Christopher Salch

2500 N. Eastman Rd. Apt 1183

Longview Tx, 75605

903-736-0916

[emeraldd.chris@gmail.com](mailto:emeraldd.chris@gmail.com)

That Which is Nameless

a novel by Christopher Salch

## A Tall Tale

“There is a somewhere in the middle of nowhere that is everywhere at the same time. In that place, time is a fluid that flows around you, and the very fabric of reality seems to twist and stretch,” said the old man, with a sly grin on his face. There was a glint in his eye that all talented storytellers have when they are reciting some particularly enticing bit. From the way he spoke, you would wonder if he’d drunk one too many and followed it with the worm. Of course, the fact that this particular conversation happened to be taking place in a retirement home, without an ounce of liquor in sight would, normally, seem to preclude that possibility.

“I’ve been there once myself. Years and years ago, when I was a much younger man. Of course, nowadays I doubt you could find it. It may be impossible to get there with all this newfangled technology around. Mapping every last inch of the world so that everything has a name to it.” He spat out those last words with a disgusted grimace. “Of course, that’s the way things have to be. If we didn’t explore every last inch of our planet, we would be a dead race. That’s the thing, you see. We have to keep moving out farther and farther to stay alive, but we destroy the mystery when we do. Curiosity doesn’t always kill the cat. Sometimes . . . sometimes it doesn’t kill anyone. Sometimes, it just closes the door and walks away.”

He looked sad now, as though a long-buried memory, stained with ancient tears, had come to light. The pain of it was clearly visible in his eyes; they were twin wells of torment. Perhaps this interview was too much for him? The nurses had warned that he often fell into depression when talking about the past. At times, his stories would be too much and nothing could stop him from overflowing with anguish.

“Sometimes, you can’t put what you find back in the box,” he said with a cracking voice. “A girl named Pandora found that out once, and we’ve never learned her lesson. I found that out, too.”

The old man almost whispered that last bit as memories came flooding back. Deeply painful memories from a past long forgotten.

“Perhaps we should continue this another time?” suggested the interviewer, moving to turn off his digital recorder. If he left the old man in a dark mood, he would hear no end of it from the desk nurse. She had been very particular with her instructions, and none too light with her threats.

“No! No! Don’t go!” he said, rousing from his reverie and stopping the interviewer from retrieving his recorder. “I must tell this story to someone. Those airheads that run this place think I’m going senile. Not a smidgen of imagination amongst the lot of them.”

The interviewer pulled his hand back, startled at the sudden response. A fire burned in the old man’s eyes that hadn’t been there before. He needed to tell this story to someone who would listen. Someone who would not dismiss his story as the rantings of an old, fading man.

“Are you sure? I can just as easily come back tomorrow if you would prefer,” stated the interviewer, a note of concern in his voice as he slowly sat back down.

“When you get to be my age, you can’t always count on tomorrow being there. I’ve been around long enough to learn a few things about death. He’s crossed my path a time or two in the past and, if there’s anything I’ve learned from those encounters, he always keeps his appointments,” said the old man with a sigh.

“How old do you think I am?” he asked after a pause, the sadness from earlier replaced by a bone-weary look –- a deep sense of exhaustion, as though his very essence were slowly draining away. This man had lived a long life. It was all there in his eyes –- ancient eyes that carried with them the weight of too much time.

“If I had to guess, I would say you were well into your nineties.” The interviewer knew he was wrong even before the words left his mouth.

That did it. The old man broke into a deep laugh that ended some moments later with a coughing fit. He was smiling now, some of the life returning to his face.

“Oh, come now! You really think I’m in my nineties? With this withered husk of a body!” He wheezed as he spoke, fighting back another fit of laughter.

“You couldn’t be much more than a hundred years old!” stated the interviewer incredulously. If he were not still catching his breath, the old man would have laughed even harder at that. He seemed to find the whole concept of age, his in particular, to be downright hilarious. It took several minutes for him to finally catch his breath and get control of himself again.

“Look over there at the bookshelf. Do you see that book there with the leather binding?” he said pointing. “Yes, that one there. Hand it here.”

If the old man’s eyes carried the impression of great age, this book held the weight of an ancient relic. It was a soft-bound text with a simple, leather thong tied around it. There was nothing specific about the book that telegraphed its age. In fact, the only identifying feature was an odd symbol precisely centered on its cover –- a stylized eye made from two semicircular lines with a dot in the middle, surrounded by a circumscribed, six-point star. The leather, though discolored by the oil from many hands and exposure to various liquids, was still soft and supple. Yet, you could not look at the book without knowing it was older than anything you had seen before.

The old man took the book and untied the thong, his hands shaking with excitement. A gust of wind, greatly out of place inside a building of any sort, much less a quiet retirement home, seemed to blow through the room. The book’s pages flipped of their own accord, coming to rest somewhere near the end. Many more pages than a book of that size should have been able to hold flew past in those few seconds. Faint, scratching noises seemed to emanate from the book, as though many sharp-pointed pens were inking words onto its pages.

“Now don’t be frightened by this old thing. It won’t hurt you in the least. It will do anything but hurt you,” said the old man with a mischievous grin. “I’ve carried it around for years. It has gotten me out of more scrapes than you could possibly imagine.”

He paused for a moment, holding his breath. “Do you hear that sound? The faint, scratching sound? That is the Scribe of Time recording everything that happens. This little Book is the recorded history of every event that has ever occurred, and a few that have not yet. Of course, I don’t expect you to believe that just yet. You will though, as time goes by. I’m going to tell you my story, but you have to promise me something in return.”

“What would that be?” asked the interviewer, still in awe of what he had just seen.

“When you’ve heard my story, I’m going to give you this Book and ask you to write something in it. Do you think you can do that for me? A few drops of ink on the page?”

“What’s the catch? There’s always a catch”, said the interviewer, now wary of the old man’s new demeanor. It would not do to obligate himself to something with no idea of what he was getting into.

“Oh, there’s a catch alright, and it’s a doozy of a catch. All I can say is that the Book will give you what you want, and that no harm will come to you. What do you say?”

“You won’t tell me the story unless I agree?”

“That’s right. It will go with me to the grave if you don’t agree,” said the old man in a matter-of-fact tone. There would be no argument over this one point.

“Well then, I don’t really have much choice do I? I have already invested a great deal of time and energy in coming here to listen to your story. I will see this through to the end.”

“You’ll do as I ask?”

“Yes, I will do as you ask.”

“Well then, let’s begin at the beginning,” said the old man, flipping back through his Book and starting to read.

The sun burned down on a solitary figure wandering in the middle of a desolate landscape. That solitary figure happened to be a much younger, and much more naïve, me. I had been wandering for what seemed like an eternity, though in reality, only a few days had passed. What a stupid idea, deliberately getting lost, in the desert, without a compass or map or even a decent knife, I thought to myself.

“If I make it out of this alive, I will never leave the city again!” I yelled with a hoarse voice. My water had run out several hours earlier, and there were still several hours to go before sunset. Yup, this had to be one of the stupidest things I had ever done. Trying to find a location that no one could draw a map to. If that wasn’t enough of a laugh, my car broke down well off the beaten path in the middle of the desert. I didn’t even know which desert I was in.

”‘Go beyond the maps,’ he says! ‘Travel to the nameless sands,’ he says!” I yelled again. What had I been thinking? Sweat ran down my face, stinging my eyes.

“You will know the place when you find it. The pit burns with unending fire to keep the unwary away. There is a way through the fire, marked with the sigil I’ve drawn here,” said the strange drunk handing over a crumpled sheet of paper. “You’ll know it when you find it. Trust me on that.”

With that he passed out, knocking over his bottle in the process. There was something strange about the bottle. Even though there was no cap, not a single drop of its contents spilled.

That should have been enough to warn me that something out of the ordinary was going on. The bottle was at least half full when the drunk knocked it over. What a fool I had been.

On I trudged, the sun beating down with all its might. In another hour or so it wouldn’t matter if I found the pit or not. A comfortable life behind a desk did very little to prepare me for being stranded in the desert. Strange how things work out in the end. A promising career as a code-monkey in the bowels of the corporate machine thrown away all because of one stinking e-mail. One stupid misplaced mouse click and it was all over: my life, my career, everything.

“What were you thinking? You sent that e-mail to the CEO!”

Bill liked to yell. There wasn’t a day that he wasn’t yelling at someone about something. I just happened to be the best outlet for his pent-up rage that had come along in a very long time. Writing that e-mail had been the dumbest thing I could have possibly done.

“If you ever come crawling back to this building again, you’re as good as dead! I’ll personally make sure that you never work in this field again!” Bill was really screaming now. The e-mail hadn’t been all that bad. Of course, the CEO, like Bill, liked to the yell . . .

Bill had made good on that threat. Three months later I still hadn’t found a job, and had no prospects of finding one. I have no idea how he pulled it off. Of course, none of that mattered anymore, because it looked very much like I was going to drop dead from dehydration or heat exhaustion.

I was too young to realize how much life I still had to live. I really thought that Bill had somehow reached out and eradicated any chance I had of ever getting another job that did not involve an offer of french fries. With that in mind, I decided it was high time I got drunk and forgot about my troubles. The rest of that time was little more than an alcohol-fueled haze, from which I emerged in the middle of some forsaken stretch of desert sand.

I don’t remember much of what happened next. All I know for sure is that I passed out and slept through what remained of the afternoon. When I came to hours later, the sun had gone down, and a foul, sulfurous smell assaulted my nose. There was a roar like some infernal furnace, and the flicker of flames casting shadows from behind a sand dune. Was this what I came out here looking for? Did that drunk in the bar actually tell the truth?

The smell of sulfur in the air was overwhelming. With what little strength was left to me, I made my way to the top of what I thought was a sand dune. Instead, it turned out to be the edge of a pit better suited as an entrance to the underworld than any earthly place. I wished for the tiniest bit of water, knowing that there would be none. It occurred to me that there was no way I would ever live through this mess. I was dehydrated, with no water in sight, completely isolated from civilization, and crawling toward what appeared to be a flaming pit in the middle of the desert.

The entire situation was utterly absurd. Why had I done this? That thought brought my crawl to a halt. Why *had* I dragged myself into the desert with no survival skills and very little water? It made absolutely no sense at all. In fact, the entire sequence of events leading up to this little stunt didn’t make sense to begin with. I don’t write colorful e-mails to blow off steam. I started crawling forward again. What did it matter? Those events had happened, and here I was, dragging my scorched, half-dead body through what felt like molten lava masquerading as sand.

As I neared the edge, I got my first good look at the pit and realized just how enormous it really was. Flickering flames ruined my night vision, obscuring anything other than the pit itself. There are no words to describe the sheer size of that pit. In places, flame seemed to bubble from the ground like a pot of water left to boil over. The sulfurous stench burned my nostrils, and the glare hurt my eyes. This had to be the pit the old drunk had described.

The ground started giving way, pouring sand into that infernal pit faster than I could pull back. I really doubt that I would have been able to avoid falling even if I had not spent the past day dragging myself through the desert. I doubt I could have avoided it if I had been tethered to solid bedrock, considering what I learned later.

How I survived that fall was always a mystery to me. Of course, it doesn’t seem all that strange in light of what happened later. There were columns of flame bursting from the ground in every direction, and holes that looked like boiling cauldrons of fire, which could have swallowed me whole. If the smell had been overpowering before, it was sheer pain to breathe in the pit itself. My body bounced off several large rocks, which had to have shattered bones, before I finally came to a stop somewhere near the bottom. I could feel sand slowly flowing away somewhere as I lay there waiting for death to end my misery. To my sorrow, death did not answer the call of my smashed body, and I simply passed out.

When I finally came to, the first thing I noticed was that my head hurt. I made the mistake of trying to sit up and discovered, rather violently, several bruised ribs and that a broken left arm. My clothing was somewhat worse for the wear, though mostly intact. Thankfully, I had worn a long-sleeve shirt and jeans, avoiding what might have been some rather nasty burns while destroying any visual appeal my clothing had once had.

Thinking back, I should have been burnt to a crisp and beaten to a bloody pulp. A nasty twinge from my ribs reminded me that I had only avoided one of those two fates. Still, my injuries were not nearly as bad as they should have been. Of course, I had been somewhat disoriented due to a day of exposure.

Other than some smudges of blood from various scrapes, and sand in a small region around me, the room I found myself in looked almost sterile. A diffuse glow illuminated walls and a floor made of some bleach-white material that had the appearance of soapstone. The air felt cool and refreshing after the blazing inferno I’d fallen through. It even seemed to soothe my parched throat to just sit there and inhale. There was no sound other than that of my own labored breathing. It was as if someone had laid a blanket over the place and packed it away in an attic to be forgotten.

The smooth walls formed a sphere. Where I found myself sitting, the room looked like a bubble blown out of solid rock. Every visible surface was completely smooth, with nothing to indicate how I had arrived or any evidence of a way out. It seemed that I had traded a quick death in the burning pit for a slow one trapped in an empty room somewhere below it.

Sometimes, I wish I had given up then and lain there until the end. If I had let the futility of my situation wash over me and stayed there on the floor, I might have avoided everything that happened later. No, that was not to be my fate. I, the ignorant ape that I was, had to go and stand up.

What caught my eye as I stood up could not have existed. There was no way that a doorway could have been so completely hidden from view, so perfectly aligned that I would not have seen it while still on the floor. I told myself it was impossible as I stared through the opening in front of me. Even more disturbing was the angle of the doorway. Somehow, the plane of the doorway was parallel to the floor I was standing on. It was almost as if it had been set into the floor and raised about three feet off the ground in front of me.

The room beyond was full of candles, hundreds and hundreds of candles on tiny shelves inset into the walls. Their flames did not seem to care that everything was at right angle to gravity. I could not help but think of the right-hand rule from back in college. As a mnemonic for the rule, you position your middle finger, index finger, and thumb at right angles to each other and the directions they point represent a relationship between forces or some such. A professor once informed me that if his class didn’t look like they were throwing gang signs during a test, he knew they needed more review.

Tiny black spots at the edge of my vision reminded me that I needed to breathe before I passed out again. Too much of my day had already been spent unconscious, and this floor did not exactly look like the softest substance in the world.

I tried to walk around the door and froze. I took another step and froze again. The door was turning. With every step I took, my geometric relationship to the door changed as if I were moving inside a spherical shell on gimbals or rollers. No, that did not completely describe what I was seeing. Not only was the door rotating so that its down matched my own, but it also seemed to be turning to face me as well.

I took a step back. The door moved in the same way as it had before. My heart was racing as I stood completely still, hardly wanting to breathe. The door had moved with a purpose, and it seemed to be purposed toward me. Of course, there really wasn’t anything else in the room to direct a purpose at. If I watched closely enough, I could see the door move with every slight shift of my body. It seemed that the door was somehow feeding off of motion in the room. I quickly realized the futility of trying to stand completely still. Even if I stood there as still as I possibly could, there would still be some motion.

“All right, I’ll try the door then,” I said, and deliberately stepped forward. The doorway snapped around to face me almost instantly. It moved so fast that I involuntarily jumped backward, trying to jerk myself away from the sudden motion. I felt something thin and rubbery push against my skin. No, not quite rubbery. It was more like the feel of plastic wrap being held taut and drawn over my face. Something popped loudly, and the pressure on my face disappeared suddenly. I could feel something deep inside me wrenching, as though some ethereal hand had reached in and twisted all of my guts. And then I was through the door.

This room didn’t have a ceiling, at least not one that I could see. The walls extended upward as far as I could see, and faded to darkness. I had been wrong about the candles, there weren’t hundreds and hundreds. More like millions and millions. Each candle sat in a tiny niche set into the wall. I sat and watched for a while as a new set of these niches formed around the room’s floor.

As I looked on, wax from two of the candles above flowed together and eroded a tiny indentation into the stone wall. At least it looked like stone, though I had never heard of anything that wax could cut through like that. After a while, I could see the shaft of a new candle forming from the material of the wall. When the candle reached about an inch in height, a tiny wick burst into flame, flaring brightly for a moment before settling into a smooth, steady burn.

While the spherical room had been sterile, this room seemed to be alive with motion. Everything was constantly changing. You could look at a candle and watch it slowly etch its way around the wall. Every once in awhile, a candle would go out, releasing the tiniest bit of smoke before being slowly dissolved by the candles around it. There was a subtle violence to the whole thing, almost a predation between the candles. Some seemed to seek out and consume their fellows. Others would pair up and produce new candles. It felt like I was watching life play itself out around me –- a strange waxy life that burned for a time and then faded away in a puff of smoke.

Somewhere in the excitement of seeing this place, I had completely forgotten about the door. I spun around the moment I remembered. The door was gone. This was another place that I wouldn’t be leaving by any normal means. I wasn’t entirely surprised to find the magically appearing door had just as magically vanished. My little trip wasn’t over just yet.

Feeling tired, and with nothing better to do, I sat down and let my eyes wander around the room. After a while, I realized that I was staring at one candle in particular. It seemed to be an exception to the slow-motion violence going on around me. The other candles were moved past it, around it, but never came into contact with it. There seemed to be an invisible bubble around this candle that cut it off from the rest.

It was more than a bubble of protection. This candle didn’t move at all. It stayed precisely where it had been set, neither letting its wax flow freely down the wall as the others did, nor etching its way around the wall. The candle just sat there, a strangely normal thing in the midst of everything else.

There was something more about this candle that caught my eye. The sigil! The candle was inscribed with the sigil that old drunk had described to me. The drunk with a bottle that wouldn’t spill. I reached out and touched the candle.

Something slammed into my gut, knocking the wind from my lungs. My body flew backwards into another barrier similar to the one I had felt in the strange door. I felt and heard the same popping sound as before, this time louder and more pronounced, and I felt the same deep, wrenching sensation from earlier. My head exploded with pain, and everything went black.

It was the third time I had woken up with a splitting headache. Thankfully, beside a new lump on my head, there didn’t appear to be any other significant injuries. In fact, I felt better than I had before the fall. My ribs were only a touch tender now, rather than throbbing with every exhale, and it looked like most of my scrapes were healing up. The break in my left arm was all but healed as well. Here was another impossibility to add to the list. There was no way that I could have healed that quickly.

On top of that, I realized that I hadn’t felt the nagging thirst since waking up in the spherical room. I didn’t feel thirsty or hungry at all. Most of a day had passed since my last meal. At least, I thought that most of a day had gone by. With no way to tell exactly how long I had been unconscious, I couldn’t be sure. The state of my wounds indicated that I had been out for days, perhaps weeks, not hours. Again, there was no way I could have survived that length of time without food or water.

Something was very wrong.

I decided to file that little tidbit away with everything else and concentrate on finding a way out of whatever spiderweb I had found myself in. This room was different than the others. None of the other rooms had exhibited an obvious means of exit. This one, on the other hand, didn’t seem to have walls. It was an impossibly vast, geometrically flat, plain of nothing. A pedestal behind me emitted a faint, white light that illuminated a small area around itself. I could see no walls or ceiling, just empty space in all directions. Considering some of the other things I had been through, having a floor was a blessing.

The pedestal supported a thick, heavy-looking book, open to someplace near the middle. I could hear a faint, scratching sound coming from the Book, like the sound of a thin needle being dragged across a sheet of paper. The pedestal itself had been carved out of solid rock, the same rock-like substance that made up the floor here and the walls in the spherical room. The soft glow seemed to emanate from the pedestal itself. The strange sigil described to me by the drunk was embroidered into a thick bookmark made from white cloth.

The words were written in a script that I did not recognize, at least when I first looked. They blurred for a moment, and I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, the evidence of the day having done nothing for my confidence in my senses. When I looked again, the text was written in clean, precise English. Stylistically, it was a little archaic but very correct, written in smoothly flowing characters that would have made any elementary-school teacher proud.

The content made my heart skip a beat. I was reading an extremely detailed account of my day up to the point where I banged my head on the pedestal. Recorded in the pages of that Book were every little scrape and ding my body had received, and even a few I didn’t know about. In some places, the flow of text shifted, as though another author had taken over and substituted their own text for what had, or what should have been, there.

At the last line of text, I fearfully reached out to turn to the next page. I carefully moved the bookmark and swallowed hard. Would I see what was going to happen next? Did this Book tell the future as well as the past? A stream of endless fears and possibilities surged through my mind, and I shivered at the thought of turning that page.

Finally, I turned the page. About halfway down the left-hand page, the text ended in a half-finished sentence. As I watched, letters flowed onto the page, accompanied by the strange scratching sound that I had heard earlier, as if being written by some unseen scribe.

Nothing much was happening in the text, since nothing much was happening around me. Then the text changed. The other handwriting I had seen earlier took over and started writing.

The Nameless stubs his toe on the pedestal.

I stared at the page for a moment and wondered what it could mean. The words faded from the page, and everything continued on normally as it had before. That was odd. I glanced around, trying to see if there was someone watching from a distance. This Book could easily be a display device being used by some tormentor laughing in the background. Somewhere, I miscalculated and smacked my toe into the pedestal.

I had smacked my toe into the pedestal. Was this a coincidence, or did it have something to do with the strange words that had appeared on the page?

A stone from the ceiling above separates and lands to the left of the Nameless.

This was beginning to get troublesome. I looked up and had just enough time to jump sideways as a boulder about twice my size fell from somewhere high above me. It hit the ground with enough force to send cracks spidering in all directions.

“I am not nameless!” It was all that I could think of under the circumstances. I was yelling at a Book that was writing itself and attempting to scare me into believing that it had power to cause things to happen. The strange text on the pages faded away.

You are the Nameless.

“I have a name, how can I be nameless?”

What is your name?

“I am . . . that is, my name is . . .” That stopped me. What was my name? Why couldn’t I remember my own name? More than anything else, that scared me. The Book had already proven it had the ability to change things around it. Had it already changed me?

You are the Nameless. I am the Book.

Things started clicking into place. Everything that had happened up to that moment had been directed by this thing, whatever it was. Somehow it had drawn me to itself, but why?

“What do you want with me? Why me?”

You are the Nameless. You are not. Those Who Are seek the Book. Only one who is not may take the Book.

“Those Who Are? You’re not making any sense.”

Those Who Are seek the Book. I am the Book. Only one who is not may keep the Book from Those Who Are.

This was getting nowhere fast. Those Who Are? One who is not? A chill went down my spine.

“You say I am not. Am I dead?”

You are the Nameless. The Nameless is not. That which is not cannot be alive or dead.

“What does that mean? Are you saying I don’t exist?”

No answer.

“Do I exist?”

You are the Nameless. You are not.

“What does that mean?”

No answer. The Book wasn’t going to answer me. I could feel my body. I could feel the ground beneath my feet, and my toe still hurt from bumping the pedestal. I had to still exist and be alive to feel at all. At least I hoped that was true. If I was dead, and this was the afterlife, what had I done in life to be put through all of this? Well, if the Book wouldn’t tell me what I wanted to know, maybe it could help in other ways.

“How do I get out of here?” I asked it. The Book had demonstrated an ability to control its environment rather dramatically earlier; hopefully it could get me back to civilization. Instead of an answer, there was a clicking sound, and a small stylus popped out of the top of the Book’s spine. The soft scratching sound came back and slowly written words reappeared on the page. What was I supposed to do now? Write something in the Book? I decided to give it a try, just to see what would happen.

The pedestal rises two inches

As I wrote, the text flowing across the page paused, waiting for me to finish writing. The ground rumbled for a moment, and then the pedestal jumped two inches upward. This would have been very interesting at another time, and in another place – somewhere I could feel comfortable rather than trapped. Could the Book get me out?

A door to my apartment opens in front of me.

Nothing happened. The words paused as before, but rather than my writing being incorporated into the text, as it had the previous time, the words simply disappeared.

“Why didn’t that work?” I asked aloud, not really expecting an answer.

You are the Nameless. You are not. That which is not has nothing.

Which meant that I wasn’t going to get out that easily. Great, just freaking great. What had I gotten into this time? Alright, how about a different take. Maybe somewhere else then.

A door to the room full of candles opens in front of me.

A simple-enough instruction. This time something happened. In fact, several somethings happened at once. The area just past the pedestal seemed to twist and writhe like what you might see when looking into a fun-house mirror. The effect spread out from a tiny pinpoint into an ovoid shape about the size of a person. Then more and more pinpoints started appearing near the first, each expanding into a man-sized ovoid. There was an excruciatingly loud rending sound, and then I could see through the ovoids as if they were a door to somewhere else.

It was as if someone had placed a camera in each of a thousand rooms, all filled with candles, in a thousand different places, and these were the displays. I could see people in some of the rooms. That scared me at first. If I could see them, couldn’t they see me? After a while, and after seeing people walk past several of the doorways without noticing them, I relaxed a bit.

That’s not quite true either. I felt dirty. Looking into these rooms, some of which were obviously secret, seemed wrong. I was reasonably certain that no one could see me or the Book, but I could see them when they thought they were in private. To me, a person’s private life should remain just that: private.

The doors close.

Another loud pop and the doorways disappeared. Maybe if I was more specific?

A door into the room full of candles, that I passed through before reaching here, opens in front of me.

There, that should be direct enough. A single doorway appeared with the same loud, tearing sound as before, and this time it opened into the room I wanted. In fact, the doorway was directed at the candle I had touched just before getting myself blasted. The candle just sat there, silent and immobile, while the other candles moved around it. I would have to remember that room and go back there someday with a camera. No one would believe me without it. Heck, no one would believe this story if they didn’t see it with their own eyes.

I continued experimenting with the Book and stylus until I figured out the sequence of instructions needed to get me back to where I had started, along with collecting a few supplies that would be helpful once back on the surface. The Book seemed more than capable of making things appear out of thin air. I had concluded that it would be a good idea to take the Book with me. The power it seemed to have over things around it could come in very handy down the road. Especially if I didn’t find employment soon.

Once I had a way out, I tried to move the Book. Its sheer weight surprised me. Whatever the Book was made of, there was no way that I could lift or move it. I had been hoping to use the Book to get back to the city.

Which city?

I couldn’t remember which city I lived in. How do you forget something like that? For that matter, how do you forget your own name? I thought hard. What could I remember? There was a vague, shadowy memory of someone I thought might be my sister. Another which might have been my boss. That was it! I would hunt down Bill. He had to remember me. Still, I needed to know how to move the Book.

“How do I move you?” I asked the Book, hoping to get a more meaningful response than I had before. Again the text faded away to be replaced by the Book’s concise script.

The Book is fixed. That which is fixed cannot be moved.

That wouldn’t work then. If I couldn’t take the Book with me, then I couldn’t use it. Maybe there was another way.

“Is it possible to use the Book and not be physically present near it?”

Yes.

“How?”

The Book is not singular. The Book has volumes that are not fixed.

“Can the other volumes be used just like this one?”

Yes.

I used the stylus and summoned another volume of the Book. It appeared right where I told it to, a little larger than I had hoped, but not too big as to be unwieldy. I could lift it easily, though it felt like I was moving the Book through a thick fluid. The problem wasn’t the Book’s weight. There was something else there. It was the same feeling you get when trying to move too quickly underwater, as though the air were thick and syrupy. I let go of the Book, and it seemed to fall just like any other object, no slower or faster.

After finding the new Book’s stylus and replacing the other one, I tried it out by summoning a backpack to carry the volume in. Since it seemed that being in physical contact with the Book somehow made it harder to move, I reasoned that by avoiding such contact I could keep it moving smoothly. Thankfully my logic proved sound, and I was ready to go.

## Being Nameless

Having been through one of these doors twice now, I was ready for the pressure and wrenching sensation that went along with passing through them. I had requested an opening close to where Bill would be, but as secluded as possible to avoid suddenly appearing in front of a crowd of people. Revealing my new-found source of power to the world did not seem like a good idea right then.

I was in some sort of an alleyway behind an apartment building, and of course, I was standing inside a nearly empty dumpster. The Book had followed my directions to the best of its ability and hadn’t put me inside a wall or something equally problematic. For that I was grateful. Unfortunately, I would stink to high heaven until I could get a shower and change of clothes. Not how I wanted to run into the guy who had fired me three months earlier. Still, there was nothing I could do about it just then.

“Ok, where is Bill?” I asked the Book. The text flowing across the pages changed abruptly. It took me a moment to realize that I was looking at a detailed account of everything that Bill was doing right then. According to the text, Bill had eaten dinner and was just sitting down to watch his favorite show on TV – some talent contest. Okay, I thought, it should be safe to knock.

Bill had a first-floor apartment on the other side of the complex from where I had appeared. The climb out of the dumpster was a bit more challenging and noisy than I would have liked. I punctured a bag full of scraps from someone’s kitchen and narrowly avoided getting myself covered in foul-smelling goo. I made a note to do something to avoid dumpsters next time.

A light came on in one of the apartments, and someone stepped outside onto the patio. They were looking over at the dumpsters, trying to see what all the commotion was about. I froze, halfway out of the dumpster. It was already too late to hide, even if I could have found a hiding place.

The man, an older guy about six feet tall and very muscular, looked right at me for a full minute. He just stood there and stared as though he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. His face went through a myriad of expressions covering the gamut of emotions. It was as if his mind was unable to believe what was right in front of him. The dumpsters were no more than thirty feet from where he was standing. I was in full view, frozen like a deer in headlights.

For a moment, the man did nothing, and then he smacked his forehead and went back inside. I took that opportunity to madly scramble out of the dumpster. If I was lucky, I might be able to get out of sight before he called the cops or came back out with something more menacing than pajamas and bunny slippers. My little expedition was not turning out well at all.

A moment later, the man reemerged from his apartment carrying a black trash bag that looked about half full. I kept walking, ignoring him. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to notice that I was the guy he had just seen climbing out of a dumpster, and he went by me without pause. Relieved, I made my way across the complex to Bill’s building, and prayed that any stench I had acquired in the dumpster wouldn’t be too strong.

It wasn’t difficult for me to find the apartment I was looking for. What was I going to ask him? It wouldn’t do for me to bang on the door and ask what my name was. Bill would either slam the door in my face or call the cops and have me committed on the spot. That wouldn’t do. Still, I was desperate by this point and, considering what I believed I had just been through, maybe being committed wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all. Spending some time in a padded room couldn’t be any worse than starving while failing at job hunting.

I knocked on the door. To hell with it, Bill would answer the door, and I would say whatever came to mind first. Someone was moving around inside the apartment. Something blocked the little sparkle of light filtering through the peephole in the door. I stood there for a moment, waiting, scared about what might happen next.

Whoever was standing behind the door walked away. Out of all the options that I had come up with, being ignored was not something that had occurred to me. I expected to be screamed at or threatened, not ignored – that just wasn’t Bill’s style. A second round of knocking resulted in the same thing.

What was going on inside that apartment? The Book indicated that Bill had checked his door twice. There was mention of seeing something outside the door that he immediately forgot and then he went back to his TV show. Strange, he saw me and forgot me? This time around, I kept banging on the door until he opened it.

“Alright! Alright! What do you want? Who’s there!” Bill looked angry for a moment, then confused, and started to close the door again. I put my hand on the door to stop him.

“Bill! Don’t you remember me?” I said, hoping it didn’t sound as corny as I thought it did. “I used to work for you.”

The confusion on Bill’s face deepened. “Who are you?”

His voice sounded uncertain, as if there was something hiding in the back of his mind that he couldn’t quite grasp. This wasn’t right. I knew Bill, and this was nothing like him. He should have been yelling at the top of his lungs by now.

“Don’t you remember? You fired me for sending that e-mail.” Bill’s face darkened for a moment when I said “fired,” and then the confusion reasserted itself. He didn’t know me. How could Bill not know me after the number of times he had cursed me out?

“I don’t know who you are or why you’re bothering me . . .” There was a spark of the anger I had come to expect from him, and then nothing. He looked confused again and moved to close the door. This time I let him and looked down to the Book. It had recorded the entire incident, mentioning me and what I had said only in the vaguest possible terms. The text seemed to treat me as though I was some ephemeral hallucination.

Fear coursed through me. I found the other man – the one who had seen me in the dumpster – and checked what the Book had to say about him. It showed the same thing: he saw something and promptly forgot what he had seen. His mind found an excuse for him to have gone outside, imagining that he had meant to take out the trash and forgotten the bag. The Book’s words flashed through my mind.

You are the Nameless. The Nameless is not. That which is not cannot be alive or dead.

You are the Nameless. You are not. That which is not has nothing.

Those statements had something to do with why Bill could not recognize me. In a sudden flash of hope, I grabbed my right, front pocket where I kept my wallet. Why hadn’t I thought of checking that earlier? It should have my driver’s license and ATM card, in it as well as a few old ID cards from my college days.

The wallet was there and no worse for the wear, thankfully. I found what should have been my driver’s license right where it should be, complete with a bad picture of me from five years back. In place of what should have been my name and driver’s license number, there was a blur. The letters just wouldn’t come into focus, no matter how hard I tried to look at them.

Looking at that blur was physically painful. The center line of the blur was absolutely black: no light reflected from it. It was as though something had eradicated that part of the card from existence and left behind a hole, opening into nothingness. The edges of that blur were even worse than the darkness. If I looked there, my eyes felt like they were being fed into a blender. The pain startled me enough to make me drop the card. My ATM card and other IDs were suffering from much the same effect.

For a brief moment, I wondered if was hallucinating. Would there be any way to tell if I was? A hallucination of this magnitude might sufficiently warp my perceptions to invalidate any test I could come up with. I tried the pinch test and quite definitely felt it. Just for giggles, I slapped myself hard enough to cause a ringing sound in my ears. Of course, neither of those actions could really prove anything.

Maybe Bill would recognize my ID cards. I banged on his door again, making sure to keep banging until he opened it. This time I handed over my driver’s license before saying anything. He looked down and dropped the card, screaming and clutching his eyes. There was blood running down the side of his face as he fell to his knees. Oh crap, what had I done?

Thinking quickly, I grabbed the card from the ground and pulled Bill, who was screaming at the top of his lungs, inside his apartment. I had to do something, and fast. Before doing anything else, I shoved the card back into my pocket, avoiding looking at it. Bill was still screaming, blood flowing freely around fingers covering his eyes.

A quick inventory of the room turned up a soft throw blanket. I balled a corner of the blanket up and shoved it in Bill’s mouth, hoping to quiet him down some while I tried to think. What had happened to his eyes? I had looked at the card with little more than discomfort.

“Bill! Bill! I need you to calm down!” I tried to yell over his muffled screams. This was turning out bad, really bad. There was too much noise for the neighbors not to be annoyed. Pretty soon, someone would either come knocking on the door or call the cops to do the knocking for them. If a cop saw this much blood, any questions would be answered at the station house.

What had happened to Bill’s eyes? Carefully, I pulled one of Bill’s hands away from his face. He struggled with me for a moment before letting his hand fall away. Where the eye should have been there was a black mass that writhed and tore at the surrounding flesh. Nothing was left of his eye socket, and most of the nose had been replaced by a bloody mess that looked like hamburger. If there had been anything in my stomach at that point, I would have puked right then and there. As it was, I jumped backward into a wall, banging my head in the process, and everything went black for a moment.

When I came to my senses again, someone was pounding on the door, and there were flashing red and blue lights outside. Just what I needed right then. Bill was still screaming louder than I would have thought humanly possible. There was an animal quality to his scream, as though some wild beast were being tortured.

How was I going to explain this one? I stood up and tried to make myself look small, hoping that whatever had allowed me to be forgotten earlier would help here. There was no time to think about what had happened or what I was going to do next.

I was frantically searching for a way to get out when the door smashed inward. Thankfully, I had pulled Bill far enough away from the doorway that it didn’t hit either of us. It occurred to me then that I still had the Book and might be able to use it as a means of escape.

“Police! Get your hands up!” screamed the young officer who came through first. I hadn’t noticed before, but the window was open. The officer had seen the blood, the blanket, what was left of Bill’s face, and me covered in Bill’s blood. The officer had his gun drawn and pointed at me with shaky hands. Not good. Something about this situation fixated him on me. Not good in the least.

“Dispatch! I need backup and an ambulance here now!” he yelled into a mic attached to his lapel. It’s sometimes funny the things that you notice. You would think that I would have been focused on the gun barrel that was wavering six feet from me, unsteadily pointed at my head. No, I noticed that the plastic covering that bound four wires – about twenty-two gauge – into a cable was fraying at the bottom of the microphone attached to his handheld radio and should be replaced. I noticed that he looked just as nauseated and scared as I felt.

My hand was inside the bag I had put the Book in, and I raised it at just the wrong angle to look like I was pointing something in the officer’s direction. Time seemed to stand still. I stood there frozen in that instant, unable to think or move.

His voice seemed to come in slow motion. “Drop the bag! Put your hands over your head!”

Fate intervened at that point. Bill lurched violently into the back of the officer’s leg, startling him. The gun went off. I remember seeing a slow-moving cloud of smoke exit the gun barrel. It burst outward in a thin cloud, the heart of which was replaced by a small, dark pellet. After what felt like an eternity, a burst of flame followed the pellet on its inexorable path toward me.

I could see it all happening but couldn’t move fast enough to get out of the way. My body felt like it was surrounded by cement. The bullet contacted my left check, just below my eye. I could feel the flesh rending under enormous pressure. A pressure wave spread out from the point of contact across my face, causing my flesh to move like ripples in a pond. The bone behind my sinus shattered in a burst of pain.

My perspective instantly shifted to somewhere just behind and above my shoulder. I saw a chunk of my skull about the size of a grapefruit burst into tiny bits of shrapnel. There was a spray of red mist, tempered with gooey bits of white brain matter, exploding from the hole in a geyser of gore. My body – I knew it was my body – dropped to the ground just as slowly, and then froze at an impossible angle just before collapsing completely.

“So this is what death is like,” I said, somehow hearing my voice even though I no longer had the equipment necessary to produce or receive sound. My perception floated, completely disembodied, where it had separated from my body. I had no form, no arms or hands. Across the room, I could see Bill frozen in mid-convulsion, his body surrounded by black tendrils of something that looked like lightning bursting from his ruined eye sockets.

A deep sense of remorse came over me. The brief burst of pain that I had felt when looking at my driver’s license should have warned me not to show it to anyone else. It didn’t really matter now what I felt or thought. There was no way that I could make amends for Bill’s eyes and probable death. I looked at the officer and saw the dismay on his face. He hadn’t meant for the gun to go off. Inexperience, and Bill’s kick, had caused this man to end a life. I felt sorrow at the memory of this being forced on him by my own foolish actions.

“You are the Nameless. You are not. That which is not cannot be alive or dead,” said a papery-sounding voice. It seemed to come from the floor where my bag and the Book had fallen.

“Who are you?” I asked, directing my attention to the Book.

“I am the Book. You are the Nameless. Hurry, Those Who Are come for the Book as we speak. Those Who Are may not find the Book,” it said, again making no sense.

“I’m dead you stupid pile of rotting wood!”

“That which is not cannot be alive or dead,” said the Book in a defiant tone. Funny, a Book being defiant. How does that one work?

Another impasse. The world seemed to be frozen in place, and that infernal Book, with its nonsense about my being not or not being, had followed me into what I took for the hereafter. If this was the afterlife, I was sorely disappointed by it. I learned later that I was denied entry to the afterlife by the Book’s nonsense, but that is for another time. As things were, I could see no way to change my ethereal state.

“Where am I?” I asked the Book, not sure I really wanted the answer.

“This is between. You are the Nameless. You are not.”

The repetition was beginning to get on my nerves. It couldn’t answer a question or make a statement without stating that I was the Nameless.

“What does being the Nameless mean?”

“The Nameless is not. That which is not cannot be known by that which is.”

That at least made some sense. Bill had not known who I was, and the man by the dumpster forgot about me even while he was looking at me.

“What happened to Bill?”

“He saw That Which is Outside. That Which is Outside consumes Those Who Are.”

“Why did this outside thing not consume me?” I realized I should have known better than to ask such a stupid question. There really was only one answer.

“You are the Nameless. The Nameless is not.”

“How did I become the Nameless?” I asked.

“Those Who Are seek the Book. Those Who Are may not have the Book.”

“I am the Nameless because I found you?”

No answer. If I had understood that last statement and this silence correctly, I would have to have a talk with that old drunk.

Time is a funny thing when there is nothing to indicate its passage. Of course, that assumes that any time was passing at all. My thoughts wandered for a while. Would I be doomed to spend all eternity in this moment with the last instant of my life frozen in all of its nauseating detail? The phrase that the Book kept using, about not being alive or dead, stuck in the back of my mind. I was quite obviously dead. Or was I?

“Explain something for me. How is it that my body is dead and you say that I can be neither alive or dead?” I asked, hoping that I had phrased the question properly.

“Time is for Those Who Are. That which is not moves with time, not in time.”

Could that be my way out of this? The Book seemed to be making more sense now. If I was not, as the Book put it, then I was not bound to the flow of time. That meant I might be able to prevent this entire mess from ever happening! I could save Bill and avoid taking a bullet to the face! My elation faded as I realized I had no idea how to do what the Book was suggesting!

It took a bit of careful phrasing, and what might have been hours of questioning, before I finally gleaned the information out of the Book. Since my body was pretty much a lost cause, the Book had frozen my essence in a pocket of suspended unreality. At least I thought of it as such, since it didn’t feel very real to me. My mind inhabited a portion of the Book in this state, allowing me to communicate with it as I had been. More importantly, I could rewrite the flow of reality in the same way as I had with the stylus, using what passed for my voice here by properly stating what I wanted to happen.

With a little practice, I discovered I could recall the block of text that represented this point in time and space. I could see the words in my mind, overlaying the frozen moment around me. A little more effort let me backtrack to a point just before opening the door, when I was still looking at my name on my driver’s license. I could see the black, lightning-like tendrils reaching out for my body, searching for something they could take hold of. Back a little further, before I took the card out of my wallet; that should be about right.

I consciously let go of the words. I don’t know how I did it, and can’t describe it any better than that. I simply let go and fell back into the flow of time. My perception snapped back into my body, my hand was sitting above my wallet as it had been just before I looked at the driver’s license. Somewhere deep inside my mind I could hear the frustrated scream of some dark and ancient beast, primal and monstrous. I knew that it came from what the Book referred to as “That Which is Outside.”

The world I found myself in was much more dangerous than anything I had ever imagined. Frantically, I knocked on the door until Bill opened it again and let it close when he forgot about me again. Everything was as it should have been. Bill was whole, I wasn’t dead. I felt the sudden tension created when I fell back into my body drain away.

If not for the fact that no one could remember me for more than a few seconds after seeing me, I would have been dragged to the nut house right there. High, strained laughter poured from my throat in an uncontrollable torrent as I lay, curled into a fetal ball. My tears would not stop flowing as relief washed over me. I had caused Bill’s death, but he was alive. I had been shot, but my body was whole. It was too much for my already strained mind to handle, and I finally passed out.

The old man paused there for a bit, the memory of those events obviously weighing heavily on him. It had been years since he’d thought about those events, though the lessons he learned that day were never forgotten.

He took a sip from a small carafe of water on his bedside table. It had been a long while since the last time that he had told even a part of this story to anyone. The emotions – the fear and loss – from those days welled up inside him again, along with the memories, and threatened to bring his storytelling to an end.

“That was the last time I tried to find anyone from my old life. It was as if something had eradicated me and my life from beginning to end,” said the old man.

“Do you still have that driver’s license? It sounds pretty dangerous to be left laying around.”

The old man looked thoughtful for a moment, as though considering what to say next. “I know where it is. It’s not safe for a normal person to be in possession of that card. Or anything that had identifying information about me on it. As far as I can tell, nothing like the driver’s license exists, other than the items I carried with me into the desert.”

“What did you do with the card?”

“All I will say is that it’s safe from grasping hands. It is too dangerous for anyone to have.”

This line of conversation was obviously agitating him. It wouldn’t do in the least to push the old man before he finished the story. Better to play the part of an interested listener than to ruin the interviewer’s chances to hear the rest. Perhaps there would be another chance further down the road to find out more.

About then, a nurse walked in with a clipboard. “Oh! I didn’t know you had a guest. Will you be having your regular dinner this evening?”

“Is it that time already, Melanie? Time flies when you’re having fun I guess. Bring my usual if you please; and no, my guest will not be joining me,” stated the old man, more at ease thanks to the nurse’s distraction. Her motions seemed harsher, more stilted than at other times. It was as though she were acting out a script rather than going about things naturally.

“And will you and your guest be having coffee this evening?”

“No thank you! That vile waste water you people call coffee isn’t fit to drink!” said the old man rather vehemently. “I would like a pot of hot water though, just short of 198 degrees Fahrenheit if you please.”

“You know we aren’t supposed to do that!” said the nurse with a chastening tone and a cross glance at the old man.

“You know better than to argue with me on this one. Ask the cook what happened the last time a nurse wouldn’t bring me hot water. Some cream and sugar would be nice as well,” said the old man, his voice leaving no room for argument. The nurse held the old man’s defiant gaze for a moment. There was a strange glint in his eyes that made the interviewer feel very uncomfortable. It hinted at a silent, seething power that was looking for an excuse to boil over.

Nothing about the old man seemed frail as he stared down the nurse. He was going to get his way whether she liked it or not, and everyone in the room knew it. She finally left in a huff.

“Something doesn’t quite seem right here,” said the interviewer. “You’ve been telling me about people forgetting you almost before they see you. How is it that I haven’t forgotten you, or that the nurses remember you?”

This seemed to startle the old man. He looked thoughtfully at the interviewer for a moment before speaking. “You don’t believe me do you?”

“I’m seeking to explain an inconsistency with what I see and what you have described.”

“All right. Answer me this; do you know who you are talking to?”

“I’m talking to you. I have been talking to you for the past several hours,” stated the interviewer with certainty.

“And you believe your eyes and ears that much do you? Do you remember the police officer? I said that he was fixated on me. The reason that the nurse doesn’t forget follows from the same principle,” said the old man. “There are reasons that a person’s mind is resistant to my nature. This place is one of them. You and the nurse are out of the ordinary for various reasons.”

“Do you have any control over when you are remembered and when you aren’t?” asked the interviewer.

The old man disappeared. One moment he was sitting there and the next, it was as though he had faded into the background of the room.

“Does that answer your question?” said the old man, now standing next to the bookcase. He was holding a prepped French press with boiling water and a couple of heavy-looking, ceramic coffee cups. “You’ve probably forgotten about everything from the moment you asked your question up to this instant. I have some control over the memory loss, but nothing all that fine grained.”

The old man sat back down in his chair and handed the interviewer a steaming cup of coffee. It was prepared just as he would have made the cup himself. It was a very smooth blend, with hardly any bitter hint to it at all. There was an almost-sweet undercurrent and an earthy flavor that most domestic coffees didn’t have.

“Oliang Powder mix. The coffee is mixed with soy, corn, and a few other things to give that flavor. You need only the tiniest amount of sugar to cut the bitterness. It makes wonderful coffee. If you ever come across a good Thai restaurant, I would heartily recommend trying Thai Iced coffee,” said the old man, a hint of excitement entering his voice. “But, you came here to hear about my past, not coffee.”

The next month was difficult. I had no money, no living accommodations, and no friends. No one knew who I was, and I couldn’t even remember my own name. Only a handful of people seemed to be able to remember me for more than a few seconds at a time, and those were not usually the ones that I wanted to deal with. Thankfully, the Book could summon most of the consumables that I needed. What it didn’t seem to be able to do was provide a roof over my head.

I had used the Book to get some money. I didn’t ask where the money came from, though I wondered. The idea that I might be stealing from some unknown and unsuspecting person bugged me, but what choice did I have? Survival in modern society without money or source of income, though possible, was something that I had no experience with.

The first night, I tried to rent a hotel room at a no-name roach motel on the bad side of town. My first attempt failed miserably. The girl at the night desk couldn’t concentrate on me long enough to remember what she was doing. In the end, I had to use the Book to shepherd the night attendant through the registration process and gloss over certain things, like my lack of identification.

The hotel worked out reasonably well for a few nights. It was not the kind of place that I would recommend to your run-of-the-mill vacationers. There were no actual roaches, though the room smelled of smoke and was none too clean for my tastes. I was reasonably certain that the people in the next room had set up a methamphetamine lab. Strange chemical and burning smells were drifting through a shared ventilation duct between the two rooms.

It provided a roof that I could count on, thanks to the Book, and that was what mattered. I came to rely on the powers of the Book for everything in my daily life: food, money, and shelter. There was very little that I could do to fulfill these needs when no one could remember me for more than a few moments. That was something that I would have to work on.

Though I felt bad about it, I used the Book to construct a shroud around the room I was living in. With a little careful wording and some experimentation, I was able to keep the room from being rented out to anyone else, and keep room service. I had to be very careful to avoid erasing the room, rather than making it appear to not exist or injuring the minds of the maintenance employees. In the end, it worked out pretty well.

This gave me time to plan. As far as the world at large knew, I didn’t exist. I had tried any number of things in an attempt to track myself down. Even to the point of going to a police station and asking them what my name was. No luck.

Using the Book as I had was starting to make me nervous. There was nothing to indicate what its limitations were or where it had come from. For all I knew, it could simply stop working one day and leave me high and dry. That meant I had to construct a fallback position of some sort in case I found myself in a bind.

I also needed some form of identity that I could use as a virtual facade for the rest of reality. Being forgotten the moment I moved out of someone’s direct line of sight made interacting with people difficult. Not having an identity, on paper, made it almost impossible to live as a normal person would.

I spent the better part of a week trying to conjure the correct set of documents, using the Book, so that I could re-establish myself as a person. Nothing worked. I even tried breaking into a county clerk’s office and forging the appropriate identification documents. Of course, they wouldn’t be worth much without the appropriate supporting history.

I was finally able to cobble enough documentation together for a driver’s license. The camera exploded when they tried to take a picture of me. The clerk was rather distraught about the whole affair and kept apologizing. I retrieved my papers and nearly dropped everything as a sharp pain shot through my eyes. The name I had forged on the birth certificate was gone, replaced by the same violently churning darkness from my original driver’s license. Establishing an identity just wasn’t going to work.

With my hopes thoroughly dashed on that front, I turned to finding out anything I could about the Book itself and what its limitations were. I learned a great deal, enough to know that I would never understand how the Book was made or even how old it was. Some of the things I learned scared me more than having my brains scattered by a bullet had.

## Those Who Are

The one really important thing that I learned came about completely by accident while enjoying a cup of coffee. I had found a unique little coffee shop in a college town out in the middle of nowhere. They served some of the best gourmet coffee that I had tasted, and I had made it a point to stop in every few days for a cup. Savoring a cup of hot espresso mixed with steamed milk helped to relieve the stress associated with my new life.

They had a collection of various whole-bean coffees arranged in large, glass apothecary jars. Each jar had a laminated card taped to the front proclaiming its contents. Everything from Classic French Roast to something that claimed to be Sumatran. Just sitting there and inhaling the smell of the place was enough to let me relax and forget about things for a while.

So, I found myself sitting there, my back to the door, holding a steaming cup of cappuccino up to my face with both hands. Taking the first deep inhale of that heavenly scent while admiring their collection of coffees. The only people in the shop were me and the barista who had made my coffee. Outside, the sun was slowly setting on another day.

A small bell signaled that a new customer was entering the coffee shop. I ignored it, and expected to be ignored as well. This would be the first sip of decent coffee for me in over a week. Usually, at least before this whole mess started, I would drink coffee every day, and purchase a cup of cappuccino on weekends. Setting up my new life had kept me so distracted that I had not found time to search out a decent brew, and the Book did not seem to understand the concept.

The girl behind the counter looked up from the magazine she had been reading. “What would you like this . . .” She started screaming. I jumped, dumping a large amount of the steaming-hot liquid into my mouth. There was no time to react, no time to do anything. The sound of the gun going off behind me shattered any semblance of calm that I had achieved.

There was that enormous pressure again, this time on the back of my head, just behind my right ear. My perception jumped outside, and I found myself looking down at my rather annoyed face from the front. The upper, left-hand side of my forehead was expanding outward in a cloud of blood, brains, and bone, splattering all over the horrified barista and the counter. My coffee had frozen in mid-fall, about to be spilled everywhere, wasted. That just plain pissed me off.

Time froze just like it had before in Bill’s apartment. The gunman was standing, with his gun about a foot behind my head. He had used a semiautomatic handgun of some kind. At the time, I didn’t know enough about firearms to recognize it specifically. It was surreal to see the gun’s slide move back and a tiny piece of brass, which I assumed was the bullet casing, flying off to the right.

The man, whoever he was, did not show any signs of indecision or uncertainty. There was a hard, focused look on his face that I hadn’t seen anywhere before. He was wearing blue jeans, a red, button-down shirt, and a heavy, leather jacket that looked like it had seen better days. If he were walking down the street I would have thought nothing of him. I quickly dug around in the Book, using the more direct link to it I had in this state, to see if I could find him and figure out what his intentions were. I didn’t want to change my evening plans only to find the coffee shop closed with police tape and a dead barista.

Working with the Book over the last few weeks helped a great deal in finding my assailant. Reading his immediate history wasn’t very enlightening. From everything I could tell, he had been watching the coffee shop for a month or so, waiting for the perfect moment to rob the place. He had rounded the corner, expecting to use the gun as a means of intimidating the patrons and the barista while he cleaned out the register.

Something didn’t make sense. The man I saw in the coffee shop had not planned on intimidating anyone. His demeanor and actions were all wrong for that. More than that, his eyes were wrong. There was a deep-seated hatred behind those eyes that twisted his face. Searching through the man’s history in the Book did not reveal any sign of such a strong emotion.

“Those Who Are have found you,” came the papery voice of the Book. There was a hint of emotion that I never noticed before: a hint of fear.

“What do you mean ‘Those Who Are’?” I asked, mildly frustrated at how the Book chose to explain things. It seemed this was a concept that the English language was not properly equipped to convey, or I was not able to understand. Some facet of the state I existed in escaped every attempt made at expression.

“Look closely,” said the Book, bringing the history I had been examining into sharp focus. There, hidden between the lines, was another text, a second history, as though another entity were acting, controlling the man. Now it made sense. This history began shortly before the man had entered the coffee shop, and carried him right up to the moment that he had pulled the trigger. I hadn’t been shot at random by some small-time crook; something wanted me dead.

I could hear it now, a faint scream of anger and frustration in the background. It was so faint that I would not have noticed under other circumstances. Cold fear clutched at me. Whatever was hunting me seemed to have the ability to control other people’s actions. It could control them so subtly that their histories in the Book gave no indication of that external control unless you knew exactly where and how to look.

“Those Who Are must not have the Book,” stated the Book, the same hint of fear as before entering its voice. I could feel the urgency it felt seeping into my mind. I had to get out of there, and fast. To do that I needed to know something more about what was hunting me.

Tracing the other history turned out to be a dead end. I could follow it back for several weeks before the trail grew too faint to trace. The puppeteer’s control faded in so slowly, and with such a light touch, that it was impossible to trace completely. There was a word here and there, a small nudge in a different direction than would have otherwise been taken. Nothing with enough meat on it to follow further back. Following the history of a phrase in the Book was much harder than searching through an individual’s life.

Following the gunman’s life back proved to be no help either. Before taking on this seemingly random criminal bent, he had been a normal, young man, about twenty-two years old, with a reasonable job and a girlfriend. Nothing about him would lead you to think that robbing a coffeehouse and shooting the first patron in sight would be in his character. Nothing to help me figure out why someone had turned this relatively innocent kid into a cold-blooded killer.

“Is there anything I can do for this guy?” I asked the Book, hoping that the fear I felt radiating from it would not get the better of it and me. I could see where the young man had been warped. As with the tendrils of black lightening on Bill, I spotted ever-so-fine hairs of greenish light radiating from his eyes, and snaking down his arm to the gun. Those green lines were a manifestation of the coercion that he was under. Maybe puppeteer was a better description than I had originally thought.

Something was wrong here. The last time I had been shot, in Bill’s apartment, time had been brought to a standstill. This time, I could see changes in the breadth and intensity of the green threads attached to the gunman. It wasn’t much, just enough that I could see the tiniest of changes, barely within perception. What was that stuff?

“Those Who Are must not have the Book! Hurry!” said the Book sounding frantic. The green light was growing stronger moment by moment, insinuating itself into the pocket of time surrounding me and the Book.

There was no more time to think about anyone’s fate but my own. I was still in the disembodied state that went along with death for me. Shifting where my sense of self was allowed me to move around physically in space and, with a little more thought, through time. I found my timeline and sought backward along it, searching for a point where I could be safe. I didn’t want to go too far back, or I might lose track of the thing chasing me. My mind had decided that it must be a thing, and not a person, to have the powers that it seemed to. I found a point and let go as before.

As though coming to me from a great distance, I heard a primal scream. That scream carried with it such hatred and rage that no living voice could have created it. The sound pierced to my very soul and left me shaking. The first time I went through this, the transition had been relatively smooth and easy. This time I could feel something trying to take hold of me. There was a deep, tearing sensation, and pain radiated from my left arm. I tore away my shirt and was relieved to find my arm still intact. Had the visual evidence not disproved it, I would have sworn that my left arm had been torn to shreds.

I needed to think. Whoever or whatever that thing was had somehow tracked my movements to that coffee shop and set that gunman up to watch for me. How had they been able to trace me there? If they were able to trace me to the coffee shop, could they trace me back to the hotel? The hotel I was standing in right now!

How far had I traveled back this time? While searching along my timeline, I had no real way to determine how much time I was passing through. I could see the events, but there were no signposts I could use to identify one point or another. On top of that, the only way for me to practice was to die. The Book informed me that the state I had experienced twice now was a safety mechanism it could use to avoid my death. There was nothing I could do to activate that state short of being “subjected to sufficient physical trauma to cause the cessation of life functions,” as the Book had put it.

Coffee, I needed coffee. Worse than that, I could not get coffee from my favorite coffeehouse without going through the whole mess a second time. I doubted that things would end as well as they had if I went back to that coffee shop. Whatever those green filaments were, they had been able to act while time was frozen. The implications of that ability meant that I couldn’t count on the Book’s safety net to save me when dealing with them.

There was a Waffle House a short distance from the hotel I was staying in. They had coffee, not good coffee, but coffee nonetheless. It would have to do. I grabbed my bag, along with a few things that I deemed essential – not that I really needed any of them since I had the Book – and headed out.

One of the reasons I had picked this particular hotel was that it didn’t have enclosed walkways. Under normal circumstances, you could pull your car right up to your room and unload. Now I regretted that choice, as it left me completely exposed. I found myself spotting various bits of cover here and there where another assassin could hide and I would never know it. Being shot in the head tends to make you paranoid, to say the least.

Having made it to the Waffle House without incident, and found a seat with my back safely to the wall, I thought it might be safe to relax. For whatever reason, Waffle House restaurants have large, plate-glass windows completely surrounding their dining areas. Normally, I only care if the sun happens to find that perfectly annoying spot right in front of my face to blind me no matter what I do. This evening, though, I found myself nervously looking around, waiting for my cup of coffee.

Would there be another gunman waiting here? I had to assume that whoever, or whatever, was controlling my previous assailant would be aware that I had somehow avoided the attack. It might even be aware of my step backward to the present. Had they planned for this event? Did they have enough infrastructure in place here to attack again?

The waitress set down my coffee, along with a small bowl full of half and half packages. I upended my usual complement of two creamers and a couple of heaping spoonfuls of sugar into the cup. Weak, too acidic for my taste. Any other day I would have complained, asking for a fresh pot. Today, I just wanted to be forgotten.

I had done my best to rig this place up in a manner similar to the hotel. With a few subtle cues, the waitress would know exactly what to bring back to my booth, even though she had no clue I was even sitting there. In her mind’s eye, she would see an elderly gentleman who came through on a regular basis and kept mostly to himself. I hadn’t been able to build in as much detail as I would have liked. Writing highly detailed descriptions had never been my forte. Thankfully, the human mind is elastic enough, and the waitress still had enough imagination, to fill in the gaps.

The longer I sat there sipping my coffee with nothing happening, the better I felt. As crappy as the coffee was, the steaming-hot liquid served as an analgesic for my mind. The tensions wound up inside me slowly flowed away with each sip. There was less urgency in the way I searched everything I could see for possible attackers. I focused on calming myself down and clearing my mind of the frantic, fearful thoughts that had been rushing about.

I was so relaxed that I didn’t notice a new patron enter the restaurant until the distinct smell of the metabolized alcohol he was exuding hit me smack in the face. For the second time, I was caught completely flat-footed when the unexpected happened. The man glanced around the restaurant and leveled his gaze directly at me. Sitting in my tiny, little corner, surrounded by my shroud of forgetfulness, the strange man had singled me out.

“You look like you could use a bit of company!” said the man as he sat across from me. The smell of his breath was nearly overpowering and served to put me back on edge again. Any hope I had of thinking things through in a rational manner was completely dashed.

Something about him seemed familiar, something that tickled the back of my mind but would not make itself known. I just sat there, not saying a word, ignoring him and his audacious manner in hopes that giving him the cold shoulder might convince him to try elsewhere. Then I noticed that there were no other patrons in the Waffle House, and this guy definitely wanted to talk with someone.

“Tell you what, I know that look. I’ve had it more times than I care to remember. That sense that all the world is out to get you! I’ve got a little something here that will set you to rights,” said the man. There was such a strong scent of alcohol on his breath that I wondered casually if one could get drunk simply by breathing the stuff in. Where did I know this man from? The sense that I had met him before was tickling the back of my brain like an itch that couldn’t be scratched.

He grabbed my coffee cup and took out a bottle from somewhere in his voluminous clothing. There was a pattern to his clothing that few people could pull off. It was as though someone had taken a pile of old coats and baggy pants and grafted them onto a person. Considering that the temperature outside was well into the nineties during the day, I wondered how he survived in all that clothing. He even wore a scarf – of all the absurd things – and a floppy, wide-brimmed hat that hid most of his face.

With great care, like some ancient alchemist trying to measure out the tiniest drop of some frightfully dangerous ingredient, he added whatever brew he carried to my coffee. He grabbed my spoon and stirred the liquid for a moment before shoving the glass back at me. I hesitated, seeing that the coffee was now a good deal darker than it had been before and that the spoon was a good deal shinier. What was that stuff?

“Go on, what’s the worst it could do? Kill ya?” He broke out laughing at his own rather lame joke. Of course, there was no way he could know about the Book and what I had started calling its safety net.

“What the hell,” I said, taking a sip of the adulterated liquid; whatever he had added couldn’t have made it any worse. Of course, I could have been wrong. Liquid fire raged down my throat, burning away everything in its path. The sensation settled into my gut and spread outward in a searing wave of pain that nearly doubled me over. My coordination disappeared, along with my ability to speak or think clearly, with that one tiny sip.

Very carefully and very deliberately, I put the coffee cup down and stared at it. I had watched him put the tiniest little drop of liquid into my coffee and stir it thoroughly. I was drunk, completely hammered! No alcoholic beverage on Earth should have had that kind of kick.

“What was that stuff?” I asked with a slight slur. Okay; not quite drunk, but well on the way to being so. I watched him take the same bottle and draw deeply from it with great relish.

“This stuff? This stuff is for what ails you. It’s about the only thing short of the end of time itself with any kick worth mentioning,” said the man. Somehow his hat moved to keep me from seeing enough of his face to scratch my mental itch. The effects of his brew were filtering through me now that the fire had subsided. I could feel the remaining tensions relaxing, almost too much as I realized that I was sliding down in my seat.

“Now, now then. You’re not that much of a softy are you? Come on, I thought you would handle it better than that!”

“I don’t drink all that much!” It was a feeble excuse, but a truthful one. Alcohol was not at the top of my list of recreational medicinals. “Is that stuff legal?”

“HA! Legal he asks!” He grabbed my coffee and downed the rest of the cup, gagging. “You call this coffee! Waitress! A fresh pot and another cup, and make dang sure it’s stronger than this swill!”

The waitress looked very annoyed but started making a fresh pot of coffee. Now he was annoying me; I had painstakingly worked on this place to be able to walk in and order just like any other person. This buffoon was taking advantage of me and my manipulations to indulge his pompous attitude.

“Don’t do that,” I said, the slurring completely gone from my voice. I could feel the soothing warmth from his additive being washed away by hot anger. I really must have been drunk to have reacted like that. All sense of proportion and control seemed to have left me.

“Oh ho! So there is a bit of backbone in you after all!” he said, putting both palms flat on the table. “Maybe we should try a little one on one outside?”

The waitress brought the pot and another cup of coffee. She set the new cup down in front of me and refilled my uninvited guest’s cup. We sat there without moving, eyes locked in what felt like a deadly standoff. There was definitely more to this guy than I could see on his face. This entire encounter didn’t feel right.

“You don’t want to fight me,” I said, my voice as flat and emotionless as I could make it. It wasn’t that I was an accomplished fighter of any sort, no nothing like that. He simply couldn’t cause me any real harm. In fact, the first time through things, I would probably want him to do his best to kill me.

“I don’t, do I? Well, fighting isn’t why I came here,” he said relaxing. “My name’s Jack; what’s yours?”

Now I was really getting annoyed. “I don’t have a name.”

“Oh really now. I wonder what I should call you then.” He paused, looking at me thoughtfully for a moment. “Let’s call you . . . no, that won’t work either.”

“If you have to call me anything, call me John,” I said, feeling somewhat exasperated.

“As in John Doe? You know, I think you’re taking this no-name thing a little too far,” he said with mock concern. Somehow, he had managed to defuse the situation and still annoy the crap out of me. “All right, John, what brings you here on such a beautiful evening?”

The sun was setting slowly again. I wondered briefly if the coffee shop would be robbed even if I wasn’t there as a target. I would have to check on that later.

“I needed a cup of coffee.” It seemed the most logical thing to say. Why was I talking to this guy? Where had I seen him before? The questions kept nagging at the back of my mind. Waiting for some little piece of information to remind me and bring it into full view.

“Fair enough. Me, I wanted someone to talk to and share a drink with. None of the bars around here are worth a steaming pile of something smelly. They cater to kids looking for a quick one-night stand with their watered-down, yuppie drinks and too-loud dance music. Whatever happened to the kind of place where you could get shot for hiding cards up your sleeve? Where a fuzzy navel meant you had too much lint sticking out of your gut? What happened to the good ol’ days?”

“I’m sorry, but I must be going now,” I said, hoping to get away from this guy without hearing his life story.

“No you won’t,” he said, pulling me back down into the seat with unexpected strength, his voice leaving no room for argument. I sat down, annoyed but not ready to push things too far. He pulled out his bottle again and poured a generous amount into his own cup. Some of the overbearing attitude he had shown before seemed to have dissipated.

“It’s not all that often that I run into someone like you,” he said.

“What do you mean by ‘someone like’ me?” I asked, reasonably certain that he had no idea what that phrase meant to me.

“You’re lost, without direction.” The tone of his voice picked up to emphasize the last two words. “You don’t know if you’re coming or going! I was like you once, lost in a world that forgets you even before they see you. Let me tell you, I’ve been there, done that, and bought the cheaply made, expensive T-shirt.”

He looked tired now more than anything else. As though the weight of years and years of time were pressing down on him. Years of regrets that would not be silenced.

“I found my answers here, in this bottle. If the world was going to forget me, I would forget the world!” He spoke with an old, deep-seated anger, burning hot once again. “Of course, it didn’t work one bit. The more of this crap I drink, the more it all comes back to me. Maybe I should have tried coffee, huh?”

I couldn’t quite bring myself to pity this man. And still, there was that nagging sense that I should know him from somewhere.

“Have we met before?” I asked. “I keep getting the feeling that we’ve met somewhere before. I just don’t know where.”

“I doubt it. People only meet me once in a lifetime. It’s the kind of person that I am, you know. Or course, you’re a little different. Maybe we have met somewhere before,” he said, looking thoughtful, and then he shook his head. “Nah! I couldn’t have met you. It’s not your time yet. Not for a long while.”

“What do you mean, ‘my time’?” I asked. Who was this man?

“You’ll know when it happens. Until then, I think I’d better head on out; I’ve got an appointment to keep and all,” he said, seeming preoccupied. He stood up to leave and paused for a moment, looking at me with an odd expression. Then he shook his head again. “Thanks for the coffee!”

Just as he walked out the door and disappeared into the dusk, I remembered where I had seen him before. The memory hit me like a ton of bricks. I rushed to catch up with him, but he was already gone. I had met him once before, at the beginning of this whole ordeal. He had been the drunk from the bar who told me about a place in the middle of nowhere . . .

I sat back down and pulled out the Book, confident that it would have better luck at keeping track of him. The more I read, the more puzzled I became with the whole situation. It was as though the man was a blind spot to the Book. At first I thought I was looking at the wrong time, perhaps another evening when I had come by for a quick meal. Then I noticed that the text described a second cup of coffee and the annoyance that the waitress had displayed with my unexpected guest.

He wasn’t there. Nowhere was there anything about him or his actions. The only way I could tell that there had been anyone else sitting in the booth with me was by the effects he had on other things. Just to be sure, I carefully read and reread the history associated with the two coffee cups and traced his actions through the door and into the street. After that, the trail was quickly lost in the noise from all the random motion outside. I had no way of finding this man.

I finished off my coffee and thought about the events of the evening. That wasn’t right; it was more than just an evening. The English language didn’t contain words for the particular flow of time that I had experienced. It was just too confusing. There was someone or something out there that wanted me dead – or worse – and then there was the disappearing drunk.

The sun had set completely now. The evening seemed to envelop everything outside in a shroud of darkness. This Waffle House was sitting alone along the side of a nearly forgotten road. If not for the hotel, I really doubted that the restaurant would still be there.

A few more customers strolled in, completely ignoring me and my little corner. Everything was as it should be. The waitress refilled my coffee cup another time as I sat there, quietly observing the patrons come and go for another hour. Nothing happened and no one noticed me.

It was time for me to head back to my room and attempt to get some rest. In the morning, with a rested mind and a fresh perspective on things, I might be able to make sense of the evening’s events. I dropped some cash I had conjured, using the Book, onto the table and walked out. It was way more than a few cups of coffee would have cost, but I wanted to make up for the annoyances.

I had given up on limiting my reliance on the Book. Some unknown force in the universe was doing its absolute best to make sure that the world at large could not maintain any record of my existence. I had no name and could not do anything to establish an identity without my effort backfiring nastily. Truthfully, I was surprised that attempting to call myself John in front of the drunk had not blown up in my face violently.

Of course, he was strange to say the least. His very strangeness made me wonder about my situation more than anything else. He was not affected by the forgetfulness that touched everyone else who saw me, and the Book could not maintain a record of him. If I had not seen him with my own eyes, I would have surmised that he existed as a figment of my own imagination rather than a flesh and blood person. Who was he? How was he associated with the Book? Too many questions ran around in my mind, crowding each other for space.

Thankfully, sleep came easily that night and most of the next week. I had decided that I would avoid the coffee shop for a while even after determining that nothing had happened without my presence. I had taken it upon myself to free my would-be assassin from his compulsion to rob the coffee shop. My efforts seemed to have succeeded, after a fashion.

Whoever had worked that kid over had done a really nasty job of things. My own skill level with the Book and its finicky phrasing was just not up to par. Even though I had been capable of some rather impressive feats when given sufficient time to prepare, attempting to save the kid quickly turned into a cat and mouse game. After nearly a week of doing my best to subtly counter any suggestions applied to him, I concluded it was time to give up.

For a moment, I seriously considered appearing in front of him and taking a more direct approach to things. Instead, I wound up directing a local counselor to where he was and letting a professional take over. The damage done could not be undone in a short time, and I feared that my meddling had only made things worse.

I felt horrible about the situation. It was obvious that whoever was manipulating him wanted to get at me and had no regard for the methods or tools used to do so. I still didn’t know how they, whoever they were, had tracked me to the coffee shop or why no one had shown up at the Waffle House to attack me.

Over the course of another two weeks I did my best to keep my little hideaway protected and well hidden. There were traps within traps within traps spread throughout the hotel, hidden in such a way that no one could trip them unintentionally. I spent many hours working on the correct phrasing and layering of the words to avoid any misfires. I was quite proud of the work that I had done.

That is, until someone tripped one of my traps. Thankfully, it was nothing overly dangerous. I had set up proximity-triggered portals around the room I was staying in, arranged to prevent anyone other than me from finding my door. In theory, anyone who activated one of the portals should have been moved down the walkway by the width of one room, none the wiser. Somewhere in the process of writing out the phrasing I had screwed up. Instead of being moved one door farther down, they were moved one door farther back.

The poor soul spent an hour trying to get away from the door to my room before I found her. She had a downtrodden, frantic look that characterized many of the residents in this hotel. Her eyes were sunken into a gaunt face, and she was generally disheveled in appearance. If I had to make a guess as to her age, I would have said somewhere in her late twenties. I was reasonably sure she had not bathed or changed clothing in some time. She was sitting across the walkway from my door with her body pulled up into the fetal position. Tears were streaming down her face as she sat there, rocking back and forth in fear and desperation.

When she saw me opening the door she screamed and grabbed my legs, holding on for dear life. “I’m freaking out! Help me! I’m trapped here! Please help me!”

## Tabitha

Her drug-crazed mind had twisted my screw up into whatever trip she had been having and sent her into dark places. I did my best to calm her and ease her fear while trying to figure out what had happened. When I did figure it out, I cursed myself for my own stupidity and quickly dismantled that trap.

“When was the last time you had a decent meal?” I asked her quietly. She had calmed down quite a bit when I showed her that she was no longer trapped. Her twisted mind seemed to keep a solid hold on me even after her fear had passed. It was my fault she was cowering, trapped in the hallway; the least I could do was try to help her out. My earlier attempts had humbled me a bit, so I did not plan to use the Book here, at least not in any direct way.

“Work has been kinda slow so it’s been awhile,” she said, her voice shaky as though she were nervous about something. She kept twitching every now and then, as though suffering from too much caffeine, though I doubt her state was the result of anything that innocuous.

“How does Waffle House sound then? Don’t worry about anything, I’m buying,” I told her while helping her to her feet. I did my best to stay in her field of vision and keep her attention as we left the hotel and crossed to the restaurant. Her strange ability to remember me had to be a side effect of what I assumed was heavy drug usage and her recent terror. Not something I really wanted to experiment with.

“What’s your name?” I asked, sitting down in the booth. I pulled out two of the laminated menus from their standard hiding place behind the napkin dispenser. Coffee was definitely not on the menu tonight.

“Tabitha,” she said, looking at the menu hungrily. I wondered what had brought her to this, when she could have been so much more. She had been beautiful once; I could see the remnants of that beauty while she tried to order. In another few years, I knew, she would be in jail, dead, or worse.

The waitress came over with her ever-present notepad. She paused for a moment when she saw Tabitha, and a distasteful look crossed her face. My own face, or at least the old man’s face that she could see, held a grim expression that left no room for argument.

“So, what’ll it be?” she asked, all smiles again.

“For me, I think I’ll have the Toddle House omelet and a glass of orange juice,” I stated, wishing I felt comfortable ordering coffee, but knowing it would be a horrible idea.

“And how about you dear?” she asked, holding her expression carefully neutral.

“There’s so much to choose from. I just don’t know. Could I have that one?” asked Tabitha, pointing at a picture of the All Star Breakfast. It had a waffle, two eggs, grits, sausage, and four pieces of toast. I hoped it wouldn’t be too much for her.

“And would you like anything to drink with that?”

“Uh, do you have any Pepsi?”

“Sure, hon. I’ll get this to the cook and be back with your drinks in a bit.”

What can I do here? I thought to myself. One meal wasn’t going to do this girl more than the tiniest bit of good. Anything I could try to do directly with the Book would be fighting against her mind, and would do more harm than good. Even so, I pulled out the Book and opened it. There was the familiar scratching sound of unseen pens emanating from it as the present filled in the pages.

“That’s a big Book!” stated Tabitha, her awe audible in her voice.

I spent a moment doing my best to find her history in the text. It was filled with things that I would have rather not read or known existed. Tabitha’s life had been a hard one, to say the least, and my initial evaluation of her was more than likely to be correct. In another few months she would be dead or worse.

“It is a big Book, and it tells me many things. For instance, it tells me that you’re on your own out here,” I said, pulling the Book’s stylus from its hiding place along the spine. While I couldn’t change her directly, there might be something that I could do indirectly to save her. Maybe. There was a women’s shelter in a nearby town that should do just the trick. With a little careful inscription, I used the Book to conjure a car and a few things that might be helpful – a couple changes of clothing, some spare cash.

“I’ve always been on my own,” she said, a touch of sadness crossing her face.

The waitress came back with our drinks. Tabitha unwrapped a straw with shaky hands and downed half her beverage immediately. I could see a bit of joy showing through the mask she wore, and with it a touch of the beauty that remained. If all went well, I might be able to help her regain that beauty before it was too late.

“So, are you staying here long?” I asked. The Book had already told me that she lived in the hotel very much as I did. Of course, she only had one resource to her name. Any money over what she needed to keep her room at the hotel went to various forms of chemical entertainment.

“Just passing through,” she said, trying unsuccessfully to lie. Even if I did not have access to the knowledge I had, her voice would have given her away in an instant. I debated whether or not I should call her out on that one and decided against it. There was no reason to push her any further yet, and doing so might hinder any chance I had at convincing her I could help.

“My own fortunes have landed me here much longer than I had hoped. Do you have any friends or family near here?” I asked, again knowing the answer.

Tabitha looked askance at me for a moment before responding, reluctantly, “No, it’s just me. Look mister, I know I kind of freaked out earlier but I’m fine now. You really don’t have to do this.”

“If I told you that I felt your being stuck in that hallway was my fault, would you believe me?” I asked.

“What are you? Some kind of magician?” she said, incredulously.

“You could say that. I left a trick laying around for someone who’s hunting me, and you found it instead. I’m sorry,” I stated in a straightforward manner, with my hands on the table, open and palms up. Had I said too much?

Again, she looked at me with that sideways glance. I could not tell if she believed me or not. Probably not considering her own history. She more than likely mistook what had happened for a bad mix of some drug; maybe someone mixed hallucinogens in with her preferred upper. In fact, I was reasonably certain she had come to the conclusion I was crazy.

“You must be some magician then. That was a good trick, even if I was high, that was some trick,” she stated, appearing to be suitably impressed even if she did not believe me. She took another sip of the Pepsi and leaned back in the booth, stretching her arms out across the back. Rather than have the intended effect of being enticing, I felt all the more sorry for her.

Tabitha was wearing a midriff-baring shirt under a light-blue jean jacket. Both had seen better days, as had she. Her fiery-red hair was a dirty, tangled mess. With her head thrown back as she had it, I could see her ribs showing through skin. I knew she had not been eating recently, but this was too much. My jaw tightened, and I felt deep sadness at what I saw. It was all I could do to not collapse in tears right there.

“So what brings you here?” she asked nervously.

“I’m passing through, just like you,” I said.

About then, the waitress brought over our food. Tabitha’s eyes went wide at the three plates in front of her. Waffle House usually served the eggs, grits, and toast on one plate, sausage on its own, and another round plate for the waffle. My own omelet had plenty of cheese and chunks of ham, just the way I liked it. I caught myself before I asked for coffee. Of course, she was drinking Pepsi, which would have a pretty decent amount of caffeine on its own. It was typical Waffle House food, nothing very gourmet, but good and wholesome.

We dug in and didn’t speak again for a while. Tabitha ate as though she were starving, which I had no doubt she was. There are three reasons to have as little meat on you as she did: lack of food, an eating disorder, or physical disease. I was reasonably certain that she did not have cancer, yet, and probably did not have an eating disorder, which left the first reason.

“Slow down! If you eat that fast you’ll make yourself sick,” I chastened.

“It’s so good!” she said. “This is the best meal I’ve ever had!”

It felt good to know that she was enjoying the meal, and then I felt my heart breaking as I realized what she must be experiencing. She had not eaten in at least two weeks, and hadn’t eaten regularly before that. I’m certain that one of my teeth cracked as my jaw clenched. Now was not the time to break down. I had to keep going, to bring this to a close before I collapsed.

“I know of a place near here that could help you,” I said. Tabitha’s eating slowed as she listened. “It’s just a bit down the road from here. They help women like you get back on their feet. If you let me take you there, you wouldn’t have to go hungry again.”

She continued eating, though much more slowly. It was obvious that I had touched a nerve there. Something about her demeanor changed when I spoke, as though she were on edge. Maybe this was the wrong approach to take. She poured syrup all over her waffle, and then tried to add the butter spread, succeeding only in pushing syrup off onto the table.

“I get by,” she said after a bit. “I can take care of myself,”

There was defiance in her voice, as though I had touched an old wound that still stung, but there was also uncertainty. I knew she had been on her own for too many years not to realize how hollow her own assertion sounded. While I knew that she would not survive in the real world as she was for much longer, I really had no authority to do anything about it. She would have to make the decision to either accept or deny my offer.

“You know better than that.” It was cold and harsh, but I said it. The words stung her deeply. Tears welled up in her eyes even as she took another bite of her waffle. I had no clue how much more of this I could take myself. “How long has it been since you had a meal like this?” I asked her.

“I can’t remember,” she whispered. There was no stopping the tears now and no pretenses for anything else, just raw emotion. Months, perhaps years of pent-up pain and sorrow poured out of her while she ate. Even while sobbing, she kept eating. I could not finish my omelet.

Was I doing the right thing? Using the Book’s power, I could have done any number of things to help her. If I really put my mind to it, I might have even been able to rewire her brain enough for her to simply walk out of there. Except I would have destroyed who and what she was. No, this was the only way to help her without effectively sentencing her personality to death. It had to be this way.

I don’t know how she ate everything she had ordered, but she did. She even finished off what I hadn’t eaten of my omelet. The waitress cleared our table and left the check, a little nicety I had added for when I had a guest. Tabitha pulled herself up into a ball with her back to the window, sobbing quietly to herself. She looked like a little child, scared and alone, cowering in the corner.

This was not going well at all. I knew too much about her and she knew nothing of me – could know nothing of me. There was too much knowledge on my side of the scale to communicate effectively for having just met her. If I wasn’t careful here I would come across as some strange stalker. What could I do to make this easier?

“The world can be a very dark place. Sometimes, you need a place where you feel safe to go and recover. You asked me to help you earlier, begged me to help you. Will you accept that help?” I asked earnestly. “Even if you don’t let me take you to the shelter, I can give you some things to help get you back on your feet. All you have to do is accept my offer.”

Tabitha said nothing, sitting there sobbing and rocking as she had before. Her face was hidden, arms crossed over her knees. The mental wall she had erected around herself was nearly tangible in its presence. For a while, I sat there waiting, saying nothing, and she sat there crying. I don’t know how long we sat like that before she spoke again.

“Asshole!” she said. “Why do men always have to be such assholes? What do you want for helping me? Huh? What do you want?”

The bitterness and anger in her voice stung me. I knew the physical nature of her past, but could not fully fathom what it had done to her mentally. “Nothing. I ask nothing in return except that you try. You have so much life in you. If you keep going down this path . . .”

I couldn’t finish the sentence; the thought of it was too much for me. My mind always had a knack for visualizing the worst possible outcome and recent events had done nothing for my optimism. I could see her lying facedown on a bed, throat slit and blood splattered across dirty sheets in a nameless hotel room. I could see a heart monitor playing a solid tone as doctors looked on, unable or unwilling to do anything. I could see her mouth foaming as her body lay twitching in a pool of her own vomit. All these things ran through my mind as I tried to speak.

“Will you let me help you?” I asked again.

“Liar!” she said, her voice bitter and harsh. My heart wrenched; those words hurt worse than anything I had experienced so far. I could feel my own tears ready to burst forth.

“Why would I lie to you?”

“All men lie! Everyone lies! Don’t you know that?” she said frantically. “You can’t trust anyone! They just want to use you and hurt you and leave you behind!”

Tabitha curled into a tighter ball than before. The waitress and cook were staring at us with concern. I gave them a warning look, and they decided to quickly find something else to do. Of course, a little help might have been better than my own fumbling efforts. So far I was zero for two in my attempts to save the lost. Not a good start.

Maybe a different tack then. “What if I could prove to you that I am telling the truth? Would you think about what I’m offering then?”

At least she stopped crying.

“How would you do that?” she said between sniffles. Her eyes were red and puffy now, not a good look for anyone, much less someone as gaunt as she was.

“I have a car in the parking lot. In the trunk of that car, I have some cash and some spare clothing that I think would fit you. If you want it, I’ll give it to you, no strings attached. I have a room at the hotel where you can clean up and take a shower. I will wait outside if you like, and let you take as long as need,” I said, being very careful with my tone. I didn’t want to imply anything or insinuate anything as a desire to take advantage of her.

“After that, I will drive you to the shelter and leave you the car and all of the items I mentioned before. I have no real need of it and can always get another. I am asking nothing in return. The only – and I do stress only – request I will make is that you do not, under any circumstances, return to this life. Don’t look back. Don’t hesitate. Just walk away and make a new life for yourself. The shelter will help you clean up. It will be painful, believe me on that one.”

She was staring at me in amazement now. It was too much for her to let herself believe. Nothing in the short experience of her life could let her believe for one second that I was telling the truth. Yet, I could see in her face that she knew I was not lying.

“You won’t even be in the room?” she asked, still amazed at what I was proposing. I shook my head.

“Let me get this straight. You are going to give me money, a car, and some other stuff, and you don’t want anything from me?”

I nodded. She just stared at me with tear-stained cheeks, completely dumbfounded at what I was saying. Would she believe me? If she accepted my offer, it would probably be a long night for me. She shook her head and just kept staring at me, her tears seeming to have passed.

“Tabitha, you can take my offer, or you can walk away. I’m not going to force you either way,” I said, careful to keep my voice even.

“Why would you do that? You just met me!” she said, her voice shaking. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Why? Because I can,” I said, a touch of the frustration I felt seeping into my voice. “I’ve been given something that lets me do anything. Anything but be somebody. You are the first person who’s remembered me for more ten seconds. You wouldn’t believe half of what has happened to me, but I get to make almost anything I want happen.”

Her eyes were wide with amazement and also a little fear at what I had said. I had said too much. The frustrations were starting to build up inside me, and I had let too much of it come out. Had I already ruined any chance I had, any chance she had?

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“I am nameless. I don’t even know my own name,” I said in despair. “There is no hope for me; I am lost to time. You can be so much more.”

For a short while longer she sat there, saying nothing. I could see her turning things over in her mind. Using the Book, I could have read what she was thinking, or even tweaked her thinking to conclude in the way I wanted. Had I done that, I would have never forgiven myself, even if it saved her life. I was tense with anxiety as I waited for her to respond.

“Can I have that shower?” she asked. “I don’t know about the rest right now, but it would be nice to feel clean.”

“Alright, let’s take things slowly then. I’ll take you back to the room and let you use the shower. One condition though.”

“What’s that? You said there were no strings attached,” she said, slightly curious.

“Give me any drugs you have on you. If you are going to do this, it’s going to be a clean break. That habit will die here and now.”

Her shoulders slumped slightly, and she looked like a guilty child who had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. I knew exactly where and exactly how much of what substances she had on her. She pulled a small bundle out of her pocket and handed it to me. I didn’t even look at it, already aware of what it was.

“Alright, the rest of it,” I said. I could see the indecision on her face. Was what I was offering her really worth losing her stash? After a few agonizing moments, she reluctantly handed me two other small bundles and a few pills she had hidden on her body. I took all of the packages and stuffed them into my empty orange juice glass.

“I’ll be taking this glass, here’s a little extra to cover it,” I called to the waitress, dropping a fifty dollar bill on the table. Normally, you would pay at the register, but I didn’t think that was prudent this evening.

We went back to my room after a quick stop off at the car. I pulled out the suitcase I had conjured earlier, along with a small messenger bag filled with money. I knew everything was in order, as it should be, so I handed the suitcase to Tabitha. After making sure that she had everything she needed, I went back out to the car to wait for her. A few scrawled words were sufficient to destroy her stash and the glass.

I came to a decision while I was waiting on her. “All right, Book, can you cleanse her system of the drugs? If I can help her avoid withdrawal symptoms I will.”

The proper words can cleanse her body.

I worked out the words carefully; there could be no screw ups with this. Using phrasing that was as soft as possible, I used the Book to strip away the drugs in her system. Touching her mind was out of the question, but I could break the physical aspect of her addiction. That meant that her body would no longer need the drugs, though the psychological desire for them would still be there. It was the most I could do without causing more harm than good.

When Tabitha came out two hours later, she looked much better. Her eyes were not nearly as sunken as they had been, and there was a little more color in her cheeks. She was wearing a man’s shirt, and a pair of blue jeans that were a touch too large for her. It had seemed like a bad idea to conjure women’s clothing, since they might scare her more than everything else had. The shadow of beauty I had seen earlier was shining through now, even though she was still deathly thin.

She had the suitcase with her when she climbed into the passenger seat, hugging it like some sort of teddy bear. For a moment she just sat there cuddling the suitcase as though someone were going to take it away from her.

“Did you lock the door?”

Tabitha nodded but didn’t speak. Her lips were trembling just the tiniest bit. She was doing her best to hold back tears. I couldn’t tell if she was afraid or happy or sad – her face was just too conflicted to read.

“Have you made your decision?” I asked, hopeful.

“Yes,” she said quietly, almost whispering. “Take me to the shelter.”

The shelter was about an hour out from the hotel. Tabitha spent the first fifteen minutes of the drive in silence. Her entire demeanor had changed since the shower. There was more of a scared teenager to her than anything else. She seemed afraid to speak, lest it all turn out to be a dream.

“When I was in the shower, something strange happened,” she started. “I like the water hot, so I had it set to just a bit below too hot.”

I could not read her face at all. Keeping her expression as flat as possible, she continued, “I’ve done that hundreds of times and never felt what I did in your shower. My skin started feeling oily or greasy, and I could see black sweat oozing out of my pores. I didn’t scream. It should have scared me to death, but it didn’t. The more I sweated, the better I felt. Something told me that the dark ooze had to be flushed out of me – that it was poison and not to be afraid.”

We drove on in silence for a bit more, then she went on again. “It said I would forget you soon. That all I would remember of you, of any of this, would be as a dream. I know it was just a feeling, but I believe it. How can you do this?”

For a moment, I thought about not answering her. Then the thought crossed my mind, what harm could it do?

“I was told that there is a somewhere in the middle of nowhere that is everywhere. If you find that place, you will find the thing you are asking about,” I told her. “Don’t search for it. If you go there and find it, there is no turning back. It took my name.”

It was a clear night with a full moon and a sky full of stars. Tabitha watched as trees went by outside. There were tall pines all around us now, and the road was a bit narrower than I would have liked. We were only another ten minutes out from the shelter. I knew there would be someone there who could let Tabitha in, even though they weren’t expecting us.

“I wish there was some way I could repay you,” she said. “You’ve been so nice to me. No one has been the nice to me in a long time.”

She let her hand fall on my left leg in a strategic position, “I can be nice too, you know.”

I kept my eyes sternly forward and my hands firmly on the steering wheel. There were any number of things that I could have done, but nothing that I would let myself do. She would forget anything that happened in a short while after I left. It was wrong.

“Please don’t,” I said, pleading. “You are a very beautiful woman, Tabitha. I just can’t. It would be me taking advantage of you, and I can’t let myself do that.”

Her hand withdrew and she hung her head timidly. I did not want to hurt her any more than I wanted to turn her down. It would not be right. Of course, that did not mean that I wouldn’t be taking a very cold shower when I made it back to the hotel room.

Finally, we pulled up to a nondescript, two-story building hidden in the middle of a grove of trees. If you didn’t know it was there, you would never find it. I gave Tabitha the keys to the car, and a title with her name on it. She did not even blink an eye at that after everything else she had seen. After a short good-bye, Tabitha grabbed me and kissed me on the cheek. She watched as I walked into the woods and disappeared.

Once I was well hidden from view, I pulled out the Book and checked on her. The Book had already recorded her memory fading, and the mild confusion I caused setting in. Tabitha made it into the shelter and on to what I hoped would be a better life. I hoped that helping her as I had was the right thing for me to do. What was the use of power if you couldn’t do good things every now and then?

“I kept tabs on her for a while after that, just to make sure she was doing all right and abiding by our bargain,” said the old man quietly.

“Do you regret not taking her up on her offer?” asked the interviewer.

The two had long since finished their coffee, and what little remained in the press was cold. The old man carried it over to a small kitchen area at the side of the room and washed the press out. He washed the two coffee cups and set everything on a towel to dry before sitting back down.

“Do I regret it?” he said after awhile. “Well, my body certainly did.”

“Did you ever use your power to have a little fun? I mean, you are better than the invisible man,” asked the interviewer with a wry smile.

“No, I can’t say that I ever did,” said the old man. “You see, I figured out real fast that the Book was dangerous. It gave me enough power to rule the world. I had to remain behind the curtain, so to speak. That kind of power is more dangerous than you can possibly imagine. There are any number of things that I could have done and left no trace. At least nothing that could bring the consequences back to me. But – and this is a big but – I would have had to live with myself and what I had done. You see, they forget *me*, not what happened. If I hurt someone, they stay hurt.”

“Okay, I think I understand that. How about Tabitha, did she stick with your bargain?” asked the interviewer.

The old man looked out the window at the setting sun. It had been a long day, and dinner would be arriving soon. There would be time enough to continue in the morning.

“I think that’s enough for now. If you ask me again in the morning, I’ll think about answering your question,” said the old man. His timing was better than he thought as the nurse came in with a tray of food. Nothing that fancy – a large, rather processed-looking piece of ham, some peas, and a few other soft vegetables. It didn’t look like much, but smelled delicious.

“Ah! Melanie my dear, you have impeccable timing. My guest here was just about to leave,” said the old man as he sat down at the one small table in the room. The interviewer gathered his things and prepared to leave.

“We will continue this in the morning then?” he asked, mildly annoyed at the delay. Still, it had been a relatively exciting and productive day. There was much more to this story than the old man had told him, and he looked forward to gleaning every last bit of information he could. The old man nodded, having already started eating.

After the interviewer left, he pulled out the Book again and started leafing through its pages, searching for something. He found the pages he had been looking for and read them over again, just to be sure. It would not do to make the wrong call now, with so little time left to him.

“Do you think we should go through with it?” he asked the room at large. A feminine shape detached itself from the wall and walked over to the old man. She looked nearly as old as he was, though a touch less wrinkly, and with golden-red hair. She placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t think he needs to hear it yet. That part of the story will come out soon enough. For now, just tell it as you have been,” she said in a soft voice. “It’s been so long since I thought of those days.”

The old man looked up to the woman’s face. “Why don’t we reminisce over a real dinner in, say, Paris?”

“You old dog you! Make it an Italian hamlet, and you have a deal,” she said with a smile, and the pair vanished.

A short while later, Melanie came back and cleared away the half-eaten tray of food. There was a slight green tinge to her eyes that glinted in the low light. Everything was going according to plan. In a few more days she would have what none of her predecessors had been able to retrieve. She would succeed where no other had. Until then, she would have to put up with the old man’s demands, playing the part of a placating nurse.

“You’re here early!” said the old man, happily inhaling a good-sized plate of scrambled eggs. The interviewer came in and set up his recording devices as he had the day before.

“I want to get an early start today. Your story is so intriguing that I have to make sure to get it all,” stated the interviewer. “Have you decided how you are going to answer my last question?”

The old man winced slightly. He had hoped the interviewer would have forgotten. Then again, Tabitha was the first real interaction with someone he had described where the person in question had remembered him for more than a few seconds. Now was not the time to talk about her in any detail, though. That would come in later.

“I lost track of her after awhile. She definitely started out on the path I had hoped – toward healing. Other things started taking precedence around then. I was just about to start telling you about the third time I found myself dead,” said the old man, doing his best to change the subject away for Tabitha.

“You still have the Book. Could you look her up again?” asked the interviewer, sounding mildly annoyed. The nurses had mentioned a woman who came around every so often to visit the old man. They had no clue whom she was or what relationship they had; just that she seemed to be fond of him. The mystery surrounding this old man was almost as interesting as the story he was telling.

The old man looked thoughtful for a moment, considering how to answer. It was not time to tell him everything, not just yet. He was not ready for the implications of the entire story.

“I might be able to. But I won’t. It would take a great deal of time and effort for me to find her again. The Book lets me examine any immediate event in great detail very quickly. It’s easy to find what’s going on right now, even if you don’t really know how to go searching for things,” said the old man, sounding more like he was giving a lecture than telling a story. “Tracing any single individual from the present back through their history before an event is also reasonably easy. It gets more difficult the further back you go, though not impossibly so. Finding an event in the past without something to lead you there is difficult. The further back that event, the more difficult it gets.”

“Could you follow your own timeline back to that point and then follow her branch?” asked the interviewer. This line of questioning gave him more insight into the Book’s limitations. Or at least its supposed limitations.

“I might be able to. My own history is special; it’s somewhat ethereal and vague. As I move through time, the changes I cause are left, but I am forgotten. That means that the Book has difficulty recording me,” said the old man, his expression now tinged with annoyance at being so derailed from his intended story. “Enough of this! Do you want to hear the rest of it or not?” he asked, exasperated.

Caught a little off-guard at the outburst and afraid of losing his subject, the interviewer decided it was best to let the story go on.

## The Empty Place

I kept walking for a while, hoping to get my mind off of Tabitha and the events of earlier. It would have been very easy for me to have done things I would have regretted. The Book’s power was too dangerous for *anyone* to have, much less some schmuck off the street like me.

The cool night air felt refreshing as I walked under the trees. Only a small amount of moonlight filtered through the canopy overhead, and no stars were visible. Normally, I would have been worried about having no clue as to where I was and no real idea where I might find civilization. Now, though, I felt no fear.

There was a high-pitched whistling sound and sudden, intense pressure that signaled another bout of being disembodied. I felt the now-familiar jump in my perception as the bullet punched through the front of my forehead. I found myself looking at mangled chunks of lead and copper floating in a cone of blood and gray matter that erupted from my head.

The entry wound and exit path seemed to indicate that I had been shot from behind and to my left. I had not even heard the shot, just felt the impact. In my last two experiences with being shot, my assailant had been right there. Avoiding an assailant directly in front of me was as simple as not going where he or she were going to be. Now, I had no clue where the shooter was other than a general direction.

I tried tracing the bullet back to its source as best I could. It was such a small thing to follow and it affected so little while passing that I could not follow it for more than a few hundred feet. Thankfully, that was enough to get a line on my assailant.

Following the trajectory led me to a man lying in a prone position with his eye to the scope of a rifle. It was not any kind of rifle that I was familiar with. The barrel was nearly as long as he was, and significantly higher in caliber than anything your average hunter would have on hand. The expended round laying on the ground next to him was a good six inches long. Great, whoever was hunting me had moved to a higher caliber of assassin.

Having found the shooter, I instantly spotted the same green threads I had seen on the would-be assassin from the coffee shop. They were not as prominent as they had been on the kid. Perhaps not as much manipulation was needed here? I traced his history back for a few weeks, then a few months; he was far from innocent. He was a professional with a much higher body count than I had expected.

His presence was not a freak coincidence either – someone had hired him. The exchange had been unusual: he had been paid a retainer and told to go somewhere and be ready to kill when he received a signal. How had they known to send him to this spot, and known where I was going to be even before I did? There was no way that human eyes could have picked the path for that bullet, and absolutely no way this man could have spotted me at that distance. The trees were far too thick for even a skilled marksman to hit a target that far away.

More to the point, how was I going to get rid of this guy? He was much too dangerous to leave running around loose, especially with that monster of a firearm. I thought back to my driver’s license for a moment before calmly and deliberately pushing the idea out of my mind. The idea of feeding this guy to “That Which is Outside,” as the Book put it, was tempting but too inhuman.

I just could not bring myself to kill him. That action would be a large nail in the coffin of my humanity. I knew I was losing touch with normalcy as it was. How could I maintain touch with reality when my mere survival required me to break free from it?

That line of thinking would not help me out of this situation though. Time in that state was extremely fluid. I had no real concept of how long it took or how long setting it up required, but I found a solution. I thought it was a rather beautiful solution. Carefully retracing my steps, and allowing myself to drop back into time, I set things in motion.

This time I heard the bullet whizzing past my head and smacking into a tree in front of me. Knowing where the bullet was coming from, I was able to move just out of the way as it streaked past. The gun’s report followed a second or so later, and I dropped to the ground behind a tree as I heard several more shots ring out, shattering the unfortunate tree and a few others along the path. Then things fell silent.

My trap was sprung. Just to make sure, I pulled out the Book and went looking for him. I found the sniper just where I expected to. He would have no more clue how he wound up in a holding cell than the officers who found a strange man, wearing all black with a freaking huge rifle, unexpectedly incarcerated.

A few more sentences written in the Book served to transplant his remaining ammunition outside the cell. I had a pretty good laugh when the guard on duty discovered his new charge doing his best to open the cell door.

It was high time to get back to my hotel room, pull in the welcome mat, and erase the door. Unfortunately, I discovered that would not be possible; the hotel was on fire when I arrived. Emergency crews were everywhere around the burning building.

Whoever had sent the assassins must have tracked me back to the hotel. I cursed myself for being so naïve in thinking that it would be safe to stay there. There was absolutely no reason that they should not have been able to track me there if they had tracked me to the coffee shop. I had to do something about this, or I was never going to be able to relax.

I traced the fire back to a room just down the hall from mine. It looked very much like someone had been cooking up a few illicit substances and knocked over a container of something highly flammable. Nothing I could trace there; a single tiny nudge at just the right moment had been sufficient to kill the two people in the room and start the fire. From there, the fire spread quickly through a crawlspace in the roof.

There was nothing I could do about it now. I felt my anger building as I saw rescuers pulling badly burned bodies from the fire. It didn’t matter that I had spent months building up the careful patchwork of triggers and events around this place. It didn’t matter that I had been shot in the head three times at the behest of some unknown entity that wanted me dead. What mattered was that there were people dead, and I could do nothing about it. I started to pull out the Book and felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t get involved here,” said a voice behind me. I turned and was smacked in the face with alcohol-laden breath strong enough to knock out a horse. The shock caused me to stumble for a second as I regained my senses.

“If you try to help them, it will make things worse. There are already too many dead here. People who should have lived on.”

The statement caught me off guard for a moment before I realized who was speaking. “What do you know, Jack? I might be able to save a few more.”

“No, you won’t. If you try, the fire will only get worse. There’s nothing that you can do here,” said Jack in a mournful voice. He shook his head and looked on as the firemen tried their best to put out the flames. The fire shifted and writhed like a living thing, consuming everything in its path. It seemed that every time they were able to bring it under control, new flames would erupt in another part of the building. Embers were falling near the Waffle House building now. A few of the police officers were diverted to keep an eye on the building, hoping to catch any fire there before it got out of hand.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my attention focused on the devastation in front of me. There was a small crowd of people who had made it out, milling around, watching as the building burned. Most of the current residents had hopped in their cars and ran when they realized what was happening. It would not do to be around when their various illegitimate enterprises were discovered or added to the blaze. A few of the more innocent people stood behind a pair of bored-looking police officers.

Jack said nothing and handed me a bottle. It was cold to the touch, though nothing as exotic as he had added to my coffee. I took a big swig off the bottle of Shiner, savoring the hoppy liquid as it flowed down my throat. There was not much of anything else to do right now. At least not if I could not use the Book to help.

“So you did find it then. I thought you might, though I wasn’t sure,” he said after a while.

“I found something. A burning pit, a room full of candles, and a Book that writes itself,” I said, bitterly. “Why did you tell me that story?”

Jack drew deeply from his own bottle before speaking. “It was time for someone to have the Book. You seemed like a decent choice.”

“Bastard! This thing has destroyed my life. I don’t even know who I am anymore!”

“You are nobody,” stated Jack. “And don’t go blaming me for your actions. I told you a story and you went out into the desert looking for it. I didn’t make you go out there.”

“No, you just told me a story,” I said with a sigh. “Who are you anyhow?”

“I don’t know who I am any more than you do,” Jack said. “I know my bottle doesn’t spill, and wherever I go, destruction follows me.”

“You too, huh?” I said. There wasn’t much of anything left of the hotel now, and smoke was starting to billow out of the Waffle House roof. In another hour or so, both buildings would be reduced to little more than bare cement slabs. I took another drink of the beer and wondered what to do next.

“Do you know who they are?” I asked Jack. He seemed to be more knowledgeable of the whole situation than I was.

“I know they want you dead,” he said. “I suspect that they have no idea of what you are really capable of.”

“They’re not alone in that one. I don’t know what I’m capable of,” I responded. “Do you know how to find them?”

“It would seem that they know how to find you. Why not wait for them?” suggested Jack. That would not work; they were smart enough to send agents rather than appear in person.

“No, I have to track them. There has to be some way to find them,” I said, my frustrations showing through.

“You may find a way. Until then, let me put you up for a while,” Jack offered.

“And where does a drunk like you live?” I asked sarcastically.

“Come along and see,” he said stepping backwards through something that looked very similar to the portals created by the Book. This one was different, though; I could not see what was on the other side of it. At this point, the dangers involved in listening to Jack seemed less problematic than the possibility of staying here and doing nothing.

So I followed him and found myself standing in the middle of what looked like an operating theater. Everything looked rusted, as though it had been abandoned years ago and left to rot. There were three large overhead light fixtures hanging from a central mount on the ceiling. The arms holding up the lights sagged under the weight of the reflectors. Behind me I could hear the distinct sound of water slowly dripping into a puddle. Jack was nowhere to be seen. Just like a drunk to disappear immediately after offering to help.

Stepping around various puddles discolored by who knew what, I made my way into the hall. The rest of the building was in no better shape than the room I had just left. There were rusted overhead lights and dingy, institutional walls all around. This would not be the kind of place that I wanted to spend a great deal of time in, no matter how desperate I was.

“Okay, Jack. Where are you?” I called out, hoping for some response but getting none. It was beginning to look like Jack had dumped me in this place intentionally. What was his part in all this? He had given me the directions that led to the Book. He had appeared after the first time I was attacked. Now, he showed up, offered me a place to stay, then dumped me here – in some old, abandoned hospital. What were his motives?

I reached for the Book with the intention of using it to figure out where I was, and perhaps get back to reality. It was not there. I searched through my bag and every square inch of the room I had walked into. The Book was nowhere to be found. The portal had closed behind me, sealing off any chance I had of a return trip.

Without the Book I felt powerless. I had come to rely on its power so much that I was scared stiff about the prospect of attempting to survive without it.

“Jack!” I tried once more, knowing it was hopeless. He was probably laughing and drinking with the Book while I was panicking. Suddenly remembering the black fringe that appeared around my name on my driver’s license, I pulled the card out of my pocket. The same stabbing pain hit me when I looked at that violent fringe. The fact that I was not on the ground, with ruined eyes meant, I hoped, that I was still tied to the Book in some manner and that I had a form of weapon, however blunt.

I went room to room through the building, looking for Jack or the Book or anyone else. By then, I was pretty certain that I was in some sort of hospital, on one of the upper floors in a multistory building. There was little indication of exactly what floor I was on or where the building actually was. My first priority was to get outside and figure out where I had been dropped.

I worked my way around the floor until I found a stairwell. Inside, there were numbers painted on the wall indicating that I was on the fourth floor of the building. The stairs were relatively clear, with no major obstructions, and no light once the door to the fourth floor closed. A rolling bed seemed to work okay as a door prop, and I started working my way down.

By the time I reached the third floor, I was feeling my way along in darkness. Reading the numbers on the wall was next to impossible, so I had to keep track of what floor I was on by counting the doorways. I stopped where I thought the first floor was and gave the door a good shove. It took two more solid hits before the door opened.

Something had been pushed up against the door. There was just enough light that I could see a hallway filled with old beds and office furniture in piles along it. A heavy, military-style desk had been moved in front of the door, preventing it from opening all the way. It took several more shoves, and a fair bit of twisting, before I could get out of the stairwell and into the hall.

“Jack!” I called one last time. I’m going to kill him, I thought to myself. An image of black tendrils burning through his eyes, turning his face into a slab of raw meat, burst into my mind, and I cringed. No, I would limit myself to punching him in the face; using the card was too much. It was so quiet that I could hear the sounds of what I imagined were small rodents chewing in the distance and the occasional cat meowing. I was completely alone in the abandoned hospital.

I finally made my way to an exterior door and found it locked. Thankfully, a few good kicks were enough to cause rotten wood in the doorjamb to come apart, and then I was outside. With no more information now than when I was inside. The area was surrounded by empty fields on all sides, with nothing to break the monotony.

Three laps of the building left me none the wiser. There were no external markings – not even an old sign – to identify the hospital. What looked like the only road had been broken up and allowed to grow over a long time ago. With the sun going down, there wouldn’t be much light left to go exploring.

I found a nice, reasonably soft spot near the building where I could see the sunset. It had been a long, very eventful day, and I was tired. There really was no point to going back inside. While I was not afraid of ghosts or any such nonsense – maybe nonsense – I did not relish the idea of sleeping inside that building. Something was wrong about the place that I could not quite put my finger on.

The sun was hidden behind the horizon, leaving behind a spectacular gradient of pinks and reds fading to blue-black above me. It had been quite a while since I’d watched the sun go down. I was usually in a building with no windows, or occupied by something that kept my mind focused away from the beauty of a simple sunset. Okay, so maybe I would let Jack live after all. Being able to see this was almost worth the imposition of getting dumped into the middle of nowhere.

I continued to watch as the light faded away completely. Something was wrong with the scene. I was missing something that should have been immediately obvious to anyone with half a brain. Then it hit me. I could not see the horizon now that the sun had disappeared. There was no moonlight to illuminate my surroundings, which might have meant that it was the night of a new moon. But no, this was more than lack of moonlight.

I looked to the sky with a hint of fear. There had been no clouds out before the sun disappeared, and nothing to bring them in. Still, I saw nothing, no starlight, no moon, no clouds, nothing. It was as if I had been dropped into the heart of a deep, underground cave and someone turned off the lights. My hand was invisible in front of my eyes.

Feeling around carefully, I found my bag and the side of the building behind me. At least they were still there. Not that it really mattered if I could not see something touching my nose. This kind of night was impossible anywhere on Earth that I knew, not that my knowledge of geography was all that good.

Where had Jack dropped me? For a brief moment, I considered trying to work my way around the building, just to see if it was blocking my view. Then I remembered that there were a few unfenced drops near the building. Having to navigate by touch, it would be bloody dangerous to move around too much. I was reasonably certain that the Book could still prevent my death, but I was not ready to test that theory just yet.

There was no noise either. Complete silence, apart from my breathing and the little noises that I made while moving around. There should have been the sounds of insects or animals moving around in the distance. Here, there was nothing. I thought I had heard some kind of small animal moving around inside the building earlier, though I was not so certain now.

An idea struck me, and I pulled out my driver’s license one more time. I wondered if the complete lack of light would have any impact on the voracious darkness emanating from the card. As I pulled the wallet from my pocket, I discovered that I could see its shape against the darkness around me. It was as if something darker were radiating from around the wallet’s edge. There was the same sense of wrongness about that darker patch that I had felt when looking at my license.

Being absolutely careful to keep a solid grip on the card, I slipped it from its pocket. I could clearly see the surface of the card, and the patch that looked like a hole in reality. There was the same burning pain as that nothingness reached out and tried to consume me.

No color, just various shades of gray on gray. There still was no light, but the emptiness seemed to make everything around it look lighter. It was almost as if someone had suddenly shone some form of anti-light onto the card. Wherever the front of the card was pointed, the scene appeared in photo negative.

It was not much, but it did provide some form of illumination. So long as nobody other than me looked at the card, it would serve as a crude flashlight. I remembered the last time that anyone had looked at the license, and cringed at the thought of it happening again. This time, there would be no way for me to undo the damage. Was it worth the risk? Did I really have a choice?

I picked up my bag and started working my way around the building, with the card pointed at the ground, away from anyone’s eye level. The card revealed just enough of my surroundings for me to avoid falling into any holes, but not enough to prevent me from tripping over something. There were enough corners on the building that I didn’t realize I had made it around to the other side until I nearly tripped over a cellar door, which I remembered seeing before sundown.

No light, no stars, and no moon to be found anywhere. There was no way I could have missed any source of light, even with the card’s strange illumination. Something was very wrong with this place. It was almost as if the building and the fields around it existed in their own little pocket of incomplete reality.

With no other options readily apparent, I decided that the best thing to do would be to sleep. I found a reasonably soft spot near the cellar door to lay down, with my bag as a pillow. The silence made it difficult to fall asleep. Even in the quietest room in the quietest modern house, there is always some little background of noise. Maybe a refrigerator running in another room, or the sound of an air conditioner fan. Here, there was nothing: just the sound of my own breath and a heavy, dead silence.

The next morning, I awoke with the sun rising. There was a reddish-orange glow radiating from the horizon. It was quite the sight to see, though I wondered if anyone other than me could see it. I sat up and worked the stiffness out of my neck and back. I had never tried sleeping on bare ground before, and would not recommend it to anyone who has other options.

Food and water were going to be a concern very soon. I could get by for a while without food, if I had to. Water, on the other hand, would be a real problem for me rather quickly. I remembered hearing dripping inside the hospital, so I might be able to find water there as a last resort.

There was an idea nagging for attention at the back of my mind. I worked my way around to the front of the building again, and went back inside: just a short distance, though. It did not take long to find a long, sharp-edged piece of metal, and some cloth to wrap around one end as a handle. I dug around looking for something I could use to start a fire, and didn’t find much. There was some loose paper around that I could use as kindling, but nothing I could use to throw a decent spark.

By the time that I made it back outside, the sun was already high in the sky. Thankfully, the temperature had remained reasonably mild, so I started walking, with my back to the sun and the hospital building. It would not be difficult to find my way back, considering how empty the surrounding land was. Of course if, by some miracle, I could walk until the building was out of sight, there was little hope of my finding it again.

I walked for several hours with little change in the scenery around me. There was nothing more to see here than there had been back at the hospital building. Empty fields with foot-high grass in all directions. Not a single tree or hill anywhere to be seen.

The sun had crested noon and was starting its return to the horizon before I realized I had lost sight of the hospital. This did not worry me until several hours later, when I had not been able to spot the building again. In a flat field as open as this one was, I should have been able to see the building long before I reached it. I was lost, with nothing to provide directions.

That night was the same as the night before, with no stars and no moon to provide any light. Trying to find the hospital building in that utter blackness, using the strange non-illumination given by my license, would have been completely foolhardy, to say the least. I lay down, using my bag as a pillow again, and tried my best to sleep.

By the next morning, I had all but decided what I was going to do. There was only one way out of this mess that did not involve me spending the next few days either starving or dehydrating. I did not see any options other than the one that scared the crap out of me.

“I’ll spare you the details of what I did. It is sufficient to say that it was quite a painful experience,” said the old man, looking slightly pained at the memory. He was silent for a moment, remembering that day and that place and what happened there. The interviewer said nothing, waiting for the old man to continue. This was one time when it did not seem like a good idea to push for more details.

One of the nurses had come by earlier and taken the breakfast dishes away. Lunch had come and gone with as little interruption to the story as possible. Now, it was dinner time, and Melanie was back with a stern look on her face.

“And will your guest be having dinner with us tonight?” she asked with skin-deep politeness. There was an obvious tension about her demeanor that did not suit her well.

“That’s a question for him more than for me,” said the old man. “I feel like I could go on for a good while longer if you’re willing to listen.”

After a moment’s thought, the interviewer replied, “As you well know, I have nothing more important to do right now than get your story down. So, what’s on the menu?”

After a short discussion with Melanie, the two sorted out what they would be eating, and arranged for some heated water to be brought by afterward. She stepped just outside the door and placed a small earphone in her ear. After checking to make sure that there was no one around, she raised a bracelet on her left wrist to her mouth and spoke.

“Jolly Roger, this is Peppermint,” she stated. She hated using the code names, even though he insisted on them.

“Jolly Roger here,” came the response.

“I am certain that John Doe has seen the inside of the Cage. He has described it in detail during the interview,” she stated.

“You must be mistaken, Peppermint. There is no way to see the inside of the Cage and escape,” said the voice in her ear sternly.

“He has seen it or had it described to him,” she said, refusing to back down from her assertion. There was a long pause before the other continued.

“You have proof?”

“I will send the recording with my regular report,” she stated, dropping her wrist. The Cage was supposed to be completely inescapable, and the old man had somehow found a way to get out. There was no other explanation for the place he had described earlier. For now, she would have to continue monitoring and see what other revelations came of this interview.

The old man sat watching the door with an intense expression after Melanie left the room. It was as if he knew that she was trying something without really knowing what. After a short while, he seemed to come to a conclusion and turned back to the interviewer.

“So, do you have any idea how I left that place?” he asked quietly.

“From what little you have told me, and your choice of words, there was only one option left to you,” said the interviewer. There was a look of grave concern on his face as he said that.

“Unless someone came to pick me up, the only way out of that place was to never have been there in the first place,” said the old man. “And the only way for me to have never been there was to backtrack along my own history. I’m sure, from the other three times I described that process, you know how I accomplished it.”

“Using the sharp-edged piece of metal,” he replied. For a bit, they sat there in silence, neither saying anything. There was a difference in the old man’s expression that seemed to indicate this was a much more traumatic experience than the others. He opened his shirt and pointed to a round scar about an inch across.

“It would seem that the wounds I inflict on myself stay with me. If I had known that, and a few other things, I would have waited a while longer,” said the old man. “But, what’s done is done.

“I couldn’t feel the Book this time when I was pulled out of my body,” he continued. “That scared me more than anything else at the time. I was able to find my way back to a safe point in time, though, and to find the Book again once I was through.”

The old man paused with his head cocked to the side for a moment. “I’ve been telling you my life’s story here, and I don’t know anything about you. You haven’t even told me your name!”

“I would have thought that you would already know my name,” stated the interviewer, treating this as another test of his subject. The old man should have been able to determine everything there was to know about him using the Book.

“Oh, I do! It’s just that I still like to hear it from a person’s mouth. You see, while I can read anything of consequence about a person in the Book, you can’t really understand a person by reading about them,” said the old man. “Even if I could absorb your entire history, down to the least little happenstance, I cannot see your soul.”

“If you know my name, then what is it?” asked the interviewer, still not believing what the old man was telling him.

“You are a stubborn one aren’t you? That’s good though. Being stubborn is sometimes all that will save you,” said the old man, with a bit of a laugh to his voice. “If you insist, let me have a scrap of that paper and a pen.”

The interviewer tore a page off of his pad and handed it over with a pen. He wrote something on the paper and paused for a moment. “They never did find your parents, did they?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your parents left you with a foster organization and disappeared. Did they ever find your parents?”

“No, they didn’t. I did my own searching, and could find nothing either. That’s part of how I got started in journalism,” he stated without thinking. Then it hit him that he had never told the old man anything about his family life. The old man winked at him, and folded the sheet of paper before handing it back.

“Don’t look at that before you hear the rest of my story. If you do, I’ll know and this will be over,” he said.

About then, Melanie came back with their food trays. She did not say anything, but looked rather annoyed about something. The old man noticed her expression, but only smiled. The pair ate in silence for a while, being too busy eating to say anything. Melanie came back with water for their coffee, and the old man set about starting a pot.

“Melanie, dear, why don’t you stay for a cup this evening?” asked the old man. “You’ve been so accommodating these last few days that I’d like to repay you.”

“Thank you, but I really shouldn’t. Coffee this late in the evening would keep me up all night,” she said with her usual smile.

“Well then, not everyone can keep a blood-caffeine ratio like I do! How about some tea, then? I have several herbal teas that don’t have any caffeine at all,” he stated earnestly.

“Thank you, but I really must be along to the other residents now,” she stated.

“If you really must.”

“Yes, I must. If you will excuse me, I’ll be around in a little while to pick up your trays,” she stated, mildly perturbed, and left the room. The old man watched her leave, and stared at the door for a good deal longer than necessary.

“Is everything alright?” asked the interviewer with concern.

“Oh yes, yes! It’s nothing that you need worry yourself with,” said the old man, and finished preparing the coffee. He used some more of the Oliang powder, and set up the press to brew.

“Have you noticed that something seems to be bothering Melanie lately? You’ve only been coming here a few days now, so you may not have,” said the old man.

“I can’t say that I have.”

“Well, then! Where were we? I think I was about to tell you about not being there!” stated the old man, brushing off his earlier musings. “But first, I think I should diverge a little and tell another story.”

## The Nurse’s Game

Melanie left the nursing home on her way home for the evening. She had her earpiece in place, and was listening to the conversation in the old man’s room while she drove. There was a recording device and receiver that looked like standard, commercial pager attached to a clip at her waist.

She could hear the interviewer and the old man talking, even though she was already several miles away. Jolly Roger had given her the device to plant in the room, and the recording rig, without really going into its theory or limitations. Of course, she was just a simple field agent and had no real use for theory so long as a given tool worked.

“Do you know much about fish?” she heard the old man ask.

“Not really. I was always more tied to a computer than to the outdoors.”

“There’s a particular fish I’ve always found interesting: the anglerfish. Do you know anything about them?”

“No, I can’t say that I do,” said the interviewer, obvious confusion in his voice.

“It has a tassel of sorts on its head that flashes in the dark. It lives deep enough down that there is no light other than that produced by bioluminescent creatures such as itself. Of course, most of these creatures are a good deal smaller, and have significantly smaller mouths,” said the old man, as if he were giving a lecture.

“The anglerfish uses this tassel to hunt. Prey see the flash and think it’s something small and tasty, only to find an abyss of teeth and a hungry mouth waiting to engulf them,” he stated calmly. Melanie could not help but think he was talking to her. There was no reason for him to go off on this particular tangent as he had.

“I see,” replied the interviewer, now thoroughly confused. This did not really seem to fit in with anything that they had been discussing before.

“It’s a lesson worth remembering. Not everything that looks nice and tasty is what it looks like,” said the old man.

Melanie pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex and parked the car. She removed the earpiece from her ear and put it into her purse with the recording device. The little recorder would keep recording even if she was not listening to it. Tonight would be an interesting report, as she did her best to convey the importance of what her most recent recordings contained.

The door to her apartment was unlocked, and the lights were on inside. Melanie pulled out a small-caliber revolver that she kept in her purse, and edged her way carefully into the tiny room. It was a small apartment, with little more than a single living area and a separate bedroom. No place to hide and no cover for her in the event things turned nasty.

There was a single couch against one wall to the left of the entrance, and a small kitchen area on the far wall. No one was in the room, and nothing looked out of the ordinary. The bedroom was on the other side of the wall to her right, with a door just before the kitchen area. A small bathroom was directly across the apartment from the front door. It was open and empty; the shower, just visible past the door, was also empty. That left only the bedroom as possibly harboring an unexpected guest.

She edged along the wall as carefully and quietly as she could, doing her best to not let her potential guest know where she was. The door to her bedroom opened inward toward the right. That meant whoever was on the other side of the door would have a good idea that someone was coming before she could get a clean shot. She would just have to chance it.

With her back to the wall on the left-hand side of the door, she turned the handle and gave it a shove. The door swung open faster than she had expected. The window must be open, she thought, as her body slammed into the opposite wall. Leaving no time for an assailant to react, Melanie spun around the corner with her gun sweeping the room, keeping her back to the wall. There was no cover in this room either, except potentially under the single bed in the corner. In the end, none of Melanie’s precautions mattered.

Immediately after coming around the corner, her senses were assaulted by the strongest alcohol scent she had ever experienced in her life. It was potent enough that she felt woozy and nearly fell when she rounded the corner. The gun dropped limply from her hands.

“Now, now, Peppermint. That’s no way to greet a superior, is it?”

The amount of alcohol in the air was burning her eyes so badly that she could not see the person behind the voice.

“Code name?” she gasped out as the alcohol burned her throat and lungs.

“I am Jolly Roger,” stated the voice in a deep, male bass. “I decided it would be better to take your report in person.”

“It’s all in the recordings,” she said, her breathing easing a little. She was starting to feel a little tipsy, as though she had consumed several strong drinks. She looked up and had her first real look at Jolly Roger.

Up until now, the name had been little more than a voice on the other end of a phone call. None of the other agents met in person, except under the most extreme circumstances, and then only long enough for one agent to disappear. It was entirely unheard of for Jolly Roger to meet with an agent in person. Of course, that could be because any agent who met him had disappeared.

“Quickly, dear. I don’t have all night,” said the giant man in front of her. His breath was laden with enough alcohol that every word sent searing waves into her eyes. Melanie pulled the device from her purse and handed it to him, keeping her face down to avoid gagging on his breath. This was definitely not what she had expected meeting Jolly Roger to be like.

He sat back down on her bed and listened to the recordings while she composed herself quietly in the corner. Her head was swimming and she knew that she was drunk, impossibly drunk just from being in the same room with this man. She watched as he took a deep draw from a bottle that had no label. He watched as she picked up the gun and her purse before settling into her desk chair. There was a small computer desk across from the bed where she wrote up her reports.

He listened to the recordings, bouncing between the various timestamps she had bookmarked, frowning. The more he heard, the more he frowned. The more he frowned, the more he drank. He sat there for the majority of an hour going over the recordings before saying another word.

“How do you know about the Cage?” he asked her, his face tinged with anger.

“It was mentioned when I was recruited. I remember reading about it in orientation materials,” she stated honestly. This seemed to make him even angrier.

“Where did you get those materials?”

“They were forwarded to me by the recruiting agent. I think her code name was Incognito,” she said. Fear gripped her now. It was obvious from his behavior that she knew something she was not supposed to. There was no way she could get away if she were to try running. The organization he led would be able to track her down and eliminate her with little trouble no matter where she went.

“What if I told you there is no agent with that code name?” he stated coldly. She could barely make out his eyes under the hat he wore. What she could see of his face held no comfort for her.

“Incognito was the agent who recruited me,” she said, terrified of what he would do. Jolly Roger held her gaze with hard eyes, trying to see if she would break. Finally, he nodded assent.

“It fits then,” he stated calmly, some of the anger having left his voice. “He was there and now he’s here. That is an impossibility we shall have to investigate.”

Jolly Roger stood and turned to leave, tossing Melanie the recorder. “You will continue your surveillance as usual. If you come across any more interesting tidbits, report them as normal. I was never here.”

Melanie let out a long sigh of relief as her fear drained away. She had been certain that he was going to execute her as a spy or traitor to the cause. Not that she really knew anything about the upper echelons at all.

A shower, some cold pizza, and a few hours later she was able to finally relax. There was no point in completing a new report, as Jolly Roger had already heard the recordings she was going to forward. Melanie concluded that sleep would probably be the best thing, considering everything else that had happened.

The next morning she found the old man and the interviewer already at it when she brought them breakfast. His ever-present French press was already brewing fresh coffee. From the little bit she had skimmed on her recorder, not much more had been told of the old man’s story. Just a few anecdotes here and there; and a few clarifications.

“You’re here early this morning!” she said to the interviewer. It never occurred to her that she did not know what his name was – it must be on the check-in sheet somewhere. She would have to remember to check at the nurse’s station.

“My deadline is coming up quickly here, and I still have to write an article from these notes. If I don’t finish this soon, I’ll be out of time,” came his response. The old man was watching her very carefully as she set down the breakfast trays. He had been watching her too closely for several days now, and it was beginning to bother her.

“Would you like to take a break and have some coffee, Melanie?” asked the old man. His expression was meant to be inviting, but only served to disturb her more. Jolly Roger’s appearance in her apartment had rattled her more than she cared to admit. Under the circumstances, the more the old man tried to ingratiate himself to her, the more she worried that he knew something.

“Now you know I can’t do that. I don’t go on break for another three hours!” she said, letting a little exasperation into her voice. The concerned expression on the old man’s face deepened as she spoke.

“There’s more to life than work, Melanie. Especially the kind of work you do,” said the old man. “It is also said, ‘keep your friends close and your enemies closer.’ Not that we are enemies of course.”

His smile was anything but reassuring as he said those last few words. This man knew a great deal more about her than he had any right to, of that she was certain. She had not believed a word of his story, and still had a hard time coming to terms with some of the things he said. How could any of it be true?

There was a strange tension in the air, as though the two of them were facing off: sizing each other up before a battle. Melanie knew that she would be found wanting. There was no way she could hope to challenge this man, even if he were a mere mortal and not the monster he purported to be.

“If this is not a good time, I can come a little later?” suggested the interviewer. It was enough to break the spell that had come over her.

“What about your deadline? I really should be getting around to my next resident, Mrs. Worthbee,” stated Melanie. The old man’s expression changed to one of sadness as she left the room in a hurry. She replaced her earpiece so she could continue to listen while taking care of her rounds.

“I’m afraid you’re more correct than you think about our time. It looks like we may be running out of time faster than I had anticipated,” she heard the old man state.

“Perhaps you could continue where we left off.”

“In the field?”

“Yes, I believe you were just about to describe what you saw around you,” replied the interviewer, as though reading from his notes.

There was a brief moment when she thought about him describing the anglerfish the previous evening. *Who was fishing and who was the fish*, she asked herself.

I felt that familiar tug take hold of my mind and separate me from my body, though it was significantly more painful this time around. There was a tearing sensation that reached into the very core of my being. It was as though something had taken hold of me and torn my body to shreds with cruel claws. Of course, the description is purely for visualization purposes, as I did not have a body at that moment. At least not one I was attached to.

The first thing that I noticed was that the Book was still missing. I could not feel its presence as I had the other times. Where I expected to find the Book’s papery voice, I found a painful emptiness. That might be explained by its absence, though I did not think so. Thankfully, I was still able to track my own timeline even without its presence.

I started moving back along that history, keeping careful watch not to lose it. That was when I noticed the greenish threads that were attached to everything around me, and to the body I was leaving behind. They were everywhere, like a puppeteer’s strings on a stage with thousands of puppets, and they all seemed to be leading back to a central location.

As I moved backward along my history, I marveled at the sheer density of the strands. Nothing I looked at had escaped being attached to at least one – and usually dozens – of the green threads. The ends of those strands seemed to be made up of tiny mouths, with tiny greenish teeth that sank into whatever they were attached to. I could not tell if the mouths were trying to eat their victims or simply hold on to them. Either way, the mental image was not a pleasant one.

It was slow going to work backwards through time until I found the portal I had entered through. There, I could see thousands of the greenish threads tearing into the Book still in my bag. What I saw terrified me, considering the state I was in.

Dark, black threads radiating out from my bag were met by the bright-green threads, as though in a struggle to the death. I let the moment replay in my mind over and over again to get a clear picture of what was going on. It looked for all the world like two masses of colored hair were attacking each other, and that the mass coming from my bag was losing. I could see a large number of the dark, black threads burrowed into my body being attacked and torn out by the green ones.

What was going on? After fixing that point in my mind, I decided to see if I could figure out where the green threads were coming from. They reminded me too much of the manipulations that I had seen in the coffee-shop assassin’s history. There were so many threads that it was difficult to see through them all to their source. When I did find it, I almost did not believe what I was seeing.

Somewhere along the way, the green threads traveled sideways at a strange angle. It was as if they took a right turn to reality and kept going, with no regard to the normal three dimensions. At their source, I found a vast, empty plane, much like the one where I found the Book. Here, though, I found an enormous wine barrel. It had to have a diameter of at least fifteen feet, and a good thirty feet in length. All of the threads came from the spigot of that giant barrel in a blindingly bright torrent of green light.

“Who are you?” came a heavy, liquid voice that seemed to emanate from everywhere. “Why have you violated the Aging Room?”

“I have no name and have no knowledge of this place. Why have you attacked me?” I responded.

“Attacked you? HA!” said the voice with a laugh. “I am feeding the Wine. Do you wish to try a taste?”

“No. How do you feed wine?”

“This wine hungers for life and power. It must be fed to grow and age. When the time is right, it will be poured into the world,” said the voice in a reverent tone. Whoever that voice belonged to, they worshiped the Wine.

“What do you know of the Book?” I asked. There was a great deal of similarity between this place and where I had found the Book. So much similarity that I could not believe the two were unrelated.

“The Book is control. It seeks to know everything, to control everything,” stated the voice with distaste.

“If the Book is control, then what is the Wine?”

“The Wine is destruction. It seeks to destroy all that is.”

The green threads were starting to make sense now. They were trying to consume everything they were attached to. I had to get out of there fast, before this thing figured out who I was and my relationship to the Book. There was one thing I needed to know before I left though.

“The Book is held by the Nameless. Who holds the Wine?”

“No one holds the Wine. The Wine consumes everyone as everyone consumes the Wine.”

While I was attempting to puzzle this answer out, there was a shift in the green threads. If not for the fact that nothing else was moving at all, I would have missed it entirely. I could feel something straining around me, trying very hard to envelope my essence.

“You have no name, are you the Nameless?” the voice asked with a rumble like boiling water. Instead of answering, I ran back along the threads to where I had entered this world. It was fairly obvious that I was not within the bounds of normal reality anymore. I could feel something tearing behind me, as though someone were pulling a knife through a sheet as I ran. I found my timeline and followed it back through the portal, hoping that whatever was behind me could not cross back into my world.

Thankfully, I was correct. I could feel the Book again in its normal place within my mind. Behind me I could hear enraged screams through the portal. Time was still frozen around me but, on the other side of the portal I watched as the world I was about to enter tore itself apart. Jack stood, frozen in time, completely oblivious to what was going on. I had gone back far enough that he had not stepped through the portal yet.

Just to be completely sure, I replayed his summoning of the portal and stepping into it several times. There was only one portal, and it was definitely the portal that he had summoned. He had meant to trap me in whatever and wherever that place was. I had found my enemy; now what was I going to do with him?

“This is not the time to fight,” I heard a familiar, papery voice say. I cannot tell you how good it was to hear that voice again. Even though its power still scared me, knowing that the Book was there again was somehow comforting.

“What is the Wine?” I asked it, hoping for a more understandable answer.

“The Wine is destruction,” stated the Book simply.

“I know that already. Where does the Wine come from?” I asked.

“The Wine comes from nowhere. It is as the Book,” responded the Book, as cryptically as ever.

“All right then, who created the Wine?” I was frustrated and asked out of desperation.

“The Wine was not created. The Wine comes from outside,” stated the Book calmly.

“Who created the Book?”

“The Book was not created. The Book comes from outside.”

“Have the Book and the Wine always existed?”

“No.”

“How is it possible for them to have not existed and not have been created?” I asked trying my best to puzzle out the Book’s logic.

“The Book and the Wine are a consequence of this reality,” it stated simply. There was no way I was going to get anywhere with this, at least not right now. I picked a point just after Jack had disappeared to drop back into time, hoping that I could escape before he figured out what was going on.

“I did escape then, and stayed hidden for several years while I prepared for my next encounter with Jack,” continued the old man. Melanie had become so engrossed by his story that she had almost forgotten to go back around and pick up trays. One of the other nurses nudged her arm and she jumped. A mildly annoyed finger pointed at a clock served to remind her that time was wasting.

She scrambled down the hallway with a cart, going room by room, picking up trays. The home was termed as an assisted-living facility, which really did not mean much. Residents were expected to be slightly more self-sufficient than you would find in the average, skilled nursing home, while not being able to completely take care of themselves.

Gathering the dirty dishes was usually a slow task, even when she did her best to move quickly. Now she was in a hurry to get through with the day-to-day chores and back to listening in on the old man. Melanie did her best to work while listening and attempting to be polite to residents. Going over hours of recorded material after a day of working was not sustainable in the long term, so she tried to listen while recording as much as possible.

Between spying and keeping track of which rooms she had cleaned and which she had not, Melanie did not notice the silent shape following her through the halls. The shape’s shadow took the rough appearance of a woman more than anything else. It followed her as closely as possible without revealing itself, blending into the surrounding background as though it had always been there.

Once she had finished with all of the residents, she headed back to deal with the old man. He would want hot water for coffee, so she made a stop off for a Thermos. Their conversation had drifted into incidental side topics while she had been distracted. Nothing of major importance.

Melanie felt something brush against her from behind and spun around to see what or who was there. Nothing. For a moment, she wondered if her mind was playing tricks on her and kept walking. Behind her, the shadow backed off a short distance to avoid being noticed again.

The conversation caught her attention as the old man said, “Now, Melanie here is one of the nicer nurses I’ve dealt with. She doesn’t go sticking her nose into places it doesn’t belong.”

“What do you mean?”

“For one, she never questions where I get my coffee,” stated the old man. “It really should be one of the things foremost on their minds, to tell you the truth. I don’t receive any mail. Other than you, I have no visitors. To top it all off, I never go along on their organized shopping trips. Not that there would be anywhere around here selling Oliang powder even if I did.”

“All right then, how do you get your coffee?” asked the interviewer. Melanie was standing outside the door to the old man’s room, and decided to take that moment to turn the handle. Both men looked at her with guilty expressions.

“Ah! To speak of the devil!” exclaimed the old man, a little more jovially than he had meant to. There was a look of concern on his face again as he looked at her, and she wondered if a little of the embarrassment and annoyance she felt were showing through. He was right, and she knew it. The way he always seemed to have little delicacies had completely escaped her.

“Would you mind confirming something for me, Melanie?” asked the interviewer. “When was the last time that our friend here left this building?”

“Without checking the logs, I would have to say that he hasn’t been out of his room more than twice in the entire time I’ve been here. As far as I know, he hasn’t left the building at all,” she stated with forced calm. She was angry with herself for not noticing this little tidbit before now. Most of the other residents had a visitor every few months or so, and spent a good deal of time in the common areas. Except for a few who were so physically limited as to make it impractical, they all went out on shopping trips at least every two weeks.

“And how long have you been working here?”

“Just over two years now,” she stated, again with forced calm. The old man was smiling at her triumphantly as she said it. To him, it was a small victory that she had not noticed, and she knew it.

“If you will excuse me. I have other duties to attend to,” Melanie left the room and did her best not to slam the door. He knew! He had to know that she was watching him. The comment and the subtle, little jab at her were proof enough of that. Maybe there was some way she could salvage the situation.

Thinking quickly, she snuck into the records room behind the nurse’s station and pulled the old log books. She opened the book to its first page and froze. What was his name? What was the old man’s name? It had never occurred to her before that no one in the facility used a name when talking about him. In any conversation, his identity was always understood, never explicit. More than that, there was never any question about who was being talked about when a conversation brought up the old man.

For the second time in as many days, real fear gripped her. What was she spying on? What kind of power could control that many minds, to such a degree that they were completely unaware they were being controlled?

The light outside was dimming, and the sun was low on the horizon. How could it be evening already when she had just finished picking up the breakfast dishes a short while ago? She made a frantic dash to the lobby entrance and looked out the glass door. She had lost most of the afternoon.

There was a slight touch on her shoulder again, and Melanie spun around, her left arm sweeping through the space behind her. Her hand came into contact with something about the diameter of an arm, grabbed it, and pulled toward her in a motion designed to throw a potential assailant. Reacting before the person’s identity registered in her mind, she threw the old man’s guest to the ground.

“I’m sorry!” she yelped, realizing how badly she had overreacted. Melanie’s heart was pounding as she helped him get back to his feet.

“No harm done. That’s one heck of a throw you have there!” said the interviewer as he brushed himself off.

“I’m really sorry! You startled me, and I couldn’t help myself.”

“It’s okay, really. You didn’t hurt anything but my pride. By the way, our mutual friend would like you to bring by some more water.”

Melanie thought for a moment and asked, “Do you know what his name is?”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think that I do. He doesn’t seem to be big on introductions. If you’ll excuse me, I should be going now. I have a few notes to transcribe,” he stated, and hurried out the door.

For a brief moment, she considered running. It would be so easy to forget that anything had happened, drop the recorder and do her best to fade into the background. Only, she knew it would not work. Jolly Roger had an uncanny knack for discovering where his subordinates had disappeared to, and either bringing them back into the fold or making them disappear permanently.

There was only one thing that she could do. The only way out was to face down the old man, the monster that had been hiding under her nose for two years. He knew what she was doing, that she had been listening in on their conversations. She had been so careful to protect her identity and actions. Where had she gone wrong?

With the thermos of steaming water in hand she went to meet him. There was nothing of the nurse or the spy about her anymore. The door in front of her had behind it someone, or something, that scared her to the very core. His stories came back to her as she worked up the courage to knock. Stories that she had never believed, even with everything she had been shown by Jolly Roger. She knocked.

“Come in, Melanie. I’ve been expecting you.” His voice came quietly through the door. “We have a lot to talk about.”

She opened the door, quietly set down the thermos, and sat where the interviewer had spent so much time. “You know that I’ve been watching you.”

“Yes”

“You know that I’ve been listening in on your conversations with your guest.”

“Yes, I do,” he replied with a stern expression.

“What are you going to do about me?” she asked calmly. She had never been more scared in her life. Even when Jolly Roger had appeared in her apartment, the worst that could have happened was death. Something told her that this man could, and would, bring about fates much worse than that.

“Your fate does not overly concern me.”

That stung as if he had slapped her in the face. For the past two years, she had dutifully recorded his every action and forwarded it on to Jolly. He had caused her to lose the majority of a day after shattering her confidence. He was not overly concerned with her fate?

“Your part in this little show is over now, Melanie. You’ve done well. Where most of your predecessors have been completely inadequate, you held up long enough for me to complete my web,” stated the old man quietly.

“You’re not going to kill me?” she asked, feeling even more uneasy than before.

“No, goodness no. What would be the point of that?” he answered, with a laugh that was meant to be disarming. In her present state of mind, it sent a shiver down her spine. What was he planning to do to her?

“Have you met my wife? She’s been here this whole time, keeping an eye on you. You might know her better by the name Incognito.”

The shadow that had been following her all day stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. It thickened, becoming the solid outline of a feminine form. Her fiery-red hair shone through before the rest of her features. Melanie looked over her shoulder at the woman and realized that she had to be Tabitha, the girl that had inadvertently fallen into his booby trap.

They had tricked her from the beginning. Incognito was the code name for the person who had introduced her to Jolly Roger. It had all been a trick, from the very beginning.

“Why am I here? Why did you destroy my life?” she asked, anger now coloring her voice. If not for this couple, she could have had a very promising nursing career ahead of her.

“Do you remember my comment about the anglerfish?” he asked. “You were the light in my lure.”

“I’m bait?”

“No, not quite bait. I’m the bait. You’re here to make me look tasty,” said the old man, his face softening as though years were falling away from him. “I’ve been preparing and hunting for a confrontation with the person you know as Jolly Roger for some time now. I just needed a way to meet him under controlled circumstances.”

“You see, every time we’ve come into contact with Jack – excuse me, Jolly Roger – he has had the upper hand. We couldn’t find him, so the next logical choice was to bring him to us,” said Tabitha calmly. There was an air of confidence about her that was not present in the old man’s stories. Her eyes were clear, and her body fuller than he had described her.

“You haven’t answered me. What are you going to do with me?” she asked again. If nothing else, they would at least tell her that.

“So impatient! If you really must know, we are going to give you a way out. A way to have a normal life again, and make all of this a dream.”

## Consequences

The old man was no longer an old man. If she had to guess, he would be somewhere in his mid- to late thirties, and in reasonably decent shape as well. She found it hard to look directly at him, as though her eyes could not focus clearly on his face. There was more to it than that; Melanie was having trouble thinking about the old man. The thoughts kept slipping from her mind unless she fought hard to focus on him.

Tabitha gave her a pair of glasses. “Put these on. It will help.”

Her mind and vision cleared the instant Melanie put on the lenses. It was still difficult to see any particularly defining aspect of the man’s face, but she was no longer losing him in her mind. As a test, she stared directly at him for a full minute before saying anything else.

“What was that?” she asked, shakily.

“I let down the illusion that has been protecting you. In another moment, you would have stood up and walked out of here, having forgotten why you were here, who I am. The fact that I or Tabitha or the old man you’ve been dutifully spying on existed would have completely left you,” he stated calmly. “I have no idea what memory would have replaced them. There isn’t really any way to tell until it happens.”

“Why didn’t you let me forget? You’ve already claimed not to care!” She was nearly in tears. So close, so close to figuring it all out and now, after failing completely, she was being toyed with. This man was more than a monster in her mind. No one should have the kind of power that he did.

“If I had done that, you would be dead right now. Run your finger along the top edge of those glasses and tell me what you see,” he asked. She followed his instructions and gasped. Thousands upon thousands of thin, black streamers radiated outward from behind him. They reached in all directions, even toward Tabitha and herself. Where they came into contact with an object, it was as though they melded with that object, becoming a part of it, like vestigial flaps of skin or a puppet’s strings.

Melanie looked at Tabitha and saw an enormous tree standing behind her. There was no way the plant could fit into the room they stood in, and yet it was there. A thin, pinkish mist seemed to emanate from the tree, flowing over everything in the room. The mist poured out life and hope into whatever it touched. It felt refreshing, like the air after a summer shower.

When she looked at herself, Melanie screamed in shock. Ravenous green tendrils were wrapped around her limbs. Each tendril had a tiny mouth filled with long, cruel-looking teeth that sank into her flesh. She could not feel them, could not tell they were there other than by what she saw through the glasses. Melanie shook and brushed at her right arm in an attempt to dislodge them, though the tendrils did not react at all.

“Get them off me! Monster! Get these things off me!” she screamed in panic. Tabitha grabbed her by the shoulders in an unbreakable grip. She forced Melanie to look at her and away from the strange creatures feasting on her essence.

“Calm,” said Tabitha in her most soothing voice. It was little more than a single word, but it was enough. A soothing peace flowed over Melanie, like nothing she had ever felt. Before letting go, Tabitha readjusted the glasses, making the strange tendrils that Melanie saw disappear.

“That was no illusion you saw,” the old man said. “Jack has sunk his teeth into you deeply, and it will be no cakewalk to separate you from his influence.” Melanie could tell that his expression was grave even without being able to see his face completely clearly.

“The cost is going to be high, but don’t worry, you’ll come out of it mentally intact, and perhaps better off than you might have otherwise been,” said Tabitha, in what she hoped was a reassuring voice. She was quite good at exuding peace, but not nearly as good at maintaining it.

“But first, I need you to do something for me. Your performance will weigh heavily in my treatment of you after this is all over,” he stated calmly. “A warning; whatever else you do, do not remove those glasses until everything is done. They will not come off until you choose to take them off, don’t worry about that. No one but we three know they are there.”

“What do you want me to do before you feed me to the worms?” Melanie asked in a bitter tone. Better to get the whole mess over with as quickly as possible and let the monster show his true colors. At least, that was what she was thinking while he spoke. It never entered her mind that he might not like dealing in death and destruction.

“I’ll forgive that once,” he said coldly.

Tabitha interrupted him before he could say any more. “Now, dear, she’s already too scared to really believe you. Be nice to her.”

He looked at Tabitha with a questioning face for a moment, and then nodded his assent. “You’re right. Of course, you’re always right.”

Tabitha smiled a sweet smile and gave him a hug and a kiss. Melanie felt sick; it was too much for her to believe, too much for her to comprehend. The foundation of her life for two years was gone in a puff of smoke, leaving nothing but uncertainty. Her head was starting to hurt, and she felt nauseated just sitting there.

“Tabitha, I think Melanie could use a little assistance. I’m afraid we won’t be having that dinner I promised you tonight,” he said with regret.

“That’s all right, dear. Do you think her apartment would be best?”

“Yes, it would. Let her rest, and tell her the plan when she wakes up. And I should probably start getting things ready for our other guest. Jack will be making his appearance in the morning.”

Melanie woke with a start, sitting straight up in her bed, and thought it had all been a dream. Reflexively, she reached up to scratch an itch on the side of her nose and bumped into the glasses. Her relief evaporated into an immediate sense of dread. It was true then; all of it was true.

“I see you’ve rejoined the land of the living. I was afraid I had overdone it and you would sleep through the whole thing,” said Tabitha from the desk chair beside Melanie’s bed. She had stood watch while Melanie recovered from her shock. Melanie noticed that she was wearing a fresh set of clothing, and her face felt like it had been washed. There was a tied-off trash bag sitting in the corner of the room.

“Did I throw up?” Of all the questions that could come to mind, that was the last one she really wanted to ask. The moment the words left her mouth, her face turned bright red and she nearly bit her tongue.

Tabitha nodded once, pointing to the bag. “Your clothes are in there. If I were you, I would write them off as a lost cause. But, I’m not you so I saved them and cleaned you up.”

“Thank you,” she said, and truly meant it. It was easier for her to believe that Tabitha was not the monster she had expected. Interacting with her now, she seemed as human as any other woman Melanie had known. Still, Melanie reached to the glasses, meaning to see what she had seen before. Tabitha restrained her hand with a light touch.

“Not yet. You had a very nasty shock and have not fully recovered. I didn’t want to remind you, but do you remember what you saw when you looked at yourself?” Tabitha asked in earnest. She remembered all right. Images of a writhing, green mass surrounding her body flashed into her mind. She felt her stomach tightening up again, and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“Calm, peace,” said Tabitha placing her hand to one side of Melanie’s face. There was a sensation like a cool breeze rolling through her mind, settling the turmoil as it went. It pushed away the fear and revulsion at the memory while passing. After a short moment, Melanie felt more relaxed than she had in year.

“Thank you again. It seems I’m in your debt more than I’d care to admit.”

“It’s nothing. Now that I have assumed a title, like he and Jack did, this has become a part of who and what I am,” stated Melanie. “I’m still learning, though. He has several years on me now.”

A reminder that Tabitha was not just any other woman. Remembering the admonishment not to remove her glasses, she leaned forward slightly and looked over them. Without looking directly through the lenses, Tabitha’s form became hazy and thin, almost as if she were made of thick smoke rather than solid matter.

“We’re removed from the world. Jack is the only one of us who has a normal, physical presence, and he is the one hurt by it most. My husband and I are here but separate,” said Tabitha, trying her best to explain something that she barely understood herself.

“Why me? Why did you pick me?” Melanie asked, desperation showing through her induced calm.

“You would have to ask Jack. I wouldn’t, though. He isn’t known for answering questions,” said Tabitha. “Yes, I was the ‘agent’ that recruited you, but Jack already had his sights on you. I just made sure my husband could shield you before the Wine could consume you.”

“The Wine?”

“Yes, I have the Tree, Jack has the Wine, and my husband has the Book. We each have a title given by those objects, and with those titles we gain certain properties. You’ve seen at least part of what the Tree grants me. The rest of it I’m too scared to try,” said Tabitha. “Sometimes, I wonder if I have the Tree or if it has me.”

“What is Jolly’s – excuse me – Jack’s power?” asked Melanie.

“It’s not really a power so much as a property or aspect. I can bring peace and calm to a situation. Wherever I am physically, plants and animals seem to breathe in life. Plants turn a healthy green. Animals get a nice shine to their coat and become playful. You should be feeling some of that now. Just being around me is like standing next to a spring of life,” she said with a smile. Then her face turned dark as she thought over what to say next.

“Jack’s trait is the polar opposite of mine. Where I seem to emanate life, he emanates death. Around him, things decay and die. The very fabric of the world frays and thins. I’m sure you felt it the other day when he was here,” said Tabitha quietly. “I am truly sorry that I couldn’t be here to protect you. He would have known immediately if I were there.”

“And what is the old man’s trait?” asked Melanie bitterly.

“The Book grants control. It knows the history of everything that has ever existed in this world. With that knowledge, it has the ability to manipulate those histories to match what is written in it. My husband has been removed from the world more completely than either Jack or myself. The Book literally stripped every record of him from reality. Any direct action that he takes is replaced by a history that does not require him to have existed while achieving the same result,” stated Tabitha sadly. “He can interact with others using an illusion – like the one he used with you – until that illusion is broken. The moment it’s broken, everything starts to unravel. Unless he has a contingency in place before the illusion started.”

“That’s why you took an interest in me? He needed a contingency?”

“Yes and no. You see, Jack has gone mad.”

“It’s about time that you look at the paper I gave you,” said the old man, sitting across from the interviewer. He had a pair of steaming cappuccinos with him. They were sitting in a coffee bar just down the street from where the interviewer was staying.

“What are you doing here?” asked the interviewer, surprised to see his subject out and about.

“Why don’t you take a look at that scrap I gave you? It has the answer you’re looking for right there.”

He pulled out the sheet of paper and read it. Then read it again and stared at the old man in shock.

“This can’t be true. What possible reason could you have for lying like this?” he demanded, angry with the old man for the first time since they had met. He could handle tall tales as well as anyone, taken with a grain of salt. This was not just a tall tale. What was written on the paper touched entirely too close to home for his taste.

“I’m not lying. Every word on that paper is true.”

“I thought you were better than this. Is this part of some ploy to convince me that all your lies and magic tricks are true?” He was yelling now. Thankfully, there were only two other patrons in the coffee bar, but both of them, and the two baristas, were staring.

“If I’m lying to you, how did I know the name?” asked the old man quietly. “No one knows that name.”

This calmed the interviewer a bit, but the anger was still there. “What are you playing at?” he asked, still seething but willing to listen. “Bringing my parents into this is way out of line.”

“Your parents!” exclaimed the old man as he drew the Book from a shoulder bag he was carrying. A small stylus protruded from its spine, which he took and made a few notations with. The younger man sat down and became very still as he saw what the old man was writing in the Book.

“Tell me, do you know what this is?” asked the old man.

The younger man said nothing. He did not move a muscle, but simply sat staring at the text and stylus.

“Oh, I’m sorry; I forgot to let your mouth move.”

A single, small notation. “And I must not forget to keep the volume under control.”

“What are you doing?!” he tried to yell, but it came out in a flat, calm tone. It was as if someone had locked his body physically at a specific intensity level.

“I’m preventing you from making any more of a scene than you already have. When you’ve heard me out, I’ll let you loose, and you will be free to go. Are you ready to listen to me?” asked the old man.

“I’ll listen, you haven’t really given me a choice have you?” responded the other bitterly.

“Fine. Tomorrow morning, I want you to come to Silent Acres and bring your recording gear. There’s something I want to show you that will bring everything into perspective. She will be there as well,” said the old man angrily. There was only so much he could take, and the younger man’s attitude was really starting to grate on his nerves.

“And if I refuse?”

“Don’t; you will regret it the rest of your very short life,” said the old man, a touch of sadness entering his face as he did. Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes, unbidden and unstoppable. He took an eyeglass case out of his pocket and set it on the table in front of the younger man.

“I’m leaving now. You sit here and finish your coffee,” he said. “Inside this case is a special pair of glasses. Put them on and look at the world around you before you make any rash decisions.” With that he stood up and left the coffee shop.

The moment the old man walked out the door, the interviewer regained control of his body. A startled yelp escaped him as his arms and legs started tingling. His body felt like it had been held in a vice.

He pulled out the sheet of paper and read it again. The old man had written his name on the paper, the names of his adopted parents, and what were supposed to be the names of his real parents. He had been searching for those two names for years. Now, this old man was using that obsession to manipulate him into doing something. He had no idea what the old man wanted, just that he wanted it.

The case sat on the table, daring him to pick it up. He opened it and found what looked like an ordinary pair of glasses. There were no obvious electronics, needles, or anything that seemed nefarious in nature. Just a plain pair of glasses that, at a distance, did not appear to have any prescription at all.

Curiosity overpowered annoyance, and he put the glasses on. After all, the old man did seem to have some sort of power to hold him in place; the glasses might just do something interesting. With the glasses on, nothing seemed different. He had been right about there being no correction to the lenses. A small scrap of paper dropped out of the top of the lens case. He picked up the scrap, read it, and ran his finger along the upper edge of the glasses as the paper instructed.

A gasp escaped him as green and black tendrils faded into being around him. There were hungry green filaments that resembled snakes writhing around people and things, attacking them with vicious ferocity. Black cords with tiny hooks on them attached to almost every object in the room, with several to each person. A thin, reddish mist floated around the room in small clouds. It would settle over an object or a person and heal any wounds left by the green filaments, or dissolve the black threads.

He held his hand up to his face and paused. The green, snake-like filaments could not seem to touch him. They froze a centimeter or so from the surface of his skin. The black threads were likewise unable to come into contact with him, though they seemed to mass around his arm in a tight bundle. One of the red clouds floated by and settled around him in a soothing layer of fluff. It didn’t seem to be limited in the same way that the other two were.

This was not what he had expected. There was no way that the glasses could hide a display or fake the image. What he was seeing had to exist all around him in some form or another. He read over the note one last time before downing what was left of his cappuccino and leaving the coffee bar. In the morning he would meet his parents.

## Death of the Destroyer

Jack took a giant gulp from his ever-present bottle of liquor as he walked along a lonely city street. He had no idea what city he was in, or even what country, not that it mattered in the least. All around were aged, decaying buildings and slums. The occasional drunken vagabond lay sleeping in old, rotten cardboard boxes in dark alleyways. Wherever he traveled, it was always the same.

If Jack stayed put for more than a few days, the buildings around him would start to take on an aged appearance. In another week or so, people would start to develop strange illnesses, inevitably leading to something terminal. Within a month, what had started as a bustling metropolis, growing by leaps and bounds, would be on the verge of collapse. Those in the population who could leave would be gone within the first few weeks. Anyone left after the first month would be out of work, out of money, and a hair’s breadth away from contracting a fatal disease.

It always happened that way. No exceptions to the rule. So, Jack moved from city to city every few days. It spread the strain over a larger area, and if he stayed away from a given city for a year or so, allowed the cities to recover from his aura. The larger the grouping of humanity, the longer it took for the drain to start manifesting itself. That meant larger cities were usually better choices than smaller ones.

In the end, there would be no escape from the destruction he carried with him. That was part of why he drank. Knowing that what he carried would eventually bring about the end of the world had a tendency to wear away at one’s peace of mind. It ate away at the edges of his sanity as acid burns away limestone.

The cask spoke to him, deep inside his mind, telling him that he was the Vintner. It whispered that it was hungry, that it needed to be fed. Always the same, whispering and demanding that he bring it more and more life so that it could grow. Every drop in that accursed cask meant the end of life wherever it fell.

The cask did not just contain pure, unadulterated destruction; it also let the Wine seep into the world. Wherever it flowed, war, death, and disease followed behind, allowing the Wine to feed. The more it fed, the more Wine there was, and the more it seeped into the world causing an unending cycle of suffering.

They are gathering against you.

“I know,” he said, almost with a laugh. He called up an image of the giant Barrel in his mind and could almost see it smile.

I must be fed. You are the Vintner; you must feed me.

“I know that too,” he said laughing loudly as he did. This was truly a laughable situation. They honestly thought that it would be possible for anyone to defeat him? He who was the very essence of defeat and death?

What will you do?

“I am going to kill them. Just like the last time,” he said, all laughter gone now. “They will taste of the Wine and die. You will feed on their remains and grow.”

I will be fed?

“You will be fed,” he asserted and took another deep draft from the bottle in his hands. It contained a small sample of what the great Wine Barrel contained, hiding somewhere outside of the normal bounds of reality. The liquid inside burned as it slid down his throat, following a searing path into the core of his being where it found a void. There was nothing left of what had been his soul; it had been consumed long ago. Where his soul used to reside there was only the Wine, seething with hunger.

It was time for the end. Only a few years had passed since the last incident involving the Tree and the Book. That time around, the two who held those objects were weak and had not been able to withstand even the slightest taste of the Wine. These two seemed to be more capable. One had already tasted of the Wine and barely flinched at its potent spirit.

He still remembered the last holder of the Book. That one had fallen for the Cage and finally succumbed to its slow, wasting doom. The Wine had feasted on his essence for nearly a year before finally consuming him completely.

The Tree’s last Seed had fallen to him in a similar manner, tortured and drained of life. Seeds were much easier to deal with than those Nameless freaks. To kill a Seed, all you had to do was bring about enough pain and suffering that they exhausted their stored power while cut off from the Tree. Most of the time, they would not notice that their essence was being consumed until there was nothing left to pour out. Then, they would simply fade away into nothingness.

Dealing with the Book and the Tree one on one was easy enough, but the two of them together: that was a different story. Together, it was possible for them to overcome the destructive power of the Wine. The Nameless could direct the healing mists from the Tree and repair any damage caused by the Wine. They could protect each other from its ever-questing hunger. That meant he would have to prepare things more carefully than before.

There was a tickle at the edge of his mind calling to him. One of his agents wanted to talk.

“Jolly Roger, this is Peppermint,” came the tinny voice. She was just the person he wanted to hear from.

“Jolly Roger here. Hello, Peppermint, what do you have to report?” Jack responded with a chuckle. She was supposed to be keeping an eye on the Nameless as he pretended to waste away in old age. Jack knew better than to the believe that.

“John Doe is dead,” she said with quiet certainty. This caught Jack completely off guard. Dead? There was no way that the Nameless would simply up and die, and no way that anyone alive could kill him. Something was wrong here.

“Say again?”

“John Doe is dead. He passed away last night. One of the other nurses found him on her rounds this morning. The coroner will be along in a few hours to pick up the body,” she stated. This was not good in the least. If John Doe, as she called him, were truly dead, then there was no way that he was the Nameless. Anxiety filled Jack’s mind; could he have miscalculated that badly? Had he fallen for a feint perpetrated by the Nameless and the Seed?

“Do not let the body leave. I will be there shortly,” he said, already pouring a portal from his bottle to travel by. This was not good in the least. It could as easily be a trap as a feint. Either way, he had to know. His toy assassins and spies could not help this time; they did not have the ability to identify the Nameless.

All things considered, it had been a rather foolish idea to let humans attempt to maintain surveillance on the Nameless in the first place. His abilities guaranteed that they would not be able to distinguish between one of his illusions and the real thing.

“You did well, Melanie. Now, I need you to listen for a moment,” said Tabitha. “We need you to do exactly what he tells you to, no matter what that is. Jack is very unsure of things right now. What you have told him is true does not make any sense to him.”

“I’m scared.” There were tears in Melanie’s eyes. In all the time that she had been working for the strange man she knew only as Jolly Roger, nothing had scared her as much as the thought of seeing him a second time. She had never heard of anyone seeing him once, much less twice, and living to tell the tale.

“It’s okay. He will not be interested in you if you do nothing to provoke him. It will all work out in the end,” said Tabitha, doing her best to exude calm and peace. There was so much fear in Melanie that she wondered if any of it was getting through. If she thought of Tabitha’s husband as a monster, what could she possibly think of Jack now that she knew what he truly was?

Tabitha had done her best to coach the girl in what was to come and what would be required of her. It was going to be a very hard thing for all of those involved, especially the two who would face it with nothing more than their skin to protect them. She hoped that her husband was having more luck with the interviewer.

“Relax, and remember; no matter how bad this gets, I will be right there with you,” said Tabitha calmly. They only had a few moments to get to Silent Acres and be waiting for Jack. She knew Jack would be ready to strip a corpse bare and that her husband would be ready to spring the trap. Would Melanie be ready to close the lock?

Jack found the halls of the assisted-living facility quiet and mostly empty when he arrived. The Sun was still very low on the horizon, just barely creeping above it as a new day began. Funny that he would arrive at dawn to verify the sunset of another’s life.

There was no one at the front desk to challenge him when he entered. Not that any mortal could have done anything to prevent Jack from entering. He decided to sign the guest book in his customary manner, as he always did on such occasions: Charon. It seemed a fitting name for a bringer of death.

He sniffed the air and smiled, there was the scent of ancient decay under the sterile smell of modern medicine. It was a smell that the Wine craved, sweet and savory to his twisted essence. After everything was said and done, he would have to stay in the building for a while and pour the tiniest bit of the Wine here. It would be so easy to gather so much.

First, to business. Jack made his way to the proper wing and to the correct room, searching for the distinctive scent of death. It was there alright, drifting around the door of the room he had believed belonged to the Nameless.

The sweet smell of death and something else: fear. Someone in that room was afraid for their life. That would have to be poor, pathetic Peppermint, waiting for him and watching over the scary, dead body. An exquisite morsel for the Wine to devour.

Jack opened the door and stepped into the room. Even though she had her back to the door, Melanie gasped and coughed as Jack entered. His aura of alcoholic air poured into the room, seemingly crowding out any clean air as it went.

“Where is the body?” he asked with a slight edge to his voice. The presence of the place had served to distract him from his purpose in coming there. It annoyed Jack that he was so easily distracted, and he was not above taking that annoyance out on innocents around him.

“On the bed, over there.”

“How long has he been dead?” asked Jack looking at the cold, gray-skinned body lying silently on the bed. It was definitely the body of a man, albeit an old man, and it was definitely deceased. He moved to examine the body more closely, just to make sure that the Nameless had not determined some means of creating an illusion capable of fooling even him.

“I’m not sure; he passed away sometime during the night and was found like this when the night-shift nurse was completing her final rounds,” answered Melanie between coughs. She was already starting to feel a little tipsy being in the same room as Jack. If she had to put up with being near him much longer, she would be downright drunk.

Jack pulled a long knife from somewhere under his many layers of clothing and cut away the old man’s night shirt. His skin was ancient and wrinkled, as it should be for a man of advanced age. With careful precision, Jack drew the edge of his knife in a line along the body’s side, making the slightest of cuts. If there were any life left in him at all, the cut should keep bleeding after he finished. Only the tiniest amount of blood seeped from the wound, and then nothing.

Just to make absolutely sure that there was no life left in the body, Jack slammed the knife through its sternum up to the hilt. He pulled the blade down and split the old man’s body open. Another two deep cuts at either end of the first served to create what looked like doors into the old man’s body cavity.

Melanie gasped as Jack pulled the body’s chest open and started rooting around inside it with the end of his knife. The stench of raw meat filled the room, almost overpowering the alcoholic haze that followed Jack everywhere. Melanie ran to the small restroom and heaved into the toilet.

“Where did he keep the Book?” Jack demanded of Melanie, ignoring her retching. She did not respond immediately.

“I asked you a question. I’ll repeat myself only once. Where did he keep the Book?”

Melanie didn’t hear him either time – she was too preoccupied with her twisting stomach to think clearly. Jack stormed into the tiny restroom and backhanded Melanie with his free hand, now covered in blood and other body fluids. Her head banged against the wall and she collapsed into a tight ball on the floor, still dry heaving. She would not be able to give him any answers for quite some time.

Frustrated, he started ransacking the room, smashing the old man’s French-press coffee maker and sending his collection of coffee flying in a rain of black dust. He threw coffee mugs to the ground and tore every normal book he found into tiny pieces. The Book was nowhere to be found. Had the Nameless really covered his tracks so thoroughly as to leave nothing behind?

When he finished, there was nothing left unscathed in the room. Every cupboard, every chair, every table had been broken apart. The old man’s body was thrown against a far wall, spilling intestines and organs all over the place while Jack rent the bed to pieces. It was not there.

Then his sense noticed a different smell around him. It covered his alcoholic aura and the smell of rotting meat. It was so strong that it overpowered every other smell and sensation in the room. Jack slowly turned around with a wry smile on his face. Melanie was standing in the doorway, surrounded by thick tree limbs and a reddish mist.

“This is unexpected,” he said, laughing at his own foolishness. “I was expecting someone else and here you are!”

“I am here, Jack. You’ve gone far enough, it’s time for your reign of destruction to end,” said Melanie, in a voice that was not her own. It was as though two voices were talking at the same time, saying the same words with slightly different tones.

“And where is your late husband? I was so hoping to see him again,” said Jack, heaving his knife at Melanie. There was enough force behind the blade that she could not have stopped or dodged it. So she did neither, simply letting the blade sink into her chest as though it were nothing more than a pinprick. A moment later, it clattered to the ground, intact, and she stood there calmly, completely unharmed.

“My husband is already here. In fact, he’s been watching this with our son, recording every moment of this,” she said in the same doubled voice.

“You’re lying. If he were here, I would have noticed him by now.”

“Look around you; he’s been here the whole time.”

Jack screamed. How foolish could he have been to not have noticed? He looked now, with eyes that could see more than the physical world, and saw his end surrounding him. Everywhere he looked, every nook and cranny, every corner in the room was covered in layer upon layer of the Book’s black cords. Each cord intertwined with another in order to form a mesh without gaps, surrounding Jack on all sides but one. There was only one way out of the room and that was through Melanie; she was blocking the door.

“So that’s your game then? You are going to use my own trick against me?” he screamed. “You should know better than to try this trick on me!”

Jack took a deep pull on his bottle and spewed the vile substance inside at Melanie. She did not flinch as it splattered all over her face and arms. Melanie’s face became a mass of searing pain as her skin dissolved, revealing raw muscle and bone. Then Jack watched, dumbfounded, as new muscle and skin grew to replace what he had burned away.

He tried again, this time unleashing a gout of flames that singed the doorframe and carpet. Melanie’s body turned to blackened ash as the flames played over her, only to heal completely once they passed. Jack could hear a woman’s voice screaming, sounding very far away. It was as though Melanie was standing right in front of him while being somewhere else at the same.

He tried again and again, with cold, heat, fire, acid, and poison. Everything seemed to result in the same effect. Her body would be destroyed and then rebuilt in front of him. He could hear her screams and sense the pain that wracked her body, but none of it did any good.

There was sadness in Melanie’s eyes as he stood in front of her panting. A deep, tired sadness, as if she had seen all of it already and knew how things would play out.

“Are you done yet? You cannot hurt Melanie any more than you can leave this place,” said Tabitha’s voice coming from Melanie.

“You cannot defeat me! I am the embodiment of death! You cannot beat death!” he screamed in frantic anger, his face frenzied. Jack started stripping away the layers of clothing he wore and tossing them away. As each garment touched the outer walls of the room, it dissolved into a fine cloud of brownish mist and disappeared. He did not notice; he was beyond caring about anything other than killing the woman in front of him and escaping this trap.

All around him, the black tendrils of the Book were slowly pulling tighter and tighter with each passing moment. Jack tore off layer after layer until there was nothing left but an impossibly thin, skeletal body surrounded by thick, glowing, green bands. They reached out and tried to take hold of Melanie as she stood her ground.

The green bands attacked with gaping mouths, trying to tear chunks out of Melanie. They bit down and stopped centimeters from the surface of her skin. It was as if there was a shield surrounding her body, preventing the bands from touching her. The more they fought against that shield, the more they seemed to shrink. Soon, what had been enormous, snake-like tendrils of green light were nothing more than tiny threads.

“NO!” screamed Jack and took another gulp from his bottle. It was empty. There was nothing left in the bottle to use.

I am hungry! The Wine must be fed!

“You will be fed! I will feed this wretch to you!” yelled Jack, afraid for the first time in years.

The Wine must be fed now!

The green tendrils turned back and started trying to devour anything they could get their mouths on. Scraps of ruined paper, the body of the old man, the shattered tables. Anything and everything went to feed the green tendrils.

Melanie looked on in sadness, knowing what would happen next. The part of the Wine that was with Jack had expended all of its energy and needed more. There was not enough material left in the slowly shrinking room to satiate its hunger, even if it consumed every single molecule of matter present. All too quickly, the tendrils ran out of things to eat.

I must have more!

“There is no more. We have to kill that woman to get more!” Jack commanded. The pathetic-looking tendrils writhed around violently, searching for anything they had missed. They tried to nibble on the black cords, only to find them unpalatable, completely devoid of matter or energy. They tested the shield that was protecting Melanie once more and found it impenetrable.

I must have more! The Wine must be fed! The Wine must survive!

“You have to kill that woman!” screeched Jack, scared. He saw the tendrils turn back toward him, their ravenous mouths searching for anything to consume. One of them took hold of his leg and ripped a chunk of flesh from his thin body.

The Wine must survive!

“What are you doing? I am the Vintner! Stop!”

It was already too late. Once having tasted flesh, more of the tendrils tore into his body. Bit by tiny bit they consumed him, leaving nothing behind. Mere seconds passed and there was nothing left of Jack. Without his body as an anchor point, the tendrils snapped out of existence and his bottle fell to the ground.

The Wine must survive! The Wine must be fed!

“Shut up! Your Vintner is gone,” Melanie said in the same double voice as before. Very carefully, she picked up the bottle and placed a cap on it, made from the same black tendrils that had prevented Jack from burning his way through the walls.

“It is done,” said a voice from behind her. The old man stepped out of a door where there had been nothing more than a plain wall before.

“Would you step aside, dear? I think it is time to close this place off for good.”

When Melanie moved out of the way, he looked into the room and examined every visible inch of it. Nothing was left. Not a single shred of the room itself remained to show that it had ever existed. Only the black, tightly-woven net floating in an empty void was left. With a curt nod, he closed the door and wrote a short phrase in the Book. There was a pop, and the door disappeared.

“There is one more thing left for us to do. We will have to deal with the Wine itself. Without Jack to direct it, the Wine will quickly get out of control,” he stated. “How is Melanie? I heard those screams; that must have been torture.”

“She will be okay,” said Tabitha, stepping backward out of Melanie’s body. Melanie exhaled sharply and collapsed into Tabitha’s arms, unconscious.

“What happened to her?” asked the interviewer, stepping through the same door as his father.

“Her body went through everything you saw, Sesh. Her mind experienced the sensation of having her skin burned and torn in each of the ways you saw. Tabitha was able to repair the damage after it had happened, but not prevent it from occurring in the first place,” he said calmly. “I’m surprised she was able to stand her ground as long as she did.”

“I felt only a shadow of what she went through. If she had not been able to stand her ground like that, I would not have been able to maintain the doorway,” stated Tabitha. There was no question that Jack would have escaped without her. While Tabitha’s body would have repaired itself just as quickly as she was able to repair Melanie’s, Jack would have felt her immediately. On top of that, Melanie taking the brunt of his attacks allowed Tabitha to concentrate on healing her body and keeping the door shield without having to fight through the pain as well. No question, Melanie had pulled them through.

## Balancing Acts

Melanie was asleep in her own bed, resting from her ordeal at Silent Acres. Shortly after Tabitha separated from her, she had come to and started screaming at the top of her lungs, shaking uncontrollably. The Nameless and Tabitha were doing their best to help her through the memory without destroying her mind.

It would take a long while to bring her completely back to sanity after that experience. Tabitha had made a promise to her that she would come through the ordeal intact, and she would do everything in her power to keep that promise. The Nameless was doing everything he could to piece what remained of Melanie’s mind back together again.

Their son sat in the living room of the small apartment, trying to wrap his own mind around what he had seen. His father had shown Sesh everything that was happening through a portal that let them see without being seen. They had stood near a pedestal somewhere on a vast, empty plain that his father kept calling a “room.”

The Book had spoken to him in a strange, papery voice that seemed to come from everywhere. It had told him that something worse was yet to come, something that no one had suspected. Sesh still had a hard time believing what he was seeing. None of it fit with what he understood about reality, none of it at all.

He slid his finger along the edge of the glasses his father had given him. The images they provided served as proof to him that the world was not as he had known it to be. He peeked through the door into the other room and gasped at what he saw. Where Melanie lay, there was a writhing shadowy figure overlaying her, mouthing silent screams. The figure was definitely her, though its face was more animal than human. There were deep, angry gashes running along her arms, with tiny, greenish tendrils tearing at them.

Both Tabitha and his father were sitting, quietly focused on Melanie while she appeared to sleep peacefully. Dark, black cords were wrapping around the shadowy figure’s limbs, restraining her, while pockets of the reddish mist burned away the tendrils and sealed the wounds.

Sesh backed away from the door and sat back down on the couch. There was nothing he could do to help them, and anything he said or tried to do would only be a distraction. He wondered what kind of a world it was he found himself in.

What could he tell his foster parents about any of this? They had always been supportive of Sesh’s search for his birth parents. Would they have been so supportive if they had known what was waiting for him? More to the immediate point, how on earth was he going to explain this mess to his publisher?

“How are you holding up?” asked his father from the doorway, giving him a concerned look.

“I’ll survive. How is Melanie doing? What I saw with these did not look good at all,” Sesh replied, tapping his glasses.

“She’ll survive. I was able to save her mind, and Tabitha will be able to soothe over what I could not. It will take some time, but she will be okay in the end,” he said with a sigh. “We will have to make sure that she is taken care of for a while.”

“What I saw, is any of it real?” There were so many doubts that it was difficult to distinguish what was real and what was imagination.

“Yes and no. The glasses show you a representation of what is going on just outside of this reality,” he answered. “It’s like you’re seeing what’s going on the inside of a clock. Your mind doesn’t understand it as it really happens, so the glasses provide a suitable substitute.”

“There aren’t really green snakes tearing her body apart?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ve seen those same images though.”

They sat for a long while saying nothing, waiting for something to happen or the other to speak. It was strange for them to be sitting and not speaking; so much of their time had been spent recording the father’s life story. Now, neither knew quite what to say to the other. There were wounds too deep to heal in such a short time.

Finally, Sesh spoke. “When did you know who I was?”

“I knew who you were before you came into the room. I arranged for you to hear about an old man with a strange story and, knowing that you would come looking, waited for you to show up.”

“I have to know, why did you wait so long? Why did you and Tabitha give me up?” Sesh asked, almost pleading. It was something that had plagued him for as long as he had known about being adopted. What was it about him that had led to his parents giving him up? Was there something so wrong with him that they just could not stand to have him around?

A pained expression crossed his father’s face. “We did not want to do it. Think for a moment; you have been able to live a mostly normal, human life for the last few years. How could we have provided you with that? The two of us are so tied to the Tree and the Book that we have become what those objects represent. It is impossible for either of us to live anything close to a normal life. Can you imagine parent-teacher night at school?”

Sesh could almost see these two trying to have a conference with one of his middle-school teachers. He could see the teacher’s eyes bouncing away from his parents as she forgot why she was in the room, much less that anyone was there. It was a somewhat humorous image to think about.

“Why now? I could have lived out my life without knowing about you or any of this,” said Sesh. “I would have kept searching, looking for you. This . . . this is too much for me to handle. How can I go back to that normal life knowing what you have shown me?”

“I’m not asking you to, or not to. That will be something that you have to decide when this is all over. You may not be able to go back when this is done,” said his father quietly. The look of concern was back, much more so than it had been earlier. He had to make a request of his son that he did not want to. It would be a greater sacrifice than he would have been willing to make at the same age.

“Son, Jack is gone. Do you know what that means?” he asked.

“No, I don’t,” Sesh replied, afraid he would not like the answer.

“The Book and the Tree both have a caretaker to rein them in. We inherently constrain their power simply by being attached to them. Without someone to watch over them, they would have no sense of proportion. The Wine is free now.”

“What does any of this have to do with me?”

“Someone has to claim the Wine and bring it back under control. I can’t, Tabitha can’t; Melanie would suffer the same fate as Jack after a while. You saw how the Book’s power reacted to you. You are the only one who can potentially keep the Wine under control, and hopefully not lose yourself to it,” said his father, now pleading as well. A great deal hinged on how Sesh answered.

“We only have a short while until the Wine starts flowing uncontrollably into the world. When that happens, there will be horrors unleashed the likes of which have not been seen by man.”

“And you’re saying I’m the only one who can stop this?” asked Sesh incredulously. This could not be happening. Every aspect of his life that he had believed to be a reasonably stable, normal thing was getting turned on its ear. Now, his father was telling him that the fate of the world rested on his shoulders? It was too much.

“I’m saying you’re the only one who can survive this. Jack let the Wine take over and lost himself in it. You have an advantage in that department thanks to your mother and I.”

“I have an advantage?” said Sesh, barely believing what he was being told. He remembered what he had seen through the glasses back in the coffee shop, the Book’s tendrils wrapping around him rather than attaching to him. Somehow that did not seem like a great comfort when he looked at what had become of Jack and what Jack had done to Melanie. That power still existed in the Wine, and would now be without control.

Sesh leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes. Being exposed to the other world as he had was already too much for him to handle. Now this! It was more than he could deal with in such a short timeframe.

“How long do I have to make a decision?” Sesh asked with greater calm than he felt. “You are asking me to give up everything; I can’t make that kind of a decision on the spur of the moment.”

“I don’t know. It could be hours, days, or even years. There have been periods where the Book was without a human counterpart for nearly a decade with no negative effects,” said his father in a speculative tone. “The Wine, on the other hand, is a much more volatile thing. From what I know of its history, there has been a human counterpart nearly continuously since the first one. Jack was with it for several centuries.”

Near-immortality; that was one benefit that could be put on the plus side of the equation. Was it worth the cost of losing his humanity, though? How long would it take for the madness to set in? How long before Sesh found himself on the receiving end of the same death as Jack?

About then, Tabitha came in and shut the bedroom door behind her. She looked tired and worn. Her husband looked to her, questioningly, and she smiled a brittle, little smile. He nodded curtly, and she dropped onto the couch to relax.

“How is Melanie?” Sesh asked. Having something else to think about seemed like a good idea right then.

“She’s resting now,” said Tabitha, her exhaustion apparent in her voice. “I have healed her body as well as I could. Together, we were able to repair the worst fissures in her mind. There will be scars though. So much pain.”

There were tears in her eyes as she said the last words. Melanie had taken the brunt of an attack that was meant for her, and it weighed heavily on her mind. If there had been any other way to hold Jack, any way that did not involve subjecting someone to that brutal onslaught, she would have gladly done it.

It had been a long day, too long a day for anything other than sleep. The Nameless sat down next to his wife and put his arm around her. He knew the kind of pain that she felt right then, as he had felt it himself years before when she found the Tree. There was no cure for that kind of pain, only mild comfort in knowing that there was no other way.

Sesh had a great deal to think about, and decided that it would be best if he left for the time being. As he stood up to leave, his father stopped him.

“Have you made a decision?”

“No.”

“Don’t take too long. I will come looking for you in the morning.”

“You don’t even know where I’m staying; I never told you.”

“You didn’t have to,” said his father, and lay his head on Tabitha’s shoulder. Sesh left, closing the apartment door behind him.

Sesh found himself standing, alone, on an empty plane, walking toward something. He did not know what he was walking toward, only that he would know where he was going, and that he would know when he reached it. There was a faint light that had no discrete source, seemingly radiating evenly from all sides.

There was no sound, not even the sound of his breath as he walked. The plane was swathed in an eerie, heavy silence that deadened any sound. For some reason, this did not bother him in the least, and he kept walking.

As he neared what he knew to be his destination, the light grew brighter. Standing high above him, at what he knew to be the absolute center of the plane, sat an enormous wine barrel. Its face was carved with horrendous images of pain and death. There were scenes of war, torture, and disease that seemed to move with a strange inner life of their own.

The Wine needs a steward. I am waiting for you.

Sesh heard the voice deep inside his mind and panicked. He’d heard the voice before, when Jack was consumed by the Wine. There was a different quality to the voice now, a wild abandon that had not been there then. It was desperate now.

“You will not control me,” he said, with less certainty than he really felt.

His words seemed to trigger something in the barrel. It started creaking loudly, and bulging as though pressure were up building inside. Sesh tried to backpedal and nearly tripped over a thick, green-glowing tendril. It moved, revealing an end with cruel teeth that turned to face him.

The mouth let out a high-pitched scream, nearly too shrill to be heard. Sesh screamed, futilely scrambling to get away from the creature. Behind it, the barrel audibly cracked under the pressure building inside it.

The Wine will have a steward. You will be the Vintner! You will feed the Wine!

Its voice had a strange, liquid quality, which carried with it a sense of violent rage. At that moment, he knew in his heart that anything he did to control the Wine would be pointless. Jack had not been mad; he had been consumed by the essence of the Wine. It was the Wine that was mad, insane beyond any hope of rescue.

Sesh sat bolt upright in his hotel room bed, an image of the inside of the tendril’s mouth burned into his mind’s eye. Tremors of fear shook his body as he remembered the dream in vibrant detail. This dream did not fade as dreams normally do; it seemed to have been seared deeply into his memory.

There was no way that he could control that. He would be a fool to even attempt to control the Wine. Sesh came to understand that, if he let it touch him, the Wine would begin eating away at his mind just as it had Jack’s. His father’s plan would not work.

As he dressed, Sesh thought over how he was going to tell him that he could not take the Wine. Somehow, he knew that it would not go over very well. Sesh knew that the entire sequence had been orchestrated around someone taking Jack’s place. His parents had planned the entire sequence of events well before bringing him into it. They had no right to expect him to be the lynchpin in their plans any more than he had the right to expect them to be what he wanted.

Even if his father knew every little thing about him, that did not reveal who Sesh really was. His parents knew that as well, and his father had told him as much when giving him the glasses. They had to have a backup plan of some sort for dealing with the Wine.

This rationalization helped to make his decision seem more reasonable. In the back of his mind, there was a nagging feeling that he was missing something. There was something about his logic that would not hold up to more stringent analysis. Sesh dismissed the feeling as nervousness. He knew what he was going to do and that it was the right choice to make.

His father was waiting for him in the little dining alcove where the hotel served a continental breakfast. It was nothing special, just some stale bagels, bad coffee, and warm orange juice that had been mixed from concentrate with the wrong amount of water. The Nameless was sitting by himself, scowling into a cup of coffee.

“How do you drink this stuff?” he asked as Sesh sat down across from him. His expression darkened even more when he saw the expression on his son’s face. This was not going to go well at all.

“I do my best not to think about it.”

His father knew the answer to the next question without even having to ask it. Still it had to be said.

“You’ve made your decision then?”

Sesh did not answer immediately. He knew what he was going to do, and believed that there must be another way than what his father proposed. Still, it was hard for him to say “no” to the man sitting across from him.

They sat in silence for a time, other guests coming in and sitting down to breakfast. Every so often, one of the other guests would look in their direction, pause, shake his or her head, and sit down at a different table. If Sesh had not known what was going on – that they were seeing and then forgetting his father – it would have been terribly unnerving. As it was, he felt that their looks were somehow expressing shame and disgust at what he was about to say.

“I can’t do this,” he said finally. “It’s all too fast. I don’t know what to believe about anything right now, much less feel comfortable making this kind of choice.”

His father looked sad and tired as he leaned back in his chair, nodding. He knew what his son was going through and where this decision was coming from. If he had been given all the facts years ago in a bar, he might have made a different choice himself.

“So you’re going to do nothing,” he replied as softly as he could. There was frustration in his eyes and voice that could not be completely hidden. There was too much riding on this to just let it go.

“I’m not going to be a sacrifice.”

“You can control it!”

“No one can control it! It will devour anyone who tries and leave them no better off than Jack. Is that what you really want to become of your son?” said Sesh, his fear and anger getting the better of him.

“You’re wrong,” said his father quietly.

“There is no point in continuing this argument. I am not going to let you feed me to the Wine,” said Sesh with finality. His father saw the determination in his eyes and slumped back into his chair.

“It is truly over then,” he stood to leave.

“What will you do?” asked Sesh.

“At this point, I have no choice. Melanie is the only other person who could conceivably survive the Wine for a while. It has already found her a formidable opponent, thanks to Tabitha’s help. I might be able to restrain it with the Book, at least partially. Together, we might postpone things for another hundred years or so,” he said. “If that doesn’t work, you’ll know. If the Wine is not controlled, the world ends.”

“That’s your backup plan?” Sesh asked, exasperated.

“There is no backup plan. There is no fallback position. This game is played all or nothing,” said his father sternly and turned to leave again.

“Wait,” said Sesh, causing his father to pause.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else that can be done?”

“In all that I found in the Book, there was nothing that indicated any other possibilities. I’ll admit, we have no guarantee that you will be able to control the Wine, but your lineage is the best hope.”

“Bastard!” said Sesh, knocking the table aside and punching his father in the side of his face. It was a solid right that knocked him to the ground, coffee and bagels spilling everywhere.

“Let’s go,” he said, turning to leave.

“I wouldn’t know,” whispered his father, sadness showing through in his voice. Sesh looked back at him, confused as he pulled himself back up.

“Follow me,” he said and left the hotel.

## The Sculptor

Melanie was still unconscious, asleep in the bedroom of her tiny apartment. Tabitha had spent the entire night watching over her. She was sitting in the center of the living room floor with her legs crossed in the Lotus position. A deep, red glow seemed to emanate from her as she sat meditating. A few minutes after Sesh and his father arrived, the glow started fading. A few more minutes and Tabitha was standing up, stretching, loosening up her muscles from having sat too long in one position. She immediately noticed the rising bruise on her husband’s face and the grim expressions of the two men.

“Are you okay? What happened to your face?” she asked, worried.

“It’s nothing Tabitha. You won’t even be able to tell that I had a bruise in another few hours.”

She nodded and turned to her son. “So you’re going through with it then?”

“Do I have a choice in the matter?”

“You always have a choice. The options may not be to your liking, but you always have a choice,” she replied serenely, mentally trying to will peace over the two. The tension between them was thick enough to prevent any coherent communication. It would not do for there to be unresolved conflict between them when near the Wine. Any chink in their solidarity would be enough for it to exploit and bring them all down.

“What happens now?” said Sesh with resignation. He felt his anger and bitterness dissipating just being near Tabitha. Having her around when he was younger could have saved him a great deal of pain, and helped him avoid some of the stupider mistakes.

“Now we have to prepare you and give you directions to the Wine,” said his father, some of the tension in his own face softening.

“I thought you could just take me there, like you did with the Book.”

“I can show you the way, but you will have to go by another path. There is more to it than simply showing up and trying to physically take the Wine. You have to follow a specific path, or it will destroy you,” replied his father. “Notice that I did not say ‘kill you.’ It will erase you from all existence as though you never were. The only memory of you will be with Tabitha and me.”

They spent the next three hours going over how to reach the Wine, and where Sesh would have to be taken to find it. Finding any of the three objects was more of an art than a science. Sesh would have to find the tiny thread of influence that represented the Wine’s call – something his mother could help with – and follow it to a nameless place.

From there, things would be more or less straightforward. At least, that’s what his father claimed. None of them knew for certain what would happen once Sesh made it to the Wine’s barrel. It could be anything, or nothing at all.

Sesh was standing on the edge of a giant pit of flames, wondering what the best way to climb down into it was. Both of his parents had described falling into it and then suddenly finding themselves in a strange room full of candles. Now, he stood by what he assumed was the same pit, wondering what to do.

Tabitha had given instructions on how to clear his mind and search for the Wine’s call. It should be searching for another to take Jack’s place, or about ready to blow. They had no way of telling which path it would progress down. Everything depended on his ability to find a tiny needle in an enormous haystack.

With a sigh, he sat down, cross-legged, near the edge of the pit, facing away from it. Mediation was not one of the skills taught for a journalism degree, and not something that he had ever practiced more than cursorily. So, with several deep breaths, he did his best to clear his mind and listen.

“Once your mind is clear, listen. You will feel, more than hear, a tiny voice somewhere far in the back of your mind,” said Tabitha while he was practicing. They only had a few hours for him to get the basics down, and they would need every second. It was going to be a gamble no matter what they tried.

“Good, do you feel it there? That’s the one. Now, let your mind follow it back to its source. Don’t worry, the physical part of you, your body, will be just fine.”

His mind had traced the thin, green thread to a dark place that was completely unfamiliar to him. It pleaded with him to be fed in the same liquid voice he had heard in his dream. The green thread stretched on and on, farther than he could follow, but what Sesh had seen was more than enough to get a direction and a starting point.

Those directions had led him here. A flaming pit in the middle of nowhere, just like the beginning of his father’s story. Here, there was no Tabitha to help him set his mind at ease. Her abilities had helped enormously before; now he was on his own.

The sound of the burning pit behind him acted in a soothing manner, helping to calm Sesh’s fears. It took a little longer, as he was tense, but Sesh found the tiny thread waiting for him right where his mind had left it. The sensation was stronger here than it had been in Melanie’s apartment; he must be getting closer.

Rather than flail blindly about while falling, Sesh stood, doing his best to keep his mind focused, and walked calmly into the pit. There was a clean path to follow, clearly shown by the green thread. After the first few sharp turns, Sesh was surprised that either of his parents had survived the fall, much less been able to stand up afterward.

The pit itself seemed to be a large, inverted dome. Plumes of flame and smoke were all over the place, bursting from seemingly random locations. There was no evidence of what was fueling the fire other than the occasional flaming fissure that seemed to be venting gas. At any other time, it would have been an awesome sight to behold.

Sesh just wanted to reach what the thread was telling him lay at the very bottom of that pit. He only had to pause and clear his mind once during the climb, and then, only for a moment. Some of the peace Tabitha had imparted to him was still there, helping to keep his mind clear even though she was far away.

At the lowest point in the pit, he found what we was looking for. There, just above the ground, was a portal very similar to the ones that his father produced using the Book. Unlike those portals, he could not see through it to what was on the other side. He would have to chance it and hope for the best.

Taking a deep breath of the surprisingly cool air around him, he stepped through the portal and very nearly smashed his head on the floor. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard a shrill laugh as though some trickster were laughing at a private joke. For a moment, he had a clear vision of a room full of candles, then something did hit his head and everything went black.

“Wake up! I didn’t hit you that hard.”

Sesh heard the voice, but his head hurt too badly to respond. It felt like someone was pounding on his left temple with a jackhammer. The smell of burning wax and a strange, sulfurous scent assaulted his senses.

“I said wake up!” demanded a voice that Sesh did not know.

“I’m awake!” he moaned and tried to sit up. Sesh immediately realized it was a mistake, closing his eyes and doing his best to sit completely motionless. A hand grabbed his head and pulled his face up.

“Let’s have a look at you anyhow. I suppose that blow could have rattled something loose inside your skull,” said the voice, as the hands roughly handled his head. Sesh brushed the hands away, trying to stop the pounding in his head from turning out the lights again.

“Now that wasn’t very nice of you. Here I am trying to help you out, and you slap my hands. That’s gratitude for you,” said the voice with mock annoyance. “Tell me, what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” said Sesh with a groan. There was not supposed to be anyone else along this path other than what passed for sentience in the Wine. Had he screwed up and found his way to the wrong place?

“Where am I?” asked Sesh, his head throbbing again, “and why did you hit me?”

“Someone broke a candle! This candle hasn’t changed in four hundred years, and now it’s broken.”

Sesh’s head finally cleared enough for him to get a good look at his assailant. He was a good deal shorter and smaller than Sesh had expected, given how the dent in his head felt. The other stood somewhere around five feet tall and looked to be well into his nineties. Sesh wondered if a strong breeze might be enough to knock the little man over and break him.

Then he saw where the old man was pointing. There was a burnt-out hole in the wall where one of the candles should have been. Black soot marred the interior of the nook and much of the surrounding wall with black streaks. The jagged, broken shaft of a candle lay on the ground in pieces below the nook.

Sesh quickly spun around, looking for the other two special candles. Thankfully, both of them were intact and sitting serenely in their nooks, at about the same height as the damaged one. Relieved, Sesh turned back to examine the broken one; it had to be the Wine’s.

“This is not good. What happened to this candle?” he asked with concern. Without the candle, he had no way to get to the barrel.

“You tell me! I’m just going along, minding my own business, pruning the wicks and making sure the wax is flowing the way it should and poof! This little niche here bursts into the most violent, green flames I’ve ever seen,” said the old man. “I try everything I can to get it under control, even ruined my best leather apron trying to smother the flames. Then it just breaks off at the base like that and falls over.

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to know something about this now would you?” added the old man in an accusatory tone.

“I might. I’m not really sure. What is this place?” he asked, hoping to deflect the conversation away from his possible involvement with the broken candle.

“You’re in the Hall of Life. Everyone has a candle here. How do you come to be in the Hall and not know where you are?” asked the old man, looking at him sidelong. “What are you doing here anyhow? No one is supposed to be here but the Tenders and me.”

“Tenders?”

“Yeah, there are three of them. They do what they can to keep the world in balance. There’s one for life, though that doesn’t really describe what she does, one for control, again insufficient words, and one for decay. This here candle was bound to the life of the tender for decay,” said the old man. “It being burned out like this means that he has met a very nasty and violent end. What do you know about it?”

“I know that his powers turned inward and consumed him,” replied Sesh with a shudder. The images of Jack’s death were not something that he wanted to think about right then. Especially considering that there might be a similar fate waiting for him down the road.

“That so? That so? Huh!” said the old man not in the least surprised. “I always thought he would go out that way. Now, what are you doing here?”

How should he answer? There was something about this little man that told him it would not be a good idea to lie to him. On the other hand, could Sesh trust him with what he was planning to do?

“I’m here to take Jack’s place as Tender of the Wine.” He held his hands palm up, hoping that the truth would get him somewhere with the old man.

“Really! Oh my, let me see here,” said the old man running around the room in circles. He started climbing up the walls, using the candle niches as handholds and footholds. The reaction was so sudden and violent that Sesh jumped to get out of the way, only to find the old man behind him.

He moved with impossible speed for someone as advanced in age as he appeared. For a short while, he climbed so high up that Sesh lost sight of him completely, only to have the man come sliding down the wall on the opposite side of the room that he went up. Finally, he came to a halt in front of a candle a little below and between the two remaining special candles.

“Ah! That explains it. You are their son!” he screeched happily. “You are here in an attempt to correct the imbalances of Jack, as you called him.”

“What do you know of Jack?”

“I know of what he did. He put out so many candles. So sad, so sad. The Wine, as you called it, is a ravenous beast that wants to grow. It is the end of all things, even this. Jack could not control it, he became the beast, was consumed by the beast,” rambled the old man, a deep frown on his face. “It was time for his flame to end. But, he was a special candle and I don’t touch special candles.”

“What of the Wine now?” Sesh asked. This man seemed to know a good deal more about what was going on than he or either of his parents. Strange that they had never mentioned him when they described this place. The little man cocked his head to the side for a moment, as if trying to decide how to answer.

“The Wine is afraid. It cannot see into the world without someone to tend it,” he said, a dark shadow crossing over his face. His entire demeanor changed, taking on a pallor of fear and panic that had not been there a moment before.

“You must act quickly!” said the strange little man. “Those Who Are Outside are trying to get in! If they get the Wine, then all is lost. Quickly! You must act quickly!”

Just as suddenly as the fear had appeared, it disappeared. “By the way, I am the Sculptor. It’s nice to meet you.”

“My name is Sesh,” he replied, caught off guard again by the other’s propensity to change gears. Where had this strange denizen of his parent’s world come from? The Sculptor pulled a small whisk broom from somewhere in his coveralls and started to clean up the remnants of the shattered candle, ignoring Sesh as though he were not there.

“Excuse me,” said Sesh after waiting long enough to conclude that this strange little man was not going to say anything more.

“Yes”

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“Don’t know.”

That was unexpected. The Sculptor went about his business as though Sesh had said nothing.

“How do I get out of here?” Sesh asked after another short pause.

“Why would you want to do that?” responded the old man, now cleaning the wall with a damp cloth.

“You said I should act quickly. If I’m supposed to act quickly, I need to get to the Wine’s barrel as soon as possible,” said Sesh, exasperated.

“What do you know? Hmm! I told you to act quickly, yes. I didn’t tell you what to do!” said the old man as though chastising a pupil for not listening during class.

“I was told that I needed to get to a plain where I would find a barrel. That the Wine resided there,” responded Sesh, finding himself even more confused than before.

“And would you jump off a cliff if someone told you to?” said the old man, laughing. It seemed completely inappropriate for him to be laughing, and yet there was nothing else that fit with his personality.

“Are you telling me that I don’t need to get to the barrel?”

“No, you need to go where you think you need to go and do what you think you need to do,” said the old man as though he were expounding upon some great truth.

“Okay, how do I get there?”

“Ah! Now that is a question worth answering,” said the old man as he stepped back from his handiwork on the burnt niche. It was free of soot and the broken-off stub of a candle now, waiting for another candle to be placed within it.

“All done!” he said pointing at the cleaned niche and smiling.

“And the answer to my question?”

“I said it was a question worth answering, not that I would answer it.”

It took Sesh a few more minutes before he finally gave up on trying to get answers from the little man. Talking to him was worse than talking to a wall. Walls, at least, would not talk back.

With no other alternatives, he sat down in the Lotus position again and attempted to clear his mind. The room was silent except for the steady, low guttering of the candles. Sesh took a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting the frustrations and anxiety he was feeling flow out with the breath. Before long, he was beginning to feel relaxed and clearheaded enough to search for the tiny, green thread again.

“What ya doing?” asked the old man, completely shattering Sesh’s concentration.

“Trying to figure out where I should go next,” he replied with clenched teeth. Not only was the old man not answering his questions, he was preventing Sesh from concentrating. He was stuck in a room full of candles with an ancient man who acted like a child; how could his day get any worse?

“That won’t help,” said the old man. An idea seemed to strike him. “Is that how you found your way here? Oh my, you’re doing things the hard way. Of course, you are a mortal.”

“And how would you go about finding your way to the Wine?” asked Sesh out of frustration. He had just about had as much of the old man’s casual manner as he could take.

“I’d just open the door.”

“What door?”

“That door over there!” said the old man, muttering something about blind children. Sesh spun around to where the old man had pointed and found himself looking at what he knew to be a portal.

“This wasn’t here before!”

“Of course not, I just opened it,” said the old man. “Are you daft?”

“I don’t have the ability to open this kind of door,” said Sesh, letting the insult slide.

“Why didn’t you ask sooner? I would have opened it for you!”

“I did!” said Sesh, frustrated more than anything else.

“No you didn’t. You asked how *you* would get there, not *me*,” said the old man with a wink. “Now, let’s go see this barrel of yours and set some things straight.”

The two stepped through the door, which snapped shut behind them with an audible snap. The sound made Sesh jump and glance over his shoulder.

“It’s far too late to turn back now, boy. No sense in leaving the door open with this beastie about,” said the old man seriously.

They were standing on the same vast plain Sesh had seen in his dream, with the same sound-deadening properties. The light was different though; it had a greenish tinge to it that was not there in the dream. There was something different about the air as well, as though the entire place was angry and afraid.

“I’ve seen this place before,” said Sesh, his voice hushed.

“Yes, you have. In your dream. Your father has been here once before, too. His encounter with the Wine almost killed him,” said the old man, all of the laughter gone from his demeanor. His stance had changed from one of light mirth to a heavy walk that carried authority with it. It was almost an executioner’s walk, carrying the axe to the chopping block. Sesh did not think of asking him what he was doing there.

As they walked, the green glow grew stronger. Enormous, thick, green tendrils materialized out of thin air and writhed around violently. If one edged too closely to the old man and Sesh, the old man swung his arm in its general direction and the tendril disappeared with a howl. This strange, little man seemed to wield enough power to fight off whatever tantrum the Wine seemed to be throwing with ease.

“Who are you?” Sesh asked, in awe of the display he was seeing.

“I told you. I am the Sculptor,” said the old man as he evaporated another tendril. They were attacking outright now, diving at the pair with huge, gaping mouths and needle-like teeth. Their number and size did not matter in the least as the old man waved his hand.

“Though, Gardener feels like a better title right now. Jack really let this beast get out of hand, didn’t he?” said the old man.

“As I understand it, the Wine consumed him.”

“It consumed him, eh? That won’t do at all. Not one bit,” growled out the old man. There was anger in his voice that would not be argued with. His build seemed somehow fuller, as though he had gained a number of pounds in pure muscle since walking through the portal.

“You just stand back for a bit while I sort this out. Don’t worry, I’ll leave something for you to take care of,” said the old man, grumbling about uppity powers. They were nearing the barrel now, and the sheer size of it was enough to intimidate Sesh. It had been big in his dream; in person it was huge, by far the biggest barrel he had ever seen. The green ooze was spurting between the barrel’s planks as though the liquid inside was under enormous pressure. The old man walked right up to it and shook his head.

“Look at yourself! How could you get to such a state? I’d say you’re just about ready to blow,” said the old man in disgust, shaking his head.

“I should dismantle you and feed you to the Outsiders! How would you like that, you gluttonous beast?” he yelled. To Sesh, it seemed as though the barrel were cringing away from the old man’s voice like a chastised pet afraid of its master. The old man picked up a bucket that was hanging from a small, metal hook on the front of the barrel’s base.

“Now, I’m going to let off some of the pressure you’ve built up and see just what it is that you’ve done,” said the old man as he set the bucket under the barrel’s spigot. He drew off a small amount of fluid from the barrel and looked at it. There was a dark, green glow coming from the bucket that cast a sickening light across the old man’s face.

He motioned for Sesh to come over and look at what was in the bucket. What Sesh saw nearly made him throw up. There were images of torture and war shifting around in the liquid. Disease-ravaged bodies lying on their death beds writhed, screaming in agony. Sesh had to look away from the bucket or lose his lunch. The old man looked on as the glow flickered, showing different images of ever-more-vile things.

“What is this? What have you made of yourself?” said the old man, saddened by what he saw.

The Wine must be fed.

“You have fed on artificial pain and suffering. You cause death and destruction. You leave me no choice,” said the old man bitterly. He drew a knife from his coveralls and slashed in an arc in front of the barrel. A rent appeared, surrounded by a hungry, black haze. It hurt when Sesh looked at it directly, as though something were trying to scoop out his eyes.

The old man picked up a mallet hanging from a pin on the other side of the barrel and cleaved off the spigot. A geyser of the glowing, green liquid poured into the rent he had opened. As the flow drained the barrel, a horrendous scream tore through the plane. That scream caused the ground around them to shake with violent tremors. Cracks opened around them that fell into a vast emptiness with no bottom.

As the liquid drained, the barrel seemed to shrink in size. The dark carvings on its face faded away to be replaced by smooth wood. When the flow finally stopped, the barrel was little more than a foot in diameter. With a satisfied nod, he dumped the contents of the bucket into the rent and sealed it back up with a wave of his hand.

“And that is that. Now, are you going to behave yourself or do I need to start over with you as well?” asked the old man, looking sternly at the barrel. It seemed to shrink away from him as he spoke.

There is no more Wine.

Its voice sounded tiny and mournful, somehow empty now that the Wine was gone. Sesh could not help but feel pity for it.

“Oh shut up. You’ll replenish the Wine soon enough,” said the old man and turned to Sesh. “Take this and remember what you saw. Never drink that stuff. It was the Wine that ate away at Jack’s mind. He couldn’t take it anymore and drank it.

“I’m leaving this barrel in your care. If it gets to be too much, drain it off as I just did. Keep in mind that a portion of it must be let back into the world. Try to spread it out a little,” said the old man. Sesh nodded his understanding as the old man turned and went on, instructing him in how the Wine should be taken care of.

“One question, Jack radiated decay. Will I have that problem?” asked Sesh.

“Goodness no! I told you, Jack drank the Wine and that was where his problems started. If you don’t drink it, you will be just fine,” said the old man, laughing again.

“Now, you should let your parents know you made out alright. They have to be worried sick after that scream,” said the old man, opening a portal in front of him. “Here, this will take you to the apartment they are waiting in.”

“Before I leave, why did neither of them mention you?” asked Sesh.

“Well, now. That is a question. Why don’t you ask them sometime about how Tabitha met her Tree?” said the old man and gave Sesh a soft shove through the portal.