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LONG FOR DEATH

By

Ashley William Bittner
B.A., University of Louisville, 2018

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in English

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University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2020

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A Thesis Approved on

April 20, 2020

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ABSTRACT

LONG FOR DEATH

Ashley W. Bittner

April 20, 2020

Long for Death is an urban fantasy novel centered on dysfunctionality, alienation, and the struggle for recognition. Focused as it is on non-traditional and underrepresented characters, the novel contests the social structures that divide society and leave some individuals entirely elided from media. By employing the fraught ethics of no-win situations and the necessary confrontation with the inevitable, the narrative opposes cynical resignation to the powers-that-be, emphasizing that even a doomed battle is preferable to passive acceptance, whether it be to supernatural menace or social construct.

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THE LOUNGE LIZARD

Forgettably handsome.

That's how I'd describe the man approaching the crosswalk.

He's wearing a charcoal suit with pinstripes, a gray shirt with a white collar, and a blue tie with stripes. His jacket is not buttoned. His briefcase is leather and fails to match any other part of his outfit. Clean shaven. Dark haired. His car keys, stuffed hastily into a pocket, make an ugly bulge in the otherwise smooth lines of his suit.

His attention is buried in his phone, because he's trying not to see me. People try real hard not to see you when you're plopped down next to a crosswalk against a chain-link fence and are clearly homeless. Everyone always sees you.

I'm sitting, legs splayed out, and watching him despite his attempt to ignore me. I call out to him, wave my stump at him.

"Hey."

No answer. No surprise.

"Hey dude," I say, smiling around my cigarette. "In the suit."

He makes a more visible effort to busy himself with his phone.

"Help a disabled vet?" I ask, adding 'disabled' as if he couldn't tell by the burns.

It's specific enough. The man makes a show of looking around himself. Maybe he actually thinks there's someone nearby, but it's Thursday. This is not the busy day of the week in the LA flower district, and he finds himself helplessly alone and called out. He

flushes with guilt, trapped, and his path goes from veering away to closing.

“Miss,” he starts, and I’m on it in a hurry.

“Alice.”

He frowns, pockets his phone. “I don’t have any change.”

“That’s alright, I got Venmo.”

He gives me such a look at that, and I smile bigger, the skin grafts on the right side of my face aching as I go too big.

“I’m not homeless, guy,” which is a boldfaced lie, but I’m buzzed enough to deliver it smooth. “I don’t need your money.”

And to be fair, I don’t. But I do want him to stay here a second. I wanna get a close look at his Psychopomp, the only thing that made me care about him in the first place. A hundred folks might pass me in a day, and not one of them will have one. This guy does, and that makes him important.

It’s something like a large lizard; you know, one of those big ones. But square-ish. A boxy iguana. It’s a wriggle of glossy brown flesh that follows in his wake, every step an audible scrape of glass claws and thrashing tail on concrete. The skin is slick looking, just translucent enough to see all the way through the dark bottle and out the other side. Little bastard even has a label, though there’s no words on the wrap-around. It has a label, but no head. The thing’s neck draws up into a thick spout where the head ought to have been. A crest of red wax around the throat reinforces the lizard image, the round opening rimmed in glassy teeth that ooze a bourbon-saliva.

Not cheap bourbon-saliva, either. I may not know much about saliva, but I’m something of an expert on cheap liquor these days.

The nearness of his Psychopomp makes mine rise up behind me, a soft rumble like a furnace starting. They call to each other.

“I’m in a bit of a hurry...” he complains, but doesn’t leave.

“Yeah, yeah,” I’m stalling now, waiting for his little monster to wriggle closer to me. “I just need the time. I’m supposed to get a ride here.”

“Uh... okay,” he fishes his phone back out. “Half past five.”

Who the fuck says half past? “Thanks.” My attention is on the wriggling glass bottle lizard that has skittered around his feet, closer to me. It is looking at me as if it had eyes.

He’s thinking now. “If you’ve got Venmo, don’t you have a phone?”

He still hasn’t reacted to the rumbling behind me. He must not be able to see it. And if he can’t see mine, that means he can’t see his.

“He doesn’t know, does he?” I ask, reaching my good hand towards the creature. It wriggles close enough to brush its cool, wax-covered mouth against my extended fingers. The bottle neck twists like it’s trying to cock it’s head.

I know I look crazy now. He can go screw himself.

The fire blazes louder behind me. The bottle-lizard flares the wax frill out, giving a glugging noise like a bottle being poured out. I can’t help but feel like they’re communicating, and it makes my skin crawl. But the Psychopomp is close enough, so I take a big drag and stare hard at the lizard with my dead eye, the milky one that can’t see the real world anymore. The man is saying something, but his words drag out. The world slows as I stare through time to the moment he died.

I’m somewhere else. Smokey gray has drowned everything but a tiny piece of a faded bar. A raised table, three bar stools, glasses, bottles. One of the empty stools is falling over,

like maybe someone got up real quick. One glass floats in mid-air, tilted back. The people who were doing those actions didn't matter. Nobody else mattered in this moment but him. The forgettably handsome man is alone here, faded but beautiful, surrounded by the props of this mortal play. The star of the one-man show. He is in the same suit today as he was that night. He's slumped forward on the table.

Perched on him is the Psychopomp. It's not faded. It's vivid and vibrant. Clawed feet help it cling to the man's back. The toothy bottleneck is plunged into his side, right into the liver. This is their Tableau, the one, perfect moment it orchestrated to kill him.

I'll call it the Lounge Lizard.

Reality snaps back in, and I know now how this man should have died. I've seen what should have been the last moment of his life, before his Psychopomp ate the death that belonged to him. Ate it and left him alive.

"...really got to be going," he's saying, and he's being very polite and calm. He likes me, but he doesn't know why. Doesn't know how our Psychopomps are calling to each other. "Before..."

I don't like him, and I know exactly why. I interrupt him. "You still binge drinking?"

"What?"

"Getting hammered. Like, is it a nightly thing, or just on weekends."

He shuffles in place, looks away from me. "Look, lady..."

"Alice. Alice."

"...I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh yeah. Denial. Classic sign. Straight Alky." I finger the bottle in my own coat pocket. I want him to go away now, I need a drink.

He looks confused, looks at me, looks at the intersection. The hand is red, but if he decides to risk it, and I'm not gonna stop him. The intersection isn't safe, but he'll be fine. The light changes are too abrupt. Green, then yellow for only a second or two, then red. The other light goes from red to green the moment the first light has changed. Like it wants someone to get hurt.

It does want someone to get hurt, in fact. But it doesn't want him. He's already got a Psychopomp, and these things try not to hurt each other. I think of it like a professional courtesy.

I want him to go away. So, I encourage him. "Are you buzzed now? Do you do day drinking, or are you just a night man?"

"The fuck is wrong with you," he snaps and checks the road again. He's angry, uncomfortable. I bet he feels betrayed. He decides to risk it, and rushes across the road at a gap in the passing cars. The glassy bottle monster gives me a gurgling hiss and flares the wax frill, then chases him, body moving in a hasty 'S' squiggle of a running lizard.

I told him my name twice and he didn't ever use it. Classic.

I watch him and his death lizard go, and start digging around in the pockets of my Carhartt jacket. It's the same color as a cigarette filter and essentially the same smell, and it's probably the nicest thing I own. A little hot for it, though. Autumn in LA isn't exactly like it was in Montana, but the coat doesn't fit into my backpack very well. And I did lie to the man. I am homeless, and city ordinance says all the camps have to be packed up during the day. Speaking of, I look left and make sure my backpack is still beside me. An ILBE pack all in desert MARPAT. It's really distinctive, which is probably why nobody tries to steal it.

I end up fishing out my phone, a tourniquet, and a lighter before I find the small bottle of Old Crow whisky.

He was a brief case, a momentary distraction. He could see me, but pretended he couldn't. He couldn't see his little parasite, so I couldn't pretend to ignore him. I gave him some shit, but not enough to get him to call the cops. To be fair, he doesn't seem the kind to call the cops at all. Too meek.

I wonder if his friends at the bar that night bullied him into drinking himself to death. I wonder that as I swallow a mouthful of cheap whiskey. I need another distraction, and fish out my little clamshell phone to check the time impatiently.

Oh, hey, a message.

'Alice. I need to talk to you,' the message reads, from about an hour ago. Of course it's from Carmen, nobody else has a reason to text me. Plus, nobody but Carmen would text with punctuation and capitalization.

'sup?' I send, and instead of putting the phone back in my pocket I balance it on a thigh. Easier to notice.

I'm a little worried now that the guy has scuttled completely out of sight. This is 8th and San Julian. I'm close to the city's happy little containment area for the homeless, Skid Row, but I'm not actually in it. That guy could actually call the cops. If they're bored, they might come harass me. And I can't leave here until nightfall, because I'm here on a mission. And it's not a mission I could explain to the cops. I'd sound crazy.

Buzz. Carmen always responds too fast. 'Call me when you get the chance.' I'll let that one stew.

The intersection light snaps too fast again. There's the red hand the man risked, the one he can see on the cross walk sign. Then there's the white figure, when people are supposed to cross. What none of them can see is the figure sprawled out in the middle of the intersection, as tall as a man but all white and glowing. Like the figure from the walk sign, yanked out and splashed across the middle of the intersection, broken and bent, limbs at jagged angles, one leg visibly separated from the rest. All the limbs are so astoundingly slender, like the figure is all glowing white skin and glowing white bone. It is splayed as if it was clumsily spread across the middle of the intersection with a butter knife. It makes me uncomfortable as hell.

This isn't like the Lounge Lizard. This is a free roaming Psychopomp, this thing of dead intersections and shattered limbs. It is waiting here because someone will die here, and it is waiting to claim that death. And I'm waiting here to make sure it does.

I pull out my smokes with my left hand and check the count. Three more Pall Malls. I skip one up from the pack and catch it with my lips, then pocket the pack to fish out the lighter.

'can't call,' I send to Carmen. 'hiding' a minute later. And finally, 'monsters that hunt by sound'.

I lean back against the fence and take the first drag, staring across the road at a pretty thing, whole and sleek and young. She's crossing on the opposite side to keep away from me, she's talking loudly in Spanish to her obvious boyfriend. They laugh, they chirp, they flit along the road like birds, all canary yellow sundress and dove white capris and NO FEAR tank top and I can't stop staring at them. They move in and out of each other, they cross the road to be back on my side and I stare at their backs as they recede from me. She shoves him

playfully. He exaggerates the recoil. She kisses him. They blur. I can't tell them apart, just a twittering mass of colors.

I'm crying again.

I have to go.

But I can't. Not until the street light turns on. All I can do is hunker into my jacket more, pull the hood up, try to hide from the world for another half an hour and drink. And drink. And drink. And cry.

And remember.

I'm watching it happen from the outside. Every time, I see myself in the A-driver's seat. I'm watching myself from outside the MRAP as it runs down the gravel road, second in the convoy, fifty meters behind the lead. I'm laughing, joking, whole. Whole. I'm saying something to the driver. I've got on helmet, flak jacket, my rifle is set in the door pocket. Broad daylight, blue sky, not a cloud to be seen.

I'm watching it happen from the outside. I know I don't remember this. I don't remember anything from the day we hit the IED. I always hope it's just a dream. I hope it's something I put together from the stories people told me in the hospital.

There's a moment of tension on (my) face. I'm watching as the lead vic in the convoy passes a goat carcass. It's been rotting on the side of the road for a week, swelling in the sun and just waiting to burst.

They like to hide bombs inside them. I see (my) tension, but I don't feel any. I can't. I know what's coming. I'm not the one in the MRAP. I'm the one that knows the bomb is radio controlled. That it was planted last night. That it will explode when that dumb, big hillbilly

behind the wheel decides to veer closer to he can hit the dumb, dead goat and paste it under the big, dumb wheels.

The phone buzzes me back from to the real world and when I bring the bottle to my lips and I can't remember when it got empty. But it's gotten darker out, and the air is cooler, and the sky is less orange and more purple. The street light is on and I don't remember that happening, either, but it means I can go.

With the fence, it takes two tries to get to my feet, and then another two tries to get my backpack on right. My right arm tries to grab a shoulder strap the first time, phantom fingers feeling extra real when the world is spinning and fast. I've got enough right arm left to slip through the strap once I get it on my back, curling what's left of my forearm protectively to my chest. Night's fallen, I can go where people won't have to pretend not to see me.

I head up San Julian, hiccupping softly. The flower shops give way one after the next, and then I'm at the churches, the missions, the poor houses. I see the people I know, keep my hood low.

I pass by people with whole shopping carts worth of stuff on my way to my camping spot. There's a lot who keep a big life for not having a home, but I exist light. Everything I own is stuffed into this back. There's a roll of eggcrate foam padding hooked to the bottom that I sleep on, even if it's a pain in the ass to roll up with only one hand.

My 'spot' is by the Central City Community Church. It's 'mine' largely because there's another guy next to it. Old Joe, another vet. Nobody really likes him. He's in his sixties, with more hair on his neck than on his scalp, and spends half his time muttering to himself in a one-sided conversation that makes me feel sane. He's pretty chubby for a bum,

he knows how to stretch his coins into calories, and he's got his own war stories we swap sometimes. I'm a little fond of him. So that one time he asked if I was a dyke, I only punched him a few times. Then kicked him some when he fell over. Then some other guys pulled me off of him.

Nobody really likes me, either.

Now, Old Joe doesn't hold grudges. First night after that, he just sat right down next to me and said, "It's like Master Sergeant used to tell me, if you don't see the crazy one in the group... it's 'cause it's you." And then he guilted me out of my bottle of Fireball. He's a master of the guilt trip. Whenever he's hurting, for booze or food or smokes, he shuffles on over to me and complains about 'all them teeth I loosened up,' and I'm gonna be paying him back until he dies.

I probably deserve it.

Tonight, he's already got his camp set up. Joe always pushes it, setting up his camp before 9 PM, but he's good enough at acting crazy that the cops let him. That, or actually being crazy. Old Joe didn't entirely come back from Vietnam, and it shows. If a news chopper flies too low over us he starts screaming for it to come back.

"Hey Joe, what'ya know?" It's a usual greeting. I must've said it without a lot of energy, though.

"You been drinking already, Alice? Emptied my bottle, did you?"

"You know it. Sorry, old man, it's been a day."

"Is fine. I got my own." And he does, a bottle of something clear and unlabeled.

My calves hurt, and I need my boots as my pillow anyway, so they come off. The scent of my feet tells me that I'll need to find somewhere to get a shower soon. There's only

so long before it becomes dangerous, before sores and blisters become bad. I can make it longer by using baby wipes on those important places the Corpsmen told us, but damn the stink is getting excessive.

My backpack is a thing to prop my legs on. I'm suddenly exhausted, probably because I forgot to eat. I'm too tired to set up a tent, but it doesn't look like rain anyway.

The sky overhead is that city off-black, cloudless, starless. When I close my eyes, I can hear the droning of traffic, the roads tireless and close.

I hate cities.

I hate sleeping.

That's not true. I don't hate sleeping. I hate dreaming. I always remember them, and they're always the same dreams.

The MRAP goes over the goat. It weighs enough that she doesn't even feel the thump. She laughs like an idiot. She's spent the last few miles flirting with the driver, that young, dumb Georgia kid with the accent she finds sexy and weird sayings that make her laugh. Lance Corporal Seth Landry. She's planning to fuck him when they get back to Leatherneck. He'll be dead before then.

She's still laughing when it explodes. All the world is fire and thunder and dust, expanding in all directions so hard and fast that the 14-ton vehicle is hurled onto its side. The blast hurls the gunner, PFC Kyle Archer, from the port on top, and the impact with the ground shatters his ribs. The injury would be fatal, but the skidding MRAP rolls like a kicked turtle and goes top-down, crushing him before he can even register the pain of his landing and dragging his body along the dirt and sand underneath literal tons of steel.

There's a rush in this moment, a pleasure, an anticipation. The death is close. None of these other deaths matter, it's only about the one proper death, the one that's... just... right. It's not my pleasure, because the me-that's-watching knows that the anticipation is for the me-that's-dying's death.

I drift in and out of dreams and sleep, paranoia driving me to check my pack and boots, make sure everything is still here. I don't stay up long, just like I don't sleep long, but my stuff has never been boosted. Nobody tries to rob me when I sleep. Bums are superstitious. Some of them say they can hear fire when I'm sleeping.

THE CROSSING SIGN

Carmen is still texting me.

I got three during the night and two more on the walk here. The first was a simple, “Stop it, Alice.” I had to look at the last message I sent her to see why she said it. The second, “Alice. When you wake up, call me.” The third, “It is important.” She wasn’t impatient to start, there was an hour between each.

It’s a new day. I’m guessing it’s a weekend, too, given how many kids are crossing the intersection this early in the day. The flower shop across the road has its *rosas* on sale, and young lovers are just going at it buying flowers for each other. This whole area is flower shops. Lupita’s Flowers and Ortiz Flowers and the California Flower Mall and those are just the three I can see from where I’m leaning against the fence. If I turned my head I’d see more still. The only reason there’s not a flower shop behind me is because people need to park somewhere. It all smells of that cloying mix –flower sweet and soil rot— and if there were any more flowers in the world, they would have found spots for them, too.

Just a little bit, I love it here.

Teens swarm through the dangerous intersection staring at their phones, talking to each other, studiously ignoring me. And you know what? That’s fine. They’re fine. It’s fine. It doesn’t want them.

It’s fine.

My little clamshell phone thrums again. The two messages as I was walking were, “My phone shows that you’ve seen the messages. Call me,” and, again, “It is important.” A bit less patient, these were only separated by fifteen minutes. There’s been six more since I left the last one on seen.

People crowd the sidewalk, stopped from crossing by the little red hand. But even with them in the way, I can still see it. With how much of the intersection the broken and shattered figure of light takes up, it’s real easy to see even around the small groups of passersby. I’ve started calling this one the Crossing Sign. The streaks of white and splatters of light blood that spill from it cover enough of the intersection, it would take a whole mob of kids to keep me from seeing at least part of it. I look at it, and then I look harder.

Things fall away while I stare at it. I breathe in, red cherry flares on the cigarette. Out, cloud of hazy gray smoke, taking an eternity. Everything comes to a standstill, and everything that doesn’t matter is gone.

There’s the street, it stretches just a few feet past the intersection on each side before the edges stop. Like a turntable, perfectly round. There’s the crosswalk, the curb, enough sidewalk to show the pole that has the stop light and the crossing sign. The sign shows the white figure, stop light is green. The street light is off.

These are things that are here now, even outside of the somewhen of the vision.

There’s the minivan. Dented black Nissan Escapade, fifteen feet past the crosswalk. The front of it is smeared with blood, the metal deformed and windshield spiderwebbed. I can read “Blood of the Lamb Church” off the side of the dull Escapade, I can read the license plate, but driver, any passengers, they don’t even make it into the scene.

That’s how little Psychopomps actually care about us.

In the road, in this frozen moment, is the centerpiece. The person to die is in the center, everything is focused around the doomed, a morbid photograph of human mortality. In here, though, it's not the violated and broken mockery of the 'crossing sign' figure. In here, I can see the man, the arm bent unnaturally here, a leg sheared off, the pool of blood spread out from where his head hit the pavement. Hit it hard. He wears a (previously) cream white suit, lavender button up shirt, gold watch. No tie. Very dusky, but faded, like everything else in the scene.

Oh, but the blood is vibrant. Blood is the currency of death. And when this moment comes, the death must be bought and paid for.

The gray mist around the scene retreats, cigarette smoke drifting away from my face. The car and the victim stay in my vision like the afterimage of a bright neon sign. A heartbeat has passed, and I'm back to watching the intersection.

I pull the phone out and give it a look. Passing teens give me sneering looks. I can't tell if they're judging me for being homeless and having a cell or judging me for having a flip phone. Either way, I've violated their covenant. I'm supposed to be broke and desolate. Since I have a phone, they can scorn me instead of ignore me.

Eight new messages from Carmen. Not enough to be serious about yet.

I love it here, just a bit. It's why I found this Psychopomp. Six times per year, assuming I'm sober and remember what day it is, I need flowers for graves. And twelve days ago was one of those. It was late summer then. Even wilted by the sun and heat, the flowers promised to do what flowers do: mourn in a way humans can't. I went shop to shop, wanting the best, and even if you look homeless, nobody turns down cash in hand.

I wish I knew some Spanish. The only other language I know is dead.

I wish I knew anything about flowers, too. Beautiful and dying by inches the whole time.

And then I saw this wretched white corpse and I hated it instantly. *This* is a place for loveliness and meaningful death, and the Psychopomp is always a pointless dying. I made it a personal goal to get this one sealed away.

So, I've been watching this intersection since I spotted it. Every morning I walk over here from Skid Row, and every evening, I walk back. I've been doing it almost two weeks, but today feels different. I'm not normally a superstitious woman, but I'm still feeling it. My skin prickles. It's that feeling when everyone in the market stops to watch the convoy. It's the feeling of being watched.

I think it's the guy from yesterday. The one with the Lounge Lizard. That's what has me spooked. People who have Psychopomps are drawn to each other, but people with Psychopomps are uncomfortable around the wild ones— atavistic ones, we called them. And for people who don't know they have a Psychopomp? They don't know why, but subconsciously they avoid the wild ones even more. So, the fact that he walked right through the intersection sets me on edge.

I haven't even had a drink today.

I keep looking. I've smoked the cigarette to the filter checking and re-checking the Tableau. Church van? Check. Street light? Check. Unlucky bastard? Check. I want to find a detail that will give me more warning, and there's nothing there. All I can do is keep looking back and forth for the man in the suit or the Escapade. Trying to keep in that military mindset, what my grandmother always called my 'Marine Eyes.' Alert, aware, ready for contact. Maybe the old military habits will help keep me sharp. I've gone through an entire

pack of Camel Lights before noon, and am rationing the last one like I'm in the sandbox again. Take a drag, hold it in my lungs, exhale slowly.

I'm such a fool, trying to get left of the event. When these things happen, they happen too fast. You can only piece them together after. In the moment, it's just a blur.

A silver Camaro screeches to a halt at the intersection, the door swings open hard, and a man steps out. The man. The world doesn't slow down, but in my memory it will seem like it did. He points at a young couple near me and starts shouting, and I can see the girl—his daughter?—start shouting something back. He takes one step from his car, shouting louder. He takes the next. He's red-faced and cream-suited and striding through oncoming traffic. And then there's a blur of black.

The screams start, first the Escapade's brakes as the man is broken, then the young woman as she realizes her date killed her father(?). I shove to my feet and lurch forward, powering through the teens, many of whom are too surprised to have started recording the event yet.

This movement is reflex. I don't know what I'm going to do when I get there, but I know I'll have to be there to do it. The young woman is rushing forward as well, but is falling behind. I muscle through the crowd better. She has her phone up, fumbling with the keys.

The man is sprawled in the intersection, blood smeared and splattered, arm bent horribly, bone jutting through meat and flesh and suit, leg sheared off where it got caught between his open Camaro door and the front of the Escapade. His eyes are open and staring down the street, in the same direction he had been shouting, at his approaching daughter. The

glowing white Crossing Sign under him is like a chalk outline, perfectly positioned around him.

His mouth moves soundlessly. Blood burbles down his cheek. A pool of it spreads from the back of his head.

His eyes grow distant. His rapid, frantic breathing goes in fits and starts and stops.

I see the moment he dies.

I see the moment the Psychopomp takes his death.

The Crossing Sign is no longer on the road. It's on him. He's like a double-exposure picture, a ghostly white light that coats him head to toe. His eyelids flutter. His chest moves. His heart beats. Blood wells from his injuries.

What killed him alone can't harm them together. This Psychopomp is the incarnation of a traffic death, and it gives him that payment in exchange for his death. But he can still die of anything else, and I don't know the full limits of what he has.

Like the river pouring from his leg? Maybe it can't kill him.

I can't risk it.

I'm at him, and I got there first, but no surprise since only the young woman is rushing towards us. "Every Marine a rifleman" and all that jazz, but more importantly, we all also get a lot of basic medical training. Especially putting on a tourniquet.

His leg is severed below the knee, mid-shin. It's bad, but there's a lot worse. If it was above the knee, he'd have been dead before I even got to him. I use my knee, plant it on the Velcro strap against the man's shin, hold it in place to bring the other side around wrap the tourniquet just below the knee. I bring the Velcro together, pulling tight.

It's not tight enough yet. That's what the windlass is for.

My hand is already red from the blood. My knees are red. I'm kneeling in the spreading pool and my pants are soaking it up..

I grip the plastic stick on the tourniquet. All it needs is a few turns. A few turns and it will be tight. Someone grabs my shoulder.

“Get the fuck off him, you fucking bum!” It's a male voice. He tugs at my shoulder, pulling me away from the man on the ground.

Achilles didn't know the fucking fury I have in this moment.

I grab the hand and yank it across my chest while I stand. Thrust hip back into groin, come to full height. His weight comes up, his feet leave the ground. I roll my hip. A real hip throw takes two arms, but I make do. He hits the ground hard on his shoulder. No breakfall, no nothing. I hear the young woman screaming again, and I realize I've got my knee on this teenager's belly to hold him down while I slam my fist into his face. He doesn't even have a guard up.

I'm not sure how many times I hit him.

I feel dizzy. The heat. The exertion.

Back to the important task. What I came here to do. Save the life. If this guy dies, the Psychopomp is free. If he dies, it will look for a new intersection. And it will find one.

I grab the stick and twist, the windlass takes the pressure I'm making and amplifies it. Stronger than I could hope to be, stable, something that the paramedics can pull off him when he gets to the hospital and they can do the real thing. I twist it as my hand gets slippery, until the tension makes it impossible to turn again, and I hook the stick into the plastic arms that will keep him from bleeding out.

I can't check his neck, his spine. He hasn't got a hard on, but I don't know if it's a real medical fact that recent spinal injuries cause an erection, or if that was just bullshit. Corpsmen said to fuck with us. I can never remember to look it up when I'm at a library.

She said, as if she goes to libraries anymore.

There's sirens in the distance. They don't sound far, but it sounds like I'm underwater. Like there's wax in my ears. I know I should be going, but the sound of them is intoxicating.

I rise.

The competing scents of flowers and blood are everywhere. There is screaming and sobbing and sirens.

I'm on my knees again.

The pavement burns under me but I'm shivering. I wish I could pass out, but the adrenaline high doesn't allow it. When I try to stand again, I puke, right there in the intersection, amidst the blood and fiberglass and metal. The flames are roaring inside my head. It's here. Mine's here. Mine's always here when I'm weak, and shutting my eyes only stops my tears, not its memories. It's *trophies* from people before me.

Heavy Cruiser Mikuma shudders. American dive bombers are attempting to take it out, but the anti-air guns are keeping them from good approaches. Since the engagement at the Midway Islands started, Superior Seaman Hidetaka Hiraoka has felt mixed dread and relief at those shudders, as the bombs detonate in the ocean nearby and send ineffectual shockwaves against the hull. He's terrified, and I'm him, but I'm not him. I'm watching him, so close I can smell his death. He (me) will die soon.

He (me) is fire crew, waiting for something to go wrong. It (I) know what's about to go wrong. Up above, an American pilot's Vindicator takes heavy damage, the fuel tanks rupturing and catching fire. It is too far from Midway to get back to a safe harbor. Captain Fleming grips the stick and noses down, his plane lancing towards the Mikuma. The gesture is valiant, the sort that will go down in US military history as an act of glorious self-sacrifice, different somehow than the kamikaze attacks.

It (I) does not care about Fleming's death.

Toshi Sato makes a joke about the winds being strong today after another dive bomber misses the drop. Hidetaka gives a thin laugh. Hideto Nakamura asks what Toshi said, then interrupts Toshi's answer with a loud fart. He (I) laugh for real. For a moment, he (I) forget the danger. It (I) has not forgotten. Everyone is laughing and to die within minutes.

Captain Flemming misses his target of the bridge. A hit would have crippled the Mikuma. Instead, the impact rocks the ship as the Vindicator explodes against the after turret. Fuel and shells burst into flame. It is a terrible fire, but only in human terms. It is not near enough the battery to endanger a Heavy Cruiser like the Mikuma.

The flames roar on the deck, and fire crews move to engage them. The air intake ducts that feed the engineering chamber below the water line sweet oxygen suck those flames in. It (I) shudder in anticipation as roaring fuel flames are machine pumped into the engineering room. Light and heat washes over the men inside. The screams begin, the gas fumes and coal dust grows hot enough to burn. The room explodes.

Toshi and Hideto die instantly. Painless deaths. Not what it (I) want. Most in the engineering die instantly. Some are unconscious. Some are awake and screaming and crawling to try and escape. That's not what it (I) want, either.

Trapped. Burning. Scared.

The blast hurls Hidetaka, smashes him against a boiler frame. The force of the impact breaks gauges, handles, impales the young, doomed man on metal. Ribs are cracked. Organs are pierced. He cannot lift himself off them, there is only pain and weakness in his limbs. All he (I) can do is scream as the fire burns, think of the things he wishes to live for and the darkness that waits for him.

He (I) dies. It (I) joins with him and takes that death. (We) are beloved of flame, it wounds (us) no longer. The pain does not end. The screaming does not end. Scalding steel still impales (us).

The pain is inhuman, overwhelming. It overrides the nervous system. Shock sets in. His (our) heart rate slows, the red fire that fills (our) eyes grows dark. Hidetaka (he) dies.

I move on.

Cold water brings me back, away from the roaring of fire, away from the nightmare. It's being dripped onto my face, my parted lips. I'm in shade, and opening my eyes I see the trees that shade Lupita's Flower Shop. I don't know what they're called. I know the names of a half-dozen men who died on a Japanese ship in WWII, and I can't name the trees I've been sitting across for a month.

I don't know what they're called. Why don't I know the names of any plants?

The wind makes the leaves stir, a whispering noise that woke me from nightmares in that hospital in Germany, a whispering noise that wasn't in Afghanistan or in the Japanese destroyer on that hill in the Basque country or any of the other nightmares that haunt me when the Psychopomp is roaring. It's a sound that brings me away from nightmares, a sound that tells me, 'You're home, you're safe, you're home.' Tears blur the leaves.

Tears don't blur the police or EMTs.

I sit up, and there's a woman squatting over me with a water bottle open in one hand. Brunette hair pulled into the tightest sort of bun, a slim face with narrow lips, stern cheeks, an austere mask she has to wear. Also, blue eyes that always make me think of the Pacific. The strict, formal way she wears her police uniform makes her look like an extra in a police procedural, but for those eyes. She's Sergeant Rita Thompson, and I'm not sure if I like her or hate her. It's probably both, but I think 'like' more.

She talks the moment I try to open my mouth. "Here's the short version, Alice. You gave a sixteen-year old a concussion."

"Officer – "

"We've got videos from the 'audience,'" she spits the word at the crowd of people, still milling around, watching the scene from as close as they can manage before cops bark at them. "He grabbed you, you lost it on him. You can probably play it as PTSD if the kid's parents want to press charges."

"How bad was it?"

"He's got a concussion."

"You already told me that."

"You want to hear it a third time?"

"No."

"He, the sixteen-year old, who was out on a date with his girlfriend, has a concussion."

"Yeah, I get it. I wanna know if it's worse – "

She talks over me like I wasn't mid-sentence. "I'm sending you to the hospital with the EMTs. You're clearly in no physical condition to give a statement." She frowns. "Take a bit. Think of a good one. Don't bolt, either."

I didn't think I was hitting him that hard. Or that long. How long was I hitting him?

"The guy who got hit by the car, is he alive?"

Rita looks over her shoulder at the ambulance that's starting to pull away. I like Rita for all the reasons I don't like Rita. Her face, her gestures, the way she talks to me, are all way too much like my step-mother. She sits down beside me before answering, letting her legs sprawl forward like mine are. It looks uncomfortable with her gun belt.

"Yeah. Someone on scene happened to have a military tourniquet," she smirks, then stares at me hard with those ocean eyes. "This is the third time you've been nearby when something like this happened."

That you know of. "Yeah. How about that."

"The third time that I know of."

Shit. Too clever by half. "Officer —"

"Alice. I want you to think hard about whatever you're involved in. Because if you were anyone else, my gut would be telling me that you're a crazy that's getting people into accidents so you can save their lives."

That's a fair bit closer to the truth than I'd like.

She continues. "Maybe some misguided attempt to be a hero. But then, you also never seem to get anything out of it, so then I wonder if it's a cult thing. Some weird religious or fetish thing." She's staring really hard at me now.

"It's... not that. I'm not doing this to them."

“Get your thoughts together. I’m going to come to the hospital later, and I want you to tell me what it is. However crazy you think it is, I need to know what is going on.”

I nod. It’s the way she frowns that bothers me most.

“You still going to meetings?”

Only fucking day in a month I’m actually sober and it’s one where I have to talk to Rita. How lucky is that? “Let’s talk about that later. I need... to think.”

She gets to her feet and stretches a hand don’t towards me. I take her hand and she helps me up. As I board the ambulance, she repeats, “Don’t bolt,” before releasing my hand.

On the ride to the hospital, I check my phone. After, that is, I threaten to stab the EMT if he brings that fucking IV near me. It’s sticky because it got blood on it, but it works fine. The phone, I mean, I don’t know if the IV bag is sticky or works fine.

Touch screens, who needs ‘em?

11 text messages from Carmen. Damn. If I don’t respond soon, she’ll come looking for me. Well, time to tease her. I cycle through the list of increasingly brusque, “Alice, this is important.” “Call me, I need your help.” Before finally reaching the, “Alice, I am paying for your phone. Answer me.”

She has a point, so I reply.

‘dog. @ good sam. fetch?’

THE STRAY DOG

I spend the first twenty minutes at the hospital in the bathroom trying to get blood off my clothes. It doesn't work well. So, I gave up on that, and head back out to the waiting room, backpack in one seat, me taking up two others in an aggressive lounging that would have me thrown out in a hurry, normally.

An hour is the longest I've ever gotten to hang out at the Good Sam, and I can tell you it's way nicer than the VA hospital. Closer, too. It takes all day to cross town to the VA. Really, the only downside is that every other time I've been here, guards have bodily hauled me out.

I wish I had a fun story for that, but it's simple: Good Sam is too upscale for vagrants. If I hadn't been sent here by the police, security would've already politely asked me to leave. And I would've already told them to go explore their sexuality with another species. And they would have asked me less politely to leave, possibly with their hands.

It's a cycle, I've done it a few times.

Besides the zealous guards, it's a really nice hospital. I assume. I've never gotten past the lobby. But the lobby is really nice. The seats are comfy, the staff is hospitable, and the water is bottled. There's the usual run of Psychopomps. All hospitals have them. In fact, hospitals are about the only place they end up grouped *en masse*. But the ones here are a bit nicer than at the VA hospital. The kind of people who can afford to come to Samaritan usually have deaths that echo their wealth or privilege.

Like the nurse who gave me my paperwork. She's got a slender glowing pixie fluttering about her head. It has no other features besides shape, so it's like watching a moving outline. It does this weird optical illusion thing when it pirouettes around her head. I can't tell if it is spinning clockwise or counterclockwise. It swirls, it gambols, it leaves trails of white powder, and occasionally, just occasionally, it flies up her nose before popping back out. Sweet lady. She's got smile lines on her cheeks, and nails chewed to the nub. I want to like her.

When the EMT told her why I was here ("Exhaustion," which is LA code for 'strung the fuck out'), she arranged to make sure I had plenty of water to drink. Warned me that dehydration was a serious problem for 'people like me.' Warned that they didn't have a lot of rooms available, so probably I just needed to sit with water until the cops arrive to talk to me. I chalk the condescension I get out of her to my own defensiveness. .

I don't want to hate her.

The room starts to grow quieter around me. People who were talking to each other dive deeper into their phones, conversations just seem to break off. The only people still talking seem to be staff, or people talking to staff. Needed conversations for being in or working at a hospital. I look around, and everyone is avoiding everyone else's gaze. Everyone is pretending not to see anyone else.

The room is too big, the whole world is too big, and everyone in it has drifted apart. The feeling raises goosebumps in the places I can still get goosebumps.

Carmen.

Nobody I've met is as comfortable wrapped in their own death as Carmen. She comes through the rotating door with the Stray Dog at her side. Carmen walks bolt upright, tall and sleek and young. Stiffly elegant, and way too confident for nineteen.

She's all dark hair and dark eyes and dark skin and bones. There's no meat on her. Even years after the anorexia killed her, she just stays painfully thin. It's like my burns, I guess. It never really goes away. But she fits in here otherwise, dressed that rich. A short leather jacket that's the same purple as *las lavandas* and probably cost three grand. Silk blouse just barely off-white. Tailored black pants of some fabric I don't know the name of, needlessly wrapped with a belt of interlocking rings. Those ridiculous boots, like somehow she thought she'd get in touch with her heritage by going cowboy.

Nobody in the room notices her but me and the nurse with... uh... I'm gonna call it Pixie Dust. 'Angel dust' seems too on the nose. But the nurse can't see the Dog, whose ears perk up when he sees me, who comes racing across the lobby, who tangles long legs amidst coils of trailing intestine and falls into a rolling flop halfway between us.

To his credit, he springs up quick enough, he's just more cautious as he closes the gap now, coming up right in front of me and leaning forward panting. He's long, lean, starveling. His fur is mangy and patchy, and he leaves clumps of it behind. Fleas launch like little black fireworks from his back. His limbs are all too lanky, his ribs strain at his skin and show the pained outline of a body that has eaten itself to the bone. Everything in his appearance screams pain, deprivation, want. His broken tail wags happily as he pants in front of me, and at my slightest movement his tail wags faster, enough to make his butt slide back and forth on the floor, as hungry for attention as food.

“Paw.” I hold my hand towards him. He raises a paw to touch it. “Other paw.” I hold my stump towards him. He looks back at Carmen in confusion.

“Alice, why are you at the hospital.” She manages to say it like it isn’t a question.

“I’m pregnant.”

Carmen stares at me. She does not rise to the bait. “How’s your project coming?”

“Completed. The proud new owner of a death parasite is somewhere in this hospital.”

The Dog has put his head on my lap. I can’t help but pet him, even though he is disgusting. Plus, it must make me look crazy.

“Solipsistic?”

“I’m more of a Cynic.” She just stares again. The silence promises to become awkward fast, so I go on. “I dunno, but probably. He died fast, I doubt he realized it happened. He’s in the ER now. The crash took his leg. Maybe damaged his spine.” A shudder runs down my spine. “It looked real fast.”

“What did he look like?”

“Like he’d been hit by a van.”

“What did he look like.” An order only barely pretending to be a question.

I have to think about that. It happened fast. All of it happened really fast. I tell her so, but then do my best. “Hispanic, but not as dark as you, short black hair, cream suit, uh... 40’s maybe?”

Carmen stands and walks toward the counter. As she does so, she sheds the Dog’s horrible power of isolation, of being unseen and unheard and unloved. It falls off her like a coat, and the room no longer feels alone. A place filled with people who might actually care

about each other. The conversations around me get louder. People notice the well-dressed teen approaching the nurses desk.

“*¡Mi papi!* My daddy! He got hit by a van and the police said he’s here! Is he okay?” She talks fast, way faster than she ever does to me. Loud, too. Her hands grip the front of her jacket closed, wringing the leather nervously.

The nurse stammers a response I can’t hear from where I’m sitting. Carmen shrieks something back, she sounds like a frightened girl. One of the nurses comes around to walk her away from the desk. Her Dog is still resting his head on my lap, little spectral fleas passing right through my hand as I pet him and they jump.

It gives me a few minutes to sit. The nearness of the Dog makes my own Psychopomp rumble louder behind me; it’s harder to keep it suppressed around other Psychopomps, and there’s been a lot of them today. They’re nothing alike, Carmen’s adorable little monster of dying alone and forgotten and my ugly horror of fire and screaming.

I’ve never understood how she wallows in that power, given how it ties to her death. I’ve looked at the Stray Dog before, seen her Tableau, and it’s fucking sad.

“How can you stand to be invisible?” I ask as she returns, her little black book in her hand as she scribbles new notes in it.

“He’s in surgery. They wouldn’t let me see him, but I got his name from the chart. I can find him later.” She looks at me, adds, “They expect him to pull through though. I got that from them.”

Not exactly an answer to my question, but relief hits me as she says it. I didn’t expect it. “That’s good. So that Psychopomp is contained.”

She nods, and her pen and notebook go away as she sits down next to me. “You’re covered in blood.”

“Yup.”

“Why are you at the hospital.”

“Cops sent me here. I passed out or something.”

“You need to take care of yourself.” She taps the unopened Evian bottle next to me.
“Drink water.”

“You’re one to talk. Eat a sandwich.”

Her jaw sets. “I need your help, Alice.”

“I need more cigarettes.”

She rolls her eyes. She also pulls a sealed pack of Camels from a pocket.

“What, did’ja bribe the gas station clerk, Daddy Warbucks?”

“I don’t know who that is.” She says it without shame or hesitation.

“Kids these days,” I sigh. “Security is keeping an eye on me. I’m *supposed* to be here for once.”

“I’ve got it.” She stands in front of me, places her hand on my head. The Dog’s power rises around me, engulfs me, and it’s the same feeling as everyone forgetting your birthday. It’s the feeling of being talked over like you’d never spoken at all. It is the feeling I get when someone won’t even look at me on the street. Her hand moves away, but the feeling persists.

Carmen has exiled me from the world.

She stands and starts walking, and me and the Dog both move to flank her. Nobody gets in our way. Nobody looks at us. Except the nurse with her own Psychopomp, who I guess is too overworked to make this business into her business. The moment we’re through

the door, I tear open the pack of cigarettes with my teeth and light up that always-best-first-cigarette-from-the-pack. It's a shivering inhale, relaxing a tension I didn't realize I'd built up. Plus, it's not a Pall Mall, so it tastes even better.

With a new pep in my step, we two strays follow Carmen through the parking lot to her mother's black Range Rover Evoque. It's so trendy I want to bash the windshield with my head. The doors unlock just as we get close, and Carmen climbs into the driver's seat.

I want to sit in the back, but it's not entirely my choice. For one, the Stray Dog is already back there, flopping on the seats, leaving that spit and gore only people like me and Carmen can see or feel. For another, my own Psychopomp likes the front seat, the passenger seat. (*The A-driver's seat.*) It's like a ringing phone. I can ignore it, but the ringing isn't going to stop. So, my backpack goes beside the dog, who starts flopping against it and trying to dig at it with his paws.

Carmen is busying herself with syncing her cell phone to the speakers and her GPS and all that techy stuff new cars do. I slide into the passenger seat with mixed emotions. The sensation like the ringing phone fades, replaced by a feeling of coming home that doesn't belong to me. My feeling is discomfort. Tension. Even before the car starts moving I'm looking at the window like there's gonna be goat on the road any second.

"You were pretty cagey in those texts, Carmen. What's up?" I'm looking to distract myself, and I know it.

The car starts. "I don't know if I can explain this one. It'll make sense when we get there."

It doesn't leave me much to work with. I get silent again and lean in to the window, pressing my head to the glass. Cold. Sometimes it works like an anchor to hold me in the

present. Sometimes. We pull out of the hospital and Carmen takes us to 110 South. There's no goats here. No IEDs. The sun shines through the window on me. It's getting late in the day. The Evoque rides smooth, the roads are paved, there's nothing here to make me so nervous. Not *gravel and mud* roads, not the *blazing desert sun*...

The gunner is dead. The four guys in the back aren't. The driver isn't. Yet.

I'm not. Yet.

The vehicle has finished its death roll, and now rests on the left side. It is on fire, and the fire is pouring through the broken frame into the cab, liquid flame pooling around the driver. Another vehicle pulls up behind, and I watch as the Marines rush out to approach. Two point their weapons out, looking for an ambush that isn't coming. Even with all their training, they're both still teen boys who can't help stealing frightened glances towards the burning vehicle, unable to resist checking to see how far away the rescue party was from their trapped friends. The other three follow behind a combat engineer desperately sweeping the path for more bombs as quick as he can.

There are no mines. Just like there's no ambush. I know that, because I am watching and I know everything. I know they can hurry. I know they won't, because they are careful, and that's why Seth will die, and the me-that's-dying is going to die.

The me-that-watches ignores the driver. The me-that-watches know his name because the me-that's-dying knows it, and we'll be the same thing at some point in time, so the me-that-watches knows it already.

The explosion knocked him out, and that makes him unimportant. The me-that-watches needs the struggle, the screaming, the person about to die, trapped in metal and fire

and fighting with all their might against something that cannot be beaten: a pinned arm, a trapped leg, a sealed door. Desperate, terrified futility.

And I come in closer, watching (my) face, young and whole and unburnt, streaked with tears as (I) scream and scream and scream and all (I) can hear is the roar of the spreading flames and the banging of (my) hand at glass that can stop a rifle round and will never give way no matter what (I) do.

Carmen's fingers are freak strong for how skinny she is. She drags me back to reality with a strong grip on my wrist, and I realize I'm in California, years after the explosion. We're stopped at Irene's Liquor Store. I'm hyperventilating. My cheeks are hot and wet.

I'm probably crying.

"Go. Go get what you need," she says, looking out the window. Looking hard at anything not me. She has a few bills in her hand thrust towards me.

I don't need her money. But I don't refuse it. I have to reach across my body to open the door, but that won't stop me from getting a drink. It takes a lot more than that to keep me from drinking. I can almost hear Stanwick telling me alcohol is a bad way to self-medicate, and I want to tell him it's a better way than the morphine. Somewhere in my backpack is the six-month chip I got from AA by lying about staying sober. Those little reminders of back when I tried.

I hop back in the Evoque with a bottle of Fireball in a bag. If we're going on an adventure, might as well not take it seriously.

We don't even get back on the expressway. Carmen takes us up Figueroa, then east on Manchester. We turn into the Green Meadows neighborhood. Green Meadows isn't like Skid Row. You tell an out-of-towner they got to go to Skid Row, they'll know exactly what

they're getting into. You tell an out-of-towner they're going to Green Meadows, they're gonna think it sounds nice. They're not gonna think it's a place with some of the worst crime in all of LA. Before I died, I wouldn't have come here for money.

The sun is lower on the horizon. It'll be setting soon. The sky is turning red.

THE HOODIE

“You feel it?” Carmen asks, and I can.

“This one wasn’t hard to sniff out, was it? It... it covers the whole area.”

“Exactly.”

We drive through the neighborhood cautiously, between cars parked on both sides of the already narrow streets. Carmen takes us to the middle school, pulls the car to a stop, and gets out. The Dog follows instantly, and I climb out slower. We’re still under the Dog’s power, but Carmen streaks her hand across the Evoque and the world forgets it, too.

“Didn’t know you could do that.”

She shrugs. She squats. The Dog comes in close, almost licks her face. She tells him, “Find.” Her psychopomp takes the lead, legs padding along, snuffling at the ground. Carmen follows it, and I follow right behind her.

“If you’ve been here before, why do you need to track this one?”

“It’s... moving. I think it’s still looking for the Tableau location.”

I frown. That’s not right. “Have we ever... has that ever happened before? Have you ever seen a wild one before it was setting up the kill?”

She doesn’t look back. “No.”

The neighborhood is all short, squat houses, all metal fences. The paint is all faded or peeling, the roads cracked, the grass thirsty and thin. We pass a few people who hang out on their porches, they watch one another through their fences with narrowed eyes. A few

children play out in yards or in the street, but their games are rough. A pair of girls are shoving each other and yelling. They can't be more than eight.

We hide in that feeling of isolation Carmen makes when clad in the Dog's power, but there's a new feeling on top of it. An aura of mistrust, of anger, of violence. The taste of blood and cordite on my tongue, every breeze a final drawn breath. It coats the neighborhood. Even the Dog's hackles are raised; he keeps growling as he leads us down an alleyway.

It feels like a marketplace in Afghanistan. A place of imminent, latent violence.

"Carmen..."

"Alice."

"You're basically the president of the fucked-up dead people club."

"Presidents are elected."

"Shut it. There's five of us who have the eye... who are Voyeurs," I don't like that name, but it's the one Dr. Spence came up with. "And the other four have got cars. They've even got sunny dispositions, meaning you picked me—"

She stops in the middle of the alley and turns on her heel to face me. It's so abrupt I almost run into her.

"Don't feel too flattered. I didn't pick you first, but the first choice bailed on me after he saw it."

"Ouch. Just like senior prom all over again."

"Though I'll admit, you were a strong second candidate." She turns her back to me. "I only went with Clint first because he's so reliable; ice and air aren't as useful as metal and fire here."

I frown. “Wait, Clint bailed? *Clint*, Clint? Clint doesn’t bail.”

She doesn’t answer, so I grab her shoulder, pull her back to face me. I forgot how light she is, how slender. Like a baby bird’s skeleton. “What are we dealing with?” I hiss.

Carmen gives a wry smile, but says nothing, and I let her go. She starts walking again, following the Stray Dog, and I can do nothing as she leads me around the block. We head up another tight alleyway and we both stop at once. She gestures, a needless flick of her dainty wrist.

As if I could have missed it.

The hoodie is just there in someone’s back yard, black fabric, no legs. Just the hoodie, floating as if worn. We’re seeing it from behind, the hoodie is facing away from us, seven bullet holes visibly punched through its back. It screams violence, imminent and irreversible. As I stare, it turns in place, slow and deliberate. Not a rotation, but like a person wearing it turning. The hood turns first, tugged low over the empty pool of shadow where a face should be, low enough that the two additional bullet holes punching through it look suspiciously like eyes, and I can swear the thing is staring at us now. The sleeves are tucked into the kangaroo pouch. There’s a bulge in it, maybe a phone, maybe a gun. Maybe nothing at all.

Then it fucking *smiles* at us. The shadows in the hood split into a lipless mouthful of 9mm shells, grinning as wide as the Cheshire cat. I pale and drop my half-empty bottle of Fireball. It clunks against the ground, but doesn’t shatter.

Small miracle that.

Hell. No.

Carmen is already holding my wrist before I can even get turning. Did I say that out loud? “Alice, wait!”

“Are you seeing this thing?” I gesture at it with my free lack-of-hand, look towards it as I do so and can’t help but feel like the thing is staring me down.

“Yes, and I’m feeling it. You are, too, aren’t you?”

She’s not joking. The Crossing Sign was only strong enough to make people careless at an intersection for its harvest. Nothing I’ve felt compares to this thing. I recognize its touch on everyone around here, the nervous tension in their eyes. This thing is distrust, paranoia, and violence, all lubricated by gun oil and ready for the slow smooth pull to trigger everything. This is gang warfare. This is blacks shot by cops. This is blacks shot by whites. This is cops shot by anyone. This is a store clerk shooting a kid just trying to buy candy because the kid was wearing a hoodie. This is fucking everyone shoots fucking everyone.

“Clint didn’t even give it a real look, he saw it and he said he was out.” There’s a latent malice behind the Hoodie. Even the Stray Dog is whimpering, trying to hide behind Carmen, despite her ‘aggressive scarecrow’ build.’ “It won’t hurt just to look. We need to know what it’s looking for, at least.”

She’s not wrong. I take out a cigarette. Light, inhale, and then the slow exhale. Let the smoke fill the air and stare into the smoke. Stare at the Hoodie through the haze. The world starts to fall away. The house. The yard. The fence. Only the Hoodie remains, the main character in this bleak play.

I stare at the Hoodie, past it, around it. It stares back. It *moves*. The arm comes out of the kangaroo pouch. It raises up, pointing at me. There’s someone inside the Hoodie, but featureless, unfinished, gray, and he’s falling backwards, a Glock in hand aiming right at me. He’s falling backwards, frozen mid-fall, the blood sprayed from his back in a cloud of vivid, terrible red speckles frozen in the air.

He's not the only one. Other bodies are on the ground. I can see ten, all splayed out on the ground, all surrounded in pools of rich, red blood. Gray, featureless people except for the red stains that spread out from them. Even their clothes are gray, non-specific. The only people who ever show in a Tableau are the dead and dying. These people are extras in the Psychopomp's mortal play. A final figure forms, hiding the Hoodie from me, between me and the Glock so it is no longer pointing at me. These clothes are clear: a police officer. The officer is falling backwards like the Hoodie is, gun drawn, the frozen instant of the piece letting me see where the bullet from the Hoodie's gun spins forever in place behind the officer's head, trailing blood, bone, and brain.

I have to blink several times to pull myself back from the vision. My eyes are watering, my heart racing. The cigarette has burned halfway down in my mouth. My limbs are stiff.

The Hoodie is in its original posture, arms still tucked into the kangaroo pouch. Did it move at all?

"What did you see?" Carmen demands.

I can't answer at first, I'm running through the scene in my head. This one would already have been bad, but the last addition makes it so much worse. I turn to Carmen. "How long was I looking?"

"About five minutes."

"Jesus." I pause. She looks impatient. I crouch down and pick my bottle back up.

"What. Did. You. See." She's getting irate. That's rare.

"I saw... the scene. It's not a good one. We can't let this one complete."

"We need the details, though, if we're going to suspend it, right?"

I turn to look back towards the Hoodie. It is still staring at us. The smile has gotten wider. I take Carmen by the shoulder and start walking her away. I don't want to look back over my shoulder, I don't want to have to check to see it's not following.

It isn't.

"It's not... established. There's no faces, just a lot of bodies. I've never seen so many bystanders in a Tableau before."

"And the location? Does it have a location yet?"

"No, no location... wait, yet? What do you mean, 'yet?'" I scowl. "You said Clint didn't look."

She looks away, back at the Hoodie. "Well, we can't suspend it without knowing enough details of the Tableau to disrupt it. And we can't allow it to complete the Tableau, not with how many die."

I scowl harder. "That's why Clint bailed. You don't want to do either of those."

We're out of the alley, out of the valley behind the houses. Carmen cocks her head as she looks at me. "That's right. We proctor. We don't just let it pick the time and place and victim; we pick them, and we force it where we want it. That *thing*," she hisses the word, "has no right to choose anything."

I hesitate. She takes over the silence. Pounces on my pause.

"We can't let it complete. We can't see enough to suspend it... but even if we could, even if we suspend it, where does it go? They don't vanish, they just set out for a new claim somewhere else. And maybe it finds another city that doesn't have anyone like us trying to keep these demons inline." She's angry. Her Catholicism only comes out when she's angry. "What then? We watch the news and wonder which violent outbreak is the one we could

have stopped? Which school shooting or riot or bout of urban violence is all because we didn't try something new?" She sees my expression. "I seem to recall you were the one who came up with the idea for proctoring in the first place."

So that's why you came to me after Clint. 'Strong second' indeed. "Carmen, this shit is big. We've... we need to think about this one before we do something reckless."

"And while we wait, this whole area gets more violent. More shootings. And not just 'more shootings.' The longer we wait, the worse it gets. We're talking riots. We're talking gang wars. That demon," she gestures towards it for emphasis, "has only been here for a few days, and you can already feel how dangerous this place is. We have to get rid of it fast."

"And it might be the Glassman all over again!" I snap. "Assuming proctoring even works, and we can even set up an artificial Tableau, and we can even bring ourselves to *murder someone*," she flinches at my emphasis. "What if we pick the wrong someone and end up with another messianic serial killer? Except this time we'll be dealing with the prophet of guns."

That shuts her up, and I pick up the pace as we walk toward her car.

A shiver up my spine in our uncomfortable silence. My body reminding me that there's a predator nearby and I can't see it, so I should be worried. I've never seen a wild Psychopomp pursue someone before, but I've never heard of one moving either. I check again.

It's still not following.

I give Carmen a look, but her expression is flat again, so we walk in silence. We pass a couple who doesn't notice us. I can feel the Hoodie's touch on them already, a stain of violence and distrust. The one, a middle-aged black man, has a gun hidden in the waistband

of his pants. His partner, a younger Latino, has a gun in his messenger bag. There's the promise of fire in every gun, and fire and metal are what my Psychopomp is. There's a promise of fire in every footstep here, and the whole area is kindling. I stay silent as we approach the Evoque, and turn to watch the two of them continue down the block, their bodies tight with an anticipation of violence.

"Fine," I whisper. "We'll need a necromancer—"

"Orphic," Carmen corrects me. "And I already know who."

"Who?"

"Prudence."

"Pru. You want Pru."

"Yes."

"Why the Saint of Suicides?"

"She's easy to find." Carmen tugs her little notebook out from an inside coat pocket and flips through the pages. Up close, I'm always amazed at all the sticky notes and index cards she manages to keep from falling out. "There's only three Orphics in the city. Jamal refuses to be part of this life. Nikola doesn't have a phone. And doesn't like me."

"It's 'cause yer a busybody. You know, Pru doesn't like me."

"Alice, I don't like you. Yet, here we are."

'At least I'm too useful to abandon,' I think. I say, "Fine, but not tonight. I'm too tired to deal with the city's most depressing person to try and offset some terrible hecatomb."

I wait for her. She gives me that flat look.

"I'm not going to ask you what that means."

"See, a hecatomb is when the ancient Greeks..."

“No.” Her car beeps as we approach, the doors unlocking once we get within the radius. “You’re such a ray of sunshine to work with, Alice. It’s a wonder you don’t have more friends.”

I want to say, ‘Same to you.’ But I need the ride home.

THE SEVEN DOLORS

I haven't eaten since breakfast. Damn this has been a hell of a day.

Carmen drops me off about a block from Skid Row. She doesn't like driving down here, and I don't like having her see where I'm sleeping, so it works out that I've got legs. I toss on my backpack, give her dog a pat, and set out. She's trying to explain the plan for tomorrow, but I'm tired. I shut the door in her face and start off. I give it fifty/fifty odds she's gonna roll down the window and yell at me, but she doesn't. The engine rumbles and she rolls off, and I'm walking back to my spot thinking about if my hunger or my sloth are gonna win out tonight.

I've gone to bed hungry a lot in my life, so it seems like it'd be real easy to just call it a night. Today has already been way too much work. Even if all I would have to do is walk over to a place, bust out my debit card, and eat, the walking itself sounds like a lot of work at this point. Besides, I've got a bottle of water and a bottle of Fireball. What else is needed for sleep?

The sky isn't red anymore, it's gone a bruised purple, and with how much light the city gives off it'll stay that way all night. I'm staring up at it, thinking of all the different skies I've stared up at and taking the occasional hit from my water bottle when there's a blip of the lights on her squad car. No siren. Just the flash of red and blue.

I mean, it might not be Rita.

I look.

It is.

She doesn't even get out of the squad car, just makes a two-finger beckoning gesture. I start walking that way. Rita's eyes are locked on me every step of the way. I get next to the driver's window.

"You eat yet, Alice?"

I shake my head. The locks on the doors raise with a 'chunk.' She jerks her head, a quick over-the-shoulder gesture towards the backseat.

Right then. I climb in. I skip the seat belt, though. What's she gonna do, ticket me?

We drive a block in silence. I open my mouth, but I don't know what to say, so we drive another two blocks. We cross that weird line on Alameda that divides Skid Row from the world and pop into the McDonald's. Rita still hasn't said anything, and continues to not say anything as she parks, climbs out, and lets me out. The silence between us is oppressive, filled eagerly with those endless city sounds of traffic and distant conversations and more distant sirens.

The McDonald's is one of those fancy-ish new ones, with the kiosks and the touchscreen ordering and the little table tents so they can bring your food out to you like it's a real restaurant and not the home of a dollar menu. I'm feeling uncomfortably visible here, like everyone is watching the crippled, blood-stained hobo and her tired-looking police handler. I use the kiosk, order all the nuggets in the world, and pay with my little-seen debit card.

Rita gets a coffee, ordering directly from the counter. She talks to the teenager working the till some, before coming to take me and my number tent to a booth.

"What'd I say, Alice?"

“Don’t run.”

“What’d you do, Alice?”

“In my defense, I didn’t run. I got a ride.”

She sighs and leans back. I wonder when she got off shift. I wonder how long she was waiting for me.

“Alice, you remember what happened this morning?”

Carmen’s sojourn into nightmare town had, in fact, made me forget about it. But now, with her sitting here, the memory is quite clear of the boy’s bloodied face and the sirens and the screaming. I look down at my knuckles. They’re bruised and torn.

How many times did I hit him?

“Vaguely...”

“His name is Leon Demarco. He has a skull fracture.” She says it with such weariness. My blood goes cold. Even the soft rumble of fire that always hovers in my head is muffled. She does not wait for me to ask. “They’re holding him at the hospital to see if there’s any brain damage. The doctors are... pretty optimistic that he’s alright. But his family is looking to press charges.”

I don’t really have anything to say. My knuckles ache from the memory.

Rita slumps back in her seat. “What are you involved in, Alice?”

“I’m a homeless combat veteran. I’m mostly involved in...”

She interrupts. “No bullshit.”

I shut my mouth, frown, and think. How much can I tell her? How much will she believe? I can’t tell her nothing, she’s the only ally who might keep me out of jail right now. But I sure as hell can’t go too far into this or I’ll look absolutely nuts. Psycopomps are too

much, but maybe she'll buy the sight. "Imagine you could tell when someone was going to die."

"I said—"

"Seriously. Imagine it. You could see a person or a place, and you could tell, 'soon, a car is going to run someone down in this spot.' Would you try and change it?"

"I suppose so."

"That's what I'm into."

Rita leans back in the booth and crosses her arms. She looks far more amused than doubting as a teen arrives to plop down the tray in front of us. Two ten-piece nugget cartons and a soda cup. He hovers a moment, maybe he's noticed the awkward silence. He hovers too long. "When's he gonna die?" She asks, gesturing at him with her head. He gives her a look and retreats.

"I can't see him, it's—"

"What about the cashier?"

"No, not her either."

"And what about me?"

That's not a question I want to answer. "It's not like that. I can't see when everyone is going to die. I don't really see the person at all. I can only see the moment, the specific instant that was chosen." I realize how crazy that sounds the moment I say it.

"Chosen."

"Not the right word—"

"Eat your nuggets and I'll talk a second." I do so, and she continues. "Here's what I know. Seven months ago, I get jumped in an alleyway by an assailant with a knife, and you

show up from nowhere and patch me up and call 911. Three months ago, a fellow officer is talking about a witness statement, about how some one-armed vagrant pulled a woman from a burning car. This morning, a man is hit in an intersection by a church soccer van and you're there, again, to patch him up."

She's missing another one that happened in that time period, and a half-dozen before then. She doesn't stop talking.

"An optimistic person might say that you're just that ideal bystander, the one that saves people. You've got the background for it. I've checked. Alice Long. Traditional Catholic upbringing, US Marine. You've got it all, Corporal." The title is uncomfortable. I got promoted in a hospital while being medically separated. It's almost an insult to have earned it like that. She pauses.

I eat another nugget. No sauce. I'm an animal.

"I'm a cop. I'm not allowed to be an optimist. Follow me on this Alice: you've a military background and the alleyway assailant was never found. You're an alcoholic, and the driver of the car incident was a drunk coming home from the bar. You were waiting on that corner for more than a week before someone just *happened* to be in the intersection when a van came through. What if I think you did the lot of them? Stabbed me in the back? Rode home from a bar with a drunk and crashed the car? Shoved Mr. Ortiz into traffic? Some sort of Munchausen by proxy thing?"

She stares at me, and for a long minute I don't have anything to say. It's the dryness of my mouth that finally gives me something to say, and I squeak out a dusty, "Mind if I get a soda?"

Rita shrugs. "Don't run."

It buys me like thirty seconds as I walk to the fountain and get a cola. I have to tell her something now, because, honestly, she's making a really good case. Like, maybe there's enough witnesses at these events to keep me from being found guilty, but I can't spend a few weeks fighting with the courts. The Hoodie is on a timer. If I can see the Tableau, we've got at most a month.

Rita watches me the whole time, sipping her coffee as I come back to the booth.

"I know how crazy all this sounds," I start slowly, holding my cup, feeling how cold the soda is through the thin plastic. It's calming. "Trust me, I do. I had a hard time believing it all when it was all explained to me, and I can see these things."

"Who explained it to you?"

Shit. I keep walking into traps I set for myself. "You won't believe me if I tell you."

Rita stares at me. She takes another drink of her coffee and just waits. I eat a nugget and look out the window. Traffic on the street slows, stops at the red light. Inside cars, the darkness is lit up as drivers check phones, text, whatever. Rita's reflection hasn't changed. She's still staring right at me. Waiting.

"It doesn't matter," I grumble. "He's dead now, so if I tell you the name, you'll just add it to reasons to be suspicious."

"I like you, Alice," she says, and there's a hint of desperation, pleading in her voice. "Give me a reason to think you're not dangerous to society."

I look at her. I know why she likes me. It's instinctual. I peel the skin off a nugget and eat it, and exhale.

"You were supposed to die seven months ago in the alleyway, Rita." Her brow furrows. "I saw it, the vision of a police officer face down in her own blood, stabbed in the

back. I knew the place, but not the time. I knew the weapon, but not the person. So, I waited across the street for almost a month until it happened.”

“Mmhmm.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Mmhmm. In fact, you’re sounding crazier now. You’re saying I was chosen? By who? Who do you think is doing the choosing? Is it aliens? God? JFK?” She’s getting dismissive. She’s getting accusatory.

“No, it’s... we don’t know what they are,” I snap. I’m getting irritated. “Everyone has a theory, but they exist, and they pick people to kill.”

“ ‘We?’ ”

“Oh fuck off. Yes, there’s a group of us, and we try to keep things in check. Look, we’re out there doing work.” This is bad. I’m saying too much. I’m angry. “And you know something? It isn’t for you.”

“Mmhmm?”

“We don’t save people’s lives. We’re locking up monsters, and the only place to trap them is inside of people. I *let* you die in that alleyway, get it? I *let* it kill you. And the Psychopomp is what brought you back. I was just there to make sure you survived after, ‘cause once you die again, that little death god will escape and go to kill someone else.”

Stop talking, Alice. Stop fucking talking.

“You don’t appreciate how good you got it, either!”

No, don’t start yelling. Shut up shut up shut up.

“You don’t have to see them, you don’t have to hear them, you get your solipsistic knife-monster and I’m haunted by fire and blood and... and screaming and... and I have to

watch a man run down by a car because if I don't let it happen it might happen somewhere else and I might not be there and that person might die and then I'll have killed them because I tried to stop it I tried to save someone and it killed someone else and it's my fault I killed them I killed them, and I could've saved..." My voice cracks as it trails off.

I'm standing. Everyone is staring at me because I'm screaming at the cop. She's standing now, too. Her body is cocked and she has one hand reached out towards me. Her body is cocked so her pistol is away from me. Her hand is on it, but she hasn't drawn it yet.

I'm trembling. My hand is clutching at my chest, holding my jacket closed. Two freak outs in one day. Or is this three? My reflection in the mirror is haggard, my scarred and skin-grafted face streaked in tears, blond hair dirty and tangled. I hate my reflection.

Her reflection in the mirror doesn't show it. Psychopomps don't get reflections, but the way her body is cocked is enough for me to see a few of the knife-handles that jut out of her back. There's seven of them, exactly how many times she was stabbed in the alleyway. The Seven Dolors. Carmen would get the reference. I don't think Rita would.

"Alice," she's talking slowly. "I'm going to have to take you in tonight. You need help and you're not getting it. Whatever you're involved with, this cult, it is not helping."

"No, no, I'm... fine," I take a half-step back. I'm still trembling. I can feel it in my whole body, I'm shivering all over.

Rita shakes her head. "You need help. You were there when I was in danger. I'm here for you."

I don't even reach the door before Rita's tackled me. The impact carries me to the ground. I struggle, I scream. She plants her knee on the small of my back, twists and pins my

good arm, and easily handles me to my feet. A dozen nuggets and a spilled soda get left behind as she drags me right back out to her car and shoves me in the back.

Carmen is going to kill me.

THE BURNT EFFIGY

It's not like I can be handcuffed normally. My right arm stops just past the elbow, a stump of what doctors managed to save. It's why Rita can't handcuff me to take me to the car, but she manages by keeping my arm bent back up into the small of my back. It's the classic 'come along' position, as my old MCMAP instructor called it. It hurts like hell if you resist. At the squad car, Rita improvises more. She shoves me into the back seat on the passenger side, reaches across me to grab my left wrist, then cuffs it to the door.

I'm still trembling off the adrenaline from my freak out inside the McDonald's as she slams the door shut on me. I press to the glass, and it's cold. It helps my heart slow and my spinning head to settle. Long, slow breaths, calm down, calm down, just for one time today calm down. Cold is an anchor.

I hear the trunk open, then shut. Rita must've gone to get my bag. That was nice of her. Then she circles around, making every effort not to look at me as I stare at her. She climbs in, and I'm staring daggers into her back. Besides the seven that are already there.

The engine starts. Rita is talking, saying something about a halfway house. She knows one for veterans, or something, she's rambling about how the war messes with everyone. Like that's the thing that really bothers me. Not the psychopomps or the watching people die or the Glassman or the Hoodie, oh no, it must be the war making me like this.

The war was clean, in its own ugly way. People went to war, knowing they could live or die. And people did. They either lived or they died. I miss that simplicity. That cleanness.

I need a way out of this. If she's running me to a halfway house, they'll take my phone and I won't be able to reach Carmen for a pick-up. There's at most a month before the Tableau for the Hoodie happens. Probably less than that. Carmen won't have time to find a third person with the eye to carry out her insane plan in the interim.

We're heading north along Alameda. We're not turning into Skid Row.

What do I have? Like, really, anything in my pockets could help me escape the back of a moving police car, but what do I have? I've got... a cell phone in my coat pocket. Which I can't reach. My wallet in my back pocket. Which I can't reach. A small knife, since Rita didn't pat me down. Which I can't reach. An empty bottle of Fireball.

Fire. The ceaseless growling of flame is loud. Close. My psychopomp is excited, and once I think about it I can see why. Passenger's seat. Trapped against the doorframe. Car driving along and I'm not paying attention.

I lean away from the window. I close my eyes and let go of the anchor.

The MRAP's frame survived the rolling, mostly, but her rifle, set in the door well, caught her arm, and where the frame had bent, it trapped her there. Her forearm was brutally crushed by the bent piece of metal that had once been a weapon, as already burning fuel poured from the ruptured engine into the sideways cab.

Rescue arrived for the people trapped in the back, the heavy door forced open and knives coming out to slice away seat belts, gear, anything that kept them from pulling their comrades free of the metal tomb. They were pulled free and dragged to safety as quickly as they could be, an act made all the more difficult by the weight of all that gear. Smoke already filled the cabin.

Rescue never arrived for the people trapped in the front, but it approached in a doomed gesture. The vehicle lay sideways on the one door, trapping the driver at the bottom of an eight foot deep pit of smoke and fire. The other door was on top, nine foot off the ground, a bulletproof windshield, even cracked, giving a display of the two young Marines waiting to burn. Menendez started shooting at it, screaming as his rounds chipped and cracked but didn't break the glass. Screaming at his helplessness to save the screaming woman inside, whose free hand beat just as helplessly against the inside of the windshield, smearing it with blood.

Ayala dropped his gear and Carlson boosted him up, up to the skyward side of the MRAP and that distant door, the door that weighed two hundred pounds. The flames spread and roared, and the she-that-was-me struggled less, smoke and fire stripping away the air, blood-smearred handprints caramelizing on the glass from the heat. She died. I died.

And there we both were, in that darkness. I watch her, still whole, still undamaged, and I stare at Me through her eyes. How I must look to her! That archaic naval porthole, rusted metal floating in midair, old rivets oozing red blood. Beyond the cold glass is a roaring, red, and merciless flame. I am inside that flame, flesh blackened and cracked from the blaze, each split seam of flesh showing the brighter blaze inside of Me. I pull an arm free from the chains that bind Me to My post, and place a hand against the glass. I offer to take her death from her.

She places her hand against her side of the glass.

There it is. The engine. A beating heart of metal and fire. I reach out and crush the flame with our power. Fire is ours.

The car stalls out, Rita jerking the wheel as her engine loses all power in the middle of the road. She blips her light and siren, getting people out of her way so she can coast to the curb. I can feel every fire within a hundred feet, the latent spark hidden in every bullet in her service pistol, every shell in the shotgun, the cars nearby.

I'm not in the right state to call up all of the power, but I can do this. I can do it to all of them.

Rita is still trying to get the engine to turn over when I sweep out and kill the engines of every car nearby. Their little flicker-light blaze of their hearts is nothing to mine, and I swallow them down. They stall, and not every driver is as trained as Rita is. They swerve and slam on breaks in surprise. They try to get off the road, but don't have Rita's siren to warn people of their sudden lane changes.

"What the hell?" Rita pops her door open, gets out cautiously as cars slow, crash together. Crash might be generous for describing their speeds. Bump together? They collide for sure. "Stay here!" She barks at me, and shuts the door before I can think of a clever quip to throw back at her.

It is not enough to say my Psychopomp has power over fire. The Burnt Effigy is fire, it's steel and flame and dying screaming. And while I keep it on a tighter leash than Carmen keeps the Stray Dog, I can do more flamboyant things than she can.

I hope this doesn't get Rita in too much trouble.

I breath life back into the engine of her car, and then breathe still more in. I'm not strong enough here to make new flame, but if I shove everything I've taken from the other stalling, struggling engines into this one, the outcome is downright predictable. The gasoline will make new flame for me.

The explosion is an uncomfortable noise for anyone who's been blown up before, but it also pops open the hood of the squad car and sends a small fireball up ten feet. The engine is burning steadily now, gasoline and oil and wiring all eager to take. The roar of the engine, though, is mute to the roar of the Effigy behind me, beside me, inside me.

I'm not as good an actor as Carmen, but you doesn't need to be that good an actor with good effects, right? I slam my shoulder against the glass, bang my head to it, scream for attention, for help. It only takes a moment before Rita is there, and though her face is a mask of confusion and stress, her hands stay smooth as she unlocks the door, yanks it open, yanks me out.

"The cuffs! The cuffs!" I scream, waving my arm elaborately. Excessively. I'm making it hard on her, so she has to seize my wrist to hold it still, to unlock the cuff from the inside of the door.

I keep flailing as she pulls me all the way free of the car, until my wriggling and her attempts to be helpful finally put her head in the right spot. I turn fast, putting my hips into it, and elbow her in the head.

She goes down hard. Not like a sack of potatoes, but with that stunned surprise of someone who wasn't expecting to take a shot to the head, clutching the side of her face and hissing in pain.

It's enough. I take off running, leaving her with bigger problems to focus on than a fleeing drunk vagrant. Her car is still burning, after all.

"I still hate you," I hiss to myself—me, it, us.

Shit, my bag's still in her trunk, isn't it? That sucks.

Rita probably hates me now, too. That sucks more.

The roar of a fire engine siren approaches, along with another police car. I stop running, go to a leisurely stroll, and none of them stop for me. As they pass, I turn right sharply and start heading up Olympic. I figure I'll cross the River and head north, towards Hollenbeck Park. I fish my phone out and go through the small collection of numbers.

It's coming up on 10 PM. This is probably not a good time to be calling a college girl who lives with her parents still. There's only four numbers on the phone, though, so looking at Carmen's also let's my eyes fall on Clint's. And I think I need to talk to him about... well, everything.

I go to voice mail four times before he finally answers.

"Alice? What's wrong?" He sounds half-awake.

Jesus. What kind of life do I live that I just call a man and he knows things are wrong?

"I'm just... touching base about some things."

"Is it about Carmen?"

"Well, less Carmen than the Psychopomp she found."

"You mean the grim dang reaper out there?"

"Yeah."

There's a long pause. I'm crossing over the river now. The sirens are well in the background now. Jesus, what kind of life do I live that he didn't even ask about the sirens?

The silence gets to him before me. "Well... what did you wanna ask?"

"You saw the Tableau, right?"

"Yup."

Like pulling fucking teeth. "About ten dead, right?"

“Yup.”

“Is that why you backed out?”

He gives a short laugh. “I didn’t back out, Carmen gave me the boot.”

“Yeah, that scans right. Didn’t wanna go with her plan to try proctoring?”

“We didn’t even give that a try when Jeremy was still around and there’s a reason for it. You’d think after Nate,” the Glassman’s name makes me flinch, “Carmen would know better. We should just suspend the thing and be done with it. We don’t play god.”

“Your ethics are always charmingly straightforward.”

“What about you? What do you think? She must’ve tried to rope you into it. You’re the only other Voyeur that the three of ‘em ever talked with about the idea of proctoring.”

“I dunno. She’s kinda right... if we just suspend it, we don’t know where it ends up. What if it goes somewhere worse?”

“You ever heard the starfish story, Alice?”

“Clint, I was in Al Anon. I’ve heard it plenty.”

“Tell it to me then.”

“Clint...”

“I can wait.”

Ugh. Fine. “Guy sees a bunch of starfish on the beach, they’re gonna bake in the sun, bla bla, sees a kid dancing, gets closer, sees the kid isn’t dancing but he’s throwing starfish back into the sea. The guy’s like, ‘Hey, what’s the point, you can’t save them all, what you’re doing doesn’t matter.’ Kid throws the one in his hand into the sea and says, ‘It mattered to that one.’ Good enough?”

“You get it?”

“We can’t save everyone.”

“Exactly. We’re not gonna save the world. But maybe we can save that neighborhood. Save them ten people.” He pauses. “Save the cop and the kid with the gun.”

Turn left up Boyle Avenue. Might as well ask the hard question now.

“You in town, Clint? I could really use a place to stay tonight.”

CURRICULUM VITA

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