{Prologue}

Slowly, slowly, the woman who knows all pulls the radiant sword out of the old man’s chest, after having personally plunged it in there mere moments ago. Golden blood spills out of the wound, flowing over ornate bed that had housed the man for so long, dripping to the floor.

*Tip tip tip,* it patters.

The woman holds the blade victoriously above her head, pointing to the heavens – although, I suppose that would be below us instead.

“That’s…revenge for my sisters, I suppose,” she mutters, convictionlessly.

“Is that why you went through all this effort? Revenge?” I wonder, standing sheepishly away from the scene – as if to separate myself from it. Then again, although it may have been unknowingly for most of it, I *have* been intricately involved.

“Not particularly; it was just a thought,” she noncommittally responds, before breaking out into a small chuckle. “From your perspective, I suppose *just a thought* is what got you into all this trouble in the first place, so maybe, to you, *just a thought* is not *just* a thought?”

“Tracing my whole involvement back to only *that?* Seems like a stretch, even for you.” She shrugs. “Still, I didn’t think I’d end up committing deicide when I woke up *toda*y– if you told me, 6 months ago, that I’d be standing where I am today, I’d…well, I’d have called the police, probably.”

She scoffs.

“It’s been quite eventful for you, hasn’t it? Ever since *that day* – although I wasn’t there to witness it myself. Not *that,* nor most of the things you’ve gone through all this time. I was busy making…preparations, after all.” She shoots a glance towards the old man as she says this, before starting to mop up all the golden blood that had spilled, collecting it all into a small container.

“Do you mind cleaning off the sword for me? It poses a bit more of a threat to me than to you,” she says, as if it were only natural.

“What do you need it for, anyway?” I gesture around me. “This blood.”

“*Ichor,* is what it’s called – the blood of the gods. Then again, my sisters bled exactly the same, so it doesn’t apply strictly to *gods,* I suppose.” She shakes her head around, as if trying to remove the very thought of it from her mind. “Regardless of what it’s called, and where it’s from, it has many uses, so it’s good to gather it up. My stock is getting quite low, anyway.”

“I see,” I respond, as I begin to wipe off the glorious weapon, that shines with the brilliance of God himself, with a simple dust cloth, pulled from my backpack. “What do you want me to do with this, by the way?”

“Keep it,” she responds, not even bothering to look up from her business. “I’d prefer to keep it far away from me – as far as possible. Besides,” she finally turns around to look me in the eye, with quite possibly the only honest smile she’s ever flashed in my direction, “with *that man* dead, you’re the only one left I’d be okay with slaying me, if it ever comes to that.”

It was a soft smile at best, but it left quite an impression on me in that moment, more than maybe any of the massive disturbances my life has been faced with: vampires, giants, spirits, magic fire, magic viruses, possession, curses of beauty, curses of solace – somehow, for me, all of it paled in comparison to that one fleeting moment.

And just like that, it was gone, replaced by just another cheeky grin.

“Well, we’ll see how the future goes,” I simply respond, electing to leave all those complicated feelings out.

“Indeed we will, boy,” she says, condescendingly – although it really didn’t come over that way. “Indeed we will.”

“…you…” the old man suddenly chokes out, turning his head ever so slowly, and painstakingly, in the direction of the woman who killed him. Although, I suppose he wasn’t dead quite yet, “…are quite different from your sisters…”

“I was raised by a lowly human, after all – of course I’d be,” she responds to his question. Hearing her speak to him, I do wonder; does she hate him or not? I can’t lock it down, so I simply give up on it.

Meanwhile, the old man laughs stockily(?) – although it quickly turns into a violent coughing fit, resulting in even more ichor to be gathered.

“…you know…” the old man continues his babbling, “…ending your sisters’ lives was quite possibly the biggest mistake of my life – even more so than the fight that sparked all this…” he chuckles. “…and yet, here, on my deathbed, I don’t feel any regret…all I can muster, is a happy thought – that I might see them again after this life.”

“Oh? So even God himself falsely believes in the afterlife? Quite intriguing,” responds the woman, moving to collect the ichor that had spilled out of the old man’s mouth.

“…a cynic, just like your mother, huh?” the old man coughs up.

“You wouldn’t know my mother,” the woman spits out, uncharacteristically spiteful, “but you *are* right – I’m a cynic, and a romantic, and a know-it-all, that pretends to see everything. A child of her mother and father, through and through.”

The old man doesn’t respond, instead electing to stare upwards into the sky – although, again, that would be below us, in all likelihood.

Looking at him, that expression filled with forward motion, despite being at the end of its lifetime, I’m filled with the thought that such tranquillity can only be reached in death. And in death, it shall be found.

“…young man,” he suddenly utters out, causing me to jump in surprise. “I may not be entirely aware what has brought *her* here,” he says, referring to the woman who slew him, “…although I can follow the gist of it, but…I’m more curious as to what brought a normal person like *you* into *our* affairs. In my final moments, I’d love nothing more than to be soothed by that tale.”

“An interesting request,” the woman affirms. “Even *I’d* like to hear your side of things, even if I’m well aware of the stories you shall tell.”

“It’s quite lengthy,” I warn, thinking back on the many events that have transpired, “so it may take a while.”

“…that is fine,” the old man responds. “…while we wait for my life to expire, please regale us your tales.”

“Very well,” I say; I don’t particularly have a lot to do now anyway – nothing that doesn’t pale in comparison to where I am now, at least, so I decide to honour the old man’s last request. “Then, I suppose I’ll start with *that one,*” I continue, as a story comes to mind. It’s not a particularly interesting one, in the grand scheme of things, but, by pure coincidence, it was the first to be recalled, so I’ll tell it regardless.

“On a certain day,” I begin.

{Penniful}

{ch.1}

As the world around me slowly begins to move again, the colourless monotony of a single voice droning on being replaced by the colourful monotony of a solid fifty voices droning on, I finally stir awake.

The lecturer watches me rub the sleep out of my eyes, as he retreats his lecture notes into a backpack as bland as his lectures. He, of course, is more than aware of the futility of attempting to rebuke just another lazy college student, who’s only there because their guardians are too traditional to let them do everything from the comfy confines of their parental homes.

Rather, the lecturer is so numb to it, the stiff expression in his eyes doesn’t stir in the slightest – after the nth time, one simply lacks the drive to bother.

Now, don’t get me wrong – I’m not in the slightest insinuating I’m one of those n students. My parents would never force me to go anywhere based on their own hang-ups. I’d go so far as to say they’d never force me to do anything at all, to the extent that it’s almost creepy how unconcerned they are with their own son’s life. Then again, as someone who knows them very well, it’s not eerie to me at all – I’d even go so far as to say it’s never crossed my mind that it could be *unusual,* much less *creepy.* Really, it’d be creepier if they *did* force me to do something.

They’re dead, after all.

No, my reasoning for sleeping through my lectures is entirely different. Moreover, there’s even two parts to it! This is very exciting, which is why I shout it out (mentally, not physically – I think it’s pointless to justify one’s actions to strangers, but that’s a discussion for another time).

My first riveting reason for my utterly unproductive presence: my life has been too fractured in recent times, so my attendance is one of the many ways I’ve attempted to return structure to my day to day life.

Then, you may ask – what exactly is it, that’s making your life so fractured? For what reason is your life out of your own control?

Mind your own business, asshole!

I clear my throat, as the lecturer seems to have found himself staring absentmindedly in my direction, almost like he’s trying to remember something just out of reach, something truly, honestly, on the tip of his tongue, which, someway somehow, will come to him if he stares at my face long enough. I shoot him a polite smile, which seems to stir his memory into action with a bolt of inspiration, and also, as he realises what was so close to mind, immediately causes him to hurry sorrily out of the side door, reserved solely for university staff. A far from uncommon occurrence.

Where was I? Oh, yes, I was divulging my slew of highly personal motivations, when I so rudely told you off! I do apologise for that – I know not what got into me!

Although I express my remorse over my oh so inappropriate comment, I also reserve my right to keep my stories to myself – at least for the time being.

I’ll regale that tale another time.

So, with my reason for being here *location-wise* established, I can now complete the duology by providing my reason for being here *situation-wise* – that is, why was I asleep?

Simple answer, my girlfriend keeps me busy at night.

Long answer…well, we’ll get to that.

And so, having now properly explained why I am where I am, I sleepily get up from my seat, looking around to find that more than half the hall has already made their escape while I soliloquised– only a select few seem to have been so occupied with their trivial conversations to such an extent, that they have yet to unseat themselves.

At times like these, I always wonder what they must be talking about. What conversational topic could possibly be *so interesting* that one would be too occupied faring it to bother with actions as simple as standing up and continuing one’s business?

And yet, I find myself not caring nearly enough to listen in, as I begin my late-afternoon stretches – after all, who could wake up from a nap and not do those simple movements, which can only be described as utterly euphoric. Better yet, what’s even the point of a dreamless nap, if one doesn’t stretch after? Really, it would’ve been nothing but an hour down the drain if not for that singular moment of pure bliss.

That’s what I think, at least.

As I open my eyes at the end of my stretches (I closed them to pretend no one was watching me do them), I find someone watching me intently.

Okay, I may have slightly twisted the story for comedic effect there, and, once again, I do so apologise. No, more specifically, I saw someone (who apparently has taken even longer than me to get up) take a few wobbly steps before clutching their head in pain, as if they’d, ironically enough, gotten up too quickly, despite taking such a long time.

The watching part only came after this jerky movement, as the object of my watchful gaze stumbled to keep hold of the desk next to her, struggling to even stay upright. While still having visible difficulty with the simple task of *standing,* she pulls out her phone in an extremely urgent manner, before starting a call so quickly that they must have been in the quick dial, I presume.

While she waits for the call to go through, she meets my eyes (see? I wasn’t lying when I said she looked). Although the only emotion she attempts to communicate to me is visibly annoyance and frustration, yelling silently at me to buzz off, I could easily feel a sense of *jealousy* in her gaze.

Why anyone would be jealous of me, *especially* if they, assumedly, know of my history. I, of course, do not make such an assumption lightly (I didn’t pass my first year of uni for show) - it’s quite clear, however, as she comes to her sense and scurries of like a frightened rabbit when I send her a polite wave.

And here I thought I may have finally found a girl to spend my life with, who doesn’t run off at the sight of me?

I jest, of course – I already have a girlfriend. Sorry ladies!

All jokes aside, I don’t mention this girl’s actions so extensively without reason – I scarcely have such time to waste, as every second spent thinking about another person’s life is a second you won’t get back.

This wasn’t just any other girl. This was the kind of girl one could spend their whole lives sucking up to – for good reason. A girl worth spending a lifetime for, if it means having her in your debt.

Thinking this may be an opportunity to do just that, I swiftly scan my surrounding. Finding the lecture hall to now be entirely devoid of curious eyes that may be watching me, I stealthily follow her out the door.

Penny Avaling is her name.

{ch.2}

With nary a soul suspecting me, I trail her out of the university building, as she strides towards the bus stop, now seemingly unbothered by the pain she showed earlier.

Now, you may be wondering: what is so special about the girl called *Penny Avaling*, to an extent that it would inspire me to follow her, purely for the odd chance I could earn her favour? What could possibly be so extraordinary about her, that it could cause her to seek a solitary lifestyle, due only to the fact that anyone approaching her is after naught but that *thing,* that accursed little trait that seems to have dominated her life from start to finish?

Well, we can answer that in a minute. First, let us take a slightly deeper dive into the daily life of the girl called *Penny Avaling*, starting with *an introduction to acquaintanceship,* by the incredibly interesting and furthermore fascinating, me!

I begin with this, because it’s important to understand the difference between a *friend* and an *acquaintance* in respect to the girl called *Penny Avaling*. She, after all, does have friends (contrary to what one may believe based on my earlier speech). The difference, of course, is that a friend is born from trust, and, conversely, cannot be born without. Meanwhile, an acquaintance is born out of something akin to a mutual benefit – whether this be someone to small talk with in the morning at work, or someone you work well with in projects, or someone who will trade shifts with you: it can be anything at all, so long as there’s a sense of reciprocity towards it. An eye for an eye makes the world go round. Is that how it goes? Well, that’s beside the point - that point being that an acquaintanceship with a fundamental imbalance between the two sides of the bargain is simply, and truly, unsustainable.

And such is the case of the girl called *Penny Avaling.* She has something that many people want, that many people thirst for so passionately that their whole lives will be spent in pursuit of it, and that it’d be no exaggeration to say the whole world revolves around it.

You may have guessed by now, as the thing that makes the girl called *Penny Avaling* so unique, really isn’t anything special at all.

She’s just rich. Additionally, unfortunately for her, everyone knows it as well.

And so, many a fool approaches her in hopes of getting on her good side, for the sake of maybe getting their hands on those prized papers, that would make any eye shine with delight when presented it.

Of course, I’m a fool much alike them. I won’t justify it by saying my reasons are righteous, that I *need* to do this, or anything as such. I have will nor desire to be seen as somehow selfless in my selfish pursuit. I’ll readily admit there’s no real difference between *them* and *me*.   
  
Rather, you could even argue I’m *worse,* despite my situation forcing me to pursue the lofty goal of mere riches – for example, if one jumped into a river, began to drown, and then begged passers-by to pull them out, I’d readily argue it’d be perfectly in one’s rights to ignore the drowning man entirely. Of course, that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s ethically right – it’s that I wouldn’t blame them, nothing more.

The same thing applies to me. For my own sake, I’ll chase desperately after a chance to help myself – after all, I’ve found there’s nothing as pointless in this world as abandoning oneself – but I don’t expect any sympathy on my way there. I’ll take no pity.

But, I digress. What were we talking about?   
  
Ah, yes, *Penny Avaling.* *Penny Avaling.*

*Penny Avaling*, knowing that anyone who would put themselves in the position of an acquaintance – unwilling to get truly involved with her or carry her faults and hardships (like a friend would), who’re only in it for the *trade* – are only after a piece of that dough cake, has decided not to get involved with any person who approaches her superficially, leaving only those who go through an extensive, personally devised vetting process to be her true friends.

This may seem a highly logical action a first glance, but to anyone willing to take a slightly deeper look, there’s a critical flaw in this line of reasoning: that is, if these acquaintances are only in it for monetary gain – something *Penny Avaling* of all people has in spades – then why doesn’t she use that to her advantage? It’s a simple case of supply and demand: she has the supply, and the demand is there, so she should easily be able to trade with these acquaintances for whatever they think they are able to offer. So, the question is, why doesn’t she?

Unfortunately, it seems we’ll have to leave that topic for another time; the bus has arrived.

Penny Avaling steps inside the vehicle, showing her card to the scanner before stepping inside. I take a quick look at the destination of Penny Avaling’s chosen form of transport, to find it going *downtown.*

What I mean by *downtown* in this context, is *the kind of place where a rich girl like Penny Avaling would never, under usual circumstances, find herself.* And so, my suspicions still positively peaked, I worm my way into the bus as well.

Now, I may have forgotten to mention my ‘special skill.’ That is, the ability to go completely unnoticed if I want to – like magic, I poof out of attention, going unseen and (if I’m vigilant) unheard.

I mention this ‘special skill,’ because I don’t even bother to flash my card, stepping inside and waltzing right past the bus driver, sitting down two seats behind my target (*Penny Avaling* is her name*,* if I hadn’t mentioned).

Luckily, this bus is only mildly populated – the perfect condition for my ‘special skill’ to be used to its full potential. *Its full potential,* in this case, being the ‘unheard’ part, which is relevant now, due to the phone buzzing loudly in my pocket.

*Oh, is that mine?* I put on a little show as I grab it (although no one is paying attention to me anyway, due to my aforementioned ‘special skill.’)

On the screen it reads, quote unquote, (Blue Heart Yellow Heart) My Beloved (Pink Heart Pink Heart with Sparkles). It’s important to note, in this case, the reason why I’ve chosen to use two hearts on both sides, rather than three (which would be the industry standard), and also why I’ve chosen to use this particular, wildly inconsistent colour scheme for them.

There is, of course, a very good reason for this.   
  
That was a lie: I just chose them randomly, and I do so apologise.

I pick up the phone, using my standard greeting.

“Hello (Blue Heart Yellow Heart) My Beloved (Pink Heart Pink Heart with Sparkles); how are you doing on this fine day?”

“Hello (Black Heart Purple Heart) My Cherished (Red Heart Red Heart with Layers); I’m doing quite well on this fine day. That is, except for one little thing.”

“And whatever could that little thing be, (Blue Heart Yellow Heart) My Beloved (Pink Heart Pink Heart with Sparkles)?”

“That you, (Black Heart Purple Heart) My Cherished (Red Heart Red Heart with Layers), aren’t here with me, of course.”

I put my hand over my heart, touched.

“Oh, my lovely (Blue Heart Yellow Heart) My Beloved (Pink Heart Pink Heart with Sparkles), how my normal, anatomically correct heart yearns for you!”

“Oh, my sugar sweet (Black Heart Purple Heart) My Cherished (Red Heart Red Heart with Layers), how I count the seconds when we’re apart! And yet, the universe will forever stand between the time I can taste your cherry lips once again!”

“Oh, my darling (Blue Heart Yellow Heart) My Beloved (Pink Heart Pink Heart with Sparkles), pray tell: what force of nature keeps us apart on this momentous occasion!”

“Eggs!” she yells through the phone.

“Ye gods! To think our fated meeting would be met with a forceful postponement – and yet, in my mind, I cannot blame the world for throwing us such adversity. I cry bittersweet tears to our ill fate, yet understand full well that this pitiful earth is not yet ready for our love!”

“Such is the hardship we must overcome, nay, shall overcome, if it means finally feeling your hot skin onto mine! Eggs, we must get, and eggs we shall get! And, for you, my treasured (Black Heart Purple Heart) My Cherished (Red Heart Red Heart with Layers), should you find yourself capable of performing that feat, I assure you, you shall get your just reward!”

“Pray tell! What could be, this accolade I shall receive, upon completing my duty?”

“0 dollars,” she speaks, dramatically, “and 75 cents!”

“Ye gods!” I exclaim. “That’s half the price of a packet of eggs!”

“Yes, indeedy, it is!”

“But, my not always satisfactorily recompensing (Blue Heart Yellow Heart) My Beloved (Pink Heart Pink Heart with Sparkles), why must I, who has worked tirelessly to sate my studies on this fine day, go out of my way to pay a visit to the local grocery store, for but the price of half a packet of eggs!”

“Well, my not necessarily ever so gallant (Black Heart Purple Heart) My Sherish-”

The line suddenly goes completely silent. I blink blankly, moving my mouth ever closer to the mic as the silence drags on.

“You flubbed,” I whisper.

“I flubbed!” she exclaims on the other side. “I can’t believe it!”

“On the easiest part, too.”

A deep sigh echoes through the line.

“All jokes aside, though, you *can* get eggs, right?”

“Now now, you can’t just shrug off the *punishment* for flubbing before me now, can you?”

She hesitates momentarily.

“…that’s for later. First, eggs.”

“Ahah,” I whine, “I don’t know…to go *all the way* to the store for eggs, for what? Reimbursement?”

She pouts (presumably).

“Fine, have it your way then. But don’t blame me if we end up with Wakey Wakey Eggless Bakey.”

“Oh lordy lord!” I mock. “The horrors!”

“Hmm,” she thinks, “tell you what. You go get eggs, and in return, I’ll entertain you until you’re there. Sound good?”

“Now *that* is a suggestion I can get behind. Or, rather, how did you know that’s what I was gunning for this whole time?” I lie, flatteringly.

“Just a hunch,” she lies in turn.

“So,” I inquire, “how – and with what – will you entertain me, my lovely?”

“How about…a little…discussion?”

“A discussion? On what topic?”

“Well, as a couple lovebirds in love, I was thinking we could talk about the thing that unifies us, keeps us together.”

“Eggs?” I respond.

“Love, that’s right,” she answers in tow.

“I see, I see,” I utter, as I spy *Penny Avaling* tap one of the bus’s stop buttons, signalling her will to depart, as she gets up, moving to the back door, not long after getting in. Or, at least, that’s what I thought, but I’m quickly proven wrong by a glance at the clock.

Time sure flies when you’re having fun, I think as I get ready to follow *Penny Avaling* out the door.

“Then what, pray tell, shall we deliberate, my dear Watson?”

The line goes silent for a short moment.

“Would you rather die before or after me?”

An interesting question.

“In a larger sense, would you rather die before or after a hypothetical lover?”

“Well, as a strapping young lad, with decades to get over your – I mean – *my lover’s* death, and then decades more, still, to live on afterwards, I’ll have to go with *after.*”

“Hmm? Is that so? But, a *lone wolf* like you, surely won’t be missed after your death – rather, I surmise many would celebrate it; compare that to someone like me, with friends and family that’ll mourn my death – don’t you think it would be better for the world in general if you fall first?”

“Oh? I thought we were talking about *me* and a *hypothetical* lover?”

“Then, in a smaller sense, would you rather die before or after me?”

The bus finally halts, and *Penny Avaling* gets off, after scanning her card. A meagre two-dollar charge appears on the screen with a *beep* – although it doesn’t *really* matter, as she seems to have an unlimited subscription anyway.

I, of course, don’t bother to do the same as I step out, once again abusing my ‘special skill.’ I do, however, start to talk in a whisper, having lost the noisy chatter of the bus to cover up the sounds of my own voice.

“If we’re talking about *you* specifically…Well, I wouldn’t change my answer regardless.”

“No? Even considering what I said?”

“Isn’t it much sadder to die alone, than surrounded with people who’ll mourn for you? A death grieved and lamented and celebrated by friends and family who cared deeply for you? Is there anything warmer than that? I’d even go as far as to say it’s *worse* for a lone wolf to die.”

*Penny Avaling* stops moving after navigating through a set of alleyways.

“Interesting perspective. However, I think you’re a bit off.”

“Elaborate.”

“Say you have someone who’s completely cut themselves off from the rest of the population – they live alone in a hut, hunt and farm on their own for food, clean their own toilet, discard their own waste, yada yada.”

“The definition of a lone wolf, I suppose.”

“Precisely. This person – let’s call him *Wolff* –has lived completely cut off from humanity for three, maybe four decades now. As a result, *Wolff* isn’t remembered by anyone anymore. No one knows him, no one’s heard of him, he’s completely and utterly *off the grid.* Rather, from the perspective of society, it’s impossible to tell if *Wolff* is still even *alive* or not – such is the extent of his isolation.”

‘*Wolff* sure is an interesting character,” I note, as I follow *Penny Avaling,* not nearly as interesting as *Wolff,* into and through a set of alleyways.

“Is he really just a character?” She suddenly inquires. Before I can tell her *obviously,* she elaborates. “What I mean by that is, don’t you think there’s *at least one person* out there like *Wolff,* whether past or present? Don’t see *Wolff* as just a fictional character, but as a representation of a reality.

“With that established, let’s say, somewhere out here, in our world, the one we live, is *a Wolff.* A real, genuine, authentic, *Wolff.* You could go out and meet him, if you only know where he was. You don’t, of course, because that’s the very nature of this *Wolff,* but you *could,* potentially, meet him in person.”

“Accepted.”

“Then, following that logic, somewhere out there, a *Wolff* has died, is dying, or will die in future. You, of course, haven’t been, aren’t, and won’t be hit by a sudden shock as you realise that a *Wolff* has died, because you have no knowledge of it whatsoever. Has, does, or will this death make you, as a person, sombre? Dismal? *Heartbroken?”*

“If a tree falls in the forest…”

“No, that debate is for another day. Right now, tell me, are you sad at the loss of *Wolff?”*

“I’m not sad; *it* is,” I retaliate.

“What is *it,* in this context?”

“Hmm, I don’t know – the universe, maybe?”

As I say this, I’m finally able to note *Penny Avaling’s* destination – deep in the sketchiest of alleyways, she meets with a set of even sketchier men. I stay just around the corner, barely within earshot, although I only listen with half of one – I’m sure it’s not nearly as important as the conversation with my girlfriend.

“You’ve lost me.”

“Give me an example of something sad.”

“Kicking a puppy?”

“Alright, well, imagine someone, somewhere, kicked a puppy – this is very sad, right?”

“Definitely.”

“Unfortunately, the only one who witnessed the actual kicking of this puppy is an unfeeling, unflinching, emotionless sociopath – not even the *idea* of being sad crosses this person’s mind. This means no person experiences sadness at the kicking of this puppy – does this mean it’s not a sad thing?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so.”

“Right. Therefore, this sadness must exist separate from human observation – after all, this is a sad thing, despite no living creature, beingsad.”

I hear something about *disease* and *medicine.* I go back to my conversation.

“What about the puppy?”

“It died on impact, and there is no afterlife.”

“…what about the one who kicked it?”

“It’s a puppy kick-inator – it has no capacity for emotion; only kicking puppies. So, with that said, can we establish that sadness exists outside the living psyche?”

“The only sad thing here is the working of your mind.”

“*Can we establish that sadness exists outside the living psyche?”* I repeat, with more emphasis.

“Very well.”

“So, if a sad thing happens, but there’s no one to experience that, to take on that burden – where does the sadness go?”

“…the universe?”

I hear something about *police* and *snitching.* I go back to my conversation.

“Exactly my thought. And so, too, is the case of *Wolff,* and so, too, would be the case of *I.* You wouldn’t want to make the universe sad now, would you?”

“Hm,” she offhandedly agrees. “So that’s why you’d rather I die before you?”

“Oh no, I only said that to spark the discussion. Rather than that, haven’t we been contemplating the question of whether I’d choose *myself* or *you,* if one of ushad to die?”

She goes quiet at this remark.

“Well,” she finally pipes up, “I suppose it’s fine to have answered that as well. But then, the question still stands – would you rather die before or after me?”

“If we both had to die, then…I’d go with *after*.”

“Why?”

“Well, I think I’d rather feel the grief of your loss than force you to feel the grief of mine.”

“Oh? Does that mean you think I’d feel it more heavily? Conversely, does that mean you think I love you more than you love me?”

“What, you don’t?”

She scoffs.

Is it really such a ridiculous notion? I’m a bit hurt.

“All jokes aside, I’d say I agree – I’d also prefer I die before you. Rather, I’d off myself before I die *after* you.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Hm. And you wouldn’t want my death to be on your hands, would you?”

“Never.”

“Then don’t die,” She says, before hanging up.

Of course, she and I don’t have a habit of saying ‘Don’t die’ instead of goodbye (what kind of person would?), so there must be a deeper meaning behind the statement. I conclude from this, that she must’ve realised, due to my whispering, that I was using my ‘special skill,’ which I only do while on a job – and, as such, decided to give me some subtle, *very subtle,* encouragement.

That’s my girlfriend for you; isn’t she the best?

(In case you answered no, it was a rhetorical question)

In the hopes of honouring her request (command), I decide to start fully focusing on the case of *Penny Avaling.*

Speaking of *Penny Avaling,* she seems to be about done with her dealings. As such, it’s the perfect time for me to swoop in like a hero.

After all, a *Penny* saved is a penny earned.

{ch. 3}

Let’s recap a bit: I followed *Penny Avaling* after witnessing a strange behaviour. Specifically, she had a sudden influx of pain, then immediately called someone without waiting for it to subside. I found it a bit unusual, and so decided to investigate, through the aforementioned following.

Now, had she gone in the direction of the hospital, or been picked up by a driver, I would’ve left it at that. She, however, took a bus into a downtown area, where she normally wouldn’t be seen dead, and so, I continued my tailing, to possibly prevent her being *found* dead.

So far, everything was already clear.

After this, it became a bit muddied, as I was involuntarily distracted (through no fault of my own), so let us piece together the truth from what little I gathered, shall we?

I followed Penny out of the bus, through a set of alleyways, where she eventually stopped. At this point in time, I decided to keep a healthy distance, so I stayed around the corner. She stayed waiting impatiently at this location, until she was finally approached by some sketchy people, for some kind of deal.

I’m sure there are some deductions to be made about the type and nature of this ‘deal,’ but let’s temporarily leave that aside.

First, I’d like to pose the following question: why did she have to wait after arriving?

The obvious answer would be that the people she was meeting with were late. However, I feel this is unlikely – after all, *Penny Avaling* rushed over to the meeting spot at a high pace, and then, as I mentioned earlier, waited impatiently. Unless she’s the type to be an hour early and then complain to the people who were there 30 minutes before meeting time (which I doubt), this is a very out of place reaction.

And so, let’s continue under the assumption that, for some reason, the men made her wait *on purpose,* most likely to do something else.

Continuing on, it’s about time to dissect the contents of the *deal* that was evidently performed. Most likely, the trade-in from *Penny Avaling’s* side is monetary. I doubt she’s been targeted *despite* being *Penny Avaling,* rather than *due to* being *Penny Avaling*. Her pockets also seem to have gotten lighter, but that’s only conjecture from my part.

What, all of my deductions have been naught but conjecture? That’s a bit rude, isn’t it?

Well, regardless, I think we’re a bit stuck at this point of our contemplation. For that reason, let’s attempt to remember what they talked about, while I was still involuntarily distracted (through no fault of my own).

Ah, yes, it’s starting to come back to me now. I can already hear the first line:

“Finally decided to show up, have we?” says *Penny Avaling.*

“Don’t get sassy with us now, missy – after all, we have what you need for your…affliction,” one of the men responds, almost cartoonishly. I struggle to stifle a laugh, remembering it.

Actually, it seems I failed completely, as *Penny Avaling* suddenly takes notice of me.

Oh noes, it appears I’ve accidentally stopped using my ‘special skill,’ allowing *Penny Avaling* to accidentally discover the place where I just so happen to be passing by (accidentally), before she leaves and accidentally misses me! What a disaster!

I loudly clear my throat, multiple times, making myself utterly unignorable.

Well, there evidently appears to be an added time limit to my remembrance, presently, so allow me to speed things up a bit.

“Yada yada yada hand it over already!” says *Penny Avaling.*

“Yada yada yada show us the money first! (see? I was right.)” the other man commands.

“Fine, whatever. But yada yada yada,”responds *Penny Avaling,* pulling out her wallet.

“It checks out; give her the stuff,” the first man says, after confirming the amount. The second man gives her some kind of pill, which she greedily swallows.

“Yada yada yada pleasure doing business yada yada yada,” the first man says, evilly.

“Yada yada yada,” says *Penny Avaling,* glaring.

Ah, this next part seems important, so I’ll momentarily stop omitting.

“Wow, wow, don’t glare at us like that – we’re doing you a favour. After all, only we can give you your *medicine,*”

“For the disease *you* gave me!” *Penny Avaling* shouts angrily back at them.

I see, so they somehow made her ill with something? Some kind of ailment only they have the cure to?

…is what you must be thinking right now. I, of course, knew this all along, due to my deductions! Which I just happened to have forgotten to mention! But totally did do!

That aside, let’s skip some more lines; *Penny Avaling* has almost reached my location.

“Yada yada” someone says.

“Yadadadaaaaaaa!” someone sings, happily!

Okay, they didn’t do that. Sorry for trying to spice things up a bit (that was sarcastic; I don’t actually feel sorry).

I’m side-tracking again, and seem to have skipped a lot more lines in my mental playback. Well, I’m sure they weren’t important.

Speaking of important:

“And remember: you’d better not do any snitching. If we find anyone in the area, you’re never getting another pill. Understand?”

“…yes,” *Penny Avaling* responds.

Oh, and wouldn’t you know it! They must’ve done a precursory scan of the area before showing themselves, in which I went unnoticed due to my ‘special skill.’

This means, in case you forgot, that I was right again (as always).

So, in summary, *Penny Avaling* was somehow infected with a disease that flares up every so now and again by some kind of organisation (conjecture; the two men don’t seem competent enough to execute such a plan on their own), who also have a monopoly on the only cure, allowing them to constantly extort our *Penny Avaling* for large amounts of cash money.

“What are *you* doing here?” asks *Penny Avaling,* having finally reached around the corner to find the source of the sounds she’s heard.

I greet her with a wide smile.

“Oh, I’m just passing through,” I lie, as easily as I breathe.

{ch.4}

“*Passing through?* Really? You just so *happened* to be passing through this set of alleyways, where I just so *happened* to be myself?” *Penny Avaling* sasses.

“Yup, that’s right. I just so happened to be passing through this same set of alleyways where you just so happened to be yourself,” I respond. “Is that a problem?”

For some reason, *Penny Avaling* is keeping a hand behind her back, hiding something from me, as she glares angrily in my direction. I’m overtaken by curiosity: whatever could it be?

Well, only one way to find out.

“Hey, quick question: what, exactly are you hiding behind your back.”

She clicks her tongue.

“You don’t have to know,” she responds to my enquiry.

I look her straight in the eye for a second, with still the same wide smile, and she stares straight back.

Suddenly, I lunge to the right. She responds by twisting her body to that side. Little does she know, I was only feinting: I move to the left instead, deftly grabbing the hidden object out of her hand.

I find a bright phone screen. On the dial, it reads ‘911.’

How rude, I think.

“How rude,” I say. “Didn’t I already mention I’m merely passing by?”

“…well, sorry for being a bit paranoid – I get a bit scared when I’m followed into a dark alleyway by someone who *fucking murdered three people in cold blood*.”

“*Allegedly,*” I correct.

She stares blankly at me. She must not have understood what I meant.

“I *allegedly* fucking murdered three people in cold blood – there’s quite a difference.”

“Oh, *my bad* for not making that distinction!” she sarcastically apologises.

“Thank you!” I respond, with as much mocking honesty as I can muster. “Not a lot of people are willing to admit to their mistakes.”

While I’m distracted, she reaches out to retrieve her device, but I manage to pull it back in time. She glares angrily at me.

“I’m only going to the Aldi ‘round the corner, you know? There’s no need to feel threatened.”

After regaining her composure, she responds, “Oh right, *the Aldi*. Of course! How could I not have thought of that? You’re just going to the Aldi in *this* run-down, dangerous neighbourhood - that makes perfect sense.”

“Well, I live right around the corner; it *does* make perfect sense.”

What? It’s true. I do live here. Did I neglect to mention that? Well, it’s not really important or anything. Definitely has nothing to do with anything I’ve mentioned before. Nope.

“You live here?” she then says, clear pity in her eyes.

Now that’s just rude.

“I can show you to my house if you want – but I’m going to assume you won’t take me up on that offer.”

“You assume rightly.”

She looks at me sceptically, still in disbelief.

“Look,” I say, opening up my backpack and pulling out my Aldi branded shopping bag, which I (luckily) always keep on me, in case I need to pick something up on the way home, “I’ve got my bag and everything. I’m a regular costumer, since the shop is right on my street.”

She sighs.

“Alright, alright, fine. I’ll accept it.”

“Lovely.”

“But then, answer me this – why are you going through the sketchy alleyways to get there?”

“It’s faster, duh. Besides, as an *alleged* three-time murderer, I’m not really too scared of anyone,” I spitefully mention.

“…right, whatever. Can you just give me my phone back already?”

Not even an apology? Someone should teach this girl some manners. Then again, I’m not exactly the pinnacle of courteousness myself, so who am I to complain?

After all, I’m lying straight to someone’s face right now.

“If you promise not to call the police.”

“I’m not making such a promise,” she responds, understandably enough.

Well, whatever. I doubt she’d pull anything else at this point, so I toss her the phone. While she struggles to take hold of it (she didn’t expect me to give it back, I guess), I take a seat on a random dumpster, perching myself well above *Penny Avaling,* to prepare properly for the negotiation that is about to follow – one should be in a high position when bargaining, no?

“So,” I say, after she finally has her device stably in her hands, “since I had to go through a whole interrogation, I feel compelled to probe a bit as well: why exactly are *you* here, miss *Penny Avaling*?”

After a moment of silence, she says “…no reason,” attempting to shrug it off, while looking away guiltily.

“You’re not a very good liar, you know, miss *Penny Avaling?”*

“Can you not use my full name?” she asks, sheepishly.

“You seem to be misunderstanding something, miss *Penny Avaling –* I’m currently being formal, as if talking to a client.”

“A…client?” she wonders.

“Yes. Thing is, although I may only have been passing by, it doesn’t change the fact that I was here, while you, too, were here – and so, I may have overheard a thing or two. I asked for formalities’ sake, but I’ve already grasped the situation, more or less. Well, even if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t just be able to ignore what I heard anyway.”

“I see,” *Penny Avaling* notes, more comprehensive of the situation. “And you’re offering to lend a hand?”

“I appreciate you catching on quick; I am, as you say, offering to lend a hand.”

“They won’t be very happy if they found out I conscripted a helper.”

“Fret not; as an *alleged* three-time murderer, I’d say not getting caughtis one of my specialties.”

“Hm,” she contemplates. “But then, what do you get out of it? What do you *want?*”

“I’m sure it’s not hard to think of.”

“Money, huh?” she concludes. “Just like everyone else.”

“Sorry for not being original.”

This is a lie. Rather, an omission; I have a better reasons to be doing this. Two, to be exact, but we’ll get to those later.

*Penny Avaling* takes a look around.

“Well, considering where you live, I suppose I can empathise with looking for a quick buck.”

“I appreciate your understanding of my circumstances.”

“That aside, I do wonder *how* you’ll be able to help in the first place. Surely, you understand that there’s more to this case than *just* two people*,* right?”

“Oh, I understand perfectly – worry not.”

“Then, surely, you’re not offering to rid me, or rather, the world, from the *pus* that is *that organisation?*”

“Oh, that’s *exactly* what I’m offering,” I say, with a wide grin plastering my face.

And with that, I have her hook, line and sinker.

{ch.5}

I didn’t trust *Penny Avaling* to convincingly pretend to be afflicted (and neither did she), so we decided to simply wait until it acted up again. She’d contact the organisation (through a middleman) when she got sick, go through the motions of the deal, and then, afterwards, I’d tail the sent men back to the organisation and take care of the rest. Once I’d solved the issue, I would charge her for the job.

(I don’t really care about the price. Just do it, and I’ll pay whatever afterwards), is what she said.

She’s not a very good negotiator, but I suppose that only works in my favour.

In any case, after a good week or so of patiently waiting, she finally approached me in the lecture hall.

“You ready?” she asks.

As the lecture has only just ended (she must’ve noticed the headache somewhere in the middle of it), most everyone is still sitting in their seats; as such, this peculiar action from the oh so famous *Penny Avaling* has called all attention towards us. A quick glance at her shows she’s unbothered, however.

Well, if she won’t care, why should I?

“All systems nominal,” I respond, packing my books into my trusty backpack.

I am, of course, not nearly rich enough to be able to afford actual books; I’ve illegally printed out all the pages and slapped them together in a folder.

Fortunately for me, even the most anal professor lets me get away with it; I have my reputation as a(n) (alleged) three-time murderer to thank for that.

We leave the hall, leaving a bunch of college students slightly dumbstruck.

“You don’t mind being associated with me?” I ask her, just in case.

“It’s whatever. People will talk whether I do things or not, so I might as well do things, right?”

“You know, they say rumours die in only two weeks. Don’t you think that’s true for you as well?”

“Who says that?”

“Dunno. People?”

*Penny Avaling* lets out a wry chuckle.

“Well, I suppose people *do* say all kinds of things. I’m sure you’ve experienced it first-hand – maybe even more than me.”

“Possibly. In my case, as an alleged three-time murderer, people don’t really talk to me for some reason, so I have no clue what they could be saying.”

“You’re never letting that go, are you?”

“Never ever.”

“Hmm,” *Penny Avaling* lets slip, finally thinking about the original question. “There may be some truth in *rumours* dying out in two weeks, but *fame* sure doesn’t, so it’s like a droplet in the ocean, really.”

“Isn’t that nice? Being famous is a lot of peoples’ life goal.”

“I guess infamous would be a better word.”

“Well, say infamy really does have a longer lifespan than our earlier mentioned rumours – what causes its death, then? Personally, I’d say it’s still time, just a larger amount of it.”

“No, it’s not time. Well, it is time, but *just* time won’t do it. Or, rather, no matter how much time you let pass, it won’t make the slightest difference unless it lacks a certain *something*.”

“Spunk?”

“Exposure.”

“Oh?”

“With rumours, for example, just time will do it. I mean, they have to be actively spread to be remembered; people will talk less and less, until it fades into obscurity. In comparison, forgetting a person you can see with your eyes is much harder – you can’t be exposed to them, or you’ll never forget.”

“It’s a nice idea, but I think even that is wrong.”

“Wrong, how?” she asks, almost offendedly.

“Well, I’d argue that it doesn’t matter how much time passes without any exposure – all you can accomplish is going out of *mind,* not out of *memory*.”

“Out of sight, out of mind, I suppose.”

“Yes, indeed. I’d even argue that a human will never *really* forget – all they need is the right *stimulus* to come along, and their memory will be refreshed, like drinking a crisp glass of water after a thirsty couple days in the desert.”

“What if that *stimulus* doesn’t exist anymore? Will it be forgotten then?”

“As close as can be. No, actually, that’s wrong – there is a way for something to be truly, honestly, *forgotten.*”

“I’m sure quite a lot of people would be very happy such a method exists.”

“Like you?”

“Like you.”

“Oh no, you misunderstand – my reputation is quite helpful, you know?”

“Is it, now?” she responds, mildly surprised.

Of course it is: I wouldn’t have secured this job without it, is what I *didn’t* say.

I’m far from willing to admit my livelihood may depend on this job, without exaggeration. I mean, you know where I live, so, from a money perspective, it’s more than clear I’m in need of the financial compensation. But, aside from that – and I say this with maybe a bit of exaggeration – a thing *far more* important than something insignificant like *my life* depends on this job.

Specifically, you could say my life only has value as a direct result of it, so calling it more important than my life is a bit wrong. Without this particular thing, under the optimistic assumption my life has no value to the general populace (the actual value is most likely negative), it’d have no value even to myself, leaving not a single person in this world left to whom I have value.

I find it hard to believe in peoples’ intrinsic value, so I’d say a person’s value is really only in how others value them – I’m a very economical person in that sense. As such, seeing as I would provide no or negative value to others with removal of this *something,* it stands to reason that it is, indeed, more important than my life.

*Oh, but what about your girlfriend,* you may ask, *don’t you have value to her?*

Only as long as this *something* is still here, I answer. Without this *something,* I wouldn’t provide any value to her either.

So, what is this *something,* then?

*It’s a secret – teehee.*

“A lot of professors tend to be more forgiving of being tardy, or sleeping clean through their classes when their *life* might be at stake, basically.”

“Well, is it?”

“Allegedly.”

“I suppose I’d be scared too, even if my life were only *allegedly* in danger.”

“Maybe it is.”

“…what’s that supposed to mean? Are you talking about *that,* or what?”

“It doesn’t mean anything in particular; it’s just a thought. I’ll tell you about it later, if it ends up being important.”

“I’d say any threat to my life is important, even if it’s only *a thought.*”

“If you’re going to go that far, then you shouldn’t even be on the sidewalk. After all, a car might slip and run you right over – that’s a very real risk, possibly even realer than my *thought,* and yet, here you are. If we’re talking about what’s a real and what’s a fake threat, isn’t that simply impossible to tell?”

“Unless you look in hindsight, I guess,” she says, before motioning to an oncoming vehicle – which I’m at least 92% sure will not run us over (the other 8% consist mostly of the chance I spontaneously decide to throw myself before it, although I suppose it wouldn’t have run *us* over in that case). “That’s our bus, by the way”

Don’t misunderstand me, however – I’m not suicidal or anything like that. It’s more like when you have the thought that you *could* do something, and it’s *so incredibly tempting* to just do it. Like pressing a big red button that says, ‘DO NOT PRESS.’

Getting in, I can’t help but notice the destination of this line is entirely in the opposite direction of my own house – much to my dismay. Well, maybe we won’t be going far.

“So, which one’s our stop?” I ask, motioning towards the led screen flashing our options.

She takes a quick look at it, before announcing, “I’ll just tell you when we get there,” which, for anyone who may have missed the subtext, means *it’s not even on the screen.*

Fuck.

Well, I suppose being late was inevitable anyway, so being a bit later than late hardly makes a difference. Yes, it doesn’t matter, not in the slightest – that’s what I’ve decided. I don’t care in the slightest about leaving my lovely girlfriend to eat all by her lonesome, alone, in a dark droopy room without me or anyone else, in a lonely manner.

Yes, I don’t care at all. Removed from my mind. Unrelated.

I might hurry a bit for unrelated reasons, however – we’ll see.

In any case, *Penny Avaling* scans her card and I (reluctantly) follow suit, glad I remembered to bring mine along in the first place. I usually skimp out, using my special skill, so it was a lucky break.

No, actually, I got reminded by…no one, yes, not a single person, a non-existent nobody whom I’m definitely not leaving alone.

Let’s move on.

“Why are you taking the bus anyway? Shouldn’t you have, like, a private driver or something?”

“Weren’t you going to tell me your method to *make* something be forgotten, truly and honestly?”

“Hm? Was I?”

“You most decidedly were.”

“Weird; I don’t remember being about to do such a thing. Hm, I see, so I knew something like that, huh? That’s quite amazing. Really.”

“…so, what is it then?”

“Hm? Well, I don’t know – I mean, I don’t remember anything of the sort. And, I’m sure, since I forgot it so quickly, it must not have been important. Well, I’ll tell you if I ever end up recalling – but, again, it wasn’t important, since I forgot, so I probably won’t. With that out of the way, I’d like to ask you again: why are you taking the bus?”

She looks at me sceptically, but seems to visibly give up on pressing things.

“Would you accept it if I said I can’t let my father find out about the shady people I’m dealing with, and therefore cannot afford to make use of a private driver?”

“Nope~”

“Figures.” She sighs. “I just don’t want to rely on *daddy’s money,* if you get me? Especially not after that *fiasco,* four months ago. Although,” she glances at me, “I suppose you had other things on your mind at the time.”

“I’m caught up,” I say, before straining my mind to recall the details. “Approximately four months ago, a certain media outlet discovered major donations from a mister Jeremy Avaling to our beloved university. As a result, its morals have been called into question, as it seems to be a clear-cut case of corruption. Is that correct?”

“…unfortunately, yes. Even though I thought I’d managed to get in through my own hard work and effort, it appeared my father had been pulling some string behind the curtains, while simultaneously pulling my leg with empty congratulations.”

“I see, I see,” I say, nodding along.

“It was a whole debacle for sure – and, as an unintended side effect, it also informed just about everyone affiliated with the university that, yes, *Penny Avaling* is incredibly rich. And now, that’s all anyone sees when they look at me. Even you, surely, saw an *opportunity* in that alleyway, rather than *someone in need of help, right?”*

“I won’t deny it,” I admit. “Then again, it wouldn’t be much different for a poor person, either. Besides, in all likelihood, you’re only in this situation because you’re rich, aren’t you?”

“…what do you mean?”

“Well, you wouldn’t be targeted for an expensive scam if you had no money, surely.”

“That…would make sense.”

“But, yes, I see, I see – so that’s how it is. Basically, you’d like people to see *Penny Avaling* again, rather than a walking wad of cash, which is why you’d like to learn of my *method* to make people forget that fact. How unfortunate that, ironically enough, I can’t remember it either.”

“That *is* right,” she agrees, “although, I do question why I have to explain myself to you in the first place. Isn’t this completely irrelevant from the job?”

“That may be so, but you won’t find anyone in my line of business who’ll refrain from such questionings.”

She sends a quizzical gaze my way.

“…what is your line of business anyway?”

“Ghost buster.”

“Ghostbusters! (?)” she shouts, like in the song.

“Not quite.”

“But you do bust ghosts?”

“If necessary, yes.”

“I’m strongly starting to doubt putting my faith in you. What even are you talking about with this *ghost buster* stuff? Why call yourself a *ghost buster* if you don’t even bust ghosts! It’s in the damned name!”

“Correction, we don’t *necessarily* bust ghosts. Very different.”

“*We?* So there are other *ghost busters* around as well?”

“Of course – but I assure you, you won’t be able to find them. The only way to find one of us, is if we come to you. Generally speaking, that is.”

“Okay google,” she says, as she pulls out her phone, all the while looking me straight in the eye, “‘ghost buster services’”

She clicks the second result, opening a flashy looking website promoting a certain *Dr Wickles’ premium package,* among others.

“What about this guy?”

“Total hack.”

Slightly annoyed at my instant dismissal, she pulls up another site.

Let’s see: ‘You just bought a new mansion, but there’s a constant whaling in the background, all the painting have red skulls on them, and doors are opening and closing with no one clear – *sound familiar!?* Well, worry not! The amazing Mr Wangtang promises to solve your problems promptly, for a measly 23.99 an hour! What a steal!’ it says at the top.

“A steal indeed – absolute 100%, complete hack, this dude.”

She sighs, before simply showing the screen to me.

“Are any of these results *not* hacks, according to you?”

“Well, let’s see…” I scroll lazily through the pages, making sure to note the abstracts. “Nope. All hacks of the highest order.”

“On what basis are you even calling them impostors? How do you know?”

“It’s pretty obvious, really – they all talk about busting ghosts. Like, *come on:* ghosts aren’t even real.”

“Then why are you busting them!”

“Eh,” I correct, “I’m not necessarily busting *them.* I bust all kinds of other things too – there’s so many bustable things in this world, there’s no way any *real* ghost buster would limit themselves to just *ghosts.*”

“Are those other things real then?”

“Of course not – I wouldn’t be busting them otherwise. If it’s a real thing, it should probably be left to the police, you know?”

“If they aren’t *real,*” she starts, before finally snapping, “then *how* – and more importantly, *why –* are you *busting* the damn things!”

“Techniques are highly specific, depending on whatever you’re *busting,* exactly. For your other question, it’s quite simple, really – *they* might not be real, but their *effects* are. The moment something starts to affect the *real* world – as far as that’s a thing – it becomes a job for us *ghost busters.*”

“…if they have a tangible effect on the world, wouldn’t you say they’re already real?”

“Are you saying ghost *are* real?”

“No, I’m…” she interrupts her own stammer with a sigh, while rubbing her temples.

“Look at it this way: have you ever seen a ghost?”

“No.”

“Well, there you have it! Ghosts aren’t real – QED.”

“I’ve never seen an elephant either, but those are pretty real.”

“Are you sure? Also,” I add, slightly stupefied, “you’ve really never seen one? Would you maybe like some directions to the nearest zoo: their elephant enclosure was recently blessed with a new baby boy – it may be educational to take a quick trip.”

She takes a deep breath, channelling her inner calm into outer calm.

“Fine, whatever – I’ll accept your *ghost buster* shenanigans, as long as you answer me this: why are you called *ghost busters*, if you really *bust* a whole variety of *things,* of a presumably supernatural nature?”

“Well, *buster of being of a supernatural nature* doesn’t quite roll of the tongue, does it now?”

“…I guess.”

“Besides, the job title doesn’t really matter, since you usually don’t tell people you’re a *ghost buster.*”

“Why not?”

“People will think you’re a hack.”

“Fair enough. Which does beg the question, why did you?”

“You asked. In the first place, however, I’m not particularly taking this job as a *ghost buster* – my skillset simply happens to align with your needs, so I figured I’d offer; that’s all.”

“Your skillset?” she questions. “Busting ghosts?”

“I bust all kinds of things – they don’t even have to be supernatural!”

“I hope you mean *crime rings*, not *people.*”

“Oh, speaking of: I just remembered the method to make people forget.”

“Speaking of?”

“It’s quite simple, honestly; hardly even worth all the hype we’ve built up. It’s so simple, I could describe it in only 6 words. Or 5, if you leave out articles. Basically, the idea was that something is never *truly* forgotten, unless no stimulus of any kind could make one recall it. The issue with this is, that, for something to be forgotten, every kind of stimulus in existence that may jolt one’s memory in that direction has to be removed, which is impossible.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, if we flip that idea on its head, we can find a quick and easy method; instead of removing the *stimuli,* one need only *render them ineffective.* To put it in a lot less words: *A dead man tells no tales.*”

She stares blankly at me.

“And so,” I continue, “with that line of reasoning established, I have an *additional offer* for you – as an alleged three-time murderer, I can make everyone forget about your…situation.”

She stares blankly at me. After three blinks (I counted!), she puts her phone up to her ear.

“Hello, officer? A three time-murderer (alleged) just threatened an entire university’s fill of people.”

“I assure you, officer, you misunderstand! When I offered to end the life of everyone in my college, which just so happens to coincide with the people who are closely aware of my (alleged) crimes, I was only doing it as a joke! Obviously, I had no intention to get through with it! …unless?”

She gives me a stern look.

“Haha, just kidding~”

Saved. Looking at *Penny Avaling’s* expression, totally devoid of any suspicion (I’m very good at reading faces, so I’m quite confident in this), I become more than sure that I’m home safe.

“All jokes aside, we’ve just about arrived.”