

CHPTR12 - Avensis I

Charlie:

I did not, at the time, really understand why the Boss kicked me off at some stranger's place. He did try to explain that Avensis knew everything there was to know about the game itself and about the seven other competitors, that he had probably been researching their playstyles, and that there was a good chance that Avensis himself was going to do well in the tournament. He would have liked to come in with me, he said, to at least say hi, but there was just so much that he needed to sort out and so little time left.

Now, I guess, it does make a bit of sense. Avensis could explain to me all those things that I had been worrying so much about not knowing. The logic of it all wasn't why I didn't believe a word of what the Boss was saying, the logic was quite sound. It was just that he was so uncharacteristically insistent about explaining all of this in thorough detail, rather than just winking and telling me to figure it out and shoving me out on the sidewalk. It felt like there was something more to it. It felt like he was hiding something, that he was not as much trying to explain as he was making an excuse.

It may also have been how he conveniently forgot to mention that Avensis wasn't quite sound of mind, much like how a unicycle lacks stability - it must always be in motion, its vulnerable equilibrium maintained with unfailing vigilance, lest it fall over.

But he did make a fine first impression. He had obviously been expecting me, and had apparently also been

instructed to call me Coffeeboy. I didn't get any chance to introduce myself otherwise.

The first thing that struck me, as he welcomed me inside of his apartment, was that everything was exceedingly tidy and clean, it felt like walking into some sort of laboratory where they analyze archeological findings, where the smallest speck of outside contamination can throw the dating off by thousands of years. After I had taken my shoes off, I felt compelled to squat down and make sure they were perfectly lined up, so as to not ruin the Feng Shui of the whole place.

We segued from introductions into the usual small talk, asking the usual sort of questions which neither of us really cared to know the answer to. We talked about how the drive had been, as if we had been driving through a war zone, as if he was expecting to hear about flat tires and how we had lost two men to enemy fire.

But it's like with working out, it's better to start out with some light exercises to get the blood flowing and make sure everything's in order, than to go straight for breaking your personal records. In that sense, these content free conversations where everybody knows the script by heart is a good way to build some sort of rapport before moving on to anything more serious, like *do you have a moment to talk about our lord and savior, Jesus Christ?*

We worked our way through the obvious topics - our drive, the weather and how we both knew the Boss. Avensis said they had used to play a bit together, back in the day. Then he showed me the bathroom and where I would be sleeping, and both of the rooms were every bit as immaculate as the hallway, for a moment I imagined that he was a real

estate agent showing me around after he had spent eight hours making the place look like no one had ever lived there.

The first thing which bothered me, I guess - my first clue that something wasn't quite right - was how he felt inexplicably distant. It was as if he wasn't quite paying attention to what I was saying, like when you call someone and they're in the middle of watching a television show, and they try to keep up with both the conversation and the TV screen at the same time - invariably without much success.

I got about fifteen minutes to go to the bathroom and freshen myself a bit up after the long drive before he asked me if I wanted dinner.

"I made a bit extra, in case you showed up in time," he said. "I didn't really expect you to, though, you must have gone pretty much non-stop." I kept my mouth shut, hoping that if I refused to talk any more about the stupid drive, perhaps we would eventually move on to talking about something more interesting.

Much like everything else in Avensis' interior magazine apartment, the table wasn't merely set, it was meticulously decorated, as if though we were celebrating some very special occasion.

"We're having lasagna," he explained while opening the oven. "It was always her favorite."

I absentmindedly took a seat, trying to take everything in - the smell of the lasagna, the salad bowl and the fresh bread, how there were individual plates with butter for the two of us. Avensis turned around with the lasagna and was about to set it down on the table, when his eyes met mine and he stopped mid-motion as if frozen by a spell.

"Do you need a hand?" I asked him, wondering what in the world was going on. When he still didn't move, I tried looking myself over both shoulders and made sure that my phone was still in my pocket, a nervous habit I picked up some time earlier.

When he came to himself, he was still visibly shaken. He set the lasagna down and shook his head back and forth roughly a hundred times.

"You can't sit there," he finally explained. All the while with the finger of his left hand pointing at the roof, as if to tell me to get up, he started rummaging through his cupboards, muttering something I couldn't make out under his breath.

I got out of my chair and put it neatly back in place, making sure not to make any abrupt movements or noises, like as if though I was in a cave with a hungry but sleeping lion.

Avensis, still shaking his head, assembled a new set of plates and utensils for me - some cheap stuff in the sort of bright plastics that will blind you if you rest your eyes on them for too long. It all looked no less out of place than a fax machine at a renaissance fair. Uncharacteristically, if I could say so after having met him twenty minutes ago, he didn't even bother to arrange everything perfectly, he just dropped it all in a messy heap at the end of the table.

I tried to point towards myself and then this other seat, to make absolutely sure I wasn't misunderstanding him. I worried that the slightest misstep might escalate his nervous breakdown. He didn't say anything, but I got tired of standing around and he didn't seem to shake his head any faster, so I sat myself down ever so cautiously, as if there might well have been a land mine in the seat of the chair.

Avensis threw a final couple of bewildered looks around, but didn't seem to find anything to upset him. "Lasagna was always her favorite," he repeated, and by those words the spell was broken and his head was no longer gyrating. "I hope you like it, too, Coffeeboy," he said and motioned for me to help myself.

"Shouldn't we - uh - " I found myself struggling to string together even a coherent thought, something as complicated as an actual sentence was entirely out of reach. "Shouldn't we wait? For - uh - for her, I mean?" I indicated the empty seat from across of Avensis, where I had foolishly tried to sit down.

Avensis looked at me as if I had just suggested that we should have nail polish remover, to wash the food down with.

This was one of those situations where you need to mix it up - to shut your mouth and pretend like nothing, to change the topic post haste. I didn't. "It's her favorite, after all," I tried to explain myself, for no better reason than to dig myself deeper into this hole.

"She's not coming," Avensis said, turning away, looking out through the window and into the distance. "She's not coming," he repeated himself, quieter this time, with a wistful expression on his face.

I served myself some lasagna, silently cursing the Boss for having sent me to this house of horrors entirely unprepared. I was just savoring my first mouthful - it was quite excellent, really - when he repeated himself for the third time.

"She's not coming - back."