinous eyes drifted to the serpent. "Do you have any more insights?" Asmodeus asked.

Nirah moved away and said, "I fear the focus of light will fall upon us."

"Your fears are those of a bottom dweller. They tether you to the menial, little worm, and there at the bottom you will stay," Asmodeus said. He removed his hand from the column to reveal a clawed impression. "I won't let fear cast me down beside you."

Nirah stared at his cohort and said nothing. Glass eyes at one with the night lent no notion of the small demon's thoughts, though Asmodeus knew he would balk to their mother. A forked tongue flicked to the passing seconds, and Asmodeus looked toward the ordeal he'd set in motion. In truth, he wished to expand the devastation preordained by the Jacob's Ladder of circumstances leading to this night. Misery, pain, sorrow-all were sweet nectar to be savored by the centuries-old entity.

"You're sure the boy is among them?" Nirah asked.

The presence of the boy felt close. A newly familiar sensation he had felt few and far between over his long existence had ground its way through Asmodeus's bravado as the boy approached. He had abhorred vulnerability since the days of Solomon, yet as of late, he and Lilith had chosen to dwell where this feeling was ever present. She had told him it radiated from the presence of a variable in the world which must not persist. This boy, one

who reeked of divinity and filthy fire bearing the weight of ideals and edicts.

“He is there,” Asmodeus said.

The people below had grasped something was amiss shortly before the center span fell from the bridge. The taste of their fear was sour, not yet ripe, so unlike lambs catching the scent of a wolf, they looked incredulous of the danger before them. Humankind, made soft and supple by their lack of perception. *I will make them know fear tonight,* Asmodeus thought. Excitement surged within the warden of lust before becoming tempered by a sudden assault on his senses.

Nirah reacted first by throwing his small wings out to catch the night air and fled without uttering a word. Asmodeus kept his eyes on the horizon. Something was racing toward the span. Something too fast to be ignored. Something burning bright and hot.

The internal switch from predator to prey flipped, and he followed Nirah toward the succor of the forests, glancing longingly behind him as he went before being swallowed by the opaque night. The sound of Nirah being torn apart soon pierced the calm, but it too was consumed by the notes of boundless sorrow broadcast by the victims on the Hudson.

Ω

The current carried David and the boy downriver from the bridge. He saw emergency lights where the toll booths were situated on the

east side of the span and wondered how long he and the boy had been in the water. Five minutes? Thirty?

“What’s your name?” David asked.

“Timmy,” the boy said, “but I like Tim too.”

David noted the quick response which was a good sign.

Tim was looking to the bridge. “It looks like Christmas lights.”

David said, “Oh yeah? Now that you mention it, it does.” He spoke in measured doses, struggling with their weight.

“They look far. We’ve gone away so far,” said Tim, his voice becoming smaller and more distant with each utterance.

David tugged Tim in closer. “Don’t worry, they’re not too far away to find us. We just have to make it to shore.” David wished he was as sure as he tried to sound.

“My mom and dad—” Tim said.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t have time to get you all. I didn’t see your parents. They may have made it out of the car.” David was never a good liar and Timmy demonstrated his opinion of David’s feigned optimism with an elongated silence.

David’s legs fought the water, and they drifted on down the river amidst glints of refracted light.

“Are we going to die?” Tim asked.

“Well,” David said, “I think it’d be a pretty cruel joke to have us get this far and then not make it.

Plus, I don't think I want to die just yet. I haven't even eaten dinner."

Tim stifled a small laugh. "What's your name?"

"David," he said, "Nice to meet you." He reached down to feel at the leg that had to be broken. "Does that hurt?" David asked.

"Just feels numb, but if I try to bend it, something doesn't work right," Tim said. "It's like up is down and left is right. Hard to explain."

David worried over the leg, but he worried more about the boy's shivering and speech. Tim had begun to slur. "Hey, what's your favorite subject in school?" he asked. *If I can keep this kid speaking, I can keep him awake.*

"I don't really like school. I like reading though."

"Oh yeah? Me too. What do you read?" David asked.

"I like *The Boxcar Children*, but my favorite book is *Where the Red Fern Grows*," Tim said.

David smiled. "I like that one too. My girlfriend really loves it even though she cries every time she reads it. She named her hamsters after Old Dan and Little Ann when she was a kid."

"The dogs are the best part, because they love the boy and want to stay together forever," Tim said. "I always thought it would be nice to have a friend stay forever." Tim heaved a sigh. "My parents won't let me get a dog."

David thought he could use a forever friend or two to help him out right about now. Numb to the bones, his legs labored beneath jeans of lead. He

looked over his shoulder; the shore seemed miles away.

“Are we getting closer?” Tim asked.

“Almost there. You hang on, okay? We’ll be wrapped in warm blankets and sipping cocoa in a few minutes,” he said, rubbing the side of Tim’s head.

“You have to leave me. You won’t make it,” Tim said.

David gave him a little squeeze. “You think I’d risk drowning to get you, and then just leave you here afterward? That’s not a great return on investment, kiddo.”

The pauses between words and phrases grew loud with silence. Tim was right. If a boat didn’t come upon them soon, they’d be found somewhere down by Rye in the morning. He could have made it alone, sure, but David knew himself. Abandoning the kid would have cleaved from him a portion of his humanity his subconscious refused to lose. He might have survived this ordeal, but he wouldn’t be able to live another day as the person he was before.

“You seem pretty interested in those stars, Tim. Do you know a lot about them?” David asked.

“I like how pretty they are up there,” he said.

“They always seem brighter when the leaves are changing color.”

David risked lifting his arm to point at the sky. “You see the one that looks like a warped Q-tip?”

That's Aquarius." He outlined the stars with his finger as best he could for the kid.

"I like it. It's big," Tim said. His teeth chattered. "I see some more near it too. Are they constellations?" The word sounded more like "consolations."

"There are some more near it, sure," David said. "There's Cetus there, and Pisces, and that one is Eridanus."

"I wish I knew their names," Tim whispered. His thin voice was stolen by the cold night air. "How do you know so much about them?"

"My mom is a pretty big enthusiast. She used to take out a blanket and we'd lay in the yard together. She'd point them out to me while we were looking for shooting stars," David said. "Eridanus is a river. So it's like we're looking up at a river while we are floating in one."

The thinness of his own voice escaped his notice. They watched the stars as they drifted, bodies intertwined but fates diverging. The stars stood vigil from above as David eventually stopped kicking. Time moved forward, and the winks of light, many older than the earth itself, blurred and scattered.

## Chapter Two

### The Veiled World

Light poured onto Chelsea as she pushed through the glass doors of the Jericho Hospital emergency room. She was overcome with bustling nurses and orderlies in scrubs whose pajama-like attire seemed at odds with their feverish pace. Well-occupied by citizens as well as hospital staff, the lobby was a scene of organized mayhem. People actively paced and discussed matters with staff. One section denser with the concerned showcased a woman who appeared to be fairly upset with what she was hearing if arm waving and yelling were any indication.

The controlled chaos was a muted charade to Chelsea as she trod over the ornate tile floor. "Excuse me," she said to an unencumbered hospital employee. "I received a call about an accident. I'm here looking for my son."

"One moment, miss," responded the middle-aged woman. "We are a little overwhelmed. If you're here about someone involved in the bridge collapse, please see the man at the end of the counter."

Chelsea followed the woman's gesture and saw she was being directed to the man on the receiving end of the hostile hand gestures and incredulous

expressions she'd noticed when she arrived. "A bridge collapse—" Chelsea said. "What happened?"

The woman's expression softened. "The eastern span of the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge collapsed at about eight o'clock. There have been many casualties, and the injured are being taken here and over to Hudson Valley Hospital Center. Nobody knows the cause yet, but the police haven't ruled out terrorism. It's insane, I know. I wish they'd tell people what is actually happening," she said. Chelsea's expression reminded the receptionist who she was venting to. "Let me check your name and see if it's related."

Chelsea stood motionless as she gave her information. *A bridge collapse?* She didn't much care for the news, especially the nightly news—drab and bleak stories at the center of local news broadcasts were not how she enjoyed spending her evenings. Even if she needed background noise while she worked, Chelsea usually preferred to play a podcast or music instead of panic-inducing rhetoric. She simply had no way of knowing about the bridge collapse. The gravity of the statement crept into one part of her mind as another desperately tried to assure her that this was impossible.

"Ms. Dolan, you will have to see the gentleman at the end of the counter. I can give you no further information. I'm sorry," said the receptionist, after

reading her monitor and leaving Chelsea to deduce that the news was bad.

*I'm sorry.* This is what beleaguered and underpaid professionals say to the widowed wives of war veterans or grieving mothers of motionless children on sonogram machines. *I'm sorry...*

“Can you please tell me if David is alive?” Chelsea asked. The employee’s eyes did not waver, her lips pursed, but she nodded slowly as she pointed to the man at the end of the counter. A mercy. Chelsea could only thank her with a small nod. She left the poor woman to gather her mettle for the next confused person inquiring after a loved one.

The atmosphere was heavier just twenty feet away. A gentleman standing amidst an anxious crowd attempted to answer questions and seemed to be more responsive than the front desk employee. Maybe he was even trained for this—majored in reassurance with a minor in doublespeak. Armored in a charcoal fitted suit and a flat-blue tie just wrinkled enough to indicate he’d probably worked all day and was called upon for extra innings, he fielded questions and patted shoulders.

Chelsea waited for an opening to form and slid to the front of the pack. “Hello, my name is Chelsea Dolan, and I received a call saying my son was involved in an accident. I was told to come here by the front desk.”

The man paused, and his eyes briefly flashed recognition. "Dolan? You are the mother of David Dolan?"

"Yes," Chelsea breathed.

"My name is Patrick Barge, ma'am," he said. "Please call me Pat. I am part of the hospital's public relations department."

*Nailed it*, Chelsea thought.

"Your son is here with us. His doctors would like to speak with you as soon as possible. Will you please come with me?" he asked.

Once again, Chelsea felt as though she was in a dream. Escorted through hallways flooded by fluorescence and adorned with surrealist art in cheap frames, she might as well have been floating three miles above the hospital. Labyrinthine hallways turned her left and left and right and straight and then through metallic elevator doors to be whisked up to the seventh floor. Chelsea peppered Pat with questions, but he must have practiced withholding information with more diligence than the front desk employee because he didn't leak a detail worth a damn to her.

When they arrived at the terminal double doors, he buzzed in and led her to a small side room with a couch, two leather chairs, and a meager assortment of peace lilies. Chelsea took a seat on the large couch, seemingly designed to make her feel insignificant. She looked at Pat and willed him to speak.

“Ms. Dolan, your son’s situation, as far as we know, is that he was found unconscious on the eastern bank of the Hudson River,” Pat began. “Specifically, he was found north of the span of bridge that collapsed this evening. The extent of his injuries is unknown to me at this time, but I have been informed he is not currently in a life-threatening situation.”

Chelsea exhaled for the first time in what felt like years. “And the doctor will explain his injuries to me?”

“Yes,” Pat said, “but I believe representatives from law enforcement will wish to speak with you as well. The location where your son was found is unusual. They haven’t disclosed much information to me directly, however I do know they are confused about how your son ended up north of the span of the bridge.”

Chelsea ruminated on this for a moment. It was very strange that David would wash ashore north of the bridge when the river flowed south toward New York City and the Atlantic Ocean. “Who saw David on the shore?” she asked.

Leather groaned as Pat crossed his legs and shifted his weight to the side of his chair. “Many people took part in the rescue effort after the bridge collapsed. I am not sure if your son was found by authorities or civilians, Ms. Dolan. Unfortunately, when the Department of Homeland Security becomes involved, full disclosure tends to stop.”

A triple rap vibrated on the door, and a slender woman in a white coat and glasses entered.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Sall.” Wasting no time as Chelsea and Patrick greeted her, Dr. Sall took up residence in the remaining armchair. She placed her hands on her knees and turned toward Chelsea. “Have you caught Mrs. Dolan up on the details, Patrick?”

“Yes, up to the site where David was found,” Barge said.

“Very good. Mrs. Dolan, as you’ve been told, David was found on the shores north of Beacon and is believed to have washed up there about two hours ago.” Dr. Sall rustled her notes. “That was approximately eleven o’clock. Paramedics responded immediately and found him to be breathing but unresponsive. David did not have a lowered body temperature despite being in water cold enough to cause hypothermia and he did not show many signs of physical trauma except a small laceration on the back of his head.” Sall looked up from her notes and made eye contact with the mother of her patient. “Mrs. Dolan, David’s condition is difficult for us to understand. He is in a coma—”

“A coma?” Chelsea asked.

“Yes. It may have been brought on by the trauma at the back of David’s head. We are putting him through battery of tests to see if an MRI shows swelling in David’s brain, but as of now, we have no reason to believe swelling exists. Although there

is an absence of hypothermia, the comatose state will keep David in the ICU for now.”

Pat’s cell phone began to vibrate, and he quickly excused himself to take the call. Chelsea tried to make sense of what was happening as she stared at the white lilies, unable to discern what was off about them before discovering they were plastic.

“Mrs. Dolan—” Dr. Sall began.

“It’s Miss,” Chelsea interjected. “I’m a single parent, and David is my only son. I don’t know what to do with all of this. I don’t know what to do if he is hurt.” Chelsea had not been able to speak her mind for the entire time she had been inside the hospital, having been whisked around since she entered the building like some bemused tourist.

*How could I not have noticed hours had gone by since he called me and said he was a half hour away?* This was a thought that berated her as she traveled to the hospital. She felt the guilt waver after having spoken her feelings to Dr. Sall. She could grasp the situation more now than before, as though she could wrap her hands around a small part of it and feel out its nature.

“Ms. Dolan, I’ll be frank with you,” Dr. Sall said as she glanced at the door where the public relations rep had vanished. “I have no reason to believe your son’s life is in danger at this time. His vital signs are clear—strong, actually—and his only visible bodily harm is from what could have been sustained by either one of us bumping him on the head. His coma gives us some pause because we

can't explain the cause as of now, but I assure you I will be attending to David very closely until the specialists arrive to see him."

Chelsea unclasped her hands and allowed more tension to release from her shoulders. The room took on a less ominous quality to her as she looked at a woman roughly her age, late forties, who said she would do all she could for her son. Chelsea believed her.

"It's just so odd to me. Today was normal, like any other day. I didn't even know David was late in coming home. Even if I had, I'd have thought he might have been trying to surprise his girlfriend by showing up where she works." Chelsea's voice caught in her throat.

If Rose had seen the news, she'd be beside herself with worry. Even if David wasn't supposed to be coming home until tomorrow night, you never could rely on that. David was spontaneous. Always had been. Rose may have even texted to warn him about taking another route home. "Can you believe the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge collapsed?" she might have said and never received word back.

"I have to make a phone call, is that okay?" Chelsea asked. As she stood, she heard hard-soled shoes beat the tile floor to the rhythm of an approach. Pat entered along with two other men.

"Chelsea, here are Officer Dodd and Officer Ramirez from the Federal Protective Service of Homeland Security. They would like to speak with you," Pat said.

Chelsea noted that she wasn't asked if she'd like to speak to the men. Officer Dodd regarded Chelsea with a large smile that matched his jovial features. The man was a colossus, especially next to Ramirez. Chelsea was glad he chose to sit in the open armchair and not crowd her couch.

The more reasonably molded Ramirez sat at the opposite end of the couch as Chelsea scooted to make room. Dark hair and long eyelashes. Her grandmother would have loved him. "Men always have the best eyelashes," Nana Dolan would say. She also had a deep distrust for authority, a trait that Chelsea had not inherited.

"Mrs. Dolan, as Mr. Barge said, Officer Ramirez and I work with a local branch of Homeland Security. Particularly, we head a unit that focuses heavily on terrorism and threats to infrastructure. I know the circumstances of tonight's tragedy were explained to you prior—"

Chelsea couldn't help but interrupt Dodd. "Yes, I know about the collapse and that my son is in a coma. What I'm not sure of is how I may be of any assistance to Homeland Security."

Dodd's smile didn't falter as he leaned his elbows onto his knees. "Well, there are some interesting details involved here. David was found upstream of the scene of the bridge collapse, Mrs. Dolan, and that's an odd circumstance. Ramirez and I have been in communication with engineers from the state and contracting companies that have worked on the bridge, and they've assured us that

the bridge could not have possibly fallen due to being in a state of dilapidation. Although it's well aged, it shouldn't have fallen on its own."

Chelsea heaved a sigh. "Maybe David found his way to shore and then walked until he collapsed from his injuries."

"His hospital chart doesn't indicate any serious injuries, Mrs. Dolan," Dodd said as he glanced at Dr. Sall.

Dr. Sall nodded solemnly before correcting him on one point. "It's *Miss* Dolan."

"Exhaustion, then," Chelsea said, brushing this aside.

Dodd nodded and looked to Ramirez who was turned toward her on the couch. "What do you do for a living, Ms. Dolan?" Ramirez asked.

"I'm a professor of historiography at SUNY," Chelsea said.

"That's interesting," Ramirez chirped. "So you teach history. What are your areas of focus?"

Chelsea folded her hands and crossed her legs. "I teach a few broad courses, but the university has me on for my work with the archeology, history, and religious artifacts found in and around ancient Israel and Syria. From these finds, I, and a few others in my department, work to fill any gaps there may be within the historical record of Israel and correct any mistakes. For example, we've made corrections based on which religious settlers may have had an effect on the Israelites and their

depictions of false gods and prophets within the Old Testament.”

Ramirez weighed this for a moment. “This would call for you to travel to the Middle East pretty often?” he asked.

Chelsea shook her head, seeing where the conversation was going. “Not for more than fifteen years. But, if it’ll help you to believe that my son and I aren’t ISIS insurgents, I’ll happily disclose my email communications with colleagues overseas.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Dodd said. “Just trying to get a lay of the land here. We are aware that there aren’t legions of Irish Americans signing up to join ISIS, but we have to cover some bases.”

Ramirez once again picked up the prior conversation about the bridge. “When odd circumstances pop up at a crime scene or a tragedy, they tend to point to some form of foul play, so we felt compelled—”

“Were ordered,” Dodd said. “Let’s be honest.”

“—were ordered to check you out as soon as possible,” Ramirez finished. “Occam’s Razor and all.”

Chelsea looked to Ramirez. “Well, I’m afraid your Occam’s Razor is probably going to wind up being Murphy’s Law for you gentlemen.”

Dodd laughed. “You’re probably right. We still have to look through maintenance reports and vet all of the travelers who were on or around the bridge during the tragedy. Plus, the FBI will likely

be on this if it doesn't find a quick explanation, so there's that."

Ramirez began to stand, reaching into his coat pocket for a card. "We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us, Ms. Dolan. If anything comes up that seems compelling or odd, please give us a call. We may be in touch in the future."

Ω

"She's legit," Ramirez said as the two officers entered the elevator bank.

"Sure," said Dodd, "but there's too much back story here to ignore. You remember that kid on 9/11, right?"

"The one who flew the Cessna?" Ramirez asked.

Dodd thumbed the L button into illumination and turned back to his partner. "The kid flew a Cessna 172 light aircraft into the Bank of America building to copycat the planes that hit the towers." The overhead lights flickered as the elevator descended floors. "A kid being idealistic and getting the idea in his head to blow up a bridge isn't out of the question here. It's just not what my gut is telling me on this one."

The doors slid open, and the two men briskly walked toward the lobby. "That kid, Dolan, he can't fake a coma, right?" Ramirez asked.

Dodd chanced a quizzical look at Ramirez, taking measure of him in an instant. "You know, every once in a while, I wonder if they lowered their standards for entrance into the state troopers after the eighties."

“I’ve heard of weird shit, man,” Ramirez said. “There’s people who fake their deaths by taking drugs, guys who’ve lifted computer chips and flash drives from government buildings by swallowing ‘em, and a woman who smuggled her tiny little husband out of prison by hiding him under her dress.”

Dodd stopped just after rounding the corner. “She must have been a very large woman,” he said.

“She was, and she faked a limp walking in to sell the ruse to cameras and security. I’d hate to be the guard in charge of count that day,” he said.

“I’d hate to be the guard who had to watch the trailer swaying during conjugal visits,” Dodd shot back as he started walking again.

The two officers entered the lobby and waited by the door as Ramirez made a phone call to touch base on findings from the site of the collapse. As he spoke on the phone, Dodd did what most semi-retired detectives do—he watched people. He imagined a hospital waiting room was not dissimilar to the line at the pearly gates. There were a lot of people here who didn’t really seem to know where to go or who to talk to, and they definitely didn’t want much to do with one another. Maybe it was more like the line to hell.

Ramirez ended his call. “No signs of explosives on any parts of the structure still standing. Won’t know much about what’s underwater for a while. The divers still working on clearing cars for bodies

say it could be days. They're bringing in outside help."

Dodd nodded. "Did the trooper who was monitoring the tolls get wind of anything?" Ever since the 9/11 attacks that rocked the collective conscience of the nation, cops had been stationed at the ends of bridges. They are said to be charged with protecting the scene should something nefarious occur, but they were mostly just a costly and visible way to make the general population feel better about the state of things. In reality, they were the law enforcement equivalent of only allowing three-ounce containers of liquid in a carry-on bag at the airport.

"Guy's name is Fricks. He said he didn't see anything. Made the brass proud, though. Ran out on the bridge and started traffic moving through the tolls. Got a good fifty cars off the middle of the span before the thing fell. He probably saved a hundred people, all told," Ramirez said.

Dodd nodded as he stared into the waiting area of the lobby. "There's a commendation and a fast promotion for Fricks, and piddly for us on what the hell happened last night. No way the bridge fell on its own, no explosions heard and no residue on the metal beams and columns, and this kid's lifeless body floats against the current to deposit him on the shore nearly a quarter mile north of the bridge," he said. "Full stop, the answer to most of our questions has to do with this kid. Let's go see the people who found him."

“Off we go then. It’s not too far.” Ramirez clucked his tongue. “Hey, there a nice set of legs in there or something? You haven’t taken your eyes off that waiting room since we walked up.”

Dodd snapped his attention to his partner. “No, sorry, there’s just a guy in there blowing bubbles when everyone else is whistlin’. The one with the crossed legs.”

Ramirez looked into the waiting room and picked up on the guy Dodd was talking about the way most people can spot something out of place in their house. A man of slight build and wearing business casual attire sat in a chair with rouge fabric. A khaki jacket was the cherry on top. He looked more like he was enjoying a day off from work on his front porch than sitting in a hospital emergency room lobby. Mister Pert and Perfect was reading a book laid upon his crossed legs, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

Ramirez couldn’t place it, but the dude was odd. Eager to change the topic, he said, “Speaking of legs, that *Miss Dolan* sure wasn’t ugly.”

Dodd gave a wry grin as he gestured to the door. “That there is a classy woman, Ramirez. She’s got looks and brains and you know what else?”

Ramirez shrugged.

“I’ll just bet she’s got secrets.”

## Chapter Three

### Beneath the Veil

David didn't experience waking so much as he realized consciousness. His mind loosened its grip on resonant memories where he soared through prismatic shapes and wonders. Eyes open, he firmed an understanding of where he was laying. Water. He remembered water, and there was water here, but this felt different. David looked a few feet down an embankment to see glistening granite specks twinkle through lapping waves. This was not the Hudson. For one, there was no grass. David was laying on and surrounded by, firm well-shaped rock. A cave, yes. It felt like a cave, but there weren't caves like this on the banks of the Hudson. For another, the water itself was darker—a pervasive inky quality dominated its movements and gave the impression that to touch it meant to be permanently stained.

*Where is the light coming from? The place should be black as night.*

Turning his head to look for a fissure or opening above him didn't reveal any source. Sparkling glints drew his gaze from above to below and unwrapped the mystery of light emanating from the spots in the rock he'd thought were granite. This place was surreal. David forced himself to his feet, careful to avoid any slippery spots, and took

in his full surroundings. This was indeed a cavernous space. One where a river ran through the center. The breadth of it was immense compared to David's original guess, and it became clear that he couldn't see the far bank. Water simply met darkness, and after their embrace, there was nothing.

The shore was steady and devoid of obstacles, making the decision to begin walking an easy one. More difficult, though, was the choice of which direction. From what he could see in the low light he had at his disposal, both ways seemed identical, but which would be the path to salvation?

"Flip for it," he said, reaching into his pocket for a coin. His wallet was missing, but he felt the familiar smooth surface of what he believed to be quarters against his knuckles. He raked them out. Three heavy coins revealed themselves as he checked his palms. The first was gold in color, the second black as obsidian, and the third silver. All had been inscribed with images. He traced his thumb over a wolf on the black coin. A lion and a leopard on the others. Each contradicted with a cub on one side and a mature predator on the other. The coins held David's attention for a moment as he tried to ascertain where they'd come from before his brain circled back to where he might be in the first place. The truth of his predicament remained cloaked in a similar darkness as that which covered the water.

“Left for lion and right for cub,” he said. The coin spun in the air and the sound of the slap that trapped it to his wrist echoed around him. He lifted his hand to reveal the pathway dictated by chance. “Cub.”

He set out walking in what he hoped was the right direction.

Ω

Rose dragged a worn rag across the table of her recently departed party of four. The clock ticked off the seconds to the end of her shift, but she didn't make a habit of checking it like some of the other servers. She liked what she did for a living, and the time passed quickly enough. Interacting with people was something she had come to cherish, even if it was in the capacity of slinging wings to patrons. She might choose to do something that required people skills for her future career if she ever got around to really thinking about that step.

For now, she was happy to wait tables at The Bone Yard, a local chicken and waffles place that took its shtick from both Hooters and The Waffle House. Tips came frequently, especially for girls in a work uniform comprised of a skimpy pair of spandex shorts and a form fitting T-shirt with the word BONE emblazoned on the front, and Rose didn't mind at all. Patrons tended to be respectful with their comments if not their gaze, and Rose knew how to keep the atmosphere light, and she charmed her way around the restaurant enough to keep herself well paid. David was secure enough to

not bat an eye at this aspect of her job, a circumstance that would certainly show the jealous side of some boys. Perhaps most.

She placed a five-dollar tip in her pocket, reached into the booth to straighten the slightly askew painting of a rancher leaning on a fence, and assigned fresh silverware before returning to the kitchen. Her eyes landed on the news bulletin playing on the flat-screen TV reserved for sports events during the dinner rush.

*Horror on the Hudson: Bridge Collapse Kills At Least 22...*

Before her brain could process what she was reading, her phone began to vibrate in her pocket. Her ears pounded with the jackhammering of her heart as she read the name on the caller ID. Chelsea Dolan.

Ω

David walked for what could have been hours or a matter of minutes. He couldn't rightfully gauge time in the karst; there was no sun to go by. No chirping birds, no rush hour traffic horns, nor anything else. The silence was only interrupted by his shuffling footsteps and the soft sound of water. What kept David's mind occupied were the memories beginning to flood his brain. He remembered who he was, his mother, Rose... But he didn't know how he'd gotten here. One frame of his mind had him playing with his radio and then nothing. He sifted through possibilities and was left without a golden nugget of truth. The best he

could guess, he was in some sort of cave off the shore of the Hudson River. Maybe he'd stopped to empty his bladder and fallen through a long-forgotten hole from when glaciers carved through the crust of this area like a chisel through soft clay.

His thoughts quickly shifted back when he noticed a difference in the light ahead. The soft glow around him emanated uncontested, but up ahead, it was being pushed aside by a more familiar glow. Fire light. David marched on for a few dozen paces and spied what looked to be a lantern sitting atop a hooked pole on a dock. He ventured nearer to the only man-made feature the cave had offered up to him, and something else struck him as odd. Situated on the dock rested a small bell the size of a basketball and darker in color than the brass fittings that affixed it to its place. His soles beat as a metronome as he stepped across the dock.

David remembered the wooden docks from the lake he summered at with his friend Aaron as a kid. Aaron's uncle would take them down to the waterside and attempt to expertly tie hooks on fishing lines as David and Aaron squished fake worms between their fingers and threw them at one another. The wood comprising the docks there had the weather-worn look that treated wood does as it cycles through four seasons over a span of many years.

The dock David stood upon now had seen no weather sealing agent. The first thought that

flashed through his mind was of driftwood, but the appearance was not one of dilapidation. It looked as strong and dry as the day it had been constructed. The structure caused him unease, though. There was something off about the grain as soft light from the flame flickered across it, and David could swear the dock had its own effervescent quality which met the light from both the lantern and the rocks.

He knelt and inspected the bell. Odd symbols adorned the bottom, and there was no lever to ring it. David slid his fingers along the cool surface and a deep chime resonated throughout the cavernous space. The sound echoed off the walls and vibrated the wood beneath his feet. He worried it might shake apart beneath him before it finally retreated like a wave departing; having crashed onto shore, its only choice now was to be cast back to the great expanse of the sea.

“What the hell is happening?” David uttered as he marveled at the bell.

“There’ll be no hell here, boy,” a voice carried through darkness.

David had not known what to expect when he woke here. Certainly not the loud disembodied chime jarring the cavern, or a voice from out in the river. He did what he felt he needed to do in that moment to keep from losing his mind completely: He sat down to feel grounded.

Rose raced to the cab idling out front of the dingy eatery. The news still didn't feel real, as though the world, *her* world, had tilted on its axis upon hearing the phrase *unresponsive coma*. David was her first love, and he was a part of the life she had dreamed up as her future. It had broken her heart into a thousand pieces when he left for school, but she never doubted that they'd endure as a couple. They fit in a way that was alien to some, both pieces shaped in odder contours and cutouts than most but joining in a way that completely removed the seam. One piece.

The driver was one who drove with purpose. For that Rose was thankful. She wanted nothing more than to rush through the lobby and see David, but she had to go through the motions, and it took time. Whirling through the checkpoints at the direction of hospital staff, it was impossible to miss the surrounding chaos. Panic-stricken people found themselves being directed over and over in a perverse version of *Pong*. Rose's attention fell upon two men seated across from one another in lobby chairs—the waiting room for the waiting room.

One gentleman, with his back oriented to the entrance doors, was clad in acid washed jeans and a leather jacket, the salt-dried animal flesh was struggling to contain his arms and shoulders. Two vapid eyes remained at attention and deviated from the hallway leading to the elevator banks and to the other man. This gentleman was slighter in stature and dressed in casual attire with a

seasonable khaki jacket. Soft-rimmed glasses hung low, giving the impression that his attention was on the novel he held open in his lap, *Temptation* by Vaclav Havel.

Rose could tell that the soft-blue eyes of Khaki Jacket weren't being guided by the spectacles, though, and he was looking squarely at his counterpart across the seating area with an expression both intense and casual. The men exuded an aura of extreme conflict that Rose could not place. Perhaps it was akin to feeling a storm approach. Rose gasped as a voice jarred her from the snapshot of potential energy before impact.

"Ma'am, take the second elevator to the seventh floor and follow the signs for ICU," said a man wearing almost as many wrinkles under his eyes as on the jacket of his suit.

Rose nodded and briskly made her way to the seventh floor. She thought of David's poor mother being there alone, waiting for her. *How was this all possible?* This morning, the world had been affixed with endless possibilities, and this night, the dice rolled to reveal snake eyes.

Rushing through the usual roadblocks along the way, she finally entered David's room and was quickly met by his mother.

"He's here, Rose, and he's alive," Chelsea said as she collapsed into Rose with a hug to both give and receive comfort.

Rose could see she had been crying. She simply uttered, "What happened to him?"

“He was on the bridge when it fell. It looks like he was clear of the car when it hit the water, or he swam out, but he took a hit to his head. He was on the shore when they found him and the police...” She paused for a moment, studying the arrangement of flowers in the picture on the wall beside them. “They don’t know how he got there yet. Everyone is a bit on edge about that point, but I’ll tell you about that later. For now, the doctors aren’t worried that he is in mortal danger, but they can’t really explain why he is in a coma either. I’m just so happy he’s alive.”

Rose nodded as she absorbed the information. “Can I see him now?” she asked. Chelsea turned and led her to the bed.

David lay in a hospital gown covered by a light white blanket. “He won’t respond when I talk to him, but his hands are warm, and his face is so peaceful. He looks like he is taking a nap on a weekend afternoon.”

Rose ran her palm down the length of his cheek before sitting and taking his hand into her own. Her emotion, boiling over minutes before, eased as his energy coursed through his hand and to her own. She studied his face for a few moments before speaking to Chelsea. “Do you remember when he brought me on tour of New York City for my birthday a few years ago?” Rose asked.

Chelsea thought for a moment and smiled. “I do. It was to see that street art stuff, right?”

Rose nodded. "Banksy. He's a kind of anonymous street art activist. His works are spread all over the world, but a lot of them are in New York. I was interested in them at the time, and this charmer knew that." Chelsea nodded as she took the adjacent chair. Rose continued, "He made a map and charted all the spots where we could see a real Banksy in the city. He planned our trip, made a schedule, everything. It was amazing. We went to Hell's Kitchen, Bowery Park, all over to the other boroughs. It was exciting, like we were searching for treasure." Tears welled and rolled down Rose's cheeks like morning dew that has outgrown its place on the leaf of a flower. "We can't lose him, Ms. Dolan."

Chelsea watched tears fall onto Rose's hand, which held David's, and she forced a smile. "He's coming back, Rose." Despite Chelsea's reassurances, Rose's tears continued to fall. "Can you imagine a man who would do something like turning your world into a fairy-tale adventure for a day not finding his way back to you?"

Ω

Two men sat in the lobby, one's eyes locking onto the other. The slighter fellow, with his back facing the way into the hospital proper, gently placed a black feather in his book and closed the cover. He leveled his gaze across the semi-ornate tile floor onto that of his leather-clad counterpart, who was no longer able to glance away. Eyes

locked, and in those seconds, the friction between them rose.

Patrons in the lobby wouldn't know why, but the atmosphere became heavy, as though an electrical current was rising to a dangerous level. Flickering began in the lights, and the gentleman wearing leather finally tore his eyes from the standoff the way a mongrel dog relinquishes a ball. He made no move to leave, however. The book opened once more. An unremarkable-looking man lifted out the feather, and tension fled from the room.

The sentinels carried on.

Ω

The bow of a small boat emerged from the murk. It didn't surprise David to see the wood held the same visual quality as the boards of the dock where he sat. The boat was not wide, per se, but it did not sway at all as the man standing atop it raised his arm in salute.

"Hello, young man. You've tolled the bell, and the bell told me. 'Twould be proper to ask a toll be paid, but your fare has been covered for this ride, you see, so there's no bartering to be made," the ferryman said.

The boat eased forward at a steady pace, despite David being unable to identify how it was being propelled. As it drew near, the ferryman became easier to discern. David's eyes explored the curious figure, and he was confronted with an unexpected sight. Standing upright, wearing an amicable expression, was a middle-aged man clad in jeans, a

brown belt, and a tucked in plaid shirt. He had a round helmet of brown hair and matching beard. David was positive he couldn't be shocked by anything at this point in his journey through wherever the hell he was. This development rearranged that idea very quickly.

The man lowered his arm and said, "I'll take you across now, unless you'd like to stay here and tend the bell. Be warned though, the bell tolls for you now but may not toll again for some time, and you won't be hitching a ride with any other. Every soul rides alone."

The man's speech did not match his features, that was certain. He spoke in a way seemingly both backward and forward. There was the nagging feeling of familiarity, and David stood and squared his shoulders.

"I guess I'll take my ride now, considering the alternative, but I've got to say I'm more than a little confused about where I am, why I'm here, and what I should do," David replied.

The man nodded. "Yes, that's common—common enough, anyway. You will find some solace in knowing answers await on the other side of the expanse, but less solace in the knowledge that I myself have few in the way of them. Now, will you step onto my boat with steady legs and ride 'cross the way the water flows, or will you go back to making my far dock your seat?"

David stood and asked, "Just out of curiosity, what would happen if I stayed on this side?"

“Some do, yes, they do. It’s not a fine tale to tell, dear boy. Souls may stay and try to reach across the barrier from this world to the other of the living. To bend the barrier enough to affect small change over there isn’t unheard of, but it’s for naught. Torture thrives in not moving on,” said the ferryman.

David’s foot moved with hesitation toward the end of the dock. The ferryman nodded his approval as the dock met the boat at its bow. “Walk right on and stay true to your balance,” said the ferryman. “This is not water you’ll be wanting to dip in.”

“Why is that?” David asked as he stepped sure-footed onto the middle of the boat, happy to find it as steady as it had looked.

“This water has an effect on most any who touch it, and to the degree to which they touch it will vary that effect, you see. Some have found great power and might from being dipped, and some have become lost altogether in the water itself. It flows deep, you see. Deeper than a fathom or two and deeper than fathom can you.”

David took this in as he stared at the black surface. He saw the glowing from the rocks did not extend to beneath where the surface of the water touched.

The boat cast off without the ferryman moving to push it in the way you might use your boot to push a boat off before pointing it to sea. They turned in a similar fashion before slowly gliding away from the shore into the murk that lay ahead. Darkness embraced them, concealing the dock, but it did not

crush David and the ferryman. It was held at bay by soft illumination from the wooden boat.

“What’s your name?” David asked.

The ferryman smiled. “I’ve been given more than a few of those in my time, but I’ll ask you to call me River for now. Seems fitting, since it’s a river that brought you to me and on the river we’re met.”

“Fair enough,” said David. “I’m David. David Dolan.”

He reached a hand toward River out of habit, and the ferryman looked at him with an expression of wonder, appearing to David to be enshrouded in a small dollop of fear. Young skin met sandpaper as they shook, River wrapping his long fingers around David’s own.

He met the boy’s eyes. “That’s what you call yourself... David, then?” he asked as he released the hand but retained his gaze. “I wonder if you’ve more than one name yourself, David.” River looked on ahead of them into the endless nothingness.

“David, I see you’re blind down here. I can see it in how your eyes hold me like a child holds its mother. I would like to show you something. Look out ahead of you into the murk beyond us.”

David did as he was instructed, more out of habit than obedience, and his eyes drank heavily from the void. “I see nothing but black out there.”

“One needs to know dark to see the light,” River said, and as his words hit home in David’s mind’s eye, he began to make out images in the murkiness beyond the boat.

David saw flashes of a bridge collapse, two figures struggling with the current in the water, the paramedics tending to the one who made it to the shoreline, a woman talking to official looking men in a small room... He saw a small figure holding the hand of another who was in a bed. The fleeting images held a thin quality, making them distinct enough so one could understand the broad concept of what they entailed, but lacking in the detail the mind weaves into context.

“Be so very light,” said River. “Be a gentle whisper. Use absolutely no pressure. Be like an angel’s wing.”

David was transfixed by the impressions behind his eyes, like the negatives of sunlight that appear upon closed eyelids when pointed skyward at noon.

Images continued to roll forward, and David saw more. There was a powerful-looking man squatting inside what appeared to be a sandstone cavern wholly unlike the place David found himself when he woke. He saw a dark fog that was departing from another river and into the dark trees of the forest beyond. He saw a brief glimpse of warriors gathering with a cacophonous clash of violence.

Just as the amount of information flooding David’s mind felt as though it would overcome his ability to process it, the volume ebbed to a slow stop. David found himself stunned and panting.

“What did you just do to me?” he asked.

“You looked through the murk for the first time, boy, and it marks the last time you will ever be called such because no *boy* has seen what you have. It takes time and wisdom to glean past the murk, and a boy’s seen too little time for much wisdom to have yet come.” River reached out a hand to steady David.

“I’m not alive, am I?” asked David.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” said River. “You’re more than you say or more than you know, which is to say you know yourself not. This is a truth of which I am most certain. Steady now— we’ve not much longer to go. Answers await on the other side.”

## Chapter Three

### Antiphon

Dodd and Ramirez broke off from one another before heading to see the couple who found the kid by the river. The sun was up when they pulled into the parking lot of their motel, and Dodd wanted to shower and get on a fresh set of clothes. It was too easy to end up in the same duds for days at a time when you were chasing leads, and Dodd didn't like the idea of starting his twenty-fifth hour in the same boxer briefs. He'd spent more three-day stints in the same underwear as a young detective than he'd like to admit.

The corroded handle turned his shower to scalding hot, and he washed as luxuriously as one could with a bar of soap that looked like a Chiclet in his big hands. At six foot eight and pushing two hundred and seventy, he was used to feeling like a Kodiak bear in a cage when he entered a shower stall. After the hot water was spent, he hopped out and walked through the steam into his room. The full-sized bed was still untouched and he plucked up his clothes from the floral bedspread. The bed seemed comically small to him. He would sleep diagonally on a queen bed, if they had one, but he more often than not had to push two full-sized ones together to be able to sleep without hanging his feet off the edge like a sideshow.

He dressed, ran a comb through his wet hair, and went outside to wait for Ramirez, who always took a good ten minutes longer than Dodd. Work wife stuff. You get to know each other's idiosyncrasies after a while when you're partners. Even before they both landed their Homeland Security designations, which really was a fancy payout for upping your jurisdiction without the necessity of becoming a full-on Fed, he and Ramirez orbited similar areas as detectives.

Ramirez was about a decade younger than he was, but Dodd appreciated the way he looked at things from a slicker angle. Dodd tended to do things by sweeping cards from the deck over time and trimming enough fat so the truth couldn't help but be caught with its ass out in the open. Ramirez liked to find the shortcuts and latch onto a collar faster. Even though both men had worked in different precincts, they were both New York, and talent has a way of growing a mouth and wings. Word gets around when there's a cop who sees past smoke screens, and both Ramirez and Dodd had had that kind of reputation. The two being paired up for the past few years was more than dumb luck, too. With their superiors calculating they could catch better headlines having two older bloodhounds tracking down domestics together, their partnership was all but foretold.

Ramirez sauntered out of the hotel room with his usual swagger and gave a few familiar hunger tells which led Dodd to say, "We can eat breakfast after

we talk to the witnesses.” Ramirez pouted. “You’re not going to buy all of the pancakes at Denny’s and get sluggish on me.”

Ramirez blinked wildly in feigned shock. “How can a man be expected to bring his A game to the table on an empty stomach?”

“You’ll manage,” Dodd said in his de facto no bullshit tone.

“C’mon, man, I hadn’t even eaten yet when we got the call to come out last night,” Ramirez said. “I don’t have a Martha Stewart type gene for at-home cooking like you do. You were probably on your second drumstick after polishing off mashed potatoes when we were called in.”

It was true in a sense. Even though the call about the bridge came in late, both men tended to have long hours and that meant later dinners. Ramirez was also right about Dodd’s dinner being interrupted by the call, but he had been eating shepherd’s pie at the time. It was good, too.

“After,” Dodd said with understanding, yet unwavering resolve.

Ramirez sighed deeply and used the key fob in his pocket to unlock their car. Both men piled in, and they began to drive toward the river again, this time vectoring off to the right a few miles from where they’d usually turn onto the interstate to cross.

“The place is in Fishkill, just north of the bridge. The couple is older, retired. They say they were out walking their dog,” Ramirez said.

“Any particular reason they gave for why he was out over the train tracks?” Dodd asked.

“Nothing in the brief about that. Apparently, the guys who questioned them didn’t care about trespassing on Amtrak property. We should probably start with that,” Ramirez said.

The two drove on and swung the car onto Hudson View Drive. Dodd had the luxury of being the passenger, so he surveyed the neighborhood. It was nice here, the houses kept in a way to indicate middle to high-middle income, the streets well maintained and curbed. He could see this being the ideal spot to plant roots for raising a family.

They turned onto Lamplight Road and slowed as Ramirez looked for the house numbers on the mailboxes and front doors. When they’d spotted the number twenty-one, Ramirez angled the sedan into a newly sealed driveway and the men exited. “You going to be the barber on this one, or am I?” Ramirez asked.

“You took the wheel, so I’ll do the talking,” Dodd said as they stepped up to the door and rang the bell.

The two men waited a few beats, listening for activity inside. “Maybe we came by too early,” Ramirez ventured quietly. Then the telltale sound of nails excitedly clicking on hardwood floors came to the door, quickly followed by hushed but firm words ushering the dog back.

The door opened and a man in his late sixties wearing a pair of slacks with a tucked-in white

undershirt stood before the threshold. Dodd smiled at the baby boomer generation's uniform for loafing around the house, as opposed to the mesh shorts and hoodies millennials had adopted.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" asked George Stuart, as he swung the door open a bit, revealing his foyer.

Dodd stooped a touch to appear less intimidating. "Yes, sir, we hope so. I'm Detective Brendan Dodd and this is my partner Detective Saul Ramirez, Homeland Security. We were hoping you could answer some questions for us about the boy you found out by the river last night."

"Sure, sure. I'd had a feeling I'd not left that out to dry just yet," Stuart said as he gestured the men inside.

Ramirez and Dodd said good morning to Mrs. Stuart, who delivered two mugs of weak coffee bolstered with strong sweetener. They sat at the table while Dodd pet the lab-pointer mix who was eager to be fast friends.

"Is this little beauty the reason you were out that way last night, Mr. Stuart?" Dodd asked.

"Yup, she needs a walking late at night or she gets us up as soon as the sun cracks light. We usually take a walk down Sterling Road. That's what Lamplight turns into if you keep going toward the condos there." He gestured his hand at the bay window showcasing tall condominiums peeking at them over treetops. "Bella usually doesn't pull me out farther than the pool they have

there, but last night she had a bee in her bonnet about getting on down further. Took me up over the tracks for the first time in a few years.”

“We were curious about you being out over the train tracks. Those trains come in fast. It’s dangerous,” Ramirez said, keeping the word “illegal” in his pocket.

George pushed his glasses up the bridge of his sun-marked nose. “Yeah. Meredith isn’t too big a fan of that little trick. S’why we don’t do it as much as we used to, but the fast ones are the Amtrack passenger trains. They stop running southbound at ‘round six p.m., and the CSX freighters are the primaries from then until twelve hours later. Those, you can hear coming clearly out by the water. Especially at night.” He clicked his cheek a few times to call Bella over to him so Dodd could take a break and enjoy his fast track to diabetes in a mug.

“So, you used to go over there often?” Dodd asked. “What was the allure?”

“Ah, there’s a mossy little spot on the other side that runs up to the water,” George said. “It’s low, and the ground is soft... I mean, firm as it needs to be so you won’t lose a shoe in it, but soft on the dog’s feet. She likes it. She also likes to grab some of the driftwood that piles up over there and wrestle ‘em around for a bit.”

“Sounds nice,” Ramirez said.

Dodd picked up the pace. “So, you hopped over the two sets of tracks...”

“Three sets. There’s an old siding there too. Lackawanna steel, if I remember right. Real old, the good stuff. Means it’ll probably hold up longer than me and maybe longer than you or him,” George said, gesturing with his hand.

“Used to work for the railroad, Mr. Stuart?” Dodd asked.

“Yessir,” George replied. “Spent quite a few years out there as a roadmaster, but up farther north a ways. Commute was hell, but the pay was good enough to keep us planted here.”

“So, what happened after you and Bella crossed over the tracks?” Dodd asked.

“We climbed down the ballast there, then over some bigger rocks they’ve piled up in case of flooding. Can’t under-engineer after Sandy,” George said.

Dodd and Ramirez nodded knowingly. Upstate New York took a big hit from the outer bands of the hurricane.

George continued, “I took Bella off the leash to let her run around a little even though it was so late. She bolted right for the water so fast that I thought she was aiming to jump in. I hustled after her quick as these knees would let me and found her pointing at the boy... don’t remember what they said his name was. Well, she was pointing at him lying on his back on the shore there.”

Dodd gave it a moment before he said anything. He knew the old man was telling the truth the same way a honeybee knew the soda on top of the

can is sweet, but he didn't yet know if George was giving him all the honey.

"Was there anything strange about the way the boy was lying there? Anything around him, or maybe signs of a boat landing nearby recently?" Dodd asked.

"Not a boat, no. Those leave an impression on the soft mud by the water. You can tell when kayaks come ashore 'cause they leave those shallow Vs in the mud. A fishing boat or a motorboat would have been deeper, plus a motorboat would have run the risk of getting its outboard engine caught up in the shallows or sucking up god knows what into it if it was inboard. No, I'd say the chances of there being a boat out there last night are damn near zero, but there was something—" he said as he gestured his mug to his wife. "Merry, honey, can you top me off?" Meredith, who'd been hovering by the counter cleaning up the same spot since they'd arrived, dutifully collected the percolator coffee pot and poured more caramel colored speed into George's mug. "Good, that's good. Thank you." He took a long sip. "But there was something strange out there, fellas."

Dodd relaxed his expression and glanced over to make sure Ramirez was writing in his notepad.

"Strange how, Mr. Stuart?"

"Well, there was two things," George said. "The water pushes up sticks and driftwood from the river onto the bank, and when there's been a storm,

the waves crash higher and bring the driftwood further up on the land. That's where most of the wood was last night, but there's been no storms recently."

"It's been a long time since you've been there. Maybe that wood was deposited a while ago," Dodd said.

George said, "Yeah, thought crossed my mind too, but for some reason it didn't feel that way. Maybe you'll see why if you go out there."

"We will definitely keep that in mind. What was the other thing you wanted to tell us?" Dodd asked.

"Oh, right." George furrowed his brow at this and took a long pull from his coffee. "We got these welds in railroading called thermites. They're for when there's a section that needs to be replaced from cracks and whatnot. These thermite welds are hot. Real hot. Over two-thousand degrees Fahrenheit. They will burn your eyebrows off if you just get caught thinking about them too long. There's times where the vegetation starts growing up through the ballast rocks near the tracks, ya know. We are supposed to keep it down, but things grow up all the time, an' no roadmaster has all the hands he needs to keep up the rails, let alone push down vegetation. We did more than a few welds with that greenery under toe. When you have a thermite weld going on nearby, you can see how it scorches them plants and grasses. It's not so much a burn as it is a melting. That's what's out there

near where Bella and me found that boy. The moss nearby looks like there was a huge thermite weld done there. Can't explain that."

Dodd took this in for a few seconds. "You've got more engineering experience than me or my partner here, Mr. Stuart. Do you think that could have been done by a drone or a helicopter of some sort?"

"Ain't no drone that could heat up like that and not melt, that's for sure, and a helo only swirls the grasses and mosses. It doesn't heat 'em. You'll see what I mean," said George. "Something out there got hotter'n hell."

Ω

Asmodeus found his way back through the hardwoods and lush undergrowth where he and his mother had been concealing themselves in the forest. Serenity held court until he descended into the ravine. The flora and fauna of the Catskills region didn't impress him. He was well traveled and timeless in mankind's perceptions, after all, but he *did* enjoy some of the same activities the humans he despised might undertake if they were inclined to listen to the darker voices in their minds. Catching and torturing the deer and small mammals in the area, for example, was not so unlike a child pulling the legs off an unfortunate insect. It was a bore, but it brought about a small degree of pleasure compared to the alternative of sitting destitute.

He was looking forward to hunting season, when more men would ignore the warnings of their ancestors and venture into the woods alone. Their squeals all the more satisfying to Asmodeus—a diminuendo compared to the rising torrents of crescendo heard when a being of such consciousness is extinguished.

“In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell about these woods—so tangled and rough and savage that thinking of it now, I feel the old fear stirring; death is hardly more bitter,” Dante wrote in the first canto of the *Divine Comedy*. Many feel it’s a statement relating to the fear of marching towards the twilight of one’s life after middle age. A lamentation. But a being like Asmodeus would find its meaning to be taken quite literally, if such a being had the inclination to read such works.

The woods, the mountains, the sea, and the desert were where he and his thrived. These places were, after all, where the veil becomes thinnest, and the sprites poked through into circles of death’s head mushrooms to invite people to dance astray until they couldn’t find their way back. Where the leaves stirred for reasons unknown and all living things held their breath, listening. Where gateways to paths long forgotten barely hide themselves, awaiting those unencumbered by the distractions of modern life to chance upon them.

Through the ravine and into a small clearing traced Asmodeus, making not a sound as he progressed. Trees cleared and way was made for

sunlight to caress the earthen floor ahead. Lilith awaited him atop a large boulder of granite deposited hundreds of years ago in a colder time of suffering.

She kept her face arched toward the light and asked, "Do you find your way here with good tidings? I've heard nothing from Nirah the messenger."

Asmodeus approached slowly and knelt before her. There was a time he would have laid himself prostrate before bearing news he knew would anger her, but his stature had been secured since those times, and he was less fearful of her wrath. He too was powerful.

"I did as we planned and put the boy into the water to drown. All was well until I felt a strong heat approaching and was forced to flee. I fear Nirah was consumed by their fire." Asmodeus raised his chin to show that he was not ashamed. "How one such as that knew where we were or what we were doing, I do not know, but it changes everything."

Lilith snapped herself from her leisurely pose in the sunlight. "The boy isn't dead?" she asked.

"He may be. He was all but consumed by the cold water before—"

She stomped on the embers of his logic. "No. If one capable of driving you off interfered, then the boy is alive. The nonpareils do not move without cause, Asmodeus, and cause isn't given without consideration. Eons have passed while they have

debated on a course of action that would be pleasing to the creator. If one is watching the boy, then we have to revise our plans. And there's the loss of little Nirah, my sweet child... You are right, everything has changed."

He considered his next words carefully before speaking. "We are not in peril. Much has changed since we scattered before their upraised swords. We've become stronger. *I've* become stronger than all my siblings. I do not fear them."

"You have become strong from your work, and it is true that you may be able to stand before them, but that is not our goal. We must remove the boy before Azazel takes him," she said, staring into Asmodeus's black eyes. "It is not time for us to test our mettle against that of our rivals, my son, but that time draws close." She gazed through the rays of light flooding her body. Her milky skin drank none. "No. We will take a lesson from the humans and employ a tactic I've been contemplating for some time."

Asmodeus ground his nails into the palms of his hands. "What will we do?" he asked.

Lilith gently picked herself up from the rock and stood in the light. Her form was that of terrible beauty. No man, nor woman, had ever laid eyes on her and staved off the rising tide of lust she sent flowing through their hearts. Adam's first wife, the protosuccubus and mother of a vast host of demonic denizens who have ravaged the world since its transformation from molten amorphē.

She glided as a soft breeze and wrapped herself around Asmodeus as he sat transfixed. “We will release our own host from their partisan duties and allow them to walk in the light. They will disrupt this world in ways our enemies could never have predicted. We will use this to our advantage and spear opportunity when it comes up for breath.” The words were a whisper in his ear.

“They will think we are at war, then?” Asmodeus asked.

“Yes, and they will be blinded to our movements as they choose their course,” said Lilith, before placing her lips on his, pulling his thoughts from anything but her embrace.

They united in the grove, bathed in light from above, their union grinding dissonance within the forest.

## Ω

Dodd felt the mossy ground gently reach above the wood soles of his brown leather shoes. He’d be giving a shiner some business if he didn’t step carefully on this side of the tracks. Ramirez cursed and slid slowly down the granite rock ballast of the train tracks behind him. He looked out over a water-sodden expanse of green that he guessed disappeared in the wetter months of the year and revealed itself through the dryer summer weather patterns. The way it soaked in the river’s moisture made him feel that the curtain was closing on its time above the surface, and it was not long to be swallowed by the Hudson once again.

“Doesn’t seem very special. I wonder why the old man likes it so much,” said Ramirez as he followed Dodd’s progress across the soft ground, stepping clear of the craters the larger man left behind.

“No place really is when you pick apart the pieces, Saul,” Dodd said. His eyes disrobed the ground before him.

Ramirez scoffed, “Ah, that cynical side of yours cropping up?”

“It isn’t cynical, not really,” Dodd said.

“Everything boils down to the same building blocks. Our Legos and this moss’s are all the same when the magnifying glass gets big enough. That’s the nature of things.”

“Really? You think that? I mean, I get the science behind what you’re saying, but there’s other factors at play. How about intent?” Ramirez shot back.

“Intent? What’s that got to do with anything?” Dodd asked.

“Well,” Ramirez said, “the moss is innocuous, like the Switzerland of fungus. It ain’t here to hurt nobody, and it’s fine with that, but those mushrooms over there see things a bit different. Their flag reads *Don’t tread on me, motherfuckers*, and they don’t leave scores unsettled.”

“Ah, I see what you’re saying. Eye for a fungi,” Dodd said.

“Bet you’re proud of that one, you corny old fart,” Ramirez said.

“You bet,” Dodd replied.

The men found their way past the driftwood that had been pushed up inland and walked to the water's edge, quickly identifying the spot George Stuart had spoken of. Dodd knelt and placed his hand on the obsidian black moss, half expecting to feel heat still trapped within. "This is not normal," he said.

Ramirez appraised the situation as professionally as he could by uttering, "What the fuck is that?"

The moss did look as though it had been melted, as George had surmised. Lush green color had defected to a thieving blackness.

"There was intense heat here," Dodd said. "Hot enough to melt this and turn the ground underneath into clay. Look." He rapped his knuckles against where the anomalous ground was, and then, pushed his fingers into the sodden soil a few feet away, releasing water two knuckles deep.

"Maybe there were explosives used here," Ramirez said. "We should get a forensics team to check and see if anything was detonated. Check for residue." He pulled his phone out and began scrolling through contacts.

"Get a rocket expert to come, if you can," Dodd said. "One of the retired demo guys, and somebody with experience using SAMs or RPGs. For the affected area to be this perfectly symmetrical, something shot heat down directly where the kid was laying. Look at his imprint there."

"Okay, I'll ask," Ramirez answered.

Dodd felt the water soaking his socks between the shoe leather and his flesh. Something had fired heat directly down into the ground here, and it had been hot enough to turn the area into a temporary kiln. The boy had been found unscathed.

The logic was becoming less and less firm and Dodd didn't like it.

Ω

Two sentinels set in repose atop dilapidated thrones heard the sound simultaneously as it thrust through the lobby.

To the larger of the two, with lupine features and clad in leather, the sound resonated deeply and rang harmoniously. His ears perked, and he cocked his head with unrestrained and outward pleasure. The slighter custodian closed his book, not bothering to mark his place with the black feather, which now slowly drifted to the floor. The sound reached his ears to quite a different result than his counterpart. It pealed through him as birdsong rang cacophony for Beethoven and to similar effect. He was filled with transient unease at the sound and its implications.

The man with lupine features stood and strode toward the inner hospital where the elevator banks were hidden away. The slighter sentinel stood and filled the vacuum of space in his path: glasses cast aside to reveal a conflagration behind his eyes, now seemingly twice the size of the visage who sat poring over a story.

His counterpart stepped a foot closer, near enough to smell the embers. Heat alone may not have made him break away from his course, for he was invigorated as he had only been on such occasions when he pursued prey under the light of the full moon. Even on those occasions, when his true predatory self was left untamed, he felt only a fraction of this fervor. But when the temporary custodian of Jericho Hospital uttered a word unintelligible to all but the most ancient of entities and a handful of scholars, the leather clad sentinel broke from his desired path and made for the exit.

The slighter man had said, “परीक्ष” which, if heard by someone who was of Indo-Iranian descent in the year 600 BC, would have sounded like, “Test me.” The emissary of predation wisely chose not to but was emboldened to run through the day and the night alike and to act unencumbered by pacts and treaties long standing and long despised. The slighter sentinel knew this. However, his charge was to protect Jericho and the precious soul temporarily ensconced within it. Still seemingly larger than he’d appeared just moments before, he collected his belongings and made his way out of the lobby exit shortly after his counterpart. Nobody would take notice of him walking down the sidewalk and the next instant becoming a memory. No cab hailed, nor car entered.

Nobody save the vigilant woman at the front desk who’d helped Chelsea and Rose find their way to David. The whole occurrence was

outwardly bizarre from her perspective but shouldn't have been frightening. Yet, for reasons she couldn't understand, she was covered in a cold sweat. Her breath keeping just out of grasp, she hoped to never see those men again for as long as she lived, but hope holds little sway when weighed against the hands of fate.

## Chapter Four

### Jacob

David and River traveled in silence for a short time. The placid nature of the water added to the unnatural miasma surrounding the boat. The feeling was reminiscent of The Old Mill ride at Playland in Rye, New York, as though they were being pulled by an unseen mechanism below the water's surface and floating on and on. The two seemed content with the company of silence until River broke the spell.

"Water's like me. Does things the easy way."

"Can you read my thoughts?" David asked.

"Not in the way you're thinking," he said, "but I can see through the murk as well as the keenest eye ever molded. It adds a touch of precognition, if you understand."

"I understand better than I would have over an hour ago, that's for sure," said David, remembering his visions through the living darkness. He moved closer to the front of the boat. "It's clearing up there."

Darkness had become so familiar to David while they were crossing the water that he hadn't imagined an end to it. Layers of opaque lifted one

at a time, giving the sensation of forward movement he had not felt since they lost sight of the far dock. With it came a sudden shift in perception and a bout of vertigo that made David take a seat in the boat to let it pass.

“See how it fades right into nothing? That’s just what you’re looking for,” River said.

David shook his head. “That’s the problem. I’ve never seen darkness fade without light before.”

“It is to be expected, David,” River said. “You may have a foot in this world now, but you’re not of it. An orchid raised on the sill of a window won’t find feeling the desert air as easy a sufferance as its brothers and sisters who dwell within it.”

“I did alright in figurative language when I was in school, Riv. You speak in a lot of metaphors, and I’m starting to think you’re telling me I’m more than David Dolan of New York.”

River began, “Anytime you learn, you—”

“Gain,” David finished. “I heard that once on TV, when I pretended to be sick to stay home from school. I think it was channel thirteen. I’ve heard a few of the things you have said to me down here on that TV show with that painter guy, Bob Ross.” Realization hit David’s features. “You look exactly like him too. Are you Bob fucking Ross?”

River smiled so broadly it threatened to crack his face. “No, I’m not. I’m River the ferryman, taking you across the way.” David gave him a look of distrust. “I take many across the way and many who come to the bell are tired and scared. A life’s

toils compound, and most don't enjoy their last memory of leaving because what they don't tell you is that dying is hard. And for most, dying is pain. A long time ago, I took to changing my form to match what is comforting in the traveler's mind. I can see it—"

"—through the murk," David finished.

"Yes. Through the murk," River added.

"Why didn't you take the shape of Gandhi, or Mother Theresa, or my girlfriend? Hell, you could have been Elmo if you wanted to make me feel comfortable. I barely remember Bob Ross. I mean, he was amazing on that show, but still." David sighed. "Sorry, it feels like I'm speaking about you in the third person even though I know you're not Bob Ross." David paused. "This just doesn't make sense to me."

"Much won't for some time yet," River said. "My ways are included, given that you aren't likely to be seeing me again. And if you *do* perchance come my way in the future, it means no good came to you in recent circumstance. This one parcel of confusion I can shed light on for you, though. I couldn't see far into your mind's eye. It's closed off to me in ways it never is for ordinary folk. A shutter in your mind blocked most all, but I snatched a tiny ray of light I saw coming through it." He smiled as he mimicked brush strokes in the air with his right hand. His left held an invisible paint pallet. "Happy trees, David. Happy. Little. Trees."

The outline of a shore became visible to David as he looked away from the ridiculous ferryman and past the bow of the tiny vessel. The utter similarity between this landscape and the side he'd left behind caused momentary panic until the absence of a bell atop the slowly emerging dock showed a variation. David thought he saw a figure standing off to the right. His vision was keen, but the murk had a way of making the available light waver.

Squinting, he could make out that the man was taller than average and wearing clothes that would be out of place in New York but were somehow fitting here. They were baggy, like what you might see extras wearing as they filmed a movie scene at a bazaar. The most striking feature the man held was a thick cloth covering over his eyes. He was blindfolded.

"There's he who paid your toll fee. It's not an easy fix, sending the ferry to the other side to courier the living, but he over there..." River lifted his arm and pointed across the water at the figure standing near the far dock. "He can move mountains if the ends justify the means."

"Wait, I'm supposed to be dead?" David said. "Why am I supposed to be dead?"

River sighed. "You aren't supposed to be dead, David. That's the point. I just told you—life courses through those veins, but you are where the dead pass, mistake that not." River gave David a serious look. "That man there is going to take you when we reach the dock, and you'd be wise to listen to

him. I like you; you've light, and I don't see much light down here. I don't want to see you run off into the darkness and find your doom."

David tried to keep his eyes on the man he was being ushered to meet, but something about the glinting of the shores pulled his gaze away. The sparkling stopped well before the waterline over here. A survey of the dock showed the glow from the wood was also dimmer partway up the columns holding it aloft. "Why is the rock there not speckled with light?" he asked.

"The water eats the light it touches. S'why I cautioned you not to venture into it or let it splash you," River said.

"But there's no water touching those areas," David said.

"True," River said. "No water is there now, but there was a time when it kissed those peaks, though briefly. The river swells high when many souls come through at once. What you are seeing is from the river rise due to a great war in your world, probably before you were alive. Raised the water higher than it's ever been."

"The world wars," David said. "I think those are what you're talking about."

The boy sat for a few seconds to ponder this, then he turned to River and considered his next words. "I want to see the real you. Can you take off the Halloween costume?" he asked.

"Youths all wish to cast themselves from ignorance, but none ever know the burden

knowledge brings," River said. "There are stories of once-untouchable titans perpetually rent and torn over this burden. Humanity is said to have been turned away from an eternity in the light over this burden, and a small child is being yoked with this burden at a funeral because she's just realized her own mortality for the very first time. You will never be able to look back. This is the nature of truth, David. Are you sure you want to see the truth?"

David nodded, never taking his eyes off River's. "So be it," River said.

The murky cloud cloaking the boat descended upon them, but David wasn't touched as he expected. In a few moments, he relived the ethereal geometric shapes and colors he'd washed from his memory when he awoke on the shore. Windows formed in the shapes and through each he could see rivers flowing through different landscapes. There were thousands. So many that he shouldn't have been able to process the sheer amount, but he could, and he understood them as well.

He saw a river of deep sadness flowing in a space that looked similar to where he began this journey, juxtaposed next to a river flowing in Vietnam where a family was laughing and splashing. He saw a river of flames and chains flowing into the bowels of the earth, and also a river of pure forgetfulness. There was a river head of memory, and one of oblivion, a deep void of nothingness into which everything went and out of

which nothing came. In this moment of pure understanding, David became disillusioned to many of the things he had once considered to be absolute.

As the windows flexed, reformed, and flew away, David's focus came back to his river and guide. He looked upon the boat, which he now knew to be propelled by lamentation, and saw the hue of light was gone. The ferryman continued to look at him, but now River wore a much deeper beard. Tendrils gnarled his face like the roots of an ancient oak, bearing age as iron wears rust, and out protruded a crooked nose akin to the likeness of a child masquerading as a witch in October. His eyes, sunken as they were, seemed like wells of wisdom colored in gray.

"A mask might have been your preference, then?" asked River, as he continued to appraise David.

"No, I prefer you like this. As you are," David said. "I've never liked being coddled."

River nodded. "Seems not, seems not. You know the Romans drew me more of a monster than a man, and Christians liken me more to death than the son of Night, but I guess the sight of me is easier to digest when things are in focus. And focused you are, David. Those young eyes have seen glimpses of where you are now. Not Kansas, nor New York, nor any place you'd ever thought existed. But here you are. Tell me—do you now believe yourself in a dream?"

“No,” David said. “For some reason, I know this is real. I can feel it is real in a way I can’t explain. The longer we’ve been on this boat, the firmer the motion feels. It’s odd, but I can also feel my mother and Rose. They are close to me somehow. I can’t explain how I know. I just know it feels comforting.”

“It’s good you’ve no wool over those eyes, lad. You’re not the first person ushered to me by that fellow there,” said River, pointing again to the man they drew closer to on the shore, “and not the first who still draws breath. But you are the first in a long while. Even by my standards.”

David straightened as they came to within fifty feet of the dock. “I know who you are now, but I don’t know who he is. I still don’t know why I’m here, either, but I do feel better than before. Thank you for that, Kharon.”

Kharon the ferryman smiled broadly at David. “You’ve seen the rivers, seen through the murk, and from it you’ve gleaned my true name. We are well met, David, and we can part in good faith. In that spirit, I’ll tell you one last thing. Those coins you have will weigh you down.” Kharon reached out and patted David’s pockets where the coins were nestled. “You should endeavor to lose them by any means you can. If I’m right about what I see in you, you are good, but time will tell as it always does.”

David hadn't thought of the coins since he decided to walk off in the direction that took him to the dock. "I'll try," he said.

The boat smoothed to a stop as the wood from the dock kissed the bow. A moment of trepidation stayed David before he stepped off and looked back at Kharon, who had reverted again to his Bob Ross visage.

"Just let go and fall like a little waterfall," he said.

David rewarded him with one last smile and stepped off the dock, into the shadow of the man who waited for him.

## Ω

Rose sat reading *The Penelopiad* at David's bedside. Days had passed since she'd first entered the hospital to meet Chelsea. Now, the petite auburn-haired girl had become a fixture in this room. The staff often doted on Rose, and it was a shift nurse who had handed her the novella. She found a reprieve from her thoughts as her eyes traced the pages, but the recurring idea of David being somehow entangled within his own odyssey would cause her to close the cover and place the story aside.

David hadn't yet shown any signs of coming out of his condition, yet the doctors showed little worry. Rose noted that there was an increased presence in the room, though the doctors' intentions felt more akin to those of Dr. Moreau

than medical professionals who endeavor under the Hippocratic Oath.

The increased interest stemmed from when hospital employees began to take notice of subtle oddities in David's physique that didn't jive with the listed expectations in whatever book they took down and passed around. The support staff performed the tasks they would on any patient who was sedentary for long periods of time in order to stave off atrophy and bedsores, thus making Rose feel some comfort in David's body receiving care, but they too would comment on how David's condition was irregular.

Early flags included how David seemed heavier as they moved his limbs, and one CNA swore he had become more muscular since he'd been admitted. This was the opposite of what should have been happening, and they convinced one of the resident PAs to take BMI measurements. Sure enough, David's numbers were changing in the same way one's might if they were training for a triathlon. His body fat had plummeted. Again—not altogether abnormal as some patients may come in with a large amount, but his muscle structure was also taking on a form that became increasingly noticeable. She could have sworn stares began to linger as David's body became more akin to that of an Olympic athlete than an everyman. Rose made sure the nurses who bathed him took note of her being in the room. Vegetable or not, she had staked a claim on that body. She studied David's broader

chest and shoulders with the thought of how they'd feel pressed up against her in their next embrace.

After some time caressing his hand, she stood, gently kissed David on his lips, and gathered her belongings to leave. Chelsea would be here soon to sit by David's bedside, and Rose needed to go to work.

She walked briskly past the nurse's station and heard a cheerful "see you later" from the staff. Rose thought they may have felt like the two young lovers were in some sort of Nicholas Sparks novel, their pain and lamentation being intertwined with romance in a way that had become insidious. Happily ever after didn't have to be punctuated by pain, at least Rose didn't think so. She and David were going to stay together forever; she had no more a doubt of that than she did of the sun rising in the East in the morning. If there was a price to be paid for that joy, she'd gladly wring the neck of the unfortunate soul who came to collect.

Leaving through the lobby, Rose's attention was pulled to a televised national news broadcast, a constant spew of information to stiff arm good tidings before they could break through. The story ticker read: MISSING PERSONS REPORTS SKYROCKET AS WARM WEATHER BRINGS MORE INTO WILDERNESS. The reporter, a mousy blonde backdropped by a trailhead, was speaking into a microphone and gesturing behind her as a sidebar of pictures showed three young men in

mountaineering garb and flashing snow-white smiles.

Rose walked out of the lobby, hitched her duffel up on her shoulder, and trekked toward the restaurant as the rays of the sun softened and night began its gentle conquest over the sky. Twilight air held a hint of the crisp bite of winter chill to come, but the smell of fall in the evening had also roasted and it revitalized her. Winter in New York could be a tough lesson even for lifelong residents. It stretched on longer than one might ever remember, and its hold was firm. Rose took note of the absence of people who might be out walking their dogs or choosing to ride their bikes rather than drive their cars. Those were sparse, too, for the time of day when rush hour would just begin to ebb.

The solitude made her feel exposed, looking up at the swift moving clouds of an October sky as All Hallows drew closer on the calendar. She walked on, her thoughts occupied by David's situation. The detectives hadn't returned while she was in the hospital, but she knew that Detective Dodd had called on Chelsea a few times since they'd first met. The tone of the conversations, at least on Chelsea's end, seemed quite cooperative. The detective himself appeared a decent enough man from what Rose had been told by the doctor on call—and Chelsea, as well. There was an air of him chewing over a chunk of fat he couldn't quite swallow though, and Chelsea may have felt this way too, since she very easily divulged information to a man

who, when you cut right to the bone, could be building a case that David was a terrorist. Rose was somewhat ambivalent toward the idea of the investigation. She wanted to know why that bridge collapsed in the first place. Forty-two was the number of souls lost to the Hudson's frigid waters that night, the story dominating the news for far too short a period of time in this age of scandal.

Rose arrived at The Bone Yard and entered the backroom to change into her outfit, thankful that the air inside was warmer than usual. She saw Victoria coming off her shift.

"Deep pockets tonight, Vic?" asked Rose as she shimmied her shorts on.

"Not a bad night," Victoria said. "There's a guy who has been here for a while, though, table started as mine, but you have to finish him off. He's devouring plates of food and probably had seven beers. Boss made me cut off the booze, but the guy switched to soda and seems even happier with that. He's a bottomless pit."

"Sounds like the kind of guy we like to see when bills need to be paid," Rose said.

"We'll split the tip, but even with that it might be the biggest of the night for both of us. I think his tab was over three hundred last I checked, and that was at least a half hour ago. He's ordered more since. The ticket'll be up soon." Victoria pulled her coat on over her uniform and lifted a battle-weary purse.

“Should be interesting. Seemed empty, so I won’t complain. Is he a full boother?” Rose asked.

Victoria shook her head. “He’s not fat at all. Kinda skinny, actually. Has a face like Steve Buscemi.”

Rose laughed.

“How’s David?” Victoria asked, angling toward the door out of the closet they called a changing room.

“He’s still out, but he’s not getting worse,” Rose said. “Makes me feel better to sit with him. I can’t really describe it, but I think he knows I’m there for some reason. I need for him to know I’m there. I can’t bear the idea that he’s lost somewhere in the dark.”

Victoria doubled back and wrapped her long arms around Rose. “He’ll wake up, girl, and when he does, your face is going to be the first one he sees.” She kissed Rose’s cheek and walked toward the door. Vic always left in a rush because the daycare charged her a penalty if she was a minute late to pick up her kids. “He’ll give that cute booty a grab, too,” she said as she blew a kiss.

Rose laughed, waved her final goodbye, and finished dressing, checking herself in the full-length mirror. She spent a little extra time looking at her rear than she might have if Victoria hadn’t said anything and walked out to the kitchen counter to sign into her shift. *ROSE: 6-CLOSE*. The dinner shift was the money-making shift, but the rush of customers seemed a little behind today. She hoped it would pick up soon. Working as a server

might be one of the best ways to pass time at work, but when things were slow, the pendulum swung mercilessly in the other direction and time dragged for eons.

“Plates for table thirteen, Rose,” Armand said from across the aluminum barrier. “Guy’s trying to put Vic’s kids through college. Easily had over fifty wings, ribs, and a good-sized T-bone steak. Keeps ordering. Don’t stop him—I want to see if he explodes before he leaves.” The cook winked at her before slapping the edge of his spatula against the table twice to punctuate the joke.

“Who’s busing tonight? I doubt they will be eager to clean human remains off a booth,” she said.

“Kid didn’t show,” Armand said. “Didn’t answer his phone yesterday or today either. Looks like we lost him. Same thing with Perry” Meat hit the pool of hot grease and hissed.

Perry had worked at The Bone Yard for a long time. It was completely out of character for a guy who was probably next in line to be manager to pull a “no call, no show”.

Rose wrinkled her nose. “Hope he’s okay,” she said absently as she turned and walked her zone.

There was a father with his teenage son sitting at a four top on one end and a vast wasteland of tables between him and the sole booth with an occupant. The red glow of the exit sign glinted off the green lamp shades that had replaced the

jukeboxes from when this place was a diner many years ago.

Rose checked on the father-son team, being sure to give enough attention to the son to satisfy his father's need to see him make a lady smile. She could imagine the clap on the back and the "that's my boy" as they entered the parking lot after dinner.

She walked over to the booth with her hand on her hip, but the perky greeting she'd prepared caught in her throat. Armand had said over fifty wings, but he should have probably said over two hundred. There were half as many ribs stripped down to their osseous matter too, and the bone from the T-bone had been cracked, showing that the dark marrow had been stripped clean from within.

The man looked up at her through thick glasses. His face was odd, as though the skin linked to his facial structure was barely able to cling there, and his veins showed through his forearms devoid of body fat. The guy could have played Slender Man in a theatrical release movie version of the online game.

"Hi, I'm Rose. I'll be taking care of you from now on since Vic's shift ended. Can I get you a refill on your pitcher?" Rose asked, more flatly than she would have hoped.

"Yes," he said. "More. A different kind. I'd like more bread. Do you have different kinds? Bring them all. I want more of these fried onions. More

fried potatoes.” He shifted his eyes, unusually magnified by thick glasses, back to the last of his glass of soda and the small amount of shepherd’s pie he had left. His progress as he consumed the food wasn’t fast, but it was deliberate.

Rose’s eyes followed a couple of flies hopping across the bones on some of the plates. She reached in to stack some. “I’m sorry about the mess, our bus boy couldn’t make it ton—”

He grabbed her wrist. “Leave them,” he said through a mouthful of food, releasing her arm as she pulled it back.

Rose managed to choke back a cry of surprise. “Um, sure,” she said and quickly turned to walk away. The father and son duo had seen the exchange while appraising her from behind, and they’d taken note of her wrist being grabbed. The two stared daggers at the man in the booth, but he didn’t seem to notice.

Rose placed the order ticket for table thirteen and Armand laughed as he mimicked a belly exploding from behind the counter, falling silent when he saw Rose’s expression.

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay at the hospital?” Armand asked.

“It’s not that,” Rose said. “That guy in thirteen. He’s off, but I can’t really explain it. He grabbed my arm when I tried to clear his plates.”

Armand bristled. “He touches you again, you tell me. I’ll roll him right out of here and double charge his card.”

“Will do,” Rose said and occupied herself with sorting the clean silverware before checking on her patrons again a few minutes later.

The father and son called for their check, and Rose walked to the back to the computer for the tally. She heard the buzzing of flies from the booth to her left but resisted the urge to glance over.

“Here’s the check. Thanks so much for coming in,” she said to the son before winking and turning heel to see to table thirteen.

The buzzing had grown to match the number of flies. They all but covered the spent remains, but none adorned the last remnants of the plate the man was working on. He was almost out of food.

“Where’s the rest?” he asked through clenched teeth that dripped marinara.

“It’ll be right out,” she replied, not daring to ask about the flies or the plates.

“It needs to be now. I want more now. NOW!” The outburst startled Rose enough to drive her back a few steps. Chairs scraped as the men from her other table stood.

“Hey. Take it easy, man. She’s the messenger, not the cook,” said the father.

The son followed up with less restraint. “You’ll get your food, fat ass.”

The man in booth thirteen took his bespectacled eyes from Rose and focused them on the two advancing toward him. “More,” was all he said, but he muttered it in a bedraggled mania that Rose found more alarming than a shout.

“You’re a little off, man,” the father said. “How about calling it a night and heading home?”

Silverware clinked as the patron stood. His posture was crooked at the top of his back, and his arms were odd, like those of a praying mantis. His eyes devoured the father.

“More,” table thirteen said.

Flies lifted from plates and swarmed the father en masse. The sight was stomach curdling as he desperately smacked at his face. The son, sensing the flies were somehow connected to the patron, rushed the man as Rose shouted for Armand’s help.

Clicking sounds followed as two swift blows from the kid connected before he was seized by the shoulders and shaken to a quick and violent cessation.

“Stop.” His speech turned to shrieks. “Let go of me!”

Rose looked on as thin fingers dug into the boy’s shoulders. Blood cascaded, drawn down by the whiles of gravity.

“Stop! Stop!” Rose cried, hoping it would turn the man’s attention back to his table. “Your food is coming out!”

He ignored her and studied the boy for a moment before he opened his mouth. His jaw falling impossibly low, the size of his maw swelled as teeth shifted out and around to accommodate the larger circumference. Two mandibles reached forward, out of his cheeks.

Rose watched in horror, continuing her protests. The father was too busy scraping his eyes and mouth to rid himself of the flies to yet notice. Armand had finally rounded the corner, brandishing his large flat spatula as though it were a battle axe.

The man from table thirteen's mandibled mouth descended upon the boy's head, and the sickening sounds of his skull snapping open drowned out the screams. Wet consumption followed.

The father fell, slowing his resistance to the flies, which had once again doubled in number and were clogging his airways. Rose backed away, and Armand placed himself between the young woman and the creature.

"Go to the kitchen and call the police," he said, tapping the spatula against his fist twice. "Go now."

Rose rushed through the swinging double doors and made her way to the phone. The 911 operator had just answered when she heard Armand scream, "Damn you!" The sound of furniture being overturned in the dining area followed, and she could hear the monster saying something to Armand. Rose only made out the word "Ekron."

"911, what's your emergency?"

"People are being attacked at the restaurant where I work. We need help!"

"Where are you, miss?"

"The Bone Yard on South Street. He's killing people!. We need help *now*."

"I'm dispatching the police. Does the man know where you are? Is he armed?"

"I don't know. Our cook is trying to subdue him right now, but the man is dangerous. Oh my god. He's eating people!"

"Eating people? Ma'am, you're not joking with me, are you?"

"No, he ate a teenager's head and..."

Rose sobbed. hearing the sound of the double doors swinging inward, she turned and dropped the phone.

Table thirteen was standing in the kitchen, looking at her. A deep mahogany had invaded his plaid shirt, and gore caked over his pants.

"More," he said.

Rose screamed. *This isn't real. How can this be real?* A final thought passed through her mind. *I don't want to die.*

"Miss, the police are on their way. Try to remain calm. Miss, are you there? Can you hear me?" The voice of the operator tried to assure her from miles away.

Rose backed away until spitting grease from the fryer bit through her shirt at the lower back. She hissed and sidestepped, but there wasn't an exit this way. Just the food prep window to her left.

The creature advanced toward her. His mouth had become smaller again, but mandibles still protruded from his cheeks, pushing out from beneath his fleshy disguise. Still chewing, his saucer eyes ravaged her from behind his glasses.

He rushed, looking to capture her with his long arms in the same way he'd grabbed the teenage boy.

She reacted by grabbing the first thing she could reach. The basket in the fryer lifted out and arched a spray of scalding liquid directly at the creature. He stopped to watch it soar through the air but didn't register it as a threat, and the main body of the grease landed on his face and chest.

Rose watched the appalling sight of flesh melting away, and boiling as the grease leached its way through its pores. Human skin parted, and scraps fell away, revealing horrors concealed beneath. His jaw was a nightmare of teeth, and his tongue, long and tubular, flicked like a snake. Black patches of coarse hair burst through particularly well-burned areas of skin, and his left eye melted away to reveal something bearing more resemblance to a window screen.

He spewed a green liquid at her from his tongue, but she was already rolling to her left. The cool metal from the counter kissed her skin as she rushed back into the dining room. She landed facing the kitchen. Her burning shoulder nagged at her, but she was too focused on her pursuer to give in to the temptation of checking it.

The man had reached into the grease fryer and was greedily consuming chicken wings. He had lost interest in Rose.

She seized the opportunity to rush back to Armand and the father and son who had tried to

help her. The boy's body was absent to his chest. The remaining parts of his shoulder blades showed clean white, seemingly at odds with the bottom of his ventricles, which were exposed. The father, completely enveloped in insects, appeared withered under the bulbous flies. Armand was dead. His arms had been removed at the sockets and there was a large portion of his abdomen melted away. His eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling.

Rose grabbed Armand's spatula less as protection and more to anchor her to reality, and ran through the front entrance into the night, holding it to her chest. The concept of time became foreign while she waited for the police to arrive, her focus slipping as she tried to catch her breath.

Responding officers exchanged glances as she quickly told them what had transpired, and she waited with one while two others investigated the scene inside. Red and blue lights danced on the brick siding of The Bone Yard. The third officer snapped the guard off his holster as gunshots rang out into the night.

Ω

David walked from the ragged dock to the man awaiting him. "You're likely already aware, but my name is David. David Dolan." David cocked his hand back with pointed a thumb at Kharon, who was making brush strokes in the air at them. "The ferryman said you paid for my crossing. Thank you

for that." David paused and considered his passage over the river, then said, "I think."

The man lowered his face, giving the bizarre appearance of scanning David though his cloth blindfold. "I know you, David. You may call me Jacob. Now we are known to one another."

David ran his hand through his thick hair to slick it back from his forehead and relaxed his shoulders. A sigh blew the tension of his ordeal out through his well-aligned teeth.

Jacob turned his body and gestured for David to walk with him away from the river. "As I said, I know you. You are the only son of Chelsea Dolan, you graduated from high school as salutatorian, you studied well in college, but you lost the spark of inquisitiveness many boys do as they become men. You have been kind to strangers since you were a child, you are idealistic to a fault—stomping on pragmatism as soon as it rises to challenge you. I know you well. The time has come for you to begin to know yourself."

The words seeped into David as water silently invades a sponge, the porous mouths drinking steadily and slowly. He wasn't expecting this man to be quite so loquacious just after making his acquaintance, and David certainly wasn't expecting to get a positive Yelp review.

"You been stalking me?" he said.

"You are important," said Jacob, missing the subtle sarcasm.

"I'm getting that," David retorted. "I don't agree with it, but I see you have your mind pretty well made up." He scratched his cheek and sighed. "I just met a man I first read about in Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* when I was in seventh grade. If I use that logic as a guide, then maybe you're Sampson, or I guess you could be Hercules. Might be nice to be stalked by Hercules, though I'd run the risk of getting smashed should he take too much of a shine to me. Ever read *Of Mice and Men*, Jacob? If I ask you to look at the alfalfa, you'd better start running as fast as you can, buddy."

Jacob smiled at this. His weather-worn facial features gave him a distinguished look when they lifted. "Despite knowing you, I do enjoy how your wit keeps me guessing what you might say," said Jacob, indicating he understood the references. "I'm not Hercules, and though Sampson is closer to the mark, I am not him either." Jacob paused to consider his next words. "Do you understand celestial bodies, David?"

"Not strictly speaking," David said. "That is, I guess I haven't studied heavenly bodies further than, say, Scarlet Johansson or Bella Hadid."

Jacob spoke swiftly and struck the point like the tip of a sword. "I am of fires churning with such heat that they forge the elements of all existence in your world. I have been conscious since just after light first invaded chaos, and I hope to continue to usher that light for many eons more. My brethren and I are innumerable, though we shine with

varying degrees of intensity. The further humanity peers into the unknown, the more of us they will find."

David didn't know how to respond to this. He knew he wasn't in a dream because dreams weren't this detailed, and he'd never had one even close to half as long as this experience. "Tell you what, Jacob, who describes himself in the form of a riddle... Let's say that's all true, and I am walking next to a raging furnace. What would a colossally powerful thing like you want with a person like me?"

"I've been communing with humans since they were able to feel my presence. Being allowed to feel the grace of your world is a gift that not all receive," Jacob said. "Some shine brightly, wielding power and responsibility. Some smolder and are meek. Yet, we all push back against the darkness."

"So, you're special?" David asked.

"That's a subjective question that would be narcissistic to confirm and unbelievable to deny," replied Jacob, as he turned his long stride slightly left and up an incline along the path. "You are the one who decides the answer."

The landscape around David had changed. The small comfort of the glow all but departed behind them, and the terrain took on a more open-air quality. The sky above was not yet discernible, but David could sense the lack of cover. It was dark, but it felt like a cloud-filled night more than an entombment underground. The edges of his vision

picked up the shapes of what could be small plant life. It reminded him of camping at the Grand Canyon as a boy, so different than his jaunts up the Hudson River with the Boy Scouts, but lacking the vibrancy. Reality seen through a gritty window.

"I'll do that," David said. "Make up my mind, that is."

"Good lad." Jacob patted David's shoulder with hands that may have once molded stone into sculpture. "Soon we will come to a place of choosing. You will do the choosing, naturally. Until then, we may palaver if you wish."

David decided to walk in silence for a time. He thought of the truths within the murk that Kharon had helped him lift. He thought about his mother and Rose, and what they might be thinking right now.

Not wanting to sample much more than the fruit most accessible on the lowest branches of life had become David's calling card. No backpacking trip through Europe was worthwhile, unless Rose took an interest. Or a surfing trip in Vietnam, nor island hopping through Greece. These took a backseat to slathering paint on the white picket fence that would wrap around their future home, sealing the happiness within and fending off the frivolity which may try to invade. This was the life he'd been vectoring toward, and frankly, it was the one he'd earned. Not making waves was looked down upon far too often, but waves break and ripple.

Their lives were to be the lake's crystalline surface at sunrise.

"I don't think I'm capable of doing what you may ask me," David said. "I'm not the kind of guy who walks amongst the stars."

"No, you aren't," said Jacob, giving David nothing else to chew on as they walked.

Time passed as they continued, and David realized he had no idea how long they'd been walking.

"Why aren't I getting tired?" David asked.

"You're clever to notice something like that so quickly," said Jacob, grinning wide. "What if I told you you'd never want in the way of hunger or thirst ever again? How would you take that?"

"I'd say I was dead," David fired back.

"I'd say you were just beginning to live," replied Jacob, just as quickly. "Being a man means being compelled. Forced to act by outer forces and inner urges. I believe Abraham derived something to that effect. He wasn't wrong."

"Abraham from the Bible?" David asked.

Jacob shook his head. "Abraham Maslow. He found that a man in starvation will do things considered unspeakable to a man with bursting cabinets." Jacob did not give David time to respond to this, which David may have done because he knew of Maslow's work. "So, what would a man do or be like if he did not have to act in accordance with his environment or biology?" Jacob asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe he would act with more kindness. He’d be more insightful. I guess he’d act more like an angel than a man.”

“Right on half the point,” Jacob said. “An angel is as different from being a man as a man is different from being a honeybee. There are similarities—free will for example—but the differences are far more numerous. At least until you get to the quantum level. Mankind finds it hard to differentiate themselves from angels because they put themselves into everything they see, and they only see the parts of angels that angels want to show them. Humans are shown what they may comprehend.” The words flowed out of Jacob like a deep mountain spring. “The part about insight is closer to the point. *In sight*. Seems fitting, no?”

“I guess it does,” David said. “Maybe that’s why Native American’s starve themselves when they go on vision quests.”

“And why monks fast for months trying to separate themselves from their biological desires to connect their spirits to what’s out there,” Jacob said, waving his hand making the sky burst into the most beautiful display of the cosmos that David had ever witnessed. Above was now alive, as though the still picture you might spy on a rocky mountain top at night was sped up hundreds of thousands of times. Stars were born in nurseries of gas clouds, and they formed together by the billions into beautiful arms around an abyssal center that itself danced among many more like it

throughout the darkness. Every moment brought winks as celestial bodies quietly died, and vast explosions as others cried out their demise, only to be brought back together into another cloud of calm where more were to be born.

David stared, stunned, unaware this was the first time he'd stopped walking since he and Jacob had set out together.

"Drink it in for as long as you like," Jacob said to David as the boy's wide eyes scanned the scene. "I thought you'd be less impressed with this now that there's such accurate models available for you to see whenever you wish."

"This isn't the same as seeing The Universe on the History Channel," David whispered, "and you're not Michio Kaku, Jacob. This is on another level entirely. I feel like I can jump straight up and become a part of it."

Jacob smiled as David's eyes drank in the universe.

Ω

Rose was taken to the police station by the same officer who had stood vigil over her. He was a younger man than the ones who had entered the restaurant and was keen on comforting her, though he lost interest in her statement quickly after the gunfire broke out.

Apparently the two officers who confronted the man from table thirteen had loosed their entire service issue magazines when they saw the bespectacled horror devouring raw meat from the

refrigerator. Mr. Table Thirteen had chosen flight instead of standing against two officers much better equipped to deal with him than a fry cook and some civilians.

He had fled through the exit by his table and the pursuing cops couldn't make out where he'd gone afterward. The flies were absent by the time they'd investigated the scene, making Rose's account of events seem thin. Armand was found, and so were his missing arms. The two meaty appendages had been stripped down to the bones, as though they'd been painstakingly bleached by a taxidermist rather than expertly handling cooking utensils minutes before. The cops also found the remains of the father. Whispers of him sounded grim, but she was spared the more descriptive details. Rose was questioned a few times as more and more supervisors were brought in, until Chelsea arrived to pick her up because her own parents were unreachable.

"Thank goodness you're alright. You aren't hurt, are you?" Chelsea mothered.

"I've got a bad burn on my shoulder that the cops think was caused by the fry grease, but otherwise I'm okay," Rose said. "I'll probably get it looked at the next time I'm at the hospital with David."

"That's a good idea, love," Chelsea said and planted a kiss on Rose's temple while scooping her hand.

Dodd's large frame appeared and dominated the space within the station. Both Rose and Chelsea's attention was drawn to it.

"Ms. Dolan, I'm surprised to see you here. Parking tickets?" Dodd asked.

Chelsea had had a few telephone conversations with Dodd since meeting him in person almost a week ago. He had a disarming quality that was one-part charm and one-part character. She found that she looked forward to their conversations.

"Rose was attacked at the restaurant where she works downtown," Chelsea said.

"The Bone Yard was robbed? I wish I still used a scanner—" he said, his gaze cutting to offices on the left. "Give me a second."

Dodd stalked off purposefully toward a door that read, "Lieutenant Murphy". The doors to the left and right were assigned to a Sargent McNamara and a Captain Wallace. *Are all cops Irish besides Ramirez?* Chelsea thought.

She noted Dodd had dug deep enough into their lives to know where David's girlfriend worked.

Her hazel eyes left the wake of the giant and wandered back to Rose. "You sure you're okay? I know seeing that must have been awful."

Rose looked up at her with eyes that had once been young and doe-ish. The sea-green ovals David had fallen hopelessly for had a hard edge to them now.

"There's something going on," Rose said. "Can't you feel how weird it is out there? We were

attacked by a monster tonight, Ms. Dolan. He devoured those men so fast, and he just kept coming for more and more. There was no stopping him.”

Chelsea had noticed a change in the atmosphere as of late, sure, particularly at night while the breeze brought in cool air to her basement workshop from the cracked windows on the floor above. It kept her sharp while she worked. Fewer people were out, too. Almost like they sensed something was wrong and instincts kept them indoors where the chance of meeting something averse to their wellbeing was slightly lessened. Chelsea could only nod and stroke Rose’s long hair.

“You’re a strong girl, Rose, but working in a place like that is beneath you,” Chelsea said. “You’re laying out the welcome mat and expecting men not to be angry when they find the door in is locked.”

“It’s not that. I mean, you’re right, and I will be moving on from waiting tables in a volleyball player’s uniform soon, but that’s not what this was. Whatever killed Armand and the other two was not human. He was like a huge bug.”

Dodd came back, seemingly unnerved. “Rose, that was one hell of an ordeal. You need a counselor to speak with?” he asked.

Chelsea shook her head. “She needs to be released so she can come home with me and get a meal and some rest. When can we get out of here?”

Dodd said, "She can go right now. She's given her statement enough times, that's for sure. I'll take any heat that comes, but I've known the captain for going on twenty-five years. The release order probably just got buried."

"That's encouraging. Are all cops so reliable, Dodd?" Chelsea quipped.

"I'm a special specimen, Ms. Dolan, he said. "You should have figured that out by now that you can't hold everyone else to the same standard."

"I told you two phone calls ago to call me Chelsea. I remember because you said to keep calling you Dodd." Chelsea gently picked Rose up and hovered over her.

"Why don't I tail you home? I wanted to ask you about something we found by the river anyway," he said.

"You sure you're not just trying to score a free meal from two damsels in distress?" Chelsea asked.

Dodd smiled. "I don't suppose it will help my cause to say that I won't turn down a hot meal or the company of you two fine ladies, but I promise my intentions are far from nefarious."

"Beware the charms of a man like that, Rose." Chelsea pointed directly at Dodd. "They'll talk their way right to what they all want."

"And what might that be?" Rose asked, returning a mischievous grin.

"Biscuits and gravy," Dodd said.

David and Jacob moved on for what could have been hours or weeks. Time had become fluid, and the two palavered, as Jacob had said they could. Philosophy was discussed, as was cooking, hiking, wrestling, Genghis Khan, politics, Alexander the Great, Israel, sand, the number of stars in the universe, more politics, happiness, and finally, the idea of being a falconer. The bar didn't seem to have a limit for low or high on the topics they'd vectored to and from. David found himself enamored with his companion. He sensed a bottomless vat of wisdom harnessed in Jacob, and he enjoyed tapping into it, albeit for mostly cryptic responses.

"Why do you bother with humankind?" David asked. "I know you said you're one of the few who are allowed to interact with us, but why bother? Don't we seem kind of hopeless?"

"Mankind has been in the wilderness from the very beginning with a compass but no map. They wander lost and stumbling, picking their way through existence by striving for some semblance of certainty in it all. They have been dealt a tough hand, David. I can't imagine being able to perceive so very little while also being tasked to find so much. Being given the opportunity to receive a helping hand is supposed to even the odds for mankind, but I can't be sure. We don't know the grand plan in its entirety either. Ours is more a set of rigid guidelines to which we must adhere."

David had been fondling the coins in his pocket absentmindedly, and when he clinked them together, Jacob's attention drifted from the path ahead to the boy beside him. "I meant to ask you about God," David said. "What's He like?"

Jacob walked on for seconds that felt heavy in their emptiness before he answered. "The creator, as you understand it, is an incomplete picture. Many beliefs have some parts of the picture in the right places, but most have turned the table over and walked away. Given what mankind can sense and imagine, they've done well in trying to understand, but in this issue, the odds are against them. Many forces actively work to sway their perceptions to the wrong outcomes, and humanity simply doesn't know which is worthy of trust beyond a small nagging feeling they hold inside their moral compass. It's often easy to discount this feeling based on lack of information, David. The results are damning, however, and you will learn that a helping hand is absent for those who choose to do so. Righteous intervention is as fickle as fate or circumstance. You'll do well to remember that."

David nodded. "It's much easier to rationalize all of this when we get the inside scoop. Why haven't your kind just told us what we need to know so we can act appropriately? It seems *fickle* to leave us floundering with it all."

"The journey is the answer, not the means to it," Jacob said.

“I can’t begin to understand that. It seems like the same bullshit answer a priest would tell a woman who lost her husband in a car accident. The same *he works in mysterious ways* response someone who doesn’t know what they’re talking about gives before handing over the collection plate.”

Jacob took note of David’s bluntness. “Don’t mistake this reality for what some versions of religion say. You’re wise to be skeptical of many institutions preaching ‘the word’ for how they’ve acted in the past and at present. You may wonder how people can pack into arenas lined with neon and feel they are being filled with light? They’ve no map, that’s how. Don’t be concerned about retribution, David, and there will be retribution. Snake oil salesmen burn brightly enough in the pits of Tartarus to warm the fields of Elysium.”

“That’s another thing! David said. “Which of these stories are true? I have met a Christian angel and a Greco-Roman ferryman on this trip, or whatever this is, and I don’t know if I should be expecting to see Osiris or Buddha next.”

Jacob chewed this over. He hadn’t been certain the boy had made the necessary connections to understand he was in the presence of an angel. David’s utterance of this knowledge came as a small surprise. Jacob said, “Imagine your favorite novel—”

“*Blood Meridian*,” David said without hesitation.

“Yes, imagine *Blood Meridian* was written by Faulkner instead of McCarthy,” Jacob said. “Would

the story carry the same tone or theme, do you think?"

"Well, I guess the scenes and characters might change some given how different those two writers are," David replied. "Doubt Faulkner would have left so much unsaid. Can't imagine the story without the final moments with the Judge and the Kid. It wouldn't make sense."

"Precisely," Jacob said, "The avenues to enlightenment can be many, and this holds true for religion, folklore, and storytelling. Many of the names change, but the characters are facsimiled often. Jesus and Buddha have much in common, no? What of Gilgamesh? How about the titans and the watchers or demigods and the Nephilim? Do you see the vein here?"

"Can't answer that yet. What are the watchers?" David asked.

Jacob smiled and the beauty of it was more impressive than the previous times he'd shown his enjoyment of their discussions, almost as though David could feel his joy derived in the well-honed process of delivering information to be processed through the eager mind into knowledge. "The watchers were angels assigned to keep an eye on mankind. It's written of in the Old Testament and gnostic texts, too. They became enamored with humanity and began to interact with them without permission. The results weren't always beneficial to the journey of man. The Nephilim were the children born when a union was had between the

two types of beings. They were often giants or possessed abilities not found in mortals. The outcomes surprised even us. You see, we didn't believe man, as a vessel, could contain celestial energy."

"Aren't they why Noah built the ark?" David asked.

"You are quite knowledgeable on these subjects, David," said Jacob, as though he hadn't known David would be.

"My mother's work brought a lot of these topics up," David said.

Jacob continued, "The flood was needed to purge these half-breed children from the gene pool, not for spite, but for safety. Otherwise, we might have lost all hope of mankind achieving... an ultimate understanding."

"Now we're mixing in Hinduism?" David asked. "This is becoming pretty hard to put together."

"The journey, David. It's not going to come to you until you're done with your journey."

"Well how do I know when my journey is over?"

"All humans feel anxiety about that subject, at least on some level. And no, your journey doesn't necessarily end at your death. Because your death isn't the end humanity fears it is or may be, but that's another topic entirely. Your journey's end will be so known to you that this subject needs not be fleshed out further. I hope that brings you some peace."

“Mysterious ways, Jacob,” David said.

“Mysterious ways.”

“Yes, it’s often frustrating. Perhaps knowing my kind undergoes similar frustrations will ease your mind?” Jacob offered.

David said, “Commiseration doesn’t solve the problem, but it does lighten the load.”

“Fair enough.”

“Fair enough.”

Jacob slowed his pace as the path wound its way up to a plateau ahead, and he reached his hand out to stop David.

“We’ve come to where your road branches,” said Jacob, sitting on a rock and reaching to produce a small book. “Now comes the time for you to choose the path you’d like to tread upon as we continue our journey.”

“Why do I have to choose?” David asked.

Jacob shrugged and remained silent as he opened the leather-bound reader. He concerned himself with only the inner contents and waved David off toward the area ahead.

David pondered for a tick and decided against questioning Jacob further. He had developed a trust in his guide he’d not thought possible when he first observed the blindfolded man standing on shore waiting for him.

He walked ahead a few paces and studied the surroundings. The sky was open, as it had been since leaving the cavern, and appeared quite familiar to him, but he’d noted this earlier. What

was different were the three pathways forward. All of them seemed innocuous enough, and none offered much by the way of differentiating which would be the best choice. *Great.*

Pushing a tepid foot forward in the dust to take a look down the path on the left triggered the unmistakable low growl of a large cat. David swung his head toward the sound and spied glowing green embers rising from the brush at the path's edge. A leopard revealed itself and stalked onto the plateau.

"Oh shit," David said, stepping back toward the pathway in the middle.

The sound of claws clicking on the stone gave the boy pause. A timber wolf half the size of his car, which, as coincidence would have it, was now being tugged out from beneath the waves of the Hudson, swiftly walked up the middle path and pressed the boy further right. David was happy to find that the wolf did not growl, but he kept backpedaling, careful to keep both animals in view. He chanced a glance toward Jacob who hadn't concerned himself with this new development in the slightest.

"Jacob!" David whispered urgently. "A little guidance might be prudent here!"

The landscape shook under the pressure of a roar, and he was forced to forgo awaiting an answer to his hushed request for aid. So startled by it that he turned his back on the other two predators, he came eye to eye with a lion sitting no

more than three feet from where his feet had planted him. The lion's gaze ravaged him.

Pivoting so his back was pointed to open space and not the leopard, wolf, or lion, David slowly retreated. The lion's tail swept back and forth, forming dust clouds as it walked him down in lockstep with the others. David kept his hands up and palms facing outward, trying to appear nonthreatening to the trio.

"You can't go back that way, David," Jacob said.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" David said. Whispering seemed to be fool's errand at this point.

"A boy shouldn't say the name of the house of Satan so close to his door knocker," said Jacob, keeping his attention on the book in his hands. "You might call out worse than those kits and pup."

"What. Should. I. Do." David hissed.

Silence.

David realized he would have to make a move. He had brought the animals off to the right side of the plateau near the farthest path already. All he had to do was sidestep a couple of times and make a break for the left path. Maybe he'd get lucky and they'd shift their focus to Jacob, sitting there like a weather-worn plum.

One small step, then another, and David broke into a run. He'd always been fast, quite fast really by human standards anyway, but he knew he

wasn't on par with the apex predators of three separate continents.

Still, he flew. They followed. It didn't take long for the hot breath of one to envelope him.

A yip issued from his right as the wolf nipped at his legs and David kicked them out ahead of him as he ran. Daring to snatch a look back, he saw the leopard and wolf were only a foot behind. *Are they messing with me?*

This thought seemed to hold water until the teamwork between the animals revealed itself. David caught sight of the lion just before it became airborne, long claws fully exposed and mouth agape. If it didn't spell the horrific end of his life, David might have found the sight to be one of the most beautiful things he'd ever witnessed. Front paws spread wide to wrap the morsel of a boy in the last hug he'd ever experience, the beast rode gravity downward.

David dropped his right knee and rolled three times, while hearing the lion land on the space he himself had occupied a split second prior. He made it. This time at least.

Something snapped in David, a feeling invading the vacuum of his mind and causing him to stand tall. He had never taken kindly to being bullied and the coordinated effort by these three animals felt very much like being harassed by a gang of marauding teens. If David had chanced a glance to his left, he would have seen Jacob studying him

intently, fingers of his left hand pinching a page paused in the act of turning a leaf.

David bared his teeth and stepped forward toward the predators. They didn't shy away from the advance, not exactly, but their demeanor changed from pursuit to standing their own ground, the tenor the moment taking on the tone of a battle rather than a massacre. David hadn't been thinking, and he still wasn't, but he felt pleasure in facing down his pursuers. He felt as though he could tear them apart with his bare hands and relish in their demise by consuming them rather than being consumed.

The embers of this feeling began to rise within him and spread heat through his veins. The leopard and lion turned their heads toward Jacob, who had produced a small music box, but the wolf stepped toward David, not yet ready to allow its attention to be diverted. The look in its eyes matched David's lust for carnage with a mirrored perfection.

Jacob rotated the lever on the box, and what flowed was a cacophonous symphony of notes the likes of which David had never before heard. It chimed percussive beauty as pure as anything ever to have graced his perceptions. The tension in the air dissipated far more quickly than it took to build, and the two cats rolled onto their sides in a lazy display. The wolf followed soon after, now examining Jacob much in the same way a puppy might.

David no longer felt the murderous rush that had taken hold of him. A hushed memory remained, and he'd explore that later, but for now calm suffused him.

"Was this your plan the whole time?" David asked as he walked around to the front of the docile creatures.

"No, there wasn't a plan, Jacob said. "If there had been, your actions would have changed it. Not many make the choice to fight here." What he *should* have said was that none had ever chosen to stand and fight here. "Do you remember the coins, David?"

David had forgotten them but felt their weight when he placed a hand in his pocket. "I have them," he said, producing all three.

David walked up to the lion first, his initial fear having fled the scene. The lion took notice of David and the coins with keen interest, none of the prior malice remaining in its eyes.

"You're beautiful," said David, as he reached his hand out to run his fingers through the huge cat's mane.

The silky hair offered no resistance, and his fingers glided through and raked down the skin in a cordial scratch that any cat would welcome. It was the moment of contacting the lion's flesh when David was accosted by visions like those through the murk, when he was with River. He saw a great kingdom with a ziggurat at the center fall to ruin around a Fisher King whose smile faded with his

empire. He saw a slight man with a silly mustache drawing battle lines on the western front as he organized the invasion of far eastern Asia. He saw a light brighter than all around it being cast into the deepest darkness.

Patting the wolf brought images of death and suffering around tables full of bounty but tantalizingly out of reach of those who were wanting, and the leopard revealed images of men and women who were robbed of the things they truly desired for the opulence of milky flesh they thought they needed. Countless images and scenarios raced through his mind before the experience lifted, and he had a similar feeling of having been connected to a vast database through time.

David surveyed the three coins: the black in his left, the silver and gold in his right. They no longer carried the images of the animals who sat docile in front of him.

The animals themselves had changed too. They had been reduced to comically small sizes and began to play with one another in a fanciful display of absurd camaraderie. David now knew, though he couldn't explain *why* he knew, that if the coins were used, he may follow any path before him and experience the thematic consequences of each respectively. The animals had been trying to stop him from that fate.

He stacked the coins together and watched as they melded into one another. As they did so, the

animals also melded. A chimera the size of a spaniel remained, both adorable in its youthful look and haunting in the idea of what it might grow into one day. The paths converged into a wider roadway ahead.

“It appears you’ve chosen quite the difficult path, David. It also appears that you do so knowingly. Are you sure? Recklessness often masquerades as bravery.”

David nodded. “I appreciate your concern, but I feel something. I feel this is right, and this is how I want us to move forward.”

Jacob said, “Fair enough, David. Let us begin down your path.”

Ω

Chelsea didn’t have anything so Southern as biscuits and gravy, but she did lay out baked ham, sweet potatoes, corn, and a bean salad. Dodd did not complain one bit, and Rose found herself ravenous as she smelled the food on the dining table.

“How does David stay so skinny with food like this around, Ms. Dolan?” Rose asked.

“This isn’t the usual fare served around here. I’ve got some leftovers from the Autumn festival the student outreach organization throws for downtown. Most of the low-income housing turns out, and the college donates a little money for us to cook up a small feast for everyone. This year we were able to send people home with leftovers, too.

Big hit." Chelsea set the kettle to boil for the calming tea she was going to drink with Rose.

"How noble of you, Chelsea. That's great," Dodd said as he filled his plate. He wasn't kidding about not turning down food. Judging by the three servings of sweet potatoes he started with, he wasn't bashful either.

"Speaking of David being skinny, I noticed something odd," Chelsea said.

"The fact that he's starting to look like an Olympic swimmer?" Rose finished.

"Yes... that. The doctors have been chirping about it, but they're being cagey regarding the details," Chelsea said. "It isn't hard to see that most of them are excited. I get the feeling they don't care much about whether or not it's a good sign for David as much as it will be a great footnote for some research project they're cooking up."

Dodd perked up at this. "Mind filling me in?"

Before Chelsea could begin, Rose unloaded everything she'd heard at the hospital about David's bodily condition. She even added that she thought he might have grown taller, but she wasn't sure.

Dodd made a mental note to speak to doctor what's her name. He'd taken her card.

"Rose, can we debrief a bit about what happened in the restaurant?" Dodd asked.

She nodded but kept her voice her own. After changing out of her work uniform into a pair of Chelsea's fleece pajamas, she had taken on the aura

of a little girl, and Dodd couldn't help but wish to coddle her.

"Does anyone have any reason to target you or David, Rose?" Dodd asked. "The sheer amount of violence that occurred in there screams of a professional being involved. I don't mean to press the idea that David was involved in something nefarious, but this is not ordinary."

Rose took in a deep breath, "Dodd, you seem like a man of conviction."

He straightened at her pointed statement. "I'd like to think so, sure."

"Pursuing that idea is a waste of your time. David is a simple guy. He doesn't have a radical bone in his body, and frankly, he doesn't change his focus very often. That focus is on moving the two of us into a place of our own as soon as possible. Not much else."

Dodd said, "My intuition tells me the same thing. Still, weird shit keeps popping up around where he was or the people he knows. It's been keeping my focus on him." Chelsea shot him a sharp look, and Dodd added, "'Scuse the language."

"The guy in The Bone Yard wasn't a 'pro' hitter or something like that," Rose said.

"I just mean he caused a lot of bodily harm in a really short period of time, Rose," Dodd said.

"He wasn't human. He had a cloud of flies working for him, he had eaten enough food to feed Ms. Dolan's entire festival and more, and he devoured those people who stood for me. He

didn't use any weapons, Dodd. He *ate* them." Rose leveled her red-rimmed eyes directly on the large detective, making him feel half her size.

Dodd had known every kind of liar the world could produce. One thing he knew beyond his intuition was that Rose was telling the truth—as she saw it. He let her tell the story completely, and he even checked out her shoulder after clearing it with Chelsea, who also took a look. The wound worried more than intrigued her.

They had finished their portions, and Dodd had finished two more, before they spoke about some odd areas of the case. Dodd felt comfortable enough to loop them in on the riverbank, the burn marks, and an odd footprint the investigative team found that had been in the hardened mud just beneath the waterline.

They told him about David, sharing stories about his childhood, embarrassing moments like when he first tried wooing Rose as a young kid and replicated the scene from *Say Anything* all the way down to John Cusack's wardrobe, or when he tried out for the wrestling team but dropped off after accidentally dislocating his first opponent's arm. Too squeamish for contact sports, it seemed.

Eventually, Rose retired to sleep in David's bedroom, which apparently happened from time to time while the boy was away at school. Dodd took note of this more from a paternal standpoint than that of a detective, as the girl's parents appeared to be out of the picture. After she retired, Dodd stood

and went straight to the sink to start the dishes. Chelsea protested, but he claimed to be duty bound by the edicts of his now passed grandmother, and she'd curse him for not working off the food he'd been given. Chelsea settled for drying plates as he handed them to her.

"What do you think about Rose's story?" Dodd asked her.

"I think that kid is the farthest thing from a liar that someone can be, so I think she believes that man was a monster masquerading in human flesh. *I know* that burn on her shoulder may have been caused by grease from the fryer, but it also looks a lot like the burns some of my colleagues have gotten using acid to restore certain fabrics and artifacts for display. Nasty how it eats down farther than the surface. You can tell by the pitting."

"*Subdermal* is what that pitting is called," he said, thinking of the few millimeters of flesh that had been missing. "She also said he shot that at her from his mouth. Jesus."

"It's hard to figure out what's going on," Chelsea said. "I haven't worked much in the last week for obvious reasons, so I guess more news than usual has been creeping in. It seems so dismal lately. First the bridge, then people going missing on hikes, and now this horrible attack. It feels like things are spinning out of control."

Dodd turned to her, handing off the last plate. "I've been out there lately, and I can tell you something definitely feels off. Not just this case.

The air feels weird, almost like there's a current running through it. Maybe a circuit's been flipped somewhere. I don't like the way it smells."

Chelsea dried the plate and grabbed him a mug of coffee. She took her tea, and they both sat on the couch. Usually, the love seat comfortably accommodated her and another, but with Dodd she was very close. She thought of the nomenclature of the furniture and flushed a little.

"Will we see you again soon?" she asked.

"If you keep a baked ham by the window, I'm sure to keep on checking in," he said, patting her knee. "I really just wanted to make sure Rose felt safe, and that you were alright. This is a lot to sift through for a couple of weeks' time."

"It is, but David's condition isn't getting worse, and the doctors keep telling me he can pop up any minute," Chelsea said. "Still, they did just get my clearance for a full body MRI, which is bizarre since he doesn't have any real trauma. I signed off to keep them happy in their little science project. They think David's physical condition is something to remark upon, but a boy taking his meals through the veins is bound to get a little leaner."

"That's true, and it definitely does happen," Dodd said. "After I touch base with Ramirez—he's working with the team out by the Hudson—I'll swing by the hospital and see if I can't get them to drop some answers. I don't think they know we've become chummy yet. They might slip me something juicy." He winked at her and showed

that smile of his that belonged on a man wearing a bomber jacket in the 1950s. "At any rate, I'd better take off. Let you get your rest."

Chelsea walked him to the back door and switched on the light to force the shadows back across the yard. "You're a sweet man, Dodd. We appreciate you," she said. She stood on her tip toes, kissed his cheek by the corner of his mouth, and said goodnight.

Dodd stepped outside, where the cool breeze ran through his hair and the ghost of a smile lingered on his face.

Ω

Ramirez sat under one of the large, diesel-powered lamps illuminating the area under investigation. So far, they'd found no residue from a fuel source to explain the heat marks where they'd recovered David Dolan, no mechanical parts remaining from military equipment, and squat diddly fuck all else to explain anything around the rocket theory.

This checked out with what he and Dodd had assumed a few days ago, that there was no rocket and probably no terrorism involved, but the higher ups had hard-ons for rationalizing their tax burden on society. The pieces of the bridge they'd dredged up also corroborated his findings to that end.

*They'll love that.*

The only good lead they'd come upon was when one of their contracted divers spotted the shoe imprint in the mud that had been kiln-forged into

semi-permanence by heat. They'd carefully removed it, and it sat in the station awaiting a forensics team to check the tread design to match the style of shoe that left it, but Ramirez thought the impression was plain.

Slapping away the mosquitoes feasting on him, Ramirez surveyed the men who were wrapping up their search of the immediate area. The ground had become a grid of roped off sections with holes dug in some squares and evidence tags strewn throughout those and others. Much ado about nothing.

He fished his phone out and texted Dodd information that would put this line of inquiry to rest, or so he hoped. He hated it out here in the evening. His suits were probably fifty percent cotton and fifty percent DEET at this point, and he hadn't eaten anything worthwhile for about eight hours, so he was beginning to get cranky. The proof of this was in how wide a circumference the other men kept around him.

His phone screen lit up and he saw the response from Dodd: WRAP IT UP AND ILL SEE YOU AT THE MOTEL.

*Good.*

"Looks like we are calling it, fellas," Ramirez shouted. "Let's pack it up."

The men quickly transitioned to picking up the site. They weren't huge fans of being out here either based on how quickly they dropped their tasks and began throwing crap into bags and bins.

Ramirez walked to the water's edge and took a look at the reflection of the moon up in the sky.

"Super Worm Moon," said the diver who had found the shoe print a few days ago. He rolled his wet suit top down to the waist, a decision he might regret once the flying parasites took notice.

"Oh yeah? It's big," Ramirez said absently.

"Weird down there today and tonight," the diver said. "Like zero fish."

"You're normally a welder, right? Brought in to help with this part?" Ramirez asked as he turned and monitored the men packing items to be trudged up and over the tracks and placed into SUVs.

"Yeah, subcontracted for this. Wouldn't touch the bridge search. Too grim. Not cut out for it."

Ramirez imagined searching for bodies at the bottom of the cold, dark Hudson. "Don't blame ya. 'Least we're clearing out at a reasonable time."

Ramirez walked back to the little command center he'd made and packed up a laptop, some notes, and his cell into a briefcase then made his way toward the tracks. He had a date with Dodd at the motel, and he planned to get that location changed to a steakhouse real fast. Losing gallons of blood to flying vampires made a man hungry.

He was just about to begin his scramble up the granite ballast when he heard some commotion down by the water. "Fucking hell," he said and placed the case down to go see what was up.

There was a small crowd forming around where he'd spoken to the diver, and Ramirez saw he was pulling his wet suit back on. "Nothing but groaning and bitching while workin', but now that you get the all-clear, it's time to start looking for something?" Ramirez growled.

"Crowley saw something in the water that looked like a woman's torso," a beat cop named Steve Prince said. "Stauri is gonna go in with the lamp and see if he spots anything."

"Current doesn't push this way. The river flows south," Ramirez said.

"That kid ended up here," Prince replied, his palms flipped up.

"Hey Stauri, be careful," Ramirez said. "And if you do see a cadaver in there, pull her out with you. Might be grim, but the situation's changed somewhat."

Mike Stauri finished putting on his suit and waded into the water without his oxygen tanks or flippers. He had the grim resolve some people show when the spotlight is on them, but Ramirez saw he was scared shitless. Crowley must have spotted the body near shore. Ramirez thought it odd that the body wasn't there right now since there weren't waves pushing up on the shoreline or pulling back. *How did it sink and then float back out?*

Stauri took in a deep breath and turned on his lamp. The underwater light's green iridescence revealed the secrets of the shallows to the men on

shore. As the lamp swept from left to right, they saw surprisingly little seaweed and no fish.

A few men peeled off to finish clearing the search area, but most stayed and watched the water. Ramirez was transfixed as well. There was something about seeing into an alien space that enticed the imagination. They were tracking Stauri's progress through the shallows, their attention spans being close to the breaking point, when they saw her.

"Back there on the south part of his light." Crowley shouted. "She's right there."

They all saw her—a woman at the bottom, facing upward with wide eyes and arms fully extended. Her hair was flowing in such a way that it covered the bottom of her face, but her breasts were fully exposed. Ramirez was getting ready to shut down any comments the boys might chime in with regarding those, but none came.

Stauri spotted her and came up for a breath. "Gonna grab her and bring her over," he said before taking a few deep breaths.

He dove. They watched.

Even without flippers, the man was quick underwater. He made his way to her in under ten seconds and reached out at tepid speed to grasp an arm.

Stauri wrapped her wrist in one hand and positioned his body to begin swimming back to shore, but she didn't budge. He dropped the light in the soft mud and used his feet to try and gain

some traction, but she was anchored firmly. Her eyes, listless and vacant moments before, locked on him. Ramirez wasn't sure he was seeing correctly. Just as he asked, "Is she alive?" the woman wrapped her arms around Stauri's mid-section and pulled him off his feet.

The scene beneath the surface became a havoc of shadows and stirred silt from the upheaval of the river bottom. Ramirez kicked off one shoe, cursing.

"Human chain! Let's go!" he said. A few men also thought to preserve their footwear before heading in, but most began linking arms immediately. Had they gotten a better view of what was causing them to link arms, they may have been less inclined to wade into the river.

Ramirez took three steps into the water and wrapped his hand around the wrist of the closest man just how they were trained for fast moving water rescues. Arm locks were tight when tested and stressed, so he wasn't very worried. The woman was probably in a panic, like most drowning people. They pulled lifeguards under with them all the time.

About seven officers linked the chain, and the water had reached Ramirez's chest when he arrived at the spot where she and Stauri should be. He didn't usually wish he had Dodd's height—he was no shrimp himself at six-foot-one—but this situation would have been made easier by another six inches to see down into the water more clearly. He sucked in a breath and dropped in to look for

them both. There was nothing but a cloud of silt dancing into his eyes. He popped up to the surface.

“Shit. I can’t see anything. You guys,” he called to the shore, “can you see anything from that light down there?”

“No, it keeps moving around. I think he’s stuck with her somehow,” Crowley called. He apparently felt most comfortable being in the group of men who’d remain dry while heaving them back in.

“Alright, I’m not gonna let go, but let’s add another guy. I’ll go in further and feel around with my legs,” Ramirez said. He hadn’t turned back around yet, so when some of the men’s eyes looked down into the water and their expressions changed to shocked horror, Ramirez knew he was missing something.

“There’s something pulling at my pants!” someone cried, and the whole crew began to pull back toward shore, Ramirez being dragged along for the ride.

“What the hell are you doing? A man’s drowning down there!” Ramirez yelled, but the men paid him little mind. Their faces were locked in shocked unison, and nothing was going to tear their attention from the happening that had seized it. Ramirez followed their gaze to the woman who was now at the surface. Exposed from the waist up, she was alive, she was nude, and she was smiling at them.

Some of these men were war veterans, and some had been on the force for years, seeing terrible

things day in and day out, but every man's veins cascaded with ice when they saw her smile. Her teeth were a riot of needlepoints, and her bright, moonlight-filled eyes belied the malice they'd hidden before.

Before Ramirez could ask another man to go get her, he realized the water where she was located was the same depth as where he stood. *How is her body so high out of the water?* The situation had finally overcome his protective instincts as a law enforcement officer, and a voice deep inside him rose to the surface.

*RUN.*

"Out of the water now, now, now!" he said, wishing he sounded more authoritative, but before they could all leave the water and fully turn to make their way across the thirty yards between them and the train tracks, the sunken woman began to rise further and further still.

As the water fell away from her, it appeared she was mounted atop an overturned boat, but Ramirez's sharp eyes noted the lack of legs on her—and that this boat had fur. Her top half was fused to the body of a colossal animal, bigger than anything he had ever seen this close.

Water had begun to rise on the shoreline.

Most of the men were scrambling to safety. Ramirez stopped, remembering his sidearm in its shoulder harness. The Glock 21 would probably be ruined after firing it wet, but he didn't give a shit. Government issued.

He pulled the weapon from under his wet jacket and immediately unloaded bullets into the sunken wench's torso at center mass. Whatever she was rose another two feet in response to being pegged over a dozen times by slugs. A gaping mouth that belonged in a Maurice Sendak book was revealed in the center of its chest below where the woman was perched.

The Glock barked three more rounds into the new mouth, and Ramirez felt a twinge of glee at seeing two teeth disintegrate before he dropped the empty gun and beat feet out of there. That thing had just taken fifteen rounds, and with those, all the bravery Ramirez had mustered. He was leaving.

Running at a full clip meant he should have reached the ballast line in about eight seconds, but his heavy frame and the mud pulling at his feet slowed him. Still, he was only behind the pack of men by about fifteen yards. Things took another turn, though. The water had caught up with him. It rose from his toes to his ankles and then his knees in the amount of time it took his brain to register it was there at all. Some of the men had fallen and some were pulling at comrades. None had reached the succor of higher ground as of yet.

Ramirez looked ahead and saw his briefcase begin to float as the water surrounded its base. He wished he'd never returned to see what was happening. He'd be halfway back to the motel by now.

“Up and out. Now!” Ramirez tried to spur the men into motion despite the lack of purchase the mossy mud afforded them.

He turned to see that the beast, now a full-fledged nightmare, had made it up onto land. Its legs were like tree trunks holding up an impossibly rotund belly that would have been at home on an elephant. Its mouth gnashed its teeth as it disgorged torrents of water at them. *That solves the mystery of the water level rising.* The woman who they’d tried to save remained perched atop and smiled.

Standing in the full light of the moon, Ramirez could see she was fused to the beast just below her navel. Her long black hair, used to temporarily conceal her features, was now swept back over her shoulders.

Even with the rising water, the beast hadn’t stepped further toward them. They could make it to the tracks and dry land even if they had to swim the last ten yards.

The sound of spilling water ceased as the generator lights gave out, leaving them with only the full Worm Moon to illuminate their surroundings. Luckily it performed well in delivering yellowed light to the area, but they didn’t necessarily want to see everything it revealed.

Ramirez glanced backward to see what the thing was doing now that it had finished spitting water. It was still pretty fat, but he noted the water it

expelled had pulled in its ridiculous proportions some. The maw had been lowered down so that it was kissing the water with pursed lips. He found that to be a more welcome sight than seeing hooked teeth chomping in their direction. The sunken lady was pitched forward and running her hands across the surface like a cherub babe at the harp. She appeared to be at perfect ease despite brackish blood spilling from her wounds blotting the water. Ramirez began to register a reverse vertigo sensation. She was getting closer.

Men began to scream as they noticed the water flowing backward in contradiction to the previous current. Ramirez planted his feet and let the mud work in his favor. He craned his neck back again to see the cause to be the mouth sucking water up and inside the belly of the beast. The sunken lady lifted her face and smiled at him as if she knew the moment he'd realized they were going to die here.

"Bitch," Ramirez said, and then turned to order the men, "Push your feet into the mud. Hold on for as long as you can!"

If the thing was able to pull in water and expand, that meant it had a limit. They had a chance if they could stand firm and weather the draw. A scant few men picked up on his warning in time, but others had been swimming against the draw and were now slipping back. Those with the least luck had been upended and were rolling backward after being caught off balance by the unexpected change in flow.

Ramirez reached out to grab at men who slipped by. The closest were just out of reach, and if he lifted his feet, he'd just be riding back with them. Screams pierced the night as they flowed down and into the mouth. The woman gently pushed the heads of men down under the water as they reached her, silencing final protests. She took the time to pull Crowley in for a kiss, then tore off his ear with rows of needle-sharp teeth before sending him to his death.

The men being pulled into the monstrous mouth slowed the inflow of water, Ramirez saw, because the current had lessened substantially. He intended to make use of their sacrifice to save who remained.

"Move now!" he shouted.

The men took his order without hesitation and again began to make their way toward the tracks, redoubling over land they'd already cleared minutes before. It was maddening.

"Get to the tracks and we are out!" Ramirez said, his voice becoming less powerful as his words became punctuated by deep raspy breaths.

Hope took hold as they made steady progress toward their goal, but was tempered by a low bellow from the water. Ramirez almost resisted turning back—every time he did it was more bad news, after all—but eventually his curiosity tipped the scales. The river held nothing for them but death and hopelessness. It defied the human imagination to grasp how the veil over reality could lift and reveal the nightmare standing astride

normalcy. In the end, it was the same instincts that made him a good cop which allowed him to bear witness to the harbingers of their demise.

After turning his head to see what the ominous sound signaled for his fate, he saw a half dozen more of the creatures pulling themselves up onto the moss-covered haven where George Stuart played with his dog Bella, back when the world still made sense.

Ramirez let himself sink to his hands and knees. It took seeing Mike Stauri perched atop one of the behemoths to break the last of Saul Ramirez's resolve. Mike's open eyes stared listlessly; the creature he had become one with opened its mouth and expelled the Hudson River at Ramirez and those who remained.

PARTS TWO

&

THREE

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## About the Author



Martin Kearns is the author of The Valor of Valhalla series and select short fiction. He is a special education and English teacher and lives with his wife and children in the woods of New York.

“Stories were my first love and during rare moments of quiet my mind turns toward those I’ve watched, read, and lived. They bring to mind possibilities, which are really where the seeds of a story begin. I truly hope to bring creative tales to readers who, like me, enjoy finding themselves lost somewhere in a world of endless possibilities.”

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