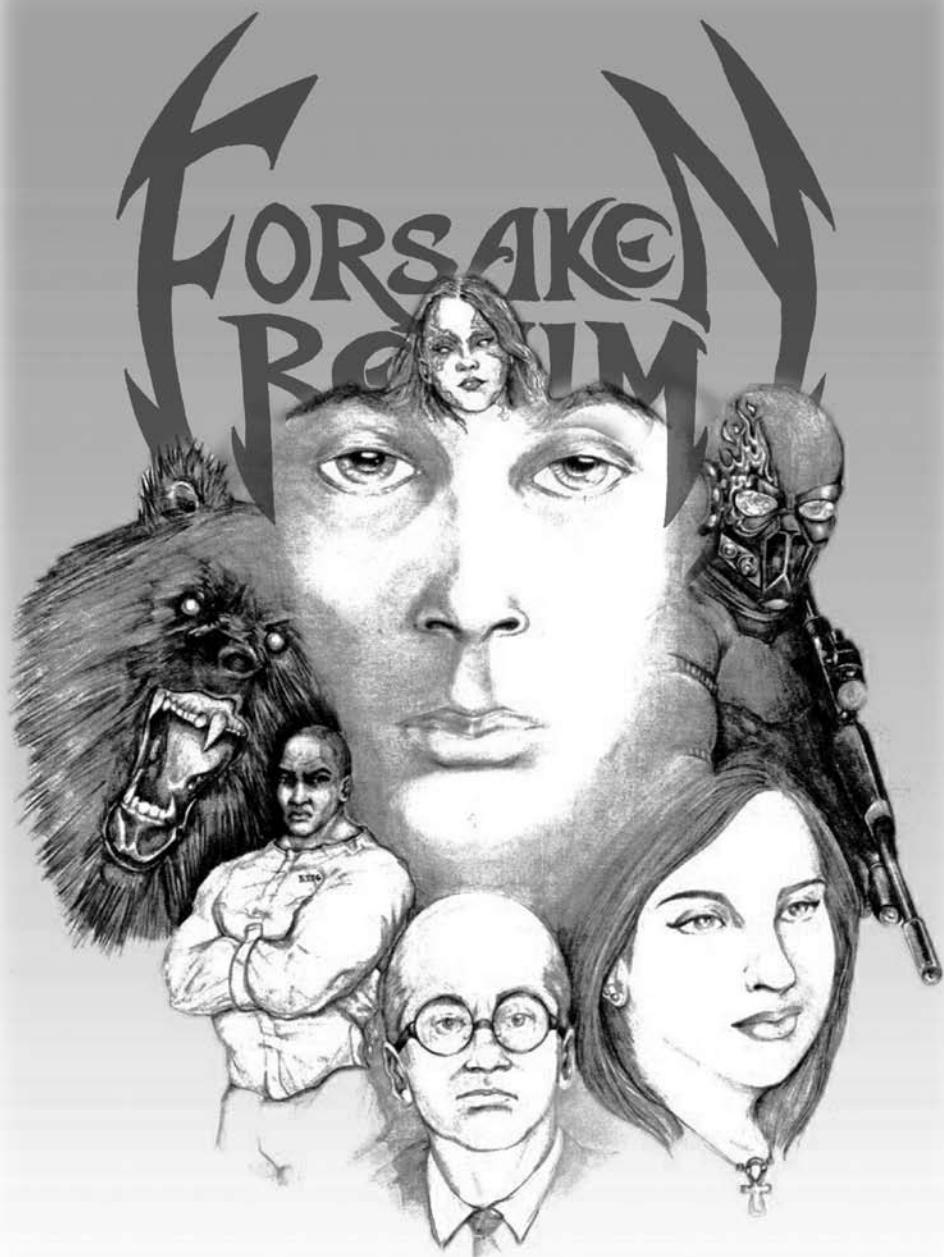


TEMPORARY INSANITY EDITION:
CHAPTERS 1 - 5



BOOK ONE:

the light within

Written by Garrett C. Holt

Illustrations by Akeem D. Brown



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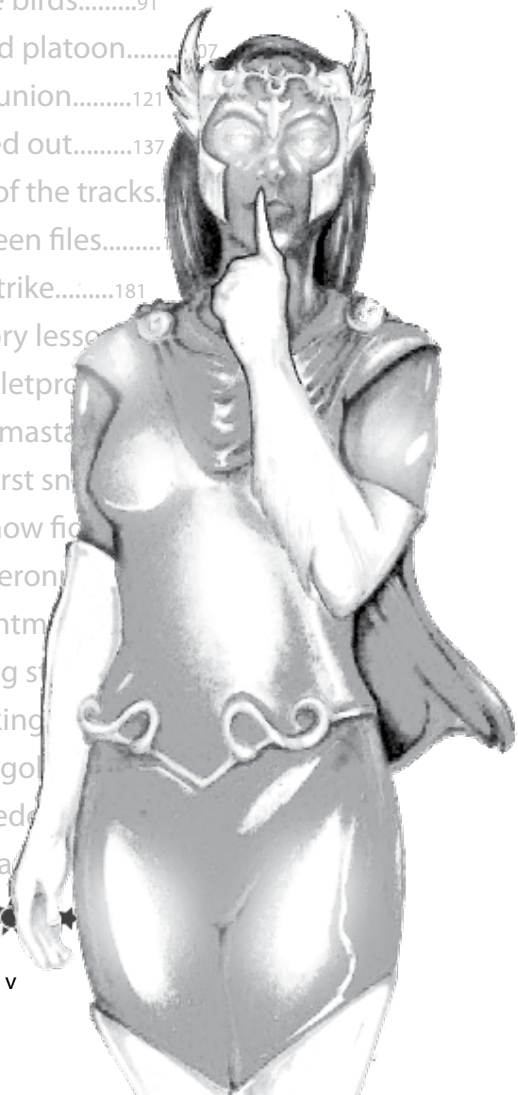
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Dedicated to our Facebook fans,
who made this
“Temporary Insanity” Edition
possible through their support
and encouragement.
Thank you.

contents



prologue: thirteen years ago.....	1
one: the freak.....	4
two: the locket.....	26
three: self-hypnosis.....	46
four: the madman.....	60
five: after hours visitor.....	75
six: for the birds.....	91
seven: the third platoon.....	97
eight: a reunion.....	121
nine: sealed out.....	137
ten: wrong side of the tracks.....	147
eleven: thirteen files.....	171
twelve: strike.....	181
thirteen: history lesson.....	197
fourteen: bulletproof.....	207
fifteen: kremastar.....	217
sixteen: the first snow.....	227
seventeen: snow for the night.....	237
eighteen: beron.....	247
nineteen: the nightmare.....	257
twenty: seeing stars.....	267
twenty-one: making a difference.....	277
twenty-two: the good fight.....	287
twenty-three: redemption.....	297
epilogue: the castellano.....	307



about the temporary insanity edition
of forsaken realm: the light within



Thank you for downloading this sampler of the first five chapters of Forsaken Realm: The Light Within. The purpose of this is to give you all a taste of what the Forsaken Realm Series is all about. So if you like it (which of course you will, it is amazing), please spread the word and grab your own 380-page, hard-back, beautifully illustrated novel with a fully painted wraparound cover.

Please stay tuned to our website at www.forsakenrealmseries.com for updates, promotions, and special offers.

Now, without further ado, we present the prologue and first five chapters to Forsaken Realm: The Light Within, and we invite you, implore you, to go ahead and let the madness in.

Sincerely,
Garrett C. Holt and Akeem D. Brown
Creators

prologue



thirteen years ago

An incredible fire consumed the once quaint house. Flames roared and licked out of the windows. The night air filled with the sounds of wailing sirens. Two large fire engines screeched to a stop outside the house.

Across the street, a neighbor watched in horror as he calculated the drop in property value the impending eyesore of a smoky crater would cause his carefully selected piece of real estate. Dutifully, firefighters jumped from the safety of their trucks and stormed into what was quickly becoming a blackened skeleton of a house, while the others methodically sprayed the waning inferno.

These brave souls in front of the house were far too engaged in their work to notice seven oddly dressed figures that stood within the edge of the woods, not even fifty feet from the house. They stood in a circle, facing one another. The flickering flames and flashing lights bounced them in and out of shadow, revealing an eighth tiny person. They glanced back and forth between one another, waiting for someone to speak.

Finally, the man who held the sleeping infant broke the silence. He pulled his hood back. “We must protect this child.” His face was stone as he said the words. He looked like a soldier. His head was shaven, his brow furrowed. His shirt was torn at his collar, revealing ornate black tattoos that stretched from his chest to his back. His

powerfully muscled, dark arms contrasted sharply against the pale, helpless child that softly slept within his embrace.

Beside him, a man went slack-jawed. “Joachim, you cannot possibly be serious.”

“Bridge, when is Joachim anything but serious?” asked a member of the circle. She was younger than the others; her sleek black hair caressed her pretty, cinnamon-colored face. She arched an eyebrow and comfortably rested a hand on the handle of the sheathed sword by her side.

Bridge took a breath, and prepared his thoughts. *Via is right*, he thought. *Joachim would never say such a thing lightly*. Joachim fixed his gaze upon him. Bridge was a slender man, with the build of a cyclist. His brown hair hung across his left eye playfully. He pushed this hair back toward his temple, so he could meet Joachim’s stare. “Perhaps the parents are fine after all, perhaps we...”

“No, Bridge,” a sober voice interrupted. “I saw the charred bodies pulled out of the house, nothing is fine.” Bridge looked over at Sol. He was shocked to see a tear drip down his tan cheek. “We can’t let this one suffer the same fate. One of them will be back, you know. None of the old rules apply, I just don’t understand.”

A bearded man stepped into the center of the circle. He was not tall or particularly impressive at first glance, but his presence commanded respect. He looked around the group with blue eyes that almost glowed in the darkness. His right hand extended from the folds of a large cape. He removed his glove and reached two fingers forward, gently touching the child’s cheek. He tightened his mouth then he let out a small sigh. “I am sorry, little one. We were too late to save your parents.” He glanced around the circle. “The child goes with us.”

“The child goes with us.”



chapter one



the freak

Richard Jenkins stepped into the dark room, clutching his worn, zip-top briefcase in his right hand. An orderly flipped the light switch behind them. The barely audible hum of the fluorescent lights mirrored his sigh as he glanced around. Through a pair of round, thin, wire-rimmed glasses he scanned the small room; the walls were painted a bland rosy beige. A small table in the corner was the only thing that prevented the room from being completely empty.

“I’m sorry we keep moving you around like this, Dr. Jenkins,” said the orderly nervously, “The conference room was already booked.”

“No, no, this will be quite fine,” Dr. Jenkins smiled reassuringly. His hand emerged and removed his hat, revealing a decided lack of hair on his head. “Do you think you can get me a couple of chairs? The comfier, the better.”

“Of course,” the orderly smiled while she closed the door, and left the psychologist in the room.

There was nothing striking about Dr. Jenkins, but he communicated in winks and smiles, and had the ability to put nearly anyone at ease. He walked toward the lonely table and placed his briefcase upon it. He turned just as the orderly entered again and dropped off the chairs.

Dr. Jenkins thanked her and glanced down at the chairs as the orderly left. They were the kind normally used in school cafeterias,

plastic and yellow with metal legs. If the uncomfortable choice of chairs irritated him, it certainly did not show.

Excitedly, he pulled them both over to the table and arranged them on opposite sides. He unzipped his brief case, and dragged out file after file. Most of them were covered in square sticky notes of different sizes and colors. The ones that did not had note paper taped or stapled to them. Dr. Jenkins spread a dozen or so out on the table, then rearranged them in an order discernible only to him. He hurried over to his briefcase, and pulled out a small plastic case of thumb-tacks triumphantly. Within moments the file folders were emptied and the contents canvassed the once empty wall.

Dr. Jenkins cleared the table. He carefully placed a small spiral-bound notebook and a single ballpoint pen in front of him and took his seat. He glanced at his watch, unsurprised to see that he was alone in being on time for his appointment. Although he was unaccustomed to being made to wait, this patient was worth it all, worth leaving the comforts of his office in the city, worth postponing sessions with clients who would stand in line in the rain for a paid session with him.

He looked over at the wall, scanning the photos and pieces of paper in plastic sheet protectors for what felt like the thousandth time. Most of the photos, including a mug shot, were of the same man.

A police report beneath a photo of the man in an interrogation room gave the basics.

**Joachim Smith, black male, 5'7", 260 pounds.
Attacked and injured seven on-duty officers.**

Dr. Jenkins pulled out a tape recorder, locking eyes with the man in the photo. He clicked the record button. "Patient has made significant progress toward recovery from schizophrenic episodes. Demen-

tia is being successfully treated without the use of medication.” He continued to study the photos and medical reports, few of which made sense. A newspaper clipping with the familiar mug shot was accompanied by the headline *Area Police Capture Maniac*. He pressed the stop button. “How about we see if we can undo some of that damage you have done.”

A woman entered. “Your *patient* is ready to see you, Dr. Jenkins. He would have been here much sooner, but there was an altercation.” Dr. Jenkins hurried back to his notebook and pen. “As always, we would be more than happy to provide someone to help keep him in line.”

“Oh, no, no, that will not be necessary. Just go ahead and send him in. I am certain I will be just fine.”

The woman glanced into the hallway. “Go ahead, Gerhard. I’m trusting you to behave yourself.” As she walked out, a young boy walked in. He rolled his eyes as she passed, then sneered as he looked around.

“So, Jenkies, what’d you do to get us kicked out of the conference room? Don’t they know you’re a super important guy?”

“It would appear that the conference room was booked today, my apologies. Please have a seat.” Dr. Jenkins motioned to the seat across the table from him.

“Aye, aye, captain!” Gerhard said, in a tone Dr. Jenkins had come to expect as the minimum level of sarcasm. Gerhard slumped into the chair, clutching his blue binder. Dr. Jenkins looked over his subject.

The thirteen-year-old with whom he had become familiar over the past few months was the same as he ever was. One of his beat-up tennis shoes was untied. His jeans were drawn all over in marker, full of words and fantastic creatures. His partially zipped hooded jacket obscured what looked like a drawing of a banana on his tee shirt. His dark brown hair was unruly at best, wrapping around his big ears, and he was certainly in need of a haircut. His expressive eyebrows framed

a pair of bright blue eyes, accompanied this time by a purplish bruise.

Dr. Jenkins flipped his notebook open, “May I take it that shiner is the reason you were running behind?”

“What’s a shiner?” Gerhard asked.

“A bruise,” Dr. Jenkins readied his pen.

Gerhard looked at the pen with contempt. He pursed and relaxed his lips, leaning back in the chair. He pulled his index finger up to the bruise in question like a poorly operated marionette. “What, this old thing? Nope, that’s from the other day. I’m afraid I have nothing new for our show and tell session today. Hmmm,” his eyes became cynical slits, “what are you writing?”

“Really, really important things.” Dr. Jenkins smiled and flipped the notebook around to show Gerhard the sloppily written words *write some really important things HERE*. Gerhard laughed out loud and fell at ease.

“Jenkies, shouldn’t you be doing your job? I mean, there’s this totally insane kid with dementia and shizophonía.”

“Schizophrenia,” Dr. Jenkins corrected, “and I hear you are having some regressive episodes again.”

“Yeah, bad dreams,” Gerhard’s shifted his eyes to Dr. Jenkins’ hastily constructed photo gallery. “I guess we have to talk about *him* again, huh?”

“Not if you would rather discuss something else. Are you adjusting to the Academy here? It has been over five months now. Have you been able to make some friends?” Dr. Jenkins narrowed his eyes.

Gerhard shifted in his chair, obviously uncomfortable. “I’m sorry,” he started indignantly, and pointed at his eye. “Did you miss exhibit A? What about exhibit B?!” Gerhard raised the edge of his shirt, exposing four long parallel scars. Each was nearly an inch wide, and about eight inches long.

“I’m a freak. Even the teachers and orderlies don’t really look at

me. Nobody forgot about the weird stuff I said when I first got here,” He slammed his binder onto the ground and stood up.

He pointed a shaky finger at Dr. Jenkins. “You’re not gonna make me normal, you can’t fix what’s wrong with me! So why don’t you just give me a bunch of pills like the last shrink did and run away!”

“What is your name and who are you?” Dr. Jenkins asked, ignoring the outburst. Gerhard was stunned as Dr. Jenkins met his glare coldly. It was not unusual for Gerhard to have reactions like this, and Dr. Jenkins knew exactly how to calm the boy.

“What?” Gerhard breathed angrily, but his rant was definitely knocked from its track.

Dr. Jenkins repeated the question. “What is your name and *who* are you?”

He took a breath and thought for a moment. “My name is Gerhard, and I’m...I’m trying to figure that second one out.” Slowly he sat back down, and picked up the binder. He felt bad for snapping at Dr. Jenkins, and it showed. “Does it have to be this hard, Jenkies? I just want to be able to walk around without the looks.”

“Gerhard, when we began our sessions you swore you were the prince of the Seventh Kingdom of the Light Realm. That you came to Earth a few months before to prevent a catastrophic chain of events that would unmake our world and other worlds we cannot see. During our first sessions you defended this man,” Dr. Jenkins pointed to the newspaper article, “You said that he was your protectorate, and that he was a knight who lived in that same imaginary world with you. God only knows what he did to you, what he convinced you was true.

Every day I see you, you are more grounded in reality, and you can differentiate between that and the dangerous fantasy that once trapped your mind. You no longer need to convince yourself of those falsehoods. After all, it was undoubtedly an attempt by your mind to cope with whatever horrors that psychopath subjected you

to; from the cornucopia of drugs that were in your system to the scar on your stomach.”

“He isn’t a bad man.” Gerhard started to feel small; his bravado was replaced by the insecurity that accompanied saying something wrong.

Dr. Jenkins was surprised to hear this again; he blinked rapidly, and then smiled, “Gerhard, we have been over this. When I first took on your case, you asked me to prove that the two of you were not from another world. Do you remember that?”

Gerhard looked as though he were about to cry. “You brought in the police reports from years and years ago. He was connected with a bunch of people getting hurt and killed. There were photos and video of him committing one of the crimes”

Dr. Jenkins pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket, and handed it to Gerhard. “Yes. We know for a fact that this man was here ‘in this world’ years ago. Obviously, he was not in another realm during that time, now was he?” Gerhard shook his head.

“I am so proud of you and the progress you have made. You are an exceptionally bright young man, with a very exciting future. Your imagination is vivid, and your artistic ability is certainly impressive. May I see?”

Gerhard rubbed the edge of one eye with the handkerchief, and smiled at Dr. Jenkins. He handed the blue binder to him, the closest person he had to a friend. Dr. Jenkins thumbed to the back (being quite familiar with its contents), and opened it like a precious treasure.

“Incredible, Gerhard, such an imagination.” Gerhard wanted to contradict this notion, but instead nodded in silent thanks. The drawings themselves were very good for his age, and frequently were rendered in panels, like a comic book. Dr. Jenkins stopped on a picture of a cat-like human covered in spots. “What is this character’s story?”

“Oh, him. He uh, he can run really fast, and make people fall asleep

by pricking them with poison-tipped claws,” Gerhard was trying his best not to appear eager.

“A feline that induces sleep, eh? Is he a Narco-Leopard?” Dr. Jenkins chuckled at his own clever assertion.

“Actually, he’s a jaguar. But I can’t remember, I mean, haven’t come up with a name. That’s a good one. Can I use it?” Dr. Jenkins nodded, and continued to look through the drawings. A black mask with a flaming body was drawn on several pages, as was a happy girl with colorful designs on her face. Dr. Jenkins was relieved to see this smiling clown girl in the sea of dark imagery.

“May I borrow a couple of these drawings?” Dr. Jenkins asked.

“Where are the last ones you borrowed?” Gerhard raised his eyebrows in accusation.

Dr. Jenkins chuckled as he reached into his bag, “Ah, yes. Here they are. Would you consider a trade?” Gerhard scanned the drawings in question, and took them. He flipped through them to assure that Dr. Jenkins had indeed returned all of them from the previous session, then handed him the new ones.

This was an exchange they had made many times before. The binder itself was Dr. Jenkins’ idea. His intention was to give Gerhard a time and place for fantasy, so he could separate it out from reality. He never imagined the sheer volume such a tactic would yield. Twice a week, at the end of each session, Dr. Jenkins would take Gerhard’s new drawings, photocopy them, and return the originals back to the artist’s care. Dr. Jenkins allowed Gerhard to keep talking about the new pieces for the remainder of their session.

“Oh my, Gerhard,” Dr. Jenkins looked at his watch. “I am afraid our time has come to an end today. Will you allow me to speak to you this Tuesday?”

“What choice do I have, Jenkies?” Gerhard smiled, “I can’t let you swipe my drawings. I’m gonna need those back.”

Gerhard watched as Dr. Jenkins took down the various photos and clippings and placed them into the folders. He opened his mouth to speak, but then fell silent. Dr. Jenkins noticed. “What is it, Gerhard?”

“I just...if he really did all of those things, why would he do so many bad things?” Gerhard rubbed his thumb into his palm nervously.

“Gerhard, you can never really know why anyone does anything, besides yourself. Sometimes it is even difficult to discern *that*. It is a very small world, when you get right down to it. Every one is connected, and sometimes we underestimate the long-reaching implications of our actions. Our lives are a crisscrossed network of paths, and if we are lucky, our paths cross with those that will help move us forward in life.” Dr. Jenkins loaded the last folder into his bag and zipped it up, as if to punctuate his statement.

“Is that what you’re doing here? Crossing our paths to do me some good?” Gerhard knew what the answer would be, but needed to hear it.

“If you let me, Gerhard.” Dr. Jenkins replaced his hat and coat, and gave Gerhard one of his famous winks before strolling out the door. Gerhard hugged his binder close to him as Dr. Jenkins made his way down the front steps of the Williams Hope Academy. He climbed into his car and checked the mirror, taking comfort in the knowledge that he was not the only one that felt warm inside.



Gerhard had been a resident at the Williams Hope Academy for nearly six months. To Gerhard, resident was a nice way of saying crazy orphan. He was placed there following a police standoff, during which he watched his captor get shot several times. He could recall this event in his mind clearly, but everything prior to that incident was

fuzzy at best. These fuzzy memories featured Gerhard as the prince of a faraway land, with his father a great king.

During his residence, five different therapists had attempted to work with Gerhard, piecing together the fragments of his mind. Two had dropped his case after being attacked by the boy, the other three had quit after being pushed to their limits. One of these was a colleague of Dr. Jenkins, who in turn became fascinated with the boy's case.

Initially Gerhard found his new doctor as intolerable as the others, but Dr. Jenkins soon won his respect by actually listening to the boy's claims. Instead of summarily and flatly dismissing them, he would research the claims exhaustively and bring in contrary evidence. Dr. Jenkins had even persuaded Gerhard to participate in the visual arts workshop, hoping it would provide additional opportunities as a creative outlet. Miss Lister, a former resident of the Academy who was in the process of getting her teaching certification, conducted the sessions. While it provided brief moments of escape, reality had a tendency to crash back down on him, and always when he was least prepared.

Gerhard worked hard to move forward, but few of his fellow residents had forgotten the claims he had made when he first arrived. Kids could be cruel, and there was no shortage of this in a home for those that were "troubled".

"Hey freak! Oh, I'm sorry, *your majesty*. What's that supposed to be?" Gerhard squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw for a moment before looking up at the source of the nasty comment.

"We're supposed to be working, Luke." Gerhard looked up and met the gaze of the boy who had punched him in the eye days before. As he glared at the much larger boy with the freckled face and spiked, blonde hair he felt his fingers crawl around the edge of his pencil and gripped it tight. His knuckles turned white.

Luke snatched the drawing Gerhard was working on out from under his arms. “What is this?! A monster all chained down? You really are a freak!” Luke had never been the most pleasant resident at the academy, and Gerhard had fallen onto his radar as an easy target. The problem was that Gerhard had a tendency to make matters worse.

Gerhard stood up, his sneer peeled into a smirk. “I’m sorry Luke. Does it remind you of the chains your daddy smacked you with before he blew his brains out?”

The flash of colors was first accompanied by silence, then a chorus of mumbles filtered into his ears. This was not the first time he had been punched in the face. Slowly, Gerhard opened his eyes. His face was pressed against the glass of the window that had been behind him. His vision was still blurred, and he looked out as he tried to focus. Nearly twenty feet away, in the midst of gold and brown leaves that covered the ground, a figure stood.

It was definitely woman-shaped, but did not look entirely human. She (if it was a she) looked as though her skin was encased in a brilliant red metal. Gold metallic wings flanked the sides of her head, as well as her ankles. A small clasp held a tiny cape in place, and she firmly held a golden-winged staff in one hand. Gerhard had only a second to take it in, because in the moment he brought her into focus, a flurry of leaves marked her departure.

As the echo of murmurs stabilized into discernible words, Gerhard grunted and realized only seconds had passed since he had received Luke’s well-deserved punch. He saw out of the corner of his eye that Luke was flailing his arms as an orderly struggled to restrain him, and took him out of the room.

He could not make out his words exactly, but it was obvious that Luke was not finished with him. Gerhard’s nose was bleeding, and he felt hands beneath his arms helping him to his feet. He shut his eyes and shook his head in an effort to rid it of the metallic red figure he

had just seen, and he looked at the person helping him to his feet, Miss Lister.

Although he had been unable to bond with any of his peers, he felt an unusual connection to Miss Lister. She was pretty, Gerhard would often think, and he was unaccustomed to being this close to her. Her sleek, black hair framed her face in a playful, chin-length bob. This stood in stark contrast to her heavily made-up eyes and glossy red lips, which made it difficult to notice that her nose was just a little large for her face.

Unlike the actual teachers and staff members there, who wore khaki pants and polo shirts with the Academy's logo emblazoned on it, Miss Lister wore a variety of long skirts with long-sleeved tee shirts that featured bands Gerhard had never heard of. Invariably, both were black and topped a pair of matching ankle-high combat boots.

"I can't believe you said such an awful thing, Gerhard." He looked into her disappointed eyes and felt genuinely sorry. She handed him a small towel, and he pressed it to his nose.

"I know. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry I acted like that in here." His words were heartfelt. Like Dr. Jenkins, Miss Lister had never once been mean or hurtful to him.

"Are you okay?" A smile took its place on the edge of those bright red lips. Gerhard nodded in relief. She stood and turned around. "Alright everybody, there were only a few minutes left anyway, we'll meet back here at the usual time on Tuesday. Make sure if you borrowed any supplies they go back in the cabinet, and please..." Gerhard tuned out her words as he thought about the metallic red figure again. He gathered up his sketches.

He had seen it, he was sure. He looked back out the window. *But*, he thought, *crazy people are sure they see things all the time when they're not actually there, and I'm definitely crazy. But crazy people don't believe they're crazy. If I believe I'm crazy, does that make me sane?* This thought had occurred

to him before, but it resulted in little more than a headache. He wondered whether or not he should tell Dr. Jenkins.

“You should tell him,” Miss Lister’s voice cut through the static of his mind. He realized he was the only resident still in the room as his teacher ran around picking up any leftover messes. The shared room hosted many different activities throughout the week.

“What?” Gerhard asked, worried that he had been thinking out loud.

“You should tell him. Luke. You should tell him you’re sorry.” Miss Lister was gathering her belongings into a little backpack. It was black, of course. “Take care, Gerhard.” As she left, he looked around at the empty classroom. He inhaled, and gathered his things as he walked to the door. He noticed the drawing he had been working on had been placed on the edge of Miss Lister’s desk. He picked it up and looked at it. It was as if the dead white eyes on the chained figure were looking directly at him. The chains were all shapes and sizes, and the scary, black, tar-covered figure they restrained looked impossibly powerful. Gerhard shuddered, and shoved the sketch into his blue binder.



As time went by, Gerhard took some satisfaction in having a routine. A routine helped his life make sense. Sleeping, eating, and going to school in the same place made it easy for life to feel surreal. He had a hard enough time staying grounded in the real world as it was.

He had not been in a fight for weeks, and his grades were much better than they had been. His sessions with Dr. Jenkins were going well, and he was learning a lot in his art workshops; they had become the highlight of his week.

His worlds seemed to collide one day as he went in to his therapy

session and saw both Dr. Jenkins and Miss Lister talking to one another. Dr. Jenkins smiled at Gerhard and motioned to a chair. Gerhard slumped into it. He could tell they had been talking for a while, and he felt his cheeks become hot with anger.

How dare he, he thought, *she is the one person in this whole stupid place that treats me like a human, and now he's ruining everything.* Tears welled in his eyes as he struggled to keep his lip from quivering. His heart pounded. Dr. Jenkins looked over at his favorite patient to give him the usual reassuring wink, and was shocked to see the boy shaking.

“Gerhard, are you alright? What seems to be the prob—”

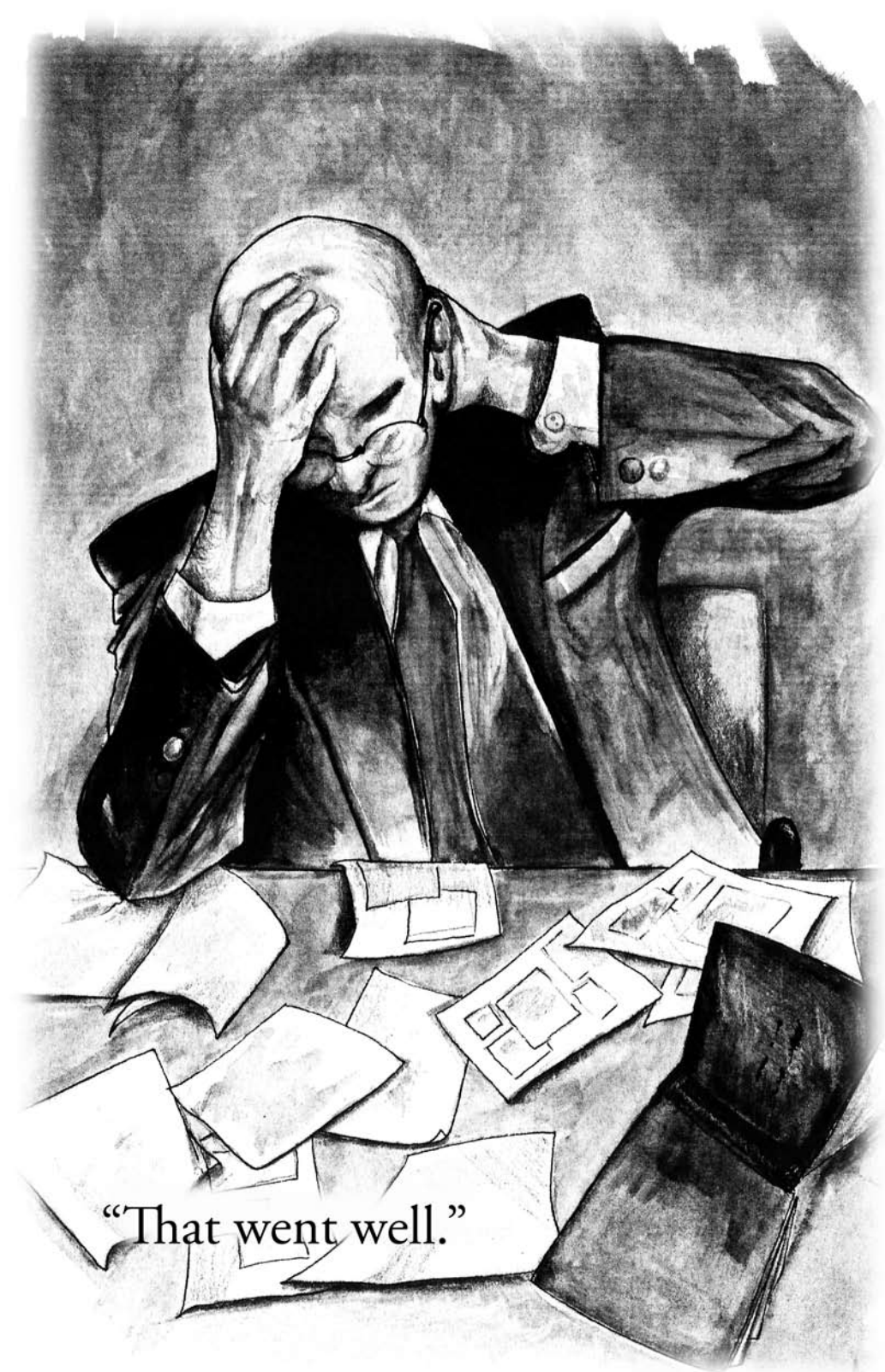
An angrily thrown binder cut off Dr. Jenkins' question. It caught him in the center of his face, knocking his glasses crooked as hundreds of sheets of paper flew in every direction. Gerhard ran out of the room and slammed the door as the sheets drifted to the floor.

Dr. Jenkins straightened his glasses and placed his palm against his forehead. He inhaled. “That went well.” He gritted his teeth and sighed, and he sat in the chair intended for Gerhard.

Gerhard ran. He ran down the hall, out a side door, and across the yard on the south side of the academy toward the tree line. As he ran, the cold autumn air hit his face. He could feel a chill where each tear had streaked his cheeks. He had never been so angry. Angry at Dr. Jenkins, angry at himself for crying over the whole thing, angry at Miss Lister for listening to whatever Dr. Jenkins told her. As his legs slowed, and anger gave way to exhaustion, he fell down on the leafy ground. Over his shoulder the Academy still loomed large, and his head drooped in defeat.

He took a deep breath, and rubbed the edges of his eyes to clear any remaining evidence of the tearful episode. He raised his head and looked forward into the trees, and wondered how deep he could run into them.

After mulling it over for a moment, he shook his head. He knew



"That went well."

something was wrong with him, and he needed to stay here. He craned his head around and looked at the Academy as he sighed.

Feeling a strange and sudden awareness, Gerhard turned back to the woods and saw her again. This time she was looking at him, and even though the metallic red and gold figure stood quite a distance away, he could see her more clearly this time. Even amongst the shines and highly polished reflections, her facial expression was discernible as stoic, and her gaze was fixed on him. She pointed at him with her finger, and then lifted it to her lips as if requesting his silence. He squeezed his eyes shut to make her go away.

“Gerhard,” came a voice from behind him, as a hand clamped down on his shoulder. He screamed and spun around to face his fear, but saw Miss Lister instead. She crouched down with his blue binder in hand. All of his drawings were back inside of it. Her lips tightened as she raised a shapely dark eyebrow. His head spun back to the woods and confirmed, yes, the red and gold lady was gone. He wanted to ask her if she saw it too, but knew that would be a step in the wrong direction. That would mean he believed it existed in the first place, and he knew it most certainly did not. He focused his attention back to Miss Lister, and felt his indignation return as he stared her down.

“What?” he sneered. “Shouldn’t you and the good doctor be discussing what a freak I am?”

Miss Lister was perplexed. “What are you talking about? I just dropped by to turn my syllabus in to the office for next semester’s workshops when I saw Dr. Jenkins waiting in one of the rooms. I had no idea he had been visiting. I know him from way back. We were catching up when you came in and had your meltdown. What’s your deal anyway, man? Dr. Jenkins is a really nice guy. What did he do to you?”

Desperately Gerhard wanted to crawl into the deepest hole he

could find. They had not been talking about him at all. His rage was instantly turned inside out into a burning shame.

“Whoa,” he said. “I suck. I...I thought maybe he had called you in or something. He had told me I should take the art workshops and when I saw you two I thought that,” he winced, “I think I kind of overreacted.”

“You think so?” she half-smiled, punctuating the question with wide eyes and a playful head tilt.

“I should probably go apologize,” Gerhard grunted as he rose to his feet.

“He’s already gone. Sorry, guy. Don’t worry, he’ll be back for your appointment next week, but he said he needed to purchase a shield or something first.” Gerhard laughed, shaking his head. He knew that getting Dr. Jenkins’ forgiveness was going to be much easier than he deserved.

“Miss Lister,” Gerhard started, unsure how to ask, “so Jenkies is like, an old friend of yours?”

She puckered her lips while her large dark eyes moved up and over, as if the answer to his question was hidden in the air beside her.

“Hmm. I would certainly say he’s a friend now. At first, though, I was just some nutty girl lucky enough to be taken on as his patient. He helped me, and actually treated me like a human no matter what I threw at him. Not that I literally threw things at him, mind you,” she smiled. “No matter what crazy things I said I believed, he always listened” Gerhard stared at her in slack-jawed disbelief.

“But Miss Lister,” he was so shocked. She had to be making it up.

“Tell ya what, we’re not in class right now. How about you call me Bliss.”

“Bliss?” His face seemed to disapprove. “That’s your name? That’s kind of weird”

“Weird? This from a kid named Gerhard who throws notebooks

at nice people's faces and pouts in a pile of crispy leaves? There are slugs in there, you know?" Gerhard smiled.

She inhaled and spoke quickly as if she had memorized the explanation she was about to give. "My real name's Belinda, and my college's IDs have everyone's first initial and first three letters of the last name with a student number, so mine said BLIS in big black letters. We wore them on campus, and people started calling me that. I thought it sounded better than Belinda. Besides, I think I was ready to kind of start over. New name, new attitude, all that good stuff."

"Okay, okay, I'll call you Bliss. I just feel kind of weird calling a teacher by their first name."

"Hey that's cool. But I'm not actually a certified teacher yet, and we've already established that it isn't really my first name," she nodded matter-of-factly. She had him there. "But in the classroom we will still follow the formal nomenclature."

"The what?" he shook his head and curled his lip on one side.

"Call me Miss Lister when you're in class, smart guy."

"Oh." Gerhard thought for a moment. "Bliss," he said, trying it out, "you seem so...normal. Why were you meeting with Dr. Jenkins in the first place? I...I just can't imagine you needing to do that."

"Gerhard, will you promise not to tell anybody else what I'm about to tell you?" He nodded in wide-eyed consent. "I've worked really hard to be where I am now, but I think you're a good enough friend to not go blabbing about Batty Belinda."

"I won't tell anybody," he said, turning the word *friend* over in his mind. He felt warm inside. She handed him his binder, and she thought for a moment.

"I loved my grandmother very much," she started, "My parents died when I was very young, so she raised me. She always told the greatest stories. I would sit and listen for hours by the fireplace as she read from an old leather-bound storybook. My favorite stories were

about a character called the Magician. He was an ancient warrior who tricked and defeated a god of light and a god of darkness, and took their power.

“Their power, however, was accompanied by their knowledge. Because of that, this great warrior-king had accidentally become the wisest being the world had ever known. He had earthly knowledge, as well as the knowledge of dark things and light things.”

“Hmph. That’s pretty cool. What happened to him?”

“Well, in the story, things apparently got out of hand. The short version is that he sacrificed himself trying to make things right again, save humanity, y’know, all that stuff. The stories stopped being fun though, because one day my grandmother snapped.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gerhard.

“I was about ten, I guess. She came into my room one night while I was sleeping. I woke up to see her crying, and felt the cold blade of a knife being held to my neck. She kept saying lots of weird things about my destiny, and how I was an abomination and a monster. I started crying too, I was scared. When she opened her eyes and saw that I was crying, her grip loosened and the knife fell to the floor. She took me into her arms and said she wouldn’t do it again, and that she was sorry.

“She did other stuff, though. Sometimes she would say that the Magician had been real, that she served the dark ones, sometimes she would talk about how my father was a great vampire lord in another invisible world, descended from the royal bloodlines of the pharaohs.” Bliss furrowed her brow, “I mean, what was I supposed to do with this information? I was ten! She home-schooled me, and would make me memorize all of these weird mythologies like they were...I don’t know...baseball statistics or something.

“If I got something wrong, especially about my supposed bloodline, she would cut me with a small razor on my arm or leg,” she

stretched her leg out of her skirt to show Gerhard a huge crisscrossing network of faded scars. He gasped.

“One day, when I was about thirteen, I ran out to the mailbox, the only thing I ever really left the house for since she had trouble walking, and a guy on a bicycle crashed into me. I was bleeding pretty badly, and the guy who hit me started yelling for help. A neighbor ran outside and offered to call an ambulance. Well, the ambulance came and picked the both of us up. It didn’t take very long for the police and social services to get involved once they saw my legs and arms. I mean, falling down the stairs can only explain so much, right?” She shrugged.

“Anyway, before we knew it, she went to a loony bin for old people, and I got sent over here. Best thing that could have happened.”

“So you got here and came to terms with reality and weren’t a freak anymore, right?” Gerhard said, forwarding the story to what he assumed to be its obvious conclusion.

“Oh, no, no, no! I was so angry when I first got here!” Her eyes narrowed, “I told everyone I met that I was a dark vampire queen and would probably destroy the world. Strangely enough, I got a couple of friends out of it. I continued to cut myself, we would sneak off and smoke when nobody was looking, we all dressed in black and listened to angry music.”

“You dress all in black now,” Gerhard interjected.

“Hey, I look really good in black. There’s nothing wrong with finding a look that works even if you’re all nutsy in the head at the time.”

“Sorry. So what changed things?”

“Well, both of my friends killed themselves, then everyone started watching me, expecting that I would want to do the same. Specialist after specialist came in, and they all just gave up, like I was a lost cause. I guess what my grandmother did wasn’t all that easy to undo. At some point, Dr. Jenkins heard about my case, through a confer-

ence or something. We met for nearly two years; he even wrote a book detailing my case. All four years of my schooling is already paid in full because of that book. He listened to me, and he walked me out of the damage my grandmother had done, step-by-step. I don't know what it is that you're going through, but I'm sure he'll be able to do the same for you." Bliss smiled and rubbed Gerhard on the shoulder.

"Did you ever see your grandma again?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"Last year, right before she died, I got up the courage to visit her; Dr. Jenkins actually set the meeting up for me, said it would help to have closure. She was completely out of it; she stared into space as if she was already gone. I kissed her on the forehead and told her I forgave her. As I walked out she slowly turned and said something as I was leaving."

"What did she say?" had Gerhard been on a seat, he would have been on the edge of it.

"Don't know, don't care. She was crazy, but that doesn't mean I have to be." Bliss stood up. "Look, any time you want to talk, let me know." Her face became stern, "But if you ever throw something at my face, I'll kick your scrawny little tail." He smiled as she helped him back to his feet, and they walked back toward the Academy.

"So, I can be normal too?" Gerhard looked at Bliss hopefully.

"Dude, trust me, being normal is exhausting. Be yourself. Nobody normal ever did anything phenomenal. Where's the fun in that? We freaks are the ones who change the world." For the first time, the word *freak* seemed more an honor than a curse, and Gerhard smiled.



A week later, Gerhard took a deep breath before he entered the room for his session with Dr. Jenkins. He reached into his jacket

pocket and felt the edge of the apology card he had made as he walked in. The room was dark. He could barely make out a figure sitting on the far side of the room.

“Come in, Gerhard,” came a muffled voice; Gerhard’s heart pounded as he reached over and flipped on the light. He looked over to see that it was indeed Dr. Jenkins, but he was wearing a scuffed up yellow motorcycle helmet with the visor down. The helmet cocked to the side as he stood. A familiar hand extended to offer him his seat.

Gerhard laughed, but stopped abruptly. He ran across the room and grabbed the doctor around his middle. He squeezed him with all of his might.

“I’m so sorry, Jenkies,” he pressed his face into his chest hard enough to feel the pointed edge of his tiepin. Dr. Jenkins placed his palm on the top of Gerhard’s head and rubbed it in forgiveness. Gerhard sniffed deep as he slumped into his favorite chair. Dr. Jenkins removed the helmet, revealing his reassuring smile.

Gerhard looked up to the usual assembly of pictures on the wall. “Joachim somehow messed up my head. I don’t know if I’ll ever figure out exactly what happened to me, and I hope the crazy stuff in my head eventually gets replaced with the real memories.”

Dr. Jenkins thought for a moment. “You know, Gerhard, sometimes the mind creates a reality to deal with really, really terrible things.”

“Well, whether or not I get to find out what I used to be, I know what I want to be from here on out.”

“And what is that, Gerhard?” Dr. Jenkins was surprised by each word that emerged from his patient’s mouth.

“The kind of freak that changes the course of the world,” he beamed, holding his head up in smug satisfaction. “And one other thing, Jenkies,” he said looking over at the wall. “One day, I want to go talk to that guy, and forgive him.”

“That is wonderful. I think that would be most appropriate, one day,” Dr. Jenkins nodded.

“Where is he anyway?” Gerhard asked.

“Oh, not to worry. He is actually in a very nice place, all things considered. What matters is that he is in a place where he will not be hurting himself or anyone else for a long time.”

“Good,” Gerhard said, and knew that all was right with the world.

chapter two



the locket

Chuck Moss was not a pleasant man. His unkempt mustache did its best to hide a mouthful of chunky yellow teeth. His belt-overlapping belly and alcohol-tinged breath gave a glimpse into his social tendencies. Were it not for his criminal record, he might have been a high-way patrolman. Instead, he was a security guard at the St. Benedict Institution for Mental Wellness. Chuck had been watching the monitors and sipping scotch from a metal thermos when Joe, his partner for tonight, returned from his midnight round to the guard desk.

Joe slid into his chair and yawned. “All of the nuts are tucked in and good. Except that one lady who keeps counting, and Joachim, of course.”

“Oh yeah? How many times we gotta drug that guy?” Chuck stood up and pulled up at the back of his belt with a grunt. “Maybe I should do one more round, huh?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Don’t do anything stupid. If you get fired I’m not sticking up for you.” Chuck flashed him an ugly smile as he slid on his hat and grabbed the master key ring.

Chuck walked down the dim west corridor. The building itself was over a hundred years old, and the concrete walls and steel doors gave no evidence to the contrary. Passing door after door, he looked through the small square windows into each room. Finally he arrived at the one he had been looking forward to. He fished for the right

key and slid it into the lock. He swung the door open and stepped into the ten by ten foot space claiming to be a room. A small grated window to the outside let moonlight sift onto a figure that sat on the edge of the bed. His hulking frame was rendered inert by a straitjacket reinforced with steel cables; thick leather straps attached his feet to one another. He glared forward at the wall, paying no attention to the security guard as he entered. A number of bruises indicated this was not the first time Chuck had visited.

“Didn’t ya get the memo? It’s bedtime, boy!” Chuck gripped his buckle with both hands. Joachim continued to stare ahead blankly. Chuck’s face turned sour as he leaned close to Joachim’s ear. “I said, how ‘bout you lay down and call it a night.” Chuck’s face twisted into an angry smile. “That’s what I love about you and your cop-beatin’ self,” he chuckled as he popped his knuckles in his open palm, “you never do as you’re told.”

With a sickening smack, he slugged Joachim across the left side of his face. The impact knocked Joachim off-balance slightly, but he settled slowly back into his starting position, still staring forward. Chuck squeezed his hand and rubbed his fist in preparation for the next punch, but then he thought about what Joe had said. He looked to the camera in the corner of the room. He walked over and turned it toward the window. He produced a small silver lighter and lit a cigarette.

Chuck stepped back toward Joachim, taking a drag and blowing it into his face. “I hate to do this, you know. You’re really bringin’ this on yourself.” The orange tip of the cigarette illuminated his face with a sinister red glow, “This is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you.”

“That is true,” Joachim said, and locked eyes with Chuck. His voice was deep and steady.

Back at the front desk, Joe poured his third cup of coffee casually. He watched the brown stream with gratitude and admiration as

it filled his mug. The late shifts were not so bad, but working with Chuck was so exhausting he could not help but love the coffee pot for making his night endurable. He strolled back over to the guard desk and looked at the monitors. A few had continuous feeds, but most rotated through a number of rooms networked to it. He noticed one of the screens was scrolling through a number of sleeping patients, but kept showing a shot of a window. He pressed a button beneath the monitor to stop it on the one feed and sighed.

“Chuck, I don’t have time for this garbage.” Joe cradled his cup in both hands and walked to the west corridor. He saw the large steel door of Joachim’s room swung open wide. Something was laying half out of the doorway. Joe gritted his teeth and moved faster as he yelled down the hall. “Chuck! Leave him alone, man. Don’t...” his voice trailed off as he realized it was Chuck in the doorway, unconscious and facing up. His nose and mouth were covered in blood.

Joe looked into the doorway where Joachim sat calmly, facing forward, staring at the wall. “You left him alive, right?” Joe pressed his fingers against Chuck’s neck and found his pulse. He pulled him into the hallway and removed the keys from his coworker’s pocket.

He walked in and returned the camera to its normal position, then gripped the proper key and began to close the door. He looked in at Joachim. “I know you’re not going to say anything, but for what it’s worth, thanks.” He then slid the door shut and locked it, stepped over Chuck, and walked back to the desk.

Chuck woke up about an hour later. He raised his fingertips toward his face, and felt the dried blood. He stood up and felt for the keys, but they were not there. His head throbbed as he looked across the floor for them. He was afraid that the prisoner had gotten them and escaped, but a peek into the window of the locked door confirmed this was not the case. There was no glass in the window, just a mesh metal grating. There was Joachim, the same as usual, staring forward

"This is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you."

"That is true."



angrily. Chuck felt the handle of the baton at his side, and wondered if payback was worth his job. Before he could weigh the decision too seriously, he heard footsteps coming down the hall. It was Natalia.

Natalia Wood worked the early morning shifts. Chuck looked at his watch. It was only 3:00 AM. She should not have been in for another couple of hours. He remembered his appearance. He scrubbed his face hard to get rid of the blood, and held his hat in place over the red spot beneath his collar. She had only worked there a few months, so he did not know if she was the kind of person who would report this sort of an infraction to his superiors.

“Chuck,” she called out with the husky voice of a lifelong smoker. Her reddish hair was tightly pulled into a ponytail. Her square frame was not delicate in the least; she certainly looked the part of an officer. She did not wear much makeup, and what little she did wear was uneven and out of place. “Checking in on our favorite patient?”

He looked guilty, but she did not seem to notice at all. He looked through the window at Joachim, and saw that this time he was looking toward the window at him. His jaw was clenched. Natalia removed a small watch from her pocket and frowned at it.

“Well, I’ll be in at 5:00 for my shift. See you later.” As she walked away, Chuck breathed a deep sigh of relief. Had he not been so pre-occupied with his own actions, he might have found this encounter odd. Instead, Joachim’s returned glance took center stage in his mind.

“I finally got your attention, huh?” he asked, stepping to the window.

Joachim’s lips parted. “I advise you to open your eyes to the forces of Darkness that fill this building. Your kind are always the first to fall,” he said, in clear, measured tones.

“My kind? Boy, I wasn’t ready for that little sucker-punch head-butt move you pulled earlier, but I got a mind to show you what my kind is. You don’t know me for nothin’,” he fumed.

“But I do. You are a failure and a coward. You drink too much and you hit your wife. You do it because your father did the same. You swore you would never be like him. Too bad your word is as worthless as you are.”

Chuck was frozen. Tears filled his eyes. “How are you doing this?” he was sweating, his pulse raced.

“You must beware of the Darkness,” Joachim said.

“SHUT UP!! JUST SHUT UP!” Chuck banged his club against the door and ran down the hall. He stepped into a bathroom and pulled a cigarette out of his pocket shakily. He felt his pants pocket for the lighter, but it was gone. He threw the cigarette onto the ancient tile floor and leaned forward onto the sink as he looked into the mirror. He had not looked into any mirror in a long time.

Joachim leaned the side of his head against the concrete wall. A voice came from the other side through a small crack. “I told you he’d never help.” The voice belonged to Leonard, another patient who occupied the next room. He swore to help Joachim in any way he could, and believed every word he had ever said.

He knew Joachim needed to retrieve a special key before the agents of Darkness used it to plunge the world into oblivion. He wanted to help Joachim do this. He also wanted to build a bicycle made of ice cream.

“Well,” Leonard started again, “I got you the info you wanted, so now you have to tell me about the key. A deal’s a deal.”

Joachim whispered into the hole. He was always worried about others hearing his words. “There is little to tell. The key is small and shines and is marked with sacred symbols and seems insignificant. Our fates are all connected...” his words trailed off. Even though he was given his dose hours ago, the drugs were taking effect finally.

“The end’s coming, huh? Do you know where the key’s at if you get out of here?” Leonard was concerned.

“No...hopefully no one has figured out...that...” his eyes rolled into their lids as sleep took him.



Nearly 2000 miles away, Reverend Damon Harris looked over the church full of empty pews, recalling the small symphony of chatter that had filled the chapel nearly twenty minutes before. He was contemplative; he furrowed his brow as he reached past his green satin robe into his shirt pocket and produced a small golden locket. The chain dangled as his thumb stroked the engraved markings on its face.

He wondered to himself if he was foolish for keeping it, as if letting it go could release him, after these many years. His chest felt shaky, and he may have been on the edge of crying, but this feeling vanished when he heard a noise behind him in the hall. He turned his tall frame to see a familiar face. Creases appeared beside his eyes as he smiled.

Quickly Reverend Harris shoved the locket back into its normal hiding place, and walked toward the girl, “Ready to get on with the day, Aurora?” The two figures could not have been more different. The Reverend was in his early thirties, tall, thin, and tan; his dark eyes and thick eyebrows always seemed to be focused on something. His black, neatly groomed hair was beginning to recede, which served him well; it helped him look a little more approachable.

Aurora, on the other hand, was a young teenage girl with pale skin and blonde shoulder length hair. Her light brown eyes were incapable of staying still for more than a moment, darting around frequently, and full of wonder at the smallest things. It was rare to see her without a smile, as if she had been listening to a song that had just gotten to her favorite part.

“Alright, let’s go home,” Reverend Harris patted the pockets beneath his robe. Aurora raised her eyebrows above widened eyes and tilted her head. She lifted her hand with a jangle as she held up his keys proudly. He looked at them and winced. “I left them in the door again, didn’t I?” She nodded consolingly as he took them and he knocked on his head as if it were empty. He sighed. He locked the wooden exterior doors of the simple stone church, and they walked to the only car left in the parking lot, a square grey station wagon.

After dinner, Aurora thanked the Reverend, went to her room and closed the door quietly. He sat there, alone at the table, and contemplated his situation. She was a runaway, he knew that much, he also knew it was inappropriate to let a teenage girl live with him; the parishioners had already started to talk. He thought back to the first time they met.

It had been nearly a year ago, and on a Sunday, no less. He had spoken that day about the parable of the Good Samaritan, how one must always help those in need. His chapel had long been empty, and he felt the burden of his own emptiness weighing on his heart. His eyes welled up with tears as he looked to the front of the room and fell to his knees.

“Why, Lord? Why did you take them from me? They were all I had. I’ve tried hard. I want to do as you tell me, but it’s too much. Please...I’m not strong enough, not for myself, not for my congregation.” He glanced up at a stained-glass window, the figure in the colored pieces felt far away. “So much has been taken. Please, Lord, give me something to live for,” he sobbed. Almost in answer, the exterior door slammed. The hollow echo reverberated throughout the building.

He ran to the hallway and found a girl with blonde hair. She was naked, shaking, ready to collapse. What looked like suds were clinging to her body. She reached forward with one hand toward the rever-

end. She was wild-eyed, and could hardly breathe, “Help me...” she gasped, falling forward in a broken heap. He snatched his trench coat from the rack nearby, and wrapped her in it as he carried her into his small office.

He placed her on the small couch across from his desk; he reached to test her pulse, but pulled his hand back when he saw that she was breathing. He sighed in relief and picked up the phone. He called the police, and looked out the window as he relayed the scenario that had just played out. He turned to see the girl had sat upright and was clutching the coat around her tightly, as if she were freezing. She looked at him intently for a moment, almost in judgment, and then looked at the phone fearfully.

“Oh don’t worry. The police will be here soon, they’ll take care of you,” he said. She looked terrified.

“Help me,” she repeated, and reached toward the reverend as he rubbed his head. He clasped her hand in both of his, and eased it down.

“I...I am,” he said, and offered a reassuring smile. “Good people are coming, they’ll take you home, and make sure whoever’s looking for you can find you.” The girl screamed. She ran from his office and down the hall into the chapel. He entered. She had stopped in the center, facing the front of the room, frozen in place. He approached her and noticed blood on her neck. Her gaze remained locked on him as he maneuvered to her front and lifted her hair to reveal four tiny holes, each spaced an inch or so apart. He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and placed it in her hand. He lifted it into place on her neck. “Just keep pressure on it, okay?” She did not look away from him. She was afraid, clearly, but she stared at him as if he had wronged her somehow.

He struggled to find the right words, “Did somebody hurt you?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. She looked away from him, ready to cry.

She turned her face away from his. Her lip quivered. "Where are you from?" he asked, trying to offer a better question. Her finger extended and she pointed to the front of the chapel. "That way, huh?" he asked, jerking his thumb in the same direction. "You know, I live out that way too. Maybe we're neighbors." Her eyes softened and the edge of her lip slowly curled upward.

He felt he was making some progress. "Where are your parents?" he asked. She looked confused by this question; she shook her head and looked down. He sighed. This was, unfortunately, starting to make sense. "You don't want the police involved, because your ... I see. You think that if the police get involved that you'll just go back, and that would be bad." He lifted her chin up with his thumb and forefinger. "You're afraid that someone is going to hurt you." He lifted the handkerchief for a moment to inspect the bloody spot on her neck.

"Please. Help me. Protect me," she said.

A knock came at the door. "They're here. Don't worry, nothing bad will happen to you," he cringed as he watched tears fill her eyes. Two tears fell simultaneously, one on each side. He made his way to the door, but stopped. He felt as if he was about to betray her, but that was silly. He shook his head and opened the door to an older gentleman in a brown, wide-brimmed hat and gray uniform.

"Hey, rev'ren," the sheriff remarked, he removed his hat as he stepped into the building. "So, we got a runaway girl on our hands, huh? We haven't had any reports of a missing person that fits your description, but it's early yet," he wheezed a laugh, and pushed his large glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "So, where's the young lady?"

Reverend Harris walked the sheriff into the chapel, but she was nowhere to be found. They searched each room and closet, but found nothing.

“Sorry, rev’reen, looks like your runaway done did it again,” the sheriff said. “If she comes back, you know my number.” He looked around himself for a moment as he opened the door. “So, bein’ a priest, is that hard? I mean, being married to the church and all? You’re a young fella, I couldn’t imagine not bein’ able to get married.”

“Priests within our faith may marry,” Reverend Harris sighed.

“Well why haven’t you then?” the sheriff asked. He winked as he prodded him with an elbow.

He could feel his heart pounding. “I was married once, my wife passed away years ago,” Reverend Harris said, trying to say it in a way that would not make the sheriff feel bad.

It did not work. “I’m sorry about that, rev’reen, I didn’t mean to any offense,” he looked embarrassed.

“No, no, none taken. I know what you were trying to say.” He smiled warmly as the sheriff replaced his hat and walked through the door.

“Call me if she comes back, but she prob’ly won’t.” Reverend Harris closed the door, and fell with his back against it. He slid down the door, and squeezed his eyes tight to hold back the tears. He wished he were stronger. As he sobbed he felt something soft push against his hand, and opened his eyes to see the girl standing above him, returning his handkerchief. She was still wearing his coat, but she had also assembled a somewhat familiar ensemble that included a sundress, mismatched tube socks with yellow sandals, and a floppy tan beach hat. The reverend recognized them from the bin in the back.

These clothes were intended for those in need, and she certainly qualified. As he wiped his eyes with the bloodstained cloth, he thought about how all prayers are answered, but rarely in the way anyone expects. He struggled to his feet, resolving to be a better person. This girl needed his help; he just needed to figure out how to be able to do that.

That night, he took her to his cluttered home. Magazines and books, fast food wrappers of every kind littered every flat surface in every room. “This is just temporary, you know, until we can figure this out,” he said. She smiled at him as he imagined an angel would, and he was happy to gain something positive in his life, for a change. She sat upon his worn out recliner with her hands clasped. Any terror on her face had long since vanished into curious wonder as she looked around the room.

Reverend Harris walked into the kitchen, and noticed an open bottle from the night before. He grabbed it by the neck and tipped the bottom up above the sink, and watched the amber liquid circle the drain. He glanced over to a framed photo hanging crooked on the wall. He was in the photo, though a few years younger. A petite, beautiful blonde woman stood by his side. Their smiles were unmistakably genuine. He stared at the lady in the picture lovingly.

“You’d help her, wouldn’t you? Yeah, I know what you’d do. You wouldn’t have hesitated for a moment.” He placed the bottle onto an overflowing garbage can, and sighed. He walked over to the photo and straightened it out. “I won’t forget the man I’m supposed to be, not anymore.”

He walked back into the living room with a renewed sense of purpose. The girl looked at him with a pleasant smile. “Okay,” he said, “I’m gonna clean up this mess, and I’ve got an extra bedroom you can sleep in, but just for tonight. In the morning, we’ll figure this all out.” He crouched down in front of the sitting girl, and clasped her small hands in his. “I promise you’ll be safe here. I’ll keep you safe, and tomorrow we’ll work it all out. Now, what’s your name?” She appeared to think for a moment and then leaned forward, as if to tell a great secret.

“My name is Aurora,” she glanced about as if someone else might have been listening.

“Well my name is Damon Harris, but you can call me Reverend Harris. I’m sorry the house is such a mess, but I’ll get to cleaning it. How about you make yourself at home and I’ll go out and get a bucket of chicken or something.” He scooped up his keys and grabbed a box of big black trash bags from a cabinet. Aurora watched as he shoved a handful of papers and wrappers into a bag decisively. “Aaah, I’ll take care of that when I get back. Are you okay to stay here?” She nodded.

When he returned, burger bags in hand, Aurora was standing by the door excitedly. He shook his head in disbelief as he entered, facing several full trash bags. He scanned the room in confusion. Each surface had been cleaned and wiped off, magazines and books were stacked neatly upon the shelves and mantle. Aurora held a small wet rag in her hand.

The reverend watched as Aurora approached her small burger in awe. She crammed each bite into her mouth before she finished the previous one; her cheeks bulged as she attempted a smile. “You like that, do you?” he asked. He smiled as he sipped his soda through a straw.

“I’m a fan, too. Is that your first burger, or something?” She nodded, clutching the remainder of the partially wrapped hamburger in her hand. “Wow, I wonder what it’d be like to eat a burger for the very first time?” he smiled. “I mean, what did we do before we figured out how delicious cows were?”

Aurora’s chewing slowed to a stop. She looked down at her meal, sadly. She pointed toward the patty in the center. “Cow?”

“Yeah, it’s...” the reverend trailed off, perplexed by the question. He looked over to see a tear fall as she spit the contents of her inflated cheeks back onto the wrapper. He sighed, “Guess you’re a vegetarian now, huh?” He reached into the bottom of the bag and produced a fast-food salad.

“Cow?” she asked, pointing to the small plastic-lidded container.

“No, no,” he said, opening it and placing a fork into it. “No animals at all, just fresh,” he glanced down at the greens, “um, kind of fresh vegetables.” She smiled and put her burger down, plunged the fork into a green leaf, and continued to eat.

After the meal, he went into an old closet at the back of his home and pulled out a rectangular plastic box. He dragged it into Aurora’s bedroom. She came into the room and he removed the top, revealing his wife’s clothes. He saw his wife’s old locket at the top, and grabbed it, slipping it into his shirt pocket. He smirked as he raised his eyebrows. “There’s lots of stuff in here that you can wear, so help yourself. It’s been a long day, for us both, let’s figure this out in the morning.” He left her room and went to his. There, for the first time in years, he slipped pleasantly into sleep.

The following morning came and went, as did the following days, weeks, and months. She accompanied him to every meeting, every service, every outreach. She volunteered to run the nursery, and cleaned everything compulsively, at home and at church. He tried on several occasions to discuss the case with the sheriff, but their town was so small he did not seem to care.

He would spend hours at the library combing through missing person reports, but could never find a photo that even bore a passing resemblance to the girl in his care. His congregation assumed the girl to be his niece. Most hardly noticed her at all, and the children adored her. Unfortunately, his ability to keep his promise was about to come under fire.

As Reverend Harris sat at the table, deep in thought nearly ten months later, he pondered the more recent events. One of the members of his congregation was convinced that his relationship with Aurora was unnatural. He had even walked in on a conversation she had in the church parking lot. Her name was Fran Getty. She was

round and short, her eyes were overly made-up with blue eyeliner and shadow. She had a tendency to sing loud and off-key, and was always far more preoccupied with the salvation of others than her own.

"I'm just saying," she said, clutching a Bible very visibly, "it's fishy. A young, pretty thing like that, living with a single man? Who knows what they do behind closed doors. It's absolutely scandalous!"

"But he's been through so much, his..." another older lady in the circle was cut off by Fran abruptly.

"Yes, I know. His wife and unborn child were killed in that accident years ago. What are you saying? That morality doesn't apply because he's sad? My husband passed away years ago too. You don't see me living in sin with some pool boy." Everyone around her fell silent. She turned to see the reverend standing behind her.

"Sister Getty," he started, "this girl is special, and she came to me in a time of need. I assure you, there is nothing that is inappropriate going on. She's just a girl. I would never do anything to compromise my values or my priesthood vows."

Fran sneered, and then a fake smile came across her face. "There may very well be nothing going on, Reverend," she said. "But a single man living alone with a teenage girl is the sort of thing that I will not turn a blind eye to. A time of need you say? Hers, or yours? I will be notifying the archdiocese about it this week. I'll leave the judging to them."

"That is your choice, sister Getty," he nodded, and cast his eyes about the circle of older ladies. "I will certainly take your words to heart when I kneel tonight."

His hand stretched across his jaw as the words echoed in his head. The most infuriating thing was that she was probably right. There was a wonderful safe house for runaways a few hours away, in Dallas. He would take her there. He had researched the home some time ago, and felt confident that taking her there was the right thing to do.

It would be hard, she had become the daughter he always wished to have; but it was what had to be done.

The following morning while it was still dark outside, he woke up and got dressed. He crept into her room and loaded an old piece of durable plastic luggage with several outfits from her closet. He took it outside, placed it into the back of the car, and went back in to tidy up a little. He began to wash the dishes so that he had something to do with his hands. They were shaking uncontrollably. While he was drying a plate, Aurora appeared beside him, a huge, sweet smile across her face. The plate fell to the floor, shattering in every direction. She jumped a little at the sound, but she realized it was just the plate and she put her hand on her chest and sighed relief. Reverend Harris, however, was anything but relieved.

“Aurora, I need you to get dressed. I laid out something for you to wear at the end of your bed. We are going to be taking a little trip today.” She smiled as if a field trip to a candy factory had just been announced, and scurried into her room. The reverend heard the shower come on. He remembered how fascinated she had been by running water when she first arrived. How he had to explain the use of a toilet in detail to her, as if she had never encountered such a thing. He smirked and shook his head. He was glad that this adventure had happened, and was sorry to see it come to an end.

Day broke as he drove on the long, boring stretch of highway. Each mile captivated Aurora, as if the repeating scenery offered an endless enchanting variety. She pressed her palms and face against the glass to ensure that she saw everything. Reverend Harris was certain he would miss that.

As they passed a mile marker and he checked his gas gauge, the reverend realized that they were going to have to make a stop before they got into the city. It was just as well; he had to tell her what was going on. He needed to get it over with. Two hearts were about to be

broken over an early morning meal. He felt the outline of the locket in his shirt pocket. If only it could give him the strength he lacked.

Aurora had eaten in restaurants with him before, but never one like this. The parking lot was filled with enormous trucks, and an endless cavalcade of people came in and out of the doors. It was one big building, but it housed a diner that seamlessly morphed into a gift shop in the middle, and then became a gas station at the far end. Every few minutes a distant voice announced which shower was now ready, whatever that meant.

As they sat in the booth, they studied their menus. Aurora pushed her hair behind her right ear and smiled sweetly. She pointed resolutely at a picture of pancakes topped with strawberries. She squeezed her lips together and arched an eyebrow as she nodded at the obviousness of how perfect her choice was. A waitress approached the table.

“What’ll it be, handsome?” her pen hovered over a small pad.

“Oh,” the reverend had been drifting. “I think coffee will do it for me.”

“And for your daughter?” the waitress snapped her gaze in Aurora’s direction.

The reverend felt as though he were going to be sick. He swallowed the pain. “The young lady will be having the small pancake stack with strawberries, please. And, uh, an orange juice.” Aurora grinned in impressed confirmation. The waitress headed back behind the counter, and quickly returned with the coffee and juice. He looked through the window despondently, weighing his words in his mind.

He turned to Aurora, “Listen, this isn’t just a trip, I’m taking you to a new home.”

Aurora was perplexed; hurt inched its way across her soft features. A fear returned to her face that he had not seen since the first day that he met her.

“You,” she shook her head, “you promised to keep me safe,” her world was shattered. Her eyes looked up toward him, wet with betrayal.

“This place is safe. It is.” He felt sick to his stomach. “Aurora, I’m a man of the cloth, I just can’t have a young lady in my home. You know how people talk.”

“You protect me. You do not understand.” The girl was fretful, the reverend shook his head as he prepared his response.

“This is a wonderful place, it *really* is. Nobody will hurt you there. I’m sorry, it can’t be me. Not anymore. I’ve tried, I have. I’ll call, I’ll visit,” Reverend Harris smiled.

Aurora shook her head and frowned, “They will find me. They will hurt me.”

“Who Aurora? Your family? Did they beat you? Did they hurt you? They’re not around. They haven’t found you for almost a year. This place is much safer than my little house.” He crossed his arms and tightened his jaw. “If you’re really in danger, if that’s what you really believe, then it makes more sense for you to be somewhere like this, regardless of my reasons.” A tear fell down her cheek. He sighed, and reached into his pocket, producing the golden object. His gaze softened.

“Aurora, listen to me. My life is forever changed because of you. I don’t know what it was you went through before you showed up on my doorstep, but I was doing my part to destroy my own life.” He squeezed the locket in his hand and felt the texture of the engravings against his thumb one last time.

“About six years ago, I was the happiest I had ever been. My wife, Meggan and I had been trying to conceive for a few years. We wanted a baby so bad. She finally got pregnant, and we were so happy. She was seven months pregnant when...when it happened. She wanted ice cream, so we hopped in the car. We only had a couple of miles

between dessert and us. I was driving; it was night. I can still hear the screech of the brakes. The medics had to cut me out of the car,” his voice cracked, but then he regained his composure.

“I was pretty banged up, but I lived. At the time, I wished I hadn’t. My wife died in the accident, as did the driver that hit us. They tried to save our baby, but it was too late. I lost everything that day. I had no idea what else to do with my life. I enrolled in seminary because I thought...I thought maybe if I was closer to God I could eventually demand answers for what happened.

“When I didn’t get the answers I wanted, I started to drink the pain away. It didn’t work. Nothing worked. And then one day, you appeared. You fixed me, reminded that there was a lot I could do to help. You’re so much like her...you see only the good. The two of you set the example everyone should strive for.”

He held up the locket. “Meggan didn’t wear jewelry, except for this. It’s very special to me. I can’t let anything happen to it, the same as I can’t let anything happen to you.” He leaned across the table and clasped it around her neck. “This is going to be okay.” He smiled to comfort her, but his heart was heavy. He pulled a small camera from his jacket pocket and snapped a photo, he looked at the preview shot in dismay. She looked sad in it. Now he was sorry that he had not taken more pictures to help him remember this special girl. She held the locket up and looked at it. She smiled.

Reverend Harris had no idea that he was letting go of something that would change everything. The plate of pancakes landed on the table, like a buzzer signaling the end of the conversation. He thanked the waitress and twisted around to look at the back of the diner.

“I’ll be right back. Go ahead and eat, we have a couple more hours on the road. I promise everything will be fine.” He went into the restroom to compose himself, and looked in the mirror before he left to check his poker face. It was anything but convincing. As soon as he

stepped out, he saw the table was empty. She was gone. Frantically he ran to the window and looked out. He grabbed the waitress.

“Did you see where she went?!” The reverend rubbed the side of his head anxiously.

“No sir, she—”

“HAS ANYONE SEEN THE GIRL!?” he shouted, hysterically spinning around. The diner fell silent. He yanked his wallet out and pulled out a twenty. He threw it onto the counter as he barreled out of the door.

Nearly half an hour later, his head dropped in defeat. He had run from one end of the parking lot to another, asked every person he saw at the truck stop, even banged on the windows of a dozen trucks. Nobody noticed, nobody saw her leave. He sat on the hood of his car, watching cars and trucks arrive and leave in an endless symphony of throttling engines and squeaking brakes.

She could be anywhere. She could have hopped in a car or truck going in any direction. He buried his face in his hands. A runaway had run away, and only he had noticed. He was alone once again, and well before he was ready for it. But even this was nothing compared to breaking his promise to keep a girl safe, a girl who had given him so much.

chapter three



Gerhard hunched over a table in the study room as he enjoyed his moment of solitude. Sunlight streamed through the window and filled the otherwise dim surroundings. Unlike the many mismatched additions that the Academy had, clearly this room was part of the original floor plan.

The room often served as a waiting area for relatives that visited the students. The ceilings were high; the walls looked as though they were covered in plaster at least a century old. A fireplace in the leather-furnished room remained empty on the far wall, and a number of painted portraits hung on the walls proudly, occupying spaces between the built-in bookshelves.

Gerhard's lips puckered as his head swung back and forth between the drawing he had been working on and the picture he was trying to copy. It was not of any of the esteemed gentlemen or ladies adorning the wall, rather, he was trying his best to reproduce a picture in the book he had borrowed from the Academy library, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*.

The picture was of an older, mustached knight in white armor facing to the left, amid a forest of trees. Walking beside the horse was a little girl, her arms crossed as she looked upon the rider. Accessories and vegetables of every sort hung from the saddle, and a bell was attached to the horse's forehead.

He had been attempting to copy the drawing line for line, when he flipped his pencil around and beheaded the knight with his pink eraser. The tip of the pencil landed back in the newly blank spot as he placed an attempt at a likeness of his own head atop the white knight's body. Unfortunately, the eraser had created a smudgy grey mess in the place where his head was supposed to be. He breathed the sigh of an artist whose reach had exceeded his grasp, and crumpled the paper into his hand. Resolutely he placed the ball of paper onto the table and glared at it.

A clock in the room chimed the hour. He gasped as he looked up at the tattling timepiece, and realized his head would be much more appropriately placed over the body of a certain rabbit with a pocket watch.

He gathered his book and binder, and darted out of the room. He cursed under his breath as he ran back in, grabbed his drawing, smoothed it out against the table, and placed it into his binder. Three interconnected hallways and a run through an outdoor atrium later, Gerhard entered his therapy session completely out of breath. Dr. Jenkins looked displeased.

"Jenkies! Hey, how's it going!?" Gerhard plopped down into the chair. He scratched at his neck uncomfortably, but maintained his playful smile. Dr. Jenkins fixed his stare on the boy. Gerhard's grin gave way to a frown. "Sorry Jenkies. I lost track of time."

Dr. Jenkins relaxed in his chair. "Ah," he said, swinging his open palm in the air, "you haven't been late in a while, it's okay."

Gerhard deflated in relief, "So, what's on the good ol' agenda? How are we gonna crack Gerhard's crazy skull today?" He knocked on his own head twice, clicking his tongue in tandem as a sound effect.

"Well, Gerhard, You have made remarkable progress of late, and I am quite proud of you. I mean, look at you, you are allowed to use your free time as you see fit, and the orderlies here do not even seem

concerned. They certainly are not accompanying you from one place to another, as they did when we began our sessions. I have received no reports of any fights in quite a while now, and your academic pursuits are unquestionably showing the great amount of effort you have placed in your studies.”

“So...basically, what you’re trying to say,” he made a cartoon-like face, full of sarcastic bravado, “is I’m pretty much the greatest guy ever. You wanna be me. Hey it’s cool, I can’t blame you.”

Jenkins smiled. “Yes, Gerhard, that is probably it. But there is another reason I bring this up, aside from my overwhelming desire to be like you, of course.”

“Of course,” Gerhard smiled. He was so happy that Dr. Jenkins let him be himself.

Dr. Jenkins face became serious, and he leaned forward. “Several months now, we have been attempting to deal with your memories. Trying to find the real ones, deconstructing the imagined ones. I know that you have been attempting to suppress those memories, dismissing them as pure fantasy, but today I would very much like to try something a little different.”

Gerhard’s lip curled as skepticism crept across his face. “What do you have in mind, Jenkies?”

“Ah,” Dr. Jenkins raised a finger and both eyebrows. “Today, Gerhard, we are going to put these things on the table. We are going to dig into your subconscious and truly move forward. I am fully confident that as you have moved forward past any major schizophrenic episodes, and dementia-related outbursts of physical violence, that we are at a point where hypnosis could actually help you.”

Gerhard’s head cocked to the side as he made a sour face, “You’re going to hypnotize me? Seriously? Are you still mad at me? Are you going to make me quack like a duck to get revenge?”

“No, no, Gerhard. I am not talking about stage hypnosis. This is

an attempt to heal, not some chicken-clucking parlor trick. I cannot make you do anything that you do not wish to do, that is not how it works. All clinical hypnosis is essentially self-hypnosis, you are the one in charge of the exploration, you just take me along for the ride.”

“I’m just scared of letting someone in my head. I mean, that’s what happened last time, right?” Gerhard scratched at his neck.

Dr. Jenkins smiled reassuringly. “Gerhard, I shall not be entering your head, only you will.”

Gerhard breathed deeply, “That’s what I’m afraid of, Jenkies. That’s what I’m afraid of.” He bit the edge of his lip.

“I am sorry Gerhard, maybe it is too soon for us to take this step. Perhaps we can approach this some other time. What did you draw this week?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

Gerhard relaxed, and the two performed their weekly drawing exchange. Dr. Jenkins commented on the detail in the white knight sketch, and the rest of the session was dedicated to talking about his week in general. All in all, it was a pleasant session, but Gerhard realized that he was still afraid of his own mind, and it bothered him to have passed up an opportunity to face that fear.

The sleeping quarters for residents were not the prettiest of rooms, but they were functional. Four metal framed bunk beds slept up to eight boys in Gerhard’s room, though two of the beds were empty. There were five such rooms scattered through the Academy, a sixth had been converted into a television room years ago.

Gerhard lay in bed that night, tossing and turning as he thought about the missed opportunity. He was angry with himself for being afraid. He trusted Dr. Jenkins completely. If he had said it was safe then it was. Of course, he had not told him about seeing the red and gold figure in the woods, but it had been weeks since that happened.

Eventually Gerhard tired of these thoughts, and sleep took him. He nestled a pillow between his arm and head; his bedsprings announced

each tiny movement as he rolled onto his side. Slowly his eyelids closed, and his dreams enveloped him.

Gerhard knew he was dreaming. He sat up in his bed, and looked across the room toward the window. He walked to it, and realized the room, as is often the case in dreams, did not look quite right. Some of the beds were missing; pieces of other rooms were in their place. A female voice was calling to him.

“Gerhard, please listen to me.” He turned back toward where the window had been a moment before, and instead saw a large lake. He was standing at the edge of it and could feel the stiff, cold grass push into the bottom of his bare feet. The voice repeated itself as Gerhard tried to find its source, and ultimately decided it was coming from the water itself. He saw a ripple in the otherwise still surface, and stepped back. He lost his footing and stumbled backwards, landing on the ground. If it hurt, he did not notice, his eyes were fixed on the ripple’s center, certain it was where the voice’s source.

A dark bulge broke the surface, and he watched as slowly, steadily, the form appeared. He saw that the dark spot was the top of the hair of a person of some sort, and as it continued to rise he could see the silver eyes. The figure elevated into place, as if lifted mechanically from beneath, and came to a stop upon the surface of the water like it were solid ground. It was most definitely a girl, but not completely human. Her skin was covered in sparkling silver, and as he crept closer across the grass he saw that she was covered from top to bottom in iridescent scales. He was pretty sure she was naked, but it was hard to tell amidst the sheen and a number of wet weeds stuck to her. Her hair was long and dark, and also had plants tangled throughout it. As strange and inhuman as her appearance was, Gerhard was captivated by her beauty. She walked forward across the water and stood directly in front of him. He was frozen in place, mesmerized by her.

Her silver lips parted, “Gerhard, I need you to listen to me.” He

nodded in awed consent. "You need to remember who you are, and why you are here. These memories that you are trying to forget, they are real. You must not lose sight of that. I need you to find me. You are the only one who can."

"Are you real?" somewhere in the back of Gerhard's mind he objected to having this conversation, even in a dream.

"If you let me be," she said.

"I love you, don't I?" he reached his hand out to touch her face.

Gerhard's eyes snapped open. He was awake, lying on the squeaky bottom bunk he knew all too well. He could hear the snoring of his former enemy, Luke, on the opposite side of the room. He sighed, and set about telling himself the dream was simply another hurdle to overcome, nothing more, like his "memories".

"I'm sorry for being scared last week, Jenkies," Gerhard started in the following therapy session. "It's just, I want to get better. Let's get it all 'out on the table' like you said." He looked nervous, but was decided on the matter. Dr. Jenkins protested at first, but after a lengthy discussion, they decided to give hypnosis a try. Dr. Jenkins explained the process in great detail; that he would be giving him a series of verbal cues to which Gerhard would respond.

Dr. Jenkins drew a set of plastic, yellowed blinds across the window and turned the light out. He sat back down on his chair, clasped his hands, and leaned forward toward his patient.

"Gerhard," he said, "when we first began our sessions, you were adamant that you were from another realm and had been transported to Earth through supernatural means. According to your original account, you had been on Earth for a very short time before coming here. We both know that this is not the case, however, your memories that you have been attempting to suppress have most likely remained unchanged. What we are going to do is have you put yourself into a state of hypnosis."

“Hypnotize myself? I thought you would do this for me.” Gerhard’s face contorted in confusion.

“Like I said last time, all hypnosis is self-hypnosis. I will be facilitating the process, but you will be the one engaging your memories and accessing your thoughts. You will be able to think and feel, to listen and speak throughout the process. We are going to start simple, and revisit your memories of,” Dr. Jenkins used his fingers to make quotation marks in the air, “‘your arrival on Earth’.”

Gerhard raised his eyebrows, “So I’ll be sleep-talking during this?”

“You will not be asleep, or even in a state similar to sleep. We will simply be focusing our mental efforts internally, and cataloguing what is there the best we can.”

“Alright, alright, I got it.” Gerhard took a deep breath in through his nose and blew out of his mouth. “I’m ready, Jenkies.”

Dr. Jenkins began. “Close your eyes, Gerhard. I am going to count backwards from ten. When I arrive at zero, I want you to imagine you are back to the place where you first arrived on Earth. You will tell me what you see, what you feel, every detail you can recall about the experience.

“Ten...your face is relaxed, your head and neck...nine...feel as if they are almost numb...eight...your shoulders are relaxed...seven...your arms and elbows, your hands down to your fingertips feel nothing...six...your torso and back are at ease...five...your legs and feet...four...have no sensation...three...your feet and toes feel loose...two...you can feel nothing, as you go back into the time when you arrived on Earth...one...here you can see everything, just as it was...zero.”

Dr. Jenkins’ voice cut through, “Where are you Gerhard? Describe your surroundings.”

“I am in the grass. It’s raining really hard, and it’s night. I hear thunder, but it sounds far away. I’m kind of against a really tall rock. Feels

like my nose is bleeding. My head hurts real bad, and I'm ready to throw up. There are lots of tall rocks around me. I'm trying to get up, but my legs are all shaky. I just fell over and hit my face on the rock on the way down. It really, really hurts.

"Someone is putting their hands under me, and lifting me up from where I am. My head and face still hurt, must have scraped my face, it burns as the air hits it. My legs are dangling, my vision is a little blurry but I can see that it is Joachim holding me up, like he is checking me. He looks concerned.

"My eyes close again and my head is so heavy. It feels like I'm being carried. He's holding me like a baby, and we are moving very fast. I feel so groggy, I need to do something, but am trying to remember what. I can't tell what happens right after this."

"You have control over what you are seeing, you can pause, re-wind, or fast-forward. Have you lost consciousness? Did you pass out? What is the next thing you remember? Fast forward to the next moment you remember" Dr. Jenkins' voice was soft, barely audible amidst the scene Gerhard was watching and reliving.

"Next, I'm...I'm in a shed or something. It doesn't sound like it's raining anymore. It's really dark. I'm waking up and I can't see much at first, but...there's more light now. Joachim has lit a lantern. He is saying that it takes but the smallest light to fill a room. I don't know what that means, but I'm listening to him talk."

"What is he talking about?"

"Finding the key, the trip from the Light Realm, I don't know, lots of stuff. He's saying that we're safe for now, that it could take our enemies months to figure out where we are. This makes me feel calm inside. I guess I was afraid they'd find us quickly.

"We sleep there, and wake up in the morning, but then an old man is beating on the door, he has a shotgun. Joachim throws the door open really hard, and the gun goes off, it's so loud! We start running

past the old man. He's okay, but he's on his back, trying to get up. We keep running across yards and fields and past houses for a long time. We're in the country. My side really hurts from all the running. We finally slow down...we walk all day long...It's starting to get dark outside. I think he's kind of letting me lead the way. When I look around, he's always behind me."

"Take a good look at him. What does he look like, Gerhard?"

"Um...he's really big, I guess. Not that tall, but really strong. He's wearing boots, and pants. His shirt and pants are kind of green and brown colors. I think they're made out of leather. When he first picked me up, in the rain he had a hood over his head, but now he doesn't. His arms don't have sleeves. I can see a lot of black tattoos on his arms. He looks really, really serious."

"Good. What is happening now?"

"We're out of the woods, and there's a beach in the distance, we seem to be heading toward it. Joachim stops, and holds me by the shoulder so I stop too. He looks mad...nervous almost. He's hearing something, something in the woods. I'm listening too. I can hear something, something big. There are cracks and crashing sounds and everything, like a huge boulder's on its way.

"Joachim says it's impossible, they couldn't have found us so fast," Gerhard breathed harder as he continued. "He's picking me up and throwing me over his shoulder. He's running so fast, I'm getting shaken around, we're headed toward the beach, but I'm facing the woods. I...I can see what's making the sounds."

"Tell me what you see."

"It looks like a bear. It's huge, something that big shouldn't be moving that fast. I'm twisting around to look ahead. I'm yelling to Joachim to stop running that way, we'll be trapped. He isn't listening. I look back at the thing; it's more in the open, and much closer to us. It's not a bear, not like any pictures of bears I've ever seen. Its hair

is really long and stiff and black, not like regular black, though, like totally black. I can't see any details, but his eyes are glowing red, he looks really scary. Somehow we made it to the water, Joachim drops me down. My feet are in the water. I can feel it soak through my boots and socks, even the bottoms of my pants. I don't care though, I'm really afraid of the scary black creature. I don't know what to do. Even if I run, it's too fast. I'm yelling at Joachim, asking him what we should do. The creature's running on all fours toward us, he isn't listening to me, like he's checked out or something...I'm so scared...I don't want to die...should I pause it?"

"Gerhard, you may, but remember, you're safe. You definitely won't die, or you would not be recounting the story now. Do you want to tell me what happens next?"

Gerhard decided to test what Dr. Jenkins had said and had paused the action in his mind. Everything was still, frozen mid-action, except for him. He walked around the immobile figures. Joachim was kneeling by the edge of the water; his hand was touching the surface. His eyes were rolled back into his upper eyelids, as if he were possessed. Gerhard noticed something strange. His tattoos all had a thin white glow outlining them; they were actually giving off light.

He walked to the creature as well, inspecting it. It was in mid-stride, now running on its hind legs. It truly was enormous, probably over seven feet tall. He could now see what he had thought were long, stiff hairs were actually enormous quills, like a porcupine. Its mouth was open, full of huge, sharp teeth. They looked like they were made of tarnished metal. His hands and feet had similarly tarnished metallic claws, but they were each the size of the blade of the largest knife in a cutlery set. A thin black rope around his waist and shoulders had small pouches made from torn flesh attached. He shuddered and looked up at the bulbous, blood red eyes, and walked back over to his starting point, in the water.

“Gerhard, are you okay?” came Dr. Jenkins’ voice from the outside world.

Gerhard was about to respond when he heard a splash in the water behind him. He turned to see the silver scaly girl from the previous dream standing on top of the water. “You must listen to me, Gerhard, and you must not respond, he can hear everything you say. You are *not* crazy. Every part of what you see here really happened, just as you see it.”

“You weren’t here,” Gerhard retorted.

“That’s fine, “ Dr. Jenkins said, “I was not, you are in control, tell me what you see now.”

“See, he can hear you. No, you are right, I was not a part of this memory, but we must speak. I am a part of you, and I can help you. Please, Gerhard, remember who you are and what you must do.” And with that, she disappeared back into the water, yanked downward by an unseen force.

“Gerhard?” said Dr. Jenkins.

“I’m sorry. I had paused the action, like you said I could. I’m in complete control, just like you said.”

“Wonderful. That is most impressive, indeed. Are you ready to move forward?”

Gerhard moved back to his original position in his mind, and the action resumed.

“Joachim is whispering something, it sounds all weird. The black bear creature is running at us on his two back legs. We’re at the waterside. Joachim isn’t really paying attention; it runs straight at him and hits him so hard. He lands with a huge splash. The bear is turning to me now. I’m running deeper into the water, but it’s grabbing me by the head, and pulling me out of the water. I’m kicking as it drags me back in the direction of the woods. It smells so bad. It’s stopping. Joachim is standing in the water now; he picked himself up.

His tattoos are glowing, and he yells something, but it doesn't make sense, like it's made-up words. It looks like some of the glowing light from the tattoo has gone into the water. Nothing is happening now; Joachim is just standing there.

"The creature holding me is just standing there, like they're waiting for something. I can hear a deep scary growl coming from the bear-thing. But now there's another growl, it's so loud I can feel it in my chest. Something is bubbling behind Joachim in the water. Joachim is running forward back to us and the water explodes, and a...a huge... fish-dragon monster is rearing out of the water like a horse would. It's so big, like the size of a two-story house. The bear is distracted for a moment and Joachim grabs me, but he's running to the dragon; that can't be right. It's lowering its head and looking at us, and opens its enormous mouth.

"It's hissing at us, but we're still going toward it. I'm screaming and it's leaning its head back and...oh *gross!* It's shooting out its huge tongue at us. It's wrapped around Joachim, who is holding onto my arm tight. The tongue is being snapped back into the open mouth, and taking us with it. Ow!! As I'm getting pulled through the air, the bear tries to catch me again, but we're going too fast. His claws get me though, across my side, as we fly through the air and then...then nothing but darkness."

"Where are you now?"

"I can't tell. There's only darkness."

"Gerhard, you are going to come back to the room where we have our sessions. When I get to five, you will open your eyes...one...the sensation is returning to your fingers and toes, hands and feet...two...you feel your arms and legs again...three...the feeling is climbing up, up through your stomach and chest and neck and head...four...you are ready to join me and will open your eyes now...five."

Gerhard opened his eyes and looked at his therapist. He did not

“I’m in complete control,
just like you said.”



want to admit it, but he was exhausted. "How'd we do, Jenkies? Anything I can use to get uncrazy?"

"Well," Dr. Jenkins said, "I think it went really well. You exhibited control within your own mind, and were able to exercise that control. That is wonderful. These things take time, though, Gerhard. It is not as though we can use one memory to put all of the pieces back together, but they can give us clues. Like I said, the most important thing is that you were in control." Dr. Jenkins smiled.

Gerhard nodded then squinted, "How could I not have control?"

"Oh. Well, there are some very rare cases where those who have been hypnotized become the victims of their own delusions. Sometimes their minds tell them to do things. They feel as though they are helpless, and follow whatever internal instructions they are given."

"Hmmp, weird." Gerhard was uneasy as he thought about the silver girl.

"Gerhard, you look tired. That is not unusual. I think we accomplished a lot today. No use overdoing it, now is there?" Gerhard shook his head. "You're good to go, unless you had anything that you would like to share." Dr. Jenkins winked at his patient.

Gerhard looked at him seriously. "No, Dr. Jenkins, I am fine." He stood up, and left the room. Dr. Jenkins was surprised that he had just been addressed formally, but decided Gerhard was probably just tired. He, too, was a little tired. He gathered his things and left.

chapter four



the madman

Dr. Jenkins, in a rather nice suit and tie, clenched a large file in his hands as he waited in the uninviting lobby of the St. Benedict Institution for Mental Wellness. As he looked around, he took note of the cold stone that surrounded him; the sleek furniture on which he was sitting failed in its attempt to make the facility look either more modern or inviting. Secretly he wondered how many mentally handicapped people had been tortured here in the name of medicine throughout the century.

He smiled at a security officer behind the reception desk, but she did not seem to notice him. He removed his glasses and cleaned them with the end of his purple and black-checked tie. He put his glasses back on just in time to see a man with a familiar face walk toward him. He stood up.

“Richard Jenkins,” the stout, bearded man in a long white coat approached him. “We’re not so accustomed to receiving celebrities here at the institute.”

“Thomas Becker, thank you for seeing me,” Dr. Jenkins smiled.

“That’s Chief Director Doctor Thomas Becker, M.D. Esquire Sir to you, you bald fool,” his stern face tightened as he stared Dr. Jenkins down.

Dr. Jenkins broke into a laugh first, and immediately was joined by a hearty chortle from Dr. Becker. Both men smiled as they shook

hands warmly. "How long has it been? Fifteen? Twenty years? If I was going by your hair, I would guess more," Dr. Becker joked.

"You know, I think it was the stress of rooming with you that sent my hair running for the hills," Dr. Jenkins retorted.

"Agghh, enough of this, why don't we catch up in my office," Dr. Becker led the way out of the waiting room and down one of the many hallways to his corner office.

After nearly an hour of playing catch up, they were familiar with one another's marriages, divorces, children, and in Dr. Becker's case, grandchildren. Dr. Becker shared how he had gotten to his current position after completing his doctorate in psychiatry.

Dr. Jenkins shared his experience of how he pioneered a number of breakthroughs in the field of mental therapy, particularly with young adults. This brought them to the topic at hand. Then Dr. Jenkins said the name of the patient he wished to meet.

Dr. Becker poured some brandy into a short glass. He motioned an offer to his old friend, who declined politely. He sat down and took a swig, grimacing as he swallowed. "Richard, trust me, I have dealt with quite a lot of crazies in my time. It's kind of my job," he laughed.

"But this guy, Joachim, if that's even really his name, he is dangerous. This boy you're helping, if he spent any real time with the man, he's lucky to be alive. I'm more than happy to help you in any way I can; you know that. Hell, you let me use your meal plan when we were in the dorms more times than I can count. But he won't let you in, he won't tell you anything. He's smart. You wouldn't believe the crap this guy pulls," he scratched at his beard.

"I had an officer quit a couple of months ago because he was convinced Joachim had psychic powers. We came to find out he had simply convinced an inmate, I mean, *fellow patient* to use people he knew on the outside to do a little detective work. A couple of police reports later and he had all the dirt he needed to 'see into his soul!'"

he raised his hands ominously as if to cast a spell. “What a piece of work.”

Dr. Becker looked up to see Dr. Jenkins scrawling down notes. “Have there been any other occurrences like that?”

“Hmmm? Oh, little stuff here and there, mostly with the other patients. It’s pretty interesting, really. I suppose I’ve grown used to my patients living in their own heads. But half the patients here are on board with his special brand of crazy. He’s got them believing he’s a prince-guarding knight from—”

“The Seventh Kingdom of the Light Realm?” Dr. Jenkins said as he glanced up from his notepad, his teeth clenched.

Dr. Becker raised his eyebrows. “Exactly. I suppose it goes without saying...oh...” an awareness spread across his face. “The kid from the shootout is the supposed prince, and *that’s* your patient. I don’t know how I missed that this whole time. Ah, jeez. How messed up is he?”

“Well, I am limited in my responses to respect the confidentiality of the doctor-patient relationship, but we will say that this is a professional consultation between us, yes?”

“Absolutely.”

“The boy has made incredible strides, but there are still some missing pieces. This is making it quite difficult for me to know how to move forward. Because of the circumstances leading to his being in the care of the state, residents like him are frequently put through a battery of tests, including drug tests. Typically these are screened for narcotics or methamphetamines; of course, even abuse of over-the-counter medication is not uncommon. He had sustained serious injuries at the time, and was being treated for a series of gashes in the hospital.

“At first, due to the excessively high chemical levels it was assumed there was some sort of clerical error in the toxicology screens,” Dr.

Jenkins pulled a number of pieces of paper from the file he had been holding, and placed them on Dr. Becker's desk. "There were, however, no errors. The screens were correct."

Dr. Becker pulled a pair of bifocals out of his shirt pocket, placed them on his nose, and glanced over the pages. He rubbed his forehead with two fingers, "That certainly isn't aspirin, is it?"

"Have you seen results like this before?" Dr. Jenkins leaned forward, waiting.

"Not very often, that's for sure." He opened a drawer in the desk, pulling out a long manila folder and a small plastic bag that contained a few capsules, some small leaves, and seeds. He placed the bag on the desk, and handed the file to Dr. Jenkins. "That's our full medical history on Joachim. I took the liberty of pulling it for you earlier today. A lot of what's in the boys tox-screen were in his tests too. It's like somebody opened a pharmacy on an herb farm in a snake's mouth. It's all off the charts. Look at the melatonin levels. There are similarities between these chemicals and a number of natural poisons, but it is a unique strain."

"And those?" Dr. Jenkins asked, looking over at the plastic bag.

"These," Dr. Becker tapped the bag twice with his finger, "were in a small leather pouch on his person at the time of capture. This is one of each item; there were originally dozens. Some are harmless sugar pills, some are opiates, some are just poison." He tossed the bag across the desk. "You can keep these too, I just hope it helps. Maybe they can be compared to the kid's results, because there were no traces of those in Joachim's tests. By the way, you didn't get any of this stuff from me."

"Of course not. Thank you." Dr. Jenkins placed the bag into his pocket and continued to flip through the file. His eyes widened. "Is this accurate, Tom? Is Joachim currently being treated with this many different tranquilizers? This dose cannot be right."

Dr. Becker stood and walked around the table to look at the reports. “No, no, that can’t be right, must be a typo. I mean, this guy’s no petite thing, but that could kill an elephant. Hold on,” he frowned. “That can’t be right. It looks as though he has been receiving regular doses of sodium pentathol.” He sighed.

“Looks like I’ll have to chat with his doctor. I’m sure it was an honest mistake, he probably was being a little rowdy and his doctor got a little carried away with shutting him up.” He looked unsure. He sat back down in his chair. “Anyway, is there anything else I can do to help you with your little guy, what’s his name?”

“Gerhard,” Dr. Jenkins said with a nod.

“Gerhard? Really? Kind of a rough name for a kid. Does he get beat up a lot?” he chuckled. “Just kidding. Mostly. What can I do to help out our friend Gerhard with his,” Dr. Becker snapped his head up, “yes, Officer Wood?”

Dr. Jenkins turned to see Officer Wood standing in the doorway. She looked uncomfortable, shocked. Quickly she composed herself. “I’m sorry to disturb you, sir, but patient 5336 just attacked a doctor.”

Dr. Becker’s head cocked to the side, and he smirked at Dr. Jenkins. “You want to guess who that is? Looks like duty calls.” He stood.

“Tom, I want to speak to him. I just need a few minutes.” Dr. Jenkins also stood.

Dr. Becker looked pained. “Richard, he just attacked a guy. Do you really want to do this now? We already know how it’s going to turn out. It will be a complete waste of your time.”

“Probably, yes. But I need to speak to the man who did all of the damage that I am now attempting to undo. It is for my own peace of mind more than anything else.”

Dr. Becker nodded, and then poked Dr. Jenkins in the chest with stiff fingers, “Alright. But after this, we’re even for all that free food I ate from your meal plan back in school. Deal?” Both men smiled.

“Natalia, I’m sorry, Officer Wood, I want you to gather five officers and a doctor. I want patient 5336 mildly sedated and brought into the talk room. I want him jacketed and strapped tight. I want him super-glued to that chair. If anything happens to my old friend here, I’m holding you personally responsible.”

“Yes sir.” Officer Wood started radioing the request immediately, never taking her eyes off of Dr. Jenkins. “I’m sorry, sir, it normally isn’t quite so crazy here. Is it like this where you work, too?”

Dr. Jenkins smiled. “Oh, no apology necessary. What is life without the unexpected to shake things up?”

Officer Wood’s radio beeped a series of random number codes, and she stepped out of the room. Dr. Becker traded his short glass for a more socially acceptable coffee mug. The two men walked to the door. “I’ll be right back,” said Dr. Becker, “I need to fill this with some wake-up juice. You’re going to make me put in some overtime today, aren’t you? Good thing there’s no wife at home to nag me about getting in late, eh?” He left Dr. Jenkins in the doorway.

Officer Wood was in the hallway, telling the radio new sets of numbers. She turned to Dr. Jenkins. “The patient is ready for you, sir,” she looked at him in awkward silence, then proceeded with chitchat. “So, I guess you’re a big-deal psychiatrist like Becker, right?”

“Actually, I’m a psychologist, but yes, basically,” he stood a little awkwardly, and forced a polite smile.

“So, where do you work?” she asked.

“In Harrisburg. That is where my practice is, at least,” his small talk was improving. “That is where I see most of my clients.” He was unaccustomed to talking about himself, and it showed.

He was relieved as Dr. Becker reappeared with a cup of coffee. “I’m sorry, I forgot to offer you some of the good stuff. Would you care for some?”

“No, I am quite alright. Thank you, though.”

“Hope I didn’t keep you waiting for too long,” he said, taking a sip. “Oh, no, Officer Wood here kept me company.”

A moment later the officer led them down a flight of stairs, to the basement level. The three entered a room with a large glass window that looked into another room. Dr. Jenkins walked forward to the window, and there he was. Staring forward, directly into his eyes, was the face he had looked at in photos many times, but he was different in real life.

Immediately, Dr. Jenkins was able to understand the fear of Joachim being able to see into your soul, because that is what it looked like he was doing. He was in a straitjacket; his ankles were strapped to the large wooden chair in which he was sitting. There were four officers, two on either side of him, watching him intently. He sat behind a metal table. Dr. Jenkins realized the drip of blood beside Joachim’s eye was probably from the officer that held his baton tightly, waiting for an excuse, any excuse, to use it again. Dr. Becker walked to the window.

“It’s one-way glass of course,” he rapped on it twice with his knuckles. “And if I do say so myself, that man is going nowhere. Go ahead, Richard, he’s all yours. Please escort the good doctor in, Officer Wood.” He put his mug down and crossed his arms as the scene unfolded before him. The wide window added a letterbox format to the scene.

Dr. Jenkins entered the room and sat in the wooden chair across from Joachim. He placed the folders on the table. He felt the stare continue, and met the madman’s gaze. He noticed at that moment the stern face seemed to soften, if only for a second. Dr. Jenkins inhaled and collected his thoughts. He touched his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

“Hello,” he started, “My name is Dr. Jenkins.”

“You are a good man,” Joachim said, he tightened every muscle in

his body. The guards around him looked shocked; it was the first time any had heard his gravelly voice. "I will speak to you if she leaves. She may not hear our conversation."

"If who leaves? Officer Wood?" Dr. Jenkins asked. Joachim nodded. "Why her?"

Joachim's face looked disgusted as he turned to face her. "I will continue only after the Set Hep-Andi has left the room. Send her away. I shall share nothing with you in her presence."

Dr. Jenkins sighed, "Officer Wood, may I ask you to leave, please?"

"No problem at all Doc," she turned to Joachim, "Be a good boy while I'm gone, okay?" she shot him a wink and walked out. He watched as her portly frame left the room.

"What about them," Dr. Jenkins motioned to the other guards. "They should probably leave too, right? We should probably loosen your restraints as well, is that correct?"

"They may remain, they simply believe me to be mad, what we shall speak of will not concern them in the least." As if to confirm, the guard with the baton rolled his eyes. He leaned forward and lowered his voice, "I assume the prince is in your care. That is fortunate for the time being. You must listen to me carefully. Do not say his name here, do not tell anyone here where he is being kept. Forces of darkness fill this unholy place. They are looking for him. He will be looking for him."

"Who do you believe is looking for him?" Dr. Jenkins was already frustrated by the way that Joachim had managed to take control of the conversation.

"The Czar of the Dark Realm, the one who killed my king, the one whose servant cut off my arms."

"Well, it is a little hard to tell in your current ensemble, but I am pretty certain that you have arms." Dr. Jenkins moved past frustration and into anger.

“These are not my real arms. My real ar—”

“STOP IT!!” Dr. Jenkins slammed both palms down on the table. “I am not a child, nor am I a patient here that you can jerk around. I have a little boy in my care that you may have irreparably damaged! I am not here to process your lies; I am not here to help you through your mental damage. You will be answering my questions, and that will be that. Are we clear?” Joachim’s face returned to its usual blank expression. “Or so help me, I will march right out there and tell Officer Wood exactly what room the prince is staying at so that the forces of darkness may do what they wish with him!”

Joachim blinked rapidly. “You would not risk his life, you are a good man.”

“A good man who does not believe the lies coming from your mouth. Or do you wish to see if I am bluffing?” Dr. Jenkins stood and walked to the door. “The way I figure it, you actually believe what you are saying, or you know you are lying and can not risk admitting that. Either way, I am not going to play your game, you are going to play mine.” He placed a hand on the doorknob.

“Wait!!” Joachim’s eyes slid from side to side. “I...hrm...what is it you wish to know?” He had been beaten, and he knew it. “If I answer your questions, will you assure me he will remain safe, will you not reveal his name or location to those here?”

“You have my word that he will remain safe. This format will be simple. I will ask you questions. You will answer them. My questions take your beliefs into consideration, not mine. Do not mistake for one moment that I believe in this dangerous fantasy that you have created for yourself and others. Agreed?”

Joachim’s face was tense. Through clamped teeth came his reply, “Agreed.”

“What did you do to the boy?”

“He is not just a boy. He is the heir to the throne of a kingdom that

will be destroyed, he is on a quest to prevent the collapse of all of reality—”

“Do I need to go over the ground rules again? Now, what did you do to the boy?” asked Dr. Jenkins, his patience waning.

Anger tightened every inch of Joachim’s face. “I protected him. I have done him no harm, if that is what you are implying.”

“Of course not. Then would you mind telling me what these are?” Dr. Jenkins held up the small bag of pills and plants.

Joachim tilted his head back a little. “Most of those help humans to see the things around them which are usually invisible.”

Dr. Jenkins raised his eyebrows, “Things and creatures from the Light Realm and the Dark Realm, is that right?”

“That is correct.”

“But if you and the prince are from the Light Realm, as you say, can he not see those things without help?”

“These are not for me or for the prince, he can see, unless someone interferes. Someone who knows the mind, and is trustworthy, convincing,” Joachim looked at Dr. Jenkins accusingly, “he could be persuaded to ignore those things, to lose his Sight.”

“I could not have said it better myself. But the fact is, both you and the boy tested positively for a whole series of unusual chemicals. If there was no drug use by either of you, how would you explain that?”

Joachim looked a little confused. After a moment of thought, he responded. “You will choose not to believe this, but it was probably from the travel cocoons.”

“Oh, this I have to hear.”

“The boy and I, shortly after our arrival to Earth faced many difficulties.”

“Hold on. Earth? So when you say you are from another world, what you mean is you are an alien or something. Where is your spaceship?”

“You are mocking me.”

Dr. Jenkins raised his hands. “A thousand pardons. Space aliens are pretty far-fetched, are they? Fine. You arrived on Earth. What about the drugs.”

“When we arrived, our Path ended at what your people call Stonehenge. The forces of Darkness should have had no ability to find us, at least not for a while. They found us, however, almost immediately. An ursine nightmare beast got to us quickly. He would have killed us both, but I summoned a water elemental, a liwyathan, who swallowed us before anything bad could happen.”

“I am sorry. I do not get it. Did you just say a sea monster eating you was not a bad thing? You are not making sense, even for you.”

“The liwyathans are noble creatures. They wrap those they transport in a protective membrane. This cocoon is filled with a substance that slows the heart rate and breathing almost to a stop. That must be the chemical in your tests.”

Dr. Jenkins shook his head and glared at Joachim. “Unbelievable, simply unbelievable. You are a danger to every person that comes into contact with you. I cannot figure out what perverse pleasure you get from these bizarre fantasies, but I hope you rot here. There is a wonderful, intelligent boy out there whose mind you have shattered into a hundred pieces. All I wanted from you were answers, I would have settled for partial truths, even.” He stood.

“I mean, I ask you about what drugs you gave the boy. You explain to me that the positive toxicity screens are the result of sea monster cocoons?! A sea monster that carried you from Europe to, well, I guess all the way to the Atlantic coast of our country; can I go ahead and connect those dots? That’s what happened next, right?” Joachim looked down and nodded. “How about you tell me something, hmm? If you can summon a monster, why are you still locked up here? How about that?”

"I could, but the prince is still safe, and I do not know where he is. As long as I do not know, the dark agents are spending time on me, shooting me up with medicine, trying to get the answers. But I can not give what I do not have." His scowl seemed to border on a smile.

"I have tried, Joachim. I have tried to reason with you. But you, you are a bad man, who has done bad things. I hope I can undo what you have done." He walked to the door, this time to leave.

"Please, Dr. Jenkins," he yelled louder as Dr. Jenkins left the room, "Do not tell them anything. He will be in danger! The agents of darkness are conspiring! This Set Hep-Andi and her minions here are just the beginning! The jaguar blood god is already on earth! You do not know the evil they are capable of!"

Dr. Jenkins stepped back into the door. "I have heard enough, Joachim. I will keep my word to protect the boy, but it is too late for you. I have made a career out of showing those with mental issues that their concerns are completely in their minds. I am going to do you the same favor. By your account, Officer Wood is an agent of darkness who is on an unholy quest to capture Gerhard. Officer, would you hand me a radio please?" One of the guards passed his hand radio to the doctor. He pressed the button. "Officer Wood?"

"NO!" Joachim struggled frantically against his restraints.

"This is Officer Wood." Came the voice from the speaker.

Dr. Jenkins watched Joachim convulse in place. "This is Dr. Jenkins. Could I get you to go to a computer and look up the quickest route to the Williams Hope Academy in Fairview? I have a young patient I would like to visit tonight named Gerhard."

"No problem, sir, I will have it printed out and ready for you at the front desk."

He smiled at Joachim, "Tomorrow I will give you a call to let you know he is fine. And then, my friend, you will have to admit that you are in great need of help."

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!” Joachim lurched back. The chair broke with a loud crack. He jumped to his feet, pieces of the chair still strapped to his legs. He struggled against his straitjacket as the guards rushed him. He caught one guard in the head with the sickening crack of a chair-assisted kick while the other three wrestled him to the ground. He snapped the restraint cable on his straitjacket, and his arm swung free. A loud smack echoed as he flung one of the guards against the wall.

Dr. Jenkins stood, frozen in the doorway as the madness played out in front of him. Four more officers and Dr. Becker pushed past him into the room. They struggled to hold Joachim down as Dr. Becker injected a yellowish fluid into his neck. They continued to hold him as he struggled less and less, until he was still. They then dragged his limp body up the stairs, back to his room.

Dr. Becker smiled at Dr. Jenkins. “Just another day at the office. What I wouldn’t give for a little excitement around this place. You get a lot of that where you work?”

His heart was still racing. “Well, a kid hit me with a notebook full of drawings a few weeks ago. That is kind of the same thing, right?”

“Definitely,” he laughed and put his arm around his old friend as they left the room.

After a brief chat in the office, Dr. Jenkins walked to the lobby where a security officer stopped him. “You’re Dr. Jenkins, right?” He nodded in confirmation.

“Natalia told me to give you this, it’s directions. She had to leave early. Family emergency or something.” He handed the printout to the doctor.

Dr. Jenkins opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Immediately he shook the thought from his head and walked out of the front door. He produced his keys from his jacket pocket as he approached his car, and aimed it toward the door. He grabbed the handle, and

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!”



jumped as an explosion shook the very air. He spun around to see a thick plume of smoke billow from the back of the building. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him to the other side. A large gaping hole in the architecture poured smoke, as flames fanned against the edge of the broken stone. A fire alarm was soon silenced as both flames and smoke disappeared amongst the faint sound of an extinguisher. Dr. Jenkins looked at the hole; it was nearly ten feet square. A sick feeling crept into his stomach. Although he had no idea where any of the patient's rooms were, he did know one thing. Joachim was no longer there.

chapter five



after hours visitor

Gerhard inched forward, the crisp, leafy ground crunched beneath him. He was nearly out of the forest. As he stepped toward the clearing he could see it was much earlier in the day than the darkness of the closely nestled trees led him to believe. He was relieved to have found a familiar spot, and knew he was close to home. His eyes were still adjusting to the sudden brightness, but he saw a figure several feet from him.

He raised his arm to block the intense sunlight, but his attempt to get a good look at the figure was derailed. He heard a frenetic rush of movement to his right. He turned in time to see a blur of yellow and black. He felt the impact after he was already flying through the air; he slammed into the ground and struggled to regain the breath that had been knocked out of him.

He winced at the pain, but then became aware of a deep guttural growl coming from above him. He opened his eyes. Crouching upon him was a creature; its face was so close to his that hot breath fell upon him in rhythm with the growl. Gerhard was petrified.

He stared into the face of a large spotted cat, but there was something human in its expression. It was a look of disapproval, of judgment and disgust. It then looked to the side, in the direction of the figure Gerhard had seen, and stood up.

It was at this point Gerhard could see the entire creature. It stood

like a man upon its hind legs, fur clinging to an awkward skeletal frame. Gerhard watched the creature contemplate its next move for a moment, and then quickly it whipped back around to face him. Its long, spindly fingers were topped by longer, needle-thin claws. It roared as it placed a heavy, padded foot on his chest. Claws extended, it pulled its arm back, and sliced through the air toward Gerhard's face. He screamed.

Gerhard bolted upright in bed, covered in sweat. The familiarity of the Academy dormitory instantly replaced the ethereal forest. He breathed in deeply; the intense imagery of his dream was now out of place, laughable against the backdrop of reality. The room was dark; the heavy patter of raindrops created the only sound in the silence.

Gerhard rubbed his palm across his forehead and into the edge of his eye, sighing as he shook his head. He rolled over to his stomach and hung his legs from the side of his bunk; the squeaky springs announced each tiny movement as he placed his feet on the floor. He grabbed the top blanket and balled it up into his arms; he gasped as his bare feet felt the cold of the old wooden floor as he shuffled toward the door.

Quietly, Gerhard hobbled into the television room. It was against the rules to be up after bedtime, but most of the after-hour orderlies usually did not care as long as he kept the volume low. He grabbed the remote from the coffee table, and enveloped his body in the warmth of the blanket. He tucked his feet in carefully, and maneuvered until the remote and his head were the only things sticking out of the protective bundle.

He turned the television on and lowered the volume. The room was bathed in flickering blue tones; Gerhard scooted forward until he could hear the barely audible television. The channel selection at the Academy was poor at best; two or three channels were all that came in. At this time of night, the selection was even worse. He flipped

the channel back and forth between an infomercial featuring an innovative pancake maker and the national news. He yawned hard as he rotated himself into a horizontal position on the floor. He began to drift off as a news reporter with striking features and long, sleek black hair caught his attention.

“A local female university student, whose name has not been released by the police to the public, is safe and sound following two weeks of captivity similar to a string of recent incidents carried out by a man wearing a rubber pig mask, whom locals have dubbed the Pig Man. The only lead to the storage unit in which the girl was bound and gagged appears to have been provided by the captor himself. The chief of police has declined interviews, but has released the following statement: ‘We are currently pursuing every means necessary to find and bring this sadistic terrorist to justice. Our hopes and prayers are with this young lady and her family, and urge anyone with any information on the perpetrator of these crimes to help us bring him to justice.’ Reporting from Brookdale, Iowa, this is Nasim Hajar.”

Gerhard drifted off as another reporter spoke about a high-speed chase that ended in a man shooting nearly a dozen police officers. Gerhard wondered if the craziness of the real world was any better than the one in his head.

Terry, one of the orderlies who preferred to work the night shifts, organized the linens in the laundry room. He reflected on how much he hated scary stormy nights in the huge facility, and grabbed his flashlight. The hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention as a creepy feeling overcame him. He stepped out into the eerily silent main hall. He walked forward and assured himself there was nothing to fear, but then he heard voices around the corner. As his heartbeat increased, he stepped toward the doorway that concealed the source, and took a deep breath before sticking his head into it. He deflated

and smiled to see the blanket-bundled Gerhard in front of the television. He walked over and turned the set off.

He smirked as he noticed the string of drool that tethered the boy's face to the floor. The Academy returned to silence; the only thing Terry could hear was the low rumbling of the distant thunder.

As he walked back to the laundry room, he thought he heard a light rapping on one of the rear doors. With his bravery restored, he marched to investigate. The rear door of the food preparation area had a large window to the outside, but the lights were still on, causing the window to reflect his face. He turned the switch off, revealing what was on the other side of the glass. As the door burst open, he did not even have time to scream.



Dr. Jenkins gritted his teeth as he continued to drive through the pouring rain. Between the Pennsylvania trees and horrible weather, his cell phone could not get a signal. With one hand on the wheel, he pulled the phone out for what felt like the hundredth time to look at the display. There was still no signal. Angrily, he threw the phone into the passenger floorboard.

In pleasant weather, the drive from the Institution to the Academy was nearly three hours. He took comfort in the fact that even if Joachim knew how to get there, it would take some time to do so. There were dozens of logical reasons for Dr. Jenkins to worry about this in the morning, but he could not shake the feeling that he had to get Gerhard to another safe place. He could not allow Joachim to hurt the boy again.

He was not concerned about the idea that an otherworldly force in the shape of an unfit security guard was also a potential threat, and told himself this over and over. "She had a family emergency," he

muttered under his breath, “that’s pretty common. No use letting him get into your head too.” He sighed at his own ridiculousness.

He pulled into the entrance of the long Academy driveway, and drove up to the softly lit building. His headlights shuffled across the woods that filled the grounds. Gravel beneath him slid his car an extra foot forward as he braked to a screeching stop only yards from the front steps of the building. He lunged for the handle as his windshield was smashed; cracks spider-webbed across the glass. Dr. Jenkins jumped out of the car to see what had hit him, his face twisted in disbelief as he saw an orderly he vaguely recognized, stretched across his splintered windshield. Dr. Jenkins looked around, but saw nobody else. The orderly was alive, groaning as he attempted to get up. He was crying.

“Terry! Are you alright?!” He shouted to be heard over the pouring rain.

Terry winced as he rolled over onto the hood from the windshield. He placed his palms beneath him, and pushed himself up. His hands slipped on the wet surface, but Dr. Jenkins caught him before his face crashed into the car.

“Ugghhh...came out of nowhere...I just...” Terry struggled to stay conscious.

“Shhhhh,” Dr. Jenkins looked at the young man. He was certain there were at least a few broken bones. He did not want to move him, but he could not leave him there, soaking wet. “Can you get up, Terry?”

“Maybe after a quick nap,” Terry said.

“No, no, no!” Dr. Jenkins slapped his face lightly. “You can not go to sleep, you could have a concussion.” Terry’s eyes opened. “There you go, let me help you up, let me at least get you inside and out of the rain.”

Laboriously Terry spun around to a seated position on the hood

of the car. Each blink was long and painful. He held a hand against his side. “Think my rib’s broke, or whatever bone’s in here,” he grumbled, feeling the sharp pain that increased with his returning consciousness.

“You are going to be okay,” Dr. Jenkins said. He patted him on the shoulder, hoping it was not broken. Terry looked at him, and forced his grimace into a smile. The smile faded as his eyes refocused on a point past the doctor.

“Who is that?”

Dr. Jenkins turned, following Terry’s gaze. “Get in the car.”

Lightning flashed, revealing the powerful form of Joachim stepping out of the edge of the woods. He was shirtless and his feet were bare; his tattooed body was covered in deep lacerations. He stepped toward Dr. Jenkins, who shook his head at the impossibility of what he was seeing.

“In the car Terry! Now!” He followed the doctor’s advice and painfully pulled himself into the back seat. He watched in horror as the tattooed man seized Dr. Jenkins by the collar and held him into the air.

Dr. Jenkins looked down into the face of the madman. He wondered if he was about to die. Joachim’s eyes were stern; his voice was deep.

“You did a very foolish thing, mind doctor. The boy was safe for the time being, but you brought that to an end. I know that you would never knowingly put the boy in harm’s way,” Joachim pulled his face close to his, “but *you*. You know *nothing*.”

Joachim dropped him to the ground and turned to the Academy. Dr. Jenkins scrambled to his feet. “Don’t you dare touch the boy, it’s not too late, you can still turn yourself in and—”

Joachim spun to face the doctor, interrupting him. “I am sorry, sir. You have failed in your attempt to keep him safe. The forces of

Darkness are not the kind that bide their time. Your smug relay of information was all they needed.”

Dr. Jenkins felt his head spin. If he could keep him talking longer, maybe he would not do anything that would put anyone’s life in danger. “You, uh, you are here to stop the evil security guard, right? Natalia, the dark priestess?” Nervously Dr. Jenkins licked his lip, wondering if it was too late to strike a chord. “Get him before she can?”

To his surprise, Joachim came to a stop. “Set-Hep Andi was already here when I arrived. She had already forced her way in to the building. She’s fast...too fast. My myrao brother could barely keep up. The rain was no help.”

“Why did you hurt Terry? What did he do?”

“Not me. Wrong place, wrong time,” Joachim said coldly. “He’s lucky to be alive. The Setians are not in the habit of letting their captives live. After she threw him at your car, I chased her into the forest where our battle continued. I was not able to kill her, but I injured her greatly. She is probably searching for reinforcements as we speak. I owe you no explanations.”

Joachim walked up the Academy steps. He gripped the door handle, and with a yank and twist, shredded the door’s edge as he ripped it out of place. He tossed the handle down the steps as he entered the building.

Dr. Jenkins could not think fast enough. He ran to the car, pulling the door open and releasing the trunk latch. Terry looked fine in the safety of the back seat; he looked through the window at him. Dr. Jenkins ran to the trunk and pulled out a four-way tire iron. The slam of the trunk perfectly coincided with a thunderclap in the distance. He gripped the black cross tightly, committing himself to do what must be done. He hoped it would not have to come to that. He ran past the broken edge of the front door.

His run continued into Gerhard's dormitory, where a small boy with blonde hair woke up. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dr. Jenkins," he whispered. "Which bed is Gerhard's?"

The boy was too tired to ask why, so he motioned to an empty bunk. "Jenkies? What's that in your hand?" To the doctor's relief, a sleepy Gerhard entered the door. He wore a blanket draped across his shoulders. His bare feet were visible through the opening at the bottom.

"Please stay silent. I am sorry, there is no time to explain," he rushed over to him, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "We have to get you somewhere far away from here, now."

"I, um, okay," Gerhard was confused, but nodded.

"Okay. We are going to try to sneak out of the side door, do not make any noises," They stepped to the other side of the room, to the other door.

"He's here, isn't he?" A sickened, scared expression overtook his young face.

A deep voice came from the doorway. "Yes." Gerhard turned to see someone he knew well, someone with a frame that nearly spanned the width of the doorway. "I must take you somewhere safe, the forces of darkness are already advancing."

"No," Gerhard said, tears filled his eyes. "That's a lie. You're a bad man. You made me believe crazy things that weren't true. I won't go anywhere with you," he turned to the doctor, "Please, Jenkies, don't let him take me," he held him around the middle tightly, clinging for safety like a frightened animal.

Joachim looked around the room. All of the boys were awake now. They clutched their blankets, too frozen to move. He exhaled.

"There is far more to the world than this human sees. You know that. He is the one who has placed you in jeopardy currently, not I. He has convinced you that falsehoods are truth, not I. He is the one

who has failed to keep you safe, not I.” Joachim advanced upon the two.

Dr. Jenkins jumped in front of Gerhard, brandishing the tire iron. He swung it with all of his might. It missed Joachim’s head, slamming into his shoulder. Joachim did not move.

Dr. Jenkins swung the iron again, this time from the side. Joachim caught it, bringing the swing to a sudden stop. Dr. Jenkins gritted his teeth, still holding on.

“You cannot have the boy,” Dr. Jenkins grunted, beads of sweat intermixed with the rain on his already wet head. “I will stop you.”

“No,” Joachim’s face looked almost sympathetic, “you will not.” Joachim swung his head forward; the sound of the collision reverberated in everybody’s teeth. As Dr. Jenkins and the clanging tire iron fell to the floor, Joachim walked forward to Gerhard.

“You killed him!” Gerhard screamed, tears streaked his face. “I won’t go anywhere with you! You’re a liar and a killer!”

“He will be fine, Gerhard, he is unconscious. I have no time to explain how dire our situation is. We must leave now.”

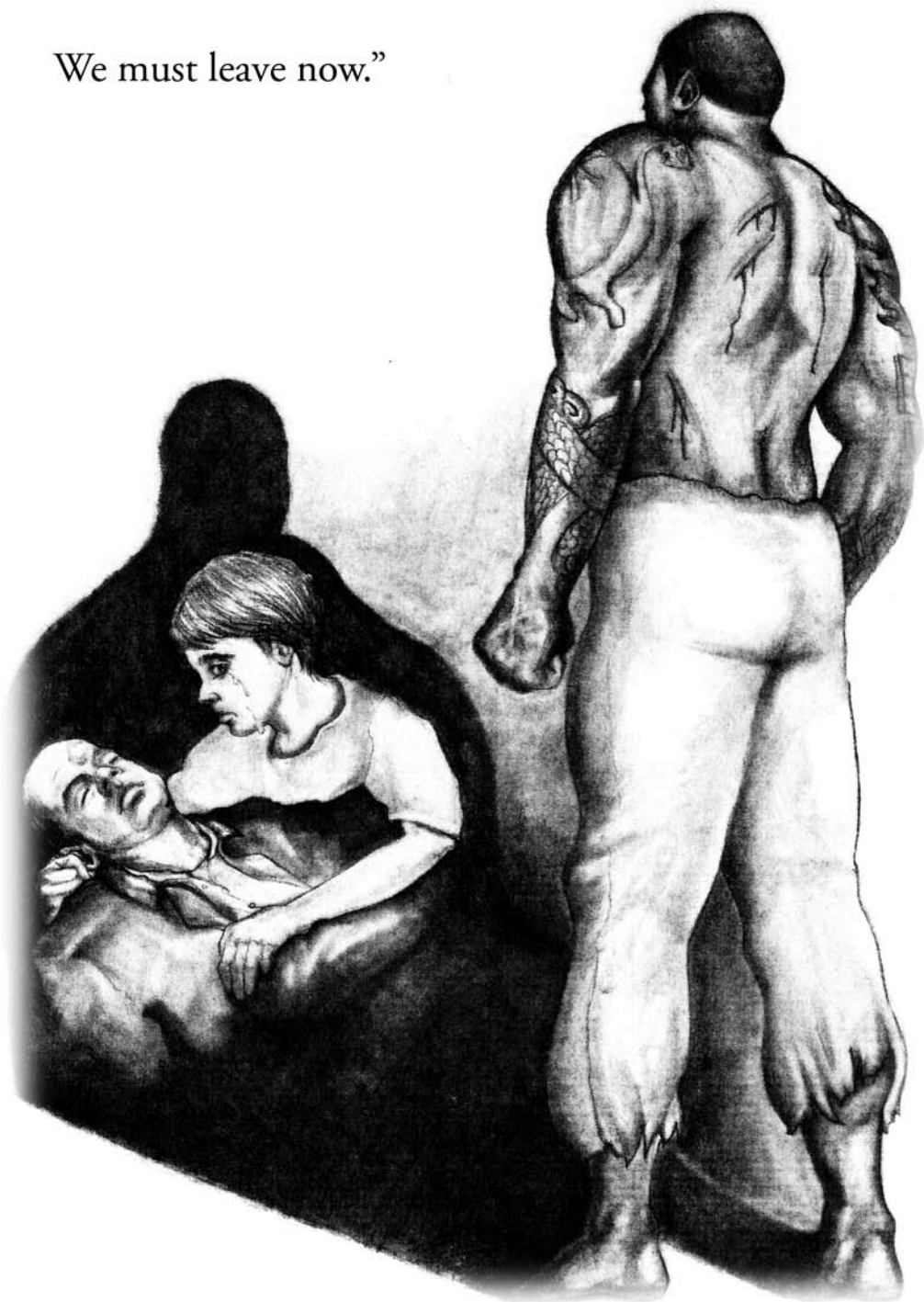
Gerhard was enraged as he ran to Dr. Jenkins’ side and grabbed the iron. He held it into an X shape, side stepping around Joachim to get closer to the door. “Jenkies might have bad aim, but I don’t. Leave right now, or I’ll bash your face in!”

“A thousand apologies, prince. Neither of us have time for this foolishness.” Joachim ran forward toward him. Gerhard swung the iron at him with all of his might. Joachim again caught it, and threw it to the side. It crashed through one of the tall windows, shattering it loudly. He grabbed the boy around the waist and held him tight in the midst of a barrage of frantic kicks, punches, and head-butts.

Gerhard grabbed at each doorframe they went through, screaming at the top of his lungs. The frozen audience attempted to comprehend the last two minutes of what they had seen. Gerhard’s screams

"I have no time to explain how dire our situation is.

We must leave now."



faded until they were replaced by the sound of the rain, now louder through the broken window.

The small boy with blonde locks was the first to move. He walked into the bathroom, and filled a small glass with water from the tap. He carried it back to the unconscious doctor in the center of the floor. He shook the man's shoulder, "Dr. Jenkins?"

He woke up and struggled back to his feet. He took the glass, and sipped as he looked around the room. He held his head in shame, seeing the path of damage that confirmed it had really happened, that he had really lost Gerhard. He tucked his lips in. "Where is the phone, young man?" The boy directed him.

He called the police, as well as an ambulance for Terry. Within a half-hour, the Academy was awash in flashing red and blue lights. The other orderlies had come out of the various buildings, none had seen or heard anything until the police arrived, because of the storm.

Dr. Jenkins gave the police his statement; they assured him no effort would be spared. After all, they could not have gotten far. He tried to do everything he could to stress the importance of the situation. Long after the ambulance had come and gone, the authorities advised him to go home and get some rest. He called a tow truck and a taxi, and determined to sort things out in the morning. His wife was relieved when he finally came into their lovely suburban two-story home; her anger over having worried subsided as he relayed the account of what had happened.

"So you're fine?" she asked, and gently touched the knot on the bald head that she loved so much.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes, yes. Nothing a pound of aspirin can not fix," he smiled, looking into her reassuring eyes. "I left St. Benedict's before I even found out exactly what happened. I will have to return there tomorrow. Tom will never believe this."

"Wait, you left directly from St. Benedict's as soon as he broke out?"

“Yes.”

“And drove straight back to Harrisburg with no stops?”

“Yes. It was raining so it took a little longer than usual, maybe four hours.” Dr. Jenkins was unsure of where this was heading.

“How did he get there before you?” she asked as she tilted her sleepy head.

“I...I do not know, Jenny. I suppose he might have, no,” he shook his head. “I do not know.” This question repeated itself in his mind, until he fell asleep.



The following day, Dr. Jenkins borrowed his wife’s car, and drove back up to the St. Benedict Institution in Dorchester. As he drove through the lush greenery, he reflected on how different it looked from what most people picture as New Jersey. He parked his car and approached the old building. A number of construction contractors were already parked, most likely fixing the missing section of exterior wall. Dr. Jenkins changed his path as he saw Dr. Becker talking to a man in a hard hat, and approached his old friend, for the second time in two days.

He smiled, “Well, Richard, looks like we both had a long night,” he stared at the knot on Dr. Jenkins’s head. “Look, I heard about the kid. I’m sorry. Don’t worry, they will find him.”

“Thanks, Tom. Sorry I left in such a hurry yesterday. Do they know how he did it?”

“We’re still piecing it together, but near as we can tell, it was a homemade explosive of some sort. A powerful one, too. The police brought in a demolition expert. He said that the bomb, or whatever it was, must have been a focused charge of some sort. It generated such extreme heat that Joachim should have been killed during its detona-

tion. The only thing we know is he used a lighter. There was a small, charred silver lighter in the rubble of what used to be his room.”

“Did any of the other patients see? Someone had to have looked out of a window after hearing the explosion.”

Dr. Becker laughed heartily. “Richard, I wish you could have stuck around for the show yesterday. I thought I was going to get to watch a cop have a nervous breakdown. They saw it, and if we weren’t at a nut house, I’m sorry, institution for mental healing, what they saw might be useful.”

“What do you mean?” Dr. Jenkins asked.

“Well,” Dr. Becker said, “They all agree there was a fire, but that seems to be the only part of the disparate stories that has any consistency. One of them said that a flaming meteor erupted from the clouds and got him, another said a lion made of fire cut through the wall; another said hellfire was how he did it. It’s pretty hard to piece together what really happened when your witnesses are all crazy.”

Dr. Jenkins thought for a moment. “What about the patient that got Joachim the information about the officer, the one that quit?”

“Funny you should ask. Actually, Leonard’s room is right beside Joachim’s. He says that Joachim actually tried get him to leave with him on a meerkat or something.”

“A what?”

“I don’t know. According to Leonard’s account, Joachim used a lighter’s fire to contact,” he pulled out a small pad and read from it, “a fire god thing, a fiery griffin from an elemental council that Joachim is a part of. He calls it a meerkat.” Dr. Jenkins remembered Joachim’s mention of his *myrcao* brother. “Anyway, Leonard says he declined the offer to leave because the blueprints for his inventions are all here.” Dr. Becker chuckled as he shook his head.

“What inventions?”

“Oh you know, a cell phone made of ketchup, a tofu helicopter.”

Dr. Jenkins scratched his head. “Yesterday, right before the incident, Officer Wood went missing. Is she suspected in any of this?”

“Missing? No. Yesterday she had some sort of family emergency. Her mother’s been in and out of the hospital lately.”

“Has she returned?” Dr. Jenkins asked, holding his breath.

“Ah, geez,” Dr. Becker chuckled, “don’t tell me he got to you, too?” He motioned for his friend to follow him side. As they walked in, he pointed to the front desk with a grin. Officer Wood watched a panel of monitors through dark sunglasses. “Officer Wood? Did you and your forces of darkness last night try to capture the duke of the twenty-third kingdom of the realm of flashlights?”

“You know it,” she laughed, never turning away from the monitors.

“Richard, I don’t mean to make light of the situation. The boy is with a very dangerous man. Hopefully, they will be found before he gets hurt. That’s the best we can hope for. I watched the news this morning. Both of their faces were all over the place. They won’t get far. You’re a good man, Richard. This world would be a better place if every doctor was as invested in their patients as you are.”

Dr. Jenkins sighed. “They are out there. If anything happens to Gerhard, I will never forgive myself. He has worked so hard to mend his broken mind. I am afraid that Joachim is going to plunge him back into that surreal landscape, where fantasy and reality merge into a cacophonous nightmare.”

Dr. Jenkins looked at Dr. Becker, “For all I know, that madman is already piecing together a new reality for Gerhard, rewriting his future with familiar details that balloon into a skewed perception of the world around him.” His head dropped, overtaken by fear and failure.

Dr. Becker had no words with which to reassure his old friend, for they both knew the odds were not in Gerhard’s favor.

End of the Temporary Insanity Edition

Wait...what happens next?



What do you want next? Government conspiracies? Knock-down, drag-out battles? Super-assassins, faeries, and evil billionaires? No problem, we have all of that plus what happens next to Gerhard, Joachim, Dr. Jenkins, and the rest of the characters.

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