LIFE IS WYRD

by

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Chapter One - Dreams

Ever since my twentieth birthday on May first I’ve started having dreams. I went to sleep that night and as soon as I lost consciousness I found myself in a starless black void. It was so… nothing. I didn’t even know I could feel anything until, well, something touched me on the shoulder. I didn’t quite notice at first when something grabbed me by the shoulder and started dragging me backward. I want to say that there was sensation of rushing wind or that it was a gentle movement or

anything really. Anything would have been better than the complete lack of describable feeling. The only thing I could feel was a tugging sensation and a bit of sliminess. That went on for what seemed like hours, or was it minutes? It went on until I felt more things wrapping themselves around me, exploring my body slow at first, but getting faster. Then they were all over me, in my throat, in my stomach, in my… I felt like I should be terrified but I didn’t mind. I didn’t need to breathe or do any of the things you usually do to stay alive. I just, existed there while the things, or the thing, felt me.

I woke up the next morning feeling empty, but in a good way? I can't describe it. I couldn't describe a lot of things. I made myself a cup of coffee and drank it while I sat on the couch in my flat. The black coffee helped clear my head a little bit and I tried to think about what the hell happened last night. Did I eat, whatever it is you eat that gives you dreams about being in inky blackness with some strange creatures roiling all over you? Fuck if I know. Until last night I didn’t even know that was an option. I hadn’t even dreamed since I was what, six or seven? Even then it hadn’t been anywhere near like, this. I kept drinking the coffee and hoping that if I ingested enough caffeine I would start producing answers.

That didn’t work. I drank two pots of coffee and couldn’t keep my hands still or my teeth from chattering and I still didn’t remember anything that might have caused those peculiar dreams. I got up and retrieved my laptop from my bedroom where I left if to charge last night. I sat it down on the coffee table and opened it up, opened up Word, and started typing up whatever I could remember from yesterday. That took all of two minutes before I ran out of relevant things to remember. I rested my head in my hands for a second, I really, really, needed to get out of the house and get some friends or something. After moping about for a second I started writing up some stuff about the dream. That took a while longer, most of which I spent trying to find the right words to describe what happened. I learned a few new ones, like tenebrous means of the dark and derives from Latin. I felt, better after writing it all down. I saved all my work as Dream Journal, stood up, and stretched. Once I finished popping everything back into place I went to the hall closet and grabbed my coat, shrugging into it as I gathered my things and arrived at the door. I popped a book into the big pocket on the outside so I would have something to read in case I got bored and I opened the door.

“Hi.” Said the little transparent girl on the other side of the door.

Slam, said the door while I walked back into the kitchen and started pulling the alcohol out of the cabinets. I poured myself two shots, drank them, and went back to the door. Timidly, I opened it again.

“Hello again.” Said the little transparent girl on the other side of the door. She did not seem to mind having a door slammed in her face. My hand gradually snaked out of the door and tried to poke her to make sure she was real. I tried for a gentle prod with no success, unless success meant my hand went all the way through her torso, in which case it was a resounding success.

“Could you, not do that please? It tickles.”

I nodded, and started shutting the door again. This would require more inebriation.

“STOP SHUTTING THE DOOR.” She yelled at me, putting her foot in the way to keep me from closing the door all the way. It did not come as very much of a surprise to me when the door kept going through her foot and I wasted no time contemplating what that could mean. I had booze to drink dammit. I snatched the whiskey bottle and the shot glass off the counter where I had left it. When I returned to the door she stood in front of the door, straightening her flowery spring dress. I sat down at the coffee table with my inebriation equipment and poured another shot.

“I’m not going to go away just because you get drunk. I am not a figment of your imagination.” She said, injecting more than a little indignancy into her speech.

“Could you please just, sit. On the couch. Sit on the couch while I get ready to deal with this.” I waved one arm between her and the far side of the couch I was sitting on while I held my face in the other hand. “I get the feeling that this is going to be a long day and I need to get a drink in before I start talking to ghosts.” She huffed and crossed her arms, but she floated over to the couch and, well she sort of floated on top of it. I could tell she wasn’t sitting, it didn’t seem like she quite knew how to. That bothered me a little bit. I threw back the shot.

“Can you please stop drinking?” Came the pleading voice of the transparent child on the couch next to me. “You are not helping yourself.” I was in the middle of tilting the bottle to pour the fourth shot, but she seemed to be showing genuine concern for me. I sat the bottle down on the table and looked her in the eyes or as close to her eyes as I could get with the transparency thing. She seemed happier with me after I put the bottle down, not totally happy, I had still shut the door on her twice, but happier.

“Okay, ahm, I really don’t know how to start this, sorry.” She rustled through her dress again and rubbed a spot of it between her thumb and forefinger while she found words. “I’ve been trying to find someone who could see me properly for a while now and I really don’t know what to do.”

“How long have you been looking?” I asked.

“Two years, give or take a few weeks that I didn’t keep track of.” She replied.

“Ah.”

“Well I was rather traumatized when I died, excuse me for not keeping up with the newspapers.” More arm crossing, just for me.

“I’m not trying to say.” I stopped that train of thought and sighed. “I want to know why I had this really weird dream last night and why I’m seeing ghosts or whatever you are all of a sudden. I am more than a little confused.”

She looked embarrassed after that. “Well, I probably won’t be very much help with most of your questions, I don’t know a lot myself. All I know is that you’re the first person that’s been able to see me in two years that is, a person still.” She rested her hands on her knees after she finished and looked about ready to cry.

“Um, sorry, but what do you mean still a person?” I shifted into a more comfortable position on the couch where I could keep an eye on her. “Are they all, ghosty like you or…?”

She composed herself a little bit before she said anything. “Some of them are like me, sort of, disconnected spirits roaming around. Then there are the guys that are a little off, like Mr. Langtry. Then there are the, worse ones. I’ve only seen them once, and I really, really don’t want to see them again.” She hugged her knees to her chest. I panicked internally and reached for the alcohol again, but I stopped halfway to grabbing it, my hand hovering in the air above the bottle. I sighed and sank further into the couch.

“Look, I really just want to get some writing done today and maybe pickle my brain in alcohol. I have no idea what you’re talking about, who you are, or why you are here and you freak me out by existing.” I cleared my throat a bit. “If I can do something for you I will, if not, please let me get back to my day.” As soon as I finished I knew I had done something wrong. She started crying. “Nonononono, stop please don’t…” I felt the pit of my stomach turn into a roiling mass of shame. “Shit.” I muttered as I tried to hold her comfortingly and pat her on the back. The air around her felt way too humid to be natural, like the air was only a few moments from becoming solid water and splashing everywhere. “Just, whatever you need you got it.” I said, still frantic and trying to comfort her. “Whatever you need.”

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Two hours later and I was sitting at my computer, trying to write something interesting and failing miserably. I leaned back from the coffee table and clenched my hands into fists. I was going to need another job if I wanted to make the rent this month and keep the flat. Eliza’s head popped out of my torso and started reading whatever was visible on my Word processor.

“JESUS.” I yelled, slamming my hands onto the lid of the laptop and closing it as quick as I could. “Warn me when you’re just going to float through me like that.”

“Howard, I want to read what you’re writing.”

“No.”

She pouted. “Why not?”

“Because it’s awful.”

“I don’t care, I want to read it.”

“Well I care because I have crippling insecurities about my writing.”

“Then why are you an author in the first place?”

“Because…because it’s all I know how to do.”

She looked at me with pity for a moment. “Well, I’ve rested up a bit now, we could go and see is Mister Langtry knows what to do about your dreams.”

I scratched my head a bit. “If you think he can help we might as well.” I fiddled around and got everything I needed, keys, wallet, phone, and a handkerchief. Then Isabella started leading me through the twists and turns of the city.

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We made it to an old gambrel roofed building sandwiched between an antique shop and a bookstore. The paint on the house itself was a chipped and cracked grey but the door shone bright red in the dim light of the cloudy afternoon. Isabella floated up and knocked on the door with a spectral hand, and it actually hit the door, producing a noise like fwumph. The sort of noise you get when throwing a pillow at a wall. I watched, hands fidgeting with the straps on my bag as I waited for something to happen. Eventually the door creaked open just enough to let Isabella in, she motioned for me to wait for a second and squeezed inside. The door shut. I wondered if I had made a mistake letting her go through a random door in a strange part of town that I didn’t know about in the slightest. She'd be fine. Definitely.

Something nudged me. It nudged again, right in the face this time. I felt something cold and slimy press firm against my nose for a second. I brushed it off again and trued to curl up in a ball. Why the hell wouldn’t this thing let me sleep? I think I heard some muttering between something that sounded not entirely dissimilar from a voice but lacked things that make a voice, human. The other one sounded mostly normal, kind of familiar. I felt two things wrap around me and lift me up with gentle strength. I got laid down somewhere a little bit later, but I couldn’t really tell how long it took to get there or where I was. I cuddled up to something like a pillow and went back to sleep.

I woke up in a swamp, steam hung everywhere and choked my senses with the smell of damp and decay. I opened my mouth to breathe and I could taste something bitter carried in the thick air. Shades of gray and black and speckled white are all I can see. I hear the noise, the sucking noise. The noise of the creatures. They roam around the bog, around me, but they don’t do anything. They just suck at the air and the bog greedily, trying to siphon it into their flabby bodies before they lose suction and it spills out of them again. It goes on for… time. I can’t tell how fast or how slow the creatures are moving. How long it takes for the swamp to produce a wet sounding pop just out of my sight. The dimness that obscured half of the swamp never lightened or darkened. One of the creatures came up behind me. I didn’t move. It tried to suck me into its body, the orifice grasping weakly at me while it made that awful sound. Then there were more of them. All sucking at me with toothless mouths and filling the air and my mind with terrible sucking sound that defeated all rational thought in its cacophonous intensity. Then I woke up, but the noise stayed with me for several long minutes.

I’m in a bed. It is a nice bed as far as my experience with beds go, it has a mattress and pillows and blankets, which are all really desirable things to have in a bed. The complete bed package one might say, but there was one problem with this bed that should have been perfectly acceptable to anyone who wasn’t some sort of bed snob. It was not mine. I tried to figure out where I was from the paraphernalia surrounding the bed but that left me more confused than when I started. Books, statue that appeared to be the likeness of a squid monster thing made out of material that glistened greenly in the light with peculiar depth of color, more books, a cheap looking architect’s lamp that might be homemade, sheaves of paper covered in crowded unintelligible writing that might have been another language entirely but on closer inspection is simple bad cursive handwriting, and the glass of tea that sat on the nightstand next to me. At least I assumed it was tea, it had a bag in it and the glass looked hot. I decided to conduct further investigations into the matter.

Apparently, it was tea. Peppermint with a hint of ginger and a touch of honey in it. After I drank the tea I started to relax a little bit more. I headed out of the bedroom and onto the stairs, still carrying my now empty glass, and heard something sizzling. Something that smelled like breakfast. I crept downstairs with less caution than I should have displayed in a strange home, but I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss breakfast. Even breakfast cooked by a person who may have kidnapped me. The kidnapping might be kindhearted, or not a kidnapping at all. I might have eaten myself into a stupor and forgotten all about how absolutely, mouthwateringly delicious that cooking smelled. By the time I made it to the kitchen I had only one goal in mind, and it was to fit as much food into my body as physically possible.

Isabella sat, or floated right above, a chair at a small table in the same room as the kitchen. She waved at me as soon as she saw me, although there was some hesitation in it. I waved back, I say waved, it was more of a clumsy swatting at the air. I did like mornings, but that did not mean I functioned well during them. I would need ample water, food, and a good shower before I could be reliably identified as a sapient being again. I settled myself into the chair across from her gentle as I could manage. It produced roughly as much noise as an amateur murder with an electric carving knife. Isabella seemed amused. She cupped her hands around her translucent mouth and said, “Mister Langtry, Howard’s made it down!”

I heard a few shuffling noises from somewhere nearby and a voice that spoke with a thousand tongues sibilantly whispered, “Be there in a moment! I just need to find out where I put the sourdough.” I sat there in stunned silence for a few moments as my mind tried to wrap itself around the concept of that voice. Isabella looked embarrassed.

“I probably should have mentioned that Mr. Langtry isn’t, quite right.” She said.

“NONSENSE.” Spoke that same voice from right behind me, sending chills tickling up and down my spine. “I am perfectly alright.” I could hear some of the voices gently whispering something else at the same time that they said the words in unison, like each had a distinctive personality trying to break apart and remain the same all at once.

The figure I assumed the voice belonged to walked in front of me with a strange loping gait that looked alternated between clumsy and impossibly coordinated. It, or he I think, had the remains of a suit on from what I could see, though ripped and torn in lots of places. The left arm was torn entirely off to make room for a bulging mass of tiny appendages that all coalesced in the rough form of an arm. Isabella looked at it, him, crossly. “You know what I mean, if people aren’t used to you, you make them go funny in the head sometimes.”

The thing cooking breakfast rippled in a way that a wholly human body should not have been able to. “Funny in the head? Isabella almost everyone is already funny in the head.” Its, his hand reached out to grab some butter as he spoke. He cut off two pieces and stuck it to some bread before slapping it into the already sizzling frying pan.

“Yeah, but most people aren’t so funny in the head that their brains start dribbling out their ears.” Isabella said.

“That only happened once.” Said the thing cooking breakfast. It seemed to lose some of its spark when Isabella mentioned that and deflated a little, literally.

“Well it was a big once. Be careful around Howard. He’s not used to all this…” Isabella waved her hands around, searching for the right word, but grew exasperated before she found it. “All this weird stuff yet.”

The creature’s left arm started extruding five or so appendages over to the larder on the other side of the room. They deftly opened the fridge, plucked out two more eggs, some chicken breast, a block of cheese, and some sliced turkey. One grabbed a short, thin knife on the way back. Did it do that because the thing told it to or because the tiny appendage thought he was going to need the knife? “I’ll try to restrain myself, but subtlety is not my strongest suit.” The voices spoke as the knife got passed to the other hand and started cutting thick slices of cheese off the block. “But Mister Howard does seem to be doing quite well so far. Better than you did when we first met.”

“Howard is already a little weird. I told you about his dreams, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you told me. I would like to hear more from the horse’s mouth, as it were.” A few bits of chicken breast got sliced off and tossed into a bin. “Hearing what he thinks about them, and especially seeing their effects on him should tell me all I need to know.” Toasted bread flew onto a pair of plates, chicken hit the pan, soon followed by an array of spices and splashing sauces that crackled and popped explosively.

I groaned something that sounded like, “Waussurr” and pushed myself upright from where I had slumped down into my chair. “Witturr.” I repeated for emphasis.

The creature, Mister Langtry I guess, didn’t say anything, but the pink appendages that made up his left arm sent out a few feelers toward a cabinet above the sink. They clinked and clacked for a bit before coming back with a glass that had a picture of knitting needles on it with the words, “Love Craft.”, underneath it. Then the appendages drifted over to the sink, set it down under the tap and turned the water on. The glass filled in a few moments, and the appendages picked it up again gingerly. They brought it over to me and paused a few feet away in something akin to contemplation. Then they started tapping the glass against my face with evident insistence. I reached up a hand and took the glass from them. The little pink fleshy tendrils drifted back towards Langtry and joined the rest of their pink fleshy family, looking pleased somehow. I drank the water. It was lukewarm.

The thing that I think is Mr. Langtry finished cooking after ten or twelve more minutes and slapped two sandwiches onto two plates before setting one in front of me and settling in with his plate in the adjacent chair. I didn’t want to look at him too much, but I couldn’t fail to notice the distinct yellow wrappings around his head covered in what looked like ancient hieroglyphs, except more complicated and abstruse. He didn’t eat, and judging by where his head pointed he was staring at me. I picked up the sandwich and took a cautious sniff before deciding that if he wanted to kill me he would have done it much earlier, and I took a hearty bite. It remains the single most delicious thing I have ever tasted in my entire life. The texture of the chicken, cooked enough to be firm yet still retaining all its juicy flavor. The salt and pepper and whatever other strange spices and sauces he had thrown into it caught me in a whirling miasma of complementary flavors that were sweet and savory and succulent and everything else I had never dreamed of. The cheese and turkey slices added yet another layer of fascinating texture and flavor to the sandwich and I could feel myself falling backwards into a pile of bread as I relished the fantastic food.

I woke up with a slight concussion and the lingering taste of something delicious in my mouth. I was still at the table with Isabella and Mister Langtry. His sandwich was gone and he was adjusting his wraps like he had put them on in a hurry and he didn’t fit them on quite right. I brought a hand to my face to muffle the pitiful groan coming out of me.

“Ah, back with us again are you?” The Langtry thing said. “I am pleased that you enjoyed my sandwich. I haven’t had the opportunity to cook for anyone other than myself for a while and I thought I might have become a little, rusty.” He tugged at the yellow wrappings on his head absentmindedly. “I suppose now that you’ve had breakfast and rested up a little, I should introduce myself.” The left arm made out of those spindly pink appendages offered itself for a handshake. I accepted, tentatively. “I am Langtry Gibbons. I copy strange and terrifying manuscripts, write strange and terrifying manuscripts, and collect trinkets and baubles and suchlike. I used to be a lot more, personable, but I experimented a little with some of the things in my books and it led to…” Langtry wiggled his normal looking hand around, trying to sift the right word out of the atmosphere. “Unforeseen consequences.”

I sat and watched as Langtry waved his arms about and explained how the book on surgery he had gotten from the Me-Go led to his left arm becoming semi-sentient tendrils of pink flesh. Somehow, even though his voice threatened to drive me even madder than I already was, even though his body had about as much humanity left in it as a toaster, and even though I could not see his face because he had it wrapped in cloth sprinkled with strange symbols, I started to feel comfortable. You know, as comfortable as you can get when your mind is teetering on the edge of insanity.

“…and that’s why I have to keep my good looks under wraps.” He finished and stood up from the table. “Now, if you don’t have any objections I prefer to conduct interviews in my study. I keep all my writing materials in there and it would be such a bother to move them.”

“Sure.” I said, silently wondering what could possibly lurk in the study of a scholarly abomination.

Isabella floated up from her seat at the table and followed us as we went up the creaking stairs and filed into the room next to the bedroom where I had woken up. I wondered if the bedroom was Langtry's. Then I spent the next few minutes trying to forget about ever thinking that.

The study just had piles of writing paper and pencils and pens littering every available surface. The places where the paper and writing utensils were though, that seemed a little strange. Furniture littered the floor and walls like a small bomb had gone off in the room. Papers half covered with writing were tacked to the walls and ceiling wherever there was not already a writing desk or a coffee table suspended in the air.

“Excuse the mess if you would, I don’t get many guests these days.” Langtry said as he strode forward and stood behind a stand in the middle of the room. “Afraid I don’t have any seats in this room, but you are perfectly welcome to sit on any of the desks if you can reach them, or the floor. I would appreciate if you cleaned any papers out of the way first.” He picked up a pen and started scribbling something at the top of the paper in his stand. His left arm had begun unfolding and stretching out towards the other desks and papers and pens, picking them up and scribbling idly with no apparent input from Langtry.

“Start whenever you’re ready.” He said, voice half drowned out by the growing noise of pen scratches.

Interlude - The Children of the Dark

Hungry, need something in my belly. Mother is not here, where is mother? I see one of my brothers. I ask where mother has gone. He does not know. He is sobbing dark tears from his many eyes. I wrap myself around him and coo him to sleep. Brother will sleep here. I will find filling for our bellies.

Walk out of the alleyway, there is noise and light outside of it. The light burns bare skin. I do not stop. Further, further, towards the place where the food lives. The places made out of stones and not made out of stones. That is where food lives.

See one of them, walking, he does not know I am here. None of them look at me. None of them know that we are here. That any of us are here. Some of us want to make them know. Some of us want to make them fear. To make them run and scream and cry. Mother did not like that. They did not speak again when she listened. Mother is not here now.

He struggles, but he does not speak. My tongue wraps around his throat. He tried to hit me, but grows weaker with passing moments. I watch the food struggle and squirm. I wonder what the food thinks. What the food thinks of us. Mother would not approve, but mother is not here.

I return with the food and wake brother. He looks at me strangely. Looks at the food strangely. Questions. I do not have answers. Brother is silent for a long time. He takes the food and eats. We do not speak again. We wrap each other in our flesh and sleep. We dream of mother, and we dream of heatless fire.

Chapter 2 - Friends?

Langtry sent us out of the house a while ago so he could go through all his tomes with the notes he made and see if there was anything to go on. Apparently, I had piqued his interest. While I explained my dreams he kept growing more and more manic with his writing until one of his tentacles broke a pen. After I finished talking and he asked me a few questions he sent Isabella and me out to, “Get ice cream, or do whatever, just don’t get arrested, or murdered, or trapped in a different plane of reality by a being that transcends space and time or…” For several minutes during which I think he covered every possible scenario that he could. Including being attacked by clowns disguised as waffles and clowns disguised as waffles, with SYRUP. Which I gathered, was somehow worse than syrupless waffles.

“Can you…?”

“Can I what?”

“Can you even eat ice cream?” Isabella looked at me with all the expression of a white sheet of paper. Then she poked an arm through her torso and wiggled it around a bit.

“That is a no right?”

“Gee, I’m glad I found a smart guy who could see me. Heaven knows what I would have done with a guy that’s about as sharp as wet dirt.”

“Not as if I asked to be followed around by Casper’s twin sister.”

“How old do you have to be for Casper to be part of your pop culture glossary?”

“…”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Someone’s not getting any ice cream.”

“Someone’s not getting any smarter.”

“Someone is getting bitcher by the minute though.”

“AT LEAST I DON’T THINK I CAN FEED GHOSTS FROZEN COW JUICE.”

“EAT A DICK SPOOKY SUZY.”

“ASSHAT.”

“GHOST CUNT.”

“HOW THE FUCK DO YOU EVEN KNOW THIS MANY SWEAR WORDS?”

“I WATCH TELEVISION.”

“HOW? YOU CAN’T TOUCH SHIT YOU ECTOPLASMIC IDIOT.”

“I DON’T HAVE TO TOUCH SHIT, I CAN JUST FLOAT INTO SOME ASSHOLE’S HOUSE AND WATCH WHAT HE’S WATCHING.”

“WHY THE HELL ARE PEOPLE LOOKING AT ME?”

When I looked back at Isabella after verifying that, yes, everyone for at least three blocks was staring at me, she sported the most impressive shit eating grin I have yet seen in my life.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh you bitch.”

“I wasn’t egging you on for nothing dumbass.”

“No way in hell are you getting ice cream now.”

“Goddamit.”

“Gonna buy myself a triple scoop.”

She flipped me the double bird.

“With extra sprinkles.”

She looked red with impotent ghost rage. I leaned down next to her ear and whispered, “Motherfucking waffle cone.”

I giggled all the way to Baskin Robbins while she swore bloody murder at me and tried to kick me in the dick. She probably really missed having ice cream now that she had no tongue to taste it with. I felt a bit bad after getting the triple scoop waffle cone with extra sprinkles and, on a whim, the drizzle of hot caramel and fudge. The ice cream helped me feel better about taunting my ethereal companion with things she could never have again.

“So what do you think Langtry’s going to come up with?” I asked after I found a booth far back enough that no one would mind me talking to myself.

“Well if I were a mostly insane hundreds of years old abomination that frequently performs experimental self surgery and lives a secluded life of researching eldritch texts, I could tell you.”

I licked my ice cream at her.

“But since I’m not.” She threw her hands into the air. “We’re just going to have to wait and see what he turns up.”

I licked the ice cream in silence. I had no idea what the hell I should think about all this. Then two dark, not figures but still resembling something with a rough similarity to humans, walked into the Baskin Robbins. I averted my eyes to Isabella and regretted that. She had seen them too, and she looked horrified. She darted right into my torso, and I let out a bleat of intense discomfort as she did.

“What are you doing?” I said through clenched teeth.

“Hiding. Those are some of the things I told you about.” She said from somewhere that felt like right behind my eyeballs.

“Could you hide somewhere that isn’t inside me?”

“They can see me, I’m hoping that being inside of you will make me harder to see, since you’re alive and stuff. Maybe your ambient energy or whatever can cover up my spirit-ness.” Holy shit it was disturbing to have someone talk to you from literally inside your own head.

“Glad you’re so confident in yourself.”

“Eat shit.” She said as quietly from around my corneas.

“What do these things actually do?” I asked while trying to get back to licking my ice cream like a normal person would. I tried to avoid licking it like a person who had a ghost inside of his head and a roiling pit of fear in his stomach.

“I’ve seen them eat whatever they come across, but they seem to prefer animals, especially people, and…”

“Why did you trail off?” I asked, hoping that they weren’t coming straight for us.

“They’re, erm, looking straight at you.”

“Well that’s not.” I paused. “What do you mean you? Shouldn’t that be us?”

“Last one back to Langtry’s is a rotten egg.”

I felt suddenly warmer as her cold presence left my body and I was alone and empty. I had my back to the somethings that looked human-ish and all I could see was my triple scoop in front of me. Fuck it. If I’m going to die, I’m gonna die full of ice cream. I started gobbling down as much as I could, trying to work past the cold that shot through my teeth and the pain that ran its tendrils up and down my brain. Just a little bit more, come on, come on, come on, down to the cone. They were next to me. I could feel hunger radiating off of them like heat from a furnace. They stood tall and black and imposing and both of them had a bucket of ice cream. Both of them had a bucket of ice cream. They sat down in front of me, with their bodies of pure blackness and their two buckets of ice cream.

I fumbled for something to say and eventually came up with. “Hey, that's a bit much for you blokes isn't it? I mean, you're not that big and I don't think you've got a hollow leg or anything.”

They tilted their heads at me a little bit.

“Yeah you’ve probably got it, I’m just gonna finish mine off and then I’ll get out of your hair. Like I would, if you had any hair, but you don’t because you’re monsters and holy shit please don't kill me I swear I won't tell anyone you like ice cream."

I went back to eating my ice cream after they tilted their heads all the way around their necks without making any noise. I finished my cone while they slurped up their ice cream with dark scaled tongues. How far away is the door? Not that far, I could probably make it. Then again I really don’t know how fast these guys can move, best to calmly get up and walk out after I finish munching on my waffle cone so as not to disturb them.

I got up and two things happened at once. The first is that gravity reminded my bladder that it had a lot of work to do after I ate all that ice cream. The second is that both of the pitch-black things sitting across from me turned to watch me as I got up from my seat. I couldn’t see any eyes in their facial regions, but I’m sure if they were there that they were following my every movement. I quickly made my way over to the bathroom and shoved the door open as calm as I could. I may have slammed it against the back wall hard enough to wake the dead. The bathroom looked like a normal chain restaurant bathroom and, regrettably, smelled like one too. I walked over to the urinal and relieved myself as best I could while simultaneously craning my neck back to see if anyone followed me in. I didn’t hear the door open. Maybe they had gotten bored and left after they polished off their frozen cow juice. Yeah, that’s it. I finished and turned arAAAAAAAHHHHH!

“What the.” I tried to squeeze words out of my suddenly heaving lungs. “What the hell?” Both of them stood right behind me with an air of curiosity. “The, the, the door didn’t, it didn’t open.” I said haltingly. “How did you, why? What are you? How long have you been…?” They kept looking at me with those non-expressions. The only thing I can get is their posture and even that doesn't make much sense. Half of their joints look too big or like they don’t belong on a human. I really would enjoy an explanation, but I didn’t get one.

Sometime later I calmed down and got up off the piss stained floor where I’d fallen and started scrabbling away from the tall black intruders. I washed my hands while the things kept watching impassively. It felt like a tunnel bore drill bearing down on the back of my neck. When I couldn't reasonably wash my hands any longer I headed back out into the ice creamery proper. I held the door open for them. Mostly because I wanted to see if they would use it properly. I felt cheated when they walked through it normal as can be, normal as can be for black abominations. The rest of the diners didn’t notice how harried I looked after my trip to the lavatory or my two new friends. So I left, or maybe fled. Fled sounds a lot more accurate to what I was doing right now. It seemed especially accurate as the two creatures kept gliding along behind me, moving around other people like they didn't exist.

I walked all the way back to Langtry’s house with no sign of Isabella, though she could have been watching from a safe distance or something. I hoped she was at least. I really did not want to be all alone with these two despite how little they had actually done in the way of evil. They set me on edge, but if I’m being honest Langtry did that as much as these guys did. Langtry at least talked though, and cooked breakfast. These two followed and observed might be the right word. They didn’t seem to be watching me for any specific reason, watching me in general, like I was a particularly interesting rat in a maze.

They strolled up with me to the wooden door and continued to stand unnervingly close behind me while I knocked. I heard some shuffling from behind the door, and what sounded like a small argument. The handle jiggled a little bit and then the door opened a fraction.

“Howard, not to be rude, but why do you have two of the dark children following you?” Langtry’s susurrating voice asked.

“They just, started following me for some reason.” The door took a few moments to process my words.

“Have they tried to, how do I put this, ingest you?”

“No, they showed up, Isabella bolted, and then they started eating ice cream with me.” The door took a lot longer to process that.

“What do you mean, eating ice cream?”

“They ordered ice cream at the Baskin Robbins about a mile down the street, and then ate it, like, really fast.” The door seemed to be wandering in a mire of confusion.

“Well, if they don’t appear to be all that hungry for living flesh or souls or anything, I suppose they can come in. I’ll put the kettle on or, or something.”

The door opened the rest of the way to reveal Langtry, with a frightened Isabella sticking out of what I assumed could still be called his torso. I waved at both of them. Langtry waved back, Isabella stared at me. I could see out of the corner of my eye the two creatures behind me wave after I did. Then they started waving at each other and at me and at Langtry and back to waving at themselves. Langtry looked at me with a mixture of worried disbelief and pleasant bemusement. I moseyed inside and took a seat on the couch in the bookshelf laden living room. Everyone else shuffled in and sat on whatever furniture was available. Langtry reclined in a big ratty padded rocking chair. Isabella floated warily next to him. The two black brothers sat next to me on the couch.

We all sat there for a while, staring at each other. Except for the two brother children things, they were still stuck on waving, which weirded me out a little. Usually strange tenebrous beings that exist only tenuously in your reality don't happily wave at each other like, well, like kids. Which they were, according to Langtry. A piercing whistle came from the kitchen. It knocked Langtry out of his staring match with the two kids while they waved back and forth to one another in increasingly strange ways. It had begun to look like a gymnastics routine for masochists by the time Langtry came back with a steaming pot of tea and enough mugs for all. I got the one with a yellow crown on it that said, “Greetings from scenic Carcarosa.” Langtry held one with a cute snake hanging off a tree branch that said, “Yig better hang in there!” Isabella's had a picture of a cute pink pony on the front of her mug. One of the entities sitting next to me had a mug that said, “I’m with Azatoth.” The other one’s mug had music notation on it, but the notes were warped in strange ways and the direction for playing it had a stylized f multiplied by infinity. We waited patiently for Langtry to pour tea and I cautiously sipped a little. It tasted like fresh raspberries and peppermint. The two black brothers watched me while I drank and started lapping at their cups with long, purplish scaled tongues. The tension in the room lowered. Apparently seeing that they enjoyed his tea let Langtry relax a bit. Isabella still looked wary though.

“So, I found a few things on your condition while you were out and about Howard.” Langtry said. “Couldn’t find anything on how exactly it happens, but occasionally individuals emerge that have a certain, affinity for the weird.” One of his tendrils snaked up to stroke where I assume his chin is underneath his wrappings. “Reports are that other beings feel drawn to them and feel that they should do whatever the individual thinks is right. It leads to a lot of shoggoth see shoggoth do.” Langtry nodded towards the two dark children and their wild waving. The tentacle stroking his chin slithered back down to the rest of the mass that formed his left arm. “With a power like this, you’re going to want someone, or something, to keep you safe. There are forces like the Mi-go who will want to dissect you and find out what makes your ability tick and then there are those like Nyarlathrotep and his cronies that will see you as a threat and kill you. There are a lot of other things that will eventually come to your notice I imagine, but those two are the most pressing.”

“So, what am I supposed to do?” I asked.

“Well it’s what WE are supposed to do in this case. I’m not letting you try to find a safe haven all by your lonesome. Isabella seems attached to you, and your two new…” Langtry stared at the two entities sitting next to me. “Friends, will certainly want to help, They're good boys. Haven't tried to eat you at all.” He slurped down the rest of his tea and set the mug down on a table next to his chair. “We’re going to go and see an... old friend of mine that has some experience in these matters, so pack up whatever you need and I’ll swing by your place and pick you up.” Langtry stood and stretched. “Best to hurry though, we don’t know who or what knows about you or what they plan to do if they do know.” He strode off to another room in the house and left me in there with the creatures and Isabella.

“Soooo, how about this tea then?” Isabella stared at her cup. One of the things next to me cooed a little bit. I made a silent wish for something stronger than tea.

Interlude - Hotwiring

“What the fuck are you supposed to be?” The security guard asked.

“My name is Langtry sir, and yours?” He scowled at me, I certainly don’t remember humans being this rude the last time I went out.

“What the fuck are you doing around here?”

“Ah! Just here to pick up a car my good man. I am also a good man, as you can tell from my human physique and lack of multitudinous appendages.” He stared at me for a bit. I might be selling disguise too hard.

“Get the hell out of here before I have to push your teeth in.” I knew what that meant at least. Why must there always be a difficult bastard that doesn't know to let well enough alone and cower in fear? I reached up and tugged at one of the loose ends of my head wrap.

“What are you doing you freaky piece of shit, I told you to get LOST!” I did not have time for pleasantries anymore. I stripped off the last of the bandages and looked at him.I could see his mind shattering behind his eyes. He went prostrate and started muttering things. I reached through the guard station with one of my tendrils and pressed the button that removed the bollards blocking my way to the impound lot. I patted him on the head before retracting the tendril and walking inside. I think a little bit of blood might have started dripping out of his nose before I left. I felt bad for a moment, for a moment.

Blue cars and red trucks and green SUVs and even an old tan station wagon that still had a cassette player in it. I tried to decide which of them would work best in a situation like this. Most of the cars were nondescript and got pretty good mileage. Trucks had a little bit more utility and we could carry a bunch of stuff in the bed if we needed to while still fitting everyone into the cab comfortably. SUVs had about the same space as a truck, but enclosed and with gas mileage that made my wallet blush. I sighed and let my eyes wander over all the vehicles for a minute or so until I saw it. An antique blue Thunderbird with a cloth top and a pimped out interior. Plush leather seats, power steering, and even a splendid little cigarette lighter in case I was feeling dangerous and sexy. I rippled with satisfaction at the thought of driving that beauty on the open road, wind blowing through my... I don't think I still had hair but it would still be damn cool to have wind blowing through stuff. I immediately climbed in and started fiddling with the steering column.

Five minutes and twelve failed hotwiring attempts later and I concluded that when they pimped out the interior, they pimped the security. This baby was dead unless I had the key. It took me another few minutes to find the safe which I assumed the keys were in. I tore it out of the wall and tried to see if I could crack the code like one of those crime serial criminals. I got tired of guessing after three attempts and started thinking of some other way you could open a safe.

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I sat in the Thunderbird with the top down and a key in the ignition listening to the motor purr. After I enjoyed myself enough I took my new ride out of the lot and drove in Howard’s direction, being sure to avoid the scattered bits of safe. I wondered if I should leave a few dollars to help with the costs of replacing all that stuff. The walls might be hard to put back together, and I’m sure a safe as durable as that cost a king's ransom. I absentmindedly pressed my foot down onto the pedal and the motor roared in my ears. They could handle it. I had important business to attend to.

Chapter 3 - Road Trip

Me and my unwholesome entourage found my house and I spent a few moments fishing my keys out and opening the door. Isabella kept to my elbows and never lost sight of the black thingamabobs. The black whatsits were examining a ficus that belonged to my neighbor with worrying intensity. I hoped Mister Abernathy didn’t come out and ask me where I had been the last couple of days. I don’t think I can come up with a plausible answer. The door swung open with a creak that reminded me that neither I nor my landlord had any inclination for home repair.

We all walked in and I started packing up, Isabella stayed outside as a lookout for Langtry while the brothers followed me around and watched. I found one of those big plastic tubs with the top that never secures properly and always falls on your foot at the most inopportune time while you’re carrying it. It would have to do. I carried that with me around the house, tossing in glasses, what little silverware I actually owned, clothes that I never wear, and whatever other stuff that I might need and didn’t want to find replacements for in the uncertain future. The two creatures following me didn’t try to copy me or scare me by being right behind me without appearing to have traveled the intervening space or anything . That was good, I was kind of angry and more than partially confused. I liked this flat. It had a comfy bed and reasonably thick walls and neighbors that didn’t have loud sex at all hours of the night or scream at each other and the landlord might have been lazy but he always understood when I couldn’t pay the rent on time. He actually read some of what I wrote one time. He hadn’t said it was actually good or anything but he had read it, and tried to soften the blow when he told me it sucked. I just, I felt good here and leaving because I suddenly developed weird powers and got involved in a world that I didn’t know anything about didn’t feel right. Nothing felt right. I wanted to stay here. I wanted to drink myself into a stupor and forget everything in the morning. I wanted to take a nap for two weeks.

I laid down on the floor and tried to collect myself. One of the brothers stood there and watched me for a while, then called his sibling in and they both crouched down next to me, cooing softly.

“What are you guys doing…?” I hesitantly asked. The left one wrapped a pitch black arm around me and kept wrapping arm around me until he was all wrapped around me like the world’s longest and warmest black scarf that happened to be made out of amorphous flesh. The one to my right patted my head affectionately and continued to coo soft noises in my ear. I didn’t move, half from fear of what they could do to me and half because the genuine concern and comfort felt absolutely wonderful.

After we laid there a while, I calmed down and wiggled my legs a little bit. They understood I wanted to get up and get back to what I had been doing. I still needed to get all my books out of my room and onto the porch so we would be ready for Langtry. The one around me unwrapped himself and reformed into a normal-ish being again, with legs and arms and a thing that could be generously termed a head. The other one helped me back to my feet with a black appendage.

We started gathering books and taking them out to the porch I shared with the other tenants. The two of them did most of the work after I carried the first pile out though. I started gathering up the booze from the cabinets and cupboard and fridge. I took a hunk of cheese out of there and snacked on it while I watched the two brothers work. There were a few splendid moments of me standing there and eating some delicious pepperjack while two strange beings that I hadn’t known twelve hours prior moved my books for me. It lasted for approximately twelve minutes before something ruined it.

“HOWARD WE NEED TO GO!” Isabella shouted into my face from a position occupied moments ago by empty air. I choked on a piece of cheese and ran outside. I was met by the sound of screeching tires and the sight of a blue Thunderbird with no top piloted by what could only be Langtry scream up the road and skid to a stop at my building. I didn’t ask questions, not least of all because the piece of cheese I had been trying to eat lodged in my throat. I grabbed my bin of stuff and started down the stairs to the car, desperately swallowing with every footfall. The bin lid, astonishingly, held fast all the way down the steps and did not spill everything I had carefully packed into it all over the ground. I thanked whatever gods were looking out for me and threw it into the back of the Thunderbird.

“Howard, so good to see you again, how have you been, how is Isabella, there are police following me, how are the dark kiddies, there are police following me, did I ever ask what you do for a living, and did I mention that there are police following me?” Langtry said. His grip on the steering wheel was beginning to bend it into a figure eight. The only things running through my mind at that point were expletives and intense desire to have a larger esophagus so I could swallow the cheese still stuck in it. The two brothers took a hint from the surroundings and began sprinting back and forth with books, piling them into the boot of the car as fast as they could. Which meant that they were almost teleporting back and forth. While I was climbing into the passenger seat I realized something. I left the grocery sack full of alcohol on the counter of the kitchen. I was not leaving my flat to face more of this without my alcohol.

I strode back up the steps with Isabella hovering in front of me, frantically trying to get me turned round and in the car. I ignored her and pushed through. I maneuvered around the two dark brothers getting books into the car and walked into my flat. There, right where I left it with my unfinished hunk of cheese sat the booze. I slipped my arm through the grocery bag and heard the bottles inside clink like wind chimes. My other hand grabbed the cheese, and then I was back out the door and heading for the car. Unfortunately, the fuzz caught up to Langtry and flew up the street like a vengeful wind made out of noise and light. I tried to take the steps two at a time and ended up taking them all at the same time flat on my ass. Soon as I hit dirt I flung myself to the car, and the police kept coming. Langtry must have pissed them off incredibly, because as soon as they were ten blocks away they opened fire on the Thunderbird. Shots rang out across the street and I could feel people getting up and staring out of their windows at the commotion going on outside. I ducked and kept trying to get into the Thunderbird. Then, heart pounding out of my chest and my legs feeling like two chewed up licorice sticks, I got in. Langtry didn’t waste any time and started giving the Thunderbird gas before I shut the door. By the time I did actually shut it we were already halfway up the street and gaining speed.

I heard an ear splitting pop from behind us, like a giant child poking a pin into an equally massive balloon. Black rubber spilled off our car's back wheel and slipped under one of the police cruisers. We were out one tire and despite Langtry’s lead foot the cops were right on top of us. I looked down between my legs and made a decision, a hard decision, but a necessary one. I gripped a half full bottle of whiskey in my right hand and chucked it right at the front cruiser's windshield. It hit and imploded the windshield as it shattered, adding to the shower of glass that peppered the policemen inside and stinging them with fresh booze. They kept going for a bit, but after the front bumper ate three mailboxes they started slowing down. When they manged to get out of the car, we were long gone. I leaned back into the upholstery, adrenaline still jackhammering through my veins. Langtry patted me on the back with a few of his tendrils and said nothing.

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“Do you want anything else with that?”

“No, I should be fine.”

“We’re having a special on our potato fritters, buy one mess of ‘em get a side a slaw free.”

“I don’t want a mess of potato fritters or slaw.”

“We got chicken tenders under the heat lamp if’n you got yourself a hankerin’ for those.”

“I don’t.”

“Seven bucks getcha seven tenders.”

“…”

“Comes with mashed taters.”

“Hmmm.”

“And thick brown gravy with couple chunks good bacon in it.”

“Good bacon?”

“I should be damn sure, made the stuff maself. Them’s big chunks too, I don’t skimp on gravy.”

The seven dollars slid across the counter with a slight hiss.

“And will you be wanting a drink to go with that?”

“Two, and how much is that jar of pickled eggs?”

“Well th’ eggs are fifty cent ea-.”

“No, the WHOLE jar.”

#

I walked back to the Thunderbird and poked Langtry. He woke up ponderously but his arm tendrils took the food and drinks from my hands before he got in the same postal code as awake.

“I got you two packets of sunflower seeds, nine sticks of oily meat, a water, and you can have the big half of this chicken tender meal.”

Langtry stretched his limbs, pushing himself halfway out of his seat as he made strained noises beneath his headwrap. “What about the eggs?”

“She said if you can eat the entire jar you can have them for free. She wants a picture.” The words were hardly out of my mouth before Langtry was striding through the door of the convenience store and chatting with the woman at the counter. He pointed an avid finger to the huge jar of pickled eggs next to the register. I strolled to the passenger side of the car and let myself in. I stuck the water in my lap and twisted the cap off before I opened the plastic lunchplate filled with chicken tenders, gravy, and a small cornbread muffin. She insisted on that last one, apparently I needed to put some meat on my bones, and it only added fifty cents to the cost of the meal and I did need something to mop up mashed potatoes and gravy with. A small scream echoed from the shop as I ate. Langtry, unless another eldritch abomination wandered into the shop as well, which was disturbingly likely at this point.

Langtry returned from his brief adventure into egg swallowing looking fatter and happier. He opened the car door and sat down next to me in the driver’s seat.

“So, how are you feeling today Howard?” He said while filching a few chicken tenders from my plate.

“Pretty good for someone that had to flee his home because of potential threats from beyond mortal ken and one of his new friends attracting the local police.”

Langtry politely choked on one of the gravy covered chicken tenders he was feeding through a slit in his mask. “Well I just, didn’t quite remember about all the rules and regulations that this sort of thing has.”

“What sort of thing?”

“The not being a recluse sort of thing, I don’t go out much.”

“How little do you go out that you forgot police and laws exist.”

“Well I knew that they existed, it’s just that before they were a lot, slower.”

“Slow enough that you could get away with almost demolishing an entire building, beating a safe to pieces with a lamppost, and stealing an antique car from an impound lot?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I mean they didn’t have impound lots or antique cars or a lot of lampposts back when I last went out.”

“How, how old are you Langtry?”

“Old enough that counting got boring.”

“Fair enough I suppose.” We scarfed down food for a few more minutes before either of us wanted to talk again. “Hey.” I said with a mouth half full of cornbread. “Do you think Isabella and the twins are going to be able to find us?”

“MmmHmm.” Langtry muttered through a mealy mash of food. “They’ll just follow your scent.”

“I have a scent?”

“Well, not so much a scent as a unique feeling you leave behind in whatever places you’ve been, sort of background radiation.”

“I’m not radioactive am I?” I asked through a mouthful of mashed potatoes, she hadn’t been lying about the gravy, hot damn.

“No, well probably no, I’ve not had the opportunity to learn much about you fellows. Everything I know comes from secondhand written accounts and even that is rumor and hearsay. All that's know for certain is that you are incredibly influential to weird beings like me and Isabella and the err, twins, as you call them.”

“So, there have been others like me in the past?”

“Yes, your predecessors usually did not last, and the ones that did proved to be.” Langtry breathed out a sigh. “Unsavory characters.”

“So why is there nothing much known about them?”

“Well, that has to do with Nyarlathotep and his brood roaming around destroying anyone or anything with even tangential connection to one of them.”

“Ah.”

“Yes, for those that do survive with knowledge the threat of extinction keeps them extraordinarily tight lipped, or tightly orificed.” Langtry paused for a moment. “They don’t blab.”

“I gathered.”

“I hoped, but didn’t want to assume.”

We finished off the rest of the food, checked that we had enough gas to get to the next station, and headed out for somewhere called Providence with Langtry behind the wheel and me in the passenger seat, nose deep in a book.

Interlude: Dust in the Wind

The nice man has left brother and I. We suppose he had to. He did seem to be in a hurry. Wish left directions. Little one that nice man is fond of is with us. We watch her while we travel. She does not trust. She is suspicious. Sad.

We do not want to frighten but little we can do. We stay near. We make sure she is safe. We follow through dust. We are catching up. Perhaps he will teach more. More about being different. More about waving. Brother enjoyed waving. I wonder if there are any other things like waving. Wonder if there is foot waving or tongue waving. We try to wave at the girl. She does not appreciate. Need to get the nice man to teach us how to be not frightening. So much to learn. Wish mother was here.

There is a place with food on shelves. Many of these places but this one is different. Nice man and the T-man have been here. We go inside. Brother collects food from shelves. I take from the warm place. I eat. Good. There is a lady here. She is frightened. I place an arm around her and sing. She smiles. Good song. I finish. Brother waits. We give each other food. So many different foods. Why did we never do this before? So much to explore. Anticipation. Joy. I wrap myself around brother. We part after time and continue travelling.

Chapter 4 - Providential Circumstances

Dim vistas of a lake city with crenelated spires spearing into a dusky sky like long questing digits. The city shone in what little light there was with brilliance I can hardly describe. I moved closer, through the lake, my feet gliding across the water as if I were a bug skimming the surface. I began to see why the city glowed, it was aflame. Fire licked at the strange materials of the buildings and pale people in tattered yellow robs fled from the city into the lake, swallowed up by the water like stones. Those that remained screamed, screamed and ran from something. They screamed and ran from the biggest and tallest building in the city. I stood in a flaming avenue as people passed through me. I could not feel the heat of this place like I had felt the mire of my other dream. Everything seemed dimmer than it should be. Even the screams and the volume of the raging flames and crumbling ash edifices gave no hint to the all consuming carnage of fire around me. I walked toward the palace, passing more screaming people in the streets. A few had laid down to wait for death, their eyes distant and their faces expressionless. They dressed in better robes than the others. Their eyes were rimmed with red, their bodies still wracked by heaving sobs. They did not move. They only waited for the end.

The palace steps shine with blood, interrupted by the occasional body. These had not waited, these had rushed headlong into oblivion. The bodies I could see were twisted, mangled, like a cruel child would mangle insects, so were these pale bodies ruined. I walked over the corpses and continued through the shining doors. I do not know how I knew it to be a palace, the opulence, the fine craftsmanship poured into all I could see. I simply knew it to be a palace. Something wet and squamous echoed through the regal halls as I walked, getting louder the deeper I ventured. I looked in on dining halls filled with food and dead. Music chambers starkly silent despite the number of players sitting at their instruments. Myriad other rooms has a similar lack of life, but the dead here seemed fresh. Life here had been a fleeting bird that heard me coming and dashed away, leaving faint traces behind. Then I came to the ballroom, and the king himself.

Resplendent in once beautiful robes that now hung about his writhing frame like torn curtains caught in a tempestuous gale. Rags covered his face, rags that held familiar symbols. His arms clutched around a pale faced woman. She wore robes in the same style as his though hers were with crimson from the waist down. Here belly was open, organs steaming the air as vitality passed from them. The king sobbed with his arms around his queen. Sobbed pitifully in that dim palace under the dim sun.

I reached out a hand to touch him, and to my surprise, I did. He turned to face me, his face partially visible through the bandages. I wish I had no eyes to see that face. I wish I had not seen, but I did see. I cannot ever forget the roar of that abominable king in yellow, a roar like an oath, promising annihilation of all things, promising that all suffer as his city beneath the dim sun had. That no time or distance would stop his wrath. He took my neck in his grasping, slimy limbs and pressed my throat shut. Vison began to swim; my limbs numbed and my mind crawled to a stop. I closed my eyes and let the blackness overwhelm me.

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I awoke to a faceful of leather upholstery and a vicious hangover. I turned woozily onto my side and tried to empty my stomach over the side of the car, I only came up with a few dry heaves. We were driving through somewhere cold, roughly twenty degrees Farenheit, give or take a few degrees since I was judging by how far my balls were retreating into my body.

“Jeeziz.” I mumbled to myself. “Jeeziz pizz iz culd.”

“Oh good, I had started wondering if you managed to drown in your seat.” Langtry’s pink appendages helped me settle back into a more comfortable position. “You polished off a fifth of gin last night and said your throat was, ‘Dry as all hell.’ I was going to ask if you wanted me to pull over and get some water at one of the stations around here but before we got to one you decided to try and wet your throat with beer.” He turned his head to me, enough to give me a half glare, even though I couldn’t see anything but the head wrap he always wore. I could tell the expression underneath it was mild to middling disappointment. “I don’t have to tell you that I had to pull over on the side of the road and help you empty yourself out, do I?”

I rustled in the seat a bit and tried to get to someplace that felt right to my stomach and the rest of my body. While doing that I eventually realized there was no glassy clunking when I shifted my feet. That either meant that the booze got moved to the back sometime last night, or that Langtry left it somewhere on the side of the road next to the pile of puke. I flopped over onto my left side and tried to see if there were any road signs that could tell me where the hell we were.

“You need me to pull over again so you can, go in the bushes or something?” Langtry said, his cigarette holder bobbing up and down as he talked and leaving a trail of smoke trailing behind his head like a comet. Wait a tick.

“When did you start smoking?” I asked.

Langtry reached up to his mask of bandages with his right hand and took the cigarette holder out of, I assume, his mouth and blew a pile of smoke into the rushing wind outside the car. “When I decided to stop at a few flea markets on the way last night and pick up some new duds, my old ones were getting a little musty.” I recalled the tattered bits of suit he had been wearing and started looking at him a little more closely. He had a white bucket hat on top of his head and some mirrored patrolman shades hooked into his wrappings. I wondered if Langtry's sight through the wrappings actually got affected by his wearing sunshades. That occupied me for a few minutes before I looked down at the cheesy Hawaiian shirt he had on that left the rest of his right arm exposed. Scars ran up and down the arm, some looked surgical but most appeared to be symbols like the ones on his head wrappings, just carved into the flesh. Nothing I didn’t at least half expect at this point. The pants were, actually pretty normal, so were the boots. I wondered for a few minutes why the entirely non-descript somehow seemed the most remarkable thing about his outfit.

“I did get you a few things as well while I was shopping.” He said, passing me a plastic bag that contained another pair of mirrored patrolman shades and a teddy bear that had one arm and three button eyes. The bear and I looked at each other for a bit while speeding down the road in the cool air. I sighed and hugged the mismatched teddy to my chest as I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sound of the wind and the rocking of the car as we shot down forest flanked lanes towards strange places. Cloth gently pressed onto my head while I had my eyes closed. I reached up and confirmed to myself that Langtry had popped another bucket hat onto my head. I smiled as I squished it further down onto my head and tugged the brim down to block the sun from my eyes.

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“Are you certain he’s not home?”

“Yes dear, but mister Carter did leave a message in case anyone named Langtry should come calling for him at this residence.”

“Well, go ahead and read it then.”

“You’re certain that you want me to read it?”

“Of course, old Randy and I were the best of friends, bosom buddies, thicker than two thieving peas in a pod. I’m sure it is a heartfelt letter to an old friend about how nostalgic he is for days gone past.”

“Fuck you, you white livered sack of inhuman shit.”

Langtry sighed.

“After that it looks like he got too angry to keep writing and just started tracing over and underlining all the swear words.”

“I got it, I got it, thank you for your time and I apologize for being such a bother.”

“Sorry sweetie, maybe you’ll have better luck somewhere else.” The kindly old woman patted Langtry on the head and politely shut the door in his face as she went back to doing whatever it is old ladies do in secluded homes out in the woods. Probably competitive knitting or something. Langtry came back to the car at a slow pace, his feet dragging the ground in a tired shuffle. I reached out an arm to pat him on the back as he slid into the driver’s seat of the Thunderbird.

“You tried mate, I can just pawn off a few of my books and stay at a hotel somewhere around here, no problem.”

Langtry looked up at me and I could sense something I didn’t expect from him at the moment, dread. “There is still, one more person to try…”

“You don’t seem very excited to go and see them.”

“Well the last time we saw each other there was a heated exchange of harsh words. I say exchanged, I didn’t contribute much at all, too busy screaming and running away to do much else.”

“Maybe whoever it is has cooled down since then, what got said that made you run away?”

“Something like, ‘You’ve gone too far and I cannot permit a beast such as yourself to live any longer. Prepare to face the eternal embrace of oblivion foul betrayer.’, Might not be exact words but the gist is she didn't want to see me hanging about. You know how it is.”

“Langtry what did you do?”

“Nothing! Nothing I swear.”

“I don’t think someone swears an oath to kill you if you haven’t done anything.”

“You would be quite surprised.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I would really rather not.”

“Langt-”

“No.” He said in a tone that brooked no argument, all the voices that made up his voice were in perfect unison. “I will not.” I looked at him for a few minutes, and then I let the tension fall out of me and relaxed into the carseat.

“Alright.” I said. “What are we going to do now?”

“Now? We’re going to rent a hotel room and wait for Isabella and our other company before we go over to her house. It's late.” Langtry started the car up again. The engine jolted the entire body of the vehicle before settling down to a gentle thrum. “We don’t want the brothers anywhere near her. I’m sure that she’ll be fine with Isabella, but those two will have to stick with me for the time being.” Langtry shifted the car into gear and took off towards the closest motel we could find at that time of night. He stayed up writing a letter while I took the chance to get a bit more shuteye.

Interlude - Another Long Night

The wind rushed past me as I followed the familiar path up to the house I shared with my daughter. My motorcycle helmet had gained several new cracks in it, so it sat in the back compartment while I rode tonight. Shouldn’t be too hard to get another plexiglass visor. Lutka got worried if I was out too late, and I already knew I’d passed simple concern a while ago. I'd probably find her out on the porch, looking for me and hoping nothing had happened while I was out. Besides the usual. I know it should warm my heart, but I didn’t want her staying up for my sake. She needed to be in bed and so did I, but the hunt kept me awake and away.

The gravel crackled as I pulled into my driveway, I felt the forest’s eyes on my back as I slowed to a stop and dismounted my metal steed. I took the helmet out and tucked it between my arm and the side of my chest, then walked to the house. Lutka was there when I came in. She asked me where I was. I said hunting and tried to continue about my business. I could feel more questions about to fly. Sh asked if all the blood on my clothes was mine or the beast’s. I relented. I might as well relent early. I knew how this ended.

“Mostly mine.” I said, Lutka looked at the lacerations that still wept with blood. They were on my legs, my arms. Some especially deep ones were on my chest. Lutka sighed.

“I’ll get you cleaned up and then we can both head off to bed.”

“No, no, I’ll get myself cleaned up, you need to rest.”

“It’s alright mum.”

“You’re not falling behind in classes because of this, are you?”

“No mom, I’m doing great in all my classes, I’ll be an anesthesiologist in no time.”

“You’ll be doing good work, but make sure it’s good work far away from here, there’s too many in this place that know you’re my blood.”

“I just wish you would stop going out and hurting yourself.” She said as she poured the alcohol onto the lacerations. I hissed in a breath as she did. There was no adrenaline to dull the pain. It hurt like a bitch.

“I’m not hurting myself sweetie, it’s the beasts doing that.”

“But you know that they’re out there, and you know what they do.”

“Which is why the hunters must hunt.”

Lutka hated seeing me hurt. Hated knowing I would do this until one day I didn’t come back. I hated it too. I would give anything to be able to stop and live in a house with my baby girl, but I couldn’t. I couldn't because I'm a hunter, and a hunter has responsibilities to keep innocent darlings safe. The hunter must hunt until the hunt is finished. That’s what father had always said, even when his joints failed him. Even when he died the words lingered on like an afterimage.

I hugged Lutka to my side, pinning her to me with my arms and basking in the warm glow of being near her. She returned my embrace and we sat in the bathroom for a while, arms wrapped around each other and not caring that one of us still bled, not caring about death, not caring about the hunt, not caring about any damn thing at all except each other. We existed in that fantastic crystal moment, until I let go of her and she let go of me. It couldn’t last forever, nothing could.

Chapter 5 - Old Flames

The dark brothers looked at me with pleading, they didn't have eyes, faces that's good, faces as I gave them one last hug. They had been so pleased to see me when I woke up that morning, I hadn’t. That was because I woke up to them two inches from my face looking at me with that same rapt attention that they always did. I wondered if I would miss that, waking up to someone who loves you, even if it is a weird love that you don’t fully understand, in the morning. Having them hug you as you sputter in surprise, their dark amorphous mass flowing around you and becoming an organic glove for your body. I gave them a parting hug. It was warm and familiar in its peculiarity.

“Now remember what I said, go with Mister Langtry and do whatever he says, until I get back he’s your dad.”

“I'd prefer uncle actually.”

“You are pretty avuncular. Alright scratch that last bit, Langtry is your uncle, listen to him and do whatever he says and keep him safe and don’t, I repeat. Do. Not Eat. Him.” I said, putting as much stress into those syllables as was humanly possible. They waved at me. I hoped to god that was a yes or something. As soon as I finished Langtry had them loaded up and was driving away down the dirt road as fast as the car would go. I turned to Isabella, who had been patiently floating next to all my luggage, and opened my arms for a hug.

“C’mere, I haven’t gotten to talk to you much since you got back with the terror twins following me around.” She stared at me for a second as I held out my arms for a hug. I imagine that she was debating whether to tell me that hugging an intangible person is a futile effort and accepting the hug because it would make us both feel warm and fuzzy on the inside.

“I missed you too you piece of crap.” She said as her spectral arms wrapped around me.

“Love you too Izzy.” I said, trying not to accidentally phase my arms through her body.

We kept hugging as best we could for a bit longer before we broke apart. I loaded all my stuff into my arms and Isabella floated in front of me. She was supposed to tell me if I was about to walk over a rock or a tree branch or a small mammal wandering around in the woods. After the first few yards with no sign of the house I began to regret letting Langtry decide where he would drop us off at. He probably picked somewhere miles away so he could avoid talking to his friend. Not that I blame him, after all the nasty letters and speeches he got from his other ‘friends.’

The house was only a mile away. By the time I got there my arms felt like noodles that had cooked past the point of softness to somewhere around molecular disintegration. That I still held up my bin full of stuff with all my books that I took with me stacked on top was miraculous. Isabella said we made it to the house and I trusted her, I could see some of it from around the stack of books in front of me. Not much, but what I could see was certainly house shaped. What I could see was aged brick and wood and a chimney sticking out of the rooftop. Then, in the middle of gawking, I almost tripped and fell onto the stairs that led up to the front door that Isabella had forgotten to mention. I recovered after a breathless moment and decided that it was about time I put all my crap down. Isabella chuckled to herself as I walked up the steps and rang the doorbell.

The door creaked open a few moments later and revealed a woman dressed in torn biking leathers. On top of the leathers an aquiline face perched. Her posture gave off the impression of a coiled spring, filled with tension and power. That I noticed later though, because when I first saw her I was mildly pre-occupied with the massive bloodied hammer held in her hands.

“So how are you miss…?” I tried.

She said nothing, but visibly tightened her grip on the hammer. Her leather gloves made a few straining noises.

“Okay, I’m Howard and this is Isabella. We’re looking for some safe haven from…” I searched for a word that would accurately describe most of the things I had run into thus far. “Eldritch beings that may want to kill me because I somehow got weird abilities to influence them.”

She did not loosen her grip on the hammer. “Get your things and get in.” She said, her voice far less gruff than I expected it to be. “Tell me the whole story inside, over a cup of tea if you want.”

“No arguments here.” I said as I turned around to go and get my things. I heard Isabella start introducing herself to the scary woman, she seemed less wary of her. I leaned down and put my hands on the bin lid to lift it up. It came up fine and I started going up the steps and then I felt it. Something shifted underneath my hands. I could do nothing to stop my motion. The lid came off when I was halfway up the steps. The bin went tumbling down the steps, contents spilling out all over the ground. That left me with a lid that had several stacks of books balanced on top of it. Several stacks of books promptly overbalanced and smashed into me. I could feel my back hit the steps and almost crack under the weight of the books. I slid down with slow inexorability. I landed on the ground with my body aching and my pride broken into tiny infinitesimal pieces. I laid still and moaned for a long while with my ears ringing before I heard the peals of girlish laughter echoing all around me. Isabella somersaulted in the air as she hugged her sides and giggled with reckless abandon. The woman who opened the door had doubled over and was leaning on her hammer so she could stay upright in the unexpected onslaught of her laughter. I rested my head and waited for them to stop, which took a damn long while to happen, from my perspective.

After the raucous laughter died down to breathless wheezing hee hees and tears got wiped out of the corners of their eyes, they made their way over to me. I felt strong hands grab my shoulders and hoist me up and onto more shoulders. The biker leathe clad woman gave me a firm pat and said, “Perhaps you do need my help.” She carried me inside and sat me down at a table in the kitchen. “Stay here, I’ll go and collect your things and put them in the guest room. You will tell me all you can when I get back. Both of you.” She let her eyes linger on Isabella for a moment, and the ghostly girl shifted under the woman’s gaze. Isabella floated over next to me when the lady left.

“Do you think maybe we’re in a little bit over our heads here?” She asked.

“From the very beginning.” I replied, trying to find a spot in the chair that didn’t push against one of my new bruises.

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She sat down a steaming pot of tea in front of us. She’d taken off her jacket and laid it on the back of the chair. She did not give us coffee mugs. She gave us mugs that looked like they belonged at Oktoberfest filled with foaming beer instead of tea. She poured each of us a mug, including Isabella for some reason, and sat back in the chair before fiddling with the top button on her shirt.

“Start talking.” She said.

“Shouldn’t we at least know each other’s names first?” I said.

“Introductions come when, and if, I decide to let you stay, not before. Now one of you start talking and tell me how you got here and why you’re here, do not spare details.” She finally got the top button of her shirt loose, and unbuttoned about three more before leaning back into her chair and letting her chest breathe. She started gulping down the tea in her mug. Despite how terrified I should have been of a person who moments ago held a possible murder weapon in her hands, I couldn’t keep myself from looking at her cleavage. It was good cleavage.

“Well, I’m an up and coming writer that lives, or used to live, in an apartment in Georgia before, this happened.” I waved my hands around to indicate my current position. I took a swig of tea, a little bitter for my taste, but it was warm and felt fantastic after being out in the cold. “A few days ago I started having strange dreams. I met Isabella when she knocked on my door and sort of, invited herself into my flat and my life.” Isabella waved across the table at the woman and she lifted her glass up to the ghostly girl. “Then after we realized that neither of us knew what the hell was going on with me, Isabella suggested we go visit someone called Langtry.” The woman across the table cocked an eyebrow and seemed about to say something, but stopped herself when she moved a hand to scratch at her chin. There were a few minutes of consideration before I received a motion to continue. “We went over to Langtry’s house and Isabella went in. She took a while to get back. I decided to take a nap and I woke up in an unfamiliar bed. After some investigation I found that it was a bed inside Langtry's house.” I shifted again in my chair, making it creak in protest. “He cooked breakfast for us and helped research my condition as much as he could. He said that I had something called a shard of Azatoth sort of, embedded in my soul. He took me down here to see someone who would be able to provide more help and shelter than he could. Unfortunately, everyone else that he knew either hates him, moved away, or both. He left me here with instructions to come to your house and give you a letter. He went to go and keep anyone meaning me harm on the wrong track.” I took another few gulps of the bitter tea, might be Assam.

The woman across from me straightened her posture.

“Alright, I’m willing to believe you don’t mean any harm. Seeing you lose a fight with a plastic bucket makes me wonder if you could cause me any trouble if you wanted to, but why am I supposed to let you stay here? I don’t run a charity.”

I took the letter Langtry was writing last night and held it out to her. She reached across the table and took it from me but left it on the table next to her mug unopened.

“Girl, I want to hear your side of the story before I open this letter.”

“My name’s Isabella.”

“I’ll use your name when I know who you are, until then you’re a girl.”

Isabella pouted, but started into her story a few moments later. “I died a little over two years ago in Atlanta. My parents were with me, but they couldn’t do anything to stop it from happening. Something picked me up and started tearing my flesh off in the middle of the airport. No one could see me for some reason, like I had just become invisible and my screams inaudible. Everyone kept doing what they had been doing, texting and eating and sleeping and sitting and waiting, while I died.” She sniffled. “I came back a couple seconds later near my own body. I could see black things crowded around the spot where I died so thick that I could barely see. They were all sorts of shapes and sizes but the same. The same amorphous black that writhed in place, and some of them were looking at me. I could feel their hunger coming towards me like a tidal wave. I didn’t want to find out if you could die twice, so I left as quick as I could. They didn’t follow. I met Langtry two weeks later while I was trying to find someone watching the new episode of My Little Pony Friendship is Magic. I phased right into his house and started looking for his television while ignoring him. He caught my attention and we started talking and that led to us being friends and I started staying at his house because I finally had someone to talk to, even if they weren’t quite right.”

“Not quite right how?” The lady of the house asked from across the table.

“Well he has the full head wrappings covered in strange symbols that he can inexplicably see out of. The arm made out of a multitudinous array of tentacles. His chest is a patchwork of scars which makes me think he’s replaced some of his organs and he has webbed toes. They’re still human toes and stuff but they’re webbed, kinda weird.”

I stared at Isabella while across from me the woman pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed, trying to hold back either a scream or a chuckle.

“Why do you think webbed toes are weird?” I asked.

Isabella put her finger to her lips for a second in deep thought. “They just are you know, why do you ask?”

“No reason” I said. Bringing my mug of tea closer to me and averting my eyes.

“You don’t no….no you couldn’t, do you?”

I pursed my lips, and didn’t look at her.

She almost fell over laughing. We both did fall over seconds later, when the woman slammed the remains of the letter onto the table. The hand that wasn’t pinning the offending parchment to the tabletop held her face. She looked to be somewhere between crying and pounding the table with her fists until her hands or the table broke.

“Please, go to the guest room and make yourselves comfortable.” She said through gritted teeth. We didn’t argue.

Interlude - Homecoming

I made it back late today. One of my classmates wanted to have a talk with me again after I finished classes despite how many times I’d told him I didn’t want to talk to him. Usually he didn’t stick around after that and politely left, but this time he’d brought friends. They weren’t expecting me to fight back much after one of them clocked me from behind with a textbook the size of a pickup truck. So when I didn’t fall over like a fragile waif they hesitated, and I took advantage of that.

No one saw me while I disposed of them. Which I suppose I should be thankful for. The blood stains were going to be really difficult to wash out. I hated having to solve problems with violence. It almost always worked but it wasn’t supposed to happen that way. There were supposed to be courts and laws and due process. Punishment equal to the crime. I dipped into the well of sudden anger and gave them the punishment I thought was right. I sighed into the cabin of the car. I needed to get out and check on mum. She hadn’t called me even though I was taking an inordinately long time to get back to the house. I pulled up into the driveway in a few more minutes. I stepped out and went through the dance of getting all my things out of the various spots I put them in the back before heading up the steps. They seemed looser today, though that could have just been from mum’s heavy footfalls. She never learned how to step lightly.

Inside a mess awaited me, worse than the usual mess the house was in when I got home. I hadn’t seen it look this bad since the week after dad left. Appropriately, mum was in about the same place she was the last time the house got this messy. I found her seated at the dining room table passed out and resting her head on a bottle of whiskey. Another sigh got past my lips. I went to set my things down in my room and heard something odd coming from the guest room, breathing. My own breath caught in my throat. I opened the door to the guest room and took a cautious peep. Two figures on the bed, one pale and see through and on top of the covers, the other tucked neatly under the blankets and breathing steadily. I could only see a shock of thick brown hair poking out onto the pillow. It wasn’t him. Dad had blond hair. I closed the door silently, made sure I’d brought all my stuff in, and went back to check on mum more thoroughly.

I picked her head up and put my hand in front of her to make certain she was still breathing. She is, of course. I drop her head back onto the table with a hearty thunk. It barely manges interrupts her snore. The whiskey bottle next to her is almost empty. I pick it up and go check the trash where I find the other whiskey bottle that was still half full when I left this morning. I uncap the one in my hands and pour it down the sink before it joins its fallen brother in the bin.

I was about to pick mum up and put her to bed when I see a letter sitting on the table in front of her. I pocket it, the letter can wait until I’ve got her in the bed. She’s surprisingly heavy for a woman that doesn’t weigh much more than one hundred seventy pounds. It takes me a few moments to get her in my arms where I won’t be in danger of throwing her to the floor when I take a step forward. I make a truly arduous walk out of the kitchen with her unconscious body. She didn't make much noise when I accidentally banged her head on hallway doorframe, but I know she’ll be wondering how she got that bruise in the morning. I’ll just tell her she fell off the table and onto the floor while she was blackout drunk. She won’t ask much more after that. I finally make it to her room and lower her onto the plastic tarp I put down over the bed before tossing a blanket over her. I don’t tuck her in. I’ve had a long enough day already. I check on the guests again as I go back to my room, then I undress and crawl into bed with the letter.

I didn't sleep that night.

Chapter Six - Breakfast

Pain lancing into my arms. Something squirming inside them. Squirming and worming and moving through veins towards my heart. I feel it snaking up my arms and bursting capillaries as it goes. It's carving a path through the muscles and meat. It touches something inside me and gives it an exploratory stroke. My heart beat against a thick viscous thing slowly enveloping it. I try to open my mouth in a scream but I manage only a whimpering mumble because of the thing in my throat. There is pressure against my heart, something pushing harder and harder against it. I desperately will it to keep beating, keep pumping and keep me alive. There is no reason left in my head as I thrash against my bonds. There is only the desperate need to survive. I try to throw myself away, anywhere else, but moving is difficult. My heart can't keep up for much longer and I feel my struggles getting weaker and weaker. Limbs become dead weights, unresponsive and dull. Head lolls and I felt my heart give another beat, a faint one, before it burst from the pressure.

I woke up in a puddle of cold sweat with the sheets bunched up around me. Isabella still floated right where she was when I went to sleep. Despite my having moved the covers she rested on over to my side. I stayed there for a while, calming down and making sure there was nothing wrong with my heart. I heard something in another room of the house go bump. Someone else must have been up. Maybe they would be making breakfast. I could definitely use something to take my mind off of the dream I just had and a pancake seemed perfect for that. I rolled out of the bed and my feet hit the cool tile of the bedroom. I didn’t mind that much. This was not the first time I had woken up in a cold house. It is the first time I’ve woken up in this particular cold house. I picked through my bin of stuff for something warm and I came up with a wooly white sweater and a pair of jeans. I shrugged into them and pulled on my old pair of boots after I slipped into some warm, poofy wool socks.

I stood up and brushed the wrinkles out of my sweater before trundling off to the bathroom to take care of a few points of hygiene. I didn’t want to show up to the breakfast table looking gaunt and terrifying, wouldn’t make the best impression. Moments later I looked fresher, certainly not totally fresh but I hadn’t been able to eat or drink since yesterday. I shuffled out into the hallway and followed the sound of sizzling to the kitchen.

There is a girl in the kitchen. She is cooking breakfast. I asked if she would cook me some breakfast and she said yes. I laid my head down on the table after that and wondered if this is what love felt like. That someone else would make food not only for themselves but for someone else too. That you would sacrifice the possibility of eating all the bacon, pancakes, and eggs yourself so you could make someone else full and happy. A huge grin formed on my face and I may have started drooling onto the table. Delicious breakfast subsumed my every thought. A few minutes later, at least I think it was a few minutes, so hard to tell when you’ve got breakfast on the mind, I felt something tap against my head. I lifted bleary eyes up and viewed a goddess wearing nothing but an apron and some gray sweatpants hand me a plate stacked high with eggs and strawberries that rested on a bed of pancakes and syrup. She sat the plate down where my head had been resting, grace flowing from her every movement as I sat in awe of her.

“You okay there?” She asked.

I nodded, tears in my eyes as I picked up a fork and started eating. Sometime during that Isabella woke up and came to the kitchen, she looked at the food angel curiously.

“Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met, my name’s Isabella.” She offered her intangible fist for a bump, the food angel stepped away from her cooking to touch her flesh fist to Isabella's ectoplasm.

“I’m Lutka, you two already met mum I guess?”

“Yeah, she’s a real charmer, nearly made Howard shit his pants when she answered the door.”

“What did she do?” The food angel asked as she piled eggs onto two more plates, she didn’t add any strawberries though, she must have run out after mine or something.

“She showed up to the door with a bloody hammer and looked at Howard like he was a nail.” Isabella said as she floated towards the table alongside food angel.

“Oh, she’s really not that bad, just doesn’t like to look weak in front of other people.” Food angel said while she set one of the plates down in front of an empty chair before taking another seat and plate for herself. “Let her warm up to you a bit more and everything will be fine.” She dug into her eggs and started shoveling them into her mouth.

“She doesn’t seem to have warmed up to us much at all.”

“You’re still in the house, aren’t you?”

“I guess, but she did send us to our room without dinner, or an explanation for why she got so livid after reading the letter we brought her.”

“She’ll tell you what you need to know, don’t worry.” Food angel said between mouthfuls of egg. “She really doesn’t like to talk about personal stuff though, so don’t force her.”

Isabella nodded and floated down to the table to watch us eat. About an hour later, after both me and the food angel were nursing glasses of milk and full bellies, her mum walked in. She looked like someone tried to bury her in a shallow grave and she came back to life halfway through. She wore a nightshirt bordering on see through and flowing gray pajama pants about the same color as the streaks in her white hair. She padded up to the fridge, got out a glass bottle of water and ketchup then walked back to the table.

“Morning mum.” Got a halfhearted grunt as a reply.

“Morning …” Isabella petered out into silence. Food angel mouthed something at her from across the table and Izzy perked back up. “Morning Eliza.”

“You look like hell.” I said, before taking a drink of my milk. Food angel and Isabella looked at me like I’d put a lit stick of dynamite in my underwear.

“You don’t look too bad yourself, shithead.” Eliza said as she uncapped the ketchup and squirted a bunch of it over the eggs on her plate.

“Good to see you’ve got such a keen eye for beauty.” I shifted back up to a straighter sitting position in my chair. I’d started to slump down somewhere between finishing my food and now.

“Someone's gotta be discerning enough to tell you that sweater is fuck ugly.” She said, rolling up all the stuff on her plate into a pancake burrito and taking a massive bite out of it.

“Like the nightie you’re wearing is any better, if it was any more threadbare it’d be a fashionable swimsuit.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t like what you see darling.” She said as soon as she swallowed a few bites of her breakfast taco. “I may be old, but I’ve still got it. You ain’t any good at hiding your wandering eyes.”

Well, she had me there, I couldn’t really keep my eyes off pretty ladies. I looked over at food angel, I should probably ask for her name, and her face looked redder than a fire engine. “I’m not that bad am I angel?” I asked her.

She looked at me with a mixture of awe, horror, and increasing facial redness. “Well, I mean, I didn’t notice, but I think you were, more concerned with the food at the time and mum, seriously?” She shot an accusatory glare across the table. “He’s been here for less than a day, you probably don’t even know his name, and you’re already acting like he’s your drinking buddy.”

Eliza threw up her hands and chuckled as she spoke. “You can’t tell me that this isn’t hilarious. Try not to blush too much sweetie, if you get any more hot and bothered…” Eliza sported a shit eating grin just as good, if not better than, Isabella’s. Her daughter buried her face in her hands while Isabella and Eliza crowed with laughter. I tried to hold it back as best I could, but my internal giggles were probably visible.

“Besides I do know his name.” Eliza said as the table quieted down and Lutka stopped burying her face in her hands. “It’s mmmmm…” She snapped her fingers a few times as she looked at me before pointing triumphantly. “Jeff.”

Everyone looked at me in expectation for a few moments. I shook my head no.

“I meant Andy.”

“Nope.”

“Davison?”

“Not even close.”

“Harmond?”

“Actually, pretty close, but still no.”

Eliza tapped her finger against her chin for a few moments. “Handel.”

“Not a composer.”

“Oh for fucks sake.” She scooted out of her chair and took one long step that brought her right next to me. She shoved her hand into my front pocket, fished out my wallet and took a look at my driver’s license. She closed my wallet back up and left it on the table. “Howard.” She said, staring at me, daring me to say no again. I withered under that gaze.

“Yep.” I said. She patted me on the shoulder in a way that communicated, “Good boy”, without words. She sat back down, a smile on her face.

“You could have asked him.” Angel said.

“Maybe I wanted an excuse to feel him up.” She replied.

“Do you have no shame?”

“What the hell would I do with shame?”

“Not embarrass your daughter in front of strangers for one.”

“You assume I WANT to do that.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you are insufferable.”

“Yes, but it does my heart good to hear it again.”

“Finish your breakfast.”

“I was planning on it sweetie.”

We returned to relative silence for the moment. Some pleasant small talk passed between us, nothing particularly remarkable. We finished eating and drinking and let our meals digest enough that we could get up again without feeling the contents of our stomachs slosh like overfull buckets. Eliza got up and went to take a shower while the rest of us remained at the table. Food angel seemed to be watching me with thinly veiled interest.

“Something on your mind?” I asked, cradling my head in my hands.

“No, looking in your general direction that’s all. Not looking at you.”

“Uh huh. What's your name by the way?” She gave me a more intense look for a few moments before she replied.

"Lutka, means doll."

"You are a doll, doll."

She groaned, but straightened up in her chair and met my eyes. “Well you’re a stranger in my house that showed up sometime between when I left for classes yesterday and when I got home. During that time you did something that made mum want to drink herself to sleep. Then you wake up this morning and come in here with an odd white sweater and boots, ask me if I’m going to cook breakfast for you too and pass out on the table. When I bring you your breakfast you look at me like you’re having some kind of religious vision and start devouring everything on your plate like a wild animal.”

“That is a clear case of exaggeration.”

“When you got halfway done you tipped the plate up and let the remains of the pancakes and everything else slide into your mouth.”

“Okay, maybe I did do that, but it was the best solution I had at the time.”

“Of course, far be it from me to tell you how to be a neanderthal.”

“Alright I get it.”

“Then you started flirting with my mum.”

“Not flirting, that was small talk.”

“Small talk that involves looking at her breasts?”

“They are very nice breasts you have to admit, and besides, she appreciated the attention, I think.”

“I don’t particularly want to think about my own mother’s breasts. I'll admit she does look young, except for the hair.”

“I kind of like the white and gray hair.

“Please stop.”

“Would you prefer if I made small talk with you instead?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but shut it and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“You do look really lovely. You made me breakfast so I know you're a wonderful person in addition to being hot. I’d be honored if you let me get to know you better.”

She, looked at me, and seemed to be consider it for a moment.

“Don’t tell your mum but your boobs are totally better than hers.”

She covered her mouth and tried to choke back laughter. I slapped the table with my hand and threw up my fists in a victory. I looked around for Isabella and found that she was conspicuously absent.

“Hey, have you seen Izzy?” I asked after I looked around the room for her and found nothing.

“You mean the-” She interrupted herself with a fit of giggles. “The little spirit girl following you around?”

“Yeah, where'd she go?”

We heard heavy footsteps coming from the hall and turned to see Eliza, once again decked out in biking leathers, with the gigantic hammer slung over her shoulder. Isabella floated behind her. Eliza set the hammer down next to the table and stretched for a moment before addressing us.

“I have acquired a new shower partner.” She said, nodding her head towards Isabella.

“What.” Lutka and I said in unison.

“Well you two were arguing like lovebirds in here and I wasn’t about to interrupt that flirt fest, so I went and found something interesting to occupy my time.” Isabella said.

“Something interesting being me.” Eliza clarified for us.

“You gotta admit, you are pretty interesting.” Isabella said.

“I’m, I’m not arguing with you Izzy, but you’re like twelve or something.” I said. Lutka probably would have said something but she seemed to still be processing the ghost girl ogling her mother thing.

“I’m fourteen.” Isabella said with a huff.

“That’s still pretty early to be staring at other people when they’re naked.”

“Not like it’s the first time I’ve done it.”

“You’re, you’re serious aren’t you?”

“I’m an intangible being that can’t interact with most of the physical world unless I exert a monumental amount of effort. When there’s nothing on TV and no interesting things happening outside I peep on people while they’re changing or showering, not like they care.” Eliza cleared her throat. “Usually.” Isabella corrected herself.

“And you’re fine with this?” I asked Eliza.

“Not like I can stop her and it kept her out of trouble.”

I opened my mouth a fraction.

“You’re not invited.”

“Not what I was going to ask.” I said.

Eliza didn’t look like she bought it.

“I was going to ask if we could stay, since we don’t have anywhere else to go at this point.”

“On one condition.” Eliza said.

“Which is….?” I asked.

“You start training with me, eat what I tell you, do what I tell you, and assist me to the best of your capacity in my hunt.”

“Sure, not spoiling for choice here.” I said.

Eliza smiled wolfishly and stuck out her hand. Lutka tried to say something but her mother glared her back into her seat. I hesitated for a second, then put my hand in hers and shook. Hopefully I wouldn’t regret this.

Interlude - The Black Man

One of the two children of Shub Nigurath held the agent down while the other stripped the flesh off his face. It didn’t stop him from talking in the slightest, though it did make it more interesting to watch as blood pooled underneath him and he kept jawing at us.

“Stop running Langtry.” It intoned monotonously in its borrowed voice. “You can’t escape the crawling chaos any more than you can stop breathing.”

“Hurry up boys, we need to get out of here before something worse arrives.” I said.

The two children nodded and subsumed the agent. A few dull noises followed, and then there was nothing except the children standing in front of me. No evidence remained that the agent had ever been there. I patted each on the head and cooed to them a little, before I started running back to where I’d parked the Thunderbird. The children followed soon after, keeping pace with my long loping strides.

We got to the parking lot and into the car before it went wrong. Something slammed into the car faster than I could see and we went rolling arse over teakettle across the parking lot. We left scraps of metal and glass from the headlights behind as we tumbled. The car stopped when it hit the brick wall of the resort and broke my neck. I wrenched it back into position and kept going, no time to hesitate. Hesitating around this thing meant we’d be dead or worse before we knew it. I crawled frantically out of the car. The two children were there. They helped me out of the wreckage as best they could, fear poured off them like fog from a dry ice machine. They took me in black arms and started running, as fast as they could. The world blurred around us as we achieved speeds that shouldn’t be possible. We were out of the parking lot and onto the road in one blur. Another blur and we were further away, the resort just a faint blip in the distance. The world kept alternating between blur and sharp focus, we should have been far enough away. Something purplish and dark shot out from above and pierced through the brother on my left. The sheer momentum carrying him forward and slamming him into the ground. The purplish dark thing started dragging him back into its sucker like maw to chew him. Black blood and black flesh fell on top of us in a grisly shower.

“GO!” I screamed at the brother still with me. He picked me up again and everything blurred. We tumbled to a stop three miles down the road and the child fell, incapable of doing another hop. Probably shock after seeing his brother eaten. I picked him up. We got about two feet before one of the agents walked out from behind a tree with a massive auto shotgun and unloaded an entire drum magazine into my legs. I felt the first five shots, everything after that was filling the ground beef that used to be my legs with more lead. The child tried to move, tried to protect me, The agent walked up and started clubbing it to death with the butt of the shotgun. I watched the fear go out of his eyes as his body got beaten to pulp that mixed and mingled with the sandy ground. I watched him die. The agent stood over me, the shotgun clasped in his hands so tight his knuckles were white.

“I told you not to run.” It said.

“Fuck you.” I replied.

It dropped the shotgun, picked me up by the collar, and lifted me into the air. I saw the stringy red meat that used to be my legs rising with me. Then I was slung over the agent’s shoulders and carried towards a sensible white car that wouldn’t have been out of place in a soccer mom’s driveway.

“We’re going to work on that attitude of yours.” The agent said in the same monotonous tone you would use to describe paint drying. “The crawling chaos doesn’t like disrespect.”

I couldn’t muster another insult. I let him take me to the trunk and throw me in. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a syringe of clear fluid. The syringe went straight to my neck, and the plunger went down. I stayed awake long enough for him to shut the trunk and start the car, then I was gone.

Chapter 7 - First Blood

The wind combed through my hair as the motorcycle rumbled down the dirt roads that led to the highway. I had my arms wrapped around Eliza’s torso. I could feel muscles shift every now and again as we rolled down the road hemmed in by trees, throwing dirt up behind us. I wondered for a moment if I should worry that I didn’t have a helmet on, but I couldn’t do much about not having one. Eliza’s only helmet had a visor spirderwebbed with cracks and Lutka didn’t ride the motorcycle so Eliza never bothered with a second helmet. I felt a jolt underneath the motorcycle and Eliza shifted sharply to the right. I saw a vast landscape of asphalt open up before us. We were on the highway.

We passed cars and split lanes whenever Eliza felt we were taking too long to get to the city. She did make occasional stops off the side of the road and sniff the air. I asked her why in the hell she needed to do that and Eliza replied with, “The stink of a beast carries for miles.” I asked why I couldn’t smell it. "You've not yet tasted blood." I wanted to ask more questions after that but she shushed me and told me to hop back onto the motorcycle. I did. Eliza is not an easy person to refuse.

Once we made it into Providence proper Eliza started sniffing the air more often. She was smelling it for something, I had no idea what. She either didn’t find it or needed to be on foot to track it. We found a spot somewhere in the center of the city where she could park the motorcycle for a while. I peeled myself off of her back and shook feeling into my legs. She dismounted and stretched as well, before reaching into one of the saddlebags and pulling out a 50 cal revolver with a barrel so long it qualified as a billy club. As an afterthought, she pulled out a black glock and handed it to me. I hooked it into my belt and pulled my sweater over it. She nodded. We started walking the streets of Providence, heavily armed and looking for trouble.

“How are you carrying such a massive piece and that huge hammer thing in the middle of the city with no one batting an eye?” I asked after we passed the tenth passel of civilians.

“Normal folk don’t see Hunters quite right.”

“Not quite right…?”

“Have you ever tried to look at something through foggy glass, or looked through an out of focus lens that lets you see a general blur but leaves out details?”

“Okay. So when someone looks at you they see general stuff like shape and color and stuff , but can’t see the details like what you’re carrying or your face.”

“Mmm hmmm, hunters are the people you see out of the corner of your eye and never quite look at enough to get the full picture.”

“So why can I see you?”

"Same way you can see that little girl, Izzy, clear as day."

"I don't know how I can do that."

"Well it's the same thing you're not sure of at least." She shifted her equipment around. "Be terrible if it was a different something you'd need to find out about."

I appreciated how out of my depth I was for a few moments.

"Well what are we going to do?"

"If you're going to be a hunter you need to taste blood. So we're hunting for a beast. When we find said beast, you'll help me kill it. After that I drain the blood and we drink to a successful hunt. Then maybe get some ice cream."

“Sounds alright." I let what she said percolate in my head for a bit. "Ice cream?"

“What about it? You look like you enjoy sweets.”

“How did you really know I liked ice cream?”

"Doesn't everyone?"

I eyed her for a few moments as we walked.

She interlaced her fingers and leaned her head back into the palms of her hands. “A little bird told me.”

“A little ghost bird.”

“Might have been.” She said coyly.

I was about to say something smarmy when Eliza froze halfway through a sniff. She walked forward and pulled in a long breath through her nose, held it, and let it out as she started down the street towards a hole in the wall bar. The sign out front read, "Dagon's Dive." It had a flashing neon representation of an anthropomorphic fish diving into a glass of beer in the front window and not many cars in the parking lot. Eliza ate up ground between her and the front door and I followed as close as I could. She stopped when she got to the door and waited for me to catch up. Her hand went to my shoulder and she said, “Don’t touch anything. Don’t draw your gun unless it becomes an emergency. You’ll be able to tell when it becomes an emergency.” Then she was through the door. I kept with her.

Inside the bar a band played a twanging song about strange liquors of the sea and tobacco smoke hung in the air like a grounded cloud. Beer mugs held by patrons that drank out of them like they took no pleasure in the act. Whenever they weren’t drinking their mouths wrapped around cigarettes. Eliza ignored them those and went for the billiards table. Two men were knocking balls around and drinking as much beer as they could swill down between shots.

They saw Eliza coming when she was about fifteen feet away. The one with the pool cue in his hands held it up like he meant to bat the oncoming woman away with it. She stepped up to him, within easy reach of the pool cue, and glared at the man holding it. He didn’t drop it. Which is when his friend came up next to him, punched him in the gut, and wrested the pool cue from out of his hands.

“Sorry about that miss Eliza. I don’t know what came over Sanders here. He must have had a complete lapse of self-control and self-preservation doing a fool thing like that." Eliza picked up the pool cue and broke it over her knee. She didn't flinch or break eye contact for a moment. The halves of the pool cue got tossed at the man on the floor. He didn’t close his eyes as the bits of wood knocked against his head. He continued to stare resolutely at Eliza with something like contempt.

“What the hell are you doing around here Solomon?” She said as she grabbed onto the man’s shirt and hoisted him up with it. “Last I heard you and Sanders here had taken a little jaunt somewhere else out of my jurisdiction. Why do I smell your scaly ass in this damn bar?” She punctuated the sentence by shaking him back and forth. His hands grasped her arms to try and keep still though it did little. Eliza held him like he was a doll.

“We didn’t have anywhere else to go Ellie, and the hounds are after us. Please just help us out one last time and then I promise, we won’t bother you or yours again alright?” She dropped the man onto his feet again. “Thanks for that Ellie darling, knew I could count on you.” He offered his hand for a shake. “No hard feelings?”

She punched him square in the jaw. It sent him flying into the billiards table like a shuttlecock with limp spaghetti noodles hanging off it. He laid there on top of the emerald baize nursing his side. The balls that had been on the table bounced off and started clacking over floor of the bar. Air whistled in and out of Solomon's mouth in short gasps as he tried to recover from Eliza’s right hook.

“You got the hounds on your tail and you thought the best thing to do would be to bring them here?” She asked the pile of whimpering meat on top of the billiards table. “When in the hell did I give you the impression I would help extricate your stupid ass from the pile of shit you landed it in you stupid scaly bastard?”

“When you demonstrated your gentle, ladylike demeanor and boundless patience.” He managed to choke out. Eliza didn’t reply verbally. She punched him in the back hard enough to send any air inside him rushing out again. She wound up another punch and stopped like she had outside. She sniffed the air before she drew the hammer off her back and held it in her hands.

“Shit.” Eliza spoke softly.

Then the bar turned into hell on earth.

The first of the things ignored Eliza and went straight for the man lying on the pool table. Wolf bodies with bat snouts and hides and wings. Its huge curved teeth gnashed and ripped at his suit, coating the table in gouts of blood and ragged strips of flesh. Eliza hefted the hammer and smashed the beast off him, sending the creature sprawling to the floor. That barely slowed it down.

I dimly heard the patrons flying out of the bar. The man on the floor, Sanders, got up and started checking to see if his friend was alright. He pulled a few strips off of his clothes to staunch the flow of blood from his friend’s wounds and muttered assurance that everything would be fine.

The bat hound was back up and growling at Eliza. It paced around her and snapped its jaws towards the two men behind her. Eliza closed the distance and tried to hit again with the hammer, but it made a lazy jump to the side. Eliza let the hammer smash into the floor and smoothly tapped the side of it with her foot. Something disconnected with a ping and Eliza drew a longsword out of the hammer's hilt. The hound seemed surprised. Eliza took full advantage. She speared the hound through the head with one thrust of the sword. Translucent ichor oozed out of its head, and it continued to growl, undeterred by the sword in its head. Eliza put her boot on the hound’s neck and shoved it to the ground. She pulled the sword out and began chopping into the hound’s neck with heavy strokes. It took an inordinately long time for her to actually cut the damned thing’s head off. It stopped struggling a minute after she managed to chop all the way through. Eliza stopped for a moment, her chest heaving and her front splattered with the ichor that served as blood for these creatures. Then she reached inside of her coat and pulled out a fistful of syringes. Eliza crouched down and let them spill onto the floor. She started jamming the empty syringes into the body of the beast and drawing translucent purplish ichor from it. She stuffed each filled syringe back into her coat while keeping an eye on the men. She motioned for me to help Sanders with the other man. I did.

The man on the pool table had looked normal at first glance. On closer inspection I could see that his skin had strange patterns to it. In the places where the hound had torn through suit and skin I could see scales. His eyes flicked to me as I came up. The pupils were vertical slits of black in pools of amber. Sanders was already picking him up. I helped him. The man hissed in pain as we carried him between us to the area behind the bar, but he didn’t try to stop us. We got there and Sanders started grabbing rags from the bartender’s table and jamming them into every liquor bottle he could find. The other man took felt around under the bar for a moment. He produced a lever action rifle and handed it to me.

“I can’t shoot for shit right now. Sanders can't hit the broadside of a barn door. S’why he’s making molotovs. You’re going to have to nut up and help Ellie kill these fuckers.” He propped himself up against the side of the bar and used the rags Sanders hadn't taken to staunch his bleeding.

I heard Eliza yell again. I turned to see her taking on two of the hounds with the sword in one hand, and the revolver in the other. One hound with a gash in its side had latched onto her arm. I assumed that would be why she had started screaming. She dropped the sword for a moment and passed the revolver to her free hand, poked the barrel into the snout of the hound hanging off her arm, and fired. Most of the hound's head jumped onto the far wall, but the jaws didn’t let go. She jammed the revolver barrel between the teeth and her arm and started levering the jaws open. The other hound started padded towards her. She started walking backwards, but she couldn’t do much to defend herself with an entire hound still hanging off her arm. I raised the rifle to my shoulder, hoped I wasn’t about to piss myself, and took a shot at the advancing creature. The bullet landed square in its ass and forced it to lean with the impact and right itself. It took less than a second. Then it started sprinting towards me. I clamored to chamber another round as fast, but it was already about here by the time I got the shell casing out. It got almost all the way to me, and then it got hit by a bottle. The hound stumbled around, wreathed in flames that replaced the relatively pleasant smell of tobacco smoke with the stench of burnt meat. Sanders patted me on the back.

“We need to get the hell out of here.” Eliza said as she finally got the jaw of the dead hound to let go of her arm. The carcass slumped onto the floor in a haphazard pile of limbs and loose flesh. “Bring the rifle.”

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Outside there were more of the hounds, and even more were coming. They boiled into reality from corners. Every single place that had a slight angle I saw a beast sizzling into reality, slavering and mad with bloodlust. We ran. Sanders had the other man in a fireman’s carry. His bag full of Molotov cocktails hung off the arm that held his friend stable. Eliza had rejoined her weapon into the hammer and batted any creatures that came close back. The hammer crushed bones and destroyed limbs, but the beasts were soon back. There was no end to them. We sprinted down streets that were filled with passerby moments ago, now devoid of anyone but us.

“WHERE THE HELL IS EVERYONE?” I yelled above the sound of growling and frantic running.

“Boy, these are the hounds of Tindalos, they only got a quarrel with them mortals that mess with time.” Sanders said from next to me. A hound rushed towards us and he flung another Molotov into it. The flames slowed it slightly, but not by much. I steadied my breathing and fired into its head. The body jolted and then laid still, letting the fire slowly turn the hound to ash. “They don’t give up their prey, and you can’t kill them. You can slow them down, sever their head, or turn them to ash.” Sanders adjusted the weight of his bleeding companion. “But they’ll be back, and no one can run forever. Someday you get tired and sloppy and they getcha or maybe you just get tired of running all the fucking time.”

“Then why the hell are we fighting them?” I asked, chambering a new round into the rifle and firing into the throng chasing us. It hit one of them square in the chest. That slowed their advance a fraction. We kept running.

“Because you’ve involved yourselves.” Sanders said, his heavy feet slapping against the ground. “You interfered in the Hounds during their appointed duty. Now they’ll want to kill you as much as us.”

I looked at Eliza. Her own red blood and the vile smelling ichor that ran through the beast’s veins stained her clothes. Her arm oozed blood from where the creature latched onto her earlier. She had acquired a thousand other smaller lacerations and bruises from carving a path through the damned things in front of us. Her hammer smashed into hounds with terrifying speed and power. It visited implacable destruction on those that got too close and drove back any that lingered within reach. Her eyes were red. I could see spittle at the corners of her mouth. She’d gone half mad trying to keep up with these creatures. The thing that left a pit in my stomach is that they weren’t overwhelming her like this was some valiant last ditch effort. The beasts were wary of her. They were afraid. She couldn’t be human, not entirely.

We cut through an alleyway and came to the area where Eliza parked the motorcycle. Sanders and I ran forward and tried to keep up with Eliza’s sprint. Something smashed into Sanders like a brick shithouse and he fell on top of me. His huge body crushed mine and I struggled to get out from under him. I heard Eliza’s boots scrape as she turned and looked at us. She saw the hound that had taken Sanders down bite into his side. He screamed.

“NO, GODDAMIT NO!” Eliza roared. She ran back to us as fast as she could, but the hounds were faster.

Second after we fell the hounds surrounded us. They started biting into Sanders, tearing great gobs of flesh out of him that sweated with blood and steamed in the cold air. I grabbed one of the hounds and did the only thing I could. I bit into it. Maybe I could distract one of them for a moment. My teeth had trouble parting the thick flesh of the hound. I gnawed and kept gnawing at it until I finally heard a yelp from the beast and some of the vile ichor spilled into my mouth. It tasted like fresh rot and I drove my head further into the wound. I swallowed the vile blood and meat because if I let go then the hound would go back to eating Sanders. I was not going to let that happen. I kept biting and chewing and tearing as much as I could out of the hound until I felt hands on my back pull me off of it.

I blinked at everything in front of me. Sanders laid there clutching his side and trying to keep his friend awake. I could see that Sander’s friend had his left arm chewed half off at the elbow. I could see Eliza’s hands on me, clutching at the collar of my sweater and holding me up against her legs. She kept slapping me, but I could feel my consciousness flagging in and out. The hounds, the hounds were gone. Except for one of them. One of them coming towards me with ichor oozing out of its back from where I bit into it. I could already see some the flesh being knit back together. Sinews stretched back over the space where I rent it apart a few seconds ago. Eliza didn’t stop the hound. I tried to scrabble backwards. My legs pushed against the ground as hard, but Eliza held me there. I only managed to bend myself in the middle. She forced me to look at the beast. She said something, but I couldn’t hear. I ripped at my sweater. After a few seconds I go to the pistol still pressed against my side. I drew it, cocked it, and Eliza slapped it out of my hand. She pinned my arms to my side. I struggled, but Eliza was stronger than me. The hound stood next to me, opened its stinking maw, and ran its strange tongue over my face.

Interlude - Interrogation

I woke up feeling like the shit that hit the fan. I pushed myself off whatever it is I was laying on, a pillow and the concrete floor. I looked blearily around. I was in a police lockup, judging from the bars all around me and the lack of a toilet. I got to my feet. Oh, damn, I had feet again, and legs that weren’t a pile of useless red smear on the ground. My pants were still torn to shreds below the knee, and my boots were gone. I think that made me even more than I was before before. I checked my body. Arms were the same as I left them. Some tendrils on my composite arm got bruised. The legs were new, though they felt like my old ones. Torso seemed fine, all the right scars were there. Headwraps were as I left them. I picked up one corner and felt around underneath. I found a neat little puncture wound, almost healed already.

After reassuring myself that I was intact and alright I noticed that besides the bed, myself, and the distinct lack of a toilet, there was a tin cup on the floor in front of the door. I walked forward, picked it up, and rattled it against the bars. I heard shuffling from another area of the police station. Two agents, one of them still dressed in officer’s clothes, strolled into the room. They kept the exact same step, so that it sounded like one especially loud person walking. The one still in officer’s clothes took a key ring off his belt and popped one into the lock, turned it, and replaced the key ring. The two agents led me to the toilet and watched me the entire time with all white eyes. I got up and tried to leave, but one of them, the one in the suit, blocked me, and pointed to the sinks. I went over and started to wash my hands. The one in the suit came up behind me and put his hand on the collar of my shirt, then smashed my face into the mirror.

“FUCK.” I yelled on instinct.

“That disrespectful mouth needs a wash, don’t you think?” The agent said in its monotonous voice. I felt its hands start tearing at my head wrappings. I tried to grabs them, tried to keep him off of me, but he kneed me in the gut and pressed my head into the sink. I felt air touch my face. It felt so cool that it stung. The agent in the suit started running water into the sink. The other one in the officer’s clothes stood by us, squirting soap into his hands from the dispenser. He got two sudsy handfuls, walked over, and shoved both hands into my mouth. I bit down and twisted my head. Flesh tore and bones snapped. His hands came off. He didn’t twitch, his facial expression stayed the exact same as his stumps bled into the water filling the sink. The other agent slammed my head into the sink and held it under the water. I screamed. I couldn’t do anything else. The water filled my mouth and washed the soap and blood together as I sent bubbles rocketing out of the water.

When I was half drowned the agent pulled my head back out. The one in the officer’s clothes held a towel in his bleeding stumps. The agent in the suit took it.

“Isn’t that better?” It said, drying my head off with the towel. “Freshening up for your interview.” He left the towel draped across my shoulders and looped his arm through mine, the one without hands did the same on my opposite side. I could hear blood pattering against the tile floor.

“This way.” The one in the suit said.

I followed, I didn’t have much of a choice. We went through the rest of the police station. Empty except for the agents now. They sat with their hands across their laps, or with hands resting on assault rifles. We went to the interrogation rooms. He was already there, sitting behind the one way glass with a pot of tea and a manila file. He waved as we came up, though he didn’t look up from the file. The agent in officer’s clothes unlocked the door and pushed me in, the door shut behind me. I walked with caution over to the chair opposite the Black Man and sat in it. He didn’t acknowledge my presence, but somber piano music started to pipe into the room. Claire de Lune I think. He flipped through a few more pages in the file and sat it down.

He looked at me with eyes that were chaos and destruction. Eyes of infinite capriciousness born of from the beings that spawned the universe. I looked into the eyes of the Crawling Chaos from across the interrogation room table. I looked into the eyes of Nyarlathotep himself. The bastard smiled.

“Langtry, so good of you to come.” He said in a voice like dark honey. “I wanted to have a chat with you about our mutual friend, Howard.” He reached across the table and poured out a cup of tea for me, and one for himself. “It has come to my attention that Howard has taken possession of a shard of Azatoth and poses a thrat to my operations, but I can’t rush in and kill him.” He took a polite sip of his tea. “That leaves too many avenues for his power to influence me and too many avenues for other players in the game to kill me.”

I reached out and took the teacup. I brought it up to my nose and sniffed it, peppermint with ginger and honey.

“So, will you sell out your friends to preserve your own life? Come over to my side of the conflict? Put on a black hat?” He smiled. His teeth glinted in the light of the interrogation room, stark white against his coal black skin.

I threw the hot tea in his face. He frowned.

“I expected as much.” He reached a hand over to my neck with a suddenly elongated arm. “I admire that bravado. Spitting in the face of destiny and the powers of darkness and all that.” I felt his hand shift as it reached my neck and something ropy looped around it and tightened, cutting off my airflow. “I can’t blame you. I’m not a very good negotiator even when I hold all the cards. Something about the return of the old gods and my being their herald just rubs everyone the wrong way I suppose.” The grip of the tentacle on my neck tightened and his smile returned. “You'll have to be helpful in other ways I suppose.” He relished the last word as it passed his lips and he giggled at my panicked reaction. I felt something stroke the side of my face. He started laughing even more as his body changed, twisting and becoming more amorphous. Limbs bent and the table of the interrogation room launched to the side, revealing a vast array of slithering, slimy things. The mass of black grabbed my legs and bound me as I flailed pitifully against my bonds. I felt something cut into me as I struggled to stay awake. I focused on the strains of piano music I could still hear piping into the room, but they were soon drowned out by the writhing of the tentacles. I let go, and felt blackness deeper and darker than sleep take me.

Chapter 8 - Home again Home again

Music, beautiful music played at the feast. I ate and watched the dancers twirl and pirouette with perfect poise. They glided gracefully through the air with gossamer garments glistening and glimmering in the light. I saw familiar faces and I hugged them and kissed them and everything was beautiful, so awesomely beautiful. Tears streamed down my face as I ate the meat before me. I tore long, delicious strips out of the leg and enjoyed them loudly without reservation. I licked spices and sauces off my lips and the tips of my fingers. I do not know how long I spent eating. I don’t care. I felt something tap me on the shoulder. One of the rabbit masked attendants stood at my side. He looked at me with eyes that were pinpricks of black in a sea of white and pointed to the ballroom floor. Amidst the haze of bodies and clothing that swayed to the swelling music I saw a vision of shining radiance. My vision beckoned me to the floor for a dance. I rose and brushed scraps from my robes before I loped towards the floor and into her arms.

She took my waist in her delicate alabaster white arms and we moved to the music. We let the notes of that odd orchestra flow through us like water. She moved perfectly. Hips shifting and sliding beneath her dress, her bare feet touching the ballroom floor only lightly. I could hardly hope to match her grace. My dance was darker and heavier. The dance of a hungering predator pursuing prey. Her heart fluttered beneath my hands as I whirled her about me

Her laughter echoed with the music in that grand hall of feasting and frolic. She slid to the floor again and I let her out of my arms. She did not let me our of hers. She drew me closer, until her breasts pushed against my chest through the thin fabric of her robes. I felt hunger welling up inside me as she pressed her lips to mine. I sucked the sweet air from her mouth. I tasted the wonderful ambrosia that percolated inside her. The world slowed as we shared that kiss. The lights of the hall dimmed until it seemed that it was lit only by wan moonlight. We broke away and I saw the feasting hall turned black and alien. Flies swarmed over once delicious food and rot overtook the fruit that laid fresh on the table moments before. The ballroom floor felt slick with blood and other peculiar fluids. The attendants no longer dressed in fine livery. The animal masks had become warped and strange. Not something separate, but a part of their face, indistinguishable from living flesh. Screams rang through the hall and the music that flowed in such smooth legato a moments before started and stopped in stunted staccato that sounded abhorrent to my ears. The only thing that retained the luster and grandiose glory of the former ballroom was my partner. She sucked in greedy breaths, still recovering from our kiss. I took her into my arms. Her chest heaved up and down, trying to slake her need for air while I pressed my lips against hers again.

I pulled her closer to me, hugging my last bastion against the encroaching dark to my chest. My tongue explored the hot recesses of her mouth as the dancers and attendants advanced on us. The lights grew dimmer. I felt her warm breath against my face as her diaphragm rose and fell. We established a steady rhythm of breathing to replace the profane music filling the hall. I felt claws on my back tear through my robes and my flesh with ease. I felt and heard my blood spill on the floor. Heat left my body to spiral into the cool air in great curls of steam. I only kissed my dear partner harder, determined not to let go. I stole her sweet breath and she took mine in return. I could feel nothing but the sensation of her tongue on mine and her breath in my lungs.

Then it all went truly black.

#

I woke up with someone’s face on mine, and breath pushing into my lungs. I raised my hands and shoved at the person on me. I heard people talking around me. Hands on my shoulders supported me and I decided to focus on breathing for the moment. My eyes stayed unfocused. I didn't mind. When I finally came out of my stupor I saw Isabella floating nearby and a red faced Lutka dressed in bloodstained clothes at my side. I knew Eliza held me up. Her hands were familiar. I relaxed into them and went back to sleep, breathing content peaceful breaths.

I woke up in a comfortable rocking chair in the living room with Lutka and Eliza talking. Isabella floated near me and watched my breathing.

“What did you do to him out there? His heart was about to beat out of his damn chest when you brought him back slung over your arm.”

“He took his first taste of blood. Straight from the source.”

“And you stood by and watched him? You could have stopped him or rendered some help.”

“I didn’t have a choice. I had to deal with a lot of distractions at the time. Let's be glad he did it. Because if he hadn't done it we'd have got ourselves et by the hounds.”

“Wait. Hounds? You don’t mean THE hounds, right?”

“…”

“Why in the hell were you hunting the hounds of Tindalos? No one ever hunts the hounds of Tindalos unless they have a death wish.”

“I got surprised and I react badly to surprises.”

“Can you not suppress your urge to smash things? Is that it? Or do you enjoy seeing me worried about you? Do you like it when you see me sitting up waiting for you to get home? Do you take some sick pleasure in me knowing I might not see you again every time you go out?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“THERE'S NOTHING TO BE SORRY ABOUT. Be sorry about something you can change. Be sorry about dropping a mug or ironing a hole in my pants. Be sorry about that. Don't be sorry about yourself. Even if it hurts me." Lutka buried her head in her hands and tried to hide her sobbing.

“Look at me.” Eliza gently pulled her daughter's head up with one calloused hand. “I’m not going to lie to you and tell you that I’ll always be here. That’s bullshit. I’m going to die one day, and when that day comes you’ll be alright. I know you’ll be alright. Because you’re my daughter. Because you’re strong. Because you’re fantastic, and because you are a thousand times better than I could ever be.” Eliza sniffed and she leaned down to kiss her daughter on the head. “I love you sweetie.” Eliza pulled back and stood straight again. She squeezed her daughter's shoulder and walked back a few steps.

“You guys are sappier than pine trees.” Isabella said from next to my elbow. Lutka and Eliza turned to glare at the translucent girl and Eliza drew her thumb across her neck in the classic 'you're dead' gesture.

Then they noticed I was awake. Lutka sprang up and came over, looking at me like I might break or grow wings out of my arse and fly away at any moment. Eliza moseyed over, her long legs making easy work of the distance between us.

“Are you feeling alright?” Lutka asked, her hand twisting and turning my head as she looked for something out of place.

“Erf eel ine.” I said. She took her fingers off my face and stopped pressing my cheeks into my mouth. “I feel fine.”

“You feel fine.”

“Yeah.”

“Howard, you should be dead.”

“Why exactly, should I be dead?”

“You ate or drank…” She groaned. “You ingested whatever makes up a Hound of Tindalos.”

“And that’s bad.”

“Yes Howard, eating bits of a creature that exists outside of normal reality is bad. You did a bad thing. Would you like me to explain how eating mushrooms you find out in the forest is bad?”

“No, I think I got it.”

“Are you sure? Not going to go and eat urinal cakes because they’re called cakes are you?”

“Alright now you’re getting silly.”

“At least when I’m silly I don’t almost die.”

I tried to think of a clever response to that one. I came up with nothing. “Point.” I said

“I’m so glad we’re on the same page.”

Eliza patted me on the back. She seemed unconcerned about me having nearly bit the dust. “Glad to welcome you to the hunter’s fold.”

“What?” I asked

“Mum, no.”

“What? He got his first taste of blood and survived it fine and dandy. Plus, he demonstrated admirable calm under duress.”

“Were you paying attention to him, or were you distracted with beating the immortal Hounds of Tindalos off yourself?”

“He helped out quite a bit. I think. I saw him take down three.”

“They’re immortal? They didn’t seem all that immortal.” I said.

“They’re immortal in the sense that they will always return to being hounds that exist outside of this reality once they’ve been quote unquote killed.” Eliza said. “The blood in you will return once it is no longer part of something living. When you die, all the Hound’s blood within you will return to, wherever it came from.”

“Oh, splendid, and the part about me being a hunter now?” I asked.

“You’ve consumed the blood of something spawned from the elder gods and didn’t let their power overtake you or strip you of your humanity. You passed the first test of your mettle. Now you’re a hunter, a fledgling hunter, but a hunter.”

“Why do I get the feeling that might not be a good thing?”

“Because it’s not.” Said Lutka.

Eliza opened her mouth to say something, but a knock sounded on the door as she opened her mouth. She hefted the hammer onto her right shoulder and stalked over to open it. She cracked the door. The person on the other side muttered something at her. She sat the hammer down and opened it a bit more to reveal a man in a brown turtleneck with a seashell in his hand and a laurel on his head. The man walked in and set the seashell down on the closest counter he could find, the laurel went next to the shell. He adjusted his round eyeglasses and looked to Eliza.

“May I sit down madam?” He asked in a thick Irish accent.

“Of course.” Eliza said. She picked up a chair from the dining table and brought it into the living room. He followed her and sat down.

“Alright, let’s get introductions out of the way.” He pointed to himself. “I’m Andrews the Hunter, currently representing Nodens as best I can. I know who Miss Eliza is and I know that you’re her daughter.” He pointed at Lutka. “But, I need to know who this young lad is and who the specter currently trying to hide from me is before we start gabbing.” Isabella muttered a curse word and phased out of the bookcase behind me.

“I’m Howard. Sorry if I should know this, but who is Nodens?”

“You know how all the scary things made of stuff you don’t quite want to look at? Weird things that seem to exist outside of space and time or have a different relationship with it than regular blokes like you and me?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Nodens is one of those, except he fucking hates all those blokes. He gave some of his blood to the first semi-humans or whatever they were at the time and the first hunters were born. Ever since then he and all the hunters have been trying to kill the other elder gods that want to return here set up shop again. We've had varying degrees of success.” Andrews adjusted himself in his chair. “That clear things up for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, cause I ain't got time to explain fuck all else.” He snapped his fingers. “Now who is Casper the eavesdropping ghost over there?”

“I’m Isabella, you old sack of potatoes.”

“I like potatoes.” He looked at Eliza. “You vouch for her?” Eliza nodded. “She's alright then. Listen good, because I only have time to explain this once.” Andrews scratched his chin for a moment. “We started seeing some strange activity from Nyarlathotep’s brood a few days ago. They converged on Georgia for some reason. Hunters Samantha and Godwick went to investigate. Godwick came back with no left arm and half his face missing. He told us, in exchange for as much morphine as we could pump into his old arse, that one of the shards of Azatoth had emerged again and the Crawling Chaos was going for it. We sent in a few more hunters with better intel and equipment. They pushed Nyarlathotep's agents out of Georgia and had them on the run. Then we get wind that the shard is no longer in Georgia. It's headed towards Rhode Island.” Andrews leaned back in his chair. “That’s bad for us. Because we put a bunch of our best hungers in Georgia with no way to get them out. Now the Crawling Chaos has a head start on us which we probably won’t be making up.”

“Why can’t you get the hunters out of Georgia?” I asked.

Andrews put his chair back on the ground and for the first time since I’d seen him he looked sheepish. “Well, hunters usually get better with age. Gives 'em more time to kill things and drink their blood and take their power. The older ones can be a bit, difficult, regarding modern conveniences.” Andrews rubbed the back of his neck. “They refused to use any form of public transport and adamantly refused a helicopter.” He sighed a long-suffering sigh. “Because it is of the devil and would render them soft and malleable to his whims.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I wish I was.”

“So I assume you didn’t come here to tell us to sit tight and wait on inevitable doom.” Lutka said.

“Right you are. I’m here to take everyone to the court of the charnel god. Problem is, that means we have to drive to Chicago and Nyarlathotep has blockades set up around the most obvious routes, since he’s not stupid. We also expect a bunch of other surprises, because he’s a devious conniving bugger.”

“So, we either smash through all the forces that a servant of the Outer Gods can muster, or we sneak past a being older and smarter and more of a bastard than anyone or anything else.” Lutka said.

“Well when you put it like that neither option sounds very attractive.” I said.

“I would prefer doing the loud and obvious approach. Subtlety has never been my bag and I know Eliza hates skulking around in the shadows. We'll leave that for the bad guys. Our transport is not exactly the most… inconspicuous of travel options.” Andrews got up from his chair and strolled outside. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

Cherry red, flames painted on the side. Two miniguns and a whole host of other preposterously macho accessories all over it. It even had, “HUNTERZ RULE OUTER GODS DROOL”, spray-painted on the front for gods sake.

“I thought you said hunters didn’t like modern conveniences?” I asked, in awe of what I saw before me.

“The older ones don't. This thing is on loan from one of our younger members, works at a military base. Don't ask me how he loaned it to us.” Andrews said as he hopped into the M1 Abrams tank. "Because I didn't."

Interlude - The Reaper

Mordiggian the charnel god spoke in the language of absence. He spoke with sucking voids and abject loss. His existence is a vacuum for heat and if there ever was, is, or will be something that can be described a living black hole, Mordiggian is it. He waits for me to take my seat in the old red chair. The god's presence has faded and worn the leather of the chair. I walk forward and ease myself down. I sink deep into the fabric of the chair with ease, though I know by experience that getting out again is the problem.

Mordiggian awakens ponderously and fixes his eyes on me as I sit in the chair and await my orders. The air shifts around me. The stark absence fluctuates in intensity and pitch, the poetic tones of decay. He tells me Nyarlathotep is launching a battle against the hunters and their lord Nodens. The spawn of Azatoth is vying for control of the latest shard of his progenitor. Mordiggian tasks me with protecting the shard and those traveling with it. I nod and the great god stops talking. He lifts one rot covered end of himself to bid me good fortune. I rise from the chair and bow low to the ground, basking in the glorious rot of his presence. The rot shall overtake all the universe one day. He returns to his slumber. I leave the great hall and walk back out into the network of catacombs where the rest of the ghouls make their home.

Charon is waiting for me when I make it back outside to the car. He holds up a green skinned hand in greeting and I return the gesture. He pats the trunk of the hearse. I open it, curious to see what sort of artillery I’m going to have on this outing.

The barrel is black, less than a foot with a grip on the underside. The launcher is heavy in my hands. The weight promises power, destruction. The cylinder can hold six grenades at a time. I depress a button close to the grip and press against it. It pops out with ease. There are two more cylinders in the car along with my regular equipment. I press my other hand into the grip nearer my chest and the stock to my shoulder. Yes, this will do. I put the launcher back into place amidst the weaponry in the back of the hearse and turn to Charon. We share a quick hug. He pats me on the back, makes me promise to come back safe and sound. I hug him tight and he knows that I will. After a while we let go. Charon bids me goodbye, returning to the catacombs to see if the charnel god has any other use for him.

I walk up to the driver’s side door and open it. I slide into the cushy black leather seat. Unlike the chair in the chamber room this one is still firm and supportive. I don’t sink in. The key goes into the ignition, a quick turn, and the lights spring up in front of the car as the engine jerks to new life. I drive towards the outskirts of Chicago and take the exit towards Rhode Island.

Chapter Nine - Tanks for the Memories

“Stop staring at my butt.”

“I’m not staring at your butt.”

“Isabella is Howard staring at my butt?”

“No, of course not.”

“See, your concerns were totally unfou-”

“He’s ogling your posterior with lecherous eyes.”

I stopped looking at Lutka’s butt and turned to glare at Isabella as hard as I physically could. “LIES AND BASELESS SLANDER!”

“Can we please.” Andrews said from elsewhere in the tank. “Focus on the issue at hand? The evil wanker trying to kill us?”

“I’m still feeling a pair of eyes on my butt though.”

Eliza leaned back to look at us from her position manning the main gun of the tank. She looked straight at me. Watched me start sweating under the pressure. She’s going to rat me out as hard as she can and have fun doing it. Her eyes narrow and she raises two fingers to her eyes while mouthing, “I’M WATCHING YOU.” I nod as submissively as I can. She nods back.

“There’s no one looking at your butt Lutka. If there was I’d appreciate the attention, not everyone can transfix a man with toned glutes alone.” Eliza mouthed, “YOU OWE ME.” I nodded as fast as I could.

I passed a few more hours of the journey watching the beautiful landscape outside as it passed by. Watching the beautiful landscape of Lutka’s backside as she shifts in her seat. Listening to the tank rolling over things as we travel alongside the highway. Looking at Lutka’s butt some more. Imagining how nice it would be to cuddle up next to Lutka on a rainy day and fall asleep next to her, and her butt.

We were getting closer to the midpoint between Providence and Chicago.There were fewer and fewer vehicles on the road. Some had pulled off on the side of the road. Others were in the middle of the road with people still in them, sitting and doing nothing. It felt wrong. This is a highway. No one ever stops dead still on a highway.

The interior of the tank grew tense as we waited for something to happen. Maybe a dark creature made of tenebrous tendrils would pop out of the bushes and yell boo, or a fifty foot tall robot will come crashing down out of the sky and make us a flat smear on the road. Andrews kept the miniguns spinning. Nothing appeared that we could fire at. Eliza kept the main gun trained on potential ambush spots. She paused to sniff the air for any trace of beasts every minute or so. I kept one hand on the glock Eliza gave me and braced for the sound of firing guns. Isabella phased out of the tank every now and again, scouting about the place for any nasties. Lutka sat in the commander’s position, helping scan the surroundings. The lack of resistance felt unnatural. Like trying to punch a wall and finding that it was only air that looked like a wall.

Not a trace of anything. Nothing waiting for us, nothing behind us, in front of us, or in the sky. Surrounded on all sides by an abundance of nothing. It scared us. Our watchfulness grew frenzied and edgy. We checked and double checked around us for any sign of an advancing foe and found nothing. We almost obliterated a particularly evil looking bunch of bushes before Isabella flew over and confirmed they were nothing but bushes. Tensions rose as we found ourselves continually confronted by a lack of resistance. We made it past the halfway point and kept going. We were crossing an overpass when it happened.

Something slammed into the tank from the side. The vehicle made a sickening lurch to the right and tipped us toward the edge of the overpass. The air became thick and cloying with the stench of something old and rotten. I gagged and could hardly keep my stomach from spewing all over the ammo loader for the main gun. Something else hit us.This time the screeching sound of metal rending accompanies the lurch of the tank. The smell becomes even worse. The inside of the tank turns into a hell of noise and rank odor. Andrews grabs a sawn off pump shotgun from somewhere above him and sticks his arm out of the top hatch to fire. The deep thump of the shotgun sounds before a scream, higher pitched than anything human, slices through my bones. Andrews snakes his hand back into the tank and shuts the hatch as quick as he can. The bloodied shotgun tumbles from his hand. Andrews is sporting deep lacerations all the way up his shooting arm oozing with fresh blood.

“This is bad. In case anyone needed help coming to that conclusion." Andrews said.

“Byakhee?” Eliza asked.

Andrews nodded. “We won’t be able to catch something moving faster than light before it gets to us. We’re going to need to let them hit us and then take care of them.” He tore off the neck of his turtleneck and used it to wipe blood off his arm. “Focus on getting us the hell out of here as fast as the tank can go. Sooner we get to Chicago the sooner we’ll be safe.” He picked up the gun in a white knuckled grip, racking another shell into the chamber. “Probably safe at least.”

Another thing hit the side of the tank and started scrambling over the outside. Claws clinked and scraped against metal as the odor asserted itself as an almost physical force. Metal above us strained and broke apart. A beak jutted into the tank and the long pale tongue sticking out of it scythed out to investigate. The beak snapped wildly after pulling the tongue back in. Andrews maneuvered the shotgun underneath it and let loose another explosion. A scream like the first pierced our ears through the sound of the shotgun, but this one sounded more ragged and wet. My gut shifted along with the tank took another hit. This monster stayed quiet for a few moments. Then we heard something slashing and scraping at the treads of the tank. Andrews swore and clambered half out of the tank to shoot this one. The shotgun roared once, twice, and Andrews dropped back down. Blood waterfalled down his left shoulder.

“Jesus…” I said. Andrews moved his injured shoulder with his right hand to see how bad the damage was. A tiny piece of gristle still connected it to his body. The rest of it was cleanly severed, including the bones. He hissed as he worried at it and reached into a pouch somewhere on his person. His hand came back with a syringe, filled with a shimmering white liquid. He sunk it deep into the meat of his left shoulder as his blood evacuated his body. The plunger depressed in one swift motion. He gripped the nearly severed shoulder and held it against him. The squirting gobbets reduced to more of a slow trickle down his side. Andrew's shoulder cracked and he bit his lip to keep from screaming. Another thing hit the side of the tank and sent him tumbling into an awkward position against the vehicle walls. He righted himself a moment later, still covered in his own blood and looking far paler than he had a moment ago. His left shoulder was back together. A rough circle of angry red scar tissue the only thing that hinted at his injury.

Volley after volley of Byakhee smashed into us. Each rent apart the metal armor of the tank with razor claws and long serrated beaks. I grabbed the lever action rifle from the spot next to me and started blasting at the putrid things through the chinks in the tank's armor. Gouts of black blood splashed with every shot. Andrews tried to keep them from entering through the top hatch. His shotgun kicked back into him as it rent apart invading beaks and floppy membranous limbs. Eliza sliced at any limbs that tried to get into the tank with the silvery sword of her combined weapon. When not occupied by swordplay, she fired at the swarming creatures with her handcannon. Lutka held a compact SMG in her hands that chattered as it sprayed out streams of bullets. She had another sitting on her lap. She displayed an awe inspiring calm as she unloaded clip after clip into the ravenous hordes crawling and skittering on the outside of the tank. I could hear nothing but muted gunfire and ululating screams. Then the screams changed from ones of pain and furious frustration, to fear. Not fear of us, we were only harming the beasts. I saw several warp away through the air once injured. Replaced moments later by more of their kind. These screams were a warning to flee while it was still an option.

Clumps of Byakhee took flight and sped away from the tank. A few stayed and hissed at us between the cracks as they tried to scrape us out of the armored shell. I put the stock of my rifle to my shoulder again, but Andrews gripped the end of my rifle’s barrel and pulled it down. He pointed to something behind us. Something black was visible through one of the holes the Byakhee sliced into the tank. I shuffled over and peered out to see a huge dark monster whose taut wings propelled its rubbery body towards us. The faceless visage scanned the area as it shot forward with alarming speed despite the leisure of its flapping wings. It landed on the tank and the remaining Byakhee screamed hate at it as they scrambled over the exterior. The newly arrived creature stretched out its arms and began plucking the other monsters up, cracking their necks with one quick movement of the ropy muscles along its arms and tossing limp bodies aside. Some of the Byakhee tried to advance on it from behind. The black creature pivoted faster than anything that lanky should have been able to and slashed the skulking things to pieces with claws that did not glint despite their smooth blood slick sharpness. Once the terror assured itself that no more of the Byakhee were present, it settled on top of the tank.

“What in the hell…?” I breathed as I looked up at that thing that tore apart those creatures.

“That is a night gaunt. I assume he's on loan from Nodens to assist us in the hunt for the Crawling Chaos.” Andrews said. I looked over to him and realized that his eyes had become inhuman. Orbs clouded over by a black film that did not obscure his vision but did make him look like a demon. His muscles bulged underneath the remains of his turtleneck. He sat back in his seat and manned the miniguns again, rubbing at his left shoulder every few minutes. Eliza went back to the main gun.

“Why did it take it so long to get here?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t actually know we were getting one. I know this one is from Nodens because he's their boss. I know the gaunt is on loan because no one gets to keep one. They're sort of a big deal.”

“What would we even call him if we were going to keep him?” Lutka asked.

“We’re not kee-” Andrews started.

“Mister Cuddles.” I interrupted.

Everything in the freshly ventilated tank went silent for a bit.

“Seconded.” Isabella said as she zipped around the tank.

“Thirded.” Eliza said with a smirk.

“Fourth-ed.” Lutka said, stumbling through the awkward word.

“I hate all of you.” Andrews said, being a massive killjoy.

Mister Cuddles looked down at us curiously with a featureless face.

Interlude - Snake Oil

Sanders pushed my wheelchair around to the front desk of the hospital. My ass felt cold as fuck. Only natural, since it didn’t have a single fucking thread of cloth to cover it and I was cold blooded on my father’s side. That combined with the fact that they kept it abominably cold in this wasteland of a hospital made my asscheeks constantly about to crack and crumble off from hypothermia, but did the hospital staff care about that? NOOOOOOO. Go back to your bed they said. Stop bothering us they said. When are your insurance papers going to come through they moaned. Nothing but a bunch of whiny bastards who wanted to jilt us out of our hard earned money.

I briefly reflected on the fact that both Sanders and I were grifters, and promptly ignored the thought. Grifting at least was honest. You knew a grifter was going to cheat you out of your money. You expected it. They had to really put on a show, really blow your socks off with cleverness and cunning to get their daily bread. These guys? They were amateurs at best. Ham handed asking for all your money when they’d done nothing to earn it, made me sick to my stomach.

“HURRGLARB.” I went as my guts emptied onto the white linoleum of the hospital floor.

“Christ on a bike Cohen, least you could do is warn me.” Said Sanders from behind my head. “You sure you’re alright to get out of here?”

I wiped my face and made sure that I launched all the vomit off to the side and onto the hospital’s floor, not onto myself. I checked out. “I’ll be fine, not used to the painkillers yet. Keep pushing.” And keep pushing he did.

We made it to the front desk. More accurately, Sanders made it to the front desk. I was floating somewhere between reality and the dreamlands. These painkillers were the shit, I couldn’t even feel one of my arms anymore. I held both of my hands in front of my face. I only got the one I could feel up there but that’s because when you can’t feel something you can’t move it. The other one was still next to my side, hanging there like dead weight. I couldn’t see it but where the hell else would it be?

“Can I check out Mister Cohen here?” Sanders asked the lady at the front desk. She was tall, with a nice pair of knockers and a tight fitting uniform. She had been in my room a few times. Mostly when I caused trouble for the other nurses and she needed to administer some kind of mild sedative. Couldn’t remember her name though. The fact that every time we’d been in the same room she drugged me until I passed out probably had something to do with that.

“Sorry, but he’s not cleared for release till Wednesday, and he’s going to need significant physical therapy.” Her knockers bounced as she talked, and while she breathed, and they were even starting to move around for no reason at all. I needed to get some of these painkillers in a doggie bag or something.

“Hey.” I said. “Your boobs are HUUUUUUUGE.” I held out my hand to show her how huge her tits were. “HUUUUUUUGE.” I repeated to make sure she heard me.

She looked at me, obviously appreciating the insight I gave her into her own physique. I think Sanders choked back a laugh, bastard didn’t even have his mind on the job at hand. Probably thinking about some joke he heard earlier about bars and fishmen walking into them. How did that one go again?

“Are you sure you can’t let him go a little bit sooner?” Sanders asked, once he’d recovered from his chuckling fit. “I don’t feel right leaving him alone here.”

“Yes, I’m certain that I can’t do anything to get him out earlier.” The nurse with the big boobs said. I imagined what squeezing my face between them would feel like. A big bowl full of half melted marshmallows. Except less sticky and more fleshlike but just as warm and inviting.

“Marshmallow tits.” I said while pointing at her cleavage. “You got, marshmallow boobies.” I giggled to myself for a second, and Sanders leaned over the desk. I heard something go click, and the doors behind us started opening. The doors to the outside.

“Sir.” The nurse said sternly to Sanders.

“Sorry about this.” He replied, turning my wheelchair on a dime and running out of the hospital with me. The wheelchair jerked around and bounced me like a ball. I felt every single slight dip or bump right on my tailbone. It hurt like a bitch, but we got out and Sanders started shuffling me from the wheelchair to a car I didn’t recognize. He folded up the wheelchair in a few seconds and tossed it into the back with a thump of metal on cheap faux leather.

Sanders climbed into the driver’s seat and buckled himself in. I belatedly started trying to find my seatbelt and stick it in the holster. Damn thing was slippery. I still couldn’t feel my other arm.

“Hey Sandy, where are we going?” I asked while he started up the car and looked into rearview mirror to back up. Seatbelt was still giving me some trouble with only one hand.

“Figured we’d follow that kid and make certain the hounds aren't going to be back.” He clacked the gear into reverse. “And we do kinda owe him for saving our scales.” He stepped on the gas and I rocked back, missing the seatbelt by a few inches. I swore to myself. “What’s left of them anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, finally got the sucker while we were pulling out of the hospital parking lot. I grinned, ain’t nothing getting the best of me. I twisted my body clicked the seatbelt into the holster, and noticed something.

“HOLY DOGSHIT SANDERS.”

He jammed on the brakes as we were leaving the parking lot. “WHAT?” He screamed.

“WHERE THE FUCK IS MY OTHER ARM?”

Chapter Ten - Lovecraft and Lemonade

The little tank that could kept going for a few more miles before it decided it had enough of all this shit and died. We crawled out of it and observed the once proud graffiti scrawl on the side rendered illegible by deep furrows carved into the metal armor of the tank and the generous splashes of black and red blood coagulating in open air. Mr. Cuddles walked with us. He twitched his head to the side like he was listening for something on the cusp of his hearing. Andrews looked like hell and the rest of us didn’t look much better. We walked through two miles of empty highway until we saw something odd. A wooden table, about a mile off in the distance, with several chairs around it, only one of them had an occupant.

We trudged toward it, staying wary and looking for any sign that this was another ambush. Nothing, just like last time. We made it close enough that we could see the table. It had a glass drink container with a spigot on the end of it sat next to the figure and several colorful coffee mugs placed in front of the chairs.

“Welcome, welcome, good to see all is well.” The man at the table said. He was wore a blue suit with pale gray pinstripes over a white shirt and a paisley tie that looked like a starry sky. His skin was black, pure black without even a shimmer of sweat showing from his time out in the sun. Each of us tiredly took a seat at the table. Except Mr. Cuddles, he stood behind us and stared at the pinstriped man with his blank slab of a face.

“Please, partake of the provided refreshments. I’m sure you're all parched after such a perilous journey.” He indicated the drink container filled with cloudy yellow liquid I assume to be lemonade. He took the mug in front of him, filled it, and drank. “Ahhhh.” He moaned, baring his stark white teeth in a grin. “Delicious.”

We each filled a mug and drank. Except Isabella, I filled her mug and sat it in front of her. She nodded her appreciation, happy at inclusion despite her handicap. The lemonade tasted fresh and sweet. I filled a second mug and saw a few of the others doing the same.

“Do you like the mugs? I had to borrow them from a, mutual friend.” The pinstriped man said. “He wanted me to make sure I gave his regards.” I looked down at my mug. It had a picture of a pink pony. It looked a lot like the one Langtry gave to Isabella when we had tea back at his place. It even had a chipped rim like the other mug. The other mugs looked familiar too, especially the one that the man in the pinstripes drank from that said, “I’m with Azatoth", on the side.

“Oh.” I said to myself.

The pinstriped man smiled at me with his fingers steepled in front of him. “Go on then. Oh, what?”

“You’re that Nyarlathotep guy aren’t you?”

“How good of you to notice. I had begun to worry that more cliches might be necessary to get the point across.”

My head felt heavier than usual and swimmy, like I was trying to do a handstand underwater with no air in my lungs. I shook my head to clear it but that only made it worse. I looked at Nyarlathotep still idly sipping from his mug. He noticed my staring after a moment and put his beverage down.

“The swimming head and general cloudiness of your mind is my fault I’m afraid. I get to peek at what you're thinking too and I must say that you have a gift for description. I would put you totally under like the rest of your friends but I’m afraid that’s a bit too close for comfort. What with you having that power that can make me all suggestible. Apologies, you look like you could do with a nap and if my hands were not tied I'd gladly provide one for you.” I looked around to see that everyone was resting their heads on the table and gently snoring. I turned around with sluggish speed and saw Mr. Cuddles stretched out across the asphalt sunning himself.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why? Why did I go to all this trouble to get you refreshments? Why do I have these mugs? Why do you keep asking such vague questions that not even an elder god with eyes inside your noggin can answer?” He rubbed his chin with his thin black hand. “Fuck if I know. You're the one with all the power here.” He held out the hand scratching his chin and it formed into the shape of a writhing black mass that hurt to look at. All mouths and eyes and thrashing multitudinous flagella. “You got paired with a shard of Azatoth. You know, the thing that sits in the exact center of space, give or take a few lightyears, created and sustains the entire universe. That Azatoth.” His hand went back to being a hand and he laid it flat on the table. “If I let you keep running around and influencing things and exercising that power of yours one of two things will happen.” He held up a finger. “One is that you manage to screw up all the plates that I’ve kept spinning until now and plunge the entire world back into the..." He tapped the table with one finger. "...appendages of the Elder Gods. The best result of that is the entire world gets used up and discarded like a gas can and the Elder Gods move to world after world destroying each one and fighting for dominance. Like the old days.” He held up another finger. “The second and worst thing that can happen. This sudden shift in the positions of power causes Azatoth to awaken and he does something that blind idiot gods do. He annihilates existence.”

He creaked around and resettled into his chair. “I’m supposed to be…” He brought out the finger quotes and sarcastic tone of voice. “Preparing this world for the glorious return of the old gods so that they may revel in its bounty once more.” He lost the finger quotes and the smarmy tone and wearily rested his chin on his fist. “But I’ve got no incentive to do that and you guys are a lot more interesting than the rest of those bastards. All they want is blood this and sacrifice that and respect me because I am a being spawned from the deepest recesses of space.” He sighed. “Boring regular shit that pervades most of the universe.”

“Now, the one who’s really jonesing for the return of the elder gods is Nodens. I assume from the fact that you’re keeping company with two hunters and that night gaunt that you know about him?”

I recalled Andrews telling me something about Nodens but I couldn’t remember much with my head all foggy. After sitting for a moment in contemplation I gave a weak nod.

“Well you probably know all about how he’s hunting me and all the other elder gods because he believes in humanity or something like that. Which is a massive crock of shit.” Nyarlathotep picked up his mug and took another swig of lemonade. “The rat bastard knows I’ve got a bunch of the less terrifying and awful deities preventing the ones that truly hate all life from coming back. He’s been trying to kill them. Until recently he hasn’t had enough success to warrant attention. He has made great strides in the last hundred years due to advancement in warfare and caustation of general mayhem. Bit of a bitch that. He’s managed to kill a lot of lesser deities and Shub Niggurath. Very bad that last one, threw a whole bunch of stuff off kilter.” He stretched and propped his feet up on the tabletop. “That and his recent alliance with Mordiggian and the ghouls is causing me a shit ton of trouble. All because Carter made friends with a night gaunt and that moldering tit Pickman.” He massaged his temples with his hands and leaned back in his chair. “To say nothing of how much he screwed my plan to install gods of my own that would keep the elder gods patsies from getting followers by luring them away to a magical dream land flowing with milk and honey. Carter gets all up in arms because it's his dreamland and he needs it.” He seemed to be getting pissier just thinking about it.

“I’m telling you this, because I need to ask you a favor.” He said after composing himself again. “Nodens and Mordiggian are getting to be a big problem for me, and if you could get them to drop the alliance or make it harder for them to bust my balls all the time I’d appreciate it. I can get you a nice cottage far away from anything you could screw up where you can enjoy life until you die. Sound like a deal?” I gave a dumb nod. “Perfect. Now there’s going to be someone coming along in a bit from Mordiggian. This guy's supposed to meet up with you and take you back safe and sound to the great charnel house or whatever he calls his pile of corpses these days. I’m going to have to get into character and be all squamous and rugose and evil so they don’t know we had this little chat, alright? And you don’t tell them anything we talked about, or they’ll have you and your friends strung up like Christmas turkeys before you can say halitosis.” He scooted his chair back from the table and stood up, brushing wrinkles out of his suit.

“By the way, those bird things, called Byakhee if your friends didn’t let you know already, those weren’t mine.” He made careful adjustments to his tie. “I fucking hate the scrawny little buggers. They shit everywhere and the smell is atrocious.”

Interlude - Tipping the Scales

“Cohen.”

“Yeah Sanders?”

“Do we actually know where the kid and Ellie have gone off to?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, and excuse me if this is a bit too much for you, could you be a bit more SPECIFIC?”

“Well I know they’re not at Ellie’s house.”

“Ah good, that just leaves the entire rest of the planet.”

“Well there was something at Ellie’s house.”

“And what, pray tell, was there at Ellie’s house? A note saying where they're headed? Perhaps a detailed map? GPS coordinates?”

“No, and you can drop the sarcastic attitude, you armless git.”

I felt the pit in my stomach give a little twitch. The pain killers have worn off now and I can distinctly feel each and every facet of my body again. I can distinctly feel that I don’t have a left arm anymore. I’ve got a stump about a half foot long. I told myself I wouldn’t cry about it again, but dammit I lost my ARM. I’ve had that arm since I was a baby boy fresh out of my mother’s womb. It’s always been there for me. Picking up stuff. Helping me do me pressups to stay in shape. Helping me nick wallets and purses and all sorts of other stuff that it’ll never get to do again. I won’t ever be able to have one hand that washes the other. I won’t be able to hold a pretty broad on each big muscly arm. Only one broad on one scrawny arm. My right hand will always know what my left hand is doing, because all it's doing is being digested by one of those bloody hounds.

“Cohen…” Sanders said. “Cohen don’t… don’t cry.” He tried to put a hand on me, but I shoved myself to the side of the car so he couldn’t.

“You’re right.” I sniffled. “I’m nothing but an armless sack of shit now. Probably can’t even open a godforsaken pickle jar anymore.” I rounded on Sanders and stared dead in his face. “Why the hell did you even take me out of the hospital? You should have left me there to rot like the fucking vegetable I am.” I could feel more tears welling up and dribbling down my cheeks. “Just an armless bastard, half a man. Even more of a half man than I was before.”

“Cohen.”

“What? You don’t need to say anything else. I know the fucking score.” Sanders flinched, and pulled the car onto the side of the moonlit road.

“Cohen, I don’t give a damn if you haven’t got your arm or not. I don’t give a damn about what you say about me. I don’t even give a damn about the fact that I had to wait for six hours just to get into that hospital and bust you the hell out while you were tripping balls worse than a clumsy juggler.” He put his hand on me, and I didn’t shy away. “What I DO give a damn about, is what you say about yourself. Because you’re not an armless sack of shit, or a vegetable, or even half a man, you’re not any of that.” He pulled me closer to him. “You’re my best friend, and that won’t change no matter how many limbs you have.” Damn him. I was crying even more now. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him back.

After a brief moment of sappiness Sanders got back to driving down the road as I wiped the tears off my cheeks.

“So, what did you find at Ellie’s house?”

“Well, it’s not a certainty but, look out the window in a couple seconds.” We were pretty close to Ellie’s house, must have been something big to be visible from up the curving dirt road that led over there though. I kept my eyes peeled.

“Is that…?”

“Yeah, seems kind of hard to believe doesn’t it?”

“Knowing Ellie? Not that hard to believe, scary to know that she’s in a bloody tank, but not that hard to believe.”

“Well the treads keep going this way for a while. I didn’t follow them far, just enough to make sure that they came from Ellie’s house and go this way and not the other way round.”

“Gotcha, you don’t think she got nicked do you?”

“I watched her annihilate at least fifty Hound of Tindalos on her own while we were trying to get out of Providence in one piece. I wouldn’t totally discount the possibility, there are some scary buggers out and about on earth, but I don’t think any of them drive tanks.”

“True, they’d be more of the formless horror category.”

“Mmmmm.”

We drove on in silence for a few minutes, following the tank tracks through the dirt on the side of the road. Then I heard some soft sizzling sound from the backseat. It sounded familiar, familiar in a bad way. Like how the sound of bees was always familiar after I got stung by a hive of them when I was a kid. I looked into the backseat and wished I hadn’t.

“Sanders.” I said, shaking his arm.

“Cohen quit it, I’m trying to drive here.”

“Sanders it’s one of them.”

“What do you mean it’s one of them?”

“I MEAN IT’S ONE OF THOSE FUCKERS THAT TOOK MY ARM OFF MATERIALIZING IN OUR BACK SODDING SEAT YOU DAFT BUGGER THAT'S WHAT I MEAN BY ONE OF THEM.”

Sanders finally fiddled with the rear view mirror a moment and looked at the damn thing tearing the fabric of reality like a cloth chew toy in our back seat. He scoffed and flipped the mirror back to where it was before.

“That’s just Shirley.” He said.

I looked back at the hound sizzling its way through reality and pointed to it. “Am I not supposed to be afraid of losing my other arm because you gave these things NAMES?”

“Not names, a name for a hound. There’s only one Shirley.”

“Only one. Only one friendly one of these? How the hell do you know it’s friendly?” I waved my stump at him. “The bloody things certainly weren’t friendly BEFORE.”

“You might have passed out during that part actually.”

“Passed out for when you made nice with the being from beyond our reality by dressing up in a frilly bonnet and serving them tea and cupcakes with a chaser of MY ARM?”

“I told you about the kid doing the things with the dogs, I know I did.”

“I certainly don’t recall it, but hey, not like I’ve been blasted out of my noodle on a cocktail of painkillers and sedatives for the past two days or so.”

“Valid point. I couldn’t really tell when you were sober and when you weren’t for a while. Sort of a fifty fifty shot as to whether or not you’re lucid when I’m talking to you.”

“Just make me a list.”

“Next time you get drugged into a stupor I will.”

“Good.”

I felt a long, forked tongue drag itself across my cheek and rough skin chafing against the side of my face. I looked at the hound, now fully in the backseat. It still looked like the ones that wanted to kill both of us earlier as far as physical characteristics like skin and teeth and flesh and teeth. The stance didn’t look like it was about to pounce though, more relaxed and content with itself. I reached out and gave it a tentative pat and almost shat myself when it took my hand into its mouth. I thanked all the gods I could think of that it just nibbled playfully.

“Why did you name it Shirley?” I asked “Is it a girl?”

“Nah, I named her Shirley cause it’s surely a good name.” Sanders said with smugness that saturated the car.

“I hope she bites you, right in the dick.”

“Love you too Cohen.”

Chapter Eleven - The Not so Final Battle

“Howard? What’s going on?” Lutka asked as I shook her awake. Nyarlathotep had released them form the blanket mental whammy a few moments ago. It was taking them a while to shake off the effects though. Nyarlathotep cleared the table and everything else by flinging it into some nearby forest. I did convince him to let me stuff the mugs into Eliza’s rucksack. Mordiggan’s agent was still a few miles out but closing fast. We, or I, had to make sure that the battle to the death with the Crawling Chaos looked convincing. I was one of two who would know it wasn't an actual battle to the death. I hoped I wouldn't have to do much. I'd never had acting chops to speak of and I didn't want to test them against Eliza.

“It’s Nyarlathotep.” I said, hoping I could sell my panic and terror to Lutka at least. “HE’S HERE.” Something black and slimy slithered onto the bridge in the waning sunlight.

Massive tentacles supported a vague human shape composed of deep writhing masses of black and dark purple. It squirmed toward us with terrifying speed and dexterity. Its pointed head protruded like a grotesque mockery of a church spire. With each slap against the ground the tentacles smashed asphalt, throwing up bits of rock and dirt as it began to move towards us with murderous intent.

Eliza was the first to get up. She hefted her hammer and started running towards the advancing wall of squamous flesh. The heavy steel head of her hammer tapped against the ground and sent up sparks that lit her body in momentary flashes of yellow and white.

Andrews got up next with the sawn off shotgun gripped in his crudely bandaged hand and in his other hand held a strange weapon that looked like someone had tried to add a rifle and a shield to an already perfectly good sword. He kept pace with Eliza until they got close to the beast. Andrews started firing with both his weapons as Eliza continued her headlong rush. The gunfire and the sparks of Eliza's hammer on the road lit up the night in vicious flashes.

I kissed Lutka on the cheek and picked up my lever action rifle to start blasting away. She laid there for a moment. Maybe shocked into silence by my debonair affection, or the tentacular mass of doom coming towards us. A man can dream. Lutka recovered her wits in a moment and found her own guns lying next to her.

The gunfire drew screams from the creature and black blood began to stain the highway as it thrashed at the source of the pain. It missed Eliza by a hairs breadth as she weaved between strikes and smashed into the tentacles supporting it. The hammer blows splattered viscera across the ground with each momentous swing. Andrews kept unloading his guns into the beast. He stopped every time a tentacle thrust towards him with intent to impale him on its disgusting length and slashed furiously at the invading appendage with his weird weapon until free to fire again. I stayed further back and steadily unloaded all the bullets from my rifle into the writhing mass. Lutka did the same, only faster and she had two guns. The beast dropped blood and pieces of itself all over the battlefield as we fought. It felt like we should be winning, felt like there was a glimmer of hope in the face of such monstrosity. We were wrong.

Eliza failed to dodge one of the flailing tentacles and was flung aside like a wet doll. Her body carved furrows into the ground alongside the black blood stained highway. Andrews managed to cut back one tentacle but found himself grabbed by three others. Stripped of his weapons and held aloft like a living trophy in an instant. A testament to false hope. Lutka and I tried to run but my legs got taken out from under me by a sweeping tentacle. I went flying tits over arse and landed hard on the asphalt. I felt something break. I saw Lutka unloading a clip from her submachine gun into the tentacles following her, but they remained undeterred. I heard a roaring echo that for a moment I thought was the creature’s cry of victory. Instead of getting softer it got louder and louder, filling my ears with a visceral explosive noise.

I turned to see an advancing car. Headlights cutting through the half light with blinding white and an engine screaming protest at the speed it traveled at. The vehicle swerved and its metal body smashed into the huge trunklike tentacles supporting the beast’s weight. The creature fell and threw Andrews to the ground with a wet crack.

A huge man, his brown coat hanging off him like a cloak, stepped out of the driver side of the car. He bent his tall frame down into the car for a moment and came back with an equally massive pill launcher. He started walking towards Nyarlathotep, unloading shot after shot onto the collapsed monstrosity. As each pill impacted the body of the beast an explosion so loud it bordered on physical force resounded through the air. It sent flesh and gobs of blood sailing into the sky. He kept advancing towards the beast until it managed to produce supporting tentacle again and right itself. The man pushed the empty cylinder out of the launcher and let it thump against the ground. One of the tentacles smashed into him and sent him through the front windshield of his own car. I waited for a minute with bated breath before the doors at the back shot open and the figure returned, sans grenade launcher. Instead he brandished a scythe as tall as himself. He moved with impossible speed and ferocity across the asphalt and leapt onto the mass of black writhing hate. He held on with his scythe and scored greats cuts that poured black blood out onto the highway.

Nyarlathotep roared and writhed as the scythe bit into his black flesh. He thrashed himself against the ground in an attempt to throw the brown coated man off. The man sunk the scythe in deep and held fast.

When Nyarlathotep stopped the wild thrashing and switched to more mindful ways of removing the thorn in his side, the brown coated man began digging in his coat. He pulled out a revolver and began unloading shot after shot into the beast. Soon he threw his depleted revolver to the side and pulled a black shotgun from the left side of his coat's interior. He jammed the barrel of it into the head of the loathsome thing and the stock of the gun into the crook of his shoulder. He pulled the trigger so fast that it may as well have been fully automatic. The flailing tentacles grew weak at last, their frantic flailing slowed and stopped.

I raised myself to my feet on limp arms and went after Lutka as she darted to her fallen mother. I saw Isabella and the brown coated man run towards Andrews. Eliza, groaning and in considerable pain, propped herself up with one arm where she had landed. I could see blood creeping its way out of her jacket. Lutka and I stood her up and supported her between us as we ran to the half destroyed car. Isabella gave terse instructions to the man as he shuffled Andrews body into the back of the car. The hunter looked weak but the brown coated man pulled another syringe of that strange shimmering white liquid out of Andrews pants pocket and jammed it into him. Color but not consciousness returned to Andrews in a moment. He got shoved into the back of the vehicle. Eliza joined him. As we shut the doors on them I saw Eliza pull out her own syringe. One filled with the odd translucent blood of the hound things. Lutka, Isabella, and I joined the man in the front of what I realized was a hearse. It smelled of overwhelming decay ineffectually fought by the many cheap air freshners hanging about. The man slotted a key into the car and started burning rubber toward Chicago. I laid my head in Lutka’s lap and watched what I could see of the stars through the windows. My eyes drifted closed and I let the trilling tones of warmth and safety lull me to sleep as Lutka stroked my hair.

Interlude - On the Way to the City of the Dead

The hearse rocked over the bumps and grooves worn in the highway with pleasant smoothness. I patted Howard’s warm head as it rested in my lap and tried to ignore the rotten smell that permeated the cabin. The air freshners were numerous and gave the air a tinge of pine, peppermint, ginger, orange, caramel, you get the picture. Unfortunately for us they didn’t cover up the smell. They only charged it with different flavors of decay. I leaned back and tugged my shirt up and over my nose, that let me breathe a bit easier.

The man that saved us drove the car. He hadn’t taken off his flowing brown canvas greatcoat and it bunched up in the seat behind him like a rough pillow. He did take off his gloves shortly after we got going. Green skinned hands covered in callouses revealed themselves. Long nails protruded from the ends of fingers that looked like they had been recently bitten back, leaving the ends blunt. The car slowed for a brief moment as he rammed the clutch in and racked the gear box with one long arm. He settled his heavy black boot back onto the gas pedal and we kept going. The most disquieting thing about the man, something I hadn’t noticed earlier, was his mask. What looked like the top half of a bleached white skull sat on his head, but where the upper jaw and the teeth should be there was a cleft right above his mouth. It would not have been very disturbing except for how the more I looked at it the less it seemed like a mask.

“You’re Mordiggian's agent?” I asked. He kept his focus on the road. I thought he didn't hear me, but after a while he nodded a quick yes.

I tried to think of a good way to ask my next question. It felt a tad personal but it was the only thing I could think of other than asking how the inside of the vehicle got so rank.

I could always ask him how much he had to spend on courtesy air freshners for passengers who didn’t enjoy the smell of liquefying corpse.

“Have you, always been a ghoul?”I asked. He straightened from where he had hunched over the steering wheel. “Or were you…?” He said nothing. He stared ahead at the yellow lines of the road as we sped along the highway. I turned and did the same.

Then a high pitched, almost keening, voice broke the almost silence of the bumping road and the humming engine. It sounded off, as if it were coming from a blown out speaker.

“Once.” It said. “Not anymore.”

I looked back at him for a moment. He shifted under my gaze, uncomfortable at like a curiosity. I turned back to the road.

“How is it?” I asked. “The changing from human to ghoul?” Howard stirred in his sleep. I ran my fingers through his short thick hair again.

“Long.” He said as he took one of his hands off the steering wheel and flexed it in front of his face. Joints cracked underneath his thin skin and I could see ropy muscle twirling around his fingers and his palm and the back of his hand. He looked tired. “Long.” He said again, quieter and more to himself than to me.

“Do you ever, regret it?”

He slammed a foot into the clutch and jerked the handle of the gearbox up another notch, noticeably harder than he did before.

“No.” He said. I decided not to press the issue.

“What exactly do you do for Mordiggian?” I asked, steering away from the previous subject.

“Kill.” He reached an arm up to scratch around his chin. “Enforce.” A longer than usual pause passed. “Protect.” He finished.

“So you’re his right hand man?” He looked at me quizzically for a second out of the corner of his sunken eyes. “The person who he trusts to do what he can’t or doesn’t want to do?” This time he nodded.

“I listen. I act.” He said, halting and tumbling between the words.

“Have you got any family?”

He thought for a while on that one. He didn’t reply for so long that I almost closed my eyes and let the movements of the car rock me to sleep. After I had closed my eyes for a minute or so I heard that keening voice split the silence again. I jostled myself out of the half conscious haze and listened.

“Many brothers.” His rough green hand slid noisily across the wheel and the car coasted off towards an exit on the right. “Many sisters.” He started shifting to a lower gear, something appropriate for cruising around Chicago.

“Brothers and sisters in ghouldom yeah, but are you closer with any of them than you are with all the others?” The engine’s vrooming went from a loud protesting noise permeating the cabin to a more pleasant sound that didn’t make me feel like the entire hearse was about to judder apart.

“One.” He said. He didn’t elaborate. I didn’t mind, I couldn’t think of anything else to ask him anyway. I let myself relax in the seat and closed my eyes. I could see the vague brightness of the streetlights from behind my eyelids but after a minute or so I got used to it. I patted Howard’s still sleeping head in my lap and drifted off shortly after the engine cycled down to a vaguely audible hum.

Chapter Twelve - Necropolis

I was whirling in the center of a huge ball of what looked to me like stained glass. It kept moving and curling in on itself as it spun around and around. Occasionally the shapes were mundane things I could recognize, triangles and squares and diamonds and the like. Most of the time the ball formed shapes that seemed impossible. I only called it a ball because when I first found myself in the middle of it, it was dormant. Just a hunk of shining colors and blinding light refracted through mutable glassy substance.

Shapes and symbols swam through the glass, changing as they went. Squiggles of a language that I couldn’t even begin to describe. It was all wavy lines that as soon as I focused on they morphed into something different. I saw snatches of Egyptian hieroglyphs here and I could turn my head to look at some Latin script all bunched together with no spaces. Arabic, German, and French and a few bits of English were there.

None of what I could read made much sense any way you put it together. I could see lots of long guttural adjectives and the only noun present was tentacles. I existed there for a long while. Then I heard humming. I think it might have been going on for a while before I consciously heard it. I had to listen for it between the sound of the glass remaking itself.

The more I listened to that humming the less noisy the glass rearranging itself became. It wasn’t because the humming got louder over time, but the more I focused on the humming the quieter the glass surrounding me became. I tried to forget about the humming but it stuck in my mind. It refused to be unheard. The humming made an inexorable advance past the cusp of my hearing into the front of my mind. The glass got closer and closer. My heart beat in my chest faster and faster as I slammed my fists into my ears, hoping I could deafen myself. My left ear swelled as I punched it and the humming grew quieter again. The implosion of my stained glass prison slowed, but did not stop. I felt blood trickling down my face as I beat my other ear, viciously clawing and punching at it until it filled with blood and bruises. The glass didn’t stop. It slowed, it slowed considerably. It didn't stop. I covered my swollen bleeding ears with my hands, the glass moved at a snail’s pace now but it still moved. I spasmed in the center of it, held there by unseen hands as my doom crept toward me in shining and spinning and crashing glory. I felt the first cut in my side and I tried to press my hands to it to stop the bleeding. The glass only sliced my hands apart apart and they became wads of flopping flesh on the ends of my arms. The glass tore into my ribs. It twisted again and bisected my eyes, more pain lanced through my nervous system. Another twist and my hamstrings rolled up my legs like meaty rubber bands. Another crackle and a short moment of resistance as my spinal column came apart. My mind held on for a second or two, gasping for oxygen. I faintly heard the humming and the cracking of the glass synchronize. Then nothing.

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I pushed myself off of the leather seat and felt my skin stretch as it came off like some bastard had glued me to it. The cabin still smelled awful. I started questing around for the handle to the passenger side door so I could get out and breathe air that wasn’t thick with smell so bad I didn't dare open my mouth for fear of tasting it. My hands slipped and slid over buttons and embellishments until I finally felt something door handle shaped. I pulled and locks popped open. The door let fresh air into the cabin and let me fall onto the asphalt outside. I sucked in a few breaths of air before I stood up and looked around. I was in a parking complex with very few cars. I could hear clanking noises from the back of the hearse and I walked around to investigate.

“Is he still not awake?”

“No, he hit his head pretty good when he got dropped.”

“Anything we can do?”

“Gimme a second.”

I walked around the side of the hearse to find Isabella, the brown coated man, Lutka, and Eliza all around Andrew's unconscious body. Eliza straddled Andrews and shoved part of her bloodstained shirt under his nose. Half of the blood on it looked to be regular red and the rest was black blood from Nyarlathotep. Andrew's chest moved shallowly once, twice, and then I saw his chest expand out as much as it could with Eliza on top of him. Andrews shot up from the floor and sent Eliza tumbling off him. Andrews sucked in a few breaths and looked around with wild eyes and grasping hands. The man in the brown coat put a green skinned hand on Andrews shoulder and steadied him. Andrews’ breathing slowed to a moderate pace and he let his eyelids droop back to where they should be.

“I’m fine. I’m alright and right as rain and all that stuff.” He got his legs back underneath him and stood up. “Hwooo boyo, head is not on perfectly straight again though. Feels like someone took a hammer and chisel to it.” He spent a few minutes exploring his head with his hands. Presumably making sure there wasn’t an actual chisel lodged in his skull. “What happened after I got bounced off the road?”

“Well, he blew away the Crawling Chaos and loaded us all into the car to get us, wherever here is.” Eliza said, pointing to the man in the brown coat. “Although I’m going to hazard a guess and say that even with all the hurt we put on him Nyarlathotep isn’t dead yet.”

“Fair assumption. He didn’t survive since around the dawn of the universe by being a squishy pushover.” Andrews rubbed the back of his head. “We're alive and that's good. I’m probably gonna stay quiet for now and let my head get better. Reapy here can show you the way into the catacombs of our host and make all the necessary introductions.” Andrews winced for a moment as his hand rubbed a spot of hair on top of his head matted with blood. “Really not feeling up to talking right now.”

Everyone nodded to Andrews' words and turned to the brown coated man as he loped up the parking garage towards the elevators. We followed along behind him and his ground devouring stride. He punched the elevator call button and waited for us to catch up. A cheery little ding rang out through the half empty parking complex and we walked into the elevator with our ghoulish guide.

He depressed a button with a long bony finger and we shot down. I briefly wondered how I got from my apartment where I spent my days trying to write unsuccessfully for hours on end before giving up and drinking myself to black dreamless sleep, to this elevator with a ghost, two people who defended the innocent from monsters by becoming monsters themselves, an incredibly attractive girl who might actually be interested in me despite my social ineptitude and general awkwardness, and an eight foot dude with green skin that hurt his car more than the car hurt him when he got thrown through it. I remembered the people that weren’t with us. Langtry, the black skinned brothers I met in Baskin Robbins, Sanders, and his friend from the bar. The last time I saw Langtry he was heading off to attempt a vacation on the beach with the two brothers and cause enough of a ruckus to draw attention away from me. I wondered if he managed to get a tan. I wondered if he COULD get a tan. The elevator dinged again, and we all stepped out onto the cool white linoleum floor of a morgue.

Brown coat led us forward to a wall of those pull-out refrigerated shelves where you put corpses to keep them nice and fresh. He yanked a key out of his pocket and started unlocking a few of the bottoms drawers. Once he jimmied the key around in enough locks he slid five shelves out. He clambered into one of them with surprising ease, reached back into the square hole he pulled the drawer out from, grabbed something, and pulled himself in. The drawer rattled shut and I heard something sliding down beneath my feet.

“What.” I stated more than said.

“Ghouls prefer to move around through graves. With cremation getting more popular and it becoming harder to move around and collect corpses without being seen they started widening their definition of grave to include morgues and funeral parlors and anything else that could afford a better connection to their favorite food.” Eliza said.

I looked at Andrews and Eliza as they laid themselves out on the steel shelves and did the same as Brown Coast. They left only gently rattling shelves behind. Lutka and Isabella looked at me as I stood there, rubbing one of my arms.

“Is there, another way down?”

“Yep! Sure is.” Said Isabella with a smile.

“Oh good, not that I mind going down that way I just sort of…” I trailed off as I watched Isabella float down through the floor with smug satisfaction. “Really should have expected that at this point.” I turned to Lutka. She seemed to be holding back tearful giggles while she looked at me trying to weasel my way out of lying on one of those cold racks.

“You can do monsters and things that would make most people crap their pants at the sight of them just fine. Ask you to lay on one little metal shelf and suddenly you get cold feet.” She cackled at my expense. “Get it? Cold feet? Like a corpse?”

“You’re not helping.”

“Was I trying to?”

I sighed. “Alright could you just, help me get in there so we can all move on with this? The others are waiting for us.” I climbed onto the shelf with evident trepidation and tried to relax. Lutka walked over and put her hands on the front handle of the shelf.

“You sure you’re ready?”

“Push it before I try and scramble out of here.”

She shoved me into blackness and I let out a short terrified yelp as I felt myself slide along the back of the shelf and then tumble into a wall of dirt. I slid down in the dark. I tried to right myself without knowing which direction was up, which turned into mad scrabbling at the earth. I tried to give another little yelp of fright, but one second of having my mouth open let two clods of dirt fly in. I decided that it would be best to fall in terrified silence.

After a long few seconds of flapping my arms in pitch blackness like a noodly tube man trying to sell automotive vehicles, I fell into a cavern lit by lightbulbs connected to wires that hung off the top of the cavern. The wires and lightbulbs trailed off down several other paths through the earth. A smell, similar to the car but far worse, suffused the air and invaded my nostrils with every breath. I pushed myself off the ground once everything inside my head settled back down. The cavern I was in had thick support beams all along the walls and ceiling. They looked fresh. I think I saw a few tags still on some of them. This spot must have been a new branch from an older excavation. I pinched my nose and headed down the rightmost tunnel, brushing dirt off my clothes as I went.

I walked around the tunnels for a bit, checking down each one for any sign of the others and listening for footsteps. I didn’t hear anything for a while except the soothing sound of dirt with an undertone of soil and a hint of earth. Then a faint something down one of the older looking tunnels caught my ear. I sped my pace toward the sound. I walked into a stone chamber decorated in multicolored stands of Christmas lights draped over wooden trellises like ivy. Eliza and Lutka stood in the center talking with each other about something.

“What do you mean by don’t kill him if I see him again?”

“I mean don’t stab him in the chest with your sword or smash his head in with your hammer like he’s an overripe watermelon.”

Eliza scoffed. “I would never do something like that.”

Lutka looked immediately relieved. “Thank god.”

“I’m planning on strangling him with my bare hands and watching the life go out of his eyes.”

“MUM.”

“Kidding, kidding…” Eliza placated as Lutka fumed at her. “Mostly kidding.” She added. Lutka sighed and put her head in her hands.

“Is this a bad time?” I asked. Both women turned to me with no small amount of surprise.

“Howard? Where the hell have you been? I thought you’d gotten lost or something.”

“I was sure you’d find us before you died of dehydration.”

“I think you might have a bit too much faith in my sense of direction Eliza.”

“Nonsense. I’m sure if we put you in a cardboard box you could find the way out within an hour. Maybe even under thirty minutes, but I wouldn’t want you to strain yourself.”

“I’d be more offended if that weren’t accurate.”

Eliza had a few heh hehs and haw haws for that. She called down one of the tunnels. Andrews and Brown Coat shuffled into the room a few minutes later. Brown Coat took us all down another tunnel that curved further into the ground. This one wasn’t paved with dirt and wooden supports beams. Roughly hewn blocks of slimy stone made up the walls and the path with a few columns of it holding up the ceiling. I wondered where Isabella ran off to. Probably trying to find something more interesting than us to entertain herself with.

The smell and the tunnels themselves both grew as we continued further down. I had to hold my hand in front of my mouth to discourage my own gagging. We walked into a huge room as big as a city block and bustling with just as much life, though not human life. Ghouls of all shapes and sizes in all sorts of strange configurations were there. Some came into the room from tunnels joining this room to the rest of the catacombs. They walked to shabby wooden market stalls piled high with trinkets, tattered clothes, and half rotted meat. There were stone doors set into the wall that none of the ghouls seemed to disturb. They might have been storage areas for some of the shops out in the market or flats. We passed through, garnering a few slanted looks from the green skinned ghouls shopping . Our guide hurried us along when we started to stop and look at some of the stalls. All the trinkets looked tacky beyond belief but some had the distinct glimmer of value. We passed into another tunnel that led further down. This one was also made out of the slimy stone that the older tunnels had.

The tunnel became smaller again until we had to walk single file to get through it. The short tunnel quickly expanded into a room and a cyclopean seat of doors that obstructed our path. Two apelike ghouls waited on either side of the door. Neither of the two wore much other than a strip of cloth around their waists. They acknowledged our presence and bowed to the ground when the ghoul in the brown coat walked towards them. Brown Coat waved. They got up and drew back the stone doors. Our party stepped into a room that didn't smell at all. The room was bursting with absence and void. Sitting on a stone dais of the same size as the doors was a giant wormy form. Due to my significant experience recognizing eldritch gods, I could tell it was Mordiggian. Both ends of the worm were nothing but gigantic toothy maws that sucked in the air of the room. The skin was brown and earthy with some parts covered in green lichen. Inside the mouths I could see gray flesh that gave way to an infinite blackness that I did not want to explore but whose depths called to me. We stepped forward with reverence. The infinite black beckoned to me, pleading with me to succumb to the grip of the devouring king of the ghouls.

We walked forward into the chambers. The masonry here was ancinet. Covered in crude symbols still visible through the erosion of countless years. The only thing still carrying definition were depictions of Mordiggian or his deformed offspring. From what I could see the ghouls and Mordiggian assisted the decay of the world and grew fat on carrion, especially the carrion of man. There were bodies littering the chamber. They looked to be fresh plucked from graves and mortuaries, laid here as a buffet. I don’t think anything got the chance to rot here in these halls. Either the ghouls would descend on a body and devour the flesh. Chew it apart and crack the bones to suck on the cold marrow of the dead. or Mordiggian himself would swallow them up. The oddest thing in the room, other than the elder god, was the chair sitting in front of the charnel god’s dais. Aged red leather that in some spots had frayed until the seams were visible and the stuffing shone through cushioned the chair. In other spots strange stains congregated in sanguine splotches that darkened the faded leather. None of us went past the chair, none of us got particularly close to the chair, except for our guide. He strode forward, his coat rustling around him with soft susurrations. He lowered himself into the chair and we watched the colossal carrion lord rumble to wakefulness. Silt spilled from the ceiling with each rumbling roll of his slithering body.

The god and the ghoul in the brown coat spoke for a few moments. The former communicated through the absence he created, intensifying it and changing it in subtle ways. The latter spoke in a series of halting sounds and half choked noises that sounded more akin to the gibbering of a lunatic than actual speech. Both understood the other from what I could tell. Though I could discern nothing. The two stopped exchanging words in their strange languages for a moment. I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding and released tension that had built in my body since I fell into these unhallowed halls.

Another ghoul in purple robes and a metal mask strode through the door behind us. He was thinner than most of the other ghouls and the parts of his face not covered by the mask reminded me of a jackal. He drew three prisoners behind him bound in chains with rough sacks over their heads. He said something in his gibbering language to the ghoul sitting in the red chair. He nodded to the ghoul robed in purple. Purple brought the prisoners past the red chair and knelt before Mordiggian. He forced the prisoners to do the same before he tore the sack off the first one.

“Langtry?” I said.

“Bart?” Andrews said.

“You BASTARD.” Eliza spat.

“Dad?” Lutka said.

“I answer, to all four of those.” Langtry said as he knelt before the altar of the charnel god. “But I do take exception to the third.”

Interlude - Something Wicked this way Comes

The wind rushes against my robes as my chariot steals through the night. I can smell the worthless filth crawling on the earth below. The night gaunt's forward momentum slows, and the stench of the refuse grows worse. I clench my hand tight against my trident. This charade has gone on for long enough. My enemy has finally overextended himself in a desperate final bid. I will not waste this fool’s hubris. This night I shall drink hearty of the Crawling Chaos' blood. My chariot lands amidst a black lake of stones and I depart it. My attendants follow me as I stride across the ground towards the building that obstructs my path to the throne room of the worm.

My bare feet crash against the stones as I walk, carving out furrows as I haste to battle. A building stand in my way. I reach out a hand to the edifice and send it crashing into the earth. The tumultuous roar of destruction fills my ears for a brief moment. My attendants tremble behind me. I have not displayed my power so fully in years and never with such lust for blood. They are right to fear me. I shove apart the rubble that still prevents me access to the tunnels leading to the great maggot. Then I and my entourage continue down into the stinking depths.

One of the braver ghouls tries to stop me instead of retreating into a hole like the whimpering beast it is. I acknowledge the bravery and spear him on the end of my trident. The foul creature sputters out questions in its worthless yipping tongue. I laugh in its face, long and hard, before fixing my full attention on the creature.

“I AM NODENS.” I toss the bleeding body of the ghoul aside, following the arc of his limp body with my eyes. “AND I AM HERE TO FINISH THE HUNT.”

Chapter Thirteen - The Beginning of the End

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked Langtry.

“I'm here to help you.” He said, jangling the chains around his arms. “I ran into Nyarlathotep and he forced me to tell him where I’d left you. Fortunately, he got distracted with preparing to meet with you and let me escape. I caught wind of where you had gone and followed you, but I neglected one small detail…” Langtry held up the chains. “One needs an invitation before you can stroll into the court of the charnel god and the punishment for that social faux pas is, rather severe I’m afraid. Though I did get to meet these two gentlemen before I got eaten by a massive wormy god, so that’s nice I suppose.” He pointed to the other two that still had sackcloths over their heads.

“Hey kid, good to see you.” The one dressed in a tattered suit said.

“Well we haven’t really seen him.” Said the one garbed in a hospital robe.

“Sanders? And…erm.” Couldn’t quite remember the other one’s name, but I knew he was the one that got torn up the worst back at the bar.

“Are you shitting me? I get my arm torn off and you can’t be arsed to remember my NAME?” He jangled the chains around the arm he still had in frustration.

“Solomon Cohen, what in the name of Sub Niggurath’s milky tits are you doing here?” Eliza said.

“At least you remember. We’re here to thank you for rendering assistance in our time of need.” He shifted his chains awkwardly for a moment. “And to return your dog and make sure that the hound things won’t be back to rend our flesh apart for mucking about with time and related dimensions where mortal men are not permitted to tread and all that jazz.”

“Return a dog?” I asked. I could hear Eliza shift her feet a little bit. “What dog?”

“Sanders, show him.” Cohen said.

Sanders whistled through his bag and stamped his foot on the ground. “C’mere Shirley, come to Sanders.” He said. A tear in the fabric of reality sizzled open at his feet and one of the hounds that almost killed us back in Providence crawled out. Everyone in the room watched as Sanders bent down to let the hound lick his sackcloth covered face. He called her a good girl. Mordiggian appeared unconcerned.

Something itched in the back of my mind as I looked at the hound. Something that felt incredibly important but fuzzy and vague. I didn’t get much of a chance to think about it, because Mordiggian spoke again and sent everyone except the ghouls reeling. The purple robed ghoul nodded assent and began to drag the prisoners to the base of the stone dais and the eager mouths of the charnel god. Mordiggian slid one enormous section of his body down the dais and opened his maw wide to receive his tribute.

Lutka tried to rush forward and fire at the huge thing as it prepared to engulf Langtry, but Eliza pinned Lutka's arms to her sides and held her.

“Goddammit mum let me GO.” She said as she aimed frantic kicks at Eliza’s shins. Tears were beginning to stream down her face. “We have to do something or dad's going to die.”

“Your father made his choice a long time ago. He went too far and sold himself to the Mi-Go and the Crawling Chaos and the King in Yellow. He chose forbidden knowledge and power over us. Let him die. What would we do anyway? We’d only die with him. If there is anything left in there that resembles the man he used to be, he would rather himself die than see his baby girl throw her life away trying to save him.” Eliza seemed to be on the verge of tears herself, but she kept a firm grip on Lutka. “Close your eyes if you don't want to watch.”

Langtry approached the great sucking mouth of Mordiggian, with the purple robed ghoul leading him on. “Can’t we do anything?” I turned to Andrews. “Just, tell them not to kill him. Tell them he's with us. Get them to stop. Do something, please.”

“I can’t.” Andrews said. “He’s not part of the deal and he didn’t come with an invitation. There's nothing we can do.”

I couldn’t let this happen. I ran forward, bounding down the stone steps. Maybe I could do something. Use my power, whatever it was, to stop Mordiggian. I could pull Langtry out of the way and run...somewhere. I'd figure that part out when I came to it. I saw Isabella flick into the room while I tried to get down the steps without falling. She looked around urgently until she saw Langtry. Her face froze and she darted away from the dias as fast as she could. She opened her mouth and cupped her hands around it to scream something that only one person in the room expected to hear.

“THAT’S NOT LANGTRY!”

I turned from Isabella as she zoomed to the group still behind the chair. I looked back to Langtry and Mordiggian. I saw something tear its way through Langtry’s skin in a red instant. It sloughed out and stood tall, a writhing black mass of flesh that pulsed and shifted and expanded. In seconds it reached up to the top of the chamber room and started to compete with Mordiggian for sheer size. The charnel god moved with surprising agility. He moved off the dais and threw himself at the bottom of the invading creature. The stones underneath the god cracked as he tossed himself at the mass of squirming black tentacles. His maw came close to taking off one of the tentacles supporting the creature, but the newcomer was faster than the charnel god. Tentacles thrashed as it sidestepped the giant devouring maw. More black appendages wrapped around Mordiggian. The charnel god squirmed and wriggled uselessly as the tentacles constricted. He roared with all the power of the void and sent all those standing to their knees. He drove our minds half insane with the infinite absence present in his voice. His roar faded. I could hear mocking laughter coming from the many mouths of the black thing holding the wriggling god in his grip.

“The early bird…” Intoned the many mouths in a familiar chocolatey tone. “Gets the worm.” Nyarlathotep twisted and pulled as Mordiggian belted out another distorted roar. The charnel god’s body split in two. Thick gobs of greenish yellow blood spilled over the chamber floors. The two halves twitched for a few moments, but there was no real life left in them. Nyarlathotep held up the remains and let more huge globs of yellow green viscera slop to the floor. The gobs slapped against stone and sent wet echoes reverberating through the chamber.

The ghoul in the red leather chair drew a handcannon from within the folds of his brown coat and fired three shots as he rose. Each of them hit the writhing black mass of the Crawling Chaos and drew beads of black blood. Brown Coat got to his feet and pressed down on the trigger to fire a fourth shot. He didn't. A tentacle hurtled through his chest and pinned him to the chair. He dropped his revolver and clutched at the appendage that pierced his chest. He tried to move it for a few moments. His . The other ghoul drew a saber from his cloak, but a tentacle as thick as a tree trunk smashed him into the stonework before he got a chance to swing it. The only thing left of him was thick paste and red rivulets running through the cracks in the cobbles. The tentacles retracted into the main mass and let the body of the ghoul in the red chair drop to the floor in a lifeless heap.

Nyarlathotep stretched his long body and began walking to me. He shed mass and changed from his monstrous form into the midnight skinned man in the pinstripe suit. He strolled forward to the body lying next to the red leather chair and prodded it with his shoe.

“You won’t mind if I borrow your seat, will you?” The corpse said nothing. Nyarlathotep smiled and turned the chair around to face me before hopping into it. He moved it around to make himself comfortable, and then turned half lidded eyes to me. “Hello again Howard.” He crossed his legs. “How’ve you been?”

Questions and rage boiled through my brain, but I could hardly feel it. The same murk that had been present the last time I’d met him was back. Worse than before. I struggled to make my mouth move. To keep my body upright and my eyelids from closing and condemning me to sleep.

“Why?” I managed to croak out.

Nyarlathotep tapped his foot on the stone floor and leaned back in the chair. “Some individuals might find your habit of asking these vague open ended questions distasteful, rude even.” He let the leg supporting the chair skid across the stone tiles and the front chair legs clacked back onto the ground. “In this case I’ll cut you some slack, you’ve had a long, smelly day and seeing a god torn in half before your eyes can be off-putting. Add to that my putting you under my mental influence and your poor old think pan isn’t up for much right now.” He relaxed further into the chair and stretched his legs out. “Your first question is probably why I was wearing poor old Langtry’s skin. I got him a while back, shortly after he dropped you off for your playdate with his wife. He didn’t want to provide me with information I wanted while he was still in possession of his body. So I got what I wanted manually. Fortunate for me, and terribly unfortunate for him, he didn’t survive. I decided that if he wasn’t going to be of use to anyone I could always fold myself into him and use him to disguise myself. It worked exactly as long as I needed it to.”

He rested his head in the palm of his hand. “Why am I making my play now when you’ve only just arrived here and done nothing? You’ve actually done quite a lot for me.” He held up a hand of five fingers. “One, you were a neat distraction to most of the other ghouls that might take interest in the sudden arrival of uninvited guests. Guests being actually invited and escorted by Mordiggian's right hand former man is far more intriguing.” He folded a finger down. “Two, several of you are carrying my blood on your bodies, making it unremarkable that my scent is here in the catacombs of the charnel god.” He folded another finger. “Three, your entourage and their theatrics kept the attention on you instead of me. Save for that Isabella girl, but she didn’t interrupt anything important so I’m willing to let her slide.” He curled his middle finger down “Four, you provided other individuals to get taken prisoner. That took a lot of suspicion off of me.” He held out only his thumb now. “And five, you’re going to make a lovely hostage.” Something in the tunnels above us collapsed in a cacophony. “Right on time.” One of his hands bubbled and morphed into a tentacle that scythed out and wrapped itself around my throat. I grabbed at it, tried to bite it and scratch it, and wiggle my neck out of its grip but it tightened further and began to cut off my airflow. He dragged me towards the chair he sat in. I saw other tentacles extending themselves and wrapping around the necks of my sleeping friends. I squeezed air into and out of my lungs, barely managing to stay conscious.

Interlude - Blood and Thunder

As I advanced through the necropolis more and more of the stinking feral creatures threw themselves at me. I swiped them out of the air and dashed them on the ground. I speared them through with my trident and watched red blood flow free through cracks in the earth. I cast the fools who dared intercede for their fellow filth down to the ground again and again. Their bones and their blood mixed together in a mealy paste. I painted the tunnels red with the blood of ghouls. I treated them like the beasts they were. They screamed and tried to protect their young from me, tried to protect their weak, their infirm. I dashed them to the ground and destroyed them utterly. I left no door undarkened by death. I did not suffer any of them to live.

There were champions brought before me, huge ghouls bulging with sinewy muscles. Warped by age and diet into cloven footed beasts that resembled demonic two legged dogs than the men they were. They fell like the rest. My patience waned as my disappointment waxed. I had no more time for these petty squabbling creatures. I strode forward, destroying tunnels and whatever else thrust itself in my way with little effort. My attendants followed close behind. One found himself crushed as a tunnel collapsed behind me. His death did not slow my advance.

Two more ghoulish giants, larger than the rest and heavily deformed, blocked my way. They stood before the stone doors that led to this night’s prey. Both rushed me, swinging great rusted lengths of chain. I caught both of the chains on my trident and pulled them back. That sent the two ghouls crashing into the stones and spilled a meager amount of their blood. I let my trident drop as I walked forward and drove my hands into their flesh. It parted easily before my touch and more blood wept from their wounds. My hands explored through muscles, severed arteries and pushed through great swathes of glistening red meat until I found the prizes. I wrapped my hands around both and jerked. Their bodies erupted into showers of blood and torn flesh as I pulled. I held aloft the mangled remains of their spines, the bones twisted and cracked, held together by the thick cabling of their nervous system. I flung the worthless trophies aside and focused my attention on the door. I stretched out my left hand. I cast down the slabs of stone with my will and walked forward as the rumbling echoes died and the dust settled. The prey’s scent grew strong and I allowed myself a smile.

Chapter Fourteen - The Last Battle

Strange creatures dressed in white sheets fixed to their bodies with golden seashell pins ran across the rubble. They carried strange instruments that seemed carved out of coral or stitched together from fish. In some revolting cases, both elements were present. Their skin was green like seaweed and as they rushed into the chamber I saw water was running down their bodies. It ran down through what looked like bare strings of muscle from their hideous faces. Each face was subtly different, but all had at least two puckered holes from which water constantly flowed. Some heads were tall and some were wide, some heads had frills expanding from the back and others had spikes covering their skulls. They ran to the sides of the chamber and pressed profane instruments to puckered holes. The players threw the hall into a hell of strange sounds that had not even passing semblance to music. Water flowed from their instruments even more than it had from their faces. The water flowed over the stones and began pooling in the bottom of the chamber as the clicking and trilling noise of the players grew to even greater heights of mind shattering sound.

Another figure strode across the rubble and into sight. His white robes flapped with each momentous step, and the ground cracked beneath his bare feet. His face was that of a scowling bearded man with black eyes and bronze horns jutting from the sides of his head. He carried a trident in his left hand made of coral that branched first into four segments at the top. It branched further into an entire tree of shining steel barbs half as long as my arm as he slammed the pommel into the ground. The figure stopped once it walked past the rubble of the great stone chamber doors and it focused its gaze on us.

“I HAVE COME TO END THIS FOOLISH GAME.” It spoke in a voice that reverberated across the stones and near deafened me with the sheer power of the words.

“You’ve already lost Mordiggian Nodens. If you come further than that you will lose this boy and your only chance at controlling the Elder Gods when they return to take this planet back.”

Nodens tilted his head at Nyarlathotep's words. “YOU BELIEVE I COME FOR THE BOY?” He smashed the base of his trident into the ground at his feet, sending a shockwave through the room. “I DO NOT CARE FOR HIS POWERS. THEY ARE BETTER SUITED TO A SKULKING WEAKLING LIKE YOURSELF.” He spat the contemptuous words at Nyarlathotep and the tentacles around my neck tightened a little more. “I WILL CRUSH THE ELDER GODS BENEATH MY HEEL WHEN THEY RETURN. THE DEATH OF THE GREAT MAGGOT MORDIGGIAN AND THE DESTRUCTION OF HIS PITIFUL NECROPOLIS ARE ACCEPTABLE LOSSES IF IT MEANS THE REMOVAL OF YOUR VILENESS FROM MY EARTH.” He pointed his trident at Nyarlathotep and the waters around the room noisomely swirled in response. “NOW DIE.” He took a step forward that launched him with jet engine speed towards the Crawling Chaos. Nyarlathotep flung me and the rest of my entourage to the side and once again took on his colossal form that scraped at the top of the chamber.

I flew through the air and felt my back crunch against the stones on the other side. I fell gasping into the flowing streams of water produced by Nodens' attendants. Lutka and Eliza landed next to me in unconscious heaps. I pulled their faces out of the water and propped them up against the stone wall so that they could breathe without sucking in lungfuls of water. Both had broken arms. I could see Eliza’s bone white femur jutting out of her leg and her blood trickling swiftly into the running water. I tried to stand, but my legs failed to respond to me and I fell forward into the water. I tried again, and felt nothing. Everything below my waist was dead weight about to drag me down to the bottom of the chamber. I pushed myself up on aching arms and dragged my useless lower body to where the water wasn't pushing at it. I looked to the titans battling at the water-logged base of Mordiggian's throne room.

The water surged into the black beast Nyarlathotep and forced him to the ground. Nodens leapt forward and thrust his trident into him, drawing a pained cry from his many mouths. Nodens twisted the trident, spooling skin and tissue onto it before he gripped it in both hands and tore it free in a resounding fleshy snap. The water around Nyarlathotep grew black as blood spilled from his gaping wound. Nodens tried to press the attack. He rushed headlong into the battle with his weapon held high above his head and his muscles coiled to drive it into his opponent. As he closed to strike again a black tentacle rocketed toward his midsection. Nodens twisted his body as he advanced, but the tentacle still scored across him. It opened a section of the bronze horned god's stomach that spilled forth shimmering white blood. They both retreated from each other and let their wounds stich together again. Green and black flesh reformed in moments.

I saw something else thrashing about in the pool. Almost invisible amidst the battle were two floating bodies and a dog dragging them to the shore. Sanders, Cohen, and the hound called Shirley that they were trying to return to us? To me? I tried to recall when I had last seen them, but I couldn’t find it in my hazy mind still addled by Nyarlathotep’s mental whammy. I pressed my hands to my head and let my body drop back into the cold flowing water. I had to remember, I needed to remember or we would all be dead by one hand or another.

“Come on, come one, come on come on come on WORK DAMMIT.” I ground my fingers against my scalp in desperation, trying to get the pain to cut through the fog in my mind. That did nothing but tear out a few clumps of my hair and start a trickle of warm blood down my cheek.

The two fighters circled each other, trying to find an avenue of attack that wouldn’t allow for timely retaliation. Tentacles thrashed wildly in the small lake as Nodens walked through the water like air. I could see the hound bring Sanders and Cohen out of the water and onto the stairs leading to the lowest part of the chamber. The hound clambered around on the slick steps and took the soaked hoods off the heads of the two men. I could see both of them taking faint breaths. I pushed myself back up out of the water. I could feel it coming off my chest in wet splashes that settled to a slow drip after a second or two. I clawed my way down the steps, towards Sanders, Cohen, and the hound. The stone tiles scratched at my hands and I felt blood start to flow from my palms. I kept moving, kept scraping my body forward until I was sliding down the steps. I heard something behind me crack that was probably my kneecap. I kept sliding and tried to keep myself from building too much momentum that I couldn’t stop myself when I reached the bottom.

Nodens stretched out his arm and sent a tidal wave toward Nyarlathotep. The mass of black stretched out a few appendages to keep the wave from breaking too close. If the wave did break close to Nyarlathotep it would blind him or send him sprawling into the water. The wave broke. It did not break on Nyarlathotep’s outstretched tentacles. Nodens burst through it a moment before it would have made contact and grabbed the outstretched tentacles in his left hand. Nyarlathotep dug himself into the chamber floor. It didn't help. Nodens gave a mighty pull and brought the crawling chaos sliding toward him on the water slicked stones. Nodens gave out a cry of surprised pain and released his grip. The tentacles had produced spikes. They shone with the white shining blood of Nodens and a few patches of the bronze horned god's skin were stuck to the barbs. Nyarlathotep reeled his tentacles back into himself. The black squirming mass barreled forward and slammed into Nodens. Tentacles began slicing, cutting, stabbing, and rending as much as they could. White blood lit up the surrounding water. Nodens threw his opponent off after a scant few seconds, but the frenzied attack left severe wounds. The writhing black creature made a fluid landing on the opposite wall and stuck there like an enormous spider.

“ADMIRABLE.” Nodens said. “I KNEW YOU WOULD PROVIDE A THRILLING HUNT.” He felt at some of his wounds with his left hand.

“I’m afraid you’re outclassed, and no amount of hammy speeches or macho bravado is going to turn the tables. Lay down, roll over, and play dead like a good dog before I have to get out the newspaper again.” Questing black tentacles spread across the wall.

Nodens looked at the black spider on the wall for a moment, considering his options. “NO.” He said as he dipped his trident into the water and the liquid foamed. The blood in the small lake from Nodens, Nyarlathotep, and Mordiggian began to coalesce and move toward the bronze horned god. Blood, viscera, organs, and water began flowing into his mouth with the ferocity of a raging river. He drank deep from the gory fount and his body began to renewed itself even faster than before. Soon there was nothing left to drink. He took his trident out of the water and held it above his head, ready to strike. “MY THIRST IS UNQUENCHED.” He took a step forward and, without appearing to travel the intermediate distance, buried his trident in Nyarlathotep. Nodens threw the dark god into the basin at the foot of the stone dais. Nyarlathotep tried to clamber away but he found purchase on the watery floor a moment too late. Nodens slammed into him from above and crushed him into the ground. His trident sunk deep into black flesh but did not draw it out. He left it where it stuck and drove his bare hands into Nyarlathotep’s screaming body.

I finally slid down to where Sanders and Cohen lay. The hound shot me pleading looks as I tried to find a spot where I wouldn’t be immediately washed away. I started alternating between pumping at his chest and pinching his nose to give breath to his struggling lungs. In a few moments, he started coughing up water. His breathing got steadier, but he didn’t quite wake up. I started doing the same to Cohen. He coughed up a few lungfuls of water onto himself as well. I collapsed at the bottom of the steps. My arms ached and the pain in my upper body got worse now that I didn't have an objective to distract me from it. My lower body continued to be frustratingly numb. I rolled onto my front and rested my elbows on the steps. The water had risen to engulf most of my legs. I didn't feel it. The hound started to drag Sanders and Cohen up the steps, trying to keep them from sucking in any more water.

I looked to the two battling gods. Nodens was still digging into Nyarlathotep’s body. He had progressed from trident to bare hands. I watch as Nodens tears handfuls of flesh from the pulsing mass beneath him. Nodens kept at it even as more tentacles wrapped themselves around his body and tried to wrench him away. Hundreds of thick tentacles wrapped around Nodens' torso, arms, and legs. Nyarlathotep managed to tear his aggressor off. The tentacles flung Nodens through the air. He tumbled for a few moments before he threw his hands out and dropped like a boulder into the water, displacing most of the lake into the air. His scowl looked had deepened on his face. Nodens held out a clenched fist. Nyarlathotep began rolling forward with determination as blood poured from his wounds. Nodens fell to one knee and brought his fist down, splaying his hand apart as he slammed it through the water and into the earth. The trident embedded in Nyarlathotep twitched. The great black god stopped and let out a pitiful whine. He thrashed, knocking into walls and the stone dais that held Mordiggian. Nyarlathotep's struggles left deep cracks and indentations in the stone and sent loose tiles from the ceiling tumbling down. Nodens stayed crouched. His bronze horns glowed in the light reflected off the choppy surface of the lake. The black mass strained upward for one crystalline moment.

A thousand steely barbs branching off each other and jutting down into the earth ripped Nyarlathotep apart. Organs and blood simply dropped out of his failing body as the tentacles supporting him weakened and he slipped to the stone floor. The steel barbs drilled into the ground with earsplitting shrieks of metal grinding against stone.

I felt the fog that had been plaguing my mind lift enough that I could reach back into my memories again. I looked back at the hound still struggling to move Sanders’ bulky form and Cohen’s thin one armed body. I remembered seeing it before. I remembered biting into it and the taste of its strange blood and meat on my tongue. I remembered it coming up to me and licking my face. I knew how to end this and I hoped that I hadn’t remembered too late. I pushed my aching body up again and tried to drag it up the steps and found that I couldn’t. My arms were too weak, and they were pulling a shitload of dead weight. I strained and strained, my muscles screaming at me to stop and lie the fuck down. I didn’t listen. I needed to get up, needed to get to Andrews. I made it up one step, then two, and I threw myself onto a third before I couldn’t support my own weight and I collapsed. I lay there. I tried to breathe through my nose and craned my head up to stay out of the water flowing past my face. I closed my eyes to keep the spray from pelting into them. I could hear labored rattling breaths from the trapped god below. I could hear splashing footsteps as the white robed death strode forward. I tried to move my legs again and for a moment, I felt something lift behind me. I tried again and felt them lift even more, and then water engulfed my face as I was breathing in through my nose.

Water rushed into my nose and my mouth. It tasted of salt and filth. By the time I could think to reach out for the steps and get a hold on them to drag myself back, I had already drifted too far away. I opened my eyes and felt the stinging harshness of salt on them as I looked into the debris strewn murk. I could vaguely see the steps a few feet away from me. I could definitely feel the waves rocking me out farther from any chance I might have to get out of the water and keep crawling. Bubbles rose up around me as I sucked in another lungful of water. I felt my stomach start to bloat and my brain screamed at me to stick my head out of the water and get back to the stairs. It screamed at me to get oxygen into it someway, somehow at any cost. I just floated there, soon to be nothing but another piece of flotsam. Then I saw someone step into the water in front of me and hands grabbed my back. I got hauled out of the water and onto a wide pair of shoulders.

“Is he still alive?” Cohen asked from further up the stairs. I puked a bellyful of water out onto Sanders' shoulder and saw some of it splash into the water, discoloring it and dissipating through the liquid. “Thank Christ, I don’t think either of us knows mouth to mouth.” Cohen turned to keep walking as I retched again, this time coming up with more bile than anything else. “We need to get the other two over there and get the fuck out of here.” Cohen started walking up and away. Sanders stomped after him, water splashed around and into his already soaked leather shoes and socks. I tried to say something and vomited a third time all over Sanders. There couldn’t have been more than a token amount of seawater in that one judging from how much it burnt my throat on the way up. My leavings danced in the water for a moment before flowing away.

I looked over my shoulder at the two gods below and behind us, and I knew why Sanders and Cohen had finally woken up. Nodens had finished walking over to Nyarlathotep’s prone body and was digging into it with his bare hands again. He didn’t seem to be in much of a hurry this time. He conduced a slow exploration. The black mass no longer writhed with frantic power. Only a few tentacles appeared to possess enough power to move and even they could only make weak slaps at the surface of the water. Occasional squirts of purplish, black, and rare orange, blood shot out into the water and onto Nodens robes. The bronze horned god rifled through tissues and exposed muscle as organs plopped into the lake below and drifted to the bottom.

I tried to speak again and this time sputtered something almost coherent that made Sanders cock his ear and stop. I took a deep breath. “Andrews.” I coughed out. My throat felt like someone was trying to drag a sandpaper loofah through it. “Get me over to Andrews.”

Sanders looked around. We had made it back up to the level with the red leather chair where everyone else was. He spotted Andrews on the opposite side of where Eliza and Lutka were and started walking over to him.

“Where the hell are you going Sanders?” Cohen asked as picked up the now thoroughly wet revolver that the ghoul had dropped earlier. “I need your help to get Lizzy and Luts out of here.” I turned to the side to see Lutka standing and trying to pick up her mother with one arm while the other hung useless at her side. Eliza’s only working limb looked to be her left leg, which she was using to try and angle herself onto the hound that stood patiently underneath her.

“Kid needs something from that bloke over there.” Sanders said as he pushed me back up onto his shoulders from where I’d started to slip off.

“Hurry up.” Cohen said, flicking open the side of the revolver in his hands and checking the bullets. “I don’t wanna stick around.” Sanders nodded and ran as fast as he could without slipping on the slick tiles.

I could see Nodens pulling something pulsing, orange out of Nyarlathotep’s body. It had little boils of darker orange and light yellow covering it. Nodens held it up to the sky and I think I saw a rictus grin across his face.

Sanders lowered me down into the water next to Andrews.

“What are we looking for?” He asked as he crouched down in front of me.

I shifted myself with my hands so that I had a better look at Andrews. The first thing I noticed was his head still sitting in the water. The second thing I noticed is that his neck had bent at an odd angle that I was all but certain necks never bent in. I couldn’t do anything for him now. I looked back to Sanders.

“Look through pockets.” I croaked out. Sanders nodded and started adroitly sifting through the contents of the late Andrews’ trouser pockets. He found a wallet, a useless phone, and a heaping collection of lint. “Shit.” I mumbled as I racked my brain for where else he might be keeping his syringes. I looked over to Nodens, he was eating the thing he’d pulled out of Nyarlathotep. He popped the boils individually and lapped up the warm liquids that flowed out with a sharply pointed tongue. I looked back to Sanders.

“Take his pants off.” I said.

Sanders didn’t question me for a second. With a short movement of his wrist and a tug Andrews' pants were off. Tucked into the area between pants and underwear was a last syringe in a leather case. I grabbed it with the hand I had been leaning on and fell onto Andrews' cooling body. I pulled the syringe out of the case and jammed it into my other arm. I pressed the plunger down and felt something like liquid fire shoot up my arm. I bit my lip as I felt it broil through my veins, getting worse and worse as it went. Up my arm and across my chest and creeping downward to my heart with all the intensity of a welder’s torch. I felt it touch my heart and my ticker skipped a beat, and when it beat again it sent a pulse of white hot pain through my entire nervous system.

“FUARGHHHHH AAAAAAAAAAGHHH!” I screamed as my brain had a solid block of blinding hurt dropped onto it. I couldn’t even fucking see anymore. I rolled onto my stomach with arms that I could barely feel and writhed on the floor for a few minutes. My heart kept pumping pain through my system and everything started to feel as numb as my legs did. I noticed after a minute or two that I could MOVE my legs again. They weren’t useless sticks of dead weight anymore. I still couldn’t see through the pain lancing across my nervous system but I could move my legs. That meant I could stand if I tried hard enough.

It took me a while, but I stood. I stood still screaming bloody murder as my lungs started to go raw. I stood a little shakily, but I stood. I walked forward on legs that I could only feel when pulses of pain shot through them. I found steps and started down them but I couldn’t wait to get down them normally so I started running down. Then I was falling and tumbling with my arms around my head. I felt bones crack and reform a second later again and again, like some horrifying masochistic loop. It took me an eon of falling and pain and cracking bones and scraping flesh before I reached the bottom. I laid face down in a pool of water for a long while. I thought I might be drowning again, but I pulled my head out and wobbled back to my legs. I needed to see for this next part. I strained my eyes through the blinding pain got a grainy picture half obscured by what was either water or blood dripping from my hair into my face. That didn't matter. What mattered is that I could see and I saw Nodens standing in front of me. He clutched his head in his hands and tried to scream or roar or make some noise other than a barely audible choking whimper with his voice. I walked forward with my numb body and my heart beating pain into every step, every movement I made. I grabbed his head by the horns. Weak at first and almost incapable of holding on. I stopped focusing on sight and my grip tightened considerably. My vision went black again but I didn’t need it anymore. I wrenched his head down and to the side and fell to my knees in the water. Nodens struggled, thrashing against me as I held his head under the water lapping at my chest. I felt his horns cut into my hands but I kept gripping harder and harder, forcing his head to stay under the water. He could have destroyed me with a touch, with a thought or with a word. He didn’t. Something kept him from doing anything about me holding his head under the water except make futile splashes and foam up the water around me. His flailing grew weaker and less and less bubbles flowed up the sides of my arms from his open-mouthed wailing underneath the water. After a hundred pain filled beats of my heart he stopped. I held on for a hundred more and then another hundred and then I let go.

I heard laughing and only after trying to listen for it from every direction did I realize it was coming from me. I laughed and laughed with lungs that struggled for air. It sounded horrific, like a broken bellows that kept going on and on out of spite. My body tried to empty itself again but there was nothing left. I sat there blind on my knees in the water alternating between ragged laughter and dry heaving. I heard something slapping its wet way down the stairs before I passed out.

Interlude - Flight

“Hol-e shit.” I breathed into the air. The kid was down there with the bodies of two gods around him. One that he’d just fucking held under the water and drowned to death. The things behind us with the puckered-up faces I assumed were with the guy that got drowned ran around in blind horror. They smashed into each other and caused general mayhem as they continued to puke water out of their holes.

Sanders started down the steps as soon as he saw what the kid was doing. I think he might have been going down to stop him and pull him the hell out of there, but now he just walked calmly down the steps, careful not to slip on one or take his eyes off the kid. I watched the kid flop forward into the water. Sanders started taking the stairs a lot faster. Crazy bastard almost slid down some of them as he rushed to get down there and fish the kid out of the water. He'd be back up soon enough. I saw him haul the kid onto his shoulders. The kid thanked him by puking onto his suit, again.

I turned to Lizzy and Luts, they’d stopped trying to get Lizzy onto the dog the moment the screaming started. Now her daughter was holding her up so she could watch what was happening down below. I ambled over to them and tucked the dripping revolver into the waistband of my underwear. I thanked my earlier self for having the presence of mind to ask Sanders for a pair of his underwear before we got into all this business.

“Hey.” I said, waving at them as I walked up with my right arm. “You two need any help?” Both looked over to me with awestruck expressions. Looked like they’d taken a few muscle relaxants. “Lemme just, there we go.” I slipped my head under one of Lizzy’s arms and held her steady with the arm I still had. “Now come on, we gotta get out of here before something else decides to bugger us over.” Luts nodded and slipped her head under her mother’s other arm and supported her opposite side. We walked forward, with Shirley padding along in front of us.

Sanders made it back up the stairs around the time we managed to walk back to the red leather chair. He had the kid on his back. Poor little bastard was breathing, but he wasn’t doing much else. He didn’t need to I suppose. He’d done the hard part. Now we just needed to get him out of here and lay all our worthless bodies down to sleep, maybe drop some off at a hospital.

We made our ponderous slow way out of there, navigating around collapsed tunnels and vistas of gore and horror that I wasn’t in the mood for. I got blood on my hospital slippers Nothing could make them that much shittier though so I didn’t pay it any mind. We found a way out of there in the form of a service door that connected the catacombs to a morgue. We shuffled our way across linoleum floors and around a couple examination tables until we got to the elevator that led to a parking complex. On any other day, I would have found the elevator music tedious and sort of stupid. On that particular day it was a lovely note of normalcy in a world gone completely off its rocker. I relished it for the short time it was there. We hunted for our car with Sanders telling me all the time that he knew right where he had parked it. That was a load of horse apples. We spent ages walking around before we finally found it and got loaded in. It was a tight fit, but we managed since we didn’t have a choice not to.

Sanders drove us over to the University of Chicago Medical Center and made me strip down to my underwear before he’d let me go in. I knew it was to make sure that they wouldn’t know I’d walked out of a hospital already but a man wants to have some dignity dammit. He walked us in and started spouting off some phony story about us being in a car accident and having to swerve off a bridge to avoid hitting some drunk paddy bastard and how he’d miraculously sobered up and helped Sanders, who was just a passerby and not affiliated with any of us at all, fish everyone out of the drink. They bought it, or maybe they didn’t and couldn't give a fuck long as we all needed urgent treatment. Sanders said something about needing to take Shirley for a walk and was out the door before they could stop him.

Eliza and Luts went off to surgery while the kid got pawned off on some nerve specialist sawbones. I got laid down into a bed and since I had nothing else to do, I went to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen - Recovery

I felt wind rushing past me as something carried me over endless piles of bones. Some were human. Some looked human but I could see on closer inspection odd warping that couldn’t have been part of a proper skeleton. Some were obviously different. The giant skulls with no sockets for eyes or the remains of great clawed arms and elongated snapping maws stood out in that category.

Creatures were moving amongst the bones. They spoke in a strange gibbering tongue that sounded familiar. I waved down at them as best I could with the thin black nightmarish thing holding me in the air. I managed a slight jerking back and forth than a wave really. Some of them looked up at me and waved back. Most of them continued burrowing into the piles of bones or gnawing on ones that still had bits of dry flesh attached to them. The horror carrying me flapped on. It felt familiar in an odd way that I couldn’t quite place. Memories that were there and yet not.

We passed from vistas of bone into a strange bright city. It looked like earthly cities but more idealized, more beautiful, more imaginative. It took a blank slate and then kept adding and adding with wild and reckless creative abandon. The thing carrying me sat me down next to a fountain with bright multicolored water spraying in gorgeous impossible shapes from it. I stood and watched them as they moved and morphed for a while and then I began wandering around the lanes of the city.

Eventually I came upon a palace where the king of the city resided. He told me his name was Kuranes and that the city was Celephais. We talked for a while about the splendidness of his city and he told me about his bleak life before he came to live in the dreamlands. We ate a short meal there in his throne room. The food was a white fruit that melted on your tongue as soon as you bit into it. He told me that I needed to return to the Waking World. We said our goodbyes and I curled up on the floor that was comfortable despite being stone.

#

I woke up in a bed to the smell of sizzling breakfast. To the smell of bacon and pancake batter. I crawled out of bed and thumped against the floor when my legs didn’t respond quite quick enough to catch me. I heard a chair scoot back and in a moment Eliza opened the door to my room and helped me up. She had on a cheap cotton nightie and a flannel robe. She wobbled a little on her new leg, but she stabilized herself in a moment. The replacement was a good one, and she was a quick learner.

“You alright there?” She asked as I got my feet back underneath me.

“Yeah.” I said. “Mostly.”

She kept an eye on me as I put on pajama bottoms and wandered out into the hall. I shuffled my feet on the cool wooden floor as we made our way over to the sun bathed breakfast table. Lutka was cooking breakfast again in nothing but her underwear and an apron. I had seen it hundreds of times by now since I’d started staying there, but it never failed to bring a tear to my eye. I’m sure that’s one reason why she did it.

“You still having trouble getting out of bed in the morning?” Lutka asked over her shoulder.

“Well severe damage to the nervous system doesn’t repair itself overnight.” I made myself comfortable in my chair. “Or over a month of nights.” Eliza sat a bottle of cool water in front of me that she’d just plucked from the fridge. “Thank you lord.” I said.

“Don’t mention it.” Eliza said as she plopped herself into her own seat and stretched her limbs out.

Lutka finished frying up the bacon and pancakes and filled our plates full before she got her own share. She left a few extra bacon strips and pancakes up there though, I wondered if it was for seconds or…

“Are Sanders and Cohen coming up today?” I asked as I drizzled maple syrup onto my food.

“Nah, too busy cheating some poor son of a bitch out of his money I guess.” Eliza said as she put her bacon on her pancake, squirted ketchup all over it, and folded it up into her usual breakfast taco.

“I thought you said they gave up the grifting business?” Lutka said.

“Yeah, but that’s only because they wanted to stick around Providence and mooch off of us.” Eliza took a sip of her morning tea. “Besides, they work for the city government now and you can bet good money they’re finding a way to bugger some poor bureaucrat out of his hard earned paycheck that he gave himself a raise on three years in a row on taxpayer money while neglecting to repave any of the damn roads around here.”

“It’s almost as if you’re bitter about something, but for the life of me I can’t tell what.” I said.

“Chalk it up to that severe nerve damage.” Eliza said, taking another bite out of her breakfast taco and letting ketchup drip onto her plate.

We continue eating breakfast for a while, making pleasant small talk , nothing particularly remarkable. We get up after a while. Eliza and I go out to do yardwork while Lutka heads to her room to check on her job application to the Butler Hospital. I pick up the sticks from the yard and Eliza hops onto the lawnmower in her sun hat to drive around the yard slaying the grass. We do a few more things before we head inside and get something to drink and sit down for a while.

Then comes the time of day that I most dread, physical therapy with Eliza. She has me run laps around a field barefoot in nothing but gym shorts until my legs work even worse than they did before. She comes over with a bottle of water, props me up, and does the same thing I did only a whole hell of a lot better and faster and longer than I did. This cycle continues through push-ups, pull-ups, dips, and then comes the daily lesson in martial arts which always manages to stretch me in ways I didn't think physically possible. When we finish Eliza drags me back to the house and put me into a chair where I can slowly recover as I pray for death.

Then Lutka comes in and sits in the recliner with me, telling me about her day. About how they built a new bowling alley in Providence and we should totally go visit and have a few beers while we’re there and eat at this new pub that just opened up that’s supposed to have mouth-watering burgers and really good sweet potato fries. The talking helps take my mind off of the dull aches and pains in my body. Then she gives me a nice firm kiss on the lips. She knows Eliza is watching and if she sees her slipping me the tongue we won’t hear the end of it for fricking weeks.

After Lutka leaves I alternate between reading and writing for a while. I’ve been improving a lot with the whole writing thing. I cut out all the spirals of self-loathing and binge drinking that made up the writing process. That streamlined it considerably. Then I got out of the chair and we all gather at the table for the supper. It’s usually pretty dark outside by the time Eliza gets back and Lutka’s done with the cooking. I don’t ever get to cook since I almost burnt my face off a few weeks ago by throwing oil into an already hot pan. We eat and then I snuggle up into bed, grateful for the pillow underneath my weary head.

I’m even more grateful when I feel someone warm crawl under the covers next to me with soft breasts pressing into my back and strong arms wrapping around my waist.

“Love you doll.” I say.

“Love you too sugar.” Lutka says.

Then I drift off to a pleasant sleep with a goofy smile on my face.

Epilogue

Immediately after the battle between Mordiggian, Nodens, and Nyarlathotep, no one spared a thought for cleaning up the mess. The bodies of the three gods were left there for days before some enterprising, hungry ghouls thought to go down and see if there was anything good to be picked off the bones of the gods. They did not come back. Another expedition into the ruined catacombs was mounted by the remaining attendants of Nodens and a few hunters. They found the rotting husk of Mordiggian. Nodens’ body was absent, though his spear was still lodged in the stone floor. There was no trace of Nyarlathotep. There was no trace of the earlier ghoul explorers. The charnel god of Chicago was left to rot amongst in his royal chambers. The spelunkers remove Nodens trident and carry it to the next gathering of hunters. The next gathering of hunters occurs in a few weeks after the news of Nodens passing reaches most of the relevant ears. Arguments and disputes of various flavor are heard over who should receive the trident. Consensus is reached after much yelling and the consumption of fourteen boxes of donuts. The trident is to be a symbol of the authority and power. Whoever holds the trident is the chief commander of the hunters. This is not nearly so illustrious and powerful a title as it sounds. Hunters enjoy a great deal of independence. Getting all of them to come together requires, at minimum, something that threatens the destruction of earth.

Howard fully recovers from his eldritch ordeal in a few years. During those years he manages to write about his adventures, using suitable pseudonyms for most of the colorful characters he met. Howard spends the rest of his writing career supplying weird stories to a growing niche of readers who like that sort of thing. The dreams never leave, but Howard learns to live with them with some help from his friends.