Part I

On Earth

Times on times he divided, & measur'd  
Space by space in his ninefold darkness  
Unseen, unknown! changes appeard  
In his desolate mountains rifted furious  
By the black winds of perturbation

--*The Book of Urizen* by William Blake

**$CHAP\_BREAK**

# 1

Vaughn Nash sat in last period Physics class, working furiously with pencil and calculator to determine whether he could buy his salvation. The math looked grim.

Even allowing for an optimistic fudging of the numbers, he lacked credit enough to buy what he desperately needed: muscle. Of all the people who owed him money, two were massive enough to defend him against the upcoming assault. Trouble was that neither Matt Symanski nor LeRoy Bell were in enough debt to Vaughn to stick up for him against a fellow jock.

*Loyalty*. That was what made this problem too expensive to fix. The 6’ 4” mound of aggression who currently had it out for Vaughn was also the new pitcher and star player of the Rockhart High baseball team. Ryan Church was the goon’s name, and despite his lack of humor he already had more pull with the right parties than Vaughn…than *Vaughn*, a pillar of the school’s underground economy. A few lucky genetic occurrences had conspired to provide Church with an 88 mph fastball at age 17. Therefore, though he’d just arrived in town this winter, he’d eclipsed the standing Vaughn had earned after accruing semesters upon semesters of debt and favors.

$PAGE

A burpy hiccup soured Vaughn’s throat.

*Hold on*. He exhaled, tapping his incisors together. Could he transfer Bell’s balance ($525.00) over to Symanski ($780.00)? Thus actually padding Symanski’s pockets with $255.00 hard cash on top of debt forgiveness? But no…the logistics didn’t work. What would happen is this: Bell would not pay his friend Symanski as promptly as he would pay Vaughn, the bookie who he needed to square with in order to place his weekly bets. Most likely they’d both end up resenting him for driving an awkward wedge of debt between them.

Could he make one of them pay up now? Negative. He’d only accrued both debts after the NCAA finals two weekends ago. He always waited a month to collect. One couldn’t break policy, not even in the worst of times.

The numbers hummed on the page. Giddy, chuckling traitors. Vaughn rubbed his eyes.

Usually money is a powerful ally. It bestows equality between blonde-haired, blue-eyed possessors of ideal fast-twitch musculature and sub-5’ 5”, sub-130 lb pipsqueaks who, in infancy, had weathered the difficulties of floppy baby syndrome. And Vaughn *skilled* at the money game. He’d gained his initial capital selling pirated Japanese games, unreleased on this half of the globe, along with the the hacked hardware to play them on. Then he’d taken up bookmaking, which was by now a sideline to multiplying it all at online poker sites. His funds bloomed. As his balance sheet told him, however, he was currently lacking cash-on-hand. His assets were frozen; he could hardly summon a drop of liquid.

$PAGE

Some would say the freeze was his fault. He’d miscalculated when he used his father’s name to withdraw winnings from an offshore gambling site. Miscalculated in thinking that Albert Nash would actually *welcome* seventeen grand instead of pooh-poohing its origin as not up to his “ethical” standards. He’d only faked his dad’s identity because he was less than two years shy of being able to claim the credit with his a checking account all his own. Surely the corporal punishment he now faced as a consequence of that chunk of change being out of his reach was greater than his crimes. He wasn’t depraved. It’s not like he’d *stolen* his dad’s identity. Merely borrowed it.

Shaking his head, he floated his pencil over the numbers, began to trace one last wishful + sign. But it was exactly at that moment that his brain completed the final triple-checked tabulation. Here was undeniable proof, he conceded with a hiss of air through his teeth: He was screwed.

$PAGE

¬

Preparation had to be made for possible side effects of 88mph-capable fists besieging the contents of a thin-boned skull. Same binder, new page, new accounting: In nearly 17 years on this planet, what had Vaughn Hamilton Nash accomplished?

*Vaughn Nash’s List of Singular Accomplishments*

*(descending order of importance)*

1. *Skipped the eighth grade.*
2. *Second base with Wendy Liu.*
3. *Dungeon Mastered longest single session of D & D known to local population: 22 hours; Campaign design flawless, i.e. never once fudged dice rolls.*
4. *Super Smash Bros*. *champion in region 2 yrs. running.*
5. *Won a series of five straight poker tournaments before moratorium affected against attendance.*
6. *Despite achievements 1,3,4 & 5 avoided violent encounters with predatory contemporaries. Avoidance achieved w/ minimal fake crying.*

$PAGE

Vaughn put his pencil down, smoothed out the sheet of loose-leaf paper fastened into his three ring binder, and read over his life’s achievements. Laying a delicate hand on his chest, he sighed. There in the final item was his last, desperate hope. The fake cry. He would have to become pathetic enough to make Ryan Church embarrassed to lay a finger on him.

The bell rang. Last period was over. A sea the uncondemned filed out of the classroom. The room emptied except for Vaughn and Mr. Kovak, the ancient physics teacher. “Nash, got a question?” asked Kovak.

“Can I borrow one of the 500 gram hook weights? Just for the night?” He eyed the heavy little cylinder tucked into the case with its fellows. It might allow him to land the blow needed to escape. He’d heard you could use rolls of coins for such things.

$CHALL

“No.” Mr. Kovak waggled his head unsteadily in the direction of the door, a motion that happened when he meant to nod. “You look pale. Get some fresh air.”

The fake cry it was. It’s an art only for the courageous. Sure, people think they’re brave when they grit their teeth and bear it, but that’s simple minded. A true strategist forgoes everything to accomplish his goals, and only those who don’t care enough about survival refuse to sacrifice, at the outset, something as useless as dignity.

Anyhow, Vaughn found his pride in other places. Brittle people learn early not to depend on their bodies. He found pride, for instance, in how thoroughly he had dressed Church down a few hours ago. In a sense the beating was a compliment.

¬

It happened in Advanced Placement European History, a class in which a jock recently transplanted from who-knew-what dirt farm in Tennessee had no place. Not that Vaughn was prejudiced. Church’s incessant questions over the prior three weeks had made it plain that he was outclassed. Not that Vaughn cared much for whether the lesson was interrupted. It was more the principle of limited excellence: A kid could not be *too* good at *too* many things, especially not if he was also good looking. Church had too many physical gifts. The line between athletics and academics was a venerated iron curtain, and Vaughn had arrived in class today prepared to repel this encroacher on his turf.

$PAGE

Subject: French Revolution. Focus: Maximilien Robespierre. Vaughn had done extra reading last night. He’d culled a small dossier from Wikipedia. The notes sat quietly before him on a single page that would not need to be flipped. Better to avoid exposing his extra preparation with undue shuffling of paper.

Ms. Fagan approached the white board. Her marker squeaked to work. Patiently, Vaughn awaited the first bray of frustration that Church would emit once his brain overreached itself.

He did not need to wait long.

*Blah blah blah*, Ms. Fagan began by way of summary. *Blah blah*, she said, describing the beheading of King Louis, then his famous wife. *Blah,* she continued, as Robespierre turned on his former allies and more famous heads roll. *Blah and then blah*, she concluded in summarizing the multitude Robespierre sent to the guillotine, given a place in history on strength of sheer numbers.

“So,” said Ms. Fagan, “this is a man who resigned his first big political position, as a judge, because he would not allow himself to pronounce a death sentence. Just over ten years later he’s this ‘Bloodthirsty Dictator.’ He sends thousands to death without trial. What happened?”

A question like that, one so rhetorical, a question that provokes anyone who even bothers to notice it’s a question to think to themselves, *Answer: History happened. You’re a history teacher and we know you teach History. Now get on with it*. Such a question was the exact thing to flummox Ryan Church.

$PAGE

Two seats in front of Vaughn, one column left, a tall back straightened. The vaunted throwing arm raised a few inches, paused to let the substandard brain form words, then shot up eagerly.

Fagan herself was surprised. Instead of continuing the planned lecture, her mouth formed a pale circle. “Oh,” she smiled in way that resembled, Vaughn thought, the trained smile of a referee in charge of shepherding stragglers through the Junior Special Olympics. (“Do I remove the first hurtle?” the ref wonders, “Will he remember to take a running start at hurdle number two? He forgot to run on the very first approach, poor dear.”) “Um, yes Ryan?”

“Well, I mean, that’s it. Robespierre doesn’t make any sense.” Church paused for breath. (Vaughn imagined the young hurdler struggle in inarticulate confusion. He’d been encouraged and cheered on the way to the starting line, but is now is faced with a sea of incomprehensible fluorescent knee abuse. What does it all mean?) “Like, it’s not like someone else was calling it ‘the Terror.’ Robespierre called it that.” Vaughn saw the blonde head bow down. Verifying that the text on page had not changed. “It’s, uh,” (And here the hurdler sees white lines on the red track and the green grass surrounding. He smiles with the insouciance of the Special, forgets his frustration, and wanders off the track to plunk down on the finely trimmed lawn.) “I just can’t hardly *believe* it,” Church concluded. (Somewhere in the stands, a father sobs.)

$PAGE

“Yes, well,” Fagan tapped the textbook. “It did indeed happen.”

She was about to go on but Vaughn couldn’t miss the opening. He started by entering the discussion on the side of the beleaguered (and he switched, in his mind’s eye, the image of the imagined simpleton with the real one, the star pitcher who needed a reality check). “I agree with Ryan that it does seem pretty unbelievable,” he said.

Almost too conveniently, Church turned to him, detestably well-defined cheekbones bracketing a smile. The rube thought he’d found an ally. “But only if we somehow forget,” Vaughn continued, “that, you know, a *Revolution* happened. Robespierre, early in his career, refused to execute someone on behalf of the government that he then went onto *overthrow*. After he overthrew them he every tool he had to protect the Revolution, to stop the real tyrants from returning.”

Church’s smile quickly flattened. “Yeah, but,” he said, “I mean, it’s like what’s the point of removing tyrants if you do the same stuff?”

$PAGE

“Fight fire with fire,” Vaughn swished his hand forcefully. “As Robespierre himself said, ‘Government in a revolution is the *despotism* of *liberty* against *tyranny*…’”

Confident that his cheat sheet was maintaining a low profile on his desk, he paused to let everyone comprehend that he’d (seemingly) quoted that from memory. After registering the familiar blend of admiration and resignation in the AP students around him, he went on in his own words.

“…You can’t possibly hope to fight those who kill by decree without killing by decree yourself. It’s an arm’s race. Simple as that. Get it?” He locked eyes with Ryan. There it was: A crimson flare in his opponent’s complexion.

The point scored, he’d fall back to await another opening. Fagan stared through her bifocals with a look of amazement. Probably her students had never extremporaneously quoted historical speeches.

Church, however, was not finished. “No way! That defeats the point.” He drawled. “What’s the point, you know, if you go and do all that killing?”

$PAGE

Vaughn shook his head. “The point is to win. To *not lose*. To stop the laws you revolted against from returning to punish you. You erase your enemy so they don’t erase you. Peaceful revolutions never happen, not real ones.”

His adversary then produced his strangest noise yet. It was something like *mmm* and something like *neyyyahhh*, all gumboed together in his southern twang. When the noise finally subsided Church said, “Well what about Jesus?”

Vaughn had to reconfirm with himself that he’d just heard that. And had Ryan really sounded *convinced* of its relevance?

He was barely prepared for such a gift. For a moment the image of the overwhelmed handicap hurdler returned to his mind, nearly eclipsing his view of the sought-after baseball star. For a moment, that is, Vaughn almost felt remorse for what he was about to do. But nah:

“What...” he savored each word, “about…Jesus? A…good question,” he raised a pensive finger to his chin. Behind Church he could see Fagan squirm with discomfort, but she was becoming a blur as he focused entirely on his quarry. “You would be referring, then, to Jesus overthrowing…what? Rome?”

$PAGE

Church’s jaw was clenched. By now he had to realize he was being mocked, but he answered like a good boy. “And, you know, Judea…Pilate. And Herod. All of them. At *least*.”

“Let’s see, you know, I guess I never thought of it like that. So let’s run through the happenings: Jesus starts his Revolution.” Vaughn really only knew the greatest hits of this whole sequence. Frankly, he didn’t know anything about Herod (were there more than once) except that he was a name in Easter Plays. Still, he could string them together well enough.

“…Judas betrays him. Jesus is a put to death…after a trial, but after a trial by the bad guys.” Ryan nodded. “But then, as we all know, Jesus comes back to life a bit later. Walks out of his tomb, and,” Vaughn snapped his fingers, “the Revolution is back underway! What were the decisive battles of that one? Oh yes, Judas vs. Judas’s conscience, Constantine vs. Constantine’s conscience: Two big victories!”

Church seemed like he was mulling a reply but Vaughn was on a roll by then. “But two major wins aren’t enough for Jesus. That was Robespierre’s problem, he won the early stuff but couldn’t lock the situation down. *Jesus*, though, *Jesus* leads a bunch of campaigns over the next several hundred years. The culmination, sending those Visigoths into Rome, was a brilliant gambit. But we should give him credit for softening the Romans with all of those full-frontal assaults. You know, that centuries-long guerilla campaign. All those Christians in high stakes bouts against all those lions.”

Ryan cracked his neck and said, stuttering, “What I mean is…you have to look at…it’s like…the world we live in today.” Vaughn cupped a hand to his ears, awaiting more. But that was the whole rebuttal.

Time, then, for the *coup-de-grace*. “So like I said, I never thought of using Jesus as an argument. But there you have it. All good things that ever happened were due to him, and all the bad things were just tests.” He raised his eyebrows in a show of welcome. “Are you going to sign up for AP Bio next year, Ryan? If so, I *definitely* want you in my lab group when we artificially inseminate a unicorn.” Church’s face turned red as carnage. He stood up, catching his yellow polo shirt at the edge of his desk.

$CHALL

“Mr. Church, leave it!” Fagan’s voice warbled. Church looked at her then again at Vaughn, like a trapped animal. He clutched the side of his desk and lowered himself, slowly, back into his chair.

Vaughn, right at this moment, was seeing red himself. This was strange because he’d taken the fullest possible swipe on this one. It was clearly time to congratulate himself on his victory and back off. But an odd thing happened. As he laid eyes on the bright red of Church’s stiff neck, a similar rage leapt up inside him. He felt an indignation at someone having got away with something, even though he’d been the one to get away with it.

Suddenly, the lack of a violent resolution made the room stifling.

Such moments happen in the lives of young men. They become enraged at a person and their ability to express what is making them so angry shuts off, constricted like the flow of blood through vessels shrunk by the adrenaline spuming forth from the same glands that began the cycle of anger. Thus afflicted, these young men will summon every insult available, even those with no relevance, to forge a smoldering bludgeon of verbal hate.

$CHALL

Vaughn cleared his throat, and spoke quietly through the murmur of class starting up again, as Fagan turned her back and marked up her white board. “What I mean to say, you inbred hick, is that you can spare us your Bible thumping and your stupid questions about things we all established before the fourth grade. Go back to your retard classes where they give you A’s because you can throw a ball *real fast-like*…” Impressing himself, Vaughn added a warped low-country accent at the end there.

So that was how Vaughn earned his beating. With no clumsiness getting out of his desk this time, Church was quickly standing over him. The brute spoke with a whisper, righteous in its clarity. “You think you can just get away with calling me crap like that? Nah, bud. You’re gonna pay for that. Today.”

¬

Vaughn now stood exposed in the science hallway. He had no choice but to make a go for his bicycle, blending with the crowd on the way. If he slipped out the library exit, then along the desolate wall on the school’s east side, he might escape the premises. Maybe then he could leave the country, or more likely fake sick and hide out for a few days in his basement. Lamping up in the basement for a few days and playing *Euphonia* until things blew over...thoughts of that arrangement made his heart ache.

In *Dungeons and Dragons*, and every one of the countless games derived from *D&D*, there is a class of character, the Rogue, who, with practice, can vanish into stealth mode and sneak past all of his problems. Sneaking is a Rogue’s bread and butter; it allows them to score all-important treasure without so much fighting. Vaughn had yet to develop a proper stealth mode, but he thought he understood the basic tenants. He scurried down the hall, head bowed below the average shoulder height of the student body surrounding him.

Presumably Rogues in stealth mode focused very minutely on each action. Vaughn’s mind drifted in currents of anxiety. Who would miss him if any vital organs ruptured during the impending fisticuffs? His mother: undoubtedly. His father: yes, but he’d also be glad to be relieved of a source of ethical compromise. His sister: yes. Selma would miss him, but his passing would probably be good for her in the end. She looked up to him an awful lot. This was bad because Selma was a spectacularly nice person. How spectacular? She was eleven, and a conspicuously not nice person like Vaughn was frequently shamed by how kind she could be—to strangers, to non-friends, even to classmates who teased her—despite the fact that Vaughn was otherwise shameless. Selma was so astoundingly generous that the unfairness of a sibling’s death would only grow her kindness exponentially. It would be for the better.

Vaughn’s *D&D* regulars would probably be happy to be rid of him. The fools had been making noise about limiting his autonomy as Dungeon Master. They had no idea what was good for the game, and if they did they never proved it by architecting anything in the same league as his flawless designs.

Back to Selma. Contemplating her response to his death had been a nice way to prepare for the fake cry. It underscored that difference between him and Selma that always puzzled him and occasionally threatened to pull the rug out from under his considerable confidence: that she somehow perceived the best in people, while he only saw the people. He tried to focus on his contempt for most of humanity, which, aside from his measly stature, might be his only persistent failing. With enough concentration, a lump of regret began to take form in his throat.

He was sniffling deeply, building up sinus interference for the fake cry, when he heard a small voice behind him. Selma.

“Vaughn?” Her arrival in a school she should not be in, just as he’d been thinking of her grieving his death, disturbed him mightily.

…ah, he’d forgot it was Tuesday. On Tuesdays she came to the high school in the afternoon for prodigy-level music lessons. He escorted her home on the bus.

“What happened?” Selma asked, looking up at her older brother. Her look of concern, like most of her qualities, seemed way beyond her years.

$CHALL

She let him gather his answer. He calmed down as he did. Selma’s presence helped him put things into perspective. This could end like any other Tuesday. Forget sneaking out of obscure side doors of the school. His bike had to stay the night on the rack. He had to do right by Selma, so he’d just to the bus area and ride home to sanctuary. If Church confronted him, he’d apologize and say he had to see his sister home. He wouldn’t exactly use her as a human shield, though maybe he’d hold her hand as a sort of protective ward.

“Nothing’s wrong, Sel,” he said, chuckling with relief, “I was just out of sorts because some meathead’s angry at me for making him look like the idiot he is.”

“You shouldn’t make fun of people.”

“Sometimes you have to. Honestly, some people are so, I guess, predictable. The only thing you can do is laugh and move on.”

“You should *not* laugh at people, Vaughn.”

“Okay, okay. You’re right, I’ll be nice to the simple folk from here on out.”

“Good,” she said. As they set off toward the bus pool she hummed bars of Bartók. They exited through the double doors at the back of the school. The afternoon light stung Vaughn’s eyes. The front steps were crowded. Though the day was done, most of the kids were lingering instead of moving on to their cars, buses, and bikes. Vaughn and Selma made slow progress through the throng. When they’d finally reached the end of the first landing, a wrathful voice boomed out behind them. “Nash!” *No*, thought Vaughn, *no-no-no-no-no-no-no-no*. Stealth mode! *Stealth mode!*

But stealth mode failed in its activation. He could not recede into the crowd. The damn crowd cut off his escape. That horrible chant began. “Fight!” they shouted. “Fight! Fight!”

“Nash,” said the voice behind him, “you little smartass.” Maybe it was because this predator used the surname Vaughn shared with his sister, maybe it was something more primal, but an instinct to protect Selma kicked in. His plan to keep her close was overridden before he could reconsider. He ushered her through small gap in the crowd, an alley through the humanity thronging the school’s wide front steps. Oblivious to what was happening for at least a moment, she kept walking long enough to be out of harm’s way.

Swallowing a mouthful of nothing, he turned.

Church was on the same landing. He started on some excuse for a speech. “You…I can’t believe you think it’s okay to say what you said,” he was saying. “I bet you think you can talk your way out of anything. Not today, smartass. Tables are turnin’.”

$CHALL

Vaughn’s lip curled into a sneer as he listened. His anger spiked, evaporating the reservoirs needed to muster a fake cry. So, with absolutely no recourse, he resolved to explain to the brute that the tables had not turned, and they would not turn even after he got his ass beat. He’d point out that Church would remain the same Neanderthal he was now independent of—

But Church stepped to him before he could offer these words, negotiating the breadth of the landing in one menacing stride.

“Please,” Vaughn whimpered, “don’t.”

Church grabbed the collar of his shirt. Vaughn watched in horror as a fist cocked back and rocketed toward him. He closed his eyes and swung his head away, trembling. He felt no impact. Nothing except the grip on his collar. He registered an ugly, tussive chattering…was it laughter? He opened his eyes, and saw that indeed the onlookers were cackling at him like hyenas. Warily he looked back toward Church. The fist was right in his face, but was no longer a fist. Over the laughter of everyone else he heard Church’s arrogant guffaw. “Look at this! No words left, huh you—” the last word was lost to Vaughn as Church snapped his fingers loudly in front his face, but the onlookers laughed all the harder.

Church tugged him by his collar, trawling him to the side of the landing. “Maybe next time you’ll think twice before you sling such crap.” Vaughn slumped against the cement railing and looked around at the high school fauna. Faces red with glee at his embarrassment, heads shaking at his lack of a backbone. He saw the swagger evident in the mere half-step Church had taken away from him, leaving him humiliated. The crowd parted for the winner.

$CHALL

The loser regained the fury that had flown in the instant of the punch. Screw this, Vaughn decided with a knot of rage in his chest.

He yowled in a pitch he’d never before produced. The heat in his chest spread through his body like a firestorm. He lunged forward to shove Church down the steps.

Church heard the screech and turned. He got around far enough to deflect the smaller boy with one elbow. Vaughn was sent reeling backward and landed on his butt on the upward step. A mere flick of the pitcher’s offhand had batted all his momentum backward. Even his dirty trick had failed.

Or so it seemed.

Vaughn’s eyes grew wide as Church stumbled back and teetered off the edge of the lower stair. The tall boy stared back at him with his eyes wide open. Neither could believe the ambush had actually worked.

Vaughn grinned, and the thrill in his chest seemed to flare up even more.

But then Church grinned.

And then Church, like a ballerina, pushed off his toes into a glorious leap.

But a bad glorious leap.

For the smallest moment, the 6’4” body seemed to float, lying horizontally on a pillow of air. The wind rippled Church’s yellow polo shirt. Then he dropped out of sight over the edge of the landing.

Vaughn stood and crept forward, wondering what was behind that grin. He saw Church splayed out on the stairs, unmoving. To one side of the kid a thick line of blood ran across the gray cement, and down the next stair. The blood pumped from a hole in Church’s arm, from which about three inches of jagged bone also emerged.

A detachment of kids ran off to alert the nearest authorities. Vaughn’s eyes followed their progress emptily. What had just happened? What had he done?

Selma appeared at the front of the crowd. She asked the same two questions, her small voice trembling.

$CHAP\_BREAK

# 2

After several teachers arrived and concluded that Vaughn had pushed Church down the cement stairs, they decided to send him home with his sister with the promise of discipline later. The ambulance had arrived as he and Selma boarded the bus.

On the ride home, Selma sat with Vaughn but didn’t talk to him. They sat near the front, and in the din of the bus behind them he could tell there were whispers about him under the usual chatter. This was a bus of underclassmen, too, looking down on him. One of the few juniors at Rockhart High without a car was now also considered a psycho. Vaughn and Selm’a stop was dead last.

Selma hopped off before him and hustled down the street. Their mom would be off work by now. Vaughn wasn’t sure whether his sister was hurrying so she could rat him out, or simply to get away from her reprehensible brother. Sel wasn’t disposed toward tattle-tailing, but this time she seemed really pissed off.

As he followed slowly behind her, his thoughts shifted to Ryan Church. Vaughn had been sure he saw him grin, which indicated that he meant to jump off the steps like he did. But how did that make any sense? Vaughn picked up a handful of small rocks and started hurling them at trees. He pictured the trees smiling masochistically as they were struck, though he missed more than he hit. Also, he was reminded of the many times he’d been laughed at before for throwing like a girl. He stopped winging rocks.

He brushed some dirt from his hands before remembering he was about to be late for something. The crew of adventurers he was traveling with in *Euphonia*, his main online game, had scheduled a meetup time in fifteen minutes. They were going to attempt a raid on a necromancer’s remote frozen lair.

Vaughn’s worries about Church faded as he thought about *Euphonia*. His nagging worry that Selma was going to tell on him ceased to press on him. He reflected on the character he’d designed. Vaughn knew the *Euphonia* rules in depth, and he’d leveraged every variable perfectly with this hammer-wielding barbarian warrior. Every swing of Abnaar’s maul had a genius of planning behind it. This well-bred fighter had eaten the right foods, read the right runes, and sacrificed the perfect combination of mythical creatures when forging his weapon.

In *Euphonia*, he knew the parameters would never conspire to mess with him. Today, reality had been amended to twist his life up. If everyone who was watching said he caused Church to fall, and no one had seen that weird smile, then there would be no question that Vaughn had caused it. Those were the rules of the real world. He was the only one who had seen them break for an instant.

¬

His mother’s car was outside the house, highlighting the risk that, if Selma did tell on him, he wouldn’t be able to play *Euphonia*. He entered, and walked through the house to the kitchen to try and gain his sanctum unnoticed. His mom’s white nurses’ jacket was slung over the back of one of the four chairs at the smallish table. Her mug, emblazoned with a picture of he and Selma sticking their tongues out, emitted a wisp of steam. She was leaning against the counter.

“Hey V. Do you want any tea?”

“No tea, thanks. Selma came in, right? She ran ahead of me when we got off the bus.”

“Yeah, she just went right upstairs. Didn’t say anything. Seemed upset. Something up?”

“Nope, she’s just tired. I could hardly get a word out of her on the ride home.” Vaughn dropped his backpack by the back door and started toward the stairs to the basement. “Sorry, I’ve got to meet up with some guys online.” Precious moments of computer time were trickling away, such moments as would be denied him as punishment in the near future. His hand touched the knob.

“Hold up a sec. I need to talk to you about that computer.” Vaughn rolled his eyes, but this lecture about limiting his gaming was one he had to endure on occasion. He’d learned long go that protesting only extended the talk.

Costuming himself as the bright, attentive son, he whirled back around. “’Sup?”

His mom was tapping her tea mug, mulling over what she was going to say. She was an old hand at the gaming lecture, so this didn’t fit. Vaughn began to actually pay attention. “When you built that computer…” she began, “did you use anything, any, um, parts, that you shouldn’t have? Like, that are somehow…illegal?” She let the question hang before adding. “You can tell me.”

This was out of left field. Maybe some of the stuff he’d won in online auctions had fallen off the back of the truck, but that wouldn’t implicate him. And it wasn’t as if, say, a graphics card fresh out of retail packaging was properly traceable. He ran a tally of his rig’s components in his mind. He knew could tell his mother if he’d installed a black market part. Unlike her husband, Victoria Nash wasn’t apt to freak out just because something Vaughn did broke a mundane law practically written by the companies they favored. She’d looked askance at his dad’s fury over the online poker winnings. Mom would’ve had no compunction about padding the old checking account.

But the computer was clean, as far as he knew. “No,” he said, honestly.

Now his mom shook her head. “That’s not what the two men from the cable company said when they came by an hour ago. They said they were supposed to check the serial codes on some part of your computer. They wouldn’t—”

“What!?” The fascists! “And you just let them in?”

That earned him a cross look. “Vaughn, you haven’t exactly left us in a stellar legal position with your little gambling spree. We’re lucky we aren’t being charged.”

“Ugh,” he groaned, “did you watch them? Did they copy anything? Upload anything?” His Mom shrugged. “Nevermind,” he said, “I’ll check it out myself.” He headed for the basement stairs, but then remembered the sword hanging over his head; word of the Ryan Church incident would arrive at some point. “But sorry you had deal with them. I’ll get to the bottom of it.” He scratched his head, and smiled. “Love you, Ma.”

She raised her mug. “You, too, V. Hope your bat cave is not entirely compromised.”

Despite this eery news, his step on the faded gray wood of the first basement stair calmed him. He’d figure out what the spooks had done, but for now he wanted to play *Euphonia* before he was grounded. Let the cable company watch that.

¬

The basement. *His* basement. Everything he needed was in his small room at the bottom of his house, which was in Scitico Gulch, which was at the bottom of Rockhart. The computer whirred as he booted it up; the fan he’d installed himself. When he clicked the dragon’s wing symbol that called up *Euphonia* the screen blinked just when he knew it would. Here was the world he preferred.

$CHALL

$CHAP\_BREAK

# 3

In disgust, he ripped the power cord out of his computer. The session in *Euphonia* had been sabotaged by the horrible machine. At the most critical part of the boss battle he and the others in the campaign had been working toward since yesterday, tragedy struck. The computer crashed to a blue-screen.

He massaged his temples. He could sell the whole contaminated rig for parts and build a new one…but all of his money had been unfairly vacuumed up by the poker site. He’d have to ask his parents for part money if he was not going to downgrade significantly.

His father. Oh man, his father. Vaughn sighed and flicked a tightly rolled booger into a dark corner of his hideaway. The poker winnings had been almost ten grand *post-tax*! Without pause for even half a thought, his dad had commenced railing about fraud and dishonesty. “What if you had wracked up a debt? One I had no idea about until they demolished my credit?” All that blustering in the face of the facts. Fact 1: Vaughn had not lost. Fact 2: Vaughn didn’t lose. Not in the long run, not ever.

As he contemplated exactly what $10,000 of computer would look like in place of the traitorous box in front of him, the unplugged machine lit up.

Flashes of gold then green light. These came not from the screen itself, but from the vents along the side and top of the monitor. A full-scale electrostatic meltdown. Vaughn kicked his chair away in alarm, but the flashing stopped. He stood and sniffed the air, but instead of the expected reek of fried plastic there was a strong waft that called to mind citrus and caramel. Despite the dim light of the basement he could see a wavering haze above the monitor. It looked like something within was boiling.

Vaughn pulled the collar of his shirt over his nose as a minor protection against fumes. As he wondered what toxic element smelled like caramel, the screen projected a brilliant golden light. Though it only lasted a second or two Vaughn’s chest, where the beam caught him, tingled afterward as if it had been irradiated outside and in.

He was about to clear out of the basement and see about other proper precautions, when a new light captured his attention. A glowing had appeared image in the center of the screen. It drew him in. As he leaned forward the image expanded to fill the screen.

There was no calling what he was seeing “graphics.” It was so real that it didn’t even seem to be photographic. It looked like a window into a real place. The window was flying across a landscape of cracked marble and broken metal, toward a distant, slender column. A golden sun was rising behind the column. Queerly, when Vaughn turned his head to see more of this place—adjusting naïvely like a geriatric playing a first-person videogame—the viewpoint adjusted at the same time. He could control it like his own sight. Also like his own eyes, he couldn’t detach himself. He physically could not look away. He broke into a nauseated sweat at the sudden awareness that he was somehow fastened to the computer screen as if by a phantom optic nerve.

He was zipping by a broad wooden structure to the left, and to the right a gloom impenetrable to the rays of the rising sun. As he looked forward again his heart was jolted by a sense of arrival.

Whatever land mass he was flying over ended with a cliff. A void yawned ahead, between the land’s edge and the distant column. Vaughn placed his hands on the desk and reared, vainly tying to stop this rush toward the edge. The phantom connection would not have it. His eyes ached with the unrelenting tug. Even worse than that inexplicable pain was the fact that he was still careening forward. He poured all his will into stopping himself—it was impossible now to not view the window as his own eyes. Vaughn could hear and then feel footfalls, his own, pounding the hard ground and he was finally able to plant his feet, and bring the insane course to an end. He had too much momentum, though, and tumbled over the edge into the bright nothingness.

Fear surged within him, but before he plunged into the cloudy emptiness an invisible force took hold of him. The grasp of the force provoked a feeling of neural horror far worse than the sensation of falling. It was like being enveloped by an ocean wave infested with little worms that meant to burrow into his skin. Whether this force was virtual or physical, he knew that it meant to devour him. His entire being shrieked, but he kept his mouth closed to the burrowing invaders.

The invisible, seething force tested his weight, bouncing him a few times. Following an unknowable logic, it ejected him backward out of the void. He still felt the basement desk under his hands, yet he also felt the solid thud of landing on stone, on his side. He caught his breath, rose, and limped away from the edge, toward the dark ruins he’d flown over. He froze when he heard new sounds.

$CHALL

Amidst the great chunks of masonry, something was approaching. Many things. He scurried up against a huge chunk of marble, and tried to look down a gap between this and the adjacent slab. He heard the scrape and clatter of claws, and deep, guttural hissing.

Though they were animal noises, the calls answered each other in a way that expressed purpose and communication. He wanted to run but there was nothing in the other direction except the bright, haunted void. Immobile with panic, he listened as the bestial voices came nearer.

The hissing stopped, and he could hear the scrape and clack of clawed feet walking closer. The claws stopped when their owner was on the other side of Vaughn’s marble slab. He heard, from low on the ground, a greedy sniffing. An animal tracking a scent. With two careful clawsteps the entity moved closer, feet from the edge of the marble Vaughn hid behind. He’d have to make some kind of run for it.

Over Vaughn’s shoulder came a stream of light—normal, light bulb light. He turned away from the screen, shocked and grateful at his ability to do so, and saw his mother’s shoes at the top of the stairs. When he glanced furtively back at the computer screen he saw that it was dark. Inactive, unplugged. “Vaughn!” His mother called sternly. He fled up the stairs.

¬

He pulled the basement door shut behind him. His heart seemed to be slamming itself against all parts of his chest, seeking a way out. What were they, stalking him through the ruins? What were the ruins? Had that happened at all? Was he going crazy?

“Vaughn, what happened today?”

His dad was in the kitchen, too. He folded his arms over his broad chest. “Want to tell us what the hell is going on?” His dad hadn’t changed after his shift at the shop. There were fresh smears of oil on his overalls. Vaughn, speechless, stared at the spots. Those were real, the motor oil and denim. They had smell and substance, things that computer images could not have. Computer images had no substance but light. That was some kind of audio-visual freakout. A stress hallucination? A symptom of some awful disease?

Vaughn rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans. Those grease spots. His Dad had obviously been working on another of the cars that he would never sell for more than he paid restoring them, and that was before accounting for time-as-money.

His mother cleared her throat and spoke.

“We heard from the school that you were in a fight. The other boy is in the hospital with a concussion and broken bones. Do you want to tell us what happened?”

Vaughn managed a few words. “I…uh. It was an accident. And he started it. And he was…is so much *bigger* than me.”

His dad looked at his mom, raising his bushy eyebrows. “What part was an accident?” his mom asked, “the woman from the school said you pushed this other boy off the steps.”

“Yeah. Well, no. I don’t know. I meant to push him, but I didn’t think he would fall. He’s a foot taller than me. Built like a brick wall.”

Walking so quickly into this inquisition was actually very calming. No matter how weird what had happened when Church had thrown himself off the stair, the mental distance that was building between Vaughn and the vision of that strange cliff was a good thing.

His father eyed him but didn’t (yet) launch into a lecture. Vaughn saw that he might have the old man’s attention. “I was angry. This kid, he accosted me in front of all these people. He made me look pathetic,” …now his father’s gaze softened…“So when he went to walk away, I pushed him.” ...but now his dad’s face changed as if he’d taken a bite of something rancid.

“You pushed him down the stairs,” his dad asked, “when he’d turned his back on you?” Instead of answering, Vaughn waited. He remained still, like a forest creature who sights a gun and, without knowing what it is, knows it’s trouble. “You pushed him down stairs *and put him in the hospital* when he was walking away?!” His dad shouted. The tirade was starting. Without meaning to, Vaughn nodded confirmation.

“You can’t be such…act like such a…” his dad’s dirty hand wiped absentmindedly over one of the grease spots, his face now a deep red, “…coward.”

“Albert,” his mom said, “relax.”

His dad took the deep breaths that were a familiar sight to his son, the attempts to enforce calm that came too late. “Vaughn. It’s just…here’s the thing.” He approached and moved the hand from the grease spot to the back of Vaughn’s neck. “People can be jerks, and they often deserve to be taught a lesson. But you cannot do it so sneakily. You cannot attack people when they don’t expect it, because then they don’t know what they are being attacked for.”

“Albert, that’s not what this is about.”

“Victoria, it is.” His father’s voice rose, but he took another restraining breath. “Son, people need to be faced head on not because it’s the brave thing to do. They need to be faced head on because if they aren’t then you don’t solve anything. They’ll feel they were in the right no matter what they did. They’ll even feel right to retaliate.” He stood, “that’s why you *can never*, even if they deserve it, go at someone when they don’t expect it. If you hit someone,” he waved his fist in front of Vaughn’s face by way of example, “you want them to know why you’re hitting them. Do you understand?” He pressed his knuckles lightly against Vaughn’s cheek.

The smell of sweat and motor oil, welcome moments ago, when it felt like a reminder that the world was a real place where computers didn’t throw you off and back on to cliffs, was caustic. The stench of so much work for so little gain. Vaughn turned away from the second faux-punch of the day. Another phony blow from someone trying to teach him another lesson.

He closed his eyes. He was weighed down by stubborn people trying to explain a world he already knew the facts of. Forget it then; he was done trying to confront idiocy. Let Ryan Church flunk out of AP History on his own. He was headed for a life of praising the arm God gave him until he became too old to close for a minor league farm team. Let Albert Nash dole out his admonitions: *Stand up for yourself but not in a way that will give you an advantage. Don’t take money that wasn’t earned per state regulations*. Vaughn would just smile and nod and give up trying to show people they were wrong. Better to save that knowledge for yourself.

“Vaughn, do you understand what I mean?”

To give up. To not argue with those you couldn’t change. It was not the lesson his dad meant to impart, but maybe Vaughn did understand. “Yeah. I do,” he said.

“Good. Well, you’re grounded. No computer for three weeks. The school suspended you for six days.”

As if he was going anywhere near that computer again. Staying in his room and wasting away in boredom was as good an option as anything. “Okay,” he said, “I don’t even like that game anymore.”

He walked up stairs, pausing at the top out of habit to eavesdrop.

“Well,” he heard his mom say, “I guess that went well enough. I hope that other boy is alright.”

“Uh huh,” came his father’s reply, “but why does he bother lying to us like that? We know he loves his game. Why did he bother lying about that? What’s to be gained?”

Though he’d resolved to divorce himself from any efforts to please his father, Vaughn felt a minor black hole develop in his gullet. “Albert, come on. You can’t hold him to such a high standard. He’s just a kid who doesn’t quite know how to fit in the world.” Wow *that* criticism came out of nowhere. Vaughn had thought he was rather skilled at fitting in the world on most days. With his mother demeaning him, too, the black hole turned major, world-devouring. He snuck to his room and tried to think of nothing until sleep took him.

¬

No school to attend; no internet; no desire to say a word to his parents in the evenings; and no desire on his sister’s part to engage with him. Vaughn was isolated. He spent the first night of his suspension pacing his room, thinking about rules. He had a thing for rules. Finding them out; playing around within them. He loved exploiting rules that worked to undermine those that were broken.

After hours of pacing, Vaughn realized what he needed to do. He’d invent the rules of a brand new game. Forget *Euphonia*, or *D&D*, or chess. Out came the pencils and paper. He scribbled for a long while, breaked twice to go to the bathroom, and finished scribbling. Hours later he had something to tape on the wall next to his bed. He sat cross-legged, and contemplated his overview.

*V. H. Nash’s Framework,*

*for the Great Modern Game*

* *LIKE CHESS, in that it is made up of tools with limited, defined functions and takes place in a limited, defined space.*
* *NOT LIKE CHESS in that it won’t take forever to learn, and your history teacher won’t be able to beat you while barely ever looking at the board when you spent six months of your life trying to get good. Also it will look WAY cooler than chess.*
* *LIKE VIDEO GAMES in that everything will be brightly colored and generally killer-looking, also new developments will be released to keep people addicted and putting cash money in my pockets.*
* *NOT LIKE VIDEO GAMES in that it costs a small fortune to keep up with, and old versions go stale. Not (necessarily) powered by electricity at all. (Cards? Board(s)?)*
* *LIKE MAGIC: THE GATHERING in that every piece has unique art. People can spend money to upgrade their arsenal…fwd: to cash money in aforementioned pockets.*
* *NOT LIKE MAGIC: TG in that girls should not run from players…girls should be into it, too. Art style should keep busty faeries at a minimum. Also people should not delay and hem and haw when I am beating them, they should just man up and make their moves like I do even with the end in sight,* ergo *quick thinking rewarded, but not essential. Timer?*
* *LIKE POKER in that wagers and gambles can be part of game.*
* *NOT LIKE POKER in that it is boring without money at stake.*
* *LIKE D & D because every player brings something different to every game.*
* *NOT LIKE D & D because it should have a low learning curve & not take too long to pull together a session.*
* *LIKE WORK in that time, effort, and attention are rewarded.*
* *NOT LIKE WORK because you don’t turn your brain off when you do it.*
* *LIKE SCHOOL because you make use of real facts.*
* *NOT LIKE SCHOOL in that it sucks it sucks it suck suck sucks, and is run by fascists.*
* *LIKE FUN in that it’s all you want to do.*
* *NOT LIKE FUN because it is useful.*

Vaughn turned on his bed and gnashed his teeth between long periods of utter stillness. He thought, and made progress. He approached a notebook, then backed away as more ideas came to him.

Eventually he became aware of his own stiff legs and shoulders muscles and began to pace. He rubbed absently at his sternum which, oddly enough, eased his general soreness. “It’s a question of converting real forces into simulated forces,” he declared in a hoarse voice. “Then a matter of knowing your competitor’s forces, when to bring yours against them, and how.” But there needed also to be chance and style, and something gained in the losing that was cool, though nowhere near equal to what was gained in the winning.

He stretched, and sneezed. Suddenly, with the rush of revelation, the rules of the game came to him. The rules began to arrange their own minutiae in his mind, keeping within the constraints he’d laid out. It was a perfect, golden framework that built on itself like revelation. “Yes,” he said, laughing, “That’s it! I’ve got it!” He was seeking a blank page in his notebook when he was distracted by a loud knock from downstairs.

He crouched by his closed door, listening for someone to answer. How anyone could be knocking this late at night? When no one else in the house moved to answer, he opened his black window curtain to see who it was. He covered his eyes, hissing in pain as the light of day assailed him. Somehow it was around noon of the day after the night he’d started his masterwork. No one had answered the door because no one else was home.

The knock sounded again. “Who the hell,” Vaughn snarled, still rubbing his eyes “could this be.” He tiptoed downstairs. He paused to look in the mirror in the small dining room as he passed through it toward the front door, and observed that in his long sleeved white tee shirt and smallish sweatpants he looked like an escaped mental patient. “Be normal for a second,” he told his reflection, “and tell this delivery guy to scram off your property like a normal human being.”

When he opened the door, however, he was not faced with a deliveryman. Later, he would remember that it was exactly at this moment that the golden framework of his game, his perfect creation, lost its shape in his mind, deforming like the great work of an ancient kingdom subjected to millennia exposure—leaving him with mere erasure and the broad suggestion of design.

On his doorstep stood an all-black pit bull as well as a figure with a bloodshot eye, a massive plaster cast, and a ludicrous smile on his face. It was Ryan Church.

$CHAP\_BREAK

# 4

“Hey there, bud.” Church said far too calmly, and followed with a far too earnest, “It’s good to see you.”

Vaughn He slammed the door in Church’s face, bolting it. ‘*They’ll even feel right to retaliate,’* his dad had said.

“Dude! I’m not going to hurt you!” Vaughn leaned a chair under the knob for reinforcement. The voice sounded again, “I’m here cause, well, I’ve been bored as anything, and I don’t know this town at all, really, but I did know that you were suspended and so you had to be home. So I looked you up.” A pause, heavy on the nerves, passed. “Also, man, got to to apologize.”

Vaughn responded tremulously, “That doesn’t make sense. I almost killed you.”

“You didn’t almost kill me. Take it easy,” replied the voice beyond door. No noise had yet come from the attack dog.

“You’re alright? No damage done? Then why do you look like your eye is going to fall out?”

Laughter came from beyond the door. “Nah. Just a few burst blood vessels. You should have seen my ankle when I shattered it taking a low pitch to walk a guy home in the Sandy Koufax finals three years ago. It swelled up like a grapefruit. Leaking purple puss—and all that!”

Vaughn sighed, not only because he was ashamed at barricading himself against someone with at least three broken bones, but also because he was reminded that the only sports injury he’d ever had was a jammed thumb from a passed basketball that he wasn’t coordinated enough to catch.

“Did you think I wouldn’t think it was weird that you came here?” Vaughn called out, “and how did you get here? I didn’t hear a car.”

There was a long pause during which Vaughn realized that, in his game-creating fervor, he might not have heard a helicopter buzzing the house. Still, his question turned out to be a good one. “Well, that was weird actually,” Ryan said thoughtfully through the door, “We drove here, but before we were halfway down your street all the dash lights in my pickup started blinking like crazy, about two dozen times, until the car totally shut off. Wouldn’t even turn over. The radio antenna was whipping like crazy, too, until it fell down across the hood…it had to be some electrical craziness. Anyway I was able to coast in neutral for most of—”

“Hold up,” Vaughn shouted through the door, “Who is *we*?” Had Church imported a bit of southern tradition up north? Did he bring friends in his pickup for a gang beating?

“We? Oh, I mean Pepper and me. Pepper, say ‘Hey Now.’” The dog woofed twice. It was impressive, but that the pit bull would obey its master’s orders to the letter did not comfort Vaughn. Church continued his rambling. “So anyway I could use a jump, too, if that’s possible…but also I think we need to start over, you and me.”

“My dad’s a mechanic. What I mean is, your truck could be in a worse place, but—” Vaughn caught himself. “Hold on. No. Sorry, but you got to go. I don’t know why you’re here but please just leave me alone.”

There was a full minute of silence before the reply came from the other side of the door. “Alright now, but first I should apologize for calling you out like I did. I just got real angry when you said all that stuff in class. I mean, I know you were just in a bad mood or something, but that ‘inbred racist’ stuff doesn’t really do me any favors. This school, and moving up here…anyway…it just really riles me when someone plays the white trash card.”

Vaughn kept the television off when he was home from school to avoid this daytime talk show crap, and here it was on his doorstep. “Okay,” he said, “you’re forgiven for getting angry. I’m sorry for insulting you and for pushing you down the stairs. So we’re good. You can go now, and we can ignore each other until the end of time.”

There was a jingle of the dog’s collar, and Church cleared his throat. “Uh, actually, speaking of that. I, uh, wanted to ask you about what happened with that, you know, that deal when you pushed me. No hard feelings about it, but there is a detail I had a question about. And, uh,” he cleared his throat even louder, “I don’t want to be rude about this but my blood is kind of thin from the meds I’m on…so walking home could be a little rough. Pepper could use a watering, too, if that’s doable.”

Vaughn did feel it was quite rude. It wasn’t his fault that this kid had stranded his injured ass in Scitico Gulch. “You need to convince me that you’re not going to tell your dog to rip my throat out or something,” he said. Not that he could think of anything that would convince him. “Sorry dude, but this is just way too abnormal.”

“Simple then,” came the reply, “You want to know what brought me down here? It was the right thing to do. *If you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others?*’”

Vaughn was perplexed by what sounded like some sort of quotation. “Are you asking me that?” Then he noticed the rhyme. *brothers-others*. “Or are you…freestyling or something?”

Church chuckled. “Nah, it’s Matthew 5:47.”

“Oh. Like…from the Bible?”

“Yes from the Bible. I was at home, reading, and when I came across that it hit me that I needed to come make amends. So here I am.”

This kid read the Bible? On his own time? Vaughn was floored by how far out of his frame of reference all this was. He wondered if he should be reassured by this, as Ryan seemed sure he would be, or if it confirmed that he was dealing with an extremist. But, then again, what was the point of religion if not to protect people from killing each other when there was no one else watching? “Fine,” he decided, “how about you give me another Bible line that shows me you think you’ll go to hell if you kill me. Then I’ll open the door.”

Church wasted no time. “How about I throw a little Matthew 5:40 your way: *If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*”

“Oh, come on, the turn the other cheek thing? Even I know that one.” He’d heard of it at least, though the specifics were news.

“No prob, bob. Romans: *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head*.”

Now Vaughn laughed. “Uh, wrong choice. That whole burning coals thing doesn’t really gel with me letting you in.” Though he said this, Vaughn had relaxed quite a bit. He’d probably only get in more trouble if he let the kid limp away and pass out on the road up out of the Gulch “Whatever.” He moved the chair, undid the deadbolt, and swung the door open. “Come on in.”

¬

Ryan Church was downright jaunty. Despite looking as if he should have three intravenous drip racks rolling behind him, he was bouncing a bit on his toes as he looked around the house. The old grandfather clock in the front hall jangled with the motion.

“Nice digs. I really like the seclusion you guys have going on down here.”

“The house floods a lot,” Vaughn said flatly. “But my dad can repair most of the stuff that happens.” Pepper did a lap around the downstairs and settled in the kitchen, where the boys joined him. This was the most composed dog Vaughn had ever seen. It stared at him as he entered as if sizing him up. He filled a soup bowl with water and placed it down.

“Can I grab one of those too?” asked Ryan. “Then you want to kick it outside for a sec? I’ve been inside for too long with all of this recovery crap.” Vaughn gave him a glass and waited while Ryan drank and refilled until he’d consumed about a gallon of water.

Vaughn rubbed the back of his head. “So, yeah, like I said I’m sorry for pushing you. And for embarrassing you in class.”

Church waved a hand at him and gasped between chugs. “Didn’t embarrass me.” This struck Vaughn as contrary to facts, and his face must have shown that he didn’t understand because Church put the glass down and said “I haven’t been embarrassed since I was baptized naked as a baby.” He proclaimed this in a canned *‘You know what I always say?’* manner that Vaughn just could not abide. It crossed his mind that he should stick to his resolution of two days ago, to ignore idiocy, but this he really could not leave alone.

“See, but I know that’s not true,” he said. “Exhibit A: It was me embarrassing you that made you call me out.”

“Nah, that was just anger. I get angry a little fast. But I don’t get embarrassed.”

Vaughn considered pointing out that anger doesn’t just appear, and in this case was *clearly* prompted by humiliation, but he decided to attack Church’s more elementally stupid claim. “You don’t get embarrassed? What if you were in school, completely naked?”

“That wouldn’t happen.”

“Do you know what a hypothetical question is? Whatever, fine. What if the girl you have a crush on walks in on you when you’re taking a dump?”

“Why’d she go and do that? If she doesn’t know what goes on when I walk into the crapper, then she’s not the sharpest tack around.”

Vaughn went on with his interrogation, convinced that there was no way this kid could be so unfamiliar with embarrassment, an emotion he felt so regularly. He ran the nudity and girl-you-like course until he exhausted the scenarios, then moved on to various sexual hijinks, which yieled nothing, then went down to minor things like nose-pickery that might hit a phobic nerve. Church replied to it all with some variant of “Well that’s just how things are,” or “Hey man, if I’d done that, I’d just have to own up to it.” Vaughn even tried some baseball related failures and flukes that should have chaffed this supposed prodigy. Dropped balls? Unfortunate diarrhea in those white pants? Church shrugged all of it off with the sort of self-comfort and sincerity that was absolutely unacceptable for a teenager.

“So you’re just going to play it like that? Deny, deny? Well okay then I just don’t believe you.” Vaughn crossed his arms. His statement was met with a shrug. He started to feel dumb for being so snappy. “Listen, I’m going to call my dad to see if he can think of with a quick fix for your truck. Might just be a matter of, I don’t know, tightening something or putting some fluid somewhere.”

“Don’t think so,” Church said, but just cracked his kneck and walked past Vaughn to the back porch.

Vaughn took the house phone from its cradle and dialed the autobody shop where his dad worked. When he put it to his ear he heard the cranky blare of a botched connection. He hung up, tried again, and listened. The same stupid noise. His cell was upstairs. He’d grab it in a minute, but for now he needed a breather after his failed interrogation of the world’s only shame-free man.

He returned to the porch. Ryan was leaning heavily on the outer railing. “Man,” he began in his drawling way, “Y’all certainly live near some awesome woods. I can’t even hear a car.”

“I guess,” Vaughn said, yawning, “but I like it more when it’s rainy. It feels more dense, more like you’re somewhere exotic.” Church smiled over his shoulder, nodding. Vaughn was suddenly chilled by the sight of that smile. “Wait, what was it you wanted to ask me about? Some detail from when I pushed you?”

Church’s expression turned serious. He began to rub his temples. Vaughn felt Pepper brush by him. Seeing his dog seemed to bring Ryan out of his momentary transfixion. “Okay, this is totally crazy, but I remember it perfectly. What happened was, when you pushed me, it was like my thoughts all rearranged themselves.” He tapped his fingers on the porch railing. “Like I switched sides on myself. I didn’t *see* me through your eyes, like I wasn’t actually hallucinating, but all of a sudden I was thinking of myself as the enemy. As I started to lose balance over the stairs I started to feel, like, *triumphant* inside. Like ‘Yeah I actually got him!’ But ‘him’ was me…so it was screwed up.”

Vaughn nodded, scarcely able to believe that his recollection of what happened was being corroborated. “I saw that too! When you were about to fall you started with this huge grin, it was totally bizarre.”

“*You* were grinning your ass off!” Church said. “And yeah, I felt like I was on *your* side. So then, it was like my mind was against my body so my brain, you know, made my body take the dive. Forced it to.” He shook his head slowly. “It was crazy.”

“Yeah. It was, uh, weird.” A chill went down Vaughn’s spine. It was like someone had inserted a bug into the code of human interaction without anyone but he and Church noticing.

Church clapped his hands, bringing them both out of their reverie. “Push me again,” he said. Vaughn didn’t need to ask why, and stepped to the kid with both hands forward. Church puffed his chest out a bit and the smaller boy fell back against he side of the house. “Huh,” Church shrugged, “I thought maybe you had some, I don’t know, magic touch or something. I guess it’s just one of those things you can never explain.”

Vaughn was incredulous. “That’s it? All of that and you just want to chalk it up as some mystery of the universe? If only one of us noticed it, yeah, it’s just some trick of the brain. But we both felt it, and saw it happen. Two people can’t witness something so out of the ordinary without there being an explanation.”

Right then Pepper, who had been so intensely calm, started barking. The dog bared his teeth and barked furiously at something in the woods off Vaughn’s back porch.

$CHALL

$CHAP\_BREAK

# 5

“Pepper! Down boy!” Ryan grabbed for the snarling dog’s collar but Pepper dashed off the porch and into the trees. With no thought for his injuries, Church leapt after his dog, batting foliage out of his way with his heavy arm cast. Vaughn was about to follow when he heard an awful sound. It came from deep in the trees, toward where the snarls of the dog were fast approaching. A low, rumbling hiss. Vaughn had heard the same sound two days ago in his basement, at the edge of that nightmare cliff. The hiss of the creature that been hunting him.

But all that had been confined to the computer screen. Sure, he’d developed some psychosomatic pairing with the images on the screen, but even granting that it wasn’t like any of those hallucinations could follow him up out of the basement. That made no sense.

But that *was* the same hiss.

“Ryan, stop!” he shouted, but it changed nothing. The other kid was out of sight. The way Scitico Gulch echoed, he could hear all the noises well. He heard Pepper’s barking change into a ferocious growl. He heard Ryan thwacking branches out of the way in pursuit. There was a wheezy roar and a high yelp before Pepper went silent. Hissing and clucking, almost like laughter, rang out before the monstrous sounds also ceased. Vaughn called for Ryan again, even walked to the edge of the porch, but received no response. Every part of him wanted to flee to the house and barricade himself in. Instead he ran down to the back fringe of yard, to the other side of the porch where his dad chopped firewood. He yanked the axe out of its stump.

He returned to the edge of the woods, gripping the axe. He couldn’t hear Ryan. He didn’t want to call out in case whatever else was in there turned its attention to him. But what if Church had lost the direction back to the house? He backed up the porch stairs, took a deep breath and shouted. “Over here! Back this way!”

Something charged. His heart pounded as he retreated all the way up the porch steps. His hands shook. He regripped the axe, gripped it low for a big sidelong swing. Eyes wide, he watched the border of the trees.

He could see the leaves shake just before what was charging him broke into full view. Ryan. He had a limp black mass held to his chest. “Open the door!” he shouted but Vaughn had already flung it open and pitched the axe inside. Ryan jumped up the stairs and into the house. Vaughn followed, and as he slammed the back door he again heard the guttural hissing noise. The thing was close, at the porch steps. Vaughn bolted the back door and ran to the kitchen window. He saw nothing in the back of the house but the boughs of trees waving up and down, disturbed by the passage of something tall.

¬

Church laid Pepper on the kitchen table. He put his ear to the dog’s muzzle and placed his hand on its belly. He gently ran his hands around the dog’s limp body, searching for wounds. “He’s alive.” Ryan said quietly. “He’s knocked out.” His glance snapped to Vaughn. “Nash. The front door.”

Vaughn ran to the front and replaced the bolt and chair he’d used to keep Ryan out. He checked the garage to confirm the car entry was shut, then latched the door to the house. He braced another chair against that door. “What was it?” he asked. “Not something that’s going to be opening these doors right? Like, some kind of animal right?” He tried to smile, to intimate that they were overreacting, but his half-grin only caused Ryan to go and check that each door was firmly blocked. Vaughn followed. “Did you see it?”

“I saw something, yeah.” He was gazing out of the back door now, at the woods. “Don’t know what it was. It had white skin. But not like a person. I don’t know. I didn’t get a good look.”

“Was it big?” Vaughn asked.

Ryan nodded. “Bigger than a person.” Vaughn ran upstairs and found his cell phone. It had no service, not even an emergency option. This was strange, because though the depression of Scitico Gulch confounded all sorts of signals, his dad had installed an antenna on top of the house so the family’s phones would never be without service. For a moment Vaughn trembled with anger at his father’s shoddy work. Of all the times for the antenna to fail…but then he realized that though Albert Nash did plenty wrong, he did not build shoddy work.

He returned to the kitchen. Ryan was stroking Pepper’s back. “Is your cell working?” Church shook his head. No surprise there. “Okay,” said Vaughn, “we need to get the police here.” He checked the house phone again, but again heard only the yack of the broken connection. But it was okay, his dad had made sure he knew how to work the antenna. He explained the signal-booster to Ryan.

“So I’ve got to go fix it.”

“You can do that?” Ryan asked.

Vaughn nodded. “Even if the power went out there’s a dedicated battery for it in the attic, and a generator.” Probably whatever weird static had scrambled the land line had done the same to the antenna. If he shut it down the charge would disperse, and he could flip it right back on. Same type of thing he had to do about five times a week with the wifi.

Ryan returned his focus to the dog. He gathered up the kitchen tablecloth in a bundle around Pepper and began rubbing to warm him up. Vaughn opened the basement door. The breaker box was only a few steps down, but he felt a shudder looking down into the dimness. He hadn’t been back down there since his experience with the computer screen. He took a calming breath, hefted the axe in one hand, and walked down. His hand found the thin metal door of the box. He popped it open.

By the light of his cell phone he found each of the breakers for the whole house and flipped one at a time. Instead of hightailing it back into the kitchen, he shined the meager light downward. He took a few steps. With another steadying breath, he turned on the basement light. There was nothing there, just his former sanctuary. It was becoming clear that his mind was hyperactive, capable of a totally freaky hallucination because he’d been stressed; the fight with Ryan, his computer’s apparent demise at the hands of of some monitoring device some cable company goons had installed…it had been far from a typical week. He shook the axe at the ugly gray computer, “I’ll deal with you next,” he vowed, and climbed back up. Threatening an inanimate object put him at ease. He left the axe in the kitchen as he passed through.

Upstairs, he pulled down the attic trap. It was dark in the hall outside his room and darker up in the attic space, but he was calming down. A desperate fear had hit him when he’d heard something in the woods that his brain translated into a hiss, and such an irrational fear was not the sort of thing to form plans of actions upon. His suspension from school was nearing its end, and he’d have to join the real world again soon. What must have got the dog was a black bear. It was amazing Pepper was still alive. Bears like that weren’t common in this region, but neither were they unheard of. He had to get the police and animal control over here STAT.

In the attic, behind a blockade of recently stowed summer clothes, he found the orange light of the battery’s kill switch.

$CHALL

He reached for it and a static discharge big enough to see in the dark zapped his hand. He swore, but reached in again and clicked the battery off.

He gave the charge a good minute to disperse, then turned it back on. He watched his phone. No change. He turned the phone off then back on. Still nothing. He cut the power again, this time for twice as long, and waited twice as long before turning his phone on, too. Dead. “Of course,” he sighed, shooing away a creeping panic with the sound of his own voice, “of course I have to go all the way up to the stupid roof.”

¬

Vaughn opened the double attic window and popped his head out. Outside all was still. The early spring air was cool, but the afternoon sun kept the roof warm. Carefully he hoisted himself onto the window frame, his back to the two-story drop. He boosted himself off the windowsill. Nothing moved below him but as he struggled on the eave he imagined a starving bear watching him from the woods. Here was a yummy, dangling piece of meat about to be tenderized and immobilized by a generous fall. He yelped as his elbow scraped backward over the shingles and his weight swung downward. He kicked franticly and his feet caught the edge of the house as his forearm caught in the gutter. He was able to prevent himself from slipping off. Scared even to breathe he found the top of the window frame with his toe and pushed upward again. This time he was able to haul himself over the eave. He crawled up the main pitch. As he neared the apex his toe slipped, but spreading flat on his stomach allowed the friction of his clothes on the shingles to catch him.

When he had a good hold over the ridge of the roof, he craned his neck to have a look at the antenna. He had to inch his way closer to believe what he saw. The thick aluminum rods had wilted like boiled spaghetti. The antenna was draped down the roof. The parts had melted into each other and fused. He poked at the mess, half-heartedly trying to stand it up. It was bonded to the shingle.

How could this have happened? Even had it been struck by lightning it wouldn’t have been so deformed. He drew a quivering breath. Before he could shimmy back down the roof, however, something in the back yard caught his eye.

A doe walked slowly across the clearing of the yard, not far from the woodpile. Deer were common in Rockhart, especially at the edges of neighborhoods circumscribed by woods. So at first Vaughn fixated on the deer as a welcome sign of normalcy. Wild life was going about its business, and that seemed to give some hope for his life to return to the way it used to be. But then he noticed the way the doe was walking.

She was ungainly, as if one of her legs was injured but she couldn’t determine which. The limp seemed to circulate between all four legs, making her amble unnaturally. Cold disgust pinched Vaughn’s stomach. As the deer continued her grotesque progress he saw she was moving toward another moving something. A pale twitching shape extruded from the trees, like a spider, but not quite. A hand. A large white hand. Not Caucasian white, but the white of an albino or a deep-sea creature. It somehow beckoned the doe.

The trees prevented Vaughn from seeing anything attached to the hand from his high vantage. It looked human, though the fingers were improbably long. These fingers moved constantly, as if playing invisible piano keys. As the deer approached, Vaughn realized that the rhythm of the hand’s small movements fit rhythmically with the haphazard pace at which the animal took each incongruous step forward.

The doe reached the edge of the yard. She sniffed the hand, and nuzzled it. The fingers, in turn, ran up the doe’s snout, petting it. The doe’s back leg kicked once, hard, as if in instinctual rebellion from the rest of her body, but in an instant she was all still again. The thumb of the hand slipped under the animal’s chin, slid toward its neck. A sickening crack resounded through the yard as the hand wrenched the doe’s head up and backward. The body of the deer dropped to the ground. Vaughn watched in clammy silence as it was dragged partway into the trees then twisted and tugged at, devoured by something just out of his line of sight.

He drew a slow, silent breath, and slid one hand along the roof, so he could get a view of the thing. Every time he picked his hands up even a little they were shaking. Still, he worked his way right until he had an angle on the creature. It crouched in the shade of the trees, hunkered over the kill, picking it up with one hand to tug out strips of gore. Its torso, which he could see in profile, resembled a primate’s except for the lack of fur. The bright white skin ceased at its waist, giving way to some dark fur that didn’t stand out enough to see.

The head did not belong to any primate Vaughn had ever heard of. The skull was massive, and it curved up and out in the back in a way reminiscent of a triceratops—a comparison that leapt into Vaughn’s mind on account of the pair of long black horns that jutted out of the long forehead. The thing’s face, spattered and darkened with the deer’s blood, was the site of a wide maw that flashed a long teeth bright with the blood of its kill.

Vaughn closed his eyes and wished that this thing would be gone when he opened them. It remained, glutting itself. Worse, far worse, the forest behind the crouching monster stirred before disgorging *another*.

The newcomer was hard to see at first because the only bright white showing was of its totemic face. There was an exchange of guttural noises and low hisses. Briefly, Vaughn had a hope that this predominantly dark colored variety might try to kill the pale original for the meal. The pale one merely tugged at the deer’s rear leg until, with a louder and wetter noise than the breaking of the animal’s neck, the haunch ripped away. The second monster removed its dark covering—a garmet, not fur—down to its waist, exposing a similar white torso of fearsome musculature. It accepted the bloody meat like a gift.

At this display of pack intelligence Vaughn ducked behind the peak of the roof. He could hear the distant pop and crumble of splintering bone. He descended the roof, heedless of his slippery palms, only taking time to wipe the cold sweat from his hands before lowering himself back over the eave to the attic window. He had to tell Ryan. That they had no phone was no longer the worst news.

¬

“They’re *dressed* in black? They *spoke* to each other?”

“Yeah. And the first gave the other a piece of its deer. And, Christ, the way it killed the deer…I don’t even know.”

“Don’t take the name in vain,” Church spat out reflexively. Vaughn’s jaw dropped, and he grew light-headed from the massive irrelevance of the comment, but Ryan went on. “We need to block the doors better. No, wait, we need to get out of here. Does your dad have a gun? Do you?”

Vaughn blinked, and shook his head. “No, he doesn’t. All I have is a crappy pellet gun. Let’s see, uh, we have the axe. A kind of spear thing for killing raccoons that nest in corners of the attic, um…”

$CHALL

Eventually they amassed a tire iron, a wood softball bat turbaned with old rags, and a pair of water rifles along with two cans of gasoline. Pepper came to while they were gathering everything. After walking exclusively jagged lines for a few minutes as if he was drunk, the dog seemed to pull himself together. Vaughn was watching out the front door while Ryan, who had become quite pale, fortified himself on bananas and peanut butter before they uncapped the gasoline to fill the squirt guns.

As he came back through the hall, Vaughn stopped in front of the grandfather clock. He felt a chill in his bowels. Had he not checked the clock this whole time? It was 2:57pm. A deadline had passed, a deadline he could not believe he had ignored. Two minutes ago, the bus from the middle school had dropped Selma off a quarter mile down the road. She could be walking down the driveway any second, oblivious to what was out there.

¬

He dashed into the kitchen and grabbed the bat, a gas can, and a stove lighter. He ran back to the front door and kicked away the chair. His hand tremored as he flicked open the bolt and pulled the door wide. Ahead of him, the cracked expanse of the driveway, curving out of sight as it turned and ascended fifty of yards of woods to the street. A blue pickup truck run slightly off the road at the bend. Nothing else out of the ordinary, not visible.

He tipped the gas can off the front steps, pouring the clear liquid over the rags on the bat. He looked up, saw his sister come around the bend of the road. She saw him, and the gas can, and shouted, “Vaughn what are you—“ She fell silent when a tall figure stepped out of the trees between her and her brother.

Here it was then. None of his motions felt fast enough. He stepped off the stairs. Drew the stove lighter from his back pocket. Thumbed the safety, clicked a flame into existence. Flame caught rags. Rags were engulfed. His legs felt stuck and slow though he was running at a dead sprint. The black figure, it’s back to him, had not moved. He would not let it move. The flame atop the bat roared, devouring the wind as he raised it high.

For the second time in his life, the third time that week, a place inside Vaughn emitted a silent howl. Wrath. *I will beat you down*.

The pale thing turned.

A dark hood was tented over its horns, making way for the stare of eyes with too much intelligence. These big, dark red eyes caught a flicker of the fire as Vaughn swung up at its face. The thing dodged sideways, giving the boy a chance to place himself between it and Selma. He jabbed the lit torch at it. “Sel,” he shouted without breaking eye contact with the thing, “run back to the street, find help!” He jabbed again. The thing took another step away. It exhaled heavily out of broad nostril slits, and opened its atrocious mouth. Through the opening and closing of that wide, clicking mass of teeth came bursts of hissing like the threat of a massive lizard. These noises were the same as what he’d heard coming from the woods, but now there was a total change in how he heard them. They had meaning, and he could hear the meaning in his mind as if it was real language. “So frail,” the creature uttered in words that somehow caused Vaughn’s chest to reverberate, “such a *waste*.”

Though baffled, Vaughn knew he only had one answer to all this. He leapt forward and swung the bat wide from his hip, to catch the flame on the thing’s robes. Instead of dodging again, it slapped down at the torch with an open palm and, in a flare of sparks, sent the bat flying from his grip. He yelped with the shock that ran through his hands from the impact, but his shout was cut off when the creature’s other huge white hand grasped him by his throat. It lifted him off the ground. He stared at the terrifying face. Blurry white crowded his vision as he suffocated.

Hoarsely he gasped for breath. He heard screaming. The cool air, he needed it to stave off unconsciousness and save Selma. But without warning the air began to burn his nostrils. It carried an acrid fragrance harsh enough to rouse his senses and make him understand what was happening. From over his attacker’s shoulder came a squirt-gun stream of clear liquid. An amber piss stream of hope, just within reach. Breathing deep the astringent smell, Vaughn used his last oxygen to reach back, pull the stove lighter from his pocket, and jab the sleeve with the the spark. Fire bloomed before his eyes. He fainted.

¬

When he came to he saw a pile of smoldering black char. The air stank of burned plastic. Pepper was running around the pile in wider and wider circles, his nose to the ground. Pepper’s owner was raging. “That freak!” Ryan bellowed. He stood at the edge of the woods, visibly restraining himself from running into them on his own. “I’ll find you and take you both down, you freaks!”

Vaughn pushed himself up. Neither Selma nor the attackers were anywhere to be seen. His groan turned into a sob, but before he lost it completely he saw the black pit bull in front of him. Pepper emitted a high bark, and crouched with his front paws spread, looking up at Vaughn. The dog was ready to hunt. Vaughn wiped his tears on his sleeves, took a deep breath, and called to Ryan voice. “Where is she? Did Selma get away?”

His face flushed with anger around his bloodshot eye, Ryan looked like a madman when he darted over. “They took her. They—”

$CHALL

his face shrunk spastically in anger. “We need to arm ourselves. We’re going after them.” He dashed back toward the house. Vaughn kicked the burned pile and found it to be nothing but the mostly ashen remains of a great black robe and a warped hunk of plastic barely recognizable as a squirt gun. Ryan returned from the house, thrusting the axe toward Vaughn and testing the weight of the tire iron in his unbroken hand. “Pepper,” he said grimly, “get on ‘em!” The dog loped into the trees. They followed.

¬

As they ran through the brushy woods Church explained what had happened while Vaughn was unconscious. “After you set him on fire, I intended to roast him up fully but the dang squirt gun gave out. So I flipped it and clubbed the freak with the tank so it broke over him. That got him blazed the heck up.

“But then your sister saw that you were in the dirt. She started coming back. Nash, I told her to get away.” Church’s voice cracked with anger and regret. “‘*Run,’* I said. I screamed it. But she didn’t hear me, man. She didn’t hear. The other thing came out of nowhere—out of the woods—and just scooped her up on his shoulder. She was struggling, Nash, and hard. She was kicking and biting. But it took her.”

*It took her.* Those words hung bloated in the dank air of the sunken woods. Vaughn tried to say something, but couldn’t. He vaulted a dead log and ran after Pepper.

“We might have had him, man.” Ryan said, keeping up on his right. “Pepper and I were rounding on the creep when it happened. It got me. It was like…I don’t know, like how you got me when you pushed me on the school steps. But different. And worse. I froze. Like I *got* frozen. My legs, my arms, my shoulders; it all just locked up. He was doing it to me, too. He had his hand held out at me and was locking me up.” Recollecting this caused Ryan to uppercut a small sapling with the tire iron, ripping it from the ground. “It was like what I said you did when you pushed me, turned my mind on my body, but the other way around. My body was totally in that freak’s control and I was stuck on the inside and could *feel* it overruling me every time I tried to move. Then the other guy got Pepper.” Ahead of them, the dog paused at his name but when no command came he put his nose back to the trail. “Pepper was doing good. He was ripping at the legs of the one with Selma when he was froze by the one you burned. That thing had somehow got the burning clothes off and walked up without even looking at me. Then it just turned Pepper’s lights out with a wave of his hand. *Ugh*,” he spat, “he was awful to look at, white like a shark and scarred up. Dinosaur legs and a fat ass tail.

“The one we burned took Selma—she was still screaming and struggling, you know, not hurt that I saw—took her from the guy who had me and left. The one with his hand toward me walks up to me and I can’t do anything and he gives me this awful look. He takes his other hand and just presses the two together in front of my face and as he does this I can just feel my body going dead from the outside in. I felt myself die one part at a time. I knew I was a goner, so I was just praying so hard to God and then the death comes up my neck.”

They had made their way to the bottom of the gulch, where the vegetation had thinned out. “But you didn’t die. He must have just knocked you out.” Vaughn said. His mouth was dry and speaking was hard, but it was important to say that. Ryan didn’t die, nor did Vaughn. They’d been at the things’ mercy but left to follow them or report them to the cops, the National Guard, whoever. But why? The question was too much of snag to dwell on, though. They needed to find a cell signal, but priority number one was keeping the trail hot.

“No, I didn’t die,” Church agreed with a snarl, “so now I’m going to find them and take them down.”

¬

Pepper stopped to wait for them near a place where the thin brush of the deep gulch seemed, from a distance, to be clear-cut in a large circle. As they drew nearer Vaughn saw a large hole was sunk—or dug?—into the soft earth. Maybe ten feet down a floor could be seen, composed not of the rich brown of the surface dirt but a deep, and oddly loose, red sand. The floor continued into a dark tunnel. Two sets of clawed tracks lead down the tunnel.

Faced with pursing those things into a dark, closed space, Vaughn registered the folly of their desperate pursuit.

$CHALL

“Listen,” he said to Ryan, “you don’t need to come with me. You should go tell the police about this...or tell them something that will get them down here. I’ll follow them and try to keep tabs, or delay them, or…something.”

Ryan had already found a thick, semi-rotten tree trunk and begun dragging it over with his one good hand. He shook his head. “Nah. I got the dog. He can track, but he won’t for you.” Vaughn helped him tip the long trunk into the hole, forming a wet, rotted, but workable ladder. He tossed his axe in where it landed with a dull thud. “Someone should go tell the cops though,” Ryan conceded.

Vaughn stopped an uneasy scramble onto the log. That was the sensible thing to do, wasn’t it? Let Ryan keep the trail while he mustered the full force of the law. Surely it was the logical course. Yet even as he settled on that reasoning he was seized on the inside of his chest by a visceral rejection of leaving the trail.

This was no pseudo-sensation, either, no mere shot from the hip or a call from the gut. It was from the chest, right behind his sternum but close to the top of it, inches below the V of his throat. An intensely unpleasant sting from that spot persisted for as long as he considered the logical path of leaving to alert the authorities. As soon as he decided to get himself further on the trail to Selma, the stinging relented. His body was making the choice for him. He tried not to think of how this bizarre somatic effect related to the hallucination about his computer.

Ryan saw that he meant to descend. He nodded. They both climbed down, and Pepper scrabbled down the steeply angled tree behind them, eyes wide and nervous but determined. Vaughn picked up his father’s axe, clicked on the stove lighter, and they entered the tunnel.

¬

Less than fifty paces in the tunnel walls were encrusted with black crystals. These mineral deposits reflected and refracted the small lighter flame, expanding it into a weird gray glow that reached usefully ahead of them. Pepper lead with his snout to the red sand floor. They walked a long way, past a handful of snaking turns and downward slopes. But they kept a good pace because the tunnel never forked. Even without the dog the clawed tracks of the kidnappers were easy to follow. Neither boy said a word.

When they emerged into a chamber two or three times the size of Vaughn’s bedroom, they saw something was wrong. The room was a dead end, and Pepper lost the trail immediately. The claw marks simply ended a few steps into the cavern. Grinding his teeth, Vaughn hurried around the cavern’s perimeter in search of some sign. Nothing. Tears began to blur his vision. “Aw, god,” he moaned. “Where is she? What the hell is this place?”

He wiped his eyes, tried to push back the feeling of helplessness, and looked around the cavern once more. The walls in here were made of a smooth, polished version of the dark crystals in the tunnel. Even stranger, the chamber appeared to be a perfect dome but for the exit back into the tunnel, as if a bubble of hot magma scalded its way outward at this spot until it found a weak point in the stone where it melted through and surged up to the surface. Vaughn didn’t need to be a geologist to understand that had to be close to what formed this cavern, but he also knew this explanation couldn’t be right. There had never been volcanic activity in Rockhart, nevermind in the woods just behind his house. Furthermore, he’d never seen this sinkhole or tunnel before. These were not deep woods, and he’d played in them his entire childhood. Something inexplicable had happened, and he had a sense that he was standing at the epicenter.

Church whispered quietly into his ear. “Do you think they backtracked? Went down a side tunnel we missed?” Vaughn shook his head. He hadn’t so much as blinked as they’d come down the tunnel, because backtracking and confusing the trail with multiple branchings was what he’d have done if he had a mind to shake pursuers. He was sure there’d been no other paths.

A numbing truth bludgeoned him, freezing his guts like the clock in the hall of his house had freezed him when he saw it and knew that he’d failed Selma. He had no plan, could do nothing. She was gone.

Through the shock, he felt something on his shoulder. Ryan’s hand. He looked at his former enemy. Church’s looked defeated, as Vaughn felt. He wondered if it was normal sympathy or another display of what, if he were reaching for words, he’d call an empathic connection…until he discovered he didn’t care. He only cared that Selma was gone. “I...I should have—” Church shook his head, and was about to speak but his eyes suddenly lit up. He turned his head.

Voices were coming down the tunnel.

¬

Waiting in the dark amplified all sound. Pepper’s panting seemed cacophonous. Ryan’s raspy, struggling breath reminded Vaughn of the other boy’s serious injuries. Gradually the tall haggard figure, casted arm hanging limp at his side, became visible again. A light was approaching the cavern where they waited, pressed against the smooth walls on either side of the entrance. The formerly muddled voices became distinct, human words.

$CHALL

“—still here?” asked a young woman.

“If it was I don’t imagine it would let us get this far in without harassment,” replied a calm male voice in some gentle British inflection Vaughn couldn’t place.

“So it got away?” replied the woman.

“It knew what it was taking from the lab, so, yeah, I think we can conclude it’s already gone through.” This came from another male voice, with an American accent. After a pause, the same man said, “Sol, next time I advise you to let me shoot.”

“My friend,” the first man said, “I’d sooner die than kill a new sentient being—stop, this must be the convection point.”

Whoever these people were, one of them wanted to shoot the creatures that took his sister. This was enough to win Vaughn over. “Hey out there,” he called in a hoarse voice, “don’t shoot this time either.

There were three quick inhalations and a shout from one of the men. “*Dios!*”A pause followed, then the British man spoke calmly. “Who is in there, and how did you come to this place?”

“Two of us in here,” Vaughn said.

“And a dog,” Ryan interjected.

“Uh,” Vaughn cleared his throat, “I live here. Like, above ground. In a house. Nearby.” He breathed deep to quell the electric panic in his chest. “And well, these freakish white things took my little sister. And it sounds like you might know what I’m talking about.”

There was a long pause. “You’re the Nash boy.” The man said.

Surprised, Vaughn stepped into full view. “Yeah, that’s me.” His voice faded to a mousey whisper as he saw a shotgun leveled at his chest. He’d never had a gun pointed at him before, and for a heartbeat he could only watch the barrel and imagine the shot jettisoning outward, ripping through his heart and lungs. But he recovered, and looked up.

In front of him were two men in white lab coats and a teenage girl in a hoodie. The man with the gun had the look of a thrown-together pack mule—a utility vest hung over his white coat. He wore a hard plastic backpack. The other was a tall black man made to look even taller by the mane of dreadlocks that hung below the shoulders of his white lab coat. The taller man, with his outstretched, open palms and calm look on his face, assuaged Vaughn’s anxiety about the gun ever so slightly. The girl, who couldn’t be much older than Vaughn, looked like the odd one out of this trio and not just because she had no lab coat. Her straight dark hair was shorn to bald on one side, exposing her scalp. She had a big silver nose ring, too.

Vaughn’s mind gathered this sight and in the same moment set to calculating what to do, and what leverage he could use to get information out of the strangers. One side conclusion his reptile brain reached was that a girl this beautiful would traditionally be in Ryan’s league, yet the anxiety and deviance suggested by the nose ring, black on black, and *half*-*shaved head*; assembled a report that favored someone more anti-Establishment, like Vaughn.

What the hell did *that* matter? What was *wrong* with him?! Great: he had leverage over Ryan in a situation massively more normal than the one he was currently in. He thought of these things abstractly, in the throes of mental asides. Thankfully, in the measure of another breath his mind was dominated again by thoughts of Selma. His eyes returned to the shotgun barrel . “C—could you?” he eked out.

“Christ sake, Los, lower the gun!” This came from the girl. The stalky man dropped the gun, looking surprised that he’d still had it raised.

“My young friend,” the man with dreads said in his soothing voice, “I think it’s best that you tell us what you saw, and let us handle things from here.” Vaughn opened his mouth to tell him that that would *not* be the way things went, but unexpectedly felt a wave of relief. Here was someone with authority, who could make sense of things.

He heard Ryan limp up behind him. “Nah man, you all tell us what *you* know. Like Vaughn’s name. You know, like how you know Vaughn’s name.”

It took Vaughn a fat second to parse out what exactly Ryan had said, leaving alone why he felt it was helpful to say, Vaughn waved his hand to tell the newcomers not to bother answering.

“No, I don’t care about that right now. You,” he pointed at the shorter man, “Los, right?” Los nodded. “You said that the white things, the aliens, had *gone through*. Crossed through what, and how do I follow them?”

There was no question about who was in charge. Both the girl and Carlos looked to the dreadlocked man. His glasses obscured his eyes, reflecting, as they were, the gray glow of the crystals lit by flashlight, but he was plainly scrutinizing Vaughn. Seeking, Vaughn thought, a sign that he could make the boys cry off and let the pros handle things from here. He watched the lambent eyeglasses and gritted his jaw. After most of a minute in silence, the man stepped forward and placed one large, delicate hand on Vaughn’s shoulder. “Vaughn Nash, I’m Solomon Burke. I’ll show you where they took your sister.”

¬

Carlos had protested briefly, but at a gesture from Solomon he shuffled into the center of the cavern and slung off the backpack.

“We’ve been studying this site for some time now,” said Solomon, “Naturally we had an idea of who lived in close proximity. Albert and Victoria Nash, two children of 16 and 11: Vaughn and Selma. This place, what we were studying, is what you might call an eddy—an eddy in a very curious body of liquid. I’ll try to explain in a way that is comprehensible to—”

Vaughn interrupted him. “Please, we can’t waste time. I do care what those things are and where they came from, and I want to know if there is some freak radiation or something near my house, but right now I just need to know where they took Selma.”

Sol took a deep breath. “Well, I don’t exactly know where,” he said, “but we will be able to follow them there.” He walked Vaughn over to where Carlos was working in the center of the stone room. Carlos slid a ceramic tube out of the pack. He set the tube to the side, and took out a spool of measuring tape and a yellow barrel on a tripod that turned out to be a laser level. He set to measuring the cavern.

Vaughn cracked his knuckles impatiently, but knew he could only wait. He addressed Sol. “So, give me the short version of what is going on here.” Church, patting his dog’s back, seconded the request for an explanation.

“We are standing in a locus of thermodynamism that is, more or less, perfect.”

“Huh,” said Vaughn, and tried to muster the focus to at least remember the science babble, if not understand it.

“For several years I have studied this site, covertly and under the direction of Dr. John Gareck. We found that, through what you can call a miracle of thermoconductivity, physical entities can be transported from here.” Sol paused, and seemed to be rechecking his synopsis in his head.

“Transported to?” Church asked restlessly.

“Elsewhere. A considerably distant elsewhere.” Sol crouched next to Carlos to check his measurements. Satisfied, he picked up the ceramic tube, uncapped it, and worked with almost reverent caution with Carlos to slide a core of gray, chalky material onto the red sand. They positioned this in what they must have measured to be the exact center of the chamber. They packed up the measuring tools. Alone on the cave floor, the lonely little gray tower resembled an ancient idol, awaiting an offering.

“Professor Gareck embarked from here 22 days ago. He has not sent back the packages he was supposed to. Per protocol, myself and Mr. Velazquez here are to follow after 28 days incommunicado. Early this morning, a break-in at our laboratory by one of the entities you encountered has engendered two outcomes: First, all the venting solution the Professor and I had been manufacturing over the past three years was stolen except for a supply that I kept separate and known only to myself; Second, I concluded that we must pursue Professor Gareck without further delay.

“The rest of what has transpired,” Sol pointed back up the tunnel, “is evident from the situation we now find ourselves in. We are all of us in this together now. That being the case, I’m glad for the extra hands. Speaking of, allow me to formally introduce my assistants Carlos and Luisanna Velazquez.” Everyone exchanged curt nods.

“Now then.” Solomon produced a small black case from an inner pocket of his coat. From the case he drew out a test tube filled with a metallic yellow liquid. It looked like a large batch of gold nail polish. “Carlos, gunpowder cannot be party to the reaction. Boys, I’ll also ask you to discard any combustibles you may have on you. Place them outside the chamber.” Carlos laid the shotgun on the dirt floor of the tunnel, and dropped a half dozen some spare shells next to it. Vaughn tossed out the stove lighter. With his flashlight, Sol directed everyone to stand in a circle around the gray cylinder. Ryan knelt by Pepper, stroking the dog’s head. Vaughn held the axe like a cane, pressing the head of it into the soft sand.

Solomon withdrew the stopper from the test tube and poured the liquid over the gray object. As the solid and liquid contacted, a wave of dry heat radiated out. Vaughn glimpsed the cylinder burst into sparks before the reaction threw up a spurt of burgundy smoke that quickly filled the chamber. He tried to wave the smoke from his face. He wanted to see the sparks again, because he could have sworn that instead of bursting outward they were condensing inward on the cylinder, an explosion in reverse. The gas was too thick; he couldn’t see anything. He didn’t want to breathe this stuff in. Impulsively, he looked to run out of the chamber, but the air was so thick with swirling gas that he’d lost track of where he stood relative to the exit. The three strangers’ flashlights had been totally obscured by the smoke.

Someone called his name. Ryan. “Nash! Man, are you staying?” Ryan spoke severely, not giving a damn whether the newcomers heard his mistrust.

$CHALL

“I just… I have to,” Vaughn said, his voice betraying even more terror than he’d known was in him just then. He breathed in more smoke, couldn’t help it. “Ryan, get out of here.”

“No can do.” Ryan said, calm now that the call was made. “We’re all in this together, right Sol old boy?” No answer came through the deep red, except series of brilliant flashes. Pepper whimpered. That was when the floor began to melt.

As Vaughn lost track of the ground beneath his feet, he thought he was falling backward, but as he tried to step back and catch himself he found he didn’t know which way backward was. Forward either. The flashes grew noxiously bright. Everything had taken on the lingering pink of heat lightning. Even if he closed his eyes the brightness continued to escalate. He tried to shield his eyes, but moving his hand toward his face resulted in his having to pull his arm across an extraordinary distance, and slowly. It felt like, while still organized as his ‘arm,’ every molecule in that organization had spread apart by inscrutably large distances.

Worse than the elongation of distance was a weirding of time. Time passed, but to Vaughn’s inner clock it passed in a warped way that he couldn’t quite. Time passed, but to Vaughn’s inner clock it passed

Judging by the speed of his heart

most of all his

minutes, and months were all jostling

seconds, minutes, and

hundred palpitations in less time than a single breath

tried not to think of anything but

most of all his

heart Judging by the speed

fought to form a rhythm with his lungs

senses of smell and taste aligned themselves with his respiration. He inhaled a fast taste like combination of salt and lemon peels. Vaughn exhaled hours of burning caramel. It was, at least, a refuge of wrong sense from the storm of nonsense. He fought to keep a rhythm with his lungs and lost

tried not to think of anything but

most of all his

heart Judging by the speed

Worse than the elongation of distance was a weirding of time.

¬

Abruptly, everything compressed and became coherent. Before Vaughn could reorient his senses, his hand was accelerating with great speed toward his face.

The heel of his palm smacked into his nose with a cartilaginous thwack. The surrounding smoke cleared and he saw, through teary eyes, everyone else lit by their flashlights, standing in the same circle on the same red sand. There was no trace of the cylinder in the center of the cavern. Dazed, Vaughn noticed a fading taste of lemons and salt when he breathed in, but no caramel came when he exhaled. Normalcy, he thought, had been restored.

Part II

The Village

Departing; departing; departing:  
Leaving ruinous fragments of life  
Hanging frowning cliffs & all between  
An ocean of voidness unfathomable.

The roaring fires ran o’er the heav’ns  
In whirlwinds & cataracts of blood

--*The Book of Urizen*

# 6

Vaughn squelched his natural questions about what the hell had just happened. All that mattered was that he’d arrived, intact, to the place Solomon had spoken of. They needed pick up Selma’s trail. Before he could say anything about that, there came a thunderous slam of stone against stone.

A chain of great cracks echoed as, somewhere over his head, the cavern ceiling fissured. Another slam sounded, a sledgehammer colliding with the cavern walls. Vaughn instinctively threw his arms over his head. He hissed in pain as a chunk of rock fell on his elbow.

$CHALL

“They’re taking the place down on us!” He shouted. Covering himself, he ran until his shoulder crashed against a smooth wall. He pressed against it, hoping the worst collapse would be in the middle of the room. He looked on as the searching beams of the scientist’s flashlights fell on Church.

Ryan’s face was bright red and tear streaked. He was in a state of mute, desperate panic. Pepper circled him in sidelong leaps, barking. Luisanna gasped. Vaughn watched Ryan raise his arm and saw the dark, glistening thing attached to it. He slammed the arm against the wall, trying to knock the parasite off. This caused the most colossal hammering noise yet. The flashlights scanned quickly around the cavern. There was no sign of the creatures that had taken Selma. It was Ryan who was about to bring the place down on their heads. Vaughn dashed toward him.

“Stop moving!” he shouted, but Church didn’t hear him. “Ryan!” He dodged around the black dog and grabbed Ryan’s upper arm, careful to stay away from whatever clung to it but desperate to stop the hammering.

But no. No freaking out now. Selma needed him. Vaughn summoned every ounce of will and wrenched Ryan’s arm back. “*Stop it!*” He bellowed.

His meager tug did little to restrain the much larger, much stronger boy, but Ryan did stop. His hysteria subsided. Vaughn’s words had got through. Ryan looked over his shoulder at him, his eyes red with veins yet no longer uncomprehending. They both turned their attention to the thing affixed to Church’s forearm.

Vaughn had taken it for some kind of giant leech at first, but now he realized it was nothing alive at all. Two chunks of either rock or metal were embedded in the arm where Ryan’s cast had been. The cast had been blasted away, but Vaughn could see the sticky outline of where it had been. The black ridges ran the length of Ryan’s forearm, splitting the arm lengthwise into three sections of meat.

“Get it off.” Church gasped. “Get it out of me.” But it was not coming out. On the upside, blood loss was not a threat here. There was no blood, not even an incision or laceration where the shards had entered Church’s arm. They seemed instead to be growing out of the skin, like fingernails from cuticles but with more evident violence. Like they’d burst out all at once.

“No,” Vaughn said, holding Ryan’s gaze steady as he held his arm. “There’s nothing we can do now. We need to hurry.” Ryan gave one more queasy glance at his new deformity, but nodded.

Their new companions had located the cavern exit. The flashlights also illuminated a stream of dirt falling from the ceiling. That colossal hammering. How was it Ryan had managed to nearly cave these rock walls in?

The axe lay on the red sandy floor nearby. Vaughn grabbed it, inspired by a sense of possibility. “Something’s weird about those things,” he said, nodding to Ryan’s arm, “It didn’t hurt when you were bashing them against the wall, right?”

Ryan shook his head.

“That’s weird as hell, right?” Vaughn didn’t wait for confirmation. “Hold your arm out.” He flipped the axe so the flat back of the head would lead. Ryan saw what he intended, and though his face was drained of color, he offered his arm.

Vaughn raised the axe, but hesitated when he heard a voice just behind him. “It seems that his fracture was contaminated by the convection current.” It was Solomon, examining Ryan’s mutation.

Carlos looked from Sol to Ryan’s arm, and looked far more eager than his superior. “Go on,” he said, “have a swing.” Vaughn did.

On contact the axe sprang backward. Vaughn lost his grip, and Carlos only barely evaded the axe as it caromed backward through the air, tumbling into the sand. Vaughn ran to fetch it with Carlos on his heels. The thick metal wedge of the head was obliterated, split almost in two from the flat side. Wood splintered out under and above it. The whole business end of the weapon was ready to fall off. Vaughn left it where it lay. He had a far better hope for saving his sister in Ryan’s screwed up arm.

Carlos bent over Ryan’s arm. “I wonder how it generates such force,” he said, “maybe a magnetic aberration? Or some kind of fossil of the tetradimensional patterns in the convection current? *Mmm*,” he grunted, “I can’t wait to run tests!”

Vaughn glanced back at Ryan, who was letting Pepper lick the hand of his deformed arm while he lifted his shirt to run his fingers along three sharper ridges of the black matter that protruded from the right side of his ribcage. Those fractures had mutated as well.

$CHALL

“Test it later,” Vaughn said. “We have to move.” Solomon and Luisanna had found the only exit to the cavern, and the clawed footprints that trudged up the tunnel.

¬

Vaughn ran as fast as he could, but this tunnel was steeper than the one on the other side of the conveyance that Solomon had brought them here on. His lungs burned in his chest. Pepper caught him up. He and the dog pressed on until they surpassed the reach of the flashlights behind them. Heaving and blind, he had to stop. This tunnel was also longer.

As he clutched his knees and hyperventilated in the dark, the weight of all this change caught up with him. Where was he? He was in a place that must be home to those monstrous pale creatures. Them and what else? And why had they taken his sister, and not him or Ryan? For what reason had he been able to follow them here, and not been eviscerated on his driveway, for his parents to find and wonder, pulling their hair and crying and swearing, what had happened and where their youngest, the good child, was?

He reached out in the dark for the black dog. Pepper nuzzled his hand. There were too many unknowns to be rushing in blind pursuit without a good plan, but did he have a choice? Only now, when he paused to assess the situation, did he realize that he’d been foggily holding on to the hope of tracking the creatures to where they took his sister and simply calling the police. He needed to leave that idea for dead. He kicked at the sand. The variables had changed. Now he had to account for the fact that this place, wherever it was, was the enemy’s turf. He needed an advantage. There was no guarantee that those rocks on Ryan’s arm would be enough to turn the tables. Even with the element of surprise, a weapon capable of bringing a cavern down would just as likely hurt Selma as her captors.

The others rounded the bend in the tunnel behind him. Vaughn turned to the lights. “Before we go a step farther,” he announced, “we need a plan.” He addressed the three newcomers, “Now’s the time to tell me what you know.”

¬

What they knew was not much. At least—and Vaughn was well aware he could trust only what he knew first hand—what they *told him* they knew was not much. Solomon and Carlos knew the theoretical details of the “thermodynamic convection,” that had brought them here, and of that none of them could yield any useful information before deferring to mathematics way over his head.

“It’s basically worm holes,” Luisanna told him, by way of translation, speaking over her older brother’s insistence that the spacetime exceptions in play were quite different than that. FIND THIS At least, Sol told him, the eligibility for this place as an output from the “current” they had entered through the “eddy” in Scitico Gulch inherently meant it was safe. Air could be breathed, blood would neither boil nor freeze. Small comforts, but not to be taken for granted. This was, they explained, decidedly another planet. Finding out where in the stars they now stood was one research goal among many.

It is remarkably easy to brush aside the awe of arriving on a new planet when someone you loved was in lethal danger. Unsatisfied with his new companions’ information, Vaughn saw no choice but to continue forward. Church commanded Pepper to hit the trail again. As they started to march Vaughn felt a hand on his elbow. Luisanna fell in stride beside him. “I’m sorry about—what’s your sister’s name?”

“Selma.”

“Selma. Well, Vaughn, we are going to find Selma. She’ll be safe. Sol says this is all just a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding at first contact.”

“Sol has no idea.” Vaughn muttered. “They hypnotized Ryan—or paralyzed him, or something—without touching him. They’re monsters, and they’re smart. I don’t think they misunderstood what they were doing when they took my sister.”

Luisanna fell silent. He glanced over at her. Her head was bowed, her half-head of dark hair cascaded down the far side of her profile. Cast against the sparkle of thousands of crystals, she looked beautiful. The sight stirred him, and made him sad. “But thanks,” he sighed, inviting a regretful look from her eyes like polished bronze. “I mean, thanks for saying something. I hope you’re right. Just a misunderstanding.”

As they climbed final steep stretch of tunnel, a sunlit opening resolved into view: The exit. They picked up their pace, but on approaching Pepper stopped and emitted a cautious growl. The dog stalked toward something on the ground just inside the cave mouth. As Vaughn crept closer he saw it was something lying in heap. Something like a person. Beyond could be seen a reddish, treeless landscape, *terra incognita*, but Vaughn’s attention was drawn to the downed being.

It was not human, but nor did it resemble the things who took Selma. It was much thinner, though like the pale things seemed to be over seven feet tall under the mass of brown fabric that pooled around it. Its skin was a warm blue-black tone that made Vaughn think of a Hindu deity. The thing had two wings, one splayed outward toward the exit and the other bent back awkwardly under its body. The pinions of these wings would have seemed black but for the green and blue that shone at the edges in the alien sun. Its head, bulbous on slender shoulders, was bald except for ivory horn stubs that protruded a few inches before ending flatly. The half-closed eyes were golden and they continued to stare up at nothing even as a long dark hand reached up and snatched Vaughn by the wrist the moment he bent within reach. The thing yanked him close with a martial twist of his arm.