

The Hidden and the Maiden

by Eben Mishkin

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## PROLOGUE

“On the other side is Preternatural magic, which is alien to each race. The motive force of such magic is the elimination of ordinary processes, either within an artifact of the spell or within the caster. Consequently the root of all Preternatural magic is death.”

—Grayson, “An Alchemical Primer on Magical Theory,” in *Grayson’s Collated Works*, Vol. 1, Natalie Braitwight, PhD, MscD (Wire Island: Isles University Press, 2 NE), 7.

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Kenton Dean replayed his mother’s last message to him while he strangled the steering wheel: “You fucking cops killed my son!”

“I’m your son, too,” Kenton repeated in the space of his mother’s sobbing breath.

“Don’t you ever call back!”

Kenton pulled his piece-of-shit Crown Victoria in behind the black-and-whites. He hit the button to save the message another forty days. He shouldn’t have played it again. Or gotten out of bed. Or picked up when Halperin called at nearly three in the morning.

He reached down to his keys, ice cold from the blast of the A/C. He had a sudden impulse to reach farther down, shift into reverse, go home, get drunk. Shoot himself or pick up an assault rifle and take it into the station house. Anything other than get out of the car and do what he always did, what he was good at. He lowered the window to let in the air of Three Pit, then twisted the keys to kill the engine. The acidic stench of urine and vomit—mixed with deeper scents, like burning trash and evaporating motor oil—flooded the car. Underneath it all came the wet-mineral scent of the abandoned quarry

pits and the ocean beyond. Kenton inhaled, sucking it in as if it would give him strength. It used to. Before the shooting.

Back then, when he smelled Three Pit he would know in his bones the place was evil and that, by contrast, he must be good. He was Saint George and Three Pit was his dragon. Now the air just made him queasy. Three Pit had beaten him. He was like everybody else: worthless. The smell was inside him, made him not even worth the bullet.

Slamming his door behind him, Kenton crunched his way over broken glass and trash. He tried to smooth his rumpled clothing. He had fallen asleep in his clothes after his second shot of vodka. None of the rest of them tried anymore; why should he? It was pointless. This way, he was ready to go as soon as he got the call. His gun was already in his holster.

He gave up on his clothes and eyed the two-story tract house, dark gray in the flashing pops of blue-and-white lights. Great fuzzy pockmarks of toxic-looking fungus ate at the house, making it slump toward the iron-and-cement four-unit in the lot to the left, the type of little apartment prisons that had replaced most of the houses in the forty years since the company fenced off the quarries.

He paused at the police line strung across the gate, his hand hovering over the tape. He looked back at his car. He had another bottle of vodka at home. He could easily make himself too drunk to pick up when they called to fire him. He clutched the tape. This was his dream: to be the knight in shining armor. He took another deep breath, hoping. He had asked to be assigned to Grand Forks, before he knew only outsiders

called it Grand Forks. He lifted the tape and ducked under it into the front yard—nothing but cracked copper-red clay.

Inside the house, uniformed officers were busy planting markers on all the bloodstains on the gray linoleum of the living room floor. They were also pinning markers to slashes in the wallpaper that had probably been bright canary when the company built Grand Forks but was now the color of yellowed teeth. Kenton leaned in to look at what appeared to be splotches of cavity rot on the paper then realized it was a pattern of roses. He pulled back, and they faded to rot again. Roses didn't belong in Three Pit. The plainclothes officers were raiding the fridge in the kitchen. As if it were a party.

Kenton tapped a uniformed officer on the shoulder. "Where's the kid?"

The officer—Schmidt? Smith? Something forgettable with an S—pointed up the stairs. Her brown eyes were glazed over, as if she were sleepwalking. Kenton wondered if his eyes looked the same.

*Are we all sleepwalking?*

"Halperin is upstairs with him. First room on the left."

The rotten stairs bowed and creaked beneath Kenton as he climbed. Though if Halperin had made it, Kenton knew falling through and breaking his own scrawny neck was too much to hope for.

"Hey, Halperin! What's the story?" Kenton asked.

Halperin, fat and bored-looking, heaved himself out into the hallway. He recited the facts like he was reading a grocery list. His walrus mustache twitched in disapproval as he spoke.

“Vic was a sixty-eight-year-old male Caucasian, Russell Cole, original owner of the house. We assume retired, but no word on anything this time of night. Little shit did it. His fingerprints are all over, in Cole’s blood. We’re guessing he’s thirteen. Male. Caucasian. Says his name is Dylan but won’t give a last name. Says no living relations. No record we can find yet.”

Kenton looked longingly down the stairs. “What do you need me for? You don’t need a confession with all that.”

“Some of his fingerprints are in places he couldn’t have reached. He must have had an accomplice. No confession and no murder weapon, so if the lawyers say the other guy did it, the guy we don’t have, the kid will walk,” Halperin said.

Kenton blew out a long breath. Fucking lawyers. His inhale was tainted with the slaughterhouse smells of fresh meat and shit. Kenton hid his discomfort with another futile smoothing of his shirt.

Halperin snorted in derision and rolled his eyes. “You’re a pretty boy, Dean. Get on with it.”

Kenton stepped into the room. He surveyed the long-faced boy on the far side of an ancient writing desk Halperin had commandeered. From the dirty laundry on the floor, Kenton guessed this was Dylan’s room. He saw an extra pair of pants—the kid was living well.

Dylan picked sullenly at the wood, trying to pry up splinters with his chewed-down fingernails. He glanced up for a moment when Kenton came in, only for long enough to show puffy, reddened eyes beneath the long bangs of his unwashed rat’s nest.

“Dylan? I’m Mr. Dean. I’m with the Wire Island Police Department’s Juvenile Division. I’d like to talk with you if you don’t mind,” Kenton said.

Dylan scowled at the desk. He refused to meet Kenton’s eyes. He tore up a long splinter and used it to chisel blood out from under a nub of a fingernail, his cuffs clinking all the while. “Why bother? You fucking pigs have already decided I’m guilty.”

Kenton sat in a metal folding chair on the other side of the desk. He took out his pad and pen and smiled sympathetically at Dylan. “I know it’s been a rough night for you.”

“Fuck off, Popo.”

“I’m not a uniformed officer. It’s my job to double-check their work with you. Make sure that your side of the story is getting listened to, and that you’re being treated fairly,” Kenton said.

“That mean you’re my lawyer?” Dylan asked. “I got rights. Cole let me watch TV. I know I get a lawyer. If you’re not him, I’m not saying fuck all to you. I’m not stupid.”

Kenton transcribed only: *Cole let me watch TV. I’m not stupid.*

A tape recorder would have called him a liar, but if they wanted tape recorders, they could raise the department’s budget. Kenton was half-tempted to say Dylan was right, put it in the record, and let him have his lawyer. Then he would quit. And then what? Vodka and ammo chasers. He knew deep down this was the only job he was trained for. He wouldn’t even have a couch to crash on now that his brother was dead. He shook his head as if to shake away what he hoped were wrong thoughts—but he knew they weren’t. He was trapped.

Kenton reinforced his smile. Smiling was important. “It’s my job to listen to you until your counsel arrives. Lawyers are too rich to work at three in the morning.”

Dylan fidgeted. Rich didn’t mean “ally” down here. It was so simple to sow a little distrust. If he could get the kid talking, keep him going, Kenton knew he could crack him. The guilty could never stop once they started.

“You aren’t framing me. I get a lawyer. And he has to defend me. He has to,” Dylan said.

Kenton faked every ounce of compassion that he could. He hunched over his side of the desk, mirroring Dylan’s posture. “You think so? You think you get the lawyers you see on TV? You think lawyers who make half that ever come down here? You think they even let people from Three Pit come up to see them? They don’t care, Dylan. They can’t be bothered to find the guy who really did it. They don’t have to. Not with your fingerprints in his blood. You watch TV—what is anybody going to make of that? You think any lawyer you get is going to give you any advice other than to plead guilty and beg for leniency? To them, you’re just a stupid kid.”

Dylan gripped the edge of the desk, his fingers paling with the strain. The patina of blood stood out in stark splotches where he hadn’t scraped it off. “I’m *not* stupid. That’s why Old Man Cole took me in. He only takes the smart kids. I know how sweet a deal I had. I wouldn’t kill Cole. Cole was my ticket out of Three Pit. And I didn’t have to be a whore for him to do it. Why would I kill him?”

“Then tell me who to pin it on. If you’re smart, act it. Give me somebody else. Make the facts fit your accomplice,” Kenton said.

“I didn’t have an accomplice!” Dylan shouted.

Kenton mouthed the words as he wrote them down.

“Damn it. No. That’s not. . . You don’t get it. None of you fucking pigs get shit.

You aren’t from here,” Dylan said.

“I know what it’s like here,” Kenton said.

“You work here. You don’t live here.”

“I can see the De Paul Orphanage from my apartment.”

It was technically true. If he got on the roof and used binoculars, Kenton could see De Paul’s.

“It’s not like you can go home anyway,” Kenton added bitterly. “Go somewhere safe. No matter how many locks you put on the door, or bars on the window, Three Pit gets in. It follows you, makes all the roads lead back to it. It’s the late bill collectors start calling about just when the car has to go in. It’s the flu that becomes pneumonia. It eats your savings. It got rid of your family, so they can’t send you money. It’s in a recession, so you can’t change jobs. It’s cut off all *my* ways out. I do live in Three Pit. I’m trapped here, too.”

*What am I saying?* Kenton thought. He gripped his face to force himself to regain control. His fingers dug at his brows, his palms pressed his false grin back onto his face. *He* wasn’t guilty. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.

Dylan whispered his next phrase so low it barely reached Kenton’s ears. “Have you thought about swimming?”

Kenton dropped his hands back to his sides. It wasn't the first time that someone had asked him that weird question. It was the only mystery Three Pit had left for him, and somehow Kenton knew it was at the secret heart of this place. The place to stab. What did "swimming" mean? If he could figure it out, he could get out. It wouldn't own him anymore. He needed the answer, but every time he questioned someone about it, every time he admitted or gave away his ignorance about it, they shut up. How could he learn what it meant?

Kenton realized he had been silent too long. "No, uh, no swimming for me," Kenton said quickly.

Kenton felt ridiculous saying it. He checked over his shoulder, hoping he wouldn't catch Halperin eavesdropping. He could imagine the fat snort of derision at Kenton botching what should be a simple job because he was too liquored-up to get a confession from a stupid little shit. But there was no one there. What he didn't realize was that he had stumbled on the right reaction: fear of being overheard.

Dylan huddled into himself, leaned forward against the desk. He hugged himself as much as the cuffs would allow. "The guy across the street from me growing up, he got a fortune afterward. He could have gone anywhere, done anything if he hadn't waited around. I would have run, left everybody. I would have made it if I had dunked my head like him."

Dylan shivered. His skin had suddenly broken out in goose bumps. But he kept talking. Unable to stop. Guilty. "Old Man Cole, though, he did more than dunk his head. He dived so deep I couldn't see him anymore. I saw him drink it. Like the pit water was

normal water. If anyone understood, it was Cole. But he wasn't afraid. That's how it got him. He should have been afraid."

"How did it get him?" Kenton asked.

Dylan's voice dipped even lower, and he hunched tighter over the desk, clung to it as his anchor. "Cole gave me something. It tasted bad. Worse than trash drips. It was like a cold paste. And then I could see how everything was broken...was going to be broken. Where it was weak. And there were kids. Just standing around. In the room with us. My sister. I saw my sister, even though she's been dead for years."

Kenton gripped his pad tight, but nodded in encouragement.

*Concentrate on what it means, not on the sister.*

Drugs were good money down here. Maybe Dylan had been the tester on a bad batch, so the deal went south. *That* was important, not a dead sibling.

"I talked to her. She knew who killed her. She knew what happened to Mom and Dad after we got taken away. She knew all about me, told me she'd followed me," Dylan said.

Kenton couldn't help looking over his shoulder again. As if *his* brother might be there, following him. His brother would have told his parents not to blame Kenton. He knew it. He wasn't guilty.

"The other kids were weird," Dylan continued. "They talked to us, but it was like we were other people in their lives. Like *we* were ghosts, haunting *them*. One told me to get his ball from where he had hidden it—and it was there. Right where he said it would

be. Cole told me I could tell them to do things, and they'd do it. Whatever I said. He had me have one rot out the front of the house, cover it in mold.”

Kenton's pen stopped. The mold. But the officers had been raiding the fridge. There had been good food in the fridge, where most people's fridges were nauseating. Decent food and a moldy house didn't fit together.

Dylan didn't pause. “Even if it was awful, they'd do it. He made me make the one with the ball believe it was his father's head. And he cried the whole time, but he still kicked it around the room. Cole was really happy about that.

“Then Cole started talking funny. But I still knew what he was saying, even though it wasn't a language I spoke. He summoned up this monster. It came up out of the ground. It...it looked like the Grim Reaper. It had a hood and a scythe and something like a skull for a face. It had this blue, glowing eye. And I couldn't stop staring at it. There was screaming, but all I remember is the eye. That thing killed Cole. But they won't ever believe that. They aren't from here. They don't know about the water in the pit. They don't know about Old Man Cole,” Dylan finished.

Kenton wondered if they could be making drugs out of the residual chemicals in the quarry. He had heard the rumors about drug experimentation out here. New stuff. Weird stuff. Sold by men in suits with names like Smith and Doe. Get money and get high—it was too good to pass up, and no one noticed another whack job around. Maybe Cole was one of the makers. He had to keep the kid talking.

“How do you know someone didn't come in and kill him for the drug when you were passed out?” Kenton asked.

“It wasn’t shrooms or meth. You think I haven’t run everything, tasted everything?” Dylan tilted his neck to the side to show a long jagged knife scar. “Got this when I was eight ’cause I skimmed five for food. They nearly killed me ’cause they said I was too old for that shit. You think I don’t know what drugs are like? Nothing Cole gave me was anything like that. Old Man Cole was a wizard. If you’re smart enough and brave, he would take you as his Igor. If you made it through his ‘apprenticeship,’ he’d help you set up, give you a life. I’ve heard of a few kids he got into college ’cause of the stuff he taught them to be able to help him. He taught me to read. He taught me math. I didn’t kill the best thing going for me, and no pusher did either. His wish just backfired—like everybody else’s.”

“Wish?” Kenton asked. “I thought you said he was a wizard.”

Dylan’s jaw fell. His face went pale, and his eyes grew wide. He smacked his head into the wood. “You fucking, lying-sack-of-shit pig.”

Dylan turned his face up and glared at Kenton before Kenton could recover from the abrupt change. He realized then *that* was what “swimming” was supposed to give you: a wish.

“You aren’t one of us. You don’t know shit about the pits. I hope you think it’s a great joke. Go on, laugh. You’re fucking dead now, piece of shit. I hope they make it hurt, you lying motherfucker. You go ahead and lock me away a few days. I’m gonna laugh my ass off when you turn up dead. The pit is ours. You think you get to trick it out of some stupid...” Dylan’s voice broke on the word. His face twisted in on itself as if he had bitten into a rotten lemon. He sobbed once before he forced himself to continue. “Some

stupid kid like me. They will find you, and they will kill you. The water is all we have. Our chance for a better life. You aren't taking it. You aren't telling anyone. You won't even make it home. I hope you're still screaming when they come for me."

Dylan hawked and spat in Kenton's face. Then he curled against the desk. His thin frame shook as he cried like his bones would rattle out of him.

Kenton wiped off the spit. He felt a perverse desire to laugh. In all these years, no one else had ever actually spit on him. A choked sound escaped his throat that sounded more like Dylan's sob than a laugh. He wanted to believe it. He hoped "they" would. He just needed somebody else to pull the trigger.

But what if death wasn't better? What if Dylan's story was true? His mind returned to the mold. What if he stayed where they, whoever they were, killed him? Then Kenton would be stuck here in Three Pit forever. For the first time in months, Kenton felt an urge to live. He didn't want to die. Not in Three Pit.

"I can save us. I'll never tell. You'll never tell. Where did Cole keep what he gave you? We'll say it's a drug. We pin it on him and...the guy who gave you that scar. We make it their fault. They're guilty. Tell me where it is. I'll make it happen. You have something over me. I have to help you," Kenton said.

Dylan looked up from the desk. The hopeful look on Dylan's face made Kenton feel nauseated at his own deception. His stomach churned, and acid rose in his throat. But Kenton nodded encouragement, clinging to his own sorry excuse for a life.

"There are big jars of it up in the attic fridge. A ladder pulls down at the end of the hall," Dylan said.

“Halperin! I’m checking on something,” Kenton said without even checking if Halperin was in earshot.

He dashed for the end of the hall as if it were the exit to Three Pit. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a pointillist pattern of bloody fingerprints—he thought he could almost see them forming an image as he sped past, as if it was a small picture atomized to take up the whole wall. Of something big and fat and faceless.

Kenton stopped and faced the wall. The bloody prints stretched all the way to the ceiling and from end to end of the hall. They went much higher than Dylan could have reached on his own, just like Halperin had said. He scanned the prints, trying to find the image he thought he had seen. But, standing still, he couldn’t pick up a pattern.

Kenton found the hanging rope at the end of the hall by bumping into it. The rope blended into the wallpaper so well it was hard to see even when he was holding it. Kenton pulled the rope and was rewarded by a smooth-gliding stair of metal extending with a quiet hiss. There was light up in the attic. A lot of cold light.

Kenton crept up the stair, half-expecting someone to swing something at his head. But the attic, lit by a long bank of halogen lights, had no one in it. It was far from empty, though. The whole place hummed and hissed and gleamed with equipment. Spinning discs shot bolts of electricity to steel balls wobbling on nearby booms. Long stretches of glass piping dripped phosphorescent liquid. With so much to spark an explosion, Kenton could at least rule out a meth lab. On top of a half-size refrigerator in the corner was a large spinning gyroscope inside a wire-frame globe—an armillary. A plumb line attached to the gyroscope orbited a circle of symbols etched into a metal plate below.

“Igor is right. Cole wasn’t a wizard. He was fucking Frankenstein,” Kenton muttered.

Anything that wasn’t in motion was piled carelessly around the room. There were strange statues and objects everywhere. Against the fridge’s side there was even a teddy bear—deflated from having lost most of its stuffing—and draped over a many-armed golden idol with a spider’s head.

Kenton opened the refrigerator door. Bottles of liquids and tinfoil-wrapped packages were squeezed into every corner. Eight large black mason jars took up the center of the main shelf.

Kenton pulled one heavy jar free. He set it on top of the fridge, disturbing the gyroscope’s plumb bob so it spun wildly off its path. It jerked into a new alignment, cutting in a straight line from an engraving of a man with a scorpion tail and a severed arm in his sharp teeth to a young woman with a laurel crown, her arms open wide in invitation. Then the plumb bob arced into the center of the metal plate, froze to a stop, then spiraled outward as if hunting for something. It jerked all on its own, now cutting across its previous path to a kneeling man holding up a cup, then creeping across the face of the plate almost like it was sneaking to point at another kneeling man holding up a spear. The plumb bob dashed away again, circled all the images—Kenton counted forty-two—reversed directions, and sped up to arc over to another figure before turning sharply and speeding up again. Its movements defied conventional physics as it moved to connect seemingly random figures on the plate.

Kenton stared at the impossible motion. He peered into the armillary to try and see what mechanical system was moving the bob, but there was only the gyroscope and the line. It was magic.

Kenton tore his eyes away and opened the jar's bail-top clamp, dim with the first signs of rust. A translucent gray substance filled the jar. He skimmed his finger along the top to feel if it was actually just dust. It wasn't. It was a gelatin that felt like a mix of cornstarch and water and resisted the press of his finger like rubber. When he pushed on it fast, it would break apart and form small cracks, then melt back into a sludge when he slowed his finger to a halt. It was cold from the refrigerator, and the cold clung to his finger. He rubbed it against his thumb, feeling for wetness, and found that the cold wouldn't rub away.

Dylan's story ran in circles through his head.

"I saw my sister," Kenton whispered.

Kenton looked over his shoulder. Was his brother following him? Kenton looked back at the sludge, then the stairs. The others wouldn't let him take it, and the jars were too big to hide. Even if he told them it was just a drug, they would all want a cut.

Kenton dug two of his fingers into the revolting frigidity of the sludge, feeling as if he were violating it as he forced his fingers through its resistance. He pulled them back up quickly and some sludge snapped off in a chunk before melting and oozing over his fingers. He shoved his fingers into his mouth, choking past its taste of bitter earth and ashes. He had to fight his gag reflex to let the cold, slimy substance slide down his throat.

His stomach roiled in protest, but Kenton clenched his jaw. He had done it. He would live with it.

A gray twilight fell over him, sourceless and pervasive. Kenton found himself in a different room...no...he realized he was in the same room, but it was falling apart around him. The sky became visible above, through cracks and holes in the ceiling. It was a uniform gray—the same twilight, stretching up into infinity. As many cracks and holes had appeared in the floor, mirroring those in the ceiling. Through the new holes below him he could see people, many people, all evenly illuminated. None cast a shadow.

He recognized Halperin. The fat man's breathing was labored, and his skin was flushed, veins throbbed beneath his sweat. He looked like he was having a heart attack, dying then and there, but Halperin seemed oblivious to it. Dylan was there, too. He was the opposite, emaciated. His joints stuck out like balls from his too-thin frame, like he was slowly starving to death. The girl next to Dylan looked much like him, but she was healthy, had no signs of decay. She was patting Dylan, telling him it would be okay. His sister.

Kenton snapped his head up, searching desperately for his brother. There was a girl in the corner, lying on the floor, muttering to herself. Two small boys sat in a zombielike daze, playing catch without a ball. Their eyes followed the memory of the ball, and their hands grabbed at it, but they had nothing to toss. Kenton turned around and around, but his brother wasn't there. He knelt down at one of the holes to look below, tempted to force his head through, even though he knew it was solid to everything except

his drugged mind. He searched the empty faces of the ghosts below, looking for any sign of features similar to his own. Nothing!

Kenton's gaze traveled bitterly back to Dylan and his sister. She was still stroking him, still repeating the same assurances over and over. Kenton stared at her, full of unreasonable jealousy. The more he stared, the less human she seemed. The less solid. She looked like a three-dimensional tapestry woven of silvery thread to give the semblance of solidity. Kenton narrowed his eyes; the threads became more distinct. He could follow them, trace them in and out of each other and then down inside of her. Kenton focused on a single thread that traced prominently across her face, weaving in and out of the irises of her eyes. He leaned forward, flattening his face on the worn floor as he tried to force his head through the hole. The thread expanded in his vision until it became a series of images and sensations twisting and winding through her. He caught a glimpse of Dylan, hands covered in blood, laughing while he sobbed and pressed his fingers to the walls.

Kenton concentrated on that image, and the vision expanded, enveloping him. He became the little girl. She watched her brother go insane, painting the walls with blood when he should be running away. The police would come. One of Cole's experiments might hurt him. Kherty-Aken might come back. She begged him to go, but he couldn't hear her anymore. Everything had gone back to normal. Dylan couldn't hear her.

Kenton pulled back from the girl's memory, worried he would lose himself. And once he turned his eyes away, it vanished completely. He felt no lingering aftereffect of being the girl.

So he went in again, plucked at the same thread. He followed it, tracing it like a filmstrip, trying to find the part of the movie he was interested in. He found it: the fearful image of a ashen-cloaked figure, hunchbacked, great horns hidden under its cowl, and a terrible, electric-blue, glowing eye. Kenton plunged into her memory, giving himself over to it.

She stood rooted in fear as Cole sang out the words. Cole was alive; he shouldn't know how to speak like the dead. She turned toward the warping space, where the eternal twilight gave way to an alien darkness. The great figure hulked out of nowhere on great wings, floating on an invisible current, his blue eye surveying the room hatefully. Cole shouted at Dylan, telling him what to do, but she could see how afraid Dylan was. She shouted at him too. He had to run, get away if he could. She could barely hear herself shout as screams of panic and fear began to rise up from all the others. The great figure whispered something in a voice that sounded like a wind rushing through reeds. Everything but Cole fell silent. Cole still screamed, ordering Dylan to say the words he was too afraid to use. The creature laughed and raised its giant scythe, the crescent-shaped top flashing through the air as it gutted Cole with a single sweep. It turned toward Dylan. At last Dylan found his voice. He ordered it to go back, and it worked.

Kenton stood up, pulling back from the memory. He scooped his fingers into the sludge again, shoving more into his mouth. Through the girl's ears, he had heard what Dylan had not. He knew the words of summoning and command. He could make death do his bidding. He could have his brother fetched to him.

A realization washed over Kenton that even more could be his. He swallowed down another scoop of sludge. In a flash, a whole new life stretched out in front of his eyes. He could solve any murder. Destroy any criminal who deserved justice but the judges were too stupid to convict. Or maybe...he wouldn't have to be a cop anymore. With the power of death at his beck and call, any life he wanted could be his. He shoveled a third mouthful in. Anything he wanted. Justice itself at his command. He clenched his fists and let Cole's words tumble out of him. His mouth formed the strange syllables whose meaning he understood by the power of the old wizard's concoction.

“Kherty-Aken, one-eyed god of death who rules the Blessed Land Beyond Shadows, I evoke you by your horns and summon you to stand before me. Raise high your scythe to deal the death I command you. My will is my coin. I know the five names of your conquerors, and I speak them to be the corners and lock of your cage. Hear and obey...”

## CHAPTER ONE

“Phrases such as ‘After a year and a day’ and ‘When the moon is once again in \_\_\_\_\_’ abound in magical formulae but are not meant to be taken as literal day counts. They mean ‘subsequent to the change.’ Most frequently this is a warning not to get ahead of yourself. Working on later steps before prior steps are complete will produce a null result.”

—Grayson, “Common Ingredients in Formulae,” in *Grayson’s Collated Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Natalie Braitwight, PhD, MscD (Wire Island: Isles University Press, 2 NE), 78.

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James worried at the old wound, his fingers massaging the wrinkled flesh. He dug harder into the muscles of his shoulder, trying to ease the tightness beneath the branded handprint. The damn fire had died again, and it left him aching at shoulder and hip. His body was trying to remind him of what happened when he lost control.

*Try again. Ninth time is the charm: three, three times.*

He leaned over the circle of stones and gravel and dropped fresh kindling on top of the halved, hollow concrete block that was now obscured by the soot of previous trials. He struck a match and blew.

*Concentrate. Dream without sleep. Be the fire.*

He dropped the match in the water bowl next to the fire extinguisher. The fire flickered. James could feel Cole’s old reprimand, aimed at correcting his thinking.

*Not the fire, him. “You must be the fire. How else will you make it do what you want?”*

The answer was blood. James had figured out in college that it was the blood that was important, not the actual act of killing the rat. Cole hadn't needed to worry about rats. There were plenty in Three Pit. That had been James's first job for the last wizard: trapping rats.

James, though, had to worry about finding rats even just two bus stops northeast of Three Pit. There weren't so many running around, and the pet stores got suspicious if he bought too many and no other pet snake supplies.

*Too much money anyway. Focus.*

All he wanted to do was go to sleep. He had been up most of the night. Work was...soon. But tiredness was the easiest way to get in the right mental state without drugs.

*Focus.*

He put his knife to his arm just below the elbow. He nicked himself, knew he would only need a drop. It would clot quickly—the other eight incisions had. James flicked the drop of blood into a glass holding boric acid and then tipped it into the fire.

Blood and fire merged in his thoughts.

He flickered green, rose in a pillar, and danced in the still air of the apartment. He split, one pillar branching to five, his fingers flexing.

*Higher. The fire has to go higher if the elemental is to come out.*

The spell collapsed.

“Fuck!”

The fire still crackled green, but he had blown it again. It was just a fire, and James was still James. He tossed wet burlap over his makeshift fire pit so it wouldn't burn down his apartment. James stood up and paced to work off the energy that made him want to kick the stones.

“How the fuck can you screw it up nine times in a row? Even you, James.”

He stumbled over a cryptex puzzle box that had rolled out from a pile of stuff he had pushed aside to make sure nothing caught fire. The cryptex skittered off into the darkness of his bedroom while James teetered dangerously, barely catching his balance before falling face first into a taxidermied blowfish.

James got his equilibrium again and sighed irritably. Cole, when it came down to it, had been a shit teacher. He had been a shit wizard, if it came to that. Who the fuck cared about teaching fires to ballroom dance or indexing the taste of dust or drinking abandoned mine water? And as if working on those things hadn't been bad enough, James had fucked up and ended up in the orphanage. Sister Maria had tried to push all that already useless stuff out of him with textual analysis of the Bible. How was James supposed to make anything work? Even Nat had turned useless.

James forced himself to take a deep, rumbling breath. That line of pessimistic thinking was getting him nowhere. The past was the past, and it didn't matter anymore.

*Try again. Tenth time is the charm: the wand and Shekhinah, magic dwelling in the fingers. Point, and it will be.*

He pulled the wet burlap off his stone fire pit. He checked for any embers that might still be burning. There could be no contamination. He poured the last of his boric

acid into the glass, wiped his knife on a stained microfiber cloth, spritzed it with a disinfecting spray, and then wiped it on a clean yellow cloth. He tried to clear his mind.

That old bastard Cole would have poked him in the head. Yelled at him to think. There were other boys. Cole hadn't needed him. There are always other boys.

*Concentrate.*

James's mind slipped away from his present location, in his bedroom, and visualized standing at attention on Cole's gray linoleum floor. Cole swayed his hand like a snake, as if he was hypnotizing the one rat that was too dumb to cower with the others. In that dream state, he saw Cole's hand become a serpent, scaly and glistening.

James opened his eyes. He was not asleep. He dropped new kindling onto the ashes of the old. The match. Fire. The knife. Blood. The boric acid. Not a fire anymore.

He formed his face first this time. The length of his nose leaped up from the low spread of his cheeks.

*Inhale.*

He burned bright, flaring green. He opened his mouth to inhale again, to feed himself. He was growing, coming out. Life from lifelessness. The fire opened its mouth in a silent scream, its eyes opening, staring fearfully at James.

The fire snuffed itself out. James had killed it again.

James smacked the floor in frustration. "How? How can I keep messing this up?"

He snatched his hand-scrawled notes from behind him as if they would tell him.

As if he hadn't read the notes last night. As if he hadn't copied them a dozen times in the

twenty-five years since he first scribbled down his memory of controlling the fire with Cole.

“You’re the first goddamn spell I did!” He threw his notes onto the ashes of the fire. They didn’t even smolder. He kicked the fire pit. Hot gravel and embers tumbled over his floor.

“Just fucking great.”

James grabbed the fire extinguisher and sprayed. The white foam covered over his latest failure.

James’s cat, Tango, leaped off the nest of pillows that comprised James’s bed and came over to sniff at the white foam.

“Checking to see if it’s another white fuzzball?” James asked.

Tango turned his yellow-and-blue eyes up to James in his best withering glare. His tail flicked to one side.

“No,” Tango said in his small mewling voice.

“Well, what do you want then? I’m busy.”

Tango’s ears flattened momentarily, then he sat down nonchalantly on the ground next to the mess and groomed one leg.

James snapped, “Could you be any more useless? Couldn’t you have done that on the bed? I’m in the middle of something. I’m—”

“Late,” Tango said.

James stomped all the way around the bed to pick up a wooden wreath he had gotten out of harm’s way by stacking it on top of his alarm clock.

When he saw the time, he realized it was after the hour the alarm was supposed to have woken him up. But he hadn't ever gone to bed the night before. Which meant he hadn't turned the damn alarm on.

"Why didn't you tell me?" James asked.

Tango flicked his ear then looked down at the foam mess seeping into the threadbare carpet.

"You make a crap assistant," James said.

Tango curled and tapped his tail in annoyance. "Fish," he said.

"Fish? That's all you have to contribute?"

"Hungry."

James exhaled in a growl and threw up his arms in defeat. "I never should have made you capable of speech."

"Accident," Tango reminded him.

"No one fucking wants a talking cat on purpose."

James stormed out of his bedroom and into a narrow hallway, flicking on the lights as he went. The light was not kind to his apartment. It showed the sides of the narrow hallway, which were covered in rolling mounds of junk he just couldn't be sure wouldn't be useful if he finally figured anything out. His feet crinkled on strewn notes about unsatisfactory experiments that had all somehow migrated there.

"Clean?" Tango asked hopefully.

"Tomorrow," James said. "I don't have time today."

"Yesterday," Tango said.

“Yeah, I know I said yesterday I would clean up today, but I didn’t think the experiment would take this long.”

James stepped into his narrow kitchenette and pulled a blue bowl out of the top of the sink.

Tango hissed. “No.”

“It’s not like it isn’t the same thing I’m about to put in,” James said.

“No,” Tango repeated.

“Fine.”

James opened up a cupboard, looking for a clean dish. He found a bottle of porcupine quills, a petri dish with something dead in it, a chipped octagonal plate with the ninety-nine cent sticker still on it, and finally Tango’s actual food dish. He pulled out the tiny plastic bowl that he had carved “Tangaroah” into when he realized he permanently owned a cat.

He pulled a bargain fish fillet from its bag in the freezer, nuked it on the chipped plate, and slipped it into the bowl. It stuck up at an angle.

Tango sighed heavily through his nose but ate without further complaint.

James looked in the fridge for his own breakfast. Nothing much edible. He needed to go to the store. He reminded himself that he needed to save his money for the new book shipment, though. Coffee would be fine.

He went through the sink, deciding that the mug with a small brown half-moon on the bottom, which he had used yesterday, was clean enough. He set some instant coffee to brew and stared longingly at the wall-to-wall bookshelf in the living room—the reason he

had rented this apartment. If he could just take a few books down and research what he was doing wrong. The answer must be somewhere in his books. Or it might be in the new shipment that was supposed to come in. If only he didn't have to work. But he needed the work. He needed the money. No money, no books. No paying off his student loans. No apartment. No more experiments. He remembered that he was late.

At least he wouldn't have to go back to Three Pit. He had a safe deposit box with enough cash for two one-way tickets across the country—one for him and one for Tango so his cat wouldn't spend the last hours of his life stuck under a seat. James didn't doubt the plane would go down. Three Pit didn't let go of people. It had let him go, sort of, but James suspected it only tolerated him being out because he stayed close. And because he still visited. There was always the chance he could be mugged, beaten, or killed for a watch he didn't have. Letting him move across the country... Three Pit wouldn't stand for it.

The coffeemaker beeped. Maybe he could just skim a few volumes while he drank.

*Just a few minutes. I'm not that late. It couldn't hurt.*

James poured his coffee and took his cup with him into the living room, stepping over the orrery that had come to rest between his deflated blue lounge chair and the coffee table when he threw it down because his calculated dates didn't match its stellar movements.

*Where to look? If only I had more time.*

He hated it when having to get a paycheck interfered with his real work.

*In one of Dodd's quartos on animation? No. Not those.*

James knew animation wasn't his problem. It was concentration. He sidestepped over to the next shelf.

*Green Wise's prayers? No, I should resell that. It's all drug-based. Useless book.*

The shelf below had Steele's *Mazes*.

*Yeah, that would work.*

He picked up the small blue hardback and plopped into his chair, scooting to the left so he would have some cushioning. He would need to go Dumpster diving again at the end of the school year when the students moved out. He took a sip of his coffee, wincing at the bitterness. He flipped to the chapter on corresponding mazes and ran his fingers over the pages. When he came to Nathaniel, he stopped.

“The maze of Nathaniel circles east to west in accordance with the shield motion of Sol Invictus in seven layers.”

*That would be Nathaniel from Biblical text, saving the seven faithful. It would mean extinguishing flames, except Sol Invictus was a sun god. Did Sol Invictus protect from fire as well as burn?*

James read the rest of the page. Nothing was conclusive. He would need to check Tobin. Tobin would tell him. He set his coffee down so he could pull the other book off the shelf.

He skimmed the thick, leather-bound guide.

*Sabatiel, no...Sho'ote, no...Sol Invictus. There!*

That entry led him to Huitzilopochtli. From there to Aten, the disk or shield.

Tango came and wove himself between James's legs. James ignored the cat, engrossed in his reading. The cat pressed hard against his shins.

"I'm busy," James mumbled.

Tango bopped James's leg with his paw.

"Hey! What? What do you want?"

Tango stopped to lick his leg, grooming the white fur into place. "Late."

James checked the microwave clock in the kitchenette. He had lost track of time.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

James would barely have enough time to rinse the smell of smoke off himself and run for the bus. "Shit. Thanks. Thanks a lot." He dashed for the shower, tripping over the orrery's upthrust Saturn.

"Clean!"

"Fuck off."

James showered as quickly as he could, but he still had to hop into his business slacks as he raced down the hallway. Then he ran back for his knife, which he had left in the bedroom; he stuffed it into the sheath he had sewn inside his antique frock coat. He raced to shove his feet into his black penny loafers, grab his keys, and be out the door. He squinted against the brightness of the sunlight for the second it took his brown eyes to adjust.

"Don't make a mess while I'm out," James called.

"Me?!"

James closed the door on Tango's objection, locked the dead bolts, and ran for the bus. He kept one hand inside his faded gray coat, ready in case anyone came out of an alley.

The number eleven was just pulling away as he got to the bus stop. He sprinted for it, pulling out his pass at the same time. He slapped it against the glass doors with one hand and slapped his other hand on the doors to demand entry, like it was a badge entitling him to get on. The bus accelerated for a second before the driver relented, pressing on the brakes and opening the door.

"Why don't you get your ass outta bed on time instead of doing this every damn day?" the driver demanded.

James grunted and ran his pass under the scanner, ignoring her glare.

"I'm not stopping for you tomorrow. Your long-haired hippie ass can run as long as you can keep up. I'm tired of this shit. If I hit your cracker ass, I've lost my job."

James curled into the first empty row of blue plastic seats. The driver muttered to herself. She was still angry enough to flip him the bird when he got off the bus at the transit center.

He cut across the bus loop and walked down toward the Greyhound station. He gritted his teeth as he passed the trolley tour.

"In a moment we'll be turning to cut across Via Marissa, the largest pedestrian-only walk on the island, and its oldest street," the tour guide proclaimed over the speaker.

"Wrong," James grumbled to himself.

“Via Marissa was built by Mayor Todd Wire in 1849 to connect the capitol building to Saint Serra’s church.”

“Wrong. He built it to connect to the workhouse next to the church.”

“He named the street in honor of the Virgin Mary.”

“Marissa Dowd,” James corrected. “His mistress at the workhouse.”

James shook his head. He hated that damn tour. They couldn’t be bothered to learn the truth about anything. It had only taken him two days, just two days, to find out the truth in the library. The tour company hadn’t cared when he informed them. Only James cared about ignorance. Everyone else thought it was harmless. He rubbed at the ache beneath his shoulder’s handprint. He had hunched over the fire for too long last night. Ignorance wasn’t harmless.

He got to the end of the street. At least the tour bus got the green light and drove off so he wouldn’t have to listen to it anymore. He looked hopefully to the left before turning right himself. It could be a late day.

It was. James saw the gap in the crowd, a space about four people wide that everyone flowed around as if there was something contagious inside of it.

He stepped away from the corner so he would meet the gap on the far side of the sidewalk. He brushed a hand over his drying hair in a futile attempt to tame it. A moment later, the gap was close enough that he could see his manager inside it, four foot one in her one-inch white heels, power walking to keep up with the rest of the hurrying crowd—almost.

She smiled when she saw him. “Good morning, James.”

“Morning, Dink.” He fell in beside her, slouching as low as he could. But at six foot three, he towered over her no matter how low he got.

Dink slowed to a more companionable pace, taking the opportunity to smooth out the wrinkles in her white coat and pencil skirt. “Were you waiting for me?”

James stuffed his hands in his pockets. Saying yes would make him sound like a stalker. Saying no would make him an asshole. “Running late.”

Dink was silent a moment, watching the traffic pass. She looked up at him with a frown before brightening again. “I suppose I’ll be merciful then and won’t write you up for not shaving.”

James touched his bristly cheek. Damn it all. There hadn’t been time. “Forgot to turn on my alarm, and I was up late last night.”

“Me too. I’m so hungover it’s not even funny.”

James snapped his head toward Dink. He had a hard time imagining Dink in a bar, let alone hungover. “What?”

“Yeah, it was my thirty-first yesterday. So my sister took us out drinking until midnight, and then we all went to pick up gigolos. Bit of a disaster really. Have you ever been turned down by an ugly gigolo?”

James gaped at her. His brain wouldn’t supply him with anything except the dumbest possible reply: that he wasn’t gay.

Dink turned her heart-shaped face up to him and grinned. She winked. “I’m joking, James. Really. I’m virginal. Pure as the driven snow.” She plucked at the neck of her white blouse. Her voice turned tremulous, as if she was holding back laughter. “Why

do you think I'm wearing white? For the stain resistance?" She laughed briefly and turned to watch a pickup drive past that appeared to be held together with duct tape. It had red cellophane for brake lights.

She cleared her throat. "Cheer up, emo kid. Even Ingpen cracks a joke now and then." Dink reached up to pat James's forearm reassuringly.

The horns of "Reveille" blared from her white purse. Dink snatched out her cell phone, looking grateful to have something else to do.

"Speak of the devil... Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?" she asked eagerly. Her eyebrows rose. "Like the appliance?" She shook her head. "Um, I have no idea. I'd have to check the records. I'll do that first thing and get them to you in maybe half an hour. Yes, sir. See you then."

Dink hung up and gave a low whistle. "I tell you, James, it's a good thing I like to be kept on my toes."

"Ingpen want something weird?" James asked, grateful for a new subject.

"Ingpen always wants something weird. He wants me to look up all the vacuum companies we've worked for."

James scratched his head through his tangled hair. "Maybe his house is really dirty."

Dink laughed so infectiously James couldn't help smiling. Dink patted her auburn bun to make sure it was still in place. "Frankly, I expect he gives his house the white-glove test at least once a week."

James nodded. Ingpen could claim there was no military service in his background all he wanted—he wasn't fooling anybody.

“You think he wakes up to ‘Reveille’?” James asked.

“I expect he leaps out of bed at dawn, does a hundred push-ups, and then plays it for himself.”

James chuckled. He relaxed into a slouching lope. He could deal with jokes at Ingpen's expense.

Dink patted her bun again, looking up at him expectantly. “So...why was *your* night a late one?”

James sobered immediately. A quick image of Dink laughing at him ran through his mind. No one sane believed in magic anymore. He wouldn't himself if he hadn't grown up in Three Pit, Cole summoning dancing green flames and Mrs. Lorchman smelling of rot with flies buzzing around her.

“Chemistry experiment. Like to have something to show for my degree.”

They passed an alleyway, and James half reached for his knife, checking for anyone lurking. He didn't see anyone, just crates and a trash bin. A motorcycle parked against a door. Safe.

“You sound a little bitter,” Dink said. “Odd Jobs not giving you job satisfaction?”

“I've no intention of leaving if that's what you're asking,” James said.

“Yeah,” Dink said. “That's good.”

James looked down at Dink. She tucked a strand of hair that had come out of her bun behind her ear. She wet her lips and inhaled to say something, but then closed her mouth as she thought better of it.

James frowned. If he didn't know better... But he was a big, mean, ugly son of a bitch and Dink, as much as she seemed pleased to have his company on the days she walked to work late, was little, kind, cute, and successful. No matter what people said, in his experience opposites did not attract.

Dink stumbled on a crack, her balance off from looking up. James caught her shoulders to keep her from bumping into him. He steadied her until she had her feet again. She blushed, and James felt the heat of it in the palms of his hands before he pulled them away.

“Maybe I'm still drunk. My sister ordered two pitchers of mojitos. That's all right for her. She's five eight. I'm dinky.”

She laughed at herself then scratched her arms nervously.

James's frown deepened. Dink's sister should have taken better care of her. That much alcohol could be dangerous at Dink's size. She had to weigh less than eighty pounds. Fuck stumbling around—a blood alcohol level that high could lead to trouble breathing. That was not the way to treat your family. He would never do that. He glanced down at Dink at the same time she glanced up at him.

“Sorry,” she said. “I shouldn't remind people of the obvious.”

“Yes, you should. People are stupid about things right in front of them. We just see what we wanna see. And we skip talking about important things, just because we

aren't used to thinking about them. Like how much you can safely drink...And happy birthday."

Dink's lips twitched up. "Thanks, James. I appreciate it."

James smiled back. *Why don't I ask her out? Oh, right...because Dink has to know she could do better.*

His smile faded. He couldn't even get himself shaved in the morning. And besides, how would he explain Tango's ability to talk? "Chemistry" accident?

They came to another alley; his hand hovered over his knife again. It was one of those that was just right for darting out from, with a dead end so whoever might attack you didn't have to watch their own back.

"You always do that," Dink said accusingly.

"Huh?" James asked, his eyes still on the alley.

"You stare down every single alley we pass like it is the most important place in the world," Dink said.

He dared to turn back toward Dink when he didn't see anyone within charging distance, but she wasn't looking at him. She was staring straight ahead with her arms crossed and her jaw clenched.

"Alley mouths are great places for ambushes," James said.

"We're in morning traffic. Hundreds of people are passing by," Dink said.

James pointed into the alley at a stack of wooden pallets. "They hide behind there. Makes them difficult to see. But they see through the gaps fine. They see someone alone and snatch them. Cover their mouth, drag them behind the bin."

He pointed at a large gray trash bin sitting against the opposite wall. “If anyone hears anything over the sounds of traffic, they attribute it to a stray cat or dog. It all happens with people just feet away, and no one will see anything. People don’t see what they don’t want to,” James said.

“You are just a ray of sunshine. But you sure are right about—”

Dink’s phone started up again, a regular ring-ring sound this time. She unfolded one arm to reach for it, took a deep breath through her nose, and checked the caller ID. She shook her head, then answered the call.

Her voice was cool and professional when she spoke. “This is Dinah Pallik. How can I help you?” Her brow furrowed, and her face turned tight. “Edmund? Yes, I’ll accept the charges.”

James looked away, feeling silly for having thought about asking Dink out. Edmund was probably her boyfriend.

“Where are you? You said you were coming home.” Whatever she heard on the other end of the line didn’t make her happy. “Morocco! Why? No, don’t answer that. I don’t care. We haven’t heard from you in months, and you said you were coming back to the US. No, you don’t. Please. Please come home.”

James rubbed his thumbs uncomfortably against his forefingers as he pretended he wasn’t listening.

“You don’t have to make amends. You didn’t do anything wrong, Dad. You just have to act like you have a family for once. That’ll make up for everything. Don’t hang up!”

Dink growled out a sigh as her shoulders slumped. She ground her free palm into her eye. She turned the phone off.

“Favorite mistake,” she said. “Would you believe he’s my favorite family member?”

James couldn’t think of anything to say to that. He wasn’t sure if Dink needed sympathy or a pretense of ignorance.

“Your father?” James asked.

“Yeah. He went crazy when I was twelve. Went chasing fairy tales. Said he made a mistake and needed to make up for it.”

“That...uh...sucks.”

Dink shrugged as she put the phone back in her purse. “Not sure what kind of a mistake an anthropology professor could make to launch him into a war with pixies.” She tried to smile like it was all a joke. “Sort of set the tone for the men in my life, come to think of it. They’re all crazy about me.”

James swallowed, having even less of an idea what to say to that. He noticed the familiar forked crack in the pavement that marked half a block to go to the front door of Odd Jobs. He wished he knew what to say, but it was too late to say anything anyway. He let the silence brood until they reached the glass-and-white-wood door.

He held it open for Dink, thinking he really should say something. “I hope your day improves.” He winced as the words came out.

*It sure couldn’t get any worse. Unless she gets a call next that her father is dead.*

“Thanks.”

“You deserve better,” James said.

Dink paused in the door to look back at him. “I would like to think so.”

“Maybe I’ll see you later.”

Dink searched his face a long moment, as if trying to dissect what he was feeling.

Was he just being polite, or was he honestly offering sympathy?

“Maybe,” she finally said.

James held the door for a few more moments before stepping inside himself. He wasn’t sure if it was the lack of sleep, but the morning had taken on that odd, nightmarish quality where everything felt off.

He walked past the reception desk. Emma, who worked as receptionist most days, cleared her throat.

“I take it you said no,” she said.

James looked at her blankly.

“No to what?”

Emma rubbed the wrinkles under her eyes. “Never mind.”

James frowned as he walked toward the lists showing him what he was supposed to do for the day. *What would I have said no to?*

He traced his finger down the request list. He wasn’t on it—no surprise. He didn’t think he had ever been on the request list in his eight years at Odd Jobs. Not on the suited list either. Not suited for anything they were doing for the day. James scratched his stubble. *Not suited. Was Dink’s complaint at my expense? Was I the one who wasn’t crazy about her?*

James reread the maintenance list, in case he had missed his name. As he did, it dawned on him that Dink could have been flirting with him. That odd reference to getting gigolos and then being virginal. *But she's...but I'm...an idiot.*

He wasn't on the maintenance list. He snorted to himself as he turned to the rotation list—which everyone in the office except Ingpen called “the shit list.”

He was marked down for a briefing with Ingpen in half an hour. Had he really had a chance to ask Dink out and blown it? Yes. His normal, unshaven, Three-Pit, ray-of-sunshine self was too busy condemning other people for not seeing what was right in front of them.

James stalked back to Emma, who was taking advantage of a lull in activity to take a handful of pills.

“Did Dink talk to you at all?” James asked.

“Hmm? What about?” Emma asked.

“You're too old to be coy, Emma,” James said.

“At least you're honest. Nope. I just make it a point to keep my eye out for her. She's a good kid.”

“She's not a kid,” James said.

“You, on the other hand...” Emma said.

“I know what I am.”

Emma sniffed and shook her head. “Then what are you yapping at me for? Straighten up and fly right, kid.”

“Don't make a federal case out of it,” James shot back.

Emma laughed and leaned back in her chair. Her sweater cuff moved up as she did, showing an old, faded line of a wrist tattoo. She yanked the sleeve back down.

“Decade off, but not bad. You might still blend in on the Ferris wheel.”

“I’ve never heard that one.”

“Probably never will again. We used to say it about blending in with Americans when we got here. But it was only us on one boat. Your know-it-all reputation is intact. The problem is, you come off as a creep.”

James rubbed the dark stubble on his cheek.

Emma nodded in agreement. “That doesn’t help either,” she said.

He nodded. He might be ugly, but being unshaven made it worse. Maybe he could talk to Dink when she got off and take her to a calm birthday celebration. Do something nice for someone for a change. But first, he would need to clean up. The corner store would sell disposable razors and travel-size shaving cream. And who knew? Maybe Emma was right. Maybe Dink did actually want to be taken out by him, if he were a better man. He had changed his life before. He could do it again.

“I’ll be back.”

“That quote reinforces your creepiness,” Emma called after him.

James waved that away and headed for the store.

## CHAPTER TWO

“All users of magic must learn the difference between valid and invalid perceptions. Ignoring a valid perception, even if no one else perceives it, is a sure way to end up dead. Accepting an invalid perception, even if others perpetuate the error, is a sure way to end up insane.”

—Grayson, “An Alchemical Primer on Magical Theory,” in *Grayson’s Collated Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Natalie Braitwight, PhD, MscD (Wire Island: Isles University Press, 2 NE), 9.

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Zephyr’s recurring nightmare dragged him in again. He knew it wasn’t real, but he was trapped in his own mind. He told himself to wake up, to stop thinking it. He even clenched hard at the back of his ears to pinch himself. He tried to open his eyes early, but the nightmare kept him in darkness. It let him deviate enough to pray today. Maybe he had prayed.

*No, it never happened.*

It was all in his head.

“All praise be to God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, the Father of compassion and—”

Zephyr could hear his father yelling, his mother yelling. It wasn’t true.

*That isn’t how it happened.*

“The father of compassion and the source of all consolation, who comforts us—”

Hot liquid rolling over his hands made him stop again. The blood ran in rivulets down his arms when he held them up, splashed onto his chest. It wasn’t real either. There was no blood.

“Comforts us in all our tribulations so that we also—”

His mother screamed. Then his father screamed. Both of them together. The noise pounded against Zephyr as he pushed his wet palms harder to his ears, trying to block the noise out.

*It's just my imagination.*

The wood of the bed frame snapped as his parents' weight fell on it.

*Wake up.*

He raised his voice, trying to drown out the lie.

“That we also may be able to comfort them that are suffering as we are comforted from God.”

He didn't want to hear the thick, meaty sounds of fists hitting hard enough to tear flesh. His father's screams were still rising, becoming impossibly loud. His mother's turned to sobs.

The nightmare took over again. All was silent except for the heavy chunk-chunk-chunk of flesh being destroyed. And he had to know. He had to follow the dream's script, had to pull his hands away. He listened for the third person in the room. He listened for the person who had to be there: the real killer. But he could hear only the sounds of violence. His father was silent now, his mother's sounds were covered by the gallop of his heartbeat.

He strained his ears.

*Someone else.*

There must be someone else, because he knew this couldn't have happened. But there was no one, just the chunk-chunk-chunk and the drip of blood on his skin. He had to know who it was, even if it was just a delusion.

Zephyr opened his eyes. His mother, JJ, stood right in front of him, blocking his view, her square jaw set. "You shouldn't be here, baby." From behind her came the steady chunk-chunk-chunk of meat being torn and tenderized. "You shouldn't see this." She reached for his face, her thumbs moving gently over his eyes like a whisper of wind. Chunk-chunk-chunk.

Zephyr finally gasped awake into the dim light of his closet. He rubbed at his eyes, relieved to find them wet merely from sweat. But the chunk-chunk-chunk was still there. He turned his head over on his pillow and toward the thin wall that divided the closet from the kitchen. Chunk-chunk-chunk. His mother was cooking.

Zephyr groaned. He was just moving from one nightmare to the next: JJ cooking always meant that something was wrong.

He pushed the silk sheets down and put his palms into the well-worn handprints in the wooden door, sliding it open. He squinted against the bright light. What time was it? He reached for the short stool that he kept next to the closet as a bedside table. He felt his glass of water and...nothing else. No alarm clock. No pills.

"Mama!"

No answer but the steady chunk-chunk-chunk. What had happened to his pills? He tried calling his mother by name.

"JJ!"

The sound from the kitchen stopped. Zephyr heard the click of heels on linoleum. Heels were bad too.

But JJ's voice called back calmly. "I'm in the kitchen, baby. I'm making dinner for tonight."

"Have you—"

"Stop yelling. If you want something, be polite and come talk to me."

Zephyr groaned as the chopping sound resumed. Propriety wasn't an encouraging trait either. Things had been going so well. He crawled out of the closet. He avoided going right to her by turning around and making his bed. He tucked in the corners around the mattress and smoothed the wrinkles out of the light comforter. He plumped the pillows. He could just crawl back in the closet. Then he wouldn't have to deal with it. He would have done it if it hadn't meant missing work.

"Work. Criminy."

Zephyr crossed himself for almost using the Lord's name in vain. Was he late? What time was it? Where was his alarm clock? He hurried for the door, skirting around the heavy oak frame of his father's bed. JJ kept saying he should move into it, but Zephyr liked the closet. He was used to it.

He found the alarm clock on the far side of the bed, by the door. It blinked an unhelpful red 12:00 at him. Someone had torn out the plug and then tried to twist off the back cover to get to the batteries, leaving the matte-black finish bruised white. He dropped the alarm clock into a silver garbage can next to the door. Someone had already dropped in the frayed wire. The pills weren't in the trash, though.

Zephyr went down the clean white hallway to the living room. Someone had opened the curtains to let in plenty of light, but it didn't warm the apartment much. He rubbed his arms at the kitchen threshold. He was glad to be wearing socks with his pajamas when he stepped onto the cold linoleum.

JJ had scattered pots over the floor in her mission to get to a big cutting board. Zephyr picked his way through the pots to JJ, who was dressed all in gray sixties chic, like Jackie O., from the coat over her wiggle dress to her high heels. Her hair was up in a blond beehive and held in place with a gray hair band—also a bad sign.

He came up behind her and leaned up to kiss her cheek. “Good morning, Mama.”

“What are you, five?” JJ asked.

“Good morning, JJ,” Zephyr said obediently.

“That's better. Good morning, baby.”

Zephyr was tempted to look and see what she was cooking. He could see red out of the corner of his eye, but he knew better than to look. It was always better not to look.

“What are you making?”

“I'm making haggis, to celebrate your first week!”

Haggis. Bad. They didn't have the ingredients for haggis. He needed to get their minds on other things. He pulled at one eye to emphasize his narrow features and adopted the worst brogue he could manage. “Why haggis? We're nae Scottish.”

JJ stopped chopping to glare at him. Blue eyes. Also bad. She put her hands on her hips, and the motion drew his eyes down.

“Your father and I taught you better than that. Stop it.”

Zephyr swallowed thickly as he stared at the intestines snaking out of the bloody rent in JJ's dress and onto the cutting board. They were sectioning themselves off in precise chunks, even without the aid of the chef's knife.

"Sorry, Mama."

"You're in your twenties, Zephyr."

"Sorry, JJ."

Why had he looked down? He knew better than to look down when JJ was in a bad mood.

"That's better," JJ said. She picked up the knife and started chopping again.

Zephyr turned toward the fridge so at least he didn't have to see the food preparation, even if he couldn't turn off his ears. What he needed was his pills, but he couldn't just ask the personality he had named Mrs. Wayne. She would scold him for misplacing them. He wouldn't even be able to blame it on "someone." He sorted aimlessly through the contents of the refrigerator.

"My alarm clock died this morning. Must have lost power. You wouldn't know what time it is, would you?"

"You're up early. You could make one of those fancy breakfasts you love. Use up your pressed sea-goat cheese."

"Asiago pressato," he corrected.

"Well, look who's so smart. If you know it all, you can help me with the haggis."

Zephyr had no intention of helping JJ make haggis. He could already hear the gagging sound JJ would make when she reached down her throat to pull out her stomach

if he told her how it was really supposed to be made. His subconscious always imagined worse things than his conscious mind. It was like looking down.

“You’re right. We really should celebrate. My getting a job was as much your doing as mine. We should go out so you can people watch.”

The chef’s knife slammed into the wooden chopping board. “You just don’t want to eat my haggis. I’m not good enough for you.”

Zephyr dared to look back at her, bent over the cutting board, her back tense. “No, no, that’s not it at all, JJ. I love you. I love that you want to cook for me.”

“Liar!”

His pills. He needed his pills. It would be all right if he could find out where she had hidden his clozapine. Maybe. He had to get her switched, get her back to being the real JJ.

“I just want you to have a good time too. You love to people watch, and you can’t eat. You deserve a night out.”

JJ’s shoulders shuddered. She didn’t reply.

“Please, JJ...Mama, you wouldn’t want me to starve, would you? I can’t eat illusory food.”

JJ backhanded the knife so it skittered into the sink. She turned around to face him, her blue eyes paling. She looked like she was getting ready to change to a worse personality.

“I am not a delusion! I am your mother!”

“No, that’s not what I mean. It’s just...”

*Just what?*

Where were his pills? What could he say? His eyes darted back and forth around the room, afraid to look her in the eye. He even glanced down at the giant open wound of her stomach. He was trapped. He had to do something.

“It’s just that, unless you went to the store, it’s ghost food. And I can’t eat it. I’ll pass right through it. See?” He dared to poke through her shoulder. When he did, a cold covered over his finger like he had put it in front of an air-conditioning vent. It was a risky maneuver, and they both hated it, but it was the only thing he could think of that might calm her down.

*Please calm down.*

JJ jerked back, clapping her hand over where he had poked her, as if wounded. Her eyes flushed to a deeper blue and then switched to green.

Zephyr took a shuddering breath. It would be all right. She would see reason. Green was good.

“No,” she said softly. “No, of course you can’t.” She shook her head like she was trying to clear out cobwebs and think straight. “I’m just being silly. No, of course I don’t want you to starve.” JJ backed away, stepping through the pots. Her hair brightened, the blond taking on red highlights—also a good sign. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I guess I just wanted to do something together. I wanted to do something nice for you.”

“We will do something together. We’ll go out tonight. It’ll be fun for both of us.”

“You hate going out,” JJ said.

“I don’t hate it. But we can stay in and have a movie night. Watch your favorite.”

“It’s been on cable. I’ve seen it three times this week.”

Zephyr wondered if it really was on cable. Had he seen *An Officer and a Gentleman* out of the corner of his eye on the guide? He was never sure what she made up and what he had actually observed but not remembered. But, real or not, a bored JJ was a dangerous JJ.

“Is that what’s wrong?” Zephyr asked.

“Who says anything is wrong?”

Zephyr pointed at JJ’s hair.

JJ reached up to pat her beehive. “What? Don’t you like it?”

“You’re blond.”

“It goes with the hairstyle. And the hairstyle goes with the dress.” JJ primped her hair, then frowned. “Oh, fine. If you dislike it so much.”

She closed her eyes in concentration. Not the best sign. But her hair went from highlighted to tinted and then finally snapped to red. It was the switch—everything changed. Zephyr couldn’t help exhaling in relief as she dropped back down to her usual six-foot height, her heels vanishing. JJ’s dress flowed down her legs as it morphed, molding to them until she ended up in jeans. The top of it sealed over too, closing the hole in her abdomen. But it became a fuzzy, white-wool coat with big eighties-style gold buttons instead of a T-shirt, and her face fattened, rounded. It wasn’t the personality that he thought of as the real JJ—it was Babysitter JJ. Her hair dropped out of the beehive to curl naturally down her back. She blinked bright-green eyes at him.

“Better?”

He masked his disappointment by smiling at her. It was a bit better, but as Zephyr had grown he had become increasingly uncomfortable with the younger personalities JJ adopted. He had outgrown the playmates and even Babysitter JJ—he couldn't see her as older than him anymore. "Much better."

He looked over at the cutting board, now clean, of course. The knife was in the same condition when he picked it out of the sink. Only the new cut, where she had slammed the knife home, was real. Perhaps he had done it last night when he was cutting up onions. He must have pulled out all the pots and pans after washing up for the night. He picked up the closest pan, a sautoir. It was perfectly clean, even where the sides met the bottom.

"Do you remember what I took this out for?"

"I took it out. I was looking for the cutting board."

"Right. Of course."

JJ scowled at him. "I'm not imaginary."

"Then why did you take my pills? Or is that something I *did* do?"

JJ weighed her answer, looking away toward the closed curtains in front of the kitchen as if she were thinking of opening them. "You should have gotten rid of them. They just make you sick."

"They're to make me better. You want me to be better, don't you?"

"You're not schizophrenic. They don't make you healthy. They make you drool. You should throw them away."

"Did *you* throw them away?"

“Hey, kid, who’s in charge here?” JJ grinned at him, trying to make it all a joke.

Zephyr wasn’t having it. “JJ…”

JJ’s smile wilted. She brushed a speck of nonexistent dirt from her front as an excuse to look down. “Please don’t take your pills. They don’t work, and they’re scary.”

Zephyr couldn’t argue with them being scary, and they certainly didn’t work the way they were supposed to. The more he took them, the less effective they seemed to be. The clozapine was always a gamble. It was God’s will whether they worked on any given day or not. Upping the dose sometimes worked in his favor, but then things really did get scary. The one time he had taken a triple dose in desperation was a vague, fuzzed-out horror of being frozen in place, drooling, while the blob JJ had become screamed at him in an attenuated echo.

“I’m not going to take them. I just need to know where they are.”

“They’re in the bathroom.”

Zephyr knew they weren’t in the bathroom. The shower made JJ nervous, so she wouldn’t have gone in there. “JJ…”

“They’re behind the bed,” she said.

“Thank you.”

To prove to her he wasn’t going to take them, he bent to the task of cleaning up after her instead of going immediately to retrieve them. He started returning the pans to the cupboard.

“Zephyr?”

JJ was still looking down at her front, worrying at a small woolen thread near her stomach. She didn't look up at his hum of acknowledgment. "Could I come to work with you?"

"What?"

JJ plucked the thread out of the coat with a quick jerk of her fingers. She let it drop, and the thread vanished into thin air midway between her fingers and the ground. She found another small loop to worry at. "I'm so bored. There's nothing to do here except watch TV."

"You could watch a movie. We have plenty of movies."

JJ pulled out that thread too, snapping it off with a quick tug. "I can't change the discs by myself. It's too hard."

Zephyr did not want to take JJ to work. Not that she wasn't with him everywhere. He knew she was all in his mind. She was just the semblance of a real person, without any life of her own. All the doctors had insisted it was important to remember that. But his mind wasn't so easy to convince, so she seemed to come and go. So far, she had let him go a whole week without trying to accompany him out of the house.

Her fingers played over her abdomen, seeking out another thread. "There's nothing to do outside, either. School's in finals mode. It's ages until tax time, so there's no work for me. Please, baby."

Calling him that was a dirty trick. The same one he used on her: "Mama" to get her to mother him, "Baby" to get him to do what she wanted.

*It would be a disaster, an endless opportunity for trouble.*

Even JJ admitted she was trouble. But he also couldn't leave her picking at her coat, his mind spinning out some alternate life for her. And boredom could mean trouble too. She had been cooking nothing real this morning. She might be cooking something real when he got back.

*Taking her might save some stray cat from becoming haggis.*

JJ plucked at another thread, twisting it around her long fingers. She tensed her arm to rip it off.

"You have to promise," Zephyr said. "You have to promise me you'll be good and you won't cause trouble, Mama."

JJ bounced up on her tiptoes, grinning. She flashed the impish grin that never changed, no matter what personality she manifested. "I promise."

She rushed over and hugged him.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the press of coolness against his skin. He made himself feel it as pressure, as a real body against his: his mother hugging him. He held the hug a long moment, knowing she wouldn't back away until he released her, wouldn't risk passing through him and breaking the illusion of her reality. "And you have to stay invisible. I can't be distracted at work. Okay?"

"I promise."

He opened his eyes as he released her. Her body was already fading out, wisping into a distortion in the air. Soon, there was nothing but the happy creak of her feet on the floorboards as she bounced excitedly. Zephyr knelt and cleaned up her last mess, praying fervently that he hadn't given her the opportunity to make a bigger one.

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Zephyr finished his morning with his favored collect.

“I pray that the Father, the giver of hope, fill us completely with joy and peace through our faith in Him. Then we will overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

He leaned over the candle, one hand on his charcoal-gray tie, and blew it out so the flame and its reflection in the glass of the portrait sitting behind it snuffed out. He was as calm as he could hope to be. And he could always hope that his father benefited from the prayer as well. Though he supposed people already in heaven didn’t really need prayers. He left his apartment’s second bedroom, closing the door behind him and locking it. The door wouldn’t stop JJ, but she accepted the symbolism and never messed with the shrine—even if she did hover disapprovingly in the hall.

“You should burn all that stuff,” JJ said.

“I like it. I feel better afterwards.”

“Afterward. You could go to church. Normal people go to church. They don’t keep shrines.”

Zephyr grunted. He hated that. Yes, he wanted to be normal. He would give anything to be normal. But church put his schizophrenia into overdrive. And he had loved his father. He never quite understood what happened after his father died. JJ had loved him too.

He double-checked the ink in his pen, then put his stiff-backed pad into his pants pocket. He grabbed his keys and wallet, putting each into a pocket of his charcoal vest.

He took a deep, steadying breath, punched in the alarm's disarm code, and opened the door. Everything was fine—another beautiful day on the island. He rearmed the system and then waited for the cool waft of JJ to pass by him before stepping outside himself and locking his dead bolts.

He could hear the soft pad of JJ's feet following him down the steps to the street before the passing cars overwhelmed the sound. And then there were other pedestrians. Zephyr just had to trust that she was there and following him.

Though not for long.

“Do you really walk all this way to work everyday? You should get a car,” JJ said.

Zephyr pulled his stiff-backed note pad from his pocket. He flipped to a clean page and wrote: *Can't drive.*

He felt the cool draft of JJ leaning close. He wondered where the breeze came from. Had he noticed it every day in his subconscious, to prepare for when JJ came along? Or was he imagining it? He would never find out. He couldn't just ask a stranger, “Did you feel that breeze?”

“So? I learned. I'll teach you.”

Zephyr underlined the word: *Can't*.

“It isn't that hard, baby. You step on the pedal, and you aim where you want to go.”

He shook his head. He underlined it again: *Can't*.

JJ sighed. “I think you just don't want to try.”

Zephyr flipped back to the front of the note pad, carefully adding another circle to the dark imprint around the word *Sorry*. He had circled it so many times the paper was in danger of tearing through.

A woman wearing a green evening gown and pushing a wrecked grocery cart came out of an alley in front of them. She reached out and plucked a red-and-white can from the empty air, laying it in her shopping cart in front of a bunch of fresh kale. She paused to turn toward the traffic, exposing the smashed ruin of her otherwise serene face to them. Shards of glass stuck into her skull and cheekbones. She muttered to herself.

JJ called out to her. “You should run, Mrs. Peabody. They’ll catch you again if you look at groceries.”

Zephyr moved farther in from the traffic so he could avoid the ghost as they passed each other.

Mrs. Peabody smiled spacily, her tongue visible through a hole where her cheek and teeth should have been. She looked down at her gown then ran her fingers over the black tire mark slanted across her leg as if it were a decorative sash. “Thank you, dear. I got it for my granddaughter’s play tonight.”

“That’s nice, Mrs. Peabody, but they’ll be after you as soon as they notice you’re gone.”

“Oh, that’s lovely, dear. I’ll see you there then. Come by after.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you later, Mrs. Peabody.”

Mrs. Peabody waved to the empty space at Zephyr’s side, her palm raw and filled with black gravel from being ground into the asphalt.

Zephyr flipped back to the clean page and wrote: *That's why.*

“Why what?”

He underlined: *Can't drive.*

“Mrs. Peabody? She's harmless. Too harmless. She's usually not even out and about.”

*There are others.*

To prove his point, a great shaggy monster bounded out of a building and turned toward them. Its slavering, wolfish muzzle had emerged from the brickwork just at the height of Zephyr's head. Its arching back was flattened and spread like a cobra's hood. It snapped its steel fangs. Yellow eyes glared at them.

Zephyr shivered in shock at the cold as JJ darted through him.

JJ flashed into visibility, arms outstretched, red hair flying in a wind of its own. Angel wings of pure downy white appeared at the back of her woolen coat, rising high and menacingly.

“Get back! He's mine! Mine!”

Zephyr slowed his pace to a stop, trying to pretend for the benefit of other passersby that he was absorbed in thinking about something to write down, but all his attention was on the stand-off between JJ and the wolfish thing.

It growled at JJ. The low, bubbling roll turned into a snarling demand. “Where's Peabody, Little Mama?”

JJ relaxed and then snapped her wings straight, cracking them like a whip. “I don't know. And I wouldn't tell you if I did. Go fuck yourself, Collins.”

“I’ll fuck you, Little Mama. Then your—”

JJ lunged at him, elongating back to her full six-foot height. Her scream made the wolfish thing flinch. His gray hackles remained raised even as he slunk backward.

“I’ll fuck *you!*” she yelled in a voice turned so harsh and deep it even made Zephyr take an involuntary step backward.

He knew that voice—it could mean danger for him too. Her outfit didn’t change, but Zephyr couldn’t miss seeing that the hand JJ raised to strike the beast was decayed. Bits of bone poked out of its rotting flesh.

The wolfish thing turned and bolted away before JJ could slap it. She stooped down to the ground and came up with a half-smashed piece of brick from nowhere. She threw it at the retreating monster to hurry him on. She ran forward, stooping to the ground again, this time coming up with a gray lump of concrete. That throw connected, and the wolfish thing howled in pain. It darted into a storefront accompanied by the sound of smashing glass, though Zephyr saw none.

“Keep going! I will fucking eat your soul!” JJ shouted. She ran for the storefront. “I will rape your memories!”

She grabbed up a handful of glass from nowhere—the glittering shards simply appeared when she reached out. She flung them into the storefront as easily as if she was simply skipping rocks. “I will tear you into nothing!”

Zephyr realized he was trembling. He stared at JJ’s back, hoping she wouldn’t turn around. He didn’t want to see her skull. He looked around. Sure enough, some

woman passing by was staring at him. She gave him a wide berth, her hand in her purse. He was sure she was gripping her pepper spray.

He bent his head to the note pad. He tried to make it look like he wasn't weird, just having the most amazing idea for a story—that was all. It was safe to ignore him. He forced his breathing to become controlled again.

*This isn't happening.*

It was just his imagination. It was just an amazing idea for a story. Just his vivid imagination. Maybe he should take his pills. He could take the two in his wallet. Maybe they would work. He inhaled deeply through his nose when he felt a cold touch.

“It's okay,” JJ said. “He's gone.”

JJ had become invisible again. She was behaving. But Zephyr couldn't tell what she looked like. He couldn't tell if she was safe. Her voice sounded gentle, but that wasn't always a guarantee.

He wrote in his notebook: *What was that?*

“Collins. He's the slaver that owns Mrs. Peabody. Thankfully, he's a coward.”

Zephyr wrote: *Never seen him before.*

“He's out mostly at night. Or he's in the hospital. Slavers like hospitals.”

He wrote: *That's why.*

“Don't be silly.”

He couldn't help giving a sigh of relief. “Don't be silly” was a safe reaction. She was probably still in babysitter mode.

“He’s a coward, like I said. He’s been dead seventy years, maybe more, but he still runs away from me every time. But if you’re convinced you can’t drive, why not let me drive for you? Or you could hire a driver.”

He wrote: *No*.

“Oh, come on. It’s not like you don’t have the money. Your godfather would be happy to see you give yourself airs like that. He might even give you the money.”

He circled *No* and added an exclamation point.

“But limos are fun. People would think you were a movie star, or rich, or doing a shady deal. It would be an adventure every day.”

Zephyr wrote: *Too much money*.

“What’s the fun of being rich if you can’t have a little fun? It’s not like you’re snorting blow off a hooker’s ass.”

“I’d never—” Zephyr said aloud before he could stop himself. He glanced furtively side to side. A man in a plaid shirt gave him a curious look as he walked by, but that was all.

“I know. But you have to have your fun some way, baby.”

Zephyr didn’t reply. He wished JJ’s fun didn’t come at his expense.

Zephyr cut across upper Via Marissa, enjoying the anonymity the surge of students heading for morning classes provided.

There was a bicyclist standing in the middle of a crosswalk, clutching his bike. The signal chirped when the light changed and it was safe to cross, but none of the students seemed to notice him as they streamed around him.

He called out: "Help! Help me. Please!"

"Don't stop," JJ said.

"Please. Don't any of you see me? I'm right here. Please. I'm hurt. I'm right here. I'm here!"

Zephyr slowed so he could look into the young man's frightened face. He was pale, and one blue eye was covered in blood, but it locked onto Zephyr as surely as the other.

"You see me! Oh, God, please. You have to help me. I've been hit." He reached for his face, which was completely unmarred, but his fingers came away bloody. He showed them to Zephyr.

"Don't stop, baby. People are looking at you."

Zephyr jerked his head around and hurried to the other side of the street.

"Help me! Don't leave me here!"

The light changed. The bicyclist turned, dawning horror on his face. A car ran right through him. He screamed as it did. Then he screamed again as the next car "collided" with him and then just glided on through.

"You can't help him, baby."

Zephyr lowered his head to look away from the screaming cyclist and asked in his notebook: *Can you?*

"No one can help him. It would only hurt one of us."

Zephyr looked at the screaming man a last time as the light changed again. The bicyclist turned to the next crowd crossing, begging them to help, begging them to see him. Zephyr walked away with his shoulders hunched.

He wrote: *Horrible.*

“That’s the way the cookie crumbles. You deal with your shit, or you go down. He won’t last long. He’ll probably be gone by this afternoon.”

Zephyr wrote: *Doubt it. Always worse than I imagine.*

Zephyr heard a hard slap of skin on pavement as JJ stomped her foot. She made an angry “Ooh” of frustration.

“I’m not imaginary.”

Zephyr got as far as writing: *Didn’t...*

JJ interrupted. “You did. That’s what it means. If he isn’t real, then neither am I.”

Zephyr flipped to the front of the pad to circle *Sorry*. Then he flipped to the next page, circling the heavily outlined *I love you*.

“If you loved me, you would believe in me.”

Zephyr didn’t have an answer for that. There had been days, weeks—even years—when he had believed in JJ totally. But never once had anyone else seen her or even felt her. And sometimes the drugs worked.

“You don’t love me, do you?” JJ asked.

Zephyr circled *I love you* again. He didn’t press carefully enough, though, and the paper tore under his pen.

“Then believe in me. You aren’t crazy. You’re special.”

Zephyr knew they were about to have the same argument again. She would challenge him next, saying that his belief in his faith wasn't based on factual proof either. It was based on less. At least he could see her, hear her, feel her.

"You have faith in God. You can't even hear *him*. Why am I different?"

He could predict her responses, of course, because it all came out of his own mind. She was the smarter, faster, more observant, more mature part of him, but intellectually he knew she was still just a figment of his imagination.

He wrote: *I believe you love me. I love you.*

"But I'm not real," she said despairingly.

*You're my mother.*

"Who isn't real."

*It doesn't matter.*

"How can it not matter? How can I be your mother if I'm a figment of your imagination?"

Zephyr didn't know, but he did know he didn't want to hurt her feelings. Even knowing she was just his own mind playing a trick on him, he still loved her. She was still his mother. It didn't matter to him. If she was the only one he ever saw, he wouldn't care. He wouldn't have gone back to any doctors. It was seeing the other delusions that made a normal life impossible. But she wouldn't accept that. It was all or nothing with her.

*You just are.* He circled the new *I love you.*

"I just have to take it on faith."

*Yes.*

“Then why can’t you?”

Zephyr had no answer to that. The real answer was that he was too old to believe in imaginary friends. But that would upset her. She didn’t press him, though, she just brooded in silence for the rest of the trip.

Zephyr arrived, his watch telling him he had avoided being late by less than thirty seconds. He would have to leave earlier next week in case he ran into further delays. Especially if JJ was done staying home. He greeted gray-haired Emma at the front desk.

“Good morning, Emma. I hope you are well today.”

Emma raised her cane and spun it in her hand so the handle whirled like a noisemaker. “Doc Stevens gave me a clean bill before work today. I’m excellent. Thank you for asking. They’ve got you on the rotation list today. I spotted your name. Did they explain the rotation list?” she asked.

“Yes. Ms. Pallik explained the lists. Though I think she called it something else,” Zephyr said.

Emma laughed. “Dink tells it like it is. That’s my best piece of advice for everyone who comes through the door: Listen to Dink, and you’ll be all right. Though you’ve got Ingpen today.”

Zephyr frowned. Ingpen made him nervous.

Emma shook her head reassuringly. “It shouldn’t be too bad. You ready for your first time?”

JJ tsk-tsked. “Dirty old biddy. What does she want to know about your first time?”

Zephyr blushed. He did not want to know what line of thought had brought that out of his subconscious. He cleared his throat. “I couldn’t say.”

“Some of the most fun I’ve had here have been jobs off the ‘shit list.’ Some of the worst too. I had one where I was supposed to be a human statue in an art exhibition. Never been so achy in all my life,” Emma said.

“That’s supposed to make you feel better? Wow, glad she’s the receptionist. Otherwise people might enjoy being here,” JJ said.

Zephyr rubbed his throat nervously, watching Emma for any sign that she had heard his mother. He could never quite convince himself that no one would ever hear JJ. “I’ll do my best not to let the client take advantage of me.”

“Good. Hopefully you’ll get a fun one.”

“Thank you. I hope you have a good rest of the day.” He went toward the posted list to check the time of his meeting.

He winced as he heard JJ give Emma a parting shot. “You smell like old lady.”

He really shouldn’t have brought her to work. It had just been giving his mind permission to cause trouble. He found his name easily enough on the light-green sheet. The advantage of going by Zephyr Wayne was that he was inevitably right at the bottom, no matter how anyone alphabetized.

“Hey,” JJ said. “You’re with Sherlock Holmes.”

Zephyr dared to make an inquiring hum. He glanced around to make sure no one had heard him. No one was close by, at least.

“Don’t you remember those old black-and-white Sherlock Holmes movies? There’s a guy named Rathbone meeting in the same room at the same time as you.”

Zephyr scanned the list until he found Rathbone, James. She was right. He was with Ingpen too, in conference room 2 at 9:20.

“Ooh, maybe you’ll get a mystery,” JJ said. “That would be fun.”

Zephyr hurried to his cubicle, hoping to distract JJ from any ideas she might have for making the day “fun.” He logged into the time system on the computer sitting on his white MDF desk and clocked himself in. Ms. Pallik had said it wasn’t important, that Ingpen already knew whether you were there. She had pointed upward to a black dome camera mounted in the ceiling by way of explanation. Without anything to do for a few minutes, he decided to double-check the work he had done the day before. He logged into the company’s data-entry program and began comparing spreadsheets.

His first week at Odd Jobs had been reassuringly not that odd: just some orientation and then straight to auditing work, which he was semiqualfied for, he supposed.

“Oh, man. Look at her,” JJ said. “What a skank. You can tell she has STDs. Stay the hell away from her, baby.”

Zephyr groaned, closing his eyes tight.

“It’s an office, not a brothel. Why don’t you wear a real skirt?”

Zephyr rubbed his forehead. He just had to ignore JJ. She wasn't doing anything. He was used to this. He flipped through the sheets, telling himself to just focus on the work.

“Oh, hey, look. A midget!”

Zephyr gritted his teeth. Sure enough, he could see the reflection of Ms. Pallik's head hurrying past in the glass of his monitor. Why had he brought JJ to work?

He tapped the desk to get JJ's attention.

“You didn't tell me you worked with a midget. That is a crucial detail about your day.”

Zephyr tapped the desk again, harder this time, but JJ kept ignoring him. “She's kind of cute too. Not as cute as that one over there, though. Holy shit, that girl is yummy.”

Zephyr looked around in time to see Lilah hurrying past, trying to catch up with Ms. Pallik. He shouldn't have been surprised. Lilah was tall, dusky, and willowy—JJ's preferred type. He supposed that made her his preferred type too. Though, fortunately for his temptations, the lustful part of his personality manifested itself through JJ.

“Maybe I should just follow her,” JJ said. “See where she goes. I'll tell you what color panties she wears.”

Zephyr shoved back his chair and stood up. He made an imperious gesture for JJ to follow at his hip when he was sure no one could see. He stalked over to the restroom. He knocked and entered when there was no answer. He held the door open a little longer

than necessary so JJ could slip in with him. He locked the door so they wouldn't be interrupted and then turned to face the direction of the cold breeze next to him.

He pulled out his wallet, where he kept two emergency clozapine pills, and pointed it toward JJ.

“Do I have to take these pills?” Zephyr demanded. The words came out too loud for the small, tiled room. He swallowed and clutched his throat. He dropped his voice to a low whisper. “Do I, JJ?”

Zephyr was answered by a horrible moment of silence, which made him wonder if JJ had actually gone after Lilah to look up her skirt.

Finally, she replied in sulky voice, “I didn't do anything. Don't your coworkers talk?”

“JJ...”

“Do you threaten to drug yourself into oblivion whenever *they* talk to you?”

“They're not—”

“Imaginary? Is that what you were going to say? Delusions? Hallucinations? Figments?”

“Stop. Just stop,” Zephyr said. “Do I have to take them or not?”

“Those pills and those doctors are fucking with your mind. They're probably eating your brain cells.”

Zephyr's leg tensed up in response to her accusations, but he kept himself from imitating her annoyed stomp. He wasn't here to argue.

“I’m working, JJ. I need a job. Even you said so. I want a normal life. Now are you going to help me, or do I have to do it without you?”

He stared at the tiled wall, half wishing she would appear so he could see her face, make sure her eye color or her hair hadn’t changed again. It would also be nice to know he was even looking in the right direction. Zephyr gritted his teeth. Of course he was looking in the right direction. JJ was in his brain. She was wherever he imagined.

“Well?” Zephyr asked.

“I’ll behave. Just don’t poison yourself. Those pills scare me.”

Zephyr relaxed. He put his wallet away. “They scare me too,” he admitted.

He reached over and flushed the toilet for the benefit of anyone who might be waiting outside. He turned to the sink and washed his hands. He froze as he suddenly felt a cool caress of fingers against the side of his neck. He eyed the empty room in the mirror.

“JJ…”

“We’re alone. You’re not working. I don’t want you to be mad at me.”

Zephyr sighed. “Mama, I love you. I do. But I need you to help me, all right?”

The cool of JJ’s body pressed against his back in a hug, her arms two bands of draft over his chest. “All right,” she said.

Zephyr finished washing his hands and then exited the bathroom. He decided that there wasn’t enough time to check anything more on his computer, so he headed for the conference rooms. He could hear muffled voices coming from inside the room where his meeting was scheduled, so he leaned against the wall to wait for that meeting to end. JJ

leaned against his side and was very good about not saying anything, even when Lilah walked by and waved to him. JJ only lifted her head off his shoulder for a moment. Zephyr waved back shyly.

“Don’t forget...” he murmured.

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