

The Roomer

Zenna jolted awake at the sound of a door slamming. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, her surroundings slowly coming into focus. Her room was bathed in the pale moonlight, which cast long shadows that elongated her furniture to create ominous, humanoid shapes. Swinging her legs around the side of her bed, she listened intently. Her mother's voice carried upstairs and Zenna could hear her checking someone into the house. Roomers, as Zenna called them, were temporary residents who inhabited her mother's large house. Zenna was always intrigued by the personalities that came through her front door. This one had arrived at night, imploring her to unlock the roomer's secrets.

Zenna rose and began placing her feet in the precise areas on the floor that would not creak upon impact; in this old house, she knew how to traverse silently. She made a circuitous path across the hall and toward the wooden stairs. Her mother had stopped talking, so Zenna assumed the roomer was finished checking in. She hurried inside a closet at the stair landing and left the door open just a crack, barely in time to stand still as a man's silhouette reached the bottom of the stairs.

She felt his presence before she saw him. A cold breeze drifted up the stairs as he came into view. Every nerve in her body stood on end as she took in the sight of the stranger. His shoes were simple loafers with reddish mud splashed on the sides. He wore gray slacks that dragged the floor when he walked, and were too wide for his bowed legs. His black trench coat traveled from his knees to his neck. She made the mistake of looking directly into his eyes; if his presence was cold, his eyes were colder. Framed by round, wire-rimmed glasses, his left eye seemed to be slipping off of his face, drooping below a relatively centered right eye. Zenna shifted her focus downward, desperate to look at anything but his vacuous eyes, and saw he carried a worn briefcase with the letters MJW engraved on the front.

As he came up the stairs, he paused at the landing, tilting his head. Zenna was sure he knew she was hiding, and braced herself for a confrontation, but he merely continued around the corner and up the rest of the stairs, as if nothing had happened.

Realizing she had been holding it, Zenna finally let the air out of her lungs. She remained still until she heard the door click shut to a room adjacent hers. She slowly opened the door of the closet, making sure to shut it behind her, and pranced up the staircase and into her room before her mother could catch her eavesdropping. She would find out more tomorrow.

When she passed the man's room the next morning, she thought she heard static crackling and several different voices arguing in a foreign language. Zenna contemplated this. Her mother owned a radio, but it was the size of a cabinet and resided in the basement. They could not afford two-way radios, and if they could, they would have been confiscated by officers for use in the war. If the man owned a radio, it was not an American device.

Zenna realized that she had been idling outside the man's door for too long. Before he might see her, she ran downstairs to the kitchen for breakfast with the other roomers. She encountered the familiar scene: Flossy and Dahlia were quietly discussing the news with the paper between them, and Grace was at the burner, addressing anyone who would listen, "My cousin signed up for the draft again. This time, he's Malcolm Johnson from Queens. Just about nobody can keep that boy out of the war," she huffed.

Grace smiled when she saw Zenna. "Morning, darling," she said.

Zenna returned the smile and addressed Flossy. "What happened today?"

Flossy turned away from her conversation, an annoyed expression on her face, "What's it matter to you? You're too young to understand the ways of the war. Stay out of this business, it'll do you some good."

Zenna expected no less of a scathing response. Flossy had lost her husband and son to the war, and had every right to show her bitterness about it. Dahlia gently took Flossy's hand, giving her a brief reproachful glance before turning to Zenna. "There were five brothers killed in action on a sunken ship last night. The entire family, gone in minutes."

Zenna's breath caught in her throat, thinking about what would happen if her entire family were lost in one day. She had no siblings, but her father was already off to the war, and she braced herself every day for a downcast officer to come to the door, but knew no amount of preparation would keep her heart from crushing under the weight of his death.

"Thank you for telling me," she said to Dahlia. She tried to give Flossy a reassuring look, but she seemed to be deeply invested in the contents of her coffee mug.

Despite the warm weather, Zenna felt cold breeze rush through the kitchen. She knew he was there before she turned around.

The man from the night slowly entered the kitchen, and his disheveled appearance shocked Zenna. More reddish mud caked his shoes, his thinning hair was up in spikes around his head, and his glasses were askew. Zenna doubted this man had slept at all.

He clutched his briefcase as he made his way across the room, and Zenna noticed different letters engraved on the sides: RTL. She also noticed a ring on the middle finger of his left hand depicting an eagle with blood-red talons and a screaming beak. Without a word to Zenna or the other roomers, he reached the front door, pulled it open, and hobbled out into the daylight, closing the door behind him.

The women began chattering immediately about his strangeness, but Zenna paid them no attention. She pushed away from the table and hastily put on her converse, practically running toward the front door to try and see where the man was going. She almost made it, but her mother called her from upstairs. Zenna grudgingly turned and followed her mother's voice.

She was sitting on the couch, reading a magazine, her glasses perched pretentiously on her nose. She glared over them at Zenna and said, "You must get your allergy medicine today. You're running out, and we can't afford to take you to the emergency room again."

Zenna was annoyed, and glared back. "I know, mother. I was just about to leave when you called."

"Were you? Or were you following the new resident?"

Zenna could feel her cheeks burning, but said nothing, not wanting to give her mother the satisfaction of getting a rise out of her.

Her mother pulled off the glasses, placing them and the magazine on the ottoman as she sat up. "His name is Augurus Trier. He worked at the state department, and was just transferred here to DC to work as an air raid defense warden for our block. It is the warden's job to turn on the siren and initiate the blackout to protect our city from airstrikes." Zenna knew about the blackout drills; shutting down all possible lights made it difficult for enemy aircraft to target the city. She had heard stories about entire cities going unnoticed when the citizens adhered to blackout regulations. Her mother continued, "He will only be with us temporarily, but we need his payment. Don't scare him off with your infernal curiosity."

Zenna tensed. She knew her somewhat childish investigations of the roomers had gotten out of hand before and had lost her mother money, but this was different. Zenna doubted with every fiber of her being that Augurus Trier worked at the state department.

She sighed and attempted to seem timid, “He scares me. I have no desire to learn more about this man.”

Her mother looked skeptical, but apparently decided against arguing, “Get your allergy medicine. And while you’re at the pharmacy, pick up our allotted blackout materials. The air raid defense station supplies each family with window shades, black cardboard, and glass paint. There may be a blackout tonight.” She picked her glasses back up, turning her attention to the magazine. The conversation was over.

Zenna was used to her mother’s terseness. It arose from having to survive without anyone to help support her or her family. Her mother was cold, but she was unassailable.

Zenna turned, making her way down the stairs, to the front door and out to the road where she would board the streetcar and embark on the habitual route to the pharmacy.

She sat in the back of the streetcar, watching the jagged cobblestone road pass by. Her transfer to the bus would come at the fourth stop from the station she boarded near her house. The driver was approaching the third stop when an alleyway caught Zenna’s eye. She sat bolt upright in her seat, craning her neck to continue looking at the alleyway as the vehicle came to a halt.

She was positive that the reddish-brown mud carpeting the alley was the same material that was caked on Trier’s shoes. Her heart pounded, and she strained to take in as much information as possible about the area. The apartment buildings framing the alley were indistinguishable from almost any buildings in Washington, DC, but the distinct color of the mud was enough for Zenna to memorize the *tableau vivant* before her and sequester it in her mind.

The driver pulled away from the stop, and only the jolt of a large pothole on the tracks was able to pull Zenna out of her stupor. She nearly missed her own stop, as she was too busy contemplating the exploratory opportunities of the day ahead. Augurus Trier’s room called to her, beckoning her to unlock its secrets.

She caught the bus to the pharmacy and air raid station to pick up her materials, all the while thinking about the endless possibilities of what Trier could be up to.

She hopped off the return streetcar and ran to her house, pushing through the front door into the kitchen. She handed the standard-issued box of blackout materials to her mother, who was

chatting with the roomers at the kitchen table. Ignoring their quizzical looks, Zenna bounded up the stairs to find Trier's room sealed shut and quiet save for peculiar humming noises. She could hear her mother beginning to work with the others to set up the blackout materials throughout the lower level rooms; she figured she had enough time to investigate Trier's room.

Zenna considered the door. She could not acquire her mother's keys, and even if she could, she suspected Trier had set up some sort of jury-rigged lock on the door in addition to the doorknob itself. She went to her room and pulled a metal clothing hanger off the wall. She straightened it, bent it into a curled "L" shape, and shoved it unceremoniously under Trier's door. She carefully turned it so that the end of the hanger was hitting the door's handle on the other side. She took a deep breath and altered the hanger's movements infinitesimally, turning it to curl around the handle. When it caught, she yanked the hanger down and heard the satisfying *click* of the lock releasing.

Smiling to herself, she pulled back the hanger and wound it to fit in the pocket of her overalls. She paused, and heard the others bustling with the blackout material and arguing about how to attach shades over the windows. Satisfied with the action, she pushed open Trier's door, utterly unprepared for what she saw.

The lights were off, but a soft glow emanated from several machines Zenna had never seen before, casting an eerie, yellowish light over the room. The bed was in the center, with a wardrobe to its left and several peculiar items to its right: the two briefcases she had seen him carry were dumped on the floor, with sheets of paper haphazardly spilling out onto the carpet. Blueprints of the streets and buildings of Washington, DC covered every inch of the walls. Another machine looked to be a part of some kind, meant to store a device. She guessed this held the two-way radio, which was absent.

It occurred to Zenna that this man's dealings were far too complicated for her playful musings and explorations. Looking at his belongings, she sensed that his work was dangerous. She doubted that his tasks began and ended with being an air raid warden--Augurus Trier was up to much more sinister endeavors.

She wanted to know more, to know why he acted the way he did and what he was up to when he worked in the dark hours of the night.

Zenna was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn't immediately notice the noise downstairs had quieted. She could hear her mother ascending the stairs. She quickly shut the door and

dropped to the floor, scooting under Trier's bed and holding her breath, desperately hoping that her mother did not have the insight to look into the room, let alone to check under the bed.

She breathed a sigh of relief when her mother's footsteps passed into another bedroom across the hall. Zenna was about to crawl out from under the bed when she heard the lock on the door click and saw light emerge as it opened. Trier's mud-caked loafers came into her view, and Zenna cupped her hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp of surprise and fear. He shuffled around her view, toward her left. She noticed that he put little weight on his right leg--his bowed legs favored his left side.

He continued to hobble toward the bed, his feet getting closer to her where she was lying. Her heart pounding in her ears, she watched a third briefcase drop into view in front of her, now with the letters "JHL" engraved on the front. His list of peculiarities ran on. None of the letters on the three briefcases made his initials.

He reached her side of the bed and came close enough to where she could smell the coppery mud on his shoes. Terror coursed through her veins as he leaned one hand on the floor and his knees began to bend, as if to lean down.

She only then realized that the papers from the other briefcases were immediately to her left, and he was going to gather them up, an impossible task to do without looking under the bed. Zenna saw the glint of his ring and felt Trier's sour breath on her face as his head came inches within the gap between the bed frame and the floor.

Trier's radio crackled loudly, his veiny and decrepit hand stopping mere inches from her face. Zenna could not understand the language of what was said, but she heard Trier curse and watched his knees extend as he stood, grabbed the newest briefcase at the end of the bed, and hurriedly limped out of the room.

She counted to twenty under her breath before daring to make a noise. Grabbing the nearest sheet of paper from the second briefcase, she crawled out from under the bed, ran through the doorway, and bolted to her room before Trier could return.

She saw through her window that it had already grown dark outside. She wriggled under her covers and feigned sleep, looking at her own shadow on the wall, cast by the moonlight. The floorboards outside her room creaked with heavy steps and Zenna watched a silhouette appear on her wall. She shut her eyes and forced herself to breathe rhythmically, despite the panic

settling deep in her lungs. She could feel a cold breeze settle on her neck and travel through her spine, and it took every ounce of strength she had to keep from violently shivering.

Trier was behind her, she knew, and to move was to give herself away.

He seemed to stay there forever, unmoving, and Zenna did not dare to shift until she no longer felt his presence behind her and she heard his irregular footsteps travel down the stairs and out of the house. Opening her eyes and seeing no silhouette, she turned and was finally able to breathe normally as she observed the empty room. She remained still for hours, processing the recent events.

She eventually pulled the crumpled piece of paper from her hand and smoothed it against the bedspread. Using the light of the moon, she discerned a series of long and short tic marks on the paper, with no other characters present. The marks evoked a distant memory, which crept into her mind and played itself under her eyelids for the first time in years.

She recalled her father teaching her how to read dots and dashes as letters of the alphabet. She remembered complaining that such a code could never be useful to her. He was patient, and expressed the importance of learning this military language in a bellicose world and that it might come in handy one day. He could not have been more right.

Zenna racked her brain and was slowly able to decipher the paper. The words came together in her mind, forming several concise orders:

Blackout drill tonight | Air raid tomorrow | Do not initiate blackout | Eliminate WDC

Pieces of the puzzle that had been growing in Zenna's mind began to fall together. She knew three things: an air raid was arriving in one day; Augurus Trier's job was to disrupt the blackout system, giving the pilots a city to target; and since she doubted anyone would believe her, Zenna was the only one who could stop him.

Zenna knew the blackout drill would happen before the sirens began to wail. The paper she took had come from the second briefcase, indicating that the blackout drill would occur on the current night and the true air raid would happen on the next. The radio call Trier received must have been to initiate the blackout.

The sirens began to wail--Zenna rose from her bed and moved downstairs to help the roomers and her mother complete blackout preparations. Grace bustled through the kitchen,

extinguishing the burners completely and switching off power to the kitchen outlets. The rest of the guests went through the house, shutting off lights and drawing the shades of every window.

Zenna stopped her mom at the foot of the stairs and asked, “Did you see Trier come back from work tonight?”

Her mother gave her a pointed look. “No. He has been at work all day and will most likely stay there until his administration of the blackout is over.”

Zenna responded with the most measured voice she could manage, “He was here. I saw him not an hour ago.”

Her mother began to move up the stairs, not looking back at Zenna as she spoke, “And I thought you weren’t curious. The roomers are free to enter and leave as they please, but I keep track; I am absolutely sure that Trier did not return this evening.” She reached the landing before she turned back and glared at Zenna, “Cease your childish explorations and help with these procedures.”

If Zenna had not been sure before, she was then. She was on her own in this undertaking, whatever it may be.

Following the blackout drill and a night of intermittent sleep, Zenna woke at dawn, immediately straining to hear the sound of Trier’s door opening and closing. Based on his previous patterns, he could be expected to return in the day before finishing work at night. Zenna waited in her room throughout the day until she heard his door open and close. He spent several hours in his room before leaving late that afternoon. Zenna followed him out, boarding the last streetcar route of that day through the city. It occurred to her that she would not be able to get back the same way she came. She decided to deal with that later; it was the least of her worries.

Throughout the previous night, she had read and reread the orders on the stolen paper, and continued to contemplate their meanings as she traveled into uncertainty.

Eliminate WDC.

Zenna had no idea what to do once she arrived at Trier’s office... or what she assumed was his office. She didn’t know if her efforts would even accomplish anything, but she had to try.

Eliminate WDC. Eliminate WDC. Eliminate WDC.

The streetcar slowed to a stop in front of the drab apartment buildings and the alleyway Zenna had committed to memory. She hopped out, jogging along the sidewalk until she reached the corner of the building. Trier should have arrived not long before her if he had taken the earlier streetcar.

Zenna rounded the corner and caught a glimpse of Trier's billowing trench coat disappear into a tunneling ground entrance. She progressed towards it and looked down.

Every instinct Zenna possessed told her to run far away from the descending staircase. She took a last, fleeting glance back at the street. The sun had sunk below the line of buildings and few cars remained on the roads. It would be dark soon.

Eliminate WDC.

She pressed on, gingerly prodding down the steps. Trier could be anywhere in the space below, but she had no time to lose. Turning the corner at the foot of the stairs, she found herself in a long concrete corridor, leading to a set of double doors at the end. She tiptoed down the corridor, grateful for once that she grew up in a noisy house and knew how to be quiet.

The closer she got to the double doors, the darker the corridor became as the daytime quickly ran out. Only a soft glow remained.

Arriving at the doorway, she could hear the two-way radio crackling, along with Trier's response. As he continued to converse, other sounds became apparent to Zenna: the whirring of a fax machine spitting out paper, and the hum of what she assumed to be electrical controls of the sirens.

Steeling herself, Zenna risked a glance through the crack in the double doors. She saw Trier hunched over a desk. All around him were photographs, newspaper clippings, and letters pinned to the wall. The room was no larger than the kitchen at home. Metal shelves packed with faxes lined a set of parallel walls.

The corridor finally grew completely dark, the only remaining glow coming from Trier's office. He seemed to sense this, and the chattering on his radio grew insistent. Zenna knew that if she was going to save her city, she needed to act soon.

She knew that air raid defense wardens each had access to sirens that would trigger blackout protocol, and the devices in Trier's office confirmed his access to these materials. Zenna knew she would have to disable Trier long enough to trigger the siren and cut the power grid to his allotted section of the city. She took a deep breath and slowly pushed open the door.

Trier did not appear to notice her. She was lucky--the door swung silently. As soon as the thought went through her mind, he whipped his head around, freezing her with his stale gaze. Her own terror was reflected in his eyes, which were briefly perplexed by her presence, but recognition quickly took its place.

He had moved slightly to his left, and she could see the briefcase propped open on the desk. On the inside was a map of America, and focuses on what looked like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington DC.

Zenna took the precious moments of Trier's confusion to visually locate the power grid and siren controls. On the far wall, now behind Trier, was a large pull-down handle and a three-digit space blinking with a red light.

She ran forward, aiming for the control panel. Before she could make it, Trier stepped in front of her, blocking her body, causing her to stumble backward. She parried to the right, narrowly avoiding his swing. Surging forward again, Zenna felt a sharp pain above her left eyebrow and felt blood trickle into her eye immediately. Trier's ring had punctured her forehead, and the blow caused stars to dance around her eyes; darkness threatened to consume her vision, but Zenna forced herself to remain aware.

She recalled Trier's limp and sent her foot crashing down as hard as she could on his right knee. He cried out, falling to the ground. Zenna clutched her left eye to keep the blood out and navigated the room by memory, reaching the control panel.

Three digits. She wondered if it could really be this easy, and punched in *JHL*. The daily briefcase letters. Zenna grasped the handle and pulled down.

The room was immediately swallowed in blackness, save a crack of moonlight escaping through the ceiling. The sirens began to wail. Her head pounding, Zenna blindly turned toward the doorway, hands stretched out in front of her. She sharpened her remaining senses to the best of her ability, but her body seemed to be spinning in circles.

Zenna forced herself to focus her right eye around the room, and caught the glint of moonlight on askew spectacles rapidly advancing towards her. She ducked and heard his fist impact the shelf to her right. She swung wildly, meeting her target in the shoulder. She stomped downward with all her strength, finding contact with his right knee once more. She heard him crumple to the ground.

Zenna stumbled forward, hoping to reach the double doors. After groping along the walls with her right hand, she found the doors and swung through them. She was rapidly fading out of consciousness, and knew she had little time left before she would pass out. She felt her overall pocket for the hanger wire, pulled it out, and began wrapping it around the outside door handles as tightly as she could. She twisted the ends together, trapping Trier inside.

She turned and staggered through the stone corridor, which had grown miles long since she had arrived. She no longer knew if the sirens were still going or if the screaming she heard was coming from her own lungs.

She reached the staircase and crawled on her hands and feet to the street level. She continued to stumble blindly towards the road, tripping on a large pothole. She stayed down, wondering vaguely if she would die. No lights remained on the street. The city was invisible and eerily silent, allowing Zenna to hear the bombing planes fly overhead.

She braced herself for the impact, but none came.