

GLORY

by
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Dedicated to Liz, for putting up with my true contradictions.

“Having once strayed into the labyrinth of evils,
The wretched [Soul] finds no way out...
She seeks to escape from the bitter chaos,
And knows not how she shall get through.”

—Hippolytus, *The Naassene Psalm*

BOOK ONE

“Beware the treacherous eye and mind!
Do not trust anything you think to know.
These words can bring even the fool home,
But eternal forces will align against this.”

—*The Lost Pillar* 1:8-11

HORAIOS

I’m not my brother’s keeper, but he seems to think I am.

This is the third time he’s sent me for his pot now. And why? Because he has a reputation, and I have a history. A reputation is more important for a person with no history, and people with history have no need for reputations, so he says.

How hard is it to find a discrete way to score weed, anyway? It’s not even a damned drug any more. I’ll teach him how to use a fake name and phone number. If he’s this paranoid before he smokes, he’s got shit to work out. He’s a sweetheart, my brother, really, just a dork. You wouldn’t like him. I don’t. Maybe I do.

He exists.

My connection Yoshi is a chill guy, but he’s also the kind of dealer who won’t let you get your shit and go. Has to talk to you about video games, his movie collection, all that. Every visit is one long conversational parade of the things his illicit trade brings him that I could give not one fuck about.

It could be a crush. Can’t rule that out. It’s happened before.

He always tries to give me a sample of his harder stuff, to gateway me. Coke. Acid. Today it’s shrooms in a baggie. Boy must be aching for the day I come in desperate for a fix and willing to do anything for it. I’m pretty sure it’s clear I’m not that kind of girl, but you and I both know this truth never seems to stop that kind of guy.

Then again, Yoshi’s samples have no real price tag. He’s never resentful or acts owed. I shouldn’t give him too much shit. I do promise that I’ll come back for more if it’s a good trip, but that’s the only price I pay.

Plus, sell them to your girlfriends who are similarly afraid to talk to another person when said person sells drugs, and you can get your weed for free with the proceeds. Gotta hustle some. There are no free lunches on the island of Manhattan. Free pain, free poverty, and free jail time, but never a free lunch.

His operation exists between two and four in the morning in the back of a small upscale five-and-dime, one I’m not entirely sure the owner knows is open for business at night. Then again, given rents, you never know. There’s a secret knock, then Yoshi comes to the front and lets you in with the key. His setup is the break room, which isn’t really a room as much as it is an expired couch filled with ghost farts someone hauled in from the street and put against the wall, along with a few crates of glass bottled sodas stacked to make a basic table. It does feature a bathroom, one of those bleak numbers that uses a broken hook for “privacy.”

Yoshi is a stupid name. Trust me. I know names. He liked the Super Nintendo when he was a kid and it stuck, so now he spits out little egg-sized sacks for coins. It fits. He hasn’t used enough of his own product to fry his brains, but he has used some, it’s obvious, mostly the green stuff.

Presently we're sitting on the couch and he's trying to tell me the difference between psilocybin strains, emphasizing how important they are. I've heard this speech before about weed, the difference between Diesel and Maui, Gopher or Upchuck, whatever the hell they're calling varieties these days.

I truck none of this garbage, because if I ever get to the point where I can tell the difference between one and the other, I'm dropping whatever it is. Doesn't matter what it is, weed or coffee, if you're talking about what hints of what it has, you're trying too damned hard. Coffee's coffee, weed is weed, a fart is a fart, and don't try to tell me one's better than the other. They serve their purpose with or without nuance. That's why they're ubiquitous.

He does manage to catch my attention when he pulls out a spore print, strange Rorschach blobs in the shape of a mushroom's cone. Yoshi tells me this is what he uses to start the grows in something he calls substrate. The substrate itself looks like a jar of beans to me. Maybe it is. I dare not ask. The prints are rather arty in their own way, like a fossil on paper. We sit on his couch checking them out and I start getting interested, truly interested, when the door to the break room flies open hard enough to blow the hair out of my eyes.

Before us stands a dingy, muscular mongrel bastard with a look of kill in his eyes, not the kind of man you want to see in a drug den. He has a smell. Ripe. Not ripe like a good apple. Ripe like kimchi fermented in a dead body.

"Where is the wallet?" he says in a quiet, even tone, at which point I logically conclude that he is bugfuck crazy.

The bathroom door flies open like its sister on the other side of the room and out comes Slim, right on time. Slim is Yoshi's huge Russian friend. Slim stays in the bathroom and checks his phone, unless, of course, you are peeing. Slim takes some of Yoshi's money to make sure that no one robs Yoshi. It's money well spent. I'd wager that so far, Slim's entire job has consisted of looking askance at people who might cause trouble, maybe growling if things get really intense.

Not so today.

Yoshi makes panicked cartoon dinosaur noises and gathers his various prints and drugs. He's genuinely scared. Slim clearly is as well, but he still charges smelly. Me? I freeze. I've never been in a situation like this. I have no fucking clue what to do, who to side with, what to grab, or even what sounds to make. Hell, I can't even tell the difference between strains of psilocybin.

Slim's first punch is dynamite, a hard enough slab of fist meat against chin to knock anyone unconscious. This is good, except Crazy is still standing. Crazy tongues the inside of his cheek a bit and proceeds toward Slim, who backs toward the bathroom, terrified. If this guy can take that punch, this guy can take Slim, and Slim knows that. Easy math, even for a guy with no GED. Not that I'd cast aspersions. I succeed only at failure.

Crazy holds his ground, seeing Slim's retreat. Slim wavers between fight and flight, seeing Crazy between him and the door. Yoshi stands. Crazy looks at him. Yoshi sits back down. Crazy looks back to Slim.

"The wallet," Crazy growls. "Where is it?"

Slim screams and comes in. Crazy executes a neat turn and does something to Slim's off hand. Slim flips around like a stunt guy in a movie and lands hard, on his back. Dropping, Crazy puts a solid fist into the center of Slim's chest. Slim starts to flop around

like bacon in a pan, clutching where he's been hit. Bacon, for the record, is a much better nickname than Slim or Yoshi. Or Crazy.

Yoshi draws a wallet from his back pocket and holds it as far from his body as he can, stretching toward Crazy. Crazy moves to take the wallet with laser focus, obsessed. This is a mistake.

Crazy's belly explodes outward in a chum of viscera. My face, my clothes, every part of me is now crimson filth. Yoshi gets blood rain too. The drugs, the couch, the floor, the ceiling, you really have no idea how much crap flies out of a human when they're shot in the back and the soft front explodes. And the weird part, dig it, is that Crazy looks down at his open spilled tummy and missing whatever-the-entrails with a look of, I shit you not, irritation. Not anger. Not sadness. Not loss.

Irritation.

Three more shots blow the front of his chest apart, and Yoshi and I, we are sopping rouge. Also the drugs, the couch, et al. I'm not doing the list again. From the floor Slim kicks Crazy's legs out at the back of the knee. Crazy spins going down, scattering the glass bottles and the crates. His face lands on and shatters several bottles. Slim lays there with the pistol in his hand and a look of amazement at what just happened to go with his dopey fear.

I can't look, and then I can't not. Crazy's face is shredded meat and bottle chunks. Jerking and convulsing involuntarily, he flips to his back and stills, staring blankly at the ceiling with milky dead eyes.

That's when I realize I am screaming, and also deaf. Pistols in a closed space are fucking loud. Earplugs are for champions. To hell with all of this.

Yoshi and Slim flee having uttered nary a word, abandoning me with the body. I have no idea what I should do. There's the wallet, on the floor. Somehow it missed the spatter, having dropped behind Crazy as he fell. Yoshi and Slim forgot it, or didn't care for it, something. Numb and dull, I pick it up, wondering what's so damned important about this benign thing that a man would walk into an apartment and die without hesitation for it.

Or not.

Crazy has made it to his knees while babbling something liquid and awful, his face falling off in papier-mâché strips. He's looking at me. I am holding the wallet.

Shit.

I want to react, but brain says no. The last thing I say as the blood rushes from my head is a quiet little dammit, the kind of dammit I reserve for when I have a baggie of mushrooms in my pocket that the cops will find when they tag my corpse.

What will mother say? What, oh what will my brother do when—

No, you know what? Fuck my brother. Fuck his ear. He sent me here, and I'm about to die for some shitty weed, and I don't even know if it's Diesel or Bug Spray or Mellow Shart. He can suck shit.

Selah.

###

I burble waking from a faint. Didn't know that. Today is my first faint. At least I didn't land in the soda blood. Win?

Feels like it hasn't been long. Crazy is gone. The broken break room door is sagging, but shut. I don't feel rifled or fondled. That's some small favor. No sirens sounding, not yet. There will be. The apartments above us will be somewhat perturbed by gunfire.

Think.

The wallet is gone. I am whole and unhurt. I should clean my face, throw the mushroom samples into the toilet, pray that it flushes, then wait for the cops. They can infer that I was here to buy weed, yes, but I haven't actually done it, and I didn't do anything to any of these people. What crimes could they pin on me? Trespassing? Destruction of property? A lack of education in the difference between intoxicants?

But they'd still take me in for questioning, with the jacket I have. Not the one covered in blood, the one covered in misdemeanors. I'd have to explain everything to Mom when she picked me up, and her head would turn into a hair dryer and blow hard. I might end up sleeping in Central Park or even worse, at Xander's house. You think listening to a neighbor's TV is bad? Try snoozing through your brother's raging buttsex. He's young, rich, good looking, and he knows it, the bitch.

Right. Run the hell away and pretend this never happened is officially the plan. Well, not a plan. But it's something. First though, we make sure Crazy isn't waiting there in the store with a bologna log or lotion, changing into his clown suit. I crack the door.

Shit. He's still there.

His back is turned, and he's looking down at that precious wallet of his, not me. Good. But he's swaying, like he wants to fall over. He has to, soon. I mean, how is he still standing at this point?

I should close the door, but I don't. I'm not partial to watching a guy die, but once again, I can't not. I have no idea how he even got up with wounds like that. I have pieces of his fucking organs on my chest. And face. And god dammit.

He's hurt. I could save him. But he's crazy. And violent. And wallet obsessed. And he smells. Check on him?

Check on him.

But what do you even ask a man who's just been fatally shot?

"Are you okay?"

That's not bad. It's not great. I don't know. I'll work on it.

"That looked like a lot of gunshot holes there, buddy."

That's a little better.

Crazy turns around, eyeing me with an expression of puzzlement. "Are you talking to me?"

"Unless there's someone else over by the ciggies who got shot."

His face lightens. Before, a stern and brutal tightness lent him a dangerous air. Now he's all weird childlike joy. His shoulders unclench. He wilts in relief. This is dying, right in front of me, I'm sure of it. Clearly the man is having a religious experience. Or his bowels are loosening.

Fifty-fifty.

That's when I realize I am doing a thing that is impossible. I am seeing and reading the expressions on Crazy's face. Recall his face had been cut to shreds. Maybe you already noticed that, because you're smart, soaking in all the details. I myself am not so bright and shiny pressed into distress by apparent murder and a less than tidy case of the

vapors. Suffice it to say, the cuts on Crazy's face have closed, leaving blood in thin dry lines where before there was laceration.

The wallet falls from his dangling fingers. Crazy pounds knees to floor. He sobs, because of course he does, rocking back and forth with his head near the ground like it's the Wailing Wall. He whispers to himself. I step out a little to bend and hear it.

He's saying: "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

"You're welcome," I say.

Crazy looks up at me like I've said something ridiculous.

Sirens.

I bend down and almost put a hand to his back, then decide against it. "Look, pal, I didn't mean to set off an episode. I just wanted to make sure you're still breathing. Should I call an ambulance? I need to know fast, because I'm allergic to jail."

But you can't call him an ambulance. They'll trace your phone, idiot.

"I will be fine." He closes his eyes. Steels himself. Stands.

Phew.

"Don't forget your wallet." I bend down. Get it. Hand it to him. Put more of my fingerprints on it. Bigger, dumber idiot. "Also, uh, by the way, you got shot four times in the chest. Your face was all cut up. Now it's not. I saw you die. I don't think I saw you die. I know I saw you die."

He grunts. Nods. "I can explain that."

I have to not laugh. It's hard. He's being completely serious. I manage, but I can't keep the sarcasm out of my tone. "Oh, please. Do go on."

"No time. Police. Come with me."

"I can't do that. You're a crazy person."

"I am sane, all appearances to the contrary. I give you my word. It's your choice. I'm no threat to you either way." He starts shuffling for the front door, holding his stomach. He stops. "I would very much prefer it if you came. If that matters."

The sirens are louder.

###

I got arrested for the first time when I was fourteen. Breaking and entering. I only got caught because I called the cops on myself. There was this old foundry just asking to be explored. I broke in using bolt cutters I borrowed from the school janitor, along with a camera and a notebook in my backpack. I didn't even know why then, and I don't now. It was a regular case of whatever a teenager thinks when they're not thinking, which is all the time.

There the building was, a material survivor of the ravages of time in a city with too much turnover. How and why? That's two steps toward a good story, provided I could figure out what the hell said story actually was. I never did, though, because I tripped and cut my shoulder open on a rusty something and started gushing enough blood to panic and grab my phone. The ambulance patched me up, the cops hit me with a few minor charges, the school paper spiked the article, and I got a ton of detention.

Dicks.

Not the ambulance guys. They were cool.

Anyway, the moral of this story? For what amounted to four stitches and no real answers, I copped an arrest record that only grew as I started picking at moral scabs and turning interesting human rocks. I have too much curiosity, but not enough brains to quit when I'm behind. It's as damnable as my recurring favors for people who don't have the courage to buy their own weed.

This here shot-up man says he is sane when he is clearly not, and I am genuinely considering going with him to his combination wallet collection rape lair. Do you know what that fucking means?

It means I'm the crazy one, friends.

###

I stick my shoulder into Crazy's armpit and make myself into a human crutch. The rest of his chest weaves itself together in front of my eyes through the remaining tatters of shirt. I did not eat those shrooms, officer, I swear.

I don't even have to hold him up by the time we get to the door. I take off my filth-covered hoodie and use the inside to wipe blood from my face and hair, as fast as I can. Crazy picks pieces of bone and chunks out for me with a careful touch, once he sees that I'll let him.

"Sorry about your jacket," he says. "I will get you a replacement."

"Dude, seriously." I toss the jacket back into the dark grocery. "No biggie. It was a hand-me-down."

It wasn't. I borrowed it, the kind of borrowing that's stealing. Fuck you, Xander's coat!

Crazy starts to head out, all covered in piece of scalp and whatnot.

"Hey."

"Yes?" He stops.

"You go out there like that, people will tackle you just to take you to the hospital."

He smirks. "Doubtful."

An entirely new man, a healed man, steps out unassisted, and I follow.

The street is filled with a large circle of folks gawking at the front of a stopped bus as blocked traffic honks.

"Stay here." Crazy walks toward the crowd. "This may go poorly."

The crowd parts like this guy is some Moses of the avenue. A few scream, presumably at the blood. One guy runs. All step back. I hear someone shout at him to get away. Through the parted masses I see Slim's body, along with the imprint Slim made on the front of the bus.

Crazy takes a knee and removes the tattered remains of his own coat, draping it over the man who killed him. He stands and examines the crowd. They keep their distance. When he walks back through them they zipper back, returning to the body as if what just happened hadn't. They don't follow. They don't even watch after him. Very surreal.

"Seven times," he says, shaking his head.

"Seven what?"

"Doesn't matter." He gestures forward, down the sidewalk.

We walk. I look back, but the sirens stop where Slim did. I can't explain it, but I won't cry about it, either. They'll be learning things. Asking about Crazy. His coat. What

happened to Slim. Still he strolls down the street covered in gore with casual disregard for these facts. And I'm walking with him, aren't I?

A few blocks north, Crazy sees something and tucks us into a vacant boarded doorframe, holding up a hand to tell me to wait. Before I can object, he's jogging across the street right through traffic, approaching a cafe I've walked past a time or three. It's usually filled with people eating food that costs way too damned much being served by people being paid way too damned little.

The diners talk and eat. Some hide in their phones. Not the kind of folks who tolerate the presence of someone like our pal Crazy, and yet Crazy has walked in the front door covered in guts. No one is reacting.

He liberates an expensive leather motorcycle jacket from the coat hooks near the door, along with an even more expensive winter coat. Pausing with them in his hands, he looks at the rest of the garments as if shopping at leisure, and plucks a hoodie down. Must belong to one of the kids.

People should see him, but they don't. They're not avoiding him, like when you hear someone singing Lionel Ritchie songs on the subway and don't want to make eye contact. Even then, a person can't help but turn your head a little, if only to make sure a drunk isn't about to throw shit at you. Not that. These people don't realize what's happening, or somehow can't.

Crazy crosses the street again. He strips his shirt as he makes his way back to me, dropping it in the street, donning the thicker coat over his bare chest. There's no helping his pants, or their smell. I take the leather jacket and put my arms in. Fits well. Pedestrians pass us, but they make way, giving a wide berth, and they don't stop to stare. He uses the hoodie to wipe the last few splotches of gore on my face away, careful and gentle. Hesitant. Like he doesn't know how to touch another human being.

"The leather jacket has a liner. It should be warm enough."

"Even if it wasn't, it's too damned cool not to freeze in." I play with the nifty buttons and zippers. "How did you do that, by the way?"

"What?"

"Any of that, with the not being seen."

"People don't want to see me until they're forced to." Crazy swipes at his face. It doesn't change much, but he doesn't seem to realize. He tosses the hoodie aside.

"Sometimes they do anyway. Not often."

"I do. And I definitely didn't want to see you."

He smiles. "Yes. You do. And that's wonderful."

"You're awful peppy for a guy who just went through something so awful."

"I'm happy. I'm having a conversation."

"No shit, Einstein."

"In person."

"You sure you're not crazy?"

"Misunderstood, perhaps. All of this will be easier to explain when we are clean, dry, and most importantly, safe. This way, please."

He walks on.

I shake my head and follow his lead.

###

We walk from southeast of Hell's Kitchen toward Upper East, crossing through Central Park. People walk around like we smell or are dangerous. Both are likely true. No one bothers us. I'm glad I wore comfortable shoes instead of the ones I was thinking about before I left, or I'd have oodles of blisters.

About a mile in I consider asking why we don't catch a cab or a subway before I think it through and close my mouth. I need exercise anyway. This guy looks like he walks everywhere. Completely undisturbed, though his shoes look worn.

I try talking to him a few times. It goes about like this:

"Do you still have any bullets, you know, inside?"

"No."

Or:

"Why were you at Yoshi's loft?"

That gets no response.

Once:

"Do you even know where you're going right now?"

Nada.

Finally:

"What's your name, then? Can I at least have that?"

Silence still, so I give up, because he's walking fast. I only have so much breath.

###

I've walked around Upper East before, looking at houses and trying to figure out the kind of people who live here. I don't get it. If I ever had the kind of money it takes to get one of these places, I sure as hell wouldn't stay in New York. I'd find some place in the middle of nowhere and buy a hundred acres and put a house right smack in the middle of the property.

Said property would have every essential. Fire poles. Slides to the outside from the second floor. Secret passageways. Hidden compartments filled with bananas or loaded guns. And trap doors. Gotta have trap doors. I have drawings of this house, for the record. You can look at them if you want.

No one does.

Truth be told, I think about leaving Manhattan a lot. I'm tired of this city, but the city isn't tired of me yet. It won't let me go. That's the lying poet way of saying I can't save enough money to move. Is that the same thing?

I think it is.

The house Crazy stops at is not the kind house you stop at, not if you don't want to get arrested. A huge brownstone, plainly the kind only owned by the richest of rich fucks. The building takes up a whole damned short block, which is weird, because it looks like just one residence from the outside. That can't be. It has to be some kind of multi-dwelling unit.

I follow Crazy as he walks up the stairs with confidence, smell and all, and plants a finger on the doorbell. Chimes sound. Footsteps echo down a long hall. The door opens, a little.

A very severe looking old butler in a fancy suit stands before us, frowning past the chain. “Can I help you?”

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” Crazy says. “Thank you for your service.”

The butler frowns and turns his head to the side, as a child might avoid being fed bitter medicine. “To hell with you,” he manages, retreating into the mansion.

He’s abandoned us. The door is open and cracked, chain and all.

“Okay, that’s just weird.”

Crazy takes me by the shoulder and turns me back down the stairs. We cross the street and stand below a shaded tree, watching the building.

“This is creepy. What are we doing?”

“That man is the caretaker for my property. I just spoke a prearranged code phrase to dismiss him from service. It’s the first time we’ve ever interacted in person. He’ll need time to pack and go, so we wait.”

“Your property.”

“Yes.”

The front door to the house slams shut with startling sudden furor.

“What’s that about? Why did he curse you?”

“He couldn’t help it. Patience. Please. We live in an age of many ears.” He points to the roof of the house behind us.

“Can a camera see you?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“When I film myself I see myself, but I don’t know what other people see. I make an effort not to put myself on camera. We can experiment and find out, if you’d like, but for now I’d rather not have you filmed standing on a city street talking to your invisible friend, should someone examine the footage and find me missing.”

“Ah, chill. It’d look like I’m muttering to myself on camera, which I already do constantly. And this is New York. Come on. If you’re not talking to yourself, you’re not paying attention. So what’s in your serial killer mansion?”

“It’s not a serial killer mansion. It’s a repository. One of twelve I keep around the world. The least valuable, because of the location.”

“One would think this would be the place to keep your good stuff. It’s not like this is a bad neighborhood.”

“I speak in terms of what the house holds, not the structure or the land. This is the most expensive piece of property, yes, but I don’t care about that. The books and artifacts within are my concern. It would be foolish to keep your greatest treasures anywhere near a place that would surely be looted in the event of societal upheaval.”

I spot the butler rounding the far corner of the street, two suitcases in his hands. He seems confused, like he’s forgotten something important. I feel sympathy for the guy. He didn’t seem like a bastard.

“Your guy took the back door.”

“Indeed.” Crazy and I cross the street. He tests the knob at the front door. Finding it open, he nods and enters, examining the foyer as if entering for the first time in a long while. He looks like I feel when I get home from a weekend away, times ten thousand.

“This is good. He left everything in fantastic order.”

“Were you worried?”

“I’ve found repositories looted and destroyed. Most people, when you trust them, do well by you. Others, well...” He runs a finger along the exquisite molding lining the entry. “No matter. Now we are safe. We have shelter and necessities.”

“That’s putting it mildly. Look at this place.”

This foyer is as large as my first apartment. Larger. Raised wood panel squares line the entry. They’ve been kept stained and shining, though they’re clearly old. Crazy presses his finger to one, and is perplexed when nothing happens.

“Jeeves didn’t maintain your secret passage, eh?”

“Nothing so compelling.” He puts his hand on the panel to the immediate left, presses, and a cabinet clicks open revealing a landline rotary telephone. “More I haven’t been here in thirty years, and forget where things are.”

“Thirty?”

The guy looks about... well, I don’t know actually. How old would he be? I squint. Can’t get a good read. Doesn’t look thirty, so he must be close. And yet he looks older. He acts old. He speaks old, even when the words are modern.

“So you grew up here? A child of wealth?”

He ignores this and spins the dial on the phone. When he’s entered all the numbers, he hands the receiver to me. “Please tell the butler that the code phrase was indeed spoken, and he has fulfilled his duty with all due diligence and care. Also, please convey my strongest thanks.”

“You just said that to him, though.”

“He won’t remember.”

“I don’t know your name.”

“Neither does he. Call me his old friend. He’ll understand.”

The other end is ringing.

“Yes?” Indeed, the butler.

“Hi, um, hello. I mean, good afternoon.”

“Who is this?”

“Our mutual friend, your old friend here, he wants you to know what you weren’t hallucinating, you did hear the password, it got said, and uh, you did a really good job. Awesome stuff. He says thanks. A lot.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Everything is A-O-K.”

I see Crazy staring at me, a little cockeyed.

“Who is this?”

“I’m his assistant. Mallory.” Mallory?

“Very well. I wish to express my thanks in return,” the butler says.

“He says thank you,” I say, cupping the talkie part of the phone.

Crazy nods at me.

“Our guy here says right on, man.” What am I, five? Come on now, Gloria.

“Best wishes to him.” The line goes dead.

“He says best wishes to you.” I put the receiver in its cradle. “And that — that was genuinely weird.”

“That man is as close as I ever get to having a friend. We communicated through letters for decades, using the telephone on occasion. Once the internet came, we chatted over text.”

“But he never saw your face?”

“No. When someone has seen me in person, every other form of communication is tinged, sullied. Things are never the same. Not like here. Now. With you.” He clicks the cabinet shut.

“I have questions about that.”

“Of course.”

“You promised answers.”

“I did. Come.”

We walk deeper into this mansion, passing large double doors to the immediate right. The first room after houses a rather large spiral staircase with a series of cabinets going up the sides, which hold more books than you might see in a typical house. I look up two stories to the top of the spiral.

Crazy starts taking the stairs.

“Where are we going?”

“I thought it best to show you to the shower.”

“Great. Now I can feel all the crusted shit in my hair again. I had forgotten.”

“What can I have ready for you, when you get out?”

“You got anything to drink around here? I could really use a drink.”

“There should be spirits in the pantry.”

“I like bourbon.”

“The shower is on the second floor. Help yourself. My house is yours.” He holds out a hand.

“What?”

“Your coat.”

It rolls off my shoulders and into my hands like it was meant to be. I’m keeping it.

Once he has it, he heads off to the right, down another hall and through a door, leaving me to my own devices. I start to poke around, climbing the stairs. Down the hall to the left on the second floor, the bathroom is the first room I find that’s not filled with old books. Even the halls have built-ins. This place is walled with tomes, more volumes than volume. Through the gunk my nose takes in that wonderful, familiar smell of an old used bookstore, like the ones I loved when I was young, before digital killed almost all of them. Must, age, and potential.

I love it.

The shower is stone, with multiple jets. It has a clear glass wall defining its space, which has to be, I don’t know, ten by ten? Is this even a shower? It’s more of a chamber in the middle of a room the size of an apartment. Fuck. There are four detachable hoses. I can’t even tell how many showerheads there are up there.

This isn’t what I think of when I think of a shower. To me a shower is standing in a bathtub under a low-flow hunk of cheap metal you have to hunch below and hurt your back using, with plastic curtains that stick to your legs. Rich people. Bleh.

Crazy reappears. “Everything all right?”

“This bathroom, man.”

“It’s ostentatious, I know.” He taps one of the stones next to the pedestal sink, and the stone slides open, revealing a secret compartment filled with bathrobes, towels, and fancy soaps. “I came up because I realized you might not be able to find the towels.”

I make a mental note to put a banana in there later. Or a loaded handgun.

“You got a thing against knobs, you rich people? Not that I’m complaining. I love a good secret compartment.”

“I did not choose the designer. That fault or success would lie with Anthony.”

“Anthony?”

“The butler. One of the privileges of his service was choice of decor and, of course, its use. I approved them when he sent them to me, but I would have anyway, come what may.”

I pull out one of the towels. Large. Thick. Fluffy as hell. The towel of towels.

“Thanks.”

“Enjoy.” He steps out, closing the door.

I wander over to the blinds covering the window and allow myself a peek out. There’s a balcony. A damned balcony. This is the kind of spacious impossible thing that shouldn’t even exist in Manhattan. Then again, I’m running into a lot of impossible things today. I can deny them, or roll with it.

For now, I choose the latter.

###

I take back all the shit I talked. A walk-in shower is the best thing that ever was.

Did you know that there are showers with screens where you can press a digital readout button and raise the temperature one degree at a time? You can hit that perfect sweet spot. I was getting pissy about not remembering to grab soap before I got in, but then I started pressing on chunks of wall, and yep, one of the squares pops out, and there’s four kinds of soap, even though there was all that other soap in the cabinet. Redundant soap. I don’t know if I exfoliated, because I don’t know what exfoliating is, but I think whatever that soap does, it included exfoliating me.

When I come out in a towel, Crazy calls out from the next room over that I should go to the nearest bedroom and take anything I’d like in the master closet. The master closet is bigger than a bedroom, and has three sections, men, women, and children. All are in the very height of fashion for 1975. Or 1985, I don’t know. In that range.

I grab an I-Heart-NY shirt and a pair of stonewashed jeans, two of the more modern trends in the closet. They look fantastic, given their age. I transfer the shrooms over, because I don’t want whoever gets the old pants to think less of me. I should just put the baggie in the trash, but I can’t. Kids, raccoons, giant rats, and all other things that dig in trash are the potential victims of me accepting a simple gift. At some point I’ll have to eat the fucking things to be rid of them.

“That’s one of the originals,” Crazy says of the shirt, when I walk out. He’s in a robe. “It suits you.”

“Thanks.”

“I put your coat in the Gothic Hall, on the back of the chair. It’s waiting for you, should you need it.”

“Of course. The Gothic Hall. That only makes sense.”

“You’ll get used to this. All of this.”

“No.” I note he is still covered in red. “You didn’t shower?”

“I got distracted examining the wallet. My apologies.”

“No need. Here.” I open the door to the bathroom for him. If he takes a nice long shower, I can take a nice long snoop.

That never happens, though. I end up standing right next to the door for his whole soak, because when Crazy showers, he sings, and it’s interesting enough for me to stay.

I don’t sing myself, that’s for dopes, but his song is an exception, very beautiful to hear. It’s in another language. German maybe? But not German, because there are things that sound Greek in it. I think it’s Greek. The song isn’t verse-chorus-verse so much as it is a continuing poem. A certain number of set syllables and then a beat, on which I hear his foot slap against the tile. Sometimes he claps instead, and the timbre of the song changes. It’s kind of haunting. A song of lost love maybe, or of loss in general. A canticle of tragedy, but not like the usual tales of woe. You can really hear his misery in what he sings, the meaning of the words, like listening to a live album instead of the studio cut.

His shower is long, but the song doesn’t stop for the length of it. I was in and out and fifteen, he soaks in the spray for almost an hour. The man that comes out of the bedroom in fresh clothes is not the man I saw before. Years have come off.

Well, off him. His clothes? Not so much. A denim jacket, a black shirt, and blue jeans, with spanking new hi-tops. Seriously.

He cocks his head. “Were you standing there listening?”

“What? No. Jesus. Gross. I just got here.”

“Of course. Sorry. Shall we?”

He holds an arm toward whatever this Gothic Hall is. I loop my arm into his, which he doesn’t expect, and sashay down the stairs with my more somber partner.

###

I should tell you what Crazy looks like, but I can’t. I can see him. I talk to him. I know what he is, a man, and who he is, the man who got shot in front of me. I remember the things he says like I would for anyone else. If I concentrate, I can see his nose while looking at it, or his eyes, or his hair and its length. Sometimes it might be red. Or brown. His skin is dark, but it seems light at other times. He is an attractive man, but he also has an indescribable ugliness. I can look at him without desire, if I so choose. I can look at him with desire, especially now that he’s showered. Sometimes when I look at him I think he has a beard. Other times I see a shaven face. And I don’t really care about this. The only consistent thing was his smell, and now that’s been replaced by perfumed soaps.

I was joking about the crazy thing, by the way. I’m not crazy. This is what I am seeing as a sane, if quirky, adult woman. I know how to look at things. I really do. I went to college for journalism before dropping out and living with my mom because I couldn’t afford tuition, not because I couldn’t cut mustard. I worked for the school paper, and not in delivery. I can describe a person, a place, and a thing within my scope of experience. Sometimes even an idea.

Part of what makes people not want to see this man is at work in me, which is disconcerting as all hell. He describes a curse where people avoid him at all costs and do not remember him, but I seem to be afflicted in the complete opposite fashion. I want to remember him. Part of my fear is leaving the house and forgetting him. I also fear never being able to see him, I mean really see him, and ever understand.

Not knowing a thing bothers me.

###

The alcohol burns, but then, that's what alcohol does. I cough tasty, tasty bourbon fire from the pit of my stomach.

"More?" Crazy holds the bottle out toward my empty glass, from the chair opposite.

"Depends on what you start saying. Pour just in case."

He does, another shot's worth.

We are in the Gothic Hall, but I'm gonna go ahead and call it The Book Room. I have to call it The Book Room, because there's no other way to describe it, even if every other room in this damned house, as I've noted, has almost more books than walls. This thirty-by-fifty foot room is ninety-five percent books and five percent a few antique reading chairs set near a fireplace that would be comfy when roaring with flames. The chairs have little tables next to them, with lamps, but furniture is otherwise lacking. The floors are high shine wood with extra long knotless boards, old stuff maintained well. There is a rug that must have taken half of India thirty years to weave, and they should be proud at how quickly they finished. That ceiling is probably, not exaggerating, thirty-five feet high. This room could host a banquet or house a platoon. Wrought iron spiral staircases on both ends lead to a second floor landing with bookshelves lining every inch of wall, floor to ceiling. That's, you know, if you don't want to use the rolling ladders for the third floor's books, which I'm glad OSHA can't see right now. Open space and thousands of volumes in all shapes and sizes.

I want to live here forever.

"So," I say, my voice a little lower from the alcohol. "Guess you like books."

He smiles. "Knowledge. The most valuable thing in a world where things mean little."

"I could do with some other valuable things myself. I'm so broke my car has no spare change. Spare to change? There's a joke there. I fucked it up. I don't even own a car."

Crazy arches an eyebrow. "And see, I'd trade an entire continent to keep my five legitimate copies of the works of Mani."

"Who?"

"Exactly."

It's cold. I take my jacket off the back of the chair and put it on. "Look, we don't know each other's names. That might be a better place to start than comparing history dicks."

"You are Gloria Bingham. That is, unless your ID is fake."

"You saw my ID?"

"After you rendered yourself unconscious, but before my face healed. Yes."

"I didn't feel rifled."

"You were not. Your wallet fell out of your hoodie."

"And what, you just went through it? You some kind of wallet fetishist or something?"

"I looked in case, for some reason, you were pertinent to my investigation. No malice intended, I promise."

"All right. I'm Glory. Who are you?"

“Cain.”

I snort. “What, like Cain and Abel?”

Cain touches his finger to his nose.

“Your parents didn’t think through naming you very well.”

“The name was not so stigmatized at the time.”

“Right.” I take the next drink and lift it. “Here’s to you, Cain, you wacky guy, you. Pleasure to meet you, undead circumstances notwithstanding.”

Bottoms up.

I put the empty glass down and come off my butt to hold out my hand. Cain looks at it. He holds out his hand. Takes mine. Shakes. Keeps shaking. Realizing he’s shaking too long. Lets go. Stares at his hand.

“My grip isn’t that firm.”

“That was my first handshake.”

“God, I hope not. I’m not very good at it.”

“I thought it was fine, myself.”

Cain stands up, sporting this goofy smile I doubt he realizes is goofy. He heads over to the fireplace. I see some preparations I hadn’t noticed before, inside. A pile of dry twigs. Fluff in the middle for an easy start. It’s too neat. Must have been put together by the butler.

He takes an ancient-looking palm-sized wooden box from the mantle shelf. It’s covered in ornate carvings. He turns it with his hands, opening a compartment, and from it he removes flint and steel.

Taking a deep breath, Cain squats before the twigs and strikes. Once. Twice. Over and over. Soft at first, then with increasing intensity and vigor, trying to spark what should be an easy flame. Nothing so much as smolders. Cain sighs. He tucks the flint and steel back into the box and returns it to the mantle shelf.

“What was that?”

He comes back to sit with me again. “Had to see if it would take. You being here might have changed things. It hasn’t.”

“There’s this stuff called gas. Or lighters.”

“Wouldn’t work.” He stares at the fireplace.

“Want me to try?”

“It’s not that.”

“Hey, it’s not a big deal, you know? It’s warm enough in here.”

“You put on your coat.”

“It’s instinctive. I do that all the time in cooler houses. Saves heat costs. Rich guys like you, you don’t know that trick. You just keep the thermostat right where you want it.”

“I see.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m cold, it just means I’m cheap and trained myself well when I was young.”

Your bluff is not working. Change the subject. I grab the bottle and pour another drink in Cain’s heretofore-empty glass. I push it across the table toward him. He looks at me. Takes it. I pour another for myself.

“To lighting fires,” I say, holding up my glass.

He holds his glass in his fingers for a moment, looking at it. “To sins past.”

He raises. We drink.

I only do half the shot. I don't want to get stupid. "Cain, today, I have to say, has been mighty fucked up. There are a lot of things that I don't know if I've really seen and done that have happened in the last four hours."

"I might say the same."

"Well here's my list." I tick it off on my fingers. "I saw a dude die. I saw a dude come back to life. I saw someone get shot. I saw people not see another person. I took a shower in a room that could rent for the price of most apartments. I got a vintage shirt."

"Add to that list drinking bourbon that has aged for a century."

I look at the bottle. It's old. Dusty. I can see my fingerprints and his. "The fuck you say."

"It was amusing to see you drop it back like rotgut."

I lift the bottle to my nose and sniff. "Smells like the regular stuff. Maybe more alcohol-y."

"There's nothing special about it. I put it in the barrels myself. Replaced the cork a few times before I could set others to the task. Some of it has evaporated. It gets stronger. Brewing, crafting, making. It's a thing to do. Bourbon gets most of its flavor quickly, because of the fresh barrel. I had no intention of making a vintage. I simply do not drink enough to justify my barreling habit."

"Just enough to bullshit?"

"I don't follow."

"You said it was century-old."

"Yes."

"So you're saying you're a century old."

"Yes."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?"

"I cannot control whether you do either way. I hope that you will. That I can convince you."

"How old do you think you are, then?"

"I don't know."

"Guess."

"Twelve thousand? Perhaps more. Not less."

I look at the rest of the shot, but that's it. Sometimes looking is enough.

"I understand if you can't believe me. People lie. Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. We could walk out the front door and find three women claiming to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ within the hour. We'd be the fool to trust them. I have some insufficient proof. I won't pretend, however, that I have anything empirical. That's setting myself up to be a liar."

"If you've been alive for that long, you have to have some kind of proof."

"Some, but it's all anecdotal, and nothing I can prove."

"Like what?"

He pats the wood of his armrest. "These chairs."

"What about them?"

"I wrote to purchase them in eighteen seventy-three, from a man who had decided to leave the country, owing to his dissatisfaction with Ulysses S. Grant getting a second

term. Grant sat in them with him, once, before the election, before their friendship ended.”

“You’re saying a president sat here?”

“Or maybe here, in mine. Maybe both. I don’t know. I never cared enough to ask or seek provenance beyond what I was told. Presidents, caesars, pharaohs, kings, they’re transitory. Most aren’t worth remembering. I can show you the letters. I can have the chairs dated. But that all, very easily, could be faked.”

“You have to have pictures. Show me something of you twenty years ago.”

“I’ve taken pictures, but none of myself. There was no reason.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have a mirror.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Who would I show a picture of myself to? Even supposing I wanted to, a picture of myself would be dangerous. A way to track me. Imagine there are others like you out there, people who could remember me, a possibility I can never preclude. What happens if they know what I look like? If they come for me?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I thought you wanted companionship.”

“I do. This is tangential to the point, however, and I’ve made you wait long enough for answers, out of fear. Listen. Glory. Do you believe in God?”

“Oh, Jesus. Here it comes.”

“I am not proselytizing, nor do I care what the answer is. I merely need to know.”

“No, Cain. I don’t believe in God. Too much suffering, too little interaction. And by little I mean none. There’s also those kids who get slow painful cancer, so even if He did exist, I wouldn’t like his malicious ass.”

“I sympathize more than you might know.”

“And then there’s periods. And dying. And the itch in the middle of your back you can never reach. And terrorism. And teen girl bands put together by horny fat middle-aged men. And the internet. All of the internet. Have you seen the internet? It’s horrible.”

“I have.”

“Then I’m guessing you’re an atheist too.”

Cain laughs.

“I’m not kidding.”

“I’m not an atheist. Not exactly.” Cain looks once more at the fire, then back. “To be honest, what I’m saying would be easier for you to believe if you were a theist, but I’m glad you’re not, because if you do believe what I say, you will not do so without a healthy skepticism.”

“Thanks?”

“I have spoken, directly, to the Lord. I have seen the extraordinary evidence required to justify the extraordinary claims underlying every bit of His existence. To make the claim bolder, I am, so far as I am aware, the first human being born of a man and a woman.”

I pick up the glass. I look at it hard. I put it back down. “You’re saying you’re not a Cain, generic, you’re the Cain, name brand.”

“I know how outlandish that must seem. It is. You are the first person I’ve spoken to face-to-face since my mother, father, and brother, so long ago and far away, before there was even a word for daughter. This is why I had such an intense reaction to you, at first. I can’t even begin to know why this is happening, but clearly there is a reason, there must be, and it is a reason I intend to find, with your permission and aid.”

“Where’s your mark, then?”

“The mark is fiction.”

“Convenient. Like the picture thing. Next you’ll tell me the world is six thousand years old.”

“I don’t know how old the world is. We didn’t number our summers or winters for far longer than we’ve been recording time. I’m sure it was there for quite a long while before I was.”

“You lived through all of history.”

“All human history. I live adjacent to most events, like everyone else, perhaps more, but I was alive, yes. Mostly alone.”

“You’d have gone mad.”

“It did keep me feral, in many respects. The advent of paper communication has done much to bring me back. The internet you so malign is perhaps the greatest thing ever to happen to me.”

“I take it you don’t read the comments.”

“I am not a fool.” Cain offers a friendly smirk. “But interaction with strangers, even from afar, in a chat room, is some form of interaction. I am still awkward, but I feel as whole as one can be, returning to humanity. Perhaps this is part of that.”

“You have a mansion.”

“And bank accounts. And family fortunes. And taxes. It’s amazing what can be established by proxy, without speaking directly to anyone.”

It’s the eyes. His damned eyes. He believes this. All of it. Questions. Trip it up. Find the lie. Investigate. “How much of the Bible is true?”

“Almost none of it, save certain historical events, and those are often distorted by the lens of the text’s purpose.”

“What about Jesus?”

“I wasn’t there.”

“Moses?”

“I don’t know.”

“The flood?”

Cain pours a drink. “The flood was real.” He knocks it back.

“I may not know this Manny guy, and I’m no fan of lay, lie, or lay, in whatever way they’re properly used, but I do know that science and the fossil record have damn well proven that the flood is a giant, fictional crock of shit.”

“Rationally, yes. Now imagine mountains made and unmade before your very eyes, and the sudden appearance of water sufficient to drown the Earth. It doesn’t make sense. It can’t make sense. Forget fossils. The flood is logically incoherent in that any amount of water in such sufficient quantities would have killed all of the green life on Earth.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“And yet when the waters fell, the trees were there, the grass, even the beaches and the snow atop mountains. Water is not forgiving to anything, and yet someone, or some thing, unmade and remade all that was, save man.”

“Humans.”

“Sorry. Old habits.”

“So what, you grabbed a chunk of wood and waited it out, is that what you’re saying?”

“It came too fast. I’ve seen tsunamis. They pale in comparison. It was a hundred days drowning, choked in desperation on the very waters of life. When the calm of the grave came upon me, I would wake again, gasping, muscles cramped in agony, dying again and again to serve penance. And for what? I can’t even assume, save sin that was deemed to have started with me, punishment devoid of respect for the intentions of the sinner.”

The eyes are the same. He believes he is not lying.

“You’re asking me to take what you’re saying on faith.”

“In your place, it would be impossible to believe me. Nonetheless, being alone for as long as I have been, I must try to persuade you that I speak the truth.”

“Then you’re saying you’re a murderer.”

Cain frowns. “I object to the choice of words.”

“You didn’t kill your brother?”

“I did. But killing and murder are two different things. He was an offering to Lord.”

“Come on.”

“Consider a world where no human has died. Only animals. A world where, for hundreds of years, father, mother, and two brothers have lived alone in harmony and happiness. I needed only to look at a field and speak, and the green faces of the plants would poke up their smiling heads. Abel had only to ask, and a calf would begin to grow in the belly of its mother.”

“And it gestated in half an hour, and the baby was born already cut into steaks.”

“More like a day for each birth. But that simple, yes, as absurd as I know it to be. My brother’s offerings were always favorable to Lord, I believe because he cared for his stock as though they were people. I did not envy him this. There was no jealousy. The love of Lord is not delivered in powers or multiples. Any is enough for all. We were in awe. All we desired was to please Him.”

“To the point of killing?”

“I saw Lord favor an offering of flesh from the animal Abel most loved. Lord’s pleasure was such that He brought the animal back to life, for Abel to take joy in once more. What better expression of love than to offer the thing you care for the most? And so I took my brother, willingly, placed him on the altar, and sacrificed him.”

“He let you?”

“We both believed he would be returned to us, and that together we would earn more favor from the Lord for our faith. Instead, when the flames died down, Abel’s charred corpse remained still, and there was only dread silence. The voice of Lord asked me, in a tone I’d never heard, where my brother was.” Cain’s lips begin to tremble. “And then mother came. Father came. They saw what had happened, but they did not see me. They buried their son in grounds I used to till and wept.”

Cain pauses to sob. It’s horrible. Worse, it’s real.

His head finally rises.

“Cain. Please. You don’t have to—”

“I fled paradise into the land of Nod, hoping to return with my shame cleansed. After, I could no longer find my way home. I wandered eternally, cast out. Much later, when I came upon people, I was spit upon, beaten on sight. Before the flood and after, I made it my mission to find murderers, in the shallow, wasted hope of being allowed to return home. I solved an untold number of crimes, but never washed my hands, somehow, with my judge.” Cain takes the bottle and drinks straight from the neck, pausing. “I am, I maintain, innocent of that crime. I loved my brother as I loved myself. I killed, but I am no murderer. We were committing an act of faith, not turning our faces from Lord. Abel knew.”

I swallow. “True or not, that’s horrible.”

Cain nods, his eyes wet, from the drink or the tears, I can’t tell.

What the hell do you say after a thing like that? The air in the room is too thick.

Dick joke.

No.

Something. Anything. Get him talking. Questions.

“You die a lot?”

“Yes.”

“How many times?”

“Beyond count.”

“How about suicide? You ever kill yourself?”

“Every few years. For a long stretch, the attempts were constant.”

“A long stretch?”

“A good half a century.”

“You ever try the vacuum of space?”

“Why would you ask a thing like that?”

“Hi Cain. I’m Gloria. Have we met? Curiosity is kind of my thing. Tact? Not so much.”

“I’m the fourth human to expire in space, the first to do so via direct exposure, given that the Soyuz Eleven disaster happened inside the crew capsule. I made my way into the Challenger cargo hold on its sixth mission, before the tragedy. No one tried to stop me. I cinched myself down well, so I didn’t float off. It’s not pleasant, as deaths go.”

“On a death scale of one to ten, where ten is the worst?”

“A nine.”

“What’s a ten?”

“Radiation. Burning.”

“How did you die of radiation?”

“I tried to vaporize myself in the heart of the blast zone at Trinity. I buried myself a foot below the ground as they prepared the device and waited to come out until the very last second. For a while there, I thought it would work. I mean, with nothing to come back, what could regenerate? Sadly, I was mistaken.”

“Wasn’t that a super-top-secret facility or something?”

“Sure. But it wasn’t built in a day. It’s easy to eavesdrop and learn things when the person talking doesn’t realize there’s someone listening in, or doesn’t want to. I’m sure you can imagine why my curiosity was piqued by a thing like an atomic bomb.”

“What was it like?”

“Well, it was instant. I didn’t feel anything. But after, when I woke up, my skin sloughed off. I vomited blood. Symptoms persisted until I crawled far enough away from the blast site, which took some time, given that to crawl, one needs fingers.”

“Yeah, of course, that only makes sense.” I put a finger in my mouth and make a gagging noise.

He smirks. “I tried again with Ivy Mike, the first hydrogen bomb. That was the last nuclear explosion for me. I had to swim, in addition to all the aforementioned effects of radiation. Drowning is my least favorite way to die, even if it’s not the most painful. Reminds me of the flood.”

“If no one can talk to you, how do they know about you?”

“I don’t know, in the same way that I don’t know how, if my parents could no longer see me, the story of my exile persists. It makes sense that what does survive is grossly distorted, as I had no part in its veracity. The Bible is largely bunk.”

“That’s a very un-Cain thing to say, a Christian might observe.”

“I define Cain. It’s my sole privilege.”

“Fair enough.” I shake my head. “Also, damn you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re either the best bullshitter that ever was, or you’re telling the truth. You have an answer for everything, and you don’t have to think about it, or salt it. You’ve set the hook. I hate it when the hook gets set. You know why, Cain?”

“No.”

“Because in about three months you’re going to borrow a hundred bucks from me, and I’ll trust you enough to do it, and then you’ll never pay it back. It always happens. Every fucking time.”

“I will not borrow a hundred dollars from you.”

“That’s what the people who never pay me back always say.”

“It’s taken me over two hundred years to find one wallet. Filling it with cash is low on my list of priorities.”

“What is that wallet, anyway? What makes it almost worth getting killed for?”

Cain reaches into his inside pocket and draws it out. Looks at it. “I did get killed for it, actually. To answer your question, I don’t know what makes it so important. That’s the mystery of the thing. This is the first one I’ve managed to get my hands on, and I’ve been looking since the Napoleonic Wars. I think it’s older than that, though I’ll have to test it to know for sure.”

He hands it to me. It’s definitely an old wallet, though it’s hard to imagine it could be that old. Hand stitched leather. It doesn’t want to open easily, but it does with a little force. There’s nothing inside. On the front face ancient symbols weave into a circular representation of a maze with words for walls. In the center of the maze is the face of a bull, rudimentary, but menacing.

“Kind of like a relic version of a no trespassing sign.” I hand the wallet back.

“Indeed. Do you know the story of Daedalus?”

“Not really.”

“Father of Icarus.”

“Oh, of the wings and the flying too high and the splash?”

“Yes.”

“Then yeah, I’ve heard of the guy, but I don’t remember much. High school and all.”

“You don’t need the details so much as the idea. The Icarus story is about reach exceeding grasp. Daedalus also, according to myths, created a great labyrinth to contain a minotaur, the boon of Gods granted to Minos.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“The maze is symbolic, in most theory. The peril of taking a gift from God and using it to further your own selfish ends.”

“Okay.”

“In the early medieval period, I discovered writings suggesting a group dedicated to such things, a cabal of sorts with sinister intentions. I’ve been watching and listening for more than whispers ever since, and the only physical indication I can find that any of it may be real is this wallet, likely one of many, crafted as a symbol representing a man who admired Minos and his power, as opposed to learning from his errors.”

“The illuminati?”

“Nothing so rudimentary or fictional.”

“And you’re saying you found it just now, this week, in New York, in the same place you found me, the first person who could ever see you.”

“Yes. But I’m almost positive they’re unrelated. Correlation—”

“Is not causation, I know. Former journalist here. But it is a strange coincidence.”

“I agree. I just don’t believe they’re necessarily related.”

“So you have a wallet. An ancient mystery wallet. What now?”

Cain reaches over to cap the bottle. “I think it might be wise, given the hour and all we’ve been through, to eat and rest. Start researching with a fresh mind, a good night’s sleep.”

“I am damned tired.”

“If you wish, you may stay in the bedroom of your choice. Provided you’re still here in the morning, I would very much like to employ you in the quest to find the origin of this wallet. Your assistance would be invaluable, given my disability.”

“I dunno, Cain. I’m not cheap.”

“I’ve never been an employer before, but you should know, I pay well.”

“I don’t know if you realize how well you’ll have to pay. I’ve never been a detective before, but I base my rate on how rich the person I’m working for is.”

“Wise.”

I look around. “How much would you say your net worth is, Cain?”

“I don’t have exact figures.”

“Spitball.”

“Somewhere in the range of sixteen billion dollars. Though most of it is with silent partners, so in a sense, I have next to nothing.”

“Except that sixteen billion dollars.”

“Well, yes.”

“In that case, I’ll take the job for a million five, and ten bottles of that bourbon. Plus expenses. Can’t forget expenses.”

“Done.” Cain stands. “Shall we see what’s in the pantry?”

I blink a few times. “Done?”

“Yes. Done. I agree to your terms.”

“But — I was joking.”

“I wasn’t. What’s the problem? Do you want more?”

“Yes.”

“Too bad. You should have quoted a higher rate during our negotiations. We are bound to the amount and agreed.” Cain spits into his palm and holds out a hand.

“Oh, now you’re the one with the jokes.”

“I am not joking. You will not receive a penny more than one million, five hundred thousand dollars, upon completion of the job.”

“I’m not shaking that hand.”

“Oral agreement it is, then. I assure you, it will stand up in any court.” He walks for the door, smiling. I think he’s joking. He must be.

I stand. “You’ll forget the bourbon.”

“Never.”

“Never is a long time.”

“I know,” he says.

The door closes behind him.

###

At home, or more appropriately, Mom’s house, I sleep on a couch with an old blanket next to a hissing radiator. Even when I had my own apartment, I slept on a mattress so springy and useless it had to be cut into pieces when I moved out, because no human being could possibly have had use for it after I slept it to death.

Mom buys food for us begrudgingly, with the end goal being lording the kindness over me. She seems to think the lack of journalism jobs is something I came up with, as though I am a villain for daring to dream. And I do, dammit. I aim to make my way selling words or die trying. All my friends gave up and became full-time baristas, but I won’t.

Part-time at best.

But who am I kidding? Truth, I walk the streets dropping application after application thinking hey, I couldn’t possibly ever work in this place, and week after week, month after month, stretching into years now, I find that statement more and more true. I can’t possibly work in places like that, because they simply won’t have me. Too many workers with higher degrees and a much more sunny social disposition than mine willing to take their hard earned debt and worthless degree and make some rich person’s day paying down their student loan over thirty years.

I’m in default, I think.

I should really look.

I won’t look.

I could understand Mom and the shit she gives me if I hadn’t gone to school, gotten good grades, and made my legitimate mark. The only reason I quit was the damned cost. Now my debtors and progenitors are angry with me because they told me to aim for who I am and I damn well did.

This, not joy, is what’s going through my head as I realize I am a theoretical millionaire in jeans and a tee sprawled on a mattress that feels very much like a mattress, as opposed to a flat place someone wouldn’t want to sleep. It’s unfamiliar, this feeling.

I'm eating crackers, artisanal crackers, in this rich guy's bed. And artisanal, I've just learned, means no damned salt and dry. But it goes well with the cheese he gave me, Mancheeto or some such. I've eaten about a block and a half of it. I won't shit for a week.

There are posts. It's the first bed I may sleep in where someone could tie me up or get tied up on. There is genuine height to the frame. Sitting on the edge of this bad boy, I am almost standing with my feet on the floor. The warm, soft, thick carpet is perfect for toes. I put my wallet and cell on the end table, all the while examining the crazy, ancient, stained-glass lamp sitting on it. For all I know, it's worth more than me. Shelling off jeans, I tuck myself into covers that are smooth and don't feel like they need washing. They're comfortable and wide, king sheets on a king bed in a master bedroom.

The mattress is so firm and supportive I think I could sleep on my back without tossing or turning, a thing I've never been able to do, what with my resting body usually at some grossly obtuse angle to match the worn pattern of a sagging couch. Closing my eyes there is no spin, not from this booze. Two and a half shots would bring the pain, typically, from my usual plastic bottle shit hooch. I open my eyes one more time to roll over and turn off the lamp, and that's when I see two men in suits standing in the doorway staring at me.

I don't scream. I should have screamed, maybe. But tall and skinny has a pistol with a silencer. More terrifying: Short, stout, and muscular has a knife. They stand and wait without saying a single word, very polite in their malice.

"Hi there," I say. "You guys have the mint or something?"

"We do not wish to shoot you," Stout says. "But we will if we must. Please get up, get dressed, and follow us." The accent is a very learned British, for a thug. Then again, maybe I assume intelligence from his accent, having watched too many movies. He's outsmarted me, but I don't know if that moves the needle either.

A hero might kick the gun out of Skinny's hand while grabbing Stout's knife to stab him in the guts with his own blade, but I am not a hero. I am putting on my clothes. I am tying my shoes. I am a broke-ass ex-journo who still sleeps on the couch. I will never see one-point-five million dollars or vintage bourbon. I will walk with glum haste down the hall and stairs away from the single largest house I've ever been in and probably die.

And I still have shrooms in my pocket.

God dammit.

###

“The nemesis has a thousand black eyes;
His name is only spoken by the quieted.
The ascension is a bold lie for children,
And spirits who do not have their wings.”

—*The Lost Pillar* 12:2-5

UP AND DOWN

They don't rough me up. They don't even take my arm. It's enough to know that I have a gun aimed at me. In shows, in stories, heroes talk and negotiate. Sometimes they even convince the guy to drop the weapon because it's right. In real life the guy draws the gun without saying anything and either blows holes in your chest or you do what the fuck that person says. Maybe not. Maybe I'm a coward. A coward with no holes in her chest, notably.

I wish this were the part where I could tell you that Cain stepped from the shadows and killed the two goons with ninja Bible darts or something, but no. We walk out the front door, down the steps, and into a waiting Bentley. It's nice. Good leather. Low mileage, I can see from the odometer. Squeaks on squeaks when my nice new leather jacket meets the nice new leather seat.

The goons take the front. I sit in back. Nary a word is spoken for the drive, though I have many things I might otherwise say were there not a gun involved. It's dark, but dark doesn't mean shit to this city. They just turn on the second sun of all the other lights we made and you can see everything. Traffic is, of course, hell. Bumper to bumper, with one stretch of ten full minutes waiting while some delivery driver decides he's more important than everyone else. It takes almost a half an hour to go three quarters of a mile, about two blocks from Central Park. They cut the car toward a tall, ritzy looking apartment complex, stopping in front of a very willing and eager valet.

Stout turns to face me for the first time since he saw me into my seat. “Get out with us. Don't scream. Don't say anything. If you do, it will only inconvenience us briefly, and you will be dead. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Be sure of that.”

We get out. The car whisks away with the valet. I follow Skinny and Stout up two staircases in a main lobby to an elevator. One of them swipes a card, hits a button, and the elevator lifts us. The little P symbol on the screen tells me it could be a while. It is. My ears pop. The doors open into a foyer the size of a normal bedroom. Past the foyer is a wide hallway/gallery filled with expensive looking art and closed doors to what must be bedrooms on either side. To the right there's a kitchen, but they take me beyond it, into my second Grand Room of the day, the second Grand Room of my life.

No books. Clearly evil.

The walls are all glass. People with vertigo or a fear of heights would hate this place. To the left is Central Park, with the people looking like ants. I think I can see the tip of Long Island if I squint hard enough in the other windows. Doesn't matter, I don't get the chance to squint. Skinny ushers me to one of the couches and sits me down in front of Stout, who takes a position on another couch across from me and stares.

Behind us there's a large dining table, with fifteen chairs for people to sit at given a meal. Everything looks unused though, set in place like a dollhouse.

I'll have to be careful not to give Cain away. They might not know he exists. He's not here, after all.

Stout clears his throat. "You were at the apartment of a young man earlier today. A drug dealer."

"Yes." No point denying.

"He fled the apartment leaving behind a wallet. What do you know about this wallet? Consider your answer carefully."

This I can do. You only get caught lying when you make shit up. Lies of omission are quite effective, in the hands of a professional.

"No mom, I don't smoke pot," is a true statement if I eat it. This is an essential talent to develop if you are the kind of person who gets interrogated. Especially by police.

"I know the wallet you mean. A guy came in, asked for the wallet, got shot, and then split shit." True, note.

"How did you come to be where we picked you up?"

"I walked."

Stout closes his eyes. Pinches the bridge of his nose. "Don't get smart."

"Do smart people end up in penthouses with men who may shoot them? Pal, I'm not smart, or even trying to be smart. I'm trying to answer your questions as directly and as honestly as I can. I'm just nervous as hell."

"The question was how you came to be where we picked you up, not your mode of transportation."

"I see what you mean. Sorry. I went to the mansion trying to figure out what happened to the guy who got shot. That's all. It was his place, so I thought I'd go see what he wanted with Yoshi."

"Yoshi?"

"The dealer."

"Why would you do that?"

"I'm a curious person. It gets me in trouble. If I could show you my arrest record, you'd see, I—"

"We have your arrest record. How did you get the address?"

"Off the guy who got shot. I might have picked up his wallet and looked at it, you know, before he got back up. But I didn't take it. I swear." All true. See?

"How did you get in?"

"The butler answered the door and let me in."

"You knocked on the door of a mansion like that, and the butler let you, a stranger, in, then left you there, alone?"

"I know how weird that sounds, but it's the absolute truth."

"And you were just staying there, what, waiting?"

"Not exactly. I was also helping myself to some booze and cheese. My figuring was that whoever owned the place would come tell me what was going on eventually. And if not, hey, free food."

Stout slaps me across the face. Not a beat-you-up slap, but not light, either.

I hold my cheek. "Ow."

"Do you know where the wallet is?"

“I know where it was.”

“This is sufficient. Explain.”

“Well, the guy came in—”

“The man who was shot.”

“—yes. Him. He asked for the wallet. He got it. Then he got shot.”

“Your friends ran.”

“They’re not my friends so much as my drug dealer and his bodyguard.”

“But they ran.”

“Yes.”

“And they left the wallet behind?”

If Yoshi and Slim were supposed to defend this wallet, my answer could very well kill Yoshi. But there’s being the guy who lost the wallet, and then being the guy who has the wallet with Stout after them. I’d prefer being the former.

“Why do you hesitate?”

“Because I want to be sure of my answer. I don’t want to lie to you.”

“This is wise.”

“I would not say that they willingly left the wallet. I think the man who took it could not have been stopped. I am circumspect only because I don’t want you to think Yoshi or Slim did not properly attend to your property with all their might, if the wallet was yours. It sounds important to you.”

“The drug dealer and his muscle shot this man who took it?”

“Yes.”

“Could he have survived?”

“He was still breathing when I left, but he looked bad.” Still true.

“So you went to his house to try and talk to him instead of waiting where he was still breathing?”

“Cops, man. Cops. I don’t want to be anywhere near angry cops. Do you? I figured he’d get better, or he wouldn’t. Truth be told, I didn’t think I’d get in the door of the mansion. I wasn’t thinking that far ahead. I don’t even know what I was looking for. I was shaken up. I had to get away to a safe place. Slim got killed, man.”

“And you did not assume the police would come to this man’s house? That the butler would not place you at the scene?”

“I didn’t, no. But isn’t it clear I’m not really that great at thinking shit through?”

“You’re a liar.”

The lights from all the offices and apartments and varying heights of the city glow for me, for no one, for themselves. My cheek stings. I am sober again. These couches are all white, but I see my blood on all of them.

“I’m not.”

“Can you lead us to the wallet?”

“No.”

“Then whether you are a liar or not doesn’t matter.”

He gives an almost imperceptible nod to Skinny. Skinny walks down the long hall with the art.

“Are you going to let me go?”

Stout sneers. “What rational person wishes to know the hour of their death?”

“Me.”

I hear a rustle down the hall.

“If you do not tell us where the wallet is, you will live far longer. It’s up to you.”

“Don’t you mean that if I tell you, I’ll live far — oh.” Oh shit.

Stout smiles. He walks toward one of the back bedrooms like a guy who doesn’t want to see what’s about to happen, I immediately assume.

Skinny appears at the far end of the hallway as Stout passes him. Skinny has a doctor’s bag. He is smiling even bigger than Stout was. He proceeds down the long wood corridor, his fancy rich guy shoes echoing all the while. He stops in the entryway to the glass room, the evil Grand Room, looking right at me.

“I’ll scream.”

“You’re welcome to. These walls are very well insulated.”

“I’ll fight. I’ll claw. I’ll bite you. I’ll rip your balls from your sack.”

Skinny rubs his hands together. His smile gains teeth.

Fuck my ass.

There is a door. A balcony. It’s closer to me than Skinny is. I do the math. If he kills me here, he can dispose of the body at leisure. If I run and jump, they’ll check tapes. Find out where I was. There’s at least a chance they’ll catch these fuckers. They have this apartment. That has to leave a trail. Right? I mean, money can’t buy that much anonymity.

Can it?

Fuck you, Gloria. You have no idea what money can buy.

Could it buy me enough therapy to help me maybe stop talking to myself?

Hell with it. I bolt for the door. Maybe I can make a stand from the balcony. Maybe I can scream for help. Maybe I can throw him over the edge like in a movie.

Maybe I didn’t consider that the balcony has a deadbolt with a keyhole on both sides.

A thick plastic bag covers my face and I am suffocating, kicking, fighting the arms locking around my neck. The thrusting frees me enough to pull the bag off as Skinny gets his foot under mine and trips me flat to my face on the floor. Thank you, carpet, for not breaking my nose.

His arm goes around my neck again and he tightens the crook of his elbow hard enough to cut off the blood. There are stars and universes and a dimming feeling, a ringing noise, and then I’m back, a plastic bag over my head, kicking randomly as he tries to get hold of my flailing hands.

The soft, well-laid, yielding carpet has little traction, so I cannot slide my butt back away from him well, but it doesn’t matter. The hands grabbing at me have stopped, and the ringing I was hearing is now clearer, if changed. A cell phone. My cell phone.

The ringing stops. The ping of a text message sounds. My shaking hands come up to the bag and pull it over my head. Skinny is standing a few feet away, holding out a hand toward me.

“Give me the phone without misbehaving, and I’ll give you more time before we start.”

Ladies and gentlemen, this may seem an unreasonable bargain, but you would not believe how reasonable it sounds in that moment, how quickly I handed that phone over. You think that makes me a coward? Try going through this shit, see how much piss is in your bladder.

Underlit by the light of the phone, Skinny checks my text app. I wish I had a code on the damned thing. I shouldn't leave it unlocked. My mom is too snoopy. Lazy. I'm lazy. Skinny regards what he's seeing with frustration. What, he doesn't like my friends? I'm kidding. I don't have friends.

"I need you in here." Skinny says down the hall, as he looks closer at the phone.

Stout appears. He takes the phone from Skinny and holds it out to me. "What does this mean?"

It reads:

<UNKNOWN> I have the wallet. I will give it to you if you free her.

I take a few breaths and stand, slow and steady. I'm wobbly. You really enjoy air when you haven't had it. "I don't know."

Skinny slaps me. This is the hard kind of slap. It lays me out. Stout grabs me by the shirt with one hand and hauls me off my feet. He rears back and is about to throw me when the phone chirps again. He drops me to the floor, hard. Looks. Holds the phone out at me again. "Explain this."

<UNKNOWN> Don't hit her again.

<UNKNOWN> You have thirty seconds to send her to the elevator.

"I can't. I'm sorry."

Stout types. There is a chirp in reply. I see Stout's moment of distraction as he pokes at the virtual keyboard with his sausage thumbs, but the entry is full of Skinny standing in the shadows with a long damned knife, so that's out.

A loud thump sounds on the lower part of one of the windows facing southeast. The kind of sound a bird makes when it splats against a window it doesn't see. This piques Stout's curiosity. He lowers the phone and looks. As he does, I see the exchange of texts in his dangling hand.

<GLORIA> And if I don't?

<UNKNOWN> Fifteen.

That was about ten seconds ago.

Stout hauls me up, putting me in front of him, a human shield for any potential snipers. He turns back toward Skinny, keeping a hand on my mid-back. "Stay away from the windows."

His hand comes away, but I can still sense Stout behind me. I hear the keys pip away as he types, but before he can hit send, the picture window explodes. We are hit with a wind sledgehammer. Stout staggers backward and I drop straight to the ground, blown flat. The lights in the room go out. Howling gusts rush in and about, screaming banshees, coming with the slight smell of greenery from the park and exhaust from the streets.

Somehow I'm not cut to shit. Safety glass? I struggle to my feet, my back to the window, and start backing for it instinctively, to be away from Stout and Skinny. I get close to the edge, but Stout has his pistol out somehow, and he's pointing it at my face.

"Stay right there!"

My hands go up.

He backs toward cover, toward the kitchen, the pistol still on me.

I hate heights. I hate heights without guardrails more. This side of the apartment has no balcony. It's just a sheer drop, far enough to think about the fact that you're falling to your death for a while. If I turn around, I'm going to puke and drop to the floor, and he will shoot me. He may shoot me anyway. I expect to be killed at any second, sent flying backward and down while bleeding out.

Stout gives the gun to Skinny and moves to type furiously behind the cover of a cabinet. All I can see is his hands.

I consider the angles, what buildings could possibly be high enough to allow for such a shot. There are none in the area that I can think of, given the view. But there is a human hand wrapping itself around my ankle.

I scream.

Stout stops typing.

The hand hauls me out into the night, and I am fucking falling.

###

Owing to poverty and general common sense, there are many things I have never done that others might. One of these things is bungee jumping. Expensive, scary, and fuck you. What happens to me next is like akin, perhaps, though I am unsure, as I do not have the relevant experience, nor shall I, for I will never ever do a goddamned fuckwit ass stupid thing as this again if I have any say in the matter.

I plunge ten stories, face down. Steel vise fingers grip my ankle as we slow to a rapid, effective stop in front of another apartment with a dark empty living room. We are suspended from strong rope that's anchored below the blown out window, though I can't see how.

Cain's grip tightens on my ankle so he can work on removing things from his bag with his other hand. It hurts enough to draw my attention away from the fifty stories of death below me. Whatever he's looking for, he hauls it from his bag one-handed and slaps it to the window face, returning his other hand to my ankle. This accomplished, he starts to work up momentum, side to side, swinging pendulum-style across the front face of a skyscraper. He is methodical in this, even a bit aloof.

The first bullets zip past. Cain clearly didn't expect this. I feel a slight jerk as one of the bullets hits him in the torso. Hands cinch tighter on my ankle, causing white-hot pain. It nearly dislocates, or tears off, or whatever awful thing happens to ankles yanked too hard. I'm not a doctor, I'm in pain.

This puts us off center, tumbling, but somehow we stumble across the face of the skyscraper in one last wide arc, as from above a clip empties all around us. Cain regains his orientation and charges with his feet on the panes, a sideways football player intent on a touchdown with a ball that looks like a screaming aspiring journalist with mushrooms in her pocket. At the apex of the swing he gets shot in the chest again and almost loses me.

I scream. But that's nothing new. I've been screaming through all of this, I just didn't mention it until now because I didn't want to seem like a wimp.

The window explodes behind us (relatively), just as we clear it. Cain and I slam our way across windows toward the open hole, a spinning loose centrifuge on a rope. I don't know how he still has me. Slugs spock off windows. God help the people on the sidewalk below.

Cain manages to slam a leg into the building face as we near the new opening, planting a foot. I can feel his grip slipping. He spins with one last hard twist and hurls me into the waiting apartment with as much force as he can. This amounts to my ankle sliding free of his grip and me tumbling across the carpet, losing my wind hitting the back of a couch at full speed.

His chest and side is a wreck of blood. Reaching into his pack, he grabs for something, and to do this he has to lean in such a way that a few things fall out of his pack toward the ground below. I see a hand grenade among them. More rope. But the knife he manages, snapping it open while grimacing at the pain in his side. His movements are frantic and panicked. It looks like he's not breathing, but he must be. Right? How does that work, when you can heal?

More bullets. One hits the arm not holding the knife and deadens most of it. He slaps at a climbing device I hadn't seen until just then and descends, moving below my line of sight, below the level of the floor. I don't dare go to the edge to look, what with the bullets. And then I see him again, ascending, limp on the end of the rope.

Wait. No. He's not ascending. Stout and Skinny are pulling him up.

Cain gives that same look of frustration he had when he got shot in the gut, when I first saw him. I grab his leg and try to pull him in, but two men pull a rope harder than one skinny gal can hold a leg, and Cain waves me off anyway.

The building starts to scream, a wailing siren that must be a fire alarm, a poor people alert, an earthquake warning, a tsunami bugle, pick one.

"What do I do?" I'm not even sure he can hear me in the wind.

Cain tries to tell me, but can't speak. That look of frustration again. His eyes widen. I hear his lung inflate through his open mouth. He sucks in gulps of air like someone who has been underwater holding their breath for too long.

"How do I get you in here?"

Cain shakes his head. I can read his lips well enough when he says, "You don't." even if I can't hear it.

His good arm slices the rope.

No scream.

###

I am not invisible. People do not avoid looking at me.

There are cameras in apartment complexes, particularly ones where every floor looks like a month's rent costs more than the average person makes in a year. Stout will know this. There will be police questioning everyone about everything that ever happened here, all the way back to the Civil War. I wouldn't put it past them to bring King Arthur in to ask him about a few things, just to be thorough.

I don't know what to do. I can't go out the front door, I'll be found. If I hide here, I'll be found. And Cain. What about Cain? What if he's on video down there, right now, coming back to life, all because he came to my rescue like some idiot?

Think. Stout and Skinny won't be worried or even thinking about Cain, presumably. Will they even remember shooting at him? Regardless, I have to get to Cain, to help him escape, the way he helped me, right?

The elevator. It's not great, it could be full of Stout and Skinny, but that's better than a nice, open stairway where they can fill me full of bullets from a distance.

I run over and smack at the button, but the elevator won't open. Maybe it needs a key. Could be it doesn't open when the poor people alarm is going off. I don't know, and I don't have time to worry about it.

Stairs it is.

No. Wait.

Robes. Rich people robes. Those big, thick, fluffy, shoulder-to-knee numbers. Sure enough, I find one in the bathroom, paired on its hanger with a fancy shammy shower cap with a monogram: FP.

Frank Pilsner? Furlough Preston? Fannie Poprocks? Fucking Poseur.

I throw it aside and slip my arms into each of the robe's sleeves. Mirror check. I could be any one of these aristocrats, shaken from a bath by klaxons, right?

Right.

Wrong.

Doesn't matter. No time to debate.

The stairwell doesn't need a key. Poking my head out, I find fifty floors worth of evacuees, panicked upper-class types with assorted servants, rushing for the ground floor. Children with nannies all over the place. Insert social commentary here.

The crowd is larger than I expected, given how long it's been since the alarm first sounded. Anyone could have covered twenty stories, hauling ass, by now. Looks like most of them have things in their hands. Jewelry. Yarker purse puppies. Briefcases. They look like they can smell my fear. Is that what exfoliating does? I haul ass down stairs.

A bullet blows a chunk from the wall next to me. I don't slow, but I do look. Skinny, drawing a bead. Everyone else has crouched to the side, screaming and huddling to avoid getting shot.

"Move, you idiots! You don't stop for gunshots! Away, not toward! Jesus!"

They stay where they are, though, like cash can stop death. Hell, I tried.

I start taking stairs by three, shoving aside errant wealthy residents here and there. The kids I work around. When I do not fall and die, I try taking the steps four at a time, but then I almost fall and die. I go back to taking them by three.

This works for about ten stories, and then it doesn't. Even though I go up stairs every day to get to Mom's apartment, and am in reasonable shape, there is just a certain point with stairs where if you're rushing, you're waxed and ready for airlift. It doesn't stop me — I can still hear my pursuers above, or more specifically the protesting families being shoved aside — but they will catch up at this rate, for sure.

I grab the handle on the next level down and pull. Better to hide and be on camera than to get shot.

Locked. Of course. I need a key card. Dammit. Goodbye, precious seconds.

The floppy loose robe has untied itself. Piece of shit. The belt keeps catching on my shoe. So much for disguise. Halfway down the next flight I trip right over it, and only by slamming my stomach into the central metal bannister and gripping for dear life do I not plunge down to Broken Neck Town, USA.

A man's robe. Too big. As I scramble for purchase with my hands, the fur of the thing gets between the rail and my palm, slicking me down a full foot before I regain purchase.

Dots connect. Another stupid-as-hell idea forms.

Yanking the robe off and tossing it aside, I haul the belt out of its loops and wrap one end around my right hand like I'm getting ready to box. I wrap my left in the other, grab the rail, and throw my leg over ass forward, diving down an entire flight of stairs.

Toward the bottom I grip, which slows me enough to catch myself on the rail with my feet. Hurts like hell, but it's damned fast. I scurry over and repeat the process.

I start gaining ground. I also increase my chance of hurtling down the shaft and dying exponentially. Don't think. Just do.

Kids cheer as I pass them like I've found some big adult secret they can't have. My hands hurt, a lot, but far less than my feet. I manage the ground floor in minutes, and I don't even hear Stout and Skinny any more by the time I blow through the emergency door, which has been propped open by a helpful fireman politely hollering at entitled people to hurry the hell up.

A group of miffed people in pajamas gather in a large crowd, backing away from the building, most clearly seeing that nothing is wrong. To the side is another crowd, smaller but growing. Adults examining something on the ground with active curiosity, shooing away kids. That'd be a pile of what used to be Cain, but I assume not Cain himself, given that they're still there.

Muscling through them, I find no body, only grisly pile of remains not big enough to be a person. Given that I am mere seconds away from two very angry men bursting out to fill me with bullets, I don't linger. I can say I tried.

I turn to bolt (bolt being a relative term, given the state of my legs. The emergency door spits Skinny and Stout out of the pinball chute like homicidal multiballs. They beeline for me as if they can shoot me in front of all the world and get away with it, pistols drawn and zero fucks given. Maybe they can. I'm not waiting around to check. Pedestrians scatter. Clearly, looky-loos know what to do when you see guns. The firefighters somehow miss them. I get that. They look for fire, not pistols.

My flight doesn't last long. The steps killed my muscles. I can't outrun them, straight out. They're both winded but fine, clearly in better shape. They probably chase people all day. I don't know. Point being, I'm fucked fifteen ways to St. Patrick's Day with no green beer.

The best hope I have is a police cruiser blocking the road, but when I rush into the middle of the road to flag it down, there's no one in the cruiser, just spinning lights and an empty cab. I stop, turn, look at Stout and Skinny, and raise my hands.

Smiling, they tuck their pistols into their coats and walk for me. An ambulance wails behind me, working its way around the police cruiser to get to the scene.

"Look, you win, okay? Can I just ask one favor? Can you not kill me in front of those kids? I won't fight. They don't need to see that kind of—"

The ambulance plows into Stout and Skinny at full speed, throwing them under the wheels with wet popping crunch noises. One pop is noticeably louder than the other.

No screams.

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