

CHAPTER ONE: *Garden State*

Taking the old roads now. Sinkholes implode when the water table drops. Trees claw away at the edges. Our pencil mark on the land is swiftly being erased.

– The Wakeful Wanderer’s Guide, Vol. 3, line 421

If they hadn’t stopped in that old parking lot, they would have been fine. Barnabas Yoniver barreled down the crumbling Parkway, bouncing in the driver’s seat. He had left Daschel to oversee the conquest of the xombie town of Reverside while he and three of his men drove back to New Atlantic to check on reports of fires and explosions. Now Ted was gone, along with two more of Brady’s trainees. He was the only one left.

Ted had been the navigator for the invasion of Tarrytown. He told Barnabas to avoid the Garden State Parkway, but Barnabas couldn’t see why. It was easy going down from the Tappan Zee. Overgrowth had time to reclaim the edges, but the middle was still plenty wide enough. If only they hadn’t stopped to discuss the route, he wouldn’t be driving all by himself, Ted would still be alive, and Barnabas could show him how wrong he was.

They had pulled off just outside of Tarrytown. Ted said he needed time to figure out the route back, having torn back across the bridge with news of the fires in New Atlantic. He steered the truck into an empty old parking lot, weeds and trees growing up through the old concrete. A line of low buildings, the remains of shops, lined the far end of the expanse. A fog had moved in. There was evidence of a camp amidst the rubble. A cold pile of ashes, bedrolls, broken bottles, and some packs littered the asphalt. The area was otherwise deserted, however, so they parked and stepped out to investigate.

“I want to avoid that ambush we hit on the way up,” Ted told him. “The xombies have, no doubt, doubled the defenses at that intersection, so it would be better to go around it.”

“The Parkway is faster,” said Barnabas. “We could shoot down it to Perth Amboy, find a crossing, then continue back on smaller roads to town.”

“The Garden State is no longer safe, boss. Believe me. I looked into it. We’re better off on the little roads. I just need time to work it out.”

“Well, make it quick. We don’t know what’s going on at home. I need to get down there like yesterday.”

Ted was standing, holding the old book of maps. The pages were covered with circles, arrows, lines, and notations. The other two men were going through the packs and bedrolls, looking for abandoned supplies.

“You’d better come and see this, boss,” the larger one of them said.

Barnabas walked over to the soldier and the man handed him two spent shell casings. “What am I looking at here, Mr...” he trailed off, not knowing the man’s name.

“Lassus,” the man said. “One of those shells was fired and one was not, but both are empty.”

“That’s strange,” Barnabas replied. “These people were carrying duds in their packs? But some of them worked?”

“Raiders,” Lassus said, kicking the pack to the side. Beneath it was a desiccated leather vest. The words “Enduring Vengeance” in faded paint were still visible on the back. It was the logo of a club employed by the Reynolds family, based somewhere near Pittsburgh. “No way one of them would leave their vest behind. I don’t like it. We should get back in the truck.”

Barnabas bent down to examine the vest. It looked like it had been there for decades. The leather crumbled in his hand when he nudged it. “Whatever happened here, it was a long time ago.”

“The hell is that?” he heard Lassus say, as he passed Barnabas on the left.

Before Barnabas could follow Lassus’ gaze, a pole shot up out of the concrete, missing the side of his head by inches. There was a high light whistling noise, like a powerful wind whipping tree branches. Something hot and wet hit his cheek, and Lassus’ head rolled like a ball

against Barnabas' left ankle. He froze, not sure what he was looking at. Slowly, he looked around the parking lot.

Identical poles stuck out of the old parking lot at regular intervals. The tops of them were spinning, and a light fog of motion extended out from them, at shoulder level. Ahead of him, one of the poles wasn't spinning. It supported a life-sized doll. What looked like a young girl in a white dress, her mouth open, dangled for a moment, and then disappeared back underground. Barnabas glanced behind him toward the vehicle. The top of Ted's head was gone, his book of maps covered in blood, lying at arm's length from the sliced-off section of his skull. Ted had been shorter than the others by half a foot. Barnabas looked to the left and found the other soldier, Dylan, bent over tying his shoe. He was staring at Ted's body. He leaped up to run.

"Stop!" yelled Barnabas. Too late. A wire or a string, spinning at incredible speed, sliced through Dylan's face and ears. Barnabas looked away.

In unison, the poles pulled in their whipping tendrils and sank back into the ground. One of them was stuck, the wire embedded in the rear of the truck. It released the wire and retracted into the asphalt.

Breathing heavily, not knowing how long he had, Barnabas ran as low and as fast as he could back to the door of the truck and climbed in behind the steering wheel. It had been left idling. He threw it in gear and stomped on the accelerator. He checked the side mirrors for any motion. The poles stayed down. From the crumbled buildings to the south emerged small machines, heading for the carnage. He turned to face the exit, screaming obscenities, the tires squealing as he made his way back to the road.

The fog grew thicker on the fractured parkway. Barnabas was driving recklessly, barely avoiding riding off the road several times. In spite of the decrepit state of the surface, he pushed himself to go faster to get back to his town.

The danger a few hours behind him, he estimated his position on the old Parkway. The speedometer in the truck was broken, but he had been making good time. He thought he must be near Clifton.

A fire alone was a serious threat to his town. He remembered Bethany saying something about an attack and explosions. That was far, far worse. He needed to get there right away to assess the damage and plan for a counter-attack.

The road got better. The Parkway changed from the narrow, cracked strip to a dark, wide, smooth expanse. A half-hour later, to his left, he saw the outskirts of Newark. Newark was a xombie town and had been for decades, but Barnabas planned to blow by it before they could stop him. He reached to his side where he kept his handgun. It belonged to his grandfather, a SIG Sauer 9 millimeter SP2022 with a custom leather grip. He drove with one hand on the wheel and held the gun in his lap. "Just try it," he said to himself.

He rounded a bend, and saw a crowd of people and some small houses right in the middle of the road. It looked like an open-air market. The people were bicycling and walking around a few dozen shops and stalls. They saw his truck, still speeding along. Barnabas expected them to run, but they just stood there watching him approach. Barnabas switched the gun to his left hand and fired at them through the open driver's side window, one, two, three. He was too far away to hit anything yet. "Save your ammo," he thought to himself. The structures looked flimsy. He decided to plow through the middle. He heard a pop. The truck broke hard, and the road rose up to meet the windshield.

• • •

Barnabas is playing on the floor with a toy truck. His mother and father are in the kitchen. His mother is yelling at his father. She does that often.

Bethany is there. She grabs his hand and leads him out of the sliding glass doors to the deck. In the backyard is a swing set. Bethany pushes him on the swing. Barnabas' legs reach for the tops of the trees, the sun, the sky.

Bethany goes back into the house and returns carrying their baby brother. She puts Daschel on the grass, wrapped in a blanket, and Daschel watches Barnabas go high again as Bethany pushes.

Barnabas is learning how to pump his legs. Soon he will be able to swing himself. Bethany pushes him some more and then sits on the swing next to him and shows him how to do his legs properly. He tries to extend and pull back his legs to get the swing moving. He thinks it might be working, but soon, he loses too much height. Now he is just pumping his legs back and forth almost at a stop. Bethany gets off her swing to push him again.

• • •

He opened his eyes and turned his head. He was lying on his back in a fourth or fifth story room with floor to ceiling windows overlooking a cluster of other buildings. The room was huge and empty except for the bed in which he lay and a small table to his left. He tried to get up and almost blacked out from the pain. His chest hurt, his head hurt, his left leg was in agony. His right hand was covered in a translucent pink ball of goo that pushed back when he touched it. The same stuff was on his leg, and around his ribs and forehead. Otherwise, he was naked.

Panicking, he tried rolling onto his side. The pain got much worse, and he couldn't hold the position with his leg bound up. He rolled back.

"Hey!" he called. "Hello!" No answer. The sound of his voice reverberated off the windows, the walls, and the floors. "This could be Princeton. I could be in a family-controlled building," he spoke to the ceiling, gripping a thread of desperate hope.

He reached out with his good hand and took the cup of water from the table. He tried to smash it against the bed frame, rising up behind his head. Maybe he could use it to cut this stuff off of him. Either the frame was too soft, or the cup was unbreakable. All he accomplished was spilling water over his head and pillow. He licked the water from the sides of his mouth and sank back down in the bed. He waited.

Barnabas was unaccustomed to boredom. It infuriated him. He called out for someone until his voice was hoarse. He thrashed about as best as he could on the bed, causing new waves of pain. Hours passed. The sun was setting. Then, abruptly, he began to feel really, really calm. He smiled and chuckled a little. The room became friendly. He glanced at the pink ball on his hand and chuckled some more. Then he sunk into a sweet, dreamless sleep.

The light behind his eyelids and the pain woke him. There was a tube in his mouth. He was swallowing something cool and syrupy. He tried to pull the tube out and found he couldn't move his hands. He opened his eyes.

"You've been in an accident," the man said. He was forty-ish with a black beard and straight black hair. He wore khaki shorts and a long-sleeve button-down gray flannel shirt. Behind him was a woman in a bright green jumpsuit. She was the same age or older, with graying straight hair. Her hands were in the pockets of her jumpsuit. She seemed distracted.

"Muh hahns," Barnabas said, trying to form the words around the tube. "I can't moob muh hahns."

"That's right, Mr. Yoniver. You can't move your hands or anything else right now, but you're alive." The man said this in a way that suggested he might prefer the alternative.

"Are you a doctor? Where am I?" Barnabas was finding it hard to speak.

The man smiled slightly. "My name is Genghis. This is Mathilda. You are in our care. As it happens, I am not a doctor. Neither is she. You have already been looked at by people who could ascertain your condition. You are in no immediate danger. You just need time to heal. In the meantime, we have some questions for you to answer about the incident. Do you feel up to that?"

"What inthident?" Barnabas remembered the truck skidding on the road near Newark. It felt like it hit something in the road. "Did you crass my thruck?"

The woman looked at him for the first time. Her gaze was unnaturally steady. "Tire grips," she said. "To stop you."

“That’s not the incident we want to discuss,” the man said. “Tell us, if you will, about a boy named DASL6.”

“Who or what,” Barnabas gurgled, “the fuck is a DSL thix?” Barnabas was certain he had been captured by xombies. He pushed back a wall of panic and steadied himself.

“The boy you tortured to death with your sister in that basement near your hometown of New Atlantic.” The man in the gray flannel shirt betrayed no hint of rage as he spoke these words. His face was a mask. “Surely you remember that, unless you and Bethany made a habit of taking children apart?”

“You... and everyone like you... can fuck a rat,” he said around the tube. It sounded more like “whuck a hat,” but they got the gist.

Without another word, they turned and left. The metal door closed with a solemn click.

CHAPTER TWO: *Breakfast Plans*

We like to imagine that all of our stories and perspectives are alike. Being in constant touch with each other minimizes our differences and breeds the illusion that we are all the same. The more I travel and meet new people, the more I discover how rich our differences are.

– The Wakeful Wanderer’s Guide, Vol. 2, excerpt from line 328

Thirty/Fourteen, the chef at the Lester Sunshine Inn, was proud of his beard. It was thick, kinky, black and reached halfway down his chest. His head was bald because he liked the feeling of the cool air on his scalp. To keep it smooth, he had the stubble pulled each night by tonsorbot. Over time, fewer and fewer hairs needed pulling. They worked so gently and gradually, the feeling became pleasurable as he got accustomed to it. When he had first tried them, it freaked him out. Now it put him to sleep. His usual bed was in the carriage house of the Lester Sunshine Inn, a short walk from the kitchen where he spent most of his days.

Rising, he looked down at his arms and legs. The cuts were healing well, and the bruises showed clearly now on his arms. Blood pooled under the skin along the outer edge of his left bicep and right wrist. There was some ochre mixed in with dark purple. It fascinated him.

Remembering again that Seemi was dead, he let a long loud breath escape and walked to the lavatory. Dispensing as much water as needed, he washed his face and arms, wetting his beard and letting it drip dry. After a moment's hesitation, he dipped his hands into the decompiler well, disinfecting them. It tingled. He rinsed them off in the water and grabbed a tooth cleaning mouth guard before returning to the edge of his bed to sit and chew for two-and-a-half minutes. He used that time to plan breakfast.

The Raiders had slaughtered three of his sheep and two of his goats. The goats were milkers. Thirty had tried to scatter them ahead of their demise, but they were too slow for the hungry Raiders. One of the goats gave a good fight. Thirty felt satisfied for a moment before remembering the Raiders vomiting blood on the floor of the parlor, desiccated while still alive by microscopic nano-bots. It was brutal. He shook his head quickly to put that image to one side.

He had chickens. The chickens had scattered well, hiding in bushes and undergrowth where the Raiders were not looking. One of the roosters, a Brahma named Luke, was caught and would not stop crowing despite Thirty's repeated silent commands. They didn't have time to slaughter him. The lucky guy was still king of his roost. This morning would be about eggs, he decided.

The vertical farm was down, so lots of the usual additions would be a while in coming, as nearby tribes contributed a part of what they had after the battle. Caravans and tainers should arrive tomorrow. By then they would have more than they needed. Today's cuisine would be a challenge. Bots in the ruined farm had brought up all the young greens they could harvest before demolition started. There were lots in the way of mustard and collard greens. Thirty envisioned a combination of spicy wraps made from blended combinations of those and dried with filamentary seeds like chia or flax. There were lots of pumpkin seeds as well. His stores of

wheatgrass milk were plentiful, as the Raiders wouldn't touch the stuff. The batches had gone slightly sour, but that could be a good thing on a chilly morning like this.

Satisfied he had breakfast and lunch well in hand, Thirty threw on a ribbon jacket by the door of the cottage. Something caught his eye. At the bottom edge of his beautiful beard, he saw a glint of white. At first, he thought it was a reflection of the light from the window panes near the door, but as he turned back toward the interior of the carriage house, he realized it was gray hair mixed in with his glorious dark facial adornment.

A shudder of fear and disgust ran through him. Was he getting old? There were no mirrors in his cottage, or anywhere in the Lester Sunshine Inn, as the Interconnected didn't use them. He ran through the image feeds of his tribe from the day before, grepping his own name, and found a recording taken of him preparing a late snack in the Sunshine's kitchen. There it was, plain as the nose on his face. A circular cluster of white hairs at the bottom edge of his black beard. This was happening, he thought to himself, and posted his emotions.

Emotion posting was something new. It had emerged as the interconnection came back online. Emotions could be added to thought-text or posted on their own. The Interconnected were just starting to experiment with them, reveling in the novelty of the new app. Implant upgrades and modifications were being devised to send and receive these emotions more directly. He was pinged repeatedly with thextexts of concern and inquiries for his welfare.

["Ah, my friends. It seems I'm finally going gray,"] he thextexted back, adding the image of himself. He received reassurances, some of which were actually reassuring, and some of which were meant to be reassuring, but referenced him in avuncular terms. That was not what he wanted, but he repressed thextexting his reactions because they were all, after all, well-intentioned.

Had it really been so long since he arrived in Reverside? Thirty/Fourteen didn't keep track of his age, living in the moment ever since his liberation and salvation here. He allowed himself to retrace the dates of his arrival and acceptance into the tribe. He had to admit that he

was indeed becoming an elder member. He had arrived 33 years ago at the age of eleven. Time had flown.

The New Saudi Empire had been crumbling for a decade, but its expanded territory was maintained with ancient, durable and ruthless stamina. While the landed aristocracies here in the Americas were culled and began their reformation into Traditionalist strongholds, kingdoms like the House of Saud had the advantage of centuries of tradition and culture to preserve them. Money didn't lend them the power as much as it had before the global economy tanked, but they had power in abundance. They swept through the crumbling governments of the Middle East well into India and Eurasia before subtle modifications in the traditional lending clubs undermined their hold on the new territories. Thirty was born at the edge of the New Saudi Empire, near the foothills of the Himalayan mountains.

He was a slave. That wasn't the word that was used, but that's what he was. He had no matrilineal chain to recite among the Interconnected because he never knew his mother, and even DNA testing failed to recover a lineage for him to trace. He served a monstrous bugging cleric in a small village with medieval levels of technology from the moment he could carry a cup until the age of ten. He was raised in a harem. He could remember the tent of fearful women who showered him with love but were powerless to protect him.

Thirty had a forgetfulness implant in his head, but he didn't want to use it to forget his past. He made a conscious choice to avoid using it. One day his village was raided by a group of American Marines, self-maintaining and following their own orders after the collapse of the US government. They continued in their mission in spite of everything, running on pure will and love of the corps for a decade, raiding towns to get what they needed but getting older and fewer in numbers. After his village was liberated, a Marine named Bing found him and a few of the other children and took them under his protection.

If Bing hadn't been coming to the end of his tour with his brothers, Thirty would probably have ended back up under the control of another cleric or warlord in the region, but

Bing and his platoon were tired. Their sergeant had been killed in the raid before the one on his village, and the lot of them were ready to return to whatever awaited them in their home country.

The trip from the foothills of the great mountains to the Atlantic coast of North America was a blur in Thirty's mind. He remembered parts of a march to the sea, and then weeks aboard a noisy ship. Bing's home was Sleepy Hollow in a place called Westchester, and he was taking Thirty, whom he called Akbar, back to whatever awaited them there. Bing knew enough Pashto to spend the long days talking with Thirty/Akbar in their cabin, teaching him some English, and about the laws and customs of the United States.

"So, in your kingdom, I am against the law?" Thirty had asked Bing.

"What? No. What do you mean?"

"You told me that slaves are against the law in your kingdom."

"No, Akbar. Slavery is against the law. To enslave someone else, especially children, is against the law in my 'country.' I don't come from a kingdom. That is also against the law, but I have to tell you, I don't know what kind of laws are left in my country at this point." Bing looked tired and miserable.

"Do you have clerics in your country?" Thirty/Akbar asked.

"Not as such, I don't think," Bing replied. "Actually, that is a really complicated question. I'm not sure I know. You will have to find out for yourself,"

"I don't want there to be clerics."

"I can promise you, no cleric, or priest or anyone else will treat you like a slave ever again Akbar," Bing grasped Thirty's small shoulders as he said this.

"Can you tell me about the laws again, Bing?"

Bing produced a tablet on which he had saved a considerable amount of text regarding the laws of the former United States. He read many of these to Thirty/Akbar. The sea voyage was long, but Thirty found these texts to be fascinating and couldn't wait to read them for himself. There were two that he loved most: The fourteenth amendment to the United States Constitution

and a rule that was written into the U.S. Code in 2015 establishing penalties against the trafficking, sexual abuse, and slavery of children brought to the United States. Thirty/Akbar had Bing read this law to him repeatedly. It was numbered 3014.

Thirty/Fourteen checked on his remaining livestock as he walked back along the garden path to the Lester Sunshine Inn. The morning was bright, dry and cold. His ribbon jacket inflated slightly and wrapped around him in response to the climate. He stopped at the coop and put a dozen eggs in his basket, trying to calm Deeba, the broody hen. He almost got pecked and admonished her.

["These are not even your eggs. You just sit on them."]

["Waaak!"] she returned. He understood.

Waiting for him in the kitchen was Mem. Thirty smiled broadly at them. Mem was a Road Tech and compatriot. Thirty admired and trusted Mem, who was one of the few people Thirty knew from the time of his arrival. Initially, it took him a while to comprehend their unfixed gender, having grown up in a patriarchal culture with oppressive rules regarding the sexes. They sat, legs crossed, wearing a periwinkle dress and yellow wool sweater at the kitchen bar.

["Reyleena took off this morning,"] they messaged him in private, ["took one of the Raider's bikes. I can't ping her. She's bugged out, I think."]

["I had a feeling that might happen,"] Thirty sent back. ["It's bad timing. We don't know if there will be another attack. Will any of her supporters take her place as head of security?"]

["Unclear. I don't think they know yet."]

["How is Nora doing?"] Thirty repressed a flood of anger as he thexted her name. Anger was not in flow. It did nothing to serve the tribe.

["Oh, she's spinning her wheels by the river. We clamped her with a restraining implant. She's being watched."]

["Is it wise to keep her with us?"] Thirty was going through the stores of ingredients in the kitchen, grabbing what he needed. He got some water boiling.

["She could be useful,"] Mem thexted back. ["A hard nut, that Feudal. Apparently, she is that bastard Barnabas' sister. He's still out there, you know. We all agreed it was better to keep her with us."]

["Probably right."] Thirty returned. He lined up the eggs for poaching and waited for a rolling boil.

CHAPTER THREE: *The Stray*

Human beings can adapt to almost anything. I find this equally hopeful and terrifying.

– The Wakeful Wanderer's Guide, Vol. 5, excerpt from line 28

The xombies gave Bethany Yoniver a new implant. She could feel it squirming its way up her nose, into her skull. Known in Reverside as Nora, a persona she created to infiltrate the Interconnected, Bethany was now a captured spy. Her dream of revenge had failed. Since the death of her brother two days ago, she had been held prisoner in her tiny home, her hands and feet bound to a chair. She had screamed and rocked back and forth to no effect. The operation was over in two minutes. She sensed the subtle handshake between her subconscious mind and the gooey slug on her brain, but had no idea how to fight it. Hours later, they untied her legs and hands. She lurched forward to attack her captors, and immediately doubled over, vomiting. Her captors stared down at her blankly. She pushed past them, onto the porch.

She ran through the streets, past the squat little white cube homes packed close together, desperate to exact revenge for her brother Daschel. Each time she tried to lash out against any of the members of the tribe, she would retch. They regarded her as one would a stray dog. She tried to thext them but found that implant blocked. She remembered that she had killed their precious Interconnection, and she grinned.

She yelled, “You monsters! You killed him! He was my brother! You are all going to pay for this!” The zombies turned away, continuing with their daily routine. In front of one of the square, printed homes was a pair of boots. She recognized them. They were previously worn by one of the Raiders. The body had been dissolved like the body of her brother. She could see a trail of dust leading to the shallow gutter on the side of the road. She let out a horrified wail. No one paid her any attention.

Desperate to escape, she made her way to the southern border of the town, not wanting to risk being seen on the bridge. If she could get outside the range of the implant, she might be able to walk most of the way home. It took her the better part of the day, meandering steadily to the south, but she finally made it to the edge of Reverside. An iron pole stood at the edge of the town, its old sign rusting at the top.

‘Good riddance,’ she thought, walking past it. Without warning, she fell to her knees and spat the remainder of her last meal on the road. She crawled as best she could, covering a few more feet. The contents of her stomach left her pants and shirt wet. When the vertigo and nausea reached its terminal pitch, she blacked out.

• • •

David is with her. His lovely hair hangs over her, brown and curly, his face is dark and smiling. The sun shines above and behind him. He holds her, shushing sweetly. She feels as if she is floating. The sweet smell of cut grain is in the air. Time stands still. She wants to stay with him forever. She closes her eyes and feels a sudden pressure on her shoulders, and the back of her head.

• • •

She woke again in her tiny home, the sound of the river in the distance. There was a platter of food and tea by the bed. She swept it to the floor, the brown ceramic cup shattering as it spilled its contents. She still stank of her own vomit. Rising, she walked out onto her porch, expecting to find her jailers there, seeing no one. It was dark. A cat wandered in the underbrush,

nearby. She re-entered her home to pick up a shard of the broken cup and threw it at the fleeing cat.

“I am Bethany Yoniver!” she shouted into the darkness. “I am a noble-born human being! You fuckers will pay for what you’ve done!” Her words sank into the night like a stone dropped into the black currents of the Hudson River. She was about to weep. She straightened, inhaling deeply, engaging all of her will to gain control. “I am Bethany Yoniver,” she spoke, quietly now. “You fuckers killed my brother. You will pay.”

She stood there for an hour, staring into the darkness. There was no light coming from the town. There were no sounds apart from the sounds of the river. She wanted to defy her captors’ plans for her, whatever they might be, but the inevitability of sleep was settling around her nose and eyes. When her head began to nod and she found herself leaning against the doorframe, she turned around and crawled into bed.

• • •

Light is behind him. His strong arms are around her. She knows she’s dreaming, but it doesn’t matter. How many times had she dreamt of him like this? This time feels more vivid, more real. She can smell him. She can smell the surrounding landscape.

“Looks like you can’t escape that way,” he says to her. His voice is just as she remembered, a deep lazy drawl like honey in her ears. “You need a different plan.”

“I can’t,” she tells him. “They put something in me. I’m trapped here.” She can smell his breath. She tries to reach up to him, but her arms won’t respond.

“I’ve got you,” he says. “Think it through, Bethany. You can figure it out. Nothing is impossible.”

“That’s not true,” Bethany is crying now, her tears dripping backward to her ears. “I couldn’t save you. I killed you.”

“Shhh - shhh.” He is rocking her now. The light grows brighter, sweeter.

•••

Deep sleep faded as her breathing changed. Daylight streamed in through the windows. It was cold. She was starving. Regretting it, she left her bed and picked up the parts of the sandwich left for her the night before. She ate, feeling some strength return to her body. She remembered the shortwave transmitter tuned to her secret implants hidden on the other side of the river. Excited, she sent a message: SOS - prisoner - Reverside - B.

She received a mechanical response to let her know it would be sent. Barnabas would get that message when he arrived back home. He would come and get her out of here. He had to. She didn't want to tell him about Daschel yet. Maybe he could bring something to knock her out while he transported her past the edge of the town. Maybe the nausea implant would stop working once they were out of range. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

She ascended the hill to a public shower where she washed herself and her clothes and drank deeply from the spout. The xombies were out and about, but it was as if she were invisible. No one paid her the slightest attention. She wrung out her clothes to put them back on wet when she noticed someone had laid out a new pair of pants, a shirt, some underpants, a sweater, and a pair of shoes with soft insoles, near the entrance to the shower. She considered putting on her wet clothes in defiance of this gift, but the weather had turned too cold. She brought the dry clothes back inside to the heat of the shower room and put them on.

The xombie named 'Mem' stood outside the showers. They regarded her as she stepped out into the daylight wearing her new clothes. It was odd to be noticed. Mem had tackled her after she uploaded the virus. The xombie didn't look tough, but Bethany remembered hitting the ground hard.

"They look good on you. You're welcome," Mem said.

"I didn't ask you for them," Bethany said.

"Whatever," the xombie replied, and turned to walk away.

“Wait!” Bethany needed to hear it. “Am I a prisoner? Why didn’t you kill me like you did my brother?”

“You were immune,” Mem responded. “You ate what we ate. The decompilers ignored you. That’s what I’ve been told. You were lucky.”

“Lucky?” Bethany was furious. “How can you call me lucky? You murdered Daschel! You murdered all those Raiders! You’re keeping me here against my will!” She spat in the direction of their feet. “You think I’m lucky?”

Mem walked quickly toward her. “Listen, you little shit, if it was up to me, you’d be dust. Better yet, you’d be in the river. Don’t forget, you’re a spy. You took down our repeaters and let those assholes in to kill us and rape us. I could have let you walk around in your wet clothes, or maybe naked, getting hypothermia, but that is not how we are. We’re better than that.” Mem was very close, and Bethany was fighting a wave of nausea, as she fought back the urge to strangle her, or him.

“Well, at least I ruined your way of life,” Bethany said, smiling. “You’re defenseless now. It’s only a matter of time before my family or another family comes through and finishes you off.”

“You think so?” Mem was smiling.

Several of the xombies stopped what they were doing and turned to look in their direction. They put down what they were carrying, and dipped their hands low, circling around it in a synchronized dance. As they finished the circuit, they walked counter-clockwise to their neighbor’s load, hopped once on one foot and shouted “Yiiii!” before picking up their new bundles and continuing on their way.

Bethany wanted so badly to punch the smirk off of Mem’s face. The xombies had clearly either repaired the damage done to the repeaters, or they had planned this little demonstration to mess with her mind. She didn’t want to vomit again but thought that if she could get one good punch in, it might be worth it.

“What are you anyway?” she asked.

“What do you mean? Are you hallucinating right now?” Mem was smiling even more broadly.

“I mean, are you a man or a woman? I can’t tell.” Bethany had never asked before. It confused her.

“Enjoy the clothes, barbarian,” Mem said, and then walked around the far end of the shower house.

Feeling confused and impotent, Bethany walked back down to her hut. Had they really repaired the damage to the data repeaters? It didn’t seem possible. The worm she had acquired had been stealthy. A hard restart wouldn’t have done the trick, they would have had to rewrite all the code. The super-mod boy had created what should have been a killer virus, but perhaps she overestimated his abilities. The only other possibility was that they knew her attack was coming and had prepared fresh code to install. That was possible, but far-fetched. She watched the xombies closely. They all seemed to be happily going about their daily routines as if nothing had ever happened. She tried to access her own xombie thexting implant, and couldn’t. It remained disabled.

If the defenses on the bridge were operational again, her message to Barnabas would lead him to his death. When she got back to her porch, she sent a new message to the shortwave: Cancel - defenses back up - please reply.

This time there was no feedback to let her know the message had been sent. She tried five more times. No luck. The transmitter was either out of power or destroyed.

In the middle of her home was a half-dome contraption made of ceramic, with slats at the bottom, glowing slightly. She recoiled, retreating to her porch. The wind had picked up a bit, stinging her face and causing her to shiver. Inside, the tiny home was warm. It took her a few minutes to realize they had brought her a portable heater. There was a bowl of soup on the table by her bed. She wanted to throw it against the dome heater to watch it sizzle and die. She didn’t.

The sun was lingering above the hills on the far side of the Hudson when she finished the soup. It was a tomato bisque, with carrots, leeks, and small pieces of something salty and chewy. The cat was back, and she put the bowl on the porch for the creature to lick out the remains. She sat on the porch, watching the cat lick and purr.

“I need a different plan,” she said to the cat.

CHAPTER FOUR: *The Land of Pi*

The bastard.

Winter had come to Pi Valley. Helen wasn't in the mood to travel in the cold, but she also wasn't sure how much longer she could continue to live in this beautiful place by herself. The customs differed from what she had gotten used to in towns like Cos and Reverside, and they were constantly changing. Pi Valley was a living laboratory for Interconnected life, and its inhabitants were continually tweaking the boundaries of their tribal relations, applying new algorithms to their Merit system, or sometimes abandoning Merit altogether, only to re-apply it again in novel ways. It was a dizzying social environment.

This week, Helen was a member of the Sacred Space Collective - one of the many changeable groupings of the Pi Valley peoples focused on the creation and maintenance of beauty and stillness. The collective was composed of members spread across the vast hilly region of New New England, south of Meadow Woods and north of the Brattle, extending west to the Hudson River and many miles east of the Connecticut River.

Marto had simply blinked out and not returned. It took her a while to stop being alarmed at this. She thought he might be protecting her from his secret identity as a descendant of the Defilers. They had both discovered that his mother and father were members of the deceased global aristocracy while staying with Zeke's family in Plainville. She tried to convince him there was a way for him to stay with her, keeping his lineage secret, but now she knew he never intended to try. He ran like a coward. She had no idea where he was or even if he was still alive. She felt abandoned and betrayed. The bastard.

He could have asked her. She honestly didn't know if she would have chosen to be with him, but she felt that he at least owed her the option. Their time together was brief but intensely fun. There was a humming vibrancy between them. She felt it was too much to say she loved him, but not enough to say that it was a fling. She had fooled herself into thinking he had felt the same way. Whatever they had growing between them was cut short. It hurt.

["Respectfully, I think you should be open to the idea that you are just holding on to bygone methods of intimacy,"] her group member Theyla thexted her, while she was sharing her dark emotions after a stillness session under a canopy of nude tree limbs. They had been sitting in silence in a wooded glen, sharing the quiet and inviting other members of Pi Valley to join in. The activity was remarkably popular. Helen found her lodgings upgraded and an increase in offerings as a member of the Sacred Space Collective. It mystified her, as they were not generating anything of material value. She was comfortable, but constantly confounded.

["I wish that helped. I just feel this aching in my heart, and it's always there,"] Helen thexted back. Frankly, this advice made her retract. Helen wasn't currently interested in the Interconnected's notion of intimacy, which seemed to her to be superficially random virtual sex with no emotional bonding. If that was the alternative to love, she preferred love. ["I just feel like I've been had. I feel like an idiot for allowing him to fool me."]

["Don't get so down on yourself! Heartbreak is a good thing, you know. It means your heart is working,"] Theyla thexted. ["Believe it or not, we celebrate it. I have no doubt that Marto loved you back, but because he was born into the Interconnected way of life, he didn't try to own you just because he loved you. That way of thinking died with marriage and property. You should try to unclench that muscle. It only brings more misery to keep trying to hold on to him."]

["Yeah, I guess I'm not there yet,"] Helen returned. The words made sense, but her heart couldn't let go.

["I'm happy to guide you into a more open approach to intimacy when you are ready, Helen. Just send the word. You are so yum, it would be my pleasure."] The word 'pleasure' had

distinct sexual overtones. Helen felt an involuntary internal blush when Theyla used it. [“There’s a whole new world of connection you are missing out on. It won’t take away the heartbreak, but it might make it more bearable. You’re more than worthy of happiness, my dear.”]

The two women walked back to their neighboring houses in mental silence. In that silence, Helen began to perceive the value of the work they were doing together. The natural beauty of Pi Valley sharpened in the absence of their shared thoughts. The idea of sharing silence in nature suddenly seemed like an absolute good. This cheered Helen up a bit and she smiled a little to herself as they walked through the shallow snow.

It was the night of the Emergent Light Turning. In Helen’s home of Pittsburgh it would have been celebrated as Christmas Eve, but not for a few more days. She had been told that this tradition was older than her holiday, purely about the evening of the shortest day of the year. The celebration was in thanks for the ever-increasing amount of daylight until The Divergent Light Turning in June.

The trees were illuminated throughout the town. The lighting method was subtle and mysterious. The branches seemed to glow of their own internal luminescence. This town currently had no name, but had previously gone by SouthEnd, HamDown, Tutelage, and others. The Interconnected of Pi Valley felt that names for places hurt the sense of space, although they sometimes allowed names to be used to communicate locations. It was confusing.

Emergent Light Turning was the holiday of Meritless gifting. Helen accepted it as a challenge to better acclimate herself to the Interconnected way of life. Even their confusing matrilineal naming convention was becoming second nature to her. She composed a poem as a gift for Litmik « Door « Wendy « Tina « etc, who loved poetry. She did her best to bake some palatable cornbread loaves for various other tribal members. All gifts given on the Light Turning were supposed to be unrated, but Helen was beginning to suspect that Merit seeped in anyway. Although all gifts should be given *quid pro nihilo*, people always found ways to show their appreciation.

Helen considered Theyla's offer. Maybe it was time to experiment with this artificial intimacy and lose herself in a lustful adventure. It was something she hadn't yet tried, and though Theyla was a friend, her eagerness left Helen cold. She knew from her experiences in games that the environments the Interconnected used for these encounters were engrossing and immersive. It would most likely feel just like the real thing, if not more so. She was willing to try almost anything to fill the emptiness she felt since she was abandoned to this unfamiliar shifting culture. She pictured her body lying more or less uninhabited in the physical world while she was losing her mind in ecstasy in the virtual world, and it seriously creeped her out. She decided to query Theyla about that.

[“Oh honey, it's a safety rule. If you're in a construct, your physical body is not to be touched or interacted with in the least. It's a big rule. No one, and I mean no one, would ever touch you while you were in a construct of any kind. It would be an immediate dismissal from Pi Valley, or really any other tribe.”]

[“I suppose that makes sense. People need to know their bodies are safe when they are not completely there to look after them. It's a bit like being inappropriate with someone when they're asleep. It's abuse, or worse,”] Helen agreed.

[“Totally. Your body is safe while you dream so long as you are in a tribe. Have no fear. So, you're thinking about it? We gonna get together soon?”]

[“I think so. But I want you to go easy on me. I want to start at level one, you understand? I'm not sure about mixing constructs and intimacy - I mean sex.”]

[“Well, if you've ever had a dream about sex, it's really just like that. But in these dreams, we both get off, and it doesn't have to turn into something weird just when things are getting good. Don't worry honey, I will be light and sweet and good and kind to you my noobi queen. Maybe you can ping me later tonight?”]

["Maybe,"] Helen thexted back. She knew Theyla was a few doors down from her, but that meant nothing in this strange world of namportou: *location doesn't matter*. ["I'll let you know."]

["I'm keeping my schedule open for you, darling. You won't regret it."]

Helen reached out to Reverside. She found it on a map in her mind and then zoomed in to query Mem. It had been a few weeks since she had spoken with them, and she wanted to get the inside updates from that remarkable town. She knew that Reyleena had disappeared, and that Nora was trying to ingratiate herself with the tribe. Nora had been 'tethered' with an implant that kept her from acting out in anger. Helen wondered how anyone could ever trust her again after what she did.

["Happy Light Turning,"] Mem sent. Helen could see their face in her mind. She wasn't sure if Mem could see an image of her, or if there was something she needed to do to make that happen. ["You know, we miss you here. There was something about your journey with Marto that made you feel like family. I'm assuming you've heard nothing from him. He seems to have just blinked out for no particular reason. Any ideas why?"]

["Not a one,"] Helen lied. ["He just veered away from his path. He never made it to that mindfulness community or monastery or whatever. He just never arrived."]

["Well, I've had friends scour the path between Montpelier and Barnet and they have reported nothing,"] Mem replied. ["Frankly, I don't think Marto left in that direction at all. Word is he hopped a ride north,"]

["Did someone see him getting into a vehicle?"] Helen asked.

["There is one account. There's a better-than-average probability it was Marto according to models generated by a couple of super-mods. That's actually pretty good for the Northeast Kingdom at that time of year."]

["Wait, so you had some super-mods track Marto down?"] Helen wasn't sure whether to feel hopeful or worried at this.

["Sure I did. Marto's an old pal. I've known him since he was a babe. You understand? I think you know him too."] Mem's tone was mysterious, and yet, as with everything Mem, direct.

["Yeah. I know him, Mem. So, how are things with you in Reverside lately?"]

["I gotta tell you sister, it's getting a bit strange around here. Nora's gifting and taking on noobi chores and everyone's acting like she never did the least bit of harm."]

["What?"] Helen was shocked. She knew Nora as Bethany Yoniver from her visits in New Atlantic as a child. Bethany was a zealot; deceitful and dangerous. But Helen didn't want to give away too much about her past. As far as she knew, only Reyleena and Tash knew about it.

["Don't they remember the invasion? That's odd."]

["I know, right? She's won over some people in Reverside, and her Merit is low but rising. She's contributing a little, I have to admit, but still. Even with the tether, she's a danger in my opinion, and some people are referring to her as a productive member of the tribe. That's kind of crazy, right?"]

["Completely, totally crazy. Yes. I thought people in Reverside had more sense than that."] Helen was worried about what Nora might accomplish unchecked. ["So, Mem, I'm thinking of going north soon. How do you feel about meeting up in person somewhere? Are you ready to take a little walkabout? I mean..."]

["Yes. I'm ready. I can meet you. I'm thinking about taking a rail-rider as soon as it thaws. It's this new thing inspired by one of Marto's posts that someone in Cos put together. I want to bring along a friend I think you'll like. He needs a break from this place just as much as I do."]

["Who is that?"]

•••

The virtual sex was not as big a deal as she thought it would be, but it was much more fun than she imagined. Something she hadn't considered was that the combination of the sense of play with intimacy that wasn't personal or vulnerable was very liberating and super enjoyable.

When she returned to the waking from the activity, she felt the aftereffects in her body as a diffuse glow that lingered in her solitary printed home. Then she got a ping from Theyla.

[“So, are we going to trip the light amazing?”] Theyla sent with hearts.

[“Oh, honey, darling, I’m so sorry, but I’m all set for the evening.”] Helen took particular joy in sending this back to her.

There was a pause.

[“You spoiler! You went and got it on with someone else? You were mine, you sweet noobi. How could you let someone else go first?”] Theyla was livid, and it made Helen all the more happy to send her reply.

[“Maybe you are holding onto bygone methods of intimacy,”] Helen sent back, howling with laughter inside her little dome home. She knew that the sound travelled as far as the ears of Theyla, a mere dozen meters away.

CHAPTER FIVE: *Level One*

There was one window and one door, and the door was locked. The ugly bearded man in torn pink robes who might have been a warlock, or a wizard, or a king, had the only key. The window was built to fit only an archer’s bow. Helen couldn’t get her head through it to look down, much less think about climbing down.

“You will stay in here until you learn some respect for your elders,” the ugly old man had said before locking her in.

The room was shaped like a half moon. The walls were all stone and mortar, and there was one shabby wooden bed. Helen checked her apparel and saw she was wearing a white silk gown. Her feet were bare, and she wore no jewelry. She moved her hands to her head and found straight hair, long, but not long enough to be Rapunzel. There were no hair pins or ribbons. She checked the bed, turning over the straw mattress. Still, nothing useful turned up. Under the frame, she found only dust and dirt.

[“There must be a clue in here somewhere,”] she thexted to herself.

This game was for beginners, and Helen felt as if it must have been created for a considerably younger player. The elements reminded her of fairy tales, princes and princesses, evil stepparents and towers. So far, she wasn't finding it easy, or even any fun. She felt less than a beginner. She checked the room again and again to no avail.

Finally, she noticed a crack in the mortar of the wall behind the bed. She shoved the bed away from the wall and reached down to feel around the crack. Using her fingernails, she pulled out a small scroll of paper from the dirty crevice, uncurling it to stare at the writing. It was gibberish. She turned the paper over to see the other side. There was small writing in the corner of the tiny scroll that read:

“Peer deeply into what you cannot understand.”

She flipped the page over again and looked at it more intensely. The mysterious letters started to wobble and shimmer. The room began to wiggle and fade. Her experience split. She still had the awareness of remaining in the half-moon prison cell, but the majority of her perception was elsewhere. She was skipping along a forest path, dancing along with a hoop she was guiding with a stick. A light, happy tune was running in her head. She tried to stop skipping, but she didn't have control of her body. This was a fixed event, she thought. Perhaps it was a memory of her life before her imprisonment.

Suddenly, she stopped. The tone of the music in her head changed from light to dark. A bear stood on its hind legs on the path before her. It roared at her, but she didn't run. It roared again. She roared back with the voice of a little girl. The bear began to change shape until it became a woman, dressed in a red robe, holding a staff in one hand.

“You have a warrior's spirit, my dear,” the woman said. She was in her late 30s perhaps, had sharp chiseled features, dark skin, and straight jet-black hair reaching her waist. “Come,” she said, beckoning.

The scenery changed. She was in a wooden hut with the woman. Time was passing quicker now, moments fading in and out as the woman turned beetles into mice, apples into cake,

and herself into a man, an old woman, a child, and a bear again. The music changed as well to something more mysterious and energetic. Finally, time slowed down and Helen was peering into an old book describing the spell the woman used to effect her transformations. The game seemed to pause here, and Helen read the page carefully, memorizing the illustrations and incantations she read on the page. The woman said to her, “Do you understand now, my dear?”

Helen said, “I do,” and the scene shimmered the same way it had before. She stood in her prison cell again and the paper vanished in a puff of smoke.

It took her an hour to get it right. She was testing the spell on the bed, replaying the memory of the old woman to perfect her technique. Eleven tries and nothing happened. On the twelfth, the bed transformed into a big brown dog, wagging its tail. A happy voice announced, “Level Two,” with a flourish of music. [“Finally,”] Helen thexted back.

Exasperated, she gave the commands [“save”] and [“exit”] and saw the room around her go black. She opened her eyes to see the roof of her rounded hut. It was late. She checked the time and found it was 1:34 am. She had been playing for two hours. She was hungry and wanted a snack. Taking a shot in the dark, she posted a desire for something crispy and salty as well as a snack that was sweet. Likely, somebody not too far away was awake and cooking.

While she waited for her snacks, Helen checked the weather and saw that the anticipated blizzard had finally arrived. It would blanket the area by morning. The roads would be covered and would need clearing for the sun to hit them. The farms and bots relied on the surface getting sunlight for energy. She made sure to sign on for road clearing during the coming day.

Feeling a wave of weariness overtake her, she lay back again and shut her eyes. She found herself back in a dream version of the game she had just been playing; walking through a green forest and stopping by a spring. It reminded her of the woods near her childhood home near Pittsburgh, except these woods were more lush and beautiful. This dream she was having was not quite a dream, and she was sleepy but not quite asleep. Feeling bored, she turned her

attention to one of Marto's earlier writings, when he was traveling to the midwest. Despite her frustration with him, hearing his voice in her head comforted her.

The Erie Canal, originally referred to as "Clinton's Folly" by short-sighted members of society in New York City, was gouged out of the wilds by men and oxen. De Witt Clinton was Mayor when it began and became Governor near its completion, but the idea was supplied by a merchant named Jesse Hawley while he languished in debtor's prison. The bed is dry in many places now, but the paths along it survive. The way is flat except for short rises where abandoned locks continue to crumble.

Communities here are a mix of rugged survivalists and Interconnected tribes. I keep expecting to arrive at the boundary of a gunslinger's property, chased by buckshot and dogs. The tribes from Albany to Utica have supplied me with maps of the danger zones. I've been very lucky so far.

The construction of the canal was the biggest project of its time. The need for such grandiosity is a thing of the past now. Most people don't travel as I do. The way to the Great Lakes is a matter of remote viewing and thext. Goods and individuals need no longer travel. Everywhere is local. Everywhere is immediate. I often wonder about what we have lost by becoming so sedentary and ubiquitous.

The Rochester section of the canal was lost to a subway in the previous century. The Rochester tribes say I'm welcome. It turns out I have a healthy following here. I'm looking forward to a short rest. This trip has pushed me far past regular exhaustion. The way is onerous and I could use a break.

– The Wakeful Wanderer's Guide, Vol. 3, lines 994-996

She was interrupted by an urgent thext.

[“Hello! I have your delivery! Can you approve entry?”]

Groggy, she shifted her feet from the bed to the floor and, opening her eyes, she looked around. Remembering that there were no windows, she concentrated on the viewers set outside her home and the walls of her dome home disappeared, showing a man labelled ‘Gray Beals’ holding a package of snacks. Gray had the avatar of a Scottish warrior in a kilt. The snack was labelled ‘salty spray fried veg with sweet red bean sauce.’ She impulsively checked to be sure she was dressed and told the door to open.

“Yo,” Gray said out loud, shaking the snow from his shaggy brown hair onto the floor of the little dome home. Helen wished he had done this outside the inner door where the temporary outer hallway had been set up to keep moisture and the cold out of her tidy little dwelling.

“Coming down out there. Roads are covered.”

“Did you have to walk far?” Helen was startled by the sound of her own voice. It had been a while since she had occasion to talk.

“I managed. I’m not far from Bimuni’s all-night cafe a little under a mile away. She made this for you, by the way.” He thexted her the link so that she could give ratings. “If you don’t mind rating me up for this, I would appreciate it. I’m still struggling down in the lower third here.”

Helen hesitated, not knowing what to say. There was no written rule about not asking for a higher rating, but it was the first time anyone had requested it. It seemed untoward and made her uncomfortable. She decided to respond in thext.

[“I don’t think that’s how this works,”] she sent.

Gray’s posture stiffened slightly. [“Oh, I’m sorry. I just figured that since you were new, you might not know how.”] The excuse was clearly insufficient, and he knew it. He stared at his wet shoes and turned to leave.

[“Hold on a minute,”] Helen put the double bowl of crunchy snacks on a side table. [“I am new to all of this, but not that new.”] She remembered Marto and Lala and what they had taught her. [“What do you mean by ‘the lower third?’”]

Gray turned only part of the way back toward her. He didn't meet her gaze. ["Well, there are different levels of Merit, you know? There's people like you, who have a percentile that's higher than average, and then there's people like me. I sleep in the barracks on a bunk, and you have ... this."] He waved a hand indicating her accommodations. Helen hadn't thought them particularly luxurious, but from Gray's point of view, she supposed they were. ["I'm lower than average. You're in the middle third and I'm in the bottom third. I've been working my butt off trying to be seen as more generous, doing deliveries, digging out compost, but it never gets me anywhere. I'm just whining now, and you're probably going to rate me down anyway because I'm complaining, but you asked, so..."] He looked genuinely depressed.

Helen felt sympathetic to this handsome stranger, but she kept fighting the feeling that she was being played. Gray's plight seemed real, but she didn't enjoy being put in a position of privilege. It reminded her too much of her life growing up. She remembered a time back when she was still Estelle, before she had run away, when she spent long days alone in her family's huge home.

A woman from the town came regularly to wash the windows. Her name was Brandy, and she liked to tell the young Estelle stories as Estelle followed her from room to room. Brandy's stories were similar to stories that she had read, but the versions she told were distorted and fanciful. As Brandy cleaned the hundreds of window panes, she recalled the adventures of Lady Genevieve and Sir Lance Lott. One day, wanting to hear something new, Estelle asked the woman what her life was like down in the town. Brandy said it was hard. She and her children were barely getting by. They were hungry all the time and bitterly cold during the winter nights. Estelle was alarmed by Brandy's story and told her mother about it.

"We all have our own hard road to walk, Estelle. None of us can walk it for another," Gladys said. She never saw Brandy again. The following week there was a far less talkative and far more anonymous man in her place. That was the last time she went to her mother about 'the help.'

Gray was not ‘the help,’ she decided. He was Interconnected. Things were supposed to be different here, weren’t they?

[“I honestly don’t know what I did to be in the middle third,”] she thexted him, finally. [“I’m just learning as I go. I do what I can to contribute when there’s an opportunity to gift something. I am new here. I wish I could help, but I don’t have any advice on how to move up.”]

Gray took a moment, choosing his next thext with care. [“Well, you were already well known when you got here. You were with Marto when he met Maxtor. You travelled up the river with those ‘ninjas.’ You had an adventure with lots of people following. We all shared that story. It was something beyond. That you got to be part of that story was very... fortunate. It’s why you get offered the plush jobs and accommodations.”] He stiffened again, realizing he was making a mistake. [“Not that you don’t deserve them! You do. People like you. It’s not your fault that you’re so popular. You’re like an enchanted noob or something. I... I’m saying too much, effing this all up. So stupid, I really should just go.”] At this, he turned again and walked out into the gathering snow.

Helen sat dumbfounded in her little tan igloo and tried to get a handle on her feelings. Then she gave Gray a maximum rating while she absent-mindedly devoured her bowl of salty fried veg.